



**MORE**

# SHORT FUSES

**STEPHEN LEATHER**

# **MORE SHORT FUSES**

By Stephen Leather

\*\*\*

Published by  
Stephen Leather at OBOOKO

Copyright © 2014 by Stephen Leather

\*\*\*\*

All rights reserved. Without limiting the rights under copyright reserved above, no part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in or introduced into a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form, or by any means (electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise) without the prior written permission of both the copyright owner and the above publisher of this book.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, brands, media, and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. The author acknowledges the trademarked status and trademark owners of various products referenced in this work of fiction, which have been used without permission. The publication/use of these trademarks is not authorized, associated with, or sponsored by the trademark owners.

## **Obooko Licence Notes**

This is an authorised free digital edition from [www.obooko.com](http://www.obooko.com)

Although you do not have to pay for this e-book, the author's intellectual property rights remain fully protected by international Copyright law. You are licensed to use this digital copy strictly for your personal enjoyment only: it must not be redistributed commercially or offered for sale in any form. If you paid for this free edition, or to gain access to it, we suggest you demand an immediate refund and report the transaction to the author and obooko.

\*\*\*\*

More Short Fuses is a collection of four free short stories from bestselling author Stephen Leather. The short stories are followed by sample chapters of some of his bestselling thrillers. If you want to stop reading at the end of the free short stories, that's just fine. You can find out more about Stephen Leather at [www.stephenleather.com](http://www.stephenleather.com) or follow him on Twitter at [www.twitter/stephenleather](https://twitter.com/stephenleather) If you do enjoy the short stories, please do leave a review. Reviews actually do make a difference and writers are always grateful for them.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

[About The Author](#)

[Rules Of Engagement](#)

[The Constituency Meeting](#)

[Ghost Kids](#)

[Massage Therapy](#)

[The Stretch \(first chapter\)](#)

[The Tunnel Rats \(first chapter\)](#)

[The Solitary Man \(first chapter\)](#)

[The Eyewitness \(first chapter\)](#)

[Hard Landing \(first chapter\)](#)

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Stephen Leather is one of the UK's most successful thriller writers, an eBook and Sunday Times bestseller and author of the critically acclaimed Dan "Spider" Shepherd series and the Jack Nightingale supernatural detective novels. Before becoming a novelist he was a journalist for more than ten years on newspapers such as The Times, the Daily Mirror, the Glasgow Herald, the Daily Mail and the South China Morning Post in Hong Kong. He is one of the country's most successful eBook authors and his eBooks have topped the Amazon Kindle charts in the UK and the US.. His bestsellers have been translated into fifteen languages. He has also written for television shows such as London's Burning, The Knock and the BBC's Murder in Mind series and two of his books, The Stretch and The Bombmaker, were filmed for TV. You can find out more from his website [www.stephenleather.com](http://www.stephenleather.com) and you can follow him on Twitter at [www.twitter.com/stephenleather](http://www.twitter.com/stephenleather)

## RULES OF ENGAGEMENT

Dan Shepherd carried his microwaved Marks and Spencer meal over to the coffee table and sat down. Working undercover meant he was never sure when he'd be able to eat so the fridge was full of ready meals that could be microwaved at short notice. He'd chosen pork sausages in onion gravy with mashed potatoes, and as he sat and ate he had to admit that it wasn't half bad.

There were four phones lined up on the coffee table. The Blackberry was his own. The Nokia was a pay-as-you-go and the only number he'd ever called on it belonged to a sailor who at that minute was somewhere out in the English Channel, hopefully heading towards the south coast. The iPhone had three numbers stored in it, all big-time drug dealers based in Spain. The Samsung had two Sim cards in it along with the numbers of the accountant who had served as middleman in a multi-million pound cocaine deal that Shepherd was involved in, the man driving the truck that would collect the drugs, and half a dozen drinking buddies who all thought Shepherd's name was Micky Lawson.

If all went to plan the sailor would confirm the arrival of the drugs on the south coast, and a few hours later the driver would confirm delivery to a warehouse in North London. At that point Shepherd would make a call to Charlotte Button and armed cops would move in, seizing the drugs and the members of the gang who had put the deal together. It would bring to an end an operation that had taken the best part of three months to put together. For most of that time Shepherd had been living in a luxury Thames-side apartment with stunning views along the river, playing the part of armed robber turned drug dealer Lawson. He would be glad when it was over – he had pretty much overdosed on steak dinners, Cristal champagne and nightclubs full of young women with a thing for well-heeled gangsters.

The Blackberry burst into life and he put down his fork and reached for it. The caller was withholding his number but he hit the green button anyway. Most of his friends and colleagues were the secretive type and more often than not Shepherd blocked his own number.

He put the phone to his ear. 'Yeah?'

'Spider? It's Billy. Billy Armstrong.'

'Long time, no hear, Billy,' said Shepherd. It had been three years since he'd last seen the former SAS trooper, and the time before that they'd been in Iraq, trying to rescue Geordie Mitchell. The late Geordie Mitchell. Late as in dead, shot by a Taliban sniper.

'Where are you?'

'On the sofa in front of the TV.'

'Don't be a prick, Spider. This is serious.'

'London.'

'Have you got Sky News?'

Shepherd picked up the remote and flicked through the channels. 'What's going on, Billy?'

'Jock McIntyre's in trouble.'

Sky News came onto the screen. A camera had focussed on a terraced house. Parked in front of the house was a police car. The front windscreen was smashed and one of the tyres was flat. Across the bottom of the screen was a headline that said 'BREAKING NEWS – Gun Siege In Brixton.' Shepherd frowned as he turned up the volume. 'What am I looking at?' he said.

'Jock's the guy under siege,' said Armstrong.

'Are you serious?' Shepherd leaned forward. A woman was talking, hesitantly as if she was making it up as she went along. 'Police say shots were fired from the house and that after they

went to investigate, more shots were fired. The police have now evacuated neighbours and two armed response vehicles are on the scene.'

'They haven't said it's Jock,' said Shepherd.

'Yeah, well it is,' said Armstrong. 'I was there last year. Had a few beers with him and I had to take him home.'

The camera pulled back and Shepherd saw a police armed response vehicle parked across the road. Three men in black coveralls and bullet-proof vests were checking their carbines.

'Did he have a gun?' asked Shepherd.

'He wasn't waving one around, but he wouldn't be the first of the lads to be holding onto something for a rainy day. Where in London?'

'Battersea.'

'I'll see you there, yeah?'

Shepherd stared at the three mobile phones on the coffee table in front of him.

'Spider? You're on your way, right?'

Spider sighed and gathered up the phones as he stood up. 'Yeah. I'll be there.'

\* \* \*

The black cab slowed at the sight of two police cars that blocked the road ahead of them. Two cops in fluorescent jackets were standing next to two police cars that had been drawn up nose to nose to block off the road. Two younger uniformed cops were stringing blue and white police tape across the road. 'There's a problem up ahead,' said the driver. 'I don't think I can get any closer.'

'This is fine,' said Shepherd. He got out and thrust a ten pound note through the window.

'Need a receipt?' asked the driver.

Shepherd shook his head. 'No, I won't be claiming this on expenses. Keep the change.'

The driver thanked him, flicked on the yellow light, and drove off. 'Spider!' Shepherd looked to his left. Billy Armstrong was climbing off a high-powered Kawasaki motorbike, green with black flashings. He was dressed in black leathers and took off a black full-face crash helmet as he walked over to Shepherd. He took off his gloves and the two men shook hands and hugged. 'Nice bike,' said Shepherd.

'My pride and joy,' said Armstrong. He gestured at the two cops. 'Think you can get us in there?'

'I'll give it a go,' said Shepherd.

'I thought you James Bond types had a get-out-of-jail card you can wave,' said Armstrong.'

'Bond was MI6, I'm MI5, and no, we don't have a card, just our manly good looks and natural charm.'

'You know James Bond was a fictional character, right?' laughed Armstrong. He slapped Shepherd on the back. 'So what's the plan?'

'Just let me do the talking,' said Shepherd. They walked over to the cops. One of them was already holding up a hand. 'The road's closed, gents,' he said. 'You can take any of the roads parallel.'

Shepherd nodded. 'Who's the silver commander here?' he asked.

The older of the two cops frowned. 'And you are?'

Shepherd stared stonily at the man. 'The gent who's asking who the silver commander is. Is there a reason you can't tell me?'

The cop tilted his head on the side as he tried to get the measure of Shepherd. The authority in Shepherd's voice let him know that he meant business, but he wasn't wearing a uniform and he hadn't shown any ID. The cop looked at his colleague but he was equally unsure and he looked away, over Armstrong's shoulder.

'Superintendent Walker has just arrived.'

Shepherd nodded. 'I need you to tell Superintendent Walker that we are here. We're former colleagues of the man holed up in that house.'

'You know him, do you?'

'Denis McIntyre? Yeah, we served with him in Afghanistan.'

'And you are?'

Shepherd's eyes hardened. 'We're under some time pressure here, constable,' he said. 'Your Specialist Firearms Officers are getting ready to go in and if that happens a lot of people are going to get hurt. And if it turns out that happened because you kept me and my colleague out of the loop I figure the silver commander is going to be a very unhappy man. Just tell him we're here, okay? Let him make the decision. That's why he's paid the big bucks.'

The constable took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. Shepherd continued to stare at the policeman and eventually the man nodded and walked away.

'Gold, silver, how does that work?' asked Armstrong.

'The Gold Commander is in overall control, but he's usually sitting in a nice, warm office somewhere,' said Shepherd. 'He's almost always a senior cop. The Silver Commander is the guy on the spot, basically managing tactics but reporting to Gold. Silvers are usually at the scene but not always. They're never sergeants or constables, they'll be an inspector at the minimum. Something like this, a possible shoot-out, it makes sense for a superintendent to be on the scene. Silver will tell the Bronze Commanders what to do. They're the guys who'll get the job done.'

'Sounds like too many chiefs and not enough Indians. More like the Army than the Regiment.'

Shepherd nodded. 'Yeah, it's as much an arse-covering strategy as anything,' he said. 'And as always, the shit rolls downhill.'

The constable returned with a uniformed Superintendent. The officer was barely out of his thirties which meant he was probably a fast-tracked graduate. Shepherd smiled and offered his hand, knowing that it was important to get off on the right foot. It was easy enough to browbeat a constable but that wouldn't work with a superintendent.

'Dan Shepherd,' said Shepherd by way of introduction. 'I served with the man who's in there. In Afghanistan.'

The superintendent shook hands. Shepherd could feel the officer weighing him up. There was a sharp intelligence behind the eyes and his grip was strong and firm. 'Simon Walker,' he said.

Walker shook hands with Armstrong. 'Billy Armstrong,' said Armstrong.

The superintendent looked at Shepherd. 'Served, you said. In what capacity?'

'We were all in the SAS.'

The superintendent's eyes narrowed. 'That's not good news,' he said.

'No one told you?' asked Shepherd.

'We knew he was a former soldier, an SAS background obviously takes it to another level. What can you tell me about Mr McIntyre's state of mind?'

The question was addressed to Shepherd but it was Armstrong who answered. 'He was pretty depressed last time I saw him. And he was drinking.'

'When was that?'

'A few months ago.'

'And he was depressed about what?'

‘He was finding it difficult to get work. And his family life is a mess.’

‘You know he has a history of domestic violence?’ asked the superintendent.

Armstrong grimaced. ‘He was always sorry afterwards.’ He held up his hands. ‘I’m not making excuses, I told him he was wrong and he knew it.’

The superintendent nodded. ‘Okay,’ he said. ‘Did you know he had a gun?’

It was a leading question and Shepherd stepped in before Armstrong could say something incriminating. ‘Has anyone been hurt?’

The superintendent turned to look at Shepherd. If he was annoyed about the interruption, he didn’t show it. ‘Shots have been fired but there are no casualties,’ he said. ‘So you are former SAS, right??’

Shepherd nodded.

‘And what do you do now?’

‘I was with SOCA for a few years, but now I’m with the Home Office.’

The superintendent pursed his lips and nodded slowly. ‘Home Office? Okay,’ He turned to look at Armstrong. ‘And you, Mr Armstrong?’

‘Private security,’ said Armstrong. ‘Overseas, mainly.’

‘We know that Mr McIntyre has a handgun, but are you aware of him having any other weapons?’

Armstrong shook his head. ‘He didn’t mention it. He’s been out of the SAS for more than three years and he’s been unemployed for the past twelve months. I don’t see that he’d have access to weapons.’

‘He was overseas? Afghanistan? Iraq?’

‘Afghanistan,’ said Shepherd.

‘Well, he wouldn’t be the only one of your lot to bring back a souvenir or two,’ said the superintendent. ‘I just hope we’re not dealing with grenades and an AK-47.’

‘I don’t think he had anything like that,’ said Armstrong.

‘Guesses aren’t going to do me much good,’ said the superintendent tersely.

‘What’s the strategy?’ asked Shepherd.

‘Containment until the negotiating team gets here,’ said the superintendent. ‘We’ve cleared the neighbouring houses and we’ve got entrances front and back covered. Until we establish communication there’s not much else we can do.’

‘There’s no indication of what set him off?’ asked Shepherd. ‘No arguments with neighbours?’

The superintendent shook his head. ‘Someone called 999 and reported hearing shots. A patrol car was sent to the area and he shot out the windows and tyres.’

‘That’s a good sign,’ said Shepherd.

The superintendent frowned. ‘In what way?’

‘He was a good shot. If he’d wanted to hit them he would have.’

The superintendent’s frown deepened. ‘Which begs the question, what did he hope to achieve by shooting up a car.’

‘Do you know who made the call?’

‘It was a pay-as-you-go mobile. We’re assuming it was a neighbour.’

‘The phone’s off now?’

The superintendent’s eyes narrowed. ‘How did you know that?’

‘Because you said you assumed it was a neighbour. I’m assuming you would have called the number for intel and if the call had gone through you’d have known for sure who had made the call.’



The superintendent flashed Shepherd a cold smile. 'Can't fault your logic,' he said. 'You're right. The phone's off.' Realisation dawned and his eyes widened. 'You're thinking that McIntyre made the call?'

Shepherd nodded. 'Fast-track graduate or not, the superintendent had his head screwed on right. 'If the only damage is the car, then it would make sense.'

The superintendent sighed. 'So we're looking at suicide by cop, that's what you're saying. Terrific.' He looked over at Armstrong. 'We'd like to talk to Mrs McIntyre. Do you have any idea where she is?'

'Exeter, I think. Jock said she'd gone off with a used car salesman.'

'Jock?'

'That's his nickname,' said Armstrong. 'No one calls him Denis.'

'Any other family you know about? Parents?'

'He was a Barnardo's boy,' said Armstrong. 'Joined the Army at eighteen.'

'And he's unemployed, you said?'

Armstrong nodded. 'He was a contractor out in Afghanistan for a few years after he left the SAS, but that work had dried up. He was asking me if I could find him something...' He shrugged. 'I told him he'd have to sort the drinking out first. The days of having a drink on the job are long gone.'

'Okay, well thanks for that, guys,' said the superintendent. He turned to go.

'Superintendent, how about you let us go in and talk to him?'

The officer shook his head. 'I can't allow civilians to be involved. Out of the question.'

'Strictly speaking, I'm not a civilian,' said Shepherd.

'Home Office? Do you want to be more specific?'

'I think you can put two and two together,' said Shepherd. 'I can give you names at the yard who'll vouch for me.'

'We don't know Mr McIntyre's state of mind,' said the superintendent. 'Though from what he's done so far it's clear that he has issues.'

'Agreed. But those issues aren't going to be helped by fronting him with men in black carrying assault rifles. And if you're right and he's intent on suicide, there's no way you come out of this smelling of roses.'

The superintendent rubbed his chin. 'Let's see what we get from the negotiating team,' he said. He looked at his watch. 'Their ETA was ten minutes ago.'

'I've got to be honest, I don't think a negotiating team is the way to go,' said Shepherd. 'We're taught all about negotiation and hostage management. No offence but he'll run rings around your guys. And the last thing you want is to send your men in. He's not your run of the mill nutter with a gun. He'll know exactly how they'll enter and he'll be ready. You won't take him out without casualties.'

The superintendent nodded. 'I'd already come to that conclusion myself,' he said.

'If this is a suicide scenario, then he wants to go out with guns blazing. He wants your men to go in.'

The superintendent rubbed the back of his neck and sighed again.

'So I don't see you talking him out, and I don't see you forcing him out,' Shepherd continued. 'How about we try Plan C. Let me go and talk to him. I can find out what he wants and maybe persuade him to walk out.' He nodded at Armstrong. 'Billy here knows him best. Let the two of us go in. We'll sign any paperwork you need. It'll be on our heads.'

The superintendent considered it for a few seconds. 'I'll need to run it by my Gold commander,' he said. Shepherd could practically see the man's brain working. If Shepherd was

involved and it went wrong, the superintendent would have the perfect patsy to blame. Shepherd smiled at the man. It was a gamble he was willing to take.

‘Just make sure he knows what the downside is,’ said Shepherd. ‘And if it does go bad, it’ll be on camera.’

Virtually on cue a helicopter flew overhead. It was a civilian chopper and they could see a television camera protruding from one of the side windows.

‘Let me hit the radio, you guys stay here.’ The superintendent walked away.

‘Think he’ll go for it?’ asked Armstrong.

‘I think he might, but it’ll be the Gold commander who makes the call.’

‘Do we have a Plan D?’

Shepherd grinned. ‘Storm our way in?’ he said.

‘I was thinking abseiling down from a helicopter.’

‘I suppose you have tried the obvious?’ asked Shepherd.

‘The obvious?’

Shepherd mimed putting a phone to his ear. ‘Calling him?’

‘Straight through to voicemail.’

‘Give it another go, just in case.’

Armstrong pulled out his phone, tapped out a number and listened. He shook his head and put his phone away.

‘Did Jock say anything about any souvenirs?’ asked Shepherd.

‘It didn’t come up.’

‘Most guys have something tucked away.’

‘That’s the truth. Hopefully just a short.’

‘And there was no clue he was going to kick off when you saw him?’

‘He was depressed. And drinking too much. But that’s true of half the ex-Regiment guys. You and me are the exceptions, you know that.’

‘What well-balanced, God-fearing members of society?’

‘You know what I’m saying. We get more than our fair share of suicides, we’ve got former members of the Regiment living on the streets, in prison, running drugs.’

Shepherd nodded. He knew that Armstrong was right. Life in the Regiment was as exciting and fulfilling as it got; you devoted yourself to the SAS and in return they took care of you and all your needs. But when it came time to leave, the shock of entering mainstream society again was more than some guys could deal with. Shepherd had been lucky, he had gone straight from the SAS into a police undercover squad, from one tight-knit group to another. Armstrong had also transitioned smoothly into civilian life, albeit in jobs that generally involved him carrying a weapon in war zones. Others weren’t as lucky. Family life also tended to suffer. During their SAS days the men were off on missions most of the time, leaving their wives pretty much on their own to bring up any children. Once they left the Regiment, relations were often put to the test, a challenge at the best of times but more so when many of the men turned to drink or drugs.

It had been a couple of years since Shepherd had seen McIntyre. He hadn’t been in great shape, he’d been drinking too much and was living in a wretched flat in Reading, to the west of London. Back in the day, McIntyre had been one of the fittest guys in the Regiment, but those days were long gone. Shepherd had given McIntyre a job body-guarding a Russian oligarch but had lost touch shortly afterwards.

‘He was in a bit of a state when I saw him, but I thought he’d pulled himself together,’ said Shepherd. ‘You now he was thrown out of the Regiment because of his drinking?’

Armstrong nodded. ‘Yeah. He told me.’

‘The Regiment put him through a detox program but at the end of the day he just wouldn’t give up the booze. He had his pension and that doesn’t go far. Like I said, I thought the body-guarding gig had put him back on the straight and narrow.’

The superintendent was heading back in their direction and he waved them over. ‘They call you “Spider”, is that right?’

‘It’s been known,’ said Shepherd.

‘Turns out the Gold Commander knows you. Bit of a fan, actually. Chief Superintendent Warner.’

‘Richard Warner?’ said Shepherd. ‘He was a superintendent with West Midlands police when I came across him.’

‘He’s with the Met now. He’s retiring next year, I think. Anyway, he says I’m to take any assistance you’re prepared to offer.’

‘So we can go in?’

‘If you’re sure it’ll help, you can. I’ll need you to both sign a waiver and I’m going to need you in vests and radio contact, but soon as you like.’ He lifted the police tape and Shepherd and Armstrong ducked under. ‘We’ve set up an ops room in the estate agents around the corner,’ said the superintendent.

‘Any sign of the negotiators?’ asked Shepherd.

‘On the way, but stuck in traffic,’ said the superintendent. ‘They’re the wrong side of the river.’

Two young constables in fluorescent jackets were standing either side of the door to the estate agents. Inside were another four uniforms and two Specialist Firearms Officers, dressed in black and checking their Heckler and Kochs. Two paramedics in green jackets, a blond woman and man with a shaved head, were deep in conversation and holding mugs of tea.

The superintendent waved over a uniformed sergeant, a grey-haired man in his fifties, short and thick-set like a wrestler gone to seed. ‘Bill, I need jackets and helmets for these two, and a radio.’ The sergeant nodded and headed outside to a van.

Armstrong put his helmet and gloves on a table and stripped off his leathers. Underneath he was wearing a sweatshirt and jeans.

One of the SFOs walked over. ‘Anything we need to know, Guv?’

‘All good, John,’ said the superintendent. ‘These two are friends of the man holed up in the house. They’re going in for a chat.’

The SFO’s eyebrows shot skywards. ‘That’s a protocol I’m not familiar with,’ he said.

‘It’s been cleared with Gold,’ said the superintendent. ‘They’re former SAS, with any luck they’ll talk him down.’

‘Shots have been fired, Guv. We’ve moved past talking.’

‘Duly noted, John. But McIntyre is former SAS which means if shots start flying he’ll be more than capable of holding his own. Let’s give this a go.’

The SFO nodded. ‘We’ll need to be in position, just in case it kicks off,’ he said. ‘Give me five minutes.’

‘You’ve got it,’ said the superintendent.

‘They’re not going to be armed, are they?’ said the SFO, gesturing at Shepherd and Armstrong.

The superintendent looked over at Shepherd and Shepherd shook his head. ‘No,’ said the superintendent. ‘The negotiating team are stuck in traffic so this is our best option at the moment.’

‘And if we hear shots?’

‘You won’t,’ said Armstrong. ‘He’s not going to be shooting us.’

The SFO nodded, called over his colleague, and the two men headed outside.

The sergeant returned with vests and helmets. Armstrong and Shepherd slipped them on. The sergeant handed Shepherd a radio. ‘It’s tuned to the super’s frequency,’ he said.

‘Stay on it because we don’t want Mr McIntyre picking up any of our traffic,’ said the superintendent. ‘Any problems, call for assistance and we’ll move in.’

Shepherd clipped the radio to his belt, then checked his vest. ‘if you do move in, what’s the SP?’

‘Simultaneous front and back. Breach the doors. Stun grenades.’

‘No snipers?’

‘He has the windows all covered, and shooting through glass isn’t on anyway.’

‘What about the attics?’

‘We’ve checked. There are brick walls between the buildings. We can get through if necessary but there’ll be a lot of noise. To be honest, it couldn’t be any worse. If it was a detached or a semi then we’d have options. But a terraced house is as difficult as it gets. We need you to sort this for us, Mr Shepherd.’

‘I’ll do my best,’ said Shepherd.

‘One thing,’ said the superintendent, lowering his voice. ‘I know he’s your friend, but the best thing for everyone concerned is that he comes out and we don’t go in.’

‘No question about that,’ said Shepherd.

‘What I’m saying is, just talking might not be enough. And there are two of you.’

‘What are you saying?’ said Armstrong. ‘You want us to belt him over the head?’

The superintendent put his hands up. ‘I’m just asking you to consider all your options while you’re in there,’ he said. ‘He’s got a gun. We can’t let him stay in there for ever. If he doesn’t come out of his own accord, who knows what’ll happen.’

‘We hear what you’re saying, Superintendent,’ said Shepherd. ‘Billy’s right. If Jock trusts us to go in there, we can’t betray that trust.’

‘Even if it means that he dies, and some of my men die with him?’

‘It won’t get to that,’ said Shepherd. ‘We’ll talk to him, and whatever his problem is we’ll resolve it.’

The Superintendent smiled grimly. ‘Thanks,’ he said. ‘I just want this to be over with no one hurt.’

‘You and me both,’ said Shepherd. He took a deep breath and nodded at Armstrong. ‘Right, let’s get to it.’

The Superintendent walked them out of the estate agents and along the road. There were two SFOs with Heckler and Kochs behind an ARV, their weapons trained on the front door of McIntyre’s house. The downstairs windows had been covered with sheets of newspaper, so that no one could see inside. The superintendent stopped alongside the SFOs. ‘I’ll leave you here,’ he said. ‘Good luck.’

Shepherd and Armstrong walked across the road. Both ends of the road were blocked off with cars and it looked as if all the houses in the street had been evacuated. ‘The superintendent has a point,’ said Shepherd. ‘If they start shooting it’s going to get messy.’

‘Jock’s a mate, Spider. You don’t fuck over your mates.’

Shepherd grimaced. He knew that Armstrong was right, but he’d seen armed police in action often enough to know how easily it could all go very wrong. ‘Two of us, one of him, we could bring him out without anyone getting hurt.’

Armstrong stopped. 'That's fucked up and you know it,' he said. 'Us going in there, it's like we waving a white flag. We say we just want to talk. If we pull a stroke like that.' He shook his head. 'It's wrong, Spider. You know it is.'

'I just don't want Jock to get hurt,' said Shepherd.

'Let's talk to him, see how that goes.'

Shepherd nodded in agreement and the two men walked over to the house. Shepherd knocked on the door, then stood to the side just in case McIntyre decided to let off a warning shot. 'Jock, it's Spider!' he shouted. 'I'm here with Billy Armstrong.'

There was nothing for a few seconds and then the scrape of a foot against a carpeted floor. 'Spider?'

'Yeah, now will you open the bloody door and let us in.'

'Spider Shepherd?'

'Bloody hell, Jock, how many Spiders do you know. Open the bloody door.'

He heard something heavy being pushed to the side, then two bolts being drawn back. The door opened a couple of inches and a single brown eye peeped out, blinking in the sunlight. 'Fuck me, you're a sight for sore eyes,' said McIntyre. He opened the door wide and ushered the two men inside before slamming the door shut.

'What the bloody hell are you doing here?' asked McIntyre, looking at the two men in amazement. He was holding a pistol, a Russian Makarov PM by the look of it. Almost certainly a souvenir from Afghanistan. It normally came with an eight-round magazine but the new models could hold ten or twelve. It was the Soviet Union's standard military and police handgun until the early Nineties and the one in McIntyre's hand had probably been pried from the dead hand of a Russian soldier. It was a small gun, just over six inches long and weighing less than two pounds. It was only effective up to about fifty yards but it wasn't accurate above ten yards.

When they had served together in Afghanistan, McIntyre's hair had been thick and sandy-coloured. Now it was grey and thinning and his shoulders were flecked with dandruff. His eyes were red and watery and his nose and cheeks were peppered with broken veins. 'What's going on, Jock?' asked Shepherd, taking off his helmet. Armstrong did the same.

'Just a wee contretemps with the boys in blue,' said McIntyre. 'It'll be over soon.' He locked the door and shoved two bolts across, then waved the two visitors through to the front room.

That McIntyre had covered the windows with newspapers was clear from the outside. What the cops didn't know was that he had driven screws into the framed and threaded metal wires from side to side.

'That's clever,' said Shepherd.

'Just in case they think of coming through the windows,' said McIntyre. He pointed at the floor below the windows and Shepherd saw several planks of wood into which had been driven six-inch nails. 'I learned that one in Sarajevo.'

'What you're doing isn't fair, you know that,' said Shepherd.

'Fair to who?'

Shepherd gestured at the window. 'The guys out there.'

'Spider, last time I looked they had Hecklers and there were a lot of them.' He held up his gun. 'I'm just here with my Makarov, minding my own business.'

'You phoned 999, Jock. You called it in.'

McIntyre squinted at Shepherd. 'How do you know that?'

'Because I used to be a cop, you soft bastard. You called it in and then you shot the cop car and sat on your arse and waited for the armed cops to turn up. If you'd wanted to kill yourself, why involve anyone else?'

‘Who says I want to kill myself?’

‘What’s happening then, Jock? What do you hope to achieve by this?’

McIntyre shrugged. ‘I thought I’d play it by ear,’ he said.

‘You were always a mad bastard, Jock, but this takes the bloody biscuit,’ said Armstrong. ‘You got any beer?’

‘Fridge,’ said McIntyre.

Armstrong headed down the corridor. Shepherd looked around the sitting room. ‘Bit bigger than your place in Reading,’ he said.

‘I was sharing it with a guy but they cut off his benefits and he did a runner,’ said McIntyre. ‘Stung me for the rent and left me with the electricity and gas to pay. If I don’t come up with cash, I’m out on the street.’

