

Dangerous Dealings

By LimeyLady

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Chapter One

(11th August 1988)

‘Did you really meet Reggie Kray?’

Danny Painter was renowned for rarely if ever smiling. He twitched his lips in approximation as he regarded his questioner. *Ah*, he thought. *So this is the young nutter; the one who gets off on East End villains.*

‘Yeah,’ he said politely, ‘I met him a couple of times.’

‘What was he like?’

‘Same as he probably is now, except not locked up.’

The nutter wasn’t deterred by Danny’s unforthcoming response. ‘That must have been awesome,’ he said. ‘Was it in London? Did you get to go in The Blind Beggar?’

Danny’s expression didn’t even flicker. ‘It was over twenty years ago. I could only have been your age. I can’t remember all the ins and outs.’

That wasn’t at all true. Danny had done a job for Reggie early in 1967. Part of his payoff was a week in the big city, which he’d saved until November. Reggie had put him up in a fancy hotel and left him safe in the hands of a young woman; one who looked very much like 1966’s face of the year, with the body to match. Make that very, very much like her. She’d actually been called “Zoe”, but readily answered to “Twigs”.

Ins and outs? There had been plenty of those; plenty of ‘em and they’d been unforgettable.

Danny’s lips twitched again, this time more authentically. He didn’t know what Reggie had said he’d do for the girl, but she’d bought into her role with gusto, spending every last minute with him, both sleeping and waking. The pound had just been devalued and the weather had been iffy, so they’d filled in a lot of time by staying in bed, but they did venture out occasionally. Out and about, Zoe seemed to know everyone in London. It had been a delight to be with her, even if her version of “doing the sights” only involved visiting pubs, bars and restaurants.

‘Surely you’d remember The Blind Beggar,’ the nutter persisted.

‘I’ve got a feeling it was still closed after the shooting. Nipper Read was after the twins big-time by then. I remember that much.’

‘Nipper Read? What . . .’

At that point Paddy O’Brien got to his feet and called the meeting to order. The nutter obediently shut up and, spared further interrogation, Danny took in the other men around the table, making mental notes as Paddy introduced everyone.

Paddy had been watching too much of *The Godfather*. Maybe he’d even been reading the book. This meeting had been his idea, in his words “an assembly of *tutti capi*”, designed to “bring us all closer together”. Danny reckoned Paddy fancied himself as *capo di tutti capi*. Maybe there were machine guns waiting in the car park, ready to deal with any objectors.

That didn’t seem too likely though. Paddy was capable of violence . . . and extreme violence at that . . . but he was a pacifist at heart. Perhaps it was his age; like Danny, he was pushing the big five-o, twice as old as everybody else in the room. And, talking about the room, it was hardly the place for a massacre. The venue was in a pretty village a couple of miles outside Keighley, in a jazzed-up manor house that usually catered for weddings, birthdays and funerals.

Funerals? Danny chuckled inwardly. *Hmmm . . .*

Danny had never been convinced anything would come out of the get-together, but the hundred per cent attendance could only be admired. Paddy had got every “crime boss” in their end of the Aire Valley to come. Then again, he’d sold it as “be there or miss out”, so it was hardly surprising. And if nothing else, they’d all get to put faces to names.

Paddy must have been on some management course. He had a whiteboard with an agenda on it, written in green felt pen. He’d also started to use phrases like “our big challenge”, “going forward” and “our common objectives”. It was a relief to see that the agenda was in plain English and that he’d used everyday business headings: Areas; New Products . . . things like that. They wouldn’t be leaving anything incriminating behind them in ghostly traces of ink.

Danny found the various exchanges interesting if not particularly useful. And it was reassuring to see the co-operation levels. Positioned as he was in Bingley, he normally only had contact with the two bosses in Shipley and one of the several in Keighley. It was good to know everyone else was bumping along, avoiding needless and expensive turf wars.

Last but one on the agenda, before A-O-B, was prostitution. Not that it was headed that way: the green letters read “Women’s Rights”. Prostitution wasn’t such a big deal this far out of Bradford, not nowadays, and Danny hadn’t much of an opinion on it either way. When it was his turn to give a bit of input he kept his face deadpan.

‘I’m all for women’s rights,’ he said. ‘Ask my ex-girlfriend.’

‘Which one?’ Paddy leered. ‘You’ve had a few, haven’t you?’

