

recycling Jimmy



A NOVEL

Andy Tiller

recycling Jimmy

A hilarious bungled suicide attempt and a subsequent stay in hospital set Jimmy Gee on a life course he could never have imagined.

With his new best pal, the practical joker Kevin from the hospital's suicide ward, Jimmy starts a business like no other: "Quitters" will seek out the suicidal who, like Jimmy, couldn't quite bring it off, and offer them assistance. Not assistance in coping—assistance in killing themselves!

The terms? The suicides must be spectacular, and the "suicidees" will be filmed as they end their lives in a blaze of glory. The resulting DVD will be sold online.

It's a crazy plan and the two wise-cracking Manchester lads nearly make it work. Their first two suicides go off brilliantly, all captured on film just as planned. But the third goes terribly wrong.

Recycling Jimmy is funny, smart and outrageous, a tale of best buddies who learn that life really is for living.

KÜNATI

Provocative. Bold. Controversial.

recycled;N& Jenny



recycled; and Jimmy



A N O V E L

Andy Tilley

KÜNATI

L A R G O , U S A

R E C Y C L I N G J I M M Y

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D e d i c a t i o n

To Zane

Acknowledgements

Dan, thanks for giving me
my favourite line in the book and Georgia,
thanks for shutting up about buying a pony,
long enough at least for me to write it down.

Chapter 1

In the couple of hours since Jimmy had left his friend Dave outside the Duke of York pub, he had managed to turn his world upside down. Literally, for he was no longer standing but dangling now, head first above London Road, connected back to his life on the bridge by only a short length of rusting reinforcement bar that had hooked through his belt when he had fallen.

It was his favorite belt, too. A strip of battered old leather that he loved but that Wendy hated so much. Only that morning she had given him a crisp ten-pound note to replace it, but Jimmy had spent five pounds of that on beer and two pounds on lottery tickets. The other three pounds had tumbled from his pocket when he had inverted. He could see the coins now, lying on the tarmac eighty feet below his soft, red head.

"Shit," he gasped as another nick in the leather stretched and yielded.

Jimmy had to do something quickly to take as much of the strain as he could off his belt, so he pushed his arms downwards to dampen his swing. It worked and his swing shrank to a sway.

"Why the hell didn't I do as the bitch said and buy a fuckin' belt!" Jimmy screamed.

He took a deep breath and roared once more at the traffic below.

"HELP!"

Of course, had Jimmy understood that ultimately his life would depend on his doing as he was told for once, then he probably would have bought a new belt. But the belt he had was fine. It held his trousers up perfectly, molded casually to his hips just below the waistband of his Calvins. How the hell was he supposed to know that today, on the very day that he had

the money to buy a new one, he would need the belt to function as a safety harness?

The belt creaked again and Jimmy slipped a little more. He looked down at the deadly road below and cursed his decision to kill himself.

“So when did you decide that suicide was such a good idea, Jimmy?”

He couldn’t remember exactly, for it hadn’t been a snap decision. All he knew was that the dark depression that had drawn itself around him over the past six months had gently coaxed him to it. During this time, even the smallest of setbacks (“nails” he had called them) seemed to have had gravity far beyond their size, and the unreasonable weight of each had dragged him deeper into the black. It had been a one-way journey too because there never seemed to be a day when something didn’t go against him, never a bright day that presented him with an opportunity to shed some of the ballast and so allow him to rise a little.

Take this week, for example.

Monday, the milk man doesn’t deliver and there’s no bread for toast.

Bam! A nail drives home.

Tuesday, Wendy’s working late (again) and he burns his Bench T-shirt trying to iron it.

Wednesday, the telly packs up thirty minutes before the away leg of United’s Champions League tie with Inter Milan.

Thursday, it’s pissing down and the bus shelter’s closed because some little toe rag has put his foot through the Perspex.

Bam!

Friday, he’s late for work for the third time in two weeks and he smacks his boss in the face when his pay is docked.

Friday, he can’t find the keys to the flat, so he has to run all the way to Dave’s house (whom he has just left at the pub) to get the spare.

Friday, he trips over his shoelace at the top of Dave’s road and hits the

ground hard. (Jimmy never ties his shoelaces.)

Friday, he turns the corner and sees Wendy and Dave kissing on the doorstep. She's holding him close and, as she reluctantly moves away, she smiles in a way that Jimmy hasn't seen for three years.

Bam! Bam! Bam!

Yeah, Friday was a bad day. Friday was the day that the lid on Jimmy's coffin was finally nailed down.

Jimmy closed his eyes and clamped his hands over his ears to shut out the vertigo. Thoughts of Wendy and Dave's kiss seeped into his mind, anaesthetized his fear a little and carried him away from the bridge. Not a rescue though, for his mind was too far gone to find refuge. Broken and tired, it dropped him in a place perhaps even more desperate than the underside of the bridge.

He was back, standing with bruised knees, trembling on the footpath twenty yards from the doorstep of Dave's house. He wanted to confront Dave and Wendy when he saw them there, arms and lips wrapped around each other, but he didn't know how. What could he say to his lifelong friend, a friend who had Jimmy's fiancée's lipstick smeared all over his smug face, that made any kind of sense? Yet he needed so much to do something, something to let them know that he had discovered their betrayal.

Oh yeah, Jimmy, and didn't you show 'em good, mate!

Jimmy managed a smile as he recalled how evil and clever he had felt as he leant over a low garden wall and grabbed a large pebble from the edge of a water feature bubbling there. He had marched toward Dave's house, breathing short, sharp, angry breaths, tossing the pebble from hand to hand as he wound himself up. When he had reached within thirty feet of them, he unleashed the tension that he had built.

"Dave! Wendy! You're a pair of bastards!" he shouted.

And that was it? That was all you could think of to say to your supposed

best friend whose trousers were still swollen from your fiancée's touch? Shit, Jimmy, no wonder people have taken the piss out of you for most of your life, son!

The inadequacy of these, his final words, wiped the smile from Jimmy's face. But there was worse to come, and as the memory of what had happened next spooled into view, Jimmy cringed so hard that he almost began to swing again.

Wendy and Dave had heard Jimmy call and had turned towards him. Jimmy had pulled back his arm and aimed the rock at Dave's car, a black Mini Cooper S bought by Dave only a week before, but as Jimmy flung his arm forward, his grip was greased by the slimy surface of the stone and all the power in his throw was stolen by it. The rock looped impotently to the ground, slipped and skidded across the footpath before stopping feet short of the car. Jimmy groaned, turned and ran.

Perhaps it was that moment, when the rock mocked him, that the decision to end it all had been taken. Yes, and what was more, he remembered why he was swinging under this particular bridge and not the one nearest to Dave's place.

For while he had run from the lovers, he had reasoned thus: even if Wendy managed to convince herself that her husband-to-be hadn't seen her betrayal (or at least sufficient of it to come to a conclusion), and that the tossed rock was some kind of "new-car lad" joke, there could be no denial when she learned about his leap from their bridge, the bridge where Jimmy had first kissed her. The bridge where Jimmy had taken Wendy twelve months after that first kiss and asked her to marry him.

She had laughed then as he had pretended to climb over the barrier, threatening to jump if she didn't say yes.

And she was laughing at him still as Jimmy had arrived back at the bridge, broken and breathless, this time determined to deliver on his promise.

Jimmy had climbed the rail and planted his left foot firmly on the outside edge of the bridge. Without hesitating he had followed it over with his right and stood there looking back at the safety of the footpath he was denying himself, pulling the handrail tightly into his fizzing stomach. Quickly then, before his courage fell without him, he had released one hand to turn awkwardly on the slim ledge, whipping his free hand around in a smooth arc to find the rail once more.

Finally he would achieve something, something that people would talk about and that the woman he had loved would both respect and regret. With his back to the road, Jimmy had stared into space and prepared to let go of his life.

And that was the exact moment when Jimmy decided that death wasn't such a good idea after all, and that Wendy was a slag anyway, and that Dave was never much fun, and that he really should start to tie his shoelaces.

Me and my bloody shoelaces!

He had begun to turn again to make his way back to safety, but that lace—that treacherous, murdering left lace—had snagged a loose bolt. This had happened at the exact moment that he released his grip on the handrail, and while it had resulted in only a soft tug on his leg, the jerk had been sufficient to tip him off balance. Jimmy had tried to compensate by shuffling his right foot quickly backwards towards the barrier, but had succeeded only in tipping his upper body further forward. In a rush of panic he had tried to spin around but had been too slow and began falling almost immediately, gravity yanking him from the ledge and throwing him down in one swift, knock-out maneuver. Jimmy had cracked his knees hard on the concrete, but somehow managed to slap two hands firmly onto the bridge. For a moment his arms had held, but it had been an all too fleeting one, and soon Jimmy's legs had swung and curled underneath the bridge, slamming his chest into the stonework and levering his open palms from the concrete.

Jimmy had begun to fall, eyes closed, screaming, as he waited for the road to end it. But incredibly his head hadn't smashed into the tarmac below, it had simply tapped it. One of those annoying taps too, the type that hurts like hell but doesn't leave so much as a scratch and so tends to earn laughter not sympathy. Jimmy had rubbed his head and opened his eyes, not really understanding why it was the bridge that he had collided with and not the road. It wasn't until he had looked towards his feet again that everything had made some kind of sense. His tatty belt had hooked onto a curl of re-bar jutting out from the underside of the bridge and stopped his fall.

Up to date now and with his memories played out, Jimmy finally arrived back where he had left his precariously swaying self and was forced to consider his options. But what was he supposed to do now? Normally such cliff-hangers would run a trailer, at least give a clue as to what would happen to the hero in next week's exciting episode, but his situation felt so hopeless. Perhaps this was indeed the final episode.

Jimmy screamed again at the road below then lifted his head to scream at the road above, but his cries either bounced off the underside of the road deck or dissolved into the traffic noise. He stretched and tried to reach the edge of the bridge again but it remained inches away. The belt stretched a little more, and Jimmy felt himself slip closer to death.

"Shit shit shit shit shit," he hissed as he realized that the blood draining to his head was now becoming more than just an annoyance.

His arms and legs were tingling badly, and Jimmy reckoned that shortly they would be numbed by the lack of circulation. If he was going to do something to rescue himself, he would have to do it soon.

He looked at the re-bar and wondered if he could grab it, perhaps unhook himself. But what then? He would simply be dangling underneath the bridge waiting for his arms to tire and give up on him completely. He looked at the bridge and tried to remember if the sharp edge he could see was profiled on

its vertical face, sufficient at least for him to get some purchase and maybe use the last of his strength to pull himself up. Jimmy convinced himself that it was, certain that there was a three- or four-inch lip just beyond his reach, and that if he could get enough of a swing going, he could close the gap and finger a hold. Even if the belt failed, which it most certainly would do under the strain, there remained a fifty/fifty chance that he would be flying in the right direction and that his momentum would carry him to the lip.

You know, Jimmy, mate, this might just work.

For someone who only ten minutes ago had been so depressed that he had tried to kill himself, Jimmy's optimism was admirable. Admirable but completely misplaced. At the end of the third of his hip-and-arm induced swings, his belt did indeed fail, and as he was released from the re-bar, his shifting weight threw him horizontally out of the dark shadow of the bridge and into the bright sunlight. At first, gravity seemed disinterested in the renewed fight, and Jimmy continued upwards, scrabbling for purchase as he cleared the edge of the bridge.

But there was no lip, no concrete ledge, only a smooth vertical surface that his hands slapped. Back in the grip of gravity, Jimmy slowed and as the momentum drained from his upward motion, he stopped momentarily at the peak of his swing, which had carried him high enough to see the handrail and the pretty blonde head of a young woman who was walking safely behind it. He shouted to her and she turned, instant horror stretching her face into a silent scream.

(But what was that in her eyes? There was something else in there, something other than horror, an emotion that didn't seem to belong in those big brown terrified eyes.)

By the time the woman had moved toward him and peered over the handrail, Jimmy was already fifteen feet below her and accelerating away. He managed to turn onto his front, kicking his legs frantically and making short

swift flaps with his arms. The road below thickened with every inch of his fall and the dull rumble of its traffic now had bright tones, beeps and clangs that spiked his ears even through the rush of air that tugged his hair and clothes. As he entered the final thirty feet of his life, Jimmy closed his eyes.

Just as he had always suspected, the moment of impact was painless. This, he believed, was a natural response to intolerable levels of pain, his body accepting the futility of telling a condemned man that he would soon be flat.

But the noise! The noise was deafening and unexpected—popping and scraping, screeching and crashing. Even seconds after impact as Jimmy lay in the dark waiting for the bright light to appear and lead him down the tunnel, he could still hear noise—more screeching, metal twisting, glass tinkling.

And there were voices now, and that surprised him because they weren't the calm, assured voices of his guardian Angels (one of whom he had hoped would be his mum), but the brash cries of men.

Angry men, too, by the sound of it.

"What the fuck did you stop for, you fat twat, the lights are on green! Look what you've done to my car!"

"Listen, some wanker just threw summat off the bridge at me and nearly fuckin' killed me, and anyway, who are you callin' a twat?"

Jimmy moved for the first time since his death and pushed his arms upward. They struck something and it moved easily. He pushed again, and again, each time moving something large but light, until a shaft of sunshine burst through onto his face. He squinted, took a deep breath and then coughed hard as the dust and small balls of polystyrene that he had just inhaled hit the back of his throat.

"Fuck me, there's someone in there. Listen!"

"Help. HELP!" Jimmy shouted, and then heard digging sounds above him.

A minute later someone grabbed one leg then the other and he was dragged from under a pile of crap and onto the tail gate at the rear of a truck.

"Shit, mate, where the hell have you come from?" asked the driver.

"Up there." Jimmy raised a trembling arm and pointed to the bridge.

"You're shittin' me, yeah? No way, no fuckin' way, man!"

The driver of a bent Ford stood on top of what was left of its hood, jammed under the rear axle of the much bigger wagon, and looked up to where Jimmy was pointing.

"You are one lucky son of a bitch!" He laughed and covered his face with both hands, shaking his head in disbelief. Then he looked at Jimmy again, concerned now.

"Hey, are you all right?"

Jimmy thought about this for a moment. His head hurt where he had banged it on the bridge, but as there was no blood, he didn't mention it. His back was stinging where the re-bar had grazed as it caught him, but other than that he felt fine.

"I'm okay, I think. Yeah, I feel fine."

And then it hit him. He had just jumped off a bridge and there wasn't a scratch on him. Jimmy sat up.

"No, I don't feel fine. I feel better than that. I feel great!"

Jimmy pushed himself off the wagon, slid onto the crumpled hood of the trapped car and finally stood on the ground. He held his arms out wide and grinned.

"I feel fuckin' great!"

Jimmy looked at the side of the wagon that had broken his fall. Shaw Heath Recycling Centre it said beneath the dirt, the words encircled by two huge blue arrows. Jimmy laughed.

"Hah! I've been recycled, dude!"

Jimmy was high now, higher than the bridge, and his excitement was un-containable. He bounced away from the crash, leaping into the air and shouting “Recycled Man” at the top of his voice every time he jumped, stopping his antics only when he noticed two shiny gold dots on the road behind the car. Jimmy bent down to collect two of the one-pound coins that had slipped from his pocket as he had hung under the bridge. He turned to show them to the two men.

“Look! Look!”

Jimmy waved the coins at them and laughed.

“Ha! What’s that all about?”

His rescuers sat on the tailgate and looked totally gob-smacked by what had just happened. Jimmy laughed harder for that as he turned away and continued leaping.

That was until the lace trailing from his left shoe tripped him again, throwing him off balance for the third time that day. Jimmy twisted and tumbled, snatching as he fell at the totally ineffective barrier tape that guarded the hole dug by workers from British Gas only that morning. It was red and white tape similar to that which taunted Jimmy every day (wrapped around the temporary supports in the vault at the Duke of York) and he hated it. The tape stretched and thinned and clung to his hands as he fell through it into the pit.

Six feet later, Jimmy hit hard the tools, rocks and pipe exposed in the bottom of the hole. He heard a loud bang as his skull cracked, and he felt his legs drift away as three fracturing vertebrae severed the lines of communication. Curls of red and white tape snaked after him, covered his face and shut out the light. Jimmy had just enough time to curse it and his day before he blacked out.

Bam!

Chapter 2

Jimmy opened his eyes. The room was light and white and its image poured into his banging head far too quickly, causing his pain to build until it became unbearable. He slammed his eyelids closed almost immediately, and on the opaque skin screen he reviewed the picture that he had just captured. He was in a hospital room, he was certain. The bedstead was metal and complicated, full of levers and knobs for raising and lowering the patient. A clipboard hung there too. Jimmy often wondered what mystical secrets were scribed onto these boards. In his limited experience of hospitals, no one had ever taken the trouble to bring his board to him, turn it and explain what everything meant.

"And this, Gee, means that you have, oooh, about three minutes to live. Can I get you anything?"

"A boiled egg would be nice." Jimmy smiled as he finished the ancient gag out loud.

In the wall opposite the bed, Jimmy had seen a door. It was half glazed with a wired window and dressed with a flimsy piece of cotton, not unlike the gown that he was wearing. Beyond the door he could hear hushed efficiency, crisp footsteps and mumbled instructions carrying with them the unmistakable smell of sterility. Yep, Jimmy was definitely in hospital.

He turned his head slowly and opened his eyes to a slit. There was a metal chair (uncomfortable enough to discourage any visitor from staying too long) and there was a bedside cabinet. On top of the cabinet was a card: "Get Well Soon" in big gold letters over a picture of a red formula one racing car taking a checkered flag. Jimmy slid his arm from under the cover and picked the card up. He opened it and read the message to himself.

Have a “speedy” recovery! the print said. There was no signature. Jimmy replaced the card and settled back into stiff starched pillows. He closed his eyes to rest.

Some time later, Jimmy woke again. This time the room was orange and calming, painted in broad horizontal stripes by the soft light of dusk spraying through the louvered blinds to his right. Jimmy reckoned that he must have slept for at least six hours and he felt better for knowing this. He picked up the card again, not because it held any particular interest for him (although he would like to know who had put it there) but because it was about the only thing that he could reach and touch and interact with. That was what Jimmy needed now. He needed to interact, to talk to somebody (anybody!) about his current situation.

The impatient patient lay there for another fifteen minutes before he finally got his wish and experienced what would perhaps be one of the most extraordinary interactions of his life.

Jimmy heard a soft tap on the door and then watched as it opened slowly. Before anybody could fully enter the room, eager Jimmy spoke up.

“Hello?”

There was no answer, at least not for a moment or two. Then chilling words that Jimmy soon realized were perhaps not meant for his ears.

“I am entering the retro-date sphere now, friend Glip. Be sure to engage the shield to contain the disturbance. Peace and love,” whispered the man.

In the striped gloom, the figure that now stood at the end of Jimmy’s bed looked eerie. He was dressed in white, but he wasn’t a doctor. His movement was too slow, too fluid and loose for someone who felt that he held the power of life and death in his greasy hands and wasn’t afraid to tell everybody. The collar of the man’s tunic was starched high and it held itself tight into a slender neck. His hair was black and of medium length but plastered tight to his scalp, as though drenched in styling gel. The stranger’s features were

sharp, almost gaunt, and large dark glasses covered the upper third of his face, similar to those that a welder might wear. The figure looked scary—not threatening, but scary nevertheless—and Jimmy might have called out, but he knew that he was in a hospital (the smell, the hushed efficiency, the lack of anything interesting or pleasant in the room) so therefore he must be safe. Surely he must be!

“Friend James. How good that you are back with us,” the man whispered.

He picked up the board at the end of Jimmy’s bed and scanned it with a small light source.

“And doing so well too. So very well.”

The man smiled thinly.

“Who are you?” asked Jimmy.

“I am friend Haj. I will be your mentor, James, and hopefully your friend in the difficult times ahead. But do not concern yourself, for we will face them together and calm your fears.”

He smiled again, wider this time but still not warming.

“But for now you must rest. I will return tomorrow at the rising.”

The figure turned to leave but Jimmy hadn’t finished. Shit, he hadn’t even started.

“Just hold on a bloody minute, friend Gaj, or whatever you name is. What exactly is going on here and what’s up with me? I take it I am in a hospital, right, yeah?”

“Rest, friend, and concern not. You are correct of course. You are indeed in a medical station, I mean hospital, but medicine today is so much more than in your time and you will be fully recovered soon. Trust me. Peace and love.” And friend Haj turned to leave again.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa! Just stay there a bleedin’ minute! What exactly do you mean by that?”

"By what, friend?"

"That bit about 'medicine in my time.' What d'you mean, my time? What do you fuckin' mean by that exactly?"

Haj lowered his head and spoke quietly but clearly enough for Jimmy to hear.

"Friend Haj to Awakening Control, the subject is becoming restless and cardio henk stress syndrome is not unlikely. Do we have concurrence that I should commence the awakening immediately? Peace and love."

Haj nodded his head slowly and made soft grunting noises as he agreed with the instructions that he received. When he had finished listening, he snapped his head up and spoke directly and firmly to Jimmy.

"Friend James, you have been asleep a long time following the accident and..."

"How long exactly? Days, weeks, months?"

"Two point seven six five quandips, my friend."

"Huh? And how long is that in real money?"

"A rough approximation would be forty thousand, eight hundred and sixty seven days, friend, or if you prefer, eighty seven years. Now rest. Peace and love."

Haj turned to leave the room. Jimmy knew that this time he meant it too.

"No, that can't be true. That can't be true, damn you!"

Jimmy's world was caving in on him fast. He fumbled in his head for something sensible, something tangible, that would make this nightmare go away. And then he found it.

"But what about me?" Jimmy shouted. "What about me, eh? I should be dead, shouldn't I?" he screamed.

Haj stopped, his hand having already turned the handle of the door. He spoke in crisp, clear words, so clinical and savage to Jimmy.

"You are in a time-arrest membrane, friend James, and the room around you is simply an illusion, a projection of what you expected to see when you awoke. With time it will become clear and with time you will age again. And oh, what wonders you will see! Peace and love, friend."

Haj finally left the room, closing the door (if indeed that is what it was) firmly behind him.

Jimmy sank back, deeper and deeper into his pillows until he could hardly see the orange light of the room. He had never been in a lonelier place. A dark ravine, tight and claustrophobic, rose around him, and high above him he could sense the bridge beckoning.

"Come back and try again, Jimmy. You know it makes sense," it called. "I won't let you down this time. Or rather, I will."

Jimmy's head was in bits. He couldn't speak, couldn't move and couldn't think. The enormity of what he had just learned pinned his body to the bed and mashed his thoughts.

Then the door opened again.

"Haj? Is that you?"

"So you've met Kevin then," said the fat woman standing at the door holding a tray full of food.

"Kevin? Who the hell is Kevin? And where's Haj? I need to speak to him."

Jimmy stared hard at the woman and repeated himself slowly and clearly to make sure that he would be understood.

"Really, I need to speak to him."

"Well, you're just gonna have to wait until after supper. He's on a fag break now. Toast and jam okay with you?"

"Toast and jam? Toast and fucking jam! No it isn't bleeding all right! Answers is what I want! Fuckin' answers!"

"Calm down now, son," said the nurse. "Don't you get it yet?"

"Get what?"

"He's winding you up, you soft git. Kevin, I mean Haj, I mean Kevin. He's windin' you up. You only came in yesterday afternoon. Concussion. Now eat some toast and mind your language." She sniggered as she set the tray down on the bedside table and began straightening Jimmy's covers.

"Sometimes he can go a bit far though. I have no idea why I let him do his crazy shit, I really don't. But I do, I always do. It brightens the place up I guess and brings a smile."

She stopped straightening and turned to Jimmy. He wasn't smiling.

"Eat some toast, honey, and try not to get too serious about it. He doesn't mean any harm, honest he doesn't."

Jimmy grabbed a handful of toast and began to munch and think for the first time in a while. Finally he spoke his pearls of wisdom.

"The bastard. The miserable bastard. He really had me going then ... em, sorry love, what's your name again?"

"Sandra."

"Well Sandra, do us a favour, would you?"

Jimmy spat toast all over his white linen sheets as he spoke and Sandra tutted as she brushed the bits away.

"Okay, but only if you promise to keep the food in your gob. Now, what you want?"

"Okay, it's a deal." Jimmy smiled.

He put his empty plate down and brushed the crumbs from his hands, making sure that they were well away from his bedding.

"When Kev comes back off his fag break, tell him that when you brought me my supper I was sleeping so you didn't get a chance to put things right. You know, explain all that eighty-year coma shit. Don't let him come in again tonight, mind, but make sure he does when he starts his shift tomorrow, yeah? What time will that be exactly?"

"Should be about seven in the morning, so coffee, fag, paper... yeah, he should be on the ward by quarter past. Why?"

"Don't worry, Sandra, just leave it to me. But if you could bring me a pen and paper before you go off in the morning that would be cool. Put it on the side if I'm asleep. Okay?"

"Okay, I guess I owe you one."

Sandra collected the empty plates, offered a glass of milk to Jimmy and apologised once more.

"Oh and Sandra, bring me a bottle of ketchup too would you? Ta."

Chapter 3

Kevin Lipton dragged his scooter back onto its stand and removed his helmet. He whistled as he collected his copy of *The Daily Star* from the booty box, stepped through his Lambretta and began the short walk across the car park. 'Ambulances Keep Quear' it said on the large swing doors at the side entrance to the west corridor of St Margaret's. Kev had done this, changed a few letters of this important instruction, about six months ago. He smiled and thought about his latest stunt, convincing the new bloke on the ward that he had been asleep for eighty years. He laughed out loud and entered the building, wondering how James had taken the deception. Oh, how he wished he could have seen his victim's face when Sandra had explained the joke! But there was time yet. He would make that his first job when he arrived on the ward, apologising and smoothing things over before matron did her rounds and before any official complaints could be made.

"First things first though." He grunted, as he dropped his kecks, opened his smutty paper and squatted in trap two for his morning constitutional.

At a quarter past seven, after a quick cigarette sucked on heartily in the gardens overlooked by what he liked to call 'the cancer crew,' Kev bowled onto Ward B3. Sandra was the first person he saw, arms full of bedding as she made her way to the laundry. She dropped the bundle of linen at his feet.

"This is your job, Kev. Do it if you don't mind."

"Okay, okay, San. But I just gotta go and check on that James bloke, you know, the one I blagged last night?" Kev grinned, his smile broader than his slim face.

"How did he take it, by the way?"

"Dunno." Sandra shrugged, taking a pen from her breast pocket to write

notes in a red book left open on the ward reception desk.

"What do you mean you don't know? The bloke, the new guy who I tricked last night. What did he say when you told him it was a wind-up?"

"Like I said, I dunno. And I dunno because I didn't tell him. He was asleep when I went into the room and I ain't about to start waking patients just to tell them that they've just starred in Kevin Lipton's *Game for A Sick Laugh*."

"Shit, San! You gotta be kiddin'. Tell me you're fuckin' joking."

"Language, Kevin, language." She tutted, not looking up from the log book.

"Yeah but, San, you can't leave a bloke all night thinking that he's missed his dentist appointment by eighty years. For Christ's sake, San, he'll have been thinkin' about his family, kids if he's got any and shit knows what else. Shit."

Kev leaned in close to the back of Sandra's head and spoke calmly but with bitter undertones.

"If this blows up, San, I tell ya'...man if this blow's up."

Kev turned away before he finished his threat, realizing how empty (and gutless) it would be if he mentioned the word 'implicate.' He dashed across the ward to Jimmy's room and peered through the window in the door. Relief washed over him; Jimmy was still asleep and so he wouldn't have had time to talk to anyone. Kevin decided that he should go into the room and do some porter-type duties (move the furniture about and shuffle blinds and stuff), enough to wake the patient up. He entered and closed the door firmly and loudly behind himself and then moved over to the window. Picking up the visitor's chair, he banged it clumsily against the bedside table. Nothing, not a murmur. Dropping the chair for a final time, Kevin made certain that it clipped the bed hard. The chair clanged against the metal frame and then rattled to the floor. Still there was no response.

"Christ, you sleep heavy," he whispered, as he grabbed the draw strings for

the blinds.

He yanked on them and drew the louvers up as fast as they would flutter. The day streamed in and once more the room was bright white.

And it was then that Kevin saw it. A square of white paper folded neatly next to the get-well card on the bedside table.

In big capital letters was written, To Friend Haj.

Kevin picked up the note and read it, each word darkening the room a little until it was night once more.

Dear Friend Haj. Please do not take this as a personal failure. It is just that I cannot face a new world, a world without Debbie and the kids. A world in which people will point and examine and question me endlessly. I think I would possibly have enjoyed getting to know you. You seem a nice, compassionate man, but I believe that the pain that lost memories would bring to me each day would be too big a burden for the two of us to share. I am sorry. Good luck.

Peace and love.

Friend Jimmy.

“Oh no, please, oh no, please, oh no, please, oh...” Kev repeated again and again as he reached for the bed clothes and tugged them from the bed.

What he revealed made Kevin Lipton gag. He clasped one hand to his mouth and clutched his retching stomach with the other. In front of him, covered in thick crimson, lay the corpse of the man that last night had been alive. Of course Kevin had seen corpses before, and bloody ones too, but he had never seen the remains of a life that he had been responsible for taking. He threw the cover down, banged the emergency button and slumped into the corner, unable to take his eyes from the punch line of his sick joke.

Sandra dashed into the room almost immediately and cancelled the alarm. She turned and looked at Kevin. He was shaking and pointing at

Jimmy, lying in a pool of congealed blood on the bed.

Sandra walked towards the bed and leaned over Jimmy's face. She turned her head to one side, gathered hair away from her ear and listened. After a moment she stood up, walked over to Kev and crouched before him.

"He's topped himself, San. He's fuckin' topped himself," whispered Kev, tears already brimming over his bottom eyelids.

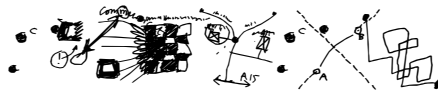
"That's right, Kev. He has. She took his hand, held it tightly, looked softly into his dewy eyes and continued.

"He's topped himself with a lovely thick layer of ketchup, love. A few mushrooms, bit of cheese and half hour under the grill should finish him off nicely. That's right, Kev, he's taking the pizza out of you, my darling."

San stood and smiled.

"And guess whose gonna tidy this little lot up?"

She blew a kiss at Kev and left the room.



A moment or two after he heard the door close, Jimmy opened his eyes and coughed. He had so much wanted to make a sound, any sound, during the past ten minutes spent feigning his death. Now, a gravelly cough was just the thing to ripple the very awkward silence that had settled over the room. In the corner he could see the porter, still slumped but far more relaxed now. He was breathing deeply and evenly, drumming his fingers firmly on each of his knees, and Jimmy found himself hoping that this little tit-for-tat was over. Kevin Lipton didn't look like the kind of bloke that you wanted to go head to head with in a war of practical jokes.

"Quits?" said Jimmy.

"Quits," said Kevin.

And in this simple exchange a life-long friendship was seeded.

Chapter 4

During the three weeks of Jimmy's recuperation, Kevin visited his new pal as much as his work rota allowed. He would sit with him at tea breaks, even missing the occasional cigarette if he had something to tell Jimmy about life in the world outside the ward. It was during one such conversation that the pair agreed that Jimmy should move into Kev's flat when he was discharged.

"I've only been in it four months," Kevin had said. "It's pretty cool, though. Couple of bedrooms, tidy-size lounge and the best fridge you've ever seen. It's got an ice maker, dude, in the front of the door! There's a small balcony too that overlooks Southern Cemetery. Shagged a bird on it last week. Sweet it was. She thought it was a bit sick, you know, looking at graves an' that while we did it, and she nearly bottled. But I just said that the graveyard was of particular interest because it was the dead centre of Manchester and that she should think herself privileged to get such a good view as most people were dying to get in there. Crap joke I know, but she laughed her knickers off. Literally."

Jimmy had groaned in mock disgust and then asked innocently, "So you got a lodger then, or you just in there on your own?"

"Funny you should say that. Now I'm a bit more sorted, I've thought about getting someone in. I was gonna put a note on the board in the student nurses accommodation block. You never know your luck!"

"Yeah, right. As if some eighteen-year-old girl's gonna move in with a thirty-two-year-old fanny rat like you. Dream on, fella, dream on."

"Aah yes, but what if they thought I was gay, eh? Women love gays, don't they? No problem with 'em takin' showers and leaving the bog door open

and stuff like that. Gettin' changed and walkin' round wi' nowt on. I'm tellin' you, all I have to do is say on the ad that I'm gay and that I need a female flat-mate to bitch about men with. Brilliant or what!" And Kevin had flicked his hair with an exaggerated limp wrist.

"Won't work, mate. First time they see you and your hard-on watchin' 'em shower, they'll be out of there and possibly have you nicked." Jimmy had laughed.

"And that, my friend, is where the plan comes into its own. What can be more of a compliment to a woman than to know that she has converted a queer? She won't be able to resist following up on that!"

Kevin had stood next to the bed with a huge smile and arms flung wide ready to accept the kudos.

But Jimmy hadn't bought it.

"It's bollocks, Kev, and you know it. Be better if I moved in and kept me eye on you," he'd joked.

"Okay, then. Sounds good."

And Kev had found himself a lodger. Simple as that.



Kevin Lipton's flat was every bit as good as he had said it was. Naturally, Jimmy took the spare room, which in truth wasn't much smaller than the master bedroom. It was decorated plainly: magnolia wood chip walls and ceiling but the sharp contrast of the crimson and purple striped curtains and bedding added a touch of warmth, and a large window beyond the foot of the bed brought sky and trees from the cemetery beyond. There was a single wardrobe and a set of drawers for Jimmy's things, and by the time he had unpacked his clothes, he pretty much felt at home.

The trip to collect his gear from Wendy's place hadn't been as bad as he

had feared either. She had arranged to be out of the house during the first Saturday morning following Jimmy's leaving the hospital. Wendy had left the door on the latch for him and she had packed pretty much all of his possessions (which didn't amount to more than one and a half bin bags full), stacking them in the hallway along with a note explaining that she was sorry and blah blah blah.

Jimmy didn't bother to finish reading it.

What he did do was have a good look round the old place.

Wendy was packing to move, and Jimmy guessed that this would be to Dave's place. There were white cardboard packing cases in every room, some assembled and filled, some still flat. The destination of each box, 'Bathroom' or 'Kitchen,' was written in big black felt pen on the side and top of each one that had been closed and taped.

"Women are sooo organized," he sighed.

He picked up the pen from the floor and wrote 'SKIP' on a box full of Wendy's clothes and underwear, belts and shoes. Jimmy laughed out loud as he closed and taped it. He carried the box into the dining room and left it there with three other similarly marked boxes.

"Yep. Organized, but so not got any fuckin' clothes." Jimmy smiled and went back to the front door.

He collected the bags and waved at Kev who sat waiting on the wall outside, smoking a fag through the open visor of his helmet.

"That it?"

"Yep. That's it. You tie 'em on, I'll nip back and close up."

Jimmy handed him the bags

He jogged back down the short concrete drive and stood on the doorstep. He reached in to knock the latch off and was just about to pull the door closed when he noticed a key that had been left out on the narrow window ledge next to it. Attached to the key was a paper label and on that were

written four wonderful words.

Dave's spare car key.

"Nice one!" Jimmy squealed and put the key in his pocket.

Of course, he didn't intend to do anything with the key, but he felt happy knowing that there would probably be a few heated words about who had had it last and possibly, knowing Dave and his love for the car, the bonus of an expensive ignition barrel and door lock change. As Jimmy gripped the seat of Kev's scooter, filled his nose with the glorious smell of two-stroke and sped away from his old, dead life, he couldn't have been happier.

Jimmy's happiness wasn't a transient, fragile thing either. He and Kev settled in well to their new friendship. They empathized with each other effortlessly, always understanding when time and space apart was needed and always managing to find it, even in the confines of the flat.

They had a local too, the Rose and Crown, less than half a mile away on Didsbury High Street, and Jimmy soon got himself back into the middle of a social scene. Kevin even commented one evening on the way to the pub how much his friends liked Jimmy and how they nearly always enquired "and is Jim coming too?" whenever they called Kev to arrange a night out. After only two weeks, Jimmy had exchanged phone numbers with all but one of Kev's friends, and he had even met one of them, on his own, for a lunchtime session while Kevin had been at work.

Perhaps it was this intrusion into Kevin's territory that sparked the first and only serious disagreement that the two friends would have. They were pissed late one night, sitting in the lounge. Each was sprawled out in his usual armchair, each had stripped to his underpants and each was greedily munching on a Donna kebab "with extra extra double chili sauce on that, mate" collected from Nick the Greek's on the way home from the pub.

"I'm telling you, Jimmy, it's the only way to guarantee not getting chili sauce on your clothes."

Jimmy leaned towards Kev and waved a drunken finger in agreement.

"Fuckin' clever us mate, eh? Eh? Up 'ere for thinkin', down there for dancin'."

Jimmy didn't notice the lump of greasy lamb slide from his hand and drop onto his cream shirt (heaped on the floor by the side of his chair) as he made his clumsy gestures to head and feet.

"What we watchin' anyway, pal?" he slurred.

Kevin reached forward to grab the remote control from the small table in front of him. As he did so, his bundle of kebab slid forward and spilled a slice of chili-soaked tomato. It fell between his legs and onto his linen trousers which were gathered around his ankles. Kevin jabbed the controller at the DVD player underneath the television.

"Thought we'd watch a bit more Jackass mucker, that all right?"

"Yeah, sweet," approved Jimmy as he slumped a little further into his chair.

The telly buzzed into life and the screen was immediately filled with long-haired skater dudes leaping about, grabbing their dicks and doing Eminem impressions while the real Slim Shady rapped from a boom box playing full blast in the car behind them.

"Dan said that you and him went for a drink Wednesday dinner time," Kevin said casually.

He looked across at Jimmy who was almost dozing, a handful of greasy meat stopped midway between pita bread and mouth.

"I said, Dan said that you and him met up for a pint on Wednesday," Kevin repeated loudly.

Jimmy woke from his daze, dropped his kebab back into its paper wrap and sat up.

"Er, yeah, he phoned me about ten, said he had the day off and wanted to know if I fancied one in the Crown."

Jimmy didn't look away from the screen. He understood that there was only one place an exchange that started like this could lead; money, and he really didn't want to go there.

"Shit, what's that all about? How the hell do they do that?" he asked, trying to change the conversation.

On the telly, a skater had ollied from a low wall, cleared the hood of the car and nailed a kick flip into the camera. The youth pulled his benny off, shook his hair and began to explain the stunt that was about to happen.

"I couldn't give a flying fuck how they do that, Jimmy. I'm more interested in why you've got money to piss it up on a Wednesday dinner but you ain't got money to split the food bill the day before."

"Just chill, Kev. I'll get you some money next week. You know I get my giro on Monday."

Jimmy didn't look at his friend while he spoke, transfixed as he was by the improbable events unfolding on the glowing screen in front of him.

"No way, no bleedin' way is he gonna make that!"

The team on the telly had nominated one of their members and he was busy clambering up a makeshift ramp. A piece of planking leant against a water tank. On the other side of a flat roof, the rest of his crew were laying a similar piece of wood up against the wall that defined the edge. The red brick building was derelict, three stories high and surrounded by trees. The lads lined up the launch ramp with a tall poplar tree that was just about roof height and rooted immediately outside of the security fence that ringed the factory. One of them jumped onto the wall and pointed at it.

"Ten meters away, mutha fuckas!" he screeched and leapt excitedly back into the action.

"You need to start looking for a job, Jimmy. Shit, I paid again tonight, apart from the first round. Now I ain't tight, mate, you know that, and it's fine while you get on your feet, but shit, man, you need to make an effort."

"And I will, I promise I will, Kev. So d'you think he'll do it?"

"You heard a bleedin' word I've said, Jim?"

"Yeah, and I told you, I'll start looking for a job next week. Okay?"

Jimmy was looking at Kev now. The guilt he felt as he recognized the truth of Kev's words blended with his frustration at being drawn away from Jackass. Jimmy felt and sounded unreasonably angry, most likely as a result of the drink beginning to wear off, slowly being replaced by a hangover.

"Now can I watch the telly in peace for five minutes?"

Kevin and Jimmy sat in silence for a moment or two and it felt strange to both of them. Normally they'd be swapping wise-cracks, commenting on the tits and asses that were now being waved at the camera by a gang of ladettes who had circled the tree. They were encouraging the nutter who would leap into it, shouting smut up to the rooftop and enticing him down. Jimmy watched as the camera tightened onto the bare, jiggling breasts of a beautiful blonde. The shot panned up to her face where her mouth and tongue were busy working her index finger. She smiled and her eyes widened, but as she looked away and back to the roof, Jimmy saw something in them other than the sexy glint of a prick teaser. He recognized the look instantly and just had to talk about it.

"She wants him to fuck it up, Kev."

"Nah. Although it would be cool if he did. Cocky twat." And Kevin laughed, relieved to be connected to his pal again.

"I mean it. She wants him to screw up. And not just a little bit either."

Jimmy thought back to the moment when he had left the bridge. He remembered the look on the face of the woman who had watched him as he had begun the fall to his death. There was horror in her face, not sex, but in her eyes had been that same macabre curiosity that Jimmy had just seen in the eyes of the girl with the nice tits.

"She wants to see him miss the tree and fall to his death. She's wondering

what it would be like to see a man impale himself on the fence or smash himself to bits on the tarmac. That's what she wants to see. In truth, that's what we all want to see, isn't it?"

Jimmy sat up straight, wide awake now, and turned to Kevin.

"That's why we watch this shit. That's why we can't take our eyes off footage of Senna missing a bend and smashing into a wall at two hundred miles an hour. Fuck, that's why we watch circuses, Kev. True, we marvel at the skill and poise of the tightrope walker and the knife thrower, but wouldn't we just love to see the bloke in the spangled tights hit the deck and snap his neck or the bird with all the feathers in her hair catch a knife in her chest?"

Kevin looked gob smacked.

"Bloody hell, Jimmy, easy tiger! You do know that there are some people out there that actually go to the circus just to enjoy the show and eat popcorn, don't you? Sick I know, but nevertheless."

"Okay, I'll make it simple for you," Jimmy continued. "How many times have you watched the Hindenburg blow up?"

"I dunno. Seen it a couple of times I guess."

"Right. And do you remember that poor bastard holdin' onto that tie line rope for far too long before letting go? He went up with it and then fell from maybe a hundred feet up?"

"Yeah, and you know, for a minute I think he actually thought he could pull that balloon back to the ground." Kev snorted.

Kev's attempt to put some humour back into the night was as futile as the man on the rope's effort to save the Zeppelin.