Shepherd dropped down onto the sofa. ‘That’s what this is about, is it? Money?’

McIntyre smiled thinly. ‘You know what your problem is, Spider? You always have to over-think everything. You were never happy just following orders, you always needed to know who, what and why. Sometimes shit just happens and that’s all there is.’

Armstrong reappeared with three cans of strong lager. He tossed cans to McIntyre and Armstrong and popped the tab on his. ‘I see there’s money for lager,’ said Shepherd.

‘You’d begrudge a man his last drink would you,’ said McIntyre. He put his gun on the coffee table and opened his lager.

Shepherd shook his head and popped the tab on his can and raised it in salute. ‘Cheers, you mad bastard,’ he said. Shepherd wondered how many shots were left in the clip. A lot depended on whether Jock had reloaded after shooting the police car. And the big question was how much ammunition McIntyre had. Souveniring a gun was one thing, but the Makarov used a specific 9x18mm round and they were hard to get.

McIntyre stood up and clinked his can against Shepherd’s and Armstrong’s before drinking. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. ‘I’m really glad you two turned up.’

‘We’re here to help,’ said Shepherd.

‘I don’t need your help, Spider. In fact as soon as you’ve finished your beers, you and Billy need to push off.’

Armstrong waved his can at the wires over the window. ‘That’s nasty, Jock,’ he said.

‘Only if they come in through the windows.’

‘I’m guessing they’ll be using infra-red as we speak,’ said Shepherd. ‘They’ll know about the wires. In fact they’ll know exactly where you’re sitting right now and will probably have at least one sniper with you in his sights.’

McIntyre grinned. ‘I’d be shitting myself if there weren’t three warm bodies in here,’ he said. ‘No way they can tell us apart with infra-red.’

‘Just bear it in mind for when we’ve left,’ said Shepherd. ‘The guy running the operation out there knows what he’s doing. He doesn’t want his men getting hurt.’

‘So he can tell them to pack up and go home.’

‘We both know that’s not going to happen.’

McIntyre waved his can in salute. ‘Looks like we’ve got an impasse, then.’

Shepherd shook his head. ‘Jock, are you listening to yourself. You’ve got nothing to bargain with. You’re in here and they’re out there. They’ve evacuated the street. They can just wait you out. How much food have you got?’

‘There’s lager,’ said Armstrong, raising his can.

‘They’re not going to be sending in pizza,’ said Shepherd. ‘It’s not as if you have hostages.’

McIntyre grinned and gestured with his gun. ‘I do now,’ he said.

Shepherd pointed a finger at McIntyre. 'Don't even think about it, Jock. I'll take that piece of shit off you and shove it so far up your arse that you'll be coughing bullets.'

McIntyre laughed and held his hands above his head. 'I was joking, pal.'

'Yeah, well some jokes aren't funny,' said Shepherd. 'I'm in the middle of the something and I'm sure Billy here has better things to be doing.'

Armstrong grinned. 'As it happens I'm fine,' he said. 'I've a job in Colombia next week but other than that I'm pretty much free.'

Shepherd scowled at Armstrong but Armstrong just grinned. Shepherd sipped his lager. 'What happened to the body-guarding gig?' he asked McIntyre. 'I thought you were sorted.'

'Didn't work out,' said McIntyre. 'I've had a couple of gigs since you fixed me up with that Russian, but it's not my thing. The last job, the client's wife kept asking me to carry her shopping. I explained that I was security and that if my hands were full of carrier bags I wouldn't be able to protect her. She told her husband I'd been bad-mouthing her and I got the push. Word got around that I was difficult.' He forced a smile. 'Didn't much like the work anyway. Babysitting gangsters, that's what it comes down to.'

'So what are you doing these days?'

'Not much,' said McIntyre. 'I've been trying to get back into static security but the place is awash with Europeans and they work cheap.'

'What about Emma?'

'Haven't seen her for years. Or the kids. My eldest has just had a kid, I know that much. Makes me a grandfather.' He grinned. 'Who'd have thought it, huh? Jock McIntyre, grandpa. I found out through a friend of a friend and I called Emma to see what was going on. She told me if I went near her or the kid she'd call the cops.'

'Sorry about that,' said Shepherd.

'Not your fault,' said McIntyre. 'I was the asshole who gave her hell. I'm amazed she put up with me as long as she did. And the kids don't want anything to do with me so it's no surprise they don't want me near their kids.' He shrugged. 'I fucked up, Spider. I fucked it all up.'

'It's not that bad,' said Shepherd. 'We can sort this.'

'How?' He waved the gun. 'This alone is going to put me behind bars for five years. Maybe longer. Then what? I'll be bloody homeless. I'm being moved out of this place as it is. The bloody council's no use. If I was a bloody Afghan or an Iraqi then they'd give me and my family a mansion in Kensington but when you're a Brit who gave his life for his country, they don't want to know.'

'Well, strictly speaking you didn't give your life for your country,' said Shepherd.

'You always were a clever bugger, Spider. But I was in the Paras and the SAS and that should count for something. But it doesn't, not in this brave new world. They hate the likes of me. White, middle-aged, male, I don't tick any of the 'must be helped' boxes.'

'We'll help you, Jock,' said Armstrong. 'The Regiment will help.'

'The Regiment does fuck all for the likes of me,' sneered McIntyre. 'Counselling for post traumatic stress disorder, that's what they offered me.'

'Did you take it?' asked Shepherd.

'Course I didn't take it,' snapped McIntyre. 'I'm not crazy, Spider.'

One of Shepherd's mobiles rang and he pulled it out of his jacket pocket. He groaned when he saw who was calling. Charlotte Button. 'I'm going to have to take this,' he said, standing up. He walked into the hallway and put the phone to his ear. 'Charlie, how's it going?'

'Where are you?' she asked.

'I've just popped out,' he said, heading for the kitchen.

‘To Brixton?’

Shepherd closed his eyes and cursed under his breath.

‘Are you going to fill me in, Spider?’

‘I’m not sure what to say.’

‘How about the truth? What did you think, Spider? Did you think I wouldn’t recognise one of my men walking into a siege situation?’

‘I’m sorry,’ he said.

‘I had to laugh at the way you kept your head turned away from the TV cameras. It would have been funny if it wasn’t so bloody unprofessional.’

‘I’m sorry,’ repeated Shepherd.

‘We’re in the middle of an operation that we have been running for the best part of three months, an operation which will shut down a network that has been bringing in fifty million pounds worth of cocaine a year into the UK, a network that has close links with at least two Middle Eastern terror groups.’

Shepherd said nothing.

‘Not a great time to go walkabout, Spider. Seriously.’

‘He’s a friend,’ said Shepherd. ‘He was in the Regiment and now he’s in trouble. They’re getting ready to storm the house and that’s not going to end well for anybody.’

‘So why didn’t you tell me this before you went charging in like the cavalry.’

Shepherd didn’t reply.

‘Because you thought I’d say no.’

‘I can’t argue with that,’ said Shepherd.

‘That’s what offends me the most,’ said Button. ‘Not that you went rogue during an operation, but the fact that you didn’t trust me enough to tell me first.’

‘I’m sorry.’

‘Yes, so you said. ‘What state is your friend in?’

‘Fragile.’

‘Can you get him out of there?’

‘We’re working on it,’ said Shepherd.

‘And nothing yet from the boat?’

‘It’s not docked yet.’

‘If that operation falls apart, don’t bother coming back to the office. You understand?’

‘Yes.’

‘Good luck with your friend.’ The line went dead. Shepherd cursed under his breath again and put the phone away. He looked around the kitchen. McIntyre had stuck newspaper over the window above the sink and done his trick with screws and wires. He’d jammed a plank of wood under the handle of the door that led to the back garden. It would be difficult – but not impossible – for the cops to force their way in. But McIntyre would hear them coming and would have plenty of time to respond. He opened an old fridge. The icebox was encrusted with ice and there was no food to be seen, just cans of lager. He quickly looked through the kitchen cupboards. There was an almost empty box of cereal, a few slices of bread that had started to go green, and a couple of cans of tuna. McIntyre certainly hadn’t stocked up for a siege.

‘Everything okay?’ asked McIntyre as Shepherd walked back into the front room.

‘Not great, actually,’ said Shepherd. ‘I’m in the middle of something and my boss isn’t happy about me being here.’

‘Tell him to go screw himself.’

‘It’s a her. And she’s right, Jock. I shouldn’t be here. And neither should you.’



McIntyre waved his gun at the front door. 'No one's keeping you here,' he said.

'I'm not going to let you kill yourself like this,' said Shepherd. 'And it's not fair on the guys outside. If one of them slots you, it becomes a murder enquiry and he's sent home until it's over. That could be months. Years, sometimes.'

'They're armed cops, it's their job.'

'Yeah, you'd think that. But the way it works, once they've shot someone they're treated exactly the same way as any villain who pulls the trigger. It's not like the Army, Jock. There's no free pass to go shooting people.'

'No one forces them to do the job.'

'That's true,' said Shepherd. 'I'm just saying, there are better ways of ending all this than death by cop.'

'Like what? Step in front of a train? Swallow a bottle of tablets.'

'How about doing something worthwhile with the rest of your life?'

McIntyre snorted. 'It's a bit late for that, mate. Bit late for a fresh start.' He gestured at the window with his gun. 'I have to say, I thought it'd be over by now.'

Shepherd shook his head. 'They have to follow the rules of engagement and everything they do has to comply with the Police and Criminal Evidence Act of 1984 and the European Convention of Human Rights. They can't come in with guns blazing. They're only authorised to shoot if there is an immediate threat to life or if they see you holding a firearm. And they have to issue a clear verbal warning first.'

'Who'd be a cop, huh?'

'It's not the job it used to be, that's for sure. But then the SAS isn't either. It's the way of the world, Jock.'

'Bet you're glad to be out of it?'

'The SAS? I miss it, Jock. I miss the action, I miss the professionalism, I miss the way we were allowed just to go in and do what had to be done. But it's not as clear cut these days. It's all about politics.' He nodded at the gun in McIntyre's hand. 'A few years ago, a Regiment guy with a gun would have just been given a dressing down by the local cops. Wouldn't have made the papers, you'd have just been given a bollocking by the Boss. These days, there are cameras on the spot within minutes so the whole world is watching and the cops have to play it by the book, The Army's heading down the same road.'

McIntyre drained his can, tossed it into the corner, then pushed himself out of his armchair. 'Anyone else want another?'

'I'm okay,' said Shepherd. He had barely touched his lager.

'I'll have another, Jock.'

McIntyre grunted and headed down the hallway to the kitchen. Shepherd looked at the gun, still lying on the coffee table.

'Don't even think about it, Spider,' said Armstrong.

'It'd mean him getting out of here in one piece,' said Shepherd.

'Straight behind bars, like he said. And he'd blame you for it. He wouldn't think of it as you helping to keep him alive, he'd see it as a betrayal.'

'See what as a betrayal?' asked McIntyre. He walked into the room, tossed a can of lager to Armstrong and sat back in the armchair.

'What the SAS did to you,' lied Armstrong. 'They should have helped.'

'They bloody well sacked me, Billy. Tossed me out on the scrapheap.'

'Jock, you're what, forty three? Forty four? You're hardly on the scrapheap.'

‘My life is over, Spider, Done and dusted. I’ve lost my job, I’ve lost my family, I don’t have a penny to my name. I’m fucked.’ He popped the tab on his lager and drank.

Shepherd looked at Armstrong but Armstrong just shrugged. Neither of them had any idea of what to say to McIntyre. ‘There has to be another way out,’ was the best he could come up with.

‘Name one,’ said McIntyre sourly.

‘We can find work for you, Jock,’ said Shepherd.

‘You say that, but we both know it’s not true. I’m not cut out for personal protection, and Billy wasn’t able to get me anything. You want me to go back to baby-sitting office blocks at night?’ He shook his head vehemently. ‘I’m done with that. I’m done with it all, Spider.’

‘You’ve got kids, Jock. They’ll see it on TV. Do you want this to be the last memory they have of you?’

‘They don’t give a toss about me.’

‘They’re you’re kids, Jock. They’ll care.’

McIntyre wiped his face with his hand. ‘My kids hate me,’ he said. ‘Emma made sure of that.’ He looked up at Shepherd, His eyes were red and he looked close to tears. ‘How’s your boy?’

‘Liam? He’s a good kid. He’s at boarding school so I don’t see him as much as I’d like to, but he loves it. Lots of sports and they work them hard.’

‘You keep hold of him, Spider. It’s easy to lose them when they’re teenagers.’ McIntyre drained his can and tossed it into the corner by the window. He leaned forward and picked up the gun.

‘Jock, think about this,’ said Shepherd.

‘I’ve done nothing else but think since I got the eviction notice,’ said McIntyre. ‘I’m out of options.’

Armstrong looked over at Shepherd. ‘What’s the story with the cops?’ he asked. ‘Is it fixable?’

‘Fixable in what way?’ asked Shepherd. ‘Can we get Jock out without them shooting him? Sure. He just has to throw the gun down and walk out with his hands in the air. Fixable as in making it go away?’ Shepherd sighed. ‘I don’t know. Really. The Police are all about ticking boxes these days and there’s no box that says forgive and forget.’

McIntyre stood up. ‘You guys best be going,’ he said. ‘I’m glad you came, it was great to see you, but it’s time to say goodbye.’

‘Don’t do this, Jock,’ said Shepherd.

‘Spider, I appreciate your concern. And I’m grateful for the help you gave me before. But I’m a lost cause.’

Shepherd and Armstrong stood up. Shepherd’s mind was racing. He could overpower McIntyre, he was sure of that. McIntyre trusted him and wouldn’t be expecting it. But what then? The cops would pile in and McIntyre would be bundled away. Five years in prison? Ten? Shepherd had spent time in prison undercover and he knew how depressing life could be behind bars. And when he was released, if anything he’d be in an even worse position. No one in the security business was going to give a former convict a job. McIntyre had painted himself into a corner and Shepherd couldn’t see any way out of it.

One of his phones rang and he fished out all four.

Armstrong laughed. ‘Bloody hell, how many phones have you got?’ he said, but Shepherd motioned for him to be quiet. It was the Nokia pay-as-you-go.

‘I’ve got to take this guys, it’s the job I’m on. Keep quiet, yeah?’

He walked into the hallway and took the call. ‘Micky, it’s Dave.’

‘Yeah, Dave. How’s it going?’

‘We’re coming in to port now. I’ll send you the co-ordinates. Text me back to let me know you get them, okay?’

‘Will do. No problems?’ Shepherd walked into the kitchen as he talked. He looked around.

‘Good as gold. Just make sure the truck’s ready and waiting, we don’t want to hang about.’

Shepherd ended the call. Several seconds later the phone beeped to let him know he’d received a message. It was the co-ordinates identifying the location of the drop off. Shepherd sent a text back to say that he’d received it. The deal was that the guys on land wouldn’t be told until the last minute where the drugs were being delivered. He held the Nokia in his left hand and called Ricky Reece on the Samsung. Ricky was parked in a lay-by outside Brighton. Shepherd told him the boat was on its way and that he’d send the co-ordinates. He ended the call and then copied the coordinates onto the Samsung and sent the SMS to Reece. He sent the same SMS to Charlie Button and then phoned her. ‘It’s on,’ he said. ‘The boat should be docked within half an hour and the truck’s on its way. What’s the plan?’

‘As soon as the gear’s on the truck we’ll move in,’ said Button. ‘Interpol are liaising with the Spanish and we’ll be picking the Costa guys up at the same time as we’re rounding up our targets in London. Nice work, Spider. Job well done.’

‘Let’s not go counting chickens,’ said Shepherd. ‘The cops could still screw it up. It wouldn’t be the first time.’

‘Speaking of which, how’s it going there?’

‘Not good,’ said Shepherd.

‘I hope you’re not there in any sort of official capacity,’ she said.

‘They know I served with him, they’re happy to use me for intel,’ said Shepherd.

‘Do they know you’re with Five?’

Shepherd closed his eyes and cursed silently. He couldn’t lie to her because if he did and she found out, she’d never trust him again. ‘I mentioned it, but only to the Silver Commander. Gold is the guy I worked with in the West Midlands a while back. Chief Superintendent Warner. He’s cleared it.’

‘Not with me he didn’t,’ said Button tersely. ‘Just make sure this doesn’t blow up in your face.’

‘I’m doing my best,’ said Shepherd.

She ended the call and he put the phones away. He unclipped the radio, then gently pushed the kitchen door closed. He held the radio to his mouth and pressed the transmit button. ‘Shepherd here. Over.’ He released the transmit button, waited a few seconds and then tried again.

‘Silver here,’ said the superintendent. ‘How is it in there? Over.’

Shepherd gave the superintendent a quick rundown of the situation, including the wires on the windows and the nailed planks.

‘What weaponry does he have? Over.’

‘A Makarov. I think eight in the clip and I don’t see any spare ammunition,’ said Shepherd.

‘He might only have a few rounds left. I’ll try to find out for sure. It’s not an accurate firearm and he’s lost any edge he once had. Just keep your distance for a while longer. I can handle this. Over and out.’

He clipped the radio back on his belt, opened the kitchen door and went back to rejoin McIntyre and Armstrong.

‘Problems?’ asked Armstrong.

‘All good,’ said Shepherd.

‘You need to be going,’ said McIntyre.

‘Come with us,’ said Shepherd. ‘We’ll go with you. We’ll speak for you in court. I’m sure I can get a doctor to plead PTSD, if necessary we can go to the papers.’

McIntyre shook his head. ‘You can’t save everyone, Spider. Haven’t you learned that? Sometimes you just have to cut your losses.’ He waved the gun at the door. ‘I’m glad you came, really. But it’s time to go now.’

‘I can probably get you work, Jock,’ said Armstrong. ‘Not with one of the big companies, but I’ve got pals in Central Africa who need a hand. You’d have to kick the booze.’

‘When I come out of prison, you mean?’

‘It might not come to that,’ said Shepherd.

‘What do you mean?’ asked McIntyre.

‘I’ve got a plan,’ said Shepherd.

\* \* \*

Shepherd and Armstrong walked out of the house. Shepherd pulled the door closed and the headed across the street. The armed cops kept their carbines trained on the door but it stayed firmly closed. The superintendent was standing at the street corner, watching them anxiously. ‘Is he coming out?’ he asked.

‘He said he’s on his way. He wanted to write a letter to his wife.’

The superintendent frowned. ‘Explain that to me, will you?’

‘He wants his wife to know how he feels, he thinks that once he’s in custody he won’t get the chance,’ said Shepherd. ‘He’s going to write it out then he wants to read it out to a TV crew. I said that’d be okay.’

‘We can’t have him live on TV, anything could happen.’

‘Doesn’t have to be live. They can record it and broadcast it later. It’ll be a great scoop for them, he gets what he wants, and you get him out of there without shots being fired.’

‘It’s what they call a win-win situation,’ said Armstrong.

‘If it works out that way,’ said the superintendent. ‘The last thing I want is for him to pull out his gun and start shooting.’

‘That won’t happen,’ said Shepherd. He reached inside his bullet-proof jacket and pulled out the Makarov and the clip. ‘I’ve made it safe,’ he said, handing the gun and clip to the superintendent.

‘So he’s in there with no gun?’

‘A sign of good faith,’ said Shepherd. The superintendent turned towards the SFO team but Shepherd put a hand on his shoulder. ‘I gave him my word he could come out on his own terms.’

‘You don’t have the authority to make any sort of deal with him,’ said the superintendent. The SFO they had seen in the ops room jogged over. The superintendent handed him the gun and the clip.

‘No, but he gave me his gun which means he isn’t a threat to anyone but himself. I gave him the radio so you can talk to him.’

‘We’re ready to go in now,’ said the SFO.

‘He’ll come out under his own steam,’ said Shepherd.

The superintendent stared at Shepherd for several seconds, then took his transceiver and put it to his mouth. ‘Mr McIntyre, this is Superintendent Simon Walker. Is everything all right in there? Over.’

There was a brief burst of static then McIntyre’s voice. ‘Aye, superintendent, I’m as right as rain. I just want to get my thoughts together. You can get me a TV crew, right? Over.’

‘You are coming out, then? Over.’

‘I’ll come out, I’ll say my piece, then I’m all yours. Do we have an agreement? Over.’

‘Yes we do, Mr McIntyre. As quick as you can, please. Over.’

‘I won’t be long now. Over.’

The superintendent put down his transceiver. He called over a uniformed sergeant and told him to go and fetch one of the TV news crews. ‘Not the BBC if they’re there, go for ITV first. Tell them they can have an exclusive if they play ball.’ The sergeant nodded and hurried away.

‘How was he?’ asked the superintendent.

‘Tense, obviously,’ said Shepherd. ‘A bit worse for wear. But that’s to be expected, considering the stress he’s under.’

‘Stress of his own making,’ said the superintendent. ‘Did he say why he shot up the car?’

‘He was just trying to get your attention,’ said Shepherd.

‘Well he succeeded. You didn’t promise him anything else, did you?’

‘Like what?’

‘He doesn’t expect to walk away from this, does he? Because that’s not going to happen. Possession of the gun alone guarantees him a prison sentence but shooting at police officers takes it to a whole different level.’

‘To be fair, he was shooting at the car and not the occupants.’

‘Well he can explain that to the judge.’ He looked at his wristwatch. ‘What’s he playing at?’

‘He isn’t the best letter writer,’ said Armstrong.

The superintendent hit the transmit button on his transceiver. ‘Mr McIntyre, my patience is wearing thin. Are you ready to come out? Over.’

The radio crackled. ‘Won’t be long now, superintendent. ‘Are the TV people there? Over.’

‘They’re on the way, But I need you out of there now. Over and out.’

The superintendent paced up and down. Five minutes passed. Eventually the superintendent’s patience snapped and he put the transceiver back to his mouth. ‘Mr McIntyre, this is your last chance. You need to come out now or we will come in and get you. Over.’

He listened but there was no reply.

‘Mr McIntyre, if you don’t answer I’ll have no choice but to send in my team. Over.’

There was still no answer.

‘My patience is wearing thin, Mr McIntyre. Please respond immediately. Over.’

The superintendent glared at Shepherd and Armstrong. ‘What the hell is he playing at?’ The two men shrugged. ‘Stay here,’ he said, and stormed off towards the temporary ops room.

The armed police went in ten minutes later. Two groups of three approached the front door. One of them was holding an enforcer, a 16 kilogram bright orange battering ram, which when swung hard hit with three tons of kinetic energy. The SFO holding the enforcer was well over six feet tall and almost as wide and he made short work of the door. Two swings and the door was off its hinges and with a third it crashed into the hallway. There were similar crashing sounds coming from the back of the house.

The five other SFOs piled through the doorway, carbines at the ready, screaming ‘Armed Police!’ at the top of their voices.

‘Shock and awe,’ said Armstrong. ‘Very impressive.’

‘Stay here,’ said the superintendent. He hurried over to the house.

‘Why did we never shout “SAS, we’ve got guns” when we stormed a building?’ asked Armstrong.

‘Different rules of engagement,’ said Shepherd.

‘It’s crazy.’

‘No argument here,’ said Shepherd.

The shouting continued for several minutes interspersed with cries of ‘clear!’ as the men moved from room to room. Then there was silence.

Armstrong grinned at Shepherd. ‘I’d love to be a fly on the wall.’

‘I’m happier being well out of it,’ said Shepherd.

Several minutes passed before the superintendent appeared in the doorway. He waved Shepherd and Armstrong over. ‘What’s wrong?’ asked Shepherd as they reached the front door.

‘Your friend has done a runner,’ said the superintendent.

‘How? We were watching the front door all the time. And your men are covering the back, right?’

‘The roof,’ said the superintendent. ‘Come and see for yourself.’

He took them inside. Two armed cops were standing in the front room and another blocked the door to the kitchen. The superintendent took them up the stairs. Two more armed cops moved aside to let them pass. At the top of the landing was a set of folding steps that led up to a hatch in the ceiling. The superintendent waved them up. Shepherd went up first, followed by Armstrong.

The attic was dusty and festooned with cobwebs. At the far end was a large plastic water tank illuminated by a shaft of light coming through a ragged hole in the roof. Scattered around were half a dozen broken tiles. An armed cop was looking up at the hole in the roof. The superintendent stuck his head up through the hatch. ‘He broke through the roof and pulled out enough tiles to get through. Looks like he crawled along the roof to the end of the terrace and broke into the house there.’

‘Weren’t your men there?’

‘It’s eight houses away. There’s a hole in the roof. He probably left through the back yard. This is a bloody nightmare.’

Armstrong grinned at Shepherd. ‘Crafty bastard,’ he said.

‘If I find out that you two had anything to do with this...’ said the superintendent. He left the threat unfinished.

‘You’ll do what?’ said Shepherd. ‘We’re not cops. And we were outside with you the whole time.’

The superintendent mumbled something and then disappeared down the steps.

‘He’s not a happy bunny,’ said Armstrong.

‘Yeah, he’s got a lot of explaining to do, and he knows it,’ said Shepherd. ‘But at least he’s recovered the gun and no one was hurt. I doubt that the Met will be doing me any favours for a while, though.’

‘You’ll manage,’ grinned Armstrong.

\* \* \*

Two days later, Billy Armstrong pulled up around the corner from Jock McIntyre’s house in a rented Audi. Shepherd was in the passenger seat. ‘Keep the engine running,’ said Shepherd. He climbed out of the car and headed down the alley that ran behind the terrace, counting off the wooden gates until he reached McIntyre’s house. Police tape had been stripped across the gate and a notice had been pinned up with a phone number to call for anyone who needed access. The lock was flimsy and Shepherd’s shoulder was more than enough to force the gate open. The yard was about twelve feet by twelve, paved and home to three filled black plastic rubbish bags and a rusting bike with two flat tyres. There was more police tape across the door. The door had been broken open by the armed cops when they had stormed the house, and whoever had been sent

around to patch up the damage had only done a half-hearted repair job. Two kicks and the door caved in. The newspaper was still up on the windows but there was enough light to see by. He headed into the hallway, walked up the stairs and pushed open the bathroom door. The ceiling was black with mould and the window was cracked. The toilet basin was stained brown and the seat was missing. Shepherd knelt down, pulled a screwdriver from his pocket and undid the four screws that held the plastic panel in place below the bath. He pulled it away to reveal Jock McIntyre, lying on his back on the bare floorboards. 'Fucking hell, I thought you were never coming back,' said McIntyre. On the floor next to him was the police radio.

'We said two days,' said Shepherd, helping him out from his hiding place. There were two plastic bottles full of pale yellow liquid up against the wall. When they had put him under the bath the bottles had been full of water. He'd drunk the water over the past two days and urinated into the empty bottles. An old SAS trick.

McIntyre stretched and massaged the back of his neck. 'They bought it?'

'Yeah, they figured you made it out. They're watching all the ports and airports. Billy's outside. He'll drive you to the coast. He's got a pal with a boat who'll take you down to Morocco and get you fixed up with papers. You're going to have to stay in Africa, though. You understand? No waltzing back into the UK. They'll be looking for you here for a long time.'

'I won't be coming back,' said McIntyre. 'There's nothing here for me any more.'

'Let's be clear about this, Jock,' said Shepherd. 'We'll get you out of the country, and Billy here has fixed you up with a gig in Nigeria. Third World problems and everyone's armed and dangerous, just like the old days. But if you screw it up and start drinking again, I'll shoot you myself. Clear?'

'I owe you, Spider,' said Jock.

'Yes, you bloody well do,' said Shepherd. 'And don't you forget it.'

**Spider Shepherd is the hero of 11 of Stephen Leather's best-selling novels. You can find out more at [www.spidershepherd.com](http://www.spidershepherd.com) The first book in the series is Hard Landing, which is now available at a special low price on all platforms. There are also several Spider Shepherd SAS short stories available on all eReaders. The first – Natural Selection – is FREE.**

## THE CONSTITUENCY MEETING

David Hewson stared out of the window of the Jaguar. It was a typical Northern rainy day, the sky gunmetal grey with no sign of clearing, the rain more like a wet fog than a downpour. 'I hate Leeds,' he said.

His companion in the back seat chuckled. 'Well don't let the constituents hear you say that,' he said.

Hewson looked across at the man. Oliver Tidy was his agent, his minder and his confidant. And like Hewson he'd been born 170 miles to the south in London. But unlike Hewson, the agent had to stay in Leeds all year round, bar the odd trip to the Capital. 'You know what I mean, Oliver,' he said. 'It's a shit-hole, it really is.'

'They did try to get you a safe seat closer to London, but beggars can't be choosers,' said Tidy.

'It's hardly a safe seat,' said Hewson.

'Exactly, so let's do what we have to do to turn it into one.'

Hewson folded his arms. 'And dragging me out to an old folks home is going to win me votes, is it?'

'Someone got out of the wrong side of the bed this morning. Come on, get your game face on.'

Hewson scowled. 'Oliver, I don't mind going out and pressing the flesh, but with the best will in the world, how many more elections are they going to be voting in?'