For once Danny allowed himself a genuine smile. He loved his wife but had been known to stray; not as often as his reputation would have it, granted, but he didn’t mind being considered a stud. ‘The last one set world records when it came to demands,’ he said, ‘but don’t tell the trouble and strife. It might give her ideas.’

For reasons of his own the boss from Frizinghall, Malky, waited for Any Other Business to raise an add-on question about drug dealing, a topic already covered in Operational Review.

‘Nobody mentioned it before,’ he began, ‘but I’m seeing a lot of new independents on my patch, all selling the same stuff at all the same prices. It has to be organized.’

‘I’ve noticed that,’ said one of the delegates from Shipley. ‘So I introduced a three strike rule. One strike and you get a slap. Two strikes and you’re in the canal. Nobody’s tried three strikes yet. I’m taking that as a good sign.’

‘Do you think it’s organized?’

‘Yeah, but only by a tosser; we soon scared them off.’

‘What about you, Mr Painter? What’s it looking like in Bingley?’

Danny shrugged. Drugs didn’t play a major part in his empire. He’d buy the odd consignment now and then because it was like printing his own money, but was only an occasional thing. Normally he just sat back and let the independents pay him tribute.

‘Can’t say I’ve noticed,’ he said, glancing at his watch.

Malky wasn’t letting go. ‘Does Sean Dwyer have any connection to you?’ he asked.

Surprised, Danny looked more closely at the Frizinghall delegate. ‘Dwyer’s a small-time fence who does a bit of loansharking. He’s not connected to me in any way.’

‘Are you sure? I’ve heard his name mentioned, and not in a small-time sort of way.’

'He's not connected and he's not permitted to deal. What is it you think he's dealing, anyway?'

'H and C in bulk. Possibly a little LSD.'

Danny fought back the anger. He prided himself in knowing what went on in Bingley. If Dwyer had gone upscale he should have been told.

'I'll investigate and let you know,' he assured Malky. 'My bet is your problem's from Manningham, not Bingley, but I'll check it out.'

'Trust me, Mr Painter. These guys aren't from Manningham. You only have to look at them to tell.'

Two of the Asian delegates from Keighley scowled at that. Malky didn't even notice.

'Okay,' said Danny, 'I'll check it out my end.'

Chapter Two

(15th August 1988)

There had been a lot of bad in Huyton's twenty-five years; lots and lots of bad. Usually he was on the giving end, though. He'd never been hit with a baseball bat before. And it hurt. Thank fuck the little twat had aimed for his shoulder instead of his head.

One to the head and I might well be dead, he thought. Then, chuckling in spite of everything, *I'm a poet and I didn't know it.*

All the time I think in rhyme.

'Move it,' Little Twat snarled, 'Unless you want another.'

For once compliant, in agony and unable to move his arm, Huyton allowed himself to be bundled into the back of a van and driven away.

Jesus, this was not in the plan!

Favouring his undamaged right side he tried to sit up, only to be met with kick from a brand-new Nike.

'Keep down, arsehole,' a different voice said. The speaker was young but heavy on the Yorkshire accent.

Huyton kept down. He hadn't previously taken notice but, now he'd had a look-see, he found he was not alone. He had company. Two white lads, in their late teens or early twenties, at a guess. One of them was the twat with the baseball bat. The other one . . . the one with the zits . . . had a handgun.

Normally odds of two-to-one wouldn't have bothered Huyton. Sadly, the circumstances were not normal. He was rendered almost blind by pain, physically handicapped and flat on his arse. While he wasn't scared of the gun, the last thing he needed was another belt from that bat.

Who in hell are they, he wondered, local vigilantes?

He hadn't an answer to his own question. They weren't undercover bizzies, he was sure of that. A plod wouldn't have belted him from behind; not with so many witnesses around, anyway.

Huyton cursed. His lifestyle had given him a nervous disposition; he wasn't usually the sort to be taken unawares. Usually he could sense danger and avoid it before it happened. But not today; today he'd been taken for a muppet and sewn up like a kipper. There he'd been, out in broad daylight, minding his own business, shaking down a few Asian dealers . . .

Next thing he knew he'd been clobbered by someone who fancied himself as Babe Ruth.

The journey was not a long one. After only a few minutes the van pulled up and the engine died. Doors opened and slammed as the guys in the front got out.

'Stay where you are,' Zitface commanded.

