



DECK OF CARDS

A series of themed robberies

MAX DRAYTON



DECK OF CARDS

A crime thriller by Max Drayton

There is strong language, violence and scenes of an adult nature.

Cover by Phil Lewis

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PART 1

Chapter 1 – A New Deal

September 2008

The rain had finally stopped. The clouds were moving ever faster, and it was getting brighter. High in the Scottish Highlands, the wind followed the road cut into the landscape. In places it howled, in others, it sighed. The chill in the air eased momentarily.

The man now calling himself Jeff Dawson huddled behind the bush, sheltered against the wind. His hands chilled despite the gloves he'd been wearing for two days.

The view, under normal circumstances, inspiring, the hills sweeping away below him. An unobstructed vista of the winding road as it glided into the valley and the small town in the distance.

The road was desolate. He'd seen only two cars in the past hour since Gail dropped him off at the chosen position. That was a long shivering time ago. He checked his watch, any minute now.

Jeff opened the small suitcase beside him and switched on the machine. Three lights glowed into life, he opened the compartment and slid in a .22 cartridge, closing it again securely. Despite the hours of testing the device, he was still cautious around live ammunition.

The hand-held radio had remained silent, the police band had little to communicate this far north in the wilds. There was little the police needed worry about this far from human habitation.

Jeff heard engine' sounds above him - they were coming. He placed his finger gently on the fire button. With a panicky reaction, he jerked his hand away as he remembered to switch off the radio. His pulse racing at the near mistake. His finger poised once again over the button. He scanned the countryside for unexpected vehicles to come along the tortuous road.

Len concentrated on the bend ahead. The truck was old, and the power steering needed upgrading. The whole truck needed upgrading. It was over twenty years old and had served as a security vehicle for far too long. He stamped on the clutch and shifted the gear heavily into second.

Music blasted through the old cassette player. He liked rock, and he liked it loud. Nickleback's 'Rockstar' was his all-time favourite, and he loved to hear it when he worked or got excited. He sang out loud and glanced at his companion to check if he was to be told to be quiet.

‘Well, we all just wanna be big rockstars
And live in hilltop houses, drivin’ fifteen cars
The girls come easy and the drugs come cheap
We’ll all stay skinny ‘cause we just won’t eat’

In front of him the red Mondeo. Behind, in his rear-view mirror, he saw the blue Vectra. They had arranged themselves precisely spaced for the whole two-hour journey from Aberdeen Airport.

He made a toothy grin at his passenger, his missing tooth right in the centre of his upper set. ‘This looks like the only stretch of straight road since we started!’

Greg nodded and grimaced. He was tired of the journey, the music and the singing. He reached forward and lowered the sound for the fourth time. He was counting the minutes until they reached The Centre. He glanced at his flashy sports watch.

‘And well, hey, hey, I wanna be a rockstar
Hey, hey, I wanna be a rockstar’

‘How much longer do you think?’ said the frustrated passenger, and in desperate need of silence.

Len squinted at his cheap analogue watch and said, ‘I don’t know. An hour or so?’

Gregg sighed and settled back, fighting to keep his eyes open. ‘Call this a bloody job?’

‘I’ve had worse. Sit back, relax. You’re getting paid, aren’t you? For doing nothing twice a year. I’m doing all the hard work. Take it easy. Easy peasy, Japanesey.’

The bi-annual journey was always tiresome. Three large bales of old, used, high denomination, Bank of England notes was the cargo each time. Twenty miles ahead was the facility just called, The Centre. Here, large shredding machines made short work of the old money. As banknotes become worn, they needed removing from circulation and new notes printed to replace them. These old notes being securely stored in a depository and shipped to the disintegration stations as required. The mulch was recycled into many ecological forms.

The payload was strapped down and couldn’t roll with the truck’s movement. The doors locked and sealed and couldn’t be opened until they reached The Centre. The two-ton payload was way below the truck’s capability, so the vehicle drove relatively lightly, its old transmission and running gear was ancient and heavy for the driver. After two hours Len was getting tired.

'You'd think Security Plus would buy a new truck, wouldn't you? This thing's had it! The stereo's shot.' Len said as the straight road allowed his arms a brief respite. 'Typical penny-pinching contractors. I don't know.'

There was the sound of a gunshot, that echoed around the hills. They heard it even above the music.

Len slammed on the brakes, skidding to a halt on the damp road. The Mondeo ahead had slowed to a rapid stop. Len had stopped only metres away from hitting the car.

Gregg was instantly alert. He peered out the windscreen at the quiet and barren landscape. 'What's happening?' he blurted. The cab now silent.

'How do I know?' said Len checking in his mirrors. The Vectra had also stopped a long way behind. 'Both cars just stopped. Get 'em on the radio.'

Gregg thumbed his switch and spoke into the handset. 'It's not working. Try yours.'

Len tried to raise the other guards, but there was silence, not even any static. 'The radio's dead. Try the mobile phones.'

They both tried to use their mobiles while observing the guards getting out of the lead car. Gregg opened the truck door and stepped onto the road. His pistol in one hand and mobile silent and dead in the other.

Luis Garcia approached the truck, his eyes searching the hills.

'What's happening?' said Gregg.

'No idea. Our radio and phones are down.'

'Ours too. Ambush, you think? I heard a gunshot!'

'Me too. Where are they? If they're going to hit us, the surprise element has gone. Stay alert. Stay with the truck.'

Gregg climbed into the cab and told Len what Luis had said. They watched Luis jog down the road to talk to the two other security guards in the Vectra. A few minutes later he was jogging back. Gregg wound down the truck window.

'Are your watches working?' asked Garcia.

Gregg peered at his sports watch and frowned. He shook his hand. All the dials were blank or frozen.

'Mine is.' said Len. 'Why?'

'Everyone's watch has stopped, something's immobilised both cars. Nothing, no electrical equipment, the engines won't start. Nothing.'

'What're we going to do?' asked Gregg.

'The truck's still running.' said Len with a grin. 'Good old diesel.'

'Well, that's something.' Garcia mumbled.

The sound of the diesel idling was loud in the quiet of the hillside. Wildlife sounds were soft in the background.

After a long pause for thought and a glance at his working watch, Len said, 'We can keep going with the truck, we're sitting ducks here otherwise.'

Garcia was still trying to decide the best plan of action.

Gregg said, 'We've no tracking devices, Luis. No one will know we're here for at least...' he frowned at his dead watch, 'an hour or two. Then they've got to send someone out. It'll be two or more hours till someone gets here.'

Garcia said, 'They'll know we're late in about an hour and call the police to find us.'

Len said hesitantly, 'That's assuming there's a police car available. This is very remote.'

Gregg said, 'We should've had a tracker on the truck, at least.'

Garcia showed his frustration, 'Satellite services cost a fortune. You've no idea....'

'Just saying.' said Gregg.

'Okay. Okay.' Garcia was trying to decide. 'We'll go with the truck. Get to The Centre as soon as possible. Stop as soon as you find a phone box, or anywhere to borrow a mobile. Gregg, stay in the truck, weapon ready at all times. Len, find a phone and call HQ. Call the police too, it can't harm. Okay. No. Wait. I'll come with you.'

Garcia stood on the step and tried to get into the cab. It was obvious there was no room for three men in the tiny space of the ancient truck.

Garcia stepped down. 'Gregg, you stay here. Wait for help. Tell them what we're doing. If you can get the cars to work in the meantime, catch us up. Come on. Get out.'

'Let's just hope it's a freak accident, rather than an attempted robbery, eh?' said Gregg climbing down from the cab.

‘It had better bloody be.’ said Garcia as he heaved himself into the cab. ‘Go. Drive. Let’s get this thing done.’

From his high vantage point, the chilled Jeff Lawson watched the truck grind its way towards the next bend, leaving its escorts stranded. He smiled as it was now safe to switch on the radio. The electromagnetic spike induced by the machine had burnt out all circuit boards for a radius of half a mile. The cars, mobile phones and radios had all the circuits fried, making them obsolete. Modern vehicles and equipment cease to work without the technology of circuitry.

Purchased in Holland, it’d cost 10,000 euros, but the compact EMP machine had proved invaluable. The Electromagnetic Pulse had been generated by a cartridge, the force of the explosion causing the electronic spike that devastated any active electronic equipment.

The radio produced static, but no police messages. So far, things were going to plan. Jeff closed the EMP case and locked the catches. He had to watch and wait again.

Len felt his arms tiring as another bend made him haul the unwieldy old truck up the winding pass. His thin frame struggling to manhandle the heavy vehicle that lacked power-steering. There was sweat on the brow of his narrow head. ‘We must get a new truck, Luis.’ he said

‘Just drive.’ Luis answered without humour.

‘So...this bubble of yours hasn’t been popped yet, has it?’ another toothy grin.

‘What do you mean?’

‘Well, since I arrived, they’ve told me how good the record for this run is. What is it...twenty uneventful journeys?’

‘Just drive.’

‘What the....!’ exclaimed Len as he slammed both feet on the brake pedal. The truck slid, but stopped several metres from an Ambulance Car, stopped in the middle of the road.

The car had two doors open, and a medic was bending into the rear seat. At the sound of the brakes, she pulled clear and ran to the truck driver’s door. With a glance at Luis, Len wound down the window. Luis’s grip on his gun tightened.

‘Thank goodness, someone’s here. My patient. We *have* to get her to hospital. Now!’

Luis studied the intensity of the woman's face and the tight grip she had on the window sill of the truck. Her knuckles showing white through the rubber gloves, covered in blood. In the car was a woman slumped in the back seat.

Len stared at Luis before saying, 'I'm sorry, we really mustn't stop.'

'She's haemorrhaging fast and I can't stop it. She needs a hospital, now!' The woman was in her mid-thirties and her frustration brought tears to her eyes.

Luis said, 'I'm sorry, but for security reasons.....'

'She'll die. Look at her!'

Luis glanced pointedly at Len and opened his door. The medic stepped down and moved to the car. With a nod to Len, Luis got out of the cab. Len wound up the windows and locked the doors, as protocol dictated in any emergency stoppage situation.

The injured woman in the car was elderly and wrapped in a blood-soaked blanket. She wore woollen gloves, blood covered everything she wore. Blood was also seeping from her mouth.

'You can't let her die.'

Luis knew he couldn't. Neither should he take her with them.

'I'm sorry, madam....we just can't.' The patient coughed, and more blood flowed from her mouth.

'There's a cottage hospital in the next town, three miles away. They're expecting her, they're ready to help save her. You must get her there, it'll take you minutes. It'll save her life.'

Luis stood back and stared at the silent hills around him. This was becoming a bad day. He felt no threat of ambush anymore, just a sense of control being wrested from him. Of course, he couldn't let this woman die, but neither should he risk the cargo.

Len called out from the truck, 'Luis. We have to take her.'

Luis knew that too. 'Okay. Help me get her into the cab.'

The two men eased the frail patient into the cab and Luis stood on the step and realised the next problem. He glanced at Len, who knew what he was going to say.

'Len. No room for me and I can't drive this thing. Get her to hospital. Get a phone call in. STAY there. You'll be in a public place. It should be safe. Wait until you get support. Can you do that?' Len nodded. 'Okay. That's the plan. Off you go, quick as you can.'

The patient reached out a hand to touch Luis's arm, which he withdrew quickly, blood was not a thing he tolerated. She mouthed thank you and the medic said it for her.

'We both thank you. You're truly heaven sent. Go, please go. Hurry.' Len slammed the truck into gear and pulled away towards the next bend. The medic sagged with relief against the side of the ambulance. She quietly said, 'Thank you.'

Luis was still looking intently around, and he said equally quietly, 'The least we could do.' He nodded at the car, 'Breakdown?'

'Just died on me. The radio and mobile phone too. I don't even know the time; my watch has stopped. I thought she might die on me, I really did.'

'Don't worry. The same happened to us, too. Len's reliable, he'll get her there.'

'Thanks. The hospital's only a few miles. You could even walk it.'

Luis stared at her and frowned. 'I could, couldn't I!'

'You'd be there before any help arrived here, I guess.'

'I don't want to leave you out here alone....'

'Don't worry about me. I have to stay with all the drugs and equipment in the car, I doubt if I can lock it with all the electronics screwed. But what's there to worry about miles from anywhere? You've your own concerns. Catch up with your colleague. Tell the hospital where I am, and they'll send out a tow truck. Go. Off you go. You look fit, jog. The speed he was driving at, you might even catch him up.'

Luis knew it was the course he should take but still hesitated.

She reached inside the car and handed him a folder. 'Take these. It's the patient's notes. It'll help the medical staff know what happened to her and what I've done. Go. They need these.'

'Okay.'

'If anyone drives past going your way, I'll flag them down and get them to pick you up. Okay? Luis took the folder and ran. 'Pace yourself. About two miles. Up the hill then downhill all the way.'

Within moments Luis was around the next bend.

With a smile, Gail got in and closed the car doors. She waited until Luis was out of earshot and started the engine. She eased the car forward, heading the opposite way to Luis.

She waited until she was nearing the pre-determined bend before switching on her lights and sirens. She swooped round the curve and screamed past the two stranded convoy vehicles. They just had time to wave for her to stop before she was past them and screeching around the next bend. They'd have no hopes of assistance when an emergency service was on a blues and twos call.

A few more bends before she switched off the sirens and lights. Further on she slowed and stopped. She got out of the car stood next to Jeff. They stared down at the two cars on the road, less than half a mile from them, and smiled at each other. With a nod from Gail, Jeff loaded his small case into the boot and they stripped the vinyl markings off the car. Within minutes it appeared to be the ordinary white Volvo it originally was. Once tidied up, they eased away for the next rendezvous.

The old truck rumbled on with the accelerator flat on the floor. The hill was too steep for the venerable vehicle to travel at speed, but Len was now in a hurry.

Len said, 'You look a mess. There are tissues between the seats. Get yourself cleaned up.'

'You should try it.' said the elderly lady. 'This stuff's supposed to taste of strawberries, more like shit. How long before we're there?'

'About fifteen minutes, we pull off the road in a mile. Good performance.'

'Thank you. My days in Rep are over, but I can still convince the crowds. Do you have any water?'

'With the tissues. I thought you'd need something to celebrate with.' He laughed with his toothy grin and she joined in with him with hers.

Once off the tarmac road, the truck rolled heavily on the rough track. Up ahead they recognised the rough wooden construction of the barn. They'd be glad to stop the bone-shaking ride.

Damien Dwyer stood at the open door. An athletic man in his mid-thirties he displayed an over-intense aura while waiting for his project to develop. He reflected that most of his work seemed to distill into just anxiously waiting. Waiting went with the job, though he knew job was not the right word. It was more of a profession, a calling – a trade.

He twirled the large gold sovereign ring around his finger and put it back into his pocket. It calmed his nerves a little.

His heart raced as he first heard the diesel engine, then watched the swaying vehicle come over the brow. In the barn he saw Lee waiting with the oxyacetylene cutter. To one side waited Dan, looking apprehensive. Dan was new to the team

and Damien was not sure how he'd react in an emergency. Let's hope there won't be any emergencies, he thought.

The planning had taken well over a year and he'd anticipated every possible situation. There should be no nasty surprises as the trickiest part was already over.

As soon as the truck entered the barn, the passengers got out and Len excitedly hurried to hug Damien. Dan syphoned petrol out of the truck, to make sure there was no danger of fuel leaking with naked flames nearby. Once completed, he helped Lee weld cables to the roof.

An old battered tractor was ready for use, and Damien backed it away from the truck, the cables attached and tightening. With a stubborn refusal, the vehicle remained upright. The three men threw their weight against the side and it rocked. It reached the critical pivot point and finally crashed on its side, with a roar and a cloud of dust.

Without hesitation, Lee slipped his visor down and cut away at the underside of the truck. He had to clear away the framework and braces before attacking the flat pan of the floor. The bright light blazed as he worked quickly and professionally.

The sound of another engine made Damien glance up. The white Volvo bounced along the track and entered the barn with a squeal of breaks, creating another cloud of dust. A buoyant Gail leapt out and hugged Damien. Jeff eased himself out of the car with a self-satisfied smile on his face.

'So far, so good, eh?' Gail said.

Damian eased her off him and said, 'We're not out of the woods, yet, Gail. Get ready to give us a hand once he's finished.'

They helped spread a large plastic sheet on the ground and had scissors, knives and tape laid aside. They were ready by the time Lee had cut a hole in the floor, large enough for him and his cutting equipment to enter the truck, through the least armoured part. Once inside, a headband light gave him enough light to cut away the strong hinges from the reinforced doors. Within minutes he shouted and the team outside pulled at the doors.

At first with a creek, then a crunch, they wrenched the lower door off its molten hinges. Then the second, with a louder crash it fell in a cloud of dust. The back of the truck lay wide open. The team stared with growing delight at the four huge bails of used banknotes as they lay in the back of the truck.

The cubes were so heavy that the men took the strain and forced each onto the plastic sheet. While the two women cut away the biodegradable plastic and tape holding the bail together.

It took five minutes to get all the bails onto the floor and a half an hour before each one was reduced to much smaller bundles. Each capable of fitting into the hundred sports holdalls waiting at the side. Stolen from a sporting goods store a year earlier, untraceable to any of the team. They stacked these into a medium sized white van near the door.

On the side of the van was a fictitious fishmonger's name. Large letters implied the van was refrigerated. This should deter anyone from asking to open the doors.

Damien studied the documentation attached to each bail in the truck. He smiled as he added up the total money they'd stolen. The team were watching him, keen to know.

He grinned. 'Four million.' The expressions of delight was obvious. Damien glanced at his watch. 'We've been an hour. Clear up, let's get going.'

They put all loose items into the boot of the Volvo, including the cutting tools. Damien took a last glance around and checked they were all still wearing gloves. 'Time to go.' he said.

Lee started up the fishmonger's van and backed it out. Damien closed the barn doors and took a reflective check around the site before getting into the van. Gail drove the Volvo with three passengers.

The journey to London was as carefully planned as the rest of the project. Damien had made the trip often and knew all the cameras on the motorway. He'd decided on the rest stops and had checked where CCTV cameras covered and where to park to avoid them.

When they stopped, the car was always positioned to watch the van which was always occupied. One occupant left to get food and relieve themselves while the other stood to guard. Similarly, the car, but two on, two off. The two passengers separated once out of the car and not seen together by the cameras.

Whilst on the motorway, the Volvo varied the distance around the van. Sometimes in front, sometimes to the rear. But always in contact via a series of mobile phones, each being discarded along the way. By the time they reached their destination, it was dark, as planned.

The Volvo drove into the mews in east London and two of the passengers got out. One opened the large garage doors and swung them wide. A few moments later the other man drove out a small inconspicuous car. The white van then arrived and drove quickly inside.

A few minutes later, both vehicles drove away from the locked garage. Their project for the day accomplished without a hitch. The mews became dark again and silence settled.

A few hours later, before the sun rose, a small van crept into the mews. It drove up to the garage doors and someone got out and opened the lock with a key.

Once inside he unlocked the van with another key and loaded the holdalls into his own van. He felt fatigued by the time he'd locked everything up and drove away. The mews returned to the dark silent atmosphere of early morning.

The following day the mews was bright in the autumn sunlight, birds filling the air with a cheerful sound.

Damien and Len drove up to the garage and Damien opened a door. Len kept watch outside while Damien opened the back doors of the van.

Damien swore, bringing Len in at a run. The van's interior was almost empty, just five holdalls remained. The rest had gone.

Chapter 2 – Lost in the Shuffle

The pub was old, run-down and sparsely used, ideal for clandestine meetings. Despite the smoking ban many years before, the aroma lingered. It was in the carpets and walls. Walls that could tell many stories - if they had a voice. Numerous light bulbs were non-functioning or missing, so they darkened the atmosphere making it even more conspiratorial.

The eighty-year-old landlord was hanging on before retiring. Waiting for the last moment. He knew he wouldn't be able to sell the pub - who'd buy it? But the land was worth something. Only regulars came here where they'd go afterwards.....the landlord didn't care.

Damien stared at his pint for over an hour. The man also known as Len said nothing. Neither dared to speak. Len, real name Ben Dishman, could stand it no longer.

'Dame? Look, you know you're the suspect, don't you? You planned it, you're the only one with keys...right?' Damien nodded. 'So...of course we trust you...but...well, you know.'

'You think it's a double cross and I've got the money. Yeah, I'd think that way too. But it wasn't me. But I have to find out who it was. Somebody talked, Ben. Somebody told someone else, and that somebody did this to us.'

Ben sipped at his scotch. 'Look, okay, you've paid off the fixed fee team, but well...I'm on a percentage and have come up really short, you know?'

'Everyone said they told no one, but someone must've. I know it's hard for you all to believe but I know it wasn't me, so it has to be one of you. For what it's worth, I'm sure it's not you, Ben. I'll make it up to you. I'll get more cash in your pocket, somehow.'

'You've got another job in mind?'

'Not yet, but when I do. It must be a lot bigger. I must be a lot smarter.'

'Well.. count me in.'

'You'll be the first, Ben.' They brooded in silence as they sipped their drinks.

Damien stared at the rings on the table his glass had made and said, 'It's a great pity. This was perfect, you know. A cash haul of that size was a thing of beauty. Untraceable, easy to move around, no laundering. Traceless and large quantities. Just what everyone wants.'

'Who said we're a cashless society, eh?'

'Not me.'

'Not me.'

Damien lifted his almost empty glass. 'To the next and the next.'

'To the next and the next.'

Damien drained his glass, 'Bigger and better.' He stood up and held out his hand to Ben. 'Try to believe it wasn't me and I'll regain your faith in me.'

Ben looked slightly embarrassed as he shook hands. 'Who said I think it was you? You're the least I'd suspect. Personally, I guess it was Lee.'

'We'll see. See you around.'

'Sooner, rather than later. I need the cash, Dame.'

'These things take time, you know. Careful planning is the key. Don't rush into anything. Okay?'

'Okay.'

The two parted as friends, destined not to meet up again until nearly a year later.

PART TWO

THE QUEEN OF HEARTS

Chapter 1 – New deal

October 2010

Ben Dishman was at a loose end. There'd been no work for over two months and he felt it was time to move on. Then, he got a message.

They sat at the same pub table and clinked the pint glasses together. 'To old times.' said Ben with a toothy grin.

'To the next and the next.' said Damien Dwyer. 'How you been keeping?'

'Okay. You? You look as fit as ever.' Ben thought the close-cropped hairstyle made Damien look more like an army squaddie than anything else.

'Fine. You've put on a few pounds.'

'Lethargy. When I'm on a job, it's easier to keep it off. Do you have anything?'

There was a gleam of excitement in Ben's eye that made Dwyer smile. 'I've got a few things to consider.'

'We wouldn't be having this conversation if there wasn't something you wanted me in on.'

'I've something that's right up your street. An inside job, about six to eight months. Interested?'

'Sure. When do I start?'

'Don't you want to know the payoff?'

'I trust you. One question only?' Damien nodded as he sipped the head off the beer. 'Are you the head of the project?'

Damien nodded. 'Yep. As before, but this time the projects bigger. Much bigger. And planning will be smarter. Much smarter.'

'And this time we will hang onto the money, right?'

'Damned right.'

'Did you find out who stole from us?' Ben asked, looking closely over his glass.

Damien's eyes narrowed, and he shook his head. 'I've spent most of this year trying to find out but got nowhere. I really can't believe it was one of the team, but who else could it be?'

I asked around too. Carefully. I kept in contact with those on the team I knew. Social occasions, that sort of thing. Got them drunk. Nothing. No one knows anything. They're still pissed at you though, for coming up short.'

'Most of them eventually got a good pay-out. I lost the most.'

'This time are you going to sleep with the haul?'

'Something like that.'

'So, what is it? Bank. Building Society? What?'

'I'll need you to be one of the key players. You're the inside man and the exit strategy. You're also the closure too.'

'I'll be busy.'

'Yep, you are. You're to get a job here.' Damien slid a piece of paper across the table. Ben casually looked around before opening it and reading. 'All the job application details are there.'

'Okay. When?'

'Soon as.'

'Primary task?'

'Gain the confidence of the management, something you're good at. You need to get access to a particular security room and need to be in there on your own for about ten minutes. You don't need to be security cleared for anything in it, just get unlimited access to that room.'

'Easy peasy, Japanesey. Okay so far.'

'Get into the venue at any level you can, I'll have papers, a background, authorisations, references and accommodation address. Proof of everything you need to show you're an honest man.'

Ben laughed and spat out his beer. 'They'd better be good.'

'Ten grands' worth, they'll be good. They'll more than pass muster for the job you're after. What you need are six months to establish yourself, then go for promotion. By then you'll be part of the furniture.'

'The usual same old, same old, eh?'

'Precisely. You can do it standing on your head. Now.....'

The two men leaned closer together. 'We need a month before the hit, so I need notice from you a month before, when you'll have full access to that room. That is vital.'

‘Okay. You know you can trust me.’

‘I know that. This is a top role, and I chose you. I’m showing my faith, as you showed your trust in me before.’

‘Mutual.’ They clinked glasses again.

Damien smiled and said, ‘You’ve one last function, which has to be done quickly and smoothly. You have the whole time you’re there to work out how you’ll do it. But you must do it on time. The key to this project ... is a key. You’ll understand later. Then....’

‘I disappear again?’

‘You disappear again. Money transferred within two weeks, into a chosen account.’

There was a long silence between the two men and Ben drained his glass before going to the bar. Damien watched him chat up the elderly barmaid and get her smiling. Ben turned to see Damien watching and grinned. Ben was a charmer. He knew how to put people at ease and trust him. This was just an act for him to see. To show Ben was still sharp and professional. Damien knew about Ben’s ability. It was the rest of the team he would be less sure about.

Damien twisted his sovereign ring around his finger. The large bulk comforted him in times of stress and nerves. His mother’s face swam into view and he shook it off. Not now. He needed to concentrate on this important briefing.

The beers arrived, and the first cool sip went down with a sigh. ‘Communications?’ asked Ben.

Damien pointed to the slip of paper again and said, ‘Details of a website on there. You can leave messages and collect them from me. Only you and I know that site. Coded only. We can work out the codes later.’

Ben grinned, ‘Cool. You said you had a few on the go? What others?’

‘Nothing to concern anyone now. If this comes off, there will be more. This’ll fund the next and so on. One big payoff down the line.’

‘Why the secrecy?’

‘You have to ask? After the last time?’

‘Point made. Do we use code names for this one?’

‘Yes. Your identity is Petre Decar. Second generation English Romanian. Always refer to this project as The Queen of Hearts. Refer to me only as The Ace of Hearts.’

‘Okay. Petre Decar... Romanian Prince fallen on hard times, or something else equally grand?’

‘No mucking about on this. You need to be dead straight. You’re not a Prince, just an ordinary Joe, needing a job. It’s a thirteen-man team and we’ll all be relying on you. No distractions, no petty thieving. Don’t go off piste. Don’t get fired. There’s a much bigger picture here, do not rock the boat. You won’t know about the rest, and they won’t know about you.’

‘Okayyyyy. I get it.’ Ben gulped at his beer.

‘I’ve spent a lot of my money on this, Ben. There’s no seeding, or funding from above, okay?’ Ben nodded. ‘We cannot afford to fall at any of the fences. There’s no second chance. Okay?’

‘Okay. Got it. Serious. Laugh about it when it’s over. I know. I get it. Sorry. Just...excited to be working again. Can’t wait to start.’

‘Bone up on the company and get yourself down there tomorrow.’

‘Will do. Call you when?’

‘From a phone box on this number.’ Damien pulled the paper towards him and pointed to a mobile phone number. ‘Only you have that number. Memorise and destroy this later. Call in once a week with a report. Make it...eleven p.m. on each Tuesday. I’ll make myself available.’

‘What role are you taking in this, then? In at the kill, the heist?’

‘Backroom only, this time. This is a strictly low budget. Paired down to the minimum. I can’t shake the feeling I’m being watched. So, I’ll fund it, plan it, run it, but won’t be active in the front line.’

Ben drained his beer and stood up. He held out his hand. Damien shook it firmly.

Ben grinned, ‘To a good conclusion, Dame. Oh, sorry, Ace.’

‘Good luck, Petre. See you next year.’

Ben’s smile faded, and he looked deep into Damien’s eyes. The bond was there, and the sincerity of the mission was clear. With a slight nod, Ben left the pub. Damien waited ten minutes, then left in the opposite direction.

The heat in the city was oppressive and wearing. Damien felt his polo shirt sticking to his body. At least one of the key players was on board, the easiest. Ben would do the job as required. He could almost forget about him now.

In his pocket, he had a list of people who he needed to contact and get committed. The Queen of Hearts project needed manpower and one very special

woman. Damien needed to find and persuade these people to take on the project and then take on intensive training.

Damien felt good the project was finally underway. He even allowed himself a smile.

Chapter 2 - Queen of Hearts

April 2011

William Castillo was a man about town. A highly successful businessman and well respected in the gaming industry of London and the South East. He liked to be called Billy Cashino, or just Billy to his close friends and lovers. He was the gilded figurehead of the two casinos, with his wife Laura making all the real business decisions.

When Billy looked in the mirror, he saw a fifty-five-year-old stud who looked sleek, fit and handsome. Someone any woman would love to get involved with. When his wife, Laura looked into the mirror from behind him she saw an ageing lothario who'd lost the plot a long time ago. But Laura didn't have time for mirrors, she had a business empire to run - the Castillo Casinos wouldn't run themselves.

This suited Billy, who was a man of active leisure pursuits. His favourite being the '*Castillo Castille*', an eighty-two-foot Sunseeker 82 yacht, moored at Southampton. When Laura would allow him off the leash, he'd cruise down to the coast in his Bentley and idle away a day or two on his male menopause indulgence.

But to him, it was more than an indulgence. Laura hated the sea, she got seasick swimming. Here, the one area of Billy's life she had no wish to interfere. A place he could be alone, or with the company of his choice. And right now, anxiously waiting for that company of his choice and she was late.

Billy was sure Laura would never make a surprise visit to the boat. He made sure she'd be tied up for the day. A management meeting discussing an upcoming conference tie-up, involving two hundred delegates. Billy let her handle all the finance side of the business. His expertise consisted of getting the high rollers in and getting them to spend money.

Billy looked at his reflection in the windscreen of the yacht and smiled. He had a charming smile, with perfectly white ceramic teeth. Who could resist his sexual sales pitch? Not Queenie, that was for sure. He couldn't wait to see her again.

He grinned as he remembered the last time they'd met. A hotel room hired just for the day, but what a day. That girl had the most voracious appetite for sex of anyone he'd ever known. Laura used to be a little like that. She was a croupier in his first business venture. She came on like a vamp until they were married. It all seemed to change after that.

Laura took an increasing interest in running the business and found she was good at it. Unfortunately, she wasn't much good at anything else, like relationships and marital bliss. Billy had admitted on one occasion to a close

friend she's no longer a wife, more a business partner. Was it any wonder his eyes strayed to other, younger, women?

Queenie was certainly a younger woman. She'd not confessed her age, but close up, and Billy liked to get close up, she could be early twenties. But she looked very much younger, almost too young for some tastes. But Billy had specific tastes for women. Apart from them having to be willing, they had to look as young as possible.

He squinted up the path towards the clubhouse, still no sign. He glanced at his \$800,000 Blancpain 1735, Grande Complication watch and didn't appreciate the quality of his investment. He only saw she's now an hour late. Was she really coming?

'Billeeeee' screeched from down the landing. He saw her long slim legs galloping towards him. His heart raced. She HAD come.

Despite her slight frame, she hit him full force in the chest with a jump into his arms. He staggered and nearly fell over the side. He caught and held her tight. Her Channel No 5 diffusing in his nostrils. This would be a great day.

The girl he knew only as Queenie sunbathed on the deck of Billy's yacht as it bounced across the waves out to sea. He scrutinised the water and saw little traffic as they headed around the Isle of Wight towards Ventnor before swinging south and heading away from land.

Billie watched her relax naked on the towel. He wanted to reach out and take her right then, but he also wanted time to savour the moment. He knew she wouldn't develop a headache or find any other excuse not to have sex that morning. That afternoon, and on into the night, if time allowed. He focused on his bearings and opened the two 1550 HP Diesel engines.

The weather was changing, a stiff breeze blew in from the south-west and the clouds were building. He worried about a storm brewing but decided nothing would spoil his day. Billie felt he'd enough distance from land for some privacy, and the stretch of water was light with traffic. He could stand down for an hour. He turned on his navigation lights and called to Queenie.

She too had been remarkably patient and leapt onto the bed of the master suite and lay waiting for him to shrug off his shorts and polo shirt. She laughed at his underpants and reached forward to yank them down. Any dent in his masculine pride in the choice of underwear was soon forgotten as she went to work, with an energy that soon drained him.

The boat, without forwarding momentum, rocked on the waves. This soothed Billy into a sleepy euphoria. Queenie held her compact camera and giggled as she

took more photos. Billy was too exhausted to resist, so was oblivious of the slight bump on the side of the craft and movement on the deck overhead.

His first notion of something wrong was when he heard Queenie gasp. He opened his eyes to see a tall man standing with a knife. Billy gagged and could not speak. The stranger remained silent and stared at Billy with an undisguised hatred.

‘What...?’ was all Billy managed.

‘Rigā! What are you doing here?’ Queenie shouted, drawing up the bed sheet to cover her nakedness.

Billy looked wild-eyed at her. ‘You know this man?’

‘He’s my brother.’

‘What!’ said Billy sitting.

Rigā leant forward and Billy felt fear. The man was over six foot and slim. He wore a cut-off tee shirt emphasising his swelling muscles.

Rigā whispered with menace, ‘Go to the boat, Queenie. Now!’

‘Wait, a minute....’ was as far as Billy got before the knife appeared near his face.

‘You...stay out of this. I talk to you later. Queenie, go now.’

Queenie leapt forward and put her head between the two faces of the men. ‘Rigā, listen. Look at me! Look at me!’ Her voice carrying an edge. She commanded his attention. Slowly, his eyes left Billy’s face and looked at her. ‘Do not harm him. In ANY way, Rigā. Understand. I will not stand for this. Okay....I’ve done wrong here, but do NOT harm him. Or you will answer to me, this time.’

With the last stare at her brother, she strode to the door with the bedsheet wrapped around her, picking up her clothes. She left silently as Rigā turned his attention back to Billy.

There was silence, neither men spoke. Billy was aware of the craft rocking as Queenie left the boat. He heard a heavy slap and winced in pain for his lover. A boat engine started up and pulled away. There was only the lapping of the waves on the hull to break the silence.

‘What do you want?’ asked Billy, with a tremor in his voice.

‘To kill you.’ said Rigā, with a hint of a smile. His eastern European accent strong with the intensity of his emotions.

‘But Queenie told you....’

'I know what she told me. But she's not here now. Just you. Just me.'

'Wait. Look. You've got this wrong....'

'How I got it wrong? You in bed with my little sister. How I got that wrong?'

'Well...yes, technically...but...she wanted me to. She begged me, in fact. I'm telling the truth.'

'I know you are.'

Billy remained silent. This man was deranged, he clearly didn't understand the language. 'Good. Then there's no need for...the knife, then. Is there?'

Rigã didn't move a muscle. 'My sister she....like sex, no?' Billy nodded. 'She like a lot of sex, no?'

'Yes. That's what I was saying.'

'You say my sister a tramp?'

'No....no. Not a tramp, just a ...loving woman. That's all.'

'She has a problem.'

'What sort of problem. Not H.I.V? Oh, God, no!'

'No. No H.G.V. that's a van licence, no? No, a sex problem. She's ...what they call it...sex maniac. No, sex addict. Sex addiction. She is being treated in hospital. You spoil the treatment. You take her away from the cure. This part I no got wrong.'

'Ah, well...I didn't know, did I? If I had, I wouldn't have ...at all. Truly.'

'Truly? You such an honest man, eh?'

'Yes, I am.'

The small smile faded as Rigã said, 'When you take my sister, I look you up on the Google. Big man, lots a money. But you like the little.... fatã adolescentã ...young girls.'

'You can't believe everything you read on the Internet. It's just not true. Honest.'

'Honest. You honest man, eh?'

'Yes. Absolutely.' Best smile, full of white teeth.

'We see how honest a man you are, Mr Cappillo. You drive boat. Honestly. For Southampton. I need decide your punishment.'

'Not Capillo. It's Castillo. You must have Googled the wrong name.'

'I no Google anything wrong. You Billy Cashino, no?'

'Well, yes. I'm called that sometimes.'

'Then I have the right man to drive boat to Southampton. Go. Now.'

Southampton was a distant speck on the horizon as the *Castillo Castille* bounced its way landward. Up ahead the boat that took Queenie away from him.

Rigã pointed and said, 'Boat. We had to borrow for the day. My younger brother, Jack. No good sailor. We need to guide him in. Slow down so he can follow.'

Billy took up his binoculars and tried to see if Queenie was in distress. Rigã took them away from him with a low snarl. 'You no more see Queenie. Ever!'

'Okay.' was Billy's weak response. He tried to glance at the boat as they passed. Queenie was sitting in the back. She looked unharmed if a little unhappy. It somehow reassured Billy, but this day was not going well at all. He just wanted to be rid of these immigrants and get home to safety.

Rigã sat in the padded chair and lit a cigarette. He let out a long stream of smoke before saying, 'I come from proud Romany family in Romania. We live here now nearly two years. I had a small modest business in Romania.'

'You were a crook!' Billy suddenly realised how rude that statement might seem to this angry man. He dreaded the reaction.

'Crook, what word? Ah, cârjă. No, no, no. More...borfaş. Thief. Finding honest work here is difficult, so we have to resort sometimes to home ways. However, tradition very strong. We have to maintain tradition. You violate my sister, must have punishments. Romany Law. My family would allow no less.'

'Yes, well perhaps we can negotiate a small sum of money to help ease your traditions.'

'Okay. One million euros. Traditions satisfied. All happy. But you no ever see Queenie again. No?'

'A million! I can't get that sort of money....'

'You rich man, no?'

'Rich yes, but the money's not mine. My wife....she has the money.'

'Okay. I ask wife for the money.'

'No! No, let's see if we can...think of something. Look...don't take this the wrong way...but she came on to ME. Okay. I was at one of my casinos, she walked up to the bar and started to talk. The next thing I know....we were....'

'What?'

'Well...in bed together. She came on to ME. Honest! I just had the feeling...she's done this before. You know, women see a rich influential man, it's like an aphrodisiac to them. That's what I thought it was. That's what it IS. Nothing more. I didn't tempt her away from anything. Just the opposite.'

'Queenie no experience in anything. She only been here less than year. No time to do anything like you say. Okay, she like men. She has habit and is getting expensive treatment. But you interfere with medicine.'

'I wasn't to know. She didn't say.'

'You think she wanted you for your looks?'

'Well...no. More my wealth, I admit.'

'You would marry her then?'

'Well...I'm married.'

'See. You treat my Queenie like a prostituată. Now you pay.'

'I can only say again that I didn't! Are they still behind us?' They travelled on in silence.

'When did you first know I was sleeping with your sister?'

'Last week. Only last week. I found some photographs on her camera. I see she was doing it all again. I challenged her, and she said a one evening stand. I did not believe her. I show photos around. Someone recognised you.'

'You showed pictures of your sister naked to strangers?'

'No. I just show bits of you.'

'So why didn't you confront me earlier?'

'I would like to have got boat earlier and stop you happening again, but getting boat took longer than we thought. Jack, he not good seaman. Tricky things, boats and sea. I found you were rich man. I am a businessman too. Between us, we could make some money, no?'

'Well...yes. If you have a proposition, I will consider it. But we need to keep my wife out of this.'

'Ah...you wife. Keep returning to your wife. She have money, not you. She finds out about Queenie, you have no money at all. We can't let that happen, can we?'

'No. We can't.'

'So. How we get money from your business and give it to my family? Your wife...she not like young men, eh?'

'No, she doesn't.'

'All middle-aged women like young men. None admit it, eh?'

'Possibly. But Laura is not one of them.'

'Strict businesswoman, I think. She hold you up, eh?'

'Hold me up? Oh..do you mean tie me down?'

'Yes I mean tie you down. My English...nearly there, no?'

'Nearly, yes. Tie me down....well? I suppose she does, given she has the purse strings to the company.'

'You get rid of her, you lose all business, no?'

'That's about it. I couldn't run it without her. Better the devil you know.'

'Better the devil you know. I like that English phrase.'

They sailed on in silence until Southampton rose out of the gathering rain clouds.

'I have found possible punishment.'

Nervously Billy looked at Rigã's face. Trying to read the bad news. 'Really?'

'Really. We will find a way to take money out of the business, without the better Devil knowing.'

'I'm not sure...'

'Neither am I. But tomorrow, we go and see your casino. I will find a way to get the one-million-euro punishment fee. And who knows...perhaps a little spare cash for yourself, yes?'

'I'm not so sure. You do know there are security checks in place to prevent croupiers, cashiers, anyone giving out money at a casino, don't you? You can't just walk in and take cash out.'

'This is nice boat. Is it insured?'

'Yes. Of course.'

'How much for?'

'Two million pounds. Why?'

'You wouldn't like to see it at bottom of marina, no?'

'Look.....'

I will find a way. All you need to do is tell me everything about how the casino is run. But if at any time you want your boat sunk, or anyone else's, you let me know. Same with the better Devil. If you ever need help, call me. I will always know where to find you.'

A chill went through Billie's whole body.

Chapter 3 - Dealing the Cards

April 2011

The *William the Conqueror* looked from the front like an old castle. Inside, it looked even more like one.

Each doorway was in the shape of a Norman Arch. The private rooms had cast-iron grills in front of them. Alcoves showed red lights and sinister skulls in helmets. They dressed the staff in the fashion of the Bayeux Tapestry. Simple shifts, thin skull caps, tights and soft shoes.

The music playing in the background was hard to define. Billy had found a composer who could churn out faintly authentic period music using lyres, flutes, hollow drums and some reedy pipes. The staff tired of it, but it soon became background noise and mostly went unnoticed.

The venue was on three floors. Between each floor was a series of narrow, winding stone stairways. Each designated up, or down, to avoid congestion. Fake flickering candles added drama to the buzzing atmosphere of the casino. Huge heraldic flags draped across the ceiling, fluttering in the rising heat of the excitable crowds below.

In the dungeon were the administration rooms and were secured from the public by large fake iron doors. Billy stood in front of one of these and waved a hand expansively at them.

'Look real, don't they? But they're not. Equally difficult to get through without the keys, but an added touch of sophistication I always thought.'

'And in there you keep all the money?' asked Rigã, his eyes alight.

'Yes, yes. The money's in there. Out of sight and extremely secure. Even from me.' He laughed, spilling his cognac.

Rigã smiled at his brother, Jack, with a knowing look. He turned back to Billy. 'Can we see in there?'

Billy shook his head violently. 'No. No way. Even I can't get back there without an escort. No. Sorry.'

Rigã leaned forward and whispered into Billy's ear, 'I thought we had an understanding, Mr Cashino. You were going to show us your casinos. We were going to find a way to help you pay your debt.'

'How can I let you in there? Isn't it going to be obvious I've assisted a theft? My insurance goes out the window and the police will have me behind bars. Go ahead, tell my wife, it would be better for me than bankruptcy and prison. No?'

Rigā conversed quietly in his own language with the increasingly hostile looking brother Jack. Jack was well over six-foot-tall and towered over Billy. For once Billy knew where the line was drawn in the sand. These immigrants were hustling him, he knew that. They had leverage, but there was a limit. They had just reached it.

Billy looked up and waved a waitress towards him.

‘Stay by me at all times. Make sure we have all the drinks they want.’ She nodded and stepped back. Rigā and Jack were talking ever more earnestly. Billy stared at Queenie. She looked beautiful. She wore a tight-fitting cocktail dress that clung to her slim curves. She was staring at him and smiling. He glanced at Rigā, who was still deep in conversation.

Billy risked a smile at her and she winked at him. She glanced at Rigā before blowing Billy a kiss. The memories of their times together came flooding back.

‘Cognac.’ Billy said to the waitress. ‘Make it large. And a Campari for the lady.’

Billy jumped when he realised that Jack was towering over him. ‘What rooms in there?’ A long arm and slim finger pointed at the metallic looking doors of the bastillion.

‘Offices. Just offices.’

‘What rooms? How many? What in them?’

Billy looked around to be sure no one else could hear him. He lowered his voice anyway. ‘Nothing of interest to you. There’s an admin office and staff suite, two secure rooms out the back. One is the storeroom, this has all the general needs of the building, from canteen ware through to toiletries. There’s also a small safe in there, which holds the new chips.’

‘Chips? What are Chips?’ Said Rigā with a new intensity.

‘These chips are used to replace the ones that get worn and damaged or even lost. Some punters keep them as souvenirs.’ Billy laughed and accepted the glass of brandy held out to him.

He nodded to the waitress. ‘Could you wait just over there Marie, please? We’re talking business with potential clients here. Thanks.’ Marie moved away, aware her boss was in charm mode to bring in more punters.

‘The main room nicknamed the "Counting House", is where the money is counted and packed, two safes in there. An operating safe, for the general running of the venue. This has cash and chips needed to supply the cashiers on a daily basis. Stock being withdrawn or deposited as required. The larger safe is where the counted money no longer required goes into, to wait for transportation to the bank.’

Both visitors intently absorbed Billy's every word.

'The money is counted at two in the afternoon, every day. Specialist Counters are ushered into the room after being searched and leave the same way after being searched. Security is tight and flawless. No way in, no way out, without several security checks.'

Jack passed a knowing look at Rigã. 'Continue, please.'

'Well, ...they prefer not to keep more than £2m in reserve before banking. The bank accepts the cash and credits our account. All staff are paid by direct transfer. No cash passes between the casino and its employees. The only cash handled is on the floor and with the punters. Mostly, our clientele draws chips using credit cards, or personal accounts directly with the casino chain.'

Billy drained his glass and risked a glance at Queenie.

Rigã said quietly, 'You not look at her. Look at Jack.'

Jack said, 'Access to these rooms here and where else?'

'There's a rear entrance, but both are heavily secured. Twenty-four-hour security and no way in without three senior staff members in attendance. This is where the employees enter and are searched coming in and going out. If the alarms go off, the police are here in two minutes. It's a no go from that point of view. Designed that way. If you're thinking of a smash and grab raid, forget it!'

Rigã moved forward and said, 'Both your casinos this way?'

Billy nodded. 'Yep. It was the best security we could devise, why break a winning pattern?'

Rigã pulled Jack to one side while they indulged in urgent conversation. They saw Billy listening and moved further away.

Billy felt a tug on his arm and was pulled around the curve of the corridor. Queenie's lips were on his instantly. He felt the flush of excitement and held her close. Breathless, he pushed her away.

'Are you mad? Your brother is just there. He'd kill me.'

She smiled and kissed him briefly. 'No, he wouldn't, I've told him not to. I've missed you.'

'Me too. But we can't.'

'No such thing as can't. I want to see you again. Soon.'

'But...your brother.'

'Leave him to me. I call you tonight. You get a room somewhere.'

'I don't know...'

'You don't want to?'

'Oh...I want to. It's just...your brothers....'

'Wimp. How you English say...faint heart never won fair lady?'

'So they say.'

'Look at you, Billy. Here in your castle.' She waved her arm, spilling the Campari, just as Marie arrived with another glass. With a most charming smile, Queenie swapped the empty glass with the full one.

'An Englishman's home is his castle? Isn't that an expression you use?' Billy nodded. 'Shouldn't it be his castle is his home, no?'

'Possibly, yes.'

'Impenetrable. That is what they were supposed to be, in the old days. Is that right? To defend your family and armies from the raiding foe. Am I right?'

'Absolutely. A fortress against the enemy.'

'And now your enemy is at the gates, trying to get in.' Queenie cutely pointed a small finger down the corridor and Billy saw Rigā and Jack walking towards them. He turned to Queenie to find she had her arm around Marie's waist.

Queenie grinned at Rigā. 'My chaperone.'

Jack ignored his sister and said to Billy, 'This the biggest of the two casinos?'

Queenie manoeuvred Marie away from the conversation and chatted about working for a man like Billy.

'No. Second biggest, in turnover, anyway.'

'What biggest?'

'The Windsor Castle.'

'How much big?'

'In terms of money held at one time?' Jack nodded. 'Four million.'

'Why?'

Rigā stepped forward, 'The biggest...too much the high profile. I like this place. This is where you will pay your debt to my sister.'

'Not so loud.' hissed Billy. He looked at the now empty corridor.

'Good. We will try our luck at your tables, Mr Cashino. Introduce me to your chips.' Rigã smiled.

Billy sat in a corner with Marie hovering nearby, the smile he put on was false. He waved at people he knew, but his eyes were on his three guests playing roulette on table nine.

He'd come to terms he should pay for his indiscretions. Billy knew he shouldn't get involved with young women. Didn't they always say, 'stay clear of temptation.' They'd caught him, and this time he'd have to pay the price.

But who could blame him? He was a vigorous and active man, young beyond his years. What was the expression...he had 'needs'? He certainly had needs that only young women could satisfy. He reflected on his wife when they were first dating. She was younger then, and needy. How things changed.

If anything, this was her fault. She became cool and frigid very soon after they were married. There were no children, he had no heirs to inherit the business. So, why wasn't he retired in the Bahamas by now? Because Laura loved the power the business gave her. And needed him for support.

But it wasn't actually her business! He'd built it up from a modest beginning, one small gambling club in Soho. Now he was just the PR guy, encouraging rich clients. Next, it'd be taking out the trash. He was a rich man but couldn't enjoy its benefits without the approval of the governess, Laura. The words 'purse strings' and 'tight' certainly applied to her.

No wonder he sought solace in young women.

He watched Queenie stretch across the table, placing chips, her dress like skin. Spending money as freely as she liked. Were these three rich, or just chancers? Either way, they had him by the balls.

What had they been discussing between them? Robbing a casino? What were they in Romania, bank robbers? Queenie clearly wasn't part of their crooked operation.

Rigã whooped in delight and swooped up a pile of chips. With a broad grin, he gave it all to Queenie, before striding over to Billy, who stood and smiled at his guests' good fortune.

'Now what I do with these...chips. Chip is right, no?'

'Yes, they're called chips.'

‘Chips with everything, eh?’ Rigã laughed at his own joke. ‘Now, how I get money?’

With an enthusiasm he did not feel, Billy guided his guests to the cashier desk and smiled as Queenie spilt the pile of chips over the counter.

‘Account, cheque, or cash madam?’ asked the cashier with a broad smile. She looked up at Billy for any of the hidden security signals that would show this was anything other than a valid withdrawal. Billy nodded and smiled.

Queenie grinned at her brothers and said breathlessly, ‘Cash, please.’

The cashier counted out large denomination notes and laid them in Queenie’s hand.

Rigã said loudly, ‘Now we go celebrate, Mr Billy where do you suggest we go next?’

Rigã put an arm around Billy and propelled him towards the door before he could answer. They were quickly outside in the relative coolness of the night. Billy saw Queenie obediently hand over the notes to Jack, who put them in his inside pocket.

Rigã held Billy by the shoulders as he said, ‘Where do you keep these chips? How many you have?’

Billy swallowed hard. They were walking down a side street, it was quiet, and Billy felt threatened. Despite Queenie’s assurances, there was a plan going on here. Jack held back with Queenie, keeping her from being a part of that plan.

Rigã was making the running now, he was the natural leader. Anything that happened next would be at his say so. Billy hoped Queenie had a strong enough hold over him because right now Billy felt vulnerable.

Rigã smiled, ‘Somewhere nice and quiet to eat, Mr Billy. We have a nice chit-chat, as you British say. I pay. Tonight, I got lucky. Tomorrow....luckier still.’ He laughed, and Billy forced a laugh along with him.

The meal had a very surreal atmosphere. Rigã seemed at ease while Jack just glowered at Billy. He felt Jack would like to see a different punishment for Mr Cashino. Queenie ate like she’d not had a meal in a year. Billy didn’t know how someone that slim could consume so much food. As they served the coffees Rigã spoke in Romanian to Jack. The brother nodded and helped Queenie to her feet.

Rigã said to Billy, ‘They have to go. Tomorrow she goes to the clinic for one week. She not allowed out at all. Her last night of freedom, eh?’

Queenie waved at Billy, who felt he daren't respond. Jack just glared at Billy and steered her out of the restaurant. Rigã sat back and called for a waiter. 'Two Sambuca, please.'

There was an uneasy silence until the drinks arrived. The blue flame of the spirit shimmering in the candlelit air of the nearly empty restaurant. Billy felt light headed. He'd drunk far too much and just wanted to get home. Rigã seemed to have a second wind. He was excited and had ideas he wanted to put into action. Billy struggled to find a way to put him off until tomorrow.

Rigã spoke quietly and clearly, 'I have found a way you can repay my sister. For you...it's not too difficult. For me, a little effort, maybe. First, you need to tell me the name of the manager of your William Conqueror.'

'His name is Holmes. Ron Holmes. Why?'

'Because you will tell him to promote one of his staff. Understood?'

'But, if I'm directly connected with you, and you rob the casino....?'

'Who said I would rob a casino? Staff, we talk about promoting a staff. How little faith you have in me, Billy. Do I look like a thief?'

There was no true answer Billy could give that wouldn't get him hurt. 'I don't like it.'

'You don't have to like it. Just do it. Soon. You have full set of keys to the building, no?'

'Not on me. I've got a set locked in a bank vault for emergencies. Why?'

'We may need how you say... alternativã ...contingencies. Now...other things. You have conventions.. is that the word?'

'Conventions, yes.'

'And they are, what?'

'Well, they're normally a large group of people who meet up to discuss their particular professional speciality.'

'I see. And this is strictly business?'

'Initially, yes. But they let off steam in the evening. Especially the last night. After all, most of these are men, who are away from home. What goes on tour, stays on tour, you know.'

'I not know. What tour?'

'Never mind. After they do their business, they relax. We've concessions...we allow block membership, for one night. That brings in the punters big time. As a group, they spend a lot. Gamble a lot. Have fun...a lot. Understand?'

'I understand fun a lot. I understand business a lot too. And this is in your casino?'

'Yes. The Conqueror. There's one due in a few weeks' time. The fourteenth.'

'That is when you will have the most people spending the chips in the building?'

'Certainly, more than a normal night, yes.'

'How much?'

'Well on a night like that we can expect to pass over about ten million pounds worth of chips across the cashier counter.'

'And how much cash goes over that counter?'

'Oh...roughly a couple of million.'

'That's a lot of money. The rest would be, cheques, credit cards, accounts, no?'

'That's right. We reckon to take a few million, just in cash a night.'

'That's a lot of money, Mr Cashino. You are rightly named.'

'It's not all clear profit, we've many overheads. The security systems cost a fortune. We've high staffing levels. I have to abide by several gaming commissions regulations. We offset to charities. The list is endless.'

'And these people will come to you on the fourteenth of May, then?'

'Yes. It'll be the largest delegation of the year. Not another for a few months.'

'Then we work on that date then.'

'What're you going to do?' Billy no longer hiding the fear from his voice.

'Me? Nothing. You, you will take a word with the Ron.'

'Look, I don't know what you're planning, but please...this is my business. My freedom will depend on me *not* being involved.'

'You will *not* be involved, Billy. I like you. Listen...this is now business. We do this, your debts repaid. Next time, we do business, we both profit. Okay?'

Billy didn't like the implication there would be more 'business'. He hid his concerns as he said, 'I want your assurance on that.'

'I know nothing of this assurance. This meeting with you is...fate. Fate and fortune are intertwined. My Gypsy grandmother foretold such a meeting from where great wealth springs. I am a strong believer in fate. We will be friends and business partners in the future. I know it. You want that too?'

'Yeah. If this works out okay.' Still unsure, but held his voice as steady, to convince this madman.

'It will be fine. We take your money. I give some to you. You claim on the insurance. Your wife no nothing where money has gone. You find yourself a nice young woman – but not my Queenie. Understand?'

'Understood.'

'See...I am the smart man. I find solution to everything. Now we drink to our new partnership. Down in one.'

Rigă drank his Sambuca straight down. Billy hesitated until he saw the look in Rigă's eyes and did the same. The fiery liquid caught in his throat and he coughed.

'We make a Romanian gipsy out of you yet, Mr Cashino. Hah!'

Billy's head was spinning. Not just from the night before and Rigă's assurance of non-involvement, but from the attention of Queenie over the past thirty minutes. He lay exhausted on the hotel bed, but she was already waiting for more.

She had surprised him when she called and told him to get a hotel room for that afternoon. He'd thought her confinement was for a week, but she laughed off any restrictions the clinic imposed. She'd other ideas and other desires.

'My brother says I lead you around by the ear. I say, other parts of your body too.' She gave that tinkling laugh he loved so much. So girlish.

'We can't do this again, you know.'

'Why not?'

'Two reasons. Rigă and Jack.'

'I handle them. You worry about your horrible wife. You watch her don't find out. She is worse. Truth?'

'You may be right. But this is all too dangerous. It's not you that'll get hurt, it's me!'

'How I not get hurt? Without you, I will hurt. You not get hurt, I won't allow it.'

'You might not get a say in it. He may send you back home. Keep you from temptation.'

'No. He wants me here, so he can watch over me all the time. I'm sick of it. I have no life of my own. Run away with me Billy. We can live together somewhere safe.'

'I thought I was safe until you came along.'

'Me and many others, no? Am I not special to you, Billy, do you not love me?'

'You ARE special, and I certainly love you. But...we just aren't going to be allowed to be together. Your brothers, my wife. It's just not going to work. She's said if she caught me again ...instant divorce. She'll take the business, my money. I might get to keep the yacht. I couldn't live off that alone.'

Her expression changed, and she sat up on the bed. She stared at him for a moment before leaving for the bathroom. The door shut and locked and Billy mentally kicked himself for telling the truth.

He turned over and tried to relax, images moving through his mind. Were these mad Romanians going to attack his castle with a battering ram? Were they going to huff and puff and blow the walls of his life down? Where was this all going to end? Was there any way of stopping them?

His thoughts drifted away and became more bizarre, as sleep overcame him. The sound of the door closing awoke him. He stood up. Queenie had gone.

He dressed quickly and collected everything from the room. He hurried to the lobby and almost skidded to a halt. At the bar sat Rigă and Jack. Billy eased backwards and looked around for another exit. He could find none.

Queenie came hurrying in from the restrooms and greeted her brothers. They were pleased to see her and ordered her a drink.

