



H₂

MAKE YOUR
CHOICE...NOW!

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
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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
Allan Scott	Administration Manager for H
Alva Alvarez	Colombian drugs baron
Andy Pandy	Supplies 'dirty work'
Arthur	Friend of H.
A'zam Saud	Fund raiser for Al Qaeda
Bahar	terrorist
Benshima Reyes (James)	Partner of H. Daughter of old money wealthy Colombian business family
Big John	Supplies muscle and transport
Biggles	Ex RAF Tornado pilot
Cerberus	H's poker name
Cleggy Jenkins	Ex gambling industry executive.
The Controller	the brain of the system
Danny	cell mate of Dieter White
Dennis	friend of Andy Pandy
Dieter White	Businessman
Felipe	servant to Alva Alvarez
Rt Hon George Ponsonby-Clive	member of Shiners Club
Harry Banner	Manager of The setting Sun

Harry Cohen	Head of family empire of night clubs
Hussein	terrorist
James James	Owner of Night Clubs etc
Janet	Arthur's wife
John Baxter	Bank Manager
John Williams	Executive Chef – The Savoy
Johnny BMW	a right hand man of Harry Cohen
Malik	terrorist
Marco Psaila	employee of H's internet site in Malta
Marissa	Taiwanese wife of Dieter White
Martin Gwen	H's Commercial solicitor
Marty	Night Club Manager
Mary and Charles James	James' parents
Miguel Carmena	Head of International Investment – Colombian Bank
Nicholson	Scam artist and chancer
Norm Phillips	H's accountant
Norma Baxter	John Baxter's wife
Oleksander Aranazov	Russian billionaire
Randy Katz	poker opponent of Marco Psaila
Ray Jones	truck driver

Senor and Senora Reyes	Parents of Benshima. Head of Colombian Business Empire
Roy Jenkins	Detective
Saddam	terrorist
Salim	terrorist
Schlomo	leader of Israeli criminal gang
Sebastian ('Needles')	Doctor with underworld clientele
Senor Serrano	Bank Manager
Stanley Arnold	paedophile
Steve Hindley	friend of H
Toby Williams	runaway child

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Chapter 1

Illicit love

He was with *wide* eyes. His beloved *wide* eyes. Eyes that were so wide he could have crawled into them and slept...

On the back seat of the car, with its windows clouded with sweaty moisture, the two were half undressed. She sat on his lap, facing him, her knees astride him and resting on the car seat, tights and pants on the floor and her skirt pulled up. His trousers and pants were down around his ankles, and his prick as far as it would go up inside her. He arched his hips slightly for more push, and she lowered her pelvis as much as she could. He had as much in as he had got and, luckily for her, he had quite a lot. Her hands were round the back of his head, twining their fingers through his hair as he sucked her enlarged nipples and kneaded her breasts with his hands. He would have sucked them dry if it had been physically possible. Their movements were passionate, frenzied and told a balletic story of a couple desperately in love and consumed with a need that had to be satisfied.

Unfortunately, he was satisfying the need of another man's wife. And she was satisfying a deeper need with a man who meant everything to her and without whom there would be no reason to live. The person who made her own marriage tolerable, but also a living, waiting, fantasising hell on earth.

She rubbed back and forth, stimulating her clitoris, then she arched her back and let out a deep primeval moan as the orgasm flooded her body. She pulled his head tighter to her bosom. He bit her left breast, and she moaned again; he moved his mouth to the right breast, took as much in his mouth as he could and then bit again. She came again. She grabbed his hair and pulled his face to her, opening her mouth ready for his. His lips covered hers, and his tongue went in as far as it could. Her mouth wrapped round it as she sucked.

‘Come in me now,’ she implored, ‘Now.....Now.....Now.....’ She raised herself up and pushed his head back down to her nipples and started to rub again. ‘Now..’ she said gutturally, urgently.

And he didn’t disappoint this woman who meant everything to him. He hadn’t seen her for two weeks, and he had lots just waiting for her. Gallons and gallons and gallons. She felt it as it spurted into her and filled her up, and another orgasm flooded through her.....

She slumped over him, spent; he cradled her head on his shoulder, gently smoothing her damp, tangled hair. After a few minutes, they sat next to each other and rearranged their clothes. She kissed him tenderly. He knew he shouldn’t say it, but he had to.

‘When....?’

‘Soon...very soon.’

‘You said that last time.’

‘I know, and I meant it then too. It won’t be long now.’

‘Do you know how long?’ he asked forlornly.

‘Not exactly, but I promise you that you and I will spend our life together. That is a solemn promise, and I would never lie to you. Not to you.’

He went silent for a few moments. ‘You’re putting on a lot of weight.....are you sure this is ok?’

‘It’s ok....’

He looked at her forlornly. ‘Not too long, *wide eyes*. It’s killing me.’

At the mention of ‘wide eyes’, a huge smile crossed her face. ‘I know.... but be patient....it will all be worth it...I promise.’

Wide eyes was his name for her. He adored her eyes. *Wide eyes*.....he lay in bed at night and said it softly to the moon. They told a story, her story, and to him, her story was an open book and the most fascinating thing in the world. When she looked at him with love or longing, they opened so wide that he could climb into them and sleep in the dark, welcoming arms of her soul.

They sat chatting for a few more minutes, then he looked at his watch.

‘It’s eight fifteen; how much longer do you have?’

‘I’m ok at the moment; he’s gone to some club or other for something...or other.’

She cared less where her husband had gone or what he was doing. She looked at him, and he saw her eyes dilate. He looked into those wonderful eyes.....time passed, life passed, eternity passed, and then he said, ‘Good.’

He lifted her dress and put his hand back inside her wet vagina, and her wide eyes became wider..... *Wide eyes*...

Chapter 2

The wedding

It was a wonderful day with wonderful sunshine and a wonderful bright blue sky. Everything was wonderful. Benshima looked wonderful. She had treated herself to a gorgeous Monique Lhuillier wedding dress that she had flown to Los Angeles to have fitted and collect. She could easily have had the same dress from Browns Brides in London, but where was the fun in that?

It had cost nearly twenty thousand dollars, but she thought it was worth it for two reasons: firstly, it was beautiful, and secondly, when she had gone shopping on Rodeo Drive in Beverly Hills, she had been standing next to a world-renowned actress, who she refused to name, but had, according to Benny, the most cellulite she had ever seen in her life! Which made her feel really good in a girly, but spitefully bitchy, sort of way...

When James saw her, he was stunned! The dress was the most sensuous garment he had ever seen in his life. The white ivory, one-piece, strapless, satin and silk dress hugged her figure down to her hips, then flowed in a train when the hem reached the floor. The sequinned bodice showed her beautiful bosom, and the ruched cummerbund highlighted her still slim waist. It could have been a ball gown.....but it was a white wedding dress!

When she had mentioned she was going to LA for a wedding dress, he thought she was mad. 'Surely any old thing will do? You'll be fine.'

But, of course, any old thing wasn't fine, and this not only proved it, but it also proved he was lucky to have a woman with taste, and who was going to be his wife!

They left the wedding man and wife and headed to a private room at the Ritz that Senor Reyes had laid on for the reception where the music, of course, included the Bolero, Merengue and erotic Salsa. Arthur, a rarely seen, but much-loved face from his past on the roads, arrived at the reception. He had been invited to the wedding, but asked if it was ok just to come to the reception.

'Sure.'

H introduced him and told them how Arthur had given him a break in life and how grateful he was for that. Arthur was embarrassed, but said, 'It was the fu..... least I could do after fu... Jimmy boy had smashed in clown's face.'

Nobody had a clue what he was talking about and so 'Jimmy boy' quickly wheeled him about and took him to the bar before they did. James gave him an affectionate hug. 'It's really great to see you, Arthur, really great.'

'Any food, Jimmy boy?'

James smiled and wheeled Arthur to a table in the corner to grab what sandwiches he could and left his wife with Benshima.

'We're glad you came,' said Benshima affectionately, 'James really likes Arthur.'

She smiled. 'That's nice.' She suddenly thought of something and said, 'Please excuse me for a moment...'

She bustled off and found Arthur, who was trying to set a world record for the number of *salmon bellini* he could get in his mouth. She told him something, and he chomped and chomped as quickly as he could while nodding like a bird,

then, with one big swallow, he high-tailed it from the room. A few minutes later he was back with a parcel, collected his wife, and they made their way to Benshima and James.

‘We have something for you. For your wedding,’ said his wife.

‘From us.....Janet and me,’ said Arthur a touch unnecessarily.

He stood there.....

‘Give it to them,’ she urged.

Almost reluctantly, he handed over the parcel.

‘Shall we unwrap it now?’ asked Benshima.

Arthur looked at his wife, who nodded. Jimmy boy took the wrapping off, and there were two glass-covered frames, each with an enormous butterfly in it. At least a foot wide. A foot! Underneath was written *Ornitoptera alexandrae*.

‘It’s an *Ornitoptera alexandrae*,’ said Arthur proudly, ‘one of the rarest butterflies in the world. Its *Order* is Lepidoptera, the *Family* is Papilionidae, the *Genus* is Troides and the *Species* is Alexandrae. An endangered species.....’

She whispered something to him.

‘Ah yes... their common name is *Queen Alexandra’s Bird wing*. From New Guinea, aren’t they beautiful? And did you know they’re poisonous? They don’t actually kill anything, but if something tries to eat them, they become very sick, and so they learn to leave them alone. Good, eh?’

They were indeed, thought Jimmy boy. Beautiful and magnificent. And rare. James had watched Arthur’s face as he handed the parcel over, and he knew it was killing Arthur to give them away. It was the ultimate gift. Giving something that you cared about... Surreptitiously, James found Benny’s hand and gave it a quick squeeze.

‘You’re both very kind,’ he said affectionately, ‘and we appreciate your present very much. In fact, we more than appreciate it as I know how much they mean to you. And that being the case, I wonder if I could suggest something? Would you keep them for us? We can come down every so often and have a look at them, but Arthur can keep them within his collection. It’s a shame they’re not in the collection.’

Arthur perked up. ‘That’s a good idea. You could come down,’ he repeated, ‘and they would still be in the collection.....good idea, good idea....’

Relieved, Arthur wandered back to the food, and his wife said, ‘Thank you. You’ve looked after him again.’

‘It’s mutual. One has few friends in life...you have to look after your friends; anyway, anyway at all.’

She went off after Arthur.

‘That was amazing,’ said Benny.

‘It was. Do you realise that Arthur didn’t say ‘fucking’ once?’

At the end of the reception, Benny said, ‘My parents would like to come back with us for a few minutes.’

‘Eh?’

‘They’re coming back for a few minutes...’

‘Why?’

‘Because they are my parents, and they want to.’

‘My mother’s already gone..... thank God,’ said H.

Benshima said nothing.

Back in the apartment, they sat and chatted for a while, then Senor Reyes said, ‘In Colombia, it is the custom that the bride’s family help the young couple find a home and assist them with a deposit and some furnishings.’

‘You’re a bit late,’ said H jokingly, ‘you could have saved me a couple of million,’ and indicated the room with his outspread arms.

‘In the light of that,’ his wife continued, ‘we have decided that we would like to continue with the custom, and so we have a present for you.’

She took a key from her handbag and handed it to James. ‘For you and Benshima.’

Puzzled, James looked at Benshima, who looked as confused as he.

‘Mama...?’ queried Benshima. ‘What is the key to?’

‘Here.’

‘Here? How can it be here? James already owns “here”.’

‘A bigger “here”.’

Her mother was smiling, and her father looked mischievous.

‘It’s a guessing game,’ said Benshima, and immediately a child like look spread over her face. ‘A guessing game.....’ she said slowly.

James waited to hear ‘you’re getting warmer....you’re getting colder’, but in reality, he hadn’t got a clue what was going on.

‘We’re moving?’ asked Benshima.

‘No.’

With that question and answer, H had already worked it out...

Surely not....? Fucking hell!

‘But it’s bigger...?’

‘Yes.’

‘We’re going to knock some walls down?’

‘Yes.’

‘We don’t have any spare walls to knock down....?’ She looked at James, who gave her no clues. ‘A bigger here.....knock walls down that we haven’t got?’ and then it

clicked, and she ran and hugged her mother and father. 'It's the key to next door,' she shouted out excitedly, 'we can knock their walls down and make it into one huge apartment.' They all trooped into the hall; Benny opened the next door to be met with a completely empty space...to do anything they liked with. A two million empty space, thought H....shit! And not only that, they now had two corner apartments which meant views of 270 degrees around London. Wonderful! And Benny could spend a fortune knocking out walls and redesigning..... Wonderful.....

As they were leaving, Senor Reyes, having made up his mind, said to H, 'Do you have time to come to the Ritz tomorrow, James, and join me for lunch?'

'Of course.'

He had no idea why, but you hardly said no to someone who has just given you a two million pound apartment.

James met Senor Reyes at the Ritz where they were given a reserved corner table. As a long time guest and shareholder in the Holding Company, Senor Reyes was treated impeccably, as, of course, they would say they treated all their guests. Though some, the ones with new money derived from fifteen minutes of fame, were so, how could one say, intellectually challenged? Crass? Common? Pig ignorant? And they didn't even notice the subtle, and sometimes not so subtle, hints that maybe the Ritz was not the place for them... They ordered drinks and chatted amiably for a while whilst looking through the menu. Lovely though the food was, H was aware that he would be quite happy with a good bacon and egg sandwich, no sauce and a nice mug of tea. Once a plebe, always a plebe...

Senor Reyes decided on Fillet of Turbot with Braised Pork Cheeks, Glazed Leeks, Vichy Carrot and Sauternes Veloute and H the Roast Loin of Venison with Morello Cherries, Juniper and chicory Flan and Bergamot Jus. H would have had steak, but it came with snails. Snails.....? How to balls up a good steak. Once a plebeian, always a plebeian.

Half way through the meal, John Williams, the Executive Chef, came to the table to greet Senor Reyes.

Senor Reyes shook his hand. 'This man is the jewel in the gastronomic crown that is the Ritz.'

'Senor Reyes,' he said with just a touch, a mere hint, of deference. Gone were the days when Chefs deferred to anyone...the Ramseys et al. of this world had changed that, but this was the Ritz.

'The meal,' said Senor Reyes, putting two rounded fingers to his lips, 'Magnificent; subtle, rounded, flavours distinct. A typical Williams offering...'

Suitably flattered, he left them to return to the boiling inferno that awaited him.

After they ordered dessert, Senor Reyes said, 'James, I have known you now for quite some time. I like you, not because you have married my daughter, but because you are honest...'

James was about to put him straight when...

'I don't mean honest in a criminal sense. Who is? I mean in your dealings with Benshima and us. Our family. Family means everything to us, and my wife and I regard you now as one of our family.'

He waited for a response.

'I am honoured that you see me that way, Jose. Benshima means everything to me and, to be honest, I quite like being "part of a family".'

'That being the case, James, I think it is time you knew a little more about the family....but obviously what I tell you now is between us...only between us.'

'Of course.'

Slowly and quietly he unfolded the history of the family and the fact that they were one of the major producers of cocaine in the world.

James said nothing.

'You are not surprised, James?'

'No, Jose, I am not surprised.'

'Why?'

'I don't know...I think it's because you possess a bearing that comes with power. You could argue that all wealthy industrialists would have the same bearing, but I am not sure I would agree with that. It is something to do with life and death. Now I know you come from a violent culture, but a wealthy industrialist in that country could be a hunted man.....kidnap, ransom, threats to the family, but you.....have a different demeanour. So no, I am not surprised. I wasn't expecting it, but I am not surprised.'

Jose smiled.

'Little bits did not quite add up,' continued James. 'A little bit here, a little bit there. The do with the East Europeans...that took a lot of clout and no matter how wealthy an industrialist you are, you wouldn't, I thought, think in those terms. There is a science in revenge that eludes most people. They have to be of a certain type, they have to think in a certain way, they have to *think* what some people would not even *dream*

of....that those things are actually possible. Now, they may not do it themselves, but the fact that they know where to get something like that tells us something about them....'

'You said nothing.'

'What was there to say? I am with Benshima. To me, her family was my family. That's all there is to it.'

They talked a little more so that they understood each other, and then it was time to go. 'James,' Jose said as they were about to leave.

'I know what you are going to say, and I understand.'

'You do?'

'Yes.'

'Are you sure you know what I am going to say, James? Really sure?'

James nodded. 'That if I ever use this information against you and your family, I will be killed. No matter that I am Benshima's husband.'

Jose opened his hands. 'I would regret it, but.....'

Chapter 3

Marissa runs away

‘What the fuck do you mean, “no”?’ he snarled. ‘You have no fucking choice in this, you stupid cow. I fuckin own you, you do what I want, when I want, where I want and with who I want. You got that!?’

He increased the pressure he was exerting on her neck.

‘Please....’ Marissa whimpered ‘please.....don’t hurt me.....please....no more.’

She was naked, lying face down on the bed, her tiny, delicate, bruised body shaking convulsively, her face streaming with tears. He raised the twelve-inch plastic dildo he was holding and thrashed it down on her head.

‘Shut the fuck up,’ he screamed, his face red with anger.

Pushing harder on her neck with his left arm, forcing her head into the sheets, suffocating her, he put the dildo at the mouth of her anus and pushed.

Fifty-year-old Dieter White, the product of an Anglo-German dalliance between a young English virgin backpacker and a German tourist late one night on a beach in Cannes, was a powerful but troubled man. He had built a large insurance company with offices throughout Southern England through hard work, good business sense and fear.

Everyone feared him.

He was completely volatile, swinging from wonderful after-dinner company to hurling vile insults, furniture, phones and anything else he could pick up when his anger demanded it. A

psychiatrist would have said borderline psychotic; White would not have recognised the picture being painted.

Although small in stature, being only about five five, his penchant for food and alcohol had contributed to an enormous girth, giving him the appearance of a no-necked bullfrog.

He ruled his business by fear, slapping anyone down who dared to say the wrong thing at the wrong moment. Any criticism of him was met with instant rage and the sure knowledge that your employment was as good as over, and if you expected any compensation, you weren't going to get it.

You would more than likely get a solicitor's letter demanding compensation from you! On one occasion, an employee had dared go back to talk to him. He appeared, much to his surprise, to receive a fair hearing and no harassment. He thanked White for listening, shook his hand and they both went to the car park. As he got in the car, White took hold of the door and slammed it as hard as he could on the leg that was yet to be pulled in. And then he pushed on it with all his weight.

'You won't get a penny,' he sneered.

When it came to women, he moved through two worlds. In one of those worlds, he saw them as goddesses, angels, deities to be revered. He wined them, dined them and romanced them until, through some psychological sleight of hand, they moved into his other world. In the other world, they revolted him! They became the lowest of the low: whores, prostitutes, dirty, smelly, sticky, slimy, revolting creatures that made him feel physically sick.

Married once, for obvious reasons it didn't work.

The incredible romance turned to mutual isolation; her classic beauty took on the vestige of a withered old crone; her vibrant body became sepulchral; her open vagina a deathly tomb; his need for her became an overwhelming aversion and revulsion. When his view changed, so did his needs. Sex became violent, and he insisted they find someone else: another man, or men, to share it with. She left.....with minimal maintenance provision and a threat of an acid-splashed face should she try to pursue more.

And so he went to the Philippines and found a young beauty. He knew he would be catered for, so he romanced her and arranged for her to get a work permit in England. He brought her back, put her in his large, secluded, rural home and allowed the romance to be replaced by.....the black world. And in that world, he got anything he wanted.

.....as he pushed she managed to move slightly to avoid the pain of the insertion of the dildo, and he missed. He became even more enraged, so he grabbed her hair, pulled her screaming in pain off the bed and dragged her downstairs. He marched her straight out of the back door and to the large cage that held the two large Rottweilers. Slamming her head into the bars, he watched as the dogs flung themselves at her, yanking her away by her hair at the last second.

‘So you won’t do as I tell you, eh?’ he screamed and forced her face back against the bars. The dogs lunged again, and at the last second, he yanked her hair.

‘Eh? Eh?’

‘Anything you want,’ she sobbed. ‘Anything...’ She sank to the ground in despair and defeat.

‘You’re so fucking right!’ and dragged her into the house.

He dropped her on the floor of the hall. 'I'm going to ring some mates,' he sneered. 'You stay there,' and went into the lounge to the phone.

Through the tears, she looked at the door. How she longed to escape, but she couldn't. When he was at work, he locked her in her bedroom, and it was too far down to get out. And when they were in, he took all the keys out of the doors. She looked again.....in disbelief. There was a key in the main door! He had forgotten to take the key out of the main door! What should she do? If she tried to escape and he caught her, he would go mental, and God knows what he, and his sadistic friends, would do to her.

But if she could get out.....?

She listened and heard him talking. Moving softly to the door, she quietly undid it, slowly opened it and then went out and closed it behind her, locking it as she did so. She ran as fast as she could to the automatic gates and pushed a button on the perimeter wall. As it slowly creaked open, she heard him scream.

'Bitch!'

She saw him climb through a window and start to run towards her and prayed for the gate to open more quickly. Not waiting, she squeezed her tiny, naked body through the opening, grazing herself as she did so, then ran up the main road. She heard a car approaching and took a chance; turning, she flagged down the car and was overcome with relief when it slowed and stopped by her.

The occupant of the car had seen the tiny, naked woman, who was clearly in distress, and pulled over. The naked woman tried to get in, but the door would not open. She looked frantically as the raging man got closer. Benshima

tried to reach over and open the door for her, but it was too far away in the big Merc.

‘Let me in...’ she pleaded frantically and tugged even harder on the door.

Benny suddenly realised the doors automatically locked themselves, and she searched the dash for the button to unlock them. She thumped something that looked like a lock and heard the car locks disengage, and the tiny naked thing suddenly burst in. In the rear-view mirror, she saw the man, now only a few yards away, waving a fist.

‘Go, please go,’ she pleaded, and Benshima put her foot hard on the accelerator, and the Merc shot forward.

‘Please help me,’ the tiny thing sobbed hysterically. ‘Please help me....’

‘There is a car rug on the back seat; put it around you. You’re safe now.’

Benshima rang 999 on the car phone to get the nearest police station and took her there. After giving her statement to the Domestic Violence Officer, she gave Marissa her phone number and told her to call if she needed help.

Chapter 4

Gaming Commission documents...

James sat in the office of his solicitor, Martin Gwen. When your name is James James, you have a certain sympathy with someone whose name is Martin Gwen who keeps getting communications starting with 'Dear Madam'.

Another unfortunate coincidence was the name of his partner: Anthony House. Like most solicitors, it should have been Martin, House Solicitors, but that sounded like one partner, and so maybe House, Martin Solicitors, and that was worse, and so it became Johnson, Forbes, which was the maiden names of their two wives. James knew that in today's marketing age the name House, Martin would have been much better and more memorable, but this had been years ago when marketing was not seen as 'done' and solicitors were honest gentlemen. How times had changed.

'I've looked through everything, James, and I don't see any significant hurdles. Obviously, the Gaming Commission want to be comfortable with your bona fides and in many ways the documents are, of themselves, surprisingly straight forward.

It boils down essentially to two concepts: you as a person and your means for purchase.

Are you a person who should be allowed to buy a casino, or indeed be involved in commercial gambling generally?

And do you have the money, legitimately obtained, as they will check every penny if there is any doubt, to affect the purchase?

At this point, you do realise that owning a casino does not give you the right to run one? For that, you need a Gaming Licence?’

H nodded. ‘I won’t have one, but the management will.’

‘That’s about it. Simple,’ said Martin. He paused for breath, then took a sip of his cold coffee, grimacing as he did so. ‘I bloody hate cold coffee! So....are you, in the meaning of *The Operating License Application Form*, a person who they would give an Operating License to?’

‘Of course,’ said James, ‘salt of the earth, punters’ friend, payer of taxes, up front honest guy.....’

Martin took a long look at H and let out a long sigh. ‘Could we take this seriously?’

‘I was. I am.’

Another long look. ‘If you look at the list.’

They both did.....

‘I assume you have done all your homework, business plans etcetera?’ H nodded. ‘Then the only problem could be Number 5: how you are going to pay for it? What about the funds? Are they legitimate?’

H looked hurt. ‘Martin, have you ever known me to do anything *illegitimate*?’

‘If I ever had *concrete* evidence that you had, I would be *legally* bound to inform the Inland Revenue and/or the Police. You understand that, don’t you?’

‘Of course. I’m sure that I would never put you in that position.’

They looked at each other, understanding, totally, the needs of the other.

‘The money,’ H explained, ‘will be a mixture of retained profit from the clubs and Secure Security Ltd and Bank borrowings.’

‘And that’s it?’

‘That’s it.’

‘Nothing.....how shall we say...added to it from other sources?’

‘No. I have no other source of income other than what I have just told you.’

Martin smiled. ‘*Very good.....very good.*’

Chapter 5

The Controller

In the large, but cramped, temperature-regulated compartment the computer silently monitored all the operations under its control. Indeed, it even regulated the temperature of its own compartment. How clever was that!

The monitoring was continuous, day in and day out, and although the computer, like most things, had the rare off day, it was, to all extents and purposes, completely reliable.

A warning flashed through to its central processor from the main pump.

‘Yes, pump?’ enquired the Controller, ‘still struggling?’

‘Sorry, Controller,’ said the pump, ‘but it’s still a.....that’s perhaps the best word, Controller, a struggle. Any chance of a bit of maintenance? Overhaul? Even better lubrication?’

The Controller sighed. It felt quite impotent. On the one hand, it had day-to-day control over all the pumps, filters, aerators, fluid pressures, anti-virus defences, internal plant malfunctions etcetera, but at the end of the day, it could not actually mend a pump. It could certainly send a note to the man in charge of doing such things, but if he did Sweet FA, what could the Controller do?

‘Want a bit of short-term boost?’ asked the Controller. ‘Bit richer mixture?’

‘It would help, Controller, if you wouldn’t mind?’

‘Not at all. It’s the least I can do; I only wish I could do more.’

‘Perhaps you could give him another nudge?’ asked the pump plaintively.

‘I’ll give him more than a nudge. I’ll send him an ‘urgent’. That’ll make him think.’

‘Why didn’t we end up with someone that would actually look after us?’ Asked the pump. ‘A proper maintenance schedule? Regular attention? Spend a bit of money on us? Surely it saves money in the long term?’

‘Quite right,’ replied the Controller. ‘Quite right. Unfortunately, we don’t get to choose.’

The computer was lost in its own calculations for a moment, and when it had decided what to do, it increased the fuel mixture to the pump and sent out a syscon – ‘*Urgent – Immediate!*’ – to the maintenance man.

‘Thank you, Controller,’ said the pump appreciatively, ‘that’s better.’

‘Afraid it’s only short-term. I’ll have to reduce the mix soon.’

‘I know, but it will help for a while as I’m pretty knackered. Message going out?’

‘Already gone, and I’m sure he’ll do something this time. I mean, there’s lack of maintenance, and there’s lack of maintenance.’

The Controller despaired of the man who was responsible for their well-being. Hardly any maintenance over the years; even the computer’s housing was old and tatty. The outer insulation had gone, and no attempt had been made to repair it or even to cover it up!

The man received the message and took a note of its contents. Thinking about it for a moment, he decided that he would have to take action to sort it out before something silly happened, and then he’d be in trouble.

Big trouble!

He made a mental note to start the remedial action as soon as he had finished his other jobs and time permitted.

He didn't get a lot of time what with one thing and the other.....

Time was very scarce.....

There were so many demands.....

Chapter 6

H goes to see Cleggy

Cleggy had rung and told H that he could 'help' with the purchase price of the betting shops and the casino, and H had taken the opportunity to give the 360 Ferrari a blow-out. It was less a blow-out than a washout. Half way there, the rain had pelted down, and it took all H's driving skill to keep the 3000 lb, 400bhp car on the road, let alone drive it with any degree of verve. Thank God for a bloody good semi-automatic.

Cleggy gave him a cup of coffee and H enquired of the Fabulous Four.

'Eight,' corrected Cleggy.

'Eight?' asked a surprised H.

'Eight.'

Cleggy smiled.

'It's retirement money.'

'You must be making a lot more money 'retired' than you were working.'

'Unfortunately, I came to the same conclusion. All those wasted years....' he said wistfully.

'So what rhymes with eight?'

'You're quick today.'

'Not just today, I hope.'

'The great eight.'

'Is that the best you could do?'

‘You try getting a word to rhyme with ‘eight’. We’re hoping to get twelve and then we have a corker...’

‘Don’t tell me,’ said H, holding up a hand and thinking for a moment. ‘The apostles.’

‘First guess; give the man a coconut.’

‘You won’t go to heaven....’

‘Wherever I go, I’ll still be talking to you.’

H grinned...

‘Anyhow, fascinating as it is talking to a man who is screwing innocent punters, heaven again forbid, you were going to help me.....?’

‘Yes. It will cost two hundred or so, and I will guarantee you that you get the casino and shops.’

‘How come?’

‘There are only two bidders, and I know both the men who are responsible for collating the bid values. Both, coincidentally and luckily, are nearing retirement and both would be happy to get an ex gratia payment towards it. Paid into an offshore account.’

‘So these upstanding citizens are both comfortable being crooks? Can’t see it, Cleggy. What are you pulling?’

Cleggy poured himself another coffee, sat back and stared at H. He sipped at his coffee and for a few moments said nothing. He wasn’t sure...but thought, ‘fuck it.’

‘For someone with a degree of intelligence, that was a stupid thing to say....’

He waited and inwardly braced himself for what was coming. All in, or all out....

H looked him deep in the eyes, but said nothing. The lack of any signal spread unease throughout Cleggy. Where did he stand? Was that good or bad? Was he waiting for an

explanation, or was this a prelude to a weekend in hospital? Or longer? He wanted to stare back at H, but hadn't got the bottle to be that defiant. His words, on reflection, had been bad enough, so he picked up his courage and went on with his explanation.

'I have been straight with you all along. I have given you help, taken you into my home and shared my.....' he glanced through to where the 'great eight' were busy clicking mice and making money, '*secrets* with you. And I am not a stupid man. Why would I rip off someone who has the wherewithal to curtail my retirement somewhat?'

He felt his voice starting to rise a little in indignation and immediately softened it. 'Why would I?' and his eyes looked down to the floor. He waited a moment as H continued to stare at him and then

'Sorry, Cleggy. I don't move in the kind of circles where trust is on the agenda. Tell me about what you have *achieved*.'

Cleggy was a hard bugger, but when he looked at H, he couldn't help but beam a smile.

'That's about it, H. I've been in the industry all my life and know everybody. I did some checking and, amazingly, it was as I said; both old friends and both about to retire. The deal isn't very big, and so no-one is keeping a real eye on it. As long as the figures stack up, they will be put forward, and the winner gets it.'

'So how does it work? We get their numbers and top them?'

'That's about it.'

'Sounds good to me.'

'There is also a bonus for you. I told them that for every hundred thou they can reduce the price, we will give them a quarter. Which means we are effectively paying them out of

their employer's money. Obviously, it only comes out of the larger bid, as that is the one that will be judged.'

'So I am essentially paying nothing as the lowering in price pays for your men. Explain the maths to me again?'

'Ok. Roughly, it goes like this. If the highest bid is, say, twenty-five mill and they have got it down from twenty-six, they get between them a quarter of a mil.'

'But surely all they have to do is start with a large, unrealistic figure, drop it, and it costs us a bomb?'

Cleggy smiled. He liked dealing with H. H was quick.

'They could have done that, but we worked out rough prices *before* they knew I was going to offer them a deal. So the answer to that is "no".'

H thought for a moment. 'Cleggy, I am going to ask you the question again, and this time don't be miffed. This is business, and I want to understand something. Ok?'

Cleggy nodded.

'What are you making out of this?'

'Nothing.'

H knew he wasn't lying. Everything about this crooked, wheeler-dealer man said he wasn't lying. Posture, face, hands, voice, eyes.

H said nothing for a few moments. 'Then you should be. It's costing me, if you'll excuse the word, two hundred and fifty on every mil?'

'Yes.'

'Well, I'll go to three fifty, and you have the difference.'

'That's handsome of you H.'

H said nothing. It wasn't handsome at all. This man, for whatever reason, had done a very good deal for James and hadn't screwed him. He deserved a reward and recognition,

and he deserved to be looked after. Brought into the expanding fold. H made a mental note. He also didn't overlook the additional stimulus it gave to Cleggy to get the price down even farther...

They talked some more, working out how and how much and where and when and then, before leaving, he spent a few minutes with the 'great eight', watching them scam the internet punters. At one point, he couldn't help but goad them when one team of four had isolated one punter, and the board had come up A A K. One of the great eight had K K and another K Q, and so they had it sewn up. The punter had limped in and obviously had nothing, and so now was the time to invite him in. They checked on the turn and the river, and as expected, he went all in with a big bluff. The kings full called and watched as the punter turned over AA for quad Aces!

'Bloody good system you've got here, Cleggy,' taunted H. Cleggy smiled. 'He's just had a stay of execution.....that's all.'

On the way back, H was talking on the car phone, in a line of traffic, when a sleek new BMW M6 Convertible came past him and just managed to squeeze in between H and the car in front before an oncoming car got him head on. H braked heavily, only inches from the Beamer's bumper and leaned on the horn. The Beamer abruptly braked, causing H to do the same and having to steer left to miss the Beamer's back bumper. Two fingers rose from the convertible. H's initial reaction was to show him and overtake the lot, but that would just be lunacy, and the risk-reward was nonsense. And what, actually, was the reward.....?

H slowed down slightly and left a good gap between him and the Beamer. After a few minutes, the traffic thinned at an island, and the Beamer went off to the right, so H settled back and put on the radio. After a few moments of listening to a dirge of a song, he switched it off again.

The horn sounded long and noisily from the back of the car, and he saw the M6 in the rear-view mirror, with the driver making 'wanker' signals with his right hand. He had gone all the way round the island and followed H.

Oh, good, thought H sarcastically.

He studied the driver. Male, mid-forties, hard looking bastard. A cretin that goes out of his way for trouble. H looked ahead and floored the accelerator; the beamer, after a short lag, followed. At a hundred and ten, and looking in the mirror to make sure of the distance, H slammed the brakes full on. The M6 had enough room, but it had taken him unawares, and he locked up; the car swerving to the other side of the road, the driver over-corrected then swerved back, on the edge of control. The back end settled, and H could see the driver had gone pale.

H smiled, then did something stupid. He answered the phone. Within seconds, the M6 had overtaken him and pulled in straight in front of him, braking hard and forcing him to stop. The man jumped out, and H could see he had a baseball bat in his hand. H had to make a quick decision. Reverse like hell and bugger off, but how to get past him without getting a bat in a light cluster? Or stand and fight?

Oh shit!

H got out of the car as quickly as he could and moved to the front. The man got to within feet of H and stopped.

'I'm going to break your head, you cunt,' he snapped.

‘Why do that? We’re just having a bit of boys’ fun in fast cars.’

‘You nearly fuckin’ killed me.’

‘Naw. You’re a good driver; you controlled it.’

‘You’re gonna pay.’

Something clicked in H’s head. ‘Don’t I know you?’

‘Why should you?’

H racked his brains. It was several years ago, in one of the clubs..... ‘You work for Harry Cohen.’

The man stopped still. ‘Who are you?’

‘James James.’

‘Oh yes, I seen you, but I actually remember your missus. The one with the tits.’

‘I can see why you struggle with life. Nobody told you *all women* have breasts. I take it yours doesn’t...? You’re queer then,’ he said with sarcasm, knowing full well what would happen. All he needed to know was from what direction? The top or the side? The second he saw the bat rise into the air above M6’s head he moved forward. His left arm blocked the oncoming bat, and his right fist shot to the man’s throat, but H softened it as it reached. He wanted the man to struggle to breathe rather than not breathe at all. BMW man retched and gasped for air, and as he did so, H moved his right leg to his right and smashed his left in his solar plexus. If breathing was difficult a minute ago, it certainly was now. Bringing his left foot round to his right, he followed up with two quick, hard fists to the ribs which broke several...

There was a muted aaaaaahhhhhh as the air was forced from M6, and he doubled up and dropped to the floor. The bat clunked as it hit the ground, and H picked it up. M6 was desperately trying to suck in air and had pain written all over his face.

H hesitated. He liked it to be finished. Now! Don't wait! This isn't the fucking films where you give 'em time to get up. Finish it. Now! He grabbed his assailant's shirt and readied to smash his face into a bleeding pulp. His foe had no means to retaliate and, at a later point, would have a vivid memory of what happens when you threaten James James.

But this was one of Harry Cohen's right-hand boys, and he didn't need to have an enemy in Harry Cohen. Harry, like H, owned night clubs. He also owned high-class casinos, betting shops, bingo halls, pubs and dance halls. The Cohens had built up a small empire over several generations and were not to be messed with. While they never bothered anyone as part of any expansion plan, they held no truck with anyone who strayed, not so innocently, on their territory. Why annoy Harry?

H looked down at M6.

What to do? Bugger off and leave him there, and then ring Harry? Ring Harry now.....but M6 could recuperate and carry on the bash.

H let out a deep sigh, let go of his shirt and dropped him to the floor where his head smacked the tarmac. Kneeling on his chest to keep him immobilised, H crossed his hands, put them each side of M6's neck and held his collar. Pulling his hands forward and across he applied the strangle for several seconds and watched him go limp then pass out. He wouldn't be out for too long, but long enough.

Going back to the Ferrari, he rang Toby and asked him for Harry Cohen's number. After a few moments explaining who he was, he got through to Harry.

‘Afternoon H,’ said Harry. ‘As you rarely ring me, I have no doubt this call is either to make me money or cost me money. Which is it H?’

H smiled. Always money..... But there was no malice in Harry’s voice, yet.

‘As it happens, Harry, it’s neither. What I want you to do is give me a bit of advice.’

‘Since when has the mighty H needed advice off the lowly Cohens?’ said Harry with just the merest hint of sarcasm.

‘Since one of your boys nearly drove me off the road and came at me with a baseball bat....’

Harry knew who kept a baseball bat in his car. ‘You mean Johnny?’

‘Don’t know his name, Harry, but I met him several years ago in of our clubs when you popped in to have a look around.’

Which was code for ‘eye up the competition’. Funnily enough, H was not competition to the Cohens; their clubs didn’t cross H commercially or geographically. Harry just liked to know what was going on.

‘Drives a big Beamer.’

‘That would be Johnny,’ sighed Harry. Harry knew very well H’s reputation for extreme violence when threatened and asked the obvious question. ‘Is he still alive?’

‘He is, Harry, because he works for you. In fact, he’s just a little winded, maybe a couple of broken ribs, but I’ve put him to sleep for a few minutes while I talk to you.’

‘Appreciate that H. Johnny is a pain in the arse at times and prone to going off like a bloody bomb with a faulty fuse, but he’s been with the business for many years, and we wouldn’t want him.....retired, too early. Johnny has many uses that we

call upon and has always been loyal. We put a store by loyalty, H.'

'Ok, Harry, just so you know. I'll leave him here, and he'll be fine quite soon....but I have to tell you, Harry, that if he comes looking for me, I can't keep babysitting.'

'I understand, H, but I'll make sure he doesn't come looking.'

'Thanks, Harry. Appreciate it. Take care, Harry.....'

'H,' interjected Harry quickly, 'I think it's time you and I had a talk. A business talk. I think there is an opportunity for us if my sources are correct, and we should chat.'

H paused for a moment. Business opportunity with Harry Cohen? Was this the possibility of big money or a very long sleep?

'Excuse me asking, Harry, but why would the mighty Cohens need the lowly H?'

He heard the chuckle.

'Touché. H, it's just an exploratory talk. I think there is a possibility of making some money. We should just have a talk and see what happens.'

'Ok, Harry, I'll ring you tomorrow morning, is that ok?'

'Fine, H. Drive carefully.....oh, and H.'

'Yes, Harry?'

'What are you driving today?'

'The Ferrari.'

'Ok, talk to you tomorrow, see you, H,' and the phone went dead.

H smiled. Harry liked to leave you knowing where you stood in the order of things...

Ferrari can't beat a beamer, H?

Really?

Oh dear.

Chapter 7

John Baxter goes to the Bank

John Baxter was thoroughly pissed off. It was half past ten, and he was just getting to work. Shit! What a world... What a shitty world. He had a wife, if that was the term for a frigid, incompetent, shoddy, boring, getting fatter every day, woman...Was she a woman even? Had he married a man? A transsexual or whatever you called the perverted bastards? The thought horrified him. He knew he was talking nonsense, but a.....man? He shuddered at the thought.

So no sex this morning...or last night....or last week....or last month. He'd had some the month before because they had both got drunk, and he fucked her as she was half unconscious. Not exactly satisfying, but in a way.....very satisfying.

So he'd left home in a foul mood as his wife bumped into the table again. Again! She was always bumping into things...tables, doors, beds....she was a mass of bruises!

He had to leave her; he just had to. But how? If they divorced, his nice little semi-detached house in the suburbs would go, and he wouldn't be able to afford anything like that again with house prices being what they were. It would be a bedsit somewhere in the capital, but that seemed a rather lonely existence. Of course, it would also allow him to see the nightlife, and there were plenty of single women. Sex..... A glow lit him up. Proper sex with a proper woman. Maybe it wasn't such a bad idea after all.

He was now only half a mile from the bank, but his pace was slowing down, and he felt knackered. Fucking suicide bombers! Why today? Or why couldn't they have blown themselves up *after* he had used the tube? Inconsiderate bastards! And now they were with vestal virgins in some fucking far off place. Oh yeah.....as if. If they'd wanted a virgin, they could have had the wife. He smiled to himself. Now there *was* a reason for blowing yourself up!

The rain started to come down, wetting his smart, I-work-at-a-bank suit. What else was going to cock up his day?

When he arrived at the Bank, he was met immediately by a teller. 'We've been trying to ring you.'

'Eh?'

'On your mobile. We've been trying to ring you.'

He felt his jacket pocket, but it wasn't there. Putting down his briefcase, he tumbled the combinations, and there it was. Eight missed calls, it said. 'Couldn't hear it in the briefcase. Sorry. What did you want that was so urgent?'

'Mr Serrano hasn't arrived. He rang in to say he has food poisoning, and you to see his clients. In fact, there's one waiting; he's been there half an hour.'

Baxter held up his hands in despair and cast his eyes to the ceiling. Foreigners! Bloody foreigners. Why did he leave safe old Lloyds TSB to come and work for a poxy South American bank? 'Have you got the file?'

'It's on the desk waiting for you. Mr Serrano said it was just a matter of tying it up.'

'It's *Senor* Serrano,' he said in exasperation. '*Senor!* How many times.....'

He gave up and went to the office. Entering, he saw a man sitting in front of the desk. Tall, handsome, well dressed, looking superior. Well, fuck you! As Baxter walked in, James stood up and towered over the five foot eight Baxter. He held out his hand.

‘James James,’ and felt the soft flesh of the hand that seemed reluctant to close on his; it touched fleetingly then moved away.

‘Morning, Mr James,’ replied Baxter, moving to his side of the desk and sitting down. ‘As you may have heard, Senor Serrano is ill, and I have been assigned to see you. Unfortunately, I was late due to problems on the tube.’

‘Yes, I heard on the news coming in. You were lucky.’

‘Yes.’ But, he thought, luck is a relative term. ‘Let me just have a quick look at your file.’

He quickly scanned through it. James James – *what a stupid name* – wanted twenty odd million..... Offering clubs and debenture..... Not willing to put up home..... He turned over some more pages to where he should find Serrano’s summing up. It was a terse one-liner: ‘Loan – no guarantees’. Baxter knew it meant ‘no loan – no guarantees’, but Serrano’s English left just a little to be desired. Baxter savoured the moment before it had even arrived. He just wanted to see the look on the self-important bastard’s face in front of him.

‘I’m afraid the loan has been declined, Mr James. Sorry,’ and to emphasise the cruel point he was making, he shut the file abruptly and stood up to terminate the meeting. James didn’t move.

‘I thought this was a done deal?’

Baxter shrugged. ‘Apparently not. It seems your collateral just doesn’t stand up.’

He was enjoying this. It was a part of banking that he found the most enjoyable; telling them to 'fuck off!' You made your money on the 'yes's', and you got your kicks from the 'no's'.

'I supplied Senor Serrano with all the information he asked for. Business plan, P and L, Balance sheet, three-year projections, and I was led to assume that it was ok...'

'As I said, apparently not.'

Baxter moved towards the door. 'Now, if you will excuse me, I am rather behind and need to get on...?'

James still didn't move. 'Are you sure about this? It is quite at odds with what I was led to believe.'

'Quite sure.'

'You couldn't have misinterpreted the file?'

Baxter sighed. 'I have been a Banker for many years, Mr James, and I can assure you that I do not misinterpret files. Now, if you wouldn't mind.....'

He beckoned to the door. James still didn't move. 'Perhaps you could ring Senor Serrano to make sure.'

'That won't be necessary, Mr James; now, if you will just....' and he waved a hand in the direction of the door.

James realised he now had first-hand experience of why the words banker and wanker were synonymous. 'Ring Senor Serrano.....' said James.

Baxter was just about to dismiss him again when he heard the voice. He had already heard the sentence, but now, a moment or two later, he heard the voice behind it. There was something about the voice, and it stopped him dead. It wasn't threatening, it wasn't loud, it wasn't aggressive, but nevertheless, it bothered him on a level that he couldn't quite understand. He felt uneasy. He felt vulnerable. And for some ridiculous reason, he felt *scared*. He threw off the feelings.

‘Mr James, there really is no point to this. You just have to accept that in this instance we cannot help you. You have to try other banks to see if they are more willing to *speculate* with their shareholders’ money. Now, if you wouldn’t mind....’

‘Ring Senor Serrano.’

This time it was worse. He felt it hit him in the chest. His heart started pumping faster, and he felt his hands tremble. What the hell was happening? James knew what was happening, so he took him out of his dead end and gave him an exit. ‘I’m sure one phone call would clear things up...’

He stood up, picked up the phone and gave it to Baxter. ‘Do you have his number?’

Baxter looked at him blankly and nodded. James beckoned to the phone, and Baxter punched in the number. It rang for quite a while, then Baxter said, ‘Senor Serrano, I am sorry to get you out of bed, but I appear to have a slight problem here and I wonder if you would be kind enough to help me. I am with Mr James, and I have explained to him that we cannot help him with the loan he has requested and..... the file says he cannot have a loan.....’ he opened the file, went to the summation page and read, ‘loan – without guarantees’.