Huyton wanted to rip the bastard's head off but common sense prevailed. He stayed where he was and tried to identify the gun. Unless he was very much mistaken, it was the ever-popular Browning HP. Ever-popular in his bit of Merseyside, anyway. Obviously the Yorkies had a liking for the Hi-Power too.

Someone thumped on the van's panelling and yelled, 'Wakey-wakey, we're here!' Then the rear doors opened to reveal a small crowd. Others must have been already there, waiting for them. Wherever they were.

'Get up real slow,' said Zitface.

Seriously outnumbered, seeing no alternative, Huyton hauled himself upright, his left arm singing *Ave Maria*. He reckoned it was gradually getting better, but in no hurry to make a full recovery.

Zitface waved the gun at him. 'Let's go see Charlie,' he said. 'He's got a new shirt waiting for you.'

Sean grinned down into the face of the woman under him. Sally was old enough to be his mother. She could have done with losing a few pounds but she had great tits and a pretty face. And boy, could she fuck!

Yes, he thought, *yes she could!*

Just shy of his twentieth birthday, Sean had had a lot of experience with "ladies". In fact he was renowned for being up for fresh fanny when and wherever opportunity knocked. And he wasn't too fussy about "fresh" or "wherever". He claimed he preferred younger women but had never been known to turn down an older one. The older ones were always hungry for cock. Hungry? No, some of them were ravenous. Like this one. Like . . . what's her name again . . . Sally. Sally was as ravenous as anybody he'd ever met. It would be rude to let her down, wouldn't it?

Sean's ego was such that he'd forgotten how and why they'd got together. Later, in the pub, when he was telling everyone about his dazzling "swordsmanship", he'd claim it was all down to his irresistible charm. In truth charm had been only a tiny part of it: Sally was fucking him for coke.

'Yes,' he grunted, firing into her, never pausing to wonder if pregnancy was still a possibility. Not for one second thinking about anything but firing and firing and firing. Then, registering her lack of orgasm, he grinned again. She'd be supposing she'd had her lot, game over player one. Hadn't she got a surprise in store!

Quickly recovering his rhythm he produced his party trick and carried on . . . and on and on and on, without needing to rest. Driving his rock-hard cock into her again and again, enjoying the feel of her and the increasingly wet sounds of sex.

And he wasn't the only one enjoying it. Sally was thrusting back at him more energetically than ever. 'Brilliant,' she gasped, 'don't stop. Whatever you do, don't stop.'

Sean had no intention of stopping. Naturally gifted, he could go on like this all day. Come to that, he could go a lot more vigorously and keep on all day. For him, in situations like this, to think was to act. Gritting his teeth, he pushed in more strongly, at the same time ever-so-slightly upping speed.

'Fuck me,' Sally yelled. Then, vigorously cumming beneath him, 'yes, fuck me! Fuck me!! Fuck me!!!'

Ever the gent, he obliged.

The van was parked on an expanse of bare earth behind a massive old mill building. Like really dead massive. Its original purpose served, the mill yard had now been split into several lots, most of them currently vacant. Not this one, however. It was being used as a scrapyard. There were piles of junked motors everywhere, guarded by the world's biggest Alsatian, thankfully fastened onto the end of a long chain.

'Mind the dog,' said Little Twat, sniggering.

'Wouldn't want you getting hurt,' Zitface added. 'Not yet.'

Huyton let himself be led across the yard. Well, he had the shooter pressed up against his spine, so perhaps "let" wasn't strictly accurate. It was more a case of having no say in the matter. He still wasn't afraid, not exactly, but he was wondering what the fuck was going on. Wild thoughts were swirling inside his head. That mention of a "new shirt" was ringing alarm bells, but he didn't know why.

There was a dilapidated old portacabin standing by the mill. It looked as if it was propped against the wall for support. Zitface told Huyton to go inside so he did, and was surprised to find a smart interior consisting of just one room. He was also disturbed to see a long, bench-like desk and as many as a dozen chairs, set out in a rough semi-circle around the perimeter. Another solitary chair had been placed smack-bang in the middle of the carpeted floor.

A ravaged-faced man was sitting on the desk, idly swinging his feet. 'Ah,' he said in greeting, 'you must be The Accused.'

Huyton had been in plenty of courtrooms over the years. He recognized the set up in a flash. And those alarm bells were ringing louder and louder.

'Come on in, lads,' the ravaged-faced man went on. 'Take a seat.'