'It's the next one that matters. And with luck they'll all be around for that.'

'The average life expectancy for people admitted to care homes is two years, did you know that?'

'I didn't,' said Tidy. 'But with the election due next year, that doesn't worry me over much. Look, David, they asked for you. Do you know how many organisations say no when I ask if you can visit? And here we have a group who want you to talk to them. If I were you I wouldn't go looking gift horses in the mouth.'

'And how many will be there?'

'They promised me forty or so. And forty votes is nothing to get sniffy about.'

'Okay, point taken,' said Hewson. 'But half an hour, max.'

'A cup of tea and a slice of cake and we're out,' said Tidy.

Hewson nodded. 'Fair enough,' he said.

'And really, it's not too bad up here.'

Hewson looked down his nose at the agent. 'Oliver, it's Leeds. I'm a London boy. I belong in the big smoke. So do you.'

'We'll get there eventually. Get your majority up here and you can write your own ticket.'

'I wish I had your optimism, Oliver.'

'You just keep climbing the slippery pole and I'll keep pushing. Now get your game face on, we're here.'

The car pulled up in front of a featureless concrete building with a wheelchair ramp up to the main entrance. 'I can't park here, double yellows,' said the driver.

'They said there was a car park at the back of the building,' said Tidy. 'We'll see you there later.'



‘Keep the engine running so we can make a quick getaway,’ said Hewson, opening the door and stepping onto the pavement. He rubbed the back of his neck. The tendons were as taut as steel wires and he had the start of a headache.

Tidy joined him on the pavement. He was carrying a battered leather briefcase and had the collar of his raincoat turned up. Hewson was wearing a cashmere overcoat over a dark grey suit but he took off the coat as soon as he followed Tidy through the main doors.

A woman was waiting for them. She was in her late sixties with tightly-permed hair and lipstick that was almost scarlet. Her eyebrows seemed to have gone and had been replaced with thin brown lines, either with a pencil or a tattooist’s needle. She was wearing a two-piece suit from a thick pinkish material, a high-cut jacket and a skirt that went to below her knees. Her flat shoes were also pink, as was the silk scarf loosely tied around her neck. She was carrying a large red leather handbag in the crook of her left arm. She smiled and Hewson saw a smear of red lipstick across her top teeth. ‘Mr Hewson, thank so you so much for coming,’ she said.

‘Mrs Tyler?’ said Tidy, holding out his hand. Mrs Tyler was the administrator of the home. ‘Oliver Tidy, it was me who spoke with you on the phone.’

‘Oh no, I’m Ruth Duffy, one of the residents,’ said the woman. ‘Mrs Tyler asked if I’d welcome you and take you through.’ She released his hand and shook hands with Hewson. ‘So nice to meet you, Mr Hewson. And thank you for coming to see us.’

‘Very happy to be here,’ said Hewson. ‘Please, lead the way.’

Mrs Duffy took them down a corridor and through a set of fire doors. The building had an institutional feel, the floors were tiled and the walls were painted a pale green and dotted with noticeboards. There were fluorescent lights overhead and Hewson squinted, his headache getting worse by the seconds.

‘Here we are,’ said Mrs Duffy, pushing open a door. There was a blue plastic sign under a small window with the words DAY ROOM in white. Hewson followed her inside, with Tidy close behind. Hewson already had his professional smile on, but it hardened a fraction when he saw how empty the room was. There were only a dozen or so people waiting, the youngest in their seventies.

‘We were told that there’d be forty or so people,’ said Hewson. Most of the residents were sitting in armchairs that were lined up with their backs to the walls. There was an old-fashioned television set on a small table, a card table with four wooden chairs, a dining table with half a dozen chairs, and a sideboard piled high with magazines. There were blinds on the windows overlooking the street but they were down and the overhead lights were on.

‘I’m sorry, yes. There are forty residents but quite a few are confined to their rooms.’

‘And Mr Caine died last night,’ said one of the ladies.

‘Yes, he did. That was a pity.’ Mrs Duffy smiled at Hewson. ‘He was a lovely man. He’d only been here six months.’

‘I’m sorry for your loss,’ said Hewson, flashing her his most sympathetic smile. ‘Are you expecting anyone else?’

The door opened and two elderly men came in, one of them supporting himself on a walker, the other using a stick. ‘I think that’s everyone,’ said Mrs Duffy brightly. ‘Perhaps we could make a start.’

Hewson nodded. ‘I thought I’d say a few words and then answer some questions.’ He looked around the room. ‘Will the press be here? The local paper?’

‘No, I’m sorry, it’s just us,’ said Mrs Duffy. The door opened and an old man came in with a tray of tea things. ‘Ah, here’s Mr McCall with your refreshments,’ she said. ‘Why don’t you

make yourself comfortable while I pour the tea.' She waved at a winged armchair and Hewson sat down. Tidy sat in another chair, by the windows. 'How do you take it?'

'Milk.'

'No sugar?'

'I use sweeteners.'

'That's nice for you. And Mr Tidy?'

'A dash of milk and one sugar.'

Mrs Duffy poured their tea and handed cups to both men. The rest of the residents sat down and looked expectantly at the MP. Hewson stirred his tea and took a cautious sip. Bad tea was one of the drawbacks of the job, but this cup tasted fine.

'Before you start, do you mind if Mr Cohen records your talk. It's not often we get a VIP and we'd like a souvenir to remind us of this special day.' She gestured at a wizened old man with thick-lensed spectacles who was holding up an old-fashioned video camera, the sort that used a small video-cassette. He nodded and smiled showing uneven yellow teeth.

'Of course,' said Hewson. 'Just remember to say "Action" when you're ready.'

'Do you hear that, Nicholas?' said Mrs Duffy. The man nodded sagely.

'I was joking,' said Hewson.

'Action!' said Cohen, and he pointed at Hewson with his free hand.

Hewson took another sip of his tea, then went into his standard ten minute speech about the debt the country owed to its senior citizens, about how experience came with age, and then switched into a list of all the good things his party were doing to make the country a better place. Hewson had given so many speeches that he could pretty much talk on remote control. He knew when to tell a joke, when to feign sincerity, and when to sound enthusiastic. He knew all about maintaining eye contact and smiling and when to nod and when to frown. Then he asked them if they had any questions and he finished off his tea.

'When are you going to increase our pensions?' asked a woman sitting at the table. She had an ill-fitting blonde wig that looked as if it might slip off her head at any moment.

'Pensions rise in line with inflation,' said Hewson. 'Our Government has done more than anyone to make sure that senior citizens receive enough money.'

'Enough money?' said a woman in a floral housecoat. She was wearing thick surgical stockings and leopard print slippers. 'We get nothing. The council take it straight off us to pay for this place. We never get to see the money.'

A grey-haired man pushed himself up out of his armchair and pointed a gnarled finger at Hewson. His face was so wrinkled he could have been anywhere between seventy and ninety years old, but his eyes flashed fire. 'You answer me this, Mr Hewson. Why can someone from another country come here and get free health care and a mansion in London and a big screen TV, and then they get to bring their whole family over here? Yet you can't pay to take care of your country's old folks. My father died to save this country, Mr Hewson, I'm just glad he didn't live to see what you've done to it.'

'Really, you don't want to believe everything you read in the Daily Mail,' said Hewson.

'I read the Guardian,' said the man, jabbing his finger at Hewson again. 'But that isn't the point. The point is that this country now cares more about foreigners than it does about its own people. Do you know how much I have pay to stay here, Mr Hewson?'

Hewson looked over at his agent. Tidy was sipping his tea and studiously avoiding his gaze. 'No, I don't,' he said.

‘Three thousand pounds a month,’ said the man. ‘And when all my savings have gone, they’ll sell my house and take that. I’m being raped, Mr Hewson, raped by your Government and shame on you.’

‘Please, Mr Mosby, there’s no need to raise your voice,’ said Mrs Duffy.

The man muttered an apology and sat down. There was a damp patch in the crotch of his trousers as if he had spilled something there. Or wet himself. Hewson tried not to stare at the wet stain.

‘It is something we feel strongly about, as you can see,’ said Mrs Duffy. She picked up a plate of Digestive biscuits and offered it to the MP. He took one and smiled his thanks.

‘They took my cats,’ said an old woman who was sitting with knitting needles in her hands and a large ball of wool in her lap.

‘I’m sorry?’ said Hewson, but the woman didn’t look up. He put his biscuit on his saucer and took a sip of his tea.

‘The council, they took her cats away,’ said Mrs Duffy. ‘You’re not allowed to have pets in here, so they took her cats away.’

‘They killed them,’ muttered the woman.

Mrs Duffy nodded. ‘I know they did, Mrs Pinborough, and shame on them for that.’ She smiled at Hewson. ‘They told her that they had found homes for the cats but they didn’t. They put them to sleep.’ She tilted her head on one side as she continued to smile at the MP. ‘Isn’t that funny?’ she said. ‘A euphemism for euthanasia. That’s almost a pun.’

Hewson frowned. ‘I suppose it is.’

‘Have you been to an old folks home before?’ asked a wizened old man with a bent spine. He had to push himself back into his chair to meet Hewson’s gaze. ‘Have you?’

Hewson shook his head. ‘No, I haven’t.’

‘You’d hate it,’ said the man. He was wearing a green cardigan, brown corduroy trousers and tartan carpet slippers.

‘It looks perfectly nice,’ said Hewson, looking around and forcing a smile. Actually it was one of the most depressing places he’d ever visited. The carpet was threadbare, the armchairs lined up against the walls were stained and worn and there was a horrible smell in the air, a mixture of sweat, urine and stale cabbage.

‘It’s a shithole,’ said the man.

‘Mr Wilkins, please,’ said Mrs Duffy. ‘There’s no need for language like that.’

‘But it is a shithole,’ Mr Wilkins muttered, but he put up a hand by way of apology as Mrs Duffy continued to glare at him.

‘It isn’t perfectly nice, though, Mr Hewson,’ said Mrs Duffy. ‘It’s actually quite horrible. They keep us two to a room, did you know that? And we have no control over who we share with.’

‘The woman in my room is dying,’ said Mrs Pinborough, her eyes fixed on her knitting needles.

‘We’re all dying,’ muttered Mr Wilkins. He looked away as Mrs Duffy glared at him.

‘Every night, when she sleeps, her breath rattles like it’s going to stop at any moment,’ said Mrs Pinborough.

‘Shouldn’t she be in hospital?’ asked Mr Hewson.

‘She’s not sick,’ said Mrs Pinborough. ‘She’s dying. And she’s taking her own sweet time doing it.’

‘The man in my room snores so much I can’t sleep without earplugs,’ said a stick-thin man with swept-back grey hair. His Adam’s apple bobbed up and down as he spoke. ‘And he farts. He

farts and he snores and I've complained but nothing is ever done. It's like Mrs Duffy says, we'd be better off in prison.'

Mr Hewson frowned. 'Prison? What do you mean?' He looked over at Mrs Duffy. 'What is he talking about?'

Mrs Duffy shrugged. 'It's true, unfortunately. You treat prisoners better than you treat us senior citizens.'

'That's a ridiculous thing to say,' said Hewson.

Mrs Duffy shook her head. 'In prison, we'd have single rooms. With a television. And Sky TV.'

'You have Sky TV here, don't you?'

'Only the basic package. No sport. And just the one set, in the television room. There are always arguments over what we should watch. And it has to be switched off at 10pm sharp. We're not allowed to watch it after that. In prison, you can watch TV all night if you want. And you get video games. And books. All free.'

'We can't use the garden either,' said another woman. She had a hair net over her wispy grey hair and a surgical collar around her neck. 'Only on special occasions. Isn't that right, Mrs Duffy.'

'That's right, Mrs Carver.' Mrs Duffy nodded at Hewson. 'They say they don't want us bringing in dirt. I tell everyone, if we were in prison at least we'd get outside every day. That's a human right, fresh air. In prison they have to have exercise, but here..' She shrugged.

'Tell him about the food, Mrs Duffy,' said a portly woman sitting by the window. She had thinning hair that had been dyed a pale shade of purple that only emphasized the whiteness of her skull. Her eyes were reddened as if she had been crying as she stared at Hewson she fiddled with a wedding band on a chain around her neck. 'Tell him how bad the food is.'

Mrs Duffy nodded. 'It's terrible,' she said to Hewson.

'You wouldn't feed it to a dog,' said one woman.

'A dog wouldn't touch it,' said a man with a stoop who was holding himself up with an aluminium walker.

'I'm sure the management would listen to your complaints,' said Hewson.

'They don't care,' said Mrs Duffy. 'We're not people to them. We're profit centres. They take as much money as they can and they give us the bare minimum.'

'Less than the bare minimum,' said the man with the walker. He started coughing and his whole body shuddered.

'Mr Waites, please, don't upset yourself, you know it only makes your asthma worse,' said Mrs Duffy. One of the ladies standing near to Mr Waites helped him away from the walker and into a high winged armchair that had been covered in plastic.

'Did you know, Mr Hewson, that in prison you get a choice of five meals for your dinner? And there's always a vegetarian option.' Mrs Duffy nodded enthusiastically. 'Always.'

'I'm sure you have vegetarian meals here,' said Hewson.

'We only get meat every second day,' said Mrs Duffy. 'If you're a vegetarian on a meat day, they just scrape it off the plate before they give it to you.'

'It's not meat,' said Mr Wilkins. 'Not real meat. Not steak. Or chops. We get bits of meat in gravy or sauce and it could be anything. I wouldn't be surprised if they were feeding us horsemeat.'

'For breakfast we get porridge or cereal and a slice of toast,' said Mrs Duffy. 'That's it. No eggs. No bacon. No sausage. Then we get pasta or soup and a sandwich for lunch. And for dinner we get slops.'

'I'm sure that's not true,' said Mr Hewson. He looked over at Tidy but the man was slumped in his chair and staring at the floor. Hewson leaned forward to pick up his cup, hoping that the movement would attract Tidy's attention, but he continued to stare vacantly at the carpet. Hewson sipped his tea and took a quick look at his wristwatch. He had only been there for fifteen minutes.

'It's slops, Mr Hewson, there's no other way to describe it,' said Mrs Duffy.

'I haven't had food that needs chewing for more than a year,' said Mr Wilkins, and most of the other residents nodded in agreement.

'You know what happens when you don't eat solid food?' asked Mosby. 'Your teeth fall out. If you don't use them, you lose them.' He tapped his front teeth, 'I've got dentures now but my teeth were fine when I moved in.'

Hewson put down his cup and looked over at Tidy. Tidy had closed his eyes. Hewson was just about to call over to him, when Mrs Duffy started speaking again.

'Do you see how crazy the world has become, Mr Hewson? Do you? We have to sell our homes to stay here. They take all of our money, everything we earned over our lives. They take it from us and they make us sleep two to a room and they feed us slops. And when we die, they get someone else in to our beds before the sheets are even cold. I want to leave my money to my grandchildren, Mr Hewson. I want to give them a good start in life. But the council won't let me. They came to see us and gave us a little presentation, with slides and everything. They said that if we gave any money to our children or our grandchildren they would find out and they would take it back. We had to pay for our care, they said. We have to pay for everything. My husband died for this country, Mr Hewson. He was a soldier, he died in the Falklands, back in 1982. I was pregnant with our second child. I brought them up on my own, I did. And then my younger son was killed fighting in Afghanistan. His wife is now struggling to bring up their children. And you won't let me give my money to my son's kids. You want to take every penny I have before I die.'

'Mrs Duffy, really, it's not like that.'

'It's exactly like that, Mr Hewson. For all of us. All you want to do is take, take, take. You're bleeding us dry, Mr Hewson, and enough is enough.'

'What about your families?' asked Hewson. 'Have you told them about your concerns.'

'Our families have abandoned us,' said Mrs Carver. 'Mine have, anyway. My son lives in Australia now with his family. I can't blame him, not with the way this country has gone.' She pointed at Hewson and sneered at him contemptuously. 'And you're to blame. You and the rest of the bloody politicians. You've sold us down the river. We used to be Great Britain and now we're overrun by foreigners.'

'Careful Mrs Carver, remember your blood pressure,' said Mrs Duffy.

'I don't care anymore,' said Mrs Carver. 'They hate us now. They want us to die, that's what they want.'

'Mrs Carver, no one wants that,' said Hewson.

'Then tell me why you've allowed so many foreigners into this country,' said Mrs Carver. 'So many that our own young people can't get jobs. And when you go to hospital you have to sleep in a corridor because so many foreigners are on the wards. That happened to me, Mr Hewson. Last year. And don't tell me it didn't.'

'And what about the foreign criminals you say you can't send home,' said Mr Cohen, holding the video camera away from his face. 'We've got rapists and murderers who don't belong here but they claim their Human Rights mean they should stay, And the judges let them. That's just stupid, Mr Hewson, you know that?'

'We all benefit from the Human Rights legislation,' said Hewson.

‘But do we?’ said Mrs Duffy. ‘What about our human rights, Mr Hewson? What about our right to live out our last days in comfort, with good food, our own room, pleasant surroundings, with people who care about us?’

Hewson looked around the room and frowned. He still hadn’t seen any members of staff, no one had even popped their head around the door to check if everything was okay.

‘No one cares about our rights, Mr Hewson. No one cares about us, full stop. Mrs Carver is right. The world wants us dead. But before we die they want to take everything we have.’ She waved a hand around the room. ‘This is a prison, Mr Hewson. And we’re all serving life sentences. The only way out of here is in a wooden box, and we have to pay for that ourselves. That’s what I’ve explained to everyone here. We’d be better off in prison. Conditions would be better and the state will pay. You know what would be fair, Mr Hewson? What would be fair is if you would put the nation’s old folks in prison and the prisoners in old peoples’ homes. I tell you, if you put prisoners in a place like this, they wouldn’t re-offend, that I can promise you.’

Hewson looked around the room and was faced with a wall of nodding heads. He looked at his watch, but had trouble focusing on the dial. ‘Anyway, as much as I would love to continue this conversation, we do have another appointment, don’t we Oliver?’

He looked over at Tidy but the agent was slumped in his chair, his eyes closed and his mouth wide open. Spittle was dribbling down his chin. ‘Oliver?’

‘He asleep,’ said Mrs Duffy.

Hewson tried to get to his feet but his legs had turned to lead. ‘What’s happening?’ he said, but his tongue felt too big for his mouth and the words came out all slurred.

‘That’s what is so unfair, don’t you see?’ said Mrs Duffy. ‘Someone commits a crime and they go to prison, the taxpayer pays for everything. They get a room, they get three good meals a day, free healthcare, free dentistry, free education.’

‘My teeth hurt and they say I have to pay £200 to see a dentist,’ said a woman in a pale green shawl. She had clearly applied her lipstick with a shaky hand and there were red streaks under her nose.

Hewson opened his mouth to reply but he couldn’t seem to form the words and all he could manage was a mumble.

‘That’s true,’ said Mrs Duffy, nodding. ‘They say that there isn’t an NHS dentist nearby and they charge us £200 just for an examination. Plus we have to use their taxi service. If we were in prison, the dentist would come to us. Same as trying to see a doctor. We can never get a same day appointment, we have to wait until it’s convenient for them. If we ask for a doctor to come to see us, they just laugh. If we were in prison, there’d be a doctor on call.’

‘Why isn’t he asleep?’ asked the woman with aching teeth.

‘I put more in the other one’s tea, Mrs Bolton,’ said Mrs Duffy. ‘I didn’t want him waking up. But I want to explain to Mr Hewson why we are doing what we’re doing. I think we owe him that much.’

‘We going to have to do this quickly,’ said Mrs Bolton. ‘We can’t keep them, locked up in the basement forever.’

‘They can’t get out,’ said Mrs Duffy. ‘And as soon as we’re finished here we’ll let them out and they can call the police.’

‘What have you done?’ asked Hewson.

‘It’s what we’re going to do, Mr Hewson,’ said Mrs Duffy. ‘Don’t you see, it’s obvious what we have to do. We have to go to prison. We’ll be looked after there.’

‘A choice of five meals a day,’ said one of the men.

‘Sky Sport,’ said Mr Wilkins.

‘A doctor on call,’ said a woman in a pink nightdress spotted with food stains.

‘We’ll get better food, a room of our own, and do you know what the wonderful thing is, Mr Hewson?’

Hewson frowned at her, trying to comprehend what was happening. He tried to lift his right arm but all his strength seemed to have gone.

‘It won’t cost us a thing,’ continued Mrs Duffy. ‘Not a penny. Everything we have can go to our families. We will finally be able to help those that we leave behind, instead of being a burden on them.’ She rubbed her hands together. ‘Now, we’ll have to get started, we don’t have too long. Mr Wilkins, do you think you could clear the table, please?’

‘Of course,’ said Mr Wilkins. He cleared the tea things off the coffee table and placed them on a sideboard. A woman in a frayed dressing gown and pink slippers helped him. Once the table was clear, Mrs Duffy went over and stood in front of Hewson. ‘Now, let’s get him onto the table. Be careful, we don’t want to hurt ourselves.’

The residents shuffled closer to Hewson. He tried to raise his hands but they wouldn’t move. ‘What are you doing?’ he whispered.

They grabbed him by his legs and his arms, pulled him out of the chair and carried him over to the table.

‘That’s it,’ said Mrs Duffy. ‘Nice and easy does it.’

They placed him on the table. Mrs Duffy produced four lengths of cord from her handbag and then placed it on a chair.. ‘Use these to tie him down, just in case,’ she said, handing out the cords.

Mr Cohen had retrieved his tripod and was fixing the video camera to it, taking care to keep the MP in the frame.

Mr Wilkins took two of the cords and began tying Hewson’s ankles to the legs of the table. Mrs Bolton and another of the women bound his wrists. Hewson tried to struggle but it was as if his whole body had gone numb.

He twisted his neck to look at Mrs Duffy. She was smiling down at him. ‘Don’t worry, Mr Hewson. This will soon be over.’

‘What are you going to do?’ he asked. His voice sounded as if it was coming from the end of a long tunnel.

‘We’re going to do what we have to do to be sent to prison,’ said Mrs Duffy. ‘We’re going to kill you.’

‘You can’t do this,’ said Hewson.

‘Oh yes, we can,’ said Mrs Duffy.

‘You’re not killers,’ said Hewson. ‘You’re not murderers.’

They finished tying him to the table and stepped back. Mrs Duffy inspected their handiwork and nodded approvingly. ‘Well, strictly speaking, while we will all be convicted of your murder, individually we won’t be killers.’

Hewson frowned. ‘That doesn’t make sense,’ he said, his voice trembling.

Mrs Duffy smiled. ‘It makes perfect sense,’ she said, ‘It was Mr Billingham’s idea.’ She looked over at a man with a grey beard and totally bald head who nodded with pride. ‘Mr Billingham was a solicitor, he knows the law.’

‘The trick is that none of us will actually inflict the killing blow,’ said Mr Billingham. ‘We will all stab you at the same time and withdraw our knives at the same time. Twelve knives. Twelve wounds. You will bleed to death, yes, of course, that’s the idea, but no individual will bear the guilt.’

‘You’ll all be guilty,’ said Hewson, close to tears.

‘Yes, again, that’s the plan, don’t you see. The courts will find us guilty.’ He chuckled. ‘Mrs McDermid said that we should all plead guilty but we mustn’t do that because then we’ll get a reduced sentence and that would defeat the whole point of the exercise.’ He was wearing thick-lensed spectacles and he took them off and polished them with a bright red handkerchief. ‘We will be found guilty, but we won’t feel guilty.’

‘That’s nonsense,’ spluttered Hewson.

Mr Billingham put his glasses back on. ‘Is it?’ he said. ‘It seems to me to be no more nonsensical than you saying you don’t feel guilty about what your government has done to the old people of this country. And you don’t feel guilty, do you? You don’t feel the least bit guilty for the way you mollicoddle convicts at the same time as you take us for everything we have. Well, as Mrs Duffy said, enough is enough. Once we’ve done this, the Government will take care of us. Our troubles will be over.’

‘You can’t do this,’ said Hewson, tears trickling down his cheeks.

‘Yes we can,’ said Mrs Duffy. ‘We can and we will.’ She stood up, took the scarf from around her neck and used it to gag Hewson. He thrashed his head from side to side and tried to keep his mouth closed but Mr Billingham pinched his nose and when he was forced to breathe, Mrs Duffy slipped the material between his teeth and tied it at the side. ‘Really my dear, there’s no point in you struggling,’ she said, patting him on the cheek. ‘It’ll soon be over.’ She looked over at Mr Cohen. ‘Do check the camera, Nicholas,’ she said. ‘It would be terrible to not get it on tape. We’ll need to show the judge that we all knew exactly what we are doing. We don’t want anyone saying we were crazy.’

Mr Cohen went over to the camera and peered at it. ‘It seems fine,’ he said.

‘Excellent,’ said Mrs Duffy. ‘Now, do we all have our knives?’ She opened her handbag and took out a large yellow-handled kitchen knife. Mr Cohen pulled a Swiss Army knife from his pocket and carefully unfolded the blade.

‘I thought I might use one of my knitting needles,’ said Mrs Pinborough. ‘Do you think that will be okay?’ She had a soft, wheezy voice, her eyes were almost obscured by the folds of old skin around them.

‘That’ll be fine, Mrs Pinborough,’ said Mrs Duffy. ‘But just the once, remember. We all stick a knife – or a needle – in him, then we pull it out and that’s it.’ She looked over at Mr Wilkins, a small, portly man whose bald head was dotted with dark brown liver spots, giving him the look of an antique globe. ‘We don’t want anyone getting carried away in the heat of the moment,’ she said.

Mr Wilkins nodded. He did have a bit of a temper, everyone knew. He had once thrown his tray of food against the wall in the dining room and had once bitten a nurse who had tried to force an anti-depressant into his mouth. ‘I understand,’ he said. He was holding a steak knife with a wooden handle.

Mrs Duffy beamed. ‘Well then, let’s get this done and then we can all go to our rooms and pack. I have to say that I will miss you all, but hopefully at least some of us will end up in the same prison and we can carry on with our bridge games. Now please, gather around.’

The residents shuffled towards the table, knives at the ready. Mr Wilkins helped Mrs Pinborough up from her chair and over to the table. She was clutching a knitting needle in her right hand.

‘You can’t do this,’ said Hewson, his voice muffled by the scarf. ‘It isn’t fair.’

‘I can see how you would think that,’ said Mrs Duffy, patting him on the shoulder. ‘But it’s perfectly fair from our point of view. Now, please, just relax and it’ll soon be over. You’ll move on to a better place, and so will we.’ She looked around the group. They all had their knives held



high. Mrs Pinborough was holding her knitting needle with both hands now and she was staring at Hewson's groin. 'Ready, ladies and gentlemen?' said Mrs Duffy. 'On a count of three. One, two, three..'

They all struck as one. Mr Wilkins let out a whoop of triumph but stopped when Mrs Duffy flashed him an admonishing look. They stepped back, then filed out through the door into the corridor as Hewson's lifeblood pooled over the table and dripped onto the threadbare carpet.

**If you enjoy dark stories, why not check out Stephen Leather's eBook bestseller *The Basement*. A serial killer is loose in New York, torturing and killing helpless women. Two cops are on the case, but will they catch the killer before he kills again?**

## THE GHOST KIDS

I never used to believe in ghosts, same as I don't believe in Father Christmas, the tooth fairy, or UFOs. I'm a mechanic, I work with my hands, and I always figure that if I can't hold it or hit it with a hammer then it isn't real. That was before I met Nid. Don't get me wrong, Nid isn't a ghost, she's as real as you can get, a tall lithe twenty-two year old from the north-east of Thailand and one of the fittest girls you've ever seen dancing around a chrome pole.

Nid was dancing in Tilac Bar in Soi Cowboy when I first saw her. She was wearing a tartan bikini top and a little white skirt and judging by the reflection on the shiny dance floor, no underwear. She had high cheekbones and a supermodel's legs and more moves than a Russian chess grandmaster. I was with my mate Jules, he's a London cabbie for nine months a year and a coked-up sex tourist for the rest of the time. I'd fallen in with him the previous year and this trip we'd flown over together. We had both been in Bangkok for two weeks and I had one more week to go. Jules was planning on staying for two more months and was going to head down to Pattaya. We were sitting by the toilets with Singha beers in our hands and love in our hearts. Nid knew that we were watching her and she played up to us, dipping and twisting and flashing her dark eyes. First at me, then Jules, then back to me. I figured she was covering all her bases as she wasn't sure which of us would be paying her barfine. That's how it works in the go-go bars, you buy the girls drinks and they get a commission and if you want them to leave with you there is a barfine to be paid, usually just over a tenner. You have to pay the girl on top of that, of course. Nothing comes free, right?

When her dancing shift was done we waved her over and she sat down between us. She looked just as hot close up, perfect skin, a taut body, and whiter than white teeth. She smelled good, too. Damned good. It still wasn't obvious to her which of us was going to take her out, she gave us both the benefit of her sexy smile and we both had her fingers brushing our thighs.