"It was an airship, Kev, not a fuckin' balloon. But how did you feel when the camera stopped following him, when you lost sight of the guy no more than about ten feet from the ground?"

Kev shrugged his shoulders.

"I'll tell you how you felt. You felt the same as me and everyone else who's seen it. You felt robbed, denied the opportunity to watch someone die. And not only die, but die spectacularly."

The dude on the roof was halfway across it when Jimmy looked back at the telly. He hit the launch ramp, bent low into a nose grab and then straightened back up as he and the skateboard reached the end of the plank. He used the last few feet of wood to hit the pop and throw the deck forward from beneath him. It tumbled away and he adopted a fleeting superman pose before opening his arms wide and disappearing into the leaves and branches about two thirds up the conifer. The crowd below whooped and cheered and a few seconds later the man in the tree popped his head out from the foliage and joined in. He was bleeding from a gash on his left cheek, but it didn't look serious. It certainly wasn't serious enough for the girl with the nice tits, and as the camera panned once more, Jimmy picked out a smudge of disappointment on her pretty, smiling face.

"See. I told you," he said, pointing at the girl on the telly. "She's gutted."

Kevin looked away from the girl's breasts and studied her face.

"Nah. She's just a bit of a sultry cow, making sure she still looks good on the camera. That's why she ain't celebrating too hard. She ain't disappointed, mate, no way."

Kevin's gaze dropped back to the girl's chest. "How can you go to bed every night with fun bags like that and be disappointed? What I wouldn't give..." he mumbled.

"What you wouldn't give for what? To see someone die, do you mean? And how much do you think you would pay for that, Kev?"

"Pay for what?" replied Kevin, slow to adjust having been dragged from warm bodies to cold corpses so quickly.

"To see a film of someone dying, you know, really dying, only in some spectacular stunt. What do you think it would be worth?"

"I dunno, Jimmy, it sounds a bit sick, mate! And I don't mean the new sick either, you know, the good one. I mean the old sick, the bad one. Yeah, the bad sick, that's what I mean," scoffed Kev, struggling to get his head around why anyone should have decided that the meaning of "sick" be changed and more importantly, how the hell everyone seemed to understand the new meaning in a matter of days.

Jimmy got out of his chair. He dumped the remains of his kebab into the bin and removed the tops from two bottles of Beck's which were cooling in the fridge. He returned, placed a bottle of beer on the table in front of his friend and sat back in his chair.

"But is it sick, Kev? I'm not so sure, you know. Okay, it may be a little distasteful to some, but anymore so than that Channel Four live post mortem show, or that fuckin' old git who won American Idol?"

Kevin smiled. "A good point well made my friend. But, even accepting that there would be a market for it, it's gotta be illegal. Filming people doing death-defying stunts, but without the defying bit, that's just one step down from a snuff movie isn't it?"

Jimmy went quiet as the spark of his idea was doused in reality. Kevin was right. Riggering stunts or attempting the impossible just to kill people would surely be illegal, of that there was no doubt. He thought about this for a moment; Jimmy wasn't prepared to let go of his scheme just yet. He thought about the girl by the tree. How much of her cosmetics allowance would she be prepared to spend on a DVD filled with guaranteed real life death and destruction? Ten pounds maybe? Jimmy multiplied this number again and again, once for every person watching Xtreme sports on the box, once for every lad at every pool table in every vault across the country and once for every nerd watching the Jordan/Bowers video at three o'clock in the morning with his mouse in one hand and his cock in the other. It was a big market, he just knew it was, and it all added up to a big number. Jimmy

thought about the woman on the bridge watching his own suicide attempt and he wondered how many times she had replayed that day in her mind. He wondered how many times she had edited the end, delayed the recycle wagon by a second or two and imagined the mess it made as it drove over Jimmy's broken body. Yeah, Jimmy thought. I bet she was really pissed when she realized I'd survived my...

"Suicide!" he exclaimed.

"Huh?" grunted Kev, half asleep.

"Suicide, Kev. That's the answer."

Kevin stretched, dropped the remains of his greasy supper into his trousers and leant forward to pull them up, kebab and all. He would wear them loose and low on his way to the bedroom and so didn't even notice the bundle of grease and paper caught in the crotch, oozing red stain through the fabric just below his arse.

"Well, it's an idea mate, but give it a week at least. If you ain't got a job by next Friday, I'd be happy to help you."

"Ha, very funny, Kev. I'm talking about other people's suicide, you divvy. I mean, do I look like the type of bloke who would—?"

"Would what, Jimmy, get a job? No you don't."

Kevin yawned, inspected the front of his trousers and smiled smugly.

"Think I'll wear these tomorrow night."

As he staggered to his feet and turned to go to bed, Jimmy saw the stain growing on the seat of his pal's pants. He smiled too.

"Yeah, they look cool, mate. Okay, fella, see you in the morning."

Chapter 3

The next day came early for Jimmy. He was up at eight and soon banging around the kitchen making breakfast wearing just his jeans. He'd actually been awake at seven but had lain in his bed, watching the sky and trees and thinking hard about his idea from the night before. The telly in the lounge was on loud and he could hear the theme tune to *The Simpsons* nearly finishing. More concerned about missing a Homer moment than copping for a dose of salmonella, he scooped up a runny egg from the frying pan, slapped it onto the bacon and closed his sandwich. Grabbing a plate and a glass of milk from the worktop, he dashed into the lounge. As he sat down, Kevin appeared at the bedroom door.

"You noisy twat!" he announced.

"Ah, good morning to you too, Kevin. I trust you slept well, my congenial friend."

"Fuck off. Any of that bacon left?" Kev asked, licking his lips.

"Yeah, some in the pan. Drop an egg in too, the fat's still warm."

Kevin moved into the kitchen and Jimmy shouted after him.

"I was thinking a lot last night when you'd gone to bed."

"Oh yeah, what about?"

"You know, 'bout that stuff I was saying about people wanting to see people have spectacular accidents and stuff."

"And?"

Kevin dropped two eggs into the pan and they began to sizzle, releasing a cloud of bacon molecules. Jimmy couldn't resist the sound and the smell.

"Do me another would you, mate, just an egg'll be fine. Anyway, as I was sayin', I thought a lot about it and I reckon that there would be serious

money to be made in selling a DVD with it on.”

“Yes, and what else did we agree last night Jimmy? Oh yes, it goes something like this.”

Kevin was walking into the lounge with fresh sandwiches. He stopped in the doorway.

“But Mr Policeman, I know he’s dead, but it’s his own fault for getting skunked and trying to wrestle the shark at Seaworld. I was just watching and minding his clothes.” Kevin mocked, managing to slide a few high tones into his speech, impersonating Jimmy who often did this when he was stressed.

Then in deeper, more authoritative tones he responded to himself.

“Ah, well, that’s okay then, son. Oh, and stick us down for a copy of the DVD, would you? Sarge and the lads’ll love it. Sorry, but I got to dash now and collect the Yorkshire Ripper. He’s said he’s very very sorry so we’re letting him go.”

“Kiss my shiny metal ass, Kev.”

Jimmy held up his plate and Kevin dropped an egg buttty onto it.

“Ta. Anyway, you probably won’t remember but I came up with a solution to this potential problem last night. What if all we were doing was filming suicides? Suicide isn’t illegal any more. So how can filming someone doing something legal be considered a crime?”

Kev stopped eating and looked at Jimmy.

“You’re fuckin’ serious about this, aren’t you?”

“Too right I am. I reckon it would make us a bleeding fortune. Think about it. Do the film, advertise on the net, copy to order. It can’t lose, pal, I’m telling you. Just listen to me for a minute and see what you think.”

Jimmy spent the next thirty minutes outlining the most bizarre business plan anyone had conceived since Mr Nike walked into the patent office with a hand pump and a running shoe and said he was going to fill his trainers with air and charge an extra thirty quid a pair.

The plan went something like this. In the first place, they needed to find someone willing to die and willing to do it spectacularly; a person who wanted to commit suicide while being filmed. More than this, their intention to commit suicide would have to be established beyond doubt. No first-timers, no 'Jimmies' who might stand on the edge of the abyss and decide that a life ever after wasn't for them after all.

"Preferably," Jimmy explained, "the suicidee needs to have had at least one or two serious attempts prior to coming to us. It would be handy too if some sort of official counseling had been done, you know, a shrink or a self-help group or summat. That way, if the shit hits the fan, it would be easier for us to prove that we didn't encourage him or talk him into it, yeah?"

"Okay. But is 'suicidee' a word?"

Jimmy ignored Kevin and went on to explain what would happen once someone had signed up. Together with Kevin and Jimmy, the applicant would need to decide how he was going to end it all. This was important, Jimmy explained, because it would be no good if, at the end of three weeks filming, all they had was a video of five people lying in five beds clutching empty bottles of Paracetamol while the theme tune from MASH played them out. No, the death had to be spectacular and original.

"Themed perhaps, eh?" said Kevin as Jimmy's enthusiasm began to rub off on him.

"Themed? What d'you mean?"

"Well, perhaps rather than randomly letting them decide, why don't we offer ways for them to check out; pick a theme, so to say. That way, we get more editorial control over how the finished product will look. We can make sure that the DVD is going to be as saleable as possible, gear the action to the target audience. If they understand this from the off, then there's less chance of 'em insisting on doing something that won't fit with the rest of the material."

Jimmy was stunned by the brilliance of this simple idea.

"Nice thinking, Kev, fuckin' nice thinking. And you got any ideas about what a theme might be?"

"I dunno. Say, famous film scenes, for instance, or 'man meets machine,' or even present it all in a game show type format. We can call it 'Don't Try This At Home... No, Really, Don't Try This At Home.'" He began to whistle the theme tune to *Blind Date*.

"I like it, mate, really I do," Jimmy laughed. "I think we can work on this."

He leaned forward, took a pen and note pad from his back pocket and added a line at the bottom of the list of ideas that was already two pages long. Jimmy reviewed what he had written down so far and explained his thoughts to Kev.

The first few items comprised a list of equipment: camera, DVD burner, desktop computer. Jimmy had kept a running total and was guessing that this lot would cost around the three thousand pound mark. Underneath the list of goods, Jimmy had written the words *LAST WISH*.

"Ah, now this. This is important. What I'm thinking is that the whole thing would be a bit gratuitous, a bit too gruesome, if we simply had footage of people getting mashed and smashed, so I thought it would be cool if each of the punters had like a wish granted or something like that. I was thinking that, for example, we could give them a grand to spend on their last day and then film them doing whatever it is they decide to do. What do you think?"

Jimmy chewed on his pen, not certain about this having read his ramblings again in the sobriety of the morning.

"I like it, really I do. I think it would be pretty cool and maybe a bit of a giggle too. What else you got?" asked Kev.

"Well, I think it would be nice if the people, the suicidees—"

"Made-up word" Kevin mumbled under his breath.

"—could record a bit of a speech to the camera. You know the kind of

thing, say a couple of goodbyes, apologies, maybe even have a rant at the people who've made them feel like killing themselves."

Jimmy put his pad down and looked at Kevin.

He was sitting in his chair, elbows on his knees with his hands clasped in front of his face. They covered his nose and mouth so Jimmy couldn't be sure what his potential partner was thinking. A few moments later, Kevin uncovered his face and smiled, wide and bright. His eyes were burning with excitement. Kevin stood up and raised his glass of milk.

"To the Quitters," he bellowed, loud and proud.

Jimmy stood and joined him.

"The Quitters," he repeated. "Whoever they are." And he chinked Kev's glass with his own.

"It's us, you wanker! Well, not exactly us, but the poor bastards we're going to film 'quitting.' That's what we'll call the company. Quitters. Cheers!" and he chinked Jimmy's glass again.

Jimmy collected his shirt from the side of the chair where he had left it the night before. He shook it down and put it on.

"Right, well I got stuff to do, mate. You're off today, aren't you?"

"Yeah, back on earlies tomorrow."

"Cool. Then I'll meet you in the Crown at dinner time and we can talk some more."

Jimmy finished buttoning his shirt, grabbed some money from an ashtray on the table and walked to the door.

"Later," he called back.

"Later," Kev shouted after him, barely managing to disguise his laughter at the huge kebab stain on the back of Jimmy's shirt.

Chapter 6

At 10:15 Jimmy dropped off the bus into Didsbury High Street. It was mobbed with early morning shoppers and commuters on their way into the nearby city. Jimmy worked against the crowd, bobbing and weaving into the gaps between faces of such intensity that they looked like they could explode at any moment. He wondered how many of the people that he passed were potential applicants to Quitters. How many of them were ready to make that final, grand gesture to the society that had offered them so much in their youth but now relentlessly ground them into submission, as every interest rate hike pushed their dreams a little further out of reach but cruelly, never out of sight. A fair few, he imagined, and if not today then soon.

Jimmy found his way to the door of the job centre. It was sunny and yellow, and Jimmy felt something approaching optimism as he pushed on it. Of course he had no intention of getting a job (no time; he had a scheme to develop!) but he knew that he needed to be able to report to Kevin that he had been and viewed the board, talked to an advisor or two. Otherwise, the dinner-time pint would be a disaster, and any attempt at consolidating the work done that morning would be rendered useless by Kevin's frustration at Jimmy's lack of action.

The first board that he stood in front of was filled with information detailing a million ways how the government could help you find your way back to the work place. In reality, all it amounted to was a million places where your life could be put on hold and where the jobless statistics couldn't find you. Jimmy's cynicism was reinforced as he browsed the next three boards. Seventy percent of the opportunities were for part-time work:

cleaning, taxi driving, shelf stacking. Nothing of any substance and all with starting salaries begrudgingly posted at the minimum wage. Jimmy did a quick calculation and reckoned that he would be about fifty pounds a month worse off, more if he considered travel costs to and from the workplace.

"Better off stayin' in bed and wankin' the day away," he said out loud to himself and also to the young girl who had crept up close behind him to read a contact reference number that she was now scribbling onto the back of her hand.

"What does that pay?" She smiled.

Jimmy glanced across. The girl was cute, in truth a bit too punked for Jimmy, who usually went for the rock chicks, but he moved aside anyway to see if she would move forward. She did, and Jimmy stooped to her height, pretending to be interested in an informative yellow card pinned a third of the way down the board. On it the agency described a thrilling opportunity to spend eighteen hours a week in an all-night garage watching the rest of the world either going to or arriving from somewhere.

"Wanking, I mean. How much does it pay these days?"

"Well, that's negotiable I guess. I can start you on a one-week trial basis and we'll see if we can come up with something that makes at least one of us happy," Jimmy cracked, not showing any of the embarrassment that he felt at being overheard.

The girl's smile broadened and she looked down at Jimmy's crotch.

"Do you supply tweezers, or should I bring my own?"

Jimmy laughed out loud and was about to follow up on this promising opening foray when a heavily tattooed knuckle grabbed the girl's elbow and pulled her away. The skinhead stared at Jimmy, leaving him in no doubt that the girl was taken. Jimmy wondered how much of the conversation the thug had heard but he guessed not much because Jimmy's nose was still where it should be. Not wishing to push his luck, he left the job centre and stepped

back into the working world beyond the yellow door.

Jimmy flipped his phone open and texted Kev, certain that he would have gone back to bed. It said "Crown at dinner. I have news!" He hadn't, of course, but he knew that this simple lie would be enough to make sure that his pal met him as planned. He checked his watch and calculated that he had forty minutes before the Crown opened and that gave him plenty of time to browse through a couple of electrical stores and investigate any finance deals that might be available on cameras and computers. This was one of the things that Kevin hadn't really picked up on: the set-up costs. Including a 'wish day' for five people, Jimmy reckoned that it would cost around eight thousand pounds to get the business on its feet.

"Business."

He chuckled and bent down to tuck a wayward shoe lace into his trainer. As he stood again, his head almost tucked itself under the arm of somebody who was awkwardly trying to get past him and enter the building next to the job centre.

"Sorry, mate," Jimmy said as he straightened fully.

He lifted his head to see who he had bumped and his mouth fell open. Now, Jimmy knew his mouth was open but he just couldn't seem to close it fully because Jimmy's mouth wanted to speak. It wanted to say something memorable, significant, intelligent and witty. Unfortunately though, Jimmy's brain was of no use at all in this search for wisdom, stunned as it was and far too busy processing the images that poured into it. A pathetic sounding "sorry" was all that he could manage.

"It's okay" said the girl, and she waved a tub of ice cream at him, pretending to scowl, "but if you had made me drop my vanilla chocolate chip Häagen-Dazs, then you would have been dead before you hit the ground."

Jimmy was an eyes man, he always had been, and finally he understood why, understood exactly what it was that he had been looking for all this

time. The ice-cream girl's eyes were blue—steely blue—and they reminded Jimmy of the pure clear water that an iceberg pools beneath it as it roams the ocean. Jimmy wanted to dive there, to explore those electric blue waters, but he sensed that once he was submerged, there would be no climbing back into the world of white light. He wondered how it would be to have to hold your breath for a lifetime and live in that blue.

“So, do you mind if I get past you, please? I need to return to my work.”

Jimmy had managed to block her way completely while he gawped.

“Sorry,” he said again and stepped to one side.

The girl's hair was the blackest thing Jimmy had ever seen. It had a lustre like the soft feathers of a raven's wing. It framed her face perfectly, curling under her lightly tanned cheeks, wayward strands trailing her lips as she spoke. She turned as she walked past him, and her hair flapped and her fragrance, a light breeze carried across a midnight meadow, flooded his senses. She opened the door of the building and stepped inside. The door stayed ajar momentarily, held open by the sprung hinges, and as it slowly relaxed back into position, Jimmy watched the girl walk with confidence and grace toward the stairs at the end of the corridor inside.

Jimmy stood on the pavement outside the door and wondered what to do. The sign screwed to it read Citizens Advice Bureau.

“Well, I'm a citizen, and I could do with some advice,” he whispered.

“How would she know that I wasn't coming in anyway?” He pushed the door open.

The corridor inside was hot and it smelled damp. White eggshell paint had, in places, peeled from the walls and the two heavy hot pipes that were strapped to them. Large flakes of dead paint dotted the maroon carpet and made the Citizens Advice Bureau look disinterested and amateur. There was no light, other than that afforded by a dusty window above the door, and as Jimmy walked to the stairs, he felt unreasonably on edge. The place

was not in the slightest bit welcoming, and it gave the impression that any advice that might be available would have to be stolen. However, once he had reached the third of three small landings that turned the stairs after twenty treads or so, the whole atmosphere of the place changed. The third floor was bright and airy, and as Jimmy stepped onto the blue washed vinyl, he finally felt valued. The walls, papered with soft green stripes, now had radiators and pictures: prints of Monet classics lit by bright spotlights sunk into the ceiling. Halfway along this corridor was a large recess filled with magazines and chairs and opposite that a pine door with a brass plaque that read Reception: Please Knock and Wait. An old man sat in the waiting room thumbing through a copy of *Jackie* (searching for Dr Pervert's Problem Page or a list of "ten ways to get an orgasm off your man" no doubt) and he looked at Jimmy.

"I'm next, asshole," he barked.

Jimmy laughed at him. "Sorry, what did you say?"

"I said, I'm next, asshole."

"Why are you so bleeding grumpy, old man? If I spoke to people like that, I would probably get my head kicked in."

Jimmy swaggered towards him.

"And anyway, what gives you the right to talk to me like that? What makes you think that you should be treated any different, pal, just 'cos you're old? How do you know that I ain't the type of bloke who's just a little bit unstable, that I haven't had a bad, bad week and that all I'm looking for is an excuse, any excuse, to give someone a good slapping. Eh?"

Jimmy had swapped his grin for his hard-man grimace. It wasn't very good, and any street-wise head case would see through his bluff immediately, but he reckoned that the grumpy old git wouldn't.

"And what makes you so sure that I ain't tryin' to pick a fight, sonny?" said the old man quietly.

He slipped a trembling hand inside his grubby mac. He held his coat open just long enough for Jimmy to see a black handle and three inches of bright, sharp steel.

"Fuckin' hell," gasped Jimmy, and he backed away two or three paces, kicking a plastic chair over in his eagerness to put safe space between himself and the crazy guy.

"See you outside, pal," hissed the man, his eyes small and black all of a sudden.

Jimmy turned back into the corridor and stepped quickly towards the stairwell. As he did so he remembered why he had walked into the building in the first place. He stopped and glanced over his shoulder just in time to see the ice-cream girl enter an office at the far end of the corridor. Crazy old man or not, Jimmy had to see her again. He crept to the edge of the waiting area then stepped up his pace, almost jogging past it but staying light on his feet and breathing quietly. The man didn't look up from his magazine, and Jimmy relaxed as he reached the other side of the opening.

"I saw you, dickhead! And I'll see you again outside. You can count on it, sonny!" the nutter growled.

This time Jimmy took the abuse and carried on walking. He reached the door where the girl had been and listened. There was no talking coming from inside, so Jimmy turned the handle and pushed the door open. And there she was, sitting behind her desk, her crisp white blouse dazzling and billowing gently in the sunlit breeze that she had invited in through the open fire door behind her chair. In one hand she had a spoon and was casually, lovingly, scraping the slowly softening ice cream from the tub. She looked like an advert. In her other hand was a phone, held close to her ear. Sensing Jimmy's presence she looked up and jumped a little, catapulting a small soft white blob of cream onto the keyboard of her computer.

"I'm sorry..." Jimmy stammered, apologising for the third time since he

had met her. "Are you on the phone?"

The girl jabbed her spoon into the pot and placed her hand over the mouth piece.

"No. I'm just practicing," she spat.

"Oh, right. Then if it's all right I'll, er..." Jimmy moved inside the room, took hold of the chair opposite her desk and pulled it out, ready to sit.

"Yes. I am on the phone!" the girl explained. "Don't you recognize sarcasm when you hear it?"

She took her hand from the mouthpiece and spoke into it words and sounds that made no sense at all to Jimmy, with the exception of "ciao," followed by a soft kiss to end the call. Jimmy kind of recognised the language (he had heard something like it before in a Bond film), and although he couldn't be sure, he concluded that the girl had spoken Russian.

"So, do you have an appointment?" she asked, taking a tissue from a box to her right and dabbing gently at the ice cream that she had spilled.

"Er, no actually, I don't. I was just passing and..."

"Because if you don't mind, I am actually on my break and I am expecting someone in my office in, oooh, let me see..." and she checked her watch theatrically, "just less than five minutes."

Now she looked at Jimmy.

"Except they have actually taken the time to make something called an appointment, but of course, I am sooo dedicated to my work that I always have time for people who happen to be 'just passing' and suddenly remember that they just have to discuss something with me, no doubt a matter of life or death, during my ice cream break!" She tilted her head to one side, expressing her discontent by raising a single eyebrow above the frame of her spectacles.

To Jimmy the gesture looked sexy although he had to admit she had nailed the sarcasm.

"Look, I'm sorry but I..."

"You seem to be sorry about a lot of things, Mr...?"

"Gee, Jimmy Gee. It's just that I really didn't want to make anything formal about this whole thing, but I just needed a minute of your time to ask you about a bit of a delicate problem that a friend of mine is having," Jimmy begged quietly, as if to emphasize the sensitivity of his issue and perhaps put enough intrigue into his voice to raise her curiosity.

His hastily conceived plan seemed to work.

"Okay, Mr Gee. You have three minutes...for the question and the answer, that is. And don't worry, even though this is off the record, so to speak, you will still enjoy a client-lawyer relationship with me and nothing you say in confidence will find its way outside this office."

The girl looked at her watch again.

Jimmy tingled as he heard the words "relationship with me" and knew that his reaction could mean only one thing: this girl that he had followed was becoming something very very special to him.

"Cool. Well you see it's like this. This friend of mine has, well, he has ... you see, I don't quite know how to put this, but he's kind of ..."

And as Jimmy fidgeted in the squeaky leather chair, he realized that he had no idea of what he was going to say about this fictitious friend's fictitious problem.

"Two minutes and forty three seconds left, Gee," said the ice-cream girl coolly as she spooned another mouthful and sat back in her chair, seemingly enjoying Jimmy's discomfort.

Jimmy fell silent and began to blush.

"There is no friend and there is no delicate problem, is there, Gee?"

"There bloody is!" Jimmy replied defiantly and then wondered why the hell he had decided to continue this charade after the girl had just offered him not only a way out but perhaps a way in.

That is if he could find the bottle to ask for her name or telephone number.

"Well then. What is it.?"

"How long have I got left?"

"Two minutes and eighteen seconds."

"You know, I ain't sure that that is going to be long enough after all. It's complicated. Perhaps I'll leave it for now and make an appointment like you suggested."

Jimmy stood up and walked to the door. As he opened it he heard the scary old man being rude to the receptionist about the quality of magazines in the waiting room. Jimmy panicked. There was something about the man's cold black stare and his six-inch blade that stopped him in his tracks. Jimmy closed the door again.

"I was thinking, you know, my car is on Pallatine Road, at the back of your office. Would it be okay if I was to use the fire escape?"

The girl thought about this request for a moment.

"Sure. Just mind the gate at the bottom. It's a little stiff."

She wheeled to her right on her chair and turned toward the door slightly to let Jimmy pass.

"Thanks. I'll phone for an appointment then, shall I?"

"Yes. That would probably be best. Goodbye, Gee, if that is your name." But her smile was warm, so Jimmy wasn't concerned by her mischievous accusation.

"Well, thanks for your time, all forty seven seconds of it." He smiled back.

Jimmy stepped onto the wrought iron platform three stories above the car park at the rear of the block of shops. He was about to begin his descent when he remembered something that he really did need to know.

"Oh, just one thing, and I promise it will be a simple yes or no answer."

A look that said “oh, no, the what-you-doing-after-work line is about to be delivered” soured the girl’s face.

“I’m listening,” she sighed.

“Is it illegal to commit suicide?”

The ice-cream girl sat bolt upright.

“Listen Jimmy—it is Jimmy, right?”

Jimmy nodded.

“Jimmy, suicide isn’t illegal anymore, no, but that doesn’t mean that it’s necessarily the right thing to do, either ... are you listening to me, Jimmy?” All the time she talked she used her feet to slowly wheel herself closer to the doorway, those beautiful blue eyes fixed on Jimmy.

He wondered what the hell she was doing, staring at him like this, and he looked away, down through the open grate that he stood on. His shoe lace was on the loose again.

“Okay then. So it isn’t illegal anymore. That’s good. In fact, that’s the best bit of news I’ve had all day,” he said, raising a foot and balancing it on the handrail to save having to bend to tuck the lace away (for what would be the fourth time that morning).

And then all hell broke loose.

The girl launched herself out of her chair and was on him. She stumbled as she crossed the door frame and hit him low, managing only to tackle Jimmy’s right thigh. She wrapped her arms tight around his leg to stop him from climbing fully over the railing, an action that forced her head deep into his groin.

Jimmy’s natural reflex was to protect his manhood and he grabbed her head on each side, handfuls of that beautiful black hair tufting through his fingers

“What the...?”

“Nooo!” cried the ice-cream girl.

This was the scene that greeted the wrinkly old thug that Jimmy had encountered in the waiting room as he entered his advisor's office, having waited for five minutes beyond his appointment time: Jimmy, one leg raised, his foot mounted on the hand rail, the girl's face pressed into his crotch screaming "No, don't do it, please don't do it."

The old man reached inside his rain mac and pulled out a black and silver telescopic umbrella. By the time he had reached the fire door, the umbrella was fully extended and held high above his head. Jimmy looked up just as the first blow came down on his head.

"Let her go, you filthy bastard!" The old man belted Jimmy again.

Jimmy screamed in pain as he used his nose to defend himself. The umbrella was savage, sharp pointy bits whipping his cheeks each time its central shaft smacked his face. The old man was pumped, no doubt about that, and he hit fast, hard and with admirable accuracy.

Finally Jimmy managed to prise his leg free from the girl and he bolted, leaping down the fire escape three or four stairs at a time. Unfortunately, he misjudged the distance to the next landing, hit it hard, crumpled to the deck and cracked his head on the iron railing. Dazed, he staggered to his feet and resumed leaping. The crazy old man was coming after him, egged on by the crazy girl, and Jimmy didn't want a rematch, no way. He didn't stop running until he stood outside the Rose and Crown.

Jimmy slumped into the doorway of the pub and checked his watch. Fifteen minutes to opening time. There was blood from his nose drying on his shirt, a nose that hadn't been split but had been bleeding quite a bit following the unprovoked attack.

"Kev is gonna piss himself laughing when I tell him about this," he gasped and lit a fag.

Chapter 7

Kevin was pissing himself laughing. Doubled over at the bar of the Rose and Crown he had to open his mouth and let the beer dribble out onto the floor. He had no choice; either spit or choke.

"I'm tellin' you, Kev, it wasn't funny. It was like getting double teamed by Laura Croft and her granddad. Nasty old git he was, but bloody good with a broolly. Must admit though, she was fit. Just a shame that she's a nutter. You okay there?" Jimmy laughed, patting his mate on the back a lot harder than was necessary.

Kev coughed.

"Same again please, Marianne, or perhaps just a half for the boy," jabbed Jimmy.

Marianne pulled two pints of lager. Jimmy paid for them and sat down at a nearby table. Kevin joined him a couple of minutes later having been to the gents.

"So, mucker, apart from getting a good comedy slapping, what else have you been up to this morning? Done anything about the Quitters?"

"Oh, yeah. Well no, not really. The nutter reckoned that suicide isn't illegal so that's a good start I guess. I was going to go down to Curry's and check out some gear, you know, a camera and shit but I got meself a bit busy, as you know."

Kevin grinned but managed to control his slurping this time so as not to repeat the coughing fit.

"Well, I've been thinking about it a lot this morning. At the moment, I can only see two problems, but I think I've solved one of 'em," he bragged.

"Let's have it then."

"What do you want first, the problem I've fixed or the problem I ain't?"

"The problem you've fixed, I think."

"Right. Well, when you'd left this morning, I was thinking about what you said. I came up with a few ideas for the suicide themes, by the way, but we can talk about that later. No, the main problem that stuck in my mind was, how the hell are we going to find five people to do this? I mean, it's not as if we can advertise this on the box, is it? Imagine it?"

Kevin deepened his voice and transformed into "voice-over ad man" (although Jimmy thought that he sounded remarkably similar to the policeman that Kevin had mimicked earlier that morning).

"Depressed, feeling down and want to end it all? Can't even get that right, you useless twat? Why not get in touch and let Quitters help rid the world of you? It'll be spectacular, messy and fun, and we promise, we won't feel a fuckin' thing."

Jimmy understood the size of the problem; he had been thinking about it too.

"A good point well made, Kev. So what's the answer then?"

"You're looking at it!" said Kevin with arms held wide, thumbs pointing in towards himself.

"Brilliant, Kev! Now all we have to do is find five people who don't know you and get them to spend ten minutes in a locked room while you tell them all about your top three telephone wanks. Before you know it we'll have more suicides on our hands than at a Radio Head concert."

"Yeah, well I was pissed, wasn't I? And anyway, how was I to know you were listening from the next room. But, seriously Jimmy, I am the answer."

Kevin dropped his voice to a whisper, apparently more concerned about being overheard discussing working than wanking.

"Listen, I must see twenty suicide cases a month when I'm doin' my shit on the wards, and they're just the ones that I know about."

"Yeah, and I bet you cause quite a few too, you tosser," said Jimmy flatly, remembering how bad he had felt when "Friend Haj" had told him he had slept through most, if not all, of his natural life.

Kevin ignored him and carried on explaining.

"It's easy for me to find out a bit of case history too. You know, like you was on about. No first-timers and stuff like that. It ain't hard to get that sort of info out of the nurses. They're told about shit like that so they can keep an eye on 'em. Like the ward you were on for example," said Kevin, raising a finger and pointing.

This gesture, nonchalant as it was, might as well have been a brick wall. It jarred Jimmy's mind to a halt and the sudden break in momentum forced beads of sweat onto his brow. He had always had an uneasy suspicion about how much Kevin actually knew about the circumstances that had brought them together but until now had managed to dismiss it, convince himself that hospitals were a place where patient privacy was sacrosanct and where his secret would be safe until he chose to expose it. This he planned to do, of course, discuss his suicide attempt openly with Kevin, but as older men when his own shame at what he had tried to do was far enough in their past for it to be anecdotal with no risk of turning their friendship into some kind of pathetic dependency.

'What exactly do you mean by that Kev?' Jimmy asked pointedly, hating the fact that he needed to know more about the size of this potential leak.

"That ward where you were, it usually has quite a few in. People who've tried to commit suicide, I mean. I think they like to keep 'em all together you know, and the girls there have a bit of extra training to learn how to look for signs that someone ain't dealing with it all too well."

As he listened to Kevin explain, Jimmy managed to convince himself once more that perhaps his friend did indeed have no idea how he had come to be on that ward and he began to settle, albeit with a new, darker understanding

looming; that with every minute that passed without the truth, a small part of the special thing that he and Kevin were building would be lost to Jimmy's secret.

"Now, you can't just walk up to these people and try to convince 'em that they should have another pop but this time smile for the camera as they jump off a bridge for example..." Kevin continued, oblivious to his friend's unease at this mention of a bridge jump, "...because like you say, it's gotta be their choice, they've gotta do the leg work. So, I'm thinkin' that once we know for sure that a person might be up for it, all we gotta do is leave 'em something to think about and some way of getting in touch with us. I dunno, like a calling card with a phone number on and just enough info to get them thinkin', get them curious. Enough at least to text us and arrange a meet. The way I see it, once we meet with 'em, we can talk a bit more about the detail and shit, the nitty gritty. We should be able to get a better feeling about how serious someone is without us saying too much, if you know what I mean. What d'you think, Jimmy?"

"Er, yeah. Sounds good," Jimmy stammered, feeling uncomfortable in Kevin's company for the first time that he could remember, niggled by the idea that Kevin knew everything but still unable to bring himself to ask.

He wanted to change the subject, to talk about football, the ice-cream girl, cars or anything. Anything other than death and suicide. But of course, he couldn't because death and suicide were now their business.

"Yeah, I like it. I don't suppose you've had a go at making a calling card have you?"

"Nah, not yet. I wanted to run it by you first. Thought we'd best buy one of them pay-if-you-can SIM cards too, just for this, you know? They can text us shit and it will be easier if it just goes to one number. We can pop the card in a couple of times a day and pick any messages up, yeah?"

"Like your thinkin', Kev. So you gonna design the card or do you want me

to do it? he asked, feeling a little better already as the conversation left the philosophy of death behind and got back to the mechanics of it.

"No worries, Jim. You just get the SIM card and let me know the number. I'll get some card, red I think, and get to work back at the flat this afternoon."

"Okay, fella, and I'll buy the camera later today. I saw a Sony that is so cool. Straight to disc, none of that messin' about transferring stuff. It comes with some really sweet editing software too, you know, for adding commentary or songs and stuff."

"Hmmm. Which brings me nicely to our second problem, Jimmy."

"And that is?" Jimmy smiled, reaching into his pocket, knowing already precisely what Kevin was about to say.

"Money, Jim, money. What with the camera, the blank DVDs, the wish days and all that, I reckon we're gonna need about ten grand to pull all this shit together. I mean, we can try the bank, but I don't think our friendly neighborhood loan arranger is gonna give us a bag full of cash so we can go out and top people, is he? And even if he did decide to consider the application, our business plan isn't helped by the fact that we tend to kill our clients, now is it? It's the age-old problem: there used to be a lot of books about suicide in the library, but no one ever returned them, if you know what I mean." Kevin slurped at his pint.

True, money was a big problem, but one that Jimmy already held the key to. He dangled and jangled the answer in front of Kevin's puzzled face.

"Problem solved, Kev."

"Huh?"

"This, my befuddled friend, is the key to a black Mini Cooper convertible less than four months old."

Jimmy lowered his voice and gestured Kevin to lean in towards him before continuing.

“It belongs to my ex-mate, who is now shagging my ex-fiancée. Picked the keys up when we got my gear the other week, but I only realized why I had done it the other day when I was thinking about money. Book price is about twenty thousand. All we gotta do is find a buyer before Romeo and Juliet get back off their hols. By the time the wanker knows it’s gone, the car’ll be bright yellow and driving some mick bastard around Dublin.”

Jimmy sat back and drank, long and hard, his moment of revenge only slightly tainted by the fact that he couldn’t tell his pal the complete story, couldn’t explain the irony of how Dave’s betrayal had led Jimmy to the bridge, to the hospital, to Kev and to the pub where they now sat discussing the sale of Dave’s stolen car to raise cash to film other people jumping off their bridges.

Chapter 8

Over the next few days things went remarkably smoothly for the lads. They were focused, and by the Monday following their discussion in the pub, Kevin had already deposited four ‘introductory’ cards (as he liked to call them) with patients at the hospital, each of whom had been admitted to the same ward that Jimmy had stayed in after the bridge. The cards read:

We're sorry to hear about your illness.

Here at Quitters, we understand the problems you are facing and would like to help. Don't worry, we promise we won't patronize you by trying to make you feel valued. We understand more than you know, and we would like to help you perhaps finish what you started.

If you are serious about this and would like to know more about the deal we are offering, then text YES and your first name to 077234675.

The cards were credit card-sized, printed in black ink on matte red. Behind the text was the word “Quitters” as a dark crimson watermark. Jimmy agreed that Kev had pitched the message just right. Not too specific so as to get them in trouble but with enough detail between the lines to tell a depressed and desperate soul what was on offer: guaranteed death.

As for the money, Jimmy stumbled across a potential “buyer” for Dave’s car after asking only a few “discreet” and drunken questions in the vault of the Crown. The money came to Jimmy something like this.

Marianne’s boyfriend had been over from the Wirral for the weekend and overheard Jimmy’s rather clumsy attempt at fencing his booty. As much to shut him up as anything else, Brian had given Jimmy the mobile number

and name of someone who might be able to help. Jimmy had sat on the information for a couple of days (to allow the feeling that he was under surveillance from every newspaper-reading businessman to pass) until finally making contact with his buyer, "Scouse Sammy," on the following Thursday. The evening before this, by chance Jimmy had bumped into Dave's boss, Harry Taylor, in a pub in town.

Over a pint they had talked football and girls for a while and then a little about what had happened between Wendy and Jimmy and Dave. At first Harry had been reluctant to say too much, but by the end of his fourth pint of Stella he had loosened up a bit. Harry explained how shit he had felt when he had learned about the split, and even more so when Dave had explained his part in it.

"Of course," Harry had explained, "I was gonna come and visit you in hospital, Jim but, well, you know how it is, don't you?"

Jimmy had believed him too. He and Harry had always got on at the various social occasions where they happened to meet. By the end of his sixth drink, Harry was hugging Jimmy and declaring his undying loyalty, offering to "sack that wanker" and give Jimmy Dave's job. Harry was pissed and Jimmy knew that this was mostly bollocks, but he felt good about it all the same. Three hours later, as Harry struggled into his crumpled jacket to leave the pub, he had asked Jimmy if he knew that Dave and Wendy had got engaged.

"Yeah, last Saturday it was, Jim. I'm sorry to be the one to tell you, mate, really I am. Wankers."

After fumbling about in his pockets to search for keys for a pathetic moment more, Harry had looked at Jimmy and given him his unexpected gift.

"I hope their fuckin' plane crashes tomorrow, Jimmy, really I do. Pair of wankers."

Harry had hugged Jimmy again. "Later, Jimmy, take care, mate."

"Yeah, later Harry."

So, Dave and Wendy were flying somewhere on Thursday, were they, no doubt to celebrate the start of their new life together. Sweet.

"Good luck to 'em." Jimmy had toasted alone. "And I hope they like walkin'," he had grinned, tapping text eagerly into his phone to arrange the sale of Dave's car.

Sammy had replied the following morning and confirmed the drop.

East Lancs Servs, Jn 27, M56, 11:00.

By ten o'clock the next morning, Jimmy confidently climbed into the car outside Dave's place, started it up and put the Stone Roses into the CD player. By 10:15 he was pulling onto the East Lancs just north of Salford, Kev following him on his scooter, on the way to the rendezvous. Periodically Jimmy looked into his rearview mirror and smiled involuntarily at the reflection of his best pal there, flicking Vs or giving the finger to drivers who he had cut up, desperate to stay in touch with the mini. Jimmy had sung all the way, loud and happy. He couldn't remember ever feeling so good; his best mate behind him and Sally Cinnamon banging out of the stereo while he shafted the wanker who had stolen his girl.

Police cars came and went and never once did the thief feel threatened, although Jimmy did cap his speed so as to avoid the kind of "rooky cop beginner's luck" attention that so many high-profile murder or rape cases seemed to be solved by these days.

Jimmy arrived at Haydock Park services with five minutes to spare. By the time Kevin made it, sweating and flustered, Jimmy had all but finished his smoke and "Scouse Sammy" had stepped out from the rear of a beat-up transit van and made contact. The exchange of keys for money (bundles of coke-stained twenties and fifties stashed neatly into a black O'neil rucksack) took thirty minutes. The excessive length for the transaction was partly due

to Kevin's insisting on a break before setting off back to Manchester, but mainly because Scouse Sammy turned out to be a girl, and a very fit one at that. So while Kev drank and moaned and stretched and pissed, Jimmy and Sammy flirted, smoked and agreed to meet up some time in town for a drink. They never did.

With just over nine thousand pounds in their pockets, the dedicated entrepreneurs wasted no time at all. In getting pissed, that is. Kevin had hammered his scooter as hard as hell back down the M56 and into Stockport. He made a bee line for the Crown and all the while Jimmy knew exactly his friend's intent, supporting it fully with air punches, "wuhooooos!" and "yeeehaaas" for most of the journey.

After maybe an hour on the road, Kev and Jim finally bowled into the pub and ordered two pints of Stella from a bemused Marianne. They drank them in one breath while looking into each other's eyes, smiling. That was at fifteen minutes past twelve. It was four o'clock when Kevin ordered their third bottle of Moët and by this time they were already badly scuttled.

"Haven't you had enough already, lads, you look pretty drunk to me," Marianne said.

"We look drunk?" Jimmy slurred, "What about you? Your face is all fuckin' blurred!"

And the boys roared again, collapsing into each other to continue giggling and talking rubbish far too loudly.

This was the mess that Jimmy was in when the ice-cream girl found him for the second time in her life.

Now Wanda hadn't exactly been looking for the man that she and her client had attacked on her balcony, but she had reflected on her actions on more than one occasion since the unfortunate misunderstanding. Wanda had decided that, if she ever did bump into him again, she would apologize.

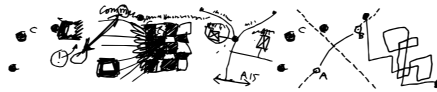
So here was her chance, and much as Wanda hated drunks (and is he drunk!) she felt that she had to take what may turn out to be her only opportunity to make good. She steeled herself, dressed her hair and walked towards them. Kevin spotted her first.

