

Vengeance

A Copper's Revenge

by Donald Phillips,

**Published: 2005
Reprinted: 2011**



Table of Contents

Chapter 1 ... thru ... Chapter 29



As a law officer you watch it all from a distance. But what happens when it gets personal? What happens when its your family dying? John MacAllister had been a CID inspector for nearly twenty years and thought he had seen it all. He had too, but not through the eyes of a victim. This time it was personal with his own family involved. He discovered he too had a dark side. Set In Bristol, England.

“It is often said that revenge is a dish best eaten cold, but who wants to wait that long.”

Chapter 1

The girl stepped down from the bus into the Bristol City Centre and strode off down the street with the hip swinging confidence only the young can have in themselves and their youth. She stopped at the traffic lights and waited for the green light to show in her favour before crossing the road to the large central roundabout, smiling boldly at the drivers of the waiting cars as she went. She was dressed to attract attention and was receiving it from the groups of youths hanging around in the City Centre where they waited for the Mecca dance hall to open for the Friday night dancing. They watched her walk by with hot adolescent eyes, wiping suddenly damp palms on the legs of their trousers and unnecessarily nudging each other to make sure their companions had seen her. They'd seen her.

Her long dark hair had been curled into individual strands in the modern, deliberately casual look and hung freely almost to her waist. She wore a sheer, long sleeved black silk blouse, buttoned to the throat and edged with lace at neck and cuffs, with a black lace brassiere clearly visible beneath. Neither were doing anything much to hide the fullness of the firm young breasts or the thrust of her nipples, which could be clearly seen as darker rings through the layers of fine material. Over the blouse she wore a tiny bolero style jacket of a shiny black, plastic material while a matching skirt hugged the firm young backside like another skin before stopping some four inches below the crotch of her black lace panties. Sheer black tights and shiny black high heeled; knee high boots completed the ensemble. She wore little make up except for a dark purple lip-gloss and a little dark purple eye shadow.

She stood about five feet four inches and you would have put her age at between eighteen and twenty, although her large brown eyes were as old and knowing as life itself. Her only jewellery was a small gold watch and the two tiny

gold stars in her pierced ears. She carried a small clutch handbag in the same material as her jacket and skirt. At the other side of the giant roundabout she once more waited for the lights to change before again crossing the road at the pedestrian crossing, where more middle aged men sat in their cars waiting for the lights to change and dreamed their carnal dreams as she passed in front of them.

Satisfied with impact she had made in the street she turned into the City Gent public house and entered the saloon bar, the public bar usually being full of noisy teenagers on Friday nights and that was not what she was after. She bought and paid for a glass of cold white wine and finding a free table in a corner sat down so that she could see the entire room and slowly sipped at it. In the half an hour she was there she was three times seen to shake her head to the different well dressed young men who approached her and offered to buy her a drink before returning sheepishly to their business companions to talk about the problem of women who were only prick teasers. Finally she glanced at her watch and picking up her handbag, left the pub and walked the two hundred meters along the street to the Mecca dance hall.

Opening her bag at the ticket desk she handed over the ten pounds entrance fee and went inside. Here she went straight to the bar, pausing on the way only to smile for a photographer. He was photographing all the prettier girls in order to display their photos in the big glass frames on the outside the building the following week. This was a useful ploy used by the management that kept the male customers interested in attending every dance. Once at the bar she bought herself another glass of white wine before finding herself a table to the left of the dance floor where she could see, and be seen, from the stage. In less than twenty minutes three other girls, all perfect strangers, had asked if they could join her, there being more safety in numbers. To each she had smiled and nodded her agreement without getting into any prolonged conversation.

For an hour and a half she sat and watched the DJ perform, sometimes swaying in her seat to the music when the fancy took her, but mostly just waiting. She refused all offers to dance from the various interested youths and young men who approached her until they finally got the message and left her alone, puzzled that she should have taken such trouble with her appearance if she was not available. She left the table only twice to visit the ladies powder room. The first time to relieve herself of the white wine and the second time, after the DJ had announced that the band would be live on-stage in twenty minutes time, to check her clothes and her make up. Satisfied with her appearance she returned to her seat and waited. Eventually, after a build up from the DJ that seemed to go on for another twenty minutes the curtains behind him opened and with a blast of sound that would have caused an older age group concussion, the band were on-stage.

Metal Heaven were fairly lightweight as amateur heavy metal groups went in that buried among the screaming guitars and crashing drums there was some iota of musical talent. The group was made up of three engineering students from the Polytechnic and a car body repair and customising specialist from a small garage in West Indian enclave of St Paul's. Racially they were a mixture of most of the different ethnic groups to be found in the city and musically they were up and coming, as the full hall testified.

Rasta Fairbrother was a pure blooded West Indian Negro. He was the ebony black usually found only in the hottest parts of Africa and was fond of telling the others in the band that he was probably the only member who wasn't a mongrel. At five feet ten inches he was not a tall man, but was built like a heavy weight boxer with massive shoulders and thighs separated by a narrow waist. He had large, deep-set brown eyes and heavy lips separated by the wide flaring nostrils of his nose. His hair was worn down to the shoulders in a multitude of thin plaits ending in small ties of brightly coloured rags. If you had dressed him in a loincloth and put a spear in his hand, most people would have said that the African plains were his natural environments, despite the fact that his family had been snatched away from them over two hundred years earlier. A natural drummer and full of the rhythms of old Africa, he was a major part of the bands sound and its rapid success. He was also a genius with sheet metal and was responsible for many of the weird and wonderful customised cars being driven around the city by his fellow West Indians. Rasta was twenty-two years old and enjoying life. The band and his cars were his whole world. Sure he liked girls and liked screwing them even more, but he was intent on remaining footloose and fancy-free. No semi detached and two and a half kids for Rasta. No way man, he was going to make it in the music business. He certainly had the talent

Ali Khan was an Anglo Indian. His father had been forced to leave his native Bradford and set up a shop in Bristol after committing the sin of marrying a girl who was white and not of the Hindu religion. Of an equal height to Rasta he was built like a whip and moved with a grace that was foreign to most men. He had a natural talent for playing keyboards and the kind of coffee coloured good looks and dark eyes that made many girls almost wet their knickers when he decided to notice them. However, he was still two years from obtaining his engineering degree and any love in his life at this time would not be serious. He felt the same way about his music. It was to be enjoyed, but it was not his chosen career. He dreamed of building massive bridges and dams and when not practising his keyboards was usually to be found with his face in a textbook. Ali was twenty years old.

Sean Combes was Celtic mixture of Scots and Irish from Northern Ireland and looked it. There was much of the wild colonial boy about Sean and although he was doing well in his civil engineering course he would have chucked it all in tomorrow for success and fame in the music business. Sean was highly sexed and apparently with his moral conscience surgically removed. Sean had been known to almost miss the second half of a gig when he had managed to get some willing young groupie to climb into the back of their converted bus with him for a leg over. Once on stage however, he was a better than average bass player and song writer and was an essential part of the bands sound and image, favouring the Keith Richard look and making sure that his clothes and hair always looked scruffy and unwashed. He was the tallest member at just six feet, thin to the point of painfulness and with cold grey eyes and dark brown hair. He spoke with a broad Ulster accent and you would not have been pleased if your daughter had brought him home for there was definitely something of the night about Sean. He also was twenty years old.

Jason Goodwell was the lead guitar/vocalist. Also five feet ten he was a blue eyed, blonde haired Adonis. He had only to smile at the audience when the curtains went up to reduce the younger female element to trembling, screaming hysteria. The fact that he actually had a voice and could hold a tune was an added advantage. Jason worked out for at least thirty minutes every day in a local gym and as a result had the build of a lightweight boxer. He was also the best engineering student in his year and was not as eager as Sean and Rasta for recording success. He realising that it was a long and heartbreaking road to the top of the music business and because of the lifestyle and temptations on the way, many in the business many had died before and after making it. However, the band did give him great social standing at the Polytechnic and made sure he was never short of female company. Jason was born of an English father and a Swedish mother, from whom he had inherited his looks and his wavy blonde, shoulder length hair. Tonight, like the rest of the band, he was dressed in black leather trousers while over his chest he wore a small leather waistcoat, opened to allow the audience to gaze at the well-developed muscles. The Fender Stratocaster guitar he played was worn low across the hips like a giant phallus. They went through their well-rehearsed opening number that gave each member of the band a chance to solo out above the others and show the audience what they could do. Written by Sean Combes it would never have made the charts, but as an icebreaker and mood setter it was a winner. It lasted fifteen frenetic minutes.

The girl knew the band's repertoire well and waited until the first crashing number was over before she stood up and went to stand in front of the stage. She did not stand right against the footlights with the teenies, but some eight feet behind them, although still in the overspill from the stage lights. When the next number began, a slow and heavy rock ballad, as she knew it would be, she swayed gently to the music and waited. First to notice her were the predatory eyes of Sean Combes. He leered at her and pulled the bottom of his bass guitar into his crotch, making his fingers stroke up and down it like a giant phallus as he watched her. The girl stared him in the eye and then ignored him. Sean sidled backwards until he could catch the eye of Rasta and nodded in the girl's direction. Rasta, looking at the straining breasts of the girl and the long slim legs, grinned and nodded back to Sean. At the end of the number he caught her eye and gripping his right bicep with his left hand, clenched his right fist at her in an unmistakable gesture. The girl ignored him also.

Jason Goodwell had just started announcing the next number and was lifting the mike from its bracket when he first saw the girl. He smiled back at her and would have looked away except for what she did. First she beckoned with her right index finger to hold his attention. When she had it she dropped her left hand to her skirt and lifting the hem high enough to expose the black lace panties, she then pushed her crotch towards him and gently rubbed herself between the legs with the middle finger of her right hand, all the while slowly running her tongue back and forth between the purple lips, her eyes never leaving his face.

He was used to getting the come on from the teenies, but this was different. It had him stunned and transfixed. He lost the announcement half way through as his head filled with visions that washed everything else away. At the back, sat on his drums, Rasta watched it all and felt his own penis harden in sympathy. The

girl then smiled and nodded at Jason and dropping the skirt back over the panties walked slowly back to her seat at the table, her hips moving in a way that has fired men's lust for thousands of years. On the way to her table she glanced just once back over her shoulder to make sure he was still watching her.

The rest of the dancers in the crowded room had turned to the stage to see what the interruption was about and the growing silence jerked Jason out of his shock and back into the world. He shook his head and repeated the announcement. The girl remained at her table for the rest of the band's two-hour stint, never moving from her chair. Whenever Jason looked at her, which was frequently, she smiled a small secret smile and running her tongue backwards and forwards across her lips, slowly nodded her head. Then just before the last number he glanced once more across at her table and to his bitter disappointment, she was gone.

When the curtain had finally come down the band only packed up their own individual instruments, leaving the rest of the gear and amplifiers to Colin the Roady who carried them out to the old converted single-decker bus that was their transport. It was painted with psychedelic angels in armour flying all over it with the words Metal Heaven in Gothic script interwoven between them. A project carried out with enthusiasm by the Polytechnic Art Department. They stowed their instruments in the racks and then collapsed onto the two lower bunks of the four that had been installed in the rear to allow them to catch up on sleep when returning from distant gigs, while Colin the Roady drove. Jason opened a cooler box and handed out cold beers. He took a long pull from his tin and gave a deep sigh of satisfaction.

"Not a bad gig that, I thought we went over very well. If that guy from Reliable Records chose tonight to come and watch us I don't think we could have given him a better performance."

Reliable Records were one of the better independent labels that had been showing an interest in them. The others just looked at him and said nothing, waiting to wind him up as they had agreed between themselves earlier on while packing away their instruments. Jason tried again.

"What do you think Rasta?"

Rasta gave him a look of disgust.

"No chance, man. I mean you blew most of the announcements. I mean man, you would get half way through and then you would just stop dead. Most unprofessional, Jason, extremely unprofessional."

He pronounced the last word syllable by syllable for emphasis while the corners of his mouth turned down in what looked like disgust, the others nodding their agreement.

"Perhaps one of us should do them from now on if you're having so much trouble remembering them, Jason?"

This innocently from Ali and Jason realised suddenly realised what was happening.

"Aw come on Guys. I wasn't that bad and you saw what she did to me. I bet none of you could have kept going with that happening."

The others were all for carrying on with the wind up, but Rasta's face took on a dreamy expression and he blew it.

“That was the sexiest thing I have ever seen in my life. Man, if she had done that to me I would have jumped down and shagged her right there on the dance floor. Jesus, every time I looked at her after that I could still see her standing there rubbing her fanny and I started to get a hard on again. Fucking dangerous for a drummer, man, with those sticks thrashing about.”

Sean sat back with a leer on his face.

“If I ever get the chance to bump into her at a party or somewhere where I can get her alone, I am going to screw the arse off her.”

Ali smiled. He spoke quietly.

“You're all forgetting one thing, you guys. Its Jason she was after.”

“That's because she has never had the pleasure of receiving the cock of a man with pure blood.”

Rasta was back on his superiority kick. They broke down into laughter at this and Jason passed around more beers while they waited for Colin to finish loading the van and the conversation turned to some of the girls they had picked up in the past. Sean, with his back to the door, was remembering one that had managed to stow away in the bus during a gig in Brighton. He had been lucky enough to be the one to go out to the van to get the cooler box of beer for the interval and he had discovered her. When the others had finally tired of waiting for him and had themselves arrived at the bus, he had already had her three times and was knackered, but the girl had been quite willing to take the rest of them on. Sean shook his head at the memory.

“Christ, when you guys switched the lights on and I saw how old she was I nearly died. If she was a day over thirteen I'll eat my guitar strap. Jail bait, pure Jail bait.”

He broke off as he realised the others were no longer listening to him. They were staring over his head with their mouths open. He turned his head and there standing in the doorway was the girl.

When she was sure they had all noticed her she walked straight past them and stopped in front of Jason, who was the furthest from the door. She reached down and taking his hands pulled him gently up onto his feet. Then putting a hand on each side of his face she pulled his head down to hers and opening her mouth, kissed him hard. For a moment he was too shocked to respond, but then his instincts took over and his hands clutched at the smooth round globes of her backside under its tight plastic covering. He smelt the subtle musk of her perfume and body odour, mingled with the taste of her lip gloss and he felt himself starting to grow and harden as the incredible eroticism of what was happening came home to him. The girl pulled her head away and smiled at him. She had even white teeth, long dark eyelashes and her breath smelt sweet as honey. She lowered her hand to his groin and felt him while she looked up into his eyes. She said just two words.

“Very good.”

Stepping back a pace she shrugged her arms out of the shiny black jacket and placed it on the top bunk. Next she unzipped the skirt right down one side and peeling it off like a sweet wrapper, placed that with the jacket, at the same time stepping out of her shoes which joined the growing pile of clothes. There was complete silence in the bus except for the sound of hoarse breathing. She put her

arms up to his face and again pulled his head down to her lips. This time driving her tongue deep into his mouth and grinding her soft belly against him before releasing him once more, her nipples now hard and thrusting against the material of her brassiere and blouse. She once more dropped her hand to his groin and felt his by now, full-blown erection. The voice was soft and husky.

“Oh that is very good.”

She stepped back again and slipped her tights slowly down her legs, bending almost to the floor as she released each foot in turn. The perfect orbs of her behind and the outline of the lips of her womanhood through the lace panties were only inches from Rasta's face and he groaned softly as he struggled to get his swollen penis comfortable in the tight leather trousers. The girl ignored him. She straightened again and undid the buttons on the sheer black blouse before slipping it from her shoulders and placing it with her other clothes. No one moved or spoke, frightened of breaking the spell. She turned her back to Jason and reaching back and pulling her long dark hair forward over one shoulder, bent her head forward and offered the clip of the black net brassiere for Jason's attention. Like a man in a trance he unclipped it and the other three were given a close up as the beautiful full breasts sprang free, the nipples swollen and erect. Rasta by now had undone his trousers to give merciful release to his throbbing manhood and was gently squeezing it while talking softly to himself under his breath.

The girl turned back to face Jason and her hands found the buttons on his leather trousers. She undid them slowly and then pulled the trousers down from his buttocks to his thighs to reveal the bikini slip he wore underneath. This too she eased down to his thighs, allowing his swollen penis to spring free. The sounds of breathing were louder now and Jason was reduced to leaning back against the top bunk for support, his eyes were squeezed tightly closed. The girl knelt in front of him and taking him in both hands, stroked him gently. She smiled up at him and then opening her purple lips, lowered her head and swallowed him as deeply as her throat would allow. He convulsed like a man in electric shock and cried out as if in pain, his hands going instinctively to the back of her head. She drew back again until only the tip of his penis was still between her lips and then swallowed him deeply once more, before finally releasing him.

Reaching up to his hands she pulled him down so that he was sat on the lower bunk in front of her, his hands out behind him for support, while she proceeded to remove his trousers and bikini slip the rest of the way down over his feet. When he was completely naked she stood quickly and lowered her black lace panties to the floor before stepping out of them. Then, kneeling on the bunk straddling him, she took his throbbing penis in her fingers and guided its head between the moist lips. When it was centred to her liking and Jason was straining upwards in frenzy, she suddenly lowered herself fully with a cry of triumph.

It was over very quickly. Three frenzied thrusts and his orgasm spurted from him and left him moaning his saviour's name, as if he himself was experiencing the agony of the cross. The girl stayed down hard on him until she was sure he had finished and then keeping him inside her, leaned forward to kiss him gently on the lips. Rasta's voice, very soft and low, broke the silence.

“Is that it lady, or are you going to be doing that for all of us?”

The girl answered without taking her eyes from Jason's face. It was only the third time she had spoken and her voice was still even and low.

"I don't put it out for ugly gorilla's. Go and find one of your gorilla women."

The sudden silence seemed to stretch for minutes until it was broken by Jason's voice, rough edged with anger.

"Don't you dare talk to him like that, he's a person like you and me and is also my friend, so you be polite to him you bitch."

The girl leaned forward and kissed him again.

"Don't be silly, he's nothing like you. You're beautiful. That's why I wanted you for my collection."

She turned and gave Rasta a look of loathing. "He is just a big ape. I can smell the difference from here." She spat the word at him. "Animal."

The reference about adding him to her collection along with the spite in her voice snapped something inside of Jason. He lifted her from his now flaccid penis and grabbing her by the hair, rammed her face down to the blanket so that her legs shot backwards and she was kneeling over the edge of the bunk across his knees. He looked up and catching Rasta's look he nodded. The big West Indian grinned and dived to his knees behind her. Grabbing her under the back of her thighs he lifted her easily and pulling her legs apart slid his long hard penis into her with a savage grunt before she could twist or struggle. The girl then wriggled and fought furiously, but Jason kept hold of her hair, forcing her face into the blankets while Sean rushed in to pin her hands. Rasta's face was a picture of savage glee, as holding her off the floor as easily as if she had been a baby he proceeded to take her with long driving strokes until he too burst within her, before dropping her to the floor and collapsing over her bent back.

After that Rasta held her hair while the other two took their turns. By then she had ceased to struggle and knelt there quietly sobbing while they violated her. Rasta watched them both with a joyful satisfaction on his face, although Jason was beginning to worry about it all now that the first flush of savage anger had worn off. He found the girls bag while Ali was taking his turn and placing five, ten pound notes inside it, he put it quietly back with her clothes. He had dressed by the time they had finished with her and told the others to go away while he tried to help the still sobbing girl to dress. She pushed his hands away and lifting her now blotchy and tear-stained face up she hissed at him. The voice no longer sweet and low, it was hard and bitter.

"Don't touch me, you bastard. I thought you were something special. I gave myself to you and you let that, that gorilla, rape me." She glared at Ali. "You let two of them rape me, because the other ones half gorilla." She struggled into her skirt. "I'm going to get you bastards, all of you. They will throw away the fucking key when I have finished. I am a white girl and you let those two rape me."

She whirled as Jason put a hand out to calm her.

"Get your hands off me, you bastard. Just don't you touch me. I'm going to report this to the police as rape, because that is what it was." Her look was all animal fury. "All of you."

She turned to go, but he put his hand across the door to prevent it.

"Don't be so stupid. Lots of people saw what you did in the dance hall tonight when you gave me the come on. Then you followed us out to the coach and

screwed me in front of the others. I was just another scalp for your collection. No one will believe you are anything other than you are just another groupie trying it on.”

She slammed his arm away from the door and jerked the middle finger of her left hand up in front of his face.

“Get stuffed.”

She ran out into the night. Jason watched her go and then went to find the others. He didn't think she would actually go to the police once her anger had worn off and she had thought about it, but it might be as well if they all agreed on the same story. At that time he had no idea of the horrors their actions of that night were to bring to themselves and others.

Chapter 2

During the Friday night into Saturday morning shift the Bricewell police station in Bristol city centre was always more active than at any other time of the week, except for those Saturday afternoons during the football season when Bristol City were playing Cardiff and the whole place became a war zone. Normally by this time, it was just 2am, most of what was going to happen out on the streets had happened, or was still happening and the results were being processed here. Today was no exception and the front lobby had an atmosphere of smoke, vomit and stale alcohol. Strangers noticed it although the staff had lived with it so long it barely registered with them.

The girl walked in through the double front doors and went to stand by the counter. The sergeant on desk duty, a grey haired man in his fifties, had seen it all before. He was trying to calm another group of six teenage girls who's boyfriend and husbands had just been taken down to the holding cells after being arrested for breaking a shop window during a drunken fight in Baldwin Street. It was obvious that the girls were also all the worse for drink and this was confirmed when one of them suddenly turned and was sick all down the wall before falling from the bench she was sitting on and passing out on the floor. The sergeant's patience broke.

“That does it. Jacobs.”

His last word shouted towards the door behind him from which a young constable appeared as if on elastic.

“Yes, Sarge?”

“Get this lot out of here and if they won't leave quietly arrest them as well, for causing an obstruction in a police station.”

The constable looked doubtfully at the six girls, but the sergeant seemed really pissed off so he gave it a try. He did a good imitation of a novice farmer trying to herd a flock of chickens by waving his arms at them.

“Come on ladies. You heard the sergeant. You can come back and collect the lads in the morning when they will be up for bail.”

The girls reluctantly started to leave, but the fact that one of their number now needed to be carried hampered them quite a bit, meaning that they had no arms left free to attack the law. The constable gently shovelled them through the door, wincing at the language coming from the young mouths before returning to stare in dismay at the mess down the wall and on the floor. Then he sighed deeply and went to get the mop and bucket. The sergeant turned back to the girl. He liked what he saw and smiled for the first time in an hour.

“Yes, Miss. What can we do for you?”

The girl did not smile back, but picked her way carefully towards the counter taking great care to avoid the mess on the floor. She looked him in the eye and his smile faltered.

“I want to report a rape.”

The sergeant blinked and did a double take.

“Pardon? Did you say rape, Miss?”

He took off his glasses and polished them on a large blue handkerchief.

“Who has been raped then?”

The girl looked at him with scorn.

“I have, you berk. You don't see anyone else with me, do you?”

She waved a hand around the reception area. The sergeant put his spectacles back on and studied her. Not a hair out of place as far as he could see and she didn't look to be in any particular distress. He gave her his patient smile that he reserved for drunks who reported seeing aliens.

“I see. And when was this, if I may ask?”

The girl was getting angry. She turned away as if counting to ten beneath her breath and then turned back to him.

“I think you bloody well should ask, don't you? Its what you're paid to do when someone reports a crime isn't it?”

The sergeant knew trouble when he saw it and decided his best hope lay in strict formality. He pulled the incident book towards him and took a biro from his shirt pocket.

“If we could just have a few details then, Miss.”

She snorted.

“I want to talk to a woman. I am not standing here in the middle of the bloody reception area talking to you about it so you can get your kicks. Sodding pervert.”

She turned away and sitting down on one of the chairs against the sidewall studiously ignored him. For a few seconds the sergeant thought about ignoring her in return, but then he sighed and picked up the phone. He turned away and spoke quietly into it.

“Jackie? Good, I have a young lady down here who claims she was raped, but will only talk to a WPC about it. No, that is all I have got. No other details. Right, two minutes. Thanks Jackie.” He turned to face the girl. “Detective Ward will be down to see you directly. That's Woman Detective Jackie Ward”

The girl just curled her lip at him and he went back to his paperwork. Two minutes later the door behind the sergeant opened and a female plain-clothes officer in her late twenties came through it. The sergeant nodded his head in the girl's direction and she lifted the flap in the counter and came through into the reception area. Five feet eight inches tall and with shoulder length blonde hair, she

was dressed in denims and a loose sweater and did not look like a typical WPC. She approached the girl.

“Hello love, I'm WDC Jackie Ward. The sergeant tells me you have had a nasty experience. Would you like to come up stairs and tell me about it.”

The girl looked at her for several seconds taking in her appearance before she nodded and rose. She followed the WPC and the two of them went back through the counter flap and disappeared through the door at the rear. The sergeant watched them go and then went back to his paperwork, glad of the lull in the evening's proceedings. He was just thinking rosy thoughts about a nice big mug of tea when the double doors into the station reception area crashed open. The man who stood there swaying gently was dressed in full highland regalia except for one thing. His kilt was missing and the only thing left covering his dignity was a large, furry sporran. He swayed about blinking short-sightedly in the time-honoured manner of drunks the world over until his eyes found and focused on the sergeant. When he spoke it was with a strong Birmingham accent.

“I want to report a bloody mugging.”

The sergeant gave a small sigh and glanced up at the clock. It was only half past one. He still had nearly five hours to go.

Jackie Ward was twenty-nine and had been in the police service for eight years. She had left school at sixteen and had tried various jobs in different offices, her seven GCE “O” levels giving her more than the average choice, before she had realised that it was not the life for her. Nine to five in an office for the rest of her life would be living death. This was an important decision for her as marriage did not figure very strongly on her list of important things to do in her life, having watched both her parents divorce, remarry and divorce again. Added to this she had realised that most young men of her age were only interested in what she concealed under her underwear and that did not seem like a good basis for a lasting relationship. Not that she was against sex. She just did not prescribe to the theory that you should spend the rest of your life with whoever gets first bite at your cherry or because they were a good lay.

After some time of looking around she had decided that she might be more suited to the army. A natural blonde of taller than average height she looked good in a uniform with her narrow waist, big hips and better than average breasts. She also liked the mixture of discipline and responsibility that the army appeared to be offering, so at the age of eighteen she signed on for three years. It took her three months to realise that she had made a mistake. Firstly she had not realised how many butch women there were in the world until her first night in a barracks. It was not that these girls were all lesbians, far from it, but they talked and acted more like the boys from the local rugby club than most of the girls she knew and she could not understand this need many of them had to appear tough and hard and make every third word a curse. She spent three quite miserable years during which she made the best of it and kept her head down as much as possible and then escaped as soon as her time was up and she could go. All in all it hadn't been too bad and she had learned a lot, but it was not where she intended to spend the rest of her life. She then spent three months in a tiny bed-sit working out what she would do next, living on a diet of tea and pasta to make her savings last. During this time she had no one to turn to and nowhere to go for advice, her

father having moved to Australia while she was in the army and her mother being tied up with the arrangements for her third marriage. What decided her on the police force as a career was getting involved in an armed robbery.

She was in the local building society drawing out the last of her savings when two youths crashed through the door waving handguns. Lying on the floor with her face on the dirty carpet of the building society office while the two youths with sawn off shotguns took the money that had been going to buy her food for the weekend, she felt an raging anger at those who prey on the innocent and helpless and vowed that she would do something about it. Later on at the police station she had asked the lady detective who had taken her statement how one went about joining the police and what they were looking for in recruits. The girls answers didn't put her off the idea and a week later, after she'd had the pleasure of picking out in an identity parade both of the youths who had pointed guns at her, she asked the police sergeant in charge how did she apply to join. The sergeant, delighted with her cool performance at the identity parade and her ignoring of the shouted threats against her that the identified youths had made, gave her all the assistance he could. She was accepted and after her basic training assigned to Bristol. After spending four years in uniform she had finally made the transfer to CID and was now in her element.

Jackie heard the girl's story through in silence while she sat and watched her, sitting at the table in the interview room, telling her about how she had come to be in the group's bus. She did this truthfully and with defiance in her eyes and Jackie felt pity for her. Alison Jensen, that was the girl's name, was an army brat and it showed. It showed in her shout for attention to every man that crossed her path and to Jackie it showed in her need to collect sexual scalps from rock bands. Her own army experience had shown her what happened when an army father was always abroad and the army wife started looking for someone else to take his place. The kids suffered. From what she had said about him this girl's father seemed like a normal enough bloke, but the resentment his daughter felt at his continual absence had come out loud and clear once Jackie had managed to break through the hard shell of worldly bitterness the girl affected. For her mother however, she showed nothing, but contempt using descriptions of her that in her own younger days would have shocked Jackie. Slag and the barracks bike having been two of the more repeatable ones. The real problem though was Alison Jensen's age and Jackie Ward sighed inwardly at the can of worms that this case would open. She tried to ring the girl's mother once more, but as before the phone just rang and rang. That was it then. It looked as if she would have to push this one higher up. She sighed and reluctantly dialled the Social Services emergency number.

Chapter 3

At this hour of the morning the bonded warehouse was in complete darkness and the dozen or so CID and uniformed policemen scattered about it in its various

dark corners were beginning to suffer the stiffness that affects even able bodied men when forced to keep relatively still for several hours. In the warehouse offices in one corner of the warehouse, raised up on stilts made of iron girders and accessed by a metal stairway and gantry, Detective Inspector John MacAllister sat behind what was normally the warehouse manager's desk, opposite the company's night security man. He switched on a small pencil torch and checked the time on his wristwatch. Three fifteen. They had been here since ten o'clock following a tip off from one of DC Marcus Lomax's snouts, that there was to be a raid on this particular bonded store this very evening and the that night security man was in on it.

Lomax was very newly transferred to MacAllister's unit from darkest rural Wales and MacAllister had been sceptical about the value of his information. In his opinion Lomax seemed to be bit of an of an arse licker who in order to ingratiate himself with those in authority sometimes leapt in before he had checked out his facts. This was the third time he had given them a big one, but the other two had been duds and it looked as if one was going the same way. What had decided him to act on the information was that when he had checked with the warehouse owners they had informed him that this was the first time in months that this particular store had contained anything of value. Tonight it contained around half a million pounds worth of Cuban cigars that were sitting waiting for someone to pay the duty on them before being released. Lomax's snout had been positive that the raid would take place at one o'clock. Three o'clock had now come and gone and MacAllister had begun to get the sneaking feeling that they were on a bummer and his arse was aching from sitting on the hard office chair. MacAllister switched off the torch again and settled back to work out the many and several ways he was going to let Mr Marcus Lomax know of his displeasure at DCs that didn't check their facts out, if this turned out to be another crock of shit. At forty-two years of age he was getting too old to be spending half the night on wild goose chases.

Then he stared at the dim outline of the security man and wondered why he still seemed so nervous if nothing was going to happen. From the tiny amount of light reflected up from the small torch when he had checked the time he had seen the sweat on the man's brow. August or not it wasn't that warm in this big airy building. He lifted the two-way radio from the desk and spoke gently into it, his soft, Scottish accent just noticeable.

"Marcus."

"Yes Guv."

"Get your arse up here, but do it quietly."

Two minutes later the tall dark Welshman arrived using his own small pencil torch to see where he was going in the pitch black of the bonded store. He took the only spare chair opposite the desk and switched the torch off.

"What's up?"

MacAllister let the silence build for a bit before he answered. Lomax must be only too aware of what was up and had probably been waiting for MacAllister to call him up for some time now. When he thought he had stretched the silence to its limit he answered, keeping his voice deliberately neutral.

"Marcus, are you sure we have the right night?"

There was reproach in the other's voice as he answered.

“Of course I am, Guv. And everything fits in with what the guy told me. This is the only time this month there will be anything of any value in this store and its only here until tomorrow afternoon. It has to be tonight.”

Even in the darkness Marcus Lomax felt he could see the cynical expression on the others face. It was an expression he was beginning to get used to. MacAllister was just about to answer him when the sound of a large and powerful diesel engine came from outside. It got steadily louder until it stopped outside the door on a throbbing tick over. MacAllister grabbed his radio, his intended bollocking for Marcus Lomax stopped in its tracks. This time the voice was full of urgency and expectation as he hit the send button.

“Everyone ready and remember, they have to get inside the building before we move. Await my signal and anyone who does otherwise will feel the weight of my boot up his backside when this is over. Radio silence now until they are in and then DS Sayers will switch all the lights on. That is your signal to go and we grab them.”

He released the button and indicated the security man.

“Marcus, handcuff this piece of dirt to the desk and then let's get into position.” He spoke to the watchman. “One sound out of you and you will regret it for the rest of your life.”

They were hardly out of their seats when the large doors at the front of the warehouse flew inwards as the giant articulated trailer reversed in, smashing them from their fastenings. It caught the waiting policemen completely by surprise and by the time they had frantically fled to any safe place they could find, the vehicle was completely inside the building. Five men had already jumped down from the back of the trailer just as DC Clive Sayers recovered from the shock and slammed down all the light switches.

The scene was like something from a waxworks. Laying around in frozen attitudes on the floor where they had dived for cover were ten or more policemen, half in uniform. At the back of the trailer were another five men dressed in jeans and sweat shirts, also frozen in shock when the lights had gone on and revealed that a warehouse that should have contained only Cuban cigars, was full of the filth. One of the five was carrying a sawn off, pump action shotgun and he was the first to act. He lifted it and fired one shot in the air for effect, shattering some of the neon tubes in the ceiling lights and then pumping another shell into the chamber. He took two steps towards the nearest uniformed copper, who was still on his hands and knees from where he had dived to the floor when the doors came down on their heads and placed the barrel of the weapon against the back of his neck. In the sudden silence that followed the shot he smiled and nodded, looking around at the rest of policemen who had also been coming back to life, but who now froze again.

“That's right, lads,” the accent was strongly West Country, “You all just back off quietly and me and the boys will leave and this little fellow will keep his head.”

It was a stand off. The other policemen returned to being frozen all except the one with the gun to his head. He had squeezed his eye tightly shut and from the movements of his lips appeared to be praying.

From his position up on the gantry of the offices MacAllister took it all in at a glance. None of the thieves had looked up and were unaware there was anyone

above them. He stood there for a few moments longer, making up his mind and judging the distance. Then he put one hand on the rail and vaulted over it and out into space.

The drop was around fifteen feet. Not much when you say it quickly, but enough to kill you if you land badly. MacAllister had only travelled about ten feet of it when his right foot kicked the gunman squarely on his right shoulder, breaking the collarbone and sending the shotgun flying from his suddenly numbed fingers. MacAllister, still in the air, pulled his body into a ball and hoped. He was lucky. Most of him landed on the policeman he had just rescued, knocking the wind from both and spraining the PC's wrist badly as it took the full brunt of MacAllister's weight. MacAllister lay where he had fallen as the rest of the squad came to life around him and handguns were rapidly produced to cover the astonished raiders. Clive Sayers suddenly appeared from alongside the trailer with the driver of the articulated lorry held at gunpoint.

"Are you all right, Guv?"

MacAllister snarled up at him, his voice dripping in sarcasm.

"Oh yes, Clive, of course I am. I just thought I would join the rest of you silly bastards laying about on the floor while these nice gentlemen emptied the warehouse, only unfortunately I landed on someone."

A low curse came from the injured gunman.

Sayers grinned and picking up the fallen shotgun took charge.

"OK lads. Lets get this lot put away and then, Marcus, you had better get in touch with the owners of this store and tell them to get someone down here to take charge until those doors are fixed or it will be empty by the morning."

Marcus Lomax looked hurt. It was his tip and his snout that had caught this lot and here he was being left with the shitty bits while the rest of them packed it in for the night and returned to the Nick in triumph with all the bodies. Sayers read his mind and just grinned at him. Meanwhile MacAllister was back on his feet and rubbing his bruises. Everything seemed to be in working order. He looked around.

"Don't forget their little friend upstairs who tipped these boys off and Clive, there is a bottle of whisky in the drawer of my desk. Give all the boys a drink"

He waved his arm in the direction of the rest of the squad and then went out and climbed into his car. There he checked himself all over and paid attention to the bruises he had ignored in front of the others. At forty-eight years of age he really was getting too old for this sort of caper.

MacAllister was not a tall man, being a shade less than five feet eleven, but made up for it by being fairly well built. His nose, long, narrow and at some time broken during an interesting arrest, was slightly crooked and set beneath two brilliant blue eyes that could turn to ice when he was angry. His lips had at some previous time permanently adopted that slightly sardonic twist to them that is usually found on a man who spends a lot of his time dealing with the baser side of human nature. One of his eyebrows was also less than straight, but wild horses would not have got him to admit that this injury had occurred at home when an iron drain pipe he had been cleaning out had parted company with the wall and fallen on him. His shoulders were broad enough to have made a good rugby half back, which he had been in his more innocent days and he kept himself in good

condition. His thirty-six inch waist size was only two inches bigger than when he had been twenty-four. A tribute to the hours he still put in the police gym.

He kept his unruly curly blonde hair cut fairly short to keep it under control and to disguise the fact that it was gently beginning to recede, but when roused he could look like an angry bird of prey. Not quite as menacing as an eagle, but certainly as dangerous as a kestrel. His complexion was that of a man who spends a healthy amount of time out of doors although he didn't, he was just lucky that he tanned quickly and an hour mowing the lawn on a sunny day gave him a bit of colour. Like most competent people he did not suffer fools gladly, and could be blunt to the point of rudeness at times of great pressure. Despite all this women loved him, as is usually the case with someone who is a bit of a maverick and good looking in a roughly put together sort of way.

Chapter 4

It was at four o'clock that same morning MacAllister walked into the Bricewell station looking more than a little pleased with himself and approached the desk. There was no one else around and he nodded to the desk sergeant who was reading a book.

"Hello, Bob. Quiet night?"

The sergeant looked at him for a while before he answered. John MacAllister could never be described as a smoothy. He was no clotheshorse and never looked smart except when dressed casually. Even when dressed in a good suit and with his shoes polished like now, he could still give the impression of having rapidly just tidied himself up after a fight. Because of this he rarely wore a suite, usually dressed in trousers and a leather jacket. Sergeant Bob Daniels shook his head in disbelief both a MacAllister's question and his appearance. John MacAllister wearing a suite? He shrugged off his disbelief and answered the question.

"After a Friday night? You must be joking." He inclined his head. "Still, I have known worse."

"Anything for us?"

"No, just the usual drunken mayhem." he paused. "Well, there was one girl in here claiming she was raped, but she would only talk to a woman. I gave her to Jackie Ward. That was over two hours ago."

MacAllister nodded.

"Well Clive will be bringing in seven more customers for you in about twenty minutes. If you are really short of space you can double them up. One of them may have a broken collar bone so you had better ring the doctor. Another is the night watchman down at Pearson's warehouse, name of Gillings. Keep him separated from the rest of them will you or we may have a murder on our hands. He was the inside man and the others are sure to point the finger at him for grassing them up even although he didn't."

He watched while the man made some notes.

"Anyone else from CID in the building?"

Bob Daniels indicated the door at behind the counter with a slight movement of his head.

"I think Jackie is still here from seeing that girl that I was just telling you about."

"Good. I'll go and see what happened."

He disappeared through the door. The Sergeant was back into his book before it had closed behind him.

Detective Inspector John MacAllister was a copper of the old school. He was a professional policeman, who like who like a lot of his colleagues still firmly believed in flogging and hanging. Nearly thirty years of being a policeman meant that there was not much that he had not seen and he had long come to the view that the victim never got such a good deal as the offender. Once the case was over the victim was usually forgotten while the offender had a stream of Prison Visitors, Probation Officers and bleeding heart care groups to look after him and make sure he had everything he needed to keep him comfortable until his next opportunity to offend, and in MacAllister's experience that was what they invariably did.

Although often sorely tempted, MacAllister had never in his life actually framed anyone, but had often obtained complete confessions by lying to arrested subjects about the weight of evidence actually held against them. Most of his colleagues thought it was this that had probably stalled his career. Having made Detective Inspector at an unusually early age, he had stayed at that rank for the last eighteen years. The powers that be loved his result rate, but didn't see him as Senior Officer material. He didn't mind. One more step up the ladder and he would no longer be hands on. He would be steering a desk and he didn't want that. John MacAllister was made for the front line. Besides, he knew the truth about his lack of promotion.

When he had first made DI he had been brought some evidence of a child pornography ring operating on his manor, he was stationed in North London at the time. He felt that because of the nature of the case and the people involved he should inform his station commander before going ahead with the investigation and he did so. To his surprise he was told to drop the case. Not officially mind you, but it was an order just the same. At the time MacAllister had two young kids of his own just out of nappies and he had ignored the order. Three paedophiles had ended up doing three years each and a Junior Minister and a well know Judge had to resign when it was discovered they had been paying customers for photographs that would have turned most men's stomachs. But MacAllister had gone against the system and as a result of this his card was marked. Nothing he could complain about, but he was transferred out of the Met and back to Bristol where he had earlier served as a sergeant and despite an excellent arrest record, he was never promoted again.

MacAllister ran a very tight unit and expected his officers to have their first loyalty to him and his view of how a CID office should be run. Those that couldn't comply with this, for whatever reason, were soon transferred away. Within the Bricewell Police Station he was sometimes referred to "Inspector Balsov", said with the appropriate Middle European accent. This had occurred when he had been the second person into the home of a well-known crack dealer, following rapidly on the heels of the constable wielding the sledgehammer. Because the man they had

come to arrest had a history of carrying firearms the arresting officers were also armed for this raid. The surprised druggie had fired one shot at the intruders, which had taken the constable with the sledge hammer in the right thigh, before trying to get out of the back window. MacAllister had had just time for one snap shot in return as the man had dived through the window and dropped the two floors to the garden below. It turned out the bullet had removed the unfortunate man's testicles almost as cleanly as a knife. MacAllister had survived the consequent inquiry into the shooting and had only found out about his new nickname after a raw recruit on his first day at the station had actually addressed him as Inspector Balsov in the belief that it was his real name. He did nothing to discourage it and if truth were known, he was secretly rather pleased about it.

To his superiors he presented something of a dilemma. He was a very successful officer who knew his patch like the back of his hand. He inspired total loyalty in his own team of officers and was something of a legend in the Bristol area. His own immediate superior maintained that many criminals stayed away from their patch merely because of John MacAllister's presence. On the other hand he could be a complete maverick who totally ignored any orders he thought to be ill considered or unworkable. He also had scant respect for Senior Officers, Scotland Yard, his local Police Commission and stupid restrictions on overtime working. These were all things that he considered prevented him from doing an even better job. He was against arming the police as a general measure, but was very much in favour of armed response teams and could shoot a regulation pistol with either hand equally well, this ambidextrous prowess being forced upon him as a natural left hander who's boys only school didn't believe in them.

He had just the one dark sadness in his life. John MacAllister was a married man and had been for some twenty years. He had a twenty-year old son, Gavin, at University in Essex studying Law, and an eighteen-year old daughter, Kirsty. Kirsty worked for the County Council as a trainee accountant in the rates office and this September was marrying a sergeant from the Traffic Division. MacAllister would talk about his kids to anyone who would listen, but never talked about his wife because Jeanie MacAllister was a manic-depressive.

Along with many people similarly affected, her illness, though quite severe, only surfaced occasionally when she found herself to be under stress. The birth of both their children had been such occasions as were his promotion to Inspector and the resulting relocation to London. Any real pressure and Jeanie just fell apart, became paranoid and blamed the resulting chaos on MacAllister or his "bloody job". When he had consequently been transferred back to Bristol in anger if not disgrace, his wife had been so pathetically pleased he had never seriously considered moving again.

His marriage was by then, in terms of love and affection, effectively over and he stayed with it only because of the children and Jeanie's illness. Divorce, he felt, could easily lead to a tragedy and he couldn't face that. However, now he could see another crisis looming with the marriage of his daughter Kirsty. Jeanie had built her life around the girl and would miss her sorely when she left to join her husband. Still, on this warm August night he was still full of the pleasure of a successful mission and these problems were far from his mind.

On the second floor MacAllister found Jackie Ward sitting at her desk in the CID office chewing the end of her biro as she read through her notes. Deciding he was off duty now and could relax a bit he allowed the male chauvinist all men carry within them to surface and admired her great breasts. She looked up and caught him at it, but merely gave a small grin.

“Hello, Guv. How did it go?”

He reached inside his new suit jacket and removed the automatic pistol he had been carrying. Checking the safety was on he threw it casually down on a pile of papers on the desk. His off the peg suit retained the shape of where it had been.

“Pretty good, but don't tell Marcus I said so. We caught six of them and the security man.”

He sat down and lifted his feet up onto a pile of paperwork that looked as if it had been there for a long time. MacAllister didn't like paperwork.

“What have you got? Bob Daniels said something about a rape.”

“Well, I think it probably is rape, Guv, but I don't think we have enough to go on.”

MacAllister gave her a crooked grin and sank down into a chair.

“Well come on, Jackie. Don't keep me in suspense. Give me all the juicy details.”

She wrinkled her nose. It was a mannerism of hers that truly turned him on.

“Well this girl, Alison Jenson, had just been to the Friday night dance at the Mecca. She admits she only went there for one reason and that was to get it off with the singer in last nights group.” She glanced at the report in front of her. “A bloke called Jason Goodwell.”

She looked back up at him.

“Well, she succeeded there all right, which isn't surprising because she is quite a looker.”

MacAllister interrupted her.

“Is she the one in interview room one? The one in the see through blouse and the non-existent skirt?”

Jackie Ward looked puzzled.

“How did you know that?”

MacAllister grinned again.

