



# **Lost in Shadows**

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**by**

**Alex O'Connell**

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## **Chapter One**

Time was up for Micky Johnston. All his tears, wailing and pleading – God knows there had been a lot – had been to no avail. He tried one last time to struggle. But he could manage no more than a half-hearted attempt to strain against his shackles and he knew by now that it was hopeless. He saw Death summoning him with a rapacious, all consuming intensity, a lascivious desire. Death's name was Doyle. Doyle had listened impassively everything Micky could think to say, but he was not a man you could reason with; certainly not a man you could offer a cut of the money to. Especially when none was left. Micky was trying to reason, trying to buy him off would just make things worse and things were already more than bad enough. Such a short time before it had all seemed so easy to him. Safe as houses. Just collecting the cash from Bellini's squalid little south London clubs and dive bars. Creaming a little, just a little, off the top. It was only a commission really. A sort of finder's fee. Nothing wrong with that. Everybody did it. But what started as a little grew, little by little, and over the months a little became a lot. More than enough for Bellini's accountants to

become suspicious. Why the fuck did a gangster like Bellini need accountants, Micky thought? Bastards. Every one of them. Bastards!

But this wasn't the time for thinking and it was too late for action. An icy chill of fear and certainty coursed like an electric current down Micky's spine and the sweat that ran down his brow stung his eyes, contorting his face in what was more of a spasm than a shudder. He had never been a brave man at the best of times, he knew that, and this certainly wasn't the best of times. Doyle's reputation went before him. It forced people out of his way and into the shadows, it made them avoid his impassive stare and concentrate on their shoes. He was a hard man of the old school. Well into a middle age that no-one had expected him to reach, he was gaunt but still quietly muscular and with a face bisected by an old bluish scar that ran from high on his right cheek, across his lips ending with a flourish low down on the left side of his chin. His nose looked like a second rate bare-knuckle fighter's and his left eye could now barely open. There wasn't much sight left in it anyway. His hair, its lustrous black once sleek with a swathe of Brylcream, was now grey and was cropped so close to the scalp that it looked almost translucent. Doyle didn't believe in wasting

money on barbers. He shaved it himself and the unevenness only added to the impression of menace. It was a face that had long ago purged itself of its last vestiges of humanity; it was a face that could make small children and Micky Johnston, prone on his bed in the seedy Clapham bedsit, cry. The damp ran down the faded, peeling wallpaper and the whole place smelled like shit. It took Micky a moment to realize that it wasn't just the flat that smelled.

"You dirty bastard". It was the first time Doyle had spoken since he had pushed through the half opened door nearly breaking Micky's hand in the process. His voice was harsh and threatening, nearly all resonances of the gentle brogue of his Irish childhood – many lifetimes ago – had long ago been exorcized. Now the accent was virtually pure south London. If pure is the right word. Try as he might, Doyle felt little that could be called resentment towards Micky. Admittedly, he shouldn't have taken Mr. Bellini's money. That was certainly not something that he would have ever dreamed of doing. But most of the cash had been recovered, one way or another, and he was being punished now. A just retribution. That was something Doyle understood only too well. Crime and punishment. He had followed both his brothers into borstal by

the time he was fourteen and six weeks after his eighteenth birthday he began the first of several detentions at Her Majesty's pleasure. Two years in the Scrubs for a violent assault. It was Doyle's apprenticeship and he served it with the due diligence of a scholarship boy. His violence became more than just an inarticulate outlet for his none too latent aggression. It was honed into a delicate precision machine tool. One that could be controlled, if possible, and used to his advantage. With increasing practice, he became skilled in the art of violent persuasion. Very skilled. It gave him power that he had never imagined could be his, one that had invariably been denied him before. Doyle was never troubled by any pangs of conscience, he was totally amoral. His victims, if he thought about them at all were just the means to an end. Although nobody told him so to his face – that would have been very unwise – Doyle was, by any accepted clinical definition, a psychopath. All that is, though, is a word in a medical text book, widely used but rarely properly understood by laymen; a clinical diagnosis made by people who rarely see the real world, Doyle's world, and have never been unfortunate enough to actually have to live in it.



Doyle was more than a simplistic medical definition. Greater than the sum of his parts or words on a page. He was real. For all practical purposes, Francis Doyle was pure evil, a devil sent from hell. They say that there's evil within us all. Every one of us from Peter Sutcliffe to Mother Teresa. Perhaps that's true, but for most of us its hidden, buried deep in the impenetrable vastness of our subconsciouses. Rarely or never articulated and always implicitly repressed. But for men like Doyle it infuses their being, barely below the surface, barely skin deep. All too ready to erupt. Like a volcano. Like Vesuvius, enveloping the serene normality of Pompeii on a sunny August morning nearly two thousand years ago. Evil like Doyle is old. As old as mankind, as old as the world; Satan the shining angel cast out from heaven, the serpent betraying Eve with the apple's bitter kiss of seduction. Doyle was part of an eternal communion. He felt part of it. Sometimes it seemed he was even at its centre. At its very heart.

During Doyle's last enforced sojourn on the Isle of Wight, the two members of the prison's psychiatric board who cared were certain of the dreadful extent of his mental condition, his illness as they insisted on calling it. But the third, the

most senior, with a weather eye on the costs, reports to the Home Office and an ever growing administrative burden, refused to agree. On Rule 43, he could be kept segregated. In isolation he could cause no harm to either inmates or prison officers and, in any case, by the time they got round to seeing him he only had a month left to serve. After that it would be someone else's problem.

Right now, it was Micky's problem. He had known Doyle for years. They were almost friends. Rather, what passed for their relationship came as close to friendship as Doyle could manage. But he knew that that would count for nothing. Micky knew that there was no way out. He was going to die and there was nothing he could do about it. It was just a question of how and how long it would take. Micky was no stranger to fear. It had been his close companion in one form or another for many years. But now he was gripped in a silent stranglehold of abject terror that was worse than anything he had ever felt before. Although by this time he made no sound, deep in the recesses of this pathetic parody of a man his soul screamed. The agonising, searing, burning scream of absolute torment. The cord around his wrists tightened and burned as it cut into his flesh. It seemed to

flame as Doyle jerked it upwards and tied it roughly to the headboard. Micky's whole body, bathed in a cold sweat, was shaking as Doyle took each of his feet in turn and lashed them to the foot of the bed. Ripping a piece off the soiled bed sheet he forced it into Micky's mouth. There was really no need to. Micky was beyond screaming and the noise that was to come would take a lot more than a piece of cloth to silence it. Doyle sat on the bed and looked dispassionately into the tiny pinpricks of Micky's terrified eyes. He didn't bother to try to explain. He didn't see the need. He was right. Reaching to the floor he pulled up his old brown holdall and placed it gently on Johnston's protuberant quivering stomach. From the holdall he pulled a sawn off shotgun wrapped in a well used Tesco's carrier bag and his leather gloved hands caressed and stroked the tool of his trade more lovingly than any craftsman. Micky choked on his gag. The acrid gangrenous taste of bile soured his throat and wracked his body. He knew what was coming, he expected it, but to see the gun so close focused his fear and he began to desperately writhe and tear futilely at his restraints. A thick, creamy foam started to creep out insidiously from the corners of his gag. What a cheek. Doyle wasn't the man to put up with this and his fist landed with tremendous force into

what used to be Micky Johnston's nose and smashed it beyond recognition. "Shut the fuck up". The shock and sudden, terrible intensity of the attack silenced Micky and Doyle seized the moment. He rose to his feet and yanked the dirty, coverless pillow from behind the prone man's head and placed it over his right knee. Micky looked down and for a moment was shocked and relieved that the gun was not pointing to his head but his respite was short lived for then came the explosion.

Just for the briefest of moments an insipid shaft of the sun's half-light broke free from its embracing mantle of shroudlike grey cloud and edged its way timidly through the partly drawn curtain. It haloed the remnants of a takeaway and empty cans of lager that lay on the threadbare, stained carpet and sent a lone cockroach scurrying for the safety of the skirting. The tin foil container held the festering remains of Micky's dinner from last night. Or was it the night before? Then, as quickly as it had appeared the doomed shaft of light dimmed and was reabsorbed into the gloom.

The roar of the shotgun's single barrel discharging like a canon at Trafalgar could not conceal the medieval sound of shattering bone,

tearing sinews and ripping ligaments. Nearly instantaneously, nearly but not quite, the blood began to appear through the tattered remnants of the pillow and to flow freely beneath, spreading insidiously like a sanguine crimson tide, rising to engulf the bed and Micky Johnston alike. The sweet, sickly stench of human blood invaded Doyle's nostrils and for a moment only it all seemed so unreal. Perhaps the whole world wasn't real. But that feeling soon passed. It was the smell of the blood itself that brought him back to his senses – it was not a smell that he was unused to, it was after all an occupational hazard, but he could never bring himself to like it. It was dirty, nasty and reminded him somehow of his marriage although he didn't know why. But still, despite all this and even after all these years, it held a deep fascination for him. Doyle looked through the charred remains of the pillow, deep into the shattered shards of the kneecap. There was, he thought, something strangely beautiful about the inner workings of the human body. He saw no irony in the fact that Micky's kneecap no longer existed in any meaningful form and, if it could be saved, his leg certainly would never work again. Maybe that was where the beauty lay. He pulled off his glove and ran his finger over the wound, stroking as would a lover, penetrating, insistently invading. Micky

shuddered involuntarily. The wound was warm and inviting, demanding that Doyle should enter further. Micky screamed. The gag tried to mute the primordial noise, which rose up from the darkest pit of his existence, shrieking along with every soul who had ever been touched by the torment of such terror and agony. The noise played like a symphony in Doyle's mind, with a refrain that underscored his tenderness and it was only the alien presence of the shotgun pellets that brought him back to reality. The purity of his invasion of Micky's leg had suddenly vanished. He hated him for it with an intensity that he had rarely felt before. Now it had become as corrupt and degenerated as the rest of the world and he brutally hooked out his finger and closely examined the bloody residue of Micky's limb, metal pellets mixed with splintered bone fragments, shining white through the blood drenched tissue. It became too much for the victim's body to bear and he gratefully succumbed to the black, blessed numbness of coma and his brain shutdown all non essential functions.

Doyle was suddenly overtaken by a sudden desire to taste he blood on his fingers and it took all his strength to fight the temptation. He wiped it instead on Micky's already stained sweater. This

profane act broke his reverie and he knew that he had to act quickly now. This may not be Knightsbridge or the flashy apartments on the Isle of Dogs, but even here a shotgun blast in the middle of a busy October morning would not go un-noticed. Not for long. Outside it might be mistaken for a particularly violent motor backfiring, but there were plenty of other bedsits around Micky's and the tenants, Doyle guessed, were not the sort of people to have regular nine to five day jobs. His glove went back on and the gun was restored to its carrier bag gun-case. Working quickly now he pulled out the long black coat from his holdall, this would effectively conceal the worst of the splatter marks on his clothes. He pulled a black balaclava over his head to protect his anonymity from anyone in the building curious or brave enough to come and investigate. He took a final look at the unconscious wreck tied to the bed. "You're a lucky man, Micky", he bent and whispered in his ear "remember that." Doyle didn't run but he moved quickly down the three flights of stairs. His precautions were unnecessary; anyone who had heard had thought it wise to pretend they hadn't, so the balaclava was pulled off and was thrust into the deep recesses of his pocket. As he left the gloom of the old house the cloud once more, momentarily cleared and for an instant the

bright late autumn sunlight stabbed his eyes. Doyle had no doubt whatsoever that Micky Johnston would take his punishment like a man. The man who shot him wore a mask, no idea of who he was or why he did it. You read about things like this happening in the Sunday papers. That sort of thing. Not, of course, because of any fairy tale concept of honour among the criminal classes but through pure, unadulterated fear of a swift and permanent retribution. It was the safest thing to do. The only thing to do. Johnston would know that the police would have neither the inclination or resources to protect him and Bellini always looked after his own.

As he reached the street, the car that had been patiently waiting for him now moved quickly up from its parking place fifty yards away. Doyle threw the bag casually onto the back seat and sat beside the driver. "Done?" Doyle nodded once and turned the radio on as the car pulled into the traffic and headed north into the city.



## Chapter Two

Doyle's seedy two roomed flat nestled in the dark underbelly of shadow of Waterloo station. Every few minutes, with every passing train, it would shake and groan and the plumbing that seemed to work only intermittently would rattle with an incessant determination to break free of the walls. The place felt its age as well as looked it. The single exposed light bulb in his living room come kitchen, swayed violently at the end of its flex noose as the trains rumbled inexorably south towards the suburbs and a better life. It vainly tried to glory in the harsh illumination of its 100 watt bulb. Unadulterated by any light shade, Doyle didn't believe in them, the bulb flooded the room with a burning bright intensity which magnified and intensified the shadows spreading from the odd angular recesses in the walls and the demons who lived within them. The contrast with the harshness of the exposed light made the shadow even darker, richer, more inviting. Doyle would sometimes stare directly into the bulb, its naked element carving deep through the pupil, into the retina of his one good eye, etching sharp green ghosts into his mind. They danced and turned and seemed to Doyle, quite, quite

beautiful. In this flat, it wasn't safe to leave any ornaments too close to the edge of the window sill, but as Doyle had no ornaments this did not present a problem. In fact, the room was remarkably similar to the shabby bedsit that Micky Johnston had been holed up in for the past two weeks. The wallpaper was peeling and it was no more often than once a month that Doyle could force himself to relocate the dust and drag his almost antique, second hand Hoover across the floor. It's not that he was a lazy man. He just liked it that way, unkempt, almost as if his flat was returning to a feral state in which the rules of conventional civilization found no place. It was infinitely better than his four years of 'domestic bliss' with Melanie. She had known about his lifestyle, his career. In fact it's what attracted Doyle to her in the first place. Women like dangerous men. They do at first. The excitement is exorcized soon enough when it comes a little too close to home. It was the baby that had really ruined things. He was the one really to blame. Or so Doyle had been able to convince himself.

He had never liked kids and he thought back to his own childhood on the brutal Irish west coast in a small village near Galway Bay. He remembered to his father constantly yelling at his mother. He remembered the old man's vitriol

exploding into dreadful, uncontrollable rage culminating in a crescendo of brief but shocking violence. He remembered the beatings most clearly of all. He remembered them too vividly. He remembered his abstract panic on the night when his mother could finally take it no more and she led him and his siblings on the long trek across Ireland to the ferry to Liverpool. He remembered the train ride down to London, the four of them huddled together for warmth and he remembered being met at Euston by Uncle Jimmy, who put them up and found his mother not one but three cleaning jobs. Some memories were bad, others were worse, but all seemed to be underscored by the threat or actuality of violence. That was what was indelibly etched into his memory. The sharp sting of his father's belt across his backside when kicked his football through a window. The clubbing force of his Uncle Jimmy's fist biting into the side of his head if he answered back. And, as is the way of such things, history was to repeat itself. His own marriage had been good at first, he thought. Well, not bad, maybe. But before little Frankie junior was two, Doyle had put both him and his mother in the emergency ward of St. Thomas' Hospital for the night and on their discharge they began the second Doyle clan exodus, ending up in a council run shelter for battered women in

Southend. The divorce was merely a formality, one Doyle would not have even bothered with if he had been given a choice. It wasn't the last submerged vestiges of his Catholic upbringing coming to the fore. It was simply the fact that he had no intention of marrying again, of even pretending to the semblance of becoming close to someone again. In the end the parting was quick and surprisingly painless. There was no property, no hope of maintenance and neither husband nor wife wanted to retain any contact with each other. The last Doyle had heard, she was married to some printer. He thought little of his family and cared less.

As he sat under the bright glare of his electric spotlight, Doyle gazed blankly out of his window, unseeing. The commuters, coats drawn close, vainly fighting against the quickly dropping temperature, were speared in the yellow flame of the street lamp, nearly at Doyle's eye level, as, with heads down, braced against the biting wind, they hustled and bustled towards the station concourse and the train that would return them to their comfortable suburban home and their comfortable suburban lives with their comfortable suburban families. He had been sitting there most of the afternoon, refusing to allow himself to think about the events of the morning. Doyle had

a God given talent to turn a mental blank to things that would drive ordinary mortals to drink at best and a psychiatric ward at worst. His only company had been a bottle of cheap supermarket Scotch but he hadn't drunk too deeply. He knew that he had more work to do that day and now it was time to leave. He put on the same long black coat that he had worn that morning, figuring that any blood on the lining would be dry by now, and eased his way down the steep flight of creaking stairs that led onto the street. The chill hit him at once, bringing a rosy flush to his cheeks that may have looked avuncular on many men of his age. He followed the Waterloo Road down, past the Old Vic without looking up to see what was playing – that world wasn't for him – crossed St. George's Circus and turned down the London Road towards the Elephant and Castle. It took only a few minutes before he was standing outside the Mount of Venus. The neon sign, flashing the badly drawn outline of a semi-naked girl, proudly proclaimed it as south London's premier adult entertainment venue. It also served as the site of Bellini's head office. He nodded cursorily at the enormous black man in the dinner jacket and ear-piece on the door as he entered, wondering if it was really necessary for him to wear his Raybans at this time of day. He received a curt

nod in return. For men like these words were often a superfluity. Besides, they didn't know many. Passing the ticket office, he walked through the auditorium. Although it was mid-week and only early evening, there were already quite a few customers. Commuters, he thought they must be, lecherous businessmen enjoying a quick pit-stop and a horrendously overpriced drink as beautiful girls writhed athletically up and down their poles, pouting, rubbing their breasts and their crotches, trying desperately to entice a punter to put another note in their garter or to pay for a private dance. Doyle allowed himself just a moment to watch. Contrary to popular opinion he was, after all, human and the new girl who had centre stage was gorgeous. Tall, graceful and dark shiny skin almost the colour of teak. She had the sort of deep, languid black eyes that any man would happily drown within, a face of classical proportion that wouldn't have been out of place on a Greek statue or a Milan catwalk. Her large, firm breasts with tantalisingly erect nipples called out to Doyle, calling him inexorably to her and telling him to bring his money. He resisted the temptation. Maybe Mr. Bellini would let him have half an hour with her as a birthday present. But his birthday was a good couple of months away, so he put thoughts of the nameless Aphrodite to a room in his mind he

rarely allowed himself the luxury of visiting and locked the door. He turned his back towards her and silently moved towards the back of the room and the discreet door marked private beneath its protective shield of heavy black velvet curtain. He entered without knocking.

Tommy sat there, with a man in a dishevelled suit, who was clearly the worse for drink, his face flushed, collar open and gaudy tie languidly pulled down away from his collar.

"Evening, Frank". Doyle nodded and visibly winced, as he did every time he saw it, at Tommy's putrid mass of shocking curly orange hair. "Who's this?"

"Some larey bastard who got out of hand and started touching Diane up while she was doing the business on the podium. Mr. Bellini wants to have a word with him. He's been waiting for you."

"Bloody hell. Couldn't one of your monkeys handle it?" Doyle didn't bother to try to hide the contempt in his voice.

Tommy was unfazed. He'd heard all this a thousand times before. "That's no way to talk, Frank. You know you love then really" he said good naturedly, before deciding that a word or

two of explanation was probably politic. It didn't pay to wind Doyle up too much. "Martin's got the trots, Joe's on door and Kenny's out on some job or other for Bellini. We'd better go in. He's waiting."

Tommy pulled up the drunk and man-handled him through the small reception room to the door beyond, he knocked and pushed him through without waiting for a reply. Bellini's private office was opulent as befitted a man of his taste and status. The desk was oak, the chair and couch an inviting, luxuriant dark leather. The decor had cost a fortune and the whole place rightly reeked of money. Every time he entered that room Doyle wished that a bit more of it would flow his way.

If Doyle was from the old school, Bellini was very much from the new. A gangster maybe, but certainly an educated one. He had qualified with a first class honours LL B law degree from the London School of Economics just like Cherie Blair and had, shortly after his twenty fifth birthday, inherited all of his father's business interests. In the time since then, he had developed and extended them, more than trebling the profits and investing in various legitimate enterprises, such as the Mount of Venus, but he never lost sight of the value of the



more nefarious, traditional money spinners. He glanced up from his top of the range laptop while he continued to type. His eyes were dark and intense. There was no mistaking his Italian heritage. The room remained under the pall of a deathly hush. After a delay just long enough to demonstrate his authority, he pushed back his chair, stood and strode purposefully towards Tommy.

"Pick him up", he said authoritatively, indicating to the inebriate who had slumped onto the floor. Tommy none too gently manhandled him to his feet.

Looking him squarely in the eyes and with all the menace accrued in a lifetime of frightening people for a living, he spat out his words vitriolically with an acrimony that came straight from the heart. "You piece of worthless shit." His tone became more measured suddenly. It was almost like he was having to make a conscious effort to regain his composure, "I'm Bellini, Don Bellini" he pronounced each word slowly and deliberately, with a stentorian *gravitas* that implied that, despite Bellini's natural aversion to any form of publicity, the sad wreck of a man who stood before him should have already known. "This is my club. I own it and I own those

girls out there. I make the rules. And the rule is you look but you don't touch. You *never* touch my property. You fucking scum." Bellini's composure had proved short lived and by now he was spitting out the words again, his pupils had dilated and a vivid purple flush had spread across his cheeks. "You're just scum. Filth. Contamination." He was on a roll now. "You contaminate my girls. You contaminate my office. You contaminate me. You're fucking pollution."

The drunk smiled to himself, the half bottle of Scotch he had consumed gave him a warm sense of inner bravura. My name is *Don* Bellini! Who the fuck does he think he is? A two bit little lti wideboy who's seen the Godfather and thinks he's Marlon Brando! Time was when I could buy and sell him any day of the week. His old man was probably a P.o.W. or an ice cream salesman. Wop. Dago. Spic. Fuck off back to Naples, Luigi. Thankfully though, some inherent cowardice or sanity held him back and he refrained from articulating his theories on the social development of an ethnic minority. But Bellini saw a faint half smile play across his lips. It lasted barely a fraction of a second but that was enough – and enough, as the man said, is too much. He had seen the same condescending, patronizing look before, a

thousand times, on a thousand faces. It never failed to anger him. In fact, the drunk was half right. Bellini's name was Donald, not typically Italian granted, but his father had wanted him to assimilate, not to cling to the old ways, to the old traditions of long forgotten past back home. He even changed his surname to Bell, but his son, more proud of his heritage than his father, changed it back as soon as he could. And his old man *had* started with an ice cream van. But alongside the choc ices, cornets and ninety-nines he did a nice line in cannabis, L.S.D. and, later, heroin. Always one with an eye for the main chance, he had worked his way up from that, gambling and running girls, the occasional protection racket when he could get away with it, and strategic alliances here and there with some of the better known faces in the underworld, the sort of men who graced the social column and the legal page in the paper and made the odd appearance on the early evening T.V. news broadcasts. By the time the stress and cancer finally caught up with him, more than seven years ago now, the old goat had carved himself out a nice little manor in Southwark and Newington and despite his early half-hopes for a legitimate career for young Don, he was happy to testate all his worldly interests to his son and heir.

Standing here now, face to face with the drunk, Don Bellini, could see the contempt in his eyes. To some people, his name would forever mark him as an outsider, a dago-leach on English society, a greasy little wop. He embraced his liminality but, at the same time, he also resented it. The contempt straight, bourgeois English society held him in played on Bellini's mind most days and, at this moment, he was not a happy man. He gave a half nod to Tommy, who, understanding the unspoken command only too well, took hold of the drunks arms, and wrenched them backwards and up. At the same time, Bellini took a step backwards and brought his patent leather shoe with the very discrete steel toecap up into the man's groin. Hard. He emitted a low guttural howl and doubled in the intensity of an agony he had never even thought to imagine before. Tommy let him sink to the floor once more as the man's hands involuntarily felt for his testicles more to check that they were still there than to try and exorcize just a little of the burning, searing pain. He vomited violently.

Bellini was angry and kicked him again, this time in the pit of his stomach. He deserved it. It was a new carpet. "Fucking hell", he exploded, "You dirty bastard. What did you do that for?" The man was in no state to reply but he was very sorry.

"Frank, get him out of here and give him the kicking of his life. Tommy give him a hand. And then get this mess cleaned up."

The two of them dragged the immobile lump out of the office and down the wrought iron steps that led into the quiet alley at the back of the club. There was no need to take him past the customers, even Dole knew that would be bad for business. In the street they picked up Tommy's car and drove half a mile or so to some derelict industrial units. They'd both been there before, this was far from being an isolated incident. As Tommy left to return to his own sundry dirty work back at the club, Doyle systematically set about his business. The drunk was already finished, a spent force who couldn't stand anymore, let alone try to defend himself but Doyle never for a moment thought of taking it easy on him. That wasn't his way and orders from Mr. Bellini were definitely meant to be obeyed. As the man lay on the ground, stinking of the putrid acidity of his own vomit, Frank Doyle crouched down and began punching his face with a wild, primordial ferocity. His nose shattered with the first punch and as his blows continued to rain down, there was the crack of a cheek bone and four teeth were knocked clear out. Raising himself to his feet once more, he

kicked the man squarely in his ribs and enjoying the gut-wrenching sound of the crunch of bones as they smashed. Taking a pride, as ever, in his work, Doyle delivered a parting shot, stamping with carefully aimed deliberation on each knee in turn. He thought the screaming would last forever. He didn't mind, he was well able to filter out the pain and suffering and there was no-one else to hear. Kneecappings, he mused silently, were rapidly becoming his trademark. He liked the idea. After a while the drunk stopped screaming, he was mentally numb, and although pulses of pain were charging through his body, he whimpers were barely audible. What a day this had turned into. Redundancy in the morning, a little relief in the afternoon to ease the pain and then beaten senseless in the evening. It's true, there is no justice in the world. Feeling inside the man's jacket pocket, Doyle pulled out his wallet, pocketed the fifty or so pounds in cash that were left and made a mental note of his address. He didn't expect to have to use it. Even if he was stupid enough to go to the police, by now Tommy would have cleared up any mess and Bellini would have his tame solicitor around in a meeting they had all been in for hours. Certainly no-one at the Mount of Venus would have ever seen this poor unfortunate man, the clientele liked anonymity and the staff knew better. It's

very sad – clearly the poor sod's confused. No wonder when you look at the beating he's taken. Don Bellini was always attentive to every detail.

A gentle rain started to fall as Doyle made his way, unhurriedly, back to the club. The droplets shimmered and glistened in the harsh, artificial illumination of the street lights and, with the natural attraction of a child, he dispelled the small puddles that were beginning to form on the uneven streets. Strangely, he found it comforting as the rain drops rolled slowly around the corners of his eyes and down his cheeks. Their very sound was caressing even. He paused and raised his gaze to the heavens. There was something raw and elemental about it all; it was as if the rain could purge his dirty, calloused soul and wash away the guilt. But these thoughts, if indeed they really existed at all, could be articulated. They were buried deep in his subconscious, in the very pit of his psyche or in his soul if he had one. It had been a long time since Francis Doyle had felt any guilt, a very long time since he had felt anything at all for that matter, and as for his soul, he thought that he had probably left it back with the priests in Ireland. The streets were emptying now, most people had found their way home or were, perhaps, enjoying a last quick one for the road in

the nearest pub, before returning to their nice, ordinary, regulated existences. That sort of life would never have suited Doyle. He liked the twilight of his world. He liked the darkness. He used to like the danger and the excitement; his heart would pump like a steam train and he could almost taste the adrenaline, bittersweet and infecting every fibre of his being as it exploded throughout his body. Insistent. Demanding more. All the time demanding more. And more. And more. Now, he simply needed it; it was all had. Like many an addict, Doyle convinced himself that he could give it all up. But why give it up? It's what he knew and what he was good at.

He dispelled his reverie as he entered the Mount of Venus for the second time that night, this time by the back entrance, as much to avoid soiling himself with contact with ordinary people as to avoid being seen. Better safe than sorry, though. Tapping almost imperceptibly on the door to Bellini's office, he didn't wait for a reply before letting himself in. He inhaled deeply, breathing in the slightly acrid smell of antique furniture and dirty money that pervaded the office. Doyle loved it although he wasn't sure why. He breathed it in deeply and let it delicately infuse his senses.



"Frankie. Any problems?" Bellini broke his reverie.

"Never any problems, Boss. But just once it'd be nice to get a bloody lift back instead of having to walk".

Bellini laughed. He liked Doyle. Respected him even, albeit a little grudgingly. He was efficient and certainly good at his job. Useful to have around. A good man to have in a crisis as they say. Even though Bellini tried to make more and more of his money, both legitimate and illegitimate, in cyber space nowadays, there was still a lot of dirty work that had to be done when things weren't altogether kosher; people to be kept in their place, disputes to be resolved, discipline to be administered. You could rely on Doyle. He always do what was asked of him. Always. No matter what it was. But Doyle seemed to like his work a bit too much for most people's tastes. He'd revel in it. Bask in it. Bellini, to his initial shock and continuing surprise, found this increasingly interesting. Attractive, enticing almost. Often it seemed that it a job would become more like pleasure than business for Doyle. True your money was safe with him. It would never ever enter his head to rip you off. But even so, could you ever fully trust a man like

Doyle? *Really* trust him? Would the day come, perhaps, when he would turn on you? But Bellini judged him harshly. Doyle, who had worked for his father before him, could not imagine his life without his boss, he thought of him almost as a friend, ironically almost as a father figure. He was the one constant, stable factor in Doyle's tenuous, transient life. Certainly, now, this was the closest thing Doyle had to a personal relationship, other than a lustful half glance at the girls in the club and an occasional half hour furiously spent with an inexpensive whore on Shepherd's Market. But that was no more than once a month and it didn't really count as a relationship even through Doyle's strangely distorted eyes. He knew it for what it was. Bellini, on the other hand, looked after him. The employment was regular, if not well paid. Doyle never had to think for himself. He liked that. He never had to worry about the consequences of his actions – everything was well planned out for him and there was usually someone else around to clear up the inevitable mess. More often than not, it was Tommy nowadays.

Although very few people realized it, in his own way Donald Bellini was as much of a psychopath as Francis Doyle. If anything, it seemed to be becoming increasingly apparent recently. Little

things, providing little clues. A few weeks ago he would never have hit the drunk himself, for instance. Now he seemed to have ever more difficulty controlling his temper and his mood could swing violently from one moment to the next. But some things didn't change. They would, could never change. No matter what he was like Bellini provided a structure, an order to Doyle's existence that he could find nowhere else and he liked that. He supposed that this need for order was why he'd always got on so well in prison, always done his time so easily. His reputation went before him, of course, and that had helped too, but the big attraction was that in prison there were no decisions to be made for himself everything was regimented. Nothing could go wrong. There was never any need for improvisation. It was like the army. Doyle was sure that he would have done well in the army and sometimes regretted listening to Uncle Jimmy and his stories of easier ways of making a living; they certainly weren't easier and it wasn't much of a living. In wartime, Doyle would probably have done well in the army. He was the sort of man who would have stormed a German pill box or slit the throats of Japanese sentries without compunction and he would have come home as a hero with the Victoria Cross or as a glorious martyr to the cause of peace and

freedom. But in peacetime, the only outlet for his violence would have been among his comrades and, in the army, he would not have a Mr. Bellini there to sweep some very large pieces under his all embracing carpet.

"I've got a meeting tomorrow with the Malek twins. I want you along with us, Frankie. There shouldn't be any trouble. Just look menacing, you know the score. I'll pick you up from your place at 8.30. Sharp".

Menacing, he could handle, if his visage alone wasn't enough, his reputation certainly was, but 8.30? Doyle groaned and wondered if there really was such a time as 8.30 in the morning. He'd always assumed it to be a figment of the imagination of the people who compiled the T.V. listings in his daily paper and he never understood how Bellini could stand these early starts. Still, he thought, he was a good soldier and orders given must be obeyed. If it was the Malek brothers, he thought, it must be important. They were big shots, major players although not yet quite twenty five. Born in Middlesex from straight as a die Kenyan immigrant parents the boys had run on the wrong side of the tracks from an early age. They were wild and reckless but they were also very clever. They had a god

given talent to make just about any system work for them and by the time they hit twenty one they already controlled a good portion of the organized prostitution and drugs traffic in north west London. They were the underworld equivalent of the City's high flyers, so young and innovative that they even thought of Bellini as an old timer, a bit washed up. Most of the time they thought of themselves as British, they were Asian only when it suited their purposes and would have apoplexy if anyone called them African, despite or probably because of their parents originating from a slum on the outskirts of Nairobi. Very clever boys. They must be looking to expand, thought Doyle. You can never stand still in business. Bellini, always with an eye to improving his profit margins, knew this only too well.

"8.30. Sharp, Frankie. Don't make me wait. You know I don't like to be kept waiting." Doyle had done this before as Bellini never seemed to tire of reminding him. He nodded curtly and made for the door. He still had the rest of his Scotch to keep him company and now he felt like an early night.

"And, Frankie." Bellini's voice was commanding and imperative; Doyle turned his head slowly and

fixed him with the numb blackness of his  
impassive eyes. "Come tooled up."

### **Chapter Three**

The haze started to lift and Micky Johnston started his slow journey back from the recesses of his slumbering, insensate unconsciousness, to reality. He tried to ease his eyes open but the flash of the striplight was too much to bear, painfully highlighting every dust mote as it whirled and danced, sometimes slowly and deliberately, sometimes suddenly contorting and veering off obliquely at strange tangents like a demented dervish. Reality, he had always suspected, was overrated. It was a harsh and bloody and as he was soon to realize it had been changed for ever. For now he could take comfort in the warm blank numbness emanating from the cocktail of drugs, soporifics and various painkillers with which he had been fed. It had been over an hour before anyone had looked through the half open door of his bedsit and seen the abattoir his bed had become. The young mother had shielded her little boy's eyes from the sight and had to fight her almost uncontrollable to desire to vomit. Then it was another twenty five minutes before the ambulance came and, by that time, it was a miracle that Micky was still alive, he had lost so much blood. But now, after three

transfusions and the operation, that was all a world, a lifetime away. Now there was just the pleasantly dwindling vestiges of his drug enhanced stupor. For the moment Micky didn't know where he was. At the moment, he didn't even know who he was but as he floated inside his mind, that didn't seem to matter. Right now he was living in a hazy, abstract world where such material concerns as where and who had no place. But it was all starting to fade. Too fast. Too fast. His whole body shuddered violently with a bloody, consumptive cough and he felt something intrusive creeping its way insidiously down his throat. He tried his eyes once more and this time he managed to keep his eyelids open for more than a fraction of a second. Shit. Too bright. Way too bright. So bright it stimulated his tear ducts to try and wash away the pain. He tried to raise his arm instinctively to shield his eyes, but such exertion lay far beyond his capabilities. He couldn't manage to move.

"Don't try to move, Michael. You're in hospital." The disembodied voice he heard was caressing and soothing, as if it were used to comfort a distressed child. "We're taking care of you. You're going to be fine. Everything's OK." The nurse knew from many long years of training and three years in the frontline of the intensive care



unit that simple reassurance was one of the most effective weapons against shock.

As his conscious brain functions, such as they were, began to slowly reboot with the clunking, step by step deliberation of an archaic computer, recollection of the morning's horrific events crept back into his mind with a Technicolor vividness of visual and auditory imagery that no Hollywood film could ever hope to emulate. His body felt no pain. Not yet. But the clarity of the evil he had faced and the stench of his fear, buried deep within his brain yet all too accessible, was so perfectly sharp and tangible that Micky began to scream. He didn't stop. The sweat was running like a fast flowing torrent down his brow and it seemed as if an eternity passed before the young houseman was summoned to his bedside. The doctor was dishevelled with a thick growth of stubble and a shirt that had missed more than one wash. He looked as if he had worked a thirty hour shift. He probably had. Barking an instruction at the nurse, who had ten years more experience than him, a further injection of potent sedative was administered and the sedation of Lethe once again embraced Micky Johnston.

He awoke once during the night but this time he felt little of the panic which had earlier enveloped

him in her dark deathly stranglehold. By this time, he was out of the intensive care unit and had been moved to a basic, functional private post-operative recovery room. They couldn't risk putting him in a public ward after his previous outburst and besides, Micky Johnston, although he didn't yet know it, still had a lot of grieving to do. He would need privacy. He hadn't been awake long, only a matter of minutes when the night nurse came in. She was tall and slim with her shoulder-length strawberry-blonde hair drawn tightly back. She had a face pretty enough to take the stark brutality of its adornment.

"Try to rest, Mr. Johnston. You're alright now. The doctor will be along to see you first thing in the morning." Micky didn't feel alright but he was in no position to argue, so he forced himself to nod accommodatingly. Thank god the pain killers were effective and he shared Doyle's god given talent to be able to readily banish all thoughts of his problems to the very back of his mind. He had long ago found out that if you ignore your problems for long enough, they generally become someone else's. Not quite up to Socratic standards, perhaps, but Micky always took comfort from his philosophy and gradually the blessed shroud of sleep overtook him once more.

"Micky, Micky, Micky. What sort of mess have you got yourself into this time?" The disembodied voice sounded to poorly educated to be a doctor, Micky thought as he stiffly and with great effort turned his head in its direction. He groaned as a dull pain in his right leg suddenly intensified, for the first time it began to throb with agonizing, rhythmical, pulsating regularity. The voice sounded like that Welsh bastard Morris. Detective Sergeant Morris. Surely it couldn't be him. Could it? Morris was part of a tactical crime squad based at Scotland Yard. Their principal objective was targeting organized crime and especially the bringing to book of one Donald Bellini, esquire. Johnston had had run ins with Morris before. On more than one occasion. He had always come off worst.

"Please, Mr. Morris, I need to see the doctor. I can't talk to you now. I'm in bloody agony." His voice was plaintive with an genuine edge of desperation. A lesser man than Morris might even have been moved by it.

"All in good time, Micky. All in good time. Me and Ray here need to have a quiet word with you. We came in yesterday but they said you weren't in any fit condition to have visitors. I suppose they had a point" he said looking down and surveying

the Micky's all too obvious injuries disinterestedly. "But there's no Nazi guards on the door this morning, so we thought we pay you a surprise visit. Just pop in and say hello to an old mate. Sorry, but we ate the grapes." Suddenly, as if sensing that he might not have much time, the detective's mood became more serious.

"We know what's been happening, Micky. Were not bloody stupid. It's been all over the manor for the best part of two weeks. You got a bit too greedy with some of your collections for Bellini, didn't you?".

"Has he said that?" countered Johnston ironically. "Does he want to press charges? Don't make me laugh – it hurts." After years of being combative with the police, it had now become second nature. He didn't even have to think anymore, he just turned on the tap and out it came. Micky Johnston could deal with the likes of Dave Morris in his sleep. Morris may be on a high profile squad at the Yard, but he was no high flyer. He was just a time server, someone to do the donkey work that the major players wouldn't demean themselves with.

"You know it was him. You can't let him get away with it. Or Frank Doyle. This has his moniker all

over it. It was him, wasn't it? He's the only bastard sick enough to do this. No matter what you did to them, no matter how much money you nicked, you don't deserve this, Micky."

"The 'great' Sergeant Morris concerned over the likes of me? Some new tactic, heh? Sent you on another course, have they? Don't worry about me, Morris, I'm going to be alright. They said."

"Jesus wept, Micky. There's alright and there's alright. But you, as sure as hell, are not going to be alright. They've taken your fucking leg off."

The cold sweat of panic that had gripped him the previous morning returned to haunt Johnston once more, only now it was so much worse. Ten times, a thousand times worse.

"No. No. I can fucking feel it. It hurts like shit." His voice was cracking. Micky did even bother to try and conceal his panic from Morris. It was too severe for that.

"Micky, it's gone. Your leg's gone." Morris spoke quietly now, but insistently. For the first time there was just the faintest echo of the merest hint of pity in his tone.

Micky hauled himself up as best as he could, feeling the searing waves of pain flood through him, and rested himself on his elbows. The protective cage, hidden under the virgin purity of the cotton bed sheet, disguised its full horror just a little but there could be no mistaking it. It wasn't Morris' cruel wind-up. Frankie Doyle had blown his leg off. The mad, evil bastard. Micky emitted a guttural howl of unadulterated anguish that came from somewhere deep within. From somewhere primordial. It was the worst thing that Morris had ever heard and in the what now seemed oppressive heat he felt tiny beads of perspiration bedeck his brow. The howl intensified. Now it was worse than Lear's and gave vent to every anguished, hurt, bitter horror that it was ever a man's misfortune to suffer. He began sobbed uncontrollably, wildly. Like a child in torment.

"Who gave you permission to be in here, officer?" The door was almost thrust off its hinges and there was more than a hint of anger and barely suppressed resentment in her voice as the nurse, framed in dark shadow like an avenging angel, burst in. She recognized the policeman from last night. She hadn't liked the look of him then either; like a second-rate comedy double act from an end of the pier show twenty years ago,

she thought. They were too pushy, too aggressive for her liking. And they wore cheap, badly fitting suits with unsuitably loud ties one of which bore ethereal vestiges of that day's lunch like a menu. There was something about the big one's eyes too, she thought. Just a little too dark. And hooded. Recessed. It was like he was permanently trying to hide something. She confronted Morris directly: "What the hell have you done to him?"

"I didn't know you hadn't told him. I'm sorry." Morris blurted out, he was defensive and probably even genuinely contrite for what he had done. But it was often his way. Speak first, think later. "We'd better go now. See you later, Micky. Sorry" he repeated once more, but it was far too little and far too late. By this time, Micky Johnston wasn't even listening.

Through the nightmarish veil of his tears, Micky had ceased to be aware of Morris' presence. He had been embraced once again to the arms of the abstract. Fear. Pain. Anger. A putrid, burning hatred rising in the pit of his stomach and infusing every sorry aspect of his existence. So black and brutal that it was becoming almost tangible. He seized hold of it and wouldn't let go.

The nurse followed Morris and his sidekick into the corridor. "You stupid, stupid bastards. Have you any idea of what you've done? The psychiatric damage you've caused? This could take months, no, years of therapy. He might never get over it." In a world that generally didn't care, she was that rare, exquisite flower, the exception.

It was all that Morris could do to mutter sorry once again. He vaguely tried to explain that he didn't know, that he thought Micky would have been told, but the nurse was in no mood to accept his half-hearted apology. It wasn't her who deserved the apology, but no, they certainly could not go back in. Not even for a moment. Morris was relieved. He didn't think he could face up to whatever Micky Johnston had become. He turned and raced away without saying anymore, head down, for the elevator and the escape to the fresh air that he so desperately needed. He felt the nurse's fixed stare burning into the back of his skull with every step he took.

She returned to Micky and summoned the duty doctor but the sobbing wouldn't stop. The man was totally enveloped in his pain. For him it was all that existed. Like Michelangelo and the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. It was all he could see, all



he could hear, all he could feel. It wasn't that he was merely unaware of other things; they had simply ceased to exist. Another, this time milder sedative, calmed him enough to listen to the surgeon when he made his rounds. The man's voice, befitting his role in life, was deep and authoritative, with the texture of rich, creamy chocolate. He had the sort of voice that you had to listen to, even if you didn't want to. And you believed what he said, too. It was a rare gift normally only possessed by the best of actors and other conmen. He was only too well aware of his talent and he had exploited it countless times over the years. Sitting beside his patient, he raised his hand and ran it through his luxuriant grey hair, only recently starting to recede. He looked sympathetically at Micky over the top of the half-round tortoiseshell glasses that perched on the end of his aquiline nose. He had lost count of the number of times he had had conversations like this, and very much worse. It wasn't easy, he hoped it would never become easy, and he always kept it as factual and businesslike as possible. Emotion was for others. Somebody with a less well tailored suit and a less well tailored manner could deal with the trauma of unbearable emotions. It wouldn't be him. That wasn't his job, thank god.

The nurse introduced him. "Michael, this is Mr Aitchison, the surgeon who operated on you yesterday". Mick was impassive and Aitchison didn't bother waiting for a response that wouldn't come. "Mr Johnston," he began, "as you know, the wounds you suffered were severe. Extremely severe. There was extensive damage to your knee and lower thigh and I'm afraid that there was no chance of saving your leg. In fact, to all intents and purposes it had virtually gone by the time you arrived here. It's not unusual for shotgun blast at such close range can to remove a limb completely. I'm afraid to say you'd lost a great deal of blood. If you had arrived here any later, I couldn't have saved you. You are an extremely lucky man." Micky half heard the words and vaguely recollected that someone else had told him this before. He didn't believe it then and he certainly didn't believe it now. The disbelief was starting to show.

"Please try and stay calm, Mr. Johnston. You must realize that you are still in shock from the accident. That's understandable, you've suffered major trauma. But you will receive counselling and although it may be no comfort to you now, I was able to amputate relatively low down your thigh, which will make fitting you with a prosthetic leg very much less painful. You will walk again,

Mr Johnston. Soon. Quite soon", he qualified his assertion, before continuing. "You could have quite easily died. But your life is far from over. No matter how it may seem to you today, everything will return to normal. Dr. Quinn to come and talk to you." He looked o the nurse for confirmation and she nodded reassuringly. "He'll be down to see you later." Aitchison now changed track. He hadn't been looking forward to this part of his monologue. What the hell did the police think they were doing. He just hoped that if the man sued he decided that it was the police who had breached their duty of care and not his hospital.

"I am led to believe that the police came to see you earlier." Aitchison now accusingly looked at the nurse staff who this time studiously managed to avoid the hawk-like intensity of his gaze. "That was without my authorization. It should not have been allowed to happen. It's very unfortunate and I apologize for it. Please be assured that I will take the matter up with the appropriate authorities personally. At a very senior level. I accept that, because of the nature of your accident, the police will need to talk to you but please be assured that they will not do so until you feel ready." He glanced at his watch, best not to say too much and he had several more patients to see. He supposed in a way that he

should be almost grateful, that fool from the Met. had, after all done the worst of his work for him. Micky hardly noticed as he ushered himself out of the room.

He was gradually beginning to return to the harsh bitter reality of conscious thought. Why couldn't he have been dead, he thought. This was his worst nightmare given substance.

Perhaps it was the fear of living outside the norm that scared him most, of being different, not in other people's eyes but in his own. All his life he had tried to fit in, run with the pack, although, like Francis Doyle, he had only ever succeeded in penetrating its periphery. He was a small time crook, no more, no less than that. A small time person as well. His marriage was a sham, they stayed together only out of apathy and he drifted from one meaningless, cheap, sordid affair to another. But now, even the ragged remnants of what remained of his life had been torn apart by Doyle. He'd paid a visit to Carole while he was running Micky to earth and he'd left his indelible mark on her as well. Right now, she was suffering nearly as much as her husband. Throughout his entire life, Micky had singularly failed to achieve anything even remotely worthwhile. He'd never made much of a

difference to anyone or anything. Even when he finally managed to get some real money for himself, not a lot, but more than he had ever imagined he would have, it had gone badly wrong. He hadn't thought it out, hadn't made a plan. Just like him. He had simply drifted into defrauding Bellini, as he had drifted into just about everything in his life; crime, marriage, the affairs. And when it went pear shaped, when Bellini became suspicious, he had abandoned everything, leaving most of the cash in a suitcase under the marital bed, soon to be found by Doyle, and leaving his wife to face the consequences and to carry his can. He ran. But he couldn't even manage to run far and lie low. He had only made it as far as Clapham and in little more than a week he had been spotted stocking up on vodka at a local off licence. At that moment, his fate was sealed. He was frightened. He didn't know the minutiae of what Bellini had in store, that varied from case to case. But one thing was certain - it would not be pleasant. Even so, he had managed to convince himself that he would be able to talk his way out of it, as he had done with so many things in the past. Maybe he'd take a bit of a beating for appearance's sake, and that would be that. After all, it wasn't a lot of money to a man of Bellini's means. He'd understand. He's bound to. Reality

had bitten home with a brutal vengeance when Francis Doyle forced his way into the room. Was it just yesterday morning? Was that all it was? It could have been a lifetime ago.

The surgeon, Aitchison, had been as good as his word. A quiet chat over a long gin and tonic, with a Commander in the Metropolitan Force who happened to belong to the same exclusive golf club and Sergeant Morris had been hauled over the coals and back again at Scotland Yard by the head of his squad, Chief Superintendent Goodwin. Did he have any idea what the tabloids would make of it? Yes – it was a mistake, a bad one admittedly, but he thought the man already knew what they had done to him. He hadn't realized. God knows he's sorry. Had he never heard of tact, diplomacy, community relations? No, err yes – sorry. If he could turn back the clock he would. But at the end of the day Micky Johnston was no more than another little rascal who got his fingers burned by playing out of his league. That hardly his fault, was it? Did he know that his card was well and truly marked and that the only way he would get promotion now would be by bringing Osama bin Laden back from his cave, preferably handcuffed to Jack the Ripper. Yes, sir. Oh, shit. The last thing he needed was

to have an official reprimand on his blameless if rather uninspiring record.

Although no-one had asked him if he felt ready yet – it was obvious to anyone who showed the remotest interest that he wouldn't feel ready for a long time to come – the following day, Micky Johnston received another, this time altogether more courteous visit from one Detective Inspector Charlotte Ashworth, Sergeant Morris' immediate superior.

His initial shock had subsided, and the tears were now limited to somewhat less frequent outbursts but still, the last people Micky wanted to see were the Old Bill. When Ashworth walked into the room, however, Johnston was impressed despite himself and the way he was still feeling. Just for an instant, she led his mind away from his troubles. She was, after all an extremely beautiful woman. But hers was no face that launched a thousand ships or made men immortal with a kiss. Behind the pristine crystal-cut clarity of her features, there lay a subtle suggestion of a harshness, brutality even. It was always apparent no how beautifully polished the exterior. It was something she had cultivated and it was very, very attractive. At thirty two she was still youngish for a D.I. Her Masters degree in

criminal psychology from a leading redbrick University and graduation at the top of her class in Hendon had ensured that she was well and truly on the fast track. At first she had developed her attitude consciously, more to counteract the hostility of her colleagues than of the villains she daily squared up to. The Job was still very much a man's world, it was always harder for a woman. Particularly for a clever woman,. Particularly for a clever, beautiful woman. One who was resourceful and starting to get a lot of good results. It was even worse for one with a small child. Nobody seemed to have noticed that she had taken only six week's maternity leave. She could have taken up to a year and she still felt guilty about neglecting Alice. And Steve too. She thanked God that she'd married outside the job. Steve kept her anchored in the real world, the world where not everyone was a thief, or a murderer, or a rapist. Or a copper. Her colleagues saw her as favoured, as they, time servers to a man, were passed over for promotions that seemed to fall into her lap. These feelings remained still but were now largely buried, her growing authority saw to that, rising to the surface only behind her back in the local after work or in the patronizing comments of a more senior officer. Ashworth could live with that but this morning she wasn't happy doing a



public relations job just because Dave Morris had screwed up. She had better things to do with her time and this was getting to be a habit. Don Bellini had been a thorn in her side for the last two years and she wanted him put away more than anything else in the world. But this wasn't the way. This was no use – it would never work. Micky Johnston knew the score. He wouldn't grass, he'd be too shit scared to do that, no matter what Bellini had done to him. Still, she supposed she had to try and, besides, she was here now. Surveying her quarry, Ashworth, only too aware of her own beauty and the control it gave her over men and women alike, was struck by how pathetic he looked. Acting up with his cronies he was the type who would play the big man, the gangster. But here, dwarfed by the hospital bed it was as if he was nothing, his identity subsumed by the pain and grief of his situation.

Physically, he was one of those unfortunate souls with over exaggerated facial features. Everything was slightly distorted, like in a hall of mirrors. Big, protruding red lips, a noticeably receding chin and a hooked nose that was way too big for his face. His Adam's apple was enormous, it protruded further than his chin and seemed to sway almost, of its own volition, like

an ensign at the stern of a ship. He looked she thought like a caricature of a man. Like an over coloured grotesque nineteenth century satirical cartoon from Punch or The Strand Magazine. He wasn't real, surely.

She sat on the moulded plastic chair next to the bed and slowly crossed her legs, deliberately allowing her knee length skirt to fall back a little too far. She was either unaware of the irony of doing this to a man in Micky's condition, or she was simply cruel. "Good morning, Mr. Johnston". The measured tones of her greeting met with a stony, cold silence. "OK I'll cut the crap then, shall I? You know who did this to you and so do I. Just give me his name and I'll make sure that he goes away for it. Look what he's done to you. Surely you can't let him get away with it? He's gone too far this time. Just as a matter of interest, how much did you get?". The story was rife all over the manor. "Twenty grand? Thirty? That's petty cash to a man like Bellini. It's nothing."

Johnston swallowed hard. Visibly. It hadn't been that much. Nothing like it. For a moment he was tempted. But only for a moment. It would have been madness.

"Who did it to you, Micky? Tell me his name." Her voice was quiet. Gentle and coaxing now. "You don't have to. I'll tell you. It was Frank Doyle, wasn't it? Bellini wouldn't dirty his own hands on the likes of you. You're not worth it." The momentary coaxing had already ended and she was more suddenly aggressive. Ashworth realized that she was playing the old good cop, bad cop routine, but she was playing both parts herself and had to stifle a smile. "You're nothing to Bellini. He doesn't care what he does to you. He cuts you down and leaves you to bleed to death. He left you to die, Micky. He wanted you to die. He sent Doyle to kill you. And now you're protecting him. I can't believe it. How stupid are you? And what's it all for? Do you think he'll welcome you back into the firm with open arms? After you stitched him up like that? Never. Not in a million years. And you're never going to work again, are you? What use is a crippled bagman who's likely to hobble off with the bag and keep it for himself? Face it Micky, you're a pariah, an outcast." Johnston wondered what a pariah was but didn't ask. "You've got no where to run. Not any more. No-one to turn to either. There's only me. I'm your only fiend – the only one who can help you now. Without me, you're on your own. And god knows you're screwed." She was in overdrive now, her tone pushing and bullying.

She had long since abandoned the idea of there being a P.R. element to her visit and she was now beginning to enjoy herself. What was more she knew that whatever he would tell her, she couldn't and wouldn't help him. Micky knew it, too and met her harangue with the same still silence as before. She changed her tack.

"OK, if you won't finger Bellini, then give us Doyle. It was him that pulled the trigger, wasn't it?" she invited. "He's a mad bastard. You know that better than anyone. He should be in Rampton or Broadmoor. Maybe he could get help there. He doesn't belong on the streets. Make a statement. He'll go down and there's no way he'll ever get out. I've seen copies of his psychiatric reports from Parkhurst. I can't believe they let him out last time." Instantly she regretted saying that. The last thing she wanted to do was to sow a seed of doubt that he might be ever released.

"Frank Doyle?" Micky's voice was croaky; rasping and dry from the tubes and the drugs.

"Yes." She replied patiently, like a nursery school teacher explaining a simple sentence to a backward boy.

"Wasn't him." He turned his face to avoid her intense blue eyes.

She knew this was coming. You didn't get men like Bellini, or even Doyle for that matter, that easily. She'd only been going through the motions really but she kept up the pretence. Sighing dramatically, she shook her head resignedly. "Well who was it then?"

"Don't know. Never seen him before. Wore a mask anyway. It was too quick." He let the lies run from his mouth in a flurry. Too much and too quick to be credible. He knew it but he didn't care.

"You do surprise me." They both knew it was a game now. "Was he black or white? Tall or short?"

"Couldn't tell. I told you it was too quick."

"What sort of accent did he have then? Local?"

"Didn't speak."

"Yeah, yeah, course not. What was he wearing?"

"I can't remember. I'm still in shock. The doctor said so. I'd like you to leave now. I'm very tired."

"Don't worry, I going. You're a silly bastard, Micky Johnston. You know that?" Her mock seriousness was still part of the game. "You've got a real chance to get even with them, put them both away for a long, long time and what are you going to do? Nothing – you're just going to blow it, your only chance. Bellini and Doyle know that too. They haven't even sent you flowers. They know you're scum and so do you. Look at the way they've treated you." With this she lent forward from the chair and sliding her left arm beneath his shoulders, she jerked him brutally to forward, with a strength she didn't look capable of possessing, forcing Micky to address the reality of his situation, to confront the deformity that Bellini and Doyle had bequeathed to him. His left leg lay there in stark contrast to the right, which ended in a heavily bandaged stump halfway up this thigh. "Make them pay, Micky. They deserve it. Make them pay." One last attempt at seriousness.