“Hey mate, look at this...” he said with an exaggerated and uncontrolled nod towards the beautiful girl who was walking purposefully towards them.

“You’re not getting your knob out again, are you?” screamed Jimmy, and set off laughing again.

“Shhhh, ssshhhhh, no mate, shh, no listen, listen. Look!”

Kevin grabbed Jimmy’s drooping, drooling chin and turned it slowly towards her, pointing with his free hand at Wanda who was by now only three feet from them.



Jimmy recognized her instantly, but in that very same moment his abused and spinning head betrayed him, reminded him of how drunk he really was. He tried to brighten and focus his eyes but they just wouldn’t do as they were told! He knew too that the harder he tried to make his eyes work properly the more stupid he looked. Jimmy’s brain slammed into reverse and back-tracked to begin a frantic search for instructions as to how the body that it found itself in actually worked. Finally his brain found something it recognized: legs and arms. Three—no wait—four articulated long things that maybe it could use to move Jimmy about and pick things up. There were three joints and a couple of muscle packs on each. Now how hard can that be to control? Jimmy’s brain engaged and began to straighten him up, told the arms to push and the legs to turn, slowly and steadily.

Simple, and for a while everything was going okay: head rising nicely,

body rotating smoothly. It was only when his motion detected a sudden resistance to completing the turn, (hands, how could I forget to let go with the hands!) that the mistake was made. Immediately, his brain sent the instruction to “release the fingers from the hand rail.”

Disaster, for the order should have been “Fingers, no matter what you see or hear, under no circumstances do you let go of that handrail!”

Jimmy’s hand slipped immediately that its grip was released. The momentum of his unsupported weight, suddenly left hanging, began to drag his torso to the floor.

Cleverly though, his brain detected the start of his tumble and managed to stop his descent by jutting Jimmy’s chin out and planting it firmly into the ashtray that was on the bar.

Bang!

Jimmy moaned as the dull pain seeped through his jaw. His head still in the ashtray and his hands swinging loosely below him, he panicked. He needed to sober up, and quickly. Impossibly quickly! If nothing else, he needed his mouth to work. To have any chance at all of taking even the smallest slice of self-respect from this situation, he needed his mouth to work.

“Christ, please let my mouth work!” he pleaded to his brain.

But his brain wasn’t listening. It was busy, fully occupied trying to remember how to operate arms and legs and now hands too. It was far too occupied to attempt the intricacies of vocal chords, lips and tongue.

“Sorry, Jimmy, you’re on your own, pal. But if you want me to take you anywhere or pick shit up, just let me know. Catch you later, dude,” and with that, brain was gone.

And so was Jimmy.

When he came around, Jimmy was on the floor with his back against the bar and his ash-covered chin slumped into his chest. Kevin crouched next to him, rubbing his shoulder gently and talking something into his ear. Jimmy

flashed back and remembered the ice-cream girl. He cringed.

"Is she still here, Kev?"

"No, mate. She did one when you fell over. You all right?"

"Yeah. I just wanna puke." Jimmy gagged, struggling manfully to keep the bile in his throat.

"Again? Shit, Jimmy, there can't be much left, mate."

Jimmy opened his eyes fully and looked around at the pool of semi-digested food and champagne in which he sat.

"Ah shit, man. Tell me she went before I did this, mate. Please, Kev, lie if you have too."

"Sorry, mate, I ain't gonna lie to me business buddy. She copped a load all over her skirt too."

Jimmy gagged again only this time, without the goal of keeping a clean floor to give him strength, he let it all go.

Chapter 9

The next day Jimmy was the first to wake. He felt surprisingly good, probably due to the fact that he had been asleep for over sixteen hours, not including the four or five trips to the loo that he had stumbled through to empty out and take on more water. Water was the key to hangovers, something that Jimmy had learned at the age of eighteen after one too many university lectures barely attended.

On one such occasion as Jimmy had struggled to stay awake while nursing a hangover through two hours of fluid mechanics, his lecturer had flogged him verbally and very publicly.

“If you can’t get pissed the night before and stay awake long enough to hear what I have to say, Gee, then I recommend that you drink with girls in future and leave the big-boy shit to the men! Now tell me again, Bernoulli’s theorem states what?” Mr Stephenson had shouted in his face.

After the lecture had finished, however, Stephenson had pulled Jimmy to one side.

“Listen, if you learn nothing else today, Gee, remember this. Three tablets when you get in and a pint of water, no matter what time it is or how good you think you feel. Every time you get up for a leak or to chuck, drink a pint of water. You’ll be as bright as a button in the morning, trust me. Now get home to bed, you look like shit.”

Jimmy had stuck to this simple routine ever since and subsequently he had not lost one single day to a hangover.

Kevin was not so enlightened. He stumbled out of bed, half dressed, and clambered onto the sofa to bury his headache deep into the cushions.

“Shit, Jimmy, I am so fucked. How the hell do you do it mate? My head

is battered." He groaned.

"Water. Like I tell you every time we go on the lash. Water. You ready for breakfast yet?"

"Fuck off."

"Suits me." Jimmy laid another strip of bacon neatly into the pan.

He left his breakfast to sizzle and brown and turned the TV on. Jimmy loved day time telly and, although he would never admit it, his favourite presenters were Phil and Fern. He loved the way they worked together, and over the months that he had watched them, he had come to understand that Fern was in fact his "funny fancy," that woman that you really wanted to sleep with but would never admit to publicly. Every bloke has one, a funny fancy, and Fern was Jimmy's.

On top of the TV was Jimmy's phone, and he picked it up to text Sammy to check that everything had gone okay with the car.

On the screen, the alert envelope informed him that he had missed a message. He didn't recognize the number and neither did his address book. Jimmy thumbed to his inbox and opened it.

YES. Wud like 2 talk. Peter.

He looked at the message and then the number again.

"You know anyone called Peter, Kev?" he asked, puzzled by the familiarity in the message.

"Pete Robinson. He works at the hospital. Why you ask?" Kev grumbled, clearly distressed at being asked to think.

"Well, he's sent a message to me, but I guess it must be for you. He says he would love to talk. You wanna tell me summat, you gay twat?" Jimmy teased.

"Why the hell would Robbo text to your phone? And I ain't gay, at least

not with Robbo anyway. Too fat.”

“I don’t know why. But he has. Want me to answer him?”

Kevin sat up and rubbed his eyes with one hand, keeping the other planted firmly on top of his head to limit any movement and the pain that it would induce.

“Hang on a minute, Jim, didn’t you swap SIM cards last night in the Crown?”

Jimmy looked at Kevin and back at the phone.

YES. Wud like 2 talk. Peter

Jimmy was shaking, staring at the message and reading it over and over again.

“Fuck me, Kev. We ain’t playin’ at this anymore,” he said in slow, hushed syllables.

Kevin leapt up and grabbed at the phone, held it through Jimmy’s hand and pulled it up towards his face. He read the message for himself.

“So what are we gonna say, Jim?”

“I dunno, partner, but I guess we better fix a meet and think about that later. We don’t want to leave the dude hanging ... so to speak.” He laughed nervously.

“Be serious, man. Shit, this geezer could be our first client!” Kev was sniggering too.

The message reply that Jimmy wrote read like this:

Will b glad 2 tk 2 u. B in Crown & Anchor on Didsbury Rd @ 6 2nite.

“Okay?” he said as he flashed the screen at Kev.

“Okay.”

Jimmy tapped quickly and added *Ask 4 Kev* to the message then hit the send button. Kevin noted the unnecessarily large number of keystrokes.

"What did you add then?" he asked.

"Nothin', mate. Now, let's see what we get back." Jimmy smirked.

For the next two minutes Kevin and Jimmy stared at the phone. They said nothing. Finally, the silence was broken by Jimmy's ring tone. The alert envelope announced that a message had been received and that the number was not recognised. Jimmy opened it.

OK.

"He says okay." Jimmy collapsed back into the chair behind him, still holding the phone, still reading the simple message.

After a moment or two he looked up at Kevin, who was now pacing around the room rubbing his hands together furiously and repeating the word "shit" over and over again quietly to himself. Jimmy looked past him at the telly. He imagined himself and Kevin on the sofa opposite Phil and Fern. Phil would be nodding and smiling, but still managing to look both interested and intelligent as he explored the concept of selling suicide DVDs with Kevin. Fern would be smiling too, only sexily, teasing her lips with her tongue and winking seductively at Jimmy.

"I said, we best get busy, Jimmy. We got shit loads to do, mate," shouted Kev.

"Sorry, Kev, I was miles away. Yeah, you're right."

He looked at his watch.

"Right, it's half ten now, yeah? I'm goin' in to town to get the video gear and stuff. What time you start work?"

"Lates tonight, so gotta be there for half seven."

"Cool. Then you got time to meet the dead dude and still get to work.

Okay, while I'm in town, you have a think about what we're gonna say to Peter and perhaps tidy up some of the ideas you had about themes and stuff."

Jimmy stood up quickly, galvanized into action by an initially slow day that had now picked up incredible pace. He grabbed Kev's cheeks firmly.

"We gotta look professional, Kev. No fuck-ups or wise-cracks, yeah? Remember, this bloke is trustin' us to help him top himself, right?" He slapped Kevin's face firmly, twice to emphasize his point.

"Yeah okay, okay. I get you. Professional. I can do professional," he called after Jimmy who was making his way back into the kitchen to rescue his breakfast from the pan.

"And while I'm out, you can tidy this place up too. It's a bleedin' mess," Jimmy shouted.

"Okay, okay," replied Kev, apparently having completely accepted Jimmy's domestic dominance, developed during the short period that they had lived together in his flat.

Chapter 10

Jimmy was on Didsbury High Street just a few minutes before midday. It was buzzing with the usual mixture of workers, students and shoppers, flitting from shop to shop to collect groceries for the weekend and sandwiches to eat now. Down narrow side streets the café culture was thriving. Coaxed by the warm sunshine, umbrellas blossomed to shade friends and lovers meeting beneath them to share stories and drinks and make Friday night plans. Jimmy envied them, especially the lovers, but that would come to him again, he felt sure. For now he had bigger fish to fry and what's more, he had to make a film while he fried them.

The camera shop was cool and quiet. Jimmy, being the only customer, was soon accosted by the eager young sales assistant who hadn't had the opportunity to spout his knowledge for at least an hour.

"Can I help you, sir?" he smarmed.

"Yeah. At least I bloody well hope so, my friend, or what else would you be doing working in a camera shop?" said Jimmy confidently.

"I, err, well ..."

"Don't worry, son, I'm just shittin' you. Now then, tell me all about DVD cameras if you wouldn't mind," and Christ, did Jimmy regret saying that!

Five minutes later and the assistant was still prattling on. Jimmy felt like he had stumbled back into a fluid mechanics lecture: he tried to listen but didn't understand a word of what he was being told.

"Okay, can I just stop you there, mate? To be honest, you've lost me. It might be simpler if I tell you what I need it to do and then you can choose a camera for me, eh?"

The boy blushed, and Jimmy could see him beating himself up as he

reviewed his sales technique.

"But what you did tell me was very very good, mate. No, really it was. Now I understand how many things there are to think about. I'm just glad you know what you're doing, Steve," and Jimmy smiled warmly, tapped the assistant's name badge and watched him re-inflate as his confidence returned.

"Okay, I want to film indoors and outdoors, long shots and close-ups. Gotta be steady too. Don't want any shake on the picture. I want this to look like them documentaries you see on telly. You seen *The Office*? Well, I want it to be almost as good quality as that, right? I need to be able to edit it too. Dub music and voice-overs on it and all that stuff. So you need to include any software that I might need, right?"

"And what's your price range, sir?"

Jimmy could feel the roll of fifties in his pocket. He was carrying at least four grand.

"We'll worry about that when I've seen what you've got to offer, Steve." And off Steve went to open cabinets and gather together a selection of equipment for Jimmy to consider.

While Steve was busy, the shop door opened and buzzed to announce the arrival of another customer. Jimmy wondered how Steve would react to this sudden rush of business; he was obviously only in the job a few weeks and covering for his boss's lunch.

"Gee?" a voice said.

Jimmy turned towards the door. Its sun-filled frosted glass panel framed the person who had called him. It captured her silhouette, held it for a moment and then projected it to the very centre of his heart where it fluttered for a while before coming to rest. Jimmy recognized the curves now. They were perfect and could only belong to one person. His ice-cream girl was here.

"James Gee, isn't it?" she confirmed as she stepped fully into the shop.

Jimmy moved away from the counter that he had been leaning on. He wanted to impress her, show her that he could stand up unassisted. But his mouth still refused to cooperate.

"How do you feel today, Gee? The last time I saw you, you were more than a little ill."

Jimmy blushed and put his head in his hands. He sighed deeply into them for a moment and then looked back at her. There was no point in trying to pretend that last night hadn't happened.

"I was an absolute disgrace. But believe me, that is so out of character. You see, my friend and I were celebrating and we decided to drink champagne and I don't normally drink it and well, you know the result."

Jimmy paused enough for a response but the girl just stared, obviously waiting for something. But what?

"Oh! I, uh, I'm very, very sorry. I really cannot apologize enough. Listen, whatever cleaning bills you have, please, let me settle them," he begged.

"I might just do that, Gee," she snapped back.

"It's Jimmy. Please, call me Jimmy."

"So, Jimmy, what were you celebrating so hard last night? And it's Wanda, by the way," she said coolly.

In spite of Wanda's slightly disgusted tone (which was understandable considering what had happened the previous evening), Jimmy felt that she was softening a little. Her stance was no longer rigid and formal and she had uncrossed her arms and laid them open by her hips.

"Em, a new start I guess. Me and Kevin—he's my friend and business partner—had just got confirmation from the bank that our loan has been released and so there's nothing really stopping us now from putting our business plan into action." Jimmy moved towards her to close the gap a little.

Wanda stayed as she was and didn't react at all as Jimmy entered her space, other than to raise a hand and move her hair from her neck. Jimmy thought that this was a good sign.

"And what business is that, Jimmy?" she asked.

"Films. Short films. You know, for corporate messages, training and safety videos. Stuff like that. That's what I'm doing here. I need a decent camera for the field work. The studio's pretty much sorted now, but for the location shoots the gear's a bit cumbersome." Jimmy nodded to add credence to the pack of lies he had just spouted.

He made a mental note to stick to the bare minimum the next time he was asked about what he did. Too much detail could only trip him up.

"Hmmm. Sounds interesting. Well, good luck anyway." She turned to leave the shop.

"Oh, I nearly forgot why I came in here. I just wanted to apologize for the misunderstanding that we had in my office the other week. Really, I was so embarrassed but, considering what you did to me last night, I guess we're even now, yeah?" Wanda smiled.

Jimmy thought he could hear doubt in her statement. Doubt intended to let him know that they were perhaps not even and that there was perhaps more that Jimmy could do to set things right. She had stopped opening the door too, waiting for a response. Yeah, this was not a rhetorical question, this was an invitation to ask her out and Jimmy wasn't about to pass it up.

"You know, I'm not sure that we are even, Wanda. In fact, the more I think about it, the more I reckon that what you did to me was far worse than me being sick on your skirt," he replied, stone-faced for a moment, long enough at least for his mock accusation to appear real.

Just as she was about to respond, he cut her off with a mischievous grin, causing her to hold her response in a sharp breath that barely escaped her mouth. Then she smiled too.

"But of course, I'm joking. No, I think you're right. Listen, let me give you my number and, if you would like, I'll take you out for a meal. Perhaps a lunch someday next week? Surely that should be punishment enough." He grinned.

"Okay, Jimmy. It's a deal." She took her phone out of her pocket and entered Jimmy's number into her address book.

"I'll let you know, then?"

"Sure. Just give me a couple of days notice, yeah?" said Jimmy coolly as Wanda left the shop.

He watched her go and then watched the door for a little while longer after it had closed.

"Yes!" Jimmy squealed as he spun and punched a clenched fist out in front of him, almost connecting with the shop assistant who had returned to coax him back to the business of the day.

"Em, okay, sir, if you would like to follow me and take a look at some of the recorders that I think might be suitable for you and I can perhaps talk you through some of the technical spec of each."

Steve led him towards the counter. Before they had reached it, Steve switched languages and reverted to speaking fluent jargon. Jimmy looked ahead and noticed that the Sony camera that he had told Kevin about days earlier was among the boxes.

"Okay, Steve. Let me just stop you there again. How much is that Sony?"

"Well, I can do that for just under three thousand pounds, but the Pioneer next to..."

"Bag it up would you, my man," instructed Jimmy, and he levered a roll of notes out of his pocket to complete the sale.

Jimmy wasted no time in getting back to the flat. Once there, he and Kevin spent the rest of the afternoon playing with the camera, installing software and getting to grips with the various facilities (it was even possible

to film slow motion, which Kevin commented would be ideal for any stunts or high-impact events). By five o'clock they had sat down with a tin of Stella each to review the short film they had produced. Basically, the clip was two and a half minutes of Kevin dicking about.

To begin with, Kevin drove his scooter (zoom out to wide angle as he approaches Jimmy), then dismounted for a close-up and a couple of words to the camera (Jimmy requesting speech to test the microphone close up, Kevin deciding that "tit wank bollox" had a nice ring to it for the inaugural sound check). After that Kevin moved inside the building for a quick dash up the stairs.

"Handles the change in light levels well, dunnit, Kev? 'Specially considerin' that you're running too. Nice and clear."

"What's that on the back of my kecks?"

"Can't be sure, but it looks like chili sauce, mate. Oh, watch this, this is good."

As Kevin reached the top of the stairs, he turned but tripped over his feet as he did so. He tried to recover and put his arms out but slipped on the top step, finishing his fall by slapping his left cheek on the landing wall. All this happened in slow motion and Jimmy had dubbed a comic "Bdoing!" over the action at the point of contact. He'd also tried to animate some stars circling Kev's head but somehow it didn't look right.

"That looks shit," said Kev.

On the telly, Kevin was in the flat now, leaping about and jumping over and onto furniture and tables. Jimmy had dubbed "Step On" by the Happy Mondays over this short burst of madness and it synchronized surprisingly well with the action.

"Pretty cool, yeah?" he bragged.

The music stopped as Kevin disappeared behind the settee. When he appeared again, he had a belt looped around his neck. He held it high with

one arm and tugged at it, tilting his head and sticking his tongue out as he tried to hang himself.

"You're a sick fuck, Kev, you know that, don't you?"

On the telly the words KEVIN ... R.I.P. rose slowly to centre screen. As they stopped, the image of Kevin pretending to hang himself faded to black.

"Sick, Kev. And I don't mean the 'good' sick either," Jimmy blasted with zero humour in his sharp tone.

Kevin leaned across, close in to Jimmy's ear.

"Am I? Well pal, if you can't handle a fake death, how the hell are you gonna stomach the real thing?"

He stood and went to his room slamming the door behind him.

Kevin was right, though. Jimmy sat quietly and wondered how the hell he would feel if he witnessed someone dying (and not just slipping away either, for the people he would film would be dying brutally).

Jimmy had never seen a corpse, let alone witnessed someone being squeezed or smashed to create one. In fact, the closest that Jimmy had ever been to a dead person was to his mother, at her funeral, and she had been all boxed up, tucked safely from view. Even then, he had imagined her lying in that coffin, set snugly amongst the folds of white satin with her eyes closed and her hands clasped upon her tummy as she was lowered into the ground.

This image had been largely influenced by what at that time had been Jimmy's only source of information about what a dead woman in a coffin might look like. Unfortunately for him, that had exclusively been 1970s Dracula movies. Jimmy sat on the couch and cringed as he remembered having to try so hard to keep his head straight in order to stop those images of his dead mother twisting into something evil and un-dead.

For months following the funeral, Jimmy would have the same dream:

his mother's restful peace suddenly shattered by her vampire spirit, ripping her eyes open and baring its bloody fangs at him as he leant into her coffin. Jimmy could sense the images forming again in his head now as he sat on the settee in Kevin's flat. Even after all this time, occasionally they would come into his mind, uninvited and unexpected, and always Jimmy would have to fight hard to sweeten their horror, to morph the stake in his dream hand and turn it quickly into a rose which he could lay gently upon his mother's chest instead of hammering a wooden dagger into her heart.

Jimmy laid his rose, shook his head and stood to walk to Kevin's door. He knocked on it quietly.

"Hey, pal. You getting ready or what? We gotta meet this geezer in half an hour and I need you there, Kev."

The door opened. Kevin looked at Jimmy but said nothing.

"Listen Kev, I've been thinkin' and I think I understand a little more now about why I said what I said. You know, about you bein' a sick twat."

Kevin said nothing.

"I reckon that I will be okay with filming strangers doing themselves in mate, I really do. It's just that when I saw you fuckin' about pretendin' to hang yourself, well, I just, er ... shit this is difficult."

Jimmy sighed, leaning into the door space with his hands placed on the door frame either side of it. He looked at his shoes

"Okay, here goes. It's just that you're my pal, Kev. My bessie. And I know we aint known each other that long but we're cool, mate, and I don't like the thought of you not bein' around. That's all. I wasn't mad with you for shittin' about, but that was all I could think to say."

Jimmy sighed, lowered his arms from the door frame and straightened up.

"I'm just so sick of losin' people, mate and ... well, like I say, you're me mate."

Kevin said nothing for a moment then he pinched Jimmy's cheeks and shook them hard.

"You big soft git. Now come on, we got a business meeting!"

Chapter 11

"So, would you like to briefly tell me why you're here, Mr. Marshall?" asked Jimmy, feeling nervous and unsure, exactly as he expected he would when seated face to face with the first applicant.

Marshall tossed the Quitters card on the table towards Jimmy.

"Got this on my food tray one day when I was in hospital recovering from a suicide attempt."

The grisly man thrust out two huge forearms. They were lightly bandaged around the wrists.

"I understood from the card that you might be interested in that."

Marshall crossed his arms and sat back. His eyes were bright and green, sparkling even, and on anyone else they would have appeared happy and excited. Not so though, for set in Marshall's sculpted and battered face the eyes looked dangerous and mad.

"And there's every possibility we are, Mr. Marshall. But can you perhaps tell me something about how you ended up in the hospital?"

Marshall shifted in his seat. He thought for a moment, then delivered in flat, colourless tones. "My name is Peter Marshall. I'm forty-five years old. My wife divorced me last year. We had a son but he lives with her. Been in the army from bein' a kid. Served in the Falkands, Northern Ireland and Iraq, both times. I've watched seven of my closest friends either shot dead or blown away in explosions. The final straw came in Basra, that car bomb outside the Embassy last year? You may have seen it on the news. I got dishonourable discharge after that for shoving my rifle butt into the face of a young girl. She'd spat at Jonesy. Right in his face while I was trying to put his guts back in. Shit like that happens all the time, it's just that I bust her

face in front of a Sky news team. Whatever, I guess I've zipped up one too many body bags and now I want my own. I haven't got anything left and to be honest, I can't be arsed anymore."

Marshall finished talking and Jimmy reviewed what he had just been told. He wasn't a psychologist, not by a long way, but Jimmy thought that he knew people enough to see that the man before him in tired jeans and a dirty white shirt was beyond sadness, beyond grief. Yes, Marshall was definitely on the other side now, and Jimmy realized that those bright green eyes of his didn't sparkle with madness or indeed anything else. They just caught the light and bounced it right back again. Yes, Marshall had glass eyes, vitrified and dead. More than that, Peter Marshall was dead; he just needed to dispose of the body, and Jimmy resolved to help him do it. Then Kevin stepped clumsily into the silence.

"Military man, eh? What regiment?"

"Three Para. Joined when I was seventeen. Spent most of my time down at Chepstow, when I wasn't in the theatre, that is. Made it to Corporal." Marshall's voice was now full of pride.

Jimmy looked at Kevin and wondered why the hell he had engaged Marshall in small talk. After all, it wasn't as if there was any future in this relationship: one of them would be dead soon. Jimmy also wondered why Kev was scribbling notes into the black A4 plastic folder that he had suddenly produced. Kevin was obviously taking his instruction to act professionally far too seriously. Jimmy decided to get back to the business of the day. He was thinking about the mission statement that he and Kev had decided upon, about only filming people who were serious about taking their own life and so he needed to know a little more about Marshall's suicide attempt.

"So why the wrists, Mr. Marshall? A man like you, with your background, I would have thought a bullet through the brain would have been more your style. You were pretty high up in the Paras after all." As he said this, Jimmy

wondered if he had overstepped the mark by effectively calling Marshall a big girl.

"You have to be, Jimmy."

It was Kev again.

"Have to be what, Kev?" Jimmy asked, thankful for his intrusion this time.

"You have to be pretty high up in the Paras. Otherwise your parachute wouldn't work."

Both Marshall and Jimmy, who had up until this point been looking at each other (Marshall contemplating, Jimmy regretting) broke off and looked at Kevin. Marshall appeared to be calm, although his lower jaw was twitching a little from side to side as he chewed over what Kevin had just said. Jimmy, who wasn't pinned by his stare, looked away from Kevin and back across the table where he had noticed Marshall's arm begin to move, ever so slowly, as if not to scare some rabbit he was hunting.

"Em, Mr. Marshall, perhaps we could..."

But Jimmy was too late. Something in Marshall's head, something continuously tensioned, snapped and launched the hand forward to strike Kevin's upper arm. Kevin yelped and tried to pull himself out of range, but Marshall grabbed his wrist and leapt to his feet, kicking his stool away as he did, and before it had hit the floor, Kevin's face slapped the table, jarring his eyes wide open as they pleaded for Jimmy's help.

"You don't take the piss out of the fuckin' paras!" Marshall hissed as he raised a huge battering ram of a fist to shoulder height, forcing Jimmy into action.

"What the hell are you doing, man?" Jimmy screamed as he reached across and tried to restrain Marshall's bony, brutal weapon.

"For fuck's sake, we're here to help you!"

Marshall looked at Jimmy but didn't change his stance, his fist locked and

loaded, Kevin remaining pinned

"We're here to help you, Mr. Marshall. Now please, calm down and let's just carry on, eh?" Jimmy urged, and this time his soft, reasonable tones had some success in de-fusing the situation.

"You don't take the piss out of the fuckin' Paras, right? You just don't do that," Marshall told Kevin again.

"And that goes for you lot too!" he shouted loudly, as he released Kevin and turned to the rest of the pub who had been looking on, pints and cigarettes frozen between table and lip.

Kevin straightened and set about adjusting his disheveled jacket and fussing his hair back into place.

"For fuck's sake man, what the...?"

"Kevin! Go to the bar and get the drinks, yeah?"

"But Jimmy..."

For the second time in as many minutes an arm grabbed Kevin's, only this one was not so vise-like as it belonged to Jimmy, coaxing as much as dragging Kevin away from the table for a quiet word.

"Look Kevin, just get to the bar and get the drinks, right? And take your bloody time too. The sooner we get this over and get rid of him the better."

"Good Jimmy, cos he's a fuckin' lunatic!"

Jimmy shot out another hand to pull Kevin's accusing finger down.

"Don't bloody point at him, for Christ's sake!"

"So what you gonna tell him to get rid of him then?"

Jimmy knew that Kevin was right, that they should indeed put as much distance between themselves and Marshall as they could, but he also understood that rejecting Marshall's application was not going to be easy. As he thought about what to do, he looked over to the crazed ex-para. He was seated again, with his elbows propped on the table, rubbing his short cropped ginger hair and talking to himself, apparently struggling to calm

and douse the fire that still smoldered in his eyes. The scene, like something out of a sanatorium, forced Jimmy to reconsider.

"You know, Kev, thinking about this, it may be best if we go along with him."

"What you mean best? Best for who exactly?"

"Best for everybody, for me and you to begin with, but for the rest of the bloody world too. For all them poor bastards stood minding their own business at a bus queue or in a pub who happen to be overheard saying something that Marshall doesn't like. Yeah, thinkin' about it, the world is definitely going to be a better place without Peter Marshall in it."

Jimmy finally let go of Kevin's arm and turned him toward the bar.

"Go get the drinks, Kev, and I'll deal with Marshall. Same again."

"But it's your round, Jimmy," he complained.

"Just stick it on the expenses account, Kev!"

"Cool," said Kev, liking instantly the idea of booking booze to his very own business account as he dashed to the bar to explain the new payment terms to Marrienne.

"Sorry about that, Peter," said Jimmy on his return to the table, still wondering how the hell he would de-fuse Marshall before Kevin returned.

"He shouldn't take the piss out of the Paras. Lads have died for pieces of shit like him."

"Yeah, I know," answered Jimmy, worrying now that his business meeting was turning into a counseling session. He needed to get it back on track.

"So perhaps I should explain a couple of things about the service that me and my partner can offer you and, just as importantly, outline what we expect from you. That okay?"

Jimmy spent the next five minutes explaining to Marshall the itinerary of his death. Through it all, Marshall listened intently, staring down at his gnarled hands which he clasped and then unclasped to knock his knuckles

together every thirty seconds or so. Only when Jimmy had finished did Marshall look up.

"Paint balling," he proclaimed.

"Come again?" said Jimmy, confused because he thought that he had heard the hard man Para say paint balling.

"Paint balling. That's what I want to do on my wish day. Paint balling." And Marshall slapped his hands firm and flat on the table to close the debate.

Kevin returned and was in the process of placing the drinks down when Marshall slapped the table.

"Wooah, easy tiger," he quipped.

"Fuck off."

Kevin looked to Jimmy for support, looking a little stunned by Marshall's explosive aggression. Jimmy shook his head slowly and mouthed "leave it." Kevin said nothing.

"And I want him on the other team."

"Me?" said Kevin as he sat down once more beside Jimmy to resume scribbling notes.

"Yes. You. And I'll give you a list of another five people I want there. I've got a grand to spend, right?"

"Yes. One thousand pounds. Yours to do with what you want. Within reason, of course," Jimmy confirmed.

"Good. That should be more than enough to buy the bastards I want there."

Marshall reached across and snatched Kev's pen and folder. Kevin said nothing as Marshall compiled his list. When he had finished, he led Jimmy through it, ignoring Kevin completely. He explained who each of them was, how they could be contacted and what to tell them to make sure that they would turn up if the one hundred pound sweetener wasn't sufficient. Marshall felt sure that it would be.

"So, you have scores to settle with these blokes right?" sighed Jimmy when Marshall had finished explaining how the last of the men on the list, Tommy Jennings, had broken his nose on the steps of a night club in town six months ago.

Jennings had been working the door and Marshall had been kicking off with an old friend from the regiment over some tart that they had both bought Vodka Redbulls for at six quid a pop.

"But, like I explained, Mr. Marshall, none of the things that I help you with can involve other people getting hurt. Either when you commit suicide or on your wish day. I thought that I made that clear," Jimmy continued.

"Listen. These wankers are gonna be hurtin' plenty, Jimmy, whether you film it or not. Or would you rather get some footage of me banging a grand worth of whores behind Chorlton Street bus station, eh?"

Jimmy looked at Kevin and Kevin shrugged, apparently already having forgotten that his name too was on the list of men who would stand against Marshall at the paint balling day. Marshall, a man who had chosen to spend his last day on earth breaking other people's bones.

"Okay. I'll try and put it together, but I am not promising anything."

Jimmy handed the list to Kevin who folded it neatly and tucked it into his folder.

"And what about the suicide itself, Mr. Marshall? If you are not sure about how you would like to end it, we have some ideas that we can perhaps run by you."

"No worries. Got it all worked out, son. All you have to do is be in the right place at the right time with your camera rollin'. Believe me, it will be spectacular." Marshall promised with a chipped-tooth grin.

Jimmy sighed again as he realized that he was about to break yet another 'un-bendable' rule and hand editorial control of Marshall's death over to the man himself. He sat back and dropped his arms to his side.

“Okay. Whatever. I’m not happy with it, but I guess it’s your funeral.”

Chapter 12

Fifteen minutes after Marshall had left the pub, Jimmy received a text. Before reading it he finished his drink and directed Kevin back to the bar. He would regret waiting.

Mr Gee. Nxt wed pm ok? let me know. Need 2 tell boss. Wanda.

Jimmy wasted no more time at all in replying to confirm the date. He didn't need to consult a diary (it would be empty in any event) because he knew that there was nothing on the planet that could stop him from making it.

OK my choice with the venue))

Two minutes later, Jimmy's phone announced a reply.

Betta b gud its ur last chance))) C U on the 12th

Jimmy smiled and folded his phone. He wanted to reply, to keep the exchange going and maintain contact with her, but he knew that this would be a mistake.

"Don't look too keen, eh, Kev," he said, winking and patting his pocket where he had just put the phone.

Kevin and Jimmy drank for maybe another hour while they discussed their meeting with Marshall. On the whole they thought that it had gone okay and both agreed that Marshall should be filmed. They also agreed that

he was a dickhead and a dangerous one at that.

"Just hope we get a couple more like him, Jimmy. You had any more texts on the Quitters phone?"

"Shit. I haven't checked, mate. Hold on."

Jimmy split his phone, removed the battery and then his SIM card. He loaded another SIM which he took from his wallet and reassembled his phone. No sooner had the phone found its new service provider than it received a text. And then another.

"What you got?" asked Kev excitedly.

"A problem, mate. A fuckin' big problem," Jimmy groaned.

He fumbled at his phone again and swapped SIMs.

"What's up?" asked Kev.

"Come on, come on!" Jimmy shouted at his phone impatiently as he waited for it to connect. When it finally did, he tabbed through his messages and found Wanda's confirmation. He opened it up and checked the date. Twice.

"Shit shit shit," said Jimmy under his breath as he began to tap out a message for Wanda.

Can we make it thurs pm. Summats cum up. Soz ((

As he waited for his reply, Jimmy supped his pint and watched his phone, pretty much ignoring Kevin's persistent (and more than a little irritating) enquiries. After two or three minutes his phoned buzzed. To Jimmy, it sounded like a bad, angry buzz. (How the hell phones recognized good messages from bad ones he had no idea. But they did.)

No. wed or nothing. Already tkd with my boss. ul have 2 change ur plans. I was first.

No smiles, no kisses. She meant what she said and Jimmy knew it. But he wasn't about to pass up the opportunity to nail such a gorgeous girl and so he replied ok and then turned to explain his problem to Kevin. He did this by switching SIMs once more and showing Kevin the first message in the inbox.

Suicide nxt Wed 12 @13:00 hrs. southern cemetery. Watch the sky. Peter

"Hmmm. Well I can understand why it might be a bit of a problem for him, but for you?"

"Meaning?" said Jimmy, dejected and annoyed at his friend's lack of understanding. He had forgotten that he hadn't actually explained his problem to Kevin yet.

"Meaning we won't hardly have to get out of bed, mate. All we'll have to do is get up, scratch our nuts and make a bacon butty. We can breakfast on the balcony and wait for Marshall."

Jimmy didn't react for a moment, just stood rock steady while an idea formed and cemented itself into place. Once it had set, he smiled broadly.

"Brilliant, Kev. Abso-fuckin-lutely brilliant, my son! I can take her round to the flat! Yeah, I can get some stuff in, you know, Dorrito's and dips and some meat pies and shit and we can eat there. Brilliant, Kev!"

"What? Now just hang on a minute, lover boy. Who exactly are you thinking of inviting round to the viewing gallery? 'Cos unless it's one of the Manson gang you can forget it! I hope you aren't thinkin' what I think you're thinking."

"It'll be fine, mate, trust me. Listen, I gotta meet her and well, she would be a good alibi too, you know, if things get naughty. Wouldn't she? What can be more innocent than a nice lunch with a professional lawyer, eh? Fuck me, Kev, she chose the date, didn't she? Imagine it, we're just sat on

the balcony havin' a bite to eat, Marshall starts to do his thing and I reach for the strategically placed camera. Simple or what? Yeah, the more I think about it, this is good Kev."

Kevin shook his head and groaned.

"You can obviously see this going different in your head, Jimmy, so I ain't about to try and convince you otherwise. But when she does suss you, and she will, just remember these words, 'cos you'll need 'em."

"Which ones?"

"When you've stopped kicking me in the nuts, can I have a last squeeze of your tits?"

"Very funny, Kevin."

"Anyway, like I said, it's up to you. But I'm tellin' you, it'll end in tears, mate. Was the other message from Marshall too?"

"Shit yeah. Nearly forgot. Let's have a gander."

He checked the inbox. There was one unread message and it wasn't Marshall's number. Jimmy opened it and read out loud.

"Yes. Darren."

"That it?" asked Kev.

"That's it. I guess he followed the instructions to the letter. I'm thinking that Darren actually knows how to do as he's told. I hope so. We don't want another Marshall now, do we? What should I tell him?"

"Tell him we'll see him tomorrow night, eh? Might as well get him onboard sooner rather than later. Don't wanna give him too much time to rethink and go it alone."

Jimmy nodded in agreement and sent his message. It wasn't until they were about to leave the pub that Jimmy and Kevin received a reply.

Still in hoozy. Out nxt Thursday. Ok then?

“Well, at least he’s in good hands for a while. Hang on, he’s not on your ward, is he Kev?” Jimmy laughed as he texted for the final time that night.

Ok Darren. Keep in touch and get well soon

It wasn’t until Jimmy had the sent the message that he realized how stupid it sounded.

Chapter 13

The day of Marshall's paint balling had been made sticky and uncomfortable by a burst of hot sun at the end of a wet spell. The "activity centre" that Jimmy had hired was no more than a collection of barns and wooden huts, forsaken by tired farmers and left to tumble and rot. Unchallenged for decades, the woodland had crept up behind them, down the steep hill to claim back its timber and stone. The victorious trees were slowly drying now in the late afternoon, gently steaming the besieged beams and trusses of the buildings, softening them to ease the way for the army of termites and beetles that they deployed daily.

But the war hadn't been won just yet, for the farmer's son had returned too, with glass and plastic and business plans. Jimmy handed him a bundle of notes and, as agreed, the fat musky man disappeared for two hours, bouncing his jeep along the rutted woodland trail, keen to get home and stash his cash before his wife returned from work. Jimmy stood and watched the jeep go then turned to look for Kevin. He stood in the doorway of one of the huts, rummaging through a pile of damp and smelly combats which had been dumped on the floor there.

"I ain't wearin' this shit on a day like today, Jim, no way. I'll be sweatin' my bollocks off." Kevin held a tatty old jacket in one hand and a full face mask in the other.

"Up to you, mate, up to you," said Jimmy with genuine disinterest.

Jimmy checked his watch. Ten seconds to four.

"He said he would be here at—"

"Four," said Marshall stepping out from behind the "secure area," a substantial and newer shed where the guns and pellets were kept. The man

looked immense, so much bigger than he had done in the pub. The danger level in his eyes seemed to have notched up a couple of levels too. He was already dressed for battle, in what Jimmy assumed were his own fatigues. On closer inspection, a hole in the chest of the jacket raised Jimmy's suspicions that perhaps there was more here than met the eye. And indeed there was: flashing in the sunlight as it swung proudly on the end of a chain pinned to Marshall's upper left sleeve was a dog tag. Jimmy could see a number on it and a name also. It read PETERSON or perhaps PATTERSON, Jimmy couldn't be sure, but it definitely didn't read MARSHALL.

"Okay, Mr Marshall. You look just about ready to go."

Marshall said nothing, simply raised the rifle in his left hand and tucked it into his shoulder. Before he lowered his eyes to the telescopic sight, he looked at Kevin and smiled. A squeeze of the trigger and three pellets left the gun in quick succession.

The first smeared itself across the visor of Kevin's crash helmet which was stowed on the headstock of his scooter thirty yards down the track. The second went left of the scooter and rattled a metal fence post. The bird that had been roosting there took flight, scooping air frantically into its wings. It had only managed to flap four times before the third ball of paint slammed into its delicate, mottled brown chest. The paint ball didn't burst until it had finished spinning the thrush backwards into a thick tree branch. The songbird hung there for a moment then fell to the ground, silenced for ever. Marshall turned slowly, straightened and smiled thinly at Kevin. Kevin crouched and began scrabbling once more through the pile of combats.

"Do you think this fits okay, Jimmy?" he mumbled from behind a face mask that he had chosen.

Kevin didn't wait for an answer but dived back into the pile to search for something thick and heavy.

"What time are the others due to get here, Jimmy?"

"Er, half past four, just like you said, Mr. Marshall."

"And they all said they'd come?"

"Yep. All of them," Jimmy nodded.

"Well, latest I hear is that Harrison won't be coming. He's having problems with his car today."

"Really? And he can't get it fixed in time?" asked Kevin.

"The problem with his car is that it's on his legs at the moment," grinned Marshall.

The thug was still grinning as he continued, obviously pleased with the way things had gone so far.

"Okay. Good. Everything is in place, then. You've done okay up to now, lads. Now, I'm going to make my way up to the objective, have a look around and get an idea of the terrain. When they get here, Jimmy, I want you to blow this whistle once. That clear?"

Jimmy nodded.

"When they're ready and in position, blow it twice."

"Once when they get here, twice when they're ready," Jimmy repeated as he accepted the whistle from Marshall.

"Oh, and you need to film them like this, Jimmy. This is the order I'm going to take them down in."

Marshall handed Jimmy a slip of paper and then lowered the visor of his face mask to snap it shut. In one smooth movement he looped his arm through the strap of his rifle and slung it around his back as he set off jogging up the hill. His pace was steady and even, and Jimmy could see that he was measuring distances between the stacks of oil drums and piles of tires. Range finding, they called it. He couldn't help but admire how athletic and awesome the man looked, melting into the foliage, of what was surely his natural environment, to join the other predators that stalked there.

Kevin gulped.

"Want to know what number you are, Kev?" Jimmy taunted after he had scanned the list.

"Huh?"

"You're number six, pal. Lucky number six, eh? That is you lucky number, isn't it, Kev?" Jimmy joked.

"At least I'm not last," said Kevin, as ever looking for an upside in a really shitty situation. "That would be just too fuckin' scary, knowing that he'd taken everyone else out and it was just me and him alone in the bleeding woods."

"Got news for you, Kev. Six is the last on the list. Harrison's not gonna make it remember. He's wearing a Polo at the minute, the Volkswagen type, not the T-shirt."

Jimmy pointed at Kevin's name on the list and showed it to his pal. TRAITOR KEV was written in bold capitals, but after this, in lower case, rather worryingly Marshall had written 'nice arse'.

"No way! No fuckin' way, Jimmy! I ain't doin' it. A kickin' I can handle, but if that sick, mad bastard is saving me for last so he can shag me, well, I'd rather die, Jimmy. Really, I would top myself rather than take one up the nought!" Kevin shouted as he ripped his face mask off.

