

PRISONERS

I am almost at a loss to know where to begin. When my mind returns, as it always does, every day, every hour without fail, to the awful events of that cold, wet January evening, my recollections stir and whirl about like debris in an unsettling wind; at first slowly, as the initial misgivings arise; then more powerfully as near-certainty sets in, until I watch the tornado of the truth pick my whole life up again and smash it into the million small pieces it has become.

I am surely not alone in noticing that objects are haunted by the ghosts of our feelings. At intense, critical times in my life the things in my proximity have absorbed the anguish I have felt, releasing it later, whenever I handle or look at them. The particular associations of that night were so strong that I had to get rid of the clock on the mantle-piece; for the same reason I now have to switch off the television if a well-known comedy actor is mentioned or appears. That evening both were at the centre of my attention, the former gradually upstaging the latter. How I now loathe myself for laughing at that little man so unrestrainedly while elsewhere events were set to become no laughing matter at all. At what point did I first glance away from the screen and look at the clock? When was I first struck by the thought that my son was overdue from Boys Brigade? When did the first pang in my heart and the first lurch in my stomach make me seriously aware that there could be no good reason for such a reliable and obedient boy to be nearly a half-hour late? The steady rain at first calmed my fear. He must be sheltering. I opened the front door and saw it was relenting. And every time I came back to look along the tunnel of the dark, shiny street I was sure it could only be a matter of moments before I would see him and his friend Charlie approaching, skipping along and pushing each other. But there was only ever the swish of car tyres leaving their tread-marks just for a second in the wet. In my dream I see the boys growing as they approach, hooded and in their anoraks. When the next deadline for his certain return had passed at a quarter to ten I knew something very bad had happened. The recollection of a siren much earlier on then gripped my throat like a sudden strangle-hold. By ten past ten I knew that my son, my beautiful, clever son, was no more.

Or should I perhaps begin with his birth? It was not easy. He was nearly ten pounds and had such a large head that I needed a dozen stitches to sew me back up. His dad took an interest but when his cries continuously kept him awake he began to drift away from us. And then finally he left for good.

At seven months my boy walked and at ten he talked - in full sentences. His child-minder could not believe how clever - so much cleverer - he was in comparison with her other charges. Within five minutes he had figured out the riddle of the new security gate at the bottom of her stairs and was demonstrating to the others how it operated. He began to read at the age of three and could scrawl letters and draw simple pictures. At infant school they found themselves at a loss as to how to occupy him. At primary school they had to find special maths books and he was reading stories aimed at secondary level pupils. Yet he never complained of being bored. He wrote his lovely funny stories and illustrated them. He helped his neighbours and chatted with his teachers about adjectives, adverbs, verbs and nouns, and about caterpillars, pupae and butterflies, his special fascination. He adored school. What would he have become? What good might he have done? That night he became a corpse and just an assembly of my memories, a twelve-year-old boy killed by three indistinct figures on a filling-station security camera, as he and Charlie ran backwards, clearly pleading for their lives.

His crime? To be of an origin and of a colour which they despised.

Charlie, his friend, survived with a flesh wound.. Paul was stabbed through the heart and died within seconds. A bus had pulled up; a nurse dashed off but she could do nothing for him. The police showed Charlie photos of known tearaways and he picked one face out - a fifteen year old called Terry Welfare. He came from an estate just off Moss Side and had convictions for assault and robbery. He could not, apparently, be tracked down.

Crimewatch reconstructed the attack and showed how two black boys, Paul Driscoll and Charlie Clarke, not even teenagers, had been set upon by three older boys in hoods. Many subsequent callers mentioned Welfare and three others: two brothers called Lee and Tony Jesson, and a boy without a surname called Craig. But no progress was made and gradually interest in the case waned. A chill despair filled the emptiness inside me. Then three events jolted me out of my apathy.

I absolutely could not believe what I had just heard over the phone.

“We did it, you black bitch. You’ll be next!”

I slammed the phone down and was almost sick. I sat on the bottom stair and wept. I tried ring-back but, of course, the number had been withheld.

Some weeks later I was at the new supermarket. I heard laughter from behind. At first I took no real notice but when I felt a trolley hit the back of my heels I turned to see three teenagers behind me. I turned away and heard the same scornful laughter. I heard the same voice as before call me a black bitch. I stopped and looked. They were waving at me at the end of the aisle. They had their hoods pulled up.

“They’re taking the piss!” I shouted down the phone at Robbins, the DI assigned to David’s case. He told me to calm down. The security camera footage would not identify them, he told me, and even if they had been Welfare and the Jessons, what did it prove? They were waving. So what?

I did not like Robbins. Despite his assurances that everything was being done and that it was “only a matter of time”, a certain something in the unguarded moments of his ruby face told me he did not give a fig about David.

Then there was a second phone call.

“Hello? Mrs Driscoll? My name is Craig. Just listen. Say nothing or I’ll hang up. It’s been on my mind a lot about your lad. I thought it would go away but it just gets worse. I know the Jessons killed Paul Driscoll. They came to my house to lie low after.”

I dared not ask him anything. I hardly dared breathe, as if it were a fragile candle-flame before me, and not a voice.

As soon as he had gone, I rang the police. I eventually spoke to Robbins who seemed so interested that I was sure this new information would be the key to unlocking the case. But nothing happened. Since then, I’ve found out that Robbins is bent. Please, tell the papers the horrible man is bent!

I went in to see him. But he was on leave. So I spoke to his sergeant, a man called Cropper. He wrote down enthusiastically what I said. At last, I remember thinking, somebody who genuinely seems to care!

“Probably a hoaxer,” he muttered, to my intense dismay.

“But surely it would do no harm to talk to him!”

“Craig who? “

“Can’t you look through your files? There can’t be that many Craigs.”

“Mrs Driscoll. It’s been nearly a year. Even if we managed to find a Craig, would he talk to us? And if he did, it would be the word of the Jessons against his.”

“Is Robbins bent?”

When he laughed I saw instantly what a repellent man he really was. He had the ruttled face of an alcoholic. There was a large gap in the middle of his yellow teeth. He wheezed and coughed like a forty-a-day smoker. It was not a particularly warm day but his thin hair was plastered down with sweat. His boss was not bent, he assured me. This Craig character was a hoaxer, he insisted. But I knew that he was not.

“It must be the same Craig who was mentioned by those callers into Crimewatch, you know, the ones at the beginning.”

“Just hoaxers, Mrs Driscoll, trying to drop another gang in it. Happens all the time. There were ten or twelve names given to us. All had cast-iron alibis.”

“How do you know for sure about Craig unless you talk to him? I believed him. He sounded tortured. He might have a new piece of evidence. Maybe he *does* know the Jessons and that other one - Welfare. My boy is dead. Why won't you do something? If you won't, I will.”

“Do what? What will you do, Mrs Driscoll?”

The question sounded innocent enough but his face had hardened like cement. There was almost a scowl traced in it.

I live in Hulme, fifteen minutes away from the city centre. I work in a solicitor's office. From the window I can see what remains of Moss Side. Many houses are boarded up and some have been deliberately set alight. It was in a street near to Maine Rd where I was brought up. It was a rough and ready area, cosmopolitan and generally friendly. It was only in the eighties that people - decent, hard-working people - stopped going out at night. Even the police were reluctant to enter. The gangs had gotten hold of guns. There were drugs and lots of money to be made. I was in my mid-teens and I had to be back home by nine in the summer and eight in the winter. I met Cyril Driscoll when I was seventeen and a year later we were married. We scraped enough together for a deposit to buy a tiny house in neighbouring Hulme and Paul was born a year later.

Moss Side began to disappear like a crumbling cliff in the tide as new money swept in. Smart new apartment blocks for office workers shot up. The old football stadium disappeared under the new build. There was still stabbings and shootings, but not as many fatalities as gentrification immersed the old, and while the old gang mentality persisted in a less virulent form, the feeling was that the bad old days were generally behind us. Most pubs took a firm line with drugs, displaying notices warning of a life ban for pushing or using drugs on their premises.

What happened to Paul was doubly shocking because it came at a time when parents cautiously felt it was safe again for their kids to be out after dark. How I torture myself for not picking up Paul and Charlie from Boys Brigade. Sometimes I dream that I will do so in future, just to be on the safe side.

And then, one day, there was a breakthrough. A beaming DI Robbins had come round to see me. They had arrested an eighteen year old called Sam Fisher. They had the evidence, they had a knife, they had a murderer. I felt no joy of course, only relief.

Fisher filled me with utter disgust when I saw him in the dock. He was the very antithesis of my Paul. He was squat, fat, had a heavy jaw, a low forehead, tiny eyes and a pasty, cratered complexion like the moon. The evidence against him seemed pretty convincing. The police had raided his house and found a knife in the stuffing of his sofa. Its blade matched Paul's wound and around the hilt a speck of his blood had been found. Fisher's prints were on the handle and he had no alibi. His story that he had picked up the knife after it came through the letter box almost made me giggle like some of the others in court. Fisher was as stupid as Paul was clever and the prosecutor tied him in knots, ran rings around him and left him speechless. Was he a

member of the BNP? Yes he was. What did he think of black people? He didn't mind them. Oh? Then why was he a member of a racist party? He didn't know.

His story sounded exactly like one made up by a person of very limited intellectual resources. The defence made very heavy weather of, admittedly, a very tough job, having few promising moments. A clergyman brought in as a character witness was a disaster. He had a pronounced lisp and an unfortunate tendency to call Sam Fisher, Brian Fisher, causing all present to wonder whether in fact he had mixed up one thug with another, an easy mistake in a neighbourhood where many white youths had a striking round-headed, ear-ringed, swinish resemblance to each other.

DI Robbins was also unconvincing. He had no persuasive answer when the defence counsel wondered aloud why telephone tip-offs about three other key suspects had taken three days to follow up; but when asked if he thought it odd that all three shared the same alibi he had simply shrugged, said no, and pointed out that all three were in the same group of friends. They had a cast-iron alibi provided by a publican. He had made a statement confirming that they had been playing pool in his bar. The father of two of the suspects had been playing with them and had made a statement himself.

At some point, as Robbins gave evidence in his lazy, confident drawl, the chill feeling that he was insincere crept over me again. Out of the blue, the defendant Fisher, who had remained glumly silent, shouted out in a fury that Robbins was lying and that the Jesson alibi was "rubbish". He had taken five minutes to calm down and had been removed from the court.

I was all of a sudden certain he was telling the truth.

But it took under two hours for the jury to find him guilty. He went stone white and had to sit down. His previous convictions were impressive. He had been involved with the police since the age of ten and had been done for assaults, thefts, robberies and arson. Significantly his last offence - and he had spent a year in youth custody - was for stabbing. (Robbins had already assured me, in confidence, that he "knew" Fisher had also stabbed a rookie policeman but they had had insufficient evidence to proceed). As the boy was led away he screamed abuse at everybody he could think of, including me, but his final shout I DIDN'T DO IT almost made me shout back - I know you didn't!

Outside in the sunshine, Robbins grinned and scanned my face as if he was looking for approval and gratitude. When I did not respond as he expected, he frowned and asked me what the matter was. *Was I not pleased?* - he asked. *Pleased??* I told him that I would never be *pleased* again.

"If a murderer is off the streets" I said "Then it's a good job.....*If*."

"If what?"

Then I turned and left him on the steps, never thanked him, never said goodbye.

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I need to explain. I had ghost-written the above for Pauline Driscoll. Then one day she called me and insisted I go no further. She sent me a cheque for £200 which I still have. She had sounded afraid. Her breathing was fast and shallow. What, I wondered, could have so frightened her to make her abandon her determination to get the bottom of that stinking heap? She had struck me as a very brave woman. Had someone intimidated her? How? Had news of her plan somehow reached the wrong ears?

I am - or rather was - a reporter. She told me she had seen my name in the paper. I had won an award for a story about a councillor taking a nice back-hander for the award of a swimming pool contract. She told me who she was and I had to rack my brains. I had not worked on the

Driscoll case, being on the sports team at the time. She gave me chapter and verse and told me that the wrong man was doing time for her son's murder.

She had contacted me the very day the body of a youth called Tommy Craig had been found burnt to a cinder on waste-land. She had no further doubts, she said. Sam Fisher was not her son's killer. Whoever had killed Craig had killed her Paul. She told me about the phone call she had received. She told me that a detective called Robbins - a man in whom she smelt corruption - was somehow involved in the perversion of the case.

When I first went to her tidy house in Hulme, not far from The Stretford Rd, she seemed surprised that I was her colour. She showed me all her photos of her Paul - he was a truly beautiful boy - and all his various awards for swimming and life-saving, and his school certificates. I was probably more surprised at her than she was at me. I had imagined her more maternal than she was. Maternal? She was absolutely gorgeous, looking more twenty-two than thirty-two. She had a fine nose, dark, intelligent, searching eyes, a flawless complexion and a slender figure. I assumed that she jogged and spent a lot of time at the gym. She seemed to guess what thoughts I was turning over in my mind because she said simply that there was no-one in her life now, since Paul. What could I say that would not be taken as a hit on her?

"And Paul's father?" I managed.

"Him. He left after Paul's first birthday. He seemed to lose interest. Said that I was all for Paul. I was. But he was a difficult child."

"Difficult?"

"He would not sleep."

I turned over a photo of him in his uniform.

"That was taken just after he began at Boys Brigade. I was so proud."

Her voice trailed away. She scooped the photos together and put them resolutely back into the tin.

"And did Paul's father get involved when he was killed?"

"He came back three days after he died. He had moved to London. We had a terrible row about me letting him out at night. I ask you, what interest had he shown, apart from his birthday card and a measly tenner every year? Anyway, he left the next morning. He came back for the funeral and that was the last I saw of him."

She began to tell me about her doubts over the conviction, about the first phone call and the harassment in the supermarket. Finally she talked again about Robbins.

"I just know that the man is a liar."

Back at the office I read through my notes. Tommy Craig's death jumped out at me as the most significant detail. In our computer archive I read up all the proceedings in the case against Sam Fisher. He had been tried in Liverpool. Fisher was, it struck me, clearly very stupid. But was he guilty of murder? Would he be stupid enough to pick up a knife from a door mat and hide it, like some nine year old boy, in the bottom of his sofa? I decided that he probably was. If so, who posted the knife?

I wrote up a quick outline and went to the editor. He was distinctly unimpressed.

"I won't touch it with a barge-pole, David," he said throwing the paper back at me. "It's about as thin as a witch's little fingernail. There are thousands of Craigs out there, Christian names and surnames. The police reckon that Tommy Craig had double-crossed his supplier. You know he was an addict as well as a pusher?"

I shook my head. I had not covered the case.

"What about Robbins? Have you ever heard whether he's a bent?" I asked.

"No, but so what if he is? I reckon between five and ten per cent of coppers are. So what?"

“So what? What if he was paid or leant on to take the heat off the Jessons and their mate, Welfare? What if he knew about the frame-up of Fisher?”

“What if? I can’t go printing stories full of “what-ifs”! What if I get the fat arse sued off me? What if we both get the sack?”

I picked up my note-pad and sauntered out. He was right of course. I had nothing. Pauline had been racially abused and harassed over the phone and in a shop. A known racist with a low IQ had been convicted of murder on overwhelming evidence found in his sofa.

I was dropping off to sleep that night and, as so often happens when the conscious mind relaxes, a question darted into my head from somewhere - and then I did not drop off until three. Who had tipped the police off about Fisher?

I got back to Pauline and had to tell her that my chief had not thought the story newsworthy. She went silent. I asked her if there was anything else she could bring to mind. Then she mentioned Charlie. He had testified in Fisher’s defence that he couldn’t swear that he had been amongst the gang that night. Fisher was quite fat and the attackers had been thin, as far as he could remember.

“But how clearly did Charlie see whoever stabbed Paul?” I asked.

“He only glimpsed him - them. It was dark and rainy. They were wearing hoods.”

I asked her where Charlie lived and promised to go round and ask him a few questions. Then I remembered.

“Do you know who tipped off the police about Fisher?”

“I think they got a phone call after the second Crimewatch. You’ll have to ask Robbins. Not that he’d tell you.”

Charlie Clarke was in a poor way. His mother was over-protective and was determined to do all the talking. She said he hardly went out, couldn’t sleep, couldn’t do his schoolwork (he was now nearly fifteen) and couldn’t cope with being reminded about the attack. He sat looking away from me, his elbow on the arm of the chair, his fist pushed into the side of his face. She looked at me suspiciously and told me that if I was looking to do a feature on him, I was wasting my time. I told her that I had no feature planned.

“As I said on the phone, this is really a favour for Pauline Driscoll. She feels convinced that Sam Fisher did not kill Paul.”

“He didn’t!” exclaimed Charlie, suddenly animated. “He wasn’t even there!”

I was taken aback. “How can you be so sure?”

“When they come running towards us I see all three faces. I know his was not one.”

“But why didn’t you tell the court?”

He looked away again into the fake coal fire. “I just said I couldn’t be sure whether he was there or not. I felt nervous. And I didn’t want to let Mrs Driscoll down. So I played it even-steven. All I know is that Welfare *was* there.” He pressed his fist back into his cheek and fell silent.

“Poor lamb, he was barely thirteen. And scared to death,” said she, stroking his jerking knee. I thought that this might be all I would get. I drained my tea cup and was about to stand up when he began to mutter in the direction of the fire.

“I tell the policeman after, Fisher was innocent, but he says not to worry. The knife proved they had the right man. He says that the memory can play strange tricks, specially in a bad situation.”

“Can you remember which policeman you spoke to, Charlie?”

“No, but he was the main man. Big nose, crooked.”

“You didn’t manage to pick Fisher out at the ID parade?”

“No. None of them were right. Fisher was not there. I told him. But he didn’t care.”

Here then I had found the first loose stitch which would lead to the unravelling of the case against Sam Fisher.

My editor seemed a little less unimpressed when I went back to his office to update him. "It still isn't enough, David. He's a minor. We couldn't print anything without his mother's permission.

"But couldn't I just say that a key witness has had second thoughts and throw some doubt on the conviction?"

"You could but you won't. It's not enough. This was a high-profile case. You're trying to make big waves with a tiny paddle. You'll end up making us look stupid. Lots of witnesses and jurors have second thoughts. It's normal, especially if someone has gone down for life."

"What if I ask Pauline if she's prepared to go public with everything?"

He tapped his table and told me to go and see her again. He would think about it.

Pauline thought it all over. She looked straight at me with those wonderful eyes. She wanted more than just a five-minute-wonder in the local rag.

"The police will just discount it. Robbins told me - warned me even - not to think about the Craig and Jesson angle any more. They were completely in the clear, he said. David, I want you to tell my story. I want you to write a book. You can find things out which I can't. I read your story about Councillor Binns."

"A novel? I'm a journalist not a novelist."

"Same difference. It's only words. I'll pay you for your time. If it ever got published, I only ask that some of the money goes to set up a fund in Paul's memory, so that kids from his background have a better chance. To pay for college and such like. I don't know. I haven't thought it all through. I thought maybe you could change names and places and just accuse the real villains without, you know, getting into big trouble. And if you did really find things out, you could maybe call it the truth... The Truth About Paul... or something like." She looked away in embarrassment. I shook my head. What were the odds on the truth coming out about anything? I hated to disappoint her. She was a lovely woman. I could see what it meant to her. In the end, hiding my reluctance, I agreed to write a first chapter, a try-out, with her as narrator - the one you already read.

As soon as I had finished it, a problem struck me. I realised that if the investigation were to proceed, and the novel parallel to it, that it would all have to go into the third person. The trouble was, how could those innermost thoughts and feelings she had experienced that evening be convincingly portrayed by an omniscient narrator? ("When did the first pang in her heart.....The steady rain at first calmed her fear...")

It just did not feel right or convincing. I then considered using myself as narrator from the first ("Pauline told me that the first pang in her heart...etc, etc) But it read and felt like the worst ghost-written biography. I screwed up the effort in disgust.