Most of the crowd did as requested but Little Twat and Zitface held position behind Huyton, gun barrel in spine, bat presumably out and ready for action.

'Charlie, let me prosecute this one,' said Little Twat. 'It's my turn.'

'Fair enough,' said the man on the desk. 'You can be Mr Prosecutor today. Did you frisk him?'

'Yeah; he only had this.'

The lad was holding up Huyton's favourite weapon: a silver hammer. In his agony he hadn't been able to stop it being confiscated. Now the sight of it made him sigh. He wasn't a sentimental guy but he loved that hammer. He'd got it from a fence who swore it was the one that inspired the old Beatles' song. It wasn't, of course. It wasn't even made of silver. But it didn't half feel good when he banged it down on some fucker's head.

'Must be the Liverpool in him.' Charlie grinned. 'Okay, son, I'm going to give you a choice. Sit or be nailed to the floor. What's your poison?'

Oh fuck, thought Huyton as realization dawned, *this crazy bastard thinks he's Charlie Richardson.*

Pat was spending the afternoon in a similar manner to his lifelong crony. The difference was that he wouldn't be bragging about his prowess later. He'd been making love, for one thing, not simply *fucking*. And, for another, his "older woman" was not one to brag about. Not with her being Sean's sister.

Now, lying back and smoking a post-coital cig, he marvelled at the way they'd been carrying on. It had been two years and Sean still hadn't a clue. Sean, the man who thought he knew everything about everyone in these parts.

Pat had known DeeDee almost as long as he'd known Sean. Their families had been next-door neighbours for ever and a day. Sean had been his very first playmate. And they'd bonded right from the off. By the time they began primary school they were already firm friends. That friendship continued all the way through the educational system . . . until Sean got himself booted out of the fifth

form . . . and it would continue until one of them died. Theirs had been an ever-changing friendship, though; it certainly hadn't stood still.

DeeDee had always been there in the background, throughout all their childhood. In fact she'd been as much of a big sister to him as she had been to Sean. Except he'd sometimes listened to her well-meaning advice; Sean never did.

Pat grinned as the lady in question took the cigarette from his hand and used it to light another for him. As a boy he'd admired DeeDee without even once looking at her sexually. She really had been like one of his fraternal sisters: friendly, beautiful and completely out-of-bounds. Then, one night in 1986 . . .

DeeDee had been at university but was back to attend a friend's birthday party, held at the rugby club. He'd been doing extra training because competition for his treasured position at loosehead had been getting fierce. Strictly speaking, their paths shouldn't have crossed on an occasion like that. Partygoers were expected to stick to the function room; club members and players were supposed to keep out of their way. But things never went exactly to plan, did they?

We were destined, he thought, never mind "paths crossed".

It was fair to say Dee had been pleased to see him. If he remembered correctly she'd been done up to the nines. And she'd practically stuck her tits in his face when saying hello. That was probably the moment he first noticed her as a woman, come to think about it.

Anyway, after re-introducing herself outside the ladies', she'd shown no intention of re-joining her mates, abandoning them and joining him in the Committee Room instead, obviously happy to be surrounded by would-be-colts and older players and ex-players.

Being courteous as well as the next-door neighbour, he'd offered to see her home. And he hadn't protested when she suggested they stopped off for sex. Not just once, either. Firstly on the rugby pitch of Bingley Grammar's arch rivals, Beckfoot. Secondly, again at her instigation, about three minutes further along their way. And finally, acting on an impulse of his own, he'd picked her up in his strong, prop forward's arms and taken her vigorously against the wall of a snicket, maybe two hundred yards from their homes.

'What are you giggling about?'

'Happy memories of being an eighteen-year-old,' he replied, blowing smoke rings.

'About me, I hope.'

'Oh yes,' he assured her. 'I only ever have happy memories about you.'

By the time Sally cried "enough" Sean had lost count of all the cums. She'd beat him four-to-one, he reckoned, but as to an actual final score . . .

'I need the loo,' he announced. 'Then it's up to you whether I stay or go.'

Sally laughed. 'I said I was paying you with an afternoon in bed. It's early, yet. And you're still up and proud, aren't you? Make sure you don't pee on my bathroom ceiling.'

'I won't,' he assured her. 'And I'll be back, ready for more. Like I said, the rest is up to you.'

