

# **DEVIL**

A crime novella

**Mick Sims**

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Ruthless yet wildly attractive.

As lawless as the criminals he defends.

Top defence lawyer Marshall Masters may have taken on a gangster too far in his latest corrupt venture.

He revels in his nickname but the Devil knows he must carry on winning if he is to stay on top.

In this fast paced and occasionally violent crime thriller, Masters comes up against worthy opponents on both sides of the law.

His love of money, women and danger combine to give him the devil of a good time.

**Can a man who represents the Law  
be a law unto himself?**

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1

Run for your life.

That was the thought racing through the man's mind.

Run.

For.

Your.

Life.

He had never been very good at running. At school the cross country races were torture for his breathing, and his aching legs. The crippling stitches that developed in his heaving chest left him gasping for air.

Run for your life.

Now he was well past school age. A diet of beer and fast food, not to mention the regular packs of cigarettes, gave him little hope of getting away from the three men chasing him. No hope, but he had to try.

He was desperate. He knew what they could do to him if they caught him. Would do to him. When they caught him.

The narrow alleyway he ran up was slippery from the recent rain. The summer shower had left the bleak walkways and crumbling tower blocks fresh and clean for a few minutes. Now their natural state had been reclaimed the estate crouched anxiously, hunched, as if waiting for the next step on the downward spiral of decay.

The pinched alleys he ran through were covered in graffiti.

Run for your life.

He knew he was slowing. His lungs were heaving. His legs were numb. His eyes were wide with terror.

He didn't know the men chasing him but he guessed who they were worked for. Guessed why they were after him.

It had been a mistake to think he could get away with telling the truth. All his life he had avoided it with sly winks and looking the other way. The one time he tried to do the decent thing and see where it got him.

Faster, run faster.

For a fleeting moment he thought he could call someone for help. He pulled his mobile phone from his pocket and attempted to press a speed dial number while still fleeing. His fingers fumbled, his feet stumbled, and the phone fell from his fingers to bounce onto the concrete ground.

A moment's hesitation while he wondered whether to retrieve it or let it be. Self preservation kicked in. He wasted a precious second looking at the cracked screen lying in a puddle before he kicked on and headed for a stairwell. It would lead to his fifth floor flat. Safety. Possibly.

Huddled around the foot of the stairs was a gang of youths. He ran towards them not expecting trouble, but knowing there would be no help either.

"Scotty," one of them called out.

They were core members of a gang that ran the drugs on the estate. The youngest was thirteen.

"Scotty, you training for the marathon, man?"

He ignored them. Tried not to break his faltering stride as he ran through them.

They attempted to block his way. Messing with him. Mischief. He was about to cry out that they needed to let him past. Needed to let him escape.

Then they caught sight of the three heavy-set men lumbering into view and they parted. Scott glanced over his shoulder. He put one foot on the bottom step and moved upwards.

The gang of youths disappeared. A cloud of smoke. There one moment. Gone the next.

Scott found the stairs harder to run up than he imagined. His legs were finished. The muscles had no more to offer.

His mouth was dry, his lips felt burnt.

He used his hands to grab onto the concrete sides of the stairs. Pushing himself up with what strength he had left. A combination of pure fear and adrenaline. Hands holding on, push. Legs trailing, step by step.

Run for your life was a memory. He was practically crawling now.

Behind him he could hear footsteps. They sounded nearer than before.

He reached the fourth floor before they caught him.

"Scotty."

He could barely speak. His breathing was fast and ragged. His legs were shaking violently.

Two of the men grabbed him. They lifted him up. Turned him upside down. Dangled his head and shoulders over the ledge of the balcony.

Beneath him Scott could see the dirty ground. A burned out car was directly below. If I hit that it might break my fall, he thought.

The arms around his legs were strong. He wouldn't fall while they held him. The arms loosened and he dropped a few inches. His waist was level with the edge of the balcony.

"You've been a naughty boy, Scotty," the man not holding onto him said.

"Sorry. I'll get it sorted."

"You don't know what you've done yet. How can you sort something you don't know about?"

Without changing their grip on his legs the men lowered him still further before lifting him slightly.

"We're a good few feet up here, Scotty. Reckon you'd squash like a ripe tomato. Especially if you fell on your head. Paralysed at least, if you made it."

The man was talking. He had a chance.

"What do you want me to do?"

The man made a sound that might have been a laugh. "We'll have to hurt you, you realize that? Making us run through this dump like that. Not good for our image."

Hurt him? Not kill him?

Run for your life was over. Talking for his life might work.

"I don't know you. What have I done?"

"Been talking to the police, Scotty."

The police. The one time he was telling the truth about something. It had been a mistake to think he could get away with it.

"They found me. Told me..."

"Told you what? That they'd protect you? Where are they now?"

"It was a mistake. I can see that. I'll tell them."

"So you know who we are? Where we're from?"

"I think so."

His legs were lowered further over the edge. They had their arms hooked under his knees. They only had to let him slip and he was gone.

"No!"

"Listen, Scotty. The night you thought you saw Mr Board. You didn't. You were at a poker game. With some friends of ours. They'll vouch for you. Understand?"

He knew they were from Board. His influence was everywhere.

"Poker game. I can't play poker."

"You're not the brightest are you? You didn't see anyone doing anything. Understand? Is that clear enough for you?"

"I'll tell..."

"No. You won't tell the police anything. You'll go to the trial. They'll call you as a witness for the prosecution. They'll ask you what you saw. And you say..."

"I saw nothing. I was playing cards with mates."

"Now you're getting it. You won't change your mind when we've gone?"

"No. No, you can trust me."

He felt his body being lifted. Rough hands grabbed his jacket and pulled him onto the walkway. As his feet touched the ground a fist pummelled into his stomach. The air was expelled from his lungs and he doubled up.

"We know where you live. We know where your mother lives. Just in case you have a change of heart. Decide to play the honest citizen."

A foot swung up and caught him hard between the legs.

He sank to his knees. Groaning.

Fists came at him left and right.

As he lay on the ground and watched the three pairs of legs walking away from him he began to cry.

2

Marshall Masters opened his eyes, rolled over and wondered who the blonde woman next to him in the large bed might be. He blinked, trying to drag a name from his fuddled memory, but it didn't oblige. Stretching, he was strangely reluctant to touch her. Strangely, as he assumed they had not woken up in the same bed without having become well acquainted at some point the previous night. Touching her now, after the event, might seem a normal gesture, but it wasn't one he wanted to commit. Besides he had no wish to wake her, there was somewhere he had to be this morning.

The digital clock on the bedside table closest to him showed him it was close to eight in the morning, early enough for him to get ready and be out in plenty of time. He pressed a button on the remote control on the same table top and the drapes at the windows curled back, in a sardonic smile. He wasn't concerned if the bright sunlight flicking through the broad expanse of window disturbed her – judging from the small shallow noises she was making, the effects of the third bottle of Perrier Champagne were treating her slightly more drearily than they were him.

He pushed back the Egyptian cotton sheets and slid out of bed. Mandy - that was it, or perhaps Sandy. At any rate he doubted he would come across her again so it was easily dismissed, the name and the girl. The carpet in the spacious bedroom was deep and soft under his bare feet. The silk paper on the wall his wife

insisted be called the feature wall was a rich burgundy, and he had to concede it did blend well with the creamy white paint of the other three sides of the room.

At the thought of his wife he mentally checked his calendar, but it was a reflex action, he knew full well what day it was, the court case had been looming for weeks. Marie wasn't due back from her mothers until Friday, three more days of bachelor life, if he could last the pace.

Last night's event at the Club in the Café Royal had been a sumptuous affair. He'd met Mandy or Sandy in the Library bar, and noticed immediately when she contrived to catch his eye. He knew the type and appreciated them, almost as much as they appreciated his money, connections, and generosity.

He was a member of several London clubs, and one or two in the suburbs as well, for appearance sake. He was a great believer in appearance, perceived and reality. In London he was well known. A few knew what his true nature was but most saw the façade. The successful, if ruthless lawyer, the family man with the huge house in a wealthy part of North London, once Middlesex.

He took a lazy shower, running over in his head the way the case would go once they sat in front of the judge. He had every good reason to believe it would go in his favour, the verdict, after all he had gone to considerable lengths to ensure that there were unlikely to be any last minute surprises. Having friends in the Met was worth the funds it took to maintain the flow of information. He should never have had access to the list of prosecution witnesses, but life was so much smoother with a little insider dealing.

He admired his physique in the full length wall mirrors. The time he spent in the very expensive and exclusive gym he visited three times a week was money well spent. He was lean, muscled without being bulky, and he wore his height well.

Once he was towel dried he ran his hands through the black hair that he wore just a shade too long, and thought he might leave it to dry naturally. He had learned that perception was key in his position, and if what people saw when they looked at him was someone who might live on the edge, might play loose with convention, then who was he to deny the image?

His dressing room was adjacent to the silver tiled en-suite bathroom, and next to Marie's separate dressing area. He selected a dark navy Savile Row suit, his black Barker brogues, and a wine red silk tie he had bought on his last shopping trip to New York. The handmade shirt was from W H Taylor, and was a shade of cream even an interior designer would struggle to name.

In the bedroom, where he completed dressing with cufflinks, watch, and the modern accessories he used without thinking - mobile, keys, wallet - the girl was still sleeping, her hair spread out over the pillow like water spilled from a bottle. He took a handful of notes from his bedside drawer and placed them on top of the dress he had pulled roughly from her those few hours previously.

There was no suggestion that she was a professional and would have requested payment, but he had found from experience that it kept lips silenced if money changed hands, enough of it, and of course she would be insulted by the gesture, which he would enjoy.

He closed the door as he left the room and went down the wide sweeping staircase to the rather grand entrance hall of the huge house. His butler, Standing, was waiting for him.

"Good morning, Mr Masters."

"Standing. Is the car ready?"

"Out the front, sir, as requested." Standing handed him his leather briefcase and raincoat.

Masters walked past the erect figure who had served with him for nearly twenty years now, before he turned as if with an afterthought. "Standing, there is a young lady in the master suite."

"Indeed, sir."

"Give her a couple more hours, no more, before she realises it's time to make a decent departure."

Standing nodded, his face a mask of good taste and blank emotion. "Of course, sir. Nothing else in that regard?"

"I don't make a habit of picking up hookers, Standing, but since you raised the matter, it's been dealt with."

If Standing ever smiled, the grimace that flickered across his eyes was as close as it might be.

"Very good, sir. Shall I expect you for dinner tonight?"

"I'm not sure how long the case will be in court today. First day presentations and all that. Best assume I'll make my own eating arrangements."

"As you wish, sir."

"Give you a night off. Perhaps you'll have time to visit that gentleman friend of yours."

Standing looked embarrassed, although he had long ago guessed his secret life was anything but.

"Don't worry about it, Standing. I'm hardly one to judge. Not that there's anything to judge. Leave that to the courts, eh?"

3

Amanda Bathurst fiddled with the sleeve of her Armani cardigan until she was satisfied it was hanging perfectly on her tanned arm.

She looked around the vast kitchen of her London home and frowned at the mess the children had left in the wake of their breakfast. Frowned as much as the recently applied botox would allow.

Smiling at the thought that the housemaid would deal with the clutter and the sticky finger marks, Amanda slipped on her Choos and opened the front door.

"Nina, I'll wait by the car," she called up the stairs.

Nina, the nanny, answered, and Amanda left the door open behind her.

The Range Rover was new. The parking permit prominent. Sebastian, her husband, resented the fact that they had to pay to park outside their own house. Amanda didn't mind. Anything that irritated Sebastian was fine by her. If they could afford to live in this part of South London they could afford a few pounds each month to park conveniently.

She checked her watch. She had plenty of time to get to the gym.

That was her priority. The school start time was something Nina dealt with. Amanda guessed they would arrive at the gates of the private primary in time for the roll call or whatever it was they did these days. In her time at school it had been the register called out alphabetically. Little Amanda Withers had grown impatient each day waiting her turn.

These days she rarely waited for anyone.

At that moment Nina came out of the house with two young children.

Amanda glanced at her watch again. She hadn't had to wait long.

She watched as Nina fussed after the two children.

The girl was eight, dressed smartly in the maroon uniform of the school, her bag clutched under her arm. Blonde, like her mother, pretty, like her mother, and thoroughly spoiled.

The boy was six, the image of his father. Amanda had to concede that Sebastian was a handsome man. In his city suits he always looked dashing. A trader, his bonuses alone would dwarf the incomes of many small nations. His son was dark haired like him, arrogant already, and known to have the odd tantrum or two.

Nina ushered them into the rear seats and got in between them.

"Are we all ready," Amanda said as she climbed into the driver's seat.

"Mummy, can we have pizza tonight?" Robbie asked.

"I think we can do that can't we, Nina?"

Amanda fixed her gaze in the rear view mirror and saw Nina looking anxious.

"Anything wrong?"

"Tonight is my night off."

"Oh, I'm sure we can work around that. Robbie, pizza for everyone."

"Can I have my ears pierced, mummy?" Isabella said.

Amanda smiled. Hers had been done at seven years.

"Of course we can, my darling. This weekend."

Amanda switched on the engine, put the car into gear and rolled away from the side of the road.

She pressed the radio and soft classical music wafted through the car.

"Mummy can we have our nursery rhymes?"

"No. This is beautiful music. Classical. Listen and learn."

The London traffic was fierce. Cars cut in. Cyclists overtook. Pedestrians appeared out of nowhere.

By the time they had gone less than half a mile Amanda felt she needed a large glass of Château Cos d'Estournel.

Robbie and Isabella started a silly argument over some TV programme involving a pig.

"Nina, can you keep them quiet? It's hard enough driving as it is."

The children distracted her. She didn't see the black BMW pull out in front of her.

"Here we are," Amanda said as she braked the car in front of the school gates.

The BMW was in front of her.

She saw two men get out from the rear doors.

"Come on," she said. "Nina, can you unbuckle them."

The two men were staring at her through the windscreen.

"Stay there."

She got out of the car. Despite her selfishness she was a mother. Instinct kicked in.

She pressed the key fob to lock the car doors behind her. She stood to one side of the car so the children couldn't see her.

"What do you want?" she said to the two men.

She had heard about children being snatched in kidnap attempts. Ransoms demanded.