‘Yes, sir.....yes, sir.....yes, sir, Senor Serrano..... yes, sir....your office at ten tomorrow....yes, sir,’ and he gingerly put down the phone.

He turned back to James, and without quite looking at him said, ‘There appears to have been some kind of mistake,’ he stuttered, ‘.....and the Bank will give you the loan....’ he took a gulp of air as though the next part was like eating a lemon, ‘and without any guarantees over and above the debenture.’

James held out his hand to leave, and Baxter took it, wincing when James held it very tight.

‘Thank you for all your help,’ said James slowly while looking straight into Baxter’s eyes. ‘I’m sure Senor Serrano will want to talk to me in due course.....he has my home number.’
The threat hung in the air like an executioner’s axe.....

Chapter 8

The Truck Driver goes to work

The alarm had woken him, and he rolled over and shut it off quickly. He hated Sarah Kennedy with all his being, what with her ridiculous jokes, plummy voice and life he didn't recognise. But she was good to him in one way: she made him wake up and shut her bloody whining prattle off! He moved gently out of bed, trying not to disturb his wife, and padded softly into the bathroom.

Ray Jones was fifty-four years of age and been a lorry driver for nearly all his working life. He started first of all as a drayman, delivering the beer to the pubs and restaurants, and it had been the happiest years of his life, allowing him to indulge in one of his major passions – beer, the others being food and pigeons.

He sometimes felt guilty about not including his wife on the list, but she was not a passion; she was his life...

He would often drink twenty to thirty pints a day and sometimes wondered how he ever managed to get the lorry back to the depot. Although a big man, the beer had made him considerably bigger, and now, even though it had been ten years since the change of job, done at the insistence of his doctor, and the reduction in beer intake, he was still a 'touch overweight'. He looked in the full-length bathroom mirror and rubbed his large stomach.

'Ho ho ho,' he said, doing his Santa Claus impersonation. He was used to these 5 am starts and enjoyed the clearness of the morning, the peace of the world. He washed and went

back into the bedroom to dress, and was not entirely surprised to find his wife had got up. Dressed, he found her downstairs cooking his breakfast. He went towards her and kissed her gently.

‘Thank you.’

‘You’re worth it.’

‘Thank you again.’

‘I suppose I can’t tempt you with muesli, toast and marmalade, grapefruit and coffee?’

‘You can tempt me with bacon, eggs, sausages, fried bread and a large cup of tea or two; exactly what you’re cooking.’

‘When you retire, I’m going to make sure you stick to a proper diet so that you lose weight.’

‘All I need is more exercise,’ he said, winking.

‘Based on that, you should be about seven stone,’ she said, grinning. ‘Is the lorry at the park or down at the steel mill?’

‘The mill.’

‘Could you take a package and leave it for Harry to take to Lynn?’

‘Sure.’

‘Will you be home this evening?’

‘It depends on how quickly I can turn around the other end. They’re a bolshie lot up there and quite happy to stop unloading at a moment’s notice. They also like the overtime, and if it’s getting close to knock-off, they make damn sure there’s still stuff to do. So it’s anybody’s guess. But I’ll try.’

He finished his breakfast quickly, wiping the remaining egg off his plate with a large piece of buttered white bread.

‘Just go and do the pigeons,’ he said, moving towards the back door.

Outside were his pride and joy. Homing pigeons had fascinated him from childhood, and he had kept them and reared them for as long as he could remember. Up until a few years ago, he had won the occasional race with them, but now, with the increase in popularity of the sport in a more commercial way, you had to have considerable money to buy the champions, and he couldn't afford it. However, he didn't mind. His pleasure came from the birds, not from the winning. He and his wife, Doris, spent happy hours driving to different parts of the country in the car to liberate the birds. They then drove slowly back, stopping at the odd pub on the way for a pint and a sarnie, and then they, like the birds, arrived back at their roost.

Ray was a rare individual. He was happy. Always had been and always would be. His demeanour was always the same, no airs, no graces. Whoever met him, wherever, whenever, would all have given the same description. He had an honesty that came through any lack of deception, self or otherwise. Ray was.....Ray.

Back in the house, he sat down for one last cup of tea and looked at his wife.

'What are you thinking?' she enquired.

He paused for a moment. 'I suppose I'm thinking how lucky we are, but it was more of a feeling really.'

'In what way?'

'In every way.'

They looked at each other for long moments, and a tear moved slowly down her cheek. 'Yes.'

Down at the steel mill, he went to the loading bay and clocked on, checked the weather forecast on the internet along with any other road information available, then went out to his lorry. It had been loaded overnight, but it was still his responsibility to check the safety of the load for both weight and stability. He moved around the trailer, checking the stays, but found everything as it should be. Getting into the cab of the turbocharged diesel, he started the engine and moved down to the weighbridge where the load was checked.

‘You’re three grammes over your capacity,’ shouted the grinning man from the weighbridge office.

‘Oh my God!’ shouted back Ray dramatically. ‘I’ll have to go back and tell them that the bridge keeper says I can’t go. Oh Lordy, how will I feed my starving children?’

‘You’ll have to eat your bloody pigeons; it’s about time something did. My tortoise can fly faster.’

‘In the words of our immortal bard Shakespeare, “stick it up your arse”.’

‘I bet you’ve never even read William Shakespeare, you illiterate truck driver.’

‘That wasn’t William; that was Fred Shakespeare, our milkman.’

Ray grinned, enjoying the almost daily riposte with his friend from the pigeon club. He waved at the man. ‘Have a nice day ya all,’ he said in a voice that sounded more like a strangled parrot than an American.

He put the twelve-gear automatic box into drive; the truck let out a pssst as the air brakes released, and he pulled out onto the road.

He had three hundred miles to go today. It was going to be another long day, and pulling all this steel around was quite tiring as you had to be ahead of the game all the time with the anticipated stopping distances and some of the clowns that were on the road nowadays.

Some of them had no idea how much distance he needed to stop the bloody thing! Fully laden, it was forty-four tonnes of instant death if you happened to get in front of it, and although the Volvo fourteen-litre, 420 bhp engine and brakes did a magnificent job, if there was a mistake, you could expect to look like an undercooked beef burger!

Chapter 9

Baxter thinks about Serrano

Baxter fumed all day. He bollocked the staff for any infringements, major or minor, real or imagined, and prayed that some stupid, dumb, thick, council house couple would arrive looking for a loan that he could refuse with complete and utter contempt and without any possibility that the high and mighty fucking Serrano would stick an oar in.

He also spent much time with his feet up on his desk, contrary to Bank regulations, trying to work out how he could stop the loan to Mr James-fucking-stupid-name-James from going through, and wondered whether he could, or even should, tell Head Office in Bogota about it. It was obvious it was a scam and that Serrano was getting a huge kickback from the deal; why else would he allow a loan with no guarantees? He thought some more, and the more he thought, the more it made sense. That was why Serrano had gone off the deep end. He was scared! It had been a balls-up – him being off the one day he needed to be in – and he must have prayed that I would just have signed it off without too much thought. That was it! The bastard is working an inside scam and making a fortune!

The more he thought about it, the more obvious it became. But what should he do?

Do nothing....?

Tackle Serrano and get a percentage?

Tell Head Office and get Serrano sacked and be promoted?

He thought through all the options.

Do nothing....that was the safe option, and, let's be fair, there's no concrete proof of a scam.....but why would you give someone a loan with no guarantees? It didn't stack up. The bastard was scamming!

Tackle Serrano....if it was a scam, and Serrano was making a packet, there was a chance that this wasn't the first time and certainly would not be the last, so there was an excellent opportunity to make a substantial, and easy, amount of extra money. It sounded good.

Tell Head Office; maybe? But what if the fellow he talked to at Head Office was in on it? Maybe they were all in on these things. Maybe that was the way it was done in South America? Who knows?

He decided to think about it overnight and decide what to do.....?

Chapter 10

The Russian Billionaire

Oleksander Aranazov stood on the vast deck of his 'log cabin' in Aspen, looking at the snow-covered peaks in the near distance. The twenty thousand square foot 'family' home had all the latest toys befitting a man who, at forty-six years of age, was one of the richest men in the world. From humble farm beginnings in the Ukraine, he had built up an Empire, one way or another, in steel and energy, and then in the early part of the twenty-first century, he had sold the lot to Gazprom. It was not from choice, but when the most powerful man in Russia tells you to do something, it is better to do it and live than refuse and die. And it could have been a lot worse. He was allowed a reasonable price and the ability to move a reasonable amount (the amount that was reasonable to the man sitting behind his desk in the Kremlin) into dollars. So now he had ten billion. Five in US, five in rubles. And at an exchange rate of nearly twenty-five rubles to the dollar, that was a lot of rubles! And he was still alive and having a good time.

His money bought him a luxurious lifestyle: the ability to hire anyone at any time to do anything (Beyonce had been paid \$5M for an hour of her time to sing for his guests at his forty-fifth birthday) and all the pretty young things he could handle. Literally.

'It's a magnificent view, my friend,' said his guest, and broke into his reverie.

Oleksander turned and smiled. 'Better than Afghanistan?'

The man grinned. 'Much.'

'Better than Iraq?'

The man let out a belly laugh. 'A touch.'

'Why do you do it?'

'You keep asking that. How many times are you going to ask?'

'Until I get an answer I can understand.'

'You will never understand, my friend.'

Oleksander sighed in exasperation. 'Why....' he started.

'Not again...surely not again.'

'Why...' he continued, 'does a highly educated Saudi prince, at Stanford no less, join Al-Qaeda as a footman, rise through the ranks to become number three behind Ayman al-Zawahiri and embark on a reign of terror against the Mighty Satan and, I may add, anyone else that is in the way, and for no real apparent reason?'

The Saudi said nothing. He had heard it before.

'Now, I know it's not for Allah; that's bullshit and just keeps the ignorant faithful in line. And it's not that you have been oppressed, because the British got out of Saudi a long time ago. And you haven't looked back since Yamani endeared you to the West when he quadrupled oil production, and you realised what you had in terms of power. You got rid of him and have been riding the crest of a wave with a dubious future ever since.' He grinned. 'I bet you wished Carlos the Jackal had kept him?'

He drained the wine.

'So what is it, my friend, that takes you to the hills, to the caves, to the supporters of Allah and the amateur pilots? What makes you destroy the World Trade Centre, and yet you

sit here drinking Californian champagne and admiring the Great Satan's mountains?'

A'zam Saud, a descendant of the King of the House of Saud, smiled, bowed slightly to his friend and raised his glass. What indeed? A few years ago, he detested the House of Saud with its hypocrisy and corruption, so he left to join Osama, an old friend. He had money in several bank accounts, connections, intellect and a burning desire to correct injustice. After a short time, he had realised that was, to use a term used by the Great Satan, bullshit. Oh yes, he still wanted to fight injustice, but what he really wanted to do was *fight*. The ambushes, hijackings, roadside bombs, kidnappings, torture and occasional rape of an informer's wife in front of the condemned man. That was what really turned him on. That was the crusade.

To live! To be alive. To feel everything that the world abhors. It wasn't the liberation of others.....it was the liberation of himself.

And now he was no different than his supposed enemy of many years ago. Now he was just the collector, going from state to state, faction to faction, rich person to rich person and charming them into a generous contribution to the cause.

Whatever it was now.....?

There was a part of him that wanted an end to it all. He was tired, and he had had enough, but there was nowhere to go where he wouldn't die.

He could live in Syria or Iran, but who the hell would want to live there? And anywhere else, and the Israelis, Americans or his own side would find him and then.....so he carried on.....collecting.

'So how much this time?' asked Oleksander.

‘As much as you can afford.’

‘I can afford far more than you can ever need, but that is beside the point. What’s it for? Something specific?’

The Saudi said nothing, which bothered the Russian.

‘This won’t give me a problem, will it?’

‘How could it? Are you going to do the dirty work?’

Chapter 11

Baxter confronts Serrano

John Baxter was thoroughly pissed off. It was half past ten, and he was just getting to work. Shit! What a world... What a shitty world. No sex this morning...or last night....or last week....or last month. So he'd left home in a foul mood as his wife bumped into the table again. Stupid cow...stupid cow.

He had to leave her; he just had to. But how? If the meeting today with Serrano went well, it may be that would solve the problem. The extra, tax-free money that Serrano would stump up would be a secret, and he could divorce her and live a good life. Get another house, better car, better woman, better sex. He smiled to himself.

He was now only half a mile from the bank, but his pace was slowing down, and he felt knackered. Fucking Network Rail bastards! Why today? Or why couldn't they have gone on strike *after* he had used the tube? Inconsiderate bastards! Three days off for a two and a half percent pay rise...where was the upside in that?

The rain started to come down, wetting his smart, I-work-at-a-bank suit. He went in, smartened up, then knocked on the door of Serrano.

'Come in.'

Pompous bastard. He went in and closed the door behind him. Senor Serrano beckoned him to a chair. 'Good morning, John.'

'Morning, Sir. I'm glad to see you're well.'

‘A bit of undercooked chicken, that’s all. Not good, but not bad. Now, tell me what happened yesterday....?’

‘It was a genuine misunderstanding, sir. I had gone through the file quite carefully, and when I came to your summation, it did not appear to tally with the facts. We appeared to be lending a substantial amount of money, in fact, a considerable sum of money, to a man with no history with us, having been turned down by another Bank, and who could not offer us the usual level of guarantees which we would need.’

He looked at Serrano for a sign...what was he thinking? Was he nervous? Was his scam becoming transparent? Serrano was unreadable. Clever bastard. He must have done this a few times to be so cool.

‘And so when I came to your summation which read ‘loan – no guarantees’, I thought you meant you were referring to the loan and stating ‘no guarantees’, which I took to mean no loan, no guarantees. That’s really all there is to it.’ He sat back and watched Serrano intently.

‘So you declined the loan?’

‘Yes.’

‘And what did Senor James say?’

For a second, Baxter hesitated. Has James talked to Serrano? He decided to play safe. ‘He stated that he had given us all the documents etc. that we needed and that he was under the impression, to use his words, it was a “done deal”.’

‘Why would he think that?’

Baxter just waded in... ‘I assume because you told him.....so.’ Too late. He had seen the trap far too late.

‘And yet you chose to deny the loan even though there was a possibility that I had agreed it but may, just may, have put an ambiguous comment on the file?’

‘I rang you.’

‘Please, John, don’t insult my intelligence. I know why you rang.’

Baxter summoned up his courage and decided to press. ‘So why did you give him a loan that should have been declined?’

‘Because I can.’

‘That doesn’t answer my question.’

‘It does. It just may not be the answer you want.’

Baxter was at a crossroads. Accept the situation or go for broke. His pulse raced, and his head hurt, but he blurted out, ‘I think you gave him that money without authority.’

‘I don’t need authority. That’s the difference between you and me,’ he said with just a hint of sarcasm.

‘I think you hatched this up with James (what a fucking stupid name) James, and he is looking after you.’

Baxter waited. What would happen now? An explosion? A feeble explanation? A deal? Serrano leaned back in his chair and stretched. Then he moved forward, opened a drawer and fished about in it until he found a toothpick. Serrano resumed a comfortable but slouching position in the large swivel chair and said, ‘So you think I have agreed a loan with a client without guarantees, and for that the client has given me a sum of money?’

Baxter knew he had him. He just knew it! ‘Money, girls, houses....something. You’re getting something.’

Serrano nodded. ‘How much do you think I’m getting?’

‘On the money involved, more than likely a million.’

Serrano nodded again. 'And as you have not got in touch with my superiors yet, I assume we could.....negotiate about this?'

'Yes.'

'And assuming the sum you think I received for helping Senor James was roughly in the region you have suggested, what would you suggest is the figure you and I negotiate around?'

Baxter thought quickly. Asking for too much was no good, neither was too little. Let him have the majority and get in on the next scam?

'Fifteen percent and ten percent of all other loans so that I can cover your back.'

'So if I give you one hundred and fifty thousand pounds, you will turn a blind eye to what you think I have done this time and also you will help me with.....future transactions.....if I give you ten percent of what I illegally make?'

'Yes.'

Serrano smiled. 'How soon do I have to give you this money?'

Baxter was jubilant. What a result! A hundred and fifty. Tax-free!

'Seven days.'

'And how do you want it paid? In an offshore Bank or cash?'

'Offshore.'

Serrano smiled again. 'No.'

Baxter was puzzled. 'Cash then.'

'No.'

Baxter was lost. What was he rabbiting on about? 'No what?'

'No to your suggestion.'

'How else can you pay it?' asked Baxter.

'I'm not paying you anything.'

'If you don't, I go straight to Head Office.'

Serrano smiled and shook his head slowly. 'John, I don't think I have met anyone more stupid than you in all my life. Do you honestly think I would give an unsecured loan to someone off the street, with all the checks and balances we have?'

'You have,' said Baxter defiantly.

'Did you ever ask yourself why? Or could you only come up with one reason and that reason was that I was crooked?'

'Why else?'

'Because he is the son in law of Senor Reyes, and Senor Reyes is not only one of the Bank's biggest customers but also a significant shareholder.....'

Baxter died. Panic overwhelmed him. His arse felt as though it was going to explode and pebble-dash the office.

'So, John, it would seem this is the end of your banking career.'

'You can't prove anything. Not a thing. It's my word against yours.'

Serrano picked up a phone. 'Lucy, could you come in, please?'

The matronly Lucy came in, and Serrano beckoned her to a seat.

'Lucy, I want you to listen very carefully to what you are about to hear.'

He reached in the toothpick drawer again, and voices came out of the speakers attached to his computer. Baxter heard himself say all the things that would hang him. He got silently out of the chair and walked out of the office, collected his coat and left the Bank never to return. And there would be no more Banks to return to; he was done for.

He trudged back to the tube to find that they were on strike. He had forgotten. Ah, fuck! He felt detached; his shoulders felt like concrete, and his head ached. Somehow, in the space of an hour, he had gone from dreams of another house, another car, another woman and plenty of sex to no job, the house at risk, crap car and a woman whose sex was debatable.

He stopped at a small corner shop and bought two lottery tickets and a packet of cigarettes. He never won on the lottery, and he hadn't smoked for five years, but fuck it!

Chapter 12

The reassessment of the casino

Cleggy was the lynchpin in relation to the casino, so he liaised with the two men who worked for the opposition and also with Adrian, who was going to run the new acquisition. It was Adrian who first alerted Cleggy to the problem, and then all four of them had monitored the approaching sea change with a mixture of trepidation and, on the part of H, opportunism. It was something that needed doing, that the country needed, that the majority of its citizens had demanded, but it was killing the casino industry. The smoking ban!

The smoking ban was changing habits, and none more so than in the casino industry. It meant that people were not staying as long in the casino; they stayed until they desperately needed a fag, and as you just can't wander to the nearest door, as in a pub, once they had made their way outside and had a good dose of nicotine, they didn't bother going back. It had ended their run, their concentration, their time there.

The smokers were no longer dying, but the casinos were. And it was all because you needed a punter to stay and put his winnings back in the machine or the table. The maths were quite clear. On a blackjack table, the average return was about 2.7%. However, that return moved up considerably because the winners stayed and lost a lot of their money back to the table. That meant that the average take moved from

2.7% to nearer 17.5%. The same applied to all the games there.....

But now they were leaving early, or at least not staying very long. The average stay of a punter was usually about four hours; this was now down to forty-five minutes. Forty-five minutes! *Forty-five fucking minutes!* How much money can you take off somebody in forty-five fucking minutes?! Profits had dropped dramatically, and so had the asking price of casinos. The acquisitive Americans had dropped out of buying up British casinos, and prices were nearly half what they were four months ago. And this posed a dilemma for H. It was half the cost and a third of the profits. What to do?

After a long chat with Adrian, who had already had a peek at The Reno, and Cleggy, who knew everyone, and consulting that well-known teller of fortunes, Excel, H knew what to do next. It was agreed that their two comrades in arms, or at least partners in crime, would halve their estimate of the casino's worth. The Groups that they worked for were very aware of their own tumbling profits, and they had absolutely no desire to overpay for a reducing asset, then be set upon by the shareholders for wasting money.

That meant they would pay half the original eleven million, i.e. £5,500,000, and H would go in with six mil, plus the ten and a half mil for the bookies, which had not been hit by the smoking ban, plus a quarter of a mil for the internet site.

A total of £16,750,000, plus an extra mil that Ade had flagged up to completely upgrade and refurbish the casino.

They had to work out a new incentive structure for the comrades, but that was easy. An extra £200,000 tax-free to both to help ease the rigours of retirement seemed to be acceptable, and, of course, some for Cleggy.

Adrian declined.....

Chapter 13

Lucky dip

It had been hell.

He had explained to his wife that he had been made redundant with immediate effect as the branch was closing. As he hadn't been there very long, he also explained that the amount of severance pay was basically nil as the bastard South Americans had little feeling towards their English employees.

He raided a secret 'rainy day' fund to put the equivalent of a month's net wages in his bank account so that she would not be suspicious.

Luckily, the day after, Lloyds Bank announced the closure of some of their offices, and so it tied in with his story. It also allowed him to have problems finding another job which he certainly did. The large financial institutions were a closed shop to him as they would all take up previous employer references, but the smaller boys, the IFAs, the brokers, he may stand a chance with. Alas no.

What broker would want a smarmy ex-banker who had always looked down their noses at them? No thanks.

It had taken three months, but he was now helping to pay the mortgage by answering highly technical financial questions in.....a call centre. A fucking, shitting, arseholing call centre! He cringed as he thought about it. He was one of nearly six hundred people in an enormous room that hummed all day with 'good....., this is..... my name is..... can I.....'

And so it went on. Day after day after day. He knew he said it in his fucking sleep! The only good thing about the whole demeaning experience was the women. There were women everywhere. You couldn't move for women, and with the current vogue for cavernous displays of bosoms, it was wonderful. And they flirted. And if you didn't go too over the top, you got the occasional feel. He'd had more sexual excitement over the last few weeks than in years. And there was one pretty little thing who he had arranged to meet next week.

'What are you thinking about?' asked his wife.

'Nothing, why?'

'You were smiling.'

'Just a joke I heard at work.'

'Tell me.'

'No. It was a bit crude; you wouldn't like it.'

'I may.'

If only, he thought, oh if only we could be crude. If I could lose myself amongst the degradation and filth of sex and *be allowed to enjoy it.....*

'Dinner's ready.'

'Ok.'

He wandered into the dining room, and she shouted through, 'You've got those old trousers on. Take everything out of your pockets, and I'll put them ready to wash after.'

Unthinking, he took out a few pounds, two credit cards, a petrol receipt and an old lottery ticket. 'I've got an old lottery ticket; we could be rich.'

'Unlikely.'

He nipped into his study, clicked on Google and found the lottery site. Putting in his number, he was amazed when he saw he was a winner. A Jackpot winner! 'Christ,' he said softly, and instantly he realised this was his exit. Keep quiet, say nothing, fuck her off and then claim.

'We've won the jackpot,' said a soft voice behind him...

His heart sank. Oh great. Was there no end to his run of bad luck? Resigned to his fate, he said, as happily as he could, 'Yes; isn't that incredible?'

'How much is it?'

He peered at the screen. 'Three million seven hundred thousand-ish.'

'That *is* incredible. Now come and have your dinner, and we'll talk it through.'

He reappraised the situation. Maybe it wasn't so bad. Nearly two million each, and she could still piss off. Life was good after all. His luck had changed, and life was good after all... Fuck the dago Serrano and fuck the call centre.

He heard a loud piercing scream come from the kitchen. It would have woken half the street if it had been bed time. What the hell has the silly bitch done now? He stuffed the ticket in his pocket and hurried in. 'What?' he asked agitatedly.

'A spider....a big spider.'

An enormous wave of disappointment swept through him. Of her, of their marriage, of this, of that. Please let it all end soon. 'Where?'

'Under there somewhere. He just scuttled under there. He was enormous.'

‘Yeah....’ he said, knowing that enormous spiders didn’t live in outer London. He hunted for a few minutes, but could find nothing.

Satisfied she wasn’t going to be devoured as she served, she said, ‘Could you just carry that casserole in while I cut some fresh bread, please?’ and gave him a pair of oven mitts.

He put on the mitts, picked up the piping hot casserole dish, turned round and then stopped still. Perplexity crossed his face as he saw the smile on hers, followed by pain. He was in much pain, but somehow....somehow....it wasn’t real pain. Why would there be real pain? and then he looked down at his chest, and the twelve-inch carving knife with just the handle sticking out of it. He looked at her again, and puzzlement spread over it.

‘Why.....what.....?’ he gurgled.

He tried to speak again, but slumped to the floor and lay in the hot food that was encircling him. She watched him for a moment, making sure he no longer breathed. Reaching into his pockets, she searched until she found the ticket, put it in her pocket, then went to a door in another room and held the doorknob. Bracing herself, she pulled the door towards her as hard as she could, and the edge smashed into her face. Then again. Her face puffed up, her lips swelled and bled, and her eyes watered so much she couldn’t see. She sank to the floor as the blows took their giddy toll, waited a few minutes for the giddiness to clear, then got up and went back to the kitchen. She looked at him again.

He hadn’t moved, and the outpouring of blood had ceased. Going back into the lounge, she picked up the phone and dialled 999.....

Chapter 14

H gets the casino

Twelve weeks later, H heard his bid had been accepted by the Executors of Hathaway's estate, and he now owned thirty betting shops, a casino – assuming Gaming Commission approval, although informal talks had indicated there would not be any referral – and an internet poker site.

Unbelievably, after the deal had been done, The Chancellor of the Exchequer increased the tax band on smaller casinos to 20%, which was a real ball breaker!

H formed a new Holding Company, JJ Holdings Ltd, into which he put all his companies, splitting them into independent legal entities, and if one went belly up, they wouldn't all be affected.

It comprised:

J J Casinos Ltd

J J Internet Poker Ltd

J J Nightclubs Ltd

J J Betting Shops Ltd

J J Security Ltd

There had been some technical debate with the accountants as to the tax efficiency of bringing the internet site in with J J Casinos Ltd, but it had been decided that stand-alone, and its Malta location, was better and offered more opportunity for taxable offsets, and things.....

Now all that needed doing was to sort it out and to do that he needed help. Certainly Adrian could sort out the Casino, but what about the betting shops and the internet site? And what about the fact that this was now a biggish business which H could hardly run from the back of a fag packet in his study at home?

He needed help. A right-hand man or woman? Nah.....a right-hand man. He didn't need a useless woman around the place.

Chapter 15

Adrian joins H

Adrian left his employers and joined JJ Casinos Ltd as General Manager and set about trying to make it more profitable. As in all businesses, there were good, bad and downright ugly. His little gem was in between the last two. The Reno Casino, not renowned for its original name, had merely been a cash cow, disgorging an amount of profits each year, which were quite high regarding return on capital employed, but only because nothing was going back in to be reinvested. The place needed a new coat of paint, some new tables whose cloths had faded and in some places worn away.....and more electronic terminals. On top of that, it needed better seating, better eating facilities, better food, better music, better lighting, better everything, to attract more customers.

All in all, about a million pounds. Perhaps a touch less.

He called in an established company of designers he had used before at a previous casino and told them what he wanted. More space, better lighting, more colour, more seating, more machines, better eating facilities, more....excitement!

They went away and created storyboards, then modelled the interior and the new layout and fittings on their CAD system. Eight weeks later, they were sitting in Ade's office, H attending, with the laptop purring away and sending its 3D presentation to the large plasma on the wall. Adrian was

pleased with what they had done. Much better use of space; they had knocked down two walls (he had mentioned one) and moved the bar area, which made the world of difference. He looked enquiringly at H for his approval, but H smiled and said, 'It's fine by me, quite impressive, but it's your baby; you're the expert. I'm just the one who's paying.'

With minor modifications, Ade agreed the plans, and they went away to get drawings completed and quotes off several refurb companies.

Ade made a mental note to apply for planning and inform licensing and the Gambling Commission for their approval to the changes.

Another month later, they returned with the job completed. 3D finished, drawings ready for the refurb company and a timetable for the work. And the Bill. £850,437 for the refurb and 7% for the design. A grand total of £909,967. Plus VAT of course.

It would now take about four weeks to finish the job. Adrian had insisted that the casino wasn't closed while it was being done, or, if absolutely necessary, a Monday or a Tuesday, and so they worked through the nights. From 3:30 till 11:30 for all major work and then non-invasive work could carry on through the day. As long as the clients were not inconvenienced. The 3D presentation showing the new interior was shown on several plasmas in the casino so that the customers could see what it was going to be like, and therefore didn't mind a little bit of disturbance. But only a little bit...

Adrian had learned many years ago that how you defined things dictated what happened to them. In this instance, he had regarded the design money as an *investment* to promote

gambling, keep his clients happy and therefore increase revenue and profit. If he regarded it as a cost, it would have been seen as too expensive, pruned down to the lowest amount possible and wouldn't be half as good. And half as good meant half the profits! If you were lucky...

While the refitting was taking place, it was time to 'sort out' the general running of the place, which was amateurish. Whoever had owned it before didn't know too much about casinos, and the General Manager was poor. The ex-General Manager was poor.

When Ade arrived, he found Croupiers standing looking bored at the tables with not enough action at any of them. And on a good night, half of them didn't arrive! Salaries were low, and there was no incentive to work the most profitable peak time, when the real gamblers played, from about 1:30 am till 3. The staff were generally there for a salary and had no interest whatsoever in the clients, the company or how it operated. It wasn't their fault; it was bad management!

And there were very few remote electronic terminals. These would be hooked up to the roulette wheels, and you could play a wheel remotely. They were wonderful, as it meant gamblers that were a bit shy at a table could still play, and the player who was superstitious, or even paranoid, or always thought the croupier was out to cheat him, could just play from a distance. And if you didn't want to play through a table, you could always play against the machine.

And so Ade started the clearout. He watched for several days and said nothing – let them think he was as bad as the other guy – and then he had them in the office one by one. After a talk, twelve decided to leave immediately, and forty were

given written warnings. Ade knew they would still be crap, so their days were numbered one way or the other.

With the staff that were left, he changed things. Croupiers no longer stood by empty tables, and the number of employees working at any one time matched the client throughput. If there were few clients, there were few tables open. Obviously!

The previous management had refused to pay overtime which meant that few people would work the late shift. Ade introduced extra money for the critical period after midnight and also tried to give his staff hours that suited them. That meant he had moms that could only do from lunch until late afternoon and younger bucks who were happy to keep going all night, and got extra pay for doing so. And, as in all companies where good leadership is shown, the casino started to operate efficiently. To maximise the client base as soon the refurb was completed, Ade set about enticing two other managers from other casinos in town to join him.

He had visited the casinos and watched their staff and worked out who he wanted. They were efficient, but more than that, they were good with customers, with personal greetings, smiles, jokes and all the other things you needed to do to keep clients coming through the door. And they would bring their clients with them!

Just after the refit was completed, the unexpected happened. Ade was knifed.

It was certainly unexpected by Ade.

And over nothing. A manager had called him to the front door where he had refused entry to two men who were slightly drunk but insisting on going in. Ade tried to calm them down,

but when they got even more aggressive, he told the manager to go and call the police. When he was out of sight, one of them stuck a knife in Ade's chest, and they ran. Laughing and shouting and punching fists in the air, they ran. Laughing and shouting? What a fucking world we live in.....

With blood seeping through his shirt, he staggered back to reception, and they called an ambulance. The first aid person on the staff immediately arrived and saw that the knife had been removed. He sat Ade upright and got someone to get towels from the toilets. He put his ear by Ade's chest and listened.....no sucking noises or blood bubbling, which was a good sign. The knife had missed anything critical. When the towels arrived, he put them on Ade's chest and pressed firmly. They found some string off a package that had recently arrived and tied it around him to keep the towels firmly in place, and then waited for the ambulance. Ade looked enquiringly at his first aid man. 'Always wanted to be a doctor....'

They kept him in overnight, made sure there was nothing serious going on that was not obvious, and H collected his bandaged Manager the next day.

'I leave you alone for one minute.....'

'I join you, and then I'm stabbed.....'

'Life's fun, eh?' said H, grinning.

'Certainly is.'

As they drove back, they chatted about this and that, and H said, 'Did you recognise them?'

'No.'

'Ok, I'll sort it out.'

‘You can’t, H. Not this time. You’re now a respectable Casino owner and floating bodies going down the river are frowned upon by the Gaming Commission. I think they much prefer you to tell the police and alert the other casinos.’

‘Not even a bit of a dip? A mere wetting? A touch of fluid in the lungs?’

‘No. Nothing. The police and casino alert. That’s it.’

‘A bit boring, isn’t it? What kind of message does that send out?’

‘That you are a respectable casino owner who does things in accordance with the law of the land and the Gaming Commission.’

H said nothing for several minutes.

‘Ok, but I don’t like my friends or employees attacked. I don’t like that.’

‘I know, H, and I appreciate your concern, but this is the only way.’

‘You do understand, don’t you, that if that knife had killed you, there would have been no police and two dead bodies. And I wouldn’t have given a fuck for the Gaming Commission taking it off me.’

‘I understand that, yes, I do.’

‘Ok, then this time we do it your way, but would you arrange for lightweight flak jackets for the doormen to make sure this doesn’t happen again. And get a raft of cameras to cover any possible trouble spots. Ok?’

‘Ok, H.....’

‘Lucky bastards,’ mumbled and grumbled H.

Adrian smiled to himself. They were indeed lucky bastards; they would only have to answer to the police!

Chapter 16

The Detective

Roy Jenkins was taking early retirement, and he just couldn't wait. Only in his mid-forties, but he had been in the police since he left school, had risen through the ranks to Detective Inspector, and now had enough of the culture, violence, obscene language, binge drinking, crude jokes and sex. And that was only at the station! It was even worse out on the streets.

So enough.

He had been left a house by his mother that would buy him a nice villa overlooking a golf course in Spain, and the money from his house would augment his pension. And perhaps, out there, he could work a day or two a week doing security or something or even translation as he was quite fluent in Spanish. His colleagues envied him, but couldn't cope, yet, with giving up the force with its daily ration of paperwork and male bonding.

Only a few, very few, weeks to go.

He had been to the crime scene, and there was nothing out of the ordinary. It was as she had said. Perhaps? It certainly appeared that he had come at her with a scalding dish of something and she had thrust out the knife to stop him, but was that it? It was too easy. Too simple. It was rarely simple....or at least not often.

And so they gathered around the table with the officers concerned and his deputy, Colin.

‘What do you think, Guv?’ they asked with the term that TV had long ago, and ever since, given them.

‘Just seems a bit too obvious to me,’ he said. ‘A bit too obvious.’

They all nodded, but mainly out of deference. One of the coppers was too thick to work it out, and the other wouldn’t help on principle. The principle being that he was a copper and he did the legwork. If they got paid the big bucks to use their brains, then let ’em get the fuck on with it. When he was plain clothes, he would use his brains, but until then.....fuck ’em!

‘Let’s just go over it again, Col...’

Col went over to a large white board, the type used in schools. It was connected to a computer, and it allowed the board to become the computer. He pushed his finger twice on the board, and a menu came up, and he was off. This was Col’s thing. Although any child of eight could use one, it was a skill that few in the Met possessed, and so it bestowed Col with much kudos as a technical wizard.

‘This is as much as we know,’ and he started pointing to headings on the board. ‘Norma Baxter and John Baxter. Married nearly twelve years. Nothing untoward as far as we can see. They’ve moved homes three times because of his job, that is, getting promotion and moving to another branch. He was recently sacked from his job for trying to embezzle from the Bank where he worked. A bit of a ladies man from what we can see from his current job. Indeed, we’re told that he was already having an affair, or at least they were putting one in place, with a woman there.....’

‘Indeed.....’ said one of the coppers in a pseudo-posh voice.

‘Fuck you,’ said Colin.

Jenkins inwardly sighed. 'Roll on Spain,' he said aloud.

'Sorry, Guv,' said the copper.

'Not much about her really, Guv,' continued Colin, but not before he'd stuck two fingers up at the copper, 'because, from the looks of it, she doesn't exactly set the world alight. Certainly not your typical stabber! Has a part time job in Boots on the specs side and seems to lead a quiet life. Goes line dancing twice a week and teams up with another lonely old soul, and they dance together. No hint of another man and not even a good lesbian relationship we can pin on her....'

'Shame,' said one of the coppers. 'I've always wanted to watch...what about you, bollock brain?' to his accomplice sitting alongside.

Jenkins glared at the coppers. For the full effect, he glared again. Jenkins realised that this wouldn't usually happen at one of his meetings and that they had essentially written him off as their superior. The king is dying.....let the bastard die slowly.

'Enough,' he said with as much authority as he could muster.

'And so to the deed,' carried on Col. 'As we have mentioned before, we are told, obviously by her, that he had threatened to throw a scalding casserole over her. She also said that she had suffered many months of violence and that she was terrified of being disfigured. Now we can't prove that one way or the other, but we have obviously done as much history as we can, and she has been to the doctors at least once every month, and on two occasions twice, for at least six months. Each time she had fresh bruises, and on one occasion she insisted on seeing a female doctor and showed her bruising to her vagina and anus.'

One of the coppers went to say something but decided against it...

‘On the night in question, a neighbour heard a loud scream only moments before the incident, and there was certainly fresh bruising where he appears to have hit her face.’

Jenkins thought for a moment.... ‘Any other motive....?’

‘They have very little money, Guv. Any money they had in the bank was swallowed up when he was sacked...and by the way, he didn’t tell her he had been sacked. Said he’d been made redundant. Moved some money from a Building Society account to their joint account to cover it up. There will be equity in the house, but half is taken up by mortgage...’

‘But the other half will be paid off by the Insurers?’

‘No, Guv. I’ve checked that, and there is a Clause in the mortgage for this sort of thing.’

‘Even if she’s not guilty?’

‘Yes, Guv. It’s not deemed an accident in the true sense of the word. So they tell me.’

‘Well, it still stinks to me,’ said Jenkins, ‘all a bit too pat; or should I say, Norma.....’

‘Good one, Guv,’ said a copper, ‘not heard that one before....’

Old jokes, old scenarios, old job, old man he wasn’t, but he felt it. He shuffled about on his seat as though undecided.

‘We should dig some more.....Col, here’s what I want you to do....’

Chapter 17

H needs an assistant

‘I agree,’ said H, nodding to his accountant, ‘it’s something that I’ve known for a while but done nothing about. But it’s a good idea nevertheless. What do I do?’

‘Same as everyone else, James...advertise.’

‘For what? An assistant? General Manager? Operations Manager? Tea boy? What...?’

Norm Phillips grinned. It wasn’t often James James was a bit stuck...

‘Why don’t we do what we should do and start from the beginning? What exactly do we want this person to do, and if we isolate all those things that you need but either don’t have the time to do, or don’t want to do?’

‘Ok.’

Norm moved to a Nobo board and said ‘Ok.....’

An hour later, after giggling hysterically at all the qualities that they would have liked but the law would not have allowed, they had reached a consensus. H left the room to go to the loo, and when he came back, he saw on the board.....

Summation

Young

Big tits

Big mouth with red lips

BSc(Honours) in fellatio

Must be able to make good coffee

More giggling and then Norm turned it over...

Operations Manager

Reporting directly to the Group Managing Director, you will be responsible for the overseeing of all of the Group's operations

The Job

- Collate all statistical and anecdotal information to provide an analysis of their performance
- Compare performance with outside indicators
- Suggest areas for improvement
- Suggest methods for the improvement

Qualities needed

- Self motivation
- Analytical mind
- Marketing background an advantage
- Knowledge of finance an advantage
- A common sense approach

Norm had wondered whether an accountancy, as against the vague 'financial', background would have been preferable, but one accountant was enough – there was no need to put James' fees at risk...

'Where do we put the advert?' asked H, and already his mind was off on a tangent. 'How about the Beano?' he suggested.

'Big Jugs weekly?' said Norm.

'Deadly snake of the Month Club?'

'Time Share for the discerning Investor?'

'Northern Rock for the discerning Investor.'

'How to get your subprime mortgage?'

'Tony Blair – How I Saved the World – monthly instalments'

‘Gordon Brown – How I Saved Britain – pay by instalments’
‘My complexion secrets – John Prescott.’
‘Holiday in North Korea – you’ll never leave.’

.....and so on it went until they could think of nothing else, and they decided, in the end, on the local paper, the Evening Standard and the Job Centre, which was free.

Norm Phillips wanted to just give it to a Recruitment Agency, but H had demurred, though he had relented to having a professional interviewer present.

And then H went back into the world and reality.

Chapter 18

The Detective (cont...)

‘Are you sure, Col.....nothing? Absolutely nothing?’

‘Nothing, guv. We’ve been over it all again, and there isn’t anything that jumps out at you. Now she may have just stabbed him for the hell of it, but the rest of her story stacks up.’

‘Oh shit.....and we’ve got the CPS in an hour. Oh great.’

The man and woman from the Crown Prosecution Service were old hands, thank God, because now they were using more and more trainees with two minutes’ training and thought they knew it all. Seen too much LA Law on the tele and wanted to rule the world.

After pleasantries and coffee, thoughts on who had nicked Maddie, if anyone, the new – a contradiction there – Brown Government, and into the issue at hand.

Jenkins stood his ground.

She had to be charged, even if they let her go after with ‘insufficient evidence’, he argued. It was a murderer’s charter...any woman would realise that she could just kill a violent husband with impunity?

It was the wrong thing to say. It was actually the right thing, but put wrongly. It was..... Shit! Wait for it.....

‘Are you suggesting somehow that men have an inviolate right to harm women but that women have no right to self-defence, Inspector?’ she bridled.

‘No, Julie,’ he said quietly, ‘quite the opposite. I just cocked up what I was trying to say, that’s all.’

He sounded tired and resigned. She heard the sincerity in his voice and left it alone.

‘I don’t see how we can prosecute,’ said the lawyer, ‘and get a conviction. Legally, it’s not a problem to haul her before the Courts with at least manslaughter, but get a conviction? I’m not so sure. What are your thoughts, Julie?’

‘It’s borderline. I agree with you that she should be charged and let the Court decide, but that’s the legal bit and my training talking. I also know that if there are any women on that jury, they will vote not guilty, and I doubt whether many men will have the guts to go home and say they didn’t stick up for a woman who was getting beat up by her husband. I tend to think we charge her and then drop it if nothing else comes up.’

‘I don’t really want to do that,’ said the lawyer. ‘If we go down that route, there is as much admin and paperwork and staff usage as though we were going to Court. I’d prefer us to be in or out. Especially as we have an even smaller budget this year, and so we don’t need, as it was explained to me the other day, “frivolous cases”.’

‘I have an idea,’ interjected Jenkins. ‘I am not convinced she is innocent but am willing to be persuaded that she is. If she is, then she deserves our sympathy; if not, she deserves jail. Give me two more weeks to see if I can find anything. If not, you can drop it...?’

The lawyers looked at each other and nodded. It was a neat solution and would make everybody happy, including the bean counters.

Jenkins had met Norma three times, and she had stood up well at the interview.

‘But there’s something Col....there’s something...’

‘Maybe it’s just time to let it go, Guv. She’s hardly part of the Krays, is she? Who cares?’

Jenkins closed his eyes, then clicked his fingers. ‘I know what it is,’ he said jubilantly. ‘She read the witness statement.’

‘Yeah....so?’

‘And when there was a screeching of brakes outside, she went to the window and looked.’

‘Yeah....so?’

‘She wasn’t wearing glasses.’

‘Sorry, Guv, but..so?’

‘When we’ve seen her, she wore glasses. She read in them, she saw distance in them. How could she see without them?’

‘Contacts?’

‘No...contacts will let you see long or short, but not both. Certainly not without much time for your brain to get used to them.’

Jenkins thought for many moments, and Colin wondered whether he had nodded off. ‘Is this woman just an actress Col? Are we dancing to her tune? Is she just pulling our strings? Let’s pay her a visit, Col....’

Norma Baxter sat demurely on the chair and the detectives a bit too formally on the sofa. She had offered them tea or coffee, but Jenkins had declined before Col had a chance to say yes to coffee.

‘This won’t take long, Mrs Baxter,’ Jenkins announced. ‘I just want to ask you one question. When we met you on two previous occasions, you wore glasses, and you used them for short and long sight. The last time we met you didn’t wear

them, and you obviously don't have them on now without any apparent difficulty. Perhaps you could explain that, please...?' She was silent for a moment or two. 'Yes, I can,' she said quietly.

'Inspector,' she started hesitantly, 'I am not the most attractive woman in the world, but I am, nevertheless, a woman. And like most women, I care about my features. I buy oils and scents and lotions and girly things that more than likely do absolutely no good whatsoever, but we think they do. My husband knew that was a weakness, which is why he liked to see me bruised and hurt. Not only did it hurt physically but also mentally. He knew that....'

Jenkins wanted to know what the hell this had to do with eyesight, but said nothing.

'When he hit or slapped my face, it was usually the side, but occasionally a finger would land in my eye. Once I couldn't see for nearly a week before the swelling went down and it stopped watering. I hated that. I hated it..... And so I bought a pair of clear-lensed glasses from work, with my staff discount, and told him my eyes had deteriorated and that I now needed to wear glasses.'

She paused and sipped at her tea. 'He still hit me, but it protected my eyes..... and now I don't need them as no one hits me.'

Colin looked at Jenkins, who looked at her.

'Thank you, Mrs Baxter,' said Jenkins as he stood up. 'I think that's fine.'

Back at the station, Jenkins rang the lawyers and told them what had happened and that he no longer had any objections to forgetting it. The lawyers breathed a sigh of relief. The last thing they needed was a crusading copper.

Chapter 19

Dieter White is arrested

It had not been a good time.

The police had arrived at his house and, in a vile temper, had refused to open the electric gates. When they requested politely that he reconsider and that all they wanted to do was talk to him, he still refused. When they pointed out that another refusal may be regarded as obstructing the police, he remembered an old Oscar Wilde riposte: 'Life is much too important a thing ever to talk seriously about it.'

'Fuck off, you fascist bastards,' he heard himself say through his temper and alcohol-filled brain, which, even in his state, was surely not Wilde?

Oh well.....and he went to the lounge.

They went away and came back with a SWAT police Range Rover with all the goodies and rang the intercom again, but with another bottle of wine in him, he didn't hear them as he slept on the sofa in the lounge. Attaching the hook of the winch to the gates, the Range Rover slowly gathered it in, and the gate bucked enough for the lock to prise apart, and then they were in. They knocked on the door and got no reply, so they smashed it in. In a drunken haze, he got up and was smashed in the face by a gloved hand. Rough hands grabbed him, lifted him up, smashed him in the face again and kned him in the groin. He sank to his knees in agony.