Slowly it dawned on Billy how she'd got away from the clinic. She was spending the afternoon with them. Queenie had slipped out early and had a few hours with him. She was sailing too close to the wind for his taste, she was becoming a liability. Her excessive desire for gratification made her reckless. The increased danger added even more spice to her sexual experience. Billy was being taken along for the ride.

He decided one way, or another he wanted to be finished with these lunatic Romanians. All of them. Let them do their stupid honourable traditional thing. Pay them off and let them leave. The last thing he wanted was them as business or sexual partners.

Once the fourteenth had come and gone, Billy would take a break. Whether or not Laura liked it. If they couldn't find him for a while, they couldn't screw up his life any more.

Chapter 4 - The Chips are down

May 11

Petre Decar found himself alone in the room. 'Easy, peasy, Japanesey.'

The room was small, just large enough to store the items the casino needed for daily running. The wall was magnolia and the strip lights harsh and too bright.

He pushed the trolley nearer the safe, bent forwards and tried the key. With a smooth action, the lock turned, and the door swung open. He looked up at the CCTV cameras and smiled. After six months of menial tasks his objective was being fulfilled. His main task was in motion.

With more urgency now, he removed the boxes. Each box was like a small weekend case, made from nicely finished wood. You get what you pay for, he supposed. All they contained was otherwise worthless pieces of plastic. Cheap to make, only of value inside the two Castle Casinos.

Petre took the top layer of boxes out of the safe and placed them in the same order on top. He then carefully, emptied the boxes of the shining new chips into several small black plastic sacks. The sacks he placed in the lower tray of the trolley. He replaced each emptied box in the safe in the same position as he found them.

When all the lower boxes were emptied, Petre replaced the full ones back on top in their proper places. Anyone needed chips replacing in the casino would start with the upper boxes. No one would know the lower ones were empty for some time. Satisfied, he locked the safe.

He opened several storage cabinets in the secure room and found the cardboard boxes he'd stored there earlier that day. These were flat, but when pushed open and assembled, they showed a manufactures logo and description of toilet rolls and kitchen rolls. These empty boxes he piled on the trolley, obscuring the black sacks.

With a song on his mind he pushed the trolley through the staff only area and towards the security check out.

I'm gonna dress my ass with the latest fashion
Get a front door key to the Playboy mansion
Gonna date a centrefold that loves
To blow my money for me'

He dropped his voice to a bass note for, 'So how you gonna do it?'

Two bored looking security men waved him through the inspection tables. One even held open the double doors and watched as Petre rolled the trolley down the slope, as he had done every working day. Making the heavy sacks appear light

took a little strength and technique, but he'd been training for months. Petra threw the cardboard boxes on top. The rubbish skip was almost full.

He made a face of disgust at the guard and waved a hand under his nose. 'What've you lot been eating?'

The guard laughed and let him wheel the trolley inside before closing and locking the door.

Ben pushed the trolley back to the store room and left it against one wall. As he walked out, he removed the small device that scrambled the CCTV camera's signal. The whole of his activities would be a mass of digital noise.

In a few hours he'd be clocking off for good. It'd taken over six months to gain the confidence of the management, but Ben was always sure of success. His sudden new promotion had been the last hurdle he'd been stumbling over. Once he'd access to the store room, he notified Damien Dwyer, and unseen wheels began to grind.

Ben didn't know how Damien got hold of a duplicate key to the Chips Safe, but it worked. He knew from early on that staff couldn't take any large items out of the building on their own, they searched employees in and out. Ben had solved the problem of moving bulky items using garbage bags. Right under the search teams' noses.

His job was almost complete. He whistled as he made his way to the staff canteen to while away the last few hours of his shift. He'd made sure everything was up to date and no one would hassle him for tasks undone. A good cup of coffee, read the paper and listen to Nickleback on his MP3 player. A job couldn't end any sweeter than this.

In a few weeks he'd expect upwards of over a hundred grand in his account, that would keep him for a few years. And Damien had said there was already another project in the pipeline.

Ben checked his pockets for his forged passport and genuine airline tickets. In four hours, he'd be on the way to Mexico for a long holiday.

With a mind flash typical of his current mood, he clocked off early. They'd deduct his pay, but he wouldn't be picking up any pay cheque that month, anyway.

He grimaced himself through security, complaining of a belly ache and said a cheery goodbye to the guards. He hopped on the usual bus but got off two stops earlier. A taxi and another bus before the Underground and a long walk. A final bus into Heathrow Airport and collect his luggage from the left luggage store.

Two hours later England fell away behind him as he sipped his first gin and tonic of the day. Tomorrow it would be tequila. He silently toasted himself. 'To the next, and the next.'

Early the following morning, in the dark, a tired looking rusty truck eased down the alley behind the casino. Dawn was coming, and everything looked blurred in the half light.

The truck stopped beside the huge metal rubbish tip and two scruffy looking men got out. The guard on video surveillance duty sat up and looked at the tiny monochrome screen. With a flick of a switch the central screen showed a clearer view in colour.

The guard's hand moved towards the phone, but he paused. He knew his next action could cause endless questions, followed by endless paperwork. For what? Gipsy chancers looking for scraps? It reminded him of the sixties and the last of the rag and bone men.

His hand hovered as he watched them rout in the rubbish. They found a few items and threw them into the back of their truck, already full of odd bits of metal. He could see the wheel of a bicycle. Do they still get money for that these days he thought?

One man got back into the truck while the other took one last look and took a few black plastic sacks. He heaved these onto the truck and sauntered round to join the driver. After a moment the truck eased out of the alleyway.

The guard took his hand away from the phone but made a note of the event in his log sheet.

Desperate times called for desperate measures, but what possible value could there be in plastic sacks thrown out into a skip?

Chapter 5 - Cashing in the chips

May13

By ten o'clock that evening both casinos were filling up. The crowds swirled around the gambling tables. Some sat at the one-armed bandits with steady concentration and eager expectation.

The Floor-Walkers watched the tables and scrutinised the punters, ever vigilant for fraud and cheating. Sharp practices were usual in this line of work and quickly discouraged with a visit to the manager's office, or an exit through the back door. In case they missed anything, a series of cameras surveyed throughout the casino and watched by a small team of trained personnel in a viewing room upstairs.

In the William the Conqueror, the period dressed staff mingled with the casual dressed players. People came in jeans and tired shirts, gone were the days of bow ties and dinner jackets. Casinos were a place of indulgence and hope, no longer a showcase of the rich and their finery.

Alongside hope came disappointment, and some people acted irrationally with disappointment. Fights could break out, or wails of despair echo around the small gaming rooms. The Walkers had to be quick to use psychological ploys to calm down distressed clients. To ease them out the door into a real world, where dreams were not shattered by the throw of dice or the spin of a wheel.

Tonight, for a few selected people, there'd be no disappointment. Not if they played their part and stuck to the agreed plan. Nouã stood in the Restroom and composed herself. She checked the rooms to ensure there were no CCTV cameras. She withdrew a small pile of chips from her bulky sweater and put them into her handbag. She checked her lipstick and walked out the room with a smile.

Outside, Opt was waiting in the over-elaborately decorated corridor. He was dressed casually, but smartly. His shirt was open-necked, but designer label. His slacks were clean and neatly pressed. The casual shoes were clean and not scuffed. His smile was practised and bright. He held her arm as they sauntered towards the cashier's desk.

The gold filigreed desk offered two positions, both had a cashier waiting with a smile. The metal grill looked thin and flimsy but was deceptive in its resistance to force. Within micro seconds shutters would drop and protect the cashiers and their money.

The narrow opening loomed wide for Nouã.

With a delighted squeal she pushed the chips through the opening and said breathlessly, 'How much have I won?'

The cashier smiled and said, 'One moment, madam. I'll count them for you.' While he counted, Nouă held onto Opta's arm and giggled.

'Thirty thousand pounds, madam. Congratulations.'

Nouă hugged and kissed Opta who appeared as pleased as she was. 'Let's play some more then.' she sighed.

'Let's quit while we're ahead, dear.'

'I want to play again.'

'Okay. Look. Let's go get something to eat, then come back later. Okay?'

With a pout she silently agreed, Opta smiled at the cashier and steered his partner out the front door. They almost skipped down the steps and turned the corner and stopped. Here a non-descript car was waiting for them and they quickly got in.

As Jack drove them to the other venue, they changed clothes in the back seat. On arrival, they placed the Casino's cash into Jack's hands and took another pile of counted chips from a box on the seat.

'One hour and then out. Okay?' Jack said with no trace of a Romanian accent. They nodded and got out of the car.

Jack counted the money and made sure it tallied with the amount of chips they had allocated them.

Nouă and Opta walked into the second casino looking like anyone else. They appeared together, but not holding hands, or really associating with each other. They wandered around the tables and placed small bets on roulette, blackjack. Opta also played some dice. After nearly an hour, Nouă visited the restrooms.

Once she was composed, she walked out and joined with Opta and made their way to the cashier's desk. Once again with a delighted squeal she pushed the chips through the opening and said breathlessly, 'How much have I won?'

Within minutes they were outside and in a car driven this time by Rigă. He drove to the next location while they changed again in the car.

This time they varied the act and collected winnings of £10,000.

'Honey, we won again! I love this place.' She squealed.

'Quit while you're ahead, sweetie. You've been lucky so far.'

'Just one more go, then home. I promise.' Her face a picture of cuteness.

'You know what we agreed.' A pout. 'We'll come back tomorrow. Okay. Promise.'

'Really promise?'

'Really. Back tomorrow. Come on it's late. You know what YOU promised, didn't you? Come on. Tomorrow. Promises.'

After much persuading Nouă allowed Opta to lead her out of the casino. A slower walk around the corner and into a car. Another change of clothing and on to the next venue.

Several hours later Nouă and Opta's tasks were accomplished. The driver dropped them off at their hotel and they remained there and rested until the following night. When they were in action all over again.

In the other venues similar performances were being played out. In teams of two, the casinos were being used as a cash dispenser.

The handsome Şase partnered the voluptuous Şapte. They took it in turns to cash in the chips. One minute he was a little drunk, at another time she was feeling unwell.

They moved between the casinos in the cars driven by Rigă and Jack. They counted the money and issued the chips. Changes of clothes and disguises achieved on the move.

The two women Cinci and Patru were middle-aged and moved serenely through the gaming halls. Their winnings were equally fortunate, but their calm demure attitude showed it was nothing new to them. They changed clothes, wigs and sometimes makeup.

By the early hours of the morning they were wilting. Buoyed on by the knowledge they received a percentage of their takings, they stuck with the grueling cycle, until they'd visited both casinos twice. By two in the morning they were in their hotel room and fast asleep.

Tomorrow was to be another day.

Trei and Doi were obviously gay. Their movements and shy looks at others showed they felt out of their depth but were up for a new experience. They visited both casinos just the once and hit each for £200,000.

In the second venue they unwittingly drew attention from the Floor-Walkers, who were alerted by the upstairs security guards.

As they walked to the door, arm in arm, a burly guard stood in their way. 'The manager would like to see you...gentlemen. This way please.'

A look of genuine concern crossed both their faces, and they protested. Another burly guard arrived to make up their minds for them.

The overweight Ron Holmes sat at his desk and hoped he looked intimidating enough. The movie scene splendor of the manager's office went unnoticed by the ushered in guests. Despite its careful charade of golden splendor and rich decoration, it was still only a Manager's Office.

Ron said very quietly, 'Been having a good evening, gentlemen?'

'Up till now.' Trei said as angrily as he could.

'You've just withdrawn a large amount of money from our cashiers. We like to be sure all is well with our clients when that happens.'

Trei was working himself up to bravery, 'So now you'll rob us of our money, will you?'

'Not at all, sir. It's just that...we didn't see you gambling much this evening and wondered where all those chips came from?'

Doi looked desperately at Trei and said, 'I feel sick. It was the last martini. I said it was off. Toilet, quick. I need a toilet.'

He was on his feet and heading for the door. The big security guards looked at Ron who nodded. Someone opened the door and Doi ran out, the security man gestured towards the toilets and followed him in.

Ron sat quietly waiting for him to come back.

Trei spoke quietly in a very masculine voice, 'Close the door, please.' He took a small card from his pocket and said, 'Call this number now. Quickly, before he comes back.'

As slowly as he could, Ron picked up the card and looked at the single number. No name, or any description. He slowly lifted the handset and dialled. 'Who's this?'

'You'll see.'

Ron looked at the clock on the wall before saying, 'At this hour?'

A sleepy male voice answered a simple flat, 'Hello?'

'My name is Ron Holmes, Manager of the Windsor Castle Casino. I have a man in my office who suggested I call you.'

'Tall guy, effeminate looking, blond hair?'

'Yes, that would appear to be him. Who are you?'

‘John Hawkins, C.I.D. He’s one of our undercover officers. Can I have a word with him please?’

Ron passed the phone over to Trei who was expecting to speak to his boss.

‘Sir? Sorry to wake you, but it went a little over the top. Yes, he’s still here, being sick now. I don’t know, you must have a word with the manager. Still on track sir. By tomorrow latest. Yes sir, that near. Okay. I’ll pass you back. My chief wants a word with you.’

The handset came back to Ron, who waited. He listened to the voice at the other end while studying the man opposite him. He made notes and finally hung up. Ron steepled his fingers and considered his options. ‘C.I.D. you say?’

‘I am. The other man’s a crook. He’s proposing to make forged chips and we want to find out where they’re made and who else is involved. I assume C.I. Hawkins told you that?’

Ron nodded. ‘Yes, he did. Do you have any I.D.?’

‘Not when I’m undercover. He’ll be back in a moment, don’t blow this for me. Two months I’ve been on this. Don’t upset Hawky. You’ll be having security visits for months if you do.’

‘Leave an address I can contact you tomorrow.’

Trei used the card with the number and wrote down a hotel address and room number.

‘We’ll both be there, so be guarded if you MUST call me.’

Ron’s eyebrows moved up. ‘Just the one room? You must be dedicated to your work, officer.’

‘You’ve no idea. He’ll be back soon. Please.’

‘This is a lot of money we’re talking about. Counterfeit chips notwithstanding.....’

‘He’s not using counterfeit chips tonight. Look.’

He took a few chips from his pocket and gave them to Ron. Holmes inspected them carefully and could see they were genuine. ‘May I keep these?’

‘Of course. Call Hawkins again tomorrow, he’ll be grateful. But I can hear him coming.’

‘But where did you get all the chips from....?’

‘It’s laundered money. He’s a sponsor who’s funding the project. This is a form of payment. The chips were bought at another time, legitimately. They change them for the cash to get the project rolling. He’ll use these real chips to model for the fake ones.’

Doi entered sheepishly and sat down. Trei held his hand and said, ‘We’re going now. A little mistake is all. Okay? Sick?’

‘Nearly. My friend here was a great comfort.’

The huge security man glanced at Ron who tried not to smile. ‘Have a good evening, gentlemen. We’ll look forward to seeing you again, sometime.’

With a smile hidden from Doi, Trei, said, ‘Thank you so much. Goodnight.’

They hurried out of the office and the two security men escorted them to the door. They watched as the two men held hands and walked across the road, earnestly talking to each other. They turned a corner and were lost from sight.

Ron Holmes looked at the card and felt something was not right. Tomorrow he needed to sort this out.

Inside the car, the two men let out a sigh of relief.

Rigã said, ‘Well done.’ He collected the large wad of notes and smiled. It was always good to have several contingency plans.

The following morning the Casino money counters were having trouble balancing the books. There was a deficit between cash and chips. But overall the balance seemed to tally as they couldn’t find any actual loss of money.

They found they had a surfeit of chips and had to put some back into the store.

The day after the chip swindle, Billy Cashino answered a call from Rigã. With some apprehension, he agreed to a meeting at a local swimming baths.

This was the fourteenth, the day when everything was supposed to happen. He dreaded to hear what the Romanians had planned. He was relieved it was imminent and would soon be over with.

Laura had been particularly difficult that morning. She seemed to want to know exactly what time he was going out and when he would return. How could he say if he didn’t know himself? When he’d asked about her movements, she told him to mind his own business. He said, almost too flippantly, ‘It is my business.’

So, on one level the call from Rigā allowed him to get away from the house and Laura. Let her play with her accounts and boss the staff around. He said he was playing golf, and that got him away for a good five hours.

Billy hated swimming. But he found himself chest high in the smelly water, with the great unwashed public all around him. For over half an hour he floundered until he gave up waiting. As he walked in a dream to the ladder, a head bobbed up beside him.

‘Billy Cashino. My friend.’

Rigā was all smiles and had a surprisingly hairless chest. Billy forced a smile and said, ‘You wanted to see me?’

‘And see you I have. Smart bathers. Let us swim a while, no?’

‘I’ve been swimming. For quite some while, actually!’

‘No matter. We swim and talk.’

Rigā swam easily away with smooth arm strokes. Billy decided he’d wait for him to return. Rigā reached the far end and stopped. He rested his arms on the pool wall and smiled at Billy. And waited.

Eventually, Billy lost patience and climbed the ladder out of the pool. He was in no mood for playing games. Either Rigā had something to say, or he didn’t. Either way let Rigā come to him for a change.

Billy showered and dressed. He combed his hair carefully and checked for any new wrinkles. In the mirror, another face appeared. Rigā wasn’t smiling and even frowned.

‘I see grey hairs there, friend Billy.’

‘Where?’ said Billy looking closer to the mirror.

‘Perhaps I was mistaken. We walk outside, no?’

Billy shrugged and picked up his sports bag. The air was clear for a change and a little cool. He felt warm from his attempt at exercise and waited for Rigā to catch him up.

Rigā jogged up to him and laughed. ‘Nice day, eh?’

Billy nodded. ‘You wanted to see me?’

‘I do. Yes, I do. Billy...see...here is the problem.’ He put an arm around Billy’s shoulder and Billy felt his heart sink. This would not be good news.

‘Go on, Rigā. What is it?’

'We will not be able to continue with our ...business venture, I'm afraid. We found your casino ...too hard a nut to crack. Is that how you say it? Tough nut?'

'I did say. I did tell you so.'

'So, you did, and we didn't listen. You were right. And for once, I was wrong.'

Billy felt a great weight lift from his shoulders.

'But, that means we still have to find a way for you to pay your dues regarding my sister.'

Billy felt his heart sink again. Now what?

'I have not found a way yet, but thought you need to know that I am thinking hard about it.'

'Okay. So, everything is off?'

'Off is the word at the moment. Yes. Everything is off. However...'

The arm returned to the shoulders. 'We really should do business together. I like you Billy Cashino. I feel you are like a ...brother-in-law. What with my sister and...well you know....waters under London Bridge.'

'I don't know....'

'I have a small business in Bucharest that is import-export. I think you could provide an international outlet for me here in London. What you think?'

'What sort of import-export?'

'Anything your heart desires. Watches, phones...women. No, I joke with you. Not women. You have enough of them in London already.' He laughed loudly at his joke.

'I don't think so. I run casinos, not a market stall. Thanks for the offer, but no thanks.'

'A pity. I could do a very nice watch like yours there, but for only twenty pounds.'

'This cost nearly half a million...'

'Exactly. You need not pay so much.'

'But this is real!'

'So is my offer.'

'No thanks.'

‘Okay. You’re going to think about it. But we still have some unfinished business. I will be in touch, Billy. Give my regards to your lovely wife. Toodle pip for now.’

With a wide grin and a wave, Rigã walked away.

‘What the hell was that all about?’ Billy said under his breath.

That evening the casinos were busy. The Newcastle delegation was in force and the alcohol flowed freely. The more you gambled, the more you got to drink for free. House rules.

The large security team were on high alert as this was a busy night. People were in increasingly high spirits and things could get out of hand very quickly.

Nouã moved through the throng easily and waited until the cashier’s booths were very busy. She stood in line and created a slightly drunken smile as she slid all the chips through the aperture and opened her eyes wide in anticipation. The male cashier smiled at her as he expertly counted the chips.

‘£180,000 madam. Well done.’

‘I lost more than that last night.’

‘An early night, then?’

‘Oh, I don’t know. I might come back for more, later. Night.’

‘Night. Safe journey.’

Şapte and Cinci worked the floor and kept a close watch on all the security staff. They needed to know they were not under scrutiny. They could do nothing about the video cameras up above, but they were alert to any signs of interest from the Floor-Walkers.

They had confidence in the chips they were being asked to use. They had put them through a washing machine to take the newness off them. They were originals, not fakes. The management couldn’t prove they’d stolen them. They had offered them a small window of opportunity and they had to go for it. It was a perfect set-up.

It was still early in the evening by casino standards and they’d a lot more to do. So, without hesitating they made their way to the cashiers with their back-story ready. As sisters, they would split the money equally but take it back to the hotel room first and put it all away, so they couldn’t gamble it all again. But they’d be back for more later.

Şase and Opt worked the casino separately. Sedately and with dignity they handed over their chips and accepted the cash without a glance. They nodded their thanks to the cashier and left the casino calmly. They moved on to the next casino and did the same thing again. They changed clothes and repeated the whole process again.

Rigã and Jack worked the taxi service with a choreographed list of pickups and drop-offs, that resembled a ballet. They counted the cash and noted who had collected what and calculated the running balance of payment to each cashier. They had allowed 5% per person, and the money was totalling up as planned.

When time allowed, each car pulled into a quiet road and transferred the cash into large bags in the boot. They moved unused costumes from the boot to the inside the car and the old used costumes put on top of the bulging bags. When possible they stopped for a drink of water and a sandwich. As the night wore on, the team were wearing out.

They had given Patru and Doi the main task of the evening and they had to wait until the early hours of the morning before they could execute the plan.

For the last two days, they'd attended the seminars at the local hotel with the rest of the delegates at the conference. They'd registered as genuine delegates using a false business front set-up by Rigã. They'd learned as much as they could about the conference subject, 'Moral dilemmas within the NHS', so they didn't stand out in the crowd as pretenders.

They spent their time integrating themselves with as many of the delegates as possible, trying to find out who was going to the casino later in the evening. Once inside the casino, they mingled happily with the rest of the delegates. Each delegate wearing the identity necklace they'd worn for the seminars, thus providing them the hospitality of the William the Conqueror casino on their special night out.

They built up a routine of going with a small crowd to the cashiers to draw out more chips. The cashiers becoming familiar with them, identifying them as part of the delegate crowd.

Before the crowd dispersed at two in the morning, Patru made the first move. He dragged a few of the more drunken delegates with him and handed over a pile of chips for cashing in.

'We won. The syndicate won. Can you believe it? Tell us how much, love, and I'll divi it up.'

'It's quite a lot, sir. Three hundred thousand.'

'Wow. Large bills then. Wow.'

'I'll need some identification?'

With a slight drunken lurch, Petru pulled off his identification tag from around his neck, dropped it on the floor and finally handed it to the cashier.

‘Sorry love.’

With a nervousness he had to hide, Petru waited while the cashier got authorisation to release that large sum of money. She packaged up the notes into a nondescript canvass bag for carrying.

To his relief, it was handed over to him and he smiled as he said, ‘They’re gonna love this.’

He moved off into the crowd and eased to the side. He made the call to Rigă, then casually strolled out of the casino.

An hour later Doi, now looking completely masculine and taller, did the same thing and walked away with a smaller pay-out.

The night was ending, and the casino thinned out.

The cashing team had hit two casinos at least twice each. In each case, the last hit was to be their largest. After that, they did not enter a casino again.

They changed how they looked and mixed up their partnerships, so they wouldn’t be recognised easily. Changing wigs. Putting lifts in the shoes. Once, even a fat suit for one of the bigger withdrawals.

Each character presented a different acting performance. Nothing too over the top or distinctive. They’d rehearsed and discussed how they’d achieve this mammoth task for the past month. The dedication to rehearsals and detail of characterisation had been successful.

The evening was ending and one by one they finished their last hit.

But an hour earlier, Rigă got a call he was dreading.

Ron Holmes stood in the viewing room and looked at all the screens. He knew who he was looking for and hoped they’d be there that night. After two hours Ron sat down and rubbed his eyes.

‘Someone get me a coffee.’

The coffee helped to get him on his feet again and he resumed his study of the thousands of punters in that evening.

‘I hate these convention nights. Drunken bastards.’

‘They pay our wages, chief.’ a burly security man responded with a grin.

'The Castillo's pay mine. But I know what you mean. There. There. Zoom in. Is that him?'

The seated operator fine-tuned his joystick, and the image enlarged to show a man watching a roulette game.

'That's him. Bring him in, now. My office. Don't let him get away.' The face of Trei looked calm and relaxed as the security equipment recorded his every move.

Holmes took his time getting in to see Trei. He let his security men hustle him into the main office and search his pockets. They checked everything he had and one of them left the office to report to Ron.

Ron entered the room casually and sat at his desk. Trei stared at him silently for some time before saying, 'We meet again Mr Holmes.'

'I don't believe in coincidences. Not when it's associated with counterfeit chips and big money withdrawals. No, I don't believe in them at all. Are you going to tell me this is a coincidence? Part of your undercover operation?'

'Nothing's changed since last night. I'm still doing my job and you're still doing yours.'

'What job is it you're doing then? On your own? No..."mark" as you'd call him? You had a large number of chips in your possession?'

'As I explained last night....'

'Ah! That's the point. You didn't explain last night. At least not to my satisfaction.'

'Just call Hawky. He'll.....'

'I have. I've been trying all day. When I gave up on that, I called the C.I.D. and no one had heard of him.'

'Why should they? We're an undercover unit. If we're known through the Met force, how effective could we stay?'

'Where's the man you were with last night? Why aren't you shadowing him, or whatever you call it?'

'He's in the hotel room.'

'I tried that number too. They'd never seen you.'

'I paid them to deflect enquiries.'

'So, what were you doing here?'

'So much for me staying undercover with Inspector Morse here.'

‘You’re not going anywhere tonight until I’m satisfied who you are and what you’re doing in my casino. Now. Some answers. Please.’

‘Just call, Hawky. I’ll let him decide how much you need to know.’

‘Tell me and tell me now.’

After a moment’s thought, ‘Okay. Just you. Can your personal assistant here leave the room?’

Holmes nodded to the guard, who eased out of the door, his bulk only just clearing the door jamb.

‘Well?’

‘The man here last night. Let’s call him Mr X., is being funded by a small, but growing syndicate – nasty bastards - to create counterfeit chips. Not yours, but a more well-known casino in a posher part of London. No offence, but there are other casinos better than yours. Rather than a straight, and often traceable cash transfer, they bought chips and give them to Mr X to cash in. He gets the money. Legal, safe and untraceable.’

‘Money laundering? In my house!’

‘It just happens to be your house. The chips were purchased here and only can be cashed here. It’s not rocket science, is it?’

‘And why are you cashing them?’

‘It exhausts the poor lad. I said I’d do it for him. Part of the bonding process, you know.’

‘Something doesn’t ring true here. I need to call in the police. Let them deal with you.’

‘I know how this looks and you probably should call in the local police. But before you do...just have a word with D.I. Hawkins. Let him know. I’d hate it to come from me. You’ve heard of the hairdryer, haven’t you? I’m not in his good books as it is.’

‘I’ll just call the local police station if you don’t mind.’

‘I don’t mind. But if you let Hawky know first, perhaps he can soften the blow to the local plod. We’re operating on their manor without authorisation. They get touchy about that sort of thing. They’ll hammer Hawky, he’ll hammer me and then I’ll blame you. Guess who gets hammered next?’

Holmes sat back and steepled his fingers in thought.

‘What harm can a phone call to Hawky do first? At least give him the opportunity to warn the cops before you get them involved.’

Ron decided. He pulled out the piece of paper from the night before and dialled. ‘If there’s no reply, it’s a call to the police, and that’s an end to it.’

‘Good move. You’ll thank me later.’

The two men waited in silence, the soft burr of the ringing tone sounding in the quiet room.

‘D.I. Hawkins? My name is Ron Holmes, William the Conqueror casino? We spoke last night? Yes, he’s here again, I’m afraid.....No, I don’t think that’s necessary. I wanted you to know I’m calling the local police to sort this out. I’ve been trying to get you all day....yes I’m sure you are. But I called the C.I.D. and they’d never heard of you.....if you say so. But I’ve no proof of this. I think calling the police is the

Trei sat back with an amused smile on his face. Ron glared at him and tried to interrupt the voice at the other end. He stopped trying and listened. After a sigh, he agreed to the suggestions Hawking’s had made and said, ‘Within the hour then. If I don’t hear from you, I’ll call them. Bye.’

‘Well?’ asked Trei.

‘He wants to tell them first. Make it official. Then they’ll get involved and he can save a little face. He’s very.....’

‘Bullish?’

‘Something like that. Determined more, I’d say. I’ve given him an hour.’

‘Then time for a coffee, or tea. Any chance?’

The time passed slowly for Trei, who was left in the room with a security guard while Holmes had a business to run.

The Police Sergeant had to wait fifteen minutes until Ron could be found. He sat awkwardly in a small office and his aggravation was beginning to show. By the time Ron hurried in, the Sergeant’s patience was wearing thin.

‘Sorry about that.’ Ron said breathlessly, ‘You said you’d be along in an hour and you got here early. I was in the storeroom, a slight problem. Anyway.’

‘It doesn’t amuse My duty officer at all. To say he’s not amused is an understatement. When he’s not amused, the whole station becomes unamused. He’s not a man who relies on patience. What the hell is going on here?’

‘My point exactly. I really don’t know. All I know is that this man, who calls himself Trei, he says he doesn’t have another name, has a large number of chips on him. And as far as we can tell, has not paid for them, or won them. Now...this has happened twice. That’s suspicious and my job is to protect the casino against fraud. Now, that’s in both our interests. Don’t you agree?’

‘I would if I knew what you were talking about. All I know is some D.I. called Hawks is in the Chief’s office and has made the Chief angry. I don’t like that. None of us in the shop like that. So, he sent muggings here to drag your Mr Trei, or whatever his real name might be, drag him by the ear to see the Chief. Now, where is he?’

‘In my office.’

The Sergeant stood and said, ‘Let’s go get him. Get this over with. The Chief hates being kept waiting. So do I.’ with a meaningful stare at Holmes.

Inside Ron’s office, Trei appeared almost asleep. The Sergeant stared at him and kicked his shoe to wake him up. ‘D.I. Hawks is waiting for you. You’d better not keep him waiting any longer.’

‘It’s Hawkins. Ready when you are, Sergeant. Thanks for the hospitality, Mr Holmes. Hope to see you again.’

‘I hope not. Sergeant, get your Chief to call me tomorrow and tell me what’s going on. I need to know too, you know.’

‘Will do, sir. Do you need me to sign a release statement or anything?’

‘No. Just get him out of my sight.’

‘That we can do. This way Mr Trei.’

After they’d gone Ron sat with his head in his hands until the phone rang. Another day, another problem.

Ron’s problems were not going away. The following afternoon when the counters had cashed up, they found once again a deficit between chips and money. This time it was too significant to ignore.

They returned the excess chips to the storeroom safe and found there were more empty boxes than accounted for. With a shock, Ron realised his worries were founded. Something had been going on. He called in extra staff and they made an inventory of all the chips in the two casinos. They checked that against takings and pay-outs.

The result shook Ron visibly. They were missing over four million pounds.

He made a call to the local police station straight away.

Chapter 6 – Jokers in the Pack

May 15

Ron Holmes stood by, feeling helpless. The casino was full of policemen, both uniformed and plain clothes. His call to the local station had been immediately referred to the C.I.D. and within half an hour the police had arrived. First the local uniformed branch, who sealed off the whole casino. All the staff were herded into one large area, names and addresses taken and then released.

By the time the investigating officer arrived, they'd covered the place in coloured tape and Ron had nowhere even to sit.

Detective Inspector Martin Dobbs stood in the doorway of the storeroom and looked around. He was tall, lean and appeared under-nourished. His dark hair fell in an unruly style over his eyes, and he had repeatedly to push it back. An irritating habit for those who spent time in his company.

His suit was old, but well cared for. It fitted him better when he'd first worn it. The tie was the most expensive thing he had on his body, perhaps except for his cologne. People knew he was coming long before he arrived, and the aroma lingered long after he'd left.

His Sherlock Holmes stance was practised and acknowledged by his investigation team. It was hard for them to hide the smiles, for a detective least like Sherlock Holmes had yet to be found.

His nickname was Dobby, Blobby Dobby the Bobby. Since coming up through the ranks they knew him as Blobby the Bobby. He knew it but had the assurance he'd prove them all wrong. And so, he had. He stood there on the polished concrete floor of the storeroom as a full D.I. He was in charge. Like the captain of a sailing ship of old, in his own mind, he was King and God of all he surveyed.

He loved this moment, the first step into the unknown. He breathed in the atmosphere of the room. 'Haaaah. This is stale air. No ventilation shafts, tunnels or secret passageways?' He asked no one in particular.

Mike Madson, Dobbs' number one, stood just behind him. Madson was the opposite to Dobbs, being short and slightly overweight. His suit fitted him better, in some places. Mike's new weight stretched the fabric in others. His round face was as serious as Dobbs', but Madson always claimed a sense of humour where Dobbs had none. Madson knew the eccentricities of his boss and tolerated them. He turned and looked at Holmes and waved him forward.

Madson whispered in Dobbs' ear, 'The Manager of the casino, sir. Ron Holmes.'

Holmes moved forward and eased his bulk past Madson and stood behind Dobbs, who'd now moved fully into the room.

'None of those, Inspector. This is a sealed room, ventilated when the door is open. No one stays in here for any time. We don't need vented air, so to speak.' He finished lamely as Dobbs did not appear to be listening.

'The door always kept locked?'

'Yes, Inspector. Only opened when required, always kept locked otherwise.'

'These boxes? the stolen chips were expected to be in them, correct?'

'Yes, Inspector. We discovered they were almost all empty and should've been full.'

'Almost all?'

'Yes.'

'How many were still full?'

'Ten, I believe.'

'I see there are rows of these, once stacked neatly, no doubt. And the boxes that were full, were random within the safe?'

'Apparently not. Just the top level. The top row only.' Dobbs closed his eyes and visualised the scene.

Madson raised his eyes to one of the S.O.C. team in the universal, "Here we go again" gesture.

'So...not all the chips were taken. Those that were left were on top. So....in the event someone came to the safe to take out, or put chips in, the robbery would not be immediately discovered.'

'I suppose that was the case, Inspector.'

Madson looked at his colleague again, who was trying not to laugh. Madson mouthed, "And who has the keys to the safe?"

Dobbs studied Holmes before saying, 'Who has keys to this safe? You?'

'Yes. Me, both Mr and Mrs Castillo. And one spare set that's used by the Duty Manager, when I'm not on-duty.'

'No one else? Under any circumstances?'

'No, sir. Never leaves our possession.'

'And they're the only ones to have the key to this door?' An unnecessarily dramatic pointing to the open door.

'Well...no. There are three members of the support staff, more maintenance support, that have a key to this door only, but not the safe.'

Dobbs strolled around the room. 'Cameras. We must see the recordings from the last ...week or so.'

'I have them ready for you, Inspector. I thought you'd need to see them.'

'Mickey, log those in, would you?'

Dobbs bent down to examine the lock of the safe. 'No scratches, or signs of picking. Certainly not forced. Someone had a key.'

Another walk around the room. He opened the storage cabinets and looked at the items inside. He strolled to the camera high on the wall and peered intently at it. Dobbs reached up his arm and placed a finger on the wall two feet below the camera.

'Our thief was a little shorter than I am. And the video recordings will be useless.'

Madson's grin left his face. 'How do you know sir?' The look on his face was one of genuine surprise.

'Note also the trolley against the wall there. The number of chips would be sizeable and couldn't be carried easily in a single theft. Therefore, a trolley is the most obvious thing. Follow?'

Dobbs spun on his heel and brushed past the dazed Madson. 'Have you had any new employees join recently, or any leave?' The question was to Holmes, who was struggling to keep up with the pace of Dobbs.

'Yes, Inspector. We had an employee a few days ago didn't report to work. When we called, his phone was no longer connected.'

'And he had a key to that room, did he?'

'Yes.'

'Ahhh!' was all Dobbs would say.

'I have his file ready for you. He seems to be an obvious suspect.'

'Our bird has flown. This trolley, what's it normally used for?'

'Er.... moving stores around the various parts of the casino. Toiletries, cleaning materials, that sort of thing.'

'Nothing else?'

'Only taking out the rubbish to the dump outside.'

'And which way would that be?'

Holmes eased awkwardly past Dobbs and tried to increase his pace, aware Dobbs seemed to be in a hurry. He turned a few corners, down corridors and ended up in the staff security area.

The two on-duty security men looked up with disinterest as Holmes entered, followed by the serious looking Dobbs. Behind him followed Madson and two other S.O.C.O.'s.

Dobbs seemed to take a moment to single out one of the security men before asking him, 'When was the rubbish emptied last?'

'How would I know? I'm responsible for staff comings and goings, not waste management.'

'Then perhaps your colleague there can tell me how the rubbish is normally taken out from this venue?'

The other man looked guiltily at Holmes and struggled for an answer. Holmes helped him out. 'We usually use this staff door here. The security men can keep an eye on it then. No employee can leave the premises completely without being signed out and searched.'

Dobbs looked at Holmes and grinned. 'You need to tell your man there that. He clearly doesn't know who comes and goes. That, I assume is his job'

The guard stood up indignant. 'Wait, a minute....'

'Okay, Dixon. We'll sort this out later. The Inspector is just trying to get some answers here.'

Dobbs walked to the door and waited for the first guard to calm down and open it for him. He walked through and looked around outside.

'A ramp leading straight out to the small mews alleyway. A large skip against the wall. All your refuse goes out here?'

Ron hurried to join him outside. 'Yes. Non-recyclables emptied once a week. Tuesdays, actually.'

Dobbs hastened down the ramp and climbed into the skip. Madson raised his eyebrows at his colleague and whispered under his breath, 'Blooby finds a new home.'

After rooting around for a while, Dobbs climbed out. 'Gone now, I suppose.'

He hurried back into the security room and asked the guards, 'Either of you see the rubbish emptied recently?'

The second guard hesitantly said, 'A few days ago. Petre had a pile on the trolley.'

Dobbs looked directly at Holmes as he said, 'And this Peter, he wouldn't be the employee you lost track of...would he?'

Holmes nodded. 'Petre Decar.'

'So, we have the thief and we have the method. Now we need to find the rest of them?'

Madson could hold his tongue no longer. 'There's more, sir?'

'Of course. What was one man going to do with all those chips? The chips were going cashed in the casino. To do that, you need people to cash them. We'll need the tapes from the casino gaming rooms covering the time since this man disappeared.'

Holmes said, 'They use the chips in all two casinos. That's a lot of tapes!'

Dobbs smiled and said, 'Four million pounds is a lot of money. Someone's got a lot of watching to do. We just need to match up the faces that keep cropping up cashing in chips. This was a lot of money and a big operation.' Dobbs moved along the corridor back into the storeroom.

Madson had to ask, 'Why do you say this thief was smaller than you, Guv?'

Dobbs pointed to a tiny circular mark below the security camera. 'He pressed some sort of device to scramble the signal. If he was taller, he would've placed it higher. Holmes, your casino is being flooded with your own chips. You need to be more aware of anyone cashing large amounts. Not a lot you can do about it, I'm afraid. Change the design as soon as you can. Finish up here, Mickey. Get the tapes sorted, organise statements and start viewing. I'll be back in the office if you need me.'

Dobbs swept out, leaving the ensemble a little stunned.

Madson turned to his S.O.C.O. colleague and said, 'He's never done that before.'

Holmes said, 'Walked out and left you to do all the dirty work?'

'No. Got *anything* right first time.'

'I thought he was quite impressive.'

'He was. That's most unlike him, he's a jerk of the highest order. We do all the solution finding normally.'

'Where does this leave me though?'

'Okay. Look...an idea. It may be too late but try this. From now on, get all cashiers to wear gloves so they don't leave any fingerprints. Then, any large withdrawals for cash, get the punter to sign their name with a new pen for each person and time date it. Put those chips in a numbered, and time-dated, plastic

bag and the pen in there too. That way, we can get a fingerprint off the pen and chips and we can match it with the time-dated security video recording. Then, we'll have something to go on. A bit after the horse has bolted. But at least you know what's going on now, and all we now have to do is find your thieves.'

'Any chance you'll get some money back?'

'Who knows? Some maybe. You're insured aren't you?'

'Yes. We updated the policy only a few weeks ago.'

'Whose idea was that?'

'Mr Castillo.'

'Well, I'm sure the Detective Inspector will want to have a word with him, anyway.'

'Dobbs seems to think he's solved the crime already.'

'Thinking you have the right man doesn't solve the whole case. Your Petre Decar had to get the key from somewhere, or someone.'

'You think there was more than one person working from the inside on this robbery?'

'We need to find out. I personally think that D.I. Dobbs has done enough detective work for one day. The strain's too much for him.'

His colleague, Knowles, laughed out loud in agreement. His long horse face and protruding teeth earned him the nickname 'Shergar'. He said, 'We have a saying in the Scene of Crime office which goes...'Blobby away, crime at bay.'

Holmes looked on unamused. The officer felt guilty and added, 'Course, it's an in-joke, no harm intended.'

Madson took out a pad and made notes, 'So...we must take statements from all the staff. How many were there tonight?'

Holmes said without having to think, 'Fifty-three full time, ten part-time.'

'Oh...Christ!' said Madson with feeling. 'That's the week gone. And we'll need all video recordings in the gaming rooms, the storeroom there and in the alley. Sayfrom a week before Decar disappeared. That's a starting point, we may need to go back further.' He consulted his list, 'We must see the owner, who is..?'

'Mr and Mrs Castillo. They own and run the two casinos.'

'Okay, give Inspector Knowles here their details. Give him the list of staff....oh, give him everything.'

Knowles rolled his eyes in mock despair and said, 'Thanks, Mickey. Okay, Mr Holmes, these security tapes?' Holmes led the way to the main security room.

Madson took one last look around the storeroom and tried to see what Dobbs had seen that he'd missed. That one patch on the wall, so feint, so easily overlooked. They'll take all fingerprints, but he knew there'd be too many to get a clear picture. He needed to get Decar's prints first.

'Mr Holmes, before you go?' Holmes turned back. 'Did Decar have a locker in the staffroom?'

'Yes. All the staff do. They must wear uniforms and need to change out of street clothing. I'll get the keys and join you in there.'

The locker was empty, but Madson found an S.O.C.O. tech still on duty and got him to do a full fingerprint workup inside. Somewhere in that lot, we'd find our mystery man, thought Madson. Once we've found him, the rest will follow.

He hoped.

Martin Dobbs sat in his darkened office and thought through his day. His kingdom was the definition of clutter. Paper, open boxes, waste bins, hanging certificates on the wall, nothing was tidy. It seemed he'd added every personal item from the day he first arrived and had left it there. Elgar was quietly playing on his music centre buried on a shelf, but he heard none of it.

The bottom drawer was open, but the bottle as yet untouched. The handset of the telephone was covered in papers and within reach, but as yet not used. Darkness was visible through the small single, dirty window. It slowed his thoughts and allowed him time to think. It was moments like these that produced his best ideas. Stimulated his creative thinking.

He'd felt a strange high as he reviewed the clues and confirmed his explanation of the solution to the case. He smiled and thought back to Madson's face and that of the smug Knowles. They would learn to appreciate him soon.

The music washed over him as his eyes drooped. He was strangely weary, a reaction he supposed from the high excitement of a new case. Martin stood up, suddenly motivated. He moved into the main department office and cleared the working wall, referred to as his Wonderwall. He pulled out strips of tape and made a lattice of boxes in a grid pattern. Ranged from left to right, would be the suspects and characters in the plot. Top to bottom was the time line. Connect characters to a timeline and you had a better, more visual story to ponder over. Even his more junior members of the team would understand and appreciate his system.

He was aware he'd been a figure of fun with the team. He knew the nicknames they'd branded him with. Of course, it hurt the ego, but he knew his time would come. In fact, it was already here, but they didn't know it yet. He'd wait for the team to return before filling in the Wonderwall.

Martin moved to the TV and turned it on. He muted the sound and pressed the buttons to get the financial channel. He studied the stocks and shares a

moment and grimaced at the lack of progress his meagre investments were making. One day he'd be a bigger player, in a bigger market. This he knew with conviction. For now, he needed just to dabble. Not over-stretch himself, just familiarise himself with the workings of the system. Understand it better, begin to make it work for him.

He sat back at his desk and poured a small whiskey, which he sipped in appreciation. He'd given in to this luxury indulgence. Martin would need to make this glass last.

He looked at the phone. Calling his wife was a harder indulgence to resist.

Chapter 7 – Turnover the cards

May 17

Billy sat through his third cup of coffee in the tiny café in East London. He hated this area; it reminded him of everything he was not. Poor, desperate and striving. He'd been waiting for over an hour now and he vowed not to let Rigā keep him waiting this long again. Next time, if there was a next time – and he hoped not – next time he'd be an hour late himself. See how Rigā liked it!

The cheap plastic construction of the dining area irked him. He liked softness, calm colours, designer thought-to-concept. Not plastic table, chairs and utensils. He would've made this café look like a palace.

The bell on the door tinkled and Rigā entered with Jack just behind him. Billy noticed Jack scrutinised everyone in the room before joining them at the table.

'My friend, Billy the Cashino. How are you?' said Rigā with great warmth.

'Late for a meeting. Where the hell have you been? You said two, it's now nearly three.'

'Meetings, meetings. We all have meetings, friend Billy. Me too. I have been meeting with my grandmother. Okay, not a meeting, on the telephone. She sends her regards. Oh, no...she doesn't. She hates you for what you have done with her Queenie. She curses you, in fact. Hiss, hiss, hiss, I got for two minutes. She took a lot of calming. But I did in the end.'

'What do you want?'

'To calm my grandmother. I said I will make you pay. Find a punishment fit for the crime, no?'

'We're back on that, are we?'

'No, not back on it. Never left it. Unfinished business, Billy. We have to honour the grandmother. It's what she wants. You want curse lifted, or not?'

'I don't believe in all that mumbo, jumbo.'

Rigā's face hardened. 'You not talk like that about my blessed grandmother. She who predicted us meeting. Where mumbo and the jumbo there, friend Billy? No mumbo and jumbo, just fact.'

'Okay, sorry. What do you want?'

'We have to forget the William of the Conqueror. It is no good now it's been unfortunately robbed of the chips. We need to look and see what we have in the Castle of the Windsors. I need you to take me back there and have another looky see at the place. Something will come to mind, I am sure.'

'With Queenie...and Jack there?'

'I think so. More... de crezut...'

'Credible.' Jack said quietly.

'Credible it is. Tomorrow. We go looky see in the evening. I see you inside there.'

Billy leaned forward and dropped his voice, 'The police interviewed me yesterday.'

'Of course. You are the owner of the robbery place. Why not interview you?'

'I'm sure they know about me giving you the key.'

A hardness came into Rigă's voice and Jack's face changed into a scowl. 'You didn't mention us, did you?'

'No...no, of course not.'

'Then how they know about a key?'

'They've guessed. Only a few people have a key to that safe. I'm one of them. I'm a suspect.'

'So, they arrest you and throw you in the prison?'

'No. I'm here aren't I?'

'So why you worried? No arrest, no suspect, no?'

'They'll be back, I'm sure.'

Rigă shook his head. 'No, no, no. Next time suggest, don't tell them, just suggest, the safe must had been pick-pocketed. By the master criminal who organised everything. Of which you know nothing.'

'But they'll be watching me. I can't get involved in one of your...hare-brained schemes. They're watching ME!'

'No brain of the hare scheme. Not me. I just want to look around your Castle Windsor. Is all. Police soon forget you. A few weeks' time you can do what you like. We can ALL do what we like.'

'My wife is also giving me hell too. She somehow blames me for this.'

'She evil woman, your wife.'

'You're telling me.'

'I AM telling you. She is evil.'

'I'm not sure she's that.....'

'Look. I made a mistake. I could not do business in the William of the Conqueror, no?'

'I told you it was a tough nut to crack. But would you listen?'

'Anyway. Nut, no nut. We start again and this time, Cashino, we make lots of money. The two of us, no?'

'I don't want to be involved, Rigă. Is there not some way I could...you know just pay you some cash and you go away?'

'What? Leave my friend, Billy. No. I don't think so. You have no cash with evil wife – she has cash. We have unfinished business and I do not allow unfinished business. Tomorrow, eleven o'clock, I see you in the Castle of the Windsor's. Do not be late.'

Rigă and Jack left the café. Jack gave Billy a last stare of hatred before closing the door with a dinging of the bell.

Billy watched the flow through the gaming rooms in the Windsor Castle. He couldn't help the thrill of knowing he was earning money from most of these people. The odds were always stacked in favour of The House. So, he couldn't lose. The way Laura ran the finances, he wouldn't be haemorrhaging money from the business and so profit was the bottom line, middle and top.

He waited at the top of the sweeping main stairway that was designed to impress the clientele. It added grandeur to what was still an activity that carried a stigma with the public. The public that didn't like to gamble that is.

He knew Rigă would be late and looked at his watch. Nearly midnight. What was it with the Romanians, always an hour late?

Billy was set in his mind to resist all Rigă's approaches tonight. He would not get sucked in some seedy exploration of his business. He'd rid himself of the pesky Romanians. He'd be sorry not to see Queenie again. But then, seeing Queenie had got him into this particular pickle.

He stiffened as he saw Rigă and Jack enter the revolving main door. They were dressed smartly in dark lounge suits and ties. They looked relaxed as they looked around and conversed briefly. Jack went to the cashiers and paid cash for chips.

Billy felt a light touch on his arm and turned to see Queenie beside him. His heart raced, she looked drop-dead gorgeous. Her flowing gown left nothing to the imagination, and he had a good imagination for her body.

‘What’re you doing here!’ He whispered unnecessarily. He glanced down at the main entrance and saw Rigã looking around while he waited for Jack. ‘If they should see you....!’

‘I said I was powdering my nose. Does anyone really do that anymore?’

‘If they see us alone....’

‘Calm down. They won’t. Come back here.’

She gently pulled him away from the balcony and into a wide corridor. People came and went without glancing at them.

‘I wanted to say...goodbye.’

‘Oh.’ Was all Billy could say. His heart was mixed with sorrow and relief.

‘I’m on a new course now at the centre. It’s a little drug, a little psychology and a little therapy. It is working, Billy.’

‘Good. Great. Careful of the drugs.’

‘Oh, they know what they’re doing. I don’t think of sex all the time now. Often, but not all the time. And when I do – I think of you.’

‘You’re very sweet. But don’t tell your brothers that, okay?’

‘Okay. When I’m fully recovered, perhaps we can meet again. As friends, of course.’

‘Of course. I would like that.’ he lied.

‘So, until that time, I wanted to say goodbye for now and give you a little gift.’

‘That’s very sweet of you. What is it?’ His heart rate increased

She pulled an A5 envelope from her handbag and gave it to him with a blown kiss.

‘It’s worth more than money and shows I really do care for you, Billy. They are photographs of people having sex.’

‘I don’t want porno pics!’

‘No porno. Your wife.’

‘Laura?’

‘Yes, Laura. When she’s been...what’s the word? Indiscreție...indiscrete. Use them as you will.’

'Laura?'

'Yes, evil Laura. Having sex with men.'

'Where did you get these?' said a stunned Billy.

'I asked Rigă to do me this favour. He was not willing, but I told him straight, I never wanted my Billy to get hurt, in trouble, or upset in any way. I made him promise me that – and Jack, too. They followed your wife and got those. Now you can tell her go to the hell, right?'

'I just can't believe this. Laura?'

'Your evil wife. She kept you under the thumb, so she can have her fun, no?'

'What's she going to say when I show her these?'

'What can she say? Sorry? You are more equal now, no? Unless she finds out about me right now.'

'Good point.'

'Both Indiscreție, yes? As long as she doesn't know - perhaps you can start all over again? New ground rules.'

'I don't know what to say.'

'Make sure the evil one doesn't find out about any of your Indiscreție. So be careful with Rigă. Don't make him tell the evil woman about you and his sister. Right?'

'I really want nothing to do with Rigă and his....'

'Rigă is a very smart man and will figure something out for all of us. Just do as he asks. He will not allow you to come to harm. His homeland values may have a little....not too honest approach, but he is good man.'

'I still don't know....'

'I must go to them now. I will see you in a moment.'

Queenie reached up and kissed him softly on the lips. She grinned and hurried off down the corridor.

Billy felt himself changing his mind again. She was so beautiful, everything he wanted in a partner. But she was dangerous to be around. He must hold strong. He just couldn't risk seeing her again.

He opened the envelope and looked at the photographs. It was clearly his wife and some man he'd never seen before. She was certainly paying the stranger more attention that she had with Billy for many years. Billy felt horror, anger and

a sense of betrayal. But remembered he was exactly like that with Queenie. Laura would have felt the same had she seen similar photographs of Billy's bedtime activities.

Billy felt tears coming into his eyes. It was all getting too much. He was to blame, he caused all this. Then he looked at some other photographs and realised they were different men, in different beds. The anger rose again.

He would confront Laura and ask her what she thought she was doing? She would break down in tears and apologies and be a subservient wife from then on. Bollocks, she would. She'd throw it back in his face and ask why she had no photos of him and his whores.

So, what to do with them? He decided he would keep them and wait for an opportune moment. He'd make sure there was a long period without him getting caught with other women. Then, should she be difficult one day, he'd confront her and say how tolerant he'd been with her ways. Now it's about time she allowed him some leeway.

He was sure she'd blame him for the poor marital arrangements they had developed over the years. But it takes two to tango, he mused. Or, in this case, not to tango. But he'd decided. He slipped the envelope into his pocket when he felt a light touch on his arm. He turned and was about to say, 'Queenie,' when he stared into Rigã's smiling eyes.

'Friend Billy. Good evening to you.'

'Rigã, late as usual.'

'True friends never keep account of time. How are you today? Looking ...English.....dapper as ever. Have you seen Queenie?'

'Er...no. Is she with you?'

'Clearly not. You make the joke. She here, but right now, not with her brothers.'

Jack walked up the stairs, always a few paces behind Rigã, covering his back. He nodded at Billy without a smile.

'Jack, nice to see you.' Billy smiled, although felt it inappropriate.

'Rigã!' Queenie's cry came from below and she hurried up the stairs and smiled at Billy.

'You have too long a queue in your restrooms Fix it. More cubicles for the ladies, no?'

'I'll look into it. Good evening, Queenie. You look....radiant.'

'I feel radiant. And lucky. Jack? Chips?'

Jack gave her some chips and with a giggle, she ran off to gamble money.

Rigā leaned forward with a soft menacing tone and said, 'You no seeing my sister, right?'

Billy put on his best smile. 'I'm no seeing your sister. Damn right.'

'Good. Then we can get down to business. Show me around Cashino Billy. I want to see everything.'

Billy walked them slowly through the gaming rooms and hoped they'd get tired and go home soon. Rigā never lost his enthusiasm, while Jack remained silent, watched everyone and had a permanent scowl on his face.

Rigā stopped outside a double door and read the sign. 'What is this Maintenance Room mean?'

Billy sighed and said, 'Nothing of interest. That's the mechanics of the building. Heating, air conditioning, electrics, boiler, all those sorts of things.'

'There is not keypad on this door. All other rooms have keypads. Why not this room?'

'There's nothing of value in it, that's why. The rest have access by a six-figure code. They have safes, or personnel records or other valuable items that need to keep people out. This...is a maintenance room.'

'Do you have the codes for these secure rooms?' asked Jack quietly.

'No. Never. They're changed every day. If I need to go to any of them, I go in with a senior member of staff. No, I don't have the codes. I'd look suspicious if I asked for them now.'

'And you have a key to this room?' said Rigā.

Billy felt a tingle go down his back. Here we go again. 'I have a full set of keys to each venue, yes. They're in my safe deposit box - back in the bank.'

Jack moved forward and whispered, 'We will need a duplicate key to this room. Okay?'

There was no room for argument. 'You get me duplicate key as soon as possible, no?' said Jack.

Billy nodded. It wasn't a serious security issue, unlike the last time. But the last key Billy had given them hadn't been used then and may not be again. He doubted the wisdom of these two brothers in their ability to organise anything.

Rigã said, 'The main security room, on the lower floor. That has a safe, no?'

'It has a safe, yes. But it also has security guards who ARE armed. A smash and grab will not work there.'

'I not smash and grab anything. I not violent and never use guns. Bad things. Get you into trouble. No smash and the grab. No.'

'Good. Glad to hear it.'

Jack was whispering again in Billy's ear. 'The safe in the main security room? Is it left open?'

'You're still thinking along those lines, eh? Well, you're wasting your time. The safe is open during the busy hours, when cash is needed, both going out and coming in. But... it's heavily guarded and you won't be about to get in. Even with a smash and the grab.'

Rigã said, 'My brother is trying to say, when is the safe open?'

'As I said, during the busy part of the shift. From about eleven to two in the morning, normally.'

Jack breathed, 'Then it is shut and locked?'

'Yes.'

'And the guards remain?'

'Yes. Then, when the casino shuts, all money is put inside, and it's locked. A guard remains there 24-7.'

Rigã said, 'How long to shut and open the safe?'

'I'm not sure. It takes about ten minutes to shut it. A timing device kicks in so it can't be opened for at least thirty minutes afterwards.'

'And to open again?' pressed Rigã.

'Oh...about fifteen minutes, I suppose. Why?'

Jack said, 'What set of actions cause the safe to be closed?'

'Oh...not being required. An emergency of some kind. Why?'

Jack and Rigã conversed quietly in Hungarian and ignored Billy. He began to sweat. These two would force their way into the room and get themselves caught. He just knew it.

Rigã said, 'What is the busiest time in this casino? When do you normally have the most cash in the safe?'

‘Wait, a minute...’

Jack said menacingly, ‘A simple question. Just answer.’

‘Uummm...most Saturdays. After midnight. The busiest time of the week.’

‘Any...special events coming up? Like your delegation from the conference in the Conqueror?’

‘Uumm.. Yes. We have a high-roller’s party due on the ...19th June. I think it is.’

Again, they conversed quietly in Romanian.

Rigã said, ‘The security room, is not at street level, no?’

‘No. Everything’s below street level. Except for the reception hall and bar. Why?’

‘And everything kept cool by the air vents?’ Jack pointed to a grill above their heads.

‘I see what you’re thinking. No, no. There are no access tunnels or air ducts in the safe room. Not big enough for anyone to crawl through. The security designers thought of that long before you did.’