"Amanda isn't it?" the taller of the two men said. He had a rough London accent. His face was even rougher.

Both men were large. Muscular. Both were quite ugly. It was as if their roles in life had transformed their faces.

"Who are you? What do you want?"

"Just a little chat, Amanda."

"How do you know who I am?"

"A little birdie tells us you believe you saw something recently. A man doing something he probably shouldn't have done."

The testimony.

It came to her. Sebastian had pleaded with her not to agree with the police to give evidence. "Men like that don't mess about."

One of the men was behind her now. The other directly in front.

"I told the police what I saw."

The man behind her grasped her arms and pulled them roughly down to her sides.

"That was a mistake."

"It was awful what he did. He deserves to go to prison."

The man in front of her hooked a finger into the top of her blouse. He yanked the finger down and three buttons popped off. The blouse gaped open.

"That would be a shame. You might live to regret going into court. Little Robbie and the lovely Isabella might get a little upset seeing mummy and daddy hurt."

"Leave them out of this."

The man clutched her left breast and squeezed hard through the lacy bra.

Amanda squirmed trying to get free but he only gripped harder.

"Nice body. I know a few blokes that would pay good money to spend some time with it. Your husband can watch."

"What do you want?"

The man slipped his hand inside the bra and pinched the nipple very hard.

"I know a few blokes who would like some time with the two kids as well. Your husband might not want to watch that though."

Amanda slumped back against the man behind her.

"I'll do what you want. Anything."

The man released her breast.

"Go into court and give evidence. When you answer what you saw you say you saw nothing. They won't be expecting that. You were at home with the family. Never been anywhere near the place the alleged incident took place."

"Okay."

She felt the man behind her move away. Both were now facing her. She drew the torn front of her blouse together.

"You won't let us down now will you?"

Amanda shook her head.

She was still shaking as they got into the BMW and drove away.

Outside the house the sun was already beginning to cast a warm glow across the acres of land attached to the property. Masters thought he might ride out later in the

day, if he did get back in time, perhaps take the new stallion for a gallop across the pastures, test out what the beast was made of. Even if events went according to plan he knew he would probably have to postpone the ride for later in the week.

The house was immense. No mortgage, no debts, at least none that could be counted in monetary terms. He employed several people, all of whom he trusted with discretion. He ensured he had a hold over all of them just in case greed reared its ugly head. Or a rival thought they could muscle in.

The grounds were immaculate. The gardening team was worth every penny he paid them. He had no sense of horticultural beauty but when he looked out over the estate he felt something inside him become affected. If he didn't know differently he would have imagined his soul was being moved.

His Bentley was purring on the gravel drive, the rear door held open by a discreetly uniformed driver who nodded a polite greeting. Masters slipped into the back and breathed in the heady aroma of the leather. The privacy glass was open as the driver got in and touched a lever to commence the journey.

"How's it looking, Richard, traffic going to be kind?"

"It's under fifteen miles, sir, be less than an hour at this time of day. North Circular sounds a bit snarled, we're taking the A1."

Masters pressed a button and the darkened privacy glass slid up. He opened his briefcase and began to read through the case papers. Not that there was any real need, he knew what he would say, and he knew equally how the verdict would go. Friends in high places, but just as many in places that couldn't go much lower unless they were subterranean.

Weeks previously a man had been dangled by his feet over the fourth floor balcony of a tower block of flats until the scene he thought he had witnessed was miraculously erased from his memory.

A middle class bitch had been frightened off with threats to her family unless her memory suddenly deserted her.

There were several others whose memories had been altered.

None of this was in the notes that Masters studied, but every detail was logged in his brain. He knew the names and the places, and the people he worked for had long since ceased to try and control him. Provided he performed his magic for them, they would pay him handsomely and leave him alone.

He had made the decision to work as a defender because it suited his personality so much more than trying to build a case for the prosecution. He had always loved knocking things down as a boy. Building block towers were fun to erect, but the real enjoyment came from hitting them and seeing them tumble.

His reputation was second to none and he liked that. It had been a struggle in the early days but he was at the top of his profession, and he fully intended to stay there. Whatever it took. He was prepared to do anything to preserve what he had accomplished. Had done a lot of things already to keep what he had.

The Bentley slowed as it approached the entrance to the Central Criminal Court of England and Wales, more frequently called the Old Bailey, which was in fact the name of the street. It was like a second home to Masters.

He had enjoyed learning the history of the various buildings when he first started appearing there. He liked the fact that the present building stood on the site of the medieval Newgate jail, and the Old Bailey Street followed the line of the City of

London's fortified wall, known as a bailey. He hadn't fantasized about the past for a long time, there was far too much to enjoy in a very lucrative present.

He liked the way the public galleries were open on trial days. Akin to the crowds who used to turn up for the hangings, or the mobs who stalked through Bedlam to view the poor wretches confined inside. He always liked to give them a show. Today it might be a brief one but it would be entertaining.

The glass partition slid down as the car came to a halt.

"Wait round the corner for a few hours, Richard, okay with that?"

"Of course, sir. Anywhere you would advise I shouldn't park?"

Masters looked sharply at the efficiently barbered back of the driver's head and wondered where the information that might prompt such a question had come from.

"Any reason you'd ask that?"

Richard turned and his face was as guileless as it could be. "Don't want to get a parking ticket on your big day, sir."

"Cut the 'sir' crap, Richard," Masters said, and a wicked smile creased his handsome face. "We've worked together for too long to play games. Head up towards Newgate Street and find somewhere round Fleet Place or Bishops Court, around there."

"Go give them hell, Marshall." With that the driver stepped out, came around to the pavement side and opened the rear door.

Masters had tidied the papers into his briefcase a mile or so back. He left the raincoat on the back seat, stood on the pavement and looked at Richard. There were few people he trusted but he was one of them. Just in case trouble ever erupted Masters had a secret file in his safe that would ensure it would be the employee that suffered.

## 5

Laurence Hopwood - "Call me, Larry." - was sitting outside on the London street, enjoying the sunshine. Peckham was up and coming in places. Café culture and all that.

The coffee shop, a regular haunt of his, had tables and chairs spilling onto the pavement and when the weather was fine, as it was today, Larry enjoyed sitting, sipping, and tapping away at his laptop.

Sometimes he would stay for hours. Wasting time on the Internet more often than not. Killing time because he had lots of hours and not enough productive activity to fill them.

It was only a matter of time before he finished his first novel, a crime story. Then he would get an agent, sell the book and the associated rights and make some money, real money.

He had been stuck for a plot for weeks, but now he had witnessed a real, proper crime, he was getting stuck in. It was fortunate that being in the wrong place at the right time had kick-started his inspiration.

It wasn't something he considered to be good fortune when he happened upon the incident. At the time he had been terrified he might get caught up in the violence he saw. The man was clearly a gangster, though not a young man. The man he attacked must have died. The other men made sure he never stood a chance. The other men supporting the gangster.

Now the dreadful scenario was being written into his novel. The first scene in the manuscript to have any veracity, any shred of life.

He liked the glances he got as he worked away at his laptop. Yes, he wanted to say as he looked up and smiled at the onlookers. I am a writer. Not yet, you won't have seen me yet. Wait until this baby is published and then I'll be on the chat shows. For now I make a living writing blogs for people, articles for freelancing sites, the occasional piece in the locals.

I get by. But wait and see.

Occasionally he would be able to brag sufficiently convincingly that a woman would be impressed enough to take him to her bed. None of the relationships lasted. Hardly warranted being called relationships in truth.

He had tried to grow a beard, one of those hipster ones, but it was too straggly to look anything other than unhygienic tramp.

He smiled indulgently as the pretty waitress took away his cup and replaced it with his third so far. He'd eaten a breakfast roll earlier but he was considering a muffin when the man at an adjoining table caught his eye.

This man didn't look as if he was intrigued by someone working at a laptop. He looked the type who would be unable to string together anything other than the most mundane and basic sentence. He looked a similar type of man to the one he had gone to the police about. The one he was scheduled to give evidence against shortly in court.

"What you looking at?"

Larry looked away immediately. His lifelong fear of physical violence constricting his throat, making his heart beat unnaturally fast. It was a hangover from school bully days. Habitually scared of any confrontation.

The man sat at Larry's table.

"I said what you looking at?"

Larry had no choice. He had to engage the man.

"I'm sorry. I was just looking around and I caught your eye."

"Do a lot of that do you?"

"A lot of what?"

"Looking around. Seeing things."

For all his faults Larry wasn't a foolish man. It came to him straight away what this thug was referring to.

"No, I..."

"Only it seems to me that you've seen things you shouldn't."

"I shouldn't have been there. I missed my bus. I..."

"You saw something. But then again. You didn't see a thing. Did you?"

Larry was terrified. The man had his hand, huge thick fingers, on the top edge of the laptop. Larry was still paying it off in instalments.

"I can tell them I made a mistake. I don't even know his name."

"Mr Board. His name. He's a businessman."

"I didn't know that..."

The hand flicked forward and brought the lid of the laptop down firmly. It trapped Larry's fingers. The pain was instant.

"Let's think about where you were that night."

"I'd been to see my grandfather. I missed the bus..."

The hand pressed down on the laptop lid.

"You're not hearing me. I don't care where you were. I'm telling you where you're going to say you were."

"Tell the police I was mistaken?"

The whole fist pounded down on the lid. Larry's fingers were becoming numb.

"You've told the police one version. This is what you'll say in court. They'll be surprised. You *were* mistaken."

"I can't feel my..."

"You went to see granddad. Peter isn't it? Lives in those warden assisted places in New Cross. Nice. I was going to check them out for my old mum."

"I did see him. I can say I stayed longer than I did."

"He won't know either way will he? State he's in now."

"Alzheimer's."

"Dreadful. I'm sorry for you." Bizarrely it seemed to be genuine concern.

"I can say I made a mistake. Wasn't there at all. I was with..."

"With old Pete, granddad. That's the ticket."

The hand eased on the laptop and Larry pulled his fingers out fast. He rubbed the injured hand, holding it close to his chest.

"That coffee hot?"

Larry nodded. "It's fresh. Have it if you want."

The man picked up the large cup, and his hands dwarfed it. He raised it to his lips, smiled and threw the hot contents over Larry's face.

"You weren't there. Remember that."

As he heard the chair scrape back, and sensed the menacing presence had gone, Larry lifted his one good hand to his face and dabbed at it with his paper napkin.

He'd managed to close his eyes before the steaming coffee hit him. His cheeks were scalded. His lips felt raw.

The day in court he had hoped would be an experience and research had turned into a nightmare.

## 6

Masters was gratified to see the rows of media that swamped the pavement in front of the building. Sweating police officers were straining to keep the crowd at bay but there was nothing they could do to stop the camera lens being pointed, or the microphones being operated.

He heard the shouted questions as he walked the few paces to the entrance.

This was his stage, almost as much as the courtroom itself. He loved the attention, the tacit disapproval that seeped out of the questions. He thought he often detected a frisson of respect, perhaps even fear, from some of them.

"Surely this is one you can't win?"

"Board is a gangster, why defend him?"

He listened and then he stopped, raised his hand, and waited for as close to stillness as he could expect. He was their master in this moment. The parent calming an excitable child.

There were TV and radio here as well as the national press. Another week of his face being public property. Another week of free advertising.

"I defend people who have been accused of dreadful crimes," he said. "Men I might not like in my personal life but men who, through the quality of our

outstanding legal system, deserve to have their position defended. Now if you'll excuse me."

He turned away. Always leave them wanting more. The baying questions trailed behind him as he marched away. The cameras clicked and the mics remained on. He made sure he turned his head back more than once, allowing his image to be captured for the viewers and the readers.

Striding through the ornate stone arch Masters was, as ever, impressed by the rare atmosphere once away from the busy London traffic, noise and pollution. Here was calm and contrite deliberation.

His client was Board, and as the crude statements outside had said, he was a gangster. Most of Masters' clients were on the wrong side of the law. They paid well, and he had a reputation that was flawless for getting them off, all of them. He had never lost a case. He knew that he was disliked for the work that he undertook, but he knew that he was also grudgingly respected, and he valued that far higher.

He went through to the changing room, pleased that he was the sole barrister there. That might mean nothing, but more likely meant that the prosecution had already been in and were elsewhere in the building. No doubt trying to fathom out where some of their key witnesses were, and why the others who had appeared were being so evasive.

He quickly dressed, gown and wig, and took his briefcase with him to one of the small cells where his client was waiting.

William 'Bill' Board was probably in his sixties, and every year was etched into the lines that traversed his ugly face like pitted craters in a dried riverbed. There was a raw power that emanated from him, and Masters had no doubts that the man had been a bully, and a vicious one, since schooldays.

Short, but stocky and strong, the stories about the violence he revelled in were whispered throughout London, and yet the time he had spent in prison was a round number that preceded one. There was the time in his youth when he had spent a few months inside a young offenders unit for throwing a petrol bomb at a nightclub that had refused him entrance, but he tended not to let that count against him.

There was a security guard at the door and he nodded in recognition of Masters and unlocked the door. As he entered the room, ensuring the door was closed tightly behind him, Masters was once again reminded, when he looked at the muscular body straining the seams of the Gieves & Hawkes suit, of a fat malevolent bullfrog.

"Marshall," Board said, and remained seated. "We safe?"

Masters shook the proffered hand and sat on the hard seat on the opposite side of the desk. "You know the answer to that better than me."

"Cocky sod, aren't you?"

"Confidence in my own abilities has served me well."

Masters cast a glance at the two men who flanked their boss and waited for the signal to pass. He didn't see it take place but some kind of communication was clearly made as the younger of the two reached into his inside jacket pocket and took out a thick white envelope.

"Well, go on then," Board said. "Don't play with it. Hand it over."

Masters found this part of the transaction distasteful, and his face conveyed the internal shudder that he felt as he grasped the envelope.

"It's all there," Board said. "Though you'll want to count it out."

Masters shook his head and produced a smile from deep within. "If I can't trust you, Bill, who can I trust?"

Board laughed and the desk shook from the vibration of his stomach leaning against it. "Going to be any surprises?"

Masters opened the file he took from his briefcase. It was a gesture to calm the client rather than a need to remind himself of the contents. "There were nine potential witnesses," he said. "Now there are none."

"CCTV?"

"Camera wasn't working that evening. Routine maintenance failed to pick it up."

