



Mary of the Seven Veils

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Life is; whatever you want it to be

Chapter 1

The dark alleyway resounded with the smell of urine and vomit. Its litter strewn floor was a haven for the rats and mice who ate away till their hearts content. The noise of wood on bone disturbed them for a while but they carried on regardless. It was a strange abnormal sound that left Colin Jones with an abnormal amount of pain in comparison. It brought him to his knees in agony unsurpassed by anything he had ever felt in his short unaccomplished life. His kneecaps were certainly shattered by the force of such an impact and he lay helpless to the mercy of whatever was coming next. I looked at him with the contempt that I thought he deserved and cast the pick-axe handle to the ground. It was payback time and on seeing the fear in his eyes I knew that he had guessed as much. He looked at me through unknowing eyes because he was not sure who I was. He had only seen me on one occasion but had been too full of himself to take much notice. I stood awhile just to add more tension to the scene though it was not needed. He was shaking violently, unsure of my next move and trying to work out who I was. He had made a lot of enemies in his time so I could be one of a hundred. He was too scared even to speak at first but when he did he said, "What do you want from me? I don't know you. Look I've got money." He put his hand in his pocket and took out a well filled wallet. I stood there still silent and shook my head in mock pity before I kicked the wallet out of his hand. I could not bring myself to talk to such a low life. Thoughts of Dave lying in a prison cell came to the fore and ignited a rage inside me that erupted with a sharp kick to Colin Jones' throat. He reeled back and his head bounced violently on the cold unforgiving concrete. Blood spurted out his mouth and sprayed the surrounding area. I looked down to see my trousers had caught some and this only added to my rage. I heard a rib crack as my next kick found its mark on his chest. He lay there helpless in a pool of blood but still I had not finished. Six years was a long time to spend in prison. How much punishment did it warrant? I was not sure how far to take it. I saw his pain but it was not enough. I had it in my mind that maybe I should take his life. It would have been so easy, too easy in fact. To me he was no better than the vermin that lived all around where he lay. But who was I to judge a man let alone be his executioner? What gave me the right to take a man's life? I knew that if I did it would haunt me for the rest of my life but I was willing to accept that for my hatred was too strong. It needed to be sated and this was the only way I knew of doing it. I launched another kick to his head just to keep the pain going and thought about the situation that had bought about the scene.

Dave had been like a brother to me and his family were like mine. I had watched his children grow up and had felt pity for their loss. He had been in the wrong place at the wrong time and had had the misfortune of getting acquainted with Colin Jones. Greed had done the rest. The pursuit of easy money takes you down many roads I suppose but he was not a bad man. He was genuine and sincere in his friendship and that was all that really mattered to me. Hate had blinded me somewhat at the time so I picked up the pick-axe handle and carried on. It was just like hitting a sack of flour except that it was blood not powder that escaped from his body. Again and again I pummeled him until he had no more breath in his battered body. I only stopped in my frenzy when I was sure that he was dead.

His battered shell lay motionless before me. I looked around but there was nobody to see his demise. I left the body to be gnawed at by the rats and made my way back home. I was very calm really which thinking about it later was quite irrational. I even slept peacefully that night and woke up to a bright new day.

The news of the murder was soon the talk of the town and had captured the community's imagination. Most people thought it was just a mugging that had gone tragically wrong and I was content to leave them in their ignorance. I went to work that morning with an initial feeling of apprehension which was quite natural really I suppose but I had nothing to worry about. In fact it was not until it was mentioned on the mid day news that people actually started to hear about it. The usual turn of conversation was about how the place was getting more and more violent and a great tirade upon society in general. If they had known the man I reasoned to myself they would have

spoke differently. Whilst I kept that in my heart I was at one with myself but there was always the doubt. To be perfectly honest I wasn't sure if it was him who had set Dave up, it was only circumstantial although to me it was almost conclusive. I listened quietly without comment to the chatter and thought them naïve to think that these things only happened to other people, it was happening all around them yet they were too blinkered to see it. The day went quickly which was a bit of a blessing as I had long since tired of their conversation.

I went home to my small untidy bed sit and meditated a while on my next move. I knew that I would not stay around for too long as I was a drifter by nature. I longed to get back to the city for a while just to get lost in my own thoughts and see what life had to offer me there. I could easily get a job in one of the many factories as I had a lot of experience and I was not looking for something too highly paid. My living expenses were cheap to say the least as my nomadic nature never wanted to collect too many possessions as they could be a restriction to my movement. I had to go and see Dave's wife Theresa that night as I had promised to help her with some odd jobs around the house so I got ready and made my way over to her house. The streets were quiet and nightfall was thinking about retaking its place as I walked the short distance to Main Street. It was quite a cold night as autumn was drawing in and I held my coat tightly to try and keep warm.

The house itself was a nice little semi that had been well looked after and Theresa greeted me with a smile as she answered the door, "Come in Stuart the kettle's just on. You timed that right."

"Don't I always," I said with a laugh, "Any news of Dave?"

"Yes he phoned not long ago. He's settled in quite quickly. He's after trying to get into an open prison soon."

"Oh that would be good if he can pull it. So what do you want doing while I'm here?"

"Well," Theresa said looking at the kitchen door, "That's about falling off its hinges. I think Dave must have pulled it off. Have a cup of tea first though."

I went into the living room and sat upon the leather settee. Theresa brought the tea in. "Thanks," I said taking the cup off her.

"Did you hear about Colin Jones?" She said after she had sat down, "He was found dead in an alleyway at the back of Sure-save last night."

"They were on about him at work. I didn't really know him. He was more of a friend of Dave wasn't he?"

"Well," She said with a frown, "I don't know about friend. He used to keep him out most of the night though, I know that. They reckon it was just a mugging don't they?"

"That's what they say," I said. Half of me wanted to tell her but the other half thought otherwise, "Mind the town is getting a little rough recently."

"No, I think there was more to it than that. I think he got involved with the wrong people. He always thought he was a bit of a gangster. He would have got Dave in a lot of trouble the way he was going."

"Sorry," I said with more than a hint of surprise, "I thought that he already had. That's why Dave's inside isn't it?"

"Stupidity or greed I don't know which is the worse. He got well over his head but by the time he had realised it was too late."

"I thought that he had grassed Dave up," I said confused, "That's what Dave told me anyway."

"That was his anger talking. When he had calmed down he realised that it was his own stupidity that had caused his downfall. He was never a gangster. It might even have been him that caused Jones' death. You don't really know what you get involved in when you mix with those sort of people."

I went quiet for a while as I was trying to come to terms with what I had done. She was right in surmising that Dave was partly responsible for Jones' death but not in the sense that she had meant it. The evidence that Dave had given me was so convincing though so I said to her, "But he told me that Jones had grassed him up to the C.I.D. It could only have been him."

“It could have been one of seven people, his greed had blinded him. He was dealing with total strangers who were in a different league to him. He says that it was Roy Johnson now. He sounds more likely than Colin though.”

“No,” I said not believing, “He seemed so sure when he told me. It was Jones for definite. It seemed so logical to me.”

“Well it's all water under the bridge now as far as Dave is concerned. He just wants to do his time and forget about it. It would not do him any good to sit and stew about it in prison. It would only make the time drag even more.”

She wanted to let the matter drop but I could not. It was important to me but I could not tell her why.”What makes him think that it was Johnson then? He seemed so sure that it was Jones before why the change in mind?”

“When he thought it through he realised that Jones didn't even know about the job. He probably was a grass but he didn't grass Dave.”

My mind was in mild turmoil now as I thought about Jones battered body lying in the alleyway. I had taken the role of executioner to an innocent victim, well innocent of Dave's dilemma anyway. I needed time to think now, time to be on my own. I finished my tea and said to Theresa, “Can I come back and do that door tomorrow? I forgot that I have to see someone today.”

“Sure, there's no hurry. It must be important.”

“Well not really but I can't get in touch to tell him so I don't want to let him down by not turning up.”

I said my goodbyes and went for a walk in the local park. The brown leaves had virtually all fallen off the trees and the park had the smell of autumn all around it. I sat awhile in the darkness and tried to come to terms with what I had done. I was so sure, it seemed so certain and now it was not. I felt guilty but not as much as I should have because I disliked the man intensely for no other reason than I did not like his face. Strange really when you sit on a cold seat in the middle of a darkened park the clarity of thought you seem to acquire. When all said and done I hardly knew the man and yet I took his life for no real reason than I did not like his face. I had thought him responsible for Dave's imprisonment but even that was no reason to take his life. My hatred for him had done the rest and yet I did not know him. What sort of person had I become, had I lost my sense of reason? Was I that blinded by my emotions that reality had changed in my mind to suit their purpose? I looked around the still of night and saw no interruption to distract me. I debated about my next move now. I had planned to leave town but now I was not so sure. Thoughts of Roy Johnson came to the fore. I had killed the wrong person of that I had no real doubt but something inside me wanted to carry on. Maybe my hatred had regained control as I thought about Roy Johnson. He was a slime-ball of the first degree. He would have sold his grand-mother to the devil for next to nothing but somehow I had never thought of him as a grass. Maybe Dave had got it wrong again? I stopped awhile and reassessed my thoughts. I was actually thinking about taking another man's life again. What was wrong with me, I should not even be contemplating such a thing but there I was doing it. I got up and walked all night but it would not leave my mind. I knew for my own well being I ought to leave town but something held me back. Maybe it was the thrill of the execution. I wanted more; it was an adrenalin thing that just seemed to take over. It would not leave me in peace not until it was satisfied. I had to make sure though this time. I had a visiting order to see Dave and I would tactfully breach the subject. It was like I was not myself and as I walked home I felt that I was aloof from it all. The chances of being caught never even crossed my mind; I was in my own reality. A reality that said I could do anything I wanted without fear or hindrance. It was almost as if I was invincible.

The streets were empty as I made my way back to my bed-sit. I fell quickly into a dream on my return but it was a dream that unbalanced my mind and set me into violent temper. I saw Roy Johnson and he was laughing at me. He taunted me about how much money he got from informing on Dave and how he was going to buy a nice little car with the proceeds. He said that he had

something lined up for me and he knew that it was me who killed Colin Jones. He said he might even get a nice little holiday out of it. I found myself with my hands around his throat squeezing his very life force from him but the alarm clock woke me up and brought me back to reality. I decided not to go to work that day as I was still tired and had a lot on my mind. I phoned in sick and decided to take a long walk in the vain hope of getting the evil thoughts out of my head. I must have walked for miles but still they remained to taunt me.

I went over to Theresa's and fixed the door for her later in the afternoon and she told me all the latest gossip. I told her that I was going to see Dave at the weekend and asked her if she had any messages for him. She had nothing to tell him as he had rang her only that morning and she had told him about Colin's killing.

"What did he have to say about that?" I said packing my tools away.

"He was shocked. I think he sounded a little worried as well. He's still not truly sure what he has got involved in."

"Does he think that he may be next?" I said trying to sound concerned.

"Who knows? He has a lot of time on his hands, he could be thinking anything. Mind you he is probably safer where he is," and laughed before saying, "Well at least I know where he is on a night time now."

"True," I said with a wry smile, "Anything else want doing while I'm here?"

"Well now you ask the back door sticks a bit. Could you run your plane over it?"

"Sure no problem." I quickly finished the door, said goodbye and left. I had it in my mind that I would see an old friend of mine and find out as much as I could about Roy just in case it came in handy at a later date. I had known John Tipper on and off for around 10 years and knew that he was very friendly with Johnson. He did not live too far from Theresa so I went straight around to see if he was in.

I knocked on his door and it was quickly opened. John invited me in and offered me a cup of coffee which I gratefully accepted.

"So," He said after I had made myself comfortable, "So long time no see. What brings you around Stu?"

"I was just passing," I lied, "And thought I would drop in. So what's been happening around here then?"

"Well," John said casually, "There was a murder the other day but I expect you already knew about that."

"What do you mean?" I said getting defensive and then inwardly cursing myself for my stupidity.

"Well everybody is talking about it," he said unperturbed. Maybe he had not noticed my defensive manner. I vowed to be more careful in future.

"To tell you the truth John I haven't heard much recently. I don't get out as much as I ought to."

"It was a fellow called Colin Jones. They reckon it was a mugging that went wrong but I'm not so sure."

"Why is that then?" I said casually.

"Oh you probably don't know Jones he's not from around here. He thought he was a bit of a lad but I guess he wasn't. He used to pal around with someone I know, Roy Johnson. I don't know if you know him?"

"That name sounds familiar," I said and pretended to think about it, "Yes, he used to knock around with Dave Timms didn't he?"

"Yes that's right. You used to be good mates with Dave at one time didn't you?"

"Yes, mind you I haven't seen him in ages. I've only been back in town a few months."

"You heard he got sent down though?"

"Oh yes, I still used to phone him occasionally. Mind you I don't know the full story. Handling or something wasn't it."

"That's right. Mind you a lot of people thought it was a set up. He got hold of some hot jewelry

about 20 grands worth so I'm told tried to shift it to some night club owner, Martin Short."

"I've heard of him, owns The Springs doesn't he?"

"Yes that's right. He's supposed to have his fingers in a lot of pies though. Roy was with Dave when he seen him. He told me what happened. Short wasn't interested but he said that he knew a man that might be and arranged a meeting for him."

"What him and Roy?"

"No, Roy didn't want to know after that I think that he only went along for the ride anyway. I don't think that he was really involved to a large extent. Dave met some other fellow called Steve something, I'm not sure though. He was an antiques dealer from Nottingham, that's about all I know really."

"Oh," I said trying to sound indifferent. I did not believe that Roy was as clean as John was trying to make out but I said nothing. "I haven't seen Roy in ages. What's he doing with himself nowadays?"

"Oh this and that he went into the building game for a bit but couldn't make it pay. I think he does a bit of fencing for the crack-heads, dangerous game that though."

"Does he still drink down The Swan? He used to be quite a regular if I remember right."

"No he got banned. He drinks in The Red Lion on Sydney Street now. You'll find him in on most nights."

"So he still likes to drink then. I'll probably see him one of these nights."

"Oh more than likely I didn't realise that you knew him."

"From a long time ago I used to work with him at Farmer's Pet Foods about six years ago."

"He'll probably be glad to see you then as most of his friends are away now. Hazards of the trade I suppose."

"He probably will" I said smiling inwardly to myself, "Look I've got to get off now. Thanks for the coffee we'll have to do it again sometime."

I got up and left John to himself and walked the rest of the way home. The day was quite bright which surprised me really as we were nearly in the throes of winter. The wind was still chilling though rapidly dragging me out of the illusion of summer. The bag of tools was getting very heavy but I knew that I would soon be home so it did not worry me unduly. It was with a great relief that I opened my front door though and made my way into the kitchen to put my tools away and make myself a cup of tea. My mind was soon back on Roy Johnson. I could not really believe that he was as innocent as John had made out but John had never appeared to be a liar to me before so it left me with more than just a hint of confusion. I reasoned that Roy must have lied to him though and this went a long way to appeasing my mind. Upon reflection I must have already judged Roy and any new information was just as quickly disregarded. Maybe I was getting used to the fact that killing could be so much fun that I would not let anything get in the way of such a pleasure.

The whistling kettle put my thoughts back in line and as I made the tea I heard a knock on the door. My heart stopped beating as I thought that maybe I had been found out. It was with a great nervousness that I went to the door and opened it. Much to my relief it was the factory manager. He was a thin man with a large opinion of himself but to me he was a bit of a joke. He tried to sound angry as he said, "You weren't at work today Davies. You phoned in sick."

"Yes," I said with a supercilious smile that was done to antagonise him, "And you came around to see if I was alright. That's very kind of you. You must really appreciate my work, thanks."

"Are you trying to be funny," He said trying to fix me a steely glare.

"Are you trying to be funny," I said throwing it back at him, "Who do you think you are coming around to try and check on me?"

"I'm your boss," he said as if it was a major point, "And I want a reliable work force. I don't want dossers as they are ten a penny. If you want to keep your job then I would strongly suggest that you be in on time tomorrow and we'll say no more about it."

My rage took over when he said those words and my voice took on a menacing tone, "I tell you

what why don't you stick your job where the sun don't shine and if you ever dare to talk to me in that tone again I will rip your head off. Do you understand?"

He must have done because he backed off slightly and said, "You can pick your cards up tomorrow then."

"No," I said with the anger still inside me, "You post them to me as I don't want anything to do with that place again got it?"

He went off muttering something under his breath which I didn't quite catch and left me to get back to my drink. I finished making my tea and sat down to enjoy it but my thoughts were elsewhere. I knew that I wouldn't have been long in that place as it wasn't what you would call a decent job but I had intended to stay another month or so just to get a bit of money before I went off on my travels. Maybe it was the excuse that I needed to get out of town but I was reluctant to take it. The thrill of the game I was playing had taken away all my sanity and I was not even contemplating thinking about my future yet. My mind was stuck in neutral as I debated on Roy's involvement; it seemed to take over my very existence. I could not plan for a future because I might not even have one. It was early evening by the time I was at peace and I decided to nip out down to the local off license and get a bottle of whiskey. There were quite a few people about as I made my way the short distance to the shop. I knew one or two of them and they nodded their acknowledgment as I passed. The shop was empty and I quickly got served and made my way home with the intention of getting drunk. I was not a drinking man as such as money was usually too tight for such luxuries but today I had strong urge to get drunk. I opened it when I got home and took a drink straight from the bottle. Its warming glow soon encapsulated me and sent me into a drunken stupor. I just lay there and let it take me to where ever it wanted and fell quickly to sleep.

Chapter 2

I found myself in the mid day heat of the desert. My mouth was like a furnace as I struggled to crawl my way forward. I did not know where to but I knew it was over the next bank. Sweat poured out of my withered body but still I carried on. I knew I must make the bank otherwise I would die. It was an inner feeling that was hard to explain but it drove me on. My dry mouth almost choked on the hot almost thorny sand but still I persisted. It was only ten feet away but it could have been at the other side of eternity to my dry almost lifeless body. Each movement was an ordeal but still I carried on. I reached the brow of the bank and on the other side saw an oasis. I just seemed to fall forward and roll down into the cool clear water. Its coolness on my hot aching body was like nothing I had ever felt before; it was like steam was leaving me. I took a drink from the water and it felt sweet against my hot dry tongue. I just lay there for a few moments to try and get my breath but I heard the sound of music and it seemed to drag me to its source. I felt like a snake that was being charmed and I almost floated along just to see where it was coming from. I saw a large white tent that was not there before but I was too enthralled to take any notice. It was a square tent of about twenty feet in length and I could hear shouts and screams coming from it. I had no fear as I entered but I found that it was empty except for a large man dressed in a monk's cloak intently watching a woman dancing in front of him. I could not see the woman clearly as she was covered in veils. She moved with such elegance that she captured my imagination and all I could do was just stand and watch her every movement. She swayed with the grace of a tree in a gentle breeze and gyrated her hips with such sensuality that I would have eagerly went with her to the ends of the Earth just to be in her presence. She looked over and saw me watching and this seemed to unnerve her slightly. She stopped and nodded to the man who turned around and walked towards me. He had not an aggressive manner in his approach but he had purpose in his stride. He lifted his hood and I saw a well scarred and weather beaten face."You have come for Mary?" he said with an air of indifference."But have you earned her?"

I stood there confused for awhile and said, "Mary?"

"Mary of the Seven Veils is that not your purpose here?"

I saw her standing coyly behind him and then I knew it was true. I wanted her badly and yet I did not even know what she looked like. To me she was the essence of everything so fine and I had not even seen her face. What beauty lay behind those veils only she could know but I wanted to find out I moved forward to take her but the man blocked my way, "You have not earned her yet," he said in a polite and yet forceful voice, "Though she has lost one of her veils."

"What must I do, I will follow her to hell if I have to."

"Hell," the man said with an air of contempt, "That is the leftovers when the rich have had their fill. Once she had seven and now she has six, think about it. Imagine it you could have Mary for eternity what more could any man want?"

"I want to see her; I want to look at her face."

"First you must win her for is she not worth fighting for. The likes of her kind has never been seen by mortal man before. Many have tried but none have won her. Smell the scent of death and it will not lead you astray."

"Who are you, why won't you tell me what I must do?"

"Me," the man said and touched his chest, "My name is unimportant. I only guard Mary until she has found her equal. You will know what to do when the time comes for only you can do it. Do you accept the challenge?"

"Yes," I quickly said. I did not know what it was and I did not know what Mary looked like but I knew that I must have her, "But at least allow me the honour of watching her dance some more." The man looked at Mary and she shyly nodded. The music seemed to appear from nowhere and the dancing began again. It captivated me with its grace and sent my senses to outer space. I stood there spell bound and watched every movement. It was out of this world but then another sound came to the fore. It was like a knocking on wood. I carried on with my gaze but the noise persisted. Soon the tent disappeared and I found myself lying on the sofa with the mother of all hangovers. The noise continued and I got up to answer the door. My eyes were still heavy as I walked the short distance to the door. I opened it to be confronted by two large burly men.

"Stuart Thompson?" the elder one said and I nodded my head still half asleep, "I believe that you know David Timms."

I had regained my senses somewhat by then and so I said, "Who are you?"

"Old friends of his," the younger one said with a scornful laugh that I took great offence at hearing, "I want you to give him a message from us. I believe you are seeing him soon."

"I would say that was none of your business and I am nobodies messenger boy." I was about to slam the door shut but the elder of the two put his foot there.

"Now don't be like that," he said in a tone that he thought menacing, "As we said earlier we are old friends of his."

"Take your foot out the door," I said unperturbed, "Or I will feed it to my dog. Now get lost or I will hurt you."

I had not seen the other one move as the first one had distracted me somewhat. He threw a punch that connected to my right cheek and sent me backwards into the wall to the left of me. The two men barged by and dragged me forcibly into the living room. I felt powerless as they threw me to the ground but I was lucky in the fact that I landed on the settee. I remembered the whiskey bottle that lay beside the chair since the previous night and so I picked it up and crashed it on the settee's arm. The bottle smashed leaving a jagged stub which I pushed into the elder man's face."So you want to play do you?" I said spitting venom.

He backed off and said, "You won't get away with this." Out of the corner of my eye I saw the other man edge to my side. He looked like he was going to throw another punch but I had noticed him this time. I swung the broken bottle and caught the left hand side of his face sending blood out with the intensity of an oil rig. He fell backwards in shock and the other man made a run for the door.

"Who do you work for?" I said to the younger one who was now on his own and looking more than a little frightened.

“Martin Short,” he said almost shaking, “He sent me here.”

I looked at the man and saw he was no gangster. He must have been one of Short's doormen.”I don't want to see you again,” I said and he quickly made his way out. I decided that it might be a good idea to find alternative accommodation as I did not quite know what I was dealing with. I knew a man who had an empty flat and I did have a little money left from what I had taken from Jones so I went over to see him. He was reluctant at first but I said it would only be for two weeks and gave him a handsome deposit. I reasoned that I would not get my other deposit back as I would not be giving notice so I decided to take some of the fittings in compensation. As it was only a hundred pounds I just took the television and the stereo and got my money back by selling it at the local second hand shop. My possessions were few so I had packed and left the bed-sit before dinner time. I was seeing Dave at three and so I made my way to where he was incarcerated. It was only thirty miles and so I made it in good time. I had to queue for quite a while before I eventually got to see him. He looked gaunt and had lost quite a lot of weight since the last time I had seen him. He warmly greeted me saying, “How's it going Stu?”

“Not too bad Dave how are you managing?” This was my first visit to Dave and he had been away for three months.

“Keeping my head down really, I suppose you heard about Colin.”

“Yes, it was the talk of the town. They say that it was just a mugging that went wrong.”

“I'm not so sure,” Dave said and I could trace a hint of fear in his voice, “Things don't seem quite right to me.”

I wanted to tell him but I knew I could not. This made it difficult because I had to tell him about my earlier visit.”I don't know how to say this,” I said sheepishly, “But I had a couple of visitors earlier. They wanted to give you a message from a bloke called Short, I think they were trying to scare you off something.”

Dave went deep into thought and I could see that it played on his mind.”What did they look like?” He said eventually.

“Big men, one was about forty with a scar down his left cheek and the other about twenty five, six feet tall and about sixteen stone.”

Dave nodded his head and said, “They must think that I know something I shouldn't. What did you tell them?”

“Nothing really, I don't even know the full story myself. First you tell me it was Colin Jones and now you think it was Roy Johnson, what actually did happen?”

“I don't really know for sure. My thoughts were first with Jones because that was the sort of thing he would do. It wasn't till later that I realised that it was more likely Roy. He set the deal up with Short and left me to it.”

“Didn't you know Short?”

“No Roy told me about him. I don't usually deal with people I don't know but I was desperate. I never deal with that sort of thing so it was all new to me.”

“So who was Steve from Nottingham?” I said remembering my conversation with John, “How does he fit into it?”

“That Short bloke put me onto him said he might be able to help. Short said that he didn't really deal in that sort of thing anymore but he knew a man called Steve Simon who did.”

“So you set the deal up with him?”

“Well,” Dave said sheepishly, “He put me onto a fellow called Paul because he said it was too small for him to deal with. He introduced me to someone called Chris who turned out to be an undercover copper.”

I looked at Dave in disbelief.”What were you playing at? You usually cover your tracks a lot better than that. Why didn't you just pull out after the first referral?”

“I was in too deep. Twenty grand was a lot of money when all said and done. It blinded me.”

“So what did you think those two fellows wanted,” I said changing the subject.

"I don't know. Maybe it was something to do with Colin's death you should have asked them."

"I didn't like their attitude," I said with a smile, "Where did you get the gear from in the first place anyway?"

"It was part of a larger job. Most of the stuff went abroad. I got the rest. It was a director of some company who owned it. He had a large house in one of the local villages. It was someone my cousin knew who actually did the job so I knew it didn't come from that end."

"Do you still think it was Roy then," I said because I was getting more than a little confused, "By the sound of it, it could have been any one of the others."

"I don't know, I've racked my brains but he seems the most logical. That Paul could have been undercover and so could Steve for that matter. I've put it all behind me now though. It just does my head in even to think about it. There could be that many angles."

We talked a little more but nothing of any real importance. The time soon went and I found myself outside the prison walls. I thought that I would drop in and see an old friend who lived not far from there but he was out so I made my way back on the long journey home. The flat that I was borrowing was a lot more spacious than the bed sit and it had a lot better atmosphere. I watched a little T.V. and waited for the night to appear. I was going out that night. I thought that it might be a good idea to have a drink in the Red Lion on the off chance of seeing Roy and besides I could have done with a good night out, all the new information that Dave had told me had confused me as I had set it in my mind that it was Roy and Roy alone that had been responsible for Dave's plight. The dream came back in my mind and I thought of Mary and her veils of silk. The man had said that I would know what to do when the time came but I was none the wiser. All I knew was that I wanted her more than anything I had ever wanted in my life. Strange really because it was just a dream but to me it was reality. In fact it seemed more real than the reality I was living in at the moment. I felt at peace in her presence, something that had never really happened before. She had captured my heart of that I had no doubt. I just wanted to make her my own. It might sound strange but to me it made perfect sense. Time had moved on by now and it was early evening. I got ready to go out which did not take too long and walked the couple of miles to the pub. I did not quite know what to say or how to approach the matter so I decided to play it by ear. I quickly covered the journey and found myself outside the small well weather beaten pub. It was more like a converted house than most of the pubs I had passed but it had a good reputation for beer and to most of the regulars that was all that mattered. I walked into the bar and saw that it was empty. I looked at my watch and saw that it was 7.30."Pint of lager please "I said to the large fat bespectacled barman, "Not many in tonight."

"It don't start filling up till 9 now," he said nonchalantly, "Sometimes I don't know why the gaffer bothers opening so early. There doesn't seem to be the money nowadays."

I took a drink from the glass and must admit that it tasted good. I was no connoisseur though. I got talking to the barman just to pass the time away and the first customers started to mill in at around 8.30. A couple in their late fifties were the first to arrive they ordered the drinks and took them into the lounge.

"I don't know why they do that," the barman said by way of conversation, "It costs the same whichever part they drink." The door opened and a group of youths entered. They looked like they had either been drinking or on drugs as their eyes were heavily glazed. I took no real notice of them except to see that they were looking at me on the sly. After a while they seemed to forget about me and went on their way with their own company. I was getting bored a little by now and the drink was starting to take its effect. I thought that I had better ease off for a while or I would be in no fit state to see Roy. It was 9.30 when he finally graced the pub with his presence. He recognised me and came up in a friendly manner."Long time no see," he said as he shook my hand, "I thought that you had left town." I noticed that the group of youths had been watching this and when they found out that I knew Roy they did not bother with me again.

"I've been back a couple of months. So what's been happening then?"

“Not a lot really, what you having?”

“I’ll have a lager if you’re in the chair,” I said and finished my drink.

“Two lagers please Andy,” Roy said to the man behind the bar, “And have one yourself.”

“Cheers Roy, I’ll just have a half then.”

He poured the drinks and gave Roy his change. “I was sorry to hear about Dave,” Roy said because he knew we were friendly, “Six years is a long time in anyone’s life.”

I could feel my rage rising and I had difficulty in keeping it in check. I took a deep breath and said, “Tragic. I went to see him today.”

“So I heard,” Roy said mysteriously. I wanted to ask him what he meant by that but it was the wrong place and definitely the wrong time. I made a mental note of it though and put it with the rest of the questions. “So tell me Stu what are you doing with yourself now?”

“Unemployed at the moment I was thinking of leaving town again. See what the wide world has to show and all that.”

“You never do seem to stay around a long time. It must be a strange lifestyle.”

“It suits me. I could never stay in one place for too long. I get bored too quickly I suppose. So what are you up to now? I heard that you were in the building trade last time I was about.”

“Wheeling and dealing now, no money in the building game now. Well not since those programmes about cowboy builders.” he seemed to find that amusing as he laughed loudly to himself.

“I’m after a T.V. If you know anyone,” I said formulating my plan.

“No problem, how does sixty quid sound?”

I pretended to think awhile before I said, “I don’t know it sounds a bit steep to me. Got anything cheaper?”

“I could do you one for forty. It’s not state of the art but it’s not in bad condition.”

“That sounds more like it. I don’t want nothing too flash, a small portable will do. You know what it’s like when you move about.”

“So when are you thinking of going then?” Roy said and it was only then that I realised I was being pumped for information. I cursed myself for my own stupidity. It was then that I thought I was in a little too deep. I knew that I had to finish him that night but I had to find out who wanted to know so much about me first. Things seemed to be getting confusing now. He could be working for the police but I put that down to paranoia, the inner fear of getting caught was creeping up on me. No I reasoned to myself he must be working for Short. He must have wanted to know a little bit about me after the run in with his staff. I had heard that Short could be a dangerous man to cross so I bore it in mind as I started to make my play, “A couple of weeks, there is nothing here for me really. I thought that I might go up north. Blackpool or Hull I’m not sure. I’ve got friends up there so what about this T.V. then, I could do with picking it up tonight if you can?”

“It’s a bit short notice but I might just have one for you. I did not realise it was a portable you were after. I could get you a real good one for that. I’ve got to have a word with someone first though.”

I thought he was going to make a phone call but much to my relief he went over to the group of youths and whispered something to one of them. The youth nodded and got up and left the pub. Roy came back and said, “He won’t be too long. You can have a look at it in the car park.”

“No,” I said trying to sound cautious, “They look like crack-heads to me.”

“I didn’t realise that you were fussy,” Roy said giving me a strange look, “I’m not creating a market I’m just capitalising on it. They would get their drugs from elsewhere if I didn’t.”

“Oh it’s not that, I just don’t want anything to do with them. They’re too treacherous.” I noticed that Roy shied away a little when I said that, “We’ll meet up at the park after closing. You don’t know who’s watching in the car park.”

“Oh,” Roy said and I noticed a trace of relief, “I see what you mean. Yes alright I’ll go for that.”

I noticed that Roy had finished his drink so I ordered the next round and we carried on talking. “I saw an old friend of yours,” I said, “John Tipper.”

“John, yes I know him quite well.”

"I nipped in for a cup of tea, haven't seen him in ages."
"I didn't realise that you knew him."
"Yes we go back years. It was him that put me onto you."
"He did," Roy said suspiciously, "What for?"
"I was after a tele and he said you would be able to sort me one out. I needed it cheap you see as money is a bit tight."
"Oh," Roy said with a sigh of relief, "Yes if you want anything like that I'm the one to see. I tell you what I could get you a D.V.D. Player at a good price. It will match the tele."
"Sounds good but I don't like carrying too much stuff around. If anything it's a bit of a hindrance when you travel like I do."
"Oh of course, I can understand that. Anything else you want though you know where I drink. I'm in here most nights. I could get you C.D's at £3 each."
"No good to me I haven't got a player."
"A portable one for a tenner twin deck, tape and radio."
"Sounds good but not for me I could keep my ear to the ground for you though. I mean at those prices they should snap your hands off."
"Yes, thanks Stu. I'll make it worth your while."
"Don't worry about that. That's what friends are for."
The youth returned to the bar and winked at Roy. He looked at me and said, "It's in the back of the car. You can see it anytime you want."
"I'm in no hurry. About your round isn't it?"
"Yes why not, same again Andy and have one yourself."
"You're very friendly with him."
"It helps him to turn a blind eye," Roy said with a grin. "Mind you I have to be careful of the land lord. He's a different kettle of fish. He's got more to lose I suppose."
"Well his license for one thing. I know what you mean about being careful though. I mean look at Dave. He got mixed up with the wrong sort and now he's doing six years."
"Yes it was a shame that, he was a good bloke."
"Makes you think though. You never know who's watching you."
"True," Roy said, all his defenses started to drop as the beer started to take its effect, "Mind you it's not that bad around here. Everybody knows each other."
"Yes, I did get a few strange looks earlier. They must have thought I was a copper."
"More than likely, they are not very trusting really."
"Fair play to them, you didn't tell them my name by the way did you?"
"No I just asked them to sort you a tele. As you said yourself you can't trust crack-heads."
I smiled to myself when he said that. Mind you I reasoned that they were that far out of it they would have probably forgot by morning anyway. It all seemed to fall in my favour which gave me great peace of mind as I took a drink from the glass.

Chapter 3

The night wore slowly on and to tell you the truth I was starting to get bored with Roy's company. At around twenty to eleven I said, "I'm going to have to get off. What time shall we meet at the park?"

"I thought that we would go round after the pub has shut. It would make more sense."

"I've got to nip home and fetch some money. I wasn't sure if you would be in and I don't usually carry that kind of money around."

"Alright, how long will you be?"

"Twenty minutes. I'll meet you by the bridge."

I left Roy and went back to the flat. There were not a lot of people about in fact it was very quiet for a Saturday night and I quickly got home and got the money just in case. I walked the short distance

to the park and waited with growing anger for him to appear. I had it in my mind that I would knock him out and take him for a little ride in the countryside. He seemed to know a lot more than he made out and this only added to my ire. I wanted to know how he knew I had visited Dave and a myriad of other things that had left me in mild confusion. He had a lot of answers and I knew that I could drag them out with a little gentle persuasion. A set of car lights awoke me from my thought chain and I saw that he had come. He got out the car and said, "I won't be a moment it's in the boot."

He opened the boot and leaned in to take the tele out. Now was my chance I reasoned as I went up behind him. I was about to grab him but another set of head lights approached at speed. I backed off slightly thinking that it was just someone driving past. The car came closer and screeched to a halt. The two large men I had previously been acquainted with jumped out and ran towards me. They seemed to have caught hold of me before I even had a chance to know what was happening.

"Pull him down," Roy said and I felt helpless as they quickly over powered me. I fell heavy and that was when the pain started. I felt a kick to the chin and it sent it vibrating with pain. The clonk of leather is a hollow sound but it hurts as much as if it was solid. It felt like the whole side of my face was numb. Another kick followed but this time it was to my stomach. It lifted me up slightly and let me fall with a thud that seemed to shake the ground. Again and again the blows came and I felt blood leave from various parts of my body. They carried on for what seemed like hours before Roy said, "I think he's had enough now."

"Not quite," the younger of the doormen said, "I haven't left my mark." From his back pocket he took out a butterfly knife and twirled it open. He slashed the side of my face and I felt blood spurt out and spray my collar. I was too weak to get up. I just laying there stunned by either fear or tiredness I was not sure which.

"Mr. Short has got a message for Dave," the elder one of the two said, "He would be very grateful if Dave would keep his mouth shut as it is bad for his business. Now be a good boy and tell him that for me would you."

Roy laughed and said, "I think he will get it this time." He came over to me and kicked me in the chest, "Nice to see you again Stuart. We'll forget about the tele then shall we."

My consciousness was debating whether to leave me as I heard the cars pull off. I ached all over. I had never been hurt like that before. It was quite enlightening really as I learned to feel pain. It brought me down to Earth with more than a little bang. I felt the burning in my face from the opened wound and it seemed to blend in with the numbness of my body. I felt strangely light as if the pain inside me wanted to leave and take me with it and then I found myself back in the tent face to face with the monk. He shook his head sadly and said, "Well you didn't do too well that time did you?"

I did not quite know what to say as I hadn't a clue what was happening. "Who are you?" I said after a couple of moments.

"Who do you want me to be," he said mysteriously.

"Are you trying to play mind games with me," I said looking at him strangely.

"Wouldn't dream of it," he said with a laugh, "How is your quest for Mary getting on?"

On hearing her name I felt strangely uplifted but all I could say was, "I'm none the wiser, I've got too much on my mind." She brought out a strange honesty in me that I had never really known before.

"As above then so below," the man said. I did not really know what he meant but I was too enrapt with the thought of Mary to be led astray by minor things like mind games. I sort of felt a strange attraction to her when I was in her presence. She had appeared from behind him with an appearance of concern. Her mannerisms told me that she too had an attraction and this seemed to lift me even more.

"You are love so I must be hate." the man said and with that I found myself back in my body more than just a little confused. The numbness seemed to have left me by now but the wound did want

treating. I could tell the hospital anything I liked as I was the victim but it seemed an ordeal to get up at that moment so I just lay there alone with my thoughts. My hatred for Roy soon came to the fore. It was becoming an obsession with me recently. I cursed my stupidity for getting hurt and vowed to be more careful in future. I had acquired another source for my venom as I remembered the look on the younger doorman's face as he slashed mine. I had never really been classed as handsome but it was the principle of the thing. I felt strong enough to get up as a new life seemed to have taken over. I was surprised that the hospital did not want to know much about my scar so I wasn't too forthcoming with my information. I was soon back in the flat with a glass of whiskey in my hand. I was not really much of a drinker but for some reason it seemed a good idea at the time. I just relaxed and actually felt quite safe. I had time to reflect on my mistakes as I stayed there gathering strength for two days. The pain had completely gone after that. Two days of whiskey drinking certainly brings out the pain. I was now on a vendetta as thoughts of Mary had long since disappeared. Dave's plight never entered into it either. It was a bitter hatred that had taken over and I could not control it. I found it quite exhilarating though so it did not leave me with that much concern. I decided that I wanted to see Roy again as I wanted to have another look at the television but I would be a lot more careful in the future as that was a lesson I would never forget.