Rigã made a false smile and nodded. ‘You have been a most helpful host, friend Billy. We go gamble and put money in your pockets now. Sometime, we may put even more money in your pockets, no?’

‘If you say so.’

‘I do say so. You just heard me. Come. Show me how you play the Blackjack. Named after my brother, no?’

‘Sure. Why not? I must leave you a while, I have things to sort out. I’m sure you understand?’

‘Of course, Mr Cashino has to earn his living.’

‘Good. This way.’

Rigã smiled a more genuine smile and said, ‘The next time we meet, it will be to give you your cut of the profits and your debt repaid. It will satisfy the grandmother. I buy her a new caravan. It will be all over.’

‘Let’s hope so.’ said Billy, with more conviction than he felt.

Chapter 8 – Palm a card

May 19

The evening was warm, and the river looked calm and peaceful. Couples walked their dogs and kids fed the waterfowl. It was an idyllic English Spring evening. Damien Dwyer sat on the bench and watched the people enjoying the Thames towpath. He sat so he could see the car park behind him and his BMW parked under the trees.

He looked at his watch and noted Rigā was running late, again. The man had serious issues with timekeeping. He heard the throaty roar of a powerful engine and turned to see a dark blue Porsche 911 bump onto the rough car park gravel. With a burst on the throttle, the engine died and Rigā got out with a wave.

‘Still driving that old thing?’ asked Damien with a smile.

‘Until I can find something better, I can afford.’ The men shook hands and gave each other a hug.

‘You really should lock it. There are thieves around.’ said Damien.

Rigā laughed and said, ‘Let’s get the stuff transferred and then it’s your problem.’

They both took a casual look around and saw no one particularly suspicious. An old man sat on a bench seat near the river reading a book. A mother and child sat on another seat. A young man was asleep on a bench. Rigā opened his boot and the two men transferred three large holdalls into the boot of Damien’s BMW.

‘Three million quid doesn’t look much when bundled like this, does it?’ Rigā smiled.

‘Large denomination notes?’

‘Nothing smaller than a fifty.’

‘It’s all money. Easy come...’

He shut the boot and locked it. They walked away and sat on a bench, facing the cars.

‘All accounts settled?’ asked Damien.

‘Yep. Just under four million from the whole project. Two and a quarter from the cashing in of the chips and one and a half from the sale of the rest of them.’

‘My contact came through with a good rate for you?’

‘Yep. De Silva gave us sixty pence on the pound.’

'You should've got more.'

'Sure, we should. But the night before we went into operation? Lucky he came across at all, really. This was very tight you know. Sell the chips and two nights later cash them in. The following night makes the big cash in. Very tight.'

'Sorry about that. Just the way things worked out. The team now all paid off?'

'Yep. Petre Decar got his £200,000. I took my 150 and Jack a hundred. The cashiers earned on commission and got £32,000.'

'Queenie?'

'She had her hundred up front. The other hundred I just settled.'

'Expenses?'

'£730,000. Making an overall profit of three million, which you have in your weighed down boot. A tidy profit for you.'

'Some of it. We've expenses already running for the next job. How did Chopper go?'

'I saw him the other night, and he's nearly ready. Nice job.'

'Good. We'll discuss that next week. So, to finish up, how's Queenie? She happy to stay in character for the next project?'

'Delighted. She likes the long con. Says she's just as happy with one regular client than numerous ones. Some woman that.'

'You can say that again. Not met her myself. Looker?'

'If you like the slim, ethereal type.'

'Okay. Keep in touch with her. We need Billy on a tight rein. You okay to continue as Rigã?'

'It is my...how you say.... Plăcere ...pleasure.'

'Where did you learn Romanian?'

'Girlfriend. Long time ago. Another life. Jack's getting pretty good at it too now.'

'He okay to stay on board?'

'More than happy. We're both looking forward to the percentage of a very large haul. Thanks to you.'

'My pleasure. I'm delighted to have such professionals on this. Any problems I need to know about? Any hitches?'

'No. Not really. The scam with Trei went really well. Good idea of yours. While the manager was worrying what Trei was up to, the cashiers went into overdrive and did the business. The key worked well, too.'

'Billy gave it up without a fight?'

'Sure. He's a pussycat. Anytime he resists, we unleash Queenie on him. He's as good as gold.'

'The photos of Billy's wife? No problems?'

'Nah. She's totally unsuspecting. I'm sure she doesn't credit Billy with enough smarts to figure out her misdemeanours. She gets rid of him when she wants a little roll in the hay. He'd never have guessed. I suspect that's why she let him have his yacht - he's out for the whole day.'

'That's all very good. That's about it for now I guess.'

'Stop fiddling with that ring. Why does it mean so much to you?'

Damien grinned as he said, 'Long time ago. Another life.'

'People don't wear sovereign rings anymore, in case you haven't noticed. It sticks out like a sore thumb.'

'I don't comment on your pronunciation of the Hungarian vulgar verbs, don't you comment on my taste in expensive jewellery.' Damien said with a grin.

The man currently calling himself Rigã stood up. Damien stood up too and walked back towards the cars. They shook hands.

Damien said, 'My office. Tuesday at ten. Try not to be late.'

'I won't.'

'You will. And watch that heap. It's a death trap. Take care.'

Rigã nodded and squeezed himself into the car. With a roar the motor started, he backed the car gently out and drove away sedately.

Damien stood looking at his full boot and smiled. Three million in profit that was a good haul. This project was cheap to set up and execute. Now, on to the next one, with even richer pickings.

He hoped.

Chapter 9 - Counting the cards

June

The flat was very sparse and bare. A single bedroom, a small kitchenette, bathroom and sitting area. Reasonably well maintained, clean and tidy. Madson moved slowly around, lifting and moving things that could reveal any clue who lived here. It surprised him at how simple and barren a life this person had led for over six months.

Petre Decar had rented the place for a year and paid a month in advance. The landlord said he was hardly ever there and was as quiet as a mouse when he was. It was clear to Madson that Decar didn't live here at all. He was just there long enough to reply to any answer phone messages left by the casino. It was just an address to provide credibility for employment.

Madson noted the absence of photographs, TV, radio, or even reading materials. Decar spent only a few hours a week there. So where was he the rest of the time when not at the casino working?

Madson sat on a chair and stared at the walls. He'd stuck the rest of the team in the office watching hours of surveillance videos of the casino. He was glad to be out of it. But Dobbs would expect him to come back with something.

The case seemed excessively complicated. There were quite a few people involved, in what was really a simple robbery. But Madson reflected - to get the chips cashed in and a large enough sum of money carried away, it took several people and lots of visits to the cashiers. It surprised him the casino didn't have a warning system in place. But if they weren't expecting an onslaught, why be suspicious?

Billy worried him though. They'd interviewed the casino owner, and he seemed very nervous. Dobbs didn't seem to think Castillo had any involvement, but Madson was sure there was something behind the increased insurance deal. Did Billy know something would happen? If he did, he must be part of it. It still puzzled Madson why Dobbs said to let him go without further questions or even following up on Billy's statement. That was just the legwork and grunt job Dobbs would normally give to him.

With a sigh, he stood up and left the flat. He was due to hold an update meeting for the team.

The team looked at the Wonderwall and tried to absorb all the details at once. Grainy photographs of suspects were linked by strips of tape or ribbons. Handwritten notes covered the spare spaces. Madson stood back and studied his handiwork.

The wall was the brightest spot in the whole room. The walls had long since faded from white to off-grunge. The strip lighting giving the occupants a ghostly pallor. The desks and chairs were miss-matched, acquired from other areas, where they had alternative purposes. The coffee machine worked, occasionally. There were no windows, therefore no clue as to the time of day or night. As a working environment, it was not inspiring, but it was all the departmental budget allowed for.

Madson looked at his colleagues, Dave Knowles and Robin Jackson and saw them frown. Robin was the first to speak. 'All those people involved? That's a bigger operation than we first thought, Guv!'

Madson said, 'We've now studied all the tapes and narrowed it all down to these people. Here, this line here. These are the people who cashed in the chips. Eight of them. Here, this empty box, Petre Decar, inside man. Photo from his job application. Opened the safe and took out the chips to the skip. These two here collected the rubbish bags and drove away. That's eleven. We need to check if there was even more.'

Madson stood and pointed to a still photo from a video clip. 'These two here, collecting the bags. They're obviously disguised. Could they also be on the cashing-in team? I don't think so. We have all these stills from the casino surveillance and we can see all these suspects have appeared at the teller several times a night for two nights. Okay, they have wigs, some make-up and other small items to disguise themselves, but there're only eight of them. None look like the two tall men with the truck.'

Knowles said, 'You couldn't get anything from the truck's plates?'

Madson shook his head, 'Too dirty. Deliberately, of course.'

'So, we just have the cashiers to go on for now?' asked Knowles.

Madson nodded. 'We've run a check against known felons and by cross-referencing on the central database, we've come up with an identification of six of them. Here are their mug shots next to the surveillance shots. Some are obvious, some are not. Now we have to find them. Take two each and go and get them in here. Then, we need to get out there and find the other two.'

'How're we going to do that Guv?' asked Sam.

'The usual. Knock on doors, local knowledge, ask a policeman.'

For the next few weeks, the C.I.D. team of Mickey Madson, Dave Knowles and Robin Jackson ploughed through the mind-numbing details of a police investigation. They added the slowly gathered facts to the ever-expanding Wonderwall. But a fuller shape of the investigation failed to materialise.

Madson organised the troupes as best he could, delegating investigation aspects between the three of them. Dobbs was now noticeable by his absence. He'd been seconded onto another emergency case by their Chief Inspector, Ronald Cummins.

Madson didn't know whether to be pleased or pissed off by this. On the one hand, Dobbs wouldn't interfere or mess about with staff delegation. On the other, they were short-handed and whatever results from the team produced, it would be open to criticism by the often acerbic Dobbs.

The days were long, and the interviews seemed interminable, but there was a light at the end of the tunnel. Then, there was the end of the tunnel. Madson had achieved all he thought they could. Now the process of making sense of everything had to be tackled.

Madson wandered into another office to try to find Dobbs. He thought he'd better keep him informed of the hours put in on the case and the limited progress. Dobbs was out, but Madson's opposite number greeted him with a grin.

Over coffee, they compared notes on their mutual boss. It quickly became clear to Madson that the two faces of Dobbs were quite different. Dobbs effect on the other case was minimal. In fact, Inspector Ross had little good to say about Dobbs' ability as a detective. Madson felt he had to defend his boss and said how intuitive Dobbs had been with the casino case. Ross laughed and asked Madson to take Dobbs back.

The two men parted with a handshake and promised to keep each other informed. Madson returned to his office puzzled. He knew Dobbs wasn't the best detective in the world, but more recently Dobbs had shown how surprisingly good he could be.

Madson stood and looked at the Wonderwall and rubbed his chin in thought. It all started with Petre Decar. He was the inside man. He smuggled the chips out of the casino which was picked up by two men, now thought to be someone called Rigã and someone who called himself just, Jack. These two men then ferried a series of people round between the two casinos to cash in the stolen chips. It seemed simple, but a few items didn't add up for Madson.

Madson realised someone was standing behind him. He turned to see Dobbs studying the board.

'Hello, Guv. Case solved?'

'Which case do you mean? Not this one, I see. What's happening?'

Madson gave Dobbs a rundown on the progress so far and Dobbs leaned in to study the Wonderwall more closely.

'So, from security recordings, you've tracked down everyone that helped cash in the chips, right?'

'Yes, Guv. Bloody hours of repetitious video, but we cross-referenced these eight people. They changed wigs, clothes and even make-up. But we're sure there's only the eight.'

'And where are they now?'

'We located all of them, sir. They're reasonably well-known villains, with long petty crimes to their names. All reasonably local and we tracked them down for interviews. That took over two days alone. They all had similar stories, and all confirmed what the others said.'

'These are their names? Nouă, Șase, Patru, Șapte, Opt, Cinci, Trei and Doi? Their given code names. Why those names? They seem.... foreign, are they?'

'Yes, Guv. That's what we thought. Well, the suspects aren't foreign, just their assumed names are foreign.'

'And have you had them interpreted yet?'

'Yes, Guv. We think they're of eastern European origin. Slavic.'

'And they're just people's names?'

'Well, no, actually. They equate to "two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight and nine".'

'Where's number one, then?'

'There isn't. As far as we can tell.'

Dobbs studied the board for a few moments longer before pointing to a photograph. 'This man. Our safecracking thief. Decar. Also, foreign?'

'Yes, sir. We think it means "Ten".'

'What language are we talking about?'

'We're reasonably sure it's Hungarian. Although the word roots travel through a lot of Europe. They mean the same in several languages. Sir.'

'Humm. Rigă? Checked that?'

'It can mean "King", Guv. In Hungarian, anyway.'

'Hummm. And we have a Jack. Jack means....Jack. This is a pack of cards, Mickey. They've named them after a pack of cards.'

'We thought that might be the case. Though more like a suit of cards. But the Ace and Queen are missing.'

'Are they? You sure? You sure that it's you just haven't found them yet?'

'Possible, sir.'

'The Ace. Could that mean someone at the top? The brains behind the heist?'

'Possibly, sir. Then the Queen could be....his woman? Wife, lover...sister?'

'Don't get smart arse with me, Mickey. These two here.' He tapped two photos. 'They're involved in all aspects. The collection of the chips and the cashing of them. These two were running the show. But we need to get the person above them.'

Dobbs picked up spare cards and taped one to the wall, above all the other segments. He wrote in large letters "Ace". The other he put lower and labelled "Queen".

'We're looking for HIM, Mickey. Get out the files and check the databases, we need to get a list of anyone we know capable of this size of a job. Pull them in and get some answers.'

'We've tried everywhere to get some sort of track on Decar, Rigã and Jack, sir. They've disappeared off the Earth. No one knows them, no one's heard of them.'

'They're out there somewhere, keep looking.'

'I still think Billy Castillo has something to do with this, sir. He increased his insurance....'

'You still banging on about that sleazy little git? Next, you'll be telling me he's the Ace in the pack.'

'Well, sir.....'

Dobbs pointed to Trei. 'This guy. There's a link here to....Holmes? Who's he?'

'He's the manager of the Casino, sir. You met him when we were first on the scene....?'

'Ah yes. The large man, slow-witted, I thought. What about him?'

'Well, he actually had the man calling himself Trei in his office, twice.'

'What for?'

'Holmes suspected him of some con, or other...but after a call to the local cop station a sergeant came around and took Trei away. No one's heard a thing since.'

'Really. And what've you done about that?'

'Well we got Holmes in here and he identified this man, calling himself Jack, as the police sergeant. The whole thing was a con. We think it was an escape clause, in case they caught any of the cashiers. Tell the same story as it were.'

Dobbs turned and smiled at Madson. 'You've done very well. With this lot, anyway. Now, how we going to get the rest?'

'We seem to have drawn a blank there, Guv. We've got as much out of the cashiers as we could, but they don't know anymore that can help us with the last three.'

'Five. There has to be an Ace and a Queen.'

'As you say, sir.'

'Where are the eight cashiers now?'

'We had to let them go with a caution, sir.'

'What!'

'We have little to prosecute them with. They have no chips anymore. We have no evidence the chips they had were the stolen ones. And...Billy Castillo and his wife refuse to prosecute them. Bad publicity for the casinos...he says.'

'Why wasn't I informed about the decision?'

'You were away, sir. On another case, I believe. We tried to find you, but Inspector Ross, says you couldn't be contacted.'

'You could've emailed me?'

'We did, sir. But got no response. So, I took it upon myself to go to Cummins and let him decide. He decided. Perhaps you'd like to talk that over with him?'

'I will. Where are these eight now? Can we get hold of them again if we need to?'

'Yes, sir. They're very low level. We know where they live, where they hang out. They're not going anywhere. It's just that we don't have a strong enough case to prosecute them. Frustrating, isn't it, Guv?'

'It certainly is for Cummins. I got an email from him to finish up this case quickly. Fat chance, if he's letting all my suspects go! I need this case, Mickey. I've a feeling about this...something good will come of it for me. Us.'

'If you say so, Guv.'

'The Devil's in the detail, Mickey.'

'So, you say, Guv.'

'If there's a loose end, the case is not closed.'

'I'd go along with that.'

However, Cummins wants an end within a week. One way or another this case is closed within a week. I'd rather hoped and expected more from this case. But there you go. Life sucks. I now have a robbery in Hackney to sort out and it's a bummer of a problem. You can help me with that. Let Knowles and Jackson handle the rest of this. If they get stuck, they can shout for your help. Okay?'

'Whatever you say, Guv.'

'I think you and Ross will get along, don't you?'

'Sure of it, Guv. One thing?'

'Yes, Mickey.'

'Who'll be in charge - out of me and him?'

'Why you, Mickey? Who else? One other thing.'

'What's that, Guv?'

'I think you'll need a bigger Wonderwall.'

The Wonderwall was photographed a week later and dismantled. The photographs were needed as a record, in the event, they reopened the case at any time. A blank canvass replaced it, ready for the next case. Knowles and Jackson watched the blank space for a few weeks, hoping for something substantial to replace the project they had christened "The Missing Ace Case".

Cummins directed them into smaller, less interesting cases. They became disenchanted, feeling left out in the cold and abandoned by Dobbs and Madson.

It was sometime later that the Queen, and the Ace came to light again, and the Wonderwall came back into its former glory.

PART THREE

THE KING OF CLUBS

Chapter 1 – A New Deal

May 18

“Chopper” Harris was a family man. He loved his wife and three kids. It delighted him to treat them as often as he could. His next project would allow him to do just that. A two-week holiday to Disney, Orlando. Just the thought of it got him all excited.

The only recent family trip out, had been to the local fire station open day. That was a real opportunity for Chopper. He took lots of photos of his kids climbing all over the huge red fire engines and water trucks. The sun was shining, and everyone had a good time.

It made such a contrast to his dingy garage where metal was cut and ground. Oil and grease pervaded the air, his hands were always dirty and grimy, even on a good day. The flickering fluorescent tubes added to the overall depressing atmosphere of the workshop. Chopper couldn't even open the barn doors to see his country view. Secrecy was the name of the game and Rigā had insisted that this was a long-term covert operation.

This was the most expensive and time-consuming project he'd ever undertaken. He was used to working on quality cars and rearranging their looks for foreign markets. Clients used him to modify scrapped vehicles and making them fit for the roads again, under new identities. This was how he earned his reputation and the nickname “Chopper”. But this was a much bigger job than any he'd worked on before.

The amount of sheet metal work was mind-blowing. The detail of fabrication and skill needed to make the finished item look real was extraordinary. This was Chopper Harris' toughest professional challenge ever. He knew he'd be proud of his finished work, he hoped Rigā would too.

The flare of the plasma cutter burned through the flat steel like a warm knife through butter. Chopper flipped his mask up and inspected the work. He heard a noise behind him and turned suddenly, fear touched him as he strained through the dim lighting to see who had entered his garage.

Chopper cut the torch and slipped off the helmet as a figure walked towards him. He hoped it wasn't one of his kids or his wife.

‘Nice job, Chopper. Looks really good.’

Chopper grinned and wiped his hand before shaking Rigā's.

‘Not your ordinary little runabout, is it?’ said Chopper with a laugh.

‘It certainly isn’t. Very....grande.’

‘Thanks. Time for a beer? I could do with a break.’

Chopper sat and sipped at his bottle while Rigā walked slowly round his new vehicle. It obviously impressed him.

‘It’s nice to have company and a break. I’ve been working on this bugger for over six weeks, night and day.’

‘Built from a scratch?’

‘No. Too timely and expensive. Too difficult for just me. You said not to involve anyone else.’

‘I did. Very, very important.’

‘So, I got the second-hand basic vehicle very cheaply. I checked the engine and brakes and all that good stuff before creating the shell. It’ll run far longer than you’ll need it for.’

‘Excellent.’ Rigā said with a smile as he chinked beer bottles with Chopper. ‘I have your second payment here.’ He found a clean space to put down his briefcase and opened it. Rigā handed Chopper three large brown envelopes of cash, which he took gratefully.

‘Ta. Much appreciated. You’re pleased with the work so far then?’

‘Absolutely. When will it be finished?’

‘About three weeks, I would guess. When do you need it by?’

‘June 19. That okay?’

‘No problem. It’ll be here and ready for collection.’

‘We return the same night and you dismantle. Completely, no?’

‘Completely, as instructed. Nothing left to identify, even a rivet.’

‘Good.’ Rigā drained the bottle and placed it on a cluttered table. ‘Do the dismantling correctly and there’ll be no comeback on you, no?’ Chopper nodded. ‘If no one knows anything, no one gets into trouble, yes?’

‘That’s the beauty of being out here in the countryside, Rigā. Just an hour drive from Central London, but in the quiet of the countryside. No one sees anything, no one knows anything.’

‘Okay, I go now. I have meeting with other peoples. Thank you. I will keep in touch and tell you time of collection. Balance of payment on dismantles, yes? Good work.’

‘Okay. I must get on too. Good to see you, Rigā.’

‘Bye.’

Rigā picked up his briefcase and took a last look at the huge vehicle in the middle of the garage. He grinned and shook his head as he walked out the door and into the country. A few minutes later the roar of the Porsche sounded and faded into the distance.

Chopper ripped open the envelopes and counted the money inside. The smile on his face broadened as he downed the last of his beer. He opened another bottle in celebration as he hid the money deep in the clutter of his garage. Satisfied it wouldn’t be found, he returned to the welding of a huge sheet of metal.

The grin didn’t leave his face for days.

Chapter 2 – Dealing the cards

June 11

The boat named “Castillo Castle” bounced along the roughening sea. Billy Castillo was in his element, at the wheel of his beloved yacht. Hanging on with a grim smile was Laura Castillo. Billy grinned at her.

She looked almost as attractive as he first saw her at a card table. Her short dark hair cut into a fashionable bob, her large dark eyes captivating as they seemed to see into his very soul. Her heart-shaped lips set in a practically permanent pout, set below the smallest nose he had ever seen. She was of average height but had kept her curvaceous figure well. Taken independently, each feature was not the best in the world. But taken as a whole, she was beautiful to look at.

She tried to smile back and said, ‘Are we having fun yet?’

‘Isn’t this fun?’

‘Not really. Does it ever stop going up and down?’

‘Sometimes it goes sideways. Would you prefer that?’

‘Just stationery would be good right now.’

Billy eased off on the throttles and turned the craft into the swell. He was a good sailor and the sea never made him ill, but his wife was a landlubber. At heart and in the body too.

‘Better, sweetheart?’

‘A little. Are we going back now?’

‘In a minute. Look at the lovely view.’

‘Sea? All I can see is the sea!’

Billy laughed and thought back to the conversation that had started her interest in coming on board his yacht.

Laura had been in a particularly grouchy mood for a few days and everything Billy said or done was a problem for her. She questioned when he would go out for the day, so she could get some peace. She questioned him on his return to the house. Where he’d been and who with? It had annoyed him, then angry and finally he decided enough, was enough.

Billy asked Laura, ‘If I took as much interest in your whereabouts, as you take in mine – what would I find?’

The silence was telling. Billy had photos of her infidelities and, as yet, she didn't know about them. He didn't want to play his trump card, so he thought he'd introduce his knowledge slowly. She covered her silence by leaving the room to use the bathroom.

When she returned, she had a smile on her face. It was a little forced, Billy knew, but a smile was an improvement to a scowl.

'We really should spend more time together, Billy. Perhaps we could both go out on your yacht, sometime?'

It was hard for Billy to hide his smile and the mounting feeling of satisfaction and power as she said those words. Although the shoe was not yet on the other foot, it was at least slipping off her foot. He knew he should take this gently and grinned at her.

'That....is a great idea. But, I thought you didn't like the sea?'

'I don't. But what else could we do together?'

'Point.'

'Okay. I'll prepare a picnic.'

'I wouldn't bother. You may not feel like anything away from land. Let's just have dinner at the Yacht Club when we get back. The bracing sea air will make you ready for something to eat then.'

For a few days, she was surprisingly quiet. She made a point of telling him exactly where she was going every time she left the house. He, on the other hand, said less about where he was going.

The boat bobbed gently in the swell and Billy downed a beer and looked at the colour draining from her face. He felt he should punish her more, for the years of abuse and aggression towards him. But if he did that, he'd be no better than her. Besides, he wanted this new, less tormenting wife, to continue for longer.

'We'll head back then, shall we, dear?'

Her nod was grateful and rapid. He smiled broadly as he turned back to the wheel and opened the throttles. In a smooth graceful curving arc, the Castille powered back to the Marina.

By the time the Castille gently bumped against the moorings, Laura was past caring. Billy tied off and helped her to solid ground. She sat on a bollard and held her head in her hands. She was moaning gently as she waited for her world to return to normal. Billy stood for a moment and stared at her.

'Not a good idea, was it?' he breathed.

She shook her head and quickly stopped, the dizziness was worse. Billy remained silent and looked down the walkway towards the white stucco clubhouse. His heart stood still. Sitting on the edge of the walkway was Queenie. She smiled and waved at him. Billy glanced at Laura to see if she had noticed. Laura's head was still in her hands.

Billy motioned for Queenie to go away. Queenie smiled and shook her head. With a few simple motions, she indicated she needed to talk to him. With one simple motion, Billy indicated she should come no nearer.

Billy moved to Laura and eased her to her feet. She reluctantly let him as he said, 'Come, sweetheart, walk it off. Your head will clear quicker if you move about. Look...go to the Clubhouse and get us a table. Order some wine if you like....'

'God, no!'

'Believe me, you'll be fine in a half hour. Just....get the table and order some wine. I'll finish up here and be with you in about ten minutes. Go on, the walk will make you feel better. Honest.'

Billy put her handbag in her hand and gave a gentle push in the direction of the Clubhouse. Laura walked unsteadily towards the safety of the non-moving building. She'd had enough of the sea for one day. Even for a lifetime. She told herself 'never again'.

Billy quickly tied up and locked the door. He hurried towards Queenie, looking to see any sign of Laura.

'Darling...I've missed you so....'

'What are you doing here? Are you mad!'

'I missed my Billy.'

'That's my wife. If she saw you.....'

'She didn't. I wanted to see you. You're not mad at your little Queenie, are you?'

'Mad...no. Annoyed....possibly. Come over here. We mustn't let her see us.'

He pulled her around the corner of the Clubhouse and was surprised when Queenie kissed him hard on the lips.

'I missed that, Billy.'

'Me too, but I thought you said it was all over?'

'I did, and it is. The treatment is working wonderfully. I no more want sex every hour. But I do miss you, Billy.'

'Good. I think.'

'I just wanted tostay in touch with my Billy.'

'That's nice. But what about my wife there? What about Rigă and Jack?'

'Your wife, the evil one. Who cares? My brothers, I can handle them. I needed to see you, Billy. We must stay in touch. One day I want to ...well, you know what I want to do.'

'But we can't. You said we can't.'

'One day, my Billy. Next time without the desire just to have sex. At a safer and more distant level, no?'

'No. Definitely no. It's far too risky!'

'You no love me anymore, Billy?'

'Look...it's not a matter of what I feel for you, it's more...God, what will happen to us if we do ...anything together. You heard Rigă threaten me!'

'He's a pussycat.'

Billy's mind was in turmoil. He really wanted her back but needed to be finished with all the Romanians for good. 'What's happening with Rigă and the casino? Has he given up on robbing it?'

'I think so. It is so difficult. You very clever man, Billy. You protect too well your money.'

'I tried to tell him....'

'But he say you still owe debt to Grandmother. My honour has not been settled. He will want something from you. You have money now?'

'No. But Laura is more...well...helpful shall we say.'

'Yes, let's say that. She give you money, you give to Rigă. All settled.'

'Not quite as simple as that, Queenie. Nowhere near. However. If Rigă can give me some time...?'

'Jack says it's been two months, and that is a long time for a debt. Jack, I think, is more angry than Rigă. Rigă likes you, Billy, not in the same way as I do. Just as well, eh?'

'Look...I'd better go now.'

'Now? We've just met again.'

'Another time. Somewhere...safer, okay?'

'I am disappointed, Billy.' she pouted.

Billy took a quick look round and kissed her quickly. She smiled. 'That's more like my Billy. We meet again? Soon?'

'Okay. Let me call you.'

'You promise?'

'I promise.'

'How about we meet next Saturday? My brothers are away. I can be free. Saturday night?'

'That's....the nineteenth. No. Can't make it. We have a big night at the Windsor. A High Roller's Party.'

'What High Rollers?'

'Big spending customers. Twice a year we give them a free party. Helps them spend even more.'

'So...you think more of making money than seeing your Queenie?'

'YOU said there would be no more seeing Queenie. You said it. You told me it was all over. Now....?'

'A woman can change her mind. What the heart says goes. No?'

'Yes, well. But I can't come out to play at a drop of a hat.'

'Who's dropping hats? What is "dropping hats"?''

'A figure of speech. Look...another time, not *that* Saturday, okay.'

Queenie put on her practised pout that used to so inflame his desire.

'We can talk later. Just...go now. Please.'

'Okay. You call me soon.'

With her most charming smile, she walked away with a wave. Billy let out a deep breath and braced himself for lunch, with his very seasick wife. The meal was not one of the happiest occasions of their married life. But Laura pulled herself together and ate a salad and a small main course. She restricted herself to water and Billy finished most of the bottle of wine.

When she could talk, Laura only spoke about the business. Billy half listened, his eye out the window looking at the wall where Queenie had kissed him less than an hour ago.

Laura expressed concern the police were no nearer catching the criminals that robbed the casino. It had been several weeks, and they had heard nothing from them. She demanded Billy chase them up. It was the last thing he wanted to do. He knew Madson suspected him and as far as he was concerned, the quicker the case died the better.

Despite the amount of alcohol he'd drunk, Billy had to drive the Bentley home. He drove carefully and slowly and was relieved to be parking in the garage with no road incidents. Laura went straight to bed for a rest and Billy sat on the patio with a brandy, to think.

How was he going to get money out of the casino without Laura knowing? It was a problem he'd lived with for years, but now he needed to solve it quickly. After much thought, he came to a frightening conclusion. He couldn't do it without the help of Rigă.

Damien Dwyer's office was not in a fashionable part of the city. In fact, it was in the most run-down part of the surviving east end of London. Cheap, and not cheerful, it was a bolt hole more than an office. It was in an area near the river, with the last vestiges of wooded areas left in London.

To say it was an office was an understatement. It was a collection of converted farm sheds. The whole area was due for renovation, if they could find the funds from the local council and property developers - the arguments raged on. Meanwhile, the rent was very cheap, with no questions asked.

All the vacancies were now for office space, mostly storage. No one lived in the buildings anymore. No one would want to.

The man, currently calling himself Rigă, sat in a creaky wooden chair opposite Damien and smiled.

'Nice place you've got here.'

'Shabby, chic. That's the look I've gone for.'

'And succeeded, too. Except the chic's left.'

The walls were long overdue a coat of paint and the single window hadn't been cleaned for years, inside or out. A cheap desk and filing cabinet complemented the two chairs. A pile of paperwork sat on the desk, to make the room look like it was being used as an office.

Damien twirled his sovereign ring and looked at Rigā. 'Everything going to plan?'

'Of course. Exactly as planned.'

'Training?'

'Yep. We had an ex-marine for fitness levels and that seems to have upset everyone. We all think we're fit until we have to test ourselves. But that's all fine. Not a strenuous project by any means....'

'But you never know when you have to run. And run and run.'

'True. Anyway. That side's all fine.'

'Equipment?'

'Yep. Chopper's done an excellent job on all that. He's due to finish up tonight, so we're... a few days early. Nothing to drink in here?'

Damien smiled as he pulled a bottle of scotch from a drawer in the desk, with two dirty looking glasses. Rigā held up the glass to the weak light from the window and said, 'Isn't this taking shabby chic too far, Dame?'

'Got to keep up appearances. I have to have a genuine business front to account for the extra income.'

'What possible business could you do from here that justifies your income from the projects?'

'Import-export.'

'Import what, exactly?'

'Surgical Steel.'

'What?'

'Hospital equipment. I have a dummy company in Amsterdam and we sell the same stuff back and forth.'

'You know how to live, don't you? Salute.'

'Cheers. Ben back yet?'

'Yep. Checked in a few days ago. He's seen Chopper's work and driven it a few times around the farm. He's happy enough.'

'Ben can drive anything. All monies accounted for yet?'

'I've paid Chopper and Queenie half. We'll all take a percentage on this one, as long as the haul is good enough.'

It will be. We've chosen the right night, I'm sure. Anything else?'

'Nah.'

'Check in with Billy for the last time. Make sure he'll not be a loose cannon.'

'Okay. That it?'

'Yes.'

'We could've done this over the phone, you know!'

I'm not so sure. Listen.....watch your back on this one. I have a feeling. Can't say exactly. But...I think I'm being watched.'

'By whom?'

I don't know! Just a feeling. Double up on everything. Security, bolt holes, emergency plans. Make sure they've not followed you. Just be extra careful, okay?'

'Okay. You're the boss.'

They drained the glasses and Damien put them back in the drawer.

'Aren't you going to wash them?' asked Rigā with a frown.

'What with? There's no running water.'

'Christ! Is this the best you can do?'

'No. Why pay for something you rarely use?'

'I think like that about my wife, too.'

Damien's face grew serious. 'One more thing. If this should go wrong. Disappear. Leave the country, at least two years. Put those plans into place now.'

'What's the matter?'

I don't know. Just...something. We don't know each other, never did. Okay?'

'Sure. No problem. Is this you losing your edge?'

'No. Just being...cautious. Just in case, okay?'

'Okay. You take care.'

'You too. Now you go first. Check your tail. See you in a few days.'

Rigā drove away from the area, watching his rear-view mirror. There was no one there. Damien was being obsessive. This was all too well planned for anything to go badly wrong. Every possible problem area had been thought through and planned. Exit strategies developed, refined and honed. As soon as he thought it, Rigā wished he hadn't. Being superstitious, he hoped he hadn't jinxed the project.

On June 18 Billy took a call from the C.I.D. and held his breath. He nodded sagely and agreed to everything they said. Laura watched and became more aggravated as she couldn't tell what the call was about. As Billy hung up she launched into investigation mode.

'It was the C.I.D. They want to come and chat with us.'

'Chat? What chat? Have they caught all the criminals yet?'

'I didn't ask them.'

'Stupid. What else is there to chat about? Why didn't you ask them if they know who did it yet? Why isn't somebody under arrest for this yet? Why....?'

'Just take it easy, Laura. For Christ's sake. They just want to chat to us, update us on the investigation. Just calm down. Okay?'

'But it's been four weeks since the robbery and we've heard nothing from them!'

'Let them do their job. Nothing's solved overnight. You watch enough Morse to know that. Take it easy. Just listen to what they've got to say. THEN, you can ask your questions. Quietly, passively. Don't jump down their throats like you do to me. They're just trying to do their job.'

Two hours later, Billy opened the door and was surprised to see Dave Knowles standing there. Knowles smiled and showed his badge. 'David Knowles. Inspector, C.I.D. You probably remember me when we visited your casino? After the robbery? I was with D.I. Dobbs and Inspector Madson?'

Billy grinned and extended his hand, 'Of course. I was distracted then. Where is D.I. Dobbs today?'

'He's on another case....' Billy could see the change in Laura's face at this, 'I'm the officer in charge of your case now.'

Laura couldn't resist, 'Why? Are we not important anymore, or has the case been solved?'

Billy welcomed Knowles into the house and seated him saying, 'Excuse my wife. She's a little tense on this subject. Is there any news? Have you caught anyone?'

Knowles took a moment to take in the splendour of a rich couple's house. The expensive tastes in furniture and furnishings. Not his taste, but with such a large building, something had to fill the spaces.

'As you've been informed, we've caught the people who cashed in the stolen chips. As you also know, you decided not to prosecute them.'

'That was my husband's idea. I never really agreed with it.'

Billy glared at her and said, 'Please go on, Inspector.'

'We've identified the chain of command for the operation, but as yet, we cannot locate all the suspects.'

Laura stood and confronted the seated man. 'So we're no nearer getting any of our money back?'

'I'm afraid not. In fact, if we don't get any more leads soon, we're putting this case on ice.'

'What!' from Laura. 'Our insurers are expecting the police to return at least some money. The bastards are holding back payment because of that!'

'I'm sorry, Mrs Castillo. But there's nothing more we can do. They're a very well organised team and ...well.....there're just no more leads.'

'This is not good enough! Who can I call at your office? Who is your superior?'

'Well, D.I. Dobbs has been taken off the case, so I suppose you need to talk to Chief Detective Inspector Cummins. I have his number here.'

Knowles stood and produced a card. Laura snatched it from his hand and picked up the phone and began to dial. Billy took Knowles by the elbow and walked him into the next room.

'What does putting the case on ice mean, then? No more investigations at all?'

'None, unless something turns up. New evidence, that sort of thing. I'm really sorry about this....'

'That's okay. Just doing your job. Don't mind her, she's having a running battle with the insurance company at the moment.'

'I see. Is that the same company that you increased the cover with?'

‘Still on about that....look it’s a damn good job I did too. I increased everything across the board. Our houses, my boat, the business. Just...the timing seems a little off. But that’s water under the bridge.’

‘Have you implemented the changes we suggested in the casino?’

‘Yes we have. We’ve changed the chips, made them more recognisable and easier to degrade through use. So we can spot a brand new one from a used one. We’ve beefed up the security surveillance. All sensitive areas are now manned twenty-four seven. This is all in agreement with the insurance company’s wishes too.’

Laura entered and threw the handset on the sofa. ‘Bastard’s unavailable. You tell him from me that I’m not going to let this case be dropped. No way.’

Billy held out his hands to calm her, but she shook him off. ‘Don’t get into a state about this, sweetheart. The police have done all they can. Let it go. Push the insurance company if you like, but don’t take it out on them.’

‘We really have done all we can, Mrs Castillo.’

Laura glared at him and looked away. Billy indicated with his head it was time for Knowles to leave.

‘Well...if there’s nothing else I can help you with, I’d better be going, Mrs Castillo.’

‘You’ve done enough.’ was the quiet reply from Laura. ‘Or bugger all, more like.’

Billy waved Knowles off and waited for the onslaught. It was not long in coming. For five minutes she berated her husband for being spineless and stupid. He let the anger subside momentarily before sitting in a chair and turning on the TV. She turned it off and glared at him.

‘What do you want me to do now, Laura? Exactly?’

She spluttered in anger before saying, ‘I don’t know! Something!’

‘Then I’ll watch the match on the TV. For there’s sod all I can do about any of this. Give us all a break, shut up. Go to the beauticians, go to work. Fire a manservant. Eat a warm child. Anything, but don’t take it out on me. Okay?’

She was too angry to speak and walked out of the room. Moments later he heard the front door slam and the Merc start up and drive away with a roar.

Billy watched the football match, seeing nothing. He could feel the new hope of getting money away from Laura slipping away. In fact, he thought, the situation now was worse than ever. With Laura in this mood he could never get

rid of the Romanians. Speaking of which ... if Laura was off to meet her lover – which he was sure she was – he'd give Queenie a call.

He let the call ring for a long time before hanging up. He felt depressed. Things were going from bad to worse. And he was sure there was more to come.

Billy stayed out of Laura's way for the rest of the day. He slept on the yacht that night and awoke to a sunny morning, which helped restore his mood a little.

He threw himself in the organisation of that evening's High Roller party and spent several hours on the phone. During one call, he received another and looked at the identity of the caller and froze. He asked his first caller to hold and pressed the receiving key for Rigã.

'My friend Billy. How are you? Long time no see you?'

'Rigã, look...I'm on an important call, I'll call you.....'

'No problems Quick call. Just to let you know I thank you for the duplicate key you gave me, but I no need it. It's no good. I cannot think of a way into your vaults. You are naughty man in protecting your wife's money so well.'

Billy slowly breathed out before saying, 'Well that's good news.'

'Yes indeed, it means we can settle your debt with cash only now.'

Billy's heart raced. 'We discussed this. I don't think I can get....'

'Of course. Of course. You will be given time. I have decided on one million of your Euros. A good offer that my grandma approves of. All honour settled. Three weeks, friend Billy. I will call in two to arrange collection. Go now, your important call. You must make the money even more now, yes?'

The line went dead and Billy found himself speechless. He reconnected to the other caller and told him he'd call back. Right now he didn't want to talk to anybody about anything. His world was collapsing around his shoulders and he had an important day ahead where he needed to be at his best.

It was early in the day, but a large brandy was necessary. He felt intense relief that Rigã would not rob his casinos. How would he explain that to the insurance companies and the police? But on the other hand, he had to find a million Euros to pay off the Romanian.

He couldn't decide which was worse.

Chapter 3 – A Rigged Deck

June 19

Cashino Billy Castillo was smiling. All his worried thoughts suppressed as he worked the room. His beautiful wife by his side, the epitome of the Hostess with the Mostest. It made the High Rollers feel special as indeed they were. They were pouring money into the Castillo's coffers.

All the drinks and food were free this evening, They treated even the non-regular punters to a special experience. People gambled freely and without reserve. Just the way Laura liked it. She looked at her husband and found it hard to see him as the man she'd argued with earlier. He was relaxed and seemed happy. She knew he wasn't, but then...was anyone anymore?

Billy appeared to be throwing chips at the gamblers in an abandoned, devil may care way. But he was only giving them to the rollers who were not spending enough. He knew his punters and Laura knew her finance. They made a good team when working together. They both knew this but working *together* was their main problem.

The evening wore on into the early hours of the following morning.

The security team were on heightened alert, but even the most diligent employee gets weary in the early hours. Concentration lapses and a nice cup of tea dominated the thoughts of many. The constant patrolling of the gaming rooms and public areas was tiring.

Outside the maintenance area, a couple were hugging and kissing. They seemed particularly alert, each glancing in the opposite direction. From one end of the corridor, a man hurried past them and inserted a duplicate key into the door. It opened easily. With obvious relief, the man, code name "Five", entered quickly. It had worried him about the validity of the key. The whole team had decided it was not worth the risk to try a dummy run first. If caught, the whole project would've been jeopardised.

The couple outside continued their guard duty while Five went about his task.

Five found the box on the wall with the automated emergency services alert system. With a few deft touches, learned from many old cons in gaol, he quickly removed the cover and disabled the whole system.

He next turned his attention to the huge ventilation system. The large motors were whirring quietly, driving air through the ducts throughout the building. High up, near the ceiling, the large duct had a visible panel. Five climbed onto the casing and began to take out the screws holding it in place. He carefully placed the screws into his pocket and held onto the panel. From his jacket pocket, he took out two small canisters. With a pull on their levers, he threw them into the duct. As fast as he could, he replaced the panel as if it had never been removed.

Within three minutes the smoke canisters would emit a dark grey, non-toxic smoke.

Satisfied with his work, he tapped on the door quietly. The two lovers, named Three and Four, opened the door. Five locked the door, and the trio moved down the corridor to their next assignment.

As the first strands of smoke came out of the air vents, the woman code-named Two, pressed the fire alarm. The howling sirens and sudden bright lights took the crowds by surprise.

Outside the security room, Three and Four shouted, 'Fire. Fire! Get out quickly. Fire.' And moved on to the other security areas and did the same.

Two and Five ran through the gambling rooms causing as much panic as possible. Soon there was a swathe of people hurrying for the exit doors. They spilled out into the dark street and the uproar increased as people were nervous about their friends, or the cash they'd left behind.

Paulo Gonzalez was as bemused as anyone. But aided with many rehearsals for Fire Drill, the Duty Manager of the Windsor Castle Casino calmly ushered everyone ahead of him into the fresh air. He was the last out the door and stood looking back into the building that was slowly filling with smoke.

'This is not happening!' he said to nobody in particular.

'What the fuck is happening?' said Laura loudly into Paulo's ear?

'I don't know yet, Mrs C. It looks like a fire.'

'Fire Brigade been called?'

'Yes. I assume so. It's all automatic.'

'Are we safe out here?'

'As safe as anywhere.' In the distance, they could hear a siren wailing. 'Here they come now.' said Paulo with obvious relief.

Billy pushed through the crowds towards Paulo. 'Someone's trapped inside! I've just got a call on my mobile, someone's in the security area. The doors are sealed, they can't get out!'

'What?' said Paulo. His eyes looked for the receptionist and waved her over. He almost snatched the fire register from her hand and looked through it quickly. 'It can't be anyone. All staff accounted for.'

Billy shook his head, 'No. They called for help.'

'Who is it?' asked Paulo.

‘Didn’t say. It just went dead.’

‘Mother of Jesus! We must get them out. There could be others. Here they come.’

The fire engine sped around the corner and screeched to a halt outside the building. Seconds later a support car arrived, blue lights flashing. The crowd parted and stared in fascination at the huge engine. For most, they’d never seen a fire engine so close up.

Four firemen got out of the cab on the other side and hurried round to the crowd. ‘Who’s in charge here?’ one shouted. Paulo pushed himself forward. Laura and Billy followed closely behind.

The support vehicle fire officer said, ‘Please, everyone move back. Nothing to see. Please stay out of the way. You, sir. Stand back from the engine, we need access. Well back, please.’

‘Someone’s trapped inside.’ said Paulo breathlessly.

The officer in command surveyed the scene as two more of his men arrived from the rear of the truck. Both had full equipment with large breathing apparatus kits on their backs. He pointed to the front door and shouted to them. ‘Someone’s inside.’ He turned to Paulo, ‘Where are they? Do you know?’

Paulo nodded and said, ‘Security room. Basement, near the back.’

‘Can we get access?’

Paulo looked at Laura, ‘Well, its security locked, I’m afraid.’

There was a moment’s silence as Laura and Billy looked at Paulo, who just stared at them.

‘We must have access, sir. Lives are at stake here.’ The tension was electric. The driver of the fire engine joined them and the four firemen stood waiting for some sort of decision. They pulled down their helmets over their faces and the breathing apparatus hissed as they sucked in the precise balance of oxygen and hydrogen. They were waiting to get on with their job.

Billy held his breath and looked at the fire officer, now growing impatient. ‘Do we need a code to get in? A key? Anything? Come on, man!’

A chill went through Billy’s body. He recognised that voice. He stared closer at the face behind the tinted faceplate.

It was Jack!

Jack looked at him and stared. ‘Sir, who are you?’

Billy stammered, 'I'm the owner.'

'Do we need a key or anything to help this person inside?'

Billy knew he was doomed whatever he did. He turned to Paulo and said, 'Give them the override codes.'

'But, Mr....'

'Now!' said Billy and turned away into the crowd. He needed time to think. He was getting very frightened.

Paulo looked at Laura who nodded. '587126. That combination will get you into any secure room. Now hurry. Please.'

With a nod, Jack led the way and three firemen followed him. The driver waited behind and stood with his back to the engine. Any inquisitive member of the public that came near, he would gently usher them away. If any could get near enough to him they would hear him quietly humming, 'Rockstar'.

Paulo and Laura watched the firemen hurry unafraid into the now billowing smoke. They both feared the worse. Laura feared the press attention and Paulo his job. They both hoped the firemen could rescue whoever was trapped in the room. Laura wondered who it could possibly be?

Inside the building the four firemen hurried to the secure room and Jack tapped in the bypass code. They pushed open the door and hurried in. Two and Five, who had been waiting down the corridor, quickly followed.

They took one look at the open safe and had to suppress a laugh. The door should have been closed by now, triggered by the automated alarm system. They took as much money and chips as they could carry.

It seemed like hours, but was only a few minutes before Laura saw shapes coming through the front door. Four firemen emerged, two helping out two more people. The survivors had wet blankets draped over their heads.

The driver hurried forward and said, 'Anyone else, Chief?'

Jack shook his head, 'All clear. No one else in there.'

Ben took the two people to the rear of the engine and gave them oxygen. While the inquisitive public were kept at bay by the three other firemen, to give them time to recover. The three firemen, code named six, seven and eight, kept their visors down and eased around the side of the vehicle. Getting ready to get into the cab on the blind side of the public.

Laura said, 'How bad is the fire?'

Jack said, 'We couldn't find it. We think it might just be something chemical. A chemical reaction somewhere, or even electrical. We'll call a specialist clean-up team, they should be here in ten minutes. Meanwhile just stay away from the smoke. We'll get these two to hospital.'

Paulo reached out his hand and shook the heavily gloved fist of Jack. 'Thank you so much.'

'Just doing our job. We'll push on now, if we may, we've had another call. Nothing WE can do here.'

'Sure. Thanks again.' said Paulo with a meaningful nod.

Within moments the firemen had their coughing passengers in the support vehicle and the suited firemen in the fire truck. The engine burst into life, and with a slight grinding of the gears, the unit pulled away and drove off.

Laura found Billy leaning up against the wall. 'What's the matter? You look ill?'

'How're we going to explain this to the police and insurance company?'

Ben Dishman drove the fire truck carefully through the streets of London and out of the inner city. He headed back a different way to the one he'd driven, just an hour earlier.

The mood in the cab was jubilant as the firemen divested their equipment and clothing and pushed them into the especially created space behind the cab. The two civilians in the car soon stopped coughing and were smiling. Ben was whistling 'Rockstar' until Jack told him to stop.

'That went well.' said the ever happy Ben.

'Like clockwork.' said Jack. 'I don't think we needed any of the contingency plans, did we?'

Ben said, 'Nobody had to fake a heart attack by the engine. No one came even close.'

'I think everyone got out and away, long before we moved off.' said Two.

'Well done everyone.' said Jack.

'How much do you think we got?' asked Five.

Jack said, 'Too early to tell. We took all we could carry.'

'We got as many chips in our pockets as we could without it being obvious.' Five laughed.

‘Okay. Just take a moment to calm down before we get to the farm. Work still to be done here. Ben, slow down. It may not be a common site to see a fire engine on the road at this time of night, but not this far from town.’

‘Yes, boss.’

The tightly packed houses gave way to a more sprawled suburbia and with a last turn onto a B road, grass areas appeared in the dark. Within an hour they were pulling into the large barn that Chopper called his office.

The huge engine drove into the garage and Chopper closed the double doors behind it.

‘How’d it go?’ he asked with a grin.

‘Like clockwork’ chimed in Ben.

Jack shouted, ‘Come on, everyone. Transfer the load to the van.’

For the next ten minutes everyone helped unload the clothes and equipment from behind the cab. They opened all the breathing apparatus and the large denomination money stored inside was transferred into holdalls. They placed the holdalls in the back of a dark grey van, which they’d all arrived in five hours earlier.

The clothing and equipment were taken out to a large skip and piled in. When every last item used for the robbery was accounted for, petrol was poured over the skip and they set it alight. It was part of Chopper’s brief to ensure nothing remained that could incriminate anyone. It should be fully burnt out by the time dawn came.

As the blaze lit up the dark country night, the van pulled away and headed for another rendezvous. The barn doors were closed and Chopper started the arduous task of dismantling the fire engine. Destroying any piece that could be identified as being part of the robbery.

Chopper had disguised the main part of the truck using fake rolling panels. The ladders on top were all fabricated, using the original photos Chopper had taken at the Fire Station open day. That seemed years ago now.

Chopper had been particularly pleased with the detail in everything on the vehicle. The control panels, the wheel hubs, everything looked authentic. As Rigã had said, ‘Who really knows what a fire engine looks like close up?’ But Chopper had his pride and reputation to consider.

It seemed sacrilege to pull it all apart and destroy it. But he knew it had to be done. Nothing must remain to connect anyone to the robbery and that included him. He must burn all paintwork off, nothing that could possibly have any

fingerprints on it, especially his. He must reduce even the fake ladders to scrap metal. It was a long job, but once finished, he would get his final payment.

As the sun rose a few hours later the grey van was in a lock up in Reading. It would remain there for years unless someone discovered it by accident. The team had split up to go their own ways. Each with a small cash advance for their services. The rest to be calculated and sent to them by special delivery when all the fuss had died down.

As dawn lit the sky above London, the true impact of the smoke and action of the night became a real nightmare for the Castillos. Once again the police had to be called in to investigate a robbery in one of their casinos.

Chapter 4 – Counting the cards

June 25

The Wonderwall had grown. It now occupied two walls and the familiar faces looked out from the panels as if they'd never been away. Madson stared at it with an initial sense of dread. Six days since the second robbery and not one lead to move on.

Madson watched Dave Knowles taping the new blow-ups into position. The grainy images were taken from the few video surveillance tapes they had, that was not corrupted by smoke. A solitary fireman leaning against the vehicle. Four firemen exiting the building, half carrying the two “victims” of smoke. The courting couple outside the maintenance room. The man who opened the door to the maintenance room. That was all they had for six days of intensive work. Dobbs wouldn't be impressed when he returned from his conference in Canada.

Cummins had visited the office several times but shown no enthusiasm or authority. The man was busy. He was also miffed he hadn't gone to Canada instead of Dobbs. ‘Carry on,’ was his helpful advice.

Madson had been contacted by The Midland Insurance Company who questioned the state of the investigation into both the Castillo's robberies. They were justifiably concerned that this was not a coincidence, and they were going to resist any pay-out until they clarified all matters. Madson had promised a report at some point, when they'd something concrete to go on. It looked like an empty boast at this stage.

One thing was sure, they'd not let William Castillo off the hook so easily this time.

Dobbs called Madson on his mobile and Mickey sighed in trepidation. For the next ten minutes, he updated his boss with the situation. ‘Yes sir, we're covering every angle at the moment. But there's bugger all to go on yet.’

‘Have you searched for the fire engine?’

‘Yes, Guv. We put out requests to all agencies, and no one reported seeing a fire engine silently cruising the streets at three in the morning. I guess that's no surprise, eh? The CCTV coverage runs out after a few minutes and they go off the radar. No sign of them past Wandsworth.’

‘No fire engines reported stolen?’

‘Nope.’

‘Someone has built it to purpose. In that case, round up anyone in the London area that might have built it. No, wait. Make that a radius of a hundred

miles. Round them up, bring them in for an interview and sweat them. Somebody built that bugger to order.'

'Okay, Guv. That's a lot of work....'

'It's a lot of robbery. Cash AND chips. We possibly have the selling on of the chips scenario again. Check who'd handle that amount of assets. Bring them in and sweat them too.'

'Okay, Guv. What about the Castillos? They have to be involved somehow?'

'Possibly. Interview them separately and find a connection. The Devil's in the detail. Anyone searched the ventilation system in the casino?'

'Not yet, Guv. Why?'

'The smoke was false, right?'

'Yes, Guv, there was no fire, but....'

'Some sort of smoke bomb had to be used. Find the device, check its history to see who bought it, you know the drill. Are you being particularly slow on this or what, Mickey?'

'There's so much to do and nothing to go on, sir.'

'Same casino hit twice. Could be the same mob. The faces you got off the video, how clear are they?'

'Some are very good, Guv.'

'Good. Get the Manager of the first casino in, what's his name...Sherlock, or something. See if he recognises anyone. Make the connections, Mickey.'

'We've already asked him to come in tomorrow. He's more than willing.'

'Mickey....that couple you say....kissing?'

'Yes, Guv. They were watching the corridor while matey went into the maintenance room.'

'By kissing, do you mean REAL kissing or ACTING?'

'I'm not sure.....it looked real enough, I suppose.'

'Then they're a real couple, I would guess. Find one, you'll have the other.'

'Yes, Guv. When you due back?'

'Two days' time. I expect some progress, Mickey. This is your chance to shine. Our chance to shine. No screw ups now. By the book.'

'Yes, Guv. Have a good conference.'

'I will. Bye.'

To Madson's relief, the line went dead. He knew he'd thought of most of the things Dobbs had said, but there were only so many hours in a day to follow through on everything. With just the three of them, it was a strain. He looked back at the wall and sighed.

Ron Holmes looked at the Wonderwall and squinted at each picture in turn. He shook his head so many times, Robin Jackson whispered, 'One more shake and his head'll come off.'

In the end, Ron had to admit defeat. 'No one there I recognise.'

Madson smiled, 'No problem. Just a few minutes of video I want you to look at. Here are the firemen getting out of the fire engine. Anything there?'

They ran the images several times and slowly Ron pointed to the screen and said, 'That man there. Waiting by the engine.'

'The driver, yes?'

'That could be Petre Decar, the man who you thought stole the chips at my casino, him. It could be him. Right sort of height and frame. He slouches like him too.'

'Okay, that's something.' Madson said without conviction.

'Guv?' said Knowles. 'One witness said that man was odd.'

'In what way?'

'They weren't sure. They said he was too relaxed. He was whistling and humming and well....one of them said too casual for the situation.'

'That doesn't give us anything....' Madson said.

Ron said, 'Wait a minute. Decar was always humming and singing. What was that song he was always singing? Some quite catchy tune....Rock something?'

'Rockstar?' offered Knowles.

'That's it. I wanna be a Rockstar.'

Knowles searched through a file and said, 'Something here, Guv. Where is it? Here. One of the witnesses said he heard the firemen singing...Rockstar, by Nickleback.'

‘Never heard it!’ said Madson.

Robin started singing, ‘And we’ll hang out in the coolest bars, In the VIP with the movie stars, Every good gold digger’s gonna wind up there, Every Playboy bunny with her bleach blond hair, And well, hey, hey, I wanna be a Rockstar.’

‘Good rendition, Rob, but I still don’t know it. But one thing looks likely, our driver there is Petre Decar.’

‘At least that’s one down, Guv.’ said Jackson with a sense of achievement.

By the time Dobbs walked into the office the investigation team felt they had made suitable progress. Madson knew Dobbs wouldn’t admit that, but the less he could criticise, the better.

‘Welcome back, Guv.’ The chorus welcomed Dobbs back into the fold.

It took only a few minutes to update Dobbs, and he was raring to go. ‘Who’s first?’ he asked, with what passed as a smile.

‘The Castillos, Guv. We have them in, kept separate.’

‘Okay. I’ll see them both together, I think.’

Madson looked puzzled and glanced across at Knowles. ‘Really, Guv? Might they be in this together? We should try to get separate statements....?’

‘Where are they?’

‘Holding room three and four.’

‘Pull them into Two. Let’s go.’

This was the second time Dobbs had interviewed Billy. He didn’t like the first, and he knew he wouldn’t like this. He showed his nervousness and was surprised at how calm Laura looked. But then, she didn’t have his involvement in the two robberies.

Billy was most fearful of what revelations would come from all this. He dreaded Laura finding out about Queenie and any relationship with him and the Romanians. He’d thought intensely about what he could say, what he should say, and especially what he couldn’t say.

Billy sat tense, waiting for the first strike by the brooding, and as yet silent, C.I.D. Detective Inspector Dobbs.