I could see that Jules was up for it but I really wanted to be the one that left with her, so the next time she was up dancing I switched our rounds to tequila shots and got half a dozen down him before she came back. He's not the world's best drinker so he was hardly able to stand and I thrust a thousand baht note into her hand and told her that I wanted to pay her barfine. Jules was too drunk to argue and I left him barely conscious, head back against the wall, as I left the bar hand in hand with the lovely Nid.

She took me across to the Penny Black, a short-time hotel where you get an hour and a half and reasonably clean sheets for about a fiver, but they were full and there were two Japanese customers with girls queuing up. Nid squeezed my hand and flashed me a smile. 'We go your hotel?'

I pulled a face because I was sharing a room with Jules to save money and we'd both agreed not to bring girls back.

'You want to come to my loom?' she said.

Okay, she said 'loom' but I knew what she meant and I was surprised. Most bargirls won't take their customers back to their rooms because nine out of ten of them live with their Thai boyfriends or husbands.

'Are you sure?' I said, which was pretty much the most blatant act of looking a gift horse in the mouth that I've ever committed.

‘No problem,’ she said, and pulled me to a taxi. We climbed in the back and she spoke to the driver in Thai and off we went, with the lovely Nid spending most of the time rubbing my thigh to make sure that I didn’t lose interest.

I’m not sure where we went,. We headed down Sukhumvit and then made a right, that much I know, but as she kept sticking her lips onto mine and playing hockey with my tonsils, I didn’t spend too much time looking out of the window.

She lived in quite a modern building with a keycard entry system and potted plants either side of the door. The lift was clean and according to the notice in a frame on one wall, it had been serviced only three months ago. Nid lived on the ninth floor. There was no Thai boyfriend in residence, but half a dozen large cuddly toys lined up along a shelf over the bed, all staring at me accusingly as if I wasn’t wanted.

There was a wardrobe and a dressing table and a desk with a flatscreen television and a new MacBook computer on it. Around the mirror above the dressing table were photographs of Nid on various beaches and at Thai beauty spots, always alone, and always making a cute face with her finger and thumb under the chin. She was alone in the photographs but I was pretty sure that it had been a customer, or more likely a string of customers, who had taken the pictures. I got the feeling that Nid had a lot of admirers, and somebody must have paid for the television and computer.

‘You want shower?’ she asked and gave me a pink towel with Hello Kitty on it. The bathroom was tiny, just a toilet and a shower head and a washbasin. I gave myself a quick shower and when I came out of the bathroom she was wearing nothing but a skimpy towel. I made a grab for her but she slipped past me. ‘I shower first,’ she said.

I lay back on bed and looked up at the ceiling. It was my fifth trip to the Land of Smiles and my first visit to a hooker’s bedroom, though I couldn’t help but wonder how many other customers had been invited across the threshold. There was a small wooden shrine to the right of the bathroom door, painted red and gold with a small brass jar containing incense sticks. There was a small pile of wrapped sweets next to the jar, and a couple of tangerines. A blue plastic dog and a small doll were standing either side of the shrine.

There was remote control on the bedside table so I grabbed it and flicked through the TV channels while I waited for Nid to finish showering. She actually had decent cable, all the Thai channels obviously but she also had HBO, Cinemax, Fox, BBC and CNN, more channels than I had back in the hotel.

The bathroom door opened and Nid reappeared, wrapped in a fluffy yellow towel. ‘You okay?’ she asked, slipping off the towel and tossing it on a chair.

‘Oh yes,’ I said. ‘Big okay.’

The next couple of hours passed in a blur, partly because the tequila shots and partly because it was like being in my own private porn movie. Nid was awesome, there wasn’t anything she wouldn’t do and she showed me a few tricks that were totally new to me. She moaned and she groaned like I was the best lay in the whole wide world, and while at the back of my mind I knew that she was a hooker and I was paying for it, it still felt as if she was genuinely enjoying herself. I don’t remember which of us passed out first but I’m pretty sure it was me.

I woke to find Nid already dressed, sitting on the edge of the bed, watching me. She smiled and brushed my hair away from my eyes. ‘You want McDonalds?’ she asked.

‘What?’ I asked sleepily. I squinted at my watch. It was just after nine.

‘Breakfast,’ she said. ‘I get McDonalds.’

Only in Thailand, right? You pick up a go-go dancer, she takes you home and gives you the best sex of your life, and then she goes and gets you breakfast. While Nid went of to get my

McMuffin and coffee, I luxuriated in a warm half-sleep, cuddling her pillow. I was just drifting off when something pinched my leg. I flinched and sat up, wondering what the hell was going on. It hadn't been an insect-bite, I was sure of that. I pulled up the sheet and looked around but there was nothing there. I figured I must have imagined it so I lay down again. I was just drifting off to sleep when it happened again, only this time it was my arm. I yelped and rolled out of the bed, gathering the sheet around me. I felt a bit of an idiot, I have to say. I mean, I was alone in the room, right? So nothing could have touched me. I looked under the bed and there as nothing there. Obviously. And I checked the bathroom, even though I knew I was alone in the room. I heard giggling but it was faint so I figured that maybe it was from another room. I pressed my ear to the walls either side but didn't hear anything.

I got back into bed and snuggled under the sheet. I was drifting off again when something tickled my ear. I rolled over and after a few seconds there was a tickling sensation on the other ear, as if an insect was brushing against it. I sat up and looked around but there was nothing to swat. Just then the door opened. It was Nid, with my breakfast.

She could see from the look of confusion on my face that something wasn't right so she sat down on the side of the bed and asked me what was wrong.

'Something pinched me,' I said. 'While you were gone. And it kept tickling my ear.'

She laughed. 'Is that all? That'll be Nok and Som. My children.'

I didn't understand. There was no way that Nid could have had children. Her stomach was washboard flat and totally unlined and her breasts were damn-near perfect.

'They're just playing with you,' she said. She handed me my coffee and McMuffin but I didn't feel like eating.

'What's going on, Nid?' I said. 'You don't have kids.'

She sat down on the edge of the bed and gave me the whole story. Apparently she was at a temple six months earlier and a monk had come up and spoken to her. The monk had told her that two ghost children had been living at the temple for the past year or so, but that they had chosen Nid as their new mother. The monk had said that the two children, a boy called Som and a girl called Nok, had been standing either side of Nid, but she couldn't see them. The monk said that the two children had died in a car crash along with their mother and father. A drunken truck driver had piled into the side of their truck and it had burst into flames. The parents had died immediately, the children had survived for another two days in intensive care before passing away. According to the monks, the spirits of the children had stayed behind. They had found their way to the monastery but now they wanted to live with Nid.

Nid asked the monk why and he said the children had said that she seemed like a good person so Nid agreed to allow them to live with her.

At that point I really had to stop her. I asked her why, why had she believed the monk and why had she agreed to take two ghosts into her life? She couldn't really explain herself. I know that ghosts are important to Thais, they do tend to believe in them and there are always stories of dead family members coming back to give their relatives winning lottery numbers, and nonsense like that. Nonsense? Well, yes, that's what I thought it was when she told me the story. Now I know different, of course.

Anyway, Nid explained that's why she had toys in her shrine and bigger toys around the room. They were for the ghost children. And she always left sweets on the shrine for them to eat, but she balanced it with fresh fruit because she thought that would be better for them. She explained that there were ghost children everywhere. A lot of ghost children liked to be in cars so often they would stay with a taxi driver and that was why when you got into a taxi in Bangkok you would sometimes find children's toys along the rear window.

I thought she was crazy, because she admitted that she'd never seen the children or heard them. But sometimes they would tickle her and often last thing at night she would feel them kiss her neck just before she fell asleep.

It all sounded bloody weird, truth be told, but then the Thais can be funny about the supernatural. All the bars have little shrines in them and the girls also do the wai thing where they put their hands together as if they're praying whenever they pass it. They're always telling stories about seeing ghosts in their dreams and the ghosts giving them lottery numbers and stuff. Anyway, I ate my McMuffin and then gave Nid another seeing to and then I went back to my hotel.

I couldn't get Nid out of my head and so for the next three nights I went back to her bar and paid her barfine. Took her out to dinner, went to a movie once, took her to a Thai disco, and each time we ended up back at her place. She said she didn't want me wasting my money on a short-time hotel. To be honest, the sex was never as good as it had been on the first night, but it was still pretty darn good.

I didn't get pinched again, and I never heard the ghost kids laugh, but every now and then I'd get a tickling sensation on my ear or on the back of my neck. Sometimes, on the way to her room, Nid would get me to stop off at the 7-11 to buy some sweets to put on the shrine. She said that would keep the kids happy and make them like me. Bloody ridiculous, right? Yeah, that's what I thought.

The day before I was due to fly back to London with Jules, I barfined Nid and took her to see a movie at Terminal 21 and then for dinner at an Italian restaurant. We drank a bottle of red wine between us and then we went and hung out at her bar for a couple of hours and I was spending money like there was no tomorrow, knocking back shots with Nid and three of her mates. I must have blown the best part of two hundred quid but I had a ball. I was more than a bit drunk when we got back to Nid's place. I don't remember having sex but I guess we must have. I do remember our conversation, though, as we lay in her little bed with our arms around each other. 'They want to go with you,' she said.

'Who do?'

'Nok and Som. They want you to be their dad.'

I remember laughing. 'You said they didn't talk to you,' I said.

'I know what they want,' she said. 'They want to go to England with you. Can they?'

It was crazy, right? Two ghost kids wanted to come and live with me? I remember laughing and saying of course and she asked me if I was sure and I said yes. I think I passed out then.

I woke up to find Nid sitting on the bed with a warm McMuffin and a hot coffee. I asked her if she wanted to go to the airport with me but she said that she'd be too sad to say goodbye which I thought was sweet. Anyway, I had my breakfast, had another roll on the bed with Nid, then headed back to the hotel to pack. Fifteen hours later, I was getting my bags at Heathrow. Jules had said he was off to Pattaya but I made him promise not to barfine Nid.

That was a Sunday and on Monday I was working, my adventures in Thailand already feeling like a dream. I called Nid but her phone was off.

It was Monday night when things started to get a bit weird. I was watching TV when books started falling off my shelves. And the tap kept turning on and off in the kitchen. And I started to hear laughing. At first I thought the laughing was coming from next door but I pressed my ear against the party wall and couldn't hear anything. I thought I was imagining things but when I went to bed something kept pulling the duvet off me. It was the kids, I realised. Som and Nok. I know it sounds crazy, but they were in the flat, I was sure. I got up, switched on the lights, and

phoned Nid. Her phone was still off. I went back to bed but I didn't get much sleep because the duvet was constantly pulled off me.

The next day I phoned Nid but, you've guessed it, her phone was off. She hadn't set up a voicemail, it just rang out. That lunchtime I went to a toy shop and bought a small teddy bear and a soldier, then I went to a newsagents and bought a couple of chocolate bars. Back at the flat, I put them on the bed in the spare bedroom. 'They're for you,' I said, feeling like an idiot because I was talking to myself. Except it worked – that night I slept like a log. In fact everything was fine for the next three nights, but then the duvet-pulling started again. I bought some more toys and sweets and it stopped.

The following Saturday I picked up a girl in my local pub, a fit blonde hairdresser called Dawn. Cute as a button but not very bright, which is just how I like my English birds. She'd downed half a dozen Bacardi Breezers, most of which I'd paid for, and I'd to pretty much carry her the last few yards to my flat. Dawn was well up for it, and as soon as I'd shut the front door she had her top off and she left a trail of clothes down the hallway on the way to the bedroom. We kissed and cuddled for a few minutes then she stripped off my clothes and climbed on top of me. I was just reaching for the condoms when she screamed like a banshee and jumped off the bed. 'Something pinched me!' she shouted.

'You've had a bit to drink,' I said.

She twisted around and showed me red marks on her backside. 'Something bloody well pinched me, I'm not making it up,' she said.

I tried to hold her but she wouldn't have it, she put her clothes back on and rushed out. I was fairly drunk so I just hit the sack and was asleep within minutes. It was only the next day that I realised what had happened. It was the kids. They'd obviously taken a dislike to Dawn and made their feelings known. I went out and bought them some more toys and sweets and stood in the middle of the spare room and said that it was my flat and that if I wanted to bring a girl back they would have to bloody well behave themselves.

The following week I was out with some mates and after a few drinks we hit a curry place and there were four really fit girls at the next table. One of them was a student, Jemma her name was, and she was high on something, ecstasy probably. We paid our bills at the same time and somehow we ended up back in my flat. I'd had a fair bit to drink so I'm not sure what my chat-up line was, but to be honest she was so high I don't think it mattered what I said. We had a few beers in the flat and then she starts snogging me on the couch. She was just about to take off my jeans when she screamed and leapt to her feet. 'What the hell was that?' she asked.

I asked her what had happened, but I already knew. Something had pinched her backside, she said. Pinched her hard. And as both my hands were on her breasts, she was sure it wasn't me. She looked under the bed, and while she was bent over she screamed again. The second pinch had been harder, so hard that it left a red mark. She demanded to know what was going on and I lied and said I didn't know, and with that she stormed out of the flat.

It was the ghost kids, I was sure of that. I gave them a piece of my mind, cursing them for messing with my life, but I didn't get a reaction. But later that night, when I was asleep, the duvet kept slipping off me and falling onto the floor. Every time it happened I woke up and so the following morning I was dog-tired. I realised I had to do something because the ghost kids were making my life a misery. I needed to talk to Nid. I needed her to take the kids back.

I called up a guy I knew who lived in Thailand. Robin, his name was, he used to be manager in the NHS but he'd taken early retirement and now he runs a couple of ladyboy bars in Nana Plaza. Bit of a funny bugger, I have to say, but he spoke reasonable Thai and I couldn't think of anyone else who could help. I gave him Nid's address and he went around to talk to her. Except

that she wasn't there. Apparently she'd moved out the day after I'd flown back to London. Robin spoke to the neighbours but no one seemed to know for sure where she'd gone. One said Phuket, another said Singapore. It looked to me as if she'd done a runner. She'd dumped the ghost kids on me and gone somewhere where they couldn't find her.

I needed advice on what to do. I Googled "How to deal with ghost kids" but didn't find anything helpful, but I did turn up a Thai monastery in, off all places, Wimbledon. I got the Tube to Wimbledon station and a bus and then walked half a mile or so through suburban streets until I reached the wat. That's what they call a temple, the Thais. A wat. I thought it was funny the first time I heard it. What's a wat? What? Yeah, I guess it's not really funny.

You walk down a narrow lane to get to the temple, and it's a little piece of Thailand, a genuine Thai temple with lots of monks wearing saffron robes. It's known as the Buddhapadipa Temple, pristine white walls with a red and gold arched roof, and set in four acres of gardens with ponds and trees.

There were a couple of young monks sitting on a bench talking and I went over and introduced myself. One of them spoke fairly good English and once I'd told him what my problem was. He had me take off my shoes and then he took me inside and down a corridor to a small windowless room where an old monk was sitting on the floor. I say old, he was ancient, more than eighty, probably more than ninety, totally bald and his skin so thin that you could practically see through it. The young monk knelt down on the floor and motioned for me to do the same. I've never been a fan of sitting on the floor, but the Thais seem to prefer it to chairs and sofas. The old monk's arms and legs were stick thin and his fingernails and teeth had yellowed with age, but his eyes were bright and his thin bloodless lips curled into a smile as the young monk explained in Thai why I had come to the temple. When the young monk had finished, the old monk nodded and said something in Thai. I heard the phrase 'Phi Dek' several times.

'They are ghost children,' said the young monk eventually. 'In Thai we say Phi Dek.'

'They're real?'

The young monk nodded. 'Oh yes. Very real. And they like you. They like you a lot.'

'I'm sure they do,' I said.

'No, you don't understand,' said the young monk. He nodded at the old monk. 'Phra Sarawut has spoken to them.'

'Spoken to them? What do you mean?'

The young monk smiled patiently. 'Phra Sarawut says that the children are here with you and that they are very happy to come to the temple.'

My knees were burning but I was barely aware of the pain. 'He can see them?'

The young monk nodded. 'Of course.'

'Can you?'

The monk smiled and shook his head. 'No. But I am sure they are with you. Phra Sarawut says the girl is called Nok. She is eight years old. Her brother is Som. He is two years younger.'

That knocked me for six. I hadn't mentioned their names or their ages, but the old monk knew. 'Ask Phra Sarawut what they want,' I said.

The young monk spoke to the older monk and then listened intently as he replied.

'They want to be with you,' said the young monk. 'You are their father now.'

'I'm not their father. I just met their mum a few times in Thailand. Their parents are dead.'

The young monk smiled patiently. 'Yes, but so long as they remain on this earth, they can choose who they live with. And they have chosen you.'

'They're making my life a misery,' I said.

'In what way?'

‘Every time I get close to a girl, they start throwing things around and pinching me.’

The young monk laughed. He translated for the benefit of the old monk and the old monk laughed too.

‘They are jealous,’ said the young monk. ‘You are their father, the lady in Thailand is their mother. They do not want you to be unfaithful to their mother.’

I shook my head in disbelief. This was crazy, absolutely crazy. ‘Look, can you get Phra Sarawut to explain to them that I’m not their father and that they need to leave me alone?’

The two monks spoke to each other in Thai for a couple of minutes, then the young monk looked at me and shrugged. ‘Phra Sarawut says that there is nothing you can do. You are their father and you are responsible for them. You need to take care of them until they are adults. They are your responsibility now.’

The old monk closed his eyes, which I took as a sign that he had nothing more to say. I got up, my knees making loud cracking noises, and I walked unsteadily out of the room. The young monk followed me and he took me back to the road. Just before he left, he put a hand on my arm and whispered that I should be careful. I asked him what he meant and he put his mouth close to my ear. ‘Phi dek can be dangerous if they are unhappy,’ he whispered. ‘When they are angry, then can hurt you. Best you don’t make them angry.’ Then he hurried away.

So that was that. I went back to my flat over the next few days I installed a small shrine in the hall, similar to the one that I’d seen in Nid’s room. I put a small teddy bear and a doll in the shrine, along with some sweets and miniature bars of chocolate. I left some bigger toys in the bedroom and in the living room. It seems to have done the trick. Sometimes I see that the toys have moved but nothing gets thrown about and I haven’t been pinched awake. So that’s it. No sex for me for another twelve years or so. Unless I can persuade the ghost kids to go and stay with their mum. But according to the old monk, they’re more than happy to live with me. They like me. I make them laugh.

I’m working lots of overtime and I’m saving every penny I can so that I can go back to Thailand. I’m going to look for Nid. That’s my plan, anyway. If I can find her then maybe I can persuade the kids to stay with her. I know it’s not much of a plan, but it’s all I’ve got.

**If you enjoy supernatural stories, why not try Stephen Leather’s Jack Nightingale supernatural detective novels. In order they are Nightfall, Midnight, Nightmare, Nightshade and Lastnight. There are also two Jack Nightingale short stories, Cursed and Still Bleeding, which are only available as eBooks. Jack Nightingale has his own website at [www.jacknightingale.com](http://www.jacknightingale.com)**



## MASSAGE THERAPY

I first met Ricky sitting at bar on Walking Street in Pattaya. He was tall and thin and pretty much bald, hunched over a glass of iced water. He seemed a bit miserable and I'm a cheerful enough chap so I asked him what was wrong. He had one hell of a story – most people move to Thailand because they want to start living but it seems that Ricky had come to die.

He'd been a butcher in the north of England. He'd owned his own shop and made a decent enough living despite competition from the supermarkets. He was a widower – his wife had died of cancer in her fifties – and had two grown-up sons. When he'd reached sixty Ricky had started having problems with his waterworks and had to get up several times a night to pee. It got so bad that he went to see his GP and the doctor referred him to a specialist and the specialist told Ricky that he had prostate cancer.

According to Ricky's specialist there are two sorts of prostate cancer. There's a slow-growing one that can be treated and managed, and there's a fast-growing aggressive one that is invariably fatal. Ricky had the second type. They treated Ricky, with drugs and radiation therapy, but the cancer continued to grow and to spread. After six months they told him there was nothing else they could do so they gave him a leaflet for the McMillan charity and sent him home.

Ricky decided that if he was going to die he'd do it under his own terms. He sold his business and his house, gave most of the money to his sons and flew to Thailand. He booked a suite in the Marriott Hotel in Pattaya and kept a bottle of sleeping tablets in his wash bag. His plan was to enjoy what little time had left and once the pain became unmanageable he'd take the tablets.

He couldn't drink alcohol and most food made him feel nauseous but at least Thailand was warm and the people were friendly. There wasn't much I could say to him, but I did suggest that he should have a Thai massage. A good Thai massage done by a professional can really make you feel better, I told him. Ricky said that he'd try. He left the bar soon afterwards, saying that he felt sick. To be honest, I never thought I'd see him again.

I was wrong. I bumped into him again about three months later, in the Golden Bar in Bangkok, across the road from Nana Plaza. At first I didn't recognise him. He had put on weight and his hair was growing back. And he was drinking a beer. He grinned when he saw me and told me he was feeling better than he'd felt for months. And it was all down to Thai massage, he said. Or rather, a massage girl.

The day after he'd met me in Pattaya he'd done as I suggested and tried a Thai massage. He did indeed feel better and from then on he had the hotel send up a masseuse every day. Ricky had become disenchanted with Pattaya. "The world's biggest brothel, it was a big mistake moving there," he told me. He'd moved to Bangkok and checked into the Marriott in Sukhumvit Soi 2. He'd tried to book a massage on his first night but they didn't have anyone available, so Ricky had gone looking for a massage parlour. And that was when he met Cherry. She worked in a place in Soi 23, not far from Soi Cowboy. She was in her forties, a bit chubby but with a lovely smile, he said. Cherry had great hands, he said, and had been trained as a masseuse at the famous Wat Po.

He felt so good after the first massage that he went back to see her the next day. And the day after. On the fourth day Cherry asked him if he wanted a 'special' massage. He wasn't sure what she meant but she'd smiled and said that for a thousand baht he could have a happy ending.

Ricky explained that he was ill and that he thought a happy ending was out of the question, but Cherry said she would try anyway. Providing that he paid a thousand baht, of course. Ricky had laughed and told her that if she could indeed make him come he'd give her ten thousand baht.

Cherry had Ricky roll onto his back and she poured a good measure of baby oil over his dick and went to work. To Ricky's surprise he soon found himself growing hard. Cherry was smiling like the proverbial Cheshire Cat and she started caressing his balls.

Ricky hadn't felt so aroused in years but he didn't feel that he was going to come, despite Cherry's valiant efforts. But Cherry knew what she was doing and she locked eyes with him as she slipped a finger into his backside. Ricky gasped and exploded like a geyser. "It was the best ten thousand baht I'd ever spent," he said. "The thing is when the doctors used to shove their fingers up my back passage I'd scream like a banshee, but when Cherry did it, it was the most erotic thing I'd ever felt. Really, it was just out of this world."

Cherry's happy endings became a regular feature of Ricky's life. He paid her for a two hour massage each time, with the first ninety minutes taken up with a traditional Thai massage followed by thirty minutes of her special oil massage culminating in her own special version of the prostate exam.

After a month of seeing Cherry every day, Ricky noticed that his appetite had improved and he had started to put on weight. And to his surprise, his hair began to grow back. He knew that his condition was terminal, but there was no doubt that he was starting to feel better. He made an appointment with a cancer specialist at the Bumrungrad Hospital, one of the best medical facilities in Asia. They gave him a thorough investigation and confirmed what he already knew – he had prostate cancer. But according to the Bumrungrad doctors, he was in remission. The cancer was there but it hadn't spread and it wasn't life-threatening. Ricky was stunned. But the doctors were adamant. The cancer wasn't killing him. Or at least it was growing so slowly that it would be decades before it put his life at risk.

"It's Cherry," he told me. "I'm sure of it." And with that he patted me on the back and went back to his hotel. I watched him go, wondering if it could possibly be true, that Cherry had somehow managed to massage away his cancer.

I met Ricky for the final time in the Golden Bar, a few weeks later. He was halfway through a bottle of Singha Beer and was as happy as Larry. He had just been to the Bumrungrad Hospital and they'd given him the all clear. Not a cancerous cell in his body, they said. Pretty much six months to the day that the National Health Service had given up on him.

"Bloody morons," said Ricky. "They said I wouldn't last six months and now the docs here say I'm as fit as a fiddle."

He looked good, there was no question of that. He'd put on a fair bit of weight and his hair seemed thicker and there was a glint in his eye that hadn't been there the first time I'd met him. I asked him what he planned to do and he grinned, reached into his pocket and took out a small red box. He opened it and proudly showed me the diamond ring inside. "I'm going to ask Cherry to marry me," he said. "I know she's not the prettiest but she's a good sort and she makes me happy." He put the ring away. "And she's the one who saved me, I'm sure of that. Her massage, her hands, they healed me. If it wasn't for her I'd be dead. Soon as I've downed this, I'm heading to Soi 23 and going down on one knee. She can stop work and I'll build us a house up in Korat, where she's from. Might even start a butcher business. I love this country."

He finished his beer, paid his bill, shook my hand and wandered down the road to get a motorcycle taxi. That was the last time I saw him. From what I heard later he got sideswiped by a truck that ran a red light at Asoke, killed him and the motorcycle taxi driver stone dead. Somewhere along the line someone stole his wallet and the ring. I did go looking for Cherry to

tell her what had happened but there are a lot of massage parlours on Soi 23 and I never did find her.

**If you enjoy books set in Thailand, why not read Stephen Leather's bestselling novel *Private Dancer*, where a writer meets a go-go girl who steals his heart and much more, or his detective story *Bangkok Bob* and *The Missing Mormon*. His novels *The Solitary Man*, *The Tunnel Rats*, and *Live Fire* are also set partly in Thailand.**

Following are the opening chapters of five of Stephen Leather's best-selling novels: *The Stretch*, *The Tunnel Rats*, *The Solitary Man*, *The Eyewitness* and *Hard Landing*. All are available as eBooks or regular paperbacks.

## THE STRETCH

The gun went off, catching Preston Snow by surprise, and he felt as if he'd been punched hard in the stomach. There was no burning sensation, and surprisingly little pain, just a dull ache and a spreading coldness. His eyes widened as he stared at the face of the man who'd shot him. Unfeeling blue eyes stared back at him.

Snow clutched a hand to his stomach and staggered backwards, blood pulsing from between his fingers. There seemed to be a lot of blood, but still he was hardly aware of any pain.

The man with the gun watched dispassionately, the gun now at his side. His face was totally blank as if he had absolutely no interest in whether Snow lived or died.

Snow felt the strength drain from his legs. He stumbled over a coffee table and fell on his side, barely conscious of where he was. The coldness was spreading from his stomach, up across his chest, a coldness that seemed to be drawing all the strength from his limbs. He tried to speak but no words would come and it was an effort to breathe. He managed to get up on his hands and knees and crawled towards the stairs.

The man who pulled the trigger stood in the middle of the room, watching Snow with a look of bored disinterest.

Snow scrambled up the stairs, frantically trying to get away from the man. He had a gun upstairs, somewhere. It was in one of the drawers in the bedroom. If he could get to it, if he could defend himself, then maybe, just maybe, he'd stand a chance.

His tracksuit top was drenched in blood and it flopped around as he crawled. He heard footsteps behind him but he didn't look back. He felt himself drifting in and out of consciousness and shook his head fiercely, trying to clear his thoughts. "Stay focused, man," he muttered to himself. "Stay fucking focused."

He looked down at his stomach as he crawled and saw blood dripping down on to the threadbare stair carpet. He tried to stem the bleeding but as he pressed his hand against his stomach a bolt of pain shot through his midriff. He grunted. It felt as if a hot knife had been twisted inside his stomach.

"For fuck's sake, Snow, will you stay still!" shouted the man with the gun.

Snow took a quick look over his shoulder. The man was standing at the bottom of the stairs, gesticulating with his gun.

Snow reached the upstairs landing and pushed himself upright. He staggered towards the bedroom, putting his free hand against the wall to maintain his balance, smearing it with blood.

The man followed him up the stairs. He took his time, with a lengthy pause between each step. It was the precision that Snow found terrifying. The man was taking it slowly, knowing that he had all the time in the world: no one would come to Snow's aid. If anyone had heard the gunshot, they wouldn't want to get involved. It wasn't the sort of area where people telephoned three nines.

Snow collapsed in front of the dressing table and pulled out one of the drawers. No gun. He cursed. Where'd he put it? Where hell had he put it? He tried to concentrate, tried to remember where he'd last see the weapon. He pulled open a second drawer and rifled through socks and underwear, cursing his stupidity for not having the gun out in the open. No gun. He tore the drawer out of the cupboard and tipped the contents on to the floor and searched frantically. It wasn't there.

There were footsteps behind him and Snow twisted around. The man stood in the doorway, the gun at his side, a confident smile on his face. Snow's head swam and he slumped backwards, sliding down against the dressing table, his head banging against one of the open drawers.

Snow's eyes fluttered shut. He could feel consciousness slipping away. The pain was going, replaced by a warm glow. He sighed and his hand slipped away from his stomach, drenched in blood.