Anyway, I sent her a copy of the first chapter and she said she liked it. It described exactly how she had felt. I did not tell her about the two structural problems I had. The first, about how the tale could continue in the first person I have touched on; how could Pauline, a solicitor's clerk, possibly turn into a cross between a private eye and an investigative journalist? The second problem was the plot. There was no problem in just bending events and altering names while keeping it obvious to any reader with a brain what the underlying reality was. The difficulty lay in this; would the novel become a self-fulfilling prophecy - if Pauline's instincts - and increasingly mine - were correct? Or would the truth behind the framing of Sam Fisher either not come out at all or come out in a totally unexpected manner? Would the investigation force out the truth or would it all remain fiction? I began to lay down a series of key events and possibilities on my laptop, which I could flesh out, alter or discard as new developments - if

there were any - required. I had my ways and means of squeezing the truth out. Somebody or bodies knew what it was and it was up to me to apply the right pressure. There were other people, nasty powerful people like Robbins, who I needed to avoid squeezing at all costs until the time was ripe.

In the end unforeseeable events solved all these problems for me. When Pauline called to say she had had a change of heart and sent back the chapter I was dumbfounded. I phoned her back and, as I said, she sounded very nervous. No, she did not wish me to call round, she said. Finally, after many calls she agreed, with great reluctance, to meet me in town.

“What’s your problem, Pauline? What has changed your mind?”

She shrugged. She had just had second thoughts, that was all. Her eyes uncharacteristically avoided mine. She was obviously lying. She seemed depressed.

“You’re not a very good liar, Pauline. You don’t make a habit of it, I can tell.”

She sniffed. She sipped her lager and lime. It was city-centre pub - my favourite - not far from the Arndale Centre, a previous target for the IRA. It was noisy and busy, an ideal setting in which the truth could slip out easily and unobserved. I leant across to her and promised I would not breathe a word of whatever was troubling her. Those eyes of hers suddenly blazed up to their full extent in my face.

“You - a journalist - not breathe a word?! It’s like a thief promising not to steal as he picks your pocket!”

Without intending to I took her hand and after an instinctive snatch-away she let it return. She apologised.

“I don’t like it here,” she said. “Too noisy.” We went back to my flat. As I was in the kitchenette filling coffee cups I felt her lean her head against my shoulder. I glanced around and saw that she was naked. My heart almost exploded with a thump. She was utterly lovely. I did not even try to resist. There was no point. My conscience whispered “Felicity”; my heart and every other trembling part of me shouted “Pauline”. I will not go into all the details - it isn’t that kind of a book - but the next hours were the most delightful I had ever known. It was as if years of emptiness and frustration were expiated for her. Until then I had not realised what I was capable of with a woman.

In the dark afterwards she began to tell me of the third phone call.

“Somebody must have said something to somebody,” she said. “I had just got in from work. The kettle was boiling. The phone rang. It was the same voice as the first time and in the supermarket. *“Who have you been talking to, you black bitch? We know where you live. We know where your sister lives and where Milly and Amy go to school. So button that fat nigger’s lip of yours and butt out!”* and that was it.”

What reply could I give her? She made me swear to leave things alone, cash her cheque and forget the whole business. I drove her back to Hulme at about two in the morning and let her out two streets away from home. She stood and waved as I drove off. I never saw her again. On the way back something was bugging me. Something she had told me about the night when her son had been killed. What it was just would not come. I got in and turned on my laptop and scrolled down my initial notes until it hit me. The night of her son’s death, Pauline had been taken by the police to her sister’s house miles away in Chorlton, where she had stayed for a day or two. *By the police*. How on earth had the malicious caller gotten hold of details of Pauline’s sister, if not from a police source?

So there it was. For the sake of her sister and her nieces, Pauline wanted me to go no further. After weeks of debate, I eventually shredded the copy of the chapter and deleted the file which I

had provisionally entitled The Truth. I did not, however, empty the recycle bin. Anyway, I got on with my life, forgot about Pauline - nearly - and moved in with Felicity, a head-turning strawberry blonde from the typing pool.

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It must have been about five months afterwards when Geraghty, my bronchial, obese editor, called me in one fine late autumn morning. He handed me a statement from the Manchester police.

DI Peter Robbins and DS Andrew Cropper have been suspended from duty pending formal investigations by a neighbouring force of allegations of taking bribes.

I rushed back to my cubby-hole and retrieved the file from the recycle bin. I opened it and added the date and the details. I phoned Pauline but the number was dead. Either she had moved or had gone ex-directory. I sat and pondered. I needed someone on the inside who could tell me what was really going on within the Force. I had had a brief fling years ago with a WPC but I could not remember her surname. I had lost her phone number. I wondered over to Denis Chivers' office, our senior crime reporter. He wasn't in. I left a message on his table asking him to phone me.

That evening, after we had cleared away the dinner pots, my mobile rang. It wasn't Denis, but Pauline. She was excited and nervous.

"What did I tell you about Robbins? It's all over the front page!"

"I know. I helped to write it." I said.

She fell silent.

"Pauline? What's on your mind?"

"I'm worried. You won't break your promise will you?"

"You know I won't. If things come out now it won't be through me. Keep your fingers crossed and let matters take their course. The truth will out, one way or another."

Felicity asked me later if that had been an old flame.

"What on earth makes you think that?" I blustered.

"Oh, just something in your voice, David." She threw her magazine onto the coffee table, and folded her arms. "That, and the fact that you've barely said a word for two hours."

I went into Denis the next morning and asked him if he knew what was behind the bribery allegations. He was in his mid-fifties and not far off from an early retirement. He put his hands behind his head, leant back and beamed at me.

"Well, young man, my little bird tells me that Cropper is deep in the doo-doo and keen to sweeten up his air. Basically he's ratted on his boss, Robbins. Cropper got caught in a sting operation taking backschiche from somebody who dealt in phoney M.O.T. s. A somebody from the Ghost Squad. Cropper had a tip-off (from the Ghost Squad) and walked straight into a trap - on camera - threatening this pretend garage owner with years in prison and saying he wanted a thou to keep his gob shut. Now Cropper has named his boss as the Bribetaker-General. My bird says he had a major fall-out with him over some massive cock-up. Robbins dropped him in it and so now it's pay-back time."

"So it'll be Cropper's word against Robbins'?"

"Basically, yes. Unless Cropper's got Robbins on tape."

"What do you think? About Robbins?"

He smiled. "He's bent. As bent as a coat-hanger."

"How do you know?"

"Well, let's say the people he leans on phone me from time to time. Petty criminals, no names. He offers to mislay paperwork for money and favours, that sort of thing. But they can't prove it so we can't print it."

"Denis. Did you ever hear whether he was up to his tricks in the Driscoll case?"

"Paul Driscoll? No. But it wouldn't surprise me. But he'll be dead careful from now on. You can bet the Ghosts will be trying everything to set him up as soon as he beats this one."

"How can you be so sure he'll get away with it?"

"One man's word against another's. And Robbins has some powerful friends, on the inside and the outside."

That same morning Geraghty called me in. I knew what he would want.

"That story, about Paul Driscoll. I'm interested all of a sudden. Tell me again what we've got." I saw Pauline's eyes plead with me and shook my head.

"We've got zilch, Boss. Pauline told me there was nothing to it after all. She accepts that the right guy is behind bars."

"What about that other boy. Jimmy?"

"No, Charlie. Like you said, witnesses can have their doubts."

Geraghty stared at me across his desk and made a roof with his hands. He was very long-sighted and his lenses magnified his blue Irish eyes to bovine proportions. He cocked his head to one side like a fat budgie.

"David, if you weren't black, you'd be blushing. You're holding out on me. I can tell."

"Pauline won't comment and that's that..." and added a little too quickly "I know she won't"

"When did you last speak to her?"

This time I made the mistake of taking too long and his meaty fist came crashing down, spilling coffee all over the table.

"Don't try and sell me a dead rabbit Paul! You were young reporter of the year around here ONCE! I haven't noticed much inspiration since then - if truth be told."

"Hold on, hold on. I phoned her last night for a reaction but she said she wanted to put it all behind her. She never liked Robbins and thought he was a pretty useless officer. But it went no further than that."

He thought this over and swung in his chair.

"Then that's what we'll go with. We can leave a good stink in the air without doing much of a fart."

And thus it appeared in the paper that evening:

It has been pointed out that DI Robbins was the chief investigating officer in the Paul Driscoll case. Asked by a staff reporter for a comment about his suspension from duty, Mrs Pauline Driscoll said that she had never been impressed with police handling of her son's murder, but, beyond that she had no comment to make and wished to put events behind her and move on.

This snippet appeared beside a photograph of Robbins (who had a crooked snout indeed) and below the headline:

DRISCOLL OFFICER FACES CORRUPTION CHARGE

“YOU BASTARD!” screamed Pauline. “Do you want my sister’s kids killed, you fucking bastard? You promised.”

“Pauline! Calm down. Sit down wherever you are and just hear me out. Most of Manchester knows Robbins was on Paul’s case. The editor asked me to get in touch with you. I refused. I made up a lie and said I had phoned you for a comment but you had insisted you wanted nothing more to do with it. Which is true. This puts you all in the clear. Don’t you see? Read the article for God’s sake! You’ve done exactly what you were told to do, to say nothing.”

Within a few weeks the CPS announced that no charges would be brought against Robbins due to insufficient evidence. The Chief Constable made it clear that he would face an internal disciplinary enquiry relating to other matters of procedure (Denis told me it was chickenfeed, to do with his record-keeping) but he would be returning to duty forthwith. Cropper in due course went to court and was sent down for a goodly stretch with the judge’s contempt ringing in his ears.

It was approaching the second anniversary of Paul Driscoll’s death. It was as miserable a January as I could remember. It was bone-bitingly cold and foggy. The depression which had descended upon the city would not lift. Felicity had asked me - most politely - to leave as she thought we were headed “nowhere”. I did not protest very loudly and a few days later an old friend found temporary room for me in his new flat in Hulme, not far from where Pauline had lived. I checked her place out but the new face at the door had no idea where she was. Junk mail still came for her but the current occupier had bought the house from an Asian man, Pauline’s successor. For him she had a forwarding address. I called on him but he had not kept her details.

In the final days of the month two suicides altered everything.

The first one was Charlie’s. His mother had come back home to find him hanging from the banister. He had left no note but he had not needed to. His face said it all. That evening Pauline phoned me and wept. She felt guilty; sending me to see him had set his “miseries” off again, his distraught mother had told her. I told Pauline that in no way was Charlie’s death her fault. I begged her to let me come round and sit with her. I told her I missed her and could not stop thinking about her. I pleaded for an hour. Then my battery went flat.

The next day, on the very eve of Paul’s death she took an overdose of sleeping tablets and never woke again. I handed in my notice to Geraghty. He looked shocked.

“What will you do?”

“Dunno.”

“Will you be wanting a reference?”

“Maybe.”

I tramped around the estate agents until I found exactly what I wanted. I moved out of my friend’s place in Hulme with my car loaded up to the window tops with stuff. I found the house with the bed-sit I had signed for (with a £250 advance and a further bond of the same amount) fairly easily in what was left of good old Moss Side. In the space where Francis Lee and Mike Summerbee had delighted the Kippax well before my time, there now stood flats. From my grimy window I could see their white prefabricated roof tops gilded by the waning afternoon sun. Below me was Freehold Street. Some windows were boarded up. One house further down was frequented by a steady stream of mainly black men. It was possibly a crackhouse, an illegal drinking club, a gambling den; probably all three. Across the road, judging from the busy,

bustling young women passing and re-passing the upstairs windows and the regular rat-a-tat-tat at the front door, this was a popular place to go for an invigorating massage on a cold day. There were three of us in the house, sharing a kitchen, lounge and bathroom. The furniture had all been bought in from second or third hand shops and bore the greasy veneer which only years or generations of standing in the fumes of cheap cooking-oil and in wretched poverty could impart. The television had a thin white band across its screen and sound only. One ring on the ancient cooker was dead.

As the other two residents waited for me to complete my smoky bacon sandwiches, I told them that I was between jobs. *Barry* had turned up a day after I moved in. He said he had just come over from Ireland. He was a carpenter and joiner, a single man, in his early thirties, I guessed, who said he was looking for a change of air and scenery. He would keep mainly to his room. *Trisha* was about my age, mid-twenties, West Indian, a little on the plump side for my taste and had a rollicking laugh. She did a clerical job at the local hospital. She asked me a lot of questions to which I fed my ready-made lies and I found myself having to invent many others on the spot. She looked at me and told me I was a deep one. She offered to tell my fortune but she never got around to it.

“How would you like to help me out Trish?” I asked her one February evening, not long after I had settled in. “You know The Wheatsheaf?”

“Yeah. I go in with friends some times. A bit of a dive but there are worse places. You asking me out, Dave?” She chuckled and gave me the most outrageous wink.

“Sort of. Will you come in with me tonight? I’ve got some business there.”

Now her smile vanished. “You ain’t no trafficker are you, Dave?”

“No way!. I don’t do no drugs. I’m looking for somebody who owes my bro some money. I don’t want to arouse no suspicions, like. I need a girlfriend. You getting me?”

“Not really. But as long as you ain’t going to cause me no grief. Give me half-an-hour.”

The Wheatsheaf straddled a corner. It was a large building - of late Victorian origin, I thought. To the left hand side of it there was nothing but open space and rubble. Way beyond, like fresh fungus stalks, stood white, cream and light brown modern three or four storey blocks of flats and offices. To the right there was a squat parade of drab shops behind wire mesh: a Chinese takeaway, a betting shop, a convenience store and, at the end, a brightly lit chippy. Beyond them there was a short row of terraced houses, opening directly onto the pavement, ending abruptly on the edge of another wasteland. As we approached I saw impromptu bonfires made, no doubt, from the remnants of the demolished houses. Gaggles of small silhouettes were shouting indistinctly in front of the glow, but there were other youngsters, mostly invisible in the quarter-light of the street lamps, who could only be inferred by their screams and laughter. I knew already that this was the place where Tommy Craig’s body had been dumped and set alight. A notice telling everyone to KEEP OFF flapped uselessly in the wind.

On the antique stained glass of the pub door was another warning, about drug use, threatening a life ban from this and other licensed premises, and below it a poster of a young black man.

Anyone who had information about his shooting was invited to contact the police on a crime-line. It was a Wednesday night and fairly busy. There were the usual fruit machines, a dartboard (no-one was playing and no-one ever did) and in the far left hand corner a pool table. Two young men stood setting up the balls. Trish greeted a few people and introduced me briefly. I kept my eyes low and nodded. I looked across at the bar. Behind it on the wall was screwed a brass plaque announcing FREE BEER TOMORROW. The landlord had his back to me but I could tell he was a powerful man. He was certainly quite fat. Up and down the bar raced - almost - his barmaid, as if she was seeing how fast she could do the job. She was very pretty. I caught her eye unintentionally and she smiled. She had blonde hair tied back in a pony tail,

which she shook habitually to make sure we were watching. She had a long slender body, with a waist as thin as a wasp's, and slim athletic legs. In the fifties she would have made the perfect bobby-soxer. My eyes kept returning to her. I sensed that she could sense my interest in her, although I did not see her look at me directly again.

We had sat down with a Shirley and a Paula beneath the big screen. An FA cup replay was in progress but no-one seemed to be paying it much attention. The volume was low. The music was louder.

The two young black women turned out to be working at the supermarket by the Arch, the one where Pauline had been harassed.

"Paula's on the tills" announced Shirley. "I'm a stacker but sometimes I'm on the meat counter. Trish is a big meat-eater - or so she says."

They all giggled. Trish said that Shirley preferred the meat counter but had lost count of the meat she had had. They howled.

I didn't know what to say. I smiled and looked shy. Trish, still giggling, began to confide something in them and I looked away, minding my own business, as they laughed again. Within twenty minutes they had left. Trish told me some scandal about Paula, the check-out girl and I managed to look just about as shocked as I ought to, I hoped. Later another crowd came in and some greeted Trish and nodded at me.

"New man?" asked one girl, nudging Trish. The girl giggled and went on, as if I was not present. "What's he like?"

Trish put her face in her hands, told her that she hadn't found out yet, and then burst out laughing. I joined in and said that I was a good guy. This was exactly how I wanted it. I bought the drinks and tried to keep pace with Trish, which was not easy.

"Who owes your bro?" she tried to whisper, with a slight slur in her voice.

"Shh, not so loud. I dunno his name. Someone told me he drank here. A white guy with a big, crooked nose. I'll know him if he comes in."

"I never seen no dude like that in here."

She looked around as if to ask someone else if they knew of such a man and I caught her arm gently.

"Hey, this is our big secret, right?"

She nodded and pinched my cheek. "He owe your bro big time?" she whispered.

"About a thou - but, hey Trish, don't tell nobody nothing, specially here. I'll do the looking round, OK?"

"Sure."

"Another bottle of red?"

I got up as unobtrusively as I could and kept my eyes to myself. The landlord, I knew, was called Jerry. He had - and I realised they must be absolutely requisite in an area like this - forearms like great joints of pork. Although he carried a large belly I could see that he would be most useful - at least in the first five minutes - in a set-to. He was eye-balling me. He had a very piercing stare.

"You alright?" I asked pleasantly. He nodded.

"A pint of Stella and a small bottle of Shiraz. I got the glass."

This was Jerry Spriggs, the landlord who had given the Jessons and Welfare their precious alibi. He placed the drinks on the bar and laid his great hands flat, with fingers spread out, on either side of them.

"You new round here?" he asked. Instead of the Mancunian growl I had expected there was the pleasant, sing-song voice of a Brummie.

"Yeah. From Bolton. I had to leave town in a hurry. Woman trouble."

"Oh yeah? I had one of them once. Women are always trouble."

"This one was somebody else's. A big guy's."

He blessed me with the faintest smile. He asked me what I did. I told him I was a taxi driver. I was looking for work. He sucked in air through his teeth and shook his head as he wiped the bar down with his great fist.

“Too many at that game round here, pal. Not a lot going. That’s £4.70.”

I paid him. “Well, if you hear of anything going, let me know.”

“Can you pull pints?”

“I could learn.”

“You fancy doing this Saturday? I had to get rid of my number two cos she was on the fiddle. £5.50 an hour, eight till eleven, £6.50 till twelve and £2 for clearing up. Interested?”

“You’re on. I’m Dave. Dave Bishop.”

“Jerry. Jerry Spriggs. Next round’s on me, for just you and Trish, OK?”

“Great.”

He called the blonde girl to him and told her I would be doing Saturdays with her. She was Sammie. And she was absolutely lovely with those ice cool grey eyes and a mischievous smile.

Trish was more than tipsy when we got in. I’m not particularly proud of what happened next, and I did tell her more than once that I did not want to take advantage of her. She laughed and said she was taking advantage of me. So she kind of laid it on a plate and in the end I could not help myself. I had never had sex with a fat woman before and it was quite hard work for a start and I nearly gave up. But eventually I found her spot and by the end I had to cover her mouth up in case she woke Barry. And all the rest of the neighbours. And Sir Alex Ferguson.

“Barry must have thought I was murdering you,” I whispered as she subsided. She was my friend for life after that and whenever she was willing and I was not too busy or tired I would oblige. After all, I reasoned, she was part of my cover and, besides, she was great fun, in and out of the sack. My lovely Trish! Bless you!

Through a mate of Jerry’s, I managed to pick up some late night driving with a local taxi firm. With that and my bar work I would, I calculated, just about break even and only occasionally need to dip into my few savings. I agreed to do Friday nights as well at The Wheatsheaf as an early spring threatened to arrive and the pub became busier. I had done a couple of Fridays when one evening, at about nine o’clock, the Jesson brothers walked in. I had seen their photos in our archive but it was still a shock to see them up close, live. They looked even meaner in real life. Tony, the elder wore dark glasses; Lee was a head shorter. But you could see immediately that they were brothers. They had the same round, piggy heads and short-cropped hair, baseball caps, ear-rings, neck tattoos, the lot. Their gash-like mouths were turned down at the same corner, as if deformed by too many snarled threats. I saw all this in one short glance. Jerry greeted them and asked after their dad. I did not hear their reply. I moved down the other end of the bar and tried to look as if I was taking no notice. The second time when one of them, Lee, came to the bar, Sammie served him.

