

DEFRAYED

A DARK GRITTY THRILLER WITH A KILLER
TWIST

M J NEWMAN

MJ NEWMAN BOOKS

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PROLOGUE

The dead-eyed stranger matches his stare. His lips, numb. A crackling noise inside his head adding to the fuzzy sensation running from his neck, into his shoulder, reaching down his arm, ending at his fingertips. He probes the inside of his mouth with his tongue. The taste, metallic—aluminium, or at least the way he imagines it to be. He swallows it down, the dull aching at the back of his head a constant reminder of his mortality.

He closes his eyes, trying to focus as he repeats the mantra, reciting his name, age, and address. Next, he'll take some pills and go back to bed—wishing it all away like a bad dream. If only it were that simple.

He logs the details into his phone, a diary entry for when he no longer has the capacity to recall the basics. The time when it all turns to shit, his life playing out like a scene from *Memento*, the film, where the lead role, Leonard, tattoos his body to record details of his life before he loses his mind in its entirety.

He's checking the clock now; still got ninety minutes waiting time. He doesn't want to appear too eager—bordering on desperate. Better to leave it to the last minute, cut it fine. He hates waiting rooms. The smell, the décor, the people—everything. The worst thing, now he's part of it, another statistic waiting to happen.

A splinter, a fragment—call it what you will, he knows it's there, like trying to remember the finer

details through the fug of a persistent hangover. That's his life, this new reality.

Another stupid argument. Came out of nowhere, blowing in like a storm. Been a lot of that. Pressure of the job, modern life, and just about anything else he can take a stab at. If only she'd bloody listened, that would've been the end of it, but no, as always—she was right. Was a time when things like that wouldn't have mattered, not even registered, but not anymore.

You'd think after all this time, she'd know, been together long enough, but that's her all over. Maria always liked to push his buttons—provoking the reaction, craving the showdown. And this time she got her wish.

Two words, that's all it took. Forget the build-up, those two little words *I'm leaving*. No coming back from that—turn the next page.



HE'S MOVING to the car now. Time he was on his way. Can't put it off any longer. Garrett needs to know—good or bad. Then he can plan. Strategise. Put his skills into practise; it is after all what he gets paid for.

He sticks the car in reverse. His cell phone vibrates and chirps in tandem. The dual action causing annoyance. He'd delete it, if only he knew

how. He resists the temptation to pick up. A fraction later, the hands-free connection kicks in.

Garrett keeps his eye on the rear-view. 'On my way now, I'll see you there.'

The call disconnects. He spins the car round in the road, his mind turning to the task at hand. He doesn't want to be alone, not for this one. At least he knows he can rely on her, unlike his wife.

Garrett's staring at the time on the digital display, he's still early. For the moment, he's content to sit and wait, his thoughts like storm clouds whirling, gathering momentum. He can't be doing with the inquisitive looks. That can all wait. He takes a deep breath, sucking in the diesel fumes and the detritus, the pollutants of modern urban life. He tastes it, rolling it round his mouth like a connoisseur. It sticks to the back of his throat, burning when he breathes in deep.

It's all down to the final verdict. Could go either way, condemned man or sentence quashed.

His phone's beeping, a text alert—she's there. Waiting inside. No more delays—he's going in.

Stepping away from the car, he's looking at the sky, grey and ominous. He keeps mulling it over in his mind. It has to be this way. The wheels set in

motion a long time ago. No opportunity to bail on this one.

He walks towards reception, his heartbeat hammering in his chest. With each step, he's resisting the urge to turn and run. He can't deny the truth—*no better than a dead man walking*.

He realises he's been running all his life. A fugitive on the run, and now he's handing himself in, hoping for a lighter sentence.

Nothing he can do now except hope for the best and plan for the worst. It's all down to fate. The gods having their way, toying with him. Garrett passes by the smokers, slung together like limpets sucking the life out of the dog-ends. One final drag before they go in, putting off the inevitable. He considers joining them, the camaraderie of outcasts.

He decides against it, can't take the risk of pissing her off. Not today. Keep moving.

The automatic doors part with a slow swoosh, like waves before him. His eyes scan the signs, a confusing melee of red, green, and blue fonts merge into one as his eyes struggle to focus.

Now he's making his way down the long, wide corridor to the junction, the smell of fresh disinfectant hanging heavy on the air. He's ignoring the looks, not that he can see them, but he can feel them. Tunnel vision—that's the only way, blanking them out, eyes straight ahead.

The hammering sensation in his chest catches

his breath. He feels lightheaded, as if he's about to faint. Garrett reaches out with his arm to steady himself against the mint green wall. He looks down at his feet, feeling as though he's walking on a blanket of memory foam mattress's. He needs to stop, his vision blurring, everything around him turning to a Monet painting. The ground feels as if it's coming up to meet him head-on, to swallow him up whole. He can't breathe—*shit*, panic attack.

He's looking round, willing himself not to black out. Not here, not in public—he's still got some dignity. Besides, he doesn't need the attention. Garrett wants to blend in, to be anonymous—normal, same as everyone else. He's crouching, breathing deep, telling himself he needs a minute.

Come on, you can do this. He's straightening up, ignoring the looks. *Keep moving.* Garrett reaches the junction, turns right. Down the corridor to the end, he turns left, then follows the narrow corridor. One hundred yards down, he takes a right. You have now reached your destination.

She's there, awkward and out of place, pacing up and down in between the rows of waiting patients. The anxiety's written all over her face. She's chewing at her gum. Then he remembers her text, that she's back on the patches and the nicotine gum, desperate to quit. The way she looks he wouldn't bet against her smoking her way through a pack of twenty before the day is out.

They embrace as she fights back the tears, willing herself not to make a scene. It's been over a year since they last met up in person. So much to say and so little time, but nothing can change their bond, not even this.

They sit in silence—waiting. Hands clasped like lovers on a date. Garrett glances around. Storing the information away. The door's opening, there's a guy coming out, he has that look. Same one Garrett recognises in the mirror. Assigned to it, exclusive members club—invitation only.

This is it. He's next in line.

Garrett scans the room one more time. They're all the same, avoiding eye contact, trying to put off the inevitable by staring into space—pretending it's not happening.

Garrett doesn't hear his name on first call. She squeezes his hand; he looks at her, her eyes imploring him to make the first move.

Showtime. He's up and out of his seat, a little too fast as he struggles to manoeuvre his jellified legs one in front of the other towards the consultation room.

She's leading him like a toddler—taking his hand. No way out. He's got to face up to it. The door clicks shut behind him, he's trapped, caught in the snare.

He sits letting the news sink in, his eyes closed, scrunching the pupils till it hurts as stars dance across his eyelids. It's just him and the noise, like the tinnitus pitch of a TV of old drilling down to his core.

The drone of the consultant's voice has slowed like an old seventy-eight record stuck on the go-slow. 'Mr Garrett... can you hear me?'

Garrett, cold-eyed stare—catatonic.

'I need to know that you understand the diagnosis and its implications.' The consultant's words seeping through like syrup, the awakening cold and numb.

First, he notices the décor, sparse and business-like. Some might call it professional, or utilitarian. The designer favouring the Northern European, Scandinavian influence, straight out of the IKEA

catalogue, the glass-topped desk with white, cylindrical legs and matching chairs. The effect is sparse and cold, the aesthetic nondescript, creating a consultation room devoid of character. It's nothing more than an after-thought tacked on to the side of the ward—hollow and soulless.

His eyes flicker a note of recognition. Autumn rays, like bullet holes piercing the venetian blind, texturised shadows dance across bland magnolia walls.

‘I get it, just don’t understand... Why me?’

‘I’m sorry Mr Garrett... that I can’t answer, but I can say that with radio therapy life expectancy may well increase by as much as six months to a year.’ He pauses, his eyes narrow, looking for sincerity. ‘There is no definite time frame.’

‘And without it?’

The consultant, Mr Aziz, a tall, slim business-like third generation British Asian, early fifties, pauses then smiles. Aziz tries to look comforting, like a kindly old uncle. He makes a point of removing his oval-shaped, carbon fibre designer spectacles, cleaning the lenses on his flamboyant, Tweetie Pie cartoon character tie. He’s playing for time, waiting for the right words to form in his mouth.

‘Mr Garrett, you have a Stage 3a inoperable brain tumour. You may live three weeks or six months. God willing—even longer, but the headaches, the

nausea, and mood swings, they'll all worsen—that's a given.'

Helen squeezes his hand, he'd zoned out, forgetting she was there. Garrett averts his eyes from Aziz to Helen, seeing the tears well up in her hazel eyes. He knows she's scared, every fibre of his body feels her pain.

He looks straight at her, his eyes piercing her soul, Garrett forces a smile. Needs to be strong, face it straight on. Man up, he tells himself.

He squeezes her hand and nods as if to say it will be all right. But it won't, it can't be. The outcome, inevitable. It's just a matter of time.

Garrett looks from Helen back to Aziz and catches the sideways glance. That's the second time. He ignores it, pretending not to notice. Reminds himself that she's a big girl now, and she needs to fend for herself. Besides, he won't be around forever.

'What about work?'

Caught off guard a moment earlier, Aziz fumbles through his notes, 'And your profession is?'

'Corporate Analyst.'

Aziz affixes his glasses in situ and eyes Garrett, attempting to get the measure of the man sitting before him. He recalls from standing and shaking his hand when he entered the room that he is of reasonable height, around six feet tall, weighing in around twelve stone. An ordinary guy. Healthy, with

an athletic, wiry physique. In good shape for a man of thirty-nine.

Thirty years of experience have taught him outward physical appearance can deceive. It's only two weeks since Ronald Johnson's diagnosis.

In the guise of the Grim Reaper, Aziz delivered the fatal blow on the Tuesday. Johnson appeared to take the news in his stride. Unlike Garrett's diagnosis, it was treatable. Friday of the same week, Johnson was dead. Given up. No energy for the fight. Aziz didn't blame him. At least not at first. Some patients just didn't have it in them. The blame and glimmer of self-doubt—that came later. Three days later, in fact, after the initial Post Mortem found Johnson had OD'd on a mixture of paracetamol and vodka.

Then there was the note. Which led to the ongoing investigation. Aziz had been notified that he might have to appear before The Board, but at this stage in the proceedings he was free to continue working. The note, which they weren't at liberty to discuss, was the reason for the enquiry. Nice of them though, he thought, to let him continue, until such time that they decided different.

Aziz closes his eyes, pushing the recriminations aside. He buries them deep. Needs to focus on the present—Martin Garrett is a fighter.

'Mr Garrett...' He stops, meticulous in the choice of wording. 'How can I put this? You need to get your

house in order. If you choose not to have the radio-therapy treatment offered...' Aziz pauses and looks straight at Helen. Demure is the word that springs to mind. Dark hair and porcelain skin.

He continues, not daring to let his thoughts wander further. 'It's your call. There may be other aspects of your personal life,' Aziz lingers on the word personal, his eyes boring into Helen, '... that take precedent over work commitments.'

Garrett straightens himself out of the chair. Projecting his body upward in one fluid movement. No sign of weakness, not that of a condemned man. He thrusts his hand out towards Aziz. Gripping it, he thanks him for the diagnosis and candid summary.

He turns to Helen. 'Come on, let's get out of here.'

Outside, he looks up at the bright, powder blue, cloudless sky. The air is crisp. He inhales long and deep. Winter's just around the corner. He wonders if he'll be around to see it. Helen's gentle touch to the shoulder brings him back to the present.

'I know you're scared, and I've known you long enough to realise that you're too damned stubborn to admit it or ask for help, but the offer's there. This new assignment, it can wait.'

Ignoring her offer, Garrett forces a weak smile. 'Saw him checking you out back there. I should've planted one on him.'

‘More important things to deal with, don’t you think, Martin?’

She’s the only one who ever calls him by his first name. To everyone else, he’s just plain old Garrett, even to his wife, but there’s something comforting in the way she says Martin.

Lines crease his face. ‘I appreciate what you’re doing. I mean it, and thanks for today. It’s just something I need to get my head round. Work it out for myself, you know?’

Helen nods agreement, no use in flogging a dead horse. She wants to say more, but can’t find the right words. Not sure how to go about it, she blurts it out. ‘It’s not my business but... I think you should let Maria know.’

Garrett seems to consider it for a moment, before shaking his head. Decision made. ‘For what? It won’t change a thing.’

The last flicker of hope vanishes from her eyes. ‘Maybe, maybe not.’ She’s about to add some infinite wisdom as the bleep of a text message diverts her attention. She mouths a silent apology, S O R R Y, as she’s interrupted by an immediate second annoying text.

‘You’re popular,’ says Garrett, reaching into his jacket pocket to check his own messages.

Helen glances at the screen, her brow creasing. ‘Shit, I’m sorry. I need to go. Call me, I mean it. Any changes—I want to know straight away.’

'Go... Go on. We'll speak soon.' It's just a formality, and they both know it. Later, she'll be boarding a flight, off to God knows where, another foreign assignment.

They embrace; she can't look him in the eye. Fearing he'll see straight through her, it's important that she remains strong for him. He's glad of it. Can't handle an emotional outbreak. Not in broad daylight in the middle of a public car park.

She's moving away, looking back over her shoulder, waving at him like some enthusiastic lunatic. They both feel it, caught under the black cloak of death. He wonders if they'll ever meet up again. Maybe in a different life.

Garrett watches her go. Seconds later, she's out of sight, swallowed by the mass of cars.

Now it's just him, on his *Jack Jones*, against the world.

Garrett takes another look at his phone. Two missed calls. The Caller ID confirms it's the office. He presses 1 for the answerphone and hangs up halfway through after recognising Tina's nasal whine. Whatever it is, it can wait. He can guess from the tone of his PA that Williams, the Senior Account Director, is lurking nearby, dictating the message verbatim.

He knows he's in for a rollicking. A few weeks ago, he would have stressed over it. Not now, the death notice absurd and liberating in equal measure.

Williams is on the warpath and out for blood. One of Garrett's key accounts—imploded, and now the client wants compensating. The old adage shit flows downstream ringing true. Williams is looking to pin it all on Garrett. The emerging Kazakhstan market place not as stable as the original intel

suggested. Garrett told them to hold off, but Williams overruled him, deciding he knew better.

Garrett decides to phone in, but the truth can wait. First, he needs to weigh up the options. He's thirty-nine years of age. Game Over, not quite. There are things to sort before he bows out. He needs to put his house in order.

He makes the call.

Tina picks up on the fourth ring, her voice urgent, 'Where have you been? You've missed your nine-fifteen appointment, William's is doing his nut over this. Roscoe & Ballingers were expecting a presentation on the viability of the Moldova project.'

Garrett closes his eyes, letting the line go silent. Same old shit.

'I've been puking up most of the night, think I've picked up some kind of bug. Slept through the alarm this morning, never had time to cancel any of my appointments. Sorry, I should have checked the phone earlier.'

Her voice is distant, preoccupied. 'Oh... Shit. That doesn't sound good.'

'Listen, can you make my excuses and cancel the rest of my appointments for the day?'

Garrett stands in the car park, the phone pressed hard to his ear, straining to decipher the incomprehensible mix of background office noise and the whirring sound of traffic accelerating on the A road behind him.

‘Tina I said can you...’

‘I heard you...’ She pauses, completing her Instagram update, ‘Okay, but you owe me big time for this.’

‘I know, what can I say? You’re a diamond. Costa Coffee all round.’ He hangs up before she can protest.

Twelve feet out, he disengages the alarm on the arctic white Audi R8. Sweating. Despite the autumn chill, his breathing—laboured, he can’t feel his legs. Sharp pins and needles strike down his left side, causing a numbing, tingling sensation throughout. He makes it to the roadster, his arms splayed, resting on the roof. He tries to steady himself, then swallows hard, shaking his head. The voice of Aziz playing on a loop, Stage 3a.

Out of nowhere, he pukes. All his good work undone as the healthy contents of his Fruit and Fibre breakfast steam on to the tarmac.

A thirty-something, fake-tanned bottle-blonde sneers in disgust as she ushers her young daughter out of the line of sight, shielded by the top spec, midnight blue Range Rover Sport.

Garrett wipes his mouth with the back of his hand, giving her a look that says, what the hell you looking at? He guesses the wannabe has never driven it anywhere near the countryside, let alone got so much as a whiff of cow shit.

Breathing deep and slow, he gathers his

thoughts. The bitter after-taste of puke and bile forcing him to expel the remnants to the floor. His stomach twisting and turning in protest. Three weeks sober and he's desperate for a drink. He should call his sponsor. What the hell, it's not like it's going to make a difference, not now. He tells himself. One drink—just to settle the stomach.

Garrett looks to the sky, and asks himself, Jesus, can this week get any worse?

Yesterday, he awoke to a *Dear John* from his wife. Thought it was junk mail and almost binned it. Gone so far as opening the lid. Then he glanced down and saw his own name. Recognising the handwriting, he opened it and scanned the contents. At first, he thought it was a joke. Then it hit him straight between the eyes.

He read it again just to be sure, "*we're not the same people we once were, we're like polar opposites. You're always angry or pissed off at someone or something, and I get the brunt of it. Most days, you don't even see me—lost in your own world. I'm just convenient. I want more from this life, and I deserve more. I can't handle your moods or violent outbursts. I'm leaving. It's over.*"

Sure, they'd had their arguments. You don't stay married for eight and a half years without the odd *Barney* along the way. Garrett had a stressful job, come to think of it, so did Maria, but deep down he knew the crux of it, she wanted kids and he didn't, and that's where it all stemmed from.

Garrett kept turning it over in his head. There was something, a fragment, a sliver, but each time it failed to present itself fully formed.

Leaning on the roof of the car, he scanned the area, trying to get his bearings. It had been a while, but the place had changed little, save for two new skyscrapers and shopping mall come multiplex cinema.

He pulled his collar tight against the biting wind and headed out of the car park. Walking across the bridge straddling the busy A road beneath, he stopped and looked over, mesmerised by the rhythmic beat of the traffic. For a second, he let his mind wander, contemplating what it would be like to climb up over the railing and just let go, his body in freefall.

Two hoodies approach, mid to late teens. Overplaying their bad man swagger, no doubt copied from the endless Hip Hop videos they idolise. Loud and animated, they near cussing, with their arms flailing.

Garrett fights the urge to take out the nearest one with a punch to the throat, irritating little bastard that he is. A few years back, he would have done so, but those days are long gone. Today he's the picture of respectability, a white-collar professional. Instead, he fixes his dead-eyed stare. Cowed, they drop their eyes to ground level and pass without incident.

He takes the corner and turns left, greeted by the austere and uninviting Victorian building. He stands for a moment, staring, letting it goad him from the other side of the road. The place has changed little in the last twenty years, save for the gaudy, lime

green exterior paint job. It's still the same, a local hangout for the dregs, the waifs and strays. He lets the memories wash over him, a time he's long since chosen to forget.

A change of name and a lick of paint can't erase that. Its history etched deep into his soul, cemented together like bricks and mortar. He glances down at his watch, 10:27am. On any other day, he'd consider it to be a little early to take a drink, but today he'll make an exception. He waits for a break in the traffic before crossing the road, heading for the realm of the lost and dispossessed. The sanctuary of Brannigans inviting the wanderers, the loners, and those without options or anywhere else to turn. Just his kind of place.

Standing outside, he hesitates, takes a deep intake of breath, and pushes on through to the inner door.

Garrett enters the main bar and scans the room. It's empty. He makes his approach. Twenty-one years melt into the haze, as if he's never been away. He can't say he's missed the place.

This was the realm of his father, the notorious Stan Garrett. He doesn't belong, an imposter in a foreign land. Yet here he is, standing in the main bar.

No sign of life. He turns to go. He's made a mistake, a bad judgement call. No harm done. He can still get out quick.

There's a voice from the back of the room. 'She's down there.'

It catches him off guard, his eyes dart left and right, half-expecting to get beat down upon. He identifies the owner and focuses on the stabbing motion of the pork chop fingers. He turns back to the bar, tracing the implied invisible line, his eyes settling on the cellar hatch door located to the right behind the beaten, cherry red rustic bar.

'Barrel's gone dry, she'll be up in a sec.'

Garrett remains silent and nods his thanks, content to wait it out for the anonymous female to make her return. He composes himself, taking in the surroundings. Not so much shabby chic, more shabby shit. A makeover, well overdue.

'Amy... Amy,' bellows the voice.

A petite, auburn-haired twenty-something appears from below. She looks harassed. Garrett gives her the once over, not his usual type, but playful green eyes draw him in. *What the hell*, he thinks to himself. *Condemned man and all that*.

The gruff Geordie voice kicks in again, preventing Garrett's mind from wandering further. 'Customer's been waiting on you, girl. And same again—when you're ready,' he says, the sarcasm seeping into his tone as he waves his empty glass above his head.

She ignores the comment and focuses on Garrett. 'What can I get you?'

He eyes the choice of draught beers. The usual provincial favourites, Carling Black Label, Stella, Fosters. Being more of a dark ale man, his eyes drift towards the Doom Bar and Seafarers.

His stomach's still doing butterflies, he plays safe. 'Just a Guinness... A half, no wait, make it a pint.'

The barmaid smiles and sets about fulfilling the order. 'You're sure now?'

Garrett nods his agreement as he watches her work, his eyes drawn to the pert bum and firm breasts. Maybe it wouldn't turn out to be such a bad day. She takes her time creating a perfect shamrock in the white froth. Garrett notes the attention to detail. They lock eyes. She smiles, her manner flirtatious. It's fleeting, but a welcome distraction from reality.

He takes a long sip, allowing the thick, malty blackness to saturate his taste buds. *Been too long, old friend.*

The bar door swings opens as the cold, autumn chill sweeps in. Garrett notes the change to Amy's face, the smile becoming fixed and strained.

He looks over his right shoulder. Two figures stand in the doorway but make no attempt to enter. Content to stand and stare.

One has a cell phone pressed to his ear, the other can't remain still, jiggling from side to side, white earbuds planted in situ, his body jerking to some impulsive, hypnotic beat.

Garrett recognises them as the hoodies he passed earlier, maybe they've followed him looking for easy pickings. Bad mistake. He balls his fists, then relaxes, telling himself, not today.

Garrett's eyes focus on the old-timer in the corner of the room, he's turned to face the door, shifting in his seat, his jaw clenched tight.

'Out... Now,' he barks.

Garrett watches, but says nothing. It's not his fight. He knows better than to get involved in local community politics. He's only a tourist on a day pass, yet part of him feels compelled to intervene.

Both figures ignore the instruction. The owner of the cell phone whispers something to the other. The recipient sniggers. He takes two steps forward and eyes Amy, his intent clear.

Garrett's heartbeat quickens, no longer a bystander—like it or not, he's part of this. Instinct kicking in. He stands his ground, tilts his head forward and widens his stance.

He hasn't thrown a punch in a bar for over fourteen years, but something inside him can't let this pass.

The hoodie approaches. He looks through Garrett as if he's invisible. Hands reaching for his crotch, eyes locked onto Amy. He speaks. A mixture of local slang and street patois.

Incomprehensible to most, but Garrett knows

these streets. 'Don't do that. It's not a good idea. Do yourself a favour and get out of here.'

The hoodie eyes Garrett. 'What's it to you?'

'I'm offering sound advice. Free of charge. A special one-off deal, never to be repeated,' he pauses then takes a hit on his Guinness. 'Now, why don't you and your friend toddle off the same way you came in, and leave me to enjoy my drink.'

The hoodie approaches Garrett, stopping three paces short of his face. His back up follows, remaining farther back, his eyes scanning the room, alert to any potential moves.

Garrett keeps his stare fixed on the immediate threat.

Up close, he's even uglier than he thought, dark eyes sunk deep into the back of his head, hollow cheeks, and acne scars around the mouth. He's only five feet ten inches tall, skinny with it. The emaciated look of a user. It's fleeting, but Garrett catches it in his eyes, the recognition. He's made a mistake, it's written all over his face, but he can't back down, can't afford to lose face, not when he's got a witness videoing it on his phone.

Garrett assesses the situation. If the hoodie pulls a knife, he still needs to lunge forward, putting him off balance, leaving enough time to step forward and disarm him. Not that he's had much experience of late, but he's counting on muscle memory to come to his aid, if the situation requires it.

Garrett takes another swig, then lowers the pint glass, holds it waist level. A makeshift weapon, if needed. He keeps his eyes fixed on his opponent. 'Do yourself a favour, walk away.'

'Or what?'

Garrett shrugs. 'Guaranteed, your day will take a turn for the worse.'

The youth sniggers. 'Yeah? Or, maybe I'll just mess you up.'

The adrenaline flowing, Garrett's entire body feels light. He's ready, hasn't felt this pumped in years, the diagnosis giving him a new found freedom, a licence for destruction.

Garrett's patience is wearing thin. *One last try*, he tells himself. 'Take the old boy's hint. Be smart, leave—now.'

The hoodie turns to his compatriot, he's about to retort the offer.

Garrett takes his chance, throws a left, it connects with the right-hand side of the youth's jaw, and he drops to the ground. Dazed, but not out.

His wing-man retreats three paces. Slack-jawed, he's in shock. Fear in his eyes. Should he turn and run or stand his ground?

'Get out of here... Go on. I won't say it twice,' says Garrett.

The back-up flees the scene, leaving his partner splayed out on the barroom floor.

Garrett looms, grabbing him by his hoodie cord,

pulling him to his feet then dragging him back to the bar towards Amy.

‘You owe my friend an apology, so what do you say?’

Eyes glazed, or maybe they’re tears welling up. Either way, Garrett’s not letting go. He twists the youth’s arm up high into the middle of his back, applying pressure to his wrist. ‘She’s waiting.’

‘Okay... Sorry. Just get off me, man. You’re breaking my arm.’

