

Chapter 1

"Well you've got to have a go on something".

"No I haven't. There's nothing here that appeals to me. It's for kids mostly".

"No, not really. It's a funfair. Funfairs are not just for kids. Anyone can enjoy them. Except for you. Here we are, what about this?"

Caroline Trent was at a local park where there was a travelling funfair that had settled for the week with her friends, Sandie, Vanessa, Leanne, and Mandy, along with her brother Ray. With Caroline's wedding on the horizon, she and her bridesmaids had decided to go along to the fair, having all left from her house. However, at the gate on the way out about to call was Ray, and Mandy had told him they were on their way to the funfair and would he like to come along?

Before his mind could tell him to refuse, his mouth spoke 'yes' and he found himself tagging along.

They stood before a small arcade which featured one-armed bandits and various gambling machines beneath a large open-sided canvas tent. Just outside stood a fortune-telling booth which looked old and worn, made perhaps before the Victorian age.

'The all-seeing oracle will tell you your horoscope'.

Inside the cabinet was a mechanical puppet dressed in a yellow shirt with a necklace and gold headwrap, meant to represent a wizard.

"Come on, have a go on this at least," Caroline said.

"Nah, I don't believe in horoscope rubbish," replied Ray.

"Look, why are you here? I knew you wouldn't bother with any of this and that you'd rather be down the pub having a beer with the lads, but you're here now so you might as well have a go on something. It's Mandy's fault anyway for inviting you". She looked at Mandy who said:

"Yes come on misery guts. I'll have a go". She walked across to the booth and put her pound in the machine.

In front of the wizard were twelve cards, and in front of them beyond thin glass were twelve buttons.

The puppet jerked into life.

"Welcome welcome welcome," it said in a tinny, but loud voice. "I am the all-seeing oracle. Press your star-sign and I will tell your future".

The girls and Ray all gathered around the machine. Mandy pressed the Virgo button.

The inner workings toiled away as if it had not been used in a long time, but after a few moments from a slot beneath the buttons, a card churned out.

"Thank-you," said the oracle. Mandy took it and read it aloud:

"When Saturn moves into Aquarius, you will be sensitive to different conditions as you usually are and your attitude does nothing for you. With Virgo being an Earth sign, you are honest and forgiving, but you must take the reigns and control the situations you have faced before, especially when your emotions threaten to overwhelm. Do not be a doormat. Virgo's welcome change and when your disappointment comes you will be in a stronger position. Drop your heavy weight, and the man with the muscle will pick it up. By the time Jupiter meets Pluto, your confidence levels will be higher, and you will be in much more control".

"Sounds like it's talking about your Carl," said Vanessa. Mandy nodded.

"It kind of does".

"They're all generic," said Ray, "You could read any of them and find something in them about yourself. Load of rubbish". The girls were quiet for a few seconds as if all thinking the same thing: 'Well go away then you miserable fucker'.

Leanne put her pound in the machine and pressed Sagittarius. The Oracle jerked into life.

"Welcome welcome welcome..."

A card churned out and she read it:

"A bright and adventurous fire sign. When the sun rises in your constellation, the wisdom of Jupiter will ensure your employment is ended, but for good reason. A new job will emerge and your enthusiastic lunar nature will ensure positivity for you and your new colleagues, certainly whilst Jupiter is in your sign. Talk for a while, and when opportunity knocks, answer the door. Affairs close to you will pull you in but you need to be head-strong to resist becoming too involved. Sagittarius knows you have the resolve and broad-minded attitude to not let them consume you. Some people always try and take advantage. You must be firm but fair".

Caroline stepped forward and inserted her pound. The puppet became animated.

"Welcome welcome welcome, I am the all-seeing oracle..." She pressed Aquarius and moments later a card came out. She read it aloud:

"Your sense of rationality and objectivity enhance your concerns for the environment and society. You love your Libra friend, although they are weak and vulnerable, but they are good for you. They are safe. Sometimes your resolve lets you down, and you place too much expectation on other people. Say farewell to a blood kin, and embrace a new dawn. Freedom is a valuable commodity to you, but your union with your Libran, especially when joined by a Capricorn will widen your horizons. Aquarius knows your independence will see you through".