"DNA?"

"Contaminated somehow whilst in transit."

Board's chest swelled and Masters was certain he could hear threads tearing. "So truth is they've got fuck all."

Masters stood, gathered his papers and straightened his wig and gown. "Truth is you're a vicious career criminal who can afford to pay men to frighten off innocent witnesses, greedy officials, and live to fight another day."

Board stood as well and even though Masters was taller by at least a foot there was no doubt who was the more dangerous of the two men. "I can also afford to pay the likes of you, barrister boy, and keep you in that Hadley Wood mansion with your wife and kids, not to mention the parade of girlfriends you entertain. How is the little lady by the way? Marie? Keeping well is she? Let's hope it stays that way."

## 7

Imogen Randall opened the first floor window of her bedroom and slipped out into the night as silently as she could.

Her bare feet touched the tiles of the garage roof that was directly beneath her room. She had her four-inch heels in the bag slung over her shoulder. She was meeting a man she'd met online. It was fun. It was exciting.

She was fifteen years old.

The drop from the edge of the garage roof wasn't a steep one and she landed neatly on her feet, a move practised over several years at her gymnastics classes.

She knelt for a moment, still, listening for any sounds that might indicate her exit from the house had been heard. When there was nothing she stood, put on her killer heels, and clipped away through the side gate.

She'd arranged to meet him around the corner. He had a car. A red VW he'd said. She had to look up what that meant but the important thing was a *car*. He had to be what, seventeen, eighteen, maybe even older. Dangerous. Thrilling.

She was on the verge of boring exam years. Talks about what she wanted to do with her life. "Live it", she'd say, but that never impressed her parents. She apparently needed a plan. She didn't have one and had no intentions of finding one. Not yet. She hadn't even kissed a boy. Time for career plans later.

Her dad would kill her if he knew what she was doing.

It was a warm night and she was dressed appropriately. Loose, thin summer dress. Her body had developed quite early, her breasts at least. She looked older than she was. Her profile did at any rate. Her hips and legs were catching up but there was still a hint of puppy fat about her. She had the ungainly stance of the awkward teenage years.

The lane at the side of her parents' house was dark. No streetlights. She knew it well, it was where she walked the family dog. An escape from the tedium of suburbia.

Up ahead there was a car, she thought it might be red. As she approached it she saw cigarette smoke billowing from the driver's open window. She had tried smoking, in the park with her mates. She didn't like it, but she couldn't admit to that. She'd take one if he offered.

He'd said his name was Brett.

It wasn't.

He'd said he would take her for a drive.

In a way that was true.

She reached for the passenger door and pulled it open. She leaned in.

This can't be right.

The man smoking in the driver's seat was older than her dad.

Then she noticed the two men in the rear seats.

She moved away from the car. Deciding if she should take off the heels and run, or just run. She knew immediately this was a mistake.

The rear doors opened and she didn't even have time to scream.

The man nearest to her covered her mouth with a huge hand. His other arm snaked around her waist. While she was held firmly by him the second man came round to that side of the car. He grabbed her legs and swung her off the ground.

She tried to resist, to kick out, but the men were large and strong.

The driver got out and opened the boot.

She was slung in like a bundle of old clothing. The lid shut and there was darkness.

She felt the car begin to move. The lane was rutted and it was uncomfortable lying in the boot. She was scared. Frightened of what the men were going to do to her. Terrified what her dad would say when he found out how stupid she had been.

Half an hour later her father was woken by his mobile phone ringing.

"Mr Randall?"

"Do you know what time it is?"

"Check your daughter."

"What... who is this?"

"Your daughter. Imogen. In her room is she?"

Randall got out of bed and walked the short distance across the landing to Imogen's room. The moment he saw the open window he knew something was wrong. The empty bed merely confirmed it.

"Where is she?"

"I'm sending you an image. Wait for it. There."

The voice on the phone was uneducated. Rough London accent. Older man maybe.

Randall's phone beeped and he clicked on the image.

It was his teenage daughter. She was slumped on a plastic garden chair. She was tied up by her arms and her legs. Silver masking tape over her mouth.

"Where is she?"

"She's in a lockup garage south of the river. She won't get hurt if you do as I say."

"I don't have any money. I can get a loan, I..."

"We don't need your money. I probably make more in a month than you do in a year, old son."

"What do you want? I'll do anything."

"I'm glad you said that. You intended speaking at a trial. I want you to go into the witness box and suddenly remember you were somewhere else entirely on the night in question."

"And you'll let her go? You won't harm her?"

"I'm sending another image. But Paul, we're family men ourselves. We're not animals. She won't get harmed unless it's a last resort."

Randall's phone sounded again and he clicked the new image. He clamped his hand to his mouth to suppress the scream that bubbled there. The image was of a pair of torn underwear. He wouldn't know for sure but he could only guess they were from Imogen.

"That's just a warning."

"I'll do it. I never saw a thing. I promise. Please. Let her go."

"All in good time. We'll feed her. Keep her safe. The rest is up to you."

"You can't keep her that long. The trial isn't for weeks."

"It's been brought forward. You'll get the call the day after tomorrow. By the end of the week this will all be over. All being well."

"I'll do it. I will."

"Make sure you do. Say what we want to hear and she'll be delivered to a place near the court. We'll tell you where once it's over."

8

Outside the room where he'd left Board, Masters let his breathing subside as he unfurled the fingers of his right hand where they had drawn up into the palm. The flesh was marked with four red gouges.

"How on earth can a defendant be allowed visitors?" he said to the guard. That Board was able to have people with him was outrageous, even to Masters.

"One is his legal representative, and the other is his doctor, heart I think."

"Bastard doesn't have one of those."

It was time to take his position inside the courtroom. He was scheduled for Court One with the glass roof that gave the room a brightness that belied the serious matters being conducted.

First he went into the Grand Hall, which wasn't usually open to the public. It had the air of privilege about it. Only infrequently photographed. Here were the bewigged barristers and sharp-suited solicitors, all gathered beneath a dome painted with mosaics by Gerald Moira.

He saw them immediately, the prosecution team. He counted from ten downwards and they were upon him before he reached three. They didn't look happy.

"That took you longer than I thought," he said.

Susanna Chambers was tougher than most men he had crossed legal swords with. "How the hell did you do it, Marshall?"

Masters raised his hands palms upwards in a gesture of confused nonchalance.

"Half the witnesses. Cried off. How the hell do you sleep at nights?"

"That depends who I'm with. Speaking of which we really should get together again, soon."

Susanna glanced to the side, but her team were a respectful few steps back. "That was a one off. The biggest mistake and regret of my life. Bedding you was like sleeping with a snake."

"A little harsh, but tempered by my imminent success. See you in court, darling."

"Fortunately we have a few brave souls prepared to stand up and tell the truth."

Master smiled. If only she knew the truth about the remaining witnesses. What they were going to tell the court. Still, she'd find out soon enough.

"Truth is a precious commodity."

"As if you'd know anything about that."

"I defend so that the truth can prevail. Justice must be served."

"You defend," she said. "Because the scum you work for pay you through the nose. Money. That's the only master you serve."

Later he would call her, make a date for dinner, and after that who knew where it might lead.

As he walked through to the courtroom he wasn't oblivious to the stares and the whispered comments directed towards him. He ignored them all. Reputation was as important as perception, and his was exactly where he wanted it to be.

"Marshall Masters," a well-modulated male voice rang out as he placed his briefcase on the table in the courtroom.

He didn't have to look to see who was speaking, he would know that voice anywhere. "Heskey Sanders. What brings you to this place of dark deeds?"

The man was dressed as a titled gentleman in his early seventies had every right to dress. Sufficient style to impress, and the appropriate level of establishment adornments to signal status. "Assisting young Susanna," he said sweetly.

"I didn't realize she needed assistance."

"We all need help at times, Marshall, and you never know but that might apply to you one day."

"I didn't realize, either, that you still practiced. I thought you'd retired to that pile of yours in Berkshire to write your memoirs."

"Crown thought it would look better if I got a bit involved in this one," Heskey said. "Can't have you getting all the villains in London off scot-free now can we?"

"May the best man win."

"If that were the way it works you'd be out of a job," Heskey said.

Masters smiled and sat at his position.

He worked alone. Always had, and he intended to keep it that way.

The prosecution team was a large one. He liked that. The jury would see one man up against many. It worked in his favour.

Within minutes the courtroom was full, the defendant had been brought up and was sitting behind a glass panel, flanked by two prison officers, and the proceedings had been brought to a hush in preparation for the arrival of the judge.

He was announced. Everyone stood, and then sat, as the judge surveyed the room.

A shaft of light glinted through the roof and reflected from the spectacles of the Honourable Peter Jameson. The beam of light seemed to direct itself at Masters as the judge took several seconds to appraise the face of the barrister, even though

they had met before, on different cases. It was as if the man was trying to commit every feature of Masters' face to memory.

Masters glanced up at the public gallery. He played to them almost as much as he did to the jury. The twelve men and women were the main focus for him, it was they who gave the verdict. But the murmurs from the gallery, the gasps, the laughs, all worked towards persuading the jury about the verisimilitude of what he was saying.

He saw some journalists he recognised. Some members of the family of the deceased. And, as he anticipated, some associates of Board. They were intimidating even when just sitting and staring.

The trial was scheduled to last for weeks. The jury had been sworn in and warned of the longevity of the undertaking they were about to begin. The papers had been filled with the story for days. TV experts had pontificated about the rights and wrongs of the case, and the futility of the British justice system if men like Board were allowed to go free. Radio shows had devoted whole hours to the wider debate about the police, powers and constraints. Everyone anticipated that the trial would be a long one.

It was as good as over that same day.

In actual fact it had been over before it even began.

9

The large pub in Palmers Green, on the crossroads of Green Lanes and the North Circular had been ugly ever since it had been built. The kind of looks only a mother could love.

It had been through numerous incarnations over the years. Painted white. Painted black. Called by a host of different names, none of which summed up the fact that it was an eyesore.

Like many ugly buildings it spawned bad things inside its walls. As if it realised it wasn't a thing of beauty and couldn't allow good things to happen. They rarely did there. Bad things were far more frequent. Violence was seeped into the walls.

It was Turkish owned now. That had altered over the years as well. Originally owned by a brewery, then an East London gang, then Enfield based people. As it got older, and ever more offensive to the eye, it was taken over by a variety of ethnic owners. Greek, Cypriot, Asian. The Turks had owned it for a couple of years but the Albanians were making noises.

It wasn't even a pub any longer. A supermarket selling all kinds of foodstuffs and other goods. Out back were rooms where the owners did a different sort of business. They ran their drugs trade out of the back rooms. Interviewed the girls they employed in their brothels and dance clubs. Interrogated people they suspected of collusion with their rivals.

The majority owner of the business was Baris, which translated into peaceful man. He wasn't.

Baris had witnessed an act of violence recently that he suspected wasn't random. He recognised the man meting out the sustained attack. Board was well known in the circles in which Baris operated. Not a direct rival, not these days, but there would be opportunities if Board went away for a while.

That was the only reason Baris had offered his testimony when the police came calling. That and his "public duty as a law abiding citizen." Even the detectives smiled when he said that to them.

He had been challenged by his associates. None of them spoke with the police. He had to use all his powers of persuasion to show them it was a good idea. Needs must. It would be a ploy. An act of co-operation with the authorities that would benefit them in the longer run.

Baris was in the back room checking the figures.

He had found it amusing when he had been approached by the men. Board's men undoubtedly. Change his story. Say he was mistaken. He was elsewhere. He hadn't seen a thing.

He was brave, stubborn, resistant to threats, and he wasn't about to roll over and do the bidding of these thugs. Most of Board's businesses these days were bordering legitimate. Certainly had the façade of respectability. Computers, online, data, these were the currency he worked in nowadays.

The two men he sent to speak to Baris were old school and they didn't frighten him one bit.

He re-checked the figures. There was no mistake. Someone was skimming off the top. Someone was cheating him. He just had to find out who it was. The shortlist consisted of four people.

He looked at his watch. It was late. If he left now he could get to his uncle's restaurant in Arnos Grove and enjoy some late night food. Maybe a card game. Maybe one of his uncle's waitresses would still be there. The one who liked to keep him sweet.

He called out to the men still at the twenty four hour supermarket and went into the warm night.

His Jaguar was parked close by, in the open car park directly outside. He liked the car. It was a bit old fashioned for him but it made him feel as if he had a veneer of propriety.

He didn't see the black BMW. Not at first.

This was his turf. No one would challenge him here. Not even the uncivilised Albanians.

It wasn't the Albanians sitting in the BMW.

Baris looked across the wide streets. The printers, the café, the newsagents opposite. All closed for the night. The other side of the crossroads. The nail bar, the large corner shop that had been closed forever. It wasn't a wonderful area, but it was home.

Even that wasn't the truth. Home was a large detached house in Winchmore Hill. Where the neighbours nodded as they trimmed their front lawns. Tried to engage him in conversation about football or the news as they washed their cars. Even asked him about holidaying in Turkey, as if he was a travel expert because he had been born there.

He got into his car and switched it on.

The radio was already active. Pop music. His wife must have been playing the unfamiliar station when she dropped the car off for him.

The Jaguar was quite compact inside. The leather seats were like armchairs. He strapped his seatbelt around him.

It was then he glanced in the rear view mirror and saw the large figure in the back window.

Instinctively he reached across to the glove compartment where he kept a Tokarev handgun.

The passenger door opened and a huge fist closed over his wrist.

"No need for that, Baris."

Baris sat back in his seat.

The driver's door opened and the second man stood there.

He held an AK-47 assault rifle in his large hands.

"It was only business," Baris said.

"We understand that. So is this."

The noise from the automatic fire was deafening inside the Jaguar. It didn't last long.

When the gunfire faded away, there was blood dripping from the interior of the car. Blood and bits of Baris that had been torn from his body by the ferocity of the assault.

The BMW had already driven away, down the North Circular, headed for the M11.

By the time the men rushed out of the supermarket it was all far too late.

Baris was past giving evidence in court.

It would be reported in the newspapers as an apparent mistaken identity gang-related shooting.

10

When the judge declared the opening statements be made, the prosecution, led by Susanna, but with Heskey close in attendance, had asked to approach the bench. Masters was invited to join them.