Garrett releases his grip. Part of him wanting to go further, to keep pushing, cause a dislocation. Nothing he’d like more than to make a statement, but it’ll keep for another day.

He watches as the hoodie scuttles away, out towards the door, to the safety of the street.

Out of harm’s way, the youth is standing half in, half out of the doorway. He shouts back toward the bar. ‘You’re a dead man walking.’ He raises his right arm, his index finger and thumb forming the shape of a mock pistol. ‘Better watch your back, pal. I’ll be waiting. You won’t even see it coming.’

Ignoring the threat, Garrett turns a one-eighty to the bar, taking a sip of his Guinness. Curiosity getting the better of him. ‘Friend of yours?’

‘Not quite,’ say Amy.

Garrett turns and looks over his shoulder toward the back of the room. The old boy nods his thanks. Garrett reciprocates and turns back to Amy.

‘You get a lot of that in here?’

Suspicion aroused, Amy narrows her eyes. ‘You from the brewery or the counsel?’

‘Neither. Forget it, doesn’t matter.’

‘Look, I didn’t mean to be rude, it’s just, I’ve never seen you before, and yet here you are punching out the local scumbag, and its not even turned eleven o’clock.’

Garrett considers her response and smiles. ‘I don’t know, what can I say? I just couldn’t stand by and watch.’

He turns, taking another look at the old-timer. ‘He seems okay now.’

The old boy returns Garrett’s quizzical look.

Amy interrupts Garrett’s thought process. ‘He doesn’t like undesirables coming in off the street,’ she says, raising her eyebrows, the playful emphasis aimed at Garrett.

‘Better watch myself then.’

‘Exactly.’

The old boy grumbles something incoherent, interrupting their banter, but clear enough to demand his drink. ‘What about that drink of mine?’

‘Best keep his Lordship happy.’ She looks beyond Garrett, ‘It’s coming, hold on a minute, you old gadgie.’

She reaches for a fresh pint glass. Garrett’s eyes tracking every movement as she pours a fresh pint of mild bitter.

Amy leans over the bar towards him. ‘Grouchy old sod he is, would you do the honours?’ Before he can answer, she slides the drink towards him.

They lock eyes, Garrett pauses. How can he refuse? ‘Sure, why not?’

He makes his way over to the old-boy. He’s aged around sixty, give or take a few years. A lived-in pockmarked, crumpled face—wears it like an old leather boot. Garrett’s eye drawn to the faded scar running the length of his face. Not wanting to stare or cause offence, he places the pint down in front of the old-timer.

‘There you go, chap.’

‘Thanks. This weather... Plays havoc with my asthma. Everything’s an effort,’ he says, taking a puff on his blue inhaler.

Garrett nods his agreement.

He turns to make his way back to the bar. The old-timer reaches out, grabbing at his wrist with surprising strength.

Garrett frowns. ‘Something I can help you with?’

The old-boy stares back, his eyes black as coal. He smiles, revealing a gold tooth and three black cavities, his teeth long forgotten.

‘Sit with me, lad.’ It’s more of an instruction than a request. Garrett looks around. The cute barmaid’s done a vanishing act.

‘Okay, I’ll grab my drink.’ He makes his way back to the bar.

Amy reappears from the adjoining room. Garrett points towards the Napoleon brandy. 'Better add one of those to the bill. Think of it as a medicinal supplement.'

She smiles. 'You two getting on then?'

Garrett looks over his shoulder, direct to the old timer. 'Yeah, he's alright. Bark's worse than his bite.'

Amy pours the shot, makes it a double. 'There you go. That should give him a glow for the afternoon. Might even quiet him down a bit.'

Garrett reaches for his wallet. Begins pulling out a twenty.

Amy reaches out, places her hand on top of his. 'No need. This one's on the house. Just don't tell the gaffer,' she says, looking towards the old-boy. 'Our secret, yeah?'

Garrett nods agreement, then returns to the

corner table and places the drinks down, taking a seat next to the old-timer.

‘Not there. Want to get a good look at you,’ he points towards the stool on the other side of the table, urging Garrett to move.

Garrett smiles, then nods, bemused by the request, but goes with it.

The old-timer’s eyes cast downward towards the brandy. ‘That for me?’

‘Thought you might like it, help with your chest. It’s Napoleon.’

‘Prefer the Martel, but I suppose it’ll do for now.’

Garrett raises his stout, knocking it against the old-timer’s drink. ‘Your health.’

He takes a hit of Guinness, thirst taking him beyond the halfway point.

The old-boy nods with an approving smile, his black eyes burning into Garrett.

‘Something on your mind? Whatever it is—looks like thirsty work.’

Draining the rest of his pint, Garrett places the empty glass back on the table. ‘Just taking stock.’

‘That was quite a thing you did back there.’

‘Not my usual way of an introduction I’ll admit but... Doesn’t matter, it’s done with now.’

‘Let’s hope so.’

‘You think they’ll be back?’

‘Count on it, regular as clockwork these days, but don’t worry—it’s not you they’re interested in, and I

don't think that skinny streak of piss is going to come looking for you any-time soon either. He'll be licking his wounds. That's quite a left hook you've got there.'

'Lucky punch.'

The old-timer nods but says nothing.

Garrett's lost in thought as he continues to stare at the empty glass.

He notices the old-boy's ACAB dots tattooed on the knuckles of his right fist. Standard prison tattoo, *All Coppers Are Bastards*. A badge of honour for those who graduated from borstal in the sixties and seventies.

The old-boy studies Garrett. Intrigued. He can't place him, but there's something familiar about the stranger.

He breaks the silence. 'Another?'

Garrett acknowledges the offer with a tilt of the head.

The old-timer signals to the barmaid for the same again. He clears his throat. 'If we're to sit here and drink on, we best get the introductions out of the way. Alan Tweedy,' he says, holding out his hand.

Garrett takes the hand, gripping it with confidence. 'Martin.'

'You don't look like a Martin.'

'Everyone calls me Garrett, it's my surname, kind of stuck with me throughout school. Whatever your comfortable with, it's fine.'

Tweedy's eyes are distant, a note of recognition

transporting him back in time. His brow furrowed by thick lines, ‘Garrett... I used to know a guy by the name of Stan Garrett, a while back now. A regular in here he was. A relative of yours perhaps?’

Time for the show and tell. ‘Sounds like that could’ve been my father, more in name than anything else. He used to come in here. Didn’t see that much of him. Spent most of his time in and out of prison when I was a kid.’

‘Stan Garrett, Jesus, that’s a name that takes me back. Now it makes sense, that left hook of yours, inherited from Garrett senior.’

Garrett shifts his gaze around the room, the memories flooding back. ‘Way I remember it, this was his second home.’

Amy arrives with fresh drinks, and sets them down on the table.

Garrett takes a swift gulp of Guinness, furnishing him with a white, frothy moustache. He dabs at his top lip with finger and thumb. ‘So, you knew the old man then?’

Tweedy takes a long pull on his Banks’s Mild, letting the news sink in. ‘Everyone knew Stan Garrett; he was that kind of guy. A real presence, least I guess that’s what you’d call it. People respected him. Never had to buy his own drink—put it that way. Things were different back then, not like it is now.’

'You referring to those two muppets from earlier?'

'No, they're foot soldiers—cannon fodder. Be doing a spell on the inside by this time next year. Why the interest?'

'No reason... Seemed odd. Like they were expecting something.'

'Nothing for you to concern yourself with.' Tweedy changes the subject. 'So what brings you here, a nostalgia tour, is it?'

'No, just visiting an old friend at the hospital.'

'St Vincent's?'

'That's the one.'

'One of those fancy new super hospitals. I remember the local press made a huge thing about it when it opened. Won awards for its architecture. Everything hi-tech, shiny, and modern. Wouldn't look out of place in the middle of London. Never had cause to go in there, thank God.'

'Yeah, I read about that too,' says Garrett.

Tweedy takes another sip of ale. 'So, this friend of yours, they're okay?'

'Early days.'

Tweedy searches for his cigarettes. Taking one out, he lights it with a gold-plated Zippo lighter. He offers one to Garrett, he declines. Smoke drifts up, Tweedy's eyes narrow. 'Why d'you, really come here today, you the Old Bill or something?'

Garrett raises his glass—slow and deliberate,

taking another drink. ‘Yeah, National Crime Agency, had you under surveillance for that truckload of iPhones you’ve been punting to the regulars.’

Tweedy chuckles, his laugh turning to a hacking cough. ‘Proper comedian you, eh?’

‘Believe me, after the morning I’ve had, I needed a drink. That’s how I ended up here. God’s honest truth, I’d forgotten all about this place until I rounded the corner. The name threw me though. The last time I was in here...’ He gathers his thoughts, trying to recall the year. ‘Must’ve been ninety-nine or early two thousand. This was the...’

Tweedy chips in, ‘Mercers Arms.’

‘That’s it. The Mercers...’ Garrett’s words tail off as the memories wash over. ‘The bloody Mercers Arms, Jesus—takes me back. How d’you go from that to Brannigans?’

Tweedy chuckles to himself, taking a drag on his cigarette. ‘You don’t remember? Back in the nineties, this place had a terrible reputation. Attracted unnecessary attention from the police. Fights kicked off a little too regular. Let’s just say too many undesirables under one roof,’ he says with a wink. ‘Spit and sawdust, a man’s pub. Anyway, the place needed rebranding. Even more so after that nasty incident with the young gal. Shitty business, all of that.’

Garrett takes a hit on his drink. ‘What was that then?’

‘Come on, you must know? You from round

these parts back then. It was big news. The underage girl, the one that snuck out from her folks' house, fancied a night out with her mates, except they didn't turn up.'

Garrett shakes his head, unable to recall the incident.

Tweedy continues, 'the sixteen-year-old, come on — you remember?'

'No, can't say that I do.'

Tweedy's face turns to a frown. 'The two guys plying her with drinks.'

Garrett remains impassive. 'Doesn't ring any bells.'

Tweedy shuffles in his seat, readying himself to take on the role of storyteller. 'Okay, these boys—right, they reckon they're onto a good thing. The girl, young and naïve, dolled up to the nines. You know the sort, right?'

Garrett nods agreement, letting Tweedy recount the tale.

'She looks the part, bumps in all the right places, if you catch my drift? They feed her a mixture of Alco-pops and shots. Whisky, tequila, you name it, they had it. By now the girl's well on her way to oblivion. Her guard's down. Relaxed, she's pissed, a bit giggly. You know what I mean?'

Tweedy stops to take another pull on his pint. 'These boys are like hyenas they see their opportunity and drop a pill into her drink. Not long after,

they make out like they're going outside to get some air, but they drag her into the Gents loo.'

Tweedy locks eyes with Garrett, checking he's up to speed.

'Now these boys have done their homework, they know they're on CCTV, so they keep their heads low, impossible to get a positive ID. Back then, quality of CCTV imagery was crap. Not much better these days, but then it was total shite. Anyway, out of sight of the corridor camera they've got a free rein. Once in there, she never stood a chance. Bastards dragged her into a cubicle and took turns with her while the other stood guard. When they'd both had their way, they left her comatosed on the floor. Arrogant bastards waltzed out of there without a care in the world.'

'Who found her?' says Garrett.

'Maggie, head barmaid. She was on her break., heading out back for a ciggie. Walked past the two of them, sniggering. Caught her interest, stuck her head round the door, found the poor girl lying in a pool of piss. Not content with assault and rape, the bastards had the audacity to degrade her like that. I mean, what kind of sick depraved...?' Tweedy's voice tails off.

He takes another sip, nearing the bottom of the glass. 'Animals.'

Garrett inhales deep, rubbing at his chest like he's got trapped wind. 'What happened next?'

‘Maggie raises the alarm, but the boys are long gone. Hit her hard, finding the girl in that state. Couldn’t even give a description, at least not anything worthwhile. Meantime the Old Bill are all over this place, dabbing this, and swabbing that, analysing the CCTV footage, questioning me and the staff. Went on for weeks. Almost got us closed down for good.’

‘So what happened?’

‘Never caught, well, not by the police anyhow. Local knowledge goes a long way. Stan Garrett, your old man, he knew that.’

Tweedy swallows another gulp of beer, then changes the subject. ‘Let’s just say, some things are best left in the past.’ Garrett glances at his watch. Twelve forty-five. Ninety minutes in, he’s starting to feel the alcoholic glow.

Tweedy watches. ‘You needing to be somewhere?’

‘Should have been somewhere first thing.’

‘No sense in sweating it now then. Another?’ intones Tweedy.

Garrett looks at his watch again. ‘Yeah, why not?’

‘Good man.’ Tweedy hoists the empties aloft, beckoning Amy to pour the refills.

Garrett turns and faces the bar. She’s cute. More so than he remembered when he first entered the bar. Confident. Worldly beyond her years. He can’t

decide if that's good or bad. That smile and those green eyes, a knockout combination.

'What's her story?' asks Garrett, trying to sound casual as he looks over towards the bar.

'Ah, wee Amy... my niece. Told my brother I'd look out for her. Did my best, treated her like my own.'

Garrett chokes on his beer. 'Your niece?'

'Aye, my niece... Why?' Tweedy's tone like iced steel.

'No reason... I just thought she...' Garrett lets the words tail off, not wanting to cause offence.

'My woman,' Tweedy cackles. 'Oh aye, state of me,' he says, taking another hit of Ventolin. 'My days as a Lothario are long gone, more's the pity.'

Amy arrives with the drinks, setting them down on the table before making her way back to the bar, Garrett's hungry eyes following her every step.

Tweedy takes another sip. Instructs Garrett to do the same. 'Drink up, man.' His tastebuds tingling, anticipating more drink. 'This is no time for light-weights.'

Garrett complies and drains his pint.

'You ever heard the name Cullen?' asks Tweedy.

'No, can't say that I have.'

'He's a piece of work.' Tweedy eyes the bar towards Amy.

'Grade A total shitbag.'

‘And the hoodies, they part of his crew?’ says Garrett.

‘Get daily visits now, sometimes twice. He’s just trying it on. Take more than a couple of loudmouth pill heads to scare me into selling up. Wouldn’t have happened in Stan Garrett’s day, I know that much. He’d have nailed their hands to the bar for even daring to poke their heads through the door.’

‘Yeah, I heard those stories too, thought they were more like urban legends.’

‘No, trust me, they were true. You didn’t cross Stan if you knew what was good for you. How d’you think I got this?’ Tweedy says, pointing to the facial scar running the length of his face.

‘He did that?’

‘Card game. Guess I should have let him win. I never made the same mistake twice, mind.’

The conversation halts, Tweedy’s eyes remain fixed on Garrett as he takes two gulps of stout. He lights another cigarette, contemplating the unfolding scenario.

Garrett yawns, rubbing at his eyes. ‘Time I was going.’ He stands, swaying. Gravity getting the upper hand. Like a matelot yet to find sea legs, he plonks back down in his seat.

Tweedy chuckles, amused at the onset of Garrett’s intoxication. ‘You’re in no fit state to go anywhere, let alone drive.’

He tries to stand again. His legs refusing to

comply, Garrett falls to the floor. He takes the table and its contents with him, smacking his head off the metal table leg, and tearing a jagged gash to the side of his left eye.

The room's spinning, warm, fresh blood running into his eye, Garrett struggles to focus. He tries to speak, but his lips feel like melting rubber on a hot day, making it impossible to form the words. Browns and greys meld into one. He can hear voices. Imagined or real, he can't be sure. The world turning black.

Approaching the car, he could see the windscreen daubed with yellow parking tickets. Garrett checked his watch. He'd outstayed his welcome by eight hours. *Great.* He snatched the ticket, read the fine, then peeled off the remaining adhesive plastic wallets.

He had a choice; he could pay now or later. The prospect of settling in cold, hard cash, immediate and cheaper—offering a lesser tariff of sixty pounds. Garrett scanned the mass of parked cars, trying to locate the attendant's hut—confident he could explain and negotiate—because of his extenuating circumstance.

His eyes fixed on the weather-beaten, seven by five yellow cabin, the interior light illuminating a window fogged with condensation. He strode towards it, covering the short fifty-yard stretch in less

than a minute. Garrett had a nasty taste in his mouth—sour and bitter. A remnant of the alcohol he'd consumed, or maybe it was the injustice he felt for the penalty imposed upon him. His gut twisted and lurched, the content vying for pole position, but he held it in.

Garrett reached the hut, fixed penalty in hand. To the left, he saw the parking meter—rendered obsolete. Smothered by a tattered, orange hood, the words OUT OF ORDER stencilled across it. Even if he had the cash, he still couldn't pay. He turned back to the cabin, the tinny sound of a portable radio pumping out an excited voice. A race commentator—dog racing.

He rapped his knuckles against the door and waited.

The race neared climax as the commentator's excitement peaked. Garrett banged against the door for a second time, this time with his size ten.

The cabin vibrated as movement from inside showed its occupant was mobile. Garrett stepped back in the nick of time as the door swung open. An irritated attendant stood towering over him, six feet three inches tall, and four stone overweight, his stomach hanging over his trousers. Unkempt, wearing a food-stained, light blue shirt, flapping in the wind. He was on the wrong side of sixty—waiting for death or retirement, whichever rushed up to greet him first. By the look of him, the grim

reaper was odds-on favourite. He was munching on the last remnants of a hot dog roll, the tangy aroma of onion making Garrett's nose twitch.

He swallowed down the last bite, licking the grease from his fingers. 'Yeah?'

Garrett held the fixed penalty notice in his right hand. 'I think there's been some kind of mistake.'

The attendant's podgy paw swiped the ticket, wiping his mouth with the back of his other hand. He read it aloud, muttering to himself. 'Looks okay to me. Says here, failure to display a valid ticket. Seems straightforward enough.' He thrust the penalty back towards Garrett and went to close the door.

Garrett stepped forward. 'Look, let me explain—I had an appoint...'

The attendant cut in, 'this expired eight hours ago.'

'Come on, give me a break, It's been a crappy day, I lost track of time.' Garrett pointed towards the obsolete parking meter. 'I'd pay now, but your machine's on the blink.'

The overweight hulk stood staring at Garrett, eager to get back to his racing and out of the biting cold. 'It's not my machine, I just check the tickets, mate.'

Garrett let out a sigh, 'I know that and...'

The attendant puffed his cheeks out, blowing air from his mouth. 'The contact details are on the back,

put it in writing, state your case to them. I'm doing my job, mate. That's all.'

Garrett held his hands up to placate the attendant. 'Okay, I get it, hold on a moment.' He fumbled through his jacket, searching for his wallet. 'Let's call it twenty quid, treat yourself.'

Must be here somewhere.

'Twenty lousy quid. That's the best you can do? It's more than my job's worth, pal. Do yourself a favour, pay the fine and piss off. Not like you can't afford it.' he said, looking over towards the Audi R8 roadster.

Garrett felt the irritation rise from the pit of his stomach, like an annoying itch he couldn't reach.

'Now, if you don't mind, I'd like to get back to my racing, what's left of it, anyhow.'

Garrett balled his fists, then stretched his palms wide. Seemed like people were hell-bent on getting in his face today. 'You've at least got a supervisor I can talk to, right?'

The attendant sighed, raising his eyes to the sky. 'Christ sake,' he muttered under his breath. 'No, they got rid of him at the end of last year, latest round of cutbacks.'

Garrett stood his ground. 'So that's it?'

The attendant locked eyes with Garrett, his irritation unmasked. 'You're not letting this one go, are you, mate?' His mouth twisted into a wry, self-satisfied smile. 'The car park's run by a private company.'

They set the tariffs, not the Trust. Pay now or later, it's up to you.' He pulled back to step inside the cabin.

Garrett took another step forward, trying hard to contain his temper. 'Machine's out of order, so I don't have a choice, do I?'

'Engineer's on his way. Anyway, your ticket got issued when the machine was working, so it's valid.'

The attendant took another step backwards. Reaching for the door handle, he pulled it towards him.

Garrett grabbed the edge, wrenching the handle from his grip. 'I don't think you're listening.'

The startled attendant narrowed his eyes. 'You don't want to do that.'

Garrett lunged, clamping his thumb and index finger around the attendant's throat, shoving him backwards into the cabin, out of sight, forcing him to slump down into his seat. 'Let's try again.'

The attendant tried to get up from his chair; gravity and the sight of Garrett fixing him in place.

'All I want to do is pay this bastard fine, but you're telling me I can't even do that, because your stupid crappy machine isn't working.'

The attendant nursed his bruised throat with his right hand, trying to keep the panic from his voice, 'I don't make the rules.'

Garrett loomed, spittle flying from the side of his mouth. 'Not my problem.'

He'd only taken the job part-time to get him out of the house twice a week. He didn't need this kind of stress or aggravation. It wasn't good for his heart. He protested his innocence. 'It's not my fault, I do what I'm told.'

'Well, guess what...,' Garrett spied his name badge. 'Bill. I'm promoting you. Congratulations, you're now the chief decision maker.'

Despite the chill, the attendant was sweating. Garrett was far from done.

'What's wrong, Bill, you don't look so good. Can't handle the pressure?'

The attendant still rubbing at his throat, his eyes wide with fear, watching for any sudden move. 'Look, I don't want any trouble. I'm just an employee of the Trust, doing my job, that's all.'

Chatter from a young couple passing by close to the hut distracted Garrett. He turned, watching as they neared the hospital reception. 'Yeah, well that's...'

Garrett never got to finish the sentence, as the transistor radio smashed into the side of his head. His knees buckled, the attendant's full weight slamming into him.

Down, the ringing in his ears excruciating, his vision blurred.

Bill laid into him, his steel toe capped boots finding purchase along Garrett's torso. 'You come in here thinking you can dish it out...'

Garrett tried as best he could to protect himself from the worst of it, he had to even the odds and quick. He used his arms and shoulders to deflect the worst of the blows, then threw his weight into the attendant's squidgy gut.

Feeling him crumple, Garrett projected himself upward, catching the attendant's chin with the top of his forehead. He followed it with a shove. The attendant stumbled, losing his footing on the loose carpet tile. Garrett watched in slow motion as he continued to fall backwards, the back of his skull connecting with the corner of the metal filing cabinet, before dropping to the floor unconscious.

Shit. Garrett stood for a moment, his mind racing, unsure what to do for the best. He leant forward, his hand reaching for the attendant's neck. *Thank Christ.* The pulse was there, albeit, weak.

Garrett scurried across the car park back to his own vehicle. He got in and slammed the door. Checked left and right for potential witnesses, fortunate that the car park was all but empty. He caught his reflection in the rear-view mirror. The cut to his eye reopened, *fantastic.*

He looked down at his hands, the adrenaline surging, his left knuckles red and swollen from his earlier altercation in the pub. Garrett took a moment, then fired the ignition.

The flashing blues on the radiator grill reflected in his rear-view mirror. Garrett cursed under his breath, ‘you arsehole.’ He’d taken that last corner a fraction too fast, piquing the interest of the unmarked Volkswagen Golf hiding up on the elevated slip road. The fading light, his camouflage, a predator waiting to pounce.

Garrett eased off the accelerator and dabbed the brakes, keeping his eyes fixed on the Golf. Panic surged as he flitted to the dashboard clock. Calculating at least six hours had elapsed since his last drink, he told himself to relax, confident the alcohol count per milligrams of breath to his blood count would render a negative reading. He exhaled just as the stabbing pain struck his chest. *What if it was about the pub, or the parking attendant?*

Locating a suitable pulling in spot, he flicked the

indicator, slowing to a moderate twenty-five mph in the forty zone. Coming to a halt, he switched off the engine and stuck two Wrigley's gum sticks into his mouth, watching as the hypnotic blue lights danced left to right across the VW Golf's grill.

The driver from the unmarked police car waited a few seconds—checking the Audi R8's details with traffic control before alighting the vehicle. The yellow fluorescent hi-vis jacket approached, seeming to float in the darkness. Garrett knew the drill well enough, this his third stop inside a year. He opened the window and waited. Conscious of the swelling to his left hand, he hid it from view.

'Can I help you, Officer?'

No response—silence. The traffic cop playing the mind game before speaking.

'This your vehicle, sir?'

'It is, yes.'

'Would you mind stepping out and accompanying me to the patrol car?' It was a flat, routine statement rather than an invitation.

Garrett knew if he declined, he'd get dragged from the car and cuffed at the roadside. He told himself to remain calm, he needed to control the situation, couldn't afford to let paranoia get the better of him.

'Is something wrong?'

The officer opened the door to the R8. 'Just take a seat in the back of the patrol vehicle, sir.'

Garrett complied. Releasing his seatbelt and removing the keys from the ignition, he extricated himself from the Audi. The officer took a step back, allowing Garrett free access, but remaining close enough in case his prey bolted. He followed Garrett to the car, then opened the rear door for him.

The patrol officer standing close, almost intimate, as he climbed into the rear seat.

‘Mind your head there, sir.’

The officer made his way to the front of the car and positioned himself in the driver’s seat, engaging the automatic locking system as he sat down.

Garrett scanned the interior. Masculine, black leather trim, reminded him of a grown-up boy racers car. All that was missing, a rear-mounted boom box. His eyes drawn to the comms unit, a Mecca of flashing lights. Best guess—he was sitting in the back of a Golf GTI. A fast response vehicle, more akin to lurking by motorway slip roads waiting for unsuspecting speedsters. Not the standard unmarked patrol car for country back roads. It was still no match for his Audi, if he had the mind for it.

The officer reached over to the front passenger seat, retrieving a black lever arch file containing the standard-issue, paper work.

‘Did I do something wrong?’ said Garrett.

The officer looked up from the file, his smile thin-lipped. ‘Are you the registered owner of the vehicle, sir?’

‘I am.’

‘And do you have your driver’s license with you, or any other form of identification?’

Garrett fumbled through his pockets—still no wallet. He must have left it back at the pub. He prayed to God it hadn’t fallen out anywhere close to the parking attendant’s cabin. The last thing he needed right now was evidence to place him at the scene.