The tears started to flow and Ashworth lowered him back to his helpless, prone position considerably more gently than she had raised him.

"I fucking told you. I don't know who did it." His tone was desperate rather than aggressive and

his hand reached up and fumbled aimlessly for the bell like a fly caught in a spider's web, prepared to rip its own legs off to try to regain its liberty.

The nurse duly came. A different one. She said in her attractive West Indian lilt "I think Mr. Johnston's had quite enough for one day." It was clear that she would brook no arguments.

"It's alright, I'm going." Ashworth had expected no better outcome than this and so she wasn't disappointed. She rose imperiously. "Think about what I've said, Micky. Don't let them take the piss out of you for ever. Here's my card. Call me if you change your mind. In the meantime, I'll send someone in tomorrow to take your statement."

The nurse escorted her brusquely out of the room and Micky noticed for the first time the alluring aroma of Chanel No. 5 as it lingered on the air. For just a moment he allowed himself to wonder why his wife never smelled like that. The answer was fifty quid a bottle. For a moment the sweet pastoral scent seemed to anaesthetize his pain and exorcize the room from her previously odious presence. I might be stupid, Micky thought – and he had plenty of evidence to back him up – but I'm not a bloody fool. Micky distrusted the police. So did everyone he knew,

all the lads he had grown up with back in the sixties, in years when the likes of the iron fist of the likes of the Richardsons and Freddie Foreman had held London in the vice of their protection. If you had a problem, you didn't run to the Old Bill. You sorted it yourself. That was the way of the world. Of Micky Johnston's world, anyway. This was something that he would deal with, not the police. He didn't know how. Not yet. But he knew he would with a certainty that he had never felt about anything in his life. Already the horror he felt at his amputation was metamorphosing into a bitter canker of hate and anger directed against Bellini and Doyle. Unbeknown to himself, he had already embarked, on a crusade that would consume his mind, his soul and what was left of body. He would have his revenge, his retribution. Bloody, black, murderous retribution.



## Chapter Four

It had all the rich, textured vividness of a Renaissance painting of the Flavian Amphitheatre. The Christians away to the lions, with a result that could have been predicted by even the most clueless Pools Panel. Asif and Salim Malek lay dead in their office. Asif, the elder brother by some twenty minutes, was slumped forward over his desk and Salim lay prostrate on the floor of their office, a flow of blood continued to seep, now gently, from the single, perfectly positioned gunshot wound in the centre of his forehead and spread out to infest the rich, luxuriant pile of their new hand woven Wilton carpet. This was no amateur bodged job. It was clinical. A professional hit. Detective Inspector Ashworth had been wrong about Don Bellini or at least about the man that Don Bellini was in the process of transforming into. He *would* do the dirty work himself. He stood, silhouetted against the harsh piercing glare of the early morning sun hammering on the recently washed window pane, surveying the scene. He revelled in the scene of carnage and mayhem that had played itself out before him. It seemed like he had been both character and audience in a play.

Like Titus carving up the pie made of Tamora's sons and feeding it to her. There was more than a little madness here too, despite the fact that Bellini had seemed so controlled. He suddenly felt like James Bond, sharp suited, caressing the silencer on his Beretta, inhabiting a world where there were no external consequences. No, he was more than James Bond, more than a carefully crafted sham of literary fiction. He felt more like a god. An Old Testament god of fire and retribution. He held the power of life and death in his hands, to be executed on a whim. His whim. He turned and faced the window. It was as if the sun shone for him alone. He stared straight into it and did not burn his eyes.

Francis Doyle stood quietly, trying to comprehend the Noh play that had just been revealed to him. He still wasn't sure exactly what had happened. This wasn't going to be anything out of the ordinary. Just a routine meeting like any other. A bit of business, that was all. Bellini had only wanted him and the other two heavies along to look menacing. That's what he said. Just in case things got out of hand. It was to be an ordinary day. It was only him and Bellini who had walked into the Maleks' office that morning but there was nothing unusual in that, men like the Maleks appreciated a little confidentiality in their

commercial transactions. Tommy and little Nate had waited in an outer reception room of the pool hall. There were no customers at this time of day and they passed away the time pleasantly lining up a few shots with the three or four local thugs who were waiting for Salim Malek to dole out an assortment of tasks suited to their disparate skills. They did not even notice the two muted little thuds emanating from the bosses' office. Sure, Doyle had been surprised by the silence that Bellini had handed to him in his flat that morning when he picked him up. But that was just a new toy. Bellini liked toys and he thought no more of it after fixing it snugly to the sleek barrel of his matt black Russian Tokarev self loading pistol. He sat next to Bellini, in the back of the S Type Jaguar, resplendent in British Racing Green, that he had taken delivery of only the week before. The big cat purred her way slowly through the snarl of central London's congested traffic and headed out towards Wembley, to what was, graphically but inaccurately, known among south London's underworld low life as 'Indian country'.

Doyle liked the car, the new car smell more enticing than any perfume. The soft, embracing luxuriance of the leather interior and burr walnut veneer were pretty much the only things in his mind as he followed Bellini into the Malek's inner

sanctum and closed the door. He wasn't the sort of man who was used to intellectual multi-tasking. At first he didn't really pay much attention to what was going on but that changed suddenly as Bellini began to unfold events. What happened all seemed so unreal. It seemed like the slow motion sequence of an old film flickering before Doyle's one good eye. Like Bellini, he took the role of both audience and actor. But not director though, Bellini reserved that august position for himself. Salim rose from his desk and crossed towards Bellini his hand outstretched in greeting, a welcoming smile playing across his lips. Without a word, without any warning whatsoever, Bellini reached inside the breast of his sharp Italian suit, pulled out his handgun and shot Salim dead. Doyle could barely take in what had happened, it was so unexpected. Neither could Asif but he made a sudden movement to his desk drawer. Doyle, still seeing this in slow motion, reacted instantaneously on pure primordial self-preserving instinct and before Asif could produce the semi automatic he kept loaded in his top right desk drawer, he too was already dead. For the first time in a long time, Doyle was stunned. He sort of knew what had happened, he had absolutely no idea why. It never even entered his mind to ask.

"That's why I wanted you along, Frankie. Well done." Bellini sounded calm, although Doyle had never before even seen him with a gun, let alone commit such a calculated act of obviously premeditated, cold blooded murder. Yes, it was a shock but already Doyle felt his bond with Bellini growing yet more close. They had shared this, shared something special, something that was, in Doyle's twisted psyche, beautiful – they were now brothers, bound together by a kindred bond of blood.

Bellini too had shared Doyle's sense of unreality. He hadn't expected to feel this way. Right now, he knew that he could do anything. He was the king of the world. He looked Doyle straight in the eye. For the first time he could fully comprehend the powers of the evil demons, the avenging Furies, that possessed and tormented him, that drove him onwards and, like Orestes, haunted his soul. For the first time ever he truly respected Francis Doyle, for power like was accompanied, he felt, by great responsibility. The responsibility for the matter, the very fact, of existence. By a simple, single act, Bellini had become something greater than he had ever imagined he could be. He felt that he had become whole for the first time in his life and, with it, he had grown to be greater than the sum of his parts. He knew that

people would be able to see it in him – his countenance radiated, he could feel it almost burning it was so intense. He was an irresistible force with an irresistible power. He had become. He crossed the room and placed his hand on Doyle's head in what would look like any observer a bizarre parody of a papal benediction. There lived within Don Bellini a bizarre madness which no-one had ever even suspected existed and it was as if it had now, suddenly, rather than gradually and insidiously, not just risen to the surface but had permeated his entire being. It was already dominating and controlling him. Although he was no stranger to violence, he had never before killed anyone. Not himself. That had always been left to the hired help, normally to Doyle. He felt now that he had been blooded, like children being made to confront the inexorable fact of death in the raw at their first fox hunt, their innocent faces being corrupted, in a bent ancient liturgy, by the blood of the innocent. Bellini knew that he would never feel ordinary, never feel mortal, again.

He turned from Doyle and opened the door.

"Gentlemen" he announced. There was an audible gasp as the Maleks' hired hands looked beyond him into the room, over the carpet of

blood to the lifeless bodies of their employers. Every one was a hard men, well used to the bloody realities of their modern lives, but even so the shock was almost overwhelming. Perhaps it was this that prevented them from opening fire immediately. Three of them pulled weapons from their waste bands and raised them shakingly at Bellini. His own men, Tommy and Nate, followed suit in north London's version of a Mexican stand off. Bellini simply raised his hands out before him and lowered them again slowly, commandingly. He smiled benignly. It was as though he was a Roman emperor, or Alexander: the known world was at his feet and would hear his command and obey. Without a word being uttered, in fact almost hypnotically all the men, both the Maleks' and Bellini's, lowered their guns. No-one would have been able to say why they did it, but they all felt the insidiousness of his authority, and were impelled to respond to it.

He slowly inclined his head, deliberately and at a slight angle, implicitly acknowledging their acceptance of his authority.

"Gentlemen" he repeated. "As you can see, there has been a hostile take-over bid for your corporation. Asif and Salim have", he paused, selecting his words with great care, "retired. With

immediate effect you are in my employ. Welcome. Tommy, Nate, please dispose of these" he waved in the general direction of the bodies. "You gentlemen", he addressed the new members of his organization, "please bring Mr. Robinson to me. And assure him that his employment is ... secure. Then bring everyone here. I want to appraise all my new employees of their new terms and conditions of employment." The thugs were not used to the stern formality of the language of the boardroom, but they thought that they understood the general idea and silently complied.

\* \* \*

Kurtis Robinson sat opposite Don Bellini, the expanse of the desk separating them like protagonists. There was an almost tangible frisson of tension emanating from Robinson. He tried to suppress it and he could not imagine how Bellini stayed so cool. When he had received the summons and the quick précis of events, he too had to make an instant decision. Should he run? Fight back? Or play along? Every option was fraught with its own danger, that much was



certain. Bellini had a bad reputation which had just got worse as he instantly just moved up a league. He was in the big time now – the biggest. Up until an hour ago Robinson had been the Maleks' best boy, their number one lieutenant and if Bellini was serious about his 'hostile take-over' then, he thought, he would almost certainly need the infrastructure that the Maleks' had built around them in order to continue 'trading'. He would need him. Robinson was the only man still alive who knew the full scope of their business enterprises. This, so he hoped, would give him an element of job security, for the time being. With this he could buy himself a little time to decide what to do and how his own interests could best be served. At this moment Kurtis Robinson did not feel much like a company man, but he knew that he had to formulate a plan. Right now, he didn't know what support he had within the firm. Or indeed, if he had any at all. All of this had all happened so quickly, so unexpectedly. He couldn't believe the twins had been so stupid to get blown away in their own office. But how could they have been suspicious? They had met with Bellini a dozen times before, normally quite amicably. This wasn't the way things were done here. Maybe in Russia but Robinson doubted even that. It belonged to the realms of fantasy. He was as seriously

concerned about the long term effects of Bellini's actions as he was about the short term. If he went on like this it could be the start a gang war. The whole fucking city would explode, he thought. It would be anarchy. Pure bloody anarchy. No-one could win, except maybe the police, with half the crime bosses in London dead and the other half too scared to venture outside of the security of their offices for fear of having their head blown off. This was twenty first century London for God's sake, not Chicago in the nineteen thirties. It wasn't the wild bloody west.

By the time Robinson had arrived at the pool hall, both Bellini and the office had returned to some semblance of normality. Bellini's self perceived glowing aura had seemed to fade as the corpses of the Malek twins had been hastily removed. He wondered if their very presence acted as a catalyst. Maybe that was what he needed. But for now they were safely locked away in the boot of Tommy's car, ready for a trip to their final sanctified resting place in a shallow grave that would be dug that night. Two bodies with a single soul, in death as it was in life. The largely unsuccessful attempts to remove the blood stains from the carpet had been tried and abandoned, and they were, for the time being, nearly hidden beneath a couple of gaudy scatter

rugs that one of Bellini's new boys had been sent out to buy. It was the businessman that Robinson saw, sitting at his boss' old desk, and not the dark, avenging angel of death.

"Mr. Robinson." Bellini offered his hand and Robinson shook it. Robinson had surreptitiously wiped the sweat from his palm on his trouser leg so as not to betray his nervousness. His grip was firm and decisive. Bellini liked that. It was the handshake of a genuine man. The sort you could trust. Robinson knew that, right now, he could not afford to show the turmoil that was racking his brains and churning up his guts like a cement mixer. He said nothing, afraid that his voice might crack. Bellini continued, "Thank you for coming in so promptly. I'm sure that you must be feeling a little, erh," he searched for the right word, "unsettled, following Asif and Salim's unexpected retirement." There was no hint of irony in his voice. "I want to reassure you that I plan no further changes in personnel. No staff cuts. Not yet. There will be no redundancies for the time being. I hope we can keep it that way. I want you on board with me and I want you to be happy. You're very important to my plans, Kurtis, so I'll give you the background to what's happened here this morning. I've had a little deal going on with the Malek's for some time. You know about

that? The imports from Columbia.” Robinson nodded. “All of a sudden, without any warning, last night, they tried to move the goal posts. Tried to bypass me. I can’t accept that. You understand. They undermined my position and put me in a terrible position. If I had let them get away with that, my authority, my entire organization would be undermined. I had to take action. Immediate action and I had to be decisive. In our business you can’t show any weakness and you can’t let people shaft you.”

Robinson knew bullshit when he heard it but began to relax a little. The Maleks had had no intention of stitching Bellini up, he was sure of that. It wasn’t their style. If they had, he would have known about it. Anyway, they had needed him more than he needed them. He was handling the import of the drugs, they were dealing only with the North London distribution. On this deal, they were his agents only, no more. But if Bellini was going to the trouble of making up a story, no matter how lame it was, Robinson felt that the odds of him getting out of the room with his head still attached to his neck were improving. Likewise, Bellini knew his story would be incredible to Robinson, but he didn’t really care, although he now wished he had come up with something better, a little more plausible. But, as

he waited in the office for Robinson, he had been too occupied to give it much thought. The only thing that mattered was how he would respond to it.

"Do you want me to show you around the manor? Introduce you to a few of the faces?" Robinson felt confident enough to speak now, without fear of his voice breaking down and betraying his insecurities. But more than this, he also wanted Bellini to stop spouting this crap. They both knew why he had done it. Greed. Covetousness. Avarice. Robinson didn't much like playing these games.

"Yes. Thank you." Bellini seemed satisfied. "That would be very useful. You know my associate Mr. Doyle, of course." Doyle stepped out of the corner of the room. He had been behind Robinson all the time, brooding and silently watchful. In his initial state of shock co-mixing with intense concentration, Robinson hadn't even noticed him.

Suddenly he was worried. Was that mad bastard still here? What for? "Hello, Frank." He managed to stay calm. Robinson looked him up and down to make sure that none of the weapons Doyle was known to habitually carry was drawn and

ready for use. They weren't and Robinson steadied his nerves once more.

"Kurtis" was his curt acknowledgement. Robinson was pleased to see that he remained motionless in the corner.

Bellini continued and Robinson turned back in his seat to face him once more. "When we get back, I'd like you to arrange for me to see all the books. All the books" he emphasized. "And set up a meeting with the late Misters Malek's accountant. It's a Mr. Kellett, I believe?" Robinson nodded. "I have a few ideas for maximizing profitability." Bellini was on familiar territory now and was beginning to feel very comfortable. The two men rose and accompanied by Doyle, the master led the way out to survey his newly acquired territory.

Robinson's assessment of Bellini had been somewhat less than accurate. This morning's business expansion had been only incidental. He did not desire the Maleks' local empire. It was almost as if it had been forced upon him. It was only at 3 a.m. that morning that his need to kill the Maleks had materialized. It was strong. A potent desire the like of which he had never felt before and it had to be satiated. . The planned meeting was going to be just what it purported to

be – genuine, purely routine. The next heroin shipment was coming in next week. It was a big one and Bellini wanted to be sure that the Maleks were ready to move their share. Suddenly, as he lay beside his beautiful wife in their beautiful home, in a reverie somewhere half between sleep and sentience he was hit by a flash of inspiration. He felt blinded by it. It was only sensible to him, but it lit the room with a piercing golden glow and seemed to emanate from within his own consciousness. It was not something that he would ever be able to articulate. It had to be felt. Sensed. This was how Hieronymous Bosch or William Blake must have felt, he thought afterwards, as they created their visionary paintings and songs of innocence and experience. It was a revelation. He was St. John the Divine on his island cave of the Apocalypse on Patmos. He had seen God. Touched him. Felt him. God was revealing his mysteries to him, communing with him. Was he becoming God? He knew what had to be done and he knew how to do it. The question of why was irrelevant. It never even occurred to him. He had already ascended to a higher plane. Mere details could be left to mortal men, he was occupied with bigger matters than 'why'. He didn't know, what the future held for him. But it would soon be

revealed to him, he had no doubt about that. And it would be, he was certain, magnificent.

No-one had seen it coming. Not Bellini himself, not his wife or kids, nor his colleagues. They couldn't have done. It was too sudden for that and he had always erected too many walls to allow anyone to ever get really close. It was the same with his heroin use. He'd hidden that from everyone, too. He'd even denied his growing dependence to himself; he refused to see how it had affected him. The walls he built grew ever higher. They kept himself out of his own psyche as well as others. He was a very insular man, he always had been. Self reliant. Even when was a child it was the same. He had never been able to articulate his feelings, his father had done his work well, in this he was far more English than Italian. As far as he could remember, he had only once told Natalie, Harris as she had been then, that he loved her and that was just to talk her into his bed. He didn't know then what the word meant and he sure as hell didn't know now. But it wasn't the heroin that was changing him, he was able to convince himself of that. He could handle it. No trouble. Bellini had brainwashed himself well and in fact he was indeed partly right. There was more to his descent into madness than just the smack. Why do these things happen? How



can a man fall so rapidly and so completely into vast abyss of insanity? It's not just the opiates, that alone can't explain it. He had suffered no shock. No trauma. No matter how many doctoral theses are written, or how many learned dissertations are delivered, no-one really knows how it happens or why it happens. To some extent, megalomania came with his job and, in any case, delusions such as Bellini's are far from uncommon within the volumes of respected psychiatric journals and in the wards of secure hospitals its still not unknown to find Jesus occupying the next bed to Napoleon. Perhaps there are too many lapsed Catholics in the world. Certainly there are too many Bellinis and too many Doyles. In hospital they can be controlled. Treated, if never really cured. But what of care in the community when it so easily degenerates into don't care, and without the community? On the streets it becomes so different. On the streets you find smelly ranting old men you cross the road and brave the oncoming traffic to avoid. But they aren't your problem, you can just pass by and forget them. It becomes your problem though, when the man with the delusions has real power. Not the sanitized, disinfected power of the boardroom or the political chamber but the real, blood stained power of violence, of fear, of

manipulation, of extortion. Power over life and death.

\* \* \*

Daniel Bungay was the managing director of South Essex Construction Services Limited, a wholly owned subsidiary of a Jersey based holding company, which itself was owned by a corporation based in the Cayman Islands, which, although his name appeared on no deeds, files or documentation, was ultimately owned by one Donald Bellini. It was one of many semi legitimate business that Bellini had created, bought into or, somehow or other, acquired. They served him well. The few he was openly associated with, allowed him to call himself a businessman and gave him some social status in his local suburban community. Generous donations could be freely made to charities and he could admire his picture in the papers, in the social columns rather than with the court listings. In this way, he had made many valuable contacts, some, even at the highest level of government. These corporations could be used to launder some of the vast profits made by his

less legitimate business ventures, the drugs, the whores, the extortion, the racketeering. Some, like South Essex Construction, afforded him other advantages which he was able, from time to time, to exploit. The company had, thanks to Bungay, never won a tender legitimately. He had a rare talent for sniffing out who was open to bribery and could judge just how full a brown envelope needed to be, or how big an extension to a councillor's house was required. More than one local authority executive and contracts director of major contractors had a lot to thank Bungay for. He didn't consider that he was doing anything wrong. In his own mind, he certainly wasn't a criminal although he had few illusions about the real source of his principal's income. He lived in abject terror of ever upsetting Bellini.

Bungay dreaded calls like this one. It wasn't the first he had had and he knew with a positive certainty that it wouldn't be the last. Sometimes he would lie awake at night, his pyjamas drenched in a cold sweat, praying that the phone wouldn't ring.

"Good evening, Mr. Bungay. This is Tommy Windsor from Mr. Bellini's office. I'm sorry to disturb you so late in the evening but I need to ask for your assistance." Tommy's voice was

matter of fact and almost ingratiating. He sounded to Bungay like a latter day Uriah Heep, but he knew that this was no more than a veneer. Whatever was wanted, he would have to comply. He had no choice. He knew from past experience that it was a foolish move to fail to comply with any of Mr. Bellini's 'requests'. He looked down at the gnarled stump which used to be the little finger of his left hand to prove it. The mental scars were worse.

"What can I do for you, Mr. Windsor?" He did his best to control the tension and fear in his voice but he singularly failed.

"We have a package, two in fact. Material that has become surplus to our requirements. We need to dispose of the discreetly, quickly. You understand?"

Bungay understood – he didn't need to ask, he knew only too well what would be meant by 'packages'. He certainly didn't want to ask, for fear that he might be told.

"Our site at the Docks should be able to accommodate them, without too much difficulty." Bungay tried to draw comfort from being as businesslike as possible, it was as if he was trying to detach himself from the reality of his

situation. "The foundations of the first two units are ready. We can dispose of your 'packages' under the lower shuttering and I can arrange for a layer of concrete to be poured first thing in the morning."

"First thing?" Tommy stressed the urgency. He didn't need to.

"I think that would be wise, don't you? What time would you like to meet me there?"

"About twelve."

"Very well, Mr. Windsor. I'll be there. I believe you know where the site is. I'll attend to the security guard and I'll leave the gate open for you."

"Thank you very much. We'll see you at twelve."

Bungay hung up. He ran towards his toilet where he heaved and brought up a bellyful of bitter, sickening bile. Why the hell had he got involved in this? With gangsters? Real, bloody gangsters. Not Jimmy Cagney or Edward G. Robinson, but hard, violent men. Men with no sense of morality. Men with guns. Men who were prepared to use them. Men who would kill you if you crossed them. His reason had been money, of course.

What else could it have been? He hadn't needed it, the firm was doing well enough and he had a comfortable house in the nicer part of Chigwell. But he had been greedy, he had wanted more. Also, he told himself, to assuage his conscience, it would have been hard to turn down Don Bellini. Even then, Bungay had known of his reputation. But now it was all getting too much for him. He lived a daily dread that someday, either metaphorically or literally, something, or worse, someone he'd buried would turn up. He'd have a hard job explaining a corpse and he was under no illusions about getting any support, any backup from Bellini. He could, would, he corrected himself, go to prison and he knew that he wouldn't be able to cope with that. He had tried to talk to Mr. Bellini about retirement. He wouldn't have done if he'd appreciated Bellini's definition of the word. He hadn't been well, he told him. The ulcer was playing up and he was getting too old to run the business. It was a young man's world. Bellini would hear nothing of the sort, he had a good ten, fifteen even, years left in him. He told him how much he valued his experience and that evening Bungay had cried himself to sleep.

Now, he sat in his darkened car at the construction site. It was quiet apart from an

incessant, dull drone from the motor works nearby. To his right, the Thames ran swiftly. Tonight it seemed to smell quite rancid which was, Bungay thought, perhaps more than a little fitting. In front of him, beyond the car factory, he imagined the old marshes stretching out, sweeping inexorably into greater Essex. In the old days, Bellini's boys could have got rid of the bodies there. But that was many years past. Bungay had paid off the man from Premier Security Services with a hundred pounds stuffed into the top pocket of his uniform and he was told to have the night off. Bungay would be here, he had paperwork to do in the site office that would last well until the morning. The man took the money gratefully. He didn't believe the story about the V.A.T. No, more likely he was playing away from home, he had a bird coming over while the wife was tucked up in bed. Dirty old bastard, he thought enviously as he collected his thermos flask and left.

Shortly after midnight, Tommy's old white Ford Mondeo, with a dent in the driver's door that he'd never bothered to get repaired, made its way cautiously along the dual carriageway, pulling off into a discretely marked side exit. He drove steadily, just within the speed limits. The last thing he wanted was to be pulled by a traffic cop

now. At the second junction, he turned right at the 'caution site traffic' notice into the small unmarked lane, crossed the railway line, past the back of the old warehouses on his right. The buildings were looking their age now and they would soon be superseded by South Essex Construction's gleaming high tech Technology Park that would, in ages past, have gloried under the title of Trading Estate. Tommy slowed as he reached the site's makeshift gates and Nate, who everyone still jokingly referred to as 'the boy' although he was now twenty two and as hard as nails, hopped out of the passenger's seat and pulled the gates wide, closing them again as soon as Tommy had passed through. He paused to allow Nate to get back into the car.

Bungay flashed his lights twice to identify his position and Tommy drew up and parked beside him. The three men got out of their cars and Bungay offered his hand.

"Good evening Mr. Windsor, Mr. Carroll. I see you found us alright." Bungay had met both men before and was trying desperately to show that he was not afraid of either them or the business at hand. He was none too successful. Nate couldn't remember the last time anyone had called him Mr. Carroll and looked around



instinctively for his father. "Shall we get down to the business then? I don't want to detain you gentlemen any longer than necessary."

"Let's do it."

The dug foundations of the industrial unit they were currently working on were cordoned off. It looked uncomfortably like a police crime scene to Tommy. He didn't like the thought and he immediately banished it.

"There's wooden shuttering on the floor. It's only loosely laid. If you lift some of it and dig down a little way, that should be good enough. I've put a ladder there for you, and a couple of spades."

Both men had come sensibly dressed for manual work, jeans, boots and old sweaters but Nate couldn't resist a dig at the suited Bungay.

"Aren't you going to help?" He knew he wouldn't, Bungay was way too fat, his jacket stretched to meet across the vast expanse of his belly, the product of too many business lunches, wining and dining and of too few rounds of golf. That was the world he belonged to, not this. This was sordid. It was contemptible to him and it should have been beneath him. If there was any justice in the world. Had he helped with the heavy work

he would have probably had a heart attack from a combination of exertion, repulsion and fear.

"I'm afraid I can't. Doctor's orders. I've got a weak back. No heavy lifting. Nothing." Lies, of course. There was no way he was going to get involved with this. And he certainly wasn't going to touch any corpse, get his finger prints all over it, get roped into murder. He shivered with a sudden cold chill as if someone had walked over his grave.

"Let's get to it, Nate" Tommy had no time now for banter or witty repartee. The ground was hard and despite the chill they had both built up quite a sweat before they had gone down far enough to comfortably take two bodies. The two reluctant gravediggers dissipated the displaced earth, to make it look as natural as possible before climbing from the nether regions back up the ladder to the upper world.

"Thirsty work that. Have you got anything to drink?" Nate asked Bungay, who simply shook his head in reply as Tommy fumbled for his keys, and still breathless from his exertions, opened the boot. It was a tight fit. Thank God that Tommy had had the foresight to roll Asif and Salim Malek as best he could into rough approximations of the foetal position before rigor

mortis had set in. Otherwise he would have had to cut their legs off – or heads – and he had no stomach for that. It wasn't easy getting a purchase on the thick black plastic sheeting taped tightly around the corpses and Tommy's hands, still damp with the sweat of his work, slipped as one of the bodies, Salim he thought, was being raised over the rim of the boot and it fell to the floor with a heavy thud.

"Christ, he's heavy for a little bastard" said Nate as he and Tommy picked him up once more and unceremoniously threw Salim Malek into the pit of the foundations, as close as possible to the shallow grave. Asif followed and with the jolt of his landing heavily on top of his brother, the thick polythene split revealing his sad, pathetic head, a look of eternal surprise and complete disbelief would remain on his dead face until the worms, maggots and the inexorable process of decay removed it forever. This was too much for Bungay. He had been able to cope with it as an abstract concept before but now, suddenly, it had become all too real. This was a real man. Flesh and blood, like him. Some poor bugger who'd crossed these evil, mad bastards and had paid the price. He retched violently and vomited with a violence that wracked his stomach and sent his entire body into an involuntary spasm of panic.

Bungay couldn't watch as he Nate and Tommy laid the Malek twins to rest and battened down their coffin lids of cheap wood with shuttering. Nate took both the spades and, following him up, Tommy raised the ladder.

"Tomorrow morning, then, this'll be filled?" He sought another confirmation.

"By eight o'clock Mr. Windsor." It would take wild horses to prevent Bungay leaving it any later than that. "I'll be staying here tonight. Just to make sure that nothing is disturbed."

"Wise move. You'll call me in the morning? As soon as it's done?" Bungay nodded in assent. He too was sweating now, though not through exertion. His was the painful sweat of abject fear. "You've got my mobile number." Tommy knew that he had and Bungay accompanied them to the gate, as much to make sure that they really gone as to lock up behind them. Then this nightmare could finally come to an end. Finally.

"Call me tomorrow." Tommy re-emphasized his final instruction.

"Thanks for your help. See you soon," Nate said with a smile and a little wave out of the passenger window, fully realizing that these

words would cut Bungay more deeply than the sharpest knife. The Mondeo drove off into the pitch, embracing blackness of the night. Tomorrow Tommy would have the car valeted, steam cleaned, to remove all but the tiniest trace of its fatal cargo. Bungay wrapped the thick chain tightly around the gates and fitted the enormous padlock that even bolt croppers could not eat into. He pulled it, hard, to make sure that it was firm, and then pulled it again.

He was dejected as he walked to the site office. His head hung down plaintively and he felt defeated. See you soon, the little bastard had said. See you soon. Bungay had no doubt that he meant it.



## Chapter Five

Despite his refusal to admit it to himself, the heroin, was a significant contributory factor in Bellini's decline. It had to be. Such drugs have their place in an ordered world. As diamorphine its on the side of the angels, prescribed to ease the pain and passing of the hopeless and hopeful alike. In its other forms, it is something altogether more insidious. Creeping and caressing. Softly taking the soul to oblivion, its grip tightening and tightening until it possesses it completely. In the past, Bellini had never touched the stuff. The thought of doing so had been abhorrent to him. In spite of the vast revenues they brought him, he had, in fact, always despised his customers. He had looked down on them from the very height of the certainty of the ivory tower of his personal moral rectitude. They were weak people; they had no respect for themselves or anyone else. He hadn't even been able to imagine losing control of himself. Just once, he had tried pot whilst at university. He vaguely remembered giggling helplessly like a pre-pubescent schoolgirl at the trivia of existence, feeling fuzzy as everything around him grew increasingly surreal. He made up his mind then

and there that it wasn't for him. He hated the warm passiveness of the experience but he was sure as hell glad that so many others embraced it so readily. Karl Marx had said that religion was the opium of the masses, but long ago, it had lost its place to T.V., he thought. Now, thanks to the regular, cheap supply of entrepreneurs like his dear father, opium was the opium of the masses. Or shit like this. And crack. And smack. Bellini thanked God for free enterprise, for the capitalist state and for the blessed virgin Margaret Thatcher. He had no illusions about his father's trade. It was never hidden at home even when he had been very young, although it was never really openly advertised either. He knew his old man would be furious if he had ever found out about his experiment with the weed but thankfully he never did. Pander to your customers, that was his father's philosophy. Cater for their every need. Grow rich off their addictions, feed like leeches off their despair and misery. Bleed them dry like a vampire bat, if you can. And usually you can. But never, on no account, never ever become like them. Never emulate them. They're not real people. Not like us. They're something less than human. They're not worthy, not deserving of the good things in life. All they can hope for is a brief seductive kiss that only



temporarily numbs the pain that is an inevitable by product of their pathetic little existences.

He was sitting alone now in his office of the Mount of Venus, reflecting. Thinking about his father which was something he often did. He would have hated all this. Stupid little man. Try as he might, Bellini could not even remember how his drug habit had begun, let alone why. Was it the pressure? The stress? Was it curiosity? Or just the fact that it was there that day – it couldn't have been more three months ago, could it? – locked in his immense safe, safely recessed deep into the concrete floor of his office, waiting for distribution by men like the Maleks? He tried to blame his wife. That seemed to fit. Most things had been her fault, especially since she had packed her bags a couple of weeks before, not long after he killed the Malek twins. She had led the kids by the hand to the Jeep Grand Status Symbol that they all looked far too small for, and after spouting an unnecessary tirade of vitriol and abuse at him had sped off into the night to her mother's. She could stay there for ever for all he cared. What the bloody hell was the matter with him? she'd said. He hadn't just changed, he'd metamorphosized into a monster. Did he have any idea what he turned into? Frankie bloody Doyle, that's what.

Didn't they see it at work? Why didn't they tell him? She couldn't stomach it any more, all these ranting and raving. He was more like a ravenous beast than a rational man. All for no reason. And then there were the arguments. Over nothing. But this had been the last straw. He'd never raise his hand to her again, she swore. He'd never bloody see her again. Or the kids.

They were lucky. They got out just in time.

His first instinct was to be relieved that they had gone. He didn't need all that shit and it was becoming increasingly difficult to hide the track marks of his hypodermic needles from them. He could no longer wear polo shirts and had even taken to wearing pyjamas in bed for the first time since he was eleven. On one occasion he'd even tried to inject directly into his thigh to make it less conspicuous but he hadn't been able to raise a vein. He wasn't an addict, though. It was just recreational, that's what they call it. His first hit had been so beautiful. It was warm and caressing and touched him in ways that he had never even been able to imagine before. Then came the euphoria. The euphoria grew into ecstasy and the ecstasy into pure 24 carat gold, angelic bliss. For a moment he could do anything, travel anywhere, become anyone.

Jesus Christ! No-one had told him it felt like this. Even coming down wasn't too bad. Nothing like as bad as he had heard or expected. He remembered worse hangovers as a teenager although now he had been tea total for years. Still this was definitely a one off. Just an experiment to touch the experience. He wouldn't ever go there again. Never. That would be bad for business. Well maybe just one more time – why not? His good intentions had lasted a week. Nearly. And then he was on the rocky road to his own personal heaven and hell. His usage grew with frightening rapidity as his dependency developed. By this time, he was taking a hit every day. At least once a day. And the doses he took were growing ever larger as his body built up a tolerance and the highs seemed a little lower with each successive hit. What had been a seductive and inviting experience had now become demanding and insisting. Just as the highs weren't so high anymore, so the downs were worse too. Darker, deeper, blacker, more despairing and demanding. Lasting longer. In a strange way he sort of enjoyed that too. He thought, it was only when he was coming down, that he could truly see himself for what he was. He could see with a sharp twenty twenty acuity of vision, accentuated by the actual physical pain he felt, that was not present in the blurry unreality

of his drug induced Nirvana. He wasn't an addict though. He still wouldn't accept that. He knew it for sure. Addicts were the scum suckers who lived in shitty little squats and had to whore themselves or nick money from their mothers' purses for their hits. He wasn't like that. Unlike most heroin users, Bellini had no problem with supply. He controlled the supply. He was the supply.

But the heroin gripped him ever more tightly, her long bony fingers reaching out, grasping and seizing at his body and mind. Insidiously. It stroked and caressed him. It squeezed, it strangled, it emasculated. It burnt into Bellini's soul and subsumed everything that he had been. It became the very essence of his being, consuming everything he had ever been or could ever have been. It is perhaps too simplistic to call it the sole cause of his decline into what an objective layman, if not a qualified medical man, would call, accurately enough, madness. But it had, if nothing else, been a catalyst. It reacted with something deep within him, something that had always been there but had laid hidden, dormant throughout his life. Now, it was drawn to the surface. It was something that belonged to a less evolved creature than homo sapien; something that had no place in twenty first

century London, unless caged, tightly tethered in the zoo in Regents Park. But Bellini was unable to reject it. It was too potent and insidious for that. It was something he could not resist and he had neither the strength nor the desire to fight. It was utterly compelling. An irresistible, controlling force and Bellini embraced it like the most beautiful of lovers. Now it was embracing him, touching more intimately than he had ever been touched before; in mind, in body, in soul and beyond. Far, far beyond. Lightening was at work in his brain. He was visited by angels and by devils. He communed with them and could detect no difference between them, they were one and the same creature. Black was white. White was black. Not only had all gradations, all shades of grey, been vanquished, so had all colours.

He never thought about his kids but on occasions he missed Hannah. It came mainly when he wanted sex. And he wanted it now. She'd always been a whore in bed, he thought. A real dirty bitch. He had tried to be abstemious but he didn't know why. God knows, if he had plenty of heroin, he also had plenty of girls. He had a few at the upper end of the market. Escorts rather than prostitutes. Rented out through a proper agency. Kosher. Legitimate. Classy. Sort of. But mainly, his girls catered for a more down market

clientele. Not working the streets. That was too messy and too difficult to control. That sort of business could be safely left to the dirty little pimp running his dirty little slag of a girlfriend, making her turn the tricks to keep him in the low life style he was trying to become accustomed to.

That wasn't for Bellini. He owned three massage parlours in addition to the brothel he ran discretely in a quiet suburban street in Chiswick. There's nothing wrong with that, Bellini often thought to himself. We all live off immoral earnings, one way or another. Everyone from pimp to Pope. Everyone one of us profits from the exploitation of someone weaker, less fortunate. The only thing that varies is the degree and the amount of profit. Bellini felt, with the self righteous justification that only the really deluded can lay claim to, that, in this respect, the real difference between him and everyone else was his honesty. Oh, and the amount of money he made. Everyone except him was a hypocrite. They were all fucking hypocrites and he despised them. They were little people. Insignificant compared to him. It was becoming increasingly rare, nowadays, for Bellini to give any thought to other people at all, to even concede to their existence, even in these pejorative terms. The

world wasn't simply centred around him, turning for him and for nobody else. The world was him.

And he wanted to feel it. To exploit it. With a quick goodnight and a few hastily thought up instructions to Tommy, delivered more for the sake of form than out of necessity, he went out into the chill of the night air and drove to the nearest of his massage parlours.

He sat outside in the Jag for a good five minutes before he finally rang the bell. This was yet another of the commodities that Don Bellini, in the past, had been happy to supply but had never yet himself partaken of.

"Good evening, sir. Welcome to the White Peacock. Here for a massage? You've come to the right place, the best in town. We have some very beautiful girls working tonight. Very talented. Very special." Maureen Bailey had written her script to the best of her limited ability. It was delivered in her clipped tones without favour or prejudice to every customer alike. She was well rehearsed. Maureen had been a working girl all her life. She had prided herself that she had been better than most, classy in an inexpensive backstreet way. But that was a few years ago now. The once vibrant Titian hair now glowed with the harsh tint of an inexpensive home dye to

hide the premature grey. Still, with her makeup plastered deep to hide the worst of time's ravages, she didn't look her forty five years. But she had done once. "Mr. Bellini!" she was startled by her sudden recognition and showed it. After all, it was only the third time she had ever seen the man. Others handled the cash collections, paid the wages or dealt with any problem clients. "Everything's alright, I hope. Just checking up on us, are you?" Bellini nodded but as soon as he walked into the muted, subduely lit reception room, she knew, she just sensed perhaps, that he wasn't just checking up on them. He was here on 'business'. Rumours had reached even this far out that Mrs. Bellini had done a runner, but she had just assumed that the boss must have been playing away from home. That was normally the case in her experience and he was a man, wasn't he? Still, in her long career, she had learned by bitter experience to be diplomatic. "While you're here, Mr. Bellini, why don't I introduce you to our new girl. Her name's Rosie. She's very attractive. Long dark hair. Lovely figure. Great legs. I think you'll like her. Or would you prefer a blonde."

Bellini found her lack of subtlety distasteful but found it unimportant and ignored it. "No. She'll be fine. She sounds... nice." To Bellini 'nice' was an



insidious epithet and he noted its incongruity with the sleazy half lit décor of the Peacock. He added a dismissive "Thank you" as an afterthought, no more than a matter of form. Never had she received the courtesy with less sincerity.

Maureen led him through the reception and into a tiny, spartanly furnished massage room, with a shockingly bright light. "Make yourself comfortable. Rosie will be with you in a minute." Poor cow, she thought, let's hope she doesn't upset he boss.

Bellini hung up his coat, took off his shoes and sat on the edge of the massage table come bed. His eyes surveyed the room expertly, missing nothing from the small crack in the wall to the unfortunate stain on the carpet. He'd seen the working end before, of course, it pays to know your business. In fact, he knew, quite as well as Daniel Bungay, which officers at the local nick would be susceptible to a thick brown envelope and which government official would appreciate being flown out to Bellini's Marbella villa free and gratis for a month every summer. For a man with his many and varied business interests, Bellini had surprisingly little trouble with the authorities. He was comfortable in their world, he felt at

home with them. But here it was different. It was as if he were seeing it anew, fresh, for the very first time. The whole scene reminded him more of an operating theatre than a supposedly a setting of sensual intimacy. It was clinical, impersonal. Bellini liked it very much.

There was a tap on the door and Rosie entered. She had been well briefed by Maureen. This is *the* man. Give him the works. Everything he wants and then throw in a bit more. Make him feel like a god. And for heaven's sake don't mention money, don't even ask for a tip. This one is all on the house. After all, it is his bloody house.

Bellini was impressed by Rosie Case. Maureen hadn't oversold her. At twenty four, she had a great advantage in this business – she looked seventeen. Barely seventeen. She mirrored the pseudo professional arrangement of the room in her dress. Her new white uniform was functional but pretty, not unlike a nurse's dress. Only the fact that it was so tiny distinguished them. It revealed a small firm bottom to Bellini, smooth and olive skinned, as she calculatingly bent from the waist, keeping her long svelte legs perfectly straight, to retrieve the strategically placed clean towels. As she placed them as pillow on the bed

he allowed his gaze to cover every inch of her body, to caress her almost. Her dress was tight, not at all subtle and it little left to the imagination. It was a good job as the majority of the punters here didn't have too much imagination. There wasn't a market for it. Beneath the dress, she was totally, perfectly naked. Her breasts, large but beautifully proportioned, heaved dramatically against the thin, virginal white material, pulled taught despite the buttons being undone to reveal a cleavage that a man could lose himself within forever. He reached out and stroked them gently. She smiled benignly and through the harsh fabric he felt the plateau of her nipple erect and stiffen to his touch.

"Let's make you comfortable. Shall we?" Her voice was soft, delicate and alluring, hinting at the sensual pleasures yet to come, betraying only the vaguest hint of her origins deep in the 'wilds' of Essex. She'd be popular with the clients, he thought. Maureen had chosen well. But right now she's mine and only mine. She stood in front of him, delicately loosening his fashionable purple Paul Smith tie and then began to unbutton his well tailored shirt. She's well named, he thought, she is just like a rose. Indeed he was right. In any society, at any age, Rosie Case would have been considered beautiful. Hers was

a delicate beauty. It was as if she had been delicately carved from marble by Michaelangelo, every strike of the chisel richly deserving the eternity that was invested in it. But she had none of the cold, dead stillness of stone. She was breathtakingly vital, stunningly alive. When she smiled at him, Bellini felt that she radiated the pure, intense, searing heat of a million suns. In a kinder world, in a world without this incessant night, in a world without Don Bellini, she might have been a model, or a movie star. Or, at least, happily married to a man who really loved her. But that world had ceased to exist for Rosie when she was seven, on the night her drunken bastard of a step father raped her for the first time. It took her years, of course, but she escaped as soon as she could, working on the streets from fourteen. Hers was a tough education. Few people had had it as tough and survived. It was an existence, not a life, that no young girl should ever be forced to face but despite it all, all of the hateful slings and burning arrows that outrageous fortune had continued to hurl at her, she retained a purity, a rare spiritual innocence even, deep within her soul. No man could ever cheat her of that. After all these years, things were finally just starting to look up and she would occasionally permit herself the cherished fantasy that she could one day lead a normal,

ordinary life. This job was a good start. It was the best she had ever had. It was secure and safe. Rosie had tried to hate the world, hate all men. God knows she had had enough reason to. But she couldn't. There was no hate within her. She was that rarest and most precious of things, a diamond, hardened by the fires of her creation but infinitely more brilliant than everything that surround her. If her looks were those of a goddess, albeit one who has been incessantly brutalized, her soul was that of an angel, uncorrupted despite her endless trials. All her life, she had been touched by evil, the worst, but she had never yet met the likes of the monster Bellini had become. For his part, he was captivated by her. He wanted to, needed to take her, to have her, to subsume himself within her, to possess her. Completely. Universally. Totally. Finally.

Rosie's hands were deft and skilful, her art honed with years of practice. She freed his fly button and pulled down his trousers, allowing her hand to momentarily linger, stroking his balls and rubbing against his already erect penis. But she would make him wait. Pleasure is heightened by anticipation and, as she lowered him gently to the bed, face down, she took up a bottle of baby

oil began to caress it seductively into his neck and shoulders.

"That's it. Relax. Enjoy it. It's all for you. Just for you." Bellini knew that it was.

Slowly, deliberately, she worked her way down his back and over his buttocks, easing the oil into every pore. Lingering over every muscle. He could seem to feel his tension wash away in the sea of her art. As her hands made small circular kisses on his inner thighs, she once again brushed against his rock hard testicles. She rubbed a little harder this time.

"Time to turn over, Mr. Bellini." Mr. Bellini. He liked the respect and complied slowly, unhesitatingly.

Rosie unfastened another two buttons on her uniform and as she did so she revealed the full uncensored magnificence of her body. She is truly, truly beautiful, he thought. A real work of art. A masterpiece. By now this work of art was moving her hands deftly, expertly up his calves and onto the tightly knotted muscles of his thighs. He felt the oil warm on his body and he welcomed its invasion as she reached the pinnacle of his pleasure. Stroking his balls once more she ran her hand slowly up and down the

shaft of his erection. All this time she was engaging Bellini's cold dead stare with her honey almond eyes, so alive, so deep, so searching, and she took the head of his engorged prick in her mouth. The warm embrace of her hand increased its pressure and tempo as her tongue darted and stroked and engulfed the essence of his masculinity. As she felt him tense, she pulled back.

"Not yet. Not yet" she coaxed. "That's it. There's a lot more for you yet." He lay prone as she moved forward and kissed him tenderly on the lips. Like a lover. Not like a prostitute. After all, it was not like he was a customer. Bellini could taste himself in her mouth. It was strangely compelling and he explored her with his tongue, meeting hers almost violently and forcibly asserting its dominance. Freeing a condom from its foil coffin, Rosie's expert, knowing hands slid it delicately into place. Freeing herself finally of her uniform, allowing it to slip from her shoulders and gently slide down to the floor, she climbed carefully onto the table and onto Bellini. He clearly wanted her to do the work. That was fine with her and as she guided him to enter her, she let out a well practised sigh that was just understated enough to perhaps have been real. This was nice. Genuinely nice. It was not often

like this, she thought, and never at work. She allowed her hands to run forcefully across his belly and through the rough hairs on his chest. Her hands met his and their fingers, as did their bodies, entwined. As she felt him increase the pressure on her hands she smiled at him, radiating her warmth. But she was met only by his ice. His eyes seemed to glow now, in the half light she could swear they were almost red.

Instantaneously the vestiges of humanity that still clung to Bellini had vanished. In their place was the monster, the devil who had executed the Malek twins. Rosie sensed the sudden change in him. Instantly, an icy, creeping terror descended over her. She was absolutely terrified, more so than she had ever been before, even when she was seven. There were tears in her eyes but she was too afraid to scream. With great strength, more than a man should possess, Bellini turned her over, without ever withdrawing from her. Before, for Rosie, despite the fact that she was working they had been almost making love, but now he was violating her, raping her. In her job she was not unused to violence, it was an occupational hazard and you had to put up with some to make a decent living. But Bellini was now thrusting into her with such violence that she felt a crippling agony assail her body, deep



inside. She was being torn, literally ripped apart by his brutality. It was as if an inexpressible mania that should have remained repressed had been given a tangible vent, an outlet into the real world, inhabited by real people with real lives. It was something that had no place there, something that should be buried in the deepest pits of the darkest recesses of a man's soul. Evolution had hidden it, removed it from sight but it had been too powerful to destroy.

To accompany his aggressive, primitive thrusts, he forced his hand across Rosie's body, over her taut, writhing stomach, over her breasts, the heart within pulsating and pounding at a fever's pitch, screaming silently for any release. The obscenity of his touches parodied grotesquely the exquisite beauty of her own caresses just a few seconds before. Bellini's hands crept bitterly up to her throat and gripped, tightly, obsessively, angrily. He would not have known why he was doing this. There was no demonic voice in his head corrupting him, urging him ever onwards from atrocity to atrocity. He was acting on pure instinct. He was, at this moment, no longer human. He had regressed into an earlier bestial state of being. Rosie tried to fight back but all her attempts to resist were futile. He was far too strong for her to resist and her life force, powerful

as it was, was rapidly being squeezed out of her. All the time his hips were pounding, grinding into her like the inarticulate, desperate animal he had become and by the time he finally came, with a deep, primordial, guttural roar, Rosie Case had already died.

He rose and wiped Rosie's blood from his genitals with a towel. Maureen, who had been waiting outside trying to summon the courage to enter and put a stop to the obvious carnage finally burst in. She was confronted by the sight of Rosie, still on the bed but no longer serene. She was contorted in the agonizing death throws of her strangulation, her eyes wide open staring accusingly at Bellini and at Maureen too. They were scarlet, as red as his had seemed to her only minutes before. Every blood vessel and capillary within them had exploded.

Bellini stood naked before Maureen and said, calmly, "The Peacock's closed. Get everyone out of here. Now. Right now. Tell the punters the police are coming if you have to. Then lock the doors and go home. Be back here tomorrow for the lunchtime trade. What's happened here stays between us" he said looking down at Rosie. In all her years in the trade, Maureen had never felt the sense of overwhelming menace that flowed

like a torrent from the imperceptibly narrow pupils of Bellini's dark eyes. "Do you understand? Not a word. To anyone. I'm serious."

If Maureen had doubted this, she only had to look at Rosie, the poor silent witness, to know just how serious Bellini was. She stared vaguely at Rosie, as motionless and dumbstruck as the corpse itself. Never before had she seen anything like this, anything so terrible and she prayed to God that she never would again.

"Now. Do it now." This time his voice was even more imperative and commanding than before. More aggressive, too. She knew that she had no choice but to obey.

Bellini closed Rosie's legs and roughly pushed her feet off the bed. Her body twisted but she did not fall to the floor. He retrieved his attaché case from the corner of the room, from where it had witnessed such a bloody and complete twist from tenderness to terror. Sitting on the bed, once again nearly in union with his victim, he removed his mobile phone from the case and pressed number one on its speed dial. Tommy's voice answered croakily as if he was barely awake.

"Tommy, it's me. I'm at the White Peacock. I need you over here right now. There's a bit of a

mess that needs cleaning up” he paused, hardly listening to Tommy’s vain attempt to extricate himself. “No, it’s got to be tonight. I don’t care if you have to shut the fucking club. You’d better bring my spare set of keys, I’ve told then to lock up. Come here first and then you’ll have to go an have a word with Maureen for me. Stress the need for her discretion.” He hung up. He didn’t want to give Tommy the chance to say another word. He couldn’t face being angry any more. He felt deflated, drained of all the power that had, only a few minutes before, coursed through his veins with the vibrancy of a Siberian tiger on the hunt. He had really liked that fucking girl. Maybe they could have even had something together. Something special perhaps and she’d just gone and spoiled it all. Fucking bitch. He pushed her onto the floor and she landed with a dull thud behind him. She was out of his sight now and he was grateful for that. Through the door, he could hear Maureen ushering people hurriedly out, towards the street. He imagined old men trying to do up their trousers as they ran down the road, wetting themselves if they heard a police siren. He smiled to himself and by the time he heard Maureen drop the latch and turn the key he had already pulled the belt tight around his bicep and was administering the hypodermic. Tossing it aside, he lay down on the bed and waited.

Back at the Mount of Venus, Tommy sat and sighed, despite the fact that the phone call had conveyed the last vestiges of Bellini's excitement and found it increasingly compelling. He didn't know the details but he could imagine the sight that would confront him only too well. He'd seen it before. More than once by now. What the fucking hell was going on with Bellini? Still, it wasn't his problem. Tommy had his own agenda and was starting to find it difficult enough to keep his own head above water without having to bother about anybody else's. What did it matter to him what Bellini got up to, business was business after all, and if he kept quiet and did as he was told, he'd be alright. He'd make sure of that. One way or another, he'd be alright.



## Chapter Six

"It's been over two months now, Frank." There was the hint of a sigh in Kurtis Robinson's voice as he returned from the bar with another two pints of carefully settled Guinness and passed one to Doyle. He stared intently into its warm inviting blackness, stroked the silky cream head oh so gently with the tip of the little finger of his left hand and delicately licked it before slowly, deliberately taking his first sip. The first one was always the best.

"Two months since he hit the Maleks and he's getting worse. I don't know what the fuck's the matter with him but he's lost the plot. Surely you can see that. None of us are safe anymore. You included. I think he needs help, a doctor. The man's gone psycho."

Doyle did not like this conversation. Not one little bit, but he had been expecting it, or something similar for weeks now. He didn't know if it would come from Robinson or Tommy or little Nate even, or from one of the others. But he knew that it would come. Despite his fierce burning loyalty and his inbuilt desire not to accept the fact, Doyle shared Robinson's concerns. Things had been

getting seriously out of hand and Doyle had been doing his level best to keep as low a profile as he could. Bellini's irrational spells seemed to be coming with greater frequency now and they were certainly lasting longer. Sometimes, he would lock himself up for days on end in the office. Alone. But with the sounds of his manic rage and frustration clearly audible to all. He felt better when he was alone. He felt blessed by the solitude. But it was the rages that even began to terrify Bellini himself in his more lucid moments. Even someone with the unflinching, unquestioning loyalty of Frankie Doyle could not ignore them. It seemed that when he was able to summon up the strength Bellini was able to control himself, just about. But it was as if there was usually a noticeable reluctance for him to even try to exert control over his baser, guttural self. Sure, he had his good days. Days on which Doyle hoped that just maybe everything was returning to normal. That everything would be alright, just like it used to be, and they could all get on with business as usual. There weren't as many of these days as there used to be and, even then, out of the blue, something could simply click inside Bellini's brain and he would turn. Like the time that Robinson himself had had a gun thrust against his temple for no reason at all and he counted himself lucky that the trigger



hadn't been squeezed. By thus time, six other people had not been so fortunate. All of them had been killed by Bellini himself. Not by Doyle. They were all low life, that much was true, Robinson accepted that. They were people who didn't matter to society, let alone to Bellini, not that that was a reasonable measure because at the moment nobody mattered to Bellini. That made seven people in total if you include Salim Malek. That was as many as Doyle had accounted for in his entire life, professional and private. Overnight almost, Bellini had become one of the biggest serial killers in recent years, Fred Shipman excepted of course, but no-one outside his immediate circle even knew that any crimes had been committed. That is, until the last one. The whore in the massage parlour. OK it had been cleaned up. Covered up. Tommy was getting pretty good at that. After all, he was getting a lot of practice and by now there was a small entourage following discreetly behind Bellini to tidy up whatever gory mess he left in his inexorable wake. The old bird who ran the club wouldn't talk, Robinson was certain of that. Neither would the girls. They weren't that stupid. But they were frightened, it would be a cold day in hell before any one of them would go into a room alone with Bellini, again. Everyone knew that he was a madman but it took a brave man to

bring it out in to the open. Kurtis Robinson was just brave enough and he knew that he'd never have a better chance to usurp Bellini. To do to him what he had done to the Malek twins and to assume control himself. Fear was spreading like a cancer through the Bellini's empire. Rapidly. Insidiously taking hold in every dark, unseen crevice. Robinson could draw upon, nurture it and watch it grow. Soon it would reach out beyond Bellini's insular little half-lit underworld and into the real world where ordinary people live. Then the shit would really hit the fan for them all. If there were any of them left by then. If Bellini hadn't killed every one of them first.