I was about two yards away, my back turned, holding up a glass to the scotch bottle.

“Who’s the black guy?” I heard him ask her.

“Paul. He’s from Bolton.”

I turned and took the double to the customer and noticed that the elder one had joined his brother at the bar. As I turned from the till I could sense the younger eyeing me up and down. He sniffed the air.

“Can you smell old Bill, Tony?” he announced. His brother sniffed the air twice and shrugged. I almost dropped the change on the floor. I resolved to have nothing to do with them unless it was absolutely unavoidable. I stayed down the front end of the bar near the door and did not look into the corner where they were playing pool. At about ten, Terry Welfare walked in and walked straight up to Sammie and kissed her. Whether I was more astonished than horror-struck I could not tell, but I was obviously not able to conceal my feelings.

“What’s wrong?” Sammie asked a while later.

“Nothing. He your boyfriend?”

“Well, he’s not my brother.”

I realised I was really not jealous at all but rather more disappointed, shall we say, in her utter lack of taste. He was tall and slim and, I suppose, reasonably good-looking, but nowhere near her class. However, as I stood emptying the glass-washer I suddenly saw what a stroke of good fortune this might be. I was sure that Samantha fancied me. My antennae told me so. Might she not be a useful stepping-stone to Welfare and the Jessons?

Just after eleven I had no choice but to serve the younger brother.

“You a Bolton supporter then?”

I could smell his sour, beery breath and was disgusted. “Yeah. Who told you that?” I asked with little interest.

“Sammie. I’m a City fan. You were lucky bastards to draw at the Reebok. Did you go?”

“No. Watched it on the box. What can I get you?”

“Three Carling.”

As I poured them I tried my hardest to keep cool. This youth was evil and very shrewd. I knew my stuff about Bolton. I came from there and was a Wanderers fan.

“Who scored your equaliser?” he said, turning his little eyes into slits. “I’ve forgot.”

He wafted a tenner under my nose. I knew it was Davies. I screwed up my face and told him I had forgotten. Then I pretended to have a flash of memory. “It was November wasn’t it? Hold on...*Davies*, every away fan’s favourite player. Anyway, what do you mean- lucky? Your first goal was a mile off-side!”

“Like bollocks it was!” he retorted. I grinned at him and took his note to the till and stuck it under the ultra-violet, without waiting for him to react. Had I passed my little test? I handed him his change not looking at his face and immediately served another customer. Time was moving on and some people were drifting away. When Jerry rang the bell for last orders it felt like the end of a boxing match.

While we cleared away Terry Welfare leant against the bar and waited for Sammie. The Jessons, well oiled, were finishing off a disputatious game of pool as Jerry went around pulling out the plugs to the fruit machines.

Terry was quite a pretty-faced boy but a spiteful glint had come into his eye. “You like it here mate?” he asked me from across the other side of the room.

“Yeah. Friendly enough area. I live in Freehold Street. You?”

His answer was to blow out a jet of smoke and I did not pursue the question. For a while there was just the sound of the glasses clinking.

“Sammie’s a gorgeous girl ain’t she?”

“Stop it Terry!” she said, smiling up from the glass machine.

“Sure is,” I answered. “You’re a lucky guy.”

“So, you’d like to give her one, hey?”

“Stop it Terry, you’re embarrassing me.” she cried. I pretended I had not heard and, whistling, I carried on wiping down tables and putting up chairs. Jerry had settled down in the corner and sat smoking with his back to us.

“Yeah, I bet it must be really hard working behind there, resisting the temptation to clamp them great black hands of yours on her pretty arse!”

“Will you fucking STOP IT, Terry!” screamed Sammy. “Or we’re finished!”

I could no longer pretend I had not heard. I held up the palms of my hands and said “Hey, pal, they’re as pink as yours.”

“You taking the piss?” he snarled. I took a few slow and gentle paces towards him.

“Listen, this is really painful for Sammie. Not particularly for me - I’ve heard that sort of stuff all my life. Your Sammie’s a lovely kid. Absolutely right. Hey! I’m twenty-six. I’ve not hit on her. And I won’t hit on her.”

“Cut it out Terry,” growled Jerry. “Dave’s a sound guy. Now leave it.”

Terry broke the long silence. He began to laugh as if he had just played the world’s most ingenious practical joke on me. Sammy furiously polished the bar. His laughter was painfully forced. At last he managed to gasp “Can’t you take a joke, mate?”

I laughed a little - just enough to defuse the tension and get him off the hook. I went back to the tables. The Jessons had finished their game and were asking Terry what had gone off. He told them. They guffawed. What awful people they were.

“Terry thinks you’re a dirty old man and Lee reckons you’re the old Bill!” said the elder, hooting. I turned and faked utter astonishment. Sammy had donned her coat, and wishing me and Jerry a hurried goodnight, she stepped out into the dark. They followed her.

“Fuck was all that about?” asked Jerry.

“I really don’t know, Boss.” I put up the last few chairs and racked the pool cues which the boys had thoughtfully left out for me. I turned and saw him looking me up and down with renewed curiosity. I could almost see the question which had come into his eyes. He strode over to the till, opened it and gave me an extra fiver. Neither of us quite knew how to break the silence between us.

“I think they had had too much,” I said finally.

“Yeah. They’re nice kids, really” he replied without any enthusiasm. I sensed he was still “inhaling” me, if I can put it that way, and I knew it would be a fatal mistake to ask who they were. I bade him goodnight and went home. I felt angry and disgusted. What a depressing place this was, so wet and miserable in the jaundiced light of the lamps. Did it make its people the way they were or did it bear the imprint of their moral corruption? I could not decide.

I lay in bed and went over and over the confrontation I had had. Had I awoken any suspicion? What was Jerry thinking about me? He missed little, I knew. He had spotted someone dealing straightaway the previous week and had had him out by the scruff of the neck within seconds. I could see no easy way to make progress with Welfare and the Jessons after what had happened. I needed to allay any suspicion against me. I decided to try a big bluff.

“Jerry. I’ll work tonight and then jack it in, if you don’t mind.”

He stared at me and frowned. ““Why? You’re good.”

“Look, working behind the bar there with Sammie is not a good idea if it’s going to cause trouble.”

“Leave it with me,” he said. “I’ll sort it.”

It was karaoke night and, apart from a middle-aged man who sounded like Sinatra, it was pretty excruciating. Time was dragging its feet. I stayed as far away from Sammie as I practically could. The place began to fill and, at about nine, Welfare walked in. Sammie was distinctly off with him, pulling her shoulder away as he tried to paw her. Out of the corner of my eye I saw Jerry beckon him over. I could not see Jerry’s face but Welfare’s went red and serious as Jerry’s fat finger wagged from side to side. A while later it fell to me to serve him. I grinned amicably.

“Look...Dave?...I-I’m sorry about what I said last night. I was out of order, mate. Pissed.”

“Forget it mate. No prob.”

“I’m Terry.”

“OK, Terry.” We shook hands and he bought me a drink. I was in.

One night we were pretty slack and I stood chatting to Sammie. There had been a stabbing in a nearby street and we got onto talking about how bad crime in the area was. I looked up and saw

that Jerry was talking to someone in a distant corner. I saw my chance to ask the question which was burning my insides.

“Somebody was telling me a local youth was found dead on the waste ground behind here.”

She did not grow wary as I worried she might - she just tossed her ponytail.

“That was a while back. He used to come in here. Before my time. They say he double-crossed his pusher. A nasty murder. Horrible.”

She whispered that they had set his body alight.

“His dad still comes in on Wednesdays.”

“Really?”

“You must have seen him. He’s got a funny eye.”

“A glass eye! Comes in with his whippet about ten?”

“That’s him. Regular as clockwork. Has a couple of pints and stays about an hour”

On Wednesday I came in with Trish later on. He was there. His dog lay as usual with its nose in a broken open packet of crisps. Its master was busy rolling himself a ciggy. I waited until he got up and went to the toilet. It had become a habit of mine when not on duty to collect a few glasses for Sammie. I ambled into his corner, picked up a couple of empty lager bottles, bent down to pet his dog and slipped a beer mat into his overcoat pocket.

I had almost given up on him when he at last phoned me.

“Who am I talking to?” he asked. I was so unprepared I almost told him.

I held a handkerchief over the speaker and found my poshest voice.

“Never mind who I am. Is that Mr Craig?”

“It might be. What’s your game?”

“I want to help you, like the beer mat said.”

“Help me how?”

I took a deep breath and trusted to luck. “Mr Craig, your Tommy’s murder was never solved. I can help find the murderers.”

“You the police?”

“No. I’m researching a book. About unsolved crime in Manchester. About the police and corruption.”

“Were you in The Wheatsheaf the other night?”

“No. I asked somebody to pass you my number. It doesn’t matter who. Do you want to talk now?”

There was a silence in which he thought this over. He told me he would let me know.

I phoned Denis at the paper. I told him a little of what I was up to. I wanted to know where Sam Fisher and Andrew Cropper were serving their time. He came back to me a while later. Fisher was in Walton and Cropper in an open prison off the A50 near Stoke. I sat down and wrote two letters.

Dear Sam Fisher,

I know that you did not kill Paul Driscoll. I can help you. Will you let me come and visit?

I signed it simply David and used my friend’s address in Hulme. I did the same for my letter to Cropper.

Dear Mr Cropper,

I know from conversations I have had that DI Robbins is, as you alleged, a corrupt officer. I am researching a book, the rights to which I have already sold. I assume that not the least of your troubles when you have served your sentence will be financial. If you can help me, I will give you a percentage of the proceeds.

I signed off and included a contract which only required my signature. Within days I received Sam's scrawled reply, inviting me to come as soon as I could.

I lay on my bed the next evening pondering how I could get further in my quest. Trish was playing her awful hip-hop stuff. I could hardly think. I banged the wall and shouted "too loud". She banged it back and turned it up. I went down to the kitchen where Barry was finishing off some fish and chips. I asked him if he had managed to find work. He had. When, conversationally, I asked him *where*, he became, I thought, evasive. I was working, as he probably was, in the cash-in-hand-no-questions-asked economy, and it seemed no big deal. But I did not pursue it and within a few moments he was tramping back to his room from where he never seemed to venture after tea. My mobile rang. It was Mr Craig.

"Alright. I'll talk. I can't prove who it was killed my lad but I have a pretty good idea. Lee and Tony Jesson - it must have been. I never go in when those two bastards are there."

"Was his death drugs related?"

"No. That was just the rumour - which I reckon they must have started. It was to do with something totally different. Just over two years ago a boy called Paul Something was stabbed to death somewhere off the Stretford Road. He was a West Indian, about thirteen, I think. After they attacked him the three of them came banging on Tommy's door - he was sharing a house with some bird not far away. He had been in their gang. They needed to lie low and clean up." I hardly dared to speak.

"Did Tommy tell you all this?"

"He did. About a year after. It was more and more on his mind. Tommy had a troubled teenage - his mum left when he was twelve - and he started drinking and then doing drugs. He got expelled from school for hitting a teacher and never went to another. He got in with the Jessons and their gang. Neil Jesson, their dad, is one of the biggest villains in Manchester. They could run wild because they were fire-proof. I tried to put a stop to it but he was beyond my control by then. Deep down my Thomas was a good, genuine lad and in the end he couldn't cope with the guilt. He vaguely knew the lad - Fisher - who went down for it. I think he must have told somebody else besides me. He was just getting himself straightened out - had a job and a nice, steady girlfriend called Dawn. He should have gone to the police."

He said that was as much as he knew.

"Why didn't you go to the police, Mr Craig?"

"For the same reason Tommy didn't. They don't care and you can't trust them. Can I trust you?"

I told him he could and then asked for Tommy's address. He told me but could not recall Dawn's surname and had no idea what had become of her.

The next morning I walked around there. Many houses had vanished but number 25 still stood, though all boarded up. I knocked several times to see if any squatters were present. At the lounge window there were scorch marks. I stood back and saw a curtain briefly move in the neighbouring house. I wondered around the back and counted until I found myself behind the right house. The gate was jammed, not locked and with a good shove I managed to budge it enough to squeeze into the backyard. You might imagine the chaos of shattered glass and debris which had trapped the gate. It was almost knee high and lapped up against the back door. A voice startled me. "It's empty."

There was a brick wall about four feet high to my right. I looked across and saw a grey haired lady peering out through a gap she had opened in her kitchen door. I told her I was from the council.

“We’ve had reports about rats,” I said.

She cackled like a magpie. “Have they only just found out? There’ve been rats here since the forties to my knowledge, when *I* moved in!” She told me that since Tommy had died and his girlfriend had moved out there had been no-one living there. The kids had got in and wrecked it. One evening someone had thrown a petrol bomb in and the fire brigade had come. A few days later she had heard them boarding it up. No, she couldn’t remember his girlfriend’s surname.

“They keep trying to move me out but I’m staying put.”

I told her I needed to get in and check up and she wished me good luck.

“God knows what you’ll find in there.”

The old back door did not need a lot of encouragement to open. I entered with trepidation. It smelt stale and musty in the kitchen but it was dry and cockroach-free and relatively clean for a derelict house. I switched on my torch and went from room to room. There was little furniture - just the most rickety stuff had been abandoned - and upstairs, in one bedroom there only remained a bedstead and a chest of drawers - which were empty. There was a pile of letters by the door, junk mail addressed to various names, including T Craig. The last one I turned over bore the name D Prestidge. I opened it. It was an insurance quote for a vehicle. The registration was given. I pocketed it. I was about to go when an idea came to me. If Welfare and the Jessons had brought Paul’s or Charlie’s blood in on their shoes it would be most likely to be on the carpet by the front door. Of course, it had been a wet night, and hundreds of footfalls since then would have covered it but it might just be in the pile at the bottom. I asked the old lady if I could borrow her carving knife.

“What? To kill the rats?”

I cut a two foot square right by the door. I held it up to the light in the backyard. The pile was almost flat and there was nothing to see. I stuffed it inside my coat, returned the knife and went back to Freehold Street. I collected my camera and took photos of the street, the front of the house and the hallway with its missing square of carpet and got them printed at the supermarket. I rolled up the carpet and parcelled it up. I included the photos and a brief note:

This carpet is taken from 25 Byrom St, Moss Side, Manchester. There could be blood from Charlie Clarke and Paul Driscoll in the pile. This is the address to which their real attackers ran after the crime. Sam Fisher is entirely innocent I believe.

David Bishop.

I addressed the package to an investigative journalist I knew of at the BBC, but decided not to post it for a while – until I had made more progress.

Dawn Prestidge. The date on the insurance quote was the previous September. There was surely a good chance that she drove that same vehicle. The letter had come from a local insurance broker’s office. I phoned the number and said I needed to inform my insurer that I was taking my car abroad. I gave my address as 25 Byrom St and my name as Paul Prestidge. I kept my fingers crossed. Back came the voice at the other end. The registration and the make I had given checked out but of course the name did not.

“Not again!” I exclaimed. “It used to be registered in Dawn’s name - she’s my sister - but I bought it off her last year. You should have it in my name now.” I pretended to be irritated.

“I’ve phoned and had this problem before. You told me last time you would sort it. Dawn said how reliable you were. That’s why I changed to you.”

The voice was very apologetic and confused. I wished aloud that I had gone on-line for my insurance - and said that when it came up for renewal in September, I probably would. More apologies and more reassurances followed. I was asked to confirm my address, as it did not give Byrom St on the computer. I gave her my address in Freehold St. Oh, said the voice, that’s not what she had on screen.

“Don’t tell me you’ve still got my sister’s address on there?”

“16, Spondon Drive?”

“I don’t believe it!”

“Look Mr Prestidge, can I send you a form?”

I decided to write to Dawn. I did not want to risk knocking on her door. I posted the letter and then called at my friend’s flat and found that Cropper had written back to that address I had used.

Dear David,

I received your interesting proposal. I would be willing to speak to you about certain matters at your earliest convenience. I have no plans or engagements currently in my diary and am entirely at your disposal.

I decided to see Fisher first and drove to Liverpool a few days later. Sam Fisher had one of the most hideous faces I had ever seen. No wonder the jury had taken so little time to convict him. He had a black eye and a swollen nose into the bargain. His hairline began an inch above his eyebrows and his complexion was a mass of pockmarks, as if he had been used as target practice by a darts team. He looked me over suspiciously. I offered him a fag and left the packet on the table. I had faked an ID on my printer which described me as a solicitor and we had a fairly private consultation.

“You been in a fight, Sam?”

“Yeah. One of the coons got me in the shower. No offence, mind.”

“None taken, Sam. You know why I’m here.”

He began to tell me his story. I made notes. He told me that everyone at the time knew that it was Welfare and the Jessons who “did” the black kid. They had been after a member of a rival gang for a grudge and had attacked the wrong lads by mistake.

“Why did they post the knife to you, Sam?”

He took a long drag on his fag and blinked. He told me how they had always taken the piss out of him at school. “They kept bullying me and telling me I was stupid. Do you know what I mean?”

I knew what he meant. I asked him why he had picked the knife up. He looked up at the high ceiling with its garish strip lighting.

“Because it’s true. I am stupid. I didn’t fink, like. I hid it in the settee so me mam wouldn’t find it.”

“Who tipped the police off?”

“I dunno. One of the Jessons. Must have been.”

“Who arrested you?”

“Can’t remember his name...Roberts? Ugly guy with a big crooked nose.”

“What can you tell me about the Jessons’ dad?”

“A bad man. He has a crippled leg. He runs all the drugs into Moss Side.”

“Is that common knowledge?”

“Yeah. He don’t care. He owns the police. That’s why they never go in there. His patch.”

“Do you know the names of any coppers he bribes?”

No, he did not.

“What about Tommy Craig?”

“I knew him a bit. He was a mate of theirs. Same gang.”

“Which gang were you in, Sam?”

“I wasn’t. Nobody wanted me in their gang.”

“So where did all those convictions come from, if you weren’t in a gang?”

He looked disconsolately across at me and drew another fag from the packet.

“Everybody was after me, know what I mean? I had to look after mysen.”

He asked me if I still believed he was innocent. I nodded. I felt sorry for him. What chance had he ever had of keeping out of trouble? I smiled and told him brightly that things would start to look up for him and that it would not be long before he got out.

(In fact he was out six months later. In a hearse. One of the coons stabbed him in the shower.)

Dawn Prestidge turned out to be about the most abusive, foul-mouthed young woman I had ever had the displeasure to listen to. (I delete the expletives) How had I got hold of her * address? Why should she talk to me about * Tommy Craig? He was a * loser and she had a new life now. I should mind my own * business etc, etc, etc. I decided to send her another letter giving more detail about my enterprise and how important it was to see justice done all round. Her reply was a two word text message which I deleted immediately. You win some. You lose some.

My next surprise was an extraordinary – and a much more pleasant - one.

“What do you see in Trish?” asked Sammie out of the blue one Friday evening.

“Trish? She’s a house-mate, that’s all.”

“Not according to what she tells my mate, Jen.” There was a gleam in her eye which both fascinated and worried me. “Oh? And what she been saying behind my back?”

“Quite a few things. When she’s pissed.”

“Well...we have a bit of a laugh, that’s all. She’s good fun.”

“She told Jen what good fun you were. You know.” She lowered her voice. “In the trouser department.”

Shocked, I walked away, more eager than usual to serve a waiting customer. When I looked again she was grinning at me. She was gorgeous and knew it, the little minx. That night Welfare did not come in as he normally did. When I mentioned it casually later on she said, as wide-eyed and as deadpan as she could manage, that he had flown to Dublin with his cousins for a stag-do. The Jessons came in and played pool.