‘Sorry, don’t seem to have it on me.’

The officer nodded, before scribbling down some notes and running through the obligatory standard questions regarding full name, place of abode, and date of birth, trying to establish whether Garrett was in fact the bona fide owner of the roadster.

‘This is a forty mph zone, sir. How fast would you say your vehicle was travelling?’

‘I couldn’t say—I was just trying to get home. It’s been a shitty day.’

The officer narrowed his eyes. ‘Regardless, we still have to abide by the legal road limits.’

‘I understand that. I suppose I was doing forty-four, maybe forty-five, or you wouldn’t have bothered to pull me over.’

‘Let’s take a look at the video footage, shall we? You can see for yourself.’

The officer hit the replay button; Garrett watched a tiny, seven-inch screen, the Audi’s

number plate visible, his speed recorded at the bottom of the monitor. The Golf tailed him for more than a quarter of a mile, his average mph clocking forty-eight, accelerating into the hairpin bend, the Golf's camera recording his speed at fifty-two mph.

He'd been careless, caught on camera. Protesting his innocence or citing extenuating circumstances was pointless, he just needed to take his medicine and accept the fixed penalty.

The aching in his left fist throbbed; he placed his right hand over it, massaging the pain. It was all bullshit, but he had to go through the motions.

The officer noticed Garrett's swollen hand. 'Had an accident, sir?'

'No, it's nothing, I trapped it under the bonnet when I was checking the oil.'

'That's a nasty looking gash to the eye you've got there, been in the wars, by the look of it.'

Garrett had forgotten all about his eye, more concerned with his hand.

'I took a tumble, that's all. Clumsy of me, I know, tripped over my own feet. I've never been very good with coordination or balance.'

The patrol officer nodded, a sceptical look upon his face, before continuing with his notes. 'Have you been drinking tonight, sir?'

Garrett answered a little too fast. 'No. I mean yes, this afternoon, earlier than that. More late morning

—I had a couple. I felt unwell, so I slept it off. Officer this...’

‘And where was this?’

Garrett sighed, before reciting the details to the best of his knowledge.

The PC listened, eyebrow raised, as he noted the details. ‘Was that the effects of the drink or the illness that you slept off?’

Garrett read the officer’s name badge, trying to engage the human empathy approach. ‘Look, PC Reid, It’s been one hell of a day, I received some bad news earlier today, life-changing stuff, got told that I have...’

Reid was already preparing the roadside breathalyser. ‘If you wouldn’t mind blowing into this, sir, until I say stop.’ He passed the mouthpiece to Garrett, ‘take a deep breath.’

It was useless, no point in resisting the inevitable. Garrett took hold of the breathalyser tube and pumped his lungs, expelling as much air as he could in one blast. *Que sera sera.*

He watched the lights blinking as the digital display calculated the reading. The light stayed green. Rendering Garrett’s result below the safe, legal driving limit, much to the annoyance of the officer.

The comms unit burst into life, the voice confirming Garrett as the registered owner of the Audi R8. His story checked out, but the officer

remained unconvinced. Without reasonable cause to detain him any longer, Reid issued the speeding ticket, instructing Garrett that he could either pay the fine or enrol upon the next drivers' awareness course, to avoid additional points to his license.

PC Reid disengaged the locking mechanism and held the door open as Garrett alighted the Volkswagen before making his way back to the roadster.

It was a close call. All he wanted to do was to get home, sleep, and forget all about it.

Reid sat in the Golf, drumming his fingers against the steering wheel. Watching the orange glow of the indicator as the R8 pulled off. Something wasn't right. Garrett's story checked out, but Reid's gut instinct told him different. Whatever it was, he couldn't put his finger on it, but he knew Garrett was hiding something.

The officer waited, counting up to three before firing the ignition. Garrett had a thirty-second lead, enough time to let him think he was home and dry. Reid shifted through the gears, speeding into the darkness. His destination, 9 Chantry Close.

Garrett pulled up at the edge of the Close, letting the engine idle as he peered back towards the house. Nothing... Only darkness, his thoughts caught somewhere in the void between the old and the new.

What did he expect? The *Dear John* had said it all. But part of him would have welcomed her return. Reality brought the realisation that she'd fled to the arms of a faceless stranger. More likely his bed. Images of sweaty, heaving bodies entwined together invaded his thoughts. Gritting his teeth, he forced them out. Exhaustion and resignation in firm control. His wife's indiscretions would have to wait for now.

As he entered the house, he flicked the light switch to the ON position. To the untrained eye, all would appear normal, but Garrett knew different.

Her address book, the one she always left on the hallway table with her keys, next to the triptych of miniature cacti plants, conspicuous by its absence.

Shivering, he checked the heating thermostat; the LCD flickering half digits. Another job he'd failed to get round to. He tapped it with his finger and flipped the slider up and down, trying to engage the manual override—nothing. Resigned to the fact that he'd need to call an engineer, Garrett made his way through to the open-plan kitchen diner, Maria's absence adding to the chill.

He opened the fridge, the depleted stock offering nothing more enticing than a pasta-based, microwave-ready meal. He grabbed the solitary bottle of beer from the middle shelf and read the label, Sol. A crappy Mexican lager, the kind she liked to drink.

In for a penny. Besides, far as he could remember, there was nothing else in the house. Garrett cracked the lid against the faux granite worktop and took one long swig. Gassier than he recalled, as he let out a loud burp, the kind that pissed off Maria if he ever dared to do so in her presence. Not that he needed to worry about that now. Social niceties put on hold—his house, his rules.

Garrett moved through to the smaller lounge area, switched on the TV, and stood with the remote in hand, comatosed as he surfed through the

hundred-plus channels, wondering why he continued to pay the subscription.

He made a mental note to remedy that. First thing in the morning, he'd phone and cancel. Didn't need a dish any longer. Another of Maria's insinuations they sign up to the latest bullshit deal, tying them into another eighteen-month contract. Come to think of it, why the hell did anyone need a dish? He could stream any choice of programme he wanted. It was all there, available at the touch of a button. Better still; if he went to the right sites, he could get it all for free.

With his dead man's bones weighing heavy, Garrett slumped down into the leather armchair and kicked off his boots. He took another hit on the beer. *Jesus, who drinks this shit?*

He placed the bottle down and rubbed at his eyes, tiredness and exhaustion causing them to burn. The throbbing to his left hand forced him to stop. Garrett inspected the damage, prodding at it with his right. The swelling plateaued, beginning to subside with the help of two paracetamol.

His mind drifted back to the parking attendant. The guy was an arsehole, but he'd left him for dead. Now all he could do was hope it was nothing more serious than a concussion. He felt bad, but the guy had pushed his buttons. He'd snapped. Nothing more to it than that.

Garrett forced himself up and made his way back

into the kitchen area. Pouring the remnants of Sol down the white enamel sink. Then it hit him. He reached down to the L-shaped base unit and stuck his arm around the corner, feeling his way past the array of pots and pans.

Result, it was still there; he pulled it out by the neck. A bottle of Australian Shiraz. He poured himself a glass, raised it to his mouth, taking the time to let the delicate, sweet and spicy aroma fill his nostrils. He took a mouthful; the tang bringing his taste buds back to life.

It tasted good, too good. He replaced the cap and returned the bottle to its hiding place. Out of sight, out of mind. If only it were that simple.

After a day of relapses, Garrett realised he needed to quit while he was ahead. He'd fallen off the wagon, but shit, if his diagnosis wasn't a good enough excuse, then he didn't know what was. He made a mental note to phone Derek, his sponsor, first thing in the morning.

Shiraz in hand, Garrett walked back through to the TV lounge. He plonked himself down onto the sofa, his cell phone kicked into life, playing that bloody annoying electronic synthesiser ring tone his wife had loaded.

He added it to the list of changes to make. Looking at the screen, he didn't recognise the caller ID and left it unanswered—most probable cause, an automated voice telling him how he could claim shit

loads of money for a supposed injury he'd never had.

He sank back into the cool, leather fabric. Closing his eyes, he exhaled long and hard, attempting to exorcise the demons—but still they dug their claws in deeper. Garrett blinked away the heavy eyelids, telling himself sleep was close.

It seemed like seconds, perhaps it was longer.

The double bleep of the phone bought him back to the present. He scanned the content, Amy, the barmaid from Brannigans. She'd found his wallet and wanted to return it. Garrett looked at his watch, 10:47pm. Considered his options; he needed his wallet to produce his license and documents at the police station. Being realistic; had no plans to make the return journey to Al Tweedy's place any-time soon.

Garrett texted back.

The drive took Amy a little over forty minutes. The SatNav snaking through the twisted throng of back roads.

She arrived wearing a tight, little black skirt, a matching lacy top, and four-inch heels. Just the right amount of appeal. Sirenesque rather than slutty.

Garrett opened the door, a smile fixed to his face. She guessed his enthusiasm was down to her returning his wallet, but hoped there was more to it than her Good Samaritan routine.

An awkward moment passed. Garrett hesitated, not knowing whether he should give her a peck on the cheek as a greeting or a formal handshake. He did neither, safer to opt for an invitation to enter the household.

‘Amy, thanks for coming over.’

She handed him his wallet as she stepped in from the cold, observing the décor. 'Nice place.'

'Thanks,' he replied, not knowing how much longer he'd be able to hang on to it for.

They made their way through to the open plan living area, Amy taking in the reclaimed mango wood furniture, thinking she liked his taste, acknowledging the nagging thought it was down to a woman's touch.

'Would you like a drink? I know I've got a bottle of Shiraz kicking about somewhere?' said Garrett.

'Shiraz is fine.'

Garrett ushered her to sit down on the two-seater sofa, while making busy with the drink. He released the cap and noticed the slight tremor. He pumped his fist, telling himself to get a grip, then he held the wine glass out towards Amy, conscious to control the tremble in his hand.

'You're not having one?' she said.

'No, the head's still a little woozy,' he said, placing his hand to the ridge of his eye, 'thought I'd lay off it for a while.'

'What happened to your hand?'

'Oh, it's nothing. Looks worse than it is. Started swelling on the way home. It'll go down in two or three days,' said Garrett.

'And there was me thinking my day was bad enough,' said Amy.

'It happens...' He paused for a moment, his mind

wandering. 'Thanks for bringing the wallet, I mean... Be lost without it.'

She held his gaze, 'least I could do after today.'

Garrett rubbed at his hand. 'Yeah, about that. Listen, it's not my usual thing, going around scapping with young lads, but I couldn't let it pass. Just his whole demeanour, the way they both waltzed in like they owned the place.'

Amy raised her hand to gash above his eye. 'It's weeping.'

'Don't worry, it's a scratch, I've had worse.'

'Here, let me look at that,' said Amy, moving closer.

'It's fine, honest,' said Garrett.

Too late, Amy moved in fast. Her body pressed up against his, her smell intoxicating. Her touch light and gentle.

'This needs a proper clean; I didn't make a good job of it earlier. It's beginning to scab over. You don't want it to get infected. Looks as though it needs an antiseptic wipe or gauze or something.'

She pulled away, reaching for her bag. Garrett's eyes following the cut of her blouse as it tightened against her chest.

'I might have something in here,' she said.

'Thanks, I mean, for driving out here. It's not like it's round the corner from your place, is it?'

'Glad to get out of there, that's the truth of it. Didn't want to be hanging round if they came back.'

‘The hoodies?’ said Garrett.

‘Not so much those idiots, more concerned whether Cullen might show up in person this time.’

‘That’s the name Al mentioned earlier, like I should know him.’

‘Forget it, he’s a wannabe. Low to mid-level, if he’s lucky. Been trying to make a name for himself for the past two or three years. Gives me the creeps. Thinks he can muscle in on Al’s business.’

‘I never meant for this to cause you more problems.’

‘Doesn’t matter, it’ll blow over. Anyway, that little shit had it coming, I’m glad you floored the skinny runt.’

She leaned in and kissed him.

It was unexpected, but Garrett reciprocated, then pulled away. ‘Sorry. It’s been quite a day.’

Amy gave him a coy smile, her face lingering inches from his before returning to her wine.

Garrett extricated himself from the sofa. His mind awash, he sat back down in the armchair opposite, but couldn’t help himself from drinking in her svelte, size eight figure from head to toe. She’d dressed to impress. He tried to push the thoughts aside.

He got up and poured himself a glass of Shiraz, then sat back down next to Amy.

‘So you’re joining me now?’

He raised his glass, clinking it on to the side of hers, 'St Bart,'

'Saint who?'

'The Patron Saint, for all things lost and recovered.'

'St Bart.' Amy took a sip. 'I better not drink all of this; it's a long drive back.'

Garrett stared into her eyes, his mind made. 'Stay, I'd like you to. I mean, if you want to, that is.'

She took a sip, never taking her eyes off his. 'You're sure this is what you want?'

Garrett moved in, kissing her hard. In tandem, both put their drinks to the floor. No pretence, two bodies searching each other out. Unfamiliar territory to claim and conquer.

Garrett pulled her to her feet. Entwined, breathing in each other's smell. Wrapped up in one another, they stumbled around like a pair of eager teenagers. Garrett led her towards the bedroom. They only made it as far as the worktop. He hoisted her up onto the work surface. Amy leant back, allowing him easier access.

She pushed him back and slid down off the worktop, her hands finding his zipper, trousers falling to his knees. He tried to stifle a groan as she delved deep. Garrett pulled her close, clawed at her lacy top. Spun her around, her hands grabbing for purchase on the edge of the faux granite. Ravenous like animals, Garrett mauled at her breasts, the

immediacy of the moment precedent over the pain in his left hand. He hitched her skirt up high around her waist, tugging at her thong. Both lost, consumed by the madness.



GARRETT WOKE in the early hours. Nausea forcing him to sprint for the bathroom. He locked the door and vomited into the bowl. Three retches later, all done. He made his way back to the bedroom, glad to see she hadn't woken. Garrett went to the window. His stomach lurched, then flipped. Willing it to calm, he stood looking out into the darkness, surveying the scene.

He turned back towards the bed and Amy's naked body, straining his eyes against the blackness, searching out the green glow of the bedside clock obscured by the edge of the duvet.

Not wanting to disturb her, he left it alone. He guessed it was still early. The street-lights obsolete, the latest borough council incentive to claw back money from the over-spend.

He liked it that way, the cul-de-sac wrapped in a veil of blackness. Where others might find it oppressive, even dangerous, he found it peaceful and comforting.

It provided the opportunity for clarity. He glanced back over his shoulder to the bed, listening

to her light intakes of breath. A soothing melody which in that moment, in the confines of the bedroom, made everything seem okay.

There he sat until the first glimmers of daylight shattered the darkness.

Dawn broke, traversing the red crimson glow. Reid yawned, then stretched, elongating the muscles in his lower back. He cracked his neck left, then to the right. His eyes fixed on the time, 06:47.

Working a precursive eight-hour shift, and pulling a surveillance job back to back would never hail as a good idea. Knackered didn't come into it, he'd gone way beyond. Even dozed off at least once in the wee small hours. The onset of fatigue coming in waves. One crashing into the other.

He'd never intended to wait it out through the night, but the girl with auburn hair driving the Toyota Rav 4, arriving close to midnight was unexpected.

Reid longed to get out of the car. Almost gave in to it, but the threat was too great. Whatever

happened, he couldn't risk getting spotted. Too much invested. He owed it to Maria; he had to see it through to the end.

Sitting cooped up in the Golf all night, always guaranteed to play havoc with his spine. He chastised himself. *Should know better. Been on enough stakeouts.* He shuffled forwards in the seat, successive short dagger-like pains striking his body into spasm.

Reid breathed through the pain, doing his best to block it out, letting it run its course.

Rubbing at his eyes, he reached for the chrome thermos and poured himself the remnants of luke-warm black coffee. He'd make do.

Reid swallowed it down. He'd tasted worse, couldn't recall when, but assured himself he was right. Anything to stave off the tiredness. Whichever way he looked at it, he needed to be on top of his game. *Soon be over,* he told himself.

Now it was a case of biding his time, waiting for Garrett to make his move.

Amy made the drive home, following the same route she'd taken the night before. She'd woken to find Garrett sitting in the bedroom armchair asleep. Didn't know how long he'd been there, but he looked peaceful and content. *Best not wake him*, she thought.

She smiled, recalling the frantic passion of their first encounter and how Garrett had taken control. Wild and feral like. The urgent ferocity of their tryst, leaving them both spent, collapsed amongst discarded clothing scattered across the kitchen floor.

There they sat, finishing the bottle of red, giggling like covert lovers before going upstairs where they'd found each other's passion reignited.



THE UNFAMILIAR SOUND of the Toyota choking and spluttering into life woke Garrett from slumber. His head still woozy, thanks to the combined efforts of alcohol and lack of sleep, taking him a second to realise he was in his own home.

He looked to the bed, already vacant, the duvet thrown back, suggesting its inhabitant left in a hurry. *Probably for the best.*

Garrett padded over to the window, pulled back the curtain, watching as Amy's beat-up Rav 4 kangaroo'd out of the close.

He made his way to the bathroom, showering before taking a light breakfast of tea and toast. When done, he dressed in casuals, picking out his boot-cut denims and the check patterned, lumberjack style shirt. The one Maria hated.

Completing the look, he reached into the closet, opting for his favourite brown suede, Loake brogues.

Garrett appraised himself in the full-length mirror hanging on the back of the bedroom door. He looked the part. Appropriate for what he had in mind. *You've got this*, he said to himself, before making his way out to the car—his destination, the office.

Time to set things straight.

Reid watched from the shadows as Garrett's car exited the drive and sped off from Chantry Close towards the carriage-way. G guessed he was heading into work. At least that's what he hoped for. It was now or never, and whichever way it played out, one way or another—he had to know.

Something was off. Reid couldn't put his finger on it. Acting on nothing more than gut instinct. It was all on the line, the job, the pension, and his liberty, but this time it was personal.

Reid moved forward, a silent prayer on his lips he wasn't wrong. Reached the back door, pushed down on the handle, as expected—locked. He moved to the French windows and peered in; the key was in the lock. The teak wooden frames housed

single glass units measuring six by eight inches, enough to force an elbow through.

Looking over his shoulder, he checked the immediate vicinity. Then followed with a furtive glance left and right. This was it, game on.

Reid popped the window and entered the property.

Stopped and listened. What did he expect? Wasn't sure, but his copper instinct told him he was on the right track.

Reid made his way through the open plan living area into a smaller room, a TV—man cave. Judging by the folders and paperwork strewn about the place, it doubled as a makeshift office. Reid sifted through the papers.

Finding nothing, he exited the TV room and ascended the doglegged staircase. Searching each room one by one, same answer—zero.

Reid made his way into the bathroom. Opened the mirrored cabinet—home to an array of female toiletries scattered amongst the male grooming products.

Another blank.

Reid went back to the master bedroom and opened the sliding glass doors to the first closet. Sparse, save for a few items of female clothing, most of it size ten summer dresses. Thought he recognised one or two garments. Pulled them off the mahogany wooden hangers and held them to his

face, taking in their sweet aroma. He recognised the faint scent of her perfume, Chanel Number 5, the one she'd worn when they first met.

The question remained, where was Maria now? She couldn't have vanished. That was never part of the plan. It had to be down to Garrett. Maria wouldn't have run out on him like that.

He made his way along the landing, back down the stairs to the hallway. Faded blood spatter caught his attention. He leant closer, the remnants scrubbed, a bodged attempt at a quick concealment.

Reid considered radioing the station. Question was, how to explain his reason for being at the scene? Needed to validate his story. Torn between self-preservation or Maria's safety. He'd have to come clean; Maria's life could be at stake. He wrestled with the idea that the blood could be innocent, the result of a cut to the hand or even a nosebleed, but his instinct screamed a different tune.

Twenty seconds later, his mind made; the house was a crime scene, requiring a team of SOCOs' to decipher the clues.

Reid turned to go. Intending to go outside and put the call in. His journey cut short as the muzzle of the weapon pressed hard into his left cheek.

That was the last he remembered.

I ntrigued, Cullen had watched as the figure crept from the tree line towards the back door. Content to let events play out, caught in a state of flux—zig-zagging between casual observer and potential interrogator.

Reid woke to find himself gaffer taped to the kitchen diner chair. His assailant performing a thorough job, applying the tape to his ankles, wrists, and binding his torso to the back of the uprights.

He blinked, trying to adjust to the light. He felt the trickle of warm blood run down the side of his eye. Clarity pierced through the dull thud inside his head. *Pistol-whipped*, the classic rookie mistake.

A rough, calloused hand grabbed at his chin. Reid tried to focus, his eyes failing, replaced by another deeper throbbing sensation inside his skull.

He blinked again. The figure slow to emerge from the blur.

‘He’s coming round, you want him to talk?’ said the anonymous voice.

A figure stepped into view from the periphery of Reid’s vision. He came closer. It wasn’t Garrett.

‘So, who might you be—snooping about the place?’

A second voice, younger than the first, interrupted before Reid answered. ‘Found this on him.’

Reid squinted his eyes. Two figures were pawing over something. What was it, a wallet?

No way. He couldn’t be so stupid, of that he was sure. Although the nagging self-doubt was gaining confidence.

That’s when he realised they’d found his warrant card. He felt a stabbing sensation deep in his chest. *Stay calm*. If he wanted to keep all of his faculties in good working order—he’d need to style it out. Talk them round. Convince them to do the right thing. Besides, what was the sense in harming a police officer? They didn’t need that kind of aggravation.

‘What do we have here? PC Reid. Collar number 2418.’

Reid didn’t answer, his mind blank. He needed a story, but what?

Cullen loomed forward. ‘Well now, 2418, looks like we’ve got ourselves a dilemma, doesn’t it?’

Reid swallowed hard, his words hoarse. 'Untie me.'

Cullen smirked. 'And why would I want to do that?'

'You're preventing a police officer from carrying out his duty. Untie me, now.'

Cullen took a moment to ponder the situation. 'Breaking and entering, I wasn't aware that was in the police officer's handbook,' he said.

'That's how I found it.'

'Not the way I see it.' Cullen pulled out his iPhone and held it to Reid's face. 'I love modern technology, so convenient. Here, watch this, Mr Police Officer. See—now, look there, that figure. There we go, straight to the patio door.'

The camera zoomed in close on Reid's face.

'And this, wait, this is the best bit—yes, and he's in. The old elbow through the pane of glass trick. Works every time, at least that's what I've heard. Judging by your performance, it rings true.'

Reid said nothing. What possible defence? Caught on camera. His best option, play for time.

Cullen continued to regard his phone. 'Now, if this went to court, I'm sure any jury would call that breaking and entering.'

'You don't know what you're doing, kidnapping, beating a police officer, that's a hefty sentence you're looking at.'

'Hear that, boys? Reckons he's took a beating.'

Cullen leaned in closer for effect. 'We haven't even started on you yet, my friend. So, if we're looking at years rather than months, maybe we'll make it worth our while.'

'Listen. You can still walk away from this. Do the right thing, untie me. Do it now, and I promise you, nothing will come of this. You have my word,' said Reid.

Cullen nodded. 'So you say, and it's an interesting proposition, but from where I'm sitting, doesn't look like you're the one calling the shots. If I had to guess, I'd say no one's got any clue you're here. In fact, your presence in this house is suspicious. So what are you doing here, 2418?'

Before Reid could answer Cullen continued. 'I'll put money on it you're not acting in any kind of official capacity. If I was you, I'd speak now - while you've got a chance. Unless you want to answer to my two young friends. A word to the wise, they're just about house trained.' He leant in closer, almost touching Reid's ear. His voice a whisper. 'Between you and me, neither of them are fond of the police.'

'You're interfering with an ongoing investigation—you're in way over your head,' said Reid.

Cullen grabbed at the officer's chin. 'And you're off the reservation, sunshine. Now, why don't you play nice and tell me what your interest is in Martin Garrett?'

Driving in, Garrett couldn't get Amy out of his head. The thought bringing a smile to his face. Wasn't like he'd planned it; just went with the moment. He made a mental note to call her. First things first, he needed to prioritise. Doctor's orders, Aziz told him to get his house in order—and that's what he was doing.

On arrival, he found his reserved parking space taken by a car he didn't recognise. No point in sweating it. Garrett reversed into the visitor's bay and entered the Western Alliance Corporate Insurance Group headquarters. He flashed his identity badge to the ageing security guard, who offered nothing more than a cursory glance from his well-thumbed paperback.

Garrett didn't catch the title, taking comfort in the notion that at least he wouldn't end up working

for some rent-a-cop security outfit, sitting in a foyer wishing away his remaining days.

He took the escalator to the third floor and scanned the barcode on his ID, buzzing through to the internal glass door.

Tina was on reception duty, hidden behind a mass of files.

She dashed round to intercept him. 'Where the hell have you been? It's all kicking off in there. I've been trying to contact you on your cell phone, which I might add you decline to answer, and your landline—well, that's a joke.'

'Tina, relax—I'm here now.'

'Relax?' said Tina, scanning his fashion ensemble from head to toe. 'And what's this?' she pointed at him. 'You off on a jolly or something?'

He smiled, bemused at her concern. 'What, you don't like it?' he said, holding his arms out to the side, before giving her a three-sixty view.

'The board's called an emergency meeting, and you're planning to waltz in looking like you've just come from watching the Match down at your local?'

'Something like that,' said Garrett, leaning forward and kissing her on the forehead like a father might embrace a daughter.

'I'd better get it over with.' Garrett turned to face the frosted glass doors.

Tina looked confused. 'I don't think you understand. They're out for blood. Barging in uninvited,

that's about as good as waving your P45 in the air and saying sign here.'

Garrett turned back to her, his mind preoccupied. 'Maybe—we'll see.'