The man walked over and looked down at Snow. He prodded Snow's leg with his foot, but Snow didn't react. Snow's chin was down on his chest and a bloody froth dribbled from between his lips. Blood pooled on the floor around his waist, a thick treacly redness that seemed to sit on the surface of the carpet, refusing to sink into the pile.

"You dead, Snow?" he sneered. "Don't tell me you're dead already."

He raised his foot and stamped down on Snow's hand, crushing his bloody fingers. Snow's eyes opened wide and he screamed in pain. The man grinned triumphantly and levelled the gun at Snow's face.

\* \* \*

They filed into the jury box one by one, and Sam Greene could tell by the way they avoided looking at her that the news was bad. Her heart sank.

"It'll be okay, Mum," said her son Jamie, giving her hand a small squeeze.

Sam shook her head. "No, Jamie," she whispered. "It's not going to be okay."

Sam's husband looked across at her from the dock. "Chin up, love," he mouthed. Terry looked tired. There were dark patches under his eyes and when he smiled Sam could see the worry lines etched into his forehead. She was sure there was a touch more grey at his temples but he still looked good for fifty-two though; broad-shouldered and flat-stomached with the confident good looks that turned the heads of women half his age.

Sam fingered the small crucifix that was hanging around her neck on a thin gold chain. And hadn't that always been Terry's problem, she thought. Too handsome for his own good.

Sam tried to smile back at Terry but she could feel tears welling up in her eyes and she blinked them back. It wasn't fair. Her husband's fate lay in the hands of twelve men and women who knew nothing about him, and yet they and they alone had the power to put him behind bars for the rest of his life.

Sam watched them as they took their seats. Eight women and four men. That was in their favour, Terry's solicitor had said, because Terry was a good-looking guy and women were less likely to convict a man that they fancied. Three of the jury were black, and even Laurence Patterson had to admit that that wasn't such good news, because the man Terry had been accused of shooting was black. "When all's said and done they do stick together, Samantha, but let's look on the bright side, shall we?" he'd said, and he'd patted her gently on the shoulder the way you'd console someone at a funeral. Everyone dressed in their Sunday best, faces sombre, avoiding eye contact, all gathered together to say a final farewell to Terry Greene.

A tear ran down Sam's cheek and she brushed it away with the back of her hand, determined that no one would see her cry. She knew there'd be photographers outside and they'd like nothing more than a picture of her with tears running down her face. She'd been in court every day, and without fail the tabloids had carried photographs of her arriving or leaving, always mentioning the fact that she was forty-eight years old and that she used to be a singer and dancer. 'Faded Sixties singer' one of the Daily Mail's more acid female feature writers had called her, and Sam had silently seethed at the unfairness of that. Her career had barely started to get off the ground

before she'd met and married Terry, and as for 'faded', that was just malicious. She was the mother of three grown-up children and under more pressure than she's ever been in her whole life, how was she supposed to look? Radiant?

Considering the pressure she was under, Sam figured that she looked damn good. At least one of the prosecution lawyers kept looking at her with more than a professional interest, smiling each time he caught her eye. Every morning she took extra care to get her make-up just right, enough to cover up the effects of not-enough sleep, but not so much that she'd look as if she was trying too hard. And she'd been to the hairdresser to get her hair colour topped up just before the case started. Again, nothing too obvious, but she needed a little help to keep its original dark blonde sheen.

Patterson twisted around in his seat and gave her a confident smile. She acknowledged him with a nod but couldn't bring herself to smile back at him.

"Will your foreman please stand," said the clerk of the court.

A middle-aged man got to his feet and self-consciously rubbed the bridge of his nose.

Sam took a deep breath, steeling herself for the worst. Jamie squeezed her hand again and she squeezed back.

"Have you reached a verdict upon which you have all agreed?"

"We have. Yes."

"On the charge of murder, do you find the defendant Terrence William Greene guilty or not guilty?"

The foreman rubbed his nose again, then cleared his throat. He was a small, nondescript man in a cheap suit and Sam figured that this was his one moment of glory in a life filled with mediocrity, and that he was determined to make the most of it. "Guilty," he said, stretching the word out as if relishing the sound of it.

Sam cursed under her breath.

Someone cheered behind her and Sam turned around. Two detectives were grinning and slapping their boss on the back. Detective Chief Inspector Frank Welch, the man responsible for putting her husband in the dock. Welch grinned at Sam and she turned away quickly, not wanting to give him the satisfaction of seeing how upset she was.

The judge nodded at Terry's barrister. "Mr Orvice, is there anything you wish to say on behalf of the defendant?"

The barrister looked across at Terry, who shook his head.

"No, your honour."

The judge fixed Terry with a look of contempt. "Terrence Greene, stand up."

Terry got to his feet and adjusted his tie, and straightened his shoulders. He was wearing a dark blue suit, one of his many Armanis, a crisp white shirt and a tie that Sam didn't recognise. He looked the judge in the eye, his chin raised defiantly.

"Before I pass sentence, I have a few words to say about the conduct of one of the witnesses in this case," said the judge. He turned to look at Sam, and she fought the urge to look away. She felt her cheeks redden but she continued to stare at him, concentrating on his thin, humourless lips.

"Despite the weight of forensic evidence against the defendant, his wife Samantha Greene has insisted that she was with him on the night of the murder. I disbelieve her account of events, as did the jury, and I regard her claims as at best misguided and at worst a deliberate attempt to pervert the course of justice."

“You should hang the lying bitch!” A young black man with shoulder-length dreadlocks had got to his feet and was screaming at the judge. A pretty black girl tried to persuade him to sit down. “She knows he killed my brother! Should be in the fucking dock with him!”

Two uniformed policemen hustled him out of the court. The black girl followed, imploring them to let him go. Luke Snow and his sister Nancy. Brother and sister of the man Terry was accused of killing. A middle-aged black couple shook their heads tearfully but stayed where they were, not wanting to leave until they’d heard the sentence. Preston Snow’s parents.

As the courtroom doors banged shut, the judge once again fixed Sam with his baleful stare. “I hope the police will take a close look at the evidence given by Mrs Greene, with a view to considering a charge of perjury. The love of a wife for a husband is no excuse for lying to a court of law.”

Sam stared back at the judge, knowing that there was nothing she could say or do. Her mouth had gone dry and it hurt when she swallowed. It seemed like an eternity before the judge turned away from her and looked back at Terry.

“Terrence William Greene, you have been found guilty of the murder of Preston Snow. A savage, brutal murder for which you have shown no remorse. The sentence of the court is life imprisonment. Take him down.”

Two burly custody officers moved either side of Terry. Terry blew a kiss at Sam, winked, then walked down the stairs leading from the dock to the holding cells below the courtroom.

“Are you going home, Mum?” asked Jamie.

Sam nodded and got to her feet. “You coming?”

Jamie looked at his watch. I’ve got to get back to Exeter. Exams tomorrow.”

“How about a coffee first before you go?”

Jamie looked suddenly concerned. “Are you okay?”

Sam screwed up her face. “I feel a bit numb, really. I don’t think it’s hit me yet.”

Jamie nodded. “I know what you mean. I sort of expected the worst, but life? I can’t imagine Dad behind bars for life, can you? Not Dad.”

“We’ll get through it, Jamie. So will he.” She gave him a hug. “Thanks for coming.”

“I wasn’t sure if Dad would’ve wanted me here.”

“Of course he did. Don’t be silly.”

Jamie nodded towards the doors. “I’ll walk you out.”

“You will not!” Sam said quickly. “The last thing I want is for you to be photographed with me. You’ve gotten off lightly so far, the last thing we want is for your face to be splashed across the papers with mine. Lawyer-in-the-making in court for drug baron’s murder trial. Just what you need to kick-start your career.”

“I’m not ashamed of Dad,” he said.

“I know you’re not. And neither am I. Bet let’s not make things more difficult than they already are, shall we? You sneak out, they’ll be too busy looking for me. I’ll see you at the coffee bar we went to last time, yeah?”

“Okay, Mum.” Jamie kissed her on the cheek and headed out of the courtroom.

Sam stood where she was to give him time to leave the building. She desperately wanted a cigarette but smoking was forbidden inside the court building.

Patterson appeared at her elbow holding a stack of files. “Samantha, I’m gutted. But it’s not over.”

“Swings and roundabouts, Laurence.”

“We’ll appeal, of course,” said Patterson.

“Whatever.”

Patterson placed a hand on her elbow. "Can you call in at Richard's office this afternoon? It's at Terry's request." Richard Asher was Terry's accountant, and Sam didn't feel ready to start talking money.

"Can't it wait?"

Behind her she heard raucous laughter, then a Geordie voice. "Great job, Frank." It was Doug Simpson, a detective inspector, the man who'd come around to Sam's house with a search warrant and who'd spent the best part of four hours looking in every nook and cranny with half a dozen uniformed policemen. Simpson was patting Welch on the back. "The look on his face when the judge said life. Like he expected to be let off with a slap on the wrist."

Welch said nothing, but he grinned triumphantly.

The Crown Prosecution Service's barrister walked by and gave Welch a thumbs-up. "Thanks, Frank. Wish all my cases were as open and shut as that."

Welch's grin widened as he walked past Sam, and Patterson steered her away into a corner. "It's important, Samantha. I wouldn't ask otherwise."

"Okay. Fine. Whatever. I'll be there." She looked around the wood-panelled entrance hall. "Is there a back way out, Laurence?"

"I'm afraid not. Not for members of the public."

"What about for wives of convicted murderers?"

Patterson smiled thinly and shook his head.

Sam took a deep breath and walked towards the double doors that led out to the street. She heard the click-click-click of cameras and the buzz of questions before she even pushed the doors open. The Press were huddled around Welch and Simpson, whose faces were white in the glare of television camera lights.

Sam kept her head down but it was useless, they were waiting for her, and like hounds on a fresh scent they bore down on her, throwing questions from all sides. How did she feel, what were her plans, how had her husband taken the sentence, had she lied?

Sam tried to push through them. "Please, I've nothing to say," she shouted. "Nothing."

Two figures barred her way. A man and a woman. Sam raised her head and looked at them. It was Mr and Mrs Snow, the victim's parents, dressed as if they'd just come from church. They were both in their late fifties, he in a dark tweed suit and highly polished brogues, she in a blue flowery print dress and a dark blue coat, with a matching blue hat with a wide band into which had been tucked three silk daisies.

Sam tried to get by them, but Mrs Snow moved to block her way. "How could you?" she hissed at Sam. "You gave your word before God and you lied. How could you do that?"

Sam shook her head. Mrs Snow raised a gloved hand and Sam stared at her unflinchingly, waiting for the blow. The older woman lowered her hand and burst into tears. Her husband put an arm around her shoulders. His eyes were dull and flat, as if he wasn't even aware of Sam or the near-constant barrage of flashes as the photographers clicked away.

Sam pushed around them.

The questions continued. Did she know why her husband had killed Preston Snow, had her husband asked her to lie for him, where was she the night Snow was shot? Sam tried to blot out the shouts, tried to imagine they weren't there. A television camera appeared at her side and a bleached blonde with too much make-up thrust a bulbous microphone in her face. Sam pushed the microphone away. "Don't you understand – no comment"! she shouted.

She reached her car, a black convertible Saab. It was penned in by two almost-new saloons and Sam knew instinctively that the Press had done it, cutting off her avenue of escape. She



whirled around. "Can someone please move this car!" she yelled, but she could barely hear her own voice above the noise of the Press pack.

A battered old Land Rover roared up, smoke belching from its exhaust. "Mum! Get in!" It was Jamie. He threw open the door and Sam climbed in gratefully.

"Jamie, you're a life saver," she gasped.

Jamie grinned and accelerated. As he roared away from the still-shouting journalists, a bottle smacked into the windscreen, cracking it down one side. Through the side window Sam saw Luke Snow screaming and shaking his fist.

Jamie slammed on the brakes. "Bastard!"

"Leave it, Jamie," Sam said.

"Look what he's done."

"Forget it."

Jamie looked as if he was going to argue, but Sam patted him on the leg. "Come on, I'll buy you a coffee. And a new windscreen."

Jamie accelerated away, still cursing.

She rubbed the back of his neck as he drove. "You should go and see him, as soon as you can."

"I will. Laura wasn't there."

"Yeah. Probably too upsetting for her. You know what your sister's like. It's Trish I feel really sorry for. They're bound to give her a hard time at school."

Jamie drove them to a coffee bar and they sat in the window sipping cappuccinos in silence.

"Why did you lie for him, Mum?" Jamie asked eventually. "After everything he did to you."

"We're neither of kids, Jamie. Anyway, who says I lied?"

"The judge for one. Come on, the forensic alone was enough to convict him. Plus they had an eye witness. I don't know why you bothered."

Jamie had a smear of frothy milk across his upper lip. Sam reached over and wiped it away with her thumb.

"What are you going to do, Mum?"

"Been asking myself the very same question."

\* \* \*

A cheer went up as Frank Welch walked into the CID office flanked by Detective Inspector Doug Simpson and Detective Sergeant Fred Clarke. Welch raised a hand in acknowledgement. There were two cases of lager on a side table, along with half a dozen bottles of red wine, stacks of paper cups and a few packets of crisps. Clarke headed straight for the lager.

"Drink, Frank?" asked Simpson.

"Get me an orange juice and lemonade, Doug. I'm going to have a word with the governor."

Welch went down the corridor and was waved through to Superintendent Simon Edwards' office by his secretary. "He's been waiting for you, Chief Inspector," she said.

Edwards was buried in paperwork, but he stood up and shook Welch's hand as soon as he walked in. "Great work, Frank. First class. Pass on my congratulations to the team. I took the liberty of arranging a small libation."

"Much appreciated, sir."

"Not every day we see a villain like Terry Green sent down."

"No, sir."

Edwards sat down and picked up his fountain pen. When Welch didn't move towards the door, Edwards put his pen down again. "Something on your mind, Frank?"

"Greene's wife, Samantha. She lied through her teeth. The judge gave her a tongue lashing, but I'd like to send the file on to the DIP."

Edwards winced. "I'm not convinced that's in anyone's best interests, Frank. You're not married, are you?"

It was a rhetorical question. Edwards was well aware that Welch had never been married. Welch answered anyway.

"No, sir."

"Wives stand by their husbands. That's what they do, bless 'em. For better or worse."

Welch put his hands on the superintendent's desk and leaned towards him, but he could see from the look on his boss's face that he resented the territorial encroachment, so he stood up again and folded his arms. "The judge said he thought there was a case of perjury to answer, that's all I'm saying. She lied in court."

"But it didn't do any good, did it, Frank? Greene still went down. Let sleeping dogs lie. Okay?"

Welch said nothing. He wanted to argue the point, but he had worked with Edwards long enough to know that there was no point. Once the superintendent had made his mind up, it was like a steel trap. Nothing would budge him, and he'd regard even reasoned argument as a challenge to his authority. Welch nodded slowly. "Okay, sir."

"Good man," said Edwards, and returned to his paperwork.

Back in the main CID room, Simpson held out a paper cup to Welch. "There you go, boss."

Welch took it but didn't drink.

"What's up?" asked Simpson.

"Difference of opinion with the governor," said Welch. "He thinks Sam Green's a sleeping dog. I think she's a lying bitch."

**The Stretch continues with Sam Green taking over her husband's criminal empire, trying to recover his money while at the same time keeping her family together. It's a delicate balancing act that is much harder to pull off then she at first realises. And there's a cop on the case who wants her behind bars with her husband.**

## THE TUNNEL RATS

The old lady muttered to herself as she walked along the street pushing a supermarket trolley, and passers-by gave her a wide berth. She had a red woollen scarf tied around her head and a thick tweed coat that reached down almost to her ankles. She was wearing scuffed leather boots with bright yellow shoelaces and from around her ankles protruded pieces of newspaper. One of the wheels on her trolley kept sticking and she had to concentrate hard to keep it moving in a straight line. The trolley contained everything she owned, packed into plastic carrier bags which were stacked on several sheets of cardboard.

She stopped next to a rubbish bin and began searching through it. Her first major find was a copy of the Daily Telegraph, rolled up tightly. She unrolled it carefully and flicked through it. She beamed with pleasure as she saw that the crossword hadn't been done, and refolded it, slipping it into one of the carrier bags. Deeper inside the bin she came across a Burger King carton containing a barely touched cheeseburger and a pack of French Fries, along with an unopened sachet of tomato ketchup. She giggled and did a little jig around the bin, then packed her treasure into another carrier bag and resumed her journey. There were more than a dozen rubbish bins along the one-mile stretch of road and she checked them twice each day.

Small drops of rain began to patter around her and she glared up at the leaden sky. A raindrop splattered on her spectacles and she took them off and wiped the lenses with a pale blue handkerchief. After she'd put her glasses back on she untied a large golfing umbrella from the side of her trolley, unfurled it, and jammed the handle down among the carrier bags so that she had some shelter as she walked.

\* \* \*

The train lurched to a halt, throwing a Japanese tourist off balance. Her husband steadied her by the elbow as the doors opened and half a dozen passengers spilled out on to the platform. The doors closed and the Tube train swiftly accelerated towards the next station. Tommy Reid rested the back of his head against the window and exhaled through clenched teeth. He'd been riding the Circle Line train for more than two hours and he was dog tired. He had a bottle in a brown paper bag, which he raised to his lips, taking a couple of swallows. He narrowed his eyes and stared at the map on the wall of the carriage opposite him. Bayswater was the next station. He sighed mournfully. The muscles in his backside ached and his ears hurt from the near-constant noise. He scratched the two-day growth of beard with the palm of his hand and grinned across at the blind man sitting opposite him, a thirty-something man in blue wrinkled linen jacket and black jeans, holding a white cane between his legs.

The train began to slow as it reached Bayswater. Reid's earpiece crackled. "We have a possible contact," said a voice. "Three white males. Black motorcycle jacket, red baseball jacket with white sleeves, green anorak." The three muggers had struck four times in the last week. Reid sniffed and took another swig at the bottle as the train slowed then stopped.

"Fourth carriage," said the voice in his ear. Reid was in the fifth carriage from the front. He swivelled his head. Through the window in the connecting door he saw the three teenagers board the carriage and huddle together, laughing at something Anorak had said.

The doors closed and the train lurched forward again. Motorcycle Jacket took a stopwatch from the back pocket of his jeans and nodded at Anorak and Baseball Jacket. All three of the

teenagers pulled out black objects from inside their jackets, the size of flashlights with small metal prongs on the end, and spread out along the length of the carriage. Baseball Jacket clicked the trigger on his and blue sparks arced across the prongs.

Reid got to his feet and went over to the connecting door. Two schoolgirls moved away uneasily. He slowly buttoned up his thick overcoat, figuring it would offer at least some protection against the stun guns. Reinforcements would be waiting at Paddington, and all Reid had to do was to make sure that no one got hurt.

A businessman handed over his wallet. Anorak took it and put it into a green Harrods carrier bag. A housewife fumbled in her shopping bag while Baseball Jacket stood over her menacingly. An elderly black man was waving his hands and shaking his head, clearly unwilling to give up his money. Anorak walked quickly over to him, thrust the prongs of his stun gun against the man's thigh and pressed the trigger. The man screamed and then stiffened, his whole body shuddering involuntarily.

"Oh shit," said Reid. The muggers had never actually used their stun guns before – the threat alone had always been enough to frighten their victims into submission. He gripped the metal handle and pulled open the door. The noise of the rolling gear rattling down the rails was deafening. He opened the door leading to the adjoining carriage and stepped across the gap.

The three teenagers looked up. Reid held out the bottle and grinned blackly. "Wanna drink?" he asked, pretending to lose his balance. Reid figured they were about thirty seconds away from Paddington – all he had to do was to keep them distracted.

Suddenly the door at the far end of the carriage opened and two men in leather jackets and jeans burst in. Reid cursed. They might as well have been wearing uniforms.

"Cops!" yelled Motorcycle Jacket. "Run for it!"

All three teenagers hurtled down the carriage, towards Reid. Anorak reached him first. Reid stepped to the side and slammed his bottle against the teenager's head. Anorak slumped to the side, falling against two young men in suits who grabbed him and wrestled him to the ground.

Reid tried to bring up the bottle for a second time but Baseball Jacket ran into him, slamming him against the carriage door, then stabbed the stun gun against Reid's shoulder and pressed the trigger. Reid felt as if he'd been kicked by a horse. He tried to breathe but his lungs wouldn't work and the life seemed to drain out of his legs. Baseball Jacket yanked open the door and he and Motorcycle Jacket spilled into the next carriage. Reid heard the brakes begin to bite as the train approached Paddington.

They rushed along the carriage, pushing the two schoolgirls out of the way, the two plainclothes policemen about ten paces behind. Ahead of them the blind man was getting to his feet, one hand gripping his white cane, the other outstretched. The train burst out of the tunnel and the platform flashed by.

"Out of the way!" Baseball Jacket shouted, pushing the blind man to the side as the train came to a halt and the doors opened. Baseball Jacket stepped out, but as he did so, a hand grabbed his hair and yanked him back.

"You're under arrest," said the blind man, slamming Baseball Jacket against the side of the carriage. The white cane dropped to the floor.

Motorcycle Jacket skidded to a halt and held out his stun gun. "You're not blind!" he shouted.

"It's a miracle," grinned the blind man, jerking Baseball Jacket's arm up behind his back until the teenager yelped in pain.

Motorcycle Jacket glared at the blind man, then spat at his face and jumped out of the carriage. The blind man pushed Baseball Jacket towards the two plainclothes policemen, who grabbed his arms, then he tossed his sunglasses away and chased after Motorcycle Jacket.

\* \* \*

The uniformed inspector shook his head in frustration as he stared at the closed-circuit television monitor. The teenager in the motorcycle jacket was cannoning down the platform, pushing people out of his way and waving his stun gun in the air. Nick Wright was in pursuit, his arms pumping furiously as he ran. On another monitor Tommy Reid stumbled out on to the platform, still holding his bottle, and was almost bowled over by the fleeing mugger.

“Keystone bloody Cops,” muttered the inspector.

“Sorry, sir?” said the shirtsleeved officer sitting in front of him.

“Where are the reinforcements?” said the inspector, putting his hands on the back of the officer’s chair and leaning closer to the rank of monitors.

“Main ticketing area, sir,” said the officer. He pressed a button on the panel in front of him and the image on the central monitor changed to show half a dozen uniformed British Transport Police officers sprinting towards the top of the escalators.

The inspector straightened up and ran a hand through his thinning hair. He watched the mugger run into one of the exits, closely followed by Wright. At least Wright appeared to be gaining on him.

\* \* \*

Nick Wright exhaled through clenched teeth as he ran, his lungs burning with each breath. He swung around a corner just in time to see Motorcycle Jacket collide with a guitar-playing busker, scattering a tin can of coins across the tiled floor.

“Stop him!” Wright shouted, but no one moved to help. His quarry sprinted to the escalators and ran up, pushing people out of the way.

“Police!” yelled Wright. “Move, people, please!” Again his pleas were ignored and he had physically to force his way up the escalator after the teenager.

Motorcycle Jacket was halfway up the escalator when a group of six uniformed officers appeared at the top and fanned out. The boy snarled at the waiting officers, then leaped off the escalator and on to the concrete stairs. He sped down the steps, taking them five at a time, as the policemen rushed to the down escalator.

Wright vaulted off the escalator and on to the stairs, twisting his leg as he landed. Passengers on both escalators watched in amazement as the teenager cannoned down the steps with Wright in pursuit.

As they neared the bottom of the stairs, Reid appeared around the corner. His jaw dropped as he saw Motorcycle Jacket running towards him, and before he could react, Motorcycle Jacket ran into him, knocking him to the side.

The teenager was a good fifteen years younger than Wright, and Wright cursed the age difference as he ran. He took a quick look over his shoulder, flashing Reid a sympathetic smile. In his earpiece, Wright could hear the inspector giving instructions to his men, but there was no sign of the uniformed officers. Motorcycle Jacket reached a crossroads and dashed off to the left, forcing his way between two students with rucksacks. The tunnel led to a platform which

Motorcycle Jacket sprinted along. Closed-circuit television cameras stared down at them as they ran along the platform.

Motorcycle Jacket slowed as he realised that there were no more exits off the platform, and all that lay ahead was the train tunnel.

Wright slowed, too. In his earpiece, the inspector told his men which platform Wright was on. He heard footsteps behind him and he turned to see Tommy Reid jog on to the platform, some distance behind him.

"I've got him, Tommy," Wright shouted. Reid waved his bottle in acknowledgement.

Motorcycle Jacket turned to face the two men, holding his stun gun in front of him, then jumped down on to the track and began to sprint towards the tunnel mouth.

Wright took a quick look up at the digital display above the platform –the next train wouldn't be along for six minutes. He ran after Motorcycle Jacket, into the blackness of the tunnel, then gradually slowed and stopped.

The teenager was bent double, his hands on his knees, fighting for breath. "What are you waiting for?" shouted Motorcycle Jacket.

Wright jumped as if he'd been pinched. He swallowed. His mouth was dry yet his whole body felt as if it was drenched in sweat. He tried to step forward, but his legs wouldn't move. Reid had jumped down on to the track and was walking uncertainly towards him.

Motorcycle Jacket grinned. "What, afraid of the dark, are we. Jesus, are you in the wrong fucking job or what?" Laughing, he turned his back on Wright and began to jog down the track, into the blackness.

Wright closed his eyes, willing himself to follow the teenager, but he simply couldn't move. His legs remained locked. A hand fell on his shoulder.

"What's up, Nick?" asked Reid, and he moved to stand in front of Wright. "You're soaking wet," he said.

Wright opened his eyes. "He got away," he said.

"Don't worry about it. We'll get the bastard." Reid held up his bottle. "How about a drink?"

Wright shook his head. He took one last look into the black depths of the tunnel, then turned and walked towards the platform. Back into the light.

\* \* \*

The old lady splashed through a puddle and grimaced. The newspaper lining her leather booths kept her warm but they didn't keep out the water. The rain was pouring down, and even with the golfing umbrella over her head, she was still getting soaked. Ahead of her lay the mouth of the tunnel she knew would provide her with warmth and sanctuary.

She rattled the trolley along the side of the railway line, the rails crusted with dirt and rust from years of disuse. The wheels of her trolley skidded across a patch of gravel and then locked as they bit into the damp grass. The old lady whispered soft words of encouragement and coaxed the trolley into the tunnel. It was suddenly quiet. One by one she removed the carrier bags, then she carefully placed her sheets of cardboard and three blankets on the ground and sat down on them with a grunt.

She leaned over to the carrier bag where she'd put the Burger King carton. She opened the carton with an expectant smile on her face, then took out the burger and sniffed it. It couldn't have been more than a couple of hours old; it was still warm. She took a bite and chewed slowly. Something moved at the tunnel entrance, something small and black that kept close to the rail furthest from her. It was a rat, almost two feet long from nose to tail. The old woman watched it

go. She had no fear of rats, and no revulsion either. Like her, it was only seeking food and shelter. She tore off a small piece of hamburger and tossed it over to the rat, but it ignored this tidbit and hurried by.

\* \* \*

The man woke as the first rays of the morning sun hit the tops of the New York skyscrapers. Down below, the city's garbage trucks growled through the streets and far off in the distance a siren howled like a lovesick dog. As soon as his eyes opened he sat up and swung his legs off the single bed. There was no clock in the small room and no watch on the man's wrist but he knew exactly what the time was. He walked naked to the bathroom, his feet padding across the bare wooden floorboards. He stood under a cold shower and washed methodically from his head down. He rinsed and dried himself before going back into his tiny room and opening the door to the wardrobe. A single grey suit hung there, with three identical long-sleeved white shirts that had been laundered and were still in their polythene wrappings. A tie rack on the back of the wardrobe door held a solitary tie. At the bottom of the wardrobe were two drawers. The man pulled the top one open. It contained a dozen pairs of khaki shorts. He slipped on a pair, then took the sheets, blanket and pillowcase from the bed and put them in the wardrobe.

Behind the bathroom door was a black plastic bucket and a wooden-handled mop. The man filled the bucket with water and swabbed the wooden floor. When he'd finished with the floor, he used a cloth meticulously to clean the toilet, basin and shower.

The cleaning over, he went back into the room and sat down on a wooden chair, his hands on his knees. In an hour's time he would exercise for thirty minutes, then he would go to a local diner and eat breakfast. He would only leave the room twice, both times to eat; the rest of the time he would spend exercising and waiting. Waiting for the call. The man knew the call would come eventually. It always had in the past.

\* \* \*

The rat scurried purposefully down the disused rail track, its nose twitching as it scented the air ahead. It could smell something sweet, something nourishing, something it hadn't smelled in a long time. It was joined by a second rat, a female several inches shorter. A third rat emerged from the darkness to their left, its eyes glinting and its ears forward.

The three rats began to run, their paws crunching on the gravel around the sleepers. Soon they were among more rats. A dozen. Twenty. All heading the same way. Before long the tunnel entrance was nothing more than a small squashed circle behind them. The three rats stopped running: there were too many furry bodies ahead of them to keep up the pace. They slowed to a walk, then they had to push their way through the mass of rodents to make any progress. The sweet smell was stronger, driving them into a frenzy. Food. The food was close by.