"I agree, Kev. This is a bit too sick. We're gonna have to get you out of the way before Marshall gets to you. If worse comes to worst, you'll have to lie low until after next Wednesday. He'll be gone by then. Only thing is, mate, you're gonna have to start this thing, you know, make like you're up for it. You realize this, don't you? But it'll be cool because you'll also know that you're bulletproof. Marshall ain't gonna come for you till he's ready. So, all you have to do is stay visible so he knows you're there and when ... now let me just see ..." Jimmy paused to check the list. "Yeah, Thompson is number five, so when Thompson's gone down, you do a runner, right?"

"Okay, cool. Thompson, yeah? No worries."

Kevin looked over Jimmy's shoulder in the direction of an engine noise, over-revving as a vehicle lost its grip in mud-filled ruts just beyond his scooter. The minibus driver over-compensated the skid at the precise moment that his vehicle's tires re-established grip on a stony dust patch. The back end of his van flicked out and knocked Kev's scooter off its stand. Kevin sighed and shook his head, apparently accepting defeat from a day that he knew was all out to shaft him. Jimmy slapped him on the back.

"Not your day, pal, is it?" he said just before he blew hard and long on the whistle.

The minibus pulled up five yards short of Jimmy and the side door slid open. Five silent men stepped from it. The driver leaned his sweating bald head out the window and shouted to Jimmy.

"Next time you're organising a fuckin' safari, do us a favour and call Dial a Tank instead, would you? You twat." He gunned the bus again to bounce his wheels out of a water-filled hole before reversing back down the track.

"See you at seven?" Jimmy called after the bus hopefully.

In truth though, he thought that ambulances might be more appropriate for the return journey, and so Jimmy wasn't too bothered when the driver flipped him a finger.

He looked at the group of men that the bus had deposited. They were now either sitting on or leaning against a low stone wall. All of them were smoking in silence. They looked hard—"Lock Stock and Two Smoking Barrels" hard—and as Jimmy walked towards them he wondered about Marshall's chances of coming through this unscathed enough to kill himself with any vigour. Jimmy stopped just in front of them and introduced himself. Three of the men nodded, one spat and the fifth, a heavily tattooed, wiry skinhead, said hello. He looked the youngest of the group and, in truth, a bit of a misfit in spite of his aggressive image. Jimmy thought that he looked totally out of his depth, his unblemished face trying to appear cool and cold

but managing only to look naïve among the twists and scars of experience. Yeah, he was an apprentice of sorts and no doubt with potential. Jimmy could see as much in his burning green eyes.

"So, I guess you want to know what all the mystery's about then, eh?"

"Not really, but I'd like to know where my fuckin' money is," said the man who had spat.

"No worries, Mr...?"

"Taylor."

Jimmy ticked his list and thought that this might be a good time to complete a roll call. He wondered why he'd bothered as each time he called a name he was met with silence; he might as well have called out "tree" or "rock" for all the response he was getting and his nerves began to build. That was until he called out Harrison.

"He ain't comin'," answered a short, stocky man with a thick Irish accent.

Jimmy thought that this might be Jennings. At least he looked more like a doorman than any of the others.

"Um, which one of you is Thompson?" Kevin garbled.

The tallest man in the group looked at Kevin through an unkempt mop of ginger hair.

"And who the fuck are you?"

"I'm Kevin. You Thompson?"

The man drew on his cigarette and flicked it into a pile of leaf litter swept into the base of the wall by the wind.

"You should have said we were bringin' our bitches, Thomo. Mind you, he's better looking than the last boy you shagged on E Wing," shouted the smallest, but perhaps meanest looking of the men, and he laughed loudly at his own joke. He stared at the others with a crazed, threatening look until they laughed too.

It chilled Jimmy to be in the presence of someone who was obviously not

only capable of inflicting immense pain on others but who would relish every bone-breaking punch too, given or received. While they laughed falsely, Kevin moved in closer to Jimmy.

"Why do I get hard men fancying me Jimmy, just why the fuck is that?" he whispered.

"Wrong question, Kev. You should be asking why you get men hard? Perhaps you shouldn't wear your jeans so tight, eh, pretty boy," and Jimmy blew Kev a kiss.

The evil man slowed his laughter to a grunt and the others followed his pace. Jimmy decided that now was perhaps the time to explain to this group of thugs why they had been brought to the woods and, more significantly, who had commissioned the gathering. He hoped that none of the men would take offence at having being lied to, at being tricked into coming here, but he felt confident enough that the bundle of cash he was levering out of his pocket would placate any anger. As for whether they would stay once they knew the truth, of that there was no doubt. Not one of these men would consider showing fear in front of the others. They would rather have their face smashed and broken than lose it, and Marshall had known this. Reputation was everything in their business.

"Okay, gents. Listen up a minute. Now, individually, I've told you various things about why you're here today. From TV hard-man shows, Mr Jennings, to simple cash payment, no questions asked, Taylor. Well, while there is a little truth in all of that, I guess it isn't strictly the truth of it."

The men all locked stares at Jimmy and grimaced or scowled. Jimmy realized what he had said and how it must have sounded to them.

"Oh, don't worry, lads. You will get paid, and I will be filming you while you do what you do, but the main reason that you're here today is a Peter Marshall."

Jimmy paused and looked for a reaction, checked to see if he and Kevin

should be running or not.

Thompson immediately dropped his head and gulped, and Jimmy reckoned that he didn't really have the stomach for what was about to happen. He looked like he was thinking back, back to something bad that he had done to Marshall in the past. He must also be remembering the price that he had always known would have to be paid one day. Thompson was last on the list after all, apart from Kev, that is, and so Jimmy thought that perhaps Marshall had indeed singled him out for special treatment.

Taylor simply nodded knowingly as though he had always suspected Marshall's involvement in all of this. Taylor tried to spit but he managed to produce only a small amount of phlegm that stuck to his bottom lip and dribbled onto his chin.

Jennings looked more confident. He swelled his barrel chest and stood away from the wall, arms held slightly away from his body, fists clenched white tight. Initially Jimmy thought that this was eagerness, a kind of "bring it on" strut, but his façade was soon blown away as he began to flick furtive glances at the bushes and trees, crumple a little more each time the wind whispered to him from the woodland. He was shitting himself, Jimmy concluded.

The evil short man turned to face the skinhead boy.

"Your old fella is a pain in the fuckin' arse, Billy. Why the fuck won't he let it go, eh? It's been three fuckin' years since me and your mam got together. Three fuckin' years, Billy, and he still can't accept that I've got a bigger dick than him!" He laughed again, grabbing his pants and thrusting it at Billy. This time the others didn't bother laughing with him. He stopped laughing abruptly and turned to Jimmy.

"Okay then, mate, what happens now?"

"Well, Mr. Phillips, if you all want to follow me, I'll show you the gear that you need. Not compulsory of course, but highly recommended," Jimmy

advised, reading his list and deducing that the skinhead must be Marshall's son, Billy Fisher, taking his mum's maiden name but keeping his dad's eyes. Therefore the evil little bastard had to be Tony Phillips.

It took another ten minutes for everyone to finish collecting equipment and loading pellets into guns. Jimmy had spent the time setting up his camera on a tripod and planting it out of sight in the bushes opposite the security shed. By the time he was ready, the men were all done and messing around firing pellets at each other like big, ultra-violent children. All of them had opted to wear a mask; all of them had opted not to wear combat clothes or boots. Except Kevin, that is, who was manoeuvring among them dressed head to toe in smelly green as he tried to stay close to Thompson.

"Okay," called Jimmy. "Now Marshall's base is that fort at the top of the hill. The one with the red flag. There's a four-hundred-pound bonus for whoever takes it. But Marshall has instructed me to tell you that this money will not be shared. His only rule of engagement is that you cannot simply rush his base mob-handed. There is to be no double teaming," Jimmy emphasized, though he doubted this posse of mercenaries could spell "cooperation" never mind achieve it.

"Questions?"

There were none so Jimmy blew the whistle twice. The men seemed to understand that this signified the start of the game, and they turned and strolled towards the base of the hill, dispersing as they did so. Each one looked for a place to stop, to crouch and view the objective. They surveyed routes, picking out cover offered by tires, bushes, trees or piles of wood and crap which had been draped in camouflage netting. Jimmy collected his camera from the tripod and panned the scene in wide angle. He found Jennings in his viewer, the round bouncer who was first on the list, and walked towards him as he filmed. On his way he passed Kevin, hunched behind a pile of oil drums next to Thompson.

"Will you fuck off, mate!" rasped Thompson, and Kevin shuffled back two or three feet.

Thompson glared at him over his shoulder and Kevin shrugged as if to say "It's a free country, mate." The practised thug turned back to the business in hand, shaking his head as he did so.

Jimmy was within fifteen feet of Jennings now. The doorman sat on the ground behind a large tree, already sweating and breathing heavily. Jimmy looked at him, so fat and so apparently unfit, and wondered how the hell the slob in front of him had ever managed to beat Marshall in a fight. Jennings raised his visor and wiped sweat from around his puffy eyes. He looked across at Jimmy and smiled for the camera. He waved and mouthed "hello, mum" then lowered his mask again.

No sooner had he finished adjusting its strap when three sharp splats pasted his mask yellow. Barrell-shaped Jennings panicked, shocked by a sudden loss of vision, and scrambled for what seemed an age, trying to get to his feet. He could use only one hand to push himself up from the ground, his other hand's fat fingers busy trying to clean the paint from his mask.

Jimmy jogged into position behind him and focused the camera on the back of Jennings' head, which was leaning out from behind the tree in the foreground. Then, beyond Jennings in the thick bushes, there was movement.

Marshall burst forward with incredible power. Jennings made it to his feet and ripped his mask from his face at almost the precise moment that Marshall was upon him. Marshall raised his right hand and slammed the corner of a concrete brick hard into Jennings' face. Jennings screamed and fell to the ground, once more unable to see, this time blinded by blood and torn flesh.

"Concrete fuckin' hurts, dunnit, you fat twat," spat Marshall and disappeared into the bushes once more.

Jimmy stepped around the tree, pumped, stunned and sickened by the speed and savagery of the attack he had just witnessed. He tightened his shot on what was left of Jennings face, mashed and moaning loudly from behind crimson hands that trembled as they tried to hold cheek and nose and lip together. Jennings was barely conscious and Jimmy wanted to stop and help, to rewind and call the whole thing off.

“There’ll be help along in a bit, mate. Just sit tight, yeah? Em, here’s your dosh mate, I gotta go.”

He dropped a roll of twenty-pound notes into the injured man’s lap then jogged back into the open, realising that he didn’t have long to find Taylor. Perhaps Jimmy could stop Marshall before he did any more violence, reason with him (from a safe distance) and convince him that it wasn’t too late. He could still spend his last day supping beer or banging whores like he had suggested in the pub. But whatever the outcome of that discussion, it would have to happen fast. It was obvious from the speed with which Marshall had dealt with the first name on his list that this was not going to be a long drawn-out affair.

Across the hill, tucked into their holes and hideaways, the thugs looked towards where Jennings had screamed. Jimmy picked out Taylor. He was a little further forward than most, lying in a shallow fox hole which had been excavated and shuttered with round fence posts. Taylor had turned to lie on his back when he heard the scream, and now he was propped up on his elbows, looking back down the hill towards the tree where Jennings was slumped. He couldn’t see Marshall, but Jimmy could, and he thought about shouting out a warning but couldn’t make his decision in time.

The attack on Jennings had caused the diversion the ex-Para needed to get into position. As Taylor and the others allowed their attention to focus on Jennings, Marshall scuttled unseen up the left-hand side of the hill and emerged from the woodland twenty metres above Taylor’s foxhole.

Marshall dashed low across the open ground between his cover and a sheet of timber propped up only two feet in front of where Taylor lay. He had been there less than thirty seconds.

Taylor rested his arms on the wooden posts to steady them as he lowered his right eye to the rifle sight. He scanned the fort. Seeing no sign of Marshall, Taylor tracked down the hill along the tree line. Then the sight went black. Taylor lifted his head from the gun just in time to see a size twelve Doc Martin boot stamp down on his forearm. The snap of unsupported bone spanning dirt and timber was loud and sickening and soon Taylor was screaming, flipping onto his back once more and cradling his flailing limb with his good arm. He looked up at Marshall, eyes pleading to be left alone.

"I didn't fuckin' know, Pete!" he wailed.

"Shud have fuckin' asked," replied Marshall coldly.

He raised his boot again and drove it into Taylor's left shin, piling it into the caked mud until that snapped too.

Jimmy snapped his eye away from the viewer, leaving the camera running but not really caring what it saw anymore. Even the sound of the violence was more than he could stomach.

"Marshall! Marshall!" he screamed. "Enough is enough, man!"

But Marshall wasn't in the mood for listening. He was in the zone now and spun around to focus on Tony Phillips at the base of the hill. Phillips launched his gun into the trees and turned to leave. Walking quickly he made for the cover of the first group of trees. He unfastened his face mask and dropped it casually on the ground, as though he was bored and had suddenly remembered that he had something better to do.

A blast of yellow paint hit the back of his head and he yelped. A second paintball slapped his back between the shoulder blades and Phillips turned away from its sting. While his target spun, Marshall raised his sights, placed

the cross hairs on Phillips's head and waited for his mark to rotate into view. When he could see Phillips's face, Marshall squeezed the trigger.

The evil little man hit the floor hard, clawing at the third pellet that had burst on his eye. Marshall shouldered his weapon and bounded towards him, rummaging in his jacket pocket for something as he went and producing a set of handcuffs just as he reached Phillips. He grabbed the man's hair, raised his chin and slammed his knee into his face.

"Fuck my wife, would you, you ugly little cunt," blazed Marshall.

"She was fuckin' beggin' for it, needle dick!" screamed Phillips, too proud, too stupid to keep his mouth shut.

Phillips reached for his attacker's legs but failed to grab them. Marshall pushed his face down and punched the back of Phillips's head quickly four times then dragged him towards the nearest suitable tree. All the time that Marshall wrestled and punched his victim into position, Phillips taunted.

"You never made her cum once with that tiny organ of yours, Marshall." He mumbled through his broken mouth.

"She may think it's a tiny organ pal, but that's 'cos I was playin' in a fuckin' Cathedral...now, shut the fuck up!" He punched him again, hard in the guts.

The blow drove the air from his body and Phillips softened sufficiently for Marshall to finally pull previously rigid arms backwards and cuff his wrists behind the tree. Marshall leant against the trunk.

"So, you reckon you've got a big lash then, eh?" he whispered when he had his breath back.

Phillips, now truly helpless, didn't answer.

"Well, I'm just wonderin' if I can't help you make it a little bigger for the bitch. Let's see, shall we?"

Marshall moved away from the tree and stood in front of Phillips, who had slid down the trunk as far as he could, the chain of the handcuffs caught

on a branch keeping his rump suspended eighteen inches above the ground. Marshall swung his boot and buried it hard into Phillips's groin. Phillips screamed and crossed his legs, pulling his knees up as high as he could.

"Hmmm. You know, I think we might be onto something here, shithead. Now, open wide for Dr. Peter."

Marshall grabbed the ankle of each scrabbling leg, raised and pulled them apart then swiftly launched his boot again before thighs could close. He kicked Phillips in the nuts hard and fast twice more.

"Stop! Please, Pete, stop! I'll leave her, mate, I promise I will, just please st—" Blood and saliva curdled his scream.

Before Marshall had finished venting his hate, Phillips had passed out.

From behind the pile of oil drums that he shared with Thompson, Kevin had sat and watched the carnage. He had only moved once, when Marshall had been busy dragging his wife's lover into the trees. Kevin darted out of his cover and ran up the hill, just as Jimmy was making his own mercy dash to catch up with and maybe stop Marshall. Jimmy caught Kevin in the camera and stopped in front of his pal.

"Shit, Kev, this man is a bleedin' nutter. We gotta do somethin', mate."

"Bit late for that don't you think, Jimmy? Kevin shouted in a tone that bordered on accusing.

"Anyway, I know what I'm gonna do. I'm gonna get my four hundred quid for reaching the fort and then get the hell out of here!" Kevin ranted excitedly.

Jimmy lowered the camera and pointed it at the ground, hoping that removing Kevin from the world of movies and dumping him back into reality might help him understand.

"For Christ's sake, Kev, you're not a bloody contender here! Now get back to Thompson. Maybe you can talk him into running." Jimmy wailed, amazed by his friend's lack of focus.

Finally, the gravity of the situation managed to drag the penny through Kevin's thick skull.

"Okay okay. I get you. But I doubt he'll listen to me or that you'll be able to do much to stop Marshall for that matter."

"Just go, Kev, before it's too late. Stay close to Thompson if he won't run, and when it's his turn, you just do one yeah?"

Marshall had finished in the trees and was strolling casually up the hill to the fort. He removed his mask and placed it on the hood of a burnt-out car. He grinned as he strolled past Jimmy. Jimmy focused the camera on Marshall's sweaty face.

"So far so good, eh, Jim? Now comes the tricky bit."

"Marshall, stop it, eh? These people need help and I can't just ignore that. We agreed that anythin' you do on your wish day shouldn't hurt anyone else and shit man, look what you've done!"

Marshall stopped and turned.

"And what you gonna do about it, eh? Yeah, we've got a deal all right, and unless you want your mate joining this scum in hospital, you'd better stick to your side of the bargain. Now film!"

Jimmy pointed the camera after him as he walked toward the fort, which had glided into the shot. The director stood for a moment longer and allowed his mark to shrink into the distance a little before striding after him. When Jimmy finally caught up, Marshall was at the top of the steps and entering the fort. Jimmy walked forward and climbed two treads, gaining height enough to film inside. Had he not been so terrified, Jimmy would have been pleased with the composition of the shot; Marshall's legs, large and dark, framed the scene and looking up between them, Jimmy's audience would see Billy Fisher.

Billy looked scared, backed against the far wall and held there by four bright bars of sunlight that extruded through the walls. For a few seconds,

Billy didn't move, frozen perhaps by the fear of pain. His eyes were wide and he was breathing heavily, sucking courage into his slim, wiry frame. When he felt he had enough, the young skinhead exploded, rushed forward, shouting expletives at Marshall and swinging a large tree branch above his head.

Marshall raised his arm in measured defence, and the branch snapped across it. Billy held on to the remains of his weapon and thrust it towards his father's face. Marshall grabbed, twisted and pulled. In an instant the danger was dealt with as he held his son tightly in his arms.

"Hey hey hey," Marshall whispered. "Come on now, Billy, you really don't want to do this, son. You didn't think I was gonna hurt you, did you, pal?" He held his son closer.

"Well what the fuck do you want, dad?" shouted Billy trying to pull away. "Just fuckin' let go, will ya?"

"I will, son, but only if you promise that you'll listen to what I have to say. Deal?"

Billy tried once more to wriggle away before finally accepting his father's offer with a muted "okay."

Marshall released his lad and Billy returned to the rear wall of the fort, not taking his eyes off his father for a moment.

"I'll tell you what I want, son. I want to try and make you understand a couple of things. About me, about me and your mum, and perhaps most of all, about yourself." Marshall crouched down, hands clasped between his legs.

He began by talking about how proud he had been of Billy as a boy and how hard it had been to leave him each time that he was called away to go on manoeuvres. He explained how he regretted his choices now, wished that he hadn't drifted into a career that took him away so often from the son that he loved so much. He tried to explain how bad it felt to be a father who could only experience his son's life through telephone calls and email, a father who would miss every milestone that would turn his boy into a man.

"It may surprise you, son, but these aren't choices that I made consciously. I mean, what type of man would choose to leave his family and son unprotected for weeks at a time, eh? No, these choices are made for us, mate. One day maybe you'll understand that. You'll be in an office or on a building site and you'll read on the notice board or hear in the tea shack about an opportunity, some work abroad. Good money too. You'll talk to your wife that night and you'll agree that you should do it, but that it'll only be for a while. A year or two at the most, you'll say, you know, while you save some money, get that car and decorate the kitchen maybe. You'll convince yourself that it'll be good for the kids in the long run too, and that you'll be able to give them some of the better things in life."

Marshall lowered his head and sighed.

"Ten years later you'll find yourself pissed in a pub, celebrating your birthday surrounded by a load of wankers and wishing with all your heart that your son had sent you a birthday card or called or texted you."

Billy sat down, listening to his father's words, maybe, for the first time in many years, maybe remembering some of the good times that he and his dad had shared.

"As for your mum, well, to be honest we were finished a long time before Phillips turned up. We just stopped loving each other, mate. And if anything, I guess me being away so much only dragged it out longer. Nah, the army had nothing to do with me and your mum splitting, pal. That was just people."

"So why'd you break his balls today, then?" asked Billy.

"Never did like him. Nasty little bastard. He'd have been at the top of my list anyway." Both men laughed together.

"As for you, well I gotta tell you, Billy, that I am more than a little concerned. I keep my eye on what you get up to, you know, oh yes, and recently ... well, let's say that I have heard some shit that I ain't too pleased about. You were

involved in happy-slapping that paki down in Longsight, weren't you?"

Billy said nothing but there was a smirk on his face.

"It may seem like a laugh, Billy, and sure your mates'll all tell you how hard you are and how much respect you've got but, believe me, son, when the filth are climbing all over it, your mates will evaporate faster than a bottle of poppers at a gay wedding. Now I know what you've seen here today, and you could be forgiven for thinking that what I did was gratuitous and evil, but you'll understand soon enough why I did it. Suffice to say they all had it coming. But what I don't want, Billy, is for you to go the way I did. Life's for enjoying, not for taking. Every time you twat someone for no reason, even if you don't damage them bad, you knock a piece of confidence out of 'em and you replace it with fear. They won't walk in the streets after dark anymore to collect a DVD for their mam. They won't let their kids play in the park or let their wife go for a drink with the girls. Long after the bruises have gone, Billy, they're still affected. You do this each time you attack someone unprovoked, son. You steal a piece of their life, and that ain't right."

Billy continued to sit and stare at his father in complete silence. Eventually he looked past him and at Jimmy, who was still filming from the steps. Billy stood and walked towards the door.

"Can I have my four hundred quid now?"

Jimmy reached into his jeans pocket and pulled out a bundle. He offered it, still filming, and Billy stepped past his dad and into the light to take it. He didn't stop, just climbed down the stairs and walked down the hill to the road.

"Just think about what I've said, Billy!" shouted Marshall. "And remember, I love you, son," he added.

Billy stopped and turned to look back.

"What right do you have?" he called. "Exactly what gives you the right to tell me how to live my life after all this fuckin' time, eh? You're a quitter and

a fuckin' coward, and I hate you!" He turned to run the rest of the way down the slope without waiting for an answer.

Jimmy continued to film, marveling at Kevin's insight when he had named their little venture "Quitters." He wondered whether or not Marshall might have changed his mind about suicide if Billy had perhaps stopped and offered a hug or shared a few words of reconciliation instead of pushing his dad aside.

"Well, at least I tried," said Marshall as he looked at the camera and shrugged.

This simple action confirmed to Jimmy that Billy was right. His dad was a quitter, ready and willing to accept physical pain (as much as you could give him), but put him in a situation where he might have to swallow pride or arbitrate emotions over a prolonged period and he would run a mile. Or jump off a bridge. Yep, Marshall was a true quitter and his son had him sussed, instinctively knowing that a manly hug or a sincere "maybe see you around then, dad?" would last only as long as the moment that it took to deliver it. After that, it would be business as usual for Marshall.

"What the fuck's up with him, Jimmy?" Kev asked as he watched Billy's angry retreat

"You'll have to buy the DVD, mate," Jimmy sighed.

"But isn't it time you weren't here?" he added, panning the shot over Kevin's shoulder and zooming in on Thompson, who was pounding up the hill shouting Marshall's name and removing goggles and gloves.

"What? And miss the death match of the century? Don't think so, pal. I'll just keep my distance and if Marshall starts to get on top, I'll do one then."

Kevin, apparently having already forgotten more than he had learnt about Marshall's ability to inflict pain, backed away from the steps and stood behind the camera allowing Marshall to descend. When he had planted his feet firmly on the floor, Marshall rolled his head and clicked his neck.

Thompson had slowed his gallop to a walk, wisely deciding to get some breath back before engaging the fort's defender. Twenty feet away from Marshall, he stopped completely and for a ridiculous moment the two men simply stared at each other in hard silence, acting out some hammy gun fight in some timber-fronted old-west town.

"Lads, lads! Come on now, eh? You've got nothing to prove here now, have you? Please, let's just call it a day, shall...?"

"Just film!" barked Marshall, flicking his head towards Kevin before facing front again.

"So, just me and you now, is it, Pete?"

"Seems to be, Thommo, seems to be. Just like the old days, eh?" grinned Marshall.

"Aye, just like the old days. 'Cept back then we'd both be wearin' blue and not this fuckin' carki shit," replied Thompson, finally losing the stare-out and lowering his eyes.

He held his arms open, hands hip height, and beckoned at Marshall with a "come and get it" flick of the fingers.

Marshall delayed no more. The ex-Para gritted his teeth and snarled, tensing his upper body with a vigour that shook thick blue veins from his neck and forearms. Thompson watched him, calm and still.

"He must be one hard mutha, Jimmy. Shit, if I was him, I'd be running like fuck!" marveled Kevin.

"Me too, fella. Speaking of which, shouldn't you be running like fuck anyway by now?"

Kevin thought for a moment, considered the distance that he would have to cover to reach the safety of his scooter and made his decision.

"Nah. I'll be all right. He'll be knackered after this, if he wins that is, and I'll be off and away before he gets his breath back and—oooh this is gonna hurt!" Kevin squirmed as he tucked his head into Jimmy's jacket.

Marshall released the tension from his shoulders and neck and sprang forward, pumping his arms and accelerating at a very impressive rate towards Thompson. Thompson crouched slightly, spread his feet and clenched his fists, bracing himself for impact, but when it came the hit was too hard and both men were on the ground, rolling down the hill as they grappled, stopping only when they had ploughed into a pile of tyres and junk. As the tangle of bodies came to rest, Thompson found himself on top. Ignoring the short sharp punches that Marshall was landing on his back, he wrestled and twisted himself around until he had his attacker pinned. Only then, his target secured between his legs, did he cock his head back, three kilograms of bone and brain locked and loaded.

"You ready for this, you bastard!" Thompson shouted as he clamped his huge hands either side of Marshall's face and pulled it into range.

Jimmy zoomed in tight on Thompson's mad grin. He wanted to close his eyes and let the camera watch the face-breaking head butt on his behalf, but for the shot to work his hand would have to guide the camera's eye.

Thompson stopped grinning and pulled the trigger. Mercifully for Jimmy, whose reactions had been dampened by his lack of enthusiasm, Thompson's head snapped out of shot and by the time Jimmy found it again contact had been made.

"Fuckin' hell, Jimmy!" cried Kevin. "Now that is sick, man! Turn the bleedin' camera off, for Christ's sake. Nobody wants to see that."

"No way, Kev. Okay, it ain't what I was expecting, but think about it, neither will the audience. This is good shit, Kev. Sick, but good shit for the DVD nevertheless."

He zoomed out a little so that the two men could be seen on the screen from the waist up. They were kissing, deep and long, hard man's mouth on hard man's mouth, stubble scratching stubble.

"Anyway, isn't it time you weren't here? I'd do one before Marshall comes

up for air.”

“Fuck yes! Nearly forgot. Right, I’m off. Catch you later, mate.”



Then it struck him, the situation that he was in, and as the facts accumulated in his mind, the conclusion Kevin drew froze him to the spot.

Fact: Marshall had a “friend,” someone who had obviously been there to back him up in the event that things had gone wrong, and Marshall and his friend were now between him and his scooter.

Fact: Marshall and his friend liked a bit of the other, and from the way they were sucking each other’s face, they were horny too. More than this, though, they fancied him, or at least that’s the impression that he had been given by each of them, and those light quips that had been tossed around earlier, piss-taking or not, suddenly had incredible weight.

Fact: Marshall and his friend were on their feet and staring at him.

Kevin backed away slowly. He didn’t dare turn, even momentarily, to survey an escape route. It was a mistake and he had only taken five steps when his left heel clipped the bottom step of the fort ladder causing him to fall backwards onto it. Marshall and Thompson made their move, sprinting forward. All Kevin had time to do was turn and scramble up the steps and disappear into the darkness.

“Jimmy! You gotta help me, Jimmy. Don’t let them rape me, for fuck’s sake do something!”

His friend’s words became muffled as they scrambled through gaps between the fort’s timbers, but they were no less frantic for that. Jimmy smiled at Marshall as he passed him to join Thompson who had already climbed in through the door and pinned Kevin to the floor. Marshall winked and spoke loudly enough for Kevin to hear.

“Keep the camera rollin’, Jimmy my boy. I’m gonna teach this feisty young bitch a thing or two about respect for the Paras. Oh, and maybe show her a thing or two about butt fuckin’ along the way.”

Marshall laughed loudly as he raised his huge frame into the fort.

“Pucker up, Kev, it’s time for some man lovin’,” he mocked, and Kevin screamed again.

Chapter 14

Kevin didn't speak to Jimmy for almost two days after the paint balling. On the following Monday he didn't acknowledge his flatmate's existence at all, even when Jimmy told him about a new text they had received from a potential Quitter, Dianne. By the time Tuesday had almost given up, Kevin thanklessly accepted a cup of tea and a bacon sandwich from Jimmy when he returned from work. Even then, it was a good forty minutes before he actually spoke.

"Forget about that Dianne bird, she's dead," he said coldly.

"Dead? Hmmm. So she managed it then. How?"

Four minutes passed, each of them staring at the television.

"Overdose."

"Overdose? In a hospital?"

Another two minutes dragged by.

"There's hell on at work over it. Police all over the place," said Kevin.

Now it was Jimmy's turn to be quiet. He gathered his phone from the coffee table and diligently swapped SIM cards. He scrolled through the inbox, found Dianne's message and deleted it. He sat back and resumed watching the telly, more relaxed now that he had broken any connection between himself and the death of a woman that was being investigated. And then it struck him.

"Kev, the card! What if the they find the card!"

Kevin didn't look away from the TV. He reached into his shirt pocket, pulled out a card and tossed it at Jimmy.

Jimmy looked at it for a minute then screwed the card up and threw it in the general direction of the waste bin. It hit the wall, bounced once and

landed in the middle of the kitchen doorway. Kevin looked away from the television and scowled at Jimmy. Jimmy could not only sense his friend's displeasure but his landlord's too. He got up, collected the crumpled card and placed it in the bin on his way back to the sofa.

"Nice one, Kev. If they'd found that, well, who knows. Anyway, well done mate, that's quick thinkin' that is. Nice one." Jimmy spoke in tones full of genuine gratitude and praise.

But it wasn't enough for Kevin, and so Jimmy returned to the television for another five minutes of silence, both men now adamant that the other would cave first and that only then would they discuss that which they needed to discuss: Marshall's punishment of Kevin. Finally, Jimmy buckled.

"Awe come on, Kev, this is stupid, mate. How long can we keep this up, eh?"

"Stupid! STUPID! No. I'll tell you what's stupid, Jimmy." shouted Kevin.

He stood and turned toward Jimmy, towering over him as Jimmy sank into his seat.

"Stupid is setting up your pal for a fake arse rape, Jimmy. Especially when you know how fuckin' much he hates the thought of that sick shit. Stupid is puttin' your best mate in a position where he is shittin' himself so bad that he's prepared to do anything to get away, to kill someone if he has to, Jimmy, 'cos he thinks that prison or death would be preferable to taking cock up his arse. That's stupid my friend!"

Jimmy wasted no time in responding. He had had two days to prepare his defence and delivered it just as forcefully as he had been attacked.

"Listen Kev, believe me, I know how bad it was for you, mate, but I had no choice. Marshall was gonna bust you bad. He told me the day before when he phoned me up to confirm his wish day. He told me what he had in mind for you, Kev and it wasn't good. He was gonna hurt you proper, Kev,

believe me. It was only when he told me that his mate Thompson was gonna be there to back him up that I thought about the fake rape thing. And he bought it, Kev. It took a bit of persuading but he bought it. Now you tell me, Kev, what would you prefer? Take the beatin' of your life and spend the next six weeks on your ward eatin' through a straw, or have five minutes of utter terror and walk away? Now I know it ain't much of a choice, mate, but I think I made the right decision for you, really I do."

Kevin shrivelled back into his seat and resumed staring at the television.

"You could have told me, that's all. You were right, but that's not the point. You should have told me, Jimmy. I could have acted scared."

"Couldn't take the risk, mate. You know Marshall, the vicious bastard can smell fear. It's his job. If he had even suspected that you were fakin' it, then you and me both would have been right in the shit. No, it had to be that way, mate. Sorry, but that's how it is."

And there it was.

"I accept your apology," said Kev.

"Hold on a minute, Kev, I never said I was sor..." Jimmy stopped, leaving his retraction hanging between them.

"So how about we turn the TV on now?"

"Cool. The remote's next to your leg," said Jimmy as he leaned forward and hit the power button.

The telly kicked into life and Kevin flicked through the channels until he found their favourite Tuesday night viewing, *Wife Swap*. As the abandoned and floundering partners in telly land bitched and moaned, Jimmy and Kevin slipped effortlessly back into their routine.

"So, it's a big day tomorrow, then."

"Too right it is, Kev. Our first suicide and I must admit, I'm kacking it. I just wish we knew a bit more about how it was going to happen. What d'you reckon he'll do?"

"I dunno, Jim, but he said watch the sky, right?"

"Yeah, watch the sky. That was it exactly," Jimmy said, smiling as the gentle black geezer in Dudley welcomed his "wife" for the week; a tattooed, foul-mouthed skinhead girl from Croydon.

"Well it can really only be one thing then. He's gonna jump from a plane," said Kevin confidently, offering the facts that proved his theory.

"He was in the Paras, right? So I wouldn't have thought he'd have much problem findin' someone to get him up there. Once he's jumped, all he has to do is leave his chute in the bag and—splat. Ground one, Marshall nil. Game over."

"Hmmm. I was thinking the same, Kev. Which makes me wonder how best to film it. It won't be easy, you know. Let's say it's cloudy tomorrow and all we do is hear a plane. First we know about it is when he drops through the bottom of a cloud. It's going to be hard to pick him up in the viewer and track him to the ground."

Jimmy ran through this worst-case scenario in his mind. The low cloud, the tall tree to the left of the balcony (which had to obscure at least a third of the cemetery view) and from somewhere in the sky a dark hum as the plane approached. Jimmy would almost certainly have to have his camera set up in wide angle and sitting on the tripod. If he used the remote to operate the zoom, then he could more easily track and zoom simultaneously once Marshall appeared, rocketing through the cloud base. Add to that the tension and the adrenalin, and the task of capturing clean, explicit images of a man falling to his death became altogether challenging. But what struck most about the image and events that Jimmy imagined was their similarity to the footage of the man falling from the Zeppelin that had set all this in motion. Perhaps the reason why the moment of death hadn't been captured on film was nothing to do with long-forgotten press ethics but the difficulties of filming such a thing.

"You'll be fine, mate. Just as long as you keep your eye on the sky and off the skirt," Kevin reassured.

"Huh?"

"The bird you puked on. She's here for lunch tomorrow, isn't she?"

"Oh, fuck!" Jimmy cried, and to his list of things that could go wrong (two items at present: low cloud and big tree) he added "spectacular tits."

"I had completely forgotten about Wanda. Shit, mate, I haven't got anything in to eat or drink or nothing."

Jimmy was already up and panicking. He dashed to the kitchen and took a quick inventory of the fridge and cupboards.

"Nothing. Not a bleeding thing! Unless her idea of fodder on a first date is cat food. And by the way, Kev, why have we got five tins of Go-Cat in the cupboard when we don't have a cat?"

Jimmy thought back over the last week's menu and recalled a rather chewy and strange smelling lasagne that Kevin had served him three days ago. He glared at Kevin as he slung the tins in the bin.

"On second thought, don't answer that. Right, now here's the plan. It's your day off tomorrow, yeah? We'll get up early, say nine o'clock, and I'll give you a list of shit to buy. You can go shopping. I'll stay here, tidy the place and set the table up on the balcony. I'll organize the camera too, somewhere discreet but at hand if you know what I mean. If you get back before eleven then that should give me time to prepare the meal. I can leave you to add any finishing touches while I go and get Wanda on the scooter. Sound okay?"

"Sounds like a plan, my man." Kev smiled.

Chapter 15

The menu that Jimmy decided on for his lunch date was necessarily simple but had a flare that impressed Kevin immensely. Garlic bread topped with sun-dried tomatoes presented next to a Greek salad in the centre of the table. Shell fish too, scattered on a bed of cress; something to pick at while Jimmy was in the kitchen preparing three bowls of mussels (pre-packed, of course, and taking only a couple of minutes to warm through, but Jimmy insisted that he should be seen shaking a pan about). There would be three finger bowls, each with a slice of lemon, and when she had finished and sat back to relish and marvel at Jimmy's gastronomic wizardry, he would offer Wanda Greek yoghurt topped with fresh orange slices all drizzled with honey.

"I hope she likes fish," mumbled Kevin as he scanned the Tesco fridges.

Fortunately, next to almost every item on the list, Jimmy had written an alternative ingredient, so when the Tesco girl said that she didn't have any lobster tails, rather than panic, Kevin simply took the tiger prawns instead. Jimmy was a good organizer, no doubt. Kevin arrived back at the flat with twenty minutes to spare and was extremely pleased with himself.

"Got the lot, mate. Oh, except for the lobster. Had to get prawns instead."

"Sound. Stick it all in the kitchen, mate. I'll be in in a minute. Just gotta finish up out here."



Jimmy continued dressing the small table which he had placed in the sunshine on the balcony. It looked very impressive. He had covered a

collapsible table (normally only dragged out from under Kev's bed to stash booze at parties) with a white sheet. In the centre of that he had placed the wine ("a very agreeable Rosé, sir" he had been assured) in a foil-covered, ice-filled planter. There were three place settings, each with a wine glass, a white side plate and a neatly folded blue paper serviette. Jimmy had also toyed with the idea of a single flower (arranged in an old vinegar bottle that he had found) and although it had looked okay, he thought twice and removed it, deciding that it was probably a bit over the top for a first date. The three dining chairs he had borrowed from his neighbour were in position; two of them on the balcony, pushed close up to the railing, facing each other and the third, which would be his, placed so that it straddled the doorframe between the balcony and the room. Partly this was due to space limitations but mainly because it allowed Jimmy to stand the video camera innocently on its tripod next to the television, tucked away but within easy reach.

He stood back to admire the setting for a moment. It looked very sophisticated, he decided, and wouldn't have looked out of place in even the most posh of holiday brochures, his white table set among the lush, green tree canopy, framed by a warm blue sky. All it needed now was a beautiful smiling girl and a handsome boy. Oh, and of course his divvy mate screaming and pointing at a maniac committing suicide in the cemetery beyond.

"Perfect."

In the kitchen Kevin had unpacked everything and laid the food out across the surfaces. Now he needed direction.

"Okay, Kev, open them tomatoes and put some on the bread, would you? When you've done that, chuck a bit of cress in that glass bowl, drain the shrimps and throw them in. I'll handle the rest. Fuck, is that the time?"

Jimmy spent five minutes putting the Greek salad together, dusted it with black pepper—any excuse to use his stainless steel electric pepper mill which was about the only thing of any value that he had taken from his

relationship with Wendy—then left Kevin meticulously placing shrimps among the cress. While it was frustrating for Jimmy to watch Kevin think about the placement of each one, he said nothing. Kev had been a star and a real help all morning. Jimmy took a shower, dressed and in less than ten minutes stood at the kitchen door with a crash helmet in each hand. Kevin was still placing prawns.

“Okay, fella, I’m off to get Wanda. When you’re done, stick the gear on the table, would you? I’ll sort the mussels out when I get back.”

Jimmy returned with Wanda twenty-five minutes later, a full thirty minutes before Marshall would leave the planet. Kevin opened the door for them, said a quick hello and stepped back into the kitchen. Wanda and Jimmy stood for a moment longer near the doorway as Jimmy explained to her what the flat had to offer. Naturally, they would have been forced together by the narrow landing immediately outside the flat door, but they remained close once inside, in spite of the space available to them.

“And what are we eating, Kevin?” Wanda asked, peering into the kitchen and smacking her lips loudly.

“Well, it’s mainly stuff that Jimmy has made so he’ll tell you better. I made the prawns though.”

“Hmmm, I love prawns. Can I pinch one?”

“Sure. They’re on the table. We’re dining al Tesco today,” he joked, pointing at the table and the mound of blue and white striped bags on the floor by the fridge.

As Wanda left to get a shrimp, Jimmy came into the kitchen.

“What d’ya think, Kev? She’s a darlin’, isn’t she?” he whispered in Kev’s ear.

“Seems like a nice enough girl, bit on the short side for me, though. And I wouldn’t get too excited ‘cos...”

“Oooh, a present!” shouted Wanda from the balcony.

Jimmy looked at Kevin.

"What the fuck is she talkin' about, Kevin?"

Kevin smiled knowingly but said nothing.

"Kev, what the fuck have you done?" Jimmy hissed and grabbed Kevin's collar.

"Can I open it now or do I have to wait until we're sat down, Jimmy?" called Wanda.

Kevin began to snigger and Jimmy released him.

"Um, I think it would be better if you leave it on the side and perhaps open it when you get home, Wanda. It's silly I know, but I hate people opening gifts in front of me, you know, in case they don't like it." He snarled at Kevin again.

Whatever the "present" was, if Kevin had gone to the trouble of buying and wrapping something then it must be one hell of a bad-taste joke. If Jimmy could get his hands on it during lunch then he could "lose" it, replace it with something of a similar size then call later that afternoon to say that he had "found" her present.

"But that's not fair! You can't surprise me with a beautifully wrapped gift and then say I can't open it! Don't be such a tease!" Wanda pleaded.

"I agree, Wanda. That would spoil the gesture, wouldn't it?" shouted Kevin.

"What the fuck is it, Kevin?" mouthed Jimmy.

"Okay, Wanda. But I'm sure you can at least wait until we're all there, yeah?" Jimmy called after a moment.

Wanda yelped excitedly. Jimmy shook his head in defeat and turned back to the business of preparing shellfish while trying to prise the gag out of Kevin's mouth.

"Right, you twat, you win. But at least tell me what's in the box so I have half a chance of this relationship lasting longer than the fuckin' salad, you wanker!"

Kevin laughed again and Jimmy rattled his pan angrily. The mussels were ready. Jimmy took them off the heat and scooped them into the bowls while Kevin looked on, ignoring each of Jimmy's frequent and demanding stares. Kevin followed Jimmy to the table carrying one of the bowls and a basket of crispy baguettes. Just before Wanda came into view he whispered two syllables into Jimmy's ear.

"Dil-do."