"Loada shite," muttered Ray. The girls just ignored him and Sandie stepped forward.

"I'm a Sagittarius like you Leanne, do you think it'll be the same message?" Leanne just

shrugged.

"Try it anyway," so Sandie did.

"Welcome..." and a card made its way out. They compared them.

"No they're different," said Sandie, and read hers out:

"Your ruling planet Jupiter needs for you to stop being naive and fickle, and step up and take what you know is rightfully yours. Your child-like quality is a positive asset, but you tend to be taken advantage of by Geminis and Aquarians. Saying 'no' will make you feel so much better. Keep being open and honest and forgive your family. They mean well. Avoid the transport and spice up your love-life. Enhance your 'can-do' attitude and your positivism will rise".

"Vanessa your turn," said Caroline.

"Welcome welcome welcome..." Vanessa read hers aloud:

"According to Libra, an Aries romance will be on the horizon. If your sense of disillusionment, indecisiveness and high standards of perfection are taken down, you may not grow old alone. Your ego is at a rather high level, and you look down on far too many people, even though you are their equal, but only some of your pompous attitude can be justified. Put coins in the blue tin then get out of the rain. You enjoy debate and controversy, but sometimes your mouth gets you into trouble. With a Taurus sun and Gemini moon your sense of morals will be lowered to an appropriate level. Reign in your good taste and you may find yourself in a more rational position".

"This is so wrong. I'm not posh".

"Yes you are," said Leanne.

"Come on Ray it's your turn," said Caroline. The girls all looked at him expectantly. He made an exaggerated sigh and stuffed a hand in his pocket.

"Don't spend any of your precious beer money," said Caroline sarcastically. "You can get a can of cider for a pound".

"Less, actually," he said, finding a pound coin. He slotted it into the machine.

"Welcome welcome welcome..." said the oracle, jerking into life. "I am the all-seeing oracle. Press your star-sign and I will tell your future".

He pressed Pisces. The inner workings toiled away and soon a card was coming out.

"Thank-you," said the wizard.

He took it, but the machine kept going.

Another card came out and fell to the ground. Ray and the girls just watched as another churned out, and another, and another.

"See, the things broke," said Ray as the final card fell on the grass. He picked them all up and shuffled them like playing cards.

"You've got all the zodiac cards," said Leanne. He found Pisces and read it:

"Pisces understands your negative attitude and disbelief in everything but reality. This, however, runs against you. If you took more positive movements to open your mind and believe, you would be happier. As you do not believe in horoscopes, it's time to have some fun. A competitive nature you once had. Then your friends took it away. Now you are a lazy drifter..."

The girls all laughed amongst each other, and Ray glared at them.

"I think this zodiac thing has got us all down to a tee," said Sandie. Ray waited a few more seconds and continued:

"...you want everything on a plate. Which star-sign will get you to believe in the zodiac? They will win, and so will you, now you are the zodiac's toy". Ray stuffed them into his pocket.

"Time to get something to eat," said Mandy. The girls all turned and headed away, Ray following. However when he was a few metres from the machine he heard it whirl back into life and he turned and looked at it. The wizard turned its head and looked directly at him.

"Game on," it said.

Chapter 2

On the way to the food van, they were distracted by the hook-a-duck and cups-and- saucers ride, except for Ray, who stood moping like a sulky teen, before Vanessa and Sandie said their good-byes, leaving the others to the makeshift cafe in the corner of the fair.

A few plastic tables and chairs were scattered in front of the van, and there was only one person sitting down eating a hot-dog. Litter was sporadically strewn around, not helped by a weak wind that occasionally came by.

Leanne ordered a cheeseburger and bottle of water, Mandy a cone of chips. Caroline a cone of chips and a hot-dog.

The man serving was an overweight grizzled chef with a grey, greasy short beard and a stained apron.

"Can I have a cone of chips and a hamburger, please?" Ray asked. The man turned to get his order, and a few moments later placed a package wrapped in newspaper in front of him. He held out a five-pound note but the chef just waved it away and turned to his grill.

Caroline watched as Ray came across and sat opposite, carrying his package.