\* \* \*

Superintendent Richard Newton stirred his tea thoughtfully as he watched the video recording. He looked up as his secretary entered his office and placed a plate of assorted biscuits on his desk. "Thanks, Nancy," he said, using the remote control to switch off the recorder. He sighed and leaned back in his executive chair. "I suppose you'd better send in the clowns," he said.

Nancy opened the door and ushered in Nick Wright and Tommy Reid. They stood in front of his desk, unsure whether or not to sit. Newton continued to stir his tea, a look of contempt on his face. Reid had changed out of his tramp's disguise, but his brown suit and stained tie weren't much of an improvement. Wright was as usual the better dressed of the two, but there were dark patches under his eyes as if he hadn't slept for a week. Both men studiously avoided Newton's stare, their eyes fixed on a point in the wall behind him.

"Tell me, Tommy, what does the word 'assistance' mean to you?" asked Newton.

"Help?" said Reid, hopefully.

Newton nodded. "Help would do. Support. Aid. All perfectly reasonable alternatives. So when the Moles asked for assistance, what do you think they expected to get?"

"Help, sir?" said Reid, frowning.

"Exactly," said Newton. "Help. Not hindrance, not a foul-up, not two of my men making fools of themselves. What happened down there? How did he get away?"

"The guy was fast, sir. That guy could run for England."

Newton sniffed and wrinkled his nose. "Maybe if you two spent more time in the gym and less time in the pub you'd have been able to keep up with him." He picked up his spoon and started to stir his tea again. "What was in the bottle, Tommy?"

After several seconds of silence, Reid shrugged. "I was supposed to be an alkie, sir. I could hardly have carted around a bottle of Perrier, could I?"

"Inspector Murray said you'd been drinking on the job. So I'm asking you on the record, what was in the bottle? On the record, Tommy?"

Reid looked across at his partner, then back at the superintendent. "Ribena, sir."

Newton put the spoon down and sipped his tea. "Ribena?" he said, as if it was the first time he'd ever heard the word. "That would account for the smell on your breath, I suppose," he said dryly, then opened the top drawer of his desk and took out a pack of Polo mints which he rolled across his desk towards Reid. "We're going to need an artist's impression of the one that got away. There's nothing usable on the video." He dismissed them with a tired half-wave, then had a change of mind. "Nick, stay behind, will you?"

Newton waited until Reid had closed the door before asking Wright to sit down on one of the two steel and leather chairs facing the desk. "Are you still living with Tommy?" he asked.

Wright nodded. "Yes, sir."

"How long's it been now? Three months?"

"Five."

Newton traced his finger along the edge of his saucer. "What about getting a place of your own?"

Wright pulled a face as if he was in pain. "It's a question of money, sir. Things are a bit tight just now."

"Your divorce came through, right?"

Wright nodded again. "Yeah, but she's still after more money. There's the house payments, child support, she wanted double-glazing put in." Wright held his hands out as if warding off an attack. "I'm sorry, I shouldn't bring my problems into the office."

"You've nothing to apologise for, Nick. Divorce is becoming the norm these days. Unfortunately." He stared at the cup with its pattern of roses. "Five months is a long time to be living with Tommy. He's one of our best detectives, but his personal life leaves a lot to be desired. You've got a lot of potential, Nick. I wouldn't want any of his –how shall I put it? – habits, rubbing off on you."

"Understood, sir."



Newton's telephone rang and he waved for Wright to go as he reached for the receiver.

\* \* \*

The old woman muttered to herself as she threaded a plastic-covered chain around the shopping trolley and padlocked it to the lamp-post. She checked that it was securely fastened before walking into the police station.

A uniformed sergeant looked up as she approached the counter. He smiled politely. "Hello, Annie, how are you today?" he asked

"I've seen Jesus," said the old woman. "On the cross."

"That's nice," said the sergeant. He was in his early fifties, with greying hair and a tired face from years of dealing with irate members of the public, but the smile he gave the old lady seemed genuine enough. "How about a nice cup of tea? Two sugars, right?" The sergeant called over the WPC, a slim brunette, and asked her to fetch the old woman a cup of tea from the machine in the reception area. The sergeant reached into his pocket and gave the WPC a few coins. "Milk, two sugars," he said. The WPC gave the old woman a quizzical look. "Annie Lees, she's a regular," the sergeant explained. He lowered his voice to a conspirational whisper. "She's harmless."

The old woman stood up straight and glared at him through the thick lenses of her spectacles. "Young man, I am not harmless," she said, her voice trembling with indignation.

\* \* \*

The doctor unscrewed the cap off the tube of KY Jelly and smeared it over the rubber glove, making sure there was plenty over the first and second fingers.

His patient hitched his gown up around his waist and bent over the examination couch. "I had hoped that by the time I became Vice President I'd be past the stage where I'd have to let people shove their hands up my backside," he joked.

The doctor smiled thinly and put down the tube. He knew how concerned his patient was, but he also knew that there was nothing he could say to put him at ease. The examination was purely routine, and neither man was expecting a change in the prognosis. "Okay, Glenn, you know the drill. Try to relax.

The patient chuckled dryly and opened his legs wider. "Relax, says the man. You know when I last relaxed?" He grunted as the doctor inserted two fingers into his rectum.

"Try to push down, Glenn. I know it hurts."

"Pete, you have no idea." The patient forced his backside down on to the probing fingers, biting down on his lower lip and closing his eyes. The doctor's fingers moved further in and a long, low groan escaped the patient's mouth. "I can't believe that some men do this to themselves for pleasure," he said.

"No accounting for folk," agreed the doctor. He moved his fingers gently, feeling for the hard mass that the Vice President's prostate had become. The patient tensed and gripped the sides of the couch. The doctor continued to probe the mass for several seconds and then slipped out his fingers. He stripped off his gloves and dropped them into a bin before handing his patient a paper towel to wipe himself with.

"How've you been feeling, Glenn?"

The patient shrugged. "As well as can be expected, considering I've got terminal cancer." He forced a smile. "Sorry, shouldn't let the bitterness creep in, right?" He finished cleaning himself and changed back into his clothes. "It's the unfairness of it, you know?"

“Yeah, I know. There’s nothing fair about prostate cancer, I’m afraid.”

“I can’t believe the speed of it all. Six months ago, I was fine. Now . . .” He smiled ruefully. “Now I’m not so fine, right?”

The doctor made some notes on a clipboard. “It’s bigger.”

“A lot bigger, right?”

The doctor nodded. “It’s just about doubled over the past month.”

“That’s what’s so unfair,” said the patient. “Mitterand’s cancer took years to kill him. Hell, he even stood for re-election knowing that he had it. But mine . . .”

“There’s no predictable pattern, Glenn. I told you that.”

“I know, I know.” The patient adjusted his tie and checked his appearance in the mirror above the washbasin. “So what do you think?” he said, his voice matter-of-fact but his eyes fixed on the doctor’s reflection. “How long?”

There was no hesitation on the doctor’s part. The two men had known each other for many years and had developed a mutual respect that the doctor knew merited complete honesty.

“Months rather than weeks,” he said, “Nine, possibly.”

“Nine productive months?”

“That would be optimistic. Four would be more realistic.”

The patient nodded. He turned around. “Enough time to get my affairs in order,” he said. “Ensure a smooth transition and all that.”

“How’s Elaine taking it?”

A sudden sadness flashed across the Vice President’s face. “She’s only just gotten over her father,” he said. “I intend to spend as much time with her as possible before . . .” He left the sentence hanging and gave a small shrug. “I’ll see you next week, then, Pete.” He headed for the door. “Give my love to Margaret.”

Two Secret Service agents in dark suits were waiting for the Vice President in the reception area. They escorted him to the elevator, one of them whispering into a concealed microphone as they walked.

\* \* \*

Tommy Reid carried two plastic cups of coffee over to his desk and sat down heavily. His desk was pushed up against Wright’s and they shared three telephones between them. Reid looked over his shoulder and reached into the bottom drawer of his desk. He took out a quarter bottle of vodka and winked at Wright as he poured a slug into his cup. He held up the bottle, offering Wright a shot, but Wright shook his head. Wright was trying to arrange a photofit artist but no one was available. A bored secretary had put him on hold and for the past six minutes he’d been listening to a computerised rendition of something that a child could play with two fingers. He watched Reid sip his laced coffee.

Reid put down his coffee. “What?” he said.

“What do you mean?” asked Wright.

“You were staring at me like I had something in my teeth.”

“Nah, I was just thinking.”

Reid passed over Wright’s cup of coffee. “Yeah, well you don’t want to be doing too much of that.”

Wright slammed down the receiver. “It’s a plot by British Telecom, that’s what it is.”

“What is?”

“The music they play to keep you hanging on. In the old days they’d say that they’d call you back. Now they put you on hold for hours. Who profits, huh? British sodding Telecom, that’s who.”

Reid grinned. “The old days,” he said. “How old are you, Nick?”

“Old enough.” The middle of their three telephones rang. Wright raised an eyebrow. “I suppose you want me to get that?” he said.

“Wrong, Wright,” said Reid. He picked up the receiver as he took another sip at his coffee.

Wright began pecking away at his computer keyboard. He was working on a report of the morning’s undercover operation and had come to the section where he had to explain what had happened in the tunnel.

Reid replaced the receiver. “That can wait, Nick. We’ve got a body on the line.”

Wright stopped typing. “Jesus. Another? That’s three so far this month and we haven’t even had a full moon yet.” He picked up his notebook. “All the pool cars are taken. Can we take your car?”

“Sure. I could do with the mileage.” The detectives were supposed to use pool cars when available, but if they had to use their own vehicles they were paid a substantial mileage allowance.

They went down together to the car park. Reid’s car was a four-year-old Honda Civic with forty-three thousand miles on the clock and a back-seat littered with empty fast-food containers.

They drove out on to Tavistock Place, headed south to the River Thames and turned right along the Embankment. It began to rain and Reid switched on the wipers. They smeared greasily across the glass.

Wright flicked open an A to Z. “Where are we going exactly?”

“Nine Elms, not far from New Covent Garden Market. Nearest road is Haines Street, off Nine Elms Lane. I thought I’d swing across Vauxhall Bridge and double back, the traffic’ll be lighter.”

Wright tossed the street map on to the back seat. “I don’t know why you bother having an A to Z,” he said. “You know every bloody road there is.”

“Just one of my many talents, Nick. You hungry?” Wright shook his head. “Thought we might stop off at a pub or something.”

“Maybe afterwards,” said Wright.

Reid snorted contemptuously. “What, want to see it on an empty stomach, do you?”

Wright said nothing. It wasn’t his stomach he was thinking about: he was more concerned about his partner turning up on a job smelling of drink.

It took them a little under twenty minutes to reach Nine Elms. They saw two police vans and a white saloon parked at the roadside, and Reid pulled in behind them. Wright climbed out of the Honda and peered down an embankment overgrown with nettles. A beaten-down pathway through the vegetation showed where the occupants of the vans had gone down to the tracks. The sky was a dull grey and a fine drizzle gave the scene the feel of a washed-out watercolour painting.

“I thought you said this was a body on the line?” said Wright.

“That’s right,” said Reid, opening the boot and taking out a pair of mud-covered Wellington boots. “What’s wrong?”

“See for yourself,” said Wright.

Reid took off his shoes, pulled on the Wellingtons and joined Wright at the edge of the embankment. The two lines down below were crusted with rust and dirt. “Ghost train?” said Reid. He popped a mint in his mouth and started down the slope. Wright followed him, his shoes slipping on the muddy path.

At the bottom, they looked up and down the tracks, unsure which way to go. To the south, they could see several hundred yards before the lines were swallowed up in the drizzle; to the north, they curved to the left. Wright looked down at his feet. A trail of muddy footprints led north. He nodded in their direction.

Reid grinned amiably. "You ought to be a detective," he said.

They followed the trail. Moisture flecked Wright's suit and he put his hands in his pockets and shivered. Reid was wearing a brown raincoat which fluttered around his boots, and from somewhere he'd produced a battered tweed hat. He looked like a farmer setting out to market.

As they walked around the bend they saw a young uniformed policeman in a fluorescent yellow waterproof jacket standing at the entrance to a tunnel. The tunnel entrance was of weathered stone crisscrossed with veins of moss and overgrown with ivy and brambles. The policeman tensed as the two men approached.

"British Transport Police," said Reid, taking out his warrant card and showing it to the constable. "Tommy Reid. This is Nick Wright."

"Reid and Wright?" The constable rubbed his hands together. "Sounds like a comedy act."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah, we've heard all the jokes," said Reid wearily.

"Our guys are already inside," said the constable.

"Then they're wasting their time, it's a BTP case," said Wright.

"There hasn't been a train along here for ten years," said the constable.

Wright shrugged. "Makes no odds. It's Railtrack property, so it's ours." He put his head on one side and listened to a rumbling noise from inside the tunnel. "What's that?" he asked.

"Generator," said the constable. "The SOCO boys brought it with them to run the lights."

Reid stepped into the tunnel. Wright stayed where he was. "Nick?" said Reid.

Wright swallowed. "Yeah, coming." He followed Reid into the tunnel mouth. He shivered involuntarily. Ahead of them they could see white, ghostly figures moving around, and beyond them, a bright wall of light. Wright stopped. He could feel his heart pounding.

"Nick, are you okay?"

Wright took a deep breath. "Yeah." He shook his head and started walking briskly down the line, towards the lights. As they got closer, they saw that the ghostly figures were Scene of Crime Officers in white overalls and boots, gathering evidence. Two dark silhouettes carrying flashlights walked towards Reid and Wright, tall men with their hands in the pockets of their raincoats. Wright recognised them immediately and his heart sank. The slightly shorter of the two, Inspector Gerry Hunter of the Metropolitan Police CID, was a good-looking man in his mid-thirties with black curly hair and tanned skin. His sidekick was Detective Sergeant Clive Edmunds, slightly older with receding hair and a thickening waistline.

"What brings you on to our turf, lads?" asked Reid good-naturedly.

"A uniform found the body and called it in," said Hunter. He nodded at Wright. "Thought we'd have a look-see."

"What was the uniform doing down here?" asked Wright. "Having a kip?"

Hunter smiled coldly and ignored Wright's sarcasm. "A down-and-out name of Annie Lees was sheltering from the rain a couple of day's back."

Edmunds lit a cigarette. "She's a bit crazy. She kept talking about finding Jesus." He offered the pack of cigarettes to Reid and Wright but both men shook their heads.

"Jesus?" repeated Reid.

"You'll understand when you've seen the body," said Hunter. "No one took her seriously at first."

"Where is she now?" asked Reid.

“We’ve got her back at the factory. We’ll keep her for you.”

Reid nodded. “Cause of death?”

Edmunds chuckled. “Well, it wasn’t suicide.”

“The doctor’s there now,” said Hunter, “but I think it’s safe to say we’ve got a murder enquiry.”

“We?” said Wright quickly. “This is our case.”

“Yeah, handled many murders, have you?” asked Edmunds.

Wright felt Reid’s hand on his shoulder. He realised he was glaring at Hunter and he forced himself to relax.

Hunter started to walk away and he motioned with his chin for Edmunds to follow him.

“Don’t forget your gloves, lads,” said Edmunds.

Wright was about to reply when Reid squeezed his shoulder. “Don’t let them get to you, Nick. They’re just taking the piss.”

They continued along the tracks towards the lights. There was a flash, then, a second later, another. “What’s that?” asked Wright.

“Photographer,” said Reid. They walked by a small generator. A white cable snaked away towards two large fluorescent lights mounted on tripods.

A woman came down the tracks towards them. She was in her forties with greying blonde hair tied back in a ponytail. She was wearing disposable rubber gloves and carrying a large moulded plastic briefcase.

“Excuse me, are you the doctor?” asked Reid.

“Pathologist, actually,” she said brusquely. “Anna Littman.”

“Tommy Reid and Nick Wright,” said Reid. “British Transport Police.”

“I’ve already spoken to your colleagues,” she said briskly, and stepped to the side to walk past them.

“They’re not our colleagues,” snapped Wright.

She raised her eyebrows and stared at Wright with the greenest eyes he’d ever seen. “I’ve known Gerry Hunter for three years,” she said. “I can assure you he’s a detective.”

“He’s with the Met, Dr Littman,” said Reid. “We’re British Transport Police.”

“Sounds like too many cooks to me,” she said.

“Can you tell us what we’ve got here?” asked Wright.

“What we’ve got is a dead white male, late forties, I think, and he’s been dead for several days.”

“It’s murder?” asked Reid.

“Oh, there’s no doubt about that.”

“Murder weapon?” asked Reid.

“A knife, I think.”

“You think?”

“The body’s in a bit of a state. The rats have been at it. I’ll know better after the post mortem. Now if you’ll excuse me . . .” She brushed past Wright.

The two men turned to watch her go. “Nice legs,” said Reid.

“I’m off women just now,” said Wright.

Reid sighed and turned up the collar of his raincoat. “Why would anyone dump a body down here?”

“What do you mean?”

“Bound to be found eventually. If you really wanted to hide a body, you’d bury it, right?”

They walked down the track, their feet crunching on gravel. "No footprints," said Reid. "And none outside if it was two or three days ago."

"No drag marks either. So how did they get the body in here?"

"Carried it, maybe."

"Which brings me back to my first point. Why carry it in here? Why not bury it?"

A Scene of Crime Officer stood up and stretched. He was in his fifties with steel-grey hair and thick horn-rimmed glasses. "Nice day for it," he said.

"Found anything?" asked Wright.

"Lots of stuff. Problem is knowing what's relevant. Down-and-outs have been sleeping here, kids playing around, dogs, cats, rats. There's litter, used condoms, sweet wrappers, empty bottles, cigarettes. We'll bag it and tag it, but as to what's relevant and what isn't, well, your guess is as good as mine."

"No sign of a murder weapon?" asked Wright.

The man snorted softly. "No, and I haven't come across a signed confession. But if I do . . ."

Reid and Wright walked past one of the tripod lights. A woman in white overalls was kneeling down, examining a wooden sleeper. Wright flinched at a bright flash of light. The photographer was a small, squat man in a dark suit, standing with his back to them. He took a step back, adjusted his focus and took another picture of something against the tunnel wall.

Wright moved to the side to get a better look. "Jesus Christ," he whispered.

"Yeah, practically crucified," said the photographer laconically. "I don't think they cut Jesus's dick off, though, did they?" He turned his camera side on and took another photograph. "Who are you guys with?" he asked.

"British Transport Police," said Reid.

"Don't think he was hit by a train," said the photographer.

A young man in blue overalls joined them carrying a large metal suitcase. He placed it on a sleeper and opened it to reveal a large video camera and a halogen light. "Are you going to want the video, then?" he asked, pulling the camera out of its foam rubber packing.

"Yeah," said Wright, handing him a BTP business card.

The body was naked, spread-eagled against the wall, the hands impaled on thick nails. The man's groin was a mass of blood, and strips of flesh had been ripped from his chest, arms and legs. A knife had been thrust into his chest.

"That's not what I think it is in his mouth, is it?" asked Reid.

Wright leaned forward. Between the man's teeth was a piece of bloody flesh. Wright's stomach lurched. He screwed up his face in disgust. "What sort of sick bastard would do that?" he whispered.

"Black magic?" said Reid. "Some sort of Satanic ritual?"

Wright shook his head. "There'd be symbols. Candles. Stuff like that. This guy's been tortured to death." He took a step closer to the body. There was something impaled on the knife. A playing card. Blood from the man's face had trickled down over the card. Wright reached out his hand.

"Don't even think about touching that!" boomed a voice.

Wright looked around. They grey-haired man in overalls was standing behind Wright holding a polythene evidence bag. "I wasn't going to touch anything," said Wright defensively.

"Who are you anyway?" asked the man. "Gerry Hunter's already been over the crime scene."

"I'm Nick Wright. This is Tommy Reid. British Transport Police."

"Been at many crime scenes, have you, Mr Wright?"

"What?"

The man sealed the evidence bag. Inside was a cigarette packet. "Standard procedure is for detectives to wear gloves and shoe covers before they go trampling over a crime scene."

"Yeah, well, we'll watch where we put our feet," said Wright. "And it's Sergeant Wright. What about the victim's clothes?"

"No sign of them. Assuming he didn't walk in naked, the murderer must have taken them with him."

Wright put his hands in his pockets and turned to look at the body again. He peered at the playing card. "Ace of spades," he said. "Now what the hell's the significance of that?"

"Bridge game got a bit nasty, do you think?" said Reid.

"It must mean something, Tommy. Someone went to a lot of trouble to stick that on his chest."

**The two British Transport cops end up travelling to Thailand and Vietnam on the track of the killer who left the mutilated body in the London tunnel. The Tunnel Rats is a fast-paced thriller with a startling twist at the end.**

## THE SOLITARY MAN

The prisoner lay in the damp grass and watched the building. It was in complete darkness. To his left was a line of small planes, standing like soldiers on parade, their noses pointing towards the distant runway. Two of the planes were four-seater Cessnas and he memorised their numbers. A police car sped down the road that ran parallel to the airfield, its siren on and lights flashing. The prisoner flattened himself into the grass, spread-eagled like a skydiver. He closed his eyes and breathed in the fragrance of the wet grass. Dew had coated his beard and he wiped his face with his sleeve. The siren sounded closer and closer and then began to recede. The prisoner lifted his head. It wouldn't be long before they searched the airfield.

He got to his feet and ran towards the single-storey building. There was a main entrance and fire exit, and a window that overlooked the parked planes. Two locks secured the main door: a Yale and a deadbolt. The Yale he could pick but he'd need a drill for the deadbolt. He scuttled around the side of the building and checked the emergency exit. There was no lock to pick, but the wooden door didn't look too strong. A couple of hard kicks would probably do it. The moon emerged from behind a cloud, making the thick yellow stripes that ran down both sides of his blue denim uniform glow.

A truck rattled down the road. The prisoner took a step back from the door, then waited until the truck was close to the entrance to the airfield. When the truck's engine noise was at its loudest, he kicked the door hard, putting all his weight behind the blow. The wood splintered, and it gave way on the second kick. He pushed the door open and ducked inside. The keys were in a cabinet mounted on the far wall of the office.

He dashed over to the planes. The fuel tanks of the first Cessna he tried were almost empty. He said a silent prayer and went over to the second four-seater, a blue and white Cessna 172. He fumbled for the keys, then unlocked the door on the pilot's side and switched on the electronics. Both tanks were half-full. The prisoner smiled to himself. More than enough to get him well away from the island. He untied the chains that kept the plane tethered to the metal rings embedded in the concrete parking area.

In the distance a dog barked. The prisoner stopped dead and listened intently. There was another bark, closer to the airfield. A big dog, a German Shepherd maybe, the sort of dog that the police would use. He walked quickly to the front of the plane and climbed into the pilot's seat. He let his hands play over the control wheel for a few seconds. There was so much to remember. He closed his eyes and took several deep breaths. Carburettor heat in, throttle in a quarter of an inch, just enough to get the engine turning over. He turned the key. The engine burst into life. He pushed the throttle further in and the engine roared.

The noise was deafening. He hadn't realised how loud it would be. It was the first time the prisoner had ever been in a small plane. He shook his head. He was wasting time, and the dogs were getting closer. He put his feet on the rudder pedals and released the handbrake. The plane lurched forward.

He wrenched the control wheel to the right but the plane kept going straight ahead. Only then did he remember what Ronnie had told him: on the ground, you steered with your feet. The control wheel was only effective in the air. The prisoner took a hand off the wheel and wiped his forehead. He had to stay calm; he had to remember everything that Ronnie had taught him.



He pushed his right foot forward and immediately the plane veered to the right. He overcompensated and tried to use the control wheel to get the plane back on course. "Rudder," he muttered to himself.

He jiggled the pedals and manoeuvred the plane to the end of the runway. The windsock down the runway was blowing towards him, so he'd be flying straight into the wind. He pushed the top of both pedals forward to operate the brakes, and held the plane steady. The gyroscopic compass was about twenty degrees adrift, according to the magnetic compass, so he reset it. A heading of 340 Ronnie had said. North-north-west. He pushed in the throttle as far as it would go and let his feet slide off the pedals. The plane rolled forward, accelerating quickly. He used the pedals to keep the nose heading down the middle of the runway, resisting the urge to turn the control wheel.

His eyes flicked from the windscreen to the airspeed indicator. Thirty, thirty-five, forty. The runway slid by, faster and faster until it was a grey blur. He waited until the airspeed hit sixty-five and then pulled back on the control wheel. The plane leaped into the air. His stomach lurched and he eased back on the wheel, levelling the plane off. A gust of wind made the plane veer to the left and he pulled back on the wheel again and started to climb.

Below, houses and gardens flashed by, then a road. He began to laugh. He was doing it. He was actually doing it. He was flying.

He looked at the altimeter. Five hundred feet and climbing. Wisps of cloud hit the windscreen and then were gone. Ahead of him were grey clouds, but he could see large areas of clear sky between them.

The control wheel kicked in his hands as he hit an air pocket and he gripped it tightly. He scanned the instruments. Everything seemed to be okay. He looked down at his feet and realised he'd left the fuel selector switch in the 'off' position. He reached down and turned it to 'both', freeing up the fuel in both tanks. That had been a stupid mistake. Running out of fuel wouldn't have been smart.

He took the plane up to a thousand feet and levelled it off, pulling back on the throttle as Ronnie had told him. He looked out of the window to his right. There was a beach below, and then he was flying over the Solent, towards the town of Lymington. The muscles in his neck were locked tight with the tension and he rolled his neck. Taking off was the easy part, Ronnie had warned. Getting the plane back on the ground would be a lot harder.

He flew through a patch of cloud and for a moment he began to panic as everything went white, then just as quickly he was back in clear sky. Ahead of him were more clouds. They were grey and forbidding, and the prisoner was suddenly scared. He pushed the control wheel forward and took the plane down a few hundred feet but all he could see ahead of him were the slate-grey clouds. Far off to his right was a flash of lightning. The clouds seem to rush towards him and he turned the control wheel to the left, figuring he'd try to fly around the storm, but he was too late.

Before he could react, he was inside the storm, the plane buffeted by the turbulent air. He could see nothing but impenetrable cloud. It was totally white, as if he were surrounded by a thick, cloying mist. There was no way of telling whether his wings were level or not, no sense of which was up and which was down.

The engine began to roar and he pulled back on the throttle. It didn't make any difference. He scanned the instrument panel and saw that his airspeed was rising rapidly. He was diving. Diving towards the sea. He yanked the control wheel back and his stomach went into freefall. His compass was whirling around but nothing he did stopped the spin.

He began to panic. He'd been crazy even to think that he could fly. Crazy. The engine was screaming now, screaming like a tortured animal, and the plane was shaking and juddering like a car being driven over rough ground.

He yelled as the plane dropped out of the clouds and he saw that he was only fifty feet above the waves. His left wing had dipped so far down that he was almost inverted. He wrenched the control wheel to the right and kicked his right rudder pedal, his cries merging with the roar of the engine.

\* \* \*

Wreckage from the small plane was found floating in the Solent two days later. After a week police divers discovered the bulk of the plane scattered over the sea bed. There was blood on the windshield where the prisoner's head had slammed into the Plexiglas. Of the body there was no sign, but one of the doors had sprung open on impact and the tides in the area were strong, and the Hampshire police knew that it wasn't true that the sea always gave up its dead. The file on prisoner E563228 was closed and his belongings sent to his ex-wife, who was listed on his files as his next of kin.

\* \* \*

The farmer knelt down, took a handful of reddish soil, and held it up to his lips. He sniffed, inhaling its fragrance like a wine connoisseur sampling the bouquet of an expensive claret. He took a mouthful and chewed slowly, then he nodded, satisfied. He had worked the land for more than three decades, and could taste the quality of the soil, could tell from its sweetness whether it was rich enough in alkaline limestone to produce a good crop of opium poppies.

It was important to choose the right land to grow the poppies, because if the crop was bad, the farmer would be blamed, and with blame came punishment. So the farmer chewed carefully, mixing the soil with his saliva and allowing it to roll around his mouth. It was good. It was very good. He nodded.

"Yes?" said the man on the white horse.

"Yes," said the farmer. He stood up and surveyed the hillside. "This will be a good place."

The man on the horse wore a shirt of green and brown camouflage material, with matching pants. Black boots that stopped just below his knees were thrust deep into the stirrups and he had a riding crop tucked under his left arm. The horse stood up straight, its ears pricked as it too looked at the hillside. They were more than three thousand feet above sea level, in a mountain hollow which would protect the crop against high winds, but high enough that the plants would be nurtured by the night fogs. The ground sloped away gently, providing good drainage, but not so steeply as to make planting and harvesting difficult.

"How long will it take to clear the land?" asked the man on the horse. He watched the farmer through impenetrable sunglasses.

The farmer ran a hand through his hair. If he over-estimated, Zhou Yuanyi would think he was being slothful. If he under-estimated, he might not be able to finish the work in time. He thought it would take eight days, if all the men and women in the village helped. "Nine days to cut," he said.