Tina reached out, touching his forearm. 'Don't do anything stupid, okay.'

'Moi? Come on. You know me,' he said, taking her hand in his. 'Listen, I've never thanked you—for everything... And, well, I'm not about to start now, but for what it's worth, thanks anyway. I mean it.'

'You're such a piss-taker, Garrett,' said Tina, wearing her best sarcastic smile. 'Christ, what happened?' she said, noticing his eye, then his hand.

Garrett recognised her concern was genuine, he'd always had a fondness for Tina, but not in the same way she'd have liked it to have been. He smiled back at her. 'Life, death, the universe... Take your pick.'

He let go of her hand and spun around on his heels. Pushing down on the brushed steel handle, he turned back to her, 'watch and learn.'

Garrett flung the doors open and stood before the board members. Done with all the bullshit, the formalities, and the polite etiquette. It was nothing more than window dressing, and none of it mattered. Not anymore.

He'd only ever met the board once, when he was first appointed to the role of business analyst. In the early days, there'd been opportunities, golf tourna-

ments, a chance to caddy for the bigwigs, and black tie charity events, both providing those who were career savvy the chance to get their names out there. Garrett always declined, making up some piss poor excuse, confident to let his month on month figures speak for themselves.

Garrett could leave that to the likes of Matt Williams, UK Sales Director. Besides, he'd never been a schmoozer, or an arse kisser; call it what you like, by his reckoning, it boiled down to the same thing. Some people are born to it, others learn it as they go along, and they get accustomed to wearing it like a fake smile when it matters most. He'd never been interested in climbing the ladder, so the way he saw it, there was no need to play along.

There were five of them sitting around the walnut oval table. Garrett cast his eyes around the room, their ages ranging from late forties to the upper sixties. They were studying some kind of report, opened in front of them—colourful red, green and blue line graphs depicting a downward trajectory—company sales figures, he guessed.

Williams was standing at the foot of the table. On seeing Garrett he stopped mid-sentence, his French Connection glasses perched half-way down the bridge of his nose. The look on his face—priceless. The suits looked up from their reports, first to Williams for an explanation, then to Garrett.

‘Morning, gents, looks like you’ve started without me!’

Williams approached, his eyes ablaze. He strode the twenty paces, covering the distance in record time, like that of a man thirty years his junior, his complexion flushing beetroot. Garrett couldn’t tell if the cause was down to the speed at which he moved or his rage coming to the boil.

‘A word outside,’ he said.

Garrett smiled back. ‘I thought we’d do this here, get it all out in the open.’ He projected his voice, looking beyond Williams, ‘I’m sure the board would be interested to hear what I’ve got to say.’

Garrett leaned closer to his adversary, ‘I’ve got nothing to hide, how about you?’

Williams made a grab for his forearm.

Garrett glared at him. ‘Don’t.’

Seeing the cold fury in Garrett’s determined stare, Williams retracted his grip mid-air.

‘Out,’ he said.

Standing motionless, Garrett stared, then smiled. ‘Sure, okay, Matt, whatever you say.’

Williams stomped ahead to find a vacant office, livid at the interruption and Garrett's apparent laissez-faire attitude. He waited for Garrett to enter, then closed the door behind him.

'Where the hell have you been?'

Garrett ignored the question. Instead, he took a seat and made himself comfortable.

'I've never been in this office, you know that? In all the time I've worked here, I've never been in this room,' he said, taking in his new surroundings.

'And what has that to do with anything?'

'Just saying.'

Williams raged back and forth, his glasses held in his right hand slicing through the air, working out his frustration.

‘Have you any idea what you’ve done? We’re looking at a potential lawsuit, hundreds of thousands of pounds. Perhaps more, and you go AWOL. Off the bloody grid, then turn up here, looking like...’ He appraised Garrett from head to toe, noticing the cut to his eye, then his swollen hand. ‘I don’t know what...’

Garrett brushed an imaginary speck of dust from his shirt. Then raised his hand to his eye. ‘Yeah, what can I say? It’s been a strange couple of days.’

‘That’s it? A strange couple of days... Unbelievable. Are you back on the booze, Garrett, is that what this is about? You falling off the wagon.’

Garrett smiled, then exhaled, shaking his head. ‘You don’t get it, do you, Matt? I can call you Matt, right? After all this time, it sounds a little pretentious to refer to you as Mr Williams. So here it is. Let me lay it out for you. I don’t give a damn about the contract, you, the board, or this place.’

He paused, waiting for the reaction.

Williams clenched his mouth, lower teeth grinding upon upper. He moved closer to Garrett, the muscles tightening then relaxing along his jawline.

‘Is that right? Well, that’s an awful lot of jobs on the line besides yours. You’ve got thirty-seconds to explain, before I go back in there, and tell them to fire you right now. And you can forget about the

severance package. We're looking at gross negligence, Garrett. Know what that means?'

Garrett looked on nonplussed.

'No? Allow me to enlighten you. You get nada, zilch, and you can kiss goodbye to the three months salary, along with any shares or pension annuities—it all goes. Oh, and let's not forget the car, your beloved R8.'

Garrett narrowed his eyes. 'The car's mine, has been for over a year. Bought it when the downgrade went through. Couldn't picture myself driving a Ford or a Vauxhall. Didn't feel right meeting clients driving a dad car. Go check with the lease company, but I'm telling you it's mine.'

Williams turned on his heel. 'Maybe I'll just use it as a down payment for the lawyers we're going to need to sort this mess of yours out.'

'Always true to form, Matt, I'll say that much for you, but I'm not playing scapegoat, so go find yourself some other mug.'

Williams shook his head. 'Your finished.'

Garrett shifted in his seat, 'know your trouble, Matt? always too quick to take the glory, and never around to carry the can when the shit hits the fan. If you'd listened to me, none of this would be happening right now. You signed it off, your signature—your mistake.'

Williams snorted his derision, 'you've never had

the balls or instinct for this business. Your nothing more than an also-ran. Only reason you've lasted this long is because of old man Hendricks. You're a lame horse, Garrett, have been since day one.'

Staring at the floor, Garrett put his head in hands and rubbed at his face but said nothing.

Williams continued, '... and I'll tell you something for nothing—it's your team that's carried you this far, and like an idiot, I've covered your arse, thinking it was a temporary measure, a glitch, a mid-life crisis, or God knows what. But there's only so much goodwill to go around. Face it, Garrett, you've had your nine lives, and this time there's no one looking out for you. You're out on a limb, on your own.'

Garrett leaned forward in the chair, resting his forearms on his thighs, massaging his left hand. Hendricks had been like a father to him, given him a break and took a chance on him when no one else would, schooling him in the business from the ground up. The old man had taken ill over the last six months, the Alzheimer's affirming its grip, and now he was in a nursing home somewhere, drugged up to the eyeballs just to keep him quiet.

'You know something, Williams, you can paint it any which way you like. None of it matters.'

He rose to his feet, standing two inches taller, eyeballing his soon-to-be former boss. 'All it's ever

been about for you is looking out for number one. You'd screw your own mother over to get what you want.'

Garrett sidestepped Williams and made his way to the door.

Williams grabbed at his shoulder. 'Make no mistake, you're done. I'll see that you never work in this industry again. Go on, get out, before I throw you out.'

Enough was enough. Garrett swung round and launched himself, his head connecting with the bridge of Williams's nose, obliterating the cartilage. He slumped to the floor. Garrett stood over him, his size tens jabbing Williams in the ribs.

'Always got to have the last say. Not this time, Matt.'

His victim squirmed on the floor, bloodstained hands clutching at his ruined nose. Garrett jabbed him again.

'Make sure I get what I'm owed.' Garrett straightened up, adjusted his attire and turned to leave. He stopped. Spun round on his heel. 'You see that I'm paid in full, otherwise I'll be back, and you'll be taking a swan dive out of that office window of yours.'

He made his way to the door and opened it, greeted by a crowd, none of which tried to stop him. Tina was upfront, her jaw gaping wide open. 'Jesus, Garrett, what did you do?'

He gave her a brief nod of the head and walked past in silence, leaving the door ajar, allowing the entire office to witness his handiwork.

Tina raced to catch up with him. 'What the hell happened in there?'

Approaching the ground floor, Garrett could see the old security guard standing about twelve feet out from the foot of the escalator, clutching at his radio, anxiety etched all over his face. Garrett didn't want to hurt the old man, but he needed to get out fast. The police were sure to be en route by now. As he inched closer to the exit point, Brian approached, his radio held just inches from his mouth, calling in the backup.

'Sir, I've got my orders. I'm to detain you until the police arrive.'

Garrett shook his head. 'Come on, we both know that's not going to happen.'

'I'm afraid, sir, I must insist.'

Garrett tried to placate the security guard. 'Brian, isn't it?'

The old man looked on, uneasy at the thought of

Garrett knowing his name. He hesitated then answered, 'yes it is, sir.'

'Listen, Brian, I've got no quarrel with you, but you need to understand something, I'm leaving this building—on my own terms. So don't do anything stupid. Okay?'

Garrett paused, reading the old man's response. His mannerisms rigid and taut, trapped by circumstance.

'But, sir, I've got my orders.'

'I understand, you're a loyal employee, you want to do the right thing, and now that means you've got to stand down, Brian.'

He remained fixed to the spot, his face ashen. Part of him wanted to turn and run, but like a loyal dog to an overbearing master, he awaited further instruction.

Garrett monitored the periphery. Time wasn't on his side. He weighed up the options. He could barge his way past Brian or wait for the police to come and arrest him.

'How long you worked here, five, maybe six years, Brian?'

'Seven, almost eight, Mr Garrett.'

'Eight years, that's a long time. Ask yourself this, how many times have they even said good morning to you, or asked you how your day is going? You think they give a shit?'

The static on Brian's radio erupted into life.

‘APPROACHING GROUND FLOOR.’

‘Sir, I’m going to need you to come with me.’ He held his hand out to Garrett. ‘Nice and calm now, please.’

Garrett watched as the elevator doors pinged open, two thickset guards, black suits and earpieces joining the scene.

‘Brian, listen to me. It’s time to step aside. You don’t get paid enough for this. You did your job. Look, the cavalry’s here now. Go read the small print in your contract.’

The men in black filtered out of the elevator’s chrome, sliding doors, one going left, the other heading right. Fanning out, covering the ground between them, preparing for Garrett to make a break for it.

‘Sir, I’ve got my orders, and it’s them that pays my wages—besides, I need this job.’

Garrett nodded to Brian. ‘Okay, your choice, but stay out of the way.’

The two black suits were attempting a flanking movement; Williams had given the order to detain Garrett at all costs, no matter the threat level.

Garrett tried again. ‘Stand down, Brian, your friends here look eager to get started.’

Brian turned and looked over his shoulder, the two men in black preparing for the intercept, going wide, attempting a pincer movement.

He looked back to Garrett. ‘Come on now, sir,

you're outnumbered, we don't want this turning ugly. I'm sure we can sort this out nice and amicable, like.'

Garrett waited until they were within six feet of him, then he started hurling the insults.

'What happened, the Secret Service let you out early today?'

No response. They continued towards their target.

Garrett turned to Brian. 'Reckon they pick each other's clothes out?'

His comment had the desired effect. The younger of the two guards sneered, his mouth curling at the side. He was short and wide, bulked up by supplements.

'Come on, pretty boy,' Garrett taunted, getting under his opponent's skin some more.

The guard was itching to get physical, a welcome break from the monotony of driving the suits around all day. He lunged forward.

Garrett sidestepped, sticking his leg out and tripping his would-be assailant. He spun round, ready to face the second contender. Garrett looked back over his shoulder. His first attacker was back on his feet, approaching like a speeding train.

Garrett whipped his head forward just in time to witness number two guard snapping his right hand forward, a telescopic cosh extending before him. Not standard regulation issue, he guessed.

He didn't have time to think before the felled

assailant, back on his feet, slammed into him. Garrett stumbled forward before hitting the ground.

In situ, they grappled like two MMA fighters, each seeking the opponent's submission. The guy was small and squat, but he had strength and power. He was trying to wrap both his legs around Garrett's waist, attempting to manoeuvre him into a chokehold position. Garrett squirmed, but the grip was solid like iron. Starved of oxygen, his eyes watered; seconds ticking away before black out. Guard number two was inching closer, cautious in his approach. The cosh held like a baton, ready to strike.

Garrett reached down and behind with his right hand, finding the guard's groin he made a claw and thrust it into his scrotum, pulling down hard. The guard yelped like a six-week-old puppy. The effect immediate, as the pressure on his windpipe slackened.

Garrett coughed and wheezed his way to his feet, as the full brunt of the cosh smashed into the side of his neck and lower jaw.

Felled like prey. He shook his head, trying to gain some clarity. Garrett could see the guy's mouth moving, his voice shouting instructions at him. Muffled, as though submerged in a bathtub of water.

The sting of the second strike brought him to his senses. He made a grab for the cosh before his assailant could recoil and bring it down hard for strike three.

Garrett sprang to his feet, his face connecting with the spray mist as it burned, choking the air from his lungs.

Squinting through the watery blur, he backed away. The guard was still advancing, a can of mace in one hand, the extended cosh in the other. Garrett had one shot, but the guard needed to be closer. He dropped to one knee, feigning a worsened injury, and counted in his head, one, two, three.

Driving himself at full tilt, Garrett slammed his body mass into the guard, the ricochet shock-wave judder knocking the wind from him.

He made a grab for the cosh. Wrestling it from the guard's grip, he swung it down two-handed like a sledgehammer. It only took one hit—the guard rendered useless upon impact.

Garrett was up on his feet. Rubbing at his eyes, he retrieved the pepper spray and tucked it in his pocket.

The smaller of the two guards was still curled up in a foetal position, squirming on the floor. Garrett stumbled over to him. 'Hurts, doesn't it?'

The guard was panting as if in the final stages of labour. His face all red and blotchy, 'you'll get yours,' he managed, as he struggled for air.

Garrett crouched beside him, 'That pain you're feeling—right now trust me, it'll pass. What you need is something to focus on.'

Garrett took the pepper spray from his pocket

and aimed it four inches from the guard's face. 'Open wide and don't forget to say thank you.'

He sprayed the remnants of the can and walked away, leaving the guard choking obscenities at him.

Now it was just him and Brian. Garrett leaned against the side of the Perspex booth, taking a moment to catch his breath.

Brian had sunk low to the floor, still clutching at his radio. Old but wiser, knowing better than to tangle with a man with nothing left to lose.

Garrett tapped on the plastic glass. 'You can get up now—it's over.'

Brian pulled himself to his feet, his eyes connecting with the slumped bodies adorning the foyer like something out of Tate Modern. His radio crackled into life. 'What's happening down there?' said the voice.

Garrett recognised it was Williams. He grabbed the radio from Brian. 'Think you might need a new security detail, your boys are a little incapacitated at the moment.'

He handed the radio back to Brian. 'Think it's time you opened those doors now, Brian, don't you?'

Brian complied without further hesitation

Garrett raised his right hand in recognition. He limped out into the autumn chill, his vision reduced to a kaleidoscope of teary blurs. He wiped his eyes with the back of his hand.

In the near distance, the wail of sirens fast approaching, adding impetus to his escape.

Back at the car, Garrett took out his phone and texted Helen: I MESSED UP...

He'd suffered the severe, debilitating headaches for well over a decade, ever since he'd taken a beating outside of the club after an all-day drinking session. Inebriated, he'd offered himself as easy prey—no contest, as they set about him like a gang of baying wolves ripping into him.

The change came with the sickness and the regular bouts of vomiting. At first, he put it down to something he'd eaten. A bad curry or something. At one point, he even convinced himself it was his own doing. Maria was always saying he needed more time in the kitchen, so he'd bought himself a cookbook and set about his experimental phase, Spanish paella, Italian pasta and Moroccan tagine lamb stews.

Like straw blowing in the wind, he snatched at

anything. He needed something tangible, anything to allay his private, hidden fears. Those same fears that weren't up for discussion. Stored away deep in the recesses.

Garrett compartmentalised it, shut it down and closed the door. He followed the rationale that if he couldn't see it; he didn't have to deal with it, making it unreal—as if it were happening to someone else.

Garrett's eyes flitted to the rear-view mirror. Still no sirens, no tail car holding back just far enough to let him think he was home and dry. The road ahead, devoid of life—a fitting metaphor for his own existence.

His thoughts turned to Helen, he wanted to give his side of the story, she'd understand—the only one who ever had. Fitting, he thought, tying up loose ends and letting go. It was important; she heard it from him and not some jaded hack or graduate journo eager to break their first big story. It had to be verbatim—straight from the source. He knew they'd still write a pile of crap about him afterwards, as they always did.

People weren't interested in the genuine news stories. They wanted the dirt. Sensationalism sold newspapers. Not the truth. The insatiable public appetite for scandal and intrigue forced editors to bow to consumer demand. The masses craved constant grime and the stench of the sewer, so that's

what they'd got. But Garrett remained determined he was going out on his terms.

The Audi R8 entered the cul-de-sac of Chantry Close. Home sweet home. Except now with Maria gone, there was nothing sweet, just a sour after taste. Garrett brought the car to a halt on the bend in the road by the front lawn belonging to the widow, Mrs Johnson; he gave a cursory glance to her front window.

No sign of life.

The batty old cow was out or hiding behind the curtains. Nothing got past her. The self-appointed eyes and ears of the Close, a self-styled neighbourhood watch warden. Garrett had only ever seen her as a busybody, someone keen to gossip and speculate over the lives of others, compensating for her own shortcomings—neither family nor close friends ever in attendance.

His mind wandered back to Maria, they'd been together for close to a decade, married for over eight years, most of it good. They'd always had their moments. Theirs being a relationship of passion and fire, so the odd flare up was inevitable. He put it down to Maria's Latin heritage. Her father warned him she had a temper, one to equal her own mother's. But none of that mattered. They could work through anything, overcome any hurdle that life threw at them.

Together, united in love.

Things changed about two-and-a-half years ago, Maria approaching her thirty-second birthday. The conversations led to the inevitable arguments, centred on children. More to the point, babies or the lack of them.

Catholic by birth, Maria was one of four. Small by comparison to other Italian families, but children were important. At least to Maria and her mother. Garrett had never wanted a family. For him, they had a good life, so why spoil it by bringing kids into the equation?

They both had careers, which afforded them a lifestyle others dreamt of. Weekend European city breaks taking in the likes of Paris, Barcelona, and Rome. Annual skiing in Val Thorens, and round the world tickets with stopovers in Singapore, Tokyo, Sydney, Auckland, LA, and New York. What wasn't to like?

Garrett wanted more of the same, not less. Convinced people with kids didn't get those opportunities. The best they could hope for was an all-inclusive package holiday to the Costas' once a year.

Then there was his own childhood, not that he wanted to dwell on it. He'd spent most of his adult life trying to bury it, pretending it never happened, working hard to reinvent himself.

It started with him moving away from the old neighbourhood—too many memories. He'd made a new life, got a decent job, met a nice girl and bought

a house. For the most part, life was good, but the arguments worsened. Maria just wouldn't let it go, and so the inevitable happened. They drifted apart.

She made excuses to work late most evenings, and in response Garrett fell into his old ways, drinking to pass the time. His mind in overdrive, fuelled by alcohol—he'd sulk, awaiting her return. When she came home, Garrett remained subdued and silent, which drove Maria closer to the edge. Her temper at boiling point, she'd shout and scream just to get a reaction. When that didn't work, she'd grab anything that came to hand—pots, pans, plates, and glasses—all flying in Garrett's direction.

Garrett reverted to type. He'd simmer, raging on the inside, but wouldn't let it show, telling himself he wasn't like the old man.

The childhood beatings and the intimidation. It all came flooding back as if it were yesterday. There was no way around it; Garrett had the old man's genes. The same messed up DNA profile was lurking in there somewhere. Hidden deep. He could feel it, like a miasma waiting to distil the air with its odious vapour.

Garrett pulled up on the edge of the drive, keeping the engine running as he observed the scene. It all came back, Maria packing a suitcase, going from room to room cleansing the scene as though none of it had ever happened, and with it, erasing close to a decade of memories, gone within minutes.

Without Maria, the house was nothing but a shell, an empty husk. He missed her laughter and even the arguments, but that was fast becoming a distant memory. Somehow, Garrett had to move on.

He opened the front door and entered the house. For a moment, his heart quickened as he hoped he might hear Maria's voice and that life would return to normality, or at least something close to it.

Garrett paused.

Nothing, save for a cavernous vacuum. Not even

the residual sound of the TV forming a comforting layer of background noise.

He reached for the light and flicked the switch. Lost in thought, he took another two steps before realising the light failed to illuminate.

Garrett turned, making his way back towards the front door. The thud to the base of his skull brought him to his knees. His world faded to black before the second blow found its target.

Cullen lit a cigarette and sat in silence, observing the enigma. ‘You sure it’s him?’
‘Yeah, I’d recognise this bastard anywhere,’ said the scrawny youth.

Cullen took a long, hard drag. ‘Time to wake him up.’

Garrett felt the stinging afterglow of the slap to his cheek before the rough, stubby thumb and forefinger stabbed at his eye socket. ‘Wakey wakey, shit for brains.’

He wrenched his head to the side as another pair of hands clamped his neck. He opened his eyes, at first nothing more than a tearful blur of shapes, his retina slow to adapt as he blinked through the mist.

‘Back with us?’ Cullen’s voice, monotone and flat as he scrutinised the driver’s license. ‘Says here you’re Martin Garrett.’

Garrett didn't recognise the mid-forties male with salt and pepper hair asking the questions. His eyes flitted left, then right, but there was no mistaking the two scrawny halfwits that accompanied him.

He sat in silence, playing for time. The base of his skull throbbing like he'd been hit with a bat. 'You're Cullen,' he said, his voice a hoarse and bitter statement.

'Correct,' he pointed to the two figures standing poised and ready, 'and you've met my associates.'

Garrett observed but said nothing.

Cullen took another hit on his cigarette, the smoke rising in front of his face. 'Seems you like to throw your weight around. Funny, you don't look the type.'

Garrett coughed as the nicotine irritated the back of his throat. 'What are you doing in my house?'

Cullen clicked his finger. Seconds later a mass of black bloodied material landed at Garrett's feet, bound in silver gaffer tape. Garrett fixed his eyes on the blood-stained West Midlands Police tunic insignia.

Cullen jabbed at the body with his boot. 'Friend of yours, Mr Garrett?'

Garrett stared through the dried blood and matted hair. There was something familiar, he just

couldn't place it. He shook his head. 'I don't know who this is.'

Cullen outlined the facts. 'Didn't realise he was a cop at first, on account of him wearing a jacket over his tunic. Then we found his warrant card. Sure you don't recognise him? Take a closer look.'

Cullen signalled his intent to the youths. Before Garrett could process the information, they cut the restraints, then in the same motion shoved him forward. He toppled to the floor, his face landing inches from the blood stained wreck.

'Recognise him now? This is PC Reid 2418, Traffic Division. Turns out he's the same guy who pulled you over. Question is, why's he here?'

Garrett shook his head. 'No idea.'

Cullen raised his hands out to the side, his gestures animated, as though he were on stage. 'You should be thanking me. I caught him breaking and entering your home,' he paused, waiting for a response.

'I already told you, I got no idea why he's here,' said Garrett.

'Odd though,' said Cullen, 'you being the traffic violator...'

Garrett shrugged.

Cullen wasn't letting it go. He moved closer to Garrett's face. 'Doesn't add up now, does it?'

Garrett had no answer.

Cullen sat back in the chair, inhaling deep on the

nub of his cigarette before discarding it to the floor. He locked eyes with Garrett. 'So, you expect me to believe you don't know each other?'

'Believe what you want, but I'm telling you, I don't know why this cop's in my house,' said Garrett.

'Interesting.' Cullen sat mulling it over for a few seconds. 'Let's try another name, see how we go.' Cullen made a point of drawing out the process, heavy on the theatrics, his eyes cast skywards as though trying to conjure a name. 'I know. How about Al Tweedy?'

Cullen noted the glimmer of recognition in Garrett's eyes. 'Now we're getting somewhere, so tell me, what's a loser like Tweedy to you, Mr Garrett?'

'I don't know anyone called Tweedy,' said Garrett, swallowing down hard.

'You want to play games? Fine.' Cullen's boot connected with Reid's bloodied pulp, laying lifeless at his feet. 'As you can see, my two associates are more than capable of extracting information.'

Cullen got up to leave.

Garrett had to act. 'Okay, your two boys here, halfwit one and two, they were out of order. All I was trying to do was have a quiet pint, and then they walk in and interrupt my conversation. I didn't like the way this one,' he said, staring straight at the offender, 'spoke to the lady—that's all.'

Cullen laughed. 'That's it, what are you, the last of the great romantics? So you've got a thing for the

barmaid, Tweedy's niece. Christ. I suppose I can see the attraction, in a scabby way—bit of rough skank to while away the time.' Cullen turned to the youths, 'what's her name?'

One youth chipped in, gesturing with his hand and mouth. 'Amy, but I can think of a few other names for her. Word is she's a right goer.'

Garrett felt the anger rise. 'You should watch your mouth, boy.'

'Yeah? What the fu...'

Cullen cut in. 'Leave it. Time for all of that later.'

Now it made sense, they'd returned to the pub to confront Tweedy, this time with their boss, Cullen. They must've seen Amy leaving and followed. Her actions leading a direct route to Garrett's house. Once located, all they had to do was sit and wait, biding their time.

Cullen leant down in front of Garrett, the smell of fresh nicotine on his breath, close enough to make him gag. He cupped his hand and slapped Garrett's cheek. 'I get it now, you're just a nobody that poked your nose in where it wasn't wanted, all for the sake of a bit of skirt.' He shook his head, 'grave mistake, my friend.'

Cullen repositioned himself, settling in for a ringside view.