It was there that he heard them say that due to the untimely withdrawal of several of the prosecution witnesses, the murder of another, the contamination of evidence including DNA, and the loss of CCTV evidence, the CPS could no longer claim to have the same viable case it had originally entered.

"That is unfortunate," Jameson said.

"Not for my client," Masters said.

"Mr Masters, this might be fortunate for your client, and may also be fortunate for you, but it does not serve this court well."

"As you wish, your honour."

"Ms Chambers. I presume you have sufficient evidence to proceed?"

Masters did not miss the way Susanna looked at Heskey. Or the imperceptible nod he gave to her.

"We feel we have sufficient to bring the case, your honour."

"Good," Jameson said. "Mr Masters. No comment to add, smart or otherwise?"

Masters asked Susanna if that was their final position, and when it was clear that it was, Masters formally asked for the case against his client to be dismissed.

"Denied," Jameson said, and with a stare that lesser men than Masters would have wilted under, Jameson sent them back.

As they walked back to their positions, Masters whispered to Susanna. "Let's hope your witnesses come up with the goods."

The judge spoke directly to the jury. He outlined the facts of the case, and told them what the process would be. He offered to answer any questions they might have. Explained what the prosecution and the defence roles were. Told them they had to listen to the facts and judge guilt or innocence on the evidence presented to them.

He looked across at Board as he summed up.

"It will be for you and only you to determine if he is guilty or not guilty."

The first witness to be called was Declan Scott.

He looked as if he had been hit by a bus and dragged along by it.

He was sworn in and Susanna rose to begin her questioning.

"You appear to have been injured recently. Are you feeling strong enough to continue?"

"Yes."

"What happened to you?"

"I fell down some stairs."

"Mr Scott can you tell us what happened on the night of June 23rd this year?"

"I was at a poker game."

"When did it begin?"

"Around seven I think."

"And when did you leave the game?"

"I stayed all night. It ended around five in the morning."

Masters watched Susanna's face. She did a good job masking her confusion. This was a different story than Scott had told the police. The version the police had given the CPS was a strong one for the prosecution. This story of a game of cards meant Scott wasn't a witness to the alleged attack at all.

"Mr Scott. You told the police you had seen the attack..."

Masters stood. "Alleged attack, your honour."

"Sustained," Jameson said. "Mr Scott can you look at the defendant."

With obvious reluctance, Scott dragged his eyes over to where Board was seated.

Jameson said, "Have you ever seen this man before today?"

"No, your honour."

"Ms Chambers?"

Susanna looked at Heskey and he shook his head.

"No further questions, your honour."

Scott left the witness box. He scuttled out of court as quickly as he could.

Next to be called was Amanda Bathurst.

She walked confidently through the courtroom and took her position in the witness box. She was immaculately dressed in a cream suit with teal blouse. Her hair was held back in a simple pony tail. She looked very young.

She stated her name, gave the oath and waited patiently.

This time it was Heskey who stood.

"Mrs Bathurst. You've sworn an oath. So we know what you are going to tell the court is the truth. You're an honourable woman. A respectable citizen. Here to do your duty."

"I'm here to answer your questions."

Heskey set the scene with her. Establishing the date under discussion. Painting a picture of the place Board was alleged to have beaten senseless the man who later died in hospital.

"Now," Heskey said. "You were walking past at the time..."

"No."

"I'm sorry?"

"No. I wasn't walking past. I don't know where that place is."

"You told the police you had visited a client and were looking for the nearest underground train station."

"I got confused. That was a different night."

"You were very specific in your statement."

"They confused me. I was at home that night. With my family. My in-laws were round."

"So, several people can vouch for your whereabouts?"

"Yes."

"Has anyone approached you before today, Mrs Bathurst? Threatened you? Offered you money?"

Masters was on his feet. "Your honour. Really?"

"Mr Sanders. Your frustration is showing."

"Apologies, your honour. No further questions."

Masters stayed standing.

"Mrs Bathurst. Do you recognise the man in the dock?"

Amanda seemed fascinated by the wood grain of the witness box.

"Take a look at him. He won't bite. Not from this distance."

Amanda stared at Board and everyone saw the small shudder that passed through her.

"I have never seen that man before."

Next up was Larry Hopwood.

There were no surprises for Masters from his brief testimony. He couldn't say the same for Susanna. Her face was beginning to resemble a caricature of shocked expressions. There were few, if any, that hadn't passed over her features.

"Mr Hopwood. Are you seriously telling this court that on the night in question you spent the entire evening with your grandfather?"

"Yes. Yes, I am."

"He's quite ill I understand."

"He has Alzheimer's, so yes he isn't as able as he was. His memory deserts him."

"Runs in the family," Susanna said softly but loudly enough to be heard.

Masters was starting to rise in objection but Jameson beat him to it. He held up his hand to indicate that Masters should remain where he was.

"Ms Chambers. Thoughts do not need to be voiced if they are not questions. Are we letting this witness go?"

"Yes, your honour."

Masters stood. Pointed at Board and asked Larry if he had ever seen him before today.

"No. I don't know that man."

After a lunch break the next witness was called in.

Elliott Randall wore a dark navy suit. He looked what he was, a successful businessman. His face bore the stress of worrying where his daughter had been for the past few days. He had received daily images on his phone. Each indicated she was being fed and yet she was still tied to a plastic chair in a dingy garage somewhere.

He was impatient to give his evidence. Get it out of the way so he could be directed to wherever they were going to dump Imogen.

Susanna rose and approached him. She was smiling warmly but her eyes betrayed some of the panic she felt inside. She had only Randall left. He was her last hope. The only thing standing between Board and his freedom. The only faint chance she might be able to bring a prosecution.

"Mr Randall. May I remind you of the oath you have just sworn. The truth. That's why we are all here."

Randall nodded. He didn't hear a question so he didn't speak.

Susanna placed a manicured hand on the witness stand and gave what she hoped was a reassuring expression.

"It's important that you remember that fact, Mr Randall. The truth. I want to ask you about the night of June 23rd this year. Is that a date you remember?"

"It wasn't especially but, yes, I do know about that date. It was a Wednesday."

"Is the day of the week relevant?"

"No. I mean, yes. Sorry, I'm nervous. I haven't done this before."

"Done what? Given evidence? That's not quite true, though, is it."

Randall was confused. He had his story ready to spill out but this line of questioning was off his script.

"You have been in court before, haven't you?"

Randall nodded. "Well, yes, but that was different."

"Because you were the one on trial in that case."

"It was a business dispute. It should never have gone to court."

"And you were acquitted, of course."

"Yes. Yes, I was."

"So you know the value of the truth. The importance of the facts being told."

Jameson intervened. "Ms Chambers. Will there be any questions in your session this afternoon?"

"Sorry, your honour. Mr Randall. Can you tell the court what you did on the night of June 23rd?"

She glanced over at Heskey. He was watching Randall with interest. The case against Board hinged on the next few moments.

"Yes," Randall said. "I was with my lover. My mistress."

There were a few gasps from the public gallery.

Even Masters was surprised. He knew Randall had to come up with a place he had been that evening but this was going above and beyond.

"You have a... you are married aren't you?"

"I am."

"And yet you expect the court to believe that, contrary to what you told the police in your statement, you did in fact spend the entire time with a woman who is not your wife."

"I was ashamed. I am ashamed. I didn't want to tell them where I was, or who I was with."

"So, if I ask you. When I ask you, if you have seen this the defendant before today your answer will be, what?"

"I have never seen that man before. No."

Susanna sat. Her head almost touched Heskey's as they conferred.

Masters stood. "No questions, your honour."

Randall was excused.

He rushed from the courtroom and stood for several minutes staring at his mobile phone. After an interminable length of time it rang. It was an image. He opened it. The picture was of Imogen. She was sitting in the bar of the Viaduct Tavern on Newgate Street. She was alone. She was holding a beer bottle in one hand and a sandwich in the other.

She was attempting a smile for the camera but it was weak and unconvincing.

Randall ran from the Old Bailey and within moments he was hugging his precious daughter. She felt thin.

In Court One, Masters, Susanna and Heskey had approached the bench. Jameson was furious.

"It is quite obvious what has gone on here."

"Allegedly," Masters said.

"I don't want to hear from you, Mr Masters. Ms Chambers, Mr Sanders. Do you have any further witnesses? No, I thought not. Do you have a case? I thought not. Re-take your places."

Jameson dismissed the jury, and told Board he was free to go.

Outside the building the massed ranks of photographers and journalists were wild with astonishment and questions. Board posed with Masters, and at one point took hold of his hand and raised both their arms in the air in a gesture of triumph.

"Restores my faith in British justice." Was one of the platitudes Board spluttered as he ignored all questions and simply spoke a few words until his car was ready.

When the red Mercedes pulled up to the kerb, Board grabbed Masters' hand and shook it hard. "Terrific work, Marshall. Don't take it personally but I hope it's a long time before I see you again."

With that he jumped into the back of the car and it sped away in the direction of Ludgate Hill.

"I won't be seeing you again, Bill," Masters said quietly.

"No wonder they call you, the Devil," Heskey said, but Masters had already turned away, walking in the opposite direction to Board's car. He didn't need to see what would happen next.

The explosion, when it came, was loud and very effective. From the screams and shouts of the people crowded in front of the Old Bailey it was clearly spectacular. He learned later that the Mercedes was speeding when it suddenly lifted into the air, and a split second later the massive roar filled the area, like the death knell of a huge dinosaur.

The wreckage was strewn across both sides of the road, and windows were blown out of a building to one side. Three Japanese tourists were killed by the blast, as was a taxi driver whose cab was closest to the target vehicle.

That was what Board's car had been designated. He and his associates were all killed outright. Some commentators mentioned something about the ways that British justice might have been served after all.

It was a warm day and Masters was happy to walk the short distance to where his own car would be waiting for him. He even removed his jacket. He never let go of the vice-like grip he had on his briefcase, or the envelope of Board's cash it contained.

Richard had the Bentley purring by the side of the road, outside the Magpie and Stump pub. Masters put his jacket back on. Opened the rear door without waiting for it to be done for him. "That was a loud bang," he said as he settled himself into the seat.

"I hope those terrorists don't get the blame," Richard said with a smile.

"There are a lot of nasty people about these days."

Masters opened the briefcase and transferred the envelope to his jacket pocket.

"Enfield?"

"Brimmsdown to be exact," Masters said and closed his eyes. "The industrial area."

The envelope in his breast pocket bulged nicely against the seatbelt.

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When he opened his eyes again the car was driving slowly through what seemed to be an area of abandoned industrial warehouses. Locked metal gates towered over them on either side, pockmarked with torn posters advertising long past dates of concerts and events.

Richard turned left through a side alley that skirted a half-demolished brick built building. When he pulled the car to a stop, engine running, it was in a small open air clearing.

There was already a car waiting. A dark Lexus.

"You're not getting out are you?" Richard said.

"He who sups with the devil should have a long spoon. Let them come to me."

There was a pause. Then the other car began to move forward slowly, until it was next to the Bentley. Two men got out, both carrying small semi-automatic weapons. The driver stayed in his seat, as did the final occupant, who occupied the rear of the vehicle. The window slid down, and Masters pressed the button to lower his.

The face that glowered out was Eastern European, Albanian was Masters' best guess. He was still conducting his covert investigation into the man's background.

"I heard it went well for your client today, in court."

"In court, yes. I believe there was a disturbance outside though."

"You did well. Here." The man held out a small black holdall, cheap and disposable. "What we agreed. The price we settled."

Masters took it and nodded his thanks. "I doubt our paths will cross again."

The man spoke in his own language and the two armed men got back into the car. "If we do meet I shall expect the efficiency you showed to Mr Board – inside the court."

The car sped off and Masters closed his window. He opened the bag. It was stuffed with banknotes. He couldn't be bothered to count it, not right now, he was

still too exhilarated from the day. Now who would be best suited to sharing an evening when he was in this good a mood?

"Where to?" Richard said.

"Mayfair," Masters said. "The casino. I think my luck is in today."

From that part of Enfield to Mayfair was about fifteen miles and they were in no hurry. Masters had the whole night to enjoy.

It was over an hour later when the Bentley smoothed to a halt outside Crockfords on Curzon Street.

"Shall I wait for you?"

Masters checked his watch. It was still early.

"No. Take off. If I need to I'll get a room. The Dorchester has a standby for me."

"Good luck then."

"I'll leave the bag here," Masters said. "Take ten per cent and deposit the rest in the usual place."

"You don't need any for the casino?"

Masters patted his inside jacket pocket. "Double pay-day. I'm covered nicely."

"You usually are."

Masters got out of the car.

It was still a warm evening and for a moment he contemplated walking around for a while. He watched the Bentley pull away. The lure of the games were too much for him

The uniformed doormen nodded to him as he approached the pristine white portico.

"Mr Masters. Good to see you again, sir."

"Thanks. Let's hope I can say the same on the way out."

One of the men opened the black, shiny front door for him.

"Did I hear you had a success in court today, sir?"

Word travelled fast. He glowed inside.

"I was fortunate."

"Case dismissed in less than a day. Very fortunate, sir."

Masters took hold of the door but before he went in he turned to the two men.

"Have you had a chance to see the early evening news yet? That's how you've heard?"

One of the men looked down at his feet but the other was bolder.

"It was an item on the news. But we often hear whispers. On the grapevine as it were."

The other man looked up. "Shame about the Japanese tourists."

Masters smiled. "There are rather a lot of them at this time of year."

He let the door close behind him.

Inside the casino it was plush, luxurious, and if it were a person it would be called dignified.

Masters debated whether to eat first and then play, or go straight to the gambling tables. The choice was taken out of his hands by a discreet hand on his elbow.

"Mr Masters. Your presence had been requested. Upstairs."

Masters looked at the tall thin man at his side. Chinese by birth he was one of the sons of the man who operated the casino. Masters knew what was upstairs. That

was where Cheng operated from. His lair. There he could see everything that went on at the tables, the restaurant, even the restrooms if need be.

A request to visit him wasn't one that could be declined. It wasn't a request, it was a directive.

"Be my pleasure," Masters said. "Lead the way."

To the side of the entrance foyer was a staircase and the two men walked up it side by side. At the top of the stairs was a door. The Chinese man opened it, stepped aside, and ushered Masters inside.