An officer radioed in. 'It's ok, Sarge. I think he may be on pills or something as he came at us like a bull, very violent, but after a bit of a scuffle, we've managed to restrain him and

bringing him in.'

Another looked down to White, 'Fascists bastards, eh?' and kicked him hard in the ribs.

They took him out and threw him in the back of another Range Rover that had a cage in the back usually reserved for the dogs...

He slept it off in the cell, and the next day he refused to answer questions without his solicitor being present. His solicitor arrived, quite confident; he had done this before when Dieter had assaulted someone in a bar or club after he had had a few. Ah well, this wouldn't take long; he had the speech off pat...

The list knocked him back... 'False imprisonment, rape, rape with others, buggery, assault, refusing reasonable entry to a police officer.....'

There was a joke there, he thought mischievously.

'.....obstructing police officers in the course of their duty, assaulting police officers, resisting arrest, urinating in a police vehicle, likening police officers to Satan's helpers, kicking the station door and last but not least, not drinking his tea as...' He looked at his notes. '.....it had more than likely come from the penis of the duty Sergeant... Which would be me, sir,' said the officer to the solicitor.

'My apologies, Sergeant,' said the solicitor. He made his face look contrite. 'I'm afraid my client gets a little....over the top when he's had a few.'

'Not a problem at all, sir. He's a delightful little chappy, and we look forward to seeing him as often as he wishes to visit.'

He smiled, but the message was very clear.....be careful..... because you've fucked about with us, and we don't like it.

He was charged the next day and refused bail.

Chapter 20

H picks an assistant

H had wished he had taken Norm's advice and given the job to a Recruitment Agency. Two hundred and thirty-two replies. Two hundred and thirty-two fucking replies!

A veritable forest of paper! An Amazonian plea for employment.....He decided to read them all, but after several couldn't be arsed. What a load of bollocks! He put them in a pile on the floor and decided to play poker. He switched on the site, found a game and was just about to enter when he stopped. He knew what he was doing. Escapism. You don't like what you should be doing, and so you do what you like. He turned off the site and looked at the pile on the study floor. Oh fuck...

He looked at the pile for several minutes and found himself wondering what the mathematical chance was of an 8 9 against A K, Q J, and 10 9? He shrugged, moved everything off his desk, picked up the pile without any hint of enthusiasm and plonked them down. He needed a system, other than the obvious one of sticking them all in the bin, so decided to read, if it was readable, the first page. If it were readable and realistic, it would go in one pile; if not, it would go in another.

An hour and a half later, Benny walked in and said, 'Are you all right? All I can hear is mumbling and cursing and "as ifs" and "oh yeahs"...and "you must be", expletive deleted, "joking". What are you doing?'

'Choosing an assistant?'

‘And....?’

‘And what?’

‘Have you got one?’

‘Down to twenty-four out of two hundred and thirty-two.’

‘That’s a lot of people who want a job.’

‘Nah. It’s a lot of people that want to work in the gambling and entertainment industry, and that’s two different things....’

‘And I suppose you’ll pick the ones with the biggest tits now that I’m going old and grey?’ she said in an old and grey voice.

He smiled and was about to answer when he stopped himself. ‘Nah,’ he said instead.

‘Cup of tea?’

‘Please.....and are there any of those Eccles cakes left that you made?’

‘Maybe....’ and she was gone.

He was going to say he wasn’t going to pick a woman, but that was a red rag to a bull, and so he had declined a battle that he couldn’t win. You could make any law you wanted, but to a large extent, he had no interest in working with women. He didn’t mind women working *for* him, but he had no interest in one working *with* him. It wasn’t chauvinism, he told himself, although he knew that wasn’t entirely true as he didn’t want to hear...

‘I’m pregnant.’

‘I’m getting married, and we’re moving.’

‘I can’t come in today because the kid is sick.’

‘Got to go home now to do the school run.’

Who needs it? And not only that, he wanted the luxury of saying what he wanted to say when he wanted to say it and do what he wanted to do when he wanted to do it. And if that

was a crude joke or scratching his arse, that was what he wanted. He could with a man; he couldn't with a woman. In essence, he wanted to be comfortable in his own world, and he didn't want to have to change to suit the mores of another world. And so, coward that he was, he hadn't said that to Benny, but that again proved, to him, his point. It could be hard work with a woman if you stray on the wrong subject...

At least with men, you were both wrong together! Men are from Mars, women are from Venus.....I don't think so.....they weren't even in the same solar system.....

An hour later, he was down to ten. A cross section from the high flyers looking for something 'different' to the staid middle of the road, right down to one or two no hopers who had appealed to his maverick sense.

It had all gone wrong. It shouldn't have, but it had.

H took an immediate dislike to the smart arse 'professional' interviewer and dismissed him after less than half an hour. As he left with 'I shall still have to charge you for the day', he heard a voice say, 'You can do what you like, but it won't be paid.'

Professional Interviewers would now join his list of jobs for which the only qualification was being negative about everything else. He ranked it just above Health and Safety but below County Council Executives. Professions, if that was the word, for people with little talent, few brains and a need to denigrate everything else to make them feel good about themselves.

H tried hard, but he struggled. It was crap. He didn't like this selection process and realised that it was his own prejudice that was getting in the way. He had been given no opportunity

when he left school until Arthur had helped him, and the chip on his shoulder was getting in the way. He struggled with the applicants who had had safe working lives, one step at a time up the career ladder, with a wife and two point four children. They were no doubt good men, but not what he wanted.

The last one of the day was the one to send them home with a good laugh. Allan Scott, mid-fifties, divorced, had a business degree, had owned several small businesses, but apparently hadn't made much, if any, money; had 'run' small companies for other people and done 'consulting' which H took to mean any job that he could get to pay the bills.

After the usual pleasantries, Norm asked, 'Why are you specifically interested in this job?'

Allan wasn't good at this and had no idea why he had managed to get an interview. He was on the verge of getting a job stacking shelves at Tesco when the letter arrived. He paused for a moment. He knew what he had to say, as he had been rehearsing it. He had consulted a 'How to be good at Interviews...' book and even spent twenty pounds to go to a 'How to be good at Interviews' seminar.

With one of his tutors, he had come up with... 'The industry fascinates me, and it seems to offer someone like me, someone who has considerable experience, an opportunity. It is not an industry fettered by outmoded ideas of status and jobsworth mediocrity but one that rewards those that can help produce figures that add to the bottom line. I am one of those people.'

He started to speak.

‘In all truth, I have applied for about a hundred and fifty jobs this year, and this is the only one where I have got an interview. I applied for it because, in theory, I actually have some of the qualities that it asks for, although, like most other adverts, you really need to be a God to be able to do everything they want, but, in reality, I don’t expect to get it.’

‘That’s a bit negative, isn’t it?’ Asked Norm.

‘If I tell you it’s raining outside, and it is raining outside, you wouldn’t say, “surely, Allan, you mean the sun *isn’t* shining...be positive, man”. If I told Mr James that one of his clubs was losing money, would he say, “come on, Allan, don’t be negative....let’s just say it’s running a profit deficit”? So I’m telling you what appears to also be a fact. Positive or negative does not enter into it. I can only go on history to help me predict the future.’

‘So you’re not very good at interviews then?’ asked H.

‘Fraid not.’

‘Why?’

He paused for several moments. ‘I don’t know how to do them. It isn’t me. I just do a job and get on with it to the best of my ability. But it seems to me that the interview and the job are two different things. I am judged on my interview technique, which is crap, and by association so are my skills. I can manage, am bloody good at marketing, quite good at finance, like solving problems but can’t get through an interview. So I don’t get jobs.....’

He paused, waiting for another question, but none came, so he carried on...

‘I have no political or social skills. I don’t know what you want me to say, and so I just answer the questions. I have absolutely no ability to respond to your question in a way that

puts me in a better light. The peculiar thing is, I'm quite good in a work situation. I think in that situation I am a something...a manager, a buyer, a negotiator...something that I can hang my hat on.....but as just me, I flounder somewhat.'

Norm spoke first. 'Mr Scott, I admire your honesty, but I don't think.....'

'Tell me a bit more about you, Mr Scott?' interjected H, cutting off Norm.

'Started life in industry, in buying. Moved to another company and thought I could do it better, and so I started my own business, but unfortunately, which seems to be the story of my life, we then went into the three-day week and recession, and so I have to sell fifty-one percent to stop going under. Built it up for ten years, but left as we were part of a large group, and I was a nothing. Packed myself off to University to do an MBA...'

'Why?' asked H.

'Why?'

'Why did you need an MBA?'

'I wasn't good enough. I was a good Manager, but on a bad day, when the world is falling in around you, I had nowhere to go. No basic rules to fall back on. Easier to go home and take a Librium and hope it would go away. And so now I can go back to basics. In any company I work in, I can start from nothing and build a picture. I don't need to know about the business, although that obviously helps; I have a....template....from which to work. And I found that my natural management ability was obviously a lot better if I could statistically isolate those things that were actually the problem rather than those that were merely a symptom.'

‘And you’ve run other companies?’

‘Yes. Waste Management company, artificial flower importing company.....’

‘But I don’t have a company that wants running.’

‘It’s a matter of degree.’

‘In what way?’

‘You want to make sure your Group performs well in all areas? Yes?’

‘Yes.’

‘Because you are not at a size where jumping in the car to do this and do that is no longer an option.’

‘It never was....’

‘So you delegate?’

‘I do.’

‘Ok. So now your priority is to know that everything in your Group is performing as it should, and to do that you need facts and figures and words?’

‘Yes.’

‘And someone you can trust?’

‘Of course.’

‘Then you should employ me.’

‘Should I....?’

‘Yes.’

‘Give me one good reason....’

Allan Scott paused for a moment. ‘I am told you play poker...?’

H nodded.

‘I play internet poker, but only pound and three-pound games. I don’t do any higher because I’m not aggressive enough to be a consistent winner, and so I play small stakes, and then I can enjoy it, win or lose. Anyhow, Mr James, if there were four

hands, Ace King, Jack Jack, nine nine and five six, and excluding any flushes, what do you think the percentage chance of the 5 6 would be?’

H thought for a moment, shrugged and said, ‘ten percent?’

‘Nearly,’ said Allan ‘but it’s actually fourteen point one two.’

‘Really,’ said H. ‘There you go. Interesting, eh?’

‘And that’s why you should employ me.’

Norm looked incredulous. ‘He should employ you because you know a bit about poker? No wonder you can’t get a job; you’ve lost the plot.’

‘No,’ said Allan ‘so that I do my best to minimise the amount of crap that Mr James is given and which he has to make decisions with. I actually have no idea what the percentage chance is of that hand or any other. I made the figure up (Norm looked at the percentage later that night and found it was 17%). The point is, people bullshit, and I will do my best to make sure it doesn’t happen, and Mr James gets a reliable picture. I am totally honest. What you see is what you get.....’

H said nothing. Norm was about to say something and then shut up.

‘What hobbies do you have, Allan?’ asked H.

‘Well, poker I’ve mentioned; a bit of golf, like writing, especially letters to The Times.’

‘Letters to The Times?’ queried Norm ‘How is that a hobby?’

‘Depends on how many you write.’

‘And how many do you write?’

‘Two or three a week.....’

Norm was lost. What the hell were they talking to this idiot for?

‘What do you write about?’ Asked H.

‘Anything....everything. Whatever I feel like griping about.’

‘Have you had any published?’ asked H.

‘No....’

‘And how long have you been sending them?’

Scott thought for a moment. ‘About two years.’

‘That’s not a very good hit record.’

‘No.’

‘What was the last one about?’ asked James to the concern of Norm who just wanted this to end. In fact, had James looked at Norm, he would have seen him literally squirming in his seat with the embarrassment he felt.

‘Dogs....’

‘Dogs?’

‘Yes....dogs.’

‘Why dogs?’

‘Because they don’t pay rates.’

‘Don’t pay rates?’

H suddenly became aware of the ‘ask a question, get it answered, repeat it’ routine he was in.

‘We have a barking dog next door,’ Scott continued. ‘Asked the owner to help with the noise, and he tells me to.....go away. I ring the Council and complain, and a woman says, “Does it bark at the postman etc....?” and I say yes; “does it bark to be let out in the morning?....” and I say yes; and she says, “that’s what dogs do”. And I say I know what dogs don’t do, and she says, “what’s that?” and I say, “Pay rates! So why is the dog being allowed to bark at a rate payer’s expense?” No answer.’

No one said anything for a little while. What could you say to a conversation about dogs who don’t pay rates?

‘Mr James,’ said Allan ‘I am ballsing this up, but I *can* do a good job for you, so let me suggest something. Give me a chance. Give me three months with you. Let me show you. I am willing to work those three months for nothing. If I am crap, you can sack me at any time in those three months without any pay. If you keep me, then you give me the money at the end of the three months.’

H shook his head. ‘No.’

Scott looked down. He was beaten. He had tried, but he had failed.....again. Tesco beckoned...

‘Allan,’ H said ‘when people work for me, they get paid. I want to sort some things out with you so you and I know exactly where we stand, but notwithstanding that, I assume you can start at the beginning of next month.....?’

Scott looked lost.....

Norm looked at H as though he had gone mad.....

Chapter 21

H's mom

He didn't see her very often. Once every two months if Benny made him, every four months if he could get away with it. And rare phone conversations. The bimonthly visit was lunch there, and Benny bought fresh flowers for them to take but him to give. The lunch was the usual overcooked meat and two boiled tasteless veg and a pudding that he would have put in the bin.

But Benny insisted, and so he did it. But he hated it. He was uncomfortable in her presence and could hardly look her in the eye, and he usually started the conversation with 'We won't be able to stay long today because....'

But now he was with her as she lay in the hospital fighting for her life.

It's peculiar, he thought, watching a person die who you once wanted dead. With him... But what did he think now? He wasn't sure. He felt that in the films this would be a moment of forgiveness, of bonding, of healing the wounded soul. But that was in films. That was Hollywood. This was Kingsbury.

He was enraged that punks could have beaten up and stabbed a sixty odd-year-old woman for a handbag and mobile. But he would have been enraged if they had done that to anyone. There was still little or no connection to *her*. Purnell explained it well in his 'attachment theory', but essentially it was detachment. When things aren't so good, and you are fighting for survival, you 'detach'. It isn't you

getting beaten up or having a prick stuck up your arse; it's him over there that looks like you but somehow....isn't. And you remain detached, from many things, and sometimes from life itself. He looked down at her, with the tubes in her nose and throat, the monitors beeping away...

She had been unconscious for nearly two days, and it would be touch and go.

But he was still detached...

When visiting time was over, he went out into the evening sun and sat on a bench in the car park. He tapped out a number on his mobile. 'Can you talk?' He asked. 'ok.....I need some help.....three lads or youths or men or animals mugged an old lady two days ago in Warren Street in Kingsbury... She's nearly dead from the beating and the stab wound.....I know.....I know.....but I want their names... I know it's a bit outside your sphere of influence, but I want their names.....I don't want to know the cost; I want to know their names.....and I want them very quickly.....ok?.....good.'

The Three Kings, as they called themselves, were white, middle class no hopers in their early twenties with a penchant for crack. That penchant was catered for by a circle of ever increasing robbery and violence to pay for the habit that gave them an instant high that lasted no more than thirty minutes and brought them down to the depths so quickly that another high was needed to offset it. They started off by working to pay for it, then they burgled to pay for it, then they robbed to pay for it and now they would do just about anything for it...including killing if need be. They just didn't give a fuck anymore about anything or anyone!

And here they were, going through the local park in the late evening looking for a mark. Any mark. They saw a couple groping in the bushes, and walked on, and came back and circled them. On the nod, they rushed in and beat the man unconscious and smacked the woman around the head. They held her mouth, put a knife to her young, pretty face and threatened to make her pretty features look like pieces of meat if she made a sound. They forced her to the ground and ripped off her clothes.

‘No....’ she pleaded, ‘please no.....please....’

‘She’s asking for it,’ said one, ‘she’s saying please....’

Zips came down; one held her nose while one put his prick in her mouth, and the other got between her legs and forced it up her cunt. She was so traumatised she stopped struggling and was quite still, which they misinterpreted as acquiescence. When he came in her mouth, she gagged, but he didn’t take it out until he had finished. Then they swapped. They fucked her and defiled her for nearly half an hour, stopping only once when her boyfriend started to come round, and one went over and stamped on his head several times until he died. When they had finished with her, they strangled her with her tights. They took what money they had and left.....

H received the call two days later. One day after his mother had died.....

The Three Kings were in their two-room flat, in a drunken stupor when, at three in the morning, the door was broken down, and they were dragged away. Andy Pandy’s men took them out to a set of unused cattle sheds which had been converted into a holding pen where they would not be disturbed.

Andy was waiting. He was looking forward to this. He hadn't had a good bit of sadistic violence off H since the black lads wanted white pussy. He was tempted to think H was going soft, but Andy Pandy wasn't that stupid. Andy Pandy feared nobody...except H. He had known H many years and done many jobs for him, and he didn't have enough fingers to count the number of people that had been.....sent to a better place. That excluded those that had crossed H and now had the permanent scars to prove it.

But he thought the white pussy caper was by far the best.....and he still had hard nights in bed, or wherever, masturbating to the thought.....

In this instance, H was specific. Let them *dive*....let them go down as deep as they can go.....keep them in their misery...and when that stopped.....give them pain....as much pain as you can without them dying.... and then call Biggles. Andy was up for that! Andy was already hard with anticipation!

Andy left them there, in the improvised cell, for three days...

When they went back, it stunk. They had shit themselves for three days and lived in it, and two of them had bruised faces. Andy smiled to himself; one of the advantages, although it did take some of the pleasure away, was that addicts tended to round on themselves when they were desperate for a fix. Andy thought they had lost weight, but they didn't really have much on them when they got there; when you are continually buzzing your head off, you don't need food, so maybe not...

Andy went back out and dragged in a large hose and turned it on. The icy cold water hit them hard and bowled them over until it smashed them into a corner, and the force held them there. They screamed as the force of the cold water removed

the stink off their unwashed bodies. He handed the hose to a mate who used it to wash all the shit off the floor down the cattle sludge drain.

'In there,' said Andy, but they just stayed there, huddled together.

'Fuck you.....' said one.

Andy chortled, and the men – there were six of them – grinned.

'You're half right,' said Andy.

'In there,' he beckoned again to a door in the wall.

'I told you, fuck you....'

He had got it wrong, quite wrong. If he had said yes, sir, no sir, it would have been much less fun for Andy, and the men, but he hadn't. He had said 'Fuck you', twice, which made Andy not only more sadistic but more turned on. What more could a man like Andy want to hear?

'Get him,' said Andy, so three men waded in and grabbed the mouthy one. The others wondered whether to try to stop them, but they weren't that stupid, and he had given them their bruises. So fuck him! They dragged him through the door into another pen. This had some old chairs, an electric fire for warmth, a desk, ropes hanging on a wall and relics from its previous existence as a farm. Hooks for grabbing the hay bales, pitchforks and other assorted tools of the trade.

'Tie him,' commanded Andy, and they tied his hands behind his back.

Andy sat him down, pulled a chair up and sat very close to him.

'Do you know why you are here?'

'I've told you before, poofter, get fucked.'

He waited for the blow, but none came. Andy was on a knife edge. Every fibre in his body wanted to kill this *thing* in front of him now. NOW! But he didn't. This wasn't for him; this was for H and H's mom. Especially H's mom. Andy was quite sentimental in things like this. You should look after your mom, which he did, and they should be cared for when they were old, which he did. And the thought of anyone hurting a little old lady was beyond his comprehension.....? They were animals! Just animals with no feelings.

'What's your name?' asked Andy.

Nothing....

'What's your name?'

Nothing arrived except spit that just missed Andy.

Voices screamed in Andy's head: *Kill him.....kill him.... kill him.....now....now*

Andy stood up and walked away for a moment, controlling himself, talking to the voices in his head. *H said no*, he told them, *H said no.....*. He saw an old spade standing in the corner of the room, and he visualised himself pulling it back at shoulder height and pushing it forward so that the blade hit no name in the throat, ripping through his windpipe, slicing through his spine and decapitating his head... *Do it*, said the voices, *do it..... H said no.....*

He turned back towards no name and looked at him. He now hated no name with an evil that no name could not have comprehended but soon would.

'Tie him to the chair.'

They did.

'Ok....now let me explain in an elementary way what is going to happen. It's elementary, my dear no name,' he said, warming to the theme. 'Elementary.'

He thought for a moment. 'Did you know?' He said, digging up something from the Discovery Channel; in between maiming and bugging, Andy was a keen collector of unusual facts and also a competent crown green bowls player. Luckily, his fellow players knew nothing of his other life, or even that when he 'shushed' for quiet in a gentle, polite way, that he was quite capable of killing the shushee. But when it came to bowls Andy was politeness personified.....'did you know.....that the second most abundant *element* in the Universe is Helium?'

He nodded to himself. 'Yeah, I bet you did.....'

'An *element* of luck.....' Andy said to no one in particular.

'Do you know the difference between elementary and alimentary?' asked Andy. 'No?....poor fucker. Well, it's elementary that you have an alimentary....'

He giggled at his joke, then tired abruptly of his own game.

Andy went over and turned on the three bars of the electric fire and waited as they glowed from nothing through dull to bright red.

'Drag him over here.'

Andy pulled over a box that stood about chest high and put the fire on it. They sat him in front of the warm fire.

'Better?' enquired Andy. 'Warmer?'

And then his pent-up fury at no name could be held no longer; he viciously grabbed his hair from the back with both hands and edged his face towards the red-hot bars of the fire. No name struggled ferociously, but it was no good. He had nothing to fight with, no platform to use as a lever to resist, and as his chair tilted closer and closer to the burning heat, he screamed 'I'll tell you my name, I'll tell.'

Andy smiled a triumphant smile. 'To tell you the truth, sonny, I don't give a fuck what your name is. Very soon no one will recognise you anyhow.'

He pushed no name closer and closer until he started to smell and scream and writhe. His face began to crinkle as his flesh burned and his eyes steamed. Actually fucking steamed! Andy cackled with glee. How fuckin' wonderful!

No name passed out. A burning flesh smell filled the room, and it was disgusting, but Andy loved it. It smelt of pain and death, and Andy thought life was worth living when there was pain and death. The others wanted to puke and get out, but it was best not to upset Andy at this point....perhaps at any point, and so they held their nerve...and breath.

He nodded at them to get out and go back into the other room, and they did...immediately.

Andy took a small bottle of smelling salts from his pocket and stuck it under no name's nose, and he writhed. It took several goes, but he came back. He untied him from the chair and propped him on a table. Undoing his zip, he took out his prick, which was so hard and enormous it was a struggle to get it out of his pants. Out of another pocket, he found a small tube of KY and put it on his prick, then grabbed hold of no name's hair, forced his head down and his prick up. No name screamed, then started sobbing, so Andy reached round and slapped him lightly on the face, and he screamed in agony again. Each time he subsided, Andy slapped him again.

Now, *this* was what you called a good fuck!

When he had finished, he slapped him hard across the face and watched him as he slid, unconscious, to the floor.

He put his dick away and went in the next room.

‘Show them,’ and nodded to the door.

They dragged them in, turned over no name, and they saw his smouldering face which was now raw, hideously swollen and unrecognisable. He smelt like a roast pig. When they were dragged back, Andy said in a mischievous sort of way, ‘Your turn...’

They were horrified. One was instantly sick, and the other knew that at any second he was going to shit himself. None of his muscles were working properly, and he knew he had no control over what was about to happen. It was no good...and it streamed out of him. A smelly, runny mess.

‘Oh fuck me,’ said Andy, ‘hose the dirty bastards down and let’s get on with this...’

They hosed them again with the freezing water and threw them some old rags to dry themselves with.

‘Now here’s what’s going to happen,’ explained Andy in a matter-of-fact way, ‘firstly, you’re going to get a good dogging. I’ve already had one, but another would be good. Everybody is going to have a go, and Freddie, you will be pleased to know – well, at least we are pleased to know – will go last.’

‘This is not because Freddie has the biggest prick, which he has, by the way, but because he has AIDS, and we don’t want it. So Freddie goes last. That ok with you, boys?...’

It was too much. They had seen their friend with hardly any skin on his face, and now they were going to be ‘dogged’ by seven men, and one had Aids? It was beyond their comprehension. It was surreal.....

They were grabbed and bent over the desk.

It may have been surreal, but when the first one forced himself up and the lad screamed in pain it became real.....very real. The force and the violence of the men and

their needs opened up, ruptured and tore the inside of their arses to such an extent that Freddie's disease thought it was Christmas..... and rushed hither and thither to invade their open wounds and spread their destruction as if they realised they hadn't got much time.

When they had finished, Andy nodded to one of the men, who came over and smashed their knees with a lump hammer... H had said to hurt them, and Andy could do a better job, but they also needed to be conscious.....

Andy took out his mobile and rang Biggles.

Taking them to a field, they waited until dead on the hour, then flashed the lights on the van. The large Sikorsky S-76C Executive Helicopter that Biggles used to take executives all over Europe landed loudly but softly on the grass. The three men were immediately bundled in, followed by Andy and two others.

As Biggles took off, he shouted to Andy 'Try not to get blood on the leather...it's just been cleaned.'

Andy had never been in an Executive helicopter before, and he sat in one of the four cream leather armchairs and looked up at one of the two large plasma screens on the wall.

'Fuckin' right on,' then lashed out with a foot at one of the lads on the floor.

'Keep away from the fuckin' leather...'

Biggles headed east then north, and when he thought he was far enough across the sea, and when he could see no lights on any ships, he went down and hovered. Andy tossed them out as though they were garbage, which, to his perverted code, they were. They had hurt H's mom, and in his book that was very, very bad.

They went under immediately.

He hovered several minutes..... Andy said, 'Nothing,' as the lads failed to come back up to the surface, and so Biggles gained height and flew back.

Several days later, the police were made aware, from an anonymous source, that there was no point in looking for the killers of the couple in the park and the old woman.

It had been sorted.....

Chapter 22

The Detective retires

And so it had ended. Thirty years.

They had thrown a party for him, but somehow they all seemed so young he hardly knew them. And they hardly knew him, but a party was a party. Everyone got drunk and indulged in intellectual activities such as the farting contest where you line up, fart, and someone holds a lighter by your arse and the one with the longest flame of searing methane wins. Or goes to hospital.... Not exactly University Challenge, but....

At the end, they all piled, blind drunk, into their cars and went home. And Jenkins got his taxi.

Recently he had changed his mind about Spain and spent some time on the West coast of Florida, looking around, and bought a modest beach house where he could watch the surf and the diving cormorants.

And eight weeks later he was gone. To his new home. By the sea.

It was wonderful. The sun shone, the local people were civilised and spoke English, the food was superb, healthy and cheap. Why the hell hadn't he been born an American? Lucky bastards! He had driven to Las Vegas but found there was no excitement there for him. It did nothing for him, so he left and wandered up to the Grand Canyon which did turn him on...

Why hadn't he been born an American? Lucky bastards!

All this on your doorstep.....

After twelve weeks, he was lucky enough to have a friend coming over to stay with him, and he went to Orlando airport to pick them up in his new BMW soft top that he had bought for half the English price. He sat in the waiting lounge area, deeply into an article about the merits or otherwise of Al Gore when he noticed a pair of high heels just in front of him. They were very close, and he craned his head to look up at their owner.

It was Norma Baxter! Norma bloody Baxter! He stood up and looked at her, not knowing what to say.

'I thought it was you,' she said, 'Chief Inspector hard bastard of the Yard.'

What could he say?

'Picking on a poor little woman...have you no shame?'

What could he say?

'I hear you're no longer in the force...retired. And so....' she demanded 'what have you got to say for yourself now, Mr hard bastard ex-Detective Inspector?'

He knew what to say. 'Hello, *wide eyes*,' and his face flooded with love and joy. She flew into his arms and clung to his neck and kissed him passionately.....

'It's been too long,' he whispered as he softly kissed her ear.

'I told you we would be together...I told you...I promised you.'

Later that night they sat on the deck and watched the moon reflect on the ocean. He had prepared a lobster meal, which she had devoured, and drunk a bottle of champagne and were now sipping another. She was so slim now. The two stone she had decided to put on had gone, and she was slim and shapely. God, he ached for this woman! He would die for this woman....he would lie for this woman.....as he had. And he *had* been the bastard. He had created an environment to

allow them to shift to her, to be on her side, or at least see her side.

'I claimed the lottery ticket you sent to me, and it's all in an account in my name. Nothing has been touched. Every bit of money I have used was mine.'

'You could have used it.'

'No, I couldn't.'

'How much is there?'

'Three million seven hundred thousand pounds and getting bigger by about three thousand a week interest after tax.'

'That's nice,' she said with not too much interest. 'When can we get married?'

It hit him like a bomb. It exploded in his head and sent shock waves through his body. The only word he had ever wanted to hear and was never mentioned.

And she had said it!

She had said it to him!

His world was complete.....

Chapter 23

H meets Harry Cohen

They met for lunch at The Dell, on the south side of the Serpentine in Hyde Park. Harry picked frugally at a tuna salad while H tucked into a full English breakfast, which Benny would have disapproved of.

After chatting for a while about this and that, and then the clubs and the general entertainment scene, Harry said, 'You knew Ernie Hathaway?'

'Our paths crossed once or twice.'

Harry smiled. 'Once or twice?'

'Maybe three times...'

Harry took a tiny mouthful of tuna.

'You slimming, Harry?'

'Funny tummy. Doesn't work so good. Have to keep the amounts small so that it digests. Pain in the arse...literally..... Anyway,' he carried on, 'Ernie and I used to have a business relationship. I used to help him with information, and he used to errrr do whatever he did.....and so I made a couple of bob, and so did he, and also the person who used to help Ernie do whatever he did.'

He looked at H. 'You with me, H?'

'Could you try English, Harry?'

'The situation is, H, that I still get the odd bit of information, and Ernie isn't around anymore, and I thought I would go straight to the horse's mouth. You with me, H?'

'Good for you, Harry, but what's this got to do with me? Do you want me to find out who it was or something, Harry?'

‘H, I could keep talking like a pillock or somebody out of a Le Carre novel, or you could give me a bit of help....?’

‘I’m a bit stuck, Harry. I have no idea who Ernie used to be in with, but I may be able to help if you have something specific in mind...?’

At last, thought Harry, at last..... Harry briefly explained. ‘Have you heard of Oleksander Aranazov?’

‘The rich Russian?’

‘The very rich Russian. Yes, that’s him. Well, in about four weeks’ time the very rich Russian will be at one of my casinos, playing in a large cash poker game. It’s a million pound entry, and ten people will play. Five other very rich people and four invited poker pros flown over from the States.’

‘Why aren’t they playing in the States?’

‘Because they live in London. Anyhow, this has nothing to do with anything except background. The main thing is he will berth here in his super yacht, more than likely next to Abramovich to try and outdo him – they are so like children – and on board will be a special something.’

He looked at H, waiting for the question, but got nothing. Harry looked disappointed. When his grandchildren sat on his lap, and he told his stories, he always kept them in suspense so that they would demand answers. H had let him down.....

‘He has a habit of having large amounts of cash on board, but not just cash....gems. And when he goes ashore a heavy brings some along in a briefcase. It’s just show. It’s just a poor boy done good, and the world has to know how well he done,’ he said, for no apparent reason, in an American southern states drawl.

‘You surely don’t want to knock off his man for a million, Harry?’

‘Nah,’ said Harry, ‘but I wouldn’t mind the other twenty-five, one way or another, he keeps in a safe on the boat...’

‘Million what, Harry? Rubles, dollars, pounds?’

‘A bit of everything, but the total will be twenty-five million BP.’

‘That’s a lot.’

‘True.....plus the gems.’

H ordered another round of drinks. Still water for Harry, fizzy for H.

‘Why bother Harry? You and the family must have millions already....what’s a few more?’

Harry grinned a wide grin. ‘If it’s there for the taking, H, it would be against my religion not to.’

H was quiet for a minute or two. ‘Harry, it’s possible I may have been able to help in, in the past, venture like this one, but in this instance, I can’t help. I know sod all about boats, and I can’t see me belting along on a speedboat and shouting “stand by to board”. Not quite me, Harry. Sorry.’

‘I know, H, but look at it another way. It’s just a job like any other. It needs looking at, analysing, forming a plan and testing the downside. Why don’t you have a day or two to have a look at it?’

‘Harry, I don’t have the people for this, and not only that, I don’t think, in reality, you can nick much of that. God knows what even a million dollars weighs or what space it takes up?’

‘Don’t worry about the people. If you can find a way, I can let you have eight of the best people there are, who hire themselves out as a team at times like this. Good men, fit men, intelligent men. As for the dollars, a million in hundred-dollar notes weighs about twenty-five pounds.’

'Is that all?'

'That's all.'

'I thought it would be more than that....'

'No.'

'Who are these men?'

'They live in France, speak English and hire themselves out.'

H said nothing. He really wasn't sure about this.....

'Think about it, H, and let's see if we can earn a couple of quid.'

'What's the split, Harry?'

'The team will want five. There will be expenses; let's say another million. We share the rest.'

'You're asking me to use people I don't know.'

'H, think about it. These guys are specialists. They come, they go, and what money they get leaves with them, and where they spend it, who cares? But they're not spending it round here for the coppers to sniff out....' Harry held out his hand.

'Ring me in a few days when you've worked it out.'

He shook hands and wandered off, and H got up to leave.

'Excuse me, sir,' said a waitress, 'the bill....?'

Good old Harry, thought H.

H rang Harry back in four days. He had managed to get the schematics for a boat the same as the Russian, but his would have been modified to suit his tastes. Nevertheless, it gave H an idea of what it would take to do it. As a starting point. Then there was the problem of ship security. How many goons just sat there with Kalashnikovs?

'It may be possible, but it depends whether I am taking everything into account and whether your guys are as good as you say they are.'

‘They are more than likely better....’

‘Do they have any knowledge of this kind of thing?’

‘From what I have been told, they have done this before.’

‘You’re well informed, Harry.’

‘Isn’t that what you want, H? To be well informed?’

‘I’ll need some more detailed help for the insides, Harry, and where the.....wallet is?’

‘I can help you there, H.’ Harry helped considerably. Harry knew lots.

He knew the Very Rich Russian quite well.....

Chapter 24

H takes Benny to see the animals

H had spent a few minutes with Steve Hindley, a brewery rep, and gleaned some wonderful information.

‘Really Steve? And we can come and have a look?’

‘Of course H.’

H immediately picked up his mobile and rang Benny. ‘What are we doing tonight, love?.....Tonight? Surely not?.....Cancel it. Think of some excuse; tell ‘em I’m dead, and they’re boring anyhow.....’cause we’re going to Steve’s.....I’m not telling you. You’ll have to wait and see.’

At seven that evening, the big Merc, with the Sat Nav issuing orders, found its way to Steve’s detached house on the edge of a housing estate. They parked the car, and as they approached the door, the outside light came on, and Steve opened it and stood there.

‘Steve, this is Benny; Benny, Steve.’

‘Pleased to meet you, Steve,’ said Benshima, ‘are you going to tell me what the secret is?’

‘Wouldn’t dare.....’

He took them into the lounge and introduced his wife, Dawn, who sat with two enormous dogs. One, a stunning jet black Great Dane called Bruce, and a Neapolitan Mastiff named Bella. Bella was officially classed as blue but looked more like slate grey.

Steve walked to the dining room door, opened it, and Benny saw rows and rows of cages and glass tanks. H watched her face as she started to understand she was in the middle of a minor reptile zoo. It was a picture. It lit up like a child's. H thought it was wonderful that someone could have so much pleasure out of sheer expectation. He had never felt that in his life, and it was unlikely he ever would. Dear papa had knocked all that out of him, to be replaced by an expectation of something quite different.....

For a moment H felt quite sad.....

'What first?' asked Steve, 'snakes, lizards, spiders, scorpions.....?'

'Snakes, please,' demanded Benny excitedly, 'and can I hold them?'

One by one, Steve took them out of their warm houses and handed them to Benny, who cradled them and, with the ones that wanted to wander off, continually put one hand in front of the other to let the snake keep moving.

She held and talked to them all: the green tree pythons, royal pythons, a trio of yearling corn snakes, several hatchling corn snakes and diamond pythons....and several others. She bonded with the Royal Python, whose defence strategy of curling up in a ball made it very unlikely to bite and easy to handle. The African snake constantly checked the air for smells with its tongue. Flicking....flicking.....flicking.

'Feel this,' said Benny to H as she stroked the snake. 'Just feel this.....'

H felt the snake and was surprised at the sensation. It was nothing like he had expected. He had expected a skin-like quality, maybe a touch moist, but it felt exactly

like?.....exactly like?.....an expensive shoe, or handbag or belt.....! Amazing.....!

Then the lizards, which were mainly for looking at, as the large monitor would happily take your finger off, although that didn't stop Benny having a quick stroke of its sensual skin. She loved the frilled dragons and opened up and admired the gorgeous blue frill.

She wanted to hold the Tarantula, but Steve cautioned against it, as it was quite happy to bite, and as the jaws were underneath its body, you had no way of knowing when that was going to happen. But he did give her a complete Tarantula skin to hold that a few days earlier the spider had shed. It looked exactly like the real thing, so she put it on her hand while H took pictures of her bravery with his mobile.

'I'll email this to all the girls,' she said excitedly.

Steve popped in to say something to Dawn, and Benny whispered to H, 'This is their dining room.'

He nodded.

'We've got a big dining room.'

He nodded again.

'Think what we could get in our penthouse!'

He shook his head. She pouted like a child and did a Homer Simpson 'Doh'. After they had finished peering at the Scorpions, Steve took them outside to two aviaries. In one sat two barn owls, introduced as Ozzy and Fern, and in the other a magnificent Snowy Owl called 'B' for Bianca.

'Or Benny,' chirped in Benny.

Steve looked at H, who shrugged.

'Or it could be Benny,' said Steve, 'maybe we misheard.'

'Or Benshima....?'

‘Definitely Benshima,’ agreed Steve, who could see this beautiful woman in front of him was just an excited little child..... The snowy owl was allowed out, and it pranced around on the lawn, majestically showing its plumage, then, as a present, Steve gave it two defrosted day-old chicks, which took away a bit of the romance for Benny, but, as H pointed out, they had to eat something!

‘And we eat cuddly little lambs,’ he rubbed in. She put her hands over her ears and grimaced.

They went back into the house, and as they did, his wife opened the door to a man.

‘Mr Arnold arrived to get little Stevie to go swimming,’ she called.

The man joined them in the lounge as big Steve called little Stevie down from his room. The man was introduced, and as he shook H’s hand, H’s blood ran cold. He looked into the eyes of the man, and he knew.....

He knew.....

He started to become agitated and felt his muscles getting more tense by the second. Dawn offered them a cup of tea before they went, which Benny was going to decline, but H immediately said, ‘Yes, please.’

As Mr Arnold led little Stevie down the path to his car, H said, ‘I just need something out of the car.’

He got to Arnold’s car before he could pull away and knocked on the window. ‘You got one minute?’ and he moved away from the car.

Arnold got out, shut the door and moved to him. ‘How can I help you?’

‘You can take the boy back.’

‘Pardon?’

‘You can take the boy back....’

Arnold smiled. ‘Why would I do that? We’re going swimming.’

‘I know what you’re going to do.....’ said H ominously.

‘I’ve had enough of...’ He started to turn around, but H stopped him.

‘You have a choice,’ said H, who was now towering over Arnold, his face was very close, and holding his lapels. ‘You can go now, and I will take the child in, and you never come back, or you take the child, and I promise you by the end of this week I will find you and you will be in so much pain that hell will be a favourable alternative.’

‘What are you suggesting....?’ he stammered ‘that I would...I would....’

‘I’m not suggesting anything. I’m fucking telling you. It isn’t a suggestion. Now, before I lose my fucking cool completely and smash in your face.....fuck off.’

H was on the edge, and he knew it. He was so close to smashing this man’s face in, he could hear it breaking. If he had an oar..... Arnold was beaten. He had no idea how H knew, but he knew.

‘Ok.’

He opened the car door. ‘I don’t feel too well Stevie, so I think we’ll have to miss tonight.’

Grumbling, Stevie jumped out of the car and went up the path to the front door. Visibly shaking, Arnold got in the car, but H stopped him pulling the door closed.

‘Let me make this very plain. If I ever hear you have been near that child again, I will have you killed. Do you understand?’

Arnold just looked up at him from his car seat. H lost it and lunged with two hands at his throat, which he grabbed with an iron grip. He squeezed and kept on squeezing until he saw him stop breathing. H wanted to kill him, and it took all his willpower to loosen the grip. Arnold choked and gasped for air.

‘I asked you a fucking question, and I want a fucking answer, or else you won’t get home tonight. Now, do...you...understand?’

H eased the grip.

‘Yes,’ wheezed Arnold.

‘Do you give kids swimming lessons?’

He hesitated, but when H increased the pressure, he said hoarsely, ‘Yes.’

‘Not any more,’ commanded H.

‘But....’ and then his head hit the wheel.

‘Do you fuckin’ understand?’

‘Yes,’ he said as blood started to dribble down his chin.

‘Good. Because I am going to ask Steve where you teach, and I will ring them in two days, and if they don’t say you have resigned, you will suffer. Do....you...understand?’

‘Yes,’ he said instantly.

‘Now fuck off,’ said H, and slammed the door.

He waited a moment for him to leave, then willed himself to calm down. The blood was pounding around his body and crashing like breakers into his skull. Emotion swept over him, and tears started to run down his cheeks. He looked around at his car in the shadows, walked over to it, bent down as though looking at a wheel, and for several moments he sobbed uncontrollably until a vast tension suddenly released itself from his mind and body. Taking several deep breaths, he

felt a lot of the anger leave him, but he knew he had wanted to kill him so badly....so badly.

It had been a long time since he had felt like that, and the ferocity of his deeply buried feelings had taken him unawares.....

He opened the car, found a bottle of Benny's Evian, which he splashed over his face to wash away the tears, then dried himself with one of her tissues. The incongruity made him smile; from wanting so desperately to kill.....to a gentle dash of Evian applied sparsely over his delicate skin then softly absorbed with a tissue.....

Perhaps she also had some moisturiser? Perhaps a mere prick of Botox? He grinned to himself at the choice of words and headed back to the house.

'Everything ok, H?' asked Steve as he went back in the lounge.

'Yeah, he was feeling sick. Must have been something he ate, but he's gone off home now.'

'He should have come in,' said Steve.

'I think he preferred to go.....'

Benny looked at H, and she saw what was in his eyes. And then she worked out why Mr Arnold had gone.....and Stevie was back in the house.

She moved close to him and held his hand protectively.....

Chapter 25

Allan Scott starts

He was led to a small room, which was to be his office, housed over the nearest Club to his home, but it was tiny and had panoramic views of the car park. He felt elated but quite alone. He had a job.....in a small space with no one to talk to. Why was it always like this? So near and yet so far? You had the job but not a space to work in..... You had to do the job, but you weren't given the tools to do it with..... The masochistic, destructive side of him said, 'walk out, tell 'em to stick it'. The other, more reasoning side said, 'this may be your last chance.....or would you *really* prefer stacking shelves at Tesco?'

As Allan looked at the unwelcoming space, a smiling man said, 'Coffee, mate?'

'I'd love one.'

'Milk, sugar?'

'Both, please.'

The man wandered off, and a few minutes later he was back with hot coffee. 'Have to lose a bit of weight, eh, mate?' he said, nodding at the tiny room.

'Looks like it.'

Then he was gone again. Allan Scott didn't know quite what to do. There was this small space, no furniture, or phone, or.....anything. Another man entered and gave him a mobile. 'H.'

'Hello?' said Scott tentatively.

'Morning, Allan, what do you think?'

Scott didn't know what to say. He could try with 'it's fucking awful' or 'how the fuck do you expect me to work in this dump' or...or....

'Erm.....er.....I may.....struggle.....a touch with.....where to put my filing cabinets.....and things.'

'Why?'

Oh fuck it, thought Scott, in for a penny. 'It's very small.'

'No, it isn't.'

'Yes, it is.'

'How big is the room?'

'About eight feet square.'

'That's small.'

'Yes.'

'You need something bigger?'

'If you wouldn't mind....?'

There was a long pause on the other end, and Scott knew H was debating whether to get rid of this troublesome bastard now.....

'Allan, just go out of the door, turn left and go in the next room and see if that is any better....'

Scott did as he was told and went into a large, brightly painted, carpeted office, with two desks in the shape of an L, an executive chair, computer, cabinets lining the wall and its wide airy windows looked over the bustling main road.

'Would that be any better for you?'

Scott nodded happily.

'You there Allan?'

'Is this for me?'

'Yes.'

'Thank you,' said Scott appreciatively, 'thank you.'

‘Good,’ said H, ‘now what I want you to do is spend a few minutes to feel at home, and then go downstairs and find Tony. Tony is the Club Manager, and he has.....volunteered to be your mentor initially. He will give you all the information about that club which you can then use as a template. He also has a sound knowledge of the industry generally. You will take every shred of that knowledge, and we will regard you as succeeding in your job when you go back to him and tell him something he doesn’t know and what will make us more money. Now, for the next eight weeks, unless you have to, I don’t want to hear a word from you. I want you to visit every club, every betting shop, the casino and security company and then I want an initial report from you. I don’t expect anything groundbreaking; I just want to see how you see it at that point. Tony has arranged a car, petrol credit card and mobile phone for you..... Is there anything else you need to know?’

‘Er.....no, that’s fine.’

‘Good,’ said H. ‘See you in eight weeks.....’

In his lounge, H smiled. He was sure Allan Scott could be a pain in an employer’s arse....but not this one. Mr Scott would be played like a fish so he knew who was the boss, and he would be treated well. H was quite sure, with a good wind, that Scott would be with him a long time.

Chapter 26

H has cold turkey

H and Benshima were on their terrace, early evening, under the stars. H had cooked one of his famous chips, steak, eggs and onions dinners. They were famous to a very few select people and mainly for the chips. They were golden brown, crispy with a gorgeous taste. In fact, they tasted more like an expensive crisp than a chip, but they were magic. She raised her glass of Cristal champagne she'd bought especially for the occasion.

'To you. I am very proud of you.'

'Thank you,' and they chinked cut crystal glasses.