“Pair of wankers,” she breathed.

“Why does Terry hang about with them?” I asked as innocently as I could.

“Because he’s a wanker himself. I’m finishing with him.”

This alarmed and disconcerted me. I asked if that was such a good idea. She looked at me with indignation, as if to ask me what business it was - her love-life - of mine. I told her he was dangerous and that she should be careful how she handled it. She giggled.

“Dangerous? About as dangerous as a goldfish in a temper! He’s all bluff! I bully him, he’s pathetic. All trousers and no prick.”

A noisy hen-party came in and we were kept busy. Jerry joined us for a while. We seemed to circle one another in some weird dance routine, to the till and back, now close, now far. And every time I looked at her she smiled that smile of hers. She waited at the till as I did my change and said quickly she had kicked him in the balls that night when he had had a go at me.

“But you seem to get on so lovey-dovey” I said as we passed. “I’m not getting you.”

I poured a lager as she fished around below me for some handle glasses.

“I’m fed up. He’s useless. In every way. I need a change. Have you seen any handle glasses?”

I bent down and looked. Now she gave me absolute full beam.

“Hate to break things up, boys and girls. Anyone in the shop?”

It was the elder Jesson. We both stood up together as if stung. His gashed smile was hideous and sarcastic. “Cat’s away, hey?”

“Don’t talk shit!” said Sam as she snapped back the tap of the lager pump. His slitty eyes managed to narrow. He gave a kind of snort which I interpreted as a warning, as if he was saying it was lucky for her she was a girl - talking to him like that. The younger Jesson turned and leered as soon as his brother had rejoined him. I made sure that I stayed down the other end of the bar as far away from Sam and them as I could.

When she left me outside the door as Jerry shot the bolts well after midnight and walked towards her taxi, she called back and told me, enigmatically, to think over what she had said and wished me pleasant dreams.

Saturday was not the Jessons’ night at The Wheatsheaf. Samantha looked more sensational that evening than ever. She wore a black mini-skirt and a strappy black top that finished somewhere around her navel. She kept tossing that clipped, lovely honey-blond mane of hers around. For me. She was a clever girl, taking the year out to save for a degree course at Salford, reading English. I knew she lived with her divorced mother and when she casually mentioned that she had gone to stay with her sickly sister on Tyneside until Sunday night I took a deep breath.

“I hate it on my own,” said she, with an arch raising of an eyebrow. I had to make my mind up quickly, I realised. I thought I could see a way of having the best of all worlds but it would involve an enormous gamble. Could I rely on her for my plans to work?

Jerry was having his customary quiet smoke in the corner with his back to us. He seemed in a trance. She was crouching down sweeping up some broken glass, knowing that I would be unable to resist gazing at her long beautiful legs. She had caught me staring at her over and over again all night. She stayed down sweeping for ages, making sure she had every single shard.

“Help me up, Dave. I’m stuck.” I reached down and took the dustpan from her and gently pulled her like a ballerina to her feet with my free hand. Her eyes asked me an unmistakable question. I had to nod.

We went our separate ways in case Jerry was watching. Without arranging to, we met on the next corner. It was a cold late March night and we walked briskly, saying nothing. She lived in Hulme, not far from where Pauline had lived. It took less than half-an-hour. There was a short flight of steps, worn in the middle, up to the front door of the Edwardian villa where she lived. She glanced up at me as we ascended and smiled briefly. In the umber of the street light I watched her slender hand tremble and she fumbled with the key. She could not find the opening to the lock. I put my hand out to steady hers, expecting to find it cold. But it was warm. As the key finally turned she let out a long breath she had been holding on to.

Once upstairs I began to feel like an intruder. No worse - a paedophile. For I found myself in the bedroom of a teenage girl; a soft toy sat smiling, propped up against her headboard; on the walls around her bed were posters of young pop stars I did not recognise, both male and female. Away from the pub she seemed different, very young and vulnerable; virginal. She had dropped her saucy act and she was nervous.

Feeling that I was taking advantage I asked her quietly whether she was sure. In reply she stood and within a few seconds had discarded the few flimsy clothes she was wearing. They lay at her feet like a shadow. She was more exquisite than I had ever imagined. She came to me and unbuttoned my shirt and jeans. I slipped out of them and she sat down heavily on the bed. I noticed a flush spreading down her neck and across her breastbone. It was not embarrassment.

She swallowed hard. I could hear her breathing, almost her heart beating. She looked down at her clothes on the floor.

“Anything wrong?” I asked gently. She shook her head vigorously.

“I’ve only ever had one...real boyfriend. Terry. I don’t really know what....”

As I slipped down my shorts she gasped.

“Oh my God, David...how will I...?”

I lay down beside her and threw the toy onto the floor. I drew her on top of me. “You’re in charge, Sammy.” I whispered, stroking her smooth, downy back and kissing her neck. “Take your time. Help yourself to as much as you want.”

The first time she did not take much time at all. The second time she was over an hour.

In the bright morning she showed off her culinary skills, cooking me a delicious breakfast of eggs, bacon and mushrooms.

“I want you to carry on with Terry.” I said.

She stopped eating. “But I can’t! How can I after last night. Why?”

Back in bed, later that morning, I began to tell her what I was really up to, but only the essential details. At first she laughed and said I was having her on. But slowly she realised that I was not. She said she knew of Pauline and Paul Driscoll. She was horrified that she had “been with” a murderer, she said.

“I’m not so sure that he is. The video shows one of the three figures hanging back. He looks taller than the first two. My guess is that the Jessons used the knives.”

Somewhat relieved she said that that made sense; that deep down Terry was a wimp, inadequate. “But this is a dangerous game, David. The Jessons are bad news. They took somebody out the back once and really duffed him up. Jerry did nothing. Even he seems frightened of them.”

“I owe it to Pauline. She wanted any money from the book to go to deprived youngsters. That’s my plan. And if you help me it will pay all your university fees. And there’s a really stupid, frightened young man in Walton prison serving twenty years for a crime he did not commit.” She did not speak for several minutes. Finally she turned to me and asked me what I wanted her to do.

“There has got to be a way to get Terry to talk about it. He can’t hold his drink.”

“I know, but how?”

“I don’t know yet. Don’t try anything out yourself. Leave the how to me to figure out.”

“I figured it out for myself last night, didn’t I?”

“No, Sammy. Be serious. Don’t make any move yourself. You must promise me.”

“As long as we can still see each other, I promise.”

The next day, Monday, I drove down past Stoke and along the A50 until I saw signs for the open prison where Cropper was being held.

He reminded me uncannily of a drunken Australian dentist I had once had. Pauline had described him perfectly and I could not stop watching his mouth, waiting for the gap in his teeth to appear. He had a distinct southern twang in his speech which did not appeal to me. We had a room to ourselves with no officer near.

“I was caught fair and square. I can’t complain. But I get this nagging thought that that bastard Robbins set me up. Why was I targeted? I was small fry - a ton here, a ton there, for little favours and a blind eye turned. Whereas Robbins had his fat fingers in everybody’s pie, earning serious money, more than his wages, the greedy bastard. He would cut me in on the big deals now and then.....What’s your angle, anyway?”

“I told you. I’m researching a book.”

He cocked his head to one side and looked at me with a quizzical eye. “No. You’re a reporter. I remember you in the Binns case. You blew the whistle. You won an award, didn’t you?”

I had a mind to say he had got me mixed up with someone else but a voice said that would be a mistake. I told him I had been a reporter but I had quit to start a writing career.

“I got fed up covering stuff I wasn’t interested in.”

“So you must know Denis.”

“Of course. Our main crime reporter. You know him?”

“Oh yeah, we go back a long way. Big pal of Robbins’ as well.”

I froze. How much had I told Denis? I began to see how certain information could have got out and just how large Denis’s little bird possibly was. Then it struck me how close to danger I might be. But I managed to keep my disquiet to myself.

“So, Mr Cropper, why did it all go wrong for you? How come you’re sitting there and not Robbins?”

“Is that important?”

“Just tell me and we’ll see.”

“Well, basically we had a fall-out. You must remember the Paul Driscoll case. No? The black lad who was stabbed?”

“Er, yeah, a year or two ago...”

“Over two. Well, the chief constable had us on toast for not bringing four or five suspects in for questioning straight away. He said we had probably missed forensic evidence; we could have got them before their stories had had a chance to harden up, that sort of thing. You know what I mean? He gave us a right bollocking. Well, I took mine fair and square. That bleeder Robbins, only crept back in later, I found out, and said it wasn’t his fault at all, but mine! Said he had been on the sick and had assumed I would bring them in, as he had told me to do! The bloody cheek of the man! He had had three days off alright but he wasn’t on the sick. He only took his wife to Paris with one of the biggest villains in Manchester, posh hotel, all expenses paid! It all came out a year later. His wife had too much at a party and let it slip to my ex-missus.”

“Which villain?”

He thought the question over and shook his head. “I’m not saying.”

“Why?”

“Because he’s fucking bad news, that’s why. He has friends on the inside and the outside. How do I know what your real game is?”

I told him to pass the contract I had sent him. He took it out of the envelope. I signed and dated it and passed it back to him.

“What did Hitler say about Chamberlain’s famous note? - What a nice man - nice of him to ask for my autograph!” He barked out a laugh and revealed his most unlovely aspect. I thought he was about to rip the contract up but instead he folded it and returned it to the envelope.

“It won’t do any harm to see what happens, but I shan’t build up my hopes too high. Anyway, where were we?”

“Are you saying that Robbins somehow stalled and effectively scuppered a murder enquiry? And left you with the blame?”

“That’s exactly what I’m saying. I can’t prove it of course. I wanted to pull in all the names for questioning the next day. One or two we did, younger kids; but there were another two who Robbins wouldn’t entertain. They were naughty boys, he said, but not murderers.”

“What were their names?”

“Oh, I can’t remember. Started with a G or J...”

The liar. He knew of course. But he seemed more interested in dishing up the dirt on his ex-boss, telling me about his rackets with massage parlours, illegal drinking and gambling dens and drug pushers, about how paper work would go missing or how no further action would be recommended.

“So how can you be so sure Robbins shopped you?”

“It was after I had been in for a promotion. I never got it. Somebody told me the Chief had blocked it. Over the Driscoll case. That’s when I realised what Robbins had done, the slimy bastard. Of course he was all covered in glory because he had arrested that lad Fisher. I went to see him and had it out with him. He tried to deny it but by then I knew of his secret Parisian adventure at Jesson’s expense. He went as white as a corpse when I mentioned it. He denied it, said he had been to Paris, but not in January and he had paid every penny himself; his wife had got muddled up. What a load of bollocks! Anyway, the very next day I found a fat envelope in my desk drawer with a thousand quid in it. He knew I was skint - I was getting an expensive divorce - and of course I took it. A few weeks later I was arrested over an M.O.T. scam I was running - or I thought I was - and that was that. Coincidence? I phoned him up and he just laughed. So, that’s when I decided to land him in it, to get a lighter sentence. I expected every crook in Manchester to come crawling out and finger him. What did I know? They didn’t of course. Why? He had threatened to set his big dog on them. That villain I mentioned.”

That villain he had accidentally mentioned by name, the chump! I said nothing and within a quarter of an hour and after many reassurances I was on my way. He had given me the crown jewels and had not realised it. All he had, like Neville Chamberlain, was a worthless piece of paper signed in another name. As I drove back I saw exactly where I would have to go next. I phoned Denis and thanked him for all his help. I declared that I had had enough.

“I went to Walton to see Fisher. Of course he denied the murder but I reckon he did it. Andrew Cropper was entertaining. He hates Robbins, told me about his rackets with the massage parlours -“

“Listen, David. You’re a good kid but you’re getting out of your depth. Hear three words of advice: leave it alone. You’ll never get anywhere with Robbins. He knows some very, very unpleasant people. Geraghty was talking about you again the other day. You could walk back in here tomorrow. Be my number two. How about it? I need a good bloodhound.”

“Thank you Denis. The fact is I saw an advert for a job on The Guardian in London. I fancy a change of scene.”

He was almost overcome with delight and told me he would give me a fantastic reference, and so would Geraghty.

A few days later amongst the pile of mail there was a letter for me, hand-delivered. Who had I given my address to, I wondered, besides the insurance broker’s? Intrigued I ripped it open. The message inside was simple.

WATCH YOUR BACK. GET OUT NOW. There was also a CD. When I played it I could scarcely believe what I heard. There was the unmistakable voice of Denis in conversation with a man with a rich Lancashire accent, from somewhere out Ormskirk way, I thought.

Denis: David is a good kid. He’s as nosy as hell. He’s a first rate newsman in the making.

Man: Really? Then why is at The Wheatsheaf pulling pints. And why The Wheatsheaf? You’d better find out.

Denis: As far as I know he’s looking into police fiddles. He left the News in February. He went to see Cropper. Why should you worry about him?

Man: I don’t like strangers - especially reporters - sniffing about on my manor. I think it’s time he was shown the door.

Denis: Don’t you dare hurt him. There’s no need. He tells me he’s moving to London soon. He’s making no headway here.

Man: Don’t tell me how to handle this, Denis. How crude do you think I am? I’m just going to give him a few extra incentives to pack up and bugger off. There’ll be no trouble as long as he sees sense. Keep your ear to the ground. Earn your keep.

It sickened me to think that Denis might be on Robbins' payroll. That afternoon I phoned him to say that I would definitely need a reference. I was applying to The Guardian. He seemed to breathe a sigh of relief. On Wednesday night I casually told Jerry that I was applying for a job in London. He seemed neither pleased nor disappointed. He stared and cleared his throat. It was impossible to tell what he felt.

That night I lay next to Trish thinking how on earth I could regain the lost initiative. It was past midnight. Unusually there were voices coming from Barry's room. I thought at first it might be his radio but then realised he had visitors.

"Barry's got company" I whispered into her ear. She muttered in her sleep, let out a snort and turned over. I listened harder. Besides his brogue I could hear a bass voice and now and then, surprisingly, a high voice like crystal chiming. At about half past midnight I crept out onto the landing to go to my own room. Barry's door swung open and I found myself face to face with a tall woman in her early forties, a classic beauty once and still attractive, with black hair and dark eyes. She swiftly looked me up and down and recovered her sang-froid. I was naked apart from my shorts.

"I'm sorry" she said "I was looking for the bathroom." She was Irish – with a voice like a soft oboe. I was so taken aback I did not reply to her. She excused herself and squeezed past me, went in and locked the door. Barry pushed his head around and smiled at me. "Hi Dave. Just a couple of relatives from back home. They're off soon. Sorry if we kept you awake. It didn't sound like you and Trish were sleeping to me though..."

I smiled at him, winked and went to my bed.

The next night I got in late from taxi-ing and found Barry's door slightly ajar. A thin bar of light streamed out onto the landing. I thought I would just bid him goodnight. So I pushed it open but found there was no-one in. On the table were round gadgets sprouting wires, a laptop and other electronic equipment I did not recognise. I heard the flush go and just before the door to the bathroom opened I quickly took a few steps back towards my own room, so that as he appeared, it looked as if I was about to pass. He started when he saw me. He said he thought I was in bed. I told him I had just got back in from the airport.

"I've been on all afternoon and all night. Knackered. Have you finished in the bathroom?"

"Help yourself. Night."

I did not drop off until gone two. I could hear him pottering about, whistling low, occasionally talking to himself, picking things up and putting things down.

When I got up he had long gone. It was ten o'clock. Trisha had gone too. It was early April and rainy. I made some breakfast and coffee. I slowly revived. I went back upstairs and tried Barry's door. Locked. I was no expert, of course, but what I had seen on his table did not look like the tools that a carpenter would use. I had a hunch. I got the warning note I had been sent and pushed it under his door. Then I wished I hadn't and spent ages trying to swipe it back with a knife. But I could not get hold of it.

Friday came round again. I was serving one of Trish's friends when of all people Barry walked in. I greeted him with enthusiasm but he nodded darkly. He ordered a pint of stout and sat on a bar stool.

"Who's he?" asked Sammie. I told her I shared the house with him, a carpenter by trade. I looked around and saw that Jerry, great mitts full of dirty glasses, was looking him up and down as well. Welfare came in and Sammie dutifully gave him a peck on the cheek. I had told her to fake it and she had replied with an arch smile that she was used to doing that as far as he was concerned. As I was hovering in Barry's vicinity he muttered that he had got my note. I asked him in a whisper what he was up to. He lit a cigarette and barely shook his head. "See

you later,” he said. Then at about ten thirty the Jessons walked in with a much older man. He was limping. Sammie whispered that it was their dad. Jerry greeted him like a long lost brother. I had never seen him so animated. Immediately I recognised his rich Lancashire accent, as thick as gravy. Inwardly I began to panic like a schoolboy sent for by the Head. I could feel his eyes on me but I tried to look at him only in passing, as if I was as half-conscious of him as I was of everyone else around me. I knew it would be a catastrophic error not to look at him at all. I kept telling myself I had a slight advantage over him which I must not forfeit. If he had come in to weigh me up, I was resolved to weigh as light as a feather. I joined in with the laughter around the bar, tried to look engrossed with the job, and look entirely stupid and superficial. I pulled the elder Jesson’s leg about his beloved Man City and said that they would lose at Tottenham. I had never called either brother by their names and had given no indication that I knew them. When the father approached me, as I knew was inevitable, I had my reply ready.

“You new?” he asked.

“Yeah. You too?”

“You don’t know who I am?” he asked, bewildered.

“Nah, sorry mate. I’m from Bolton. Been here a couple of months. I work here Fridays and Saturdays. I come in for a drink Wednesdays. I haven’t seen you in here before I don’t think.” He thought this over and sniffed. Gesturing backwards with his head into the corner he told me proudly that they were his lads.

“Ah right! The pool brothers.”

“No. The Jesson brothers. They’re not the pool brothers. I’m their dad, Neil Jesson.” He did not resemble them much at all. He had a good head of wavy blonde hair swept back, shrewd blue eyes and a pleasant, friendly mouth. He looked trim for his age, the late forties, I thought, even though his pecs were turning into beer titties. The tight tee-shirt he was wearing only served to emphasize them. He looked very tanned for early April. I asked him if he had been away. He looked down at my arms. He narrowed his eyes and, looking my skin over, said with a sarcastic grin “No pal. Have you?” He decided to show me his unsettling inner self but I tried to make believe I had not seen it. He slowly picked up the three pints in two hands, broke his icy gaze, covered me with a warm smile as a favour, and hobbled off. I realised he could not straighten his right knee properly. I almost let out a sigh at the till. I looked up. Barry had gone. Terry Welfare had sloped off to make up a four at pool. Sammie was collecting glasses and Neil Jesson was chatting her up. I saw immediately what a winning way he had. She was laughing, putting her hand to her face, doubling up and showing him the tops of her pearly little breasts. She came back behind the bar and began to stack the glass-washer. I had just given someone their change and there was no-one waiting. I felt disgusted with her. In the lull I remarked to her briskly how odd it was that she liked the father but hated the sons.

“He’s a real laugh. They’re just thick shits. Probably take after their mamma.”

Oh yes he had a wonderful sense of humour, albeit a rather sick one. Mind you, I could hardly blame Sammie, a girl of barely eighteen who thought, like most of her age group, that she was a much better judge of character than she actually was. And like most vicious psychopaths Jesson had such persuasive charm and an ability to disarm. He could switch it on and off like a spotlight. Only I had seen behind the scenery and knew what lurked backstage.

As I was kneeling down, putting glasses away I heard Sammie whisper to me that Terry was off to London the next day for the match with the brothers. They would all be staying over. I stood up and looked her ironically straight in the eye. Jerry shouted that he needed help down the other end and she sprinted away, turning to raise one eyebrow as she filled a glass. She came to the till and pulled a glum face like a sad doll. A little later I walked past and asked her if her mum was going to the match too. She sniggered.