I did not want to kill him straight away as I wanted to torture him first. Maybe this was to compensate me for the humiliation of being outwitted by him I was not sure but I did know that he still had a lot of answers for me. First of all I wanted to find out where the doorman lived as the scar had made it personal. I still wanted to find out what it was all about but that had not the priority as it had, had before. Roy must have thought that he would not be hearing from me again as he carried on with his life in much the same way. I followed him awhile to ascertain his movements as I was still gathering my strength. It was a full week before I was ready to start formulating any sort of plan. I had been too busy even to think of Mary as my hatred for Roy grew and festered and took away nearly every waking hour. His movements were very easily checked as he followed a strict pattern between the pub and the bookies and so I could redirect my efforts to finding out more about the doorman. I was surprised how easy that was as he was quite well known in the area. I got his address from a friend called Steve who also told me that his name was Don. With that behind me I could have a clear head when I saw Roy and I could find out about Dave as I had all the other information that I needed. I still wanted to know what it was all about but that was more to do with the fact that I wanted to know who to kill next than helping Dave. To tell you the truth I think that Dave would have just let it lie and put it down to experience. It was me alone who had picked up the banner but that was more for my self satisfaction as my evening up scores could not have helped Dave in any way whatsoever. Maybe that was why I had not told him as he would have thought that I had lost my mind. Maybe I had but I did not see it as that. I saw myself as an inverted caped crusader helping out a friend in his hour of need so I guess you could say that I had lost my sense of reason as reason for me was whatever I wanted it to be. I was still a little confused at who to turn my hatred on first as there were two candidates that would have fitted the bill. By the time my strength had returned my mind had fell on Roy and I had decided that he would be the next victim of my ire. He was a lot easier to get a hold of than the other man and his lifestyle and dealings with the crack-heads would give people an impression of danger so if he did disappear they would not have been too concerned. In fact they would have probably thought that he just did a runner owing people a lot of money. I did know that I would have to bury the body this time as my cunning instinct had started to make an appearance. My killing of Colin Jones was a spur of the moment decision and so I had not taken any real precautions. I was lucky that time but I made sure that I would cover my tracks a little better in future. Besides I wanted Short himself to think that Roy had done a runner because if a body was found he might put two and two together and come up with me. The police interest in Roy would be at a minimum to say the least but if a body was found that would put a new light on it. I decided that I would pick him up when he walked back from the pub and take him to an old shack that I knew on the other side of town. It was situated in the middle of a

patch of wasteland that nobody ever seemed to visit.

I needed a little time to be alone with him and I did not really know what sort of man he was. I had heard that he liked a fight but that did not frighten me. I just did not know how long it would take to break him as his fear of Short would probably be a lot stronger than his fear of me. The wasteland was well off the beaten track and this was a great comfort to me as I was a little concerned about people hearing him scream. I had got hold of a second hand car out of the local Ad Mag from over Mansfield way for next to nothing and I did not bother to re register it just in case there were any complications. I decided that that night being Monday would be the best night more for the reason that I was getting restless than anything else but it would be a quiet night anyway so it worked in my favour. I took a steel bar and putting it into the car drove to the Red Lion. I made sure I was not being watched as I looked in. I saw Roy sitting there with the group of lads who had been in the last time. I must have waited at least thirty minutes before he looked like he was ready to move. I had sat patiently in my car for all that time but much to my dismay he appeared with another man and they set off down Albert Street. I followed discreetly behind them and was about to turn and come back on another occasion when the other man said his goodbyes and left. He went into a small terraced house that looked like it could do with a lick of paint and a gardener to clear the mess in the front. I followed Roy and decided to make my play at the bridge that he would have to pass to get back to his house, this was two streets away and it gave me ample time to park up and wait. I knew that Roy did not know the car so he would not be suspicious on his approach. I think that he was too drunk to notice anything anyway so I was probably worrying needlessly. I had been a little reluctant to use the car at first but I guess I was just being a little over cautious. Thinking back it would have been quite a feat of memory for anybody to recall Roy's last day as I was going to make sure that the body would never be found so a murder inquiry would have been out of the question. If they ever did find the body it would have probably been that far in the future that I would not have been around to face the consequences anyway.

Though it pains me to say it I was a little nervous at facing Roy as if he did manage to put up a struggle it would have been not too long before it would attract attention. The bridge was in quite a built up area but that could not be helped. I sat there with the bar in my hand and a little trepidation as I waited for his arrival. He was staggering slightly when he came into view and I got out of the car and waited behind one of the walls for his approach. My heart beat faster but I think that was more the thrill of the chase than anything else. As he got closer I noticed that he did not even see me as his head was bowed down looking at the floor. He was a lot drunker than I had first thought and that would make it even easier to carry out my deed. He was almost upon me before he saw me. "What do you want?" he said without even the trace of fear, "You got off light the last time." I did not know if it was the drink that was making him brave or if he just had a low opinion of me but it did not matter as it was no concern of mine. I produced the steel bar but it did not have the effect that I thought it would. Although it did not frighten him he backed off slightly and said, "So you need a tool then. Do you think that you are that good?" and laughed. I did no more than crash it across his head and he reeled back in pain but it did not knock him out. The brick wall that was behind him stopped his retreat and he fell heavily against it. I thought that he might try and raise the alarm but he remained quiet and came towards me. I thought that I was not having that happen and so I threw the bar down and hit him square in the throat. This was silly really because I had given away my advantage but as I had said it was personal so my hatred just took over. He reeled back against the wall and blood trickled down his white jumper. I kicked him in the groin and he fell heavily to the ground with a crash that I thought had shaken the bridge. I picked up the bar and hit him again and this time he was out for the count. It was quite a struggle for me to move him as he must have weighed at least 18 stone but I got him in the car and drove him to the shack. There was no one about during the time all this happened.

The roads were very quiet and I made my way without any undue stress. It was a job to carry him into the shack but eventually I made it. I tied him to the chair and waited for him to come around. It

seemed like hours before I heard a groan.

“Oh my head,” he said unaware of where he was, “I ought to give up the beer.”

“I wouldn't worry about it too much Roy,” I said and his head shot in my direction. He looked at me awhile before it eventually registered with him.

“Well,” he said with a marked tone of contempt, “You're in for it now. You've picked the wrong man to cross. You don't know my back up.”

“I don't see anyone around Roy,” I said mockingly looking around, “It's just me and you. I want some answers.”

“Go and screw yourself,” he said defiantly. I thought that maybe it would take quite a while to crack him so I made a start. I hit him straight in the jaw and heard it crack.

“Enjoy it while you can,” he said. He seemed to think he was protected even where he was. Mind you if he'd have known about my true intentions he might have felt differently. I hit him again and the chair fell backwards crashing to the ground and knocking his head against the hard wooden floor. I kicked him in the stomach and felt a rib cave in. Still he was defiant and this unnerved me more than slightly. Blood lay all around his mouth and spread across the floor. He saw this but it only seemed to raise his temper. He struggled wildly to try and escape but it was to no avail. I waited for a while to let him exhaust himself and then carried on with the assault. I laid into him again but still he would not yield. It was like he was a lot more afraid of Short than he was of me and so I needed to even the odds up a little. I looked around the shack to see if there was anything that might shake him. The shack itself was fairly empty and I found nothing that would do the job. I remembered a hammer that was in my tool box and went out to fetch it. It was a bitter cold night but that only added to my favour as it meant that there would be less chance of anybody being about. I opened the car boot and my eyes fell on the bag of tools. Every one of them would make an instrument of torture. This seemed to fill me with a certain amount of glee. In fact I took the whole bag in case I came up with any other ideas. It was quite heavy and I struggled to carry it back. As I entered the shack I saw that Roy was still struggling so I went over and cracked his left knee cap with the ball-pein hammer. He screamed with pain but his strength still lay in the hope that this was just a beating in retaliation for my earlier beating. He thought that he could ride it out and get his revenge at a later date.

“Anything you do to me,” he said when he had stopped screaming, “Will be returned with interest. Look let me go and I'll put this down to experience.”

“You only fool me once. Don't try that trick again.”

“Look,” he said trying another track, “What do you want from me? I've got money. Not on me but I can quickly get hold of it.”

“I reckon that you've probably carrying about £500 on you at the moment,” and looking at him I could tell I was not that far off, “I could have took that at any time.”

“Well,” he said pretending to panic, “What is it then?”

“I want some questions answered,” I said and looking at him I noticed that he seemed a little too keen.

“Yes, whatever you want to know.”

I thought that it might be a trick so I would try and catch him out. I already knew the doorman's address but I reasoned that Roy did not know that, “I want to know where the fellow who gave me this scar lives.”

Roy thought a while and said, “Oh you mean Jimmy. He lives down Edward Street, number 44.”

I laughed loudly and hit him on the other knee cap, “I don't think so Roy. I've heard that he does not live in this town.”

He screamed again and went quiet. His fear of me was building up rapidly but his fear of Short was still too strong. “I don't know,” he lied.

“Oh but you do. Don't take me for an idiot. You might be afraid of Short but he isn't here so tell me again. Where does he live?”

“Derby,” he said and I knew that I was getting somewhere, “He lives just off Osmanton Road.”
“Do you think so,” I said and hit his little finger with the hammer crushing it completely and sending intolerable pain through his body. It was almost electric as it seemed to shake him to the very bone. He was a lot braver than I had given him credit for as I had expected him to quit when I first hit him with the hammer on the knee cap.”No,” he said, “He will kill me. You don't know what you are dealing with.”

“His address,” I repeated and brought the hammer beside his second finger, “I've got all the time in the world.”

“I can't,” he pleaded, “It's more than my life's worth. They're animals.”

I smiled at that because I knew that his life would not be worth anything soon and said, “I want his name and address.”

Half of me wanted to torture him more as I took a certain sadistic pleasure from his pain but I did not want to overdo it as he was getting weak now and I still had answers to get. I knew that once he gave me the doorman's address then everything else I asked would be answered truthfully. I thought that it would be a good time to try and destroy his spirit with his mind.”Animals,” I said, “You haven't seen anything yet.”

He looked at me and I think it was then that it finally sank in. He saw my eyes and saw that I meant business. This was going to be a lot more than just a few slaps as a lesson. He knew I was after really hurting him and this unnerved him more than slightly. I was not sure if he realised the full extent of what I was going to do but he guessed that he would be very beaten by the time that I had finished.

“Look,” he said the panic finally sinking in, “I'll give you anything just let me go. I won't say anything. You said that you were going to leave town soon how does two grand sound as a nice going away present?”

“I don't want your money,” I said, my temper rising at the thought that I could be bought off so easily, “Just give me some information.”

It was then that he cracked. Maybe he realised that there was no way out I'm not sure but he was ready to talk, “His name is Don Jacobson and he lives at 23 Infin Road. The other man lives at Dove Park, no.3 in Chaddeston.”

I had not really wanted to get the other address as I had nothing against the other man but I remembered it nevertheless. Roy had gave me the right answer so I pursued the matter, “So why did you grass Dave up he's never harmed you?”

“It was not me I just set the deal up with Short as he said he was after some jewelry that was all my part in it. I didn't know that he was going to turn him in. I liked Dave he was a good bloke.”

I saw a certain amount of truth in his eyes and that left me more than a little confused.

“So,” I said trying to find a ray of light, “What is your involvement with Short then?”

“I just work for him,” Roy said softly as his breath had started to leave him, “He supplies the gear and I sell it for him.”

“The gear,” I said and realisation hit me in the face, “Let me get this right, you supply the crack and they steal for you.” I had thought that Roy had just been a fence. I had not realised the extent of his involvement, “Cuts the middle man I suppose.”

“I could get you a cut in the deal,” Roy said thinking that I was coming around to his way of thinking, “You could make a hell of a lot of money.”

“Yeah right, as soon as you got the chance you would feed me to the dogs. Besides I told you before I don't deal with crack-heads.”

“He's got a lot of irons in the fire, Short has. He could fix you up no problem.”

I laughed and said, “Don't take me for a fool you are not in the position to try and play games with me.”

Roy thought about what I had said and went quiet for a while before he said, “What are you going to do with me?” I detected fear in his voice and this seemed to drive me on.

"You remember Colin Jones," I said and watched his face whiten though that could have been through loss of blood." "Yes," he said shaking slightly, "He got mugged didn't he?" "Not strictly true," I said with a glint in my eye that did not go unnoticed by Roy, "He got in my way."

Fear gripped Roy as it started to sink in.

Chapter 4

"No," Roy said, "Not me. I had nothing to do with it."

"Well you haven't been very helpful," I said shaking my head sadly, "Just like Colin wasn't."

"I'll tell you what I know. Just let me go please." he said the last word in a pitiful voice that I thought beneath him.

"Steve Simon, what do you know about him?"

"He's a friend of Short's. He's from Nottingham way. He gets rid of the electrical gear that I get from the drugs and ships them all over the country. I have only seen him twice as I just work for Short."

"That's not a lot to go on is it Roy, you don't even know where he lives. You aren't much good to me, what about Chris?"

"Who," Roy said in a confused tone, "I don't think I know him."

"Just like Colin," I said sadly shaking my head, "He was not very helpful either. I'm afraid your time is nearly done now Roy, you're starting to bore me."

Roy was shaking quite openly now, "Not me, please not me." It was pitiful to hear him wail so I thought that I would get it over with quickly. I took out the $\frac{3}{4}$ inch chisel and plunged it into his heart. Blood spurted out and covered my shirt much to my disgust. Roy slumped into a heap and I knew that he was finished. I had meant to make it last but I was still a little nervous about killing. I was expecting the police to break in at any moment but that might just have been the final remnants of guilt working their way out of my system. I saw the state he was in and I was very reluctant to take him in the car as I could not risk getting blood over it. I decided that I would bury him near the shed. This might sound foolhardy but I was intending to dig a very deep grave at least six feet down so there was little chance of it being found. I went into the cold outside and picked a suitable spot. It was about 20 feet away from a large Oak tree and it was far enough away to mean I would not be digging through any roots. I put my spade into the hard frosty ground and realised that I would have a job on my hands. I vowed that next time I would be a lot better prepared and carried on with the arduous task of burying him. Next time I thought to myself with a wry smile I'll get them to dig their own graves. I made good progress but it still took a lot longer than I had expected. By the time I had covered the full hole with its original layer of grass the sun was rising in the sky. I knew I still had a lot of clearing up to do so I went straight back to the shack and started that little job. I had not realised how much blood there was and I had great difficulty in removing it.

It was mid morning when I finally finished and by the time I got back onto the main road I was straight into a long traffic jam. It seemed like hours before I finally parked up a quarter of a mile from the flat. I thought that it would be a good idea to park it there as it was safe from prying eyes and far enough away from my flat to attract any attention to me. It was parked in a disused garage and as I shut the door behind it I went off with a spring in my step. I was tired but it felt like a huge weight had been lifted from me. My hate was satisfied but I knew it would be back again. The quarter of a mile to the flat was soon covered and I even stopped off for a bottle of whiskey in case I needed it to help me sleep. I got back to the flat and sat on the chair with a huge sigh of relief. It felt like I had not slept in days as I felt myself nodding off.

I found myself face to face with the man in the monk's shawl and he greeted me by saying, "Getting better. I think you might just make it."

"Where's Mary," I said with an air of disappointment, "Why isn't she here?"

"She might be along shortly. Now she has only five veils."

It was then that it finally sank in, "You mean that I have to kill to remove each of her veils is this what it's all about?"

"With each time you kill you get closer to her. You lift one of her veils."

I was speechless when I heard this. There was too much going on in my mind and I was finding it difficult to cope, "Why?"

"Isn't she worth killing for, it's not as if she's asking you to die for her is it?" he laughed at this and it unnerved me slightly. The idea of killing had already taken over my mind so I guess it was just a bonus that with each one I would see more of her.

"What happens after seven," I said the thought of the man's laughter still in my mind, "I get Mary right?"

"Yes, she is yours for eternity."

I took a little time out to study the man. His scar seemed to be in the same place as mine but I did not think much about it. I noticed that he had dull lifeless eyes and his graying beard looked like it could do with a trim. He was not dissimilar to me in height and build and his nose looked like it had been badly broken at one time. The man saw me studying him and so he said, "Maybe that is why Mary likes you. She can see me in you."

"Where is she from?" I said because I thought that it would be a good idea to know a little about the woman I was killing for.

"She is from nowhere and yet everywhere," the man said mysteriously, "She has no place because like you she is a drifter. When I first met her she was a dancer but I was not strong enough to keep her, you might be more lucky."

I was wasting my time asking him questions as he always side stepped them or only gave me half the answers that I wanted so I said, "You are not very forthcoming are you."

As I finished the sentence Mary seemed to appear from a side door. My attention was totally captured as I gazed upon her. I had completely forgotten about the man as my eyes were only hers. She had removed another veil to reveal her tanned silky thighs and I stood there in awe of such splendour. She danced for me and sent my senses into orbit. I found that my love for her knew no bounds and as I watched with intense pleasure all my thoughts just seemed to disappear. The man noticed me and said, "Many have tried to win her but all have failed. What makes you think that you will be different?"

"What makes you think that I won't?" I said trying to get my own back on the man for being so vague with his answers. He never answered me so I guess he did not like me playing him at his own game. I stood for a while just watching her but I heard knocking on wood and found myself lying on the chair. I looked at my watch and saw that it was 3 o'clock in the afternoon. "Who the hell's that?" I said getting up. I was not too happy as it was the second time I had been awoken like that. I was a little wary though as the last time it had been the doormen. I looked through the window and saw that it was the man that owned the flat. I opened the door and invited him in. He entered rather quickly and this aroused my suspicion somewhat I must admit. He went through to the living room and said, "I'm afraid I've got some bad news Stuart."

"What's the matter John," I said looking at him strangely

"I need the flat empty. I've got someone coming to live in it. I'm going to have to ask you to leave. I'm very sorry."

There was something wrong with his tone of voice and it sent my alarm bells ringing, "What's it all about John. There is something you're not telling me."

John looked at the door and said, "I did not know that Short was looking for you. That puts everything in a different perspective. He's trouble Stuart and if he thought I was helping you my flat would end up like your bed sit. I can't afford it."

"Like my bed sit, what are you talking about John?"

"It got fire bombed last night," John said looking at the floor.

"What?" I said in surprise, "How do you know it was Short?"

"Let's just say that I heard it through the grapevine," John said and I thought that he was not telling me all he knew.

"Not you as well John" I said with an air of disappointment, "Is there nobody I can trust nowadays?"

"That's why I came straight round to warn you. It might be an idea to get out of town Stuart. He's got a lot of very powerful friends and he knows how to use them."

"So, what are you going to tell him?"

"Nothing, he does not know that you are here but if you stay any longer he is bound to find out. If he ever found out that you stayed here he would smash the place up along with me. You don't know what sort of man he is."

I was quickly finding out though. I reasoned that John would not tell on me as what he said sounded about right but I wanted to know why Short had, had my bed sit fire bombed. It was too early to do with anything about Roy so I assumed he was just rubbing salt in my wounds. I looked at John and said, "Yes I think you are right. I'm going to high tail it off to Hull I've got friends up there."

I had no intentions of going there but thought it best to tell him that as I could never be too sure about him. I was quickly packed and John gave me the money I had gave him to help me on my way. I did not really need it but then again it would always come in handy as I was not going to sign on the dole for fear of drawing attention to myself. I still had a lot of Colin's money left and with what I got from Roy it added up to quite a tidy sum so I reasoned it was enough to get by for a while. I walked the distance to the car as I did not want John to know what I was driving. I decided that it would be safest sleeping in the car as I could always be on the move. The next few days I spent checking the papers to see if there was anything about Roy in them but I found nothing. I had been right about the police's lack of interest and most people who knew him had indeed thought that he had ran off owing a lot of money. It was surprising how quickly he was forgotten about. I had heard that Short had missed him though so assumed that he must have owed him a lot of money.

I used to drive a couple of miles out of town have a good drink of whiskey and sleep in relative peace. I had been a bit of a jack the lad before the beating. I had thought that I could not be hurt and it had been an eye opener to feel such pain. It had given me a fear that made me even more cunning. I still did not have the fear of being caught by the police but I had a fear of Short's power and this made me very wary of him. I had not heard very much about him only that he came from down south somewhere. I had heard that he thought he was a top notch gangster and for all I really knew that might have been the case. I had a lot of time on my hands and I wanted to make sure of every detail that I could. Originally I was just going to get rid of Don to satisfy my hatred but I needed more questions answered and he was more likely to know than Roy.

My hatred for Short also seemed to grow as if to take the place of my anger towards Roy and I looked forward to meeting him for the first time. He would be a dangerous man to get to but I felt that if I eliminated both of the doormen it would panic him into rash decision. I had not decided what I was going to do but I knew it had to be special. I had planned to see Theresa Tuesday night but I phoned to cancel telling her I had left town for a job in Hull. I did not really like lying to her but I thought she would be safer with that knowledge. I told her that I would be back in a few months and I would keep in touch by phone.

On Wednesday morning I drove to Don Jacobson's and waited some distance from the house to see if he would appear. A tall good looking woman that I took to be his wife left at about 9 o'clock and returned again at 6. I assumed that she must work and made a mental note of it as it was useful to know when she would not be around. I saw no sight of children so guessed that they did not have any. Don did not make an appearance that day until evening time when he left the house at around eight. He got into a silver Escort Ghia and I followed him to work. He spent three nights a week at the club and did little else of note. I reasoned that the best time to hit him would be late morning when he would still be a little groggy but I still needed more information about him. I needed to

know if he had a gun as that would have gave him a distinct advantage. I did not quite know how to go about finding it out so I took it that he did. I had never had any contacts in that department so it would have to be done without one. I found out that he worked Wednesday, Friday and Saturday so I would have to work around those days. The weekend was out of the question so it would have to be Thursday morning. I could not do it the next day as it was too short notice so I drove back to my countryside retreat and waited patiently trying to work out how I was actually going to do it. The idea of drugging him appealed to me. I did not know too much about that sort of thing but I knew someone who did. He was an old friend that I used to know over in Birmingham so I thought it would be a good idea to try and renew his acquaintance. I had a few days to kill and a trip to Birmingham was as good a way of doing it as any. Besides I was getting bored just hanging around waiting for my next step. I set off in the early hours and found myself in King's Heath at around seven. I knocked on his door and he was surprised to see me.

"Stuart," he said as he was still only half awake, "What brings you here and this early?"

"Sorry Dave," I said entering the house "I thought that you would be up by now. I wanted to catch you before you got off to work."

"Oh I finished there a fortnight ago, laid off again."

"So is it your turn with the urn?"

"You've got a cheek I'll give you that. Do you want a smoke?"

"A bit too early in the morning for me," I said taking a seat, "Would it be alright to stop over for a few days. I wanted to see what the work situation was like."

"Yes no problem. You can even give me a hand to sort out the bike."

"I thought that you would have finished that by now," I said because the last time I had seen him he was still doing it and that was six months ago.

"Bleeding carbs want re-jetting but they only do the push in ones now. Trust me to get an old bike. I suppose that I had better put the slash cuts on and leave it at that."

"Fair enough we could do it this afternoon if you like."

"Alright, no hurry, you look like you could do with a bath. Been sleeping rough again?"

"It's the only way," I said with a smile, "You'll be surprised at the money I save."

Dave put the kettle on and made the tea. He brought it in and rolled himself a smoke. He offered me a drag but I declined as I wanted to keep a clear head."So how's your lad?" I asked when he had settled.

"Don't mention him to me," he said with a marked note of bitterness in his voice, "He robbed me blind he did."

"Tony," I said in surprise, "What happened?"

"He's a smack-head now. I want nothing to do with him. You remember his girlfriend Stacy?"

"Yes, didn't she have his baby just before he left?"

"That's right. He emptied her bank account and bled her dry. He did a job over Stockport way. It was a garage but it was owned by the local hood so now he is up to his eyes in it."

"Really," I said in surprise. I knew Tony was a bit of a con man but that was not like him at all, "What happened?"

"He took some wielding gear, a tig welder and a couple of migs, stashed them at his mate's house for a couple of days before he sold them. The fellow got to hear about it and his mate ended up in hospital. That was just for handling so God knows what would happen to Tony if that bloke ever got hold of him. I let him stop at mine for a couple of weeks and that was how he returned the favour."

"Sounds like you haven't been having much luck. Where is he now?"

"Last time I heard he was in Wales. He can stop there for all I care."

"You still drink in the Breedon?" I said wanting to change the subject as it seemed too painful for Dave.

"Now and again, not so much since I lost my job."

“We'll give it a go tonight then,” I said in the hope it might cheer him up.

“I'm skint,” Dave said and took a drink from his mug.

“Don't worry about it. Call it rent if you like.”

“Yes, cheers Stuart I could do with a good night out. These walls seem to be closing in on me. The water's hot by the way.”

I took £60 out of my pocket and gave it to Dave, “Here you are. Get some food in while I have a bath.”

“It's a bit early yet. Are you sure you don't want a smoke.”

“Go on then,” I said taking it from him, “If it will make you happy.” I took a drag from it and let it fill my lungs. I must admit it felt good and as it was a long time since I had touched it, it seemed to hit me straight away.” “Good stuff this Dave,” I said as I let it flow.

“I get it from Northfield way. Not bad is it.”

“Mind you I don't think that I will be up to doing that bike now.”

“Have a bath; we could always do it tomorrow.”

“Sounds good to me so have you any jobs lined up?”

“There might be a ducting job with Sid but I'm still waiting to hear from it. So what line of work are you after now?”

“I'm not too fussy. To tell you the truth I'm really looking at this as more of an excuse for a holiday.”

“Idle git, I'm afraid that I have only a mattress on the floor at the moment as I am totally cleaned out.”

“You mean he took your bed as well, the bastard.”

“No not mine it was too big to get out of the house without taking it apart. He took the one in the small room along with all my tools, my television and video.”

I shook my head sadly at that because I knew that Dave did not have much to begin with and by the sound of it he was indeed cleaned out. I looked around the bare living room and wished that I had got a tele from Roy but that was water under the bridge so I did not mention it.” “So looks like I am on the floor then. Mind you it beats sleeping in the back of the car.”

“Sounds like you haven't been having a good time either. Mind you, you seem to have a lot of money on you.”

“I called in some old debts,” I said with a smile, “Don't know how long it will last though.”

“Who does?” Dave said with a sigh. I took another drag and settled back into the chair.” “So what's been happening since I've been away?”

“Nothing much, Badger got busted last month.”

“Badger, what for?”

“Two years,” Dave said with a laugh, “He got done for ringing and a couple of charges of T.W.O.C.'ing.”

I laughed at that and said, “Do you remember when we stashed half a Fiesta in my flat?”

“Yes I got grassed up on that. Do you remember?”

“Lee Donald wasn't it? I would have thought that you would have known better than that.”

“Too trusting by half that was my trouble not any more though,” and the conversation got back to his son again. It had left a deep scar with Dave as Tony was his only son and knew his financial circumstances only too well. We talked a while longer and had another smoke. Dave went off to get some food in when the shop opened and I went and had a bath. It felt good to relax in the hot water and I soon forgot the reason for my visit. I wanted to rest awhile and let the world go by as it had been a little too much for me recently. The warm water seemed to take away my emotional pain and I just lay there relaxed and clean. I was getting dressed when Dave came back with the shopping. He was carrying a lot of bags and it looked quite hard work to me. He packed it all away and made me a huge fry up. My diet had been spartan to say the least of late and my stomach was not used to so much food. I struggled but in the end I had to give it up only half eaten. Dave looked at me in a

funny manner as the last time I had seen him I would have polished it off without any trouble whatsoever.

“Are you alright?” he said eventually.

“Too much here for me I've been a bit off my food lately. Help yourself if you want anything.”

“Go on then,” Dave said tucking in, “Waste not want not.” I saw the way he ate it and must admit he took to it with a keen knife and fork.

I felt a little more energetic as the smoke went off and so we sorted his bike out. Replacing the exhaust was a lot easier than I thought and we had finished the job by around eleven. He kept his bike in the front room whilst he was working on it and it was with great relief that he finally wheeled it out.

We sat a while just talking and smoking and I was completely at ease as it had a calming effect on me. I even started to fancy a drink and when I suggested that we went down for one at dinner he eagerly accepted. We still had a little time to spare as it was only 11.30 and so I gave him a hand to fix his bathroom door as it seemed to have acquired a hole from somewhere. I patched it up the best that I could but it did not really look too professional. It was the best that I could do with what was lying around though so he was quite pleased with it.

“Mick still run the place,” I said as we made our way out the door.

“No he went bankrupt about six months ago. Not long after you left actually.”

“Oh, it's still a biker's pub though isn't it?”

“Yes, mind you it does not do the trade that it used to.”

“That's probably more to do with money than anything else. It's just the same where I am at the moment.”

We walked the short distance to the pub and I soon found myself outside the back door.

Chapter 5

As we walked through the door I noticed that the bar had hardly changed a bit. The pool table was still in the middle and a fire place stood to the right. A large bill board of an Indian motorcycle adorned the wall to the left and the pinball machine was still standing near the door. The pub was empty of customers so Dave set the pool table up and I ordered the round. A small middle aged man with a moustache and patchy beard asked me what I wanted. I remembered him as a customer but I did not know what he was called.

“Two lagers please mate,” I said in a friendly manner and he quickly served me. I took the drinks and went over and put them on the table by the pinball machine and let Dave take the break. The white ball cannoned into the pack and sent two yellows into the pockets. 'Lucky sod' I said under my breath and waited for him to take another shot. He cut another into the middle bag and positioned the white for a long shot to the right hand corner pocket. I had forgotten how good he was and all I could do was sit down and watch him clear the table. He asked me if I wanted another game but I declined as the experience of being seven balled put a dampener on my pool playing for a while.

We talked awhile and finished our drinks and Dave went to the bar and ordered another round. As he was doing this a middle-aged couple came through the door. They looked like business people, which was unusual as the pub had a bit of a reputation and this scared off most people.

“Dry white wine and soda for the lady,” the man said as Dave took the beer back to the table, “And I'll have a pint of bitter please.”

I did not take too much notice of them as I was deep in conversation with Dave on his return. I reasoned that I could ask him about the drugs at any time and so I was just settling down and enjoying the nostalgia of the place. We talked of all the people who used to drink there and much to my surprise I found that most of them did not use the place any more. Another couple of similar attire entered, ordered their drinks and joined the first pair who had moved to the table that was by the entrance to the toilets.

“This place still open all day?” I said to Dave as I was getting quite settled by now.

“Yes but you don't get the crowd in that you used to.”

“Andy still about?”

“Which one?”

“The one who was always drunk, you know who I mean he was never off the pool table.”

“Oh him no he's on the wagon now. He doesn't come in anymore, the temptations too much I suppose.”

The conversation carried on but I found myself starting to listen to the other people's chatter. It just seemed to drift over in hushed whispers like shadows in the night. I do not know why I was listening because the talk was of business deals and general chit chat that had no appeal whatsoever. Maybe it was the smoke but my concentration span was starting to dwindle and Dave noticing it said, “Are you alright?”

“I don't quite know. I feel a little funny.”

“You look a little pale now you come to mention it. Maybe you are not used to such good living,” and laughed.

“Maybe, do those people come in often?”

“I'm not sure I hardly use the place now what with money being tight and that.”

I noticed that I had attracted the attention of the other people but they had not heard me talk about them.”They seem to know you,” Dave said, “You don't owe them money do you?”

He laughed out loud after he said that and the two couples quickly looked away. They must have thought that we were a couple of down and outs judging by our appearance but still they came back to haunt my mind. Maybe the smoke had made me paranoid as it was sometimes known to but I had a very uneasy feeling as I sat at the table.”No,” I said shrugging the idea off, “I'm sure I know that man on the left. He seems so familiar to me. God I think my memory has gone to pot just lately.”

“Goes with the territory,” Dave said by way of comfort, “Don't worry about it. I never do.”

“Yes but you're fifty. I mean it's expected of you isn't it.”

“Cheers Stuart I'll remember to do you a favour one day.”

We talked some more but the feeling of unease never left me. I listened in a little more in the hope of picking up clues but still nothing came to me. It was like I had seen him before but I could not be sure when. I noticed that he was looking over on the sly so I guess that he was having similar thoughts to me. In the end I just gave up and asked Dave if he wanted another drink.

“Same again,” he answered, “What about a chaser?”

“I take it you don't want to be out too long,” I said with a laugh, “Unless you have learned how to drink the last time that I met you.”

“I could drink you under the table,” Dave said getting upset, “You just got me on a bad night the last time.”

“Well that's a good enough excuse as any,” I said and got up to the bar and ordered the extended round. A group of youths had entered by then and waited for me to get served with great impatience. Dave had got up and set the pool table for another game to try and get his own back for my comments about his drinking prowess and waited patiently for my return.

“Your break,” he said with a smile, “It means that at least you'll have one shot,” and laughed quite loudly. The beer had started to sink in a little and he usually got loud when that happened. He was not really a man to go drinking with as there was always a good chance that you would get into a fight.

I put the drinks down and took the break. I noticed the youths studying the game intently as I broke into the pack. I was lucky to put a ball down from the break so a whitewash was out of the question. I put a second one down but missed the third by a long way. It was Dave's turn now and he proceeded to clear up with relish. He put five down in a row before he had finished but he left me in a good position to continue. I put another one down and set another up for my next shot. Dave finished off the clear up so that proved a waste of time.

“Never mind Stu,” he said laughing, “You got a lot closer that time.”

I declined another game and so we both sat down. The group of youths came over and sat near us. I was a little suspicious but maybe that was just the smoke speaking again. I noticed them a little more as I thought that it might be in my interests to do this. There were four of them and they strutted around with the airs of their perception of menace. Two looked about 20 of very slim build and wore baseball caps of some American team that I had never heard of. They did not look as if they had any fight in them but that was not the case with the other two. The third one looked around 25 and was well built with a look that did look menacing. He was shorter than the other two but he looked like he could throw a good punch. The other one was slightly taller and looked like he had been around. He was the oldest of the four looking about thirty. He looked at Dave and said, “Winner stops on here isn't it mate?”

I would have let him play on as I did not like the look he had on his face but Dave had other ideas, “You want to set them up?” he said and took a drink of lager.

The man got up and putting his money in set the balls up. He looked at Dave again and said, “Do you want to make it interesting?”

“How much,” Dave said as he was not averse to playing for money.

“I'll play you for £20 or is that too much?” he had a slight mocking nature in his voice that told me that he had done it before on numerous occasions but it was lost on Dave. He looked at me and I shrugged my shoulders and said, “Have you got enough?”

He smiled and said, “Don't worry I don't intend to lose. I've still got some money from what you gave me earlier.”

The man tossed a coin and Dave called heads. It was tails so Dave got to break. His first shot put a red down into the bottom left hand pocket and set him up for the middle pocket. He potted that one and knocked another red of the side cushion and left it over the bag. His next shot put a red into the top right and he missed the next one.

“Not bad,” the man said chalking his cue. I noticed that he was trying to wind Dave up in the hope of him losing his concentration, “But now it's my turn.”

His first shot knocked a yellow into the top left hand pocket and he quickly followed with one to the middle bag on the same side. He put another one into the top left and missed his next one.

“Guess it's my turn now,” Dave said and took his shot. He cannoned into the little pack that was left in the middle of the table and planted a red into the bottom left hand side. He quickly followed with two more to the same pocket. His next shot missed but he left it covering the bag.

“Not bad,” the man said but this time I think he meant it. He put two yellows down in one shot but I think this was more luck than judgment. He tried another yellow into the middle pocket but missed although it was left in a good position covering the bag. “Let's see what you can do with that.”

Dave smiled and potted the one that was covering the bag that he had placed earlier. His next shot put the last red into the bottom left hand bag but he was left with a hard shot on the black. He shook his head and nominated the bottom right hand corner. The black was situated on the cushion so Dave tried to roll it down along the cushion into the bag. He took his shot but to his disgust he left it over the bag. This brought a smile to the other man's face and he potted the ball he had set up earlier. His next shot was rather tricky as it involved a tight cut to the middle right hand pocket. He took a deep breath and I could see that the pressure was getting to him as he lined the shot up. He cut it too fine and it missed the hole by about half an inch. Dave smiled and potted the black he had positioned earlier. He moved to take the money that was on the table but the man picked it up and said, “I said that I would play you I didn't say that I would beat you.”

“I'm not having that,” Dave said moving menacingly towards him. My attention had been distracted by this until I felt a sharp blow to my nose. I felt my nose collapse and blood and mucus stream down my face. My head hit the wall heavily but I quickly regained my composure. It was the stocky one that had landed the punch and he looked like he was about to throw another one. I moved quickly to his left and landed a right cross that bounced his head around and sent his reeling towards

the pool table. He hit his head on the table and that was the last I heard from him. The other two young ones with the baseball caps backed off as their friend's quick departure unnerved them more than slightly.

"Nothing to do with us," one of them said, "We don't want no trouble."

The man with the money was not frightened though. He looked at Dave and said, "Put it down to experience. Who knows you might even use that trick yourself one day."

Dave was having none of it so he grabbed him by the throat, "No I've got a better idea. Why don't you give me all your money and put that down to experience."

One of the youths decided that he would join in on seeing the man's distress. He picked up an empty bottle of lager that had not long been finished and in panic crashed it on the side of the table. The bottle smashed and left an ugly looking stub of glass that had once been the stem. He came at Dave saying, "Leave him. You'll kill him. He's my brother."

I saw his coming and launched a left jab to his nose but still he carried on. I think that it was fear for his brother's safety that gave him that extra strength so I knew I would have to hit him a lot harder. I drew back my right hand and hit him as hard as I could and he fell backwards onto the table behind him. The man that was in Dave's grasp relented and gave Dave the money that he had won. He bought us both a drink by way of an apology and they quickly left the bar. I had time to go into the toilet and check the state of my nose. I was not sure if it was broken but it had certainly swelled up a lot. I cleaned the blood up and went back to the bar.

Dave laughed on seeing my approach and said, "The things you have to do to earn a crust. I don't know."

"Did you know them?" I said looking at Dave suspiciously.

"Local pool shark he tried the same trick on Andy last year got away with it that time."

"You mean to tell me that you expected it to happen," I said giving Dave a look of surprise, "Why didn't you have the decency to warn me about it? I might not have got this," and pointed at my nose. "It suits you," Dave said with a laugh, "It goes well with that new scar that you seemed to have picked up since the last time I saw you."

I looked at him in disbelief but there was a glint in his eye that made me laugh and say, "You'll get me shot one day. Anyway I reckon that it's your round for the rest of the afternoon then."

"Sure," Dave said finishing his drink, "That will be my pleasure. I've been meaning to get my own back on that divvy for ages. I mean Andy's harmless isn't he."

"That was dangerous though wasn't it? What would have happened if he had recognised you? He might have been better prepared."

"He's a bit too arrogant for that. He thinks he can get away with anything. He's probably tried that trick so many times anyway so he can't be that wary of people."

"I think you owe me for this," I said and pointed at my nose.

"Well I'm getting the drinks in aren't I?"

"Yes but not here. They might come back with a few of their mates."

"I shouldn't think so but the Hibernian's open all day as well if you're interested."

That sounded like a good idea to me as I liked the beer in there so we said goodbye to the barman and left. He had a look of relief as we walked out the door. The two couples had remained in their seats whilst all the trouble happened and they too were a little relieved to see us go. I still could not place the man but it didn't matter so much as we walked the long distance down the Pershore Road to our next pub. We stopped about halfway at a pub called The Three Horseshoes but this was more for a break in the journey than anything else as we were quite tired by then. The pub itself had quite a few people in and I quite liked it there. I could have easily got settled but Dave was quite anxious to go to the Hibernian. The Hibernian was empty and we got served straight away by an attractive barmaid in her thirties.