Jimmy almost dropped his mussels but managed to land them on the table. When he looked up he was looking at Wanda. She was squeezing and feeling the mystery, twelve-inch-long gift in her hands, from flat round base to bulbous tip.

"What the hell can it be, Wanda? You are full of surprises, my friend," said Kevin as he slapped Jimmy on the back.

"I don't know. But I can't wait any longer."

Wanda began to pick at the wrapping. Jimmy cringed.

"This is so exciting, isn't it Jimmy? Hey, I've got an idea, Wanda, why don't we try and guess what it is by asking Jimmy yes or no questions? We could have three each. What d'ya reckon?"

The girl stopped picking, having managed to expose only a small section of black plastic at the base. She smiled at Jimmy warmly.

"Cool! Me first, though. Okay, is it something that only a woman would use, Jimmy?" She passed the parcel to Kev and reached for a chunk of bread.

"Yes," Jimmy replied quickly, desperate to move things along and finish this.

"Good question, Wanda! Okay, my turn." Kevin giggled, feigning excitement. He turned and stared at Jimmy while he examined the mystery object through the wrapping. He slid his hand up and down slowly, an innocent enough gesture to someone who didn't know what was inside but to Jimmy, the mime was as obvious as the trouble he was in.

"Does it need batteries, Jim?"

"Yes. It needs batteries, Kev. Supplied, I hope." Jimmy scowled.

"And is it something practical or just for fun?" added Wanda, snatching her turn back.

"Ahaaa!" exclaimed Jimmy. "The questions have to have yes or no answers! That isn't a yes or no question, Wanda, so I'm afraid you lose, which means that you have to give me the present back until another time! Sorry, but them's the rules, Wanda."

Jimmy reached across the table to snatch the present back but Kevin was too quick for him.

"Bollocks, Jimmy. Just answer the question and don't be such a spoilsport. Is it for fun, yes or no?" demanded Kevin.

"Yes," sighed Jimmy.

"Right. Still my turn. Now let me think ... is it something that a girl would use every day? Well, I say girl but I guess your mum or even your grandma could use it too, right Jimmy?"

Jimmy kicked Kevin under the table and Kevin yelled out, leaving Wanda looking a little confused.

"Sorry mate, I sometimes kick out like that when I'm thinkin' hard. It's an involuntary thing. God knows what I might do if I was really stressed. Let's just hope that you never find out, eh Kev?" Jimmy spat.

"Now, getting back to your question, I guess that would have to be a yes, although I would advise against daily use, especially for old people," he added, matter-of-factly.

"Hmmm. This is my last question, right?"

Wanda prised another mussel from its shell and thought about her question while she chewed it.

"Just let me recap. It's for women, of any age. It would be used alone, perhaps daily and for fun mainly—and what else?—oh yes, it takes batteries."

"Yep. That's about it up to now," confirmed Kevin trying so hard not to laugh that he had to pretend to choke on a piece of shrimp.

"Okay. Here goes. Do I have to be wet to use it?" she asked.

Kevin lost it. A burst of laughter forced his mouth wide open. Wanda watched him as he struggled to recover his composure, her forehead furrowed by puzzlement.

"What's so funny, Kevin? What have I said? It could be something that you use in the shower or the bath, couldn't it, smart arse?"

"Oh, I'm not laughing at the question, Wanda, really I'm not. It is such a fuckin' good question, isn't it, Jimmy? No, I'm laughing at something else. So anyway, Jimmy, does she have to be wet to use it?"

"No. You don't have to be wet, Wanda."

Kevin sat back, slapped two hands on the table and painted his face with dramatic disbelief.

"Are you sure, Jimmy? Are you sure that Wanda wouldn't be wet when she uses this thing that you have bought her?"

"Yes, I'm sure! She wouldn't necessarily be wet! Now ask your last question so we can get on with the meal?"

"Okay, okay. Chill, will ya, it's only a game after all. Last question coming up. Would Wanda have to grind or shake it about when she's using it?"

"Yes, I guess she would to get the most out of it. So Kevin, any ideas what it might be?"

"I think I know!" shouted Wanda suddenly, and her pretty red nails began clawing at the gift wrap on her lap with the savagery of a cat skinning a mouse.

"Aren't you going to have a guess, Wanda? I thought that we—" but Kev was too late.

The wrapping was shredded and on the table before he could finish.

"Oh," Wanda said quietly, and her mood swung from eager excitement to

something else that she struggled to hide behind a half smile.

Jimmy thought that Wanda's expression looked a bit like disappointment but somehow "disappointed" didn't describe her fully. Was she sickened, upset, offended? Jimmy couldn't tell but he felt obliged to speak.

"Look, I'm sorry if you don't appreciate the joke, Wanda, but..."

"Joke?"

"Yes, and not a very good one either. It was really just meant as a bit of an ice breaker but I can see now that perhaps it was in bad taste. I hope you aren't too angry with..."

Jimmy stopped in mid-sentence as Wanda placed her new electric pepper grinder—Jimmy's old one—on the table.

"Angry? I'm not angry, Jimmy. It's just that I already have one very similar to this. Sorry. I don't mean to seem ungrateful, but I'm not very good at hiding my feelings when it comes to presents. I think I get too excited. But don't feel bad, it's a lovely thought and you weren't to know."

To emphasize her apology, she pressed the button and ground black dust over her plate.

The grinder growled as it did its thing and Jimmy mouthed "wanker" to Kevin, silent and smiling, congratulating him on his prank.

When the growling had stopped, a soft hum remained. Kevin looked east and skyward towards the source of the noise and found it just above the spire of the church; a small single-prop plane was approaching.

"Fuck, Jimmy, Marshall's here!"

"Marshall?" said Wanda, peering into the distance to where Kevin was pointing.

"Yeah, Marshall. It's, uh, a type of light aircraft. I'm, er, into planes and, well, there aren't many of these knocking about these days," explained Jimmy.

He turned to Kevin.

"You know what, Kevin, I think I'll film this one. You never know when we're gonna see another one in the air, do we? Now, where the hell did I put my camera?"

Kevin leaned behind him and, without even looking, twisted his arm around the door to grab the tripod and camera.

"Here it is, mate."

Jimmy took the equipment from him and set it up on the corner of the balcony. He plugged in the cable remote and adjusted the viewfinder so that he could see the image more easily without bending too much. It didn't take long for him to find the plane. He hit 'record' and zoomed in.

"She's a beauty, isn't she, Kev?"

"Sure is, Jimmy. Them Marshalls are a sight to see, aren't they?"

"So what's so special about them then?" asked Wanda.

"Oh, nothing really. Look, Jimmy, there's someone climbing out under the wing! Must be one of them parachute dudes, eh? Hey, wouldn't that be good to film?"

Kevin pointed at the screen then looked up at the plane, but it was still too far away to see any detail. He looked back at the small screen that Jimmy was studying while he tracked the action. It could be seen clearly now. Marshall had clambered out underneath the wing of the plane and was preparing to jump. Jimmy zoomed out a touch and grabbed the tilt handle of the tripod ready to follow Marshall's death jump. Marshall waved and instinctively Kevin waved back, turning his gesture into a head scratch the moment he realized what he had done.



High in the sky Marshall was thinking. Not about dying—he had thought enough about death recently having been surrounded by it for so

much of his life and, indeed, even caused it on a few occasions—but about life; his own life. He wondered if he would be jumping to his death if he had experienced more love and less hate over the years. Would his nightmares have found him and chased him all the way to the edge if he had had more dreams to hide in? If his life had kept even some of its promises instead of eroding away certainties with a constant stream of lies, would he be quitting today? Marshall wasn't sure, but he did know that of all the things that he despised about his life, the thing he hated most was the uncertainty that had dogged it.

Marshall hadn't always felt this way though. There had been a time when he'd wanted to believe in life's promises. He had cherished those that his wife had made to him for example, but the slut hadn't. He had believed in the love of his son, but that had failed on almost the only occasion that it had been challenged. He had trusted friendships as well; the promises of pals who offered their lifelong companionship one day only to disappear in a ball of fire and noise the next. So when the army, the only rock-solid certainty in his life, rejected him and locked him up for simply doing his job, Marshall finally let go.

That was the day Peter Marshall decided that the only true constant in his life was loss, and that was the day he decided he didn't want it anymore. He took his left hand from the strut and waved to the camera.

"Fuck 'em!" he shouted, released his right hand and began his final descent.



Kevin and Jimmy watched the screen and each took a sharp breath as Marshall disconnected from the plane.

"This is it, Jimmy, this is it!" shouted Kevin excitedly.

They were both engrossed, staring at the small screen, watching Marshall pick up speed while expertly adjusting his posture to prevent the streaming air from twisting him into a spin. All the time Jimmy tilted the camera and tracked Marshall diving to the ground.

Then, without warning, Marshall disappeared from view.

"You've lost him, Jimmy! Find him, quick!" urged Kevin.

Jimmy looked away from the screen and into the sky to get a reference. He needn't have panicked because he found Marshall immediately, swinging casually underneath the parachute that had just opened and snatched him from the shot like a puppet at the end of the show. Only this time the show hadn't even started. Jimmy pointed the camera at Marshall, zoomed out a little and turned to Kevin.

"Bastard's bottled it, Kev. He's changed his fuckin' mind, the wanker!"

"What the hell is going on here, Jimmy? Something isn't..."

Wanda's thunder was stolen by a sound that blasted through them and shook the windows of the flat. All three cowered together, crouched to protect vulnerable guts, arms wrapped around precious heads. When the detonation had dissipated and only the echo of it remained ringing in their ears, they straightened and looked out across the cemetery. No one spoke.

In the clear blue sky where Marshall had been was now a ball of black smoke, slowly spinning itself out. Through it, Marshall's tattered parachute flapped down like the sad flag of a fallen army drifting across an empty battlefield. There were other, heavier things in the sky too, falling through long arcs to join the kindred bones of the cemetery graves below.

As body parts rained, office workers gathered sandwiches and drinks and ran for cover, leaving the gravesides of dead people that they lunched with but had never met. Just below the balcony, a distraught old woman tugged at Fifi's lead, gently asking her fluffed and pampered poodle to drop the leg that she had found. Fifi wasn't listening though; years of baths and

bows had never managed to erase the fact that Fifo was an animal, a bone-crunching, flesh-tearing dog.

"Did that just happen?" asked Wanda "Did that parachutist just blow up? Did he hit a power line or something?"

"I don't know, Wanda," Jimmy lied, wondering when she would finally get round to asking him about his part in all this.

"I'd better get you back to work, though. It's nearly one o'clock," Jimmy continued solemnly.

"Tidy all this up while I'm gone would you, Kev?"

"No way, Jimmy, I ain't doin' it on my own! Why the fuck should you get off scot-free? You're just as involved as I am and anyway, I'd puke if I had—"

"The food, Kev, the food! Just tidy the table!" Jimmy interrupted, glaring at Kevin and worried that his friend's outburst had implicated him even further in Wanda's mind.

Jimmy took a moment to calm and then turned back to Wanda.

"You ready to go, then?"

She didn't answer, simply collected her bag, helmet and present and followed Jimmy through the lounge. As Jimmy opened the front door for her she stopped, held out the pepper mill and asked Jimmy if he would tuck it into his pocket.

"You know what I was thinking earlier, Jimmy?" she asked.

Jimmy shook his head slowly from side to side, deciding that it would be better to wait for the question than jump in with a rapid response that might unearth more truth than she needed.

"I was thinking that this present that you bought me was a dildo."

Wanda smiled and squeezed past Jimmy to make her way into the hall beyond the doorway. She stopped at the top of the stairs, turned and winked.

"Pity I was wrong."

Jimmy stood and watched her descend the stairs. Did she really just say that? He replayed the last few moments and concluded that he had indeed heard Wanda tell him that she wished that he had bought her a sex toy. Jimmy made a mental note and added another word to the list of things that he liked about Wanda: intelligent, funny, beautiful, ambitious. And now smutty.

"Fuck, am I in trouble." He mumbled to himself as he followed the girl that he loved out into the street.

Chapter 16

On the television, the moment of Marshall's death was vivid. The zoom on Jimmy's camera was far-reaching and the tripod kept the image clean and sharp, Marshall's left hand fumbling near his belt and yanking at the grenade pin as he drifted five hundred feet above the ground. Seconds later a madly grinning Marshall was ripped apart. Weirdly, Marshall's screen death was silent. His arms and legs parted from his torso without a murmur and through the clean bright flash the strings of his parachute could be seen turning on him, no longer his saviour, tightening around his neck and decapitating him as the canopy was punched full of air. The explosion that did this, that wrenched Marshall's body apart, took almost another second to cover the distance to the camera before it could announce to the world what it had done. When it arrived, roaring with pleasure, it shook the screen and stressed the amplifiers.

Jimmy and Kevin watched the images over and over, not only out of morbid fascination—Jimmy had been right about the compelling nature of witnessing Death at work—but also because they needed to edit. After more than an hour of debate and rewind, they finally agreed on the sound track that would accompany Marshall off the planet.

"That really works, Jimmy. Really cool. Fits perfect, mate, nice one," said Kev sitting back having watched the finished article.

"One more time then bed, eh? It's been a busy day."

Jimmy pressed play and Marshall appeared clinging to the plane. The crisp clean guitar riff of *Vertigo* began to play as Edge picked the intro. Bono sang about "lights going out" just as Marshall jumped. From here on, the phrasing was almost perfect and Jimmy had needed to do little or

nothing to the speed of the film to make it fit. As the break in the song came, Marshall disappeared from shot and when the chorus began he was back, swinging almost in rhythm. The music added to the tension and as the song built, Marshall pulled his pin to begin the countdown to an explosion of fire and guitar. The whole sequence was very powerful indeed.

“Cool. That’s a wrap then, my boy,” Kev said, raising his tin of Stella and adding, “To Peter Marshall, may he rot in hell.”

Marshall had been a violent, evil bastard in life and Jimmy saw no reason why he should have to pretend otherwise just because the piece of shit was dead. He raised his drink in agreement.

“One down, four to go. Right, let’s do one.”

The lads left the couch and were almost in their bedrooms when the phone buzzed on the lounge table. They looked at each other to see who might be interested in checking the text. It only took a moment for them to decide that neither of them was and that it could wait until the morning; organizing suicides was tiring business.

Chapter 17

"Four times did you say?"

"Yep. Four times," the quiet man confirmed, oddly proud of the number of times he had tried to commit suicide.

Fifty-five-year-old Darren Howard looked head to toe one of life's losers, and as he sat nursing his pint opposite Jimmy and Kevin—actually his second; he had knocked his first one from the table while reaching for the ashtray—he oozed failure. He had long greasy hair, dragged over to cover his bald head, and from time to time strips of it flopped down onto spectacles that had been repaired in at least three places that Jimmy could see. When this happened, Darren lifted it back into position by dragging a fat, grubby hand across his forehead. The clothes he wore were third-hand tat which looked to be begged and borrowed from charity shops and doss houses. They were so dated that as he had approached their table Kevin had joked with Jimmy.

"Where do you think that bloke's going, 1973?" he had whispered.

Howard had noticed Jimmy sniggering, which had made Jimmy feel bad until he realized there was no reason for the man to dress like a tramp as he was far from destitute; he had a job, a good one too, in a local quarry.

"Four times, eh? Well, how come you haven't managed it yet, then?" Jimmy was concerned that perhaps the man was simply crying out for attention.

That would explain the clothes too.

"Oh, I'm serious about it, if that's what you mean. Very. It's just a combination of bad luck and my own fears I guess. You see, I want to die, but I can't stand the thought of pain, if you know what I mean. I've tried hanging, which someone told me was meant to be almost peaceful, but I tell

you, it fuckin' isn't. I was kicking and thrashing about so much that the hook came out of the ceiling. Terrifying that was, I wouldn't recommend it."

"What else?"

"Well, Kevin, the time after that I tried the old hot bath and slashed wrists routine. That didn't hurt much, stung a bit when I made the cuts, but I had to stay in there so long that the water went cold. Freezin' I was and I had to get out eventually. Thinking back, I probably missed the vein, but to be honest, I've never been a good bleeder. My skin was wrinkly for days after. I tell you, I wouldn't recommend it."

The stumpy man flashed a toothless smile and scraped his hair back into place once again. He noticed that Jimmy had seen his poor dental display.

"The teeth? Yeah, well I lost them on the third attempt. Didn't really think that one through, looking back. See, I was pissed one night watchin' the box, and there was one of them 'world's worst car crashes in the history of the world ever' type things on. Anyway, on a few of 'em the narrator—I think it was that Martin Burke fella, you know that bloke who does that 999 series? I like him—anyway, he kept saying that the driver had died instantly and shit like that, so I thought about it for a mo' and reckoned that, even if a car crash did hurt a lot, then 'instantly' ain't such a long time to put up with a bit of pain, so that was what I did. I got in my car and rammed it into a wall."

"And?" said Jimmy, totally absorbed in the man's stories about fluffed suicide attempts (so much so that he began to wonder if that wouldn't be a good idea for a second DVD).

"Well, I just got it all wrong, didn't I? Had my seat belt on, for a start. Force of habit, I guess. And the wall I hit wasn't really strong enough. It was that one that runs along the outside of Woodbank Park. You know it? Delivered a lot of stone to that job. Back in '97. Pulled a cracking bird one dinnertime too, in that boozer on the corner. Jill her name was, cracking tits. I guess that's what made me think of it. Anyway, it's a dry wall, innit, so no cement

I should have remembered that. There's no strength in them, you know. Good in a wind 'cos the wind goes through the gaps. That's why farmers use 'em. But no strength if you twat 'em from the side. All that happened was the car pushed straight through it. Car was a write-off. Popped the air bag too, it did."

"Did it? Aw, man, I've always wanted to see one of them air bags go. Hey, d'ya know what I think they should do with 'em?"

Jimmy looked at Kevin, never ceasing to be amazed at his partner's lack of ability to stay focused for more than three minutes. Jimmy's eyes pleaded with Kevin to shut up but to Kevin his friend's stare was an invite to "go on mate, I'd love to hear what you have to say."

"Well, I think they should have prizes that you can win when the bag inflates. You know, written across the bag when it comes out. Not on all of 'em, of course, that would be stupid. People would be crashing for fun. No, it would have to be just on a few, say one in a thousand. Most of the bags could say 'Sorry, you are not a winner' and perhaps have the number of the local hospital on or summat like that, but some of 'em could have like loads of silver confetti in and big fuck-off writing that says 'Congratulations, you're a winner, phone this number to claim your cruise' or whatever. What d'ya think?"

Stunned silence.

"Obviously they could wait until they were feelin' better. There wouldn't be a time limit on it or nothing like that," Kevin qualified, amazed by the cool reception that his idea had received.

"And is that how you lost your teeth? Banging them on the steering wheel or something, Darren?" Jimmy continued, finding it incredibly easy to ignore Kevin.

"No no, Jimmy. Like I say, the bag went off. No, I tripped over a pile of stones when I got out of the car. Did my ankle and knocked three teeth out. Fuckin' hurt that did, I can tell you. Wouldn't recommend it."

Jimmy put his head in his hands.

"So why were you in hospital this time? Jumped off a roof and landed on a trampoline or perhaps a pile of pillows? No wait, I bet you snagged your belt on the gutter, didn't you?" sniped Jimmy and instantly regretted it.

Jimmy wasn't sure where the thought had come from, but as it passed through it scooped him up and took him straight back to his bridge. Jimmy winced, not because he had been pricked by the memory of a dark day but by the realization that ultimately, when their lives were stripped down, there was little to choose between Howard and himself. The essence of both men was failure and a will to die. To think that he and this annoying little man had anything in common, never mind this, was almost too much for Jimmy.

"No. Not a roof, a motorway bridge. Just north of junction 28 on the M6. You know it, just past them services? I tell you, fuckin' great breakfast in there, you know. Bit pricey but there's summat about the full English they do in them places. But only if it's fresh, mind. I reckon you gotta be there before seven to get a good one. Any time after about eight o'clock you just get a plate of greasy shit. I wouldn't recommend it."

"I know I'm going to regret this, but what happened?"

"Landed on a lorry, didn't I? Morrison's it was. He was just pulling off the hard shoulder when..."

"Bollocks," said Kevin, casually but with enough emphasis on the 'B' for his disbelief to be felt.

"Actually, Kevin, not bollocks!" Jimmy jumped in, loud and angry. More commonality. "Sorry about that, Mr Howard, please continue."

"Well, like I was saying, this Morrison's lorry was just pulling off the hard shoulder. Guess he'd been to Knutsford. You been to that Morrison's at Knutsford? Really good. Mind you, I like Morrison's as a rule. Better than that Tesco mob. Anyway, I guess I should have had a look at the road before

I jumped, really, but all I did was close my eyes and count to twenty-seven. That's my lucky number, twenty-seven. Won me a bonus on the lottery, it did. Was lucky that day too, I suppose, depending which way you look at it! But I tell you something, though, being stuck on a lorry roof at seventy miles an hour..." he chortled.

"Let me guess. You wouldn't recommend it?" snapped Jimmy, still feeling a little residual anger but also becoming increasingly frustrated by Howard's meandering account.

"No, I would actually. It was all right. Like being on top of a fuckin' train. I always fancied that. You've seen them films where the hero's punchin' and shootin' baddies one at a time, all lined up 'cos they can't get past each other? Well, it was just like that. Only trouble was it started raining just past Preston."

"Preston! You ended up in Preston?" said Jimmy in disbelief.

"No. It started raining at Preston. I ended up in that truck stop at Carnforth. The one near that Pine Lake place if you know it. Not many people think that you can just walk into the bar there, you know, off the street like, but you can. It's not private or anything. Anyway, that's why I was in hospital. Piss wet through in a seventy-mile-an-hour wind for the best part of an hour. Copped for hypo-fuckin-thermia. I tell you what though."

Darren paused and looked at Jimmy, his greasy, poker face challenging him to guess the punch line. Jimmy paused for a moment waiting for a clue that didn't come.

"Um, you wouldn't recommend it?"

"No. I would actually. They do a nice bar meal. Very nice."

Darren Howard grinned and dragged his hair back into place.

Jimmy had had enough. This man wasn't a loser at all. In fact, never mind being a "good bleeder," Darren Howard was one of the luckiest bleeders Jimmy had ever met. Jimmy sat back and glared at him.

"Why the fuck are you trying to kill yourself, Howard? I reckon all you have to do is spend five minutes in the presence of someone with a gun and they'll do it for you! And anyway, you've done nothin' but laugh and crack jokes and talk about things you like from the moment you sat down. You don't seem too depressed to me. On the contrary, I'd go as far as to say that you're one of the most optimistic bastards I've ever met, considering what you've been through. You've got a job, a house, money, women. Okay, you dress like shit but hey, if that was any reason to commit suicide, there'd be no fuckin' Scousers left. So if you don't mind, I'd appreciate it if you didn't waste any more of my time." Jimmy stood to leave.

"The big C. I've got the big C," said Darren.

He had stopped laughing.

Jimmy stopped in his tracks, expelled a deep sigh of relief and sat down again.

"Is it terminal?"

Howard nodded.

"Well why didn't you say so then, silly? Now, let's get back down to business."

Chapter 18

Organizing Howard's wish day was a simple task. It took one phone call and cost only five hundred pounds.

The remainder of the budget, an unexpected five-hundred-pound windfall, provided Jimmy and Kevin with an opportunity to buy some badly needed new clothes. Jimmy, being a little more conservative than his friend, compiled his outfit in only two shops: Next and Footlocker. He bought jeans, a lightweight crew neck jumper and a new pair of Etnas. Kevin on the other hand was in the mood for a change, a makeover as he called it. It was three hours after they had started shopping that he finally selected the last component of his new image; a pair of Diesel jeans that were ripped and torn across the thigh and knee.

"What do you reckon, Jimmy?" Kev asked as he strolled up and down the changing area.

"I think you must be off your head paying one twenty for a pair of jeans, that's what I reckon."

"You are such a tight twat, Jimmy, you know that, don't you? You only get what you pay for in this world and with Diesel, you get fanny. Trust me, the tarts love it."

Kevin spun on his heels and clapped once. It was his best and only dance move. As he turned, Jimmy noticed two other slashes in the denim, one just beneath each buttock, and he was about to mention them when Kevin gave him an idea.

"Actually, do you think they look a bit gay, Jim, or what? I ain't too sure, you know."

"Gay? No, not at all mate. No way. Nah, like you say, I reckon the girls'll

love ‘em. Definitely not gay.”

By eight o’clock that evening Jimmy and Kevin were suited and booted in their new clobber and ordering the first pint of the evening.

“Oh, I nearly forgot to tell you, I’ve asked Wanda to meet us tonight, Kev. Hope you don’t mind.”

“Mind? No, not at all, mate. Why would I?”

He nodded towards the entrance. Wanda had arrived.

Now Jimmy had never seen Wanda wearing anything other than her working gear, and as he watched her walk through the pub towards him, he felt completely inadequate. She was wearing her hair up, tousled into a loose bun, and the classic lines of her neck and jaw were accented to perfection by a simple but stylish silver necklace and earrings. Her shoulders were bare, carrying only two slim straps to support her classic little black dress, the cut of which tapered her figure exquisitely down to the sharp points of her black stilettos. The dress swelled only twice, once to cup her breasts and once to celebrate her hips.

Every person, male or female, that glimpsed her, turned their head and tracked her for as long as they thought was socially acceptable, or more likely, for as long as their partner would allow. Those that didn’t care about etiquette, didn’t appreciate the subtle difference between paying a beautiful girl a compliment and making her feel like a whore—the early evening drunks who had nipped in for a pint on their way home and stayed for one too many—leered and pointed. Some even called after her, cheesy and lewd chat-up lines that turned Jimmy’s stomach. He was on the verge of confronting one particularly obnoxious middle-aged suit, intending to ask him how his kids would feel if they saw him behaving like this, when Wanda stopped him.

“Let it go, Jimmy. Just part of being a woman in this town, I guess.” She took his hand.

Jimmy understood that this gesture was more to do with telling the rest of the pub that she was with somebody than it was an open expression of affection, but it felt good all the same.

"You look beautiful, Wanda. Really beautiful. What would you like to drink?"

"Mmm, I think I'll start with half a Stella, please Jimmy. You look good too. New clothes?"

"Yeah, actually," Kevin interrupted, butting in like some simpleminded horse.

"Pretty cool, huh? What d'ya think of the jeans?" and he spun slowly, clapping once.

'Uh, yeah, I guess they're okay. Diesel, aren't they? I think I saw Will Young wearing something similar on MTV the other night," she explained, just as Jimmy had instructed her by text only minutes earlier.

"Will Young? He's queer, isn't he?" Jimmy said and he looked at Kevin with comic-book concern.

"No, Jimmy luv. Will Young isn't queer. But the bloke who's shagging him is," said Marianne as she passed Jimmy his drinks.

Kevin stared at Marianne, begging her to help him hold together his crumbling self-image with a compliment. She simply smiled sweetly and gave him his pint.

"Want an umbrella in that, sweet cheeks?"

"Marianne, if I wasn't such a gentleman I would knock you out. I swear to God, girl, I..."

"Oooooo, chase me, chase me!" Marianne goaded but in a tone that was far too high to sound like an effeminate man.

However, the fact that Marianne had chosen to continue the joke rather than back away from it was enough to undo Kevin completely.

"Fuck this, Jimmy, I ain't goin' out like this. I'm gonna nip back to the flat

and change me kecks. Okay?"

"Too late, son, taxi's here. Sup up."

Kevin moaned continuously during the fifteen-minute taxi ride into the city as he analyzed every aspect of his appearance. Fortunately for Jimmy, he and Wanda had commandeered the back seat and so the brunt of Kev's bitching was taken by the driver. Jimmy shrugged apologetically as he leaned forward to give the wearied stranger his fare when they had finally arrived outside the Oxford Road night club.

"Sorry about all that, mate. He's a bit nervous tonight. He only came out recently and this is his first shot at pullin' a bloke without a keyboard in front of him, if you know what I mean."

Jimmy palmed the driver an additional five pounds, partly to compensate him for the torrid time he had been subjected to but mainly to impress Wanda. He soon wished he hadn't bothered because as he turned to open the door he realized that Wanda had already gone.

"You'll pick us up at about half two then, yeah?"

Begrudgingly the driver agreed and offered Jimmy a business card. Jimmy found Kevin and Wanda at the back of a buzzing queue of semi-drunken students. The line stretched from a heavily guarded entrance back to the corner of the building where a huge bright red 'T' flashed, proudly announcing the word 'Tropicana.'

"What you doin' standing here, Kev?" asked Jimmy.

"Er, queuing to get in the club. What do you think I'm doing? Do you think I like spending time with a load of freeloading bastards while I'm dressed like Jim Clarie on a pink march, eh?"

"So Kevin, my confused cross-gender friend, do you mean Jim Carrey or Julian Clarie? 'Cos to be honest, the Jim Carrey look really isn't for you. Your ears are too big, mate."

The students in front of them in the queue turned as one. The biggest of

them stepped forward and spoke directly to Kevin with the confidence of someone who was used to winning fights.

“Three things, mate. Firstly, you look fuck-all like either of them, more like a sad old twat who’s tryin’ to look young. Secondly, although I want to, I’m not going to push your face through that window because, and listen carefully now ‘cos believe me this is important to you, thirdly, you’re going to say ‘sorry.’”

Kevin stared at him. The bloke was obviously gay, for not only was his voice limp and bright but he was holding hands with the man next to him. But the fact that he kissed men made his words no less threatening, his presence no less imposing, and in truth his open homosexuality worried Kevin more than his demand for an apology. The guy had no doubt fought hard against prejudice for most of his life to earn his right to public displays of affection. His eyes flashed electric red in the glow of the neon ‘T’ and Kevin thought about how the story of him being thrashed by a bender would go down at work.

“Okay, I’m sorry,” said Kevin softly.

“Nice and loud now, so all these lovely, hard-working students can hear you please,” insisted the man with red eyes.

“I’m sorry!” shouted Kev, staring back at him defiantly but getting little or no response from the audience he had allegedly offended.

“Good boy,” said the queer, his eyes returning to blue as DEFCON 2 was achieved.

“And by the way, you look lovely,” added his lover. He blew Kevin a kiss then turned and walked forward to close the gap in the queue that had formed during the stand-off.

Kevin, Jimmy and Wanda remained rooted for a moment.

“Okay, so will you two please pack it in now! I would like to try and enjoy tonight if that’s at all possible,” warned Wanda.

Jimmy heard her, loud and clear. He turned to Kevin, reinforced her order and took her by the hand. They walked quickly to the front of the queue.

"Where you goin' now?" called Kevin, scrambling after them yet trying to look cool and nonchalant (but not confrontational) as he passed the group he had offended.

He caught up with Jimmy and Wanda as they were disappearing into the pounding darkness of the club via a small wooden side door held open by one of the bouncers. As Kevin approached the large black man put his arm out to stop him, but Jimmy retracted it with a cool nod.

"He's with me, mate."

Kevin slipped past the doorman and asked Jimmy how he had managed to jump the queue so effortlessly, but Jimmy's response was lost in the huge cheer that greeted Peter Kay's "Road to Amerillo."

Yep, it was definitely student night.

Jimmy led them to a small table at the front of the club to the immediate left of the DJ booth. He removed the card that stood upon it (supported by an ashtray and a bottle of Moët) and handed it to Kevin.

It read:

RESERVED

Mr. James Gee and party

Agents

"Agents?" shouted Kevin above the noise.

"Yep. Agents, Kevin."

"And who exactly do you represent, Mr. James Gee?" asked Wanda.

"A bloke called Darren Howard. I'm not actually his agent, but he's a friend of a bloke I know through the film production company, and he asked me to look after him tonight. He's only in Manchester for a couple of nights, you know, doin' a couple of pub gigs and stuff, so I thought yeah, why not. VIP treatment all round."

Jimmy took the champagne and opened the bottle. He was a little disappointed that the cork didn't pop, but as he poured the drink into the three flutes provided, bubbles appeared and fizzed wine onto the table. It made Wanda smile and Jimmy felt very pleased with himself indeed. He raised his glass and toasted.

"Cigarettes, alcohol and the dedicated staff at Booze Busters."

Kevin and Wanda chinked glasses and laughed before following Jimmy's lead and downing their drinks.

"Okay, I've just got to go see Mr. Howard and check with the management that everything is arranged for later. Be about five minutes," Jimmy explained as he refilled the glasses.

He left Wanda and Kevin quaffing champagne and approached the DJ booth. The young lad behind the decks directed Jimmy towards a black curtain near the edge of the stage, behind which was a door. Behind the door was another curtain and behind that, on a small plastic chair, surrounded by rolls of cable, microphones and amplifiers, was Darren Howard. He had his acoustic guitar in one hand and a large whisky in the other.

"Hey, Darren! How's it goin', dude?"

"Truthfully, Jimmy?" said Howard without looking up. "I'm absolutely kacking myself."

Jimmy approached and crouched on his haunches in front of Howard using the edge of the chair to lower himself down. The man on the chair looked like a child, a small boy who had lost everything (including his bottle), and Jimmy pitied him. Until this moment, Jimmy's understanding of suicide had been very much biased by his own experiences. True enough, he perhaps had more empathy for those who were preparing to die than most people could, having himself stood on a bridge ready to let go, but even accounting for his relationship with Marshall and the handful of people from Kevin's ward that he knew of, his exposure to suicidal tendency

was limited; limited to a very discrete sub-set within the whole. Crouched now, looking at Howard, Jimmy realized that most of the people he knew who had contemplated suicide had done just that; contemplated it.

They had all had a choice, a choice whether to live or die. Sure, some would say that the defeated, the lonely and the hopeless didn't in fact have a choice, at least not from their own perspective, imprisoned in towers and viewing the world through the narrowest of slits that depression had left open in their mind. But to Jimmy this simply wasn't true. Those people did have a choice. Those people could let down their hair and seek help. Granted, perhaps life would be a difficult choice to make every day, but it remained a choice nevertheless; jump or be rescued from the tower.

For Howard, though, things were different. Darren Howard was a man who had leapt out of bed most mornings with a spring in his step and a smile in the mirror. He had close friends, a naïve sense of humour and a blind optimism, important possessions if a person is to decide that tomorrow is worth experiencing. Unfortunately, Howard wasn't able to tick every box on the lifestyle list because for him one of the oldest clichés in the book had applied since his fifty-fourth birthday. Darren Howard didn't have his health.

So when the doctor wrote to tell him that his life was over, Darren Howard did indeed lose control of everything. There was no drama there, no mountains to be made from mole hills. Darren Howard had been abandoned, standing in the hallway that day with only two things left: the insidious shadow in his blood and bones, and the chilling choice of when to turn the lights out to defeat it.

Jimmy sighed.

"You'll be fine, mate. Don't worry about the crowd. Tonight is your night, yeah? And if you're shit, so fuckin' what? You ain't gonna see any of these pricks again, are you?"

Howard looked up, cracked a smile and nodded.

Outside the DJ shouted something over the PA, and the crowd cheered again. The place was really filling up. Jimmy looked towards the noise and then back at Howard. He had spun his guitar onto his lap, strings down. Jimmy watched as he took a small paper wrap from his jacket pocket and emptied the contents onto the back of the guitar. Howard then began poking at the pile of white powder with his finger, dragging it into thick wavy lines.

“What the fuck are you doing, Darren?” shouted Jimmy.

“Just a little something to calm me down, Jimmy. I got it off the doorman. Nice fella he is, used to live not far from me as it turns out. In fact, I think I know his missus from...”

“Right, right. But Darren, those aren’t lines, mate, unless you’re Daniella Westbrook. They’re fuckin’ huge, pal. You ain’t gonna calm down with two grams of Charlie racing through you! Jesus, if you snort all that shit, you’ll be able to finish ‘Bohemian Rhapsody’ in about thirty seconds flat! Come here.”

Jimmy reached into his wallet and pulled out a credit card. He used it to chop and slide the powder around until he had produced four narrow lines, each about three inches long. Howard watched as Jimmy swapped the card for a ten-pound note which he rolled into a tight tube.

“Okay, now watch.”

He lowered his head to the cocaine and snorted long and loud as he snuffed one of the lines out.

“Goddam, I said Goddaaamm!” Jimmy squealed.

Howard looked at Jimmy with a puzzled expression so Jimmy offered him an explanation.

“It’s from a film. *Pulp Fiction*. There’s a bit in the toilets at Jack Rabbit Slims where Uma Thurman powders her nose. That’s what she says.”

“I know. I’ve seen the film. But I didn’t know she talked like that.”

“What do you mean? She talks exactly like that!” exclaimed Jimmy,

offended by Howard's inference that his impersonation from his favourite movie was not up to scratch.

"So is this you or are you doing John Travolta now?" queried Howard.

"Just shut up and do the shit will you, Darren." Jimmy laughed and stood to leave. "I'll be back in ten minutes, well before you go on stage. Okay?"

Howard, polite as ever, nodded, but he was mid-line as he did so and jarred the ten-pound note against the guitar, planting it firmly up his left nostril. He exhaled sharply and looked up, note in nose and cocaine dusting his top lip.

"Er, you can keep the tenner, mate. See you in a bit."

Jimmy went back through the curtains, had a quick chat with the DJ then got down from the stage. Kevin beckoned him over, but Jimmy replied by jiggling his hand in front of his mouth to indicate he was going to get some drinks. Jimmy then waved and smiled at Wanda and both Kevin and Wanda waved back. Kevin had a sweet, mocking smile across his face.

"Enjoy, Kevin, enjoy, because it won't be long now," muttered Jimmy, and he set off toward the bar to begin the process of wiping the smile off his friend's face.

Jimmy found what he was looking for directly; the group of gay friends that had confronted Kevin in the queue outside the Tropicana. They were now huddled at the bar near the entrance. The ladies were giggling and slamming tequila.

"All right, lads" Jimmy announced confidently in their general direction.

They stopped talking and looked at him. Jimmy focused on the biggest of the group, the lad who had mouthed off outside, and offered him his hand. The queer took it and shook it firmly.

"Listen, I'm really sorry about all that nonsense before. My mate, Kev, he's pretty cool really, just that he had a bit of bad news tonight and he's on one at the moment. No hard feelings though, eh?"

"Pity that. We like hard feelings, don't we girls?" a tall blond man said from the back and they all shrieked.

Jimmy cringed but forced a smile and continued.

"Tell you what, let me get these, eh?"

He turned to the girl behind the bar.

"Two and a half pints of Stella please, love, and the same again for this lot."

As the girl prepared the drinks Jimmy spoke again.

"Tell you what, though, and feel free to say no if you don't fancy it, but I wouldn't mind playin' a joke on Kev. Think it might teach him a thing or two about keeping his mouth shut."

"Best to keep his mouth shut. Wouldn't want to spill any now would he girls?" said the blond again, obviously the cabaret Queen of the group, and they all laughed loudly, as contrived as the joke was.

Jimmy shook his head and began to wonder if it was worth it. He was considering walking away, finding someone else to bait the trap, when the big guy spoke up.

"So what you got in mind?"

Chapter 19

Kevin and Wanda had almost finished the champagne by the time Jimmy arrived back at the table with the drinks.

"Sorry about that, people. You wouldn't believe the queue at the bar and just as I got to the front, the Stella went down. Anyway, cheers."

Jimmy supped a little then shuffled his chair closer to Wanda. He leaned over and whispered into her ear to tell her about the trick that he was attempting to play on Kevin. Of course he didn't really care if she knew or not, but it was a good excuse to smell her hair and rest his hand on her bare shoulder. She laughed and slid her cheek along his to find his ear and whisper her approval. When she had finished, Jimmy pulled away but left his hand on her shoulder for a moment before sliding it down, along her back, and cupping it around her waist. She moved a little closer to him to let him know everything was cool and every part of Jimmy tingled.

"Place is really fillin' up, Jim. Think Howard will be okay?" asked Kevin.

"He's nervous, no doubt about that, but he'll be fine once he's up there."

"Nervous? Why is he nervous if he's such an old pro?"

To Jimmy it seemed that every time Wanda asked him a question she was merely testing him when in fact she already knew the truth. Her direct questions did so much more than simply ask; they exposed the cracks in Jimmy's life that he had never really had time to paper over. Sometimes Jimmy wished she knew everything; that tonight wasn't a favour for his agent friend at all, but a deal struck on behalf of a terminally ill man whom he and Kevin would help to die tomorrow afternoon. He began to sweat, small beads of water oozing from his forehead, pooling under his arms and running down the side of his chest. Perhaps one day he would learn to plan

conversations more carefully before touching on anything remotely relating to the Quitters, but for now Jimmy needed to think on his feet again

"He is. He is. But he's doing a couple of new songs tonight and I think he's a bit concerned about the words and stuff like that. Saw an interview on the box with Elton John the other night and even he still gets butterflies so I guess it's normal. He'll be fine though. Howard that is, not Elton. Well, Elton will be fine as well probably. I hope so anyway. Not that he's performing tonight. Well he may be, but not here anyway, if you know what I mean." Jimmy stopped babbling and took a breath.

Wanda looked at him with the blankest of expressions.

"Drink okay?" he asked her.

"What are you talking about, Jimmy?" Wanda replied, her words accompanied by an incredulous laugh

"Jimmy! Heads up. Them puffs are coming over!"

Kevin stood quickly and almost knocked his chair over. He grabbed the empty champagne bottle.

"What you doin', Kev? Put the bleedin' bottle down and sit, you soft twat."

Jimmy looked toward the unlikely collaborators and nodded discreetly.

"Now, do they look like they want trouble? And anyway, even if it did kick off, the place is full of bouncers so just behave, will ya?"

Kevin sat back in his seat but he kept his hand near the bottle. The four gays stopped in a line before they reached the table and the man who had spoken to Kevin outside raised his open palms.

"Listen, I just wanted to apologize for the way I behaved outside, mate. I was out of order. By the way, my name's Pete."

"Don't worry about it, Pete. I was a bit on edge too. No harm done."

Pete agreed and offered his hand but didn't step forward. Kevin remained in his seat.

"Well, shake Pete's hand, Kevin. It's the least you can do," urged Wanda.

Kevin looked back at her and then at Jimmy. Jimmy nodded emphatically and Kevin stood slowly. He walked out from behind the table and reluctantly offered Pete his hand. To his knowledge, Kevin had never touched a gay before, let alone shook hands with one. Now he found himself holding a hand that only hours earlier may have been curled around another man's stump. The image was strong and stomach-churning and Kevin snatched his hand back as if Pete had tricked him with a palm buzzer.

"Okay. Good. Let's just forget about it then, eh?" said Pete as Kevin returned to his seat.

"One more thing though, if you don't mind me asking, that is."

"Fire away," replied Kevin, not paying much attention, busy as he was rubbing his palm hard with the table cloth.