"Doesn't want my money," he said, pocketing the note. He opened the newspaper and saw two fish.

"This is not what I ordered," he said. "I've got two fish. I'll go back and..."

"He just give you them free," said Mandy, "just be grateful".

"But I ordered burger and chips," he said, looking disappointedly down at the fish.

"You might as well eat them," said Caroline.

"Two fish," said Mandy. "Pisces". Ray just stared at them.

"Pisces," Caroline repeated. Then added: "You gonna eat them?" His lack of answer made Leanne reach across and pick one up and place it in front of her.

"I'll have one". They ate in silence for around five minutes.

"Got to admit," said Ray, "that was a nice fish, wish I'd had the other one now". Leanne just shrugged. "Too late," she said, "but it was nice, you're right".

"Alright Ray," said Mandy, "Let's see what the Oracle said on those other cards. Seems to know about us".

"No he doesn't," Ray said, "it's not real. How can the stars possibly have an influence over everybody?"

"We came from stars, I think," said Leanne, "like humans or something came from the same elements".

"What does that even mean, we came from stars?" Ray asked.

"It means we're made of the same stuff". Ray simply looked at Leanne with a confused look on his face.

"How on earth did we come from the same womb?" said Caroline. "I work as an assistant manager in a garden centre. Our little sister down in Sussex University is studying for a degree in accounting, and you...you do work, but only on a weekend, cleaning supermarket car-parks or whatever, and even then the job-centre pushed you into it".

"Still a job," said Ray, "keeps the dole off me ass".

"Yet you still get benefits as well. The rest of the time you are just lazing around with your mates smoking and drinking, whinging about how society owes you and how wrong everything is. Putting the world to rights. Honestly I'm going to get a DNA test from our mother. There's no way we have the same father. Mum must have got knocked up by a tramp behind some pub bins and produced you".

"Now, don't say that," Ray said, frowning. Leanne and Mandy said nothing. "No defence from yous then," he said looking at them both.

"Clearly you're waiting for your master to get out of prison," said Leanne.

"Oh yes," said Caroline. "Lee Sherwin, your nut-job of a mate who you idolise".

"No I don't. He's a good lad. People have just got him wrong".

"He's a violent armed-robber who put his own dad in hospital. He's in prison for trying to rob a bank on his own. And how did that work out for him? Best place for him is inside. What bit have I got wrong?".

"Once you get to know him, he's sound. He's out on probation tomorrow".

"I think I'll take Sandie's opinion," she said hooking a thumb over her shoulder. "She fancied him at one point until she realised he was a nutter".

"What is it about bad boys that some women really go for?" asked Leanne. "I don't get it. I don't see the appeal".

"It's because they're not really that bad," said Caroline. "It's a lot of bravado and showing off. When really they love kids and their Mums...but for the likes of Lee. He's a 'real' bad boy who most women with at least one brain cell would avoid like anything. Almost like your Carl..." she said to Mandy.

"No, my Carl, he's..."

"Oh what's he up to now?" asked Leanne.

"Nothing, but he's just never around enough".

"You've always said this ever since you met him," said Caroline, "off he goes again, sleeping around or doing whatever. I mean he gave you chlamydia at one point. Who he'd caught it off, I don't know. You've got two kids to him, and nearly twenty years later you're still taking him back because he says sorry, it won't happen again...awww...you're the one for me. Then you forgive him, because he knows you will, and then he's off again...and comes crawling back, and then you forgive him".

"Yes, yes I know..but he's just.."

"He's got you wrapped around his little finger," said Leanne, "...and you know it". Mandy nodded despondently, then rummaged around in her bag and took out her horoscope card.

"...when your emotions threaten to overwhelm. Do not be a doormat," she read.

"There you go, see, these cards have got us spot-on so far...come on Ray show us those other ones". Ray took from his pocket the cards and distributed them around.

"I'm not reading them all". He picked one at random and read:

"Virgo. Virgo knows your intellect or IQ is in two digits.."

Leanne laughed. "This is definitely directed at you Ray". He said nothing for a few moments, and continued:

"...is below normal, not helped by your penchant for cigarettes and alcohol. Your friends drag you down, as you drag them. They are like you, spiritually lost, stupid and insecure and have an aversion to work".