“I always make a habit of looking through all the spy holes in the interview room doors when I come in. That way I don't get surprised. Who are the other blokes in room three?”

“Hang on, Guv. One thing at a time.”

She looked again at her notes.

“Oh yes. Well, she got Jason Goodwell all right. Just walked into their bus and undressed him and herself and screwed him right there on one of the bunks in front of the rest of them. Of course I don't imagine he struggled too much.”

MacAllister started laughing. The even white teeth shining in the light of the overhead neon lighting

“No. I don't imagine he did. So where does the rape bit come in?”

Jackie sat back in her chair and put her feet up on the desk.

“Well, that's when we get to the problem. The girl says that Rasta Fairbrother, that's the big black bloke in interview room three, asked her if she was going to do

the same for the rest of them. The girl maintains she couldn't bare to be touched by a black and told him so.”

She checked the notes again.

“Ah yes, here we are. I told him to, fuck off and shag one of your gorilla women.” She looked at MacAllister enquiringly. “Really knows how to get on with people doesn't she?”

MacAllister sighed and shaking his head lifted his legs from the desk and stood up.

“I think I can guess the rest.”

“Yes, I'm sure. Anyway, to cut a long story short she maintains that they then held her down and the other three raped her. All four men were involved in this.”

“What does the Doc say?”

“He says that she has had sexual intercourse, but that there was no proof it was rape. No cuts, scratches or any other signs of a struggle that could not have been caused when she was having it away with Goodwell.”

“So what are those fellows in the interview room for?”

Jackie Ward sucked at her bottom lip before answering his question with one of her own.

“Guv, you saw that girl. How old do you think she is?”

Walking away towards the door in search of the coffee machine MacAllister shrugged.

“I don't know. Twenty, twenty one?” He stopped dead and turned to face her. “How old is she?”

“She was fifteen years old three weeks ago, Sunday.”

MacAllister was suddenly all business.

“Right. Tell me what procedures you have carried out so far.”

Jackie allowed herself a small private smile. It wasn't often you could get a reaction out of MacAllister. Then she too was all business.

“Right, Guv. I didn't think to ask her age until we started to fill out the complaint form. I mean she hardly looks under age, does she? Then I immediately sent for the doctor and asked the engine room to get a trace on the addresses of Metal Heaven, that's the name of the group by the way. That wasn't difficult as three of them are living in at the polytechnic doing an engineering course. They gave us the address of the fourth guy and we sent out some uniforms to tell them what the problem was and to ask them to come in and make a statement.”

“What was their reaction?”

She sorted through her notes.

“They all expressed complete surprise that she should have accused them of rape. They all maintained that although the girl had only been after Jason Goodwell to begin with, she let the others have her when they offered her fifty pounds.” She reached into her drawer and brought out a plastic evidence bag. “Five ten pound notes found in the girls purse.”

MacAllister shrugged and relaxed.

“Well if that's the case the only thing we can do is have them for sex with a minor. What does the girl say about the money?”

Jackie gave him an old fashioned look and shrugged.

“She said a lot of things and not much of it was repeatable, she has some vocabulary, but the gist of it was that she had never seen it before and that bastard Goodwell had put it in her bag while the other bastards were raping her.”

“Any chance of breaking any of them from their story?”

“I don't think so. They all told it word perfect and separately. And they all know that rape carries a pretty heavy sentence.”

“What do you think really happened?”

She grimaced, yawned and stretched and then looked up at MacAllister who was again leaning against the wall watching her with interest as she strained the material of her blouse. She ignored his interest.

“I think it happened exactly as Alison Jenson tells it. Fairbrother, that's the black guy, is really enjoying himself, especially when he tells us that he thinks it was worth every penny of fifty pounds even if he has never had to pay for it before.”

“Do they know she's a minor?”

“They do now. I hoped that might shake them a bit, but although it did worry them, except Fairbrother that is, it hasn't changed their story.”

MacAllister began to pace around the office while he thought about it. Then, decision made, he stopped.

“Right. Release them, but tell them there may be charges brought on having sex with a minor.” He shook his head. “That girl looks at least as old as my Kirsty and a sight more experienced.” He shrugged. “Then we had better get the girl back to her mother.”

He started towards the door and then stopped.

“Where is her mother?”

Jackie Ward picked up her bag and got ready to leave.

“Her mother was not at home when we called. Alison says her mother thinks she is staying with a friend and that when she does that, her mother usually does the same.”

“Did she say who this friend is her mother stays with?”

Jackie gave him a tight little smile.

“No, she couldn't do that. She said it usually depends on who her mother meets on the night.”

MacAllister just nodded and sighed.

“OK. We will put her in one of the cells until morning under protective custody. I am not about to leave her alone in the middle of the night after what she has been through. Not even in her own house and not even if her own mother does so on a regular basis.”

He started towards the door a second time and then stopped again.

“Where's the father? Pissed off long ago I expect.”

“No Guv. He's in Belize, South America. He's a Sergeant Major in the Royal Marines. And I should leave her in the interview room if I were you. The Social Services are sending some one over any minute now and they will take responsibility for her.”

MacAllister just shook his head and finally manage to walk out of the office. Two minutes later as Janet Ward had just switched out the lights and was stepping into the corridor her self he came rushing back. She smiled at him sweetly and

held out the automatic pistol he had left on his desk. He looked at her with his kestrel look for some moments before he reached out and took it and then without a word turned and walked away. Her voice followed him.

“If you bought a double breasted suite that gun would sit a lot more comfortably under it and you wouldn't have to take it out all the time. It would also show off your shoulders nicely as well.”

MacAllister ignored her. Jackie Ward had a figure like a stripper and it wouldn't take much for her to tempt him into something he had avoided for the last twenty odd years despite the offers he had received from time to time and that was crapping on his own doorstep. Not that he was an angel, far from it. But he did believe in keeping work and business very much apart.

Janet watched him go, smiled to herself and followed him down the corridor. Pity he was married.

It was twenty minutes later that Jean MacAllister heard her husband's car arrive and turn into their drive. She looked at the bedside clock and was not surprised to see it was nearly five o'clock. She had watched her husband change over the years from a hard working and cheerful bobby to a slightly embittered and extremely cynical Inspector of CID and she did not like the change. But she had been guilty herself of ignoring what was going on and had hidden away from it by devoting all her time to her children. However, her son was now of at university and her daughter was soon to fly the nest and start up her own home. Jean MacAllister had looked around and realised that she had nothing left except a husband she no longer knew. She wasn't quite sure yet what she was going to do about it, and putting the clock back on the bedside table turned over and pulled the covers up as if she was still asleep. It could all wait until Kirsty was safely married and then they would have to sort it out.

Chapter 5

Shane Flinders had been first a bit of a handful and then a tearaway for as long as any one who knew him could remember, and lots of people knew Shane. Police, Probation Service, local shopkeepers, neighbours and school teachers. They all of them knew him and of one accord detested him. Shane had defeated his own parents by the age of six and had then gone on to take on the rest of the world. At seventeen his crime sheet down at the local nick covered shoplifting, malicious damage, grievous bodily harm, burglary, car theft and general drunken rowdiness. He was a bad un'. Shane was the only son of George and Betty Flinders and was, they had thought, a gift from god when in their early forties and having given up all hope of a child, they had finally found they were to become parents. They were giving their thanks in entirely the wrong direction.

George Flinders, a sparse, skinny man of medium height and almost completely bald, was not given to drawing attention to himself. He worked, if the travelling public can forgive the euphemism, as a porter for British Rail at Temple Meads station in Bristol. He was not the cleverest man in the world, but he was happy

enough at his job and could imagine no other life after twenty-five years service on the railways. Betty Flinders was a tiny, plump woman with mousy brown hair and large brown eyes, which, in her younger days had been her best feature. Like her husband George, she also believed in keeping one's self to one's self. Betty Flinders had worked at the Will's Tobacco factory from leaving school at the age of fifteen until she was four months pregnant with Shane at the age of forty four, when the doctor had advised her that as an older mother she should stop work, stop smoking and rest more. George and Betty had at that time been married for twenty years.

When the doctor had told the amazed couple they were about to become parents they had spared no expense. The spare bedroom of the tiny terraced house they had scraped and saved to buy was made into the nursery and a new Silver Line pram was purchased along with the finest quality crib and bedclothes. Betty followed a strict regime of exercises and rest and duly gave up smoking, not easy when she had been smoking free and cheap cigarettes for over twenty years and she also gave up chocolates. George, for his part, cut down his nights at the pub to just his regular Friday night darts match, much to the relief of the other regulars who were getting just a little tired of hearing about "The Miracle Pregnancy". The money they saved all went towards things for the new arrival.

As had been predicted Betty experienced a difficult pregnancy and for the last two months was confined almost totally to her bed, so bad was the swelling in her legs if she spent more than half an hour on her feet. The doctors, forgetting in their professionalism just how overwhelmed Betty Flinders felt to have finally and unexpectedly been granted the gift of motherhood, showing little sympathy for those foolish enough to have their first child at her advanced age. By the time Shane was ready to make an appearance so many people had enjoyed regaling her with tales of problems that attended older mothers pregnancies, that she had come to believe them and was dreading the moment when it would be time to actually see her offspring. A feeling that was to return with a vengeance some years later when he began his one-man crime wave.

Shane Flinders finally entered the world some two weeks late after being delivered by caesarean section. He was born in the condition that the hospital staff referred to as "flat" and spent his first two weeks in a incubator, recovering. For a few days it was touch and go, but he then rallied strongly. By the age of three months he had caught up with and began to pass his peers. He was not a pretty child and when she had first laid eyes on him Betty's immediate reaction had been that they had shown her the wrong baby. The bright, carrot red hair and green-grey eyes being no match to anyone in hers or George's family that she could give name to. George too suffered some surprise at the appearance of his offspring, but in the manner of parents all over the world the significance of his sons looks soon paled besides the miracle of having produced a living being, and a boy child at that, someone who would carry on the Flinders name into the future. His little chest ached with being thrust forward with pride for most of his waking hours. Shane was taken home at the end of three weeks and proudly displayed to anyone who could be persuaded to look at him. Not unnaturally Shane, named after George's favourite western, was indulged shamelessly.

After a normal babyhood in which he progressed to the satisfactorily, at the age of five he went off to school. After he had been there several months it became obvious that he would never be a genius although he had a natural animal intelligence that would probably see him through. The only problem was his total disrespect for others property and a willingness to punch anyone to get what he wanted. There were remonstrations and punishments from both parents and his teachers, this meaning no more an occasional tut-tut or naughty boy from George and Betty and little more from his teachers, did little to change him. Consequently he found he could do pretty much as he liked.

By the time he was fourteen, Shane had practically the physical development of an adult and this meant that pupils over two years his senior and most of the school staff were careful not to upset him. The bright red hair had remained to be joined by a reddish blonde down on his cheeks, while a large and prominent nose only just separated the tiny greeny-grey eyes. The bottom jaw was slightly undershot giving him a permanently aggressive look and bore more than its fair share of adolescent acne, while his neck was thick, short and powerfully set upon shoulders that strained his tee shirts. He was to finish growing at a height a little shorter than average at five feet nine inches, but would never be described as small because of his powerful body.

His teachers had long since given up trying to teach him and were content to allow him to drift through his academic studies provided he did not disrupt the rest of the class during lessons. In the playground they did not even try to control him and he did pretty much what he liked to whom he liked. Smart enough to realise this he ran a one man protection racket among the younger age groups that brought him all the sweets and pocket money he needed, but he was careful not to push it beyond the bounds of reason that would have forced the authorities to take action, thereby allowing them to completely ignore it. And so a kind of truce evolved saving all concerned from what could have been a difficult situation, with the exception his fellow pupils and victims that is. The crunch had to come and it finally came at a school football match.

Shane liked football and played as a defender for the second-eleven team in his year. He was by no means a brilliant player, but the sight of him running towards them with a look of grim determination on his face was usually enough to distract most forwards before they could take any meaningful action. Those that needed stronger persuasion than this were flattened without ceremony by a crunching and usually late, tackle. The ensuing free kick did very little to persuade them it was worth trying to pass him a second time

On this particular occasion they were playing away at a local private school, where due to the intensive sports coaching given, the standard of opposition was a lot higher than usual and they had lost eight to nil. The opposing right-winger had been running rings around Shane all of the afternoon and had been far too quick and clever to suffer the usual "smash them into the floor" treatment. Not only had he been running rings around Shane, but also he had been laughing at him while he did it and at the final whistle Shane was not in the best of humours. He and the rest of his team had dressed as quickly as possible in their dressing room and tried to slink quickly away from the scene of their humiliation, but it was not to be. The boys from the private school were stood around waiting for their parents to

come and collect them in their cars and Shane and company had to run the gauntlet to reach their old and battered school mini bus. The winger who had humiliated Shane all afternoon, as well as scoring four of the eight goals seemed to have decided they were not to get away that easily. Leaning back against the veranda rail of the chalet style wooden changing rooms beloved by small private schools everywhere, he turned his head to his colleagues and made his remarks in a loud voice.

“Hardly worth turning out for really, chaps. Not even a decent practise for us today.”

Shane and his teammates kept their heads down and walked towards the mini bus with their necks and faces turning deep red.

“Should have scored even more you know. It would have been ten or twelve if someone hadn't let that Orang-Utan onto the pitch. Had to keep running around the blighter to reach the goal.”

Shane's mates carted their eyes at him waiting for the explosion that did not come. Shane himself was certain the other boy was taking the piss, but being unsure what an Orang-Utan was, didn't want to make a Pratt of himself. The other boy continued.

“You must have seen it lads. That bloody great big red monkey that was wandering about in the middle of the pitch. I asked the Ref to ring the zoo at half time and get it collected, but he must have forgotten.”

At this his colleagues gave a few titters of nervous laughter, but Shane's build prevented outright merriment. This last remark however, had removed any lingering doubts from Shane's mind that the other was having a go at him. Having reached the mini bus by now he threw his kit into a seat through the open door and then looked around to make sure that the teacher who had brought them here and the other school's teacher were still in the club house kitchen enjoying their cup of tea. He walked back to the other youth and stood directly in front of him.

“Get down of that veranda you cocky little bastard and come here. I'm going to break your face for you.”

The two boys were of an even height although Shane was by far the heavier and stronger of the two, but his did not worry the other youth. He was two years older than the redhead and the captain of the school boxing team. This big Neanderthal had a few surprises coming. By now the other boys had gathered around in expectancy, both sides feeling that the other team's man was in for a bit of a shock. Without hurrying the private school youth stripped off his blazer and school tie and after rolling up his sleeves vaulted the veranda rail and landed in front of Shane, but some six feet away. He lifted his hands in the classic boxing pose and began to dance lightly around Shane while flicking out his left fist.

“Come on then, caveman, lets see what you can do.”

He danced in and his left hand stung Shane twice above the right eye before he danced back out of reach. Shane blinked, shook his head and turned to face him. The youth came in again dancing lightly about and twice more the left hand landed on Shane's right eyebrow, which began to turn an angry red. Shane swung a haymaker of a right and when it missed by some six inches rushed forward to follow it up with a swinging left hook. No one was there, but two more blows landed on his face, the second bringing blood to his nose. By now the private

school boys were cheering their man on madly while Shane's mates were beginning to look at each other in consternation. What the bloody hell was happening to Killer Flinders? The stinging left fist caught the right eye twice more and Shane's vision was reduced to one eye. He rushed in and tried to grab his opponent, but a combination of six or seven punches left him grasping at thin air with only a split lip and his bleeding nose to show for his trouble. The other youth looked him over and decided it was time to move in for the kill. That was his mistake.

He danced in again and drove several punches into Shane's body before stepping back a few inches to switch upstairs to the head, but he had come too close and a large meaty hand caught the front of his shirt and yanked him forward and off his feet. The first head butt caught him on the forehead with enough force to stun him. The second landed directly on his nose, smashing the bone and sending him into semi-consciousness. The third landed on his left cheekbone as he desperately twisted his head to one side to avoid it, causing in the following order, a depressed fracture, unconsciousness and concussion. It might still have been all right if Shane had stopped there, but that was impossible, his blood was up. Feeling the other become a dead weight in his hands Shane dropped him face down onto the grass. He stepped back a little to make room and then twice kicked the other in the short ribs as hard as he could, fracturing three of them.

It was this last action that the two masters witnessed as they came running out in response to the baying of Shane's team mates and the screams of dirty fighting from the other boys. The two of them grabbed him by the arms and pinned him against the veranda rail, panting and snorting until the red mist had cleared from his eyes and they could release him. Then they bundled all the comprehensive schoolboys into their mini bus and their teacher drove them home, while the other master rang for an ambulance for the unconscious right-winger. On the way home Shane refused even to discuss the matter with anyone, even his mates, while the teacher drove in frosty silence imagining the explaining he would have to do to the headmaster.

It is just possible that Shane might still have got away with it if the other boy had not been Andrew Hobart, the son of a local engineering manufacturer. His father, Terry Hobart, owned and ran a precision engineering company specialising in aerospace components. He was successful because he ran a very tight ship and would not employ anyone who did not reach his own high standards. He was also a Mason and as such knew a fair number of other influential people in the city. After visiting his son in hospital, where he could scarcely believe the extent of the injuries that had been inflicted upon him, he rang a fellow mason who was a barrister and gave him the details of the affair, not forgetting that it was Andrew who had picked the fight. John Braniggan, the barrister, listened carefully before he gave his reply.

“Well, Terry, if you take the matter to court you must expect that Andrew will not come out of this smelling of roses. He picked a fight with a younger boy of whom he felt himself to be intellectually and physically superior, safe in the knowledge that he was his school's and the area, boxing champion.” He paused before continuing. “However, if what you say is true and the other boy used his head to knock him unconscious and not content with that went on to break three

of his ribs by kicking him when he lay helpless, then I would think most of our magistrates would take a dim view of that.”

It was what Terry Hobart wanted to hear. He thanked his friend and hung up, only to immediately pick up the phone again and dial the number for the local police station and that is how Shane Flinders started his criminal record.

John Braniggan had called it almost exactly right. Andrew Hobart was bound over to keep the peace for a period of six months for his part in the affray. In Shane's case the magistrates were not so lenient. He was given probation for one year, provided he attended the Probation Office weekly during that time. It was the turning point that began a career of violence that over the next couple of years would make him one of Bristol's best-known juvenile delinquents.

Stung that he should have been treated more harshly than that rich bastard who had started the fight, Shane declared war on the whole system. No one and nothing was sacred. He started by stealing a half-pound ball pane hammer from his father's shed, which he then carried halfway across Bristol to the Hobart home in Filton. Here he used it to smash every bit of glass in the Hobart's Jaguar Daimler, which for once had been left in the street outside the house. When he got home the police were already waiting for him and he was again taken off to the Bricewell and charged, the hammer found to be still in his pocket. While awaiting trial he terrorised the other pupils at his school until in the record time of just five weeks he was expelled for the safety of the other children. At home his father became afraid to talk to him and both parents took to hiding their money and valuables in obscure places.

At this second visit to the magistrate's court he got six months in the Youth Detention Centre on Portland Bill. Here he found that he was not leader of boys he had been on the outside. Here he was a very small fish indeed. He had to fight for everything, every day, even his food. He took to it like a duck to water and after some bloody battles and good hidings he finally worked his way up to become a part of the ruling strata of the place, one of the acknowledged hard men. It was here he learned how to commit burglary and car theft without getting caught. By the time he was released his already prominent nose leaned at an angle across his face. It was a souvenir of his first day in the detention centre when he had yet to establish his place in the hierarchy and an unexpected head butt had floored him after he had questioned the right of another inmate to some of his cigarettes. He was also almost without physical fear as he reckoned that he had already survived the worst that society could do to him. He immediately started on a two year, one-man crime wave, only very briefly interrupted by a further three months in the Detention Centre. A hardened criminal, he now carried a one-pound ball pane hammer with him everywhere. He had it suspended in a sling under his left armpit where it was inconspicuous beneath his jacket, but ready for instant use.

At ten o'clock in the evening on a fine summer night in late August, he was strolling down an avenue of large private houses looking for a likely burglary prospect when the latest incident occurred. In one of the houses a party was going on and parked outside were a variety of new and expensive cars. Shane listened to the loud sounds of merriment from within and then decided to give them something to wipe the smiles from their faces when they came out. Strolling down the line of cars he took out the hammer and began to smash the front and rear

lights closest to the kerb on each vehicle. What he did not know was that a neighbour three doors away from the party had come home from his Rugby Club just twenty minutes earlier to find a rear tyre of his car was flat. As he was expected to be joining his wife and children at his parent's house, Trevor Morton was angry and frustrated when he discovered the puncture. He had just finished changing the wheel when Flinders passed the end of his drive accompanied by the sound of breaking glass. Jack handle still held in his hand he ran down the drive to intervene.

"Hey, you little bugger, what do you think you are at?"

He caught up with Flinders and grabbed the sleeve of his jacket, waving the jack handle at him. Flinders shrugged him off.

"Fuck off or I'll smash your face in."

Trevor, a halfback for Bristol and a County trialist was not afraid of a nasty little guttersnipe like Shane Flinders and grabbed the sleeve again. Because of this confidence in his size and his ability to look after himself it did not occur to Trevor Morton that he might be the next to feel the weight of the young thug's weapon, although he had heard the breaking car lights as Flinders went about his vandalism. Hanging on to his arm he attempted to pull the red headed youth along the pavement towards his house and a telephone

"Come here with me you destructive little sod, I'm going to call the police."

The ball end of the hammer started its travel from somewhere behind Shane's back at around waist level. It gathered speed as it sliced upwards and around and with the full power of Shane's muscular arm propelling it, hit the other squarely on the left temple. There was the soft smacking sound of a ripe apple being thrown hard at a brick wall and the hand fell away from Shane's sleeve as Trevor Morton staggered away backwards from the blow, dropping first to his knees and then on to his face without any attempt to break his fall. He was already dead when his head hit the pavement. Shane stared down at him waiting to see if he would move again before slipping the hammer back into its harness.

"Stupid Bastard."

He casually kicked the fallen man once in the chest before walking off down the street towards his own area of the city. The old lady in number fourteen had only come to the window to see what all the noise and breaking glass was about. She watched Shane Flinders walk past her front door by the light of the lamppost in the street outside and saw the whole incident. With a mottled old hand pressed to her lips she watched without daring to breath as Flinders kicked Trevor Morton's body before placing his hammer back in its sling and walking off. Then she hurried out into the hall to use the telephone. It took her nervous old hands three attempts to ring the number.

Detective Sergeant Clive Sayers was the first CID member at the scene of the crime. He had been on his way home at the end of his shift when the call had come through on his radio. A short, stocky, fair-haired man of thirty-two, he had been a sergeant in CID for seven years, all of them working for MacAllister. As he was the stabilising factor on some of his DI's more radical views they made a good team. He and MacAllister liked and respected each other and though they sometimes disagreed fundamentally on what the law allowed or did not allow, they very rarely exchanged harsh words. Sayers was a career policeman. Still a

sergeant, at his age he did no longer took it for granted the one day he was bound to make Inspector rank. This did not trouble him as he realised that he was not cut out to be the leader. He knew however, that as a second in command there was no one better. He had seen all the same nasty things as the rest of the force, but had not developed the same hard cynical edge as some of the others. He did his job as well as he could, but did not take it home with him as he felt the unsocial hours were already enough for his family to put up with. He intended to see out his remaining time on the force in CID and then at fifty five take his retirement and pension and buy that cottage in Devon he and his wife had dreamt about for a long time. After another twenty-three years of dealing with the general public, especially on incidents like this one he was on his way to now, he would have earned it.

Sayers parked his car behind a local Panda car that was parked with its hazard lights flashing. Parked in front of that was an ambulance with its strobotic blue light intermittently lighting the street, vehicles, people and surrounding houses, as if they were all in some giant disco. Only the noise was missing. He walked up to the small group of policemen and civilians who were stood around the body on the pavement with its pool of dark liquid leaking from the head and nudged one of the policemen. The man turned and recognised with a quick flash of a smile. Sayers nodded at the corpse.

“Hello, Bob, what have we got here then?”

Constable Bob Evert turned to face him. Six foot two with the broad face and weathered complexion of a countryman, Evert had operated for eight years as a motorway patrol man and he was used to the sight of death. Compared to a lot that he had seen this one was a comparatively tidy death. Just a trickle of blood and the body was all in one piece. No need to go searching about in the dark for missing bits of limb with this one. He nodded back as he checked with his notes.

“Evening, Clive. According to the neighbours,” he indicated the half dozen people stood a few yards away talking among themselves and shaking their heads, “this was Mr Trevor Morton. He's dead and it looks as if the cause of death was a blow to the head with the proverbial blunt instrument, but we are waiting for the doctor to arrive and confirm that. If it is Morton then he lived in that house over there with his wife and two kids, but there is no one in at the moment. His neighbours say that his wife always takes the kids to spend Saturdays at her parent's house up on Clifton Downs when her husband is playing rugby away from Bristol. They usually stay there the night.”

Sayers stared down at the body.

“Have we got any idea what happened? You know? Who did it and why?”

Bob Evert grinned at him.

“Must be your lucky day, my old mate. We've got an eyewitness in the house over the road. My partner Jennie Carver is with her making her a cup of tea as she is a bit shaken up.”

They both turned as a blue Ford Mondeo pulled up with a jerk and MacAllister and Marcus Lomax climbed out from it. They both walked over to the group on the pavement where MacAllister took over without a blink. His soft Scottish accent at odds with the urgency of his body language, the deep set blue eyes darting around

taking everything in. He was wearing a new double-breasted suit and for once it didn't look as if he had borrowed it.

“Evening, Clive. Catch you on your way home did they? Never mind.”

He turned to Marcus Lomax.

“See that the area is properly taped off and then you and the uniforms start a house to house to see if anyone saw anything. The Doctor won't be here for some time as it seems that someone down in the Hotwells area has dug up a body in the garden of a house he has only just bought, so she is a bit tied up at the moment.” He turned back to Clive Sayers. “What have we got so far?”

“I just got here, Guv, I think Bob Evert could give you a better idea.”

MacAllister turned to Evert and moved his head in a gesture of inquiry and Evert imperceptibly straightened his shoulders and his thoughts. MacAllister didn't take kindly to rambling reports and Bob Evert had ambitions of joining the CID if the chance came his way. It would sure beat showing the flag in St Paul's or scraping the jam of the motorway for a living. He held up his notebook again.

“We got a report at ten fifteen of a man being assaulted here in Webley Road. When we got here we found this bloke lying on the pavement with his head in a small pool of blood and no one else to be seen. I gave him a quick check over, but couldn't find a pulse so I assumed he was a goner and called for the works. The ambulance was here in minutes and they confirmed he was dead. I sent my partner over the road to talk to an old lady who saw it happen, a Mrs Blackmoor and she's also the one who reported it, and then I made sure nobody touched anything until the CID arrived.”

He waved a hand around, a gesture that took in the whole area.

“The only other thing is that this whole row of cars has had their lights smashed on the kerb side, front and rear. Most of them belong to that group of people standing over there. They were having a party at about four doors along at the time and according to one of the other neighbours you wouldn't have heard Concord taking off over the noise they were making, so none of them heard anything.”

He resisted checking his notebook, determined to impress.

“Morton was the only one at home as his wife visits his parents on a Saturday with the two kids. Saturday is Morton's busy day. He's a car salesman with the local BMW agency and then he plays rugby for the Bristol second fifteen in the afternoons. They were playing a cup match away down in Devon this week and we think he had just arrived home from the match when this incident happened. As far as we can tell he was out in his drive changing a wheel on his BMW. The boot of his car is still open, the car is up on the jack, the wheel still lying in the drive is a flat as a pancake and Morton is still holding a jack handle in his right hand. As I said, we have an eye witness in the house across the road who said she saw two men have a fight.”

He relaxed visibly having managed a clear and concise report and resisting the urge to tell MacAllister of his own theory and conclusions and therefore put the Inspector's back up.

MacAllister merely nodded and turning to Clive Sayers pointed at Mrs Blackmoor's front door.

“Better get over and get the details while they are still fresh in her mind.” He turned back to Evert. “Can you give Marcus Lomax a hand on the house to house? I will look after this until the doctor gets here. Wonder why he came home instead of going straight to his parents place?”

Evert had played a lot of rugby in his younger days and he knew.

“They go by mini coach usually so they can have a drink with the other team after the match and not have to drive home pissed.”

“In that case we had better check Morton's blood alcohol when they get him to the morgue. Hope the bloody doctor comes soon.”

As if on cue a small red Alfa Romeo pulled up and the doctor arrived. Doctor Jacinda Dass, the medical examiner, was from Sri Lanka. She had been going out to dinner when she had been called out to examine a set of bones some one had dug up in their back garden. They had come from what she was sure would turn out to be an old plague pit, as they had to be at least three hundred years old. Trevor Morton was her second call on a night that should have been her night off except for a colleague's sudden illness and she was dressed in a dark blue, silk sari with gold edging that she had put on two hours ago for the dinner date that was now ruined. She was just twenty-eight years old, slim, very dark skinned and looked absolutely stunning. She dropped her bag to the pavement and gave MacAllister a weary smile.

“Good evening, Inspector. What have you got for me?”

MacAllister dragged his eyes away from the beautiful vision in the sari.

“Suspected murder by the look of it, Doctor. See if you can take a guess at what he was bashed with, will you. And if you think he has been drinking?”

She crouched down and by the light of the car headlights with a powerful torch quickly and skilfully examined the body. After five minutes she straightened up and stripped off the plastic gloves she had been wearing. She looked up at MacAllister who was waiting patiently.

“As far as I can see in this light, he has received one hard blow to the left temple causing a depressed fracture as severe as anything I have ever seen. I should think that death was instantaneous.” She hesitated. “I cannot be absolutely certain, but the only thing I can think of that could have caused such an injury is a hammer. As for drinking, it is impossible to be sure without testing, but he doesn't smell of drink.”

She bent to close her bag and picked it up ready to leave.

“You can move him now whenever you are ready. Goodnight, Inspector.”

She gave a small smile and getting back into her car drove off to her delayed dinner date. MacAllister looked thoughtful and turned to Clive Sayers, the thumb and finger of his right hand massaging the bent nose as if he was trying to straighten it.

“Clive, do you remember that red headed kid that we did for burglary about a year ago? The one who carried the big ball pane hammer in a sling under his arm? Call in and get his name and address and then when you have finished with the witness go and pay him a visit.”

Sayers nodded.

“I don't need to ask his name, Guv. It was Flinders. Wayne or Shane Flinders it was and he is a right nasty piece of work. Something like this is would be right up

his alley. I had better take Marcus with me in case he fancies taking another swing at someone.”

MacAllister turned to Bob Evert.

“Bob do you know where Morton's parents live? We had better get over there and break the news. Do you mind if I take Jenny Carver with me on this one? You can cope here, can't you?”

Evert nodded, but said nothing, not sure how to break the news to MacAllister. MacAllister, not the most patient of men, became irritated.

“Well? Do you know where they live or do I have to ask the neighbours?”

Evert wriggled.

“You're not going to like this.” He sighed. “His father is John Morton.”

MacAllister jerked. Evert nodded to him. MacAllister's hand went up and covered his eyes in a gesture of disbelief.

“John Morton of Morton Engineering? The bloody law and order Councillor? The scourge of the police force?”

Evert shrugged.

“That's him.”

MacAllister turned his eyes to heaven.

“Ye Gods, that's all I need.”

He turned to where Clive Sayers was approaching with a uniformed policewoman.

“Clive I think you had better come with me and leave Marcus and the uniforms to pick up Flinders. I think the shit is going to hit the fan.”

The Morton Senior residence was more of a mansion than a house and was set high up on the downs above the Avon Gorge, the buildings dating back to the period when the slave trade had brought great wealth to Bristol's merchants. The two detectives parked their car in the street ignoring the imposing driveway that already held a BMW compact and a large silver 530d, as though not wanting to impose their presence more than was absolutely necessary or conscious of the shabbiness of their hard working police Ford Mondeo when parked next to the more exotic machinery. Locking the car they walked up fifty meters of driveway to the house in silence. When they arrived at the enclosed porch that was almost big enough to hold a party, Clive Sayers reached out and using the big, highly polished brass knocker, announced their arrival. The noise it made sounded like the knock of doom.

They stood back slightly so that the light set into the porch ceiling could fall on their faces, aware that these days people who called after dark and unexpectedly could be treated with some suspicion, especially in a wealthy area like this. When the door was opened by the two identically dressed little blonde girls MacAllister knew that this was going to be one of the really difficult ones. They had opened the door laughing and smiling only to stop dead when they saw the two strangers. It was more than obvious this was not who they had expected to see. The smiles froze and little fingers went to mouths as they backed away uncertain of what to do. A tall willowy blonde woman in her late twenties joined them in the doorway and smilingly shooed the children back inside the house. She turned the smile at the two men standing grim faced in the doorway.

“I am sorry about the girls but they are expecting their father any minute and they naturally thought it was him when you knocked. They should not really be up at this hour, but he usually puts them to bed on a Saturday.” She frowned. “He should have been here an hour ago. Is him or my father you wanted to see?”

The two policemen looked at each other, Clive Sayers saying nothing, as when it came to situations like this it was an unspoken rule that the most senior officer present did the dirty work. MacAllister hardened his heart now that the two little girls had disappeared back into the house and became a professional CID officer.

“Are you Mrs Trevor Morton, Mam?”

The woman nodded, suddenly scared.

“I am Detective Inspector MacAllister from the Bristol CID and this is Detective Sergeant Sayers. Could we come in for a moment?”

He held up his warrant card for her inspection and the woman nodded and stood to one side for them to enter, the apprehension on her face now bordering on panic.

“Is it, Trevor. Has he had an accident or been hurt at the match? Is he all right?”

Her voice had gone up half an octave. Sayers decided to help out.

“Is there anyone with you, Mam? Any one else in the house?”

She nodded, hand at her throat in a universal gesture of distress.

“Yes. My husbands parents are in the lounge.”

“Do you think we could go in there then please, Mrs Morton?”

Jane Morton swallowed the questions that were about to tumble from her lips and led them across the hall and into a large and luxuriously furnished room that looked out onto a beautifully manicured and floodlit garden. Through the French windows at the far side of the room was a glassed in patio with deeply upholstered cane furniture and here an older couple were sitting where they could look out over the garden, although at this minute their heads were craned around to see who had come in. From their expressions of curiosity it was obvious that the two little girls, who now clustered against the knee of the woman, had told them of the two strange men at the front door. As the two policemen entered the lounge the man stood up and leaving the patio came to meet them and MacAllister recognised the pugnacious features of Councillor John Morton MBE. He tried mentally to prepare himself for what was to follow while he heard off to his left somewhere Jane Morton telling her father-in-law who they were. The councillor thrust his face forward. His attitude seemed unnecessarily aggressive, but MacAllister knew he was always like this.

“CID? Well what's it all about then, Inspector.” He turned to his daughter-in-law. “Its all right, Jane. Trevor must be all right. The CID only get involved when it's criminal.”

He turned back to the two detectives and jerked his head at them in inquiry. MacAllister looked meaningfully at the two small girls and John Morton walked over and closed the double French windows to the Patio area. MacAllister took a deep breath and started.

“At about ten o'clock this evening, a man identified by several neighbours as Trevor Morton, was involved in an affray in the street outside of his home. During

in that affray he received a massive blow to the head with a blunt instrument, probably a hammer, and I am afraid that he was killed instantly.”

Clive Sayers caught Jane Morton as she collapsed, lowering her into a chair and the scene that followed was one that MacAllister had seen all too often in his twenty odd years in the police force and one that he had still to come to terms with. He and Sayers went through the usual scenes of disbelief, the chance of it being mistaken identity, the requests to know if they knew the man who did it, did they have the man who did it, and finally, when were they going to arrest the man who did it. They suffered without reply to both the innuendoes and outright accusations that it was their fault, the police in general that is, who were responsible for allowing this type of crime to happen, mixed up with demands for justice when they finally brought the killer to trial. Then when the storm had blown itself out they lived with the tears and the heartbreak until relatives and friends could be identified and summoned to offer the love and sympathy that was needed at such a time. It was an hour in all and when they finally got back into their car it was past midnight and under the orange glare of the street lamps MacAllister's face looked as if it had been forged from brass. He was silent for much of the journey until just before Clive Sayers dropped him off in the police station car park. He was about to shut the car door when he leaned back inside and whispered fiercely to his sergeant.

“I think they should pass a law that says all those stupid bastards that abolished the death penalty should be the ones that go and break the news to the victims families. Then perhaps the arseholes would change their bloody, bleeding heart minds.”

Sayers didn't take the slamming of the car door personally or the fact that there was no goodnight or thanks for your support from MacAllister. He knew that murders like this hit the boss where he lived and that come the morning they would be all out to nail the bastard that did it. He put the car into gear and drove home to his ruined supper.

Chapter 6

In the heat of Belize sergeant major Martin Jenson dismissed his class and watched them shamle off across the parade ground towards the canteen with that loose-limbed walk that is totally foreign to white Europeans. The six foot two, dark haired soldier sighed and started to put the weapon back together. He knew he was supposed to treat them as equals, but these buggers would never make professional soldiers without a white man to kick their arses now and again. Their temperament was more African than South American and in his experience, and he did have a lot of experience of the Dark Continent, that meant they would never make professional soldiers, as The West understood it. If that made him a racist, then so be it.

Today was had been a typical example. He had picked up the weapon from the stores this morning ready for the lesson in maintenance and it was already filthy

when he collected it. It was as well it was an old one just kept for training because he would have hated to rely on it in a real firefight situation. He had handed it around the class and then asked if anyone would care to comment on what was wrong with it. All he got for his trouble was ten blank stares that became ingratiating smiles as he turned to look angrily at them one by one. Becoming increasingly frustrated he had started to raise his voice when he asked the question again. Still the blank looks. Then he had then asked if they would like to take it out to the range and fire it. Ten black faces had lit up and ten smiling heads had nodded vigorously. He had pointed out to them the dirt all over the mechanism, the dirt and pitting in the barrel, the worn cocking lever and totally knackered spring, but the faces just went blank again and he gave up. Now, at the end of two hours, only three of them could actually put the thing back together again after he had taken it apart and he still hadn't managed to get them to understand why the weapon had to be kept clean.

He sighed all alone in the empty classroom and picking up the Bren put it over his shoulder. Bloody gun was practically obsolete in these days of throw away Kalashnikovs, but he knew which he would rather have to defend a fortified position. Perhaps his trainees would take weapons care more seriously if he had allowed them to fire the thing. He doubted if it would have taken more than half a box of ammunition before it had jammed solid or blown up. He sighed again and headed for the armoury. If he got it checked in now he would have time to get over to the mess and catch the football scores on the world service and see how Liverpool had had got on against ManU. He set out across the heat and dust of the parade ground.

Martin Jensen stood straight at six feet and had the muscles and build of a good light heavy weight boxer, plenty of strength, but not so heavy as to destroy his speed. At thirty-eight years old he still had all his black hair, cropped down almost, but not quite to a crew cut and fierce grey eyes that looked out under equally dark brows. His fitness was exemplary and his uniform he had re-tailored himself until it fitted him like a second skin. He was a man who had been born to be a soldier and in any other era, from roman up until the present time, would have looked equally at home with the weapons and uniform of the times.

He moved with a military, but fluid movement that only people blessed with perfect coordination and innate athleticism possess and was invariably surprised when others didn't share this god given ability. He suffered fools badly and in his book a fool was someone who made no effort to learn how to do a job properly. He was born to be a Sergeant Major except for his voice. Jensen never had been heard to use a parade ground voice. He could shout with the best of them, but that wasn't his way as he felt it lacked dignity and demeaned your position. Therefore, Martin Jensen gave his orders in a reasonable, but clearly audible voice and those who knew him well carried them out to the letter and without hesitation.

He trudged across the square in the steamy heat of Belize. When he arrived back there the armoury seemed unmanned. It angered, but did not surprise him. Once upon a time when there had been a full British regiment here you could have been the armourer's mother and you would not have even got in, let alone managed to draw a weapon without a properly signed chitty. He banged the tripod of the Bren gun on the once highly polished, but now chipped and broken wooden

counter in an effort to draw attention. A black corporal appeared from behind a rack of mortars, yawning as he came. He took the gun without comment and headed for the rear of the armoury until Jenson's voice stopped him.

“Corporal!”

The soldier turned with a look of inquiry on his face. “Yus?”

Jenson stared at him.

“Yes, Sergeant Major.”

The corporal swallowed and stiffened to attention, which was difficult in the narrow confines of the weapon racks while carrying the big Bren gun.

“Yus, Sergeant Major.”

Jenson sighed and relaxed. What was the use?

“Do you think I can have my chitty back, corporal, signed by you to say I have returned that weapon, before you lose it?”

The corporal looked offended, but he put the weapon on the floor and came back to the counter. He reached underneath and brought up a small wooden box the size of a shoebox. He took out the half a dozen chits that were in it and started to examine them, holding them close to his face. Jenson reached forward and taking them from his hand turned them up the right way. He put them back into the shoebox just retaining the one he had himself signed two odd hours ago. He held it out to the corporal.

“Sign it.”

The corporal laboriously signed his name and gave it back to Jenson, who studied the scrawl in front of him for some time before putting in his pocket and heading for the door, shaking his head as he went.

“Christ” He thought. “The beggars can't even write their names so what chance have I got?” He headed for the sergeants mess.

Although the building was still called the Sergeants Mess, in these days of reduced manpower all the non-commissioned officers now used it. When Jenson arrived there were only five people in it including the barman and the other four were playing darts. He signed for a bottle of beer and then went and turned on the short wave radio in one corner of the room and finding the BBC World Service he settled down to wait for the football results. Sergeant Jimmy Curtis rumoured to be the oldest sergeant in the British Army, left the dart players and came and sat beside him, putting another bottle of beer down on the table by his first one. Jimmy's lived in face was creased in what he evidently thought was a conciliatory look as he pushed it across the table to Jenson. He cleared his throat nervously and then began on the speech that the lowest score with three darts had decided he should make to Martin Jenson, first pushing the fresh beer closer to the other man.

“Have one on me.”

He hesitated and waited for Jenson's response. None came and the silence built. Curtis could stand it no longer.

“Look, I know you're the top sergeant here, Martin, but don't you think it would be polite if you at least said hello to the rest of us when you come in. After all, there are only two hundred of us in the whole bloody country now and it doesn't do to fall out with your mates, you know.”

Jenson turned to him.

"I'm sorry, Jimmy, but sometimes I wonder what we are doing here trying to make soldiers out of these thick bastards. I really do."

Jimmy Curtis glanced around anxiously to the black barman, but his attention was on the other three non-commissioned officers still playing darts in the far corner.

"You want to keep those comments to yourself, Martin. You could get the rest of us in trouble if they are heard and reported and I wouldn't want the squaddies here to think we all felt the same way about them as you do."

Jenson glared at him.

"These buggers wouldn't have lasted ten bloody minutes in the Falklands and you know it. They are fucking hopeless."

He glared in the direction of the barman who was still watching the dart players while absent-mindedly polishing a pint mug. Curtis followed his look before he replied, softly but firmly.

"No, I don't know it. They are a bit lazy, but so are a lot of British squaddies I know and these people do live in a country far too bloody hot to be running around snapping to attention every time one of us walks by. Also, these are conscripts and that does make a difference. You weren't in when we had conscription in our lot, but just be glad we only have volunteers now."

"They are bloody idle and useless. They are morons. I could have walked off with the whole bloody armoury just now."

Curtis gave him an old fashioned look.

"They are also black and I think that's your problem. If you don't like them why the hell did you volunteer for this place? You would be better off at home or in Bosnia."

Jenson gave a strangled little laugh.

"Better off at home? There are more of these buggers in Bristol than there are here, and you have to almost call them Sir, these days."

He ignored the beer Jimmy Curtis had bought him and standing up straightened his uniform blouse before walking out, football results unheard. Curtis stared after him for some minutes and then picking up the unwanted beer walked over to rejoin the dart players shaking his head at their raised eyebrows of inquiry. They all knew that Jenson's problems were a slut of a wife and a deep-seated prejudice against anyone who wasn't white. Belize and its black conscripts just exacerbated his natural prejudices.

When Jenson reached his room he found a message pinned to the door saying that the C/O wanted to see him. He went inside and checked his appearance in the mirror before heading off across the square to the administration block. When he got there the orderly corporal snapped to attention and knocked on the C/O's door. A brusque voice answered immediately.

"Yes?"

"Sergeant Major Jenson is here, Sir."

The door opened and Major Harry Wallingford, the C/O's number two stood there looking unusually pensive and nervous. He ran a hand over his thinning hair and then rubbed it across his beak of a nose and thick-lipped mouth before speaking. Jenson always made him nervous with his Calvinistic self-righteousness.

“Ah, Sergeant Major Jenson. Please come in, please come in.”

Jenson knew it was bad news from the way he was being treated. Wallingford was usually a mean bastard who thought being pleasant to anyone under the rank of colonel was a sign of weakness and he always used only a mans rank to address him, never his surname. He walked past the Major into the office and stood to attention in front of the desk.

“Please sit down and relax, Jenson. This isn't a military matter.”

Jenson perched stiffly upon the edge of the only other chair in the room while Wallingford scurried behind his desk and took his own chair. Once more in the position from which he was used to commanding he squared his shoulders and reverted to form.

“Rather bad news I'm afraid, Sergeant Major. You have a young daughter I understand?”

Jenson's heart went cold and the icy spasm of fear he experienced showed clearly on his face. Wallingford caught it and responded. He waved his hands in a gesture of protest.

“Its all right, Sergeant Major, she's not dead or anything.” He stumbled on. “She's not even hurt. Well, not in the physical sense anyway.”