‘Mr and Mrs Castillo. I feel it only fair to warn you, it looks to us, like you’re both implicated in these two robberies of your casinos. The connection is strong and we’ve some evidence that we think is enough to prosecute. If we’re successful, you could be looking at a prison sentence of up to five years - each.’

The long stunned silence from the Castillos showed the shock they were feeling. Neither could speak and just looked at each other.

‘What?’ Laura was the first to speak.

‘We’ve done nothing wrong...’ Billy added.

‘That’s for you to convince us?’ said Dobbs with a half-smile, that looked more like a grimace.

Dobbs moved around the room and sat opposite the couple, next to Madson.

‘Shouldn’t we have a lawyer here?’ asked Laura.

‘That’s entirely within your rights. But as soon as he represents you, the world changes. We’re limited in what we can do to help you and you’re limited to what you could do to help yourselves. So I thought we’d have this little off-the-record chat first, so we all know what’s happening. I’m sure you’ll agree to something, which will be for your benefit.’

Billy looked at Laura who stared at him in disbelief. He knew she was blaming him already.

Laura said, ‘And we can call a lawyer and stop this conversation whenever we want?’

‘Whenever you want, Mrs Castillo. Now.....we’ve looked at all the telephone calls you’ve both made over the last few months....’

‘What?’ from Billy.

‘.....and we’ve got a few numbers that we think are of interest. Perhaps, Mrs Castillo, you could identify people from the numbers?’

Dobbs pushed a list across the table and Laura looked at the phone numbers. She seemed to lose her steadiness as she pulled a pen towards her and started to write names next to numbers.

‘You too, Mr Castillo.’

Another sheet and another listing began. As they finished, Madson took her sheet and compared the names with another list he had in front of him. ‘Maurice Denham, Mrs Castillo. Who’s he?’

Laura said, 'The agent for the insurance company. We're trying to negotiate a settlement on the first robbery. Now we've got another one. What a mess!'

Madson pushed Laura's list back to her. 'And the rest?'

Laura pointed to each of the ten names and said, 'These are all friends. The rest are all employees. Easy to check on them.'

'We have.' said Madson.

There was a silence as Billy finished his list. Madson took it and glanced at it before passing it back. Billy took a deep breath and ticked with a pencil a selection of names. 'Friends. Most of them probably the same as Laura's. Employees, the same.'

'And the rest?' queried Dobbs.

'These are business associates. Well...most of them. These two, well.....they're not really...they wanted to be.'

Dobbs read out, 'Rigã and Queenie. Colourful names. Can you vouch for these people Mrs Castillo?'

'No, afraid not. Billy has many business contacts I don't deal with. Billy's the PR man.'

'I see.' said Dobbs. 'I...get these feelings, Mr Castillo. Call it intuition, call it what you like. But these names speak to me. Perhaps you can enlighten us. Who are they?'

Billy blew out his cheeks and went into his rehearsed explaining. 'They're Romanian. They came to me...oh, a few months back now and said they wanted to do business. I didn't think it would come to anything...and it didn't. They wanted to get into the casino business. I wasn't sure, but I thought they wanted to run some sort of scam. So I just said I wasn't interested.'

'The last call was very recent. So you're still in touch with them?' said Madson.

'Yes. They're very persistent.'

Dobbs said, 'If you thought they were crooks, why not call the police?'

'As I said, I couldn't be sure. They have such a phoney accent and attitude. Nothing's come of it, so no harm done.'

'Rigã and Queenie. Huummm. Husband and wife?'

'No, brother and sister. They had another brother, Jack...I think his name was. Said very little. I don't think he liked me.'

‘And this, Queenie, attractive was she?’ Laura said, looking hard at Billy.

‘Yes. I suppose she was, in an undeveloped way. But she had two brothers guarding her night and day. I don’t know why they ever involved her.’

Dobbs said, ‘Who agreed to give the bogus fireman the security over-ride code?’

Billy stuttered. ‘I suppose I did. But I didn’t know they were bogus at the time. How could I?’

‘That’s what we need to find out, Mr Castillo.’ said Dobbs with no trace of a smile. ‘They came to see you at the casino?’ Billy nodded. ‘When, exactly?’

Billy screwed his face in thought. ‘It was....they were late, I remember. May 18. I remember because I had to cancel a day on the yacht. Definitely late evening, May 18.’

‘Please excuse us, we need to check on something.’ said Dobbs.

Dobbs and Madson left the two alone. Both Castillos knew they could be monitored, or even recorded, so they remained silent for a while.

Billy sighed and said, ‘I suppose we must install infra-red security cameras now. The police said the smoke was too dense to see what happened. Christ! More expense. Assuming any insurance company will insure us again!’

‘Don’t worry, they will. What’s the chance of us being hit a third time? No need to look for another company. I’ll handle it. So who’s this Queenie, then?’

‘Look. They always came together. They wanted to look round the casinos and see what business they could muscle in on. It wasn’t about this Queenie. Rigã was the main man. He did all the talking, asking all the questions. I didn’t like them. Not even the woman. So I said no. Several times.’

‘Yet you had her number?’ Laura said with menace.

‘It was a backup, in case I couldn’t reach the Rigã guy. As I said, they were pushing. Always keen to get something going.’

They sat for an hour saying little. A policewoman brought in teas and coffees and they were grateful for the distraction. Billy looked all around the room but couldn’t see any cameras or microphones.

‘What’re they doing? Why’re we kept waiting for so long?’ asked Billy.

‘No idea. One thing’s for sure. They think we’re involved and until we can prove otherwise....’ Laura let the thought trail away.

It was a long time later that Dobbs and Madson entered the room. They sat in silence until Dobbs said, 'We've just reviewed the footage from your casino. We looked at that date and the three people are there, just as you said, Mr Castillo. We extracted images and ran them through our records.'

Madson pushed several photographs across the table to Billy. They were of poor quality, but recognisable. 'That's them.' agreed Billy. 'That's Rigă, and that's Jack.'

Dobbs said, 'That's Jon O'Donnell. A huge list of the long cons. Fraud. Theft and robbery. He..... is Darren Baker. Known associate of O'Donnell. Also with a long list of felonies and similar offences to O'Donnell. This woman..... Sharon Wese, also known as Queenie. Prostitute to the stars, they say. Well-known hooker and party girl and known for the long con. Romanian you said, Mr Castillo?'

Billy was speechless. His Queenie nothing more than a prostitute? Rigă not Romanian and clearly not her brother. He'd been had.

'What's a long con?' asked Laura.

Madson said, 'It's a set up to con somebody, that takes place over a long time. Days, weeks, sometimes even months. Like the Peter Decar you hired in the first casino heist? He was conning you for six months. He was also the driver of the fire engine. We're also pretty sure that your Jack, our Darren Baker, was the Fire Chief you gave the security code to. Pity you didn't recognise either of them, Mr Castillo. All this could've been avoided.'

Billy was deep in his own thoughts and was only just registering the conversation. There's no fool like an old fool they say. He felt that way now. How she'd deceived him so well and so easily. What a fool!

At one level he felt relieved that the pressure was off to repay the Romanians. On the other hand he was disappointed that Queenie had been playing him. He felt a slight relief that after all was said and done, it wasn't him that seduced her, but the other way around.

Dobbs said, 'They're all involved in both the robberies. I call them The Deck of Cards Robberies.'

'Why?' was all Billy could say.

Dobbs pulled himself up to his full height and strode around the room. 'Because some clever mastermind had a theme to all this lot. Your first robbery ... you had Rigă, which is Slavic for King. Now we seem to have the Queen. Jack, speaks for itself. They then called the people cashing in the chips ten down to two, in Romanian of course. Adds to the theme.'

'And the second robbery?' asked Laura.

Dobbs smiled, 'Same characters as before, so we can assume the same naming gimmick.'

Madson said, 'So we believe there's an Ace in the pack. Don't we, Guv? We just haven't found him yet.'

'So these people were trying to get at the casino through Billy?' Laura asked with a glare at her husband.

Madson said, 'We doubt it, Mrs Castillo. They probably had all the information they needed, long before they contacted Mr Castillo.'

'Then why....?' Billy left the sentence unfinished.

Dobbs said, 'To keep an eye on you. Keep control. Check the facts. Check the dates and events going on in the casino. You admit yourself that both nights had bumper takings.' Billy nodded. 'Control. That's all. They needed to take full control.'

'And keep the casino owners off guard.' added Madson.

Dobbs said, 'We traced the call you received from the distressed person in the security room, Mr Castillo. It came from a recently purchased mobile phone. They made the call from nearby, but not in the building. Probably from the fire truck. It was just a trigger to get you to give the up-to-date code more readily.'

Madson said, 'I assume you'll want to go ahead and prosecute this time, Mr Castillo?'

'Yes we most certainly do.' said Laura with conviction.

Dobbs said, 'Assuming you're not prosecuted yourself, of course.'

'We had nothing to do with this!' Laura almost shouted.

'We'll see.' said Dobbs. 'We'll see.'

It was a few days later that Madson and his team realised they'd made significant progress. To his surprise, he noted that Dobbs was on a mission. He was on fire; his intuition radar was working overtime.

Dobbs took charge of each interview and interrogation. He had a purpose and a spirit. He also had an opening statement for each that was both awesome and terrifying. To the suspects and investigation team, alike.

'This is my case.' Dobbs would say. 'I intend to solve it and get a promotion. My team also will get promotion and the kudos that goes with it. I'll leave no stone unturned to track down everyone involved. I'll put extreme pressure on

everyone, including my own men, to get the truth. If you have an alibi I don't believe, I'll keep you in gaol until I can break that alibi. However....' Here he'd break out into a smile, that would only look like a sneer. 'I'm willing to help those that help me. Co-operate with the police and we'll help get any sentence reduced. That's my promise. Don't co-operate and I promise to prosecute with such force, as to get the maximum sentence in every case.'

When Dominic De Silva was interrogated, Dobbs held nothing back. He seemed to be convinced they had the correct fence and wouldn't let him off the hook.

De Silva's premises had been searched, and no chips found. De Silva rested on this fact and refused to be drawn into any other scenario. He demanded legal representation and eventually they had to allow him his rights. Once the lawyer arrived, it was moments before they had to release De Silva. They had no hard evidence. Dobbs was furious.

Dobbs ignored any effort to rationalise the situation by Madson and went into his office and slammed the door.

Martin Dobbs knew he was heading for one of his depressed moods and unlocked his drawer. The pill would help, but it took a good half an hour before he felt better.

He clenched and unclenched his fists, fighting the toxic combination of anger, frustration and fear. His eyes squeezed shut as he fought to think of a displacement thought and tried to imagine being in a place that calmed him. There was only one image that ever worked.

He imagined lying in the arms of his wife, his head on her chest. Her shallow breathing calming him. Her hand stroking his hair and her soothing voice whispering to him.

An image from the past, not the present. His anger and frustration increased. The image wasn't working anymore. He needed something more current and real. He reached for the phone and knew it was a mistake.

The tone sounded and his grip on the handset tightened. The ringing stopped.

'Hello?'

He drew breath, 'Alicia, it's me. Don't hang up, I've something to tell you.'

'Martin, we agreed.....'

'I know and I'm really sorry, but this is important. Alicia, you still there?'

'Go ahead.'

‘There’s a big case brewing and it will elevate me to the higher level.’

‘I’ve heard all this....’

‘It’s true. You must have read the papers about the casino robberies. Together they amount to one of the biggest heists in English history. It’s MY case, Alicia. Mine.’

‘I’m....pleased for you, Martin. But you know you’re not supposed to call me unless....’

‘It IS important, dearest. Look, please just let me talk to you sometimes. Just for a minute. Please.’

‘We’ve been through all this, Martin. Both our counsellors agreed we should spend a significant time apart.....’

‘What do they know?’ Dobbs felt his anger rise and with an effort he forced himself to be calm. Conversations with his wife always raised his heart rate and along with it his blood pressure.

‘A lot more than we do, Martin. Is that it? Is that what you wanted to say?’

Dobbs paused before saying, ‘And I love you. Things will change, Alicia. They really will. I will get you back and you’ll see....I’ll make you proud of me. I’ll make you happy.’

‘Take care, Martin.’ The line went dead.

An hour later Dobbs came out and said to Madson, ‘Get the creep De Silva back here, quickly. Keep the lawyer out until I’ve had a word with him.’

De Silva was in a confident mood as he sat opposite Dobbs. He wasn’t even worried about not having a lawyer next to him. This would be just a waste of time.

Dobbs sat on the edge of the table, invading De Silva’s space. De Silva had been in many interrogations and knew the old tactics of the law officers.

De Silva smiled up at his tormentor and said, ‘Can I smoke in here?’

‘It’s bad for your health, De Silva. So is prison - and that’s where you’re going. You can’t smoke in there either.’

‘Are you sure I can’t smoke in here?’

‘You’re still on parole, aren’t you, De Silva?’

‘Nope. Finished.’

'Nope, three weeks yet to go. I just checked. If I charged you now, which I can do, your two-year sentence will take effect. On top of whatever sentence they hand out for the two casino jobs. Another four years, I'd say. Six years in total.'

'That's wrong.'

'It isn't. I have the dates and have double checked. Now co-operate and I'll charge you *after* the parole expires and see what reduction of sentence I can get you. Don't co-operate and you've got a good excuse for giving up smoking. What's it to be?'

Dobbs slid photos of Rigã and Jack across the table.

De Silva took the time to think. He knew he couldn't go back into gaol. It would be a straw too many. At his age of seventy, it could be the end of him. He felt he'd no choice. He owed no loyalty to the man in the photograph. De Silva had only met him twice. He nodded.

'That's the man that sold you betting chips?' Another nod.

'How many?'

'Half a million this time. More the time before.'

Dobbs appeared to think awhile before saying, 'You can't break a habit, can you Dominic? You've been a fence all your life, and it's not going to change. You'll confirm that statement in court?'

'If I must.'

'I thank you for your help with police enquiries, Mr De Silva. You've been most helpful and instrumental in the conviction of one of the main suspects of these robberies. Now an officer will escort you outside, so you can have a smoke.'

They seated the next victims of Dobbs' grand intuition opposite him and Madson. Once again the grand speech delivered and a pointed stare at each of the suspects, showed they were in for a rough time.

Madson said, 'So to recap. You...' he pointed to the young man opposite him, '...were designated "Three". Your girlfriend there, "Four". And you with the key, "Five". Right?' They nodded. 'This man approached you...' He slid a photo of Rigã across the table, '...and offered forty thousand pounds each to be part of this robbery?' They all nodded again.

The girl called Four said, 'If we say yes, we don't have to go to prison. Do we?'

Dobbs said, 'You must be a witness for the prosecution and that'll go some way to mitigate any sentence passed on your part of the robbery. We can't

guarantee it, but we can strongly recommend that you serve only a minimum time, or, if we can persuade the judge, to let you off with a probation. However, you have form - that's how we found you. There's no guarantee. But if you don't co-operate, I'll throw the book at you and blame you for all the parts I can't find a suspect for.'

The three looked at each other and remained silent.

Madson said, 'Where did you get that key from?'

The man looked at his hands in front of him. His receding hair looked white from stress. He'd been to prison so many times another stretch wouldn't hurt. But it wouldn't help, either. He pointed to the photograph.

'Him. Called himself Rigā. He paid me ten grand up front and thirty on the night.'

Dobbs stood and walked to the door. 'Book 'em in, Mickey. Who's next?'

Madson had been more than impressed when Dobbs had looked through the list of possible suspects that could have built the complex and large fire engine. Without hesitation, he'd pointed to one name and insisted that Brian "Chopper" Harris was brought in for questioning. While on his way to the station they would search his premises. They would issue a warrant as Cummins had already agreed to help in any way.

Harris sat and waited a long time before Dobbs and Madson entered. Dobbs delivered his speech and Harris merely smiled.

Dobbs said, 'We've made a complete search of your garage, Harris, and found a few interesting things.'

'If you like rats, you'll find loads of those. Very rural there, isn't it? Nice scenery. I've always wanted to live in the country. As soon as I retired from the illegal motor game, I moved to the country and went straight.'

'Moving story, Harris. We found something that could wipe that smile off your face.'

'Tell me. I'm all ears. What evidence have you planted on me now?'

'You have a large skip outside the main barn, haven't you?' said Dobbs.

'You found that? Nothing gets past you lot, does it?'

'Inside were traces of materials that match those of the uniforms firemen wear and the equipment they use. A more thorough search will reveal parts of a vehicle constructed to imitate a fire engine.'

'What does that mean, exactly D.I. Dobbs?'

‘It means we’ve got you red-handed, handling the uniforms and can put you as part of the team that robbed the casino on the 19th of June.’

‘The 19th, you say. A Saturday. And today’s July the second. Wait, a minute....I remember now. A skip you say? Outside my barn? And you say there’s now traces of material from a robbery on the 19th of May. Now that’s funny.’

‘How funny?’ asked Madson quietly.

‘Because they change the skip every month. The new one came yesterday. I haven’t used it yet, so there can be nothing in it at all.’

Dobbs stood and said to Madson, ‘Deal with this.’ and walked out.

‘Wait, a minute.’ Harris said to Dobbs as he left. ‘You’re saying you’re connecting me with this robbery, by building a fire engine? Take time to think, man. Stealing one is quicker, cheaper and easier! Who’d possibly want to build a fire engine? Are you mad?’

Dobbs had long gone, and the door shut. Harris shook his head. ‘Lying about evidence that ain’t there....well...what can I say, Mr Madson? This won’t look good in court, will it?’

Madson forced a grin as he said, ‘No. It wouldn’t.’

Chapter 5 – Palm a card

July 3

The view over the downs was beautiful. The sun almost at its highest for the year and the rolling countryside was green from the recent rain.

Damien Dwyer sat on a bench and looked at the view thousands of people enjoyed over the year. The natural beauty spot was tarmacked, with tables and benches supplied for those that wanted to picnic and make a day of it.

He looked around at the people using the facilities. A young man and his children. An older couple. A few people sitting in their cars, they must be hot, he thought. Why not enjoy the fresh air and early summer breeze?

Damien twirled his sovereign ring and let his mind drift back to a happier time. He was a younger man and his father and mother always used to holiday on the south coast. His sister and brother were always there too until they became too old for the family holiday. He too reached that stage and went abroad with his friends. It was another time, another world.

He looked at his watch. He was nearly an hour late again. Time slipped slowly by. Damien's eyes drooped, and he slipped into a light sleep. He awoke to the throaty sound of the Porsche driving into the car park. He came awake quickly and turned to see Rigã ease himself out of the ridiculously small car for his frame. Rigã waved and walked over to him. They hugged, and both men sat down.

'Still the same toy car, I see?'

'Still the macho BMW, I see.'

'Horses for courses.'

'You look tired?'

'I'm fine. A lot going on at the moment. Do you have a present for me?'

'Lots of presents. Three million of them.'

'That's a lot of nice presents. Breakdown?'

'I took my 200 thou. Jack has his hundred. Queenie a hundred and Ben fifty. Forty grand each for two to nine. A hundred to Chopper. That comes to a million. Just under four from the haul. The balance on the sale of chips to De Silva.'

'What did he pay this time?'

'Fifty-five pence on the pound. Yeah...I know I should've done better, but these chips are hot you know. Short usage expectancy. They'll change them again after this.'

'Anyway, water under the bridge. No problems?'

'None, as usual.'

The men sat in silence for a while.

'Anything else in the pipeline I might be interested in, Dame?'

'Sorry, no. You're done. Get away for a while after you've finished up. How's Queenie?'

'She's going to tie up Castillo soon, create an exit strategy. Make a clean break. We don't want him making any connection. If he doesn't suspect anything, he won't want to make a fuss and start asking questions. He needs to believe we have caught him fair and square and deserves the penalty for his obsession.'

'Good. The fire truck worked then?'

'Like a dream. Apart from the fact that nobody really knows what one looks like close up, it was very realistic in its detail. Chopper did a brilliant job. That truck could be driven anywhere, and nobody would know it was a fake, except perhaps for real firemen.'

'That's nice. You did a good job. I'll keep you in mind, old friend.'

'Do that. I must ask. Why the card thing? Why the strange code names?'

'Nothing for you to worry about. Call it a ...idiosyncrasy. Come on. Let's get my presents.'

Damien heaved himself off the bench and opened his boot. Rigã transferred the five holdalls from out of the tiny car. This made Damien smile. 'You must get a bigger car for these bigger jobs.'

'What're you going to do with all this money, Dame?'

'Not all mine. People to pay off. Nothing you need to know about.'

Damien unzipped a bag and Rigã watched as he pulled out a bundle of notes.

'Take this as a bonus. Keep it or distribute it. Up to you. You deserve it.'

'Thanks, Dame. How d'you know I haven't done that already?'

'Because I know you wouldn't steal from me. And I know exactly how much they took in the first place.'

'How do you know?'

'Nothing you need to know about.'

'So this is it for a while, then?'

'Yep. As I said before, have your exit strategy ready. The police are going to come down harder now. Take care and watch your back.'

'You too.'

'I will.'

Rigă's mobile phone rang. 'It's Billy!' he said with a frown.

'You'd better take it.' said Damien leaning back on his car.

'Friend Billy, the Cashino. How are you my old buddy, mate?'

'Not happy. The police are on to me and I think they know all about me.'

'Calm down, my little friend. They know nothing. How could they?'

'You, you bastard. You robbed my casino!'

'A slight...how you say in English.... Înșelăciune...deception. Nothing more.'

'They're going to interview me again tomorrow, and right now I think I'll tell them everything. You, your brother and ...your sister.'

'Not a good idea, Billy. Queenie would be most upset. And think about grandma. Look...if it makes you a happier, man, your debt is paid. My sister is honoured. We can call it the quits.'

'No way. You used me, Rigă. You promised me a profitable business deal, and it never happened...'

'Hold on, Mr Billy. This is not a secure telephone. We must talk about this more...privately.'

'That's why I'm calling. I want half a million in cash. Sterling, not the foreign Euro rubbish. I want it here within the hour. I'm going away on the boat for a week or so and you're going to finance it.'

'Your wife still not co-operating on the money side, eh?'

'Damn right. She's not co-operating on any side. One hour. In my office. The police can't watch me here. Bring the money, or I'll call them from here in an hour.'

'You're not thinking straight, friend Billy. Think of Queenie, what it would mean to her to be arrested and put in prison?'

'I am thinking of her. You'd better bring your sister and brother, so the family can decide on what to do for the best. This is just the first payment, Rigă. Bye.'

Rigã closed the phone and stared at Damien. 'You probably got the gist of that. Billy wants half a mil to keep quiet. He's off on his gin palace to escape the wrath of the law.'

'What does he want you to do?'

'He wants to meet in his office in an hour.'

'You'd be pushed to make it. Especially as you're always late.'

'He wants Jack and Queenie there too. I don't think I should go. I don't like it.'

There was a moment's silence before Dwyer said, 'How much time do you need to tidy up?'

'A few days.'

'How's your exit strategy?'

'I have to wait a few days.'

'At least you have something in place.'

'But I can't move on it for two days. In the meantime.....?'

'Then we need to take action. Take Queenie, perhaps she can calm and influence him.'

'If I did that, it'd blow the setup that I didn't want Billy anywhere near my sister. If he smells a rat now.....'

'Okay. Take Jack but leave him outside. He can be a backup if needed, but no point both of you going into the lion's den. Take extra care. I knew there was something odd about this. Something's not quite right about the whole thing.'

'I'll manage.'

Damien opened the boot again and unzipped a bag. He took several wads of cash and looked around to see if anyone was watching.

'Pay him off with this.'

'But....' started Rigã.

'It affects us all. Pay him off and get out quickly. Call me as soon as you've finished with Billy.'

'I will.'

'I hope we're not misjudging Castillo?' Dwyer was frowning.

'I don't think so. He's too timid and stupid to try anything fancy. His bottom line is money. His weakness is younger women. And what he wants now is money. And we did promise him a cut of the profits. In some ways, we owe him this.' Rigā patted the money now in his pockets.

The two men were thoughtful for a moment, before Rigā said, 'Just how bad would it be if Billy told them everything he knew?'

Damien shrugged, 'Can they find us, even with Billy's help? Possible. It only takes someone that knows us to put a bad word in. We haven't exactly been low profile. The point is, is it worth the risk for half a million?'

'Billy can identify me as being part of the robbery. He saw Jack there and I've been to the casino.'

'Is it worth half a million to keep him quiet and give us time? Obviously, it is. What price your freedom? It's a risk, but one that might be worth taking. Up to you.'

'Okay.'

They hugged and Rigā squeezed into the car. A roar and he was off. Damien closed the boot and locked it. He took a last look round to see no one was watching and got into the car.

A successful conclusion to a profitable project. Damien smiled. He hoped Rigā was right and they could sort the Billy incident. He thought of the giant haul in his boot and laughed out loud. Then roared with uncontrollable laughter as he wound his way gracefully down the narrow lanes of the countryside.

Billy replaced the receiver and let out a long breath of air. He felt the weight of a hand on his shoulder and Dobbs said, 'You did exceptionally well, Mr Castillo. Well done.'

There was a ripple of applause around the office, yet Billy felt no real accolade, or pride in his work. 'Will he come, do you think?' he asked, half hopefully, half fearfully.

Dobbs strode around the office, his eye on the new member of the investigations team, Clive Raines.

'You see, Clive. This is how we work in the C.I.D.'s top investigation team. Thinking outside the box. Thinking like the criminals themselves. Sometimes a great detective relies only on intuition. Other times he has to be smarter than the opposition.'

'Isn't this entrapment though, Guv?' Raines offered.

‘We’ll worry about that when we have to. First, we need to find the bastards, then we can get the technical things right to put them away. Right lads?’

There were a few unconvincing murmurs from Madson, Knowles and Jackson.

Madson said, ‘Now we wait.’

Dobbs spoke to Raines, ‘We have two uniforms stationed across the road, so the front entrance is covered. We’ve locked the rear entrance....’

Billy interrupted, ‘Against Health and Safety regulations.’

‘...and we’ll be in the en-suite waiting for Rigã to identify himself to our Mr Castillo here. Now...coffee anyone?’

It was nearly two hours later that Rigã entered the front door of Castillo Castle and asked a member of staff where Billy’s office was. They pointed down a stairwell and Rigã moved towards it. He hesitated outside the door which proclaimed, ‘Manager’s Office’ and tapped lightly. Billy said to come in and Rigã opened the door.

‘Mr Billy. Nice to see you again. Strange circumstance though, no?’

Billy stood from behind his desk and moved forward. ‘You’re late again. I nearly phoned. Have you brought the money?’

‘Here it is, friend. As good as my word.’ Rigã placed the bag on the desk and Billy stared at it. In a strange shuffling motion, Billy moved towards the office door.

‘Where is Jack and Queenie?’

‘I came alone. Why?’

‘Good. I just need to...er. One moment.’ Billy opened the door and hurried out, closing it behind him.

Rigã knew something was up and moved to follow him. The door to the en-suite restrooms opened and Dobbs strode through and said, ‘Mr Rigã, we meet at last.’

Billy leant against the corridor wall and breathed out. He was not sure if Rigã would get physical and he wanted to be out of the way in case he took his anger out on him. He sighed too at the thought that Queenie was not here to be arrested as well. His thoughts raced.

He still clutched his returned mobile in his hand. Queenie’s number was still on speed dial. He thumbed the buttons almost subconsciously. She picked up on the third ring.

'Run. Get out. They have Rigā and Jack. But they don't have you yet. Run.'

'Billy? My sweet Billy, what're you talking about?'

'The police have arrested Rigā and Jack.'

'My brothers?'

'I know they're not your brothers. I don't care about them. But I do care about you. Thank God you didn't come here with them.'

'Come where?'

'Listen. I may not have much time and I probably won't call you again. They know who you all are and were involved in both robberies. I know you're just a....whore. But I did feel there was something between us.'

Her voice changed from that of a little girl to that of a more mature woman. He found it strange to hear another woman talking to him. 'Thank you, Billy. I did...do, have a very soft spot for you. We did have fun, didn't we?'

'Sure did. The hospital treatment? Was that....?'

'A ruse, I'm afraid. It was my exit strategy for our eventual breakup. I'm sorry. So sorry it was...you. Of all people.'

'That's okay. Actually, it's not okay. But you can hide somewhere, can't you?'

'Yes. I have a place. I'm packing as we speak.'

'I couldn't live with myself if I was part of your downfall too.'

'I really appreciate that, Billy. Look....in the future. No promises, but there may be a time when we meet again. Under different circumstances and in a different world. Till then we will be friends. If that's okay?'

'That's okay.'

'Good. Then I have a parting gift for you, darling Billy. Your wife's having an affair with a man called Maurice Denham. It might help you if the police knew this.'

'Why?'

'Because he's the insurance agent handling your claim. Don't you see? Wouldn't it look suspicious if there are two robberies and she's in bed with the man handling the claim? If I was the police, I'd want to know more.'

'I don't believe.....'

'It'll keep her off your back for a while, wouldn't it?'

'I suppose so. But I really don't....'

'Just let them know. Tell them you're not sure how much of a rumour it is, but it might be true. He is in one of those photos I gave you. Just show them, Billy.'

The door to his office opened and Billy said quietly, 'Must go. They're here.'

'I love you, Billy Cashino.'

'Me too.' The line went dead and Billy stood to face the man who called himself Rigã. Handcuffed and angry with himself.

'You're no longer my friend, Billy.'

'I'm okay with that, O'Donnell. Glad of it in fact. But we should both consider Queenie, don't you think?' Billy quickly flashed the mobile phone at Rigã before Dobbs came out of the room.

Rigã looked into Billy's eyes and formed an understanding. 'Who?' was all he said as Knowles and Raines led him away.

'I've done my part, Inspector Dobbs. Am I free to go now?'

'Detective Inspector Dobbs, Mr Castillo. Free to return to your office. But there are some unanswered questions that need to be resolved. We'll speak again. Come on team, let's not keep Mr Rigã waiting.'

Dobbs led off with his speech about toughness, leniency and co-operation with the police.

'We've enough evidence to charge you with masterminding the two casino robberies. We're going to throw the book at you. I need a top collar and you're it. However, the ten-year gaol sentence you undoubtedly face may be reduced. If you agree to co-operate, Mr O'Donnell.'

'I have no idea what you're talking about. Why am I here without representation?'

'We're giving you the opportunity to be smart, O'Donnell. Keep this up and you'll get a lawyer and then you'll be hamstrung right up to the time the gaol doors slam in your face. If it's taken out of my hands by some jumped-up ladder climbing lawyer, I can't help you and I really want to help you.'

'That's reassuring.'

'Do you know why I want to help you?'

'I suppose you're going to tell me anyway.....Why?'

'Because I want to help myself. If you're still confused, let me straighten you out.' Dobbs began to pace the room, gesturing with his hands to emphasise his points.

'We've your colleague Jack, real name Darren Baker, impersonating a police sergeant. We have the two of you linked together, on several occasions in several locations. In the back of a casino collecting black plastic bags full of stolen casino chips. Inside two casinos, obviously casing the joints. Selling the stolen chips to a fence called De Silva. We've also got Chopper Harris, for building the fire engine.'

Madson looked at his boss in disbelief at the blatant lies.

'Your past history alone could condemn you outright, especially added to this lot.'

'You can't have past misdemeanours taken into consideration.....'

'I don't care. As long as I get a confession, a witness and a conviction for these robberies – I don't care what happens in-between. Got it?'

Dobbs let the statement hang in the air. He calmed himself and sat down opposite O'Donnell.

'You're going to get convicted and looking at ten years, minimum. Co-operate, help me with a few grey areas. I'll see that it's noted you helped with the enquiries and we'll get the sentence down as low as possible.'

'So, you're the carrot and the stick?'

'Keep up the smart remarks. I'm a man of limited patience and rash actions. This is a one-off chance, O'Donnell. Take it or take the consequences when I wash my hands of you. Now, what's it to be?'

'It rather depends on what you want to know?'

Dobbs smiled and leaned forward, 'Code names? What's all the code names about?'

'I don't know what you mean.'

'Okay, hypothetically. Twelve people involved in each robbery. We have a King, that's you, or should I say Rigā. We have your buddy Baker, or should I say, Jack. Queenie, who's temporarily given us the slip. Then ten down to two. A suite of cards, I'd say. What about it?'

'Two robberies you say? Possibly, then, let's hypothesis the first to be a love tangle. Queen of Hearts. The second. No rational answer let's call it King of Clubs. That could also be a reference to Castillo – King of gambling Clubs.'

'But no Ace anywhere. You see my dilemma?'

‘Very difficult that.’

‘Enough word games. Who’s the Ace in this deck of cards?’

O’Donnell sat and stared at the floor. He knew this was the end for him. He wouldn’t be able to wriggle out of this completely. Co-operation was the only way forward, but could he do it without giving away the last name missing from Dobb’s list? The name of a long-time friend?

‘I would really like to help you, but I have a problem.’

‘What’s that?’ asked Dobbs, leaning forward.

‘I really don’t know who could be the Ace. I only met the man who called himself “Ace” a few times. He hired me, I worked on commission. Would I recognise him, yes? Would I tell you, no.’

‘Where did you meet him? When? How did you contact him?’

‘I can tell you all that. But I don’t *know* who he is.’

Dobbs moved around the room. He felt he’d made some progress; he’d got the suspect co-operating. Now he needed some useful answers.

‘Where’s all the money gone? If you could return the money, or even some of it, the sentence will be even lighter.’

‘I can return my share. One hundred thousand. That’s all I got.’

‘From nearly eight million? You can’t expect us to believe that!’

‘These were expensive operations. There were people to be paid above me too. I don’t know the full story. I was just a paid employee.’

‘What did you do for your money?’

‘I was given a list of people, their code names and told to follow a basic plan. Put it into operation, find exit strategies and pay off the team. I kicked the balance of each haul up to the man who called himself, Ace. I know nothing about packs of cards. I supposed it was a gimmick. The sort of thing you’d read about in the papers, The Deck of Cards robbery. Something like that. An ego thing, I suppose. Ace just trying to be clever, perhaps too clever.’

‘Why d’you say, too clever?’

‘Because we’re caught, that’s why.’

‘Yet he stays free. Don’t you resent that? If you could, wouldn’t you want him facing the same problems as you’re about to?’

‘Yes. I suppose so. But I know nothing more than I’ve told you already.’

'Like I believe that.'

Dobbs continued his pacing until he sat down suddenly and said, 'Where did you get the key from?'

'Which one?'

'Either. Both.'

'Ace.'

'And the fire engine?'

'Ace organised that. It was waiting for us in a side street. Everything was in the truck. We dressed on the move and did what was planned. Then, drove it to the casino and dropped it off at a different place on the way back and left everything in it. We took some cash for up front part payment and dispersed in separate cars. We're awaiting final settlement, but I doubt if that'll happen now.'

'If we have two suites of the deck, there must be two more?' pressed Madson.

'I know nothing about that. My job is done. Another day and I'd be unreachable. Just my luck and bad timing. I'm late for everything.'

'There must be two more robberies planned.' insisted Dobbs.

'If there are, I won't be part of them, will I?'

Dobbs signalled Madson to follow him out of the room. 'What do you think?' he asked once outside.

'Not sure. He looks like he's cracked, but how truthful he's being...who knows?'

'Keep the pressure on him. Get as much as you can. Follow the money. If there's a trail I want to be on it. Let's look at a list of people who could fit the bill as the Ace. Get them in here for a line up. Get O'Donnell to I.D. them. Watch his face, see if he recognises anyone. Pressure, Mickey. Keep up the pressure. We're getting there.'

'Yes, Guv.'

'With regard to Petre Decar, or whoever he is. I have an idea.'

Damien Dwyer sat in his pokey office and watched the hours tick by. As the sun began to set he knew for certain the game was up. No call from Rigā meant he'd been detained somehow.

He looked at his emergency closing-up list and started to shred the relevant documents. Both of the projects were shredded, and then he poured the paper remnants into a metal bin and burned them. He broke down his mobile phone and added the pieces to the burning debris, sending reeking fumes into the air. He opened the window with some difficulty, as it hadn't been opened for years.

Once satisfied he had cleared the evidence from the office, he drove to the canal and sat and watched the canal bank for an hour. After that time no individual person reappeared or was hanging around. He felt secure to move on. He walked down the path and onto a small canal boat, moored near the end of a line of other boats.

Before boarding he looked around again for ten minutes. Nothing moved. He stepped onto the boat. He unlocked the small door and entered the narrow confines of his bolt hole. He locked the door behind him.

He sat and tapped his fingers on the back of the short bench that acted as a sofa. He looked at the wooden table in front of him, until he could resist the urge no longer. He had to know.

He checked all the curtains were pulled together before sliding the top of the table off the base. The solid looking base was hollow, and he looked down to see the dark muddy water lapping below the vertical tunnel.

Attached to the inside of the tunnel were several strings. The thin strands were attached to screws set in the wooden tunnel, forming the base of the table. Gently he pulled on a thread until he felt resistance. As he pulled harder, the package resting on the bed of the canal below rose to the surface. He could see the black plastic sheets, taped with silver waterproof tape still intact. Just as he'd left it. His hoard of money had not been discovered.

He felt a great sense of relief from that. Time to put into action his own exit strategy.

Ben Dishman was having a great time. He couldn't remember having such a great time on his own since...well, ever.

Nickleback were awesome. The sound never better, the crowd as one. He sang all the songs and waited for his favourite, which he knew would end the show.

The arena was packed, and he couldn't believe how fortuitous he was to have a ticket. It had arrived a few days earlier, pushed under his rented room door with the simple message 'Thanks for everything. R.'

It had to be Rigā and typical of the thoughtful nature of the man. He wished it was two tickets, and then he could've asked Charlene. But what the hell, she

didn't like Nickelback, so the evening would be wasted. Besides, she'd have wanted to go home before the end, and the end was going to be the best bit.

The group wound up to the finale and held out mentioning the name of their last song. The excitement was almost too much to bear, as Ben was on his feet and ready to roar out the words to his favourite ever song. He wanted to live by the lyrics as well as sing them. If he could just make the big time he'd achieve his dream.

As the opening bars sounded the crowd roared. As they all sang, 'I'm through with standin' in lines to clubs I'll never get in, It's like the bottom of the ninth and I'm never gonna win, This life hasn't turned out, Quite the way I want it to be.'

The crowd shouted as one, 'Tell me what you want!'

In the security room the cameras were panning across the crowd, looking for a single face amongst thousands. Dobbs stared fixedly at the screens and didn't move a muscle.

Madson, Knowles and the rest of the team looked too. They had a poor printed image of Ben Dishman as Petre Decar, but to find that face in the thousands would be the proverbial needle in a haystack. In this case, a small needle and large haystack.

They'd been concentrating for nearly an hour, zooming in on faces, zooming out to pan again.

Suddenly Dobbs pointed, 'There. Zoom in, there. That's him!'

Ben's face filled the screen. His heightened colour and wide-open, gap-toothed mouth, as he sang his heart out.

Dobbs said, 'He'll be singing that with the Prison Male Voice Choir soon. Go get him boys.'

The subsequent interrogation of Ben Dishman revealed nothing new about The Deck of Cards Robberies. Dobbs was disappointed, but not surprised. As he viewed it, it was one down, two to go.

Dobbs could only take as compensation his ruse of sending Dishman the ticket had worked. O'Donnell had been forced to fall in with the plan but stopped short of giving an exact location. The ticket had reached Ben through a series of cut-out drops, used in emergencies over the years. O'Donnell had agreed to put that system to use, but refused any further assistance in Ben being caught.

Damien Dwyer knew the call would come, and when it did he feigned surprise. His house was visited by three men from the C.I.D. who wanted him to attend an

identity parade. He knew this was always a prelude to a lengthy stay in a police station and told his wife not to wait up and to contact their lawyer.

With a smile he said to the waiting group, 'Shall we go?'

Six other men formed the line-up and Damien was surprised to see two faces he recognised. He let his eyes slide over them, no sign of recognition would show on his face. He'd been here too many times before to be thrown by police tricks.

The witness was unseen behind the glass panel and Damien maintained an even expression. He waited with controlled anxiety hoping nothing bad was going to come from this.

It was still a surprise when he was allowed to leave and return home straight after the parade. He walked away from the station and caught a bus. He watched out of the rear window to see who was following him. He got off the bus and walked a mile. Then caught a cab and went home.

He wasn't followed, but that didn't mean he wasn't being watched.

Dobbs sat in Cummins's office and felt at ease. His boss had congratulated him and his team on a successful case for prosecution. Promotions had been mentioned and a few glasses of scotch drunk in salute.

It niggled Dobbs that Cummins had named the case The Pack of Cards Robberies. He couldn't bring himself to correct his superior with his own nickname of The Deck of Cards Robberies.

'How's the wife, Martin?'

'Fine, sir. Just fine.'

'How long's it been now? I mean the...whatsit...?'

'Separation, sir?' Cummins nodded. 'Coming up two years, sir.'

'Good. Good. Trial separation, wasn't it? Not the dreaded divorce thing. I hope not. I had one of those. Messy. Expensive. Nasty things.'

'So I understand, sir.'

'Good. Keep me up to speed on that then, will you?'

'Certainly, sir. We hope to be reunited once the term has expired. Any day now, sir.'

'Good. And this case wound up, then?'

'Not quite, sir. I hate loose ends.'

'But we can go to trial, right?'

'Yes, sir. I'm sure everything's in place to get a mass of convictions.'

'Good. Well done. Look forward to it. Some good news for the department for a change, eh?'

'Indeed, sir.'

'But you don't look happy.'

'Well, sir, as I said, loose ends. I want to finish this up more than anyone, but until we have the Ace and the Queen, I'm not sure the case is closed.'

'I see. What's the chances of getting those two before the trial, then?'

'I'll keep trying, sir.'

'Well, bear in mind time limitation and budgets. Neither are limitless, Martin.'

'I'm aware of that, sir. I'm sure Queenie will turn up on the radar. She'll never change. She's always been high profile. We'll get her eventually. This Ace character is different. However, I'm convinced there are two more robberies out there still to come.'

'I hear you had a line up for an Ace suspect? No go there?'

'No, sir the witness refused to recognise anyone. I'm not too surprised. Honour amongst thieves and all that.'

'Okay, but there are three cases already waiting your attention, Martin. Needs must when the devil drives.'

Dobbs drained his glass and looked at his boss before saying, 'I just know there's more to come, Guv. I just know there is.'

PART FOUR

JACK OF DIAMONDS

Chapter 1 – New deal

June 23

She stood in the doorway and pressed the bell for the second time. She was tall and extremely attractive. Her long blonde hair flowed over her severe, close-tailored black suit, which covered her slim body to perfection. Black high-heeled shoes lifted her head and shoulders above most men.

She smiled sweetly at the camera and the door lock clicked open. With a mouthed, 'Thank you' at the camera, she pushed the door open.

The jeweller's shop was studiously kept old-fashioned. The dark mahogany display cases had been around for as long as the family had owned the business. Cohen and Sons has been one of the most respected merchants of precious and semi-precious stones for over a hundred years.

They designed the modern hanging illumination to look like old gas lamps, giving a soft warm glow to the atmosphere. More like a Gentlemen's Club than a store. The windows to the road were one-way mirrors, so the street traffic could not see what was inside the shop. Nor recognise any of its customers, of which the famous were regular visitors.

Jacqueline Moss was met at the door by a very tall man dressed in a tailed jacket. A white shirt and dark red bow tie, topped his striped waistcoat. He bowed and held out his hand to her.

'Welcome, Miss Moss. My name is Sol Solomon and I am one partner of Cohen and Sons. Follow me, if you please.'

They shook hands, and he walked ahead of her to a door which led into a small room with comfortable chairs, a table and a coffee machine. He waved her to a seat and bowed again.

'My partner Joseph Cohen will be with you shortly. Please, may I offer you refreshments?'

'I'm fine, thank you.' Jacqueline said with a charming smile.

She saw him blush, and he backed out of the room. His black shiny shoes squeaking on the polished wooden floors. Solly hurried through the corridor and knocked on the door marked private. Joseph said, 'Come in.' and Solly swung open the door.

He stopped and looked at the two men bent over the three black and white monitors set in the wall. He moved between them and smiled, 'Quite a looker, isn't she?'

Joseph remained silent, his eyes drinking in the vision on the monitor. His assistant, Paul, was more vocal. 'That is class. My mother would hate me to bring her home, but that is class. What I couldn't do....'

'Thank you.' said Joseph. 'We all know you what you would and wouldn't do to the ladies of this city.'

Joseph turned away from the screen, pulled down his waistcoat and put on his jacket. He looked in the mirror to check his appearance before meeting a potential client for the first time.

Joseph Cohen was of medium height and very slim. His hair was receding even though he'd not yet turned forty. It was very black, with no grey hairs and slicked back in the old-fashioned style, traditionally favoured by the management of Cohen and Sons. His eyes were somewhat sunken, made more obvious by the more prominent nose. His mouth was narrow and so he tried to smile to augment the lips. He grinned at himself, to check his teeth were clean and adjusted his bow tie.

'Thank you gentlemen. I can handle this from now on.'

Solly shrugged, leaving the room to walk back along the corridor. Paul was ushered into his own world, the room beyond Joseph's office. A world that incorporated one large safe. Just outside the safe was Paul's desk, his ledgers and his job from nine to five, five days a week, with three weeks holiday per annum.

Joseph pulled the door closed on Paul's world. It looked like a normal connecting door, but it was three times as thick. It had bolts that would slide into the framework of the wall when activated. A keypad was another indication this was a secure door.

As the door swung closed, Paul said, 'How long are you going to be, Boss?'

'An hour. At most. Now shut up and get on with your work. I'll send for you if I need you.'

Solly knocked on the door even though Jacqueline was looking straight at him. 'Mr Cohen will see you now, madam.'

At the furthest stretch of his bow, Solly could still not lower his eyes from the woman's ample bosoms Jacqueline was used to this attention and didn't notice anymore. However, it never hurt to create an effect from the start.

She'd known since a very young girl that men loved her and most women hated her. Well, perhaps not all women and perhaps not all men. But enough of both to make her life stimulating.

She followed Solly along the dimly lit hallway until they reached the door where he tapped gently with his fingers. Joseph bid them enter and Solly held the door open for their guest. After she'd entered, he closed it quietly and returned to his domain of the main shop area.

Joseph's room was similar to the main shop sales area, except it was solid wood panels throughout. There were no windows, but soft, golden lights rested on small desks, or shone from wall sconces. The room looked like a reading room in a library, but without books.

'I love this room.' said Jacqueline, her eyes sweeping round in a full circle.

'We like it. Welcome, Miss Moss. Please take a seat.'

She shook hands and sat down, placing her black alligator skin briefcase by her feet. She said, 'Please excuse my gloves. I have a rather embarrassing skin condition. It comes and goes, but these are medically treated gloves. I wear them day and night when it gets bad.'

'It's no problem. May I get you some tea, or coffee?'

'No thanks. Let's get down to business. If I may?'

'Certainly. How can I help you?'

'I want to buy diamonds. Special diamonds. Not the kind I can get from standard traders.'

'What do you mean by special diamonds, Miss Moss? All diamonds are special. They're all individual, as I'm sure you know.'

'Yes. I mean...for instance, my current requirement is for a Cushion cut, colour D, or better, Flawless, a minimum of five carats. Do you have any like that?'

'That is special and very specific. I would have to check.' He picked up the handset of the 1950's replica phone and smiled at her. 'Excuse me one moment, please.' She nodded. 'Paul. Come in for a moment please.'

They waited in silence until Paul knocked on the door, paused and opened it.

'Paul, this is Miss Moss. Miss Moss, Paul Wiseman, my assistant. Miss Moss has a specific stipulation. Would you be so kind as to check if we have anything similar in stock?'

'Certainly, madam. What would you like?'

‘Cushion cut, colour D or better, Flawless, a minimum of five carats.’

‘I will look for you. By cushion cut ...you may mean Pillow Cut, yes?’ She nodded. ‘Square, or rectangular in particular?’

‘Square, please.’

‘I will be a few moments.’ Paul pulled the door shut behind him.

‘He will be a lot longer than that. We still operate a ledger system. We don’t trust computers. Are you sure I cannot get you anything? Glass of water. Glass of wine?’

‘No. No, thank you.’

‘Cushion cut, a good choice. The facets cut that way adds sparkle to the joy.’

‘Joy?’

‘I call diamonds “Joy”. It’s what they bring, don’t you think?’

‘Good term. I like that. Joy. Has a sense of.....’

‘I think romance. Joy, brings out the romance in the product.’

‘You keep a large stock of diamonds on the premises?’

‘We have...a selection, I should say. We have been in business for over a hundred years and have a collection compiled for our more discerning clients. Like yourself.’

‘I see.’

‘Please tell me more about...well yourself. How did you start in the diamond business?’

‘Oh...it’s not my business. I’m merely a provider. I’ve bosses who give me the orders, I just act upon them.’

‘Really? They must be very rich and, therefore, influential people. Would I have heard of them?’

‘I doubt it. We operate a very...discrete business. Supply and demand. Much like you I imagine.’

‘Quite so. And they need specific stones for...any particular purpose?’

‘Ah....indeed. They make special requests. For the rich and famous. And sometimes, infamous.’

'I can see the need for discretion. Well, you need have no fear, we are the most discrete company still in the diamond supply industry. We're well known for it. Discretion, that is. You know what I mean?'

Joseph stood to cover his word stumbling. He had to tear his eyes off her chest and the most curvaceous lips he had ever seen. This was embarrassing. Where was Paul?

In the short silence that followed, a knock at the adjoining door signalled the entrance of Paul. His head appeared first then the rest of him followed. He held a ledger in his hand and placed it on Joseph's desk. Joseph moved to it and looked at the entries where Paul was pointing. Paul held Jacqueline's eyes and smiled.

'It seems we may have a few that you may wish to consider.' said Joseph.

'Good. Can I see them?'

'Yes, indeed. Paul, if you please?'

Paul moved back into the secure area and Jacqueline stood up to follow.

'Sorry, Miss Moss. We allow nobody back there. I'm sure you'll understand?'

'Yes, of course. I'm sorry. All those diamonds.' The door closed with a loud snick of a lock.

'Indeed. He'll be but a moment. You're...employers, do they have a name? I mean...of course they have a name....I was just...perhaps if I could call them something, rather than a vague...I'm sure you know what I mean?'

'They are, Mr and Mrs King. That's how I address them. Although she does like to be addressed as Queen, every now and again.'

'I see. So, Mr and Mrs King are in the jewellery business too? The King and Queen of the industry, I suppose?'

'They're in the supply and demand business. Only part of what they do involves jewellery.'

'Okay. Enough said.'

'We'll be looking for a long term relationship with our diamond supplier.'

'That's something I could work with.'

'Quality, reliability and continuous standard of service are key measures.'

'That's sounds like our motto.'

'We deal in cash, Mr Cohen. Does that pose a problem?'

‘None at all. Book keeping is the same, cheque or cash.’

‘I will inspect the product and agree it is to our standard. I will then place it in a sealed box and you will arrange secure delivery. I would suggest that we pay one third, or half, of the value of each sale up front, to you, here in the office. If that is suitable?’

‘I see. Okay, so far.’

‘The reason I don’t want to walk out the door with the product is obvious. Apart from the security aspect...’

‘Vulnerable female carrying diamonds?’

‘...is the insurance aspect. You are insured? I am not. You are insured for this type of transportation of goods, aren’t you?’

‘Indeed, we are. We do it all the time.’

‘Also, our business is...well, let’s say we don’t have your style of book-keeping. It’s a cash business, Mr Cohen.’

‘I fully understand.’

‘Which is why confidentiality is as equally important as quality of product.’

‘I think we can satisfy your every need on all those counts, Miss Moss.’

‘You will collect the balance of the payment on each delivery. That too, will be in cash. We will not be insulted if you wish to count it before delivering the package to our representative.’

A knock at the door, a hesitation and his head round the edge, before Paul entered. He carried a small tray, covered in a black velvet cloth. Set on the top were four diamonds, sparkling in the warm lights of the office.

He placed them on the table and moved to one side. Joseph leaned forwards and looked closely at each stone with a glass. He leaned back satisfied and gave a nod to Paul. The lights dimmed, and a solitary hard white light shone down over the desk.

‘Miss Moss. Perhaps you would like to see flawless diamonds from Cohen and Sons?’

Jacqueline moved around the desk. She bent over, her long legs stretched out to balance her tall frame. The tight skirt riding up over her thighs. Paul had the best view and was grateful he was in the dark end of the room. Joseph had the best view of her cleavage. It nearly took his breath away. He became conscious of Paul watching him and shifted his gaze to another part of the room.

Jacqueline took her time and inspected each stone thoroughly. She separated two and put them to one side. She studied the remaining two. Finally she made a selection and handed the glass back to Joseph.

‘This one. How much?’

Joseph looked at Paul who brought the ledger forward and pointed to the four items.

‘Okay. This particular gem is....’

‘Before we discuss payment, may I have a word with you alone, please?’

Jacqueline held Joseph’s eyes and Joseph looked at Paul. Paul hesitated, but moved out of the office and closed the door with a click.

Jacqueline sat and looked at Joseph until he sat down at his desk. She leaned forward and said, ‘You will pay me a five percent administration fee for each sale. In cash. How you account for that in your system, I don’t care. However, the receipt and invoice presented to Mr King will be for a single and total amount. Understand?’

‘Yes. It’s a little unusual....’

‘Mine is an unusual business, Mr Cohen. From my fee, I will personally give you ten percent. In cash. How you account for that, whether you account for that, I don’t care. Is that agreeable?’

‘I’d have to be creative with the accounting, but I’m sure we can accommodate you on those points. Yes. It’s agreeable.’

‘Good. Now, with that in mind, what figure do you place on that diamond, Mr Cohen?’

Joseph did some mental arithmetic and decided to round up the figure. ‘Shall we say fifty thousand?’

‘Euros?’

‘Pounds, sterling, Ms Moss. We’re very old fashioned here. I’d like to work in Pounds Shillings and pence, even Guineys, but we can’t.’

Jacqueline pulled a phone from her small black purse and pressed a button. She removed a diamond earring from her right ear and held the handset to it. She placed the earring on the black velvet cloth. The phone burred and was answered. Joseph could hear a man’s voice at the other end, but the words were unclear. Jacqueline realised his proximity and stood up, walked to the end of the office and spoke into the phone.

‘Sir. As close a match as I can find. Fifty. No, he won’t budge from that. He started at sixty.’

There was a silence, during which Joseph picked up the earring and looked through the glass. It was flawless and round cut. He valued it at a minimum of five thousand pounds. Ten for the pair.

‘Best deal. Yes sir. Okay. Thank you, sir.’

She ended the call and walked over to Joseph and held her hand out. ‘Deal.’

He stood and shook her gloved hand. It felt soft and feminine, but had strength too.

‘I’m relying on your full discretion, Mr Cohen.’

‘You have it, always, Miss Moss.’

‘Without it, we have no business. And me no job.’

She picked up her briefcase and placed it on the desk. Opening it, she withdrew bundles of fifty-pound notes. She handed them to Joseph and pulled out a small red box which she handed to him as well.

‘Twenty-five thousand. Count the money, I’ll not be insulted. We need to trust each other. Put the diamond in this box and I’ll seal it. A receipt for the full amount and I’ll be on my way.’

Joseph called Paul back in and had him prepare the paperwork. He carefully picked up the diamond and opened the red box. It nestled into a hollow that was almost made for it.

With a touch to his hand, she stopped him closing the lid. She held her phone very close and took a series of photographs of the diamond. She released his hand for him to close the lid with a click. Jacqueline took a key from her necklace and slid it into a very small key hole. With a twist she locked the box and returned it to Joseph.

Jacqueline sat down again and closed her briefcase, placing it at her feet. She waited while the two men hurried to complete their formalities. A few minutes later the red box had been placed in the safe and an envelope handed to Jacqueline with all the paperwork completed.

‘When can I expect delivery, Mr Cohen?’

‘Anytime you wish. Today, tomorrow?’

‘Tomorrow. At this address. Eleven o’clock. A.M. that is. The balance of twenty-five thousand will be ready for you. Don’t forget to count it before handing over my box.’ She pushed a small card across the desk towards Joseph. ‘Is there

anything else?’ Joseph looked at the card and nodded recognition of the address and shook his head. ‘Nice doing business with you, Mr Cohen.’ She turned to leave.

‘I’m sorry, Ms Moss. I have to escort you off the premises. Security and all that. A bind, I know, but I’m sure you understand?’

‘Yes. Certainly. Good to see it.’

She stood on the steps outside the shop and shook hands with Cohen. ‘If this works well, we’ll do more business with you again.’

‘I’d be delighted. Call me anytime. Here’s my card.’

‘Goodday to you, Mr Cohen.’

‘And you too, Miss Moss.’

She smiled and walked away. He stood watching her until she turned the corner. He pressed the buzzer to be let in again. The smile on his face was obvious as he told his partner the value of the sale.

‘We might have struck gold here, Solly. She’s as business savvy as we are.’

‘Praise indeed. Not just a pretty face, then?’

‘No. She’s got a great bum too.’ Paul said from behind the counter.

Solly and Joseph just looked at each other and said together, ‘Youth!’

Chapter 2 – Face down

July 20

It was raining as Jacqueline pressed the bell. She was having difficulty holding the umbrella, handbag and briefcase. The wind tore at the broly and it flipped inside out. Her black suit didn't show the rain, but it was becoming wet. Her mini cape flapped around her head, adding to the annoyance with which she coped with the undignified situation. The door clicked open, and she gratefully hurried in.

Solly was the first to greet her, dressed exactly the same as before. He summoned staff to get kitchen towels to help dry down the client. He showed her to the waiting room and offered her a tea, or coffee. She declined and wrestled with the umbrella to get it into a collapsed state.

Joseph watched from his security desk and felt a pang of pity for the beautiful woman in distress. He was anxious for Solly to get his act together and get the woman into his office.

'Come on, Solly. Move your fat arse.'

'You told me not to mention arse, last time.' said Paul with a snigger.

'I'm talking about my partner. You...young man..... no smutty remarks in front of the client. Keep your remarks to yourself. In fact, keep your mouth shut and out of sight too.'

'Yes, boss.'

'Remember who pays your salary.'

'When - you remember.'

'Silence. Get the products ready and remember. Mouth shut.'

'I like the new tie, boss.'

'Shut it.'

Paul entered his inner sanctum and laid out the tray with a black velvet cloth. He arranged the six stones as artistically as he could and gently placed a red silk scarf to cover the diamonds. The presentation was everything, they said in this business.