"Look at you, Frank" Robinson continued. He would have made a good psychologist. He was an adept at picking up on an individual's needs and fears and he knew, through years of practice, how to exploit them. "He's pushing you aside. How often does he use you these days? Hardly ever. It seems to me that as far as Bellini's concerned, you've had your day. I'm really worried for you, Frank. I'm pretty sure you're going to be next. There's an awful lot of rumours going about."

"What rumours?" Doyle tried to sound unconcerned.

"That you can't be trusted anymore. That you'd sell him out."

"That's bollocks. Who's saying that?"

"I know its bollocks. That's why I'm talking to you" Robinson studiously ignored Doyle's question. Like a seasoned politician the lies came easily to him "But does he? You're more loyal to him than anyone but that doesn't seem to count for much, these days, does it? Think about it, Frank. He's gone too far. It's not his fault, I suppose, but he's not normal anymore. Not rational, not like you and me. Let's cut the crap; he's gone fucking mad and we're all going to get it in the neck. And you'll be first. Mark my words. We've got to do something about it."

The conversation seemed strangely unreal to Doyle. He sat with Robinson at their table in the corner of the busy pub and he felt totally divorced from the Christmas revelry going on all around him. Businessmen in paper hats were having their once a year flirt with their secretaries; students, now on holiday were drinking far too much and becoming ever more raucous. Over the cheap P.A. system Roy Wood and Wizard were wishing it could be Christmas every day. Doyle didn't. His principal Christmas wish was that Roy Wood would shut the fuck up. There

was little seasonal festivity on his table. Peace on earth was an alien concept and goodwill to all men was a novelty that both Doyle and Robinson had long ago laughed into rejection. Doyle, like a latter day Ebenezer Scrooge, prayed sincerely that it would all go away. He wished that everything could be back to normal. But he didn't think that it ever would be and, in any case, he didn't know what he could do. Deep down, he felt that maybe Robinson was right. Don Bellini was in a downward spiral, accelerating towards his own destruction. It was just a question of who he would take out on the way and who he would take down with him.

"I know he's not been" here he paused searching his limited vocabulary for a suitable epithet, "alright for a while, now but maybe we can get him some help. Persuade him to see a doctor or send him away somewhere. Perhaps we could get in a shrink." The idea was stupid, even Doyle knew that but he couldn't just turn his back on Bellini without making some sort of an effort to save him. They'd been through so much together and hadn't Bellini had always been there to support him? Although he wasn't really all that much older than him, people used to joke that Doyle loved Bellini like the son he had never had – he certainly didn't love him like the son he did

have. People always took care that Doyle didn't hear them.

The irony of a psychopath like Francis Doyle giving advice on anyone else's mental health problems was not lost on Robinson but he made sure that he didn't let it show. "Get real, Frank. How are we going to do that? Even if we could get a shrink stupid enough to make a house call, Bellini would just tear him to shreds. And us, too, for calling him in. You *know* its true. He's beyond help, now. It's gone way too far for that."

Deep down inside, Doyle knew he was right. He nodded sagely, not knowing what else to do. He admitted his ignorance and desperation to Robinson. "What do we do then?"

"We do to him what he's going to do to us. You and me together. Only we do it first. I know you've been with the family a long time but, ask yourself this. Would his old man have wanted him to end up like this? That's not what I've heard about Tony Bellini." Doyle shook his head in tacit agreement and Robinson continued "We'll be doing him a favour, really. He's getting worse by the day. That little girl in the whorehouse was the last straw. She didn't deserve die – not like that. She's not even in our business or anything. Who's it going to be next?"

Some old boy going to pick up his pension and Bellini doesn't like the way he farts? Or a little kid in his push chair going down to the swings?"

This appeal to sentimentality was lost on Doyle. He didn't care about the O.A.P. or the child, and so he turned matters back to practicalities. "So, say we do him. What happens then?"

"We step in. We do him, just like he did Asif and Salim", his old loyalties still lay heavy with Kurtis Robinson however hard he tried to conceal them, "and then we run the show between us. I'll deal with the business side of things and you take care of the sharp end, make sure there's no hiccups or anything. We'll split the profits. Eighty, twenty. That's real money, Frank. Big money. You deserve it. With all due respect, Frank, take a look at yourself. Bellini's been keeping you down. Everything you've done for him. For years and years. And what have you got to show for it. Not all that much by the looks of it. You haven't got your own house, your own car. You've not even got your own bird. Nothing. You've taken all the risks for him. Its your life that's been on the line, not his. Countless times. He's been getting rich while you've just been getting by. Together, we can make things right, Frankie. All that you're

doing is taking what he owes you. Nothing more than that."

Robinson had heard that money, or rather the lack of it, had always rankled with Doyle. The trade on a man's greed had long been a profitable one and he thought that this should clinch his argument. He hadn't wanted to make the deal look too tempting, though. If he offered him too much Doyle would, no doubt, become suspicious and the last thing he wanted too do was to alert Frankie Doyle to the part he was really going to play in the master plan. Let's get the dirty work over with first. Make Doyle a part of it and not some maverick on the outside, intent on revenging his only friend.

"I don't know Kurtis. Its one hell of a big step to take. I'm going to have to think about it."

"No, Frank, no." The last thing Robinson wanted was for Doyle to think. "We can't afford the time for that. We've got to act and it's got to be now. Now or never. If we leave it any longer, Bellini'll get wind. He's bound to. You know he hears everything and I don't trust that bastard Tommy. I think he's suspicious of us already. I wouldn't be surprised if he wasn't the one stirring things up for you with Bellini." Divide and conquer – another old trick. "He's sharp though, I'll give him

that. He doesn't miss a fucking trick. As soon as he gets a sniff Bellini'll come for me. And then just being seen with me, is going to be enough to put the noose round your neck. You're already guilty in his mind. You're as good as dead now. Unless we take action."

Doyle could not see that this was exactly what Robinson wanted, binding themselves together in a common bond. Frank Doyle wasn't scared. It had been a long time since he had felt the luxury of this or any other real emotion. But he was worried. It all seemed too quick, to him. Then again, he told himself, once the decision was made, why wait? In his experience Doyle had found that decisive, fast action always gave you the edge. Sometimes it could be an edge for life over death. But to kill Don Bellini? His boss, his friend – after all these years?

"I don't know , Kurtis. "When are you planning to do it?"

Robinson hadn't expected it to be easy, although he had hoped. If he wasn't going to lose Doyle, he would have to push. Hard. "Now. Right now. It has to be this afternoon. Our lives aren't worth shit to Bellini anymore. You're nothing to him, Frank. Not any more. Granted, you used to be his best boy but that was a long time ago and he



was a different man then. He's right at the edge now, and one thing's for certain, he's going to pull us over with him. Unless we act first. Now. Today. He'll be locked away in his office and it should be pretty quiet this afternoon. We won't get any trouble from the boys. They mostly feel the same. They don't know when they can expect a bullet in the back of the neck. For no bloody reason." He spoke slowly now and emphasized every word clearly, deliberately. "It'll be a relief for them all. Believe me, Frank, I don't want to do it any more than you. But it's him or us. Surely you know that. Deep down. You saw him with that shooter at my head. I've never been so fucking scared in all my life. You saw the girl, too. It's not just outsiders he's killing, it's us too. We've all seen it happen before. Remember Matty Mason a few years back. Blew away half his own firm. And his wife and kids too. He's in a fucking straight jacket in Rampton now. Padded cell. The works. He's never getting out."

Doyle nodded at him and smiled wryly, of course he remembered Mad Matty Mason. Everybody did. When he went wild, on a rampage against his own firm with a sub machine gun that left the entire sub culture of the London underworld reeling. He thought that his mind was virtually made up now. "Let's have another drink first" he

said and he pushed his now drained glass across the table to Robinson. Looking at a frothy residue desperately clinging to the side of the glass but slowly and inexorably succumbing to gravity and falling hopelessly, helplessly to the bottom, Doyle thought he knew exactly how it must feel. He was a player in a game, always had been, he knew that. But now? Now he felt more isolated and alone than ever. It seemed like he was on a roller coaster, almost. Racing faster and faster to its unavoidable predestination. Once it was in motion, there was no way to get off. Doyle felt that he had nowhere to turn. There was no-one to trust, no-one to put his faith in.

\* \* \*

Robinson was right. Of course, he was right, he'd planned it all too well to make a mistake. This had been no spur of the moment idea, dreamed up over a lunchtime beer with Frankie Doyle. It had been conceived in the wake of the Maleks' death and he had been biding his time, watching as Bellini' insanity grew, enveloped him and became more apparent to his immediate circle, until it had finally reached the point where no-one

felt safe any longer. Paranoia within the firm was growing daily – Bellini wasn't alone in that. But Robinson's timing had to be perfect. If he made his move too soon, Bellini might just get the benefit of the doubt and retain enough loyalty to survive, and to have Robinson presented to him, trussed up on a plate, like a stiffed turkey, dressed and ready for Christmas. If he acted too late, Robinson might get his own head blown off in one of Bellini's irrational outpourings of hate and vitriol. This had very nearly happened, as he had just told Doyle. It was only thanks to Tommy distracting him that he was still alive, changing the subject as if there was nothing strange going on, as if replastering the walls with contents of Robinson's skull wasn't that important after all and could, perhaps, wait until tomorrow or the day after. He owed Tommy one for that. He wouldn't forget, he promised himself. What he had said to Doyle about not trusting him was just a front, a smoke screen to make him feel even more isolated than he really was. Tommy deserved a promotion, he thought. There'd be no more cleaning up for Tommy when Kurtis Robinson was in charge.

That afternoon Bellini was in the north London office. Robinson had made sure that he would be. The pool hall was open for business as usual

but he could see no problem in that. The Maleks had had their office sound proofed, they too had liked to keep their business, particularly the more noisy aspects, those that involved a greater or lesser degree of screaming, private. Nor would there be anything unusual about Doyle and Robinson arriving together. Everyone was surprised how well Robinson had been assimilated into the new firm. He did everything that was asked of him and more. He got on with everyone, even Frankie Doyle would let him buy him the occasional beer. Bellini had been pleased with him, too. At the first hint of trouble he had been prepared to discard Robinson as a casualty of war, but it hadn't been necessary. Their one little contretemps had not been of Robinson's making, he was just unfortunate enough to be in the wrong place at the wrong time and as soon as Tommy had calmed him down, everything been forgiven and literally forgotten. Robinson had proved that he was good at his job. He knew the Maleks' business inside out and as far as Bellini had been able to tell, and he had looked hard, he had no fiddles of his own, either minor or major. He was a good man. A sound man. A man you could trust.

Robinson was also a cautious man. He had approached Tommy some weeks ago now. Not

overtly. He was far too clever and wary for that. An insidious subtlety was more his style. He manipulated him sophisticatedly, cleverly guiding Tommy along all the right paths and channels, pushing and directing him carefully until the ideas that he had surreptitiously embedded into his mind formed themselves into the plan that Robinson was now pleased to call Tommy's and congratulate him for it. Tommy was on the same eighty, twenty deal that had been promised to Doyle, the only difference being that this time Robinson intended to stick to it. With Doyle he had had to be more cagey. Dropping the odd hint into conversation, here and there. No more than that at first. Tommy, you could read like a book, he had no secrets from anybody, but Doyle was unpredictable and Robinson had left it to the last day to approach him outright. Even then he tried to disguise the fact that his whole plan was premeditated and that there were others involved. That's why he had kept Tommy's name out of it. If Doyle had responded badly, kicked up a fuss or rejected the plan out of hand, Robinson had intended to kill him in the alley on the way back to the car; he had a gun hidden in the waistband of his jeans, concealed by his old brown leather jacket. It was just a contingency plan and it hadn't been required, thank God. There was no way he would have been able

keep Doyle's death quit for long. Now all Doyle had to do was to back him up. He didn't even need to do the shooting, although Robinson would have preferred if he had volunteered. Doyle's presence alone was all that Robinson required.

As they drew up to the pool hall, Robinson asked his partner in crime to open the glove box. He pulled out two handguns and he examined the pair of Model D Mabs minutely. Good enough. Nice weapons. Self loaders, compact too, small enough to conceal easily but a bit too petite and feminine for Doyle's liking. He liked a gun to look like a gun, to feel like a gun. He liked to feel its latent power transfer and merge with his own in an unnatural symbiosis of man and machine. He checked the clips. They were both fully loaded and he handed one to Robinson who tucked it away in his jacket pocket.

"Now, then?" Doyle asked enquiringly, the final vestiges of his reluctance still lingered with him.

"No second thoughts, Frankie." It was more an instruction than a question but nevertheless Doyle shook his head resignedly. He allowed Robinson to continue. "Good man. I knew that I could rely on you. Let's get it out of the way, Frankie. Just you and me together. We'll walk

straight in and do it. If he's not on his own, we'll wait in the room outside." Robinson knew this would not be necessary. He had organized things too minutely for it not to run like clockwork. It was what he was best at. "It'll be all over in a minute or two and we can get back to some sort of normality. And we can start earning some serious money."

It was nearly dark by now, although the luminous dial of his cheap watch revealed to Doyle that it was not much more than mid afternoon. He felt the light drizzle of a gentle shower of rain chill his face and he pulled back from it instinctively. It was bitterly cold and he wrapped his jacket tightly around himself and pulled up his collar. The pool hall was utilitarian, stark and grey in the way that only the worst of buildings built in the sixties can be. Its drab concrete reflected the bitter austerity of the December weather and it seemed to brace itself defiantly against the biting north wind. But its windows revealed another world. Through the flaking paint of their frames and their grubby, nicotine stained panes of glass, Doyle saw into a parallel universe. He saw the same gaudy decorations that had been used for the last five years dangling from the same place on the ceiling. The sad, plaintive tree in the corner, its fairy lights flashing in time to the

falsely seasonal music clawing its way from the stereo, seemed to be shedding its pine needles already, despite there being still three days to Christmas. Faces stood at the bar and at the tables, trying for one brief festive season to forget the sadness and pain of their hum drum lives in a haze of booze and unwarranted Yuletide cheer. It was a world that Frank Doyle had long ago rejected. Looking in on it through the window, as an outsider, he felt no regrets.

Robinson and Doyle walked into the club through the bar. Silently, tensely they made their way past the pool tables, ignoring the barman who was too busy at work to even give them a second glance, ignoring the drunk slumped dejectedly in the corner trying to persuade someone to buy him one last drink for the road, ignoring all around them, until they came, at last, to the rear offices. Anticipation and adrenaline were rising and Robinson could feel his heart start to race and his chest tighten, with the thought, the smell, of the kill to come. He wiped the sweat from the palms of his hands casually against his trouser legs and hoped that the ice cold beads he felt appearing on his brow existed more in his imagination than in reality. Tommy, as usual, sat as sentinel, guarding the doorway and access to Bellini.



"Is the boss in Tommy? On his own?" Robinson's voice was controlled, modulated and measured. It betrayed nothing of the anxiety that was racking his brain, tearing at him from the inside out and telling him to cut and run. Telling him that he must have forgotten or miscalculated something. He knew he hadn't and so stood his ground and faced his fears. Francis Doyle, as usual, felt nothing.

Tommy had made sure that Bellini was alone, just as he had been instructed to. "Yeah. He's through there, Kurt. How are you doing, Frank?"

Doyle made no reply and the two men entered the inner sanctum without knocking. Bellini appeared to be in one of his more rational states of mind and looked up from his computer notebook to be confronted by Doyle and Robinson, guns raised and pointing directly towards his face.

"What the fu..."

He had no time to finish the sentence before the retort of the gun shot rang around the office and Tommy, who had heard its muffled echo even through the extreme sound proofing, rushed in.

"Fucking hell!" he exclaimed as he tripped over the body of Kurtis Robinson. Robinson looked surprisingly peaceful as blood seeped gently from the small hole at his right temple. It was surprising because the left half of his head and a good portion of his brain were splattered against the wall. Francis Doyle stood to one side his gun still raised, hand, as was his habit, turned ninety degrees from the conventional stance, with his palm facing downwards towards the floor. He did not find it more effective to shoot that way, quite simply he had seen someone do it in a film many years before and he thought it looked better. It was a practice he had affected many years before during his long and brutally bloody apprenticeship on the streets of south London. For an instant, just before his death, Robinson had glanced sideways at Doyle, alerted, perhaps, by a sudden impression of his movement. Instantaneously he was crucified by a complete and final realization of his impending fate. In the midst of the bitter Judas kiss of his betrayal, he had been betrayed himself. Robinson couldn't move, he couldn't shoot either. There wasn't time for that, but it took only a fraction of a millisecond for the electrical nerve impulses in his brain to become aware that he was facing death at the cold, callous hands of Francis Doyle. There was a clear, accusing look in Robinson's eyes as

Doyle pulled the trigger. It seemed to cut straight through his external, tangible persona as if it could see deep within him and was searching for his soul. He doubted if it would find one. But he recognized the look, it was one that he had seen before. Many times. Was it fear of death? Or just of the unknown, perhaps? Was it the chemical effect of the adrenaline or maybe just a last, wild, hopeless, helpless shock of anticipation? Doyle didn't know. Neither did he much care. Not really. He was, though, surprised by the extent of the damage and the mess of what had once been the side of Kurtis Robinson's head. What sort of bullets had Robinson been using, he thought. Not the usual bog standard 32 automatic ammunition, that's for sure. The wound would have been much cleaner with that. Explosive bullets, dum dums, glycerine tipped perhaps. Nice touch, Doyle thought. It was really quite appropriate.

Doyle had needed to act quickly, to get in before Robinson could shoot and his reflexes had not let him down. Right up until the very last moment, he hadn't been sure, not one hundred per cent sure anyway, which way he would turn and who he would shoot. Would it be Robinson or would it be Bellini? Even now, after the event, he wasn't sure if he had done had made the right move.

Pretty much all of what Robinson had said was true. He knew that but in the end, without it ever being consciously articulated, his loyalty to his boss had proved to be his primary consideration. Maybe now, if nothing else, he had just cemented over a few of the cracks which had started to appear insidiously in his relationship with Bellini during the last few weeks. Doyle had made his decision and now he would have to accept the consequences, whatever they might be. He would take his chances with Bellini. There were no longer any alternatives available to him.

Bellini seemed to be remarkably unfazed by even this dramatic turn of events. Very little in his life seemed real anymore and although this had been unexpected he had relished the experience. In a way, he almost regretted that Robinson had not shot him. It would take more than a bullet to kill him, he thought, and he wasn't even sure if it was now even possible for him to die at all. He was on a higher plane than ordinary men. The laws of physics, let alone the laws of England, no longer applied to him. But he did not blame Doyle for denying him his experience. It wasn't his fault. How could he be expected to understand? He was just a little man, doing his best, no doubt, but involved in things that were the vastness of an eternity beyond his

comprehension. He walked across the room, stepped deliberately over Robinson's prostrate body and embraced Doyle warmly, with real affection. "Francis." That was all he said. No other words were necessary. Bellini felt that the bond between them, which he knew had become less stable although he would never accept that his own tortured ego and id were to blame, had suddenly strengthened. They were, perhaps, kindred spirits after all. Doyle had become, for him, an avenging angel. But he was a possession to be treasured only for so long as Bellini felt the need. Thereafter, like everything else, he would, once again, become expendable. Seconds extended into minutes and the two men stood in the comforting, caressing warmth of their embrace. Doyle felt better, normally he didn't relish such close bodily contact with anyone and certainly not another man. But this seemed somehow acceptable to him. It was right. Healing. Broken bonds, he thought, were being sealed, once again. Eventually, after what by now seemed like a silent eternity to Doyle, Bellini broke his reverie. "Tommy" he called up "you'd better clean up this mess."



## **Chapter Seven**

It had not been a good Christmas for Micky Johnston and he was glad to see the back of the decorations and of all the festivities and the forced goodwill he had been made to endure by the few people who could force themselves to care enough to bother. Still, for the first time he was able to force himself to entertain the possibility that both Doyle and the surgeon may have been right, that he had been lucky. Carole had sworn after her encounter with Francis Doyle, that she would never have him back inside the house again. She'd never even see him again. She'd sworn it on her dead mother's grave. This was his world, not hers. She didn't belong to it, she never had and she wanted no part in it. It was his own fault, deep down he knew that, but it didn't stop him from trying to blame somebody else. Anybody else. When Micky had heard that the heat was on he had abandoned Carole. He'd just cut and run in a blind, unthinking panic. It seemed like a lifetime ago, now. Shortly after he'd gone, Carole had been paid a visit by a menacing, gaunt man with a scarred face who had, so she thought, only one eye. It was a man she knew by reputation only.

But what a reputation. My God, had she been frightened. She had good reason to be. She didn't know what Micky had done, that was the truth. But Doyle wouldn't believe her. If Micky had got any money, she'd be the last person that the little bastard would share it with or even spend it on. She told him that but it wasn't what he wanted to hear. He'd be better off talking to one of his cheap tarts. He probably knew who they were. He probably set him up with them. This was a mistake, Doyle was not the sort of man to provoke like this. She soon found this out as he punched her, with the full extent of his strength, straight in the stomach. He punched down, straight from the shoulder, twisting his hips as he threw it to put all his weight behind the blow. Carole fell instantly to the floor, writhing in an unspeakable thunder clap of agony. This was nothing like the way Micky used to hit her. Nothing like it at all. It was as an amputation is to a graze. Her whole world seemed so unreal, as it everything had become suddenly brutalized. She was physically unable to answer him when he once more demanded to know where Bellini's money was and as he bent down, crouching next to her to could feel the heat of his breath against its cheek, she could almost taste its rank putrid stench and she felt a wave of nausea sweep across her. He spat a hideous green concoction



of sputum, phlegm and catarrh directly in her face. It stung her eyes and smelled like the worst sulphurous pits of hell. She had wanted to scream but she couldn't. Rising to his feet, Doyle kicked out at her left hand and stamped down with the heel of boot viciously. He ground it into the floor, applying his full weight, taking delight as virtually every bone in her hand was crushed. Carole Johnston had been left with a lasting legacy of her visit from Francis Doyle. For the rest of her life, her left hand would be useless, a withered lifeless testimony to her visitation from his callous brutality.

It would have been worse, she had no doubt of it, had Doyle not then turned his attentions to the house. That was the last place it would have been – she knew that – couldn't he just believe her?. But much to her amazement, he found the money. Or most of it, at least. Doyle looked at her as he walked sedately down the stairs, a suitcase in his hand.

"You tell Micky that I'm coming for him." There was more menace in his dull flatly delivered words than Carole could have ever imagined.

Her relief, when she finally heard the front door slam, engulfed her totally and she began for the first time to cry, to wail, to howl. She had to crawl

to the telephone and it seemed like an eternity before the ambulance finally fought its way through the busy streets belatedly to her rescue. How could this monster have done such atrocities to her? And how could that monster have left the money in her house? Without even telling her anything was wrong. She hoped the one eyed man caught up with him. She hoped he bloody killed him.

Today Micky was alone in the house. Carole's hatred had burned fiercely but it was short lived. She had relented at the moment when she first saw him in the hospital. All the promises she had made herself simply dissipated into thin air. Sitting next to him, her own hand swathed in bandages and with a pain so great that it caused her to wince in agony with even the slightest movement, despite herself she felt pity for her husband. It was not love. That had died a long time before. But lying there, consumed as he was in his misery, depression and grief, she shared his suffering with a compassion that he really did not deserve. It had taken her almost two weeks before she could force herself to confront him and come to the hospital. This was only slightly longer than it had taken the combined efforts of doctors, nurses, psycho- and occupational therapists as well as the seemingly

ever present psychiatrists to make him look at the permanent and brutal reminder of his deformity, the stump where the shattered remnants of his leg ended. In a life spent avoiding confronting his problems, it was the hardest thing that Micky Johnston had ever had to do. In a way it seemed almost like his leg was still there. He knew that it really wasn't, of course, but he could still feel it, he thought, still feel his foot, not where it should be, but higher, somewhere around where his knee had once been. It was the strangest sensation but it seemed so real. Phantom limb syndrome. That's what the doctors had called it – apparently it's not uncommon. They had tried to explain the psychology of it, but Johnston did not comprehend. All he took in was that it might get better, but it might not. For all practical purposes, no-one understood how the brain produced these self delusions. It may be just yet one more facet of his disability that Johnston had to come to terms with and adjust to. And slowly he did start to adjust, almost despite himself. He began to accept what he could not deny. To look at what was left of his leg without feeling physically sick. God knows, it wasn't easy, but at the hospital he was surrounded by professionals. They had helped him through the tears that came at night. Every night. They helped him face the future, to

accept, to realize that maybe he did have something of a future after all. What helped him most of all to get through each bloody, tearful day was the certainty, the blind, unquestioning, absolute faith, the definite knowledge that he, Michael Kenneth Johnston, would absolutely, undoubtedly, unequivocally, kill Don Bellini and Francis Doyle.

When the doctors finally signed his discharge documents, it was to Carole's house, he could no longer think of it as their house, that the ambulance took him. It was only temporary she told him, he had to understand that and things wouldn't be easy for either of them. He'd have to live downstairs until his leg was able to support the prosthetic limb and with her hand she wouldn't be able to help him out physically to any great extent. Money was tight, too, but there was nothing unusual in that. It was a battle Carole had faced throughout her married life. She was now back at work, which helped. Of course, with her hand her manager had had to arrange to move her out of the typing pool and onto the factory floor, with a consequent reduction in wages, but it was good for her to be back to a semblance of her old life.

Micky had had one hell of a fight with those bastards at the D.S.S. to claim any benefits for himself. At first it didn't seem that he existed, he wasn't on their computer database, which they took as the only positive proof of intelligent life. He had never been what you might call a regular contributor to the National Insurance fund. But in the end, after more than one visit to the house to ensure that he wasn't just another disembodied voice trying to make a fraudulent claim, and many threats and much screaming in return, he eventually received a giro which Carole was able to encash for him at the nearest Post Office. It wasn't much but with what they had between them, they wouldn't starve and the council was receiving the rent regularly enough to keep them almost happy.

He'd had his first fittings for the artificial leg before he left St. Thomas' Hospital. When he saw the limb for the first time it re-opened all the floodgates of his emotions and the tears began to flow incessantly. But this was merely the residue of his fears and self loathing. He was over the worst of them by this time. And although it hurt with a rare, deep pain, a pain so exquisite that he sometimes had to give vent to it and scream at the top of his voice, the amount of time he could spend on his new leg gradually

increased with practice as did his mobility. By now he had been able to abandon the stick and was walking well enough to make his way, with a slow, stiff legged limp, out of the house on occasions and down to the paper shop or to the pub. Things were progressing, as the doctors liked to say, as well as could be expected. He could buy the Sunday papers once more and now he was able to look throughout them without having to get Carole to vet them first to make sure that there were no graphic pictures of African landmine victims to, without warning, at the turn of a page, force him to confront the reality of his injury. He could look at his fellow patients in the physiotherapy sessions without feeling the need to avert his gaze. What had been to Micky Johnston, his acceptance of his leg had finally started to be blessed with the casual, unthinking acceptance of the commonplace, the everyday. Like Don Bellini he too had grown and become something more, something greater than he had been before. He still did not know how he was going to get to Bellini, he had heard rumours that he had lost the plot. That he was running out of control. He half expected that someone else would get to him before he was ready to and that worried him. It worried him a lot – it had to be him. He needed to be the one to exact his own retribution. But, for

Doyle, his plan was already forming. He owed Doyle. He owed him big time. It wasn't just for himself, it was for Carole, too. And the new Micky Johnston, unlike the old version, would always settle his debts.

He was dozing on his chair with the incessant, comforting drone of daytime T.V. that had become his constant companion when he heard the piercing, metallic ring of the front door bell. He looked down at his watch. It was already 3.30. He was half an hour later. Never mind, it didn't matter much, they still had plenty of time. Carole wouldn't be back from work for a good couple of hours yet.

He rose from the chair, still gingerly. The screaming pain of the early days had transformed itself into a muted dull ache but, even so, Johnston, had learned to take even simple activities, like rising from a chair, cautiously. He made his way to the door with a rolling, almost nautical gait, swaying slightly, like a drunken man in a strong wind. His movements were deliberate and mechanical. They would improve with practice. This he had been told although he wasn't quite sure that he believed it. He opened the door and welcomed his visitor warmly.

"Good to see you, Tommy. Thanks for coming. I don't get too many visitors these days."

"It's good to see you too, Micky. You doing alright?" Tommy was careful not to say how well he looked.

"I'm getting by. You know how it is. Come in and sit down." Micky returned to his chair and slumped back into it, easing himself down as gently as he could. He didn't bother turning off the T.V. and seemed to keep casting an occasional glance at it as they spoke, as if he was worried about missing whatever banal trivia might appear next. Tommy sat facing him, on the old faded blue velour sofa which had seen better days long before Carole had bought it and now sat resplendent in its faded luxury with various odd coloured patches on the arms where the material had worn through.

"I was surprised to hear from you" Tommy admitted.

"You haven't said anything about it to Bellini, have you? Or Doyle?" Johnston looked for reassurance.

"No, of course not. I told you I wouldn't. It wouldn't have been a good idea for me to



mention your name. Not the way things are at the moment.”

“Yeah. I’ve heard things are getting bad. I’ve still got one or two friends left.” In reality he had none. “It’s true then. Bellini’s out of his tree?”

“Half way down at the very least. It’s all over the manor. Common knowledge. Kurtis Robinson – you know him? Well, he went to do him just before Christmas but Frank Doyle took his head off. I tell you, Micky, it’s all getting out of hand.”

“That’s why I wanted to see you, Tommy. I’m worried. As far as I was concerned this whole business was all over.” Micky was well rehearsed, he had gone over this conversation a thousand times in his head, rehearsing it with the same attention to detail that Antony Sher might give to a lead at the R.S.C. “He got the money back and I was taught a lesson. Well and truly. It was all in the past to me. But now. God knows what Bellini might do.”

“There’s nothing I can do to help you, Mick. I’m on the fucking line myself. Every day. If he hears I’ve even been here, he’ll go ape shit. The man’s beyond paranoid.”

"Don't give me that crap, Tommy. I don't want much from you. Just a favour. Only a little one – it won't put you out. I need you to get me a gun. Bullets, too. I don't care what sort as long as it shoots."

"What the fuck are you planning, Micky? Don't be stupid. You can't take on Bellini."

"Whose being stupid now? Of course I can't take him on. I'm not planning anything like that" he lied. "I know I couldn't stand up to him. What could I do in this state? For God's sake I'm a fucking cripple, man." He banged the palm of hand down hard on his artificial leg and it there was a hollow ring as the carbon fibre resonated as if to amplify his words. "And you were involved in this as much as Bellini and Doyle. Don't try to deny it, I'm not stupid. You owe me, Tommy. All I want is an insurance policy. Self defence. Just in case they try to finish me off for good. Carole's scared. She's really, really frightened. And so am I. Who's to say he won't just come round, pay us a little visit. From what I've heard, that's his style nowadays. Or his pet monkey Doyle, he'd shoot his own grandmother if Bellini told him to."

Tommy conceded the point but he was still far from sure. He had no wish to put himself on the

line for this little scumbag. "I don't know, Micky" he said, with an overt reluctance.

"It'd be a terrible shame if Bellini were to hear that you'd been paying me social visits, wouldn't it? I don't suppose he'd be too happy." Blackmail seemed to suit Johnston. Perhaps he had missed his vocation in life.

What a little bastard, Tommy thought. He knew that he shouldn't have come. He should have just hung up when he heard who it was on the other end of the phone. But he had been too soft. "OK. OK. I suppose I can sort you out with something but it won't be cheap."

"Don't try that on me, Tommy. You know I haven't got any money. And you owe me, remember. You can lay your hands on a gun easily enough. They're not exactly in short supply at the Mount of Venus, are they. And from what I've heard, Doyle's got a fucking arsenal at his place. Borrow one from him." Johnston liked the sound of that. It would be very apt.

"Oh yeah, that'd be a good idea, wouldn't it?" Tommy said ironically.

Micky laughed. Just a little. "You'll find me something, Tommy. Doesn't matter what.

Anything will do, just so long as it shoots straight. I know you can do it. I've got every faith in you."

Tommy wished that he didn't have. "Alright. Alright. I'll see what I can do." He knew that laying his hands on a gun wouldn't be a problem and he would make sure nothing would lead back to him. And what if Micky was mad enough to have a go at Bellini? In the best case, the stupid little fuckwit might get lucky and kill him. Tommy felt that his life would be a whole lot easier and a damn sight safer then. In the worst case, Bellini would take him out. Or Doyle. Or he'd do it himself if he had to. In any case nothing could come back to haunt him. No-one knew Johnston had even been in touch with him and the shooters that he could get hold of were not the sort that could be traced. He probably really did want it just in case Bellini turned psycho on him. It wasn't outside the bounds of possibility.

"Well done." Johnston continued, pleased with his *fait accompli*. Now, how about a nice cup of tea?"

"No thanks," Tommy retorted harshly harshly, "I've spent long enough here already. I'll let myself out."

"Tommy," Johnston summoned him back coaxingly just as he was opening the door. "I need it tomorrow. No later. Carole's out from half eight. Bring it round any time after that."

What a cheeky bastard, thought Tommy as he slammed Micky's front door a little harder than was necessary and opened his car door with the remote control key from across the pavement. He started up his Mondeo, indicated left and pulled away from the kerb. Sometimes it seemed that the whole bloody world was giving him instructions.

Some fifty yards further up the road, behind Tommy, a second car started its engine and pulled out into the traffic, keeping a discreet distance behind. The man at the wheel of the ageing, anonymous white B.M.W. 3 series coupe, which served, in effect, as Bellini's pool car, had known exactly where to go. Francis Doyle had been to Cumberland Road before. He had seen him clearly. You couldn't mistake Tommy's obscenely red hair. The report had been right then. Bellini would owe Stavros a nice drink but he doubted if the debt would ever be settled. That sort of good practice had died out, ages ago now, it seemed. It had been simple chance. Nothing more than that. But it is chances

that can change history. And this was the sort of chance that the tenuous thread of men's lives hang upon. Tommy had been alone in the pub that lunchtime, he had got there early, the others hadn't arrived yet. As far as he could remember, he hadn't even said Micky's name. He didn't think he had, but he must have done. The call to his mobile had been so unexpected that it just came out in surprise; "Micky Johnston? I didn't expect to hear from you" that sort of thing. But Stavros was a sneaky little bastard. He wasn't the sort to miss a trick, especially if he thought that it would stir up a little trouble and perhaps raise a little cash. He'd kept his ears wide open and had taken everything in; putting two and two together and coming up, quite correctly for once, with four. One of Bellini's best boys was meeting up with Micky Johnston. That's a turn up for the books. There'd have to be something in that. A few shekels perhaps. He'd rushed to Doyle, who, for once in his life played it cool. No point in telling Bellini and getting Tommy killed. Not yet, there might be nothing in it. In the reliability stakes, Stavros was hardly Reuters News Agency. Besides, if he thought about it, he almost quite liked Tommy, but then, most people did. He didn't want it to be true. But if it was true, why?, Doyle thought. Tea and sympathy, perhaps? Tommy was a nice bloke but that was

hardly his style. And he surely must have known that it wouldn't matter to Bellini. Tommy was enmeshed in a wicked game, a dangerous game, a game of chance in which the odds were stacked heavily against him. But like the true gambler, he kept on playing regardless.





## **Chapter Eight**

It's a mixed up, messed up, bugged up world when you can't tell the police from the criminals.

Charlotte Ashworth sat on a bench outside the café on the south western corner of the Serpentine. It was nearly mid-day and although the lake was grey and uninviting as she waited, the sun had finally broken through the cloud and Hyde Park had, at last, started to look a little more hospitable. He was late. She had been here, at the same time for the last three days and had become increasingly worried as her expected contact each time failed to arrive. She watched as a groundsman on the opposite bank of the lake drove his powerful tractor mower across the grass like a rally car, turning far too sharply and accelerating as fast as his vehicle would allow. The noise of the tractor carried across the stillness of the lake, above the chatter of children and elderly couples sedately strolling, hand in hand. She tried to let her mind wander, just for a moment to escape the brutal realities of twenty first century London. She imagined the Regency beaus and dandies parading along Rotten Row running behind her. She imagined herself as the object of their grand passions and

heaving desires. She tried for a moment to imagine but failed. That wasn't her, dressed up in bonnet and crinolines at the constant beck and call of some second rate Mr. Darcy. No, she'd do better to think what she would do to the little shit when he finally turned up. Pull him out, that's what, if she had any sense. Ashworth didn't know what was going on but she knew that something was wrong. That much was becoming increasingly obvious and she certainly didn't like it. She was supposed to be the one in charge and here he was running around like some loose canon, breaking contacts and not filing reports. Those that he did file told her nothing, absolutely nothing. She would crucify the little bastard, she thought. There was no way the glittering star of her career was going down the pan for him or anybody else. She didn't know the half of it. It wasn't her fault. Not really. OK maybe she had given him too much of a free rein but that was the nature of the beast on jobs like this. You had to trust the man on the ground, he was the one in amongst the action – after all he had to think on his feet, improvise and act for himself. He wasn't in a position where he could come running to her every time he encountered a problem, even if he had the inclination. But what would happen if the trust that she put in him was misplaced?

Silently, a young man sat down beside her. He was tall, dressed casually in sand coloured cargo pants and a blue bomber jacket. He could be spotted at two hundred yards by the great shock of his ginger hair. It was so violent that you could call it, without too much exaggeration, orange. In his childhood, his mother had insisted that it be kept short, shaved close to the scalp. That had always rankled with him, he was proud of the distinctiveness of his hair, it made him stand out, made him special and now he wore it long. Today its natural curls were pulled back into an unkempt pony tail.

"Where the hell have you been, Tommy? Why no word? You know the rules." Ashworth started aggressively, as she meant to go on. She was angry with him and made no attempts to hide it. Tommy knew that he was late but he couldn't tell her about the package he had had to drop off to Micky Johnston in Cumberland Avenue earlier that morning.

"And you know as well as I do that the rules can't apply when you're in undercover, not when you're as deep in as me. The rule book has to go out of the window, if you want to stay alive. If they want me to run errands, I run errands. If they want me to babysit someone. I've got to do

it. That's why I haven't been able to make the rendezvous for the last few days. Ma'am." Her title was added pointedly as an afterthought and there was more than a hint of sarcasm in the way it he spat it out. Ashworth could tell. Its formality seemed strangely incongruent to both their situation and their conversation.

Detective Sergeant Tommy Windsor had come to Ashworth's squad especially for this job. He was a good man. His record proved that and every one of his former colleagues that she had spoken to gave him a glowing report. He had no family and had successfully completed all the training. That's why he volunteered for the job. He also had a recommendation from her boss, Chief Superintendent Goodwin, to back him up. Everyone agreed that he had been the right man for the job. But he'd had ten months *in situ* now, nearly a year to get noticed by doing a few menial jobs on the periphery of the firm. After this time, any trained copper worth his salt should have been able to get close to Bellini. But Tommy hadn't been able to get a sniff of anything at all. For all he could prove to Ashworth, Bellini might be the legitimate pillar of society that he always claimed to be. All Tommy had been able to produce was rumour and conjecture. Not much more than hearsay.

Definitely nothing that they could use to put him away for more than a few months at best, maybe not even that with the quality of his lawyers, and that was not the purpose of this operation. She wanted, no needed, Bellini to go away for good. Of course, Ashworth knew only what Tommy told her, his official line, what his reports said. But she wasn't stupid. Tommy wasn't her only source of information about Bellini and her informants had started using Tommy's name with increasing regularity. Nothing concrete, of course. There rarely was around Bellini, that was always the problem. But she had heard enough to make her start to worry. And Tommy's reports that had always been on her desk dead on time were now starting to drift in late and, latterly, on occasions not at all. Their appointments were made and broken without word. Her initial concerns were beginning to develop into something more deep seated. If she'd known half the reality of the situation, she'd have known that she was finished in the Force, that Tommy Windsor had flushed her fast-track, gilded career down the toilet of his own ambition. It had started out that way, at least.

Getting Bellini brought to book had been his sole target. It was the only thing that mattered, at first. But that hadn't lasted too long and as he got

closer to the centre of his empire, he became gradually seduced, by the power, by the free vent to his aggression that he was for the first time afforded. And by the drugs. Although he tried to hide it from Nate and the others in the gang, it was an open secret that Tommy was now a serious smack head. No-one seemed to mind too much and he had never let it interfere with business; he was always there when he was wanted and did what he was told to. But the drug habit crept up on him insidiously and by this time, he was using nearly as much as Don Bellini. Thank God for his copper's salary; Bellini was a tight bastard to work for, a bit like the Queen, and Tommy could never have afforded it without that regular income, even with the plethora of free samples he regularly got from Bellini's distributors. In the firm, he was with his mates and he felt a camaraderie that, he imagined, must have been a lot like it was in the Great War, in the trenches of the Somme or of Ypres. In fact, he thought, it was almost like he was fighting a war. Perhaps that was it. It was a war that he'd always been fighting, and now he had found for the first time which side he really wanted to be on. He felt close to Bellini, despite all of his only too apparent problems, and to the others as well, even Doyle. There was an honesty about Frank Doyle that he felt he had never seen in anyone

else, ever. Tommy had started down his rocky road, at about the time Micky Johnston had got shot. He told Ashworth of the 'rumours' that Johnston had fleeced Bellini, and that Doyle had shot him by way of retribution. But that's all they were, he said, just rumours. He told Ashworth that Bellini wouldn't open up to him. He was far too cagey to trust him. But things were beginning to run deeper. His reports studiously avoided any mention of his own part in acts of violence and, of course, there had never been any record of his negotiations with Kurtis Robinson. But it had really been when he and Nate had laid to rest the bodies of Asif and Salim Malek in the concrete foundations of the South Essex Construction building plot near Dagenham, now enshrined forever safely below their fifteen thousand square feet factory unit of a mausoleum, that Tommy finally had to accept that he had crossed the line. He had no regrets, he wasn't sorry, not in the least. He didn't even mind having to do the clearing up. Not too much. It gave him a sense of purpose to his life – one that the Police had never quite reached. In some ways he even admired the creature that Bellini had transformed into. He lived for the moment, he was above all laws even those he which he himself had created. Tommy didn't know where it would all end. He was on a roller coaster and he was

determined to make it to the end of the ride, wherever that was. He studiously avoided thinking about the ultimate consequences of any of his actions.

Ashworth continued her harangue, "What's happening, Tommy? You're not telling me anything and the word that I'm getting from my contacts is scaring me." She ran her hand seductively, carelessly through her short blonde hair, as if she was unaware of how attractive men found it. She was not. "I'm getting told that Bellini's becoming increasingly unstable, 'a fucking madman' we're the actual words used." The profanity seemed strangely out of place on the beautiful scarlet slash of her lips. Perhaps it even became a little sanitized. "More than one person has said that he's on some sort of killing spree. I've even been told that he's killed a prostitute and your name came up in the conversation too. That's serious stuff, Tommy. A serious accusation to be made against a police officer, whatever the source. We can't just wash over it. I need the truth from you and I need it now. The whole truth. Nothing but. Tell me. What do you know about it?"

"Where are the bodies, Ma'am? If half of what you're hearing is true, south London would be



knee deep in the corpses of villains and whores. I've heard the rumours too and that's all they are. Rumours. It's what these people feed on. Has anyone broken their parole? Missed their court hearing? Nothing out of the ordinary, I bet. You know how it is. Men like Bellini live on their reputations. It's how they get the respect they need to keep the lid on their operations and I've got to do the same if I'm ever going to nail him. I knocked off a whore last night. It was me that did for Micky the Fish. It's all bullshit but it's what they want to hear. It makes me sound a big man. You know the sort of thing. I need to create a reputation if we're ever going to get this to work and finally nail him."

It was true that there had been no bodies. No missing persons reports either. But then again, these were not the sort of people that were missed. And if they were, they would unlikely to be reported to the police. Besides, Tommy himself had covered their tracks, done the spadework, and done it very competently.

"I know how it works as well as you" she agreed but was hardly pacified. "But what about the Maleks? Strange how they go A.W.O.L. and Bellini just steps in and takes over their manor."

"That's old ground, boss. You've had my report. It was all hearsay, anything we could get against Bellini would be circumstantial. It'd be laughed out of court, not the Crown Prosecution Service would let it get as far as court. You know as much as I do. What we need is to be able to collar him for something we've got hard evidence for. Incontrovertible proof."

"And you don't seem to have anything that fits the bill. Not a thing. My sources also seem to imply that you're closer to Bellini than you're letting on. Why the hell are you playing it down? It's what we've wanted, what we've been trying to achieve. You've got nothing to hide, have you, Tommy? Tell me you've got nothing to hide."

Tommy regretted that he had not been able to persuade Ashworth to identify her informants before he went in. If he ever found out who those slimy little bastards are, they wouldn't know what had hit them.

"Of course I've got nothing to hide. And I'm playing nothing down to you – but I play it up to other people, like I said. It takes time to get in tight with a firm like this one. Look at Frankie Doyle, for instance. He's as close to Bellini as anyone but he's been with the family for years. It's like I say, boss. You've got to talk big. If you

tell everyone you're a big man often enough, sooner or later some of them are going to believe you and then you're involved. These people aren't Einsteins, they live by their reputation. They come from the street. They haven't got degrees in criminal psychology." His comment was pointed, but she didn't rise to his bait.

"I don't feel that you're being open with me any more, Tommy. There are too many stories floating around that are too different to yours. It's been over ten months now and what have you got to show for it. Jack shit, that's what. Almost makes me wonder if you're still on the right side, Tommy. We can't go on. Not like this."

He couldn't let her get away with insinuations like that, especially as they were so close to the truth. He went on the attack. "What do you mean, too many stories? Do you put more bloody faith in your informants than in me? Thank you very bloody much. And you think I've gone native? With respect, Ma'am, that's a fucking joke. It doesn't happen in the real world. It sounds like you've been watching too many re-runs of the Sweeney. This is London, not U.K. Gold, and I'm a trained bloody professional. I resent accusations like this – totally unfounded – being made against me. And I can't believe you'd take

them seriously. I know it's taken a while but you can't expect to get close to someone as big as Bellini overnight. It's a miracle that I've got this far so quickly. You should be thanking me, not hauling me over the coals. Not accusing me of something that's so far fetched that it's totally bloody ridiculous." His voice had been rising as his agitation grew and it took an effort to calm himself and he paused before starting again, more slowly this time. "I put my life on the line every day with these people. Seven days a week. Just meeting you is dangerous. What if someone walks past and recognizes us? What if someone borrows my mobile and checks your number? These are hard men. What the hell do you think they'd do to me if they even got a whiff that I was Old Bill? I'd be posted back to New Scotland Yard, piece by piece. And they wouldn't use a fucking stamp either." He laughed, as best he could. It was a vague half laugh, the sort that you give to the offensive or absurd. There was no real conviction about it. Deep down he knew that one day, his time would come, that he would be called to account. By either his superiors in the police force or by Bellini himself. He didn't know which was worse. Neither was an attractive prospect and he felt that he was in too deeply with both sides to even try and break free from either. The only thing he was sure of was that

when he went down, as he knew he surely must, he intended to go down fighting.

"Course I'm not saying that you've gone native." Ashworth back tracked once she knew that Tommy wouldn't be bullied. "I'm just asking you to see how it looks from my perspective. I'm accountable too, you know that. I have to report to Goodwin and the powers that be upstairs. You're going to have to realize that something's got to give and you haven't come up with the goods in the best part of a year. I'm pulling you out, Tommy. Right now. I haven't got any alternative. The way things are developing, it's just going to get more and more dangerous for you with less and less chance of getting anything in return. You're coming back with me now." Ashworth meant it as more of a threat than anything else, she wanted to see how he'd react. He didn't disappoint her. Tommy's face, naturally pale, blanched. Against it, devoid as it was of its last vestiges of any colour, his hair seemed to glow like fire. Ashworth desperately wanted to tell him to die it – black, brown, blond if it could be done. Anything. It broke her concentration and she had to almost physically restrain herself from saying it, as she did every time they met.

"No. Absolutely no way" he spluttered, half choking on the words as he vomited them forth. "You can't do that. We're in too deep. Both of us. If you pull me out now we've wasted the best part of a year and Bellini's still no nearer to being nicked. I'm making real progress, I'm starting to get closer to him, he's starting to open up to me now. I think he's just beginning to trust me. It's what we've all been waiting for. Once we've got that, we'll get something tangible, something that his brief can't knock over in half an hour in The Bailey. And then we're away. You know I can do it, boss. What would the Chief Super say? It was his baby to begin with. He'll have egg all over his face with the brass. His budget will get cut and that means our budget, too. Who do you think he going to blame for that?"

She knew that he had a point but what really worried Ashworth was that in pulling Tommy out she'd have to lay all her fears about him on the line to Goodwin. Could she justify them? Was there actually a possibility that he really gone native? They were big allegations; ones that she could not make on supposition and gut feelings alone. In reality, she had nothing to substantiate them with, apart from Tommy's lack of success and a few casual comments from narks. And how reliable were lowlifes like them, she thought? Yet

there remained a doubt, nagging at her, tearing her in two directions at the same time. She felt that she was between a Scylla and Charybdis and was worried that they were going to crash together with enough violence to put the golden girl in a traffic warden's uniform.

"OK" she conceded. "You've got a week. Just one week. No more. If there's nothing to show, you're coming home. Have you got your report?" This would give her time to work on Chief Superintendent Goodwin and try to convince him that they were flogging a dead horse. She had to make him understand that Tommy had not been the right man to get in tight with Bellini. She knew that she would have her work cut out. Tommy was Goodwin's blue eyed boy. It was him who got him posted to the squad in the first place and he had been his choice for this job, not hers. Ashworth wouldn't have been surprised if someone had told her they were related.

Tommy breathed a palpable sigh as he pulled the report from the inside of his bomber jacket and handed it over to her. He felt sure that Ashworth must have seen his relief but he no longer really cared. He didn't want to come out, to go back to the routine hum drum of police work, he knew that now. His certainty came at

the very moment she told him that he was being withdrawn. He wasn't even sure that he could come out. Not now. It wasn't just that he was worried that the real extent of his involvement in the nefarious affairs of Bellini's mob would come to light. He could almost certainly explain that away – anyone talking would be bound to try and implicate the copper once it became public knowledge that that was who he was. That wouldn't get much credence and there's very little in the way of forensic evidence that can be extracted through fifteen feet of concrete. It was more than that, he liked it too well in the heart of the organization. They were his brothers, kindred spirits. If nothing else, he too had bought himself a little time. He knew that he would have to try and come up with a plan. Perhaps he could let them have something on Doyle, that shouldn't be too hard to engineer. He could be sacrificed to the greater good. It would be a shame but it's a dog eat dog world, he thought. Maybe that's what he liked most about it.

In the café behind them, Doyle the watcher drained the remnants of his cup of tea and poured himself another from the little aluminium pot that sat still on the moulded plastic tray he had left on the table in front of him. He sat a couple of rows back from the window to avoid



any casual observance and had arrived at a discreet distance behind Tommy. He looked tired and unwashed, because he was. In fact he had spent the night outside Tommy's flat, his good eye trained unblinkingly at the front door. That morning he had followed him back to Cumberland Avenue. Tommy was carrying a small package. A pay off, perhaps? Why? Doyle had no idea. Someone else could work that out. Not that it really mattered to him. Tommy was now history. He had shown his true colours. Doyle had recognized Charlotte Ashworth instantly, she had neither the face nor body that, once seen, could easily be forgotten. It was clear to Doyle. Tommy what not the personable, straight as die, friend to all that the world took him to be. He was a police informant, a grass. He had to be. True, he hadn't seen Ashworth actually pass him any money. She probably wanted to check out whatever was in that envelope he gave her first. Tight bitch. Or maybe he was taking payment in kind. Doyle thought for a moment. He wouldn't act now. First, now he had the unquestionable proof of his own eyes, he would go to see Don Bellini and take instructions from him.



## Chapter Nine

"Why didn't you come to me sooner, Francis? I don't like secrets. You know that." As he spoke, he ran his fingers sensuously across the oak panelling of his ornate desk. He liked the feel of the grain, the way it was smooth and inviting, leading drawing him ever onwards and yet resisting him at the same time. He liked the way that it felt simultaneously alive and yet dead. Outside the Mount of Venus, it was still dark, in fact at 5 a.m. it would be an hour and a half, maybe two, before day would really begin to break. To Doyle, Bellini seemed relatively calm at the news. When he had called him the night before, he hadn't become enraged, and demanded to see Doyle then and there and, as far as he knew, Tommy still remained part of this breathing world. Doyle hadn't slept much that night. At the moment, an interview with Bellini was the last thing he felt like; history had taught him that a messenger bearing bad news was always likely to be the first one shot. Maybe literally. But Doyle was surprised. Bellini appeared to reacting well to the news, surprising as it was.

"I had to be sure, boss. I followed him after he met with Ashworth but he came back here. I couldn't say anything with him outside. He could just walk in at anytime. You need time to consider your position, to decide the best way to play it. You don't just want to jump in and blow his head off, do you?"

"Don't I?" Bellini paused. "No. You're right, of course, Francis. I don't care about Charlotte Ashworth. She's a hard faced bitch, we all know that, and clever with it. That's a dangerous combination in a woman but Tommy can't have given her much. OK say he knows where a few bodies are buried but I've got alibis that Rumpole of the Bailey couldn't shake." He was right, even now, even when deep into his rages, even in the carnage of the debauched violence to which he sometimes suddenly descended, he knew how to cover his tracks and he did it like the expert he was. He was still a professional. A lot of powerful men owed him a lot of 'favours' that he could call in, he held a lot of dirt on a lot of dignitaries, secreted away for safe keeping, that would finish them if it ever saw the light of day. There was no shortage of lawyers and government officials at various levels, who could be called on at short notice. He even had a cabinet minister, but he was saving him for something special. The

photos of him and the rent boy were too good to give up lightly, they'd taken some getting. Once in a while Bellini would take them out of his safe and examine them in minute detail as he had done a hundred times before. Just for the simple joy that holding such power over one of the most influential men in the land gave him. The irony was that the photos were all set up, the poor bastard was doped out of his brain. He didn't know what was going on, he hadn't even been able to get it up, not that that mattered. The poor bugger wasn't even bent for God's sake. That's what appealed to Bellini most of all. He's probably the only one in the cabinet who wasn't.

"Even if it came down to it," he continued, "what jury would take the word of a lowlife little shit like Tommy. A grass. A bloody copper's nark. I wouldn't have put him down for that. Not in a million years. I thought that I could trust him, but he deceived me, Francis. Maybe I'm losing my touch."

Doyle smiled and immediately wished that he hadn't. "We all trusted him. None of us could ever have dreamed that he'd do this. He was very plausible. That's why he was so good. He took us all in. I wouldn't be a bit surprised if he hadn't cooked all that shit up with Kurtis

Robinson, as well. I wondered if he had done it all on his own, didn't you?"

"Yes. I did. You could be right again, I suppose. You are a wise man, Francis. But all that's in the past. Now, thanks to you, we're a happy little team once more."

Doyle couldn't tell if he was being serious and changed the subject, hurriedly. "But what do you think he was doing with Micky Johnston? Two visits in as many days. That's a bit much. Don't you think?"

"He must have been trying to get him to talk. For the lovely Miss Ashworth. That would explain the parcel he took him. Money, payment in advance for services to be rendered. It's got to be" Bellini was certain. It was the only thing that could explain it. "Don't worry. You've got no problems there, Frank." He reassured, implicitly drawing a veil over who had instructed Doyle to pull the trigger. "He's had his chance to talk months ago and I knew he wouldn't take it. He didn't have the balls then and he hasn't got them now. He's just trying to pocket a bit of cash for himself. He'll give them nothing in return." Neither of them remembered or chose to remember that Stavros had said that it was Micky who had phoned Tommy, not the other way around, and that

Tommy had seemed genuinely surprised to hear from him. Bellini was thinking about the bigger picture nowadays, he no longer focused much on detail, and Francis Doyle was generally more comfortable when all the thinking was left to someone else.