"What do you think of her," Dave said quietly to me, "Not bad eh?"

"So that's why you wanted to drag me down here is it. Do you want me to try and fix you up I owe

you one don't forget.”

“No it's alright Stu I think I can manage that by myself.”

“Well,” I said with a glint in my eye, “If you're sure. I mean it's no trouble in fact I would enjoy doing it.”

“Yes,” Dave said laughing, “I bet you would.”

We talked awhile longer and after Dave had had a couple more he went over to the barmaid and tried to make his play. She turned him down flat and he came back with a sheepish look that told me everything.

“I told you that you should have let me do it,” I said laughing.

“Oh it doesn't matter. Are we going to get off now then?”

“What's your hurry,” I said winding him up, “We've got all day yet. Your round isn't it?”

“Yes,” Dave said with an air of disappointment, “Any chance of you getting them? I'll pay but I fetched them last time.”

“Are you sure?” I said rubbing it in, “You might get another crack at that barmaid.”

“Not me. Once bitten twice shy is my motto.”

“Okay,” I said getting up, “I tell you what though I'll put in a good word for you if you like.” I'm sure I heard Dave mutter bastard under his breath as I left.

The barmaid smiled as I approached and said, “What are you having?”

“Two lagers and two whiskey chasers please,” I said politely.

She quickly served me and putting the drinks on the counter said, “Stuart isn't it. I haven't seen you in a long time.”

I looked at her again and a vague recollection came over my face. She looked at me and said, “You don't remember me do you.”

“I'm sorry your face is familiar but I can't put a name to it.”

“Laura, Laura Davies. You used to work with my husband Steve at Peter Jackson's about two years ago.”

When she said that I remembered her for I did used to know her quite well. “I'm sorry,” I said again, “But I suppose with all the traveling around you get a bit mixed up. So what's Steve doing now? Does he still work there?”

“Yes,” she said smiling. Out of the corner of my eye I could see Dave looking over suspiciously so I thought I would keep her talking a while. “I think he'll be there until he retires. So you must have moved out then. I didn't know that.”

“Yes, I got itchy feet again. I'm only here for a few days. I thought I would stop at Dave's for a while.” she looked over at Dave when I said this and it made him even more suspicious of me.

“He still gets drunk then,” she said and smiled over at him.

“He ain't a bad fellow,” I said laughing and making sure Dave heard it. By the time I had finished I wanted him to have an inferiority complex as it seemed a good way to avenge myself. “Anyway Laura nice talking to you.”

I got back and put the drinks on the table and Dave said, “What was that all about?”

“Nothing,” I said shrugging my shoulders because I knew that it would wind him up.

“What do you mean nothing it didn't seem like that to me? What did you say about me?”

“Nothing,” I said again and I knew that I had him hook line and sinker, “Well not much anyway.”

“What do you mean not much anyway?”

“I tried to put in a good word for you but I'm afraid she was not that keen. Never mind though eh.”

“You bastard.”

“I thought that was what you said the first time but I wasn't sure,” I said laughing, “Getting a bit paranoid aren't you Dave.”

“With good reason by the sound of it look what did you say?”

“I'm winding you up,” I said after I thought he had suffered enough, “She's married to someone I used to work with that's all.”

“Are you sure?” he said looking suspiciously at me.”

“Dave now would I lie to you? I mean you put me up out of the goodness of your heart that would be ungrateful wouldn't it.”

“You,” he said but could not think of anything else.”Drink up I fancy going to The Three Horseshoes next.”

Dave seemed very keen now that he found out Laura was married. He swiftly drank the whiskey and took a large gulp out of his lager.

“I'm not in that much of a hurry,” I said, “Slow down. Come over and I'll introduce you to Laura.”

This seemed to urge him on and he took another gulp that half emptied the glass. I drank my whiskey and took a large gulp of lager just to try and keep up with him but he was well on the way. He finished the rest and said, “I thought you said that you could drink.”

“I didn't. What I said was you couldn't”

“Well it doesn't look like it does it?”

I rushed to finish my drink but it was too gassy to do it all in one go so I only got about half way.

“Is that the best you can do,” Dave said by way of encouragement, “You surprise me.”

The next drink emptied the glass and I told Dave that I would bring them to the bar. He declined to help me as he said I was strong enough to manage on my own. I walked to the bar and putting the empty glasses on the table said, “Thanks Laura. Tell Steve I was asking after him and I'm stopping at Dave's if he wants to come over. Oh he lives at 22 Warlan Road I forgot that Steve doesn't know him.”

“He probably does. See you around then Stuart. Steve will be glad to know that you are back.”

I walked out and Dave was waiting for me, “What kept you. I thought that you would never leave.”

“Just tying up a few loose ends.”

“Don't start all that again. Let's go back to the Horseshoes then. I quite fancy the barmaid there.”

“You must have a thing for bar maids, what's the attraction?”

“Cheap beer, get in with a bar maid and you're made,” he laughed loudly and we walked on our way.

The short distance to the pub was quickly covered but to our dismay it was shut. I looked at my watch and it read three thirty.”I thought this place opened all day. Looks like it's back to yours for a smoke then.”

“Sounds good to me I thought that it opened all day too. What about the Red Lion though. I bet they'll be open.”

“No I don't like the beer and besides it's an old man's pub.” then looking at Dave, “Mind you I bet you'd be right at home.”

“Yeah right I ain't that old.”

“Dave,” I said laughing, “The only reason that you passed history at school was that there was not a lot to remember when you were there.”

“I swear you get worse it must be the beer,” and shook his head in mock pretense.

“Shall I get some cans in,” I said as we passed the local spar, “Finish of the session and all that?”

“Why not, they have a special offer on Tennants Super this week.” That sounded good to me so I went in and bought six cans. I carried them back to Dave's and we settled down for a long session. I decided to try and find out a bit about drugs from him now as he was very susceptible. I reasoned that if I played it right I would not have to tell him too much. It was not that I didn't trust him it was just that I did not want my business broad casting.

Chapter 6

“So,” I said after taking a drink from the can, “We still on for tonight?”

“We'll see,” Dave said as he had a habit of falling asleep after a few drinks, “I think there is a band on so it should be quite full.”

“Sound,” I said trying to find a way of getting around to the drugs without arousing his suspicion but it was a difficult thing to do. I went quiet for a while and Dave passed me the smoke so I took a drag. I looked at it and an idea came to me, “I had better be careful then as this could send me to sleep.”

“You'll be alright with that as it's not that bad. Mind you I've got something a lot stronger.”

“Really,” I said with a show of interest that was a little put on, “I could do with something like that I'm having trouble sleeping at night.”

“That's what sleeping in a car does I've been there myself. Take some of my stuff and you'll be out for the count no problem.”

He went upstairs and came back with a small bottle and gave it to me. “Try this and all your troubles will be over. You don't need much though only half a tea spoon will do. It won't harm you if take more though you'll just sleep longer.”

I thanked him and took the bottle. I thought it wise not to dwell too much on the subject as there was always a chance that it might arouse his curiosity. I put it in my pocket and the first problem was solved. The next would be harder though. How would I actually get the doorman to take it? I had plenty of time to decide that as I had got what I came for. I settled back and enjoyed myself drinking and smoking. Dave told me that he was thinking about going home to Manchester as he was getting a little restless himself. Nothing much seemed to be happening and like me he got easily bored. He had been thinking of getting a little money together and going over to India for a while on his bike but that had never come to fruition. I could see that his world was coming apart and Tony's antics were the last straw. He had never really settled in there as he could never get on with the people. He got quite maudlin as the beer took its hold and he talked about his old days in the army. I listened intently as that kind of thing interested me. I had never been in the army as when I left school it had never appealed to me but as I grew older the appeal grew somewhat. We talked a lot and finished the beer but by then the beer had also finished me and I felt tired. I looked at Dave and said, “Could we leave the pub until tomorrow I'm knackered.”

He was in the same mind I could tell but he put a brave face on it and said, “Well if you can't cope fair enough, there's some blankets by the mattress and a couple of pillows in the ward robe. Don't get me up too early in the morning though.”

I said good night and made my way upstairs to where I was going to sleep. I made the bed and got undressed before I got in. I was more tired than I thought because I fell quickly to sleep. In fact it was virtually as soon as I hit the pillow.

I found myself in scorching heat nearly choked by black acrid smoke. I coughed at first until I got used to it and tried to get a bearing of where I actually was. I saw people running around in extreme panic and burning buildings everywhere. I did not have a clue as to what was going on but I knew that it was some sort of battle. I moved forward but found myself restricted. I looked down to see that I was wearing chain mail and a white tunic with a red cross on it. I had a large sword in my hand and I took a great deal of comfort from it. I saw arrows rain down from the left and quickly took cover. The smell of death was all around me and my stomach churned with the stench. Burning flesh has an unusual tang that once smelled is never forgotten. People were falling all around me in their panic to escape but for some reason I had no fear. It was like I was meant to be there.

“Save us,” an old woman said running up to me, “They are coming.” she ran off but was quickly caught with an arrow. Thoughts of Mary came to my mind and I found myself running down the road but I did not know where to. I saw a white building that was larger than the others and ran inside but she was not there. I looked for her amongst the smoke filled rooms but to no avail. I heard shouts outside and a woman's scream took over. It sounded like carnage and I was only too

happy to join in. I ran outside and saw a man of Arabic appearance holding a woman with his knife to her throat. I swung my sword and it seemed to nearly cut him in half. He fell to the ground almost in two and I had to put my foot on his back and pull my sword out as it had become stuck.

People were running all around me and I saw mass slaughter on a scale that I had never seen before. Arms and legs lay all around in a myriad of pieces that would perplex any jigsaw addict. An arrow whizzed past my head and hit the wall behind me. I looked to where it had come from before ducking back into the building and finding a large shield to cover my torso. I returned to the street but it seemed a lot quieter now. Numerous bodies lay all around but the fighting had moved onto another area.

I had time to think now that the panic had gone. I reasoned that I must have been on one of the crusades but I did not see any other knights around. Thoughts of Mary drove me on and I looked around in the vain hope of finding her. Shouts up ahead alerted me to more trouble but my senses told me that that was where she was so I made my way in that direction. Two men of Saracen appearance saw me and ran towards me with their swords drawn. One went to the left and tried to circle around me. The other went to my right and tried to come at me on my blind side. I swung my shield and pushed him backwards with great ease. Turning to my left I swung my sword again and caught the other man in his side sending him swiftly to the ground. The first one backed off slightly and looked like he was going to run to raise the alarm. My sword swung and caught his leg just above the knee. He fell to earth and I noticed that his leg had departed from him. He lay there screaming with pain and losing blood rapidly. I wanted to leave him to suffer but my sword swung down almost cutting him in half above the stomach.

I moved forward once more but it was like I was on someone else's legs. They seemed to know where they were going so I just meekly followed. I saw a mutilated body of an old man, his insides hanging out and I nearly vomited in disgust. I took deep breaths and carried on as if I was on a mission. It was like I had switched to instinct mode and was just relying on my reflexes. A small child cut in half was my next view and this sickened me even more. Still I moved forward and saw a lone Saracen coming out of a small building. He was covered in blood and had an inane smile on his face. When he saw me his smile changed to a look of fear. He looked like he was going to call out but my sword had other ideas. It swung high and sent his head flying back into the building. I entered the building and saw the carnage he had left behind. Blood covered the walls and floor and the bodies of four people lay almost on top of each other. I quickly left the building and went onto my goal. I saw the body of another knight lying up ahead so I went over for a closer look. I nearly fell backwards when I saw it was Roy. He looked like he had been stabbed in the stomach and had died in great pain. Onwards I went as if drawn by an attraction stronger than any magnet. I stepped over numerous bodies but I did not see their pain now. To me they were dead and that was that. I had got desensitised by now. I just wanted to move forward and find Mary and rescue her from whatever fate had decided. The noises grew louder as I got closer and I stopped behind a wall and tried to make out what was going on. The Saracens seemed to have left and I saw two men arguing over a woman. I could not see her properly as she had her face covered. Something inside me told me it was Mary and I ran towards them.

One of the knights was a large well built man with a tightly trimmed beard and a heavy scar on his right hand cheek and the other was slightly smaller with brown hair and a scar over his right eye. They stopped on seeing my approach and I found myself saying, "Put her down, she's mine." It came from me but I could not actually recall saying it. The man looked at me and the taller one said, "So Richard of Billesley you think that you can take her. Come and get her." I moved forward with a lot less caution than I should have had as my mind was on Mary and Mary alone. I did not even see another knight appear until it was too late. I felt pain and that was when I woke up.

I was sweating heavily and in a state of mild panic. I looked at my watch and it was only three o'clock in the morning. I would have to try and get back to sleep but I knew that it would be

difficult. I tossed and turned for what seemed like hours before eventually dropping off. I found myself back in the tent and face to face with the man in the long cloak. He had an unusual smile on his face as he said, "So you made the same mistake as me then."

"That was you," I said as realisation hit me.

"Richard of Billesley at your service," He said and bowed, "Yes that was me."

"So who were those men then? I mean they weren't your friends. I thought that you were fighting on the same side?"

"Joseph of Bardon, he was the larger of the two. Stephen of Walton was the other. They were cousins. The man that sneaked up behind you was Nigel of Davenport but I guess you did not get to see his face and no they were not my friends. As for fighting on the same side it was not like that. You were fighting for what you could get and that was all. Some people came back very rich indeed."

"So I could not really call you a religious man."

"I started off as such but life had other ideas."

Thoughts of Mary were forgotten awhile as I talked to the man. Maybe it was my interest in war that had took over. I found him quite interesting but Dave had other ideas. I heard his voice infringe on my dream and say, "Are you getting up Stuart I've made some breakfast."

I found myself half asleep back on the mattress. I turned to get up and felt a pain in my hand. I looked down and saw that I had been pricked by a syringe. It must have been one of Tony's I reasoned but kept it because I had the start of an idea. I could use it to pump the drug into the doorman. I got dressed and went downstairs. Dave was already eating so he said, "It's on the table in the kitchen. Help yourself to some bread." I seemed to have got my appetite back as I quickly finished it.

"So," I said, "What have we got planned for today?"

"Not a lot. Well not until my head clears anyway."

"You and me both Dave" I said laughing. I had decided to give Theresa a ring later just to see how she was getting on and if there was any news of Dave. I did not really want the other Dave to be present as I like to keep my two lives separate. As I felt like I needed a walk to clear my head I said, "I'm going to get off for a while Dave. See a man about a dog and all that. I won't be too long but if you have to go out will you leave me a key or something just in case."

Dave did not have a spare but said he would leave the key under the front mat. He did not seem too interested in where I was going so I left it at that. I walked out into the cold windy street and it soon cleared my head. By the time I got to the phone I was fully aware and had even a slight bounce in my step. An old woman was already on it and it seemed like hours before she had finished. I did not mind though as I had nothing better to do. She apologised for the delay when she had finished and walked off slowly towards Cotteridge. I dialed the number and waited for Theresa to answer it. After about ten rings she finally picked it up."Hello," she said and I detected a trace of nervousness in her voice.

"Is that you Theresa, its Stuart here."

"Stuart," she said with a sigh of relief, "Where have you been? I've been wanting to get in touch with you."

"Have you. Is there anything the matter?"

"I'm scared," she said and I could tell that she meant it, "They smashed the place up and said that they would do Dave harm when he gets out."

"What who did?"

"I don't know who they were. There were two of them. It was just lucky little Dave was at his Gran's. I don't know what to do. I daren't go to the police they told me not to. They're evil."

I did not know what to tell her. I guessed that they were the same men that paid me a visit so it was something to do with Short but that did not really help Theresa out. Drastic action was called for and it was called for almost immediately. She could not stay there for a start.

“Have you anywhere that you could go to? Just until it’s sorted out.”

“No,” she said, her panic rising, “Anyway it can't be sorted they are not people that you would mess with. I think I'll have to leave town. God I wish Dave had never got us into this mess.”

I did not know what to say to her. I knew she was scared but I did not know how to help her. She was desperate for help and she needed it quickly. I did not know where she could stay and that was a big problem. That transcended everything. I thought about Dave but I could not really see it as his place was too small for Theresa and the kids. I remembered my old next door neighbour Brian. I had heard that he now lived in quite a large house on the other side of Northfield. I thought that he still lived alone but I was not too sure. I told Theresa that maybe I knew someone in Birmingham but I would have to ring him first. She was that scared that she did not think that too drastic a move so I got Brian's number from Dave and phoned him. He wanted to know what it was all about but I felt reluctant to tell him so I just said that she had split with her husband and needed a break. I phoned her back and asked if she knew Birmingham at all and as she did I arranged to meet her at Dave's address. That was one problem solved but I was coming to another straight away. It was actually about going to the police. That might sound strange as by now you could call me a potential serial killer but Theresa was involved. It was nothing to do with my involvement as I doubted that Short thought I had an involvement. Dave must have known something that they wanted kept quiet. It suddenly dawned on me. I had been that engrossed in my hatred towards Short and his doorman that I had took my eye of the big picture. Maybe if I found out what it was it could help him. Maybe the doorman would know about it? I doubted it but it was my next logical step. Thoughts of going to the police faded as I got back to the thrill of the chase. I had intended to see Dave as early as possible but that would not have been before I had intended to see the doorman because of the visiting structure. The doorman himself was another problem as his death could not look suspicious for I did not want to arouse Short's curiosity. I wanted some answers from him though and the only way I knew of doing it left cuts and bruises.

Theresa and the children arrived later that day. She had left the keys with a friend to keep an eye on the place and in her haste had only packed the bare minimum. She seemed more settled when I saw her so I decided to ask her if Dave had said anything that might have been of some help.

“I can't remember it seems a long time ago now. It won't be of any use now anyway.”

“I'm not sure, they seemed anxious to shut him up. There must be something that they thought he saw.”

“He met a bloke in a nightclub,” she said trying to remember, “He was with that Roy. I think that he was a friend of Roy's. They just talked at the bar and had a few drinks. I remember that Dave was very drunk when he came back. He said that the bloke, Short I think his name was could not help him but said he knew someone who might.”

“Did he see anything unusual?”

“Like what?”

“I don't actually know but I think he must have seen something otherwise they would not have took such an interest in him.”

“He said he was followed home by a motorcycle and car but I'm not sure if he was being paranoid.”

“A car and a motorcycle?”

“Yes when he came back he was quite scared. He told me that he managed to lose them. I told him to get out but by then he was in too deep. He wanted to sell the jewelry at any cost. Mind you it was not until later that I knew the full story.”

“So what happened then?” I said making a note of him being followed. I could not really see the relevance though that might change at a later date.

“He met a bloke called Steve in a pub in Hilton. He said he was in the import export business but he wasn't interested either. He said it was too small a deal for him but he could set up a deal with a man called Paul who would take them of his hands.”

“So they met in a pub. I guess there was not much chance of seeing anything untoward there.”

“Well the next meeting was also in a pub but that was the one that was recorded.”

“Recorded,” I said as this was the first I had heard of it, “By who?”

“The police of course,” Theresa said as if it did not need saying, “There was another man with him called Chris, he turned out to be C.I.D.”

“Have you got the transcript?” I said thinking that maybe it was something said not seen “I wouldn't mind having a look at it.”

“They're at home in the wall unit by the back. I didn't take them with me as I didn't think them important.”

“They might not be but I wouldn't mind having a look.”

“It will do no good but if that's what you want I've got the spare key and I'll let my friend know you are coming.”

“When are you planning to see Dave again?”

“Well I'm not sure if it's a good idea. What if they're waiting for me?”

“I think they were just warning you off. They would think that you were just giving him the message so they would not be too eager to stop you.”

“I'm due to see him tomorrow but I was going to cancel.”

“No don't do that I want to come along.” I could see that she was a little scared and was reluctant to go but eventually she gave in. Brian came around and they all left for his house leaving me alone with Dave.

“So what's it all about?” he said and I decided to tell him the story without my involvement in it because he had heard most of it from Theresa. He sat there in awe before saying, “What have you got yourself involved in? You're getting well out your depth, well out.”

“I can't do anything else. I'm involved now.”

“You've only fixed her up with an address leave it at that.”

“But she can't stay there forever. I don't like the idea of her being forced out of her house.”

“That's a matter for the police,” Dave said with an air of indifference.

“She's too scared,” I replied. I was starting to see Dave in a new light now. I thought back to the incident in the pub and this only added to my case. It was like he had changed since I had last seen him. Maybe it was all the hassle with his son I was not sure but I had noticed something different about him maybe it was me who had changed but I found myself developing a new opinion of him.

“Ah never mind,” he said, “Are we going down the pub?”

It was then I lost my temper, “What, how can you talk about going to the pub? Is that all you think about drinking?”

He seemed stunned by my outburst and said nothing for a while. When he finally spoke he said, “What else is there?”

I noticed a tone of despair in his voice but it was lost on me as I was still too concerned about Theresa and her predicament. I looked at him but without a trace of pity and said, “You want to sort yourself out. You've changed too much.”

“I put myself first for a change. There's nothing wrong with that. I don't get conned anymore.”

“Only by yourself and a bottle of whiskey what kind of life is that?”

“You're one to talk you just drift from one place to another. What kind of life is that?”

I went quiet and thought about what he had said. In my mind I was happy just to drift around but he didn't see it like that. I had realised that my fairly solitary lifestyle was having an effect on me but not to such an extent that it affected my general well being. I reasoned that I was on a mission so had put my life on hold for a while whereas Dave's life was like that all the time. “It's a life that makes me happy. Can you say the same?”

He went quiet as I must have hit home. He looked at the ground and said, “What went wrong? Why did he rip me off? I was trying to help him get settled into a good life. I could have got him work no problem.”

“It wasn't you,” I said softly, “It was the drugs that did it. Lay off the drink for a while and you will

see it.”

“It gets me through the day,” he said and I noticed his hands were shaking and thought that his drinking was becoming quite a problem for him.

“You only think that it does but if anything it makes it worse. What happens when you have no money, are you going to end up like Tony?”

“There's no comparison. I would never do what he did.”

“What happens when you lose control? I bet Tony said that at one time.”

“No,” he said again, “I could never do that.” He wanted to try and blank it off but I was persistent

“Think about it,” I said, “Your life is turning out like his already.”

“No,” he said angrily, “I'll never be like that.”

“I can see it in you. Look at you shaking. You tell me that you never go out but your whole manner tells me otherwise. How much of your money goes on beer?”

“That's none of your business.”

“That much that you are embarrassed to tell me.”

“I like a drink it's as simple as that.”

“You've become an alcoholic it's as simple as that.”

Dave laughed and said, “Do you think so.”

“Yes and you might laugh but it doesn't mean that it's not true but it's your life and you must do what you must.”

“So the pubs out of the question tonight then,” Dave said and I just shook my head sadly. I knew that my friendship with him would be coming to an end soon but I still needed a place to stay for the night. I had intended to go back the next morning anyway so this only made me more determined.

Chapter 7

We spoke little for the next couple of hours until about 8 o'clock when Dave asked me if I wanted to go down the pub. I declined saying that I was going down to Brian's to see if Theresa was settling in. He offered to go with me but I said it was unnecessary.

“Look,” he said, “I might have been a little too wrapped up in myself earlier. You know how things get you down. If I can be of any help just let us know.”

“Thanks,” I said thinking there might be something left in our friendship, “But I don't really know what to do yet.”

“What about trying to scare them off, I'm up for it.”

“These people don't scare easily. How do you think I got the scar, I made that mistake already.”

“What about the police then. It looks like you don't have much choice.”

“It's not that. I think he's a police informer and quite a big one by the sound of it. I'm not too sure if they would believe us and anyway it could all fall back on Theresa. I don't think they would be too averse to hurting her.”

“It sounds like you are in a very tricky situation I can't really see any way out of it. It calls for too drastic matters.”

I looked at Dave and debated on whether to tell him that I had already started them. He seemed eager to help but I was not sure if he would go the whole way. Maybe it was asking too much of him if I did and what with his liking for drink I could not trust him so I said nothing.

“Well,” I said, “First things first I'm going to see her old man tomorrow. I can't really say anything until after I have done that but I guess I'm only clutching at straws really. I'll give you a lift down to the pub if you want. I've got to go past there on my way to Brian's.”

Dave gratefully accepted and I said that I would probably join him when I had finished. I dropped him off and went to Brian's. He had a nice semi on the borders of King's Norton that he kept in good condition. I pulled up and knocked on the door. It was quickly answered and he invited me in. He had not changed much but it was only six months since I had last seen him so I did not expect

him to have."Come in Stuart," he said fully opening the door. I followed him through to the living room where Theresa and the two children were watching television. I arranged to meet her the next day at 11 and then had a quiet word with Brian. I took him aside and said, "Are you alright for money?"

"Yes don't worry about it. How long do you want me to put her up?"

"I'm not sure hopefully a few days maximum."

"Do you think she will get back with him?"

"Sorry?" I said because I had forgotten that I had told him that she had split up with her husband.

"Her husband." he said looking at me in a funny manner.

"Yes," I said remembering, "It's just a matter of time."

"So it's not going to be a long term thing. That's good because I've got my mother coming up from London in a fortnight."

"Oh, she'll be back long before then."

"Well she's very welcome until then you know that."

"Cheers I won't forget it. How is she anyway?"

"She seems a little scared for some reason. Is he a violent man?"

"No, she's probably just a little scared of the city. She'll get used to it she's only a country bumpkin really."

"It seems a shame she's such a nice person."

"True. Well are you sure that you don't need anything because I promised to meet Dave for a while."

"What, down the pub?"

"Yes, is it me or is he drinking a lot heavier?"

"I always thought he was a heavy drinker. Well every time I saw him he was drunk so I guess I'm biased."

"He seems different. Maybe it was that thing with his son."

"Well he shouldn't deal with smack-heads you never know what will happen."

"What. I thought that his son emptied his house out."

"Oh that was later. His lad sorted him out with some knock off gear and brought the lads who nicked it around the house. They came back at a later date and pinched it back. What a situation to get into. I think it went downhill after that. His son got hooked and the rest you know."

"He forgot to tell me that lot. Anyway I'll see you in the morning if you are not working then."

"I'll be away by the time you get here. I'm working over Dudley way now."

"I'll probably see you when I get back then." I said leaving him to get back to the television.

I drove back to The Breedon and saw that it was quite crowded. The car park was unusually full so I had a job to park. Eventually I found a place and walked to the bar. Dave was there with a couple of fellows that I knew from when I used to live around there.

"I've got a plan," Dave said with a slurred voice, "I've had a word with a few of the lads and they're keen."

"What," I said angrily, "That was not for broadcasting. I don't want my business spread around the pub."

"I thought that you needed help," he said confused, "I was doing you a favour."

I could see that he meant well but that seemed to make it even worse. I thanked myself that I had not told him the full story as that would have more than likely gone the same way.

"So," I said with an air of resignation, "What did you come up with?"

"We go and put the frighteners on them. Turn up with some of the lads and they'll soon change their minds."

"That won't work they're too well protected."

"Well if you want anything more drastic I know this fellow."

"No Dave. I don't think it has got to that stage yet."

Whilst I was talking one of the men who were with Dave came over. I had not seen Bob for ages and he warmly greeted me, "How's it going Stu, Dave was telling me that you've got trouble. If you need a hand just let us know. You can rely on us you know that."

"Thanks Bob but I don't think that it will get that far. It's just a little misunderstanding. I should be able to sort it out myself."

"Oh Dave must have got it wrong. He said something about gangsters and all that."

"No," I said trying to put on a smile, "It's just got exaggerated a bit that's all. You know what Dave is like."

"True. He means well but that's about it."

I laughed at that and Bob bought me a drink. I was on coke as I was driving. We got into good conversation and last orders soon came around. It's amazing how time quickly goes in good company and it was quite a surprise to hear the bell.

"I'm going to get back now Bob, well if Dave is ready that it."

"Are you in tomorrow?" he said as we waited for Dave to finish his drink.

"No I'm going back for a few days. I might be back after that but I can't be too sure."

"Well I'll probably see you when I see you but let us know if you need anything." I guessed that I needed a gun but I did not tell him that as it would arouse his suspicion so I just said, "Thanks I'll catch you later then."

I took Dave back home and the beer had settled well in by the time we got back."I reckon," he said with a much marked slur, "That we ought to just turn up mob handed and sort the thing out once and for all."

"That's not necessary," I said with a patience that I normally could not muster. I knew he meant well but he did not have a clue what he was dealing with. I did not really know myself but I knew that it was big. He offered me a smoke but I declined saying that I had better get off to bed as I had to be up early next morning. I told him that I was going back home for a few days so it was more than likely I would not see him the next day. I said I would see him when I got back though. He settled in front of the radio and I went to bed.

I fell asleep and found myself in front of Richard of Billesley. He looked at me in a disappointed manner and said, "I think that you trust people too much. What are you taking passengers for anyway?"

"You mean Theresa?" I said unsure.

"Yes, she'll only tie you down. Get in your way even. You still have another five veils to lift. You have a long way to go yet."

"She's my friend's wife what else can I do?"

"You did not need to drag all that distance did you? She's not in that much danger."

"It seemed it to me and to her as well."

"No they daren't do anything too heavy. They would be bound by the police. They might get away with the odd bit of crime but I can't see the police letting them do anything more."

"I didn't want to take that chance. Not when I'm dealing with Dave's family."

"Passengers again but it's your game. I wouldn't trust that other man though."

"You mean the other Dave. I've already worked that one out for myself thanks."

"There may be hope for you yet."

I looked at him in a funny manner and said, "You know what this is all about don't you."

"Afraid so but I can't tell you anything."

"You can't, why not?"

"It's to do with self reliance. Rely on no one and you will not be disappointed. Paddle your own canoe and all that."

"So are you trying to tell me that I can't even rely on you?"

"That's about it. When you have passed you will know the reason why. Just be patient and it will all fall into place."

"I'll have to take your word for that," I said and then remembering seeing Roy in the battle, "I saw Roy when I was in the battle. Could you at least tell me what that was about?"

"Roy," he said thinking, "Anthony of Wessex, that's who you must mean. He was one of the veils that stopped me from Mary but I managed to remove him."

I thought into what he had just said and said, "So these veils. They can't be just anyone then. I can't just go out and kill willy-nilly."

"I don't think that he was a veil. No you are right they have to be certain people or you are wasting your time."

"But you are not going to tell me who these people are. I could be wiping out people for no reason at all then."

"Well enjoyment is as good a reason as any but you will know them when the time is right. Don't forget that you have seen two of them already."

"It's the one that stabbed me in the back I'm worried about."

"Oh they would all do that so be very careful."

"Too right after all I don't want to make your mistake do I?"

"But you already did," he said taking the comment the wrong way, "It was only in a dream but it happened just the same."

"Alright," I said changing the subject, "So that's three of them I have not seen but I think I already know two of them."

"Very good so it is just the one that stabbed you that you have to be careful of."

"Don't worry about that I'll be careful."

"So what about losing all the baggage then?" he said out of the blue, "If you worry about them then it all adds to the stress. Keep a cool head otherwise you are just wasting your time."

"I can't just leave them there are children involved. Look I'll be alright."

"It's your choice but if I were you I know what I would be doing now."

"You play it your way and I'll play it mine. As you said earlier paddle your own canoe."

"Fair enough, I'll not say anymore then."

I had to laugh at that as he had not actually told me anything of any value up to now. He saw me laugh but it did not sink in why so he said nothing. I woke up to find myself back on the mattress and looking at the time saw it was 9 o'clock. I quietly got dressed so not to disturb Dave and got my things together. I crept downstairs and to my surprise saw him asleep on the settee. I left as quietly as I could and went for a little walk to clear my head and waste a little time before I was due to meet Theresa. She had arranged to leave the kids at her grandmothers while we visited Dave so that would be our first stop. I walked along the canal-side and got off at the next bridge and made my way back amongst the carbon filled streets. I had forgotten how bad it was and it was a great relief to actually get out of the place. I drove to Brian's and then Theresa followed me in her car. We dropped the children off and went back to her house. I quickly found the transcript and took it with me to read at a later date. I should have read it before I met Dave but time was running short and I did not want to be late.

We queued for a while before we were eventually let in to see him. He seemed a little frightened for Theresa when she told him about the visit. He did not know what they thought he had saw that might be dangerous to them as he did not recall seeing anything at all. I asked him about the transcripts and he said that it was a bad recording and a lot of what was said had not appeared on it. This sounded suspicious so I asked him to elaborate. He mentioned that Paul had said he could bring in drugs and guns but that had not appeared. I thought that there might have been something in that but could not be sure. It sounded as if the tape had actually been tampered with.

"It's already checked," Dave said, "They sent it off for analysis to a reputable place."

"What and they found nothing at all?"

"They just put it down to bad recording as it was in a pub. Mind you I did not like it when they took it to a police laboratory for the test. It did not seem impartial."

“They took it to a police laboratory? Didn't the defence barrister say anything about that?”

“He was a waste of time. He said that the man who received the tape did not have the right equipment. Can you imagine that it cost £1,500 and he did not have the right gear? He did not take voice samples or nothing. I don't know why they bothered.”

“What and they accepted it.”

“Yes there was something strange all the way through it. I tried to change my solicitor but she wrote a three page letter to the judge and he refused. The barrister was happy enough just to get me put down it was an open and shut case to him.”

I could not believe what I was hearing. Nothing seemed to add up anymore. Dave must have got involved in something that was very big indeed. I thought for a while before I said, “This Chris was a copper wasn't he?”

“Yes but for all I know that Paul might have been one as well. It could even have been that Simon too. God it's so confusing. I've been doing my head in trying to find answers but it's lost on me so I gave up in the end.”

I could see his point as six years is a long time to fester with a problem like that. I did not really know what to tell him as I did not know what to think myself. Maybe I would find something in the tape transcripts but I held a lot of doubt about that. As I was thinking Dave said, “Mind you all this speculation is all very well but what about Theresa? What's to stop them coming back or even going out to look for her?”

“I shouldn't think they would find her she's stopping at a friend of mine's.”

“I'm not sure. I've heard that Roy has gone missing now. It might be that he owes them money so the rumours say but I'm not sure. It doesn't add up, what with Colin's death and that.”

I thought that if Dave had put two and two together then maybe Short had done the same. This made it more urgent that I had a plan for when I went for the doorman. I still had the syringe and sleeping draught but that was all I had to go on. I would have to watch the house for a little longer.

“I think Roy just scarpered,” I said, “You know what sort of man he was.”

“Yes I certainly do.”

“He's probably just done a runner. You know you probably wasn't the only one he grassed up.”

“Do you think that it was him then,” Dave said as he still wasn't sure.

“Well it proves your point doesn't it. He wouldn't have run unless it was down to him. You know how the word on the street goes.”

“True, well that's one problem out of the way just the other thing now. What about Short? Why does he think that I know something I shouldn't? That's going to be a major worry to me.”

“Do you want me to have a word with him? I could tell him that I've seen you and you don't know what he's on about.” I had no intention of doing it I just wanted to calm him down.

He looked at me as if I was naïve and said, “That's not a good idea. I don't think you could call him a reasonable man.”

“He's not stupid though. He won't want to do too much for fear of drawing attention to himself.”

“Well he's smashed the house up and threatened Theresa if she went to the police. Where's he going to draw the line?”

“Well it's the only thing I can think of unless of course you have other ideas. Do you know where he lives?”

“No I only ever saw him in his nightclub. That's a bit like going into the lion's den though.”

I was aware of that but said nothing only, “Well it has to be done.”

“Be careful then. Don't turn your back on him.”

When he said that a shiver went down my spine I looked at Dave and said, “What does he look like as it might be a good idea to see him alone without his back up.”

“Watch him he can handle himself. He's about six three with a short cropped beard and long brown hair done into a pony tail. He's got a pronounced London accent and weighs in at around 17 stone, he's big so be careful.”

His description did not seem to match the two people I had seen so I thought that maybe he was the one who had stabbed Richard in the back. The shiver told me he was one of the veils if nothing else though."Hopefully he'll see reason. When he knows that you know nothing he'll leave you alone and get back to his business."

"Hopefully, mind you I wish I had your faith, I don't want to see Theresa get hurt."

"I don't either but seeing him is the only option I can think of. Theresa can stay with Brian for a few days and hopefully it will be all over by then."

"I tell you what I'm not getting involved with anything like this again."

"You had better not," Theresa said, "I'm not going through all this lot again I can tell you."

Dave looked at her and said, "I'm very sorry that it ended like this. I only wanted us to be happy."

"We can be happy without all that," Theresa said, "It no good for my nerves all this. What about the kids. God help you if anything happens to them because of your stupidity."

"It will never happen again I'll make sure of that don't worry. This stint in prison has made me think."

"About time because if it hadn't I would not be here when you get out. I'm not putting up with anything like that again."

"It won't happen again I'm not going through all this again I can tell you."

"Don't forget that it's just as much a prison for me as well except I can't even go back to my cell."

"I'll have a word with him," I said by way of comfort, "Hopefully it will all be cleared up and you can go back soon."

"I hope so," Theresa said, "It doesn't feel right putting on your friend like that and besides I've always hated the place."

"Brian won't mind he's a good man. You'll soon be back home once again and be able to put all this behind you."

"I'll never be able to do that. I'll always be looking over my shoulder. If little Dave's back late from anywhere I'll be thinking they have him. What sort of life is that?"

Dave looked quietly on the floor when he heard all this. I do not think that he had actually realised the extent of Theresa's fear and so all he could say was, "I'm very sorry please believe me."

"I wouldn't be here if I didn't," Theresa said with a smile, "But don't ever do it again that's all I will ever say on the matter."

It went quiet for a while as there seemed nothing else to say. I looked at my watch and saw we still had a couple of minutes left so I said, "I'll go over and see him tomorrow as its Saturday the place will be open."

"You've picked the right time to go it will be full of people."

"That might be a good thing he won't want any trouble in front of all those witnesses."

"Watch that he doesn't try to get you into the back room. That's where they usually take the trouble makers to give them a good kicking."

"Right, so whereabouts is it?"

"Do you know the club?"

"No," I had to admit, "I've never been there before."

"That's going to make it difficult," Dave said and thought awhile, "As you go in the dance floor is on your left and there are the toilets to your right. Round the corner there is another door, that's where they take them."

"Cheers, I'll remember that."

The prison officer called time and so I said goodbye and left them to their own goodbyes.

Chapter 8

It was very cold when we left the prison. I asked Theresa if she would be alright getting back. She said that she would so I left her and took a ride into the countryside to be alone with my thoughts and have a proper look at the transcript. To tell you the truth it was rather garbled with a lot of the conversation put down as unrecognisable. I looked through what little there was and it all seemed to incriminate Dave. The actual parts when he was being offered drugs and guns were put down as distortion at every crucial part. Whether it was a bad recording or something more sinister I was not sure but I thought it strange how selective it was. The material that was not garbled was as clear as a bell. I studied it with no joy for hours so with a heavy heart put it down and got back to the case. I drove to Infin Road and waited at a safe distance. It was Saturday morning and I saw that the milk bottles were still outside the front door. That gave me the start of an idea and I cautiously walked past the house looking for signs of life. The curtains were drawn still which was unusual as it was early afternoon. I took the syringe out and withdrew some of the sleeping draught that Dave had given me into it. I looked around to see if anyone was about but the street was empty. I slowly walked down the road and casually stopped by his door pretending to tie up my shoe laces. I put the syringe into the milk bottle that was closest to me and released its contents into the bottle.