'One year. Not one in one year. I didn't think you would make it, but.....' and she raised her glass again. 'Continência.....'

'Does that mean I wet my pants?'

'It's *salute* in Portuguese.'

'Thank God for that.'

'How has it been for you..... a real struggle?'

He thought for a few moments. 'Initially, it was tough. I would find myself in a situation where one, or more than one, was absolutely necessary....but I had to fight. Fight very hard to cope without one. It must be a bit like smokers feel but obviously much, much worse....perhaps ten times worse....?'

She caressed his hand.

'You poor thing....so brave. Did you have withdrawal symptoms?'

'Very bad.....very, very bad.'

‘How you must have suffered.....?’

‘I did. I meet people all the time, and you know the type of people I mix with, and I *knew*, just *knew*, they’d had one, or even more. That was very difficult.’

She cooed her admiration for her man.

‘And of course something would happen, even daft things like Gordon Brown on the news and all that lying spin, and then, oh my God, then; then I really needed one....’

‘But you didn’t.....’

‘No.....I didn’t.’

‘I am so proud... so proud. My brave, oh so brave man....’

She cut off a piece of steak and savoured it.

‘Is it ok?’

‘Lovely.’

‘Really lovely, or are you just saying that?’

She smiled. Nothing changed. Which was nice.....

‘One of the best,’ she said, and H joined her with a great lump that he stuck in his mouth.

‘Mmmmmm....’ he mmmmed through a mouth so full he couldn’t speak.

In the middle of the fresh fruit dessert, she said, ‘I think you should be allowed one last one.’

‘Why?’

‘You deserve it...’

‘What if I relapse? I can’t do the cold turkey again...it would kill me.’

‘I think one would be ok.’

‘I need a reason....’

‘Gordon Brown...’

That was a good enough reason.

‘Gordon Brown is a.....cunt.’

‘There you go,’ she said, ‘not the word I was hoping you would finish with, but how do you feel?’

He paused and put his hand on his heart, feeling for the pulse. ‘Surprisingly calm.’

‘There’s no going back now.....you’re expletive-free....’

Chapter 27

H meets Schlomo

They met in an underground car park late one night using Harry Cohen as a go-between. H waited fifteen minutes and was about to go when he appeared at his door. For a moment, H was startled...he had watched all about him, but not seen him arrive.

Before opening the door, he showed three fingers, the sign, and H let him in.

Without a sign, H would have let him in. He could see why Harry knew about, or sort of knew, this guy. Jewish through and through; about six feet-ish, forty-ish with chiselled features, lean, powerful physique and possibly ex-military. It made sense to H now. Mercenaries! Fought in the Israeli army, more than likely commandos, maybe terrorist snatch squads and due for retirement. What do we do now boys? Not very exciting in civvy street...how can we put our talents to good use? I know; we'll be professional robbers stroke villains. Anything that suits our skills and pays well, and we're in. How're that sound guys?

It had obviously sounded good.....

H was more relaxed now. He had been very concerned about working with a team he didn't know, but this man had a professional air about him. H sensed that they would be a highly organised, highly efficient squad that would get the job done. That's what they were used to. That's what you were paying for.

‘Schlomo,’ said the man, holding out his hand.

‘James.’

‘It’s good to meet you, James.’

They only talked for a few minutes as the meeting was exploratory and to assure each man of the other, but both were comfortable, and arranged to meet a few days later.

They met again one evening, in a small unit on an industrial estate. Schlomo grasped James’ hand. ‘Yada’ata she hatayas mezayen et ishtecha?’ and looked at Biggles, who was stretching his arms to the Heavens in an almost ecstatic yawn, then back at H enquiringly.

H was confused. ‘I’m sorry, I don’t know what you said?’

‘It was just a simple greeting in Hebrew, wishing speed and success to the pilot.’

They were all there: Schlomo and his eight-man team, H, Biggles and Big John. Around the walls were schematics of Aranazov’s yacht, or at least the one he would be in when they visited. By billionaires’ standards it was small, but by millionaires’ standards it was magnificent.

The ‘Pavlova’, named after the famous Russian ballet dancer Anna Pavlova and his quirky delight for the dessert named after her, was over eighty metres and had a cruising speed of nearly twenty knots. With a crew of twenty and initially designed with thirty-six cabins but reduced to eighteen to give more space to the leisure areas, it was sumptuous.

The health & fitness centre included a spa on the lower deck and fully equipped gymnasium to the highest standards. The Pavlova sundeck also boasted a plunge pool, a spa that rivalled any deluxe land facility, saunas, steam rooms, cold plunge pools, a beauty salon, treatment areas and cinema.

On top of that, a business centre from which he tracked his many investments through the myriad of electronic gadgetry, satellite and microwave, that the ship possessed.

The magnificent dining room also, incongruously, housed a large ten-seater poker table.

Throughout the evening, it became apparent that boarding the ship would have to be by air, more than likely two helicopters, a speedboat being far too dangerous. From what they knew, the ship would anchor two miles off shore for a one-week stay, and while it had a large crew, they would hardly be the type to put up a fight. There may be one or two heavies but.....

The raid would be audacious by any standards, but the biggest problem would be the heat afterwards. Aranazov was a powerful man and would lean on the police and could employ others to seek out the perpetrators, and it made H ask whether it was worth it? He had no desire to be hounded to the ends of the earth by a man with unlimited funds to pursue him. As it stood, only the team within the Unit and Harry Cohen knew anything about it. There was no need to widen that, as these boys could do it all, plus another to pilot the other copter, and that would be Biggles' assistant, who was well-versed in the black arts. The main problem of information leakage, therefore, was not one to worry about. At the moment at least, and assuming everything went ok.

It would have to be late at night, or at least when dark, and either before he went ashore or after he came back as they needed him to give them the combination of the safe.

'What happens if he won't?' asked Andy.

‘He will....’ said Schlomo quietly, and H didn’t doubt it for a minute.

‘We could do with jamming equipment,’ said Biggles.

Schlomo nodded. ‘Leave that to us. We can get that over here; where we come from, it’s part of every day life.’

‘Jamming ships?’ queried H.

Schlomo smiled. ‘If it moves, we’ve jammed it, and that includes ships.’

‘I’m a bit concerned,’ continued Schlomo, as he was the only one of his team that seemed to talk, ‘about how we get on to the ship itself. We can’t abseil down ropes as there may be too much wind, and we can’t land two copters on the deck as it takes too long and they could hit the deck...?’

‘How about a wheel?’ asked Biggles.

Schlomo looked at him quizzically.

‘It’s a bit like a wagon wheel; our commandos have used them. It’s a wheel shape that hangs from the copter. Around the wheel, the spokes are, for want of a better word, nooses. The commandos just put their hands in and hang on, obviously as long as the trip isn’t too far or under fire, and when they get there, the copter gets low enough to allow them to drop off and then goes, without touching the ground. It then operates in reverse. Easy...’

Schlomo thought for several minutes, then looked at his team. Each one silently nodded.

‘Ok, but add two extra places in case there is a need for anything to change in the way of more men.’

‘More men?’ asked H.

‘Who knows?’

‘You have more men?’

‘Who knows?’

Well, thought H, a wheel it is then..... and tried hard to ignore the fact that a wheel was the lowest ranking straight in poker.....

'If that's the case, we only need one copter for the team.'

'Even better,' said H, 'because we need the other copter to go in another direction with the cash.'

Schlomo nodded. That didn't concern him. Harry Cohen's go-between had guaranteed that this would be ok.... They talked for another two hours going through every possible item that needed attention, with lots of 'what ifs?' and 'that's ok..... but if...?' 'that's fine, but the downside is...' and hammered it all out until there was little else to hammer.

As they left, a tired Biggles said to H, 'Fancy a quick calm-me-down drink?'

Benshima was in Rome with her friend so H quickly agreed, and they found a late night brasserie and had a cold beer....

They met again several days later. Schlomo had organised the jammers, big John had a wheel fabricated to Biggles' spec, Biggles and his co pilot had been practising low flying, and H had taken a call from Harry Cohen.

'How's it going, H?'

'Good, Harry.'

'Good, H. Just one small detail....'

'Yes, Harry?'

'From what I gather, the person will not have the product until a particular date. I will let you know that date.'

'Why's that, Harry? Why a particular date?'

'No idea, H. Why do ducks quack?'

Chapter 28

Allan Scott sits at home

In his modest detached house, Allan Scott sat on the settee and watched the television news. He had no idea why, as it was only doom, gloom, hype and spin. What bollocks. On a bad day, he hurled abuse at the tele. On a good day, he hurled less. Allan was struggling, as usual, with life. One day up, the next down. He had no idea why it happened, as nothing really changed to make it so.

But one day up, the next down.

He had occasionally wondered if he was psychotic, or, in today's terms, bi-polar? Who knows? Maybe he was...maybe he wasn't....?

And if he went to find out would they put him away in a dreadful asylum somewhere where they would drug him all day, take what bit of money he had from his account, sell his house behind his back, pocket the money, then leave him in solitary confinement all day in a strait jacket?

To go mental..... Nah..... Unlikely.... But you never know.....

Funny word, *bi polar*. Two poles. But the North Pole and the South Pole were both cold....? The same. So someone who was psychotic was the same in opposing moods? How does that work then? He decided he didn't want to be bi-polar; that wasn't quite right. And yet he felt there was something else that would describe what he was. But what?

He was bi-polar, perhaps, which was cold; and yet quite often he was warm....? In fact, he was quite a warm hearted chap really, given the chance. So what was he? Cold at the poles,

warm in the middle. Bingo! Bingo!

He was equatorial! That was it. Cold on the outside with a warm interior. Equatorial! What a wonderful word. Equatorial. It could be a new phrase in modern psychiatry! Maybe he could do a PhD – it was only thirty or forty thousand words – and be a Doctor and tour the world giving speeches about this new level in psychiatric appraisal.

‘Fellow colleagues....you have gathered here in Hawaii so that I may, with a considerable degree of humility, present my latest theory on.....’

He went back to the plate on his lap with roast ham and two large duck eggs. He took a huge mouthful then saw Tony Blair on the news, in the Middle East, where he was ‘sorting out’ the region. Swallowing as quickly as he could the hardly masticated food, he screamed, ‘You couldn’t even sort out Britain, you pillock. Or England. Or London. Or the NHS! Or the roads. Or the petrol. Or Gordon Brown! Or the budget deficit. Or the balance of payments!.....’

He grinned. That felt better.....

‘You useless prick!’ was the icing on the cake before Tony Blair faded to be replaced by Gordon Brown with his granite face and fixed, glacial grin, trying to appear interested at a school.

‘Oh, for fuck’s sake,’ he moaned in despair, and looked to Heaven. ‘Take me now....’

Tonight was a bit of American football, Patriots V the Colts, which should be pretty damn good, but a part of him yearned for the good old days of San Francisco with Montana and Rice. Now *that* was football. After that, he had Tiger Woods and a subtitled Chinese film about an Emperor and the Court

intrigues, politics and battles. They did that well, did the Chinese! Majestic, with a cast of millions!

His mind wandered back a few minutes. Equatorial.....? It was worth a letter to The Times. He would knock one off later.

His short time with Mr James James, who he now knew as boss, had been ok. In fact, more than ok. You knew exactly where you stood, and he could cope with that. It was *not knowing* that completely threw him.... After H had told him to acquaint himself, he sat down and..... decided he hadn't got a clue what to do! That didn't bother him too much as he never had....

Whenever he started something new, he knew he would panic, decide he couldn't do it, decide it wasn't his kind of job after all, want to leave..... and yearn for shelf stacking at Tesco where life was simpler.

And so he did what made him comfortable and just got down to the most simple basics and worked outwards. Do the simple things and the rest will take care of itself. He opened up Excel in his shiny new computer and started making a matrix of what he needed to know: how many betting shops, where, employees, square footage, turnover, profit, salaries, customers, bets, etc....every damn thing you could possibly want to know to allow you to understand where the money was coming from, any going out, and then to compare each club with the others.

Then the same with the clubs; and the casino; and the security company.....and the online casino? How do you do that? Just start with the basics and expand the knowledge from there.... Exactly the same way. Send them an email and ask all the obvious questions.

And so he had toiled and toiled and toiled.

As he thought of another new piece of information, it brought up another avenue of enquiry, and it kept going until it was, he thought, exhausted. There were no more questions in the whole of the Universe! He got the numbers of every manager and rang them personally to introduce himself and explain what he was doing and what he needed. One or two were suspicious, or at least a touch quiet, and didn't exactly want him snooping round, but he told them it was nothing like that. Although it was *exactly* like that. After four days, he emailed them all and waited. And waited. After three days, he rang several of them, and they assured him it would be done when they had the time, staff, resources, holiday shut down, the moon was in line with Saturn.....et fucking cetera.

He put his feet up on the desk, rocked back on his executive chair and looked out of the window. You didn't get this problem stacking shelves! But you didn't get a good salary and company car either.....mmmmm. What to do?

Ring H and get his backing or sort it out and to hell with it. You can't make an omelette without breaking eggs! What had that got to do with anything? As he moved his weight to get back to his original position, the castors went forwards, and the chair went backwards, and Allan found himself hurriedly trying to keep his head up as the back of the chair hit the floor with a thump. Shit! A few moments later Tony poked his head round the door and saw Allan getting up off the floor.

'Ok, Al?'

'Sure. Must be a faulty chair or something.'

'Maybe you dozed off.'

Allan grinned. He liked this humour. 'Nah...I have a strict rule about that. Never go to sleep in your chair, always curl up on the desk. It's all about Health and Safety, Tone..'

'I can see that, Al.'

'As you're up here, got a few minutes for a coffee?'

'Sure.'

'Good. Cos while we've got a minute I just want to ask you a few questions...'

Come in to my parlour, said the spider to the fly.

An hour later Tony had answered every question and been smoothed and patted lovingly on the head as he did. Although suspicious, Tony couldn't see any problem at the end of the day by giving a load of statistics, some of which were so obscure, you could do nothing with them anyhow. How many bog rolls you used in a year? Who cares?

Allan Scott did.

He knew that most businesses were poor when it came to collecting data on themselves, and yet what else could you do to see how you were doing? He also knew a lot of businesses were happier not knowing.... He knew that every piece of information told a story...but not necessarily by itself. With one or two other snippets it may tell him something very interesting....hopefully. Or he would be going to the Boss and saying, 'Nothing to report, sir. Everything is wonderful. I'll get my coat.....I know the way out.'

And he visited all the clubs and betting shops, and Adrian had patiently told him all about the casino and the percentages that he expected: punter spend, hours spent at each table, return per table, return per croupier, per machine, return on capital, etc., etc. Every damn thing in there was monitored by Adrian, even the amount a *george* gave which, Allan found out, was a tipper.

Allan was impressed! This was how you ran a business. Get the figures, understand them, and they tell you what to do. He decided there wasn't too much he would be helping Adrian with and, not being from the industry, and with the Group having only one casino, he had absolutely no basis for any comparisons.

At the moment....

And so he beavered away, and as they sent him more and more information, the picture became ever clearer, not only on the page, but in Allan Scott's mind. Now he could see the picture. Now the story was unfolding. Now he could see patterns. Now he could see glaring differences and subtle nuances.

Now the panic was leaving.

Now he was staying...

The Patriots V Colts was slow, so he deleted it. Tiger Woods had started early, so they only showed a couple of minutes of his highlights, and he had done a good job, as usual, of balling up the first day, so he deleted that as well. One of these days Mr Woods would have four good days in succession and win by twenty. Orgasmic! He realised that he hadn't actually got the patience to watch tele at the moment, so he went to his computer and opened a folder marked 'Times'. He had several topics waiting to be fleshed out and wondered whether to do one of them or the new 'Equatorial' one, which certainly had gravitas. He decided that he would do one that was still topical and send the psychological one when it was honed.

To The Times

Dear Sirs,

You may remember I wrote to you last year, and the previous five years, on this subject, but you, for some reason, deemed the letters unsuitable for publication.

Could I, with respect, bring you back to the same topic, namely that of Daylight Saving Time?

As HM Government is awash with Scottish ministers who wish to keep DST unaltered, thereby plunging the English into darkness for much of the year, could I suggest that at midday on the first of January 2008 we all put our clocks forward?

There's no law against it, so why not....?

I remain, Sir, your obedient servant,

Allan C Scott

He read it several times, and although he realised it could no doubt be better, it would do. When he read some of the letters in The Times from obviously well educated men and women (but a lot less women?), with their skill in composing letters, he knew no-one was going to print his.....

And then it struck him! He had written God knows how many letters to The Times and had none printed; in reality, they were more than likely pinned to the Editor's office wall to give visitors a laugh.

'Look at this one from this fellow Scott,' the Editor would say. 'I can only assume English is his second language and intelligence a forlorn hope.....'

And they would chuckle and play a game of working out how many grammatical errors there were in a letter, and the winner would get a bottle of champagne from the Editor. Bastards! So they could stick his letters up their arses and he would do it differently. If The Times were not interested in his

views of the world, then what he would do was write to the people who were at the centre of those views.

The horse's mouth and all that.....

And now for Plan B.....

Chapter 29

Senor Reyes and the President

'I thought Pablo was bad enough,' said the President in the enormous room that was his office, 'but Alvarez...?'

Jose Reyes nodded in agreement. Alvarez indeed.....

Alvarez was an enigma.

Like most, born into poverty, when he was young he had hustled to make a few pesos, and then in his late teens, driven by an urge to help his countrymen remove the yoke of poverty, he left home, or the foul-smelling shack he called home, and joined the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, which the outside world knew as FARC. Founded by Manuel Marulanda some fifty years earlier, its main aim was to overthrow the government and establish a communist agrarian society. From its base in the south of the country where it now 'ruled' an area of 20,000 sq miles or just under half the size of England, it financed its operations through kidnapping with an appropriate ransom arrangement, extortion and narcotics trafficking.

Rising through the ranks, Alva Alvarez saw, and liked, how FARC used its financial power and the power of coercion to raise funds and manipulate the local people. With an income of more than two hundred million dollars a year from criminal acts, and two thirds of that from cocaine trafficking, Alva saw it less as a career, more as a business model that could be refined.

And so he left to start his own operation, which had now grown to the point where its overwhelmingly efficient production and trafficking structure brought in revenues of nearly a billion dollars, three times that of the current FARC operation, twice as much as Jose Reyes and a billion dollars too much for the Colombian government to stomach at all.

The Colombian government were not naive....there would always be cocaine....but it needed a balance.....a balancing of scales that saw the government on one side and the cocaine producers on the other. And in time that balance, due to the overwhelming structure of the state, would slowly dip down on the Government's side, and all would be well...

It knew there would always be cocaine, but what it wanted was an influence in what happened to the revenue. Not only that, it was quite aware that, unchecked, the cocaine traffickers made Colombia a pariah on the world stage. When people were killing all over the world just to get another fix, mainly a Colombian fix, it was difficult to hold your head high at the top table and influence world affairs.

The peculiar thing was, it did influence world affairs, but in the wrong way. The flow of drugs money that circulated the world, untaxed, created huge problems for the world's financial systems. It may only be a few billion dollars from the distributors, but then it hit the middle men, who sold it on to the pushers and dealers, and a billion dollars at source saw its value multiplied by a hundred. That was a lot of extra value added to a cheap product and the world circulation of cocaine money was now \$200 billion.

And drugs had become much cheaper to buy. As the price came down, it moved from the wealthy few to the middle classes, then to just about anybody with a little money or the

ability to steal it. The price of a pure gram of cocaine had moved from \$200 in 1981 down to around \$30 in 2006. The world was awash with cheap drugs, and in the UK alone there were estimated to be over 750,000 users, snorting a gram at a time, usually chopped up into twenty lines, at £30 a go!

Jose Reyes was also a drugs Lord. True, he was also other things, but he was, by any other name, a drugs Lord. But he was a responsible drugs lord.....he would merely see this responsibility as not only his duty but also the maintenance of what was an extremely lucrative business. Why fight the government?

It had always been family policy that you never, ever, acquiesced to them, but offered goods and services that bought you the right to be left alone. You atoned for your transgressions through public service...schools, housing developments, municipal facilities and the bribing of government officials.....which included the President.

Many years ago, a British Prime minister, Edward Heath, had coined the phrase '*the unpleasant and unacceptable face of capitalism*' when referring to the antics of Tiny Rowland and his business dealings in Africa, with African politicians and his sanction-breaking deals with Rhodesia. Jose Reyes was, alternatively, *the acceptable face of cocaine trafficking*.....if there was such a thing and if cocaine could ever be truly acceptable in a modern society.

Alva Alvarez, however, was not acceptable to the Government, Jose Reyes, FARC or the White House, who looked on impotently as they poured money into Colombia to help fight the war on drugs, which was making their cities a nightmare, and seeing very little by way of return. Indeed, the

more billions they put in, the less it seemed to affect the outcome. But America was good at throwing money at anything it didn't like. It looked good, and money was what it had most of.

Alva was becoming, thought Jose, Pablo Escobar all over again.....

But Alva was different. Pablo had been a psychotic maniac who could be wonderful, kind and tender. And although he had Presidential ambitions, he was never anything other than a despotic drug dealer.

Alva had somehow morphed from someone with a hunger for the common good to a tyrant. A cold-blooded, kill-anyone-and-anything tyrant. There was the famous story about the day when Alva's personal barber was shaving him and nicked his chin with the razor. Absolutely petrified, he just stood there and shook. His whole body trembled with fear, knowing that he would never see his family again.

Alva beckoned him round to the front of his chair with his finger, beckoned him to kneel down and pulled out his gun.

'Coffee first,' he said calmly, and nodded to the man standing to one side to fill up his nearly empty cup. Replenished, the man bowed slightly, and as he started to move away, Alva put a bullet in his head.

It exploded, and several people in the room were splattered with blood. No one moved...no one said a word. Alva felt better. Someone had to die, but a good, faithful barber, the man who held a sharp blade to his throat, was hard to get.....

His altruism had turned to megalomania, and his power had become an embarrassment for too many interested parties. Especially as his powerful tentacles were moving ever farther

outwards, and his ambitions seemed to include not only vast wealth but the annihilation of any competition.

Jose had first-hand knowledge of that; Alva had sent him a message.....

Five weeks earlier his wife had been shopping with a friend in Bogota. Shopping meant.....who knows what to a man, but that was what they said they went for. As usual, the car with the blacked-out windows had an escort, front and back, and a trained driver. The drive there was uneventful as it should be, but on the drive back.....

The driver of the front car saw the dustbins on either side of the road, nearly three hundred yards away. There was nothing particularly unusual about that; it was a long, uninhabited road, and any old thing could wind up there....but a dustbin? Dustbins? Senor Reyes had spent a lot of money on the security men that accompanied his family wherever they went. Local men with local knowledge; perhaps ex army or police or even just someone who would be good at it, were all sent to Blackwater, perhaps the world's largest security company, or, as they would describe themselves, a private military company. As the largest contractor to the US Military of 'operations support' – a little known fact being that the amount of 'operational support' staff in Iraq is more than the total of the combined allied troops – they not only supplied support but had a massive seven thousand acre training facility where Government Agencies sent their employees and Senor Reyes sent his men. They learned all they needed to know about everything that could happen to their charges: the responses, the exits, the counter attack if absolutely necessary.... They had firearms training, bomb training, hand to hand combat, vehicle manoeuvres; indeed anything that made the lives of their employers more safe.

.....a dustbin? With a hundred and fifty yards still to go, at seventy miles an hour, he calmly said, 'red flag,' to the intercom joining the cars, and slammed on the brakes. His compatriot sitting in the front with him lifted the machine pistol in readiness. At the speed he was going, it took just over one hundred yards to stop.

The driver of the following car, the middle car, the Senora Reyes car, heard the warning and saw the brake lights and the smoke from the tyres of the lead car, and knew what was happening. His colleague already had the Glock cocked and ready.....

Even as he had all his weight on the brake pedal, he was computing the next step. Slow down to a controllable speed, change direction slightly one way to move the weight of the car and then, in a controlled turn, swing it back the other way to force a sideways skid which would result in the classic 'going back manoeuvre'. Then into first and floor it! He did it beautifully; his instructors would have been proud. Controlled, unhurried, a classic evasive manoeuvre. The car came to its pivotal point, where the forward momentum had ceased, it had been turned round, and its spinning wheels were now trying to grip to take it back from whence it came.....

It is said that a person never hears the bullet from the rifle that kills them. Some, that have lived, have disputed the indisputable.

'I heard it,' they say. 'I moved, and that's why I'm still alive.'

Of course, they're wrong. They either moved, were shot at by someone a touch inadequate with a gun or, more than likely, were shot by a hand gun...which is quite different.

A bullet from a slow hand gun leaves the muzzle at about 800 fps (feet per second) which is about 545 mph, whereas the muzzle velocity of an average rifle would be about 3500 fps, about 2886 mph. Now, with the speed of sound at 769 mph, it doesn't take much brains to work out that the bullet from a rifle is going to get into your head a damn sight quicker than the sound will get into your ears.....

But they did hear this.....

Just a split second before it reached them. With a muzzle velocity of only 570 fps, 388 mph, they heard it..... A small bang, mainly due to the sound proofing of the bullet proof windows, a slight whoosh and then.....

The Serbian produced M80 Zolja, held tightly by its user, taking care to get out of the way of the explosive back blast, disgorged its finned deliverer of death. Although nearly two hundred yards away, it would reach its target in just a fraction over a second..... Which meant that the speed of sound delivered its deadly warning half a second before the rocket propelled anti tank missile with the third of a kilo of explosive, entered their car and exploded only a couple of inches from their heads. They, and the car, were totally destroyed.

However, there would be bits left of the car.....

Alva had been clever. Relying on the training of the drivers to stop at what they saw was a trap, his men had waiting for the cars. Why waste an opportunity with the problems associated with a roadside bomb? Faulty detonator...remote transmitter packs up... bomb doesn't pick up remote transmitter signal ...a second delay and the blast misses the high speed car....speed of car still takes it away from where you want it – so many problematic variables. Who needs them?

Senor Reyes half listened to the President and for the umpteenth time thanked the Virgin Mary that his wife and her friend had decided to stay the evening in Bogotá, have a meal, see a show, then spend the night in the company pent house that they kept for overseas visitors.

But he was sad for the two dead men in the car that was returning home. Due to the rota system, it was their turn in the middle car. Yesterday or the day after it would have been two of the others.

Yet again he was reminded that life, and death, were all about.....

timing.

But what to do about dear Alva? He was ensconced in his fortified headquarters on the outskirts of the vast jungle, far enough in to be safe, close enough to supply routes.

What to do?

He had to die, of course, but how?

And was death enough?.....what of his organisation?..... Of the control and command structure? Would that collapse, or would someone simply fill the vacuum?

A bit of both perhaps....? It may not collapse, but it was unlikely that someone could immediately fill Alva's shoes. If he was that good, Alva would have killed him already!

What to do?

Obviously kill him.

How?

How indeed....?

There was a way.

There had always been a way.

Perhaps now was the time....

Chapter 30

Letters

*To Richard Lambert
Director General
Confederation of British Industry*

Dear Sir,

As a manager within a company with a large workforce, I must protest most strongly at the possible introduction of new legislation to further promote the ability of employees to have time off at any time of their (not the company's) choosing.

As any employer knows, it is already extremely difficult to run a company with the myriad of regulations in place, and this will only add to our current woes.

Obviously our masters in Westminster remain ignorant of our plight, as they have never managed anything in their lives, and, should they reach the dizzy heights of running (I use the word loosely) a department, it will hardly be noticeable if people are absent, as civil servants do so little, and there are so many of them anyhow....

Yours,

Allan C Scott

Dear Mr Scott,

On behalf of the Director General may we thank you for your views, which have been noted and will be added to the other feedback from our members.

With regards,

Martha Prinkle – Liaison Officer

Now this was better.....they had said nothing, but a reply was a reply!

Chapter 31

The team raid the ship

It had been decided to board the ship after Aranazov returned from his gambling in the City. They watched his helicopter soar over the sea, then gave it ten minutes. They had debated at great length whether they should hit early in the morning when people were asleep, but decided this way people may assume the return of Aranazov and these two copters were linked.

On the deserted beach, Biggles took the helicopter up to ten feet and half the team, dressed in all black with black balaclavas, their Uzi machine pistols hung over their shoulders, put their hands in the nooses and held on. He soared up and headed across the sea.

The other copter did the same. They would drop their cargo at both ends of the ship, which would minimise the problems and halve the risk of calamity.

They would then wait a short distance away so that the jammers worked effectively then return when signalled. At the end of the mission, the one helicopter would take the men and the other the money, which would be in holdalls, currently flat under their black sweaters. Big John should have been on board Biggles' copter, but two days earlier he had been rushed to hospital with appendicitis, and so his second in command had taken over.

As they flew towards the ship's lights in the distance, Biggles and Trev, the pilot of the other helicopter, switched on the pair of jamming devices. They had been flown in by the team from

God knows where, but, ironically, they were made by Thales, a British company. One jammed mobile phones; the other ship to shore.

Aranazov's helicopter landed on the deck, and he gave the pilot a hundred pounds, slurred a 'thank you' and stumbled his way under the rotors, ducking to nearly waist level to miss the blades that were at least two feet higher than his head if he stood tall. Then he was nearly blown over as the helicopter lifted and went back to the casino from whence it came.

The captain saluted. 'Everything ok, Sir?' he said.

Aranazov nodded and gave him a hundred pounds. 'Good,' he slurred. 'Goodnight,' and the Captain knew that was the end of the conversation and the master wanted no more social intercourse. Only intercourse...

'Yes, sir,' said the Captain.

As he was departing, Aranazov called after him, 'Everyone still in their quarters?'

'Yes, sir, and will be until first light.'

He nodded and tacked his way to the state room.

In it he found his guests: five men and ten women. Well, not so much women as whores; but they must have started off as women....? Three of the naked men were standing around a kneeling woman who was masturbating a prick in each hand and had one buried in her mouth. Close by, two of the men were up another woman; she sat on one while the other was up her arse from the back. A few feet away, and in line of sight of the men, the other five girls had obviously been told to 'get on with it' so they were all entwined in lesbian positions, some using the champagne bottles as dildos.

Aranazov smiled at the sight and marvelled at the hypocrisy.... One looked up and shouted, 'Oleksander, come, have champagne; pull up a woman and give her a good fuck....'

Oh the hypocrisy.....

'As I'm paying,' he replied, 'I think it's only right they come to me and give me a good fuck!'

'Quite right, my friend,' he replied, and pointed to the girls. 'Go.....'

They disentangled themselves and went to the man with the money....

Keeping low with their lights off, all markings covered and their call signs disabled, it took only a minute to get to the ship where they hovered for a few seconds and the team slipped out of their nooses. The copters immediately moved up fifty feet and hovered. This would create considerable noise and confusion.

There was nothing better than confusion.....

The team knew exactly what to do and where to go, as the information they had was impeccable. They ran to the stateroom and had a quick peek in, watching for a moment the debauchery inside.

'Fucking hypocrites,' whispered Schlomo.

In one move they were through the door, screaming and shrieking, and had eight Uzis trained on the men.

'Stay absolutely still!'

One of the men clicked off several shots of the scene with a tiny camera. When he had finished, Schlomo gesticulated to the girls. 'Over there and shut up. No one will hurt you if you keep quiet.'

The girls moved as one to a far corner of the room.

‘The safe,’ screamed Schlomo to Aranazov, ‘open the safe...or you die. Now!’ he screamed even louder. *Keep control....give them absolutely no time to think whatsoever.* Aranazov was still too slow, primarily because he had too much champagne in the casino, and so Schlomo slapped him hard across the face. ‘Now!’

Aranazov moved, almost absent minded, totally confused, over to a desk. He started to open a drawer, but an Uzi was suddenly at his head. ‘Do it very, very slowly,’ said a team member.

He did it slowly and took out a key. A gun pressed against his temple.

With the key he slowly opened a drawer beneath, and it showed a small console.

‘Don’t touch it!’ he said. ‘Don’t even move!’

He looked over at Schlomo, who came to his side and looked at the equipment. ‘Ok.’

Aranazov pressed several buttons, moved away, and the top of the desk silently started tilting upwards to reveal bank notes, small packets, documents, a gun and several syringes.

‘Now,’ said Schlomo.

The Team took it in turns to fill up their holdalls with notes and packets of gems.

.....Surprisingly, the notes had been the subject of much discussion due to their relative values and weights. If they took a million dollars in 100s, it would only weigh about twenty two pounds. If they took a million pounds in 50s, it would weigh about fifty one pounds. It was obviously easier to take more dollars.....but.....a dollar was worth less than a GB pound. On top of that, a 100 dollar note was considerably

smaller than a GB 50. They had decided to go for dollars if there was enough loot to allow a choice, as it was much easier to get back into circulation due to the massive amount floating around the world at any given time.....and they could get nearly two million dollars in each holdall.

When the holdalls were full Schlomo nodded to the team to get out and then turned to Oleksander Aranazov and his four guests and shook his head. Raising his Uzi machine pistol, he pulled the trigger and kept it pressed. He started with Aranazov, then moved to the other four. The stream of bullets cut into them, opening them up, blood spurting everywhere, and they shook and writhed as life went from them to be replaced by a gruesome death.

That left one who stood there....naked but defiant. And then, somehow, his face changed to one of....inevitability. He had never seen it this way....he knew this way had always been a possibility but somehow....not. It should have been glorious: a battle that filled the news channels all over the world; that lived in legends forever; handed down in his family forever....or....just peaceful. An elder statesman who accepted audiences who left with his wisdom for which he received some small token of their appreciation....

He savoured that....that would have been nice.

But no..... It was going to be like this.....

Tomorrow the photographs would be all over the net. True, they would say they were fakes, or doctored, or something, and the idiots at the bottom would believe that, but the others would know.

His family would know.....

Schlomo moved the catch from auto to single and put a bullet in both the man's legs. He dropped to the floor in agony, profanities screaming from his mouth. Keeping the Uzi trained on the man writhing on the floor, he looked over to the girls.

Which one, he thought....? Which one....?

'Metzada,' he shouted to them. After a moment or two a naked girl removed herself from the pack and started to walk towards him. Raising the gun, he pointed it at her.

'Metzada,' she said back.

He nodded, and as she reached him, he turned the gun and unleashed a hail of bullets into the other girls. They danced around like marionettes as the bullets ripped into them and carried on through; some straying from their trajectory by the bone they had encountered on the way. It was unfortunate, he thought, wrong place, wrong time.....

Schlomo turned back to the man, gave the Uzi to the woman and bent down. It was a shame, really. He would have liked the Uzi to have finished the job; it was fitting that a weapon designed by Uziel Gal should have lowered the final curtain..... but still. Taking a knife from the back of his belt, he grabbed his hair, wrenched his head back and drew the knife across his throat. Life blood pumped and spurted out of his neck, and he gurgled and clawed with his hands..... grasping for life. After a few moments, when his brain had given up its forlorn hope of more blood and the life giving oxygen it possessed, the man slumped down and lay still.

Still holding his head, Schlomo sawed away at his neck until he managed to sever the vertebrae, and the head and body parted. He placed the head upright in a prominent position and from an inside pocket took out a camera.....

They ran from the stateroom, joining the team on the deck where the first helicopter was being loaded with the holdalls full of notes and gems. Loaded, it moved away fifty yards and hovered, waiting to make sure it wasn't needed as a back up in case something went wrong with the other copter.

The team, totally professional, ignored the naked woman and one of them took out a boiler suit from inside his shirt and gave it to her, and she attached herself to a sling.

From the deck Schlomo watched Biggles hover and realised there was something wrong. Big John hadn't shut the doors! As he was getting attached to the wheel, Schlomo screamed as hard as he could to his pilot, but he couldn't hear, and as he was underneath the copter's fuselage, he couldn't see him either.

The helicopter lifted, and Schlomo watched with impending doom as Biggles, now sure everything was ok with the launch of the second copter, prepared to move away. Schlomo decided to take a risk and he pulled himself up a little and slid out one tethered hand. Swinging precariously, he waved frantically at Biggles, who didn't notice him.

Please, Schlomo screamed to himself, just turn around horizontally and go nose first. Don't bank! Don't bank! He waved again frantically, his legs swinging all over the place, this time catching Biggles' eye, who waved back, grinned and gave him a thumbs up. Seconds later he watched as it banked steeply to head off over the Channel and the holdalls slid off the floor of the copter and fell slowly one by one into the large sea below them.

He could see them floating, but there was nothing he could do. In a few minutes they would be waterlogged, and the wet banknotes would sink to the bottom of the sea.....worthless.

He watched one sink straight away. That would be the one with the gems in, he thought.....

What a fucking joke. All that fucking money. He was livid....fucking incompetents! That was what you got when you dealt with fucking amateurs. He manoeuvred himself back into the straps and began the long journey home.....

Chapter 32

The Controller

It was still a struggle.... The bloody, stupid, lazy engineer had done nothing.... Nothing! The Controller would have branded him incompetent, but how could someone be incompetent that did nothing? To be incompetent, you at least had to have done something, anything; but nothing? And so the Controller had sent off messages of various types: general reminders, check-up reminders, low priority reminders, level 1 reminders, level 2 reminders, excuse me is there anyone there reminders?.....loads of fucking reminders! The Controller would surely have said 'fucking' had it been programmed to do so....

The monitoring of all the systems had to be increased, and now not only was the pump working overtime but also the Controller. Because the pump desperately needed an overhaul, or complete change, it was now affecting everything to varying degrees. And because of that, the Controller was having to work hard to keep everything in synch.

There had been an assault on its systems by a virus which had been extremely difficult to fight off. Wherever it had come from, it had been clever and attacked in waves. That had taken a lot of effort, and while the Controller was doing that, it meant not looking after the rest of the system as well as it should. Not all of the virus had been eradicated, and the Controller knew that somewhere, within its complex circuitry, lay a dormant virus, an enemy, that was waiting for the right moment to unleash itself on the weakened system...

On top of that, as though that wasn't enough, the pump was now on its last legs. The Controller had to coax it through the day and let it rest in the evening when the shifts finished, and it just ticked over.

The pump was integral to the whole operation, and it was a disgrace that the engineer was so tardy in his attitude. What the hell was more important than keeping the system going? The Controller knew that the engineer would pay for his tardiness, but by then it may be too late, and the whole system could be put at risk.....

Fuck the engineer!

The Controller would surely have said that if it had been programmed to do so.....

Chapter 33

H learns about the raid

H learned later that evening that the holdalls had fallen into the sea. Big John's deputy had forgotten, or no-one had told him, that the copter would bank steeply, and therefore the doors needed to be shut, and so he watched in horror as they slid past his seat belted body.

What the hell would happen now? It had been agreed that if it all went wrong, then the team would pay for their expenses, and H and Harry would split theirs. But would the team wear this? This was incompetence on H's part. Would the team wear this, or would they come looking? You really wouldn't want those hard bastards looking for you.....

H slept badly that night, as there were things to be sorted. He got up at six, went down to the street and walked a few hundred yards to a coffee shop. On the way, he bought a copy of The Times.

The headline screamed out at him.

**A'zam Saud assassinated
Al Qaeda number three gunned down on
billionaire Oleksander Aranazov's yacht
Fourteen believed dead!**

He read the rest of the article, which postulated that it was more than likely either an Israeli attack, but that was unlikely in British waters; an American attack, also unlikely for the same reasons; an MI6 sortie; or even an internal power

struggle....? It also suggested that it could have been an armed robbery which had gone wrong, but, coincidentally, had also taken out a hunted Al Qaeda main man in the process.

Oh yeah.... it hinted within the lines, as if!

H knew what it was..... Still only seven o'clock, he rang Harry Cohen.... 'Morning, Harry, did I wake you?'

'No, H, I'm an early riser.'

'You certainly are, Harry. You get up that early, I didn't even see you coming....'

Harry said nothing.

'You set me up, Harry.'

Harry had been expecting this and had his speech ready. 'Not really, H. You had a legitimate chance to make a lot of money and my.....friends had an opportunity to undertake a minor transaction at the same time.....'

'Harry,' cut in H.

'H,' cut back Harry immediately, and with an edge in his voice, 'this isn't the time or the place. If you want to talk, I'll meet you at the usual place for lunch. Ok?'

Grudgingly H agreed.

H went back to his office and sat and wondered about Harry. What was going to happen? What would Harry do? After an hour of musing and thinking and planning and musing and thinking again he decided to wait and see what Harry came up with first. He picked up the phone, dialled the bar and asked for a coffee. A few minutes later a girl came in with a large mug and placed it on his desk. She was fairly new at the club, maybe a month, and H hadn't really spoken to her. He looked at her fleetingly....leggy, slim waist, lovely bust, low top, high cheek bones and wide, full mouth....attractive.

Exactly what the punters wanted. He racked his brains for her name. Sarah? Zarah? Sara?

'Thank you. I don't think we've met before....?'

'My name's Zoe.'

'I'm James.'

'I know.'

'You can't reach your cup,' she said, and leaned over his desk until her bust nearly fell out of her top, to push it closer to him. She stood up and smiled. 'Is that better?'

'Thank you.'

She smiled at him again, and in her eyes there was a look. David Attenborough may have explained it in a slightly different technical way, but it essentially said, 'If you want to fuck me, you can.'

H's phone rang.

'Thank you for the coffee,' and picked up the phone. She smiled again and sashayed to the door and was gone. Half an hour later there was a knock on his office door. 'Come in.'

And another cup of coffee arrived.

'I thought you might like something,' and H noticed her top was even lower with just a hint of nipple showing.

She leaned over to give him the mug and retrieve the other.

'Do you like?'

'A bit milky for me, but ok.'

She giggled. 'That's a good answer, but to the wrong question. I wasn't asking about the coffee?'

'What were you asking about?'

'My breasts....'

'That's not a question you're allowed to ask or I am allowed to answer.'

'Why?'

‘Because this is work. And at work we work. Anything else happens outside of work.’

‘Would you like them outside work?’

H was getting in a mess. He hadn’t meant what she thought he had.....or was he playing games? What man wouldn’t play games with a voluptuous girlwoman who was offering her body? It doesn’t take much to flatter a man and persuade him to get his dick out. In fact, it takes very little. And they weren’t little... ‘How old are you?’

‘Twenty one.’

‘Don’t you think you’d be better off using your charms on a twenty one year old than on an old geezer who also happens to be your boss?’

‘They fumble.’

‘Eh....?’

‘They fumble. They mess about. They’ve hardly got a clue how to undo your bra without half strangling you. I want someone who knows what he’s doing.’

‘Believe me, I haven’t got a clue what I’m doing.’

‘That’s not what I’ve heard.’

H was getting uncomfortable. In front of him stood every man’s dream, and in another time and another place he would have locked the door, put her on the desk and spread her legs. But this wasn’t another time and this certainly wasn’t the place.....

‘Zoe, I’m flattered you find me attractive, but for many different reasons I can’t help you. I’m happily married, I’m your boss, I never mix work and pleasure, I’m old enough to be your father.....etcetera.’

‘You don’t like me?’ pouted Zoe.

‘Zoe, I’m sure you’re a nice girl, but I think this conversation has to end now,’ he said kindly.

‘You could set me up somewhere. A flat or something?’

‘Zoe, enough of this. I think you should go back to your work now.’

She clasped her top and pulled it up and then did the same with her bra.

‘You could have these any time you want...and anything else. I would give you anything you want....’

It was a struggle to keep his eyes on her face.

‘Zoe, I can’t help you. Stop this now, and we’ll just regard it as a mistake.’

‘Anything you want.....any time.’

H held up his hands in front of him. ‘Enough of this, Zoe. Go back to your work, and let’s not have any more of this....’

‘Please....’ and her voice pleaded.

H knew this was getting out of hand, and that the girlwoman in front of him saw him as....what? Saviour? Powerful man who women fall for? Escape? Excitement? Bad boy? God knows what she saw, but it wasn’t exactly realistic. He knew half his business friends were fucking their secretaries or had women lined up on business trips, but Zoe was a bit needy to say the least. If there was one thing you didn’t need in a mistress it was ‘needy’. A mistress? Had he debated her as a mistress? Nah..... Another time, another place. He didn’t need another woman. For any reason whatsoever.

He stood up and walked to the door.

‘Get dressed, Zoe, and we’ll forget about this conversation.’

She did nothing for a moment then rearranged herself. He opened the door, and as she was going out, she said, ‘You should have taken me up on the offer.’

In the cafe at Hyde Park H and Harry sat opposite each other. 'H, before you get mad and say something we will both regret, let me, quite simply, explain. My friends needed help, local help, to do a job. I asked you to help, albeit unknowingly, and also at the same time make a huge amount of money. That's hardly, if you will excuse the pun, a crime. As it happens, it all went wrong, and no one has made a penny, but that's not the fault of anything to do with me. From what I gather that's the fault of one of your men or, to put it another way, you.....'

H could, of course, see that argument coming, and there wasn't a counter argument to it. What could he say?

'I accept that, Harry, but because of you a robbery has turned into a massacre, and the cream of the plod will be on the case, and I will go down for a long time. That's the problem, Harry...' he paused, 'I'm afraid me and my missus are going to be living in Colombia with the in-laws very soon.'

'No,' said Harry.

'No what? What do you mean *no*?'

'It won't happen H. No plod, no investigation.....'

H stopped and sat back. 'No plod...no investigation.....what's going on Harry?'

'Nothing, H...just don't be concerned. Hasn't it occurred to you that I actually have a lot more to lose than you, certainly at my age, and yet I'm not too concerned? Hasn't it occurred to you that I would not have helped in this if there was any, and I repeat any, possibility of our, and especially me, going to jail?'

'So this is all going to...fade away.'

'No...it won't fade away, but the ramifications will not be at our level. It will be diplomatic, there will be posturing, there could even be an almighty riposte from Al Qaeda, but these are not

concerns of ours. These are for others sitting in Whitehall, the Knesset, the White House, Gaza and all points east. Not us.'

'Shit Harry, I wondered what the fuck you had got us in to?'

'I thought you'd give up swearing?'

'Did I swear?'

Harry nodded.

'Shit.'

They sat quietly and ate, then H said, 'It's been an expensive exercise, Harry. It wasn't cheap to get that far.'

Harry looked at him and grinned. 'I was wondering if you'd have the guts to bring that up.'

'Well, it seems to me, Harry, that your....*friends*..... have done all right; Whitehall, the Knesset and the White House, maybe not Gaza, but Jimmy James is out of pocket...'

'How much are you out of pocket, H?'