"So you think it was money in the package? The one Tommy handed over to him" Doyle questioned him, knowing that he was covering old ground but he wanted to make absolutely certain that there could be nothing more insidious afoot.

"Johnston'll take their money, won't he? He's always been good at that. He'll string them along for as long as possible and then, when the cash is all spent on cheap whores and cheaper booze, he'll suffer from selective amnesia. He'll be too scared to go out of his front door once he hears about the sad demise of poor, unfortunate little Tommy. And I want him to hear, Frank. I want everyone to hear. I want it on the national bloody news. I'm serious." Doyle could see that it was. "No-one fucks with Don Bellini and gets away with it."

"What do you want me to do?"

"Just keep an eye on him today. Wherever he goes, you're ten paces behind. Keep it normal. Make it subtle, if you can, don't let him know you're there, I don't want you to scare him off. But make damn sure that he does nothing to compromise us. Don't hit him. Not yet. Call me on my mobile tonight. At ten o'clock. I'll have your instructions ready for you then. We'll take care of him tomorrow. We won't leave it any later than that."

To both Bellini and Doyle, Tommy Windsor was no more than a dirty, cheap little Judas, betraying his friends with the bitter sting of a kiss, for thirty pieces of silver and immunity from prosecution. Had they known the truth, they would have been more concerned. Even Bellini might have worried.

"Frank, you've done very well. I'm very proud of you. You handled things well, professionally, just like I would have done." He added "Thank you" almost as an afterthought and was suddenly dismissive as if he regretted having to say it, to admit that he was even slightly beholden to anyone at all. In reality, though, it was his primal desires, his deepest needs, that began to rise up through his subconscious and hit the surface like a geyser suddenly spouting its blisteringly hot



sputum high into the air, that made him seek solitude. "Off you go now and keep that little bastard under close tabs. Oh, and leave a note on the desk outside that I'm not to be disturbed."

Doyle nodded and silently made his exit. Before the door had even closed Bellini had started to roll up the sleeve of his striped City shirt and was feeling blindly in his desk draw for the comfort of his syringe and for the blessed release it afforded him.

\* \* \*

It proved to be a quiet day for Francis Doyle. Tommy didn't seem to have much to do, Bellini certainly hadn't summoned him, and he didn't surface before eleven thirty. Doyle had waited patiently outside his flat, checking interestedly every time the front door opened or shut as the house's various occupants went about their lawful or not so lawful business. After that, there was good hour and half waiting outside the Blind Dog while Tommy was inside enjoying its liquid hospitality and a decent helping of shepherd's pie. From there he finally went into the Mount of

Venus and, ten minutes later Doyle was able, at last to come in out of the cold for the first time since the early morning. But still there was nothing doing. Bellini hadn't been seen all day. Thank god it was one of his quiet days. Everyone was grateful and one or two of the lads voiced the opinion openly. After an hour gainfully studying the racing form, Nate and the one or two others who had reported in, made their carefully considered selections and Tommy volunteered to venture out and place their bets on the last race of the day at Kempton Park.

"I'll come with you, Tommy. I could do with stretching my legs." It would be easier to go with him openly than to have to tail him, Doyle thought.

"Sure, Frank. It'll be nice to have a bit of company. I didn't know you were into the horses." Doyle shook his head. He had never had enough money to be able to afford charitable donations to the bookmakers' benevolent fund.

The pair casually strolled the short walk, no more than a couple of blocks to the nearest office of Ladbroke's. There was still a chill in the air. It seemed to be lingering this year. It matched the mood in south London. Doyle wondered if it really could be due to the global warming. He

had seen some poncy scientist on telly say that because of global warming, ironically England could get colder rather than hotter. It was something to do with half of Greenland melting and diverting the Gulf Stream. That's what he thought the man had said but he couldn't really be sure. He tried to explain to Tommy but failed miserably. He hadn't understood it himself and he had turned over to watch the Bill half way through instead. That would teach him for watching Channel 4. They've never been the same since they got rid of that red triangle, years ago, the one which told you that a film might be worth watching. What's it to me anyway, he thought. If it's true, he'd buy another jumper. He unwrapped a piece of chewing gum and casually threw the wrapper onto the pavement. He didn't think to offer a piece to Tommy.

They passed the blackened window of the bookies. It was a place on the margins of society as *they* would like it to be. The moral minority, so keen on dictating and forcing their own standards on everyone. It was as if its corrupting influence has to be masked, obscured from the sight of an easily shocked society by opaque glass, Second World War blackout paint and shabby paintings of what Doyle believed to be horses, greyhounds and men in gaudy nineteen seventies style

football kits. As they opened the door they were hit by a thick blue plume of tobacco smoke and the heat of betrayed anticipation. Doyle spluttered and could feel himself beginning to perspire with the sudden increase in temperature. He wasn't used to this, he only smoked when he was in prison. He didn't like to smoke, he never enjoyed it, but it was written somewhere, deep within the small print of the penal code that you had to. Tommy thrust him the scrawled note he had made back in Bellini's office, with the unintelligible names of over bred and under priced equine stock and he handed over a small wad of cash.

"You write out the slips, mate. I need a Jimmy" he explained and headed towards the dark recesses of the corner of the room.

Doyle took what was offered quietly. He didn't like to admit that he did not know how to write out a betting slip and took his place at the small counter that ran around the wall to look for inspiration. He found none and turned his gaze instead to the wide variety of life assembled there; the long term unemployed desperately celebrating giro day by giving as much of their benefit as possible to the bookmaker rather than to their wives and kids; the lads from the nearby

offices who had popped out un-noticed to place a quick bet and relieve the awful tedium of their soul numbing routine; the elderly lady and her shopping trolley investing a pound or two from her pension on a Yankee that had no hope of ever coming off; a local publican, flush with his takings, betting far too much and occasionally winning; a young man disinterestedly feeding the insatiable mouth of a fruit machine, oblivious to the expectant chatter of the punters and the bank of T.V.'s each telling a different story of triumph and disaster. Doyle didn't like this place much. He could see that the owners had clearly spent quite a considerable sum on the décor, trying to shake off their somewhat seedy image. There were nice chairs and a coffee table on which to put your indeterminable drink from the vending machine. There was even a potted plant. Or Doyle thought that it was probably a potted plant. The room was spacious but somehow it managed to seem crowded even when it wasn't. It had probably been quite nice when it had first been done up, he thought. For the first day or so.

For Tommy, of course, all this was a familiar sight. He had spent more time in places like this that he cared to remember. He thought back to his dad illegally sneaking him in for a quick look round when he was kid before making him stand

outside with a Coke while he watched the races live on a Saturday afternoon. Places like this brought back good memories to him, warm memories of a happy childhood but he couldn't allow himself the luxury of sentiment as he walked through the door marked toilets. He had business to attend to.

The gents was on his right and the little used, but statutorily required ladies was on his left. He walked straight past both and rapped on the 'Private' sign of a functional, white painted panel door.

"Come in." The voice was weak and effeminate. It was totally out of place coming from the man sitting at the desk. He was big, and looked as though he knew how to handle himself and indeed, not least because of his voice, he had had to do so on numerous occasions. His was a weather beaten face, lined with experience, good as well as bad. He had seen a lot of life, the seedy side and a good deal of laughter too. This room, like the main one was smoky and too hot.

"Hello, Charlie. You got it for me?"

"Course I have, Tom." Charlie pulled a small brown paper bag from the drawer of his desk and handed it to Tommy who deposited it deep into

the recesses of his jacket. "Take the weight off your feet. Have a drink?"

"I can't. I've got company outside. I'm just paying a visit to your loos now."

Charlie took the ten twenty pound notes that were offered to him and slid it trustingly into his trouser pocket without examining them. After all, Tommy had one of those faces you knew that you could trust.

"“Enough said. Just as a matter of interest, what do you want it for, Tommy?"

"Kinky sex games, Charlie, what else?" he said with a smile playing on his lips and a twinkle in his eye. Their always seemed to be a child like sense of mischief about Tommy and as he smiled, Charlie laughed back. You'd never get a straight answer out of him, either. It was probably best that way.

"I wouldn't put that past you" Charlie said good naturedly and this time it was Tommy's turn to laugh.

"Look, I've got to dash. I'll see you around. And thanks a lot for this."

On his way out, he pushed open the door to the gents, just to make sure Doyle wasn't in there. He wasn't and moving back through into the business area he saw him, standing motionless, surveying all before him as if it were a work in Tate Modern. Tommy thought for a second, perhaps it could be. If Tracy Emin had put together the assemblage of vagabonds, misfits and the hopeful, Charles Saatchi could probably be talked into paying a hundred thousand or so for it.

"Are we all sorted, Frank?"

"I thought I'd leave it for you." Doyle refused to admit that he was out of his depth.

"Oh, right. No worries." Tommy took back the hand written note presaging the future prosperity of the Bellini's inner circle and wrote out four individual betting slips. "Are you not going to have a flutter then, Frank? Rock of Ages, that's who I'm on. It's worth a tenner each way. It'll cleft for me." Doyle shook his head. "A fiver, then?"

"I'm not a gambling man. You know that."

"You're never going to get rich with that attitude, Francis." Doyle suspected that he was probably right.



Tommy took the slips to the counter at the back of the room. He asked for the odds on two of the horses and took them. The teller duly stamped them and he handed over the cash. The two men once again braved the cold and made their way back to the rear entrance of the Mount of Venus.

There was rising excitement as they watched the race on the fourteen inch portable in the outer office. Even Doyle could feel the tension. The picture on the small set was none too clear but Nate could see well enough that Peaceful Dove was more than three lengths ahead and was stretching out with only the final flight of hurdles left to clear. By the time she crossed the finish line he was shouting louder than the commentator.

"Yes! Thirty quid at seven to one! Yes! Yes! Yes! Come to daddy! The drinks are on me tonight boys!" His excitement had got the better of him for a moment.

"For Christ's sake, Nate, keep it down. Bellini's still in there." Tommy had brought him back to the real world – he killed the young man's euphoric sense of joy with the mere mention of their lord and master's name. Nate wisely became suddenly taciturn. "You don't want him to take you off the job do you?" Tommy tousled

his hair playfully, like a favourite uncle, to show that there were no hard feelings and Nate smiled once again thinking of his windfall. Two hundred and ten quid, he calculated. Very nice too.

"You had a tip, didn't you? And you didn't let us in on it. Jammy bugger."

"It's just skill, Tommy, a gift I've been given. Didn't you know, I'm a golden child! I just can't lose."

"Yeah, not much, King Midas" Tommy said ironically as he tore up his own slip and tossed it vaguely towards the general direction of the bin.

"Right" Nate said as he rose to his feet. "I'm off to get my wages from Ladbroke's, then who's for a beer? My shout."

"Not me, mate" Tommy replied. "There's nothing doing here so I'm going to get off home early."

No-one even thought to ask Francis Doyle if he felt like a drink and no-one noticed as he reached for his coat and slipped silently out, following Tommy until he was sure that he was picking up his car. Unseen, he ducked around the corner and opened up the B.M.W. That morning, Bellini had left the keys with him, he knew that he would

need them. He waited for Tommy's Mondeo to pass by and slipped out into the traffic two cars behind. Doyle didn't like driving much, he worried about his bad eye. He wasn't even sure if he was safe to drive, at all and avoided it wherever possible. He made an exception for this car, though; he liked driving the B.M.W. It wasn't a new motor. It wasn't even luxurious, not like Bellini's flash new Jag, although it was plenty good enough. He thought, because it was white it wouldn't have looked out of place at a wedding, not if you decked it out with a ribbon or two. But even the association with weddings didn't dampen his enthusiasm for it. It was a shame that it was German. Doyle didn't like the Germans, not that he could ever remember actually meeting one. But he liked their car. With its sports suspension, it would hold the road like a limpet and at pace it cornered like a rally car. If you put your foot hard down, you could accelerate your way out of virtually any trouble. That was if you were pushing it but Doyle had no need to today. Tommy, it seemed, was heading back to his flat just like he had said. Doyle was relieved, he had had visions of having to follow him at high speeds all across London. But instead, he just following sedately behind the Mondeo. As he drove, he ran his hands around the leather of the large steering wheel, now worn

smooth by years of use, taking pleasure in every easy gear change he made with the small, close ratioed stick. He was almost sorry when Tommy pulled into his road, abandoned his car and ran purposefully up the steps to the front door of the large Victorian house, where he rented a small flat on the second floor.

Doyle parked the B.M.W. a little way down the street, facing the same way as Tommy's car and he made sure that he had a clear view of Tommy's front door. He desperately felt the need to urinate but that would have to wait until it was properly dark and there were no passers by to take offence and call the police. Always provided, that was, that Tommy was settled in for the night.

He was. Or so it seemed. Eventually Doyle had been forced to get out of the car and take a pee against its near side wheel arch. It seemed like sacrilege to Doyle, almost like he was defiling something sacred and he hoped that no-one had seen. But soon he was back in the car. He had been sitting in the same position for hours. God knows he felt stiff. He felt that if he moved, bits of him might fall off. He hoped that, if they did, they were not bits he regularly used. He didn't want to get out again and take a walk around to ease the cramp that was starting to bite sharply into his

right leg, so he tried to move it as best as he could where he sat. He had to be ready, he knew that, alert and waiting. Besides, if he was up and walking around when and if Tommy came out, there was a greater chance of being spotted. It was bad enough being in a white car, a white car that Tommy knew and who's number plate he'd recognize. But that couldn't be helped. He'd have to stay back. Be careful and give him plenty of room. At least, it was dark now, he thought. That would help. Most people would have been bored to the point of insanity. Sitting hour, after endless unchanging hour, staring with an intense unbroken gaze at an old green door with flaking paint on the opposite side of the road, some way in the distance. He watched a few people occasionally enter, a few leave. But the man he wanted, his quarry, never moved. Doyle, though, wasn't bored. His brain seemed to just switch off, be set to standby mode in the way you only do to T.V. sets in hotel rooms.

He looked at his watch. Christ it was ten past ten and he hadn't called Bellini. He reached into his coat pocket and pulled out his functional Siemens mobile phone. It was old now, and 'pay as you go', but that was all he needed and all that Bellini would stump up for. It had been the cheapest he could find in the Argos shop in

Oxford Street as he jostled the tourists, hating every moment of it, but it was good enough for his purposes. Doyle didn't need the latest technology. He didn't need to send e-mails or input polyphonic ringtones. God knows, he had few enough people to telephone. Apart from tonight, and this wasn't just to talk. He needed to turn on the car's courtesy light, just for a moment, to see what he was doing and it went straight off again as soon as he'd pressed and held the number two button and Bellini's own mobile phone had been speed dialled.

"You're late, Francis. I expect punctuality. Why must you constantly disappoint me?" His tone had changed completely from this morning and Doyle thought it best to draw a veil over it, if he could, and without apologizing he started to briefly outline Tommy's movements for the day, few as they were. Bellini seemed relatively satisfied. After receiving his report, he gave Doyle his detailed instructions. They surprised him but they were simple enough, he'd be able to follow them, hopefully without too much difficulty. As soon as he'd finished Bellini hung up without the pleasantries of a goodbye.

Doyle didn't put his phone away. Instead, he searched the Siemens' memory for another

number, located it and hit the central button with the phone symbol to dial. It took five rings before Tommy answered. He sounded agitated. He was clearly on edge and his voice betrayed him.

"It's Doyle."

"Hello Frank. Is everything alright?" It was a reasonable question. Frank Doyle was not best known for his social intercourse and a phone call from him was far from an everyday occurrence.

"Everything's fine. I want to meet up with you. Talk to you about Mr. Bellini."

"What? Is there a problem?"

"Not over the phone, Tommy."

"You don't want to do it now, do you? I've had half a bottle of Scotch and I feel a bit pissed." He didn't sound drunk to Doyle, although he didn't seem, somehow, all there.

"No. Tomorrow morning. Early. 9.30 at the Tower of London. I'll meet you at Traitor's Gate."

"What?" Tommy was nonplussed by this. "Why not my place? Or yours?" It seemed a bit too

dramatic for Tommy's liking. Not the sort of thing that would be Doyle's idea.

"I want to get off the manor and I don't want anyone to see us together, not after all that shit with Kurtis Robinson. What I need to talk to you about doesn't need an audience."

"But why the Tower, Frank? It's full of bloody tourists."

"That's exactly the point. We're not likely to bump into anyone we know. Or, more to the point, anyone who knows Bellini. We'll just merge in with the crowd. Faceless. Besides, I've never been there."

"Nor me" Tommy half laughed. If that's what Doyle wants, that's what Doyle will get. "OK Frank. I'll be there 9.30 at Traitor's Gate. I expect it'll be sign posted. I'll see you then." Bloody hell, did mad Frankie Doyle have hidden depths after all? A culture vulture? And a sense of humour, too? Somehow, Tommy doubted it, but what choice did he have? He'd have to go along with it. Things were escalating for Tommy Windsor, catching up with him so fast that they loomed large in his rear view mirror, just waiting for the chance to overtake. He knew that he had to act and he had spent most of yesterday, after his



meeting with Charlotte Ashworth, thinking, coming up with the first stage of his plan. He had spent most of today convincing himself that he really had to go through with it. To see it through to its bitter conclusion. Although it was drastic, it might take the heat off him for a while. That would buy him a little bit more time. And it was time that he needed most of all. Time to think. To give things a chance to settle down. As for Frank Doyle, he was tomorrow's problem, not today's. Tommy felt that, now, he could only deal with one problem at a time. Anymore than that and he felt that he would snap. Maybe Doyle was genuine, regretting now that he had turned his back on Robinson. Perhaps now he wanted a bigger cut for himself. But all that would wait. It would have to. Now he had business to attend to and he had to get ready to go to work.

Doyle had sensed that something was rotten with the state of Tommy and he had decided to wait around a bit longer, maybe all night if he felt it was necessary. He had all the equipment he needed with him for tomorrow morning's meeting and if he smelled a bit rife, well, people would just have to put up with it. Tommy had seemed a bit too edgy when he had called. Doyle didn't like it much but he thought that he had probably just scored a hit of his smack. In fact he had.

Perhaps he was suspicious of his request. That didn't matter. Just so long as he showed up. Or perhaps he was up to something else.

Doyle didn't have too much longer to wait. It was a little before midnight when Tommy left his flat, his bomber jacket zipped up tightly against the bracing chill of the cold night air. Doyle followed his Mondeo through the almost deserted streets. There were few cars about at that time and Doyle had to hang well back to make sure that Tommy wasn't aware that he was being followed. He needn't have worried. Tommy had his mind on other things as they made their way the short distance to Fulham. Pulling into one of the myriad of the expensive streets off the Fulham Palace Road, just a stone's throw from the old cemetery, Tommy slowed and found a parking spot. Some way behind, Doyle did the same. He watched as Tommy, now on foot, turned left into a nameless road with lofty houses and flat conversions that were very nice now and had once been even better. He was just quick enough to see him take the next left turning, cross the road and walk up the small path that led to an impressive, stained hardwood front door with two ornately decorated stained glass inserts. The house was in total darkness. Tommy unzipped his bomber jacket and seemed, as far

as Doyle could tell, to be checking something in an inside pocket. He roughly rubbed his across his back, almost as if for re-assurance and then delved deep into his trouser pockets, producing a pair of tight fitting black leather gloves. So, no social visit then, Doyle thought to himself. Tommy took out a credit card and a thin wire that served him as a skeleton key, and got to work on the lock. He made short work of it. All those years in the Met. had taught him something. Even Doyle was impressed at the speed with which he accomplished his entry. He's done that before, muttered Doyle casually, under his breath. He had no intention of following Tommy inside the house, but he walked past, on the opposite side of the road, and checked the number of the house. He saw it clearly, the door had been left ajar but it was virtually imperceptible. Doyle retraced his steps and at the end of the road made a mental note of the street name. He planned to go back to the car and call Bellini again. He probably wouldn't be asleep. In any case, he doubted if he would mind being woken up for this. One of his contacts in the filth could check out the address for him in the morning, but, by the time he did, who ever's house it was, Doyle thought, Tommy would be dead by then.

Now inside the house, Tommy made a distinct effort to regulate his breathing, not to let it betray his presence. He had seen the deliberately distinctive red box of an alarm casing high on the wall of the house, but he knew it wouldn't be on while the occupants were at home. He had been to the house before and he thought that he could remember the rough layout, but he took his time, and allowed his eyes gradually to adjust to the darkness. It was only when they had, that he pulled out his torch. It was little bigger than a pen and the beam that it emitted was seemed so tiny in the Victorian vastness of the old house. But it was powerful enough for his purposes. He made his way slowly up the stairs, careful to place his feet at the very edge of the treads. These old houses would creak like the devil and he needed to be as quiet as possible. He didn't want anyone to wake. At the top of the stairs, he saw that the nearest door had been left open and by the glow of the night light he saw the sweet, sleeping face of a child. Alice was six now and was as blonde as her mother. She would be a stunner too, break a few hearts in her time, he thought. When they had been introduced she shook his hand politely and addressed him as Mr. Windsor. All the time, she couldn't take her eyes off his hair, she had never seen anything quite so wonderful, she thought, and Tommy, in turn, had been

captivated by the rarity of her innocence. That had been along time ago. A whole bloody lifetime ago. He pulled her door shut and moving towards the front of the house, he came to the next door. This one was closed but through it he could clearly hear a light, rhythmical snoring.

From the pocket, inside his jacket he pulled the vial that he had obtained from Charlie earlier that day. It contained chloroform and he poured the entire contents on the two large cotton wool pads that had been supplied with it. The now empty vial was safely returned to his pocket and he opened the door. It groaned, almost inviting them to wake and Tommy winced. But the snoring continued as regular as before. He followed his pen light around the bed, careful not to bring it too near to the faces of the couple sleeping there. He could make them out well enough, the outline of their bodies, so close together that they were indistinguishable from each other, almost as if they were one single person. He wasted no time and held the chloroformed pads, one in each hand, tightly over their faces, making sure that their mouths and noses were fully covered. He had used enough to knock out a rampaging bull elephant. The opiate acted so quickly that Steve did not ever awake but Charlotte Ashworth did. She tried to struggle, to fight both him and

the drug, but the intoxication was too compelling to resist. His eyes widened in fear and before she finally succumbed, she stared into his eyes, with a gaze so intense, so powerful that he felt it had pierced his soul like a laser. At that moment Charlotte knew Tommy Windsor intimately, completely, right down to the very core of his being. She hated him.

The child had to be next. He had no intention of killing her but he didn't want to disturb her and set her off screaming. The house was detached so the neighbours shouldn't be a problem. He really did not want to have to kill the girl. He returned to her room gently and kneeling beside her placed one of the pads carefully to her face. This time he didn't press hard, but left it in place long enough to be quite sure that she wouldn't wake up.

He moved back to the master bedroom and surveyed the scene. Stretching his right hand behind him, towards his left shoulder he reached underneath his jacket and drew the machete from the sheath strapped tightly to his back. It was a fearsome weapon, over twenty inches in length, blade and handle. Thick and curved, its steel glistened like silver even in the dull light of his torch. It was sharp, too. Tommy had spent

most of the evening with a whetstone seeing to that.

Charlotte was lying, contorted in the terror of his initial attack but Steve seemed to be quite clearly at peace. Tommy pulled them apart. He needed a little room to work. Looking at the blade of his knife, he examined it minute detail. He was pleased with his handiwork. That would so the job.

Standing beside Charlotte, he raised his machete, holding tightly in two hands and brought it down with all his might, clefting open her forehead, high, just below her hairline. With that first blow, Charlotte Ashworth, mother to Alice, wife to Steve, detective inspector to the Metropolitan Police Force, a woman with so much still to offer the world, her prone body already lifeless, died. Tommy was surprised just how easily the machete cut through the bone and into the brain tissue. The noise had been gruesome, that was true enough and blood spurted out, covering the knife, splattering him, running down the chiselled perfection of Charlotte's face and drenching the bed. But he had a strong stomach and this was proving easier than he thought. The second blow came easily too, so did the third. The fourth removed

the top of her skull, and with it, sliced off the top of her brain completely. He picked it up and looked deep into it. He had expected the brain to be a grey gelatinous mess, but this was stained red, dyed crimson with her blood. He felt that he had destroyed her completely. He had shattered everything that she had ever been, both body and mind.

What came next hadn't been planned, it wasn't what he rehearsed, but he couldn't seem to stop himself, not that he really tried, so enraptured was he with the moment. He pulled off the duvet that had now slipped to the foot of the bed and he raised Charlotte's white satin night gown, high above her waist. His gloved hands was now as red as her bed. He looked at them distastefully and he pulled off his right glove and, careful to keep it free from her blood, ran his bare fingers against the lips of her vulva; gently at first, but with ever increasing pressure he invaded her, communing with her in her death as he violated her. Tommy didn't know why he was doing it; he didn't want to do it but it excited him, aroused him, drew him deeper and deeper in and it seemed like minutes before he could finally force himself to stop. He wished instantly that he hadn't done it and he knew, at that moment, the moment when he took himself from her, that he



couldn't let Steve see what he had done to his wife. Not killing her, that didn't seem to matter so much to him, but he had violated her spiritually as well as sexually. Steve was a good man, he mustn't ever know what had happened to his wife. He pulled his glove back on and went round to the other side of the bed. He rolled Steve sideways, onto his belly. Picking up his huge knife, he swung wildly, uncontrollably, at his neck and felt it slice through his vertebrae and sever the spinal column. With his second blow he decapitated him and his head rolled pathetically to the side of the bed and fell plaintively to the floor.

Tommy sat there, on the floor, for some twenty minutes. He was swathed in blood. He knew that he would have to wash it off as best he could. He couldn't go out onto the street looking like this. He hadn't accounted for the ferocity of his attack. He was supposed to have been clinical, but to his own surprise, he had become like a wild beast, a shark in the uncontrollable fury of a feeding frenzy. He comforted himself that he was thinking rationally now. The shoes would have to go, too many bloody footprints around the bedroom, but then so would all the clothes. That could wait for tomorrow. All he'd need now was to wash off everything that was visible and get a

big coat to cover the rest. He'd noticed Steve's overcoat next to Charlotte's on a hook by the front door as he came in. That would have to do.

Doyle was still at the wheel of the B.M.W. when he saw Tommy hurrying, not running, back to his car. He'd been one hell of a time and if he had been robbing the place, he didn't seem to have a lot to show for it, just a solitary bin bag and a different coat. Scant reward for such for the an enterprise upon which he had expended so much time. It didn't seem right to Doyle, although he was too far away to see any blood or to notice that Tommy was barefoot. Still, Bellini would be able to piece it altogether in the morning.

The night was clear and brilliant, and Tommy stood, before unlocking his car, and stared intently upwards. What cloud cover there had been earlier that evening had now dissipated and he looked for the brightest star in the night sky, its ethereal luminescence and eternal brilliance almost eclipsing everything around it. It drew his gaze and held him fixed, enraptured for minutes. Below it, barely visible to Tommy in the harsh reflected light of the city, over the artificial horizon of roofs and chimney pots was Orion the Hunter. He focused hard, trying to make out the three stars of his belt and he thought he could

just about see them. Despite their vast distance, Tommy felt that he would be able to simply reach out his hand and take hold of them, take possession of them. It was as if they were calling out to him and in their presence, he felt like a child again. They were immortal, unchanging over millennia. Certain. Reassuring. Comforting.

Doyle watched this tableau unfold before him with a degree of bewilderment. He thought that he was just about the only sane man left in a mad, mad world. When Tommy finally got into his car and pulled away, it seemed to Doyle that his driving, like his earlier actions, was more than a little erratic, too. If he wasn't lucky, the Old Bill would pull him over. But he was lucky and Doyle followed him all the way back to his flat. He drove a little closer this time, as he had the feeling Tommy wasn't using his mirrors. There was no point waiting now, he thought, he might as well get some sleep while he still could. He drove off into the night. Alone.

Alice Ashworth would never recover from the scene of carnage that she awoke to the next day. Who could have done? She was feeling unreal, fuzzy headed and slightly sick. Nothing could have prepared her for what she was to see. Its memory would haunt her dreams and terrorize

her consciousness for the rest of her life. The nightmares would never end. They only ever intensified as she was passed from one institution to the next, as the medication got stronger and less effective. But at least she was not dead. She would always hate the bastard for that most of all.

## **Chapter Ten**

She never thought about the past. Or in any event she tried not to. Not anymore. That all belonged to a previous life into which was better left buried. This was a past life into which she had no desire to regress. Things were much better now for Mel. She was no longer the Melanie that had lived in London with that bastard, Francis. The symbol of her shackles, the name 'Doyle' had been quickly swept aside too. When she moved out she had reverted to her maiden name, O'Callaghan and she had made sure that little Frankie had done the same. Now she was Mrs. Wheeler and had been for over twelve years. And she was happy at last. Contented. Things with Scott were better than she had ever dreamed she had any right to expect when she was with Francis.

It's not surprising that she had made every effort to blank out her conscious memory. Things had been pretty bad. At first she had really loved Francis Doyle, she was sure of that. She had been so innocent and naïve back then, a good Catholic girl, brought up on tales of sin and purgatory and a morbid fear of breaking the commandments and incurring the fiery wrath of

the priest or nuns. That's why he had been so enticing, so attractive to her. He wasn't like her, he didn't care. Doyle had already rejected everything that her priest had tried to indoctrinate her with. He lived on the other side of the law and on the other side of religion, on the very margins of acceptable society. It was like he was an incubus, her own little devil. Wicked, yes. Dangerous, perhaps, the scar across his lips stood as compelling testimony to this. But he wasn't evil and he certainly couldn't be irredeemable. She couldn't bring herself to believe that. He'd settle down in time. With the love of a good woman. That's all it would take and she could change him in time, get him away from the influence of old man Bellini. She'd find him a steady job. It was a story that has been told a million times before and, no doubt, will be told a million times again. But like all the others, Melanie O'Callaghan was wrong.

Doyle hadn't wanted to marry her. You could see that in the wedding photos, if you looked, the ones taken on the steps of the church by her Uncle Patrick. He made no show at even trying to hide it. Whilst she was smiling radiantly and felt that her heart might, at any moment burst with all the love and pride that was welling up inside it, he was distant, unsmiling and it was

clear to even a casual observer that he really didn't want to be there. Especially not in a church. That was something he had been happy to leave back in Ireland. He had only really agreed to it in order to shut her up and because it was what his family seemed to want. Doyle found it easier to be carried along with their tide than to resist. After all, he was getting no younger, his mother insisted. And she was a good girl. A Catholic girl. With an Irish name if not the accent to match. There were O'Callaghan's in their village back home, they told him. Good people. They had a lot of land. And respectability. She was pretty, too, long brown hair and dark, almost black eyes that were enhanced by her pale, almost opaque, complexion. She even looked Irish, they thought, despite the fact that her father had been born and bred in Kilburn and they'd overlook the fact that her mother was English. The Irish connection seemed strangely important to them, much, much more than to Francis himself. It was a good match. He wouldn't do any better, they told him. His family loved Melanie O'Callaghan in a way that Francis Doyle never could. They, like her, thought that she could tame the wild man with a raging beast inside that had long since shown its first signs of stirring. But the beast, his own private devil, was too strong. They, like her, were wrong. Melanie's family had

no illusions. They knew what sort of man Francis Doyle was. Didn't everybody in that part of town? His reputation, even in those early years, preceded him. They pleaded, threatened, cajoled, cried. But it was all to no avail. Her mind was made up.

She was able to blame the booze for his violence at first. Wasn't it always the way with men? He would spend the evenings in the pub and if she opened her mouth when he returned, he would hit her. Sometimes he hit her even when she kept quiet. Nothing too serious. A bruise here and there. Maybe a split lip. Still, that wouldn't last. Not once the baby had arrived. He'd be too occupied with his son or daughter to go out drinking or to beat her. Two months to the day after their marriage, she announced to his delighted family that she was pregnant. Hers too were surprisingly pleased – maybe a baby was what they needed. Doyle was furious. That evening he beat her with a ferocity that she had not known before. It was a miracle that she did not miscarry. That was what the doctor called it. A miracle. Still Francis had a lot on his mind. The following day, whilst Melanie was still at the hospital, her wounds being neatly sewn and dressings applied to the worst of the contusions, Doyle was arrested on a totally unrelated charge



of grievous bodily harm and assault with a deadly weapon. That had been business. Although the charges were later down graded to the lesser offence of actual bodily harm, someone had 'persuaded' the victim to down play the severity of his injuries somewhat. Doyle was in Wandsworth prison when his son, also to be named Francis in honour of his father, was born. Melanie was grateful, although she found it hard to cope on her own, her family rallied round and helped as much as they could. It took her three buses to get to the prison, but she went as often as she could obtain a visiting permit, right up to her confinement.

That first night in hospital, when they laid little Frankie next to her, Melanie knew she had, at last, found purpose to her being. She loved her family, of course, and Doyle still, although not quite as much as she once had. But she had never before felt this way about anyone or anything. She imagined that no-one had. Ever. She loved Frankie immediately and with an intensity that she had never even been able to conceive of before. She loved him completely, with every fibre of her body. He now was her life. Without him she would be incomplete. Nothing else would ever matter again. That night she cried, warm beautiful tears of joy and hope.

The first trip out little Frankie ever made into the real world was to the harsh, unfeeling Victorian brick façade of Wandsworth gaol. Thank God he knew nothing about it but Melanie could still imagine that, small as he was, he must be missing his father. Surely his father would love him as much as she did. How could do otherwise? Flesh of his flesh, blood of his blood. His mother queued with the other grey faces outside, a new born baby earned no special privileges here. She hugged him tightly to her and showed him off to the admiration of those other poor hopeless victims of their husbands', or sons' crimes and brutality. When Doyle saw who was waiting for him, he turned straight around and walked out of the visiting room. He refused even to see them. Melanie cried all the way home. These were no longer the tears of joy and hope but of rejection and bitter, grey despair. She knew now that things would never be how she had imagined. She saw, at last, through her delusions, every one of them, with a clarity that wracked and tortured her. She didn't go back to the prison again.

It was not until a week after his release that Doyle eventually came home. She was beginning to think, and to hope, that she would not see him again, that she and the baby had been

abandoned. She thought, she must be entitled to a few benefits or allowances then. But he had, without announcement, walked back through the door and back into her life and back into her bed. Things were different than before. Worse. He barely spoke to her now and refused to even acknowledge the existence of little Frankie. Half the time, it was as if he couldn't bring himself to even look in his general direction. Time passed but things did not get better. She no longer expected them to and eventually she even gave up hoping that they would. It wasn't long before the beatings started again and she took them as uncomplainingly as in the past. They became an accepted part of her life, like going shopping or watching Coronation Street. They happened; it was her lot in life. She no longer bothered to make excuses to the people she saw at the shops or, for when it was especially bad, in the doctor's surgery. She hadn't fallen downstairs or been careless, walking into a door. She just smiled at them instead. A pathetic, insipid smile. It was the smile of the defeated. She could cope as long as he never laid his hands on little Frankie. If he ever did that, she would kill him. She even rehearsed it in her mind. A carving knife between the shoulder blades. That would kill even him. Or maybe turn that gun he now

kept hidden away under the old sheets in the airing cupboard on him.

Eventually, the day came as she knew inevitably that it must. Frankie had been a good baby for the most part. He had hardly cried at all, even when he was very small. But now he wasn't well. He had been sickening for something all day, toddling across the floor, falling and crying uncontrollably. It was nothing serious, just one of those regular childhood illnesses that pass of their own accord in a day or two, but Melanie was worried about how Doyle would react. She was always worried nowadays. He hated it when the baby disturbed him. The door slammed behind him with a heavy thud. It was still early, and she was grateful that he hadn't been out drinking tonight. He had been on a job. He was tense, she could sense it as soon as he walked in and she knew that something must have gone wrong. He wasn't normally this bad. The tension emanating from both of his parents communicated itself to little Frankie, and, with his temperature still high, he started to cry again.

"Shut him up." The command had been issued.

God knows she tried to do it. She really, really tried. She caressed him, she rocked him, she tried to sing a lullaby but her voice was choked

with fear and apprehension of what must surely come. She could see Doyle becoming visibly more agitated. His face reddened and he paced the room, like a caged tiger, inexorably but with increasing rapidity.

"Shut the fuck up!" He now addressed himself directly to Frankie who screamed with fear. Doyle screamed back with rage. He turned and punched the wall with such ferocity that he dented the plasterwork and blood ran freely from his knuckles, through the fingers of his clenched fist and dripped onto the floor. This enraged him even more. She knew that she had to get out, but her first thought was to protect the baby, who was now screaming with the full vehemence of his unarticulated primal emotions. She had laid him on the sofa and placed herself squarely between him and Doyle. He went straight through her to get at the baby. His hand thrashed out and hit her on the temple, knocking her sideways, to the floor.

Doyle wasted no more words on Frankie, he simply picked him up and felt his little body suddenly tense, become rigid even, he wasn't used to such close contact with his father. His inaction was only momentary and it couldn't last. There was no cradling or comforting, of course.

Instead, Doyle threw the baby against the wall, twisting his entire body as he did so, putting all his considerable strength into his obscene brutality. His face had contorted into something inhuman – death's dark shadows had descended upon him.

The baby became suddenly silent as he hit the wall with a sickening thud and fell to the floor. Melanie raced to him, trying to rise from her hands and knees as she did so. When she passed Doyle, he kicked upwards into her ribs. The steel toe cap of his boot seemed to bite through the flimsy fabric of her dress and embed itself deeply into her flesh. She heard the crack of bone and knew that one rib was broken, if not more. She didn't care. She wouldn't let that stop her. She *couldn't* let that stop her. With reserves of strength that only a mother defending her young can call upon, she dragged herself, on her hands and knees, to where little Frankie lay. Motionless and quiet. Perfectly still. He looked so peaceful, serene. She felt for an instant almost loath to disturb him. She took up his tiny wrist and felt desperately for a pulse. Thank God. He was still breathing. She stroked his face gently and saw that just a little blood was beginning to seep from a small wound at the back of his head. That blood screamed her back to reality. It

screamed at her in a way that the child was no longer able to. It pleaded for protection. It demanded a retribution that she was unable to meet out. It was a cold silent scream; the unvoiced, unheard scream of all of those who throughout all the eternities of human history have been helpless and hopeless. It was the bitter, useless silent scream of the victim, the oppressed throughout ages lost and ages yet to be lost. It tore at Melanie's soul and revived her with a fierce new determination. Suddenly she was no longer beaten and defeated. Now she was vengeful and determined. She was what Doyle had made her and she had to win. For Frankie's sake. All the while, as she crouched over the baby, she braced herself for Doyle's next onslaught. Mercifully, it didn't come.

Hospital. She had to get him to hospital. Frankie was alive, his breathing was shallow but perceptible and he still remained unconscious. There was some blood at the back of his head, not a lot but she knew enough to know that any head injury was serious, even more so in a child. How could it be anything other than serious? He had tried to kill her baby. She picked Frankie up and, clutching him to her, rushed to the door. She felt little pain herself. The shocking sting of its initial intensity had faded as she acted on pure

instinct and adrenaline. It was only a temporary respite, her pain would return with a brutal stabbing vengeance later. But that lay in the future. It didn't concern her now. Doyle made no attempt to stop her. He was just grateful to see them both go.

Outside, hugging her lifeless baby against her breast, she kicked on the door of the next flat. Old Mr. Yexley look as dishevelled as ever as he hurried Melanie and Frankie into his home.

"Get an ambulance. For God's sake, get an ambulance." He saw the desperation in her eyes. Sweet Jesus, he thought, that madman has killed the boy.

Yexley had heard the noise through the paper thin walls and if he had not known of Francis Doyle and what he would certainly do to anyone who interfered, he would have definitely called the police straight away. Confronted now with the screaming reality of his violence, he wished that he had screwed up his courage and done so. Ashamed at himself, he now became braver. He rushed down the two flights of stairs that Melanie everyday had to contend alone with the push chair and breathlessly dialled 999 on the pay phone, feeling that his own chest would, at any moment, explode.



The ambulance carried them like an angelic chariot of salvation to St. Thomas' Hospital, lights flashing and sirens carving a way through the heavy traffic. By the time it arrived little Frankie was starting to come round. They scanned his brain. He was concussed, no more, and even that was mild. A minor contusion to the back of his head but nothing broken. And there wouldn't be any lasting damage. That boy had a charmed life, a nurse told her as she sat on the edge of Melanie's bed and showed her the leaflets for the women's refuge in Southend. It was good, she told her. There were people there who really cared. People who could help her get back on her feet. They would make sure that she and Frankie, were safe. She groaned with the pain from the three cracked ribs that were now heavily strapped. It was an effort for her to breathe but, if nothing else, they were out of that damned flat and out of Francis Doyle's life. They could try for a new beginning and try to begin to put the past firmly behind them. She didn't think she could face her family. Not yet although she knew that they'd support her and when the nurse, pretty and fresh faced despite a twelve hour shift offered to call her friend at the shelter on Melanie's behalf, she nodded gratefully. The following day, against the better judgement of the medical staff, she discharged herself and Frankie

from St. Thomas' and caught a bus from Victoria Coach Station to Southend on Sea. They had with them the clothes they wore, a potty borrowed from the hospital for the baby and the princely sum of twenty pounds in cash that the nurse could ill afford to spare. To call her an angel would be to use a clichéd platitude that did could never do justice to the full extent of her charity. To Melanie, she was so much more. She had given them the most valuable gift in the world. More priceless than diamonds or pearls, she had given them hope.

That had been her new beginning and she would remain indebted to the nurse, who's name she never even knew and to Emma and Jane, the middle aged couple who ran the shelter in Southend, for the rest of her life. They provided her with a support system, financial, physical and emotional that she could not have survived without. And gradually things did begin to improve. Emma helped her get the benefits she was entitled to and to file for a divorce. In time Jane found her a flat. It was small but it was clean and to the two of them anywhere without Doyle would have seemed like a palace. And when she got the job in the printing factory, collating the pages of the technical manual that accompanied every piece of computer hardware

and software sold before the advent of the Internet and inbuilt help programmes, they jointly helped her sort out the child care. After a while, she was able to help out at the shelter herself, as a volunteer, sharing her experiences with people who had imagined themselves to be completely alone in the world that didn't care. She gave what little cash she could afford to help fund them, it was the very least she could do. No matter how she tried, she would never be able to repay them, her debt to them was too great. After living with a man like Francis Doyle, Melanie could draw comfort in the fact that there were still a few people like this, decent people left in the world. People who thought about others not just themselves and were prepared to do something to make a difference.

It was because of them, indirectly, that she had met Scott. He'd served his apprenticeship at Walker's printing works where she worked and was now running one of their two colour Heidelberg SORKZ presses. She liked him straight away. The others might have thought he was a bit boring, shy and a little bit too thin to be really good for him. But he had kind eyes and she thought he was nice. After seeing what Francis Doyle could do to you, she now found the idea of boredom attractive. For another thing,

Scott was steady. He had a trade and a good job with prospects. As far as she knew, he had never been in trouble with the law and had certainly never gone to prison. She knew, soon after meeting him that he was a good man. Basically decent. He would make a good husband. And father. But what attracted her to Scott most of all, was that he didn't seem frightened off by her young son, who remained the apple of her eye. In fact, he was good with Frankie, really good; he seemed genuinely fond of the boy. At first, Mel was surprised by this. It hadn't been what she was used to and it took her some little while to really open up. It wasn't easy for her to begin to trust anyone with Frankie, let alone to consider sharing him. He had, after all, been hers alone, no-one else's. Certainly not *his*.

There was no real passion between them, certainly not the burning all consuming fiery lust of a first love. But there was a love of sorts. One that grew slowly, gradually and was, perhaps, more real and all the stronger for that. It took him five years before he finally asked her to marry him. She was beginning to think he never would and she accepted instantly with a smile that he felt at that moment lit up the room and his whole world.

It had been a good marriage, safe solid. Money was often tighter than she would have liked but they never went short. There were always presents at Christmas, good presents, and, holidays on occasions, one even to Spain. They still had the ornate bottle of wine encased in its wicker coffin, un-drunk on their mantelpiece, as testimony to it. There had been ups and downs, of course, as in any marriage. Once he had strayed. Only once, the result of a drunken fumble at a Christmas party. But he was honest about it – eventually – and she respected that. God knows, he had been repentant, on his knees even. It had taken time but she had forgiven him. After all she had faced in her life, she could find it in herself to forgive a whole lot worse. And he would never do it again. She was sure of that. She was right. He knew that he had too much to lose and he'd told her so. Compared to Doyle, Scott was a saint and Mel felt that, most of the time, she was as close to paradise as she could ever hope to get. She knew that she was very lucky. She saw her family from London sometimes. Occasionally they would come to the seaside to visit. But her past was a subject that was never touched upon. They all agreed on that. She and Scott had tried to, but they had never had children of their own. It didn't really matter. To Scott, Frankie was his son, they had

made it legal. His natural father had raised no objections, of course, and the love he gave was returned by the boy more deeply than any mere genetic bond could ever engender. It had been hard when he left, that autumn, for Scott no less than Mel. He missed him, the walks on the beach, the kickabouts on the park, the sharing of secrets. But those had given way to an intense pride. Going to university, who'd have thought that would happen? And to study music, too. There were no doubts, the boy was gifted. Everyone had told them so. Although they always liked to hear it, they didn't need to be told, they could hear it for themselves. It hadn't been easy to find the money for the lessons, let alone for the flute, but they had managed somehow, and got him the best they could afford. It had paid dividends, a scholarship to the Royal Academy of Music. A full scholarship. They didn't hand those out on a plate – they required something a little special. They had high hopes of fame and fortune for Francis Wheeler. Both of them.

Mel was now aged forty five and although Scott told her otherwise, she looked it. She was not sorry to be growing older. In fact she embraced it, every year put more distance between her and the horrors of her earlier life. It was a nightmare

that lived with her still, no matter how hard she tried to forget or pretend to herself that *that* Melanie had never existed. But it would never return. She knew that. She thanked God for it every day.





## **Chapter Eleven**

That morning it seemed that, after all, maybe there was a hope that spring would finally break free of the cold, wet shackles of a seemingly endless winter. There was less of a chill in the air and sun shone, brightly and crisp. Even here, in the middle of the city, Doyle could make out the shrill chorus of song birds in the occasional infrequent gaps in the traffic noise, that were starting to appear now that the worst of the rush hour had passed. The new leaves on the few sparse trees that stood sentinel, guarding the main entrance to the Tower of London, seemed to be flourishing for the first time that year. They showed the really vital, elemental green that the only the French impressionists at the height of their creative storm could ever fully capture the real spirit and truth of. Today was a day when people would feel glad to be alive. Doyle seldom gave vent to any feelings whatsoever and certainly not when he had business at hand that needed his attention. But today was different, somehow. For once, he almost felt a part of the world around him. Not, as usual, isolated from it and alone, but human, able to interact with people, to relate to them and perhaps even to

empathize with them. He felt surprised by this. It was a long time since he had felt this way, but he thought he liked it. Sort of. It was a warm, seductive feeling, inviting him to be drawn deeper into the society that for most, no all, of his adult life he had shunned and rejected and which had, in its turn, shunned and rejected him.

He had left home that morning feeling like a man who had not wanted another drink the night before, but there had been one left in the bottle and he was damned if he was going to be beaten by it. But by the time he had arrived on the Circle Line at Tower Hill tube station, and ascended into the cool morning air, he felt much better. He felt truly alive. It was more than simply the prospect of what Mr. Bellini's plan held in store for him and Tommy. He couldn't identify what it was, why he was feeling this way. He had arrived over an hour ago and, even now, he was still early. Tommy wouldn't arrive for at least three quarters of an hour yet, if then, for, unlike Doyle, he wasn't renowned for his punctuality. As soon as he had freed himself from the shackles of the station's subterranean caverns had intended to go in and take a look around the Tower. He had surprised himself for he had never thought that he would be interested. It was a place for school kids and for the bloody tourists. It was certainly

not a place for men of business like him. But last night, he had had a lot of time to think, more time than he would have wished. The Tower had been a place for people like him. That was the whole significance of Bellini's plan. Not only had it been a prison throughout ages past, it had also been a place of execution. It was to be again. But that would have to wait as he found that the ticket office was not yet open. It wouldn't be until nine. At a kiosk he had intended to buy a paper but bought a guide book to the Tower instead. It was the first book Francis Doyle had ever bought and he was shocked by how much it cost him. He returned to the tube station entrance and sat on the grass in the small, ornamental garden looking out across Tower Hill to the imposing grandeur of the ancient fortress itself. He struggled with the words, with some of them anyway. He was a man for whom the Daily Mirror was the height of his literary aspirations and he had never been brave enough to attempt its crossword. Doyle was a man for whom Seneca's vitriolic but joyous *Apocolocyntosis* would forever remain a mystery, Dickens would guard his secrets jealously from him and Proust's self obsessed effeteness would never be in past his remembrance. In that last one, he could have taken some comfort. Although he struggled with it, he found his new book a real treasure. He read of things that he

vaguely remembered from the few history lessons he had ever bothered to make a vague pretence of attending when he was, nominally, at school. There the teacher's methods had seemed to be largely based on simple dictation, copying down the passages the teacher (he was sure she was a dyke) read uninspiringly from the textbook. Doyle could rarely keep up. Now, like him, it too seemed to come alive. He read of Sir Walter Raleigh incarcerated in the Bloody Tower for thirteen years from 1603 for plotting against King James. He read of the little princes, who mysteriously disappeared. But what really fascinated him, what gripped his attention were the seven famous executions on Tower Green, which he read of with more than just a professional interest and a wry smile at the appropriateness of Bellini's plan. This was the sight of the private executions, those intended to avoid embarrassing the victim as well as the reigning monarch. Commoners and the hoi polloi were executed in public outside the castle walls on Tower Hill. It was, after all a public entertainment and, more often than not, thousands would attend. But it was here, he read, on Tower Green, that the authorities privately despatched the notables, the treacherous, the stupid and the just plain unlucky elite. They included two wives of Henry VIII,

Anne Boleyn receiving the privilege of being beheaded by a skilled French swordsman rather than the considerably more brutish English axe. There, also, poor Lady Jane Grey, who reigned for only a few days in 1553 thanks to the machinations of her father in law, the Duke of Northumberland, died admitting that she had been wrong to accept the crown but declaiming her innocence nonetheless "touching the procurement and desire thereof." She met her end bravely as the axe man splattered her blood over the assembled audience. That was a good death, Doyle thought. A noble death.

Glancing at his watch, he saw that it was now past nine and he made his way across the road and back to the ticket office where he paid for his admission. At that time, although there were plenty of people about, it was still too early for much of a queue to have formed. He would have liked to have joined the people assembling by the Middle Tower for a guided tour conducted by the blustering, avuncular Tower of London version of Fred Pontin's blue coats, the Yeomen Warders, but he knew that he couldn't. Maybe he could come back another time. He paused as he looked down at the green expanse of what used to be the moat and he wondered why they didn't fill it up once more. After all those bloody floods

last year, it should have done it by itself, he thought. He stopped again as he came to the Byward Tower and looked up with a childlike wonder at the grandeur of its portcullis and murder holes. He was struck by the curiousness of the gateway tower, two imposing circular posterns of weather beaten white stone surmounted by the evenness of a modern superstructure of even whiter stone and red brick. The whole complex of towers was a composite of varied styles, he had learned that from his morning's study, with the White Tower dating as far back as the eleventh century and the conquest of William I and the Fusilier's Museum and the Waterloo Barracks not being completed until the mid nineteenth century. He strolled sedately along Water Lane and passed the water gate, Traitor's Gate as it is known to all and sundry. He stood at the railed off steps that led down to the water, framed by the great semi circular stone arch. Never before would he even have noticed the Tudor timber framing above it but now he was captivated by it, its sturdy oak timbers and the diagonal pattern of the brick work forming large chevrons. How much he had missed before, he thought. How many opportunities had he wasted? Still, he would not shed a tear for the man he could have become.

There was still some time before Tommy would arrive and Doyle was keen to make the most of it. As soon as he entered the upper chamber of the Wakefield Tower, his mouth almost fell open at its sheer scale. From the intricate marquetry of the vaulted ceiling, he saw suspended a vast wooden chandelier which dominated the room and seemed to hang so low that Doyle felt he could almost reach up and touch it. But it was the throne that drew him. It was magnificent; it stood on a raised stone dais, and had carved heraldic motifs, fleurs de lys, and coats of arms surmounting two roaring golden lions. It reached out, stretching upwards as if commending its anointed incumbent to the heavens above. Doyle thought that no human hand could have made such an exquisite object. If there hadn't been work at hand, Doyle knew that he would have stepped over the barrier and enthroned himself there, to become Henry III or perhaps even Francis I just for a moment. He had to turn his back on it, remove the object of his temptation from his line of vision. It was nearly time now. Tommy would be here shortly. Now, turning to face the wall he inspected his guidebook carefully, once more. Casually yawning and glancing over both shoulders to make sure the mother and daughter, the only other people with him in the chamber, were not watching, he pulled

out, from the shoulder holster underneath his jacket, his small Tokarev pistol, the one he had used to kill the Malek twins with Bellini so long ago. Its short snub nosed silencer was already in place and he concealed it within his guidebook, rolling it securely around the gun and he placed the bundle carefully within his voluminous jacket pocket. Doyle could not resist one final glance around the room as, with some reluctance, he made his way outside.

His eyes blinked as he left the gloom within and they became accustomed to the light outside once more. He stood behind some Japanese tourists, cameras auto focused and shutters clicking at everything that moved or didn't move. He strained to hear the Beefeater, a tall unsmiling man in his dark blue Tudor uniform, resplendent with the scarlet crown and E II R motif, give his well practised, and none too historically accurate, commentary. The man wore his own swathe of military medal ribbons proudly and Doyle envied him his service, and the knowledge and the respect that they had earned for him.

A voice from behind suddenly re-focused him back into the real world.



"Been waiting long?" Tommy was, for once, on time. He was unshaven and looked as though he hadn't slept. He was, though, scrupulously clean, he had spent most of the night in the shower, trying, in vain, to wash away the sin of all his iniquity. He felt worse because his last hit of heroin seemed to be wearing off already.

"Just got here. Christ, you look rough." He sounded it too, Doyle thought.

"Heavy night. You know how it is, mate. Now, what do you want to talk about." Tommy was keen to get down to business. He did not know what was in store for him but, whatever it was, he had decided he would have to play along.

"I want to talk about Mr. Bellini, like I told you. But there's no rush. Let's have a wander around first." Bellini had been quite specific. Get in, do the job and get out. But there was so much that Doyle wanted to see and this was too good an opportunity to waste.

"Do we have to Frank? I've got a busy day ahead of me."

Doyle was disappointed and it showed, although Tommy did not seem to notice. He was too preoccupied with his own rapidly mounting

problems. Doyle resigned himself to following his orders to the letter after all. "No, I suppose we don't. Let's go and find somewhere to sit."

He had studied the guidebook's map carefully. He knew exactly where to go. It had been planned out for him. They turned and walked through the arch underneath the Bloody Tower. To their left was the expanse of Tower Green and the black and white half timbered Tudor Queen's House which had been home to so many prisoners of high rank. It was there in 1605 that another Catholic conspirator, Guy Fawkes had been interrogated for his part in the Gunpowder Plot but now it was just the home of the Resident Governor of the Tower. Outside the house, just in front of his sentry box, a guardsman stood stiffly to attention. He was wearing his bear skin and a three quarter length grey greatcoat, although he didn't really need it and as the temperature continued to rise, he would soon start to feel even more uncomfortable than he did already. His self loading rifle was at shoulder arms. Doyle had no doubt that it would be loaded but he wasn't overly concerned. They turned left down the path that would lead them to the Beauchamp Tower, where a display details the defensive capabilities of the Tower were on show and which was home

to a rare fifteenth century crossbow that Doyle really wanted to see. He wished he had it now, rather than his Tokarev. That would be the way to do it.