He ground to a halt. Jenson stared at him for some time waiting for him to speak until he could wait no longer.

“Don't you think you should tell me what's happened, Sir?”

Wallingford nodded and took a deep breath.

“I had a telephone call from Bristol Social Services about twenty minutes ago. It seems that your daughter told your wife she was going to stay with a friend, but actually went out to some dance.”

He stared down at the desk and then said in a quiet voice.

“It appears she has been raped.”

Shock went through Jenson like a spear. Alison? His little girl? Raped? He realised that Wallingford was still talking to him.

“So as you only have three weeks to go to complete your tour here before getting six weeks leave before your next posting, I have arranged for you to leave tonight on a RAF transport. It will give you three extra weeks to find out what really happened and sort things out. We can call it compassionate leave.”

He stood up, came around the desk, and opened the door, anxious to get rid of the Sergeant Major and his non-army problems as quickly as possible.

“The corporal has all the times and details so I will leave you with him. Good luck and I hope its all some terrible mistake.”

Still in shock Martin Jenson limply shook the Major's proffered hand and walked out of his office and unknown to him at the time, out of the British Army.

Annabelle Courtney-Jenson was sat at the breakfast bar in her modern, but tiny kitchen, drinking black coffee and sorting through the post she had just picked up from the front door mat. It was eight o'clock in the morning. She had been home for just ten minutes and her head was aching from a mixture of too much wine and too much noise from the all night disco she had attended the night before. Annabelle was a small, petite blonde with a page three figure, but at this moment in time she looked decidedly faded and out of focus. Removing the hated reading

glasses she drained the last of the now lukewarm instant coffee from her cup and shuddered at its bitterness. She shoved the bundle of bills and junk mail on the breakfast bar away from her in exasperation and rummaged around in her purse for her cigarettes and lighter. There was no noise from upstairs and she wondered if Alison was in the house or if she had been out at a friend's place for the evening. She knew she could no longer control her, if she ever had been able to and had given up trying. She sighed and poured some more of the black coffee into her cup and lighting her cigarette reluctantly gave some thought to her wayward child.

The social worker had been absolutely scathing when she had come to visit her after the Metal Heaven business. She made it quite clear that not only did she expect Annabelle to know any family Alison said she was going to stay the night with, but that she was also expected to check that she had actually been invited before allowing her to leave the house. She blew her cheeks out in an expression of disgust. What did they think she was, the bloody Gestapo? She could just imagine her daughters reaction if she found her spying on her like that. She would probably move out and take all Annabelle's best clothes with her, while she, Annabelle, was slaving away in that rotten boutique. She wouldn't mind betting that the bloody Social Worker couldn't have managed to control her any better than she could.

What the child really needed they said, was a stable family life with both parents at home. Annabelle had scoffed at that. What she needed and had always needed, was hers fathers belt across her backside, but he was always too soft to do it. God knows she had felt the weight of her father the Colonel's strap a few times as a child and it had never done her any harm. At least she hadn't been a gang banging an entire rock group while she was still at school. At this she smiled to herself. She had done her share of banging afterwards though, once she had thrown off the shackles of her girl's only, private school education. It took her mind back to last night. Her daddy, the Colonel, would be absolutely furious if he knew she was having it off with his own adjutant. The thought gave her a secret glow and she made another effort to sort the mail out.

She started to put them into piles, junk mail to the left and bills etc to the right. Halfway down she came across a letter addressed to her with the crest of the Royal Marines on the envelope. She wondered what they wanted now. She thought they had given up on getting her involved in the regiment's activities long ago, when it became plain that the only part of it that she had any interest in were the younger and better looking officers. She opened it and read it, her mouth dropping open in disbelief and her half smoked cigarette dropping down the front of her nightdress, causing a frantic leap to her feet to retrieve it before it ruined the material. She read it again desperately hoping she had got it wrong. It still read the same. Not only had the interfering bastards told Martin about Alison and her gangbang, but they had given him compassionate leave as well. He would be here within twenty-four hours, God, how she hated the bloody army.

It was her own fault. Her father had told her that if she insisted on marrying an enlisted man she could no longer look to him for anything in life. He had not sent her to private schools and finishing school just to see her throw herself away on some piece of Scottish beefcake. Her mother, a duke's daughter, had merely been

a frosty silent elegance that had refused to talk to or admit the existence of her daughter, from the day she announced her engagement to an enlisted man. With nowhere else to go they had gone to live with Martin's parents in their tiny council flat in Aberdeen until the wedding. If she was honest she had known then that she was making a mistake. A council flat in Aberdeen in the middle of winter had almost convinced her that her father was right, but her stubborn streak and the fact that she was by then four months pregnant and an abortion at that stage may have been dangerous to herself, had decided things for her and they were married. Since then her father had thawed enough to admit to her existence, but her mother still totally ignored her and her husband and daughter.

Martin had been hurt and angered by her parent's attitude. He had always been brought up by his own socialist parents to believe that bloodlines didn't matter, because it was the man himself and his achievements that counted. The only previous contact either of them had ever had with the British aristocracy was when his own father was in the army and that was not quite the same thing. An ordinary chap could be treated a lot more as an equal when you were his superior officer as he still had to do as he was told. Out of the army the same was not true. It had been a rude shock to Martin when he had been transferred down south to England and met and fell in love with Annabelle, only to find that her parents totally rejected him because of his background. The other thing that had shocked him was the amount of black faces the country had.

Before his father had gone to work on the oilrigs and they had moved to Aberdeen, they had lived in a small agricultural community and the only black faces he had seen were on television. Now he seemed to be surrounded by them and he didn't like it. Their attitudes and culture were foreign and distasteful to him and with his Calvinistic background he always felt immediately superior to any one who did not share his religion and nationality, let alone his colour. Any blacks that joined his regiment had a rough time coming as his naturally assumed British superiority complex over the natives came out.

When they had moved to near Bristol with its Large West Indian community Martin Jenson had hated it and would not even go shopping with his wife on a Saturday afternoon in case he had to rub shoulders with them. He himself could not explain why he felt the way he did for in most other things he considered he was a moderate and reasonable man who was always prepared to listen to the other persons point of view. Except on matters of religion, politics and women's rights that is. It was not really his fault. He was merely carrying on the rules his parents had lived by. His mother had no time for women's rights and the only use she ever made of them was to cast her votes as her husband told her. Added to this Jenson didn't really like the English, was fiercely pro an independent Scotland and consequently was very lonely away from his birthplace.

These attitudes combined with the strains of living on the army base in its shabby married couples accommodation, the attitude of Annabelle's parents to their marriage and Annabelle's own refusal to realise that their income was limited, had seen things had go from bad to worse between them until he had volunteered for service abroad at every chance he got. That meant Annabelle had become very isolated on the great big army base left on her own with just a small

daughter for company for months on end and had eventually succumbed to the blandishments of a young lieutenant.

That had been the start of it and a string of affairs with the junior officers had started despite the dangers to their careers, as Annabelle was very good at sex, a thing her puritan husband with his limited sexual experience had never realised. Martin Jenson had eventually found out about her adultery, but to her surprise had ignored it. He seemed pleased to be just left alone to get on with his soldiering. She sighed. Not this time though if she was any judge. This time Alison was involved and some of the men were black. This time the shit would hit the fan and they would all share it.

Chapter 7

The voice wasn't loud but cut clearly through the morning air.

"Which of you is Fairbrother?"

The tone of voice used had been that of the boss talking to one of the labourers. The six West Indians grouped around the bright red and immaculately restored 1950 Ford Pilot V8 had stared at the well-built white man who had asked the question and then all looked to Rasta, waiting to take their cue from him. The barrel-chested panel beater come rock drummer had turned his head to take a long look over his shoulder at the man and then went back to explaining the changes he had made to the car, deliberately ignoring him. Who the fuck did this guy think he was using that tone of voice to him? Cheeky bastard. The man waited three seconds for an answer and then stepped forward and with a vicious swing his right foot, kicked the left rear wing of the car, the rubber sole of his highly polished boot leaving a long dirty black streak on the until then, pristine paint work. All seven of them had then turned back to him, now giving him their full attention, their eyes suddenly hard and angry, their voices a chorus of surprised and indignant protest. The man had merely smiled grimly at them.

"That's better. Now I have your attention shall we try again? I said which of you bastards is Fairbrother? Rasta Fairbrother."

The others started to move towards the man in a group, but Rasta had put out his arm to stop them. Nobody did that to his work right in front of his eyes. This prick was his. He bent down and made a show of examining the mark the man's boot had made on his precious paint job. It had scratched right through the six layers of paint and into the primer, ruining over one hundred hours of painstaking work. He'd straightened and turned to face the other, a scowl on his face. His voice when he spoke was full of barely suppressed anger.

"Mister, I'm Rasta Fairbrother and that's gonna cost you money or blood, its your choice."

Behind him he could hear the chorus of "Yeahs" as the brothers backed his move. He smiled at the man with the smile of the hungry tiger, hoping the guy would choose blood. The man didn't seem at all phased by it.

"My name is Jenson. Does that mean anything to you?"

Rasta shrugged his big shoulders. His voice when he spoke reflected his complete disinterest in who this prick was.

“No. Should it?”

Rasta heard enjoyed the brother's laughter behind him and without taking his eyes off Jenson, gave a grin. The man grinned back, but it didn't reach his eyes.

“You cast your mind back, black boy. You cast your mind back to the 6th of August when you and the rest of your shitty band raped my daughter.”

Rasta relaxed. “So that was what it was about. This man was the girl's father. Where the hell had he been for the last three weeks?” If this confrontation was to happen he had expected it a couple of weeks ago. He looked at the man. In his late thirties, about three inches taller than he was and quite well set up, but he knew he could take him. After all, he was the only man he knew that could lift the front of a Ford Focus off the floor without help. This fucker had a shock coming. Remembering the damage to his precious V8 he decided to wind him right up before he smashed his face in. He leered at the man.

“Yeah, I remember her. As a rule I prefer my pussy black, but for a white whore she was pretty good.”

Sniggers came from the brothers and Rasta waited for the man to lose his temper and rush him, but he only lifted his foot again and kicked out the glass from the rear light of the Ford. The glass that was practically irreplaceable. In the strained atmosphere of the garage the sound of the pieces hitting the floor sounded unnaturally loud. Rasta's temper surged.

“Right, you motherfucker!”

With the encouraging cries from the brothers ringing in his ears he launched himself at Jenson, swinging the meaty right fist with all his power. It never landed. Jenson stepped smartly to one side grabbing Rasta's wrist with his own right hand as it went by his right cheek. Then using Rasta's momentum combined with his own strength he had swung him round in an arc to the right and straight into the framework of the garage door, splitting his lips and breaking his nose. Without letting go of the arm he pulled him back towards him and then kicked him on the inside of his right thigh just above the knee, causing the right leg to shriek in agony as it suddenly refused to support his weight any more. Still holding onto his arm he swung the boot as Rasta fell, a vicious kick to the lower rib cage just above the kidneys that took away his remaining strength along with his wind and cracked bones. God knows what else he would have done to him if the others hadn't piled in and dragged him off, finally managing to force him back out into the street. Several of them had felt the weight of Jenson's feet and hands as they did so and upon releasing him they had retreated back into the garage, rubbing their bruises and grabbing up whatever was metal and heavy, to make sure he stayed at a distance.

Martin Jenson had stood in the street like a stag at bay with his chest heaving, although not from his effort as he had hardly made any, just from anger and emotion. The brothers had stayed crouched in a semi-circle just inside the garage door, clutching at spanners and wrenches and any other weapon they could find to protect Rasta, themselves and the Ford V8 from further damage. The face off was still in operation some thirty seconds later when the Panda car arrived, called

by a local shopkeeper who had seen what could happen to the local shops when this sort of aggression went unchecked.

Jenson had refused to leave and eventually another police car had arrived. It had taken all five of the policemen to get him into the back of a Panda car, at least that's what they told Rasta later. He himself wasn't seeing or hearing that well at that point in time, lying on the garage floor with his head spinning and suffering agony from his nose and kidneys. When the police had come to interview him later it had turned out the bastard was a weapons and unarmed combat specialist instructor in the Royal Marines. Jesus! He was just glad he hadn't been alone when the man had arrived at his garage. The very thought of what might have happened then turned his blood cold.

MacAllister had seen the man being brought in kicking and struggling as he had arrived at the station twenty minutes earlier and he had stayed in his car until they had got him safely inside. Anyone who needs three uniformed constables to get him out of the back of a car and into the station while handcuffed was a rough handful and MacAllister had for some years left the rougher stuff to his subordinates and younger colleagues, except when he felt there was a point to prove or it was a villain he particularly disliked. He gave them a couple of minutes to get the tall, dark, well built man into the holding cells and then followed them into the building. The three constables were just returning from the holding cells area as he approached the Custody Sergeant's desk, rubbing their bruises and grumbling amongst themselves as people do. Wally Stoner was the duty sergeant and they had known each other for many years. MacAllister decided to wind Stoner up a bit. A thing he was good at.

"Looked like a rough handful that one, Wally, but I reckon your blokes are not what they were. Three of them to bring one villain in."

Wally looked up from the charge sheet he was processing and took in the others new suite that for once did not look as if it had been slept in. MacAllister could see he was not in the mood to be amused.

"Five, actually. The other two are in the first aid room having their bruises looked at. Plus the fact that we have now got most of St Paul's stirred up good and proper."

MacAllister blinked.

"St Paul's? If it happened on their patch what the hell did they bring the bugger here for? On our wanted list, is he?"

Wally Stoner read from the sheet in front of him.

"Name; Martin Jenson. Occupation: Sergeant Major, Royal Marines. Offence; Assaulted one Reginald "Rasta" Fairbrother, breaking his nose, fracturing two of his ribs and dislocating his left arm, as well as causing sundry bruises and contusions to a variety of Fairbrother's neighbours who came to his aid. Connection with previous crime; Jenson is the father of one Alison Jenson."

He looked up, his expression one of total smugness.

"Ring any bells."

MacAllister gave a deep sigh and nodded.

"Yes. That's the girl who accused four of them of raping her. I thought her old man was in Belize."

Stoner shrugged.

“Obviously not any more.”

“Was Fairbrother the only one he's had a go at, Wally?”

Stoner relaxed, he'd almost had his revenge.

“As far as I know, John. Of course, from the way he was going at Fairbrother the other three could already be dead.”

MacAllister jerked. That wasn't funny.

“Don't even joke about it, Wally. Get someone to call the Polytechnic and see if they are all right. Give the Sergeant Major half an hour to calm down and then take him to interview room three. I'll get Clive Sayers and Marcus Lomax as back up just in case he runs amok again.”

He walked off and Stoner called after him, enjoying himself now.

“Do you want them to draw arms? That black bloke he creamed is one of the local hard cases and he just took him apart, and in front of half a dozen of his mates as well.”

MacAllister just stopped and stared back at the other man, his own humour now suddenly gone astray, but Stoner just grinned at him. Strangely enough he was feeling much better now that Inspector MacAllister had the problem

When MacAllister entered interview room three some forty minutes later, Jenson was sitting quietly, the handcuffs had been removed and he was smoking a cigarette. Marcus Lomax and Clive Sayers were standing, one behind him and one to the right. Both safely out of range should he explode again. MacAllister pulled out a chair at the other side of the table, spun it around and sat down with his legs spread and leaned his elbows on its back. Jenson took in the brilliant blue eyes the broken nose and the sardonic twist to the lips of the other man in complete silence. MacAllister leaned back on the chair and relaxed. He grinned at the Sergeant Major, an inquisitive grin.

“Well, Martin, what's it all about then, laddie? By my count you could be facing assault charges on half a dozen civilians and three police officers. It has to be a good story, old son.”

He spoke softly and reasonably, hoping his Scots accent might strike a chord with his fellow national. It didn't.

“Don't patronise me, copper. The name is Mr Jenson or Sergeant Major Jenson and that black bastard raped my daughter.”

MacAllister stared at his fellow Scot for some moments while he tried to make up his mind if the other was up to hearing the truth about his daughter. When he spoke again his voice was even softer. He ran his long fingers with the short cut nails through the curly hair. He shrugged.

“That's not proven or likely to be and I think your daughter was not entirely innocent in the matter. She already admits having it away with Jason Goodwell in front of the rest of them.”

Jenson sneered at him. He sat up and leaned across the table causing the two detectives by the door to stiffen in reaction while MacAllister never even blinked.

“I suppose you are afraid to nail the bastards in case they report you to the race relations board. Afraid they might start giving a hard time to your boys in St Paul's. That police station you have there is already built like a bloody fortress; so

don't tell me you're not expecting trouble sooner or later. It hasn't even got any windows in the ground floor. How long are we going to take it from these bastards.”

He ground his cigarette out in the ashtray and immediately lit another while MacAllister started become angry with the other man. He thought it was time to tell him a few home truths. He kept his face carefully neutral while he did so, although the voice was now harder.

“Listen to me. Your daughter admits that she went to their band bus with the sole reason of having sex with Jason Goodwell. She also admits that this took place in front of the others and that she made all the moves. Then she says they all held her down and raped her. They in return claim that after she'd had Jason Goodwell they gave her fifty pounds to let the rest of them have her and that she agreed, and fifty pounds was found in her purse.”

He stood up and waved an arm in a movement that took his two colleagues in.

“What the hell do you think we can do? She had no cuts and bruises and there is no evidence that she wasn't a willing partner with the whole band. She wouldn't be the first girl to turn groupie and its four people's word against hers and no evidence to the contrary.”

Jenson sneered again and blew smoke over MacAllister.

“Then why would she report them for rape. You tell me why because it doesn't make sense.”

With difficulty MacAllister ignored the smoke in his face.

“I can't answer that, Mr Jenson. All I can say is that your daughter is not your usual fifteen years old. We have copies of her Social Services reports if you would care to read them.”

This brought Jenson to his feet and the two off them faced each other across the table like angry stags.

“What Social Services reports?”

MacAllister indicated to Lomax without taking his eyes from Jenson's.

“Marcus, get the reports for Mr Jenson will you.”

Lomax left the room and Jenson sat down and lit another cigarette from the one he was smoking, his dark brows drawn together in a scowl, his hands continually playing with his cigarette packet and matches. When Lomax returned he handed the file to MacAllister who then offered it to Jenson, but he shook his head as if afraid to touch it.

“You read it.”

MacAllister hesitated and then nodded. He had some sympathy for the man and the position he found himself in so he condensed it down to the bare essentials from the dispassionate, but highly descriptive prose in front of him.

“Eighteen months ago when Alison was still thirteen, she was found giving oral sex to one of the senior boys in the equipment cupboard of the gymnasium at her school. It seemed it was his reward for doing her maths homework. The school informed her mother, but as she refused to believe them, they also, in their own defence, called in the Social Services who took over the matter. They had Alison examined by a doctor and it was found that she was no longer a virgin. Alison, when questioned, said she had not been a virgin since her thirteenth birthday

party and that she couldn't say how many boys she had been with, but thought it was around ten or twelve. Do you want me to go on?"

Jenson had dropped his forehead down onto his folded arms and appeared to be in pain. He lifted up an agonised face and nodded.

"They then had her examined by a psychiatrist. The psychiatric report wrapped it up in a lot of long words, but our police surgeon says that what it all means is the only thing wrong with the girl is that she has an highly developed sex drive and sees nothing morally wrong in indulging it. In a country with a lower age of consent it wouldn't matter, but here, where it is set at sixteen, it causes her and us problems. In the end the only thing they could reasonably do was to warn her of the possible consequences and medical dangers and put her on the pill."

He closed the report.

"Now, Mr Jenson. If we took your daughter into court and accused those men of rape what do you think a good defence lawyer would do with this evidence."

He held it out in front of Jenson's face and answered the question for him.

"They would crucify her and you and your wife. It would probably wreck your career."

He paused.

"Personally, for Allison's sake I don't even want to charge them with sex with a minor, but I have no choice in that as it won't be my decision. I have five signed statements that all say it happened and its too late to change that."

He put both hands on the table in front of him and looked the other man squarely in the eyes.

"Your best bet would be to forget the matter and go home and give Alison your support. It looks as if she needs some help and advice."

Jenson stared back at him.

"You mean I should just let it go. That black bastard laughed in my face and told me my little girl was the best white arse he had ever had. I want to see him suffer for that."

MacAllister straightened up, the Kestrel look firmly stamped on his features.

"You're not listening, Mr Jenson. At the moment you can be charged with grievous bodily harm if Fairbrother decides to press charges and that won't help Alison, will it?"

He softened his voice again.

"Look, you drop the violence and go and support your kid and I'll see if we can get the assault charge dropped. I can't promise anything, but I don't think his friends would appreciate it if his stubbornness caused us to have a lot more men in the St Paul's area for a while. Might inhibit the free trade that goes on there. Until then you will be released on bail."

Jenson thought about it for a few moments and then nodded.

"If I agree, can I go now?"

Ten minutes later MacAllister stood with Marcus Lomax and watched him leave the building.

"I hope to heaven he keeps his hands to himself from now on, Marcus. He has been a weapon and unarmed combat instructor for about fifteen years and I wouldn't fancy the chances of those kids in that group if he decides to take

matters into his own hands again. Especially if next time he doesn't do it in broad daylight and in front of ten witnesses.”

He pulled at his lip thoughtfully.

“You ever get offered oral sex for doing some ones homework while you were still at school, Marcus?”

Lomax, young and new to the squad appeared embarrassed by the question. MacAllister didn't seem to notice that.

“No, neither was I. Your maths must be as bad as mine.”

Chapter 8

It was six o'clock in the evening a week later. MacAllister was in his office sorting out the hated paperwork when Jackie Ward put her head around the door and waved a copy of the local evening paper at him.

“Seen this Guv?” She drew the paper back from his reaching hand. “No you don't. That's how I got it.”

She opened it up and sorted out the page she was looking for. She read it in silence for a few minutes and then folded it up and put back it in her bag and smiled at him.

“Jackie, are you extracting the piss?”

“No, Guv, I am just refreshing my memory. Martin Andrew Jenson. Ring a bell?”

MacAllister nodded and sitting back let her enjoy herself.

“Well, it seems that when he told his regiment about his problems they saw the nasty publicity that could be coming their way and immediately offered him the golden bowler, which he grabbed. Early pension at fifty, that's ten years away for Jenson, and about two years salary in a lump sum straight away seems to be the average guess at what they gave him. Getting on for forty thousand in cash.”

She leaned back against the wall and smiled an even bigger smile.

“Well....”

“Bloody well get on with it Jackie and stop saying, Well.”

Jackie Ward just giggled at him, her eyes bright and merry.

“Well....”

MacAllister sighed and held his hands up in surrender and at his capitulation Jackie continued.

“Well, it seems that his wife's family had never approved of her marriage to a common or garden ranker because her Daddy is the Colonel of the regiment and Mummy's father is a full blown Duke no less and they have never spoken to him or their daughter since their wedding day. Then it turns out that while Jenson has been abroad, Annabelle Jenson has been having it away with half the regiment's junior officers, the latest being the colonel's own adjutant. Anyway, it seems that Jenson found out his wife was going off to see the adjutant at his flat last Monday night so he rang the Colonel anonymously and informed him that his adjutant was having it away with a ranker's wife. He also rang the local paper and they sent a reporter and a photographer along in time to witness the Colonel leaving the

adjutant's flat, so that in the paper tonight they have a nice clear photo of him dragging his daughter out of the building by the hair. Jenson has also sold his story to the Sunday papers for an undisclosed sum. You know the sort of thing. "Officer's frolics with enlisted man's wife forced him to abandon career". I understand Jenson has now gone off back to his family home in Scotland. Evidently given both mother and daughter up as a bad job."

She grinned at him. "Goodnight, Guv." and she was gone.

MacAllister put his head back and yelled.

"Marcus."

Marcus Lomax appeared in the doorway.

"Get me an evening paper and I don't care if you have to steal one."

He sat back in his chair and lifted his feet up onto the hated paperwork, the grin on his face almost from ear to ear.

"Well, well, well. Good for you my old son as that sure is a better way of sorting them out than getting arrested for GBH."

As he sat and read the paper that Marcus Lomax found for him he was totally unaware that on the third floor of the multi-storey car park across the road from the Bricewell police station, an elderly couple were handing over their money and jewellery to a man wearing a balaclava and a dark blue car coat and holding a ten inch kitchen knife. His cold grey eyes watching the valuables disappear into the carrier bag he was holding in his other hand until he was satisfied that he had it all. Then he asked them for their car keys and told them to turn round and face the barrier, which prevents people from driving through the four-foot outer wall of the car park and all the way down to the street below. When they finally plucked up the courage to turn around again the grey-eyed man was gone, along with their brand new Vauxhall Astra.

Alison Jenson sat and looked at her reflection in the mirror of her dressing table. She had just come back from a session with her Social Worker and the Social Services tame shrink. The gist of it had been that although her body had been violated she shouldn't allow them to hurt her mind. What the fuck did they know about it? They hadn't been them held face down across a dirty blanket while three of them had raped her and it wasn't them that had been questioned for hours in the bloody police station only to be told that those bastards were going to get away with it. Even her Dad had let her down. Oh yes, he had beaten that big black bastard up a bit, but then he had just pissed off back to Scotland and abandoned her with her mother. Scotland with me or stay with your mother he had said, but I am off.

Scotland? That meant some bloody cottage in the hills with no dances or discos and a load of thick country boys for company. She hated her mother's guts, but at least here she could see a bit of life and think about how she was going to repay those bastards in Metal Heaven. She couldn't do that in Scotland. She got up and went into her mother's bedroom and opened the fitted wardrobes. She often "borrowed" her mother's clothes as they were much more sophisticated than the clothes she was allowed. She passed quickly by the outfit she had been wearing on the night of the rape and was soon lost deciding what she was going to borrow for this evening.

Chapter 9

Bathed in the early morning sunlight the CID room was quiet and tranquil this summer morning. Jackie Ward was sitting at her desk by the window with her head bent over some paperwork that had been awaiting her attention for several days, the big grey eyes screwed up in concentration and the short blonde hair messed up from the continual running of her fingers through it. Her tongue could be seen peeping out of the corner of her mouth making her look like a rather mature schoolgirl struggling with the maths exam paper.

Marcus Lomax was the only other occupant in the room and he was pretending to be checking through a statement, but in truth he was giving more attention to the way the sunlight was silhouetting his colleagues breasts through the thin material of her summer blouse. She spoke to him without lifting her eyes from her paperwork, her big boned, Scandinavian looking face showing her irritation.

“Marcus, if you have got nothing better to do than stare at my tits would you mind going and getting me some coffee. Its like a bloody greenhouse in here and my tongue is sticking to the roof of my mouth.”

Lomax jumped and then grinned. The rotten bitch knew he fancied her like mad and delighted in playing hard to get, but he would get her in the end. He always did. Lomax was a little over six feet and good looking in a dark Celtic way. His accent had a trace of the Welsh valleys that no amount of elocution training had been able to eradicate. Since his arrival in Bristol some two months ago his success rate with the women police officers had been one hundred percent, until he had turned his attention on Jackie Ward. Here he had run into a brick wall. What he did not know was that the twenty-six year old detective had fancied him from the moment he had arrived. However, after she had watched him operate on the other WPC's for a few weeks, she had decided that she was not going to mix business and pleasure with this particular copper. It could only lead to heartbreak.

As Lomax left the room to go to the coffee machine she heard through the wood and glass partitioning that served as a wall, MacAllister arriving in his office next door. Although she could not see him over the top of the partitioning without standing, she saw the top two inches of the taller Lomax's head enter the office through the second door from the corridor and knew she would not be getting her coffee, arse licking had taken precedence. She signed the last of the hated paperwork and threw it into her out tray. Friday she was in court in the Alison Jenson case and she had better remind MacAllister about it. When he was involved with a murder case like the Morton case everything else left his mind.

She got up and went and knocked on the dividing door between the two offices. Now she was standing she could see through the upper glass section her boss's face and he did not look happy. She waited for him to notice her and then entered at his wave. She looked at the coffee in MacAllister's hand and then at the one that Lomax was drinking and suddenly she didn't fancy the big Welshman any more.

Jackie didn't like arse lickers much. She contented herself with giving Lomax a look that would have withered grapes on the vine and then turned her attention to MacAllister.

“Morning, Guv. I thought I had better remind you that I am in court tomorrow on the Jenson under age sex case. You remember? The fifteen year old and the local rock band.”

MacAllister ran a weary hand across his brow.

“Christ, Jackie, I should have told you this two days ago. That case has been dropped. The CPS considered it against the public interest and the interests of the girl. Her grandfather, the Colonel, has reunited with his daughter now that the Sergeant Major has bugged off back to Scotland and I am given to understand he has been pulling strings like mad to keep this out of court and the papers. Sorry.”

Jackie didn't know whether to be glad for the girl or angry that she had just spent half the morning preparing for a case that had been abandoned. Compassion for the Jenson girl won out.

“That's all right, Guv, to be honest I'm delighted. I couldn't see any good coming out of dragging it all through the court in the first place if we were not going to pursue the rape charge. Better for the girl and everyone else if this one is allowed to just fade away, I reckon. Of course if I had known I could have spent some of that overtime the Commander is always moaning about, doing something useful, but I'm sure you will explain it to him.” Point made she relented. “How's the Morton case going?”

MacAllister scowled and Marcus Lomax looked away out of the window as if he wanted no part of such a question.

“He is still maintaining self defence and now he has seen a solicitor he is getting very cocky with it.”

Jackie looked surprised.

“What about all those broken car lights then. Does he say that was self defence as well or is he claiming someone else broke them?”

MacAllister waved a hand towards a spare chair and dug some change from his pocket. It was a measure of his disturbance that he was offering to pay for something as his reputation was that of a man who was more than a little careful with his money.

“Marcus, why don't you go and get some more coffees and I will take the pair of you right through it. I have a nasty feeling about this one and if we don't nail this little animal John Morton is going to be kicking holes in this police force for the rest of his life. That was his only son laying on the pavement with his head caved in.”

Jackie Ward smiled inwardly because without knowing it MacAllister had struck a blow for women's lib by sending the chauvinistic Lomax and not her for the coffee. She had seen the expression on his face when MacAllister had given him the money and she knew it would come back to comfort her the next time she was passed over for promotion to sergeant.

Lomax took two minutes to come back with the coffee and she took hers gratefully. It was foul, machine made stuff, but she was parched. She moved her chair back away from the hot sunlight streaming through the window and Lomax

immediately got up and lowered the blind. Trust him to play the white knight, but she had his measure now.

Four minutes went by in complete silence, MacAllister seeming to have found something interesting in the bottom of his plastic cup so she tried to bring him back to the present. She crumpled her now empty cup and threw it across the room into a bin already more than half full of them.

“So what's the trouble then, Guv? What are you worried about? I thought we had a witness who had seen the whole thing?”

“Witness?” He shook his head doubtfully. “Gracie Blackmoor is seventy eight years old and doesn't have the best of eyes, but she did manage to identify Flinders in a line up and it was a really positive identification. That's not an issue the defence can, or will, argue with.”

Lomax now seemed to be finding something interesting about one of his finger nails so again she asked the question.

“What's the problem then?”

MacAllister snarled at her making her realise why Lomax had kept quiet.

“The problem, Jackie, is that she can't be sure if Morton was threatening Flinders with his jack handle or if he just still had it in his hand when he went to tackle him.”

He raised his hands in a gesture of helplessness.

“We know that the nice, red headed young man in the cells is going to claim self defence so Clive Sayers thought it as well to ask her if she was sure that Flinders just bashed him without provocation. Do you know what she said?”

Jackie didn't think he really wanted her to try and guess what Grace Blackmoor said so she just shook her head. MacAllister glared at her, the Kestrel looked burned upon his features.

“She said, and I quote because I can remember every bloody word, she said that Mr Morton was waving something about when he caught hold of the other man, but she didn't think he would have hit him with it. He was far too nice a man to go around hitting people and after all, his father is a Councillor.”

Jackie tried hard not to laugh, but she couldn't help it. The more she tried to stop it the more she laughed. Lomax moved away from her and made sure his own expression was carefully neutral. MacAllister glowered at her for a bit, but then he relaxed and waited for her to recover.

“You can see why his brief is pushing him for the self defence bit. All right, he might have been a bit naughty by smashing a few car headlights with his hammer, but he wouldn't hit any one with it. Not unless he was frightened.”

He stared down at his desk.

“Trevor Morton was over six feet tall and well built, while Flinders is only five feet eight, even if he is built like a little gorilla. Think about it. Not difficult for the defence to sow the idea that Morton might have been more than a little angry when he saw what Flinders was doing and attacked him with the first thing that came to hand. In this case, a car's jack handle.”

He stood up to leave. At the door he turned back into the room.

“I've got to go and try on my Morning Suit for the wedding or Jean will have my sweetbreads on a toasting fork. By the way, Jackie, it was you that had to go and tell the Wiltshires about their kiddie wasn't it?”

The Wiltshires had just lost a son to a perverted sadist that some well-qualified and socially aware person had let out of a mental hospital as cured.

“Me and Clive Sayers, Guv”

“Well the shrinks have just finished examining that animal that killed him. He will be sent to Broadmoor in the morning and I doubt if anyone will be silly enough to let him out again. I don't suppose that will be a great comfort to the Wiltshires though, do you?”

He picked up his jacket from behind the door and left. Marcus Lomax looked at her and shrugged and then he too stood up, shaking his head.

“You would never believe that his only daughter gets married in a few days time the way he carries on. His wife must forget what he looks like at times. Oh well. Better get on with some work then I suppose.”

Jackie Ward gave him an angelic smile.

“Why don't you say that to him then, Marcus?”

Lomax at least had the grace to blush and satisfied, she went back to her desk.

MacAllister had got no further than the main entrance when the desk sergeant called him. He went over to the desk with a look of resignation on his face.

“Is this important, Andrew?”

Sergeant Andrew Davies looked at him with the air of one who wasn't going to be hassled by a mere CID inspector with less time in than he had. Not after thirty-three years on the force.

“You tell me, Mac.”

He pointed out into the waiting area. The person he had indicated was in his early sixties and looked well nourished, but not fat. Sleek would have been an accurate description. He was expensively dressed in a dark blue woollen overcoat that would have cost the average copper a week's pay and wore handmade black shoes, polished like glass. He was of medium height although he was made to look smaller by a head that seemed too large for its body. It was covered in a bushy mane of iron-grey hair that matched his Dennis Healey style eyebrows. The eyes could just be seen as glints of light in the deep-set sockets and his whole body language said confrontation. MacAllister closed his eyes to see if he was imagining it, but when he opened them again the man was still there.

“Councillor, bloody John Morton. That's all I need.”

He turned to see Andy Davies unsuccessfully trying to smother a grin. He shrugged.

“Oh well. I might as well get it over with and you can take that grin off your face as well, Davies.”

He lifted the flap in the counter and walking through held out his hand in greeting.

“Councillor Morton! What can I do for you, Sir?”

He was careful not to smile. This man had just lost his only son in the most terrible circumstances and would not take kindly to inanities. The Councillor ignored the outstretched hand and stood up. He was of an equal height to MacAllister and the two looked each other squarely in the eye. Neither smiled and it was obvious that Morton had done his crying and was now about to put his weight behind the conviction of his son's murderer.

"I came to see what the situation is with the Flinders case and to see if I could have a private word with you, Inspector. Is there somewhere we can talk?"

MacAllister looked around and saw Andy Davies ears straining like a radar receiver trying to catch every word. He turned back to John Morton.

"You had better come through to my office where we can talk without half of the station hearing us." He turned to Andy Davies. "Give my lot a buzz and ask one of them to pop around to the coffee shop and get myself and the Councillor some decent coffee, will you please, Andy?"

He lifted the flap and motioned his visitor through.

When they entered the CID room MacAllister made no effort to introduce his visitor to Marcus Lomax and Jackie Ward, he didn't need to. There wasn't a member of the force in Bristol who didn't already know Councillor John Morton, the law and order councillor. Morton was a right wing Tory of the old school whose views would have often made Margaret Thatcher look like a wimp. With this present New Labour government he appeared to be somewhere to the right of Genghis Khan, but to be fair MacAllister himself wasn't entirely out of sympathy with some aspects of his shoot them and flog them attitudes. He himself was fed up with arresting the same criminals every other year as some kind hearted parole board released the buggers back onto his patch, although he would never have told the councillor that. It would be too tempting for him to then go out and announce to all and sundry at some political meeting that the local CID were in favour of his views. They went through into his office where he pulled out a chair for the other man and tried to remember that however much in the past this man had unfairly castigated the police force for his own political ends, he had just lost his son.

Marcus Lomax came in with the coffee. Jackie hadn't argued with him when he volunteered to go and fetch it, as she knew he would wait a long time for the Guv to pay him for them. She had been caught enough times herself until she learnt her lesson. She would have liked to be able to hear what was being said in the next office and went over and opened the top drawer of the filing cabinet closest to the connecting door in pretence of looking for a file, but MacAllister closed the door firmly. He then went around his desk to his own chair and sitting down put both hands palm down on the desk in front of him.

"Well, Councillor. What can I do for you that is not already being done, that brings you all the way over here?"

This was veiled sarcasm because the council chambers were less than four hundred yards away. However, for all his complaining about the poor efforts of the police to maintain law and order in the city, the Councillor had never taken up their invitation to come and see at first hand what they were up against. Morton had the grace to look uncomfortable for a moment, but not for long. After all he was a politician.

"How are you doing in the Flinders case?"

It was obvious he could not bring himself to call it the Trevor Morton case, as it was filed in the CID office. MacAllister stared at him.

"You know how we are doing, Councillor, because you are on the police board and you used your position to ask the Chief Constable to find out for you. That was only two days ago."

Morton wriggled, but it would have taken more than that to make him really feel uncomfortable. You didn't build an engineering works employing fifteen hundred people in less than twenty years by being easily flustered. Nor did you become a local councillor if you embarrassed easily.

"I know that and he said that you thought that Flinders would claim self defence."

"Quite so. After all, your son did have a fairly substantial bit of metal in his hand at the time of the incident in the shape of a jack handle. Any brief worth his salt is bound to try for self defence."

The other's veneer of sophistication shattered and the man who had built up a business and fortune with only the skill of his hands and the sweat of his brow was revealed. A man who had not hesitated to take whatever measures he thought he could legally get away with to obtain an advantage over any opposition, man who was seething with hatred at the killer of his only child and heir.

"Of course he had a bloody jack handle in his hand. He had just been changing a wheel for Christ's sake. That doesn't alter the fact that the other bastard was walking around armed with a bloody great hammer. Damn it all man, he even carries it in a special holster."

MacAllister reflected that the Chief Constable had been a bit too free with his information and that Morton must have used his Masonic clout on him.

"We know that, Councillor, but he will say he was only carrying it as a burglary tool and he was. I don't suppose when he left home he intended to kill someone with it."

Morton put a thumb to his lips and chewed it savagely. MacAllister waited for whatever it was he was trying to make up his mind to say, the silence stretched on for several seconds, and then.

"Trevor wouldn't come into the business with me you know. Knew he wasn't cut out for it. He was too pleasant and easy going for the cut and thrust of commercial life. It was our fault I suppose, his mother and I. Loved him too much and protected him from the realities of life. All he ever cared about was his rugby and cars until Jane came along. Even then he was quite happy selling cars for a living. Didn't have an enemy in the world that I ever heard of and now some little thug has killed him because he tried to protect his neighbour's property."

His voice grated and the slight northern accent became stronger.

"Look, Inspector, what I want to know is if there is any way we can make sure that he gets what's coming to him?"

"Councillor, nothing would give me greater pleasure than to see that evil little sod hanging from a rope or locked up for the rest of his life. However, we have one old lady witness and some forensic evidence. I think we can expect manslaughter at best. If your son hadn't been carrying that jack handle I think we could have made murder stick, but under the current circumstances it will take a miracle."

Morton looked shocked.

"How long will he get for that?"

"Five years, tops." He held his hand out to stop the outburst. "I know, its nothing for wiping a mans life out, but that's the way it is."

He softened and let the hand drop to Morton's sleeve.

"I'm sorry."

Morton pushed his hand away, roughly.

“Don't give me your bloody sympathy because I don't want it, but I'm telling you that one way or another that bloody animal will pay for what he did to Trevor. Even if I have to wait for years I will get that little bastard. Isn't there some way we can make sure he gets tried for murder.”

MacAllister didn't reply for several seconds.

“Do you mean, rig the evidence, Councillor?”

Morton's face went bright red as he finally allowed the true purpose of his visit to come out.

“If necessary, yes. Damn it. All we need is one witness and I think I could arrange that.” he glowered. “Or for someone to sort him out if the police can't manage it.”

MacAllister shook his head gently.

“I will do you a big favour and pretend I didn't hear that, Councillor, but remember this. The law applies to all of us and if something happens to Flinders and it is traced back to you, it will be you in the dock, not him.”

Morton stood to leave, but he didn't offer his hand. He just picked up his hat and walked out of the office without a backward glance. Lomax and Ward watched him go and then busied themselves with their paper work as MacAllister walked out of his office and left without a word to either of them.

“I suppose that being the boss does have its drawbacks as well as its privileges.” Lomax said, with a big grin on his face. Jackie was not amused.

“Listen Marcus. MacAllister a good Guvnor and what goes wrong for him goes wrong for all of us. He's under a lot of pressure at the moment. He's got a murder case on his hands and his only daughter is getting married on Saturday. That's not a combination you would choose to have if you had any sense. I hope if you ever make Inspector, which is unlikely if you go around grinning every time your boss gets a problem, you remember MacAllister and try to make as good a job of it has he does.”

Lomax backed away from her and raised his hands in a gesture of surrender.

“Steady, Jan, steady. Don't blow your stack. I didn't realise you had such a strong case of boss fixation. I thought that only happened to secretaries, not hard bitten police detectives.”

“Piss off you arrogant, chauvinistic, Welsh prick.”

Lomax grinned.

“I think that is a very racist remark, Detective Ward.”

“Bollocks.”

She picked up her jacket and her handbag and stormed out of the room. Lomax grinned at her disappearing back and turned back to the file on his desk. He didn't hear Sergeant Clive Sayers enter the room until he stopped two yards in front of his desk. He jumped at his sudden appearance and the colour rushed to his face. Sayers walked over and sat down sideways on the edge of the desk, knocking some of the paperwork to the floor. He didn't seem to notice he had done it. He looked Lomax in the eyes for some long seconds before he spoke.

“How long have you been with us, Marcus?”

Lomax managed to produce a smile when he answered.

“About six weeks I suppose, Sarge.”

“Yeah. That's what I make it as well. Slow learner are you, Marcus?”

Lomax looked indignant at this.

“I don't think so, Sarge. Why? What's your problem?”

“You are my friend. You're the problem. I think its time you and I got a few things straight.”

Lomax allowed a small smile patient smile to appear on his face. He sat back in the chair and folded his arms.

“Going to give me the benefit of your experience are you, Sergeant.”

Sayers smiled back, but there was no friendship or humour in it.

“I don't think so, Marcus. You don't seem to have the ability to absorb it, so what I am going to do is give you an instruction that you are going to obey, that is if you want to stay on this squad.”

The smile vanished from Lomax's face as he unfolded his arms and sat up straight in the chair. Sayers leaned over the desk and with his left hand pushed him back into his again seat and held him there, his face was only about twelve inches away from the other mans and the fact that the tall athletic Lomax was nearly six inches taller and about two stone heavier didn't seem to worry him. For when he spoke his voice was calm and level.

“Since you have been here you have been licking MacAllister's backside as if it was chocolate flavoured. Now that's all right with me, as I know the Guvnor is quite capable of sorting you out if and when he gets tired of it. That is between you and him. However, you have also been treating Jackie Ward as if she was the office girl and only here for you to chat up and talk down to because she wasn't born with a set of testicles.”

He took his hand from Lomax's chest and stood up. Lomax remained where he was, sat back in his chair and Sayers continued.

“That will stop. She is a good copper and she has been in CID for four years. In that time she has arrested some right hard bastards and once stepped in and stopped a little thug who called himself a football supporter, from breaking my head with an iron bar. She is senior to you in service and experience and if this world were an honest place she would be a sergeant by now. So in future you treat her with the same respect you want for yourself or I will sort you out. Your choice.”

His voice was gentle, but there was no mistaking his meaning. Lomax had the good sense not to speak. He just nodded his head a couple of times. Sayers nodded back and went over to his desk. He sat down and picked up the top paper in his in tray with a heavy sigh. Lomax went back to his own files and silence filled the office.

Chapter 10

It was early morning and the eastern sky had taken on the deep red streaks that often precede the actual sunrise. The Black Granada Scorpio was parked on the edge of the group of cars outside the Leigh Delamare motorway service station,

but not far enough away from them to draw attention to it. Inside it there were three men, all of who would have frightened your grandmother if she had bumped into them unexpectedly on a dark night. Two of them were brothers, but apart from that, the common trait between all of them was a willingness to commit violence for gain.

Darryl and Kevin Walker were from the Cheadle area of Manchester and came from a well-kept, upper middle class home, although they had not been welcome there for several years. Given all the advantages of a secure family background and the necessary income to prevent any hardship, they had become that most difficult to understand of all delinquent groups, the upper middle class gone bad. It is a category that drives all teachers, parents and social workers to despair and produces such terrorists as the Red Brigade and the Bader Mienhoffs, so it was fortunate for mankind that the Walkers were neither political nor very bright.