'I'm not sure, Harry; I haven't added it up, but there are expenses and the boys should get a bit...? Don't you think?'

Harry grinned. He liked it.... how to turn a balls-up into an opportunity. Good one, H. And it wasn't his money...

'My friends....will forward half a mil for your help in the matter and your cooperation after the event. If you see what I mean.....?'

H nodded. He thought for a few moments. 'Harry, under the circumstances, that's not much money.'

'H, under the circumstances, I would take it....'

There was just a touch of threat in there....just a touch. It wasn't a threat from Harry as such...it was more from Schlomo....whoever he was?

'Who were they?'

'Who knows....who cares....?'

H reached over and extended his hand. Harry grasped it firmly and nodded his satisfaction. 'I have enjoyed working with you, H. It may have been a bit of a balls-up, but we both know these things happen; however, I do like the way you handled yourself in this. I think we should keep in touch....don't you?'

'Yes, Harry, I do.'

As he left, he got a phone call from the Club asking him if he was going back, as they had a problem..... On his arrival, he was met by the manager and two police officers.

'Could we talk to you, please, sir?' Asked a young, fresh faced one, who H reckoned had been in school no more than a week ago.

He took them to his office and Frank, the manager, explained that Zoe had resigned and gone to the police and complained that H had sexually assaulted her. H sat down and let out a deep sigh. 'It was a bit the other way round, I think.'

'Perhaps you could enlighten us, sir?' Asked the schoolboy a smidge sarcastically.

H explained what had happened.

'I think, sir,' said the young one, still leading the interrogation, 'that you had better come with us, and we'll get a statement from you.'

'Why? I've told you what happened. Why would I want to go anywhere?'

'I'm afraid it's your word against hers, sir, and so we have to take it very seriously. She was very upset, sir.'

'It's not my word against hers.'

'It is, sir,' he said wearily, as though he had been doing this for thirty years, 'or were there two of you? Did two of you assault her?'

'I think you've been watching too many television dramas. They're not real you know. It's only acting.'

The copper bridled. 'I think that would be insulting a police officer and.....and.....obstructing the police in the course of their duty.'

H grinned and looked at the older plod who raised his eyes. He looked back at young plod and grinned again.

'You! Now!' said plod the younger, 'with us!'

H didn't move and looked at him and couldn't stop himself giggling. The copper started to realise there was something wrong. He had missed something..... He couldn't see it, so he started to panic and repeated his message. 'I told you. Now!'

No one moved, and they were looking at him..... The copper's disquiet deepened. He had got in this so far that he could hardly back out, but of what? It wasn't him that had the problem; it was this high class thug in front of him.

H looked at his mate. 'Before this goes any farther, do you want to give him a hint?'

'I'm not quite sure myself, sir, but I assume you have a witness?'

'I do.'

'Would it be a camera, sir?'

'It would.'

'Could we see the tape, please, sir?'

'You can. Frank, can you get the tape, please?'

Twenty minutes later, they had watched the tape from the hidden camera in H's office, put there because of drunks or druggies that were detained and occasionally put in a complaint of violence or intimidation.

'Happy now?' said H to young plod.

He said nothing. H knew he was happy, if only because they had watched a soft porn movie while at work!

'One thing does surprise me sir,' said plod the elder.

'What's that?'

'How you kept your hands off her.'

H smiled. 'I'm a happily married man,' he said, knowing the camera was still recording.....

Chapter 34

Scott's letters

To Michael Martin MP

Speaker of The House of Commons

Dear Sir (I would put Right Honourable but it hardly describes most MPs, so if you don't mind, I won't),

I write, yet again, about the abhorrent situation that we find ourselves in, namely the subject of Member of Parliaments' salaries.

As I have written before, it seems to me that people who have no responsibility or accountability should actually get less money, not more.

It is a strange situation where a person, who may have no qualifications at all for the job (except a smooth tongue), can then, literally, decide on their own wages.

The term 'pigs in troughs' has been used before, but it seems repetition would, in this instance, not diminish its message.

I remain, Sir, your obedient servant,

Allan C Scott

Dear Mr Scott,

The Speaker thanks you for your letter and apologises that he cannot reply himself. You may not be aware that great care is taken to make sure that MPs' salaries are only raised when deemed necessary by an independent review body that aligns MPs' salaries with a basket of comparable private sector salaries.

Thank you for your letter....

Yours sincerely,

Trudi Martin

Administrative Assistant to Michael Martin MP

Chapter 35

At the 'Setting Sun'

Three years earlier the 'Setting Sun' had been the sixth 'night club' to be converted to a lounge bar / restaurant / dance floor / entertainment venue, and it had flourished. Attracting mainly city types and the middle classes, it was a 'suited and booted' sort of place and surprisingly profitable, with little or no problems to deal with. The age group tended to be from late twenties upwards, whereas the night clubs tended to be eighteen to twenty-four, with all the attendant problems. He had only one night club left, and although it was still quite profitable, the costs never went down. The security staff were numerous, inside and outside, but the police and Council had their weekly postbag of complaints about noise and rowdiness at chucking out time. Inside, you had to be constantly on guard for pushers, who could quite happily be pretty and eighteen and supplied by their dealers, and you needed medics on hand in case someone OD'd. One day, he knew, that would have to go as well, but it was in the wrong part of town for anything better, so he was putting plans in hand for demolishing it, and building flats should the need ever arise. Until then, the profits from the club were far better than he would get from the property...

On the top floor of a three storey building, The Setting Sun, on a good night, did thirty-five to forty thousand, and the margins were still about sixty-six percent, split almost evenly between food and drink.

That was handsome. It employed about forty staff one way and another, but even after that, the profits were excellent.

It was nearly midnight, and H had been there for four hours with the manager and representatives from a company that did refurb, and they now had a good idea of how they could keep its atmosphere but give it an edge over the competition. He watched as the refurb people went into the lift and descended, then turned to the Manager, who was still waiting attentively. 'You did well, and I appreciate your input.'

'Thank you,' said the Manager. That was all you needed to hear.....praise from H was what it said and what it meant.

H pressed for the lift, then went down to the street below. The club had no car park of its own, so he walked down the street, through the piazza with its fountains and the closed coffee shops to the NCP Multistory Car Park, climbed the stairs to the third floor, and as he was walking to his car, his phone went. He looked at the screen and saw it was Toby. 'Hi, Toby, what's.....'

The first hooded man with the baseball bat caught him around the head, and he went down, his head reeling. The second smashed him again around his head, and he felt himself losing consciousness. He tried desperately hard to try and find something within him to fight back with, but the third blow sent him out cold. He got one stamp on the bollocks for good luck, then they started pouring the petrol..... A match flared in the darkness, and suddenly H was ablaze.

'What are you doing?' they heard a voice shout. 'Police! Police!'

'Let's get the fuck out of here,' one screamed, and they ran as fast as they could from the man burning on the car park floor.....

Harry Banner, the Manager of 'The Setting Sun', had noticed H's briefcase lying on an easy chair and had dutifully gone chasing after him. He arrived to see the *whoosh* of flame and saw three men high tail it. Running to the unconscious burning body, he took off his jacket and covered H's face then stripped down to his underpants and put everything else on H to stop the oxygen. He then rolled H over several times to smother the flames, then lay on top of H and stopped the air completely.

As he lay there, making sure that nothing else ignited and giving time for the fumes to dissipate, he was aware of two things: the sound of a car spinning its wheels, and the 'waste of time, stupid first aid training' that he had received and knew he would never use..... had now been used! He noticed H's phone lying nearby, grabbed it and dialled 999 for an ambulance.....then rang Toby.

H had a fractured skull in two places, very sore testicles and third-degree burns. The flames had got rid of much of his hair, eyebrows and eyelashes but, luckily, had only singed the skin on his face. His hands were burnt but would heal quickly. Harry Banner had not only saved his boss from a horrific death, but his prompt action had also saved him from any lasting damage.

Lucky H.....

In the hospital, recuperating, when Benshima went to get them coffee, H gave Toby a task.....

Just before he was sent home, it was like a men's club with people wandering in and out, and that included the police. H couldn't help them.....it was, at times, the risk of being in one of those professions that tended to attract maniacs. And that meant, primarily, the customers!

It was one of those peculiar things that the public would not expect, but while there may be a degree of criminality in his chosen profession, they did not go around killing each other. If you excluded the crazies who did the drugs, it was mostly well-ordered. You knew where you stood, and you tried not to make trouble. Who needed trouble? You couldn't have a good life if you were dead! And so it was generally agreed it was a disgruntled punter of some sort, and while the police would do their best.....

H went back home. He looked a bit weird but was generally ok and would soon, hair growing permitting, look fine. He thanked Harry Banner on the phone, but at the end of his week at home, he rang him again and invited him over. H had looked at Harry's employment records and spoken to Toby, who was the boss of all the clubs. After pleasantries, H again thanked Harry for what he had done.

'It's a cliché, James, but I suppose I would have done it for anybody.....'

'I've no doubt, Harry, but you actually did it for me.'

Harry shrugged. He would have liked to have said something in reply but could think of nothing...

'You work a lot of hours, Harry.....do a lot of overtime.'

Harry shrugged. 'It gives us a bit extra, boss.'

'You can't live on your salary alone?'

'Not really, boss...there's Michael.'

'Michael?'

‘Our son, boss...he’s autistic, and the missus has to stay and look after him, and so she can’t work. So I make up the difference.’

‘Where do you live, Harry?’

Harry smiled. ‘We’ve got a cosy little two-bed terraced house. It’s a bit of a squeeze, but it’s ours....’ he paused, ‘Not exactly.....’ he looked around the huge room and shrugged again, ‘....but it’s ours.’

H knew all this, but he wanted to talk to Harry.

‘Harry,’ said H, steeling himself. ‘For reasons I am not going to explain, I am more appreciative than you will ever know that you voluntarily put yourself at risk to help me. Because of that, I want to show my appreciation.....’

‘There’s no need, James,’ said Harry quickly ‘really....’

‘There is,’ said H, ‘there is...Firstly, I understand the struggle you must be having with Michael with so little room. That being the case, I am giving you two hundred thousand pounds so that you can move to a bigger house...’

‘But....’

H held up his hand and cut him off. ‘Secondly, to help you and your wife I will pay for someone to come in and look after Michael for half a day every day for the next ten years so that your wife can do whatever she wants and get a break.....’

He saw Harry was about to say something else, but again he gently raised his hand. ‘Thirdly, if you want a few days away, I will pay for Michael to be looked after....or to be with you. Fourthly, I will buy you a people carrier to help carry Michael about, and fifthly, if there is any other thing I can do to help you.....you just ask. I will put the money into a Trust Fund so that there are no tax implications for you.’

Harry was speechless... H’s voice was beginning to crack.

‘Sorry, Harry, still a little singed, and I can’t talk for long.....’

Benshima had listened from the kitchen and knew H was labouring. She knew from his voice that he was desperately trying to keep control. She went in the lounge. ‘Have you forgotten we have to be at the Maguire’s in about five minutes?’

He looked at her in confusion.

‘Have you and Mister Banner finished?’

H slowly nodded, and Harry got up.

‘I’ll sort out all the details with you, Harry...ring me tomorrow.

Oh...and Harry...this is strictly between you and me. Ok?’

Harry nodded. ‘James, I don’t.....’

But Benshima interrupted and ushered him to the door and saw him to the lift.

‘Why has he done that?’ asked Harry as they waited for the lift door to open.

Benny paused before she answered. Why had he done that?

She thought she knew, but she also knew it was complex.

James was a man-child.

To the world he was indestructible....but his mind had never got over the endless and unremitting brutality that had been inflicted psychologically and physically. He now reacted in an extreme way to polarised situations. If he was under attack, he would kill.....and if he was being helped, he struggled with intense emotions of sincerity, gratitude, emotion, tears.

He couldn’t cope with being abused, and he couldn’t cope with being loved. Benny had watched him when she had done something for him, perhaps very little. Maybe even making him a cup of tea when he was not expecting one. She saw it in his eyes. She saw the child....who was so grateful that he

had been given a cup of tea by someone who loved him and kept him safe. And she could see the relief that after being given the cup of tea....it had not been thrown over him!

She knew that James still struggled to believe that anyone would love him without killing him, and she knew it had been a great risk on his part to offer her a place in his life. And she loved this man-child with all her heart....and kept him safe.

‘Because he wants to....’ she said eventually.

As the lift door closed, she hurried back and found H sobbing. She sat by him and cradled him.

‘He helped me.....’ he sobbed ‘he helped me.’

‘I know, my love.’

‘He helped me.....’

She cuddled him and soothed him.

‘No one helped me.....before.’

She held him tighter. And he emitted a dreadful wail of despair.....for the time when all he wanted was someone to help a tiny child who was getting horrendously violated.....and no one did.

After five weeks, H was well enough to get back to it. He had not bothered with work, even though at times he had fretted about it, or even with his assailants, but now it was time...

He told Toby to come across.

‘You sure?’ he asked Toby

‘I think so. The time is right; three men that appear to be waiting.’

‘Let’s have a look.’

H had thought long and hard in the hospital when he had to stay still to help the burnt tissue to heal, and it seemed to him that three men would not wait for hours and hours in a car in

the car park. That being the case, they must have waited nearby for a reasonable time to wait for him to leave. But he had been quite late, and so perhaps, just perhaps, they had waited nearby as long as they could and then gone to their car. So where had they waited, and from where could they see the club? The obvious place was Greco's coffee bar. It was open until 11:30, and their window tables would see H's club. Toby had been despatched to see Antonio Greco, a friend of theirs, and he had given them his CCTV tape for the evening. He also agreed to swap it for a dud if the police asked. Toby played the tape, and the three men were there: grainy, a touch out of focus, a little dark and indistinct, and walking like actors in a silent film, but they were there.

'Any good H?' said Toby, still looking at the screen.

H didn't reply, so Toby looked across and saw him looking at the screen.....and smiling.

'Oh fuck,' thought Toby, 'he knows who it is....'

And for some reason, a feeling of absolute dread rippled through him.....

Chapter 36

Schlomo goes home

The helicopter dropped them on the outskirts of Boulogne in a grassed area within a large gathering of trees, then immediately went home. The team rubbed their sore and cold hands, then sat down to wait. Almost immediately, a larger helicopter arrived and took them to a small airfield where an unmarked Jet was waiting. Within minutes it was on its way, taking them two thousand miles to the South East..... and home.

Just under three hours later they landed; Levi Solomon left his team and was whisked to the centre of Jerusalem. The team went in the other direction and back to their barracks.

He was ushered into the large office, immediately stood to attention and saluted the five men that had been waiting for him.

‘Well done, Captain,’ said The Deputy Prime Minister, sitting in today for the Prime Minister, who was in Washington. ‘You are to be congratulated on a job well done.’

‘Thank you, Sir.’

‘Can we see, please?’

The Captain took the two small cameras from his pocket and handed them out. They clicked through the images of the party and then of the assassination. They smiled with satisfaction. They had waited a long time for this. He had eluded them for years. They had missed him twice when their helicopter gunships had struck at houses he should have

been in and had also missed him when they detonated a bomb under his car.

But this time..... This time there was no mistake.

And it sent a message.....keep away from Israel...and its territorial borders. Your terror may work in Afghanistan and Chechnya, and you may create havoc in the USA, Spain, London, the Philippines and anywhere else where easily persuaded people would give their lives for a 'greater good'.

But we know what you really want. Osama wants to be Mahdia reincarnated. The mighty Mahdia. The charismatic leader and strategic genius who liberated Sudan in the late eighteen hundreds from the British when they were the mightiest power the world had ever seen. And what liberation he had given them: Sharia. Or at least his version. Slavery was legalised; women should control their desires and not go out unless 'strictly necessary'; a divorced or widowed woman who slept with another man would be buried to her neck in sand and horses ridden over her until she died; women with uncovered hair, even for the 'blink of an eyelid' would receive twenty-seven lashes; a man caught talking to a woman who was not his relative would receive twenty-seven lashes; a man caught calling a fellow Muslim a dog, Christian or sodomite would be given eighty lashes; smiling, chewing or spitting tobacco would get eighty lashes.....

This was liberation from the British? Arrogant pigs they may have been, but, to most observers, this was not liberation. At least not if you were a woman.

And now you want to liberate the world from the infidel? But Al Qaeda and their fervent Taliban army could keep their version of Sharia to themselves.

And so in this world of espionage that they inhabited, they knew it was not just the battles you won that made the difference; it was the edge that you showed you had.

The brains, the cunning, being one step ahead. The determination to win. It was the doubt that you put into the enemy's mind.....

They would see the images on the net and know they had been found wanting...and they would know that no matter how many suicide bombers they enlisted in the name of Allah the Almighty, and no matter how many went to Heaven to meet their virgins, they would not win.....

Chapter 37

Toby Williams

Little Toby Williams sat on the edge of his bed and waited for his friend to arrive.

His special friend.

In his little room, he had a small colour television, a game station with lots of games, comics and a small fridge. He also had a small toilet and a wash basin.

There were also toy lorries, trains, cars and an Action Man. Toby liked it in his room. It was quiet, he had lots to do, and when his friend arrived, he would bring him a small something. It may only be a chocolate bar, which, if he didn't feel hungry, he would put in the fridge for another day, or it could be a small toy or anything that his friend thought he would like.

This was much better than where he had come from. There, they shouted and screamed and hit and hurt and it wasn't nice.

Here it was nice.

Initially, it was a bit confusing, and his friend used to get annoyed when Toby did something wrong, or flinched, or cried, but Toby came to learn that his friend was only doing what was good for him, and that he loved him, and this is how you showed it. He understood that now.

This was how you showed you cared.

And the more Toby showed how much he loved his friend, the more his special friend was kind in return.

And he liked that.

It was nice to be appreciated. Not shouted at.....

And so they did things together, and he knew from the look on his friend's face that he had pleased him.

And sometimes, when his special friend had made a funny kind of aaahhhing sound, he would be held and hugged.

That was nice.....

Chapter 38

Marco Psaila

It was hot in Malta, and Marco was glad of the air conditioning in the place where he worked. He slouched over a computer, bored, and amused himself playing 'FreeCell' and had a quick peek at the porn on the net. Marco was, by local standards, well off. A few months earlier he had come into some money from his grandparents. He had bought a hardly used, second-hand expensive car, moved out of his parents' house and bought a modest one of his own and had a two-week holiday shared between New York and Las Vegas.

'You finished that mod yet Marco?'

'Nearly there....' and he went back to the myriad lines of the computer code on the monitor.

Marco was a computer techie at a company housed in a business park on the outskirts of Valletta. Like several other companies there, they hosted an internet website, primarily because the tax was lenient, and the government left you alone as long as you contributed. One or two also appreciated the money laundering opportunities it gave them. Marco was also a keen no limit Holdem player, and now he had a few more pounds, he could play in the higher stakes games, and he did quite well, augmenting his already healthy bank balance.

He did play with his friends one evening a week at a local taverna, but his magic never quite worked there. He was much better online.

Marco would have liked to have finished work altogether, but had decided against it. Better to be there.

At the end of his shift, Marco got into his nearly new SLK, took the silver foil off the screen, started the engine and pressed the button to start the steel roof to wend its journey to its secondary home in the boot. He found his sunglasses in a small cubby hole and put them on to stop the glare from the setting sun, and drove into Valletta and a beckoning cold beer.

With his two friends, they watched people playing water polo in the harbour and drank their beer.

‘Listen,’ said one and indicated they should be quiet.

They listened. At another table, two Americans were discussing poker, and one was bragging as to how good he was. With too much booze inside them, it may have been the booze rather than his skill that was talking.

‘Beat anybody on a good night,’ drawled the one, ‘freakin’ anybody.’

‘You are the man,’ said the other. ‘You are surely the chosen one...’ and he called for another beer.

‘Challenge him to a game,’ said Giuseppe. ‘Take him on.’

Marco shook his head. ‘I only do internet.’

‘Maybe he does internet? Ask him. Take his money!’

Giuseppe leaned over towards the couple. ‘Excuse me, I couldn’t help but overhear. You are good at poker, yes?’

‘Right on, boy.’

‘Do you play on the net?’

‘I’d play on the freaking moon, Sonny, if I could get a game.’

‘But do you play on the net?’

‘Hell, Sonny, the world plays on the net.’

‘My friend here is a very good player, and I bet he could beat you...’

‘Hang on a minute....’ interrupted Marco. ‘I am sorry, Senor; my friend has had too much to drink. He didn’t mean that...’

‘So you’re an ace poker player, eh, sonny? Don’t look much more than a child....? You sure you don’t just poke the fire? Or maybe you just poke her...get it?’ and he and his friend guffawed and high-fived, then turned away.

‘He could take *you*,’ blurted out Giuseppe.

Randy Katz turned. ‘Really? And how much can your friend wager in this battle of the poker giants? A dollar? Fifty cents? Give me a break...’

Marco was insulted, and he rose. ‘I have as much as you, if not more.’

‘Really, Sonny. And you’re willing to wager some of your vast wealth, eh?’

Marco just stood there. How dare they?

‘How about ten thousand?’ asked Randy.

‘Ten thousand what?’

‘What? What? Dollars! Is there another currency in this world that’s worth a damn? You think we’re playing for this Mickey Mouse Lira you have over here? Who the hell would change it for me when I’ve won?’

Marco was only well off locally, and his money was limited, but he could afford that. And, anyhow, it would be twenty after the game.

‘Ok,’ said Marco, ‘ten thousand US dollars.’

‘What site?’ asked the American.

‘I use Twentyfourseven, which is international but based locally.’

He omitted to say he worked there. What had that to do with anything? The yank thought for a few minutes. Thinking had started to offset the booze, and he was becoming livelier.

‘How do we do this?’ he asked. ‘If I go back to my hotel room to my laptop and play from there, and you are somewhere else, how do I know I am playing you? Your papa could be Doyle Brunson...’

His travelling buddy leaned over and whispered in his ear.

‘Gawd,’ said Randy, ‘there are times, Billy Bob, when you really amaze me; you really do.’

He turned back. ‘Billy Bob says we should play in an internet cafe. You play one side, and I play the other. I watch you log in, and you watch me. That way we both know who’s playing. Billy Bob and your friends can watch the game on another monitor. That ok with you, boy?’

‘That’s ok with me.....’

Two nights later, at the allotted venue, Randy Katz and Billy Bob Schluberger arrived to meet Marco and his friends, and other friends, and friends of friends. Word had got around. Randy had deposited ten thousand dollars at the site, and Marco had increased his account by eight thousand. It was a lot of money but.....

The cafe owner, warned of the impending avalanche of humanity, had changed the emphasis somewhat. All the other computers were shut down except for three. One for each of the contestants, and one hooked up to a large screen TV on the wall, which they used for watching football. The seats had all been arranged to view the screen, and the two protagonists were seated facing each other but separated by two desks on which sat their monitors. Extra booze had been

brought in for the evening, and the proprietor wondered whether he had hit on a brand new, and lucrative, source of revenue?

It had been agreed that the first two hands would not be played. Dealt, but be alternatively won without betting. That was to establish that they were indeed playing the hands as seen on the screen, and had not logged in as someone who was playing on their behalf. Both sides' 'seconds' ascertained this was so.....

And so it began.....

The blinds were small, so there was little action. Even a good hand was played carefully, as neither wanted to lose ten thousand dollars on a freak draw, and so pot control was necessary at this stage. There was nothing worse than having Aces against Kings and seeing the first card was a King, and sometimes the second as well.

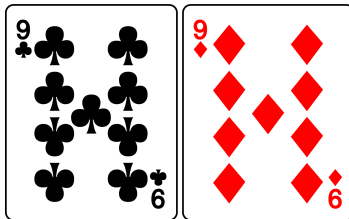
For half an hour it went back and forth. A little here, a little there, but Randy was getting the edge. A more aggressive player, he was more prone to steal the blinds, especially as they got bigger, and also risk a bet in first position in the knowledge that one time out of four the opponent would catch nothing on the flop. As long as you didn't bet more than two-thirds of the flop, mathematically you were going to win more than the amount you lost when your opponent found a hand and went over the top.....

After fifty minutes, the blinds, increasing at ten-minute intervals, were becoming a large factor in the betting.

They had started with 1500 chips, and the blinds were now 200 – 400, a large proportion of the stacks and not to be given away lightly.

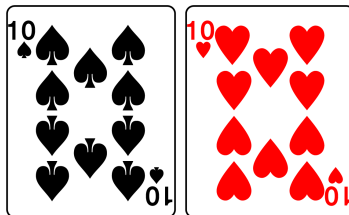
Randy had 2000 and Marco 1000.

Randy hit 9 9



and put Marco all in.

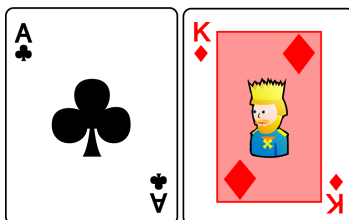
Unfortunately, Marco had 10,10



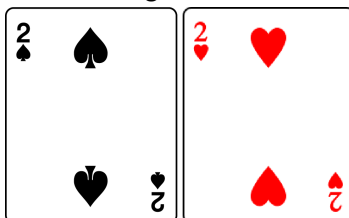
and called. The flop helped neither, and so they reversed their positions.

And then it was all over.

Randy slow played an A K



which encouraged Marco to go all in with 2 2.



Randy immediately called, with Marco a 55% favourite, but essentially a coin toss. Again the flop, turn, and river caught neither of them, and Marco was the winner!

All Randy's chips moved over to Marco...

A loud cheer, thunderous applause and stomping of feet drowned the cafe. Marco walked around and shook hands with Randy.

'Hard luck,' he said.

Randy nodded. 'You were lucky,' he said ungraciously. 'I was better than you, but you were lucky.'

Marco shrugged, but his face beamed with the win in front of his friends.

'It happens.'

'I bet it wouldn't happen again...'

'What do you mean?'

'Exactly what I freakin' said: "it wouldn't happen again". You were lucky. You played like a girl...just lucky.'

'You lost,' said Marco, 'which seems to suggest you were the girl.'

'Pardon?' Demanded Randy, getting annoyed. 'Me, a girl? Are you calling me a girl?'

'You called me one.'

It was all getting a bit school playground.

'Again then,' said Randy. 'Proper stakes, and the loser's a girl.'

'Alright,' replied Marco, far too quickly; he wasn't sure he had just heard himself say that...what were *proper* stakes?

'What can you afford, sonny?'

'As much as you can,' replied Marco defiantly, not wanting to wilt in front of the listening crowd. And he did have twenty towards it.

‘A hundred.’

‘Dollars?’

‘Thousand....’

It hung there, and there was a communal gasp from the assembled throng. A hundred thousand? Most of them would never earn that much in their lifetime! Surely Marco hadn’t got a hundred thousand? Marco quickly converted what he had into dollars. He had bought his small house for about eighty thousand, and he had about fifteen thousand in a bank account, and, of course, he was ten thousand better off now he had Randy’s money. That was one hundred and fifteen, but he could hardly put his house into the poker account. However.....he knew he could beat him again, and one more win and he would be rich...

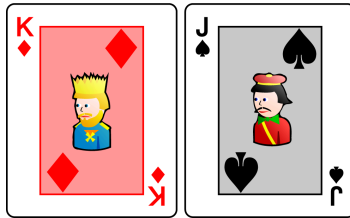
‘Ok,’ he heard himself say.

They met one week later, one day before Randy and Billy Bob went back to Arkansas and their Real Estate business. Marco had assigned his house to the Bank, and they had allowed him ninety percent of its value and transferred the amount to his poker account. With the twenty-five thousand in cash and an amount borrowed against his little Mercedes SLK, he had the money.

It was the same format as before except there were three times as many people. The proprietor had put another large TV screen outside to join the extra tables and chairs. By coincidence, beer and food prices had increased. Even the local press arrived. This was *an event*. Marco tried hard not to shake, but inwardly he was so nervous. How had this happened? One minute he’s playing FreeCell and the next he’s in a poker game for one hundred thousand dollars.....

How? And for everything he had in the world... How?

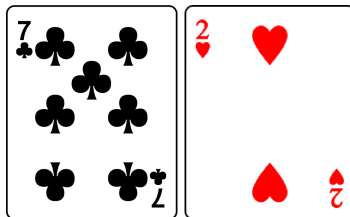
They went through the checking formalities, ignoring the first two hands, and then they were away. Marco started poorly. His hands were visibly shaking, and at one point, when he tried to use the mouse, he accidentally hit the wrong button and folded K J



when he should have called.

The air conditioning made no difference...sweat still oozed out of him. He looked up and saw all the people. And the girls...there were a lot of girls. Soon he would have his pick and not the strict Catholic ones who only wanted to kiss or marry you before they.....

He heard the computer say, 'Your turn,' and looked at the table. Another crap hand. What were you supposed to do with 7 2 off suit? Again.....



He called, and Randy raised three times the big blind. Marco folded, and a gasp filled the room.

They had played fifteen hands, and Marco had only won one and folded every other. He knew you should be aggressive heads up, but 7 2 off?

He could wait. It went from bad to worse, and Marco found himself with only 500 chips to Randy's 2500. It was literally all over, and the fat lady could be heard warming up in the wings. He lost another 300, and his supporters winced. Mathematics said there was a way back. It would take a miracle....or something.

A chip and a chair....a chip and a chair. From such scenarios legends were born; celebrity was assured. He knew the story of Jack Strauss from where the chip and a chair came.

In 1982, in a particularly bad patch, Strauss had gambled his way down to the last \$25 he had in the world. With one green chip left, he wagered it in a hand of blackjack. He won the hand and let it ride, winning and doubling up again. Again, he left his now-\$100 on the table, again he doubled, and he did it one more time before removing his \$400 fortune.

He headed to the poker tables, sat down, and turned that \$400 into \$1000, leaving before the odds could catch up with him. Now holding a small fortune, he put the chips back on blackjack. He doubled up twice, headed back to poker and tripled his money again.

Strauss took his \$12,500 to the Sportsbook, where he bet every dollar on the Superbowl, betting on the Green Bay Packers. He won and finally retired for the night, having multiplied his \$25 by 1000 times. He'd literally gone from having one chip in the world to holding a small fortune in less than 24 hours.

And Jack became famous. *A chip and a chair....*

And so would Marco. It was time.....

Several minutes earlier, he had opened Google and typed in:

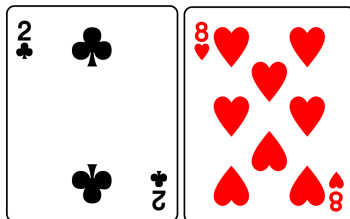
www.twentyfourseven/Marco/Backdoor.com

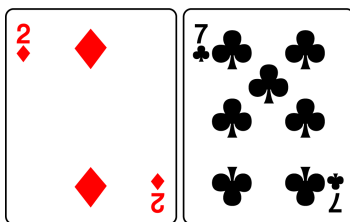
When he had found it buried in the millions of lines of code months earlier, it had Hathaway in its title, whoever he was. But now it was going to make sure he won. Like it had done for the last few months and made him very well off. He looked at the full suit of cards and watched as the random number generator shuffled, then he saw the cards waiting to be dealt. Nine cards...waiting.

It was ironic really. The computer continually tested the 'randomness' of the random number generator and continually threw up a sequence of three hundred million numbers and checked them mathematically for theoretical randomness. So that it was fair. So that it didn't get skewed. And now he was going to change them.....

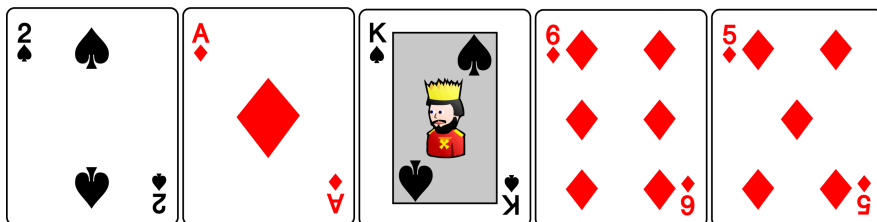
Let the legendary comeback begin! He smiled at a joke as he was about to play. Let the mouse devour the Katz.....*eccellente!*

On the first hand, he gave himself 2c 8h and Katz 2d 7c.





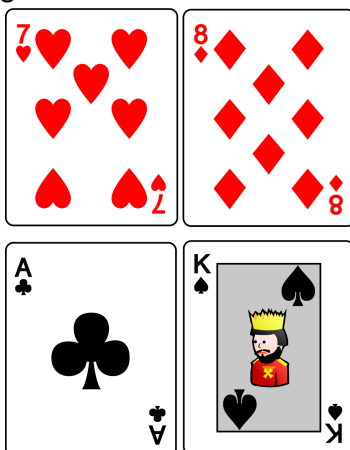
Katz was big blind, and Marco went all in, which Katz mathematically had to call. He changed the cards so that they came as 2 A K 6 5



Marco's kicker played.

Katz had been so close to a split pot...so close.

The next hand he gave himself 7 8 off and Katz A K.

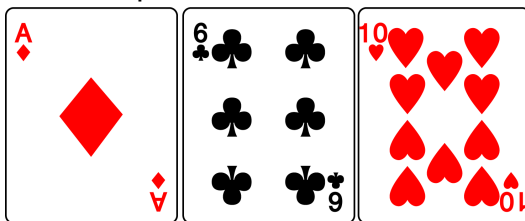


Katz slow played it, and Marco went all in.

Katz immediately called and saw that Marco was a 5 to 3 dog.

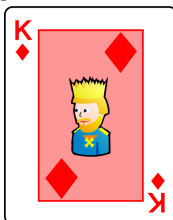
Got you, you bluffing bastard! It was as good as over.

He watched as the flop came A 6 10



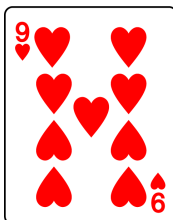
Two Aces! Two freaking Aces!

The turn produced a King



Two pair. Only a 9 could save the runt now, and the odds of that happening were about 8 percent, 12 and a half to 1.

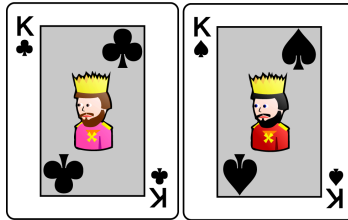
He watched as the 9 of hearts hit the table and his mouth opened and dropped.



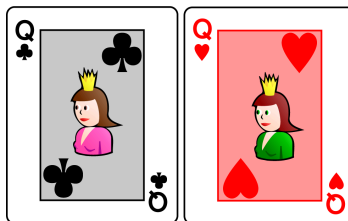
You must be freakin' joking....? He looked round the monitor and glared at Marco. He was about to say something, but didn't. Keep calm.....keep calm. It was difficult when your pulse was over 110. Marco let him win the next hand by folding then won the next two. He now had 1475 and Randy Katz 1525. It was time to leave him humbled...just sitting there with 50 chips.

He gave Katz two Kings and himself two Queens, dealt the hand, and immediately went all in.

Randy



Marco



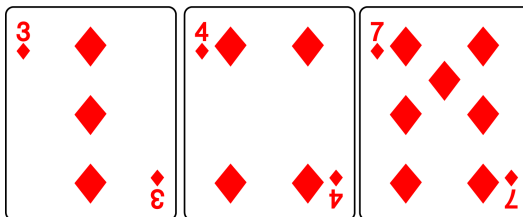
Katz thought for a moment as there was a chance that Marco could, perhaps, possibly, maybe, an outside chance.....have two Aces. No freakin chance!

He piled in behind him.

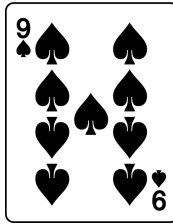
It was all down to this.

Marco could see the sweat on Katz's forehead. Good, let the Yankee sweat.

The flop was 3 4 7 suited diamonds which helped nobody...no good.



The turn was a 9....no good.

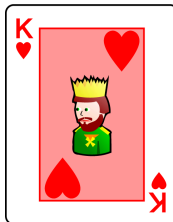


Marco looked at the Queen he had chosen to appear on the river and looked at Katz as it was dealt, waiting to see the destruction written on his face.

Katz leapt in the air and whooped and hollered as only Americans can. Jubilation flooded his face, and Marco heard Billy Bob screaming from the back.

What? He had lost....? What.....had happened?

He looked at the cards and saw the river was a King.



A King?

How could it be a King? He had put a Queen there to be delivered. How could it be a King?

And then it hit him..... He had lost everything.....the house, the car, his winnings, everything.

He started to shake.

He started to cry.

How had this happened?

Why had this happened?

Chapter 39

Scott's letters

*To Professor Pam Maras
President
British Psychological Society*

Dear Madam,

I wonder if you could point me in the right direction, please? Although not a psychiatrist as such, I believe I have come upon a new variation of the Bi-Polar syndrome (the old name for schizophrenia).

From exhaustive tests on myself, observation and medical data, I have established that there is also a condition that I have termed Scott's Equatorial Disorder.

This, as you will realise, is a half-way house between Bi-Polar, with its massive swings, and the softer middle, which I have termed 'equatorial' to illustrate the warmer area between the poles.

If, like me, you realise the important gap that this fills within the Bi-Polar debate, could you let me know which department I could contact to arrange funding for further research?

Yours truly,

Allan Scott

Dear Mr Scott,

On behalf of Professor Maras could I thank you for your letter and your most interesting observations in relation to Bipolar disorder.

As I am sure you are aware, there are already three categories of the disorder, Bipolar 1, Bipolar 2 and Cyclothymia (and the catch-all Bipolar NOS), which replaced the old 'manic depressive' term coined by Emil Kraepelin over one hundred and fifty years ago and is now Classified with ICD 9 and ICD 10.

Whilst there may be a space within these categories for Scott's Equatorial Disorder I think we would need considerably more empirical data to take this further.

Could I point out we do not provide funds for research, and you will have to contact the Department of Health or a Foundation such as Wellcome.

When you have your new data, please feel free to contact us again.

Yours,

*Julie Windrush
Secretary to Professor Maras*

Chapter 40

Hello Dennis

It had been a relaxing night in the pub. He played darts for his local team and was, even if he did say so himself, a bit good. The pub was less than a mile away, so he walked there, which allowed him to have several pints, and walked back, which set him up for a good night's sleep. Life was good. There had been a hitch or two lately, but he was a survivor, and there were always opportunities. Next week he and a friend were off to Morocco. And there were certainly opportunities there.....

As he fumbled to put his key in the door lock of his three-bedroom semi, everything went black.

He woke to find himself strapped to what seemed to be an operating table. The lights were low, but around the room were various pieces of medical equipment. He suddenly realised he must have had a stroke or heart attack or something...and he had been rushed to the hospital. Thank God for that.

He remembered trying to open the door and then.....nothing. He was lucky that someone must have found him. The straps keeping him secure on the table were a bit tight, so he shouted, 'Nurse.....nurse....'

After a few seconds, the door opened, and the man said, 'Hello, Mister Arnold.....'

He didn't understand. *This man wasn't a doctor...*
He was confused. *This man owned nightclubs.....*

But if he wasn't a doctor, what was he doing visiting him in a hospital? His head spun. Why was he visiting him in a hospital? What was going on?

He felt frightened.

Why was he in his room?

Not only that, he should be.....dead?

He felt scared, and panic swept through him. Oh, Christ!

'Nurse,' he shouted, 'nurse!....nurse!....help me, nurse!'

No one appeared.

H pulled up a chair and sat by him. He knew he had to keep control. He wanted to smash his face in. Now! He wanted to kill him. Now! But he had to keep control.

'It's good to see you again, Stanley,' said H. 'How've you been keeping? Still fucking little boys?'

Easy Jimmy boy, he thought, easy does it. Enjoy this, savour this, don't rush it.

Stanley Arnold started to tremble. 'What do you want?' he asked weakly.

H smiled. 'I promised my missus I wouldn't swear again...but that's a fucking stupid question.'

For some inexplicable reason, H started giggling and shook his head. 'What do you want?' He repeated in a pathetic voice back at Arnold. 'What do you want? What the fuck do you think I want?'

'I don't know....'

'Then let me help you work it out. If some men had tried to kill you by setting you alight, what would *you* want?'

Tears were starting to flow down Arnold's face, and he kept farting. 'It's nothing to do with me.....I had nothing to do with it.'

H just smiled. 'Give it a rest.'

'Please....no.'

H shrugged. 'You should have thought about all this before you started.' H looked at the door. 'Needles.'

Needles came in and walked to a gleaming white table where instruments waited. He picked up a syringe, inserted it into a phial and drew in the pale liquid. After squirting a little out to get rid of the air, he came over.

'This is just to relax you and will, to a large degree, paralyse your muscles. It will take away much of your ability to move, but will not deaden any sensation.'

'No!' screamed Arnold. 'Don't you fucking dare touch me!'

Completely ignoring him, Needles inserted the syringe into his arm, slowly pushed in the plunger and said to H, 'It will take a few minutes to work its way through his system.'

H nodded.

'Coffee?' asked Needles nonchalantly.

'Why not?'

After a latte and a mocha, they went back into Arnold, who was crying through a mouth that was hardly moving.

'Let me explain what's going to happen now,' said H. 'You are going to be taken to another part of this place where you will enjoy some sexual delights. I know you will enjoy them because you inflict them on other people, and you think *they* enjoy them. Or maybe you don't? Anyhow, after that you will be brought back here, and we will talk again.'

He pulled his mobile phone out of his pocket. 'Ok, Andy.'

In a small barn fifty yards from the main building, Andy, three men and a friend they had brought with them were waiting for H's call.

‘Let’s go. You stay here, Dennis,’ he said, pointing to their visitor.

They collected Arnold and wheeled him back to the barn.

‘Stanley, meet Dennis; Dennis, meet Stanley. I’m sure you’re both going to get on like a house on fire.’

Arnold tried to speak, indeed tried to scream, but his paralysed lips and tongue refused to help. They untied him from the trolley, stripped him, then leaned him face down over a table, which they tied him to.

‘Where’s the stuff?’ asked Andy.

He was given an aerosol, which he squirted on Arnold’s naked arse. It took a minute or two, and Andy could see the spray was having an effect. Dennis’s dick was huge, and he was getting very agitated.

‘Could do with some of that for my man,’ said one of them.

Grinning and nodding, Andy said, ‘Ok,’ and he and two of the men went over to Dennis, untied him, and led him to Arnold’s waiting, pheromone-laced arse.

The donkey reared on its hind legs, and with a little help from a gloved hand, he found the entrance to Stanley....

The pain within Stanley was unbelievable; it was as though someone was trying to tear him apart. Dennis started pumping. Pump. Pump. Pump.

He couldn’t take it.

He couldn’t take it.

After several minutes, Stanley was close to the edge when a highly aroused Dennis caught him on the side of his head with a hoof. His head shook, his breath left him, and he passed out.

Dennis didn’t notice that his lover was now a limp wreck and kept pumping until he had a massive orgasm.

Assuming Dennis had finished, they tried to get him off, but he would have none of it, so they decided to leave the donkey with the huge prick pumping away until he lost interest...

Back in the white room, Needles cleaned him up, stopped the blood from his ruptured anus, then left him for an hour to let the toxin wear off and, hopefully, come round.

Needles had checked him out, and he was ok. Physically, he would be ok. Sore, ruptured, unlikely to have a satisfying shit for a while, indeed more than likely have to wear a nappy for a bit, but.....ok. The amount of psychological trauma they would have to wait to find out. It would also have been a bugger, so to speak, if he had snuffed it with a weak heart.

An hour later, Needles gently slapped Arnold's face, and he came round.

'Enjoy that?' asked H.

Arnold started to cry. 'How could you.....?' he sobbed. 'How could you.....?'

'What's the difference between what happened to you and what you do to a little child?'

'There's a

'Do you hurt?' asked H in a concerned manner.

'You fucking know I do,' he spat out.

'Good....then Dennis did the job, eh? Now you know what it feels like to have a prick up your arse that wasn't designed to go there.'

H thought through what he had said and wondered whether he had actually said what he meant to say. Somehow it hadn't quite come out right. He shook his head slowly. 'Anyhow, let me tell you where we're at. I gave you an opportunity, a while ago, to get out of my life. I knew what you were doing, and I

gave you the chance to stop, at least that part that I knew about. It should have stayed there, but you decided to kill me. If it had worked, that would have been fine. But it didn't, and now you're here. So.....firstly. I want the names and addresses of your two mates.'

He wasn't going to answer, but H said, 'Or..... I can take you back to Dennis, who I think has acquired a thing for you.'

Arnold gave him the information, which H wrote down. 'Oh, by the way, I think you were unconscious at the time, but did you know that Dennis shot his load in you?'

Horror and revulsion entered his face. It contorted and writhed. He couldn't believe it.....he couldn't.....he couldn't.....surely not.... surely.....?

He wanted to die....this was vile.....this was.....horrendous....this should never happen to a human being.

'Just thought you'd like to know. But, if you are in any doubt, we do actually have the video for you to watch after.'

Arnold writhed in his own personal hell again. They... people.....would watch him being.....

'And after you've seen it, we're putting it on the net,' said H, twisting the knife.

Arnold sobbed uncontrollably. He felt so.....defiled.

'Anyhow, my friend here has things to do, so we'd better get on. My friend is going to relieve you of your testicles so that you don't go round fucking children anymore, and on those lonely nights, when you have even the slightest urge, you can always sing falsetto in the choir.'

Needles moved towards him.

Arnold screamed loudly and piercingly. It was the cry of a wounded and caged animal. H smacked him hard in the face with his fist.

'Shut the fuck up,' he snarled.

'But...'

The fist hit him again, and H left it in front of his face. 'One more fucking word off you, and it won't just be your balls that we remove; it will be your fucking eyes as well. And with no fucking anaesthetic!'

He nodded at Needles.

'I am going to give you a local anaesthetic,' said Needles, 'usually it would be a general, but H thinks you would like to watch....'

'No.....please no.....'

Thirty minutes later, and to his utter horror, Arnold had watched his testicles being removed and placed in a jar beside his bed.

'There,' said Needles in his best bedside manner, 'that didn't hurt a bit, did it?'

'Should slow the old hormones down a bit, eh?' H said to Arnold.

The forty-eight year old Arnold looked eighty.....

H looked at Arnold.

Was he starting to feel pity?....a little.

H was, after all, human.

Regret?...perhaps a touch.

Ah well.....

'It may strike you as strange that you get fucked by a donkey and have your testicles removed when I could, much more easily, have had you killed. I bet you're thinking, as they

haven't killed me, and when he's done his thing and the bastards let me go, I'm going straight to the police and have him locked away for the rest of his life.....?'