Doyle sat on a bench with his back to the soldier on sentry duty across the Green. Facing them was a small railed off plaque marking the site of the scaffold site, where the seven notables had been executed. Tommy was next to him and they sat in silence as three Beefeaters wandered slowly past, rapt in conversation about last night's football, paying no attention to the two ever so slightly incongruous men sitting quietly in the sun on this beautiful spring morning.

"So, what's it all about Frankie?"

"A little bird tells me that you've been visiting Micky Johnston."

Tommy swallowed hard. Suddenly he became he was worried. This was not what he had been expecting. He tried to stay calm. Surely Doyle couldn't do anything here? It was far too public. Didn't they keep the Crown Jewels here, for Christ's sake? There must be more here soldiers

than in Iraq, he thought but could take little in the way of comfort from it.

"You don't want to listen to rumours, Frank. I haven't seen him for months. Not since before..."

"Cut the crap, Tommy. I saw you myself. There. At his house." Doyle's cold, unflinching eyes bore into him like a tungsten drill.

"Yeah. OK." Tommy was trying to think on his feet. Under normal circumstances, this was something that he was good at. That was why he had been selected for an under cover job like this in the first place. But these were far from normal circumstances. "I was there" he seemed to stumble over his words a little, "but only because I felt sorry for him. He's not coping well with the leg. You know, depressed. He won't go out. None of the lads from the firm will have anything to do with him. Not that I blame them" he emphasized. "I didn't want to either. But he calls me up, out of the blue and asks me to come round. He was crying, Frank, for God's sake. A grown man crying. Pathetic, but you know me. I'm a sucker for a sob story."

"Is that why you went back the next day? Gave him money? You didn't seem to be too keen to stay and have a chat then." Doyle still assumed

that it had been money in the parcel that he had handed to Micky and Tommy wasn't about to correct him.

He nodded, it was the best that he could come up with but Doyle continued, "So what about you and the filth? Detective Inspector Ashworth? I followed you from Micky's all the way to Hyde Park. Nice cosy little chat you had, just the two of you. Well, three if you count me. You're a fucking grass, Tommy, that's what you are. I never had you down for that. I thought you were straight as a die, we all did, even Mr. Bellini. But you've betrayed us. You'd sell us all out for a few poxy quid."

Tommy was now close to panic but it seemed that Doyle didn't suspect the truth. Maybe he could buy a little more time. How the hell could he have been so stupid as to be followed? And by Doyle of all people – he was no Brain of Britain. Had he forgotten all of his training? In truth, as Charlotte Ashworth had suspected, he had. It was that that had got her killed and now it was going to do the same for Tommy himself. "It's not like that. I swear. I can explain it all. Have you told Bellini?"

"You're still alive aren't you?" Doyle didn't answer the question directly, he didn't want Tommy to try

to make a run for it. Perhaps, he thought now, it would have been better not to say anything. Just sit down and do the job quietly and efficiently. But it was too late for that. Besides, he had wanted him to know. To tell him that he had been rumbled. To look him in the eye like a man as he killed him.

"Thank God for that." Tommy heard only what he wanted to hear. "Ashworth tried to get me to talk. She's a hard fucking bitch. She's been threatening me. But I've never given her anything about Bellini. Or about you, Frank. Or any of the boys. Just little things, that's all. Outside the firm. Always, outside the firm." He was becoming slightly more confident. Doyle hadn't gone to Bellini. Even he must know that Bellini is history now. Perhaps he's looking for a way out. Could be. Tommy's mind was racing. It was going so fast that he didn't notice that Doyle had removed his guidebook from his pocket and had laid it on his lap. "What are we going to do, Frank? There must be a way out of this. A way that works for both of us."

"There's only one way out, Tommy. I'm going to kill you" Doyle's voice was quiet and matter of fact as he raised the gun, still concealed by the guidebook and shot Tommy through the left side

of his chest. There was no more than a muffled pop as the silenced 7.62 mm. cartridge cut through the heart of Detective Sergeant Thomas Windsor and killed him instantly. As he murdered, as he executed, Doyle's skin seemed to fluoresce, to glow yellow, then red as raw emotion fought to take control of every element of his previously almost rational being. But Doyle had long since learned to control himself, although, God knows, it was still a struggle he managed to suppress the feelings and felt them subside and return to their dark homes deep within his psyche. He sat there, as calmly as he could and as Tommy slumped forwards, Doyle caught him and pulled him upright once more. He was wearing a black denim jacket. That was a stroke of luck, thought Doyle, it was only on close examination that you could see that there was any blood, indeed that you could see that anything was wrong at all. He folded his victims arms, concealing the wound as carefully as he could manage and brushed his index and middle fingers over his eyes to close the eye lids in the way you see in films. To any casual observer, such as the two old gentlemen who now passed by, Tommy Windsor was enjoying a pleasant nap in the soft spring sunshine. The soldier behind them hadn't moved. His unfocused eyes were fixed on a spot high on the bell tower of the

Chapel Royal of St. Peter ad Vincula. For the briefest of moments Doyle wondered if he could continue with his tour. There was so much history here and he didn't want to miss out on any, he wanted to immerse himself in it all. But that would be tempting fate. Instead he would content himself with the fact that he had become part of our nation's bloody history and that he had become Tower Green's eighth executioner.

The Tokarev and its silencer now safely stored inside the voluminous inner pocket of his jacket, Doyle walked back the way that he had come, past Tower Green, past Queen's House with its ever alert sentry who had seen and heard absolutely nothing, through the Bloody Tower's monumental arch and back into Water Lane, where he removed his jacket and left it folded over his left arm, just on the off chance that anyone was looking for him and might recognize him by it. He was in no hurry and he tried to take in as much as possible as he walked. He would come back, he thought. Definitely; he promised himself that. Best leave it for a few weeks though just in case anyone had paid more attention to him than he thought.

\* \* \*



It was nearly one o'clock by the time Doyle had jogged reluctantly up the back stairs of the Mount of Venus and into Don Bellini's private office. He hadn't rushed. His head had been too full of new experiences that he was still trying to digest and come to terms with.

"Where the fucking hell have you been?" Bellini greeted him vehemently. "All I've been getting all morning is a bloody metallic voice telling me that your mobile's switched off."

"The battery needs re-charging. I tried to call you. What's the matter, Mr Bellini?" Doyle could see that he was clearly extremely agitated and he knew, from recent experience, that this was far from being a good sign. Bellini was so unpredictable now, more so than ever, more so with every passing day it seemed. And there was no telling how he would react to just about anything – be it good or bad – when he was in this state.

"Haven't you seen the news?" Bellini demanded.

Doyle shook his head. "I've only just got back."

Bellini reached across the desk for his remote control and switched on the sleek flat screened Sony T.V. On the Sky News channel Doyle saw an outside broadcast from a crime scene, blue and white tape emblazoned with a continuous repetition of the word 'police', as if anyone needed to be reminded, bisecting a quiet street that looked vaguely familiar to him. He assimilated in the words "horrific murder" and "brutal crime" before he realized where he had seen it all before.

"That's Ashworth's house. Bloody Detective Inspector Ashworth. That's where he was last night. Tommy, I mean." Bellini didn't seem to be far from hysteria. He could feel this himself and he tried to take a step back from his paranoia and regain control. "Did he turn up this morning? Have you done it? You killed him?"

"Yes. There were no problems" Doyle tried to reassure him but Bellini wasn't sure if he was happy about this news or not.

"No problems, the man says." Bellini's tone was loaded with irony and he jerked his head, directing Doyle's attention once again towards the T.V. "Look. It's like the fucking Texas Chainsaw Massacre in there. He's cut her head off. And her husband's too."

Doyle sank into a chair. This news surprised him and it showed. There was more than a little crack of reticence in his voice when he replied. "Why would he do that? He was just an informer, he admitted that much to me this morning." Nothing seemed to make sense anymore.

"Did he say anything to you about it? What did he do? How did he seem?" Bellini's questions were rapid fire, like a machine gun, hardly giving Doyle time to answer and certainly not to think.

"He said that he'd had a heavy night, that's all. He looked it too. I just assumed he meant that he'd hit the bottle after he got back. Do they know that it was him who did it?"

"Of course it was bloody him." Bellini paused for an instant as he realized what Doyle actually meant. "No, apparently not. At least, they're saying they don't know. Not yet."

"It's a good job he's out of the way then" Doyle said. "Has there been any word about him yet on the telly? I did it just like you said. That was sweet, if nothing else."

"Well done, Frank. No, I've heard nothing yet. It'll probably take a while for them to get round to identifying him."

"Is my alibi sorted?"

"Of course it is. You were here with me all morning. We had my brief over, updating my will now that Hannah's gone. You witnessed it." Doyle noted resignedly that as the witness, he was obviously not being left anything and once more he felt that he was on the outside, trying desperately to claw his way in. "Hang on, this is us" Their attention was drawn back to the T.V. as the newscaster moved on to the next item and continued in an rich, sonorous voice:

"And finally, there's news just coming in of a murder this morning at the Tower of London. A tourist has discovered the body of a man on a bench at the site of the scaffold on Tower Green. He had been shot through the chest and is thought to have been dead for some time when before he was found, perhaps more than an hour. The man's identity has not been released but sources at New Scotland Yard suggest that he was a serving police officer. We'll bring you more on that story as it develops. And now with news of last night's sporting action ...."

"A what?" Bellini exploded. "Did he say a policeman? Fucking hell." He opened his desk draw and prepared to take an emergency fix of

heroin. Doyle had never seen him do this before, although, of course, he had known about it for what seemed an eternity. By now everyone did. There were not even vestiges of secrets anymore. He watched, not with disapproval or horror but with a minute fascination.

Bellini let out a sigh as his hit kicked in. "He can't have been. Tommy in the filth? He's been with us all the way. For Christ's sake, he's done more than his share of the dirty work. There's an awful lot of blood on his hands." After last night it seems, Doyle thought, there must have been an awful lot more. Bellini sat in silence, engrossed in the intensity of the moment. "If he really was with the police, perhaps he forgot what side he was on. Gone native. We've all heard of that happening. But I never believed it. If he'd given them half of what he had on us, they would have pulled us all months ago. I suppose it explains about Ashworth. Well done Tommy, old son. You clear up your own mess, I'll say that for you." His mind was racing now, the heroin had forced it up instantly into fifth gear and the revs were so high he wished he had a sixth. The excitement clearly emanating from him infused the room. "We're going to have to act fast. Francis. I want you to go back to your place now. They could be watching it already. Although, thanks to *la belle*

Charlotte, the Old Bill have got a lot on their plates today. Can you go in through the back way?" This was like the old Don Bellini, he was back at his best now, thinking logically, rationally and decisively. At that moment, Bellini felt that a crisis was just what he needed.

"I can if I go through a window" Doyle responded.

"Good. Do it. Get what you can. Anything you need and clear out whatever weapons you've got there. Then get over to my safe house in Kilburn. You know the one?" Doyle confirmed that he did and he pocketed the set of keys that Bellini threw across the desk to him. He knew the house well enough, he had been there before once, when Bellini had some little shit holed up there who he had to teach a lesson to. He remembered it well and he knew that he didn't like it. For one thing, it was too close to the Scrubs for his liking but he was in no position to be choosy and he knew it. "Take this, too" and Doyle gratefully received the roll of notes that Bellini had withdrawn from his desk. Thank God for the smack, thought Doyle, he'd have never given me that without it. "I'm going to fix us up with a cast iron alibi. It's time for me to call in a favour. On your way, Francis" he summarily dismissed the man.

Bellini hadn't even been involved with one of the murders that he had seen on the news and he had been safely in his office at the Mount of Venus for the other. That would have been enough in normal circumstances but this had suddenly grown much bigger, and he still, even now, wasn't a man to take un-necessary chances. For this he would use something special. Call in one of the many 'favours' that were owed to him. The big one. As soon as Doyle had left the room, Bellini was checking through the address book on the address book of his laptop computer for that special number. He found it and dialled.

"Sir Charles?" He had the number of his direct line, straight to his desk in Westminster. "Good afternoon. This is Don Bellini."

There was a stunned silence for just a moment before a voice that bore all the traces of the best education money can buy at Winchester and Christchurch College responded. "Good afternoon, Mr. Bellini. How nice to hear from you. I'm afraid I'm in a meeting at the moment. Would it be possible for you to call back tomorrow." There was no meeting. Sir Charles Knight, baronet, Her Majesty's Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, was alone, he had just

dismissed his principal private secretary and was about to dissect the minutes of a meeting of one of the many committees that reported directly to him. He knew though, that he would be in Scotland tomorrow, visiting development sites, and there he would be out of that terrible little man's clutches, for the time being.

"No. I'm afraid it would not be possible. Unless you want to see the pictures of you shafting poor little Ricardo sent to the Prime Minister. And to your wife. And to the Brazilian Embassy. And to every tabloid and magazine editor here and on the Continent." There was an overt air of menace that Sir Charles remembered only too well. He had seen Bellini in action before and he had no doubts that he would be prepared to carry out his threat – and a good deal more besides. He couldn't afford to let that happen. He had worked too hard to throw it all away because of a supposed moment of indiscretion. There was even talk of one of the big three jobs in the next Cabinet re-shuffle. He hoped for the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, that would get him out of the country for a long spells at a time. He wanted to be as far away from Bellini as possible.

"Very well, Mr. Bellini, let's talk."



"That's better. I want you to give me an alibi – say that I was with you last night, stayed over all night. And this morning too. It was Sunday, so don't tell me you were in the House." Bellini knew how Sir Charles would try to operate."

"No. No I wasn't. But I'm afraid I can't oblige you. I was at a private function. A good twenty people saw me there."

"Oh, no they didn't." Bellini had expected no less from who exuded an easy air of upper class authority that is concomitant with a family tree whose roots could be traced back to the Norman Conquest. But he knew Sir Charles could be bullied and he wasn't in the mood to be put off easily. "We were at your mews house in Belgravia all evening. Drinking that nice malt of yours and talking about government policy. Perhaps I was giving you some advice about your career." He was very pointed. "Get in touch with your host from last night and make sure he knows that you weren't there. Just in case."

"Mr. Bellini, I can't ask them to lie. These people are friends of mine." He sounded defeated already. He was doing no more than going through the motions as best he could. He was just playing the game.

"If they're your friends then they'll do it for you. Do I have to remind you that Ricardo was only twelve? And doesn't he look in a lot of pain in those photo's? You perverted bastard. It's not just your career that'll be finished. You'll go to prison. Not a cushy, soft one like your pals Aitkin and Archer. You'll be in one where you might never get out. Maximum security. There'll be times when you'll wish you were dead and there'll be no shortage of people only too willing and able to do it for you."

Sir Charles knew this was true. Over the years he had spent countless sleepless nights considering the possibilities, reviewing his options and deciding every time that he had none. Why had he done it? He didn't know what he had done, even. He could remember nothing of that night, except that he had been stupid to even put himself in the position where something like this could happen. He was pretty sure that he had been set up. He never been interested in boys. Not even when he was at Winchester. But that didn't matter. Bellini had him over a barrel, and the barrel was now teetering over the precipice of a very steep cliff. Of Niagara Falls. And it was a barrel that would implode in on itself and crush him if it ever once started to plummet.

"Very well, Mr. Bellini. I'll see what I can do."

"No. You won't see *what you can do*. You'll do exactly what I tell you to do. Now, tell me what happened."

Bereft of even the last vestiges of free will, Sir Charles knew that he had no option but to comply. "You, an old and valued friend," he sounded the word poignantly, "came to my house at nine o'clock last evening?"

"Nine o'clock is fine. Carry on."

"We spent a very pleasant evening in conversation but both drank rather too much whisky. Not wise to drive. I insisted that you stay over. We breakfasted together and you were still there when I left for the House at around ten o'clock this morning."

"Make it ten thirty, just to be on the safe side."

"Very well. Ten thirty."

"There. That wasn't too difficult was it?"

"I take it that in return for this service you'll supply me with the negatives and every copy of your sordid little photographs."

Bellini laughed. "I hardly think so. This doesn't warrant so high a price. All this is, is a little favour, to show me we're still good friends. Let's call it a gesture of goodwill, shall we? Besides, you really shouldn't get personal; you're not talking from a position of strength. My sordid little photos, are they? I think you should really take another close look at them. They make it pretty clear who the sordid one is. Think of me as a white knight. I'm just defending your reputation. I'm protecting your honour. Big on that, aren't you? Now. Get onto your friends. They're not going to be bothered but make sure that they know the score. Then expect a call from the police. It'll probably be quite soon."

"Very well, Mr. Bellini."

"Don't let me down, Charlie." He'd always hated it when he was called Charlie. Bellini was knew it. "I'd make sure that you'd regret it."

"I am only too aware of that. Good day to you."

Bellini smiled as he replaced the hand set of the phone. It didn't get any better than this. That man was one of the elite. He had been smug and superior in the comfort of his old money and interbreeding. Sir Charles Knight was a man of genuine influence, real power and Bellini owned

him, body and soul. He could toy with him, play with him like a pet dog. There was apparently even talk in some circles about the possibility of him being a future leader of the party, a future prime minister. Bellini prayed for that day although he had been giving it less thought in recent weeks in the wake of what had at the time seemed his own burgeoning quasi divinity. He had been so aware of it on the day that he had assassinated the Maleks. The sense of latent power had never gone, not even subsided really but it had become a thing familiarized by custom. It was always there, in the background. Now he could feel it rising once more. This time, it felt stronger than ever. The police wouldn't be able to touch him now. He had made sure of that. He would manipulate and control them just as he had manipulated and controlled Knight. They were simply pawns in his grand game. The next call he made was to his solicitor. He told him to get straight over to the club, so they could begin to rehearse their performance.

\* \* \*

Francis Doyle, as usual, felt himself to be no more than a pawn in someone else's game. Although he had never played chess, he knew how expendable those pieces could be. Could he still rely on Bellini? Would he really look after him now, as he had so often done in the past? Doyle wasn't sure but he knew that he had no other options available.

He was breathless when he reached the dirty, run down road, close to the imposing edifice of Waterloo station, that he called home if he called it anything at all. He had entered the street cagily. He knew Bellini was right about one thing, if the police weren't here already they soon would be. There was nothing obvious in the street, no police cars, no uniforms and nothing that he, with his practised eye, could identify as an unmarked police car, with its occupants staking out his flat. He would take no chances though. Before he got close to the door of his building, he slipped unobtrusively down a side street and, after checking that he was alone, he hauled himself up and over a six foot brick wall, using his knee to brace himself at the top, before dropping down, careful of where he landed. Keeping close to the rear wall, taking as much cover as possible, he made his way slowly, each footstep deliberate, across the back yards of the

old Victorian terraced houses that had grown up with the station. He had another six back yards to cross before he reached the one that ran behind his house. He had never been in it, it didn't belong to his flat but, when he looked down, he could see it from his rear, bedroom window. And from the little toilet and bathroom he shared with the other apartments on the first floor. On a day like today, he was surprised that he had not run into anyone in their yard. Surprised but grateful. It had saved him having to cosh anyone.

Doyle wasn't as young as he used to be, but he was still fit and agile and when he looked up at his bedroom window, he knew that he'd have little trouble reaching it. He remained lithe and relatively athletic and the drainpipe looked as though it would be strong enough to bear his weight well enough. As he cautiously shinned up it, it creaked and groaned a little, here and there, but it held firm. He placed his knee on the bedroom window sill and peered in. There was no sign of life inside and it did not look as though anything had been disturbed. In truth, Doyle would have been hard pressed to have known it had been.

He tried the window, although he knew it was locked. As expected, it didn't move so, using the

butt of his pistol he smashed it, high up, near the latch. He cleared a big enough space with his elbow, his jacket protecting him from being cut to ribbons, to allow him to gingerly insert his hand and to free the lock. He slid up the sash window, and nimbly slipped inside, with a grace and agility that would be worthy of a man half his age. His eye scanned the bedroom, and he peered further on, into his living room. It was empty and he felt secure enough to put his gun away. Reaching under his bed he pulled out a large brown holdall, matching the one he had taken to Micky Johnston's flat all those months ago, only slightly bigger. Inside this, ready packed, was his armoury, collected from various jobs over the years. The sawn off shotgun was there, still in its usual carrier bag cover, as was a small Smith and Wesson model 586 revolver and a Browning FN Vigilante. There was enough ammunition to start a small war and to finish it as well. He scoured beneath the assortment of switch blades, butterfly knives and knuckle dusters, to make sure that his pride and joy was there. Wrapped in a cloth, as lovingly as if they had been the swaddling clothes warming the infant Jesus, was his big IMI Desert Eagle Magnum. It made him feel like Clint Eastwood just to hold it in his hand. It was comforting. Reassuring. With it, he felt that he could take on the whole world



and he suspected that, today, he would probably have to. But he had no time to enjoy the pull of its power now. Yanking open his chest of drawers he thrust whatever clothes came to hand into his bag. On top of this, he piled his wash bag and phone charger, Bellini would want to get in touch. The corner of his living room, poky as it already was, was what he euphemistically referred to as his kitchen. From its single shelf he pulled down a tin and pulled out the tea bags from it. Beneath them was concealed his money. It wasn't a lot, it would never have made a comfortable pension, not enough to retire on to the coast, but, such as it was, he needed it now. He didn't want the those bastards from the Old Bill to pocket it when they turned over his place and he wouldn't put a trick like that past them. That was enough. It would do. It would have to, he didn't have much time. In truth, Francis Doyle did not have many more possessions that he could have taken, even if he was so inclined and those few that he did have, he would not miss. If he'd had a passport he would have taken it just in case but that wasn't an option. As he returned to the bedroom once more, he felt in his pocket to reassure himself that Bellini's key and money were still safe. They were.

Before he drew the zip on the holdall, he placed in it, right at the top for ease of access, his guidebook from the Tower of London. He knew that it would have been wise to lose it, to leave it on the tube perhaps, or to drop it down some grating into the sewers. But he hadn't wanted to. There was still a lot more to read and he wanted to finish it.

He slung the handles of the holdall over each arm so that it lay on his back like Mallory's ungainly antique rucksack. At the still opened window, he half slid, half climbed down the drain pipe, feeling the friction sharply sting and burn his palms. He was less concerned about discretion now, it didn't matter much if he was seen anymore, and he traversed the walls and crossed all the yards in less than half the time that it had taken him to get in. Within minutes he was at the station and made towards the nearest tube station entrance. As he walked onto Waterloo's bustling concourse, he thought that he could hear police sirens emanating from the general direction of his flat, wailing and howling plaintively in the distance across the busy London traffic and the constant dull roar of the trains. It may have been just his imagination.

## **Chapter Twelve**

Chief Superintendent David Goodwin was far from being a happy man. Everything that could go wrong had gone wrong. Really wrong. To lose one copper was a disaster but to lose two, to refrain from paraphrasing the great Oscar, was a catastrophe. The public needed to see a strong police force if they were to retain any confidence in them. And his manor, it seemed, could now rival the worst of anything the mean streets of Chicago had to offer in the roaring 20s and 30s. He had less than a year to go to his retirement and he needed a catastrophe like this like he needed a hole in his head. The top brass upstairs were going to ask questions. Of course they were. Hard questions and a lot of them. In fact they'd started already and they would see that the buck well and truly stopped with him rather than them. Goodwin didn't have many answers. Charlotte Ashworth murdered in her bed?. He couldn't believe it. It had been a crazed attack, the work of a psychopath, a madman. He'd never seen its like in all his many years on the force. This was not a gangland execution. Not a clean, sanitized, clinical death. There was something deeply, bitterly personal about it. It

couldn't be a man who'd done that to her, it must have been a monster. A devil from hell. Goodwin hadn't liked Ashworth much, although he'd never admit it publicly now. Few members of the squad had. She'd got too far, too soon. It had all been too easy for her. She'd served her apprenticeship in a university, not getting dirty on the streets, pounding the beat day after day, night after night, like he had. There were rumours that she had slept her way to promotion. He knew that such rumours abounded almost automatically when good looking female officers were advanced. He also knew that she hadn't slept with him. He had tried to persuade her to once but she had refused. Nicely. Tactfully. If she wasn't married, maybe. That seemed to make it worse. But despite all of this, he accepted that she was a good copper. And he wouldn't want to see this happen to anyone, especially not when it was down to him to clear it up.

And then, there was Tommy Windsor. Getting killed. On the same day. Was it a co-incidence? Probably. It was the last thing he needed but at least he could understand it. Tommy was engaged on extremely dangerous work and Bellini must have caught wind that Tommy was an undercover copper. That was a simple gangland execution for all the melodrama of its

style and setting. He didn't expect anything less from Bellini, that was his style, he thought. Always tended to the theatrical, the Italians. That's why they had invented opera. They wore their emotions on their sleeves, that lot. And only a single shot had been needed, at an angle, through the chest. That spoke of a professional job. Francis Doyle more likely than not, he was Bellini's number one enforcer. Goodwin tried again to see if he could manipulate a connection between the two killings. He wanted to find one desperately. It would have given him a starting point, but, try as he might, he failed. He couldn't see that Bellini would have murdered Ashworth. Not in that way. He had nothing to gain from it. Yes, he must have known that she was after him, but he also knew, no doubt, that she wasn't getting very far with it. There couldn't have been any dark shadows in Ashworth's private life could there? No, he doubted that. If she had been any more clean her fanny would have squeaked when she walked. But, then, what was the alternative? A freelance psycho on the streets? Taking down the police one by one? That'd do the latest recruiting drive a power of good, he thought. As if they weren't having enough trouble already. Thank god she wasn't black.

The bloody media weren't helping matters. Plastering pictures of little Alice Ashworth all over the front page of anything that went to press and headlining the T.V. news bulletins with her. He could feel the media elevating fear to a crescendo. Calling this bastard Hannibal the Cannibal, based on Chinese whispers and hearsay. That had to have started within his team. He'd make bloody sure he'd find out who it was. And then things had got even worse when they ran the story about Tommy on the news, without clearance and before he had even been able to pull in Bellini and Doyle. Bastards, he thought. Who's side are they on? It's just a story to them. But to Goodwin it was real. To Charlotte and Tommy it was real. To Steve it was real and to Alice it would stay real for ever.

By the time the police were ready to come for him, Bellini and his lawyer had arrived at New Scotland Yard, volunteering to help them with their enquiries into Tommy's murder. Volunteering! They were downstairs now. He couldn't keep them waiting much longer. And Doyle had had it away on his toes. They were watching the ports and airports, of course, but Goodwin didn't hold out much hope.

He picked up his phone, dialled an internal number and made sure that the judge had signed the search warrants for Bellini's home, the Mount of Venus and all of his other properties. Those they knew about. It wouldn't matter much. They wouldn't find anything worth while. Nate and the boys had had enough time to store away anything too incriminating and to become word perfect on their own alibis as well as Don Bellini's. Goodwin called out loudly, through the open door of his office into the general work area beyond littered with overflowing desks, stacked filing cabinets and a multitude of blinking computer displays. Sergeant Dave Morris, now partly rehabilitated after his unfortunate incident with Micky Johnston, strained to hear him over the noise.

"Dave, you're coming with me. Bellini's downstairs with his brief for interview."

"OK, guv. I'll be right with you." Morris hastily ended the telephone call he was on. Goodwin was not the sort of man to keep waiting, particularly if your past indiscretions had not been totally forgotten.

They trailed through the warren like maze of corridors that is New Scotland Yard and took the lift to the ground floor and the small, box like

interview room, where Bellini sat in silence with his lawyer, Jack Loader. They were accompanied by a pretty, uniformed W.P.C. who left the room as soon as her superiors entered. Loader had known Bellini for years. They had been at university together, they had partied together, studied together and qualified together. And they had worked closely together pretty much ever since. Bellini's world was a seductive one. It drew people into it insidiously and once it had them, it rarely let them go. Not that Loader wanted to go. Thanks largely to Don Bellini he had a nice, comfortable life. A little bit of work here and there and enough money to spare for the flash house in Esher, with a Porsche parked out side. Enough money to pay for the Armani suits and his gorgeous trophy wife. They all fitted in perfectly with his blond coiffured hair and coffee table magazine good looks. Those in the cleaner end of the upper echelons of service to Don Bellini were richly rewarded. Loader's was a lifestyle that Francis Doyle would never be able to even dream of affording. He wouldn't have wanted it. The lawyer was a man brimming with all the confidence that his position bought, the sort of man who could dominate a meeting simply with through the unspoken power of his presence. His was a confidence built on knowledge and success but he was never



allowed to forget where the source of his power lay.

The interview room was Spartan. The police liked it that way. No distractions to put off the less focused, criminal and copper alike. It had no carpet, just a cheaply tiled floor and a Formica topped table bolted to the ground, to prevent it being used as an offensive weapon. There were four plastic stacking chairs, two confrontationally placed on each side of the table. Affixed to the wall, within easy reach of the table was the twin cassette recorder and microphones, which thanks to the Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984 recorded every syllable of every word of every interview. Every official one anyway.

Bellini offered his hand and Goodwin who shook it limply. It was all very civilized. Before coming into the station, for that's all Scotland Yard really is despite its literary reputation, no more than a glorified cop shop, Bellini had taken another hit of his heroin, this time in the presence of Loader. He no longer cared who saw him but Loader found it extremely distasteful, this was not the good old Don of their days together at the L.S.E. in the Strand. This was something altogether darker and more sinister. And more worrying too. In his experience heroin users were not the most

reliable or predictable of people and right now Bellini really needed to keep his head. He had told him that and as he did so, he had thought, just for a fraction of a second, that Bellini was going to hit him. He had tried to talk him into going to ground for a few days but that only seemed to irritate him more. He was calm now, that was something to be grateful for, and he seemed very confident. Loader prayed that he could keep up this façade but he knew that he would have to get him out as soon as possible. It hadn't helped that that old bastard Goodwin had kept them waiting for more than three quarters of an hour without even the offer of a cup of coffee. Well, at last the show was getting started now.

Goodwin was a tall man, imposing. He towered over Bellini but he knew that he would not be able to intimidate him. He pulled two virgin cassette tapes from a box on the floor and discarded their cellophane wrapping in the waste paper basket. Sitting down he pressed the button to start the tape. He recorded the date and time as procedure dictated.

"Taped interview with Donald Bellini, accompanied by his solicitor, Mr. John Loader of Loader Associates, to discuss the murders of Detective Inspector Charlotte Ashworth, Mr.

Stephen Ashworth and Detective Sergeant Thomas Windsor. Officers present: Chief Superintendent David Goodwin and Sergeant David Morris."

Loader interrupted, "I would like to place on record that my client has come here as a volunteer to assist you with your enquiries; furthermore, he is neither under caution nor arrest and that he is free to leave at any time."

"Yes. We acknowledge that, Mr. Loader. Thank you for your co-operation, Mr. Bellini."

"In addition, my client wishes to state as a matter of record from the outset that he is not involved in any of the crimes you mentioned. Nor has he any knowledge of them. He is not, and never has been, a criminal. As you are aware, Chief Superintendent, Mr. Bellini has no criminal record whatsoever. He is, in fact, a well respected business man and who serves as a patron of his local community."

"Then he's going to be of great help to us, isn't he? We're looking for a brutal, sadistic killer." Both men knew that, legally speaking, Loader was right. Despite the extent of his nefarious activities, Don Bellini had always been clever enough to escape a successful prosecution.

"He intends to be of considerably more help than your facetious manner, Superintendent. Mr. Bellini has come to you because Mr. Windsor, whom we now believe to have been a police officer, presumably investigating my client's business affairs, all of which, I may add, are respectable and perfectly legal..."

"Of course, of course," Goodwin interjected, trying to put an end to Loader's unmitigated droning.

"...and perfectly legal." The solicitor was unfazed. "This Mr. Windsor was retained by my client on an ad hoc and occasional basis to perform certain low level administrative and general duties."

"Like making tea and delivering smack?"

"I resent that implication." Bellini smiled nonchalantly as he spoke for the first time.

"At no time did Mr. Windsor identify himself as a police officer." Loader took up the offensive, once more. "We would like to have copies of all reports he submitted in order that we may refute any accusations made against my client." Loader and Bellini had, earlier that afternoon, come to the definite and correct conclusion that Tommy must

have been a renegade, an officer seduced by the criminal life he had been sent to expose. He had to have been. It was what Bellini initially suspected as soon as he had heard the story break on the lunchtime news. It was the only possible, logical conclusion that could be drawn. The only one that fitted all the facts. There was no way the Met. Could condone even an undercover officer actually participating in crimes the way Tommy had done. They assumed, quite correctly, that any reports Tommy had submitted would have been heavily expurgated. If not, Bellini would have been arrested or called in for questioning, months ago. Goodwin could pretend that he held all the aces in his hand but both Loader and Bellini were too sharp to let him bully them with threats that they all knew he could not back up.

But Goodwin's took his turn to smile. "Copies of his reports? Yes. I'm sure they'd be very useful to you but, as you know, they have to remain confidential. For the time being. Mr. Bellini, can you tell me when you first became aware that Sergeant Windsor was a police officer?"

"Not until this afternoon when I saw it on the news." This was true but, of course, Goodwin didn't believe him. "I hope his moonlighting won't

cause any trouble. I didn't think that the Met. allowed second jobs."

Goodwin drew a veil over the jibe and said, with mounting impatience, "Come on Don, you can do better than that."

"Superintendent" Loader interjected. "My client has responded to your question fully and frankly. Please respect his answer. It will serve no useful purpose, either for you or for us, if you repeatedly put the same question to him and to receive the same answer."

"Perhaps then you can be a little more specific, Mr. Bellini, about the 'administrative and general duties'" Goodwin referred to the words that he had scribbled down into his notebook, "that Sergeant Windsor would 'occasionally' carry out for you?"

"Certainly. Miscellaneous little jobs. Running errands, delivering a parcel here and there. He'd clean things up, too, if there was a mess. I seem to remember he was rather good at that." Once again Bellini smiled at the policeman, rightly suspecting that this would annoy him more than anything.

"And when was the last time you saw him?"

"Probably a couple of days ago, it's hard to remember – I have so many businesses that require my attention. If Tommy was supposed to be with me full time, maybe he was playing you along as well as me. Perhaps he had his own little side line, his own personal agenda. What do you think?"

Goodwin didn't like this. He had not expected Bellini to cough and hold his hands up. Of course he wouldn't do that. But he wished that he had been able to conduct the interview on his own terms rather than this villain's. It was clear that he had spent most of the afternoon rehearsing his statement with his brief.

"So you didn't see him this morning? You weren't at the Tower of London?" Goodwin knew that he wouldn't have been. As far as he was aware, like most of the people outside the aegis of his immediate, close knit little circle, it was still Bellini's standard operating procedure to have someone else attend to the dirty work.

"Of course I wasn't. I don't have time to visit tourist attractions. I'm a very busy man, Inspector."

Goodwin didn't rise to the insult. "So it was Doyle then? They've got security cameras at the Tower

now. C.C.T.V. covering the place like a rash. Good quality ones as well, not the crap they put up in shopping precincts. Did you know that? My team are going over them now. With a fine tooth comb. They'll pick him up, have no doubts about that." Goodwin really hoped that this was true. He had been told that morning that most of the C.C.T.V. cameras were focused on the more valuable exhibits. There were only a few in the open areas and these made sweeps across some quite wide expanses.

"Francis Doyle? You don't think that he's involved, do you?" Had Goodwin not known him, Bellini's mock surprise might have sounded almost genuine.

"Alright. Let's talk about Doyle, then. He's another of you 'employees', isn't he? Does he do 'general duties' for you, as well?"

"An employee? No, you're wrong there, I'm sure he's not. Feel free to check the P.A.Y.E. records of all my companies. I will admit to having one or two business dealings with Mr. Doyle in the past – only on a casual basis you understand – but to be frank, I've always been a bit put off by his reputation. I'm not sure that he's always been exactly on the right side of the law. I get the



impression that he's not quite such an upstanding man as you or me, Mr. Goodwin."

Bellini was taking the piss and Goodwin was in no mood to stand for it. "You're 'not sure' that *mad* Frankie Doyle is on the right side of the law. You should be bloody sure because you're no more than a bloody gangster and Doyle's your enforcer – the man you pay to scare people off, break their legs, kill them sometimes. Now stop pissing about with these stupid games. They're beneath my intelligence and yours. Three people are dead, for God's sake. Two of them were ours and I'm going to get the sick bastards who did it." He was now at the edge of his seat, leaning over the table and staring Bellini straight in the eyes. He was as close as he could get without standing up or getting on the table. Bellini didn't move, he just stared back impassively.

"Superintendent Goodwin," Loader reprimanded him harshly. He was surprised but pleased with this outburst although did his best to disguise it and sound shocked. Goodwin losing his cool made his job ten times easier and Bellini was holding up better than he had dared to expect. "Please do not make ridiculous accusations against my client. Ones that you clearly cannot substantiate. If you continue to harass him in this

unprovoked and unwarranted manner, I will be forced to issue a summons today, against the Metropolitan Police Force and against you personally, for defamation of character. Furthermore, if you are not able to control your language and conduct this interview in a reasonable manner, a professional manner, with respect for my client, I will have no alternative but to terminate it immediately."

Goodwin simply ignored him but when he spoke again the full vehemence of his anger had somewhat subsided and he was noticeably more calm. "So then, Doyle wasn't with you this morning?"

"He most certainly was not." Bellini tried to sound indignant at this scurrilous suggestion.

"What about last night?"

"Nor then either." Bellini, in concocting his own new watertight alibi, had effectively abandoned Francis Doyle to the caprices of fortune. He had done so without a second thought, without even the vaguest pang of regret or emotion. If the police wanted a scapegoat, then let them have Frankie Doyle. If all went according to his plans, he, Bellini would take care of both trial and punishment on their behalf as well.

"And you don't know of his whereabouts now, I suppose."

"I'm afraid not. I rarely see Mr. Doyle as I explained before."

"Not to worry, we're confident that we'll be bringing him in for questioning very shortly." More over optimistic police bullshit thought Bellini. By now Doyle would be safely stashed away in Kilburn, in a house so safe that not even Sherlock Holmes could link it to Bellini. Goodwin went on, "Let's turn to the events of last night. Or early this morning to be more accurate."

"Yes, what a terrible business. I saw that on the news too. You're not trying to link the two crimes, are you? That seems most unlikely to me. This is surely the work of a psychopath. Hannibal the Cannibal? That's what you're calling him, aren't you? Hardly original but, well, what can we expect. The Met.'s not really renowned for its imagination, is it?"

This struck a nerve. "No. We most certainly are not calling him *that*. Are you aware that Detective Inspector Ashworth was also investigating your links with organized crime?"

*Links* with organized crime? Bellini liked that. He had no *links* with organized crime. He was organized crime in a good part of the city and Goodwin knew it as well as he did. "I most certainly was not." He deliberately echoed Goodwin's words, turning them, as it were, back on him. "As far as I can recall I've never even met the woman. Although I wouldn't have objected judging by her photograph on the television."

Loader backed him up. "And I take it by virtue of the fact that my client has not even been questioned in connection with any alleged crimes, let alone charged with them, that D.I. Ashworth's investigations concluded that my client was an honest man and that this continued harassment by the police can now be drawn belatedly to its proper conclusion."

"Oh, no. D.I. Ashworth's investigations were far from complete. And rest assured, they will be concluded by another officer. A senior officer."

"I have every confidence that justice will be seen to be done" Bellini said self-righteously but with a straight face that he struggled to prevent from being cracked by a hysterical giggle. It all seemed so ludicrous to him now.

"It's too much of a co-incidence for me, you see. I don't like co-incidences, never have. I don't really believe in them. They always seem to smell just a bit too much and this one is starting to stink. Charlotte Ashworth – dead. Tommy Windsor – dead. On the same day. Ashworth heading up a long term investigation into your criminal activities. Windsor on her team, a key man, who'd infiltrated your organization. Too many co-incidences", he repeated himself. "Something's rotten and I know exactly what it is."

Loader jumped in. "Superintendent. This all smacks of a police conspiracy. Investigation and infiltration into perfectly legitimate businesses. It's beyond the pail, it really is. I need to discuss this in detail with my client in order to decide what action it is appropriate for us to take against the police. I suggest that if you have no further questions, we conclude matters now. My client has been as helpful as he can be and yet, for some reason known only to yourself, you seem to be unwilling to accept his answers."

"I wonder why?" Goodwin said with irony so thick that it seemed to have been laid on with a trowel.

Bellini wished, just for a moment that he could tell Goodwin about Tommy and his little sojourn to Ashworth's house last night. That'd wipe the

smug look off his face. But there was no way he would voluntarily become more involved than he already was and he understood that it'd take a more reliable witness than Frank Doyle to convince the police. Besides, they'd just close ranks to protect their own. That was their way. He had already come to the conclusion that Doyle had to be the fall guy and take the blame, posthumously of course, for all three murders. So be it, he thought. That was a price Bellini was more than prepared to pay.

"Just one more formality, Mr. Bellini," Goodwin said. "If Mr. Loader doesn't mind. I take it that your own movements between the hours of say eleven thirty last night and ten o'clock this morning can be accounted for."

Bellini smiled yet again and Goodwin wanted to punch him in the face. Hard. Just once would do. That's all it would take. "Yes, of course they can."

"Of course they can" Goodwin echoed ironically.

"I spent the evening with a good friend of mine. I stayed the night. Didn't leave until about half past ten this morning. Then I went to my club, the Mount of Venus." Bellini made it sound like the Garrick or the Athenaeum.

"With a good friend. Let me guess – could it be Mr. Loader here?" Goodwin knew the form and was only too well aware of Loader's long association with Bellini.

"Alas not, Superintendent. Whilst I count Mr. Bellini as a close friend as well as a client, I spent yesterday evening at home with my wife and was in my office by nine. I take it that I'm not required to provide an alibi."

"We'll see about that later." Goodwin couldn't quite bring himself to say no. "So who were you with?" he asked Bellini.

"Sir Charles Knight. He has a lovely little mews house in Belgravia. He's the minister for trade and industry. You may know him." He deliberately corrected himself. "Of him."

Oh my God, thought Goodwin, now he's even corrupted the bloody government. He felt like giving up then and there. He couldn't imagine what sort of hold Bellini could have on a man of Sir Charles Knight's profile and reputation but he knew that he was worried by it. Was nothing sacred anymore? "What were you doing there? Advising him on policy?"

"Yes, that's right." The concept was so similar to the one that Bellini had suggested to Knight himself that he wondered if his phone could be tapped. It wasn't. In reality Bellini and Goodwin had a lot more in common than either of them would have wished, though they both would have been mortified by the suggestion.

But this was all that Goodwin could take. He hadn't expected much from the interview and in the end he got rather more than he had bargained for. He could already imagine the nightmares that would surely follow. Things had been bad before the interview, but he now felt them to be much, much worse. They had now descended to a whole new, an even more deeper and darker, level of veniality. What did this monster have in mind. Was it to be Don Bellini for prime minister?. Or worse still, Bellini as the next Alastair Campbell? He felt that there was no useful purpose in continuing here. Not for the time being. He hoped that the search warrants which would by now have been executed would have turned something up. Anything. He badly wanted to see Bellini in custody even if it was just for the night. But he felt, in the pit of his gut, that it wouldn't happen. It wasn't that sort of day.



"Mr. Bellini, if you remember where we might find Frank Doyle, please let Sergeant Morris here know. No doubt we'll need to see you again as our investigations progress. Thank you for your co-operation. Interview terminated at 4.27 p.m." he spat into the microphone and switched off the tape. He labelled both tapes, from the twin cassette deck, with a single identification number and offered them both to Loader who selected one and stored it securely in his briefcase.

"If we can be of any further assistance, Superintendent." He was a smarmy bastard that Loader, Goodwin thought. He wouldn't mind seeing him locked up in the next cell to Bellini. In fact, in a strange way, he seemed almost worse than Bellini himself. He leeches off him, he was no more than a parasite. Loader, he thought, deserved to be crucified too, but Goodwin knew he was the type who always came up smelling of roses, no matter how deep the shit was around him. He was as bent as they come. It seemed that everyone who even came into contact with Bellini was, he was a man who had that effect on people. With this, his thoughts momentarily turned to Tommy but he soon banished them. He didn't even want to consider that possibility. He should have looked at himself.

As Morris led Bellini and Loader out of the room and through the various security checks and procedures that led to the free world outside, Goodwin sat dejectedly alone in the interview room. They had won the battle, maybe. They were always going to win that one, they'd had enough time to set everything up properly, the bloody media had seen to that. But he'd win the war, he promised himself. Or in any event, he'd take them down with him.

In the semi illuminated dusk of the underground N.C.P. car park Bellini sat on the back seat of his Jag. and prepared his next fix of smack. Loader was shocked by how little visible effect the drug had on him and how quickly he had need of more. He wondered how much he was using. He tried to avert his eyes but found them drawn, almost unwillingly, to the spectacle. It was as if he were a motorist slowly passing an especially horrific car crash, desperate not to look for fear of invading the personal sanctity of the horror and grief of those involved, but having to sneak a look despite himself. He saw the pupils of Bellini's eyes contract until they were now more than pinpricks. Was that normal, he wondered?

"That went well enough" he said as if to break their reverie. Bellini did not or for a moment could

not reply, so Loader went on almost *sotto voce*, “That business with Knight was a stroke of genius. I think you upset dear old Goodwin a bit with that one. He can’t take all that excitement anymore. Not at his age. Did you see how red he went? I thought he was going to explode. You’ve never told me, old son, just what is it you’ve got on Knight?”

Bellini laughed. “It’s a secret – I promised him that I’d never tell. Besides, I don’t think that your stomach’s strong enough to take it.”

They both laughed and Bellini came around to the driver’s seat and they headed off, both well satisfied with their afternoon’s work, to see what sort of mess the police had made of the Mount of Venus.

\* \* \*

Goodwin had been dreading the call but he knew he’d have to take it. It was now nearly 6.30, two hours since Bellini and his brief had danced away and the way things were going, it didn’t seem as if he would get home at all that night.

For the last two hours he had been expecting Sir Charles Knight to return his telephone call from the House of Commons. He knew just what to expect but he had to go through the formalities. Whatever the outcome though, he had no intention of making it easy for Knight. Clearly Bellini had a hold over him. It must be something big or Knight would have been able to hush it up. He was not a man devoid of all influence. Far from it. But, whatever it was, the net result was the same. Sir Charles Knight was bent. Corrupt. And he was one of the men governing peoples lives. The men people put their trust in to serve them honourably and steadfastly. Goodwin was sickened by the very thought of him betraying that trust.

"Chief Superintendent Goodwin, good evening. I understand that you wish to speak with me."

"Yes, that's right, sir." Goodwin struggled to be polite. "Thank you for calling me back."

"I wonder if you could make it brief. The House is sitting tonight and I'm due to speak very shortly."

"I'll be as brief as I can. Can you please tell me your movements yesterday night and this morning."

"Yes. I was at my home in Belgravia from about eight thirty last evening and remained there until around ten thirty this morning when I left for the House."

It all seemed a little too much off pat, almost as though he was reading from a carefully prepared speech. "And where you alone, sir?"

"No, as a matter of fact I had an acquaintance with me. A Mr. Donald Bellini. I'm afraid we imbibed a good deal so I put him up for the night. He left at the same time as I did this morning."

"And what time did he arrive?"

"It must have been around nine o'clock."

"Are you certain of the times, sir? Could Mr. Bellini have left during the night, perhaps, and returned later?"

"I'm afraid not, Chief Superintendent. You see, my door is alarmed. Mr. Bellini would have needed the code to deactivate it and I'm quite sure that he doesn't know it."

"And the times, sir" he re-emphasized. "Are you absolutely sure of them? You see, we have been questioning Mr. Bellini in connection with three

particularly brutal deaths. The murder of a young detective sergeant who had been operating undercover in Bellini's organization and the murder and mutilation of the detective inspector who was heading up our investigation into his criminal activities and her husband. They were killed while their daughter watched." Goodwin had always been prepared to be more than a little cavalier with facts when it suited his purpose. To him, facts were not set in stone, they were fluid and mutable, to be shaped and moulded as desired. "Perhaps your friend the Home Secretary has mentioned it to you?" His tone was harsher now, bitter almost.

Knight had been taken aback by this. He'd seen about the murders of course, but he had failed, in his naivete to associate them with Bellini's demand for an alibi. He paused noticeably and Goodwin could have sworn that he had heard him swallow. "Yes. I'm quite sure of the times."

"And your friend Mr. Bellini. Were you aware that he is involved in organized crime, Sir Charles? Drugs? Prostitution? Robbery? Murder?" His delivery was staccato, each word being punched out for maximum emphasis.

"He is an acquaintance, as I told you, officer, not a friend. I only know him through certain

charitable functions. He gives very generously, I understand. As far as I am aware, he is a legitimate businessman." Knight sounded flustered. Goodwin could tell that he no longer believed any of the speech he was delivering.

"You can imagine how it would look, though, to the press. They'd have a field day." Sir Charles thought, at that moment, that his career was surely over. He was being pulled in so many different directions and he knew that, sooner or later, he would come apart, limb from limb.

"Are threatening me, officer?"

"Not at all, sir" Goodwin tried to force a laugh for effect, "I was merely commenting on how unfortunate it would be for a man of your status and position to be seen consorting with a known criminal. A man who is the prime suspect in the brutal murders of two police officers and an innocent man. Now are you sure, that Don Bellini was with you last night? Quite sure?"

Knight thought for just a moment, but still, his shock as these horrific revelations unfolded was not as great of his fear of Bellini and what he would do to him and his career. "I'm certain. And I'm not in the habit of making false statements to the police."

"Very well. If you're sure. I'll need to get a written statement from you."

"Will that be absolutely necessary, Superintendent? I'm a very busy man."

"As am I, minister. Especially now, with three murder enquiries to run. And yes. It is necessary. Absolutely necessary. I can send somebody to your office to take the statement. Save you the embarrassment of coming to New Scotland Yard." That would be a job for Morris, he thought and he even wondered if he would get away with sending a uniformed constable, a probationer, perhaps, instead. That would show Knight how much respect he really commanded.

"Very well. But it will have to be on Wednesday. I'm flying to Scotland tomorrow. You can come to my office at the D.T.I. number 1 Victoria Street. Shall we say nine thirty?"

"That will be fine. I'll make sure that someone's there. And one final thing, Sir Charles."

"Yes?"

"Just what hold has Bellini got over you? Drugs? Sex? Blackmail? Or are you his lover?" he added as an afterthought. Goodwin thought he heard



Knight say that that was outrageous as he threw down the receiver. It had been pointless – certainly; unprofessional – probably; but worth it? – definitely. He hoped that he had upset the bloody sell-out and he tried, but failed, to put it from his mind as he returned to his work.



## Chapter Thirteen

Micky Johnston had been watching the developments in the press with all the concentrated single mindedness of a raptor in pursuit of its prey. When he first heard the story, he was stunned. It had come as a complete bolt of the blue. Like everyone else, he couldn't believe that Tommy was not exactly what he had seemed to be. A nice, friendly, personable little gangster. Perhaps none too bright, But he didn't need to be. What no-one, absolutely no-one, was aware of was that he was a consummate actor and he had played his part to perfection. He had played it so well, in fact, that it seems that even he had started to believe it. Micky was become increasingly concerned. He had been half waiting to be pulled, either by the Old Bill or by Bellini's mob since he'd heard the news. He'd hidden his new gun and ammunition in the bottom of a cupboard. It was pretty accessible but he really believed that anyone searching the house would surely never find it there. But, in fact, nobody had come. Nobody had searched his house. In truth, as had happened so often before in his life, no-one had even given him a second thought.

Micky hadn't planned to act this quickly. But why not? It was the ideal time. The first part of his plan was already formulated and if he waited much longer Doyle and Bellini might turn on each other, he thought. Or maybe the police would get them both first. Even they could get lucky on odd occasions. If that happened, he would never be able to rest. He would never be able to find the peace that he knew could only be afforded him by the retribution that was demanded for his mutilation. He was consumed by a ravenous, insatiable hunger for that retribution. Retribution in blood. Not until then would the debt be settled. Not until both Bellini and Doyle were dead, lying cold, rotting in the ground. That was what had kept him going. It was his only motivation. It alone had forced him to confront his most elemental fears, to face up to and to assuage his most awful terrors. It was that, and that alone, which had kept him alive.

He was steadier on his new leg now. The jerky stutter that he walked with at first had gradually become more of a rolling gate and even that was now not much worse than a heavily pronounced limp. The crutches had long since been repossessed by the hospital and he was even becoming increasingly less reliant on the battered walking stick that had once belonged to

his grandfather. The dull ache in the stump of his lost limb remained and, God knows, the new leg still rubbed and chafed like hell on a bad day, but he had learned to live with that without complaining too much. It still felt as though his leg was still there, that hadn't faded either and on more than one occasion he had fallen over when rising from his bed, believing that he still had both his limbs to use. But the world was gradually returning to normal for Micky Johnston. At least his interactions with the world outside of his head were. Carole had not spoken about him moving out of the house for some while now and he was even thinking about looking for a job. It would be the first real job he had ever had but it would have to wait until he had concluded his business. Maybe after that, he could settle down to a life of some normality with Carole. A normality that they had never known before. His wasn't quite the dream of a little cottage with blooming red roses encircling the door. It was a sort of inner city, urbanized, council flat version, but it was as close to the ideal as Johnston could imagine.

He'd told Carole that he was going to stay with his cousin Charlie in Southend on Sea. Just for a few days. She said that she thought it would do him good. She wished that she could go with him

but she couldn't afford the time off work at the moment. He promised that he would send her a postcard. His small overnight case was packed and he was ready. Among his change of clothes, he had carefully secreted the gun. He had told Tommy that he didn't mind what sort it was, but he hadn't let him down. Tommy had produced an old Brocock cartridge revolver and now it was fully loaded with six bullets. Effective, reliable and very easy to use. It reminded Micky of the sort that British officers had carried in the old war films he had seen when he was a kid, although the barrel was a little shorter, a bit more snub nosed. It didn't stop him from acting out the part while Carole was at the factory. Playing with it, like a little boy with his toy cap gun. He lost himself in his fantasies and became David Niven, with his upper lip so stiff that it was rapidly reaching the point where it was bound to crack at any moment. Or was it Trevor Howard? He couldn't remember. His case also contained a few more, prosaic items; a hammer, a carving knife, some thin nylon rope and a few reels of strong black duct tape. There was also the pre pay mobile phone that he had bought with blessed anonymity the day before. He had handset and the little instruction booklet for half an hour before he had been able to programme its S.I.M. card but now, safely stored was the

number of Doyle's personal mobile phone and the direct line to Bellini's desk at the Mount of Venus. He had wanted Bellini's mobile number, too, but he had never been given it and now it was too late to discretely ask Tommy for it. These were, he thought, the tools of his new trade. They would be enough. Plenty – more than enough. He might never have made the grade as a gangster. He'd always been more Nationwide Division Three than the Premiership. But psycho killer? He weighed up the term he had heard in an old song on the radio. That was a different matter. That he could handle.

Carole, living blissfully unaware of the tormented plan that had formed in her husband's tortured head, had walked him to the bus stop on her way to work that morning. It looked like the weather was holding up. Don't forget the postcard, she reminded him. She'd helped him onto the bus. Steps could still be a bit of a problem, although he could manage on his own well enough if no-one tried to rush him. He sat near the driver with his case next to him as the bus made its way towards the West End. He kept his hand tightly gripped around its handle, more for comfort than for security. The address was etched into his memory. He knew that he wouldn't forget it. It hadn't been difficult to find it. Not once he had

got the name and that had been easy enough in itself. People still remembered her, even after all these years. After that, it had just taken a trip to the local library. There was a listing in the phone book. Why wouldn't there have been? They had no reason to be ex-directory. No reason to fear. No reason to hide. It had been as simple as that. It took a change of buses to get to Victoria Coach Station. Then he had to wait for his connection. It wasn't due for the best part of an hour but that didn't matter. He didn't mind at all. It gave him a chance to make a good inroad into the four cans of Special Brew lager he had bought at the station's off licence kiosk. He felt that he had always operated better with a drink inside him. It wouldn't take long from here and he took comfort in the fact that by tomorrow morning, Francis Doyle would be dead. Then he could turn his attention to Don Bellini.