The scrawny youth stepped forward. His face still bore the marks of Garrett's precision left hook.

Cullen nodded. 'Look at it from my point of view,

Martin, I can't have a nobody like you taking a pop at my boys. That's not on. The thing you have to understand is people talk and then before you know it—the word goes round. Today it's a do-gooder, and if I let that go, then tomorrow, well, let's just say there's lots of competition out there for my business. What you need to consider is there's far worse people than me that Al Tweedy or his niece could deal with.'

Conversation ended. Cullen gave the signal. The youth dragged Garrett to his feet and re-seated him. Once in situ he applied fresh gaffer tape, binding Garrett to the chair.

The first punch landed without warning. Garrett felt the cartilage crunch. His eyes watering, warm blood trickled from his nose down into his mouth.

The youth admired his handiwork. 'Not such the big man now, eh?'

'That the best you've got?' managed Garrett, blinking away the pain.

'Plenty more where that came from. Don't you worry.'

The other youth bounded back into the room after an unsuccessful scavenge for high-value saleable items to punt on the streets. 'Boss, you better come quick... You need to see this.'

'Not now... Can't you see I'm busy, things are just about to get interesting.'

'Trust me, you need to see this, now.'

'You deaf. What did I just say?'

‘This can’t wait, telling you—it’s messed up.’

Reluctant to pull himself away, Cullen rose to his feet and traipsed out of view. ‘This better be good.’

As he left the room, he shouted back over his shoulder, ‘he’s all yours—but go easy, I’ve still got questions that need answering.’

The youth loomed over Garrett. Sniggered then walked away out of his peripheral vision.

Garrett twisted against the restraints, struggling to see. It sounded as if his assailant was taking a drink from a bottle or a can. Getting jacked up, ready for the onslaught. When he returned, Garrett noted that he’d removed his outer layer, losing the puffer jacket. Now he was limbering up, putting on a show, the same way a boxer might warm up in the ring before a big fight.

Trussed up, Garrett flexed against the restraints. It was no use, bound tight—unable to move. All he could do was ready himself.

The youth stepped forward. ‘Now your mine.’

Rigid with fear, she lay silent—her eyes gummed tight with remnants of dried blood. Gaffer taped at the wrists and ankles, Maria tried to pull her legs towards her, but the effort proved too much. Fatigued and close to physical exhaustion, she relented.

Tears formed, then flowed as she recalled how Garrett had returned home and found her packing, flying into a rage within what seemed like seconds.

The involuntary shiver prickled against her skin as she remembered the look in his eye. A seething malice—belying murderous intent. Seconds later his hands tightened around her throat, squeezing harder, then tighter still. Crushing her windpipe into submission. She felt herself drifting, the darkness all-consuming.

Maria opened her eyes. She was alive, and if she was breathing, there was still hope.

The dimmed light from the hallway leaked into the garage, allowing just enough illumination to get her bearings. She turned her head a fraction to the right, greeted by a bolt of fresh pain searing through damaged nerve endings. She wiped at her eyes with her bound wrists; the tape scraping against her skin.

Maria bit down and tore into the tape. She rolled over onto her front, pulling herself along the dusty, cold concrete, her elbows scuffing against the floor, desperate to drag her battered body to the tool racking system that Garrett had been so OCD about installing.

There had to be something. Garrett was always tidying. Everything had its place, all labelled and secured away. Frantic—driven by a surge of fear and adrenaline, Maria searched. Please God, let there be a saw, or a box cutter knife... Anything.

She shuffled along deeper into the darkness. Her efforts proving futile, Garrett was meticulous. The bottom level housed a couple of old five-litre paint tins, some discarded remnants of wallpaper, and a few other items comprising hardened paint rollers and brushes.

Maria fought against her own frustration—she wanted to cry out and call for help, but the risk was too great. Closing her eyes, she hung her head, fighting back the tears. There had to be another way.

She looked back to the internal garage door; a long shot, but maybe she could make it down the hallway to the front door and raise the alarm.

Where the hell was Mrs Johnson when she needed her?

The adrenaline surged as Maria pushed forward on elbows and knees, ignoring the pain as the uneven concrete ripped into fresh skin.

Excited voices from the kitchen forced her to reconsider. They were getting closer; maybe Garrett had brought in help to finish the job. Maria turned, scabbling back towards the polythene. Then, out of the corner of her eye, something caught her attention. She squinted against the low light. She hadn't imagined it, a glint of something under the racking system. Maria reached in, pulling out a broken pair of black-handled decorating scissors.

The voices were louder, advancing closer towards the internal garage door. Maria scudded along the remaining distance to the sheeting and buried herself underneath the polythene. She held her breath, clasping the scissors between her bound wrists, vowing to stab the first bastard that dare lay a finger on her.

Lying under the polythene, Maria regulated her breathing to a series of shallow breaths. Her mind wandered to the not so distant past.

Falling out of love with Garrett had been a gradual process. She'd always wanted kids, but he'd resisted, doing his utmost to dodge the subject. So much so, it had become the root cause of their marital discord.

Garrett had been open with her from the beginning, adamant he didn't want to become a father, under any circumstances. Maria persisted, which pissed him off, souring his mood for days on end. He'd sulk like a sullen child, reluctant to utter a single word. A few days later it would be fine again until the next time, but Maria could never leave it

alone. In Garrett's mind, the matter wasn't open to discussion, let alone compromise.

The best she could hope for was that one day she'd wear him down, but that day never came. Instead, his stance hardened. Then she found his confirmation letter to go ahead with a vasectomy procedure. Not that he'd ever thought to mention it to her.

That was the final straw.

She'd planned it right down to the day. How the hell was she supposed to know the outcome of his prognosis? It could still go in her favour, provided she could live for the next few hours.

Stay calm, stay alive.

Maria had known he'd been ill for some time. The signs were subtle at first, changes in his temperament and mood. She'd put it down to stress. He'd always been that way, presenting himself to the outside world as the laid back executive. In reality, he was the opposite, always bringing work home, and burning the midnight oil. His career obligations eating into their weekends, the sacred time in their busy schedules, which they'd both vowed to protect above anything else.

To Maria's mind, he'd pushed her away, prioritising everything else above her needs. She wasn't even an afterthought. More a case of convenient—when it suited him.

What was she expected to do, stay in a loveless marriage because of his diagnosis? That wasn't a good enough reason. Maria had plans, and Garrett didn't feature in them any longer. She needed to move her life on, to live rather than exist.

Cullen's eye rested on the mass of concentrated polythene in the middle of the garage floor. His heartbeat quickening as he stepped forward. He looked to his associate, his face a mixture of grim excitement and wondrous expectation. This changed things. The entire dynamic tipped on its head.

Where to from here?

Cullen leant forward, swallowing hard as he pulled back the sheeting. The breath caught in the back of his throat, causing an involuntary cough.

The body bore signs of a struggle, red blotches amongst other small abrasions. Cullen was no CSI, but he'd seen enough TV programmes to know the victim had put up a fight. His eye lingered on the bruising and swelling to the jawline and neck area.

Cullen turned to his associate. 'Who the hell is she?'

The youth shook his head, 'No idea, but this ain't what I signed up for, we need to get out of here.'

Cullen agreed. He replaced the polythene over the body, then motioned to his associate to follow. Both returned to the kitchen in time to witness Garrett getting worked over by the other youth.

'That's enough. Leave him be,' said Cullen.

Exhausted from the violent exertion, the scrawny youth leant forward, hands on knees, sucking in the oxygen. 'You said he was all mine.'

Garrett's face bore the marks of a sustained beating, his nose swollen. Smearred blood starting to dry, forming the beginnings a crusty layer along his top lip. The gash to his eye had opened up; both sockets apparent with fresh black and purplish bruising.

'And now I'm telling you to stop—so back off,' said Cullen, reaching for a chair and plonking it down inches from Garrett's face.

'I don't know what kind of sick game you two are playing,' he said, the tip of his boot jabbing into Reid, 'and I don't have the time to dick around, so I'm only going to ask the one time.'

Garrett took a second to process the information, unable to decipher Cullen's meaning.

Cullen assumed the role of Master of Ceremony. 'Not that it was my intention to play Poirot, but it's all gone a bit Agatha Christie. Seems we have a body in

the garage.’ He reached down and grabbed Reid’s blood-soaked, matted hair. ‘That why you’re here? Suppose it makes a good enough reason for breaking and entering.’

Garrett cast his eyes downward to the unresponsive carcass, trying to make sense of the words coming out of Cullen’s mouth.

Cullen turned to Garrett, ‘Let’s go for a little walk, Martin.’ He motioned to the youths to free Garrett and pull him to his feet.

Garrett shuffled the short distance to the garage, the overhead fluorescent tube still flickering. Cullen shoved him to his knees, the polythene sheeting inches from his face as momentum took him forward.

Cullen crouched next to Garrett, his hand gripping the back of his neck, then nodded to his associate to pull back the sheeting.

‘I’m guessing this is your handiwork. Who was she? Come on, you can tell me. Girlfriend, wife, mistress? Let me guess. She gets lippy, so you give her a slap. Got caught in the moment, didn’t you? Couldn’t stop. Sound about right?’

Garrett’s stared at the bloodied pulp, his breathing coming in a series of rapid pants.

‘Come on, Martin? We’re all men. We’ve all been there. Women eh? Don’t know when they’ve got it good.’ Cullen paused, letting Garrett take in the scene.

Three seconds passed before he continued. 'There is another scenario, Martin. I'm thinking, maybe I've read this wrong. What if she's a total stranger, someone you grabbed off the street? Am I right, eh? That what does it for you? You some kind of white collar deviant?'

Garrett continued to stare but offered no response.

Cullen grabbed his hair, snapping Garrett's head back. Their eyes locked. 'You will answer me, you sick bastard. Even if I have to drag every syllable from your mouth.'

Garrett's body shook. His eyes glassy. The tears rolled. Guttural sounds emanating from the deep, like a wild animal caught in the hunter's trap.

Memories of the night flooded into vision. He'd lost it, come home to find her packing. He tried to reason with her, but her mind was made. She was leaving. No negotiation, no second chances. It was over.

Cullen straightened up. A sudden light bulb moment—it all made sense. He turned to his associate, 'I've got it. I worked it out.' Cullen turned to Garrett. 'The cop, he was screwing her, right?'

The youth looked on, a blank expression painted across his face. 'What?'

'Keep up, christ sake,' said Cullen. 'Her and the cop—they were lovers, the two of them, going at it—behind his back.'

Cullen addressed Garrett. 'And you found out. Didn't you, Martin? You made the cheating bitch pay with her own life. Shit. You're one cold, unfeeling bastard. I'll say that for you.'

Cullen signalled to his associate, two fingers beckoning him. 'Sod this. We're out of here. Leave this little menage for the Old Bill.'

'But he's seen our faces.'

Cullen considered the dilemma. 'Look at the state of him. He's a loon. They'll bang him up on the mental ward. I don't think we've got anything to worry about from Martin Garrett.'

'And what about the copper?' said the youth.

Cullen grinned, the prospect of taking Reid hostage appealing to his sense of malice. 'Bring him along for the ride. He could still be useful.'

Garrett collapsed. Didn't even register Cullen had left. He reached out to her, his hand lingering mid-air, denying the urge to touch her face. His gaze dropped to the marks on her throat, unable to comprehend how he could do such a thing to his own wife.

He backed away, the truth too painful to decipher, seeking refuge in the darkened corner of the garage. There he huddled, his arms wrapped around his legs—staring at the mass of polythene.

Garrett tried to make sense of the last twenty-four hours, nothing more than a mash of fragmented memories. Everything led to this point, the headaches, the sickness, the endless cycle of arguments, the rage that burned within. It all slotted together like the missing pieces of a jigsaw puzzle.

He remembered the way she'd looked at him; her face hard and unforgiving as he'd held the *Dear John* note. Then she'd mocked him saying, 'you're not the only one with secrets.'

Something snapped, he'd swung forward, grabbing her, pushing her face down onto the bed, twisting her arms up high into the middle of her back.

Despite her protestations that she couldn't breathe, he'd forced her head down further into the duvet. Lost in the moment—his mind awash with rage, he couldn't allow her to leave. He'd kept his grip solid, watching as her body bucked and flailed before coming to rest.

By the time he released his grip, Maria's lifeless body lay splayed amongst the duvet covers. He'd tried mouth to mouth, before reverting to heart massage. He knew the basic principle—but nothing worked.

Realising it was futile, he'd slumped to the bedroom floor, head in hands, rocking back and forth. Repeating the same words over and over. 'No, no, no...'

Garrett remembered thinking he'd only held her for a few seconds. He'd pulled himself from the floor. She couldn't die. Not like this. Not Maria, not his wife. He'd shook her, pleading with her to wake up.

But there was no change.

Desperation setting in, Garrett checked her wrist. Any sign of life - he'd take anything.

Despite the cool damp air and numbing chill of the concrete floor seeping into her bones, cold pools of sweat covered Maria's body as she lay under the polythene.

Fear and adrenaline concocted together as she realised either Garrett or his newfound friends could still lurk in the darkest recess of the shadows.

Four minutes elapsed. During which she'd kept her breathing controlled and shallow, not daring to move a fraction, for fear of alerting Garrett or his captors.

Raised voices from the kitchen suggested they were on the move. She had to act. Maria crushed any remaining doubts as she slithered from beneath the sheeting. She raised her bound wrists to her mouth. Securing the broken scissor handle between her

teeth, she moved her wrists backwards and forwards along the serrated edge of the blade.

The first cut missed, biting into fresh skin, the sharp pain causing her to wince as warm blood spilled onto her forearms and face. Maria realigned the scissor blade, ignoring the torn skin, she hacked through the tape. With her hands free, she leaned forward, slicing through the ankle restraints.

Maria rose to her feet, unsteady at first, taking a second to gain her balance. She skulked across to the internal door, pulling it a little way towards her as she listened to the raised voices. It was difficult to hear every word, but the gist of the argument revolved around whether to take Reid hostage, leaving Garrett for the police.

One of them wanted to burn the house down. 'Three dead bodies,' he said. 'Nice and clean—no trace.'

Her mind made. It was now or never.

Fearing she might not get another chance, Maria crept along the hallway to the front door. She reached for the lock, a tentative glance over her shoulder, before focusing on making her escape. She twisted the grey oval shape left, then right. The door refused to budge. They'd locked it from the inside.

Fate had decided for her—Maria crouched in the shadows and waited.

Iris Johnson picked up the phone, a slight tremor to the hand. She hesitated. *What if she was wrong?* Last thing she wanted was to cause trouble. She knew what they thought of her. *Batty old mare, busybody, nosey bitch.* Wasn't like it was a revelation, she'd heard it all before in the workplace. Story of her life. People just never seemed to get her.

None of the neighbours ever said it to her face. Most of the Close's residents were far too busy to engage in conversation beyond the usual pleasantries. Young professional types—rushing from A to B. Never finding the time to stop and take stock.

Iris didn't blame them. They had their own lives to lead. Besides, she was happiest in her own company. Come to think of it, she'd never been comfortable in social situations. People were hard to read, and easy to misinterpret. These days they

called it social anxiety. Back in her day, they labeled people like Iris odd or awkward.

At sixty-nine Iris realised peoples' opinions didn't matter so much. Least, that's what she told herself. Truth was, she was a sensitive soul. Her insecurities skin deep. Below the surface, hidden from view.

In retirement, she'd retreated to the comfort of the electric fire and safety barrier of the net curtains. Iris structured her days, swapping out the regimented admin duties of the office, replaced with a daily calendar. She ran a tight schedule. A mixture of daytime soaps, quizzes and home improvement shows. Peppered with regular tea breaks, and the unconscious window hovering, monitoring the comings and goings of the other residents.

The recent activity at number 9 piqued her interest. The raft of visitors over the last 24 hours, unprecedented.

First, there was the girl with auburn hair driving the jeep, arriving close to midnight. Iris was sure she'd stayed over. *But where was Martin Garrett's wife?* Come to think of it, she'd seen neither hide nor hair of her for a couple of days.

Then there was the Volkswagen Golf—parked up. *Why was he there, watching and waiting, but doing nothing?* By the time Iris clocked the Chrysler, lurking at the far end of the cul-de-sac, she was convinced something was amiss.

She'd observed as the three occupants alighted the vehicle, an older man and two rough looking teens. Iris wasn't one to cast aspersions but couldn't help thinking they wouldn't look out of place on the *Crime-Watch* TV programme's *Most Wanted* line up.

Iris monitored their footsteps. To her annoyance, the landline began ringing. She prayed it would ring off, but the caller was persistent. *Could be important.*

Iris tore herself away from surveillance duty. By the time she'd hung up the unwanted home insulation cold-call, the trio were walking past the front of her window.

She'd watched as one of the youth's passed something to the older man. A fleeting glance. The movement, well-versed and fluid. Completed mid-step, the object deposited and concealed within the man's jacket.

What if it was a gun?

The female corpse, wrapped in polythene, wasn't part of the plan.

Shaken, not that he'd admit it, not even to himself—Cullen needed an out. Problem was, he couldn't risk losing face.

He closed his eyes and straightened up. *Get a grip.*

Truth was, reality collided head-on with his self-induced fantasy, the one he liked to portray to the outside world.

A small-time dealer with delusions of grandeur. He was in over his head. Flying way above his comfort zone. He didn't do corpses. That meant serious jail time, and no way was he going back. Not after last time.

All he wanted—was to be out of there.



MARIA WATCHED as the three figures made for the front door.

Cullen in the lead, key in hand.

She crouched, waiting for the moment to strike. One chance to make it count, her one and only chance to get it right.

Cullen never saw it coming; too preoccupied fleeing the scene. Fumbling with the key, attempting to disengage the double locking system. He made for an easy target.

Maria launched herself from the shadows, attacking with banshee-like ferocity.

Cullen's two younger associates bolted for the safety of the kitchen, leaving Cullen alone and exposed.

Cullen turned.

Without warning, Maria swung the scissors down, plunging them deep into his shoulder and neck. He'd moved left, trying to block her strike, deflecting the attack with his forearm. His reactions too slow, as the scissor blade sliced into the primary artery.

Cullen staggered, then lost balance. He leaned back against the wall, pressing a hand to his neck, a look of disbelief plastered across his face, as if to say, why me?

A moment later he slumped to the floor.

Maria searched both hands for the key—found nothing. But how? He'd just had it. She'd seen it with her own eyes. Maria checked his pockets and the immediate surrounding area. Zero.

Panic took hold. Maria dropped to her knees, both arms making sweeping arcs, desperate to locate the key.

The seconds ticking away; she grabbed Cullen's face. Teeth clenched. 'Where is it?' she said.

Cullen's mouth moved, trying to form the words, but he was already too far gone.

Out of time. The voices in the kitchen animated as they drew closer, readying for the counter-attack in their bid to escape.

Maria eyed the front door, then snapped her head to the sounds coming from the other side of the kitchen door. Whatever her thought process - it had to be now.

Her options, scant. She could slink back into the shadows, take refuge in the garage, and hope to God they didn't go on the offence. If they did, she'd be no better than a wounded animal caught in the headlights.

No time to hesitate. Scissor blade poised towards the kitchen door, Maria launched herself up the stairs, taking two at a time.

She hit the top riser as the two youths sprang from the kitchen, armed with stainless steel knives, liberated from Maria's own wooden knife block. The

irony wasted as they sprinted for the door, hauling Reid's bloodied pulp in tow.

'The key. Where's the key?' they shouted.

Cullen managed to point towards the lock. There it was. The only place Maria hadn't looked, and the most obvious.

The scrawny youth dragged Cullen to his feet, while the other seized the door and flung it open. In tandem, both man-handled Cullen through the doorway and down the drive towards the car, leaving Reid slumped half in and half out of the house.

Discarded on the backseat of the Chrysler, Cullen struggled to focus, his eyesight a continuous myopic blur. He'd lost track of time, drifting in and out of consciousness. No longer able to distinguish between reality and the imagined. He tried to prop himself up on one elbow, keeping his other hand free to stem the flow of blood from his neck.

Death drew closer as he shivered against the cold. Cullen thought he saw the lid of the boot spring open. Or maybe it was his mind playing tricks. He thought he heard indistinct voices, then a loud thud as something heavy shook the entire car suspension.

Whatever it was—imagined or real, the vibration caused him to bite down on the edge of his tongue.

The pain numbed only by the woozy light-headedness he felt, as he fought the urge to give in to sleep.

That's when he caught their eye, saw the exchange. A quick and fleeting glance. He knew that look; the one that said he was a dead man walking. Only thing was his brain hadn't caught up yet.

Cullen tried to speak, the words dying in his mouth as his body entered shut down mode. Perhaps he imagined it, or maybe he was already dead, embarked on his journey into purgatory to plead his case.

Her instinct was to run, to put as much distance between herself and the house as possible, but deep down she knew the truth. This scenario wouldn't play out like that. It ended tonight.

Maria crept along the landing. The broken scissor blade held aloft, ready to strike down any would-be assailant.

Her own savage ferocity had taken her by surprise. She'd struck hard and fast. The blade plunging deep into soft tissue. It happened in seconds, three at most. The adrenaline and the will to survive—driving her forward. The blade caught the key holder, the older one, she assumed to be the boss, somewhere between the shoulder and lower neck area.

Transfixed, the breath caught in the back of her throat. Engrossed, with morbid fascination as the wounded man's legs buckled beneath him.

Dead or alive, he was no longer her concern.

Maria's thoughts turned to Garrett.

It was all down to fate. Some might say an accidental meeting.

Reid was out with work colleagues for an end of shift drink, and Maria was on a pre-planned girly night out. Three glasses of Prosecco had taken their toll as she stumbled into him on her way to the *Ladies'* room.

He used it as an excuse to strike up a conversation, pulling out his warrant card and offering to sit with her, until she sobered up a little. Maria saw it for what it was, a ruse to spend time with her. Happy to go along with it, and glad of the attention. Besides, she needed a bit of excitement in her life. Garrett was unbearable to live with, and over the preceding weeks they'd spoken less than a smattering of words the entire time.

Five minutes in, Reid offered his number; at first

she hesitated. He insisted, in case she ever needed to talk.

Not wanting to come across as rude, Maria took it.

Reid's eyes drifted to the ring. But that was part of the thrill. His thing. Married women out on the prowl. In Reid's head, they were all the same, anything to relieve the boredom and monotony of their home life.

Two days later, after another argument with Garrett, Maria found the number scribbled down. She'd forgotten all about it, discarded on a scrap piece of paper at the bottom of her bag. She hadn't risked keying it into her phone because Garrett was paranoid at the best of times and checked her contact list without permission or warning.

Her devious intent brought a smile to her face. *Why the hell not?* she thought, as she held his number in her hand, trembling a little at the thought of phoning the gallant stranger. Ten seconds later, she'd tapped his number in and hit the call button.

Maria wanted to vent, and it was easier to do that with the man she'd met in a drunken haze rather than a close friend. She needed someone who wouldn't judge, and Reid could be that guy. Besides, he had a spark about him, something Garrett lost long ago.

They met up out of town. Reid selected the

perfect spot away from prying eyes. The Millers Crossing Restaurant Hotel ran adjacent to the busy A46 carriageway and provided sufficient anonymity. A place they could both blend in amongst the raft of weary commuters looking for a convenient pit-stop on their way home and the business types that used it for hosting affordable, out-of-town team building and conference events.

Reid booked a room, not to be presumptuous, but on the off chance events might develop at speed. *Better to be prepared*, he thought. Going on experience, and confident in his own seduction technique, knowing if things were going well, they'd be back in the self-contained studio apartment after a few drinks, ripping and tearing at each other's clothes.

He wasn't wrong.



MARIA WAS quick to exploit the fact Reid could prove to be her ticket to a new life. Portraying herself as a woman on the edge, trapped in a loveless marriage, she took every opportunity to goad him into action.

Over the weeks and months that followed, she reeled him in, drip feeding just enough information about Garrett, playing on and exaggerating what she referred to as his violent outbursts.

Via a series of illicit hook-ups, Maria convinced Reid she loved him and couldn't wait to move in and

set up home as a couple. The only hurdle—monetary circumstance. The house, everything. It was all in Garrett's name. What was she to do? Maria couldn't walk away, she'd invested too much to leave it all behind.

As time went on, Reid's behaviour mimicked a lovesick adolescent. He couldn't bear the thought of Maria in the same house as Garrett, let alone his bed. He wanted him gone, out of her life—for good. Despite her reasoning to stay, Reid begged her to leave, to move in with him.

As Reid saw it, he had the money and the means to look after her. So why wait? They could set up home and start a new life together. Maria could file for divorce with immediate effect. By his reckoning, a battered wife fearing for her life with the right solicitor could negotiate a settlement in less than six months.

Events took on a life of their own the day Maria turned up with swelling to the side of her face. Fresh red marks and light purplish bruising to her right eye, hidden by sunglasses and make-up. Enough to convince Reid, Garrett had to go—by whatever means necessary.

His initial instinct was to go after him, track him down, then beat the daylights out of him. But that wouldn't do. Reid needed to play it smart, besides he couldn't risk losing his career, not if he wanted to provide for Maria.

Garrett wasn't stupid, he knew she was seeing someone within the first couple of weeks of the affair. At first, he noticed the subtle changes, like the way she wore her hair on certain days. Then came the gradual change in her work clothes, sexier tops that accentuated her curves, and tighter, shorter skirts evident on Wednesdays and Fridays of each week.

She'd also taken to wearing Chanel Number 5 perfume, even though she knew it irritated his sinuses. The conclusive proof, if he still needed it, materialised after a search of the closet—new, sexy black Agent Provocateur lingerie, Maria's blatant two-finger salute. *Screw you, Garrett.*

Part of him couldn't blame her, he was hell to live with, and although he wasn't proud of it, he'd hit her. He tried to reconcile himself with the fact that it

was a moment of blind rage, but it wasn't an isolated incident. He was more like his old man than he cared to admit. Although he'd apologised, the guilt ate away at him; he knew then, things would never be the same between them. He'd crossed the line.