"Where did you get the jeans?"

Jimmy could almost hear creaking springs straining as the trap was prised open and latched. Kevin stopped rubbing but said nothing.

"It's just that I've been looking for a pair like that since I saw Will Young wearing them. They're really sweet."

"It was somewhere on Market Street, wasn't it Kev? Not far from HMV?"

"I don't know, Jimmy. You tell me."

"Cool. Thanks. I'll have a look next time I'm in town. Okay, see you later boys, maybe on the dance floor?"

Pete winked at Kevin, put his arm around his partner's waist and walked away.

"Right. That fuckin' does it. I'm off," spat Kevin.

"What do you mean?"

"Well I ain't stayin' here dressed like a fuckin' queer, am I? I'm going home."

Kevin finished his pint in one gulp as he left the table. Jimmy stood to block him.

"I can't believe you let me buy these jeans, Jimmy. I really can't. Did you know they had slits under my arse?"

"I didn't, no. But they look fine, honest."

"No, Jimmy, they look fuckin' queer and I ain't stayin' here dressed like this. I'm off. Goodnight, Wanda, have a nice evening."

"Just wait a minute, Kev, will you? Look, I tell you what I'll do. You're about the same size as me, right? How about if we swap jeans and I'll wear yours. I really don't want you to go, mate, it'll be a good night and we haven't been clubbin' for ages, have we? There's at least half a dozen girls at the bar just waitin' for you, a few of 'em already wounded. And we don't want to let Howard down now, do we? Come on, eh, what d'ya reckon?"

"Okay, Jimmy. Thanks, mate. You're a pal. Let's go to the bogs."

"Sound. Just give me a minute to have a chat with the DJ and check what time Howard's on."

Jimmy went over to the DJ booth and explained to the young lad behind it what would happen next. The DJ laughed and Jimmy left him to it, collected Kev then battled his way to the gents at the far side of the dance floor. The toilets were busy so Kevin suggested that they should use a cubicle for the clothes swap. Jimmy agreed, adding that there wouldn't be enough room in one, and anyway, two men undressing in a cubicle would appear even more gay than the slashed jeans, so they waited until two adjacent traps were empty. Kevin and Jimmy occupied one each and locked the doors.

"Okay, Jimmy, sling 'em over," Kevin requested after taking a moment or two to wrestle out of his own jeans.

"Give us a mo', Kev, my zip's playing up. Chuck us yours, though."

For the longest of moments nothing happened and Jimmy wondered if he had been rumbled. Perhaps Kevin wasn't so stupid after all. He needn't have worried though, because Kevin's practical joke radar, usually so difficult to slip past, was blind in his dense homophobic fog and Jimmy could hardly

believe his eyes as the waist band of Kevin's jeans appeared, draped over the top of the partition. Quickly, he yanked them down.

The trap had sprung and Jimmy honoured it with silence.

"Chuck us yours then, mate," said Kevin finally, with a quake in his voice.

"You know what, Kev, I think I've changed my mind. I don't fancy wearing your jeans after all and as you ain't too keen either, I'll just take 'em with me, shall I?"

"Don't, Jimmy! Don't you fuckin' dare, you twat!" screamed Kevin after he heard the door of the cubical next door open and close.

"Jiiimmmmyyyy!"

But Jimmy couldn't hear him. He was already out of earshot, crossing the dance floor, high-fiving queers and waving Kevin's pants around his head. The DJ saw him and the music stopped.

"Okay everyone, listen up."



Kevin sat on the toilet in his underpants and wondered what to do. Of course he couldn't hear the DJ outside and so had no idea as to the extent of his predicament. All he knew was that Jimmy had tricked him into giving him his trousers. Kevin scolded himself again as he thought about this. He couldn't believe how stupid he had been. How did he allow Jimmy, his best mate yes, but someone who he knew was a practical joker, to con him out of his trousers, and in a packed night club of all places! Oh, the bastard was going to pay big time for this!

But that would come later. For now, Kevin needed to mitigate the damage and recover his kecks with the minimum of fuss. But how? He considered the fact that the club was busy to be a bonus. People didn't look at legs in crowded pubs and clubs. This he knew for certain, for he himself had

demonstrated it on more than one occasion, in the name of good clean fun of course. It had been something of a party trick for Kevin, dropping his trousers at the bar while trying to pull a girl. He remembered his personal best and smiled at how he had stood at the bar in Bredbury Hall, chatting to a complete stranger, drink in hand and trousers round his ankles, for over three minutes before her friend had eventually cottoned on.

So, the club was full. Good. Now it was just a matter of picking the optimum route to get him back to the table and the jeans that he had despised but now craved so much. He thought about the club and its layout. There was the bar area running down the left of the room and that was almost certainly busy, but the bar itself had blue strip lights running under its lip that illuminated everything from the waist down. Kevin wasn't sure, but there was a chance that those lights were ultraviolet, and if that was the case his white jocks would shine brighter than the glint that no doubt Jimmy had in his eye. No, the bar was too big a risk. It would have to be the right-hand side of the club. That would be okay apart from perhaps the first ten yards or so where the cloakroom and bouncers were. But once Kevin had dashed past the relatively bright entrance, where the bouncers would have their backs turned and the punters would be concentrating on looking old enough and sober enough to get in, he would be back in the dark, lost in the crowd. Sure, a few people might notice, but what the hell?

"Yes. This is going to be okay, Kevin my boy," he assured himself.

He opened the cubicle door. There was one lad busy at the stones, but he didn't turn around and Kevin's confidence grew. Kevin grabbed the toilet door handle and took a deep breath as he prepared to leave and make his dash past the main doors (keep tight against the wall, Kev, and isn't there a series of high tables to dodge behind?) and into anonymity. Kevin yanked the door open and stepped out.

It was the biggest cheer of the night so far. Seconds after it had begun the

spotlight found Kevin and pinned him to the toilet door. Kevin needed a shield because the light was bright and the roar of the crowd was painful—raucous laughter and abusive shouts tipped with sharp wolf whistles—but the toilet door was not an option. Going forward was the only thing left if he was going to retain any dignity. Kevin walked away from the door and stuck to his original plan; go left. The spotlight tracked him and after a yard or so the music started.

“Don-ald where’s your troooos-ers” sang the crowd as they clapped along and stamped their feet to the record.

The place was loud and bright and threatening, not at all the place to be exposed. Seen from afar the scene was comical and benign with lots of smiling faces, laughter and cheers, but to be at the centre of it, to experience the abuse hidden in the laughter—“fuckin’ queer” someone shouted, “needle dick” said another. If Jimmy had known how Kevin felt as he walked towards him, maybe he would have thought twice about subjecting his friend to such an ordeal, for Kevin could quite easily have curled up on the floor and cried. Thankfully though, he was soon back at the table and stepping into his beloved jeans.

“Big round of applause for Kevin everybody and, Kev, when you’re dressed, there’s a free drink at the bar for you. You’re a good sport, mate. Let’s hear it for Kevin, everybody!” the DJ screamed and the club cheered again before slipping effortlessly back into drum and bass as though nothing had happened.

“Suppose you think that’s funny, do you?”

“Em, yes actually, I do. Fuckin’ hilarious. Live by the sword, die by the sword, mate. That is, unless you want to call a truce,” offered Jimmy, praying for a deal as it was now Kevin’s turn to scheme and plot and no doubt escalate.

“I don’t think so, mate. I really don’t fuckin’ think so! Anyway, I thought

we already had a truce after that thing at the hospital.”

“Yeah? Well so did I, until you pulled that stunt with the pepper grinder!”

“Pepper grinder! That doesn’t even come close to this shit, Jimmy!” Kevin fumbled with the button on his trousers.

“What thing with the pepper grinder? Do you mean my pepper grinder, Jimmy?”

Jimmy smarted at the question ever so slightly, but it was enough for Kevin to notice.

“No. It was another one, Wanda. Um, Kevin filled it with coffee beans once. Listen. I’m really sorry, mate if it was a bit much, but to be honest I never thought you’d fall for it and when you did...well, I just couldn’t pull back. Sorry.”

Kevin took Jimmy’s hand and shook it.

“Friends?” said Jimmy.

“Friends,” agreed Kevin.

Kevin dragged his chair and positioned it in the dark fringe away from the light of the table. There he sat, sulking in the dusk just beyond Jimmy and Wanda’s conversation.

“Okay, nearly time for Howard. I’ll go and prime him, talk to the DJ and get things going.”

Jimmy leaned over and kissed Wanda on the cheek. He stood to leave but she tugged his elbow, pulling him back down and kissing his open mouth as he sat again. After the kiss, Jimmy smiled.

“I’ll only be a couple of minutes.”

As Jimmy left, Kevin pulled his chair back into the light, smiled at the love of Jimmy’s life and leaned in closer.

“Do you want to know a secret, Wanda?”

Chapter 20

Jimmy found Howard pretty much as he had left him. He sat on the chair with his guitar on his lap only now he was bright-eyed and smiling broadly. He didn't look in the slightest bit concerned, and Jimmy didn't feel like he needed to ask if everything was okay. Howard was obviously tripping.

"Right, we ready, Jimmy? Let's do it, son."

Howard sniffed and prepared to get up.

"Okay, Darren, just give me a minute though. I need to get the DJ set up, check the mike and shit, but that shouldn't take long. I'll leave the door open so you'll hear your cue. Good luck, mate and enjoy yourself, yeah?"

Jimmy returned to the club and checked the microphone, tapping it twice on his way to speak to the DJ.

"Microphone okay?" asked the lad, fully aware that it wasn't yet connected to the mixer.

"Seems to be, mate, thanks. So, you're gonna give him a bit of an intro then?"

"That's what I'm paid for, dude. Just let this tune run out and then I'll get after it. He's ready?"

"Rarin', mate."

"I tell you what, Jimmy. You owe me big time for this."

"Bollocks I do. You've had your money, Baz. Just do your job and stop worrying. It'll be fine."

Jimmy stepped down, aware of his own nerves for the first time during the evening, and returned to his place next to Wanda. He was too intent to feel her hard stare. Jimmy rummaged in his jacket and pulled out the video camera from one pocket. From another he produced a small portable

tripod. After fixing the two together he set the camera on the table, adjusted its view and prepared to hit the record button. Not a moment too soon.

“Okay, everyone, it’s time for a bit of live entertainment. Now I know it’s not a usual feature for Saturdays but who knows, if it goes down okay it could well be. Anyway, we’ve got a right dude for you tonight, gonna knock out a couple of tunes for us on the ol’ guitar and of course the same rules apply as they do for all the tunes you hear tonight. If you know the song...”

Baz cupped his ears, inviting the crowd to finish his Saturday night catch phrase.

“Sing along!” they duly obliged.

“Okay, so let’s have a big up foooooorr ... Darren Howard!”

The club cheered and clapped and didn’t stop cheering and clapping until Darren had reached the microphone stand and almost finished the first two bars of his opening song. The crowd quietened to appreciate the remainder of the intro and then began to sing along, loud and tuneless as the first verse began. “Wonderwall” was a good choice and Darren Howard was playing it brilliantly. Supported by the crowd, his voice was strong and steady and full of attitude.

Jimmy turned to Wanda. “He’s not bad is he, love?”

“No. He isn’t, Jimmy. You could say that he’s playing like there’s no tomorrow.”

Jimmy shivered as Wanda’s words poured cold dread down his spine. Surely not? She couldn’t possibly know that this was Darren Howard’s last night on earth. Could she?

Jimmy dismissed the coincidence and put his arm around Wanda’s shoulder. He tapped it gently to the rhythm of the song. When Darren had finished, Jimmy sat up and clapped loudly along with everyone else.

“Now that was good. Wonder what he’s going to do next.”

“Ooooo, let me think. ‘Suicide is Painless’ perhaps? ‘The Drugs Don’t

Work' maybe? How about 'Liar Liar Pants on Fire' eh, Jimmy? No wait, that wouldn't be right, would it? Because he isn't actually a liar, is he, Jimmy?"

Jimmy had never heard Wanda so angry; he had never even suspected that she was capable of it. The closest she had come previously had perhaps been when he had interrupted her ice-cream moment way back at the beginning, but that spat didn't begin to compare with what he was sensing now. After a moment's consideration, Jimmy was left with no doubt about the reason for her anger.

Oh, true enough, she probably didn't know everything, but that was kind of irrelevant now. She knew enough to confidently accuse him of lying and so she knew enough to force him to tell her everything. If he was to have any hope of keeping Wanda in his life, then Jimmy couldn't afford to get caught in a lie ever again.

"Okay. It's true, Wanda. I do have a lot to tell you, and I need to put a few things straight with you, but if you can just give me tonight, just at least until after Howard's finished, then perhaps we can sit down somewhere and talk it through. Please, Wanda, don't make any hasty decisions until you've heard me out, eh? Please?" He begged while staring down at his wrangling hands.

Wanda's face was riddled with the hint of an expression that Jimmy had seen twice before and it had changed his life forever: once in the eyes of the pretty lady as he had disconnected from the bridge, and once on face of the skater girl with the big tits.

"Okay," she said, "but it better be good. Now watch your client."

On the stage Darren Howard was well into his second number, "Delilah" by Tom Jones. The crowd was loving it, hands raised and swaying as they belted out the final chorus.

"You know, he really is quite good isn't he, Jimmy?"

It was Kevin.

"That wasn't even funny, Kevin. I can take a joke but simply blowing me

up to my lady just isn't funny. You know what, I expected better from you."

"Yeah? Well, you shouldn't have nicked my kecks then, should you? That wasn't funny either."

Howard finished his song and the crowd cheered both him and themselves. He turned away from the microphone for a moment and coughed violently into his fist. To those on the dance floor that may have noticed, this would have seemed a natural reflex to singing with such vigour in a smoky club, but to Jimmy the cough was a dark portent and immediately put his own personal trauma into perspective. Howard recovered, turned back to the mike and spoke with the brashness of a man who had won a crowd and was pumped with adrenalin and amphetamines.

"Well, thanks for listening, everybody. I only have one more number to do now and I hope you enjoy it. It's certainly one of my favourites, an all-time classic, and I'm sure you'll know it so please, carry on helping me out. But before I sing it, I would just like to dedicate it to someone who is very important to me. Someone who I owe an awful lot to and has been just about the only person in my life who I could rely on. The song's by the Verve, it's called 'The Drugs Don't Work' and I'm gonna sing it now for me, Darren Howard."

Jimmy smiled and checked the camera. It was still recording. He looked at Kevin and offered his hand.

"No hard feelings, mate. She would have found out sooner or later anyway, so I guess now is as good a time as any."

Kevin clasped Jimmy's hand tightly, as if it would drag him from a stormy sea.

"Listen, I'm gonna go and have a scout round and see if there's any wounded. Should give you a chance to have a chat with Wanda, yeah?"

As Kevin skulked off into the dark, Jimmy smiled at his friend's reference to those girls who had drunk too much to make sensible decisions about

where to sleep that night. Hunting the wounded was a strategy that Kevin often applied to get girls back to the flat and one that had provided him with more success than perhaps morally it should. After all, was there really any difference between a girl plied with alcohol and a girl slipped a pill? Then again, this was a two-way street. Alcohol had been responsible for a number of disasters too, occasions when Kevin had gone to bed with a beautiful young thing only to wake next to her mum. Jimmy always said that leaving a club with a bird when you were drunk was like leaving a kid's party with a balloon; tight and firm at the disco but flaccid and crinkly three days later when it was found behind the settee.

Jimmy turned to Wanda and hoped to God that his balloon hadn't been burst by the prick that called himself Kevin.

"So do you want to start then?"

"I have nothing to say, Jimmy. But I'm all ears."

Jimmy accepted this and began to tell the story of Quitters. He didn't have the courage to take it right back to the bridge but decided instead to skip to the television show that he and Kevin had watched just after the move into Kevin's flat. He told the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth, even explaining the joke that Kevin had played with the pepper grinder. Wanda didn't look at him much during his tale, but with every word Jimmy felt better, and by the time he had finished, he understood what a tremendous weight his lies had been.

"So that's why you came into my office that day when we first met."

She sounded disappointed.

"No, no Wanda! Not at all! It's true that I needed advice, or at least to try and find out a little more about the legality of what we were doing, but believe me, after I bumped into you outside I would have followed you anywhere. Shit, if you had been a dental nurse I would have come in and had my teeth drilled just to make contact with you. Honest, hun, I haven't

used you if that's what you're worried about."

Now Wanda did look at him. She smiled softly, took his hand from the table and clasped it on her knee as she kissed his cheek. Jimmy sat back, amazed. After everything that he had just revealed, it turned out that the entire cold-shoulder, you're-in-big-trouble-now attitude had nothing to do with his actions but with her own concerns as to whether or not she had been manipulated! It was his motives toward her that had troubled Wanda.

"So he's really dying, then? The bloke who's singing."

"Yeah, he is. And you were right about that other thing too."

"What?"

"The song he's singing. 'The Drugs Don't Work,'" Jimmy whispered.

"You like him, don't you."

"I don't know about 'like,' Wanda. I hardly know the guy. But I think I could like him. He's a genuine enough bloke and although he goes on a bit, he's usually got something interesting or funny to say. Mind you, having said that, I guess he'd get on your tits after a while."

Wanda laughed.

"To be serious though, unlike Marshall who was going to crash and burn anyway, this guy needs help. He just hasn't got it in him to do stuff on his own, especially commit suicide. No, Howard strikes me as the type of bloke who needs telling that he's doing the right thing from time to time. Now I ain't saying he's not capable of making decisions, 'course he is, he's the one who decided to sack it, but he is someone who likes to look over his shoulder every now and then to check that he's still going the right way. I guess that's where Quitters actually does work for him, a couple of strangers, not exactly encouraging but certainly validating his decision."

Wanda snuggled up to Jimmy and leant her head on his shoulder.

"You know what, Jimmy? I think that on the whole what we're doing is a

good thing.”

Jimmy took a supp of his pint, enjoyed the moment and wondered how he would explain to Kevin that where there had once been two, now there were three.

Chapter 21

Breakfast chez Kev was a strange affair. Well, not breakfast exactly, more like brunch. Jimmy and Wanda wouldn't leave each other alone and she spent the whole time in his lap. They kissed and petted and fed each other strips of last night's pizza between whispers and giggles. Kevin caught a couple of words (olive, pineapple, orgasm) and felt that he had enough evidence to confidently assume that they had now consummated their relationship, in spite of the fact that he hadn't heard a sound from their bedroom last night.

This could have been largely due to the fact that he had himself been busy entertaining Karen, the woman who sat opposite him at breakfast, shoveling food into her gob. Every chomp pounded into his hangover and Kevin felt more and more disgust with each mouthful, not only at the appearance of this overweight, middle-aged divorcee, but at the depth to which his standards had slumped. Kevin vowed never again to compromise his golden rules of thumb; taller than wide, younger than mum.

"You ready then, Karen?"

"In a minute, baby. You go and get back in bed and I'll join you. Unless I bring summat with me. What d'ya think, huh? Could be fun, eh?" and she made a growling noise that sounded more like avian flu than sex kitten.

"No, I meant it's time for you to get off home. I've got work, you see, and well, I gotta start getting ready and stuff. That okay?"

"Oh right, hark at me!" and she laughed, loud and crass, her open mouth still churning mashed up food.

Kevin remembered what he had put into that very same mouth only hours before and wondered again why the hell he had done it. There had been no physical attraction, pissed as he was, no laughter, no conversation.

There had been no connection whatsoever; just a couple of lines delivered with no conviction—what you drinking? I’ve got my own place not far from here—and a grapple in the back of the cab on the way to the flat. Christ, he had only found out her name over breakfast! Now he wished so much that he hadn’t because Kevin felt sure that he would have nightmares about this one. Knowing its name would only make the demon harder to exorcise.

“So are you gonna run me home, luvva? I can show you where I live. It’s not far, just up through Chorlton on the Sale Road.”

“I can’t, Karen. Sorry. I only have the scooter see, and I’ve only got the one helmet. But there’s a bus that goes that way. It stops just outside the cemetery. Look, you can see it from here, just the other side of the trees.”

Kevin pointed across the cemetery and as Karen searched for the bus stop he disappeared into the room to hide Jimmy’s crash helmet. He barely had time because the woman joined him moments later. Kevin kept her momentum going and led her to the door where he avoided a kiss by pretending to have a coughing fit. When the woman had left, Kevin returned to the breakfast balcony where Wanda and Jimmy were laughing hysterically.

“Who you textin’, Kev? Chester zoo to let them know one of their bears has escaped?” They laughed again, harder this time.

Kevin didn’t flinch, he kept on tapping and texting. When he had finished the message, he showed it to Jimmy who took a moment to read it and then nodded in agreement.

“You’re a master, mate. It has everything.”

“Let me see it,” demanded Wanda.

She took the phone and read the text out loud.

“Hi Karen it’s Kev.”

“Friendly,” said the lads in unison.

“Cant remem if told u I got ex fiancée or not.”

“Honesty but with a hint of drunken confusion.” Jimmy said with a nod.

"Had fun time & u r nice lady"

"Complimentary." They nodded together.

"But cant 4get I still luv her"

"Ah yes, sensitive and loyal," marveled Jimmy.

"Safe trip & hope u r ok x"

"Nice finish, Kevin, caring and cuddly."

Jimmy high-fived Kevin.

"Standard stuff, nothing too pioneering but nonetheless, a nice, tidy piece of work I think you'll agree. Hit the send button would you please, Wanda, and cleanse me."

Kevin stood with his back to the balcony, tipped his head back and held his arms out wide. Wanda laughed in disbelief and sent the text.

"And you lads think that we girls actually believe this rubbish?"

"Definitely, Wanda."

"And to be fair, it isn't all rubbish," added Jimmy quickly, sensing that they were very close to touching a nerve.

"Well I tell you what, if you ever wrote me a text like this I would think that you were the biggest—"

"WANKERRR!"

The shout had come from the bus stop outside the cemetery. Kevin turned round and through the trees saw Karen shouting and making obscene gestures, oblivious to the old man and his old wife in front of her in the bus queue.

"Well, perhaps it could do with a bit of work, but the main idea is sound," Kevin said, defending his nice-guy tactics even as he flipped a finger back at Karen.

"Unbelievable," said Wanda and she handed the phone back to Kevin.

Chapter 22

The journey to the quarry was tortuous. This was one thing that Jimmy hadn't anticipated when he had agreed that Wanda could join them at Howard's suicide: three people just didn't fit on a Lambretta. Sunday timetables didn't help their cause either, and so it had taken two buses, one train and three hours before they finally arrived at Buxton. They left the station and followed the directions given them by the guard. Jimmy led, turning from the main road into the car park of the Red Lion as instructed. When they reached the far side of the tarmac, keeping the low dry stone wall close to their left, they clambered over a rusting double gate and dropped onto a rutted stone track that rose out of sight beyond a small hilltop copse about three hundred yards further on. The surface was heavily gouged and difficult to walk on, so they opted for the narrow verge between the road and its wire fence.

"Tell you what, if we didn't have pubs, no one would ever know where they were going."

"True enough, Kev. Did Howard reply to your text telling him that we're running late?"

"Yep. He said he's ready and he'll meet us at the entrance. I guess that wasn't it."

As the ground leveled at the crown of the hill, another much taller fence ran away at right angles to the left and the right. The fence was well maintained, with signs wired to it in places. The signs warned ramblers of steep cliffs and falling rocks and demonstrated to judges that the Northern Stone Company had done everything that could be reasonably expected of them to prevent young Timmy from falling to his death as he fought ninjas

in the woodlands.

Standing behind a set of tall gates was Howard. He looked a little nervous, but Jimmy thought that that was more to do with the fact that he might get caught trespassing than anything else.

"All right, you lot, find it okay, then?"

"Eventually, Darren, aye. Shit it's miles from anywhere, isn't it? Oh, by the way, this is my girlfriend, Wanda."

"Pleased to meet you, Wanda. Was you at the gig last night?"

"I was indeed and I thought you were really good, Mr Howard, really had the crowd going. I think they wanted to hear more."

"You know that's about the only thing I regret about last night, Wanda, not playing a bit longer. But you see, I'd always imagined that the last song I would play would be that Verve number and, well, once I'd done it, it was too late. Mind you, I guess I could have played it again, or at least the chorus bit, when I'd finished whatever other songs I played. Yeah, that would have probably worked. Mind, I was too excited to be thinking stuff like that off the top of my head. I tell you what though, I can recommend it. Performing in front of people like that, I mean. Come to think of it, if..."

"Um, shall we?" interrupted Jimmy, gesturing for Howard to open the gate.

"Sorry, mate, of course. Where are my manners?"

Howard had already removed the heavy chain that bound the central posts together and laid it on the floor with the clasp undone. As he dragged the heavy gate open, he nodded towards it.

"Chain's down there for on your way out, Jimmy. Remember not to leave it open, son, just in case kids get in or animals and stuff. Dangerous place this. I tell you what, though, I feel like bloody St. Peter opening the gates like this, aye. Wonder if I can get a job doin' that, helpin' him open his gate." He puffed.

Jimmy thought about cracking the obvious jokes about the down escalator or the gates of Hell but decided against it. Jimmy could sense sadness in Darren Howard's demeanour today. Fortunately though, he did manage to fill the silence before Kevin had a chance to blunder into it.

"Mate, I'm sure he'll be glad to have you help him out. It must get pretty boring manning them pearly gates, and I can't think of any one better to stand and chat with for the rest of eternity."

"Thanks, Jimmy, that's a nice thing to say. But I guess I do go on a bit sometimes, don't I?"

It was the truth, and everyone knew it, so there was no need for a reply. Howard waited for Jimmy, Wanda and Kevin to enter the gate then he and Kevin pushed the gate closed. Howard set off down the track at quite a pace and left the others trailing a little. Kevin picked up to try and catch him, but Jimmy caught him by the arm.

"Let him go, Kev. I think he wants a bit of time on his own, mate."

"D'you think he'll bottle it? I'm just bothered that if he thinks about it too much he might change his mind."

"Howard ain't gonna change his mind, Kev. He can't, can he? He's a dead man already. No, he's doing it his way and that's the end of it. He's a determined little fucker when it comes down to it, you know. No, we're here for two reasons. Firstly to film him of course, but secondly to give him a bit of support. We just have to back off a touch because believe me, he'll let us know in his own way when he wants it."

Howard turned just then and spoke, proving Jimmy right.

"I was thinking that the best way to do this would not necessarily be from the highest point but the one with the rockiest base. See, the highest point is played out and the face is closed. It's about 150 feet, but it drops onto a bit of grassland where they've started landscaping already. What do you think, Jimmy?"

"I think you're dead right, mate. What options have we got? Remember though, we're gonna need a clear shot of you running and jumping."

"Oh, I ain't jumping, Jimmy, no. You've not forgotten, have you?"

"No, I haven't forgotten. You specifically said that you wanted to mimic a cartoon character falling off a cliff and flapping and running as fast as you could, to see how long you could stay in the air."

"No, Jimmy, no. Your memory's playin' tricks there. I did say the bit about the cartoon and mimicking a cliff fall, but I think you've assumed the rest, mate. Mind, you had had a couple that night as I remember."

Jimmy was getting that sinking feeling again. He'd lost control of Marshall completely, pretty much from the start, and he hadn't expected the same from Howard. He was beginning to feel more like an observer than a director.

"So what are you going to do exactly?"

"Come on, I'll show you. Easier to show you than to explain. It's all set up behind the maintenance stores."

Howard pointed to a large wooden building straight ahead. Beyond the building was nothing, just bright blue sky and the ragged edge of a huge open gash in the land where three generations of men had scraped and blasted into the limestone hillside. The cut was wide and deep, and as Jimmy got closer, he began to understand the size of it. You would need at least five football pitches laid end to end to bridge to the soft meadow on the other side of the pit.

Kevin was the first to follow Howard around the maintenance building. He yelped with delight as he began to understand the deadly gag that he would soon witness.

"Jimmy, Jimmy! You gotta see this, man. This is gonna be sooo sweet, I'm tellin' you."

For once Kevin was ahead of Jimmy in both body and thought. He stood laughing loudly and back-slapping Howard in front of a dust-drenched JCB,

its powerful digging arm raised and extended out over the edge of the cliff. Attached to its toothed metal bucket were four ropes, each tensioned by the weight of the battered old caravan that they gripped by the corners. The caravan was twisting slowly in space, level with the ground where Jimmy stood but ten feet beyond the quarry face. Jimmy held onto the front grill of the machine and peered over the edge, desperate to uncover the purpose of this lash-up before Kevin had a chance to explain it to him. He stared for a moment at the pile of rocks one hundred feet below and then announced his decision.

"This isn't going to work, Darren. Firstly, there's no guarantee that we will hit the mark and secondly, if we get involved by releasing the van, then it ain't suicide anymore, it's murder. Am I right, Wanda?"

Wanda, who apparently was now some kind of legal brief, nodded.

"What are you talking about, Jimmy? You still don't get it, do you?" said Kevin with a quick grin, all that he would allow himself before quickly continuing to secure his supremacy.

"We ain't dropping the caravan on Darren. No, this is so much better than that Jimmy, so much better."

Kevin released Howard and pointed at him.

"You see, our mate Darren here is going to get in the caravan and release it himself. And, wait for it, Jim, 'cos this is the best bit. Just before the caravan hits the ground, Darren is going to appear at the door and he's going to step out of it! Can you believe it, Jimmy? It's fuckin' brilliant, I'm tellin' you, man. We are like scientists, Jimmy, fuckin' scientists. We're gonna finally find out if it works. You know, that thing when Daffy Duck pushes Bugs Bunny's cabin off the cliff top and Bugs steps out of his front door just before the cabin hits the deck and he just walks away nibbling his carrot and saying 'Wots Up Doc?' Well today, my friend, we find out the truth."

Kevin finished and leaped about, occasionally hugging a very proud,

almost smug-looking Howard.

Jimmy had to admit, it was a great idea and just the kind of thing he was hoping for when he had conceived the idea for the DVD.

"Well, okay then, let's get on with it, shall we? First things first, though. Darren, I'll just set the camera up and then you can say a few words if you like."

Jimmy wrestled his rucksack from his back and placed it on the ground. From it he took the camera and a telescopic tripod. He walked a few paces toward the edge of the cliff and set it up. A quick pan down to the quarry floor and he was happy.

"Okay, Darren, how about if you stand in front of the camera, just about half way between me and the JCB. You know what you want to say?"

"Yeah, I think so, Jimmy, I think so, mate."

Howard took a moment to compose himself then walked to his mark. He looked at the camera and Jimmy made the necessary adjustments to frame the shot.

"Listen, mate, I'm gonna hit record then walk away and leave you to it. I promise you, if something goes wrong or you change your mind, I'll delete it and no one will ever see it. Not even me. Just let me know when you're done, and I'll come back and set up for the drop. Okay, Darren, good luck, mate."

Jimmy hit record and made his way towards Wanda and Kevin. He thought he was doing okay, but as he passed Howard and took his hand to shake it for a final time, Jimmy realized that he could say no more and that he was really struggling to keep it together. To look at Howard made him immensely sad, so Jimmy turned his face away but his hand stayed, tight in the grip of a man whose other hand was being tugged by the Grim Reaper. To be connected to Howard like this, to be part of a life that had only moments to run, was crushing, and he could feel his emotions being squeezed to the surface by the weight of Howard's despair.

Jimmy freed his hand from Howard's and stepped past him. As he walked away, he did happen to catch the first few words of Howard's auto-obituary but not enough to break his promise, and this he was pleased about. By the time Jimmy had taken the fifteen or so strides that it took him to reach Wanda, he had cleared Howard's cancerous influence and his own dark feelings had all but gone.

Jimmy had never subscribed to the theory that a person had an aura, let alone that another could sense it, but he did now.

"You know something, love, this is so hard."

Wanda kissed his cheek and put her arm around him.

"Jimmy, it's a good thing that you're doing, I truly believe that. When I first heard the idea in the club last night it sounded cold and heartless but now, being here and watching you and Kev help him through it, I tell you, Jimmy, it makes me kind of proud. I'm glad I came."

They held each other in silence and watched Darren Howard as he said goodbye to the people in his world. After five minutes had passed, Jimmy, knowing the way Howard loved to talk, began to wonder how long this was going to take.

"You realize that there's a good chance we won't be able to use any of this on the DVD, don't you, Jimmy?"

Jimmy looked at Kevin and waited for an explanation.

"See, I've been thinking about it, and I reckon that there's a good chance that this will work."

"You reckon what will work, Kevin?"

"The Bugs Bunny thing. The stepping out of the house just at the last minute thing. I tell you, if he gets the timing right, he could walk away from this without a scratch. Depends very much on which way the caravan falls when it hits the rocks."

Jimmy and Wanda looked at Kevin open-mouthed.

"Kevin, give your head a shake would you? You do know that cartoons are simply a series of drawings that change very quickly to give the appearance of movement, don't you? You do know that Bugs Bunny is not an actor dressed in a giant, impregnable rabbit suit being filmed on a huge painted stage, don't you?"

"Fuck off, Jimmy. I'm not stupid. But just because it's in a cartoon doesn't mean that it's impossible, does it? I read somewhere that we, people that is, aren't capable of imagining something that can't be done. Take *Star Trek*, for example. Blokes dressed in lycra walking round with video phones on their wrists. That was in the fifties before all that shit was invented. But we've got it all now, haven't we? Even teleporters, although no one will admit it. Planes and space ships, submarines and skyscrapers. There's loads of stuff like that, written about in books and films and then fifty years later it's invented. Or to put it another way, there ain't much that people have written about that hasn't eventually happened."

Jimmy thought about this for a moment and realized that his ridiculous friend may actually have a point. Were man's achievements limited by his imagination? Did nature have an intrinsic safety in its design, a clause that prevented its creations from imagining something that was truly impossible? Could it be that such a trait was necessary if a species was to avoid generations of folly and wasted effort chasing shadows?

Could Darren Howard jump off a cliff in a caravan and cheat death by stepping out of the door at the last minute, just as a man with a black felt pen had imagined?

No.

"Bollocks, Kevin, and I'll tell you why. If Newton had worked at Warner Brothers, Bugs Bunny would be dead after the first ten-ton weight had fallen on his head. Gravity, mate, that's what'll do for Howard, and that's a fact."

"Hah! Which proves my point exactly, you twat, because Newton wrote

about gravity before he invented it, didn't he?"

Jimmy was about to rip Kevin's argument to pieces when he noticed that Howard had finished talking and was busy inspecting the camera, searching for the pause button.

"Leave that, Darren mate. If you've finished, you get yourself ready and I'll sort that out. You sure you're done?" Jimmy called.

"Yeah, thanks, Jimmy. I think I said everything I needed too. Right, then, I'll get in the van, shall I?"

It was the final piece of assurance that Darren Howard would seek.

"Yeah, mate, you get yourself in the van and I'll get behind the camera."

Jimmy was keen to avoid entering Howard's space again, so he didn't go directly to the camera but instead walked close to the cliff edge, as if inspecting the shot. It was a pity, because had he taken Howard's hand one last time, Jimmy would have sensed an aura that was bright and calm. Howard climbed into the cabin of the JCB and checked the rope that would release the caravan. It was tied to the knob of a lever and ran through the broken front windscreen, along the yellow arm of the digger and down through the top of the caravan. Howard climbed onto the arm and crawled along it, checking the rope as he went. When he reached the bucket he lowered himself onto the roof of the caravan and disappeared into it through an open skylight. Wanda and Kevin joined Jimmy behind the camera and waited.

Three minutes passed and nothing happened; the caravan stayed suspended, swinging in mid-air one hundred feet above its destruction.

The tension was becoming unbearable.

"Come on, Howard, come on, mate. Just do it fella, and let's get this over with," whispered Jimmy.

"Well, he's either bottled it or there's something wrong with the release mechanism," said Kevin.

Suddenly the caravan jerked and tipped slightly toward the camera. Soon after, the door was flung open and there, holding a rope in one hand and a plastic carrot in the other, stood a giant rabbit. The rabbit waved, mumbled a shout that sounded to Jimmy something like “I tell you what though...” and then yanked the rope.

For a moment nothing happened.

That moment dragged itself out to a second and still nothing, only the rabbit and the caravan swinging precariously beneath the digger arm.

Three seconds now, and the rabbit glanced upward and shrugged. As it did, there was a sharp crack and the ropes supporting the caravan flew apart. The caravan jerked violently and the rabbit almost stumbled from the doorway but somehow managed to grasp the frame on either side, dropping its carrot in the process.

The caravan, the rabbit and the carrot were on their way.

Jimmy didn't need to pan down much in order to follow the fall but he did need to zoom in smoothly to keep the picture tight. The rabbit was looking down the whole time, staring towards the ground, its huge grey and white ears flapping above its head just like in the cartoons. It was concentrating hard, recalculating the time to impact with every second and Jimmy couldn't help but admire it. He recalled how he had closed his eyes at least forty feet above the road when he had fallen from the bridge.

That's one brave rabbit.

Both brave and clever as it turned out because the rabbit managed to time its exit from the caravan to perfection, stepping away from the doorway when it was no more than four feet from the ground.

Next, in the place where there had momentarily been a caravan and a rabbit, there was a ball of dust and noise. Tatters of sheet metal were spinning and flapping from it as the chassis of the caravan snapped in two, each end bounced high by tires that were now kicking back. In the dust

cloud there was movement.

"Look, look. Jimmy! It's worked! It is true after all!"

Jimmy zoomed the camera into the mayhem. It was true, something was in there, moving around in the settling dust. Something grey and white and tall.

Unbelievably, the rabbit was still tall.

"Fuck me," said Wanda.

"Warner Brothers one, Newton nil," cried Kevin in delight, as if his schoolboy decision to watch cartoons instead of doing all that physics homework was now justified.

Jimmy wasn't convinced and continued to watch through the camera. The rabbit took two short steps and moved forward out of the dust. It raised an arm to wave but as it did so a large red stain smeared itself across its cuddly white chest. Almost immediately, another patch of red bloomed, this time just above its waist. Further down its body, soaking up the fur of its left leg, Jimmy could see more blood. That leg failed, unnaturally so, and appeared to bend backwards as the knee joint reversed. The rabbit fell forward and its large white teeth snapped against the rocks. Slowly, its grey and white fur became sodden with crimson. Soon after, all that remained was a lifeless red bag of bones that neatly bundled up the remains of Darren Howard.

By now the noise of the smash had passed them by and Jimmy could hear Wanda sobbing. He left her to her emotions, no doubt a messy blend of revulsion, guilt and sadness, because he had tears for Howard too, but was determined to hide them. Kevin had moved nearer to the edge of the cliff and was scanning the body for signs of life, reluctant to let go of his theory.

"I tell you what though, Kevin."

"What's that, Jimmy?" Kevin said distractedly, busy as he was replaying the fall in his head, investigating what could possibly have gone wrong.

"I wouldn't recommend it."

Chapter 23

Weeks passed and very little happened. Kevin and Wanda did their thing at work and Jimmy killed time getting up late and pretending to look for a job. None of them had the inclination to suggest editing Darren Howard's suicide into something artistic and fun. Wanda spent more and more time at the flat but always took everything she had brought away with her. Unlike some girls with whom Kevin had been in relationships of six months or more, she did not appear to be moving in by stealth.

Jimmy and Kevin had discussed this one evening and concluded that the optimum time to end a relationship that was going nowhere was when two pairs of her shoes could be found in the wardrobe. They both agreed that cosmetics and clothes seemed to have no critical mass but that shoes were like relationship litmus paper; one pair was forgetful, two was intent.

Pathetically, Jimmy had become quite excited about this only a couple of mornings after Wanda had left a pair of patent leather slingbacks on the bedroom floor in her hurry to get to work. She'd returned almost immediately—unannounced—to find Jimmy victoriously strutting about the living room, stark bollock naked except for her black high heels. Jimmy never even tried to explain and Wanda never asked, but from that day, whenever she stayed over, she always packed her bag the night before and never left it until the following morning.

The Quitters phone had fallen quiet, but Jimmy kept it part of his routine to swap SIM cards every morning at breakfast. He was never sure what he wanted to find, but he did know that during the two or three weeks after Howard's death, each time he turned on the phone and found the inbox empty he was a little less disappointed. He felt that after another week or so

he would perhaps check only every other day and after that, who knows?

Darren Howard's death was reported almost three weeks after it had been discovered and with a lot less dignity than Jimmy, Kevin and Wanda had expected. They read about it one lunch time, hunched around a copy of the *Manchester Evening News* as they sat on the balcony of the flat. The article on page seven had the headline 'That's All Folks', and went on to describe the circumstances of Howard's suicide. It described Howard as a terminally ill loner who had recently been diagnosed with cancer and, while he had left no suicide note, it was assumed that he had killed himself rather than endure a shortened life of treatment and sickness. The article used Howard's case to build a platform for a discussion about euthanasia and rather weakly concluded that the government should make a decision whether or not to empower people with control over their own suffering.

"You know what really pisses me off about that drivel?" Jimmy shouted, almost spitting at Kevin. "They didn't even give him credit for the way he did it, none whatsoever! Whoever wrote that shit couldn't even be arsed to sit down and think about what kind of man Darren must have been to go to all the trouble that he did. Didn't even consider how much courage it must have taken to spend all that time preparing for a death that he didn't want but felt he had no choice about."

He read a couple of lines over.

"Loner! Fuckin' loner! He had friends, lots of friends, and the decision he made to give them a smile, even in his death, was one of the bravest things I have ever known."

Jimmy shook his head as he looked at the article again.

"Well, fuck 'em."

He leaned over Kevin's shoulder, grabbed the page with Howard's story on it and crumpled it into a tight ball. He threw it over the balcony and sat back down. Nobody responded. Kevin carried on reading the paper as

if nothing had happened. Wanda slipped away to the kitchen to make tea. Jimmy leaned on the handrail and slowly composed himself, thinking less now about Howard and more about how his behaviour might have been viewed by Wanda. He thought about following her into the kitchen but decided that it was perhaps best left for now. He could smile when she returned and apologize then. Jimmy looked at Kevin, reading intently, and wondered what had grabbed his pal's attention so completely.

"What you reading, mate?"

Kevin looked up.

"You remember that bird who texted us asking for info about Quitters? What was her name now? Debbie or something like that, wasn't it?"

"Dianne you mean? That woman who overdosed on your ward?"

"Yeah, Dianne. Dianne Stevens."

"What about her?"

"Well, there's an article here about a bloke who's been arrested for raping a kid. Jeff Stevens. It's her husband, Jimmy, that Dianne woman's husband. It mentions a bit about her suicide here. Says that that's why she did herself in. I bet she must have found out or knew something about what her sick fuck hubby had done and couldn't handle it. What a fuckin' waste. She was pretty fit too. Would have been better if she'd killed the filthy bastard instead. Fuckin' pedos."