The coach journey took longer than he had expected and it was nearly dusk when he arrived in Southend. He did know the town well so he picked up a fold out map at the bus station and examined it intently. There was about a mile to go and he didn't fancy making the journey on foot. No problem, he could see two or three taxis queuing patiently at the rank adjacent to the bus station. It wasn't ideal but it would have to do.



Looking at the map again he picked out his destination once more, this time noting the name of the next road, running parallel to it. A security precaution, he thought, and was pleased with himself for coming up with it despite the fact that it was so basic a child would have invented better. He gave the name of the street to the driver of the first cab at the rank and told him to go to number twenty three, he thought a specific number sounded more genuine, and climbed carefully into the back. The taxi smelled vaguely of stale disinfectant and even staler vomit. But Johnston, his excitement rising by the moment, hardly noticed it. After London's, the traffic seemed very light to him and it was only a few minutes before they arrived. Johnston paid the driver and gave him a decent tip. Not too much, but enough. He didn't want to be noticed or for anything to appear to be out of the ordinary.

He felt tense now, nervous, as he waited for the taxi to fade into the distance and he started to walk slowly down the street. There were no second thoughts. If he were to turn back now, that would be the end of him, he might as well lie down and die. He might as well turn the gun on himself. And he had no intention of doing that.

Within five minutes he was there. He paused for moment and delved into his case to prepare himself.

The door bell rang. That's all I need, Scott Wheeler thought, as he pulled himself up from the comfort of his favourite armchair. He had not long finished his shift at the printing works and he was waiting for Mel to cook his dinner. She was running late and, by this time, he was starving.

"Can I help you?" The man facing him at the door was a stranger. He had never seen him before in his life. He knew he would have remembered him, he was very distinctive; he was short, quite fat and, although Scott felt mean for thinking so, he was bloody ugly, too. At first the gun didn't register. It was not the sort of thing an ordinary man expects when he responds to the blind, annoying banality of the summons of his front door bell. It had certainly never happened to Scott Wheeler before and when the gun was raised to his face, at first he thought it was joke. A bad one, yes. But a joke nonetheless. The safe comfort of that assumption soon deserted him, he could tell that it was no joke as soon as he looked deep into the stranger's eyes. They were harsh and cold; bloody and lifeless. They told a

cruel story of hate, hurt and violence. It was the story of Micky Johnston's life.

"Get in the fucking house." Johnston didn't want to wait on the street a moment longer than he had to. Scott complied, silently, as if in a trance. He didn't try to speak. He didn't know if he could. He didn't know what to say anyway. The gun's mesmerizing dominion over him silently forced him backwards from the small reception hall and into the dining room. "Don't try anything. Or I'll blow your fucking head off." There was a manic tone to the words he had no need to say. Scott was a good man but he was no hero. Few of us would be when actually faced with the barrel of a loaded gun, held no more than six inches from our face. More than that, he could see in his eyes that he meant it.

"Who was it, love?" Mel's soft voice came from the kitchen.

"Tell her to get in here." Johnston's voice was imperative. Scott tried but no words came out. "Tell her" he snarled again.

"Come..." was all he could weakly manage, the word cracked in his throat and faded instantly as it left his lips. Mel couldn't make it out but in her curiosity she was already on her way.

As soon as she reached the door, she knew what was happening. She didn't know the details of course, but they weren't of any importance. Like her husband she too had never seen this strange little man before. But she knew, with no shadow of a doubt, she knew instantly, that the spectre of Francis Doyle had returned to persecute her once more. Tears welled up in her eyes and she gave vent to them. She howled as she with a dreadful, throbbing intensity that she had not known for many years.

"Shut the fuck up." Johnston had no sympathy. Who had shed tears for him? With his gun still raised he crossed the room to Mel and pushed her roughly at Scott. They clutched at each other, each trying to draw strength from the other and each failing. Johnston slammed the door shut and limped across to the small dining table, carefully pushed away into the corner of the room. The chairs, cheap moulded black plastic, circling around looked as though they had been bought from Argos many years ago. There were more than a few scratches on them and there was the odd little rip or tear, here and there, in the fabric of the dissimilar cushions that were tied to them, which Mel had neatly mended. But they had arms and straight backs. They were ideal for his purposes. He moved two of them, one at a

time, to the centre of the room, all the time keeping the gun focused on one or other of them, before stopping suddenly in his tracks. Shit! The curtains were still open and the room looked out directly onto the street. Anyone could be watching. He hurried across as fast as he could and drew them, taking care not to turn his back on still panic stricken couple. It was dark enough outside, it wouldn't look odd. As he pulled then to, he turned away from Mel and Scott. Just for a moment. But they were frozen to the spot. Neither could move.

"You. Sit down." He was addressing Scott and he gestured to the chairs with his revolver. Scott was reluctant to let go of Mel but he understood that he had no choice but to comply passively. Johnston had abandoned his case on the table and now he moved back to it and released its single catch. Feeling inside it with his free hand, ferreting deep under his clothes, he located a reel of the thick black duct tape. He kept his eyes on the pair of them all the while. He had realized his mistake of a moment ago as soon as he made it. He knew that he must not lose concentration and turn his back on them again, not until they were safely secured. He'd been lucky that time, they had failed to react, but he might not be so lucky again. He knew he had to

be more careful and silently resolved to make no more mistakes as he threw the reel of tape across the room to Mel. She made no movement to catch it and it bounced off her chest and fell to the floor.

"Pick it up, you silly cow." Despite this epithet, he was becoming more calm now. Everything was going according to plan. His tone became more persuasive than demanding, coaxing even, as Mel fumbled on the floor and took hold of the tape. "That's it. Good girl. Now tape him to the chair. Around the chest. Good. Good. No, do it tight. Tighter. That's better. Once more round. OK, break it off. Use your teeth – that's it. Now his arms. That's good. Yeah, to the arms of the chair. Well done. And the legs." The whole procedure took no more than a couple of minutes or so and had used up most of the reel. He produced another from the case. "Now its your turn. On the chair." She sat passively as he went to work. The duct tape bit tightly into he flesh but she could not feel the pain. Fear had numbed her sensibilities. When he was sure that she was secure he turned his attention back to Scott and went over all his bindings with a third reel of tape. He was sure now neither of them could move.

"Where's your key?" Scott looked up at him but said nothing. He was now nonplussed as well as petrified. A rare combination. "To the front door" he clarified.

Scott was breathing heavily. He was as close to abject panic as any man should ever get. But he felt that he had to try to be strong, for Mel's sake as well as his own.

"On a hook. By the door." He screwed up his courage and managed to shakily ask "Who are you? What the hell do you want from us?" His voice was weak, bare audible and a good two octaves higher than its normal register.

"Think of me as an old friend of the family. And I really don't want anything from either of you. Believe me, I'm sorry that I've had to trouble you." Johnston made it sound as though he had done no more than dial a wrong number on the phone. "But it's best not to talk now. You two try and rest. If keep calm, you'll be OK." He took a good length of the tape and placed it firmly over each of their mouths. "All you have to do is to sit quietly. Don't do a thing and don't cause me any trouble. That's all. And I promise that you'll both get out of this in one piece." As he spoke, he placed yet another strip of tape over their eyes and reduced their world to the blackness that

was all he felt in his heart. Johnston knew that neither one of them would ever leave that house again. They had seen his face. They could identify him. Perhaps he should have worn a mask after all. He had seriously considered it back in London but he would have had to put it on while he was still out on the street and that would have been just a bit too risky. Besides, there was his voice and his leg. He couldn't disguise them to any great degree. It was unfortunate, he thought, trying to persuade himself that he cared more than he really did, but Mel and Scott had to be casualties of his war. It wasn't his fault, he'd never accept the blame. It was Frankie Doyle's and if things went according to plan, it would look like it was he who had killed them. He smiled as he saw the damp patch spreading from the crotch of Scott's trousers. "If you need to go to the toilet" he said, "just go. It doesn't matter. It won't bother me" he added considerably.

Phase one was complete. No problems, everything had gone according to plan. Quickly he hobbled back into the hall and took the key that was suspended from a hook just to the side of the door. Opening the front door he cast his eyes quickly but intently from side to side. The road was deserted apart from a solitary tabby cat



that he could just about make out, preening herself on a wall across the street. Johnston secreted the key under the mat. The word 'welcome' was faded and worn with time but it was still visible. He didn't even notice it as he quietly shut the door and returned to the living room.

For the first time, Johnston realized that the television in the opposite corner of the room, next to the window was still on. He looked for the remote control and turned down the volume. It was only with the greatest reluctance that he ever turned off a T.V. set. He supposed that he had spent too much time alone in the house. He moved his case from the table to the settee which diagonally faced the T.V. and was relieved to sit down beside it. It had been a considerable physical strain for him and he had not yet grown accustomed to such exertions. He would have liked to take his leg off and rest his stump now, but he thought better of it, it reduced his options and made him too immobile. He would put up with whatever discomfort it took. That was a small price to pay.

He sat there for five minutes, silently composing himself. His plan was working to perfection and he felt very pleased with himself. But the next

step was just as important. He pulled out his new mobile phone from the case. It had a bright orange cover that looked strangely incongruous in the hand of a man like Johnston. He had made sure that it was credited and fully charged yesterday and it had been switched off all night and day. It hadn't been needed until now. Johnston had thought everything through carefully. He had left nothing to chance. He turned on his phone and waited for a moment as it located his service transmitter. The signal was strong. Even this was working like a dream. He clumsily worked his way through the menu, to the phone book and dialled Doyle's mobile number. Doyle was sitting alone in the darkened house in Kilburn waiting for Bellini to call. He answered it on the third ring.

"Doyle" was his single word answer, barked into the handset.

"Hello, Frankie. Remember me?"

The voice sounded vaguely familiar but Doyle could not quite place it. "No" he answered honestly. This wasn't what Johnston had wanted to hear but he told himself that it wasn't important.

"It's me. Micky Johnston." Despite himself, he sounded hurt. "Remember me now? We've known each other for years. We were mates. You shot my leg off."

"I'm busy, Micky. Waiting for a call. Now fuck off." Doyle didn't wait for a response. He just ended the call. There must have been more to Tommy and Johnston's meeting than met the eye, Doyle thought. He wondered for a moment if it had been money in the package after all, but he wasn't going to let that worry him now.

This was not how Micky Johnston had planned the call. Not at all. God knows, he had gone over it in his head enough times. Doyle was supposed to panic when he heard his old lady was here, tied up. He was supposed to get in a car and head straight down to Southend. But the bastard hadn't even listened to him. Well, he was bloody going to have to listen to him. He pressed the redial button and this time he didn't give Doyle a chance to speak.

"Listen to me, Doyle, you mad bastard. I've got your ex wife here. Do you remember her? Melanie?" he tried to be as sarcastic as he could manage, but to Doyle, he just sounded even more pathetic. "She's here with me in Southend. I want you here and I want you now. 29

Gravesend Road. If you don't come, I'm going to start fucking torturing her."

"You can do what you like. I've told you already, I'm busy. I'm not coming."

"I'm serious, Frankie. Listen." He stood up and stepped gingerly across the room. He held out the phone as he bent down, checking that Mel's wrist was still securely fastened as he did so. Her hand was clenched into a fist and with his one free hand, he prised the little finger free from her balled left hand and suddenly jerked it backwards. It broke cleanly with a sharp snap and the pain receptors in Mel's body went into overdrive and her body, restrained as it was by the tape, contorted into a spasm of agony. She screamed but it was largely muffled by her gag. Johnston pulled the tape free and Doyle clearly caught the tail end of a howl that would have sent shivers spiriting down the spine of any normal man. At this, Scott twisted in his chair, trying blindly, vainly to intercede and to protect his wife. The chair pivoted on its back leg and it fell to the floor with a deep thud, Scott with it. Although he continued for a moment to struggle, he found that it hadn't even loosened his bonds and he gave up his futile attempts to free himself.

Johnston roughly pushed the tape covering Mel's now wet mouth back into position. It wouldn't take too much to disturb the neighbours he thought and he turned up the T.V. to cover the residual wailing that was emanating through her gag. "See?" he said proudly. "See? I told you. And there'll be more. You can count on that."

"Impressive, Micky. Very professional. I hope you've brought along a pair of pliers. They're always useful. But you've just overlooked one little thing."

"Tell me." Surely he was bluffing. He had planned things too carefully for anything to go wrong.

"I don't give a flying fuck what you do. Now go on. Carry on with your torture, like a good boy. But leave me alone." Once again, Doyle summarily hung up the phone.

Johnston could not believe it. Rather, he would not believe it. Doyle was trying to con him. He'd be on his way already, hoping to catch him unawares. But he wouldn't, he'd be ready and waiting for him. If he had been able to think clearly, even for just a moment, he would have realized how unlikely, how ridiculous even, his plan was. The whole scheme was flawed. It

depended upon Doyle having normal human responses and reactions which, quite simply, he just didn't have. Had Johnston put himself in Doyle's shoes, for an instant, and asked if, in a similar position, he would gallop, like a white knight on his charger, lance in hand, to Carole's rescue, he might have abandoned this idea and tried to come up with a very different plan. But he hadn't. Micky Johnston was, after all, as everyone had always thought, a very, very stupid man.

Mel was by now almost choking with the pain from her broken little finger and the noise was starting to annoy Johnston. "Shut up" he said as he roughly hit the side of her head, with the knuckles and back of his clenched right fist and he limped off into the back room to see if his victims would be any more secure in there. There was only the kitchen and, he thought, it may be better than the living room, no-one would see a light from the street. He went back and dragged Scott, still shackled to his chair, from the room into the hall, banging him roughly against the walls as he went, and on into the kitchen. The whole operation took Johnston about twenty minutes. Every step of the way was sheer agony for him and it drove him near to exhaustion. He was sweating and straining and when he finally

got Scott through the kitchen door he collapsed in a heap, on the floor, besides him. He felt sick and he wasn't sure if he'd even be able to get up. There was no way he could move Mel as well, he decided. She would have to stay where she was. Still maybe it was best to keep her away from the man, to separate them. He wanted to do a little more work on her and he could do without that stupid fucker wriggling all over the place, getting in the way and distracting him.

It took a while before he felt able to move and he pulled himself up against one of the kitchen units, gasping violently with the sudden force of his exertion as he did so. He limped, more heavily now, back into the dining room and sank down into the old green settee. That, like the chairs, had seen better days. It looked more than a little shabby and he had the vague impression that it probably always had, even when it was new. Mel was facing him. Her sobs by now had descended into a low, soft keening. Johnston liked the sound of that much better. It was like incidental, background music to his voice as he began to speak to her.

"You probably gathered who that was I was talking to on the phone. Good old Frankie Doyle. He asked after you." Johnston gave a sad

mirthless laugh that was devoid of all human feeling. "He'll be on his way by now. He's coming to rescue you. Let me explain. I owe you that much. I've had the odd run in with your old man. Your old old man. He and I go way back. Not as far as you, obviously. Well, there's only been one run in really, we'd always got on well before that. And the wife's had one, too. Men or women. They're all the same to our Frankie."

Children, too, Mel tried to say, but through her gag, the words just wouldn't come out. She wanted to tell him that she knew what it was like to live in fear of Frank Doyle, to hate him with a vengeance with every part of your being. Try as she might, even with the passing of so many years, she had never lost that burning hate. Although she kept it buried, she could never forgive him. It was, after all, the strongest and oldest of all emotions. But Johnston wouldn't have listened, even if he could have made out her words. He was finding that talking was too cathartic to countenance any interruption.

"Once," he continued, "– you'll like this – once, when he was looking for me you understand, he beat her up. Badly. Really badly. He trod on her hand. Stamped on it. Crushed it. It shattered all the bones. She still can't use, even now. Never



be able to. That's what the doctors say. And that was just because he wanted to get to me. She'd done nothing. She didn't tell him where I was. She didn't even know. She wouldn't have told him anyway. But he found me in the end." He paused at this point. Through her own gently sobs, Mel was listening intently. "That's why I'm here you see. Retribution. That's what it's called. Francis Doyle is going to die here tonight. I'm sorry that you're involved. I really am. I've heard all about you over the years and I know that he made you suffer too. But you're bound up with him, even now, even after all these years. Like it or not, and I know you don't. You're still part of him. And he's still part of you."

As he was speaking he had once again opened his case. From it he withdrew the heavy, rubber handled claw hammer that he had brought with him from London. Its head was covered in a thick coat of shiny black paint. Only its steel shaft remained silver and it shone brightly, glistening in the harsh white light of the 100 watt bulb, as he raised it towards the heavens and smashed it down squarely and without warning right in the centre of Mel Wheeler's already agonized left hand.

The pain from her little finger, which she had felt, could never be exceeded was suddenly eclipsed. She hadn't seen it coming and did not know what had hit her but she thought that, whatever it was, it had literally gone right through her hand. It wasn't agony, that she felt. It wasn't torture. It had gone beyond the simplicity of both of those concepts. It was much, much worse. It had gone in an instant, in a flash, in the smash of the hammer, to a place where language was no longer enough to convey the corrupt intensity of what she felt. There were only feelings, or rather, there was only one single feeling. Beneath her tape blindfold, everything went white. It was a brilliant, burning white which seared and scorched and burnt into her brain. For a moment it seemed that nothing existed in the world apart from her pain. The moment became a second, the second became a minute, the minute became an hour, the hour became eternity. Inside her head, Mel could feel no emotion, only pain. She could conceive of nothing, only pain. She was nothing, only pain. Micky Johnston alone could empathize. Only he knew how she felt. Only he had felt the same. He shared a bond with her. It was a bond that would develop as the night wore on.

In the kitchen, Scott swayed slowly in his chair. It was as if he was trying to comfort himself. He could only vaguely make out muffled noises, creeping into his senses, from the room next door. But he heard that hammer blow. And he heard what must have been Mel's scream. Masked by the black tape as it was, he could tell that it was of her essence, guttural, uncontrollable and wild. It made him more afraid than ever. The initial numbness of his shock was, at last beginning to subside and that only served to make things worse. This maniac obviously had little interest in him, clearly it was Mel he was after. Scott knew about her past, of course. She had hidden nothing from him. But that was years ago. It belonged to another person in another lifetime. He knew the man at the door was not Francis Doyle. He had seen a photo of him once. Years before. He had thought that the face that stared at him, impassively, out of the black and white snap shot had the most lifeless, dead eyes, or rather eye, because only one was open, that he could ever imagine. He had tried, God knows he had tried, but he had never been able to forget that face; its harsh, callous features were acid etched deep into memory.. It haunted his dreams and he saw it sometimes in his waking moments, too. Just on occasions, when he least expected it. For no

reason, it would flash into his mind. And then, as suddenly as it came, it vanished and he could banish all thoughts of that hateful face, once more, to the darkest recesses of his subconscious and pretend to himself that it no longer existed, although he knew that really it was never far away. He knew that it was all real. Just as Mel did, Scott knew that Doyle had to be involved in this somehow. In his worst moments he had always dreaded this happening. Or something like it. Why can't the past be buried and forgotten he thought? But it never is. We are all children of our pasts. The fact that it was Mel that this man, whoever he was, wanted, and not him, made it worse for Scott. So much worse; the instinct to defend his wife, to protect was what his now took hold of him with a vengeance, he could feel it welling up inside him, ready to explode. It seemed barely controllable but he was able to give no vent to it. He knew with a certainty that he would sacrifice himself for her if he could. But he couldn't. He was powerless to help her at all. He felt so impotent that for the first time, in many years, he began to cry. His bitter tears stung and burnt his eyes, trapped as they were behind the masking tape blindfold. His brain was beating on the inside of his skull as he tried, desperately to find something, anything that he could do to help. He wrenched at his bonds but they did not give

an inch, the tape just cut more deeply into his skin and bound themselves yet more inextricably to him. In truth, although it would have destroyed Scott to accept it, his wife's fate was sealed. The hours were passing and they were slowly but inexorably drawing to their inevitable conclusion. Mel Wheeler was already beyond any human help.

Back in the living room, Micky Johnston was about to get Biblical. It hadn't been part of his plan to really hurt Mel. Well, not an articulated part, although the equipment he brought with him was never really intended to be mere window dressing. He accepted that she would have to die, but he hadn't really *wanted* to hurt her. Probably the threats alone would have been enough to get Doyle here. Yes, he had been sure of that. But that bastard had forced his hand and now he felt, more than ever that events, indeed that fate itself, had taken over. Doyle had had enough time to get here but he still hadn't shown up. He glanced down at his watch, it had just gone two a.m. and he looked back at Mel. She was quieter now. The pain had lost none of its intensity but she seemed to have developed a gradual tolerance to it. He understood that concept. She had tried to move her hand an hour or so before but that had been a step too far. The

pain had just bitten yet more deeply into her brain with a fresh new intensity. For hours now Johnston had been just sitting and staring at her, his gaze deep and penetrating. Violating. He thought that she was really quite beautiful. Even now, even under these circumstances. Hers was the sort beauty that lay deep within and permeated her countenance. It was one that the mask and gag could not hide. And there has always been something alluring about vulnerability. He traced the wrinkles of time, that grew a little deeper with each passing year, across her forehead. They spoke to Johnston. They told him of laughter and of tears, of pleasure and of pain. He believed that she could not have been more beautiful all those years ago, when, smooth and virginal, she first met Francis Doyle, than she was today. Perhaps he was right. Hers was a beauty that had been forged in trial after bloody, burning trial of adversity. Johnston felt a need to touch that beauty to commune with it. To take it for himself. Whatever he did to her, he was quite sure that she would forgive him and give him her benediction. He was wrong.

He raised himself up from the settee after digging deep into his case which was still set beside him and he stood before Mel. She couldn't see but

she sensed him there. She could feel the heat of his body near hers. Fear rose up within her once again, mixing and mingling with the pain. She didn't want him this close. It wasn't safe. Johnston reached down and pulled back the masking tape that covered her eyes. He didn't pull it all the way, just enough to uncover her left eye and to release her from her unsighted prison. He tried to do it gently, slowly but, even so, it tore at her eyebrow. She didn't even wince, the agony of her hand still fully occupied all of the pain receptors in her brain. She opened her eye wide and stared at him. At first the sudden light was too intense after the numbness of her dark, unseeing world and she screwed her eye up involuntary. It took a great effort of will to open it again and confront the man monster that stood before her, but Mel was strong willed. She had taught herself to be over the years of adversity. Her eye gradually adjusted to the light and now, freed from the shock of their initial encounter, she saw Johnston clearly for the first time. He was like a monster, sent from the bowels of hell to devour her soul. He had become death, the destroyer of worlds.

"We're both victims, Mrs. Wheeler." Johnston had used her married name for the first time. She felt even more violated by this than by any of his

physical atrocities. She hated the fact that he knew her name; she wanted it to be a secret – like the ancient Egyptians she felt that it gave him a power over her, made him somehow superior. She hated how it made her feel. She hated being a victim, too. She hated the ascendancy that he, her fellow *victim* wielded so brutally over her.

"We're Frankie's victims. And that's all we'll ever be. Until we stand up to him and put a stop to it for once and for all. He stole our lives from us. You and me. But now we're taking them back from him. I know you understand that. We're very alike. Kindred spirits really."

Of course, Mel didn't understand him. It was just second rate psycho babble; an ignorant attempt to justify his unjustifiable actions. No more than that. If Johnston had been bright enough to analyse his words, he would have known that too. But Mel couldn't argue. She was the silent, dumb witness to a carnival of horrors and he was the master of ceremonies. His face was now closer to hers, perhaps less than an inch away. She felt his breath, sticky and putrid, almost with a stench of death, assault her face. He stayed this close as he raised his knife to her eye.



She recoiled back involuntarily as soon as she saw it, now so close to her eye. It was a carving knife. She had one very similar in the drawer in her kitchen. It was twelve inches in length with a utilitarian black plastic handle. She saw his knuckles tighten and whiten around it as his grip increased its intensity. The serrated blade glinted like silver in the harsh, all seeing artificial light of night. As the twin points of the vicious blade pierced her eye she tried to scream. But no sound came out. Even without her gag, it would have been no more than a silent scream, a scream that reached beyond the senses of our breathing, human world. It called out to an older, darker place. A place where evil lives.

At first as Johnston gently, almost lovingly eased the blade through the outer layer of the conjunctiva and the pupil, no blood flowed. But then he eased it upwards and back, slicing through the ciliary body and severing a myriad of tiny blood vessels. The whole eye turned instantly scarlet and tears of blood trickled like tiny raindrops from the corner of her eye. Johnston then raised the angle of the knife's handle and as he did so, he twisted and pulled it forward. At that moment, Mel's eye fell onto her cheek. It was only the fibrous spiral of the optic nerve that held it sort of in place. There was no

vision left of course. Not any longer. There was far too much damage for that. A whole new pain wracked Mel's being. As bad as before, worse perhaps, but this time subtly different and yet more terrifying. Although she could not articulate her thoughts, she prayed for the dark freedom of unconsciousness. For the relief of a death which didn't come.

The knife had been to frighten her. Perhaps even to sever her little finger, if necessary. Johnston hadn't planned to do this. He didn't even know why he had done it. At school, he vaguely remembered that he had been told of the old maxim of an eye for an eye, of measure still for measure, but that's not what he had had in mind. Perhaps unconsciously it may have been, but he had never articulated it to himself. As he surveyed his handiwork, confronted by the dejected parody of a woman that he had turned Mel Wheeler into, he tasted the acrid, bitter spew of bile in his mouth. He heaved, retched involuntarily and vomited forth a hideous, foul smelling yellow semi liquid mucous. It hit Mel square on her face; it mingled with the vivid red blood pouring like a torrent from the gaping socket of her Oedipal eye. It ran over the orb itself and tenderly kissed her full sensuous mouth. It covered her chin and seeped down and

spread insidiously over the floral pattern of her pretty yellow spring dress.

Johnston could not bear to watch but neither could he draw his eyes away. She held him fixed, entranced, in a vision of his own brutality. At last, he could look no more. The knife, which he now held limply at his side, brushing his trousers and staining them a sticky, gory scarlet with Mel Wheelers's blood, he raised once more and he cut the optic nerve. Mel's eye, which had been swinging with increasing violence as her body went into spasm, now fell to the floor. It was deflected by her arm and dropped onto the shoe of Johnston's artificial leg. He pivoted, as best he could, and kicked it violently towards the corner of the room and out of sight.

Mel was in a clinical state of shock. Thank God. It saved her from the full, grotesque realization of what had been done to her. Her silent screams had now given way to audible groans, but they were weakening as she lost more and more blood. Still she wept but it was now a tearless keening, like the sad, lonely song of a whale, conveying gigabytes of information, more than any man's brain could ever process. It was something primordial and base, yet at the same more complex than could ever be imagined or

understood. She was now drenched in her own blood and the stain on the carpet was extending wider and wider. Johnston had turned this pleasant suburban living room into an abattoir and he could no longer bear the sight of Mel and of what he had done. He pushed the black masking tape back across her eye but it just fell into the empty socket. It would not have stuck as her blood continued to flow like a river. It wasn't able to clot and coagulate properly, the wound inflicted by the carving knife had been too wide for that and a major artery had been severed. The blood was draining from her at such a rate that within a few minutes, Mel Wheeler would be dead.

Micky Johnston did not watch. Her blood had covered him too but it seemed as though it had gone even deeper. It had permeated his greying, greasy skin and was seeping through his body, mixing with his own and starting to course through his veins. It had both infused him and drained him, with her. He sat down on the settee and he pulled up his leg and lay there, in a foetal position, with just his prosthetic limb extended. He faced the back of the sofa and turned his thoughts as far away from Mel Wheeler as he could.

He had been there for almost another hour when he was brought out of his reverie by the clear, sharp alarm of the doorbell.



## **Chapter Fourteen**

The call from Micky Johnston had been the very last thing that Doyle had expected. He had been waiting, patiently as usual, for Don Bellini to come. It had been hours, he could have sent word. The police turning up – that also wouldn't have been too much of a shock. But Micky Johnston? An hour or so before the call, Doyle had heard a siren. His hand had instinctively reached for the gun that lay within easy reach and his index finger stroked the trigger expectantly. His excitement became tinged almost with regret when it passed by and he heard its mournful wail fade into the middle distance. It had other wrongs to put to right that day, other criminals to bring to book. Then it was back to the seemingly endless mind-numbing boredom of waiting. Doyle didn't mind it, he was quite used to a numbed mind but even he raised a sight of relief when his phone started to ring. Thank God for that, it must be Bellini finally, but no, he was wrong. What did the little shit think he was playing at? What he had done to Micky Johnston had just been business. Johnston knew that as well as anyone, he was in the same game after all. If you cheat a man like Don Bellini you

have to make sure that you're bloody good at it. Or lucky. But either way, you have to make sure that you don't get caught or you will surely have to face the consequences. Doyle knew that it had been a mistake not to kill Johnston on the spot, but Bellini hadn't wanted him to do that. Not that he was soft, even back then. No, he merely wanted him to stay on the manor – nice and visible – being pushed around in a wheel chair or hobbling painfully on crutches. *Pour encourager les autres*. That's what he said. Doyle remembered it clearly. It was a stupid idea; nothing would *encourager les autres* like killing him and dumping his body in the street. But he hadn't argued. Don Bellini is, after all, the man. Whatever he says goes.

Doyle had played it cool when Johnston phoned. Or he had tried to and not show the full extent of the shock that that the call had caused. It was his instinct to end the call as quickly as possible. He didn't know what to say to the bloody little monkey. But then he had called back. Why had he gone to Melanie? Doyle hadn't even thought about her for years. It had taken him a moment or two to register who Micky had even meant. That was all buried deep in the past and the past was a land to which Francis Doyle rarely ventured. He had still less thought of the future



either, all of the dreams and aspirations for a better life that he may once have harboured, had long since been dissipated in the harsh mists of reality without him even really noticing. It had happened long before he reached adulthood. He lived squarely, unthinkingly in the present, the here and now. It hadn't been a lie when he told Johnston he didn't care. Of course he didn't care. He and Melanie had broken up years ago and even then, when it was fresh and new, even then he hadn't ever cared. Not for her and certainly not for the boy. Why should he when he couldn't even care for himself? He was surprised that Johnston had really thought that he would rush to Melanie's rescue. Perhaps on another day, he thought, one when he was not holed up from the police in this shitty little hovel in Kilburn, waiting, as ever, for someone to tell him what to do, to make his next move for him, he might even have gone to 29 Gravesend Road. Not to play the hero for once in his life. Just to finish off Johnston for once and for all.

In the peace and quiet of his solitude, Doyle began to casually reflect upon what Johnston had told him. 29 Gravesend Road, Southend. So that's where she was living now, is it? It sounded so respectable and suburban to Doyle. He turned the address over and over in his mind, constantly

repeating it, each time with a slightly varying inflection. It became inexorably lodged there. He thought he even knew where it was, roughly. Bellini had had business dealings in that neck of the woods and, in the past, he had called on Doyle to lean on some of his associates. This had happened on more than one occasion. Each time he went, after his various dirty little deeds had been done, he would wander down to the sea front and walk along the shore, shoes in hand, feeling the cold kiss of the waves rush towards him and gently engulf him, wetting the bottom of his incongruously rolled trouser legs and making him feel like the child that he had never really been. He'd stop sometimes, just for a minute, and look up at the seagulls circling above. He felt drawn to them by their plaintiff cries. That was how he felt, too. And they had a freedom, of a sort that he would never be able to experience. But even their freedom, just like his bondage came at a price. The one thing that Doyle was sure of was that in this world everything came at a price and, sooner or later, you are called to account and have to pay. As he mused on these feelings, ensconced in his dreadful isolation, just for a moment, a very brief, fleeting moment, one that fluttered on the wind and was banished almost as soon as it appeared, he felt that he wanted to see Melanie

again. Not to ask for her forgiveness. In his own mind, he hadn't done anything wrong. All he had done was to react to situations that he otherwise could not deal with in the only way that he knew how. But nonetheless he wanted to revisit that long forgotten country, to look at her face, look into her eyes, one last time. To see if she was still beautiful. To see if things might perhaps have been different for them, if they could have lived in the sunlight, like the rest of humanity, and not in the half light, a twilight existing somewhere between day and night, of his under world.

He would meet up with Johnston when things had calmed down. Micky clearly was not prepared to accept that he had been lucky to be allowed to live. There was no way, he thought, he would make the same mistake again. He gave no thoughts to Johnston's threats to torture Melanie. He could tell from the tone, from the fevered high pitch of his voice that Johnston had been looking over the edge of a deep, dark precipice. He was certain that his threats had been serious and he had no doubts that he would carry them out. Or, at any rate, he'd try to. If he had the balls. He also knew that if he did, Melanie would almost certainly die. 'Torture' as a word, devoid of the brutal callousness that underscores its actuality, comes easy to the

layman – any concentration camp guard or cinematic German dentist could have a go at it. In fact, everyone always thought that it was something that any evil little bastard with a bad enough grudge can turn his hand to. Doyle knew that it was not. He had served his apprenticeship in the late sixties with real professionals and had developed all the obscene skills of the worst of the Korean guards at the Japanese prisoner of war camps in World War II. He had been taught by men who inherited their demesnes in the wake of the disbanding of the Kray and Richardson terror gangs. Men who had, in their turn, served their time and learned their art. They were skilled. Master craftsmen. There is a very fine line. One you must go up to, touch even, but never cross. Not until you have what you want – be that information, vengeance, retribution. The thresholds of the tolerance of the human spirit varied from person to person. You had to be able to read the often almost imperceptible signs. No when to press harder and when to ease back. He doubted if Micky Johnston would be skilled enough to recognize the line. He had been nothing, a nobody, just a figure of fun among pros, among the real hard men in Bellini's organization. He was someone who you could give the little jobs to, but he was never entrusted with anything serious. Doyle considered. By this

time he expected that Melanie would be dead. Unsurprisingly, he felt nothing at this realization. In his own way, he was, after all, even more dead than she was. He had been for years.

He sat in the dark. The house may have been 'safe' but it had no electricity. Thank God he had picked up a spare battery for his phone at his flat, and that this one was fully charged. He longed for a television or a radio. Anything would do, just to give him some sign of life, something to make him feel slightly less isolated. Bellini had had plenty of time by now to fix up their alibis. Why hadn't he been in touch? Doyle realized that if he was picked up without being briefed, he wouldn't have a clue what to say. He could really drop them all in the shit. Especially as the Old Bill were going to be thorough in a case like this, a case that involved one of their own. In Doyle's experience, the police were far more bothered about other coppers than they ever were about civilians. He could understand that. They were bound to be, it was the natural order – protect your own. It worked for coppers and crooks alike – some of them. Bellini, he knew, would be questioned and cross questioned over and over again. Hammered over minute details. But he was still far too sharp for them, Doyle was sure of that, even given the severity all his present

problems. And that lawyer of his was like a razor, too. He'd look out for Nate and the other lads, as well. Mr. Bellini had never let any of them down before. He wouldn't do it now. Doyle had faith.

His stomach rumbled. He hadn't eaten anything at all that day. He normally skipped breakfast, especially when he had a job to do, and afterwards things had become too hectic to think about food. He had time on his hands now though. Plenty of time. He thought about the chip shop he had passed earlier, on his way to the house. It was no more than ten minutes away at a brisk walk, down the Kilburn High Road but Doyle knew he couldn't risk it. Even with the alibi that Bellini would have concocted for him by now, the police would want to give him the third degree and see if they could shake it ... and him. But he still didn't know what that alibi would be. Until he heard from Bellini he was in the dark and would have to hold tight and do nothing. Perhaps he might not be in touch until morning, he thought to himself. It's possible he still being interviewed or maybe the Bill are turning over his offices. And he's got all the other lads to look after as well. Yeah, that's bound to be it. There's nothing to worry about.

Doyle made his way across to the window and looked out at the street between a crack in the thick plywood sheets that boarded up the window. The night was dark, a gentle rain was softly falling and the low cloud cover had obscured the full moon. The street was deserted. There were few cars about at that time and fewer people. Everyone was either safely at home after a hard day's labour or else they were out enjoying themselves. For the first time in a long time, perhaps even for the first time ever, Doyle envied them. He envied them their cosy uneventful little lives and their happy settled families. His thoughts wandered casually back to Melanie for just a moment but he brushed them hurriedly aside when he remembered little Frankie and he allowed his old friend, the comforting ease of resentment to creep back into his bitter, black heart. He would never be able to forgive that boy, that baby for wrecking his life. Without him everything – well, it wouldn't have been alright, not really – but it could have continued as it was. Perhaps it might even have been bearable for both of them. Without him, Francis Doyle might have had an element of normality in his life. It's always comforting if you can find someone, anyone to blame for everything unsatisfactory in your life. He moved

back to the sofa, where he had been sitting and he held tight to that thought.

He wasn't sure how much later it was when he heard a gentle rapping at the front door. He had dozed off, despite his best intentions to remain awake, alert and ready for action, and it took a moment for the knock to register in his semi-conscious brain. By the time of second, heavier rap came he was standing beside the front door, which led straight into the room, gun in hand, poised ready to respond instantly to any threat he faced. He reached to the latch and slowly released it but he made no attempt to pull the door open.

The door slowly swung open revealing the distinctive form of Don Bellini silhouetted against the glary haze of a street lamp. As soon as he realized that he was safe, Doyle lowered the Tokarev, which had been immediately pushed hard into Bellini's temple. Bellini walked in, brushing past Doyle as he did so.

"Christ, Francis, put it away" he commanded. "Have you been asleep? I've been knocking for minutes."

"No ... Sorry" was all Doyle could mumble as he shut the door behind Bellini and led him to the



sofa as his eyes were not yet accustomed to the gloom. "How's it been? Did the police give you much grief?"

"Nothing I couldn't handle" he replied truthfully.

"What about the alibi? The cast iron one. Is that sorted?"

"No problems. Trust me Francis. We've had to stick with the original story though. You and I were with Loader all day. I couldn't get anything else sorted in time" he lied but he did so convincingly, "the police turned up just after you went. You must have been lucky to miss them at your flat. They've turned that over, too, by the way. Did you pick up everything?"

"Yes. I've got all my kit with me. They wouldn't have found anything at the flat. But what about the night before? What about Tommy and Ashworth?"

"That's nothing to do with us. We were both at home. Had early nights."

"But I was fucking there. I saw him go in."

"But nobody saw you." Bellini seem a little annoyed at being cross questioned all over

again. "You didn't bloody do anything. The police might be slow, but they're not stupid. It won't take them long to realize that Tommy went A.W.O.L. He's probably left D.N.A. traces all over her house. All over her too probably, although you can't really blame him for that. It doesn't seem like he was in a rational frame of mind last night, does it? No, we've got no worries on that score, Francis. We're home and dry."

"So do you want Mr. Loader to take me down to the Yard and make a statement? Get it over and done with?"

"Yes." Even to Doyle, Bellini sound non-committal. "But not just yet. We'll let the dust settle for a while. I want you to hole up for a few days."

"Not here?" Doyle hoped for somewhere a bit more comfortable.

"Oh God, no. I wouldn't do that to you. Not in this shit hole. I've got somewhere a lot better in mind. You'll be safe there and you can get a bath. Get something to eat, as well."

It all sounded attractive to Doyle and he nodded in grateful acceptance.

“When do I go?”

“Get your bag. We’ll go there right now.”

Bellini went out first and he checked that there was still no-one about and the two men walked casually side by side down the road to where the Jaguar was parked as if neither of them had a care in the world.

“You drive, Francis. I’ll give you directions.” He tossed the keys to Doyle who caught them in his right hand.

This was strange, Doyle thought, Bellini was normally possessive when it came to his cars. He wasn’t the type to let just anybody drive them. But if that’s what the man wants ... He opened the car electronically, from a distance, with the remote, central locking key. He was answered by a distinctive beep and a flash of the indicators in unison. As the locks clunked heavily open, Doyle tossed his bag, with the Tokarev safely stowed away on Bellini’s instructions, casually onto the back seat. The big engine turned with the powerful, throaty roar that is an appropriate hallmark of all Jaguars and Bellini gave him a quick lesson in how to move the driver’s seat back and to adjust the mirrors. Doyle had been holed up in one of the myriad of tiny streets that

run off the Kilburn High Road and as they pulled into it, he asked for directions.

“Head out east. We want to pick up the A13 eventually.”

This was simple enough for even Doyle to follow easily. “Where are we going to?” he inquired.

“Out Essex way. Towards Dagenham.”

Suddenly a chill ran down his spine. The only thing that Doyle knew out in that neck of the woods was Daniel Bungay’s South Essex Construction building site, now well into the next phase of its development. More industrial units were being erected and more foundations were being dug. Doyle knew that, and he knew that Bellini knew that he knew. He wracked his brain, trying to come up with another possible explanation. There must be something, he thought but, try as he might, he couldn’t come up with it. There simply wasn’t another explanation. He felt angry, angry at himself for still trusting Bellini, when he was clearly going off the rails. He should have known better. He felt stupid. But most of all he felt betrayed.

“Keep calm, Francis. We have an appointment with Mr. Bungay, you and I. I’m sorry but it’s the

only way. If you think about it, you must know that, too. You've become a liability. Things have got out of hand. Killing a police officer. They're not going to let you get away with that."

Doyle looked across. He saw that Bellini had slid a gun, un-noticed, from his jacket pocket and it was now laid across his lap, finger poised on its trigger, the barrel angled up and pointing at his chest.

Doyle's voice remained calm. This wasn't the first time he had stared down the barrel of a gun. "I killed who you told me to kill, when you told me kill them. And that's all I did. No more. No less."

"I know, Francis. I know. I'm not saying it's your fault. Your not to blame. Not really. But you *are* the only one who can put things right now." At that moment Doyle knew that his fate was sealed. Bellini had sold him out. There was going to be no alibi from Loader. There was no comfortable safe house to lie low in. He was going to take the fall for it all, for everything. He had become the sacrificial victim on the altar of Bellini's madness and there were no prizes for guessing who was going to be the high priest.

"You bastard." His words conveyed only a tiny fraction of the emotion they warranted. "After all

these years. You're shafting me after everything that I've done for you. How many people have I killed for you? For Christ's sake, I saved you when Kurtis Robinson was about to blow your fucking head off. Without me, you'd be dead. Does it all count for nothing?"

"No, Frankie, not at all. It counts for a great deal. You have my undying gratitude. I want you to believe that. But this is business, Francis. Just business. You know about business better than anyone."

"You fucking Judas" This time he spat the words out. Doyle was seething now and it was finally starting to show. His face glowed red with rage and a vein in his temple throbbed metronomically, visibly. Bellini remained as impassive ever as Doyle continued, "I would never have betrayed *you*. I couldn't have done it."

"I know that, Francis. That's why I love you so much. That's why I'm doing this myself and not leaving it to Nate or one of the other boys. I owe you that much. I need to say goodbye to you."

"You owe me a damn sight more than that, you mad fucking junkie bastard." With the adrenaline reaching fever pitch, Doyle was, perhaps

unconsciously, accelerating. He was now well over the speed limit, driving far too fast.

"Slow down, Francis. We don't want to attract any attention to ourselves" Bellini, was beginning to get caught up in Doyle's excitement and he didn't want that to happen. It could compromise things. Doyle acted decisively. Instantly, instinctively. He accelerated harder and harder, his right foot pressed hard down to the floor. The Jaguar responded instantly and, as it did so, he swerved violently to his left. At the same time, he dropped his left hand from the steering wheel and pressed the red release button on his passenger's seat belt fitting, freeing the clasp. It all happened far too quickly for Bellini to react, or for Doyle to even think about what he was doing. He was in a life or death situation and a subconscious survival instinct made all the decisions for him. He had decided to live.

As the Jaguar veered off to the left it hit the kerb and Doyle fought to straighten it up. He didn't want to take any impact head on, he wanted it only on Bellini's side. The car crashed into the back of a stationery Volvo estate. It was ideal, like crashing into an immovable Swedish mountain. Doyle felt his chest constrict as the inertia reel of his safety belt bit tightly into it. All

he saw was a swathe of white appear instantly before his eyes and then he felt his face bury itself deep within it. A shot rang out from Bellini's gun as Doyle recoiled from the airbag. He felt the bullet burn as it grazed across the skin of his forehead before it exited through the side window of the car. Blood was streaming from his nose as a result of his impact with the airbag. It felt that it was broken, he thought, as he turned to look at his passenger. It was. He had expected to see that Bellini had been thrown clear through the windscreen. He expected him to be lying dead or dying on the bonnet, or buried in the back window of the Volvo. But he wasn't. The Jaguar was fitted with a passenger side airbag, as well as a driver's. Bellini was moaning but seemed to be returning gradually to his senses. "Fucking car" Doyle said out loud. Bellini's shot had not been deliberate. The shock of it all had been too great for Don Bellini to make any conscious decisions whatsoever, let alone to discharge his gun. It had simply gone off, not with the initial impact but as the gun was thrown from his hand as he rebounded from the airbag. He felt the sharp sting of whiplash run up his back and spasmed into his neck but there wasn't a scar on him.



Doyle tried to reach down for the gun but he was constricted by his seat belt and, in any case, in the dark around Bellini's feet where it had fallen, it would have been a miracle for him to have picked it up. Bellini seemed to be coming round now, he could see that and he knew he must act quickly to save himself. His right hand dropped down to his boot and from inside, between leather and sock he pulled a long, narrow lock bladed knife. His fingers fumbled as they opened it and it seemed to take an eternity before he felt the blade click securely into position. Bellini looked around at him and saw, with eyes just beginning to focus again, Doyle's knife heading straight towards his throat. He instinctively looked away and raised his hands to try and shield himself. But it was too late. His pact with Mephistopheles had finally drawn to its preordained conclusion and, as with Faustus, Bellini's clock had finally run its time.

The knife's blade was narrow and long, five inches long. Doyle drove it through Bellini's fingers and into his neck. It severed the carotid artery and blood spewed from it instantaneously like a geyser. Doyle felt its sanguine warmth full in the face and it mingled with his own blood, still flowing from his broken nose in a steady, profuse stream. Bellini let out a scream of terror and pain.

It was a scream that came from deep inside and should have curdled Doyle's blood. The knife was still in Bellini's neck and Doyle twisted it through a full one hundred and eighty degrees semi arc, so that its cutting blade faced to the front. He ripped it forward with all his might, feeling it slice through sinew and muscle. It slit through Don Bellini's trachea and burst free of the confines of his throat, embedding itself loosely in the airbag, which started slowly to deflate. That should shut the fucker up, thought Doyle. Donald Bellini had now fallen silent. He slumped forward once more, gently this time, into the now flaccid remains of the airbag. His blood flowed thickly, but peacefully at last, staining it a dark crimson red.

Doyle turned suddenly and was confronted by the startled face of a young man. His door had been opened and the visage that looked in at him was a ghostly white, as if all the blood had been drained from it as surely as had Don Bellini's. The police couldn't have got there. Not yet, thought Doyle. In fact, the man had arrived so quickly that he must have been following right behind them and stopped to help.

He tried to push aside the panic he felt and sound confident for the sake of the 'victim'. "It's

alright, mate" he said. "I've called an ambulance on my mobile. They'll be here in a minute." And with the ambulance, the police too, Doyle thought. For the first time, the good Samaritan saw the knife in Doyle's hand, dripping red with the gore of fresh blood. He wondered what in God's name he stumbled upon. Suddenly, his face became whiter and yet still whiter when the knife was turned towards him. Doyle held it only an inch or two from his face.

"You got a car?" The question was spat at him with such insidious venom that he dared not ignore it. He nodded. "Where?"

"Just behind you."

"Come on, then." Doyle pushed him backwards forcefully as he freed his seat belt and got out of the now dead Jaguar. He stumbled and felt his legs almost go from beneath him. They felt leaden, devoid of all energy. He supposed that it was the shock from the crash. For a second the stranger thought about running but he was too fearful to try and quickly abandoned the idea. Doyle had, by this time regained his composure and pulled his holdall from the rear seat of the Jag.

"Keys?" he demanded of the man.

"They're still in there. I left the engine on" he spluttered.

"Right. Get in the boot." Doyle raised the hatchback of the man's small Peugeot and, as the man was climbing in, Doyle produced the Tokarev from the bag and executed him clinically with a single bullet through the base of his skull. At least he never saw it coming. In Doyle's twisted world, this almost amounted to compassion. The man fell into the car's boot and Doyle bundled his feet in carelessly after him and he slammed the hatch back down. The night was quiet. There were few other cars on the road, just one or two passing anonymously by, slowing to look interestedly at the site of the accident but never thinking for one moment to stop, and despite the howling of the alarm of the Volvo, anyone who had looked out with concern from the houses that were set well back from the road, had looked back in again, keen not to get involved. Such is the way of the world. But there is a wisdom, occasionally born of bitter experience, in such a policy of non-interference. Doyle himself had testimony to that in the boot of his new car.

He got into the Peugeot, pushed the seat back, for the driver had been a small man while he

lived, and then he sped off, into the night. He headed in the same general direction as before. For the moment he didn't know what to do or where to go. His safety net had been removed and he felt suddenly more alone than ever. For the first time in many years, Doyle had left the security of the Bellini's employment and had now involuntarily branched out on his own. He was self employed; his own boss. He hated the feeling and he was scared by it.

His first thought was to put as much distance between himself and Bellini as he could. And to do it as quickly as possible. He didn't even notice the red light at the pelican crossing. He didn't even notice the young man until he had hit him and sent him hurtling over the bonnet, bouncing off the roof and landing heavily on the tarmac, his head grotesquely twisted to one side, his neck obviously broken. Why should he care? He didn't think there had been any witnesses. Not that that really mattered. Not any more. Doyle knew that he was a broken man. He was finished. He had never been able to see much of a future but now he couldn't even see the present. All he wanted now was some sort of resolution. Closure.

The old Citroen car that pulled up to the body lying prostrate beyond the pedestrian crossing

found that the young man was already dead. A hit and run, a terrible accident the papers were to say. It was such a shame, he had inherited his mother's looks and everyone agreed that he had a glorious future ahead of him. You had to have a real talent, a rare talent to get a scholarship like his. It was only happenstance that brought him to this part of London that night. He had never been there before. He was just going to a party at a friend of a friend's place. It was such a shame. There weren't many people at his funeral a week later. No parents. There were few people left to mourn poor, tragic Frankie Wheeler.

## **Chapter Fifteen**

Chief Superintendent Goodwin came to the scene of the 'accident' himself. He brought Dave Morris. He wanted to see it for himself, to get his own impression of what may have happened. But more than that, most of all he wanted to make sure that Don Bellini was really dead.

His luxurious black Ford, with Morris at the wheel, pulled up to the barrier, hastily erected across the road. The two men flashed their warrant cards at the uniformed officer who was stationed there. He hadn't recognized them – he had never even been to New Scotland Yard himself – but that didn't stop them from both feeling a bit put out. Morris pulled up a little way behind the Jaguar and they were greeted by the local C.I.D. chief, Inspector Phil Penncott, who had secured the scene. Scene of crimes officers, looking strangely out of place in their disposable white overalls, were going over the car and its solitary remaining occupant, with their fine toothed combs. By now, confident that they could voyeuristically watch the spectacle without getting personally involved, a crowd had developed and two or three young coppers were trying to persuade them to disperse. They told

them that there was nothing to see, although it was patently obvious that there was plenty.

Goodwin knew Penncott vaguely and smiled warmly at him. After all, this was turning into a much better day than he had dreamed of.

"Thanks for coming out, Sir" Penncott said. "We thought you'd be interested as soon as we found out who it was in there."

"You're damned right I'm interested. What have we got here, Phil?"

Penncott was a professional; observant and succinct. "It's a bit of a mess all round, sir. The Jaguar is registered to one Donald Bellini, or rather, to one of his companies, and the driving licence and credit cards on the man in the passenger seat indicate that he's our man."

"I can confirm that for you" Goodwin interjected, looking beyond the S.O.C.O. men at the corpse of Bellini. "You probably heard that I was interviewing him just this afternoon. Not so smug now, are we Mr. Bellini?"

Penncott knew of Bellini's reputation but, even so, he gave an involuntary shudder at Goodwin's obvious delight at his death. "There was a pistol



at Bellini's feet. A 7.62 mm Tokarev. Not uncommon, the Russians have got a good foothold in London nowadays, as you know. Its got finger prints all over it. I expect them to be Bellini's because it's been discharged – there's a bullet hole in the driver's side window. It looks as though he missed whoever he was shooting at. Possibly because he was having his throat cut at the time. It would have taken a good deal of force to do it. It must have been a strong man. Someone who knew what he was doing."

"Someone like Frankie Doyle" Morris said, his accent resplendent with all the sonorous resonances of his home in the valleys.

"Got to be. A pound to a penny" agreed Goodwin "Any witnesses?."

"Nothing really. Just an old boy who thinks he saw a car drive off at speed. Dark coloured Fiesta perhaps, or something similar. He thought so, anyway, but he couldn't be sure. No idea of the index number. It may just be a co-incidence. Someone stopping to help and getting frightened off by all this." He gestured towards the scene of the carnage. "You couldn't really blame him. The driver may well have been hurt in the struggle. There's an awful lot of blood on his side too but it could just be referred. There are some blood

stains outside on the road but they faded out a few yards back."

"Which implies that he got into the car that your witness saw driving off. Maybe he had backup. But if he did get away on foot, he can't have gone far. He must have been swathed in blood, especially if he's wounded." Goodwin was now feeling lucky. "I want you to do a sweep of whole the area, Phil. I don't expect you'll find anything but I want you to try. And get the house to house under way as soon as you're through here. Davey Boy and I'll get back to the Yard now but I want you to keep me posted. With anything at all. No matter how trivial."

Pennecott agreed and Goodwin and Morris set off back to brave the west London traffic.

\* \* \*

It was late when they arrived at Scotland Yard. So far, their investigations had yielded nothing and although Bellini's death meant that he would be forever denied the kudos of a successful prosecution, Goodwin felt no small sense of

satisfaction. Whatever way you looked at it, it was good result. To get a bastard like Bellini off the streets alone was worth it. He hoped that it was Loader and not Doyle who had been the driver that evening, but he knew that was too much to dream for, and he was more than content with what he had got.

He took Morris into his office and pulled a bottle of standard police issue Glenfiddich and two glasses from their statutory home in the bottom drawer of his filing cabinet and poured then each a glass so large that it alone would have probably taken them over the drink driving limit. Not to worry, they both knew enough of the right people to make sure that nothing would ever come of that, even if they were stopped. Goodwin raised his glass and made a toast.

*"Dis manibus"* he proposed.

"Uh?" A classical education was an alien concept to Morris and similarly even the most basic command of foreign tongues remained a mystery to him. Some of his less charitable colleagues would sometimes be unkind enough to say that he often even seemed to struggle with English.

"To the spirits of the departed. This one's for you Don" Goodwin said, a little pretentiously, and

then, with somewhat more charity, he smiled like a kindly uncle at Christmas and asked his subordinate "What do you make of it all, Dave?"

Morris was nobody's fool, despite his lilting sing-song voice, and the propensity to sometimes speak before thinking, which he was now so desperately keen to control. Goodwin genuinely valued his opinion and Morris considered his words carefully before speaking.

"It seems to me, Guv, that it's likely to be one of two possible scenarios. Number one: it's unrelated to Tommy's death and the D.I.'s. It's a gang land hit, pure and simple. Someone else making a move on his territory. Maybe the Malek twins are back on the scene if they're still alive. That's one possibility but it's unlikely. It doesn't really ring true to my mind. A professional hit man wouldn't use a knife, not when Bellini was tooled up with a gun. Which brings us on to scenario number two. We saw it ourselves today in the interview. Bellini was distancing himself from Frankie Doyle. He's never done that before. Not to my knowledge and, God knows, he's been interviewed enough times, even if never been able to get anything to stick. It was like he was giving us Doyle. Not on a plate. He wouldn't make it that easy for us, would he? But making

him his scapegoat all the same. What I think is that Doyle had got wind of it, himself. But he wasn't expecting to have to act as quickly as he did. It took him by surprise that's for sure. Why else crash into the back of a parked car? I think that Bellini was putting the finger on Doyle and it all went pear shaped. He got a bit more than he bargained for."