"Oh my God..." said Mandy, staring at him with wide eyes. "That is you".

"No it's not," said Ray. "I'm not Virgo, and I'm not lost or insecure. Okay, I may be stupid sometimes I'll admit, but so can everyone". He continued:

"There will be no taking of the cherry, because there would be no purity. You need not resist temptation. Still all is not lost. When you believe in horoscopes, things will be more endearing and humble". He picked up another card.

"Scorpio...Scorpio says it is time for you to come to believe in things that are outside of your addled mind, your few brain cells". The girls giggled and smiled. Ray sighed, shook his head and continued:

"It's clear you are vulnerable, a follower, a yes-man, a hopeless wannabe. Stop blaming society all the time and take what you really deserve. That's not too much however, but it's yours if you want it. A scorpion will sting, will bear fruit, but only for you to come to understand the constellations, for your mind to be prised open".

Caroline picked a card up and read it:

"Capricorn. Capricorn is amused by the fact that you could change your belief. Does a donkey think it's a horse? While they consider you a lost cause, they hope you will come to believe. Capricorn wants to win of course but wonders if you're too much of a nut to crack. Can a goat swim like a fish? If they get you to believe you will win nothing but they will cease to make you doubt".

"What d'you think it means?" asked Leanne.

"It doesn't mean anything," said Ray. Leanne read one of the cards:

"Leo wants you to understand the majesty of the stars, but knows you're too much of an idiot to think about such things".

Caroline made a sweeping gesture of all of the cards.

"These are all describing you Ray". Leanne and Mandy nodded in agreement. Ray folded his arms.

"No they're not. They're all just generic. They describe something everyone can pick up on".

Leanne continued: "Your casual dismissal of spirituality means you are closed off psychologically. You seem quite happy in your little negative world, but all Leo wants is for you to believe. You will never have a Lion's spirit, but not all induce fear. However, there is always hope".

Caroline picked up another card:

"Cancer despairs of you, and, like Capricorn, thinks you have too much of a mountain to climb. A mountain you won't even take the first step on because of your preference for addictions and sheer laziness. You may work, but you don't want to. Will victory be declared when the bullet is bitten? Climb out of your pit of despondency and emerge into belief".

Mandy picked a card up and read:

"Libra is convinced you can come to be a believer, but can a fool become a King? It's clear you can be like a frightened lamb, even though you may put on a brave face, but that is as far as your mettle takes you. Stop hiding in other people's shadows. Sometimes the scales of justice will be balanced in your favour. All you need to do is believe. Not just say it. We will know when you really mean it".

Leanne picked up a card. Ray still had his arms folded and looked out across the fair.

"Taurus wants you to change and can see you are stagnated but content in your little zone. You have aspirations but you don't act on them. You are a dreamer".

"Everyone has dreams and aspirations but don't mind me, carry on," said Ray, so Leanne did:

"...but they take a lot of work. Work you are not willing to do because of your lethargy. Stop smoking and drinking and try to be happy, and be happy for your sister. I know you are jealous of her and there's nothing wrong with that. You will never have the courage of a bull, and like

cups and plates that can be cracked, your disbelieving mind will need to be split open also. It's fine to be realistic, but it's also fine to believe".

"See, I told you," said Caroline, "they're describing you".

"Whatever," he said, still looking out at the fair.

Mandy picked up another card:

"Sagittarius has faith in you. Unlike the little faith you have in yourself. You don't seem to have much faith in anything. Blaming others for your faults, for your lot in life. Alcohol, cigarettes and looking up to others seem to be your whole existence. How sad. Perhaps an arrow to the head will open your mind. It's time to be at least slightly optimistic. Surely you can't be a lazy fool forever".

Caroline picked up a card:

"Aries believes you can be changed. That you can stop being the indolent weakling you are and break free into an open minded space where you will be much more understanding and aware. Rams don't like apes that like botany. There is potential, deep down within the confines of your broken brain cells. You can be repaired, and can come to understand the wisdom of the planets".