Their relationship continued on a downward spiral. Garrett buried himself in his work, putting in longer hours at the office, pretending it would all come good and life at home would work itself out. When it didn't, he turned to drink.

Hearing the unmistakable crunch of metal grinding against metal, Garrett risked a peek from the outer edge of the bedroom curtain.

Chantry Close coming alive with activity, he watched as police officers ushered neighbours off doorsteps and away from windows. The most action it had witnessed in a lifetime—enough to keep Mrs Johnson going for the next decade.

Garrett cast his eye towards the end of the Close, to the smoke rising from the crumpled bonnet of Cullen's, metallic bronze 3 litre Chrysler CDI. A botched attempt to ram its way to freedom now lying in situ against the ruined side panel of an unmarked, dark blue police transit van.

He watched with keen intent as the two youths got hauled out of the vehicle and face planted the

tarmac under the vigilant gaze of the armed response unit.

A police photographer opened the offside rear passenger door and was busy videoing and taking stills of the back seat, directed by a plain-clothes officer.

Could only mean one thing—a dead body. The question was, who?

Three armed police officers stood to the rear of the car. Two of them, their weapons drawn and ready, while the other took a crowbar to the boot. From the urgency of their actions, he guessed this one was still breathing.

He was still processing the thought when Chantry Close illuminated, the incident lamps lighting up the entire area. Garrett squinted, shading his eyes against the halogen glare. He could just make out the two handcuffed figures, bundled into the rear doors of a waiting van.

The isolated creaking of the landing floorboard diverted his attention from the window. Garrett focused on the door, then tiptoed towards it, coming to rest, standing behind it.

Maria entered the room, a two-handed grip on the broken scissors. She'd drawn first blood and wouldn't hesitate to do the same again.

She knew Garrett had to be lurking somewhere.

He waited until she was three paces inside the room, swung the door shut, then lunged.

Maria turned to meet her attacker, face on.

At first, he thought she'd punched him. Winded but not out, he stumbled forwards, losing his balance before crashing to the hessian rug. He tried to pull himself to his elbows and knees, but didn't have the strength. A light sheen of sweat smattered across his forehead. Garrett ignored the searing pain in his gut. He rolled sideways, trying to prop himself up, to no avail as the pain worsened.

Resigned to his fate, he slunk back down, his head resting on the edge of the rug.

'Guess you finally got your wish,' he seethed, the warm blood seeping through his shirt, turning it crimson.

Maria stood motionless, still clasping the scissors, ready to finish the job.

Garrett pressed his palm to the wound in his lower abdomen, turned it outwards and stared at the bloodstain. 'You weren't messing about, were you?'

Time running out, his breath shortening to rasps. 'How d'you do it? You were dead.' He gulped for air. 'I tried to bring you back...'

Caught in a trance, Maria watched as Garrett's life ebbed closer to the brink. Her eyes drawn to his pallid, sweaty features. Intoxicated, caught in the hypnotic rhythm of each breath, wondering which would be his last.

Maria held all the cards. His fate in her hands. The side of her mouth twitched, turning to a smirk. Gone, as the thought of standing in a courtroom on a manslaughter charge dawned upon her.

The risk was too great.

Still holding the blade, she crouched next to him, careful to remain out of his grasp. 'It doesn't have to be like this. We can put it all of behind us. Start again. Move away, a fresh start - for both of us.'

Garrett lifted his head two inches from the rug. 'You can't play God, Maria.'

Maria's face twisted, cruel and sharp. 'I'm not playing at anything.'

'Give it up—put a stop to this madness,' said Garrett, his head slumping back to the rug.

Maria sat back against the edge of the bed and let out a sigh. 'Oh, spare me the self-righteous bullshit, please. You're not exactly innocent. Maybe you've forgotten who attacked who? Look at my neck, Garrett, those aren't self-inflicted. Any police officer will see that a mile off. And who do you think they're going to believe?'

Garrett winced as he struggled for air. 'We both know the truth, Maria. I might not be the perfect husband, but I'm no premeditated killer, not like you.'

Maria leant closer. 'Is that what you think of me? All I ever did was love you, but that was never good enough.'

Garrett's pupils dilated as he tried to deal with a sudden spike of pain. 'Who you trying to convince yourself or...?'

She looked at him, her eyes cold. 'You never trusted me. Even in the beginning. You never let me in.'

'What are you talking about? I never...' his words tailed off.

'We could have had a family. Could have made it work. But oh no, that was never part of the grand plan. Wasn't in your remit. It was all about

you, Garrett. Your terms. Your vision for *our* future.'

Garrett tried to manoeuvre on the rug. 'Like it would've made a difference. You and lover boy...' he closed his eyes to the pain.

Maria edged closer. 'Stay with me, Garrett—don't you die on me, you bastard. Not like this.' Risking contact. She checked his wrist for a pulse. 'Garrett?'

Pressing two fingers to his neck, she tried the vein. The pulse faint, but present. 'Come on, stay with me.'

Short on options, Maria struggled to lift Garrett's weight, turning, then dragging his carcass towards the bedroom door, hauling him across the landing to the top of the stairs.

With the jolt of the top riser, Garrett's eyes snapped open. 'Jesus,' he cried out, as heightened levels of pain struck his body.

'Come on. Work with me. We're almost there now. Come on, Garrett, we'll get you to a doctor.'

Unable to take anymore, he grabbed at her arm, the one holding the scissors. 'It's over, Maria. It's too late.'

Maria's voice took on a steely harshness, 'you're coming with me.'

Garrett sneered a bloodied smile. 'That's my girl. Self preservation, right to the end.'

Maria ignored Garrett, tugged her arm free, took

hold of his feet, then bundled him down the stairs, step by step.

At the bottom she grappled with his weight, steering him closer to the door. 'We're walking out of here... Together, now move,' she said, half dragging, half carrying, supporting his weight with her shoulders.

Too weak to resist, Garrett could do nothing. 'They're going to lock you up...' He would have continued but stopped short, sucking in each breath through gritted teeth as the vibrations caused by his feet dragging across the floor tore at his abdomen.

Maria ignored his jibe and focused on the door.

Garrett wasn't done. '... And when they find out what you did...'

'Save it for someone who gives a shit.' Maria spat the words like a venomous snake, then hauled his dead-weight towards the front door.

Police sharpshooters took up position, forming an arc as they trained their sights on the front door and awaited further instruction.

Intel suggested there was at least one perpetrator still hiding in the building. Then there was the added headache concerning the welfare of the female hostage. The facts remained vague. Add into the mix the traffic cop, Reid, claiming he'd forced entry to the dwelling after hearing screams.

None of it added up.

Inspector Don Kenwood focused his attention on the house, then massaged his right temple with two fingers, the way he did when he was calculating a problem. The traffic cop's version of events had more holes than M6 spaghetti junction.

Kenwood wanted to give the young officer the

benefit of the doubt. Perhaps his confusion was down to concussion. After the beating he'd taken, it wasn't beyond reason to get the facts muddled. Maybe he wasn't thinking straight.

Kenwood ran through it again. Whichever way he turned it, Reid's account failed to explain, as an off-duty police officer, why he was in the locale at the time of the incident. Then there was the speeding ticket issued to the homeowner—Martin Garrett.

Complicated, but that wasn't his concern. He'd leave that to the realm of Internal Investigation's. As Chief Firearms Officer, Kenwood's primary focus was to bring the siege to a quick and peaceful conclusion, preventing any further loss of life.

He stepped down from the command trailer and reached for the loudhailer, then made his way to the line. 'This is Inspector Kenwood of The West Midlands Police Armed Response Unit.'

Maria took the first tentative steps, dragging Garrett in tow. The blinding halogen lamps illuminating Chantry Close like a Premier League stadium.

Garrett's arms draped around her neck, she shuffled forwards. Her own body forming a human shield. One arm wrapped around his waist to support his balance, the other clutching the blood-stained scissors. The tip of the blade brushing against the side of his torso.

The odds of making it—stacked against her. Each movement tracked through the crosshairs of the Armed Response Unit, but she dare not release the grip on her makeshift weapon. Not while Garrett remained a threat.

'Don't shoot... Please... We're coming,' shouted

Maria. Her eyes squinting to thin slits, voice cracked hoarse with emotion.

Kenwood rubbed at the two day white stubble on his chin. The intel received was patchy. The initial report suggested Maria Garrett was already deceased at the scene.

He watched the unfolding scenario as the blood-spattered ICI female advanced towards the cordon, a wounded ICI male part hidden by her own body mass.

‘What the hell?’ he said out loud to no one in particular.

Kenwood turned to his second in command, ‘get that traffic cop up here now.’

The Inspector kept his eye fixed on the two figures. He spoke into the police radio attached to his tunic. ‘Alpha Team, hold position, do not engage, repeat, do not engage.’

Kenwood muted the channel and raised the loud-hailer to his mouth. ‘DROP THE WEAPON. STAND STILL AND PLACE YOUR HANDS ON TOP OF YOUR HEAD. DROP TO YOUR KNEES. DO IT NOW.’

Seconds later, Reid appeared on scene, flanked by two uniformed officers.

Kenwood gave him a cursory sideways glance. He noted the tinfoil blanket and steaming mug of black coffee clutched between both hands. ‘You a marathon runner now, Reid?’

Two thick lines creased Reid's brow, unsure how to interpret the question, let alone answer.

Kenwood refocused his attention on the two approaching ICIs. 'Making the most of the hospitality, I see.'

Reid didn't a chance to answer.

'Can you confirm that's her, Constable, is that Maria Garrett?' said Kenwood, pointing towards the house.

Reid mouthed her name, 'Maria?'

'Yes, Maria Garrett. Is that her?' said Kenwood, his irritation clear.

Kenwood quelled his temper. 'Take a good look, Constable,' he said, pointing at the female figure advancing in the direction of the cordon.

Reid stepped closer to the tape and squinted. His voice distant and disbelieving, 'That's her... She's alive. My God, I thought she was dead.'

He ducked under the tape and began moving forwards. 'She's alive... Maria...' His voice gaining confidence, 'Maria.'

'For Christ's sake. Somebody grab that idiot before he gets himself killed,' barked Kenwood.

Two officers swamped Reid, grappling him to the ground, before removing him from the line of fire.

'Get him back here, behind the line,' shouted Kenwood.

The uniforms presented Reid to the Inspector.

'I don't know what the hell you think you're

playing at, or what you've got yourself mixed up in, Reid. And at this precise moment, I don't give a shit. My concern is preservation of life. That means you stay out of my way, and away from my team. Understood?

Reid nodded agreement.

'I didn't catch that. I said, do you understand?'

'Yes,' said Reid, through clenched teeth.

'Yes Sir,' corrected Kenwood, glowering back towards the PC.

Reid averted his stare. 'Yes Sir, I understand.'

Kenwood lingered with the toxic stare. 'Good. Now we're all clear, piss off out of it, and let my team get on with their job.'

Reid turned to go, his two man uniformed escort following suit.

'Reid, one more thing,' said Kenwood, looking back towards the house. 'Tell me that's not Martin Garrett, she's dragging out.'

The PC glanced back to the emerging figures. He hung his head, puffed out his cheeks, then raised his eyes, glassy tears beginning to form at the corners. 'That's him,' he said, shaking his head. 'I don't get it... Just don't get it at all.'

Kenwood shook his head, slow and deliberate. 'If I was you, Reid, I'd contact my Federation Rep. I'm guessing a lot of people are going to want to talk to you.' He let the revelation hit home before continuing. 'Go on, get out of my sight.'

The two uniforms led Reid away. His thoughts clouded, still trying to process that Maria was alive, let alone compute the fact she appeared to be attempting to save the life of her estranged husband.

Kenwood turned to his second in command. 'Make sure they keep him on a short rein. I don't want this operation compromised. He shows any signs of trouble, cuff him, read him his rights and stick him in the back of the van.'

'Understood, Sir.'

Kenwood refocused his attention on the scene. 'Alpha Team, sit-rep?'

Kenwood's earpiece crackled into life, 'Alpha 3 to Control: No clear shot, repeat, no clear shot.'

'Hold position, Alpha 3—do not engage unless there is a direct threat to life.'

'Copy that, Control. Alpha 3, holding position.'

Kenwood spoke again. His voice directed towards the two bloodied figures. 'DROP THE WEAPON. STOP WHERE YOU ARE. KNEEL ON THE GROUND WITH YOUR HANDS ON YOUR HEAD.'

Maria ignored the command and continued moving forwards.

'God damn it.' Kenwood raised the loudhailer. 'STOP. DROP THE WEAPON. I REPEAT, STOP - STOP WHERE YOU ARE. DO IT NOW, OR WE WILL SHOOT.'

Fatigue and exertion taking its toll, Maria's pace

slowed to a crawl. The end in sight. No going back. She kept moving forwards.

‘Alpha 2 to Control. No clear shot—target hidden. Repeat no clear visual.’

Kenwood watched with bated breath. ‘Affirmative, hold your position, Alpha 2. Repeat, hold position.’

‘Alpha 1 to Control. No clear shot.’

‘Copy that. Hold position, Alpha 1.’

Time running out, Kenwood issued his final warning. ‘STOP. WE WILL SHOOT. DROP THE WEAPON. NOW.’

The gap closing. Only thirty paces separating them. Close enough for Maria to read the expressions on faces in the crowd. Her heartbeat quickened. Almost there.

Kenwood closed his eyes and shook his head. ‘Alpha Team sit-rep?’

Maria began a tentative step forward, dragging Garrett towards the line.

He lost his footing somewhere between the kerbstone and loose shale in the road. White-hot pain seared through his body. His agony sounding like a battle cry, piercing the night air.

Maria craned her neck, her stare fixed on his eyes, stumbling as her ankle gave out under the sustained pressure.

Garrett seized his chance. He made a grab for the scissor blade.

Maria's body projected forwards as the two of them struggled for control.

Garrett's hand clutched the blade, then yanked it upward. Doing so exposed his torso for a fraction of a second. Enough to engage the marksman's crosshairs.

Three shots found their target.

Maria looked out from the patrol car's rain-spattered window. Nine days and twelve hours elapsed since the siege. The first time she'd returned home.

The police officer opened the car door, escorted her through the crime scene tape, past the defunct white forensic tent, concealing the spot where Garrett's body had fallen, cold against the asphalt.

On the far side of the Close, two white-suited SOCOs were busy with their kit.

Maria's eyes darted over. *What were they looking for?*

The police escort clocked her interest. 'Just tying up a few loose ends, nothing to worry about. Best leave them to it,' he said, taking her by the arm, ushering her towards the front door.

Maria wanted answers, but couldn't risk putting herself in the frame by asking too many questions.

Her thoughts turned to Garrett. The police liaison officer informed her of his cremation the day before. A low key event. A few close friends and acquaintances paying their last respects.

The press had gatecrashed, trying to get the inside track on Garrett's private life. Rumour abound, six-figure sums touted in return for an exclusive. The tabloid vultures ever hungry for a double page scoop. Their interest piqued by an unofficial leak. A so-called reliable source, pertaining to Garrett's death, an apparent suicide.

Death by Cop.



TODAY MARKED the rest of Maria's life, a new epoch. She was packing up, saying goodbye to the past and moving on.

The investigation—ongoing; the police following enquiries about Garrett's involvement with Cullen, a well-known low to mid-level figure in the criminal fraternity. Turned out, the two youths picked up at the scene, little more than addicts. Scumbag skag-heads, working for Cullen on an ad hoc basis, in return for a cheap fix. Both—fast tracked to local remand centres, awaiting trial.

Maria was still under counselling, but making

progress. Recent conversations centering on taking a holiday. Seeing it as a chance to put recent events into perspective. As things stood, Maria wasn't a person of interest. Having given the inquiry her full cooperation, she was free to come and go as she pleased.

Garrett's life insurance policy was still to pay out. Married at the time of his death, Maria remained the legal next of kin. Entitled to the lot. A cool two hundred grand.

Maria wasn't stupid, she had to play the long game so as not to arouse suspicion. A widow, with societal expectations to fulfill. She'd give it a couple of months, a suitable mourning period for a battered wife seeking a new lease of life.

In her head, she'd mapped it all out, leaving behind the grey skies of England for a place in the sun. Thoughts of the Caribbean and walking bare-foot along the beach at sunset, sipping cocktails, served by a handsome stranger, appealed to her sense of adventure.

She reminded herself that she wasn't home and dry, not yet. For now, she needed to keep Reid on side; still love-struck, phoning and texting her daily. She'd played the traumatised victim card. At first it had worked—he'd backed off, but now he was becoming ever more persistent.

Truth was, Reid had served his purpose, she'd tried to let him down nice and gentle, but he wasn't

getting the message. If needed she'd opt for a more direct approach. A call to his superior officer might do the trick, enough to warn him off.

If that didn't work, she'd make trouble for him. It wasn't in either of their interests for the affair to come to light. Worse for Reid than her. The stakes were high, but it was a risk worth taking. A gamble that could end his career or even put Maria back in the frame.

EPILOGUE

SIX MONTHS LATER

Helen stood on the balcony of her rented villa in St Lucia. Closed her eyes and let the warm evening sea breeze wash over her. Under normal circumstances, an ideal getaway destination.

She'd been in the country for eighty-two hours. Prior to which, twenty-seven hours airborne, flying three different time zones to reach the island.

Helen placed the glass to her lips and emptied the contents, the warm spiced rum afterglow helping to dull the lingering effects of jet lag.

She raised the binoculars to her eye. Her source was right.

True to form, Maria was in place, drink in hand—entertaining for the third night in succession. The potential mark, ten or twelve years her senior, a heart attack victim waiting to happen.

Maybe that was her plan. Helen pushed the thought aside. Her journalistic instinct, honed from sixteen years of investigating hard news stories around the globe, screamed there was more to Garrett's death than suicide.

Talking to the British Police had proven a fruitless exercise. Her hopes for justice now laying in the hands of the island's local constabulary.

She'd known Garrett for most of her life and whichever way it played out, she owed it to him, to get to the truth. Helen poured a single measure, then necked it. *Dutch Courage*, she told herself.

Helen couldn't recall their first meeting, but had never taken to Maria on account of her jealousy and scheming to ruin the platonic friendship between herself and Garrett. Factor in her job, nine or ten months of the year overseas on assignment, all of which made regular contact near impossible.

She owed Garrett more than she could ever repay. That fateful night in the Mercers Arms would always haunt her, but Garrett promised to find the culprits and bring them to justice. True to his word, where the police failed, Garrett succeeded.

Helen took one last look through the binoculars. *Time to go.*

Using the cover story that Maria was an old college friend, Helen bribed the night staff with a hundred dollar US bill. Enough to convince them to

allow her to deliver room service champagne to Room 44.

Helen made her way up the stairs to the fourth floor. Arriving at the door, she knocked and waited, sweat dripping from her forehead. As predicted, Maria had ordered a fresh bucket as the clock struck 11:30pm, right after her latest conquest disappeared into the night, scrabbling his way along the hillside back to his unsuspecting wife.

It seemed Maria was adept at playing the merry widow, developing a penchant for rich, expat middle-aged men, of which there seemed to be an abundance on the island.

Maria's slurred, inebriated tone instructed Helen to enter. She obliged, pushing down on the handle, greeted by the cool breeze blowing in from the balcony as she opened the door to the suite.

'Just set it down on the table and pour me a glass, would you? There's a ten-dollar tip on the side unit. Be sure to take it on your way out,' she said in her dismissive tone.

Helen stood watching as Maria swayed, her hips moving to a silent rhythm. She thought perhaps Maria was wearing earbuds, listening to her favourite track, whilst looking out over the bay. Or maybe she was humming a tune, moving to her own routine.

Helen's attention shifted to the cloud formation masking the half moon. The local weather report

forecasting a storm, destined to hit landfall by the early hours.

She took the bottle from the ice bucket and advanced through the chiffon veil and out onto the balcony.

‘Hello Maria,’ she said, giving her a start.

Recognising the English accent, Maria whipped her head round, but still couldn’t comprehend how in God’s name Helen Travis was standing in her hotel room. ‘How the hell...?’

‘It’s been a while, hasn’t it? You look well. Good to see you’re taking Martin’s death in your stride.’

‘Get out—now. I’ve nothing to say to you. You chase me all the way here looking for a story. A bloody scoop, is that why you’re here? What’s your angle, personal insight into my marriage? You’ve got some nerve.’

‘No story, Maria, just the truth. One on one. No voice recorder, not even a pen and notepad. I just need to hear it from your lips.’

Maria’s eyes blazed. ‘What, you want to know how your beloved Garrett beat me, and tried to kill me?’

‘So you say, and we’ll get to that, but first, why don’t you start with your police officer friend, PC Reid? He’s quite the talker—after a couple of drinks.’

Maria’s eyes narrowed to slits on hearing Reid’s name.

Helen noted the recognition. Straight to the nerve, she thought. A silent victory.

‘Oh, don’t worry; he divulged nothing incriminating, but enough for me to get the gist. Like how you both met. That you confided you were in a loveless marriage to a violent alcoholic.’

Helen paused, letting the accusation bed in. ‘You fed him a line, Maria. Had him eating right out of the palm of your hand. Drew him in, hook, line and sinker.’

‘I’m calling security,’ said Maria, but making no attempt to move.

‘Be my guest, please do, and while you’re at it, get the call patched through to Inspector Lowry, I’m sure he’d love to hear your version, whatever that is,’ said Helen.

Maria swayed against the wind. ‘What’s this really about? Money—is that what you want? Think you’re entitled, because you were the one true genuine love of his miserable life?’

Helen shook her head. ‘I’m not here for money, just the truth.’

‘The truth. You want the truth? Hmm—Okay.’

‘Whatever it is, spit it out,’ said Helen.

‘You think you’ve got it all worked out, don’t you? Look at you—all smug and self-righteous. A right little Miss Marple. Well, I’ll tell you, Helen Travis, Miss Big Shot Award-Winning Journalist, you know nothing.’

Helen took a step closer to Maria, close enough to smell the alcohol on her breath. ‘I know you wanted him dead. That you couldn’t wait any longer, and that you already knew about his illness. Your golden ticket, wasn’t it? Bide your time, wait for the insurance money to come through. And just in case, on the off chance, you took up with the dashing PC Reid. A little extra insurance if plan A failed to materialise.’

Maria drained the remains of her glass. ‘You stupid cow.’ She turned her back and looked out over the bay. ‘He never wanted to be with me. He wanted you.’

Helen absorbed the information, but said nothing.

Maria spun back around to face her. ‘What d’you think that’s like to live with day in day out? Knowing your husband desires his teenage crush. He never wanted kids—not with me anyway, but you already knew that. He confided in you, rather than me. And you want to know what pissed me off the most? You were always bloody well there, in the background, in his thoughts, day and night.’

Helen took a step closer. ‘Maria, listen, Garrett not wanting a family wasn’t anything to do with me. It petrified him. He didn’t want to turn into his own father. So if you’re looking for a scapegoat, blame Stan Garrett.’

Maria teetered as a gust of wind whipped up,

causing her to loll against the white blistered paintwork of the wooden railing. ‘Yeah, that’s what he told me, and I went along with it. Even believed him. Took it at face value. Least until the night he got bladdered and blurted it out. Only time he ever spoke the truth. Guess what he said?’

Helen looked on, her eyebrows raised, offering no verbal response.

‘No. You’ve no clue? He said, she’s the only one who understands, the only one who gets me.’

Helen stood frozen to the spot. She remained silent, absorbing the information.

‘I’ve carried that around in my head for the last two years, been eating away at me from the inside,’ said Maria.

‘We were only ever friends—nothing more, I promise,’ said Helen, processing the revelation.

‘Not in his head. Turns out he had a thing for you. The only reason stopping him was you being damaged goods.’

Helen’s voice hardened. ‘What did you say?’

‘Oh, I’m sorry, Helen. Did you think he’d kept your dirty little secret hidden? Well, if it makes you feel better, I found it in the back of a journal, expressing his undying love. Pathetic. The way he went on about coming to terms with the fact you two could never get it on—because of your... Issues.’

‘You’re lying,’ said Helen, spittle flying from the side of her mouth.

Maria offered a glazed grin through her drunken haze. 'Am I? Guess you'll never know. Since he's gone.' She took a step closer, taunting Helen. 'As my mother would say—good riddance to bad rubbish.'

Helen lunged, smashing the Chateau Margaux into the side of Maria's face, opening up a jagged three-inch gash running to the side of her forehead. She stood, transfixed, shocked at her own violent outburst.

Maria held a hand to her ruined face. 'You cut me, you lousy bitch.' She launched herself at Helen, the attack vicious but clumsy.

Being the more sober of the two, Helen fended off the razor like talons with relative ease, then shoved Maria back against the railing. 'Tell me the truth,' she said, grabbing Maria by the hair. 'Tell me, now,' she screamed.

Lost in the moment, Helen heard neither the creak, nor the violent crack as the old colonial wood balustrade gave way.

Time slowed, the scene unfolding as though she was viewing footage from one of her own news stories in slow-motion. Watching the playback, realising the horror as she let go—Maria tumbling backwards over the edge.

Helen took a moment to catch her breath, then dared to peer over the ruined balcony. The effect, immediate. She wished she hadn't looked. Her eye

drawn to Maria's smashed and mangled body lying broken amongst the jagged outcrop.

It was an accident, but who would believe her?

Garrett had taken their secret to the grave and in time Helen would do the same, her debt to him defrayed.



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

MJ Newman is a UK based Crime/Thriller writer. He lives in the Midlands and enjoys taking his dogs for long walks, allowing his mind to wander to the dark side, dreaming up gritty crime thrillers for readers to enjoy.