He heard the muffled sounds of voices coming from the other room and assumed their guest had arrived. He'd never seen Solly, or Joseph, act like this before. What is it with men and beautiful women? They just go to pieces. He reflected his behaviour was suspect too. She was gorgeous, and he fantasised about her when he went to bed at night.

He sat and waited to be summoned and then he instantly dismissed, he was sure.

Solly backed out of the office after a particularly direct stare from Joseph, allowing Jacqueline time to sit in the guest's chair.

'Can I get you a towel, Miss Moss?'

'No, thank you. I'm fine, really. I had an umbrella.'

'Nasty weather. We don't expect it in July, do we?'

'It's only rain.'

'Indeed. So...are you well?'

'Fine thank you. And you? Very smart bow tie that, Mr Cohen.'

Joseph fingered his new purchase. He'd decided he could afford to be a little more flamboyant with his younger clients. He'd selected a bright red tie, with flecks of gold thread running through it.

'It makes you look years younger.' Jacqueline added.

'Thank you, madam. How gracious of you to notice. You look your usual elegant self. Where do you buy your clothes?'

'I have a tailor. You have my money?'

The lack of humour in her voice alerted Joseph to the matter of business at hand and he stepped back behind his desk. He opened the drawer and handed her a company monographed envelope. They printed the words Cohen and Sons in a script, in a gold colour on vellum textured paper.

She swiftly counted the money and looked at him.

'Oh. I calculated that your five percent equated to £2,500 and therefore my ten percent was £250. I took that, and you have there the balance of £2,250. Is that correct?'

Jacqueline looked stern-faced at him before saying, 'It is. But in the future, I'd like to have the pleasure of presenting you with your bonus myself. If that is agreeable?' A small smile appeared at the corner of her mouth and Joseph relaxed and smiled in return.

'I would be delighted with that. I'm sorry...'

'No, no. Don't apologise. Early days of business and we need to get an understanding going, a rapport if you like. We all have these little idiosyncrasies.'

'I look forward to it. May I offer you refreshment?'

'I would love a cup of tea. This weather....'

'No problem.' He lifted the phone and called Paul.

Paul entered with the tray of jewels and smiled at Jacqueline but did not speak. Joseph waved the tray away and said, 'Tea for our guest, Paul. Quickly now.'

Paul looked puzzled and backed out of the room.

'The delivery was to your satisfaction, I trust?' asked Joseph as he sat behind his deck, not wishing to be standing over her.

'Yes. Fine. On time and your delivery boy was polite and attentive.'

'I told him to count the money. That was correct?'

'Yes. He did. I was there and received the package myself. I was half expecting you to deliver it, Mr Cohen?'

'If I knew you would be there, I would have.'

'Perhaps next time?'

'If you wish. If I knew you'd be there, I would have got him to return this to you.'

He took a small red box from the drawer and gave it to her. Her thin black glove reached out for it.

'What is this?'

'Your earring. You left it behind last time you were here. I've had it cleaned. I had it valued too. Would you like to know how much the pair is worth?'

'I...no. Yes. How much?'

'About ten thousand pounds.'

'Oh. I see. I thought more. Thank you. Very thoughtful of you.'

'All part of the service. I assume they were a gift from an admirer. Your husband, perhaps?'

'I'm not married. But they were a gift, and that's all you shall know.'

'I'm sorry. I'm...curious by nature.'

Jacqueline opened her briefcase and put the box inside. 'You know what curiosity did to the cat, I assume?'

Paul knocked and hesitantly entered the room. Joseph waved him in and cleared a space on the table for the tray of tea. Paul was dismissed again, back to his safe office and closed the door on his exit. Joseph poured and waited for Jacqueline to indicate her tea preferences.

‘Just milk, please. No sugar.’

Joseph poured in the milk and stirred. Finally passing the china cup and saucer within reach of his guest.

‘We have managed a positive response to your telephone request, Ms Moss. Six perfectly matching stones, round cut, three carats each. Flawless, of course.’ Her eyes flashed, and she smiled. It was a sight that warmed him. ‘Would you like to see them now?’

‘Yes please.’

Paul was summoned by phone and the desk cleared for the jewellery tray. Paul was, as expected, dismissed before the unveiling. Joseph waited until the door clicked shut, before removing the red silk scarf, like a magician revealing a previously invisible assistant.

Jacqueline stared at the gems before holding out a hand for a glass. Joseph placed the glass delicately in the gloved hand and she peered into the depths of the stones for five minutes.

‘Are these to be a necklace, bracelet, or some other worthy joy for one of your clients?’

‘Drop earrings.’

‘We have an excellent metal smith that could provide the mount for you. All precious metals catered for.’

Jacqueline looked up at him and said, ‘That’s something we wish to handle ourselves. Part of our client confidentiality, we desire to control the whole project. Obtaining the diamonds is the only thing beyond our control. We let nothing else go outside our business.’

‘Thought I’d mention it. You see... behind the shop side of our business, the frontage to the street, is a fully functioning jewellery design and manufacture business. We offer bespoke jewellery to the highest standard. Two separate business under the one umbrella.’

‘Thank you for the offer.’

‘You are welcome. Joy times six. Some lucky woman will be wearing those. Is it for your boss’s wife?’

‘I think I mentioned confidentiality before, did I not?’

'Sorry. No harm intended. Just...curious.'

'These are fine. Price?'

'Same arrangement?'

'Exactly.'

'Ninety thousand.'

Jacqueline stood, produced her mobile phone and dialled. She stood near the end of the room and spoke quietly. 'Sir. Yes perfect. Ninety. Started at a hundred. We have a good deal. Yes, I will. Thank you. Bye.'

'Is that a yes?'

'It is. Delivery?'

'When would you like them?'

'Tomorrow at eleven. Same place.'

Jacqueline opened her briefcase and handed him a small red box and took neat bundles of notes out, counting the piles onto the table. Joseph put the diamonds into the padded cushion in the box and watched her take the key from her necklace and lock the box.

'Thirty thousand there. Balance on delivery. Tomorrow. I will be there.'

'Then so will I, Ms Moss.'

Jacqueline sipped her tea and locked up her briefcase. A while later Paul entered with the envelope that held the part payment receipt. He handed it to her and bit his lip to remind himself to remain silent.

Jacqueline moved towards the door and stopped. 'Ah...your security. I forgot.'

'Sorry. I must escort you out. This way please.'

'Does your other, metal-fashioning shop have the same security as this?'

'Not quite the same. We have the locked door, and there is a separate safe that is out of bounds to the clients. We're very security conscious, Ms Moss.'

As they left the room Paul entered and picked up the empty tray. He looked at the tray of tea and lifted a biscuit to his mouth and bit it. He watched the monitors as Joseph showed the delightful Ms Moss out of the showroom.

Joseph led Jacqueline towards the locked front door as he said, 'It occurred to me, Ms Moss. Your first name is Jacqueline is it not?' She nodded. 'And Mr King is your boss?' Another nod. 'His wife, you said likes to be called, Queen?'

'I did. What occurred to you, Mr Cohen?'

'Well, we have a King and a Queen. That would make you a Jacq. As in a pack of cards. Don't you see?'

'And would that make you the...Joker?'

Joseph laughed and nodded.

'Very funny. But I thought that you'd then be our Jacq of Diamonds. Don't you agree?'

On the monitors, Paul could see Solly was still unnaturally hovering around and both the partners laughing as they waved Ms Moss into the rain. They stood talking for a while before Joseph moved back towards his office.

Paul took the opportunity to eat one more biscuit and fled to the safety of his own office.

Chapter 3 – Cut the Deck

July 27

Jacqueline sat and sipped her tea while looking around the office. The lighting certainly hid some of the more ancient and ill-kept parts of the old woodwork. Still, it was carefully lit to induce calm and old-world elegance.

She looked past the desk to the three black and white monitors on the wall and saw the jewellery shop from the high level. Solly walking around as if he'd nothing to do. A single customer sitting at a display case and an assistant showing a range of jewellery. Another assistant arrived with a tray of tea. Solly watched over the proceedings like a mother hen.

The second screen showed the street side of the front door. Anyone ringing the doorbell would first need to be recognised before allowed entry. The last screen showed a big metal door. That must be the second safe, thought Jacqueline.

Delivery of the diamonds had gone very smoothly. The Diamond Team had rented offices in a prestigious block in central London. The office was only occupied during these deliveries from Cohen and Sons. Even then, only the reception room was used. There was a reception desk, behind which sat Ten. She'd always be there when the courier arrived, whether it was to be Joseph or another.

As Joseph had arrived, the Receptionist had buzzed through for Jacqueline and she came straight out, carrying her briefcase. Joseph had smiled and extended his hand to shake hers. She was not wearing gloves, and he noticed how smooth her skin was. He was tempted to comment on a good skin day but decided against it.

Ms Moss was all business in front of the staff as she opened her briefcase and handed Joseph a package. He looked at the secretary and decided not to embarrass Moss by opening it in front of her. He nodded and passed over the small red box.

Moss unlocked and opened the box, then studied the diamonds again through a glass. She nodded her thanks and held out her hand to be shaken.

Joseph shook hands and smiled, 'Have a good day, Ms Moss.'

'You too, Mr Cohen. Thank you for the delivery. Very punctual. Can you see yourself out?' she added with a smile. The comment on the security element was not lost on Joseph, who had a grin on his face all the way back to his own office.

Joseph came out of the safe room carrying the tray as if it contained a bomb. He placed it on the cleared desk and waited until he knew he had her attention. With a dramatic swish, he removed the red scarf and waited for a reaction.

Jacqueline stared at the ten gems on the black velvet and leaned forward. She picked up the glass and examined each piece.

Joseph shut the safe office door and quietly moved to his seat, to settle in to await the expected verdict. He had trouble in finding the exact requirements, but he'd sourced the ten items as close to the spec as possible. He waited silently.

'I'm not sure of the clarity, Mr Cohen.'

The colour drained from his face. 'I'm not sure I...'

'There are slight variations between three of those stones. They're not exactly the same as the others. Do you have more?'

Joseph was breathing hard, 'No. That was all I...we had trouble in getting...sorry...these are all.....Are you sure?'

Jacqueline separated three stones and handed the glass to Joseph. 'Take a look.'

He took as long as he could and tried to find words to say to her. But in the end, he looked up and said, 'I've never seen smaller imperfections. You have a remarkable eye, Ms Moss.'

'I need to with my boss. I'm sorry, I can't accept those three stones. How long before you can replace them?'

'I'm not sure I could....it may take a while. Weeks. Would that be okay?'

Jacqueline stood up and activated her mobile. She paced the floor as she spoke.

'Sir? A slight problem, I'm afraid. They're not all identical. I know, sir. I've said so. A few weeks, apparently. It is tight. Do you want to take the seven and wait for the....No, of course. The deadline is still.....? Okay. Yes, sir.'

She ended her call and looked thoughtful.

'Well?' ventured Joseph.

'Don't worry.' Joseph was relieved. 'We have other sources.' Joseph's face fell again.

'Look...give me another chance, please.'

Jacqueline was still in thought. 'I have to see whether I can get them from somewhere else. In the meantime, no reason why you can't use your sources, is there? Besides, I like the little...personal arrangement I have with you. How much would those be, assuming they were perfect?'

Joseph shrugged and said, 'One hundred and eighty?'

Jacqueline tapped the phone gently against her perfect white teeth. 'And how long do you think before you can get those three, or even a completely new set, all perfect?'

'I'll get Paul on it now. Paul!' he shouted. The door opened a crack, and a head appeared.

'Yes, boss?'

'Mr Cohen, Paul. In front of clients, Mr Cohen. We need ten perfectly matched stones to Ms Moss's requirements. And we need them now. Get on with it.'

'But...Mr Cohen, I just did....'

'Then do it again, only this time get it right. They weren't perfect.'

'But you saw them, and you never said...'

'Call the Van Sars, Amsterdam. They have the biggest stock. Do it now!'

Paul ducked back into his sanctuary and shut the door.

'Some more tea, Ms Moss. Or something stronger?'

'Tea, please.'

'Please just wait while I make this enquiry. If they can't supply it, I don't know where else to go. But they are very expensive, I'm afraid. That one eighty may be nearer two hundred.' Joseph poured more tea.

'Given the time restraints, I may be able to swing that.'

The room fell into silence before Joseph said, 'I have to mention this Ms Moss, but were you ever a model? You know, glamour, or fashion?'

'Sweet of you to think that. No. My ears are too small, and my knees are awful. I also have some rather unsightly scars from childhood.'

'You surprise me. So you brought glamour to the jewellery industry instead. Lucky us.'

'I'm not in the jewellery industry. It's just one aspect I look after.'

'You have a gift for it. An eye, as we say. We could offer you a job here?'

'I have a job, thanks.'

'How did you meet the Kings, then?'

'You are curious, aren't you?'

'By nature, yes. Sorry.'

Jacqueline sipped her tea and thought before saying, 'Lucky accident, I suppose. I was dating a man who knew them. We met, he introduced me and suddenly I was the focus of attention. Next thing I know, Mr King offered me a job. Here I am.'

'Here you are. I'd like to meet Mr King sometime. And his Queen. If I may?'

'I don't really think it's appropriate, or practical.'

'I see.'

'I don't think you do. Mr King likes his privacy. If recognised, you would change your opinion of him. He wouldn't want that. I wouldn't want that, and I know you wouldn't want that.'

'Ahh..a typical English eccentric, eh?'

'Italian. I'll say no more.'

'Neither will I. What do you do in your spare time, Ms Moss?'

'I don't have spare time.'

'Oh, I see. I like to fish. Fly-fishing. Ever tried it? I could teach you?'

'I don't like fish, even when they're unrecognisable and on a plate.'

The safe room door opened after a timid knock. Paul's solemn face appeared, and he shook his head. Jacqueline saw the motion and stood up.

'At least you tried, Mr Cohen.'

'Please don't let this jeopardise our business association, Ms Moss.'

'Keep trying, Mr Cohen. If I fail to find a replacement, you may be all we have left. Can you show me out now, please?'

Chapter 4 – Two of a Kind

August 2

“The Dog’s Master” was a pub few frequented anymore. Run by the same landlord for over twenty years, it had fallen into disrepair and he couldn’t afford to do anything about it. The sign outside was so faded it was indistinguishable as a dog sitting at his master’s feet.

The landlord was running out of time. He’d hoped the building development schemes in the neighbouring streets would reach his location. He’d be more than willing to sell up and retire. But nobody wanted to live in this decaying part of the old city.

Nicknamed “The Dog’s Bollocks”, or “The Bollocks” for short, the pub now held few regulars. Those that drank, were short on cash and low on spirits.

Damien Dwyer remembered the pub in better days and yet felt a certain comfort to sit in the old torn leather seats again. The beer was awful, but that didn’t always matter. A smell of cigarette smoke still hung in the air, despite no one having legally smoked in there for years.

The landlord still remembered him. He’d been a regular at The Bollocks when he was working the city streets with the short cons. A little inside knowledge burglary and a few not so savoury asset management schemes that never achieved their full potential. They were hard times for the hungry Damien Dwyer. A time to learn the trade and then move on.

Now he was back. Partly to reminisce, partly to be unobserved. He wrinkled his face at the smell of the beer and went to the bar to buy a whiskey. As old Joe served him, he told him to make that two.

He noticed an old man almost asleep in his beer. The old man looked up and a sign of recognition crossed his face. ‘Don’t I know you?’

Damien nodded, ‘How you doing, Tenner? Okay?’

‘Not bad. You look like you’re doing okay?’

‘Not bad. I’ll leave one in the tap for you, Tenner.’

‘Bless you.’

The barman said, ‘You know him?’

‘Just a blast from the past.’

‘Tenner?’

'Yeah. Ricki Smalls. Called tenner because he'd do anything for a tenner. Mind you, that was a long time ago. Nowadays it would be fifty, I suppose.'

The barman laughed.

'Put a pint in the tap for him, will you?'

Damien paid and waved at Tenner as he took the glasses to a seat that was out of the way of the main bar area. Damien slid into the seat, followed by the man who had trailed him from the bar.

'Cheers, Ace' King downed his shot and so did Damien.

'How's it all going?' said Damien quietly.

'Well, but slowly. Jacq is making progress. She says another few weeks at least. They're so uptight about security, it's taking a while to break them down.'

'We did a full and proper profile on the partners, didn't we?'

'Yep. Joseph and Solly, we know all we can about them. No obvious weaknesses, no easy route in. We have to be patient and let her do her job. She's top at the long con. She'll get there. No rush is there?'

'Other than it's costing a fortune on each transaction she makes. We're buying legit diamonds. Here's your next payment.'

Damien passed an envelope under the table and King slipped it into his jacket pocket. 'Your selling then on, aren't you?'

'Yeah. But at a loss. Those bastards hike the price up so much, it's way above market value. I've a buyer for all the gems and is eager to get his hands on more.'

The man code-named King was a very large figure. Over six foot and over twenty stone, he stood out in a crowd. They rarely used him for con projects, and never as a front man.

'Joseph wants a meet.'

'With whom?'

'Me. King. Her employer.'

'Tell him no. You're too easy to recognise. One description of you to the plod and you'll be back inside again.'

'That's what I told Jacq. Anyway, we need Cohen to meet Queen. That'll have to be enough to satisfy his curiosity.'

'This has taken nearly a year to set up, King. Let's not spoil it for a few days. But tell her to hurry it on a little. Do we have the strike set up yet?'

‘Still waiting for the right deal. Soon. She says soon.’

‘Another drink?’

‘No, thanks. What is this dump?’

‘A trip down Memory Lane. Okay. Keep in touch. The usual number and I’ll get back to you. Anything else?’

King stood, ‘No. The team are on standby for the next move. I’ll keep you informed. Take care.’

King left the pub through another door and Damien waited for ten minutes. He walked the streets for half an hour to make sure he wasn’t followed. He reached his car and drove away. His eyes on the mirror until he was satisfied he wasn’t being tailed.

He pulled off the fake beard and moustache. It’d been irritating him for the last half an hour. He turned into the road that would take him home to the wife and kids.

Chapter 5 – Raise the Ante

August 3

Jacqueline was not her usual calm self. Joseph could see she was agitated as she sat down in the guests' chair.

'May I offer you some refreshment, Ms Moss?'

'No. Er, yes.'

'Tea, or coffee?'

'Did you say you have some wine?'

'Wine, yes of course. How about champagne?'

His smile was genuine, and she smiled back. 'I've had a sod of a day so far, Mr Cohen. What the hell, a glass of champagne would be just the job.'

'My pleasure.' He picked up the phone and dialled for his assistant. 'Paul, champagne and nibbles for our guest, please. Chop, chop.'

A soft knock on the door and the puzzled Paul entered. He smiled at Jacqueline and eased his way out into the corridor.

'He won't be a moment. We always have champagne in the fridge, for special clients.'

Joseph sat at his desk and admired his visitor as her gaze swept around the room. 'Doesn't he ever get locked in there?' Jacqueline said with a pointed gloved finger.

'No. It's okay. He can always open it from the inside.'

'But you have a...what do you call it....a keypad, on the outside.'

'Yes, we can open the door from the inside with a handle, but the outside has the extra security device.'

'To protect your diamonds from customers like me?' she smiled.

'Not exactly. As we say, security is good business.'

'And you have a safe in there too? Is that always shut and locked?'

'No, it's opened during working hours, and automatically shut and locked on a timer, out of hours.'

'As long as Paul isn't inside it, I hope?'

'There are safety devices, yes. Why do you ask?'

'Like you, I'm curious. For instance....when you delivered the diamonds the other day, you were alone?' Joseph nodded, 'What about security then? How did you transport the diamonds?'

'It's a trade secret.' said Joseph with a wink that was supposed to be partly conspiratorial and partly seductive. Jacqueline couldn't tell which.

'So you can't tell me? Particularly as they're my own diamonds?'

'Well....seeing as you're a valued client. I put them in my pocket and get a cab.'

'That's it? No...protection? No security guards?'

'No need. Who's to know I've anything of value on me if I'm walking the streets on my own, or taking a cab?'

'Highly risky!'

'Has worked for years. Is your curiosity satisfied?'

'For now.'

'Good. If I may....' He moved to his desk and opened a drawer. He placed a small black box on the desk in front of her, as he said, 'I liked your earring so much, I thought it ought to have a companion. It took some finding, but it's a perfect match.' He pushed the box towards her.

With a puzzled expression, she reached out her black glove and opened the box. He was delighted with the reaction on her face.

'This is beautiful.'

'Well matched then.' Joseph said, with a slight flush to his face.

She took out the diamond ring and slid it onto her finger. The large single diamond sparkled against the black background of her glove and reflected in her wide-open eyes.

'How thoughtful of you.'

'My pleasure. You like it?'

'What's not to like. Thank you. You didn't need to do this....'

'That is quite alright. I can offer a really attractive discount. Special rates for special customers.'

Her eyes hardened as she said, 'This comes with a price?'

‘Everything has a price, Ms Moss. This just happens to be heavily discounted.’

‘And what would that price be, Mr Cohen?’

‘Just three thousand pounds. Just look at the stone.’ He handed her a glass, and she held her finger up to see. It was dazzlingly beautiful. She slowly lowered her hand.

Jacqueline took the ring off and put it back in the box. She pushed it across the table towards Joseph as she said, ‘It’s truly beautiful and flawless and well above my means. But thank you for the thought.’

Joseph’s face fell. He picked up the box as if it would bite him. ‘I thought.....’

A knock at the door announced the ghostly entrance of Paul. He set a silver platter on the desk and bowed his exit to his office.

Joseph, still in a daze said, ‘Take your lunch now, Paul. Please. Thank you.’

Paul looked from one to the other and then nodded. He backed out of the room and closed the office door quietly.

Joseph removed the foil from the champagne bottle as he said, ‘I hope I’ve not offended you, Ms Moss?’

‘Not at all. I’m very flattered. It’s just the gift is perhaps a little....too expensive for either of us.’

‘Perhaps I can shave a few percent off if it helps?’ A gentle pop as the cork was released by an expert hand.

She shook her head and accepted the glass of bubbly wine and said, ‘Perhaps it should be a gift in the more proper sense if the occasion dictates?’

Joseph seemed to consider that as he raised his glass. ‘To further business, Ms Moss.’

‘To further business.’ She sipped appreciatively and said, ‘Speaking of which?’

‘Ah, yes. I have something to show you.’

He quickly tasted his drink before moving to the safe room door and tapping in the code. He grinned at her as he did so and heaved open the door. Moments later he was back with a presentation tray, which he placed on the desk and removed the red silk shroud with a flourish.

‘Pear-shaped, deep cut, eight-carat and flawless.’

Jacqueline leaned forward and studied the diamond from every angle through the glass. She nodded and smiled. ‘It will do.’

'I have a special price for you, too. One hundred and fifty thousand.'

'That certainly is special, Mr Cohen. It's way too high.'

He shrugged his shoulders and pushed the black box across the table to her. 'It comes with a special gift.'

She sat back in her chair and sipped at her wine. He followed suit and looked over the glass at her. 'Perhaps take your time to reflect on the quality of the gem and the value of the offer, Ms Moss. We have the whole bottle to finish.'

'Not for me, thank you. One glass and I begin to lose it. Straight to my head. I can feel it now. I never drink when I'm working. But it has been a bad day. Salute.' She drank deeply, and he poured her another glass.

The level in the bottle slowly dropped and both Joseph and Jacqueline were in a more relaxed frame of mind. She smiled more and laughed at his attempts at jokes. She required a restroom, and he had to escort her to the staff toilets. He had the embarrassing task of waiting outside before escorting her back to his office. She, thankfully, thought this very funny.

Jaqueline sat back at the desk and opened the box again. The ring sparkled, and Joseph lowered the lights. The bright white light made the gem zing.

'It's a fine piece, Joseph. A fine piece.'

'Do you not have somebody special that would like to give you the ring as a present?' Joseph asked with his breath held.

'No. No one special. No one at all.'

'That's very sad, Ms Moss.'

'Nah, not really. We chose the life we lead and take the consequences. I don't get to meet many eligible men and those I have were bastards. Sorry for the language.'

'No problem.'

'All of them. Not a one came up to expectations. Do you know, Joseph, the higher you go in the evolution chain, the lower the intelligence? That's a fact. The richer you are, the dumber you are. Anyway, that's my experience. Of men in particular. You married, Joseph?'

'Me. No. Only to my work.'

'What do you do when not working? To relax....oh, you fish don't you?'

'Well remembered, yes, I like to fish. I watch TV. I like game shows, I think they sharpen the mind. What do you do when you're not working? Not trying to be personal, just...curious.'

'You're always curious, Joseph. I sleep. I work, I sleep. They're hard taskmasters the Kings. Work and sleep.' Jacqueline drained the last of her glass and placed it carefully on the silver tray.

'Shall I open another bottle?' said Joseph standing unsteadily.

'No, I think two bottles is enough, don't you? I only wanted one glass.'

'I enjoyed the opportunity to relax in your company, Ms Moss. May I call you Jacqueline?'

'Not when I'm on business. And speaking of which, we need to close the deal. Is that your best offer?'

'No. It's not. It's a good offer if you want to earn a little extra and get a wonderful diamond ring.'

'I could not accept that ring on the back of my employers paying for it. You have no idea how they would react to that.'

'They need never know.'

'They would know. Trust me on that. No, I'm afraid that ring has to wait for another time. Even another owner.'

'Pity. It was chosen just for you and you alone.'

'Then we must wait for a better occasion. Now, your best offer is?'

'Well, call it the champagne talking, but let's say one hundred and forty-five.'

'That's way above market rate and you know it, Joseph. Look...I'm in no condition to call King now and get his approval. I can take the chance and go ahead, but only if it's a price I know King won't query. Get it down to One thirty and we have a deal.'

Joseph shook his head. 'I'm cutting off my arm at that price. I'm losing money.'

'Better than losing a client. I can't go back a second time without the goods from you. We had to cancel the deal before and he was not happy. With you, or me.'

Joseph agonised over the deal. Jacqueline stood a little shakily and slipped her cape over her shoulders. It seemed to make up his mind for him.

'If you could reduce your commission, I will agree to the one thirty?'

'By how much?'

'Half?'

'Okay. And you go without your commission.'

'Well.....'

'That's a deal breaker.'

He hesitated and eventually held out his hand. She shook hands, her gloves feeling softer than velvet. He began the paperwork as she placed the box and piles of cash on the desk. Ten minutes later they were ready to part.

'Can I say one thing, to you...Jacqueline? I do not know if the opportunity will ever present itself again.'

'Go on.'

'I could not see any flaws in those diamonds. Could you? Really?'

'Let's say. That day, we didn't have a deal. Today we have. Eleven, tomorrow?' He nodded.

'Let me show you out.' He staggered a little as he passed her, and she held on to his arm.

'Joseph. Do you really think the staff should see you like this? I can see myself out. Wave me off from your office. I'll look forward to seeing you tomorrow.' She leant forward and kissed him on his cheek. It was like an electric shock going through him.

Before he could respond she drew herself up and tried to walk straight. Straight down the corridor, straight into the main display area and turned to wave him a formal goodbye. Solly appeared as if by magic and signalled for the door to be opened for her. 'Where is Mr Cohen?'

'He's putting the jewellery away. I didn't want to inconvenience him. Besides, you're here, aren't you?' Her smile was captivating as he shook her hand in a daze.

With her back straight, she walked out of the showroom without a look behind. She moved down the street and turned a corner. Her mobile was in her hand and speed dialled a number.

'King. We have a go. Put them on alert. Next big delivery and we can move. Yes. He took the bait. Later. Bye.'

Chapter 6 – Cards on the Table

August 5

Mickey Madson was puzzled. He knew you couldn't turn down a dinner invitation from your boss, but when your boss was Blobby Dobbs it was weird. Dobbs never socialised with the staff. For the most part, he totally ignored them. Preferring to deal with just the one Inspector, Mickey, and leaving him to sort the team out.

Chain of command wasn't in Blobby's vocabulary. Neither was, 'Thank you' and 'Please'. 'Do it' and 'Now' were more common. Although Mickey felt he knew the Detective Inspector better than anyone else in the team, he realised he hardly knew him at all.

Madson had worked with Dobbs for three years, and in that time his impression was the same as everyone that had a boss. I could do the job better myself. It was universal, Madson knew that. He was sure the Inspectors working under him thought the same and he knew Dobbs would feel the same about his superior officer, Cummins.

But in this case, Madson was sure he was right. He could do the work better than Dobbs.

The line of thought ran through his mind as he left the sprawl of London suburbia and entered the more scenic countryside of Surrey. His two-year-old Vectra hummed along the A3 and he settled back to relax, knowing that later it would be a strained evening.

The rain had not stopped falling all day, so what should have been a nice sunny summer's evening, looked and felt more like autumn. The wipers began to set a timing pattern in his brain and he turned on the radio to break up the metronome effect.

What Madson couldn't understand was that both of them lived in London, worked in London. Yet, here he was driving into the coast for a dinner, which could have been better enjoyed within a cab ride of home. He knew Dobbs was a little eccentric, but this added to the puzzle.

The sat nav told him to pull off the main road and fifteen minutes later he was pulling into the car park of the Sailing Club. He somehow expected opulent grandeur, but the place was quite small and needed a coat of paint. He parked and looked for the clubhouse.

The dining room was far more elegant than the exterior and he saw Dobbs sitting at a table for two by the window. He waved and hurried over.

'Good of you to come, Mickey.'

'No problem, Guv. Pleased to be invited. Nice place.'

'I like it. Away from the force and pressures of daily life. My bolt hole if you like. I thought way out here, rather than in London, to let us escape a little. Don't you agree?'

'Very nice, sir. Lovely view of a lake.'

'It is lovely, isn't it? Big bugger too. I can't remember square footage and volume and all that stuff, but it takes a few hours to sail around it.'

'I didn't know you sailed, Guv?'

'A fairly recent distraction. Just dinghies, you can see the dinghy park to the left there. Mine's hidden by the bigger ones in front. You must have a turn around the lake with me sometime.'

'I'd look forward to that, sir.'

'Enough of the sir crap for this evening, Mickey. No one else to impress here. Call me Martin, or Marty as they knew me at University.'

'Well....Marty. I look forward to an interesting evening.'

'What would you like to drink, my friend?'

'Well, I'm driving...something non-alcoholic.'

The wine was ordered and Madson's fruit juice brought properly chilled. They deliberated over the menu and Dobbs advised against the fish. Despite the nearness to water, the fish was from the freezer.

'To the team, Mickey.' Dobbs raised his glass and drank deeply.

'To the team, Marty.' He sipped his juice. 'So, you bought a boat?'

'A dinghy, yes. Second hand, in case I didn't take to it.'

'And have you taken to it?'

'Like a duck to water. I love it. I want to buy a bigger one soon. You must try it, Mickey.'

'I will, sir. As soon as I'm invited. Though I've no experience of sailing at all.'

'You won't need any. I'll teach you and it won't take long. A bright young man like you.'

'It's a deal. One problem, though. I can't swim. I'm thinking of taking lessons.'

'You won't fall out of the boat, Mickey. Don't worry. Deep as the lake is. We have to wear safety vests, anyway. Stuffy buggers here won't let you sail without one.'

'That's reassuring. Ah...the starters.'

Madson was pleasantly surprised with the standard of the food. They ate in silence for a while before Dobbs said, 'What do you do to relax, Mickey? Any hobbies?'

'Not really, Guv. I go to the cinema every now and again. Listen to music or the radio. I'm a fair-weather walker. But...that's about it. Thinking of taking up swimming. I feel I need a little activity in my life. People are calling me Micki Gervais.'

'You do have a resemblance. Never saw it before, but now you mention it....'

'Don't you start, Guv.'

'What music do you listen to?'

'Oh... a mix, really. I've always like rock, but I'm happy with mainstream pop, too. Mostly on mp3's. You, sir?'

'I prefer the classics. Boring, I know, but they have....something. Something that stirs the emotions. I still have my vinyl and record player. I can't stand this modern desire for digital everything. I think computers are an abomination. I can just about manage the Internet when driven to, but that's it.'

'Each to their own. Lovely Salad....Marty.'

The light began to fade across the lake as the rain lessened. They could watch the swallows skimming across the surface, feeding and living life to the full. Another bottle of wine arrived and Madson risked a small glass.

'Mickey, I don't want to talk shop tonight, but just a few things to get off my chest, then we'll leave the subject until Monday morning.'

'Okay, sir.'

'What's your take on The Deck of Cards Robberies?'

'In what way, sir?'

'Anyway. What do you think? We've most of the teams sown up. A few got away. But there are more robberies to come, don't you agree?'

'Well, I think there's a massive ego at work here. These were very elaborate plots, don't you think? Too elaborate? Why use thirteen people, just to get a suit

of cards covered, when fewer people would be better and more profitable? I don't get it.'

'Good point. Very good point. Whoever's behind this is definitely trying to make a point. I agree. But he's also extremely clever. At a professional level, I think we should admire him. Especially as, despite our efforts, he's still elusive and we've had to let some of his team slip away. Especially that Chopper character and the hooker.'

'Can't win them all, Marty.'

'I'm convinced Chopper had a part in it, along with Dwyer. My money's on him. We'll watch him carefully in the months to come.'

'You say The Deck of Cards Robberies, Guv and yet Cummins and a few others think Suite of Cards.'

'I do, Mickey. Have from the start. I've a feeling about this case. I just knew there was more than one robbery. A suite doesn't do it for me. It has to be the whole Deck.'

'We'll see.'

'We will, Mickey. More wine?'

'No thanks. I must think about going soon. I must admit, sir, that your instinct on this one has been...well, extraordinary.'

'Thank you, Mickey. Most kind to acknowledge it.'

'If I may say so, before that your results were...sporadic. But now you're on fire.'

'I agree. Nice of you to point that out to me.'

'Sorry, sir. I didn't mean to....'

'No, no, no. Quite alright. I know what the team thought of me before all this. I know I'm called Blobby. I mean, why Blobby? Do I look like Blobby? I'm over six foot and a beanpole!'

'Nothing's meant by it, sir. My team have nicknames for me too.'

'What are they?'

'Tricky Mickey. Madman. And Water.'

'Water?'

'After Elton John's song, 'Madman Across the Water?' As in Madson Across the Water?'

'Never heard of it.' said Dobbs draining another glass.

'Mickey Mouse is another. I'll be called Donald Duck if the swimming thing gets out.' He laughed, and Dobbs managed a smile too.

But Dobbs face turned serious, 'It's still a sign of disrespect.'

'Everyone that has a boss, a Guv, a superior, tries to bridge that gap. Sometimes it's by reducing their status with a nickname, moaning about them, or in extreme instances, imagining them standing before you naked.'

'You do that?'

'No. But I know a few who have. It's never malicious. Believe me.'

'I need to be respected, Mickey. This case inspires me. I've waited all my professional career for a case like this. My one shot at redemption. If I can prove to my wife that I've some substance, some respect in my character and my job, perhaps she'll have me back.'

'I'm sure you'll be able to resolve your differences, Marty. Look. It's getting late, I really must go.....'

'I have to get her back, Mickey. Can't anyone understand that?'

'I think we're all sensitive to your problem, Marty. But there's nothing we can do. If there ever is anything, you only have to ask, Guv.'

'Only I can do anything about this.' Dobbs was almost crying now.

Madson looked around at the now sparsely occupied restaurant and felt no one was watching. He stood and moved around the table to put a sympathetic arm around his boss.

'Come on, sir. We can't have you like this. We need you to be strong. Need you to lead. Come on. Shake it off. It's tomorrow's problem. It's the wine talking now.'

Dobbs held his tears in check as he said, 'I know I'm not too good at this man management thing. We need to get to know each other better and trust each other. Know how each other thinks.'

'That's a good idea, Guv. It's something we'd all like you to do.'

'Then I'll do my best to do just that.'

'Good.'

'Mickey? If I don't get a promotion, if I'm stuck in this job forever, I will resign.'

'Now, that IS the wine talking, Guv.'

'I mean it.'

‘Can you afford to do that?’

‘My wife and I have a business. She runs it, I take twenty-five percent of the profit as income. I can afford to retire if I’m a little frugal with my lifestyle. And I can get part-time job at something. But I can’t go on like this, without her.’

‘We’re all here to help, Marty. I’ll do my best to get you through this. But, when you sober up tomorrow, are you going to revert to the secretive, aloof boss again?’

Dobbs said, ‘That’s up to you not to let me, Mickey.’

The drive back found Madson in a thoughtful mood. A lot of what Dobbs had said had come as a surprise, other things, not so much.

The whole office knew about Dobbs problem with his wife. She’d left him and labelled him a loser in every area of life. They assumed the bedroom was one area Dobbs wasn’t performing in. For he certainly wasn’t performing at work. Maybe that was a chicken and egg situation?

It certainly was a turn around that Dobbs wanted to confide in anyone, least of all a work colleague. Madson knew he was one of the many staff that had shown little respect to his boss. He felt a pang of guilt and resolved to be more considerate. He needed to let the rest of the team know the overall picture. But not give away any of the details, which he was sure Dobbs would rather be kept between the two of them.

As he neared London Madson became increasingly angry to be put in this situation. Dobbs had made him drive all that way and not be able to have a few drinks, just to listen to his problems. It was all right for Dobbs, he had a small flat near the lake and could stagger home.

Madson mulled the facts over in his mind as he drove. He shook off the feeling of gloom as he neared home. Tomorrow was another day. For all of them.

Chapter 7 – Following Suit

August 6

Jacqueline sat back in the chair and sipped the champagne. Her eyes checked every corner of the office and settled on the three monitors. How many more were there in the building? Was this room monitored in any way? She needed to know.

Joseph had been gone a while in the safe room. She was not in a hurry and thought this was one of the most important visits she was going to make. She made herself calm and relaxed. The wine helped.

A shuffling sound announced Joseph's arrival with the tray. He placed it slowly on the desk and smiled at her. She put down her glass and leaned forward in anticipation.

'I would really like to meet your bosses. If I may?'

Jacqueline looked up at him, 'What?'

'Call it curiosity, if you like. They intrigue me. It's not what you've said about them that's fascinating, it's what you haven't said. I really would like to meet them.'

'And do what? Question them on their personal business? Invade their privacy? That will go down very well.'

'You make it sound like an onslaught. I would just like to meet them.'

'Would you sit in silence, not asking any questions?'

'Well....no.....'

'Then you have my answer. What have we here?'

The brusque rejection threw Joseph. He slowly removed the red silk and tried to concentrate on Moss's reaction.

Jacqueline leant forward with the glass and spent a long time intensely studying the jewels.

'Twenty flawless, three carat, round cut, diamonds. Can I guess at a necklace?'

'You may. These are beautiful.'

Joseph sat down and waited. He ran through his mind everything he knew about the woman bent over the desk in front of him. It didn't take him long. He knew very little. He was completely captivated by her and spent every waking hour thinking of her. His sleeping hours he spent dreaming of her.

She was way above his class and any thought of amorous attachment was trying for the moon. But what choice did he have? He was in love and could do no more than show it.

Her eyes rose to meet his, and a thrill went down his spine.

'These are perfect. How much?'

'To the point. Okay...shall we say two hundred?'

She remained silent and bent over the gems again. She knew he was at least twenty-five percent over-charging. But that was Joseph Cohen, that was Cohen and Sons. That's why they'd been selected. The secret of any good con is greed. Offer a greedy man an item that promises profit and he'll take it. Withdraw it a little and he'll snatch at it.

'You sure about that price, Mr Cohen?'

'As sure as I can be. Your cut is ten thousand, mine a thousand.'

'A very tempting offer.'

'I think so too.'

She withdrew her phone from her handbag and continued to look at the stones as she spoke.

'Sir. Yes. Excellent. Unsurpassable. Yes, they are. You pay for what you get. Two hundred. Yes I did. He's not budging on this one. I will.' She touched the mute switch and looked at Joseph. 'He's questioning the price.'

Joseph shrugged. 'What do you want me to say? That's the price.'

Jacqueline thought before thumbing the button. 'We already haggled down to two hundred, sir. I think perhaps, given the quality of the gems it is fair.' There was a long silence. 'Okay. Thank you, sir.' She ended the call and gently tapped her teeth with her phone.

'Well?' ventured Joseph.

'He wants to think about it.'

'Another glass then?'

'Why not? Tight bastard!'

'No way to talk about your boss.' said Joseph, carefully pouring out her drink. 'I'm very impressed, though.'

'With what? Thanks.' she sipped the offered drink, and it brought a smile to her face.

'How you manage to sell the goods to him. Over-priced and with such sweet honesty.'

'Calling me a liar, are you, Joseph?'

'Calling you a professional, actually. Are you sure you don't want a job here?'

They toasted each other.

Jacqueline appeared deep in thought. 'The idea is becoming attractive to you?' asked Joseph quietly.

'Sorry. No. Miles away. Oh....I've something for you.'

She opened her briefcase and gave him a small jewellery box. His eyes lit up, and he carefully opened it.

'A lure? I don't recognise it?'

'I have it on great authority it is guaranteed to attract Brown Trout. Use it with pleasure, Joseph. Think of me when you catch something.'

'Oh, I will do. This is very...thoughtful. I can't thank you enough.'

'Oh...I think you can.'

Her phone chimed, and she breathed deeply before answering it. 'Sir? Hummm, humm. Okay.' She looked at Joseph and said, 'One ninety, or no deal?'

Joseph stood and paced the room. 'He's considering, sir. Shall I call you.....okay.'

She looked at Joseph with wide-open eyes as she said, 'He's waiting.'

Still Joseph hesitated. In frustration, Jacqueline put the phone on the desk and walked over to him. She took his head in her hands and kissed him fully on the mouth. He stared blankly at her, his face deepening in colour. She smiled at him and picked up the phone.

'He said yes. Thank you, sir. I will. Be there soon.'

She tipped the phone into her open case and started to count the money. Joseph sat in his chair speechless.

'You won't regret your decision, Joseph. I can promise you a big pay-out soon. Then, and only then, you can offer me the diamond ring again. Deal?'

Chapter 8 – Cut the Cards

August 7

Joseph Cohen did not sleep much that night. His mind a whirl of contradictory thoughts. Why had she kissed him? To get the deal – most probably. Because she liked him – improbable. But what if he was wrong? What if...what if...she was beginning to really like him?

The sheer audacity of the thought excited him, the sheer stupidity of it depressed him. By early morning he was sitting at his small kitchen table, looking into the third coffee and asking the same questions.

He tried to while away the hours before he could see her again. He shaved, very carefully. No nicks or scratches. He trimmed his beard and hair and looked long and hard in the mirror. He smiled and frowned. Trying to get just the right impression.

He stood in front of his wardrobe and puzzled over what to wear. All he had was black and white, and some fishing gear. Too late to get new clothes. Besides, he was in business and business dictated black clothes and white shirts. He would stick to tradition but chose the newest and cleanest outfit he had.

He was too excited to eat but forced down a bagel and some more coffee. It made him queasy, but he would have to put up with that. He took one last look in the bedroom mirror and decided it was the best he could manage, and it would have to do.

He looked out of his window and decided it was not going to rain, so just the suit would do. A raincoat would not add to the image he was trying to create.

He added a last splash of cologne and hoped it would be to her taste. He picked up the locked jewellery box and slipped it into his inside pocket. One last look in the mirror and he picked up his keys.

He checked everything. Box, keys, wallet. One last look in the mirror. Did his eyes look a little sunken today? A sleepless night would do that. It would have to do. He checked the time and realised that he'd wasted all the spare time. It was time to go.

He found a cab quickly, and he sat back trying to relax. He watched the familiar streets slip by without awareness. It seemed like moments later the cab stopped and he had to get out. He paid the cabbie and asked for a receipt to include the tip.

'Thanks for the big tip, Guv. I'll be able to afford milk with my coffee now!' Joseph wasn't listening. He was walking towards the impressive building where the beautiful Jacqueline Moss spent most of her life.

Joseph felt his heart beating faster as the lift arrived, and the door sighed open. He stepped in and pressed the third floor. As the doors closed, two men hurried in. He was unaware of them as he ran through the lines he was going to say as he handed over the box to Jacqueline.

He noticed a strange aroma as something was suddenly pressed against his face. He fought, but the effort quickly died away. Blackness enveloped him.

Nine and Eight supported Cohen's weight, as the lift slowed to a halt on the third floor. Eleven in the morning was the quietest time of the day for lift activity. They had established this months before. The delivery times set to coincide with the rarity of office personnel using the foyers and lifts. It was the only part of the operation that had no backup plan should the lift have other occupants.

They hurried him through to the reception area and the receptionist, Ten, pulled out a chair where Joseph was laid to rest.

Jacqueline came out from the office and looked at the recumbent figure before saying, 'You didn't use too much, did you?'

Nine shook his head. 'It's only chloroform. A little goes a long way. Would you like some?' he grinned, and she didn't. He handed over the locked box and moved away with t#his partner, Eight.

'Thanks.' Jacqueline said after them. They waved and got back in the lift.

Ten brought over a glass of water and looked at Moss. Jacqueline straightened her dress and smoothed back her hair and gave a nod. Some water was thrown into Cohen's face. He stirred. Jacqueline gently tapped his cheeks until his eyes opened and focused.

'What...what happened?'

Jacqueline said, 'Sit still. You must have fainted. Do you feel all right now?'

'Woozy. Very woozy. I fainted?'

'We think so. Two men brought you in here from the lift. You must have passed out.'

'How long was I out for?'

'Ten minutes, maybe. I don't know. Are you sure you're all right?'

'I...think so. I'm sorry. What a state to be in.'

Ten handed him the remaining water. 'Drink this, sir. You'll feel much better. Me gran is always 'avin turns like that. She feels okay a few minutes after.'

Joseph sipped the water and tried to smile. He struggled to remember his speech and gave up thinking along those lines. He tried to sit up and found it was okay. Slowly he stood, with the help from the two women. Was that genuine concern in Jacqueline's eyes?

'Just sit for a moment, Joseph. We're in no hurry for the delivery.'

The delivery! Yes, the delivery. He put his hand into his inside pocket and his heart froze. He quickly searched his other pockets. 'It's gone!'

'What's gone?' asked Jacqueline, concerned.

'I've been robbed.' He stood quickly, almost toppling over, but for the steadying hand of Jacqueline. 'Call the police.'

'Just wait a minute. Calm down, Joseph. Check all your pockets again. No need to panic.' He checked his pockets and his face coloured. 'Are you sure you picked it up before leaving?' His nod was emphatic. 'Perhaps you dropped it in the cab?'

'No. I know I didn't. It's a deep pocket, you see. Nothing can fall out of it. I've definitely been robbed. We must call the police, now.'

Jacqueline put a calming hand on his shoulder and said to Ten, 'Julie. Will you leave us a moment, please?'

Ten looked puzzled but picked up her handbag from reception and went into the office. Jacqueline put her face close to Joseph's and whispered. 'We cannot bring the police into this. Mr King's business is extremely....sensitive. He'll not allow any intrusion. Do you understand?'

'But the diamonds! Someone has stolen them?'

'If they have, then they've gone. You don't think the police are going to get them back, do you?'

'We must report it. My insurance.....'

'The insurance company will pay you the going rate, which as we both know is far less than Mr King is paying. Do you get my meaning here? If he finds out their true value, no more business for you, and I'm out on the street. You do understand, don't you?'

'I don't know.'

The telephone on the receptionist's desk rang and went unanswered.

'Look...you have half the money. I'm sure I can persuade Mr King to let you keep that. He won't be happy, but these things do happen. He'd prefer to lose half

than have inquisitive police all over his business. Asking for receipts and details of where the diamonds go. You do understand, right?’

‘I don’t know. It’s a lot of money!’

‘Look...you’re not thinking straight. Whatever those guys did to you, you’re not fully functional yet. I’ll get you a cab and you go home and rest. Call no one! Not even your partner, yet. I’ll....I’ll clear a space in my schedule here and see you at the office in a few hours. Okay? We’ll have a drink and talk about it. Okay with you?’

‘I don’t know.....’

Jacqueline turned to see a woman come out of the office. With a whispered, ‘Christ! It’s the Queen!’ she stood up straight.

Queen entered in a hurry. She was a tall, imposing woman, with close-cropped hair and dressed in a power suit. Her make up was stark and severe. She seemed to have permanent grooves in her face from regular frowning. ‘What’s happening?’

‘Our delivery’s been stolen. Mr Cohen is still a little wobbly. The jewels have gone, marm. He wants to call the police.’

‘Well, he can’t.’

‘I’ve explained that. But he’s an honest man and feels the police should be called. His insurance company too.’

‘Well, he can’t. Listen, what’s his.....?’

‘Joseph, marm.’

‘Joseph? We give you a lot of business, right?’ He nodded. ‘And we can give you a lot more. But not if the police get involved. Am I clear?’ He nodded again. ‘Police in, you’re out. Your choice. Is that alcohol I can smell on you?’

Jacqueline bent closer and sniffed. ‘I think it is. You been drinking, Joseph?’

‘No. Not a drop. It’s morning.....’

Queen said, ‘There’s definitely alcohol. Can we trust him, Jacqueline?’

‘They must have put it there...’ said Joseph trying to smell his shirt.

‘I’m not sure about this man, Jacqueline?’

‘He’s been reliable so far, marm. We ought to give him the benefit of the doubt.’

'If you're prepared to vouch for him, I suppose....okay. But your job is on the line.'

'Thank you, marm.'

Queen bent towards Joseph, then recoiled at the smell. 'We'll make up your loss, don't worry about that. Jacqueline, give the man a big order next time.'

'I will, marm. How about....the Constantine project?'

'Good. Very good. Bring it forward. Sorry, this happened to you, Joseph. But we'll make it up to you. Call in the police and we'll want our money back too. Understand?'

'Okay.'

'See to him, Jacqueline.'

Queen forced a smile at Joseph and hurried back into the office.

Jacqueline smiled at Joseph and said, 'We're sailing close to the wind here, Joseph. I'm not too sure the police will believe you at the moment. Collapsing in a lift and smelling of drink.'

She appeared to decide something. 'Look, they can manage without me for a while. Let's get a taxi and I'll take you back to the office.'

'What will I tell Solly?'

'The same as I'm telling you. It's a loss that will be made up, with interest. It's good business, Joseph. Call it in and you'll get nothing more from the King family. It really is a no-brainer.'

'What will Solly say?'

'We'll face him together. Look...if it helps, perhaps we can increase your percentage to twenty percent. How does that sound? I'm sure the Kings won't be querying your prices for some time now.'

'Okay. Let's start with that. If Solly agrees with no police, then I'll go along with that.'

'He'll see the sense in it. This robbery is a warning, which you must take as a positive. Your insurance company would not be so generous as we have.'

Joseph seemed to be thinking through his options. 'Your boss, Queen, or whatever, she's very....butch, isn't she?'

‘That’s no way to talk about my employer or the woman who’s giving you lots of profit. Shame on you, Joseph. Now, let’s get you back to familiar surroundings and sort out Solly. Then a drink and chat. Sound good to you?’

It sounded very good to Joseph.

Chapter 9 – Face Value

August 8

Damien Dwyer loved his family. But several terms in prison had dented his relationship with his wife, Lorna. He'd decided several years previously to spend more time at home and build up their relationship again. With two children under ten, they needed a father, and she needed a husband.

Plans do not always go as hoped and the small business venture he'd set up didn't provide a living wage. It was still good as a front, but with regard to spendable income, it was a failure. Going straight was always difficult when your talents lay only in the criminal world.

The decision to take on the Deck of Card sequence of robberies was not taken lightly. Neither did he discuss it with Lorna, he knew what her answer would be. So once again he set himself a lonely path of deceit to his family and a harder and more loyal devotion to the criminal fraternity.

One of the deciding factors of the Cards Project was that he would not be directly involved in any of the robberies. His role was to be purely planning and financing. The execution was down to others.

A carefully selected crew were approached and recruited over a period of many months. The planning had to be meticulous, but the profits were rewarding. He needed to keep on top of events daily, but it did mean he could spend most of his time at home.

He knew he'd have to lie to Lorna as to where the money was coming from, but he'd always done that. He was an accomplished liar, and she knew it. She had gone past the stage where it worried her. She no longer took it personally. But she knew what to watch out for now.

Lorna studied his behaviour patterns carefully. She knew when he was being kind if it was out of genuine affection for her, or some hidden guilt she would never find out. When it was genuine, her heart would soar and her love for him reassert itself. When the less genuine times came, she was waiting for the knock on the door and a long absence for the children from their father.

She'd spent too many days visiting him in prison. Trailing young children who didn't understand why their daddy couldn't visit them. But spending time with so many other people in a big, funny smelling place.

She knew he was into something right now. His moments of deep absorption while thinking through a problem. The vagueness of his whereabouts, at strange times of the day and night. His days away "on business". She knew he wouldn't keep the many promises of the past. She knew her man and had to take the good with the bad. But she'd felt his latest release from prison would be his last. He'd said so, in such a convincing manner. She thought even he believed it himself.

But here they were again. Going down the same old road, with the same old destination in sight. And for her, it would be the last journey. She heard the key in the lock and put down the paring knife. She wiped her hands and walked into the hallway.

Damien entered and smiled at her. 'Hi ya.' He dropped his over-night and moved quickly and kissed her hard, hugging her for a long time. This was one time he meant it and it made her feel good. But she was on a mission and feeling good would have to wait.

'Just in time for dinner. You are in, yes?'

'Yep. What we having?' Said Damien putting his wallet and keys on the hall shelf.

'Now you're here, takeaway.'

'My favourite. Where are the girls?'

'Jenny's. A sleepover. We've the place to ourselves.'

'That sounds good.'

'It is. A chance for us to catch up. Whisky?'

'Love one. Thanks.'

Damien recognised the signs and moved to the sitting room. He flopped onto the sofa and looked at the blank TV. This was going to change his plans for the night, but that didn't matter. His wife was a high priority in his life and he knew she wanted his undivided attention for a while. She deserved that at least.

He twirled his sovereign ring as he thought through his plans for the next few days. Whatever she would throw at him he needed to have a get out somewhere along the line. There was nothing too timely for a week or so, so he could relax and just take what was about to be thrown at him.

Lorna sat on the chair and they clinked glasses. 'How was Amsterdam?'

'Hectic as usual. There's four people I needed to have meetings with. To fit it into one day, to avoid a stay-over. Too hectic. It had to be a two-night stay, I'm afraid. But it's looking good. If I pull this off, we're in the money again.'

'Well, business is business. It's good you're busy. Busier than normal, you've been around so little. The girls have noticed too.'

'Really? I hadn't realised I was out a lot. But if you say so, I'll be home more often then. Certainly for the next few weeks. How's their school term going?'

'Summer break, remember. We're supposed to go on holiday somewhere? Last minute you said. We'd book somewhere last minute? Now we're into August. Last minute is here, Damien.'

'Sorry. But if Amsterdam comes off, then we can afford to go wherever you want.'

'I won't hold my breath, then.'

'Look.....sorry, I've been distracted lately.'

'I know. It's just like you used to be when you were on a job.' She let the statement hang in the air. He remained silent. 'ARE you on a job?'

'No! Of course not.'

'Yes, you are. Don't try to kid me. I've been through it too many times before to be fooled by you. What's it this time? Bank, Post Office. Little old lady's pension book?'

'Nothing. I'm just....helping out.'

'That's new. The hired hand, are you?'

'As a matter of fact, yes. Paid employment. No risk. Money straight into trusts for you and the kids.'

'Nothing about your business is no risk. What is it then?'

'You don't need to know.'

'I'll find out when the judge reads out the charges and I hear your sentence. What is it?'

Damien drained his glass and stood up for a refill. He took his time, and she waited. The longer he thought, the nearer the truth would be the answer. Her untouched drink grew warm in her hand.

'Someone approached me to plan a series of....projects. It's really no big issue for me. The projects are non-violent, and the targets arelet's say, not the people you want to have round for dinner. Count the cutlery before they leave, so to speak.'

'Bullshit! Who approached you? Anyone I know?'

'No. A total stranger to me.'

'And I'm supposed to believe you working for a total stranger doesn't have any risk? Bullshit!'

'True.'

'What do you have to do?'

'Plan four ...projects.'

'Robberies?'

'Yes.'

'What kind of robberies?'

'Varied. A couple of casinos, a jeweller and a bank.'

'And you do JUST the planning?'

'Just the planning. I handle the cash flow and organise the teams. I go nowhere near the marks. I don't have a fingerprint issue. I have no traceability – because I control it all from a distance.'

'And I'm supposed to feel reassured you're in control, and you'll stay out of prison?'

'Feel what you feel. You asked me, I told you. Decide for yourself. I'm not going to glamorise or elaborate anything. That's the job. It's fully in hand and the risk is extremely low. The amount of money coming from this..... I can retire. For good. That's the only reason I took it on.'

'Get caught, and the money is useless. They get it back.'

'Not this time. And I won't get caught.'

'Christ! How many times have I heard that from you?'

'This time....'

'It's always, "this time". Wake up, Damien. You're not the world's greatest thief. You're not Raffles or the Pink Panther. You associate with losers.'

'Not this time. This time they're prime. Personally selected....'

'And still losers. You'll all go to gaol! You said the same about the Scottish job. Look what happened there? They stole from YOU!'

'This time it's different. I've taken extra precautions. Trust me, this is as tight as anyone can make it. You can believe me, or not.'

'Not.'

'Then don't ask again.' He downed his drink and picked up his wallet from the hall table. 'Indian, or Chinese?'

Chapter 10 – A Rigged Deck

August 13

Solly was still unsure the decision he'd made was the right one. Despite some persuasive arguments from the Moss woman and some pleading from Joseph, he was now having second thoughts.

'What's it going to look like calling the police, two days after the robbery, Sol?'

'Better late, than never?'

'Look, they're coming today to give us a big order. Huge, probably our biggest to date. In over a hundred years we've never had customers like these. Do you want to blow that for a hundred thou, Sol? Think about it longer. Let's see what they offer. Can that harm?'

'Well.....'

'Look ...our Percentage Game. What's the highest percentage you have at the moment?'

'Oh...a rock star. Chav king, or something. Rap isn't it? I don't know. He's a25 percenter.'

'See? You can overcharge a client by twenty-five percent on marked price. ME, I'm trying for forty from this lot. Just think, Sol. They're going to be buying by the millions. Think of the personal profit in this for us. Don't ruin a good thing, friend.'

A member of staff walked over to them and said, 'I think they've arrived.'