Mandy picked up a card:

"Gemini wonders how on earth you can come to believe in the zodiac, being so one-track minded. You would be sceptical even if twins slapped you in the face. Beware of your maniac friend, the one who returns. He can walk all over you, and you do not have the power of resistance against him or against his choices. You are a dog amongst wolves, even to your siblings. Redeemable, but a challenge".

"One more Ray," said Leanne. He looked down at the card, picked it up and read:

"Aquarius. Now you are a play-thing. Albeit a rather pathetic, idiotic one. Your hard-headed disbelief makes prising open your skull that much harder. We've made so many believers. Your naive outlook on the world will serve in your favour if we are to change your belief. It won't be easy but it's what we like. Formidable closed beliefs to play with. If I win, then you can shed a tear of joy, of realisation, because water can be life, and water can be death".

"Those cards were definitely aimed at you Ray," said Mandy. Ray sighed and gathered all the cards together, tried to rip them in half, but found he couldn't. Even individually they were impossible to tear. So he put them next to Caroline's empty cone of chips.

"So have you got a photographer yet?" Leanne asked Caroline.

"Not yet, I..."

Ray sighed exaggeratedly.

"Wayne," he said. "Lovely Wayne. You can do so much better than him".

"As you've said a thousand times. I love him Ray, and we're getting married and that's all there is to it". Ray pointed to his left ear.

"He wears an earring, wears pink, got long hair and wears those tight jeans. He's a ponce. Honestly you can do so much better".

"...and I'm pregnant". Everybody on the table looked shocked.

"Tell me you're joking," said Ray, and before Mandy or Leanne could offer congratulations, Caroline nodded.

"Yes, I am joking," she said, "I just wanted to see the look on your face. Why would it be so bad if I was? Anyway, I can do so much better? Who could you have in mind? Couldn't be your nut-job mate getting out of prison. I hear he's single".

"He would be better for you than bloody Wayne". A look of confusion came over Caroline's face.

"How?" she asked in all seriousness. "He's the type of nutter who the second gets out of jail, gets his stupid backside thrown straight back. Jail is the best place for him. He can't help himself".

"He'd be more...protective of you".

"Sorry am I a helpless woman that needs looking after by a big strong man? Oh what a catch Lee would be. When he gets out I'll be there to leap into his arms. I think I've fallen in love with him already. I'll just cancel the wedding and leave Wayne shall I?"

"Wish you would," Ray muttered, folding his arms again.

"I love Wayne. D'you understand that word? I 'love' Wayne, and I'm going to marry him, and don't forget it's only you I'm having at my wedding, and that's only because you're my big brother. Do not bring your mates, especially Lee".

"Are they really that bad?" asked Mandy.

"Yes, they are. I won't have them at the house anymore as well. Things go missing don't they Ray? but I can't accuse them".

"Things that are worth something?" asked Leanne.

"Yes".

"I'm just saying you can do better than him," Ray said. Caroline sighed, gathering her belongings.

"Come on girls," she said, "let's go". They all stood up and headed for the exit.

Chapter 3

Caroline nodded in approval at Sandie as she tried on her bridesmaid Amelia maxi dress. She turned before the long mirror in Caroline's bedroom.

"Amazing," Caroline said.

"I've got to admit," said Sandie, "I think I do look rather good. When Declan sees me in this he's going to be slobbering like a dog".

"How's it going with him anyway? Not seen him for ages".

"Oh, you know. He never changes. I think he gets cold feet about marriage. If I wait for him to ask me I'll be a pensioner".

"Drop a few hints. Or just ask him".

"Nah, gotta keep tradition. Although in saying that not as many people are getting married these days. Certainly not a white wedding like they used to have".

"Wayne just wanted a registry office. Isn't into all the tradition and ceremonies. So I said tough, we're having one and that's it". Caroline was 38, tall with straight light brown hair. Liked to wear ordinary conventional clothes. Brown or black. Practical. Usually only wore dresses for going out or special occasions.

Sandie 39, straight blonde hair, slightly concerned with her weight, said men liked women with 'meat on their bones', wore make-up most of the time, and like Caroline's other friends, grew up together in the area and went to the same schools.

She bunched up her hair.