He uses his own and others experiences to help craft his stories. Having previously worked as a police photographer and a prison tutor he has a tome of stories just waiting to put out there.

His stories are a successful mixture, combining fact and fiction, allowing Newman to delve into the world of both the investigator and the perpetrator, to deliver fast paced edge of the seat genre fiction.



A FINAL NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

Thanks again for taking the time to read *Defrayed*, I do hope you enjoyed it. If that's the case, I'd be very grateful if you would consider leaving a review. Just tap the link and scroll to the bottom of the page:

If you enjoy a mix of gritty noir and hard-boiled crime fiction, why not check out the Crime Syndicate series? The story centres around Malkie Thompson, and the exploits of his Glasgow criminal outfit north and south of the border.

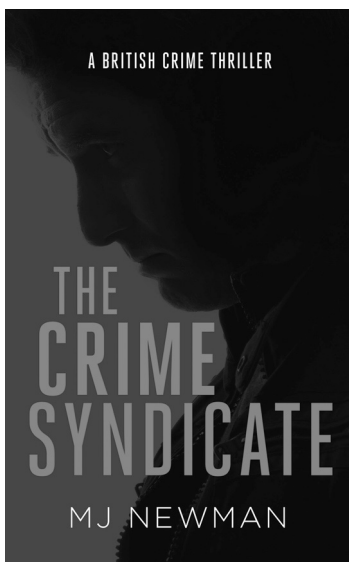
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Book 3: *Walk Amongst The Dead*, sees an ageing Malkie Thompson attempt to hold on to power, despite the overwhelming odds stacked against him.

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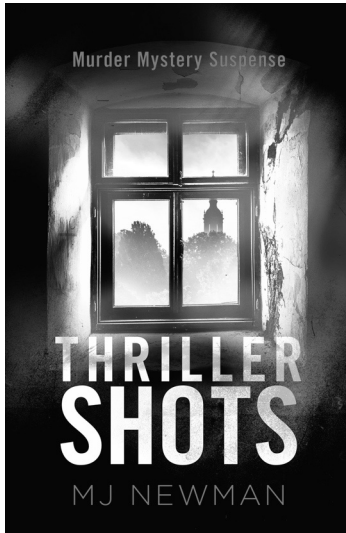
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A BRITISH CRIME THRILLER

THE
CRIME
SYNDICATE

MJ NEWMAN

VIOLENCE IN THE BLOOD (SAMPLE)

PROLOGUE: GLASGOW 1976

Agnes Thompson waits for the knock at the door. Inevitable, same way she feels the dread in the pit of her stomach. Nothing she can do about it. Resigned to it - this her lot. She's accepted it for what it is. Normality. The way it's been since her worthless husband decided upon a disappearing act four months ago.

She looks out from her third story tenement rain battered window, the street below a kaleidoscopic blur. This is the place she calls home, nothing more than a one bedroomed shithole. Rising damp leaving its mark - inky black staccato stains forming a trail along the skirting, finding sanctuary in cold dark corners.

Life was never easy when her husband was around, but this new reality, this is something else.

Agnes takes a long hard drag on her cigarette

and holds it deep in her lungs. If the damp doesn't get her first, she's damned sure the woodbines will do the trick. Part of her welcomes it, *anything's better than this*. This eternal misery she calls life.

That's when the guilt slaps her full on in the face, harder than anything the old man could ever muster. What about Malkie, what will he do when she's not around?

A vision of her sister, Violet, comes into play. Pretty little thing. Long, black ebony hair and big brown eyes that men seem to melt into. She's not what you might call the maternal type. Agnes's younger sister has a liking for the drink and men. In Violet's case, where there's one, the other seems to follow. A surrogate mother in the making? Agnes doubts it.

Three loud successive wraps on the door bring Agnes back from her melancholic daydreaming. She stubs out her cigarette and adjusts her holdups. The special black ones, with the lace spiral pattern at the top. That's what he likes. Last time he called, he made a point of getting her to put them on in front of him.

'Next time,' he said, 'be wearing them.'

Agnes takes a sharp intake of breath. She buoys herself up for the next installment. Looks at herself in the faux art deco mirror, a framework of trapezoid and triangular shapes. She adjusts her hair, then licks her lips. *That time already*. Not that she needs to

check. She can set her watch by him. Or at least she could, until she pawned it. Little good it did - bought some time. Made a small contribution and put a dent in the back payments.

Agnes walks to the door, she pauses one last time. Closes her eyes and tries to block out the reality. *May God forgive me.*

She opens it, her best fake smile plastered across her face.

He's standing, leaning against the doorjamb. Half-smoked cigarette dangling from the side of his mouth. Agnes, ten years his senior but still a good-looking woman. The man facing her, the tenement landlord - McAlister. He's come to collect. Some say he's one to watch. A man in the ascendency. The name of McAlister - one of growing reputation. Feared and respected in equal measure. Rumours emanate around Glasgow. McAlister's not a man you cross. Agnes needs to tread careful, she's got to keep him on-side. Play the game, for little Malkie's sake as much as her own.

Truth is, he's not so little these days. Growing up fast. Spends more time outside the house than in. *Christ knows what he's up to.* She'll take it as a blessing. Agnes doesn't want him around when McAlister comes calling.

The arrangement, as McAlister likes to call it, it's way past the honeymoon period. Gone are the days of small talk and chit-chat. Working off the

payments is nothing more than business - the sex, sterile and functional. Devoid of emotion.

'You look good Agnes,' he says, as a way of greeting, grabbing her by the hips, pulling her to him. Close and intimate, she can feel his urgency pressing up against her.

No escape. His breath, a mixture of tobacco and drink. Agnes tries to wriggle from his grip, but he holds her tight. His hand reaching round the back of her head, he pulls her face to his, then forces his tongue inside her mouth. She wants to gag but needs to play along - at least for now.

'Been thinking about you all morning, Agnes. What I'm gonna do...'

She frees herself, then ushers him inside, away from prying eyes. Agnes closes the door to the outside world. She might be whoring herself to keep a roof overhead, but she's still got her dignity, and no way is she putting on a show for the neighbours.

'You wearing them?' he says.

Agnes nods her head.

'Show me.'

Agnes hoicks up her maroon pleated skirt, three inches beyond the knee. Just enough to offer a taste. She watches as McAlister licks his lips. His stare never leaving her thigh. She takes the material a little higher, enjoying the power of the moment. It's a small win, but she'll take what she can get.

'Stop.'

Agnes frowns, she says nothing. Time to play along.

‘Take it slow,’ says McAlister.

She complies. ‘Like this,’ she whispers, watching as he battles his desire. Agnes teases the dress a centimetre at a time, her stare fixed on the strange expression upon McAlister’s face.

He reaches out to stroke her leg. Agnes bats his hand away - watching as his pupils dilate. His black serpent like eyes lock on to hers. Foreplay done with, he grabs her by the arm and shoves her towards the bedroom.

Malkie brings his leg back, then swings it forward, his foot connects with the crushed can. The force of the kick hoofs the decimated piece of tin forward. His eye follows the trajectory, watching its descent as it lands thirty feet further down the road. He charges forward. Teeth bared, it’s his for the taking. Nothing’s going to stand in his way. He shoulder barges his opponent, adding a jab to the gut as the taller, gangly youth stumbles off to the side.

Malkie shoots for goal, then fist pumps the cold grey sky, watching as the can crosses the line.

‘Fucking beauty.’

His face beaming, he turns to his friend. ‘Come on Frankie, we’re out of here. Let’s go see what your maw’s cooking up on the stove, eh?’

'You're a cheeky bastard, Thompson, and sure enough she'll be glad to see you. Fuck knows why.'

'It's how it is, Frankie. I'm like the prodigal son,' says Malkie, taking a mock bow.

'Aye, you wish.'

'Come on, let's get back to mine. Something I want to pick up on the way.'

'What's that?' says Frankie.

'Nowt to worry about. Little surprise. Something to keep the chill from your bones.'

Malkie and Frank make their way down the road, back towards the house. The two of them talking shit about their exploits and dreaming about the day they'll carve a slice of the city - one to call their own.

'... Frankie, that's why you're my right hand. You and me together, pal. Telling you now, this city won't...'

Malkie stops dead centre of the road, his words tail off then evaporate. Frank continues two paces before realising he's flying solo. He turns. 'What's up, you shat yourself or something?'

Malkie says nothing. He's standing - mute, staring off into the middle distance.

Frank spins on his heel, his eye darting from one side of the road to the other. A cluster of cars, made of a white Mark 1 Ford Escort and a shitty brown Morris Marina with a vinyl roof, sit idle at the kerb-side. Beyond that his eye settles on the olive green Hillman Minx, its glory days long gone, the wing

and sills conceding to rust. He squints, recognition follows. His eyes focus on the object that's got Malkie spooked. To the untrained eye it's a thing of beauty - sky-blue paint job, V8 3 litre engine, the Triumph Stag. For Malkie, it's a gut punch of a reminder.

'Guess you're not coming to mine after-all.'

'No. You get yourself on home, Frankie. I'll wait here a while. Check everything's okay.'

Frank turns to face Malkie's third floor tenement window. 'Want me to stay. You just say the word, it's no bother.'

'No. It's fine. On you go. I got this, Frankie.'

He nods agreement, knowing better than to press Malkie. He's seen that look before. 'Aye. Okay. No bother. Catch you tomorrow.'

Malkie watches Frank disappear from view, then turns his head towards the third-floor window. He takes a pre-rolled cigarette from behind his ear and lights up. The smoke wafting up, stinging at his eyes, but he won't avert his stare. Something compels him to keep watching. His mother, god bless her, thinks she's shielded him from the truth - but Malkie knows the extent to which she'd go to keep them both off the streets.

One day mother, I'll make this right. I promise you that.

Ian McAlister - slum landlord and rising star of the Glasgow underworld. Rumoured to be making

in-roads to the top flight. Feared and respected by all those in the know. To Malkie, all he sees is a man, one that hides behind a flash suit and a sports car. Nothing but fakery and sleight of hand.

Malkie takes out his knife and presses the chrome stud button. A smile broadening on his face as the five-inch blade projects from inside the black and chrome edged handle. He turns it around, holding it up towards the sunlight streaking out from behind greyed alabaster clouds. He takes his time admiring the design of its lethal beauty.

He raises his eyes back towards the window, then plunges the tip into his palm. He drags the cold steel in a downward motion, opening up a two-and-a-half inch gash. There's comfort in its effect as the warm sticky claret pools around the edges of the blade.

Memories of his last street brawl flood into vision. The boy was older, almost a man. Never thought the small kid would strike out at him like that. He had it coming. Malkie gave him a chance, told him to back off. The lanky streak of piss laughed in his face. Malkie knew then he'd carve him a smile - something permanent. A reminder he'd carry forward in life. Every time he looked in the mirror, he'd remember never underestimate the underdog.

It's close to four months since his father went AWOL. Not that that was a problem. Thompson senior went unmissed. He spent most of his time

staring into the bottom of an empty pint glass. What little money he made, he pissed up against the wall.

When he made it home, that's when the real trouble started. His favourite pastime, to knock seven bells out of Malkie's mother. When he'd done with her, he'd start on Malkie. Whatever fate had befallen Thompson senior, Malkie hoped it was something permanent.

Malkie crossed to the kerbside. He made a point of walking round the car. Slow and deliberate, taking his time to admire its design.

He could feel the eyes on him, hidden behind rags that passed for makeshift curtains. Seemed foolish to him - to leave such a fine-looking vehicle unattended. Such was McAlister's ego. Confident that he could park anywhere he wanted, without the need for a minder and the arrogance to forgo the paying of tax to a local to watch over the car.

Malkie tapped the five-inch blade on the door panel, half an inch below the chrome strip. He applied a little more pressure, then walked, dragging the tip of the knife across the paintwork - enough to leave the faintest of scratches. He continued until he'd walked the perimeter of the Triumph Stag twice over.

Satisfied. He admired his handiwork, then retracted the blade and stuck it in his back pocket. He walked the five paces to the tenement door,

opened it, then made his way inside, up three flights of stairs to the place he called home.

At the top of the stairs, Malkie took a moment to right himself. The last place he wanted to be right now was here. He opened the door. Stood there - looking in. His legs unable to move, his feet welded to the spot. He balled his fists and listened. The room - devoid of sound or movement. The bedroom door off to the right - ajar. He crept along, careful to dodge the two floorboards under the rug. The ones the old man had pulled up, a hidey hole to stash his drink money. Neither Malkie nor his mother - supposed to know it was there. His father's secret, along with the rolled up porno mag he kept hidden down there.

Malkie found it the morning after the night before. He'd watched as the old man stumbled in. Part of the usual routine. A little before midnight, enough time for him to sit and brood after closing time, before making his way home. Malkie pretended to be asleep on his mattress, huddled up in the far corner. Experience had taught him it was safer that way. His father entered, mumbling an incoherent rant - arguing with the voices inside his own head, something about Teddy's wake. Then he'd stuffed the notes and coins down into the hole, replaced the boards and rug, before collapsing on the floor. It was Agnes who'd come to his aid, pulled him to his feet, then dragged him to the marital bed.

Seemed his mother had a talent for attracting a certain man. The type who got a kick out of keeping the little woman in her place. At least with the old man, the booze dampened his fire - for the most part. On occasion it morphed into something angrier, more deep-rooted, an unprecedented violence.

Malkie tip-toed midway across the room when McAlister stepped out from the bedroom, tucking in his shirttails. Malkie looked past him, could see his mother lying in the bed, her face turned to the wall.

‘What you doing skulking around out here, son?’

Malkie said nothing - returning the strangers glare.

‘You know who I am?’ said McAlister, moving further into the room, making his way to the mirror to comb his dark ruffled hair back into position.

Malkie watched the reflection as the Brylcreem held the guy’s receding hairline in place. ‘I’ve seen you around.’

McAlister laughed, keeping his eye on the reflection in the mirror. ‘You’re not scared are you, kid? I like that. You got balls. Plenty twice your age wouldn’t stare at me the way you are right now.’

Malkie continued to stare. Movement from the bedroom forcing his eyes to avert for a split second, before returning to McAlister.

‘She’s okay, needs to rest awhile, that’s all.’ McAlister stepped away from the mirror, the hint of a

smirk on his face as he reached for his jacket. 'Here,' he said, taking his wallet from the inside pocket, 'Treat yourself - it's on me.' He held out his hand, a single pound note protruding from his fist.

Malkie looked at the money, then back to McAlister.

'What, you don't want it, too proud to take my money? Fine, have it your way.'

McAlister stuffed the note back inside his wallet, then disappeared into the bedroom. He made his way round to the window, to the dresser and placed a crisp unused five pound note on the surface. He moved to Agnes, kissed the top of her head, 'Buy yourself something nice. Want you to look good and make sure it's something I'll like.'

He made a point of locking eyes with Malkie before speaking again. 'Same time next week, hen.' The intonation in his voice, for Malkie's benefit, a statement of intent rather than a question.

He exited the room and came to a halt two paces from Malkie. 'You don't like me much, do you?'

Malkie said nothing.

'I can understand that. You're looking out for her. Nothing wrong with that. You only get one maw, right? But don't worry. We're friends. We like each other's company. That's it. That's all you need to know.'

Malkie stood rooted to the spot, his fists pumped tight like two hammers battling the adrenalin

coursing through his veins. All he wanted to do was lunge for McAlister's throat, knock him to the floor, then squeeze the last breath from him.

'Thought you were Landlord, or something?' said Malkie, keeping his temper in check.

McAlister grinned. 'You're a smart kid. How Old Are You?'

'Fourteen next month.'

'Kind of small for a fourteen-year-old,' McAlister paused, assessing the sullen face standing in front of him. 'Yeah, you got an attitude all right. Way you hold yourself and that scowl. Fuck me. You practise that in a mirror? You a tough guy, Malkie?'

'I practise nothing.'

'Don't get all moody on me. I'm just pulling your pisser. But a word of advice, son. Don't be staring at people like that, unless you're ready to back it up.'

'You've no need to worry about me, Mr McAlister. I do what's needed, when it's needed.'

McAlister chuckled to himself, 'we all best watch out then, eh?'

Malkie balled his fists tighter, then dipped his chin.

McAlister clocked the body language. 'You like to fight, Malkie?'

'Depends.'

McAlister nodded his head. 'I'll let you in to a secret. Someone like me, it's very rare I'd have to

raise my hand these days. I have people do that for me. So tell me, why is that?’

Malkie shrugged his response but kept his eyes on McAlister’s.

‘I’ll tell you. Power. Control. Respect. Take note, young Thompson, because it’s these three factors that keep me on top - ahead of my rivals.’

Agnes entered the room, pulling her robe tight around her waist. ‘What’s going on?’ she said, her eye darting from McAlister to Malkie and back.

‘Nothing to worry about, Agnes. Me and the boy here, having a wee chat. Bright lad - you’ve got there.’

‘Malkie, go wait downstairs,’ said Agnes.

‘He’s fine where he is,’ said McAlister, not taking his eyes from Malkie. ‘We’re finishing up anyhow.’

McAlister held out his hand and summoned Agnes to him. She trundled three brief steps towards him, reluctant as to his intention. Managed a nervous glance to Malkie and back, fixing her stare on McAlister.

Malkie readied himself, light on his feet, his hand reaching round to his back pocket.

McAlister took out his wallet and held out two notes.

‘That’s unnecessary,’ said Agnes.

‘It’s for the boy, Agnes. Get him kitted out.’

‘It’s very kind, but...’

‘I insist.’

Agnes hesitated.

McAlister narrowed his eye. 'It's not like you don't need it.'

'I'll take it,' said Malkie, one hand on the blade in his back pocket, the other reaching out towards McAlister.

'Fair enough,' said McAlister, a smile breaking out over his face. 'You ever box, Malkie?'

'Now and then, when the mood takes me.'

'You should. Boxing teaches discipline, fitness, speed and agility. Once you've got that mastered - let's just say you can add a few adjustments to your repertoire as and when you need.'

Malkie frowned, trying to stay on track with the conversation.

'You follow?'

'Aye,' said Malkie.

'Good. This is what I want you to do,' said McAlister, putting the money in Malkie's hand, taking out a card from his wallet and writing on the back. 'You familiar with Ramsay's, the gym?'

'Think so.'

'Cal Ramsay's a friend of mine. We go back a long way. Go see him, show him this card and tell him I sent you. If he needs to - he can call me. Number's on the back.'

McAlister held out the card towards Malkie. 'Here, take it.'

Malkie grabbed the card.

McAlister took hold of his wrist, eyeballed him, smiled, then let go.

'You've got potential wee man. Need some guidance, that's all. Ramsay will put you through your paces - right enough. If he thinks you got something he'll put the time in - train you up. You might even make something of yourself. That's what you want, right? To get you and your maw out of this shithole?'

Malkie said nothing, his cold eye burning into McAlister's.

McAlister made for the door, then turned. 'It's your choice but do yourself a favour, take that pal of yours, the big guy - the one you're always knocking about with.'

'You mean Frankie?'

'Aye, that's him. He's got the look and stature of a young Jackie Mayer. He any relation, I wonder?'

Malkie knew the truth of it but shrugged a response. Frankie came from a long line of bare knuckle boxers, going back four generations or more. No way was he sharing that kind of information with the likes of McAlister.

McAlister smirked from the side of his mouth as he lit a cigarette. 'Okay, have it your way. Makes no difference to me, even if your pal is his double, but remember this - if he throws a punch half as good as old man Mayer, you two might have a...'

McAlister stopped mid flow. 'Ah, no bother, what do I care?'

Malkie woke at his usual time of 6:15. He rolled

the mattress and stuffed the bedding into the battered old wooden chest, sitting next to the window. The day was still to break, nothing but a hint of indigo and magenta slashed across the sky. He liked this hour, the house quiet, the neighbours sleeping. It gave him time to think. Soon his mother would wake, and with it her pensive mood and bad temper. Made all the worse by her night out with Violet.

Come to think of it, he hadn't woken in the night. Strange, he noted, as he pushed the thought to the back of his mind - usually he'd hear her voice singing in the stairwell, crucifying the hell out of a Bay City Rollers track, once the mix of ale and whisky took effect. Not that he minded, Agnes was a happy drunk. It was the day after she was hell to live with. Not a scratch on the old man, though. For that they could be thankful. He was plain evil from the start, nothing but a sadistic sack of shit. Truth is, they were both well shot of him and happier for it.

Malkie crept along the floorboards, careful not to wake his mother. He slunk out of the door and down the corridor. Down the three flights of concrete stairs, then out into the yard. The rain started before he made it out of the external battered wooden door. By the time he broke mid sprint across the cobbles, it had soaked him to the skin. He took some comfort knowing he'd be first in line to use the communal

WC and on a rare occasion such as this, could take his time about it.

If McAlister was true to his word, soon enough they'd get rehoused.

Easterhouse - if Agnes got her way. Frankie had gotten the nod his family were moving at the end of the week. Not that they had a choice in the matter. The wrecking ball had been on site for over a month, ready for the go. As soon as the last diehard tenants packed up their shit, the demolition team had instructions to raise the half mile area to the ground.

Like any other place, Easterhouse had its share of problems. Malkie had listened as his older cousins regaled colourful accounts of their exploits running with the gangs. Bloody retellings of hand to hand combat, where hatchets and blades came into play. Skirmishes, his kin claimed to have won. Not that he had cause to doubt them, their faces tattered and torn, bearing scars of conflict - worn like medals of honour. Malkie relished the prospect of moving out to the Schemes, new territory to claim as his own. The perfect setting for an ambitious young man, keen to make his mark.

Ten minutes later he returned to the one bedroomed tenement. He pushed the door ajar, half expecting Agnes to be standing waiting in the middle of the room, ready to tear into him over something or other.

The room was still. Malkie entered, he grabbed a damp towel from the drying rack. He held it towards his nostrils, only making it halfway before the stale mildew wrinkled his nose. *Needs must*. He dried off, doing his best to hold his breath whenever the towel came close to his face.

He finished in record time, driven on by the cold that was threatening to take lumps out of him if he delayed. Malkie reached on top of the cupboard, searching for remnants of Thompson senior's left-over Old Spice talc, anything to mask the offensive odour. He found it and applied it under his arms. Blinking as his eyes watered from the powder, he raised his index finger and pressed it underneath his nose to quell the sneeze that threatened to erupt.

When it had passed he dressed in the far corner of the room. He wore the same clothes as the day before. Blue denim jeans, white t-shirt and his brown and beige tartan patterned jacket with the big collar. His appointment at the local bathhouse still three days off, he'd make do for now.

He skulked to the bedroom door. Shut - tight to the jamb. He twisted the white wooden knob, wincing as it squeaked, turning clockwise to three o'clock. Malkie put his shoulder to door, remembering that it had a tendency to stick. The door opened. He peered in around the edge. The bed was empty - undisturbed. Agnes hadn't made it home. She'd either got lucky or was worse for wear,

sleeping it off at her sister's. Malkie had never known his maw to date other men. Not that he'd blame her even if she did. The way things stood, tied in with McAlister, and their *arrangement*, he got the impression the local godfather wasn't the type to share his women.

Malkie decided it was time to make a house call. Violet's place was less than three miles on foot. If he got a move on he could be there inside the hour. He made it as far as the first floor. There she was, collapsed, half slouched against the bannister rail. Sobbing.

He rushed to her, lifted her head. Her make-up smeared. Her eyes defeated. Puffy, swollen and red.

'Maw,' said Malkie. 'What's wrong. Tell me what's happened? Someone hurt you? McAlister, did he do something? Talk to me?'

Agnes took Malkie's hand and gripped it. Her red-rimmed eyes boring into his. 'She's gone...' her voice tailed off as the tears rolled. 'My sweet Violet, they've taken her...'

Agnes's voice broke off again, her chest heaving in rapid motion as the sobbing vied for command.

'You're not making sense. What do you mean?'

'She's gone... Gone, I tell you.'

'Gone where? Who took her?'

Malkie grabbed Agnes by the shoulders and tried to shake some sense into her. 'Has someone got hold of aunt Violet? Tell me. I'll go find her?'

Agnes fought to control her ragged breaths. 'She's dead, Malkie... Bastards killed her. Left her battered and naked. Her body discarded on waste ground.'

Malkie felt the anger rise within. 'What? No. It can't be. It's got to be a mistake. Who told you this?'

'It's the truth, son... I've seen her with my own eyes. She's dead.'

Malkie pulled Agnes towards him - held her close. 'I'll make this right. I swear to you, maw. I'll find who did this.'

IN FOR THE KILL (SAMPLE)

CRIME SYNDICATE BOOK 2 (BLURB)

Ambitious mob enforcer, Malkie Thompson's out of favour, and this time Glasgow Crime Lord McAlister wants him gone - permanently. There's no turning back, he's sent for the *cleaner*, an ex-cop known simply as Baxter. The go to guy for delicate jobs, no questions asked.

Problem is, Baxter's got his own set of problems. Haunted by the past, he vowed never to return, but now he's broke, and with Callaghan's Newcastle firm closing in demanding he repay the debt, what choice does he have? He's backed into a corner. If he misses the deadline they're going after his family.

In For The Kill is the second in series of the Crime Syndicate thrillers, and leads on from the Amazon #1 Bestseller Violence in the Blood. The setting jumps between Newcastle England & Glasgow Scotland 1987.

Although second in series, *In For The Kill* is a self contained story and can be read either in sequence or as a standalone novel.

CHAPTER 1 NEWCASTLE 1987

Baxter thumbed through his winnings, a wedge of used crumpled tens and twenties bound together with an elastic band. Dog-eared and tatty or crisp and clean, it made no difference cash was cash. He stuffed the wad into the inside pocket of his leather jacket and zipped it up. It had been a long time coming but winning felt good.