They were twins, although not identical and at the age of twenty-six, had between them had spent some twelve of their joint fifty two years detained in one or other part of the prison service. Their criminal records, which had started at the age of thirteen when they burgled several of their neighbours, now included car theft, shoplifting and robbery with menaces. For their last conviction they had beaten a man of sixty almost to death in his own home, while trying to find his none existent nest egg. For this they were given six years out of which they served four. The Manchester CID considered them dangerous and psychotic and on the morning in question they had been out of prison for just three months.

Elroy Masters, the third man, was from the Stretford part of Manchester. Elroy was mainly West Indian although he had a white grandmother. He had started his life of crime at the age of twelve when he would stand by the cash point machine in the city centre and smile at the people using it. They would grin back at the cheeky little black kid with the skateboard and all the elbow and kneepads to go with it and then go on their way. They would not realise that the chalk mark he had just made on their jackets would identify them to his four older brothers, waiting around the corner armed with flick knives, who would be able to relieve them of their newly acquired cash. Elroy of course got a share. Elroy had then been left alone at the age of fourteen when the said brothers all went down for two years apiece for their part in a burglary. Robbed of his income he had taken to stealing handbags from old ladies as they left the Post Office with their pensions and by fifteen he was in a juvenile correction centre.

At this current point in time he had spent nine of his twenty-eight years in prison and had vowed that what ever else happened in the future, he would not be going back. It was a measure of the Walker brother's own level of intelligence that they had invited him along on this occasion. He was not exactly stable or reliable, having developed a deep dependency on crack cocaine, but they had been specifically instructed to recruit a third man who would be expendable if things went wrong and they needed someone to take the fall.

Darryl Walker was sat in the back of the car with Elroy Masters, anxiously watching all new arrivals. His brother Kevin, sat behind the wheel, was reading one of the tabloids newspapers by the glow of the map light and the eerie half-light to be found just before the sun comes up. He did not seem to be at all worried. He glanced up at his twin in the rear view mirror and grinned to himself. Darryl got

very insecure if they operated far outside of Manchester and this far to the south probably seemed like a different planet to him. He went back to the sports report, enjoying the account of last night's humiliation of Arsenal by Manchester United. The silence dragged on.

"He's here."

There was obvious relief in the voice and Kevin folded up the paper and shoved it into the door pocket. Three spaces away a white Volvo 850 estate car had stopped and the driver was at the open boot taking out three sports bags. They looked new and one still had the maker's ticket hanging from the handle. The new arrival turned towards the Scorpio and Kevin leaned over and opened the passenger door. The man threw two of the bags over the seat into the back where the two passengers caught them. They were obviously empty. The third bag he left out on the car park by the side of the open door until he had folded his muscular six-foot frame into the passenger seat. Then he reached out and hauled it up onto his knees before closing the door. It seemed quite heavy. The fourth man was very different from the other three. He was black skinned, but not the black of the West Indies.

Mitael Khorta was of Somalian descent and his family were Christians. Fleeing from various persecutions against them some three generations or more earlier, they had arrived in Britain and founded their own little enclave in Bristol. The majority of them had since only married among their own tight knit community, occasionally importing a bride when necessary. As a result Khorta's skin was the blue black of Northern Africa and his features were much finer than those of his West Indian neighbours. The other unusual and startling difference was his eyes, which were a dark, but obvious, blue, a rare trait that had been even more rare in the past when such children were superstitiously killed at birth. Khorta was the brains behind this particular group and had planned the operation they were about to carry out. His first involvement in armed robbery had ended with him receiving a five-year prison sentence when he was arrested after another member had flashed his sudden wealth too soon and then grassed up his companions to get his sentence reduced. Since then he had forsaken working for others. These days he always sorted out his own jobs and chose his own companions when needed. In his time Khorta had planned and carried out some spectacular robberies, which had left the forces of law and order grasping at mist.

Khorta had made a lot of money in the ten years he had operated and had laundered it carefully through the stock market and the betting offices. His current problem was that several years ago he had decided to go really respectable and he had used the help of a well-connected acquaintance that had fallen on hard times to make the change. Through good name of this minor Lord of the Realm, Khorta had invested the vast majority of his money in Lloyds of London. Unfortunately for him this was just at the time when the insurance business was being taken to the cleaners and he lost his entire investment and more before he pulled out and left his front man to carry the can. Today's little jaunt was to put him back into the black and give him enough capital to start again in another business.

At thirty-eight he was the oldest of the four men and the definitely the boss. From his position in the passenger seat he turned to study the other three. He eyed Leroy Masters in the rear seat, who's hands and eyes were fluttering nervously and then his icy stare turned to Darryl Walker.

“Who is he?”

The English was precise and without accent. Kevin Walker, who was the more intelligent of the twins, saw immediately that Khorta was unhappy. He answered for his brother.

“Mitael, this is Leroy Masters. You asked us to get someone special and Leroy was free.”

“I asked you to get someone who would do as he was told and not ask questions. I did not ask you to bring me a junky”

Leroy Masters bridled.

“Who you calling a fucking junky, man. I don't have to take that shit from anyone.”

His hand was reaching forward to the door handle when an automatic pistol appeared under his nose as if by magic and Khorta's voice, soft with menace, filled the car.

“You make just one move and I will kill you where you sit. I know a junky when I see one and you carry all the signs. What are you taking, Crack?”

Masters clamped his mouth shut and turned to look out of the window. Khorta leaned over and banged the end of the barrel against his cheek just under his right eye.

“I said, is it Crack?”

The West Indian nodded, still staring out at the car park.

“Will you need to take some more to do this job?”

Another nod.

“Have you got some?”

Masters nodded again. Khorta sighed. It was partly his fault. He had asked the Walkers to find the fourth man for this job, as he did not want to use any of his own former acquaintances. Most of them were now in prison or retired now anyway. The result was that he was stuck with this piece of useless trash, as the job needed four men. He sighed and then nodded.

“OK, but you take it before we get there and you only have one smoke. I don't want any hyperactive clown on my hands. Do you understand?”

Masters nodded and looked relieved. Khorta turned back to Kevin Walker.

“OK, head for Swindon. When we hit the outskirts head for the new shopping centre down where the old engine works used to be. Drive into the multi- storey car park and park on the ground floor if you can. I have a Ford Transit there that we will use to do the job. OK, lets go!”

Nothing happened and Khorta remembered that these boys were from the north. He sighed.

“OK Kevin. Just get on to the motorway heading north and I will direct you from there.”

Charles Andrew Pardoe was a bank manager of the old school. Only ever seen in a pin stripe grey suit complete with silk pocket handkerchief, he only attended

personally to those clients with large balances or overdrafts, while the day to day customers he left to his Assistant Manager and the counter staff. However, today being a Thursday morning, despite his usual immaculate appearance he was a just a little nervous. His biggest and most valuable customer was the Chandler Mail Order Catalogue Company, situated some two miles away on the local industrial estate and Thursday was their wages day. Pardoe had other big stores and factories on his patch, but what made Chandler's different was that half of its some nine hundred employees worked in the warehouse and packing areas and insisted on weekly payment by cash in hand. That meant a large weekly cash pick up from his bank. The other half of Chandler's staff was paid monthly by credit transfer and for three weeks of the month he didn't have to worry about them. But this Thursday was the first of the month and the monthly staff had just received their pay slips. This meant that many of them would be in to cash cheques during the lunch hour. What with one thing and another he currently had more than four hundred thousand pounds on the premises. For a small branch it was a lot of money.

Pardoe glanced at his watch. Normally they came to collect the cash between half nine and ten o'clock, in order to give their own staff enough time to make up the wage packets for distribution to the work force at about four o'clock. However, when he had arrived at his office this morning the telephone had rung and the chief cashier of Chandler's had informed him that they would not be coming to collect the money until midday. The security company they used to collect the money had suffered more than the usual amount of mechanical trouble this week and were running late. He had suggested to the chief cashier that they send a car for the money, but all he had received in return was a flea in his ear. Chandler's paid a professional company to take those sorts of risks, not their office staff.

He glanced at his watch again, nine thirty and time to open the doors to the public. He was about to go out into the main banking hall when his phone rang again. It was the chief cashier at Chandler's again. They had changed their minds and would be sending an unmarked van along sometime in the next half an hour to collect the money. They didn't like doing it, but they had to if they were going to get the five hundred odd pay packets made up on time.

Charles Pardoe breathed a sigh of relief as he put the phone down. When he had first entered the banking world after leaving university he had been as ambitious as anyone else. His first position with the bank had been as a counter assistant in one of the big West End branches where promotion comes a lot faster than out in the sticks. He remembered that he had been working on the queries counter on that particular day when a man had come in to enquire about opening a business account. Pardoe had taken the enquiry to the Assistant Manager who had instructed him to bring the man along to his office, and he had done so. But after he had shown the customer into the Assistant Managers office and was turning to return to the enquiries counter, the man had produced a pistol. Holding it against Pardoe's head he had instructed the Assistant Manager to call in the Manager. The ensuing half an hour had been an agony for him as the man and his by now several accomplice's had methodically emptied the vault of all its high denomination notes. All the while it was happening the pistol was held gently, but firmly against Charles Pardoe's left ear. They had then left by the back door after

tying and gagging all the staff. Since then he had spent the next thirty-five years waiting for the other shoe to fall. What he didn't know was that today would be the day it happened.

He went out into the main banking hall, a pretentious name for a bank with only three service counters although being an old branch it did have a marble floor. He smiled and said good morning to Mrs Goldstone who was one of the clients he always saw personally. Her husband had twice been the Mayor and he had just retired after selling off one of the biggest private building firms in Swindon. He spoke to her twice, but she didn't even acknowledge him, her eyes fixed firmly on the door. He followed her stare and saw with some annoyance that the main door hadn't even been opened yet and it was a good five minutes past opening time. He turned to castigate his assistant and then stopped dead. How had Mrs Goldstone got in? The tap on his shoulder nearly killed him from heart failure. With trepidation he turned and saw the tall figure dressed in denims and a black leather jacket, wearing a ski mask over his head and wrap around sunglasses. He swallowed and tried to talk, but his throat was dry and scratchy from fear. The figure pointed the barrel of a pistol straight between his eyes and then spoke in a quiet even voice.

“Get the key and open the vault quickly and no one will get hurt. Play the fool or hero and people will probably die.”

He pointed to the main hall where another identically dressed figure could be seen and from his exposure to various TV programmes Charles Pardoe knew that what the man was holding was a pump action shotgun with the barrel sawn off halfway down. He looked around the other way and saw a third man behind the counter holding an identical weapon to the head of his Assistant Manager. It was happening to him again. He put his hand into his pocket and pulled out his keys. He indicated his assistant.

“David has the other key. The vault needs both keys to open it.”

The gunman turned to where the four female clerks were standing in a group against the office wall, white faced. He pointed to the eldest of them, a woman in her late thirties.

“Get the key from him and come with us.”

The woman went over and taking the key from David's trembling hand came to join them. The gunman visibly relaxed.

“OK, lets go do it.” And they headed for the rear of the building where the giant wall safe was situated.

In the main hall Mrs Rachael Goldstone just couldn't believe this was happening to her. All her life she had been protected from the nastier side of life. Firstly by her parents who had let her go only to private schools, and then by her husband, Solomon. How could this be happening to her? She had only come in to draw out a few pounds before going down to the butchers to order half a steer for the freezer. Jack Manning the butcher always gave her a five percent discount if she paid him cash. She suspected he only did it to fiddle his income tax, but why should that worry her and it made a trip to the bank worth it. As usual she had timed her arrival at the bank to coincide with opening time as she knew she could get served then without standing in any queue. She had not even seen the masked men, who must have been waiting for the doors to open before making their move. The first

she had known of it was when she heard someone tell her to freeze and she had turned to find herself looking down an enormous metal tube. When her shocked mind finally realised it was a gun barrel she had nearly fainted on the spot. She had recovered somewhat when she realised that the man was telling her that she would not be hurt if she faced the wall and kept still and quiet, but that had been quite a few minutes ago and now her sixty eight year old legs were getting tired of standing in one place supporting her sixteen stones. She felt her heart flutter and the tightening in her chest that meant she was about to suffer an angina attack. She could not reach her handbag as the masked man had taken it from her when he had turned her to face the wall and it was now on the floor somewhere behind her. She did not dare to turn around to try and get her pills so she began to try deep slow breaths in the way the hospital had taught her. She slowly lifted her right hand onto a nearby leaflet stand and gratefully allowed it to take some of her weight.

Stood by the main door Leroy Masters was desperate for another burn. The tall bastard that Kevin had called Cota, or Carter, had allowed him a quick pipe of crack before they had entered the bank, but the effect was wearing off rapidly. He felt the sweat pouring down his face under the woollen ski mask and tried to prevent his hands from trembling with the weight of the sawn off shotgun. A pity about the two customers, but the old woman and the kid had been waiting outside for the bank to open and had to be brought inside with the rest of them. He turned his head to study the kid who was stood facing the wall with his hands on his head as instructed. A tall black youth of about seventeen, he had not seemed at all phased when he was hustled into the bank by three armed men. He let his gaze stray over to where Darryl was holding the Assistant Manager and the remaining three counter clerks. One of the girls was a long legged, Marilyn Monroe type with blonde hair and a great pair of tits that would have kept anyone happy. He wouldn't mind giving her one. He let his imagination go to overtime rate.

As Mrs Goldstone lost consciousness her weight sent the glass shelved leaflet stand over. The sound of it hitting the old fashioned marble floor was deafening in the confines of the silent bank, it sounded like a cannon going off. Already twitchy from nervousness and drugs, Leroy Masters whirled around from watching the blonde girl and bringing the sawn off shotgun up all in one smooth motion, fired at the movement he could see from the corner of his eye. Mrs Goldstone, falling a split second behind the leaflet stand, was still only half way to the floor when the blast from the shotgun blew half her head away in a shower of blood, bone and brains and blue rinsed hair.

The following silence was broken only by the stifled scream and the muffled sobbing of the blonde as she stuffed her knuckles into her mouth to try silence herself. She was trembling violently while the rest of the staff stood frozen in shock like well made wax dummies. Masters looked down at what remained of Rachael Goldstone in disbelief and then spun around to Darryl Walker like a wild and frightened animal.

“It was an accident man, I didn't realise she was just fainting. You heard the crash. I thought a fucking gun had gone off. I couldn't help myself, I just reacted.”

“You stupid junky bastard.”

The icy voice came from Khorta who had raced back from the vault at the sound of the shot. Without hesitating he raised his pistol and shot Masters, who was backing away with the shotgun held out in both hands in front of him like a shield, straight through the right eye. The impact of a thirty eight-calibre bullet fired at such a close range blew out the back of Master's skull and drove the body over backwards. Hitting the marble floor it skidded along for several feet until it came to a stop and lay still on its back. From where the back of his head had been, a rapidly spreading red pool met and began to mingle with the blood of Rachael Goldstone. One of the counter clerks fell face down without a sound onto the hard floor in a dead faint, her skull making contact with the marble floor producing a sickening sound. All though a couple of them twitched, nobody moved to help her as the rest of the staff desperately ignored the incident and stayed frozen, trying their hardest not to draw the attention of the killers to themselves

"Lets get out of here."

Khorta moved towards the door lugging the two holdalls, one of them obviously much heavier than the other. Darryl Walker was still in a state of shock at the two sudden and violent deaths he had witnessed, but as Khorta moved rapidly towards the door he quickly backed out after him waving his shotgun at the shocked staff, none of whom had the slightest intention of trying to stop them leaving. Outside in the street Kevin Walker was sat in a dark blue Ford Transit van with the engine running. It had been almost four minutes since his colleagues had entered the bank and by now his hands were becoming slippery with nervous sweat. Then he'd heard the dull boom of the shotgun, followed by the sharper crack of the handgun and would have left there and then if his brother had not been inside. He almost wept with relief when the door opened and he saw them come out. He put the Transit into gear and gunned the engine.

As pre-arranged Darryl dived into the back of the van and Khorta threw the sports bags in behind him before shutting the door and racing around to the passenger door. He had opened it and was about to climb in when Kevin spoke.

"Where is Leroy?"

Khorta didn't waste words.

"Dead. Lets go."

The police constable came out of nowhere to hit him with a rugby tackle just below the waist and the two of them went down to the pavement. They struggled for several moments kneeling face to face on the pavement until Khorta lashed out with the pistol and caught the other a crashing blow to the temple, forcing him to let go and sending him flying onto his back. Scrambling to his feet again Khorta looked down and met the stare of the now frightened and half stunned copper. He was about to try and climb into the frantically revving Transit for a second time when he realised that in the scuffle with the law he had lost his dark glasses. He turned again and met the clearing gaze of the policeman who was now in a sitting position, holding his head to try and staunch the bleeding from the jagged wound the pistol had left.

"Sorry friend."

He raised the pistol and shot him twice in the chest. Then he climbed into the van.

"Lets get away from this fucking mess."

The Transit rocketed of down the road leaving twin black streaks of rubber. Eventually those few of the public who had witnessed the incident unfroze and started to move like a snapshot coming to life.

The return to the car park and the swap back to the Granada Scorpio, their original wheels, were made in absolute silence and without any further incident. By this time they had taken off their masks and were just three more men carrying sports bags, the world is full of them. The Transit was left parked on the very top floor of the car park where it would take a systematic search to find it. It was all completed in silence and they were clear of Swindon and back on the motorway in the Granada before anything further was said. Darryl, this time with the back seat to himself, had not been able to bring himself to look Khorta in the eye since the shootings. Kevin, again at the wheel, was made of sterner stuff. He waited until Khorta had finished counting the money before he spoke.

“How much?”

“A lousy one hundred and twenty thousand. There would have been nearly four hundred thousand if we could have had another couple of minutes.”

“What happened back there?”

“Your junky friend blew half of an old ladies head away when she was careless enough to faint. Ask your brother. Christ, don't you idiots know any better than to rely on junkies.”

Kevin protested.

“It wasn't all our fault, Mitael. We didn't know he was a bloody junky. You asked us to recruit someone that couldn't be traced back to us. We reckoned you always intended to kill the fucker anyway.”

Khorta scowled.

“Of course I did, but not in the bank for Christ's sake.”

“So why not wait until we were clear”

“When you work it out for yourself you will think yourself lucky I didn't. Can you imagine what would have happened when the copper jumped us? That smoke brain would have blown away half of Swindon with that pump shotgun.”

Darryl broke the ensuing silence.

“Did you intend to kill us as well then or was it just Leroy who was disposable. After all, he can't be traced back to you, but if anyone remembers us talking to him in the pub the other night, he could be traced back to us.”

It was a long speech for Darryl and he fell silent afterwards. Khorta turned and looked him directly in the face trying to hide his surprise that the man had managed to work out something that complicated. He wasn't usually that sharp.

“Don't be a bloody fool, Darryl. The only major job you two ever got away with was with me. Did I cross you up the last time? Stop worrying about him. He was a junky and they are unreliable. If he were in this car with us now you would already be worrying about him. Remember how much he just cost you.”

Darryl shrugged. The car was pulling into the motorway service station where they had left Khorta's Volvo. Khorta held up the two sports bags that held the cash, divided equally. The third bag with the weapons had already been dumped in the canal miles back, although they both knew Khorta had kept his pistol. Darryl took the bags and opened them. They seemed to hold equal amounts.

“We'll take the black one. Less noticeable than the bright red one.”

Khorta got out lugging the red bag.

“See you fellows some time.”

He waved his hand and walked away towards the Volvo. The Walkers raised their hands in return and Kevin dropped the car into gear and pulled away. Khorta watched them go and then climbed into his Volvo

The Walker twins were back on the M5 where it cuts through the outskirts of Birmingham. Kevin had switched on the radio and was tuning it to a music channel. They were both slowly beginning to relax when its small electronic timer exploded the two pounds of Semtex moulded into the base of the sports bag. As Darryl was holding it on his lap at the time it killed them both instantly, blowing the roof of the big Ford saloon high into the air and turning the rest of it into a white hot inferno of blazing petrol and plastics, from which only the charred remains of two broken skeletons would later be salvaged. It would take the police several days to identify who the bodies belonged to and only then because of dental work they had undergone during their last time in prison. As luck would have it no one else was hurt in the explosion although some fifty other cars witnessed the blast, many of them suffering some damage from the hail of shrapnel it produced. The three lanes of traffic coming along the southbound lanes saw the explosion and gripping their steering wheels tightly, prayed that no vehicle coming from the opposite direction would mount the barrier and cross into their lanes. Their prayers were answered although there were at least three collisions as the southbound drivers realised that the giant snowflakes they were driving through were actually high denomination banknotes. Several of them stopped to release the bounty that was stuck to their windscreens, causing further mayhem. In total the M5 was blocked for several hours and at one time the tailback reached thirty miles in both directions.

Mitael Khorta drove the stolen white Volvo all the way to Bangor and left it in a public car park where he had the night before parked his BMW 530d. Consequently it was well after eleven o'clock that night as he drove back into Bristol that he heard over the car radio a report of a suspected car bomb on the motorway up near Birmingham. He smiled grimly at the announcers concern that it might be the result of renewed Al-Queda activity.

Chapter 11

It was a little before midday when the CID room at Bricewell received the details of that morning's armed robbery in Swindon. MacAllister's first reaction had been relief that it had not happened on his patch, he would not liked to have to tell his wife Jean that Kirsty's wedding might have to take second place because a copper and an old lady had been shot and killed in a cocked up bank job. He felt that it would be the one time in their marriage when she would not understand about the demands of his work. Then, guilty at the relief he was feeling that it was some one

else's problem, he phoned his opposite number in Swindon to commiserate. He was on the phone to Swindon Central for over ten minutes and when he put the phone down again he was a different person and the light of battle could clearly be seen in his eyes. He got up and opened the door into the main CID office where Clive Sayers was talking with DC Frank Lintsey who had just that day returned from two weeks holiday in the Greek Islands and had the tan to prove it. He nodded to Lintsey.

“Hello, Frank. Good holiday? Don't let the CID in St Paul's see that tan or they will be asking you to do undercover work for them.”

Naturally dark and swarthy and below average height, Lintsey had only just managed to get into the force at five feet nine inches, and he was often used by the CID to pass as a Greek or other Mediterranean type in various undercover operations. He bore the jokes this invariably brought from the rest of the squad with quiet dignity, as he believed his own bloodline could be traced back to the Ancient Britons. In all male uniformed services a touch of racism was usually endemic whether between the Scots, English, Irish and Welsh of the original British inhabitants of the island or between the later arrivals from more exotic climes. He himself was inclined towards tolerance to all, except when his temper was aroused and his antecedents showed in no uncertain manner. Besides, he had just come back from a rather enjoyable two weeks in the company of a Ward Sister from the Bristol Infirmary, and he was feeling happy relaxed and rather pleased with the world. That is until he caught the urgency in MacAllister's body language and knew the holiday really was over. MacAllister glanced around.

“Where are Lomax and Jackie?”

Sayers caught the use of Lomax's surname and wondered if that gentleman knew that the Guvnor hadn't entirely accepted him yet.

“They were both on late last night looking for the mugger that's been operating in the National car park across the road, so they won't be in for a while yet.”

“Did they get anyone?” This was asked eagerly.

“No Guv. Not a bloody thing.”

The car park muggings were a cause of some embarrassment to the CID office on account that the car park was so close to the Bricewell police station that from the window of their office you could have thrown a tennis ball straight into its third floor. MacAllister didn't like villains who took the piss and had allocated more man-hours to the catching of this one than the case called for. He scowled at the fact that they had again missed their man. Then he shrugged.

“Never mind that then. Come into the office.”

They followed him in aware of the air of suppressed eagerness about him. When they were all seated he sat back in his own chair and lifted his feet onto the desk.

“You heard about the job in Swindon this morning. An old lady blown away by a shotgun and a copper in hospital with two bullets in his chest?”

They both nodded, wondering how it was going to affect them.

“Well the copper has died so we now have a double murder. Triple really, because the thug that killed the old lady was himself shot dead by the man who seemed to be leading the raid.”

Sayers and Lintsey exchanged looks with raised eyebrows. How was this going to affect them? They had not long to wait for the answer. MacAllister continued.

“From what the Swindon CID have pieced together from their enquiries to date, it went like this. There were at least four raiders, three to carry out the actual robbery and one waiting outside in the getaway vehicle. They were waiting outside first thing for the bank doors to open and went straight in when they did. This meant they caught most of the staff cold and no one had time to press any alarm buttons.”

He massaged his nose with a finger and thumb, his blue eyes bright as he looked at them.

“Two customers were involved because they just happened to be standing outside waiting for the bank to open. One of them, a sixty odd year old woman, is now dead. They think one of the raiders panicked and shot her when she passed out, taking a leaflet stand with her as she went. Christ knows what he thought she was going to do. The other customer was a university student named,” he studied what he had scribbled on his note pad, “Winston Archibald Cumberbatch. He is West Indian even if he sounds like he is from Yorkshire.”

If Sayers and Lintsey were wondering where all this was going and what it had to do with them, they were not about to start asking. MacAllister was fired up.

“The raider that died was West Indian and Mr Cumberbatch says that the leader was also black. Mind you, we and he can't prove that as they were all dressed from head to toe in black trousers and sweaters and wore gloves, ski masks and dark glasses, but the kid says he was definitely black. He says a white man walks totally differently.”

Frank Lintsey risked it.

“That's not something I would want to base a wanted description on, Guvnor.”

MacAllister grinned at him and Sayers knew from experience that they were getting to the root of the matter.

“I know, Frank and nor would I, but I also asked DI David Blaise over at Swindon why he thought the copper was shot. By all accounts he just happened to be on foot patrol in the area when he heard the two shots. He radioed in that he thought a bank raid was taking place and that was the last they heard from him. Witnesses say he grabbed one of the raiders as he was climbing into the getaway car and the two of them went down on to the pavement. The raider then hit him across the head with his pistol hard enough to cause a fractured skull, according to the X-rays taken at the hospital, so why put two bullets into him? He wasn't a threat any more.”

Without waiting he answered his own question.

“Because in the struggle the raiders sun-glasses were knocked off and the lad must have seen something that would positively identify him.”

“You think the bloke was local and the copper knew him then, Guv?”

“No, Frank, I do not mean that.”

MacAllister fixed the Kestrel look on Clive Sayers. Sayers looked puzzled for a few seconds and then his face cleared.

“Mitael Khorta!”

MacAllister's Kestrel look was replaced by a happy smile. Lintsey just sat there looking from one to the other without a clue as to what was going on, the black eyebrows drawn together in a frown over the brown eyes. He shook his head in puzzlement.

“How can you be so sure of who it is on evidence as thin as that.”

MacAllister sat up and leaning his elbows on the desk looked squarely at him.

“Because, Frank laddie, I been at this job a bloody long time and now I can practically smell them.”

He sat back again with his hands folded across his stomach and explained.

“Mitael Khorta is a Somalian and he is not only one of the blackest men I have ever seen, but is probably one of the most graceful. He moves like he was on oiled castors. We have managed to arrest him just once for armed robbery, but that was nearly fifteen years ago and only then because some one grassed on him to get their own sentence reduced. He did five years for that before being released early for good behaviour. We are sure he has been involved in at least ten other jobs since then, but we were never been able to prove it. Not even come close. Then about six years ago he went respectable.”

He carried on reeling off the facts that he needed no file to remind him of.

“He ran an import/export agency for a bit and also had a streak of luck on the horses according to him and a rather dubious bookmaker by the name of Stanley Pike. He moved into the top floor apartment of one of those big houses up on the edge of the downs near John Morton's place. You know the ones. They have all been converted into apartments and the smallest would cost more than we could afford between us. And they say crime doesn't pay.”

He shook his head and peered out of the window as if he thought he might catch the car park mugger at it in full daylight. Lintsey still looked lost.

“Well I can see that it should concern you that we have never managed to nail the bugger again, but how does all this tie him in with the Swindon job? That looks as if it was pulled by a bunch of no brain hooligans.”

MacAllister grinned at him infuriatingly.

“Or some one who has lost all his contacts and needed the money badly. Tell him, Clive, what makes Mr Khorta worth a look at.”

Clive Sayers was grinning at Lintsey as well now and just before he lost his temper with them both Sayers told him why.

“Mitael Khorta has got deep blue eyes.”

“You mean he's got European blood.”

“No I don't. He is pure Somalian and as black as ebony, but he has blue eyes. Its just one of those things with that particular race of people, it doesn't happen often, but about one in every one hundred thousand people born to them are born with blue or grey eyes and it makes him very distinctive.”

“And you think that's why the uniform was shot. Because he saw a pair of blue eyes in a black face and the man knew it would identify him as clearly as if he had left a signed picture behind?”

MacAllister nodded. Frank Lintsey's face said the reasoning of his superiors not at all completely convinced him.

“Got it in one, Frank. We might make a detective out of you yet.”

“How are we going to play it, Guv?”

This came from Sayers.

“If it is him he probably won't be home yet, got to share out the loot and get rid of any incriminating evidence etc. So as of now we are going to watch his luxurious little pad day and night and when he does come home we are going to

arrest him and test his clothes and skin for forensic evidence that he has recently fired a gun. If that proves positive then we will proceed from there. I want some one staking out his house as of now, Clive, until he is seen. When he is spotted whoever is there must call for back up. I want no bloody heroics. Three people have already died today and that's enough for now. I am going to clear it with Bill Reid and see if we can get a couple of uniforms to help out on this one.”

He turned to Frank Lintsey.

“Frank. Go and get some rest. You will be doing the evening shift. I told you that tan would come in useful didn't I? Clive, find out what motor he is flashing around in this week so we know what to look for and then let Marcus Lomax know he is on duty tonight.” And he was on his feet and gone.

When he returned some twenty minutes later he was an angry man. Bill Reid, the Station Commander, had refused point blank to let MacAllister have any uniformed officers and had advised MacAllister that he would not look kindly upon it if he was just running a crusade against some one he suspected of criminal activities, but was without any hard evidence. As he usually did MacAllister had listened to his Station Commander in silence and then excused himself without actually admitting his intentions in the matter. That Khorta was as guilty as hell was clearly obvious to him and he was bugged if he was going to let a book bashing career officer like Bill Reid prevent him from proving it, so he briefed his staff without letting them know the whole content of Reid's little speech to him. He just told them that they would have to operate without any uniformed backup because of the shortage of manpower. A thing they had no difficulty in believing. Then he went home to help his wife with the last minute arrangements for his daughters' wedding that was to take place tomorrow afternoon.

When he got home the small living room was full of people his wife Jean had invited in for a few drinks and their daughter was enjoying her moments in the sun. Kirsty MacAllister was a pretty if not beautiful young lady, with green eyes and red hair. Not the bright carrot red hair sometimes seen in people of Celtic descent, but an altogether gentler and lighter shade, that with the light behind it became a reddish gold. At this moment she had a glint and sparkle that only a woman who is to be married the next day or has just found out she is pregnant seems to possess, as she held an animated conversation with the daughter of a neighbour. She was dressed in one of her prettiest outfits and MacAllister felt a rush of parental pride and a feeling of wonderment that she had made the transition from teenager to womanhood without him being really aware of it. As the two girls began to make preparations to leave and join other friends and colleagues for what Kirsty unconvincingly described as her last night of freedom, MacAllister approached her.

“Where are you off to tonight, Kirsty?”

She turned the full glow of her happiness on him.

“Just dinner with the girls and then a couple of drinks at the Nitelite, Dad.”

The Nitelite was a nightclub that attracted most of the younger set and it was well run so her going there gave him no qualms. Fetching his hand from his trouser pocket he stuffed a wad of ten-pound notes into her hand with an air of embarrassment and she looked up at him in surprise.

“What's this for, Dad?”

Not used to displays of affection to his family he actually shuffled his feet.

“Buy yourselves a couple of bottles of champagne.”

Kirsty MacAllister lifted her five feet three inches onto her toes and kissed her father's cheek, tears threatening to spill and ruin her careful make up.

“Thanks Dad.”

Then she was gone and MacAllister was left with the neighbours.

By nine o'clock MacAllister was weary of passing the time making inane conversation with the neighbours he found he hardly knew although he had lived amongst them in this quiet cul-de-sac for over ten years. So he waited until the vicar was the centre of attention, telling a story of a funny thing that had happened at his daughter's wedding the previous year and then picked up an empty tray that had held the salmon sandwiches with the excuse of taking it back to the kitchen. Here he quietly opened the back door, walked around to the front of the house and climbing into his car started the engine and escaped. Jeanie MacAllister watched her husband leave the lounge quietly while he thought everyone was occupied in listening to the vicar who was to perform the ceremony the next day and a few moments later she saw his car leave their drive and head down the street. She sighed inwardly. She was disappointed, but in no way surprised that her husband couldn't even stay in the one evening when they had invited their neighbours around for a drink to celebrate tomorrow's big event.

Jean MacAllister was a girl from the Isles. They had both been at University when she met her husband at a rugby club dance. Although she had gone there with another man the handsome young man with the slightly crooked nose had fascinated her and she had literally thrown herself at him much to the annoyance of her and MacAllister's partners for the night. When they left university she went into medical research at Bristol University while MacAllister joined the police force and because of his degree was put on the fast track for promotion. When they had married John MacAllister he had been a uniformed bobby doing his stint at street level and although the shift work meant he wasn't always in her bed at night, she had been blissfully happy. Then he had been transferred to CID and her world had begun to crumble around her. He loved the job to the exclusion of all else and after he had been in CID for a year he was promoted to sergeant. His superiors seemed to think that she should be proud of him, but all she could think of was that this would mean she would see even less of him and so it turned out.

They were then transferred to Bath and although it was not that far from Bristol it meant that it was too far to drop in on her friends or family, and with her husband totally wrapped up in his job she was a lonely young woman. John MacAllister didn't seem to notice. After another six months she had had enough and finally decided to see a solicitor about a divorce. Then she missed her period and it was too late. Kirsty was born and then Gavin and she had built her world around her children, living her life through them and not returning to the world of medical research. Then on the strength of a couple of big cases and his growing reputation MacAllister had been made Inspector and they moved to London. Jean had hated London. In Bristol it had been possible to live on the edge of the city where you could still see trees and grass. In London MacAllister was based in Scotland Yard and they had a flat close by. To Jean it really was a concrete jungle

and she detested it. MacAllister was aware of her dislike of London, but only really took serious notice when Jean's illness began.

At first he refused to believe the Doctor's diagnosis. Manic Depressive? His Jean? Why should she be depressed? She had a successful husband; two fine kids and a lovely home. What was there to be depressed about? He was never to fully understand and the distractions and excitements of his job and London made sure he never really gave it the thought it deserved. Then disaster struck. The child pornography case was successfully prosecuted, but MacAllister had upset powerful people and was no longer flavour of the month. It took him some time to work out what was happening to him. First of all it showed because there were only the small and uninteresting cases dropped on his desk, the other teams were getting the interesting work that had used to come his way. Then there were his reviews. Suddenly he was no longer the bright and upwardly mobile star and his reviews began to take the flavour of could do better. At the same time Jean's illness became worse and with bitter frustration MacAllister realised his career was stopped dead and he applied to be transferred back to Bristol. This suited his superiors who wanted him gone from The Yard and his transfer was affected in weeks. There they had been for the last ten years and during this time there were no further promotions.

Back near her family and friends Jean had been content to let her children fill her life again and her illness had subsided except for moments of stress. Like when Gavin had fallen from his scooter and broken a leg and when Kirsty had thought she was pregnant. This latter they managed to keep from MacAllister until to their relief they found it was a false alarm. However, now Kirsty was about to fly the nest and Gavin had already told her that when he had his law degree he saw his future in America. She watched her husband's taillights vanish round the corner of the road and told herself maybe it was time to take legal advice once more. Make a clean break and give them both a chance to make something of the rest of their lives. Then she gathered herself together and gave her whole attention to her guests.

Chapter 12

Clive Sayers had been sitting in the unmarked, dark blue Mondeo for about three hours and his backside had gone numb. The house they were watching was one of a whole road of mansions built in Victorian times, most of them from the lucrative proceeds of the slave trade. The street was lined with beech trees and in a different economic climate and era must have been quite something, with the continual coming and going of horse drawn carriages and carts. In this modern world the houses were no longer economic proposition for one family as they could only be properly run with sufficient servants on hand and they had mostly been converted to luxury apartments or taken over as business premises for well-established law firms. Despite this the area had still retained its exclusiveness as

the various expensive motorcars parked along its length testified. Not much parked here that cost less than thirty-five thousand, he thought.

All in all they had now been keeping a watch on the Khorta residence since just before midday and it was now nine o'clock in the evening. So far not a thing had been seen of the man and Sayers was rapidly getting bored. A hand knocked on the window and he jumped involuntarily. It was MacAllister. He wound the window down.

"Evening Clive, I take it nothing has happened yet?"

"Hello, Guv. No, nothing yet. Here, I thought you were supposed to be off tonight."

"I was, but our house is full of a bunch of women making all the final arrangements for the wedding of the year, so I escaped. They won't miss me because the wine was beginning to flow like water as I was leaving. Mind you, most of them were Kirsty's friends and they will be off to the restaurant for the hen party by now, but you know how long I have waited to get this bastard, Clive."

He held out a set of car keys.

"You take our car and get on home to your wife, Clive. We will take it on from here."

He indicated to where Marcus Lomax and Frank Lintsey were waiting across the road out of sight of the house.

"We will use your car because this one is nicely situated and it would be a shame to lose the viewpoint. Our is the dark grey Vectra and its parked just around the corner." He moved aside for Sayers to get out. "See you tomorrow Clive."

Sayers resisted saying anything further to MacAllister about abandoning his wife with a house load of guests on the eve of his only daughters wedding and climbed obediently out of the car. He wondered if MacAllister would actually go to the wedding if things got a bit involved here, but then decided he was being a bit harsh to his Guvnor. MacAllister thought the world of his Kirsty. Still, if he decided to pull a stunt like this when his two girls were about to get married he knew his wife; Sue would take his balls off with a blunt knife. Jeanie MacAllister must be a really understanding woman.

As Sayers walked away MacAllister climbed into the back of the Mondeo and motioned for the other two to join him. They crossed the road and climbed into the two front seats, Lintsey behind the wheel. MacAllister looked hard at Marcus Lomax who was the only one of the three of them without a raincoat.

"Don't you believe in weather forecasting then, Marcus?"

"Pardon Guv?" Lomax sounded puzzled.

"I said, didn't you believe the weather forecast? That nice lady with the blonde hair and the large teeth said it was going to tip it down any time after nine o'clock this evening."

"I didn't see the forecast, but it's been really hot all day."

"Well nor did Frank and I, but we had the good sense to ring the information line and find out what the Good Lord was going to send us tonight. In your case it is even more important because if Khorta shows you are going to be the one that covers the service road at the back of the house."

As if on cue large heavy drops of rain began to hit the windscreen and a bright fork of lightning lit the sky, followed closely by the low rumble of thunder. MacAllister gave a low chuckle.

“Hope it stops before we have to get out, don't you, Frank. This raincoat is new and I would hate to get it wet.”

Lomax looked resignedly out of the window and tried to ignore the jibe. He was beginning to wonder about life in Bristol. When he had been based in Caerphilly he had considered himself to be a real Jack the Lad. He shone out in a police force that was full of steady coppers rather than shining beacons of justice. The local station commander liked it like that as it got results. Lomax had decided that he was star material and had gone out of his way to prove it. His arrest record was nearly double that of any other copper and he was so keen that most of his colleagues began to dread being paired with him. Arresting some one for drunken violence was all right in their book but filling the cells with cases of mere drunk and incapable in order to keep your arrest rate up was not something they were in favour of. Bloody Hell! You had to live with these people all year round and when something serious happened you were not going to get a lot of cooperation from a public you had spent the rest of the year pissing off! When Lomax had requested a transfer to CID the Local DCI had refused point blank to have him. The station commander however, saw it as a chance to move him on to a bigger office and within a matter of months and with little real CID experience he found himself in Bristol. At the time as his own unit had been undermanned by three bodies MacAllister had been grateful. He soon realised however, that Lomax was keen but green and would need some time to shake down into a good team member. Tonight was intended to be a part of his learning curve. They settled down to wait. Silence reigning.

It was about an hour and a half later when what seemed like the hundredth pair of headlights of the evening turned into the road, lighting up the interior of the car with brightly spangled points of light as they shone through the rain still falling onto the rear window. All three detectives slid down into their seats until it had passed them and then came up again, like a practised chorus line. The bright red dazzle of brake lights lit up the interior as the other vehicle slowed and then pulled into the kerb about fifty yards in front of them. Frank Lintsey in the drivers seat turned on the ignition and flipped the windscreen wipers across the screen a couple of times before turning it off again.

“Dark blue or black, BMW 530d. Registration, K something or other.”

Lomax in the passenger seat had a better view.

That's Khorta's car.”

As they watched a well-built figure climbed out of the car and holding his leather jacket tightly around him as protection against the rain, locked it and then sprinted lightly up the steps to the front door.

“Looks like an athletic bugger, Guv.” This came from Lintsey who knew all about Khorta and was feeling a little apprehensive about this arrest.

“Don't worry, Frank. You and I will give him five minutes to get settled in and then we will go and ring the man's bell and ask if we can have a little chat. If he pulls a gun or gets nasty we back off and radio for assistance.”

They sat in silence for about five minutes until MacAllister considered it was time to go.

“All right Marcus. I want you to watch the back service road. The fire escapes from all these flats run down into the back gardens which all have ten foot walls around them topped with iron spikes, trusting people were the Victorians. The only way out is through a small wicket gate out onto the service road. If he runs he has got to go that way.”

Lintsey muttered under his breath.

“Unless he thinks shooting a few more coppers won't make much difference now.”

“You what, Frank?”

“Nothing, Guv.”

“OK. Lets go, and Marcus, you better stay in the car or you might shrink.”

Marcus Lomax was halfway out of the passenger seat and slid back inside gratefully. MacAllister put his head through the door.

“If he runs he has something to hide, right. So if he appears in the service road call once for him to stop and then run the bastard over. In this rain no one will believe you did it on purpose.”

He gave a little smile that left Lomax uncertain of how seriously to take the last remark. He had heard several stories of MacAllister breaking the rules, but yet not to the extent of running suspects over and he decided he was having his plonker pulled. He climbed over into the drivers seat and started the engine while MacAllister and Lintsey nipped smartly across the road and up to the shelter of the big front porch. Lintsey was glad he wasn't in Lomax's shoes. He wouldn't fancy trying to stop the big African all on his own. At least Lomax was about the same size as Khorta. Unknown to him, Lomax was also quite handy at looking after himself.

Mitael Khorta was shocked. He made it his business to know all the cars used by the local CID and that Mondeo had been with the Bricewell CID office for over two years. He had thought he could just see the top of a head in the passenger seat as he went past, but he couldn't be sure. He closed the front door behind him and made for the lift. When the lift door had closed behind him and it was making its sedate way upwards, he pulled out his small pocket diary and checked the registration number against the list he kept. There it was. A dark blue Ford Mondeo with a Birmingham registration. It was one of the law's precautions to register CID vehicles in another area rather than have them registered locally. He felt the sweat start to form on his brow and in his armpits. He should have just driven on, but they might have stopped him and searched the car so he had forced himself to park as usual and enter the building normally. No way he could have opened the boot and taken out his sports bag with the Filth ready to clap him on the shoulder and ask to look inside it. He had expected MacAllister to get around to checking him out at some time as a matter of course, but not this quickly. How the hell had they got on to him so quickly? Had the copper he'd shot survived? No, not possible. He had given him two thirty-eight-calibre bullets straight into the chest from only a few feet away. Even if it hadn't killed him outright he would have been in no state to communicate anything worth hearing. He relaxed a bit.

MacAllister was taking a flyer on him being involved. Then he tightened up again. Flyer or not, if MacAllister found the money and the pistol in the boot of his car, he was fucked.

The lift door opened and he hurried across the small hall to the door of his flat, forcing himself to do things calmly and then swearing obscenely when he fumbled and dropped his keys. He bent and retrieved them hurriedly and then stopped and forced himself to take three deep calming breaths before opening the door. The bastards hadn't been this close to him in years and he had to do something quickly. The deep breathing calmed him and he began to think rationally again. Rachael. He must call Rachael. He crossed to the telephone and picked it, up blessing the modern technology that allowed you to store those numbers you used regularly and recall them by pressing a single button, instead of trying to dial with panicking fingers. Be there, Rachael. For Christ's sake don't have left for Heathrow yet. The phone rang for the fourth time and he was about to give up in despair when she finally answered.

“Rachael, don't talk just listen to me. I said listen! Have you got the spare keys to my car with you? Right. I want you to get over here at once and pick my car up.”

He listened to her for a few seconds before he interrupted.

“Listen to me. It all went badly today. There was some shooting and a policeman was probably killed. The CID is outside my flat now and they know I am home. There are things in my car, which can get me put away forever. Baby, I need you to come and get it and take it somewhere safe. You understand? Somewhere safe until I can get it again.”

He listened again.

“Come in your own car and leave it around the corner. I will take it back to your place some other time. No, I can't tell you where to leave it as I haven't had time to work any thing out yet and the bastards will be banging at the door at any moment. You find somewhere safe to leave it and then give them me a ring or leave a message on the answer phone telling me where I can find it.”

He listened again.

“I know this means you won't be able use your car to get to Heathrow tonight. For Christ's sake take a fucking taxi.” A pause. “No, I didn't mean to shout and swear at you and I am sorry. I got to go sweetheart. Don't forget to ring me when you have finished and post the keys back to me when you reach Addis Ababa. I got to go now.”

He put the phone down and wiped the sweat from his brow. The intercom from the front door buzzed and he jumped. He went to answer it, stripping off the clothes he was wearing as he did so. Maybe he was panicking about this and MacAllister was here about something harmless, but he didn't think so. The best thing he could do was to appear totally relaxed when the nasty Scottish bastard arrived. He took three more slow deep breaths and pushed the button of the intercom, which was now buzzing continuously.