Strutting naked into the bathroom he wondered at the nature of women. A mate of his regularly compared them to typhoons. "They turn up all hot and wet," he maintained, "and when they leave they take away your house and car." Not that anything like that would ever happen to Sean. And not that

he'd ever pay for it in any way: not by cash and definitely not by marriage. That much said, the idea of a woman paying him with her body was another thing altogether.

When he returned Sally was snorting through a rolled-up tenner.

'Hey,' he cried, 'I thought your baggie was for a party.'

'I needed a hit,' she replied. 'And it's just a small one.'

'So am I staying or what?'

Sally looked up and devoured him with her eyes. No way had her hit been "just a small one". 'Get on that bed,' she commanded. 'I'm going to show you what fucking is all about.'

'Okay,' he replied, smirking, 'if you insist.'

Chapter Three

(15th August 1988)

Huyton wasn't much of a scholar. He'd been expelled from school aged fourteen and never went back. That was his mum's fault, not his. She'd unwittingly chosen the day of his expulsion to turn her single-parent family into a zero-parent family. He'd come home early, bearing paperwork that explained how to "relocate to a new educational establishment", but she was already gone.

'Ma's done one with her fancy fella,' his older brother told him. 'And I've work coming off down the Big Smoke. You won't see either of us again.'

It turned out Huyton's mum hadn't paid the rent in months. That is to say, not in cash. Her favours hadn't kept the wolf from the door indefinitely, however. So she'd jumped ship and his brother had been right: he'd never seen either of them again.

Huyton didn't hate his mother any more than he missed her, which was not at all. He'd been a bit upset at the time, naturally, but that had been more practical than emotional. *Where am I going to sleep? What am I going to eat?* He hadn't worried about who was going to tuck him up and read him a bedtime story, because nobody ever had. Not since his nana died, when he'd been eleven, anyway.

Nan had been one hell of a woman by any standards. Jamaican-born, she'd lived in London for a while before she moved north, met a no-good white guy and gave birth to Ma. Nan claimed she had no regrets about anything, ever, but clearly wished she'd given Liverpool a miss. Her "night, night stories" all centred on her time in the Swinging Sixties, south of the river. And a lot of those stories were about the Kray twins and their rivals the Richardsons, also known as "The Torture Gang".

'Come on,' Charlie prompted, hauling him away from his memories. 'I can see you know where I'm coming from. It's time to make your decision, before I make it for you.'

Huyton studied the ravaged-faced man. Despite his appearance he was only a kid. He couldn't have been more than a twinkle in his mother's eye when the real Charlie went down. And the rest of his mob was younger still. Not that that was any reassurance. A roomful of boys was not good news; they could be capable of anything.

Like the use of pliers to remove perfectly sound teeth. Or bolt-cutters to remove fingers and toes. Not to mention the application of electric shocks to . . .

To . . .

Nan claimed she'd been introduced to the Kray twins once, when she ventured across the river Thames. She also claimed she saw Charlie and Eddie Richardson on just about a daily basis. While she couldn't speak for the Kray boys, the Richardson brothers were, she insisted, "proper gentlemen". Huyton thought she might have been exaggerating. He'd met some nasty cunts in his time, but dragging it out for hours on end, making a guy cry and beg for his mummy . . .

'The chair,' he said. 'I'll sit in the chair.'

'Fuck me!' Charlie laughed. 'It talks!' Then, still perched on his desktop, still swinging his feet, he asked: 'Got a name, have you?'

'Huyton,' Huyton admitted.

'Is that your first or last? Or is it where you're from? You sound like a Huyton lad.'

'I'm from Toxteth,' Huyton growled. And said no more.

Charlie's smile didn't reach his eyes. Come to that, there was nothing in his eyes at all. 'Okay Mr Prosecutor,' he said. 'Open your case.'

'Right,' Little Twat began, still holding his bat. 'Well, as you know, the Pakis told us there was this black, Scouse bastard throwing his weight about down Lawkholme . . .'

'Mr Prosecutor, objection!' Charlie put on a pained expression. 'How many different minorities are you trying to offend?' He turned back to Huyton, smiling his insincere smile. 'Sorry about that. He has difficulties with diplomacy.' Then, after coughing mock-politely, 'What do you class yourself as, anyway?'

Shit scared, Huyton thought, surprising himself.

'Sticks and stones,' he said aloud. 'I've had all sorts.'

'But if you have to?' Charlie persisted. 'Filling in forms, and that? Go on, humour me.'

Huyton wasn't about to confess he didn't know. 'My mother's black,' he grunted.