The room hadn't changed since the last time he had been in it. Red flock wallpaper, like an East end pub from the fifties. Dark, heavy furniture, the largest piece of which was the huge desk that dominated the room. Behind it sat a diminutive man of indeterminate age. It was Cheng.

Masters knew that two of his sons were well into their forties so the father was most likely mid-seventies. He wore every year of his life on his face. Lined, scarred, angry. His hair was jet black, unnaturally so. He sat upright on the high backed chair and stared at Masters.

To each side of the desk stood large, heavy-set men. The enforcers.

"Marshall," Cheng said. His accent was Chinese-London. "Always a pleasure to see you."

"I wish I could say the same."

"And yet you keep coming back."

Masters spread his arms. "What can I say? I love the place."

"You love it when you win."

"Even when I lose."

"Which is exactly what you have been doing recently. Quite a large amount."

"What's money between friends?"

Cheng frowned. "We are not friends, Devil. I hear you were in court today."

"Word spreads fast. It was a pleasing day. Rewarding."

"And you managed to avoid the explosion. Unlike some. Careless, losing a client like that."

Masters shrugged. "I dare say the blame will be pointed at terrorists. Which outfit is the flavour this month?"

"Too many bloody foreigners here anyway."

"I owe you some money, then?"

Cheng glanced down at the notebook on the desk in front of him. He pretended to check the page but he knew precisely what Master's account looked like. The amount he was in debt to the casino.

"A lot of money, Marshall. I shall have to withhold your credit."

Masters reached into the inside pocket of his jacket. Both the men either side of the desk moved into action. One pulled out a Glock and pointed it at Masters. The other took a firm grip on Master's arm.

"It's just an envelope," Masters said.

Cheng nodded, and the man let go of his arm.

Masters withdrew the envelope filled with the money Board had given him. "This should settle my debt, Cheng."

The envelope landed with a satisfying thud on the desk top. Cheng didn't even glance at it.

"I knew I could really on you, Marshall. Have a wonderful evening."

"I'm hurt you don't consider us friends."

Cheng laughed, which ended in a wheezing cough.

Masters held the door before he left the room. "I think I'll eat first. What do you recommend?"

13

"The Sancerre, sir."

Masters barely glanced at the waiter as he held the wine bottle for his inspection.

"Just pour it."

"Of course, sir."

The man deftly filled the glass with just the right amount of white wine, and then placed the bottle carefully in the cooler by the side of the table.

Masters always enjoyed eating in the opulent dining room at the Crockfords. The cream walls, the red drapes, the discreet rugs, all combined to let him feel as if he was in the embrace of respectability. It wasn't a feeling he often experienced.

The red-jacketed waiter slipped away and shortly the appetiser of shrimp, beetroot and dressing appeared in front of Masters.

He avoided making eye contact with any of the other diners. He had learned from past visits that many of them were time wasters who had seen him in the news and wanted a reflection of his notoriety. On one occasion he had even been asked for a 'selfie'. He had called over the management. He avoided getting into conversation with the dining room manager. He found the man unctuous.

"Do you know the effect beetroot has on the urine?"

"Hardly a polite subject of conversation for a well brought up young lady."

"I am hardly a lady, but I'll take the young part."

"You were well brought up though."

"Educated at daddy's expense at all the best schools. University degree as well, believe it or not."

"Do you want to join me?"

"I may as well."

Masters watched as the slim beauty pulled back her chair and made herself comfortable.

"Have you eaten?" he said.

"Is that an invitation?"

"You don't normally wait for one."

"Be nice. It pays dividends in the long run, didn't you know that?"

Masters didn't need to gesture for attention, the staff were already aware of the change in the eating arrangements. As they took away the plate for his starter they handed a menu to the lady.

She handed it straight back. "I'll have the lobster cocktail followed by the slow baked black cod. Oh, and a glass as well."

"Very decisive."

She smiled, and accepted the glass that was presented to her. The waiter filled it and topped up Masters'. "I'm like that. When I want something I get it."

"Must be something about the way you were brought up."

"Spoiled cow you mean."

"How have you been, Monica?"

"Since the last time we met do you mean? When you bedded me and dumped me."

"Are you here for a repeat performance?"

"The bedding or the dumping?"

"I am in celebratory mood so certainly the bed antics if you're of a mind."

"How could I refuse such a charming offer? Yes, I heard the day went well for you."

"I can only apologise if my manners aren't up to the standard you are used to. I expect the Henry's you socialise with at daddy's country pile know how to treat you better than I ever could."

"Maybe they know how to draw back my chair when I sit. Maybe they know minor royals and how to pronounce certain words. But none of them have ever given me the fucking you did."

Masters inclined his head and tried to contain the smile. He failed.

"So," Monica said. "Lucrative business was it?"

"I may be uncouth compared to your usual company but even I know it's unseemly to speak of money."

"You made enough to play the tables I hope."

"If you'll join me. Lucky charm last time if I remember."

As they walked from the room eyes roamed over each of them. Nods of recognition towards him. Smiles of approval for her.

The stairs took them down to the gaming areas.

Rich lustre of the ornate, panelled walls. Muted voices. Red and green seats. Chandeliers that suggested opulence as well as success. The smell of expensive perfumes. The clink of ice in crystal glasses.

"Roulette?"

Masters smiled and took her hand.

"How romantic," she said.

"Just touching my good luck charm for the night."

Monica was quite tall, slim, dark haired and very attractive. The dress she wore was by a new and upcoming designer that her father was bankrolling, and no doubt bedding.

It was a matter of moments to exchange money for chips. The message that his debt had been extinguished had clearly got through.

Masters led her to a roulette table and they waited until two places became available and then they sat.

"Do you have a system?"

He ignored her and placed chips on three reds, odd numbers.

He took her hand and held onto two of the fingers. "If I win this can be my lucky system."

He won. One of the three reds.

She smiled and left her hand in place. "It's yours for the duration."

He placed more chips on three more odd red numbers. While he waited for the wheel to spin and stop he let his eyes roam over her body. The red dress fitted her well. The delicate cleavage was discreet but alluring, the side slit long enough to beguile, but short enough for false modesty.

Masters won again.

Monica placed her other hand over his where he lightly held her fingers. "It's your lucky night."

"So far."

"Don't they say the night is young?"

"Sometimes they're right."

His table was drawing a crowd around it. Winning was irresistible in a casino.

"Play again, sir?" the croupier asked.

Masters looked at Monica. "Will you put this one on for me?"

"Change the system?"

"I'll hold your hand this time."

She accepted the pile of chips from him and looked at the layout before she placed some of them on three numbers. Red. Odd.

The wheel span.

From the corner of his eye Masters could see a small group of Chinese men clustered in conversation. Cheng would be aware of his good fortune. It was never wise to win too much, not in one evening.

The wheel stopped.

The people gathered around let out a collective groan as the ball landed on black twenty.

"I'm sorry," Monica said, as the marker was placed on the winning square.

The dolly raked the chips from the losing numbers.

"They also say you can't win them all," Master said.

The Chinese men were dispersing. Danger was averted.

"Time to cash in while we're still ahead."

"Is that the end of our evening?"

Masters helped her from her seat. "We've only just begun."

14

It might have been the board room of a City firm of lawyers, or top ranking accountants, rather than a room filled with some of the most hardened and dangerous criminals in the country.

Most of them were of an age when their sixtieth birthday party was a dim memory, but dotted amongst them were younger faces, sons, young guns ready to take over the family business.

Today the only item on the agenda was revenge.

Three women fussed around the large, air conditioned room, like over-attentive mothers at a child's sleepover. When they were dismissed, after dispensing coffee and biscuits and oddly shaped carafes of water, the room fell silent.

As the large oak door to the large room opened, many of the older men scraped their chairs back to stand in polite recognition of the woman who entered.

Barbara Board had kept her body in good shape through endless regimes of gym work, yoga, Pilates, whatever current trend she could embrace. Her face had been chiselled to its present state by a mixture of surgery, injections and regular exfoliation techniques.

She didn't look her age, which was early sixties. She didn't look any age. She barely passed for human, by appearance or behaviour.

The room overlooked the tennis courts at the Board mansion in Essex. Fading sunshine poured through the immaculately cleaned latticed windows, illuminating some of the surface of the polished oak table, that was set for more than twenty places.

There were more than twenty of them pressed around the table. Many of the younger ones stood.

Barbara took her seat at the head of the table and touched the nearest carafe of water to check it was cold enough. The gangster to her right took the hint and poured her a glass.

"Thanks, Ed."

"We're all in shock, Barbara," the man said. Ed Slater was a long-time associate of Board's, from back in the days when muscle and fear were enough. Times had changed, but not extensively.

Many of these men, seated around the table, were as ruthless and as dangerous as Board. Yet here, in his house, around his table, even in his absence, it was as if they were paying homage to a king.

Many of these rough men had come up the hard way with Board in the old days. Back in the day they had worked alongside him in the protection rackets, the gaming clubs, the brothels. When he had taken over and become the head of them they had remained loyal. They knew some who had thought to challenge him and they knew they had all been disposed of. Some were lost at sea, but most were something in the City, usually the foundations of office blocks.

Barbara walked with a stout stick these days. It was rested against her chair. She hefted it above her head and brought it crashing down onto the table top. A water glass shattered.

"I don't want shock. I want whoever did this."

For a tense few seconds no one spoke. Eyes flickered to two men, both had been closer to Board than most. Eventually one of them gathered the courage to speak.

Vinnie Porter had gone to school with Board, 'Borstal mostly' was their long running joke. "It's the Albanians. Has to be."

"What have you found out? It's been nearly three hours. You must have heard something." Barbara's eyes roamed the room, a snake seeking prey.

"We've been to the scene... where it, well you know..."

"Where some bastard blew up my Bill. You can say it you know."

"And the driver, a taxi bloke and three tourists."

"I don't care about them," Barbara said. "What have you found out about who did this?"

Porter motioned to the man standing behind him and a manila folder was handed across.

"The bomb was sophisticated. Set to detonate once the car reached a certain speed. That was likely to be a few hundred yards away from the Court. It's not material that would normally be associated with the Shiptars."

"It's got to be them," someone said. "They've been trying to muscle in for ages."

"You think they got bold and took out Bill so they could take over?" Barbara said.

Porter nodded. "It's the only explanation."

Many of the others voiced agreement.

Barbara held up her hand. "So, what do we do about it?"

In the silence that ensued the only sound to permeate the stillness was a pen being tapped repeatedly on the table.

"Got something to say?" Barbara said.

The tapping of the pen ceased.

Albie Roust was slightly younger than many of the top echelon of the gang. He had been recruited personally by Board as an enforcer but soon proved to have far too much wit and intelligence to be wasted on legs and arms.

"You've asked what we do about it."

"You think you've got an answer?" Barbara leaned back in her chair. She knew her Bill had a soft spot for this one.

"Before we can do anything about it we need to make sure we do it against the right people. Or person."

"I'm listening."

"It's not the Albo's. I've been working as close to them as I can, under Mr Board's direction of course. They're a threat, no doubt about that, but they didn't do this. Whacking a few of us with baseball bats is more their style. Shooting up a boozier, that kind of thing. You've heard the explosive isn't linked to them. That's because it wasn't them that did it."

"You sound like you know who did do it," Porter said.

"He does doesn't he," Barbara said. "Come on Albie, you've got your audience. Who have we got to sort out for today?"

"I can tell you who and I can tell you where you'll find him tonight. I can even tell you who paid him well to do it."

Barbara raised her walking stick.

"That won't be necessary. Sorry, Mrs Board. It's just that a few of us will find it hard to believe when I tell you."

"Let us be the judge of that."

"Some call him the Devil. He enjoys that."

"Masters? What makes you think..."

"I've got an insider in the Albanian gang," Roust said. "Masters was paid by them to get Mr Board out of the way."

Barbara narrowed her eyes as she looked around at the faces staring back. "After he was paid by us to get Bill off the charges."

"I can tell you where he'll be spending a large chunk of that money tonight if you like," Roust said.

"Don't get cocky, son," Porter said. "No one likes a smart arse."

"He likes to gamble almost as much as he likes women. Combine the two and he's vulnerable."

Porter laid his hands flat on the surface of the table. "We haven't got much time. How are we going to do this?"

"Hold on, Vinnie," Barbara said. "I appreciate you taking the lead here. Things will change, I accept that. Things are changing but they haven't changed that much. I'm in charge now."

15

Masters asked at the door for a car to take them to the Dorchester.

"It's only a five minute stroll. We can walk," Monica said.

"Five minutes wasted when I could be holding you in my arms."

"Really? You want to say that?"

Masters chuckled. "Okay. I hate walking in London at night. There are all sorts around."

"The Devil scared?"

He increased the pressure of his fingers around her small hand. "I didn't say 'scared' did I?"

They stepped into the rear seats of the limousine as it stopped outside the casino. Less than a minute or so later they were walking through the grand hotel entrance, and into the lavish lobby.

They were greeted warmly by the doormen, and taken by one of them to an alcove behind which lay an elevator. The button was pressed, the doors opened, and they moved inside.

"Your room is prepared for you, Mr Masters," the doorman said.

Masters pressed some notes into his palm.

The corridor outside was thickly carpeted. Masters led the way to the room he kept there, and let them in with his key card.

The room was moodily lit with side lamps. The curtains were drawn against the night, hiding the view of Mayfair, and the bed had been turned down in readiness.

"Chocolate on the pillow?" Monica said.

"Anything you want."

She stood in the doorway of the sumptuous bathroom. "I'll just freshen up."

The bathroom door closed behind her. Masters kicked off his shoes and loosened his tie. He sat on the bed and checked for any messages on his phone. There were plenty. All congratulatory.

'Great result.'

'Lunch next week?'

'How did you pull that one off?'

He put the phone back in his pocket. He had no further use for it tonight.

From the mini bar supply of drinks he selected a champagne and poured two glasses. He could hear running water from the bathroom. He was tempted to close his eyes but feared he would miss the treat he was hoping would emerge when the door opened.

He wasn't disappointed.

Backlit from the lights of the bathroom she stood in the doorway.

"I'm looking forward to this," she said.

She was still fully clothed, but as she moved into the bedroom she reached behind her and unclasped something. The red dress pooled at her feet.

She was left standing in a Fleur lingerie set that looked expensive and very seductive. Her breasts were encased in the black lace and silk material. It caressed the skin, highlighting the curves and emphasising her cleavage.