MacAllister had studied the line of names and buttons on the intercom system and then turned to Lintsey, a cynical smile on his face.

“Terrible thing this getting old, Frank. Can't read a thing now without glasses although I could have sworn this was Khorta's buzzer. Is it this one his, laddie?”

“It is that one. The top one, Guv.”

MacAllister pressed it again and put his mouth close to the grill. Nothing happened and he put his thumb on the button and kept it there. After about thirty seconds it clicked and scratched and a disembodied and metallic voice was heard.

“Yes. Who is it?”

MacAllister grinned at Lintsey and then answered.

“Hello, Mitael. This is Detective Inspector MacAllister from the Bricewell Station. Long time no see, laddie.”

In the meantime MacAllister tried to Get Lintsey on his mobile, but could not get a signal. He closed it and put the phone in his pocket while the metallic voice spoke a second time.

“What the bloody hell do you want, MacAllister? Don't you know its nearly eleven o'clock? I am just going to bed.”

“Well, we would have liked to talk to you a lot earlier, Mitael, but you've only just come home you old stop out. Now are you going to let us in for a wee chat or am I going to have to send Frank here to get a warrant?”

“Fuck you, MacAllister.”

But there was a buzz and a click and the big front door slightly opened. MacAllister gave Lintsey a lopsided grin and pushed through the door. It automatically clicked shut behind them. They were stood in what had at one time been the hallway of a large Victorian mansion. It had been hardly changed by its conversion into apartments except that only two doors now ran off it and these bore discrete brass numbers stating one and two. The large sweeping staircase had gone and had been replaced by a smaller affair and a lift. The whole hallway and stairs were wooden panelled and painted in white matt paint with the mouldings picked out in a pale green. There was a rough bristle mat for the wiping of feet set into the floor just inside the doorway while everywhere else was covered in a dark patterned, expensive Axminster carpet. MacAllister pointed to the lift. He chuckled.

“You take the lift Frank and I will take the stairs. No heroics laddie, so if a big black man with a gun in his hand appears, just lift your arms over your head very quickly.”

Lintsey could have done without MacAllister's black sense of humour on this job and was still a little uncertain of where they stood in arresting Khorta without going through the proper channels. When he became a DI he was damned if he was going to stick his neck out like MacAllister did. Sooner or later you would drop one and that would be it. He entered the lift and the doors closed behind him. He pressed the button labelled floor three. It moved smoothly, if slowly, up to the third floor and then the doors again slid open. There was only a small vestibule to be seen containing two white doors, one with a large brass number seven on it. He kept his foot in between the lift doors to prevent them closing and waited for MacAllister to arrive. Then the unnumbered white door opened and there he stood. He beckoned to Lintsey with a small jerk of his head and walking over to number seven, lifted his hand and knocked twice.

Khorta must have been waiting for them for the door opened immediately. The black man was dressed in a very pale blue, towelling dressing gown that was casually tied at the waist by a belt of the same material, but in a darker hue. It

hung open practically to his navel and came down only to the mid thigh. It did nothing to cover a large golden crucifix on its plaited leather thong and showed the man's fairly impressive physique to full advantage. Khorta looked at them for some time before he spoke, as if making up his mind if they were worthy of entering his home. When he did speak there was no warmth in the deep, clear voice.

"I hope this is going to be good, Inspector. By my reckoning this is the fifth time in the last ten years you have arrived on my doorstep at this time of night, trying to frame me for something or other that I know nothing about. Haven't you got the message yet? I don't do those things any more." He waved his hand around at his surroundings. "I don't need to."

MacAllister looked unimpressed.

"It's all very nice, Mitael, but I would have thought you would have preferred not to live in among all these white capitalists. Most of these houses were built by people that made a living selling blokes like you to the colonies," he gazed at the panelling and then the luxurious carpet, "or is that what makes so good for you?"

Khorta just looked at him, then.

"What do you want MacAllister, I don't intend to stand here talking all night?"

"We want to come in and talk to you, Mitael. You see, one of our boys in blue was shot and severely wounded today and some people with nasty minds think you might know something about it."

His lips gave a cynical little writhe of a smile that never got anywhere near his eyes and it was obvious that the lie he had just told about the unfortunate police officer still being alive didn't trouble his conscience one little bit. He shrugged.

"So it's in everybody's interests if you can tell us where you were today and what you were doing. Eliminate you from our enquiries as it were."

He was watching the other man's reactions closely, but Khorta merely raised his eyebrows a little and then opened the door and motioned them in with a flick of his head. When they entered Frank Lintsey was completely surprised at what he saw. The apartment obviously covered half of the whole of the top floor and was situated in what had once been the servant's quarters. However, the supporting walls that had once held up the roof had disappeared and in their place were wooden ceiling beams running up to the apex. They were supported by a long central beam that ran along the length of the apex, which in its turn was supported by three massive wooden pillars, each about two feet square. It reminded him a bit of between decks in an old man of war, but with a great deal more headroom.

The first of the pillars was just inside the door and had been fitted with coat hooks and a wooden key rack on which hung a set of car keys with a BMW badge. Behind the pillar was a six-foot high lattice screen, placed so that it obscured the view into the room from the doorway and vice versa. On passing this you entered the room proper and this was huge.

The floor was of the original planking, smoothed and polished so that it shone with deep and natural warmth. There was no carpet, but scattered all over the floor were various skins and brightly coloured African rugs. Along the walls were hung weapons that were unlike anything that had ever been used in Northern Europe. Long skinny bows and arrows, blowpipes, wooden clubs and even aborigine throwing sticks were displayed, hanging alongside brightly coloured, but

primitive tapestries. The central pillar had a complete hi-fi system stacked up one side and on the other was a television and video recorder, all of these in wooden, open fronted cabinets. There were no less than three settees and several armchairs in dark brown leather grouped around this pillar, making it the central recreation area. The walls on each side of the room were lined with wooden bookshelves that were almost full. In contrast to every thing else the lighting was modern, with black angle poise standard lamps and black metal wall lamps. Behind the third pillar another lattice screen ran almost the full width of the room. Khorta caught Lintsey's look and spoke.

"It's the kitchen area." he said, "Would you like a guided tour or would you prefer to tell me what you want to know and then let me get to bed?"

MacAllister sat himself down in an armchair appearing as if he was completely relaxed about the whole thing and in no hurry to leave. He waved his arm around indicating the room.

"Very nice, Mitael. All a bit ethnic for my tastes, but I don't suppose it has that affect on you, laddie. Yes, very nice and it costs a few shillings to keep up I should think."

"I can afford it. Can we get on with it please?"

All right, all right, just being pleasant."

The Kestrel look suddenly appeared on MacAllister's face.

"Why don't you start by telling me where you have been all day?"

Khorta smiled at him, a mocking smile.

"Here until four o'clock this evening and then I was on the M4 for most of the time after that."

"I see, and I suppose you can give me a name of some one who can verify that, or were you all alone?"

"No, I was with some one. As it happens she had spent last night here."

"And who was this lady who is so honoured, laddie, if I may ask such a personnel question?"

"Rachael Kaukauna."

MacAllister caught Lintsey's frown as he struggled over his notebook with the spelling. He had remained standing next to the chair in which MacAllister lounged.

"I see. I think Detective Lintsey may ask you to spell that name in a moment. In the mean time can you tell me what this lady does and where I can find her?"

He gave the word lady an emphasis that was unmistakable in its inference, but Khorta ignored it.

"At this point in time she is staying with a friend in London or she is on her way home."

"It could help if you could tell me where to find her, Mitael, if she is going to give you an alibi that is. I mean, where does she live for instance?"

Khorta's regretful smile reminded him of a crocodile crying

"Well at this point in time, Inspector, Addis Ababa, but she will be back as soon as her mother is better."

The smile was broad now and MacAllister temper snapped.

"Now you listen to me, Khorta. You explain the situation in words of one syllable that we thick policeman can understand or we will finish this conversation at the Nick."

Khorta shrugged.

“Rachael Kaukauna is my fiancée. She came over from Ethiopia to marry me, but her mother is sick and as she has gone back home to nurse her. She is the only daughter you see and a trained nurse. Her mother is in the terminal stages of cancer and is not expected to live much longer.” He shrugged. “It is the way of her people and her parents would expect nothing less. That is why I spent the afternoon on the motorway. I ran her up to Heathrow airport.”

“You said she might be with a friend.”

“That's right Inspector. I dropped her at Heathrow and she was going to try and get a cancellation on the early morning British Airways flight. If she couldn't she was going to stay with a friend until she could get a flight.”

Apart from his own declared part in things and the fact that Rachael was at this moment in time hopefully removing his car from the street outside, the rest of the story was true. MacAllister stared at him.

“What you're telling me, Mitael is that you don't actually have a bloody alibi.”

The phone started ringing, but Khorta ignored it and after three rings the answer phone cut in. As his own voice started to say the sorry I'm not here message, he moved across and turned the volume down. MacAllister watched and then continued.

“In that case I would like you to come down to the station with us right now, if you would?”

“Christ man is that necessary. Can't I make a statement here and then come down in the morning if you need anything else? I have been driving for about six hours and I am more than a little tired.”

“No. I'm sorry, Mitael, but it has to be tonight and with the clothes you were wearing today, if you don't mind.”

“Why do you want me to put dirty clothes back on?”

“I don't want you to wear them, Mitael, I just want you to bring them with you. So we can check them and your skin for any traces of cordite and such like.”

He gave a crooked smile, but the pale blue eyes crackled.

“You know? Like you get when you have fired a gun recently.”

Khorta looked slightly concerned at this, but shrugged and lifted his hands in a gesture of surrender.

“All right, MacAllister, but the complaint I will make to your boss will be a cracker. I'll go and get dressed.”

He turned to a door that was set in the corner of the room that evidently led to the sleeping area at the back of the apartment.

“Yes of course, Mitael. Frank! Go with Mr Khorta and collect the clothes he was wearing today, will you?”

At this Khorta stopped with the door half opened and bowing slightly from the waist waved an arm for Lintsey to precede him. As the detective stepped forward he straightened up and then leaned slightly backwards as he used the full weight of his body to swing his left foot straight into Lintsey's testicles. The effect was instantaneous. Lintsey doubled over and lifted from the floor all in one movement, the breath whooshing from his lungs and his hands whipping across his body to hold the injured organs, causing him to take the brunt of the inevitable fall squarely on his face. He lay there trying to suck air back into his lungs and

making tiny mewling noises in the back of his throat, his eyes squeezed tightly shut and all colour now drained from the darkly tanned face leaving it looking yellow and jaundiced.

Khorta had not waited to see all this, but had dived through the door into the bedroom, the sound of the key turning in the lock carrying clearly to MacAllister ears over the noises that Lintsey was making. A look of exasperation was etched on MacAllister's face as he looked at Frank Lintsey and then at the bedroom door. Then, reaching under the open raincoat he pulled his radio from the inside pocket of his jacket switched it on and spoke into it in an urgent whisper.

“Marcus!”

There was only silence for some seconds while a surprised Lomax was obviously extracting his own radio from his clothing.

“Here Guv.”

Lomax's voice crackled loudly into the room causing MacAllister to quickly turn down the volume before replying.

“Listen, Marcus. Khorta has kicked Frank Lintsey in the balls and done a runner through the bedroom locking the door behind him. It is solid wood and I don't fancy kicking it down. He will be with you at any moment now, just as soon as he has put some cloths on and opened the window onto the fire escape. Keep your wits about you, but don't take any unnecessary risks. I will be down as soon as I have made sure Frank is all right.”

“OK, Guv. Received and understood.”

Lintsey by now had got his breathing almost under control and was attempting to sit up. MacAllister took his shoulders and helped him, leaning his back against the large wooden pillar in front of the front door. The detective was trying to talk, but finding it difficult to do so, his breath still coming in short gasps.

“S, s, sorry Guv”, his right hand went back to cradling the injured organs, “I shouldn't have fallen for that.”

He was wheezing the words out. MacAllister walked over to what looked like a drinks cabinet and took out a bottle and a glass. He poured some of the liquid the bottle contained into the glass and brought it back to Lintsey.

“Swig that down in one go and then try to relax your muscles. It will hurt like hell until you do.”

Frank Lintsey gulped down the brandy from the glass and then coughed, causing savage pain to course through his lower regions. However, after a few moments he began to relax and feel a little better. MacAllister walked over to the central pillar and took down the set of keys with the BMW badge. He came back and handed them to Lintsey.

“I'm going to go and see if Marcus has managed to get the bastard. When you feel up to it ring the station and get hold of someone arrange for a warrant to search this place thoroughly, ask them to send a couple of uniforms to help you do it. When you have finished that bring his car down to the Nick.”

He turned to go and then stopped and walked back to the central pillar. He opened the answering machine and removed the tape, putting it in his raincoat pocket. He grinned at Lintsey.

“Just curious about why he didn't answer the phone or want us to hear it.” And he was gone.

Down in the service road Marcus Lomax sat in the Ford Mondeo and watched what he hoped was the rear entrance to Mitael Khorta's building. None of the back gates had numbers on them and he had been forced to rely on counting the houses from the end of the road to find what he hoped was the right gate. Lomax was a bit fed up with life. He had been here in Bristol for less than six months and it was not going to plan. When he had left Caerphilly behind for a large city like Bristol he had thought he was on the up and up. What he found was not a city, but a series of villages that had been joined together to make a city. Sure it had its problems and definitely needed policing, but there was a distinct lack of the really big villains of the level to be found in Liverpool, London and Manchester to name but three.

Disappointed he had tried his best to impress by his work rate and his ability. He had quickly set up some informers and although the first two had turned out to be absolute tossers, his last one had delivered the tobacco warehouse gang straight into their hands and so far no one had even said well done. That this had been a matter of fortuitous timing he was unaware as his snout by luck and coincidence had only overheard the details in a pub while watching a darts match and would never ever give anyone another tip as good as that one. Clive Sayers was barely civil to him just because he had wound up Jackie a bit and MacAllister hardly ever acknowledged he was there except to take the piss occasionally and let him fetch him his coffee. Added to that he always got the shitty jobs. He brooded on about it to himself while shifting around in his seat trying to keep his backside from going completely numb. Then his radio crackled into life telling him that a man who they suspected of being involved in three murders was about to come his way and would he please arrest him. His stomach went tight and for the first time in his life he really understood fear.

The rain was still pouring down and he dreaded having to leave the car, he didn't fancy this one even a little bit and the sports jacket he was wearing being new and expensive. He struggled into the Mac that MacAllister had left him. As he was taller than the Guvnor it was a bit short in the sleeves, not quite protecting the precious jacket. He turned on the ignition again and flicked the wipers. It helped for only a few seconds and then once more everything was obscured. He peered through the windscreen, screwing up his eyes to make out the outline of the doorway set into the high brick wall some fifty yards away and jumped when he thought he saw it move. Did it? Yes. Some one was standing in the doorway, probably checking the road was clear.

As at the front of the houses the rear road was also tree lined, but much narrower, as it had only been intended as a service road for tradesmen when it was constructed. The only way two vehicles could have passed each other was if one used the pavement in the sections between the trees. Lomax had backed the car right up onto the pavement between two trees and against the rear garden wall of the houses opposite Khorta's in order to be as inconspicuous as possible. He didn't want to draw attention to the fact he was there if some one else wanted to use the road and found him blocking it. Because of this and its matching colour bumpers, in the unlit street the dark blue Ford Mondeo was practically invisible.

He quietly released the door catch and opened it a few inches getting a face full of rain as he did so.

The figure by the gate had complete his surveillance of the street and made his move. Turning in Lomax's direction he began to lope along towards him, keeping close to the wall on the opposite side of the road. Lomax was suddenly concerned. If he did nothing the man might just assume the car was parked and go on by and Lomax might just be able to convince MacAllister he hadn't seen him. On the other hand he might check to see if the car was useable and then he would be discovered. This man had probably already killed two people today and may well be armed. Even if he survived he didn't think he could face MacAllister if he was the one who provided the fugitive with transport. It was Hobson's choice. He threw open the door of the car and slid out. Using the door as cover he crouched behind it in the approved manner, both hands held out in front of him together, index fingers pointing at the running figure who by now had halved the distance between them.

“Stop! Armed police! Stop or I fire!”

The effect was electric. The figure skidded to a stop and froze, looking all around him with nervous little jerks of the head, like a trapped animal. For a moment Lomax thought he was going to run back the way he had come. He acted quickly.

“Hold your fire all units. He's surrendering. You! Face the wall and put your hands over your head. Place them flat against the wall.”

The figure complied. Lomax took a deep breath and began to move out from behind the door of the car keeping both hands held out in front of him in the continuing pretence that he was armed. He was only a couple of yards from the man and racking his brains about how to get some cuffs on him when a voice spoke from across the road.

“Nobody get edgy he isn't going to do anything stupid like running again, are you, Mitael?”

It was MacAllister. His torch lit up Khorta as he passed Lomax and went to stand behind the figure against the wall.

“Lower your hands and put them behind your back.”

Khorta complied and MacAllister clipped the handcuffs onto his wrists before turning him around to face them.

“Hello again, Mitael. Let me introduce you to Detective Constable Lomax. He's the man who just arrested you with his bare hands.”

The laughter spilled out of him, his white teeth gleaming in the dark and he turned and clapped Marcus on the shoulder.

“Well done, Marcus. Great bit of acting.”

Lomax felt his knees start to tremble as reaction set in and the realisation of what could have gone wrong came home to him, but another part of him was elated that he seemed finally to have made his mark with MacAllister. He gave a shrug.

“No choice really, Guv. I didn't know if he had a gun and I had nowhere to run to.”

“Modesty, Marcus, modesty. You got the bugger and that's what counts. Come on, let's get this tricky laddie into the car and down to the station.”

He pulled out his radio and informed Frank Lintsey that they had their man and then he opened the back door of the Mondeo and pushed the still silent and by now soaking wet Khorta into the car, squeezing into the back seat beside him. An equally sodden Lomax climbed into the drivers seat and started the engine. The car had immediately fogged up with the sudden influx of wet bodies and he turned the blower full onto the screen and waited for it to clear. He turned in his seat so that he could see his passengers, a look of satisfaction on his face and his ruined jacket forgotten.

“What happened up there then, Guv?”

MacAllister grinned at him, his face also showing deep satisfaction.

“Mitael here kicked Frank Lintsey in the bollocks and after locking the bedroom door on us, legged it down the fire escape.”

“Is he all right? Frank I mean.”

“Well he will have to walk and sit down very carefully for a few days and I don't suppose he will be chasing the ladies for a week or so, but he should live.” A chuckle. “Though I'll bet it's the last time he falls for that one. Come on, the windscreen is clear. Lets get on.”

Lomax put the car in gear and they moved off. Out of habit he switched on his radio to the general frequency and put it on the seat beside him and on the drive back down into the centre of Bristol it was the only sound in the car, its three occupants variously engaged in their own thoughts. They were sitting at the lights at the top of the hill waiting to turn down into Park Street when the message that would change several lives came through. It didn't seem significant at the time, but that was to change within seconds.

“Alpha Central to all units.”

That was the central control unit's call sign.

“Be on the look-out for a stolen Ford Focus Cosworth. Bright red, registration number X55 SYS. Believed to be taken by joy riders and already involved in one accident while leaving the premises from where it was stolen.”

The dispatcher was repeating the message when a bright red car squeezed alongside them, bearing a slightly damaged near side wing, but it was the thundering drumming coming from its stereo system that caught Lomax's attention. It dived across the oncoming traffic and down into Park Street just as the lights turned to green. Lomax automatically read the number and then caught MacAllister's eye in the rear view mirror.

The DI nodded.

“I see him, Marcus. Get in behind him and when you get real close, jam him in behind the car in front and give him a burst on the siren and I will call it in. Looks as if we will have to send for a paddy wagon if we run across any more villains tonight.”

He took out his radio and started to inform the dispatcher that they had spotted the stolen vehicle. Lomax followed the Focus down the steep hill that is Park Street until they were stopped by the traffic lights at the T-junction midway down the hill where other traffic joins Park Street from the right. There were four cars in front of the Focus and it seemed as good a place as any to approach it. Lomax closed up tight behind it and switched on the siren. The effect was startling.

The Focus ignored the blocked road and with the front wheels spinning furiously and smoking despite the wet street, it swerved to the left and mounted the wide pavement, bouncing wildly up into the air as it did so. Its blaring horn scattered what pedestrians there were as it raced down the pavement overtaking the halted traffic on the inside. Still on the kerb it passed the lights and made to join the road again, but here it was balked by a double-decker bus that was just pulling into the kerb to pick up passengers at the nearby bus stop. With two wheels in the road and two wheels on the kerb and the tyres protesting loudly it attempted to swerve back up onto the pavement again to pass the bus on the inside, the wet road and the kerbing making this difficult. The front tyres were going into wheel spin again at the excessive amounts of throttle the driver was using in his panic to be away. It bounced wildly as its off side wheels finally managed to mount the pavement for the second time and for a split second the driver lost control. He quickly regained it and raced down the pavement just squeezing through between the inside of the bus stop shelter and the shop windows before regaining the street and vanishing down the hill.

However, in his momentary loss of control the driver had allowed the rear of the car to slide sideways, clipping the last three people waiting to board the bus. All three were young women. Two of them lay on the pavement holding their legs and groaning, but the third had been driven backwards into a lamppost headfirst and now lay face down on the pavement without moving.

“Jesus Christ!”

MacAllister was out of the car and racing towards the scene, Khorta forgotten. He shouted over his shoulder.

“Call the emergency services, Marcus. Get the works and switch that bloody siren off.” and he was gone towards the injured people. Lomax made the call and then followed.

MacAllister quickly established that the first victim had a broken shin, but that not much else was wrong with her. He moved on to the second who was propped up on one elbow groaning. She too had at least a broken leg from the angle at which it was laying away from her, but otherwise she didn't look too seriously hurt. He turned his attention to the third girl who lay face down without moving.

Under the orange glow of the street lights the blood on the back of her head and on her shoulder length hair looked black. MacAllister shuddered. Through the welling blood coming from the injury to the back of her head he could see the lighter glint of bone. He was about to slide his hand under her hair to feel for the neck pulse with his fingertips when Lomax arrived with the powerful torch from the Mondeo and shone it down on her. MacAllister froze. The hair wasn't the blonde he had assumed it was under the orange streetlights; it was a fiery golden red. With ice in his heart he lifted the hair that was covering the features and moving it to one side and looked down into the face of his daughter. When he lifted his face up to look into the eyes of Marcus Lomax his lips were trembling and his eyes were full of tears. He had trouble getting the words out.

“Its my daughter. It's Kirsty.

Chapter 13

The well-built black man left the stage of the Mecca dance hall by the rear door and headed down the corridor to the staff and artists wash room, satisfied that they were giving the sort of performance they had built their reputation on. Above the tight leather trousers the small black leather waistcoat was open, showing the sweat glistening on the deep and hairless chest. He opened the door to the washroom and went inside to complete the urgent biological function necessary before he could relax and enjoy a few tins of beer in the hour they had before their final session.

Once over the threshold of the artist's toilets at the rear of the Mecca dance hall, he bent his face close to the cracked mirror and examined his nose closely. The swelling and bruising had gone now and it was impossible to tell that it had ever been broken. He gave a sigh of satisfaction and straightened up. That crazy bastard would have at least marked him for life and maybe even killed him if there hadn't been a half dozen of the brothers there admiring the custom job he had just completed on Elwin's old Ford Pilot V8. He turned to the urinal shaking his head at the memory of it and with some difficulty extracted his penis from the skintight leather trousers. At first, when he had asked for him by name, he had thought the guy was a possible customer. He shook his head ruefully in remembrance.

Coming back to the present he shook the drips off and turned from the urinal holding his stomach in order to get the zip closed again. He rinsed his hands and took a long look around the minuscule toilets that gloried in the name of Artist's rest room. He wouldn't be seeing this place again. This was their last show at the Mecca now that Reliable Records had signed them. That's why he hadn't wanted Jenson prosecuted, because the record company had insisted that the whole business was cleared before they would sign them up. That and the fact that Rasta didn't want the world to know that some white guy of nearly forty had half killed him. He checked his face in the mirror once more and then with a smile to himself opened the door and stepped out into the passage.

The blonde was leaning back against the wall smoking a cigarette, the unoccupied right hand hanging down by her left side. The short red skirt was almost up to her panties revealing good legs, while the minuscule white cotton top show a bare flat stomach and did little to hide much of her full breasts. Her face was half hidden by a huge pair of mirrored sun-glasses and he wondered how while wearing those she had managed to find her way down gloomy passage without falling off the four inch high heels she was wearing. That part of her face he could see showed even white teeth and full sensual lips coated in shiny pink lip-gloss. Her skin had a light golden tan. He felt his organ stir. The girl lifted one foot up behind her to rest the sole of her shoe flat against the wall and putting her head on one side blew smoke towards him.

"I thought you were going to be in there all night." The voice was without any strong accent. "I hope you weren't playing with yourself or I have probably been wasting my time waiting here."

Rasta grinned.

"You been waiting for me, baby."

The girl looked around.

"I don't see any one else here, do you?"

He played along and looked up and down the corridor.

"No."

She pushed herself off from the wall and dropping the cigarette on the floor, deliberately ground it out with the toe of one black, high-heeled shoe. Taking two steps forward so that there was only an inch or two between them and turning slightly sideways, she put her left arm around his waist and pressed her left hip into his groin. He put his arms around her with one hand on the bare skin of her stomach and felt himself start to swell. She looked up into his face with her lips slightly parted; her breath smoky, but it didn't bother him. He lowered his head and kissed her, driving his tongue between her parted lips while sliding his left hand up under her cotton top, as his right went the other way and cradled her buttocks. He was rewarded with a firm and full naked breast surmounted by a rigid nipple. He began to roll it gently between thumb and forefinger while his tongue did a complicated dance with hers. They swayed back and forth.

When the knife stabbed through his trousers and into his genitals his first reaction was one of puzzlement. Why had she punched him in the balls, she had started this? His second was shock as the pain surged up through his lower stomach from his injured genitals and then finally hysteria as she stepped away from him and he saw the bloody knife in her right hand. He fell back against the wall doubled over, clutching himself with both hands and gasping for breath as the pain winded him, watching with horror as the bright red blood ran between his fingers and dripped to the floor. The girl threw the knife down in front of him and as he looked up at her with terrified eyes, she took off the blonde wig she had been wearing and threw that down with the knife. She sneered at him.

"It was almost too easy, Nigger. I only had to appeal to your prick and you fell for it, didn't you?"

She shook out her own mane of long dark hair.

"I hope I've cut the fucking thing off, I hope you bleed to death."

Rasta could only fall to his knees and watch the perfect backside moving inside the tight red skirt as Alison Jenson strode off down the corridor and disappeared through the emergency fire door at the far end without a backward glance. Then, as the pain surged again through his lower abdomen, he slid to the floor and began to scream for help.

When Clive Sayers received the call from the all night emergency centre the name George Frederick Fairbrother had not meant anything to him, except that another Friday night was underway. Even when the reception desk had told him that some woman had stabbed the man in the groin, he had only assumed that it was a lover's tip or some pimp getting what was coming to him. He'd waited around for some half an hour to see the victim while they were stanching the blood and examining the extent of the damage, drinking machine coffee that was even worse than the stuff he got at the station. He glanced around. He himself was only thirty-three, but most of the nurses and doctors here seemed like teenagers

to him. Finally the receptionist had called him over to where a young woman in a white coat was standing by the counter.

“Sergeant Sayers, this is Doctor Madden.”

Doctor Madden was slim, blonde, blue eyed and when not on the point of exhaustion, probably quite vivacious. Sayers took all this in at a glance with the practised eye of the professional and then held out his hand to her. The shake was perfunctory.

“Hello, Sergeant. What do you need to know? I only called you because that's the regulations when we get deliberate wounding, but I haven't a clue as to what you want to know.” She went on by way of explanation. “This is my first week here on casualty you see.”

The accent had a faint ring of the North Wales valleys and Sayers gave her his best put the witness at ease smile.

“Well, what I need to know is; when did he come in; what are his injuries and are you sure they are not self inflicted.”

She exhaled rapidly through her nose and shook her head at the same time in a gesture of disbelief.

“Self inflicted? I don't know of any normal man who would have the courage to stab a knife right through one of his testicles. No. I think we can say the wound was not self inflicted.”

Sayers stayed patient with her.

“Can we start at the beginning then, Doctor? When did he come in?”

She shrugged off the tiredness she was feeling and became professional, holding out her hand to the receptionist who put a clipboard in it. She read it through and then looked up at him.

“He was brought in by ambulance at eleven fifty nine, suffering from shock and loss of blood due to a wound to the genital area. Examination showed that he had been stabbed through the genital area with a sharp pointed object, probably a thin bladed knife. This had missed the main artery and nerves of the penis by a couple of millimetres, but had pierced right through one of his testicles. He is now in the Surgical Ward awaiting the removal of the damaged testicle, probably tomorrow morning. Apart from that and I should imagine some deep mental and physical shock, there is no other damage and I would say no danger to his life, unless he is the one in every million person who for no known reasons die under the anaesthetic.”

She gave the clipboard back to the nurse and swept an escaping strand of blonde hair back behind her ear.

“Is he capable of answering a few questions? Like who did it and why? I should hate to think there was a mad castrator running amok in the city. Who knows who might get it next?” He smiled gently to let her see this last was not to be taken seriously.

“I would doubt it strongly. He was given a pain killing injection for our examination and they have probably given him a sleeping pill or two by now. Sleep is about the only real cure for shock you know. But if you must try he will be in Men's Surgical on the third floor. Now I really must get on.”

Sayers said thank you to her retreating back, but it was doubtful if she even heard. He gave a shrug to the receptionist and started on his way to the lifts on

the far side of the reception area; thankful he had only been bright enough to be a plod. At least his life and death decisions had been few and far between. He was also glad that he did not have to work in these conditions. The Nick might not be the lap of luxury, but at least they still could afford office cleaners. He looked at the general scruffiness of the corridor. Florence Nightingale would not have felt out of place in this dump. On the third floor he found the double doors that said Men's Surgical, but apart from one dim light about half way down the ward it was in complete darkness. He was looking around him like a lost tourist when a door a few yards down the corridor opened and a Nursing Sister came out.

“Sergeant Sayers?”

He nodded his reply.

“Reception told me you were on your way up, but I am afraid you are wasting your time. He has been given quite a strong sedative by the house man and he is sleeping deeply.”

She saw the exasperation on his face and turned to the double doors to the ward.

“Come on. I will show you.”

He followed her into the dark and sleeping ward, walking on tiptoe like a character from Gilbert and Sullivan. The Sister stopped by the second bed in and waving away the duty nurse who had appeared out of nowhere she pointed to its occupant. Rasta Fairbrother was lying on his back with his head on one side. His mouth was slightly open and he was evidently in a deep sleep. Sayers, who's eyes were now becoming accustomed to the gloom, leaned forward and looked closely at the face that was partly illuminated by the soft glow of light from the corridor. There was not much light, but enough to make out the Negroid features of the sleeping man and the multitude of small dreadlocks with their brightly coloured ribbons. He recognised him as the man that Martin Jenson had beaten up and then recalled the three young men in the leather trousers who had been hanging around the main entrance when he had arrived. They were the other members of Metal Heaven. It didn't take a genius to work out who might have wanted to stab this man in the balls. He straightened up with a sigh and nodded to the Sister. She nodded back and they left the ward.

“Can I use your telephone, sister?”

“Yes of course, Sergeant.”

He followed her back to the space slightly larger than a phone box that passed as her office.

Chapter 14

MacAllister watched his wife as she sat at the table and stared into her untasted cup of tea. It had been like this since he had told her what had happened on the night of Kirsty's injury. She had naturally asked him how he had happened to be there when it had happened. He had explained about the stolen car they had been following that had driven up onto the pavement and hit Kirsty and the

others. She had not at first understood what he was saying to her and he had repeated it, telling how they had received a message to be on the lookout for the stolen Focus and how it had stopped next to them at the top of Park Street. She had looked at him strangely and then had said something that puzzled him.

“You have a lot to answer for, John.”

He thought she had misunderstood what he had told her and had started to explain again, but she had only shook her head and gone to the bedroom. Since then she had spoken hardly a word to him. Several of his colleagues had rung him to express their sympathy and several had asked how Jeanie was. The truth was he didn't know. He felt she was blaming him for much of what had happened, but didn't know why. To him it was like blaming the makers of aspirin because someone had overdosed. She would only nod or shake her head when asked something and the only time he had received a full sentence was when she told him the hospital had called while he was down to the local corner shop for some bread and milk.

That was where they were going this morning. To learn if their daughter had any sort of future or if she would have to remain on a life support system for the rest of her life. She had not regained consciousness since the accident and although the hospital had now operated on her twice they had not been encouraging about the probable result. Severe brain damage was not something they could do very much about. He stirred himself and made the effort that was required.

“Come on, Jeanie its time to go to the hospital. Best get yourself ready.”

She rose without looking at him and went and put her on her coat.

MacAllister found a vacant spot in the car park quite close to the main entrance and reversed the old Vauxhall Vectra back into it. Getting out of the car and locking his door he went around to the passenger side and opened the door for his wife. It was ten o'clock on Saturday morning and his daughter had been unconscious for nearly eight days.

“We are here, Jeanie. Come on, lass, let's go and see what they have to tell us. We have got to hear it sooner or later.”

He put his hand under her elbow and helped her out of the car. Once out she stood looking not at him, but straight through him as if he wasn't there and made no move to go anywhere. He closed and locked her door and gently linking his arm through hers led her towards the main door of the hospital, as if they were strolling lovers instead of a man leading his wife to an appointment they did not want to keep. Her reaction to the situation was worrying him to the extent that he had taken leave to be with her since the injury to Kirsty. He couldn't think of it as an accident, not under the circumstances in which it had happened.

Jean had joined him within minutes at the hospital on that fateful night, fetched by an unusually thoughtful Marcus Lomax who had realised that his boss was in no condition to make any meaningful decisions. MacAllister himself would have preferred not to call Jean until he knew the extent of his daughters injuries, but Lomax had known his own collision with death when his sister had been killed on the back of a motorcycle some years ago and so had a better understanding of such situations. In the event MacAllister was glad to see her when she arrived. They had waited together throughout the night in the knowledge that Kirsty was not expected to live until morning, but not wanting her to die alone. At ten the

next day, when their daughter had been brought back from surgery still alive, but plugged into a life support system, they had finally been persuaded to go home for a few hours. She may have been still alive, but it was with serious problems. The neurosurgeon had not pulled his punches. He told them it would be several days before they would know the exact extent of the damage, but that even if she survived the prognosis was not good.

Since then Jean had hardly spoken a word to anyone and had deliberately walked away from friends and neighbours who had come to offer help and sympathy. She had continued to lay Kirsty's place at mealtimes and had told the vicar, the only person to whom she had spoken in the past ten days, that he must postpone the wedding and that she would tell him when Kirsty was again ready for him to perform the ceremony. Worse still she would not even visit the hospital again until they could tell her what was wrong with her daughter and when she would be coming home. This last had frightened MacAllister so badly that he had called in the family doctor, but Jean had locked herself in the bedroom until he had given up and gone away, leaving MacAllister with some sedative that he had been putting in her evening Cocoa each night.

They went in through the double doors of the main entrance and up to the reception desk. The receptionist was just putting down the phone and turned to smile at them.

"Mr and Mrs MacAllister to see Mr Wilkinson."

The girl checked her list and picked up the house phone.

"Hello, Cathy. The MacAllister's are here for Mr Wilkinson. Shall I send them up?"

She listened for a moment and then replaced the receiver.

"Mr Wilkinson's assistant will be down to fetch you if you would like to take a seat for a moment."

MacAllister steered Jean towards some plastic covered benches on which they had just settled when a grave young woman in her early twenties, wearing enormous gold framed glasses that made her look like a rather pretty blonde owl, approached them.

"Are you the McAllisters?"

MacAllister nodded and allowed her a small smile on account of her soft Scottish accent.

"I'm Cindy Barrett the assistant neurologist. If you would come with me Mr Wilkinson will see you straight away."

She led the way to the lifts and let them enter first before joining them and pressing the button for the third floor. MacAllister was relieved that she didn't try to engage them in small talk, but just stood quietly looking efficient and very grave. He wondered, like Clive Sayers had in this same hospital the night before, what made them do this job.

The lift stopped with a small jerk and the door hissed open. As they left the lift a group of trainees nurses were entering, chattering away like the group of schoolgirls that they recently had been. MacAllister wondered if it would affect them for more than a moment to know he had a daughter here who was probably dying. No more than it had affected him to see Trevor Morton lying on the

pavement in a pool of his own blood, was the probable answer. Not your problem except in how it affected your workload. With their arms still linked they left the lift and followed Cindy Barrett down the corridor and through another set of doors with the legend "Neurology Department" painted on them. Inside they took the first door on the left and entered without knocking.

Simon Wilkinson was in his early forties, but was one of those men whose age was difficult to guess. He had only a small fringe of hair left around the sides of his head and his skin was pink and shiny like a cherubs. He reminded MacAllister of a gay uncle he'd had. He had been sixty-two when he died, but he had looked no older, laid out in his coffin, than he had when he was forty-two. His last twenty years had been almost ageless.

Wilkinson turned from the X-rays he had been examining on the wall-mounted light box and greeted them gravely. MacAllister instantly knew the news would not be good, but forced himself to let the consultant tell it in his own time. Wilkinson waved them through into his inner sanctum where he switched on another smaller, wall-mounted light box and picked up another X-ray from his desk, which he slotted into it. He beckoned them over.

"This is the X-ray we took of Kirsty's injury when she was first brought in."

He pointed to an area on the side of the skull where the smooth shape was disrupted and darkened. It looked rough and broken.

"These small white pieces are splinters of bone. You can see that some of them have been driven right inside the skull and are lodged inside the brain. We have now operated twice but these pieces here and here are too deeply embedded to remove without causing more damage."

He pointed again to the small white pieces of what looked like broken matchstick before turning back to them.

"Now this area here around the edge of the brain," he used Cindy Barrett as a live model and with his finger drew a line from behind one temple around the front of the head to the other, "is where we believe the intelligence to live. The rest of the brain has many functions, but this is where we believe the spirit and intellect reside."

MacAllister looked up at the X-ray on its light box and felt hope die. The broken matchsticks were squarely in the area Wilkinson was indicating.

"As far as we can ascertain those parts of the brain that keep Cindy clinically alive are only slightly damaged. Her body can still accept and take sustenance and her basic bodily functions are still working, the abilities to absorb food and get rid of waste, for instance."

He paused.

"However, she will always need a machine to help her to breath and it is our considered opinion that her intelligence function has been irredeemably destroyed."

He waited a few moments to let that sink in before continuing.

"Doctor Barrett and I are of the opinion that Kirsty will never wake up again. She may well live for one or even twenty one more years, but she will not know about it and you will never again hear her voice."

"I am so sorry."

He lifted his hands palm upwards and then let them fall back to his sides in a gesture of helplessness.

Well, MacAllister thought dully, you can't say the good doctor doesn't tell it like it is. He felt light headed and unattached to the floor and had great difficulty in believing he wasn't in some nightmare. In the silence that surrounded them all that could be heard was the sound of their breathing, until Jean's voice broke the quietness, startling him after her days of almost complete silence.

"Can we see her please? Can we see our little girl?"

Cindy Barrett nodded and took her arm.

"Of course you can. Come with me."

The curtains were closed and the room was in semi-darkness, but the large bulk of the life support machine could be seen as a general outline. Cindy Barrett switched on a small dim light and detail sprang out. Kirsty was lying on her back inside the machine with only her head showing. This was swathed in bandages, mercifully hiding where the beautiful red hair had been shorn away to permit surgery. Her eyes were closed. Jean leaned forward and gently kissed her on one and then the other of her eyelids and then she straightened up and felt backwards for MacAllister's hand. She took it in a tight grip and turned to face the young neurologist.

"Kirsty has gone now, she left us on that Friday night when the car hit her. That is only a body lying there. Our girl has left us. Please switch it off."

She let go of MacAllister's hand and fled from the room. He paused just long enough to nod confirmation to Cindy Barrett's look of inquiry and then hurried after her. As he left he saw from the corner of his eye the sleeping form of Graham Simpson, Kirsty's intended husband, sprawled in an armchair behind the door obviously totally exhausted by his vigil. He didn't pause. He was sorry for the lad, but he didn't think he could deal with both his and Jean's anguish at the same time. He hurried after his wife. Cindy Barrett caught up with them in the corridor and produced a clipboard with a form on it.

"I will need both of your signatures on this and one of you will need to come back tomorrow to complete the rest of the formalities."

Jean grabbed the proffered pen and scribbled her name before thrusting the pen into MacAllister's hand and turning away. He signed alongside of the second of the two pencilled crosses at the bottom of the form and then rushed after his wife although part of his mind registered that they had had the form already and waiting for them before they arrived. When caught up with her she was waiting by the lift, but she turned and studied the notice board on the wall next to the lift doors, deliberately ignoring him. He didn't push it, but stood in silence, his thoughts with the daughter they had just written off and the distress that Graham Simpson would feel when he found out. He knew that they had made the right decision, but he also knew there would be times in the future when doubt would rise up and make him feel like a murderer.

The lift doors opened and mercifully it was empty. They got in and rode it down to the ground floor, still in silence. As they reached the foyer he saw Clive Sayers just about to enter the building. He hoped Clive wouldn't see them, as he wanted to get his own emotions and thoughts in order before he faced the world again, but Clive raised his hand to show that he had seen him. Jean turned to him.

“They have to find out sometime, John. Give me the keys and I will wait in the car. Best let him know now and then you won't have everybody asking you how Kirsty is when you next see them. Clive will make sure everyone knows and then they won't ask stupid questions.”

She held her hand out and he rummaged in his jacket pocket until he found the keys.

“I won't be long, love.”

She pushed through the door that Sayers held open for her without meeting his eyes, just giving a nod of the head as she passed and started across the car park to the car. Sayers watched her go and then turned to face his boss. His face was wary and MacAllister could see that he wanted to ask, but was afraid of the reaction he might get. He put him out of his misery.

“It's all over, Clive. She had massive brain damage and no hope of any meaningful recovery. It is just a body being kept alive by a machine now so we agreed they should switch it off and let her sleep in peace. She wasn't our Kirsty any more. Kirsty died in the early hours of the Saturday morning when that bastard ran her down.”

Sayers nodded, struggling to find some comfort to give the man, but failing.

“I am really sorry, Guvnor. How is Jean taking it?”

MacAllister thought about that for a few moments and then decided he didn't really know. His eyes came back to Sayers.

“To tell the truth Clive, I don't know. You know Jean. She doesn't give a lot away. When she first found out Kirsty had been hurt she arrived at the hospital in tears, but when Graham Simpson arrived she stopped crying and started to comfort him. I don't mind telling you I was relieved she had someone else to worry about. Since then she hasn't cried at all.”

For some reason he didn't want to tell Clive that Jean had refused to visit their daughter in the hospital until she could be told what the future held.

“Perhaps she will cry now, Guv, now it's over.”

“Aye, maybe, maybe.” He switched back to being a police detective. “What are you doing here?”

“Assault with a deadly weapon, malicious wounding. Some guy got stabbed through the bollocks with a knife.”

MacAllister closed his eyes and shuddered.

“Now that's what I call malicious wounding, anyone we know?”

“We know both of them, Guv. The girl wielding the knife we believe was our friend Alison Jenson and the bloke on the other end of it was our other old friend, George “Rasta” Fairbrother.”

“You mean the rape case girl. How on earth did he let her get close enough to do a thing like that?”

“From what he managed to tell the doctor who examined him, we think he was feeling her tits at the time when she stabbed him in the balls. We found a blonde wig on the floor in the corridor where it happened, so it looks as if she gave him the randy little groupie routine and then took a hack at his privates when he took her up on it. It's very dark in the corridor at the back of the dance hall where it happened. Anyway, we will soon know. I'm going up to get his statement now. I couldn't get to see him for twenty-four hours, as he needed to have one of his

testicles surgically removed. It seems the boning knife she used went straight through it.”

MacAllister shuddered again.

“Jesus Christ and she isn't sixteen yet. I'm glad I'm not responsible for her.”

He started as he realised what he had said and felt a rush of guilt that his interest in what his colleague was doing had made him forget already for a few moments that his own daughter was probably dead by now. He moved towards the door.

“I have to get back to Jean, Clive. I will be back in a couple of days when the first shock of all this is over.”

He turned to walk away but Clive stopped him.

“There is something I ought to tell you Guvnor, but I wasn't sure if you were ready for it yet.”

MacAllister never blinked, but the eyes went hooded and fierce.

“About what happened to Kirsty?”

Sayers lifted his hands as though he was preparing to hold him off.

“We can't be sure yet, but last night one of the Panda patrols stopped a kid who was reported as acting suspiciously in the car park down behind the Watershed Exhibition Centre. A pedestrian waved them down and told them there was a man trying the doors of all the cars. When they arrested him he had a ring with two hundred keys on it so they took him down the station and so far he has admitted to sixteen counts of taking and driving away. Naturally he was asked where he was on last Friday night. He gave us a cock and bull story about going out to the disco on his own, but we can't find anyone who saw him there. He says he didn't speak to anyone in the three hours he was there, except to ask a couple of girls he had never met before to dance. His parents confirm he came home by taxi at two o'clock, not that proves anything one way or the other.”

He looked out at an ambulance approaching with its lights flashing before he continued.