“Can’t I come round to your place tomorrow?” She whispered. “Please.”

*

I felt embarrassed. Barry was bristling with rage.

“So you just couldn’t help sticking your big, black reporter nose into my business, could you David?”

The room was clear of the state-of-the-art stuff now. Just his single bed, wardrobe, old two-seater leather settee, sad table and chair remained. I sat on the hard settee.

“How much did you see?”

“I dunno, Barry. You tell me what I saw.”

Under his breath he whispered “sweet Jesus” and rolled himself a cigarette. He had convinced me that he was indeed just a happy-go-lucky journeyman, over here chancing his arm. Now I saw another dimension to him. The brogue, behind which an acute intelligence had been concealed, was much diluted. He opened a bedside cabinet and took out a bottle of Irish whiskey and two tumblers. “David” he whispered, pouring us half a glass each. “You don’t realise how close to the edge of a volcano you are. I could make a phone call now and you would disappear.”

I tried the whiskey. I was not used to spirits and it made me hack. Then I found my voice again.

“Oh, I know Barry - if that is your real name. So, you’ve been keeping an eye on me? For Jesson?” But he did not answer.

“But if your Jesson’s man why did you warn me?” I said, half to him and half to myself. He snorted and swallowed a large measure.

“Have I been keeping an eye on you? More like an eye *out* for you. I had not got an effing clue who or what you were until I recorded that phone call between Mr Jesson and some bent old git on you old newspaper, I presume. I could not believe my Irish ears. We think that this dump is the safest safe-house on this swish, elegant estate and so, apparently, do you!” He laughed but without mirth. “Another of life’s little ironies!” He poured us more whiskey and this time I managed not to cough.

“So, who are you then if you don’t work for Jesson?”

“In a kind of a way I do work for Jesson.” He shook his head and laughed at some private joke.

I got up to go. He pushed me back into the corner of the sofa. He was as thin as a lathe but much stronger than I was. He stood over me, glowered down and told me to shut up and listen.

“You are in the shit. I am in the shit. You - and me - are in the shit. You are in danger of fouling up an operation my firm has been planning for months. You have got to leave this house, this area. Tomorrow. No,” he said, looking at his watch, “I mean today.”

I looked at him and saw how serious he was. I took a bigger gulp from my glass and got into the stride of the spirit. I warmed my throat and stomach and now I felt keen to do battle.

“Barry. I am not going. You can’t make me. You work for one of the worst men in the north of England but I’m not frightened. Pauline was frightened, Charlie was and Craig was... People like you and Jesson rely on that. You’re like the lone lion and we’re the scaredy herd -“

“DAVID, will you please shut the F up and listen, you pompous arse. I work for Jesson. I am not Jesson’s man. Why do you think I sent you the CD? I’m your guardian angel, you spoon.”

“Oh, come on, Barry - or Larry or Gary - whoever you are. Its half past one in the morning - far too late for Irish riddles.”

He filled my glass again and told me to shut up, drink and just listen. He apologised.

“When I said I worked for Jesson that was misleading. I told you I was a carpenter and joiner and so I am. The best. The truth is I can turn my hand to most things - more than you can dream of.” He took a deep breath. “The company I work for are very interested in Jesson. All I know is what I’ve been told; he’s a crook; he imports some pretty nasty stuff into Eire, from somewhere on the Welsh coast; my job is to listen in for when his next excursion is planned. I picked up that conversation you heard purely by accident. That’s all I’ll say. Tomorrow you’ll

have to be on your way. At the moment my company know nothing about you. At the moment. Shanshava. Cheers.”

I looked at him in astonishment. “That’s it? That’s all you’re prepared to say? Tomorrow I’ll go to the police if you won’t level with me.”

“And that, my friend, would be the very worst thing you could do. I knew deep down I was making a mistake - out of the goodness of my heart - warning you. You’re too bloody nosy for your own good. I should have just let events take their course.”

“Really? I don’t think you were acting out of altruism at all. If anything had happened to me the police would be bound to come snooping around here, disturbing your nice little cosy set-up. You want me gone, but not for my sake. For yours.”

“For everybody’s effing sake! Don’t you see?” He drank his glass dry and poured another. He offered me one. I was drunk. I refused. Trish banged the wall and told us to shut up. We moved across the landing into my bedroom. He looked at me for a long time in near desperation. He liked me, he told me. He wanted to see no harm come to me. Why could I not just accept I was in the way? Whatever I was up to I could carry on with from anywhere else. If I chose to stay around Moss Side, that would be my funeral - and probably would be.

But I held firm. I was going nowhere, I retorted. I wanted to nail Jesson as badly as his people did, for very different reasons. And I told him the whole story of Pauline and Paul.

“Jessons’ sons killed him for no reason. Mistaken ID. He was a tall lad for his age. They thought he was someone from one of those crappy gangs which total morons like them join because they have no idea of how else to amuse themselves. Basically a lad with an IQ of 130 was killed by two blockheads whose IQs added together would not equal his. Jesson bribed a detective to keep the heat of their backs while they dumped their bloody clothes and then fixed them up with an alibi, verified by Jerry at The Wheatsheaf. So while Paul was lying dead in a pool of his own blood the Jessons were having a cosy family game of pool in the pub. Then Jesson and DI Robbins worked out a frame-up of a lad with fewer brains than this table. Then much later on they had a lad set fire to who was threatening to spill the beans. Now tell me to give it all up!”

When I had finished he threw out his arms and told me he would level with me too. He began to explain what a fix he was in. He reminded me about a bomb outrage in Ulster after the official IRA ceasefire. He told me that he had been what he called the technician on the job. There had never been any doubt in his mind that a warning would clear the streets of civilians before the bomb went off. But a telephone warning had not been acted upon and many people had been killed.

“One night, many months later, I was snatched, blindfolded and driven away for hours. I thought I was done for. I thought the Provos had got me. In some ways it turned out far worse. A bullet in the back of the head then would have been much quicker. I was told that if I didn’t do exactly as they said, I would be handed over to the Provos or the Brits. If I co-operated and did this one job then the slate would be wiped clean. For some time I heard nothing and I began to think it was all a hoax - or a dream. One night I was walking home from the pub and I was taken off again. They trained me up for a couple of days and brought me over to Britain in a big Mercedes. And that’s when I was dumped here. They had got to know - and don’t ask me how, I have no idea - that the Jessons were having a new kitchen, bathroom and master bedroom fitted. I had to leave my calling card with the contractor and - hey presto! - a few days later I was on the job. The lads told me one of their fitters had been involved in a hit-and-run on the car-park of the local supermarket - a car had clipped him as he was loading his boot and broken his ankle - and another had had all his tools stolen. Not my company’s doing, I don’t think! Anyhow, my second best trade is now installing the stuff you saw the other night. They are everywhere in his house; garden, kitchen, bedroom, lounge, telephones, bathroom, everywhere. I know when he’s constipated and when he’s loose; I hear him tossing off in his bath, shagging

his wife and his maid; he hear his wife shagging her bloke, I hear him practising his threats in front of the mirror and talking to the daffodils in his garden. My job is to record him arranging his next trip across the Irish Sea and then they'll have him and I'll be on my way home. He'll either be nobbled on the job or extradited to serve a long, long term in prison until he's on a Zimmer frame - and maybe then they'll let the poor old focker out. Now you understand what a wasps' nest you've put your great black hoof in. Now you understand how much time and taxpayers' money has been invested in this. Now you understand why you have got to go. You've had your friendly warning, this is your official one, Davey. You have simply got to go. These are very powerful people you are dealing with - and I am dealing with. So important they won't even tell me who they fucking well are, for Christ's sake!"

Finally he fell silent. The whiskey was down to the heel of the bottle. I got up and poured us an equal measure of what was left. It was well past two. It was time for me to make my last move. "Barry, you think I'm a nincompoop. But I've got my own plans and my own strategy. The fact is I could be an asset."

Of course he laughed and then said, "An asset! More an arsehole!"

I told him to hang on and listen to me. "It's not in Jessons' interest to kill me or have me duffed up."

"Honestly? Oh, here was me thinking you were trying to get his boys a life sentence in prison for murder!"

"He has no absolutely no idea - I guarantee it - that that is my agenda, unless you tell him. He thinks I'm just looking into Robbins. Robbins? He knows I might as well be staring up my own arse. He thinks I'm off to London soon - I'm sure Denis - or Jerry has told him - and the heat is definitely off. I know it is. Did you see Jesson in the pub tonight?"

"I focked off as soon as he came in in case he recognised me."

"Listen Barry. I handled him perfectly. He has no idea I'm interested in him. Or his bloody sons. He came in to look me over. He thinks I haven't got a clue who he is or who they are. Believe me. If he's had me on his mind, he's less likely to suspect your people. No-one would think they might be under surveillance from two separate angles. Think about it. There's as much chance as a number nine and a number sixty-two bus colliding as you getting in my way or me getting in yours."

He drank his whiskey and looked at me. Now his eye seemed unsteady for the first time.

"Come on, Barry. Be honest. What have you achieved in seven weeks?"

"Six weeks. What have we achieved? I could write you a book about him and his dirty, secret habits. Otherwise? Fock all."

"OK. Listen. I reckon I can plug the Jessons in one week. Just give me till a week tonight. You're the only one to know what I'm up to. If I can't do it in a week, I'll be gone. I promise. Everybody thinks I'm off, lost interest. Jesson has no idea what I'm planning. Barry. One week. I just need your help for one night."

I awoke the next morning and wondered whether the discussion of the previous night, or rather the early morning, had really taken place. The dreadful ache in my head told me it had. A hangover after spirits is a depressing, painful experience. And then when my predicament hit me I felt even lower, worse I think than I had ever done before. I eventually got up and staggered round. I opened the window. The pungent, old sock smell of a bonfire invaded my room. I closed the window and sat down at my table. I put on my laptop. I knew I could kill all those half-characters with a touch of a button. Jerry was not really Jerry and was only half the size of the real landlord, but a bigger character. I looked at my other persona dramatis, loathing most, loving others. My finger hovered over the Delete button. I could leave that very day with my little pile and head for a remote part of the country. And safety. Perversely I sent them all to the recycle bin. I made some coffee. I went down to the dungeon to where I had sent them all

and my finger hovered again over the critical button. EMPTY RECYCLE BIN? I drew back and closed down. Later that morning, as my spirits recovered, superstitious, I rescued them all from the refuse.

On Saturday night we waited until we could hear Barry snoring next door. He probably woke up when Sammie finally made up her mind to stop delaying and stop teasing herself. The bed was lumpy, she said, and by two she had decided she had had enough. She threw her pillow onto the floor and dragged the quilt off me to lie on. I threw the sheet over her lovely pale form with its one dark patch and asked her if she wanted to talk for a little while. She asked, irritably, what about.

“It’s time to trap Welfare into a confession.”

“How?”

“Be especially nice to him when he’s back from London tomorrow. They won. Tell him how you’ve missed him. Take him to bed and tell him afterwards it was the best one ever. Tell him you were talking to me about food, how you like rice and shellfish; how I said I could cook the best gumbo this side of the Atlantic. How you took me up on it and tell him that on Tuesday you are both invited around here for a meal with Trish and me. I’ll get a load of wine in. Are you listening?” Faintly she replied that she was listening. I asked her if she thought he would talk. But she did not reply.

The next time I looked at her, the weak light of a Moss Side dawn was fluttering through the ripped curtain like a ragged yellow butterfly across her cheek.

Tuesday was Samantha’s night off. I went into town and bought twenty of the largest crayfish I could find. I bought a stick of the finest chirozo sausage from my favourite delicatessen; the whitest, freshest celery; sweet peppers, paella rice, garlic, the most virgin olive oil. I bought a case of Baden white wine, the most delicious and fragrant I knew of and also the most powerful at 13.5%. I bought strong lager and brandy. A rice dish would be just right. It would leave plenty of room for drink and - I hoped - soul-searching afterwards.

Trish would eat with us but had a date with someone later. I knew she would set the drinking pace with which Welfare would feel bound to keep up. I would take a plateful upstairs for Barry. He had placed one of his listening bugs under the kitchen table and would be recording.

*

“So what do you call this then?” asked Welfare, staring and sniffing at his plate. I had already plied him with two strong lagers. Trish had made short work of hers and he, not to be outdone, had kept pace.

“It’s a Cajun version of paella. A cross between gumbo and jambalaya. You know New Orleans? It’s a mixture of Spanish and French styles. You’ve got chicken, spicy sausage and king prawns.”

“Why is the rice yellow?” he asked suspiciously.

“That’s saffron. And the little green flecks are fresh rosemary. Dig in. I’m not trying to poison you.”

He looked uncertain where to start. His shrewd little eyes were darting around his plate. Finally he announced “I don’t like peppers.”

Trish took a mouthful of hers and her great eyes rolled in her head. She let out a cry of delight.

“Oh, come on!” she said. “It’s sex on a fork!”

Sammie, at first hesitant, now followed her example and then urged her boyfriend to try it.

Trish filled our glasses with the chilled wine, and it swished around invitingly, an irresistible

golden-green colour. She savoured it and pronounced it delicious. Welfare tried the wine; first a sip and then a gulp. I picked up a plump prawn, peeled it and handed it to him. He looked at it in wonder. He said he didn't know they had to be peeled. And he had never seen one as big as that. Trisha threw back her head and laughed. "As the barmaid said to the bishop!" she managed to say, nearly choking. Sammie stole a glance at me and giggled. If I could have gone red, I would have done. Welfare, fascinated by the prawn, appeared not to have heard. To his mouthful of prawn he now added rice.

"Mmm! Garlic!" he exclaimed. "Brilliant!" He gulped more wine and I refilled his glass. I put another bottle in the fridge. Sammie was watching me. She seemed nervous. Meanwhile Welfare had overcome his fastidiousness and was tucking in, even scooping up the peppers into his mouth. "I don't usually drink wine," he said, with a slight slur on the "usually". "Girly drink, but this is brilliant."

Brilliant. A true connoisseur. The wine came from Lake Constance and had cost me eight pounds a bottle. But I watched with pleasure as he ate more and drank more with ever greater zest. He was getting sentimental.

"Dave - you're a great guy! I'm really sorry about what I said to you that night. Aren't I Sammie? I told you how bad I felt about it. Remember?"

"He did, Dave. He really did!" she said, slightly overacting I thought.

"I didn't realise what a good guy you are. I was out of order. I'm not really a racist, but you know...I keep mainly to my own, if you know what I mean, like you guys do. It's human nature."

Oh I know what you meant, Terry. You are a racist but the odd black guy you bump into you might decide to tolerate. Particularly if he's shoving food and wine down your great red neck. But I was secretly delighted. His voice had developed that cracked, emotional timbre which is the sure sign of imminent intoxication. I opened another bottle. I spooned more food onto his plate. I had oversalted the dish a little to ensure a persistent thirst. I stood up and said I had forgotten Barry. I took him a heaped plateful and half a bottle of wine. I knocked and entered. As clear as a bell I could hear Welfare giving everyone the benefit of his philosophy; about how much better it would be if every town and city had their quota of Blacks and Pakis, so they were shared around fairly and not all concentrated in one place. The others said nothing and all I could hear were their knives and forks clattering on their plates.

"God. Isn't he a fucking twat!" exclaimed Barry. "It'll be a real pleasure nailing him!" He tried the food and gave me the thumbs-up. I went back downstairs and made my opening move. I told him what a hard childhood I had had in Bolton, hated by the white gangs and the Asian gangs. I pretended to swig my wine while only taking in reality small sips. I made sure his glass was always full. I suddenly raised my shirt and pointed to a scar below my ribs, the result of a car accident in my teenage.

"Stab wound?" he asked.

I nodded. "People go on about knives these days but back then there were enough around. I bled like a stuck pig." I thought I saw a dark shadow cross his stupid face. I filled his glass again. Trish had sat in silence. I could tell that she found Welfare obnoxious. She got clumsily to her feet and said she how much she wanted to stay and only wished she could call off her date, but her friend was having trouble with her man and needed some TLC and advice. She hurriedly took her leave as we had prearranged.

"Did you grow up in Didsbury, Sammie?" I asked.

"Yes, mostly. We moved to Hulme when my dad left."

"She's posh!" interjected Welfare. "I'm Moss Side through and through. One of the few white men left!" He began to talk of the gang rivalries and the drug pushers; the shootings, the stabbings, the muggings and disappearances. He told us favourite anecdotes of skulduggery and waited for us to laugh, which I obligingly did, but not Sammie. I sensed that she found his tales

of violence repulsive. He fell silent after a while and his eyes stared into the table as if he were revisiting some scene from his past. His movements were growing jerkier and the wine swilled around in his glass as he raised it unsteadily to his lips. I needed to prime the pump.

“And did you ever get into trouble. Terry?”

“Trouble?”

“With the police?”

“No chance. The police didn’t bother with Moss Side. We sorted our own problems out.”

“Well I’ve got a record.”

“Really? What for? Picking flowers?” He snorted and looked to Sammie for approval of his wit. She gave him a brief smile and immediately switched it off.

“Yeah, picking flowers! No, I beat up a fat white kid for bullying my younger brother. I half-killed him. My dad took me round to apologize and then told me he would never give us no more trouble. He didn’t.”

He laughed in delight and said he had forgotten to tell us about the time when they had kidnapped a half-caste from a rival street and tied him to a tree on February night. He had kacked himself and nearly frozen to death.

I tossed my head back and laughed to show approval, nudging Sammie, who managed to smile a little to encourage him. We swapped a couple more stories. The wine continued to flow.

Sammy sipped and looked depressed. He failed to notice. He mentioned Lee and Tony Jesson and said what bad lads they were; there used to be others in their gang, a Pete, a Trev, an Italian called Benithree others.....and finally, with his voice faltering, he mentioned Craig.

“Craig’s dead,” he added simply. “My best mate.” I watched a tear appear in the corner of one eye and felt a surge of excitement. I refilled his glass.

“How did he die?” I asked. “An accident?”

He shook his head and with his knuckle he wiped away the tear as if pretending he had an itch. “No. It was all to do with a fucking great bulls-up. If they had listened to me it would never have happened.” I looked over at Sam and inclined my head towards him. She caught my drift and put her arm around his shoulders. I slipped out and went upstairs to Barry. We could hear Sammie saying that if something was upsetting him he ought to talk about it. There was a long pause. Would he take the bait? Finally there came a great sob. The bottle clicked against his glass. Good girl. I smiled at Barry.

“He’s really pissed. Look well if the focker passes out.”

“Hush. Listen.”

Terry had stopped blubbering. He was telling her about a recurrent nightmare. Sammie soothed him and said that there was no-one else in the room and he could tell her what was on his mind; she loved him; she wanted to help him; she knew, she told him, that deep down he was a nice lad. This set him off again. She was hushing him and telling him to drink some wine. And then, little by little, she teased the truth out of him.

Just after ten the taxi came. We had to rouse Welfare from his stupor. With any luck he would remember nothing or little of what he had said. The taxi driver was in two minds about whether to take him in case he puked up. We crammed him onto the back seat and within seconds he was sleeping soundly again. Sammy came back into the hall and embraced me. I told her what a good job she had done.

“Did you get it all?”

“Everything. He sang his heart out, didn’t he?”

“I almost feel guilty,” she said. “He’s nowhere near as bad as the Jessons. He could have turned out a nice lad.”

I told her not to worry - he would not go down for as long as the brothers - and the father. The taxi hooted and she was gone.

Barry brought the CD down. We opened the last of the six bottles. I heard myself announce who I was, the date and the purpose of the recording. I fast-forwarded to the point where I had left the room. Between snuffles he told of an attack by some “niggers” on Beni which had put him hospital with broken ribs and a ruptured spleen. One of his ears had nearly been severed by a blade. The leader was a tall kid called Ash. He and the Jessons knew he went to a basketball club on Tuesday evenings. They had hung around in a bus shelter on his route home until they had seen a tall black youth and a smaller companion walking, hooded against the rain, toward them. They all had knives, Welfare said. The plan was to cut him up a bit. The brothers had led the attack, he had hung back. He had tried to tell them that it wasn’t Ash but they were, as he put it, in a frenzy, and had taken no notice. They had run off as a bus had come along and gone round to Craig’s. Old man Jesson had given his lads a “real roasting” but he was going to put them in the clear.