"How do you think I should have it? Wavy or braided? Think I might have it braided. Wavy with braids. Curly and tied up. No, wavy. I'll go with wavy. Wavy and tied. No definitely braided. Wavy and braided. Or curly".

They were in the house Caroline, Ray and Shelley had been left by their parents who had down-sized and moved to Penare on the Devonshire coast. It was a semi-detached, too big for one person. Only Caroline lived there, although Ray had a key, in a nice, humble area of Secreston Heath, eight miles north of London's Big Ben. It was neither a poor area, nor posh, simply 'normal'.

Ray lived in a ten-storey high-rise block of flats two miles away with his friends Victor Smith, Shane Montague, and 'A8498AF - Category C' Lee Sherwin. They had all acquired flats on the first floor when they had been built. Ray could have stayed with Caroline in the house but opted for his friends as the flats were basically shared by them.

"Your Declan's too set in his ways," Caroline said. Sandie was still staring at herself in the mirror, smoothing the dress down.

"You know how boring he is. I don't really know why I'd get married to him. Maybe it's because it's better than being single. He spends more time with his gadgets than me. Always wants to upgrade his computer, upgrade his phone, upgrade his bloody watch. He's a decent enough guy though.

"A bit like Wayne. He breaks into song at inopportune moments, and it's really embarrassing. He did it on a packed train once and I nearly punched him..hey, guess who's getting out of jail tomorrow?" Sandie stared at Caroline.

"No way," she said, "Lee".

"Yes, you fancied him at one point".

"Once, yes. One of those guys that, okay, I'll admit, looked good. So I went over and started talking to him. Then he opened his gob and then it's like, oh my God, he's as thick as... I don't know what. One of those guys that when they start talking, every other word is eff this and eff that. You know the type, can't string a sentence together without swearing. Talks loudly wherever they are, in front of kids and everything. Five minutes of that and I remember itching to leave. Then I was rescued by Vanessa who said we were leaving. Thankfully. I heard he's a bit mental".

"You could say that. I don't know why Ray hangs around with him".

"He's probably scared of him". Caroline nodded, and said:

"Him, Victor and Shane. Another pair of losers. I actually feel sorry for them. They're gonna be living with a psychopath, but Ray does whatever Ray does, and won't listen to me...anyway, have you made up with your Mum and Dad yet?"

Sandie sighed, nodded at herself in the mirror and went across to the edge of the bed and sat down.

"Their heart's in the right place, but it's just so frustrating. To be left by Grandad nearly £75000. Grandad who always moaned about money, about how expensive everything is, got loads in the bank. I thought I wonder how much I'll get, and you know when you spend the money in your head. Like what you would do if you won the lottery. I'd spend it on this. I'd spend it on that. Thinking how much I'd give Declan and Toby. Maybe we could put some towards a bigger house, and what do they go and do? have a holiday in the Maldives and give the rest to charity. Give me nothing. Not a penny. Said it's for my own good, earning money for myself. Making my own way in the world and learning lessons the hard way without relying on free money. They said I would appreciate it in the long run. I told them straight I said I bloody well won't. So I've not spoken to them since they came back a week ago". She fell back onto the bed, arms splayed.

"So no, they're not forgiven".

Chapter 4

Although they would not admit to it, they were nervous. Ray, Victor and Shane were in Ray's sparse flat, not really watching the morning breakfast show. He was stood at the window, a fist clenched.

Ray was 47, with short hair that was slowly vanishing from his scalp, tall but always walked with a stoop as though carrying weights on his shoulders and his hands often jammed in his pockets. He mostly wore the same clothes every day, jumpers and jeans, and would like to think of himself as optimistic, but in the way he saw the world that was fairly difficult. The way he saw it was that you had to get everything for yourself by fair means or foul. A similar view to his friends who sat in anticipation on the sofa.

Victor Smith was 49, but in absolute violation of 'normality', he smoked and drank, he liked to think, in moderation, but actually looked younger. At one point he gave serious thought to a conspiracy theory that it was do-gooders and hippies that told people smoking was bad. No premature wrinkles. No being out of breath walking up the stairs, although he hardly exercised anyway. He was the smallest of them with a shabby goatee-beard and was the main unofficial house-keeper. He cooked because he enjoyed it. He did the washing. No ironing though. He didn't see the point. Ray bought a cheap iron once and used it twice before it was discarded in a cupboard in Lee's flat. He came to the same conclusion. Ironing was pointless.