'Sounds like a pat answer to me.' Charlie's chuckle was echoed by every one of his sycophants. 'What about your dad? What was he? Chinese or something?'

'How should I know? I never met him.'

'So my learned friend was right. You're black, Scouse and a bastard?'

While boyish laughter rained over him Huyton had another study. Charlie was obviously a big, long-term user of his own products. That much said, his dead-fish eyes were under control. They weren't continually flickering to and fro. And he didn't have the facial tics favoured by most of his ugly little henchmen. At a guess he was clean, for the time being at least, and had never been in a youth custody centre in his life.

'Touched a nerve, did I?' Charlie chuckled again.

'So,' "Mr Prosecutor" resumed, 'my *Asian* contact rang me. He thought that this . . . He thought that The Accused had something to do with us. Said his mates up Highfield were having the same sort of problems. Well, I wasn't having that. I got a team together and . . .'

Charlie held up a hand to stem the flow. 'I get the drift.' Then, staring at Huyton: 'Case made and proven. Before I pass sentence, are you going to tell me why?'

Huyton stared back at him and said nothing.

'Why Keighley, of all places?' Charlie's eyes were deader than ever. When Huyton shrugged he went on, 'What's a big-city boy like you doing out here in the sticks? Are you going to tell me? Or do I have to nail you down with your own hammer?'

'I'm here on business,' Huyton said flatly. 'Jimmy Blue Eyes sent me.'

'Who the fuck is Jimmy Blue Eyes? Some Scouse scally?'

'He's from Manchester.' Huyton stared at his feet as he spoke. 'And he's no scally.'

'Let me get this straight. Jimmy Blue Eyes sent you here to turnover a few street dealers.'

'No. He sent me with a message for Paddy O'Brien. And I haven't turned over anybody. Your lads caught the wrong guy.'

'As if,' Charlie snorted. 'Let's see this message.'

'It's in here.' Huyton tapped his forehead. 'Men like Jimmy don't write things down.'

Charlie was doing a bad job of pretending not being interested. 'Okay everyone,' he said, 'court's in recess. Let's have you all out of here. Except you, Clint.'

Most of the occupants vacated the portacabin. In less than a minute there were only three people left: Huyton, Charlie and Clint (aka Zitface). Zitface was still brandishing his HP.

'You do know who Paddy is,' Charlie began.

'I do,' said Huyton. 'And I presume he's a . . . business rival of yours.'

'We co-exist. And we have . . . arrangements. I sincerely hope your friend from Manchester isn't rocking our boat.'

Huyton shrugged again. Said nothing.

Charlie went behind his desk for the first time and dialled out on his landline. 'Paddy? It's Chaz. I've got a guy here says he needs to see you. He's got a message from Jimmy Blue Eyes. Can you vouch for him?'

'Tell him I was with Jimmy at The Hacienda,' Huyton said quickly. 'I was the one who got us the girls.'

It was hard to read Charlie's expression but, from his half of the phone conversation, it was clear Paddy was ready to hear whatever he had to say. It was also clear that Charlie wasn't done with him yet.

'Thing is,' he said into the receiver, 'the cunt's been making waves. He's upset our friends down Lawkholme, up Highfield and possibly elsewhere. And he's arrogant with it. It's hard for me to let him walk, yeah?'

He listened then laughed. 'Sale or return,' he said, 'I like it. He'll be with you shortly.'

Hanging up he addressed Zitface. 'Deliver him and wait. If he really is the dog's bollocks, Paddy will give you enough for us all to have a decent drink. If he isn't, you can bring him back here. And never mind the genny, we'll use soldering irons.'

Pat sat at his Formica-topped table and wondered why they'd kept their affair so secret. It wasn't because of Dee's mum; that was for sure. Dianne Dwyer would be delighted to know. In fact she would be planning the wedding within seconds of finding out.

The answer was an ugly one. It was Sean; Sean with his jealousies and insecurities.

DeeDee was more at home in Pat's kitchen than he was. 'Here we go,' she said, 'Gold Blend and ginger biccies.'

He smiled his thanks as she took a seat opposite him. 'Results soon,' he said.

DeeDee struck a devil-may-care pose. 'Ask me if I'm worried.'

'Are you worried?'

'Yes.' She abruptly dropped her pose. 'Of course I am. I know I did well, but finals are very final, aren't they? There's so much at stake. It's literally life-changing.'