“He said it was only a coon and there was a load more of them around.”

He told Sammie just how bad he felt at the time, and how it got worse not better. He had to go along with the story about playing pool together. He had felt nervous but the policeman had believed him. There was a long silence before Sammie said, “So you didn’t stab either of them?”

“No, but I still see his face every time I lie down to go to sleep. Lee puts the knife into him, he falls and he’s dead before he hits the ground.”

She asked her when exactly it had all happened and he confirmed the exact date, the last Tuesday in January. Then she asked him about Craig. He drank more wine. “Craig felt real bad about it - I sometimes think even worse than me, even though he wasn’t there. He was a year older. He had a girlfriend and I think he was growing out of the rest of us. He kept telling me how it was always on his mind. In the end his girlfriend cleared off because he got so down. He told me he was going to get it off his chest. I tried to persuade him to forget it, move away, anything. Did he want to drop us all in it? And himself, for letting us dump our clothes in the loft?”

For a while he mumbled indistinctly to himself. Yet more wine was poured. Sammie began to speak softly to him again.

“But what happened to Craig?” Now he let out a long moan and sobbing again he told how he had let it all slip out – how he was feeling - unintentionally one night when he was drunk and playing pool with the brothers. A couple of nights later his body had been found on wasteland behind The Wheatsheaf. They had told him to keep his mouth shut and trust them.

“They said that Craig was heading nowhere - was on hard drugs and a sad case. There was nothing left now to link them to the stabbings. It would all be OK.”

We heard him swear Samantha to silence. If she breathed a word about what he had said then he would be next.

“Why do you hang about with still, Terry?”

“I’ve got no choice. What would they think if I broke off with them?”

“But if you went to the police and told them the truth and said you-“

He suddenly raised his voice, in terror almost, and told her not to even think about it. Neil Jesson had a long reach. And the two of them would contradict what he said.

“I’m trapped. I would either finish up dead - or doing as long, or even longer in the nick than them. You promise me not to say a word. I wish I’d said nothing.”

She promised and reassured him, as I had told her to do if that stage were ever reached. There was a much longer silence punctuated by the scrape of cutlery and crockery. She was clearing up. Finally we heard the sound of light snoring. It was over. I had them. Barry toasted me and we clinked glasses.

“Right, that’s my end of the bargain. By tomorrow tea-time you’re gone, OK?”

“OK. But I’ll have money on me getting Jesson before you.”

I was unable to get much sleep that night. Early in the morning, before the day had broken properly and while much of Moss Side was still tucked up in bed, I drove back to Byrom St. I had my torch, a roll of plastic sacks and plastic gloves from the supply under the sink, courtesy of Trish. There was absolutely no-one about. I found my way along the back alley again and got into number 25 as noiselessly as I could. The old lady's windows next door were dark.

At the top of the stairs I stood peering up at the loft lid. How could I get up there? I remembered the old chest of drawers abandoned in the front bedroom and dragged it into position. The lid shifted easily and I pushed my head into the chill, dark space. My heart sank when I shone the torch around. Piled up high all around me were years, if not generations of accumulated rubbish: toys, suitcases, rolls of carpet, old curtains and all the things which families thought might come in handy one day but never did, because they were always forgotten. I managed to heave myself up and gain a foothold on the corner of a timber. As I stood to my full length I could see down one end an uncluttered space. Slowly, ripping every black plastic bag, unrolling every carpet and inspecting every box and case, I moved the pile along and away. The light of the torch began to turn a dim yellow. I must have been up there nearly an hour and had cleared as far as the water tank which stood on a wooden frame. And there, stuffed in the gap below the tank, there was a jumble of clothes; first an anorak, then a pair of jeans, more jeans, four trainers, two more anoraks and another pair of shoes. I extricated them with mounting excitement, handling them at their extremities with my gloves on. The light had dimmed to almost nothing but I saw with a start on the one leg of a pair of jeans a very dark, ominous stain. On one white trainer there were other dark speckles. The jackets seemed clear. I dropped then one by one into separate bags and threw them onto the landing. I drove back suffused with an intense, warm feeling. Here at last I had the conclusive proof which Pauline had wanted. The late April sun was bright and cheering. Even Moss Side looked good. I put the precious evidence in my wardrobe and went back to bed for a long, sound sleep.

When I awoke I could tell it was the afternoon; the sun had swung right round and was peeping through the hole in the curtain onto the far wall. I never worked on a Wednesday and I felt great. I decided that I would phone the Chief Constable later that afternoon and I lay working out what I might say. How dramatic should I make it? That evening, I would check into a good hotel and be pampered for a change. I would ring Sammie and see what plans she had for later in the week and maybe the weekend. I could leave a few items with Trish until I had had decided what to do and where to settle. I needed to find an agent. I would buy *The Writer's Year* book and start faxing or phoning round.

I sauntered downstairs and made a strong cup of coffee in my percolator. Barry or Trish had picked up the post and it lay scattered on the table. A fat A4 package caught my eye. It was addressed to me. Intrigued I tore it open. Had Ms Prestidge had a change of heart and sent me more juicy evidence?

It contained many interesting items in fact. On the top was an air ticket to Malaga from Manchester, a single flight booked in my name departing that Sunday. There was a press cutting of me - courtesy of Denis I assumed - receiving my award. There was a thousand pounds in twenties and then a beautiful picture of Sammie walking along the road. On the back was scrawled: *I know where she lives and will always make it my business to know.* At the very bottom was a piece of paper bearing the name of a bar in Marbella and the message: *phone Aurora. She will pick you up, set you on and put you up. She pays well for hard work. So long.* So now all I had to do was to choose between my project and Sammie. And my own skin. I inwardly thanked Denis for bringing out the generous best in Jesson.

My bedroom door swung open. "Fock are you still doing here?"

I pointed to the table and told him to take a look. He turned the photo of Sammie over, thumbed through the money and looked at the ticket and message. He sat down heavily on the sofa and swore profusely under his breath. We did not speak for ages. The wind rattled the window. I got up and looked out. The massage parlour was doing steady trade; cars were parked on the pavement; a few youngsters in baseball caps were sitting astride bicycles, rocking to and fro on the far corner; a drunk was walking away unsteadily at the other end of the street.

"I wonder who took the photo," he mused.

I had turned it over in my mind all afternoon. "Jerry. It has to be. He doesn't miss much. We've been very careless, I'm afraid."

"Exactly. If you could have kept that fat dick of yours in your trousers you'd be in the clear now."

"Without Sammie I'd have got nowhere, Barry."

"You used her David - a young kid - that was bad. If Jerry knows and Jesson knows, it's only a while until Welfare knows you've been shagging his girlfriend. Then you'll be in the shite."

"Oh? You don't think that this is already like being in the shite?"

"If I were you, I'd take the money and run. You've lost. Give it up - you'll never bring Paul and Pauline back. Admit it, you're only after the Pulitzer prize or whatever you have over here."

I hammered the wall in fury. "No! To be this close! There has to be a way out. What have you got on him, Barry?"

"Do you think I'd tell you?"

"Oh come on!"

"OK - put it this way...Do you think I'd still be living in this dog-hole if my firm had got what they've come for? Anyway, as everybody keeps saying, the bastard has a long reach. The only high card in your hand is the fact that he doesn't know what you're really up to. If he thought his precious boys were in danger, you'd be joining that fellow on the waste ground."

I decided to say nothing to Sammie. I lay in sheer misery on my bed and stared at the ceiling. Someone had started to give it a second coat once but had either lost interest or died. Trish banged on my wall. Did I fancy a drink? I did. I got off my bed and pulled on my coat.

As we entered The Wheatsheaf Jerry's eyes gave away all I needed to know, as I supposed my face had just given away everything to him. He gave me a quick, confidential smirk that I interpreted as "you lose". Sammie winked. At about ten, Welfare came in. He waved to us and held his head in mock agony. He bought us a drink and said that he had felt so rough he had had to take the day off work.

Much later I stayed on to help Jerry tidy up and do the glasses. He told Sammie she could get off early. She left in glum silence with Welfare. A while later, after Jerry had turned off the music and sat down to have his customary smoke in the corner, I told him that I had decided to go to Spain.

"A friend of a friend has offered me a job in a bar. An offer I can't refuse. I'm flying out on Sunday."

He looked around a grinned that same grin. He congratulated me. If he were a younger man, he would be out there like a shot. There was nothing to keep him in Manchester.

"Whereabouts you off to?"

"Marbella."

"Lucky old you. I know people who have a villa out there."

"Lucky old them." Stupidly I dropped the pint glass I was polishing. It shattered into an amazing number of smithereens. Jerry looked and smiled again.

"Not like you to be careless, David."

"No. I'm usually pretty careful." I fetched the dustpan and brush. He came and stood over me as I swept it up. I looked up at him. He offered me his hand and helped me to my feet. We stood

eye to eye. I was longing to tell him what I thought of him, of his friends, of his verminous ilk. I had had a few pints but I kept my head. I smiled very sweetly.

“Jerry, you’ve been a big help to me in a tight spot, what with the job here and with Jim on the taxis.” I held out my right hand but he reached to my left and took the dustpan off me. He studied me, as if looking for a trace of irony or insincerity. I said goodbye. He did not reply.

I awoke in the middle of that night with a start. I had been dreaming. Pursued by a hooded gang down rain-blackened alleys, I had finally raced up against a brick wall. They had pulled their hoods back but suddenly there were more people than just the Jesson boys and Welfare. Geraghty and Denis, Jerry and Neil Jesson were behind them and bizarrely my old English teacher, with whom I had really got on well. Trish appeared and began to laugh and Sammie was shouting NO as they drew their knives, curved like scimitars. Then I had woken and immediately realised I had revealed to myself my future; a life on the run, living my life to somebody else’s agenda as one of their bullet points, morally blackmailed into a miserable silence. I knew that I could not possibly live like that and that death would be preferable. I could not give in. I was a bad loser. I lay in a torment until the dawn began to glimmer at the curtain edge, considering one imperfect solution after another until I began to work out a plan to get everyone out of their traps and which would put the culprits where they belonged.

Barry laughed again. I poured him a shot from a bottle of Jamieson’s I had been out to get. “Have you gone fucking mad, Davey boy? You are offering me your thousand quid?” He stared at the two piles of notes I had left out on the table. I reached into my wallet put a credit card on the table. I wrote down my pin number on a slip of paper and pushed them both towards him. “I’ll leave three thousand in that account. You can draw it out whenever you want. And here are the details of that bar in Marbella. I’m not fucking off Barry, you are.” He shook his head in amazement and drained his glass. I went to refill it but he pushed it away. “Whoa! I’m not falling for that old trick!” He leant over and felt my forehead. “You haven’t got a temperature, so what’s your game?”

“Barry, you’re as much in a jam as I am. I’m giving you the chance to get out. Here’s my ticket.”

He inspected it. “In your name. Not transferable. Might be a problem. And they’ve got my passport, David. But the main obstacle is that I haven’t the least intention of going. Couldn’t if I wanted to.”

They had his wife under surveillance, he added.

“Surely not twenty-four hours! That’s just a bluff, Barry. You would fly on Sunday. Today’s Thursday. I’ll buy her a flight on the internet from Dublin the same day. She could fly to Amsterdam...then Munich and then get the train to Innsbruck and fly to Madrid or further south. Then go by train to meet up with you. You can post all the tickets to her.”

He laughed. “You have an over-active imagination Davey. You’re crazy. If she goes out of Derry, she gets a nose bleed.” Now he pushed a glass over for a refill. I put my hand over it. “No. Not until you’ve heard my plan. Then we’ll get pissed.”

I told him that once the book was published he would have 5% of all rights. He looked very doubtful. “How can you get it published - even if it’s any good? You’d be signing your own death warrant - and Sammie’s.”

I pushed him over a contract. He studied it and whispered “Curioser and curioser, said Alice.” He studied the ticket, the credit card and flicked through the money again. I got up and fetched my passport from a drawer and turned to the back page. I gave it to him. He laughed and said “And where do you keep your black shoe polish?”

“You won’t need it. You said you were a technician.”

“So I am.”

“You said, the best. Well surely you can cut around my face and put your own ugly Irish mug in?”

He examined the plastic coating over the photo and the rest of the page.

“Come on, Barry. They don’t examine them that closely on the way out, and they don’t read the microchip. They don’t give a shit who goes out. It’s just the girl on the flight desk. A craft knife would do the trick. Put the plastic back - no problem for a technician as good as you.”

He closed the passport, tapped the edge of the table with it and put it into his shirt pocket. “I’ll have that whiskey now.”

“When we’ve done. I’ll book your wife on flights tonight and print the tickets out.”

“She would never come. She’s a home-town girl....but to be honest, we’re all washed up anyway - and she’s never had a passport. Ask Trish for hers - and I’ll see what I can do! No no...a joke...Now, my dark horse of a friend, pour me that whiskey, or no deal.”

I leant forward, took the top off and poured him a good double. He leant forward and said, “Now you tell me what exactly it is I have to do to benefit from your great generosity?”

“Not much. I just want you to put enough explosive in Jesson’s bath to blow him to Kingdom Come, that’s all.”

For a long time he stared at me, forgetting his whiskey. He chuckled.

“Now I know you’ve gone fucking mad. Blow the man up? Just like that? And hasn’t it occurred to you if you write this book that you’ll be incriminating yourself and me. You’ll be writing our confessions!”

“Not you. I shall change your name and everyone else’s. I shall set the book somewhere else, not here. I’ll change the way you kill him. There will be no proof. You can start a new life as me. I shall be someone else with a nom de plume.”

“So, here you are trying to bring despicable murderers to justice by becoming one yourself!”

“How many lives does a man like Jesson ruin? What good does he do to - or for - anyone?”

There are millions of good, kindly people dying each day - some naturally, some unnaturally at the hands of the Jessons of this world. I’ve tried my best to get to him legally in a derelict area where the police are not reliable. I’m more legal than your bloody operation and your agency. You’re getting nowhere and I’m up a creek without a paddle. Do you honestly think I’m going to spend the rest of my life looking over my shoulder and worrying like Pauline did about her sister and her kids? Do you want to spend the rest of your life here, looking over your shoulder Barry? Do you honestly think this is the last job you do before they wipe your dirty slate clean?”

“If I disappear, they’ll tell the Brits. They’ll find me eventually.”

“Oh come on Barry! Spain’s a big place. At least you’ve got a chance. A better chance than here or in Ireland. They have your passport. Why would they look abroad?”

I filled our glasses. He took out the passport again and examined the inside back cover.

Just at that moment a spider began to creep down the wall above my bed. I got up, took up a glass, covered the beast and slid a piece of paper underneath it I brought it back and set it down on the table.

“I’d feel more guilt killing this harmless, innocent creature than Jesson. To me he’s a mass of DNA gone wrong and twisted up. A vile monster.”

He rolled a cigarette slowly, packed the ends and said,

“A monster. Maybe a bit like you, Davey.”

Me a monster? I felt a surge of indignation. Was I such a monster?

“Or maybe more like you, Barry. Barry the technician! Is that a cop-out, or what? You killed those innocent people. You’re a murderer too!”

To my surprise he lowered his gaze and I sensed his shame. He looked up and took a drag from his flaky cigarette.

“Don’t you think I wake up every morning with that on my mind? One of them was my neighbour’s nephew. I was a stupid, stupid young man, out to impress. They *are* the dead - I’m the walking dead.” He hid his face.

“Drink your whiskey, Barry. Self-pity is disgusting.”

I took another piece of paper and folded it lengthways in half. At the top on the left I wrote “Jesson”. On the right I made a series of bullet points.

- Sammie safe
- David safe
- Barry free
- Three murderers in jail
- A bent cop nicked
- An innocent man freed
- One villain and his influence less

I handed it to him. He sat and looked at it. I told him to reckon it all up.

“It’s overwhelming,” I said, but he shook his head slowly.

“Barry, if I could send you back in a time machine with a revolver to Berlin in the mid-thirties would you shoot Adolf Hitler?”

“That’s not fair! Jesson isn’t Hitler.”

“As far as we’re concerned he is. Barry, just take the fertiliser, or whatever you use and put it under his bath. Give me the button. I’ll press it. Or get me a gun - from your bloody firm - I’ll shoot the bastard.” I let the spider out and we watched it crawl across and under the table top.

“If you pass up this chance Barry, you’ll regret it for the rest of your life.”

“Maybe.” He got up and stumbled to his room.

On Friday I had the afternoon shift but a driver phoned in ill and I offered to work on. I came in at about two in the morning. I found my passport on my table. I opened the drawer into which he had watched me put the money and the other items. They were still there. With a heavy heart I flicked through to the back cover and saw, looking back at me with a twinkle in his eye, the face of Barry. I examined the borderline of his face. The join was virtually undetectable. I could just see where he had filled in the join with the thinnest line of clear glue. His head sat on my collar and tie so perfectly that I laughed out loud. The gleam in his eye said, *I told you I was the best.*

On Saturday morning I lay in. At about ten Trish brought me a cup of tea and climbed into bed with me. Barry had already gone out and she felt even less restrained than usual.

“You are a noisy cow, Trish,” I said when she had subsided into stillness. “You’ve given me a bad head.”

“It’s your fault, you bad man. Nobody makes me come like you.”

She giggled as I pushed her out of bed with my foot and she fell on the floor. My bed looked like a track churned up by tractor tyres. I dozed for a while and then turned my mobile phone on. Sammie had left four messages, all urgent, telling me to phone. As I read them she phoned again.

“David, where have you been?”

“At work. Asleep. Why, what’s up?”

“Jerry say’s you’re leaving.”

“Yes, tomorrow.”

“Why?”

“I’ve been offered a job in Spain.”

“You can’t go.”

I did not reply and listened to her breathing. “David, you can’t go. I love you.”

I asked her what time she was on that afternoon. Five. She said she was coming over.

“No. Someone might see you!”

But the phone had already gone dead. I phoned back but she had switched off. I pulled on some clothes and rushed out. I drove the route that I knew she would have to take. Finally I saw her crossing the main road. I pulled over and opened the door. I drove away from the city towards Altrincham. She would not speak. I could see she had been weeping.

“Sammie, listen....I am twenty-six and you are barely eighteen. You’re going to uni next year. I’m probably going nowhere.”

“But what about your book?”

“There are thousands and thousands of aspiring writers out there. Only a few make it.”

“Are you telling me all that effort with Terry - and me having to....keep putting up with him....was a waste of time?”

“No. I’m sending the CD to the Chief Constable and a copy to the BBC. I’ve got the clothes they wore and the carpet they trod on. They’re finished.”

“I’m finishing with Terry. God knows what I saw in him in the first place. I want you, David. You can’t just leave me high and dry! You just can’t.” She began to weep again. She was right. I could not just leave her on her own to cope. She was in danger until all the Jessons and Welfare were out of commission. I had not given her predicament enough thought, having been concentrating on Jesson. The last thing I wanted to do was to alarm her. On my left I saw a large timber-frame pub. I glanced at my watch and pulled in. We dashed in through the rain which had begun to pour down and found a secluded table in a corner. How much could and should I tell her? I was tempted to tell her nothing at all. We could go up to one of my favourite villages - Kettlewell - in the Dales the following week and sit the storm out. I bought us a cup of coffee and saw how I might put her mind at rest.

“I’m not going to Spain, Sammie. It’s just a diversion. Jerry thinks I am and he must keep thinking that. If he asks you about me tonight, say you haven’t seen me. And give the impression you don’t care whether I go to Spain or the South Pole.”

“He knows I care. He must have seen how I was last night. I can’t believe you were just going to disappear without saying a word to me.”