Looking at the bottle you could hardly tell that there was a hole in it so I went back to the car and waited. At around 3 o'clock the curtains opened and after around another five minutes his wife appeared at the door. She looked like she was in a hurry because she turned and shouted, "Don't forget to pick the milk up I should be back before seven."

I let out a huge sigh of relief as she left because if she had drunk any it would have surely given the game away. After another ten minutes the door opened and Don appeared. He looked a bit disheveled as he bent down and picked the two bottles up. He went back inside and I waited around for another half an hour before I went to take a closer look. I wished that I had drugged them both as he only had a fifty-fifty chance of taking the right one but that couldn't be helped now. I knew that I was going to have to make my play soon whether he had drunk it or not but I was willing to do this as I had a score to settle with him anyway. I took a look around the back but there was no sign of life downstairs at all. I checked the back door but to my dismay it was locked. I was fortunate enough however to see an open downstairs window and although it was quite small I could quite comfortably get through. I eased myself up and crawled through it not making a sound as I let myself down on the other side. I took a little time out and had a good look around. I did not know what I was looking for but I was desperate for anything that might come in handy. It was then that I saw it. An empty syringe lay on the living room table. He was a smack-head and maybe that would be worth knowing. I had intended to try and interrogate him but time was running out. I checked the kitchen and saw a half empty milk bottle on the table. I went over and recognised it as the one I had drugged. That made it a lot easier for the next step. I looked around the kitchen and found a large kitchen knife. I quietly walked up the stairs and guessing that the front room was where they slept rushed in. I saw him sprawled across the bed and knew that the draught had done its work. I had not expected him to have taken so much and looking at his eyes knew he would be out for some time. I looked through all the drawers in the room in the hope of finding a gun but was disappointed. I went back down to the kitchen and after emptying out the milk bottle and washing it I looked through the cupboards trying to find the elusive brown powder. It did not turn up so I took a teaspoon and the jar of vinegar that was by the sink into the living room. I saw a packet of cigarettes lying on the table and picked one out and broke the filter off it. My eyes lit upon the bureau that was in the corner and I went over and opened it. I found a bag full of brown powder and one full of white. I smelt the white and it turned out to be talcum powder. He must have been a dealer himself. I left the talcum powder where it was for I wanted the heroin to be pure as I had finally made up my mind what I was going to do. I reasoned that he would not know anything of real value but I wanted him out of the way. I did not want Short thinking it was an accident so a drugs overdose was the obvious solution.

I heated the heroin mixed with the vinegar on the tea spoon and drew the liquid through the cigarette filter. Everything was in place so I went back upstairs to check on his progress. I need not have worried as he looked like he would be out for a few hours at least. I had decided that the older doorman would be more useful to me because all I really wanted to know was Short's address. Even that was not important because I could follow him home from the nightclub at any time. I looked at Don's arms for tell tale signs of needle marks and was not disappointed. I lifted his right arm up and wrapped my belt tightly around his bicep. I slapped his arm at the underside of the elbow a few times and his vein started to stick up. I put the syringe in and drew it back making sure that it was in properly. A little blood came out so I injected into him emptying the full contents into his arm. I saw a pile of money on the bed side table but I had to leave it as not to raise any suspicion. Shame really as my money was fast dwindling.

I went through the house from top to bottom looking for a gun but to no avail. I left the house because time was getting on and I knew that his wife would soon be getting back. I put the empty milk bottle on the front and then I took a drive over to Chaddeston to the other man's address and started my surveillance there.

I was in a strange situation really as I had nothing actually against the man. I reasoned that he had only been doing his job and so it was nothing personal against me. I knew that I had to kill but that was just part of the game. I did not see him as the next step though as I could quite easily find Short's address and besides I doubted if he knew anything that I would find useful. Dove Park was a little cul-de-sac which made it hard for me to approach. All the houses looked over each other and they looked very keen after each other as seen by the numerous neighbour-hood watch stickers. I had to be very careful with my approach as I still wanted it to look like an accident as not to arouse Short's curiosity. I also debated on whether it would be safe for Theresa's return as when Short found out that one of his men had took an overdose he would have more to be concerned with than just making her life hell. I was still not sure so I decided to leave it a bit. Another thought had come into my head and that was that Short didn't actually know what I looked like. His doormen did but with one gone and the other on the way that problem would soon be sorted. I reasoned that he might be short of man power and looking for another doorman for his club. I had worked the door before and could come up with good references if needed but that would be further down the road. My thoughts returned to the older doorman, I did not even know his name that's how impersonal it was. I knew that he would be working that night and so I wouldn't be able to do anything until at least the next day. I had been lucky with Jacobson as I did not really go up against him with a full plan. I would not make that mistake again as the stakes were getting higher. I watched the place for a while and much to my dismay there was a lot of children playing on the street creating all sorts of noise. The place was far too crowded for me to risk making a move. I guessed that Sunday would be the same so I decided that it would have to be a weekday when they were at school and hopefully it would be a lot quieter.

I needed to know a little more about the man which was difficult as I did not know his name. As I watched the house a couple of children left and went out to play with the others on the street. This meant that he had a family and it only added to the guilty feelings I was starting to have. It had turned him from a target into a family man. I saw him leave the house and knock on a neighbour's door. He entered in and stayed there for over an hour. He was going to be a hard man to get to and to tell you the truth my heart was not really in it. I could justify the others to a certain extent as Colin deserved it for being what he was and Roy would have done it to me if he had had the chance. The other doorman had scarred me but this one had done nothing. My one comfort I suppose was that I could say I was doing it for Theresa but that was a shallow reason really as I knew it was to lift another veil. The more I killed the easier it got. Deep down I was looking forward to the thrill of it but seeing the man in his own environment had put a dampener on it. I decided to take a ride over to Burton and see if I could dig anything up. I did not really have any hope of doing this it was just that I needed to be alone with my thoughts and come up with a tangible reason to do the job. It was

not important but it would make me feel better. I decided to visit one of my old locals and see what had been happening recently. It was a small terraced pub on the outskirts of Horninglow that served a good pint and attracted a small clicky clientele. As I walked in I ordered a cola as I felt guilty about going on at Dave about his drinking. I had been hitting the whiskey a bit too much recently but I think that was only to blank out the killings. I did not seem to need it any more as I had got somewhat desensitised by now. I took a drink of the cola and had a look around to see if I knew anyone. A group of youths were hanging around the juke box but they were of a different generation to me so I did not know them. An old couple sat by the door next to the dart board content in their own company. I was debating on whether I was just wasting my time when an old friend walked in.

“Alright Stu,” he said coming over and shaking my hand, “I thought that you moved to Birmingham.”

“How's it going Mick? No I've been back about six months now. I live over the other side of town though.”

“Oh, that's why I haven't seen you. So are you working?”

“Got laid off a couple of weeks ago, crap job anyway.”

“Alan's after a few lads for a roofing job I could ask him if you like.”

“I'm not that desperate,” I said laughing, “He's too much of a con man for my liking.”

“Just a thought,” Mick said and thought awhile before saying, “Someone was in here asking for you the other day.”

I went cold when I heard this and said, “Who?”

“Two fellows, they were asking the bar man where you lived.”

“Did he tell them?”

“No he didn't even know you. He's new round town, he started not long after you left town.”

“What did they look like?”

“I could do better than that I could tell you who they were.”

I noticed that Mick had not ordered so I bought him a drink. I decided to have a pint of lager this time as I was getting settled in his company, “So,” I said when the round was served, “Who were they?”

“Wilkins, John Wilkins he works for a man called Short. The other one was Don something or other I'm not sure about him.”

“Oh, I heard they were looking for doormen.”

“That must be it then. You wouldn't want to work for that outfit though would you?”

“To tell the truth Mick my money's running down quite fast and I could do with a job but I don't know a lot about them.”

“Drug pushers to a man you want to keep well away, too treacherous by half.”

“So what are the people like?” I said trying to bring the conversation back to Wilkins.

“That Don I don't know much about him. Wilkins though he's another matter altogether.”

“He is, in what way?”

“He's evil, pure evil. He cut Rob to ribbons one day.”

“Rob, you mean your brother Rob?”

“Yes outside the nightclub. I'll admit that Rob was a little drunk and you know how loud he gets when he's like that but there was no need for that. No need at all.”

I could not really use that as the excuse I needed because I did indeed know what Rob was like after a few drinks. He could get you into a fight at a monastery. I wanted something else and when he came out with the next line I had all the ammunition that I needed.

“He uses rent boys as well,” Mick said out of the blue, “Well that's what I was told anyway, young as ten most of them.”

“Really,” I said because I remembered the children coming out of his house. I had taken them for his but now I was not so sure.”How do you know that?”

"I heard it from someone," Mick answered. I was not sure if he was just saying that out of the hatred he had for the man after what he did to his brother so I said, "Do you know much about him?"

"Yes he's a part time boxing trainer but they reckon that's an excuse to look at all the young lads."

"No," I said getting impatient, "Is he married and stuff like that."

Mick looked at me in a funny manner and I regretted my outburst almost immediately. I would still have to try and control my temper as it could give me away.

"Are you alright," he said picking up on my outburst.

"Yes," I said calming down, "Don't mind me I'm sleeping rough at the moment. I get a bit irritable at times maybe its lack of sleep."

This seemed to satisfy him as he said, "Oh don't worry about it I've been there myself. No I don't think he's married in fact I'm sure he isn't. That's a strange question to ask."

"Well not being funny but I'm not sure how much of your opinion of him has been interested by the fact he gave your kid a hammering. I really could do with a job but I wouldn't want to work with someone like that."

"Oh I can see you point but I knew this well before Rob got cut up. I think that Rob made some comment about it to him and that was what got him into the mess."

"So it looks like I won't be working with him then," I said my conscience now satisfied.

"Do you want another," Mick said putting his hand in his pocket.

"Yeah go on then I'll have a lager."

"I heard Roy did a runner."

"Roy," I said pleading ignorance, "Roy who?"

"Roy Johnson," Mick said as if it was common knowledge, "Didn't you know him?"

I pretended to think awhile before I said, "Oh yes I remember him."

"They reckoned he owed a lot of money. Mind you he always was a treacherous bastard."

"I heard that though I did not really know him that well. I used to work with him but that was years ago."

"I was going to say. I don't think he's worked in years. He used to be a runner over Derby way."

"A runner?" I said pleading ignorance.

"God you have lost touch. Drugs. He used to get the crack-heads to steal through their drug addiction. He supplied a great crime wave."

"I've heard that crime was well up recently. This place has changed a lot in the last seven years."

"It's all over the place now. Burglaries are everyday events. You can't park your car without fear that your radio would disappear. That's if your car is still there."

"Yes," I said with a tinge of sadness, "It was just drunken fights when I remembered it."

"It's a different generation now and they just live for drugs."

"So he left owing money. I bet he was popular with the bloke who supplied him."

"You'll be able to ask him yourself. If you decide to work for him that is."

"Sorry?" I said carrying on the act.

"Martin Short. He's the man who supplied him. He also owns the club that those two men work for."

"It's a small world. He must be a powerful man."

"They say so but people like that I keep away from. Tell me to mind my own business but I wouldn't work for him."

"I think I've already decided that. He sounds like a right weirdo employing someone like Wilkins. I don't work for people like that."

"I wouldn't blame you. If you are desperate I'll ask around. I might be able to sort something out."

"I'm not sure. To tell you the truth I'm thinking of moving on. I'm getting restless again."

"That's probably because you are sleeping rough. Get a good bed for the night and you'll think different. I could put you up for a few nights if you like. Jean will be pleased to see you. It's been a

long time.”

“Thanks but I don't want to impose. I'll be alright don't worry about me.”

“Well it's no imposition but it's up to you.”

The bar had started to fill up a little as the other pubs had shut and this was the only one that opened all day. The atmosphere was getting loud as the drink flowed freely. It had a slightly menacing undertone to it but I was quite used to that by now. I finished my drink and offered Mick another which he gratefully accepted. I saw a few faces that I recognised but I could not put a name on them so I was left with an uneasy feeling.

A large heavily tattooed man smelling heavily of beer came up to me and said, “I know you from somewhere.”

I looked at him but there was no trace of malice in his eyes.

“It's Stuart,” Mick said, “Don't you remember him?”

Mick looked at me and said, “Tim McClaran.”

I looked at him and recognised him, “Tim, what's happened to you?” He had put on at least five stone and developed a couple of chins along the way.

“Good living. Mind you you've changed yourself,” and pointed at my scar and nose.

“Hazards of living you ought to have seen the other fellow though not a mark on him.”

He laughed and said, “It's been a long time what are you having?”

“I'll have a lager then and the same again for Mick.”

He laughed at that and bought us both a drink. After we had got served he said, “What have you been doing with yourself?”

“Not a lot really,” I said getting bored from repeating myself, “What about yourself?”

He lifted his glass and looking at it said, “This.”

“Nothing changed then,” I said laughing.

“You have been away a long time. A lot of things have changed its all drugs now. I'll stick to this though,” and took a drink from his glass. He emptied about half of it and putting the glass on the table, “How's your pool playing?”

“Still the same,” I said and started laughing.

“I'll put a bet on then. How does a pound a pocket sound?”

“I don't gamble. Not with the way I play. I'll give you a game for a pint though.”

“Sure,” he said and went over and put the money on the table. There were two others before him not including the ones who were playing.”

“It shouldn't be too long,” he said when he came back. I was sorry to hear about Dave by the way.

He was a good mate of yours wasn't he?”

“Yes,” I said not really wanting to talk about it, “Looks like you are ready for another.”

Mick said, “I'll get these, it must be my turn by now.”

“Sounds good to me,” Tim said and finished the rest of his beer. I saw the speed he drank and knew I had no chance of keeping up with him but I finished my drink and put it on the table, “Cheers Mick.”

He had noticed me struggle and said, “You made hard work out of that didn't you.”

“I don't drink so much now and on seeing Tim's laughter, “And that is why I don't carry so much weight.”

“This,” he said pinching his stomach, “Only puppy fat. I could get rid of it no problem.”

“I'll take your word on that,” I said laughing, “Though not many others would.”

We watched the game in progress and it was rather slow. I did not know either of the players as they had come in with the crowd that came in after the other pubs shut. They took their time and played numerous snookers which only made the game boring to watch. The group of youths that had been by the juke box when I had first come in had moved and had taken their seats at a table close by. I had not taken any notice of them except to see if I had known them. I did not so I left them to their conversation and carried on with mine.

Eventually the game finished and the next man got on. He was a good player and it made for an exciting game. I had forgotten that it was winner stop on so I would have to hope that Tim won in order to play him. Looking at how good the man was though filled me with doubt. He took the break and had put down five balls before he eventually missed. The one who had been snookering earlier tried his old trick again but it did not work. The game was finished quickly and the next one took his turn. I had seen his face before and it dawned on me where. He used to play in the pool team of one of the locals I used to frequent. I knew he was a good player so I had grave doubts about playing Tim at all.

“Good isn't he?” Tim said watching me study the game, “I've beat him though in a pool match.”

“In your dreams more like. I've seen him play before. Out of your league, well unless you've improved that is.”

“I've come a long way. I play for money now you know. It's not a bad sort of living either. Who needs to work eh?”

“When did that happen?” I said because it was news to me. The last time I had seen Tim play he was quite good but I would not have thought him good enough to play for money.

“Spend a lot of time in the pub and you have plenty of time to practice.”

I knew I would find out soon because the game had finished and it was his turn to play.

Chapter 9.

“Looks like it's me then,” Tim said walking over to the pool table and putting his money in. As I would be on next I went over and put my drink on the ledge close by. Mick had got into conversation with a friend of his at the bar so I decided to take a look at the juke box. I heard Tim say, “What about making it interesting?”

The other man said, “Not me Tim.”

I began to wonder if he might actually be as good as he said he was. This was confirmed when he took the break and put two down. I put some money in and as I was studying the tracks I heard the crashing of glass and saw where it had fell. It was lying at the bottom of the wall not far from the pool table. The man who had been playing walked around the other side and I was left talking to Tim “What happened?” I said.

“One of them youths threw a glass at Steve,” I took Steve to be the man he was playing against, “It just missed his nose.”

“Why?”

“I don't know. He just said what you looking at and let it fly. That one over there,” he said slyly nodding over to one of the youths sitting around the table.

The barman came out and took the balls off the table as he must have been expecting more trouble and I turned to talk to Tim. I had not seen the youth come over but I heard him say, “What are you looking at?”

It must have been the drink but I broke the first rule to punch first and ask questions later. I said, “What are.....” But I did not get any further. He had a pool cue concealed behind him which he swung and hit the wall behind me. I looked at him and saw he had a grin on his face and then my temper took over.

'Not today' I thought to myself and punched him in the throat. His face changed somewhat and he rushed around the table to try and get another cue. He was a big man, well built and I could not see why he should need one but that was not my problem. I rushed around the other side of the table and saw him leaning over to pick one out of the rack. As I ran in I drew back and let him have a right hander which landed on his chin. He shook slightly and came at me. A little bit of a scuffle broke out and I pushed him back. He fell into his friends who grabbed him and told him to calm down. My shirt was halfway up my front so I thought it prudent to take it off. They must not have had a good hold on him as he broke free and came at me again. This time I was ready though and let him have a combination of two lefts and a right that knocked him into his friends. They pulled him

out and left the pub and I said to Tim, "Who was that?"

"What was he on would be more to the point. Where ever did you learn to fight like that?"

"It's surprising what panic does," I said with a laugh, "Mind you I don't really want to stay around as I would outstay my welcome."

I assumed that the bar man had called the police and so I wanted to leave before they arrived.

"What about down the Red Lion, I could give you that game of pool then."

"Sorry Tim but I've got things to do now maybe some other time."

"You must have seen me play. Alright then I'll catch you later."

I left Tim and Mick and went for a drive in the car. I was well over the limit and so parked up not far away and sat awhile thinking things over. The little scuffle had got me in the mood again and my thoughts went back to Wilkins. I had a reason now and so it was with glee that I worked out my next strategy. His actions had disgusted me and left a sour taste in my mouth. I hated people like that and I played upon this to build up my anger. I had never been called homophobic but by the same token I had never been called a sodophile I was quite apathetic when it came to that sort of thing. My one grievance was that it was with young lads who had probably been drugged first. I had enough hate inside me now and I knew that I would have no pangs of guilt when it came to doing the deed. From what I gathered from Mick he was not married so it would be more than likely he lived alone. I would have to make sure first but my gut reaction was that he did because his lifestyle would not be very tolerable to people who were not of his ilk. I had planned to try and find out what I could but that did not matter so much now as I was formulating alternative ideas. I still wanted it to look like an accident even though Short was going to be hugely suspicious of two of his men dying in such a short space of time.

Thoughts of working for Short had crossed my mind before but now they returned with a vengeance. The only real way of finding out what was going on would be to hunt from the inside. The idea got more and more appealing but I would have to work out how I would go about working it. I could get hold of references but that was only for door-work. I reasoned that I would need to get involved more with the underside of his operations to have any chance of finding the truth. I decided that I would use another identity as he would know my name if I approached him with it. I decided with quite an ironic touch that I would call myself Richard Billesley and make out that I came from Birmingham. I knew the place well enough to be able to get away with it so I was well covered in that sense. I had no form of I.D. But to people like Short that did not really matter. In fact it was a bit of a bonus because he would have thought that I was hiding from the law or something similar.

With that side of the story lined up my mind went back to thinking of a way of getting rid of Wilkins and making it look like an accident. I did not know enough about him to formulate a fool proof plan but I had to make one as best as I could. I had been thinking along the lines of an accident at home as that was where I was going to get rid of him. Thoughts of an overdose came but soon lost their appeal as Short would not be that stupid to believe it happened twice. I needed something special but as yet that was not found. I had two days to come up with it as I was going to make my play on Monday. I knew that he would be at work that night so I could take it easy for awhile

I decided just to hang around and work out how I would get into Short's good books. That would be quite easy if I played it right. I knew that he would be looking for people to replenish his stocks and so I would arrange to get him out of trouble one night. It would be easy as all I would have to do was to arrange someone to have a go at him and I would step out and save the day. It looked like he could handle himself so I thought it might take two to pick the fight. Having said that it was quite a rough club and maybe the event would not need stage managed. My thoughts drifted all around and then the beer kicked in and I felt tired. It was about 8 o'clock when I fell asleep.

I found myself in a crowded tavern sitting at a table totally bewitched by a girl dancing in front of me. Noises were all around me but I heard nothing, all my senses were captivated by the vision in

front of me. She swayed and shivered and my heart did the same. A drunken brawl broke out to my right but I took no notice. The clash of metal echoed all around me but still I was numb. A man fell beside me with blood stained cloak and nearly knocked into my table but still I stayed. It was not until a man made a grab for the dancer that I stood up. I recognised him as Jacobson and I was over with my dagger out within minutes. He saw my approach and backed off slightly though he never let her go.

"I just wanted to see what's under the veils," he said laughing.

I said nothing but plunged the knife into his chest. He fell heavily and took one of her veils with him. A voice inside me said, 'Now she is four'.

The scene changed and I found myself talking to Richard of Billesley, "I hear that you are changing your name," he said by way of greeting.

"Yes that's right. How does Richard Billesley sound?"

"Sounds good to me, so what's your next step then."

"A fellow called Wilkins, an accidental death but I have not decided what yet."

He thought awhile and said, "Drowning?"

"No it's got to be done at his house, a household accident."

"I don't know much about that sort of thing. In my day you just went over and killed, it was as simple as that."

"Times change I want to find out what's going on and to do that I have to get into the dealings that Short's involved with."

"Working for the enemy that's treachery where I come from."

"It sounds to me that your morals got you stabbed in the back. Try living in the real world."

That must have hit home as he went quiet for a while. Eventually he said, "Why not electrocution?"

"Maybe," I said thinking, "That might work."

"See," he said with a triumphant smile, "I can be of help."

"Why the change of heart anyway? The last time I asked for help you told me I was on my own."

"I wasn't sure if you could make it then but with every veil you lift the closer you get."

"Is this Wilkins one of the veils?" I said trying to capitalise on his change of heart.

"No but think of it as practice for the next four. You are stepping up a league now; these people won't give you a second chance .

"So I don't really need to kill this man it's just extra hassle."

"You don't need to but it's always a good idea to tie up loose ends. Don't forget that he knows what you look like and if you intend to work for Short you won't want him around. Tell me something though?"

"Yes, what."

"Why do you want to know what it's all about? Wouldn't it be easier just to lift the veils and leave it at that? You are getting close now and you don't really want to ruin it by getting too involved. Just stay on the sidelines and pick them off."

"I understand what you say but I really do want to know what's going on. Besides he's a good mate and there aren't that many about."

"Well," he said with an air of resignation, "It's your game just don't make my mistake."

"I'll bear that in mind. Don't you want to know what it's all about though? Doesn't it interest you in the slightest?"

"No," he said shrugging his shoulders, "But then again he's not my friend is he."

"True. So electrocution I'll see what I can find when I get there."

"Have you used that draught up? That would make it a lot easier."

I still had a little left over so I could use the same trick again. It sounded like this one would be as easy as the first so I had a contented heart when I awoke the next morning.

Sunday morning was bright yet cold. The car was freezing when I got up and so I decided to go for a walk in the hope of warming up. I liked to walk as it gave me a clear head in which to think.

Most of my plans were sorted out now and all I needed was time so that I could implement them. The rest I decided to play by ear as it always helps if you're flexible as thinking on your feet is a great advantage in a game like this. I had thoughts of putting electrical wires to his testicles but that was more out of disgust than anything else. I reasoned that it might be a bit too obvious though so with great pity had to forget about it. I had a good walk of about three miles before ending back at the car. I decided to drive over to see Theresa as it was a good an idea to waste a day as any. On arrival I knocked on Brian's door and Theresa opened it, "Come on in I'll put the kettle on."

"I see you're well settled in then," I said entering.

"He's a good man. He's made me feel more than welcome. I don't know what I would have done without him."

"Yes," I agreed, "He's a good bloke."

"Mind you I can't stay here forever he told me his mother comes next week so I thought I would move on."

"Well I've not seen Short yet but I've heard something that might be to your advantage."

"Oh, what's that?"

"Do you remember the younger one of your visitors?" I said taking a seat at the kitchen table.

"The one with the scar he was an evil one."

"It turns out he was a smack-head that took an overdose. I don't know if that might pacify your mind about going back."

"How's that?" she said as she put two mugs on the table.

"I think that Short will probably have forgotten about you. He will have other things on his mind no doubt."

"Do you think so, what about the other one?"

"It's up to you. If you don't feel like it I could look for another address. When does Brian want you out?"

"She comes on Thursday; Brian said that I am welcome until then."

"Wednesday then, I'll see what I can do."

"Do you think that it would be safe for me to return? The kids are getting a little restless and to tell you the truth so am I."

"I don't know yet. Why not wait and see what Wednesday has to offer."

"Well I phoned my friend and she said that nobody had been around so that's one thing."

"Maybe you won't hear from them again then, it was just a scare tactic."

"It certainly worked as I never been so scared in my life."

"They know their job then," I took a drink and said, "Where's Brian?"

"He's gone down to the pub with his girlfriend."

"I didn't know he was courting. What does she say about all this?"

"What me living here you mean? She's not overly concerned. He explained the circumstances to her and she was alright."

"That's good. Do you need anything?"

"Just my home back that's all."

"We'll see what Wednesday brings." I said. My conversation with Theresa had run its course so I decided to leave her and go and see Dave. I had a bit of time to waste and he certainly knew how to do it. I drove the short distance and soon found myself knocking on his door. It seemed like ages before he answered it and when he did he looked more than just a little disheveled, "Oh alright Stu," he said letting me in, "Kettle's on."

I walked in and settled down on the sofa. He brought me a coffee in and said, "So, what progress?"

"Not a lot Dave. Not a lot at all."

"What about the thing with your mate," he said pursuing the point.

"It was all a storm in a teacup. It blew over."

What," he said in disbelief, "Just like that?"

“Yes. Well you know what women are like she just panicked. Mind you she was thinking of the kids.”

“So it's all done. How did you manage that?”

“I didn't have to fate did it for me.”

“What, how do you mean?”

“It turns out that one of his lads took an overdose. He was a smack-head.”

“Very lucky,” he said with a hint of suspicion.

“These things happen,” I said and changing the subject, “I thought that you would be down the pub by now. Sunday dinner.”

“No not today. I thought I would have a quiet day in with the football.”

“Rather you than me. To me it's like watching paint dry.”

“Each to his own are you trying to grow a beard?”

“Me,” I said and felt my chin, “Oh this. I've been sleeping too rough for luxuries like shaving.”

“Have one here if you like the stuffs in the bathroom.”

“Actually,” I said as a thought came in my head, “I may as well leave it like this. It keeps my chin warm in the cold.”

“Good enough reason as any,” Dave said and then went quiet for a while before saying, “You were right what you said earlier.”

“Sorry?” I said not understanding.

“About my drinking it has been too much recently. I'm going to cut it down. Only go out at weekends.”

“It's a good idea. It will save you money if nothing else.”

“I haven't been myself recently but that's going to change now.”

“It's for the best. You'll know it when you start to see things differently.”

“Yes, you're right. I guess I let that thing with Tony take over. Never mind. So Theresa going back soon then?”

“Yes, mid week. She's getting a little restless at Brian's.”

“Well she would rather be at home wouldn't she?”

“True, that's where her heart is.”

“Look if you need any help you know where I live. Don't worry though I'll keep myself sober.”

“Thanks Dave,” I said and meant it, “Much appreciated but I think it's all sorted now. I can't see someone like Short wanting to bother with her when he's got all those troubles going on.”

“Other troubles I thought that it was just the doorman.”

'God' I thought to myself, 'Me and my big mouth.' I would have to tell him about Roy so I said,

“Yes one of his runners ran except that he took a lot of money with him.”

“Another smack-head, there's a lot of it about.”

“I'm not sure if he was but he left town with a lot of money.”

“Oh well what goes around comes around. Do you want a smoke?”

I was very tempted but I was driving, “No thanks I'm going back soon.”

“Fair enough,” Dave said and started to roll one, “It doesn't seem to affect me.”

“I tried it once but never again. I got a paranoid trip and thought that all the lorries were after me.”

“Honest. I've never had that problem.”

“So you said any news on the job front?”

“No he hasn't been in touch yet. I might have a look in the job centre tomorrow. I've got to sign on anyway.”

“I'll be looking for work soon as my money's fast running out.”

“I'll ask around when you are ready if you like. Are you still planning on stopping around here then?”

“I'm not sure yet. I've got to see how the land lies.”

“Football's about to start,” Dave said and took a tele out from behind the settee.

“Where ever did you get that?”

“Brian had a spare one. It's only portable but it will do me for what I want.”

“Fair enough I'll get off and leave you to it then.”

“Stop awhile. Have a smoke and go back tomorrow morning.”

“No. Thanks but I've got to see an old mate. He might be able to put a bit of work my way.”

“You know you're welcome but it's up to you.”

I said goodbye and left Dave to the football. I was starting to think that he might have changed but only time would tell on that one. I drove back to Burton and parked up in the town centre. I was just wasting time really I suppose as I did not want anything. The streets were empty as all the shops were closed so I just sat awhile in the market square just watching the world go by. I must have sat there for around an hour though it did not seem that long. I heard a door opening and saw that it was a pub called The Royal Oak. It had been a long time since I had, had a drink there and was tempted to go but thought better of it. I went back to where my car was parked and sat a while in there just listening to the radio. The seven o'clock news headlines came on.

“A man was found dead in his Sinfon home yesterday, police believe that it was a drugs overdose and are treating the death as accidental. He had been named as Donald Jacobson and was a local doorman in the town.”

I smiled with relief when I heard that and drove to my country retreat. I felt like a little celebration so I went to a pub over Hanbury way as it was not far from where I was hiding. It was quiet when I first entered and I took great delight in my first pint. The barman was friendly and we got talking about nothing in particular and everything in general.

The bar was empty until about 9 o'clock when a young couple came in so I had a very quiet night which I found calming after all the previous events. It was getting onto last orders and so I asked the barman if I could sleep in my car on the car-park as I was a little too drunk to drive home. He said it was alright so I went back to the car and soon fell asleep.

Chapter 10

I found myself walking through a verdant forest with lush green trees all around me. The smell of the flora lifted me up and I seemed to float along with it. It looked like it was in England as the temperate climate did not match the previous sightings. I looked around but saw no signs of life. It was like I was in another world, a world that nature ruled and this seemed to appeal to me. A bolting rabbit drew my attention to the bush from where it had emerged and I noticed a small figure behind it. It was the figure of a man dressed in rags and when he saw that I had seen him he made a run for it. For some reason I chased and quickly catching him held him up against a tree. I nearly let him go when I saw his face. It was the face of Colin Jones except he was somehow different. He had a large growth on the side of his face and this is what had thrown me. He trembled and said, “No sire, let me go.”

I did not know what was going on so I held him firmly and waited to see if he would elaborate.

“It was not me,” he said, “I have always been loyal to you. Ask anyone around here and they will tell you. Old Davey is loyal they would say.” I still did not know what he was talking about so I held him more firmly and let him babble a little longer.”It was Joseph of Bardon he made me do it. I never meant to harm her. He just said that he wanted to talk to her and gave me a groat.”

I felt my grip on him tighten and I lifted my other hand and started to squeeze his throat. His babble had turned to a gurgle and I saw his face take on a more bluish colour. I did not know why I did it; it just seemed to take over. I lifted him off the ground and watched his legs struggle a while. After about a minute they stopped and I let him drop. He fell to the floor with a thud and I just walked on my way.

The lush green changed to sand and I found myself in a scorching desert. My mouth felt dry almost straight away as I just walked aimlessly forward. I saw a figure in front of me and I hurried to catch it up. As I got closer I saw that it was Richard of Billesley and so I shouted, “Wait, don't

go.”

He stopped and turning said, “I told you that you should not take passengers. You will end up like I did.” When I had got up to him he said, “I had high hopes for you,” he sounded disappointed but I did not know why.

“What are you talking about I have never let you down.”

“Not yet but that won't take long.”

I was still none the wiser and waited for him to elaborate but that was not forthcoming so I said, “If it hasn't happened yet then if you tell me what it is I can stop it.”

He thought awhile before he said, “The path of the veils is a special path that can only be trodden alone. When you take others on that path they get in the way.”

“Yes,” I said impatiently, “I can understand that but what has that to do with me?”

“I know your mind even more than you know yourself and I know that you are planning to bring someone in on the game.”

“Who,” I said confused, “Because this is news to me.”

“You have a friend with a drink problem.”

“I have many,” I said smiling but his face did not change.

“Perhaps if you took this more seriously you might make it but going by your attitude I think that you won't.”

“You mean Dave,” I said getting serious again, “I haven't told him anything. I don't intend to either.”

“Probably not now but you would have done as you are still a little too soft.”

I thought about what he had said and found out that he was right. I would have indeed told Dave as I thought he had changed.”I don't understand you,” I said in despair, “First you tell me you can't help me and then you go funny if you think I'm going to make a mistake.”

“Things have changed. You are getting too close now. You have nearly caught up with me. I don't want your stupidity to ruin it.”

“I'll be more careful in future but don't go funny like that.”

“There's too much at stake not to be lost at such an important stage.”

“What about my other friend Dave. I still want to know what happened.”

“I've got nothing against him but you have never planned to bring him in on the game, that's the difference.”

“Oh I understand now, it's a solo thing isn't it.”

“Yes,” he said as if it was obvious and then changed his attitude, “So how is the puzzle coming together?”

“I don't seem to be getting anywhere.”

“Well the man you strangled was Davey, son of Robert; he used to work for my brother.”

“What, oh I thought you were on about Dave in prison. I haven't even thought about the other.”

“History sometimes repeats itself,” he said but I let it go. I did not really want to be concerned with other details as I still had a lot on my mind. We walked on for a while and Richard said, “See this,” and swept his right hand across at arm's length in front of him, “It's just one giant piece of desolation. Look at it well. If you were a pilgrim it could have cost you dear to cross it.”

“Was that what it was all about?” I said looking at the sand, “You went to war over this?”

“Not me personally but that was how it started. The pilgrims were getting taxed and it caused a lot of resentment. Mind you it wasn't too safe to cross in them days either. You could wake up and find that you hadn't,” and laughed.

“So how did you get involved then?”

“I went to find a woman,” he said with a smile.

“Wouldn't it have been better going to a dance,” I said light heartedly, “I mean you did not have to go this far surely?”

For some reason this made him laugh. He turned to me and said, “You came close as she was a

dancing girl but it was an inane joke.”

“You followed a woman across half the world that must have been true love.”

“It was,” he said and then mysteriously, “But not in the sense that you mean.”

I did not want to get involved in riddles so I said, “And what did Colin have to do with it?”

“Colin? Oh you mean Davey. Well he set it up for her to be kidnapped by Joseph of Bardon. He took her across the other side of the world to escape my ire and then held her for ransom.”

“A dancing girl, surely she would not have been worth a lot.”

“To some people she would,” he said and then changed the subject, “So it's your big day tomorrow then.” he said it as if it was my first day at school, “Looking forward to it?”

“Er...” I said unsure how to take what he was saying, “Yes, I suppose so.”

“Your game will soon be at an end, one way or another.”

“It's lucky I've got a lot more faith in me than you have. I don't intend to lose.”

“That's good but then again neither did I.”

“We'll see,” I said as it was a waste of time speculating, “Once Short is out the way it should be plain sailing.”

“Actually that's not quite true. Short is only the middle man. He works for the other two.”

“Was he the one that stabbed you in the back?”

“No, he was Nigel of Davenport.”

I woke up with a dry throat and heavy head. I must have had a little too much the night before or it was stronger than I thought it was. I looked at the time and saw it was nearly 9 o'clock.”God,” I said to myself as I had wanted to be there early to drug the milk before anyone had got up. I started the car and made my way as fast as I could over to Chaddeston and got there for half past. I saw that his milk bottle was still out and looking around saw an old couple make their way out the cul de sac. I waited and let them pass and checked to see if Wilkins curtains were still drawn. They were so at least I had a chance. I looked around again and on seeing nobody about I walked down the short drive that led to his front door. I had already prepared the syringe it just wanted emptying. I pretended to knock on the door so not to arouse suspicion and then went down on one knee as it to tie my shoe lace. I injected it into the solitary bottle and made my way back to the car. I waited within eye shot for him to appear but it was not until nearly 12 o' clock that he finally surfaced. The door opened and I saw him walk into the fresh bracing air and stretch himself. He turned around and picking up the bottle went back inside.

As I waited in the car I kept a look out but the place was unusually quiet. I gave him about half an hour before making my move. I walked past the front casually looking in and saw that it was empty so I sneaked around the back and did the same. To my delight I found that the back door was unlocked so I cautiously walked in. I saw a half pint of milk and laughed out loudly knowing that my work would be easy. I reasoned that I had a lot of time as the other man had been out for hours and so I took a look around the kitchen. I did not know what I was looking for though I knew that I would not need a kitchen knife as he must have been well out for the count by now.

I checked around the cupboard but found no drugs so I continued my search in the drawers. I found nothing there and so I went to the fridge. To my horror I saw a full bottle of milk in the door compartment. It had not occurred to me that he might have some left over from the previous day. I turned around and saw him creeping up towards me with an iron bar. He did not recognise me as my beard made me look a lot different so he thought that I was just a burglar. He took an overhead swing but I just manage to side step it. It landed with a loud noise on the sink unit table and sent vibrations all the way up his arm. He lifted it up and swung around as if to try again. He must have still been half asleep as I moved quickly and rushed him. He went flying and banged his head on the floor. I had knocked him out as easily as if he had been drugged. I dragged him back upstairs which was no mean feat because of his size and tied him up whilst I decided what to do with him. I had a look around the house in the vain hope of finding a gun but still I was disappointed. I could not find anything of interest so I just sat next to him and waited for him to wake up.

It seemed like ages before he finally did and when he did the first thing he said was, "You picked the wrong man to burgle you piece of slime."

I looked at him and a sudden thought came to me. As he did not know who I was I could be anyone I wanted."So," I said, "You think I'm a piece of slime. Tell me perv. Have you any children?"

He went quiet but muttered 'oh shit' under his breath. I barely heard him but it was true confirmation of Mick's allegation. He thought that I had not heard him though for he tried to bluff it out."No, I haven't got any children. What's that got to do with anything now get out of my house or else."

I laughed at him and said, "Now you don't really look in too good a position to dictate." My mocking tone enraged him and he started to struggle violently. I had originally thought of trying to make it look like an accident but I was having second thoughts now. I reasoned that he must have bumped his head when he fell so it would have left a mark. I could still try and make it look like a fall but that might be too suspicious so I needed another plan. He looked at me and saw that I had gone quiet. This unnerved him a lot because he said, "What do you want from me, you are not a burglar are you?"

"Just call me a concerned father," and looked at him in a strange manner, "What sort of man are you?"

"Why don't you untie me and then maybe you will find out."

I was quite taken by his taunt because I was sorely tempted to but a voice inside me stopped me, "I could just cut you open," I said with a sneer, "And find out for myself."