“We found the car that hit Kirsty twenty four hours after the event. It had been driven into the river Severn halfway down the Portway to the dock areas, but whoever had done it had forgotten, or didn't know, how tidal the river is. When the tide went out it was found fairly quickly. Forensic are going over it at the moment and I think there is a fair chance they may turn up something that might tie this kid in.”

“Kid? How old is he? Where is he now, still down the Nick?”

The questions came pouring out. Sayers put his hand on his arm to calm him down. When he had his attention he continued in a gentle and even voice.

“His name is Jason Howlett and he is the sixteen year old son of Rex Howlett of Rex Motors Ltd. That's the big Ford agents up at Fishponds. That's how come he had all the keys. Pinched them from his daddy's garage. At the moment he is out on bail released on the guarantee of his father. He appears before the Magistrates on next Friday so we still have a few days to put the pressure on, although his father has now hired a very, very expensive brief.”

“I will be in on Monday morning, Clive. I can't sit at home forever or this will drive me mad. I will try and persuade Jean to go back to the hospital.” His wife

was a clerk in the Registrars Office. "But I don't know if she will listen. See you then."

He strode off across the car park with more spring in his stride than when he had arrived. Sayers looked after him for a few moments and then went in to get his statement. He hadn't had a chance to tell MacAllister about Mitael Khorta. The lab test had showed positive on the firearms test and they'd thought they had got him, but his car had disappeared by the time they sent Frank Lintsey for it and nothing had been found in his apartment that would tie him to the Swindon job. Then that little weasel of a bookie, Dave Pike, had sworn that Khorta had been firing a target pistol on the private range in his cellar the day before.

Khorta's solicitor had then got very heavy and after the statutory forty-eight hours they had had to let him go. That and the fact that some of the money had been found spread all over the scene of a car bomb on the M5 had really got Khorta off the hook and his girl friend wasn't around to be interviewed to see if she would back up his story of a trip to Heathrow airport on the day of the Swindon bank job. They just didn't have a case. Perhaps it was just as well he hadn't told MacAllister. The Guvnor had enough on his plate at the moment.

Chapter 15

Alison Jenson was in bed when the Panda car pulled up outside of her house, as was her mother. The uniformed police woman kept knocking for some minutes until the upstairs window was eventually opened and Annabelle Courtney-Jenson's blonde head was thrust out, Annabelle always used both surnames with a hyphen to remind herself and the world of who's daughter she was. By this time the neighbours on both sides were at their windows watching the proceedings. Annabelle saw the uniforms and a look of dismay crossed the sleep puffed features. She stared down into the carefully neutral faces of Bob Evert and Mary Dunn.

"Oh no. What has the little cow done this time?"

Her head disappeared and the window closed. Thirty seconds later the door opened and the angry woman, who was dressed in a very thin lace housecoat that did nothing to conceal she was wearing only a pair of panties underneath it, appeared. Mary Dunn shot her gawping companion an amused look and bet herself a few bob that he would be holding court on this little story in the canteen at lunchtime. Both the constables were seized by the arm and dragged inside. Bob Evert resisted and Annabelle pulled harder.

"For Christ's sake, come in will you. I don't want everyone in the street to hear what is going on. Heaven knows they have had enough to laugh about lately."

She turned her head and screamed up the stairs.

"Alison. Get yourself down here at once or I will come up there and drag you down."

There was the sound of a toilet flushing and Alison Jenson appeared at the top of the stairs wearing only a very short "Baby doll" type nightdress and nothing

else. Bob Evert stared up at the unhindered view of her bush as she stepped off the top stair and then hurriedly pulled his gaze away, only to find it confronted by one of Annabelle's nipples that was now thrusting through one of the larger apertures in the lace of her housecoat. Alison reached the bottom off the stairs and swept passed them and into the lounge, smiling in obvious contempt at Bob Evert's acute embarrassment at being confronted by two half dressed women. The constables followed them in and Annabelle turned anxiously to them.

"What has the little bitch done?"

PCW Dunn glanced in amusement at her confused companion and took over. She became very formal.

"Alison Jenson. We are arresting you for the malicious wounding of one George Frederick Fairbrother at the Mecca dance hall at eleven thirty on evening of Friday 23rd September. You are not obliged to say anything, but anything you do say will be taken down and may be used in evidence against you. Do you understand the charge?"

The girl just curled her lip at them.

"You useless bastards wouldn't do anything and even my dad went soft after you lot had a go at him, so I did it myself. Now that bastard knows what its like to have something stuck into you when you don't want it. I am sorry I didn't kill him."

She turned and pouted a smile at Bob Evert.

"Are you going to be sitting in the back with me to make sure I don't do a runner?"

Mary Dunn looked at the sweat on the other's brow and answered for him.

"I shall be in the back with you, Alison and I don't advise trying to do a runner."

The girl looked Evert in the eyes and made a moue of disappointment.

"In that case I had better put some clothes on. I don't really fancy cuddling up to her in the back of the car."

She swept out of the lounge and ran up the stairs leaving the two police officers looking at each other and shaking their heads. Annabelle Courtney-Jenson collapsed onto the sofa and reached for her cigarette packet.

Mitael Khorta was a worried and angry man because he didn't know where his car, gun and money were. He had made several arrangements before the Swindon job, all of them aimed at covering his back if things went badly. Went badly? That was a laugh. One old woman, one policeman and that stupid junky, Leroy, and the Walker twins, all dead and for a mere sixty thousand pounds. Shit! That wasn't worth leaving home for under those circumstances. He had always intended getting rid of the other three with the Semtex in the bottom of the sports bag, but that had been to take all suspicion away from him and give the police something to puzzle about and maybe even believe the robbery was the work of an IRA cell working on the mainland. But it wasn't supposed to end up with dead women and policemen strewn about.

He was also sorry that he had been forced to use Rachael in this business. It wasn't that she didn't know how he had made his money, but he had wanted her to only be part of the respectable side of his life, not mixed up herself in criminal activity. When the phone had rung that night while he was talking to that pig

MacAllister and the other copper, the one he had downed with the kick to the balls, he had thought that it was Rachael phoning back to say where she had taken his car. That's why he had switched the volume down on the answer phone so MacAllister couldn't hear. Now the tape was missing from the answer phone and it could only have been MacAllister who had taken it. He would have listened to the tape by now and if it had been Rachael on the phone, found out where she had hidden the car. But if that were the case surely they would have been around for him long before this.

On the other hand, if it hadn't been her phoning him before MacAllister took the tape, then call was from someone else. Rachael would then have had to wait until at least early on Sunday morning before she could have got in touch with him or left a message, because that's when they had released him and he had returned home and gone straight to the answering machine only to discover the tape was missing. He had put the spare tape in the machine, but so far no message from Rachael. He rubbed his face with one hand.

He had close come to running when he found that tape missing. He felt sure it had contained a message from Rachael ringing to say where she had hidden the car and he felt equally sure they would play it and be back for him. Now over ten days had passed and nothing more had been said and he was beginning to feel safe from the law, but extremely anxious about his money. The thought that Rachael may have just upped and done a runner had crossed his mind more than once. He wouldn't be the first man to trust a woman he thought was in love with him and ended up with nothing. He gave that some more thought.

Rachael Kaukauna was a tall, graceful girl, so much alike to Khorta himself that they could have been brother and sister. They were from the same corner of Africa; and had met when she had come to England to study medicine. He had felt the need for a permanent woman for some time now. Time to settle down and start a family. Time to leave the past behind and get matched with a good woman.

His problem was that there was a distinct shortage of Somalian girls in Britain and although Khorta had never followed his religion closely, only going to the church for the weddings and funerals he couldn't avoid, he would only marry someone from his own general culture. It was true there were plenty of black girls in Bristol, but they were practically all West Indians, a race he considered to be without culture or breeding. It was his opinion that the only thing they had ever given to the world was Reggae and that was no gift. He wanted an African girl who was as tall and graceful as he was.

When a cousin had introduced him to Rachael it had been a revelation. She was beautiful, intelligent and very politically aware. Over the two years he had known her it had become understood within their community that they were betrothed. His family were delighted and felt that she would be the one to control the wildness he had always shown, although her family were understandably less enthusiastic. He smiled. When he had eventually told Rachael how he had made his money it hadn't worried her at all. She thought it right that they should be getting something back from this country that had played such a large part in influencing their own history in what she considered to be a detrimental way. However, he wasn't sure what her reaction would be to five deaths. He put the thought aside. Rachel would not desert him. She would get in touch soon.

He grinned to himself. That sergeant, what was his name? Sayers. That's right. Sergeant Sayers. He had been crowing when the forensic test showed that he had fired a gun recently. But only until Dave Pike, his tame Bookmaker had arrived and confirmed that he had spent the previous afternoon shooting a .22 target pistol on the range in his cellar. His brief had arranged that for him and that made him worth every penny of the tear-jerking fee he would charge. Then they had made a song and dance about why had he assaulted a policeman and run away and in return he had made a song and dance about being afraid of being beaten up in the cells because he was black and knew that MacAllister had it in for him.

Next they asked him where his car was and he had told them that while they were harassing an innocent man some bastard was stealing the car from right under their noses. They had huffed and puffed a lot, but when his solicitor started talking about suing them for wrongful arrest they'd had to let him go. It would cost him two thousand pounds for Dave Pike's co-operation, but it was worth every penny. Which brought his thinking around in a circle. Where the hell were his car, his gun and most of all, his money?

He went to his writing desk and checked the international flight timetable to discover when Rachael would have arrived at her mothers house in the small village outside of Debre Marcos, about two days bus ride from Addis Ababa over some pretty awful roads. If she had caught the early morning flight on the Friday, as she planned, she should have been home days ago. He had tried ringing several times every day but the primitive telephone system in the country had always defeated him and he had waited for her to call him. Perhaps he should give it another try.

He put down the timetable and picking up his address book from the desk, found the number and then started on the tortuous business of making a phone call to Ethiopia that went farther than Addis Ababa. He got through to Addis after only three tries, which was something of a minor miracle. But from there he was outside of any automatic relay system and in the hands of the local operators. Three times he was left in silence for so long that he thought the connection had been broken again before yet another strange voice asked him what he wanted. Then at last he heard the faint ringing tone of a real telephone in a real house. The ringing stopped as the phone was picked up and a voice asked him what he wanted. He struggled a bit with the language, which he had learnt, but never really used since his first day at school in Bristol over thirty odd years ago and then he cursed the stupid bastard of an operator. He had the wrong number.

He was about to put the phone down in rage and frustration when he realised what the man on the other end was saying to him. It was the wrong number, but the right village. Rachael's mother's house was on the other side of the village. He asked if some one could go and fetch Rachael. In the ensuing silence he thought that the man on the other end had put the phone down in misunderstanding. Then a woman's voice spoke to him. She talked in passable English and asked him if he was a relative. Puzzled he explained the relationship. He and Rachael were engaged. There were another few seconds of silence and then he was listening to what she told him in disbelief. There would be no wedding. There had been a terrible accident. The bus had suffered a blown out tyre up in the mountains and

had gone over the edge into a ravine. They were all dead, all of them. Rachael was dead.

He put the phone down while the woman was still trying to express her sorrow at being the one to give him the news and sinking down onto one of the sofas dropped his head into his hands. He couldn't believe it. His Rachael was dead. Only nine, no ten days ago, they had made love on the rugs in this very room. Now he had lost her and more to the point, his car, gun and money. It was a disaster. They could be anywhere.

He had told her to hide the car, then to ring him and tell him where it was and then post him back the keys by registered package from Debre Marcos. That way even if they arrested him and kept him for a week the keys wouldn't arrive until they had been forced to let him go for lack of proof. It would also make sure that if they picked up his mail while they had him under arrest they wouldn't find the keys and realise what had happened. Now, even if the keys did arrive unless there was a note with them that told him where the car was, he would be no wiser.

He had checked around the neighbourhood to see if he could find Rachael's car, but there was no sign of it. Not that it meant much. Any car left for two days with the keys in it would have been just begging to be stolen even in this area of the city. She might well have left him her car as arranged, but if some one had stolen it in the meantime it could be anywhere now.

He threw the address book across the room in grief and anger. Sooner or later some one would find his car and report it to the police who would see it was listed as stolen. They were bound to examine it inside and out and then when they found the gun and the money in it they would have him. He opened a draw and taking out a notebook and pencil pulled the yellow pages towards him and started to make a list of the entire car hire agencies in greater Bristol. He had to find that car before MacAllister did. And he needed wheels to do that.

Chapter 16

By Monday morning MacAllister thought that Jean looked sufficiently stable for him to risk going into the office. She was talking to him again, but only about those every day things that required conversation. Any attempt to discuss Kirsty was just met with a wall of silence, but it was an improvement over her behaviour immediately prior to Kirsty's death. His own head ached from grief and he felt like a rag doll, but he was aware in the back of his mind that if he stayed at home he would eventually turn to the whiskey bottle just to get through the day. Before he left he made Jean promise that she would ring the hospital and arrange to return to her job the following Monday. Then he climbed into the car to leave for work.

The pale blue Vectra was nearly eight years old and in dire need of a new battery and for some long moments he thought it was going to refuse to start. When it finally caught he gunned the motor and made a mental note to put the battery on charge when he got home that evening. He opened the glove box and

pulling out an aerosol can of car deodorant, sprayed it all over the upholstery. He had stopped smoking over a year ago, but the smell of old fags was ingrained into the fabric of the vehicle and could not be removed, only periodically drowned by the stronger, but less enduring, smell of the aerosol. The engine beat had settled down to a steady rhythm by now and he released the hand brake and pulled out into the road. He found himself thinking about buying a new car and then felt guilty that he had forgotten about Kirsty's death for even a few moments. He thrust the feeling away and drove on.

As he walked into the Bricewell station twenty minutes later he mentally braced himself for the two reactions he would face. Those who would come directly to him to express their sympathy and those who would avoid him, embarrassed by his loss and his grief and unable to cope with it. The Desk Sergeant greeted him gravely and one or two others stopped him to express their condolences, but in the main the rest just nodded and walked past. He couldn't really blame them. What do you say to someone that you only know professionally who has just suffered a tragedy, without sounding like a trite pillock? He knew how they felt and was glad they were avoiding the subject. He didn't even mind if they avoided him for a few weeks. He needed the breathing space just to get through it all.

He made his way to Chief Superintendent Bill Reid's office and knocked on the open door. Gill Bradman, Reid's secretary, was seated at her desk using the word processor. She looked up at him and her professional smile of welcome turned to a look of concern as she saw who it was. She got up and came around the desk to him taking both his hands in her own, her face grave and anxious.

"John! What are you doing here? We didn't expect you for at least another few days. How is Jean?"

The concern poured out as she put her hand on his arm and looked up at him, her eyes damp from sorrow and sympathy. He felt he was drowning in her concern and released his arm from her grip.

"I had to come in, Gill. I would go mad just sitting at home thinking about it." Guilt chewed at him. "How is Graham Simpson? Have you heard?"

He had not been able to bring himself to contact the shattered young man and it nagged at him that he had left him sleeping by Kirsty's bed to wake up and find that they had made their decision without informing him. Gill Bradman turned back to her desk and sat down.

"He came in yesterday to see Mr Reid and asked if he could have two weeks leave and an immediate transfer back to Ealing. He came from there originally you know and he still has family there. Mr Reid said he would see what could be done. He contacted the Ealing Station Commander yesterday afternoon and the last I heard was that they would be delighted to have him back. I hear he has already cleared out his locker. Didn't he let you know?"

MacAllister understood the surprise in her voice, but at the same time realised that the only thing that he and Graham had ever had in common was their love for Kirsty. He made an excuse.

"He may have rung Jean when I was down at the hospital Friday and she forgot to tell me. Neither of us is thinking that well at the moment." He thought it time to stop her inquest into their lives. "Is Bill Reid in his office?"

She became all business and picked up the inter office phone.

“Sorry to disturb you, Mr Reid, but Detective Inspector MacAllister is here and would like to see you.”

She nodded her head in answer to the reply she received as if her boss could see the action over the phone.

“Of course, Mr Reid.” She looked up at MacAllister. “Go right in.”

Bill Reid's office was on the corner of the building on the seventh and top floor so it had a good view over the city centre and across to the far hills. Reid was fond of standing at his window staring out at the view while he was thinking over a problem. He was also fond of repeating the information that Bristol, like Rome, was built on seven hills. In MacAllister's opinion that is where any similarity to the Eternal City ended. Others who lived in some of its meaner and more violent parts may have disagreed with him. Reid was staring out of the window when MacAllister entered, but he turned as he heard the door close and walked across the room extending his hand, his features were carefully composed into lines of concern.

“Hello, John. I know you are having a rough time so I won't insult you with platitudes. How is Jean taking it?”

MacAllister had never taken Reid for anything other than a career policeman whose only concerns in life were for his own problems and ambitions. Even so, he thought it best to accept it all at face value.

“I don't really know, Sir. We had to make the decision to switch off the life support system when it became obvious that Kirsty was not going to ever wake up again and Jean took the lead in that, but how she feels I just don't know. Kirsty was her life you see.”

For some reason he felt the need to explain.

“You know what it is like being a copper's wife. You can go for days hardly seeing each other. In the early years she had both the kids to keep her busy, but when boys get to about fourteen they don't need their Mums, except as washers, ironers and cooks. Kirsty on the other hand was always with her mum and by the time she was sixteen they were like sisters. Shared everything and ganged up together on me whenever one of them wanted something.”

He went and stared out of the window himself before he continued.

“It was Kirsty that persuaded Jean to go back to work and helped her to find the job.” He turned back into the room. “I don't know if she has really taken it in yet. You know, Sir. If she really believes and understands that Kirsty has gone.”

He turned away again quickly, embarrassed that he had revealed his feelings to a man for whom he had such little respect or feeling.

Bill Reid nodded and his face showed a sympathy and understanding he did not really feel. Reid was an ambitious copper of the modern school. Like MacAllister he had become an Inspector at a very early age, but unlike MacAllister his star had kept rising. He was still only in his late thirties, but it was understood by all that Bill Reid would one day be a Chief Constable. He was not particularly liked by the men that served under him as they usually realised that their careers would be considered expendable to the cause of Reid's promotion should the occasion arise. However, that had never worried other ambitious men and it certainly did not

bother William Reid. He knew he was star material and he was not in the force to win some popularity competition. Normally MacAllister would not have been so open with him as he knew Reid did not approve of some of the methods he used to get results. However, his own immediate boss, Chief Inspector Jack Roper, was away on long-term sickness and he had been forced to see Bill Reid. He decided it was time to get things back onto a more formal footing.

"I would like to return to work as of this morning and as Chief Inspector Roper is away, I thought I had better report to you and let you know I was back."

Reid looked at him through suddenly suspicious eyes.

"This rush back to the grindstone doesn't have anything to do with the Jason Howlett arrest, does it, John?"

MacAllister carefully kept his face expressionless.

"I am always pleased to hear we have caught another one, but I don't think I have heard about that one yet."

The lie was a mistake and he knew it as soon as the words had left his lips. He should have admitted that he knew of the arrest of Jason Howlett and that his desire to return to work was from a need to return to normality. With any other Commander he would have probably done so, but his dislike of Reid had prevented him from admitting to a normal human need and had led him to make an error of judgement. Disbelief was all over Reid's face, but he decided on the fatherly advice approach.

"Listen to me, John. I don't want you within a million miles of that case and that's an order. You leave it to Clive Sayers and then, if it does turn out this little tow rag had something to do with your Kirsty's death, we won't have blown it before we get it to court. Do you hear me, Inspector? Stay away."

MacAllister was suddenly all Kestrel.

"I hear you, Sir, but if this is the right person you do realise that I am an eye witness to what happened?"

"Yes I do, but we will cross that bridge when and if we can prove it was him driving the car. Until then it is out of your hands. Do you understand me?"

MacAllister's face was an unreadable mask when he answered.

"Most clearly, Sir."

"Good. Then I will let you get on with some work."

He turned back to the window and MacAllister was dismissed.

When he reached the CID room only Clive Sayers was there and he was on the telephone with his back to the door, so MacAllister sat himself down behind Jackie Ward's desk and waited. After about half a minute, in which he just nodded and twice said yes sir, Sayers put the phone down and turned around. He jumped when he saw MacAllister sitting there and then went red. MacAllister stared at him for several seconds before he spoke, during which time Sayers shuffled the papers on his desk and looked embarrassed.

"It's all right, Clive, I know who that was and what it was all about. I won't cause you any problems."

Sayers looked relieved.

"I'm sorry, Guv. I reckon Reid is a shit to go to your staff behind your back, but he was adamant that I shouldn't tell you anything about the Howlett case. I told

him you were a certainty be called as a witness by the defence or us when it finally comes to court, after all, you were in the car that was following him. Reid then agreed that I could keep you informed, but I am to tell him if you get involved at all.”

He looked like what he was. A man trapped between a rock and a hard place. MacAllister smiled a thin smile at him.

“Don't you worry, Clive laddie, I am going back to see Mr. Reid right now.”

He was gone before Sayers could stop him. Gill Bradley looked surprised to see him back so soon, but he didn't give her a chance to speak. His manner was formal.

“Will you please tell Superintendent Reid that Detective Inspector MacAllister would like to see him on a matter of some urgency please, Mrs Bradley?”

She looked once at his face and thumbed the intercom.

“Detective Inspector MacAllister is here again, sir. He says it is urgent.”

Reid's voice told her to show him in and without waiting for her MacAllister banged his knuckles once on the door and walked straight in. Bill Reid was at his desk this time, behind his fortress of authority.

“Yes, Inspector, was there something you forgot just now?”

The formality and the desk between them told MacAllister that Reid had guessed why he was here. He controlled himself and adopted the same formal stance as Reid had.

“No, Sir. I didn't forget anything, Sir, but I think you did.”

Reid bristled and sat up straighter in the chair.

“I did? And just what did I forget, if I may ask, Inspector?”

MacAllister stared at him. Still standing to attention as if he too was in uniform.

“Well, Sir. About a year ago you insisted that I attend a course at Hendon on the subject of leadership.”

“Yes, I thought at the time you needed a refresher. What's that got to do with this?”

His expression on his face said that he knew exactly what it had to do with this, but he wasn't going to admit it. MacAllister looked him right in the eye.

“Well, Sir. That course was actually entitled Leadership and the Command Structure and it was about why we have a command structure, Sir and how a good leader respects it.”

Reid's face had gone red with anger and MacAllister knew he had already realised why he was here. Reid ground out the question.

“What about it?”

“Well one of the golden rules they insisted upon was never to shortcut the command system by going past anyone. Upwards or downwards, Sir.”

“Now look here, MacAllister.”

Any other man would have realised the dangers of the course on which he was set and to be fair to MacAllister at any other time so would he. But this wasn't a normal time. This was within a few days of his and Jean's decision to end their daughter's life and unwittingly Bill Reid was giving MacAllister a target on which to focus all the pent up rage and frustration of their loss. Caution went out of the window.

“No, you look here, Sir. Whether you like the way I operate or not, I run the everyday working of the CID office. After I left this office this morning you went past me to Clive Sayers and practically told him to spy on me. I think that stinks and I think you should apologise, and while we are on the subject let me say that I am a police officer with over twenty five years service and I have learned in that time not to let my personal feelings fuck up a case. If you will excuse my French, Sir.”

Reid looked as if he was about to suffer a heart attack. He stood up from his chair and putting both hands flat on the desk leaned forward towards MacAllister.

“Now you listen to me, Inspector. You are a dinosaur in your methods and your approach to the whole concept of policing. You are the sort of officer that the force has been trying to get rid of for years and replace with modern thinking graduates. You are also a maverick who goes his own way and cuts corners when it suits him. So far its seems that you have got away with it, but one day it is going to come home to roost and we will either be sued or else your cowboy antics will lose us an important conviction. If you want an example lets look at the case of Mitael Khorta. Including this last arrest, when you brought him in without a shred of real evidence. You have now arrested him on five occasions only to have to release him again and he is currently threatening us with a case for wrongful arrest. If that happens I will personally make sure that you face a disciplinary hearing.”

They stood there glaring at each other until Reid remembered he was a senior officer and by association, a gentleman. He offered the olive branch to his junior officer.

“Look, John, I know this is a difficult time for you, but you must see that I only gave those instructions in your own interests. No police officer can be expected to keep a sense of perspective when it concerns the death of a member of his own family.” He made the gesture that might heal the breach. “I apologise for going past you, but I have to insist that you have nothing to do with the case. Shall we leave it at that.”

He started to come around his desk with his hand out, but MacAllister held up a hand to stop him.

“I can find my own way out thank you, Sir.”

He turned and left the room and Reid sat down to get his version of what had taken place down on paper while it was still fresh in his mind. He had tried to be fair, but MacAllister had not wanted it. Well he wasn't going to let a maverick CID Inspector upset the whole station.

When MacAllister got back to the CID room word had already gone around that he was back and practically the whole team were there. Jackie Ward came to greet him in the doorway while Marcus Lomax and Frank Lintsey stood by Clive Sayers desk looking pleased, but embarrassed. He walked straight past them all and over to the doorway to his office where he stopped and turned to face them.

“Clive I need to talk to you, the rest of you take those silly grins off your faces and get on with some bloody work.”

He entered his office and took his seat behind the desk while the rest of them carried on grinning as they did as they had been told. The boss was back. Sayers arrived in MacAllister's office within seconds and took the seat in front of the desk.

“Bring me up to date, Clive. Start off with the Flinders case”

Sayers sat back in the chair and took a few moments to gather his thoughts during which time Jackie Ward came in and placed two coffees in front of them. MacAllister nodded his thanks and waited for Sayers whose face told him he was not going to receive joyful news.

“The case starts a week from Monday and the betting is that he will get off with a verdict of manslaughter and a light sentence.” He looked apologetic. “The fact that Trevor Morton had a jack handle in his hand at the time completely knackers any charge of murder, Guv and the CPS people won't allow us to try for anything more than unlawful killing. Still, at least the bastard won't just walk.”

MacAllister just looked at him with his face full of scepticism and then dropped his eyes back down to his desk. The CPS, the Crown Prosecution Service to give it its full title were the ones who made the final decision on whether a case went for trial or not. In MacAllister's and many other copper's views they were too cautious and too worried about being seen to waste public money. The result of which was they usually only took on dead certainties. He chewed on the information for about a minute and then let it pass.

“What about Alison Jenson?”

Sayers kept his voice and expression carefully neutral.

“She appears before the Magistrates tomorrow. Same session as Jason Howlett.”

MacAllister felt the surge of adrenaline hit him and cause his heart to race. Through a throat that felt tight and constricted he managed to get out the question.

“What happened?”

“Forensic found that the car had been wiped completely clean of any prints before it was pushed into the river. There were some hairs found on the headrest of the drivers seat and they are away for matching and should be back in a few days, but Marcus really gave us the result.”

“Marcus? How did he give you a result? He no more saw the driver than I did except as a silhouette against the streetlights. Nothing you could pin an identity on.”

“He didn't identify anyone, Guv. He just remembered the music.”

“Music? What the hell are you talking about, Clive?”

“Marcus said that when the car pulled alongside you at the top of Park Street the volume of the music coming from it was enough to make your car vibrate. He asked what kind of sound system that Focus had as he was thinking of getting one for his own car.”

He grinned.

“Well, when he said that the forensic bloke stopped in his tracks. Then he dashed off and left us standing there. Two hours later we had a case.”

MacAllister leaned across the desk and spoke slowly.

“Clive, if you don't get to the point I may empty the rest of this lousy coffee over you.”

Sayers grinned again.

“It seems they had checked everything in the car including all the music CDs and the controls, but they had not checked inside the CD player. It was one of those expensive ones with a flap on the front, the type that draws the CD right

inside. So they went back and looked inside and there was a CD they hadn't checked. Result? One nice clear thumb print identical to that donated to us by Jason Howlett."

MacAllister realised he had been holding his breath in tightly and let it out with a whoosh. Got the bastard! Sayers just looked happy.

"We charged him yesterday. Half a dozen or more motoring offences including causing death and injury by reckless driving."

MacAllister had picked up the phone and was dialling. He looked up at Sayers.

"Just letting Jean know. Might help her to know that we have got the bastard. Great work Clive and tell Marcus I concede that he may have some uses."

He listened for some moments and then moved the phone away from his ear and put it down.

"She isn't answering. Perhaps she has gone down to the shops. God knows we haven't much in the house. Haven't been shopping since..."

He stopped abruptly and turned away. It was some seconds before he continued.

"Thanks again, Clive. I suppose I had better spend some time getting up to date with this lot."

He indicated the pile on his desk. Sayers nodded and left. Soon have the Guvnor back to his old self. Couldn't bring Kirsty back of course, but if they nailed Jason Howlett's miserable little hide to the wall it would at least help in his recovery. When he reached the outer office Jackie Ward came over to his desk and asked him how did MacAllister seem to be coping. He smiled and shook his head.

"You know the Guvnor, Janet. Who knows what he thinks."

As these conversations were taking place, in the multi-storey car park opposite the Bricewell police station Mrs Molly Parkinson was emerging from the lifts and walking towards her car, which she had been forced to park right on the top floor of the car park. It was always the same when the Exhibition Centre was being used. All the Sales Reps that had stands there would clog up the car park forcing regular customers to go higher and higher to find a space. How their companies could afford to pay the parking fees day after day was beyond her. She stopped by the new Volvo Estate and opened her bag to get her keys. She had missed her husband a lot in the three years since his death, but at least she was free to spend some money now. When Cyril had been alive he had always been very careful with money, so when the will had been read she had been amazed to find out he was worth over one hundred and fifty thousand pounds. That, plus his life insurance of another twenty five thousand and as the house already bought and paid for and there she was. Fifty-five years old and rich. Well, extremely comfortably off.

Cyril had never let her drive so the first thing she had done was to take driving lessons. It had taken her over two years and eight attempts to pass her test, but two months ago she had made it and the big Volvo was her present to herself for being such a clever girl. She found the keys in the bottom of her handbag and opened the boot, picking up and loading into it the carrier bags of shopping she had just bought in the Marks & Spencer food hall. She closed the boot again thinking of the meal with which she would spoil herself tonight. It would be naughty, but after all she did go to aerobics every morning to stay in shape. That

was something else Cyril would not have approved of. She unlocked the driver's door.

The young man appeared out of nowhere. He grabbed her by the shoulders and spinning her around slammed her back against the side of the car. The only features she could see were the clear grey eyes that stared at her from between the scarf that covered the lower part of his face and the peak of his baseball cap. To her surprise she found herself reading what was written on it. Washington Redskins. She felt quite calm at this point. After all, she carried very little actual money, just four credit cards and they could soon be cancelled. The man showed her a sharp looking kitchen knife with a six-inch blade.

"Give me your bag."

She handed him the smart grey leather handbag with the long shoulder strap without protest and he rummaged through it, stuffing her purse, her car park ticket and credit card wallet and mobile phone into the pockets of his black nylon car coat and throwing unwanted items, like her lipstick and compact, on the floor. He gave her back the bag and snatched the car keys from her hand, slipping the knife into his pocket as he did so. He turned to the car.

"Nice car, Grandma. You might get it back in one piece if you are lucky."

She was unprepared for this and she bristled.

"You are not taking my car?"

He turned back from climbing into the car, the knife once more in his hand.

"Listen, you old bag. I am taking the fucking car and you are going to walk. Now back off, before I cut you."

She stepped hurriedly backwards and the man turned again towards the car. Then livid anger arose in Molly Parkinson's breast and for the first time in her life she understood about the red mist of rage. He was going to take her car. The one she had spent two years of purgatory and taken eight driving tests for. No he bloody well wasn't.

She stepped forward and stamped the short stiletto heel of her shoe into the instep of the foot he still had on the floor outside the car. The man shouted in pain and started to scramble out, knife again gripped in his right hand. As he emerged she looped the long leather strap of her handbag over his head and around his neck and heaved him sideways. The man came flying out of the seat twisting to try and face his attacker and landed face down spread eagled on the concrete flooring with the knife still clutched in his hand. She stepped forwards and again brought the heel of her shoe down, this time on the back of his hand in a vicious stamp that had all of her nine and a half stones behind it. The man screamed as bones snapped and he let the knife go. She stepped back slightly and then kicked him in his upturned face as hard as she could, breaking the nose and making the floor suddenly red as the blood flowed. Then she leaned back against the side of car breathing hard and muttering to her self.

"Nobody takes my car, nobody."

The youth looked up at her with terrified eyes and then scrambled away on his knees and his uninjured hand as if his life depended on it, until he was safely outside of her reach. Then he used the next car, two spaces away, to drag himself to his feet and hobbled away towards the exit stairs as fast as his injured foot would take him, shooting fearful glances over his shoulder. Molly Parkinson

watched him go and then got into her Volvo. Picking up the car phone the nice man had sold her when she bought the car, she dialled the emergency code.

“Hello. Police please. I want to report a robbery.”

MacAllister was still catching up with the different crimes that had been committed in his absence when Frank Lintsey put a grinning face around his door. MacAllister glanced up at him.

“Don't you ever knock, Frank?”

“Sorry, Guv, but I thought you would like to know that we have just collared the car park mugger.”

MacAllister sat back, all attention.

“And not before time if I may say so. Who got him?”

Lintsey's grin got broader.

“You will love this, Guvnor. It seems that about five minutes ago on the top story of the car park he robbed a fifty-five year old widow. Its pretty full at the moment with that Electronic Office Show on at the Watershed and that was the only place she could park. Well it all went all right to start with. He threatened her with a kitchen knife and she let him have her money and her credit cards, but he got greedy and wanted to take her new Volvo Estate. So she beat the shit out of him and he ran away. She reported it on her car phone and the uniform boys grabbed him within two hundred yards of the car park entrance.”

MacAllister eyes were wide in disbelief.

“She did what to him?”

Lintsey made a show of checking his notes.

“The hospital says...”

The eyes grew rounder.

“The hospital?”

“That's right, Guv. He was quite knocked about. I have a list here. Torn tendons and two broken bones in his right foot.” He looked up. “The guy was only wearing sneakers and she stamped on his instep with a stiletto heel. Several broken bones in his right hand, she stamped on that too and a broken nose and three teeth knocked out.” He looked up. “That's it.”

“Jesus H. Christ.” MacAllister shook his head. “What would she have done to him if he had tried to get her knickers off?”

Lintsey grin became even broader as his inherent male chauvinism took over.

“She's not a bad looking woman for fifty-five, Guv. She dresses a lot younger and can get away with it. I reckon he might have fallen on his feet if he had only wanted to steal her cherry, but was the thought of losing the car that upset her. Come and meet her, she's in with Jackie giving us a statement”

“No thanks, Frank. If she can do all that to some young tearaway she would probably kill me. You carry on, laddie.”

He turned back to his paperwork. No doubt about it. Life was coming back to normal.

It was with some guilt that he turned into the cul-de-sac that contained the MacAllister residence that evening. It was past seven o'clock and he had not meant to leave Jean all alone for this long on his first day back at the office. He had

thought about getting her a peace offering, but knew it would be inappropriate under the circumstances. This was hardly a time to be coming home with flowers or chocolates. He swung the Vectra into the drive. It was odd that there were no lights on in the house. Perhaps Jean was in bed already. She had been suffering from severe headaches since Kirsty's death and the only cure had been to lie quietly in a darkened room. He decided to leave the car on the drive rather than make a noise opening the up and over door of the garage, as it always rattled and banged. He slid out of the driver's seat, closing and locking the door as quietly as he could and fumbled in his jacket pocket for his keys. His nose twitched. What was that smell? It smelled like gas. He approached the front door. It was stronger. With mounting dread he lifted the letterbox lid. Gas flooded out, stinging his eyes and choking his breath off. He screamed.

“Jeanie. Jeanie, No-o-o.”

He ran around to the boot of the car scrabbling for the keys he had returned to his pocket. He opened the boot and started hastily throwing the accumulated junk it contained onto the drive. There it was, the jack handle. He rushed back to the house and smashed the glass in the top half of the street door. Then he went to the bay window and did the same thing to every pane of glass there. The gas rolled out of the house in choking clouds. Running around to the back of the house he smashed all the glass in the kitchen door and the French windows. More choking clouds of gas appeared. He waited thirty seconds until the air was clearer. Then holding his handkerchief across his face, he reached in through the smashed glass of the French windows and opening them, entered the house.

He found her in the lounge. She was lying on the settee with a bottle of sleeping pills still clutched in her hand. She looked peacefully asleep, but from the blueness of her lips he knew better. He felt for the pulse that he knew he wouldn't find. The build up of gas that had poured out of the house meant it must be hours since she had laid herself down for the final time. He went throughout the house switching off all the gas, first from the fire in the lounge and then all the taps on the gas cooker. A part of his mind was grateful that they were in the summertime and the automatic heating system had not come on at six-thirty as it did in the winter and destroyed half the neighbourhood in the ensuing explosion. He went to pick up the telephone and then remembered that you were not supposed to use anything that used electricity or made any sort of electrical connection if there was gas about. He hesitated, thought about using his mobile and then picked it up anyway. What did he care now if the whole house went up? He dialled the emergency code and asked them to send the police, told them that an unnatural death had occurred, a suicide. When he said it was his wife and gave his name and rank, it jarred the operator out of the boredom of his daily routine and he knew he would not have long to wait. Then he went and sat out on the bench in the back garden that they had bought in better times, to await their arrival. After a few moments he put his head down into his hands and cried like a baby, and that's how they found him.

Chapter 17

The Magistrates Court means different things to different people. For clerks, policemen, social workers and probation officers, it is a place of work. For the local reporter it is also a place of work, but with the tantalising weekly prospect that some day some minor case may turn into the big one. The big one that gets his prose and maybe even his by-line into one of the daily papers. For the plaintiffs it is a place of apprehension. Even small time offenders cannot be sure if it is going to be a small fine, a caution or probation. Those who had offended before might well be facing a custodial sentence and all could be sure that their misdemeanours would be faithfully reproduced in the local weekly paper, for those who knew them to read, enjoy and play holier than thou about.

MacAllister walked in quietly and sat right at the back of the public seating in the shadows of a corner. He was still wearing the same clothes he'd had on the night before when he had found Jean's body and as he had spent the rest of the night at the hospital and then walking aimlessly around the darkened city he had been unable to shave. He was only here because while sat in one of the smaller parks along with the rest of the down and outs he had seen a Black Maria go by and had remembered this was the day Jason Howlett came before the magistrates. He had gone to one of the riverside cafes and forced down a cup of hot sweet tea and while he waited for the courthouse to open had telephoned the sergeant in charge of the section house to arrange for him to have a room for a few days. Consequently he looked like a man who'd had a heavy night on the town, but his paleness and the red eyes were caused by grief and lack of sleep, rather than drink. He was running only on willpower as he hadn't eaten since lunchtime the day before and the way he felt now would probably never eat again.

He glanced around the public area. One or two of the local hooligans, there to support their less fortunate mates when they appeared in the dock, recognised him and wondered what the filth was doing in their part of the chamber looking like death warmed up, but no one asked. They hunched their jackets up around their shoulders and turned their faces away. You didn't draw MacAllister's attention to you if it could be avoided.

The court was currently trying the Alison Jenson case and in the front of him in the public gallery was a small group of West Indians here to see their man get justice. The central Magistrate, a pink faced and smoothly rotund figure, was holding the usual whispered conversation with his two colleagues that all Magistrates go through as soon as all the evidence has been heard. They finished and the central Magistrate then leaned forwards to hold a second whispered conversation with the Clerk of the Court. Checking to make sure his sentence was within the rules, thought MacAllister, whose opinion of Magistrates and Magistrates Courts was usually unprintable. Conversation over the Magistrate sat up and attempted to look stern and just. He hadn't the figure for it. When he spoke his voice was high and full of the indignation that those who have never been caught themselves reserve for those that have.

“Alison Jenson. You have admitted that you did deliberately attacked George Fairbrother with a knife, causing grievous bodily harm that later required surgery and the removal of one of his organs.”

At this the hooligans, who all knew which organ the man was talking about, collapsed into laughter, considerably annoying the Magistrate who glared at them before continuing. The West Indians also glared and as they were outnumbered the hooligans went quiet. The Magistrate continued.

“You show no remorse for this act. Indeed, the opinion you expressed in this court was that you wished it had been even more damaging than it actually was. Under these circumstances and taking into account your previous history, we see no alternative but to send you to a place where you can be shown the error of your ways. You are sentenced to six months in the Pucklechurch Youth Custody Centre. Would Mr. Bramley please liaise with the Magistrates Clerk's office please?”

Amid a smattering of applause from the West Indians sitting near MacAllister, John Bramley, a local social worker stood up, and looking resigned made his way from the court while the young policewoman with Alison Jenson tapped her on the shoulder to let her know it was all over. She started to leave the court and then turned and stopped just long enough to jerk her middle finger up at the applauding West Indians before disappearing through the door behind her. MacAllister wondered how her soldier father would take the news. Probably write to congratulate her, he thought. No wonder the poor little cow was in such a mess. The Clerk of the Court then called Jason Howlett and he forgot her.

The youth that appeared was exactly as MacAllister had imagined he would be. Not the features or the hair colouring of course, but in his clothing and general demeanour. Jason Howlett stood at about five feet eight. He had dark brown hair, which was cut very short, almost shaven, to the top of his ears and then allowed to bush out above that as if it had been styled with the proverbial pudding basin. He wore a large gold hoop in his left ear, a white, long sleeved, collarless shirt cut in the Cossack style, a beige suede jacket that was just draped across his shoulders, black leather trousers and an air of boredom. MacAllister hated him on sight.

The West Indians had drifted away and the public gallery was now almost empty except for the hooligans awaiting the appearance of those of their mates who had not been detained and a middle aged couple who were giving the boy encouraging nods. They were obviously his parents. They too were well dressed, but not as ostentatiously as the boy. MacAllister and the local reporter, who from the glances he was putting MacAllister's way obviously knew the full story, were the only other people left in the public gallery. The affair was quite predictable. Clive Sayers put the police evidence and the boys solicitor asked for the case to go to crown court, a mere formality as there was a death involved and reserved any defence until then. Bail was unopposed and was set a five hundred pounds. It was all very quickly over. MacAllister left the courtroom and went to see Clive Sayers to find out when the hearing would be scheduled for. He found Sayers in the small and grubby room reserved for the police at the back of the building. He was stacking his papers into his briefcase and looked up with some surprise as MacAllister entered the room, surveying his condition with concern and apprehension.

“What the hell are you doing here, Guvnor? You shouldn't be here.”

MacAllister snarled at him.

“What do you think I am doing? I am keeping abreast of current cases that my section are engaged in.”

“But, Guvnor?”

The voice carried a lot of concerned protest. It was obvious he had heard about Jean and was concerned that the latest tragedy had turned MacAllister's mind. MacAllister softened, but only slightly. He put his hand on Sayers' shoulder and stared him down; the Kestrel was peering out ferociously from the blue grey eyes.

“Look, Clive. That kid in there ran my Kirsty over and then drove off and left her laying there like a stray dog, except most people will stop even when they hit a dog. That drove my Jean to suicide and in my book that makes him responsible for two deaths. I think I have the right see what happens to him, don't you?”

“Guvnor, I know what you are saying, but if Reid finds out you were here there will be hell to pay. Why don't you go home?”

MacAllister's patience ran out.

“Don't be a pratt, Clive. After yesterday none of the ground floor windows have any glass in them and the smell of gas is still in the place so I don't want to go in there. Besides, I don't think I could ever again sit on the settee where Jeanie died, so I have got a room in the section house with the rest of the unmarried coppers.” He dropped his hand. “So don't tell me to go home. There's a good lad.”

He turned and walked away.

When he arrived at the Bricewell he was met with stares of amazement from all quarters. He could imagine the gossip in the canteen for the next few days. Wife dead for less than twenty-four hours and he just comes into work as if nothing happened. Couldn't they understand he had to be here? What else could he do with himself without going stark staring mad? He had been at his desk for less than ten minutes when Sayers came in with the trial schedule. It would be six weeks before Jason Howlett came to court. It was far quicker than he had expected and he asked Clive Sayers if he knew why. Sayers confirmed that it looked as if Masonic strings had been pulled. MacAllister simmered, but said nothing. He looked down the list and saw that the case immediately in front of this was Shane Flinders, accused of the Trevor Morton killing. He just stared at Sayers offer to lend him a razor and a towel and sat there immersed in his thoughts.

He began to appreciate just how John Morton had felt about Shane Flinders. If they still sentenced people to death he felt he could have executed the Howlett kid himself, along his stupid parents for spoiling the little bastard and spoil him they obviously had. The clothes the kid had been wearing in court today would have set the average copper back more than a weeks pay and there was no way he could have bought them himself. His phone rang and he picked it up. It was Gill Bradman. He prepared himself to be emotionally smothered, but she just asked him if he could come and see Mr. Reid and then she rang off.

When he entered Gill Bradman's office it was empty, but Bill Reid was standing in the connecting doorway to his own office and waved him in. He closed the door behind them and turned to MacAllister, his face now suffused with anger.

“What the hell were you doing at the Magistrates court this morning? You know you were instructed to stay away from that case.” He paused for a moment. “And look at the bloody state of you man.”

MacAllister looked at him for some seconds, remembering that his wife and daughter had been taken from him in the space of ten days and how much he disliked this prick of a station commander standing in front of him. If the man had shown the slightest sympathy for the loss of his wife and daughter then he would probably accepted that he was wrong to have been in the court this morning. But the truth was that Reid didn't care about any one or anything other than his own burning ambitions. He curled a lip at the other.

“I accept your heartfelt condolences on the death of my wife, Sir.”

Reid's face went a deeper shade of red and his voice rose a couple of decibels.