“I was not. I had other things to think about. I would have phoned you, you know that. Last night I was busy. Look, it’s absolutely vital Jerry doesn’t suspect there’s a change of plan.”

“Why? What has Jerry got to do with anything? What’s going on? Why is Spain so important all of a sudden?”

“You’ll find out. I can’t tell you now. You must trust me on this one.”

“No. Listen to me. I want to know. I was kept in the dark about my mum and dad splitting up. I knew there was something up. Don’t treat me like a child. Why won’t you tell me the truth?” Because you’re a poor judge of character, that’s why.

“OK, Sammie. Quiz time. What do you think of Jerry?”

“Jerry? He’s always thoughtful and kind. Why?”

“What if I told you he was an utter bastard? Totally without a conscience?”

“I wouldn’t believe you.”

“So why should I tell you the truth if you won’t believe it?”

“Can you prove it?” she retorted.

I could of course. Welfare had not mentioned Jerry’s role in the cover-up during his tearful confession and I would not tell her.

“Can you prove that your opinion of him is the correct one?”

“Stop playing games!”

“Believe me Samantha, this is no game. When the dust has settled you’ll know everything, one way or the other. Can you keep a secret?”

“Yes.”

“No. I mean - can your face keep a secret?”

Damn! Suddenly I realised that there was no way she could go into The Wheatsheaf that night. Jerry would read her face like a banner headline.

“Do you like Neil Jesson, the father?”

“Yes. Why? You’re going to tell me he’s a serial killer or a paedophile, no doubt.”

“I don’t know about the paedophile but I’ll tell you straight - he’s one of the most dangerous gangsters in the north of England.”

She sat back, laughed and shook her head.

“See? The truth isn’t always the easiest portion to swallow. You didn’t suspect that Terry might be connected to a murder, did you? Do you honestly think the Jesson boys turned out nasty in spite of a loving upbringing or because of the one they’ve really had? Come on Sammie, you’re a bright kid. Think!”

She sniffed and looked away as if she had not heard. I sense she felt stupid and embarrassed. I patted her knee but she brushed my hand away and folded her arms to lock me out. I asked her if she had the number of the pub on her phone. She reached into her bag and passed it to me. I found it and phoned Jerry on mine.

“Hi, Jerry. It’s me, David. Listen I just phoned Sammie to wish her farewell and that, and she can hardly speak she’s got such a throat. She can’t make it tonight....Yeah, I know what she’s like.... She was planning to struggle in but the smoke.....Listen I’ve got nothing booked tonight....I can come in...say tara to one or two people. My swan song. OK? Right. See you later.”

We went back to my room and made love. At about four thirty I came out onto the pavement to make sure the coast was clear. I opened the passenger door and she darted in. As I started the car a corpulent man with a large nose got out of a 4x4 further along and watched me drive past. I glanced at him. His ruby face was sneering.

“Tell your mother you’re going away for a few days in Yorkshire. Pack a case and I’ll pick you up tomorrow. I’ll give you a ring when I’m on my way.”

Jerry seemed genuinely pleased to see me. The rather triumphant expression on his face had gone. He introduced me to my replacement, a dusky, pretty girl of indeterminate race called Hope. The place was pretty crowded considering it was early. Manchester City had had a convincing victory in their last home game of the season and any lingering fears of relegation had been eased. The pints were flowing. At seven Barry came in for a Guinness.

“I guessed you might be here, Davey. We have to talk.”

“Sammy’s poorly. I’m filling in. She’s lost her voice.”

“Oh really? I’m not surprised after all that yelling this afternoon. I’ll be in my room waiting when you knock off, OK?”

The Jessons had already been drinking when they rolled in at about seven. Bolton, I discovered, had lost, and they meant to rub it in. Welfare followed them in a few minutes later and looked bewildered to find that Sammy was not there. He went to Jerry who turned, as he spoke, and thumbed in my direction. He took out his mobile and went outside. Within two minutes he was back. He forced his way through the scrum at the bar and said in my face, “What have you been phoning my Sammy for you cheeky black bastard?” He smelt of stale lunchtime booze.

“Cut it out Terry or you’re barred,” growled Jerry who stood serving adjacent to me. A tall white fellow in the queue told him to keep his racist thoughts to himself.

“It’s OK, pal.” I said. “Terry’s a mate of mine. He’s just had a few, that’s all. He forgets his Ps and Qs sometimes. He means no harm.”

“Don’t take the piss, David!” he sneered. “You make sure you delete her number from your phone - or I’ll delete it!”

“Hey Terry!” said Lee Jesson coming over. “Cool it. What’s up?”

“Nothing,” he muttered and he walked unsteadily off to the pool table under Jesson’s wing. Tony Jesson stared at me a few times. His brother kept mouthing “Bolton - shit” at me and sniggering. I tried to find this amusing but my impatience and revulsion interfered. Jerry must have noticed, for as he came past he whispered to me not to take any notice and told me to be careful.

Gradually the football crowd thinned out and the Saturday regulars drifted in. A vocal duo in a far corner got stuck into their repertoire and a few, then more, got up to dance. Trisha and her mates sat in the opposite corner. She was howling with laughter and telling her neighbour something behind her hand and looking at me. Her friend’s face confirmed that this was something crude. At that moment, as I was shaking my head, in feigned outrage, in their direction, a terrific row broke out at the pool table above the general hubbub.

“No it was not a fucking foul,” yelled Welfare into the face of another youth.

“You know it was,” he replied. “But if you’re determined to cheat I’ll just have my fifty pence back.”

Welfare slammed his cue down onto the table. The duo kept singing but people were more interested in the confrontation than whether this the way to Amarillo or not. His adversary, tall pale and scruffy, folded his arms and, unruffled, looked him square in the eye. Lee Jesson stood up and put his pint down.

“Hey, pal, I was watching. I didn’t see no foul shot, did you bro?”

The elder turned and shook his head which was full of a balm he was chewing. Jerry wandered over and asked what the matter was.

“This lad says Terry played a foul shot. Three of us say it weren’t” offered Lee.

“I just want me fifty pee back. He touched a ball with his little finger. They’re all lying - him chewing weren’t even looking!”

Jerry put his hand in his pocket. “Here’s your fifty. There’s the door. Go and open it, close it and fuck off.”

Now the music stopped.

“That ain’t fair!” he protested. “Been coming in here for months I have -“

“Well time for a change of scene then. I’ve told you. Off you go.”

I was collecting glasses. As he came past I said quietly to him that he should not argue with the Jessons. “They’re always right.”

“Shit! Is that who they are?” he whispered.

I nodded. He turned and went back. Jerry put his hands on his hips. The lad apologised. He had thought about it and he might have made a mistake. The three of them looked at him and grinned. “Hey Jerry!” said the elder. “The lad says he’s sorry. Anybody can make a mistake. Let him stay!”

I felt disgusted to see that big, shrewd man allow those two tattooed pigs to reverse his first corrupted decision. The music restarted and the pub resumed its boisterous Saturday night out. A while later the father limped in. He was wearing his shirt collar - a ghastly pink colour - outside his grey jacket and a cross on a chain bounced up and down on his scraggy orange throat. He had swept his hair back high to an absurd ridge and into swirls behind his ears. I could tell he thought the star of the show had just walked in, and indeed he looked around and waved at many other customers who seemed anxious to have his greetings bestowed upon them. He went to Hope to be served and as he leered over her and studied her ample bosom I could sense her repugnance by the manner that her sandaled feet squirmed about and crossed over each other. However often I glanced in his direction and tried to catch his eye, he appeared not to look and seemed resolved to blank me completely.

By now Welfare was so drunk he could barely stand steadily enough to take his pool shot and I asked myself how on earth a pretty, clever girl like Sammie could have fallen for such an lout. Tony Jesson came up to the bar and ordered four pints. I began pouring and was seized by an impulse which was akin to madness.

“Is one for Terry?”

“Yeah....And?” I looked straight into his narrowed, scornful eyes and told him I would not pull it. His eyes widened and his mouth fell open.

“He’s drunk.” I said. “I’m not supposed to.”

First he tittered and then laughed in disbelief. He turned to his brother and father and shouted,

“Hey up! Sambo here won’t pour Terry a pint! Reckons he’s pissed!”

“The name is David. No I won’t serve him. It’s against the law.”

By then the father had stalked to the bar.

“It’s OK, sunshine boy. Don’t worry. I’m the law around here. Just pull it.”

And without bothering to hear or see how I reacted he returned to his corner, looking around to see who was admiring him. I said nothing. I topped off the third pint and told Tony how much it came to.

“I told you four pints, not three, you black fuck.”

“Three is all you’re going to get. And I told you the name is David. Six pounds seventy-five.”

Jerry came over. “Problem?”

“I won’t pull a pint for Terry. He’s well pissed. We serve drinks not drunks, according to the poster in the window.”

Jerry gave me a look of astonishment and pity almost. He took a glass and filled it. “This is his last,” he told the fat, obnoxious youth. He gave me a smirk which I was sorely tempted to wipe from his face. Jerry grabbed my arm as he returned from the till and asked me what my game was. He almost pushed me down the other end of the bar.

Now it was karaoke time and of course Jesson senior had to show off with his Billy Fury act. It was flat and excruciating but nonetheless popular with many. He handed the microphone over to the next performer and waved to his fans.

At last midnight approached. Jesson was waving to everyone, wishing them goodnight over and over, as he backed out towards the door. I was washing glasses. His boys had already carried out their witless friend, pausing in my vicinity to utter a few racist oaths and glare at me. I had smiled and wished them pleasant dreams, pretending not to hear their threats and insults. I knew that by tomorrow they would be fatherless and wondered how two such vulgar, uneducated yobs would cope in Moss Side then. As he, my victim, came past he leant his elbow on the bar and shouted farewell to someone else across the room. He turned to me and switched off his genial smile. “You ignored me.”

I began stacking more glasses in the machine and did not look up.

“Hey, I’m talking to you, sunshine!”

“My name’s David.” I said simply. “You don’t frighten me.”

“Hey! Who wants to frighten anybody? Live and let live - that’s my motto. If I say pull Terry a pint, who the fuck are you to refuse? This is Moss Side not fucking Altrincham!”

He showed him that his patter was making no impression. His eyes narrowed to vicious slits. He smoothed down his hair and grinned.

“Jerry tells me you’re off to Spain tomorrow.”

“Yeah, I’m flying to Malaga. I’ve got a job lined up in Marbella.”

“Marbella! What a coincidence. I’ve got a place out there - five bedroomed villa, swimming pool, landscaped garden, outside bar and barbecue....everything a body could want.”

“Sounds wonderful. I’ll be working at Aurora’s bar.”

“Aurora’s bar?” He grinned as wide a grin as he could and said that he knew her.

“Keep your nose clean and you’ll be fine there. She’ll work you hard but she’s fair. I guarantee you’ll never want to come back to England. I guarantee it. Just be grateful you’ve been given such a chance to start a new life. Most people I know aren’t so lucky.”

Obviously delighted with his cleverness he continued to grin. There was the hoot of a car horn. “Sounds like my chauffeur is waiting.”

I thanked him for his good wishes. He looked puzzled and then suspicious. He asked me who had offered me the job. I looked him straight in the eye and said it was confidential. With a final withering look he took his leave and hobbled out.

Jerry sat smoking steadily in the corner. I told Hope to put her coat on. I would finish off. The musical duo had packed up their stuff and gone. By 12:25 the place was finally deserted as the last customer struggled out. I switched off the CD. The silence was a blessing, almost eerie.

Now I could hear tyres ploughing through the wet outside. I loaded up the final batch of glasses, emptied the ashtrays and wiped down the tables. I put up the chairs and unplugged all the machines. Jerry had his back to me. A spiral of smoke drifted above his tousled head.

“David, pour us both a double scotch. Come and sit down.”

He stared at me for a long time before speaking. I realised that this was the first time I had seen him touch a drink in all my time there. He had truly striking eyes for a man, almost beautiful; dark, intelligent and discerning. In another life, in other circumstances what might he have been? In this life, in this embodiment he was simply Jesson’s man, his look-out, his bodyguard, his informer. I felt disgust that such an intelligence should be so perverted and put to such ill use.

“David, don’t ever come back here, please.”

I looked around at all the silent tables where an hour ago so many people had been shouting, laughing and singing along. How much did he know? What might I have to admit? I decided to let him make the running.

“I was racking my brains for ages trying to place you. You weren’t a copper - you didn’t look like one, talk like one, smell like one or stand like one. But I had seen your face before. Then it came to me. Mick Binns. I used to campaign for him in the seventies, in my idealistic youth - went on the knocker, even wrote his election address. He was a good man but like me he lost his revolutionary zeal and got greedy. Took a backhander. You found him out. You finished him. It’s down to him that this pub is still standing and the little shops. It’s only a matter of time before somebody remembers we’re still here, making the place look untidy, and sends the bulldozers round. The compensation won’t be much. I’ll have to apply to manage a place then, I expect.”

“Why did you tell on me, Jerry?”

He took a gulp of scotch, let out an “ah!” of pleasure and studied me again.

“Dave, you were a class act, I have to admit. If I hadn’t seen your photo in the paper that time, I don’t think I would have spotted you. I have to remember faces in my trade - to remember all the arseholes who are bad news and get themselves banned. But you did a stupid thing going to see Cropper. He’s watched by a screw who earns a bit on the side from a friend of a friend..... I have Plods in here from time to time, checking up, sniffing round, you know, trying to make a name for themselves. They play the machines and keep looking round. First mistake. People who play the machines for real don’t do that, they study the wheels. Some coppers try to creep in here below the eyeline, sit in the corner and do the crossword. I go over and whisper, can I see your ID? And within half-an-hour they’re gone.”

“So why didn’t you kick my arse out the door?”

“I would have done - only that friend I mentioned wanted to know what you were up to. And whatever it was, you kept it very close - never asked me or anyone else as far as I could hear

about the local scene, what was going off, who was into what, pushing this, fencing that...Nothing. I knew that that Irish mate of yours was a wrong 'un, though."

"Who, Barry?"

"Him. He doesn't add up right. Trish says he's a carpenter. But he looks a bit too sharp and canny to be your common or garden chippie, if you want my opinion."

I realised I could not duck this one. "Well as far as I know he is. Keeps himself to himself in the house, minds his own. He's nowt to do with me or my game."

"So, what was your little game then, David?"

"Police corruption." I said without a blink or a second's hesitation, and then added "Robbins"

Jerry threw his head back and laughed. "You had as much chance of pinning down that slippery git as watching Lord Lucan romp home in the Grand National on Shergar. Drink up!"

He fetched us two more doubles.

"You know, all this time I had just a feeling you were interested much more in a few of my regulars, in quite a different matter."

"Really? And what might that be?"

He gave me his whole attention. "Paul Driscoll."

It shocked me to hear the name on his lips but I kept, or I hoped I kept, my composure.

"Paul Driscoll? That rings a bell."

"He was stabbed about ten minutes walk from here. The Jesson lads and that twat Welfare were suspects. Don't pretend you never heard of it!"

"I wasn't on that story, but I do remember a bit. I had no idea about the Jessons though. Is that why you warned me about them? Are they really capable of murder? "

He lit another cigarette and did not answer. His only reply was a mysterious grin. I realised with some surprise that I felt quite sorry for Jerry. What a futile existence he had, protecting and sucking up to such vermin in this dead-end establishment on the edge of ruin.

"Shall I tell you what disappointed me most about you, Jerry?"

"You will no doubt. Go on."

"You told your friend about Sammie."

"I agree, that was not very chivalrous. I was asked about your weak spots as soon as you'd been to see Cropper. It was you who got involved with her, David. Nobody made you."

"And I thought we were discreet."

"What? I've never seen anything as obvious in my life. Be grateful those cunts couldn't see it - or you would be on a slab now." He pulled out his ears. "The good Lord endowed me with a marvellous pair of these. They don't miss much - and I make good use of them in this trade to find out who's up to what. Anyway, your bloody faces gave you both away."

"Did you take her photo?"

"Her photo? I couldn't figure out a camera if my life depended on it. That must have been one of my friend's runners. I just mentioned where she lived. All I can say is that you must have a guardian angel. I'm glad you have. You're a good kid. When is your flight?"

"Early. Around nine. I'd better turn in. Bye Jerry, thanks for the scotch."

He caught my hand. "You know, a part of me wanted you to succeed, Dave. But you can't win against these people. Accept it. Way of the world. You're holding something back, though. I only hope for your sake it doesn't blow up in your face." He laid his great mitt on my shoulder and patted it. I sensed his approval.

I found Barry curled up on my settee. It was well past one o'clock. I roused him. He stretched and looked at his watch. He groaned.

"What time do you call this?"

"I've been talking." I looked at where he was looking. On my table there were a tiny gadget and a mobile phone.

“You press this tiny switch here - see it? - and put it in your ear. You’ll hear him in his bathroom. He’s a creature of habit. He takes a long bath every Sunday morning around nine. You dial three zeros on the phone and press green. That will set the detonator off. The transmitter has a range of five miles but best to get as close as you can to be absolutely sure.” I realised that I had not got a clue where Jesson lived. He described a large house on the edge of Hulme. He wrote down the name of the street. “You can’t miss it - a tasteless, fake half-timbered effort - a real chocolate box. It has long front drive, it sweeps round from one great big gate to another on the other side of the hedge. There’s a skip at the top full of rubble, a large 4x4 and his wife’s Toyota sports car. The best time to press is when he’s getting in or out. The side panel will just disintegrate and so will he. If he’s in the bath - fock knows where he’ll get to. He might end up the first man in a bath on the moon.”

The alarm sounded at six. I had had about three and a half hours sleep. When I realised what was about to happen I felt really sick. I could hear Barry up and about. Before seven we were ready. He took his case to the car and came back in.

“We have company.”

My heart suddenly pounded. He led me back upstairs. We could hear Trish snoring without a care in the world. Through my window he pointed down the street past the silent and dark massage parlour.

“The black VW Golf. See it? The driver ducked down when I came out. Hold on.” He returned to his room and came back with a pair of binoculars. I took them and found myself looking at a young pasty face looking straight in the direction of our front door.

“Recognise him?”

I told him I did not. He took the binoculars and looked long at him.

“Now what business could he possibly have here on a Sunday at this time of the morning? I reckon he’s a copper. Give me your car keys.”

As I got in the passenger side I did as he had said. I waved at a non-existent Trish at an upstairs window and blew her a kiss. Barry drove off.

“Yeah. He’s following us, the useless git,” he said, looking through the rear-view mirror.

Painfully slowly we drove to the airport. We arrived at around seven thirty. The VW followed us onto a short-stay car park. I got out and carried Barry’s case into the terminal building with him trailing behind. We found the check-in desk. The queue was long. I got into it and he stood at my side. Smiling broadly at me he told me our friend was behind us pretending to look through the newspapers. We shuffled along. We were about ten away from the desk. Suddenly he grabbed my hand and told me to have a good flight.

“Count to twenty when I go and then turn and wave to me,” he said under his breath. I counted slowly and then turned. Barry was a yard from him, waving at me.

“Hey, Dave!” he yelled. “Remember to lay off that cheap Spanish brandy! Good luck!”

I shouted back that I would. And he was gone. But the spy still stood reading a paper. He must have been told to see me go through into the departure lounge. I began to sweat. I was within five passengers of checking in. I knelt down to unzip Barry’s case. I waved the couple behind me, as the queue moved again, past me and muttered something about my passport. I stayed down. What was I going to do? I looked and saw Barry’s shoes appear. He knelt down and whispered that he had just gone. I wished him the very best of luck and stood aside. The check-in woman took my passport. I clenched my fists and watched as Barry drew her attention to something on the ticket. She glanced at the back page and then took the ticket from him. The passport lay open on the desk for an age. His bag was labelled and went through. She gave him his boarding card and finally handed him the passport back. I felt weak. He turned away and, with a wink which said he was the best, he came back over to me.