"I've never hurt a child in my life. I take good care of them. You wouldn't understand."

"Yes right. I'm sure they have sweet dreams at night and only think them night mares."

"No it's not like that at all. When I first meet them they are mixed up and I help them that's all."

"You disgust me you really do." I felt my anger ignited by a hatred more intense than anything I had felt before. All the other hatred that had been satisfied paled into insignificance when I looked at this man. He saw it in my eyes and this unnerved him more than slightly. As he looked at me though a hint of recognition came over his face, "Wait a minute I know you from somewhere."

"Maybe it's just a family resemblance that you see."

"No, there's more to this."

"I would be more worried about what's going to happen to you then trying to work out who I am."

"I want to know what you are after and then maybe we can work this mess out."

"It's not a mess," I said with a mocking smile, "Well not to me anyway."

My indifference to his tact left him angry and he struggled again. I thought it would be prudent to stop him as he looked like he was starting to make progress. I walked across and hitting him hard on his left cheek put him down."Don't struggle," I said, "It will only make it worse."

I noticed that his left cheek had swelled up and this made it even more unlikely that I could palm it off as a household accident. Now I had got past that obstacle I could really go to town with him.

"Right," I said, "You want to know what it's all about then. I want to take over your operation."

"What," he said laughing, "You want to do what?"

I hit him again and said, "I don't think I was laughing when I said that so why do you treat it as a joke?"

"I don't think you realise how big this thing is," he said somewhat more demure, "It cuts across the country."

I thought to myself that maybe he might know something useful so I carried on with that line of questioning."Oh I know the outline don't worry about that. I want to hear if you might be useful or maybe you might just happen to have an overdose like Donald."

"That was down to you," he said and started to struggle again. I had to hit him to calm him down and noticed that his face was rapidly marking. He went quiet before he said, "I knew there was something wrong but Short wouldn't have anything to do with it."

"Oh," I said latching on, "So Short thought it was an accident. What about Roy Johnson?"

"What," he said starting to panic, "He just left town didn't he."

“Oh no,” I said laughing, “He's still around town, well underneath it anyway.”

“Who are you? What outfit are you with?”

I hit him again for no other reason than he was there and said, “I'm the one who asks the questions. So Short thought he just left town then?”

“Yes, well he owed Short about £10,000 for the gear.”

“That will teach him to give credit then,” I said in a mocking manner. There was one thing that I had to know though and that was the extent of Colin Jones' involvement. Maybe this was to satisfy a slight pang of guilt as I had never thought of him as entirely innocent. It would have been some comfort to me to find out that I had good reason to get rid of him.

“So tell me. Colin Jones. What does Short think about that?”

“Colin Jones. He was just a Joey for Short.”

“Ah,” I said seeing a light, “So what did he do?”

“Set up deals and things like that. Until his mugging he was Short's middle man,” he thought a while longer and said, “Well that's if he was mugged.”

The smile on my face told him what he wanted to know so he said nothing. “You see they were not very helpful,” I said when I saw that I had got him, “But you might be different.”

“I'll tell you all I know Short is nothing to me. Maybe you could find a place in your operation for me.”

“Maybe,” I said lying to encourage him, “That depends on what you know after all you are just his doorman.”

“Oh no,” he said quite proudly, “I'm a lot more than that. I collect his rents and sort out his problems. He looks to me as his right hand man.”

‘Yes right,’ I thought to myself but said nothing. “Well,” I said aloud, “If that's the case there might be a place for you because I would want someone who knew what they were doing to take over.”

“That sounds good to me,” he said getting rather friendly, “So maybe we don't need these now.” He motioned to the rope that was tightly tied around his arms and legs.

“Not so fast. You see I don't trust you yet. Now I would be foolish to let you go until then. I know a lot about the operation so I'll know if you're trying to trick me.”

“Yes I see your point. It sounds to me that you know what you are about and that's a lot more than Short ever did.”

Thoughts of ‘treacherous bastard’ came to mind but I let them stay there. “Well,” I said, “Take me from the start. I want to know all about your operations.”

“Right,” he said thinking aloud, “Let's see. He owns three nightclubs. Well that's not strictly true. He owns the one in Derby but has another two in London in partnership with Paul Atkins.”

“Paul Atkins,” I said thinking that he must be the Paul that Dave had been on about, “He works for Short?”

“No it's the other way around. Atkins is in partnership with a man called Steve Simons.”

“Okay so what's his business structure then?”

“Short has places which he extorts from, small businesses and the like. He also fences electrical gear to the others from his runners.”

“His runners, how many are you talking about?”

“Well Roy was one but he also has another three in Derby and two in Nottingham. He has quite a turnover with these.”

“I hear that he's into the drugs market?”

“Yes he gets his gear from Atkins and milks it out either through his runners or in his clubs.”

“I've heard mention of guns, what's all that about?”

“Not Short's department that's more Simon's' end.”

“So it's quite an outfit then and ripe for the take over.”

“That would depend on how big your outfit was.”

“We'll start with Short and work our way through.” I noticed that Wilkins smiled when I said we

but I was talking about the royal we.

“Short is not really that big a fish,” Wilkins said. Now that he thought he was involved he was even more forthcoming, “Me and Don used to do all the graft. We would pick the gear up from Atkins and give it to the runners. They would swap it for anything electrical or easily carried from houses and we would take it to Short who would deal with Atkins. He has a couple of other blokes but they are just for the door as he likes to keep his business dealings as quiet as possible. He's a very cautious man in some respects.”

“So there was just the three at this end. What about the other two Atkins and Simons, what sort of back-up have they got?”

“None whatsoever, they are not structured in the normal way. They have people like Short all across the country. They're well involved with the police though.”

“In what way?” I said getting interested.

“They have them in their pockets. They turn in a few lads now and again to keep the coppers sweet and then get on with their deals in quiet so as not to attract any attention. It works well and we get left alone.”

“So they're quite well protected that might make it difficult.”

“It shouldn't be a real problem as long as you don't step too out of line they'll leave you alone. They are not really interested in the burglary victims as they come from fairly poor areas, one law for the rich as they say.”

“As they say,” I repeated, “Anything else I need to know before I untie you? What about Theresa Timms?” I said and watched his face turn white.

“Theresa Timms, I don't think I know her.”

“Oh but I think that you do. You see I have contacts everywhere. You don't realise how big this firm actually is.”

He thought a while before he said, “Short sent me over to frighten her so that her old man would keep quiet. I don't know why but I think it came from higher up the ladder.”

“Is he still looking for her or was that a one off visit?”

“I think it was a one off thing as Short didn't mention it again.”

“Is part of your job frightening women,” I said my temper rising, “Because our outfit does not do that.”

“No,” he said quickly, “That was just a one off. I think her husband got involved somewhere along the line. He was just a loser really. I don't quite know what it was all about as Short was not that forthcoming. Mind you that was him all over. Very cautious when it came to business.”

“And you don't know anything about it at all,” I said thinking that he might be telling me the truth as what he said up to date sounded about right.

“No but that's not a problem. I could soon beat it out of Short for you. Believe me it would be a pleasure.”

“Well I think that you have told me just about everything I need to know. Thanks.”

Chapter 11

“Right,” Wilkins said and lifted his arms, “So you're going to untie me then.”

“Don't be silly. Do you really think we'd have someone like you working for us? We have standards you know.”

“You bastard,” and started to struggle violently, “I'll kill you.”

I picked up the iron bar that he had come at me with and hit him on the shoulder. He fell down heavy on the bed and I sat a while to decide what I would actually do with him. I had reasoned that all hopes of making it look accidental had faded and so I would have to come up with an alternative plan. I smiled as I thought that I might take the irate father routine a bit further and so I got off the bed and went downstairs. I saw a cardboard box in the kitchen and cut a large square out of it with the kitchen knife. I took out a tin of paint from under the sink cupboard and painted on the square,

“For the safety of children everywhere” and bought it back to the bed room. His face went pale when he saw it.

“Look.” he said almost pleading, “I've told you all I know. You don't have to take it this far.”

“Oh but I do. You know too much about my outfit.”

“What? I don't know anything about it.”

“You are looking at it,” and picked up the iron bar.

“No” he said as I landed the first blow.”No,” he said as I landed the second. He never spoke after that. I left him tied to the bed and put the sign next to him. I took the iron bar and tin of paint along with the drugged milk and checking there was no one about made my way to the car. I felt quite light headed for some reason and found it difficult to drive so as soon as I got out of town I parked up and went for a walk. It was still quite cold and I soon came back to Earth. I went back to the car and tipped the milk out and went back to Burton for I needed to gather my thoughts. I still had a lot of work to do so I wondered what Richard had meant when he said I was nearly finished. I still felt that I had a long way to go and as I did not know London at all I had a job on my hands. My thoughts went back to Theresa and I reasoned with everything falling around Short's head she should be pretty safe which was quite a weight of my mind. I had felt guilty about dragging her over to Birmingham but at the time it was the only thing I could do. I decided to get rid of the things I had taken from Wilkins' house as I did not want to be found with them. I put the empty bottle on someone's front door as there was one already there and took the iron bar and paint to the tip. That done I debated on my next move. I was impatient to start but I could not do anything for a while for I had to gain Short's acquaintance. I reasoned that I had all I needed to know about the outfit as Wilkins had been very thorough in his description so my detective work was done. I still wanted to know what their interest in Dave was but that would have to keep until later so I had plenty of time on my hands now.

I felt the need for a place to stay as sleeping in the car had started to become very uncomfortable so I came up with a novel idea. I phoned Theresa to ask her if I could stay at hers for a while to make sure that everything was alright. She agreed as she did not really like the house being unoccupied and arranged it with her friend so I could have the keys. I went around and took a look at the place. The last time I had been I had just been in and out so I had no real chance to check the damage. It was a pleasant surprise to find out it was not too bad as Theresa must have cleaned a lot of the mess up. I noticed that some of her furniture had been smashed and I repaired what I could but most of it was beyond redemption. It was late evening by the time I had finished so I just settled back and watched a little television. I was anxious to find out if Wilkins had been found yet and if my ploy had worked. The six o'clock news came on and he was not in it. I waited for the local news to come and was not disappointed.

“Police have found the body of a Derby man dead in his home in Chaddeston today. He is believed to be a paedophile that was killed in a vigilante attack at his home sometime in the morning. He was found by local business man Martin Short who said that he was unaware of him having any activities involving children. The man worked for Mr. Short in the capacity of doorman at his club called The Springs. He is the second man from the club to die recently but police say that there is no connection between the two deaths.”

I laughed loudly when I heard this and went into the kitchen to make myself a cup of tea. The phone rang and I picked it up although rather reluctantly as it was not my house.

“Is that you Stuart, have you seen the news?”

“I'm watching it at the moment Theresa. It looks like it might be safe for you to return now.”

“Do you think so?” she said and sounded quite happy.

“I think that Short's world is collapsing all around him. I shouldn't think that he would have time to bother you.”

“It was some sort of vigilante killing. I did not realise that he was like that. It was lucky that little Davey wasn't there wasn't it.”

“Yes,” I said as the thought had never crossed my mind before, “He was very lucky. So what do you think then, are you ready to come back?”

“I think it should be safe. Mind you it’s too late now it will have to be tomorrow.”

“Alright, I’ve fixed some of the furniture but most of it was too bad so I just put it outside.”

“Thanks, I appreciate it.”

“No bother. I was wondering if I could sleep on your sofa for a few more days. I won’t get in your way.”

“You’ll be more than welcome. It will make me feel quite safe till I get settled back in again.”

“I shouldn’t think that you’ll be hearing from them again but if it makes you feel safer. Besides I could really do with a place as the car is getting really uncomfortable.”

“Well that’s settled then I shall be over around ten. I’ll see you tomorrow,” and put the phone down. I watched the television a while longer but there was nothing of any real interest to me so I switched it off and went to sleep.

I found myself back in the tavern but this time it was filled with smoke. I found it difficult to breathe and was nearly choking.

“Richard of Billesley,” a loud voice bellowed to my left, “Your time with us is nearly done.”

I looked across to where the voice had come from and found Roy standing there in full knight's regalia and brandishing a large sword. I only had a dagger with me and looking at it saw that it was blood stained. I did not seem to have fear as I slowly made my way towards him. I circled to his right as that was his blind side but he swung round and tried to slice me with his sword. I side stepped as quickly as I could but with the chain mail it was hard work. The sword missed me by a fraction and nearly split a table in two. He tried to pull it out again but it was stuck. He threw his shield to the floor and pulled out a dagger. I did not know what was happening only that he meant me harm and that was good enough for me. He cautiously approached me with one of his arms covering the dagger and said, “I don’t need a sword for you. You will never see Mary again.”

With the mention of her name my temper ignited and I plunged wildly at him. He side stepped to try and counter but I had moved back with quite some speed considering my attire. He came towards me this time swinging wildly and I could see the madness in his eyes. It was like a battle frenzy that I had not seen before. He was spitting venom like a snake and came on like a man possessed. If it was a scare tactic it did not work for I slashed wildly and caught his face. Blood spurted out but this seemed to ignite his rage even more. I saw him shake with anger as he came forward again. He raised his dagger in the air and ran forward to try and plunge it into my chest but I grabbed his hand and pushed him forward. He went backwards slightly but the wall blocked his retreat. I heard shouting outside but my mind was firmly on Roy. I would not let myself be distracted by anything else. I knocked his hand against the wall and felt his whole body shake. He did not let go though and so I did it again. His grip loosened a little but he had his other hand on my dagger and tried to wrench it from me. We struggled for what seemed like ages but eventually I could feel him weaken. I saw my chance and breaking the grip he had on my dagger hand plunged it into his stomach. I heard him moan in pain and felt his life force leave him by the pint. I plunged the dagger in again, this time twisting it for maximum effect. He fell to the ground and I left the building with smoke all around me.

I next found myself in the desert with Richard of Billesley. He looked at me and said, “So the pieces are finally coming together.”

“Where does Short fit in with all this,” I said confused.

“You’ll have to kill him to find that out,” he said with a laugh, “And then you’ll be as close as I got.”

“So you were none the wiser either well that’s nice to know.”

“I only came looking for Mary. I didn’t want to make it too complicated. The politics of the situation did not interest me in the least. You ought to bare that in mind it might help.”

“I will but I’ve still got to help my friend.”

“Oh I can accept that but all I’m saying is don’t let it get in the way in your quest for the veils. That

should be paramount to you at this stage. You can find out whatever you want to know afterwards.”
“That's how it's always been. Well not at first maybe but it is now. So what advice have you got for me?”

“Don't turn your back on Nigel of Davenport,” he said with a smile, “But I guess you have already felt that pain.”

“What about Short, anything on him?”

“His brains were always in his sword hand if I remember right. He was barely a squire so he should not give you much trouble. He didn't me anyway,” and this led to an eruption of laughter.

I found myself awake on the settee and I looked at the time. It was 8 o'clock and I had a couple of hours to spare until Theresa came so I just tidied up and generally made myself busy. It was 10.30 by the time she got back and she was quite surprised at the progress I had made. I put the kettle on, made her a cup of tea and asked her how she liked Birmingham.

“It's not a bad place but I'm glad to be home.”

“Yes I bet you must have missed the place. Have you heard anything from Dave?”

“No he must have lost Brian's number. You know what he's like with his memory.”

“He'll probably ring here soon. Just to see if you are back.”

“Yes more than likely.” she drank the tea and said, “So what are your plans? The last time you spoke you were going up north.”

“Oh that it fell through. I might get back to Birmingham soon I'm not really sure what I'm doing though. I'll hang around here if you like, just until it all blows over.”

“If you don't mind, mind you I feel guilty about holding you up.”

“Don't worry about it I never make concrete plans I mean who knows what tomorrow will bring.”

“True, mind you with us it's just bills.”

“It's a cruel world,” I said with a smile thinking that if she was just worrying over bills she must be getting over the shock.” Look I'm going out for a few hours. Is there anything you want?”

“No I'm nipping out myself so I'll get the shopping in. I'll leave the key on the ledge in the out-house if you're back before me.”

“Thanks,” I said getting up, “I should be back before six though.”

I went out and took a drive in the car. I had no place to go really I just wanted to be alone with my thoughts for a while. I felt like I was stagnating. I wanted action but I knew that the time was not right. I just parked up and sat in the car watching the world go by. There was nothing else to be done and I was reluctant to question Theresa anymore because it might arouse her suspicion. She had it in her mind that it was all over and that was alright with me as it covered my tracks well. I suppose you could say that I was getting restless but as I had promised to stay with Theresa for a while I was a bit restricted. I could see the sense in what Richard was saying about carrying passengers as they did tie you down. He spoke a lot of sense when he talked and I could learn a lot from him. I suppose that people would think that I was mad if they knew about our conversations but then again my actions over the last couple of weeks would not be described as rational anyway. My thoughts drifted back to Mary and I looked forward to seeing her uncovered in all her glory. She had not been around recently and this left me with more than just a pang of disappointed. It was no good I reasoned to myself I could not wait until Friday. I would go down on Wednesday and check the place out. I know that it was not the weekend but boredom had took hold of me and the thrill of the chase was all that mattered to me at this stage of the game. As it was Tuesday today I would not have to wait too long and this seemed to cheer me up no end. In fact I was positively buzzing when I drove back to Theresa's. She was out when I got back so I just made myself a cup of tea and waited for her return.

Around 5 o'clock her car pulled into the driveway. She got out and opened the back door for little Dave and Mary. They bounded out and ran towards the house. She looked like she was struggling to try and carry four bags of shopping so I went out and gave her a hand.

“Are you having a party,” I said taking them from her.

“No just feeding the 5,000.” I took the bags into the kitchen and she sorted them out as I made us both a cup of tea. Little Dave and Mary went out to play in the garden and Theresa got their tea ready.

“I don't know where they get the energy,” I said watching their playful antics, “Makes you want to be young again.”

“Yes,” she said sadly, “Life was certainly easier then.”

“Do you want a hand with anything,” I asked although I was hoping that she would say no as I was not much of a cook.

“It's alright,” she said to my relief, “I can manage. You go through and sit down. It won't take too long and then I'll bring in a cup of tea.”

After five minutes she came in and passing me a cup of tea sat down. For some reason our conversation got back to how I first met Dave. “You've known him quite a long time now,” she said and took a drink of tea.

“About 15 years man and boy now,” I said with a smile.

“God it seems like an eternity,” she said but I did not quite know how to take it so I said, “Thanks.”

“Oh no I did not mean it like that time just seems to have flown by that's all.”

“Well I won't argue with that. When did he get involved with the likes of Short?”

“That was only recently but Burton has changed a lot since you were last here. It's surprising what can happen over a few years.”

“I know what you mean I was talking to this fellow only the other day and he was saying the same thing.”

“Dave used to do a bit of handling now and again but not like what he got into.”

“Yes I remember some of his old tricks but it was mainly used cars and cowboy building in those days.”

“He just started dealing with the crack-heads and it all went downhill after that. Those days are over now, I won't put up with it for a start.”

“You do seem a lot stronger. I noticed that recently.”

“I've had to be. I've got to think of the kids now I don't want them mixed up with drugs.”

“I wouldn't blame you. How did he manage to get involved with the likes of Colin Jones? That must have gone a long way to his downfall.”

“He met him at a casino.”

“Dave,” I said in surprise, “He used to go to casinos?”

“Occasionally he went through a gambling stage.”

“I did not know that. I must have lost touch more than I thought. So what else has been happening?”

“That was about it really. Between Jones and that Roy they had him sewn up.”

“Like a kipper. Mind you what goes around comes around, look what's happened to them now. Roy done a runner and Jones kicked to death.”

“Yes this place has certainly changed.”

“It's getting quite a dangerous place now. I hear that you have to lock everything up. If it's not nailed down it will walk.”

“Like them windows,” Theresa said laughing, “Mind you they were only nailed together.”

“I was just supplementing my wages,” I said in mock protest, “You don't know how little they used to pay me.”

“That was how you first met him wasn't it?”

“Yes through a mate of mine. He said that he wanted some windows and I went around to measure up.”

“You saved us a lot of money then,” she said with a sigh.

“Don't worry about it. It didn't cost me anything and it might have gone a long way to bankrupting the company,” I laughed when I said that, “Remember our first business adventure. Bodge it and Scarper had nothing on us.”

"It was good in those days none of this hassle well not much anyway."

"Oh well nostalgia isn't what it used to be. So what are you plans now?"

"I might get a part time job. The kids will both be starting school soon so I'll have a lot of time on my hands."

"That sounds like a good idea at least you are moving forward."

"Well it's about time I had a change it gets too much for you sometimes."

"I'll ask Short if he's got any bar maid jobs if you like," but my humour was lost on her.

"That bastard has a lot to answer for," she said angrily, "After what he did to Dave I would kill him myself if I was a man."

"His time will come. It sounds to me as if his luck will be running out soon. I bet the police will be asking questions about his two dead doormen."

"Do you think so?" she said unsure.

"Bound to, I mean it sounds a little suspicious doesn't it to you?"

"Hopefully he's come across a bigger fish. I'll never know why he wanted to grass Dave up."

"Maybe it was just to get the coppers of his back. You know what people like him are like."

"As long as he doesn't bother me I'm not that concerned what he does. Dave is safe where he is for the time being. In fact it might actually do him good."

"Well I don't think he'll get involved with anything like that again. Not now he knows how treacherous those people are."

"He should never have in the first place but I'll make sure that it doesn't happen again."

"I think he'll learn by his mistakes like we all have to."

"Tea should be ready. Do you want it here or on the table?"

"Oh I didn't realise you were making me some. Thanks. Here will do if it's not too much trouble."

Theresa brought the tea in and I ate heartily. The rest of the evening was uneventful with Dave and Mary going to bed at 9 o'clock and Theresa following not long after. I went to sleep quite quickly but did not see anything of Richard that night. I woke up next morning to the shouts of David and Mary arguing over some toy. I looked at the clock on the mantle-piece and saw that it was eight. I got up and went into the kitchen to put the kettle on. I shouted up to Theresa to see if she wanted a cup and she said that she would be down in a minute. At about nine they left for Theresa's mother and I had the house to myself. Tonight would be the night I would carry on with the game and I looked forward to it immensely. I was not sure if I would be just casing the place as yet because I was going to have to play it by ear. I wanted to see what the other doormen were like for a start. Wilkins had said that they were nothing special but that might have been just to impress me as he thought he would be joining some big gangster firm. I would know for sure when I saw them but that would not be till later in the day. I was debating on whether to take a knife with me just in case but that might give the game away if I was caught so I decided to take a chance and go unarmed. I reasoned that he would not know me anyway but I did not really know who else worked for him. I might bump into an old mate there but I was going to have to take that chance. I could always just say that I was out for a drink and I had gave Dave the message but I had a feeling that he would be a little too preoccupied to bother with me.

The day went quite slowly and as you can gather from my thought patterns I was getting restless again. I was over examining everything but that might have just been down to nerves. The afternoon wore slowly on with nothing of any note happening and Theresa came back at around six. She had good news to tell me. She had heard that there might be a job going at the meat factory and it paid pretty well. I had to disappoint her as I would not even be thinking about getting a job yet although I could not tell her why. I told her that I would be going out that night to see another fellow who might have some work for me so I said I would see him first. At around 8 o'clock I started my drive back to Derby.

Chapter 12

My drive over to Derby was uneventful and I waited around for awhile before going into The Springs nightclub. It was empty when I first got in as it was early but it gave me plenty of time to give the place the once over. A large bulky doorman stood at the door but it looked to me that he relied on his size more than anything else. Inside there was another one of similar stature and I thought that maybe Wilkins was right about them. To my surprise I saw a man that fitted Short's description walking around dressed as a doorman. He must not have been able to fill the vacant positions and was that short staffed he had to do the job himself. That all worked in my favour as he looked like he was desperate. Wednesday night was usually quiet in the night club scene but the weekend would be a different matter. He would need someone urgently and so I decided that it would have to be tonight that I struck up my acquaintance with him. The place itself was much as Dave had described it except even more tattier than I thought it would be.

It was a student night and so they were not expecting too much trouble. The odd drunk maybe but the staff looked more than capable of dealing with anything like that. The place filled up rather quickly at around ten and the loud music almost crucified my ears. I looked around for likely trouble makers and my eyes set upon a group of three lads sitting drunkenly around a table near to the D.J. They looked like they were enjoying themselves and did not care who knew it. A large well built lad with short cropped hair looked like he was the ring leader but the others did not just look like followers. A small scuffle broke out on the dance floor but the doorman who was inside soon got it under control. He ejected a thin spotty faced youth that did not look old enough to drink from the club and came back looking very satisfied with himself.

The three lads carried on drinking not really paying much attention to the incident and it looked like I would have to give them some sort of incentive. I saw a man in his early twenties out of the corner of my eye walking slightly unsteadily to the toilets and reasoned that he would have to come back the same way. I moved closer to the three and waited for his return. He came back after a couple of minutes and as he got near the table I gave him a push on the sly. Crashing into the table he knocked all the drinks over and was that drunk he did not even realise that he had been pushed. "Oi," the biggest of them said, "Watch what you are doing. That's three pints of lager or else." The man was a little dazed and so did not answer him. The ringleader took it as an act of indifference and hit him square on the jaw. The man fell heavily hitting his head on the floor and was out for the count. This must have been unknown by the others because they started kicking him about the head in a frenzied fashion. The doorman who had ejected the last one came running in expecting to do the same but he was to be gravely disappointed. I saw him run in and kicked the back of his foot knocking it onto the other and making him fall over. The three youths left the first victim and went on to the other. He was in a bad way but I left them to it as they were doing such a good job.

Short had seen the brawl from a safe distance and called the other one in. He came running across closely followed by Short but the youths had seen them coming. The large man drew back and caught the doorman square on the chin knocking him backwards onto the floor and leaving Short on his own with the youths coming towards him. I was sorely tempted to leave him to it as I wanted to see how he fought but I stepped in instead.

I hit the biggest of the three with a right hook that knocked him onto the table nearly breaking it in two. He got up again and I thought that he was made of sterner stuff than I had given him credit for. Short was involved with the other two and not looking too healthy. I quickly jabbed the big man twice and followed through with a right hander to the nose. Blood streamed out of him and he fell to his knees. I kicked him in the kidneys and that was him finished for the night. I turned my attention to his friend closest to me and launched him with a right cross that shook him to the very bone. He went down like a sack of potatoes and the other one ran out on seeing this. By this time one of the doormen was up and had started laying into the large man on the floor. I hit him full on and he backed off."You couldn't do it when he was standing," I said in a mocking nature that was

meant to impress Short, "Why should I let you do it when he's down."

Short had regained his composure by then and told the doormen to carry them out. They dutifully obeyed and left us to talk. "I owe you one," he said shaking my hand, "What are you having?"

"I'll have a lager then, thanks."

We went to the bar and Short said, "Where did you learn to handle yourself like that?"

"Here and there," I said vaguely as I was trying to impress him.

"Have you worked the door before," he said pursuing the point.

"Yes I did a couple of clubs over in Brum and one up in the Moss side."

"Are you after work?" he said straight to the point. I had not expected him to be so forthright and it stunned me for a moment.

"What, on the door you mean?"

"Well that's one of the jobs. I've got a lot of other things on the go though."

"Have you," I said pretending to think, "What sort of deal are we talking about?"

"Debt collecting, door-work and a bit of handling," He said with a hint of pride.

"Well," I said putting a dampener on it, "Not being funny but I hope you have a lot better people than the two I saw."

"Them," he said with a sneer, "They're only fist fodder. They have nothing to do with the other side of the operation."

"I'm not sure. I would have to know a little about what I'm getting involved in first."

"Nothing too heavy if that's what you are worrying about."

"Oh," I said with a shrug of my shoulders, "I'm not worried about what I do as long as it doesn't involved women and children but I want to know what sort of back up you have. I only work with the best."

This seemed to impress Short because he said, "I understand that. Tell me something do you use drugs?"

"I been known to have a smoke now and again but I won't use anything heavier."

"Good," he said with a sense of relief, "What about dealing them?"

"What," I said pleading ignorance, "Smoke or smack?"

"Smack, coke all sorts like that. Anything that's usable that is."

"I don't mind dealing it I just don't use it. I reckon if people are stupid enough to use it that's their problem."

This seemed to really impress him so he said, "Have another drink and we'll have a quiet chat in the office."

"Sounds good to me," I said and emptied my glass. The barmaid filled it up and I followed him into the office. It was quite small with only a table and two chairs and looked like it needed a clean.

"So," he said settling down, "I don't like to talk in crowded places, you never know whose listening."

"My thoughts exactly you can never be too cautious can you?"

"You'll go far in this game. There's a lot of money to be made if you're not too fussy about how you earn it."

"That's me all over," I said and I saw that I had him almost eating out of my hands. I knew that he was desperate but to take on a stranger like that was going a bit too far.

"I'll be honest with you," he said coming closer, "You're right about them outside but my main backup has got into difficulty."

"Sorry, how do you mean?"

"The last man that did your job he had a little problem with smack that's why I asked you if you used it."

"No I'm always wary of smack-heads. You can't trust them."

"Well anyway," he carried on, "He O.D'ed and left me in a mess." He never mentioned the other man but I guess that was because I said that I did not want to get involved with anything against

women and children.

“Left you on your own, well it proves my point doesn't it?”

“Yes you're right what you are saying. So now I'm after someone who is reliable. I could start you off on £400 a week and take it from there.”

“What,” I said playing hard to get, “I thought that you were a big outfit. I bet you pay those jokers outside that much.”

“You've been in the business before haven't you.” he said and I could tell by his voice that he was impressed.

“I've done a bit of everything in my time,” I said vaguely.

“Have you ever killed a man?” he said and this put me in a little predicament. I did not really want to tell him anything along those lines so I played it cautiously, “Now that would be a thing I wouldn't tell you if I did wouldn't it.”

This seemed to impress him no end because his voice nearly rose in excitement. “I know what you mean.” he said and winked as if I had let him in on a big secret.

“Good, now we can get onto some real business. I don't want to start as some crummy door man. I've done it all before.”

Short thought for a while before he said, “I need a manager for this place how does that sound?”

“That sounds good. I could live with that.”

“Have you much experience in this field?” he asked after I had said that.

“Of course,” I said as if it did not need saying, “Mind you it was a lot bigger club than this,” I said to rub it in.

“Oh this place it's only a front for our real dealings. I've got a couple of other clubs in London. You could make a lot of money as I said earlier.”

“Well we'll soon find out. So how do you manage with only two door staff?”

“I'm a bit short handed at the moment. That will be your first job, sort out another two.”

“What do you mean divvies like those or are you after someone that actually knows the job?”

“I'll leave that in your capable hands. Have you got anyone in mind?”

“Not yet. I'm new to town so I don't know the set up.”

“Well I'm sorry it's short notice but I need them before the week end rush. That's only two days away so do you think that you can make it?”

“Leave it with me I'll put a couple of monkeys in if you're desperate and replace them when we've got more time.”

“Sounds good to me so tell me about yourself. I don't usually do business like this but you caught me on the hop.”

“Richard Billesley, there's not a lot to tell really. I did a little stint in the army and when I came out went free lancing. Been all over the world in my time, Angola, Croatia anywhere I could get some fun really.”

“And now you've decided to come home. Well fair play to you, you timed your arrival just right.”

“I would like to get rid of those outside if you don't mind. You know what they say about passengers. Excess baggage doesn't make for a tight outfit.”

“The balls in your court it's your show if you want it.”

“I would want to run it my way,” I said getting into the flow, “The club side that is. I want lads I can trust. You know what it's like in this business, dog eat dog and nothing left for the loser.”

“I do indeed,” Short said and I could see the greed developing in his eyes. He had fallen for my ploy hook, line and sinker and I was hoping that this might persuade him to try and take over the other two's set up. “I think that you have a good future in this business. I'm even thinking of expanding into other fields.”

“If there's money to be made I won't be too far behind.”

“A man after my own heart,” he said without realising the irony, “But first things first you'll have to sort out some door staff.”

“Let me see,” I said pretending to think, “I’m not long back in the country and so I might need a little time to find a few of my old colleagues. I only really deal with ex mercenaries as they are proven to me. You need them by Friday which could be a problem.” I was digging myself into a corner as I did not really want to bring in anyone into the operation because it might threaten my identity as Richard Billesley. I thought about Dave but Richard’s warning had really hit home. Short saw me thinking and so said, “Look I’ve an idea. Why don’t I get some down from my other clubs for the time being? When you find your old comrades then they’ll go back.”

“Sounds fair to me, to tell you the truth two days is a bit short notice.”

“Problem solved then,” Short said and relaxed with a smile of self satisfaction, “Take a look around the club and see what you can come up with.”

We both left and Short told me the details about the running and pointed out things like the fire escape and the little room where they took unruly customers. The time flew by and soon the club started to empty. By about 3 o’clock it was completely dead and we were left alone with the door men.

“This is Richard Billesley,” Short said to the two and then turned to me and said, “And this is Tom Finney and Dave Green.”

The two doormen looked at me in a funny manner and their faces dropped when he said, “He’ll be taking over the running of the club. Any problems and you go to him.”

“What,” the larger one who had been introduced as Tom Finney said, “Just like that? You don’t even know the man.”

“He knows the job and that’s one up on you.”

“Things are going to be a lot different now,” I said trying to wind him up, “I’m not going to have any fiascos like earlier.”

“You talk the talk,” Green said, “But do you walk the walk?”

“What,” I said with a sneer, “You’re a walking cliché. I’ve seen you in action and it’s more like a crawl.”

“I must have been tripped. I’m usually a lot more thorough.”

“I don’t want excuses, not in my outfit. If you’re not good enough you won’t be here too long.”

Short seemed impressed with my attitude and I could see his greed mounting up. He was only a small fish when all said and done and the opinion that I had gave him of me had gave him ambitions above his station.

“He’s the boss,” he said, “And he’ll run things his way.”

I could see that Green would try and give me trouble so I made a note to keep an eye on him. I think that around this time I actually started to think that maybe I could make a go at it. It had been easy to get this far and greed had started to cloud my vision somewhat. Short was talking serious money here and all my life had been a procession of low paid jobs. I could have quite easily settled into this environment and ran it with an ease that compared to the hard work of my previous jobs would have been a doddle. Thoughts of Dave languishing in a cold prison cell had disappeared to be replaced by thoughts of more money than I had ever seen in my life. The anticipated earnings for even half of Short’s deals would leave me comfortably off indeed. I did not even mind Short. He did not seem a bad bloke in the personable sense and he would have let me run it how I wished.

“So,” Short said bringing me out of my thought chain, “How do I get in touch with you?”

“That’s a good question as I’m sleeping in my car at the moment. I’ve only just moved into the area.”

“Honest,” he said in surprise. I guess he had never met anyone that I had portrayed myself to be before, “Look I’ll tell you what I’ve got a place the other side of Burton.” He wrote the address out on a piece of paper and gave it to me. “Turn up tomorrow at around ten and they’ll be expecting you.”

“Thanks. Will I see you tomorrow?”

“Yes I should be up and about by then.” he said goodbye and I left him and the other two to have an

argument over the idea of taking a stranger into the fold.

I drove back and quietly parked about two streets from Theresa's and walked the rest of the way home. As I got in I noticed that she had gone to bed but it was four in the morning so that wasn't unusual. I quietly opened the door and made my way into the living room and fell quickly to sleep. I woke up in the tent to be faced by an angry looking Richard, "You treacherous dog," he said almost spitting at me, "How could you do this to Mary?"

"What," I said pleading ignorance, "I'm not doing anything only trying to infiltrate them. Surely it's better to work from within?"

"Don't give me that. Don't forget that I know you better than you know yourself. You're planning on working with them aren't you?"

"Only for a short while to find out what's going on."

"I told you before," he said angrily, "The lifting of the veils comes before any of your shallow pretensions of greed."

"No," I protested, "Look at it from my point of view."

"I could but the gold is blocking your vision."

"Funny," I said going on the attack, "But that's all you're worth isn't it, cheap plays on words. Where were you when I needed you?"

"The path of veils is a....."

"Don't give me that crap, not when I can see a future for myself. The path of veils, it's just a joke to me. I could make at least a grand a week no problem. And you know what the beauty of it is, it all runs itself. It ticks over nicely and I just cream it off."

"First sniff of gold and you go to pieces. What sort of man are you?"

"I'm soon to be a rich man," I said my anger still raised, "More money than I had ever seen in my life. I could actually settle down to a good life. Short is putty in my hands."

"Well he's blinded by greed too no wonder you get along so well. What about your friend, are you going to desert him?"

"What do you care he means nothing to you. All you want is for me to finish off what you couldn't. What does that say about you?"

"When you find out the full story you will regret it," he snapped.

"The full story," I said with a sneer, "The one you can't tell me. Yeah right. I'll tell you what you keep your story and I'll keep the money. How does that sound as a deal?"

"Sounds like you have already made you mind up. What a waste of time you've been."

"Look," I said calming down, "Maybe I could still lift the veils but why not let me enjoy myself? I haven't seen this kind of money before. I reckon that I could easily get rid of Short and work my way up. You'll still get the veils lifted and I'll get a lot of money."

"What about if he still wants Theresa what are you going to do then?"

"That will never happen. I told him I don't hurt women and children."

"Maybe not you but can you say the same about the other two? They look like they would really enjoy themselves."

"Short won't want her no more," I said not really sure of myself.

"You don't know that. Besides didn't Wilkins say that the order came from higher up?"

"Nothing will happen to her," I repeated myself though I was even less sure this time.

"That's not what your voice said," Richard said picking up on my fears.

"I'll deal with it when the time comes. Anyway I'm still only thinking about taking on the job properly."

"That does not sound right to me it sounds like you've already made up your mind."

"If you think that then obviously you don't know me as well as you think you do."

"Tell me something do you think that I was not put in the same position as you? I could have easily have worked for them myself."

"Yes but I'm willing to bet that you came from a lot less humble background than me."

“So,” he answered with a laugh, “You would have lost a lot of money if you had bet. I was a second son so what I ended up with was a grudge and nothing less.”

“Well you did get left with morals and a pain in the back.”

He went quiet when I said that. In a funny way I felt sorry for him but I wouldn't tell him that. Instead I said calmly, “I just want to feel having money around me for a change. Surely I can do that?”

“It's your path. Just watch out for Short, he's not as stupid as he looks.”

“He can't be I mean nobody could look like that.”

The wind picked up slightly and I could feel a draught on my neck.

“Wake up uncle Stu,” a voice said and it brought me back to reality.

“What's up,” I said still half asleep.

“Its mummy,” Mary said, “She's crying in the hall.

I went into the hall and it was true. Theresa was sitting on the stairs crying.

“What's the matter?” I said with a look of concern.

“I've had another phone call telling me that they're coming around to see me.”

“What,” I said in surprise, “Another phone call?”

“Yes, first when you were out yesterday at about ten. I picked up the phone and a man's voice said 'Theresa Timms I want to see you. Dave's been talking too much.' He hung up and I was stunned for a while. I thought that you said it was all over. What do they want from him?”

“I don't know.” I said. Thoughts of money had fast disappeared. It looked like my rainbow had run out of paint. My confusion just seemed to take over. I was back on the path.

Chapter 13

I tried to gather my thoughts together and put them into some sort of perspective, “You said another phone call?” I said eventually.

“Yes I had one just. It was the same man and he said virtually the same thing.”

“I thought that it was all done. Short is about finished, I don't understand.”