Pat hummed at that. Dee already had job offers; lots of them, getting better and better in line with grades achieved . . . and getting farther and farther away from home in line with her success. The way he saw it, the more she excelled, the less time he'd get to spend with her.

'I visited Sean yesterday,' she said, changing the subject. 'Mum took me. He hasn't half got a nice flat. He had a fancy new XR3i parked outside. And talk about conspicuous jewellery! He had so much gold on his wrists he was dragging his knuckles as he walked. The only thing I didn't see was any sign of him working for a living. Why would that be, Pat?'

Bugger! Pat sighed. There were only two things he hated talking to Dee about: her career and her brother.

'Don't sigh at me, Patrick McGuire. Tell me the truth.'

'What do you mean?'

'Mum says he buys and sells things. I think he's dealing drugs. So which is it?'

Another, even deeper sigh escaped Pat. 'Sean doesn't do drugs,' he said quickly, before he could be reprimanded. 'He's never done anything heavier than grass. Your mum's right; he makes his money by buying and selling.'

'You mean like he did at school? The way he got himself excluded?'

'He didn't get excluded. He just got told not to bother applying for a place in the sixth form.'

'Come off it, Pat. He was excluded because he'd been fencing stolen goods.'

'No he hadn't. Not exactly.'

'Oh, you, you're so annoying! You've been sticking up for him all your life. God knows why you do it, because he doesn't deserve any help. Come on, tell the truth for once.'

'I am telling the truth,' he said. *Just not all of it*, he added silently.

Dee shook her pretty head and scrunched up her forehead. When she did that she looked as cute and desirable as a Labrador puppy. 'Mum will die if Sean gets arrested for dealing. Please tell me he isn't.'

'He isn't,' Pat said convincingly.

And that was the truth. Sean wasn't a dealer . . . he was a wholesaler.

Huyton reckoned it was the same crew in the van as before: two faceless guys up front, Zit face and Little Twat with him in the back. The only difference this time was that he got to sit on a wood bench over the wheel arch.

Oh, and the little bastard was wielding the silver hammer instead of a baseball bat.

Huyton was good at observing things without being observed himself. And he was interested to see that the safety on the HP was on.

Fuck, he thought. *Has it been on all the time? And could Little Twat really have hit a home run in this cramped space?*

Quickly falling back on another skill, he banished the past from his mind. Earlier he'd been in no state to fight, safety catch on or not. Now, an hour or so later, his arm would work again. Not well, not as good as new, but well enough.

'This is going to be entertaining.' Zitface sat on the bench opposite. 'I mean don't get me wrong, but it's ace when Charlie gets the soldering irons out. He uses welders too, but they're harder to come by. He has to get them in specially.'

Little Twat guffawed and tossed the silver hammer from hand to hand. Both of them, the so-called "guards", were up their own arses and a mile off the pace. So fuck it.

Acting purely on instinct, Huyton launched himself across the van, aiming for Little Twat and smashing his forehead down onto an unprotected nose. Little Twat grunted and flopped, offering no resistance at all. Snatching hold of his hammer, Huyton turned on Zitface.

Zitface had the reactions of a sloth. He was gaping and hadn't pulled the trigger . . . as if pulling with the catch on would have helped. Laughing now, Huyton whacked the hammer against his exposed chin. Zitface went down as if poleaxed. Ever cautious, Huyton revisited Little Twat. He was dead to the world but a solid hammer blow to his temple couldn't hurt, could it?

Impressed by himself, Huyton drew in a deep breath. What did that take? Ten seconds? Faster than Linford Christie, wasn't he?

The van was still progressing along, law-abidingly slow. The two guys up front hadn't heard the fight in the back . . . which was hardly surprising; their acid house music was rattling the panelling. Moving economically, Huyton patted his two victims down, emptying their pockets but leaving their few cards. Forty-five quid and a cut-throat razor was as good as it got.

Okay, time to change the game. He did personally know Paddy O'Brien but had fuck all to tell him, so a meeting in the current climate was not to be recommended. And, if Paddy had bothered to call Jimmy Blue . . .

Well, these days Huyton was almost as unwelcome in Manchester as he was in Liverpool. What a shame! But why else would he have fucked off east of Eden?

Light on his feet for such a big man, Huyton approached the rear doors. Unlocked, they opened at a lift of a lever . . . fortunately. And still no reaction from up front.