“Remember - three zeros, press green. Don’t foul up. All the best. Have a good life!” And without another look or word he wondered off through the crowds and disappeared for ever. When I returned to the car park my mind was entirely obsessed with the momentous task I had to perform within the hour. I was about to kill a man. So I failed to notice the black VW still parked a few yards away from my car. As I reversed out and then drove past, it suddenly dawned on me and I actually looked at the pasty-faced young man staring through the windscreen. I inserted my ticket into the machine and the barrier rose. I glanced once in my rear-view mirror and sped off. Surely he had seen me! Was he at that very moment reporting our little subterfuge on his mobile phone to Robbins or Jesson? I felt inside my pocket to make sure that Barry’s mobile was still there. Five past eight. I felt very sick and nervous. I kept glancing in my mirror expecting each time to see the black car catching me up. It was a beautiful spring morning. The sky was almost too blue and the sun shimmered. I looked at my dashboard clock again. Would Jesson be stirring now? I imagined Barry settling down to a coffee in the departure lounge and straightening a crisp Sunday paper. His work was done. He was almost in the clear. I envied him. Another glance. My heart sank until I realised that the black hatchback overtaking me at speed was not a Volkswagen. I was within a mile of the end of the M56 and the beginning of the main road to take me back towards the city. I could keep straight on and change events. I calculated quickly. Barry was safe. Samantha? I could explain everything to her, beg her forgiveness and come to some sort of arrangement where she could perhaps move away from Jesson’s watchful eye and go elsewhere - anywhere - to university. What I had unearthed would be enough to bring justice to everyone. There was half a mile to go. I slowed down. A car behind closed on me impatiently and veered out to pass me at the last minute. My head was no longer thinking, I was paralysed with doubt, second thoughts and ultimately horror.

The slip-road to the M60, the slip-road to safety and apathy was looming. I thought of Pauline and her despair; I thought of Jesson’s warning: he knew where she lived and would always make it his business to know.

My left hand decided not to take the turn-off. As the M56 became the dual carriageway I began to think of my target and of what he might be planning to do that wonderful Sunday morning. Then I stopped myself wondering and kept my mind firmly on the route to Hulme.

The large, smart, suburban houses on either side gradually diminished as I got closer to Moss Side. I took a right hand turn and headed out west. There was a warren of a yellow-brick housing estate from the seventies, where I nearly lost my bearings. I saw signs for the Salford Keys and knew I was not far away. The neighbourhood began to grow again in self-esteem. I glanced in my mirrors. There was nothing to alarm me. A car was turning off left and a milk float was parking on the right. I was in a well-to-do suburban enclave. I cruised around, turning left and right and debating whether to stop and ask, when, just after I had passed a parade of shops, I saw, with a start, the name of his road. On my left, around a long bend, there appeared as gross a confection as you will ever see. Dark timbers had actually been stuck onto the whitewashed walls; there was a Grecian portico supported by four ornate pillars; the stained glass windows were Gothic. I drove past it and turned around at the top of the road, parking about fifty yards away on the other side. Through Barry’s binoculars I scanned the house. The central top window was of frosted glass. I carefully took out the device where Barry had shown me and pressed it into my ear. I could hear nothing. I saw it was nearly eight thirty. A newspaper boy was doing his rounds; a balding man out walking a pug dog was bending down with a plastic lunch bag as the dog squatted. The click of gates, as the boy opened and closed them, was magnified by the clear, warm air. I switched on the mobile. It was fully charged up and I had a good, strong signal. I stared at my digital clock and watched the minutes changing. The paper boy rode up Jesson’s drive, delivered his paper and rode out. He disappeared around the far bend and left the street deserted. Eight forty-two. I began to worry that the earpiece was

not working. Perhaps Barry had tricked me. The silence was profound. I removed it from my ear and examined it, wondering whether to risk interfering with it. Dispirited, I put it back. And then I was shocked to hear a loud click. A door opened and then was clearly locked. I heard a voice I recognised mutter "Damn". Another door opened. "Bollocks," he muttered, "Don't tell me there's no..." and then he stopped. The door closed, the toilet seat came down and for the next five minutes I heard him relieve himself gratefully and noisily of the contents of his colon. I heard the paper roll turning and sheets being ripped off and rustling as he wiped his arse for the last time. I felt queezy. Should I dial three zeros now? Was he sitting beside the bath tub? When he pulled the chain it almost deafened me. As the cistern began to refill I could hear another noise emerge as the flush subsided, the sound of taps running. My finger hovered over the zero as I imagined him bending over the tub. But then I realised I did not know even know for sure if he was still in there. I almost panicked. I cursed myself for missing such an obvious chance. The water continued to run and shut out all other sounds. Then it stopped and I heard his voice mutter "God" in disgust and heard - and saw - at once the top window open to bring in some fresh Mancunian air. The tap dripped. My heart was pounding, my head seemed to be swimming in the water. The tap came on again but more gently; I guessed it was the cold tap. There was a swishing sound and I imagined his hand mixing the hot and cold together. The tap stopped. A mobile phone rang three times. He answered. "Derek? What's what? You still at the airport?.....He did? Are you sure? You watched him check in?.....Did you fucking watch him check in?.....OK. Good work.....Can you let Robbins know?.....Right, see you soon."

The door opened and he yelled "Lisa." Then after a few seconds he yelled her name even louder, until furiously and at the top of his voice he shouted "Lisa! For fuck's sake!" There was a brief silence followed by a bellowed request for a cup of tea and the newspaper. The door closed. My finger pressed zero three times and hovered over the green key. I could picture him by the bath. But my hand was locked and would not move. I shouted at it but it seemed totally disconnected from my brain. I was sweating and feeling very sick. The water swirled around again in my ear and there was another short blast from one of the taps. I stared at the green button but it was no use. I was literally paralysed. On the display there suddenly appeared a message - I knew you couldn't do it Davey. Never mind. There's nothing under the bath but air. Cheerio. Now press 2.

Furious with his deception, but more so with my pathetic lack of resolution, I pressed 2 and at once saw and heard an almighty bang. Debris and flames shot out from the house. I stared in disbelief and, as the dust thinned out, watched a great jagged hole gradually appear in the wall. Then it was as if nothing had happened. A greenfinch which had been chinging away in a nearby tree carried on. The street was silent and unruffled. The sky regained its deep blue clarity. A car sauntered past me and disappeared. Automatically, I started the engine and drove slowly by the house. The 4x4 was covered in dust as if a volcano had erupted. Shattered glass, whole and half-bricks were strewn everywhere. I saw a neighbour in a dressing gown poke his nose out of his front door, look up and around, and then retreat back into the darkness of his hallway. I drove for about a mile then pulled over to vomit. I had killed a man. I became aware of first, one then many sirens in strident competition with each other. My hand was shaking now but I managed to dial Sam's number. She took an age to answer. When I spoke my voice sounded high and reedy to me. I could hardly hear her and then realised I was still wearing the device in my ear. I picked it out and threw it into the gutter where I had been sick. "Sam, can you hear me? Listen, I'll be with you in half-an-hour. Get ready. Yes, I'm fine, everything is fine..."

I tried to work out the way back from there to Freehold St. I drove around and for a while nothing registered. Then I saw the Stretford Rd arch and got my bearings. I had a suitcase ready packed. I only then began to think of what else I needed to take; my laptop, the sacks of

bloodied clothing from Byrom Street, the doormat, my CDs, a copy of my favourite LS Lowry painting of a locomotive crossing a Manchester street, the notebooks in which I had scribbled the last few days of narrative, the dozen or so books I had not left at my friend Cameron's flat. For some reason I decided it was crucial to take a half-empty bag of potatoes.

I realised then that my ears were still roaring with the explosion. I sat down and took some deep breaths. I dropped a copy of the CD with Welfare's confession and a covering letter to the Chief Constable into a jiffy bag. I was about to seal it when I had an idea. I turned on the mobile phone and eventually found Barry's message. I changed it to: *Peter, press o-o-o and your pal Jesson will be a shadow of his former self.*

I wiped the phone carefully clean and dropped it into the bag. This would not be enough to incriminate Peter Robbins but it would cause him massive problems, I hoped, with his employers in the police and, ultimately, when the news leaked out, with those in the Manchester underworld.

I loaded up the car boot and drove away. It occurred to me as I passed The Wheatsheaf what a cast iron alibi I had. David Bishop was at that very moment on a plane approaching cruising altitude thousands of feet above the Midlands. I began to debate with myself how responsible I really was for Jesson's demise in view of Barry's little deception. I even sentenced myself to a suspended jail term.

I was within a few minutes of Samantha's house when my mobile rang. I pulled over. It was her.

"Paul, where are you?"

"On Stretford Road. Be with you in a minute."

"Terry just rang. He's on his way to pick me up, I think."

"What?"

"I told him I wasn't well but he said a day-out would do me good. I told him I was finished with him."

"What for?"

"I couldn't help it, it just came out. He called me a bitch and said he was coming over to sort me out."

"Be there in three minutes."

I sounded the horn. She was at the door kissing her mother. She peered down the path suspiciously trying to get a look at me.

"What did you tell her?" I asked.

"Just that I was off for a couple of days with a friend."

"What will she tell Welfare?"

"I told her just to say I'd gone away. She doesn't know who with."

"She saw me. She saw my car. Shit."

We drove east, skirting the city centre. I had a terrible feeling I had forgotten something. I patted the inside pocket of my jacket. The bulge of my wallet was missing. I turned off the main road. We had gone about three miles.

"I've left my bloody credit cards and wallet in a drawer. We'll have to go back. Unless you've got yours on you."

She looked embarrassed. She told me she hadn't got a credit card.

"I'm only sixteen," she confessed with an uncertain grin. I looked at her and held my head in my hands.

"Seventeen in a two months," she added quickly.

"So what was all that about, going to university next year?"

"I will! When I've done my A levels."

I did a three point turn and went back the way we had come.

“I’m taking you back to mum, Sammie.”

“You can’t!” she yelled. “What about Terry? He’ll beat me up!”

I was dumbstruck. What a mess. What to do? She was right, of course; she had to get away, at least for a while. We drove on in an uncomfortable silence.

“What difference does a year make?” she asked indignantly.

“A lot. You’re a schoolgirl, Sammie.”

“You didn’t seem to notice when you were shagging me!” she screamed and burst into tears.

“I’m a woman! And I love you!”

I turned slowly into Freehold St. It was twenty past ten. The masseuses were surely having a well earned rest from their exertions and there was nobody about. I turned her hot, tearful face to me and kissed her pouting lips. I told I was sorry. I told her I loved her. I left her in the car and hurried upstairs. I heard Trish cough next door. She groaned and asked me what time it was. I told her to go back to sleep. But then I realised I hadn’t put her in the picture. I went to her door.

“Trish, if Terry Welfare comes calling, or anybody else, can you tell him I’ve gone to Spain.”

“Gone to Spain? When are you coming back?” She laughed and coughed again. I told her I would give her a ring and explain later in the week. I went into my room and found my wallet. I had a last look around and then walked to my bedroom door. As I put my hand out, it flew open in my face and I felt a stunning blow.

When I came round I wondered why I could not get up out of my chair. I almost laughed to see that there was a sheet tied around me and that my jeans were down and twisted around my ankles. I was wedged between the bed and the wall. Two fat faces I vaguely recognised were gazing at me, smiling. I smiled back until I realised who they were. Beyond them at the door stood Welfare. Considering that he had Samantha in a strangle-hold and was holding a knife to her throat she seemed amazingly calm.

“Sweet dreams, Sambo?” asked Lee.

“The name is David. Leave her alone. Your quarrel is with me not her.”

Then the train of the morning’s events rushed into my dizzy head and I gasped. But this did not make any sense. Why were the brothers here? Why weren’t they around their dad’s, helping to pick up his scorched pieces? A momentary panic seized me. Had I got the wrong house? Had Barry played one final trick on me? No. That could not possibly be. The only explanation I could find was that they had somehow found out I was responsible and had come round to take their revenge. But they were smiling. The room was wheeling round, as if I was drunk. I tried to regain my balance and focus properly. My left eye was smarting and I had double vision. Everyone was standing straight and leaning at an impossible angle at the same time. I went to touch my throbbing eye but my hands were trapped by my side.

“Let him go. It was all my fault. I led him on. He couldn’t help it, it was my idea.”

“You fucking tart,” sneered Welfare, tightening his grip around her throat like some repulsive snake. “You went behind my back.”

I suddenly remembered that Trish was next door and stopped myself just in time from crying out to her. Surely she would not be sleeping through this? Surely she was on her phone to the police?

“I reckon we ought to see what all the fuss was about,” said Tony. He drew a blade from his back pocket, bent down and slit my shorts open. Both brothers stood back and laughed.

“Well, Terry. Whatever did she see in him? I really can’t think!” exclaimed the younger.

“You fucking tart! You bitch!” screamed their friend and pushed the point of his knife into her throat. I screamed at him to calm down.

“I know,” said the elder. “We’ll slice it up like a salami!”

“It might take a while, bro. Mind you, I had nothing much planned for today.”

“Nor me.”

Sammy struggled in vain and screamed long and loud. Tony turned and slapped her face.

“There’s no point shouting, you nigger-shagging slag. Nobody gives a fuck round here.”

“Hey, don’t knock her out bro, we don’t want her to miss the entertainment.”

The elder one turned to me with the most appalling leer on his face. He glanced around and saw a dinner plate on the table. He took it and placed it under me.

“I think we’d better gag them both,” said Lee. “My nerves won’t stand them screaming, not on a Sunday morning.” He cut strips from my table cloth and gagged first Sammie then me.

“Trish! For God’s sake! Do something” I yelled incoherently and uselessly through the gag. I looked at Welfare. He looked nervous. Sammie was almost fainting, her eyes were rolling in her head and she sounded as if she was choking.

“Lads, let’s just duff him over and leave it at that,” he said quietly.

“I know” said Lee. “Let’s cut half of it off - and just leave him a four inch stump!” They began to laugh helplessly. Terry joined in for a while and then stopped. I watched the blade approaching and saw the glint of pleasure in Tony’s eyes, the same glint I had seen in his father’s.

A mobile phone rang. They all looked accusingly at each other.

“Shit. It’s mine,” said Tony. He reached into his pocket, took it out and switched it off. He knelt down in front of me. I realised I was drenched in sweat. He toyed with me. To my horror I began to swell. He stared with a look of fascination. Another mobile rang.

“Switch the fucker off” shouted Tony. Lee reached into his pocket, took it out and looked.

“Hold on, Tony. It’s dad” He took the call “...Hello...mam? What’s up? You what?...A what?.....When?.....How?.....They can’t what?..... Mam....you’re not making sense.....Hold on. We’re on our way.”

He had turned very pale.

“What the fuck’s up?” asked his brother.

“An explosion....at mam’s. They can’t find dad.”

No. He’s been vaporised.

“We’d better go.” The elder went to slice me, but the gleam had gone and he had second thoughts. “Here, Terry. She’s your bird. You sort him.” He left the knife on the plate. Welfare stuttered something as they passed, and they were gone. He threw the limp Sammie onto the floor and stared at me. There was a mixture of loathing and fear in his eyes. Sammie had managed to pull down her gag. She sat up and vomited. I saw there were tears running down his cheeks as he looked from me to her. She had regained her breath and she asked him hoarsely what he was going to do without his big mates to help him. I shouted to her not to provoke him but made no sense of course. He told her to shut her mouth and took one step towards me.

“Terry, I’m sorry. Come on. You know this is wrong.” she pleaded.

He took another step, a smaller one. Sammy tried to stand but fell, landing almost at my feet.

“You stay away from him!” he screamed. “Go any nearer and he gets this in the eye.”

All at once the door flew open and Trish bowled him onto the floor. The knife spilled from his grasp. As he reached to grab it her foot stamped on his hand. I watched as she rose in slow-motion like a prop-forward and brought her considerable weight crashing down on him, missing Sammie by a centimetre. The wind rushed out of him with a howling blast as if from a bellows. She got up and left him in motionless heap on the floor.

“You’ve killed him, Trish,” said Samantha without a trace of emotion.

She laughed and put her ear to his chest. She pronounced him still just about in the land of the living and looked at me. She first chuckled and then laughed hysterically until I thought she was going to have a seizure.

“No. Don’t untie him Sam. I’m going to get my camera!”

And she took a photo - a source of much amusement at a later date as well as convincing evidence.

We never did get our few days away in Kettlewell. Samantha had her mother to take care of. She had been very badly shaken up by her early morning visitor that Sunday morning. I had a fractured eye socket.

Welfare was in the next but one cubicle to me in casualty, having his broken ribs bandaged up before going on to the police station. I delivered my various pieces of evidence to the Chief Constable by hand a day later and the distraught, orphaned Jesson brothers soon followed Welfare into custody. Terry decided to confess all and did in fact receive a lighter sentence.

He eventually came out a changed man and went into social work.

There was a funeral service for Neil Jesson but no burial. I often wondered whether his Lisa imagined he had gone straight to heaven.

A rival Manchester villain was arrested, questioned for days and then released without charge. Robbins was suspended from duty again and was quietly retired early. He saved the taxpayer the expense of his pension by keeling over one morning, not long afterwards, as he was checking his tyre pressures, succumbing to a massive heart attack.

Sam Fisher was unlucky, as I already said, surviving only one day in prison after it had been announced that he would be released, pending an appeal. The carpet I had sent to the BBC had the tiniest speck of Paul's blood buried deep in the pile, and thereby added to the overwhelming evidence against the Jesson brothers.

Denis Chivers retired from The News and went to live by his beloved Elterwater. I decided not to attend his retirement do.

And Jerry? Once all the dust had settled I went in one quiet Monday with Trish. He had got rid of the pool table and cleaned the place up.

"Hey, David! You've come back then!!"

"Yeah, I didn't like the food."

"Pint?"

"Two."

As he pulled them, he wondered, rather under his breath, if I had heard the bad news about our mutual friend.

"Trish mentioned it, Jerry. Tragic."

"Tragic? Magic, if you ask me. I'm still trying to figure out how you did it."

I smiled and sipped the top off my beer. "Just a phone call."

We studied each other. He held out his hand. I took it. I heard later that the council had indeed got around to remembering him, and all the other traders struggling increasingly to make a living in their wasteland, and had sent the bulldozers along.

He went on to manage a pub in Chester and won an award for his catering.

And what of Sammy? She stopped her bar work, at my insistence, to concentrate on her A-levels, and passed with high grades. She loved me dearly until she met somebody she loved even more dearly at Salford. I didn't really mind. I knew it would happen. She cried like a child when she finally plucked up the courage to tell me. I shushed her and told her to follow what her heart told her. She eventually settled with another man in the Birmingham area and got a job, of all things, as a journalist. We exchange Christmas cards and promise faithfully to visit each other. Maybe next year we will.

One day I said to Trish that we saw so much of each other that it made sense to get married. She agreed. She doesn't really much care for her character in the book, being in fact much more than the happy-go-lucky fattie I have depicted. She lost some weight and got pregnant. Now we have two boys. We called one, the elder, Paul. Bless you, Trish. If you had not come into the room when you did, who knows what might have happened? You saved my life, my sight and something you consider even more precious.

I have set up a fund for inner-city youngsters, paying them a small allowance to carry on with their studies post sixteen and helping them with tuition fees if they go on to further education. It is beginning to bear fruit. We visit Pauline's and the two boys' graves once a year to lay a wreath.

Barry, having managed to find a way off the airport concourse without going through passport control, is probably fitting furniture into the villas of the émigré British and doing a roaring trade. He has never been in touch.

One day the police called me in to go through the motions in an interview regarding the death of a certain gangster. I took my brief's advice and said nothing. Afterwards I felt like a real criminal. Which, off course, I am, but for the best of reasons.

Lee and Tony. You were the victims of a hard upbringing in which you had no choice. When you get out, exercise your free-will and try to do somebody, somewhere some good.