“I can't stay here,” she said as fear had completely taken over, “But I've nowhere else to go.”

I had not looked around for an alternative address for her as I had thought it all sorted.

“I'm going to see Short,” I said, “I don't know what he's playing at.”

“It's too dangerous,” she said still in panic, “What am I involved in?”

“I went to see him last night,” I said and she stopped shaking and said, “What?”

“Last night. I was in his club last night. I was actually with him when you had that phone call.”

“So it can't be him then but what about his staff?”

“No the call did not come from the club. He only had two staff and they were very busy last night.”

“I'm confused and scared, what's happening?”

“I've got to see him today,” I said as if I was talking to myself, “I'll sort it out.”

“You've met him,” She said still confused, “What for?”

“To try and sort this mess out.”

“I thought that you said it was,” she said getting suspicious.

“I had to make sure. You want to know one way or the other otherwise it will be at the back of your mind.”

She did not really believe me and I could see it in her eyes.”Is this the job that you had to see someone about?” she said looking at me in a funny manner, “Are you planning on working for Short?”

I had not expected her to come straight out with it and it threw me for a moment. Long enough for her to pick it up and so she said, “How could you after what he has done to Dave and me?”

“I'm just trying to sort this mess out,” I said because I could not think of anything else to say.

“Well how do you propose to do that? I mean am I going to see you come round and smash this place up?”

"I don't think that it is anything to do with Short. I was there with him all night. He has not got the man power for a start. He's up to his eyes in confusion at the moment. It can't be from him."

"So who was it?" she said unsure of my motives.

"I don't know. Maybe it was just a crank call."

"No he knew Dave and it was the same thing that the other two had said."

"I don't know yet. I'll find out though. I've got to go and see him today at this address." I took out a piece of paper that was in my pocket and passed it to her. She looked at it and said, "Is this some sort of joke?"

"What? No."

"This is the place that the jewelry came from," she said and passed it back to me.

"Things are starting to come together. Don't worry I'll soon have this mess cleared."

I could see that she did not believe me but that could not be helped. I could not tell her too much as what I had done up till now was not a thing to tell anybody. I just looked at her and said, "Trust me."

I left her where she was and drove to the address on the piece of paper. It was a large house with rambling ivy all around it. Its white Georgian windows seemed to gleam like they only had been painted the day before. Its majestic form just seemed to blend into its mature landscape like a picture straight out of time. I stood awhile just to take in its splendour before knocking on the door. After what seemed like about five minutes it was opened by a woman in her early twenties dressed all in black. She looked at me in a strange manner as if looking at a tramp so I said, "Richard Billesley"

With that her face changed to a smile and she said, "Come in, you've been expected."

I followed her into a large hallway with ornate landscaped pictures on the wall. Its polished stone floor shone with depth like it had never seen dirt in its life. A large marble stair case stood to the left and led to the first floor like a scene from any good movie. To the right was a row of doors and she took me into the first one. She left me there for a moment saying, "Wait here please they should not be too long."

She shut the door behind me and left me alone with my curiosity. I looked around the large square room and was in awe of its elegance. A large marble fireplace stood to my left adorned with porcelain ornaments. Statues graced everywhere I looked and paintings littered the walls. It looked like a palace and it had captured my imagination. I did not even hear the door open.

"So what do you think of the place," a voice said from behind me. I turned around to see a large man standing there with a smile on his face, "Beats living in a card board box doesn't it?"

"It does that, it does that," I took a little time to study the man as his face seemed familiar. He was large, heavily built and had a cropped beard. He looked like the man I had seen in my dreams. He looked like Joseph of Bardon. He must not have noticed me looking as he said, "Richard Billesley, pleased to meet you. I have heard a lot about you." He warmly shook my hand and said, "Can I get you anything, a drink, a cup of tea even."

"No thanks," I said in a friendly manner.

"Oh," he said politely, "Sorry where's my manners. My name is Simon, Steve Simon. I'm in business with Paul."

"Oh yes, Martin mentioned you yesterday."

"So you are stopping here awhile then. Martin said that you needed a place to hi...Er stay."

I did not quite know what Short had actually told him because he seemed to think that I was on the run."Yes," I said with a smile, "That's right."

I was getting to be quite an actor by now so he smiled and said, "Don't worry you'll be safe here. You've come to a good firm now."

"That's what Martin said. I'm looking forward to working with you."

I could see that he was thinking of correcting me and saying for instead of with but he said nothing. Maybe he would start to flex his muscles a bit more when he had found my measure but I did not

really intend to show it him."Good," he said eventually, "You'll soon settle in here. Martin said that you were in the army."

"Yes that's right." I left it at that because he might think that I was in the Special Forces. I was not sure exactly what Martin had told him but he seemed to look at me in awe.

"I was in the engineers, well a long time ago."

"Were you," I said with an air of indifference that was well noted by him.

"Yes, well anyway so now you're working with Martin. Has he given you the run down?"

"Vaguely it was all short notice so it was decided that I would pick it up as I go along."

"Good, very good. I'll get Mandy to show you around and settle you in. Paul should be in later this afternoon and I'll probably see you then."

I thanked him and he left the room. Mandy came in after a moment and said, "Would you like to follow me?"

I obediently complied and followed her up into a bedroom.

"This is yours," she said and fluffed up the pillows. It was a large room and such luxury had never been seen by me before. It had a large four poster bed that was draped in red velvet and looked straight out of the realms of history. To the left of it was a large oak chest of drawers and to its right a wardrobe. I stood there a while before I said, "Very nice, very nice indeed."

Mandy smiled and said, "Follow me, I'll show you around."

As she showed me around I said, "So Paul owns all this. He must be doing very well."

"Paul, well he owns half of it with Steve."

"It's a big place. It must take some running."

"Nobody really uses it so it's just a skeleton staff. Me and old Tom keep it going."

"Tom. I don't think that I've met him."

"No I think he'll be in the garden now. He spends a lot of time there."

"So," I said in a friendly manner, "Have you worked here long?"

"Just over a year it's not a bad job. You don't have to do too much really."

"What exactly is it going to be? Some sort of hotel."

"I'm not sure. It's such a nice place that it seems to be a bit of a waste leaving it like this."

"Some people have more money than sense," I said and she went quiet and looked at me in a funny manner. It was like she was analysing me. She smiled and said, "You're definitely right there," and led me down a long corridor dotted all along the walls with pictures and they did not look inexpensive.

"It's worth millions," she said with a sigh, "All this just doing nothing. Some people do indeed have more money than sense." I detected from her voice that she did not like the set up and so she might come in handy if I was in need of information.

"So," I said, "What are they like to work for?"

"Not too bad I suppose," she said. I decided that I would have to try and win her trust which was going to be hard as I was a stranger to her.

"What has Short got to do with all this?" I said trying to pin her down.

"He just works for them. He's their right hand man I suppose you could say."

"It sounds like he had some weird people working for him," I said making my play.

"In what way?" she said putting up her guard.

"Well a smack-head and a pervert. I mean it's hardly something that you would put on your C.V. Is it?"

She laughed at that and looking at me said, "You're alright you are. However did you manage to get involved in all this?"

"I don't really know what I've actually got myself involved in. I only met Short last night."

"Last night," she said in surprise, "And yet you're sleeping here tonight."

"I think he was left a bit short staffed," I said with a smile, "I stopped him being beaten up and he offered me a job."

“So you mustn't know too much about this set up at all.”

“That's about the size of it. I was looking for a job and this came up and as I was sleeping in my car at the time it seemed like a good idea.”

“Maybe it's a case of out of the frying pan and into the fire they're not just nightclub owners.”

“Short said that he had other things on the go but he did not elaborate too much on it.”

We stopped by a large window that looked out over the back of the house. The greenery seemed to stretch for miles. The rolling lawns lay down like a carpet that seemed to finish at the foot of a small woodland.”What a view,” I said and this seemed to impress her.

“I always come here. It's very peaceful for the mind.”

“Is it I would not have thought this a stressful job.”

“You have a lot to learn,” she said mysteriously and walked me on. We had a good look around the house and gardens and when we had finished she said, “Make yourself at home now that you know where everything is. If you need anything just give me a call.”

“Thanks,” I said and smiled at her. She left me to my own devices and I debated on how I was going to win her over. I looked around the place again and it was unusually empty. I decided to see if there was a library around as I did like to read occasionally and I had a little time to spare as I would not be meeting anyone until the afternoon. As I walked past an oak door on my left I heard voices coming from behind it. Curiosity got the better of me and I went closer to see if I could hear anything.

“What did you bring him here for?” a voice said angrily. It was Steve Simon's.

“He had nowhere else to go,” a voice answered. I recognised it as Short's.

“You don't know anything about him. He could be anyone.”

“We need someone like him. After all look at the last lot.”

“But he's untried he could be anyone.”

“I've seen him in action he knows his stuff. He's an ex mercenary they don't mess about.”

“How do you know that? You are only going on what he told you. I mean I could say I was.”

“You didn't see the way he handled them men. He knows what he's doing he could help us with our plan.”

“I don't trust him. There is something about him but I can't put my finger on it.”

“Trust me I think he'll do the job nicely. We could always get rid of him after the job is done. He's killed before why not again?”

“You don't know that, he could be lying.”

“He didn't tell me that he did but I could tell by his answer that he had.”

“I don't trust him but he's your man so if he falls down you'll get the blame.”

“Alright,” Short said and I was touched by his faith in me, “I'll settle for that. When do you want me to approach him?”

“As soon as you think he's ready, the balls in your court.”

“That's fine by me,” and it went quiet. I thought it a good idea to make myself scarce so I went on to the library and had a look around the shelves. There were masses of books and I would have been quite at home there. I picked up a book and read the title '**The Path of Shadows**'. I did not get time to start it before the door opened.

“Oh you're there,” a voice said and I turned around to see Short standing there with a broad smile,

“How are you settling in?”

“Not too bad. Big place though.”

“Yes it serves its purpose.”

“Expensive way to run a hotel though, from what I see I'm the only guest.”

“Hotel,” he said and laughed, “Well yes I suppose you could call it that. Let's just say that it's off season then,” and laughed again.

“So,” I said trying to pin him down, “I'm not in this scam.”

“Sorry,” he said and thought awhile, “Oh this. It's not really a scam. We have to put people up

occasionally for business purposes. It really impresses them I can tell you.”

“I bet it does, you have some good stuff here.”

“All the real McCoy as well, a good investment and nice to look at.”

I thought that they must be making a lot more money than I had given them credit for. There must have been millions worth of antiques, pictures and statues. It was a Mecca for culture. I was not a culture vulture but even this splendour did not go unnoticed. It must be a legitimate place as who in their right mind would have such expensive paintings hanging around if they were stolen.

“You must make a lot more than I thought,” I said trying to sound not that impressed. This seemed to urge Short on because he went into all his business deals.

“We make more money in a day than you have probably seen in your life. We virtually control all the major fencing outlets in the country. We just swap their gear for our gear and everyone is happy. No middle men see and that makes for a lot more profit. Nightclubs springing all around and we sell a lot of stuff in them. Kids get hooked and start to steal for us. What could be easier?”

“It virtually runs itself,” I said pretending to be impressed.

“And that's only half of it,” he said almost alive with joy, “We get the stuff for next to nothing. They even bring it to us.”

“Imagine the expansion,” I said pretending to be in his vision, “You could take over the country.”

“Well,” he said not knowing if I was trying to wind him up, “I don't know about that but it shows that you are ambitious. So maybe you are up to climbing the first step on the ladder?”

“The first step?”

“An initiation if you like,” he said and I was getting quite impressed with his acting but it was a waste as I knew what it was about, “To prove yourself.”

“Yes,” I said pretending to be surprised.

“Don't you have something like that in the mercenaries, to prove your loyalty and all that?”

“Yes I was just wondering who it was. You want me to kill someone don't you?”

Short was surprised at my ease in manner when answering the question.

“Got it in one what do you say?”

“Why not,” I said as cool as I could, “What stakes are we playing for?”

“Sorry?” he said confused.

“Well,” I said pretending to suddenly know what it was all about, “If you want me to kill Paul I want to be more than just a manager of some poxy club. Not much of a stake for a lifetime in prison is it.”

“I think that you are not letting on as much as you know,” he said getting a little scared. He must have thought that I was working for Simon's partner Paul and that I had found out about his little scam.

“Paul asked me to keep an eye on you,” I said thinking that if he had not then he had now, “He's not too pleased with your publicity stunts. But from what I'm hearing you are going for the big one.”

He went quite white at that and sat down on the chair that was near the door. I had some real Machiavellian thoughts lining up but he beat me to it.

“It was Simon's fault,” he said passing the buck, “It was his idea.”

“Nice to know who your friends are,” I said but it was lost on him as he sat there fretting, “Simon and his big ideas.”

I smiled to myself at that and said, “So he's the fall guy?”

“What. Look er. what exactly are you?”

“I'm a free agent at the moment looking for a bigger slice of the cake. Maybe you're hitting the wrong fellow?”

“What makes you say that?”

“Well,” I said with a knowing kind of look, “If I worked for someone who bumped his partner off would I really want to be his partner?”

Short thought awhile and could see the sense in what I was saying. He looked at me and said,

“What do you suggest?”

“Correct me if I am wrong but you are a kind of middle man who takes orders from them both so they look at you as staff.”

“Well if you want to be blunt about it yes,” Short said and then I knew that I had him, “But what's the point?”

“I bet Paul would be very pleased that you are looking after his own interests.” I said and left the point open.

Short thought awhile and said, “What are you saying grass him up?”

“Not a bad idea or you could just waste him.”

“Bit over the top though. How would I explain that to Paul?”

“You wasted him because he was trying to stop you from grassing him up. You get rid of Simon once and for all and that leaves a clean run at Paul whenever you want it. Work for yourself for a change.”

“You make it sound so easy,” he said going deep into thought, “I can accept the first part as I don't think they trust each other but I'm not sure about the second.”

“Well you're in control so it's your choice.”

“What about you,” he said looking at me strangely, “Where do you stand? You said that you were a free agent so what's stopping you?”

“I need you as much as you need me. Besides from what I see of the set up there's more than enough to go around.” I think that he must have been thinking about taking over the whole set up completely himself so I was only adding ammunition to his avarice.

“I need something a little concrete so that Paul would believe me. I just can't walk up and tell him.”

“That's easy. Why don't you tape a conversation with Simon's and take it to Paul. It's foolproof.”

“It might just work. I'll get on with it. Well Rich it looks like things are looking up.”

“It does indeed,” I said smiling to myself. I had started the ball rolling with Short and now it might be advisable to have a word with Simon and see what I could do there. That would have to be later though as I was still intrigued about the house. Dave must have been blamed for actually breaking into the place so they must have thought that he had seen something in the house. I had already reasoned that the tape transcripts were that vague that they did not tell anything. He could have not seen anything in their meetings either as they always met in public houses and so it must be the house. I thought it might be worth my while to have a look around and see if I could unearth anything. I thought that Short might even be able to help me as now he seemed to have complete trust in me.”So what actually happens here?”

“It's just a safe house really. We put up the dealers when they bring the gear over. It was an idea of Paul's really.”

“It's a bit over the top though isn't it? I mean it could draw a lot of attention a house like this.”

“It's very well protected. Paul's got a copper in his pocket.”

“Sounds like a cautious man.”

“Oh he is that. Almost to a paranoid degree but you haven't met him yet have you? You'll know what I mean when you see him.”

“Simon's says that he's coming over this afternoon I'll see him then.”

“Yes at the annual general meeting,” and laughed loudly.

“Oh, then they won't want me about. Never mind I've got to try and round up a few of my old associates anyway.”

“Meet them first and then make your excuses. I've got to see Steve now so I'll catch up with you later.”

He left me alone in the library and I picked up the book again.

Chapter 14

Short left me alone with my thoughts and the book and I started to have doubts about whether I could really trust him. Maybe I had overplayed the role too quickly but he seemed keen at the time. I was not really sure of what sort of man he was. I could see that he was greedy and I could also see that he was treacherous. He could go one way or the other. I had hoped that I had impressed him enough to stick with me and my false promise of bringing in more muscle would add to my appeal. He might think me a dangerous foe at a later date but I was hoping that by the time he realised that it would be far too late. His greed was taking him along at the moment and he was happy to let it. I started to read the book. It was a strange fictional piece that seemed pretty interesting. I was interrupted in my pursuit of its plot by the door opening and a voice saying, "Oh sorry am I disturbing you?"

I looked around and saw Mandy."No," I said smiling in a friendly manner, "Come in I was getting a little bored actually."

"Well you don't look like a reader of books, no offence."

"Well spotted," I said lying as I did not want to spoil the stereotype that she had of me, "But there's not a lot to do around here. How do the other guests cope?"

"The other guests I don't really see them."

"What about this Paul fellow. I'm supposed to be meeting him this afternoon. Does he like to read?"

"All the time he's a big knowledge freak. They say that he used to read four books a week at one time. He's a very clever man."

"He must be," I said looking around, "To build all this up."

"He likes the good things in life; it puts him at his ease."

"So what sort of man is he?"

"Sorry," she said and seemed reluctant to speak.

"Has he always been rich or is he a self made man?"

"I don't really know much about where he comes from. They don't give much away but he looks well educated and his accent smacks of a public school but he manages to hide the fact quite well. He just slips back into it occasionally when he gets excited."

"Sorry I'm not being nosy I just want to know what sort of outfit I'm getting involved in."

"I just do the odd jobs," she said getting defensive; "I don't really know what's going on around here. I thought that Martin would have put you wise."

"Oh he has about a lot of things but I don't want to ask him too much as he would think I am thick."

Mandy smiled at that. I think I must have won her over with my false display of honesty. It must be true when people say that if you can fake sincerity you can get away with anything. I was still no further in finding out what they thought that Dave had seen or their interest in Theresa. I reasoned that it either came from Paul or Steve as Short took their orders. I was anxious to know if they had any plans concerning her or was it just a phone call to keep her on her toes.

"Well," Mandy said putting a dampener on things, "I don't really know much about the place. I know they have a few guests now and again but that's all."

"Thanks anyway," I said just about giving up on her. She knew more than she was letting on but she did not trust me as much as I thought she did. I thought that I had won her over but I was wrong. This sent a series of doubts about Short in my mind. I had been wrong about Mandy so why not Short. Mandy was about to walk off when she said, "I don't really know much about you but you seem a genuine sort of bloke. Don't get involved with this shower." She was anxious just to leave it at that but I pursued her.

"Tell me what I'm getting involved in you can't just leave it at that."

"I've said too much already. I don't want to get into trouble."

"I'm not going to say anything you can trust me. I know that you don't really know me but then again I don't know you so we are in much the same boat."

She thought awhile before she said, "I guess you're right. It was all got with drugs money, the

house, the paintings everything in fact. I don't know what sort of business you are in so I'm going out on a limb telling you this."

"Drugs I didn't know that. I don't have anything to do with that sort of thing. I was just offered a job managing a club. They never mentioned drugs. I need this job though as I've been sleeping in a car up till now."

This seemed to have aroused a sense of pity in her as she said, "Times must have been bad. Maybe they just want a night club manager. I thought that you might have been a dealer at first. That's why I gave you the cold shoulder for a while."

"No I was just drinking in the club when a fight broke out. Short offered me a job and as I was sleeping in the car said that I could stop here until I found a place to stay."

"Well you're an unusual case I noticed that. You're not like the others who stay here, especially that Chris."

"Chris," I said thinking that name sounded familiar, "I don't think that Short has mentioned him."

"No probably not he's in the C.I.D. He supplies a lot of the stuff to Paul and Steve for a handsome price. He looks after their other interests as well."

"Other interests," I said acting confused.

"You know," she said as if I was stupid, "Most of their enemies end up behind bars and not propping up columns. It's a different sort of gang warfare that's all."

"Oh makes them a well protected outfit then."

"Most of the time well up until the burglary that is."

"The burglary?" I said thinking that I might be getting somewhere, "He never mentioned that."

"There was panic stations all around I did not get the full story but I was kept very busy cataloging everything after."

"Panic stations," I said trying to sound confused, "Why weren't they insured or something?"

"They were insured. They even found out who did it."

"And the police did the rest. They must have had good contacts."

"I don't know about that but the man got six years and they got the stuff back so insurance wasn't necessary."

"So what was the panic about?"

"They never told me but they had some very important people there when it happened. They were out celebrating at one of Paul's clubs at the time that's all I really know about it. Anyway I'd better get back as I've work to do. Be careful," she said as she went out the door.

I could feel that I was getting closer but it still did not make true sense. I reasoned that they thought Dave had seen something in the house but I had already reached that conclusion. It must have been something to do with one of the guests. Dave was none the wiser as he had not but they did not know that. My thoughts had been led astray somewhat as I could not put Dave into the back ground and get on with the game. I sat there awhile but the door opened again and Steve walked in. it was getting pretty busy now almost like the M.1. and I knew I would never get to read the book.

"Sorry," he said, "I'm not disturbing you?"

"No," I said wondering why he was so polite, "Come in. What's on your mind?"

"Nothing," he said quickly so I knew that there was, "I just popped in to see if you were alright."

"You don't like me much," I said putting him on the spot.

"What makes you say that?" he said getting defensive. I did not want to tell him that I had overheard the conversation so I just said, "I can tell."

This left him slightly confused. I had put him on the spot and his body language gave him away."Well," he said, "Now you've brought it up I don't trust you."

"And yet you would trust someone like Short," I said and this really confused him as he had not expected anything so direct.

"I've known him for years. I don't know you from Adam."

"That will make it easier to get rid of me when I've sorted out your little problem won't it," I said

and watched him get uneasy.

He composed himself and said, "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Now that's a shame as I can be a great help to you."

"I still don't know what you are talking about," he said and I was having second thoughts about my approach. I thought that I would have to be even more direct."Look I'm not stupid and I don't take too kindly to people who think that I am. So let's start again then. Short is planning to grass you up to Paul about your plan to get rid of him. He's even going to tape a conversation as proof. Do you really want to work with someone like that?"

Simon went quiet for a while before saying, "Who are you?"

"Me, I'm just a free agent at the moment. I'm looking for a slice of the action and I'm not too bothered how I get it."

"You sound very trustworthy," he said with an air of contempt.

"I'm more trustworthy than Short. Why would I be here talking to you about it if I wasn't."

"Now that would be worth finding out," he said going deep into thought.

I would have to play him slightly differently to the way I played Short as he was a lot more cautious.

"So you want to cut yourself a slice of the action. You think that you can just come of the street and take it. That makes you a dangerous man to know."

"That makes me a good friend or a bad enemy but that's your choice."

"You seem to have a high opinion of yourself," he said trying another tact, "But maybe you are just another ten a penny hood that needs to be taught a lesson."

"Maybe but not by you, oh you're big I'll give you that but I don't think that it's in you to do anything. You look more the brains of the outfit. I think you need me and I think that you know it. I mean look what Short comes up with, a smack-head and a pervert. Not much brawn really was there?"

He looked at me as if I might know a little bit more about them than I was letting on and said,

"Maybe I've been wrong about you. Maybe you could be a good friend. What sort of deal are we talking?"

"I want Short's job. It looks like quite a well paid living to me. The difference between me and him would be that I would be more grateful and I can get rid of your little problem myself. I don't think that Short could, do you?"

"So you just want his job. How do I know that you don't see it as a stepping stone and you've got my job in mind next?"

"Short's job will pay more than enough for me but if you want me to take over Paul's job I won't argue."

"Oh so that's it you're after a partnership. What's to stop you knocking me off or trying to anyway?"

"Well as I said earlier you seem to be the brains behind the outfit so that means I would need you doesn't it? I'm not going to cut off the hand that feeds me am I? That would be stupid wouldn't it?"

"That sounds logical maybe you might be right so what about Short then?"

"He wants to stitch you up so why not return the favour. He needs to catch you on tape as from what I've heard Paul won't believe him. So why don't you do the same?"

Mandy knocked and opened the door at that and said, "Sorry to disturb you Mr. Simon but Mr. Atkins has arrived."

"Thank you Mandy, tell him I'll be along shortly." She left us alone and he said, "I'll bear that in mind but first things first you'll have to meet Paul. I don't expect you to be around this afternoon."

"Oh don't worry about me I've got things to do, people to see and all that."

"Good," he said not really taking much notice. It was like the thought of Paul had diverted all his plans. I thought that he must hold him in high esteem and this confused me as to the motive for him wanting to get rid of him. He told me to follow him and we met Paul in the drawing room.

I recognised him from the dream almost straight away. He was smaller than Simon but he seemed

to hold himself with a lot more assertion. He looked like he would be quite a tough nut to crack but Richard had said that it would get a lot more difficult so it did not come as too much of a shock. Paul looked at me strangely and said, "So you are Billesley. Martin has told me a lot about you." he said it with an air of indifference that made me want to grab him but I kept my cool as I was in the lion's den.

"Has he," I said trying to match his indifference. My coolness didn't go unnoticed as Paul said, "Well anyway I'm sure that you have other things to do," and with that I was left to my own devices. I thought that he was a strange man. He was not like the others as most of what they said was just front. He was arrogant I could tell but it looked like he had something to be arrogant about. My thoughts were with him when I made my way to the car. He certainly was an intriguing man. His air of contempt came straight from a public school and I was not used to his kind. In all my travels I stuck around with people that came from a similar background to myself as my financial circumstances dictated this. I had never met an ex public schoolboy before as they were very thin on the ground in the streets that I used to live. He had an air of confidence that seemed more than just front though so I thought it wise to be careful how I handled him. Maybe Richard was right and I should just lift the veils instead of just trying to play mind games with them as it was getting a little too hot at the moment. I was not sure if I had been foolish in being so forth coming and should have held back but it was too late now.

I drove back to Theresa's and parked a couple of streets away. I knocked on the door and it was quickly answered.

"Come in," she said and quickly hurried me inside. She looked a little scared and so I said, "Have they rung again?"

"No but I guess I'm still a little edgy."

"You sound like you could do with a cup of tea," I said trying to lighten the situation, "And I could do with one whilst you're there."

"I could do with an airline ticket to America," she said, "But a cup of tea is all that's on offer."

"So where's the kids?"

"They're stopping at their grandmother's a while. I thought it would be safer," she said and I could see that she was scared, "It just seems to be a game to you."

"No it's more than a game. I don't know if I will be able to help Dave but I reckon I could get them off your back."

"I don't know but I know I'm scared."

"It will soon be over," I said by way of comfort but she did not believe me, "Just trust me and be patient."

"But what about in the mean time, what am I suppose to do with this mess?"

"Just keep your head down. I'm sorry that I have nothing better to advise you with at the moment."

"Thanks," she said with a sneer. I kept my temper because I was going to say that it was Dave that she should be having a go at because it was him that actually caused it. I was only trying to sort it out for her. I could see that she was in a state though and her thoughts would hardly be rational so I said nothing. I made some excuse and left and went for a walk around the village to clear my head. I had taken on a little too much and it was starting to sink in. I had been telling people all sorts of things without remembering them properly. I would have to move a little more quickly as I was getting bogged down by Theresa's predicament and trying to find out what was actually going on. My intention to play Short of against Simon could very easily backfire as it would only take them a little time to confront each other on it. I would have to move quickly and force their hand a bit. I reasoned that at the moment there would be more than just a little distrust between them and they would both be getting hold of some sort of recording device. They would both be reluctant to confront Paul without that sort of proof and so this afternoon would be safe. In time they would give their game away to the other party and then I would be found out.

Paul Atkins was a different story though. He did not look like he would be fooled so easily. He

seemed quite a cool character and not easily excited like Short had been. I would have to play him very carefully. I also needed to find out who this Chris was though as he sounded like an important player. I did not even know where to begin looking as Mandy had only told me that he was C.I.D... He could be from any branch as Atkins and Simon's network stretched all over the country. Something told me that he was Nigel of Davenport and that he would be my last veil to lift. I think he was more to do with Paul than anyone else and Paul did not look like a man that gave much away. It was with a confused mind that I drove back to the mansion. I saw another car outside when I pulled in but thought nothing about it. I knew they had some meeting planned so it must be another share holder. I knocked on the door and Mandy opened it, "You timed that right," she said, "They've only just finished."

"Good," I said with a smile, "I was getting bored."

As I entered in Short saw me and beckoned me into the room where they had been talking.

"Take a seat," Paul said and pointed to the one nearest the desk. I sat down and Short sat next to me. Simon was already sitting down and looked a little nervous.

"Martin's been telling me all about you," Paul said and I could not detect anything in his manner, "He says that you've seen action before."

"I've been around, "I said trying to sound cool but I had a lot of paranoid thoughts flying around my head. I was trying to stall him for time so I could find out what the state of play was.

"So you were in Angola."

"Yes," I said and thought carefully before my next sentence. I had heard that Angola had been a fiasco from a mercenary point of view so I said, "Well just long enough to check the situation out and get the next plane back."

"Sound like you know the crack," he said still suspicious, "We might have a place for you here."

"Yes, doing what?"

"Doing what you are told," he snapped trying to impress me. I was still not sure on how to take him so I said, "I'm working for Martin."

"And he's working for me," he said with a triumphant sneer, "So that means that you are."

"Well," I said with an air of indifference that was meant to put him in his place, "I don't know about that. Just as you're fussy about who you employ I'm fussy about who I work with."

"What," he snapped as he had never expected an answer like that, "Just who do you think you are?"

"I'm a night club manager when I start. From what I see Martin needs me to set things up and I need a job. I'll tell you what I don't need though and that's all the crap you are trying to give me. So cut to the chase and tell me what's on your mind."

I do not think that he was used to being talked to like that as he went quiet for a while before he said, "If you want to work for Short let's get one thing straight and that is that you work for me, indirectly maybe but nevertheless just the same. I want to know what sort of people I'm employing as any good boss would. I don't take insubordination in the ranks." He was trying to appeal to my soldering instinct but as I did not have one he was wasting his time.

"So," I said with a mocking air of indifference, "What do you want to know about me?"

"Everything I want to know what experience you have at running a night club. I want to know what makes you think you are so special to talk to me like that. I want to know what sort of work you have done besides night club management. That will do for a start."

"I had a little venture in Mexico, ran it for three years with a mate. I've worked in various capacities at different ones across the world and a couple over here. And what makes me so special as to talk to you in that way. Well let's put it like this I will not be talked down to in the way that you are trying to by anyone. I don't know who you think you are so maybe you should be answering the question instead of asking it."

I was winding him up a treat but I did not really want to overstep the mark. He went quiet again as if to gather his thoughts. He was trying to beat me with his mind but I was half expecting this as I had heard stories about people like him."You still haven't answered my question so I'll answer

yours. What makes me so special? Just look around and see. It's all tangible. Now can you say the same? I don't even know if you can handle yourself."

He was stopped in mid sentence by a voice that came from behind me. I had not been aware that there was anyone else in the room so whoever it was must have been hiding.

"I can vouch for that," it said.

Chapter 15

I quickly turned around and saw a middle aged man dressed in a suit behind me. It took me a little time to recognise him but when I did I was shocked. It was the man who had been looking at me strangely in the pub just before the little incident of Dave's pool game.

"I did not recognise him at first," he said to Paul, "He's got a good right cross. Mind you he can't play pool."

"You know him?" Paul said looking strangely at the man.

"I've seen him in a pub over in Birmingham. He had a little trouble over a game of pool."

"So he can handle himself," Paul said not introducing the man to me, "But can he think on his feet?"

"He looked quite sharp to me but that's all I can tell you about him."

"So," Paul said looking at me, "What is your game?"

"To make a lot of money quickly and I'm not too fussy how I earn it either."

"So," Paul said picking me up on that, "You are not too bothered how you get it."

"No, as long as it doesn't involve women and children I'll do anything."

He went to the desk and opened the drawer. He took out a pistol and putting it on the table said,

"Do you know what this is?"

"Yes I've seen one or two in my time."

"Do you know how to use it," he said picking it up.

"Well," I said smiling, "I would not have got this far without one."

"It is your key to wealth beyond your wildest dreams," He said in quite a dramatic way. "Take it," and he handed it over to me.

I took it and checked to make sure that it was loaded. Having done that I said, "So who do you want to disappear?"

"Him," Paul said and pointed at Short.

I did no more then turn around and pointing the gun at him pulled the trigger. A loud noise erupted and by the time it had finished Short lay dead on the floor. I turned to Paul and said, "It's done but why?"

"I like your style," Paul said getting friendlier, "Shoot first and ask questions later. You'll go a long way with us. For a start you have got his slice of the action," and pointed to where Short lay dead. I had never shot anyone before and I was surprised at how easy I had done it. "He had ideas above his station," Paul went on, "He wanted my job and look at him now. A good lesson to be learned in there." he looked around at the other two when he had said that. I was surprised how easy I had got rid of Short and it had left me in good favour with Paul. He looked at me and said, "I want you to put the body where nobody would ever think of looking for it and shake up his side of the deal. He's been getting us a lot of bad publicity with the antics of his staff. It has caused me quite a head ache I can tell you."

"Fair enough," I said and went to pick up Short's body, "What about Mandy and the other man, they might have heard something."

"Covered, she left here to have the rest of the day off as soon as you came back and Tom's not about at all today."

So you must have had this already planned."

"It was either him or you. I knew that there would be one body. If you hadn't I would have known that you were not what you said you were. It was as simple as that."

“Clever so what happens next?”

“Get rid of the dead weight and then Steve will fill you in with the details of Short's job.”

I dragged Short out and put him in the back of my car. I was a little reluctant to transport him as it just might have been a set up by Paul. There was nothing to stop him telling the police about it and laying the blame squarely on my shoulders. I had my prints on the gun and three witnesses to tell anything that they thought would incriminate me. I cautiously drove over the other side of town and picked up a spade. My long days hiding in the countryside had unearthed numerous possible places and so I was not short on possible locations. I remembered a little copse that was surrounded by a large open field and thought that it would be ideal. It was miles from any foot path and I do not think that even the farmer went there as it looked so wild. I parked up as close as I could and debated on the best way to do it. I was about a quarter of a mile away and I had to dig a large hole and carry Short all that distance. I decided to dig the hole first as if I was caught there would not be a body around to confuse the issue. I walked the long distance to the copse and started to dig near the trees. It was hard going and took me a long time but eventually it was done. I then leaving the shovel where it was walked slowly back looking out for signs of being watched.

I got back without hindrance and started the long haul with Short. He was quite heavy and I had to make the journey in four goes. Eventually I got him there and buried him well below the surface. I then went back to the car and drove off to find a safe place to sleep. I had decided not to go back to the big house that night as it was quite late when I had finished and besides I was going to tell them that I had buried it a lot further away and so took all night to do it.

I stopped at a little clearing about 6 miles away from where I had buried the body and fell quickly to sleep. I found myself back at the tavern standing over Jacobson's dead body. A voice came from behind me and I recognised it as Short's. I turned quickly as its tone suggested trouble and saw him standing there holding a large dagger in his hand.

“You haven't got a chance,” he said, “There are too many of us.”

Fighting was still going on all around me and in the fracas a large fire started. I did not know where it came from but it emptied the place out very quickly. I heard voices saying that the Moors were attacking and most people either just fled or made their way to where they were purported to be coming from. I was left alone with Short still brandishing his dagger. He seemed a lot more cautious now it was just me and him and came forward trying to block my path to Mary. Another two figures had appeared and dragged her off out of one of the side doors. I tried to get to her but Short had my exit blocked. He jockeyed me for position and we circled each other waiting for our chance. It was a very tense moment but I seemed cool and calculating. He looked like he was going to try and take the plunge and came forward at speed trying to slash my stomach. I stepped back as fast as I could and the blade missed me but only by a fraction. I countered with a slash to his face but he side stepped it and backed off slightly. Now that Mary was out of the way he must have thought that his job was over as he tried to leave the burning building. I circled around to block his retreat and this unnerved him a little.”You're too late.” he said with a sneer, “She's gone.”

He was hoping that I would take off after her but I had other ideas. I wanted him to die and so I plunged the knife at him and caught him on the shoulder. He fell back in pain and his temper rose. He ranted and came at me but in his state he was an easy target and so I finished him off with my next stab.

I found myself back in the tent talking to Richard.”So,” he said, “Another veil. You got as far as I did so anything that happens now is new to me.”

“Three more to go I don't trust that Paul though.”

“He wasn't much good when he was Stephen of Walton. An arrogant knight if ever you saw one. I don't think he knew much about chivalry.”

“He's got a sharp mind I think he'll give me the most problems.”

“I wouldn't turn your back on any of them but out the three I found Joseph of Bardon the least treacherous.”

“Steve Simon the least treacherous. That says a lot about the others.”

“Now you see what you are dealing with. So what changed your mind? The last time I seen you, you were talking about joining them.”

“A couple of things really Theresa is still getting the phone calls and I think that they would have done me in once I had done the business with Paul.”

“Done the business with Paul?”

“Short and Simon wanted Paul killed and Short was going to take his place. I overheard them on about it.”

“Oh so the rats are turning on each other.”

“Well they were but with Short dead it will probably come to nothing now.”

“Maybe but now you know they are divided that's one thing in your favour at least.”

“We'll see what tomorrow brings when I get back to the house.”

“Just keep your head and you should be alright. I think that you would be better off trying to take them all in one go but it's up to you.”

“I think you're right but I'll have to pay it by ear.”

“It's your game,” Richard said and I found myself back in the car. I looked at the time and saw that it was 8 o'clock. I went straight back to the big house and parked up near the front door. The cars were still there so they must have been waiting to see how I had got on. I knocked on the door and Steve answered it, “Come in Mandy has the day off.” I thought this suspicious but said nothing. I followed him into the room where I had killed Short and found the other two waiting there.

“Where have you been,” Paul demanded to know, “It doesn't take all night.”

“It does the way I do it,” I said, “You wanted an untraceable burial and that's what I gave you.”

“So the deed is done,” he said lightening up, “And the body is well hidden is it?”

“It will never be found and only I know where it is so it's all safe and sound.”

“I like to see a cautious man makes business life a lot easier. So what did you know about Short?”

“Nothing really I only met him last Wednesday.”

“And a lot has happened to him since,” Steve said with a smile. I did not know how Steve felt about taking over the set up as he seemed a lot different when Paul was around.

“Go and show him what's expected of him,” Paul said to Steve and we both left.

“I liked the way you handled Short,” Steve said, “It was very professional, very thorough.”

“It's all part of the job,” I said trying to put on an air of indifference.

“Well you've got a lot of work to do. I'm afraid he left his end in a bit of a mess. He was not too bothered who he set on. Yes smack-heads and the like. He was too lax and gave a lot of credit. One of his runners left owing thousands. I'm afraid that he's left you in quite a bit of a mess,”

“I'll soon sort it out. It shouldn't be too much of a problem.”

“Oh there is one little thing though.”

“Yes, go on.”

“We had a bit of bother not too long ago. I don't know what you heard about it.”

“A bit of bother,” I said pleading ignorance, “Short never mentioned anything about some bother.”

“Well,” he went on unperturbed, “We had a little break in. nothing too heavy but it led to an embarrassing situation.”

“It did, in what way?”

“Well let's say that somebody saw something that they shouldn't have.”

“And you want me to sort him out?” I said playing along.

“Oh no prison should do that as long as he keeps his mouth shut and leaves it at that.”

“So what are you trying to tell me?”

“We want him to know that he's in danger if he talks. We tried to get a message to him but it didn't work. That was more to do with Short's men than anything else. We want it sorted properly.”