"So he's guilty then is he, Kev? You've already decided this based on that piece of arse paper in your hands, have you?"

"No smoke without fire, Jimmy, no smoke without fire, son. Two things, mate. Firstly, you wouldn't get papers printing names and pictures if they weren't one thousand percent certain that he'd done it, and secondly you don't get women toppin' themselves unless they know summat for sure, now do you?"

Jimmy could see Kevin's point, but he was still too upset about the way

the newspaper had reported Howard's suicide to concede that the editor might be right in this case. He called to Wanda.

"Can you get me one of those chocolate biscuits while you're in there, please love?"

Wanda returned with a tray full of cups of tea and scattered with chocolate digestives. She laid them on the table and sat down. Jimmy watched her and smiled. He felt good again, safe in the company of his beautiful girl and his best friend and with no need at all to explain to either his earlier outburst. These people loved him and understood him and that was all that he needed to be happy with the world.

Jimmy had no idea that his tantrum, his ripping of that particular page from the newspaper, had revealed something to Kevin that within a week, like his bridge, would once more turn his world upside down.

Chapter 24

The end began with a tap on the shoulder, two days after Jimmy's fuss over the news article.

Kevin was ill and spending the day in bed with puffy red eyes and a streaming nose. It was a genuine allergy to summer that he had, and it was severe enough to knock him down at least once a year. Wanda was at work and Jimmy was outside the flat, astride the scooter, preparing to go and get Kevin some treatment for his hay fever. He started the engine, gunned it and was about to pull back off the stand when the tap on the shoulder arrived. Jimmy left the engine running and looked at the man who had appeared beside him. Jimmy didn't raise his visor.

"Kevin?" the man asked, a tall gaunt figure whose dark ringed eyes looked like they hadn't slept for a month but had been propped open by nightmares.

"Who's asking?"

Jimmy's words were muffled by his helmet but he understood that the man potentially thought that he was Kevin and Jimmy's natural curiosity just wouldn't allow him to reveal the truth immediately. The man began to offer his hand but curiously stopped mid-action and diverted it into the pocket of his leather jacket instead.

"My name is Simon."

"Okay, Simon. And what can Kevin do for you today?" Jimmy asked, reinforcing the man's mistake, eager as he was to know more about what business this strange stranger had with his friend.

Simon checked along the road, lowered his voice and moved a little closer to Jimmy.

"I want to talk to you about the Quitters."

Jimmy stopped the engine.

"Quitters? What's that?"

Simon removed his hand from his pocket and passed a Quitters business card to Jimmy.

"Look, Kevin, I've seen you at the hospital, I've seen you with these and I've seen you leave them for people to find. I just want to know if it means what I think it means, that's all."

Jimmy took the card and looked at it, pretending to read the words that he already knew by heart.

"And what do you think it means, Simon?"

"I think it means that you can help me. So can we talk?"

Jimmy had forgotten this feeling, that rising knot of excitement that he felt when he walked to the edge and prepared to dive into the murky world of choreographed death. To Jimmy, the draw was as irresistible as a dark sea cave is to a diver low on air.

"Okay, Simon. I guess we can talk. I'll meet you in the Crown on Main Street in forty minutes."

"No, Kevin, not a pub. I don't want anywhere public. How about back here, on that bench under the tree?"

Jimmy agreed, restarted the engine and set off for the chemist leaving the man to wander. When he returned, Simon was already sitting on the bench, smoking and drinking a tin of Red Bull. Jimmy pretty much ignored him, parked the scooter and went into the flat. He checked Kevin, who was sleeping soundly, and left the medicine on his friend's bedside table. He collected a note pad and a pen and was about to leave the flat when he realized that he was no longer wearing a crash helmet. Jimmy hurriedly changed his shirt and went to join Simon.

On his way down the stairs, Jimmy rehearsed out loud how he would

explain to Simon that he was in fact Kevin's partner and that Kevin had been called back to work. The lie sounded good, even when spoken out loud, an acid test for Jimmy, who had been caught in lies before that had made perfect sense in his head but sounded so full of shit when verbalized, and he couldn't see any chinks in it. He was full of confidence as he approached the man on the bench.

"Hi, Kevin, thanks again for taking the time."

Simon obviously couldn't remember what Kevin looked like from what must have been a brief and perhaps distant encounter on the hospital ward.

"No problem, Simon. Now, I'm not sure what you understand about Quitters so perhaps you'd like to tell me before we go any further."

"Sure. Well, simply put, I think that Quitters is an organization that has people, experts I guess, who can help people who want to die to commit suicide."

"Okay. And assuming that you are right, how would you see them helping you, Simon?"

The man looked at Jimmy with his deep, dead eyes. Jimmy had seen such eyes before. Marshall had had them. They weren't exactly the same as Marshall's, there was no anger in them, no flashes of rage, but their essence was the same; tired and hopeless.

"I want to kill myself, Kevin, but I want to do it properly, not just end up back in the hospital. There can't be any fuck-ups, yeah?"

"Okay. And assuming that I am what you think I am, Simon, why would you want to do that exactly?"

The man took a deep breath, leaned back and looked up into the canopy of the tree above him. In the tree a small bird hopped among the branches, inspecting cracks in the bark for grubs and insects.

"For modern humans, Kevin, the instinct to survive just isn't enough

anymore. People need more than hunger and the urge to reproduce to keep them going in today's world. They need to feel valued, to feel that their life actually means something to somebody or something other than themselves, or at least have the promise that it could be so. But perhaps more fundamental than this, they need the rest of the world to know their value too."

Simon paused. He was still focused on the bird and Jimmy found himself intrigued by this thoughtful man and was eager for him to continue his explanation.

"Sure, the basic instinct to survive is still in everyone, and always will be I guess, but society has buried it so deep now, replaced it with so much other crap to judge us by, that the motive to live seems to have shifted from survival to success. It seems to me nowadays that if you don't succeed you might as well not exist."

Simon took another cigarette from his packet and lit it from the crumbling tip of the one in his hand before flicking that to the ground. He looked away from the treetops and directly at Jimmy.

"You ever hear of the Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle, Kevin?"

Jimmy shook his head while taking a cigarette from the packet that Simon was offering him.

"It's physics, Kevin, quantum physics actually. You know, all that stuff that no one really gives a fuck about but that makes every day possible, stops tomorrow from disappearing up its own arse. Anyway, this uncertainty thing is all about particles and energy shells, but what it's saying is that by observing something, like for example trying to measure a particle's speed or its position or whatever, you change its nature. That's where the uncertainty is. The fact that you've interacted with it changes its reality. Taking this a bit further, you might say that your act of observation makes it real, brings it into existence if you like. Sounds weird, but what it boils down to is that

you can never really know if the bleedin' thing was there before you started fuckin' about."

Jimmy looked at Simon and laughed softly.

"What are you going on about?"

"Just stay with me a minute, would you, because this is going somewhere, I promise. Now I know this theory is all about really small things and shit, but if you think about it a minute, think bigger, what this Heisenberg geezer was really saying is that unless something is observed, then you can't be certain that it really exists, right?"

"Sorry, but you've lost me again, mate."

Simon looked frustrated and Jimmy resolved that whatever he said next he would understand and agree with fully. If he, Kevin and Wanda ever got round to writing a safety manual for their company employees, this would be rule number one: don't piss off today someone who is going to die tomorrow.

"It's like a cat in a box. If no one looks in the box, is the cat really there? Or does it take someone to see the cat or hear it scratching to make it exist? Or that tree in the forest that people always bang on about. When it falls over, does it make a noise? I'd argue that it only makes a noise if there's someone, some animal or some machine there to hear it. See what I'm saying, Kevin?"

"I do now, kind of at least, and I can see where you're coming from, but I'm still not sure what this has to do with you wanting to kill yourself."

Simon held his arms out, palms facing outward, satisfied to have finally arrived at his destination.

"I'm the cat in the box, Kevin, the tree in the forest. No one ever looks in on me, no one ever listens to me. As far as the world is concerned I don't fuckin' exist and I never really have done. I've got no reason to live 'cos I've got nothing to show, nothing to offer. I'm nobody, Kevin, and when I'm not

here anymore, no one will blink an eye. I'm a failure, complete and utter. Who knows, the world will probably be a slightly better place without me in it. Be more room at least. In fact, thinking about it, my death will probably be about the only thing that will bring my life into existence because only then will my life maybe mean something to someone. Specifically, there'll be one less mouth to feed and a bloke somewhere who can earn his living by putting me in the ground."

Jimmy thought about this for a moment. He thought about the feelings that he himself had been experiencing when he had tried to kill himself, primarily betrayal and hate and unrequited love. If Simon could feel these things now, could feel anything for that matter, the grief for lost love or the sharp pain from a friend's treachery, then perhaps those emotions would be enough to save his life. After all, was there something in Heisenberg's rule book that said interaction had to be a pleasant experience? Opening the box and pouring boiling water over the cat would pop it into existence just as effectively as a tickle under the chin.

"So why do you need us?" asked Jimmy, admitting for the first time that he represented the Quitters.

"Like I said, Kevin, I don't want to fuck this up. It's got to be quick and final and it's got to be tomorrow."

Jimmy weighed Simon's words then answered.

"No, mate. I'm sorry, but no. It seems to me that all you need is some time with people. Join a club or something, go down to the church or just hang about in a pub for a couple of hours. Shit, it's not as if you're a bloke with nothing to say and it wouldn't be long before you'd get some of that interaction you're after. No, I'm sorry, but we can't help you before you try and sort yourself out a bit more or get counseled or summat. You just haven't given me reason enough to help you die, Simon, really you haven't." Jimmy stood to leave.

Simon remained seated and calm. He grabbed Jimmy's arm.

"Well, is this reason enough, Kevin? I'm gonna do it anyway, and when they find me there'll be a letter explaining all about what you and your pals do. And when they see the card that you put out, encouraging people to take their own lives, I think the coppers will be very interested in having a little chat, mate, don't you?"

Jimmy sighed and snatched his arm from Simon's grip. It took him only a moment to run the scenarios and eliminate all but one: Simon was going to die anyway and it would be best to help him do it. After all, Jimmy argued, he and Kev wouldn't be doing anything that they hadn't already done, so there would be no tangible benefit in refusing Simon help and in doing so exposing themselves to the police.

"Okay, Simon, if that's how it is, we have a deal. But there'll be no thousand-pound wish day, and it will have to be somewhere local. You got a place in mind?"

"I have. Tomorrow it is then, my place," and he shook Jimmy's hand.

Chapter 25

Simon left Jimmy without a clue as to how he would like to die. He had simply scribbled down his address and phone number on Jimmy's note pad and told Jimmy to text him as soon as he knew the arrangements. Before taking the short walk to the corner of the road to board a bus, Simon also gave Jimmy a brown manila envelope. On it were written three large black letters, MEN, and he explained that in the envelope was a letter that Jimmy was to post once the deed was done. The letter was to be sent to the editor of the *Manchester Evening News*.

Jimmy had wanted to talk a little more about the suicide and perhaps get some general idea about likes and dislikes, but Simon, anxious to catch his ride home, had said that he didn't particularly want to know the nitty-gritty of how he would die and that he was prepared for pretty much anything. On the one hand this hands-off approach satisfied Jimmy, who finally had complete editorial control over the process, but on the other it terrified him as he had absolutely no idea what he might do. What was more, for just about the first time in his life, Jimmy had a deadline, literally. He laughed out loud at the thought as he opened the door to the flat.

"What you laughing at, you freak? Can't you see some of us are ill and trying to get some kip?"

Kevin had dragged himself from his bed to search out sympathy.

"You look terrible, mate. That medicine any good?"

"Not kicked in yet. Couple of hours and I should start feelin' better. I ain't goin' to work tomorrow, though. No way."

"Yeah, and I ain't your mum, Kevin, so calm down."

"What were you laughing at anyway?"

Jimmy explained about Simon and the work that he had commissioned them to do. He didn't discuss Simon's threat to go to the police; the decision had been made and Kevin kicking off about a done deal wouldn't help Jimmy get to where he needed to be.

"So, if you feel up to it, partner, you can sit here and kick a few ideas around while I get us both a cup of tea. Me and Wanda should be able to manage everything on the day, but I could really do with some help on ideas, Kev. Oh, and no telly until we've thrashed this out, yeah?"

By the time Jimmy had returned with the tea, Kevin had visited his bedroom and collected a quilt. He sat wrapped deep inside it, watching the television.

"Awww, come on, mate, please, I said no telly! This is serious. We've got work to do, you tosser."

"Calm down, you tart, problem solved," sniffed Kevin, raising his eyebrows and nodding towards the television.

On the screen was a man wearing a beard and thick rubber gloves. He was holding a long fat eel a few inches above a large tank of water. The caption told Jimmy that the man was a marine biologist called Peter Struyf. Jimmy watched as Peter explained that the eel in his hands was able to generate sufficient electrical energy to kill fish and stun a man. Peter then dropped the eel into the tank and an array of fluorescent bulbs shaped like a fish lit behind him.

"You like, my friend?"

"Like what? Fish?"

"No, you twat. The idea. The old electrocution-in-the-bath idea. It's a classic, man! I only wish I could be there to see it, but I guess you'll get all the gory detail in wonderful techno-colour for me to watch later, eh?" Kevin grinned, his voice wobbling as he shook himself violently pretending he had stuck his fingers in a socket.

"I like it, Kev, yeah. Fits the bill perfectly, son. What d'you reckon, toaster or hair dryer?"

"Toaster, mate, gotta be a toaster. Hairdryer might look too much like an accident. No one makes toast in the bath, not even me."

Jimmy wasted no time. He texted Wanda.

Hi babe got urgent Qs job 2mo & need ur help. Kev ill. Can u get pm off ?
xx

A couple of sips of hot tea later and Jimmy got his reply.

OK c u at 2 at the flat.

Jimmy read the message over. Not because he didn't understand it—how simple could it be?—but because he was always a little floored by Wanda's lack of affection. Jimmy always read her messages at least twice to try and ring some emotion out of them. Sometimes he would hold on to them for days and study them occasionally, during quiet moments or when he was drunk, searching for just a hint of warmth. This one, however, was particularly flat, so he deleted it immediately and then texted Simon.

15:00 at ur place. Do you have a bath

"What if he hasn't got a bath though, Kev? Would it work in a shower, d'you think?"

"Did he look like he had a bath?"

Jimmy looked at Kevin in disbelief.

"How the hell can you tell if someone has a bath just by looking at them, Kevin?"

"Dunno. They'd be clean, I guess, except for the back of the neck and if they're tall, their knees. Tommy at work, he's always got a scraggy neck 'cos he doesn't like water on his face, so he won't have a shower or put his head under water in the bath. Not sure about his knees though 'cos he's a short arse."

Jimmy shook his head and was mercifully saved from the inane debate that would inevitably follow by a buzz and a chime as his phone collected a text.

Ok and yes, I do have a bath. This will be fine. Back door will be open. See you then.

"Well he does have a clean neck and he does have a bath, so that's your theory shot to shit."

"Ah, but what about his knees, eh, smart arse?"



Jimmy and Kevin, their interest in the Quitters rejuvenated by Jimmy's encounter with Simon, spent the rest of the afternoon and most of the evening editing the DVD. As yet there was no title sequence and Kevin suggested that they should open with a short piece of narrative, perhaps a few famous suicide quotes, scrolling across the screen accompanied by Monty Python's "Always look on the bright side of life." Jimmy wasn't sure. He liked the idea of the quotes but felt that the music might be a bit naff.

"It's a bit cheesy though, don't you think, Kev? I was thinking of something a bit more arty. Maybe that Smith's track where Morrissey's going on about soil falling on his head."

"I can see your point, Jimmy, but you have to remember who the audience

is here. We ain't going for the Turner prize you know, we're targeting *Sun* readers."

Jimmy still wasn't convinced so the pair agreed that they should work on the theme tune a little later when the DVD had been fully compiled. Perhaps then they would have a better idea about the tone of the whole and the mood that they wanted to set. Jimmy did, however, concede that Kevin would probably be proven right on this as the whole idea was to try to put a bit of humour into suicide, lighten it up a little.

They googled for quotes and eventually selected three, the first being Jimmy's choice.

Frances and Courtney, I'll be at your altar.

Please keep going, Courtney, for Frances, for her life will be so much happier without me.

I LOVE YOU. I LOVE YOU.

It was true that on the face of it these words didn't have a lot to say to the world and weren't particularly thought-provoking, but Jimmy liked them for their wretched honesty; a failing husband who couldn't see far enough past his ego to understand that he was laying the blame for his death on the tiny, trembling shoulders of his abandoned daughter. The fact that the words belonged to Kurt Cobain, an idol of Jimmy's and a rock legend, was a delicious bonus and gave the DVD instant street cred.

Kevin selected the next quotation and he surprised Jimmy with his reasoning; simply that Darren would have liked it.

When all usefulness is over, when one is assured of an unavoidable and imminent death, it is the simplest of human rights to choose a quick and easy death in place of a slow and horrible one.

The quote was by an author called Charlotte Perkins Gilman, someone who neither Jimmy nor Kevin had heard of but who, until her death, had been an early advocate of the right-to-die movement and finally took the issue into her own hands by choosing chloroform over cancer, much as Darren Howard had done.

"Nice one, Kev. I think you're right, Darren would have chosen that or something similar. Wonder if there's anything suitable for Marshall."

"What, like 'when you've killed every other fucka there's only you left' or summat like that?" joked Kevin.

Jimmy laughed loudly but stopped abruptly as he read the next set of words that popped onto the screen.

"Now that is perfect for us, Kev, just perfect. It's modern, it's black as hell and it introduces the action beautifully, don't you think?"

Kevin read for a moment. Chris Chubbuck, a woman obviously tired of reading the news and desperate to make it for a change, had made this final broadcast immediately before shooting herself live on prime time Florida WXLT-TV.

And now, in keeping with Channel 40's policy of always bringing you the latest in blood and guts, in living color, you're about to see another first—an attempted suicide.

Kevin smirked as he imagined the shocked faces of families, returning from the Magic Kingdom and the carefree make-believe of Mickey and his pals, turning on the telly and watching some pretty anchor woman's head explode. He wondered what had entertained them more that day.

"Perfect, my son. It might be worth having a scout round for the footage at some point. Might come in useful for padding out if we're running short."

"Could be, mate, but for now we still got a lot of work to do with the stuff

we've got."

It took almost four hours to complete the editing. The title sequence did indeed look good and Kevin had been right about the music. There was something extremely funny about the tune that had been so enthusiastically whistled by a hillside full of crucified Jews, and the slow scroll of somber words was lifted to a humorous crescendo by the time Chubbuck featured. Yes, on the whole the lads were very pleased with the result and in particular the death of Howard's rabbit, for while it wasn't perhaps the best fit, they both agreed that Darren's death should be given a little more dignity than Marshall's. They backed it with the last song that he had ever performed. After all, the drugs certainly hadn't worked for Darren Howard and as the ambulance scene, filmed from the hilltop on that warm summer's evening faded to black, Ashcroft's outro bled away into a fifteen-second silence which Jimmy and Kevin observed each time they played it.

"Cool. Very cool indeed, my friend." Kevin pronounced after the third viewing. "How long did it run for in the end?"

"Fifteen minutes and thirty-three seconds. Not bad, really. I reckon that after this Simon geezer tomorrow, we'll only need one more. Thirty minutes should be plenty."

Jimmy emptied the DVD from the player, put it in its holder and placed it on top of the machine. It was half past ten.

"Okay, mate, I'm off to bed. I'll leave you in your pit if you're asleep when I leave. Let you know how it goes when I get back. If you're feelin' better, we could have a pint in the Crown tomorrow early doors if you want."

"Okay, mate, sounds good. Listen, I'm gonna stay up for a while. Been sleepin' all day."

Kevin snuggled back into his quilt and waited until Jimmy was almost at his bedroom door before speaking softly into the darkened room.

"Listen, Jimmy, I know why you were in hospital and what you were doin'

on the bridge, you know.”

Jimmy stopped but didn’t turn around, frozen as he was in the half light between television and night.

“It’s okay, mate, it doesn’t bother me, and I understand why you don’t ever want to talk about it... and I won’t say owt to Wanda either, that’s your shit. I just want you to know that, as far as I’m concerned, I’m glad you’re a useless twat who can’t even hit the ground from eighty feet up. Of course, we can always pretend that you weren’t trying to commit suicide and that you meant to land in a lorry load of crap, if that makes it easier for you, but personally, I’d like to think that my best mate was feeling tired and lonely and made a mistake. Much better that than thinking I’m hanging out with a fuckin’ idiot.”

Jimmy sighed, a sigh filled with warm relief that inflated his secret and allowed the weight of it to lift from his shoulders. He went into his bedroom and closed the door behind him. Once on the bed Jimmy allowed the tears to come, crying softly, finally scared by the bridge and how close he had come to missing out on what was turning out to be a very wonderful life.

Chapter 26

Jimmy slept well that night and much longer than he had anticipated. Having initially woken at around ten o'clock, he remained in bed, trying to sleep, until finally throwing back the covers at around eleven thirty, this after over an hour of nagging from a bright and persistent day. But that wasn't the last word from this maternal blast of sunshine, for once he was up she highlighted to Jimmy every stain on his bed sheets, a grubby record of over three weeks of sex and midnight suppers (disappointingly, more food than fanny).

"Gotta put these in the wash before I do anything else," Jimmy promised himself.

He pulled on his Calvins, collected the sheets and carried them into the kitchen where he overloaded the washing machine to such an extent that there was hardly room for the detergent ball. He started the wash cycle anyway and wrote a note for Kevin on the same pad that had Simon's address on it.

KEV,

*PUT THESE ON THE BALCONY WOULD YOU WHEN
THEY'RE DONE.*

BE BACK AROUND FIVE I GUESS FOR THAT PINT.

HOPE YOU'RE FEELIN BETTER MATE.

JIMMY.

Jimmy put the pad on top of the machine and went about making his breakfast. He liked to eat before his morning ablutions. He was just getting

out of the shower when Wanda arrived, over thirty minutes early. Jimmy shouted from the bathroom to double check that it was indeed her and not some smack-head looking for trinkets.

"Yeah, it's me. My boss let me go half an hour before lunch, which was really nice of him, don't you think?" she called as she hung up her jacket.

"Yeah, that is nice babe, he seems like a good bloke."

Jimmy wrapped himself in a towel and came out of the bathroom. He gave Wanda a hug and a long kiss on the lips.

"So I guess that gives us a little more time to kill, eh? Now what could we possibly do in half an hour I wonder?" Jimmy grinned, holding her closer and kissing her neck.

"Two things, Jimmy. If it's only going to take half an hour then it isn't worth getting a sweat on and secondly, time to kill is exactly what it is. I don't think that the imminent death of a desperate man is the biggest turn-on a girl can have, now is it?"

Wanda pushed Jimmy away, whipping his towel from around his waist. It was strange, but standing in front of his girl with an erection when sex wasn't on the agenda was somehow humiliating, and Jimmy covered himself with both hands as he backed into the bathroom to collect his pants.

"So where are we going then, Jimmy, and who is the customer?" Wanda asked casually.

"The address is on the notepad on the washing machine. I'll tell you what I know about the bloke over a cup of tea. Stick the kettle on would you, babe? I'll be out in a minute."

Wanda found the notepad and read the address. She knew the street, in a reasonably nice part of town on the southern outskirts of Manchester, having recently been asked to advise in a nuisance neighbour dispute. She smiled as she replaced the pad and noticed the washing machine with its detergent ball pinned to the glass door by the sheets and quilts crammed into it.

Wanda made the tea and took it through to the lounge. Jimmy was dressed and sat waiting on the balcony.

"Yeah, I actually don't know much about the guy. He collared me yesterday morning on my way out. He thought I was Kevin, said that he'd seen me dishing out the Quitters cards at the hospital and wanted to know if we could help him. Thanks, love."

Jimmy took his tea, sipped at it and then lit a cigarette.

"So what's his story, Jimmy? Did he tell you why he wanted to commit suicide?"

"Oh, yeah, 'course he did. We must have chatted for at least half an hour or so. He said that his business was going under, wife had done one, mortgage arrears were piled up. Usual shit," Jimmy lied, unable to tell Wanda the truth and that Simon was in fact blackmailing him.

"And did he say why he was in such a rush?" asked Wanda with more than a hint of suspicion in her voice.

Jimmy held his chin and nodded his head slowly as if trying to recall Simon's words rather than invent them.

"Well, he said that there were court proceedings starting this week and that rather than see his creditors trying to get their pound of flesh he would rather make 'the greedy bastards feel like shit' by doing himself in before the day. Come to think of it, he was a bit of a drama queen, probably into all that amateur dramatics stuff, or gay." He lied again, wishing that he had stopped at 'court proceedings' and not gone on to create Simone, a transvestite pantodarling who was the complete opposite of the introspective, unshaven man that Wanda would meet in less than an hour.

"Sounds interesting. Bet he's got some weird ideas on how he's going to commit suicide, has he?"

"He has, actually, but I'm not sure that we can accommodate any of them at such short notice."

Shut up shut up shut up shut up.

"Bus!" Jimmy yelped and dashed into the lounge.

Beyond the trees on the far side of the cemetery an orange bus was stopping.

"Next stop is ours, babe. Come on, gotta dash!"

Jimmy collected his rucksack, tossed Wanda her jacket, shepherded her out the door and egged her to hurry down the poorly lit stairs.

"You really need to get this light fixed, Jimmy," she protested.

"And you need to move that sexy ass of yours. Turn left when you hit the street and run as fast as you can down to Lapwing."

They made the bus stop just in time. Wanda boarded, ignored the driver and went directly to the back seats while Jimmy organized the fare. The bus was in motion by the time he flopped down next to her and, before she had a chance to resume her line of questioning, Jimmy began to detail more of his meeting with Simon and the decision that they had arrived at regarding the toaster in the bath. This time, he included more truths than lies and managed to water down the image of Simone that he had built to such an extent that by the time they changed buses in Mersey Square, Simon was pretty much an ordinary bloke who just got a little over-excited from time to time. The second bus took them directly down the A6 and after twenty minutes or so, Jimmy and Wanda buzzed the bell and staggered down the aisle, swinging from pole to pole, to leave it outside the Acton Court hotel.

"So where now, Wanda?"

"If I remember rightly, we need to take the next left and Byron Close is about twenty yards further down."

Wanda and Jimmy left the busy road and entered the relative calm of mid-afternoon suburbia. Byron Close was long and narrow, lined with elm and birch. The detached and semi-detached houses were well kept and presented proudly at the end of paved driveways. Jimmy put his arm around

Wanda's waist. He felt good, escorting his lady through the leafy shadows and imagining that they were on their way home to unpack groceries in an oak kitchen that overlooked a garden growing roses and kids.

"One day, Wanda, one day," he murmured softly but not quietly enough.

She squeezed his hand and Jimmy blushed, embarrassed that he had given Wanda an insight into the depth of his love for her.

"Bit posh round here, Jimmy. He must have been doing well for himself before his business went under, don't you think?"

"Yeah, I guess he was," Jimmy replied, surprised at how affluent the poor, lonely soul who had spilled his heart while seated on the bench opposite the flat appeared to be.

"Very well indeed," Jimmy confirmed as they stopped outside number 73.

The house was detached and had at least four bedrooms. Its bottom half looked respectably old, built as it was using reclaimed red brick, an image reflected in the design of the upper floor which comprised white rendered panels strapped together by mock, black beams. Georgian windows accessorized the look; bayed and clean, affording jealous passersby glimpses of large, flat-screen televisions and plush wall coverings.

The whole façade was impressive, marred only by a curious large rectangular splodge of yellow paint daubed across the wall to the left of a central canopied porch.

"Are you sure this is where he lives?"

"Sure as I can be. 73 Byron Close."

Jimmy checked again the copper plated number pinned on the solid oak front door.

"Simon said we were to go around to the back door. He's going to leave it open for us although I think we'd be safer knocking, just in case."

As they walked down the drive toward the left-hand side of the building, the yellow splodge began to offer clues as to its purpose. The yellow was

in fact a top coat of paint, applied liberally to a large area of brick work in an effort to cover something over. It looked to Jimmy as though there were three words hiding there, but he could only make a guess at the last two because the first was almost totally obscured.

"It says Something FIDDLING BASTARD I reckon. Guess our client wasn't too well thought of in the business world, eh? Maybe that's what the court case is all about, more of a criminal charge than a bankruptcy hearing. I reckon that our man could be in more trouble than he's letting on."

"I think you're probably right, Jimmy. Does this change anything?"

"Nah. Why should it? Just gives us a bit more understanding about why he's in such a hurry to do himself in, that's all. Come on, let's get on with it." Jimmy unlatched a tall side gate that led to the rear of the house.



But Jimmy was wrong. The writing had the potential to change everything. If Jimmy and Wanda had only taken a little more time to decipher it, or if Mr Simmons, proud father of fifteen-year-old Julie, had been decorating his lounge using a slightly darker shade of cream when his distraught daughter had confessed her love for her teacher, then the graffiti would have rung out its warning loud and clear.

For the first word was in reality nothing at all to do with bent books and balances. The first word was KIDDY.

Chapter 27

The noise that Wanda and Jimmy had made during their rushed exit from the flat had wakened Kevin for the third time that day. On his second awakening—he reckoned the time to be around eleven based on the strength of the day outside—Kevin had tested his glands and his sinuses and concluded that he was pretty much better. However, he had also remembered his dad telling him “Son, if you don’t enjoy your last day off school after being poorly, then you’re not fit enough to go back.” Now, while his dad hadn’t specifically added the words “oh, and this is true about grown-up work, too,” he hadn’t excluded them either and so the edict lived on, championed by Kevin through school and college and into his working life. Consequently he never felt guilty, even when spotted in the pub by colleagues, about extending his sick leave by a day in order to have a bit of fun and so make certain that he was indeed fully recovered. Today, Kevin had decided, fun would be a long lie in bed and an early doors session with his best pal. With that, he had thrown one off the wrist and rolled back under the covers, sleeping soundly until the slamming door and hurried feet on the stairway had wakened him for a final time.

Kevin left his bed and went directly to the bathroom to take a shower. He stayed under it until the hot water ran out and then went into the kitchen to raid the fridge. He wasn’t presented with a lot of options (shopping was tomorrow) and settled for a cheese sandwich laced with brown sauce. As he scoffed it he read Jimmy’s note about drying his bedding, checked the timer and calculated that he could relax for the next twenty minutes or so while the washing machine did its thing. Kevin turned the telly on and sat on the couch, munching hungrily at his sandwich and wondering if there

was enough cheese and bread left in the fridge to make another one. As he replaced the remote on the coffee table, he clocked the brown manila envelope with the letters M E N printed on it that Jimmy had left there the night before.

“Men?” Kevin wondered.

He wiped his hands on a cushion and grabbed the envelope. While he understood that the letter wasn’t addressed to him, Kevin also reasoned that there was enough ambiguity in the word “men” for him to be justified in opening it and, if worse came to worst and Jimmy got pissed at him, a heartfelt apology and a sincere “but I didn’t read anything” would probably cover it. Kevin tore the top off the envelope and tipped its contents onto the table.

Inside was a second, white envelope and typed neatly on that was a name: Howard Cartwright, Editor in Chief. Kevin put the letter to one side and picked up the loose A4 sheet that had also fallen onto the table. On it was a picture of a man with smiling, clean-shaven cheeks that billowed below intelligent brown eyes set behind dark-rimmed glasses. The man looked familiar but Kevin couldn’t place him. He put the picture down and opened the white envelope, too intrigued now to worry about what Jimmy might say. Kevin unfolded the letter inside and began to read it.

Cartwright.

You have blood on your hands.

Now I guess that the death of a pedo is of no concern to you but I am not referring to me, I am talking about my wife. How can you live with yourself knowing that you drove a beautiful young woman to take her own life? Her name was Dianne Stevens by the...

Kevin dropped the letter onto the table and sat back to try to understand

how all this fitted together.

Why did he have a letter from Dianne Steven's husband, a suspected pedophile, on the coffee table in his lounge? He knew that Jimmy had left the brown envelope there the night before, of course, but what the hell was Jimmy doing with it anyway? The letter wasn't stamped or even addressed properly, so Jimmy must have collected it from somewhere or someone. But who? Had Wanda been involved in this case? If that was true, then Kevin was in deep shit, but this didn't make sense either because this kind of thing wasn't Wanda's field. Anyway, the contents of the envelope didn't have a legal feel about them at all.

Baffled by what he had found, Kevin returned to the kitchen to make another sandwich. The spin cycle on the washing machine was coming to an end and when he'd finished preparing his food, Kevin waited a moment for the door to click open. While he waited, he read the note pad again, only this time something didn't feel right about the address that was there, scribbled beneath Simon's name. But what was it about that address that made Kevin feel so uncomfortable?

"Byron Close, Byron Close..." Kevin repeated to himself over and over in the hope that his incantation would summon knowledge.

Remarkably, on the eighth time of asking, it did.

"Shit! That's where Dianne Stevens lived!"

It didn't take him much longer to rescue the three-day-old newspaper from the rubbish bin tucked away in the cupboard next to the washing machine. The paper was torn where Jimmy had crumpled it in his anger and it was stained with tea and coffee slops but all the confirmation that Kevin needed was still there in black and white. Beneath her picture, next to Dianne Stevens' name were three little words that brought Simon and Jeff Stevens colliding together.

"...of Byron Close!" he shouted loudly, and ran into his bedroom to get

his phone.

Kevin hit Jimmy's number and waited. One ring, two rings, three rings, voice mail.

"Shit!"

Kevin waited impatiently as the recording explained how Jimmy's number wasn't available at the moment and that Kevin would be diverted to Jimmy's voice mail box where he could do one of three things, either leave a message, delete a message or change the content of the message simply by pressing different numbers. The message didn't explain, however, that these instructions were unnecessarily dragged out in order to milk his air time.

"Jimmy, it's Kev. Listen, the bloke you're with is a pedo. That fuckin' Jeff Stevens geezer. Don't do anythin', Jimmy, just get the fuck out of there. The coppers are gonna be all over this, pal, and it ain't ever gonna look like suicide. I'm on my way."

Kevin closed his phone, checked once more the address on the pad and set off after Jimmy and Wanda, all the time wishing hard under his breath that he could make it across town in time to stop them.

Chapter 28

Beyond the tall gate at the side of number 73 Byron Close was another world. For Jimmy and Wanda, it was as though they had stepped through an invisible force field, popped inside a bubble that kept a secret place safe and hidden from the noise and turmoil of reality. A huge lawn led the eye away from the house and down a slight incline. The grass remained trimmed and striped for almost one hundred and fifty metres until finally its fringe became disheveled, shocked by an explosion of colour beneath the spread of the biggest rhododendron Jimmy had ever seen. In the lawn was a red brick path, snaking among the borders and shrubs. About halfway down the lawn, the path struck out to circle and constrict a large ornamental pond that coughed and spluttered a white plume of water into the air. Jimmy hadn't been in such a garden since he was thirteen or fourteen, a period when he had spent many a Friday night clambering over fences, tunneling through hedges and sneaking across pitch-black gardens with his friends.

The game had been called "garden hopping" and had always given Jimmy a huge buzz, but the advent of motion detectors and security floodlights in the early nineties had pretty much killed it. Jimmy remembered his first encounter with the phenomenon, exposed and frozen in the centre of a lawn (not dissimilar to the one on which he was presently standing) by a blast of white light. Jimmy smiled as he replayed the chaos that had followed; him and his friends bolting for the shadows, crashing through the fences and clambering over the walls that obstructed the route back to the street. They had laughed crazily all the time, hit by an adrenalin rush that would last for hours afterwards.

"This doesn't feel good, Jimmy. What do you think?"

Wanda was right. The property was magnificent and oozed society. It was the home of a respected and popular man, not a desperate loner who couldn't connect with the world. Something felt wrong, but Jimmy was too far down this particular garden path to turn back now. He just hoped that he wouldn't trigger unseen events and find himself back in the spotlight.

"I know what you mean, Wanda, but there can't be any harm in just checking things out, can there? Look, the door is open like he said it would be."

Jimmy knocked loudly on the half-open door at the back of the house. There was no reply so he stuck his head around the door into the kitchen.

"Fuck me, Wanda, you should see this place," he whispered.

Wanda tucked her head under Jimmy's arm and peeked in. The kitchen was straight out of *House and Country* magazine with beautifully crafted wooden units carrying thick granite worktops that linked cookers to fridges and washers to dryers. The room was large and airy, cream for the most part, but accented tastefully with splashes of lemon and orange. Wanda wanted it.

"Hello, Simon? Are you there?" Jimmy called into the huge hallway beyond.

"Kevin, is that you?" replied the house, almost immediately.

"Yeah, Simon, it's me. Me and a friend. Is it all right to come in?" Jimmy shouted back as he straightened and entered the kitchen.

"Of course. I'm upstairs setting things up. Come on up."

"Why is he still calling you Kevin? Didn't you tell him that he had you mixed up?" whispered Wanda as they crossed the tiles.

"It's a long story, babe, I'll explain later, but best if you go with it for the time being, eh?"

Jimmy and Wanda crossed the kitchen and entered the hallway. A cupboard under the stairs was opened slightly and through the six-inch gap Jimmy could see a fuse box. He paused to inspect it. Part of a match had

been jammed into the small plastic switch that a scribbled label told him protected the upstairs power circuit.

Wanda took the lead and found the bottom of the stairs. Jimmy followed as they climbed the first set of treads and turned onto a small landing. Here the walls were decorated with pictures of Simon. In some of them he was alone, smiling and proud, outside a stone municipal building, wearing a cap and gown and clutching his hard-earned qualification. In others he was posed with a pretty blonde woman.

Coiled on the floor at the top of the second flight of stairs was a white cable plugged into a wall socket and rippling away down the landing. The cable turned through a doorway, second on the right, from which loud splashing noises could be heard as a bath filled. They followed the cable and it led them to Simon.

"Hi, Kevin, and who's your friend?"

Simon was in a white robe, leaning over the bath testing the water as it filled. Jimmy prayed that he was wearing something underneath.

"Hi. Er, this is Wanda, Simon. She helps me out from time to time."

"Nice to meet you, Wanda."

Simon held out his hand to shake Wanda's. Before she took it, she checked that he was not in contact with the bath water and that the toaster balanced on the edge of the bath was stable.

"This is a nice house you have here, Simon. Not at all what I was expecting from what Jimmy told me about you."

"Jimmy? Who's Jimmy?"

Simon had finished running the bath and turned to Wanda. The bathroom, that had only moments ago been full of noise and an uneasy trust, became threateningly quiet and suspecting.

Wanda blushed. She turned to Jimmy and kissed him on his cheek.

"My Jimmy, of course. It's what I call him. Kind of a nickname, a personal

joke from when we first started dating.”

Simon laughed.

“Well, whatever it means, you make a lovely couple, you really do. Now, where do you want me, Kevin?”

Jimmy was puzzled by the man’s disposition; he seemed giggly and a little drunk. High perhaps?

“Em, in the bath is traditional for this kind of thing, Simon,” Jimmy joked.

“I’ll set the camera up here, just outside the doorway, so I can get a full shot of you and also keep it out of harm’s way. You know, if there’s a lot of water flying about.”

As Jimmy and Wanda prepared the tripod and camera, Simon removed his bath robe. Underneath it he was wearing only swim shorts and sandals. He left both of these on and removed his glasses, placing them carefully next to a row of bottles on a tidy glass shelf fixed just beneath a mirrored cabinet. Simon held the sink and rubbed his tired eyes and, as he framed his shot through the viewer of the camera, Jimmy thought that he caught a glimpse of uncertainty. Jimmy pressed record and spoke.

“You okay, Simon?”

“Yep. Bit nervous, of course, but I’ll be okay.”

Simon stepped carefully into the bath and stood in the water, positioning himself within easy reach of the toaster.

“So, Simon, is there anything that you want to say to the camera before you do this? Any words of wisdom you want to leave behind?”

Simon thought about Jimmy’s offer for a moment and then declined it, saying that instead Jimmy could film a few seconds of the letter that he had written to the *Manchester Evening News*, or perhaps read it aloud on his behalf. Jimmy said that he would.

Simon now sat in the bath, wet to his waist, on the left-hand side of the

scene, and Jimmy thought that it would be a nice idea to zoom past him and focus the camera on Simon's glasses. Who knows, he might be really lucky and pick up the reflection of Simon as he prepared himself to die.

Jimmy panned slightly, found the spectacles and tightened the shot. Unfortunately, the idea didn't work out quite as Jimmy had hoped because the glasses had already steamed over, so rather than capturing the eerie image of a man preparing to die, viewed by the epitome of himself, all that Jimmy got was a picture of flat grey glass in dull black rims. Disappointed, the director prepared to zoom out and focus back on Simon.

And that was when Jimmy saw it, the final clue to the deception that had nagged him from the moment he had strolled onto leafy, middle-class Byron Close. Typed in bold black letters across the label of a prescription bottle on the shelf beneath the wall cabinet, was a name. Jimmy magnified the letters, as much as his digital zoom would allow, making sure that there was no mistake. He stopped the camera and read the name out loud.

"Dianne Stevens."

Jeff Stevens pulled himself to his feet slowly.

"You're that Stevens bloke, aren't you? The pedophile teacher bloke, in the *Manchester Evening News*," Jimmy said, the dread already building in his voice as he began to realize that this was not the place to be.

"Listen, Kevin, just let me explain, would you? Please, just listen for a moment to what I have to say. It's all in that letter, but if you..."

"Shutup, just, just shut up will you. Ah man, this is so not a good thing to do Wanda!"

Wanda's sharp mind didn't take long to understand the implications of what Jimmy was saying and immediately she set about gathering up the things that they had brought. She grabbed the camera and the tripod and picked up Jimmy's rucksack.

"Jimmy! Come on, move it. We need to get out of here!"

Stevens was by now half way out of the bath but Jimmy stopped him in his tracks.

“Don’t you move another fuckin’ muscle, or I swear I’ll...I’ll... just stay where you are until we’ve gone. Shit, Wanda, how the fuck have I been so stupid?”

“We’ll have to worry about that later, Jimmy. For now, let’s just put it down to experience and get the hell out of here.”

Wanda backed away from the bathroom but only managed to take two steps before she was shoved, hard and fast, against the wall. She tried to recover her balance but her arms were full and she fell to the floor sideways, hitting her shoulder hard. Kevin stepped over her as if nothing had happened.

“You dirty, filthy, kiddy-fiddling bastard!” he roared.