Sol strode to the window and looked out while Joseph moved back to his office to prepare himself. He was feeling better now. Solly had fallen into line and Joseph knew the Kings wanted him on their side. Well, they would have to pay for it. He knew Moss had his back, so he was in a confident mood to take these Italian crooks to the cleaners. Then have them come back for more.

The car was a black stretched limo. Sol watched as two huge men got out of the car. These were bodyguards, not just chauffeurs, both dressed in black suits. The two men held open a rear door and two women got out. First was Moss, dressed in a black flowing cocktail dress, a matching hat, gloves and a small handbag. Her customary cape flowed from her shoulders and she moved with the grace of a panther.

The woman called Queen followed her out of the car, her hand supported by the burly driver.

'Some car!' said the assistant. Sol shooed her away and stood by the door. He nodded to the counter assistant, who pressed the button to release the door lock.

In his office, Joseph watched the monitor and saw the beautiful eyes of Moss look up into the camera. She entered the door held open by Sol and smiled sweetly at him. She was followed by her boss, Queen, who was dressed like a dog's dinner. The woman was wearing a bright pink flowing evening gown and pink gloves and a hat to match. They looked like they were going to a ball. The Queen woman was carrying a large handbag and another huge floral bag hanging off her shoulder.

Joseph shook his head at the two women and then held his breath. One of the large men accompanying them pushed through the door too. Sol mouthed something at him and the big man just stood his ground. The Queen woman said something to Solly, who seemed to back down slightly. The big man nodded to Solly and stood by the door, his hands held in front of him as if on guard.

Joseph tore his eyes away from the screen and settled himself in his chair. Paul was fidgeting with some paperwork, one eye on the screens.

'Make yourself scarce, Paul. See to the ladies' requirements, then take an extended lunch hour.'

'Yes, boss. Whatever you say, boss.' With a grin, he entered his inner sanctum and wondered what could happen in Cohen's office today. His boss was on a high. Was there something going on between him and the Moss woman? Surely not. Not with grumpy Cohen.

The women were shown into the office and Joseph stood to greet them.

'We meet again, Mr Cohen. In better circumstances, I hope?'

'Please to meet you again, Mrs King. Please take a seat. Ms Moss, one for you too.'

He called Paul into his presence. Paul knocked and entered hesitantly.

'Refreshments for the guests, Mr Wiseman.'

Paul made a stiff bow and looked at Jacqueline as he said, 'Your usual, madam. Pink?' With a sudden flush, he realised what he'd said in front of Moss's boss. He stammered, but managed, 'We also have some white, or black tea.'

Joseph fumed silently, Paul avoided his glare as he turned his attention to Queen.

'Tea for you too, madam?'

'Nothing, thank you. For either of us. Is it me or is it hot in here?' said, Queen.

'Thank you, Paul. Just bring your fan in from your office and then take your break, please.'

Joseph waited until Paul had returned with an electric fan, plugged it in and left the office, before turning his attention to the ladies opposite him. 'You both look extremely attractive today. Some sort of special occasion?'

Queen heaved her large bag onto the desk and said, 'We're on our way to a gala dinner. In my husband's honour. He hates it, we love it. A chance to dress up.'

She opened the bag and produced a large bottle of champagne, some caviar and blinis.

Queen smiled for the first time, 'This is to thank you for being considerate after your...event.'

Joseph smiled and said, 'Well. Thank you. Thank you very much.'

He cleared a space and began to open the bottle of champagne. Jacqueline opened the caviar and put the blinis on the small china plates ready to eat. Joseph poured into the three glasses which accompanied the ornate picnic basket.

Queen said, 'We don't have too much time, I'm afraid, Mr Cohen. We have to be there in an hour. So while you're doing that, perhaps we can discuss the next order?'

Joseph finished pouring the wine and lifted a sheet of paper from his desk. 'This is a very large order, Mrs King. It took a while to get the exact pieces together.'

'Jacqueline tells me you have a very large stock of diamonds. Could you not fill it from that?'

'Not this time, I'm afraid. The order is very specific and, well....to be honest, some of these items are very rare indeed.'

'But you have everything?' asked Jacqueline.

'Everything. Exactly to specification. It has taken considerable effort, I must say.'

'We appreciate your efforts, Mr Cohen.' said Jacqueline with such a sweet smile.

Joseph held up his glass in salute and sipped. The women held theirs up but didn't drink. 'Am I drinking alone?'

'No. We'll have it after we've concluded business. It's a very boozy function later. Can't be too puddled before we get there, can we?' said Jacqueline. 'But don't let us stop you. We brought it for you. Please enjoy.'

'Well....I.'

Queen waited while Joseph sipped his drink, before saying, 'May we see the gems?'

'Yes, of course. One moment.' He stood, keyed in the code and opened the safe room door. He left it open as he quickly returned with two trays. Both had red silk scarves over them. There was a gleam in his eye that was not there because of alcohol or the company. His excitement and joy showed on his face as he carried the trays to his desk.

'I give you the Constantine collection.' Lifting both scarves with a flourish.

For the next ten minutes, there was silence. Both women took turns at examining each of the thirty pieces, placed tantalisingly on the black velvet. Joseph sat back and sipped at the wine.

Jacqueline looked up at last and said, 'Exquisite. I hope you're not going to travel with these alone, Joseph?'

'No. I've learned my lesson there. I've two others to accompany me for this delivery.'

'Pleased to hear it.' said Queen. 'I'll send a car and two men as added security. We'll all feel safer then, won't we?'

'Yes. I'm sure.' Joseph finished his glass and placed it on the table. It nearly toppled over.

'Have you been drinking already?' said Queen sternly.

'No. Nothing. I don't know what's the matter. A little light-headed.'

'Well. How much are we talking about here, Mr Cohen?' asked Queen.

'I thought a round one million.'

'Did you? I thought a hundred thousand less.' Queen said with an edge to her voice.

'Well, ...it's a fair price, given the extreme....specification and time allowed. I'd like to stick to the round figure. Ms Moss?'

'I think we can stand that price, Mrs King. Given the circumstances and all.' said Jacqueline with a smile.

'Fair enough.'

Jacqueline placed her briefcase on the table and opened it. 'Half a million, Mr Cohen. Count it if you like?'

Joseph was holding on to the table and had to struggle to focus.

'No. I trust you. I'll just do the paperwork.' He saw the neatly stacked bills almost filling the briefcase. He tried to smile but couldn't. His eyes were watering and his sight was blurring. What's the matter with me?

'We have a larger lockable carrying case this time, Mr Cohen.' Jacqueline said, as if from a distance.

'Good. Please put it on the table. I'll get the paperwork.' He tried to stand but collapsed in the chair. Jacqueline was first to him, pulling him into a seated position. Gently she folded his arms on the desk, then gently laid his head on top. She looked at Queen.

'If that's the date rape drug, the victim wouldn't be much good in bed, eh?' said Jacqueline.

'Amazing how simple a syringe through the cork. No one would spot that. That'll teach him to drink while he's working.'

'Or drink when he's stealing.' Jacqueline laughed.

'Let's get on with it.' said Queen, making a call on her mobile.

Jacqueline emptied out the stacks of false notes from her briefcase and Queen emptied the remaining contents of her large bag onto the desk. They both went into the safe room and were relieved to see the safe was still wide open. It was full of thin drawers, each sliding out smoothly and full of first-class diamonds. The two women loaded their bags.

In the display room, the guard waited solidly by the door, watched by Solly. The staff whispered amongst themselves. The doorbell rang and distracted Solly. He walked over to the door and looked at the two people standing on the step.

Both were dressed elegantly and were holding hands. Solly guessed their age to be in the early thirties. He saw the man dressed in a Saville Row suit and the woman in a designer outfit. Both looked calm and unhurried. He motioned for the door to be unlocked.

He opened the door and smiled, 'May I assist you?'

The man smiled and said, 'You have an engagement ring in the window over there. That one, with one large diamond surrounded by six or seven others?'

'The Princeton ring, sir, yes.'

'No price on it, but we're looking for something...'. He looked at his girlfriend, 'Bigger. Nothing in the window like that, anything in stock?'

Solly knew the ring retailed at over ten thousand pounds, and they wanted to spend more! 'Certainly, madam, sir. Please come in. We'll find something suitable, I'm sure.'

Queen and Jacqueline emerged from the safe room and adjusted their clothing to regain their unruffled appearance. They'd filled the briefcase, handbags and the larger bag and were ready for their exit strategy. Moss grinned as she picked up the ledger from Paul's desk.

Throwing all the paraphernalia they'd brought in with them into the safe room, they closed the door. All that was left from their visit was the slumped form of Joseph, an open bottle of champagne and the glass he'd drank from. That should buy them a little extra time, before someone could rouse Joseph and realise the safe was almost empty.

The two women held hands briefly and squeezed. Jacqueline leaned towards Queen and kissed her tenderly. 'I love you.'

'I love you too. Let's do it.'

With a last look at the comatose Joseph, Queen walked down the corridor and out onto the showroom floor. Jacqueline hesitated and returned to the desk. She opened a drawer and took out the familiar box. She quickly opened it and checked the diamond ring was in it and put it in her pocket before hurrying after Queen.

Queen walked straight towards the front door and her bodyguard stood ready to open it. He glared at an assistant who hesitated to press the release button.

Solly was bent over the display cabinet as the young in-love couple worked their way through several possible rings. He looked up at Queen and frowned. He looked at the door to the offices and was slightly relieved to see Ms Moss walk into the showroom. Moss turned and waved goodbye down the corridor.

'Thank you, Mr Cohen. See you tomorrow,' She walked towards Solly and said, 'Mrs King would like to send two of her men to drive Mr Cohen tomorrow. Better safe than sorry. Okay?'

Solly stood up and excused himself from his customers, waving a junior assistant to take over and watch the goods. 'I see. But where is Mr Cohen now?'

'He's putting everything away. He didn't want to leave it out. Mr Wiseman's at lunch.'

The doorbell rung and Solly looked up, distracted. Two women were waiting to be let in. He looked at them and then at Moss. He could see Mrs King was getting impatient and her bodyguard was walking towards him.

'Can the door be opened, do you think?' asked Jacqueline sweetly.

It confused Solly, but he nodded to the assistant. The lock hummed, and the bruiser wrenched it open for Queen.

Jacqueline stood and offered her gloved hand to Solly. 'It has been particularly pleasurable doing business with you both today. Thank you.'

'Our pleasure, Ms Moss, Mrs King. Have a really good day.'

'We will.'

Solly stood by as they left and addressed the two on the step, 'May I assist you?'

'Is this Stamford and Cohen, jewellers?'

'I'm afraid not, madam. I'm sorry to say I've never heard of them. Can we help in any way?'

The two women looked at each other and one said, 'We really wanted to see someone who said he worked there. We must have got it wrong. Sorry to bother.' They turned and moved away. Solly shrugged and began to close the door.

'Thanks for showing us those rings, but we've decided to think about it for a day or two. We will be back.' The gentleman smiled and eased past Solly. The young woman followed with a soft, 'Thank you.'

Solly quickly looked back at the counter and saw an assistant putting away the items the couple were viewing. The assistant looked up at Solly and said, 'It's okay. They didn't take any.'

Solly felt relieved and closed the door. He watched his two best customers get gracefully into the limousine and the driver and guard shut the doors after them. The car started and slowly eased away down the street.

Solly stood and watched, then turned to look at the door to the offices. He walked towards it and then continued down the corridor. He pulled open the office door and gasped in surprise. Joseph was slumped over the desk. Next to him a bottle of champagne. He shook his partner but could get no response.

It was sometime later when Joseph had awakened they discovered they had been robbed.

Chapter 11 – Turn Over the Cards

August 13

Martin Dobbs appeared to breathe in the air of the office before saying, ‘Has anything been touched?’

Solly stood behind him, the tall figure of Dobbs blocking the doorway. ‘No, sir. Nothing. The police arrived and sealed off the whole building. You arrived an hour later.’

‘It’s very hot in here.’ said Dobbs as he strode into the room.

He took his time looking at everything, stood behind Joseph’s chair and looked carefully at the table. ‘The man was found here?’

‘Yes, sir.’ Solly ventured into the room. ‘Unconscious.’

Dobbs pointed to the champagne bottle. ‘Drunk?’

‘We don’t think so. He’s still recovering, but he thinks they drugged him.’

‘Mickey?’

‘Here, Guv.’ Mickey entered the room, easing past Solly.

‘Send this bottle to the lab and the glass. Plus all that stuff they threw in there to hide it from whoever found theguy.’

‘Yes, Guv.’

Dobbs closed his eyes and turned his head as if trying to sense something.

‘Anything else, sir?’

‘There will be. Is the man fit enough to answer questions yet?’

‘I think he may be, sir. His name’s Joseph Cohen.’

‘Send him in.’

‘A “Please”, Guv?’

‘Ah yes. Thank you, Mickey. Please, if you will, Mr....?’

‘Solomon, sir. Solly Solomon.’ Added Madson.

‘Yes. Please, if you will. Now.’

Solly bustled off to find Joseph. Madson watched his boss walk around the room as if he was Colombo. The pantomime didn't impress him, but the results so far certainly had.

'Anything yet, Guv?'

'Not yet. They drugged the employee, and they walked into that open safe and walked out with a massive haul of jewellery. This was too easy, don't you think, Mickey?'

'Looks that way, Guv.'

'It is that way, Mickey? Far too easy.'

Solly helped Joseph into the room and seated him in his office chair. 'This is Detective Inspector Dobbs, and he has a few questions to ask you. I'll be right outside.'

'StaySolomon. Please.' Dobbs said quietly.

'Yes, sir.'

'Mr Cohen?'

'Yes?'

'Tell me if I have this correct. You were found unconscious over your desk, right there. Alcohol in the office opened, and you obviously drank some. Your safe door wide open and your assistant sent off to lunch.'

'That is...well, it's correct, but I really need to explain.....'

'Unconscious? Has this happened to you before?'

Joseph's reaction was obvious to those in the room. He looked at Solly for support and saw only an impassive face.

'No. Not at all. Never. No.'

'I understand they called one of these women Queen and another Jacqueline Moss?'

'That's right, yes.'

Dobbs looked at Madson and said, 'Here we go. Would there be a King involved in this at all?' Dobbs said with a smirk at Madson.

'That's right! How did you know?'

'Anyone named ten, nine, eight, seven, six, five, four, three or two?'

'No. I don't think so.'

'How much did they take?'

'We need to make a stock take.'

'How accurate will that be, I suppose?'

The sarcasm was lost on Solly as he said, 'I have built our stock up over the years. The value of the company is in our stock. Or was.'

'So now you're broke, and it depends on the valuation of the insurance company?'

'Yes. Exactly.'

'It's not going to look too good is it? What with the alcohol, open safe and people not doing their guard duty.'

'Oh, my God!' Solly put his head in his hands.

'How did these two get out?'

'They...walked out.' Said Solly, almost breathless.

'You let them just...walk out?' said Dobbs still slowly moving around the room. He entered the safe office.

'Well, we didn't know they were robbing us, otherwise, we would have stopped them.'

From inside the safe room, Dobbs said, 'Where were you at that time?'

Solly entered the small office with him and said, 'Serving customers.'

Dobbs looked at the open trays and avoided touching anything. 'They wore gloves?'

Solly nodded, 'The woman Moss did. All the time. And the one called Queen did on her only visit.'

'Both wore gloves.' mused Dobbs. 'And these customers? Regular customers?'

'No. Off the street.'

'Did they buy anything? Leave a name address, credit card?'

'No. They left. At the same time as Moss and Queen left....' His voice faded away as he realised how weak his statement would sound.

'How many customers?' said Madson appearing in the doorway.

‘Two. Oh, and two more at the door.’

‘At the door?’ said Dobbs moving towards Solly. ‘They didn’t come in?’

‘No. They rang the bell and asked for a jeweller which wasn’t us.’

‘When did they ring the bell? Just before the two women left, or afterwards.’

‘About the same time, I think.’

‘Mickey, get the video surveillance tapes, we now have our team I think.’

Dobbs walked out of the room and Solly had to move to let him pass. Dobbs stopped and faced Solly. ‘Was there anyone else in the shop at the same time, other than staff?’

‘Just the bodyguard.’

‘What bodyguard?’

‘Mrs King’s bodyguard. He waited inside the shop.’

‘Anyone else involved, Mr Solomon?’ asked Madson.

Solly thought a moment before saying. ‘There was the driver of the limo. He waited outside though.’

‘Anyone else? Anyone at any time connected with this Moss, or Queen, whatever?’ Dobbs’ face was a picture of concentration.

‘No. I don’t think so.’ Solly said after thought.

‘There was the secretary.’ said Joseph from the doorway. ‘She was a very Essex sounding girl. Pretty too.’

‘Where was she?’ asked Dobbs.

‘At the King’s offices.’ said Joseph.

‘Where were these offices, Mr Cohen.’ said Madson, pen in hand.

Joseph stumbled out the address, aware now he was getting near to the area he wanted to keep a secret. If the insurance company found out about his undisclosed mugging, they’d hesitate to pay out anything. He began to shake. Dobbs and Madson noticed the distress of the man and set him down in his chair.

‘The Kings, you said.’ said Dobbs. ‘The woman nicknamed Queen was also called what?’

‘Mrs King. She had a husband.’

'Did you ever meet Mr King?' from Madson.

'No. She spoke to him on the phone to confirm the deals. Moss, that is. Jacqueline Moss.'

Dobbs had a look of excitement on his face.

'A King, a Queen, a Jacqueline, Mickey. Four people running interference for the getaway, a driver and a bodyguard. A secretary. How many is that?'

Mickey said, 'Ten.'

'There's an Ace and two more missing. Where were they then?' He turned and glared at Joseph and then Solly. 'Something's missing. Two more people must have been involved.'

'How could you possibly know?' said Solly.

'What have you not told us?'

Joseph broke first. 'I was robbed before. By two men.'

Dobbs sat in the car and looked exhausted. Madson said, 'Are you all right, Guv?'

'I'm fine. Thanks.'

'You did bloody well back there. Christ! You were on fire again.'

'Thank you. It's definitely the third Deck of Cards Robbery. We're off again, Mickey. Get the Wonderwall expanded.'

'Looks like the Cohen guy is involved somehow.'

Dobbs said, 'He's relatively innocent. Greedy and stupid, but not involved.'

'How do you know, Guv?'

'I just know.'

'There's something he's not telling us, Guv.'

'He's not telling us that he fell for the honey trap. He's more worried about not getting paid out by the insurance company, than any threat we can throw at him.'

'I'm not so sure, Guv.'

'We'll see. Process all the surveillance tapes and we'll see who crops up.'

'Still the Ace to identify?'

'We know who the Ace is, trust me.'

'You seem sure it's Dwyer, don't you, Guv? Why?'

'Instinct. Second Sense. We'll get him. I have got a good feeling about this, Mickey.'

Damien Dwyer jogged down the country path and hurdled the five-bar gate. Fitness for him was a way of life and he lived it to the full. He shook off the heat of the day and allowed the sweat to flush away all the toxins out of his body and into his absorbent tracksuit. The false beard and moustache did not help. The make-up he'd used to darken his skin tone, was beginning to run. Damien regretted the jogging exercise while in disguise.

He kept a constant vigilance as he ran. He deliberately chose open fields and narrow lanes. Anyone trying to follow him would soon look out of place. He ran the full circle and came back to the small woodland car park and rested by a tree.

As he bent forward to get his breath back, he scrutinised every car in the car park. None were familiar, but his own BMW. He relaxed slightly. He waited next to his car for ten minutes and saw a battered old Volvo creak into the bumpy car park. Damien smiled to himself, the wreck carried more money than a small country's debt.

The Volvo parked next to him and Damien opened his boot. King got out of the large car, but his bulk made the vehicle look small. He grinned at Damien and opened his own boot. The two men transferred four plastic Tesco bags from one car to the other.

'I hope these won't break?' grinned Damien.

'Triple wrapped, Ace. No chance. I spent an hour taping them up and rushed down here. These are hot in every respect.'

They closed the boots and Damien beeped his lid locked. Sweat was pouring off him now and he wanted to get into a shower. But there were loose ends to tie up first. This was their last meeting and after that neither would be contactable with each other.

'Any idea how much they're worth?' asked King.

'Does anybody? Other than Cohen and Sons. Getting a correct answer out of them is wishful thinking. I doubt even they know how much their stock was worth. Some of these diamonds have been there for nearly a hundred years. They're untraceable without the ledger. Isn't that just beautiful?' Damien took a drink of water from a bottle. 'Everything goes all right?'

'Like clockwork. Just as you said it would. Very smooth. Congratulations. I'd really like to work with you again sometime, Ace. Or whatever your name is?'

'Everyone paid off?'

'Yeah. Queen and I took a hundred grand out of your last cash payment. The Muggers, fifty each. Moss two hundred thou. Juicy Lucy, or number ten as you know her, thirty grand. The bodyguards five thou each. The distractions got five grand each.'

'Totals?'

'Rental about ten grand and miscellaneous stuff, like the car and some props, clothing and stuff around twenty grand. The whole lot just over a million. Big project!'

'Thanks. Good job.'

'Where did all the seed money come from?'

'You don't want to know.'

'Leaves you a tidy profit, nonetheless.'

'Not all mine. One other in the chain, one more nose in the trough. You have to pay for good information. How do I know you haven't helped yourself to any of these gems, King?'

'You don't. Neither would you miss them.'

'Okay. But if for any reason you're caught, and it's discovered you've got a disproportionate amount of money or jewels. I'll come after you. Is that understood?'

'I guessed that already. So I haven't touched it. Besides, I think these are far too hot for me to hang onto. Best of luck selling them on.'

'Not your problem. Already in hand. Anything else?'

'On behalf of the team, you've never met, and they don't know you...thanks. Anything else, just call me.'

'I will. Thanks again. Good job.'

They shook hands and King opened his car door. 'Going to get me a new set of wheels.' King grinned.

'Don't spend it all, or too quickly. You may get a visit anyway, but I've made you as safe as I can.'

'Good luck.' With a wave, he got in the car and drove away.

Damien took a last look around before getting into his car. He had a long day and night ahead of him.

Damien Dwyer was almost asleep. The gentle rocking movement was very soporific. The hum of the tyres on the motorway was the only noise, and he felt his eyelids getting heavy. He shook himself alert and checked the driver was still awake.

George Ansell turned and smiled at him, 'Still awake, Mr Jones?'

'I am. I was hoping you'd be too.'

'I'm fine. I do this every week, almost. I know when to stop and rest. I'm okay for an hour more, then we can take a break. Hungry?'

'A little. Just want to get there.'

'Don't we all. Tomorrow morning, quite early, unless there are any hold ups.'

Damien watched the small overweight man turn to watch the road again. He hated people who spoke to the passengers for long periods and not look at the road. Other than that, George was a careful driver. Sometimes too careful. Damien looked at the speedometer and saw the car was doing eighty. If he was driving he'd be doing over a hundred. They built these European motorways for speed.

Still, George had a point. They didn't want to get stopped for any reason. Softly, softly catchy monkey.

Damien rested his head and closed his eyes again. He had three meetings set up and after that, he could relax. The diamonds were in refrigerated boxes in the boot. Not for temperature reasons, more they looked less obvious in the kind of cold box people carry on long journeys. He mixed them with the ice and they were now invisible to the naked eye.

Amsterdam tomorrow, an overnight and then home. That sounded good.

Damien tried to assess just how much George had guessed about this paid journey. It was a one-off and carrying secret goods. George was a normally upright and honest man. But it had come to Damien's attention – through one of his many contacts – that George desperately needed money.

The approach had been made carefully, piggy-backing on George's international business interests in Holland. A straight ten thousand for transportation out and back into England. A few days away, all hotels paid for by George. All tickets and expenses in his name and Damien travelling on a forged passport. This he'd arranged through another of his contacts.

The buyers of the diamonds could be trusted as far as any fence, anywhere, could be trusted. But they didn't know him. The only meeting he had with them, he'd used a subtle disguise and he'd use the same again tomorrow. He'd be hard to trace all the way from England to Amsterdam where he wasn't known as Damien Dwyer.

He had another business interest there. He'd travelled officially for that a few weeks earlier. Over the period Joseph was being mugged. It was also a good alibi, he would need later. Damien was setting up what looked like a genuine business deal. On paper at least. He was paying a company to give him an order and payment over a five-year period.

He was, in fact, paying them in cash and so laundering money. A company had been difficult to find that would make that kind of deal. He'd found this one by discovering their need for a cash injection. Cash spoke volumes in any language. But in the UK he could show he'd an income from his business and so begin to spend some of his ill-gotten earnings.

He'd agonised over how secure all these foreign arrangements were, he even doubted his own abilities. He was on his own on this leg of the journey. He'd deviated from the original plan. Originally all the goods were to be fenced through the one contact in Birmingham. They'd already bought the diamonds sourced from Cohen and Sons and were expecting the larger promised haul within the next few days.

Damien had a feeling for some time he was being watched. It was a risky decision to change the master plan. He remembered the EMP job and how his haul was stolen from him. This time, only he knew where it was going and when.

The diamonds were untraceable as they came from a private stock the jewellers had built up over the years. However, once the industry knew numerous quality, gems have been stolen, selling them in large quantities would drop their price. Selling them bit by bit was a long process, each sale fraught with discovery.

Going by car reduced the risk of stop and search. The customs rarely detail checked any traffic movement. Going by plane meant they might spot the diamonds. People think because diamonds are clear they don't show up on X-ray. Once the airports had been alerted by this record-breaking robbery, the customs would be on the lookout for any diamond movement. There are X-ray machines that analyse the carbonised particles in the stones and alert the security staff.

Damien had no idea the total haul value. He'd have to wait while the purchasers valued the gems. He needed to break down the goods into three packages and try to make his own inventory. His story was he was a jeweller that was selling off all his stock to retire. It would take the purchasers several days to come up with a figure. He'd have money transferred into four off-shore accounts, which he'd set up a month previously.

He hoped these accounts were secure. Only he knew where they were and had access. They would be for his wife and two girls and the other for himself. He would transfer them to three trust accounts later. He also needed some payment in Euros to pay off George.

He looked at George quickly and saw he was still wide awake. Tomorrow would be a busy day. He knew the Dutch bastards would rip him off, but what else could he do?

It would still amount to a lot of money.

Chapter 12 – Counting the Cards

August 20

The Wonderwall was getting crowded. Dobbs sat in the dark and looked at it with a comfort that comes from familiarity. He knew every inch. Every miss-spelt word scrawled on notes by his staff. Every photograph and illustration.

The case was drawing to a close. The loose ends needed tying up. But there were still a few hiccups. He moved and touched the board. To him it seemed alive and breathing. Soon, everything would be resolved. He saw himself receiving the accolade he richly deserved. The promotion. But most of all - the look on Alicia's face when she realised her husband was not the insensitive moron she'd thought him two years ago.

That would be the crowning moment. That would make everything worthwhile. Nothing else mattered. But there were just a few hiccups to take care of first.

Madson was in early and was surprised to see Dobbs sitting in his office. He knocked on the door. 'Okay, Guv? You all right?'

'Fine, Mickey.'

'You look like you've been here all night?'

'Most of it. I've been on the street, Mickey boy. Something I haven't done for years. Loose ends, you see. They always need tying up. Get out there in the real world. Talk to informants, not tap away on your damned computers all day. Get something done properly. Old school.'

'Good. Coffee?'

'No, had enough of that over the last few hours. Look here.' He strode out into the main office and stood by the Wonderwall. His short-sleeved shirt was heavily sweat-stained, and he looked tired and haggard.

He tapped out at photographs as he spoke. 'Let's start with the woman called Queen. Easily recognised from the security tapes. Jane Armitage. A record as long as your arm, Mickey. Soon tracked her down and put her in a cell.'

'I know this, Guv. I was there.'

'Humour me, Mickey. Once we had her, we had Jacqueline Moss. Armitage's lesbian lover. The two go together. What a waste of a body Moss is. Real name Desiree Goodson. Put the two together, threaten them with a lifetime of separation and we soon got....' He tapped sharply the photo of King. 'Colin Essen. We've wanted him for ages, slippery bastard. Known associate of Armitage and picked up easily.'

'How did we get them so quickly, Guv?'

'My informants. I've had them running for weeks. We got their addresses and picked them all up yesterday. While you were on that week-long ponsey course of psychology of the criminal mind. Waste of time that. I knew everything on it.'

'I found it useful....'

'The driver and the bouncer. The Distracters. All have records on file, most of them still at the same addresses. Those we picked up. The rest....'

'Your informants?'

'Got it in one. The two muggers we got Joseph to make an I.D. from the photo rogues gallery. He saw them briefly as they entered the lift, but enough to spot them in the mug-shots. All of them petty criminals, suddenly thrown into a big job. Most unknown to each other. Like that's going to stop us finding them! All were recruited by phone and only met one person before the robbery. Essen.'

'Any confessions, Guv?'

'Plenty. I told them I was throwing the book at anyone I couldn't place exactly within the overall plan. Anyone I couldn't have a role for, I'd charge them with being the mastermind. At least ten years. Help with my enquiries, probably just probation. It worked with most of them. The bastard Essen is holding out though. He says there's no person giving him orders. I've got a line-up later today. We'll get Dwyer in and nail him this time. Essen will crack even if I have to take him into a dark room and...'

'Guv, you're going off into one. Take it easy, okay?'

'Sorry. Thanks, Mickey. I've...missed you not being here. I'm working with morons.'

'I know.'

'I've had to do everything myself.'

'I know.'

'I was left to put the last pieces of the jigsaw into place, Mickey.'

'Looks like you've done a brilliant job, Guv.'

'Not finished, yet. Loose ends, Mickey. It isn't over until there are no more loose ends.'

Dobbs was getting slow of speech and Madson realised his boss was overtired. He needed to get him to rest. 'Go home for a few hours' sleep, Sir. We'll wait until you're rested before doing the line-up.'

‘What? I’m fine.’

‘You’re not, Martin. Lookyou told me to tell you when, you know, you were being... unreasonable. Well, it’s now. Go home. Please.’

‘Okay, Mickey. I’m too tired to argue with you. I’ll be back later.’

‘I’ll call a cab, Guv.’

Madson spent a few hours catching up on the details of the case that he’d missed by having to attend a previously booked course. He talked to the team and felt he was up to speed on everything. They told him that Dobbs was behaving erratically and losing his temper more than usual. They were glad Madson was back, to be a calming influence on their boss.

Madson needed a first-hand feel for some main players and so visited the man called King in his cell.

Colin Essen looked dejected. Madson introduced himself and Essen had little reaction. The man had been held in prison for nearly a week and he was already heavily depressed. Madson had a doctor’s report that stated Essen had been given medication after two panic attacks.

‘Not your first time inside?’ Madson said quietly. He saw a nod from the head held in both hands. ‘You get used to it. I’m told. Not a pleasant place, then it’s not designed to be. It’s not a reward, more a punishment.’

He sat back and waited for some reaction from the prisoner. It was two minutes before Essen spoke. ‘D.I. Dobbs said I could go away for ten years. Is that right?’

Madson kept his voice calm and low as the course instructor from the previous week had suggested. Maintain an atmosphere of calm and confidence. Get the interviewee into a state of trust, which will help you to guide them through the problems that lay ahead for them.

‘That can depend on many factors. How the Judge perceives you. Whether you’ve made a full confession. Helped the police with their enquiries. Whether you’ve shown the appropriate amount of contrition.’

‘I can’t do ten years, Mr Madson. I just know I can’t.’

‘Well, you’re in good company. Both Armitage and Goodson said the same. They’ve done everything they could to help their cause. Actually, that’s why you’re here now.’

‘There’s nothing else I know that’ll help. I told Dobbs everything.’

'I'm sure you did. But you haven't told ME everything. Tell me about the man called Ace.'

'There's nothing to say. As I said to Dobbs, I met him a few times; he'd give me the cash to pay for the Cohen diamonds. He seemed pleasant enough.'

'Where did you meet?'

'Various places. A pub, a park, in a cemetery, car parks.'

'What did you talk about?'

'The project. What was to happen next? We had a defined plan, and I was to stick to it.'

'Talk about anything other than work?'

'No.'

'Sure?'

'Yes.'

'How much money was involved in the project? How much did he give you in total?'

'It must have been nearly a million.'

'All cash?'

'Yes. Large denomination notes, in bundles.'

'A lot of money. Where did that come from do you think?'

'I don't know. He didn't say.'

'And where did it all go?'

'I got the cars, recruited the people, rented the office, got the props. Even paid for clothing. Anything involved with the project. It was all very expensive.'

'I can imagine. Dobbs doesn't think you're bright enough to plan this thing by yourself. So he's happy that an "Ace" exists. However, until he can charge someone else as being the planner, he will put the whole thing down to you, as you're the "King". You see, we only have your word about this Ace character. With no proof, you're the last person in line.'

'I don't know any more about him. Honest.'

'You couldn't pick him out from photographs shown to you?'

‘No. Look....I’m sure he was disguised. At least sometimes. Maybe all the time. You knowfalse wig and stuff. I just couldn’t see anyone in the mug-shots that looked like the man I met.’

‘Then in answer to your first question, ten years will be the minimum, I’m afraid.’

Madson stood up and collected his papers from the table. ‘I came here hoping for an extra piece of information. Something I can use to help us, and in doing so, help you too. Looks like we’ve both failed.’

‘I’m not the last in line. Neither is Ace.’

Madson turned slowly and calmed his thoughts. ‘What makes you think that, Colin?’

‘He said something. He said there was someone he had to pay off.’

‘Who? Did he say a name, anything?’

‘No. He just said, one other in the chain. One more nose in the trough. You have to pay for good information. I took it to mean he was not the only one planning this. Or, not the one financing it. I just don’t know.’

‘That’s a pity.’

‘Does that help?’

‘Actually, it does, Colin. I’ll make a point of telling D.I. Dobbs, you’ve been very helpful.’

‘Thank you.’

‘We’ve a line-up this afternoon and you’ll see some men, one of whom could be the man you call Ace. If you see him, point him out. That’ll help your case enormously.’

‘If I see him, I’ll definitely point him out.’

‘You do that. Thanks, Colin. I’ll see you later, then.’

Damien Dwyer sat in the interview room and tapped his fingers while he waited. He twirled his sovereign ring and tried to think of other things to occupy his mind. They could keep him waiting for hours, even days. He was expecting this amount of attention but felt confident he’d done everything to cover his tracks. But you never knew for certain. Human beings were quite unpredictable. There was always someone who could let you down.

He ran through all the aspects of the project in his mind and knew the only real weak spot would be King. In the line-up earlier, King had not pointed him out. His threat of past demeanours coming to light must have been enough to prevent him pointing the finger. At least for now.

As far as Damien could tell, they'd no hard evidence on him - yet. Hopefully never would. He would just have to sit it out and play the game. The door opened. Game on, he thought.

Madson sat opposite Dwyer and smiled. 'Damien Dwyer. Back again. This is looking bad for you.'

'Worse for you. It means you've got the wrong man, twice. Inefficient I call that. Incompetent the jury will say.'

'We'll see. You've given a statement on your whereabouts on specific dates and we'll be checking that very carefully.'

'Of course. Anything to help the police in their enquiries. I'm a simple businessman, spending every hour of the day trying to earn a living to feed my family. And right now, you're keeping me from doing that.'

'We're very interested in your business, Dwyer. Perhaps we should take a closer look at it?'

'Please do. Get someone with business acumen because they might be able to advise me where I'm going wrong? I'm only making just enough to eke out a living.'

'When we're satisfied with your business practices, you may go. Now let's go through where you were on the sixth of August?'

'Amsterdam.'

'Selling diamonds?'

'No. Selling my services. I'm setting up a very lucrative contract with a Dutch firm. If it comes off, I can afford to take my family on holiday. Assuming I'm allowed to leave the country?'

'Can you prove this?'

'What do you need? Airline tickets, a statement from the Dutch company? I've everything you need, Inspector Madson. You've the wrong man. And I can prove it.'

Dobbs sat and looked at the Wonderwall as Madson entered the deserted main office.

'Hello, Guv. I've been looking for you. Can I have a word?'

'Certainly, Mickey. My door is always open. What d'you need?'

'Just a few loose ends with this Jack of Diamonds case. Do you want a coffee?'

'No, thanks. Help yourself.'

Madson moved to the coffee machine as he said, 'How's it going with the missus, Guv?'

'Not good. Backwards, if anything.'

'Don't worry. You'll have the case solved in a few days. She'll be impressed with that, right?'

'Let's hope so. What've I missed, anything? I hear the line-up was a negative?'

'Fraid so. Essen didn't bat an eyelid. I'm really not sure Dwyer is our man.'

'I am. I just know it.'

'Well, unless we get something solid, we've nothing at the moment.'

'Be patient, Mickey. Just follow the money and we'll get them all.'

'There had to be more robberies, and you were right there, Guv. Spot on from the beginning. Wonderful creative thinking. None of us would've ever got near that, especially in the time. Your deductions have saved the unit thousands of pounds and man-hours. Cummins must be very proud of you right now. So I've cleared another space on the Wonderwall for what must be a fourth robbery.'

'I noticed that, Mickey. Cut out the bullshit, it's me you're talking to.'

'Right, Guv. There's clearly an Ace thing going on at the top there. The first two robberies was quite possibly the same man. Might even be the same man for the third too. But Essen said something. Essen admits there's a hierarchy above Ace. If that's the case, this other person must be the mastermind.'

'He's making it up, Mickey. Trying to score Brownie points. Don't believe him.'

'What if it's true?'

'It isn't.'

'Whose funding all these robberies?'

'Each is funding the next, surely?'

'Then Dwyer doesn't have the funding. Not from the start, not now. He has no money.'

'Offshore accounts. Won't touch it until a few years have passed. You're not thinking straight, Mickey.'

I saw Essen's face when he said about Ace needed to kick up money above. I saw his eyes. He was telling the truth, I'm sure.'

It's wishful thinking on your part, Michael. We don't want more characters to find, we want less.'

'While you were...indisposed, Guv, I went to see O'Donnell again. As Rigã he saw more of the Ace than Essen did. He was involved in two robberies.'

'You're telling me stuff I already know.'

This Ace guy has a lot of loyalty. Either by carrot or stick, I don't know. No one will finger him. But O'Donnell said one thing. He let it slip, but I think it's relevant.'

'Go on, surprise me.'

'He said the Ace wasn't the man running the show.'

'He's trying it on, like Essen.'

'We now have two suspects claiming the same thing. Neither aware of the other. We can't ignore this, Guv.'

'Yes, we can.'

'Yes we can, what?' said Cummins from the darkened doorway.

'Didn't see you there, sir.' said Dobbs standing up quickly.

'I've come to congratulate you and your team, Martin. Good job so far.'

'Thank you, sir.' Dobbs said with a smile. 'Nice to hear it for a change.'

'There's been a lot of media interest in this case and I find myself being interviewed and having to waffle. I don't know enough detail about it all. So, from now on I need to be briefed daily. Understood?'

'No problem, sir. I'll fit time into my busy schedule to get to see you.'

'This is the biggest ever jewellery theft of all time, Martin. We're going into the history book, even the Guinness Book of Records. Possibly. You're going to be famous.'

'I'm not sure that's what we're here for.....'

'Of course, it is. Raise the profile of the Division in a positive manner for a change. Think of the P.R., Martin.'

‘Yes, sir. I’m sure....’

‘Cohen and Sons have filed an inventory report with the insurers. Any idea of the value they put on the stolen gems?’

‘Not a clue, sir. Nor how correct it will be, either.’

‘Madson, any idea?’

‘No, sir.’

‘Street value of £300 million. Highest robbery ever. The next nearest was in 2006 and only £53m. How about that?’

‘We should feel proud, sir.’ said Madson with a smile.

Dobbs had a faraway look in his eyes as he decided he’d risk calling Alicia that evening. She should be proud of him now. ‘Could there be a promotion for me and the lads, sir?’

‘I would hope so, I’d certainly recommend it. Especially if the case is fully sewn up and resolved to all our satisfaction. Now, bring me up to date, Martin.’

Dobbs took a deep breath and led Cummins to the Wonderwall. He detailed as much as he could and pointed out the various aspects of each case. When Dobbs had finished, Cummins stood and studied the board. His fingers stroking his chin as he assimilated all the information that would be useful for a press conference.

‘What’s happening about this fourth job, you believe will happen? What have you in place to track that?’ Cummins pointed to the blank space at one end of the wall.

‘We’ve assumed it’ll be something to do with Spades, sir. So we’ve trawled all businesses that have Spades in their name. There is a few, but until we know....we can’t move on anything. We’ve informants looking and ears to the ground. But as yet....nothing’s come up.’

‘What’s your best guess?’

‘We’ve had casinos and a jewellery robbery. It could be anything. My money’s on a bank. Just an instinct.’ said Dobbs.

‘And we haven’t got the brains behind all this yet?’

Dobbs looked at Madson before saying, ‘We are pretty sure it’s Damien Dwyer, sir.’

Madson said, ‘We’ve checked through his business, but could find nothing there that would incriminate him. His alibis are strong, too. His wife confirms he was at home during the heist.’

Dobbs flashed a look at Madson who ignored it. Dobbs said, 'He has dealings in Amsterdam, which is well known for the diamond trade, how convenient is that?'

'Convenience doesn't prove guilt. The Judges like more, Martin.'

'We have one latest development, sir.' ventured Madson, risking Dobbs displeasure.

'Go on, Madson.'

'There may be one other person above the man we're calling Ace.'

Madson put a blank post-it note above the Aces on the Wonderwall. 'So what do we call him?' Cummins said.

Without hesitation, Dobbs said, 'Let's call him, "The Dealer". The man running the show. Dealing the cards as it were.'

'Nice call, Guv. Now, ...it's a whole new ball game.' Grinned Madson.

PART FIVE

ACE OF SPADES

Chapter 1 – A New Deal

October 1

There are few established Gentlemen's Clubs left in the city anymore. None, that still had a male membership only. The clientele of these institutions had changed over the years. Sometimes, they'd broadened the word Gentlemen to include people with wealth, rather than people with breeding.

To say they were as exclusive as a hundred years ago is an exaggeration. György Király knew this as he was sitting in one right now. He wasn't a member, as yet, but he was sitting opposite a man who was. He was a guest and therefore treated like a member.

The dark oak walls were mostly original. The lighting had changed over the years. It was still subtle and restful, but with the low voltage eco lamps, the softness and warmth had slipped away somehow. No more the layer of smoke hanging in the air, the smell of cigars and tweed. Times had moved on, for the members, if not some staff.

The hundred-year-old Grandfather chimed six o'clock and for some elderly members, it held a note of reassurance. It was a justifiable time for the first real drink of the evening, to be followed by an acceptable meal in the dining room.

'Would you like a drink, signore Király?' the diminutive Italian asked in almost impeccable English.

Antonio Novellino was the Presidente of the Banco Particolare and looked every inch of it. His image was as crafted as his Italian made business suit. 'When you are talking a million Euros, you have to look a million Euros,' was one of his pearls of wisdom to the younger staff.

His thinning hair was still very dark, mainly through the application of hair treatments on a daily basis. His pencil eyebrows gave him an arched look to his face, implying almost permanent surprise. A neat black pencil moustache under his nose gave him the look of a 1940 lothario on the silver screen. A white carnation always adorned his jacket lapel.

But his eyes were the most distinguishing feature. Small, hard and black. They missed nothing and were the outward sign of the ruthlessness that lay under the booted and suited Italian's outward appearance.

'A Club Soda would be delightful, signore Novellino.'

'Not a gin and tonic, cognac?'

‘Thank you no. I do not drink alcohol. Not since my Liver problem. Thank you, no. Soda is fine.’

The cultured British voice of György Király was at odds with his non-English persona. He dressed in very old-fashioned suits, giving the casual viewer the impression he was Austrian, or 1950s Swiss. Thick material with checks and broad weaved stripes. Shirts that had tiny collars and ties that looked like string. He looked eccentric, had an accent, but was obviously out of place in an Englishman’s Club.

As a potential new client for the Banco Particolare, Novellino had done his research on this man, before allowing him to even cross the threshold of his prestigious office.

With a long lineage of family history, György Király was in London to settle the estate of one of his Uncles, who had left a vast inheritance to him. The machinations of English and Hungarian law conflicted, and the settlement was drawing out from weeks into months. György Király was impatient but was powerless to move the proceedings along.

Király needed to reside in London for at least a year until all the formalities had been settled. He needed a Bank and had approached Banco Particolare. Novellino had taken an interest in Király, especially after understanding that the man’s settlement was to be over ten million Euros and he needed to invest.

Novellino remembered the first interview, conducted in a small client’s room at the bank. There was a range of these rooms, each decorated to suit the level of the client. Király had initially been seated in one of the more basic suites.

Király had seemed at ease as he said, ‘As you are my preferred bank, I thought it only prudent to come to you for advice first. I have ten million Euros I need to invest. I would prefer to deal with someone of your stature, signore, rather than, say, a lesser cashier only interested in selling me a portfolio of dubious value.’

‘We do not employ people like that, signore. But I do understand your concerns.’

‘After my experience in Switzerland, I’m overly cautious and it’s a great deal of money to risk. I appreciate you seeing me like this.’

‘We’re here to offer all our clients the best of service. How can I help?’

‘I’ve been recommended to Banco Particolare because it is a private organisation and I required an added element of security to my accounts. I tried a bank in Switzerland, but despite their promises of non-disclosure, I was disappointingly forced to move money away from their establishment. Tiresome business.’

'I have heard similar tales.'

'So I need a current account, eventually, an investment account and portfolio and also I need a safe deposit box. I have a small, but adequate apartment in Regent's Park, but as to security...well, who can be sure these days? I understand you've been established for a hundred years, is that correct?'

'Our bank is still relatively new by London City standards. We've only had a branch in England for ten years, but we were founded in 1905 in Rome. Our bank is now in Milan, Switzerland and also England. We grow slowly and carefully. We normally chose our clientele, not the other way around. We offer our banking services to clients who have a....minimum deposit rate per month. May I ask what yours is likely to be, signore?'

'It will vary, but up to half a million Euros per month, I should expect. Heavy withdrawals too.'

'So this is a more business account for you?'

'A little of both, but I would like to have the single account for the moment. It suits my purposes. I'm not looking for loans, just a simple bank account.'

'I see.'

'I'm not concerned about fees, but I'll need to invest my inheritance as soon as it's released. The way the legal process is going, I suspect that will be in instalments. Do I meet your requirements, signore Novellino?'

'You do, yes. We can offer you such an account, but it would need to be a business account and those charges are a little higher. But if you're agreeable, I'll give you all the information and we can get you started this very day.'

'That is excellent. Regarding the security box, I have a business colleague I wish to have access to the box. Is that possible?'

'I am afraid not, signore. Account holders only. I'm sure you understand.'

'That's okay. I thought I'd ask. And I can only have the one key?'

'That is correct, we hold the other and a member of staff has to be with you to remove your box from the storage.'

'I see. And you don't have a spare key, do you?'

'No, signore that would be against the whole principle. Only the box holder can have access. We have no spare key.'

'No master? What if I forgot, or lost my key?'

'We would have to open your unit by force and give you the box.'

‘Well, I certainly need a box. I must make sure I don’t lose the key.’

You may have to wait awhile for a standard box to become available to you, as they’re restricted, and we have a waiting list. However, there’s a larger capacity box, that’s available. Would you be interested?’

I would. What size are we talking about here?’

It is in our Queen range. The dimensions are five hundred millimetres square by twenty deep.’

That sounds acceptable.’

We have to make an administration charge, of course.’

And that would be?’

Two thousand Euros per month. A minimum year’s contract. Is this suitable for you, signore Király?’

That will do admirably.’

The men had shaken hands and moved to Novellino’s office to sign all the documentation. Another shake of hands and Novellino had seen his new client to the front door. He’d watched Király get into a chauffeur-driven limo and drive off.

A month later they were in Novellino’s club and discussing future financial plans for Király.

I was recommended to you and am grateful for your patronage, signore.’ said Király sipping his soda.

It was not a problem. Your authentication was more than adequate. We welcome the sons of nobility. Who wouldn’t? We prefer a smaller, more.....appropriate client base than a larger and less wealthy one.’

I’m afraid my claim to royalty is not as strong as I would wish. An old but fading family.’

You have a lineage going back four hundred years. But like all those great families of Europe, hard times can hit even the most established.’

That is regrettably true.’

What business are you in, signore Király?’

I’m starting up a new enterprise. I have a colleague who is the real expert. Shall we say import and export for the moment? Enough said that the security box is an absolute asset after many of my transactions.’

I understand. We are discrete by our very nature as bankers, signore Király.’

Novellino was distracted by a woman who had walked up to the large leather chair he was sitting in and stood awaiting his attention. He, amongst many other members, resented women being allowed in private clubs, but the law demanded it these days.

This woman was stunning. She was tall and slim and wore a cream designer outfit as if ready for Ascot. Her large hat covered her face, but underneath he could see her make-up was perfect. Her perfectly white teeth were accentuated by the dark red lipstick. She carried a tiny handbag that matched the dress exactly and the gloves complemented the colour co-ordinated outfit to perfection. A woollen cape protected her body from the chill in the air. Novellino took all this in one glance.

She smiled sweetly. 'Signore Novellino?'

He stood up as he said, 'I am. How may I help you?'

Király stood too and smiled at her in admiration. This was one stunning lady.

'No, not at this moment. But I'm here to tell you that in a few minutes you will get a call from Banco Particolare to say there has been a major problem.'

'I'm sorry....what did you say?' Novellino stammered, for once taken out of his cool persona.

'I don't repeat myself. I just wanted to say that I caused this problem and will be in touch soon.' She turned and left the two men standing.

Novellino turned to Király and looked puzzled, 'What did she say?'

'Something about she's caused some problem at your bank. But it's closed now, isn't it?' he looked at his watch.

'That's what I thought....is she mad?'

'She knew who you were.'

'I know, but....well.....'

'And where you work. Take a seat. She said a few minutes. If nothing happens in that time you can treat her as....mad. As you said.'

Novellino sat and puzzled over the unusual behaviour of the female stranger. 'How did she get in here?'

'Same as me, I suppose. I told the doorman I was meeting you here. I pointed you out, and that seemed to satisfy him.'

Király kept an eye on his watch. After five minutes he said, 'Well, that's five minutes. I don't think.....'

A mobile phone ringing interrupted him. Novellino snatched it out of his pocket, 'Elo?' What! When? I'll be right there.'

He shook hands quickly with Király as he said, 'I must dash. We will...continue another time. I am sorry.'

Novellino hurried away as Király called after him, 'So she wasn't mad?'

Chapter 2 – Stack the Deck

Novellino stared at the blank plate. ‘What am I looking at?’

The very short, fat man next to him adjusted his spectacles as if he could see better himself. Alberto De Luca was nervous in front of his Superior, being merely the manager who supervised the Banco Particolare, London branch. While Novellino was the Presidente of the Banco Particolare, London branch.

‘I’m not sure myself, Presidente, but behind that plate is the watchacallit...electronics. The thing that make the door work. They are spezzato. Kaput.’

‘Speak English, Alberto, I’m not a client.’

‘The damn door is broken, signore.’

‘How?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘Have you called the people that installed the vault?’

‘Of course, but it is late Friday. I have left only messages.’

‘Try again. Check the paperwork. We must have dealt with someone at the high level in the company that installed this. Get them and get someone down here, NOW!’

‘Si, Presidente.’ He hurried off muttering under his breath the futility of getting anyone to work on weekends in England.

Novellino turned to the next in line, ‘Orzo, what’s going on here?’

‘We do not know, Presidente. The security room had an alarm from the vault door. The door then closed as it’s supposed to in emergency situations....’

‘No one inside, I hope?’

‘One man, but the door is so slow, he got out in time.’

‘Then what?’

‘The alarm stopped. We can’t get any response from the security systems in the vault. Everything is dead.’

Novellino banged his fist on the panel. ‘Can we not take off this panel and have a look inside?’

‘We have instruction from the manufacturer's manual, Presidente. They say do not interfere. Breaks the guarantee.’

'How long we had this vault now?'

'Seven years. Still with a guarantee, I believe.'

'So we can't do anything until the supplier gets a technician here?'

'That is what we think, signore.'

Novellino considered the situation. 'The door closes when a fault occurs?'

'Si, signore. When there is an interrupt of the power or electronic fault. The door closes by hydraulics. It releases the breaks in the emergency and the door swings close on its own weight. No power needed to shut it. Power needed to open it.'

'Just the vault lost power?'

'Si, signore. Well..... there are rooms either side that has problems.'

'What sort of problems?'

'Equipment failed in there too. Computers, calculators, clocks. Electronics.'

'Computers? Any data compromised?'

'No, thankfully. Just everyday staff scheduling files lost. We have a daily back up for that, anyway. What did you tell the police, Presidente?'

Novellino held up his hand and said, 'We don't know what's happened yet, so we can't tell them anything. I said it was the technical fault and the alarm for their services was automatic. I thanked them, and they went away. As soon as it involves police, the whole world will know. We keep this to ourselves. No need to alarm the clients if it's just a technical malfunction.'

'But what will happen if they can't get to their security boxes on Monday?'

'We will have to wait and see how soon the door can be opened. Where is Alberto?'

The technician pulled his head out of the access panel and rubbed his stubbly chin. Gary was not happy at been dragged from home the previous night and put on a plane from Newcastle. He'd been picked up late from Heathrow and had worked all night with a progression of increasingly agitated Italians breathing down his neck. Gary looked at his watch and saw it was mid-morning already. 'Any more coffee, please?'

'Not until you finish.' Novellino stood behind and glowered at him.

The technician knew he was in the presence of greatness by the man's powerful posture and the expensive and contrived clothing. 'Another Napoleon.' he said under his breath.

To Novellino he said, 'As I've told your countless colleagues, this is not a quick fix.'

'How quick, then?'

'At least a week.'

'Impossible!'

'All your circuits are fried! What've you been doing?'

'We, have done nothing. The fault is with your product!'

'Something caused this to burn itself out. Our circuits wouldn't do that. I hear you had similar problems with some computers as well?'

Novellino glowered at his team behind him. 'It isn't related.'

'I think it is. The only thing that could cause this sort of damage is an EMP.'

'A what?'

'ElectroMagnetic Pulse. A short sharp pulse of energy that destroys electronic circuit boards. It's the only answer.'

'What causes a ...EMP?'

'Nothing. Nothing natural. Someone has to set it off. This was deliberate.'

Novellino shook off his growing fear as the vision of the woman of the previous evening came sharply to mind. 'I caused this problem,' she had said.

'How long to get this door open?'

'I've got to replace all the circuit boards. Reset the security systems, assign new security codes. So, as I said, about a week.'

'That's too long.'

'It might be for you, but I've got to get the parts. That takes ages. I'm being generous in saying a week.'

'Can you not bypass the system? Just get the door open?'

'If I could do that you wouldn't want this door system again, would you? If I could do it, any two-bit safe cracker could do it. No, it's designed to be controlled by a hidden and secure system.'

'It's clearly not that.'

'It's not the system that's failed, it's some joker using an EMP device!'

'Can this happen again?' a look of concern replacing anger and frustration on Novellino's face.

'Sure. As many time's as the Joker wants.'

'And there's nothing we can do to prevent this?'

'Nope.'

'Lead shielding? Concrete? Anything?'

'Nope. The pulse is unstoppable. Concrete, walls, earth, lead, heavy metal, it passes through unstopped. The only way to prevent it is to change the whole system. Have a mechanical opening system. Then...you're back to the safe crackers delight. That level of security is for the small business, not yours.'

'How did this happen? Where is the EMP device, then?'

The technician thought for a while before saying, 'Judging by your other damage, I'd say the pulse was a small one. About...fifteen metres radius.'

'And the centre would be, where?'

'In your vault. I reckon it's come from one of your clients' boxes.'

Novellino's face showed shock. 'How's it switched on?'

'Remotely, I'd guess. A receiver in the box and a transmitter outside somewhere.'

'And where would the transmitter be?'

'Depends of the range of both. I'd guess somewhere as far away as a hundred metres.'

'So it could be triggered from just outside the bank?'

'Just a guess, yes.'

'Once this is fixed, is there then a way of preventing the doors from closing during another EMP?'

'No, they're too heavy. The doors close slowly, allowing anyone inside time to get out. Anyone trapped inside would be suffocated by the time we reopen the doors.'

Novellino stood and thought through his reducing options.

The technician said, 'If it helps, when fixing this I can build in some quick access options, so we can repair everything quicker if it happens again? It'll cost more, and we must have a spare set of all parts. But next time we could probably turn that round in two days, instead of six.'

Novellino seemed distracted. 'Okay. Do that.'

'Has one of your clients got a grudge against you?'

'Get on with your work. I want this finished in days, not a week!'

Novellino walked away. The technician shrugged and braced himself for the claustrophobic business of sticking his head in a small space.

Novellino hurried to Alberto's office to discuss what to tell the clients.

'We can expect some angry customers on Monday.' said Albert almost to himself.

'We must make sure they're still customers by Tuesday.' said Novellino, picking up the phone.

'Orso? The man that was almost trapped in the vault when the door closed. Staff, or client? Staff, okay. Thank you.'

'Why you ask that?' asked Alberto.

'If it was a client, he could be the one that triggered the device.'

Novellino was trying to relax in the back of the car. The chauffeur driven limo was only used to impress clients, but Novellino wanted some much needed reassurance of the luxury that went with his position of Presidente.

His phone burred in his pocket. He pulled it out saw it was number withheld. Fear crept into his mind.

'Ello?'

'You know who I am, we met just the once. You know how serious this is. I've left an indelible impact on you. Now you know what I can do and how I can disrupt your business. I will tell you what I will do next. I will render your vault unusable for at least fifty years. It will also mean the rest of the building will be unusable too. Your bank will quickly go out of business. Now, that has a quantifiable value.'

'Wait. Yes, I know you as the woman from my club. But who are you?'

'You need not know.'

'But I do. What do I call you?'

'You don't call me. I call you.'

'Just give me a name?'

There was a pause until she said, 'Regale.'

'Ahhh, such a pretty name for such an ugly mind.'

'Is the repair to your vault completed?'

'Yes, Regale.'

'You'll see in the news tomorrow they have found a small amount of Plutonium. That is mine. I've a much larger stock and I will activate it in your vault. I give this warning to prove that what I say about the future is true and you must follow my demands to avoid it becoming a disaster for you. I will call again tomorrow.'

'Wait...'. The line was dead.

The news was full of the discovery of a small phial containing Plutonium. It was found in a desolate area of east London. The police were unable to comment on it and the speculation was that it was connected with a new terrorist threat.