Her long legs were sheathed in black stockings that were held in place by a high-waisted suspender belt of the same material as the bra. The panties were brief, sheer and worn low on her flat stomach.

"Well," she said. "What's the verdict Mr Barrister? Does the defence counsel approve?"

"Guilty. Not a word I enjoy hearing. But on this occasion it's justified."

He moved swiftly from the bed and gathered her in his arms.

"You're beautiful."

"I don't break either."

The kiss when it came was fierce. To him it felt like another victory in what had proven to be a successful day.

"I can tell you're excited," Monica said.

"We had better do something about that."

He led her back to the bed and gently sat her down. Kneeling in front he began to kiss her neck. When he reached the shoulder he lifted the strap out of the way so that he could continue to worship her bare skin.

He didn't hear the door open.

He bestowed kisses onto her upper chest, fluttering between her breasts when he felt her suddenly tense.

"Don't freeze now. I've only just started."

A rough male voice said, "I've started so I'll finish. Not tonight, counsellor."

Masters glanced up and saw recognition mixed with fear in Monica's eyes.

"Actually we don't use that word in the UK. You've been watching too many US TV programmes."

Two pairs of hands grabbed his shoulders and hauled him to his feet.

There were three of them. One had a gun. The gun had a long barrel that he guessed was a silencer attachment.

"Glad we got here in time. Wouldn't want you doing anything naughty, now would we?" Albie Roust was smiling.

"I'm on the side of the law. Haven't you heard?"

"Married man. In a hotel with a young lady. Sounds naughty to me. Then again maybe it's a minor offence compared to some."

"I've got money."

Roust laughed. It sounded like a blunt saw being drawn over rusting metal.

"You've got our money. And a fair bit from whoever paid you to plant the bomb. That's a lot of cash I'd say."

Masters tried to struggle but the strength of the men holding him was too great.

"Board was past it. It's a chance to start a new era."

"Very altruistic. You did it to help us did you? You got him off. Very grateful. Then you killed him. Not so pleased about that."

Masters looked over his shoulder at Monica. "You set me up."

"Nothing personal, Marshall. Daddy has been a bit awkward lately about my spending. I just needed a little extra."

"How the hell do you know thugs like these? Or Board?"

"How the hell do you?"

"Touching as this is," Roust said. "It's time for us to go. Get your shoes on, Masters."

"Where are we going?"

"The beautiful county. Essex. Mr Board's wife wants a word. Sorry, I should say, widow, thanks to you."

Masters put on his shoes. Then he was marched to the door by the two men.

Before the door was opened Roust said to Monica, "Shame really, you do look gorgeous in that gear."

"Christ, just pay me and get out."

"Of course."

The gun was levelled at Monica's head.

The noise, when it came, was muffled.

The blood, when it spurted, arched across the luxury bed linen, soaking into the fabric.

Her body, when it fell, slumped lifeless onto the bed, one leg limply hanging off the edge.

"Time to go, I think."

16

How they got out through a side entrance Masters couldn't say. He was too pre-occupied trying to find an angle that would get him out of their clutches.

It was a shame about Monica. He didn't want to follow her to the undertakers.

There was a car waiting in Deanery Street, engine idling.

Masters was bundled into the rear seats and the two hard men flanked him.

Roust took the front seat and as soon as the door closed, the car pulled away from the kerb.

"You know where we're going?"

The driver nodded. "Essex."

"Yeah. The house in Brentwood."

"I know the way."

Masters slumped back in the seat. He thought about trying to see landmarks that they might pass but he soon realised it was futile. It was too dark, they were driving too fast, and he wouldn't have known any of the sights even if he could see them. Essex was a foreign country to him.

"You know I'll be missed," he said.

"Who by?"

"No need to sound so sceptical. I'm too well known to just disappear."

"Will your wife report you missing? She hardly ever knows where you are anyway. Do you think the police will bust a gut trying to find you? You've ruined far too many of their cases for them to get sleepless nights over you. Colleagues? You like to work alone, even boast about it. No, sorry, old son. You're on your own."

"Until he meets the pigs." The muscled man to his left shook with laughter at what he had just said.

"And he don't mean the police," the man with the gun said.

Masters tried to think. He'd met Barbara Board once. In London, when he had a meeting with her husband. She might have been attractive in her youth but now she was a waxwork, and a wicked looking one at that. The hardness of her chiselled face was matched only by the motionless stones that were her eyes.

If Board had ever stepped out of line Masters was sure his wife would have kicked him back on track.

They drove at speed through country lanes once they left the motorway behind. The junction of the M25 was mostly free of traffic at this time of night. Their destination was a couple of miles further on, into the depths of Essex.

Masters must have closed his eyes because he found himself opening them when the car slowed. Ahead were a pair of tall, iron gates. The driver edged closer until he could speak into a metal box fixed to the brick gate-post. The gates began to open.

"Crime pays by the looks if it," Masters said.

"That's it," Roust said. "You keep your sense of humour. You're going to need it."

The gravel drive was wide and circular, and flanked on all sides by carefully cultivated shrubs and hedges.

The car stopped by the front doors, and Masters was bundled out.

The grip of the two men was loose but effective. He considered making a break for it but dismissed the idea before it took hold. He would never make it.

His only chance was inside the house. Talking with Board's widow.

The doors were opened by another muscular man. Masters was led into a wide, light oak panelled entrance hall.

"Wait here," Roust said, and disappeared down a long corridor.

Before the front doors were closed Masters saw the car driving off through the open gates. An escape route denied.

Roust re-appeared. He was still holding the gun, but in his other hand he held a crystal glass that looked if it held whisky.

"Are we celebrating?" Masters nodded at the glass.

"I might be. I don't think you'll find much to cheer about."

The four men walked through to a large room at the back of the house. The carpet was deep, the walls painted a delicate pastel colour, and the floor to ceiling windows gave a view of a darkened garden, lit by artfully placed lights.

"Very House And Garden."

"Told you he was a joker."

Barbara Board was seated in an over-sized armchair in front of a huge fireplace. There was no fire lit, but her eyes blazed with a fury that would have burned if you got too close.

"Think it's funny to come here on the day you killed my Bill?"

"I didn't kill him."

"I heard different. I heard you got paid nicely for getting my husband off the false charges..."

"I got him off, but the charges were honest and true. Unlike the testimonies given by witnesses intimidated witless by your thugs."

"You might find it distasteful but you were happy enough to take the money."

Masters shrugged his arms and shoulders and to his surprise the two men released their grip. They took a step back, between him and the door.

Roust was standing to one side of Barbara, between her and the windows.

"He took the Albanians money as well, don't forget."

"What makes you think that?"

"Don't take us for fools," Barbara said. "We infiltrated their gang months ago. You took poor Bill's thank you money, and then you took the foreigners money to kill him."

"I think you need to re-visit your source, Mrs Board. Why would I kill Bill? He was a regular customer wasn't he?"

Roust marched over and prodded Masters in the stomach with the gun. "You still trying to be funny?"

"Leave it, Albie," Barbara said. "He's right in a way. He got Bill off more than once didn't he. That's why I don't get it. What he did. I don't get it."

Masters was frantically trying to conjure a way out. He had to buy time. He had no idea what for, or even if he had the currency to pay for it. "Get what?"

"Come on, you're an intelligent man. We've got you. You took the Albo's cash. But killing Bill has cut off a nice little earner for the future."

"I liked Bill, I really did."

"You'll be one of the few that did then. He tested my patience more times than I've had hot dinners."

"Okay," Masters said. "Fair enough. I thought he was a nasty, thuggish brute, who liked hurting people. It wasn't personal, it was business."

"He's admitted it." Roust said. "Let me take him outside."

That was when the windows exploded inwards.

17

Marie Masters shifted the mobile phone from one ear to the other and tried to get into a comfortable position on the sofa. It sounded as if her mother wanted a long chat.

"It's not as if he hasn't been a good provider. He has. The house alone - most women would kill for a beautiful home like that."

Marie sipped some wine. "You're right. It's a wonderful house."

"And you want for nothing. House cleaned for you, expensive clothes. All those holidays. I wish your father..."

Marie zoned out for a while. She knew from experience that when her mother deviated from praise of her son-in-law to criticism of her own husband it wasn't to be a short conversation.

It was a shame. Marie loved both her parents but her father was her favourite if such a thing was allowed. To hear him verbally torn apart was hurtful. To stop herself saying something she might regret she drank some more wine.

When the glass was empty she held it out for a refill.

"But Marshall is nothing like your father."

"No, he's not."

"You make that sound as if it's a bad thing. He works hard. He earns good money. Not that you need me to tell you that, the way you spend it."

"All hail Saint Marshall."

"No need for sarcasm. All I'm saying is it's a shame you have to drag me into your little deceits."

"I just needed a couple of days away, while he was tied up with the big court case."

"But why did you have to lie to him? Tell him you were looking after me?"

Marie felt her shoes slipped off one by one. Slender fingers began a slow caress of her toes.

"Because if I told him I was staying in a hotel for a few days he'd want to know which one, he'd try to get over here, he'd be checking up on me every five minutes."

"Sounds like the actions of a man who cares."

"Or a man who wants to be in control of everything and everyone. I just needed some space."

The hands fondling her feet began to move patiently up her calves, eventually reaching the knees.

"Does he have anything to check up on?"

"What do you mean by that?"

"You know full well what I mean. Are you seeing someone?"

"An affair? Don't be ridiculous."

The attentive hands were sliding above her knees, stroking the nylon-clad lower thighs.

"Is it? Is it so ridiculous?"

"Of course it is. I may find him irritating. He may treat me like a witness at times. He may be selfish and a lot of the things you accuse daddy of being, but I'm not going to leave him."

Her legs were gripped tighter and she slumped down on the cushions.

"You know which side your bread's buttered, that's why."

"So, he hasn't been in touch?"

"No, I told you."

"And if he does."

"I'll keep your little secret. You've been with me. When are you going home though?"

"Tomorrow."

Marie ended the call and dropped the phone onto the table by her side.

The hands had reached the soft, bare flesh at the tops of her stockings.

She drained her glass and enjoyed the sensation of the wine as she swallowed.

The glass joined the phone on the table.

She put her arms out and gripped the arm and cushion of the sofa. She shifted further down in her seat. Her skirt had risen up as the exploration of her thighs continued.

"I think I need to make things a little easier for you," she said.

She splayed her legs.

The young woman kneeling in front of her giggled.

\*\*\*

The windows exploded inwards.

Masters was the first to react.

He leapt forward, arms outstretched to Barbara Board. He connected with her shoulders and his momentum propelled the pair of them to the floor.

Even before the glass from the windows had finished cascading onto the carpet the gunmen were marching into the room.

Roust levelled his gun in the general direction of the intrusion but he was far too slow.

An automatic burst from the AK-12 cut him down before his mouth could even open in shock.

The other two men fared little better. One of them dropped to a firing position crouch but he was only able to fire off a couple of rounds before several bullets shut him down. The second man thought about standing, considered fleeing, but there was nowhere to go.

When he had first joined Board's gang the enemy had been obvious. He invariably knew most of them from his youth. Sometimes he might socialise with them if the occasion presented itself.

Nowadays there were too many foreigners muscling in on the action. Different languages and different rules. Morals, ideals, nothing matched what he was used to.

More gunfire left his body bloodied and twitching on the floor.

There were five gunmen. All wearing masks, all dressed in black. Four of them stood guard. Two stayed by the smashed windows. One took up position by the doorway. The fourth stood back from the door but kept his assault weapon aimed at chest height towards it.

The fifth man lowered his weapon and stood over Masters and Barbara.

"You." He pointed at Barbara. "Mrs Board?"

Beneath him Masters could feel the woman quivering. He didn't blame her. He wasn't feeling brave himself.

"Let me stand," Masters said.

He didn't move until the man nodded.

Masters struggled to his. He held out his hand to help Barbara.

The gunman prodded her in the stomach. "You answer. Mrs Board?"

"If she is, why do you need to know?"

The man pointed his weapon at Masters.

"Steady," Masters said. "I'm just asking the question."

"I ask question. Third time. You - you are Mrs Board?"

Masters watched as the woman drew herself to her full height of five feet nothing and said, "I'm Barbara Board. Who wants to know?"

The man called out some words in a language Masters didn't recognise but guessed he knew the origin. One of the men by the windows and the man by the door took an arm each and pulled Barbara towards the darkened garden.

Masters realised argument was futile. These men had killed already. He was fortunate to still be alive.

As if reading his thoughts the man lifted his AK-12 and aimed it at Masters.

"My name is Marshall Masters."

The weapon was lowered.

18

"How the hell did that happen?"

The men and women seated in the upper storey conference room had long ago learned that such questions from this man were to be taken as rhetorical. Especially when he was annoyed. Chief Superintendent Yeats, at this moment, was beyond annoyed, he was an angry man.

"Months of groundwork. Covert surveillance. Enough witnesses to fill Wembley stadium. A career criminal that has his best days behind him but still manages to outsmart us. I say again, how the hell did that happen?"

Chief Inspector Carling glanced at some of his colleagues before he spoke. Why did they always leave it up to him to put his head above the parapet first? Rank had its benefits but there were drawbacks as well.

"There's only one reason it went tits up yesterday, sir."

"Aside from poor police work you mean?"

"With respect, sir..."

"Don't 'with respect' me, Bob. We all know what that really means. What's your 'one reason'?"

"Marshall Masters."

There were murmurs of agreement around the table.

"That and witness intimidation," an Inspector said.

"And bribery. Don't forget the money that will have changed hands." The Inspector who added that looked at Carling, but more in fear than expectation.

"So tell me something I don't know." Suddenly Yeats' anger seemed to dissipate. He sat at the head of the table and stared out of the window. London's buildings stared back. The new ones like the 30 St Mary Axe, nicknamed the Gherkin, the Shard, the Heron Tower, 20 Fenchurch, the mobile phone shaped one, the Leadenhall Building, and of course the older, more historic ones, St Paul's, and the others, beginning to get dwarfed by the taller intruders.

"The question is this," Yeats said. "What are we going to do about it?"

This one wasn't taken as rhetorical.

"I've had a team chasing the money route through the night," the Inspector who had raised the issue of bribery said. "Find where it originated, and where it ended up, and we have a link."

"Good call," Yeats said.