“Don't you try emotional blackmail on me, MacAllister? You're the one who should be sat with your family grieving, instead of running around in the Magistrates Court probably ruining any case we could bring against that boy.”

The Kestrel had taken over MacAllister completely now. The eyes were blazing with anger and defiance.

“You may not have noticed it, Sir, but half of the family you say I should be at home comforting are dead as a result of the actions of this boy, so don't give me your facetious advice because a cold blooded bastard like you could know nothing about it.”

Reid's face again took on its by now familiar crimson hue. He opened his mouth to speak, but then stopped and tried to calm himself. MacAllister just kept giving him a look of contempt as Reid's face registered in rapid succession sympathy, anger and frustration. Then anger won and he made a decision.

“Just look at the state of yourself and then tell me you are completely in control of your emotions. You are relieved of duty as of now, Inspector, on the grounds that you are emotionally unfit for command. For your sake I will put it down as compassionate leave so that it will not show on your records, but only if you don't do anything to force me to make it official. You will not come into this station until I call you in and that will not be until I have arranged your transfer to another area. You are finished with Bristol CID as of today. I will not have any loose cannons careering about in my command.”

MacAllister had taken the rest of the tirade without expression until the last two sentences. These brought the colour to his cheeks in a rush. He leaned both hands on the desk glared at the other man.

“I see. Get rid of the man and get rid of the problem. Well you just listen to me. You try to transfer me and I will cause such a fuss that your career will never recover from it, Billy boy. You think about it.”

It was Reid's turn to look contemptuous.

“Don't threaten me, Inspector. I am not one of your villains. I understand you have taken a room in the section house. You may stay there today until your house is re-glazed and then you will leave it. I have rung a local glazier I know and he will start work tomorrow. After that if I see you here, or hear that you have been anywhere near this station or the section house before I contact you, you will be on a disciplinary charge. You may now leave.”

MacAllister had one last try to swallow his feelings for the other man.

“Look, Bill, I am sorry about this morning, but surely you can understand that I wanted to see what the person looked like that has destroyed my family?”

Then in his exasperation he ruined it.

“Surely even a cold hearted sod like you can understand that?”

Reid stared at him at him for a few moments more before he replied.

“Go home, Inspector and make sure you remember what I said.”

He turned and looked out of his window at what he could see of the seven hills and did not turn back until he heard the door slam.

It was really too early, but MacAllister really needed the large whiskey he was holding. The pub had only been open a few moments and today's fresh aromas had not yet covered the smell of last night's stale beer and cigarette smoke. It was a handsome old pub, the Prince William. All old beams and polished brass and standing in one of the few remaining cobbled streets left in the city. It was the Bricewell station's local, but at eleven thirty in the morning MacAllister and the man sat opposite him were the only coppers in the place.

Jack Wirrel was the Bricewell Station rep for the Police Federation and had been for eight years. He had been in the station this morning only because he had been giving evidence in a case at the courts. MacAllister had grabbed hold of him and whisked him away to the “Prince Billy”, as the locals called the Prince William and had explained about Reid's threat to transfer him. Wirrel had listened carefully and was now sat in silence considering what MacAllister had told him. MacAllister had more sense than to interrupt him and was morosely sipping at his whiskey, waiting to hear what the other had to say while watching the landlord restocking the bar after last night's business. Finally Wirrel put his glass down, ready to give his opinion.

“Well, as I see it, John, they are entitled to transfer you at any time if they think it best for you and the force, but not out of malice or without good reason. You may have visited the court this morning against Reid's wishes, but he only told you not to get involved in the case, he never told you couldn't follow the case and he even agreed that Clive Sayers could keep you up to date on what was happening. Secondly, he never told you that you could not go to the court and watch the proceedings. Besides that he seems to have taken nothing into account of your current circumstances.”

He scratched his chin before continuing.

“The way I see it is that he has wanted to get you off his patch for quite a while, but has been unable to find a good reason for doing it.” He looked embarrassed. “Its no secret that he doesn't approve of some of your methods, John and he is terrified you are going to drop a big one and take his precious career with you.”

He continued.

“He has every right to try and transfer you if he wants to, but he must go through the proper channels. This sounds like a case of him seizing the opportunity to move you on without having to make a proper case out. Has he offered you a promotion?”

MacAllister gave him a sneering smile of disbelief.

“What do you think?”

"I think if he had any sense that is what he should have done, then you would be unable to argue with him. Any promotion above the level of sergeant practically always carries a transfer."

MacAllister held his patience with difficulty.

"So what about it then, Jack?"

Jack Wirrel gave him a slow smile and stuck out his hand.

"The Federation will take it on. I am quite happy to fight this transfer on the grounds that it is being arranged because of a personal dislike and not for the reasons officially stated. I think with your record we can show them that it will impair station efficiency to lose a man with your knowledge of the local villains and that there were extenuating circumstances for any disregard of Reid's orders."

MacAllister gave a deep sigh of relief and taking the offered hand, shook it warmly.

"Thank you, Jack and I apologise for all the times I have thought the Federation Subs were a waste of money. If you can get this bastard from off my back you will have my eternal gratitude."

"Well that's as maybe, but think on now, John. Until I have talked to a few people you should follow his orders and stay away from the Bricewell." He hesitated and then continued. "I am so sorry about your Jean, she was a good woman. I should get a shave and some sleep if I were you, John. It always makes you feel better."

He rose and with a nod of his head left the pub.

MacAllister sat finishing his whiskey and thought about his room at the section house and then about his own home, still full of the smell of death and by now with Bill Reid's influence, probably a team of glaziers. He went and bought a refill. By this time the pub had begun to fill up with the early lunchtime crowd and the smell of hot food began to fill the place, he had just about finished his fifth large whiskey. He stood up and swayed a bit before he found his balance, unused to drinking so much and on a stomach that had not taken food for twenty-four hours. He cursed himself for a fool and made his way through the now crowded pub to the doorway. He would get a sandwich down the road and sit and eat it by the river. No point in going back to the section house in this condition.

Outside the pub was bright September sunshine and after the gloom of the interior it was blinding. He stepped out onto the pavement with his eyes squinting against the glare and bumped into a group of people. He was on the verge of muttering an apology when his eyes focused upon and recognised the black leather trousers and suede jacket of Jason Howlett. The boy was looking at him with an expression of disgust as the fumes from the whiskey MacAllister had been drinking were blown into his face. He stepped back away from the contact and turned his head to his father.

"Take no notice of him, Dad. He's a drunk."

The lip curled in contempt and the face took on an expression of loathing that made MacAllister want to punch it, but he held on to the remains of his good sense and turned away. It was Rex Howlett's reply as they walked away that did it.

"Look at the state of him. Fine example to be setting to a young lad he is. Come on, Claire, lets find somewhere else to have lunch, this place is probably full of his sort."

MacAllister stopped in his tracks and started counting to ten, but only made it to five before he broke. He turned and hurried the few steps after the threesome. When he was within reach he put his hand on the man's shoulder and pulled him to a halt. Howlett Senior turned angrily and shrugged off his hand, but MacAllister took the lapels of his jacket with his right fist and pushed him up against the wall of the Prince Billy. He pushed his own face towards the other's and let him breathe in the whiskey fumes.

"Now you listen to me you sanctimonious prick. I may have had a few too many and I wouldn't deny it, but do you know why?"

Howlett senior struggled, but the MacAllister grip was like a steel vice on his lapels. He continued. The boy and his mother just stood there with their mouths open making no attempt to go to his aid. MacAllister gave him a little shake.

"A couple of weeks ago, your darling boy there, the one you spend so much money on buying him all the latest gear, stole a man's car that he had worked bloody hard to buy and then ran down and killed a young girl just twenty four hours before she was to get married. Last night that girl's mother took a bottle of sleeping pills and then turned on every gas tap in the house."

He pulled the man towards him and then slammed him viciously back against the wall, his head making a satisfying bang on the ancient brickwork. The tears were streaming down MacAllister's face by now and it was all that he could do to control his voice. He pulled himself face to face again, ignoring Jason Howlett's attempts now to pull him away from his father.

"Do you know how I know?"

He slammed him back against the wall a second time. Panic began to enter the man's face and his hands scrabbled frantically to release the others hold on his jacket, as he felt the blood running down his neck from the wound on the back of his head. Another slam against the wall and by now Jason Howlett was punching at MacAllister's head and shoulders trying to make him let go.

"Do you?"

MacAllister slammed him a fourth time and let him go. Howlett Senior slid along the wall as legs turning to rubber refused to support him and he dropped to the floor, moaning and holding his head. His wife and son dropped to their knees beside him, she frantically applying a pathetically small handkerchief to the bleeding skull. She looked up at MacAllister with hatred in her face.

"You drunken animal. I shall have the police on you."

MacAllister laughed and pulled out his warrant card. He waved it in her face.

"Does the name mean anything to you? Does it?"

The women looked at the card and then back at MacAllister before speaking.

"You're the girl's father. The one in the accident."

"That's right except I was the girl's father, remember? The girl is dead now and so is her mother. Your son did that."

With the release of tension the violence had brought to him he began to sober and realise what he had done. For a moment he considered helping the man, but couldn't bring himself to do it. He turned away leaving the Howletts to help themselves and walked back to the section house. Once inside his room he threw himself down on the bed and within minutes he was sleeping the sleep of mental

and physical exhaustion, helped by the excessive quantity of whisky in his bloodstream.

It was late afternoon and the shadows in the room were already lengthening when the banging on his door awoke him. His head was throbbing with hangover and his mouth was dry and foul so he went first to the sink to rinse his mouth and splashed some water on his face before going to the door. When he opened it and saw who his visitors were the events of the morning came back with a rush. He stood aside and waved Bill Reid and the Divisional Commander into the room, closing the door behind them and then leaning back against it. He put his head on one side, a gesture of inquiry that many a suspect had got to know well after a few hours with him in the interview room. With his unshaven chin and rumpled clothes he could have been any down and out from the Salvation Army hostel a few yards up the road. He certainly didn't look like an inspector with Bristol CID. His visitors looked at his condition with obvious distaste.

Walter Hart, the Divisional Commander, was a man who had reached the end of his promotion road with his current rank and he knew it. That be as it may, if nothing else it now allowed him to give free reign to the pomposity and arrogance that had been instrumental in prevented his further promotion. He was universally detested as a man who would break a career by putting an improperly dressed notation onto the record of a bobby who ten minutes early had been pursuing some tearaway through a filthy warehouse. But Hart's view was that if Regulations stated a correct form of dress then by Harry the men in his command would stick to it, even if it meant keeping a spare uniform permanently in their lockers. MacAllister knew that Hart would enjoy what was to follow and he was not disappointed. Hart drew in his stomach and smoothed his small white moustache with the back of his thumb as he viewed MacAllister's condition with disgust. He himself always kept his uniform immaculate and his iron-grey hair neatly barbered. You have got to present the right image to the public and all that. He became formal, standing with his legs slightly apart and his hands clasped together behind his back.

"Inspector MacAllister, this is an official visit and anything you say will be noted and may be used in any future disciplinary proceedings against you that may be decided upon. Do you understand that?"

He spoke clearly and carefully, like you would to a drunk or a half-wit. MacAllister nodded and remained leaning against the door, his expression of contempt equalling the others.

"Yes, Sir." It was not said respectfully.

Hart waited a few seconds as though weighing carefully what he was going to say, but MacAllister knew he was just mentally rehearsing the lines the two of them had agreed on before coming to see him.

"I understand that Chief Superintendent Reid gave you specific instructions that you were to take no part in the Jason Howlett case, except if called as a witness by either side if and when the matter came to court. Is that correct?"

MacAllister nodded.

"I said is that correct, Inspector?"

"Yes, Sir." The sir was emphasised.

"I further understand that you went to the Magistrates court this morning when the case was having its initial hearing. Is that also correct?"

"Yes, Sir, but...."

"Is that correct, Inspector?"

"Yes, Sir."

The contempt was now replaced by a growing anger. Hart exchanged a glance with Bill Reid that clearly said, now we have him, he has admitted to it.

"Can you confirm, Inspector, that when you returned to the station after your visit to the court this morning, Chief Superintendent Reid called you once more into his office and told you were suspended from duty for disobeying his precise instructions not to get involved in the Howlett case?"

MacAllister stared his contempt into Reid's face, but the other refused to meet his gaze. His eyes switched back to Hart.

"I understood he gave me compassionate leave following the death of my wife, Sir. Officially that is."

The men again exchanged glances and this time it was obvious that Reid had not told Hart about the compassionate leave angle. He looked embarrassed, but Hart continued anyway.

"After leaving Chief Superintendent Reid's office this morning, did you go to a public house called the Prince William and stay there for some two hours or more."

"Yes, Sir."

This time the answer sighed out as if MacAllister were weary of the whole charade.

"Were you drinking during this time?"

"Yes, Sir."

"How much would you say you had to drink while you were there, Inspector?"

"I don't remember precisely."

"Would you say you were completely sober when you left."

"No, Sir, I was not completely sober."

"As you left the Prince William, did you bump into the Howletts. Mr, Mrs and Jason Howlett."

"Yes, Sir."

"And did you assault Mr. Howlett by banging his head against the wall of the public house several times, hard enough for him to require hospital treatment?"

"I hope so, Sir."

"What did you say?"

The Scottish accent was becoming more evident while fire crackled from the grey blue eyes.

"I said I bloody well hope so, Sir."

At this last reply Walter Hart decided they had more than enough evidence and could reasonably go about what they had already arranged. He turned to Bill Reid and nodded before composing himself to deliver their verdict.

"Inspector John MacAllister, you have admitted to several serious breaches of discipline and I have no other choice than to suspend you from all duties until a disciplinary hearing can be arranged for the earliest moment possible. In the

meantime you will leave this Section House and you will return to your own home. Good evening to you, Inspector.”

At this last MacAllister moved away from the door, opening it as he did so. Walter Hart straightened his uniform cap and marched from the room closely followed by Bill Reid. Neither man so much as glanced at him, but both were unable to hide their satisfaction at the outcome of their visit.

Marcus Lomax and Frank Lintsey were parked in the unloading area at the back of one of the large electrical goods shops in the central precinct, sitting in the rear of an old Ford Focus van that had seen better days and were both stiff and cramped. They were waiting on a tip off received earlier in the week stating that the storeroom of the electrical goods shop was to be robbed some time during this week and this was their second night in the back of the small and uncomfortable van with “Cully's Domestic Electrics” written along the side of it.

The first night had ended in a farce when a couple of teenagers had tried to steal the van for a joyride, completely unaware that there were two detectives inside it and the ensuing hullabaloo of their arrest had ensured that no one would be attempting any big robbery that night. The two detectives had considered their cover blown and the case closed after that, but Bill Reid had insisted they continue for a while longer as the owner of the store was a fellow Mason. Tonight they had been passing the time by discussing in whispers the conduct of their leader. Frank Lintsey was sympathetic to MacAllister, but Marcus Lomax wouldn't buy that.

“Look, Frank, even if the man's son had shot his daughter in front of him there was still no excuse for smashing the father up. The man has concussion for God's sake. And what's more he did it to him in front of his wife.”

Lintsey's reared up at him.

“Bollocks to you, Marcus, you cold blooded sod. The man had just lost his daughter and his wife inside two weeks and then that bastard Reid tells him he is finished in Bristol CID just because he went to court to watch that little tow rag get his come uppance. I think he had a right to get drunk.”

Lomax sighed gently.

“I think he had every right to get drunk as well, Frank, I really do, but he had no right to criminally assault the kid's father and put him in the bloody hospital. You can't believe he had, surely.”

Lintsey chewed on his fingernail and stared out through the small glass panel in the rear door of the van, lost in thought. It was several moments before he looked up. He sighed.

“Your right, Marcus. Of course I don't think he should have bashed Howlett's father.”

He turned in the narrow confines of the van to face the other.

“What's really getting up my nose in all this is Reid.”

He waved his arm around as much as was possible in the confined space, to emphasise his point.

“There is the Guvnor, lost his wife and only daughter right on top of each other and what does Reid do? Does he show any grain of sympathy or understanding?” He answered his own question. “Does he bollocks. He forbids him to go anywhere

near the case as if he believed MacAllister would immediately screw the whole thing up. I ask you. A man with his record.”

Lomax sighed gently and then said it.

“But that is exactly what he did do, Frank. He totally screwed it up. He got pissed and he screwed it up.”

Lintsey glowered.

“Yeah, well he wouldn't have screwed it up if Reid had shown a bit more compassion and treated him like a responsible police officer instead of a bloody cowboy and used the whole affair as an excuse to get rid of the best copper the Bricewell has ever had”

He picked up the radio, the conversation obviously closed as far as he was concerned.

“Oscar five to control.”

The radio crackled in reply.

“Look, we have been here for four hours and nothing is going to happen now. We are going to call it a night.”

He clicked out of transmission without waiting for a reply and opening the rear doors of the van, climbed out.

“Come on Marcus, I have my car parked about half a mile away. The walk there will get the stiffness out of us and then I'll drive you back to the Section House.”

They walked along in silence after that, both of them unaware that the object of their discussions was lying awake in the bed he had until yesterday evening shared with his wife. His thoughts were black and cancerous.

Chapter 18

Jack Wirrel was perched on the edge of MacAllister's sofa as if he was afraid it would bite him. He wondered if what he had heard was true and that this was where four weeks earlier Jean MacAllister had breathed her last, but he didn't dare ask. He had liked Jean and he felt an abiding sympathy with the bleak eyed man sat in the armchair opposite him. He watched MacAllister carefully reading through the papers he was holding and he sat back into the sofa without realising he had done so and then quickly straightened and moved his buttocks back to the edge of the seat, as if the sofa would take him also into the eternal sleep. He hoped MacAllister would hurry up. As if in answer to his thoughts MacAllister dropped the papers into his lap and sat back.

“I didn't realise that you could get such a good deal if you went at forty. I mean, I know blokes that have had to work their ticket on invalidity just to get out a few years early.” He removed the glasses. “What about that motorway sergeant, Farthing was it? Yes that's the name. Freddy Farthing. He reckoned he had a damaged spine and it still took him two years to get out early.”

Jack Wirrel shrugged.

“It's all to do with how many years service you have and the discretion of the pension fund trustees, John. Farthing was a waste of space and a right wanker

and they should have shot him out years before they did, but it came up before Walter Hart and he wanted people to know they couldn't work the system while he was watching. That, plus the fact that Freddy Farthing had once nicked his wife for speeding the very day after Hart had put a reprimand on his record, made that case a bit more complicated.”

MacAllister gave a grim smile.

“What you mean, Jack is that they didn't have any reason to let him go, whereas in my case they want me out before Rex Howlett's lawyer hits the fan with the shit of an assault case.”

Wirrel shrugged again.

“Its a good deal, John.”

MacAllister softened.

“I know it is, Jack and I will take it if they can get me out and clear by the end of the month. I am forty-three on October the thirty first and I just want out now after all this business. It's burnt the heart out of me.”

Jack Wirrel took back the proffered papers just leaving the copies and stuffed them into his briefcase. He closed it and got up with some relief from the sofa, which he then eyed as if it was a large and dangerous animal. Once safely clear of it and by the door he turned back to MacAllister.

“What will you do with yourself when it comes through?”

“Well I thought I might set the boy up in his own company with some of it, but he has made it quite clear that he holds me responsible for his mother's death. You know how it is. If I had been at home a bit more she wouldn't have felt so alone and vulnerable after Kirsty's death and she wouldn't have killed herself. He might be right, I just don't know any more, but he wouldn't speak to me at the funerals or since.”

Wirrel remembered the funerals with some clarity. As the Federation rep he attended most of them, but he had never before seen a man standing as alone as MacAllister had that morning. His boy must have been the red haired lad standing with a young woman. Girlfriend perhaps. Poor bloody John. Didn't the lad know what his father was going through without turning the screw even harder? No wonder he had got drunk and then bashed Rex Howlett's head against a pub wall. Bloody surprising he hadn't half killed the Howlett boy as well. He realised the other was still speaking to him.

“I have got a sister in New Zealand. I haven't seen her in ten years and she couldn't get here for the funerals, but she has told me I will be welcome to stay with them for a few months until I decide what I want to do. I think she was afraid I might do the same as Jean now I have lost both of them.” He picked up the papers. “This will help even if it won't bring them both back.”

Wirrel shrugged.

“The most you can convert of your pension to cash is thirty thousand pounds and that's only about one year's wages after tax. Think carefully before you blow it.”

MacAllister gave a wry grin.

“Well the house is worth another two hundred and sixty odd, but I will have to wait until the smoke dies down before I can sell it for anything like that amount. People are reluctant to buy a property where there has been a suicide.”

Wirrel arose and held his hand out.

“Well it’s all in your hands now, John. You have the name of the Inspector in Personnel who you have to contact now you are going to accept it.”

MacAllister shook the proffered hand.

“Oh I will take it, Jack. I shall go and sign it all tomorrow. Its not how I intended it all to end, but perhaps Billy Reid is right. Perhaps I am too old fashioned for modern policing.”

Wirrel cancelled his rapid escape as his conscience bit him. He turned back.

“Between you and me, John, I would rather have one MacAllister than twenty Bill Reid’s, but I am even older than you are. Perhaps I should be seeing what I could get for myself.”

MacAllister saw the other out and was sitting at his kitchen table once more going through the details of his early retirement package when the phone rang. He reached out behind him and lifted the kitchen extension they'd had fitted especially for Jean, from the wall.

“MacAllister.”

Jackie Wards voice answered him.

“Hello, Guvnor. I thought you might like to know what happened in the Trevor Morton case as the jury gave their verdict about twenty minutes ago. I know your leaving, but I thought you would like to know anyway.”

MacAllister gave a big sigh.

“Don't tell me, Jackie, let me guess. Manslaughter and a suspended sentence.”

The silence on the other end of the line led him to believe he had scored a bull’s eye and then Jackie's voice sounded once more in his ear.

“Sorry, Guvnor, but no dice. I am afraid they let him walk free. Self-defence and a justifiable homicide as the papers will no doubt describe it. Makes you spit doesn't it. John Morton has already been on the phone giving Reid an ear bashing, but I don't suppose that will worry you too much.”

MacAllister didn't answer for some seconds he was so shocked at what he had heard. He had known they wouldn't get murder and they hadn't even tried for it, but completely cleared. It couldn't be right, it just couldn't be. Jackie Ward's voice in his ear pulled him back.

“Are you still there, Guvnor?”

“What? Sorry Jackie. Too stunned to speak for a moment there. I should think CID are a pretty sick lot this morning.”

“Its worse than that, Guvnor. Clive Sayers has a face like an old dog and even Marcus has lost his customary arrogance. It’s almost worth it for that I suppose. By the way, they found a Mackintosh of yours in the locker room. It’s been there since the night you brought in Mitael Khorta. You left it in the car when you went off to the hospital with Kirsty. Do you want me to drop it in the next time I am passing?”

MacAllister concentrated with an effort, his thoughts with John Morton and his family.

“Yes all right, Jackie. Leave it in the garage if I am not here. I won't lock it. Someone might steal my old lawn mower and give me an excuse to claim on the insurance policy.”

“OK, Guvnor. Bye.”

The disconnection clicked in his ear and he hung the phone back on its hook. If the Shane Flinders trial were over, then the Jason Howlett trial would start on Monday. That was the last thing tying him to this bloody island and the police force, because he had to appear as an eyewitness. After that little sod had been dealt with he might just take up his sister's offer. He could have gone back to Scotland and looked up some relatives he had up there, but his parents had brought him to Bristol when he was fourteen and to be honest he not been to Scotland for over twenty years. Besides, you should never try to go back. He picked up the phone to dial the number that Frank Wirrel had left with him. By the end of next week he would be a civilian again. The strange thing was that although he knew it was Bill Reid who was throwing him out he couldn't help blaming Jason Howlett for it. It was a strange feeling he had in his chest and it took him some time before he could recognise it as hatred.

Chapter 19

The courthouse was a lot fuller than MacAllister could remember having seen before for a case involving hit and run, even if the victim was dead. The public gallery was full to bursting and most of its occupants carried themselves in a manner that screamed, "Press" at him. It was only to be expected. Since his fracas, no lets call it what it was, since his assault on Howlett Senior the subsequent newspaper publicity; the tabloid press had considered the case absolutely red hot. Headlines had announced many variations on the theme "senior policeman assaults garage owner father of his daughters alleged killer." It was exactly the sort of publicity that turned the judge and the jury against any evidence the police could bring to bear, all because his stupid action had changed the direction of the case. The public sympathy that should have been for Kirsty was now for Rex Howlett.

He looked at the jury, those twelve good men and true, except seven of them were women. Their faces were curiously blank of emotion as if they'd had their feelings surgically removed before entering the courthouse. MacAllister knew this was a normal syndrome of people who had just been given what was probably to be the biggest responsibility of their lives. They would recover when the trial was properly underway and their deep-seated prejudices, those we all keep hidden inside us, would finally decide the verdict they arrived at, those and the strength and opinions of the foreman along with the performance of the Barristers. The Judge, Mr. Justice Bentine, was at this moment explaining to them exactly what the charge against the plaintiff was and how the police had to prove their case beyond reasonable doubt, Jason Howlett having only admitted to being in the car and driving it at the time of the incident, but on the advice of his legal representative making no further comment or statement.

At this point in time that young man was sitting back in his seat looking slightly bored with the whole procedures and stifling occasional yawns. This pleased MacAllister, as he knew no Judge liked anyone to take his or her appearance

before him or her as anything other than highly serious. Justice Bentine came to an end of his talk to the jury and called an adjournment for lunch. Everybody scrambled to their feet and waited until he had left the courtroom before themselves hurrying off to find a bite to eat in the various pubs and hostelrys that seem to spring up around such places like mushrooms.

MacAllister waited until the court was almost empty and then headed down beneath the main courtroom to where the police had their offices. He had been called as a witness by the prosecution, although Bill Reid had made sure that was his only connection with the case and he wanted to check his evidence with Clive Sayers. He rapped on the door of the police office and walked in. Clive Sayers and Marcus Lomax were sat at a table sharing a flask of coffee and munching thick sandwiches from a large paper bag. Sayers nodded at him and pointed to the bag.

“Have a Doc Pep special, Guvnor. Tuna and tomato.”

The Doc Pep sandwich bar made the best sandwiches in Bristol. MacAllister peered into the bag and decided he was hungry. He pulled out half a round of well-stuffed sandwich and took a large bite, grinning at Lomax who seemed nervous to see him there. Evidently they had received instructions to keep him at arms length. He turned to Sayers.

“Not going to drop you in the shit if I am found sharing your lunch, is it, Clive?”

Sayers gave him a hard stare.

“I decide who I lunch with and if I can lunch with some of the snouts I've eaten with for the good of the force, I reckon I can share a sandwich with you, John.”

MacAllister felt a warm glow of gratitude flood through him. Clive Sayers was a decent bloke who didn't turn from his friends no matter who made the rules. Sayers took a swallow of coffee and continued.

“I am really sorry to hear you are going, Guvnor, end of the week isn't it. I reckon the bastards have given you a really rough deal.”

Marcus Lomax made a slight choking sound, got up and made his excuses to leave and do a bit of shopping. He didn't mind taking a small chance, but Sayers was talking treason and he had a career to think of. MacAllister watched him go with a sardonic smile on his face.

“You have gone and frightened young Marcus now, Clive. You now he gets nervous about breaking the rules.” He sat in the vacated chair. “How are we going to do on this one?”

Sayers leaned back in the chair and considered the question before he answered.

“There is something I can't quite put my finger on that is worrying me. They are too relaxed for my liking.”

He sat up and leaned towards the other.

“Look Guvnor, this kid steals a high powered car using keys he has stolen from his father's garage. He then hits another car and drives on without stopping. Ten minutes later he is seen by us and knows we are on to him. Does he give it up and go quietly? Does he hell. He screams up on the sidewalk drives through a bus queue and injures three young women, one of whom subsequently dies of her injuries. Again, he doesn't stop and only gets caught when he dumps the car in the wrong part of the river and the tide goes out and reveals it.”

He paused for breath and sat back again.

“That's two hit and runs, plus injuries and a manslaughter or death by reckless driving. In my book and he should be breaking out the brown trousers, but none of them, him, his parents or his barrister, John Braniggan, seem too worried about it. I don't like it. I also do not understand why they have brought this come to court with a Barrister of Brannigan's stature. They have pleaded guilty so why not just get on with it. After all, Brannigan's last three defences were for two murders and the rape of a ten-year old girl. He seems a bit heavy for a simple hit and run.”

MacAllister nodded.

“I can see what you mean. They are probably trying to get a softening of his sentence and his old man can afford to pay for Brannigan, God only knows. That Ford dealership must bring in a fair amount of money and have you seen that house they live in. Besides, perhaps they think the fact that I banged his old mans head against a pub wall will make a difference and they think Brannigan's the man to take advantage of that.”

Sayers sighed.

“I hope that's all it is, Guvnor. I can't see that he will get less than a year inside whatever reason they give for what he did.”

MacAllister frowned.

“What's the Judge like? I have never seen this one before?”

“Don't know, Guv. He has only been at it a couple of years and I believe this is his first case involving a death so there is no known form on sentencing worth talking about.”

They sat in companionable silence while MacAllister finished off the sandwiches that Marcus Lomax had abandoned. Then he left the police office before someone else came in and Sayers loyalty cost him more than he could afford. He wandered around the city centre for a while, killing time until the court came back for the afternoon session. When he returned he found his timing was excellent for he had just taken his seat when they were asked to rise again for the entrance of Mr. Justice Bentine.

Chief Inspector George Masters, sitting in for the sick Jack Roper was seated at the prosecution table, but MacAllister could see that it was Clive Sayers who was doing all the talking to the prosecution council, George Sangrin. Sangrin was a tall and severe looking man with a beaky nose and fierce deep set eyes almost hidden beneath bushy eyebrows. It would not have taken a great leap of imagination to picture him in Judge Jeffrey's time, sending the peasants to the gallows by the cartload. However, he was a good prosecutor and knew his stuff even if he was lacking in charisma. He started off by repeating the charges against Jason Howlett, who MacAllister noted was today dressed in the burgundy blazer and grey flannel trousers of his expensive private school. The earring had also gone and the football star haircut had suddenly turned into a smart and tidy, short back and sides. MacAllister gave a cynical little smile and concentrated on what Sangrin was saying.

First of all Sangrin called on several eyewitnesses to the incident. All gave an almost similar version of what had happened, but none of them could identify the driver of the car. Next Sangrin called the two other girls who had been injured

along with Kirsty. Sharon Hopwood had been the less injured of the three and had obviously prepared for her day in the spotlight with more than usual care. Her make up was of film star quality, her hair perfect and her dress stunning. As a helpless victim she didn't reach first base and Sangrin took her very quickly through what had happened and then dismissed her as quickly as was reasonably politic. The second girl was different.

Jessica Kurly was still using a stick to help her walk and it was obvious that she made a strong impact on the courtroom. Sangrin took her through the series of operations that had been necessary to her injured leg and the further operation, to insert more bone necessary to bring the legs to equal length, that was still to come. The press pencils scribbled furiously and the defence wisely elected not to cross-examine. Then he called Marcus Lomax. Lomax took the stand looking confident, but not cocky. He looked like an efficient professional. Sangrin started his questions.

“You are Detective Constable Marcus Lomax attached to the CID office at Bricewell Station?”

“I am.”

“Can you please take us through the events of the night of Friday 16th September 2004 concerning the incident which led to the arrest of Jason Howlett.”

“On that night at exactly eleven forty six PM, I was in an unmarked police car with Detective Inspector MacAllister, bringing in a suspect for further questioning. We were waiting for the lights at the top of Park street to change to green when we received a radio call instructing all units to be on the look-out for a stolen Ford Focus with a damaged near side wing. The car was bright red and had we had the registration number while we were waiting the said vehicle pulled alongside of us and turned down into Park Street. We followed and caught up with him at the traffic lights at the junction where Crabbe Street joins it from the right and the lights were on red. We gave a short burst on the siren to let the driver of the stolen vehicle know we were on to him and I started to get out of the car to approach the other vehicle.”

Facing the jury and with his back to Lomax, Sangrin asked the question.

“Then what happened?”

“The driver of the other vehicle appeared to panic and as the road in front of the Focus was blocked by traffic he drove up onto the pavement to escape. The pavement is easily wide enough for a car there.”

“He drove his vehicle up onto the pavement?” Sangrin was still facing the jury. “With what result may I ask?”

“He made it past the lights all right, but when he tried to rejoin the road he was blocked again by a bus and only got halfway off the kerb. He tried to get back onto the pavement and go right round the inside of the bus stop, but he lost control of the vehicle as he mounted the high kerb and slid sideways into a group of people who were about to board the bus, hitting three of them.”

With the fierce eyes still on the jury Sangrin continued.

“And then he stopped?”

“No, Sir. He drove around the bus stop on the pavement, joined the road again and drove off.”

“Knowing he had run someone down he just drove off.”

The objection from John Brannigan and the sustained from Justice Bentine were both predictable and Sangrin rephrased the question.

“In your opinion, Detective Lomax would the driver have realised he had hit someone.”

This time Brannigan's shout of objection was overruled and Lomax gave his answer.

“The sound of the impact when he hit the pedestrians was loud enough where I was and from the damage caused to the car it must have been audible to the driver.”

“In your opinion?”

“Yes, Sir, in my opinion.”

“Thank you, Detective, that will be all.”

Brannigan's cross-examination first covered the state of Lomax's hearing; first class he discovered and then got to the crunch question.

“Detective Lomax, Council for the prosecution just now asked you your opinion on a matter and you were happy to give it. Would you give the court the benefit of your opinion on another matter?”

“If I can sir.”

Brannigan smiled at the court in general.

“I am sure you can, Constable. Would you say that the defendant deliberately ran down those three young ladies in question?”

Lomax looked towards the prosecution table for help, but Brannigan wasn't having it. His voice rang out.

“Answer the question please.”

Lomax's voice was quiet, but clearly audible throughout the courtroom.

“No, Sir. I do not think he ran them down deliberately. I think he lost control.”

“Then you agree it was an accident?”

Sangrin was on his feet like a rocket.

“Objection. Leading the witness.”

“Sustained.”

Brannigan gave in gracefully. He knew the jury would remember his words. He turned again to Lomax.

“One last question. Whose idea was it to use the siren?”

Lomax looked uncomfortable, but had to answer.

“It was Detective Inspector MacAllister's idea, but it is normal procedure.”

“Thank you Constable Lomax, no further questions.”

Sangrin then called MacAllister who duly gave his evidence and Sangrin took the opportunity to raise the subject of the siren and how it was standard procedure to sound it in order to inform suspects that the force of the law would like a few words. Then Brannigan took over.

“Inspector MacAllister I understand that you are not entirely an orthodox policeman in some of your methods, is that true?”

Sangrin was on his feet objecting as soon as the word unorthodox crossed Brannigan's lips. Brannigan waited for him to wind down from the forcefulness of his objections and then addressed himself meekly to Mr Justice Bentine.

“Your Honour. The defence concedes that the plaintiff drove the car that night and was at the wheel at the time of the accident to the three young women.

However, we in the defence believe that there were some extenuating circumstances and that the actions of the police did exacerbate the situation quite markedly. That is why I am pursuing this line of questioning.”

“Thank you, Mr Brannigan. Objection overruled.”

Brannigan nodded his thanks and turned back to MacAllister.

“If you would answer the question, Inspector MacAllister.”

“No.”

“I beg your pardon.”

MacAllister stared at him as if he must be deaf before he repeated it.

“No. I don't think I am unorthodox.”

Brannigan's face cleared as he realised that the witness was not refusing to answer his questions. He went on the offensive.

“No, Inspector. No?” He looked amazed. “Am I right in saying that the suspect you had in the car that night was never charged?”

Sangrin's objection and the Judge's overrule were so quick that Brannigan carried on without pause.

“And would I also be right in saying that you had arrested this man on four previous occasions and had to release him without charge?” He continued without waiting for an answer, “that sounds fairly unorthodox to me. Irresponsible even.”

MacAllister just gave him the Kestrel stare which Brannigan ignored as he faced the jury for his next question.

“How long did you sound the siren for, Inspector?”

“I don't recall. Just a short burst I believe.”

“Would you be surprised if I told you it was going for half a minute and was only switched off after the accident, sorry, incident had occurred and the car that Jason Howlett was driving had left the scene.?”

MacAllister wanted to shout at him that he wouldn't have noticed if the bloody world had blow up at that moment, but he just glowered at the other man.

“Are you surprised that Jason Howlett panicked under those circumstances.”

“He still didn't have to drive up on the pavement. The siren does not excuse that.”

Brannigan seemed to consider that for some moments, then.

“You mean it was not reasonable behaviour in the circumstances?”

MacAllister snapped his reply.

“Of course it wasn't reasonable behaviour.”

Brannigan turned to face the jury.

“Do you think it was any less reasonable than the action you took when you beat his fathers head against a wall enough times to put him in hospital?”

MacAllister didn't answer as he felt the steel of the others trap slam shut around him. Sangrin's objection and Justice Bentine's sustained never registered at all. Brannigan gave him a thin smile.

“Whose decision was it to end your daughter's life, Inspector?”

MacAllister realised where the question was going and with an almighty effort let his professional training take precedence over his emotions.

“My daughter's life was effectively over from the time the car your client was driving smashed her into a lamp post.”

He continued quickly before the other could speak.

“That is not just my opinion, it is the opinion of one of the countries leading neurologists.”

Brannigan nodded.

“But it was your decision to switch off the life support system and yours alone.”

“My wife and I made the decision together.”

“That will be all, Inspector.”

MacAllister went back to his seat blinking away the tears that Brannigan's questions had brought to his eyes.

The following morning Brannigan announced that the defence was only going to call four witnesses, Mr Rex Howlett and three character witnesses for Jason. He started off with Jason's Form Master from the private school he attended, who stated that Jason was a good pupil who had never been in trouble and was well liked by the rest of the staff and boys. Sangrin established that the Form master actually only saw Jason for some two hours a week and then let him go. Next came his ex-Scoutmaster who gave him a similar reference. Again Sangrin did not dispute what the man said, but did establish that Jason had not been to Scouts for eighteen months. Not since his father had bought him a Go Kart and he had joined the local Junior Go Kart League in fact. The last witness was a school friend dressed in the same school uniform, who told the court that Jason was considered a good chap by the rest of the boys and was very popular. Sangrin declined to question. The last witness for the defence was Rex Howlett.

It was obvious from the minute that he took the stand that Rex Howlett was suffering from some deep emotional disturbance. His face was pale and drawn and he had the look of a man who needed a decent nights sleep. His answer to the oath was so quiet that Mr Justice Bentine had to ask him to repeat it, which he did in a slightly louder voice. A murmur of expectation arose as Brannigan stood up to question the witness was quickly silenced by a glare from the bench. Brannigan walked towards the witness box with his whole demeanour expressing sympathy for its occupant. The Prosecution looked at each other. What was going on here then? Brannigan spoke softly to the hunched figure.

“Mr Howlett?”

Howlett raised his head and visibly took a grip upon himself. Brannigan continued while the court waited in expectant silence.

“Mr Howlett, will you tell the court about a previous incident in which Jason drove a motor car that did not belong to him? One that does not figure in this case.”

This caused a buzz of excitement. The Prosecution were stunned. What previous occasion was this, because they knew nothing about it? The court went quiet as Rex Howlett answered.

“About eighteen months ago, on a Saturday morning when only the sales staff were at the garage, I caught Jason driving a customer's car around the back yard where we park the new cars and any others awaiting repair and collection.” His voice grew stronger as he told his story. “He used to come and help get the new cars ready for delivery you see, to earn some pocket money and he had sneaked off during the lunch break and taken the keys from the office and was driving this car around the yard.”

He gave a mournful little smile.

“Well I gave him the mother and father of a rollicking, especially when it turned out he had been at it for weeks before I caught him and I banned him from the Garage and showrooms. But then I thought about it and I decided if he was that crazy about cars it might be better to channel his desire to drive a bit more productively, if you see what I mean. Anyway, I bought him a Go Kart and we entered him in the local Junior League.”

He gave a small smile of pride at this point.

“He was really good at it. I suppose he gets it from me, the desire to win I mean. He won his class in the first season and was heading it again this year up until a couple of months ago.”

He stuttered to a halt at this point, dropping the head again to his chest and Brannigan came to his rescue.

“What happened then, Mr Howlett?”

The head came up again.

“Well his school work had not been so good this year. He was always a top student and always got straight 'A's in nearly everything, but now a lot a B's and even a C had crept in. It was the racing you see. When he should have been doing his homework and his course work he was down in the garage working on the Kart. If he won the regional league this year he'd get promoted to the National League and that's the first real step on the racing career ladder for most drivers, so everything else was going by the board.”

The head went back down and the voice got quieter.

“I told him if his school work did not improve I would withdraw the Kart from racing.” He explained quickly. “Its entered by the garage you see. Jason is just the driver.”

He shrugged his shoulders.

“He didn't believe I would do it. He knew he only needed a few more points from the last two races, just one more fourth place and he was champion and so he didn't believe I would do it. He just ignored me.”

Brannigan's voice was gentle so as not to disturb the atmosphere the story had created.

“So what did you do, Mr Howlett?”

The answer was whispered.

“I withdrew the Kart for the rest of the season and told him if his school work improved he could give it another go next year.”

“When was this, Mr Howlett?”

“Three weeks before he stole the Focus.”

“The act that led to the injury and subsequent death of Kirsty MacAllister?”

Howlett's voice got stronger and he looked at the Barrister with pleading in his eyes.

“It was as much my fault as his, he pleaded with me to let him take part in those last two races, but I wouldn't let him. He promised on his life to do his homework and he did do it for a week until the Saturday of the last race when he asked me again to let him race. But I told him that the decision had been made and he would have to show me that he was serious for more than a week before I would change my mind. He kept on begging me right up until the Thursday before

the race when you have to declare your entry, but I wouldn't have it. Then, when it was too late to enter he went out and started stealing cars.”

The man was visibly in tears now and Brannigan's voice was soft and gentle.

“Why do you think he did that, Mr Howlett?”

Howlett did not need to think about it.

“Rage and frustration I should think. He thought I was being unreasonable and that was the only thing he could do to strike back. I don't think he stole the car because he wanted to drive it, I think he wanted to get into trouble because he knew it would hurt me as much as I had hurt him. That's why I say I am to blame as much as he is. We can both be pigheaded, but he is just a boy and I am a grown man. It was up to me to heal the breach and give him his chance. If I had, that girl would still be alive.”

“Thank you, Mr Howlett.”

Brannigan sat and Sangrin arose to cross-examine. Without seeming to he got Howlett to admit that his boy was privileged and that he had many advantages that other boys, who did not offend, lacked. But he could not shake him from his belief that he was to blame for the whole affair and finally gave up and the court went into recess for half an hour to give both sides time to prepare their final statements.

Sangrin trod very carefully during his final session. He was aware of the strong emotional sympathy Rex Howlett's evidence had created among the members of the jury and did not wish to antagonise them by directly attacking him. He reminded them that this youth had a better education than most and should know right from wrong. He had not been egged into this crime by other members of his peer group, but had decided to commit a criminal act with the sole purpose of spiting his own father, the same father who had dug deep into his pocket and his understanding to buy him the Go Kart in the first place. He then went on to remind them of the girl who had been so tragically killed on the eve of her wedding and the grief to her parents, one of whom had since taken her own life. He also reminded them of the other girls who had been injured and of the pain and suffering still to come for Jessica Kurly in her future operations. He finally reminded them that it could have been one of their families waiting for the bus on that evening and maybe them who could have now been suffering from the loss of a loved one. He ended by saying that the prosecution were not looking for revenge, but only for justice and protection for others from this type of criminal act.

Brannigan's approach was one of apology for the damaged caused by his clients actions, strongly mixed with petitions for his youth and consideration for the disappointment he had suffered. He agreed that his client may be privileged to outside eyes, but from his own point of view and with his limited experience of the world; Jason accepted his lifestyle as normal. He agreed that his client was hot headed and undisciplined, but asked if this was entirely his fault. Up until this last incident his parents had clearly spoilt him. He finally stressed that Jason Howlett, although still alive and on this earth, had also to suffer some damage in this affair in that he would carry the knowledge and guilt of his actions for the rest of his life. He asked respectfully that the court should take this into account. He talked of the Howlett parents sympathy and understanding for the victims of their

son's actions, sympathy so strong that they had decided against bringing charges when Inspector MacAllister had assaulted Mr Howlett causing severe concussion.

In his own summing up Mr Justice Bentine directed the Jury that there was really only two verdicts they could come to. If they believed that the defendant had driven through the pedestrians awaiting the bus deliberately without caring if he hit them or not, they had to find for Manslaughter. However, if they believed that the defendant had merely been trying to avoid arrest when he had mounted the pavement and that the subsequent injuries to the pedestrians had been unintentional, he avoided saying accidental, then they must find for death by reckless driving.

He explained that it was his opinion that the death of Kirsty MacAllister was directly caused by the injuries caused on the night in question as the hospital had certified her as brain dead on account of those injuries. He went on to explain what that meant and to give some details of the recent historical case that had decided that the relatives of persons certified brain dead should be allowed to switch off any artificial support and let the person go in peace. He had a few more things to say on the grounds of how their decision would affect several peoples lives for the rest of their time on this planet and the need for them to consider their verdict carefully and then he let them go off to make their decision.