“So, what do you want me to do?”

“Have a word with his wife and warn her off.”

“What sort of warning as I don't hurt women and children.”

“No, nothing too heavy just warn her off and tell her we have her best interests at heart. I think she'll understand. You shouldn't need to hurt her just scare her.”

“So you want me to go and see her. That's all you want me to do?”

“Yes we don't want to rock the boat as there's a lot of work still to be done. As I said Short left us in a hell of a mess.”

“Alright, so where does she live?”

He told me the address but I knew it already and so I said I would go straight round if he wanted.

He said it would keep until later but admired my earnest. He then went on to explain Short's old job to me. I had learned most of it before so it was not too hard to grasp. We finished at around six and then I went off to see Theresa. I parked outside the drive this time and went up and knocked on the door. She opened it and invited me in.

“I've come to warn you off,” I said with a smile, “And that's it.”

“What do you mean, what are you talking about?”

“It's over. I work for them now. I've got Short's job and everything. It was Steve Simon that sent me around. It turns out that Short's men were only supposed to tell Dave to keep quiet but they overplayed their role.”

“You mean that it's actually over, are you sure?”

“Certain, he sent me to do it instead. Lack of staff you know.”

“Just like that, all that worry and its gone just like that.”

“Yes,” I said happily, “Now all you have to worry about is the bills again.”

“And I can bring the kids back,” she was not really listening to me.

“Whenever you want it's all been taken care of now. You should not be hearing from me again, in my capacity as thug that is.”

She looked at me in a funny manner and said, “It's just a game to you.”

“Maybe but I think that your part of the game has just finished. Why not get back to enjoying life for a change.”

“So what happens with you now? I mean you've done what you came to do.”

“Well I still did not find out what Dave was supposed to have seen but if I dig too deep I fear that it might involve you again.”

“You'll still be working for Short though, well his outfit anyway.”

“No it's mine now. You won't be seeing Short ever again.”

“How did you manage to get his job then? You have only been there a couple of days.”

“Quality shows. No it was easy they moved Short down south as a sort of punishment.”

“Punishment, what for?”

“All this bad publicity was down to him. Two of his doormen dying in those circumstances does no good for the image of the club. Roy running off with thousands of the firm's money did not help either.”

“So he did a runner. I always thought that it was some sort of gangland slaying. So maybe I am safe now after all. Mind you wait until I tell Dave who you are working for.”

“I wouldn't do that it could ruin our friendship and beside I won't be working for them for that long. I just want to get a bit of money together before I make a move.”

“Oh so it's only temporary then.”

“Yes, a couple of weeks at the most.”

“Well if that's the case I won't say a word.”

“Thanks Theresa, in fact if you don't tell anyone I'd be grateful.”

“Don't worry your secret is safe with me.”

“I'll give you a call if anything changes but I'll call you in a few days anyway to see if anything wants doing.”

“Thanks Stu I'm much obliged.”

I said goodbye and went back to the big house. Steve let me in and was anxious to know how it went.

“She won't say a word. She's been worried out of her wits so I don't think you'll be hearing from them again.”

“Good, well that's one job out of the way anyway. Now the next one must be to get another runner.”

“Now that is going to be a problem as I'm new to the area. That will take some building up again as well.”

“So you know a little bit about that kind of thing.” Steve said sounding quite impressed.

“I've done a few bits and bobs in my time but I do know that to build up something like this again will take a lot of work. Re establishing old lines and all that. Did Short leave any contact addresses?”

“I'm not sure. Your best bet would be to look around the club and see what turns up.”

“We should have got all this out of him before I killed him it would have saved a lot of work.”

“Well it's done now so I suppose we'll have to make the best of the situation.”

“I hope Paul knows the mess that Short's left it in. I don't want him turning around and expecting miracles over night.”

“No he knows what's going on Paul does.”

“About everything,” I said and looked at him in a funny manner.

“Oh no,” he said quickly, “Not that. I'm just waiting for the heat to die down and then we'll come up with some sort of plan.”

“He was a bit unlucky Short was. What was Paul on about when he said that he was getting ideas above his station?”

“Well Paul told me that he had been trying to set up a few deals that were going straight into his pocket. He was trying to con him.”

“It sounds like this Paul knows a lot about what's going on. He'll be a hard man to get to.”

“No Short was clumsy with his book keeping that's all. He was found out no problem. Besides it was more the icing on the cake as all that bad publicity is hard to gloss over.”

“True, so who was the other man?”

“The fellow who seen you in the pub that was Chris Eastern. He's a bit of a business acquaintance of Paul's.”

“Will he be a problem? When Paul has his accident I mean?”

“I shouldn't think so. As long as he gets his cut he won't be too bothered where it comes from.”

“So I won't need to sort him out then?”

Steve laughed and said, “I don't think that would be a good idea at all. He's an undercover cop.”

“Oh,” I said finally getting to where I wanted, “So he's on Paul's books.”

“Yes but I don't think he'll be a problem and besides he could be very useful to us.”

“I don't know about that I've never really trusted them.”

“Don't worry about this one he likes money too much to do us any harm and besides you never know when he will come in handy?”

“The burglary I suppose,” I said and Steve went quiet. I continued to try and spur him on, “The one that the fellow in prison did.”

“That's right;” he said eventually, “Chris was very handy to know when that happened sorted it to a tee.”

“Well except the woman.”

“There's not a lot he could do about that. It was a bit too dangerous a situation for him to get into. Hopefully it's all sorted now.”

I agreed with him under my breath and changed the subject, “You've got a good little set up here. Did you build it up all by yourself?”

“Well most of it came from Paul but I did my bit. It was his idea about the drugs. He put it more on a business setting and cut the overheads down drastically. He would have made a good living in the

city that man would.”

“How did you actually meet him?” I said trying to sound friendly.

“I used to be a bit of a hippy. Looking at me now you would not think it though. I met him in a squat when I was living in London.”

“So,” I said with more than a hint of surprise, “You used to sleep rough. I had not really expected to hear that. I mean no offence but you don't look the type.”

“As I said,” he said with a smile, “It was a long time ago. We had an idea about getting into the drugs market as it was very popular in the sixties and making a good living out of it.”

“But I thought it was mainly draw. How did you get into the heavy stuff?”

“Oh it wasn't just the smoke in those days. We used to deal acid, opium and smack. We had a good base with all the drop outs that were around and made a bit of money on it. They used to go out on the rob and sell the stuff around the local second hand shops. Paul thought that we would make more out of them if we got them to steal for us instead. We paid them next to nothing and in the end we just swapped the stolen gear for drugs and made a killing. Paul knew someone in the export business and we just took it from there.”

“And now you've got night clubs and everything. You've definitely made it pay.”

“Well we get by. We're thinking of expanding now. A few more clubs across the country and operate a few more runners. Yes we're definitely starting to move now.”

“Sounds like it. He runs it very much along army lines.”

“Well he tries anyway. Short ran a sloppy unit though so he's not really a good example to follow. When you meet our other runners you will get a lot better idea of how it should be run. They run a lot tighter ship than Short ever could but that will be at a later date.”

“I'll look forward to that I can always use new ideas.”

“You'll go far then. Paul likes a man who can think on his feet. You should get on well with him.”

“Well until we're ready that is.”

Chapter 16

Steve went quiet and making his excuses left. I thought that he was having second thoughts about taking over. He was a strange man as he was very changeable. Sometimes he talked about Paul as if he was a god and yet others I got the feeling that he would gladly kill him himself. I did not quite know how to come to terms with this so I thought it prudent not to mention it until he did. I reasoned that my next step would be to go and have a look around the night club and make some pretense of doing my job. I had all the details from Steve and so I went there well prepared. The club was empty as it was late afternoon and so I thought I would check the paper work to see how the place ran. I went into Short's old office and much to my dismay found that his filing cabinet was locked. I fished around the clump of keys that Steve had given me but I could not find one that looked like it would fit. I looked around to see if I could find anything that I could use to lever it open and my eyes lit upon a screw driver. I picked it up and was about to put it into the edge of the filing cabinet when I heard a voice, “Oi, what do you think you're doing?”

I turned around to see Green walking menacingly towards me.

“What does it look like,” I said with an air of contempt, “Have you got the keys to open this?”

“What are you doing in Short's office,” came the reply. Green had obviously never heard about Short's demise so I would have to tell him.

“Short doesn't work here anymore I've got his job.”

“What,” Green said in disbelief, “Do you really expect me to believe that? What are you some sort of burglar?” He came forward again not wanting to hear what I was saying, “And you know what happens to burglars.”

I looked him in the eyes and saw that they were slightly glazed. I knew that I could not get through to him in the state he was in so I said, “Have you been on that crap?”

“That would be none of your business,” he said with a grin that told me that he had, “Short lets me

use it.”

“Short ain't here no more,” I repeated in the vague hope of trying to get through to him, “And while I'm in charge you won't turn up to work like that. Got it?”

“Who are you giving orders to,” he said. He did not seem to want to come to terms that I was actually his boss.

“I'm your boss,” I said losing my temper slightly, “And you'll do as you're told.”

He backed off slightly in surprise and said, “I don't take orders from anyone else only Short, he pays the wages.”

“Not any more and you know where you can pick your cards up from. Get out.”

“What,” he said confused. He was not fully aware of the situation, “You think you can sack me. No, no. It doesn't work like that. You are not my boss Short is.”

“Dead,” I said still angry, “Now get out.”

He turned and walked back outside the door. I saw him waiting around for a while and then he turned and came back in.”What do you mean Short's dead,” My news seemed to have brought him down to Earth as he seemed a lot more coherent now.

“He's been called away to a better place,” and smiled at him.

He must have thought that I was mad as he looked at me in a funny manner and said, “What just like that. You seem to think it funny is that because you got his job?” he looked at me suspiciously but he was not sure what was going on so he guessed, “There's something strange going on and I think you have a lot to do with it. I reckon that you tripped me up earlier when I was going in to sort out that trouble. I took a kicking for that and I haven't forgotten it. I've got my eye on you.”

“Then you want to be careful that you don't lose it,” I said angrily, “Now get out.” He seemed reluctant to move so I stood up and said, “Or am I going to have to throw you out?”

He did not seem unduly frightened by this and I debated on whether I had underestimated him. He looked at me and said, “Your time has not yet come but it will”

He walked out and left me deep in thought. He had guessed that I was up to no good but did not quite know what I was doing. He could be quite a dangerous man to me as he seemed to pick up things quite quickly. I would have to watch myself with him especially now as I'd just sacked him. I did not exactly know what he was thinking but I was willing to wager that he thought I was taking over the club and then going for the rest. He could easily sow the seed of suspicion in Paul's fertile imagination. Not for my real intent but the alternative would have put me in just as much danger anyway so it would only do me harm. I would have to put him right before it was too late but I was a little reluctant to kill him as I was so close and a little wary of taking on more risks than I really had to. I would have to put him on hold now though as I wanted to keep my head clear for my study of Short's accounts. That might sound a little strange in view of the threat from Green but I reasoned that Paul would be more concerned with getting the club running again then listening to a claim from a doorman. I carried on for about an hour and then the phone rang. I picked it up and heard Steve on the other end.”Rich its Steve can you come over straight away.”

“Yes,” I said thinking the worse, “What's it all about?”

“I can't tell you over the phone,” he went on and then hung up.

I had very mixed emotions as I drove to the house and parked up. I went to the door but even before I reached it Steve had it open.”Come through,” he said and I followed him silently into the large office where they seemed to have all their meetings.

“We've got a problem,” Paul said, “It seems that one of your jobs has gone AWOL.”

“What,” I said wondering what he was on about, “Is this some sort of joke?”

“Theresa Timms,” Paul said and I went quiet. He must have thought that I did not know her because he said, “You know. The woman you were supposed to have silenced.”

“I know who you mean but I don't know what you are on about. What do you mean she's gone AWOL?”

“Absent without leave,” he said loudly, “And I thought that you were a soldier boy.”

"I know what it means. I want to know the story."

"The story, about how you were supposed to silence her to stop her going to the police, but you didn't did you?"

"I warned her off like I was told to."

"You were told to silence her," Paul said getting louder, "What does that sound like to you?"

I looked at Steve in a funny manner and he looked away. I did not quite know what was going on so I went silent trying to think.

"Anyway," Paul said calming down, "I've sent Green to fetch her."

"What," I said coming to my senses, "I've sacked him and anyway I told Short as I'm telling you I don't hurt women."

"Then Green will do it," Paul said, "You are not a one man outfit."

"I sacked him," I said again, "For being out his head at work. I don't want people like that around me when I'm working."

"He's still working for me just like you are. Now are we going to have to ask Green to do a little job that you should have done yourself?"

"What, are you asking me to kill her?"

"That's right."

"Why, what's all this about?"

"I thought that you shot first and asked questions later," Chris said joining in the conversation, "It's a bit like your pool playing I've seen you in action."

Things were turning distinctly against me. I could feel that they had something up their sleeves but I did not know what it was. It soon came to light though. "We've still got the same gun for you to use," Paul said, "It's even already got your prints on it."

They were trying to scare me into killing Theresa. They thought that they had me in a trap as I would be scared to go against them as they could set me up for Short's murder. It threw me a little at first as the twist was very confusing. They were trying to control me but they did not know the situation I was in with Theresa. She could even give the game away and I would have to take on all three of them. Maybe this was the chance that Richard would have hoped for. He said to try and get them all together and this would be the perfect opportunity. It would mean that I would probably never find out what they thought Dave saw but I could live with that if it would save Theresa's life. All I needed was a gun and then it would be easy. They were even planning on putting one in my hand. I would have to play them at their own game first though so I pretended to be indignant. "Look let's be realistic. You might have the gun but I have the body so don't try and play games with me."

They stood there quietly for a moment as they had not expected my answer. "I still want Green sacked," I said trying to sound more approachable, "I don't want him about when I do that woman."

Paul looked at me in a superior manner and said, "So you'll do it then?"

"Yes although I won't be black mailed like that again. I want to look after the gun."

"That's fair enough," Paul said "As long as you use it when we tell you to. I don't want to hear any qualms about hurting women and that. I'm sure you've done it before in your travels."

"So what's it all about?"

"What. That's none of your business."

"Well if you want me to kill a woman I don't mind but I want to hear the story behind it. First you tell me just to warn her off and now this. I would like to know what's going on."

"Probably a mix up on the communication front," Paul said giving Steve a funny look, "But that's not a problem now."

"She seemed innocent to me so why the change of heart?"

"When it comes to judging that's my department. It will teach her old man to keep his hands to himself."

"You mean that's it. That's what it's about revenge. He didn't even do the job."

“Don't be taken in by her lies. He robbed me. He tried to take all my wonderful things from me.”

“So,” I said shrugging my shoulders, “So that's what it's about then I'll do it.”

I think I fooled him with my aloofness but I wasn't sure. Paul was a clever man although he could be irrational about his works of art. He must have been warned off by Green though and that was why he tried to flex his muscles. My mind was racing as the time wore on. I needed some fresh air but I was reluctant to leave the room as Theresa would soon be there. I heard a car pull up and Paul giving me the gun said, “It sounds like it's your cue.”

“I don't want Green in on this. Does he know that she's going to be killed?”

“No I only told him to pick her up. I knew you would see sense.”

“I'll disappear until he's gone then,” I said hoping that they would not think it suspicious, “Pay him off and get rid of him and make sure he doesn't know about the killing.”

I walked out and hid behind a door near theirs. I kept the gun with me and checked how many bullets were in it. I only found two and so this left me in a dilemma. I decided to try and get Paul and Chris and take my chances with Steve. I heard the door open and Theresa scream as she was being dragged in. Green was telling her to be quiet and my anger rose slightly. I knew that it would be foolish to try my luck whilst Green was still there so I had to patiently wait and listen to her distress.

Paul's voice came to the fore, “You lowlife don't deserve to live. Look at you, you disgust me.”

I just heard Theresa cry and it ignited my rage even further.”That will be all Green,” Paul said, “You can go.”

“I'm still working for you?” Green said unsure of himself.

“I'll be in touch,” Paul said and Green walked out. I heard a car start and drive off and knew that he was gone. The voices carried on talking.”So,” Paul said, “Your time has come.” He seemed to revel in her fear and that made me even angrier. I decided that now might be a good time to make my move. I tried to look composed as I walked into the office. I wanted to get the best target and to do that I had to get quite close. Paul saw me coming and said, “And here is your executioner.”

Theresa looked at me first in panic and then in confusion. I thought that she was going to give the game away but I think that she was too stunned to know what was actually happening. I lifted the gun and shot Paul but I only winged him. Steve had run out of the room by now and he was closely followed by Chris. I shot Paul again and he fell to the ground. I knew by his inertia that he was dead and so I told Theresa to wait there. I ran after the pair but Chris had disappeared in the car leaving Steve hiding somewhere around the house. I went back to Theresa and saw her sitting on one of the chairs. She was shaking quite violently with a mixture of fear and relief. She looked at me and said, “You killed him.”

“I had to,” I said but she was not listening.

“You killed him,” she said again, “You killed a man.”

“I had no choice they wanted to kill you.”

“You did it so casually though as if it was an everyday thing.”

“I did not have time to think,” I said but she was not listening.

“You've done it before,” she said, “That could be the only explanation for it. Who else have you killed?”

“Look,” I said not really knowing what to tell her, “We haven't got time for this. One is still around and the other has escaped in the car.”

“It's just a game to you isn't it, “She was unaware of the danger that she still might be in.

“I'm going to look for him,” I said giving up on the debate, “It might be a good idea for you to come with me.”

She started to come to her senses a little because she said nothing and got up. I searched the downstairs first but could not find him. It was a very large job because of the size of the house and all its little crags made for good hiding places. I went upstairs and started going through the bedrooms. I was in a hurry as I did not know where Chris had gone to. He might have panicked and

gone straight to the police. I did not really know how much time I had but I did not want to hang around to find out. I went through each room but found nothing. I thought that it would be a good idea to leave and started to make my way to the car. Theresa quickly followed and got into the passenger side. As I was going to open the other door I saw movement just behind the corner of the house. It was Steve and I ran to try and get him. He ran behind the house out of Theresa's view and I closely followed him. I was almost upon him when he turned around and said, "Look we can still take over the place. We were going to do him anyway so there's no problem."

It sounded sense what he was saying but I had not the time to listen. I moved forward and grabbing him by the throat lifted him up. His legs struggled violently but I felt his strength leaving him. He tried to splutter something out but I could not hear him. Eventually his legs stopped moving and I let him drop onto the floor. I quickly turned around and ran back to Theresa. I jumped in the car and drove back to her house. I did not really know where to take her so I took her there to try and gather my thoughts and work out my next move. She was very quiet all the way home and so I said nothing in return. We pulled up on her drive and went inside. Green had made quite a mess and it would need clearing up quickly. I did not really know what would happen next but I knew that it would be a good idea to try and cover up any evidence of a struggle.

"Let's clean the place up for a start," I said and started straightening out some of the fallen furniture. She helped me without saying a word as she still was a little shaken. We sat down when we had finished and Theresa said, "What happens now?"

"I don't know," I admitted honestly, "I need time to think."

"How many," she said and I pretended not to understand so she said, "Have you killed, how many?"

"I don't need this," I said looking at her, "We are not out of the woods yet. We've got to work out Chris next move."

"Chris," she said, "Do you mean the copper that caught Dave?"

"Yes, I'll have to explain it all later. He was the one who drove off in the car."

"Well that's it then. You killed someone in front of a copper."

"I'm not sure. I think he's got more to be scared off from us now we know too much. He's in it up to his neck. I don't think he'll want the police involved. If anything he'll want to cover it up."

"What if that's not the case I'll be an accessory to murder."

"No just tell them that Green picked you up and brought you to the house. Don't tell them that you know me and you'll be alright. They'll think that you are just an innocent victim in all this."

She could see the logic but still had a worry about Chris. "What about Chris making it personal?"

"He doesn't know that you know me. If anything he will keep right out of your way. If he has any sense about him he'll just clean the place up and you'll hear nothing about it."

"Maybe," she said calming down, "Besides I think he'll just be keeping his head down anyway. You're probably right but where does that leave us with my first question?"

"It doesn't matter," I said trying a different tact, "I did it to help you. I had no alternative did I? You know yourself that they would have killed you."

"But it was so casual, like it was all the time."

"No," I said lying, "Well not inside anyway. I was shaking like a leaf but I could not show them that as they would have thought it suspicious."

"I don't know what to say. I mean it's something that will take a long time to come to terms with. You killed someone."

"It was him or you," I said trying to get through to her.

"I know that but it's still a hard thing to swallow."

"Hopefully it is finally over. They've put you through enough already."

She went quiet for a while so I got up and put the kettle on. As I waited for the kettle to boil the phone rang. Theresa was very reluctant to answer it so I suggested she let it ring and press 1471 when it had stopped. After 8 rings it stopped and she checked the number, "It was only my mother probably wondering when I'm going over to pick up the kids."

“What do you think?” I said as she looked a little too emotional still and the children would quickly pick it up

“Not tonight. I'll phone her back and tell her I'll pick them up in the morning.” She did that and I went back to the kitchen and started to make the tea. I brought it back and we went into the living room and sat down.

After awhile she turned to me and said, “Do you really think that it's over? You said that before and look what happened.”

“I hope so. The only one we have to worry about is that Chris but I can't see him wanting to do anything. He does not know that you know me and it would be in your best interests not to tell him.”

“Oh I know but I've still got that doubt that there's more to come, something in the back of my mind.”

“Hopefully that will go in time,” I said trying to reassure her, “Just be patient and start living your life for a change.”

“What are you plans? What happens now?”

“I'll hang around until I know that the trouble's over and then I'll probably go up to Hull like I was going to in the first place.”

I still knew that I had to lift another veil so I would not be leaving Chris to his own devices for long. I did not really want to tell Theresa this so I would have to be very careful what I said to her.

“Just like nothing's happened,” she said in amazement.

“Oh,” I said trying to play on her emotions, “I'll never forget what I've done but it's something that I'll have to live with for the rest of my life.”

She looked at me in a funny manner and I think that she believed that I was truly sorry for my actions.”Maybe you need a little time as well,” she said and I knew that she believed me.

“Yes,” I said carrying on the act, “It was a bad situation to get into.”

“But you did it to save me that doesn't make you a bad man.”

“No just in the wrong place at the wrong time.”

“Dave's got a lot to answer for and that's a fact.”

“He just made a mistake. It could happen to anyone.”

“Yes,” she said sadly and thought about him in his prison cell, “And he's got a long time to think about it.”

“Best not dwell on it then as it will only come back to haunt him.”

“Like it came back to haunt me,” She said and then picked up by saying, “Well as you said it's best not to dwell on it.”

“That's good. If you want I'll stay here for a few days just to make sure.”

“Only if you're sure we won't be having an early morning knock. If they found you here you'll be in a lot of trouble.”

I could see the logic in what she said but I honestly did not expect to hear from the police again so I said, “I shouldn't think that it will happen. If they did just tell them I took you prisoner and made you take me back until I sorted out my next move.” That seemed to lessen her fear somewhat and so we sat and talked awhile.

Chapter 17

We talked awhile longer and at around eleven Theresa went up to bed. I fell quickly to sleep which was unusual really after the day I had and found myself back in the burning village. I was standing face to face with Stephen of Walton and Joseph of Bardon just before Richard's death. I moved quickly to my side expecting Nigel of Davenport to appear. I saw the door from which he had previously come from shut and knew that he had gone back inside.

Stephen of Walton spoke, “Your time has run out now Richard. The second son of a failed man ending up dead in a village street miles from home. What would you like on your epitaph?”

I came forward content in the knowledge that Nigel would not be around to bother me and this unnerved Joseph of Bardon slightly."There are two of us you haven't a chance."

He was trying to appeal to my fear but it was out that day so I carried on. I lifted my sword and swung it wide just missing Walton. He backed off slightly and Bardon ran.

"You're on your own," I said, "In a village street miles from home."

"I still have Mary," he said and held onto her tightly.

"So," I said laughingly mocking him, "It will be like fighting you with one of your arms tied behind your back."

He must have seen the sense in this as he threw her to the ground. My thoughts were squarely on the killing of him and so I had not took much notice of where she landed. I did not see her go as Davenport must have grabbed her while I was busy in my struggle. Walton came forward unsure of himself and started to take his position in front of me. He crouched low with shield and waited for what looked like a suitable opening. He made a very difficult target to hit and as he was wearing full plate armour he made for quite a formidable opponent. My chain mail was a lot lighter than his but did not have the protection that he had. I swung my sword and hit him on the shoulder making a loud clanging noise. He shook but that was all and moved forward like a scorpion fighting a spider. His heavy sword just missed my left arm as I quickly side stepped his assault. I swung again and caught his left leg. He shuddered a little but remained on his feet. I knew that if I could get him down he would not be able to get up again and would be an easy target to finish off. He swung his sword to my right and narrowly missed my head. I swung again at his leg and this time it stunned him. He hovered a while and fell heavily to the floor. I moved forward and plunged my sword into his head nearly splitting it in two. I had to put my foot on his chest to get enough leverage to pull my sword out, having done that I looked around for Bardon. He had hung around to see what the outcome of the battle would be as he was not sure if I would win. He saw that I had seen him and tried to run off. I was quickly upon him as his armour seemed to slow him down a lot more than mine. He turned to me and said, "It is not of my doing. I surrender myself to you."

"Your code of chivalry is no good to me," I found myself saying, "And a cur like you would not raise much of a ransom."

"No, I could be useful to you."

"Only by your death," I said and plunged my sword into him. It went into his mouth and though his chest ending up in his stomach. It sounded quite a painful death and I was glad that I was not on the receiving end of it. I left him in a heap of blood and iron and ended up back in the tent once more.

Richard was standing there with a broad grin on his face, "So what's it like to alter history?"

I did not really hear him as my eyes lit on Mary. She was standing there with just a veil to hide her face. I marveled at her wonder and Richard noticed this."Soon," he said, "Soon she'll be free."

"One more veil but I don't know how to get it."

"It will come to you. You will know what to do when the time is right."

"I am going to have to find him first and I shouldn't think that he is a man who wants to be found."

"He won't go on the run you need not worry about that."

"How can you be sure?"

"It will always be in the back of his mind. He has more to fear from you, don't forget that."

"What about Theresa, what will happen to her in all this?"

"He'll be out looking for you and as long as he doesn't know that you know her she'll be alright."

"That's what I told her but I'm not too sure."

"Don't worry it's just natural. You're still a little bit nervous but when it's over it will finally be done."

"I hope so for Theresa's sake more than anything."

"You seem to care a lot for her. Is there something I should know about?"

No," I said smiling, "She's my mate's wife. I'm just looking after her."

"Oh," he said but I don't think he believed me, "Anyway so what's the next move?"

"I've got to find him I suppose," I said not looking forward to it, "And at the moment he could be anywhere."

"He'll be close. Soon you'll have his scent. What's his back up like?"

"Well he's got the police behind him."

"No seriously who has he got to turn to?"

"I don't know," I said and my thoughts turned to Green, "Maybe someone."

"Well it might be a good idea to find this someone. I should think he'll be very helpful in your quest."

"I'll have to go back to the club to get his address and that could be dangerous."

"You've still got the keys it won't take that long."

I woke up to find myself lying on the settee. It was 8 o'clock and Theresa was already up.

"Kettle's on," she called from the kitchen on hearing me stir, "I'll bring it in when it's done." She seemed a lot happier today so I took it as a good sign. She came in and put the drink on the table."There you go; I'll make you some breakfast if you like."

"No thanks, I'll get something later."

"You in a hurry oh well it doesn't matter."

I was surprised at her answer because I thought that she would have wanted to know where I was going. Perhaps she had decided to leave me to it now and get back to her own life.

"I'm going to nip out for a while," I said, "What time are you going to your mother's?"

"Some time this afternoon I'll have to phone her first."

She did not seem too concerned of the danger now as she probably had come to the conclusion that it was all over. I left her alone and took a drive to the club. I was about to walk in but I saw Green standing around the front. I waited a while to see who he was with but from what I saw he was on his own. I needed him to tell me about the elusive Chris as I realised that I would probably never find him without Green's help. I decided to wait around in the car to see what was happening. There was no movement until around 11 o'clock when a car pulled in front of the entrance way. Green quickly got in and the car drove off down the street at high speed. I had a job to keep up with them without actually giving myself away as they knew what sort of car I drove. They turned through numerous streets before eventually leaving the city. I followed at a safer distance as I reasoned that they would be going back to the big house. I pulled in a short distance away and walked to the house via a small wood. When I got to the house I saw Chris and Green moving about in a hurry. They were cleaning the place up. I saw Green drag Paul's body and put it in the back of the car.

"Simon should be around somewhere," I heard Chris say; "I think he got hit as well."

"Sounds like it was quite a party," Green said and went inside the house to have a look. I did not see him for around ten minutes until he returned and said, "Nothing doing in there."

"We'll check the grounds then," Chris said, "He must be somewhere."

I saw Green disappear around the corner of the house and return within a couple of seconds."Round here Chris," he said in an excited state. Chris disappeared out of my view and I saw them both carry Steve back and put him in boot of the car.

"I'll get rid of them," Chris said, "You finish off inside. I won't be that long and then we'll try and get some good out of this mess."

"What's the plan," Green said, "Are you looking for someone to run this outfit?"

"Do you think you are up to it," Chris said knowing what he was after.

"Yes why not? I've been doing Short's job well as good as any way for the last couple of months."

"We'll talk when I get back then," Chris said as he got in the car and drove off. Green went back inside the house and I decided to follow him. I made sure that Chris had left the scene completely first as I did not want to take any unnecessary chances. I cautiously walked to the front door and quietly made my way in. He was in the main office trying to clean the last of the blood off the floor when he saw me.

"What do you want?" he said sounding unafraid.

"I'm just finishing off what I started, "I said looking at him in the way a cat would look at a mouse.

"Don't make the mistake of thinking I'm soft like Short." he said getting up off the floor.

"I don't make mistakes," I said playing word games with him, "That's why I live a long and happy life."

"Well maybe that long and happy life is coming to an end."

"Maybe but I don't think that it will be by you."

He came closer and I saw his eyes light upon the gun that I had carelessly discarded in my panic to find Steve. He did not realise that it wasn't loaded and made a grab for it. I let him get it as it would not do him any good.

"So," he said after he had picked it up, "You don't think it will be by me then. We shall see." He pointed the gun at me and said, "Don't move I think that Chris will want a word with you when he gets back."

"So what's he offering?"

"That's not your problem," he said almost cockily, "I don't do deals. Especially whilst I hold the gun."

"I wasn't offering you one I was just wondering how much he was conning you out off."

"What are you talking about?"

"Well," I said getting into my flow, "The whole place has been blown apart. You could get in at the top if you think about it. It he's just offering Short's old job then you're selling yourself short."

He thought awhile before he said, "I don't know what your game is but it won't work with me."

He was a hard man to get through to so I tried a different ruse, "Have you ever used a gun?"

"Yes," he said but I could tell that he was lying, "And I would think nothing of doing it again if you care to take your chances."

"It wouldn't bother me because I know that it isn't loaded."

"I don't fall for old tricks like that. Next thing you'll be trying to tell me is that there's some one behind me."

I walked forward and said, "Well press the trigger then."

He said, "Stop I'm not afraid to use it," but I carried on.

I was nearly upon him before he summoned up the strength to squeeze the trigger. A small click put him off his guard and so he tried again with similar results. He threw the gun to the ground in disgust and said, "I don't need anything like that to sort you out."

I hit him on the nose and he fell back but the table blocked his retreat."You'll have to do better than that," he said getting up again. He came forward although a little more cautiously this time. He took a good stance and it looked like he knew what he was doing. He let out a left jab which hit me on the chin and stunned me for a fraction of a second. He followed through but I had regained my composure by then and neatly side stepped it. I hit him on the side of the chin with a right cross and his head jerked to my left. He was shaken but not enough for me to follow on. He shook his head in disgust at letting me catch him out and came at me in a more guarded manner."You've had your day," he said with a scowl, "You're too old to be any good."

I threw a left but he blocked it quite easily and circled to my right. I saw that he was trying to line me up for a big right hand so I stepped to his right to stop his game. I saw him look at the gun out of the corner of his eye and work his way around to it. Just as he was about to lean down to grab it I kicked him in the face and he fell sideways and hit his head on the table. Much to my surprise he got up nearly straight away but this time he had anger in his eyes.

"No more playing around," he said, "Your time has come."

I hit him again but he just seemed to absorb it without a problem. His temper was carrying him now and he looked in a highly dangerous mood. He came forward once more and hit me hard in the stomach. I fell backwards slightly in pain and he followed through with a punch to my chin. His uppercut nearly dislodged my teeth as it sent my mouth almost into orbit. I hit him in the face once more but the pain did not seem to register. He was going to be a hard man to beat so I would have to

alter my attack slightly to have any chance of success.

He came forward and tried to grab me by the throat but I was too quick for him. I stepped back and punched him in the throat. He stopped for a while but came back for more. I hit him in the same place again and then again and I saw that it was starting to sink in. I hit him a fourth time to the throat and he fell back unable to speak. I quickly picked up the gun that was on the floor and hit him on the head as hard as I could. The gun bounced with a dull thud and I saw that it had left its mark. Blood seeped out and although it was not heavy it was enough to give me a spur. I hit him with the gun again and he fell to the ground. The blood had started to flow a little more easily now and was making quite a pool on the floor. I hit him a third time and he was out for the count. I left his unconscious body on the floor and looked for something to finish him off. My eyes lit upon a kitchen knife that was lying near the kitchen door and I picked it up and went back to the office. He had not moved at all and looked like he would be out for some time. I plunged the knife into his heart. It nearly bent over with the force of the impact but it went in and did what it was meant to do. I had not heard the car pull in but I heard it speed off. I ran to the door and to my dismay saw Chris' car pulling out the drive. I cursed my misfortune as now I knew I would have a job to find him. He would be running scared I reasoned and wanting to forget about trying to pick up the pieces of the business as there weren't really any left. I decided to have a look around the house to see if I could find his address but I was just wasting my time. I was running out of ideas now and I only had one more real chance. I might find something about him in Short's old club. It was a long shot but that was all I had.

I drove the short distance and let myself in. There was no one around which was lucky as I was hoping to avoid any cleaning staff. I made my way to his office and started looking through all the papers. It was lucky that I had studied most of them before and so it did not take too long to cover the rest. I could not find anything about Chris anywhere. He had covered his tracks well but I suppose that was to be expected. I would have to find him out but I did not really know where to start. I reasoned that he might live around the Birmingham area so that would be as good a place as any. He might have been just working there undercover though so I was clutching at straws really but that seemed the best bet for my next move. I decided to go back to Theresa and tell her that it was all over and I was going back to Hull. I had to wait in the car when I arrived though as she was not there. I assumed that she would be picking up her children from her mother's so she would not be too long. As I waited my thoughts went back to the lifting of the last veil. It was the final one and after that I would be finished. I did not know if I would be able to re adjust to normal life after all that carnage. I knew that my life could never be the same again as I had gone beyond the Pale. Tiredness seemed to catch up with me and I found myself drifting off. My next recollection was looking at Richard and saying, "I've lost him."

"You'll soon find him. He'll give himself away don't worry about it."

"How can you be so sure? He could be anywhere."

"Think about it he'll be close at hand. He's probably looking for you."

"How do you make that out? Wouldn't it be more the case that he would just go to ground? He could carry on work and I would never know. I don't even know what branch he works for."

"He'll not let an opportunity like that slip by. His greed will bring him back. He's got a ready-made business that makes more money than he could ever dream off. The only real thing standing in his way is you. Once you are out the way he'll have a clear run."

"You think so?" I said unsure, "I doubt it myself. How's he going to replace all those lost staff for a start? He can't run it himself either can he?"

"He could fill those jobs up straight away. Most people would queue up to do work like that. Look at the turnover."

I could see the sense in what he was saying but I could not really see him wanting to go up against me. His actions of running out of the room when I shot Paul and also his actions in the pub told me he was not a courageous man." I don't think he would want to come against me. He's not a brave

man.”

“He never was but how brave do you have to be to stab someone in the back.”

“True so I'd better watch mine then.”

“Good idea.”

“Do you know where he is?” I said clutching at straws.

“No,” he said almost straight away, “Why do you ask that?”

“Desperation plus the fact I think you know more than you let on.”

“Well I do know a lot more than I can tell but nothing about his whereabouts.”

“I don't really know where to turn. Does this mean I have to wait around until he gets the nerve up to make his move?”

“Patience he'll make his move and it won't be before too long either. It's nearly done now. You'll be making new plans soon.”

“Plans, I was thinking about that earlier. I don't know if I would ever be able to settle down to a normal life.”

“I didn't think that you would want to. Not after all that excitement you can't just go back to the mundane.”

“I know what you mean. I don't think I would be able to put up with all that crap at work for a start.”

Richard laughed and said, “I don't think you'll ever want to do a job like that again. I was thinking of becoming a soldier of fortune after I had finished.”

“A soldier of fortune, you know that doesn't sound like a bad idea to me.”

“It's a good life you can live off the adrenalin forever. You're probably doing much the same as what you're doing now as well.”

“I'm not sure if I'm up to the training. I ought to be a lot fitter and I haven't much knowledge of guns either.”

“Don't make obstacles it shouldn't take you that long to get back into shape.”

“Maybe but what about the guns?”

“You'll soon pick it up and don't forget that you have already shot someone. You have taken the big first step.”

What he said did sound logical and got me thinking seriously about it. I did not know what sort of money was on offer but I guessed it would be like any normal job and have good and bad payers. I would just be cautious about who I worked for.

“So,” I said, “How would I actually go about and do it?”

“Oh I bet it's a lot different to when it was in my day. In my day you just went to the local magnate and offered your services.”

“What just like that. It sounded easy.”

“It was, in your case though I think it would be more a case of who you know than what.”

“I could ask Dave. He used to be ex army.”

“Yes I suppose so. Mind you if I were you I would wait until it all died down first.”

“Oh don't worry about that. I'm not that stupid.”

“Good,” Richard said and laughed before saying, “What changed then?”

“What,” I said not understanding his humour, “What's that supposed to mean?”

“Didn't they teach you what a sense of humour was? It always comes in handy you know.”

A knocking door brought me around before I could answer him.

Chapter 18.

I looked up still half asleep and saw Theresa and little David.

“Get up,” little Dave was saying and Theresa was laughing at his antics. I got out of the car and the cold air soon brought me back to earth.”Sorry,” I said, “I must have dozed off.”

“I left the key under the mat you could have just let yourself in.”

"I didn't know. I thought you might be reluctant to do that."

"No I thought a lot about what you said and it seemed to make sense. I don't think I'll be hearing anything more and so I'm starting to live my life again."

"Good," I said smiling with relief. I would be able to move on now as she had started to settle back into the normal running of things, "So are you putting the kettle on?"

"Yes, and then I'll give you the list."

"The list, what list?"

"The list of jobs that you have to do," she said laughing, "I mean you'll be moving on soon and I don't know when I'll see you again. So I thought if I got you to finish off the odd jobs that need doing it will last me a long time."

"Well it's nice to see that you are over it anyway."