In the breaking news section, a spokesman named as Detective Inspector Dobbs, had said this was not connected with any terrorist incident, planned, or existing. It was a simple misplacement of the phial, while being transported from one laboratory to another. There was no need for alarm.

Off air, Dobbs was furious they'd not briefed him enough.

'We had nothing to give you, Guv.' Explained Knowles. 'All there was, was a note which said, "Ace of Spades"'

'I couldn't tell the media that! Is there nothing back from the lab yet? Fingerprints, DNA, anything?'

Madson spoke quietly to Dobbs saying, 'Take it easy, Guv. They're doing their best. Calm down, okay?'

'Yes. Sorry, Mickey. We must be patient. No news from anywhere?'

'No sir. We've kept a watch for reports from Banks generally and the only thing so far is that call from an Italian bank last week. That was a false alarm.'

'They're getting ready, Mickey. It'll be soon. I can feel it.'

'All we can do is wait for their next move, Guv. We must have patience.'

'This is Dwyer doing this. That was a message for me.'

'Come on, Guv. You've no reason to believe it was.....'

'He's taunting us with this, Mickey.'

'You're tired, Guv. Go home and get some sleep. Start again fresh in the morning. I'll call you if anything turns up.'

'All right, Mickey. As soon as you hear anything. But put a tail on Dwyer for me.'

Chapter 3 – Cards Close to the Chest

October 11

The small and secretive group of men who called themselves La Picche met only when there was an extreme problem with their business.

The eighth floor of a multi-storey car park was cold, the wind blowing through the open spaces. They grouped together and spoke in lowered voices in their native Italian.

‘We cannot give in to this threat. That is the prime importance.’

‘We cannot let this get out. No one should know. That is of the most importance.’

‘We must stop it dead. Quickly, before it gets out of hand.’

They all turned to the man they called Dicisone.

Remo Santori was a wiry man of medium height. His severe face and bald head gave him a villainous look. That was the effect he was after. Many people wished they had not met him.

He drew heavily on a thin dark cheroot and shrugged, ‘Give me a target. She is invisible. We looked at the security video from outside the Club. She walked away. Disappeared. She did not get into a car, she walked. We have no target. Pretty girl.’ He smiled. It was not a smile that lit up his face. ‘I have looked carefully at the CCTV from outside the bank. I searched for anyone who could have activated the EMP. There’s no sign of anyone pressing buttons on any device other than a mobile phone. We have no target there.’

‘They’re going to demand money.’

‘How much?’

‘Who knows?’

‘Where are we going to find it?’

‘We won’t pay it.’

‘What if we have to?’

‘We will find the money.’

‘What if they ask for billions?’

‘We won’t have the money.’

‘The general committee must not be notified of this threat. Not yet.’

‘Not ever.’

‘We must solve this. None of this to go further. Not to the committee, not to Rome and not to Sicily.’

‘Does this have anything to do with our competition, the Banco Sicilian? Is this a threat, or open war?’

‘This isn’t the Banco Sicilian. This is someone more dangerous. Sicilian are always high profile, you cannot solve an invisible problem.’

‘Our clients are going to be very upset when denied access to something they’ve paid highly for and is supposedly secret and accessible to them only. They will want to know what’s going on. We need a cover story.’

‘Tell them one of our clients, since asked to leave, was storing toxic liquid. A viral compound which he dropped and broke in the vault. We have sealed the vault until the viral growth dies naturally, six days. When it will be opened and properly sterilised.’

‘And in the meantime?’

‘We wait for the woman to tell us her demands.’

‘We keep our ears to the ground.’

‘These people do not know who they’re dealing with.’

‘They will when I catch them.’ said Santori, with no humour in his eyes at all.

The group that called themselves La Picche split up and drove away in separate cars. They hoped the next meeting of “The Spades” would be a more positive one.

György Király walked into the Banco Particolare as if he owned it. He walked straight to the Concierge and presented his digital identification. The concierge smiled warmly and invited the client to step into a small room behind his desk.

György divested himself of the heavy warm coat he was wearing against the English damp cold weather. He looked into the retina scan and placed his hands on the palm reader. Both lights turned green, and he smiled at the Concierge who opened the next door for him.

This had all now become familiar as he visited the bank several times a week. He waited until the next man approached him, humorously titled Guardian of the Vault. To him, Király presented his card again. It was swiped, and the number of his box was displayed on a screen.

The Guardian then entered his private room and returned with the single key. Plain, no number on it, but was unusual in shape. The key had a round barrel and looked more like a small felt-tip pen. It exactly matched the one Király had around his neck.

The Guardian led the way into the vault itself, with a ceremonious swagger that was both charming and irritating to Király.

They lined the large, almost square room's walls with a flat fascia of stainless steel. Set in these walls were the individual boxes of the clients of the Banco Particolare. Each visible by a thin break in the metal and two holes at either end.

A curtain broke one wall, concealing a small section. The Guardian unerringly walked to Király's box number and inserted his key. Király joined him and did the same with his key. With a nod from the Guardian, they both turned their keys together.

The sophisticated software within the barrel communicated with the lock in the wall and the protocol was accepted. The box made a soft click and the front panel moved outward ten millimetres. The Guardian pulled the box out and walked to the end of the wall. With a flourish he pulled aside the curtain and placed the box on a low table. He nodded to Király and left the room.

Király looked up at the security camera in the corner of the ceiling and smiled at it. He stepped into the booth and pulled the curtain behind him. The camera couldn't see through the curtain and Király knew he would be unobserved. With a deep breath he lifted the lid on the box and looked inside. Everything was as he had left it. They had rearranged nothing. He felt relieved. Király added items from his briefcase and closed the lid.

He opened the curtain and stepped away from the booth. Within moments the Guardian returned and picked up the box, slid it into its hole and inserted his key. Király put in his key and with a nod from the Guardian, both men turned their keys together. A click announced the box was once again secure.

'Thank you.' said Király.

'You're most welcome signore.' was the reply with a smile.

The Guardian led Király back to his office and helped him on with his coat. Király thanked the Guardian once again and strode out of the bank. Outside the rain had started again, but his limo was waiting at the curb. The driver opened the door for him and he got in, grateful for the warmth of the car.

The drive to Butler's Warf did not take long and soon Király was in his sitting room with a hot chocolate, admiring the view from his window. He sighed contentedly, his chores completed for the day.

He put the cup on the table and stared at the ornate desk. He moved to it and looked at the papers on its surface.

‘That’s odd!’ he said.

Novellino was in his office signing the last documents of the week. Alberto was briefing him on the business to date and they were finishing the last of a pot of coffee. His office phone rang.

‘Ello, Novellino.’

‘Good afternoon, Novellino.’ her voice as smooth and seductive as her body.

‘One moment, please.’ Novellino placed a hand over the handset and nodded to Alberto to leave the office. Once the door had closed, he removed his hand and said, ‘Regale.’

‘I said I’d be in touch and here we are again. At Five-fifteen you will have a repeat experience in your vault. I suggest you get everyone out.’

‘No, please!’

The line went dead.

Novellino tapped the receiver contact and knew she’d gone. He called the vault and told them to prepare for problems all over again. He recalled Alberto to his office and told him to get the technician back, right away.

Novellino watched the clock on the wall outside the vault. As the minute hand clicked to fifteen, they heard a soft plop from the vault. The door emitted a sizzling sound and groaned into movement. It slowly swung shut and clanged into place. Hydraulic bolts shot home, and the vault was impenetrable.

Within two minutes the police were calling the bank. Novellino gave them the security password and assured them it was just a malfunction. The police said they would have to come and check it, anyway. Novellino said it would delight him to see them. He hung up the phone with a scowl.

The police were very polite but expressed displeasure at the frequency of the call-outs. Novellino was his charming self and sent them away satisfied the problem was well in hand. Novellino added that it might happen again, but the problem would be sorted out, eventually.

Gary Jones was also displeased. He would lose another weekend because of the Italian bank. Once more he’d been dragged away from home and put on a

plane, first class, and hauled down to London. Another forty-eight-hour straight shift.

He got a short snooze on the plane and was calculating overtime rates and bonuses as he slept. It was a puzzle to him why this had happened again. It was a puzzle to him it had happened the first time. He thought he might be right in thinking someone had a grudge against this bank. This was more than a practical joke.

He was hurried to the vault as soon as he arrived. No one welcomed him, no one offered coffee, and no one seemed pleased to see him.

Gary had worked for many years with TimeLock and had enjoyed the work and the comradeship of his workmates. The people that owned the company treated their staff fairly and threw a good Christmas bash. But he'd never had to work on site for such rude people.

He sensed fear in this crowd. He knew they were worried, and he knew this could happen again. Unless he made his requirements known, they would not get the best out of him and get their requirements met. So he took a stand.

He placed his two toolboxes on the ground and waited. Standing stationery and looking at the panel that was the route to solving the problem. After a few minutes the man who was sent to stand guard over him said, 'What're you waiting for?'

Gary ticked off on his fingers, 'A good evening. Welcome. A cup of coffee, a chair and an explanation for why this has happened again.'

'Just get on with the job.'

'I will. As soon as..... Good evening. Welcome. A cup of coffee, a chair and an explanation for why this has happened again.'

'I'll get you a coffee.' Orso turned to leave.

'That's not in the order I asked for. Good evening. Welcome. A cup of coffee, a chair and an explanation for why this has happened again.'

'You're being difficult.'

'I'm only asking for something that's reasonable. For someone who's losing their weekend with their family, having to go two nights without sleep....the LEAST they can expect is a welcome. A cheery good evening, a sodding cup of coffee and something to sit on while they drink it. You want me to do my job, well start by telling me what's going on here and perhaps I can do my job better.'

Gary felt better for his outburst. But it was clear Orso didn't, he turned and left silently. Gary sat on the floor, with his back to the wall, and tried to go to sleep. Until these foreigners saw sense, he was not prepared to compromise.

They summoned Alberto and as he approached Gary, he knew they had a problem. He switched on his professional smile and said, 'Good evening, signore. Welcome to Banco Particolare. May we offer you refreshments?'

'Yes, please. Coffee. White two sugars.'

Alberto nodded to Orso who hurried off to fulfil the order. Alberto called after him, 'And a chair for the signore.'

'Most kind.'

'Not at all, the least we can do.'

'So, it's happened again?'

'Indeed. We have no more information than last time, but at least we're all more prepared, right? You can complete before Monday?'

'I can try. Keep the coffees coming and I'll do my best.'

'Should you not have help?'

'There's not enough room for one in that access hole, let alone two. No - one is best. So, I'll have that coffee and crack on, if I may?'

'Certainly. Anything you need, just ask anyone.'

'I will.'

La Picche met again. It was early Sunday morning, and the park was almost empty. A few people were walking dogs or strolling. The weather was cool, but the rain held off.

'We have a target, then?'

'We think we have.'

'Who?'

'Someone who is pretending to be a Hungarian Prince.'

'Are we sure?'

'Ask the Dicisone.'

'What do you have so far, Remo?'

'Very little. The man's name is Király. He claims to be from Hungarian royalty but fallen on hard times. His application checks out.'

'Why do we think it's him?'

'He's a recent client. Novellino has a hunch about him. We've checked out others and he appears the most likely at the moment. We've searched his apartment and found nothing. But we'll watch him closely.'

'Is there nothing else you can do?'

'Until we can physically see her, we can't track her. Her calls are too brief to trace. All we can do is try to follow the money after it's transferred.'

'But that's too late.'

'It's all we have.'

'They have us, then!'

'Is there a way to find out which box this device is in?'

Remo lit a cheroot and blew smoke into the cool air, 'We've X-rayed the boxes, but can see nothing that could be suspicious. A lot of odd items, but nothing electronic that could be a bomb, or EMP device.'

'Have you tried ultrasound?'

'Yes. Nothing showed up.'

'Can we not drill out all the boxes and find the culprit?'

'What do you tell the clients? All their security is breached? We do not know what can of worms, or Pandora's box we're opening. That's guaranteed to drive them away.'

'Can't we fill the vault with concrete?'

'It doesn't solve the problem. Everything will still be radioactive, still unusable.'

'The Board are getting nervous about this second equipment failure. What are we going to tell them, Antonio?'

'I will handle that. But Remo, you must play your part. No stone unturned.'

'Do I do this with my gloves on, or off?'

'For now, on. Later you can take them off.'

Chapter 4 – Hold all the Aces

October 22

‘Have you repaired your vault, signore Novellino?’

The voice was calm and silky as before. Novellino tensed as he said, ‘You have such a charming voice. Are you English?’

‘I’m not going to stay on the phone for you to trace this call. By now I’ve done enough to show you I can permanently ruin your business. I can quarantine your bank because of radiation. Now it’s time for you to know how much it’s going to cost you to prevent that.’

‘Before we....’

‘Listen only. I require three-hundred million euros, sent to three accounts – details to be sent to you on the day of payment. Should you decide not to pay, at that time the police and media will be alerted, so there’s no way your bank can try to cover up this disaster. This is a fair sum, to avoid what will be the total extinction of your bank, so I need never bother you again. Do you understand this demand?’

‘Yes. But, I.....’

‘You have two days only to get the money ready. I will destroy this phone now.’

The line went dead.

‘You’ll never guess who I just had a call from, Mickey?’

‘Your wife, Guv?’

‘No, Mickey, this is not a miracle. The C.I.A. no less.’

‘I’m impressed. You’re really going up in the world. What’s it about?’

‘It’s about this Italian bank that keeps cropping up on our radar. The C.I.A. had been tipped off that the platinum is linked to the Banco Particolare. A phone call from an unknown source. We also know that they’ve had two alarms that have called out the police, both false, apparently.’

‘Why’s the C.I.A. involved in this, then?’

‘They have a covert action going on concerning Banco Particolare. We wouldn’t have known about it if it wasn’t for this plutonium business. Now the yanks are spooked that it’s terrorist related, and they think the Banco Particolare is involved.’

‘Sounds a bit bizarre. Italians aren’t known for terrorism. More for...organised crime. Or is that stereotyping?’

‘True. But it’s a funny old world, Mickey. Anyway, they’ve been watching this bank for a while now and thought they’d bring in some local knowledge.’

‘What they mean is they want to get inside the bank but can’t do it legally without local law.’

‘That about sums it up, Mickey.’

‘So where do we come in?’

‘We pay the bank a visit.’

Novellino spent some time examining each of the Inspector’s authorisations. He silently returned them and sat with his hands resting on his table. ‘How can I be of assistance, gentlemen?’

Dobbs stood nearer the desk and leaned over it. ‘Perhaps you can explain why your vault alarm has been going off so often, Mr Novellino?’

Antonio shrugged in a typical gesture from his homeland. ‘It’s only twice. A simple fault that is all. We’re still working on solving it. Is that why you’re here on a Sunday?’

Madson could see Dobbs winding himself for a verbal attack and stepped in quickly. ‘We have information the Banco Particolare might be linked with Plutonium found on a building site nearby.’

‘What has that to do with me, or my bank? I know nothing of this Plutonium. How on earth can it be connected to a bank?’

‘We still have to make the enquiries, signore Novellino. We wouldn’t be doing our job if we didn’t.’ Madson said with a smile.

‘Now do YOUR job and tell us why you’ve been linked?’ Dobbs leant over the desk, almost in Novellino’s face. Madson reached out and grabbed a handful of his coat and gently and subtly pulled him back. Dobbs resisted at first, then gave in.

‘Have there been any...unusual incidences recently?’ Madson said quietly.

‘Like what?’

‘We don’t know. Say....people you don’t know have approached you with an offer, that at first sounds attractive?’

'No.'

'Have you been threatened?' Dobbs was calmer now.

'No. Not at all. What is all this, please?'

Madson stepped forward, positioning himself between Dobbs and Novellino. He said, 'We've had a spate of robberies and we believe the Banco Particolare may be the target for the next one.'

'What? This is....impossible.'

Dobbs pushed past Madson and was face to face with Novellino again, 'You must tell us who has contacted you recently. Anyone new to you? You must!' Dobbs' face was reddening as his frustration peaked.

'Guv? You remember you said for me to tell you when to cool it? It's now.'

Dobbs lowered his voice and eased up on his aggressive stance before saying, 'We know what's going on, these people have done this before. Let us have the information and we'll try to stop them for you. We'll keep the bank out of any repercussions. You'll not be jeopardising your bank, or clients', confidentiality in any way.'

'I don't have anything like that to tell you.'

Dobbs looked at Madson with a stare that showed his frustration was climbing again.

Dobbs leant forward and asked quietly, 'Is there anything in your bank that might be called, or named "Spades"?''

Novellino's face momentarily flickered with emotion. It was noticed by both the detectives.

'La Picche? No.'

Without taking his eyes of Novellino's, Dobbs said, 'Well...perhaps the only way you can be helpful is if you allow us to show you some photographs of people we think may be involved. That way, perhaps, it might trigger your memory and give us the leads we're looking for. It will only take you half an hour.'

'I'm not sure I can spare the time.....'

'You'd be helping the police in their enquiries, Mr Novellino. If you don't, you'd been hindering the police in their enquiries and we both wouldn't want that, would we?' Dobbs held the stare.

'I don't understand?'

Madson stepped forward and said, 'We'd have to get a warrant to ensure you come with us to view the photographs. There might be adverse publicity for you if we did. It's easier all round if you volunteer.'

Novellino thought for a moment before saying, 'As I have nothing to hide. Nor anything to say. I agree.' He opened his diary and said, 'I can manage nine o'clock tomorrow morning?'

'That would be perfect. Thank you for your co-operation, signore Novellino.' said Madson extending his hand. The three men shook hands and the two police officers left the building.

Novellino sat in his chair and thought through the series of events. He looked down at the sheet of paper he was reading before he was interrupted and glared at the message. The Bank Committee wanted a meeting to discuss the current problems with the vault.

Novellino felt he had been pushed into a corner all round. Something had to give, and soon.

Outside, Dobbs and Madson stood in the rain waiting for their car to arrive. 'We're ahead of the game, Mickey. We know where the robbery is going to take place.'

'That's only because they told us. Why would they want us to know?'

'This could be our toughest time and our finest hour, Mickey.'

'It may well be, Guv. But you really ought to take a break. You've been at this for days. Take a few days off, right? I'll make sure everything stays on track. I'll call you if anything happens. Please, Guv? For all our sakes?'

'I don't know what you're on about, Mickey.'

'Yes you do, sir. You nearly lost it in there. If you had.....it wouldn't be good for you, the team, or solving the case. You just need a few days off. Go sailing. Come back refreshed. Please.'

Dobbs thought about it as he looked up at the rain slanting down. 'Not good sailing weather.'

'It's due to clear up for a few days. Make the most of it, Guv.'

Dobbs turned and looked at his friend and colleague and smiled. 'You may be right, Mickey. From anyone else, I wouldn't agree. But for you. Okay.'

'Thank you, Marty.'

The limo dropped Király off outside the Banco Particolare and drove away. He hefted his large briefcase and ran up the steps and through the impressive portico, his long leather coat tails flapping.

The wide foyer was circular and had recesses with tables and chairs. A few of these were taken by bank clients and visiting business people. From one of these tables, three men rose to meet him. He seemed pleased to see them and shook hands all around. They moved to a table and sorted through documents. He spent the next five minutes signing papers and discussing various subjects.

Remo Santori observed the small monochrome screen. Looking for tell-tale body language that would tell him what this man was really up to. Novellino stood next to him, silent and brooding.

After the relevant amount of time, the three visitors shook hands again and left, in animated conversation.

‘Follow them.’ Remo said quietly into his handset. He kept his eyes on the screens as Király looked at his watch and hurried through to the main room of the bank towards the Concierge desk.

15:10

In the smaller room, Király divested himself of his long overcoat and waited for the Guardian to meet him. He waited for nearly five minutes and was getting restless. When he arrived, Király picked up his briefcase and was ready to move.

‘Signore Király, we’ve discovered a problem. Would you come with me, please?’

‘What? What sort of problem?’

‘This way please.’ The Guardian turned on his heel and strode into the vault. He pulled back the curtain and pointed to the table. ‘Please leave your briefcase there for the moment.’

Király said, ‘What is this?’

‘Please.’ said the Guardian pointing again. Király put his briefcase on the table. ‘Now we retrieve your security box if you please?’

The Guardian and Király went through the process of withdrawing his box. The Guardian placed it next to the briefcase and said, ‘May I have your key, please signore?’

‘Why?’

‘They have not told me the reason, but we regretfully have to suspend your use of this particular security box.’

‘What? But I need that box for business reasons.’

‘We will provide you with another.’

‘What! Well, I don’t understand. But, okay.’

Király took the key from the chain around his neck and handed it to the Guardian.

‘Thank you, signore. Please be so kind as to empty the box completely.’ He stepped back and pulled the curtain to allow Király some privacy.

Király put all the contents into his briefcase and held onto the handle. He pulled the curtain back, and the Guardian took the box and slid it back into its recess. It protruded a few millimetres, and he did not lock it.

‘Please follow me, signore.’ The Guardian walked back to the small room and helped Király on with his coat.

‘What about another box?’

‘We will contact you within a few days, signore, and allocate you another one.’

‘What was wrong with that one?’

‘They have not told me, signore. This way please.’

The Guardian strode out to the foyer, leaving Király in no doubt he was being asked to leave. Once outside the Guardian said, ‘Please have a good day.’ He nodded briefly before entering the building.

Novellino watched their target look bewildered at the retreating back of the Guardian of the Vault. After a moment he took out his mobile and called for his limo. He stood waiting impatiently for five minutes. When the car arrived he got in with a show of temper. The car sped away. Followed by another car, which contained Remo and three of his own entourage.

The two cars wound their way to Butler’s Warf, and the limo dropped off Király at the front door of his apartment block. Király went inside and the limo drove away. Remo waited in his car and tried to decide what to do next.

He received a telephone call from one of his team. ‘We’ve lost the subject.’

‘How?’

‘He went into the underground and by the time we caught up, a train had gone.’

‘Did he know he was being followed?’

'I don't think so, Padrone.'

'Okay.' He scowled at the phone and it rang again.

'We lost the subject, Padrone.'

'How?'

'He got on the London bus. We followed by car and it went down a one-way street using a bus lane. Sorry, Padrone.'

'Did he know you were following?'

'No. Absolutely not.'

'Okay.'

This gave Remo, even more, to think about. Ten minutes later he received the third call to tell him his subject had been lost. He was neither patient nor forgiving with this news. He sat and stared at the front door to Király's apartment.

Remo allowed only a small amount of pride that he had solved the Banco Particolare's problem. It was only one part of his job as Dicisone, the next was to find out who else was involved and why? The last step was to obliterate all traces of the problem.

It was time to take the gloves off.

Chapter 5 – Face Value

October 28

Novellino stared at the screen for a long while in a daze. He felt such a sense of relief that he suddenly realised how much tension had been within him. He felt light-headed and sat down. Antonio pressed buttons in the security room until the main screen showed him the vault room.

The screen flickered and showed the inside of the vault. He watched as the Guardian opened Király's box. It was empty as expected. Novellino smiled, they had eliminated the threat. Right now the man called Király would contact the woman who called herself Regale and tell her their plan had failed.

Before long Remo would visit Király and he'd be more than willing to tell him the whereabouts of Regale. Another visit by Remo and any others involved would be uncovered.

In Italy, for many generations, the method of dealing with people who tried to steal from a large organisation was to deliver a punishment worthy of the crime. Treason and theft were always worthy of a harsh punishment. Novellino thought it should be no different in this country.

Orso appeared at his side with a bone china cup filled with steaming black coffee. 'Gratsi.'

'Are our problems now over, Presidente?'

'It would seem so, Orso. It would seem so.'

'Things can get back to normal.'

'Hopefully, si.'

The coffee was not cold before Novellino's mobile rang. He smiled as he listened to the voice on the other end.

'Signore, Novellino. It's time for you to know the deadline you have to work to. It's two o'clock tomorrow afternoon. That's fourteen hundred on the twenty-ninth.'

'Regale, how good of you to call me. Have you spoken to your colleague yet?'

'I will not permit you to delay me. You understand the deadline?'

'There will be no deadline. There will be no "activation" of any radioactive material. There will be no payment. We have your box wide open and it's empty.'

Regale hardly missed a beat before saying, 'I thought we've proven to you that we're not to be taken lightly. Your vault will close in two minutes, Get everyone

out now. If you're thinking straight, you now know that it will not open again. The activation will take place before your repair and you will not open the door for at least fifty years. Just as you're getting out of gaol.'

'You're bluffing.'

'In case I'm not, it won't harm you to evacuate the vault for the last time. You've ten hours to have the money ready for electronic transfer.' The line went dead.

Novellino's heart raced. He'd been so sure it was all over. He dialled the vault and got them to make sure nobody entered for at least ten minutes. If it hadn't closed by then, she was bluffing, and he could breathe easy again.

Novellino watched the screen showing the inside of the vault and became aware of Orso leaning over him. He pushed his assistant away and stared even harder at the screen. He looked at his watch. How long had it been?

'What are we waiting for, Presidente?'

'Mind your own business. Go away. Do something useful. Find the telephone number for the vault technician.'

'We need him again?'

'I hope not.'

He looked at the screen and the horror crept over him as he saw a shadow move across the floor as the vault door ground shut.

'Shall I call him now, Presidente?'

In a voice he hardly recognised as his own he said, 'Yes. Get him here right now.'

His mobile rang again, and he knew who it would be.

'Don't talk, I don't want to be traced. That was your last chance to screw up. Once the device has gone off and your customers find out the vault has been targeted, they'll realise you've lost them their valuables. They will sue you, and the bank, to extinction. But before that, you'd lose all remaining customers. No one would invest in your bank anymore – end of Banco Particolare. One hour after I have activated the device, I'll release details of this operation to the police and the media.'

Anger surged inside Novellino.

'If you try to open the doors after I release the Plutonium, you'll let it spread throughout your building. Apart from the health risk to all of you in the building, the authorities will not let any of you inhabit that building again for over fifty

years. You'll be arrested and imprisoned for danger to the public and gross irresponsibility. The staff of the Banco Particolare will be the talk of the world and you'll never get credulity again, even if you ever get out of prison. But it won't come to that because you WILL pay the money. You really don't have a choice.'

'We will hunt you down.'

'I said don't talk. You've not made a good start, have you? If you can't find me now, how can you from a goal cell? Your last published accounts stated you have reserves of over 300 million euros. I'm sure you've more stacked away somewhere. You can get hold of money quickly if you have to. So the price has gone up to 400 million and you still have only ten hours. This is the last time I speak to you. You'll not be able to contact me. Either you've paid me on time, or you have not.'

Novellino was close to tears.

Payment will not break you, non-payment will. There'll be nothing left of the Banco Particolare. You'll be hit for so many lawsuits that none of you will have a cent to your name. When will you have the time to hunt me down then? You'll receive the account information in a few minutes. The sooner you act on it, the sooner you'll be safe. Goodbye, Presidente. It was good doing business with you.'

The line went silent.

Antonio's head rested on the table and he slowly started to bang it. Suddenly he stopped and keyed in a number. 'Remo? Have you got Király yet? No? Good. Abort. He is not our man. It's happened again. The EMP has shut the vault door and we've ten hours to come up with the money. Get back here. We need to decide what to do next. Hurry.'

Novellino hung his head again and was having trouble breathing. His phone chimed twice and went silent. He opened the text, and it contained three account numbers and locations. They put a figure against each. €200 million, €200 million and €1 million.

The clock was now ticking.

The desk phone rang, and Novellino snatched it up. 'Si?'

'The police are here, Presidente.'

'What? What for?'

'The vault alarm, it has triggered their response team.'

Novellino wasn't sure he was doing the right thing, but it had been Alberto that made him do it.

'You should apologise, Antonio. You made a mistake is all. He will understand. You no apologise, he may do something.'

'Like what?'

'Make a formal complaint. Anything. One phone call, eh?'

Novellino gripped the receiver and gritted his teeth. When the hello came, he turned his face into a smile.

'Signore Király? It is Antonio Novellino here. Presidente of the Banco Particolare.'

'I see, are you going to hound me further?' Király's voice had an edge to it.

'No, no, no, signore. I'm calling to apologise. There's been a mistake. I was not there at the time and one of my staff misunderstood his instructions from another manager. You know how it goes.'

'It doesn't sound very plausible to me. It's like Switzerland all over again.'

'I do not know what happened in Switzerland, signore, but I do know what happened in my bank. It was a mistake. You're more than welcome to return as a valued customer and we will waive the fee for the security box for one whole year. What do you say?'

'I was very unhappy about being thrown out of your bank earlier.'

'You were certainly not thrown out, signore, Király

'It seemed that way to me. Since I've left my own country, I don't think I've been taken at all seriously. First the problem with the bank in Lucerne, now my business partner seems to have disappeared. Now, thrown out of another bank. I'm returning home. I've just hired a representative to finish up my business interests here.'

'I am sorry to hear all that, signore Király. I hope you do not blame the Banco Particolare for any of that?'

'I don't know who to blame, but enough is enough. I shall ask you to send whatever funds I have left in my account to my home bank tomorrow. In the meantime, perhaps you'll be good enough to leave me in peace?'

'I'm sorry to disturb you. I just wanted to reassure you it was a genuine mistake, and that there is nothing amiss with your account with us. Your security box remains empty, should you change your mind. Please sleep on it and have a good evening.'

'Goodbye Mr Novellino. Thank you for the call.'

‘Arrogant European upper-class fool.’ said Novellino slamming down the phone.

‘He said no?’

‘I think he said no.’

‘So he’s not the guilty person you thought he was?’

‘He’s guilty of something. He has a very unusual business practice as far as I can tell. I wish I could speak to the bank in Lucerne. However, water under the bridge. Forget him. What is one lost customer, eh?’

The next morning Novellino agonised over his decision to visit the C.I.D. He’d considered cancelling but realised they’d only come out and get him. He thought if things did go wrong, at least he’d been seen to co-operate.

It was a wet and miserable day as his bank limo dropped him off outside the building. He told the driver to wait, he would be less than an hour, he was determined on this. He’d left Alberto chasing down funds to pay the ransom. Novellino should be there for that.

He sat in a large office with two officers bracketing him. He felt like the guilty party, not the person helping to find the guilty party.

‘Where is your senior man, Dobbs and...Madson?’

Knowles said, ‘Regrettably D.I. Dobbs is off sick for a few days, and Inspector Madson is called away for an hour, Mr Novellino. We’d like you to look through these half a dozen books of photos. Just see if there is anyone there you recognise from meeting over the last...shall we say two months, or so?’

Novellino waved a hand dramatically in the air, almost dislodging his fresh carnation. ‘I do not have time to look through all those books. If you have people you think are already involved, show them to me now. I must get back for urgent matters.’

Robin Jackson said, ‘Why can’t we show him the relevant files on the computer, Dave? Easier and faster just pull up the few rather than trawling through the books.’

Dave Knowles nodded, and Jackson tapped away on the keyboard.

Knowles said, ‘Please understand these files are classified and you shouldn’t really have access to them. Ignore the details, just look at the faces. I’m sure you understand this is classified information and anything you can remember from the mass of info, must not be divulged to anyone. We’re doing you a favour cutting this particular corner.’

'I understand.' said Novellino taking out a tiny pair of pince-nez reading glasses. 'Let's get on with it.'

Knowles flicked through a short list of possible suspects that included Dwyer. At each page, Novellino leaned forward to get a better view. His eyes flicked over the photo, the biography, the known facts and dates.

'I think I know this man.' said Novellino pointing to Király.

'In what way?'

'He's a customer. But that's not the name that's on his photograph.'

'No, that's his real name, George Wilson.'

'Why, is he a suspect?'

Jackson said, 'We became interested after he was escorted out from your bank.'

'How did you know that?'

Jackson shrugged, 'He was seen.'

'You're watching my bank? We're under surveillance?'

Jackson blustered until Knowles said, 'We were following HIM, not watching your bank. Any other faces you recognise?'

'No. I must go now.' He took off his Pince-nez and put them in his inside pocket. He stood up and walked out of the room. His car was waiting, and he told the driver to get back to the bank as soon as possible.

'Christ, Robin! You nearly gave away the CIA set up watching his bank!'

'I'm sorry, Dave. I wasn't thinking. Don't think he noticed though.'

'Let's hope so.'

'He was pretty nervous, don't you think, Dave?'

'So he should be. His bank is about to be robbed, wouldn't you be nervous?'

'Do you really think this is about to happen?'

'Three false alarms in a few weeks is highly suspicious.'

'And we have Dobbs out for a week, or so. What's wrong with him?'

'We don't know and we're not going to start rumours. Madson thinks its stress related.'

'He's been a bit weird recently.'

'He's always been a little weird if you ask me!' said Knowles with a grin. 'But if Cummins has insisted he takes a few days off, something's wrong with him.'

'What do you make of the Novellino character?' said Knowles.

'In what way?'

'Strange man.'

'Okay, he has a very old fashion sense of style, perhaps. But that doesn't make him strange.'

'No, I meant his attitude. He pointed out a man who we thought might be part of a plan to rob his bank. Did he seem concerned?'

'No, I suppose he didn't.' said Jackson thoughtfully.

'Isn't that a little suspicious?'

'I suppose so. But what about it?'

'I think Mr Novellino is not telling us everything. He was silent about the vault problems and we've warned him about a potential robbery. He's keeping something back.'

'What can we do about it?'

'What would Blobby do?'

'Or, Mickey?'

'Dobbs is off sick, we shouldn't bother him. Call Madman?'

'Okay.' Jackson dialled Madson's number and waited. 'Answerphone. Guv, Jackson. We've completed the Identification Interview with Mr Novellino, but we're a little unhappy with his response. He picked out Wilson but didn't seem to care. So we think we'll go and see him again at the bank. Take him by surprise and look at the vault and stuff ourselves. Let us know if that's a good idea. Call us back, okay?'

Knowles started to peel an orange. 'Nothing to do but wait then.'

Inside the safety of the Banco Particolare's security room, Novellino removed his carnation and handed it to the technician. Who removed a small object from it and pushed it into a slot in another device attached to the computer.

They clicked through the series of images captured by the tiny camera and Novellino sat back and said, 'Remo, that's our man. If the police think he's a suspect, and he had a security box in my bank, I think he's a suspect as well.'

Remo asked for a print and studied the A3 image. 'It is Király. Time I paid him a visit.'

Novellino nodded and said, 'Remember, you're in a foreign land. You're not at home now.'

'Can I take the gloves off?'

'Yes. But do not be seen.'

'Yes, Patrone.'

Chapter 6 – Hold all the Trumps

October 29

George Wilson sat and tried to relax. His role as Király was almost over as was the woman pacing the floor before him. They'd met just the once and now waited for the phone call that would allow them to leave the country and collect their huge fees for impersonating other people.

The woman called Regale smoked a cigarette and puffed it into the air. Her slim figure had to be admired and George struggled not to watch her every cat like move.

In the next room, the man who was the chauffeur to Király also waited to be released. He played cards with the four extra bodyguards that were thought to be necessary for this project. There were several contingency plans in place should the Banco Particolare need further pushing for the money. They were all waiting to see which, if any, were needed to be put into action.

Although the deadline was three hours away, they were all still needed on standby in case of emergencies.

'How did the call go?' asked George in his normal Devon accented voice.

Sarina Labonne shook her head. 'To plan. I just don't trust those bankers. They'll try anything to wriggle out of it.'

'Not much they can do, is there?'

She lowered her voice, glancing at the door to the next room, 'Just how safe are we, George?'

He shrugged. 'What more can we ask? We've got five burly blokes in there as protection. It's eleven now and we'll be on a plane in a few hours. Collect our money tomorrow. Relax. It's planned to perfection. Every possibility taken care of.'

'I wish we could get out now. Why can't we? They wouldn't miss us?'

'Have a seat. Take a drink. Just a few more hours that's all.'

She stubbed out the cigarette and sat on the huge sofa. She crossed her long legs and noticed George looking at her. He smiled. 'I'm going to miss this place. I've never lived in anything so posh before.'

'So will I.' she said.

The doorbell rang, and they all froze. George stood up and moved towards the door. 'Don't answer it!' whispered Sarina.

The door to the bedroom opened and two of the bodyguards came out and stood by the front door. They were large men and stood braced for action. The silence was tense. The bell rang again. The biggest of the men, codenamed Five, shrugged and looked through the spyhole. His mouth dropped open, and he jerked his head back, just as the spyhole erupted and the bullet creased his skull.

There were several soft sounding puffs, followed by splintered wood. The door burst open and the second bodyguard moved forward to intercept the intruders. A shot to his leg floored him instantly. Three men entered the room, each holding automatic handguns with silencers.

Both bodyguards were writhing in pain, their groans of agony were short-lived as one man clipped them both across the side of the head, rendering them unconscious.

Sarina was too frightened to scream but stood up quickly.

She saw the remaining three bodyguards hurry from the bedroom to enter the fray and were shot down quickly and efficiently by the three strangers. They screamed until they too were knocked unconscious.

The apartment was silent. A fourth man strolled into the room and closed the door behind him. Only a few moments had passed, but five men were unconscious and bleeding over the Persian carpets.

Remo stood in front of Sarina and said, 'I know someone who wants to meet you again. Sit please.' She did, quickly. 'Király. You think you can pull off a scam and walk away free? No. Not possible. One question. Who presses the button to activate the device?'

'I don't know.' stammered George.

Remo turned his hard eyes to Sarina, 'Is it you?'

She shook her head, the blonde waves crossing and re-crossing her face.

'Such a pretty face you have, Regale. It would be a pity to have it altered. Who's going to press the button?'

'I don't know.' she almost screamed. 'I'm just the voice at the end of the phone. I had a script. That's all I had to do. I don't know anything about anything else. Please.....'

Remo stood in front of George and looked closely at him. 'If you look into my eyes, you will know what I'm capable of. Now, one more time. Who's going to push the button?'

'I don't know. I was hired to rent the box as a decoy. That's all.'

'Who hired you?'

George had to think fast. Some answer would be better than none. Stay as close to the truth as possible. As he was thinking he was aware the other three men had surrounded him. He was shaking. This was a situation that no one had planned for. He hadn't signed up for this level of threat.

'A man named Ace. He called himself the Ace of Spades.'

Remo laughed and shook his head. 'Picche. Ha. And where is he now?'

'I...I...I don't know.' said George, holding out his hands as if to convince them of his innocence.

With a move so quick neither of them saw, George heard his own arm break, and he howled in agony. One intruder took one step back and released the arm, now sticking out at an odd angle.

'If we run out of arms, we have your legs and fingers and toes. Then we have parts of you your wife won't recognise again. And if all else fails, we begin on Regale.'

The pain came in waves and George struggled to remain alert. He was aware of a large photograph being thrust in front of him.

'Is this the man called Ace?'

He nodded. He felt loyalty was one thing, stupidity another.

'Where can I find him?'

George winced as he tried to move his arm. Remo nodded to one of his henchmen who move forwards and took hold of George's wrist. With an expert pull and twist, the bone ground back into place again, leaving George screaming, but his arm was back in a more normal position.

'The pain will be a little better now.' Remo said with a smile that was more a smirk.

Gasping through the pain George managed, 'I only met him once. He has an office down by the docks.' After a pause to catch his breath, George described the location.

Remo seemed to have lost interest in the two people, he turned and left the apartment. With minimal effort and maximum efficiency, the three intruders handcuffed Sarina and George to each other and then to a heavy sofa. They ripped out the telephone cords and handcuffed the wounded bodyguards.

As they left, one man turned and put his finger to his lips in the international gesture to remain silent. 'If you have not told the truth, we will be back.' He closed the door behind him.

Király moaned in pain as he tried to get his broken arm into a more comfortable position. 'We must warn Ace.'

'How?'

'Where's your mobile?'

'Over there in my handbag.'

'We must drag this sofa together to get to it. Are you ready?'

'Are you? This will hurt.'

'It hurts already. Go!'

With much grunting and effort, the heavy piece of furniture slowly moved towards the handbag lying on the floor. They eventually came within reach and with her free hand, Sarina picked up her phone. 'What's his number?'

With a grunt, Wilson stammered out the number, surprised he could still remember it through the pain.

'Tell him what's happened and to get out of there.'

The Oumalou clock on the mantelpiece read 11:05. Their chances of getting away on the booked plane were now zero.

His mind was a whirl of apprehension and excitement. With the end of the project only hours away, Damien Dwyer felt elated. This was the moment that made the rest worthwhile. The feeling of triumph and accomplishment. It wasn't over, but almost.

He felt his heart pounding to the rhythm of his legs as he jogged along the riverbank and felt the adrenaline course through his body. He loved running. Damien would set out at least once a day and knew it would see him in good stead when he aged.

Damien's mobile vibrated, and he pulled it from his tracksuit. He stopped and listened to the voice at the other end.

'Call the ambulance and the police. The money transfer will go ahead, and you'll get paid into your accounts. Take the hit and collect it when you get out of gaol. Hang on in there. Sorry, it had to end this way. And thanks.'

He immediately dialled the next number as he ran toward his office, nearly three miles away.

'Hello, Nine? Yeah, sorry, look, Danny. A problem's come up.'

‘What?’

‘You’re about to have visitors and they’re not friendly.’

‘The police?’

‘If only. Look, you have to hide.’

‘What about the transfers? They’re due in....less than three hours!’

‘You must complete that task, whatever happens. Look, behind the old bookcase in my office is a hidden storeroom. There’s stuff in there I’d appreciate you not look at. Gently pull the bookcase out and get in. Close the bookcase and remain silent.’

‘Ace...I?’

‘Just do it. I’ll distract them, but they may come back. When the time comes, just stick to the plan. Get the money sorted. Take off when you feel it’s safe and leave the country quick as you can.’

‘Okay, Ace.’

‘Destroy the computer before you leave and dump it somewhere remote. I’m sorry you’ve been put in danger here, I’ll make sure you get extra pay.’

‘Don’t worry. If I get out alive, I’ll be grateful. When you offered a million for this job, I thought it was well overpaid. Now I’ve seen the possible amounts of money going through, I know why. You take care too. How much danger are you in then?’

‘We’ll know in a few minutes. Don’t worry about me, I can look after myself. Get in the storeroom now and just do your job. If we don’t meet before they get there, it’s been good working with you.’

‘You too.’

‘Now turn off your phone.’ The line went dead.

Damien listened to his breath and felt his heart rate. He chose a steady pace and knew he could arrive with some energy left. He measured the route in his mind and took as many shortcuts as possible. He estimated the distance from the flat in Butler’s Warf to his office only a few miles away. It was going to be close.

He had chosen his office carefully. There was only one narrow road as access. One way in, one way out – by car.

He arrived at the site and stood hidden by the trees in the lane. It looked deserted. His BMW was outside the small series of sheds that made up his business empire. There were no sounds. Would he be walking into a trap, or once there be trapped trying to get out?

He was almost relieved when he saw a car bounce down the unmade road. He steadied his breathing, conserving energy. Setting off too late would give them a chance to catch him quickly, too early and they might miss him altogether. He waited.

The car drew slowly up and parked alongside his. Two men got out and studied the vehicle. Another two men got out and one stood aloof and seemed to be waiting for something. He made a movement with his hand and the three men climbed to the first-floor front door. It had to be now. Damien broke cover.

He crashed through the trees as he headed back down the lane. He heard shouts behind him and knew they'd seen him. Dwyer risked a quick glance to see one man chasing him while the others got into their car.

Damien slowed his pace to draw the pursuer on to him, he needed to keep the man interested. He could see the man was lithe and fit and was trying to talk into a mobile while running. The car would have to find another route to keep pace and Damien knew exactly where that would be. He knew this area well and had scouted every possible route for just such an emergency. But he never imagined it would be such a terrible occasion where it would mean his own life or death.

He broke free of the wooded area and onto the concrete pathway that ran along the river. He slowed his pace now as he saw the man behind falling back. About a mile ahead was a road that connected to the road the car had taken. That was the point where the car could intercept him. He had to get the timing right.

Dwyer heard a ping and a piece of concrete erupted in front of him. He turned to see the man firing a gun. The silencer hid the sound of the bullet, but it was near to its mark. Damien accelerated to get out of range, this was getting dangerous. These men were serious. They didn't want to talk, they wanted to punish.

The turnoff was coming up on his left and the man behind was out of range. Damien tried to see between the old warehouses to catch a glimpse of a car. He thought he saw a brief flash and slowed to get to the intersection at the same time. A piece of wood erupted by his head, the gunman was in range again. It was time.

With a deep breath, Damien turned the corner and accelerated straight towards the oncoming car. In an automatic reaction, the driver tried to brake and swerve at the same time, turning the car broadside on and sliding towards Damien. With a grunt, Damien jumped, touched the bonnet briefly with one foot to stabilise himself in the air and tried to land softly the other side. He stumbled

and nearly fell but kept on running. He turned quickly right, down a pathway between two buildings.

The screeching of the tyres stopped, and the engine revved as the driver tried to turn the car around. Damien heard all this as he weaved between the buildings. He burst out from the buildings into a road and jogged along to the next junction. Here the side road joined a main road and opposite was an underground station. He tried to decide what was best. He wanted to draw them even further from the office to give Danny time. Damien looked at the taxi rank and saw two cabs waiting and no one queuing. Damien took the first cab.

'Where to?'

'Just drive west.'

'West End?'

'Yeah. That'll do.'

The cabby turned on his tariff light and pulled out into the main road.

'I'll give you an extra fifty quid if you can lose that car behind.'

The cabby looked in his mirror before saying, 'There ain't no car behind.'

There was a screech of tyres and a surprised look on the cabbie's face as he looked in the mirror to see the Audi racing up behind him.

'That car.' said Damien.

For the next twenty minutes, the cabbie tried every trick in his book to shake off the car behind him. Every time it looked like he had done it, the car reappeared once again.

'This ain't working, governor.'

'Okay. Here's the fifty anyway and a bit more. Drop me off at a busy section of London. I'll lose them. Thanks.'

The cabbie drove erratically and finally swerved into the curb. Damien was off and running as the cabby swung out into the traffic again, amid hoots from oncoming cars.

Damien saw the Audi stop and three men get out and he knew he had them. He ran down the subway and out the other side, then hid in a doorway while the three men came out looking for him. They split up and while they were occupied in other directions, he dropped back down into the subway and into the underground complex. He bought a ticket on the run and took the first train that came in.

He changed trains several times and caught another taxi and a bus before he was within walking distance of his canal boat.

His eyes were looking all around before he dared step on board.

Damien locked the flimsy canal boat door, knowing it wouldn't stop any determined entry attempt, but it would be a few extra seconds warning. He'd no weapons on-board, he never used them. He was against firearms and the use of violence and so relied on his wits and fitness. Damien hoped it would be enough.

He removed the top of the table and started pulling up the strings. As he hauled, he dialled a number.

'Lorna. I need you to do something urgently.'

'What's happened?' The fear in her voice was familiar, and he knew this was not going to be easy.

'I don't have time to explain. I want you to take the girls and go and stay somewhere for a while.'

'Oh, my God, are you with the police?'

'No, not yet. But listen....the funny roadside Inn place we had to stop the night, last year on the way back from holiday. You remember?'

'I think so.'

'Go there. Now. Take the girls and go there as fast as you can. Leave everything else.'

'Are you in danger, love?'

'Sort of, but I'm sure everything will be all right, I just need to know that you three are safe.'

'Safe from what?'

'Just do as I say, and I'll tell you later. Look...if the police turn up at the hotel, go along with what they say. For the first time, they'll be on your side. Please? You understand?'

'What's happened, tell me!'

'I have to go. Just get there quickly and wait for the police. I'll call you later. I love you.' The line went silent.

He ripped off the waterproof coverings on the packages and started to pack the stacks of notes into two suitcases. He dialled again. The call went on to an answerphone and he waited patiently until he heard the message tone. 'This is

Dwyer here. I need you to call me as soon as possible. Call back on this number. Quickly.'

He shut the cases and reconsidered his call. He dialled another number. 'Is D.I. Dobbs available, please? What? Okay.....Inspector Madson? Where? Anyone on their team? This is urgent. Thanks. I'll wait.' He hefted the two cases nearer the door.

'Hello? Who's this? Knowles. I don't know you. Listen, I need police assistance. My name is Damien Dwyer and I'm offering you the chance to wrap up The Deck of Cards Robberies. But you need to do something urgently. Are you listening? Don't talk. There's an Economy Inn on the A24, near Petersfield. Yes, you'll find it. My wife and two girls will be there in an hour or so. I need them collected and put into protection.'

Damien started to rummage through drawers for any items he needed to take with him.

'Meanwhile, I need protection myself. Are you aware of the Banco Particolare? Yes, well they've four men, with guns, who have shot some of my people. The emergency services should've heard from them by now. A flat in Butler's Warf. Just listen, they're after me and I need the same police protection. No, just listen. I've tried your Dobbs and Madson, but they're not answering. Get someone here. You'll need an armed response unit. They've already tried to kill me. No, I'm not joking. Here's where I am.'

Damien gave the rest of the address while looking through the drawn curtains along the towpath. He was doubtful they'd be able to find him, but he was now too nervous to think rationally. He had set his future in motion and had to ride the wave.

'What? Okay. What's your number?'

Damien wrote down the mobile number and pushed the piece of paper in his pocket. 'As soon as you can. Screw up and Dobbs will have you out of the force.' He hung up and sat on the bed.

He thought about calling Danny but knew the phone was off now. He looked at his watch, 12:45. Dwyer started collecting all the incriminating evidence and threw it into a plastic sack. When he was sure he had everything, he cautiously went onto the canal bank and walked a few yards to the waste bins. He opened the large lid of the metal bin and emptied his contents into the container.

He felt the rain on his face and trickling down his neck as he returned to the boat and got a can of diesel fuel and a lighter. Within moments the evidence was going up in smoke. He hoped no one was around to complain.

Once again he returned to the narrow boat and picked up the two suitcases. He walked up the bank with them, passed all the other canal boats and came to

the end of the stretch where mooring berths were allocated. Hidden by trees and weeds was a small shed, long overgrown with undergrowth and bushes. He unlocked the door and put the cases inside. Damien re-locked the door and arranged the camouflage of nature to cover his tracks.

He sat on the bed again, twirling his sovereign ring around his finger. It was 13:15. Now all he could do was wait.

Novellino kept them waiting a long time, the surprise element in Knowles plan had long since gone. When they were finally ushered into the Presidente's presence it was nearly 12:30.

'I've not left your own offices for three hours and yet here we are again? Is there a particularly urgent reason for this? I said I was busy today and could only spare the police a limited amount of time. Yet, here we are again?'

Novellino held the tension, waiting for an answer. Jackson was frozen into silence, regretting his idea to follow up with an interview. Knowles wished they'd waited for Madson to return their call. They were stuck with their decision and they had to run the course.

Knowles spoke quietly, 'We're under the impression you really wished to help the police protect your bank from a robbery. Is that no longer the case, Mr Novellino?'

'I've helped the police, three hours ago!'

'My question was in two parts. Do you still wish the police to protect your bank from a robbery?'

'Yes, of course. What has this got to do...?'

'Then we need to have you answer a few simple questions. Either here, or back at the station. Which is it to be?'

Novellino threw his pen onto the desk and clasped his hands together and glared at his visitors. 'What do you want to know?'

'We didn't get the opportunity to ask you about your series of false alarms, Mr Novellino, as you were in such a hurry. It slipped our minds, but not the mind of our superiors. So we're here to fill in those blanks.'

'What do you want to know?'

'The cause of the alarms? The vault is having technical problems, yes?'

Jackson joined in.

'Si.'

‘And those problems are?’ Jackson was leaning forward to add impetus to his question.

‘Are, what?’

‘What’s the problem with your vault, Mr Novellino? Our time is precious too.’ Knowles said with an edge to his voice as his confidence grew.

‘It is nothing. A minor problem we’re having fixed.’

‘Now?’

‘Yes, now.’

‘May we take a look, please?’

‘I don’t see why....’

‘So we can finish up our report. Paperwork, where’d we be without it?’ Knowles smile was anything but friendly.

‘I don’t see what purpose this has, but...yes of course. Follow me.’ Novellino stood up and straightened his jacket.

A mobile phone sounded. Knowles looked embarrassed as he took his out of his pocket and looked at the sender. He did not recognise the number or the nickname. ‘Police matter.’ He said turning away.

‘Knowles. Who? Oh, I see Damien Dwyer, you say? What do you? Economy Inn. Yes, I’m there at that bank now. Butler’s Warf? Isn’t that.....? I am listening. You should really speak to my governors either D.I. Dobbs or.....’

Knowles returned to the desk and signalled for a pen and paper. Novellino handed him a pencil and a small pad.

‘Armed response unit, you’re joking! Okay, I’m writing this down.’

Knowles scribbled the address on the pad. He looked wildly at Jackson, who was opened mouthed in anticipation.

‘I’ll get on to that and try to get Inspector Madson to call you back. This call has placed your number on my phone. Will you call back and update us on your situation? Here’s my mobile number.’

Knowles read off the number and said, ‘I won’t. I won’t let you down. It’ll take us at least an hour from here.’ He looked at the phone as the line went dead.

‘Who was that?’ Jackson couldn’t hold back any longer.

‘Dwyer. He’s in trouble. Some men are trying to kill him. He wants us to help.’ Knowles became aware of Novellino standing waiting and turned to him, ‘Sorry,

Mr Novellino. Duty calls. We'll take a look another time. Excuse us.' said Knowles as he ripped the sheet from the pad.

The two officers hurried from the office and out to the street. Knowles was already on the phone to Cummins while Jackson was trying to call Madson.

Novellino calmly sat down and pulled the pad towards him. He picked up the pencil and gently rubbed the tip across the paper until the indentations showed up as white images. He read the address as he was calling Remo.

Damien was getting very nervous. The police had said an hour, but he wasn't filled with confidence about Inspector Knowles reaction to his call. He looked at his watch again as he sipped water from a bottle. 13:30. Still half an hour before the payment deadline. He wondered how that was going. It was all down to Danny now if he was still alive.

He felt the boat sway and heard footsteps on the deck. He froze. There was no more movement, just silence. He stood slowly and looked through the curtains. All was quiet. He moved to the door and opened it slowly. Damien eased his head out and moved slowly up the few steps to the after deck.

He stood and looked around and could see nothing. Suddenly a man popped his head above the front of his boat. He was pointing a gun at him. The silencer looking large at the end of the barrel.

Remo smiled as he said, 'Mr Dwyer. Nowhere to run now.'

Remo moved slowly towards Damien, who stood rooted to the spot. Damien could see movement on the bank and three more men had appeared from the bushes.

'How did you find this place?' Damien felt calm, he was resigned to the situation being out of his control. He now had a curiosity that needed satisfying.

'The police were very helpful.'

'And who are you?'

'We're the people you tried to extort money from. And where I come from that's a punishable offence. But I've a few questions first. Who has the finger on the trigger? Is it you?'

'What trigger? I think you may have the wrong person?'

'I have the right person, but I need the person who is going to set off the device.'

'I've no idea what you're talking about.'

‘We’ll see in a few minutes time. You’ll talk. They always do.’

The three men were on-board the boat now. Damien looked at the water and tried to judge if he could make it before they shot him. It was a decision he couldn’t make. This was the end of the line.

He knew the device was set on automatic and there wasn’t any trigger-man. If they paid, they paid, if they didn’t, they didn’t. There was not going to be any message to the police and media. From this point on, the team should all be on their way out of the country. There were no more contingency plans this near the deadline time. The only exception was Danny, he was the only workable link that could get broken. If he could hold out long enough.....

‘Halt! Police! Put your weapons down!’

The voice came from the road and several flak-jacketed figures emerged from the bushes. The large letters POLICE stood out brightly even in the rain. Instead of feeling relieved, Damien now felt even more terrified. There was a stand-off, and he was right in the middle. If anyone fired, he would be dead.

Remo looked at his men and there must have been some low-key signal between them because suddenly they were gone. They dived over the side of the boat away from the police marksmen. His boat was suddenly full of police looking over the side, weapons pointing urgently into the muddy water of the canal.

Damien was now standing with his hands in the air until someone came up to him and said, ‘Damien Dwyer?’ He nodded. ‘I’m Dave Knowles. We spoke earlier. Inspector Madson wants a chat with you.’

Gary Jones looked at his watch. ‘What time did you say you wanted this open by?’

Novellino hovered over him, his hands clenching, showing his anxiety. ‘Before two o’clock. Can you do it?’

Gary laughed, ‘Under normal situations, it would be impossible. But last time I was here I introduced a few wrinkles should this happen again. I also set up the next set of spare parts to be mostly sub-assembled, so all I had to do was plug them in. Consequently.....’

The vault door ground open. Novellino pushed him out of the way and squeezed himself inside.

Gary felt hurt. ‘No need for thanks. But a cup of coffee would go down well.’ He realised Novellino was no longer seeing or hearing him. He was fascinated at the little man’s antics as he ran his hands over the smooth surface of the walls, as if to find a minor flaw. ‘What’s he looking for?’ asked Gary.

Alberto hesitated before saying, 'We believe we may have...a problem with one of the boxes.'

'Which box?'

'We don't know. That's part of the problem.'

'What sort of problem?'

Alberto entered the vault and pulled the now frantic Novellino out of the room. 'Come, come, Antonio. We must shut the door. The leak. There must be no leak.'

'What leak?' asked Gary, now concerned.

Novellino seemed to calm himself and looked at Alberto and held his arms tightly. 'We must pay. Give the go ahead and pay, Alberto. Now. Go. Quickly you have less than fifteen minutes. Go.'

'What leak?' repeated Gary.

Novellino was in a time and space of his own. His world was collapsing, and he had to decide what was best to do. 'I must know where the bomb is.' He turned to enter the vault again as Orso grabbed his arm and pulled him away. 'No, no, Presidente. The radiation will kill you. We must leave the vault.'

Gary was shocked by this revelation and suddenly realised why they had him up and down the country on first-class travel to solve this problem. It now looked like their worries were about to be confirmed. His mind associated radiation with a bomb and the vault. Without a second thought, he reached inside the panel and keyed in the password. This triggered the closing mechanism and the door slowly closed.

'No!' shouted Novellino and squeezed inside the vault again. Orso lost his grip, and the door slid shut with a soft sigh, trapping Novellino in the sealed vault.

'Presidente. You're a dead man.' said Orso with tears in his eyes.

Alberto hurried to the department that housed the high-level accountants. He made for the desk of signore Di Matteo and looked silently at him.

'We pay?' Di Matteo questioned.