The Inspector who had talked about witnesses said, "My team are re-interviewing the witnesses. See if we can't find out what happened, and who threatened them."

"They'll be scared out of their minds of course," Yeats said. "I doubt you'll get much from them, but worth a shot. They've had all night to think about what happened. It might just frighten one of them into changing their tune."

"I've sent some officers to Board's house, sir. Ostensibly to pursue the investigation surrounding the bombing of the car," Carling said.

"And to pay their respects to the grieving widow," Yeats said.

"Is that a hint of sarcasm I detect, sir?"

"There's no denying that by taking out a bastard like Board someone did us a favour. Not that we aren't chasing those responsible, mind. I don't think for one moment that Masters was the one who did the actual explosive part."

"Wouldn't want to get his manicured hands that dirty." The fifth person in the room was the only female. Inspector Lucy Arnett was also the youngest. She knew she had earned her rank through hard work, good detective skills, and dedication. A dedication that had cost her a marriage, if her husband's text that afternoon was to be believed.

"My officers have been told to talk to Barbara Board only, and to get tough if needs be. She will already be looking for the people who killed her husband, but we want it done our way, not hers."

Conversation stalled as coffee was brought in, and trays of sandwiches and fruit.

"Spend a bit of taxpayers' money," Yeats said. "Have forensics come up with anything?"

One of the Inspectors consulted his notes. "The wreckage of the car and the taxi cab have been recovered and initial findings indicate East European material in the explosive itself, possibly Russian."

Yeats breathed in through his teeth. "No surprise there then. Board has plenty of rival gangs, but he's been in bed with most of them for years. They carve up all the action and the only agro is local turf wars when small fry get above themselves. Had to be foreigners getting in on the act."

"My money is on the Albanians," Carling said. "They don't play by the same rules as the old London boys."

"Would Masters have been crazy enough to link up with them? That's not his style is it?"

"Sorry to keep saying the same thing," the Inspector chasing the cash said. "Find the money, where it went, and who ended up with it, and it's likely to be Masters."

Carling looked out of the window but his impression was a different one from Yeats' view. He saw the Thames, the streets, the smaller buildings where people worked and lived and loved. He hated the crooks he had spent his whole career trying to stop. They interfered with his world ideal that decent people should be allowed to go about their life peacefully, and without the threat of violence or danger.

"Huge mansion in Hadley Wood," he said. "Expensive wife. Cars, holidays. He likes two things outside his job and his home life. Gambling and women. If he landed a big payout from the Albanians his first instinct will have been to spend it with a risk. Let's find out where he went after Court yesterday. My bet is it was to a casino."

Yeats stood, indicating that the meeting was coming to a close. "A payout from the Albanians, yes, Bob, but not just them."

"Sir?"

"His first task of the day was to get Board off all charges. He did just that. He doesn't work for free. Mr Masters walked away yesterday with money from two sources. Ironic really that Board sort of funded his own death but never mind. Keep me informed."

With that he was gone.

Carling felt the tension in room ease down a couple of notches.

"Can we finish the food, sir?" Arnett said.

"We certainly can, Lucy. I'm famished. Been up all night."

"Would you like me to follow up the casino link, sir?"

"Yes, do that. Money. Witnesses. Master's whereabouts. That just about covers it all. I just need to hear back from the team from Board's house."

His mobile phone rang.

"Talk of the devil."

He listened. He wasn't aware his face had gone pale.

When he finished one of the others said, "Are you all right, sir?"

"One of you get the Chief Superintendent back in here, quick about it."

No one had the heart to eat any more food. Within moments the door opened and Yeats entered.

"I'd only just got back to my office. What is it, Bob?"

"The officers at Board's house have found a bit of a mess. There were thugs there trying to clear it up, but my people were insistent. Windows at the back blown out by automatic weapons. Three bodies. Blood everywhere. They've declared it a crime scene, sealed it off and SOCOs are on their way."

"Why do I get the feeling there's more?"

Carling realised his fingernails were digging into his palms and he made himself relax. "There was no sign of Mrs Board. One of the dead men is Roust..."

"Albie Roust?" Yeats said. "One of Board's top men."

"Yes, sir. It took some persuasion but one of the thugs at the house finally admitted that Masters had been brought there late last night."

"And he was nowhere to be seen? And no sign of Board's widow?"

"No, sir."

"So it looks as if Masters has gone rogue then. He's hooked up with the Albanians."

19

Masters was pushed and pulled unceremoniously through the rear gardens of the Board mansion. Barbara was treated equally roughly.

"Where are we going?" Masters said, but the question was met with silence.

"Don't waste your breath," Barbara said.

"I wondered if the target was you or me."

"Don't flatter yourself. They had no way of knowing you'd be here."

"They're going to kill you?"

"They've seen a weakness. Thanks to you. With Bill gone they think I'm the new head of the business."

"Maybe they want to cut a deal."

"I don't speak their language."

There was a dark blue people carrier on the street outside. The centre doors were open. Two of the men hopped inside and motioned for Barbara to get in. Masters began to follow her but he was held back.

"You wait."

The doors were closed and then Masters saw there was a second vehicle behind. A dark Lexus. Masters was taken to it.

The rear window slid down.

"Mr Masters. I am surprised to find you here."

It was the East European who had paid him the money.

"Not of my choosing. I was happily spending some of your money when I was rudely invited to visit the wilds of Essex."

"Is that where we are? I get confused outside London. Should I be concerned you are talking with the lady who is now my guest?"

"She was the one doing the talking, but I wasn't listening. Apparently she blames me for the sudden departure of her husband."

"That is a shame. How would you put it? Most unfortunate."

The man barked out a string of guttural words and the people carrier drove off.

"What are you going to do with her?"

"That isn't your concern. I suggest you forget your involvement in my business did not end with the settlement of our agreed payment."

"Let's say I have a weakness for women. Even elderly gangsters like her."

"What happens to Mrs Board will be her decision. I intend to make her an offer. To join forces I think you might say. If she agrees then the merger will be a bloodless coup."

"And if she turns you down?"

He made a cutting gesture across his thick throat.

The remaining gunmen got into the Lexus and the window slid upwards. The car drove off.

From the house, beyond the walls and the gardens Masters could hear raised voices. It was time to be gone.

He fished out his mobile phone and dialled a number.

"Richard? Come and get me could you?"

\*\*\*

Sunshine woke Barbara Board. When her eyes adjusted to the light she looked around to see where she was.

The room was small and dirty. She was laid out on a stained mattress of the floor. That explained the dull aches in her back. Her shoes were missing but apart from that she was dressed in the clothes she wore when they took her from her house.

They had driven through the night but she had only a vague awareness of where they brought her. She knew they had driven on motorway part of the way. Then the roads had grown narrow. Pinched buildings either side crowded in and she guessed they were in inner city London somewhere. North of the river no doubt. The Albanians' territory.

The men had taken her to this room and left her. A bottle of water was the only semblance of hospitality.

She got herself into a seated position and rubbed at her eyes. She tried to stretch out but her back argued against it. She needed the toilet but she wasn't going to demean herself and go on the floor.

There were two possibilities why they had snatched her. With poor Bill out of the way they could dispose of her and take over the manor. Men like Vinnie Porter and others would resist but without real leadership they wouldn't be a match for the brutality they would face.

The second option was interesting. She had no intention of doing a deal with these thugs but they needn't know that.

The third issue running through her mind was why they had released Masters. She hadn't seriously considered he was in league with them. He was an opportunist who had done his job in getting her husband off the charges, but then couldn't resist the additional payday in setting him up to be killed. She would deal with Masters another day. For now she needed to get out of here alive.

\*\*\*

Bob Carling surveyed the scene with experienced if weary eyes.

He had seen too many bodies to feel any emotion about the dead criminals laid out here. These men had lived by the sword and now they had paid the price. Albie Roust was a serious career criminal who had evaded the law for far too many years. Carling couldn't prevent a secret part of his soul rejoicing that he was out of the picture for good.

The forensics and scene of crime team were checking every inch of the place for evidence. The garden as well as it was clear that was the escape route.

"Anything?" he said to the senior SOCO officer.

"They definitely came in and exited through the rear garden. There's a door in the wall. It's been broken open. Looks like a vehicle, possibly more than one, was waiting in the lane that runs around the rear and side of the property. We have automatic weapons fire in this room but none outside."

"Suggesting they dealt with any resistance in here, and took the hostages out the back."

"Exactly. From what your officers have established from the men here - Board's men - Mrs Board and the lawyer, Masters."

"What we don't know is whether he was taken with Barbara Board or whether he was part of the plan to snatch her."

Carling rang through to Yeats to update him.

When he was finished he took some time to look around the rest of the house. It was the luxurious place he had expected. Crime paid off well for Board. Home cinema, swimming pool, numerous bedrooms and a kitchen bigger than the square footage of his whole house. That it was decorated in an ostentatious and gaudy style was the only comfort he could find.

20

Masters sat on the patio at his home and sipped his coffee.

It had taken Richard less than half an hour to get back. He had accepted the invitation to stay and was now showering in the guest suite. Masters had slept a few hours before the sun woke him.

He was plagued by uncertainties as he showered. It was unlike him to feel what might in others be construed as guilt. He had long ago recognised that he lacked a conscience. He enjoyed the fruits of his labours, and enjoyed them all the more when he had obtained them through less than honest methods.

As he dried and dressed he tried to pinpoint exactly why he was feeling uneasy. For most people the list would have been a full one, even from yesterday's events.

He had conspired, successfully, to get a guilty man freed through violence and intimidation. The fact that he had perpetrated none of those personally didn't seem to reassure him as it usually would.

He had conspired, willingly, to have the same man blown up, along with innocent bystanders. He had done that for money, pure and simple.

He had taken a woman to his hotel room with the sole intention of sleeping with her, with no thought or regard for his wife. That she had been killed, partially because of him, was a source of regret, but so was the fact that she was gorgeous and he hadn't actually slept with her.

Now a woman who had arranged his capture had been kidnapped herself and he had been released. That was what he couldn't work out. Why did he feel guilty about Barbara Board?

He spooned the last of his eggs Benedict into his mouth and admired the way the immaculate lawns smoothed their way down to the sumptuous flower beds before disappearing into the woods beyond.

It was restful to look at. Today it wasn't calming, not today. He felt he needed to do something.

\*\*\*

Barbara Board was getting impatient. They had kept her here for too long. She banged on the wooden door.

"I am still here you know."

Almost immediately the door opened. The man who opened it wasn't armed but behind him the other two men were.

"Very heroic. Three of you just for me."

"Come with us."

"What else was I going to do?"

They moved through a series of narrow corridors. The overwhelming smell was of stale cooking. Onions, cabbage, spices that had faded into oblivion.

At the end of the last passage was a door. The man without a gun knocked on it. There was a garbled voice from inside. The door was opened and the man walked through it. He beckoned Barbara to follow him.

In the room was a desk behind which sat an older man. His face was lined, his hair was grey. His eyes were dead.

Barbara recognised the lack of emotion. She had seen it many times before. Often when she looked in the mirror.

"My name is Korab Kastrati. Korab is the name of Albania's highest mountain, at the border to Macedonia. I don't claim to be a mountain but I am aiming to become high."

"I don't think you mean high."

"My English is not so good. High is a mountain but it means something else I suppose, yes. I mean to tell you that I want more than I have now. And I have a lot already."

Barbara looked around the grimy room.

"It doesn't look like you have much."

The man laughed. Short and hard.

"This is where I bring special guests. In front is a meat processing plant. Small but it smells much larger. I often find the suggestion that a person's fate is to end up being sold from a hot-food van on the side of a nondescript road in the middle of nowhere sharpens the mind."

"I use pigs myself. They can devour a body far quicker than you might think."

Kastrati flicked a finger and a chair was produced. Barbara sank onto it with more gratitude than she might have imagined she would feel.

"My surname comes from the name of a tribe of the Malësi e Madhe area in Northern Albania. My family kept pigs for generations. And goats and sheep. On the whole chickens are far less work. I want to come with you."

"Steady, old son. I'm not sure you mean that as you've said it."

"Another English mistake. I mean..."

"You mean with my husband out of the way - killed by you - that you want to join forces. Don't you really mean you want to take over what I've got?"

"If I wanted to do that I could do it tomorrow. My men are younger, more brutal, and better armed."

Barbara felt her throat go dry. She knew what he was saying was the truth. Her time had been and gone. Most of the men she might demand loyalty from if she was to take over from Board were older than she was. There were fewer youngsters coming through.

"It's true I do seem to have less apprenticeships than I used to have. I blame the Tories."

"Democracy in action."

"So you can take me over with force. There'll be quite a few casualties, on both sides. The police will take notice. That's no good for any of us."

"That is why I want to avoid bloodshed. If I can."

"So what do you propose?"

"You and I work together. I bring my men into work with yours. You have the contacts, the inner structure...."

"Infrastructure."

"You have the command of the language. Equal partners of course."

"And if I refuse?"

"The festival season is upon us. Burger vans do good business this time of year."

"So I'm either with you or I'm against you?"

"He that is not with me is against me; and he that gathereth not with me scattereth abroad."

"Quoting the Bible and yet I'm guessing you're a Muslim."

"Islam. Christianity. All organised religion has their words to quote. None of them are ways that I can follow."

Barbara accepted the bottle of water that was pressed into her hands.

"Sounds like I'm between a rock and a hard place."

"Ah, another quote, but not Biblical this time. Did you know that phrase comes from America? Land of the free. It started in the 1920's and indicated a person was bankrupt."

"Something we both don't want to experience."

"So you agree?"

Barbara was about to stand, possibly to shake the hand of the man who ordered her husband's death, when a shot rang out.

21

Masters closed down the screen of his laptop and picked up his mobile.

"Do you need me to take you anywhere?"

Masters looked up and saw Richard.

"I may well do. Can you hang around a while?"

"Sure. Is it today that Marie gets back?"

"Friday, I think. Depends if her mother still needs her."

"Her mother?"

"You sound sceptical. Any reason for that?"

Richard held his hands up, palms facing. The international gesture of placation.

"Not at all. Mothers can be demanding."

Masters stared at the mobile he still held in his hand. Did he want to make the call? It might change a lot of things in his life. Is that what he wanted?

"Do you like working for me?"

"What kind of question is that?"