"I was thinking along the same lines myself" Goodwin agreed.

"There was something about Bellini today" Morris went on at a pace, "Did you notice it? I can't quite put my finger on what it was, but something wasn't quite right. He was cocky enough, nothing unusual in that, but it was like he was trying to keep himself in check all the time, like it was all a front. Now, he's not normally like that. It just struck me as odd."

"You could be right." Goodwin couldn't say that noticed anything like that and he wondered if his anger had blinded him. "So you agree that it was Doyle who killed Charlotte and Tommy?"

"It seems most likely. But not off his own back. He's Bellini's puppet. He wouldn't fart unless Don Bellini told him to."

"Well, he's going to find a lot of things different with Bellini out of the way."

"No doubt about that. He won't last ten minutes on his own, without him. It shouldn't take too long for us to pick him up but what worries me is what if he turns psycho now that Bellini's out of the picture. Now that nobody loves him any more. Shoots up a McDonalds's or wanders down Oxford Street blasting away with a Kalashnikov. I really think he'd be capable of it. I always had the feeling that Bellini kept the lid on old Frankie Doyle. He could control him but I'm not sure that anyone else can."

"Once we've got him, this time, he'll go down for ever, Dave. Mark my words. Without Bellini to engineer a good defence for him, we will have seen the last of Frankie Doyle."

They were interrupted by a single sharp knock on the Superintendent's half open door. Detective Sergeant Pat Todd stood there. He looked agitated and a single bead of sweat ran from his forehead, skirting his eye and over the polished ebony skin of his cheek only to be flicked casually away with the back of his hand. When he spoke, Goodwin could tell that he was seriously on edge but he wasn't in the mood to allow anyone to rain on his parade.

"Thank God you're back, Guv. There's been developments" Todd blurted out.

"Come in and have a drink, Pat. We're celebrating. That long time friend of the Metropolitan Police Force, Mr. Donald Bellini, of the Mount of Venus whorehouse, Southwark, has been shuffled off this mortal coil. And not before time too."

Todd ignored the good cheer as he stepped inside the office, shutting the door firmly behind him and then pushing it again, just to make sure that it was closed. "I've got news, boss."

Goodwin saw now that it was more serious than he had at first anticipated and he adjusted his mood appropriately. "Go on" he said dejectedly.

"First, we've got a positive I.D. from the closed circuit cameras at the Tower. Frank Doyle was there this morning. Just one shot of him. Just for an instant. And he's on his own. But it's definitely him. He was there."

"Brilliant." By Todd's tone of voice, Goodwin had been expecting something bad. He felt suddenly relieved. "This is great news. Does the time fit?"

"Oh yeah. He's in the frame alright. For Tommy's murder. But he didn't kill D.I. Ashworth."

"What? How do you know." Goodwin felt suddenly deflated and uncomfortable once more. Todd's whole demeanour was tangibly depressing.

"I've been round to Tommy's flat. I found some ... stuff." It was as though he couldn't bring himself to be any more explicit than that. Goodwin knew it must be bad and he forced the issue.

"Stuff? What stuff?"

"Clothes. Packed into a bin liner, hidden away under his bed. They're caked in blood."

"You've not told me that it was the D.I.'s blood." Goodwin felt instinctively that there was more to come.

"No but ..."

"But what, man?" He was no longer the avuncular elderly relative. He had now returned to being the hard nosed copper, a man who could see one hell of a problem appearing over the horizon and rampaging relentlessly towards



him with the speed and ferocity of a rogue bull elephant.

"It's his shoes. Trainers. New Balance ones. And expensive by the look of them – they're not all that common. They've got a very distinctive tread pattern. It's definitely the one we found all over the D.I.'s house."

"Are you sure?" Christ, Christ, oh Christ, was all that ran through Goodwin's mind. "I mean absolutely fucking certain?"

"I was there, Guv. It's the same. I'm certain."

"Oh, Jesus wept. This bag. Have you sent it down to forensic?"

"Not yet, I came straight to find you." This was a clear breach of procedure and they all knew it.

"Where is it now?"

"It's locked in the boot of my car."

"Good. That's good. Sit down, Pat." He fetched another glass and poured Todd a very large whisky. He topped up his own glass and Morris'. Goodwin could feel his mind racing, but it didn't seem to be getting anywhere, as though it was

stuck in neutral. He knew what he wanted to do, but did he dare? Would they back him up?

"Who else knows about this?"

"No-one, Guv. Like I said, I bagged it up and came straight here."

"Well done, Pat, you've did right." It all seemed too much for Goodwin to take in. He had known that Ashworth wasn't happy. At their last meeting she had told him that she wanted Tommy pulled out. She said that it was simply that he wasn't getting the right results, but she intimated that it ran deeper than that. That there was something more. He hadn't wanted to hear. He could tell that she had lost faith in Tommy but he had no idea that it could have been this serious. He doubted if she had either. And when Goodwin had said no, she whinged a bit but accepted it. Operations like these don't get results over night – you've got to develop a trust, a confidence that only embeds itself gradually. After all, Tommy had been his boy, he'd picked him out for SO10 training in the first place and then, it had been him who had recommended him for the Bellini infiltration. Could he really have gone wild? It wasn't the Tommy that he knew, but then the pressure and isolation of undercover work can do strange things to even the most experienced

men. Living two separate lives; befriending people in order to betray them. It was no wonder that lines of demarcation became indistinct. But could this really have happened? Todd seemed very sure, but only the forensic labs could conclusively prove or disprove it beyond a reasonable doubt. Goodwin had made his decision. He wouldn't, couldn't let that happen.

He sat in silence, facing his two colleagues across the desk. If it was true, he thought, he, Goodwin, had killed Charlotte and Steve Ashworth, just as certainly as Tommy had. It would be something that, over the years, he would have to learn to live with but, he was now resolved, he would do so in private and not in the full glare of the mass media coverage that would attend the public enquiry that would have to precede any court case.

Meanwhile Dave Morris sat silently as if in a trance, trying to take it all in.

"OK. We've got to decide what we're going to do. It seems to me that there's absolutely no proof that Tommy was involved in Charlotte's death. If he was there – and that hasn't been proved, its only conjecture – we know that he would have been there trying to protect her from someone, most probably from Frank Doyle. It must have

been him who killed Charlotte. Not Tommy. I won't accept that he could have done it. You both knew him, for Christ's sake. Surely you can't believe it? No. It had to be Doyle. Let's get that straight now. That would be why he killed Tommy, because he wouldn't play along. Because he tried to save her. Are we all agreed?"

There was stunned impassivity from Todd and Morris.

"Are we all agreed on that?" Goodwin repeated, this time more forcefully, and he received curt, almost reluctant nods, by way of response. "Good" he said. "Good. Because Tommy was one of us. And Charlotte was one of us. We have a duty to take care of them. To see that justice is done to them. Not to besmirch the name of a good friend and colleague. Can you imagine it? If this is put before the Crown Prosecution Service we'll never even get Doyle into court. You saw what he did to her. Could that have been the work of a police officer? You saw it. Tell me" he demanded. "Could Tommy have done that? He was a friend of yours, Pat, wasn't he? Would he have split her head open, down to the mouth. And cut Steve's right off?"

"No. I don't suppose so." Goodwin detected more than a hint of uncertainty in Todd's reassurance.

"There's no suppose about it. Of course, he couldn't have done it."

"But what about the footprints, Guv. Why was there only the one set?" It was a fair question that Morris raised and one to which Goodwin didn't have an answer but he tried to deflect as best he could.

"That just goes to prove Tommy's not involved" he argued weakly. "Doyle did the business, taking care not to leave any traces. He's a pro after all. Tommy comes in, interrupts and tries to stop him and walks right through all the mess he's made."

Morris shook his head slowly. It wasn't so much that there were holes in the story rather the fact that there were only holes and no story and Goodwin knew it. He tried to change tack.

"What good would it do, dragging Tommy's name through all this shit? Doyle's the only one that would win. Not Charlotte. She wouldn't want to see Tommy dragged through the gutter for

something that Frank Doyle did. You know that. The Force couldn't win either – not the Met. Surely you can see as well as I can that the last thing we need is another scandal. Especially after all that fuss over Ryan's bent team out in Catford last year. It rocks public confidence. They lose faith and that means we can't do our job properly. What good is the Met. if people can't trust us? Think about it. How would it look for us?" This was his trump card. "One bad apple sours the whole barrel. You know that that's the way it works. The whole squad would be disbanded. We can have kept our noses clean for our entire careers but who's going to believe that. It wouldn't be so bad for me. I've not got long to go. They'd pension me off early. Stress. Ill health. Something like that. It's you lads that I'm worried about. And the rest of the team. You're young. You've got twenty or so years ahead of you. Twenty years of being a pariah. Of being overlooked for promotion while other people, less deserving people, are pushed ahead just because they weren't tainted by a bent copper. Twenty years of not being trusted. Twenty years of rumours, of whispers. Can you put up with that? I sure as hell couldn't. And what for? To see that a cold blooded, psychopathic cop killer like Frank Doyle doesn't go down for

killing your boss. You know he did Tommy as well. Definitely. Well? What do you say lads?"

Todd was the first to speak. This had been what he wanted to hear. That's why the bin bag stayed in the boot of his car when he couldn't find Goodwin and had not been booked in and sent directly down to the forensic labs. "I say that we burn it, Guv. The whole damn lot of it. Everything I found in Tommy's flat. We agree here and now, the three of us, that the clothes never existed. I think it's what the D.I. would have wanted."

"What about you, Dave? What do you say?" Morris didn't say anything. He sat impassively, eyes firmly fixed on the floor. The others stared at him and waited. He could feel their eyes on him but he couldn't bring himself to look up. In the silence, it seemed to last for an eternity. Eventually, slowly, he nodded.

"Say it, Dave. And mean it. We've got to be in it together. All of us. Or none of us." Goodwin knew him well enough to be sure he would acquiesce now.

"OK" he responded, although he certainly still didn't sound as though he meant it. "I'm with you."

Goodwin breathed a silent sigh of relief, choosing to ignore the complete lack of conviction in Morris' voice. "Good. Well, we've got work to do. Pat, you burn the clothes. Use petrol, paraffin, whatever, just make sure that there's nothing left. I saw some empty metal barrels near that site in Lambeth we passed the other day. You know the one I mean?"

"Yeah. I know it."

"If anyone comes near, just flash your warrant card. But make sure you keep your name over your name. And," he added, "make sure that there's nothing left. I mean nothing – nothing at all. Then clean the boot of your car out, where the bag was. Scrub it. Really thoroughly. We don't want to take any chances. Dave and I'll go back to Tommy's place and clean up any mess that's left. We'll make sure that there's nothing else there. Is that OK with you, Dave?"

Morris nodded again. "Right, you go out and pick up some cleaning stuff. Bleach, Vim, whatever you can get. Tommy's not the type to have any of that in." He unconsciously used the present tense as he spoke, before pulling out his wallet and handing Morris two twenty pound notes. "I'll see you outside, by my car in fifteen minutes. OK?"



“OK” said Dave, in a voice that was little more than a whisper, and he left without looking back.

After he was sure that Morris was out of earshot, Goodwin rounded on Todd. “What the hell do you think you’re playing at, Pat?” He shut the door that Dave Morris had left slightly ajar. “Why the hell did you say anything in front of that Welsh twat? Are you bloody stupid? The fewer people involved in something like this the better all round. It’s safer for us all. Haven’t I told you that before? Him and his fucking ‘chapel on Sunday’ conscience. He’s not with us. Not yet, despite what he’s saying. We can’t afford to let him loose. I’ll have to talk to him again. Try to make him see sense, this time.”

“I’m sorry, Guv. Really. I didn’t know what to do. I suppose I was panicking a bit.”

“OK, OK. I suppose I can sort I out. But whatever happens now, you’ve *got* to back me up. Be certain of that before we go on. Absolutely certain. This is serious stuff and we’re in it right up to our necks. I’ll do whatever I have to get us clear. Do you understand me?”

“Yes, Guv. I’m with you all the way. Whatever it takes.” Despite his momentary indiscretion, Goodwin knew that he could rely on Todd.

"Alright. You'd better get off now. We've both got work to do. Come and see me in the morning. First thing. I'll brief you. And remember" he added as Pat Todd gratefully made for the door "never put me in this position again."

After Todd had left, Goodwin poured himself yet another stiff whisky. He placed it on the desk, in front of him as he held his head in his hands and wept.

## Chapter Sixteen

After he had been driving for about half an hour or so, Doyle pulled into a lay-by and switched off the Peugeot's engine. He didn't really know why he had stopped. It wasn't to compose himself, he didn't feel the need for that but he did take the opportunity to clean off most of the blood, Bellini's and his own, that still adorned his bespattered face, using a rag he found in the pocket of the door panel. He winced at the smell of oil. He was feeling calm enough now, he thought, although his mind was still racing. There was a sense of emptiness was rising and rising inside him already. Don Bellini had provided a focus to Doyle's life but he had betrayed him. Sold him out for less than the customary thirty pieces of silver. Things would never be the same again. He felt no real sense of hatred, or even bitterness, towards Bellini, just a deep seated, aching sense of regret. Bellini was an ill man, after all. It had been months now since it had started, Doyle thought, and he allowed himself the luxury of letting his mind wander for just a moment. It had all seemed to happen so suddenly at first. But Bellini's was a dirty world and dirty actions were far from uncommon. It

hadn't seemed all that unusual at the time. Doyle mourned silently for his only friend, Don Bellini. The rain was falling more persistently now and Doyle would down his window and allowed it to sweep over his face. It wasn't strong enough to wash away all the sins of the world. As he forced himself to confront the reality of his situation, Doyle began to accept that his time, just like Bellini, was up too. One way or another. There was just a couple of loose ends to tie up and then, he thought, he would be free at last. Free like the seagulls, soaring and swooping, along the coast at Southend. He tried to imagine their freedom, and the blessed release it bestowed, but he wasn't able to. His mind flitted capriciously between these surreal thoughts of abstract concepts and the banal, prosaic reality of what he should do next. Right now, he had no idea how all of the loose ends would be drawn together in their final resolution. Doyle knew that he wanted resolution but he wasn't able to work out yet how to achieve it. He knew, however, where it begin.

It had already turned three o'clock in the morning when he finally reached Southend on Sea and he drove, quite sedately, along the seafront. The pubs and clubs had long since bolted their doors and the last of the boozy revellers, locals and

tourists alike, had already made their way home. Even the bright flashing lights of the amusement arcades had ceased in their persuasive call to lost souls for the night and they were finally resting in the peaceful oblivion of their shuttered darkness. The parade was deserted, save for a solitary young policeman, pacing his beat with deliberation. As he passed the lock up shop fronts he shined his torch enquiringly into every dark recess, rattling every doors, hoping that something would happen to relieve the tedious monotony of the night shift patrol. At the same time, he hoped that it wouldn't. Doyle indicated and pulled the car in to the kerb. He fumbled for the button and the passenger side window descended with a regular, humming buzz. The officer came and crouched down at the side of the car, leaning in through the open window, trying to detect if there was the hint of alcohol on the breath of this scar faced driver which would allow him to call for a car and return to the warmth and comfort of the police station. It was a long shot, he knew, but drunken drivers had been stupid enough to flag down a copper before. Booze does strange things to a man's perception of reality. There was even one story still doing the rounds at the station of a company director, an otherwise man well respected in the local community, who went to his doctor with a

minor ailment. The doctor told him that he was drunk. Not that he was a drunk, but that he *was* drunk. Right then and there. Drunk. The man, who was well known to his circle of intimates for his aggressive alcoholism, had taken offence at such a scurrilous suggestion. He had hardly had a drop all day and, to vindicate himself and to prove what an idiot and a charlatan that so called doctor was, he drove to Southend police station and demanded to take a breathalyser test. The result of that was being immediately banged up in the cells, followed shortly afterwards by a two month period of incarceration at Her Majesty's pleasure. Much to the young copper's chagrin he could not detect even the faintest trace of alcohol on this driver's breath. Clearly, he wasn't that stupid and it was dark enough for him not to see any of the remaining traces of the blood on Doyle's clothes either. It was a good job as Doyle hadn't even thought of this – his mind had been too preoccupied elsewhere, racing with a relentless but unfocused determination, trying to come to terms with his situation and to begin to formulate a plan. This wasn't easy, in the past Bellini would invariably give him the plan and he just had to follow it through, simply, step by predetermined step, to its logical and preordained conclusion. He politely asked the young policeman for directions to Gravesend

Road and courteously thanked him as he pulled away. No more than five minutes he had said, and within four, Doyle was parking outside number 29. He reached onto the back seat and roughly dragged his holdall into the front of the car. As he drew back the zip of the bag, he removed his Tokarev from inside his jacket. He looked at it for a moment, examining it minutely. It was a thing of stark, uncompromising beauty, exactly the same model that Bellini had pointed at him just a little while before. He shook his head, silently and sadly, and pushed the gun deep down into the recesses of the bag. He fumbled around in there for a moment or two until his hand finally settled on the smooth grey steel of the IMI Desert Eagle Magnum. He pulled it out. It was a monstrous gun with a reputation for the brutality of its destructive power that was second to none. It was virtually twice as big as the Tokarev. He held lovingly, stroked it, caressed it almost as one would do to a favourite pet. He pulled back the breech and checked the cartridge. It had a full clip of ammunition. As he got out of the Peugeot and slammed the door behind him, he released the safety catch and tucked the barrel of the gun into the waistband of the back of his trousers, covering its grip with his jacket. He had by now formulated something that he could just about dignify with the grandiloquent

title of 'a plan'. It was the first plan in many a long year that had its genesis spawned in the dark crucible that was the mind of Francis Doyle. The plan went as follows: i) he would knock on the door; ii) after that, he would wing it – see how things developed and play it by ear. Doyle thought that this was a good plan. He was pleased with it.

He noted that the curtain were drawn but there was a light still visible in the front room. The house, though, appeared to be in complete silence as he made his way up the small path that led from the street to the yellow painted front door of number 29. It's a nice house, he thought to himself. Nothing special, not a mansion like Bellini's place which stood in its own grounds and had an indoor swimming pool of almost Olympic proportions. But it was certainly better than Doyle's flat. A nice ordinary house for nice ordinary people. Maybe it could do with a lick of paint but it seemed clean and tidy enough. Melanie had clearly done alright for herself. He wasn't passing judgement when he thought this, not expressing pleasure or envy or other concepts that were largely alien to him – it was a simple, straightforward statement of fact. He knocked once on the wooden jamb between the



two opaque glass panes on the door. He knocked hard.

Inside, Micky Johnston had never lost faith in Frankie Doyle, in spite of his earlier protestations and the passing hours. Despite everything Doyle had said on the phone, he knew that he would come. He had to. Johnston's very continuance of existence depended upon it. The knock though, when it came, had jolted him out of a lulling reverie that had taken him to the very edges of sleep. He was still lying on the settee and he tried to ease himself up into a sitting position. It wasn't easy with his leg but, with difficulty and no little discomfort, he managed it. As his real foot touched the floor he could sense the wet, sticky sludge that the carpet had morphed into. He looked down and saw that it was stained a vivid, vibrant red. Mel Wheeler sat slumped forward, still taped to her chair, of course. Her head was bowed as if in prayer. The masking tape had fallen from the left hand side of her head and the gaping chasm of the empty eye socket stared accusingly out at Johnston. Her face was infected by the rich crimson of her own blood. The yellow spring dress showed no more yellow. It too was soaked a bloody scarlet. Johnston surveyed the horror of the sight for a few seconds. Although he was captivated by it, he

felt genuinely sorry for Mel. He had told her as much as he lay on the settee, his face buried deep into its cushions, his back turned coldly towards her. But he wasn't to blame for any of it. That was all Doyle's fault. He knew that she would understand and now he would get his retribution. He'd do it for her, too, for Mel as well as for Carole but, most of all, he'd do it for himself. The Brocock revolver had been lying beside him on the settee. He held it close as he drew himself onto his feet and made his way, limping stiffly to the door of the living room. Through the frosted glass panes of the front door Doyle saw him silhouetted against the light. He wondered, for an instant, if he should try to shoot him straight away, through the door. But his thought processes, never quick at the best of times, seemed even more sluggish than normal and the moment passed.

"There's a key. Under the mat" Johnston called out, his voice rising an octave with barely controlled excitement. "Open the door. Come in, Frank."

Doyle bent. His knees cracked and as he pushed the mat to one side, he felt a dull, brutal ache that he had not noticed before course through his body. He suddenly felt like an old man. The key

was brushed aside with the movement of the mat and fell into an assortment of potted plants that stood at the side of the door. He mumbled an expletive to himself, as he roughly sought through them and before seeing, at last, the glint of the key. It smoothly turned and opened the Yale lock and Doyle stepped into the house. He stepped back into Melanie's life, or more probably death, he thought, after the best part of twenty years. He walked slowly up the hall, leaving the Desert Eagle still concealed in his waistband, and stopped at the doorway of the living room.

Micky Johnston stood there facing him, shielding his five foot seven frame as best he could behind Mel and her chair. His revolver was raised and aimed high at Doyle's head. Although Johnston held it tightly with both hands, Doyle could see it visibly shake and wave like grass in the wind.

"I knew you'd come. I bloody knew it."

Doyle said nothing but stepped into the room and made towards Mel and Johnston.

"Stay where you are. Don't come any closer or I'll shoot you now." Doyle could hear the panic in Johnston's voice. He could smell it in the air. He didn't stop and all Johnston did was to back off

further, hesitatingly, until his back was against the wall and he could back off no further. Doyle looked at Melanie. He had never thought to have seen her again. You look nice, he told her under his breath, it was inaudible to Johnston. He saw beyond the wounds and the bloodshed. It was the first time he had said anything like this, to Melanie or anyone else, since long before they were married. Despite her horrific appearance, it was the first time he had ever really meant it. He reached out his hand and gently stroked her hair. His fingers strayed almost carelessly down and paused, just below her ear, feeling for a pulse although he knew he would not find one. Withdrawing his hand, he delicately kissed his fingers and allowed his tongue to taste her blood. It tasted sweet to him. It was a moment of rare intimacy for Francis Doyle. He and Melanie were alone again, despite the alien presence of Micky Johnston, after all these years. This was the way it should have been. Perhaps he could have loved her after all, he thought. If only things had been different. But then, Johnston bit back into his consciousness and he became aware once more of his unwelcome, intrusive presence.

"She's not dead" he said, more to persuade himself than Doyle.

"Yes she is" Doyle contradicted him. "You've made a nice job of it, Micky. Very professional. Very thorough."

"No. She's just unconscious. That's all. I had to do it. The same way as you did Carole. This is vengeance, Doyle. My retribution. That's what this is all about. Now, get on the sofa." Although he knew what he had done – in truth it was more than obvious – Johnston still couldn't bring himself to fully accept that he had killed Mel. He was no cold blooded callous murderer. That was Doyle. Not him. He was just a man looking for the justice that the world denied him. A man trying to put right the many wrongs that had been done to him, to expurgate all the sins that had been visited upon him.

Doyle turned his back on Johnston. He walked to the settee and sat down. He suspected that the outline of the Desert Eagle under his jacket would have been visible to his adversary but he didn't care. He doubted if Johnston would have even noticed. In any case, he was more concerned about the simple process of sitting down. That would be an ironic end, he thought, shooting yourself through the arse by mistake with a Magnum stuffed down your trousers. He couldn't help it, a wry smile played fleetingly

across his lips as he lowered himself gingerly onto the couch. Micky Johnston didn't like it.

"Don't fucking laugh at me" he snarled. "Do you even have any idea what you've done? You've ruined my life. Destroyed me. You're a fucking bastard, Doyle. You know that? But its over now. Today is the day that Micky Johnston stops being pushed around and treated like shit by the likes of you and Bellini. Now it's my turn. Today is the day that you die."

Doyle nodded in agreement. Today, he thought, one way or another, probably was that day.

"You'll die at my hand." He was getting too melodramatic now and Doyle had to force himself to keep listening. "And after that, I'm going for that wanker Bellini."

Doyle shook his head and smiled once again, this time deliberately. "You're too late for that, Micky. Mr. Bellini's dead. I killed him a few hours ago. He sold me out to the police and then he went and pulled a gun on me. You wouldn't believe the sort of day I'm having." He laughed with a humour that was most uncharacteristic for him. It surprised Johnston but not enough for him to hide the sea of bitterness that he felt.

"You fucking bastard. I don't believe you." Johnston fell back on his usual standby of self denial, the one that he shared with Doyle himself. He knew, though, that Doyle was not lying and he couldn't help but felt cheated. Even now, that mad, psycho bastard Doyle had got one over on him. Doyle was now laughing maniacally. Johnston couldn't remember even seeing him smile before, let alone laugh. He didn't even know why he was doing it himself. Maybe it was just because this whole situation, his whole life, had become so totally ridiculous. His world had been turned on its head. Nothing could ever be as it was before. Doyle's reality had shattered for ever into a million bloody shards and here he was, in a room that made the chamber of horrors at Madame Tussauds look like a crèche at your local Mothercare, the blood drenched corpse of his long time ex wife taunting and teasing him silently and a one legged, jumped up little shit like Micky Johnston waving an old service revolver at him as if he were about lead one last hopeless charge out of the trenches at the Somme. It was all so surreal that surely it couldn't be true. He felt his belly ache with the strenuous effort of laughing so hard, and tears poured from his eyes. He didn't even try to stop.

Johnston was becoming increasingly furious. He wanted Doyle to cower before him, to beg and plead for mercy and a quick death before he would finally shoot him. But all the bastard was doing was laughing. Laughing at him. In the past he had had to endure it, but not any more. Now he was in control. He had the power. He screamed at Doyle to stop, until he thought his lungs would burst. But Doyle couldn't stop. That was it. He'd had enough. That was all that he could stand. He raised the gun towards Doyle's head and pulled at the trigger. The bullet exploded forward and the revolver kicked back with a strength of recoil that he hadn't expected. He was tired and still more than a little unsteady on his artificial leg and if he hadn't been braced against the wall he would have fallen unceremoniously to the floor.

The bullet that had been so carefully aimed at Doyle's head, hit him no more than a glancing blow on his right shoulder. He looked down and saw only a small, superficial wound, and felt the heat of his own blood as it began to flow inexorably, staining his jacket. There was no pain. Not yet. The shock of the gunfire had put an abrupt end to his hysteria and he was, finally, laughing no longer. He knew that, no matter how incompetent Johnston was with a gun, his next



shot might be luckier but Doyle acted, it seemed, out of instinct rather than through any coherent logic. He hurled himself forward, off the settee, driving his feet against its base, using it to give him the momentum that he required to make a sudden, lunging attack. He saw that Johnston still had the revolver in his hand, although it looked as if he was too surprised by his own actions to be preparing to shoot again. Doyle, perhaps subconsciously, perhaps deliberately, tried to put something in the line of fire. He aimed himself at Mel's corpse and hit her hard, low down like a rugby tackle. The chair, Mel and Doyle drove forward together, straight into Micky Johnston.

There was a great crash as they imploded into Johnston. He fell heavily to the floor and it felt as if his chest was being crushed by the weight suddenly on top of him. He tried to shoot, at anything, whatever was there, but he found that the Brocock was no longer in his hand. He saw it across the room, some yards away, where it had been thrown by the impact and he knew that he couldn't hope to get to it. Doyle saw it too – and was happy to leave it there. It was fine where it was, he thought. Roughly he planted his knees firmly on the carpet and pushed at Mel. She and the chair slid awkwardly away, stopping only as

she hit the table, knocking it onto its side. Mel lay there, on her back now, her once yellow dress had fallen back to her waist revealing her blood stained thighs and knickers and her head rested limply on her shoulder like a broken rag doll. Neither Doyle or Johnston gave her another thought.

There was nothing now in between the two men. They could feel one another's rancid breath assail each other's nostrils. They could see through each others eyes and deep into their souls. They both saw death's dark shadows.

Although Doyle had him effectively pinned, Johnston, who had been winded by the attack and until then quite still, now began to writhe and twist with as great a ferocity as he could muster. Doyle knew that he had to becalm him again and with a great and sudden forward force he leant down, and, thrusting his head suddenly upwards, he smashed the prominent, bony ridge of his forehead squarely into the bridge of Johnston's nose. Déjà vu. The bone shattered with a sickening crunch, much as it had done the first time Doyle broke it, so many months before and Johnston's nose was spread flat, once again, across his face in a semi-solid bloody mush. He howled pathetically in pain. It started as a low

guttural roar gradually increasing in intensity, culminating in the fevered, intense agony as Doyle head butted him, quite unnecessarily, for a second time.

Johnston lay on the floor prone and motionless as Doyle hauled himself to his feet. He knew that he would be unable to move so he didn't even try. It was the realization that he had failed in his one desperate act of revenge that transfixed him. He felt destroyed. He had been so sure of his success but now he was suddenly deflated, spiritually and mentally as well as physically. It was a feeling he knew only too well. It had been born in the harsh unyielding fires of failure that had been his constant companion, accompanying him in all things great and small, throughout his life. He hadn't been able to kill Doyle and Bellini was already dead. He accepted that his life had now reached an end, and the end was, like the beginning and middle, a dreadful anti climactic disappointment. Johnston shed his tears once more, just as he had done in the bedsit in Clapham, just as he had done in the hospital and just as he had done so many times since. He remained motionless now, apart from the contorted jerks of his body as he sobbed. Doyle had lowered himself to the floor again and sat besides Johnston with his back to the wall.

He was still breathing heavily because of the violence of his sudden exertion, straining and struggling to catch his breath. Both men were now swathed in a terrible bloody gore, their own blood mixing with that of their adversary and both being subsumed by that of Mel, which now seemed to have spread out and engulfed the entire room. Doyle reached across and he raised Johnston's head and shoulders from the floor and placed them, almost gently, on his lap. As Johnston continued to cry, Doyle reached behind and pulled out the Desert Eagle. He held it in his right hand, close to the back of Johnston's head, just clear of his line of sight. His breath was returning to him and he spoke as he gently stroked Johnston's dark, greasy hair with his left hand.

"What a pair we are, Micky. Look what we've turned into. It seems that all my life I've been dancing with the devil. Dancing a lovers' dance. Slow and seductive. Like the last waltz. He holds you tight, you know. You feel safe and warm and you never want him to let go. I've been doing it for so long now, it's the only dance I know. It's everything that I am. But now it's all over for me. I sold my soul a long time ago. Many years ago, and now it's time now for to finally pay the price."

He lent forwards and placed his lips serenely on Micky Johnston's blood soaked forehead, like a father kissing his sweet little child goodnight. Softly he slid out from underneath and rose to his feet. For the first time, he felt the wound in his shoulder sting and shock his flesh with an unexpectedly fierce intensity. He had been shot at twice that day and had survived both. The old Francis Doyle would have taken this to be a sign that he lived a charmed life, that he was immortal. The new Francis Doyle knew that he was not. To him it was no more than a fleeting respite from the inexorable finger of his fate that had long since pointed squarely in his direction. It could be no more than the briefest stay of execution.

The Magnum was held limply at his side in his now much weakened right hand. He stretched out his left hand, offering it to Johnston, who reached up and took it feebly. Doyle pulled him up to his feet. He felt a sharp, clearly defined pity for Micky Johnston. Not that he could readily identify the emotion. It was a rare, treasured sensation, one that Francis Doyle was not used to experiencing and not one that he could really understand or deal with. Perhaps he was only able to appreciate it at all because the Micky Johnston that stood before him had descended

into a state of being that was some way less than human. As Doyle closely looked him up and down, he felt that he was looking into a mirror.

"You'd better go. The chances are the police are on their way by now. You can't expect this much noise to go un-noticed." With this Doyle turned and walked out of the house.

"What the fuck just happened?" Johnston was in complete turmoil and said out loud to himself as the tears continued to flow. Why had Doyle let him live? Again. He had stopped crying now but he could still feel his tears, diluting the blood that ran from his face and sharply stinging his eyes. He staggered across the room and retrieved the Brocock revolver. He could still get another shot off at Doyle, if he was quick and this time he wouldn't make any mistakes. He could shoot him down on the street as he was getting into his car. Doyle would regret not killing him this time. But Johnston wasn't quick enough. He tried, God knows he tried, but his leg was twisted and by the time he got to the front door, he saw Doyle's small car, headlights blazing and burning into the night, accelerate off into the distance.

"I swear, Doyle, I swear by everything I hold sacred, that one day, one day soon, I will fucking kill you."

He knew that Doyle was right, though. It was no good staying here. Not now. It had all happened so quickly, it could be no more than a couple of minutes since the gun shot but this was a residential neighbourhood and everyone for a block and a half would have woken up. Then there was the screaming and shouting as well. Someone must have called the police. Definitely. And Johnston thought he didn't much want to be found there, in a scene more resonant of a medieval battlefield than a twenty first century seaside resort. What a fuck up, he thought as he picked up his bag. Why did things always conspire against him? It wasn't his fault. But then it never was his fault. He was drenched in blood. He wouldn't get far like that. Thank God he had a change of clothes in the bag. He thought about changing in the hall but now he just wanted to get out of the house and get as far away as possible. He had passed a park that afternoon in the taxi, he remembered. That would do. He could change there.

As he reached the door, he stopped suddenly in his tracks. How could he be so stupid? He walked back down the hall and went into the kitchen. Scott was sitting there still, as he had been left, several hours before. He was rocking gently, rhythmically back and forwards against

his bonds, no longer thinking coherently. He didn't see what was coming. That was a small mercy. Johnston pulled the Brocock from his pocket, where it had been safely lodged. He put it to the back of Scott's head to make sure that he wouldn't miss this time and he pulled the trigger. The transformation was at last complete. Micky Johnston had become Francis Doyle.

When he first heard it, the sound of the siren had seemed no more than a brief incursion from a quietly distant dream. At first, he wasn't even sure whether it existed only in his imagination, but by the time he had reached the front door it had become deafening, piercing both the still of the night and the sensibility of his ears. He saw the lights, swirling and twirling and flashing with an intense brilliant blue that burnt into his eyes. He stood, transfixed by them. He couldn't run. He had gone beyond that. Way beyond.

There was a screech of brakes as two cars screamed to a halt blocking the road. A third pulled up just behind.

"Armed police. Throw down your weapon." The voice seemed strangely nervous and high pitched for such an imperious command. It came from a young copper from one of Essex Constabulary's S.O.19 armed response units



that, thanks to the rise of gun crime, were now based in every major town in the county. He was crouched behind the open door of his marked white B.M.W. squad car. To Johnston he didn't look any more than sixteen. The image of youth was compounded by the baseball cap he wore, bearing a chequered band and the badge of the force as proudly as any team's colours. He wore a thick, dark blue, Kevlar backed padded vest which, he hoped, would stop just about anything thrown at it. The window was open and through it the officer's arms were extended and a semi automatic pistol was trained at Johnston's head. *He* would not miss. The driver of the car too had a weapon aimed at him across the vehicle's roof. Johnston cast his eyes slowly to the other two cars. Both had men in identical positions.

"Armed police" the man repeated. "Throw down your weapon or we will fire." The words were shouted but clearly and deliberately articulated, just as he had been taught. They hung on the clear, still night air.

Johnston was immobile. Not for the first time in his life he didn't know what to do. Christ, that bastard Doyle had dropped him in it again. Big time.

"Armed police. This is your final warning. Throw down your gun or we *will* shoot." Johnston knew that he was serious. He didn't want to give up now but he had looked death in the face too many times that day to be able to do it again. He raised his gun slowly, up from his side. The armed response unit, to a man crouched a little closer to their cars and their fingers tightened almost imperceptibly on their triggers, poised for an immediate response. Johnston opened his hand and it seemed to him that the revolver almost floated to the ground, a couple of yards away from his feet.

"Hands in the air. Where we can see them. That's good. Now, lie on the ground. Face to the floor. Arms outstretched ahead of you." Johnston tried to do as he was told, but with his prosthetic leg, it wasn't easy to comply.

"Do it now." The voice was more demanding than ever and Johnston knew he could not disobey it. He fell forwards with his arms outstretched, hitting his chin heavily on the rough concrete of the path. As he hit the ground, three of the policemen moved in cautiously, never moving the aim of their pistols away from Johnston's head. Their colleagues covered them from behind their cars. It seemed to Micky that orders were being

yelled at him, in a thousand different voices, at top volume from every direction.

“Don’t fucking move.”

“Arms ahead of you.”

“Hands behind your back.”

They all seemed contradictory but he tried to deal with each of them in turn as best he could. He felt a knee jab sharply into the small of his back closely followed by the full weight of the young policeman as it came down onto him, fixing him tightly in place. His arms, he thought were being wrenched from their sockets as they were dragged upwards and then behind his back. It came as a relief when he finally felt the harsh, unforgiving metal stab of the handcuffs bite into his skin as they were snapped tightly onto his wrists. As he lay there, he heard more police sirens, two more cars and a van this time and the slightly less abrasive howl of an ambulance. He wondered which was for him.

“Jesus Christ. It’s like Hell in there.” Three of the police officers had gone through the house, pistols raised, covering each other every step of the way as they searched, room by room, to make sure that the assailant had been alone.

They were hard men, every one of them. They'd all seen their share of action and their share of bloody crime scenes. But nothing in their training could have prepared them for the sight that greeted them in the living room. It was a scene of carnage far beyond even the worst excesses of their imaginations. Ten thousand times worse than the shock of the first autopsy they had all been required to attend. Of course everyone of them had seen sights that would make an ordinary man's hair stand on end, scenes that would give them nightmares for a year but not one of them had ever imagined that a body could shed so much blood. It was as though a collective shock had enshrouded them. How could a man could commit such atrocities on a woman? It's good that they could still be shocked. In a way it's comforting, that to some people, decent, moral, ordinary human behaviour still counted for something. After the sight of Mel, it was almost a relief for them to find the relatively sanitized execution of Scott in the kitchen.

When they came out they looked at Johnston, still lying prone on the floor, still with a gun pointed at his head. They couldn't believe that this little man could journey through life with a demon of such intense, evil monstrosity

alongside him. One man heaved and retched violently by the door, as if trying to forcibly rid himself of the stench and taste of death, but nothing came out. More police cars had arrived by this time and officers attired in more conventional uniforms were trying to usher people back into the relative safety of the domestic cocoons of their homes. Johnston was hauled to his feet, roughly, and as he arose the fittings on his leg finally gave way and it fell loose from his trouser leg and he followed it to the floor. One of the officers laughed at him. One who had not been in the house. Johnston looked up at him, his eyes full of dark, brooding, impotent hatred. His eyes never left the man, not until he was dragged into the back of the police van and the door slammed shut. The face of that policeman, full of a bitter, sneering contempt for him, was to be Micky Johnston's last memory of the free world for a very long time. It was a world in which he had never properly fitted in. He had lived only a half life, on its margins since his early childhood. It was a world that had rejected him, he had lost count of how many times and in how many ways. The face of the policeman stood as a ghastly metaphor in his mind for it all, the whole bloody lot of it. He wasn't sorry to be leaving it.



## **Chapter Seventeen**

Chief Superintendent Goodwin sat in the protective womb of his car. He had told Morris fifteen minutes but now it was nearer twenty five. Annoyance had given way to fear. Now a terrible, blind dread was starting to possess him and it sent a cold shiver through his body although the night was warm and the car warmer. Was he going to show? Had those pangs of his bloody Welsh conscience finally got the better of him and sent him scuttling upstairs to the internal affairs department. He wouldn't put that past him. He was an old fashioned sort of copper. Straight as a die. One who played everything by the book and would have a fit of apoplexy if any well meaning philanthropist ever offered him a brown envelope. He wasn't good at the politics that were so central a part of police work nowadays – he wouldn't go far in the Force. But Goodwin feared him. He knew that he could not rely on him to do as he was told. His best hope was, he felt, to get him involved as deeply as he could and to see how he reacted. But that's if he showed up at all. What the hell had Pat Todd been thinking of? He couldn't get over his stupidity, spilling his guts in front of Morris and

kept revisiting it, over and over again. He had worked with Morris for long enough, he knew what he was like as well as anyone. Wasn't it him who had coined the nickname Mother Superior behind his back? – although Goodwin, as their ultimate governor wasn't supposed to know about it. Most of what Goodwin had said to Todd and Morris in his office earlier that evening was true. Well some of it was true, but what really worried him was the precariousness his own position. The whole set up had been his responsibility. It was Goodwin who had come up with the plan to send in a man to infiltrate the beating heart of Bellini's organization. Everyone knew exactly what Bellini was up to, he had never really tried to hide it. But he was very careful about tidying up behind him and real, tangible proof, of the sort that his Q.C. would not be able to rip to shreds, the sort a jury of twelve good men and true could accept as being beyond reasonable doubt, even when they were being offered substantial bribes or their families were being threatened, was very thin on the ground. It was Goodwin who had selected Tommy Windsor for the job and many of the upper echelons at the Yard accepted him as the Chief Superintendent's protégé. It was Goodwin who gave him enough rope to hang them all, even when Charlotte Ashworth had lost



confidence and wanted him out. Her records would show that, he had no doubt. Bloody bitch. Really, it was Goodwin who had got her killed. And her husband. He knew it. It was this that hurt the most. But what good would it do to bring everything out into the open? Charlotte and Steve were dead. Did they really need a public form of justice now? Although he would deny it with every fibre of his being, perhaps they needed it more than ever.

At last he saw Morris ambling aimlessly towards him, illuminated in the ark of the car park's street lamps. He was carrying a carrier bag and it looked to Goodwin to be well stocked. Thank God for that. His relief was palpable.

He wound down his window and spoke.

"I told you fifteen minutes. Where the bloody hell have you been?" There was no answer. As Morris stood there, Goodwin did up his window, got out of the car and locked the door. "We'll take the tube. We don't want our cars anywhere near his place and, besides, we've both had a drink. He took the carrier bag from Morris and examined its contents. He seemed to have everything they might need. That was good, he thought as he handed it back. He wasn't going to bloody well carry it. When they left the car park

and turned left towards the nearest tube, he gave Morris his next instruction.

"Phone your wife. Tell her that something's come up. That you've got to work late. Don't give her any details. And don't mention my name. Or Pat Todd's" he added as an afterthought. Goodwin had already made a similar call to his own wife from the office and he listened intently as Morris spoke, checking every word that he said. He sounded numb, but to be honest, he often sounded like that. His wife would be used to it. Goodwin was happy enough with the call.

It took them two changes on the tube and a ten minute walk before they arrived at Tommy's flat. The journey was completed in total silence. Their lack of communication only served to re-emphasize all of Goodwin's worst fears and draw them back, barely concealed as they had been, right back to the surface. Both men knew exactly where the flat was, they had been here before. Morris had been invited to a party when Tommy had first moved in. He had left when it had started getting a bit too raucous and he had missed the local police turning up to calm things down. Goodwin had been there on more than one occasion when they were setting up the infiltration plan, keeping things just between

themselves, away from prying ears in the office. Bellini's influence stretched far and insidiously, they were both only too well aware of that.

The house was tall and imposing. A mid Victorian terrace, tastefully converted in flats. The area was a good one too. Not the sort of place who's residents brutally murder or are brutally murdered. But, then again, where is that sort of place? Tommy had been a lucky man to live there. The rent hadn't been cheap and he didn't have a great deal left over from his sergeant's salary at the end of the month. Not until he went onto Bellini's payroll. At first, the money was properly recorded, registered and handed over at the Yard, but as more and more of it came, and more and more of it was spent on smack, he became a little less meticulous about his accounting.

Goodwin ran up the small flight of stone steps, careful not to touch the railings. He dived into his pocket and pulled out Tommy's key ring, the one that Pat Todd had entrusted to him over an hour before. He looked down at the key ring, as he stood there, illuminated from the light within creeping out into the night through the opaque glass panels of the door. West Ham United Football Club. You won't see them promoted this

year, old son, he thought and felt a sudden but bitter pang of regret. There would be plenty time for that later, he promised himself, but at the moment he could not afford himself the luxury of emotion. Now was the time to get down to business. He turned the key in the lock and heard the hinge of the old door creak loudly as it swung open. All those people living here, it struck him, and not one of them can be bothered to put a drop of WD40 on it. He closed it gently behind them and Morris followed him up to the second floor. Outside of flat 6, Goodwin handed Morris a pair of disposable rubber gloves, the sort that are standard police issue for scenes of crimes. They both pulled them on and went in, entering Tommy's private world for the first time since he had left theirs. The flat was self contained and nicely appointed, if none too tidy. Tommy could not have been accused of being a fastidious man and there was no wife or live in girlfriend to make sure that he kept it in order. His front door opened into the living room. Off that was a small shower room and an even smaller kitchen. The bedroom was to the rear and that's was where Goodwin turned his attention first.

The duvet was hanging off the bed, where Tommy had left it and the sheets were pulled half off, too. It didn't look like Tommy had got too

much sleep on his last night alive. Goodwin kicked the bed back. As he had expected there was a distinct dark brownish blood stain which had seeped through the black plastic sack his clothes had been stashed in. There was no visible signs of any other blood on the floor or on the bed itself. Goodwin was quietly relieved. He didn't need to make the place water tight – as long as there was nothing obvious, and as long as Morris kept his mouth firmly shut, the boys from forensic would have no need to ever go there.

"You take care of that" he indicated the bloodstain on the carpet to Morris, who nodded, laid down his carrier bag and went to the kitchen to fill a bowl of water. As he did Goodwin called to him "I'll check the bathroom and have a look around."

He drew back the shower curtain. Tommy had spent most of his last night alive in the shower and all that Goodwin could see was a few minute traces of blood around the metal plug hole. He went back into the bedroom, where Morris was scrubbing frantically, maniacally even, as if his life depended upon it. Perhaps it did. Goodwin didn't say anything to him but delved into the carrier bag they had brought and pulled out a

plastic spray container of all purpose anti bacterial cleaner, one of the abrasive scouring pads and the bottle of bleach. He returned to the shower room and set to work. His, unlike his colleague's, was light work. The few remnants of Ashworth's blood were quickly wiped away and half the bottle of bleach was liberally splashed around to exorcise its memory for ever.

Goodwin was thorough, he checked the floor, the toilet bowl, the cistern even. There was nothing out of place in the mirrored cabinet, just the usual stuff; shampoo, shaving foam, deodorant, an opened packet of condoms. The sink looked OK too but he gave it the once over with the cleaner just to make sure. He opened the small white fronted cupboard door below the sink and from behind the spare toilet roll he pulled out a transparent plastic bag. Oh, shit, he thought. This wasn't good. Not good at all. It contained a couple of hypodermic syringes and a small quantity of a brownish substance that Goodwin instantly recognized as heroin. Oh, fuck. If Tommy was using this stuff, that would explain a lot. The autopsy would reveal any narcotics in his body and it wouldn't take a Dr. Quincy or a Professor Ryan to identify any track marks. This was all he needed. There was nothing he could do about it now, he realized forlornly. Hopefully if

Tommy was only an occasional user, they might be able to write it off to Bellini's boys screwing him up so they could execute him in a public place without him trying to retaliate. That would be the best case scenario. Any more regular use would be harder to explain and he'd just have to try and deflect the questions that would obviously arise, and try to lay the blame for it all obliquely at Ashworth's feet – she had been the one who was running him on a day to day basis. Surely it was better if Tommy was revealed as a smack head rather than a cop killer.

He flushed the heroin down the toilet, waited for the cistern to refill completely and flushed once more. The syringes went into a small white pedal bin liner that he found in the kitchen cupboard and he tightly tied a double knot at the top. In the kitchen itself there was nothing untoward. Nor in the living room. He searched the place thoroughly. It was something he hadn't done for many years, almost like revisiting his youth and in different circumstances he might have almost enjoyed it. He flicked through the half a dozen trashy novels that were stacked on the shelf to make sure that nothing was concealed between their pages and he took each video out of its box and examined it carefully. There were one or two that he wouldn't mind taking a look at himself.

Dirty little bastard, that Tommy. A bit near the knuckle but nothing that looked actually illegal so he just returned them to their cases. There was nothing down the back of the sofa and chairs, or beneath them either so he sat down on the floor, in the corner of the room, by the bulging expanding wallet that served as Tommy's filing system and went through it letter by letter, A to Z. Nothing incriminating in there, a few bills, his passport with the photo that made him look more like a ginger headed Reg Kray than a copper, that sort of thing. There were only the phoney bank statements, too. His real ones had been re-directed to Scotland Yard before he went undercover.

Goodwin floated back into the bedroom. Morris was still furiously scrubbing at the carpet and he didn't even seem to notice the guv'nor's presence. He opened the wardrobe door and scanned the contents, bringing every item of clothing out into the light, one thing at a time and feeling inside the pockets. He examined the shoes on the floor. They were all clean enough and there seemed to be nothing tucked inside any of them. Next he went through the contents of the wicker laundry basket. It was full to overflowing. Didn't he ever do any washing? But there was nothing in there that seemed



incriminating. Everything that he had been wearing had gone into that bin liner. Finally, he turned his attention to the chest of drawers. Everything there seemed kosher too until he arrived at the bottom drawer. Underneath the folded shirts he felt a thick wad of cash. All used notes, all fifties. There had to be at least ten grand there he thought. Maybe more. Tommy, you stupid, stupid bastard. He turned around towards Morris. He had his back to Goodwin and was still so engrossed in the strenuous, numbing banality of his work that he was thankfully oblivious to the world around him.

This would be the final straw, he thought to himself. If Morris saw this, he would go ballistic and within ten minutes, he'd be hammering on the Commissioner's door. No – he had to keep it to himself. He didn't *want* the money but it wouldn't be safe to do anything else but keep it. He could always give it to charity later, he thought. Or something like that. He divided the money into four roughly equal sized piles, for even distribution, so that they would not be noticed and put one in each of the two inside and two outside pockets of his jacket, making sure that the flaps were properly pulled down and that he looked quite inconspicuous.

"That's enough, Dave ... You can stop that now."  
His words didn't seem to register with Morris.  
"Stop it, Dave. Stop it" he commanded. Morris was so obsessively focused that Goodwin almost had to physically restrain him but he began to gradually come back to his senses. Judging by the state of his knuckles, Morris looked to be about to add his own to the blood already on the carpet and despite all his strenuous efforts, the brown stain was still clearly visible to the naked eye.

"OK, OK. Time for plan two. Dave, you go and get a bin liner. There are some in the kitchen, in the cupboard under the sink."

"OK" he responded curtly. As far as Goodwin could remember, it was the first time that Morris had spoken since the phone call to his wife; perhaps he was coming back to his senses at last. This was not what Goodwin had hoped for. He had almost convinced himself that there would be no mess and that their trip would merely prove to be an un-necessary precaution. He didn't really have a plan two but he was hastily forming one. Reaching into his outer jacket pocket and, careful not to disturb any of the cash concealed there, he retrieved his pocket knife. It was a Swiss army penknife, with a blade

less than three inches long and it was none too sharp. It wasn't designed for cutting through thick carpets and it was only with considerable effort that he could get it through at all. Morris stood and watched as Goodwin strained and perspired, the sweat dripping from his brow onto the carpet below. He wasn't used to such excesses of physical exertion and, once or twice, he thought he would have to give up. The muscles in his right arm were straining to their limits and his hand was burning with the pressure of the force he had to apply to cut through the tough material. But he persevered, although it took time. It seemed like an eternity to him. It had taken, in fact, the best part of twenty minutes to hack his way through it, and by the time his work was done he had freed a piece of carpet that was roughly eighteen inches by ten inches but it covered every last drop of the seepage of blood. He swayed backwards with a sigh of relief. His back felt like that it was about to break at any second and he felt sick and dizzy. He was no spring chicken, a little light gardening that was more than enough exercise at his age. The heavy work he would happily leave to younger men. When the giddiness passed, he turned his attention back to his handy work. The back of the carpet was soaked with a combination of the Ashworth's blood and Morris' water and

detergent. The rubber underlay, too, bore traces of blood but when he cut this away, Goodwin was relieved to see that nothing had permeated through it. Both this and the carpet fragment were thrust deep into the recesses of Morris' bin bag and by way of an additional insurance, Goodwin himself scrubbed the now exposed area of floor boards although they appeared to yield up nothing incriminating.

"I think we're about done here, Dave" he said. "Well done. Give me a hand to move the bed back" he felt suddenly very weak and very old. It was a struggle for the two men to slide the bed back into position even though it was quite light and the legs were on castors. "Let's get everything packed away and get out of here."

They stashed the cleaning equipment and Goodwin made a final cursory check to ensure that everything was in order. Morris uncomplainingly carried both the bin liner and the carrier bag of cleaning materials. Goodwin put the small white pedal bin liner under his jacket, taking care to ensure that neither of the needles was exposed before he did so. He buttoned it and kept his left arm close to his side to make sure that it didn't fall to the floor.

As they made their way down the stairs, they stopped politely to allow an elderly lady to pass.

"Good evening, gentlemen." She was small and well spoken and clearly still took pride in her appearance, despite being more than a little stooped with the ravages of time. "Thank you very much."

"Good evening, madam. It's our pleasure." Goodwin was a stickler in his own good manners and admired politeness in others. He didn't extend it to people like Bellini and Loader, of course, they didn't deserve it. Nor was it ever much in evidence to his junior officers. But to people like this elderly woman – no, lady – it still mattered and he liked the feeling that he made a contribution to the occasional little oases of civilization that can, even today, be found in the sprawling, spewing metropolis. He wished that he wore a hat as he would have liked to raise it to her. That would have been, he felt, quite fitting. He relished moments like this, tiny other-worldly pleasures that spoke volumes about times gone by and manners and mores sadly lost. It almost made him forget the rest of the world, just for a moment.

The night was a pitch, deep black and a chill had descended on the air. "Right," Goodwin spoke,

"we've got to dump all of this, and then I'm going to buy you a drink. That's an order." He smiled but didn't really mean it.

They picked up the tube and, at the first stop, Morris hopped off onto the platform, as he had been instructed and forced the bag of cleaning materials deep into a bin. He just had time to get back on before he was told, one last time, by a metallic voice to "mind the gap" and as the doors closed with their sibilant hiss, he dropped back into the seat next to Goodwin.

"We're nearly there now, Dave. We've nearly made it." Goodwin was trying to be comforting, re-assuring but he wasn't sure if Morris was even listening. This far out the trains and platforms were really quite empty but when they changed trains and picked up the Metropolitan line it became considerably busier. By the time they reached Piccadilly Circus, even at this time of night, it was standing room only on the train.

"Come on. We're getting off here." He virtually had to pull Morris off the train and for a moment he thought he was almost catatonic. He stood behind him on the escalator and followed him through the automatic barrier as it sucked in their tickets and spat them out again as they passed through. The last set of steps seemed as though

it would never end, both men were more than weary, as much from the mental as from the physical exertion. Goodwin was relieved to be free from the underground's subterranean caverns at last, although, he felt, he was really no less enclosed in the giant neon lit amphitheatre of Piccadilly Circus. They braved the racing chariots and crossed over towards Shaftesbury Avenue without waiting for the green man to tell them that it was safe. At the corner where Denmark Street abuts Windmill Street, Goodwin spotted a builder's skip set back from the road. On his command, Morris threw in the bin bag, covering it loosely with the debris that had been dumped there that day. Two down. Only one to go, Goodwin thought.

The two men made their way down Windmill Street, being accosted by 'hostess' who worked the door of a 'night club' as they passed. Her accent was vaguely eastern European, or perhaps vaguely intended sound eastern European. Her purple dress shined under the red light and split as it was, to the waist and beyond, revealed the overtly erotic temptation of what was barely concealed beneath. Its upper half was so tight and low cut and her cleavage was so cavernously deep that Goodwin suspected that it must have been painful to breathe. She

struggled on manfully and told them they looked lonely as she invited them in to meet her beautiful friends inside. Goodwin said maybe later and was, in reality, more than half tempted. He would see how the night progressed.