Alberto nodded. 'We pay. Go ahead. Quickly.' He looked at the clock on the wall and it showed 13:50.

'Ten minutes to spare, Alberto. Not giving me long.'

'Just do it, please. I take full responsibility.'

Di Matteo bent to his task and had Alberto sign off the sheets of paper that were printed out during the transfers.

Danny Gordon was feeling cramped in the storeroom. There was nowhere to sit, and he ended up cross-legged on the floor. His computer was open, and he checked his watch for the umpteenth time.

A soft chime brought him out of his reverie and the screen filled with pop-ups as the money was being monitored during transfers. He smiled and gazed in wonder at the figures flashing before him. One after the other an account signalled, "Transfer received".

He punched the air then steadied himself, remembering to remain silent.

Danny opened the bespoke software program he'd compiled and began to transfer the funds to a dozen different accounts across the world. He watched the images race across the screen and realised months of planning and setting up was now paying off. In ten minutes he'd be a wealthy man.

He activated the process of sending messages to the team to confirm the money was in their accounts.

The security room of the Banco Particolare was crowded. They all watched the screens as the clock crept to 14:00. Novellino had all but given up his search for the errant box. He was now content to sit on the floor and await his fate.

The clock hands reach the two and the men in the room checked their watches.

Alberto said, 'Any minuteThere! What was that?'

They all saw the puff of smoke coming out of a gap in the wall. One box had smoke curling out from its rectangular slot. Novellino was delighted. He would finally know who the box owner was. But he stood still, touching the smoking panel. He sniffed and felt his face, feeling nothing. He turned to the cameras and mouthed at them, 'No radiation.'

Gary said, 'How long before we really know if it's radiation?'

'Open the door, Mr Jones. Now, please.'

'I'm not sure. I need to be sure there's no radiation. It'll be my fault and me that's sued, assuming I'd survive the radiation. No, not yet. Wait, a little longer.'

'Then I will open it!' shouted Alberto and stormed off to the vault.

Gary shook his head, 'I haven't given the new codeword yet. Only I can open it and my conscience won't let me do that until I know it's safe to do so.'

The screen was quiet. All transactions and confirmations were complete. Somehow Danny felt deflated. He closed the lid on the computer and stood stiffly. He listened for any sounds and decided there were none. He eased open the bookcase and looked into the small office. Empty and silent. Danny crept down the stairs and over to the bushes where he'd left his bike.

He slipped the computer into his satchel and threw his leg over the bike. He took a last look round and pedalled off down the lane. Danny knew where he could dump the computer and had already activated a programme of his design that would permanently eradicate all data from the disc.

Danny smiled at the thought that he'd arrived an out of work youth, straight from University and was going home a millionaire. He laughed out loud.

After half-an-hour Gary gave in and started the process that released the vault door. Alberto had several maintenance men standing by, ready to extract the troublesome security box. He welcomed Novellino with open arms and kissed him on both cheeks. 'I thought you were gone, Presidente. So I did.'

'Just open the box, Alberto and check who it is that's renting it.'

They drilled the locks out, the box carefully removed and laid on the floor. Novellino slowly lifted the lid and looked at the smoking remains of some sort of device.

Gary leaned over their shoulders, pointed and said, 'That could be your EMP device.'

'What're you still doing here!' shouted Novellino.

'No one's signed off my worksheet and I'm still waiting for my coffee.'

Alberto said, 'You know this device?'

Gary pushed forward and lifted the smoking remnants and looked closely at it. 'That could be some sort of receiving module. That looks like a sonic trigger. That bit....that must be the EMP. Smaller than I would have thought. The whole thing wrapped in lead that's this melted stuff. And tin foil. So you wouldn't find it if you tried ultrasound or X-ray, I suppose. Neat and clever.'

'But not radio-active?' asked Novellino.

‘No. Don’t think so. There would be a glass phial or something. No. This was a hoax.’

Novellino pushed past him and hurried out of the vault and almost knocked over Orso. He was breathless as he said, ‘The name on the box is Charles Johanssen, Presidente. I have his address here.’

Novellino snatched the piece of paper and dialled his phone. The ringing tone stopped. No answerphone service on Remo’s phone. He would have to wait to settle his score with Mr Johanssen.

Novellino smiled to himself. Despite the loss of a great deal of money, he felt he had won a moral victory. They saved the bank from certain disaster and he could cover up the cracks the technical problems had caused. He was back in control again and ready to steady the ship. It was over, except for a few loose ends. He dialled Remo again.

Gary stood and waited for something to happen. Slowly the staff disappeared, and he was left to collect his tools.

He hefted his bag and walked through the offices until he found someone he knew. He stopped by Orso and said, ‘I suppose that’s me finished, then?’ Orso shrugged. ‘Can someone sign this sheet for me?’ another shrug.

Gary dropped the bag with a clang that made a few heads pop up. ‘I’ll put up with the lack of coffee, though I don’t know why I should, but I’ve done your lot a great service. So, now I need this sheet signed or my company don’t get paid, and then I won’t get paid. Is anyone here going to sign this for me?’ Orso shrugged again and walked away.

Gary waited until everyone had resumed their work and sighed. ‘Oh, well. What did I really expect? They’re all over you when they need you. When you’re no use to them, they don’t want to know. Well, a lesson learned hard is a lesson learned well, I always say. It’s time these bastards learned their lesson then.’

He left the building with no form of thanks and found himself on the street, getting wet. A police car was parked outside, and he smiled to himself as he waved at a passing taxi. So much for the limo each way, he thought. He made a point of adding on a big tip for the cabbie and keeping the receipt. The airline ticket was first class, so he got on the next plane home and had a few stiff drinks to wind down his experience with the Banco Particolare.

He couldn’t wait until they tried to shut the vault door that evening. Without the pass code, they couldn’t do it. They would scream down the phone all they wanted, but he’d finished his shift and would be unavailable for some time. A lesson learned.

Madson was delighted with the progress of his team during his brief absence. He congratulated Knowles and Jackson for their initiative and thought of calling Dobbs but decided it could wait. He wanted a quiet talk with Dwyer first.

Damien Dwyer was in Interview Room 2 and Madson sat opposite him in silence. Dwyer looked a broken man.

‘Didn’t go to plan, did it?’ Madson said quietly and not without sympathy.

‘Not quite. My wife and kids safe?’

‘Yes. We have them in a safe place.’

‘Who were they?’

‘The people who shot at you?’

‘They tried to kill me!’

‘Didn’t see that coming, eh?’

‘You could say that. Who were they?’

‘We...don’t know yet. I think they’re a part of the enforcement system the Banco Particolare has to protect its...interests abroad. We can’t definitely link them to the bank, so we’re not sure how to proceed. Perhaps if you filled us in on a few more details we can be more successful?’

‘Where are they now? Did you catch them?’ Madson shook his head. ‘They just slipped into the canal and disappeared?’ Madson nodded. ‘I’m allowed a call, right?’ Madson nodded. ‘I want to speak to D.I. Dobbs, then.’

Madson looked up to see if Dwyer was being serious. He could tell from his face the man was almost at the end of his tether.

‘Why? Don’t you want a solicitor?’

‘I don’t know yet. I need to speak privately with Dobbs first.’

‘He’s unavailable. He’s off sick.’

‘Then I’ll wait until he’s back at work. Until then, you’ll get nothing from me.’

‘We have an agreement, Dwyer, we saved your life, you tell us all you know.’

‘I will honour that. After I talked to Dobbs.’

Madson sat in silence considering his options. It had been two hours since they had saved Dwyer from the gunmen and he seemed to have enough spirit to wait out his time until he could talk to Dobbs.

Mickey decided. He dialled a number on his mobile and waited. The answer phone cut in. He tried another number and this time the tone changed as Dobbs said, 'Hello?'

'Guv, it's Mickey.'

'Mickey, nice to hear from....'

'Listen, Guv. A lot's happened, but we've Damien Dwyer in custody and he will confess to the whole of The Deck of Cards Robberies.'

'That's fantastic. Well done.....'

'But...he wants to talk to you first, Guv.'

There was a long silence at the other end before Dobbs said, 'Then you'd better put him on. Make yourself scarce, Mickey boy.'

'I will Guv. Here he is.'

Damien waited until Madson had left the room and the door locked shut. 'Dobbs?'

'Can anyone hear us?'

'I don't think so.'

'Check.'

Damien stood and walked around the room. He looked through the one-way glass and realised they might be able to lip read. He turned his back to the mirror and said, 'I don't think so.'

'What do you want, Damien?'

'Help. I want your help to get this whole thing lightened up. Better still, go away.'

'I could've been more use if you hadn't already declared your involvement, you stupid sod.'

'They were trying to kill me! You didn't warn me about the ninja Mafioso killing team.'

'I don't know what you're talking about.'

'I've paid you enough to expect some help here.'

'That's water under the bridge. If you've made a confession....I can't make that go away. You've been suckered, Damien.'

‘Do something, Dobbs. I know too much for you to sit back and do nothing. Is that clear?’

‘All too clear. It looks like our business relationship is over. I’d ask you to keep me out of any confessions you might make.’

‘That would depend on how much support I get from you.’

‘In that case, I guess we’re both bugged. Say nothing till I get there. No interview without me being there. I’ll do what I can. I promise that. But say nothing till I get there. I’ll be in tomorrow.’

‘You’d better.’

‘Okay, Damien. Good luck. Pass me back to Madson.’

Damien waved the phone at the window and the door unlocked. Madson entered. ‘He wants to speak to you, Inspector Madson.’

‘Guv?’

‘Hold all interviews with Dwyer until I get there. I’ll be in tomorrow.’

‘Are you sure, Guv?’

‘I don’t feel a hundred percent. Look, Mickey do me a favour. Two, actually. Let no one interview Dwyer unless I’m there. Okay?’

‘Yes, Guv.’

‘And...I’m at my flat on the lake. Can you pick me up tomorrow and bring me into London? I really shouldn’t drive. What with the pills and everything. Sorry about this. You can bring me up to speed then.’

‘That’s okay, Guv. I’ll pick you up about....ten, okay?’

‘Good. Be careful, Mickey. No one to get near Dwyer. There’s too much on this. We can’t let it slip away now, can we?’

‘We won’t, sir. See you tomorrow.’

Madson was thoughtful as he thumbed the disconnect button. He stared at Dwyer whose head was in his hands. Madson just stared at the Mastermind for a long time.

Chapter 7 – Cashing in the Chips

October 31

The rain had stopped, and the sun was weak behind a low cloud. A light breeze slapped the wires against the masts on the boats in the small marina. Madson wasn't sure how he came to be at the lake's edge, pushing out the small dinghy into the water.

Dobbs had seemed buoyant when Madson had arrived and said they were going for a sail before hitting the big city again. Madson was in no position to argue with his boss.

'Time you learned how to sail, Mickey boy. You sit at the tiller and I'll tell you what to do.'

Madson felt uncomfortable with the brightly coloured life-jacket over his suit. But his boss was the boss. He climbed awkwardly into the boat. 'It's not deep out there is it, Guv?'

'Deep as hell, Mickey. But you won't be in the water and the life vest will prevent you from drowning. Oh, you can't swim, can you? Don't worry. You're safe with me.'

They hoisted the sail, and the light breeze caught it quickly.

'Just look at the pennant on the top of the mast. That tells you the way the wind's blowing. Pull or push the tiller the opposite way you want to go. Just pull the sail into a position where it picks up some wind and the boat will drive forwards.'

'What if the wind is in the opposite direction I want to go in?'

'Then we bugger about for hours tacking left and right, catching just enough motion to move us in the rough direction. Don't worry. Coming back we'll have the wind behind you all the way. Easy, not too much of a turn on the tiller.'

Dobbs fell silent as the craft tacked across the lake. Madson was happy with the solitude, it helped him concentrate. After half an hour he felt he was getting the hang of the craft.

Eventually, Madson had to break the solemn atmosphere in the boat. 'You all right?'

'I'm...just not myself, Mickey. Not myself.'

'You've been under pressure. Is there anything I can do to help at all?'

'No. The wife has made it clear there's no hope of reconciliation. What horrible sort of word is that? A legal term for your life is over.'

'There's always hope. Never say never.'

'Then, there's the work-related mess in my life.'

'What do you mean, sir?'

'You're a smart man, Mickey, you must've figured there's something amiss with these Deck of Cards Robberies?'

'There's lots of questions that need to be answered.'

'Go on, impress me.'

'Well, there's been several times when you've made some surprising deductions. The reasoning behind them could only come from a more...intimate knowledge of the situation.'

'Fair point, Mickey.'

'I took a few hours off work the other day to backtrack through some of your old cases. Damien Dwyer came up a lot of times. You both go back a long way. Do you have something against this man?'

'I've nothing against Dwyer. In fact, quite the opposite. I admire him. He's a top professional and an honourable man. Albeit a villain. But let's say he's been...useful. Steer a little more to the left.'

'Okay. Sorry. He also asked for you first. Before he'd say anything to anyone else.'

'I know you're not going to get around to saying it but I'm concerned who you might say it to. So let's get this straight. You think I'm on the take, don't you? And I want to tell you the truth.'

'Well, there's a lot of similarities in your past case histories to The Deck of Cards Robberies?'

'I've been a bit of a naughty boy, Mickey. And I do think you're about to blow the whistle on me and there's nothing I can do about that.'

'So why did you do it?'

'My wife always said I wouldn't make it as a bobby. Too weak a character, she thought. But I did. She also thought I wouldn't make it to sergeant and an Inspector. But I did. She also thought a Detective Inspector was above me, but it wasn't. I needed to prove that to her. I needed to exceed her expectations and mine. I wanted to prove finally to her that I was a good enough man for her to take me back.'

Madson was watching his boss closely, the tiller left unattended.

'This isn't just about money, Mickey. It's about me having enough skill to solve the crimes. Crimes that appear unsolvable to everyone else. Just imagine the kudos for me in that? I give a little information, I get some information. I help facilitate the crime, I know how it was done and who committed it. If this had all gone to plan, I would've been promoted a hero and she might have had me back. But now...it's not going to happen.'

'Guv.....'

'The last piece of this world I can cling onto has gone.'

'...If you'd confided in me earlier...we could've worked something out....'

'You're a bright lad, Mickey. But you're also a career officer. You'd have had to report me, eventually. And the earlier that happened the less chance I'd have in proving my point. You've got to take this to Cummins, with my blessing. Tell him everything you know. I've got nothing to hide now. All the details are on my computer in the London flat. Password, "Colombo".'

'I'm really sorry...Marty.'

'You've never been married, have you, Mickey?'

'No, Guv.'

'Any reason for that?'

'I'm not gay if that's what you're hinting at. I've never found the right woman. As you said, I'm a career officer. My time is my work. I actually like my own company.'

'You'll go far, Mickey. Probably further than I did.'

'You taught me a lot, Guv.'

'I hope so. Just remember. Crimes are like a jigsaw, solved piece by piece. Some pieces are easier than others. Follow the money, Mickey. It always starts and ends there.'

Dobbs seemed to withdraw into himself and Madson took the time to adjust his course and aim for the tall tree at the side of the lake as instructed.

'There's no light at the end of my tunnel. One of my regrets is that I never officially solved all the cases. If you finally do, Mickey, give me some credit.'

'Of course. But it won't come to that. What're you doing?'

Dobbs was standing in the boat removing his life-jacket. Madson let go the tiller, and the boat swerved with the wind. He grabbed it again and steadied the craft. By the time he looked at Dobbs again, he was putting on some sort of collar.

From where he was sitting it looked like a series of gym weights had been wired together.

Dobbs clicked the fastening device together and examined his necklace. 'As you know, Mickey, there's another one above Dwyer. He is The Dealer. You need to find him. Follow the money.'

Dobbs slipped a padlock into the fastener and Madson heard it click.

'Goodbye, thanks for being a friend, Mickey.'

With a slow backward fall, Dobbs went over the side and sank beneath the murky waters of the lake.

Madson panicked and let go the tiller, the boat gyrated wildly until it found its own course. It had spun around and Madson could not be sure exactly where Dobbs had fallen in.

'Guv!' he shouted several times. His voice echoing across the lake and back. Madson looked wildly around for someone to help him. The nearest boat was a mile or more away.

He spun wildly around and knew there was nothing he could do, yet he must do something. He pulled out his mobile and dialled the office. He breathlessly told them what had happened and told them to contact the nearest rescue unit. In his heart, he knew it would all be too late. His boss and mentor had not surfaced. He'd a heavy necklace that would take him straight to the bottom.

An hour later he knew it was over. There was nothing more he could do. The small power boat from the yacht club had been spinning around the lake all that time. Searching for someone that would never come to the surface.

Madson held back the sudden rush of tears and occupied himself with trying to steer the craft back to the marina. It's what Dobbs would have wanted. He said no to the offer of a tow from the power boat. They stayed close to assist him if he needed it. Mickey crashed into the other moored boats and roughly roped off the dinghy. He clambered over the other craft to get to the dock and stood there shaking. He fell to his knees and let the tears release. Better now when he knew no one, than later in front of his own team.

Some while later he was free enough from tears to take a last look over the water that had taken Martin Dobbs' life. It was sad that he had gone forever, but sadder the thought that Dobbs felt he needed to go at all.

It would be a long lonely journey back to London and a lot of explaining to do when he got there.

It was a very sad day.

PART SIX

THE JOKERS

Chapter 1 – A New Deal

November 8

Madson was apprehensive of his meeting with Cummins. He'd been summoned and told to keep an hour spare. For Cummins to give anyone an hour was big news. It would not be good.

For the last few days, a search and rescue team had dragged the lake and found no evidence of Dobbs' body. They'd found an article of clothing that could be his, but nothing else. They would give it two more days and then have to call it off.

The experts in that region had said it was most likely his body was taken by the slow undercurrent. It moved through the underground old river bed, which eventually drained out to the sea. This happened when the lake gets particularly high.

Madson jumped as they called his name and led into Cummins's office. He sat and waited while his Chief finished up some paperwork.

He'd rarely been in this office. That was mostly Dobbs' job. Get the news, good or bad, and pass it down the line.

Cummins finally finished and sighed as he sat back in his chair.

'Terrible business, Madson.'

'Yes, sir.'

'You were there and witnessed his last moments?'

'I was, sir. Full report sent to you yesterday.'

'I read it. Very sad. We've lost a good man. Now we need you to step up.'

'What do you need me to do, sir?'

'We'll have a new D.I. here within three weeks. He won't have any loyalty to you, nor you to him, for a while anyway. If the Dobbs thing is still hanging on, he might want to boot it into touch. But we need to be more...sensitive to the situation than that. Don't we?'

'I think so too, sir.'

'Good. We need to be precise and conclude that Dobbs acted on his own, for whatever reason, in associating with known criminals. We need to know what

information he gave out. Above all, Madson, it has to be a complete end. No comebacks, no case reopened. Finished for good. Understood?’

‘Exactly, sir.’

‘You’ll be acting D.I. with all the authority and levels of responsibility that it brings, but your pay will remain as it is now, I’m afraid. But, I’ll be putting in a strong recommendation for promotion and we hope that the D.I. status will become official sometime soon.’

‘Thank you, sir.’

‘You deserve it, Madson. Dobbs was a misguided informer, acting alone for personal reasons, that were beyond the knowledge and control of the department.’

‘I see, sir.’

‘In the meantime, tie up The Deck of Cards Robberies for good. No loose ends. The new D.I. will want to start afresh, not picking up other people’s rubbish. I’ll keep Internal Affairs off your back for as long as possible. I take it now we have the top suspect in the case we can finish up quickly?’

‘I think we can sir. I will interview him again later.’

‘Good.’

‘One thing, sir?’

‘Yes?’

‘Can I have access to Dobbs’ files, going back for ...say five years?’

Cummins thought a moment before saying, ‘I don’t see why not. You think it necessary?’

‘It may be, sir. I delved a few days ago, there’s something that connects all these recent crimes. There are echoes of the past. There may be some logic, some reasoning there. We can’t ask him now he’s gone. But if I can find...’

‘You only have three weeks. Plus all your other cases and The Deck of Cards Robberies. Do what you see fit but remember the time restraints. You’ll be burning the candle at both ends.’

‘I’m used to that, sir.’

‘So I hear. If you think you can find a good reason that upholds Dobbs’ character and strengthens the department’s position, then it’ll be a good outcome. If the bastard was just a low-down informer, perhaps that might not look so good in the press releases.’

'I understand, sir.'

'Good luck, Madson. Keep me informed. Anything you need from me, just holler. Carry on. I've got that arrogant yank from the CIA in next. Talk about co-operation. Christ! What do they know about co-operation?'

'It's you that needs the good luck, sir. Thank you.'

Madson left the office with a smile on his face and that soon left him as he hurried back to his office. It felt strange to walk into Dobbs' office and call it his own. It was only a temporary occupation, but a very important one. He wondered how the rest of the team would take it. He could boost Knowles up to his old position, which would get Knowles on his side at least. They were a good team, but he was unsure how all of their futures would pan out when the new D.I. arrived.

He knew he would not clear Dobbs' name. But he felt he had to try to prove that Dobbs' actions were in some wayexplainable.

He sat in the swivel chair and took time to think. He had the keys to all the paper files and the passwords to Dobbs' computer files. It was a lot to go through and little time. But first, he had to deal with the outstanding issue of Damien Dwyer.

Madson had spoken briefly to Dwyer and told him of Dobbs' death. Dwyer had seemed genuinely upset. Madson had said there would have to be an interview. But Dwyer said he needed some time to compose himself. They had agreed on 14:00 that afternoon.

Madson looked at the clock and saw it was 13:30. He flicked through Dobbs' files.

Madson had arranged for a large pot of coffee and several bottles of water to be put in the interview room. There were a variety of biscuits and sandwiches ordered for later. This would be a long session and Madson informed his staff that he was not to be disturbed.

He sat alone in the room and thought through what he really needed to know and how he would get that information from Dwyer. He had a pad in front of him with a cryptic list of his questions. Cryptic because he knew other people, like him, could read upside down and could think of a false answer ahead of the question being asked. The pad, a pen and a buff coloured folder were the only things on the table.

The walls were bare and featureless, apart from the large one-way mirror. He'd ensured the room behind that was empty and locked. He had the key in his pocket.

Madson waited while Dwyer was being brought up from the cell as he ran through the events of the last few days. The King was dead, Long Live the King. He never understood that old maxim until now. His boss had gone and now he was the boss. Only for a few weeks, but he had a lot to live up to trying to be like Dobbs.

Madson reasoned that Dobbs had not always been an inspirational role model. There were many times the team, himself included, poked fun at their boss. Dobbs made some howlers too. Perhaps we remember people more fondly when they're gone, than when they're here – he thought. The door opened.

Damien Dwyer looked tired and haggard. He hadn't shaved since his arrest and the overalls supplied made him look like a convict serving a life sentence.

'Are you being treated well?' asked Madson pouring two coffees.

'Yeah. I think so.'

'Not your first time in gaol, you should know whether you've been treated fairly or not?'

'I've been treated worse. Police don't treat people kindly who are about to shop one of their own.'

'Interesting point of view. No one out there knows anything about your involvement with Dobbs yet.'

A look of surprise came into Damien's eyes. 'You kept it quiet, why?'

'I'm still unsure of the situation.'

'Don't I have any legal representation today?'

'You won't need it today. This is an informal chat. After today, we go formal. I just want to be sure that we're not sending out the wrong message. I want us to have the same understanding of where we will go from here.'

'That doesn't sound too good for me.'

'Right now you're not in a good place. You're looking at twenty years if we push for it. But today is about giving you a chance to tell me the truth. What we do with that truth is another matter.'

'I see. Just protecting your own. A cover-up. I get it.'

'Actually, no. There's a whole raft of evidence against D.I. Dobbs and that's going to be in the public domain very soon. I just want to understand what really happened. And more importantly, why?'

Damien shrugged and sipped at the steaming coffee. 'I'll tell you what I can. I'll tell you my involvement but will shop no one else. You've most of the teams already, I believe Dobbs saw to that. I'll fill in as many gaps as I can, without surrendering team members who have otherwise escaped.'

'I won't ask for any more than that.'

'I would've got away Scott free if it wasn't for the bank's heavy mob. I feel I need retribution for that. I need assurances that I and my family are going to be safe. They'll need police protection. I'm more value to my family alive in prison than I am dead. That's why I made this deal.'

'You fulfil your part of the deal and I'll promise you that your family will be protected.'

'You have that authority?'

'I'm acting D.I. and have already cleared it with the Chief Inspector. You can trust me. All we want in this unit is the truth.'

Damien seemed to be absorbed in thought. Finally, he said, 'When can I see my wife and kids?'

'How about tomorrow?' Madson said with a smile.

Damien's eyes rose quickly to meet Madson's. He wanted to see if he was joking or not. He decided the detective wasn't. 'Okay. Thanks. Where do you want to start? The Ace of Spades project?'

'That's a good place to start as anywhere.'

Damien talked for fifteen minutes, with Madson taking notes. Madson interrupted with questions to clarify a point here and there. By the time Dwyer had finished what he wanted to say, Madson had filled in most of the gaps in the case.

The beauty about the Spades set up was there was no actual heist, no hauling the money away. Hiding it, breaking it down and distributing it. It was all done electronically. Hundreds of different accounts meant the money trail was muddied and would be confused for months. By the time anyone could figure out where all the euros had been, they'd been taken out and long gone. Every member of the project was responsible for taking out their money from their allocated accounts. They were encouraged to transfer to their own secret accounts.

Regarding the team, Wilson was a master forger and con man. He spent a year building up an identity as a second cousin to a prince of Hungary. His name György Király was Hungarian, with Király meaning King. They had his Butler's Warf address paid for a year in advance. He had false papers and passport. False

documents claiming a long lineage of family history. His account with Banco Particolare was topped up every month with half a million euros, which he pretended to spend much of it. This was then put back in monthly.

He was the decoy. A highly credible, but a high-profile decoy. They knew the bank was going to initially concentrate on him, distracting them from the real problem area, Jack. He'd established a security box in the Banco Particolare a year earlier. Once again Wilson's skill as a forger providing a credible identity to get him in as a client of the bank.

Jack was the device maker. The EMP device destroyed itself each time when activated, so Jack had to replace the device after each detonation. That was the riskier aspect. The last deposit of an EMP included a clockwork timer that set off the phosphorous powder, which destroyed all the internal mechanism. But the bank never realised Jack was the real ploy.

Sarina was a long-con artist who'd been around the Europe market a long time. The risk they took with her, was that her good looks were so recognisable. So apart from the initial face to face with Novellino, they kept her contact to the phone. Regale translated as Queen in Italian, a little quirk that ran through the four projects. They chose a woman as the negotiator because they thought the Italians would be more respectful to a female and not want to hurt her. They were wrong. Damien had put bodyguards on both King and Queen as a precaution. But that turned out to be a disaster.

When questioned where the Plutonium had come from Damien was hesitant.

'It was supplied.'

'By whom?'

After a pause, Damien said, 'Dobbs. He said something about getting it from the evidence room. He knew it was there from a previous case. Otherwise, it would've been the hardest thing to obtain.'

'I'll check on that. Thanks. Tell me where Dobbs fitted into the scheme of things.'

'Dobbs supplied a lot of information. Mostly details about the people involved. Like, Billy Castillo, Joseph Cohen and Novellino, He also supplied details of the venues, plans and operating practices. It was very detailed and very useful. We couldn't have done anything without it.'

'Where did he get all that from, do you think?'

'Past cases. I think he said once.'

'And for that, he was paid. By you?'

'Yes.'

Madson opened his folder and handed Damien a few sheets of paper. 'We found this list on Dobbs' computer. It seems to detail payments over the last few months. Does it tally with your recollection?'

Damien looked for two minutes and nodded, 'I don't keep written evidence. But it looks about right.'

'That totals to over a million pounds there. That's a lot of money. Where's it all gone?' Madson said with a frown.

'Wine, women and song?' suggested Damien. 'The rest he might have squandered.' He managed a weak smile at his joke.

'There's a great deal missing. We still have to go through his accounts, so perhaps we'll find it, eventually. Now, while we're on about the money situation. This was the biggest combination of robberies in history, by a long way. Nearly half a billion pounds and yet, hardly any money recovered to date. Where is it all?'

Damien shook his head and remained silent. He knew where a great deal of it had gone. He'd deliberately kept back huge amounts and put it away in several offshore accounts. He also held back bundles of cash, destined for his family to use short-term. He hoped no one would ever find it and he was not prepared to give any up unless they guaranteed his sentence to be dramatically reduced. But for now, he had to tell the police something.

'I agreed to do these robberies because I knew I wasn't taking money from anyone innocent that would suffer by it. The Billy Cashino thing....here was a rich, greedy man and wife team who were raking in money from people who probably couldn't afford it. That was the Hearts Project, Billy being smitten by a very young woman. He even increased his insurance to get more out of it. The Clubs project used the same Honey Trap. It was a double hit on the Castillos. Diamonds, once again a greedy gem dealer, trying to rip-off a very wealthy client. He even tried to bribe our Jack to increase the back-handers.'

Dwyer rubbed his eyes. He paused and took a long drink of coffee.

He continued, 'Spades. I understood Banco Particolare to be a very corrupt bank, run by an organisation laundering money for criminals. They'd many complaints from their genuine innocent customers, which they resolved out of the glare of publicity. They'd do anything to protect their reputation. They delighted in fleecing their ordinary, smaller investors.'

Another sip.

'None of the victims of my projects could really complain to the police, because they were not entirely innocent victims. No one was ever physically threatened or got even a scratch on any of my projects.'

Madson was scribbling notes, furiously trying to keep up with the rapid flow of information.

‘For the Diamonds, we spent a long time investigating Cohen’s medical background. To ensure he was not allergic to anything, had a weak heart, or would be affected by the chloroform and the sleeping draught we gave him.’

Damien stood and paced the floor.

‘I want you to understand I’ve given employment to many people, who demonstrated their professional skills. Now and in the future, they will recirculate money back into our dwindling economy.’

‘You sound like a Robin Hood figure, rather than a criminal, Damien.’ said Madson with a half-smile.

‘More Robin the rich to give to the poor than just robbing. One puzzling thing though. All these people I used have previous records. All are therefore easily traced. All were included in the master plan I was given. It looks like someone expected everyone to be caught, including me. I wonder why?’

Damien poured himself another coffee and topped up the mug of Madson. He sat back at the table and twirled his ring as he chose his words carefully. ‘There was always a higher echelon to these projects. I was approached and recruited to be the facilitator. But I was never the original planner. I took my orders and received information from someone else.’

‘We’ve called him The Dealer.’

‘An apt name, yes. The Dealer. It fits in with the whole Deck of Cards theme that runs through everything. The original seeding money came through him and all the profits went back up to him.’

‘Who is he?’

‘I really don’t know. Never met him. One phone call a long time ago and a series of hand-delivered letters and cash. That’s it. Find him and I reckon you’ll find most of the money.’

‘Follow the money.’ Madson mused.

‘Good idea.’

Chapter 2 – Turn up Trumps

November 8 – 29

Delving through the hundreds of case histories and Dobbs' notes to himself was a task that Madson immediately regretted embarking on. He worked long into the night and then took the paperwork home to plough through even further into the morning.

A pattern was emerging. Three years previously, one of the casinos operated by the Castillo family had a minor break-in. The investigation at the time collected floor plans and details of how the Castillos organised their security. The officer in charge was Dobbs. It was clear to Madson that this formed the basis for the casino robberies.

Madson questioned why The Deck of Cards Robberies were all within London. He guessed that Dobbs wanted to be in charge of each case because they came within his jurisdiction. They were timed enough apart so Dobbs wasn't overloaded with other cases. Another D.I. might have been allocated to these cases and have solved them instead.

Dobbs was perfect as a source of information for The Dealer to use for all the robberies. Without Dobbs, it would have been impossible to complete even one robbery. Madson believed Dobbs must have known who The Dealer was and worked closely with him.

Madson considered the ego of The Dealer. All the robberies had to be part of a deck of cards. Each robbery containing thirteen people. Each robbery having a connection with the four suits. But was Dobbs only in this for the kudos of the arrests and closing out the record-breaking cases? World news events. Getting his wife to respect him again? But where was the money? It was a jigsaw that was slowly coming together. Follow the money and the last pieces will be put into place. Follow the money.

Madson reflected on Dwyer's concern that all the people he'd been instructed to use had traceable criminal records. That made them that much easier to find and arrest. Was this the Dealer's intention? Make it easier for the C.I.D.? Make it easier for Dobbs? Was this part of the deal that Dobbs was offered by The Dealer? No one left standing but Dobbs – and the dealer?

Cummins insisted on a daily update and at one of these meetings Madson asked for some specialist support. Cummins was concerned about how much it would dent his budget, but he eventually agreed and Madson set off to the relevant department within the headquarters and spoke to the technicians. They liked the idea of a challenge and so began one of the most time-consuming money traces in UK police history.

Novellino was coerced into providing details of the accounts where he had authorised 500 million euros to be transferred to. He took some persuading, but the threat of a press leak made him eventually co-operate.

This was the starting point where the team of experts traced every Euro moved across the globe. It took them nearly three weeks, but eventually, there emerged active accounts with traces of the originally stolen monies. Madson had followed the money. The other robberies were in cash and that was a lot harder to follow. But modern technology was a double-edged sword.

While the trace was going on Madson found records of Dobbs' legal separation and a psychiatric assessment of four years previous. It appeared Alicia Dobbs openly claimed her husband was useless and not supportive of her. She stated his shortcoming as the reason she'd left him. It was true that Dobbs' clear up rate was low until The Deck of Cards Robberies. And had vastly improved since.

As the three-week deadline approached, Madson felt he'd achieved all he could with the information available. He'd made some depressing discoveries, but some headway into resolving The Deck of Cards robberies.

He was ready to present his case to Cummins in full, and had some suggestions about future investigations that needed to be considered. He just knew there would be a major problem in implementing them.

Cummins was still studying Madson's report as he sat waiting for comments. The Chief Inspector had the document for over two days and had said nothing. Madson began to fidget until he realised it and tried to control himself.

'You have no doubt about any of this?' Cummins said, peering over his rimless glasses.

'I wish I did, sir. The evidence has been checked and collaborated. Dwyer has been particularly helpful I must say.'

'This is...well, hard to accept.'

Madson felt dejected. He felt it was the best piece of detective work he'd accomplished in the whole of his career. He'd gone the extra mile to extract the information, an extra effort to interpret it and bent over backwards to provide a viable solution and conclusion to the whole case. Now Cummins was expressing doubt?

'I know who The Dealer is, sir. And where he might be right now.'

'So I see. Your next step is a little....extreme?'

‘Depends on what you want the outcome to be, sir. You did say a final conclusion, no loose ends and nothing to come back and haunt us. I think this is the only way.’

‘I want you to meet somebody.’ Cummins lifted his phone and spoke to his secretary. ‘He can come in now.’

Cummins threw the report on his desk and sat back. ‘Your three weeks are up, Madson. The new D.I. is here tomorrow.’

‘So I understand, sir.’

‘This...well it leaves you without an allocated position in this unit, I’m afraid.’

Madson’s fear was becoming a reality. He was going to be sideways promoted. All earlier promises by the Chief forgotten, now the emergency had passed.

There was a knock at the door and Cummins said, ‘Come in.’

A heavy-set man entered. Madson thought him to be in his early forties and very overweight. He had a pleasant smile as he held out his hand to Madson and said, ‘Hi. Name’s Morgan. Morgan Todd.’ As far as Madson could tell, the accent was American and from the southern states by the sound of it.

Cummins was smiling at Madson as he said, ‘Morgan is in charge of the small unit watching the Banco Particolare. You may recall, they gave you videos that alerted us to Wilson?’ Madson nodded, now further confused. ‘Morgan is part of a C.I.A. unit seconded to the UK, to follow up on the bank’s more unsavoury financial activities. I think you understand fully what I mean.’

‘Well, sir...I’m not entirely....’

Cummins grinned as he said, ‘We have an understanding and a co-operation initiative to help the C.I.A. in this particular stream of their investigations. In short, they need our help.’

Morgan’s laugh was abrupt and loud, ‘As opposed to you Limey’s always needing ours.’ His smile was disarming. Madson grinned at the attempt of a joke.

‘I’ve seconded you onto their team, Madson. You’re to be the liaison officer. You’ll facilitate anything they need. Help them not to break our laws. Tread their heavy boots all over our five-hundred-year-old constitution. Not screw up with procedures that’ll let our fine British criminals off the hook.’ Cummins grinned at his verbose ragging of the foreign guest.

‘I’m sorry, sir....?’

‘You have a new task, Madson. Until we can find you a vacant D.I. post. You have an important job. You’re going to assist the Yanks in nailing the Mafioso bastards at the Banco Particolare.’

'I see.'

'Not fully you don't.' Cummins picked up the report again and said, 'This gives our department everything we needed, Madson. A fine effort. Outstanding, I would say. But your conclusion...well a little expensive for our budget. But...Uncle Sam here is now on the same page. And he has the dollars to spend. I approve your recommendations.'

'Thank you, sir. I don't know what to say. How to thank you.'

'Just finish the job, Mickey. Finish the job.'

The police normally have a way of honouring their own. Funeral ceremonies are very much presented on a military basis. There is pomp, ceremony, tradition and an open display of respect.

Martin Dobbs' memorial was a family affair only. The search for Dobbs' remains was abandoned and so it was only five weeks later the family could mourn their loss. The press had been full of speculation about the suicide of a senior police officer. Rumours had circulated and had been distorted until the truth was no longer out there. A public funeral would not have served anyone in a positive manner.

The ceremony was simple and mercifully brief. The Dobbs family was represented by his wife and his sister, whom Madson had never met, nor even knew existed. So much for his painstaking research into his former boss. The simple casket was honoured and topped by a small bunch of bright red roses. Apparently his favourite flower. Another thing unknown to Madson.

There were only ten attendees, and they were invited to Alicia's home for refreshments. Madson was uncomfortable as he knew no one in the room. He sought out Alicia Dobbs to say his goodbyes.

'I cannot tell you how sorry I am that this has happened, Mrs Dobbs.'

'Life has many surprises, Mr Madson. Not all pleasant.'

'Perhaps we may keep in touch. If there's any further news.'

'There's little hope of finding him now. He's somewhere in the Solent and maybe beyond.'

'Best to think of him as he was when alive.' Madson looked longingly at the door and an escape. But he knew his duty. He knew where his loyalty lay, so he stood while her tears returned.

'I can now admit I drove him a bit too hard at times. If I had my time over again, I'd be more sympathetic.' Alicia said behind the handkerchief.

‘He’d appreciate that. Er...did you have any idea all this was going on with your husband? All this criminal planning and subterfuge?’

‘No. No idea at all. I knew he was resentful at the separation and very angry. But I never thought he had this capability in him. I knew he didn’t have the temperament to be a special policeman. I never thought he had the stability, the perseverance, the determination. But, I suppose, he’s proven me wrong a little there. I never knew he was so capable of...well, complexity.’

‘I’m convinced he did it all for you. Only for you.’

‘Really. Well, I’m not so sure.’

‘I’m very sure.’

‘I suppose we never really know people, do we?’ she said softly, dabbing gently at her eyes. ‘Martin was a smart man. But in a ...feral way. He’d fight if cornered. But that fight wasn’t there all the time. Do you know what I mean? You probably knew him better than I did.’

‘I thought I did.’

There was silence for a heartbeat before Madson said, ‘I have to ask you, Mrs Dobbs. Would you have ever considered having him back? Were there any set of conditions that would make you go back?’

‘We’ll never know. Thank you for coming, Mr Madson. I understand you’ve done everything you could to make my husband less of a villain in all this. I thank you for that.’

‘It was the right thing to do. I was glad I was welcome today. You look after yourself, now.’

‘Oh, I will. I’m going away for a few weeks. I feel a change of scenery.’

‘Anywhere nice?’

‘Caribbean. A surprise holiday.’

‘Very good. Quite a coincidence, I’m off there in a short while too.’

‘I’m sure you need a break too. Thank you for coming. Goodbye.’

They shook hands and Madson held on to her gloved fingers a moment longer before saying, ‘Martin was a good man. He meant well and tried his best. For many of us, and that includes you, it was never enough. But I do believe his memory will live on, proving him to be a high achiever.’

‘Very sweet of you, Michael. Thank you.’

Chapter 3 – Jokers Wild

December 20

The house hidden in the verdant acreage called The Homestead was owned by a recluse. He loved the inaccessibility of the place and it helped keep away the tourists. While its borders had overgrown trees and shrubs, there was little to see of the beautiful 1950s house. The twenty bedroom and fifteen bathrooms were mostly unused as the owner lived alone. He had a few servants who were rarely allowed to sleep in the house but commuted daily from the nearest village to look after his needs.

He sat on the wide porch and let the sun flicker across his face, dappled by the leaves of a hundred trees. The Planters Punch was warm in his hand as he waited for his guest. He heard the buzzer sound deep inside the house. The feint voice of one of his housekeepers as they opened the electric gates.

He stood and carefully placed the glass on the wicker table and rested his hands on the balcony rail. He looked down at the winding path that led to the gate and watched the taxi grind its way up the slight rise. Smoke billowing out from the exhaust, tainting the scented air.

The woman that got out wore a wide-brimmed hat and looked hesitantly at the large house. The housekeeper and her husband opened the trunk and lifted out the entire luggage. Within moments they ushered the visitor into the house and the taxi belched smoke back out to the thoroughfare of George Town, Grand Cayman.

The man took a deep breath and went to meet his guest.

Alicia Dobbs stood in the foyer and looked up at the three-story mansion and her eyes were wide. This was not as she expected. Though what she expected was very little. All the information Martin's will had disclosed, was that if she survived him, this house was to be visited by her within two months of his death. It was a mystery from the moment the solicitor read it out, more of a mystery now.

All the arrangements had been made by an agent who had thoughtfully included every last detail of the journey. First class travel from London, limo service to the airport. Even the battered old taxi was waiting for her at the airport gates.

She removed her hat and looked around the huge open space; the paintings hanging on the walls and the décor. The huge chandelier and the many lazily moving fans. It was warm and humid outside, but inside it felt cool and comforting.

Her one reservation in making this journey was that the will stipulated she made it alone. Another part of Martin's weird arrangement.

She was startled by a man calling out from an upper balcony, 'Welcome, Mrs Dobbs.'

In puzzlement, she looked up and saw the smiling face of Martin Dobbs. Her recently deceased husband.

Her shock was at first too much to bear. She felt she couldn't cope with this sudden turn of events. Her mind whirled in a confused state that limited her ability to talk, or even at first to breathe properly. 'Martin?' was all she could manage for the first ten minutes.

Martin said little, letting her adjust to the realisation that he was alive and standing in front of her.

'Is this all true, Martin?' she waved a hand vaguely around the room.

'Yes, my darling it is. Who says crime doesn't pay?'

'But...you're not dead?'

'No, sweetheart. I faked my own death and now I can live in complete obscurity here in this paradise. And I want you to join me.'

As the sun went down Alicia was recovering her senses. She'd gone through the range of shock, bewilderment, anger, puzzlement and finally, fear.

'Are you totally mad? Do you really think you'll get away with this?'

'I already have. No one knows I'm here. Everyone thinks I'm dead. All I have to do now is convince you to stay with me here forever.'

'You might have to convince a few more people than that, Guv.' The voice came from the bushes and Dobbs was shocked to see Madson walk out into the light from the hanging lanterns.

Madson wore shorts, and a bright coloured short-sleeved shirt. His grey socks looked at odds with his trainers.

Dobbs was too shocked to speak.

'Evening, Mrs Dobbs. We meet again under slightly different circumstances. I could murder a glass of water or a cup of tea?'

The sun went down and the wildlife kept up their incessant circle of life noises. The servants were busy deep in the house, as the three foreigners sat on the balcony, watching the sky turn different colours.

‘It’s very nice here, Guv. You’ve done very well for yourself. I particularly love all the red rose bushes down there.’

‘How did you find me, Mickey?’ Dobbs’ voice still hoarse with disbelief and shock.

‘Just followed the money, Guv. Just like you said. See, I told you you’d taught me well.’

‘I also said you were smart, Mickey.’

Alicia was recovering from her second major shock of the day. ‘What’re you doing here, Madson? Have you come to arrest him?’

‘I’m here to get some answers. As far as London is concerned, Martin Dobbs is dead, and his case closed. I have, however a few loose ends to tie up over The Deck of Cards Robberies. And, as my worthy boss used to say, never leave any loose ends.’

Dobbs drank deeply from his glass and looked at his wife. ‘I’ve been planning for two years for this moment, Alicia. And the plod has to barge in and spoil it.’

Madson stood and waved at the garden areas, ‘Beautiful place. When did you buy it?’

Dobbs joined him at the balcony. ‘A year ago. Is that all you wanted to know?’

Madson laughed, ‘Of course not. I was just wondering how much you’d like your wife to know about your activities. Should we talk in private?’

Dobbs seemed to consider this before saying, ‘I think as this has everything to do with Alicia, she should know it all. Besides, I was going to tell her the full story, anyway. It should make more sense to her this way.’

‘It’s up to you, Guv.’

‘I think we can stop the Guv crap now, don’t you, Mickey?’

‘Okay, Marty.’

‘Let’s have dinner and pretend we’re civilised English folk.’

They served the meal for over three hours. The wine was free flowing, but Madson felt he was still on duty. Water would be enough for him until this whole business was over.

Dobbs was the first to be defeated by curiosity. ‘So, Mickey. How did you find out about the fake suicide?’

Madson placed his knife and fork on the plate and rested his head on his clenched fists. 'It was a sudden idea I had a few days after the event, that got me thinking. When I sailed your dinghy back, it felt the same as it was going out. Shouldn't it have felt, somehow lighter? I assumed perhaps the wind helped, but the actual handling felt...well, the same. It felt the same with one person on the boat as it did with two.'

Dobbs had a smile on his face as he said, 'Go on.'

'So I went back to the marina and had the Marina guys pull the boat out of the water and turn it over. There were some strange attachments on the bottom of the keel. Hooks and rings.'

'So your conclusion was....?'

'On our way out, some kind of breathing apparatus had been previously attached. When you went overboard, you simply came up underneath the boat and used the apparatus to keep breathing. Perhaps you even clipped yourself the bottom, so I towed you all the way back to the marina. There, I guess, you stayed underwater, moved along the shoreline a little and came out somewhere further down. Changed and drove away in a car previously parked.'

'Ah...but what about the weighted collar and the padlock?'

'Fake, like the rest of it. That would be dumped once you were away from the lake.'

'I said you were a smart lad, Mickey. I said you'd go far.'

'What I can't decide is, whether I should be flattered, or insulted that you chose ME to fake your suicide in front of.'

'Be flattered, Mickey. You made an excellent and convincing witness.'

'But it also made me realise that nothing you've ever said may be true. I concluded that you are a very small, very flawed individual and the only time you achieved anything was when you were committing a crime. If you'd put as much energy and creativity into solving the real crimes, as you did in planning your own – none of us would be in the positions we're in today.'

'That's very hurtful, Mickey.'

'Sorry, but it's the way I felt at the time. Not, what you wanted your wife to hear about you, but then, life's not perfect is it, Mrs Dobbs?'

'I'm more interested in how you found me here. I thought I'd covered everything?' Martin asked with a serious set to his face.

'Well, you made a long-time pretence of hating computers, so I had to assume you knew a lot more than you ever let on. Perhaps I will have a small glass of that

wine, thank you.’ Martin passed the bottle. ‘Once I realised you’d used the oldest trick in the book, fake suicide. I knew the only way to track you down was by...following the money. Thanks for the tip, Marty.’

‘You’re welcome.’

‘It took the techies a long time, but there were several accounts in the Cayman Islands that some of the original money found its way into. The Caymans have a reputation for discrete banking, being accommodating and tax-free. Many famous people have tax havens here. Now you’ve joined them. We backtracked the accounts, nearly causing a diplomatic incident, and noted a large amount of money was taken out through an estate agent, and it led us here. Mr Orson Jones, I think you call yourself now. Is that right?’

‘For the moment, it’ll do. Sounds sophisticated, don’t you think, dear?’

Alicia had stopped eating and was trying to follow the implications of what was being said. ‘You’re not Dobbs anymore?’

‘No, dear.’

‘Good. I always hated that name.’

Martin leant forward, his eyes bright. ‘Have you found The Dealer, yet, Mickey?’

‘Yes, we have. We got him at last.’

Martin looked puzzled. ‘Who was it? Anyone we know?’

Madson looked at the confused Alicia. ‘The Dealer, Mrs Dobbs is the person we believe masterminded all four of the robberies we nicknamed, The Deck of Cards.’

Martin reached out for Alicia’s hand to hold it. She was about to pull it away when Martin put his other hand on it to keep in touch. ‘We’re talking about the person who planned and executed the world’s biggest robbery ever. A real giant of a mastermind. And Mickey will tell us who it is.’

‘For a while, we thought you might be right, Marty. Dwyer fitted the bill nicely. But he always claimed a higher, mysterious figure. He never could identify him and no one else ever had contact. So that left us with this solitary unknown figure at the very top. You must know who he is, Marty, because between the two of you, the plan was for everyone else in the deck of cards to be arrested and put away. You would be the hero and The Dealer gets away a very rich man. At a rough estimate, we think nearly half a billion pounds richer.’

Alicia looked incredulous. ‘You were part of this, Martin?’

'I was. World record broken for the most money ever stolen. Some claim to fame, eh?'

Madson drank some wine. 'Very nice. Good choice. So when you disappeared, Marty, it left us looking only for The Dealer. A man so smart we didn't even know what he looked like, or even if he was a man or a woman. A man of superior intellect and cunning. Someone one step ahead of us all the way.'

'So who was it?' Alicia had to ask.

'It had to be your devoted husband, Martin.'

The evening produced louder insect and animal noises, as the sky lost all colour. The three remained on the balcony. 'Did you really think no one would ever suspect you were The Dealer?' asked Madson with an intense stare.

'I thought I had it covered. I hoped that people would be satisfied to see me only as an informer, not a master criminal. They'd look no further, especially as I was dead. When I said follow the money, I was convinced I'd hid it so well, no one could find a trail. You went the extra mile, Mickey. My ego has tripped me up, ruined a good plan. I should have got away with it all. I only wanted Alicia to know the full truth. I'm disappointed with myself.'

'What do you feel about your husband, now you know more about what he's been getting up to, Mrs Dobbs?'

'I can't say. I'm as shocked as I can be. I need time to take it on board.'

'I do have some more questions that need answering, Marty.'

'Go ahead. What have I to hide now?'

'There are several things Dwyer wanted answers to. Seeing how he's helped us so much, I feel honour bound to get the answers for him. Okay, why did you choose him to head up this project?'

'Well, ...he's basically an honest man who commands loyalty from others. I knew what he'd do in any given situation. I knew he'd play straight by me. Keep his word and see through any deal he agreed to.'

'So, he was too honest?'

'Something like that. I wanted someone who was predictable. Someone I could manipulate, expose and convict. I saw him as that man, someone to take the buck where it stopped. But he went off-piste on me.'

'He had a feeling he was being set up for something and broke the planned routine for that reason.'

'I suspect he held back some money, too.'

'I believe he thought it good insurance. But it never came to that. He thought The Dealer always knew what was happening, despite his attempts to side-track the situation.'

Martin was nodding and thinking back. 'Dwyer wears a sovereign ring, for some sentimental reason. One day, I had it stolen from him and a little man I know in the East End planted a microphone device in it. You can pick up a conversation from about a hundred yards with the right equipment. I had a series of people follow him around when they could. You can tell him, an old friend of his Ricki Smalls did most of that work. Tenner, they call him. Him and his son. That way I knew exactly what was happening at all times. Anything else?'

'Why didn't you warn Dwyer about La Picche?'

'I thought he'd be smart enough to avoid them. Be out and away before they could react. I was wrong. I knew he was against violence and he wouldn't have taken on the role as Ace if he knew there was a possibility of violent action. That project was never destined to go that far. I never intended so much money to be taken from the bank. I'd hoped to have solved that case before that point. But circumstance made me bring forward my boating plan. Similarly with the diamond haul, I never thought that would amount to so much. Is that all you wanted to know?'

'There's more, but it can wait. Oh, both of us wanted the answer to this one. Where did you get the first lot of seed money to set up the first Deck of Cards robbery?'

Martin laughed. 'From Dwyer himself. He did a big job in Scotland a while ago. I followed his progress because I was setting him up for his role as Ace. He stashed the money in a lock up and I helped myself to enough to get me started. Not all of it. I wanted him solvent, but I wanted him hungry.'

'I'll tell him.'

'I'd like to see his face.'

Madson yawned and stretched. Alicia stood up and walked around the balcony, staring into the dark vegetation where creatures lived and died in the warm night air.

There was a faint buzzing coming from inside the house. 'Someone at the door.' said Madson.

'At this time of night?' said Alicia moving to see who it was.

'He's a guest of mine, Marty. I think you'll want to see him.'

Madson introduced Morgan Todd to the Dobbs family, and they stood looking puzzled. Todd looked out-of-place in shorts and a tight T-shirt. His huge bulk straining against both.

'I guess Mickey's filled you in on the story so far. You've been a very naughty boy, Marty. Nice to meet you, ma'am.'

'Who are you?' Martin said.

'Okay. Not filled you in at all.'

'I didn't get around to it yet, Morgan.'

'You said you wanted a few hours, so here I am. Shall we get started?' Morgan beamed and looked directly at Martin. 'If I said to you - if you helped the police with their enquiries we'll help reduce your sentence. If you don't, we'll throw the book at you - would that sound familiar?'

Martin shook his head and looked at Madson, 'What is this?'

Todd continued, 'Your own people have enough on you to put you away for good, Marty. Even with good behaviour. I don't know about your good missus here, but I'm sure she won't wanna wait that long.'

'Who is this, Mickey?'

'Hear him out.'

'I've seen the reports and you've done an amazing job on those robberies, Marty. Amazing.'

'Thank you.'

'You should be proud of your husband, ma'am.'

'Proud he's such a well-known criminal? I don't think so!' Alicia was finding her balance again.

Madson saw the hurt look that crossed Martin's face.

Morgan continued undaunted. 'But we need to know how much information you've collected during that time?'

'I don't know what you're talking about!' Martin now completely baffled and all pretence of calmness evaporating.

'The Banco Particolare in particular. How much material have you gathered on the bank and its activities?'

Martin still looked confused, so Madson stepped in. 'We're trying to help you out here. Look, let me explain. Morgan's with the C.I.A. running a case on the

Banco Particolare. We need all the info we can, to get these bastards caught. If you're in a position to help us, we're in a position to help you. Do you still have records from your research? You must have been very thorough. Do you still have anything we can use?'

'Why should I help you?'

Morgan's joviality disappeared, 'Why should we help YOU? You have to realise how serious it is if the C.I.A. have paid for both of us to get out here to talk to you.'

'I still can't help you.'

Madson looked at Morgan who shrugged. Mickey said, 'The C.I.A. are concerned that the Banco Particolare has in internal force of Mafioso staff trying to run organised crime from London. Banco Particolare is funding Mafia families in London. The Bank is protective of them and the police will find it next to impossible to get inside. However, with me as a legal enforcer and the C.I.A. as the backer, we want to attack the Spades and stop a potential gang war starting in London.'

'How does that affect me?'

Madson said, 'The C.I.D. and C.I.A. cannot legally connect Remo, we believe he is the head man and his henchmen with the Banco Particolare. He could be just a hired hand by the mob, or part of the system of the Banco Particolare. I've been seconded to help, to put Remo and cronies behind bars. They will be a real threat on the streets otherwise. They could start a crime wave or a gang war. This is important, Marty.'

'Not to me.' Martin seemed resigned.

'I'm to be used as bait, Marty.'

'We need all the info we can to help keep him safe.' added Morgan.

Martin slumped into a chair and looked all in. Alicia moved to him and took one hand, his face brightening at this gesture.

Martin said, 'I've sat here for days and nights trying to decide what I did right and what I've done wrong. At one level, what I did was amazing, a quality act. At the other end, it was a criminal exercise and not worthy of praise. What did I actually do wrong? Who have I wronged? What truly innocent person has suffered by my actions?'

Morgan shrugged, 'None as far as we can see.'

'If I'm to go to gaol for the full count, what incentive do I have to help you?'

'None.' Morgan shrugged.

‘Do I want a chance of redemption?’ He looked at Alicia, still holding his hand. ‘I couldn’t stand the thought that you wouldn’t be there when I came out.’

She cried and held him close. He was crying now, aware that they’d not held each other for over four years. The series of events he’d set in motion was designed to bring them together, and it seemed to have partly worked.

‘Have you kept those details, Marty?’ Alicia asked quietly. Martin nodded. ‘Are they here?’ He nodded again. ‘Then what can it harm giving them to these people?’

‘Would I be a better man in your eyes if I took this offer?’

‘Yes.’

‘Would you stand by me and stay with me while I do this?’

‘Yes.’

Martin appeared to pull himself together and stood up. ‘I’ve a complete dossier on all the people involved in The Deck of Cards Robberies. This was as a contingency in case of any rebellion, or any thought of blackmail, or backing out. You know these criminal types.’

‘That sounds very useful.’ said Morgan with a wide smile.

‘I guess I shouldn’t have kept it all, but I have. It’s on six DVDs?’ Alicia stood beside him and slipped her hand into his. ‘There will be one condition?’ Martin said.

‘And that is?’ asked Morgan.

‘I’m in it too, I’m part of the team. I know more about these people than you do.’ Martin appeared in control of himself again.

‘I don’t think we can....’ Morgan shrugged.

‘You need me outside, because I’ve a man inside the bank. He’s fed me all the information needed. If you want to nail these people you’ll need him, and he won’t do anything without me.’

Madson and Morgan looked at each other. Morgan shrugged, ‘I don’t know about this. He’s your prisoner, Michael. Your “Fair Cop”.’

Alicia turned her face to Martin and kissed him on the cheek.

‘I want to be with my wife for as long as I can. Make me part of the team and I’ll do everything to catch these people. Leave me out and I might as well be dead. It’s a deal breaker.’

'I'd better phone home.' Madson said pulling out his mobile and moving into another room.

'Do you have any coffee here?' asked Morgan.

'I'll get you some.' said Alicia moving towards where she thought the kitchen might be.

They were all seated and finishing their drinks in silence when Madson returned. Martin and Alicia looked apprehensively towards him.

Madson grinned. 'They have a suggestion. You'll be surprised what it is.'

END

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