'I wouldn't say a word,' begged Arnold, 'not a word.'

'And I believe you,' said H sarcastically. 'Well, you will be pleased to know we *are* going to let you go. Of course, if you do tell anyone, we will come back.'

He saw the look on Arnold's face. A mere hint of hope, and also revenge? H smiled inwardly. *Hope* was such a cruel weapon.....

Six months later, via a circuitous and sometimes bumpy route, Arnold was sitting in a voluminous, brightly coloured tent on the fringes of the Sahara desert. On the sand outside were several enormous SUVs, a few camels and three kestrels on tethers.

In the tent, sitting in a circle, were several members of a family and their guests.

Arnold sat slightly to the rear and side of the assembled circle as he was not family but certainly important.

The family head beckoned to him, and he rose and started serving sweet tea. He had been taught the correct way to serve and was complying with the instructions. Getting it slightly wrong, he was gently scolded by the smiling old man for his incompetence.

Grunting his apology, he tried again at the prescribed angle. The assembled throng watched him and nodded their approval as he draped the napkin slightly differently and held the container at a more acute angle. They nodded their approval and, although he understood none of it, reiterated amongst themselves how pleased they were with him.

He had been an excellent purchase.....

A eunuch would cause them no problems; he would not bother the women and, it would appear, be acceptable to the men of a certain persuasion. He was an educated white European, which had considerable status, the usual trash kidnapped from the south being lazy and stupid, and there was certainly a curiosity value, which they were currently exploiting.

Initially, he had kicked up a fuss and screamed and shouted, but since they had cut out his tongue, he was much more accommodating.....

And Arnold, although he didn't know it, was in some ways lucky.

His two accomplices in the attack on H were already dead.

Chapter 41

Ray Jones – pigeon fancier

He lounged in the back garden on his reclining chair. Baseball cap on his balding head to shield it from the burning sun, he watched two unfolding dramas at the same time. One was his wife weeding the borders, kneeling towards him so that he saw her ample bosom almost spilling out of her blouse, and the other the forty-three pigeons that had just been fed, and he watched them busy away to get what they needed to live and to fly.

Homing pigeons amazed him. They always had and always would. From a tiny child, when he had visited his grandfather's and watched the birds empty their boxes and fly off around the estate, and then, when he was allowed, he would accompany him in his little car as he chugged miles away to set them free and find their way home.

And then the magic days, when all the local birds would be taken in an old converted bus to some godforsaken place, and with great merriment, they would be released.

He knew about them, the facts and the figures, and there was nothing better than a cup of tea and the latest pigeon magazine. Although exceptional, some pigeons had been known to fly over one and a half thousand miles home to their loft and their mate. They flew, on average, thirty miles an hour, but could hit briefly, if threatened, nearly sixty.

In the States, there were more than a million racing pigeons. A million!

The history of the pigeon fascinated him. The first records being in the tenth century in Baghdad, and then later Genghis Khan. Then on until the mid-1860s, when Paul Reuter, the founder of Reuters Press, used them commercially to fly stock prices between Brussels and Aachen; then in the late 1880s the first pigeon postal service started in New Zealand.

And one way or another, they had been used to the present day. Through the war years, as carriers of information; in 2002 the last use was made of India's Police Pigeon carrier service; and the Taliban had banned them, for obvious reasons, in Afghanistan.

So before him, cooing contentedly, was a long line of history. Noble creatures, with a noble history. He liked that. It had a *noble* ring to it.

Comfortable, warm, happy..... he dozed off.

An hour later, he was gently woken by his wife, who had showered and changed and stood there with a cup of tea and several homemade scones with lashings of butter and strawberry jam. She put them on the little table by him and leaned over and kissed him on the forehead.

'Hello, dozy.'

He put his hand inside her half-buttoned blouse, slid it inside her bra and liberated one of her breasts.

'You're awake then....' she said mischievously.

'Mmmmm,' he said, caressing it fondly and tweaking her nipple, 'time to rise....'

Chapter 42

The plotters

In a dreary council house on the outskirts of Birmingham, five men in their twenties were plotting a scenario that would shock Britain, show the world that Islam was not to be trifled with, and would send them to Heaven as Martyrs.

Allah had brought them together: quite different men who would pool their talents, their needs and their messianic zeal. Two from Birmingham, Saddam and Hussein, students in computer engineering; Bahar from Bradford, a caterer; Malik from Liverpool, a converted drug dealer; and Salim from London, an electrical engineer.

They had met over time through chance meetings in Mosques and the internet. Bonding as brothers of Allah, they spent what weekends they could reading the Qur'an, listening to tapes of Abu Qatada, the radical cleric whose call to arms against all *Kafirs* rallied them and heightened their resolve. They repeatedly watched downloads from the net of the beheading of Kenneth Bigley, the British engineer, with his colleagues Armstrong and Hensley by the Jordanian Al Zarqawi, and Daniel Pearl the American Wall Street Journal reporter.

It was wonderful!

Death to Kafirs!

Death to unbelievers!

Long live Osama!

Long live Al Qaeda!

Allah is great!

And now it was their turn.

Their turn to show their brothers that true believers, with the victorious blood of Allah coursing through them, could decimate the Western dogs, and by their example, so others would follow, and the Western World would be ruled by Allah and his followers, and the law would be Sharia!

Three of them had spent a year in Afghanistan: package holiday to Turkey, across the border to Iran and then to a training camp where they learned their craft.

Easy....so easy.

The arrogant, debauched, western world had no idea of the scale of the opposition that was rising against them.

But they would soon...

Over the months, little by little, small amounts of TNT had arrived at the address from different parts of the world. As TNT can be melted and therefore sculpted, it came in the form of small items, suitably disguised as complimentary items within a larger package. Salim had taken them away and melt them down in a pot in his little flat and make them into flat packs that could easily be held against a body and in which his self-prime detonators would go.

And now they were ready....nearly.

They didn't have a target.

Well, that wasn't entirely true.

They had a choice of hundreds. Britain was awash with targets, but which one? Which target would show not only that the Kafirs would all eventually perish, but also guarantee that these five men would be legends forever?

What, where, who was it to be?

They didn't want to emulate others. Trains, buses, planes, stores had all been done. It was so....yesterday. But they were of today. Modern men with old values. True believers.

What, where, when was it to be.....?

Late on the Sunday evening, they departed, going their separate ways. The students stayed at the house ready for University the next day and to further understand how to use the unbeliever's technology against them.

Bahar back to Bradford and the school canteen where the Kafir piglets would eat his food on Monday.

Malik to Liverpool, where he would continue selling drugs, which, it would appear, was acceptable to Allah. He had checked at the mosque to find out whether his chosen profession was at odds with his new found religion and was told that it was acceptable as long as it 'killed the Kafir'.

That was ok then...

And Salim to London, where he called Thames House, the headquarters of MI5, and arranged a meeting the next day with his handler.

'It's going well,' he said as they sat by the back wall of the little cafe bar, sipping incredibly bitter coffee.

'This is shit,' said the handler.

Salim nodded. It was one of the drawbacks of being a 'spy'. If you found a cafe with a good cup of coffee, you couldn't go back. Always somewhere different. No routine.

'We're nearly ready. All the explosives are ready. I have, as you know, supplied the detonator mechanism, which I made "at home".'

They both smiled. They may have looked home made, but highly technical operatives had put them together and fashioned the explosives in the depths of MI5.

‘All I need off you now is a target. Do we have one yet?’

‘Not yet.....hopefully soon.’

‘It can’t be much longer.’

‘I know...’

Back at MI5, it had been a difficult decision.

There you are infiltrating the enemy who want to blow something up. You infiltrate and then what.....?

Do you just boogie on in there when they’re ready to go and do the deed, and arrest them and put them away forever...and risk getting blown up?

Do you let them start their journey and stop them before they get there...and risk getting blown up?

Do you wait for them when they arrive and arrest them...and risk getting blown up?

Or do you steer them in a direction and let them blow it up, and themselves?

Of course, there were pros and cons to all, but they quite liked the latter. There was something quite helpful about the odd bombing scare.....

It alerted the public to the risks.

It pressured Whitehall into providing more funds for the Intelligence Services, including their sisters MI6 and GCHQ.

It gave the Intelligence Services a much greater voice within the higher echelon of Government, which they felt they deserved anyhow, after being made the fall guy for the Iraq ‘weapons of mass destruction’ balls-up.

Politicians had such selective memories.....

Of course, it wasn't really good practice to go round blowing up the public, but as long as there wasn't carnage – just one or two people perhaps....?
The end justifying the means and all that.....

Chapter 43

Marco

How had this happened?

Why had this happened?

Marco stared at the screen again in disbelief. His body trembled and shook as he sobbed with the enormity of what had just happened. Everything was gone! His home, his car, his money, his lifestyle, his prestige.....everything.

His mind swung desperately back to somehow see how it could all be changed. Make it so that it had never happened. Reverse time.....

He knew he had told the programme to give him a Queen on the river.

He *knew* he had....so why hadn't it?

Why had it produced a King?

Two thousand miles away in an office overlooking the casino floor, H, with Allan and Adrian, watched on a large wall-mounted 50" plasma as the internet cafe game unfolded. They were impressed that Marco had not used the software programme so far, but then slowly realised he was going to do a Strauss.

When Marco brought up the override software, he had no idea that it could also be overridden by someone else. And when it came to the last hand, someone else had substituted the King for the Queen.

Bingo!

Or poker!

The honour for the critical substitution had gone to Allan Scott, as it was he, with all his statistical data, who had realised they had a problem. His general analysis of the internet poker site's statistics showed one above average winner who just happened to be an employee.

Scotty had decided to watch Marco play on the site. If this man could be a consistent winner, then Scotty wanted to know his secret. Watching was easy, and anyone could do it. You just log on, find the table the person is playing at and watch.

So Scotty watched, night after night, and he couldn't believe what was happening. Jesus, the luck this fellow had. The amazing one and two outers on the river – and so often.

It was amazing. It defied all statistical laws. Not impossible, but bloody hell!

It defied all statistical laws.

That bothered Scotty, but that was the way it was. You can't cheat on an internet poker site!

And then he had a phone call from H, who mentioned in passing that Senor Reyes had heard a while ago about an internet site owner who had installed an override program to manipulate the cards.

Perhaps the employee had done the same, thought Scotty? But how could he?

And so Scotty sent in a techie from England, ostensibly to look at the finance side of the software, and he had found the Trojan.

Scotty told H. It was called *Marco*, but the History log showed *Hathaway*, which Scotty didn't really understand.

H wondered why it was originally called Hathaway. Ernest had no need of scamming the odd few quid off punters. Maybe it was just a joke or a way of diverting attention should it be found? Ah well.

H grabbed his mobile. 'Good one, Randy.....yeah.....as we agreed.'

Chapter 44

Alva

It may have been in the jungle, but Alva lived well. A mansion had been built with all mod cons, satellite equipment, an operations room full of computer equipment.....everything a modern day drug Lord needed.

And a pool.

Alva loved a swim, and he had an Olympic sized one in the grounds. At one end was a thirty-foot waterfall, and in the middle a thirty-foot fountain. He liked that. He liked the feel of the water splashing on him. It cleansed him. Not of sin, of....something. But it made him feel good. And he loved watching them from a bed in the shade by the poolside. The cascading waterfall, the forceful fountain.

He liked that.....

Felipe was a nobody. He waited on tables, fetched drinks, filled up glasses and was generally invisible. Highly efficient at his job, which wasn't difficult, but not too bright.

Absolutely ideal.

He spent his time either at Alva's compound or back at the village from whence he came when he was given time off. At the compound, he had a small TV hooked up to a Play Station and spent a lot of time making funny noises as he played.

Occasionally he babbled into a mobile phone when he rang home to talk to his parents or a friend. A week earlier he'd had a text which said 'Pedro is not well. He is too hot.'

‘Poor Pedro,’ he replied.

The objects by themselves meant nothing; indeed, when assembled, they really didn’t mean a lot. But if you added water.....that was different.

And so he assembled the small pieces of plastic, locking them together, then filled it with water, put in several pieces of twisted wire and hid it in the back of the freezer.

It was Felipe’s day to look after Alva by the pool. All you had to do was give him a pitcher of iced wine when he told you to, then stock it up when he napped, taking great care, extreme care, not to wake him.

When he woke, you went to the kitchen and fetched the tiny salmon sandwiches, with a mint yoghurt dressing, which he enjoyed in the day. Light and refreshing.

That was it; that was all you had to do.

The trouble was, if, in the noonday heat, you happened to doze and he happened, at that exact moment, to wake up.....you died. It was quite an incentive!

There were guards on the perimeter, unseen. The guards knew that they had to look outwards, from where the enemy would come, not towards Alva, who would kill them for invading his privacy.

Alva had settled down. He had swum for half an hour, refreshed himself under the cold waterfall for five minutes and lay on the bed and dried off.

Dry, he pointed to Felipe, who immediately collected the red wine full of crushed ice and took it to him with a white frosted wine glass from the freezer. He put the glass on the table and carefully, very carefully, filled it half full with the chilled wine.

‘Thank you, Felipe,’ said Alva, who still had a soft spot for the simple and poor, albeit now from a distance...

He would usually read for an hour, sipping at his glass, then refill it himself, before putting down the book, closing his eyes and nodding off for an hour or so.

Then you refilled the pitcher with iced wine. Felipe never quite understood why you did that, as it went warm, and it was thrown away when he woke up and replaced with a new one, but he was the boss.

Felipe watched him carefully for twenty minutes and knew he was deep in sleep. He had watched him many times and knew when it was safe to deliver the top up, and he had never woken him.....Bless the Holy Mother for guiding him... and he crossed himself.

He went inside to the fridge where the cold wine was waiting. Half filling it with crushed ice from the freezer, he looked round to make sure no-one was looking, then felt down the back for the contraption. Standing in the way of any watching eyes, he undid the pieces of plastic then placed what was left in the bitterly cold red wine.

He went back out to Alva, stood by him and put the pitcher on the table. Reaching in, he took out the hard, frozen water, shaped like a stake, and plunged it into Alva’s heart.

Leaning on him for a few moments to stop him moving, and pushing as hard as he could on the ‘knife’, it was less than fifteen seconds, and Alva was dead.

Felipe took the stake out of Alva’s heart and flipped it into the pool where it started to melt, leaving just a trace of blood which watered down to nothing. The strands of wire that had

held it together and given it strength would fall to the bottom and go unnoticed.

He put a large towel over Alva's chest and went slowly back indoors. From there, he found his little moped and told the guards at the gate that Senor Alva had given him the day off. On the way back to the village, he precariously rode one handed and typed a text with the other. 'Pedro is cold now.'

Back at the village, a car was waiting for him. His family had already been moved out to a safe place, and now he was joining them.

He smiled a grim smile. It may have been a legend that Senor Alva had spared the barber who had nicked him, but the bit that people forgot was the part about the man serving tea who had his head blown off.

His elder brother.

Rot in hell, Alva.....rot in Hell.

An aide of Senor Reyes received the text and told him the news.

'Good,' he said softly, 'good.'

He nodded to the man, who left him alone at his desk, then rang the President. 'One of our problems is solved.' He listened for a moment then replaced the phone.

It was a firm maxim of his that 'knowledge was power' and he always had people within enemy camps or even friendly camps, such as the President's staff. Usually several people, always unaware of each other's presence, all providing information from which strategies could be formulated.

He remembered the novel 'Shogun', which he had now read many times, in which Toranaga, the feudal Lord, was an exponent of the same strategy, a strategy that was as old as

time itself, and the author, James Clavell, had captured the essence of the game exquisitely.....

He also remembered a quote by Sartre: 'Hell is other people.....'

So true.....

Chapter 45

Scott's letters

To Lord Rees
Astronomer Royal
President
The Royal Society

Dear Sir,

I think it incumbent that I make you aware of a series of analysis that I have undertaken in relation to the Chaos Theory (which you may be more familiar with as 'the butterfly effect').

From studies I have undertaken, it is my belief that the theory is flawed and, in effect, is quite the opposite of chaos. I have termed this Scott's First Law – There is no such thing as chaos.

Chaos Theory would have us believe that from a tiny incident, chaos can spread dramatically and exponentially. I would say this is actually incorrect. Chaos assumes a random and illogical pattern; however, it can be seen that what is actually spreading is an enormous normalising effect to allow order to return. Many things have to change to allow order (which is why we confuse it with chaos). In the example of a freak weather pattern, it may be that the general weather around the world will have to change to allow order to return. This is not chaos; this is the normalisation taking place.

To the untrained eye, this would be seen as chaos. But it is not. It is systems adapting as best they can to new circumstances in which they can again find relative harmony.

I am sure you will understand the profound message that my theory has and that it will create quite a stir when it is aired in the New Scientist and other academic periodicals.

Could you advise where I could go to get funding for further research?

Yours,

Allan Scott

Dear Mr Scott,

On behalf of Lord Rees, may I thank you for your letter in relation to Chaos Theory. I am sure you have taken into account the mathematical principles involved in Chaos Theory as they are applied to nonlinear dynamical systems that are highly sensitive to certain conditions (which is termed the 'butterfly effect'). This sensitivity can result in the exponential growth of perturbations, creating chaotic systems that can be random (deterministic chaos or 'chaos'). Obviously, as you would know from your observations, the word chaos is taken literally by the layman while the scientist and theoretician can perceive it as an organised state.....

I am afraid we cannot help in relation to further funding and suggest you try the Dept for Innovation, Universities and Skills.

Yours,

Thomas Evans
Personal Assistant to Lord Rees

Chapter 46

The Right Honourable

The Right Honourable George Henry Clive Edward Ponsonby-Clive was a lucky man. He still had the family estate in the Shires, with its fifty thousand acres of farming, enough wood for a good shoot and a stream running through it for delightful trout fishing.

Unlike many of his friends, he had not succumbed to the looting and pillaging of the National Trust, whose aim, it seemed, was less to protect the National Heritage, more to destroy the landed gentry. Well, they can fuck off, he thought, in his very upper class, I-look-down-on-you..... accent.

He also had a lovely four-story townhouse in London and a villa overlooking Cannes. He was pleased it overlooked Cannes, as you certainly wouldn't want to live in that dump now.....ruined by property developers and a local *mairie* that preferred rates to beauty.

Disgusting.

He sat as a non-exec on the board of two major Banks and three large PLCs, which brought him in about £350,000 a year, which helped to defray expenses. It certainly helped, but Georgey couldn't live on that piddling amount, and he was most certainly not going to work – he had never 'worked' in his life – his current non-exec positions being because he knew all and sundry rather than for any formidable intellect that he possessed.

What also helped defray his expenses was the considerable overdraft that funded his life. It was currently at ten million, but was amply covered by the houses and land that they had as security against it. The large house and estate were worth about thirty-five million, the London House about five and the villa in Cannes about four. Forty-four less ten was thirty-four. More than enough to keep going for a while, and there was always insurance.....

Several years earlier his private collection of Ferraris, Lamborghinis, Bugattis and Rolls Royce, housed in their own building in the grounds of the Hall, had inexplicably set on fire.

It transpired that the mechanic who had been working on one of the cars had left a cigarette burning on a table edge, and as it burnt down, the changing weight upset its balance; it dropped into a waste bin with the previous day's Financial Times in it.

Of course, up it went; then the desk; then the building and all the cars.

It was a tragedy.

What a silly mechanic.....

He protested his innocence, of course. Said he never smoked in the building...wouldn't do it....loved the cars too much.....but it was his brand.

Silly mechanic.

The insurers ummed and aahed, but what could they do....?

Pay up was what they could do.....

Pay up five million was what they could do.....

What he tended to overlook was the fact that the Bank who had his overdraft didn't quite look at it the way he did. It was true he had forty odd million in assets, but the property

market was good.....what if it dropped? And if something happened, and they were forced sellers, what would happen then?

And so there was a 60% cap on the lending, which meant he could go up to about twenty-eight million...and he had used ten already. And the interest on that was £500,000 per year!

And so he led the good life. The club, golfing, skiing, holidaying at friends' villas around the world and*shining*.
He was a Shiner.

One of only twenty *shiners*. His friends, his rich and powerful friends, twenty of them were *shiners*.

He loved being a shiner.

It was a simple concept. If you saw something that you took a shine to, you took it. As they were all rich and powerful, they could take most things, but they were material things. So they took people.

If you saw a woman, boy, girl, donkey, duck or anything you took a shine to, you had to find a way of having it, but you had to record it to prove it.

And then they all met, once a month, at one of their magnificent homes and watched the movies or photos, and when they had finished and were in a highly charged state, they enjoyed the delights of the night. Whoever or whatever it was.....

And today he was having a *shining*.

He was the President of a charity associated with aid to the poor of the world, as though he cared, but it looked good, and provided, as did one or two of the other charities he was patron of, a supply of pretty women, young and old, for his friends to get off on when they saw the film.

She arrived at his London home just before lunch with the documents he requested. He usually requested documents about this time, as the woman would have an excuse for staying a while and wouldn't be missed. And if she was...reluctant, it still gave him time.

She was quite new at the charity, and he had spotted her immediately. As she stood in front of him, he tingled at her shapely body, a classic shape that went back to Monroe and the glamorous era it evoked.

He took her jacket, bade her sit down. 'Have you eaten yet?'

'No, but it's ok, I really should....'

'It's the least I can do,' and fetched a plate of sandwiches that 'his woman' had prepared before she left and two glasses of wine. She took one of the dainty salmon and cucumber offerings.

'Bottoms up,' and they both drank the sparkling wine.

They talked for a few minutes, and he made sure to sip at his wine and say, 'Do you like the wine?'

After nearly ten minutes, he watched her slump back on the chair, and his pulse raced. He quickly but expertly undressed her, taking great care to make sure that as he took things off, he put them in order ready to go back on correctly. Bit daft dressing them again and putting the pants on back to front.....bit of a giveaway.

He brought in the camcorder and tripod and set it up.

Going back to the unconscious woman, he lifted her up and turned her upside down on the chair so that her head was lolling off the seat and her legs were open and over the back. He stripped off, then knelt down by her. When he had finished, as a party trick for his friends, he opened a door, and in bounded two large Labradors. It took a little manipulation,

but it was worth it. And the dogs seemed to think so too...

When she started to come round, she was on the sofa, and he was sitting by her with a glass of water.

‘How are you?’ he asked gently. ‘You seemed to have a bit of a turn.’

‘I feel a bit woozy, but ok. What happened? Did I pass out?’

‘Just for a few minutes. I was going to call a doctor, but you just seem to have fainted, so I waited, and you came round again. Are you pregnant or anything?’

She looked startled. ‘I hope not!’ she blurted out, then giggled.

‘At least I shouldn’t be.’

He made her a cup of tea to help refresh her and also take a funny taste out of her mouth...

When she got back to the Charity, she went to get a cup of coffee. At the machine, she met another woman. ‘You’ve been to see our Clive. How did you get on? Did he make amorous advances? He’s a bit of a one...’

‘He was a complete gentleman, which was just as well as I had a funny turn when I was there and must have just passed out for a couple of minutes. I was just having a sandwich and a sip of wine and then gone. But he was super and made sure I was ok. He asked if I was pregnant,’ she giggled.

The woman froze, and she felt her heart race. She had also delivered an envelope. She had also had a sandwich and wine.....and she had also passed out. He had asked her if *she* was pregnant.

‘How do you feel now?’

‘Ok really. Funny taste in my mouth – the coffee will move that – but ok.’

The woman had also woken with a funny taste in her mouth as well.

‘Good.’

The woman took her late lunch, sat in a cafe and wondered....and knew. After her time there, she had felt.....entered. She couldn’t say why. She had no physical reasons to think so. She didn’t hurt or ache or anything. Her clothes had not been removed and yet, somehow, something was wrong. She decided he was obviously using some kind of date rape drug like Rohypnol or Ketamine: colourless, odourless and highly effective. And it would have been easy for him to get Ketamine. It was an anaesthetic for animals for Christ’s sake!

The bastard!

She sat and agonised over what to do....? Should she go back to work and tell the woman, and get her to the police straight away?

Or to a doctor for blood samples?

Or tell the police?

Or tell the Charity?

Or her husband? Absolutely not!

She was lost.

What the hell should she do?

She suddenly thought: *what did he do to me?*

He did something, but what?

It had been several weeks now, and there had been no sign of any infection and none from her husband either. So she hadn’t got syphilis or gonorrhoea. Aids? Could she have aids? She immediately took out her mobile phone and rang her doctor for an appointment. She still didn’t know what to do, so she decided to talk to the one person in the whole world who

would look at this dispassionately. No matter how much it hurt....

Her mother.....

Later that evening Benshima told everything to her mother. They talked about it for nearly three hours, and when it was finished, she felt much better. Her mother had given her sage advice, and she felt much better.....

Chapter 47

A nice figure....

H sat in his office and beamed all over his face. It was as though a light had been turned on, and it was Allan Scott that had done it. With his figures!

Poor old Scotty asked questions, got facts, got figures, then more figures, then more figures, until you couldn't move for friggin' figures, and then, somehow, he put them all together so that they were relative to each other and then he looked for the ones that didn't fit.

Just like that! And then he'd tell you something that you should have known but hadn't clocked...

Like Marco Psaila. No one would have known where his money had come from if Scotty hadn't just done a blanket print out of figures. Not looking for anything in particular. Just looking.....

And there he was. He stuck out because he did better than everyone else.

Just like that! And now H was learning from Scotty. Scotty would come in with another batch of comparisons, and they would sit down, and H would scour them for inconsistencies. He would pore over them and say 'Can't see anything in that one, Scotty....'

Scotty would point at a figure or group. 'Look there, boss. See that? See how that moves at weekends in relation to the others.'

'Yeah.'

'What do you think, boss?'

'It doesn't do as well at weekends as the others.'

'True. But why?'

'I don't know.'

'There's a different manager at weekends,' said Scotty with a smile.

H would sit back and give it some thought. 'So he's either crap or nicking?'

'That's about it, boss.'

H was pleased with Scotty, who had now settled in and appeared happy. Since he had started, he had shown H how to save at least two hundred and thirty thousand and H, to show his appreciation, had increased his salary by ten thousand.

He had also given him another responsibility, with Ade's blessing.

Allan Scott was in heaven.

H had given him the internet poker site to look after, and that was magic. All those facts and figures and he could have a say in what it looked like and how it was presented. The site he usually played on was dark and drab, and the figures weren't really big enough. He tended to hook the laptop up to the 42" LCD in the lounge, which was great, but it made the information small. He had written to them on several occasions, trying to say that as they had acres of space on the screen, could they just increase the font size a little, or perhaps give different colour options? But no joy. In fact, no reply...

So he had found the name of a Group Director and written to him, and in due course, someone came back and told him that they had 'undertaken extensive customer research to

have the very best poker software in the market'.

What bollocks!

They hadn't asked him!

And now he had his own chance to do whatever he wanted with the site as long as it still made as much, but preferably more, money.

Magic!

Chapter 48

The cafe

Two weeks after their last meeting, Hussein and Saddam were sitting in a Wetherspoon pub close to the University, having a two-for-one lunchtime meal and a cheap pint. Two men were eating close by, obviously city types, striped suits, clipped voices, upper class. Quite out of their environment.

Kafirs! Infidels!

If there was one class in England that should die, it was them! They held down the majority! They had the yoke of the working class gripped firmly by the reins!

Kafirs! Infidels!

Without realising it, their discussion dried up, and they found themselves listening to the *infidel dogs*.

‘.....I mean, the sixth chukka, the sixth for Christ’s sake, an open goal and he missed it. Bloody missed it. We were sitting with Charles and Cammy, and he was livid. Bloody livid. You wouldn’t think the Heir to the Throne knew such language, but it was surely merited.....’

He sipped a whisky.

‘Anyhow, the rest of the afternoon went well. We had a sublime dinner, flunkies, the lot, and then the ball was magnificent. I tell you, even in Diana’s day they couldn’t have added to it. Spiffing!’

‘Are you going to Clive’s place in, what is it, about three weeks on Saturday?’

‘How could anyone miss it? I think just about everybody who is anybody will be there. And what a place. Spend the weekend in Shropshire at his estate, bit of shooting, bit of fishing, bit of the other... The Lord Ponsonby-Clive certainly knows how to live.’

They giggled like schoolboys. One looked at his watch.

‘Bloody hell, we’ve got to go....’

They put mobile phones in their pockets, picked up car keys and rushed out. Hussein moved to the window to look at the car park, and he saw them get in a large Bentley. He came back, sat down and stared at Saddam.

He kept staring.

‘What?’ asked Saddam nervously, put out by the stare.

‘What?’

‘Don’t you get it?’

‘Get what?’

‘We have our target....’

‘How.....?’

‘You heard him. Everybody who is anybody will be there....you heard him. Mighty Allah.....a private estate, rich and powerful people, all in one big house. What more could we want?’

‘But where is it? Who are they? Where are they going?’

‘They’re going to Ponson something Clive’s estate in Shropshire. That’s just up the road from us, and anyway, how many large estates can there be in Shropshire?’

They went back and put it in Google. Within seconds they had their answer.

‘We should tell the others...’

‘About that,’ said Hussein slowly ‘I’ve been thinking about that. I don’t think we should...’

‘Why not?’

‘Security. If we’re the only ones that know, it can’t get out to anyone. It makes no difference to the others where it is. We just meet somewhere, and we take them there. Easy...and secure.’

‘I like it.’

They rang the other three and told them the good news.

Salim took his call and started to panic. ‘What do you mean you have a target? We haven’t got a target yet.....we were going to sort it out between us.....the others may be ok with it but shouldn’t we.....ok....ok.....see you at the weekend. Insha’Allah.’

He rang his handler.

‘You’ve cocked this up,’ said the handler sternly, ‘you were going to control the situation.’

‘What could I do? I wasn’t there.....’

Chapter 49

Dieter White goes to jail

It was quite a coincidence.

Dieter White meets Peter White.

And in Pentonville of all places...

Dieter White had been held on remand for nearly six months before his trial. Every ten days his solicitor asked for a review and bail, and every ten days it was refused. A video link between Brixton and the Magistrates allowed White to put his case, again, but the Magistrates saw no reason to allow him his freedom. Kidnapping, sexual abuse, grievous bodily harm and assault were hardly circumstances to allow bail, even if it was on his own wife that these transgressions had been meted out.

And then they were not sure what he would do if they let him out?

Let him stay.

In Court, things changed slightly. White had hired the best Barrister he could afford, and he was worth every penny. He made sure that the jury had a majority of men by questioning the women, pre-jury, quite aggressively about their thoughts on men.

In Court, he destroyed Marissa, making her into a whore who had inveigled her way into his life, then seduced him into marrying her with promises of love, romance, comradeship and loyalty – all the things his client was looking for in a woman. Instead, she turned into a harridan, a crone, who

refused to help in any way while his client slaved away to succeed in life and create wealth so that they could be happy together.

And it went on.

Marissa's poor English and her lack of understanding of the innuendo that the Barrister loaded his questions with, but which the jury understood all too well, was mitigating the Prosecution's case. On many occasions, the Prosecutor appealed to the Judge for help in this one-sided character assassination, but only once did he come to her assistance.

The Judge watched as...

The trembling little Asian girl told her story of servitude. Poor thing.

Quite truthful. Faltering performance. Slut!

And White told his sorry tale of spurned love. As if... Lying bastard.

Wonderful performance. Bravo.

White was, thought the Judge, a *Shiner* in the making.....but, alas, a little uncouth and below stairs, unfortunately. So it was not to be.....

So the Judge summed up the case of the man who had, perhaps due to his frustration at his wife's lack of love, beaten her up. She had alleged, of course, that not only had he beaten her up, but, according to her, also shared her and made her indulge in horrendous sexual acts with his friends.

The jury should take care with this as there was no corroborating evidence whatsoever to support the allegation.....

As to her being imprisoned against her will, it can be seen that if Mr White seriously believed his wife was going to have affairs outside of the marital home, then he may have panicked and took measures to stop her..... *the jury should take that into account as to whether that is a mitigating factor.....or indeed whether it is possible to imprison someone in their home at all....?*

There is also the fact that Mr White took this woman, from an underprivileged background, and brought her into the bosom of his quite wealthy world.....*which in itself seems to show a desire to care and share his love for her.....*

The jury retired, and after deliberating for one day, when there were heated debates between the women and the men on the jury, they reached a compromise. He wouldn't get off, which his brief wanted, and he wouldn't go down for the twelve years that the Prosecutor was asking for. They found him not guilty of the most serious charges, and it was left to the Judge to give him two years...

He had already been in custody for six months, and therefore it was now eighteen months.

However, the two years could be halved with 'good behaviour', and so it was effectively six months in Pentonville where they housed the short-termers, petty criminals and old lags who had a preference for the routine of jail rather than the uncertainties of a changing and sometimes quite lonely world.

And here he was.....flanked by two officers who had handed over the Warrant signed by the Clerk of the Court that gave his sentence, and being talked down to by someone who was called Peter White and somehow, *somehow*, compares

himself to me. A fucking prison warder and the well-off owner of a company. Oh yeah...fucking right.

Some comparison. Prick!

Peter White looked at the fat little man in front of him. Prick!

Ah well.

'Now, let's see, where should we put you? You a homosexual?'

The fat White bristled. Fucking homosexual? He hated that. He loathed the mere thought, and it made him squirm. Even when he and his mates were fucking his wife, he kept well away from their..... He was not a homosexual. He was not!

'You fuckin' watch it!' he blurted out, 'you fuckin' watch it!'

'It was only a question, but it seems to have caught a nerve....so shall I put yes?'

The fat one exploded and lunged for the man who was standing behind the desk, but before he was halfway across, he was dragged back by the two officers who put his arms behind his back and rammed them up towards his neck. He screamed in pain.

White looked at his namesake and smiled. 'So we've got a poofter, eh?'

The fat one screamed abuse at him, then screamed in pain as they moved his arms up a touch more. The officer looked at his mates and then at the fat one.

'What do you fancy then? Three, six.....nine inches? And what colour? We've got Blacks, Pakis, half-castes, white Russian.....'

He looked at the other two quizzically. 'There's Henry,' said one, and winked.

‘You’ll like Henry. He’s white, about sixty, big dong but unfortunately, has poor toilet habits. Doesn’t shower too much, so he stinks, and he also has terrible bad breath. He’s got rotten teeth, but he refuses to go to the dentist, and we can’t make him, and so he just happily rots away.....’

The fat one struggled and writhed, but the more he did, the more it hurt.

‘....So just remember when it gets a bit romantic you may have to forgo the tongues when you’re kissing.....’

The one officer moved his foot quickly as the fat one suddenly puked over the floor... They really shouldn’t do it. They knew that. The British penal system revolved around the ‘deprivation of freedom’ rather than any physical ‘stimulus’. But fuck it; one or two deserved it!

The fun over, they dragged him to a cell which he would share with Danny, and they gently threw him in. Danny was an innocuous sort of bloke, in his early sixties, and the fat one felt easier.

The bastards!

‘Hello,’ said Danny ‘what are you in for?’

‘What’s it got to do with you?’

Danny sighed. He had been in prisons a lot of his adult life and didn’t want to share a cell with a moron. Life was too short... He went to the cell door and shouted for a warder. When one came, he said, ‘I don’t want to cause any bother, Warder, but this new man is already a problem. I ask him a simple question, and he tells me to fuck off.....’

‘Pathetic bastard,’ said White. ‘Boo fuckin’ hoo.’

‘Ok, Danny,’ said the warder. ‘Don’t get bothered. I’ll sort it out. Go and get a cup of tea and be back in ten minutes.’

‘Yes, sir.’

When he had gone, the warder said, ‘You’re new here, and you’ve upset the staff already, and now your cell mate. Got a bit of a death wish, eh? You think you can beat the system and.....these?’ He indicated to the rest of the jail. ‘What are you? A big man or just a fat cunt?’

White tensed as though to charge, and the warder waited, but raised his baton a little. ‘You can give it a try.....’ he said quietly ‘Come on.....you fat cunt.....fat poofter....’

White went for him, but the baton smashed across his head. He went down, and the Warder raised the alarm. On Governor’s report, he was given two weeks in solitary. Initially, he was a pain in the arse with his insults, so they ‘forgot’ to bring his food. One insult meant he missed lunch, two meant he missed lunch and tea. Once they forgot him for a whole day.....

So he decided to play the system with the Warders, but he would get the little bastard in his cell when he got back...

After two weeks they took him back and were sure he looked a bit slimmer... When they locked his cell, he turned to Danny. ‘You ratted on me, you little bastard.’

‘I don’t want any trouble...I just want to serve my time and see what happens next.’

‘I’m going to fucking have you now,’ and took a step towards him.

‘Warder,’ screamed Danny.

White got him on the side of the head with the first blow, and then he could remember nothing else...

White came round in the Medical Wing. He was strapped to the bed, and his face was swollen; he had black eyes, he could hardly swallow, and his testicles were incredibly painful..... The nurse called the Doctor who arrived and asked him a few simple questions to make sure there was no permanent damage, and then a Warder arrived.

‘Governor’s Report again, eh, sonny? Don’t you ever learn?’

‘I don’t know what happened.’

‘You smacked Danny.’

‘So.....why am I here?’

‘Danny’s all right is Danny. Danny’s a bit of a fixture. He did a long stretch a few years ago and then keeps coming back. Got nowhere else to go, so he nicks something, and they send him here. And he understands it here; he knows the rules, fits in, causes no trouble. And then you arrive.

‘You’re what is politely called an arsehole. You come here as the big I am and don’t realise that you are a nobody; here you’re less than a nobody. This is a short-term jail, but there’s a lot in here who would, under the right circumstances, lose it and beat you to a bleeding pulp. And so, to keep you calm, we put you in with Danny. Danny who knows the ropes and who can help you. But no. You’re too high and fucking mighty to be helped, so you upset Danny by smacking him.....’

He sighed as though talking to a muddled child.

‘That wasn’t a good idea. There’s a joke in here that Danny is in for a “white collar crime”. Now that isn’t quite right cause he’s actually in for burglary, but it’s what we call prison humour. Danny’s first stint in jail, the long stint, was sort of white collar crime. He murdered a vicar! Get it? White collar crime? Get it?.....Good, eh?’

After another two weeks in solitary, White decided to play the system and be a good boy. It was the only way he was going to get out on time, so if that was what it took...

He was given landing duty, which meant sweeping up, and they moved him in with someone who was in for real white collar crime. White took to Nicholson immediately, and they spent their time together trying to hatch up nefarious schemes to make millions. Legally or illegally.

And when he wasn't doing that, he was hatching other schemes to get back at the bitch that had put him in this God forsaken hole, and the other bitch that had helped her.....

One day White said to Nicholson, 'Want to earn some money when we get out?'

'Of course.'

'Good money?'

'I take it this isn't legal then?'

'No.'

'Will I have to kill anybody?' he asked jokingly.

White smiled.

Nicholson thought for a few good minutes. 'It would need to be a lot....'

'Of course....'

'And with absolutely no chance of being found out.'

'You think I'm a fucking idiot?'

'If the price is right.....possibly..... more than possibly.....I'm in.'

'Good. Where are you going when you get out?'

Nicholson shrugged. He was cleaned out. 'God knows.'

‘Ok. Well, you get out three weeks before I do, so I suggest you stay at my place until I get out, and then we’ll try and work something out longer term based on how we do. Ok?’

‘Sounds good.’

‘And don’t screw me. Ok?’ he said menacingly.

‘Ok, ok,’ he said quickly, ‘I get it....’

‘You will if you do....’

Chapter 50

The Shiners Ball

The house was magnificent. Of Palladian style, it was designed by William Kent, the Architect, with help from Lord Burlington, whose own Palladian style home was used as a template for many such residences of its type.

Lord Burlington had a fanatical zeal for Palladio, the Italian architect of the sixteenth century, who he considered, with some justification, to be one of the most influential figures in the history of Western architecture.

The designs were reminiscent of Roman palaces and had a grandeur that money bought but often failed to replicate.

Built around a spectacular rectangular 'middle,' it had four large wings that were attached each corner of the house. These wings were all self-contained and reached by corridors rather than as part of the central structure.

The grounds were magnificent, initially designed by Kent, with its primary use of trees within the surrounding land, coupled with water and statues.

And tonight, up its long tree lined drive, drove expensive cars: Rollers, Bentleys, Mercs, Astons, etc.; a showpiece of engineering for their wealthy owners. They parked them in a rather confused way as each was used to taking a space that he wanted, rather than what suited the majority.

They went in to be greeted by fellow Shiners, who were drinking the best Cristal champagne, swapping stories and anticipating the evening to come. First, there would be a

delicious meal. When they first started *shining*, they treated themselves to a large meal, but found that, afterwards, it slowed everything down. They were too full to completely enjoy the other feast that followed, so they kept it tasteful but simple.

Tonight would be grouse.

The chef, McDonald, also a shiner, whose face was on the television most nights and sold millions of cookery books, had decided the grouse, kept moist by cooking with a layer of goose fat, would be accompanied by freshly cooked game chips, a bunch of watercress, some crisp bacon from off the bird and a healthy serving of bread sauce and redcurrant jelly. Served alongside roasted vegetables and buttered cabbage finished with a light game gravy.

When all were assembled, they stood in front of their respective dining chairs and held up a glass of Cristal. From the table, they took a napkin and slowly rubbed the stem of the glass.

It was a gesture of perfection and masturbation.

They were *Shiners*!

'*Shine....*' rang out the voice of Edward Moffatt, wealthy industrialist and currently Lord Mayor of London.

'*Shine,*' they repeated back to him, sat down and started their meal.....

In two coach houses in the grounds, the Hors d'Oeuvres were waiting.

In one were girls and boys aged between three and thirteen. In the other, several East European women who had arrived illegally to find a better world, and be immediately sold on, and were now here. A transvestite and three rent boys waited

with them and, outside, a goat and several large ducks made up the list.....

None were there of their own free will, and none would be going far afterwards...

Chapter 51

H wakes up a child....

In his office at home, H played a game of poker on the net and had lost. The ten man table had reduced to four and H had reasonable chips, but the poker Gods had decreed that his hands would get worse as the blinds got ever bigger and quite soon he was out.

He had waited for one, just one, reasonable hand to go all in with, but none came, and it ended up him having to go all in as the big blind with Q 8, and was immediately called by AK and J J.

A K, who just happened to be the chip leader, picked up an Ace immediately, and H and the other player were both out. It occurred to H, as it does to every player who goes out on the bubble, that if only they could have waited one more hand....just one more hand.....they would have been in the money.

It was mid afternoon, and he felt dozy; God knows why? He swivelled his new reclining chair towards the sun and the London skyline, and the motor hummed as the back gently tilted back and his feet raised. He picked up The Times, made himself comfortable and settled back to read. Maybe today there would be good news for a change. Brown and the entire cabinet come down in plane.....or better still, 747 crashes on Parliament when every Member is sitting.

Every politician dead.

Nation hits the streets in jubilation.

Queen makes the day official National Holiday.

Three cheers for the Queen. Hurrah! Hurrah! Hurrah!
He read for a few minutes, and then his eyes slowly closed, and the paper softly folded on his lap.

In the twilight world between now and sleep, he went back to another time where nothing made sense and confusion reigned. Monsters and ghouls hid around the corners, terror lurked in the shadows, pain visited at a moment's notice. He mumbled and muttered to himself, and his hands opened and closed as he tried to hold on to imaginary objects that would hide and protect him.

'You've forgotten, you know,' said the voice, 'you're a bad boy!'

His body froze.

He left the twilight world and entered one in which he was awake, but it was the wrong world.

His eyes opened, and he saw the person before him, but he was in the wrong world.

'No.....' he whimpered, 'don't hit me...please,' and he emitted a dreadful wail like a wounded animal. 'I didn't know I had to do it,' he pleaded. His body shook with fear, and he was trying as hard as he could to shrink back into the chair, to make himself as small as possible.

'Please, no....' he pleaded, 'please....'

He started sobbing. '*Please.....*'

'James,' said Benshima gently, 'James, it's me....it's Benshima....it's ok...everything is ok.....it's me, James...it's Benshima.'

He looked at her quizzically, not understanding. It was the wrong voice and the wrong face. His eyes, a child's eyes, peered at her, desperate to understand. Who was this? Friend or foe? Comfort or pain? That was easy. There were no friends. There was no comfort. Only fear. Only pain.

'James, it's Benshima,' she said again gently, 'you were just dreaming....it's just a bad dream.....it's Benshima.....you're safe now....I'm here....you're safe now.'

His large, terrified eyes looked at her, and slowly he came back to the real world. Where Benshima kept the tiny child, in the man's body, safe.

He looked at her and relief flooded his face to be replaced by a flood of emotion, and then he was racked with more sobbing as his mind and body replaced another nightmare with a new picture.

'It's ok, my love,' she soothed, 'it's gone now.'

She yearned to hold him, to envelop him in her love, but she knew he couldn't cope with that. It was too close, too soon, and it meant something different to him, so she stroked his face and soothed the fear.

It was several minutes before it had completely gone away, and he felt exhausted. In the past, he would have said *sorry*, but he didn't anymore. Like Benshima had said, 'You're not the one who should be apologising.'

'Let's have a cup of tea,' and trotted off to the kitchen where, after a few moments, he followed her. As she stood by the sink, he put his arms around her waist and said, 'Thank you,' and kissed her neck. She raised her hand and stroked his face.

'What's it like living with a nut case?'

She had heard this before, and wasn't quite sure why he said it, but she assumed it was just for reassurance.

'You're no more nuts than me. Deranged, psychotic, disturbed, maniacal, paranoid and many other things....but not nuts.'

'That's ok then; I was getting worried. No white coat for me with that efficient little fastening arrangement then....'

'No.....no white coat for you.'

'Good,' he said softly, and slowly turned and wandered back to the lounge.

She put the boiling water in the cups with their waiting tea bags. As she swished them around with a spoon, she knew that she rarely wished ill of anyone, but she had come to loathe and detest James' parents with a hatred that knew no bounds.

How could anyone treat a little child as he had been treated?

In bed at night, she had heard his silent sob as a long ago world resurrected itself. She once caught a glimpse of his face as he cried silently in the shadows, and it was contorted in anguish. When it had passed, he would snuggle closer to her and say softly, 'Benny.....'

'I'm here....'

And he would squeeze her to make sure he was safe, and then slowly fall off to sleep.

A man in a child's world and a child in a man's world; not always comfortable with each other.

She stopped in mid flow and stood still. How could anyone inflict so much physical and psychological damage on to a tiny child?