They passed on, up the street and turned into the first pub they encountered. The words spit and sawdust came to Goodwin's mind as he ordered two large Scotches at the bar. It was quiet enough though. There were enough customers for them not to stand out but not too many to prevent them from talking quietly. It was the sort of a place where they wouldn't remember your face and certainly, nobody knows your name. It would do very nicely. Morris knocked his whisky back in a single draught and Goodwin ordered and paid for two more and carried them over to a table by the door. He whispered discreetly to Morris as they sat down and he slid the thankfully empty ashtray on to his lap, and from there, under his jacket. He stood and looked around for a sign to direct him to the toilets. He found it and followed the stairs to the left of the bar, down into the basement. As he opened the door marked 'gentlemen' a man barged out. He looked rather the worse for wear and made no effort to say excuse me or sorry. Bastard. Goodwin walked past the empty urinals and into a cubicle,



drawing the bolt securely behind him. He placed the plastic bag from Tommy's flat on the floor and trod on it, grinding down with his heel, making sure that there were no pieces of syringe big enough to carry a fingerprint. He sat now and struggled with the knot in the bag for a moment. Why had he put in two knots? And why had he pulled then so tight? Eventually, he freed them and felt a strangely pleasant aura of success as he did. Taking a handful of toilet paper he wiped the ashtray clear of any prints and put it in the bag. It would act as ballast. The bag itself he wiped clean as best he could, and, once more using toilet paper as a barrier for his fingers he tied another knot. Standing up now, he lifted the top of the toilet cistern and flushed the handle with his knee. As the water evacuated, he let the bag gently lie at the bottom of the cistern. He watched the ball cock rise with the in-gushing water, just to make sure that it wasn't jammed and he carefully allowed the heavy china lid to slowly slip back into place. That was all the Ts crossed and the Is dotted, he thought. He glanced at his watch, Pat Todd would have surely got rid of the clothing by this time. He was a good man, Pat. Now there was just Dave Morris to worry about. Hopefully, he could talk him round. He would certainly try. Again. But he had to be sure about him. Absolutely sure. He

couldn't afford to take any chances. And if not ... Well, that was Dave's problem. Not his. But it wouldn't be necessary. He would be bound to see sense. He flushed once more to get rid of the last of the toilet paper he had used and opened the door of his cubicle. The room was still empty. He saw a sign saying 'now wash your hands'. It looked antique, he hadn't seen one for years and he felt obliged to comply.

Goodwin made his way back up the stairs, he saw that both of the whiskies he had bought in his second round had gone and Dave was now at the bar, buying more. A middle aged woman, with make up that looked as though it had been plastered on by a second rate construction firm, was asking him for a light for her cigarette. He heard her tell Dave how grateful she was. Goodwin could tell that she would be very grateful indeed. If the price was right.

"Over here, Dave" he called. Things were complicated enough without him picking up some rotten old slapper who rented herself out by the quarter hour. Morris forced a smile at his new friend and returned to the table. Since he'd been married he had never even looked at another woman. Well, OK, looked maybe but never

touched and tonight he definitely wasn't in the mood.

"Sit down, Dave" Goodwin instructed.

"I've got you another drink, Guv."

"Thanks. Now sit down." This time, Dave complied. "We've just done what we had to, Dave. We had no choice. You do understand that, don't you?"

"I don't know. I thought I did." He paused, clearly confused. "I suppose so. It's just that, well, Tommy did kill the D.I. didn't he? He must have done?"

"There's no proof of that, Dave." Goodwin could tell that this was going to be an uphill struggle. "We've gone over it all. It's just conjecture."

Dave laughed but there was no humour there. And it was a little too loud. "Of course there's no proof. We've just destroyed the fucking proof. You, me and Pat."

"The key word in there, Dave, is you. You did it. I didn't force you. I didn't hold a gun to you head and make you do it. You're in this as deep as

Pat. As deep as me. There's no going back. It's too late for that. What's done can't be undone."

"But he *killed* her, Guv. *Murder*." The word was anathema to Morris and it tasted like acid on his lips. "He nearly cut her head off. Fucking hell, he did cut Steve's off."

"Even if he did. And I'm not saying that he did. What good will raking it all up do? It won't bring Charlotte back, will it? And Tommy's not going to be punished. God knows, he's been punished enough already. If you say anything, all you'll do is crucify the three of us. If you could prove it, and let's face facts, there's not a lot of evidence left, is there? If you could prove it we'd all go behind bars for a very long time. You included. But it'd just come down to your word against Pat's and mine. They might even believe you but they'd never be able to prove it. And we'd all be finished then. After all, there's no smoke without fire. That's the way it works with the Met. We all know that. You'd be finished too. Especially you. Nobody likes a whistle blower. Tell me, Dave. Is it worth it? You'd be sacrificing everything, your career, your pension, your family too, probably. And what for? For nothing. All for nothing? Just because your lousy conscience is pricking you."

"Yeah. Now we're at it. That's what this is all about, isn't it? *Your* career. *Your* pension. Not got long to retirement have you, Guv?"

"Yes, Dave, You're right. That's what this is all about. But it's not just my career and pension that are on the line. We're all in it together. You, me and Pat."

"God, you make me sick." His tone was now aggressively vitriolic. It was all coming out at last. Morris had been in a kind of shell shock since he had heard Todd's revelations. He had been going along with Goodwin, acting like an automaton, not a man, blindly doing everything that he was told to. Not thinking for himself. For a while, it seemed, he hadn't really been able to think. But now the Scotch was flowing freely and with it, a distinct clarity seemed to return to his thought processes. As the Romans said, *in vino veritas*. "I went along with you. I didn't know what I was doing, I wasn't thinking straight but I am now. Perverting the course of justice. That's what we've done. Do you know what that makes us, Guv? Do you? It makes us worse than the criminals. We're the ones who are supposed to set the standards, not just uphold them. The rules apply to us as well. It's the fucking law." He drained the last of the Scotch. It was patently

obvious who he blamed. "I'm seeing it clearly now. What you made me do was wrong. Evil. And I'm not going through with it. I'll take what's coming to me and so will you."

He stared at Goodwin before he left. Hard, straight in the eyes. There was a real hatred in Morris' eyes, one that he had never felt for any man before. And with it came a steely determination. Goodwin could see now that it had been a mistake to get him a drink. Clearly, he couldn't handle it, but he had needed one himself and he hadn't wanted to drink alone. If he'd taken him straight home and left him to the morning he would have probably persuaded himself that there was nothing he could do and that he should just put it all behind him. Goodwin had made a bad mistake. A costly mistake. It was a mistake he would have to rectify straight away. He knocked back his Scotch, pushed his way out of the door and followed Morris down the street.

He saw him, just a little way ahead, making his way down Windmill Street, towards Shaftesbury Avenue. He ran, as if to catch up but pulled up a few yards short. Morris was striding out quickly and Goodwin felt quite breathless. He was definitely feeling too old for this sort of business

but he knew he had no option but to act, and to act decisively, if he wanted to save everything that he had worked so hard for all these years. If Dave Morris intended to spill his guts, he would have to make sure that he couldn't. He would have to kill him. He had toyed with the idea at various times that night. Tossed it from one corner of his mind to another. But he hadn't been serious, despite what he had quietly intimated to Pat Todd earlier that evening. Not really serious. Good God, he was a policeman after all, not a killer. It wouldn't come to that. Morris would see sense – he'd told himself that, chanting it like a mantra, time and time and time again. He would make him. He had to. But Morris hadn't seen sense and he knew with a certainty that the stubborn bastard never would. Not now his mind was made up. Just as the whisky had fortified and given voice to Morris' resolve, so did it to Goodwin's. He was sure of what needed to be done but not yet sure of how to do it. This wasn't the sort of job he could have delegated, even if there had been time. He had to look for an opportunity, here and now. Any opportunity. And he prayed to God that one would offer itself up. If not, he would follow the bastard home and club him to death with a brick, if he could find one.

Morris reached Shaftesbury Avenue and tried to hail a cab but the curtain had just come down on the production in the Gielgud Theatre and he was joined on the street by a throng of excited theatre goers who all seemed to share the same ambition. Goodwin pushed his way through the melee until he was standing right behind Morris. Directly behind him. He was so close that he thought Morris must be able to feel his breath, harsh and rasping on the back of his neck. But Morris' mind was elsewhere. Could this be his chance? Please, sweet Jesus, let it be. He silently invoked a deity that he had long ago lost any faith in. But sweet Jesus heard and he answered. To his right, coming from around Piccadilly Circus, was a bright red route 217 double decker bus. Goodwin glanced to his left and he could just about make out a bus stop some two hundred yards further down the road. Good, it wouldn't be stopping until then. Through the din of the incessant traffic noise and the constant bustle of the crowd, he heard the note of the bus' engine drop as it shifted gear as it came around the bend and accelerated. This was his moment. He felt it deep inside. It was now or never. As the bus passed he pushed sharply, with two hands on the small of Morris' back. Morris was a big man and despite all the booze he was quite steady on his feet. But he



wasn't prepared for this assault and he was too close to the edge of the kerb to retain any balance. He fell forward into the road and his head hit the concrete with a thudding crack. The bus driver saw something out of the corner of his left eye. He wasn't sure what it was but instinctively he turned his wheel violently to the right, trying to avoid it. Whatever it was. The bus swerved and veered as the driver braked hard. It crashed into a Rover coupe coming in the opposite direction, burying itself deep into the driver's door and pushing it over the kerb and onto the pavement, scattering pedestrians in all directions.

But as he did so the bus driver felt his near side front wheel run over the thing in the road. Jesus wept, he thought. I've killed him. He had. That was the last time that Lou Abadi ever drove a bus. London Transport wanted him back of course. They even paid for counselling. They were very supportive. It wasn't his fault, everyone told him that. It was an accident pure and simple. A tragic accident. The man had just fallen, or maybe even jumped. And the autopsy proved that he was drunk, too. Lou had done everything that he could. No-one could have done things any differently. But whenever he even saw a bus in the distance, let alone went near one, the

bitter, bloody memories came flooding back. Choking him. Engulfing him. Drowning him. He saw the driver of the Rover, an accounts clerk aged twenty five, a man who's young baby would never see *him* walk again, screaming in twisted agony, amidst the wreck of his car. But most of all he saw the man on the road. He saw him every night after he had consumed the half bottle of Scotch that he needed to persuade him to even try to close his eyes and sleep. He saw the squashed, gory mass that had been his head, everything now shapeless and unidentifiable. He saw teeth mixed with brain mixed with bone mixed with eye mixed with blood. Blood. Blood. Blood everywhere. It haunted him.

\* \* \*

Goodwin couldn't believe what he had done. It had been so easy. Far too easy. It should be much harder, he thought, to take a human life. And he had done it so casually, found it so simple just to walk away from it. The crowds on the street flocked around the body, drawn to it with the morbid insatiability of the critically curious. No notice was paid to the man moving

unobtrusively away. Probably he was squeamish, couldn't stand the sight of blood. Poor soul, he didn't know what he was missing. But Goodwin knew exactly what he was missing. Perhaps over the years he had seen so many devils, devils of desire and of despair, that he was no longer able to master the one that lived inside him. The devil within. But he could still recognize it. He could still be shocked by its power and ferocity. He walked the streets, he couldn't face the underground. Descending once more into the cavernous bowels of the earth would be too close to taking yet another step down, into the pits of hell. He'd always thought that he was a good man. A good copper, too. He'd never killed anyone before, he'd never even taken a bribe, for heaven's sake. Not even in the old days, when he was on the Flying Squad and everyone had played the game. Even then, he'd kept his nose clean. Sure, he had always taken care of his officers, those whom he liked and that was most of them. He would sweep any little indiscretions carefully under the carpet and have a favour owed that he could call in, now and then, as required. OK so he'd make sure a blind eye was turned to some of the indiscretions of one or two chaps at the Lodge. But that wasn't immoral. It was common sense. Just brotherly love.

As he walked on, the night seemed to become darker with each successive step. It seemed colder too and he pulled up the collar of the jacket of his grey suit. He was normally fastidious in his appearance but after all of this evening's events he looked and felt more dishevelled than he had ever been before. He tried to convince himself that Morris had had to die to protect the reputation of Tommy Windsor and to hallow the memory of Charlotte Ashworth. But, try as he might, he couldn't really believe it. In his heart of hearts he knew that Dave Morris had been sacrificed on the altar of self preservation to the great god of pension rights.

## **Chapter Eighteen**

It must be morning now, Micky Johnston thought. He sat on the bed of the holding cell, his back to the wall. He had been that way, he thought, all his life. The cell was sparse, just four stark walls, the metal framed bed and blanket and what he thought once might have been a small toilet, but he wasn't really sure. They'd taken his clothes off him last night and rushed them down to the forensic lab for the scientists and technicians to pore over. He hadn't been sorry to see them go. The blood that drenched them had soaked through to his skin. It felt cold and clammy and his shirt and trousers had started to stick lasciviously to his body as it began to congeal and dry. Now he was dressed in a plain white overall that seemed, he thought to be made out of a thick sort of paper. The right leg of the overall hung limply over the side of the bed. They had not given him back his leg. It was evidence they said. Bollocks. Did they think he had kicked her to death? Without the prosthesis he felt naked. He thought back to when he had had his first fitting. He had been, he remembered clearly, literally frightened of the thing. He couldn't force himself to look at it, not at first, let alone to touch

it. That revulsion had taken a good while to pass, but pass it had. Eventually. Now without it, he felt even less complete. It reminded him of how he had felt when he lost the leg itself, when that bastard Doyle blew it off. His bitterness had not subsided. They hadn't even got a crutch to give him which rendered him effectively immobile. He had had to lean on a policeman for support as they took him into an interview room for questioning and later, back in the holding cell, he had had to crawl across the floor to get to the toilet. He knew that he had no dignity left. Doyle, the filth, you, me – we had all stripped him of that. The police knew that, too. He had made it clear to them from the first minute of the first interview.

They had arranged for the duty solicitor to be called in, but despite her urging caution, he had told them absolutely everything. He had wanted to. It was almost as if he was compelled by some driving inner force. Like Macbeth, surely everyone could see that he was a man more sinned against than sinning? They would be bound to understand that. They had to understand. Johnston knew that he would go to prison although he was quite secure in his moral innocence. He knew that was how the system worked – the odds were all stacked against the

little man. He knew, also, that the system was wrong. It was Doyle that should be in here, not him. And Bellini, too. His rotten, putrefying corpse should be brought in and banged up for life. The initial questioning took three hours in all, including two brief interludes for coffee and toilet breaks. To the officers, trying to get a question in, on the odd occasion that he paused for breath, it seemed more like three weeks. It became Johnston's catharsis and he went through every minute detail, with them, starting from his early career on the fringes of Bellini's organization and ending with his being half carried into the interview. It was a diatribe, they thought. One that was punctuated by a tragic chorus of long, drawn out self pitying episodes. Here was a man whom the fates had conspired too ruin. The fates had names. They were Francis Doyle and Donald Bellini.

He gave them enough ammunition to sink the battleship that was Don Bellini's illicit empire. Unfortunately, Bellini's *Titanic* had already encountered its own iceberg and was sinking slowly but surely to the ocean floor through its own sheer dead weight. Detective Inspector Brian Young, who had been called in from the comfort and warmth of his bed, to head up the Southend murder investigation team, knew of

Bellini. Didn't everybody? He had served in the Met. for nearly ten years before he transferred out into the sticks to finally get the promotion he felt he richly deserved, and he remembered the bloody names Bellini and Doyle only too well. After they eventually managed to shut Johnston up and, at last, terminate the interview, Young tapped the two gangsters' names into the police national computer terminal at his desk and central records advised him to contact one Chief Superintendent Goodwin at Scotland Yard immediately and a phone number was given. He shuddered involuntarily – he remembered Goodwin as well as he remembered Doyle and Bellini. Chief Super. now? No problems with *his* promotions, he thought. He had been just a D.I. when Sergeant Young knew him. That bastard D.I. It was his reports that had caused the promotion board to hold back his advancement for so long. It was Goodwin's fault that he was out here in Essex and not still in London. Well. He could gloat now. Goodwin owed him and this, he felt, was pay back time.

He dialled the number excitedly an smile playing over his lips. Momentarily he had visions of being the man who brought down Don Bellini's untouchable crime empire single handed. Maybe Ross Kemp could play him in the mini series, he



thought, he seemed to be doing a nice line in the hard-as-nails-copper-with-a-vulnerable-side parts these days. But all his hopes were immediately diffused when the detective constable at the Yard who answered Goodwin's phone told him, with barely concealed delight, that Bellini had been found dead that evening, murdered, it was thought by Francis Doyle. Young didn't like the way the constable seemed to be talking to him and he liked it even less when he had to admit that he had no idea of Doyle's whereabouts and no effective leads to follow up. The D.C. did, however, promise to contact the Chief Super. at home and he would, he expected, probably call him sometime in the morning. Screw you, thought Young as he hung up the phone. If the Met. could take care of their own problems in the first place and keep them in London rather than exporting them to the rest of England, he wouldn't have this bloody mess on his hands.

Goodwin had been home when he received the call from the office, lying in bed next to his wife, but a million light years from sleep. If only Micky Johnston had come up with this when Doyle first attacked him rather than waiting all these months. It was Dave Morris that he'd sent round to the hospital to interview him in the first place. He remembered having to chew him off a strip on

the instructions of some of the brass upstairs. If only he let him have his head, let him push Johnston harder and harder, rather than send in Charlotte Ashworth to do a snow job and go through the formalities, expecting nothing. If he'd done that, how many people would have been left alive today, he wondered? He wasn't an emotional man – he wasn't in the right job for that – but he felt a single, solitary tear fall down his cheek and on to the pillow below.

He was in the office before seven thirty in the morning. He felt better for the little sleep that he had been able to get and was much more confident now. Everything had been done for the best. It would work out. The demons that had visited him in the night and had seemed so fearsome and devouring, in the morning seemed smaller and somehow less dangerous. Perhaps he would be able to banish them after all. By the time he was showered and dressed, he no longer felt the need to put on a mask to face the world. He was confident that what he had done was, if not actually 'right', in a world where it seemed that there were no moral absolutes left, then it was at least justifiable. As soon as he arrived, he had called D.I. Young in Southend for a full briefing. It had been a late night for Young but he had waited almost patiently to take Goodwin's call.

Yes, of course, Goodwin remembered him from his time in the Met. and he greeted him warmly, as one would an old friend. Young's report was concise yet comprehensive. Maybe he's not so bad after all, Goodwin thought and he invited Young to look him up the next time he was in town. Young said yes but promised himself that he would never even piss on Goodwin if he was on fire.

By eight o'clock Pat Todd was hammering at Goodwin's office door which, unused to such outbursts, shook wretchedly on its hinges and nearly burst open. When he was admitted, Goodwin could see that he was clearly agitated. He had heard the news. You can't keep things under wraps for long, not in the closed environment of a squad office. Goodwin himself had received a message from upstairs, as soon as he had finished on the phone to Young, telling him about Morris' unfortunate accident and giving him all the details that he already knew only too well. The call from the same high ranking officer who, all those months ago, had instructed him to reprimand Morris. It seemed possible, he said, that he had been in some seedy little strip club in Soho and had been either too drunk or in too great a state of excitement to see the bus coming. Goodwin was given the impression that

things wouldn't be investigated too thoroughly. Morris had a wife and kids, after all. No need to cause them any undue embarrassment. Or the Force either. It was a terrible tragedy among many terrible tragedies. Shakespeare had it spot on when he said that when troubles come, they come not as single spies but as whole battalions. One thing the Met. Had become good at over years was closing ranks at times of trouble; raising the drawbridge and excluding the world. Goodwin agreed with everything his superior officer intimated to him and thanked the Commander on behalf of Dave's colleagues and family for his tact and understanding. But now he was faced by Pat Todd and he seemed to be a long way from understanding.

"What happened, Guv? What happened to Dave?" A bitter angst was etched across his face and was pacing up and down the dark blue carpet agitatedly.

"Calm down, Pat. There's no need to get excited. Sit down." Goodwin's voice was re-assuring and employed a practised air of authority. He had, the night before, fought through the whole gamut of emotions that Pat Todd was now beginning to experience, as well as many special ones of his own. He had crawled his way through the tunnel

though and so would Todd. "It's just like they're saying. It was an accident. Pure and simple. It could have happened to any one of us. At any time."

"So what did happen, then? Really." It was a fair question from a man in Todd's position.

"We'd cleaned up everything at Tommy's flat. Got rid of everything. Dave was fine, Pat. He'd had no second thoughts" he lied. "I took him up West for a few drinks. A celebration really. Everything had gone like clockwork. It was a relief, you know. I think he'd had a few too many and he went off to call a cab. He was a bit unsteady on his feet. I suppose I should have stayed with him but I went off to pick up the tube. Anyway, I was about ten yards or so down the road when I heard this God almighty crash. There's a bus all over the road. I rushed back but there was nothing I could do. Dave was dead already. No doubt about it. He would have gone instantly, he probably never even saw it coming."

"Oh, thank God. I had horrible visions of ..." Todd couldn't quite bring himself to articulate just how awful these visions had been.

"Well you can forget about them. It happened just like I said. There was a whole crowd of people

around him by that time. It wouldn't have done any good if I'd stayed. It would have just complicated things, you know." Goodwin waited for Todd's response and he was duly rewarded with a nod of assent. "I got on the tube and went straight home. I've just spoken to Commander Bannister upstairs. It's an accident, they all know that. They're not even going to investigate it. How did things go at your end?" He tried to steer their conversation away from the subject of Dave Morris.

"No problems. I dumped all his gear and burned it, just like you said. Nobody even came near and I waited and checked that it was all burnt through. Everything was fine. But you're sure that it was an accident?" Goodwin didn't like to be cross examined and he had to restrain himself from snapping at Todd. He could tell that he was worried about the story but he also knew that in the end Todd would rather blindly accept it as gospel than to dare to confront a less palatable truth.

"I've told you, Pat. I've told you exactly what happened. It's over. Finished. Dead and buried. Tommy's clean now and Charlotte can rest in peace. Now, let's just put it all behind us and concentrate on catching the evil bastard who

killed them. Not a word about if from now on. Agreed?"

"Agreed." Just hearing the word was a relief to Goodwin.

"Good man. Now I can bring you all up to speed. Come on." He opened his door and walked through into the hive of inactivity that was the early morning routine of the squad office. This morning it was unusually subdued. The squad was still reeling from the deaths of Tommy Windsor and Charlotte Ashworth and now the rumours were circulating about the demise of Dave Morris.

"Right" he announced loudly. When he spoke he was accustomed to being listened to and everyone turned to face him as he stood in his customary place next to the white board. He looked for all the world like a teacher addressing a surly fourth form. "Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. Let's begin our briefing" he announced decisively. "We have updates. Important developments. But first off all, I'm sure you've all heard about Dave Morris' accident. Last night in the West End, Dave was involved in a road traffic accident and he was killed outright. He was hit by a bus. It seems that he'd been drinking. But that doesn't matter. Dave was one

of us. He was a good copper. You always knew where you stood with Dave, he was straight as they come. And he was a good friend too, to us all. There's not one of us here who Dave hasn't helped out of a tight corner in the past. He was the sort of man you'd turn to when you're in an awkward spot and need someone who you can rely on to watch your back. We'll all miss him. Ray," he addressed a detective constable, "I want you to take care of the collection for his family." Ray nodded obligingly and Goodwin handed him two strangely familiar fifty pound notes. "Start with this. I'll let you all know the details of the funeral as soon as I have them. And I'll be going to see his wife later today, if she's up to it. I'll pass on everyone's sympathy. On top of recent events, to lose another member of the team is the last thing any of us need, especially in such tragic circumstances, but thank god Dave wasn't killed by Frankie bloody Doyle." Although there was nothing to concrete to substantiate it, it was now generally assumed that Doyle had murdered the Ashworths as well as Tommy. "We've got to get him. And we will get him. Not just for Tommy and Charlotte, but now for Dave, too. It's what he would have wanted. We are going to make this our tribute to Dave. It's going to be his memorial.



“OK then,” he continued. “Let’s get down to business. Last night we had some developments. You’re all aware that Doyle killed Bellini last night on the Dagenham road. He severed his carotid artery and ripped his throat open. Same to assume that he’s now more dangerous than ever. I saw what he did to Bellini and believe me, it was not the work of a rational man.” The team knew all this already, it had come to pass before they signed off last night. “Like you I’m not going to shed any tears for Don Bellini. We all know exactly what sort of man he was and if it was just him that Doyle had killed, I’d pat him on the back and buy him a beer myself. But it’s not. Thanks to young Patrick here, we’ve got a positive I.D. of Doyle from the C.C.T.V. tapes at the Tower of London. He was there when Tommy died and we’ve got a guardsman who’s pretty sure that he saw them sitting together on Tower Green, where they found the body. That’s all we need – its more than enough to bang him up and get to work on him. Proof positive, in my book. Now we just need to bring him in. But that’s not all. This morning, just before zero four hundred hours, an armed response unit from the Essex Police, responding to reports of gunfire coming from a residential street, arrested one Micky Johnston in Southend on Sea. Remember him? Yes, that’s right, the one with the leg. Well, it seems that he

had tortured to death – brutally, mark you – the occupants of the house, a Mrs. Melanie Wheeler and her husband Scott, a printer.”

“Christ” a disembodied voice came from the assembled team. It could have come from any one of the assembled coppers. They all thought the same thing. “That’s big league stuff for a little prick like Micky Johnston. He’s never amounted to anything before. All he ever was was just a bag man.”

“That’s what I thought too. We all did. But it doesn’t finish there. It goes deeper and deeper. Wheeler was Melanie’s second husband. She used to be married to our friend Frankie Doyle. It seems like the poor cow hadn’t even seen Doyle for fifteen years or so. And then this. It probably came as a bolt out of the blue to her.”

“Getting revenge for his leg? On Doyle?” A middle aged man sitting on a desk at the back of the room, swinging his own legs like a child, joined in.

“Probably, Des. Well, it seems that Doyle turned up to the party.”

“And Micky Johnston’s not dead?”

"Surprising isn't it? Apparently he had enough opportunity to finish him off. He just chose not to. He walked away."

"Doesn't sound like that psycho bastard to me. Are they sure it was really Doyle? Not just Johnston telling tales?"

"The local boys seem sure enough."

"Well, could he have done the torturing then? That's more along his lines that Micky Johnston's. We haven't even seen sight nor sound of him since his accident." Everyone who knew him, everyone who had ever even met him was having difficulty in reconciling the picture being presented of the insignificant, worthless Micky Johnston as a sort of latter day Torquemada conjuring up all the worst excesses of the Spanish Inquisition.

"Apparently he's held up his hands to it. Not the sort of thing you say if you're innocent. Not something like this. I want you and Rachel to go down to Southend today, Des. It's all arranged. Liaise with a D.I. Young. I want you two to interview Johnston yourselves. Find out how much of his story's true. Really turn on the charm. Try to frighten the little shit. The yokels over there are going to pull out all the stops to

see if Doyle's holed up out that way. Personally, I doubt it. The only connections he's got are in London and I would imagine that he's back here already. Without Bellini to direct operations he's going to be feeling pretty isolated. He's not the brightest banana in the bunch and he's already acted out of character in letting Johnston live but I think we have to assume that that was a one off. God alone knows what he's planning to do next. He probably doesn't even know himself. Our number one priority is to get him off the streets so that he can't do any more damage to us or to the public. I want you lot out there. All of you. Talk to everyone you know. Put pressure on your snouts. I want *all* of Bellini's known associates pulled and questioned. Yes, I know we had them in yesterday, but things have moved on a pace since then, haven't they? Arrest them all, just a holding charge, if you need to, but I'm getting a copy Johnston's statement e-mailed to me now. Apparently that names all the names so we've got just cause on every man jack of them." Goodwin didn't know at this stage that the statement contained a clear indication that Tommy Windsor had given him the Brocock revolver. D.I. Young hadn't mentioned it on the phone, after all, it hadn't even registered with him that Tommy was the undercover copper who had been killed at the Tower of London, although he

had read about it in his paper. That was a surprise that lay in the future for Goodwin. "When Des and Rachel get back from Essex we'll go through everything we've got and pile up the charges then. I can't imagine that anyone's going to be too keen to hide Doyle at the moment. He's pretty hot property, so try and push everyone to finger him. Oh, and I want that slimy bastard John Loader in for questioning, as well. It doesn't look like Johnston's got anything on him but we can try and put on the frighteners on him, just for the hell of it. You can do that, Pat. For god's sake, play it by the book with him. And be gentle with him, his fee income has plummeted all of a sudden." There was no more than the odd muted half laugh. "One last thing" Goodwin added undeterred. "Remember all of you, Doyle is our number one priority. I want him in custody and I want him today. OK guys" he concluded firmly. "Let's get going."

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"There's a problem, sir." Goodwin was ushered into the plush office of Commander Bannister and lowered himself into the richly upholstered

leather chair that creaked wearily as it accepted his weight. The vast expanse of ornately polished mahogany desk seemed to be an extension of the ornately polished mahogany Bannister. It was starkly empty, save for a tiny lap top computer and few sheets of carefully arranged A4 headed paper. The heat was oppressive and Goodwin mopped away the beads of sweat that he could feel forming on his brow with a handkerchief that was none too clean.

"Opportunities, David. Problems are but unrealized opportunities." Goodwin hated it when he said that. It had become a sort of catch phrase that he wheeled out on every possible occasion. Goodwin didn't like the man. He was far too smug and self righteous, he thought. His uniform was far too well pressed and the buttons far shinier than any buttons ever had a right to be. And he didn't know the first thing about police work. Not real, out on the streets at three in the morning after drinking all afternoon with coppers and villains alike, knee in the groin police work.

"It's a bloody great big 'opportunity'" Goodwin said without thinking.

"Then you'd better tell me about it" the senior officer said, resisting the temptation to castigate Goodwin once more about his attitude. As he

spoke, he too sat down. The chair into which he sank was luxuriant and still smelled of new, soft leather. Goodwin tried not to but he coveted it.

"It's the statement of Micky Johnston's that the lads in Essex have sent down to me. I told you about it before." Bannister nodded. He remembered of course. He looked intently at Goodwin over the top of a pair of metal, half round reading glasses, perched precariously on the tip of his nose. His hands were together, fingers touching as if in prayer, and they tapped, gently and precisely against his lower lip. He looked for all the world as though he was a minor character in one of Dickens' bleaker novels. "Well, I've been going through it. It's good stuff. Don't get me wrong. There's an awful lot of dirt on an awful lot of villains. But there's an ..." He paused deliberating over the choice of his next word. "Inconsistency."

"And what's that?" Bannister enquired tentatively. He didn't like the sound of this at all. Another bloody cock up, it seemed, was about to land on his desk.

"Johnston claims that he got the revolver, the one that the police took off him last night, from Tommy Windsor."

"What?" This was all he needed to hear. He managed to retain a level of composure commensurate with his rank despite the fact that what he really wanted to do was scream at Goodwin. "This is not good news, David. If this comes out, it's going to cast doubt over the validity of his entire statement." A thought suddenly struck him. "You don't think he really did, do you?"

"Oh God, no. Course not, sir. It'll just be that little shit stirring things up for us. He will have seen that Tommy was an undercover copper. It's been in the papers, on the news, too. In any event, there's no other evidence to support a case that Tommy was anything other than a decent copper doing the best he could in a difficult situation." He hoped like hell that there was no other evidence. Not after everything that he'd been through to clear away everything he knew about.

"Thank goodness for that. You are absolutely sure?" Bannister seemed assuaged by Goodwin's assertion, probably because he wanted to be.

"Absolutely." Please god let it be true.

"Nevertheless, it will certainly queer our pitch in court. If the worst comes to the worst I expect the



Crown Prosecution Service will have to run with it along the lines you suggest but any defence counsel worth his salt would have a field day. Do you have any influence with the Essex Police? Could they bring any pressure to bear on Mr. Johnston. Ask him to reconsider. Perhaps his memory was momentarily faulty."

"I can try, I know the D.I. running the case. But it all depends on how co-operative Johnston wants to be."

"We can't offer him any deals, of course. He's murdered two people. Besides, Johnston himself is Essex's case not ours."

Goodwin wished he could go down to Essex himself and simply retype the entire statement. In the old days, he thought, the good old days, he might have got away with it, but not now, not with the Police and Criminal Evidence Act putting the kibosh on effective policing and him personally under an ever tightening stranglehold. "I'll see what I can do, sir" he offered reluctantly but he held out little hope. Brian Young, he thought, wasn't the type to forgive and forget.

"That's the spirit, David. It's very important that you succeed. I'm sure you realize how damaging for the Force such accusations can be, even if

they are totally unfounded. And for the officers concerned personally. Many a fine policeman's career has been ruined when a project they instigated goes badly wrong. I'd hate to see that happen to you." The threatening tone to Bannister's voice wasn't even barely concealed.

Goodwin got up and made for the door. "Yes, sir" he said. "I'm sure you would." Suddenly he felt shattered and very, very old. All his efforts, everything he had done to make sure that events turned out as well as they could for everyone, well for almost everyone, had been futile. Dave Morris had died for nothing. He had killed Dave Morris, *murdered* him, for nothing. It stung him as he said the word silently to himself for the first time. It was like, Goodwin thought, that he had been sucked into the immense, unendurable gravity of a supermassive black hole. His own, personal space time had been distorted to such a perverse degree that the laws of physics even, the universal constants, no longer seemed to apply to him. He was in free fall. He realized that at last and he knew he would never be able to stop. He knew that he could never break free.

## **Chapter Nineteen**

Superintendent Goodwin had been right about one thing. Frank Doyle had not wasted time in Essex but had made his way straight back to familiar territory. He had no intention of staying in London, however. Doyle realized that that would not be safe but that did not seem to matter any longer. He couldn't quite explain it but the city now seemed dirty to him, obscenely corrupt in way that he had never been party to before. He was filled with an overwhelming desire to leave it, to get out as soon as possible and to go far, far away. He accepted that he was now in his end game and he wasn't really sorry. He saw with an unusual clarity that, one way or another, by the end of the day, he would be dead. The irony was that Doyle, the last living lone wolf, couldn't face the world on his own. Not for long. He had been too dependant on Don Bellini for too long and now even he had let him down. Doyle felt somehow like a small child lost in a shopping mall, scanning wildly for a friendly face but seeing only the harsh, uncaring stares of strangers. Waiting for the public address system to carry the promise of imminent rescue, but secretly knowing it will remain forever silent.

Doyle had had plenty of time to reflect during the early morning drive back from Southend on Sea to his old stamping ground of south London. His brain had seemed more alert than at anytime in the last forty years. Even now, despite everything that had happened, he couldn't bring himself to hate Bellini for what he had done. Perhaps it would have been better for him if he could. The hatred might have driven him to carry on, to fight back. To hit out at anyone and everyone; that had been his way in the past. But now it was different. *He* was different, he thought. No longer the man he had been. He accepted the fact that it had been so long since he had experienced any real, genuine emotion, that he was now no longer able to. He knew the words, of course, despite his limited education but he had no idea what they meant. Not what they *really* meant, what they really felt like, the pain ... the pleasure ... the heartbreak. He sat now in the over ground N.C.P. car park in Southwark, the one near the main campus of the South Bank University. He sat, dead still, in the blue Peugeot. Its engine was switched off but both his hands remained clamped firmly on the steering wheel as if they were locked in position. Behind him, under the thin moulded plastic tray concealing the boot still lay the corpse of the good Samaritan who had tried to come to his

assistance last night. Since he had slammed down the hatchback and driven him from sight, Doyle hadn't even deigned to give the man a second thought. He didn't care that he might have a wife and children who loved him and depended upon him for their daily bread and for their emotional succour. He never gave a thought to the fact that he was somebody's son, somebody's brother. He was just somebody who got in his way, somebody who he could use. It was neither good nor bad. It was just the way things were. Doyle hadn't changed that much. He wasn't that different. He watched the sun rise before him, bestowing even at this early hour a gloriously golden hue on the drab metropolitan cityscape as it climbed slowly and majestically over the roof tops, investing them with a beauty that was rare and transitory. It was going to be a glorious day in the city. The sort of day when office workers flock to the parks in their lunch breaks to bask in the seductive warmth of the spring sunshine. The sort of day when commuters pause, just for a moment, as they swarm across Waterloo bridge and notice for the first time in years the serene glories of the city skyline from the Palace of Westminster in the west to St. Paul's Cathedral in the east, and whisper a prayer of silent thanks for Wren. It was the sort of day when perhaps, just maybe, the

world wasn't quite such a bad place and life was, after all, almost worth living. Such feelings still by-passed Frankie Doyle. They went over his head and, even if he knew that they could be there, he wouldn't have appreciated them.

He sat there for a while. He wanted to move but he found his inactivity too comforting and seductive and it was only when car after car began appearing and parking up nearby that he forced himself to cast off his lethargy. He abandoned the car, leaving it unlocked with keys in the ignition. He thought for a moment about leaving the ignition running, to advertise the fact that it could easily be stolen, thus buying him a little more time and anonymity. He decided against it, it would probably only flatten the battery. People didn't care anymore; there were so many opportunities, what did it matter if one was missed? He was wrong though. Within forty five minutes, the car would be re-stolen by an enterprising fifteen year old joy rider who got a little more than he bargained for when he opened the hatchback to see if there was anything worth stealing. It was two days before the car was eventually recovered, the best part of twenty miles away. Two days of rotting, of decomposing, of putrefying. Such thoughts were not of interest to Doyle as he made the short journey to

Waterloo station. He climbed the grand steps to the station's monumental main entrance, pausing to glance at the names of the railway's glorious dead from two World Wars. He imagined his own name up there with the others, cast into a cold bronze slab of immortality. That was where he belonged, he felt, not here, not today, a pariah with no where to run and no-one to turn to. He glanced up at the big, old black and white clock, which was suspended above the concourse, as he passed below it. He could almost feel it ticking away the seconds and minutes of his life. It was no longer early, the clock told him, it had gone twenty past seven already, and people were flocking out of the arriving trains, with an inexorable pulsating regularity. It was as if, he thought, they in a solid mass only dispersing gradually as they passed through the ticket gates and made their way unsmilingly but uncomplainingly to their day's business. Doyle stood and stared up at the constantly changing electronic departures screens suspended above his head. He had no particular destination in mind. There wasn't anywhere he had ever really wanted to go. He made his selection purely on departure time. Seven twenty five. That would do. Platform thirteen. He had to run but he made it. Just. The train was empty. All the traffic was one way at this time in the morning and Doyle

hadn't even heard of the leafy Hampshire market town that was to be his final destination. He didn't suppose that many people had. But it was out of London. And it was the end of the line. That, he mused, seemed quite appropriate. He moved along the carriage and spread himself out on a seat designed to accommodate three people. Its blue upholstery had probably once been plush but that was now just a dim and distant memory. Now it just felt harsh and uncomfortable. Still the train was on time and that was preferable to a luxury that he was far from accustomed to. It slowly juddered away from the platform with an initial jolt and he turned his attention out of the window by which he sat. It was ingrained so deeply with dirt that it had taken on a sort of opaque brownish hue from which no amount of effort and detergent could ever hope to release it. Doyle sat with his back to the engine and remembered the Euro Star trains, proudly wearing their distinctive livery, that used to pull out of the futuristic tunnel like exit in their own sanitized part of the station. For a moment Doyle wondered whether or not he should have taken that train and gone to Paris or Brussels instead. Did you need a passport? No, it would have meant a schlep across London. It didn't matter, he thought, he would rather stay in England. Finish up in England. He no longer



thought of himself as Irish. That, like everything else from his past was long ago forgotten, buried in the recesses of what on a good day passed for his mind. The train seemed to be going very slowly, he thought, but he took the opportunity it afforded him to see Big Ben and the Houses of Parliament. Why the hell did they put up that big wheel, he thought. What a way to celebrate the Millennium, the march into the new world of the twenty first century; a bloody Ferris wheel. 'Oh, brave new world, that has such people in it.' Still, it wasn't as bad as that bloody Dome had been. After the train had passed through Vauxhall, without even noticeably slowing, it seemed to pick up speed and soon was travelling at a steady pace. By the time they passed the upturned skeletal dinosaur that is Battersea Power Station the train was rattling and jarring along at its full pace. It slowed down as it passed through the myriad maze of tracks at Clapham Junction. Doyle thought back to his visit to that seedy Clapham bedsit all those months ago. He thought of his sawn off shotgun. He thought of Micky Doyle and his kneecap. I didn't blow it off, he said to himself. His leg was still there when I walked out. He should blame the bloody surgeon, not me. He thought of Tommy Windsor waiting for him back at the club. He thought of Don Bellini and that drunk in the Mount of Venus.

The one he had worked over. That was the day, he thought, the day that it had all kicked off. In truth the chain of events had started many years before. It had started back in the village near Galway Bay with the sharp bite of his father's thick leather belt ripping into his bare back. Perhaps it had started even earlier still, in the dark comforting security of his mother's womb as cells divided and divided and sent a million electrical impulses to one another. Perhaps it was all a matter of genetics and Francis Doyle could never have been anything other than what he was, a *fatale monstrum* sent from hell to torment humanity.

It must have been about twenty or twenty five minutes into the journey when the train pulled in at Woking station. More people got on, quite a lot in fact but they all seemed to give Doyle a wide berth. It wasn't so much the fact that he hadn't slept or washed, although there was no mistaking those facts. It was the look in his eyes that made them keep away. It was difficult to define, but people could tell. This was not a man to go close to. The train sat at platform three for what seemed at eternity. It was so long, in fact, that Doyle was beginning to wonder if something had gone wrong. But it hadn't and the train eventually juddered off once more, picking up

speed more quickly this time, now that it was free of the urban confines of the city and heading through Surrey to the rustic tranquillity of north Hampshire.

"Tickets, please." The man came from behind him and took him by surprise. He was still more on edge than he had thought and his hand moved instinctively to his jacket pocket, towards one of his guns, but he let it drop to his side as he saw that the uniform he wore was merely that of a ticket collector, nothing more insidious. Over the rattle of the train on the tracks, Doyle hadn't heard the same question repeated several times already as he moved slowly down the carriage. He pulled the holdall, which had sat on the seat next to him since London, a little closer. For comfort.

"I haven't got one" he admitted. "I had to get on quickly at Waterloo."

This seemed to be a regular occurrence for the ticket collector as he began dialling into a compact little electronic machine fixed to his belt. The official thought for a moment about castigating Doyle for not hunting him down to buy a ticket straight away like any upright passenger would. He thought better of it and settled for a simple "Where to, sir?" instead.

"The end of the line" Doyle replied, savouring the sound of phrase as he uttered it.

"Single or return?"

"Single's fine."

The man, his stomach straining against a uniform jacket that looked to Doyle to be two sizes too tight, finished inputting the data into his machine and it produced a ticket. "That'll be £14.60 please."

It seemed a lot to Doyle and he wondered if he had been fined for not having a ticket in the first place but he didn't argue and pulled a grubby looking twenty pound note from his pocket and handed it to the man.

"I'll bring you your change, sir" the ticket collector said and made off down the corridor between the seats, moving his hands alternately along the metal hand grips on the head rests as he did so. Doyle assumed that the money would go straight into his pocket and, strangely, he did not begrudge him. He failed to understand the accountability that the microchip in the machine enforced.

The ticket collector took less than two minutes before he was back, passing over the change to Doyle.

"I'm sorry about the pound coins. We didn't have a five."

"That's alright" said Doyle obligingly. "The end of the line – what time do we arrive?"

The collector looked at his watch automatically and un-necessarily, he knew the answer off pat. "8.35" he said and added proudly "We're running on time" as if Doyle should be grateful, if not actually impressed.

In another ten minutes they arrived at Aldershot. A large sign proudly announced that it was the home of the British army and an uneducated hand had scrawled underneath, in thick black magic marker 'whats left of it' not bothering about the punctuation. That would explain all the crew cuts and large, bulging green rucksacks that Doyle saw as he looked out of the window. A group of school boys opened the door by Doyle and he had to move back his legs to allow them to enter. They didn't bother to thank him as they sat down, three facing him and one on his side. He moved his holdall across to make a little more room but, once more received no thanks, it was

as if the boys were oblivious of the presence of the old man who had become their enforced travelling companion. It was a good job that they didn't look into his face, look at the snarling brutality of his old scar and into his one cold dead eye. There, they would have seen an icy chilling severity. They would have seen death. Instead they chattered loudly about this bird in their class, the general consensus of opinion about whom was that she was well up for it. Terry James had proved that already, or so he claimed. Their interruption of Doyle's reverie didn't last long and after no more than five or six minutes the train pulled in at the next station. As a well spoken, vaguely female voice announced "Westchurch. This is Westchurch. The train standing at platform two is the 8.14 service from London Waterloo calling at Lordern and Netherton only", the boys got out and made their way towards the covered bridge that crossed the track. They left the door wide open behind them and as Doyle reached out to slam it shut he thought 8.14, twenty minutes to go.

Everything was very green here, he thought, it looked wild and natural, not like the order imposed on nature in the parks in London that he would occasionally pass through as a short cut to somewhere else. It was too green. Too healthy.

Doyle felt a little disturbed by it and as the train pulled into Bentley station he noticed a small gate on either side of the rail track, where people could cross and a rough path which led into the adjacent woods beyond. There was no concrete on the floor, no pavement, no street lighting Doyle couldn't imagine anything worse than heading so completely away from civilization. He wondered once more, if he had done the right thing coming here. Maybe it would have been more fitting to face up to things back in London, than down here, in another country.

He was still wondering this as the train pulled into its final station. Half of him wanted to stay on the train and go back to London. More than half of him, perhaps but the metallic voice announcing 'all change' forced him to move. Now wasn't the time to procrastinate; it was too late for that. He had needed to get out of the filth and grime of London earlier that morning and he knew that the same need would return with a vengeance if he went back. He stood and gathered his bag, at the door the next round of the day's commuters waited patiently for him to descend. As he stepped onto the platform, he turned his head suddenly at the loud toot of a steam whistle and saw an old black locomotive, re-furbished to a pristine condition and proudly bearing the

insignia of the Watercress Line on its blood red fender, chug off, on the adjacent track. It billowed forth great, voluminous clouds of cloying, greyish steam which hung for a moment on the still morning air before dissipating peacefully into the ether. Doyle liked this place. He could tell instantly, just by the feel of it, its unseeing, unspoken atmosphere. Fate had chosen well for him. The station was pretty after Waterloo, a bed of pretty flowers was well tended and the paintwork was clean and freshly painted in green and beige to keep the tourists who came to the steam line happy. It was a far cry from the old days of British Rail, or from the new days of privatization and profiteering, even. It harked back to an older, more genteel, more civilized age. Although Doyle didn't know it, Superintendent David Goodwin would have liked it too.

He handed his ticket to the man who imperiously stood on guard at the exit. He received it silently with a curt nod. As he moved out of the station Doyle was struck by the size of the car park, stretching out in front of him. He watched as two cars searched hopefully trying to beat each other to the last vacant space. He was surprised how busy it was. He shouldn't have been, the journey had taken him only one hour and ten minutes,



Netherton was very much in the commuter belt. It was no longer the sleepy little market town it had once been, dreaming of its past, of its record in the Domesday Book and of its famous inhabitants, long dead. It seemed as if the spirit of the town was forged in the bloody carnage of the seventeenth century civil war, when the Roundheads beat the Cavaliers back, into the old parish church and there massacred the brave Colonel Arthurs and so many of his men. It had seen its share of adversity, like when poor sweet Florrie Johnson, aged barely eight, was murdered and dismembered in the town's meadows in 1867. At least Doyle had an alibi for that one. Now the town boasted, it seemed almost as many building societies as shops, and estate agency after estate agency selling houses at prices few can afford. But Doyle would never see this. He would never stroll sedately through the town, appreciating its quaintness, stopping for a drink, perhaps, at the old swan coaching inn. Thinking that its nice, but not really a pretty little town. Maybe it had seen too much of the dark side of life for it ever to be that. He thought he could detect the bitter sweet scent of hops on the air though, from the brewery, the only one left in a town which used to boast several. It was a strange smell, he thought, and he wasn't sure whether he liked it or not.

To his right, he saw the station café, decorated prettily enough itself and promising the delights of big breakfasts. Despite the fact that he hadn't eaten since early the previous morning, Doyle couldn't face food and the condemned man forewent his right to a hearty breakfast. Beyond that there seemed to be only a large factory unit leading on to smaller ones beyond. These held no interest for him, but as he looked left, passed the waiting busses, he saw over the line of bushes shielding the approach to the railway from the road, a large, light coloured circular building, surmounted by a cross, pointing the way to the heavens. To Doyle, it looked for all the world as if a spaceship had landed. It was the sort of church that could only have been built in the nineteen sixties but it had been constructed with such a subtlety of nuance and a considered delicacy that it was quite beautiful, almost in spite of itself. As soon as he saw it, Doyle knew that he had reached his destination. This was his journey's end.

He descended a small, steep ancient looking flight of stone steps that led down from the station approach and crossed the road without looking. A car driver hit both his horn and the brakes at the same moment and pulled up just short of Doyle. He wound down his window,

ready to hurl expletives but took one look at the man who stood defiantly in the road, staring intently back at him and decided against it. Doyle turned and crossed the road in safety and walked alongside the yellowish brick wall of the Church's gardens. Ahead of him, as the road met the High Street, stood a pair of semi detached, tall gabled Edwardian houses. Doyle thought he had once seen something them in a film. Or was it a dream, one that he could not quite remember? He avoided the patch of white paint that had long ago dried solid on the pavement and walked up a small flight of steps, past along the side of the church and paused at a sign that announced he was now standing in the three sided courtyard of St. Catherine's Roman Catholic Church. He had known from a distance that it was a Catholic Church. The Protestants would have never had the imagination, the vision to build anything quite so sublime. To his left stood the presbytery, square and functional, built of the same yellowish brick. It was adjoined to the church by a utilitarian hall. He turned and faced the main entrance of the church itself, at the top of a small flight of stairs stood a wooden porch with a ramp running off to his right. If he discounted his wedding, and he could do that easily enough, Doyle had not been in a church since he left Ireland. Well, only one. He vaguely remembered going into it in his

youth, with a few lads from the estate, they were older than him he recalled, it was coming back to him now. It was him who had broken into the vestry and made off with as much silver plate as he could carry, the others had run off without helping him. It was practically worthless though, or so the friend of his Uncle Jimmy who took it off his hands had told him. He wondered if that counted as a religious experience.

There was no sign of life as Doyle climbed the steps and tried the door. To his surprise, it was unlocked and it pushed straight open. He set his bag down by the door. He carried everything he would need with him now. The church seemed large and spacious to Doyle and he walked carefully and reverently, trying not to make any noise but his shoes squeaked invasively on the polished tiles of the floor which amplified the sound and it seemed to fill the church, rising all the way up to heaven in the glory of God. The whole space was floodlit by a myriad of tiny beams of light illuminating a million motes of dust which whirled and danced like dervishes against the quiet, beautiful stillness of the morning air. The geometric panels of stained glass cast out vivid, brilliantly surreal red and blue shadows across the tiled floor which almost seemed to sing out Alleluia as they crept up over the vacant

pews and became the congregation for Doyle's personal litany. He was struck by the modernity of the church's interior, although he really shouldn't have been. It was, he thought, the most beautiful building he had seen and the same sensual appreciation that he had just started to embrace at the Tower of London now seemed to flood his soul with emotions that he could scarcely comprehend, ones that he thought had long been dead to him. He felt a peace and tranquillity that he was sure that he did not deserve. That was enough, he thought. It was more than he had expected and he could ask for no more. But, he felt no hope. If there was life everlasting in the bosom of the Lord, he knew that he would be excluded from it. But Doyle had long ago ceased to believe in God. He knew of the devil, of course. He believed in him. He felt that he had a personal acquaintance with that dark angel. He dwelt within Doyle, deep down, deep in the pit of his belly and he was always with him. Sometimes Doyle was in control, or so he thought, but never for long. His devil was stronger. Be sure your sins will find you out. Wasn't that what old Father O'Connor had told him back in Galway? He didn't know what it meant then but he thought that he probably did now.

As Doyle walked passed the two small, delicately lit chapels on either side of the entrance, he involuntarily dipped his index and middle finger into the holy water stoop and made the sign of the cross. He felt a little ashamed of himself, it was almost as if he had given way to an irrational superstition, like refusing to walk under a ladder or throwing spilt salt over your shoulder. It couldn't be force of habit that had caused him to do it. He hadn't done it since they made him when he was a child. It went deeper than that. It was an older compulsion. Maybe it was something in the psyche of a man who stood at the end of a line of generations of Irish Catholic peasant stock. Perhaps it was genetic, even. A lot can, after all, be blamed on genetics. He circumnavigated the church, walking slowly around its circular interior, communing with each plaque of the stations of the cross in turn. Doyle was enduring his own Passion. All the time he kept his eye on the altar, the sacrificial table of the High Mass. It stood, proud and resplendent in the very centre of the church, almost as if it were a stage in a theatre in the round. He walked slowly, deliberately, as if trying to prolong his inevitable fate, as if he were trying, one final time, to savour life at last. Having completed the circuit he sat down – he would not kneel – on the front pew and tried, for an instant, to pray. But he

knew that there was no one there, just like he knew that a prayer from Francis Doyle would be a prayer forever unanswered. He tried, once more, to let his mind take in the beauty of the church, of the swirling, whirling grain of the rich red mahogany pews, of the passive, benign face of the crucified Christ staring accusingly at him from the crucifix behind the altar. As he watched, the face began to change, to mutate. The left eye closed and the nose became flattened and distorted. Doyle watched as the thick scar, blue with age etched its way down from just below the right eye, across the lips and ended on the chin. No longer was this the peace giving lamb of God. This was the hard, vengeful God of the Old Testament. The God who would smite down his enemies with fire and with brimstone. The God who demanded an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. Doyle knew that his time was now.

He stood slowly and, taking care, he made sure that he did not genuflect as he left the pew. That would be a little too much obeisance for him to pay. His muscles ached from deep within and he felt a tiredness that no sleep could ever exorcize. He felt sick to the very pit of his stomach. He was tired of his life, of who he was, who he had always been and of what he would become. All he could hope for now was relief. Respite.

He walked up the steps and ran his hand over the fine linen altar cloth. Apart from this cloth it was bare, all of the accoutrements of the Mass were safely stored away, under lock and key. The parish priest was a trusting man to leave his church unlocked – even a quiet market town on the fringes of the commuter belt has its share of unsavoury elements – but he wasn't stupid. It didn't matter. Doyle was now the celebrant, he was the Mass, he was the sacrifice. He turned and looked towards the door but the sun was now directly in his line of vision and he couldn't see out. For a moment he was blinded and he dropped to his knees. Reaching behind him, he felt for the Desert Eagle gun and pulled it out from the waistband of his trousers. He caressed it gently as he slid off the safety catch. The barrel tasted sharp and acrid in his mouth and he heaved and retched as he forced it back, deep into his throat. He angled the gun upwards, as far as he could, and felt the bitter kiss of black steel as it bit into the roof of his mouth and seemed to cleave his pallet in two. He felt no fear of death. It had been his constant visitor and he had seen too much of it to ever be afraid. His hand remained steady, firm and un-shaking. With no thought of regret or of apology or of explanation to himself or to anyone else, he pulled the trigger. The Magnum's bullet ripped through his



hypothalamus, traversed that tiny area of the brain that is responsible for hearing, passed through his cerebral cortex and exploded out of the back of his head. Doyle fell forwards and his arms extended from his now prone body. The altar cloth was instantly stained a bloody greyish red as fragments of bone and what used to be Doyle's brain mixed with his blood. The back of his skull was shattered, torn open. His head looked, for all the world, like a crown of thorns.

The blood flowed freely. It was the blood of the new and everlasting covenant. It was shed for Mel, Scott and Frankie Wheeler. It was shed for Charlotte and Steve Ashworth. It was shed for Rosie Case. It was shed for Don Bellini and for Tommy Windsor and for Kurtis Robinson. It was shed for you and me. It was shed for the saints and sinners alike, but mainly for the sinners. Such is the way of the world and, after all, they are the ones who need it most. Maybe just a little of it was even shed for Francis Doyle himself.

It was shed so that sins may be forgiven ... perhaps ... perhaps not. After all, isn't this the twilight of the gods?

**The End.**

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