Zhou Yuanyi nodded. "I think eight," he said.

The farmer shrugged. "Maybe eight," he agreed.

"Start tomorrow."

The trees and bushes would have to be slashed down with machetes. It would be hard work, back breaking, and they'd have to toil from first light until dark, but the farmer knew he would be well rewarded. Zhou Yuanyi was a hard taskmaster, brutal at times, but he paid well for the opium the farmer grew. He paid well, and he offered protection: protection from the Burmese troops who wanted to smash the poppy-growers of the region.

Once the area had been cleared, the cut vegetation would be left to dry on the ground for four weeks, then it would be burned, the ashes providing essential calcium, potassium and phosphate, a natural fertiliser. The land would be ruined, of course, good for only three years, maybe four, but by then the farmer would have cleared new fields and be ready to move on.

"How many rais?" asked Zhou Yuanyi. A rai was just over a third of an acre.

"Twenty. Maybe twenty-one."

Zhou Yuanyi sniffed. He cleared his throat and spat at the ground. "Not enough," he said. "Find me another field as well. Soon."

\* \* \*

The Irishman shaded his eyes with the flat of his hand and peered down the crowded street. Both sides were lined with stalls selling dried fish, counterfeit cassette tapes and cheap clothes. The smell of spices, fried food and sewage was overpowering. "Bloody hell, Park, how much further?" he asked.

His Thai companion flashed a broad smile. "There," he nodded. "The big building."

The Irishman squinted at a four-story concrete block with iron bars over its windows. There were several signs affixed to the side of the building, all of them in Thai, but he recognised a red and white Coca-Cola symbol and a sign advertising Kodak film.

He shuddered. He didn't like being among crowds, and the street was packed with sweating bodies: old women huddled over trays of cigarettes; men sleeping on sunloungers while their wives stood guard over their stalls; bare-chested and shoeless children running between the shoppers, giggling and pointing at the sweating foreigner. A three-wheeled tuk-tuk sped down the narrow street, narrowly missing a teenage boy, its two-stroke engine belching out black fumes.

"Come on," said Park. "We said three o'clock."

The Irishman looked at his watch. "Shit, if we're late we're late," he said. "This is Thailand, right? No one's ever on time here." Rivulets of sweat trickled down his back and his shirt was practically glued to his skin. According to Park, it would get even hotter in the weeks to come, but by then the Irishman would be back in Dublin, drinking Guinness and chatting up the local talent. The Thai girls were pretty enough with their soft brown skin and glossy black hair, but the Irishman preferred blue-eyed blondes.

Park walked down the street with an easy, relaxed stride, covering the maximum amount of distance with the minimum of effort. He scratched his right cheek as he walked. The skin there was rough and ridged with scar tissue. Park had told the Irishman that he used to be a kickboxer, but this wasn't the sort of scarring that a man would get from fighting with fists or feet. The Irishman hurried after Park, sweat pouring down his face.

They were followed by two Thai men, friends of Park with virtually unpronounceable names who'd met them at Chiang Mai airport. They smiled a lot but the Irishman didn't trust them. But then he didn't trust anybody in Thailand, not since he'd given money to a beggar with no arms as he'd left his hotel in Bangkok. The beggar had been sitting cross-legged at the bottom of a footbridge over one of the city's perpetually congested roads. He had been in his early twenties, dirty and dishevelled and holding a polystyrene cup in his teeth, the empty sleeves of his T-shirt

dangling at his sides. The Irishman had dropped two ten-baht coins into the cup and Park had roared with laughter. It was only then that the Irishman had noticed the bulges and realised that the beggar had his arms folded behind his back. He had reached towards the cup to take back his money, but Park had restrained him, laughing and explaining that the beggar was simply like everyone else in the city, trying to make a living. Since then, he had taken nothing at face value.

He stepped aside to allow three saffron-robed monks to walk by. The monk bringing up the rear was a young boy who smiled up at the Irishman. It was a guileless smile and the boy's eyes were bright and friendly. The Irishman grinned back. It seemed as though everyone he met in Thailand smiled, no matter what their circumstances.

Park took them around the side of the building to a loading ramp. The four men walked up the ramp to a steel shutter which Park banged on with the flat of his hand, three short raps followed by two more in quick succession. A door set into the shutter opened a couple of inches and someone inside muttered a few words in Thai. Park replied and the door opened wide. He motioned for the Irishman to go in first.

It was dark inside and the Irishman blinked as his eyes became accustomed to the gloom. The warehouse was hot and airless. The area around the door was bare except for a small steel table and two wooden stools, but the rest of the building was packed with wooden crates and cardboard boxes which reached almost to the ceiling. A line of bare lightbulbs provided the only illumination in the warehouse, but there were so many crates and boxes that much of the interior was in shadow, adding to the Irishman's feeling of claustrophobia. He wiped his damp forehead with his sleeve.

Park smiled sympathetically. "We check, then we go," he said.

The Irishman nodded. "Let's get on with it, then."

The man who'd opened the door was short and squat with a tattoo of a tiger on his left forearm and a handgun stuck into the belt of his pants. He had a frog-like face with bulging eyes, and around his neck was a thick gold chain from which dangled a small circular piece of jade. He grinned at Park and nodded towards the far end of the warehouse. Three more Thais in T-shirts and jeans with guns in their belts materialised from the shadows. The Irishman looked at Park, and the Thai gave him a reassuring smile. Together they walked down an aisle between the towering boxes, following the man with the tiger tattoo. They turned to the left down another aisle where a large space had been cleared. A cardboard box had been opened and half a dozen Panasonic video recorders taken out. The man with the tattoo spoke to Park in rapid Thai.

"He wants you to choose one," Park explained.

The Irishman shrugged carelessly. "You choose," he said.

Park squatted down and tapped one of the machines with his finger. The man with the tiger tattoo picked up a screwdriver and quickly removed a panel from the bottom of the video recorder. He pulled out three polythene-covered packages containing white powder and handed one to the Irishman.

The Irishman walked over to a stack of boxes. He indicated the cardboard box at the bottom of the stack. "That one," he said.

The man with the tiger tattoo began to talk quickly but Park silenced him with a wave of his hand. Park said something in Thai but the man continued to protest. "He says it's too much work," Park translated. "He says they're all the same."

The Irishman's eyes hardened. "Tell him I want to see one from that box."

Park turned to the man with the tattoo and spoke to him again. There was something pleading about Park's voice, as if he didn't want to cause offence. Eventually the man with the tattoo shrugged and smiled at the Irishman. He waved his two colleagues over and they helped him take

down the upper boxes until they had uncovered the one on the bottom. They dragged it into the centre of the space. The man with the tattoo handed a crowbar to the Irishman and pointed at the box.

“He wants you to—”

“I know what he wants,” said the Irishman, weighing the crowbar in his hand. The metal was warm and his palms were damp with sweat. He stared at the man with the tattoo as if daring him to argue, but the Thai just smiled good-naturedly as if his earlier protests had never occurred. The Irishman inserted the end of the crowbar into the top of the box and pushed down. There was a crashing sound from the far end of the warehouse followed by shouts. He looked across at Park.

The man with the tiger tattoo pulled his gun from his belt and ran towards the entrance to the warehouse. His two companions followed. Park yelled at his own two men to go with them.

“What’s happening?” shouted the Irishman.

“Maybe nothing,” said Park.

“Maybe nothing, my arse,” the Irishman shouted. “This is a fucking set-up.” He jumped as a gun went off, the sound deafening in the confines of the building. There were more shots, louder than the first. The Irishman glared at Park. “Maybe nothing?” he yelled.

Park looked left and right, then grabbed the Irishman by the arm. “This way,” he said, pulling him down the aisle. They ran between the stacks of boxes.

“Is it the cops?” asked the Irishman, gasping for breath.

“Maybe,” said Park. “I don’t know.”

A bullet thwacked into a cardboard box above the Irishman’s head and he ducked down. “The cops wouldn’t just shoot, would they?” he asked.

“This is Thailand,” said Park. “The police can do anything they want.” He kicked an emergency door and it crashed open. Sunlight streamed in, so bright that the Irishman flinched. Park seized him by the belt of his jeans and pulled him across the threshold, then stopped dead.

It took the Irishman a second or two to realise that the once noisy street was now totally silent. He blinked and shielded his eyes from the blinding sun. The stall-owners had gone, and so had the crowds. Khaki Land-rovers had been arranged haphazardly around the building and red and white barriers had been erected across the alley. Behind the vehicles and the barriers crouched men with rifles, in dark brown uniforms and sunglasses. The Irishman whirled around but immediately knew that there was no escape. They were surrounded. Three rugged Thais with assault rifles stood at the emergency exit, their fingers on the triggers of their weapons.

A megaphone-amplified Thai voice echoed off the walls of the alley.

“Drop the crowbar,” said Park calmly. “Drop the crowbar and put your hands above your head. Very slowly.”

The Irishman did as he was told.

**The Irishman is sent to prison in Bangkok where he faces the death penalty for drugs offences. His bosses put together a daring plan to get him released. They track down the prisoner who escaped from prison at the start of the book, and blackmail him into helping the Irishman. It’s a dangerous mission, one that ends in bloodshed in the lawless badlands of the Golden Triangle.**

## THE EYEWITNESS

There should have been ghosts. Four and half thousand body bags, every one containing the remains of a human being that had met a violent death, and yet as Jack Solomon walked down the length of the storage facility there were no whisperings of vengeful thoughts, no movements in the shadows, not even a prickling of the hairs on the back of his neck. There was nothing, just the hum of the air-conditioning units that kept the temperature at between two and eight degrees Celsius. Did that mean that the four and a half thousand souls had moved on to whatever form of afterlife lay beyond? Solomon doubted it. Solomon didn't believe in an afterlife. He didn't believe in God, either. He'd seen the aftermath of too many atrocities committed in the name of religion to believe in a god. In any god.

A technician was using an electric saw to slice off a piece of a femur that had been gripped in a carpenter's vice. He was wearing a white coat, medical gloves and had a cotton mask across his face and he nodded as Solomon walked by. Another technician in dark blue overalls was cleaning the concrete floor with an industrial vacuum cleaner. He too wore a cotton mask across his mouth. The white body bags were stored in metal racks, seven high, each with an identification number scrawled in black ink. Above the body bags were rows of brown paper bags. Each brown paper bag also had a number on it. For each body bag, there was a corresponding brown paper bag.

Solomon had two numbers on a computer printout and he kept looking back and forth between the numbers on the printout and the numbers on the body bags. The numbers were consecutive. The bodies had been pulled from the same communal grave.

The body bags that matched the numbers on the printout were lying next to each other in the centre of one of the racks. One of the bags, Solomon knew, contained just a torso and a leg. The head had never been found. That was the elder of the two brothers. The skeleton of the young brother was virtually intact. Solomon had read the post mortem reports on both men, written in perfect English by a German doctor who had carried out the autopsies in a portakabin close to the mass grave where the brothers had been found. Both men had been shot in the back at close range. Not once but more than a dozen times. And a hatchet had been used to hack away at their legs. The German doctor had been unable to say whether the hatchet had been used before or after death, but Solomon knew that there would have been no point in inflicting the injuries after the men were dead. They'd been mutilated, thrown on the ground, and raked with machine gun fire.

Solomon pulled over a metal ladder and slowly climbed it to reach the two brown paper bags that went with the two body bags.

Solomon took the bags down a white-painted corridor to the viewing room. There were two Muslim women sitting with the interpreter, a mother and daughter. Mothers were always the worst and Solomon was grateful for the presence of the interpreter. The interpreter was a buffer, a filter for the bad news, and it kept Solomon one step removed from the horror of the situation. The interpreter was a man in his late thirties, a former soldier who had been especially trained to liaise with the families of the missing.

The room had been made as comfortable as possible, with two small sofas, a low wooden coffee table, and posters of country scenes on the wall. There was a vase of sweet-smelling white flowers on a side table. On the coffee table were two large books. One contained photographs of the clothes and personal effects taken from bodies that had been buried. The photographs in the

second book were from bodies that had been left lying on the ground. Solomon had never discovered why that was the distinction. There were so many other ways that the dead could have been segregated. By sex. By age. By manner of death. Before DNA testing, the photographs in the books were the main key to identifying the dead.

The mother and daughter had already looked through the books and had recognised the clothing belonging to two of the skeletal remains in the holding facility. They had both given blood samples, and their DNA had been checked against DNA taken from the bones. It was a perfect match.

The fact that the woman and her daughter had been called back, meant that they already knew to expect the worst. But Solomon knew from past experience that they wouldn't believe it until they had heard it from him and had a chance to view the possessions found with the remains. After denial would come acceptance, and then would come the questions.

They were Muslims and both were wearing yellow and blue headscarves and thick padded sleeveless jackets over cheap cotton skirts. Their clothing was threadbare but clean, and Solomon knew they'd put on their best clothes for him. The daughter had no laces in her worn boots and neither woman had any jewellery. Solomon put the bags down on the table and sat down, forcing a smile.

Both women thanked him. 'Hvala lijepo. Hvala za sve.' Thank you for everything. The people in the viewing room always thanked him. Even though Solomon only ever brought bad news, they thanked him.

Solomon pushed one of the bags towards the daughter, but it was the mother who reached for it. If there had been any doubt about the identification, the old woman and her daughter would have been wearing medical gloves to prevent contamination. But in this case there was no doubt and no need for gloves. She opened it and took out a black jacket, edged in gold, with a picture of Elvis Presley on the back. The old woman gasped and put a hand to her mouth. The Elvis jacket was the first thing they had recognised in the book. It was very distinctive and Solomon doubted that there was another like it anywhere in the Balkans. The jacket had been cleaned and there were creases along the sleeves where it had been ironed. Down the corridor was a laundry room where every item of clothing was washed and ironed before being placed in a bag. It was horrific enough to view clothing taken from the dead; it would be a thousand times worse if the relatives saw them in the state in which they arrived at the facility.

The old woman laid the jacket out on the table. There were five ragged holes in the back. The woman poked her finger in one of the holes, frowning. Her daughter leaned over and whispered softly. 'Metaci.' Bullets. The old woman wailed and sat back, her hands on either side of her weathered face. The daughter took a pair of socks out of the bag. They had been neatly folded. She opened one out and examined the heel, then took a deep breath and blinked back tears. She spoke to the interpreter, the words tumbling out faster and faster, until she ran out of breath and sat back on the sofa, gasping.

'She darned the socks for her brother the day before the Serbs came and took the men away,' said the interpreter. 'She says his wife couldn't sew, she was always pricking herself with the needle, so she did it for him.'

Solomon nodded and smiled. There was nothing he could say. He wondered where the wife was, but the fact that she wasn't there probably meant that she was dead, too.

The daughter took the rest of the clothing from the bag and laid it out carefully. She bit down on her lower lip and nodded. There were rips in the cotton trousers, at the back of the knees. Solomon knew they were the cuts from the hatchet blows, but at least the bloodstains had come out in the wash.

There was a rusting wristwatch at the bottom of the bag and the old woman took it from her daughter's hand and stroked it softly.

The second bag contained just a shoe with the upper coming away from the sole, and a torn plaid shirt. Like the Elvis jacket, it was peppered with bullet holes. The daughter peered into the bag. Solomon knew that she was wondering where the rest of her brother's belongings were. It wasn't a conversation he wanted to have. What had happened to her brothers was horrific enough without having to explain that the bodies had been moved several times by Serbs trying to cover up the evidence of their crimes, and that while the bodies been buried and reburied, many had fallen apart, bits had been lost, remains had been mixed up.

Solomon spoke in English, pausing to allow the interpreter to translate. 'I want to explain what has happened, so that there is no confusion,' he said. 'The DNA we have taken from your blood matches two of the remains we have here in this facility. The belongings we have here were taken from the remains, but it is the DNA which gives conclusive proof.' Solomon turned so that his body was facing towards the younger woman. Siblings were always easier to deal with. The pain was bad, but not as bad as for a mother who had to accept the fact that her children had been murdered. 'There is no doubt that it is your two brothers. No doubt at all. We can make arrangements for you to collect the remains so that they can be buried according to your religion.'

'We have no money for a funeral,' said the daughter.

The interpreter translated and Solomon nodded. 'There are charities that can help. We can tell you who to contact.'

The old woman spoke quickly, almost jabbering, her hands stabbing at the air to punctuate her sentences.

Solomon waited until the interpreter translated. The old woman had said that she was certain that there had been a mistake, that her sons were not dead but were being held prisoner in a concentration camp deep inside Serbia.

'I'm sorry,' said Solomon slowly. 'With DNA, there is no mistake. I know that mistakes were made in the past, that funerals were held and then those that were thought dead returned, but that was before we had DNA. There is no doubt. I am sorry. Very sorry. But it is time to bury your sons and to mourn. It is time to accept that they have gone.'

The old woman looked at him with tear-filled eyes and slowly nodded. Solomon stood up. The interpreter could give them any more information they needed. Solomon's work was done.

The daughter grabbed the hem of Solomon's jacket and spoke to him in rapid Serbo-Croatian. The interpreter translated. She wanted to see the bodies. They always did, and Solomon always had to say the same thing. 'It is not possible,' he said. 'Not at the moment.'

It was, of course, perfectly possible. The two women could quite easily have been taken into the room and shown the two body bags among the four and half thousand. But then they would have asked for the body bags to be opened and Solomon knew that the sight of what was inside the bags would stay with them forever. Best that they remembered their loved ones as they knew them, not as the mouldering bones and grinning skulls in the white bags. So Solomon shrugged and repeated that it wasn't possible, then left the interpreter to it.

He left the viewing room and walked back down the corridor to the exit. He passed the photographic room where a photographer was arranging a pair of trousers on the floor and positioning a camera above it. The photographic work went on. There were more books to be filled with photographs and sent around the world so that relatives overseas could look through them in the hope of identifying something that came from the missing. Solomon found the books more disturbing than the facility with its thousands of dead. The body bags were cold and



impersonal, but the books were chilling catalogues, every item personal and every item taken from the body of a murder victim.

Solomon had to unlock the door to get out of the facility, and then relock it behind him. The door to the outside was always locked so that no one could enter by mistake.

Solomon climbed into his white Nissan Patrol four-wheel drive with its diplomatic plates and drove away from the facility. He was always glad to leave the town of Tuzla. Partly because the storage facility was such a depressing place, but also because the air pollution was so bad that his throat was red raw after a few hours. The four-wheel drive bucked and rocked over the uneven road surfaces as he headed out of town. Tuzla was built on a huge underground salt lake that had been mined for hundreds of years. The town had started to sink as the mine works collapsed, so some bright Communist engineer who had forgotten his basic chemistry decided to pump water into the old mine works. The water dissolved the salt and the collapse worsened to the extent that driving around the town in a regular car meant broken exhaust pipes and scraped bodywork. Following the war, there was no money to repair the roads so the sinking continued unabated.

He drove past the huge coal-fired power station on the edge of town, a massive remnant of the Communist system that had once dominated the region. Huge cooling towers belched clouds of steam into the air, but the damage was done by the chimney from the coal furnace which poured out eye-watering pollution over the town twenty-four hours a day and by chemical plants which had been built around the power station by a Government more concerned with economies of scale than the health of its citizens.

The road back to Sarajevo was a single carriageway that wound its way through mountains and gorges, past small villages where every house had been reduced to rubble, fields with red signs warning of mines and yellow tape cordoning off areas known to be dangerous, awaiting the arrival of mine clearance charities. It was only 130 kilometres to Sarajevo, but Solomon had never made the drive in under two and half hours. There were two mountain ranges to cross and a farm vehicle or a bus or a slow-moving army patrol could produce a frustrating tailback, but even on a clear road the hillside fell away so sharply that Solomon rarely got the four-wheel drive into top gear.

His mobile phone rang about an hour outside Sarajevo, just as he was negotiating a hairpin turn in second gear behind a smoke-belching truck piled high with boxes of toilet paper. He took the call, then held the phone between his shoulder and ear so that he could keep both hands on the steering wheel.

It was Chuck Miller, Solomon's boss. Miller was an American who had worked for a succession of Non-Governmental Organisations around the world, including spells in Sierra Leone, Mongolia and Bangladesh. His stint with the International War Dead Commission was just another line on his curriculum vitae. He was a manager and a grant-getter, an administrator who knew how to play the funding game, and it was as a result of his efforts that the International War Dead Commission's budget had more than doubled since he'd joined four years earlier. 'Jack, where are you?' asked Miller.

'Just about to drive into a gorge,' said Solomon, pulling hard on the wheel and stamping on the brake.

'Take it easy,' said Miller. 'Good co-ordinators are hard to find. Can you talk?'

'Yeah, go on,' said Solomon. 'The road doesn't get any better for the next ten kilometres.'

'Remember that case you handled outside Pristina? Three years back.'

'The family that disappeared? Sure.' It had been one of the first cases that Solomon had handled on his arrival in the Balkans. An entire family had disappeared from a farm on the outskirts of Pristina, the capital of neighbouring Kosovo. It had happened during the spring. A

farmer had seen the women tilling the fields in the morning, a Kosovar army patrol had gone by the farm in the afternoon and a sergeant recalled seeing two men from the farm working on a broken-down tractor. The next day, at about three o'clock, a shopkeeper from Pristina had driven down the half-mile track to the farm to buy eggs to take back to the city. Eggs were in short supply and the shopkeeper could get four times the price he paid the farmer so he made the trip several times a week. There had been no one in the rambling farmhouse and though he pounded on the horn of his car for half an hour, no one had come. No one ever came. The entire family had disappeared. There was a kettle on the stove, boiled dry. Half a dozen cows in a nearby field were gathered at the gate, waiting to be milked. There had been a broken bowl in the kitchen, and a small pool of dried blood on the stone-flagged hallway, the only signs that the family had not left by choice.

The Commission had been notified but all Solomon had been able to do was to compile information on the missing people. No one knew for sure how many had gone missing from the farm but after speaking to the neighbours Solomon had twenty-one names. Men, women and children. Old and young. All related, all Kosovar Albanian Muslims in an area populated by Serbs. Solomon had spoken to all the neighbours, but not one said they had seen or heard anything. They might have been telling the truth, but Solomon knew that even if they had seen something, the neighbours wouldn't have said anything. Right across the former Yugoslavia innocent civilians had been maimed and murdered, some in their own homes, others taken away at gunpoint, and nobody had seen a thing. Houses had been looted and burned, cars stripped and set on fire, and those left unharmed, those who had been of the right race or religion, had turned their backs. All he had to show for a two-week investigation was a list of names of the missing.

'They've turned up, near the border with Serbia,' said Miller.

'Alive?' asked Solomon. As soon as the question left his mouth, Solomon realised what a stupid thing he'd said.

'Get a grip, Jack,' said Miller. 'If they were alive, why would I be calling you?'

**Jack Solomon is a messenger of death. Working in the fractured remains of Yugoslavia, his task is to identify the victims of ethnic cleansing and to tell families that their loved ones are never coming home. Years of working in the killing fields have desensitized the former London policeman to the horrors of war, but when a truck containing twenty-six bodies is pulled from a lake, Solomon is unable to walk away from the case. He sets out to track down the only survivor of the massacre, a young girl on the run from the killers. Solomon's hunt for the last witness leads from the brothels of Sarajevo to the high-stakes world of London's internet prostitution - where he discovers that the killers are closer to home than he thinks.**

## HARD LANDING

Trish Elliott ran her hand across her stomach for the hundredth time since she'd left the doctor's surgery. It didn't feel as if there was a new life growing inside her, it was far too early for any movement or kicks, far too soon for the baby to be making its presence felt. But Trish had known, known at the very moment that Jonathon had come inside her, that this time, after years of trying, she was pregnant. She'd bought a pregnancy test kit the very next day but it had been negative, and she'd gone out the day after that and it had also been negative. But Trish had known, deep down inside she'd known, and a third pregnancy test had confirmed what her body had been telling her. She was pregnant, at last.

She hadn't said anything to her husband and she'd left it another month until she'd gone to see her doctor, but now there was no doubt. Pregnant. She whispered the word to herself as she parked the car at the side of the road, relishing the sound of it. 'I'm pregnant,' she said softly. 'I am pregnant. I am having a baby.' She wanted to run down the street and tell everybody, to shout it to the sky, to phone every friend and relative she had. But she also enjoyed the fact she had such a delicious secret. She knew. The doctor knew. And that was all. For a while at least, the baby belonged solely to her.

She switched off the engine and shuffled across to sit in the passenger seat. Her husband loved to drive. It wasn't a macho thing, it wasn't that he didn't trust her at the wheel, it was just that he enjoyed driving so much that she was happy to let him do it. Trish thought that she was probably the better driver of the two. She took more care, followed the Highway Code religiously, checked her mirrors constantly, and was always happy to let other motorists get ahead of her. Jonathon, well Jonathon drove like a man, there was no getting away from it. But he enjoyed driving so she sat in the passenger seat and waited for him to leave the office.

That was something else that was going to change, she thought with a smile. Jonathon had promised, crossed his heart and promised, that when they had a family he'd get a desk job. No more late nights, no more weeks away from home, no more putting his life on the line. He'd promised. He'd take a regular job, with regular hours, and he'd be there for her when she needed him. Someone else could take the risks, someone else could get the glory. He'd be a husband and father. A family man. He'd promised and she would keep him to it.

She saw her husband walking along the pavement towards the car and she waved. Jonathon got into the car and gave her a kiss on the cheek. As he pulled away, Trish slipped her hand around his neck and pushed her lips against his, kissing him deeply. He kissed her back, with passion, and slid his hand down to cup her breast.

'That was nice,' he said as she finally released him.

'You deserve it,' she said.

'For what?' He started the engine and revved the accelerator as he always did, boy-racer style.

'For being such a good husband.' She stroked his thigh and smiled to herself. She wasn't going to tell him yet, not until the time was absolutely right. The food was in the boot, all the ingredients for his favourite meal. And a bottle of his favourite wine. She'd only have a sip to celebrate and that would be the last alcohol she'd touch until the baby was born. She wasn't going to do anything that would remotely jeopardise the health of her child. Their child. The child they'd been waiting for for almost three years. Their doctor had insisted that there had been no medical reason for her inability to conceive. She was fine. Jonathon was fine. There was no need yet for medical intervention, the doctor had said, they just needed to keep trying. They were

both young, fit and healthy. Jonathon's job meant that he was under a lot of stress most of the time, but other than that all they needed was lots of sex and a bit of good luck. They'd had lots of sex all right, thought Trish with a smile. The sex had always been great, from the moment they'd met.

'What are you smiling at?' asked Jonathon, putting the car in gear and driving away from the curb. He pushed his way into the traffic without indicating, waving a careless thanks to a BMW that had to brake sharply to let him in.

'Nothing,' she said. She wanted to tell him there and then, but she wanted it to be perfect. She wanted it to be a moment that they'd both remember for ever. The moment when she told him that she was pregnant. That they were pregnant.

'Come on, come on,' muttered Jonathon. Ahead of them was a set of traffic lights. Jonathon groaned as they turned red. 'See that?' he said. 'Now we're stuck here.'

'There's no rush,' she said, patting his thigh. She looked across at her husband and smiled. He was so good-looking, she thought. Tall, broad-shouldered, and a mop of black hair that kept falling across his face. Perfect teeth. A toothpaste advert smile.

He grinned at her. She loved his grin. It was the grin of a mischievous schoolboy that had never grown up. 'What is it?' he asked.

'What?'

'You. You're smiling like the cat that got the cream.'

She wanted to tell him. God, she wanted to tell him. She wanted to grab him and kiss him and hug him and tell him that he was going to be a father. But she just smiled and shook her head.

'Nothing,' she said.

A large black motorcycle pulled up next to them. The pillion passenger leaned down so that he could look into the car. Trish thought for a moment that he wanted to ask directions, then she saw the gun and frowned. It was so unexpected that for a few seconds it didn't register. Then time seemed to stop dead and she everything clearly. She saw the gun. A dull grey automatic in a brown gloved hand. The pillion passenger wearing a bright red full face helmet with an black visor. The driver wearing a black helmet, his visor also impenetrable. Men without faces. The driver revved the engine. The passenger held the gun with both hands. Jonathon was still looking at Trish, but as her frown deepened he started to turn, to see what it was that she'd seen. As he moved, the gun kicked and the window exploded and cubes of glass splattered across Trish's face.

The explosion was so loud that it deafened Trish and she felt rather than heard the next two shots. Her face was wet and she thought that she'd been cut but then she realised it wasn't her blood but her husband's. Her face and chest were soaked with his blood and she started to scream as he toppled forward onto the steering wheel.

\* \* \*

There were eight of them in the minibus, all wearing blue overalls and training shoes and baseball caps with the logo of the pest control company above the peak. As the minibus stopped at the gate a bored security guard with a clipboard waited until the driver wound down the window and then peered at the plastic ID card clipped to his overall pocket. He did a head count and made a note on his clipboard.

'No one off sick tonight then?' On a bad night there'd only be four in the squad. Eight was a full complement, and with the company barely paying above minimum wage they were usually at least one man short. No women. The work was unpleasant and physically demanding, and while

sex discrimination laws meant that women couldn't be refused a job, few made it beyond the first night.