He looked up; a small crowd had gathered ten feet from where he was standing. Local faces, associates of Callaghan. They were huddled together talking in low tones, muttering into their warm beer. *If looks could kill...*

He caught their eye, not that it had been his intention to do so, but it happened all the same. His inner voice yelling at him to get out of there, but he couldn't help but linger a moment longer. He wasn't one to gloat but then again he was entitled to enjoy

the moment. He returned their disgruntled stare, a broad smile breaking out onto his face. He felt their pain; of late, he'd been there more times than he cared to remember. Some of them had lost big tonight, and over the last three months, Baxter had lost more than he could account for. Tonight that had changed. Something was different. He'd turned a corner, putting an end to his bad run. That's how it is; bad luck comes and goes, the law of averages. He'd finally broken the cycle.

Six grand in total, not bad for an evening's work. He'd rode his luck but he'd kept his nerve, believing it would all come good in the end. Half way through the night, things hadn't looked so good; at worst he was down by two and half grand. He went to Callaghan, the bout's organiser and kingpin of the northeast's criminal fraternity. He needed a short-term loan, just to get him through to the last bout. How could Callaghan say no? Baxter was a regular, and he was only too glad to authorise his credit. Besides, Baxter was a safe bet, he'd never missed a deadline. He understood the terms well enough, *you don't pay on time, we cut you. You miss a second payment, we take your fingers. Miss a third, we discuss repayment options with your family.*

Each party understood the expectations. There could be no misunderstanding.

CHAPTER 2

Although it wasn't a fortune, Baxter's win ensured that he could pay what he owed and keep Callaghan off his back, leaving a little left over. He still needed to get his head straight. He'd considered counselling, but his line of work wasn't the easiest subject matter to discuss with civilians, this was down to him and him alone. He felt bereft; nothing he did could shake the memory. The girl's face haunted him, ingrained on his brain, when he closed his eyes – she was there. Things had become so bad he'd begun to hallucinate. When driving the car, he'd see her at the side of the road or she'd be sitting on the back seat when he checked his rear view mirror. It was the same in his apartment, when he tried to watch the TV; he'd see her out of the corner of his eye, just sitting in the

armchair watching him intently. She never spoke, always silent, her eyes imploring him to act.

Sleep didn't come easy; he'd begun self-medicating just so he could catch a fragmented couple of hours here and there. He ignored the pharmacist's warnings about the dangers of mixing his medication. What did they know? He knew his own body better than anyone. Besides, he took them as guidelines more than instructions. He knew what he could and couldn't handle.

He'd gotten into the habit of concocting his own sleep recipe. Each night, he'd take a triple shot of brandy, crush a Nytol sleeping pill into it, and then add paracetamol, his own method to combat the hangover effects of the morning after. The difficulty was coming round, trying to rouse himself from sleep. He'd devised a regime to shock his body into action. First, he took a two-minute cold shower, followed by three cups of strong, black coffee. Then he'd go for a run, nothing too strenuous, a mile jog. If the coffee rush kicked in, then he could push it to a mile and a half. On his return, he'd perform twenty reps of crunches followed by press-ups then squats before taking a hot shower. It wasn't fool proof, but it worked for the most part. Anything was better than waking up each day feeling as if he'd been given a double dose of Rohypnol.

Ever since the McAlister job he'd been functioning on autopilot, before the win he'd gambled

his savings down to nothing. He'd borrowed even from those he'd vowed never to ask, it was all part of his coping mechanism, gambling helped him to forget. Sure, he had to get it in order, he knew that. He kept telling himself it was just a short-term solution. Anything to dull the memory. *Take each day as it comes.*



WALK AMONGST THE DEAD (SAMPLE)

CHAPTER 1 AUTUMN 2016

It's taken months of planning, and now he's at the point of no return. Another piece of the jigsaw about to slot into place.

He's standing outside, his baseball cap drawn close over his face, obscuring his features, enough to confuse the CCTV footage. He knows it's important not to loiter, he needs to blend in, can't risk drawing attention to himself. To the untrained eye, he's just another ordinary Joe, an everyday kind of guy. Disguised, kitted out from head to toe; boiler suit, cap, and boots. He could be a tradesman, or a courier, but take a closer look and you'll see he's not alone. The nondescript unliveried white transit van parked opposite contains another figure – waiting on the call.

The old man's looking up from his morning paper, *The Times*, a dedicated reader for more than

forty years. He looks forward to Sundays, and the return of the broadsheet, he prefers the traditional to the new fangled, supposedly easy to handle, Berliner format. He reads it cover to cover, scanning each of the supplements, ritualistic like taking elevenses. There's satisfaction in understanding the expectations. But that's about to change.

Putting his paper down, glasses perched on the end of his nose. Disgruntled at the unscheduled interruption, he glares at the figure silhouetted in the doorway.

The figure steps forward. The old man recognises the face, unexpected as it is. Smiling eyes, cold heart – he's come to collect.

The old man's slow to realise the intention. His inquisitive eyes staring back at the figure, scanning from head to toe, looking for a sign, looking for anything untoward.

The figure hides his intention well. No cause for concern. No alarm bells ringing. But they should be. This is no ordinary collection.

The old man's name is Walter Browne, the firm's accountant, hand-picked for the role by Malkie Thompson way back in 1988. Walter keeps the organisation's dealings below the radar. Makes sure the legit money washes through the bad. He's well rewarded for his expertise, his loyalty and silence taken as a given, relics from a bygone age.

To the anonymous figure, Walter Browne and his

ilk belong in the past. The market's evolved and moved on. *They* don't realise it yet, but he does. There's no room for sentiment, can't afford to be complacent.

Learnt that from Malkie, now he's putting it in to practise.

The ever-growing influx of foreigners moving in on their territory means existing agreements are resigned to the scrap heap. It's a young man's game; no compromise. It's about strength. Malkie doesn't get that, he prefers to negotiate. These newcomers won't hesitate. Malkie might be willing to concede ground to avert a war, but he's not.

Strength equals power. That's the real currency. Winner takes all.

He knows how to deal with their sort, paths already crossed—way back, those heady, club days, pre-millennium. Back then, it was the Kosovar Albanians trying to get a foothold. Now it's a lottery: Poles, Romanians, and Bulgarians. Take your pick, they're all lining up, waiting for the right opportunity.

He's tired of waiting for the green light, can't put it off any longer. Affirmative action is needed. Business is business. The only way to survive is to fight fire with fire. He's been running the operation for the last six months. He could have cherry picked, but he chose not to. It's all about perception, important to send out a clear message, no room for misin-

terpretation. He needed to prove he was capable, solid, and reliable. An all-rounder, a safe pair of hands, someone who could handle the pressure, day to day.

Seventeen years, he's kept his own counsel. Paid his dues, observed protocol, kicked up to Malkie the whole time. Those days are done. Enough of the penance and bullshit for past wrongs, it's time to step out from the shadows.

CHAPTER 2

Today's the start of a new beginning, a changing of the guard. Queensberry rules no longer apply, only in the minds of ageing gangsters keen to romanticise the past. It's guerrilla warfare; and he knows how to play it. Hit hard and fast, fight for every inch of ground. He'll drive them out street-by-street if needs be, no compromise, no mercy.

The whispers started over a year ago, but not one of them has ever had the balls to go public. It's time to get it out in the open. *Malkie Thompson's had his time*. His best days are behind him now. Old age hasn't been kind to him; he thinks he hides the illness well, but he doesn't. He's physically weak, they all know it, and more to the point the opposition knows it. Malkie's headstrong, always has been, desperate to hang onto power. His pride

outweighing common sense. He only has himself to blame. The wolves are circling.

The figure's breaking the silence now, content to have let the old man sweat for long enough.

He takes a step closer to the desk. 'Been a long time, Walter.'

The old man clears his throat. 'Indeed, but no Malkie? Not like him to miss an opportunity for a dram,' he says, gesturing with his hand to the quarter full bottle of malt sitting on the desk.

'Little early in the day for me, but you go ahead. Malkie sends his apologies by the way. Not himself these past few months.'

'Ah...yes of course. How is he?'

'You know how it is... He's getting by.'

Walter Browne's, weighing it all up. He has that tingling sensation at the back of his left eye, the kind he gets when he's nervous. 'I see, so... What can I do for you?'

'Got a problem I need your help with. Keep coming up against a brick wall. You know me, Walt, I'm all about solutions.'

Walter shifts in his chair, leaning forward, still looking down through his glasses on the edge of his nose. 'Okay, I'm listening,' he says, trying to make out he's relaxed. Feeling his chest tighten a little, he disguises the discomfort with a sudden intake of breath by placing a hand to his mouth, and feigning a cough. 'Damned dry cough can't seem to shift it.'

The figure smiles back at him. ‘Need to take better care of yourself, man of your age.’ He begins moving around the small office, taking his time to stop and read the various wall adornments, fellowship to the Institute of Chartered Accountants in England and Wales, and a scroll awarding Freedom of the City. ‘I keep hearing things, Walt, rumours,’ he says, stopping at the photo of a couple, Walter and his wife at a black tie charity event. ‘I remember this one. Acted as Malkie’s chauffeur for the evening.’ He removes it from the wall, and scrutinises it up close. ‘Quite a night as I recall. How is Mrs. B these days?’

Walter follows every movement, suspicion a tumorous growth. ‘She’s fine – thank you.’

‘Good to hear.’ His face a mask, wearing his best fake sinister plastic smile. ‘I’ll have to make a point of calling in on her.’

‘Yes, I’ll...’ Walter doesn’t get to finish his sentence.

‘First things first, I need answers. You know how it is, I got to separate the bullshit from fact,’ he says, still analysing the photo-frame. ‘So I say to myself, easier to go straight to the source.’

Walter’s caught off guard, his mind slicing through the veiled threat to his wife. ‘I don’t follow.’

‘Truth is I’ve let it go for too long... Far too long. Let the past blind my judgement.’ He pauses, averting his eyes from the photograph to face Walter,

further unsettling the old man. 'Good looking woman your wife.'

Walter can feel the anger rising within, like an irritation; he knows he has to contain it. 'What exactly is it you...?'

He interrupts, picking up the bottle of malt from the desk. 'Enjoy a drop of the hard stuff, Walt.' A statement more than a question. He takes his time to read the label aloud. 'Glenmorangie single malt whisky, *Malkie's preferred brand*. I guess some can handle it, and some can't.' His eyes burn in to Walter, 'How about you, Walt, can you handle it?'

Walter shifts uncomfortably in his seat, his cheeks flushing red. 'What are you insinuating?'

'Booze, Walter, loosens the tongue. Causes some people to run off at the mouth.'

Fear's taken hold, Walter's eyes are dilated, his heartbeat ramped up. He tries to speak, to refute the allegation, but his throat's too dry to respond. His brain in overdrive, he needs an answer, his mind a blank canvas as panic sets in, consuming all hope of rational thought.

'You see, Walter, clandestine meetings with the opposition that's never a smart move.' He lets the words hang for effect.

'At first, I said no, can't be, not Walter. I wouldn't have it. Not a word of it. Been with us since the beginning, I said. Even slapped one of my own blokes for delivering the message. Had to go and

visit him in hospital, make things right. Got daggers and the silent treatment from his missus the whole time I was there.' He pauses again, his eyes drilling down to the old man's core.

Walter stares back, silent and paralysed—rooted to the spot.

The figure moves in, and looms over the old man. He places both hands on the desk, resting on his knuckles, his head jutting forward like a dominant silverback. 'See, they said you were a grass, Walter, I mean *you* a grass? On the turn in his old age, they said. I told 'em no way, not my Walter. Stand up bloke. A real gent, proper diamond. Then I got to thinking, these last sixth months, jobs going wrong, blokes getting lifted. That drop that never happened. Money disappearing. And that was it, my epiphany—clear as day. Crystal. But I needed to be sure. I even put a tail on you, Walter, real Columbo kind of stuff.'

Walter tried to stand, his legs shaky. 'I think I...'

The figure raises a hand; palm outstretched flat, just enough to silence him. Beaten, the old man slumps down into his high back swivel chair, the springs grinding and protesting under his weight.

The figure's pacing now, his voice taut with tension. 'So here it is, the dilemma, why would Walter Browne - Company Accountant, career unblemished, try to fuck us over?'

Walter knows he's in the shit, and he needs to act fast. 'If you just let...'

'Poles,' his voice cranked up to full rant. 'It's bad enough Malkie keeps that fucking half-breed Mayer on the payroll. But you've gone above and beyond.'

Fears gaining the upper hand, Walter's eyes darting left to right, desperate for an escape route.

He's inches from Walter's face, so close he can smell his fear. He stands upright, then sweeps back down, slamming his fist, smashing it into the desk, sending papers scattering to the floor. A Styrofoam cup empties its murky brown lukewarm coffee onto the desktop. It's pure theatre, the final outcome determined weeks ago.

The figure breathes deep, sucking in the air through gritted teeth. 'Why...? Make me understand. Thought we'd never find out, is that what this is?'

He steps back from the desk, putting his hand through his hair, regaining his composure. 'So what am I to do, Walt? Tell me, what would you do in my position?'

Walter splutters, trying but failing to mumble some sort of coherent response. 'I'm sure we can wo...'

The figure raises a finger to his lips. 'Not another word.'

The terror's audible in the old man's high-pitched whine. 'Look, I can explain...go to Malkie myself.'

‘Doesn’t work like that. Here’s my problem, either you’ve got dementia, or you’re playing both sides, hedging your bets. Am I right?’

He doesn’t give Walter time to answer. ‘This is about you trying to save your own arse, correct? Either way, you’ve screwed us over.’

Walter reaches for the Styrofoam cup, ditches the coffee dregs into the waste paper basket and tips the whisky in, draining the bottle, then necks it in one generous draught. The slow burn in his mouth helping to steady his nerves. Walter knows he has to tread carefully, to separate truth from fiction, to calculate how much the figure really knows. Years of experience can’t stop a solitary cold bead of sweat gliding down the side of his forehead, belying his inner emotions.

The whisky glow provides small comfort. He’s straining his voice to fake authority. ‘I’ve heard enough, we’re done here. I’m not explaining myself to you. I’ll talk direct to Malkie, not the errand boy.’

The figure beams, delighted to have rattled the old man.

Walter opens the bottom drawer to his walnut desk, reaching inside.

He’s watching, hawk like, ready to anticipate any sudden moves. He could be reaching for a weapon. But this is Walter Browne, he’s never touched a gun in his life. Walter places the hip flask on the desk, his eyes defiant. He takes a nip, then follows with

another. His face turning to a twisted, blotchy red mess as he struggles to steady his nerves and contain his temper.

‘Tainted...never be the top man. You’ve a lot to learn. Not all flash cars and designer clothes. It’s about cultivating relationships.’

The figure paces back and forth, content to let the old man vent.

‘Longevity, that’s what’s important, not chasing a fast buck. That’s what it takes to survive and prosper. Malkie understood that, do you? I doubt it. Prancing in here making out you’re doing his bidding. I don’t believe a word of it. Go on get out of it.’

Smiling, the figure picks up the phone, a retro black Bakelite design, he dials the number, looking straight into Walter’s eyes. Two more digits to make the connection.

Walter returns his stare, his Adams apple bobbing up and down like a yoyo. ‘You see, Walter, it’s all about a retirement plan for you...and Malkie.’

Walter takes another swig. His words splutter out. ‘Retirement?’

A CALL TO VENGEANCE (SAMPLE)

PROLOGUE: WELCOME TO THE CRIME SYNDICATE

Malkie Thompson's spent 25 years at the top of his game, but things are changing, and changing fast.

Jason Cunningham, his nephew, wants his crown. Question is how far's he willing to go? In truth it's a rhetorical question, Malkie's got the answer, he's always had it, damn sure Cunningham will do whatever's required. He's taught him well — too well.

To some he's the natural heir, to others he's little more than a pariah. Given the chance George Patterson would have offed him in the blink of an eye, but Malkie stopped him, a decision he may yet come to regret.

Malkie's sent George on his way, no point in them both waiting for the end. By now he's heading south, least that's the plan.

Malkie's sitting, poised, his gun pointing towards

the door. Whatever's coming, he's ready. One thing's for sure, *ain't going down without a fight.*

His hand's reaching for the shoulder, dabbing at the wound, from the bullet that was meant to kill. Fresh blood oozing out as fingers prod beneath the makeshift dressing.

There are those that think he's already dead, and for now he's content to let them have their day.

His eyes drift to the shadows, the would-be assassin's corpse lying in situ, as the image of Mimi's corpse burns ever deeper into his retina, slain by those that would do him wrong.

Word is Jason Cunningham ordered the botched hit, but the question remains, who's he working with?

Soon they'll come to realise Malkie Thompson's far from done.



CHAPTER 1

He's lying there waiting for the inevitable. *Too old for this George.* He closes his eyes, *had a good run, gotta end sometime.* He lets his mind drift, welcoming the end.

His eye lids snap open as a fresh spike of pain hits him like a speeding train, *fucking razor wire.* He reaches down to inspect the damage, a mixture of mud and bloodied lacerated flesh exposing the muscle and sinew. If they don't get to him first he's damn sure the infection will finish the job for them. Nature will do the rest. The legend of George Patterson reduced to crow carrion.

Can't just sit here waiting to die. He rolls over onto his belly, trying to manoeuvre, elbows and forearms acting as leverage, drawing up his good leg in support.

On his feet, chest pumping like a pneumatic

drill. His eyes cast skyward, indigo blue filled with shades of cobalt grey. Knows he'll be easy to spot now. Needs to keep to the tree line. His body soaked to the core, joints stiff. Every fibre aching, screaming defeat.

Could have ended it back there, crawled out of the mud on his hands and knees. Put himself at their mercy. Knows for sure how that would have ended, him kneeling down, eyes closed, waiting for the bullet to call last orders.

He shakes his head, tells himself it's just fatigue playing with his mind. Too little sleep over the past few days. Losing track of time, thinking hard to remind himself what day of the week it is. Can't recall when he last ate, or when he last took a piss. Can't be good for his bladder, or his prostate. The notion brings a smile to his face, the ageing process wreaking havoc with his body.

His stomach's rumbling now, sounds like a knackered waste pipe. When did he last eat? Thinks it was some time in the last twelve hours, can't be sure. More important things to worry about. Got to keep his strength up. If he makes it, there's a long drive ahead, he needs to be alert, can't be dozing off at the wheel. George makes a mental note to get himself a clutch of those energy drinks, what is it they call it? They've all got weird names these days. Monster, or some stupid shit like that. *What kind of*

name for a drink is that, anyway? Doesn't matter as long as it keeps him from sleeping at the wheel.

His eyes cast down to his lower leg, who's he kidding? He can just about walk. His leg's burning, an inferno of pain, be lucky if he doesn't succumb to infection. He wipes at his brow, dizziness and nausea cascading through his body.

Gotta keep moving George. Keep...

Bile gathering in the rear of his throat, he spits the yellowed substance to the sodden mud. The wind's getting up, blowing southwards in his direction. He's got to keep on. Wincing against the pain, he drags himself forwards. The burning surge suffocates the oxygen from his lungs. George bites down on his lip to stifle the groan.

He casts his eyes across the open field, scanning the horizon. Checking his watch, 7:22am. He's listening, positive he can hear the burr of the carriageway, early morning commuters scurrying about their business. He trudges on across the open ploughed field, breathless and close to broken.

George stumbles into the service area periphery. He stops and props himself against a large orange recycling container. He takes a moment to scan the scene, blocking out the pain as the gentle breeze whips at his lacerated wounds.

He's waiting for the right opportunity, a good samaritan, anything. The state he's in, looking like

an AWOL extra from a zombie flick, be lucky if Mother Teresa stopped to offer help.

Picking up the pace, heading for the red and white livery of the Esso service station, less than fifty metres away. His breathing, laboured and ragged as rapid quick fire palpitations strike like the repetition of a snare drum. He ignores it and presses on.

To his right there's a disused Little Chef restaurant, a hangover from the late nineties. A hundred metres further down a Premier Inn sits prominent over on the right side of the forecourt. There's got to be close to a dozen cars, an array of saloons and hatchbacks. His eyes fix on the Jaguar and the Mercedes.

First, he's got to get cleaned up and take a proper look at the wound. See what he can do to dress it, doubts he'll find TCP or any other form of antiseptic. May even have to get creative and opt for the industrial floor cleaning bleach.

Keep moving George. He stays low, sticking inside the perimeter fence, the shrubbery his cover. His eyes flit left then right, *got to be a drivers washroom.* He checks for security cameras, but sees nothing. He limps across the service road, grimacing with every step. *Where's that bastard door?*

The sound of a foreign dialect brings him to an abrupt halt as a waft of cigarette smoke fills his lungs. George stops dead, his body pressed to the edge of the wall. He inches to the corner and risks a

look. Two guys chatting, one small and squat aged around fifty, only five six in height. The other, leaner and taller. George guesses he's thirty-five or thirty-six, both devouring the last of their cigarettes, readying to move. George reaches a hand around to the rear of his waistband, pulling out the Browning. No time for niceties, he needs to clean up before boosting a car. He tells himself it's a precaution, but if it comes down to it, he won't hesitate to pull the trigger.

One, two, three, he strides out from the wall; the 9 mm raised to waist level but they're already gone. *Shit.*

George limps the remaining five steps to the blue steel door, he opens it, sliding in as best he can, careful not to knock his leg. The smell of fresh bleach burns at the back of his oesophagus. A small yellow sign sits prominent on top of terracotta tiles just inside the doorway. It reads: CLEANING IN PROGRESS.

At the far end of the corridor a grey cleaning caddy's parked up, nestled between the GENTS and a nondescript store cupboard. George waits a second listening for any telltale signs that the owner is close by. Nothing bar the sound of someone choking the life out of a crappy 80s' pop song he's long since forgotten.

George makes for the GENTS, he stops at the caddy and lifts a bottle of industrial detergent and

what passes for a nearly new J-Cloth type rag. Less than ideal, but it'll do. He pushes on through the door, confronted by a fog of dense humid steam sticking to him like clingfilm. He shuffles in, visibility near zero, he follows the out of tune rendition. *Be a mercy killing to silence this guy.*

9 mm in hand, his leg grating against uneven tiles, sending a tremor to the pit of his stomach. Cussing under his breath, George does his best to ignore the pain. All the time moving, the Browning sweeping in an arc, his leg playing catchup.

The would-be Barry Manilow must be taking a break. The only sound now, water pounding off the tiled floor. George snaps his head left to right. His eyes squinting against the wall of fog - nothing. Shivers rack his body from top to toe, threatening shut down. He forces it from his mind. *Come on George.* He presses on, his jaw clamping down tight onto his tongue, disguising the giveaway rattle.

He spots a burgundy sports holdall on the bench. Checks all around before moving towards it. He opens it, working his way through the layers, pulls out a pair of dark blue work jeans, and holds them next to him, a little baggy for his taste but they'll do. His hands dig deeper, a grey zip up hoody, a pair of dirty old white Nikes' two sizes too small and wash bag wrapped in a gaudy face towel. He's in a bad way but still ignores the pair of stained boxer briefs. *A man's got to have standards.*

His fingertip search of the toiletry bag produces a roll on anti-perspirant, half used toothpaste and brush, some hair product and a pack of condoms that look as though they've taken up permanent residence. *Shit.* No antiseptic or anything that comes close. He re-zips the wash bag and stuffs the contents back into the holdall and makes for the nearest vacant shower cubicle.

Pelting hot water hitting his face, a mixture of blood and sludge running from his eyes, along the crevices before dripping from his chin. Putting his neck forward, scolding droplets going to work on the knots. Fresh pain exploding like a hornet's sting in his ruined calf, he can't put it off any longer, time to clean the wound.

George reaches for the discarded lime green shower gel, a non-branded supermarket rip off. He tips it into his hand and applies it to his lower leg. Most of the grime has washed away leaving ragged strips of skin and tender muscle exposed beneath. He clamps his jaw tight and reaches for the industrial cleaning gel. He squeezes a dollop onto two fingers, applies it in rapid sweeping downward movements. There's a two-second delay before his brain updates the pain ledger.

Head like a rollercoaster, he's reaching out with both arms to steady himself, nothing to grab on to, he slumps to the terracotta tiles. Catching his breath now, his vision blurred, waiting for the pain to

subside to the rhythmic tap tapping of water jets ricocheting off tiles.

As the burning fades, he pulls himself to his feet, towelling off as best he can, he dresses in the ill-fitting clothes, he's not going to win or even come close in the fashion stakes but at least they're dry. He shreds the towel into two strips and applies it as a makeshift field dressing, it'll do for now.

9 mm in hand, he steps out from the cubicle, time to pay his nearest neighbour a visit. The singing might have stopped, replaced with a jaunty never-ending whistle. *So now the guy's Roger Whittaker.*

He lingers as the sound of the bolt slides back. The occupant steps out. Unsuspecting, naked, moving forward blind, his head shrouded inside a towel. Vulnerable - one hand engaged in rubbing hair dry, the other clutching a small black toiletry bag.

George waits for him to get closer. 'Hello Sweet-pea.'

Shower guy removes the towel from his head. Confusion in his eyes, unable to comprehend the situation - is this a robbery or some darker intent? George signals with the Browning, 'over there,' pointing him towards the bench area.

As he turns, George whips the butt of the 9 mm against the back of his neck, shower guy falls to the floor. George nudges him with the tip of his Nike

trainer, checking he's not faking it. Satisfied that he's out cold George reaches for the bag and retrieves the keys and wallet.

Time to move. Outside he presses the remote key fob and listens for the telltale double beep. Hazard lights illuminate identifying the vehicle. It's neither the Jaguar nor the Mercedes. This time around he'll settle for the Toyota Land Cruiser.