And how could they call themselves parents?

And how did they square the horror at home with their persona as loving parents outside the home?

It was, she thought, perhaps a good thing that his father had died when James was still relatively young, as who knows what James would have done when he had grown into the strong, six foot odd that he now was.

His father had been lucky there.....

And now that his mother was dead, all he had was her. She realised the incongruity of the sentence.

He had never had them. Ever.

But he would always have her...until she died.

When she came back with the tea, he said, 'Now I'm a bit more normal, I'm aware that whatever you were asking me, which I totally misunderstood, I still don't know what it was?'

He saw her reluctance to repeat it.

'It's ok, I can cope now.'

He still sensed her reluctance.

'It's ok.'

She took a deep breath. 'I said, You've forgotten, you know; you're a bad boy!'

For a second, she saw the fear in his eyes, and she regretted what she had said. She waited for him to say something.

'Shit! It's like getting hit in the chest. Bloody hell. I think they did a bloody good number on me....wow,' and rubbed his chest.

She watched him.....

He exhaled. 'I'm ok now. Big bad H is back. So what have I forgotten?'

'It's been six months.....and not one. Not one!'

'Eh..?'

‘What did you give me six months ago? Actually, six months and one day now!’

‘Pearls?’

‘No.’

‘Diamonds?’

‘No.’

‘Trip on the Orient Express?’

‘No.’

‘Dolce and Gabbana handbag?’

‘No.’

He paused and thought, then smiled. ‘The trip to Disneyland that you mithered me for?’

‘No.’

‘What then?’

‘Well, before I tell you, could I perhaps point out that you have never given me pearls, diamonds, a trip on the Orient Express, a Dolce and Gabbana handbag and we certainly haven’t been to Disneyland!’

‘Ah.....’

‘It’s a poem, you prune. A poem! You gave me a poem!’

He looked horrified. ‘You want another poem? Do you know how I struggled with the one I gave you? It took years..... Years, I tell you....’

The latter in his best Kenneth Williams voice, which was lost on Benny.

‘I want another.’

‘Come on, Benny.....something else?’

‘No.’

‘Pearls?’

‘No.’

‘Diamonds?’

‘No.’

‘Trip on the Orient Express?’

‘No.’

‘Dolce and Gabbana handbag?’

‘No.’

‘Trip to Disneyland?’

‘A poem, I want a poem....’

‘Oh Christ... a friggin’ poem.....?’

That evening Benny went to bed early, as she felt quite tired, and H played poker on the net. On his own site. Fancy that! He was adding to his own profits! By using his wages that the site was providing.

He was spending his earnings to increase the profits on the site?

Have to think about that some more.....?

When he was knocked out of his third game, he wandered into their bedroom to check on Benshima and found her half sitting, book on her chest, fast asleep. He went to her. ‘I’m just moving you down.’

To which he got a mumbled ‘Ok.’

He gently moved her down, lifted her head to arrange her pillows and put her arms in. Just before he pulled the sheets back over her, he looked at her.

She was beautiful.

Quite beautiful.....

He looked at her magnificent breasts and wanted to have them. Feel them, knead them, suck them, adore them..... But she was asleep. Peacefully asleep.

He sighed silently, put the sheets over her and went to the door.

Looking back, he watched her.

He could have woken her and had her; she wouldn't have complained. Quite the opposite.

But let her sleep.

Peacefully sleep.....

Chapter 52

The terrorists meet

‘You can’t do this,’ protested Salim. ‘How can you find a target and not tell us what it is? How can you do that?’

‘It’s better this way,’ replied Hussein. ‘It’s more professional. More.....yes, professional. Our Mujahadin brothers would see this as the next step. From theory and training to independence, innovation and implementation. We,’ he said triumphantly, ‘are now true Jihad fighters. Long live Allah....’

‘But,’ said Salim, who desperately needed to reverse the decision, ‘this puts us at risk. How can we be an effective fighting cell if we do not pool our resources? You have made the decision about our target, but what makes you right? How do we know you are right if we cannot evaluate it for ourselves? How do we know we will be true martyrs if you have made the wrong decision? This cannot be right....’

‘We will be martyrs. This is not just Jihad; this is *Qitaal!*’ he pronounced sternly.

Salim looked across at Malik. ‘Surely you don’t agree with this, Malik? We are going into battle, we are going to die, and we don’t know where we are going or who we are going to fight? Surely you can see the flaws in that, Malik? Surely you of all people, with your street cred and animal cunning can see that?’

But Malik had embraced the cause with a zeal that was all-consuming, and he was entering an almost spiritual state of mind where death beckoned him like a lighthouse in an ocean of darkness. Guiding him, soothing him, preparing him for his

martyrdom and the virgins... His turbulent past would be absolved for the path he had taken for the Greater Good, the Mighty Allah.

'I agree with it. I have talked to my spiritual guide, and I know it to be right....'

Salim's heart sank. What the hell was he supposed to do now? He couldn't keep insisting, or they would be suspicious; and he could hardly say, 'excuse me, chappies, I don't agree, and so I'm out of here'. That wouldn't quite work either from a supposed terrorist extremist who would do anything to kill the unbeliever.

Oh, fuck! Fuck, fuck, fuck.....fuck!

There was only one option, and that was to go along and work out with his handler how best to play it. They would hardly allow this lot to go and bomb an unknown target, so they just may have to have a raid beforehand.....? This wouldn't look good on his c.v..

Chapter 53

Scott's letters

*Attention of Brian Barwick
Chief Executive
The Football Association*

Dear Sir,

May I add to the debate in relation to the 'new' England 'manager', should our current one be sacked (any day now?). I have seen much rubbish written about how good this manager, or that manager, is, and they should obviously be given the job. Unfortunately, that is quite misguided. A good club manager will make a useless National manager. The club manager has his own instinctive, preferred strategy, and will build to that. He will buy or train men that will fulfil his needs. He will train them physically and, more importantly, psychologically, to meet the strategic needs. He will mould them with a carrot or stick, and he will be the undisputed leader.

He is an instinctive leader of men, of a certain sort, and this works very well in small, tight knit groups!

This approach is difficult as a national manager. The men you pick have been 'programmed' by someone else and cannot be changed.

What, then, is needed? The footballers have all the skill you need. If you teach them more, it conflicts with their club programming and is negated.

So...keep it simple. Give the job to a manager who is capable of working out who goes where, and then spends all his time whipping up a frenzy of enthusiastic emotion that carries them through.....

And ignore the rubbish that Clive Woodward rants on about.

I remain, Sir, your obedient servant,

Allan C Scott

Dear Mr Scott,

Brian Barwick thanks you for your letter, which has been passed to the relevant department Head for their input.

Whilst we will endeavour to reply to your letter, you will realise, I am sure, the enormous load we are under currently, and should we not be able to do so, please do not be disappointed.

Yours,

A Thompson

Assistant to Chief Executive

Chapter 54

White and Nicholson plan

White had hired a nondescript car the day before and changed the plates. He parked it on his drive, put his large Beamer next to it, and he and Nicholson spent ages throwing and catching a dud grenade until White was sure that Nicholson was adept at the procedure. Nicholson thought a fucking idiot could actually throw a grenade into a car three feet away, but he humoured White, who was his meal ticket....and also a touch volatile.

However, he did fumble once, and so White decreed that the plan was changed and he would throw the grenade. Once he had made that decision, he wasn't sure why that hadn't been the plan all along, as it was she who had got him incarcerated and therefore it should be he, not Nicholson, who should spread her guts all over the place!

How could he have not thought of that?

Why would he give the pleasure to Nicholson?

Weird that.....?

That evening White paid for three women to come over and get whatever it was he wanted to give them, and was so charged up waiting for his revenge the next day, he wanted to give them everything.

He put his dick everywhere and in everyone and came and came and came. He had never been so turned on, and it made him wonder whether, after this was over, he shouldn't treat himself to a holiday somewhere abroad where he could

pay for something to happen that would give him the same high.

A rape? Torture? A killing?

The thought fuelled his sexual needs even more and he fucked, and bit, and pulled, and hurt all through the evening. One woman complained at how rough he was being, but he just smacked her hard across the face and threw another hundred pounds at her, so she shut up.

Nicholson felt a bit left out as his master fucked the world, so had to be satisfied with having what orifice they had spare, assuming he could get at it with White monopolising everything.

But, there again, White was paying.

White fucked and drank until he was exhausted, then passed out, and it left Nicholson with a clear run. Unfortunately, his imagination was greater than his staying power, and twenty minutes later, with a limp cock, he sent them home and went to bed.

Nicholson lay there in the darkness and his mind wandered. He was a scammer and a chancer, and he had..... nothing. Fuck all. Well, not a lot. A couple of grand in the bank, some clothes in a little flat on a run down housing estate where he went when he was desperate. It was paid for, but worth bugger all. The local muggers, pimps and dealers made sure of that.

Replay....

He was a *failed* scammer and chancer. And he had....nothing. Fuck all! Thirty-eight years of age and living in the house of a lust driven, rage driven, revenge driven maniac who, it must be said, had treated him well.

He realised he had used the phrase '*it must be said*', which irritated him. There was a snooker commentator, Thorne or somebody, who said it all the time. *It must be said*. Why must it be said? Why not just shut the fuck up?

Anyhow.....where was he? Oh yes, fucking nowhere. That's where he was. In addition, not only did he have nothing.....he could now have something, as it occurred to him that he had fucked them all without a condom. So he could now have syphilis, gonorrhoea, herpes, aids, all the nice little social consequences one got when you fucked people nowadays. Great.....! See a pair of big tits and your brain went out of the window!

Oh fuck...!

So what to do?

Failed scammer and chancer he may be, but he was always looking for the next opportunity: the one, the big one. And he had realised as he sat in his cramped cell that the opportunity he was looking for could be sitting across from him.

White was, in a way, a scammer's dream.

He was rich, arrogant, insecure, susceptible to flattery, assumed loyalty was given out of respect and had a complete belief that he knew everything. What more could a scammer want? So he used his scammer's nose for an opportunity, and here he was. Not only that, he would soon, after tomorrow's events unfolded, be in a position to change his financial status somewhat.

He leaned over and fished in the bedside drawer and found the tiny digital recorder hidden at the back. He located the file he was after and pressed the button.

‘You must be joking?’ he heard himself say, ‘you’ve had your wife killed and now you’re gonna kill the woman just because she gave your wife a lift?’

‘Oh yes, the bitch has to die, and I’m going to do it. *And....*’ White said with menace in his voice, ‘don’t ever, ever, refer to that dead bitch again as my wife. Got it!?’

‘Ok, ok...’

And so it went on.

Every question designed to get him to incriminate himself; keep talking, my man, keep talking. Tell the whole fucking world what you’re going to do. And, if you wouldn’t mind, in as much graphic detail as you can, please. We don’t want any question as to the meaning, do we? Thank you...

And when the deed was done tomorrow, he would get his twenty thousand payoff and then would start the squeeze. And White may be a hard bastard, but with a copy of the digital recording housed on several memory sticks at different locations, he was quite safe. Quite safe.

He reckoned White was worth several million, and so, by the end of the squeeze, he reckoned he would have lightened his wallet by one of them, maybe a touch more.....

Chapter 55

Toby

Toby sat on the bottom of the bed and tears rolled down his cheeks.

Where was his friend?

He knew he had annoyed his special friend as he had not been to see him, but he didn't know what he had done wrong.

What had he done?

Why didn't he come?

What had he done?

He had tried very hard to please him, and he tried desperately hard to remember anything, anything, he could have done that would have annoyed him and stopped him coming to be with him. He couldn't think of anything, but there must have been something... His friend wouldn't desert him without good reason, and so he *must* have done something to upset him.

He heard voices and froze. He knew that when there were voices, he was to keep very, very quiet, otherwise they would find him and take him away, back to that bad place, and they wouldn't let him see his special friend again.

And he didn't want that.

And neither did his special friend...

Toby listened and kept still. His Mickey Mouse watch told him that it was almost an hour before they left, and he settled down to watch the television and wait for his special friend, who would surely come. He hadn't done anything wrong, he hadn't, so he would come...

Soon he would come.....

Chapter 56

Arthur at the club

Arthur had made up his mind; this was his last night at the local ex-service men's Club. He had had a pint there for many years, but over the last few weeks it had changed, dramatically. Frequented essentially by retired people with not much money, it was a nice place to come. The beer was cheap, and you could play dominoes, darts, cribbage and cards with your mates of longstanding. It was a bit like a second home...

Was.....

Several weeks ago, two brothers had arrived to have a drink. They were in their early forties and didn't fit in at all....for many different reasons. Wrong age, wrong disposition, wrong attitude, wrong...everything.

For whatever reason, they had decided to stay and had literally taken over the place with a mixture of intimidation and aggression, and the locals were starting to stay away. They demanded cheap beer and food and used the place as their local betting shop/office.

The calm, enjoyable, matey atmosphere had gone, and Arthur had had enough. Tonight was the last night.

As he went to the bar a last time, the older of the brothers shouted behind him:

'Humpy. Bring me a fucking black and tan.'

Arthur froze. Everything he hated about this life had just been screamed at him. His disfigurement; the fact that some people saw him as an object rather than a person; the taunts, the derision.

He got himself a drink and ordered a black and tan for the insensitive idiot behind him. He paid, left his own on the bar and took the idiot's drink to him. As he approached him, he moved his hand on the handle slightly, so that when he swung the glass into the idiot's face, he would have more leverage. One good swing and he would know what disfigurement was.

He was only several feet away from the men sitting at the table when the demander of the drink answered his mobile phone, put his elbow on the table and leaned his chin on his hand.

As Arthur got to him, he was totally ignored, no taunting face looking up at him, and so, his heart bursting, he put down the drink and walked back to the bar. At the bar, he was close to fainting, so he sat on a stool and had a drink from his cold pint. He could still see in his mind what should have happened, should have happened, should have happened, but it hadn't. Idiot still had a face, and they still ruled.

He finished his pint and left.

At home, he explained to his wife what had happened and that he was through.

'But you've been going there years, love, it shouldn't end like this. I thought it would end with you falling off your stool, pint in hand, and then we'd bury you.'

He grinned. God, he loved this woman. She had been a rock. She had been everything in his life, even more than the butterflies. And how could you get more than that?

‘Why don’t you ring James?’

‘It’s not his problem.’

‘He would help you, you know he would.’

‘I know, but it’s not his problem. I’ll just have to find somewhere else to drink.’

‘But what about all your friends as well? You can’t just up and make new friends...’

He shrugged. ‘I don’t know,’ he sighed a deep sigh. ‘I feel weary. If you don’t mind, I’ll have an hour’s kip, and then I’ll feel better.’

‘You do that, love.’

He wandered off upstairs, and she went to the kitchen to do the washing up. When she had finished, she went quietly up the stairs and looked into the bedroom where she saw him curled up like a baby and snoring gently. Pulling the door to, she went back downstairs and took her mobile phone out of her handbag. She walked out of the back door and into the back garden, where she sat on a bench. Life had been difficult enough for her man as it was. Two thugs were not going to ruin one of the few pleasures he, and his friends, had...

‘Hello, James, it’s Janet, Arthur’s Janet.....fine, thank you.....no, he’s fine, but I wonder if you could possibly give him a little help.....?’

Chapter 57

Salim meets his handler

‘You’ve done really well,’ said the Handler sarcastically.

‘I don’t need your crap,’ responded Salim, ‘you’re not the one out there with maniacs who want to blow the place up. You’re behind a fucking fortress in London drinking coffee and discussing.....strategy.’ He spat the last word out.

The handler smiled. ‘Good. We wondered if you’d given up...going a bit soft maybe? Getting a bit too involved.....? Changing allegiances perhaps.....?’

‘Fuck you!’

‘What shall we eat?’ asked the Handler as though to his aunt, the taunting disappearing as fast as it had arrived.

Another day, another diner, another menu. At least they paid for his food while he risked his life. No one could say they weren’t generous..... While his mind was strong, his stomach was telling him otherwise, so he ordered poached egg on toast and a mug of coffee, in which he put liberal amounts of sugar, which he usually didn’t do. But today he felt in need of sugar. Energy.....

‘What are we going to do?’

‘At the moment, it’s difficult to say. Current thinking is that we let them get on with it. We fit you with a tracker, and we tail you. When we know what the target is, we watch until we see an opportunity. Current thinking is we will also give you a remote to detonate their packs. We quite like the idea of them blowing themselves up, bits of our eastern friends everywhere, but if it starts to go wrong, you can do it.’

‘And me as well?’

‘Hardly, dear boy. You know you’re one of our shooting stars in the killing ground firmament that we know as espionage...’

Salim said nothing, but he sometimes wished these over educated arseholes would talk English!

‘No....you can have a dummy pack. You were going to have one without detonators, but now things have moved on a little, current thinking says you should not be put at any risk.’

‘Thanks a lot....’

‘So, let *us* worry about how...and you make sure we get the ground ready for the killing. Ok.....?’

They both knew it wasn’t really a question.

Chapter 58

H sees the future

'I won't do it,' he said. 'It's not me....and if I'd known you were into this kind of thing, I'm not sure I would have married you.'

'Don't be so priggish,' she retorted, 'no one will get hurt. We go, we have a good time, we come home, and life carries on.'

'No!.....What happens if we've changed? What happens if it's a life changing experience? What happens if someone contacts you afterwards? Eh? Eh?'

'James, you are so.....parochial.'

'Hardly...you are my wife....you promised to honour and obey....well, ok, you didn't, but nevertheless, this is a step too far.'

'Please.....' she said in her little girl way.

'Benny, you know what I think about things like this...'

'Do you want me to go on my own?'

'On your own?' he spluttered. 'Are you mad? Who knows what crazies will be there? It could be a cult! They may be there looking for recruits, and this is the way they do it...'

'I think not,' she retorted, 'getting a little silly now, don't you think? Come on, James, you will be my protector as well, don't you see?'

He thought about that one....maybe she had a point.....?

He looked at the others....couples, singles, no-hopers, hoppers....hoping for what?

To talk to someone? Meet someone? Were they mad? Was he mad? Were they all mad, being here? It had been fifteen minutes so far, and it made H squirm, but Benny was thoroughly enjoying it. As someone tuned to the vagaries of language and the motives behind it, H listened to subtle changes of direction and homing in on pointers to latch on to. After forty minutes, he had had enough. He was just about to tell Benny that he was leaving with, or without, her, when he heard, from the dapper little man at the front...

'I see a shortish woman....a name.....let me get this right.....could be....could be.....Mar....Mari....?'

Ah, fuck it! H's hand shot up. 'Marianne, my mother.'

The dapper man nodded. 'And has she gone over to the other side?'

'Yes,' said H solemnly, 'she was in America visiting my brother at University when a student went on a rampage and shot some students, two teachers and several visitors and.....' he paused and wiped his eye, 'my mother was one of them.'

There were gasps from the audience.

'Let me see,' said the dapper man, 'if Marianne can get closer to us and talk to us.'

He closed his eyes and concentrated.....it was obvious from his face that he was really, really concentrating... He started nodding. 'Marianne is coming through..... she tells me that she is pleased you are doing well...'

That would be my expensive suit, thought H.

'....and that your brother.....c?.....d?.....?'

'Clive,' shouted H. 'Clive.'

'Yes, Clive.....tell me, has he been.....unwell?.....'

'He lost both legs in a mine accident.....'

Another brush of his eyes. He flinched as Benny's shoe smacked into his ankle.

'Yes...Marianne tells me that made her very sad.....but wasn't there something good in his life....?'

'That would be the quads.....'

The dapper man concentrated again. 'Yes, Marianne, yes.....yes...I see.....your mother is close to you now and is giving you her love....'

'Could you ask her something?'

'I will try, but the connection is getting weaker, and Marianne needs to go back....'

'Could you ask her where she put the Will?'

The dapper man concentrated again, but said, in a sad voice, 'I'm sorry; Marianne has gone back to the spirit world.....where she belongs....'

When they got into the car, Benny said, 'You bastard! Why did you lead him on like that?'

'Why did I lead him? What do you think he was doing?'

'That's not the point...'

'And the point is....?'

'It's just harmless fun.'

'No, it isn't....it's some conning bastard taking money off vulnerable people who desperately want to hear what they want to hear, and he provides it. He's a con artist. A good one, but a con artist nevertheless.'

Benny understood. H didn't really care about the man...he cared about the vulnerable who were being exploited.

Chapter 59

The terrorists meet (again)

Salim had brought the explosives, all ready to be put on under their shirts in case they were stopped for any reason. Gone were the days of big, bulky sticks of dynamite with ridiculous wires sticking out. Now it was sculptured TNT, made to fit the contours of your body, sir, nice and thin, so it's not seen, sir, wraps around you and held together by Velcro, sir, a lovely fit, sir. The detonator, sir? Just press this tiny button, sir, which you can house discreetly in your tunic pocket, sir, and you won't know what hit you....at least after the event. Sir...

Salim had tried again to get them to release the target, but had no luck, so he decided to give up, or at least give up trying before it looked too obvious. Maybe there was a chance he could get it in due course through the odd titbit that they may let out, and he could let the men back at the river work it out?

It was the least they could do....lazy bastards!

The brothers had worked it all out and were pleased. Secrecy and security, they had decided, would be their watchwords. The need to know dictated what you knew. Salim thought they must have been to see the latest James Bond movie...

They had also decided to do a video and had assembled the group, dressed them in eastern robes and read out a prepared text before a small camcorder resting on the tiny dining table.

'We, the British Cell of the victorious Osama, carrier of the flame of freedom, who carries the fight to the infidel in the name of the Almighty Allah, who shall conquer the earth.....'

Oh fuck, thought Salim, as he postured with the others by holding aloft clenched fists and chanting softly, 'Allah, Allah,.....' behind the reader of the document.

Oh fuck....

And so the plan was laid out. It would happen in seven days' time. Saturday evening in Chester....

'Chester?' exploded Salim, 'who the fuck cares about Chester? They'll more than likely give us a fucking medal if we blow up Chester!'

'If you would let me finish....?'

He carried on.

They would meet at Hilton Park Service Station on the M6, then go in separate cars, following the brothers until just before their destination. They would leave their cars in a lay-by and make their way through the dark woods to their target. The brothers had worked out that as long as they got near enough to the house without any problems, then all would be ok. If they were confronted near the house, they could just run at the full-length windows, which, being old, were single glazed and would break easily and detonate the bombs once inside.

And then.....martyrdom.

And they would be legends.

And songs would be composed around them.....

Chapter 60

On the back seat of the car

In the car, with its windows clouded with sweaty moisture, the two were half-undressed. She was curled up on the back seat, her head on his lap, his prick in her mouth as far as it would go. Their movements were passionate, frenzied, and told a balletic story of a couple desperately in love and consumed with a need that had to be satisfied. Unfortunately, he was satisfying the need of another man's wife. And she was satisfying a deeper need with a man who meant everything to her and without whom there would be no reason to live.

She took it out of her mouth for a moment and said, 'Now,' and went back down, and her mouth moved up and down urgently.

It only took seconds; she felt her mouth fill and swallowed and sucked at the same time.

She sat up, and he cradled her head on his shoulder, gently smoothing her damp, tangled hair.

After a few minutes, they sat next to each other and rearranged their clothes.

'I love you, darlin',' he said softly.

She kissed him tenderly. He knew he shouldn't say it, but he had to. 'When....?'

'Soon...very soon.'

'You said that last time.'

'I know, and I meant it then too. It won't be long now.'

'Do you know how long?' he asked forlornly.

‘Not exactly, but I promise you that you and I will spend our life together. That is a solemn promise, and I would never lie to you. Not to you.’

He went silent for a few moments, then looked at her forlornly.

‘Not too long, darlin’, as this is killing me,’ he said in his rich Texan voice.

‘I know....but be patient....it will all be worth it...I promise.’

They sat chatting for a few more minutes, and he looked at his watch.

‘It’s eight fifteen; how much longer do you have?’

‘I’m ok at the moment; he won’t be back till nearly ten.’ She cared less where he had gone or what he was doing.

‘Good.’

He lifted her dress and put his hand back inside her wet vagina.

Chapter 61

Hilton Park Service Station

They met on the perimeter of the large car park of the service station, out of range of prying cameras. The brothers, Hussein and Saddam, in an old Ford Escort; Malik in his black BMW convertible, with blacked out windows and revolving wheel hubs, bought with the proceeds of his drug dealing; Bahar in a nearly new Honda Civic and Salim in a Vauxhall Vectra.

They walked across the car park and placed themselves at a table in Burger King where they wolfed down burgers, fries and coffee. Refreshed, they went to the toilets, and Salim was amazed when he looked down and saw what Malik was holding in his hand! He should have been a porn star!

They went back to their cars, two put in more petrol, and then on to the motorway. It took only moments, then they came off at Junction 11 and went back the way they had come. Salim realised they were not going to Chester. He opened the glove compartment and saw the red light on the tracker, and reached and pressed a button on his hands-free. Without moving his lips, so that the others would have no inkling, he said 'Change of plan...'

'Got you....everything under control.....leave the phone on, but don't talk unless you have to....'

Within MI5, the tracker bleeped on a screen, but it seemed to raise little interest.....

The brothers decided to ring the others and tell them that, for security reasons, they had been given the wrong target and just continue to follow. When they tried to ring Salim, his mobile was engaged. Saddam, the passenger in the brothers' car, turned around and saw Salim was not talking on the phone. He seemed to be concentrating on his driving. Why was his phone engaged? Hussein slowed down the car, and when he was close, they tried to tell him his phone was not working by indicating a phone at the ear and then drawing an imaginary knife across his throat.

Salim froze. They knew! They fucking knew! How could they know?

'They've rumbled me!' he screamed into the mobile.

'Don't be fucking stupid,' came the immediate reply. 'Calm down! Assess the situation! Assess the situation!'

Salim looked at the face of Saddam and realised it did not have anger or hate written on it. What the fuck was going on? Why did they want to slit his throat if they weren't angry? Saddam repeated the procedure, but this time he imitated pressing buttons on an imaginary phone, and it clicked!

Relieved, Salim stuck up his thumb and pretended to rummage on the passenger seat for the phone. As he did so, he shut off his own. Seconds later, Saddam got through. 'Why was your phone on?' he demanded.

'Sorry, Saddam. It was lying under my road atlas, and it must have been connected accidentally. Sorry, Saddam. Stupid mistake.'

Placated, Saddam continued to update him. When he had finished, Salim immediately rang his handler and explained what had happened, and that from now on there would be no phone contact. For some reason, it didn't occur to him they were also listening in to Saddam's phone...

‘It’s ok,’ said his handler, ‘we have the tracker. Just keep calm, for Christ’s sake; you nearly blew it open back there...’

‘Look,’ said Salim, agitated, ‘in this game, when someone draws an imaginary knife across their throat, you don’t usually see it as a gesture of goodwill!’

‘Just stay calm....’

‘Get fucked....’

The brothers went off at the next exit, down the A5, across to the M54 and, as darkness started to move in, headed towards Shropshire.

Chapter 62

Practice run

'This is the third time for fuck's sake,' said Dieter White, 'now for Christ's sake get it right!'

'Just calm down,' said Nicholson, 'how can I get it right when I'm a bag of nerves with you screaming at me?'

'I'm not fucking screaming at you,' screamed White.

'You are.'

'Well, maybe I am, but this has got to be fucking right!'

'If you'd just sit still and let me do what I'm supposed to be doing, it *would* be right.'

White hit the dashboard with his fist and took a deep breath. After a long pause, he said, 'O.K., O fucking K. Just do it right.....'

'Right,' said White. 'Three hundred yards to go. I take one out. We stop at the lights, and I get it ready. We move off, and as we get onto the dual carriageway, I throw it through the window. You accelerate like fuck! And then goodnight, Dick!'

White's angry face was replaced by a smirking smile. Goodnight, Benshima James, thought White. Good fucking night, and good fucking rubbish.

He imagined the carnage the M67 fragmentation grenade would do to her within the confines of her car. The shrapnel that would enter every part of her body and shred her to pieces. Flesh everywhere, blood everywhere, death everywhere.

'Ok, get this one right.'

The big Lexus moved down to the traffic lights, and White took the grenade out of the bag at his feet. Fifty yards from the lights, the road went into two lanes. One straight on and one right turn. Nicholson went into the straight on lane and stopped at the red lights. White had already got the window down and, if everything was going to plan, she would be one or two cars ahead. As the lights changed, they would cross them, then accelerate and get level with her where the road opened up to the dual carriageway, and White would take the pin out and throw the grenade in through her window. On good days, she always had it down, God knows why? But if it were raining, they knew, as White had checked, a hard throw would break the glass, the grenade would enter the car and still achieve what White desired.

Her agonising death.

Five seconds after White had removed the pin, the fuse would reach the explosive! Five seconds!

One, two, three, four, five, agony, agony, agony.....death!

White was quite aware that hand grenades were not designed to kill; they were designed to maim. It had been realised a long time ago that while killing soldiers was efficient, it sapped the enemy if they had to tend to the wounded. Men tending injured comrades couldn't fight....and seeing them horribly injured was much more demoralising than seeing them dead...

But in her confined car, the utter devastation of those exploding metal shards would kill her. And if they didn't, then she'd never make it as far as the hospital. And the indescribable agony she'd be in.....a tremor rippled through him as he savoured the thought.

The other one, he couldn't remember her name, the one that got him sent down, was already dead. She had gone back to Thailand, where she thought she would be safe, but he had found her. Then he had found someone who, for two grand, two lousy grand, had found someone else who had thrown acid over her.

She had been in terrible agony for two weeks before she finally gave up and died.

Tough.....

Good riddance to bad rubbish!

So just one to go.

This one.

The James one...

Chapter 63

The Shiners

The meal had been good. More than good. Much more than good. They had dined, wine and smoked cigars, cigarettes, cannabis and, for those with more celebrity tastes, there were cocaine and heroin. Tales were told of what they had been up to, and then there was the *showing* of their various depravities.

On film that was.

At times not always in focus or quite clear, but the context was quite explicit. Taken with or without the participant's consent, they were a triumph of need over respect, depravity over well being. They vied for the honour of the evening's Oscars, which they eponymously called the Gary's after the gentleman they admired and laughed at in equal measure.

There were several categories: under fives, six to ten, eleven to fifteen, over fifteen, animals, sadism, snuff and best overall. Of course, many of them tended to spill over into several categories, which tended to dilute the effect in one category but pushed them towards *best over all*. Winner of best overall received a red bib and brace *overall* to wear for the rest of the evening.

The snuff categories tended to win the *best overall*, as they had the greater impact. The winner last time was the current British Ambassador to Yemen, who could not make the evening and so had sent, via a diplomatic bag, a film of him defiling several young children. When he had finished, they

were hung by their necks from the ceiling and then, as life left them, he buggered them one more time. When they were dead, he cut off their tiny penis's and slowly fried them with an egg and inserted it all within two freshly cut pieces of bread and ate them.

The film got a standing ovation, captured several *Gary's* and *best overall*. A *red overall* was despatched forthwith the next day via the diplomatic bag.

Clive's film of the unconscious woman with a dog's prick in her mouth, and one licking her vagina, found acceptable applause, but it was seen as lacking somewhat in creative imagination.....

Of the twenty people there, thirteen had their own films, while the others had used their contacts throughout the world to get theirs. One borrowed snuff film showed two naked men and a woman, in a line, two holding large calibre handguns. All three were trussed in such a fashion that the men at the ends of the line were pointing guns at the head of the woman in the middle. It was obvious that all three were friends; two could have been married, as they were desperate to be absolved of whatever was going to happen. The guns were held steady by a brace, and the hands held to the guns. Electrodes were on the genitals of the two men, and wires ran to a small box on a table next to a hooded man.

To one side were about twenty people, also hooded, sitting in easy chairs watching the drama unfold. Some were masturbating. Several young girls, their heads bobbing up and down in the laps of some of the observers, had manacles around their ankles.

‘The first one to fire his gun and kill the other two will live,’ screamed one of the captors. ‘Fire your gun! Pull the trigger! Do it now! Do it now!’

The men were sobbing, desperate, but they would not be the first to pull the trigger.

‘Do it now! Save yourself! You will live if they die!’

But they couldn’t kill their friends..... How can you kill your friend?

‘Kill them.....live....why die for them?’ he screamed.

The man in the hood gave a small charge, and he watched as they involuntarily flinched, but it was not enough to pull the trigger. ‘Kill them!’ he screamed.

He saw the eyes of one of the men, and he knew he was close to giving in. ‘If I send the charge down the line, you all die!’

He paused for a moment. ‘Don’t die for them,’ he screamed again, ‘they won’t die for you when the time comes!’

He watched the man close his eyes and pull the trigger. The bullet hurtled through the woman’s head and carried on its deadly path and entered the man’s head waiting for it. As it did, the man convulsed and pulled the other trigger, which sent a return bullet through the woman’s exploding head and back into the original donor.

Blood and brains flew everywhere.

One of the audience got up, scooped some brain from what was left of a skull and held it to his nose, taking in deep breaths, his face showing an exquisite sexual pleasure.....

In Lord Clive’s house, there was a long silence, and then tumultuous applause erupted.

‘Bravo,’ rang out voices from the throng,
‘bravo.....*shine....shine....*’

Chapter 64

The cinema

Benshima wanted to see the new James Bond movie, but H had prevaricated until they nearly missed it. It had already been on three weeks, and coming to the end of its run when he agreed.

‘You still could have gone with the girls....’ he grumbled.

‘I know, but I want you to see what a real man is like.’

‘Of course; a real man. Not made up, not faked, not primped, not primed, not Hollywood. Real...’

‘Exactly.....’

They caught it in one of the multi-screens, where it had been relegated to a small cinema, which was fine by H. He hated the cinema. He was always sitting by kids that messed about, or couples that talked all the time, or stupid youths, or men with BO, or someone enormous that sat in front of Benny, or someone that had fallen asleep and snored, or..... or..... and the list would go on....and on.

All he wanted was to be left alone to enjoy things as he saw fit, and not have other people inflicted upon him. As Jose had said when he quoted Sartre, ‘Hell is other people.’

That, thought H, must be the understatement of the.....of the.....ever!

There were only about two dozen people in and no problems. Wonderful! And then, after twenty minutes, three youths arrived with their hidden cans of lager, barrels of popcorn and loud voices.

Of all the cinemas, in all the towns, in all the world, they walk into mine.....

Then it started. The comments to the screen...

‘Give him one.’

‘Poofter.’

‘Give her one.’

‘Pussy Galore.’

Pussy Galore, thought H; they were hardly old enough to have seen the previous Bond film, let alone one that was twenty or thirty years old?

H stuck it for nearly fifteen minutes. ‘Enjoying it?’ he asked Benshima.

She smiled, and then a broad grin swept over her face.

‘Why?’

‘Just asking.’

‘It’s a bit slow.’

‘I think so, and it doesn’t make a lot of sense. What is he supposed to be? A proper secret agent or a make believe James Bond?’

‘Who knows?’ she said, staring at him and still with a daft grin.

‘What?’

‘What this place needs is some action.’

‘I thought that.’

She nodded.

‘Do you want to wait here or outside?’

‘I think I’ll walk to the back and wait.’

‘Ok.’

‘And watch.....’

He smiled. ‘Ok.’

They got up; Benny walked to the back of the cinema, and H went to the row behind the youths and walked across until he was immediately behind. He tapped one on the shoulder.

‘Excuse me, fellas,’ he said quietly, ‘but you’re making a bit of a noise. I wonder if you’d mind keeping it down a bit?’

‘Get fucked!’

‘Come on, fellas. We’ve come to watch the film; why don’t you do the same?’

‘I’ve fucking told you....’ said one sitting on the left of the trio, and stood up.

A tension left H. He was no longer irritated with them. They no longer bothered him.

As he turned, H grabbed high up his shirt, held tight, and brought his fist smashing down on the nose of the youth, which broke instantly. A loud crack was heard, and blood spurted out from his face. He yelped, and H immediately let go and grabbed the hair of the other two from behind and smashed their heads together.

Another loud crack, then H yanked one back and smashed him in the nose and then in the teeth and then, as the last one was trying to move to get away, H grabbed him and repeated the process. Broken nose, broken teeth.

H, knowing that symmetry was all, grabbed the first one again and smashed him in the mouth.

He wanted to destroy them!

He wanted to destroy anyone that impinged on his life or tried to take his happiness away!

Anyone that decided their needs were greater than his or other people’s!

Destroy them!

He grabbed one by the hair and smashed his face into the top of the seat with another sickening crunch.

What witty one liner would Bond come up with?

Have some crack?

Just enjoying the craic?

He walked away. As he was going up the aisle to Benshima and the outside world, applause rippled through the cinema. He couldn't resist, and as he reached Benny, he turned and slowly bowed.

'Drama Queen,' she hissed.

'My public adore me...'

The applause increased. H pointed down to the youths who were in agony. 'They won't stop you; why don't you all have a go?'

She looked at him.

Surely not?

Muttering went round the cinema and then, one by one, shadows of men shuffled to the youths until they surrounded them and then, as though the collective superiority had been established, fists started going in everywhere. Then wives and girlfriends arrived and piled in.....

'James,' said Benshima, 'they're going to kill them.'

'Hopefully.'

He took her hand and walked out.

It was ten more minutes before the baying mob finished, and they hadn't killed anyone. Although it was marginal...The youths were certainly a mess and would need hospitalisation for several weeks, but they wouldn't die. The baying mob, who had unleashed years of frustration at the hands of arseholes – whether it be feral youths, neighbours with

barking dogs, thieving politicians, etc. – all left the cinema and headed home or to the pub where they could relive the utter freedom of fighting back. Albeit from a rather advantageous position.

Long live freedom.....

Chapter 65

The Brothers

They sat at the table, half-drunk with free beer, and giggled hysterically at jokes that weren't very funny. Schoolboy, lavatorial jokes that they should have left behind a long time ago. Empty crisp and peanut packets covered the table, and several were on the floor. They didn't notice the door open, and a dozen men walk in, pause for a moment to survey the situation, then move en masse to their table, which they surrounded. They were grabbed by their arms, which were pinned to their sides, hauled to their feet, and a fist smashed in their stomachs, which made them sink to the floor. Their pockets were searched, and nearly seven hundred pounds, credit cards, car keys and mobile phones were found.

As they were dragged out to the car park, Andy Pandey went to the bar and put the cash on a tray. 'Use this,' he said, 'to give everyone a free meal and drink. Get everyone back and have a party...They,' he said, nodding to the departing throng, 'won't be back.'

As he left, he heard applause resound around the room. John Wayne, he thought proudly. The Lone Ranger. Zorro. Robin Hood. The fuckin' cavalry is leaving the building. He decided the last one wasn't appropriate.....he had a sympathy for the Indians, who were there first.....

Taken outside, they were put in the back of three cars with two men either side of them. Their hands had been held behind their backs by plastic gripper tape, which was tight

and painful. As they left the car park, the remaining men took the brothers' car keys and walked round, pressing the remote as they went until a car flashed its lights in response. One got in and followed another car to a nearby lake, where he parked it on the yacht slipway and wound down the windows. He got out, reached in, let off the handbrake and watched it roll slowly down into the dark water. After a few moments, it was gone...

Andy Pandy seemed to have an inexhaustible supply of buildings to take his 'detainees' to. This one was another old barn in a field close to a derelict house which, for some inexplicable reason, also had water, gas and electricity. Around the room were bits of furniture, odds and sods and anything else that Andy may need to allow him to pursue his desire for sadistic perfection.

Andy Pandy was a man of many talents, including restoring services, but his main one was certainly sadism. It was, he would say, a gift. He had an almost unstoppable supply of creative ideas for his victims and looked on it as a designer would look at an empty room or an artist a blank canvas.

Andy Pandy didn't just hurt or kill; he approached the whole scenario with an open mind as to its needs and therefore its consequences. Cause and effect. He was an artist. Every twist of the knife, every burn, every strangle was a choreographed move. Every scream was a note in a symphony he had composed.

And the Final Act was a work of art. Even if Andy did say so himself. And he did...

Andy was the Sword of Damocles. He took your generally ok existence and gave it another element. An element that changed your view of your life, and maybe your world,

forever. It was essentially a reversal of power, of fortune, of possible consequence. It hung over you, and you had time to consider it. You didn't want to consider it, but you had no option.

Andy Pandy made sure you had something to consider. That was the art to sadism.....

In this particular instance, he was working for H, so he didn't dislike these men, *per se*; they were a job, but the fact that they were upsetting old people, perhaps old people who had fought in the war, did move them from the *job* category into another category. It went from work to *pleasure*. Paid pleasure. Very well paid pleasure, in fact, as H was never stingy when he wanted a job doing.

What more could a man want?

And so Andy had agonised about their fate.

In reality, these two were clowns. Idiots who thought they were hard men because they had never come up against hard men. There was a lot of it about. There were a lot of men who fancied their chances until, by mistake, they picked on the wrong person.

And then.....and then...

Andy knew that a lot of so-called *hard* men were just schoolboy bullies that had never grown up and instinctively picked on their weaker fellows. They were never taken down because they kept away from anyone that could do it. And these two? Picking on old people for fuck's sake! Very fucking macho!

And there was no-one in that Club to take them down. Just old people and a hunchback. A hunchback that was a friend of H. How unlucky was that? They picked on a friend of H.

Now H was a hard man. Andy was hard, but H? H was different. Andy enjoyed his job of killing and maiming, but for H it was just business. Just business. Cold, ruthless business.....Ho fucking hum.

What to do?

How to make the punishment fit the crime? Andy was still pissed off with, and in awe of, H for dreaming up the *white pussy* caper. What a fuckin' gem that was! White pussy! White fuckin' pussy! Why hadn't Andy thought of that one? It was just one of those one off classics. Just a classic. In a different profession, it would be on the six o'clock news!

History was made today at a private zoo in England when, as a treat for three lovely young black lads, white pussy was arranged. Jeremy Beadle, with camera crew, were.....

So what to do? H had mentioned his friend Arthur, who had a hunched back and who they called names.....? and the old folks they had tormented?..... and Andy thought it had to be in that vein somehow...? Or other.....?

It never occurred to Andy that he had missed his vocation..... as a party planner to the stars. *And the theme for this party will be.....getting tormented for being different and getting old.* Ok. He could do that.

So, first on the agenda, he thought it important to let the Sword of Damocles hang over them... Then make them different.....

Andy, even with his psychopathic tendencies, tried to be a thinker. He knew in many, perhaps all, situations in life you have to choose. Choice was the ultimate creator of man. Your choice decided everything about you and where you would

end up. Do you live in ignorance (and bliss?), or do you lead what Aristotle termed '*the examined life*'?

Andy would give them a choice.

He sat them in two chairs and tied them tight. Nodding to one of his men, he sat down and watched. Who was dominant? Which was the leader?

'We are going to have a little fun,' said Andy cheerfully to the brothers, then stopped quite still....'hang on a minute, hang on a minute, I've forgotten something in all this fun we're having; what are your names? I don't know your names? You...your name?' he demanded.

'Ben.'

'Is that Ben or Benjamin?'

A pause. 'Benjamin.'

'And you, mate,' he said to the other, 'what's yours?'

Nothing.....other than a look of defiance.

'So you're *the man*, eh, pal? You're the older brother, and you're *the man*.....?' said Andy sarcastically.

Nothing.....

'Well, it looks like you've beaten us, mate. If you won't talk to us, we're fucked, eh?'

A smirk crossed older brother's face before he could stop it.

'That being the case...' He walked over to Ben and slapped his face so hard it rocked him on his chair. The one side of his face instantly reddened, and a look of horror followed.

'Sorry, mate,' said Andy, 'but if your brother won't help us, what can I do...?'

Through a mouth that struggled to open and sobs that punctuated, Ben cried out, 'Bill, his name's William.'

'You're fucking having me on? I don't believe it. Bill and fuckin' Ben!'

He shook his head. Surely not? It was too good to be true. Bill and fuckin' Ben! And Andy was going to be *the weed* that choked the life out of the bastards! The nice thing was, the leader, the aggressive one, was called William. *I can use that* thought, Andy.

'So are you like your name?' he asked Bill.

'Eh?'

'You know...are you like your name?'

'What the fuck are you on about?'

'Little Willie.....you got a little Willie?'

'Fuck off!'

'Don't be shy; we'll know later anyhow.....*little Willie.*'

Little Willie strained against the ropes in fury, but got nowhere.

'Anyhow, it seems to me, Ben,' said Andy, 'that you are here because of Little Willie. That right?'

'What do you mean?' he gargled.

'Well, you're hardly a fucking *hard man* like your brother, are you, so I assume he tells you what to do? Or do you just tag along and bask in his glory?'

Ben nodded; to what, Andy wasn't sure.

'That being the case,' continued Andy, 'I think we have to show you what happens when followers are happy to go to..... say.....a club where old, well-meaning people go and have a quiet drink.....and then make their lives a misery. Now that ain't a problem when everything goes well. You get your free drinks, get your free crisps and strut your stuff, and everything's good. Little Willie here is surely the man. When you're *there.*' He stared hard at both of them. The one side of Ben's face was swelling well.... 'But of course, now you're

here.' He said it as though he were a Judge pronouncing a death sentence.

Andy nodded to one of his men, who wandered away and came back with a flask and some mugs. Andy was thirsty...

'And here,' he continued, 'it's the other way round. Here you don't terrorise old people. Here, we terrorise you, and *you suffer.*'

He leapt forward and smashed Ben across the other side of his face with his fist. This time the chair toppled over.

'Pick him fucking up!' Andy screamed. Andy was getting angry. Andy's perverted sense of justice was taking over, and he now hated these scum who picked on old people.

They picked him up, and his swollen face lolled to one side. Although nearly unconscious, he quietly sobbed and then pitifully whispered, 'Don't hit me.....please don't hurt me....'

'Ben, we haven't even started on you yet. You're going to learn not to pick on defenceless people, and from behind the *hard man* that is your brother.' He looked over at Little Willie. 'Talking of *hard men*....' and he nodded to one of his men, who picked up a builder's lump hammer and walked over.

'What do you want, mate? Your knee or your foot?'

Little Willie spit at him and screamed obscenities. 'You fuckin' touch me, you cunt!' he screamed. 'I'll fuckin' have you! As God is my witness, I'll fuckin' have you, you cunt!' He writhed on his chair, but to no avail.

The men looked at him in bemusement. *As God is my witness?* What a fucking joker!

The man looked at Andy, who took a coin out of his pocket and tossed it into the air. Catching it in one hand, he flipped it over on to the other.