"One that will help me make a tough decision. You've worked for me a long time. We are honest with one another, up to a point. I don't take you for granted, much. I pay well. You get plenty of time off."

"The working hours are erratic. The people you often hang out with are crooks, pure and simple. The job can be as boring as... hanging around waiting with the car. That kind of thing. Do I enjoy working for you?"

"I'm guessing we're headed into negative territory here."

"Despite it all I actually think you're a great bloke. You revel in all that Devil crap. You defend thugs who don't deserve to be defended but then somehow, and I haven't worked it out yet, somehow the ones you defend tend to get their comeuppance a little bit further down the line. Almost as if once you've got them off they're cursed."

"Bit like Bill Board you mean?"

"He was different. You got him off more times than most. But, yes, he got his just desserts yesterday didn't he."

"Thanks, Richard. That's helped. Fancy making some more coffee?"

"See, nursemaid and chief bottle-washer."

"I was going to ask you to join me drinking it. You can even bring out the biscuits."

When he was alone Masters dialled a number he never thought he would have found a use for.

\*\*\*

There was a second shot.

Kastrati moved from behind the desk with far greater agility than anyone might have expected. When he clamped a hand around Barbara's throat it came as a surprise to her.

"It's customary in this country to shake hands."

The grip on her neck tightened. At the door the man who had stood silently suddenly shouted out. There was no reply.

"Where are the others?" Kastrati said.

There was no sign of the two gunmen who had been outside the room.

"They must have gone to see what the shot was about."

"Go and check."

"You are unarmed."

Kastrati produced a lethal looking knife from his jacket pocket. It pricked against the lined skin of Barbara's neck.

The man ran down the corridor, shouting out names. There was still no reply.

"This had better not be your men attempting a misguided rescue."

"Let go of my throat if you want to have a discussion."

The hand dropped away but the knife stayed pressed against the back of her head.

"I could sever an artery. You would bleed out in less than a minute. Or I could cut through the nerves that connect the spine and the brain. You would be alive but paralysed."

"I'd never get a wheelchair. Not on the NHS. Not with the capital I've got."

"Who is out there?"

Barbara considered the question. It may well have been her men. They wouldn't have found it difficult to locate the places the Albanians used. Vinnie Porter would have moved heaven and earth to find her.

Then she remembered what Roust had said about having a contact in the opposition. An insider in the Albanian gang.

\*\*\*

Ervin Vrioni had retained much of his generic background.

His skin was medium tanned, with dark features, and people considered him to be handsome. He was tall, over six feet, and the regular sessions at the gym kept his muscle balance set well.

He had lived in England for most of his life. At school they teased him about his name, calling him Irwin, which in the tough East End district where he grew up was considered a 'posh' name, a name only weak men had. He had to regularly prove he was neither posh nor weak. By the time he left school he had a reputation for controlled anger.

It was that, and his friendship with a young Albie Roust, that got him on the first rung of his career. How that job was defined was something that eluded him to this day, but he seemed to be good at it.

Board's man trusted him. The Albanians he infiltrated trusted him.

It would have been easy to play both sides against one another, but Vrioni had been brought up to value loyalty and honour. Roust had been good to him. Relied on him. Gave him responsibility, and now he was dead.

He had overheard some of the Albanians talking about the raid on the Board house. He knew Barbara was being kept downstairs. He knew his choices were limited. Once she was taken to see Kastrati it would be only a matter of time before she was either killed or went into business with the opposition. If she joined forces with Kastrati there was no reason for her not to reveal what she knew about the traitor in the midst.

"I'm going out for a smoke," he said to the men in the back room. They were all waiting for instructions from the boss.

Once outside, Vrioni texted a number. He had been in communication solely with Roust. It was safer and easier. Now he had no choice but tell someone else. Porter was someone he had only met from afar. Vrioni had to believe he would do the right thing when he got the message.

He broke open the phone and took out the SIM card. He dropped it down a drain as he bent to stub out his cigarette. The two pieces of the phone he put back in his pocket.

The Glock pistol, sometimes referred to by the manufacturer as a Glock "Safe Action" Pistol, was a polymer-framed, short recoil operated, locked breech semi-automatic pistol designed and produced by Glock Ges.m.b.H. in Austria.

Inside the building he shut the door but didn't lock it.

He pulled out his Glock 19.

The Glock 19 9mm calibre safe-action pistol had a fifteen-round magazine capacity and hexagonal barrel rifling. Measuring just 6.85 inches in length and weighing less than thirty ounces even when loaded, the compact design and light weight made it perfect for concealed carry.

Perfect for his purpose.

22

Bob Carling rarely answered Unknown calls but for some reason he did this time. Maybe it was because he had only just got back to the office from the bloodbath in

Essex. Maybe it was because he hadn't eaten and he wasn't thinking straight. Maybe it was just fate.

"Carling."

When he heard the name of the person on the call he sat down hard in his leather chair. He would never have expected a call from that source.

"You obviously know who I am."

"I've known all about you for a very long time."

"And you've loved me for every minute of that time."

"Not the word I would have chosen. Quite the opposite in fact. Now, delighted as I might be to chat, there will be plenty of time for that when we bring you in for questioning."

"Will I need a lawyer?"

"Do you know any decent ones?"

"I know one very successful one."

"Modesty doesn't seem to rank highly on your list of social niceties."

"Much as I too would love to chat, I didn't ring you for the pleasure of your conversation."

"I am wondering why you would call. Your client has a vicious end to his vicious life. You are up to your neck in it. In league with the Albanians? Your clubs won't like that you know."

"He who pays the piper."

"Yes, we have a team working on that. Money transfers leave traces. Even cash isn't as invisible these days as people think. We'll find where it originated and where it ended up."

"Aren't you concerned to learn the reason for my call?"

"My sincere apologies, sarcasm fully intended. Do let me know. The last we heard you were being taken away in the dead of night by the gangsters you seem so friendly with. And Mrs Board was with you."

"She isn't now. That's why I'm calling you. I know who has her."

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Once the call was over, Carling rushed along the corridor to the corner office that Yeats occupied.

Carling knocked but didn't wait for a reply. Luckily Yeats was alone.

"Bob? You look flustered. Not like you."

"You won't believe who has just given me some intelligence."

"Judging by your grin I'm guessing it will be someone unexpected."

"Marshall Masters."

"Masters rang you?"

"He says he knows who has Board's widow. Not where, but I've instructed three officers to locate the whereabouts of Korab Kastrati."

"The head of the gang? Why would he take Barbara Board? Why not just kill her? After all he's paid good money to get her husband out of the way."

"Masters reckons that might still be on the cards. It's either that or the two of them join forces."

Yeats stood, and out of habit, stared out of the window. "That would make life difficult. If he kills her we'll have a turf war on our hands. If they get into some kind of allegiance we'll be stretched to contain them."

"I hope we'll have the location soon, and I have already taken the precaution of having armed response teams standing by. I hope that's okay, sir."

"Good initiative. I've just been briefed by Arnett. Good detective that one. She'll go a long way if she can keep her home life in check."

"Her husband isn't Job, sir. I understand there have been some problems, but I'm sure it won't affect her work."

"Right. Well, she's been able to trace Masters' movements after the trial. After the explosion to be exact. He was driven to an industrial part of Enfield, for what purpose we don't yet know. CCTV has been requested. Then he was dropped off at Crockfords in Mayfair."

"Spending some of his ill gotten gains."

"We hear he was in debt to the Chinese family that control some of the action. Was, being the operative word. The debt was paid in full."

"That must be why he needed a double payday."

"With what he had left, and we can assume it was more than you or I will see for a day's work, he gambled. He wasn't alone."

"Don't tell me. A pretty young woman."

"A pretty young woman who was reported murdered hours later at the Dorchester. We observed the usual protocol with the hotel management, but the room has been sealed and is being checked inch by inch."

"It has to be the same people who took Masters to see Barbara Board. So it must have been Board's men who killed the girl. Loose ends."

"I don't like those. Let's hope you get a lead on the location of our persons of interest."

\*\*\*

Vrioni looked around the room.

One of the men who thought he was a colleague called out. "Heh, Ervin, come and get a piece of this."

Vrioni walked over. The weight of the gun in his pocket was comforting. In a corner of the room something small and skinny struggled. It was a girl. No more than fourteen or fifteen. Several hands were clawing at her clothing. Tearing and ripping.

"She's just been brought in. She's going to the Hampstead place, but they said we could have some fun with her first."

Vrioni stared at the girl. She might have been pretty a year or so ago, but living rough had leached that from her.

He pulled out his Glock. The first shot hit the back of the head of a bull-like figure who was known to like his girls young. The second shot hit the face of a weasel-featured man who opened his mouth to say something that never was spoken.

The other men moved away from the girl. For a moment there was a stand-off. They might attack Vrioni or they might run. It didn't take them long to choose the sensible option.

The girl was shivering. Her eyes wide with fear.

Vrioni hushed her. He threw a blanket over her shoulders.

"Stay here. Whatever you hear. Whatever you see. Don't move. Someone will come to help you. You need to get off the streets. If they can't do that, I will do it for you. Stay here."

The doorway was filled by the man with the gun.

"Ervin? What's happening?"

"I'm glad you ask me that. Was it you?"

"I was with the boss. Was it me what?"

"Was it you that killed Board's man, Roust?"

He laughed. "It may have been. We were all shooting."

Vrioni raised his Glock. "This is for Roust."

Before he could shoot, the doors flew open, and armed men poured in. Shouting. Shooting.

23

Vrioni took the first blast of gunfire. He went down quickly.

The other man turned to run but he didn't stand a chance.

Vinnie Porter swore. "We've just killed one of our own."

"What are you talking about? He's an Albo, look at him."

"He was Albie's inside man."

"Not any more he isn't."

Porter snarled orders for some of them to secure the rear entrance. Others he sent in search of any more of the Albanians. No one saw the skinny girl. She did as she had been told. The shooting made her more determined to lie still and quiet.

"Come with me," Porter said to four of the men. They were all armed with an assortment of weapons. Sawn-off shotguns, revolvers, automatics, even semi-automatic machine guns.

In the room at the end of the corridor, Kastrati held Barbara around the neck with a thick forearm. The knife was pointed at her eye.

"Don't come any closer."

"Mrs Board. Are you all right?"

"Do I look all right, Vinnie? Give me strength. Who's doing all the shooting?"

"We got word from Albie's man. Told us where to come."

Kastrati lowered the blade a fraction. "What is 'Albie's man'?"

"A traitor in your midst, Korab old son," Barbara said. "Didn't do us any good though did it? You still blew up my poor Bill."

She jerked her elbow back, hard, and was rewarded with the sound of expelled air. As the arm around her relaxed, she sagged at the knees and wrenched herself free.

She stumbled as she moved but Porter caught her hand and steadied her.

"I think you've earned the right to call me Barbara, don't you, Vinnie?"

"What do you want me to do with the shiptar?"

"Give me your gun."

Barbara made sure Kastrati was watching her as she levelled the gun at him. "Go into business with you? I'd rather shoot myself than work with animals like you. This is for Bill."

She shot both his kneecaps.

When he was lolling on the floor she said, "This is for killing Albie and the others."

Two shots went through both his shoulders.

"And those windows at my house. Bi-fold they were. Cost me an arm and a leg. If you'll pardon the expression."

The final shot hit him square in the forehead.

The other shots through the eyes and the heart were for artistic merit only.

"We'd better get you out of here," Porter said.

"I could do with a hot bath, a massage and a kebab."

The noise from the rear of the building was accompanied by shots and shouts.

\*\*\*

The armed response teams had been ready for the call. As soon as it came they were on the road.

"Unknown number of targets. Possibly two gangs. Definitely armed."

The vehicles swept into the side road where the meat processing plant was located. All exits were secured.

The officers leapt out, and under instructions they approached the front and rear of the building.

The teams at the front were just in position when a number of Albanian men came running out. They were already scared but when they saw the police, and heard the shouts to 'hands on heads', 'kneel down', they added confusion to their emotions.

They all complied with the instructions. They were herded away.

At the rear of the building the teams were in place when the shooting started.

The door was not locked.

Behind it several of Porter's men were keeping watch.

"Cops. They've got armed units outside."

Before a decision could be made the door was smashed open and the police swarmed in.

There were shouts of 'armed police', 'put down your weapons'.

It was a cramped room and the corridor leading off from it was narrow.

No one much fancied the chances of a successful shoot-out.

The gangsters laid down their weapons.

While they were taken outside to the waiting police vehicles, the armed response senior officer took some officers down the corridor. They checked each door as they passed.

At the end of the corridor Barbara was waiting.

"You took your time."

They were all disarmed. Their rights were read to them.

When the scene was secured. When the people were all out and being loaded into vehicles. When he had a moment, the senior officer called Carling to tell him the good news.

\*\*\*

Masters was sitting in the kitchen when he heard the front door open and close.

"That you, darling?"

He heard the click of her high heels and then smelled her perfume before he saw her.

"Hello, Marshall," Marie said. "Have you missed me?"

"How was mother?"

"My mother is a vain, domineering, selfish woman, but she's the only mother I have, so I have to indulge her."

"Tea?"

He poured from the ornate teapot on the table and handed her a china cup and saucer.

"Very elegant. I heard the trial went well but had a surprising ending. It was a surprise was it?"

"It seems to have been."

She kissed the top of his head.

"Never a dull moment."

"You have no idea."

"So, apart from that what else have I missed?"

"I have to go in and have a little talk with the police at some point. Well, later today actually."

"Something I should be worried about?"

"Helping the police with their inquiries. Isn't that how the phrase goes?"

"Since when have they ever asked for your help?"

"That seems to be another thing that is surprising. I may have done a good thing while you've been away. Bit too early to tell, but I hope I won't make a habit of it. Anyway there was a message for you."

The cup hesitated at her lips. "A message?"

"A Rosie Meadows called. Said you'd left your phone charger at hers."

"It's not what you think."

"Darling, it's exactly what I think. The question is whether I'm worried about it."

"No jokes about can you watch? Will she be up for a threesome?"

"Do you love her?"

"Marshall, I love you. God help me I try not to. You do your best to make it easy for me not to, but I love you. You knew when we married that... this other thing."

"I thought we'd go into town this weekend. Take in a show. A meal. How does that sound?"

"Stay at The Dorchester?"

"Maybe somewhere else. For a change."

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