Occasionally he would take a brush around all of the flats because he was kind of picky about tidiness. He knew that if he was not around, then certainly Ray and Shane would fester in a pit of their own filth.

Shane was the same age, and like Ray's sister and her friends all grew up together around the same area, attending the same schools. Shane was rather more 'bulkier' than the others. A long time ago he had tried to get himself a decent body and trained for around two years straight. Eating healthily, exercising, keeping himself trim and groomed, but then one day he asked himself: 'What am I doing this for?' There was no end goal, so the appeal of alcohol, his friend's influences, one or two low-tar cigarettes, and fast-food surely wouldn't do any harm. He thought he was head-strong enough to give them all up whenever he liked. 'I could give drink and smokes up like that,' he'd said when he started, clicking his fingers.

Yet, twenty-four years later, he still said the same thing. 'If I wanted to I could just give it all up. Cold-turkey would be easy for me'. Most of the time he wore jogging pants and a vest one size too big, as though he was ready to go to the gym, even though twenty-four years was the last time he had ever set foot in there. He would sometimes wear shades in weather that did not warrant them. They were a modicum of his perceived style.

The sky was grey with no clouds. There were a few vehicles in the car-park in front of the high-rise.

"Are you sure his flats clean?" asked Ray.

"Spotless," said Victor. Ray watched as a taxi came into view and pulled up in the car-park.

Lee Sherwin got out.

"He's here," said Ray. Victor stood up and paced around. Ray clenched both fists as he watched Lee walk towards the entrance.

Lee sported a buzz-cut most of the time, although that was thinning. He wasn't tall, but rather stocky. His face was rather weathered. A 'pugilist' look from skirmishes and fights with cauliflower ears, his nose never having returned to normal shape. He looked older than his 52 years.

They heard the entrance opening, and heavy footsteps slowly coming up the concrete steps.

Ray went to the door and stepped out into the corridor. Lee emerged with a ruck-sack over one shoulder and glared at Ray.

"You bunch of fucking muppets," he said, walking into the flat. Shane stood up, Victor went to shake his hand but all Lee did was throw his bag on a table.

"No-one was there when I got out. No-one. Stood there like a plonker expecting you lot to be there, but no..." They all smiled and looked at each other, thinking he was joking.

He wasn't.

"Had to get a fucking taxi with the money they give me. I've got to go and meet me probation officer later. So I just wanted to see the boys, give me some support, but fuck no. Lazy twats are still in here on my release day. Two fucking years I've been in that place. How many times did you come and visit? Eleven times. That's it. Made some better mates than you lot".

He sat down on the sofa with an exaggerated sigh.

"Nothing like this inside. Vic, pass us a can ta".

"Er, there isn't any left".

"Not there to greet me, and not even got me a drink, bunch of useless fuckwits".

"How about a smoke?" asked Victor.

"No, gave up inside, but wouldn't mind a spliff though. Bet you haven't got any of that either". Victor shook his head, looking away.

"We're glad you're out Lee," said Shane, looking sheepish. "I like your new tattoo". On the left side of his neck was a handgun pointing up to his ear.

"Good isn't it? Micky in prison did it. Boss artist. Is my stuff still in my room?" he asked. "My shotgun?"

"Yes Lee," said Victor, "but you're not thinking of another job now are you?"

"Well, yes I am. I don't meet my probation officer till two this afternoon so I've got time to get down to a post-office and rob it. I only got fifty fucking quid when I left. Said it was to last until

I got me benefits sorted. It's a fucking joke, so I just want a little nest-egg to do me over for a bit. Lay low. I'm not going back inside".

"What was it like?" asked Victor.

"Well it's fucking shit, but you know, not that bad once you get used to it. Some decent fellas in there, just fell off the wagon you know?". He stood up, stretched, picked up his bag and walked out into the corridor and disappeared into his own flat which was open, the door ajar. He lifted the mattress and saw all his weaponry there. Two shotguns, five handguns. Three knives. A meat-cleaver and two knuckle-dusters.