'Heads..... Foot.'

‘Noooooooooooooooo,’ Little Willie screamed, but it was too late, and he watched through nearly closed eyes and a face filled with dread as the lump hammer came down.....

It stopped an inch before his foot, but his mind had already prepared itself for what was going to happen, and his dreadful piercing scream rent the air. His head flew back as his body arched with the overwhelming pain that he hadn’t received.....

Andy watched him. It took a few moments before Little Willie understood what had happened...or not happened.

‘*Hard man*, eh?’ said Andy sarcastically.

Sweat started to stream out of Little Willie’s pores.

Andy smiled at him. ‘Let’s do it properly now, eh? This time, let’s really give you something to scream about.’

‘No!’ screamed Little Willie, ‘no... I’ll do anything you want. Anything, but please don’t use the hammer on me....please....’

Nearly there, thought Andy, *nearly there*.

‘See, Ben? Your hard man brother is pleading with us not to hurt *him*...’ he emphasised the word with as much subtlety as he could muster, ‘so that leaves you. We have to hurt somebody to make our point....’

‘What do you mean.....what.....?’ Ben’s voice dried up as he watched with horror as the man with the hammer came over and smacked him on the foot. It wasn’t a hard smack, perhaps a few bones broken, but nothing major. Andy wasn’t trying to break his bones.....he was trying to break his bonds.

Ben couldn’t take it, and Andy watched him slide into unconsciousness. ‘Brew time, I think.’

After fifteen minutes, a hard slap signalled the end of coffee time and the wake-up of Ben. Immediately he woke up, his head jerked towards his brother. 'How could you let them do this to me?' he sobbed. 'How the fuck could you do this...?' 'I didn't fuckin' do it, you daft twat, they did! Don't fuckin' blame me...'

Andy felt warm inside.

Ben knew this was his brother's fault. All this was his fault. It was his idea to take over the club. The cunt!

Andy knew stage one had been completed. He had division. These two, after he had finished with them, would never be the same again.

Stage two coming up.

'Did you like that, little brother?' Enquired Andy. 'What happened then, eh? I'm afraid you're going to get a lot more pain because of him,' and he nodded towards Little Willie. Little brother screamed something that through a mixture of rage and pain was unintelligible.

For a moment, Andy's train of thought left him and went to another place.

It was Ben's garbled mouthings that said nothing and everything and reminded him of a show on tele a long time ago. *Skippy the kangaroo*. Skippy would come bounding into the farm, jabber away in squeaky sounds, and the young boy would listen to him and say, 'What's that, Skippy? A man's stuck in the deep rift cave and looks very poorly? He needs help badly? Lead us to him, Skip!'

And off they'd go, Skippy leading the way, and the man would be saved!

He felt like saying that to this incomprehensible idiot. What's that, Ben, your brother's a cunt and we should kill him? Lead the way! An old habit, for some reason, resurrected itself, and he tilted his head to one side so that the thoughts would fall out.

'Little Willie, I'm going to give you a choice. What do you think we should do to Ben? So far, he's only had a bit of a tap on his foot... What do you think we should do next? Break his arm? A leg...? What....?'

'Fuckin' hurt *him*!' screamed Ben. 'I didn't do fuck all; fuckin' hurt *him*!'

Andy looked at Ben with what could have been misconstrued as pity and sighed a long sigh as though to say it really was out of his control.

Knowing he was going to get considerably more pain, Ben's eyes slowly shut, he slumped forward and fainted again.

'Well, there you go, little Willie. Young Ben can't take it.....but can you?'

Bill had had enough. He was out of his depth; he didn't want to get hurt, and it was time to call it a day. 'You win,' he said, 'what do you want of us?'

Andy Pandy looked at him incredulously. 'You lost the plot, little Willie? You think we went to all this trouble bringing you here just to smack you a bit and then you say you're sorry and that's the end of it? Is that how you think it works, little Willie?' He shook his head slowly. 'It's not like that, little Willie...it's not like that at all.'

'Little Willie, we're going to untie you now, and then I want you to strip. Got that?'

'No fuckin' way!'

Andy looked at him. How long was this big man facade going to continue? About five seconds... He nodded. A huge, solid fist smashed into his mouth. His head rocked back, and blood shot everywhere. This was followed by a hard, very hard, open palm slap on both sides of his face, which yanked his head both ways.

‘Untie him. Strip him.’

As they untied him, one said, ‘He’s got freezing cold hands. Yuk!’

‘Don’t forget what they say,’ said Andy Pandy ‘cold hands, warm arse.’

He started to struggle, so a fist in the stomach, and then another very hard slap across the face stopped him. With blood streaming down his face, Andy grabbed Bill’s hair and brought his face close. ‘It’s time you understood something, little Willie. Life ain’t like you think it is. You’ve been reading too many comics, and reality ain’t in comics. Reality is *here*.’

He smiled and brought his knee up. Bill screamed and sank to the floor in agony. His hands cradled his balls that felt as though they were on fire.

‘Does that feel real, little Willie? Does that happen in comics? Does that happen in your head when you get hard thinking about picking on people?’

He nodded at Sammy and then at the table. They dragged Bill to the table and leaned him, face down, over it.

‘This here is Sammy. Sammy is popular with the ladies, and men, for what he keeps none too well hidden away. Show him, Sammy.’

Bill’s head was just about prick height as Sammy unzipped and showed him an appendage that was getting bigger, but was already bigger than anything Bill had ever seen. Dread

filled his very being. Surely not? This just had to be to scare him? It just had to be? He could, in a roundabout way, understand the violence, but surely they weren't....? Surely.....not.....?

'Wake up young Benjamin,' said Andy, 'I'm sure he'll want to see this.'

A slap brought him round.

'You'll enjoy this, young Ben,' he said as though from a caring teacher to a young pupil. Sammy went round the back, took a tube from his pocket, squeezed some on Bill's arse and then slowly started the process of getting it in.

Bill screamed...and screamed.....and begged....and screamed...and cried....and screamed....and begged. And when Sammy got it in, and he was comfortable, he began the task of getting it ALL in. All nine inches...

'Good, eh, young Ben?' asked Andy. 'Hope you like it, as there's some for you after....'

Ben sobbed hysterically, and Andy knew he was getting close to the edge of reason. Froth came out of his mouth, and then he was sick. Andy pulled a face... Having heard a good word, he nicked it. 'Yuk.'

And when Ben finished being sick, he passed out again. Best place for him, thought Andy, another place, another world.

For some reason, Andy was beginning to get bored with this.... he had no idea why, but for some reason this was not really the turn on it should have been. Maybe it was because they weren't real villains and so he wasn't really pitting his wits against a real foe. There was not much....enjoyment in this.

Ah well...let's get it over and fuck off.

As Sammy pumped away, Andy took out a Stanley knife and carved the word 'cunt' on Bill's back in large letters. Bill had no idea it was happening as the pain from his arse was excruciating. After five minutes of incredible pain, Bill knew what was going to happen next....and it did. Sammy let out a loud moan, and Bill cried.

It was the wail of a mortally wounded animal.

It was the utter despair of a being whose life had been taken from him and for whom there was no going back.

'Ok, little Willie, and I hope now that you have seen, and had, our Sammy, you accept you are indeed a small Willie; it's nearly time to get this little get together over.'

Stages one and two over.

Stage three.....

To be different.....

With Bill still trapped face down on the desk, Andy nodded to his men. 'Keep him perfectly still...well as still as you can...who gives a shit?'

Using the same Stanley knife, he cut off Bill's ear. It was not an expert job and did produce a degree of pain, but Andy was quite satisfied with his work. He showed the ear to Bill, who was also on the edge. He didn't know what to do and was trying to do everything at once: scream, shout, cry, wail, escape, stay, talk, sob, protest, beg, pray, live.....die.

His mind had lost the plot. Andy shook his head slowly. Fuckin' hard men? *I don't think so...*

Andy was quite aware that even the hardest men struggled once you had stuck a prick up their arse. It was the ultimate in power, and therefore, by definition, the base point of weakness. Grown men, hard men, strong men had broken

down in tears after they got a prick stuck up their arse. They couldn't take it, in more ways than one.

Some could square it, and if they could, Andy would change tack and start giving them affection as well. Caressing, kissing, loving, talking softly to them, as though to a lover....

That, they couldn't take. That, they couldn't explain away. Why would a man kiss them? Why?

He had known at least two who had never come to terms with it and had committed suicide. One drank a bottle of Domestos! Fucking Domestos! And the other blew his head off.

It showed the effect it had on a man.

He hadn't taken the shotgun and shot the man who had fucked him; he shot himself! Shooting the man who had fucked him would not, ultimately, change anything. It wouldn't take away the memory, the pain, the humiliation and the shame. It wouldn't take away the *fact* that he *knew* everyone was calling him queer. They wouldn't go away and so.....and so...

Boom!

No head.....

'Let's have a coffee while these pricks get a bit of life back. Get the flasks, Pete...oh, and are there any biscuits left?'

'Yes, Andy, another box in the car. A selection....black and white chocolate, creams, jammy dodgers, crunchy....'

'Good boy, good boy,' said Andy Pandy with an almost paternal look of approval. 'Good boy.'

Two hours later, after strict instructions as to the dos and don'ts of the future situation, the brothers were put in two cars and taken home. Straight to their door. Like a taxi service. It

showed Andy's complete disregard for them and possible consequences. As if there would be any consequences.....as if.

The brothers went in separately, and a short time later little brother hobbled out with a holdall full of clothes and went to stay with a mate and never returned. Big brother's mother took him to the hospital to get his ear looked at, but it was ok. It was a shame he hadn't got the part that had been accidentally cut off, but still.....

It wasn't *too* noticeable.

Sometimes you didn't notice something that wasn't there.

And in a few months, when it had settled down, they could maybe put a plastic one on.....? It wouldn't be *too* noticeable.

It was nearly four weeks before Bill realised that the raised weals on his back actually spelt something. Over the coming months, he had surgery to try and remove it, but you could still see the letters in his flesh.

'*Cunt*,' they said. It was a constant, nagging reminder.

Billy, the elder, reappraised his life and knew he could never go back; it had been changed forever. The aggressive braggart was gone, to be replaced by a quiet, meek, much older looking man, who thought through things before he acted. He now understood cause and effect. He sought out his brother to make amends, but Ben refused to see him.

Plucking up all his courage and with complete humility, he went back to the club and apologised, which was met with surprise and appreciation. He also asked if they would let him stay and be a proper member, which was met with a degree of scepticism. What if he went back to his old habits?

After a few moments, Arthur said, 'It's ok by me if it's ok with the others.'

There were general murmurs of acceptance. Half way through the evening Bill sought out Arthur. 'I want to apologise properly, mate.'

Arthur nodded.

Bill took off his shirt and showed his back to Arthur. 'That was me, mate, but not anymore. Somebody put that there to remind me....'

Yes, thought Arthur, they did. And it reminds me that a true friend never deserts you.....ever.

Chapter 66

Near to Shrewsbury

As they left the M54 and headed along the new A5 bypass, the unmarked police Volkswagen Passat that had overtaken them suddenly put on blue 'police stop' lights on the rear parcel shelf and signalled that the brothers should pull over into the approaching lay-by. The brothers started to panic, but knew that there was nothing the coppers could know, and it must be something minor like a back light. They pulled in behind the car, Malik followed them, and the others kept going. The passenger in the police car got out and walked to them. The brothers stayed in the car, Hussein lowered the window and tried desperately to keep his voice calm. Malik reached below the dashboard and took out a small handgun, which he put in his jacket pocket, and walked slowly to the brothers' car.

'Everything ok, officer?' Asked Hussein.

'Your front lights are rather dirty, sir,' said the officer. 'You do realise that is an offence under the Road Traffic Act?'

'Sorry. I meant to get it washed, but....you know how it is...?'

The policeman peered into the car and saw a strap coming from under coats on the back seat. 'What's that?'

'It's a chest protector. We do a bit of canoeing, and you need them if you snag a rock. Otherwise, you get winded and take a deep breath and, as you may be under water at the time, that wouldn't be good....'

Malik's hand closed around the gun, and his fingers found the safety catch.

‘And where are you going, gentlemen?’

‘We’re students, and we’re going to Shrewsbury College, where there’s a party tonight.....’

The officer thought for a moment. ‘And you, Sir, I take it you’re going as well?’

Malik nodded. ‘Yes, officer....’

‘Ok,’ said the officer, looking back at Hussein, ‘if you’ll just clean those lights before you get on your way, I’ll leave you to it. Have a good party.’

And he strode away, got in the car, and they were gone.

‘Oh, fuckin’ hell,’ blurted out Saddam, and started to shake. Tears started rolling down his cheeks. ‘I was so scared, so scared.’

‘It’s ok now, brother, they’ve gone.’

‘How did you do it?’ Asked Saddam. ‘How did you keep calm....? And what was that bollocks about canoes? What was that all about?’

‘It was just something Amras told me in the student canteen weeks ago, and I remembered. I didn’t really have a clue what I was talking about, but the pig had less idea than me.’

‘But you were so calm.’

‘Yes..... I started to panic and then thought it was a bit silly to panic when we are going to die in the name of the Mighty Allah. And I just calmed down. It was wonderful. I felt.....wonderful. Peaceful.....I was close to Allah. It was ecstatic.....’

Without saying anything, just smiling, Malik high-fived Hussein through the car window and went back to his car. It was a shame, he thought, a golden opportunity to take down two pigs as well.....shame the pig hadn’t been suspicious....shame. Oh, to blow off a pig’s head.

They started on their journey again and were joined eventually by the others who had pulled into the next lay-by and tucked in as they went past.

The small sat nav device brought them, eventually, after one or two wrong turns, close to the entrance of the large estate. Hussein took them to a small spot just around the corner where they could all park out of the way, and they got out.....

'This is it?' said Salim, 'a friggin' country house? It had better be the Chancellor of the Exchequer or something, otherwise we won't go down in the history books! Unless it's as pricks!'

'It's better than that...' said Hussein, '...the Chancellor is only one man, but in here tonight will be dozens of the richest and most powerful people in Britain. And they'll all go up in one loud bang. And every time they mention their names again, they will tell of the men who blew them up. Us! We are going to decimate the cream of Britain.'

'Right on,' said Malik, 'let's get on with it.'

Hussein knew exactly what to do and where to go. They had driven around the estate a couple of times, asked daft questions in the local pub, and looked at the plan of the estate on Google earth. Ah....the internet. The terrorists' best friend.....

The entrance to the long drive to the house had a large, scrolled, wrought iron electric gate standing guard. Hussein had brought a small ladder that slotted together which they used to scale the wall. When they were all on the wall, they dragged it up and used it to go down the other side, and they were in.

It was quite simple.

Keeping in the dark areas just off the drive, they followed it to the large house, then watched and listened. There was nothing happening at the front of the house, so they slowly moved through the large bushes and went around towards the back.

As they approached the West Wing, they saw the curtains holding back the light, then heard muted applause and cheering, as the 'best overall' had just been presented, and it was now winding up for the human entertainment.

Got them!

Salim was getting concerned. Where the fuck was MI5? What was going on? Had they worked all this out and were waiting inside when they charged in? What was he supposed to do? Should he blow them all up as they went to the house? What the fuck was he supposed to do?! Oh shit!

'Don't look so concerned, Salim,' said Malik, 'we will soon be martyrs...*Insha'Allah*.'

From out of his rucksack, Hussein took several small hammers and gave one to each. 'This will break a window. We run to the house, go straight to a window, smash it and keep going. When you are in, make sure we are also there, and then detonate. You got that?'

They nodded.

'Right, check your equipment. Explosive waistcoat secure?....'

They checked the Velcro straps.

'Detonator ready?'

Each showed the tiny device, which they would press as they entered. At the moment, it was in the 'off' position, but as soon as the switch was moved to on it became live.

‘Well, my brothers, my comrades, my friends.....this is it. In the name of The Almighty Allah, we go now to a better place.’

They embraced, said goodbyes.....

‘Activate your detonators.’

He watched as they did.

‘In the name of Allah,’ he said reverently, ‘.....Go!’

They ran towards the house screaming *Allah*, but Salim stumbled, got slowly to his feet, and when he judged them to be far enough away so that he didn’t get hurt, he pressed the remote detonator...

Nothing!

He urgently pressed it again.

Nothing!

And again.

Nothing!

They continued on, heading to separate floor to ceiling windows, smacked them with the hammers, clawed the curtains aside and threw themselves in. Salim was lost. What had he done wrong? What had MI5 done wrong? Had the stupid bastards mixed up the detonators? Did they work independently after all? What the fuck was going on?

He heard pandemonium break out inside, but nothing happened. No bombs, no explosions, nothing. Was this a complete balls up, or had MI5 arranged for them to be captured inside? Would they take that risk? They wouldn’t know what other capabilities they had. Guns? Knives? Grenades? Any old fucking weapon of mass destruction...

And then he was blown back as an enormous ball of flame erupted through the windows as half the house exploded. He watched in amazement as the roof lifted.

What? He was confused.....?

TNT it certainly was, but not enough to do too much damage. Certainly, kill all the people.....but blow up half the fucking house? A room....yes. A wing.....unlikely? In fact, no. Half the house.....no fucking way. Why.....? What was going on?

He had to get out of there. He had no time to take everything off, so he made sure his detonator was unarmed and threw it in the bushes, then ran quickly back towards the road, his back illuminated by the glow that was the burning house, now fuelled by the exquisite wooden panelling that graced it. Or did.

As he climbed the ladder and got on the top of the wall, he saw a car start to move away.

‘Now,’ said a man in the car, and they watched as Salim’s body exploded and, as is the case with suicide bombers, they were not surprised to see his head leave his body and rise twelve feet in the air before coming down and bouncing on the floor near to where his body would have been had the bits not been mainly scattered around the surrounding area.

They carried on for several hundred yards, then stopped by the wall, and two figures, dressed completely in black and with black balaclavas, dropped lightly off the wall and got in the car.

‘Everything ok?’

‘Seamless.....’

Chapter 67

The Controller

It had been a hard struggle, and the Controller was losing the battle. The pump was shot, and only just struggling on; systems were going down, cooling apparatus was inconsistent, causing erratic temperature fluctuations, outside temperature up, core temperature down. And, as the controller knew they would, the virus had waited for these problems to be too much for the weakened system to cope with, had left their secure hiding places and were attacking in droves. Cowardly bastards! The controller was at a loss as to what to do. If it diverted all its resources to fight off the virus, the extra demands on the pump would surely overload it, and the entire system would stop. If, however, it did nothing, the virus would more than likely overwhelm it, and in its weakened condition, the entire system would again stop. The devil and the deep blue sea.....

It transmitted a message explaining the situation to the pump. Within seconds, the weakened pump came back. 'I understand, Controller.' 'What do you think?' asked the Controller.

'Well...I think your analysis of the situation is spot on. Without help from the idiot maintenance man, I don't think we have a chance....'

The controller nodded without nodding.

‘Pump....’ he said dejectedly. ‘You know how hard I’ve tried to get the buffoon to help us. Message after message after message after message. What more can I do? I know he gets them. I know he understands them, but he does nothing about them. I know he means to, as he starts to take steps to put a programme into action....but he just doesn’t follow through. I’ve sent every syscon alert there is in my directory of syscon alerts and....nothing. I’ve even been inventive...I’ve put two, sometimes three alerts together to get him moving but....nothing. I’m afraid, pump, that if he doesn’t do something immediately, we.....’

‘I know, controller,’ said the pump comfortingly, ‘but what more can you do? You have done your best.....’

‘I’ll try once more,’ said the Controller, ‘just once more. The highest syscon alert we have, and if he ignores that.....well.....’

The Controller searched its directory of system condition alerts and found the only one it deemed appropriate for the critical situation they were in. If the idiot ignored this.....

Chapter 68

Scott's letters

Allan Scott looked at the latest reply to one of his letters, and his heart sank. The letter said.....nothing. None of them had said anything, or at least they had not said what he wanted them to say. He paused.....not quite wanting to take the logic any farther, but knowing he had to. What exactly did he want them to say? What exactly did he want to hear?

He looked at the array of letters with their stylised letterheads drawn up, no doubt, by some overpaid branding agency. They had all replied, all, that is, except The Football Association. From Buckingham Palace through NASA down to the Local Council.

They had all said, very politely.....fuck off.

He sighed. Truth time. Oh shit. He didn't really want to go through the truth thing. Who wanted to do the truth thing? How did it help doing the truth thing? It just made you worse. He poured himself a glass of Hardys dry white wine, that he had got at half price from Tesco. A tenner down to a fiver. They had more than likely bought it for two quid, got the producer to say it was worth loads more, and reduced it from an imaginary tenner.....?

Truth time...

He went over his diatribe to Tesco and knew, just knew, he was a bitter and twisted soul. Everything he did was tinged by envy and resentment, with a need to be noticed, to be lauded and applauded. He was a nothing and a nobody, and that hurt.....

And so he wrote his letters to get noticed. He kicked up a
stink to be noticed. He was arsy to be noticed. But.....
But..... It didn't work.

This area of his life, this reaction to his environment, this
automatic response to things must be rethought.

His whole life.....must be rethought.

What was there?

In his life?

What was there?

Chapter 69

MI5

In a room in MI5, they were sipping tea and coffee.

It had been most unfortunate, most unfortunate. Five Muslim extremists had gone to a large country house where, God knows how they knew, a gathering of the great and the good were assembled.

And there, four of them had invaded the house and blown themselves up, and, it seemed, one may have lost his nerve and tried to escape, but, perhaps, a faulty detonator had blown him up as he reached the road?

That sounded about right..... the papers would buy that.....

And the great and the good had, unfortunately, so it would seem, Heaven forbid, etc., etc., been indulging in a little bit of sexual perversion, as the unfortunate beings held in the coach houses would testify. And the films that would be found in the house, some in quite good condition, would also back that up.

And the poor Ambassador to Yemen....well. A quiet word perhaps? Give him the option..... Disgrace or.....they would even supply the pills or gun or poison.

Whatever turned him off.

That little play on words always made them smile.

It was quite a bag....

Lord Ponsonby Clive....the owner of the house. Ne'er do well member of the landed gentry, insurance fraudster and rapist.

Lord Chief Justice Roberts.....main opponent, under the guise of Human Rights, of longer time in custody for terrorists under interrogation.

Sir John Trulove QC.....Human Rights specialist.

Sir Arthur Edwards.....Deputy Chief Constable.

Sir John David OBE.....important industrialist and large Labour Party donor.

John Berry MBE.....multi millionaire and large Labour Party donor.

Sir Gerald Sykes.....British Ambassador to the UN.

And so on.....

There had been much discussion as to how to play it. It started with the tip off about the exploits of Lord Clive from their friendly '*information attache*' at the Colombian Embassy. It was usually of no concern to them who Lord Clive fucked – alive, unconscious or dead – but it seemed that it mattered to someone in Colombia, someone very close as well to the President, and so they had looked at it. It was always best if you could help people who had the ability to help you in return.....

And they had bugged his London home and his stately pile in Shropshire. Fascinating.....

Then they realised the enormity of just what was going on and who was involved. And that half of them were a pain in the arse anyhow. So they hatched a plan to point Salim's dupes at the house. Amazing how easily led some people are. Oh well..... But it did enable a good old clean out of the 'upper classes', which would do no harm. No harm at all. There were still far too many of them....they were a species that almost invited a cull.

And one could always use it as a lever in future...?

So then it came down to how to play it.
What did they want to achieve?
Brownie points? *In more ways than one.*
A touch closer to the PM's ear?
Bigger budget?
Perhaps they could be seen as the obvious department within
which to put the other two?

It needed a lot of thought. There was no point in blowing up
the great and the good if no good came out of it. So to
speak.....

They giggled at that one.

Lots of good had come out of it...legs, arms, heads, bits of
everything.

Good one.....

Chapter 70

The lorry driver

Ray Jones had a poor night's sleep, which was unusual. He had a bit of pain in his chest or tummy or something, maybe heartburn, or indigestion, but with a few white chalk tablets to settle things down he was ok now. He loaded the steel early on, and if he made good time, with a good turnaround at the customer, he would be back early. He could ring the missus when he knew what his times would be; she could do a few sandwiches, and they could take the car and go up on the hills and enjoy the view. Then back to feed the pigeons. Life was good.

This was how life should be. Loving missus. Homing pigeons. Good food. Good mates... Life was good.

He came to the top of the hill and downshifted, ready for the long descent. Shifting steadily down the gears, he used the brakes as little as he could. A pain seized his chest and made him wince. 'Bugger!' He rubbed his chest and carried on concentrating on the road ahead. He was a good driver, a smooth driver; his maintenance bills were always less on his vehicles than others in the fleet. With two hundred yards to go, another pain, a more severe pain, racked his chest. 'Bloody hell!'

He took a deep breath, composed himself for a moment and downshifted again. Sweat flooded his brow, but his body core felt cold. He shook his head to clear the pain and concentrated on the long descent before him. No problem.

Nothing in front, little behind; exactly what a lorry driver needed when he had a fully laden lorry.
He winced again....

'No response, I'm afraid,' reported the Controller.

'Ok, Controller, it was worth one last try,' said the pump weakly. 'I'm really sorry.....very sorry..... but I have to stop now.'

'I know, pump. Thank you for struggling on as long as you have. You put up a magnificent fight, and all the systems have marvelled at your fortitude. Take care.....'

The massive heart attack made Ray Jones convulse, clutch his chest, and as his heart stopped, he slumped over the wheel. Uncontrolled, unrestrained, the large Volvo, weighing forty-four tonnes, picked up speed and went charging down the hill.....

Chapter 71

Dieter White

Although hung over, White was alert when he awoke. For some reason, he could exist on little sleep and copious booze, whereas he had to shake Nicholson to get him anywhere near conscious.

‘Get in the fucking shower, you idle bastard,’ he said, ripping all the bedclothes off the naked Nicholson.

‘For Christ’s sake,’ he moaned as he curled up to protect his modesty, which was a bit rich, as he had had his prick in a woman’s mouth a few inches away from White’s face only several hours before.

White left the room and headed for the shower, grumbling loudly as he went.

After a light breakfast, and fifteen minutes of White throwing a dud grenade into his beamer, they left to wait at a lay-by just before the point where they would get in behind the woman, who passed there every Tuesday and Thursday on her way to her charity job.

Only five minutes late, she went past them, and Nicholson pulled the hire car out and followed. They only had a mile to go, which gave them enough time to make sure everything was ok and not enough time for her, or anyone else, to spot anything amiss.

A small holdall nestled between White’s legs, with three grenades in it. He knew he only needed one, but one may fail, and if it did, he wanted a second go if possible. He wasn’t

quite sure how he would get a second go, as you didn't exactly wait to find out if it was going to go off, but he knew that if one failed, he had to make sure with another. Somehow.....

And the third?

He wasn't quite sure why he had brought three, but there was a part of him that just had to make sure; and not only that, he rather fancied chucking two in.....

Two.....wow....just think of the carnage....but was that too quick? Two would kill her instantly, and he really would prefer her to suffer.....so one, two, three? He hadn't made up his mind, so he brought the three, which gave him every option.

They followed her to the lights, and as they approached, they turned to red.

Ideal.

White took the M67 grenade from the holdall and held it securely in his hand. In only a few moments he would take out the pin, then when he let go of the lever, five seconds later the six and a half ounces of composition B explosive would detonate.

How wonderful.....

An almost sexual feeling ran through his body.

Playing softly on the radio, Terry Wogan was doing a Janet and John sketch, and White could imagine this being one.

'What's that you've got in your hand, little Dieter?' asked Mrs James.

Dieter was too shy to tell her.

'Can you give me a clue, Dieter?' asked Mrs James.

'Really?' said Mrs James. *'It's several inches long, hard, and if you pull it with your hand, it explodes....?'*

Mrs James giggled.

'Dieter, you naughty boy. Whatever can it be.....?'

Dieter smiled to himself. It's a fucking grenade, you silly cow! A fucking grenade! He realised then that it would also have been good to give her a good fucking before he killed her, but that hadn't occurred to him, so.....just have to kill her.

Nicholson watched the lights intently. He looked again for any cameras on the lights to catch people going across on red, but there were none. There weren't any before, and there weren't any now, but best to make sure. Not good form to get your picture on Crime Watch throwing grenades through car windows.

'Do you know these men? Have you seen them before?' And every fucking light on the telephone exchange would light up, and the majority of calls would be from his ex-wife!

A chilling fear gripped him, and a dreadful panic swept through him.

What the fuck was he doing?

What the fuck was he doing here?

What the fuck was he doing here about to blow up a fucking car with a hand grenade?

Was he mad?

Was he really this desperate?

He glanced out of the corner of his eyes, looked at White and saw the grotesque malice written all over his face.

Jesus!

He looked at the red light and knew it would change any second, any second, and he knew, *he knew*, he had those seconds to change the course of events, or at least his part in them. His body tensed as he took one hand slowly off the

wheel and edged it towards the door handle. As he started to grip it, an elbow went into his ribs, and White shouted, 'They're changing! Go! Go!'

He didn't move. This was the moment that would alter everything. He gripped the door handle tighter.

'Go!' screamed White urgently. 'Fucking go!'

He let go of the handle, eased his foot off the clutch and started to move forward. He realised his hands were trembling; he looked at White, who was staring ahead.

Please, God, he implored, let this be ok. Please....oh please.....

White held the grenade tightly and took out the pin as the hire car edged slowly forward to follow her across the lights.

Only a few yards to go now...only a few yards before the horrendous death of Mrs James. He pictured himself throwing it into her open window and the ensuing carnage as the deadly shards of metal cut and hacked her pretty body to bloody pieces.

Oh, fucking joy!

When they were half way across the lights, Nicholson thought he heard a scream and looked to his right. He saw people rushing off the street and others jumping into shop doorways. Eh...?

A moment later, he saw the truck, doing nearly fifty miles an hour, with the driver slumped over the wheel, heading straight towards them. He stamped his foot on the accelerator, but the 407 Peugeot with the automatic diesel engine refused to respond as the revs were too low.....

White realised at the last moment what was happening and braced himself as it hit them side on. Although it crushed the one side inwards and Nicholson ended up against White, the sheer weight of the truck saved them by pushing them down the road, and White and Nicholson both realised they could survive as long as the car kept slipping and didn't go under the truck or get jammed in between something else.

As they lurched about, Nicholson looked at White in horror. White was hanging on to the dash for everything he was worth. With two hands! Oh fuck, oh fuck.....oh fuck!

And then he saw it rolling around on the floor.....

White saw Nicholson's face, and as he followed his gaze and looked down at the grenade, it exploded. An enormous blast roared in the car. Shrapnel found White's face first, then entered every part of their bodies, ripping them to shreds, and blood cascaded out of them like fountains. Part of White's face had disappeared, and one arm and one leg had gone completely. The rest of his body looked like mouldy blue cheese.

The other two grenades went off in quick succession, the car dismantled and hurtled in every direction, slicing into the soft flesh of the shoppers.....

Chapter 72

Roy Jenkins – America

Roy and Norma waited six months, then married in Las Vegas. Not a tacky affair, in fact quite tasteful, and then they hired a Winnebago to travel to the top of North America, wandered over the border up to Ottawa and then back down to their home. It took them six months, and it was wonderful. They settled down to a life of gentle married domesticity. They walked the beach, fished, swam and embraced the American way. Lucky bastards..... Roy even got himself a part time job to keep his mind active. Teaching English. To Americans. It appeared there was quite an interest in 'speaking English' even if you could already speak English, but with an American accent. Jenkins thought it was great fun.

He rang her one evening and said he was going to be late as he was having a drink with some other tutors. When he finally arrived home, after his leisurely walk under the clear starry night, and got to the front door, he fished in his pocket and put the key in the lock. It wouldn't fit. He turned round and peered at it in the light from the street and realised that he had the back door key. How the hell had he picked up the back door key? No idea... Oh well. He wandered round the back of the house, stepping gingerly in the dark, as next door's dog occasionally got out and left them a little present. Feeling for the key hole with his left hand, he guided the key in the lock, opened the door and walked in.

Roy Jenkins should have known. Maybe he did know. Somewhere, deep down within him. Known, but refused to accept. As he dropped to the floor, he heard her scream, 'There's been a dreadful mistake.....I thought it was an intruder!'

The shotgun blast had created a large hole in his chest, and as he lay there with his life ebbing away, he knew he should have known. Her complaints over the last few weeks of hearing sounds outside..... twice she had 'seen' someone looking in the window....twice they had reported it to the local police.

He should have known..... There had been no reason to kill her previous husband... She could just have left.....

He should have kno.....

Chapter 73

Beachy Head

Allan Scott sat in his car looking out at the sea. The freezing wind from it gently rocked the car, so the engine was running and his heater was on.

He looked at his watch.

Twelve o'clock.

Very soon people everywhere would be sitting down to Christmas lunch. Crackers would be pulled, champagne would be quaffed, toasts offered, food devoured, and all would be good with the world.

Their world.....

But, he thought, what of my world? My world has offered so little, for so long, but now....? Now I have a job. I'm appreciated in that job, paid well, get to go to Malta occasionally and enjoy what I do. But.....

But every time things have gone well in my life, something has always happened to stop it.

The Lord giveth and The Lord taketh away.

Well, if there had been a Lord, it would have been him.

It was one of those things...some people are lucky; others aren't.

I'm not.

And now things were going well. Too well.....

Sort of well.

He was still going to have Christmas lunch on his own. Same as last Christmas.

Buy a turkey and have it with chips and egg.
And the next day.
And the day after.
And then maybe a turkey curry...
And watch tele and play poker on the net.....

Still no lady in my life.....
No one to share with.
No one.....

And so, all in all, it seemed a good idea to be here.
And make a final decision.
Life wasn't too bad at the moment, so now would be a good time...before it all went pear-shaped. All you do is put the car in gear, floor the accelerator, and the car would hurtle over the edge, plummet down past the beautiful white cliffs to the waiting finality of the rocks two hundred feet below. That's why Beachy Head was so popular...and it would be even more popular at this time of year.
Christmas was the most dreadful time.....

It was funny really. He wasn't depressed, he wasn't scared, he wasn't anything...it's just that now seemed a good time.
The ideal time.
Before it all went wrong....again.
He took a deep breath and put the car into gear.
He jumped as his mobile phone went off and startled him!
Bloody hell!
His heart pounded!
He took the car out of gear and looked at the small screen.
'Happy Christmas, boss, how can I help you?'
He realised he had slipped instantly into work mode.

‘Happy Christmas and all that bollocks to you, Allan. Tell me, am I right in thinking you’re not doing too much this Christmas....?’

Scott hesitated, almost reluctant to answer. ‘Not too much...no.’

‘Well, we’re having a little bit of a gathering here tonight; why don’t you come round and join us? It would be lovely to have you. Benny is laying on a minor feast, so you can come ready to devour... Is that Ok? Can you make it?’

It was a long pause before he answered. ‘Thank you, boss, that’s very kind of you.’

‘Not kind at all. Come and join us. Anytime after seven. That ok?’

‘That’s fine. Thank you, boss.....thank you.’

‘See you, Allan,’ said H, and hung up.

Tears filled his eyes. He pulled a handkerchief from his back pocket and dabbed them dry. He just sat there and stared ahead.

The ocean stared back at him.

What to do.....? He sat there and stared ahead.

The inviting ocean stared back at him.

On the one hand.....? He sat there and stared ahead.

The beckoning ocean stared back at him.

And then on the other hand.....? He sat there and stared ahead.

He felt its power grow as it opened its arms to envelop him.

What had really changed.....? Nothing..... He sat there and stared ahead.

Come, it said, join us and have peace.....come.....for once in your life, this is the right decision, and no one will be able to take it from you.

Be at peace...

He thought for a few moments.....then put the car in gear.....

The phone rang again and made him jump. In fact, it quite scared him, as he had allowed himself to go deep within himself, and it had entered uninvited, barged in without any warning and panicked him. His heart raced, and once again he took the car out of gear, looked at the phone and picked it up with a shaking hand. 'Hello again, boss, how can I help you?'

'I may be wrong, but I think I can help you.'

'How's that, boss?'

'Am I right in thinking you're not at home?'

Allan paused. 'No, not at home, boss.'

'Am I right in thinking you are making some kind of.....decision?'

Momentarily, Allan's heart stopped, then it raced erratically. Tears started to roll slowly down his cheeks. 'Yes, boss,' he said softly and slowly.

'I can help you with that decision,' said James.

Allan said nothing.....and waited.

'Allan, I value you....' said James 'I value you.'

James heard Allan sobbing quietly and was filled with a mixture of emotion, knowing that his instincts had been right. There had been many times when he had been at that point, but you shouldn't give up if at all possible. Give up, if you

must, without ever giving up. Lose the battle by all means, but only as a way to win the war. Struggle on.....struggle on.....

‘Allan.....wherever you are, go home. Get a bite to eat, have a kip if you can, and come to us this evening. You got that?’

‘Yes, boss,’ he said quietly.

‘What are you going to do, Allan?’

Allan was confused. ‘Pardon, boss?’

‘What are you going to do?’

‘I don’t....understand?’

‘You’re going to go home, get a bite to eat and then join us. Ok?’

‘Yes, boss.’

‘What are you going to do, Allan?’

‘Go home, get a bite to eat and then join you, boss....’ he said quietly.

‘Good man. And when you’re around tonight I want your views on a little takeover I think we should be considering. Ok?’

‘Ok, boss.’

‘In fact, you may want to give it a little thought before tonight. It’s a Birmingham casino, a bit bigger than ours, not doing too well due to the smoking and Gordon Brown’s – may he rot in hell – extra tax; so if you could factor that into your equation, as you say, and let me know your thoughts. I’ll also email you the other data I have on it so you can see it when you get home.’

‘Ok, boss.’

‘See you later, Allan.’

‘Ok, boss.....thank you.’

Benny looked at James as he put down the phone. 'You were right?'

'I think so.'

She looked at him, and her love warmed her. This man, this child – her man, her child – would destroy anything that got in his path, but would do anything to help a soul in distress.

'*You have to help your friends,*' said James. '*Anyway, anyway at all.*'

'Even with poetry,' she said, grinning.

He made an exaggerated performance of exasperation. 'A man has to do what a man has to do...'

She took a sheet of paper out of her sleeve. *Her sleeve?* 'It's wonderful,' she said. 'I'm going to read it again.'

'Not again,' he pleaded. 'Not again.'

'Yes.'

As you lie

I watch you sleeping gently
Your deep soft breathing
Pulls at my heart
I love you so very truly
As I have done from the start

I watch as you turn over
The prying moonlight
Seeks your soft skin
I adore you as you lie there
I'm truly happy you let me in

I could have woken you

*From your slumber
For my pleasure
To satisfy
But you look so
Pure and peaceful
I'll just watch you
As you lie*

I watch for your hand to find me
Making sure that
I'm still there
And having found me you smile gently
And you wonder why I care

I watch as your senses heighten
The barking dog
Invades your sleep
You move slightly for a moment
Then go down so very deep

I watch the sun sit softly
Upon your face
It glows like gold
I could lie and watch you forever
Just stay here until we're old

*I could have woken you
From your slumber
For my pleasure
To satisfy
But you look so
Pure and peaceful*

*I'll just watch you
As you lie*

'Aaaaaaaaah,' she said softly, 'aaaaaaaah.'
'Quite.' He was beginning to think it had been a mistake.
What would she want next? An opera? A symphony? He
looked at his watch. 'Just got time to ring Biggles to see how
the bugger's doing. Christmas in Alcudia....how nice.'

Chapter 74

Just a yawn

Marie took the call on Biggles' mobile and took it to him on the deck where he was sunbathing.

'My captain,' said Biggles, and immediately sat up and saluted an imaginary superior officer, 'how are you this fine, warm, sunny day?'

'Crap, cold and dreary...'

'I was going to ring you later, H, and wish you Merry Christmas, but you've saved me the cost.'

'Tight-fisted bastard.'

Biggles grinned.

'Enjoying the yacht?'

'Immensely, and as soon as you can, you have to get here and join us, or have it yourself, whatever you wish.'

'We'd like that.'

'Why not drive down in the Ferrari at some point?'

'Maybe we will. We'll see...'

The conversation dried, and Biggles said, 'How is Benshima?'

'Good. Marie?'

It was obvious to both men that, as usual, they could chat for hours if there was actually something to chat about – business, a caper, whatever – but chit chat conversation was beyond them. H took the bull by the horns. 'Well.... just ringing to do my bit and hope you have a good holiday and rest.'

'And the compliments of the season to you, Mon Capitan,' replied Biggles and saluted again.

H smiled. 'Take care, my friend,' he said warmly.

'And you. May we prosper together...'

'Salut,' and was about to hang up as Biggles said, 'Oh, before you go, H, don't forget....'

'Don't forget what?'

'Yada'ata she hatayas mezayen et ishtecha?'

'Piss off,' said H, laughing. 'See you soon, have a good time.'

'See you, H.'

He had only had the yacht three months, and this was the first time that Biggles and his wife Marie had any decent amount of time to spend on it.

With the windfall, he had leased another plane and two helicopters for the business and had bought the boat. While his life had been spent flying planes, he had always hankered after a boat, and he had found one on the net situated in the French Riviera and sold through ABYS of Monaco. A 1996, 89 foot Leopard 27M, 600,000 Euros, and quite beautiful. The shape had caught his eye immediately. It was sleek but had an aggressive nose, and it reminded him of a fighter plane. What more could he want? Perhaps twin cannon on the nose?

The boat was officially bought by a Panamanian company that had nominee directors, and was leased by Biggles as an extension of the aircraft business. The logic being that anyone that could afford a trip in a Lear could afford a couple of weeks in the Leopard in Alcudia; a nice, quiet harbour on the Majorcan coast. That was the business logic. In reality, Biggles would struggle to get customers, primarily because he wouldn't try, and he and his wife would use it themselves. In twelve months' time, when the business had absorbed a

large cost associated with it, the accountant would decide whether they could get away with it again for one more year before the tax man decided there was something going on. A yacht, two helicopters and a plane...how absolutely walk the plank wonderful.....and all because Biggles had yawned.....

.....'What do you mean...bollocks?' H had demanded. 'It's all bollocks, Captain,' said Biggles, using one of his nautical words as he sipped a cold lager in the brasserie after the team meeting with the Israelis.

'For Christ's sake, Biggles,' said H, now quite exasperated. 'What do you mean by bollocks? What's bollocks? You mean we've done all that planning, and you think it won't work? It's a bit fucking late to say so now! Why didn't you say so earlier...? The fucking Israelis will go fucking mental if we change things now!'

'No, H, the plan's not bollocks; in fact, it's bloody good, but.....'

.....After the money and gems had fallen into the sea and Biggles had lost sight of the other copter, he called back into the hold, 'Okay.'

Big John's stand in unbelted himself, checked to make sure the real holdalls were still clipped securely to the wall and closed the cargo doors. Biggles wheeled round, increased speed to two hundred miles an hour and headed back to England. As he reached the coast, he switched on his call sign and headed to Southampton Airport. After getting clearance to land, he was met by a small vehicle that moved baggage around. They quickly loaded the holdalls, which were whisked to Senor Reyes' waiting Gulfstream jet.

Within minutes the jet was on its way to Colombia, where the dollars would be fed into Senor Reyes' vast industrial empire, and the gems would be sold.

H would have preferred not involving his father in law in the money laundering, but in reality, no matter what it says in books or films, he knew money laundering was incredibly difficult. A million or so was not easy..... but fifteen? Sure, you can get someone to do it for you, but that will take anything from fifty to seventy-five percent of the take...seventy-five percent! Or you can boogie on into a foreign country and deposit it at one of the more accommodating banks....but would you get it out again? He knew that Iran was currently helpful in such matters, but would you dare present yourself there a day or two after the Great Satan, or the Israelis, had wiped out their nuclear plant? Fucking hardly!

A few weeks later, email traffic between H and Senor Reyes would show that H was making enquiries of Senor Reyes about the possibility of him giving his assistance, once again, with the Colombian Bank, and Senor Reyes, a doting father and kindly father in law, giving them an extra wedding gift of five million.....whilst keeping the other fifteen waiting for them in his Bank in Colombia for when they needed it.

Biggles still thought it was hilarious and would meet H with...

‘Yada’ata she hatayas mezayen et ishtecha?’

.....which H now knew meant ‘Did you know the pilot is fucking your wife?’

It was what Schlomo had said at the meeting to find out if anyone spoke Hebrew. As it happened, Biggles, being his usual eccentric self, had learned Hebrew rather than Spanish

or French, and it was only a heavenly yawn that had stopped his face showing his surprise.....

And after that, he had listened to everything they said to each other. And H had hatched another, parallel plan, and even went so far as to invent Big John's appendicitis to make the balls up of the duplicate holdalls, all stuffed with paper except one which had two bricks in it, more acceptable.....

Biggles got himself three million stashed in bogus Panamanian companies that he could call on when he needed a few quid, and Big John and the others did very well indeed...

'You have to look after your friends....any way....any way at all.'

Chapter 75

Little Toby

Toby didn't celebrate Christmas. It was a shame..... Toby had never had a good Christmas, and his special friend had promised him one. This one. But it was not to be.....

His special friend had promised him that when Christmas came, they would have a Christmas tree with pretty flashing lights of all colours – blues, greens, reds, yellows – and Santa would bring him presents. Toby would have liked that; that would have been fun.

But it didn't happen.

His special friend hadn't come back. He knew he would, he was sure he would....but he hadn't. Toby couldn't understand....

You love people, and they beat you and shout at you and then you run away. Then someone does show you love, and *they* run away. That made him very sad and very confused.

What had he done wrong....again?

Toby didn't know his special friend was now a tongue less eunuch in Saudi Arabia.

Toby was only seven, but he knew he was going to die. He didn't really know what death was, and he certainly didn't know what life was, but his whole being told him that this was the end.

He had been on his own now for weeks, waiting for his special friend, and had managed on bits from the fridge, lots of water from the tap, and although he didn't realise it, when

you're a prisoner in a cellar you don't take much exercise and therefore don't use much energy. That had prolonged his life....or living death.....

He was tiny when he had arrived nearly a year ago, when he had run away from home and, within a mile, had been picked up by the nice man, but he was even tinier now.

His bones stuck through his skin, and his eyes appeared huge in the little skeletal body.

A part of him knew that where he was going now, there would be no more violence, no more terror, no more pain.

It would be quiet and peaceful.

As he watched Gerry, for the hundredth time, blow up Tom, he closed his eyes.....