Jimmy blocked the entrance to the bathroom and grabbed his friend as tight as he could. Stevens retreated back into the bath, ready to defend himself with the only weapon he could lay his hands on, a plastic shower head. He waved it around to make sure that Kevin could see it.

“Yeah? And what the fuck you gonna do with that, you twat? Are you threatening me?”

“Now look. I’m not threatening anyone. I just don’t want any trouble, so if we can all calm down.”

Stevens spoke remarkably calmly for a man dressed in swimming shorts armed only with the massage pulse setting of his power shower to keep his attacker at bay.

“You and your friends can just leave, like this never happened because to be honest, I’m not so sure I want to do this any more.”

“No, I bet you aren’t. And you’re not so fuckin’ hard with people your own age either, are ya? You sick bastard. It’s a pity that the kids you’ve messed about with didn’t have the option to just walk away now, isn’t it, eh?”

Kevin tried to wrestle his way past Jimmy.

"Kids? What are you talking about? Have you any idea about the facts here or are you basing all this on the fucking newspapers?"

"Shut it, perv. No smoke without fire as they say. You know it and your wife knew it as well, didn't she?"

"Just leave Dianne out of this!" growled Stevens.

Kevin finally had his reaction and he backed off. Jimmy felt the tension relax and released his hold on him.

"Okay, Kev, that's enough now, eh?"

Kevin forced a weak smile and at that moment Jimmy felt proud of his friend. He could see him concentrating hard and managing to breathe his anger away into the steam of the bathroom. With every exhalation, Kevin calmed a little more.

Jimmy was as grateful as he was proud, for Kevin had arrived in the nick of time to stop Jimmy from getting wrapped up in one hell of a mess.

"I loved her, you know," said Stevens softly.

Kevin shrugged Jimmy away and turned around. He offered Wanda his hand and helped her to her feet but didn't offer an apology.

"Well, you should have thought about her feelings before you did what you did then, shouldn't you? If you loved her so much, perhaps you should have talked to her, tried to get help rather than..."

Kevin's words trailed away. Jimmy checked around the bathroom for one last time and satisfied himself that Wanda hadn't left anything behind. She was already halfway to the stairs and Jimmy pushed Kevin in her direction, encouraging him to leave.

"Not Dianne, Julie. I loved Julie."

Six simple words he said; six words that Stevens could just as easily have kept for his epitaph or for the judge, but tragically, Jeff Stevens chose to share them with Kevin.

Reason failed and angry thoughts exploded once more.

Kevin spun and dipped low to avoid Jimmy's outstretched arm. Jimmy grabbed his collar but Kevin had two hands on the door frame and used his arms to pull himself through into the bathroom, ripping his cotton T shirt from top to bottom. Kevin was past Jimmy now, and there was nothing between him and Stevens. As he launched himself forward, Jimmy made a final attempt at stopping him, clamping his hand around Kevin's left wrist as it left the doorway. Half restrained and half free, Kevin's forward momentum twisted him as he lashed out with his right arm, but his clawing hand fell short of its target. It didn't, however, miss the toaster.

Stevens watched in horror as the toaster toppled and dropped towards the water. He jumped, landed two feet on the thin slippery edge of the bath, raised his hands and gripped the shower holder to help him balance on the ledge. Beneath him the water in the bath bounced wildly, sending blue arcs cracking from its surface, ravenous electric whips striking at taps and chains to feed on the electrons there.

"Wanda! Unplug the cable! Unplug the cable!" Jimmy shouted as he yanked Kevin back and slung him from the bathroom.

Wanda dropped the equipment and ran along the landing to where the cable was plugged into the mains. She dived to the floor and pulled it free.

The noise stopped.

Wanda picked herself up and walked slowly back to the bathroom. Kevin sat outside, slumped on the floor against the wall opposite the doorway, his mouth and eyes wide open. He looked terrified and said nothing.

Jimmy was standing in the doorway. He was silent too.

Wanda pushed him gently to one side so that she could see into the bathroom.

It looked and smelt like a torture chamber. Jeff Stevens was hanging from the wall above the bath, pinned there not by rusty chains but by dead hands

gripped tight around the shower holder. His head flopped forward and his face, for the most part, was hidden by a mop of hair that had been shaken down covering his eyes and nose. Beneath the hair a blue-black tongue hung limply, blood dripping from its tip and splashing onto his belly. His legs were thrust forward, locked straight and badly bruised, submerged to a point just below his knees in the warm red water of the bath. Down his left leg was a trail of excrement.

“Oh, fuck, Jimmy. You know what this is, don’t you?”

Jimmy looked at her, nodded slowly then he and Wanda looked at Kevin.

“This is murder.”

Chapter 29

The police arrived on Byron Close less than ten minutes after Wanda had phoned them. Jimmy and Wanda sat on the wall at the front of the house waiting. They hadn't been able to convince Kevin to stay, panicked as he was. Kevin had frantically kicked the engine over and over trying to start it, pleading with Jimmy to get on the back of his scooter and leave with him. Jimmy had refused and Kevin had then begged him at least not to tell the police anything about his involvement in Stevens' death. Jimmy had calmly reached down and opened the choke to help the engine start and told Kevin that everything would be okay.

Before Kevin had reached the end of the road, Wanda had begun to read the riot act to Jimmy, making it quite clear that he had better tell the truth to the police because she was sure as hell going to. Jimmy objected, delivered some playground diatribe about boys and loyalty and friendship, but Wanda refused to budge.

"A man's died today, and your pal caused it, Jimmy" she had argued, "and I'm sorry that it doesn't look good for Kevin, but I am not going to try and cover this up and neither are you."

They had finally agreed on a story that amounted to pretty much the truth but changed a couple of things to add a feel of innocence and naïve stupidity to the whole affair. Simplicity would be the key to this if they were going to be believed.

By nine o'clock that evening, Wanda and Jimmy had finished giving their statements and had escaped to a quiet corner of the Crown vault. Here they would sit until closing time, comparing notes over a tray full of vodka shots.

"So how did it go, do you think? Did the detective seem like he believed

everything?”

“Yeah, I guess so, Wanda. It’s hard to tell though. She kept going back over how I met him and I just kept telling her that, as unbelievable as it seems now, I was just sitting outside the flat when this bloke sat next to me and offered me money to film him committing suicide. I said that I’d asked you for help but that I hadn’t told you about the suicide bit. What did you say about it?”

Wanda slugged a shot and covered her mouth to cough.

“Same deal. Only my version was secondhand, of course. I just said that you had asked me to help you out with a job you had on for a bloke that you’d just met, but that you hadn’t explained what it was about.”

“So far so good.”

Jimmy tipped a vodka into his mouth, replaced the empty glass and offered Wanda another one from the tray.

“What about the camera?” she asked.

“I told them that it wasn’t mine and that the bloke already had it set up when we got there, but that he had said we could take it with us after we had finished and that was why we had the rucksack with us.”

Wanda raised her glass to confirm that his story matched hers and supped another drink. The lovers were two for two.

“And the other suicides?” Jimmy asked anxiously.

Wanda reached for another shot and drank it before answering. The delay made Jimmy nervous because he remembered how Wanda had initially been quite insistent that they should come clean with everything, including the other videos that they had taken.

“Didn’t mention them,” she squeaked as the liquor burned her throat.

She took a moment to compose herself and then elaborated.

“I thought about it, Jimmy, but you were right. There was no need and they have absolutely nothing to do with Stevens’ death.”

"Okay. Good. That's very good. Now for the big one. What did you tell 'em about Kev?"

Wanda didn't hesitate.

"The truth, Jimmy, I told them the truth. That he turned up unexpected just as we were leaving, and that he became very angry and, as he went for Stevens, he accidentally knocked the toaster into the bath."

She spoke slowly and clearly so that there could be no misunderstanding what she had said, and while she spoke she stared at Jimmy so that there could be no misunderstanding about how she felt.

Jimmy held her stare when she had finished talking. Wanda didn't flinch. If anything in her expression changed, it was her eyebrows, which rose slightly, daring Jimmy to break their deal (and their relationship with it) by giving the wrong answer.

Without looking away, Jimmy took another shot of vodka from the tray and tipped it into his mouth.

"Me too, babe, me too," he finally admitted, as much to himself as to Wanda.

He took her hand across the table and held it gently. It was just the two of them now, and they both knew it.

Chapter 30

It was three days after the incident when the police finally caught up with Kevin, calling at the third address on a list of only three possibilities that Jimmy had given them for his whereabouts. When the policeman knocked, Kevin had been sprawled across the couch at his cousin's flat in Denton. As he always did on his days off, Kevin had been spending the morning eating toast, drinking tea and watching Phil and Fern. Kevin didn't see why being on the run was any different than being on the sick or being on the late shift, and he hadn't bothered to investigate who might be at the door when he was disturbed. He shouted from the settee that the door was open and instructed the visitor to come in, his invitation a gift to the young, speculative copper who didn't have a warrant but thought that he would perhaps chance a check of the flat on his way back to the nick.

Jimmy's part in Kevin's arrest was something that marred his visits to Strangeways, the prison where Kevin was held on remand. Today would be no different, Jimmy was resigned to the fact, and as he pulled his chair in to the table to wait for his friend, he practised his lines, hoping that this time they could put the issue to rest.

Kevin appeared at the gate and it buzzed open. From a distance he looked fine, but Jimmy's heart sank as each step brought him closer and his appearance into focus. Kevin's clothes were a mess, dirty and creased. His face was the same, with at least four days' growth on his gaunt cheeks that sagged under the weight of the heavy black rings beneath his eyes.

"You look like shit, mate."

"Yeah? And you look like a fuckin' police snitch, but what can you do? Why you here anyway? I thought I said I didn't want to see you no more."

"Listen, Kev, for the last time, I had to give the coppers something, at least a few addresses, or they were going to do me for obstructing their enquiry. Anyway, I thought that the ones that I gave them were okay because I thought that you would have had the fuckin' common to go somewhere new, somewhere that you didn't know." Jimmy sighed.

"Er, have you ever tried that, Jimmy, going somewhere you don't know, I mean? Tell me, bro', how the hell are you meant to find somewhere if you don't know where it is? Do you realize how fuckin' hard that is, especially when you're in the shit."

Jimmy had to smile. Kevin's twisted logic often made him do this and during the last month of living on his own, above all else Jimmy had missed those late-night nonsense chats with his friend.

"It's not funny, you wanker." But Kevin was smiling too.

"Okay, okay, you win. I shafted you, I'm a Judas, but I'm here now and I'm still on your side, Kev, all the way, mate, I promise. How's things going anyway? You got a date for the trial yet?"

Kevin brightened a little; perhaps all he had needed was for Jimmy to admit that he had let him down.

"Things aren't too bad on that front. Mr Clift reckons that the hearing should be set for the next fortnight or so. He's pretty hopeful that I'll get community service, if we don't mess about and just admit what I did. The only problem I have is that fat nosy bitch neighbour who saw me raging outside and shouting Stevens' name, threatening to kill him before I went into the house. Fuckin' stupid of me 'cos it makes it all look premeditated, you see. But Clift reckons that if we can get past that, play it down and focus on the fact that Stevens already had everything set up to do himself in, then I'll just be washing walls and wiping old people's arses for the next six months."

"And if not?"

"Three to five in here."

Jimmy tried to look and sound as upbeat as he could, but his guts were cramped, knotted by the phrase "three to five." Kevin couldn't do three years in the cubs, never mind E wing.

"What about you and Wanda, anyway? You weren't sure if they were going to press charges last time we spoke. That all sorted now?"

"Yeah, I think so, Kev, I think so. The police have said that it will all go on record but nothing more than that, and it should be cleared in a couple of years or so. I was lucky, I guess, 'cos when they reviewed the short piece of film I took, there was a bit of me asking Stevens if he was sure about doing it, you know, committing suicide. The sergeant reckoned that a decent lawyer would use this to demonstrate that I had in fact tried to talk him out of it, so she said that she would be recommending that they just forget about it. She even gave me the camera back, Kev, can you fuckin' believe it? I reckon she fancies me, to be honest."

"Jimmy, you think every split-arse you meet fancies you. Talking of which, how is the lovely Wanda? She heard from the tribunal yet?"

"Nah. She thinks it should be some time this week though. She's suspended until then, and to be honest, I don't think there's much chance of her getting her job back, do you? Imagine goin' in to the CAB for some free legal advice about your next door neighbour's dog shit and being interviewed by the 'Killer Queen' as the MEN called her?"

Kevin laughed and flipped into character.

"Yes, what I suggest you do, Smith, is drown the puppy and cut the bastard's brake pipes. That'll teach the fucker to let his dog shit on your lawn. Now, anything else I can help you with?"

Jimmy laughed, but mainly at Kevin's pathetic attempt to mimic his girlfriend.

"Yep, them journalists sure have got a lot to answer for, Kev, no doubt

about that. Making shit up from nothing and trashing people's lives."

And that was the trigger for Jimmy to suddenly stop giggling and become deadly serious.

"What? What's up, Jimmy?"

Jimmy fidgeted, sat back in his chair, touched his nose and fingered his hair.

"I sent the Stevens letter in to them yesterday, Kev, to the *Manchester Evening News*, I mean, like I said I would. I had to wait until I got the all-clear from the coppers before I could, but I felt we owed it to Stevens."

"Owed it to Stevens! Any pedo bastard that joins the Gary Glitter gang doesn't deserve shit, mate! I hope he rots in fuckin' hell."

"Just calm down, will you, Kev. You did read the letter didn't you?" asked Jimmy quietly.

"Yeah. I read the letter, Jimmy. That's why I came to warn you and that's why I'm here now."

Jimmy said nothing. He took an opened envelope from his trouser pocket, looked to his left and raised it so that the guard by the visitor entrance could see. The guard nodded and Jimmy slid the envelope across the table to Kevin.

"You need to read it again, Kev, before it gets printed in the *MEN* tonight."

Kevin stared at the envelope long and hard. What could possibly be in there that could change anything that had happened? Everything was so clear cut. Stevens was a pedophile and a coward too. He hadn't been able to face the consequences of his dirty little game and he hadn't had the balls to take his own life either. No, Stevens had definitely been scum and there was nothing in the envelope that could change that.

Kevin snatched the letter and opened it.

Cartwright.

You have blood on your hands.

Now I guess that the death of a pedo is of no concern to you but I am not referring to me, I am talking about my wife. How can you live with yourself knowing that you drove a beautiful young woman to take her own life? Her name was Dianne Stevens by the way and I want you to remember this so that when you see her dead body in your dreams you know who it is that haunts you. Why couldn't you have waited Cartwright, at least until the facts were out? The girl was two weeks from her 16th birthday for Christ's sake. Yes, I made a mistake, but my wife and I could have battled through the infidelity, we could have survived the redundancy. But the pressure that YOU put her under when you told the world that she lived with a pedophile was just too much for her to bear.

You traded my wife's life for a front page Cartwright. You are scum. Your paper is scum. Every journalist and editor that speculates part truths and lies as facts to be presented to the mob is guilty of my wife's murder.

I wait for you all in hell.

Jeff Stevens.

Kevin slumped to the table and lay his head between arms that were thrust forward to push the letter back towards Jimmy.

"He was still a pedo, Kev, don't you forget that now." Jimmy placed his hand on the back of his friend's head.

"How old was that bird from Chorlton who you shagged earlier this year, Jimmy, just after you moved in with me? Remember, we met her and her pal in that curry house in Rusholme after a night in town? You went back to her mate's flat but I fucked off 'cos I had work or summat."

"I don't know, Kev, she said she was seventeen I think."

Kevin pushed Jimmy's hand away and looked up.

"Bollocks, Jimmy. She was three months off her sixteenth birthday and you fuckin' knew it too."

"Yeah, but not until the morning after, Kev. I didn't know it at the time. She said she was seventeen, Kev. You were there, remember!"

"I do remember, I do, Jimmy. And I also remember you saying that if she was a day over sixteen then you'd go and show your arse in front of Buckingham Palace. No mate, you knew she was jail bait, Jimmy and you still screwed her."

"But Kevin, it doesn't mean that..."

"And the sad thing is, Jimmy, I'd have done her too," insisted Kevin. "And what's more, if Stevens had introduced us to his girlfriend three weeks later than the world found out, then we'd have been the first to congratulate him on pulling some young stuff, wouldn't we?"

Jimmy was silent, concerned about the dark, depressing clouds that might be forming in Kevin's mind. Who knew what would happen if those clouds were to break and release torrents of guilt on him; a deluge of that magnitude could easily wash away every bit of hope that Kevin clung to in prison. Jimmy tried again to offer Kevin an umbrella.

"Okay, Kevin, but it doesn't mean that Stevens was innocent, does it? You didn't kill an innocent man, Kev, don't even think like that!"

"I'm not saying that at all, you twat! Shit, I didn't mean to kill him, it was an accident! All I'm saying is that it could have been me or you plastered all over the newspapers and graffiti scrawled over our flat. Don't get me wrong here, I still think Stevens was a prick, but more of a stupid prick than an evil one. He was stupid and unlucky, Jimmy, simple as that. Stupid to shag his student and stupid to make toast in the bath."

Jimmy relaxed and smiled.

"Good, you had me worried for a minute. Thought you might be getting all suicidal on me. Christ knows I've had enough of that shit to last me a lifetime."

"Suicide, Jimmy, me? Give your head a shake, fella. There ain't nothing in this world that would make me want to leave it early, believe me. Anyway, it's almost time to go back but if you think that you can get rid of..."

The gate buzzed and a guard shouted, interrupting Kevin's goodbye.

"See you after the weekend, yeah?" Kevin asked as he left the table.

"Yeah, see you after the weekend, pal. Take care now and watch your back in the showers." Jimmy limped his wrist, but Kevin didn't turn round.

Chapter 31

Unlike the rest of the world (which had to go to work) Jimmy loved Mondays. The main reason for this was the return of weekday morning television and the parade of freaks and psychos that insisted on exhibiting themselves there. One of his favourite hours was occupied by the Jeremy Kyle show, a show hosted by a particularly vociferous and unqualified bloke who struggled to hide his disdain for the chav classes as much as they struggled to hide their love for their brother's girlfriend. Today was a particularly good lineup, full of mouthy fat bitches screaming at fragile, alcoholic partners after Jeremy had read out lie detector reports proving beyond doubt that "Grant had indeed kissed another woman in a passionate manner whilst he was with Chantelle."

Jimmy laughed a lot, pretty much through the whole show. When it had finished he resisted the urge to swap channels to Trisha and began to get ready for the day instead. He would have lunch with Wanda, talk about the tribunal (again) and then make his way over to the big house to visit Kevin. He was making his way from the bathroom to the bedroom, rubbing his hair furiously with a towel, when there was a knock at the door.

"Who is it?" he called, dropping the towel and reaching for his trousers.

No one answered so Jimmy put the safety across and opened the door until the chain was taut. There was no one there. Jimmy cursed school holidays and the kids from flat eight loudly enough so that their mother would hear and was about to close the door again when he noticed a brown package on the hall floor. It had no stamp and no address, just Jimmy's name printed on the front. It puzzled Jimmy because the blue writing looked like Kevin's scrawl but he couldn't be sure. He opened the door fully, picked

the package up and wasted no time in ripping it open. Parcels were always exciting things because experience had taught Jimmy that parcels were only allowed to contain good things; birthday presents, mail order clothes, charlie and shit like that. It was an unwritten rule, a natural law; only good things come in parcels.

Jimmy had apparently forgotten though, that occasionally people send bombs in parcels too.

The first thing that he felt when he reached inside the jiffy bag was a sheet of A4 paper folded in half. The note was letter-headed HM Prison, Strangeways, confirming that the parcel had indeed been sent by Kevin. Jimmy unfolded it and read the short note.

Jimmy,

Sorry about this but don't waste it, yeah? Finish what we started mate, please.

Good luck to you and Wanda and thanks. It was a blast until all this shit came down on me.

Love you fella,

Kevin

PS you owe Jonty a grand. Send cash to his mam's at 78, Underwood Road, Stretford, Manchester. Think of it as my wish day money and don't forget! He's a hard bastard and knows where you live now.

Jimmy reached back into the bag, praying out loud that the thin round disc he could feel there was a CD, a mini frisbee or a huge birthday badge. Anything but a DVD!

"No, Kevin, fuck no, mate. Please mate, tell me you fuckin' haven't!"

Jimmy was shaking so much that he could hardly get the disc loaded

into the machine. When he finally managed to seat it properly, it took him another three minutes to find the courage to press play.

Kevin appeared on the screen. His face was large and full of concentration. It was also beaten and bruised.

"Yeah, it's on now, Jonty, just stop messin' about with it. There's no need to do any of that zooming in and out stuff. Just keep your eye on the wing and take the disc out when we're done, yeah?"

From behind the camera came a deep, disgruntled moan.

"And I get a grand? Sent to me mam's when I get it delivered, right? You better not be shitting me, Kev, or I'll fuckin' kill you," said the voice, its words deep and slow as they waded through a thick scouse accent.

"Kill me? Yeah, okay, Jonty, you'll kill me. But perhaps it won't be quite so scary second time round, eh?"

"What the fuck you talkin' about, Kevin?" the cameraman replied.

Jimmy had no idea what "Jonty" looked like but the rapid buildup of frustration that he displayed as he struggled with Kevin's wit convinced him that the idea of upsetting this thug was a very bad one indeed. Jimmy resolved to send the money to Jonty's mum's no matter what happened.

Kevin ignored Jonty's question and walked as far as he could to the back of the shot, a distance of no more than six feet, taking his position in the far corner of a small, light blue room which Jimmy presumed was his cell. Once in position Kevin nodded deliberately and a couple of seconds later the intro to "Champagne Supernova" drifted in.

By now Jimmy had begun to understand what was going on and the realization chilled him. He crouched in front of the television with his face only inches from the screen and began whispering under his breath, begging the image of his friend to stop the madness, call his bluff and end the joke.

"Okay, first things first, Jimmy, you can relax. This has nothing to do with the Stevens letter that you showed me the other day. Like I said then, the

man was a wanker and I didn't mean to kill him anyway, so no regrets there. No, this is about something else that's happened in my life."

Kevin winced and, with a single trembling finger, reached for his lip where a fresh cut had ripped and begun to bleed again as he hurried to say what he had to say.

"Ouch, that hurts. Anyway, remember me saying the other day that there was pretty much nothing on this planet that would make me want to kill myself? Do you remember me saying that, Jimmy? Well pal, I was lying as it happens. 'Course I didn't know that I was lying at the time, but I was. And d'you know what it is that's made me a liar Jimmy, what the thing is that has hit me so hard that I can't face life anymore?"

Jimmy shook his head slowly from side to side and felt a tear shake free to roll down his cheek. He placed his open fingers across Kevin's image.

"Kevin, just turn the fuckin' camera off and give me a ring, mate. Let's talk about this for Christ's sake. Please, Kev, let's just talk about this." Jimmy pleaded, checking the date and time stamp on the video as he said it and acknowledging to himself that unfortunately, this wasn't a live show.

On the screen, Kevin pointed to his broken face.

"Well it ain't fear or pain, if that's what you're thinking, mate. Nah, those things I can handle. Sure they hurt, but they're both transient things you see, and they only last a few days at the most. But here's the killer, Jimmy. Whilst I've been in here, I've been introduced to something really bad and so insufferable that when it finds you in this world it's game over, my son, no contest. Any ideas what it is? No? Well let me tell you. It's shame." Kevin emphasized the word by leaning forward towards the camera, his tired red eyes opened wide.

"Shame?" Jimmy repeated out loud. "What the hell have you got to be ashamed of, Kevin?"

"Surprised? Well, I can tell you I was surprised too, 'cos I thought that I'd

already experienced shame and pretty much managed to deal with it, you know, shrug it off. But things aren't that simple, see. It turns out that what we feel when we're caught in the spotlight running across a nightclub in our underpants, or spewing up in a beautiful girl's handbag for that matter, Jimmy, that feeling isn't shame, it's just embarrassment mixed up with a bit of regret that you've made yourself look a twat in front of a room full of strangers. Oh, it feels a bit like shame I guess, and naturally people tell you that you should be ashamed of yourself, but it isn't even close. You get a feel for it as a kid, when your mum catches you smoking and tells you that you've let her down, or when your dad calls you a tart 'cos you're pissed and spewin' at your cousin's wedding. That's a kind of shame I guess, a mild version if you like. Seems to me that the closer someone is to you, then the more shame they can make you feel, Jimmy."

Kevin was struggling to talk now and needed a moment to let his mouth moisten and untangle itself. He looked away from the camera and into a small, polished metal mirror screwed to the wall. He began to talk to that.

"So ultimately, mate, the bottom line is this. It's the person closest to you who has the power, who has the ability to make you feel ashamed enough to want to kill yourself, and that person is you."

"Me, Kev? What the fuck have I done?" Jimmy screamed at the set.

"And when I say 'you,' I don't mean you, Jimmy Gee. I mean 'me' if you know what I mean. I mean that it's your self Jimmy. Shit this is confusing, I knew I should have written it down."

"Wanna borrow a pen, Kev?" said the dark deep voice.

"No thanks, Jonty, and if you don't mind, just shut the fuck up, would ya? I'm dying here," snapped Kevin, his wit apparently staying with him to the end.

He stepped backwards away from the mirror until he was almost out of shot. Leaning against the wall, Kevin held his face in his hands while

he unscrambled the next few words and composed himself. When he felt ready, he looked back at the camera.

“Feeling good about yourself is the only thing that keeps you alive, Jimmy. I kind of had a clue about this when we began doing our thing. Marshall hated himself, fuck me, who didn’t hate him, but more than that, he was ashamed of his life and pretty much everything he had ever done with it. Dianne Stevens was ashamed as well, ashamed that she had failed her husband as a woman or ashamed of the fact that she’d slept with a pedo, take your pick, it doesn’t really matter. And when she killed herself all that shame went right onto her hubby’s shoulders. He didn’t give a fuck about the girl he was screwing or what the papers might say. He just wasn’t strong enough to bear the thought that he had been responsible for his wife’s death. Then there was our mate Darren. Chirpy, loveable, spring-in-his-stride and full-of-the-joys-of-life Darren. A lovely man who just got dealt a bad hand. Bollocks, Jimmy. He hated himself too. He didn’t kill himself ‘cos he couldn’t be bothered to take his medicine in the morning, he killed himself because he was ashamed to live knowing that he’d smoked and drunk himself into a terminal illness.”

Kevin struggled to talk again, choking on his words more often now, Jimmy felt, the closer he got to his confession

“And the only other bloke I know who killed himself, or at least tried to, is you, Jimmy, so I guess you’ll know whether I’m right or not. It’s just a pity we won’t be able to chat about it over a couple of beers in the Crown, eh?” Kevin smiled weakly, his eyes seemingly already missing the world he was about to leave.

Jimmy thought about what Kevin had just said. He couldn’t be more wrong! It wasn’t shame that had led him to the bridge and made him step beyond the barrier that day, it was depression. Jimmy wasn’t ashamed of anything in his life! Sure, he wasn’t proud of the fact that he could never

seem to hold a job down, but Wendy had been a good thing, hadn't she? And yes, Jimmy had felt devastated when he had seen her with Dave, but most of his emotions that day had been anger at his supposed friend's betrayal, not contempt for his own failings as a fiancé who had taken her love for granted all those years. No, Kevin couldn't be more wrong. If Jimmy's mum had been alive, she would tell Kevin how proud she was of her "little James," she'd tell him what a good lad he was and how he had nothing to be ashamed about. Not like his dad, who had blamed Jimmy's asthma for the three years of sexless, sleepless nights that had finished his marriage. Or his last boss, for that matter, who had constantly told him he was a worthless piece of shit with no qualifications and not a snowball in hell's chance of getting any. His stepdad didn't understand him either, with his sarcastic remarks, pissing and moaning every time Jimmy crawled out of bed at midday to scratch his balls and go down the boozier.

"You're a clever bastard when you want to be, Kev," sighed Jimmy.

Jimmy had indeed been ashamed of his life and never more so than on the day that he had stepped over the barrier to unburden himself of it.

"Anyway, Jimmy, if it was shame that made you want to kill yourself that day, then you'll know exactly how I'm feeling now. You'll know how demoralizing it is to wake up every morning and be scared of shaving because you just know that you won't be able to look at yourself in the mirror long enough without crying. I didn't know you back then, Jimmy, but I guess you'll remember how exhausting it was, how pointless the future seemed when you despised yourself so much that it looked better without you in it. Well, that's how I'm feeling now, Jimmy."

Kevin reached down and felt underneath the pillow on the bed. When his hand appeared again it unraveled a length of blue rope, running from the bed, up the wall and looping the window bars before returning to its hiding place. One end of the rope had been formed into a noose, and Kevin slipped

his head through it. Jimmy watched, the image burning into his mind with such intensity that his eyes gushed water to try and douse his pain. But still he was unable to turn away and he continued to watch through blurred vision as Kevin climbed onto the bed and reached up high to tie the other end of the rope off, fixing it tightly so that there was no longer any slack between his straining neck and the steel bar. He tugged the rope twice and when he was satisfied that it would hold, Kevin shuffled toward the edge of the bed and looked into the camera.

Jimmy screamed at Kevin to stop, sobbing out of control now and slapped the telly hard to knock some sense into his pal or maybe alert the guard.

"I'm sorry mate, and I hope you forgive me one day. Perhaps you will when you know why I'm doing it and why I can't bring myself to tell you about it just now, not on film anyhow. I just don't want people to know, Jimmy, that's all, and knowing that there was a permanent record of it would be too much. Anyway, I hope I look good on the finished DVD, mate, and I know it's not up to the standard of Howard's rabbit stunt but hey, you can only piss with the cock you've got, as they say. I'm sure you'll do me proud in the edit. Love you."

As Kevin stepped from the bed Jimmy scrambled for the remote control and stopped the player just as the rope began to strain to break Kevin's fall and neck. Jimmy lost it and began to shout loudly, Kevin's name mostly, while he punched his fists into the floor until his knuckles were as bruised as his friend's face had been. He only stopped pounding when a volley of sharp pain exploded into his lower arm.

Jimmy yelped and rolled onto his back, reached out to push the eject button and took the disc from the machine. Sobbing hard again now, he took the disc and clamped it close to his chest.

Jimmy stayed like this, on his back on the floor with Kevin's digitized memory pressed to his heart, pleading through his blubbing for his friend

not to leave him, to rewind and to rethink what he was doing. When his sobbing stopped from time to time, he would surface to snatch a breath, but always he would be dragged back down into his grief. He was drained, crushed and soon found himself unable to cling to and buoy himself with the handful of good things in his life. As Jimmy let them go, he started a slow descent, surprisingly content to be finally losing contact with the world above.

The phone in his pocket buzzed and trilled with the intensity of a bright red flare burning in a stormy sky. Jimmy pulled it from his pocket and flipped it open.

"Where the hell are you, Jimmy? I've been waiting for over an hour!"

"He's gonna kill himself, Wanda, Kev's gonna kill himself and I don't know what to do to stop him! You gotta help me babe, Kev's gonna kill himself and..."

"Okay, okay, Jimmy, just calm down. I'm on my way. You at the flat?"

"Yeah, babe, I'm at the flat. Don't be long, Wanda please, hun, we need to help Kevin."

Jimmy tossed the phone aside, resumed crying and was at once dragged back under. The next time he surfaced he would find his head resting safely in the lap of the only person left in the world who cared about him.

Chapter 32

Jimmy had finally fallen asleep after over three hours of sobbing and supping. Wanda had tried to stop him drinking after he had finished the half bottle of Jack Daniel's that he and Kevin had started as they had been editing the video, but she gave up and told him where the 'emergency reserve' was hidden when Jimmy reminded her, somewhere amongst his illegible wailing, that this was in fact an emergency if ever there was.

When Wanda had eventually got him to bed (choosing not to undress him as even the slightest sexual touch would have felt oh so inappropriate) she returned to the living room and drained what remained of the bourbon into a large glass of diet coke. She was stunned by the news of Kevin's suicide and now, having provided rock-solid support to Jimmy for the past three hours, she allowed herself to soften and cry.

It was as she raised her head from the arm of the settee for the second time to take a drink that she noticed the DVD ejected by the machine and sat waiting to be called upon to fulfill its duty and entertain. Of course, this particular piece of plastic had no idea that it had been chosen to wreak havoc on lives and record dreadful things, but she hated it, blamed it almost and wondered why she had stopped Jimmy from snapping it. What she had promised him, though, was that they would never watch it, and that seemed to be comfort enough to Jimmy, who had vowed that he would never allow anyone to see it, preferring instead to cling to his belief that if no one observed it then just maybe, just maybe, Heisenberg could be proved right one day, and his friend wouldn't be dead. A ridiculous theory, true, but a theory nevertheless, and one that helped Jimmy cope with his immediate loss.

Now, though, looking at the DVD and knowing the story it had to tell,

Wanda's promise to Jimmy seemed impossible to keep.

"I'm sorry babe," she sniffed and then leant forward and tapped the player.

And there was Kevin, in the cell, battered and bruised but still talking and still cracking jokes.

Wanda smiled as she watched him struggling to direct his own demise and she cried too as she listened to what he had to say about the reasons why a person might take their own life.

"Oh, Kevin, you bloody fool!" she whispered and picked up the remote control to stop the film and respect at least a part of Jimmy's wish.

Whether it was the drink or her lack of familiarity with technology she would never know, but instead of stopping as Kevin placed the rope around his neck and climbed onto the bed, the images speeded up, double time, and raced on toward their horrific conclusion.

Wanda watched the end of the scene three times. Only then, when she was certain of what she had seen, did she remove the disc and retire to the bedroom.

Jimmy was asleep, wrapped tightly in his quilt and snoring loudly. He looked so peaceful in his dreams that for a moment Wanda wondered if it might be best to leave him there, to leave what she had to say until morning, but how could she!

"Jimmy, Jimmy, Jimmy," she called, in rising tones so as not to shock him back into the world that he so much needed a break from.

Finally he rolled over and turned a single red eye up towards her.

"What is it?"

"This," she said, and waved the DVD around in the dark. "I've watched the end, Jimmy."

"No, Wanda! But you promised!" he groaned, pulling the cover towards his face to look for the dark.

"Just wake up and listen, love. Do you remember a time when you were in hospital and you pretended to be dead or something? Something about a pizza?"

Jimmy was waking now, puzzled and already with a hangover that made it difficult to think. He sat up and grunted a few times more before remembering.

"Yeah. That was way back when I first met ..."

"Well, he got you back, boy. He got you back big time!"

Chapter 33

"I won't forgive you Kev. Never."

"Ah come on, mate. It was just a bloody joke! How the hell was I to know that you wouldn't watch the ending, eh?" pleaded Kevin as he perched himself on the rear of the seat.

Jimmy handed Kevin the spare crash helmet, checked that his bag was secure behind the seat and then swung his leg across the scooter.

"So you'll miss the place, then?"

"Yeah right. About as much as I'll miss Saddam. Fuckin' worst five weeks of my life I can tell you. If it wasn't for Jonty, I don't think I'd have got through it."

"Oh, so he's real then, is he? It wasn't all total bollocks? You really were someone's bitch."

Kevin answered with a swift clip around the back of Jimmy's head and immediately regretted it as his friend already had his helmet on.

"Ow! And that ain't funny, by the way. So what you been up to then, apart from banging Wanda that is?"

Jimmy didn't bite so Kevin pressed on, determined not to leave Jimmy with the last word in this particular exchange.

"Which reminds me, I must thank her for that topless photo she sent me. Helped me and the lads through some sticky times I can tell you. Bit of a celeb on A Wing is our Wanda you know. In fact, I wouldn't mind—"

"All right, Kev, let's leave it there, shall we?" said Jimmy, calmly enough to avoid having a falling out within the first two minutes of his friend's release but firmly enough too to let Kevin know that Wanda was off limits when it came to banter of this nature.

"Oooh, so it's serious, then. Must admit, I didn't think you two would get this far, you know, after everything that's happened."

Kevin smiled and slapped Jimmy firmly on the back.

"I'm pleased for you, mate, really I am. She's a top bird is our Wanda. And as for that crack about A Wing, you know I was only joking, don't you?"

"Course I do."

"Good, 'cos A Wing's where they keep all the queers and guess who's the pinup on A Wing, Jimmy."

Kevin tapped Jimmy on the shoulder, forcing him to turn and waiting until Jimmy could see his rock-steady face before delivering the punch line.

"I ain't joking either. That, my friend, is payback for your stunt at the paint balling."

Jimmy laughed nervously, not quite sure about the truth of it and hoping hard that he would never find himself being wolf-whistled at in the High Street by a six-foot-six ex-con wearing a cowboy costume and a moustache.

"Actually you know, there is something that I've been thinking about while you've been inside."

"And what might that be?"

Jimmy twisted around again and faced his friend as best he could.

"Well, when I'd finally got my head together after your stunt with the suicide thing, I had a play about with it and edited your staged hanging onto the Quitters material that we'd already got. I put a kind of pastiche of the Stevens fiasco in there too. Newspaper cuttings, a bit of a voice-over about his wife and some music and stuff. Even if I do say so myself, it came out really well, runs for about forty-five minutes altogether."

"Cool! So we're ready to put this thing on E-bay then, yeah? Ka-chiing!" yelled Kev, mis-judging a karate chop to the top of Jimmy's helmet and rattling his fingers hard again.

"Now just hold on a minute, mate. That's what I wanted to talk to you about."

"Ah come on, Jimmy, don't tell me you've lost your bottle after everything that we—sorry—everything that I, have gone through!" cried Kevin, still rubbing his hand vigorously.

"Just hear me out, Kev. You see, towards the end of your trial, when it became obvious that you were gonna walk, the *Manchester Evening News* started to get a right slating from the national press. They were really rounding on 'em, kind of blaming them for the mess with Stevens and the way they'd named and shamed him even before he went to court."

"Fuckin' right too! Bloodthirsty bastards, the lot of 'em," rasped Kevin, choosing to forget his own judge-and-jury speech, made when he had first read the Stevens story.

"Now now, Kev, don't talk about your new bosses like that." Jimmy grinned.

"Did you say tossers or bosses?"

"Bosses, Kev, bosses. That's what I'm tryin' to explain. I got a phone call from them about a week ago. I guess it's all part of some damage limitation exercise if you like, trying to get their public image back in line with the 'people's paper' slogan that they like to use, but the bottom line is they want me to head up a little project for them."

Kevin blinked twice and began to chew his bottom lip, a classic tell that he had lost touch with the conversation.

"They want me to help set up a support program. Kind of a help centre for anyone who's, well, thinking of committing suicide. They liked the video too, think that the film we've made could really help bring the point home, show people how real suicide is and maybe make them think twice. Your speech at the end was the clincher I think. Wanda's game too. She's putting together a kind of beginners' guide to getting back on track, listing all the

agencies that are out there and all the help that's available from the local authorities with getting housing and money and stuff. Same shit she was doing down at the citizens advice bureau if you think about it. So what d'you reckon, Kev? You in? They'll pay us too, expenses and a bit more."

By the time he had finished his explanation, Jimmy's enthusiasm had built to an irresistible climax of waving hands and gleaming eyes.

"So, let me recap just to make sure that I'm getting you here. You want me, who by the way is supposed to be dead, to help you, a man who filmed a six-foot rabbit jumping from a falling caravan, and Wanda, who still went out with you even though during your first date a ginger psychopath blew himself up less than one hundred feet above the fish salad, to organise a self-help group for losers who might otherwise, for argument's sake ..." Kevin raised his eyebrows "... jump off a bridge?"

Jimmy smiled warmly to let Kevin know not only how precious their friendship had become but that he wouldn't, or perhaps couldn't, do this without him.

"That's it in a nutshell mate. So, are you in?"

"Too right! Anything for a laugh."

Jimmy leaned and slung his arms around his pal, pulling him in tight and slapping his back hard.

"Thanks mate, good to have you back and welcome to the MEN Helping Hand team."

As Jimmy broke away he offered his right hand but instead of shaking it, Kevin retracted his arms, folded them through exaggerated arcs and filled his face with mock horror.

"What the hell is that? Please don't tell me that's what you've chosen as a name for this bloody sideshow! Oh no no no. my friend. I ain't having my good name associated with that pile of unimaginative shit!"

Jimmy knew better than to argue.

"So what do you suggest then?"

In the time it took Jimmy to ask, Kevin's love of all things ironic had sifted through his fairly limited vocabulary and produced something wonderful.

"Jimmy's Recycling Centre," he announced proudly, only now taking and shaking the hand that had previously been offered to seal the deal.

"That, my man, is genius. Pure bloody genius!" said Jimmy, the glint in his eye sharpening with delight.

As he let go of Jimmy's hand, suspicion crept into Kevin's voice.

"Hang on a minute. This isn't some kind of joke is it? 'Cos I've been thinking too, and it really is about time that we called it quits you know, Jimmy. Seriously, mate, we need to pack all that practical joke stuff in, don't you think?"

Jimmy laughed, turned back around to take control of the scooter and kicked the engine into life.

"Whatever you say, Kev, whatever you say. So where would you like to go then? Where do you hardened criminals hang out between bouts of prison? Home or the pub?"

"Same thing, isn't it?"

"Indeed it is, my man, indeed it is. Helmet on?"

Kevin shuffled backward enough to give himself room and swung his helmet up and onto his head.

"Ready."

Jimmy revved the engine, dropped the clutch and drove the scooter off its stand leaving behind the prison gates, a puff of blue smoke from the exhaust and a large white cloud as the talcum powder in Kevin's helmet spilled out to catch the wind.

ABOUT THE Author



Andy Tilley describes himself as a dad, an oilfield worker and an author. He grew up in Manchester, England, not far from his fictional Jimmy Gee. He draws from his hometown's many colourful characters and their unique language to give his writing its freshness, humour and vitality.

Recycling Jimmy is his first novel.

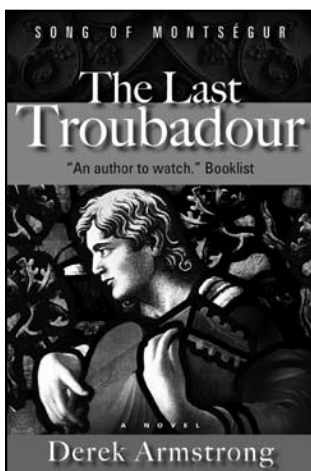


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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Andy Tilley grew up in Manchester, England, not far from Jimmy Gee, the hero of *Recycling Jimmy*. He credits that city, with its many urban philosophers and sharp wits, for the originality of his voice and his unique take on life in this, his first novel. His work as an engineer in the oilfield takes him to exotic locales such as Kazakhstan and the Algerian Sahara. He has two children and a lakeside lodge in the UK.

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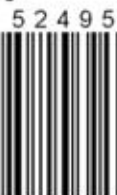
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