'New blood,' said the driver. 'Still keen.'

The security guard shrugged. 'Yeah, I remember keen,' he said wearily. He was in his late twenties but looked older with hair greying at the temples and a spreading waistline. 'Okay gentlemen, hold your ID cards where I can see them, please.'

The men did as they were asked and the security guard shone his torch at the cards one by one. He was too far away to check if the faces of the men matched the faces on the cards, but even if he had checked he would have seen nothing wrong. A lot of time had been spent to make sure that the ID cards were faultless. The van was genuine, as were the overalls and baseball caps. The original occupants of the van were in their underwear in a disused factory in east London, gagged and bound and guarded by another member of the gang. He would stay with them until told that the job was done.

The faces that looked back at the security guard had the bored resignation of men about to start eight hours of tedious night work. Three were West Indian, including the driver. The rest were white, all of them aged under forty. One of the youngest yawned, showing a mouthful of bad teeth.

The security guard nodded and stepped back from the minibus. He waved across at his colleague and the white pole barrier with its 'STOP' sign rose gently up. Standing at the gatehouse were two uniformed policemen wearing bullet-proof vests and cradling black Heckler and Koch automatics. They watched the minibus drive by, their fingers inside the trigger guards of their weapons. The driver gave them a friendly wave and drove towards the warehouses. Overhead a British Airways 747 swooped low, its landing gear down, wheels ready to bite into the runway, engines roaring in the night sky.

The man with bad teeth ducked involuntarily and one of the West Indians laughed and slapped him on the back. 'Don't fuck around,' said the man sitting next to the driver. He was a wide-shouldered man in his late thirties with sandy brown hair cropped close to his skull. His eyes scanned the darkness between the warehouses. He wasn't expecting trouble, virtually all the security was at the perimeter of the airport.

In the rear of the minibus, the men began pulling sports bags from under their seats.

'Right, final name check,' said the front seat passenger. His name was Ted Verity and he'd been planning the robbery for the best part of three months. 'Archie,' he said. He opened the glove compartment and took out a portable scanner. He switched it on and clipped it to his belt.

'Bert,' said the man directly behind Verity. His real name was Jeff Owen and he'd worked with Verity on more than a dozen robberies. Owen pulled a Fairy liquid bottle out of his sports bag. He sniffed the top and wrinkled his twice-broken nose.

Verity took a second scanner from the glove compartment, switched it on and placed it on the dashboard.

'Charlie,' said the man next to Owen. He was Bob Macdonald, a former squaddie who'd been kicked out of the army for bullying. Verity didn't know Macdonald well, but Owen had vouched for him and Verity trusted Owen with his life. Macdonald pulled a sawn-off shotgun from his holdall and slotted a red cartridge into the breech.

'Doug,' said the man next to Macdonald. He shoved a clip into the butt of a handgun and pulled back the slider. He was the youngest of the West Indians, a career criminal who'd graduated from car theft and protection rackets to armed robbery after he'd done a six-month stretch in Brixton prison. That's where Verity had met him and spotted his potential.

The alphabetical roll-call continued. A to H. The young guy with the bad teeth was Eddie. He had a revolver in his right gloved hand and a stun gun in his left. Eddie pressed the trigger of the stun gun and blue sparks crackled between two metal prongs. The high voltage charge was enough to disable a man without causing permanent injury. The tall lanky West Indian next to Eddie was Fred. He had a twin-barrelled sawn-off shotgun. Sitting on his own in the back cradling a pump-action shotgun was a thirty-something Glaswegian with a shaved head and football tattoos hidden by his overall sleeves. He was George and he had an annoying habit of cracking his knuckles.

The West Indian driver was Harry. Verity didn't know what Harry's real name was. He'd known the man for five years and worked with him on a dozen jobs but had only ever known him by his initials, P.J. He was one of the best drivers in London and claimed to have once been Elton John's personal chauffeur. Verity nodded at P.J. and he brought the minibus to a halt.

'Anyone uses any name other than the ones you've been given and I'll personally blow their head off,' said Verity, turning around in his seat.

'Right Ted,' called George from the back of the minibus, then he slapped his forehead theatrically. 'Shit, I forgot already.'

'Very funny,' said Verity. He pulled a sawn-off shotgun out of his bag and flicked off the safety. 'Remember, we go in hard; hearts and minds. Don't give them time to think. They sound the alarm and we've got less than six minutes before the blues and twos arrive and we're up to our arses in Hecklers. Everybody set?'

The six men in the back nodded.

'Masks on,' said Verity.

The men took off their baseball caps and pulled on black ski masks with holes for eyes and mouths. Verity nodded at P.J. and the West Indian drove forward. Verity's heart raced. No matter how many jobs he did, no matter how many times he'd piled in with a gun, the fear and excitement always coursed through him like electricity. Nothing compared with the high of an armed robbery. Not even sex. All his senses were intensified as if his whole body had gone into overdrive. Verity pulled on his own mask. He connected an earphone to the scanner and slipped the earpiece under his mask and into his left ear. Just static.

P.J. turned sharply to the right and pulled up in front of the warehouse. Verity swung open the door and jumped down, keeping the sawn-off close to his body. The earpiece buzzed. A suspicious passenger in the arrivals terminal. An IC6 male. An Arab. Good, thought Verity, anything that drew attention away from the commercial area of the airport was a Godsend.

Owen pulled back the side door and jumped out of the minibus. He had a revolver sticking in the belt of his overalls. The rest of the team piled out and rushed over to the entrance to the warehouse. There was a large loading area with space for three trucks but the metal shutters were down. To the right of the loading bay was a metal door. The men stood either side of the door, weapons at the ready.

Verity walked up to the door and put his gloved hand on the handle. The door was never locked, even at night. There were men working in the warehouse twenty four hours a day, though there was only a skeleton staff at night. Four men at most. Two fork lift truck drivers, a security guard and a warehouseman. Four unarmed men in charge of a warehouse containing the best part of twenty million pounds worth of goods. Verity smiled to himself. Like taking candy from a baby.

Verity pulled open the door and rushed in, holding his shotgun high. To the right of the door was a small office containing three desks and wall-to-wall shelving filed with cardboard files. A uniformed security officer was sitting at one of the desks, reading a newspaper. Verity levelled

his shotgun at the man and motioned with it for the man to stand up. As the man got to his feet, Eddie rushed by Verity and pressed the prongs of the stun gun against the guard's neck and pressed the trigger. The guard went into spasm and slumped to the floor. Eddie caught him as he fell and dragged him behind the office door. He took a roll of duct tape from his overall pocket and used it to bind the man's hands and feet as the rest of the men fanned out, moving through the warehouse. It was about half the size of a football pitch with cartons of cardboard boxes piled high on wooden pallets. Most of the boxes were marked 'Fragile' and came from the Far East. Japan. Korea. Hong Kong.

An orange fork lift truck reversed around a stack of boxes and Doug ran up to it and jammed his pistol against the neck of the operator, a middle-aged man in white overalls. Doug grabbed the man's collar and pulled him from the vehicle, then clubbed him across the head with the gun.

Verity could hear the second fork lift truck whining in the distance and he pointed in the direction of the sound. Fred and the Glaswegian ran off, their training shoes making dull thuds on the concrete floor.

Doug rolled the fork lift truck driver onto his front and wound duct tape around his mouth before binding his arms.

Verity motioned at Macdonald and Owen to start moving through the stacked pallets. They were looking for the warehouseman.

The three men moved silently through the warehouse, their weapons at the ready. Macdonald looked at his watch. 'Plenty of time,' whispered Verity. 'Radio's quiet.'

The second fork lift truck stopped, and there was a bumping sound in the distance as if something soft had hit the ground hard. Then silence.

The three men stopped and listened. Off to their right they heard a soft whistling. Verity pointed and they headed towards the noise.

The warehouseman was in his early thirties with receding hair and wire-framed glasses. He was holding a palm computer and making notes with a small stylus as he whistled to himself. He was so engrossed in the tiny computer that he didn't see the three masked men until they were almost upon him. His jaw dropped and he took half a step backwards, then Verity jammed his shotgun in the man's stomach. 'Don't say a word,' hissed Verity. 'Do as you're told and we'll be out of here in a few minutes.'

He grabbed at the man's collar with his left hand, swung him around so that he was facing in the direction of the office, then frog-marched him with the shotgun pressed into the base of his spine. 'There's no m-m-money here,' the man stammered.

'I said don't talk,' said Verity. He rammed the shotgun barrel into the man's back for emphasis.

When they reached the office the two fork lift truck drivers were lying on the ground outside the door, gagged and bound with grey duct tape. Owen was standing over them, his gun in one hand, the Fairy Liquid bottle in the other.

Verity pushed the warehouseman to the floor next to the two fork lift truck drivers. The man rolled onto his back and his glasses fell off, clattering on the concrete. Verity pointed his shogun at the warehouseman. 'The Intel chips,' he said through gritted teeth. 'The ones that came in from the States this morning.' Voices buzzed in his earpiece. A Police National Computer check on the Arab. A name, date of birth. Nationality. Iraqi. 'Bastard ragheads,' muttered Verity.

'What?' said the warehouseman, totally confused. He groped for his spectacles with his right hand.

Verity nodded at Owen. Owen squeezed the Fairy Liquid bottle and sprayed the contents over the three men. Macdonald frowned as he recognised the smell. Petrol. The fork lift truck drivers

bucked and kicked but the warehouseman just lay on the floor in shock, his hand clutching his spectacles.

Owen emptied the plastic bottle, then tossed it to the side. He took a gunmetal Zippo from the pocket of his overalls and flicked it open. 'You heard what the man said, now where are the chips?' He span the wheel of the lighter with his thumb and waved a two-inch smokey flame over the three men.

'Archie, what the hell's going on?' shouted Macdonald, taking a step towards Verity. 'No one said we were going to set fire to anyone.'

'You've got a shotgun in your hands, this is no different.'

'Have you seen what third degree burns look like?'

Verity turned and levelled his shotgun at Macdonald's legs. 'Have you seen what a kneecapping looks like?'

Macdonald raised the barrel of his shotgun skywards, showing that he wasn't a threat. 'Just wished I'd been fully briefed, that's all.' He shrugged. 'You're right. In for a penny...'

The warehouseman scrabbled on his back, away from Owen. Owen followed him, bending down to wave the flaming Zippo closer to his legs. The warehouseman backed against the wall of the office, his hands up in front of his face. 'I'm not sure how close I can get before you go up in flames,' said Owen. 'The Intel chips,' he hissed at the warehouseman. 'Where are they?'

'I'll have to check the computer,' stammered the warehouseman. A dark stain spread down his left trouser leg.

Owen clicked the Zippo shut, grabbed the warehouseman by the scruff of the neck and dragged him over to the office door. Verity followed. The earpiece buzzed and crackled. There'd been a car crash outside the departures terminal. Two minicabs had collided and the drivers had started fighting. Verity smiled under his ski mask. The more distractions, the better.

Eddie threw the warehouseman into the office. Owen snapped the Zippo shut. 'You've got ten seconds, then it's barbecue time,' he snarled. He grabbed the warehouseman and pushed him down onto a swivel chair.

The warehouseman's hands trembled over the keyboard. 'I have to think,' he said. 'I'm only the n-n-night man.'

'Think about this,' said Owen, lighting the Zippo again and waving the flame close to the man's face.

The warehouseman shrieked. 'Okay, okay, wait!' he shouted, stabbing at the keyboard. 'I've got it.' He wiped his sweating forehead with the arm of his coat. 'Row G. Section Six. Twelve b-b-boxes.'

Verity turned to the office door. 'Fred, Doug!' he called. 'Row G. Section Six.' The earpiece buzzed. Despite the clean PNC check, the Arab was being taken into custody.

Owen closed the Zippo and used duct tape to tie the warehouseman to the chair. 'I d-d-did what you wanted, d-d-didn't I?' asked the warehouseman fearfully. Owen slapped a piece of tape across the man's mouth.

Verity pointed at Owen. 'Tell P.J. to get the minibus ready,' he said, then jogged towards Row G.

'I'll do it,' said Macdonald.

Verity stopped in his tracks. He pointed a gloved finger at Macdonald. 'I said him. If I'd wanted you to do it I'd have told you.' He pointed at Owen. 'Do it!' he shouted. Then he pointed at Macdonald. 'You stay with me where I can keep my eye on you.' Verity jogged down the centre aisle. Macdonald and the Glaswegian followed him while Owen ran towards the front door.



Doug was already sitting at the controls of a fork lift truck. 'Here they are,' shouted Fred, gesturing at a pallet loaded with cardboard boxes.

'Come on, get them loaded and let's get out of here!' shouted Verity. The boxes contained the latest Pentium chips from the States. According to Verity's man on the West Coast, there were twenty-four boxes in the shipment worth almost a million pounds, wholesale.

In the distance, the metal door slammed. They all turned at the sound of running feet. Verity and Macdonald ran into the main aisle and saw Owen hurtling towards them. 'Cops!' yelled Owen. 'There's cops everywhere!'

Verity whirled around. 'What?'

'They've got P.J. There's armed cops all over the place.'

Verity's hand dropped towards his scanner. He checked the frequency and the volume. Everything was as it should be. 'They can't be,' he shouted.

'They must have hit a silent alarm,' shouted Owen.

Verity ran towards the office, where Eddie was standing with both hands on his pistol. 'What do we do?' shouted Eddie.

Verity gestured at the metal door. There were bolts top and bottom. 'Lock it,' he said. Eddie ran over and slid the bolts, then ducked away. There were no windows in the warehouse structure, no way of seeing what was going on outside. Owen was panting hard. Verity put a hand on Owen's shoulder. 'How many?' he asked.

'Shit, I don't know. They were all over the minibus. Three unmarked cars. A dozen cops, maybe. I didn't hang around to count.'

Verity rushed into the office and slapped the warehouseman across the face, then ripped the tape away from his mouth. 'Did you trip an alarm?' he asked.

The warehouseman was shaking. 'How c-c-could I?' he stammered. 'You were w-w-watching me all the time. You know you were.'

'What are we going to do?' asked Eddie.

'Shut the fuck up and let me think,' said Verity.

'There's nothing we can do,' said Macdonald. 'If the cops are outside, it's all over.'

Verity ignored him and turned to Owen. 'You said they had P.J?'

'He was bent over the bonnet of one of the cars, one of the cops was handcuffing him.'

'Did they see you?'

Owen nodded.

'The minibus was still there?'

Owen nodded again.

'Okay,' said Verity. If the cops knew that they'd been seen then they had only seconds. He gestured with his shotgun at the two men on the floor. 'Free their legs,' he said. 'And untie the twat in the chair. They're our ticket out of here.'

Eddie rushed into the office. Fred and the Glaswegian bent down and ripped the duct tape away from the legs of the fork lift truck drivers.

Verity stood cradling his shotgun as he stared at the bolted metal door. If the cops knew that they were armed, they wouldn't come storming in. And if they went out with hostages, the police wouldn't be able to shoot. Verity tried to visualise the geography around the warehouse. So far as he could recall, there were no vantage points for snipers, no high ground from where they could be picked off. It would all be up close and personal, and that meant the cops wouldn't be able to fire without risking the hostages. But they had to move quickly. 'Come on, come on!' he shouted.

Eddie pushed the warehouseman out of the office. 'The security guard's still out cold,' he said.

'Three's enough,' said Verity.

‘Enough for what?’ asked Macdonald.

‘To get us out of here,’ said Verity. He went over to the warehouseman. ‘Give me the duct tape,’ said Verity, holding out his hand to Owen. Owen tossed him the roll of tape. The warehouseman tried to speak but Verity pushed the barrel of the shotgun under his nose and told him to shut up. ‘George, come over here.’ The Glaswegian stood up and walked over to Verity. ‘Put your shotgun against the back of his neck.’ The Glaswegian did as he was told, and Verity wound duct tape around the weapon and around the warehouseman’s neck.

‘You use him like that and it’s kidnapping,’ said Macdonald. ‘Shoot him and it’s cold-blooded murder.’

‘If the cops let us go, no one’ll get hurt,’ said Verity. He nodded at Fred. ‘Do the same with him,’ gesturing at the fork lift driver. The West Indian hauled the man to his feet and started fastening his sawn off shotgun to the man’s neck with tape.

‘They won’t let you walk out of here,’ said Macdonald. ‘Even with hostages.’

‘Armed robbery will get us twelve years, maybe fifteen,’ said Verity. ‘If a gun goes off and one of these sad fucks gets it, it’ll be manslaughter. Ten to twelve. We’ve got nothing to lose.’

‘Ted Verity, I know you can hear me,’ said a voice. Verity whirled around in surprise, then realised that the voice had come through the earpiece of the scanner. It was being broadcast on the police frequency. ‘This is the police. It’s over Ted, come out now before this gets out of hand.’

Verity roared and ran over to the fork lift truck driver that Fred was tying up. He slammed his shotgun against the fork lift truck driver’s chin, then kicked him between the legs, hard. The man fell back and Verity hit him again as he went down.

Macdonald grabbed Verity’s arm and pulled him away. ‘What the hell’s got into you?’ shouted Macdonald.

Verity shook him off. The earpiece buzzed again. ‘There’s armed police out here, Ted. There’s no where for you to go. Leave your weapons where they are and come out with your hands in the air. If we have to come in and get you, people are going to get hurt.’

A telephone began to ring in the office.

‘Answer the phone, Ted,’ said the voice in Verity’s ear.

‘It’s the cops,’ said the Glaswegian. ‘They’ll be wanting to talk to us.’

Eddie hurried over to Verity.

‘They’ve already talked to us,’ said Verity. He slapped the scanner on his belt.

‘On the radio.’

‘How did they know we had a scanner?’ asked Eddie, his face just inches away from Verity’s. Verity could smell garlic on the man’s breath.

‘They knew everything,’ said Verity. ‘We’ve been set up.’ He swore and then pushed Eddie in the chest. ‘Get the fuck away from me!’ he said.

‘It’s over,’ said Macdonald. He turned to the Glaswegian, looking for his support. The Glaswegian shrugged but said nothing. ‘If we go out with hostages, they’ll throw away the key,’ said Macdonald. The Glaswegian’s finger was on the trigger of the shotgun. Most of the barrel was covered with duct tape, binding it to the back of the warehouseman’s neck. The man was trembling and the piece of duct tape across his mouth pulsed in and out as he breathed.

‘There’ll throw away the key for me anyway,’ said the Glaswegian. ‘One look at my record.’ He jabbed the shotgun against the warehouseman’s neck. ‘Let’s just do what we’ve got to do.’

Macdonald groaned and shook his head. He nodded at Owen. ‘Jeff, help me out on this. This mad bastard’s gonna get us all killed.’

‘No names!’ screamed Verity, brandishing his shotgun. ‘No fucking names!’

‘Ted,’ said Macdonald calmly. ‘Them knowing who we are is the least of our problems.’

‘He’s right,’ said Doug. ‘If the cops are outside then it’s thank you and good night.’ He gestured at the door with his handgun. ‘This peashooter’s gonna do me no good against pigs with heavy artillery.’

‘We’re not gonna shoot at them,’ shouted Verity. ‘All we’re gonna do is to tell them if they try to stop us, the hostages get it. Look, the minibus is out there. P.J. is there. If we move now, we can still get out of here. If we keep yapping they’ll be firing tear gas and God knows what else in here.’

The phone stopped ringing. Fred went to stand by Doug. The Glaswegian pulled the warehouseman back so that he was closer to Verity. Battle lines were being drawn. Owen cursed and moved over to Verity, his sawn-off shotgun at the ready. He gestured with his chin for Macdonald to join him but Macdonald shook his head.

‘Eddie,’ said Verity.

‘Get the hell over here.’ Eddie looked across at the two West Indians, then at Verity. ‘I didn’t sign up for a shoot-out,’ he said. ‘In and out, you said.’ ‘Eddie, get over here or I’ll shoot you myself.’ Eddie gritted his teeth. Verity levelled his shotgun at Eddie’s groin. ‘I swear to God,’ said Verity. ‘Get your fucking arse over here.’

Tears welled up in Eddie’s eyes but he did as he was told.

‘Answer the phone, Ted,’ said the voice in Verity’s ear. ‘What we’ve got to say is better said over a secure line, right? Don’t you agree?’

Verity ripped the earpiece from his ear and pointed at the fork lift truck driver on the floor. ‘Get a shotgun taped to his neck, now,’ he shouted at Owen, keeping his own weapon aimed in the direction of the West Indians.

Owen grabbed the roll of duct tape and pulled the injured man to his feet. ‘Give me a hand,’ he said to Eddie.

‘If you’re going to go through with this, I’m out of here,’ said Doug.

‘You’re not going anywhere,’ said Verity.

‘This ain’t no three musketeer thing,’ said Doug. ‘You do what you’ve got to do, but I’m walking out now.’

‘I’m with him,’ said Fred, shifting his weight from foot to foot.

The telephone started to ring again.

‘We’re going out there together,’ said Verity.

Eddie began winding tape around the fork lift truck driver’s neck.

‘They’re not going to let you drive away,’ said Macdonald.

‘They won’t have a choice,’ said Verity. ‘What are they going to do? Shoot at us while we’ve got these guys by the short and curlies?’

‘And what are you going to do when they say there’s no deal?’ said Macdonald. ‘Blow the heads off civilians?’

‘They’ll deal,’ said Verity.

‘If that’s what you think then you don’t know the cops.’

‘Do you?’ yelled Verity. ‘Is that how they knew we were here? Did you grass us up?’

‘Screw you, Verity,’ said Macdonald. ‘I don’t need this shit.’

Verity pointed his shotgun at Macdonald’s midriff and his finger tightened on his trigger. Macdonald swung his own shotgun up so that it was levelled at Verity’s stomach.

‘Guys, for fuck’s sake!’ shouted Owen.

‘We’re on the same side here!’ ‘We’re in this together,’ said Verity. ‘If we split up now, it’s over.’

‘It’s over anyway!’ shouted Macdonald. ‘You just don’t see it.’

‘Bob, we’re damned if we do and we’re damned if we don’t,’ said Owen.

Macdonald snarled at Owen, though he kept his weapon aimed at Verity. ‘You told me this was a straight robbery,’ he said. ‘In and out before anyone was the wiser, you said. Now we’re taking hostages.’

‘The cops are going to say we took hostages anyway,’ said Owen calmly. ‘Soon as we tied them up we were holding them against their will. Look, I brought you in on this because you were a cool head. Don’t let me down now.’ The phone stopped ringing again. Outside the warehouse they heard rapid footsteps. Then silence.

Macdonald nodded slowly and lowered his weapon. ‘Okay,’ he said.

Verity stared at Macdonald, then nodded curtly, acknowledging Macdonald’s change of heart. ‘Check the door,’ Verity said. ‘Don’t open it, just listen.’

Macdonald walked towards the door. As he passed Verity, Macdonald turned suddenly and slammed the cut-down stock of his shotgun into the man’s stomach. The breath exploded from Verity’s lungs and he doubled over. Macdonald brought the stock crashing down on the back of Verity’s head and Verity dropped like a dead weight.

Owen stared at Macdonald in amazement. Doug and Fred cheered. The Glaswegian tried to rip his shotgun away from the warehouseman’s neck but the duct tape held firm and he cursed. Macdonald swung his shotgun towards the Glaswegian. ‘Don’t even think about it, Jock,’ he said.

‘You’re dead,’ said Owen. ‘When he gets hold of you, you’ll be wearing your balls around your neck.’

‘If we go out there tooled up, we’re dead anyway,’ said Macdonald. He backed away from Owen. The Glaswegian ripped his shotgun free with a roar. He aimed it at Macdonald as the warehouseman slumped to his knees.

Macdonald kept backing away. ‘I’ve no problem with you, Jock,’ he said. ‘Or you, Jeff. I just want out of here.’

There was a loud bang at the entrance and they all jumped. As the Glaswegian turned to look at the metal door, Macdonald sprinted down the warehouse. He ducked between two towering stacks of pallets, then zigzagged right, left and right again. He dropped the shotgun and kicked it under a pallet, then sprinted towards the rear of the warehouse. Behind him he heard the metal door crash open followed by the staccato shouts of men who were used to their orders being obeyed. ‘Armed Police! Down on the floor, now! Down, down, down!’

Macdonald zigzagged again, and reached the warehouse wall. The emergency exit was at the mid-point and Macdonald ran towards it. From the front of the warehouse he heard a single shotgun blast, then a burst of automatic fire, then more shouts. He wondered who had fired. Owen was too much of a pro to shoot at armed police. It was probably the Glaswegian. Macdonald hoped that he hadn’t hit anybody and that the police had been firing warning shots. A pump action shotgun against half a dozen Hecklers was no contest at all.

Macdonald kicked the metal bar in the middle of the door and it sprang open. An alarm sounded off in the distance. The door bounced back and he shouldered his way through.

‘Armed police!’ shouted a Cockney accent. ‘Drop your weapon!’

Macdonald stopped dead and raised his hands in the air. ‘I’m not carrying a weapon, dipshit!’ he shouted, then stood where he was, breathing heavily.

‘Down on the ground, keep your hands where we can see them!’ shouted the officer. He was in his mid twenties, dressed all in black with a Kevlar vest and a black baseball cap with POLICE written across it in white capital letters. He had his Heckler aimed at Macdonald’s chest. There were two more armed officers behind him, both with their guns aimed at Macdonald.

‘Can we all just relax here,’ said Macdonald. He took off his ski mask and stared sullenly at the three armed policeman. ‘Okay now?’ he said. They looked at him with grim faces.

‘Down on the floor!’ said the oldest of the three, gesturing with his Heckler.

‘Yeah, right,’ said Macdonald. ‘Look, I don’t have time for this.’ He moved to walk by them. The Cockney swore at him, raised his weapon and slammed the butt against the side of the Macdonald’s head. Macdonald went down without a sound.

\* \* \*

Macdonald came to lying on his back, staring up at a man in a white mask wearing a dark green anorak. He was shining a small flashlight into Macdonald’s left eye. Macdonald groaned. He heard the wail of a siren and realised that he was in an ambulance. He groaned again. He tried to sit up but the paramedic put a hand in the middle of his chest and pushed him back down. ‘Lie still, you’ve had a nasty bang on the head.’

‘He hit me,’ said Macdonald. ‘Why the hell did he hit me?’

‘Because you were resisting arrest, you twat,’ said a Cockney voice. Macdonald tried to sit up again.

‘Really, Sir, I wouldn’t,’ said the paramedic, pushing him back down. ‘There’s a good chance of concussion. We’re going to have to give you a scan.’

Macdonald tried to push the paramedic away but his arm wouldn’t move more than a few inches. He looked down. His wrist was handcuffed to the metal bar of the cot he was lying on. He tried to raise his other hand. That was cuffed, too. The cop who’d hit him was sitting next to the cot, his Heckler cradled in his lap. He had a long face with deep-set eyes and he’d turned the baseball cap around so that the peak was at the back. ‘I should have hit you harder,’ he said.

‘What the hell’s going on?’ asked Macdonald, groggily.

‘Your mate shot one of ours,’ said the cop. ‘You’re all going down for attempted murder on top of armed robbery.’

‘He’s okay?’

‘Your mate? Took one in the arm. He’ll live.’

‘Screw him, he almost got us killed. The cop who was shot. Is he okay?’

‘Now you’re worried, aren’t you?’ The cop slapped his Kevlar vest. ‘Vest took most of the shot, bit of damage to his lower jaw. But the intent was there and you’re all in it together.’

Macdonald lay back and stared up at the roof of the ambulance. They were moving at speed, the siren still wailing, but he could tell that he wasn’t hurt too badly. He’d been hit before, by experts, and the butt of the Heckler hadn’t done any serious damage. What worried Macdonald was why the job had gone so badly wrong.

**Macdonald is actually undercover cop Dan ‘Spider’ Shepherd. Hard Landing continues with Shepherd continuing his undercover role behind bars in a top security prison from where a vicious drug dealer is continuing to run his operation and killing off any witnesses prepared to testify against him at his forthcoming trial. Shepherd’s mission is to stop the drug dealer in a world where one wrong move will mean certain death. As Shepherd gambles everything to move in on his quarry, he soon realises that the man he is hunting is even more dangerous than the police realise. And that he is capable of striking outside the prison walls and hitting Shepherd where it hurts most.**

You can find out more about Stephen Leather at [www.stephenleather.com](http://www.stephenleather.com) or follow him on Twitter at [@stephenleather](https://twitter.com/stephenleather) If you did enjoy the short stories, please do leave a review. Reviews actually do make a difference and writers are always grateful for them.

###



This free edition was downloaded from  
[www.obooko.com](http://www.obooko.com)

Although you do not have to pay for this e-book, the author's intellectual property rights remain fully protected by international Copyright law. You are licensed to use this digital copy strictly for your personal enjoyment only: it must not be redistributed commercially or offered for sale in any form. If you paid for this free edition, or to gain access to it, we suggest you demand an immediate refund and report the transaction to the author and obooko.