Selecting Little Twat first, Huyton lifted, dragged and threw. He laughed as the limp body hit the tarmac and bounced away into the distance. What he was seeing was, he knew, like a mirage: an optical illusion. In reality, aided by momentum, the bastard was bouncing on in the direction of the van. But it still looked and felt like tossing away bad rubbish.

Zitface went the same way and, at last, someone up front noticed. For once the driver must have looked in his wing mirror. With the screech of brakes and a sudden smell of burning tyre, the van slewed to a halt.

Not knowing anything about the guys up front, assuming they were armed and hating himself for being chicken, Huyton leapt out of the van and legged it.

'Hey!' someone yelled.

'Come back,' someone else re-joined.

As if! Huyton found himself in a mostly industrial area that, oddly, seemed to include a few shops and lots of cheap housing. He took the first right then, seeing a dead-end ahead, the next left.

Fuck! Another dead-end!

Faced with no option, he swivelled and pointed the Hi-Power. One of his pursuers was ten yards away and rapidly closing. Flicking off the safety, he fired.

Hit him bang-on!

The second pursuer arrived as the first fell. Not waiting for introductions, Huyton fired again.

Shit shooting that time, but a hit for all that. The guy went down, holding his leg. Judging by the gallons of blood spurting out of him, he'd be lucky to keep enough in to survive.

Two more sets of pockets to raid. Huyton stashed another fifty quid then cast around. There was an old woman staring at him. She looked like a cartoon character out of Monty Python. One wave of the gun in her direction and she magically vanished.

Four men down, multiple deaths imminent. Assuming there hadn't been deaths already. Distant sirens heading this way. Huyton made an on-the-spot, management decision. Fuck fucking Keighley, it was too rough; made Toxteth look like Knotty Ash. It was time move on. That other town was a better bet anyway. It was smaller and richer, full of the sort of folk who wouldn't dare fight back.

Dismantling the Browning as he went, knowing how to best scatter the parts, Huyton set off for Bingley.

Chapter Four

(18th August 1988)

Thursday in the Aire Valley had long been known as "Pay Day". Even now, late into the Eighties, when many local employers paid monthly and/or straight into their serfs' bank accounts, a lot still honoured the original arrangement and paid weekly. In cash. In those little brown envelopes that folded over, so you could count the notes before breaking the seal.

Sean always did cash but had never been paid weekly. His dealings were without fail on the nail, and he wouldn't have it any other way. Serious accidents had been known to happen when credit became involved.

'Fancy The Queens?' he said, finishing his latest pint.

'Why not?' Pat waved his hand, indicating the less than salubrious setting of The Kings. 'It's got to be better than this dump.'

'Don't be like that,' said Sean, beating the same old drum. 'When I make my first million I'm going to buy this dump. And I'm going to turn it into the best boozier for miles around.'

'So you keep saying. I only hope you get Stella in, too, and draught Guinness for Padraig. He's shunned the place since they went bottle-only.'

'What would your mum say if he was in here every night?'

'Not a lot.' Pat laughed. 'She'd be glad of the peace and quiet.'

The two friends left one pub and strolled down Main Street towards the next. Thursday night had been Lads' Night Out for years, starting when they were well underage. The theory was, as far as Sean was concerned, that people were out there with money to burn; meaning female people, of course. And not that he was after their money . . .

Comfortable in each other's presence, they crossed at the pelican and went through a pair of propped-open doors.

'Get 'em in,' said Sean. 'I'll have lager this time, to be sociable.'

The gents' toilets were deserted. Heading straight for the trough, Sean emptied his bladder.

'Better out than in,' he said aloud.

Then he turned to find himself face-to-face with a fearsome, dreadlocked warrior. No, on second thoughts make that a fearsome, dreadlocked warrior with a cut-throat razor.

'Mister Dwyer,' the warrior said, waving his razor dangerously close to Sean's nose. 'Or should I say Mister Big? I understand you're the moving force in these parts.'

'Who the fuck are you?' Sean managed. He was by no means a wimp but this guy was massive. He usually let the likes of Pat fight his battles, but even Pat might struggle with this cunt.

'I'm your worst nightmare,' the warrior replied. 'I'm Huyton. And I'm here for your business.'

An enormous, muscular grip closed around Sean's throat, cutting off his objections.

'It's quite simple,' his assailant went on. 'Hand it over or die. That's your choice. It makes no odds to me. I win either way.'

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