He had not used them all. Lee was the type of person for whom owning such things would give him a satisfactory feeling. Maybe they would never be used, but the knowledge that they were there, the feeling of having them making him feel like a collector who had found something rare, like a school-boy that took a knife to school 'for protection', or just to show-off to his friends. 'Look what I've got', their egos boosted.

Not that Lee had many enemies. Although he was the cause of skirmishes in the past and bloody fights, he never acquired the level of enemy where he had to watch his back. There were far worse criminals than him. He knew that, but had not crossed them, and was not on their radar. He left them alone, they left him alone. He did have a small reputation amongst the criminal fraternity, and in the police, and only once had someone come looking for him for revenge. A beer-bottle was struck on his head, but it never broke. The perpetrator ran. Lee tracked him down and beat his face to a bloody pulp. That was that, end of revenge.

In a way he kind of 'enjoyed' prison, simply because he was around like-minded people. There was violence and hostility there, but Lee was mostly simply an observer, but wouldn't hesitate to get involved. Sometimes he wished he did, to satisfy his high testosterone level, but the opportunity sometimes wasn't there. He knew he would never go straight. The rewards of crime were too tempting, and sometimes it was just too easy.

He had robbed a lot of post-offices, and had gotten away with it every time. He guessed that trying to rob a bank on his own was too ambitious after having that proved the hard way, but post-offices, they were different. Quick, easy, smaller, and rarely anyone willing to take him on, certainly not the clerk who in his experience were mostly of pensionable age.

He was usually handed the money to get him away as quickly as possible, and that was what he counted on. The protective glass did nothing to stop them giving him what he wanted as when a shotgun is pointed their way it becomes instant panic mode, and the glass becomes irrelevant. Sometimes the clerk in their haste to get him away would, in their state, give him more than just money. They would hand him cards, stamps, stationary, 'just-take-it-and-go'.

He picked up the CZ Drake shotgun and loaded it, took a black balaclava from a drawer as well a small black well-used duffel bag and went back into the other flat.

"I only need one of you to keep dixie. Who's coming?". Shane put his hand up and stepped forward.

"Alright, I know which one we'll hit. I've done it before. Couple of miles in the next town".

They were soon heading downstairs and out into the car-park, and they walked all the way there.

Ray and Victor watched from the window as they disappeared from sight.

"Good to see him back," Victor said, "he's looking well".

"Yes," said Ray, running a hand over his hair.

Shane came out of the post-office in a not-so-busy corner of the town, which seemed more like it belonged in a remote village, and walked across to Lee who was leaning against a post-box. He kept his voice low, even though nobody could overhear.

"There's three people in there, none of them look like they would give you trouble".

"Alright, we'll wait". After five minutes, two left. Lee took a good look around and apart from a man walking his dog over the other side of the road, there was nobody who could see him. They walked across to the door and he gave the bag to Shane who opened it wide, then took out and pulled on the balaclava that exposed only his eyes and mouth. He grabbed the shotgun, then entered the post-office.

Ray and Victor hardly spoke for the two hours they were waiting, pacing nervously around, Victor cleaning things that didn't need it, cleaning in other flats. Ray walking up and down the corridor, looking out of the window, sitting down to watch three seconds of television, going back to the window, going to another flat, until finally there they were, heading towards the high-rise, laughing and joking.

"They're back Vic, they're back". Victor emerged from Shane's flat with wide eyes and a humourless smile.

The entrance banged below, footsteps loud on the concrete stairs.

"Fucking sorted," said Lee, emerging into the corridor followed by Shane. The bag looked bulky over his shoulder.

At the table in Lee's flat, he emptied the bag, and they all looked wide-eyed at the money that spilled out.

"One of my biggest hauls from a post-office. That'll do me for a while. Now I can lay low and just chill for a while. There must be at least three grand there. Honestly you should have seen the old girl behind the counter, soon as she saw me and the fucking shotgun, she jumped and fell over. It was hard not to laugh, but she got up and gave me the fucking lot".

"Anyone would with a shotgun in their face," said Victor.

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