"I'll put the kettle on," she said going off into the house. I was pleased to see that she was back to normal even though it meant I had a lot more to do. I was in no real hurry as I had a feeling that Chris would keep for a while. Maybe it would put him in a bit of a panic if I left him alone to feed on his fears. The more I thought about it the better it sounded. I would stop with Theresa until the jobs were finished and then go and spend a day or two with Dave. I could find out what he knew about mercenaries and I could also ask the barman if Chris came in regularly. It was quite a long shot but I reasoned that he would not forget the trouble over the pool table and so he might just remember who was in at the time. For all I knew he might have even been working undercover although it looked more like a quiet afternoon drink than anything else. I went into the house and sat down on the settee. Theresa brought me in a cup of tea and sat down on the chair by the fire place."So," she said, "What are your plans then?"

"Well I'm not quite sure but I've got a cousin in Hull who might give me a job in furniture restoration. Well I hope so he owns the company."

"Well they say that it's who you know nowadays."

"True," I said and thought of Richard and what he had said to me.

"I was only joking about those jobs well unless you can spare the time."

"Well that depends on the jobs. Where's the list?"

She produced a piece of paper from her purse and gave it to me. I read the list of jobs and reasoned that it would not take me more than a day. The hardest job was putting up a curtain rail so you could imagine what the others were. I pretended to look doubtful and said, "Well I don't know about this lot."

"Oh," she said slightly shocked, "Is there too much there for you?"

"No," I said laughing, "I was only joking. Yes I should have it all done in a day."

"Oh," she said relieved, "Thanks."

"I'm not really in that much of a hurry he'll keep the job for me." We talked a little more until around eight when the phone rang. Theresa got up and answered it. When she came back she said, "Wrong number. It was somebody looking for a Richard Billesley."

"Oh right," I said and thought that it was Chris clutching at straws. Theresa did not know who Richard Billesley was and I was content to leave her in ignorance as she was in no real danger. He was only ringing on the off chance but her answer told him that she did not know him. He would not be bothering her again. So Richard was right, he was looking for me and by the phone call he must be in quite an irrational state. He would be easy to get to when he was in a panic but I was still in no hurry as I thought that another day or two he'd be ripe for the taking. I was still no nearer finding Chris but I thought that as he was looking for me he should not be hard to find. He had tried Theresa's and so the only other lead he might have had to be Birmingham. I guessed he would be keeping an eye on the Breedon. I felt a lot happier with this knowledge inside me. I even offered to make Theresa a cup of tea.

"What," she said in surprise, "Er yes go on then."

I went into the kitchen made the tea and brought it back to her. She thanked me and took it out my

hand.

“So,” I said, “Any luck on the job front?”

“I haven't started looking yet. That's the next job.”

“Shall I put it on the list,” I said taking the paper out of my pocket.

“Funny. You ought to be thanking me anyway.”

“I should. Why?”

“I'm keeping you in practice for your job in Hull. Without me you would have gone rusty ages ago.”

“Oh right.”

We talked a little more and Theresa eventually went to bed leaving me alone on the settee. I soon fell to sleep which was surprising really as I had had a nap in the afternoon. I slept soundly that night and woke up quite early the next morning. I got started on the jobs straight away and one by one they fell off the list. I worked all the way through the day and did not stop until they were finally finished at eight in the evening.

“All done,” Theresa said with a hint of surprise, “I was going to stop you anyway, to see if you wanted to go for a drink.”

“Sorry?” I said as I knew she did not drink.

“Well it's probably your last night for a while. I thought that you might want to go out for a drink but have no one to go with.”

“I wasn't really going to bother but why not it will make a change. Where do you want to go?”

“Down the Swan it's local. Angela next door said she would look after the kids. Think of it as a thank you for cleaning up the mess.”

“It was only a few odd jobs nothing to get over excited about.”

“No I meant the other one. I don't want to ever go through anything like that again I can tell you.”

We went down to the Swan and it was quite empty. It was an old country pub that served a good pint and I soon got the taste. My mind was still on Chris but I enjoyed myself no end as the beer started to flow. Our conversation got around to Dave's court case. I still could not work out why the relevant information was not on the tape until it occurred to me that it might be something simple like Chris covering the tape when he made any incriminating statements. It seemed plausible to me and so I left it at that. As for the defence that might have just been incompetence on their behalf. I did not really want to dwell on the case as it might have unsettled Theresa and she looked like she was enjoying herself.

“You know,” she said, “I don't really get out as much as I should. Maybe I ought to get a bar maids job.”

“That's not a bad idea. I think you might even get one cash in hand, save all the hassle from the dole.”

“Yes it's a bit of a catch 22 really. I can't make enough to come off the dole but I need to work.”

“It's a cruel life. What about a full time job. You could come of the dole completely then.”

“I would do tomorrow but I can't get anyone to look after the kids.”

“Don't look at me I'm going to Hull in the morning.”

“So you're definitely going tomorrow?”

“Yes I thought that I had better, sooner the better really as it sounds a good job.”

Last orders were called at the bar and we went back home. I slept soundly as the beer had made me tired. I woke up early the next morning to the sound of Theresa in the kitchen. She was making me a large breakfast to help me start the day. I tucked into it quickly as I was quite hungry and left for Birmingham at around ten o'clock.

The traffic was heavy and I got to Dave's at around eleven. I knocked on the door but he was not in. I cursed myself and waited around for him to appear. After an hour he had not shown so I decided to park the car up and take a walk to the Breedon. The place was empty as it had only just opened and so I had a quiet conversation with the bar man. He was the same man who was in the

place when the trouble started and he remembered me.

"Them blokes never came back," he said after he had served me.

"Probably went to another pub to try that trick again. Do you remember the others that were in at the time?"

"Two middle aged couples, yes. Mind you they come in quite regular."

"Do you know much about them?" I said that maybe I was onto something.

"Not really they started coming in a few months ago. They keep themselves to themselves basically."

"Oh never mind."

"James reckons that they are undercover coppers. Mind you he always had a vivid imagination."

"James," I said and thought awhile, "Little guy with blond hair, always drunk."

"Yes," he said with a knowing smile, "That's James alright."

I thought that it might be a good idea to have a word with James but that would have to keep. I did not want to ask the bar man too many questions as it might arouse his suspicion.

"So," I said changing the subject, "Do you see much of Dave?"

"Dave, oh you mean that fellow who was in here with you that afternoon. Yes, he comes in now and again. Not so much as he used to though."

'Oh' I thought to myself 'Maybe he's starting to control his drink a bit more.'

"Does he still come in here on a dinnertime," I said, "Only I've come over to see him but he's not in. Would it be worth my while hanging around do you think?"

"Worth a try he does come in occasionally on a dinner time but it's not a foregone conclusion."

"Ah well I may as well have another drink while I'm waiting. Same again then and have one yourself."

"Thanks, I'll have a half then."

He served me a drink and took out enough for a half and gave me the change."I hear Rod's back," he said casually as if I should know him.

"Rod I don't think that I know him."

"Big fellow, he seems to spend most of his time away fighting."

"What is he a boxer or something?"

The bar man laughed and said, "No he's a mercenary."

My ears pricked up at that and I tried to think if I remembered him. I could not picture his face until the barman said, "He used to go about with Sally for quite a while."

I remembered him then but I did not really know him. It was no good I would have to try and find my answers with Dave. I looked at the clock on the wall and it said two. I did not really want to be hanging around a pub all day and so I said my goodbyes and left. I walked awhile down by the canal that went past the pub at the foot of the hill. I liked the peace and quiet that it brought and must have walked around for an hour before deciding to give Dave another try. I was getting tired by now and the short distance to his house felt a lot longer. When I got there I knocked loudly on the door but there was no reply. I thought that he might be out and about on his bike now it was fixed but when I looked through the front window it was still in the front room. I checked under his mat and found his key. I was reluctant at first to go in as it could be considered bad manners but I went in eventually as it would be a lot warmer in there than out in the cold.

I turned the key and opening the door went in. The front room looked like it had not changed but something was amiss. It was hard to explain as nothing looked disturbed but that feeling never left me. I decided to make myself a cup of tea and wait to see what had happened. The feeling remained so I decided that I would have a look around the house. I had thoughts that maybe Tony had returned at first. I don't know why but it seemed the obvious reason for the feeling of unease that seemed to have captured the house. I looked all around the downstairs but found nothing untoward. I walked upstairs and started checking there. I was shocked to see a pool of blood on the floor of the bathroom and quickly opened the door. I nearly fell back when I saw Dave's heavily stabbed blood

covered body. He looked like he had been killed in a very frenzied attack and thoughts of Tony came back in my head. I quickly dismissed them as a new line of inquiry came in. I reasoned that it must have been Chris. He had saw me and Dave together and found out where Dave had lived. He must have been trying to find out who I was and then killed Dave to cover his tracks. I had feelings of revenge but they were not as strong as they would have been. I just seemed to take it more in my stride now. Chris would know my name by now as he would have surely beat it out of Dave. He would have called me Richard Billesley but that would have meant nothing to Dave. I surmised that looking at the state of Dave's body he must have been Chris' first kill as it was too frenzied to be a controlled thing. I knew that he had killed once and would be more likely to find the next one easier. I left the body where it was as I did not want to be involved in a murder inquiry and went back to the Breedon. I was determined to find out where James lived and see what exactly he knew. I was hoping that the barman would know that as it would save me a lot of trouble. I thought it wise to move the car to a more secluded place and walk back to the pub. When I got in the place had a few more customers and I saw a couple of people that I knew so I went to see if they knew where James lived.

"Alright Don," I said going up to a small man in his late thirties, "Long time no see."

"Alright Stu what brings you back to town?"

"Just visiting I thought that I would pop in for a couple and see what was happening."

"Not a lot really. What are you having?"

"A pint of lager then."

Don bought me a drink and we talked awhile."So," I said, "Have you seen anything of James?"

"Well he was in here last night pissed again."

"Does he still have that beezzer? "I asked as it might be a start.

"Yes I think so. I heard that he was on about selling it though."

"I heard that as well. I was going to have a look at it but I don't know where he lives."

"He only lives around the corner. Halfway up Frances Road. You can't miss it; it has a battered up Cortina outside."

"Cheers Don that saves me a lot of time."

"Anytime," he said quickly finishing his drink, "Mines a lager then."

I fetched the drinks in and we talked some more. I wanted to get away and see if James was in but I thought it better not to seem desperate. We talked a little longer about nothing of any real interest and I made my excuses and left after about ten minutes. I walked the short distance and sure enough I saw a battered Cortina. I knocked loudly on the door but there did not seem to be anyone in. I knocked again and was about to give up when I heard movement inside. The door opened and I saw James standing in front of me. He looked like he had only just got up and smelt strongly of beer.

"Stuart," he said unsure of my visit, "Er come in."

I went inside and he said, "I would make you a drink but we're out of milk."

"That's alright James I've just had a drink in the Breedon."

"So how long have you been back?"

"Not long. Don was saying that you might be selling your bike."

"I'm not sure. I think I was a little drunk when I said it. Why are you looking for one?"

"Not at the moment but a little further down the line."

"So you're back drinking in the Breedon."

"Yes," I said and saw my opening, "It's changed a lot hasn't it."

"Well a lot of people have."

"I suppose that some would call it progress but I'm not sure."

"Well they've even got coppers in there now."

"Sorry," I said pleading ignorance, "What undercover?"

"No drinking. I saw one the other day. He did me years ago for having no tax. Smarmy bastard."

"Really," I said pretending to be surprised, "And he comes into the pub?"

“Yes I think he comes in with his missus and another couple, quite regular as well.”

“I think I know who you mean,” I said pretending to think, “He was in the last time I was in. He must live quite local then?”

“Bourneville way I heard, near the chocolate factory.”

James could not be more specific and I was reluctant to pursue the matter as I did not want to arouse his suspicion. I reasoned that his car would be easy to find and so I left it at that

“So,” I said, “I'd better get off. Look if you change your mind about the bike let us know and hopefully my money situation would have improved.”

“Fine, are you going to the party tonight?”

“Party?”

“Rod's back just in time for his birthday.”

“First I heard,” I said in surprise.

“It's at Strikers. It will be kicking off at around seven. Just turn up you don't need an invite.”

“Sounds good to me I'll probably see you there then.”

I left James and went back to my car. I drove down the Pershore Road and turned into Bourneville on Maryvale Road and drove around the area for a while. I found no sign of his car but maybe he was out working. I decided to try again later on in the evening but remembering Rod's party made it the next day as I was now really keen to see Rod.

I had not worked out my approach as he would more than likely be cagey as he did not really know me. The time wore on and soon it was seven. I did not want to go in too early so I went to the pub first to wait until a more conventional time. The pub was quite full and it looked like most of them would be going down to Strikers later on. The beer was flowing well and most of them looked reasonably drunk already. I knew quite a few of them and got talking to Steve who I had not seen in ages. We played a few games of pool although it was awkward as the bar was getting full. I lost but that was not unusual so I brought him a drink.

“See much of Dave?” he said by way of conversation

“Dave,” I said pretending to think, “A couple of weeks ago.”

“There was a bloke asking after him the other day,” Steve said and this aroused my curiosity.

“Really, what was all that about?”

“I'm not sure. First he was looking for a Richard Billesley and then Dave. I don't know anyone called that.”

“He might have been one of Dave's friends from home,” I said.

“It was probably being about his son he seems to get him in a lot of trouble.”

“Yes, mind you Dave does a good job of that himself.

Steve laughed and said, “Too right.” He looked at his watch and said, “Shall we get off then it eight now.”

“No give it another half hour.”

The pub was emptying a little as the people started to move across but there was still more people coming in to take their places.

“Look like it's going to be a good night,” Steve said, “Rod will be happy he doesn't get back much.”

“What does he do? I don't really know him that well.”

“He's a free lance soldier. Not a bad job by all accounts.”

“That sounds an unusual job. How do you get involved in that sort of thing?”

“He went straight from the army. Mind you he was in the guards.”

“In the guards, what has that got to do with it?”

“Well if you were with them, the paras or the marines they take a special interest in you.”

“Do they, how do you mean?”

“When you are due to leave you find that one of the regular magazines you get has an advert circled 'do you want to do some interesting work' kind of thing and a contact number.”

“Sounds like they know what they are doing. I suppose you do get cowboys as well though.”

“Same as everywhere I suppose though in that game you could easily end up dead if you work with the wrong people.”

“I don't doubt it. It's a dangerous game to begin with.”

“Well I guess we had better be getting on over.”

“Yes it should be picking up a little by now.”

I finished my drink and waited for Steve. He thought it wise to go to the toilet as the cold and beer were not mixing well inside him. We walked down the hill and heard music from the large sport's hall that Strikers was.

Chapter 19

Strikers was definitely a strange venue for a party. At the front of the building was a cricket pitch that although indoors was quite large. The bar itself was in the middle and quite small in size. By the time Steve and I got in it was quite full and we struggled to make our way to the bar. I got the drinks in and we found a gap and we listened to the band. James was in there but the state he was in meant I would get no sense out of him. I recognised a lot of people and my eyes soon fell on Rod. I had only ever really spoken to him in passing and so I did not really know how I was going to broach the subject. I knew how to get in from an army background but I did not have one so it was really quite a waste of time. I did not know how he would react to a civilian wanting to join as I was willing to wager that he got a lot of people coming up to him and asking him what I was going to. He saw Steve and came over, “Alright Steve I'm glad you could make it.”

“Cheers Rod. This is Stuart by the way.” introducing me.

“We've already met,” Rod said and shook my hand, “How's it going Stu?”

“Sound Rod, happy birthday by the way. Do you fancy a drink?”

Rod thought awhile and said, “Go on then I'll have a whiskey no ice.”

“I'll get these,” Steve said, “It must be my round anyway.”

Steve went to the bar and left me alone with Rod. I did not really know how to bring the subject up but Rod gave me a start. “So,” he said, “Are you back for long?”

“I'm just passing through really,” I said not knowing that he knew I had moved.

“I can't stay in one place for too long either. Guess I've got itchy feet.”

“I know what you mean I get bored too easily.”

“You want to do what I do, you never get bored.”

“Really,” I said pleading ignorance, “What's that then?”

“Soldering, you travel all over the world.”

“Sounds good, must be a hard thing to get involved in though.”

“Word of mouth and there's plenty of work about, good money too.”

“Wouldn't I need to be ex army though? I've never been in.”

“Have you ever fired a gun because if you have you're halfway there?”

“Yes I used to go pistol shooting down my local club. Mind you I don't know much about them.”

“You'll soon pick it up it's kind of kill or cure,” and laughed.

I think he must have been a little drunk to be so open with me but it sounded good and so I pursued it, “I wouldn't mind giving it a go but I expect you get a lot of people saying that.”

“One or two but they soon disappear when it comes close to leaving.”

“Yes,” I said smiling, “I bet they do especially when the drink wears off.”

“Got it in one, the outfit is looking for someone if you are really interested but I'll have to introduce you to someone first.”

“You will?”

“Yes he'll want to check you over and see what you are made off. You know how it is.”

“Yes it stands to reason really doesn't it? You don't want someone who would run off at the first sign of danger.”

“True,” he said and thought awhile, “You might do well in it. You seem to have the quality we are

looking for.”

“I do, in what way?”

“You know what you are talking about and you've been around long enough to sort the wheat from the chaff.”

Steve came back with the drinks and Rod talked about general things whilst he was there. He left us to it after giving me his number and telling me to get in touch. He said he would be going back in four days so if he had not heard before then he would know I was not interested.”What was all that about?” Steve said after he had left.

“Oh nothing really he was after a bike and I said I might be able to help.”

“Oh, James is selling one you know.”

“I'm not sure that he is. I went around to see him earlier when he was sober and he felt differently.”

“Oh it's the beer then I should have known. I'm looking for a bike myself now, something to take on as a winter project. Let us know if you came across anything would you?”

“Yes I'll keep my ear to the ground. Mind you I'll probably be moving on soon.”

“Really where you got in mind.”

“Might go up to Hull I could get some work up there with my cousin.”

“Well it's not what you know.”

“Ain't that the truth,” I said and laughed.

“I thought that Dave would be along he was a good mate of Rod's.”

“He might be along later then. Mind you I heard his lad cleaned him out big time so he might not have any money.”

“Yes I heard that as well. Families eh.”

“Drugs, they've taken over from money as the root of all evil.”

“They're more addictive than money and that's the truth.”

“Do they still use them in the pub,” I said remembering the numerous little rooms that were upstairs?

“Mainly draw now. There's been a big crack down ever since it's been taken over. They even reckon that the place has been staked out once or twice.”

“Do they? James said that there were coppers drinking in it but he said that they were just locals.”

“That James for you, he talks but he does not say anything.”

“So,” I said rethinking my strategy, “They were undercover then. I saw some when I came in on a dinner.”

“On a dinner time, that's unusual. Maybe he's right then.”

I was more confused now as I tried to work out what was happening. If they were undercover they could be from anywhere and I was no further forward. I wanted Chris sorted out within four days as I had a strong yearning to get in touch with Rod. If as James said they were just locals out for a drink my job would be a lot easier. I knew I had to sort Chris out before I left as I did not want to leave any loose ends so if I did not find him in time I would not be able to go. I put him to the back of my mind and concentrated on enjoying myself. The band was good and I was soon in the swing. I must have drunk a lot for by the time it was finished I was well gone. The cold outside air hit me square in the face and nearly knocked me off my feet. I decided to go for a walk and try and sober up as I did not want to be found drunk in charge of a car. I decided to walk along the canal side and see what was happening. I don't know if it was the drink but I had an uneasy feeling that I was being watched. I walked further down and the feeling stayed with me. I decided to slip behind a wall and see if I had anything to worry about. As I shivered and waited I heard the rustle of grass and saw a water rat dive into the canal. I cursed my paranoia and carried on my way. The feeling was still with me but I put it down the drink and took no heed of it.

I got as far as Bourneville station and then I saw him. It was Chris and he was quickly making his way towards me. I waited and looking to the ground saw half a brick. I did not pick it up straight away but made a note of where it was.

"It's payback time," he said as he got closer.

I was a little reluctant at first as he was a police officer but as I thought of Dave my unwillingness disappeared. I had reasoned that as he had killed once he would do it again and I was not going to be the second. I looked at him and said, "I see you've been talking to Dave."

This made him laugh loudly and say, "That little drunk, he was easy and now I've got the taste."

"Not very professional though," I said trying to antagonise him, "Very frenzied it was almost the work of a coward."

"We all have to start somewhere," he said indifferently, "I mean what was yours like?"

"Colin Jones, he was easy."

"Colin Jones. Not bad. You had me fooled I thought it was just a mugging that had gone wrong."

"You weren't on your own there. I fooled a lot of people."

"You did well. You wiped out most of my outfit but now your time has come."

"Oh," I said trying to unnerve him, "They all said that. Roy and the two doormen. Tell me something by the way, why do you deal with such trash as that. I mean it does not make sense from any point of view does it?"

"So you did for them as well. Well you are right, I will be more careful in future."

"What makes you think that you have a future? You have not got past me yet."

"I shouldn't think that you will be much of a problem. I mean you are not dealing with smack-heads now."

"No just a wannabee gangster who hasn't a gang anymore."

"So anyway," Chris said indifferently. "Before I kill you I want to know what it was all about. You were trying to take over weren't you?"

"What," I said laughing, "You think that that was it?"

"What else. What would make a man kill like that?"

"You put away a very good friend of mine and one thing just led to another. Now tell me, why would you want to harm a helpless man like Dave?"

"Dave, you must mean the thief that broke into Paul's place?"

"No I meant that drunk."

"Oh him, one thing just led to another, it was easy really."

I saw him edge closer and try and get on the inside. I reasoned that he would try and push me into the canal first as I would be a dead weight wet and so I moved further in to counter attack. He saw me move and said, "So maybe you will put up a good fight but not against this," and pulled out a knife, "Dave liked this."

"I'll put it in the coffin then just as soon as I've taken it off you."

He thrust the knife wildly forward but I side stepped with ease. It's amazing how quickly the sight of a knife sobers you up; I was fully agile and aware of my surroundings by then. He came forward again slashing wildly and just missing my face.

"Close," I said, "But not close enough."

This vexed him as I had hoped it would and he tried again. This time he plunged low in the vain hope of catching my stomach. I moved back quickly and threw a punch but it was short. He came forward again but this time he was more guarded. He slashed again but this time he was more controlled. It looked like his temper had subsided and he was being more professional. I would have to work quickly as he was going to play his advantage well. He circled around again and tried to drive me into the water. I moved backwards to avoid him but he carried on with the same motion. I saw the brick but by now it was well out of reach and my only hope was a chance of a full on attack. I needed protection against the blade but there was nothing that would do. I would not have time to take my jacket off and wrap it around my hand as he was too close and would be on me well before I did it.

"You know," he said, "It does not have to be this way."

"What?"

“You could still work for me we could make a lot of money. I've seen you in action and you'll go far. I'm offering you a job.”

This was unexpected and maybe it was a trap so I had to make sure, “What is this, some sort of trap?”

“Look I've got the advantage and could finish you off at any time. I don't need to trap you.”

“You're serious; you want me to work for you.”

“With me if you like. You know the running of the place and I daresay you also know the contacts as well. I mean you must have known Jones and Johnson to get that close. We could make a financial killing instead of this. Let's be honest there is no money in it one way or the other.”

“What about Dave, he got six years.”

“He'll be out in three. I could give him a job or you could as it would be your show in the end. I just want to take over from Paul.”

To be honest the offer was tempting as I had seen how much money they were worth. He had confused me more than slightly and I was reluctant to drop my guard. “I'm not sure,” I said and he could see that I was softening, “I don't know if I can trust you.”

“That works both ways but if we want to make it pay we need each other and what better bond than mutual dependence.”

“Hang on a minute you don't know what's going on with the business do you?”

“No,” he said honestly, “Putting the cards on the table I don't. But don't forget that you need me to keep the law of your back; you will never succeed without me, as I said earlier mutual dependency.”

I could see the truth in what he was saying and I was close to agreeing but Dave's blood stained body must have had more of an effect on me than I had realised. I could still try to capitalise on the deal though by pretending to be interested until he dropped his guard. I knew that he had a distinct advantage with the knife and he was much more controlled so I would not be able to panic him.

“I don't know. I would need a little time for a decision like that. Maybe if you could help Dave in prison some way I'd be a bit more favourable.”

“You haven't got time I would want a decision tonight. As for Dave I could see what I could do but I wouldn't hold out any hopes. He was stitched up good and proper. Mind you he was caught red handed.”

I thought about that and thought it prudent to say, “Alright I'll let it go with Dave. So what sort of deal are you offering?”

“Nice to see that you have sense, split straight down the middle. You can take over from Steve and I'll take over from Paul.”

“Won't that get in the way of your police work?” I said and then regretted it although it was to work to my advantage.

“What, are you trying to be funny?”

“No but if you are taking over from Paul you'll need a lot of time to run it. I mean you're not expecting just to do nothing like before.”

“What, what do you mean do nothing?”

I knew that I had him and so I pursued the matter, “You might be able to get a burglar convicted but that's not a big deal is it.”

“I'll pull my weight,” he said angrily, “Don't worry about that.”

“We'll see. No offence but in this job we don't carry passengers.”

“I see what you mean,” he said calming down. I cursed myself for losing the advantage but I knew how to wind him up in future, “Mind you that cuts both ways.”

“In what way?”

“Well I've seen you kill before but that's all. How will that help with the books?”

“I've done all that before,” I lied, “And Steve showed me the ropes just as Martin did. I know the job as much as they do.”

“So what happens now? We could talk all night but I want to know the answer.”

“First things first we have a body to get rid off.”

“Does that mean you're in,” he said sounding relieved.

“As long as you don't expect me to do everything I'm game.” I answered. I had decided that it would be in my interests to get rid of Dave's body as I could have ended up on a murder charge. I was the last one seen stopping there and some people might put two and two together and I'd get what for.

“That's fine by me,” he said and offered his hand in friendship. I shook it and we made our way back down to Strikers. We talked little as there was still a sense of distrust between us.

“I think we had better get rid of it tonight,” I said after a while.

“What's the hurry we could do it tomorrow.”

“No it's dark now and less suspicious and besides once we've cleared this mess we can start picking up the pieces at home.”

“Okay that's sounds reasonable.”

“I've got the keys so we shouldn't have any problems getting in. His neighbour will probably think he's gone back home to Manchester as they must know he hates this place.”

“It all fits in nicely then.”

“There is one thing I would like to know,” I said and watched his face change to a look of wariness. He looked like he was going to make a grab for the knife as he said, “Yes?”

“When you recorded the deal with Dave, how did you manage to make it that only the things incriminating him were taped? I mean I remember him telling me that you offered him drugs and guns but that never appeared in the transcripts.”

“Oh,” he said easing off slightly, “That was easy I just covered up the microphone and rustled it a bit.”

“I thought so. God it was so easy. I was thinking of the lines of it being doctored.”

“No,” he said laughing, “I haven't got that kind of sway. It was an open and shut case anyway. We were just tying up loose ends.”

“So what about the defence they did not seem too interested in it at all.”

“Same again, he was lost from the start as he was caught red handed. They were probably just trying to get him the best deal that they could.”

“Six years, that was some sort of deal.”

“Water under the bridge now, he'll be out before you know it.”

“True. It's just that I've been racking my brains out trying to come up with the answers.”

“It does get confusing,” he said laughing, “He'll want for nothing when he gets out though. It will be worth it in the end.”

“True, now first things first we'll get rid of Dave. I reckon we'll use my car as if its spotted it should be safe.”

“It will. How can you be sure?”

“It's still registered in the last owners name so he'll get all the flack and I'll bet he's even forgotten what I looked like as I was clean shaven at the time.”

“Maybe you have got a brain after all,” he said quite impressed, “Where are you parked?”

“Not far now. Have you been drinking?”

“No, not at all today.”

“You'd better drive then. I must be well over the limit.”

“Sure. No problem.”

I could see that he had been taken over by greed and so he was quite an easy man to get to. I would just bide my time and wait for the right moment. I had decided to get rid of the body first and so when I disappeared there would be no come backs.

About half way into King's Heath I showed Chris where I had parked the car. We decided to go in and clean the house up first as there was a lot of blood lying around. We could only bring the car

around when everything was ready as we did not want to be hanging around the street longer than possible. We walked down Warren Road and it was quiet. I looked to see that Dave's light was still off and make sure that his son had not returned. Everything seemed the same as I had left it so I got out his key and we both went in. The place looked a mess but that was not unusual.

"There shouldn't be anything to do downstairs," Chris said, "Most of the action was upstairs."

"In the bathroom, it won't take long to clean then."

We cleaned through the upstairs but as Chris had been careful about leaving fingerprints it was just a case of clearing up the blood. It took about 30 minutes to get the place looking immaculate and I said, "We shouldn't really do that good a job as it would be just as suspicious with Dave like he was."

Chris found that amusing and laughed although not loudly. I carried Dave down to the front room and Chris left to fetch the car. Whilst he was away I took a look around the kitchen and found a small knife. It did not look too sturdy but it was the best available so I hid it away and awaited Chris' return. He was only gone about five minutes and when he came back I checked the street. There was a young couple walking away from us but we thought it advisable to let them turn the corner out of our vision before moving the body.

We had decided to bury Dave out in the country just past Withal as it was close and we were in a hurry. We did not want to be driving too far with a dead body in the boot as that might be tempting fate. I looked around Dave's shed and found a couple of shovels and took them back inside. Chris after making sure that no one was looking took them outside and put them in the boot of the car. We brought Dave out and did the same with him. It was not a long drive although it seemed it and we were soon out of the city and heading into the countryside.

"What about over there?" Chris said pointing at a large field.

"You want a bit of woodland really as then there'll be not much chance of it being turned over by a plough."

"That would depend on how deep you dug."

"We haven't really got the time to dig too deep and anyway that field is very open. Knowing our luck we will be half way down and get disturbed."

"Fair point you've obviously done this before."

"Once or twice," I said with a smile, "It becomes second nature after a bit."

"Well I'll leave the choice to you then."

"Not long now," I said deep in thought, "If I remember rightly there's a bit of forest around here. It's quite deep and so should be ideal."

"Sounds good to me, look there's a picnic sign. We could leave the car there and return to it when we've finished digging the hole."

"Good idea the place isn't far from here." we parked up and went into the cold dark forest.

Chapter 20

We stumbled through the dense undergrowth and I wished I had have had the foresight to have brought a torch. We were both very quiet as we were looking out for stray logs and the like. It was quite dangerous really as it was an easy place to stumble. Eventually we found a little bit of a clearing and decided to dig there. It was not as far in as I would have liked but it would have to do. I had not forgotten that we still had to drag the body over yet.

"This will do," I said and Chris was quick to agree.

"How deep are we going?"

"Six feet, we've got a little more time now as I should not think there'll be anyone around for quite a while."

"Alright," he said, "I'll go first." he dug surprisingly quickly and he was soon down his half. I took over from there and he said, "Why don't I go and fetch the body as it will save a lot of time."

"Good idea, don't forget the way though."

"It's alright I used to be a boy scout." he disappeared and I carried on with my work. It was hard going now as the soil was a lot harder to get through once we'd passed the top soil. It was very clayey and stuck on my spade with every shovelful. I eventually finished and to my surprise Chris had not returned yet. I thought that he had got lost at first but as time passed on I thought he might be up to something. I did not quite know what and it was an irrational thought as he needed me more than I needed him but it came just the same. After another five minutes I heard a noise coming towards me. It was definitely Chris and it sounded like he was struggling. As he came within range he said, "He's got some weight for a little man."

"All that beer, it's just lucky we did not go any further in."

"True. I was ready just to leave him I can tell you."

"Well you're here now and the hole is dug."

"The hard work is done all we have to do is bury him. That shouldn't take too long."

We put Dave in the hole and I pretended to say a prayer for him. This surprised Chris though he said nothing about it. I picked up the shovel as if I was going to bury Dave but at the last moment swung it and caught Chris behind the head sending him to the floor. He fell heavily although he was not unconscious. He looked at me and said, "Why? We could have been good together."

"We were playing different games. It would not have worked out. It would have happened one day so why not now."

"I should have killed you when I had the chance. Why did I let you go?" he was talking more to himself than me but I thought I would answer it anyway, "Greed. Pure and simple."

I lifted the shovel to finish him off and he looked at me and said, "No, I don't want to die like this."

"It's as good a way as any," I said and let the shovel fly and split his head in two. I kicked his body into the hole and finished the job of burying them. I had already thrown in the kitchen knife after wiping off the finger prints and one of the shovels. It took quite a long time to bury him and when it was finished I was tired. I debated on whether to sleep in the car but thought it too risky so drove back to Birmingham. The streets were very quiet and I parked up where I normally did and spent the night at Dave's. I felt unusually light as if a weight had been lifted off me and when I found that Dave had left some draw behind it was the icing on the cake. I sat awhile and felt warm inside as I rolled a high brand cigarette. I saw that it was still only three o'clock and so I made myself a cup of tea and settled down to a smoke. The atmosphere in my mind was light and clear and I soon drifted off to sleep.

I found myself back in the burning village with Joseph of Bardon's body at my feet. I turned around and looked for where Nigel of Davenport might have gone. The streets were deserted now just smoke and sand but I heard a noise coming from the building that he had tried to jump me from. I cautiously opened the door and walked in. It was a strange building and I found it hard to see as it too had been burned. The fire had died down a lot but the smoke still remained. I found it hard to move without nearly tripping over something but eventually I got to the other side of the main room. Noises outside alerted me to Mary. She was screaming wildly and I rushed out to help her. Davenport had her in his arms and held a knife to her throat. "Don't come any closer," He warned but I chose to disregard it, "I'm warning you," he shouted, "I'm not afraid to kill her."

"And then what happens," I found myself saying.

"Look why not just keep the woman and let me go? None of this was any of my doing I was just following Walton."

"Well you'll follow him to his death then."

"I'm a rich man. I'm worth a lot more to you alive than dead."

"I don't need your money and where you're going you won't need it either."

"Look it's over. Take the woman you've won."

"She's mine anyway. Maybe I ought to spare you."

"Yes, you'll be handsomely rewarded I'll make sure of that."

"So what have you got to offer me?"

“You'll never need to work again. Your every need will be catered for. Your family will have their titles back and the treason charge will be dropped. I will make sure of that for I am not without power in the court.”

“I have your word as a knight that all this will be so?”

“Yes,” he said loosening his grip on the knife, “You shall return a hero to a hero's welcome. As it is said then so is it done.”

“What about the others they all lie dead, how will the King react to that? Were they not his favorites?”

“The King's favour changes with the weather. Once he has heard of your brave deeds he will gladly pardon you.”

“You speak for the King. What makes you so sure?”

“As I said I am not without power in the court.”

“How do I know you are a man of trust, after all you judge a man by his associates do you not?”

“I was involved although not by choice. I too was a victim as much as you.”

“Come sir, do you expect me to believe you? What manner of fool do you have me for?”

“Tis truth and I swear before God almighty that it's so. They had something on my father though I know not what. He told me to follow.”

“How does that fare true, if you had power in the court why did you not use it for yourself?”

“My father forbade it for he was well under their spell.”

“More likely it was he who was involved in the act of treason and that would make you the son of a treacherous dog.”

“Maybe but I cannot choose my father as you can not choose yours.”

“You speak sense but that does not bring trust.”

“That is all I have to offer at the moment but things will be different now Bardon and Walton have gone. Mark my words for you shall see for yourself very soon.”

“So you say but have you the trust to let the girl go?”

“Only if you will allow me to yield before you by the code of honour that I live.”

“Fair enough you may let her go.”

He let Mary go and she came over to me. Nigel got down on one knee and said, “I yield by.....”

I ran my sword through him and he looked up and said, “Why? Are you not a man of honour?”

“I'll leave that to the rich,” I answered and then turned to Mary and said, “Now Mary I have done.”

She lifted her veil and I fell backwards in shock, “Theresa?”

The whole scene shifted and I was back inside the tent with no sign of Mary or Theresa or whoever she was. Richard stood before me and said, “Congratulations your work is done.”

“What the hell is going on?” I said angrily.

“You have freed Mary from her chains.”

“What, that's Theresa my mate's wife. What are you playing at?”

“She was Mary my brother's wife and now she is free to return to him.”

“So you mean to tell me that you went through all that bother for your brother's wife. Why, hasn't he a sword?”

“He was rotting in jail on charges of treason along with my father and younger brother.”

“What? What the hell is going on?”

“It's a long story and you have probably worked out a lot of the details already.”

“Enlighten me for I have just killed a few people and I want to know what for.”

“To try and save your mate as any good friend would.”

“What about all that lifting of the veils was that just a load of rubbish?”

“You saved Theresa's life just as I had tried to save Mary's. We have a lot in common, more than you could ever know.”

“So why seven veils though,” I said still confused.

“One for each foe, each link in Mary's chain if you like. Just as you had seven conspirators so did I.

By defeating your foes you helped to defeat mine. It was as simple as that.”

“No I would call it anything but simple. You must have been lying to me all the time. You conned me into thinking that Mary would be mine for eternity.”

“Well alright I might have stretched the truth but don't forget that it was you that lifted the first veil.”

“Look,” I said angrily, “I don't regret killing them as they were vermin but I object to being lied to, to sort out a mess that you could not sort out yourself.”

“Oh but I did and as for that mess, you did not need much encouragement from me as it is in your nature to kill.”

“What, what crap are you trying to hand me, we're a lot more civilised now.”

“I was talking about your nature, though man's true nature doesn't take much to surface. Your nature is my nature for you were once me.”

“How do you work that out? It sounds to me like you are just making it up as you go along.”

“Look at yourself in the mirror and you will see what I mean.”

“Very smart but there is no mirror about.”

“Then you will have to just trust me but can't you see that it was history repeating itself.”

“I don't see no parallel only the people but that could just be a dream.”

“So could I, so could I.”

“I'm wasting my time. I don't ever want to see you again. I've done your work for you so leave me in peace.”

“If that's what you want but everywhere you look you will see me for now I am you.”

“What, explain yourself.”

“With every veil that you lifted you became more like me. You changed not just physically but mentally as well.”

“Changed? But I don't feel any different.”

“It was a gradual thing more of an evolution. Look at your life now what are your plans?”

“I'm getting out of the country for a start.”

“Yes you have taken my advice.”

“No,” I protested, “I was going to do it anyway.”

“With a little friendly guidance who do you think warned you that you were being followed?”

“No, that was just a feeling that was inside me.”

“Yes,” he said with a smile, “It was me.”

“Are you trying to tell me that you warned me? Do you really expect me to believe that?”

“Whether you believe it or not it does not mean that it is not true.”

“So why didn't you warn me about those doormen then?”

“Maybe you needed a lesson. Count yourself lucky that it was given by a couple of amateurs.”

“You mean you could have warned me but you chose not to.”

“It was for you own good for you were too cocky. You needed to know pain as it would make you more cunning.”

I could see his logic but I would not tell him that, instead I just said, “So what happens now?”

“Your life and your world I would never last two minutes in yours just as you wouldn't in mine.”

“So you mean that's it. It's all done?”

“Yes,” Richard answered and disappeared.

I found myself back in Dave's living room on his settee. I looked to the time and saw to my dismay that it was only seven o'clock.”Oh well,” I said to myself and got up to make a cup of tea. As I passed the stairs I happened to glance in the mirror. I stopped in my tracks as I saw Richard of Billesley returning my look. He was dressed the same as me, in fact he was me.

Look out for The Path of Shadows