MacAllister went out for a smoke while the jury were considering their verdict; he was already back to forty a day, and then went for a walk around the foyer. Only twenty minutes had passed when he heard the usher calling everybody back into the courthouse. They took their seats and then stood as Mr Justice Bentine swept in and took his seat. At the usual question the foreman of the jury, a matron in her early fifties arose and confirmed it was their unanimous opinion that the defendant was guilty of causing death by reckless driving. MacAllister felt a surge of relief go through him and he relaxed back in his seat. Despite the evidence in the prosecutions favour he had been terrified that Brannigan had been going to spring a big surprise that would get his client off the hook. That had not happened and it seemed that justice had been done. This mood of relief evaporated when Mr Justice Bentine asked the defendant to stand to receive sentence.

“Jason Howlett. You have been found guilty of causing death and injury by reckless driving and it is necessary that you should be punished. You are a young man of privilege who acts were committed not because of want or need, but from petulance and anger at the act of your father.”

MacAllister closed his eye and took a deep breath of satisfaction. They were going to crucify the little bastard.

“However, I must also take into account that neither your parents nor your background have prepared you to meet disappointment in life and that your father did not handle the situation well. I must also take into account your extreme youth and naively for the situation in which you found yourself and I believe that your actions were more of panic than anything else and I recommend the police review their policy of switching on their sirens on these occasion.”

He stared sternly in the direction of the prosecution bench before continuing.

“Because of this and the fact that I do not feel that a custodial sentence would achieve anything of significance in this case, I sentence you to two years, suspended sentence and two hundred hours Community Service. I should point out to you that a suspended sentence means just what it says. If you should offend again, however slightly, the full two years of this sentence will then be served in addition to any other sentence that any further offence should carry. Is that clear?”

The entire Howlett family nodded their heads enthusiastically.

“In that case I declare this hearing closed.”

They scrambled to their feet as the judge swept from the room, all of them that is except MacAllister. He sat for some moments absolutely stunned at the decision Justice Bentine had just made. He glanced across to the prosecution bench, where Clive Sayers could not meet his eye and busied himself with some papers and transferred his gaze to Sangrin, who looked surprised, but resigned. Sangrin had been a police prosecutor for years and nothing that Judges and Juries did could surprise him any more. Then he looked across at the Howlett's. Their faces were beaming and already he could see Jason's old arrogance returning as he realised that to all intents and purposes he had got away with it. He was probably also realising that he had his parents right in the palm of his hand as well. There would be no more taking his pleasures away from him because of bad school results and before his eyes MacAllister could see another selfish and heartless little bastard being formed.

He staggered out of the courtyard and out to his car. Driving up to Clifton Down he parked it with scant regard for making sure it was securely locked and for two hours he walked along the cliff tops of the Avon Gorge where he looked down at the drop a couple of times and wondered, but he knew he was not the suicide type. Finally, when he had walked off sufficient of the hurt and anger to allow him to continue, he went back to his car and drove home.

When he lifted the garage door to put the car away he found his Mackintosh draped over the handles of the lawn mower and remembered Jackie Ward's promise to deliver it. After he had parked the car he carried it into the lounge, picking up the whisky bottle in his left hand and throwing the coat into a chair all at the same time. His aim was bad. It hit the top of the chair and slid to the floor and a small plastic cassette bounced on the carpet and ended up against the skirting board. He looked at it for a moment before he remembered what it was. It was Mitael Khorta's answer phone tape. He left it there while he poured himself out a whisky, making sure it was a moderate one. Then his copper's curiosity got the better of him and carrying his glass with him he picked it up and headed out to his own answer phone in the hall.

Chapter 20

The garage was one of a row of identical lockups fitted with up and over doors and belonging to the dingy council flats in whose shadow they rested. They backed on to the main road, which roared along behind them and must have made living there unbearable when the heat of the summer made opening a window necessary. There were sixteen of them, all of which had seen better days and all of which boasted more than one lock. Knowing the area well MacAllister wondered how much stolen property he would find if he had a warrant to search this lot. He waited patiently in the gathering dusk, brushing from his forehead the rain that was so fine it was only really a mist and shifting his weight from foot to foot. The old black gentleman with the snowy white hair who was with him slowly opened the three different locks on the garage door in front of them, one at a time from a large bunch of keys he held in his left hand. As he tried the different keys in the locks he talked in thickly accented English.

“You understand, Inspector that I have not used the garage for some time, not since I had the badness.”

He was referring to the stroke that had left him with one eye nearly closed, a constant stream of dribble from the right hand corner of his mouth and a leg that he more or less had to drag along.

“But I always thought I would be able to go back to the business one day.”

Simon Kaukauna had run a small food store that supplied many of the needs of the small Ethiopian community in Bristol until the stroke that had laid him low in his seventy eighth year. The garage had been where he stored those articles that he did not have room for in his small shop. MacAllister wondered if they would find anything inside despite what the message on the tape had said. Surely Mitael Khorta knew of this place or would have least asked around to see if anyone in the Ethiopian community knew where Rachel had left the car. The last lock finally opened and the old man stood back breathing hard, even the effort with the keys had clearly been too much for him. MacAllister took a deep breath and reached down for the handle of the up and over door. He lifted and it rose up into the fully opened position easily and silently on well greased runners.

The dark blue BMW practically filled the garage, sitting there like some powerful animal waiting to be brought back to life although it had a faint coating of dust all over that made it look as if it had been there for years instead of weeks. MacAllister was puzzled until he looked up at the gaps between the corrugated iron roofing and the walls and then realised where the dust had come from as he remembered a main road ran along the back of the garages. The rumble of the passing traffic was constant.

Simon Kaukauna looked at the car without any expression of surprise on his face. Then he felt MacAllister's attention on him and turned to look at him. MacAllister raised his eyebrows in interrogation, but the other only spread his hands palm upwards and shrugged.

“I had no idea it was there.”

MacAllister nodded and took from his pocket the key that he'd borrowed from one of his shadier acquaintances that morning, still amazed that armed only with the registration number the man had been able to supply him with the right key in less than eight hours. But only because he knew MacAllister was now retired, or would be in four more days and had assured him it would not be traced back to

him. He squeezed down the side of the car to the rear of the garage and unlocked the boot. It contained a bright red holdall. He unzipped the top of the holdall and peered into it, only the gleam from the interior boot light relieving the gloom of the garage.

The gun looked up at him from its position on top of the bundles of new and used notes of varying denominations. It was black and ugly and seemed to carry a lethal aura about it, but that was probably in MacAllister's mind with its knowledge that this weapon had already killed at least two men. He took a biro and a plastic food bag from the pocket of his Mackintosh and slipping the Biro through the trigger guard of the gun dropped it gently into the plastic bag. He then placed it back in the holdall and lifted the holdall from the boot. He closed the boot and squeezed back along the car and out of the garage to where the old man, who seen nothing of what he had been doing in the boot of the car, waited

“You going to leave that car there, Inspector. What if I want to use my garage?”

“Do you know who that car belongs to, Mr Kaukauna.”

The old man looked at him for a long moment and then nodded.

“It is the car of Mitael Khorta. It is just part of the things his ungodly actions have brought to him, but the lord will catch up with him one day.”

MacAllister looked at him while deciding if this piety was genuine or if he was being stonewalled, but it was impossible to read the old man's face. He tried another tack.

“You do not approve of Mitael Khorta, Mr Kaukauna?”

This time the old man's face showed all the expression he could wish for. It tightened up into an expression of absolute hatred to the extent that MacAllister feared for the old man's heart.

“That scum was trying to marry my niece. He wanted to lead her into his ways of filth and evil. It is better that she died before he could taint her. God saw the evil he was doing to her and took her away to keep her safe.”

MacAllister allowed his surprise to show.

“Rachel is dead?”

Simon told him of the girl's death in Ethiopia. MacAllister checked the dates against his pocket book and suddenly it all made sense. She had died before he could speak to Khorta and MacAllister had taken the only message she had managed to leave for Khorta when he had removed the answer phone tape. He gave a grim smile to himself.

“Do you have anything in the garage of value, Mr Kaukauna?”

“No. Unless you include the car.”

“Look, Mr Kaukauna, I think it might be best for you if you were not involved in this. You leave the garage unlocked until this time tomorrow and I will guarantee the car will be gone when you come back again to lock it. No one will ever know it was hidden here and you will avoid any problems with the police.”

He caught the old man's expression and hurried on.

“I need to make sure that Mitael Khorta gets his property back and I do not want him to come to you to ask about how it got here. He is a ruthless man and would kill to avoid conviction for his crimes.”

The old man looked at him with suspicious eyes, but it was clear he did not relish trying explaining to Khorta how the car had got into his garage and

convincing him that he knew nothing of it. He nodded his agreement and turned to go. He stopped some twenty yards away and turned back.

“Only twenty four hours, Inspector and then if it is still here I phone the police station.”

John Morton came back from the antique drinks trolley with a large glass of twelve-year old Scotch and placed it in MacAllister's hand. He carried another glass of the same liquid in his other hand which he took with him to an identical wing chair to the one MacAllister was using and settled back into the green leather upholstery. For a few moments both men sat sipping their drinks in silence while MacAllister took in his surroundings. The room was what Morton had called his study, but it was as big as MacAllister's front room and furnished without regard to cost. The desk and chairs would have graced any home and were matched to the exact shade of their green leather by the full-length velvet curtains. Apart from the fireplace window and the doorway, the rest of the walls were covered by built in bookcases apart from one corner, which held a small table with a computer and printer on it. An artificial log fire burned in the grate with only the occasional blueness of the flames revealing it was not genuine. The whole room was strong in masculine comfort and MacAllister could imagine the power deals that had been concocted and consolidated here. Morton turned from his appreciation of the whiskey and broke the silence that had reigned since they had entered the room.

“So John, what is it you think I might be interested in? Looking for a job are you?”

This was a reference to let him know that Morton knew of his imminent retirement and probably the reasons, no doubt through his contacts within the force. It annoyed MacAllister and he came straight to the point.

“The last time I saw you, you were rubbishing the whole of the police force and the justice system for allowing Shane Flinders to walk free. Do you still feel like that?”

Morton's knuckles went white on the glass and his convulsion of anger spilt whiskey over his hand. He hissed his answer at MacAllister.

“I would have thought you had enough reasons for hating a little yourself, John. After all, you buried two of your family.”

Satisfied that he had punctured the others air of all knowing superiority MacAllister refused to let the angry taunt get to him. Since he had already made his own decisions on what he was about to suggest he had felt an icy calm invade his whole mental process. He looked steadily at the other man, waiting for him to get his own angry breathing under control and when he thought Morton had calmed down enough he continued.

“Somewhere out there in Bristol is a desperate criminal. He is desperate because he killed two people while robbing a bank, but has now carelessly lost his car along with the money he got from the raid and the gun he did the killings with. He would do anything to get his possessions back, even kill again.”

John Morton digested that information for some time and a peculiar light came into his eyes. His guarded response however, was as expected.

“What has that got to do with me or Shane Flinders, John, or are you suggesting something I shouldn't be listening to?”

MacAllister allowed himself to smile inwardly. He knew from that last question that Morton was hooked. He waved his empty whiskey glass in the direction of the drinks trolley and stood up to get a refill at Morton's answering nod of permission. It was with his back to the other that he continued.

"What I am suggesting to you, is that this man is desperate for the return of his property and would kill again if he thought that would ensure its safe return." He turned and looked squarely at Morton. "In fact I am suggesting that he would kill anybody you asked him to if he could get his property back. He needs the money, and the gun could get him locked away for more years than he would care to think about."

Morton played along.

"It's all very interesting John, but why come to me? I haven't got his property."

MacAllister grinned a savage grin at him, eyes brilliant with triumph.

"I know that, John. You haven't got it, but I have."

Morton sat looking at him for some time. Then he got up from his chair and walked across to his desk. Opening a drawer he took out a compact tape recorder and removing the cassette it contained, handed it to MacAllister before switching the machine off and returning it empty to its drawer. He gave an apologetic shrug.

"Sorry, John, but I thought you had come here to ask me to get you your job back and as I would have refused to get involved in that, I thought I had better tape the conversation as a precaution. With what you are saying now though I think it would be best if there were no recordings."

MacAllister looked at the other with new eyes. He had not thought about recordings. He shivered at what might have happened if Morton had just recorded their conversation and then given the tape to Bill Reid or Walter Hart. Morton had not done that though, which meant he was interested. He took his glass back to his seat, pushing the tape cassette into his pocket. He was getting quite a collection of them. Morton waited until he was settled before speaking again. He tried to sound nonchalant but could not hide the underlying eagerness in his voice.

"What are you suggesting, John? I can see that you want me to do something for you or involve myself some way, so you had better give me the whole story."

MacAllister lay back in the chair with the whiskey cradled in his hands in his lap and reflected that he didn't know exactly when his grief, anger and frustration had turned first to hatred. Was it when he first looked down at Kirsty lying injured on the pavement? Was it when he had discovered Jean's body or was it when Bill Reid and Walter Hart had kicked him out of the only thing he'd had left His job. Perhaps he had been slowly learning to hate for years, little by little at each injustice or evil he came across in his daily work. All he knew was that when he had woken up the morning after Jackie Ward had brought him his Macintosh and consequently Khorta's tape, the hatred was there inside him completely formed. It now sat there cold and hard in his breast, hatred and the desire for revenge. He closed his eyes and taking a deep breath began to talk in a low, intense voice.

"Over the last few months several things have happened that once upon a time I would have just have put down to experience and then got on with the job, telling myself that you can't win them all and some of them are bound to get away with it."

He took a small sip of his whisky.

“There was Shane Flinders. This young thug has a history of violence to other people that culminated in his killing your son with a hammer when he was unlucky enough to catch the little bastard smashing up his neighbours cars. Did he get done for murder or even manslaughter? No. Justifiable homicide was the result, just because your lad happened to be carrying a jack handle and was a big man.”

He took another sip.

“Before that there was the case of Alison Jenson. Alison was a fifteen year old with the hots for a certain singer with one of the local rock groups, so after one particular concert she followed him out to their bus and practically undressed him. She had him all right, but being a young kid she hadn't reckoned on the rest of the band wanting their share and to her surprise when she told them no they just held her down and raped her. We couldn't even bring the case to court because of her past sexual history even though it had nothing to do with this case. The result of that was that she got her own revenge by stabbing one of them through his grollies with a boning knife and now she is in Pucklechurch remand home doing six months, and has a criminal record round her neck for the rest of her life.”

He stopped and stared down into the whisky glass with unseeing eyes, his chin sunk onto his chest. Morton prompted him gently.

“Go on, John.”

“You know about my troubles. A spoilt tearaway kid killed my daughter with a stolen car and that drove my wife to suicide. It has also cost me the love of my son and finally my career, with a little help of my own. All he got was two hundred hours community service because his Dad cried while he was giving his evidence. That's just in these last few months. I having been watching similar things happen for years and locking up the same thugs and perverts time after time as they are released after a few years with reformed or cured labels hung around their necks. I suppose it took my own grief to bring home to me just how disillusioned and pissed off with it all I have become.”

“And how does this all tie in with the man who's property you have?”

MacAllister's head snapped up and his eyes were back in Kestrel mode. This time it was a policeman talking.

“You remember that bank raid in Swindon a while back. The one where the ex-mayor's wife got shot and killed along with a young policeman who was unlucky enough to be outside when they left?”

Morton nodded.

“They killed one of their own as well, as I recall.”

“That's right, and he also used a couple of pounds of Semtex blew to blow two more of his so called colleague to pieces in their car just outside of Birmingham, if I have read the clues right.”

“And you have his gun, money and car, John?”

MacAllister grinned at him, but it was not at all humorous.

“The car is parked on your drive right now, Mr Morton.”

Morton blinked at him, but showed no further reaction.

“What are you suggesting to me.”

The soft Scottish voice explained.

“Khorta, that's this scumbags name, Mitael Khorta, must be desperate by now. He knows that the car and the other things will be found sooner or later and he really needs to disappear somewhere abroad. However, he only got fifty-seven thousand pounds that from the bank job, which I have anyway, and he would need a lot more than that to make a fresh start somewhere else. He could sell his luxury penthouse to raise the money, but with the current state of the housing market that could take time that he doesn't have.” He gave a little smile that didn't reach his eyes as he turned his head to look the other straight in the eyes. “I thought we might return his belongings to him and make his cash up to about one hundred thousand pounds, which would be enough to get him safely away from England. After he has done a couple of little jobs for us, that is.”

Morton began to see where the conversation was going and his eyes glittered like black jewels. He leaned forwards in his chair, plainly eager to know more.

“If I wanted him to do a certain thing for me, John, how much would it cost me? I couldn't make up the whole difference, not forty thousand pounds. Not without someone noticing and asking questions about where the money had gone.”

MacAllister held his hands out in front of him with the palms outwards.

“Calm down, no one is expecting you to foot the entire bill. As I see it there are two or possibly three of us in this thing. You, and me for a start and Alison Jenson's father could also be interested. There is also fifty-seven thousand pounds in that holdall.”

He indicated the red sports bag he had brought in with him and left just inside the door. “That means our costs will be anywhere between sixteen and twenty thousand each, depending on how many of us want a favour done.”

Morton seemed to indicate that was possible as he nodded and pulled at his lower lip.

“When are you going to approach this man, Khorta?”

“As soon as the first person agrees to go along with it. I can afford up to twenty thousand, or I will be able to after next week.”

He watched the expressions flit across the other's face until the desire for revenge won.

“OK, John. I'm in, but I must be sure that it will not be traced back to me. The loss of her son was enough for my wife and if they put me away as well because you got careless it would kill her.”

MacAllister shrugged.

“I ought to tell you that if we do what we are planning to do and you get caught, you usually get the same sentence as the hired gun.”

Morton looked a bit shocked at that, but MacAllister put his hand on his arm and addressed him by his Christian name for the first time.

“Don't worry about it, John. I will see that it never touches you. You just have the money ready when I ask for it. I will let you know the amount by the end of the week.”

He stood up and headed for the door, picking up the holdall as he went.

“Can you look after these for a few days and if my meeting with Khorta goes wrong and I wind up dead, see that they get to Clive Sayers somehow and for Christ's sake do not touch either the gun or the money.”

He handed the bag to Morton, giving a wry grin at the cautious way in which the other accepted it and then took his leave.

The cottage was the end one of a row of four that nestled against the side of the hill below a large outcropping of granite. There was nothing to show why anyone had ever thought it necessary to build them here, no farm no industry and as far as he could see no other anything except for mile upon mile of rolling grass covered valley. He had stayed overnight in Carlisle and had left at about eight o'clock after breakfast. Driving the hired Focus at a moderate pace he had arrived ten minutes ago as the dashboard clock was approaching twelve. He sat parked on the verge outside the cottages behind an ancient Landrover and wondered how the original inhabitants had made a living. Sheep perhaps.

The door of the cottage opened and he saw Martin Jenson standing just outside the doorway, filling it with his wide shoulders and six feet odd of height. MacAllister switched off the engine and got out of the car. By habit he locked the door although why a car thief would be hanging around in this God forsaken spot he didn't know. He passed through the gateless opening in the low stonewall that fronted the cottages and walked up the brick path. Jenson didn't stop to greet him, but turned and entered the house. All the way up from Bristol MacAllister had been trying to work out how he was going to approach this dour man and was still without an answer. Perhaps he should just come straight out with it and let the other say yes or no. He wasn't a man with whom you could beat around the bush.

He passed through the doorway and found himself directly in the front room of the building. It was bigger than he would have expected from the outside until he noticed that it had two front windows. Someone had knocked two cottages into one. At least it gave him an opening line. He nodded to Jenson who was standing in front of the fireplace with his back to the flames.

"I'm not surprised you bought a double, a man your size would have trouble fitting into just one of these."

There was no answer so he filled in the silence by asking the question that had come to him when he was parking the car.

"Why on earth did anyone build four cottages here in the first place?"

"Shepherd, Gillie, Gamekeeper and Groom."

The answer was snapped out. MacAllister was surprised.

"For who?"

"For the big house. It's away on the other side of this granite outcrop although it's almost ruined now. It belonged to some minor English Lord who fancied a retreat in the highlands to do some salmon fishing. He was killed at Mons and the rest of the family didn't share the same enthusiasm for Scotland. The house gradually fell into disrepair until about six years ago the family sold the lot off by auction. These cottages were cheap so I bought two of them. Some artist bought the other two and we shared the cost of converting them and restoring them between us, but she is only here now and then. I look after her place for her."

He indicated a bunch of keys hanging from a hook on the mantle shelf and then turned back to MacAllister.

"What do you want?"

Following the explanation of how the cottages came to be there this last short sentence was so direct and to the point it threw MacAllister. He rubbed his nose while he looked up at the other. He made his decision.

“A spoilt tearaway stole a car and ran my daughter down. She died of her injuries and a week or so later my wife gassed herself. As a result of that my son has decided, not entirely without reason if you listen to his arguments, that I am to blame and refuses to talk to me. In a few short weeks I have gone from have a complete family to having nothing. I have even lost my job because I was stupid enough to bash this tearaway's father's head against a wall.”

Jenson just stood and waited. MacAllister bit the bullet.

“The kid, well not really a kid because he is sixteen years old and at that age I was earning my living, anyway the kid walked Scot free.”

His emotion threatened to choke him and he had to turn his face away until the attack was over.

“He did two hundred hours community service for killing my Kirsty and maiming one of her friends.”

He stood there panting from the emotion his outburst had raised within him and Jenson turned to a side table and taking a bottle and a glass poured him a measure of whisky. MacAllister accepted it gratefully and threw it down in one swallow. Jenson watched him and then repeated his earlier question, but in a more gentle voice.

“What do you want with me, Mr MacAllister?”

MacAllister set the empty glass down on the table and looked the other right in the eye.

“I want what you wanted when they raped your daughter.”

He watched as Jenson stiffen and his eyes turn to hard blue glass.

“I want revenge.”

This time Jenson poured two whiskies. He turned and handed his visitor the glass.

“Sit down Mr MacAllister and lets discuss how you intend to go about that and how I come into this.”

He waved his guest to an easy chair.

Chapter 21

He sat in the dark blue BMW with the engine on tick over and watched Mitael Khorta emerge from the front door of his house and stare all around. He never flashed his lights to let him know where he was, but just sat there and waited for the man to recognise his own car. On the phone earlier, he had heard the contempt that came into the Khorta's voice when he had given him his name; turn to anger and apprehension as the gist of what he was saying went home. He had repeated his message and then put the phone back down, sure that the other would have to show. Now the time was here. Khorta stood on top of the front steps to his building and looked all around as casually as he dared and then, having

spotted his car, began to walk towards it. The Somali slowed down as he approached the car and again looked all around. Then, apparently satisfied MacAllister was alone; he opened the near side door and slid into the passenger seat. His door was still closing when he started talking.

“What the fuck is this, MacAllister, another one of your fit ups? If you are trying to pin something else on me I shall have your job this time, copper.”

He made the last word sound like an oath and to some one of his calling MacAllister supposed it was. He turned his head to face the other and in the light subdued light from the instrument panel Khorta could see his teeth as he smiled.

“You are too late for that, Mitael, some one else beat you to it. That's one of the reasons we are having this little talk right now. Besides, I don't think you are in any position to threaten anyone at this moment. Do you?”

Khorta wasn't listening.

“Never mind the bullshit, MacAllister. What are you doing with my fucking car, or is this the way the police return stolen property these days?”

MacAllister pressed a button and the window hummed down. He flipped his cigarette out into the street and then raised the window again, enjoying the luxury of not having to use a winder. In the confines of the big leather seats he turned towards the other as far as the upholstery would allow while the air conditioning sucked the remnants of the smoke away and cleared the air. The engine continued to tick over in silence while he explained it all gently, enjoying the moment.

“The car was never really lost, Mitael, only left where you couldn't find it. It was my fault really for taking that tape out of your answering machine. It was the only way you could have ever found out where it was. Just bad luck for you, really.”

If he had hoped for a reaction to this he was disappointed. The other man's face was expressionless as he stared out through the windscreen, the hard lines and planes making it look for the entire world as if it had been carved from ebony. MacAllister remembered the dead policeman outside of the bank Khorta had shot down without mercy and he felt his anger rise. Time to show this callous bastard exactly where he stood and who was in charge. He turned off the cool man image and let his feelings show.

“I found your hand gun and the money you took from the bank in Swindon in the boot of this car. I also have your girlfriend on tape explaining exactly where she left this car and telling you that she had to leave without seeing you in order to make the morning plane to Addis Ababa. As we know she actually caught the Addis plane on the morning after the Swindon bank raid we now have that conversation dated exactly and the gun will prove conclusively that you shot dead in cold blood a police man outside the bank and left a fellow criminal dead inside the bank with a bullet through his head. Once you are tied to the bank raid that will then make you an accessory to the murder of Mrs Goldstein and you will also be tied securely to the deaths of two other men who's car was blown to pieces on the M5 by a couple of pounds of Semtex. Because in the remains of that wrecked vehicle, money taken from the Swindon bank was found and identified. Five deaths in all and I should think they will throw away the key after they send you to Parkhurst. You will never see the outside world again, you evil bastard.”

He sat and let the silence build, watching the muscle in Khorta's jaw tensing and relaxing while he stared out through the window. Half a minute went by before the black man answered him.

“What do you want, MacAllister. If you have all that neatly wrapped up, how come you come here on your own and in a car that should be down at Forensic? If you are looking for blackmail you are unlucky, Inspector. At this point in time I have nothing to give you except what you already took from the car.”

He finally looked around at MacAllister who gave him another crooked grin that was devoid of all humour and took out his cigarette packet. He pushed in the dashboard cigar lighter.

“You were not listening to me, Mitael. I am not a copper any more. Some one objected to my methods of policing and they gave me the bum's rush. I am in the same boat as you now, except I have a little more ready cash about.”

Khorta's right arm suddenly shot out across MacAllister's chest and pinned him to the seat while his left felt all over his chest and under his jacket. MacAllister didn't struggle and let him complete the search to his satisfaction; the other finally let him go.

“No recorder, Mitael and definitely no gun. Guns have a habit of going off when you are around.”

Khorta went back to staring out of the windscreen, his chest rising and falling deeply, but more from emotion than from the physical effort he had just made. Finally his shoulders relaxed and when he spoke again there was a slight note of resignation in his voice.

“OK, MacAllister. You have had your fun, now tell me what you want.”

The gloom hid MacAllister's smile of satisfaction.

“That's better, Mitael. Much Better.”

He threw in the punch line.

“I want to give you back your car, your gun and one hundred thousand pounds.”

Khorta's head came round as if it was on elastic. MacAllister gave him the grin again.

“Surprise, but I assure you that you heard me right. I want to give you back your property and one-hundred-thousand-pounds.”

He spelt out the last four words syllable by syllable and then held a hand up to stop Khorta's reply.

“Its all right, I know what you are about to ask me. What do you have to do in reply?”

He gave a theatrical shrug of his shoulders.

“Nothing too difficult for a man of your experience, Mitael. I just want you to kill, maim or hurt a few people.”

MacAllister was again sat in John Morton's study with a glass of whisky in his hand. Sitting forward with his forearms resting on his elbows he was talking earnestly to Morton, his voice persuasive.

“Khorta caved in when he found I had his gun and the money. I think he would as have soon as killed me, but he knew I wasn't stupid enough not to have made

sure that the gun would go to the police if I turned up dead. Its all systems go John unless you have changed your mind.”

“What about Jenson?”

MacAllister sat back in the chair and ran his hand through his hair.

“That is one very angry and bitter man. I think a lot of it was because two of the men involved in the rape of his daughter were black and he is nothing if not a racist. Anyway, he will come in for up to twenty thousand pounds, but only if we can guarantee that the men who raped his daughter will all suffer the same fate.”

Morton was aghast.

“He wants all four of them killed?”

MacAllister shook his head at the others aghast expression.

“No, John. I mean the same fate as his daughter. He wants all four of them raped.”

Morton sat back in the chair in total disbelief and it was some time before he answered. When he did his expression had changed and he looked eager and excited.

“But that's a brilliant idea, John. Give the bastards exactly the same as they gave to other people. It is absolutely brilliant, an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth, brilliant and so Biblical.”

His expression changed.

“But Khorta's not Gay, is he?”

MacAllister shrugged.

“Not that I know of, but I would have thought he could find someone to do it for a few hundred pounds. Christ knows there are enough perverts and killers around these days to get anything you like done if you can give them what they want. Just look at what we are doing with Khorta.”

Morton's head snapped around.

“We are using a criminal to get the justice that the legal system has denied us.”

“Bollocks, John. We are using blackmail to revenge ourselves and nothing more.”

He put his empty glass down.

“Jenson coming in leaves us with just over forty thousand to find between us. I make it fourteen thousand each. Is that all right by you?”

Morton was still smarting over MacAllister's previous remark, but he nodded his agreement. MacAllister stood.

“Better get it ready then, because tomorrow I am going to tell Khorta exactly what we want him to do. I shall give back ten thousand of the bank raid money straight away to cover his expenses and the rest with his gun when he has finished it all. I can see myself out. Ring me when you have the Money.”

Chapter 22

The club was not one that the tall black man would have entered from choice, but it was probably the one place where he would find what he was looking for.

His questions at some of the smarter Gay bars in the city had been received with hostility by their owners and patrons alike. Only the undeniable hardness of his muscular body along with their strong distaste for physical violence had enabled him to get them to answer his persistent questions. Those reluctant answers had brought him here. Unlike the other scrupulously clean bars he had been in this one was filthy. Situated as it was right on the edge of the Liverpool dock area he would not have expected it to be glamorous, but this was the pits. It was no more than a long narrow room that ran back about forty feet from the entrance with a wooden topped bar right down one side and groups of plastic topped tables and metal chairs down the other. All had seen better days. The ceiling was an even, dark brown colour from the thousands of cigarettes that had been smoked beneath it, while the floor boasted a carpet that may have once been a deep red, if you could have seen beneath the years of drink stains and cigarette burns. The atmosphere was smoky and stale.

Khorta's entrance had attracted the attention of the only group of drinkers at the bar. Obviously dock workers or merchant seamen, there were six of them dressed mainly jeans, work shirts and casual bomber style jackets. They stared at the tall, well-dressed black man as he stood taking stock. He stared back at the group at the bar for some moments until their expressions became surly and resentful. Then he pointed a long and well-manicured finger at the barman.

“Whisky.”

He pointed at the Glenlivet bottle and then went and sat on a stool next to the group of drinkers. He turned on it and studied the man on the next stool, ignoring the glass that the barman put down in front of him. The object of his attention was a large muscular redhead who was beginning to go to fat. Somewhere in his early forties with hair that was beginning to recede up his forehead, he had compensated for this by growing it down over his shoulders and by the full bushy beard that hung down several inches below his chin. Despite the long sleeves he wore, several tattoos were visible. There was a small blue star in the middle of his forehead while several snakes were entwined between his fingers to disappear up underneath the frayed and grubby cuffs of his shirt. All his clothes had seen better days, but not any kind of cleaning agent for some time. He stared back at Khorta, obviously becoming angered by the others scrutiny, but unafraid. He finally put down the pint glass he had been drinking from and turned to face the other.

“You looking for someone, Sambo or are you looking for something?”

He gave a leer and turned his head slightly to enjoy the grins of his companions. Khorta smiled at him and nodded, equally comfortable in the situation. He leaned forward and spoke confidentially.

“Yes, Sir. I am looking for a dirty and unwashed pervert by the name of Samuel Cullings, who I am given to understand, likes nothing better than to shove his dick up another man's backside. Preferably a young, good looking man and I understand he has several convictions for doing against their objections to such practice....”

He broke off and ducked beneath the swinging right hand that Cullings brought whistling around at his head. Then, as the momentum of the man's swing brought him around on the stool to face him, brought the stiffened fingers of his own right hand stabbing forwards and upwards under the mans lower rib. The effect was

immediate. The air whooshed out of Cullings and he would have pitched from the stool onto his face if Khorta had not caught him and held him there.

The barman and the others immediately backed off to a safe distance, eager to get out of range of the sudden and unexpected eruption of violence. Khorta ignored them all and supported the other until he managed to bring back some control to his breathing. Experimenting, he moved his hands from their grip on the others forearms and when he saw he was again able to support himself he sat back and picked up his whisky. He sipped it slowly while the other man made a full recovery and watched amused as the barman and the rest of the drinkers unfroze and from their new position of some three metres further away, carried on talking as if nothing had happened.

“What the hell do you want?”

Cullings voice was little more than a whisper as he sat slumped on the stool massaging his abdomen with his right hand. Khorta smiled at him.

“Believe it or not I only want to bring a little joy and some extra money into your life, my friend. Why don't we move over to one of those tables where we can't be overheard and I will tell you how you can get your hands on another twenty of these.”

He held up a fan of five, twenty-pound notes in front of Cullings face. For a moment Khorta thought the other was going to refuse take them so he took the hand that was still rubbing at the abdomen and turning it face up placed the notes in it.

“That's for the sore stomach. Don't you want to find out how to get another four hundred pounds?”

Cullings looked from him to the money with deep suspicion.

“Why did you have to start a fight with me? Why not just tell me what you want me to do without rupturing my gut?”

Khorta's expression was bleak.

“Because I wanted you to know who is in charge in this little business deal, Samuel. I didn't want you to feel you could take the money and cross me up and now I can be sure you understand that. Now do you want to hear what I want you to do or do I have to find someone else?”

Cullings looked at him with an expression of greed mixed with apprehension. Greed won.

“There's a room at the back where we can talk.” He led the way

Chapter 23

It was early December and although Bristol was down in the “soft south” it was cold enough to send any brass monkeys for spare part surgery. Shane Flinders was sat snug and warm in front of a roaring fire in the Lost Ghost public house. The Lost Ghost was a favourite pub of his and many other alcoholics and near alcoholics, as it served only cider, red wine from the barrel, whisky, rum and gin. It looked just like another house in a narrow road of terraced houses running up

the hill from the docks. It was one of the few remaining such streets in the city, but about a hundred years ago some one had converted number twenty-three into a pub. It was done to make a living out of the thousands of merchant seamen that in those days had thronged the Bristol waterfront and although there was no longer a sign to identify it as a pub, the Ghost's customers all knew where to find it.

The entire bottom floor had now been turned in to one fair sized room that ran from front to rear. The bar area also doubled as the stock room as the cellar had taken the place of what had been the old scullery and washhouse. The original stone sink and draining board were still in use to wash glasses, while the barrels containing the various alcohols were standing around it on low wooden stands. There being only the one room the street door opened directly into the bar and you were greeted by furniture consisting of the original wooden benches all round the walls, half a dozen small round tables and some old wooden dining chairs. There were about twenty customers in that night, all of them male except for one old woman who was always there in the corner seat and all of them well past forty, except for Shane. The air was thick with a tobacco smoke mixed with wood smoke from the open fire and the smell from the cider barrels. The Ghost was and always had been a serious drinkers pub since the days when it only sold rum and black ale and if nothing else in the last three months since his trial, Shane had become a confirmed drinker. It was the loneliness that did it.

It wasn't his fault. The trial had found him totally innocent of any criminal act. Self-defence was what the jury had said, but people still treated him like he was dog shit. His own parents had thrown him out and had then phoned for the police when he had tried to get back in. His old man had actually left all his clothes in a suitcase in the street, the bastard and him his own flesh and blood. He was now living in some scruffy digs down by the docks, where the landlady didn't mind what time he got in at night or how much he'd had to drink, as long as he paid his rent and didn't cause trouble. He had thought about going back one dark night and smashing up his parents house with his hammer, but he knew the filth were just waiting for the chance to get him. Pig bastards. On top of that nobody would give him a job, not that he had tried too hard to find one and he was reduced to living on social security and whatever he could steal. This morning in the big newsagents in the city centre he had nicked a woman's handbag straight out of the basket on the back of her pram and neither she or the old bag she was gassing to had even noticed. There was only had twenty quid in cash inside it though and half a dozen credit cards. He had tried to sell those here in the Lost Ghost at lunchtime, but the landlord had told him he would be banned if he started pushing stolen gear in his pub, so in the end he had shoved them down a drain.

He drained his pint glass of cider and went back to the bar for a refill. Good stuff this Scrumpy. Still came in big wooden barrels from the local farmers and it was good and strong. Not like that fizzy cat's piss they sold in the off-licence. All bloody gas. He bumped the glass on the counter to attract the Landlord's attention, the other drinkers not even looking up. That was another good thing about the Ghost. People came here to drink and that meant they weren't always trying to start a conversation with you. Right now the pub was nearly full, but the

only people talking were the landlord and one of the other regulars. He banged the glass on the bar again.

“Come on then, Charlie. What you got to do to get a drink around here?”

Bald headed Charlie Nesbitt was not a big man, but he was hard. You had to be to run the sort of pub he had. He treated Shane's belligerence with the indifference born of long hours dealing with assorted pissheads and coming over to him took his glass to refill it. As it filled he spoke to Shane in a conversational tone of voice.

“I would go easy with the jar if I were you, Shane. You know the rules in here, young-un. One glass a night and if you break it you have to leave and you don't come back until the next day. And only then if you pay for the breakage.”

Shane glowered at him and deliberately and visibly settled the hammer in its sling under his arm, but Nesbitt was not impressed. He was probably the only person in the bar who hadn't had a drink. Not for ten years in his case and he knew how to handle trouble. That's why he had some strange rules, so that he could avoid trouble. You could be as drunk as you liked in his pub and that was all right with him and he would even help carry you to the door when you wanted to leave. But raise your voice in argument or anger and you were straight out the door and no messing. He put the now full glass down on the bar but did not release it, his other hand held out palm up waiting for the money. Shane rummaged in his pocket and found a pound coin, which he handed over and Nesbitt released the glass and dropped the coin into the till. Shane made his way back to the fire with black thoughts of robbing this place one dark night until he remembered that Nesbitt had a shotgun under the bar and he abandoned that line of thought.

He stayed in the Lonely Ghost until his money ran out at about half past ten when he once more reluctantly staggered to his feet to begin the cold walk back to his miserable digs. His tight cow of a landlady never heated the bedrooms; you had to pay for that yourself by shoving pound coins into the electric meter. His pound coins had now all been converted to cider so it would be a cold room tonight.

Outside in frosty, but clear and starlit night a lazy wind was blowing. Too lazy to go around you it cut right through to the bone. As the bitter chill of the night air hit him full force he pulled the fleece lined hood of his anorak up over his head and then shoved his hands deep into the pockets. He turned into the slight, but freezing wind and started to walk. The Lonely Ghost was set in the old quarter of the city no more than a catapults range away from the law courts and the Bricewell police station, but on the opposite side of the main road up one of the old streets that run up from the docks. The roads up here were all narrow and the footpaths even narrower and they are linked by a maze of snickets and cut throughs, as the locals call them.

The quickest route to Shane's lodging was straight up the hill and turn left, but the sudden cold had produced an urgent desire to urinate, deciding him to walk the few extra yards to a cut through where he could relieve himself up against the fence without attracting attention. Once upon a time he would have just pissed in the street, but the bloody coppers were out to get him now so he had to be more careful. Once in the cut through he was out of the wind and that alone was worth the extra fifty yards walk. This particular alleyway ran behind and between the

backs of two rows of terraced houses and was unlit. Fumbling in the dark he undid the lower buttons of his anorak and then struggled to undo the zip on his jeans. This accomplished he stood and watched the steam rise from his stream of hot urine as it hit the cold night air and allowed himself to enjoy the feeling of relief that followed.

He had more or less managed to re-zip his jeans and was working on the buttons of his anorak, when somebody grabbed him by the shoulders from behind and spinning him round slammed him back against the wall of the alley. His head hit the wall hard enough to have caused concussion if it had not been for the lined hood of the anorak and combined with the six or seven pints of cider he had consumed it caused him to suffer some dizziness. He stood there for a few seconds in bemusement, slowly shaking his head and blinking until his vision had cleared. At first he could only make out the outline of the figure that stood in front of him, but as his head cleared he could see a little better. It was a tall and broad shouldered man dressed in a leather jacket and dark trousers. Shane pushed himself off the wall and stood there softly swaying, his voice sounding slurred, puzzled and angry, all at the same time.

“What's the bloody game then, mate? Asking to get your face smashed in, you are.”

What light there was from the stars reflected off the others white teeth as he smiled.

“I don't think so, shithead. I think the best part of you just went over the cobbles.”

Shane's hand went inside his coat for the hammer, but it wasn't there.

“Are you looking for this, shithead?”

Shane looked down at his hammer resting lightly in the others outstretched hand. He put out his hand to take it, but it was no longer there to take.

He never actually saw the hammer again, but he probably briefly felt it when it whistled round to hit him on the left hand side of his head just above the ear with the full force of Mitael Khorta's arm behind it. He was slammed backwards a second time into the wall and then bounced back forwards again in time to meet a second blow, squarely on the side of the jaw, that completed the bloody destruction of the left hand side of his head. The body teetered for a bit and then smashed face down onto the cobble stones of the cut through into its own, now cooling, puddle of urine and was still. Khorta bent down and examined it briefly before placing the hammer into Shane's right hand, carefully closing the fingers around it with his own, gloved hands. He straightened up again, studied his handiwork briefly and then was gone. It was roughly five months since Trevor Morton had laid face down on a pavement in a similar fashion.

It was the next day in the late afternoon when John Morton received a phone call on the private line in his office from the Chief Constable. He listened to what the other had to say and when he answered, did his best to hide the fierce exhilaration that the news had given him. The bastard was dead. Shane Flinders was dead. The Chief Constable went on to explain that he realised that as a council member Morton would be horrified that another brutal murder had been committed in the city that they both loved and that normally he would not pass on

details of cases in this manner. However, under the circumstances he felt that the least he could do was to let him know that the person who had ended the life of his son would never take another. The fact they both belonged to the same Masonic lodge was never mentioned.

Morton thanked him and put the phone down. He needed to share his satisfaction with someone and thought about phoning MacAllister, but realised that it would be foolish to do so. They had agreed that once they had given Khorta back his car and MacAllister once again had the pistol, Morton's part in the whole affair had ended when he had given MacAllister his share of the contract money. Khorta may have guessed he was involved and was supplying some of the cash, but he would never be able to prove it, as MacAllister had been his only contact. Still, he would have dearly loved to let someone know that he had avenged Trevor's killing. This time when he reached for the whisky bottle it was for celebration instead of consolation. He poured himself a generous measure and then lifted his glass in salute.

“You can sleep easy now, Trevor. We got the bastard.”

MacAllister heard it on the midday local television news and knew that the Bricewell would have been like a hornets nest this morning as they all tried to find out who had a motive for a revenge killing of this sort. He knew John Morton would come under scrutiny and he hoped to God he had managed to hide the movement of the money he had contributed as well as he said he could. It had been nearly three weeks since he had given Khorta back his car and some ten thousand pounds of the bank raid money to cover his expenses and in all that time he had heard nothing. The silence from Khorta had not surprised him as they had agreed that unless there was a problem they would not meet again until the job was finished and it was time to pay up. However, he had wondered a couple of times if the Somali might not just sell the car and do a runner with what he had. Flinders death was reassuring as it meant he had judged his man correctly. Khorta needed the money.

As for himself he was fairly busy. The estate agents thought they might have a buyer for his house. The potential client was a Frenchman that was coming to Bristol to work in the joint aerospace industry. He did not know of the death of Jean MacAllister by suicide and MacAllister was fairly confident that the estate agents would forget to mention it. The reason given for the house being a little below market price was that the owner was about to emigrate and would take a couple of thousand less for a quick sale.

In the Bricewell several things had changed. Firstly there was a new Detective Inspector in charge of the CID office. Peter Grinton, a Mancunian of thirty-five, was a steady and thorough man who was obviously destined to go much further. He has taken over quietly and gave no indication that he knew anything about the man who had previously sat at his desk or of anything that had happened to him. Any mention of their former Guv'nor by the members of his squad was ignored and it was patently obvious that he considered that chapter of Bristol CID's history closed. Not being stupid his new staff soon got the message.

Marcus Lomax, delighted to find that his new inspector was a book soldier, had immediately become a disciple; he had had enough of mavericks and had been undismayed to see MacAllister get the golden bowler. In fact the only cloud left on his horizon was that his new sergeant was definitely not his biggest fan and he had to walk around as if the office was sprinkled with broken glass.

Jackie Ward was also happy. She missed Clive Sayers, but knew he deserved his rise to Detective Inspector even if it did mean he was now transferred to Heathrow Airport of all places. She knew his wife had been half pleased at his promotion and half terrified of moving to the big city, her being a country girl from Taunton. Janet's own promotion to Detective Sergeant had come right out of the blue and if she closed her eyes she could still relive the pleasure she had taken in the shocked look that had crossed Lomax's face when Bill Reid made the announcement. That would teach him to be more careful with his chauvinism in future. Still, he was part of the team and she knew she must do the right thing by him if she wanted his support when the time came. For the moment though, she would let the chauvinistic sod sweat for a bit.

The new Guv'nor seemed all right even if he was from Manchester and a bit of a stickler for the rules, so no one would be allowed to actually call him Guvnor, but she missed MacAllister. He used to do some crazy and unorthodox things, but by God he used to get results. Life had never been dull when he was around. She wondered if he had heard about the killing of Shane Flinders and also wondered if he had any ideas about who might have done it. Her hand was reaching out for the telephone to call him when she stopped herself. The Guv'nor had suffered enough and she had no right to use him as a free advice line. After all, she was a Detective Sergeant now and had better start acting like one. She would wait until they had completed some more inquiries and then she would sit down and brainstorm through what they had with Marcus Lomax and Frank Lintsey. That's what the Guv'nor would have done.

Up in his ivory tower on the seventh floor Bill Reid was a happy man. With one fell swoop he had cleaned up the CID office, got it working by the book and nobody had got hurt, except MacAllister that was and he had asked for it. He had personally arranged Clive Sayers promotion in order to transfer him and his allegiance to MacAllister out of the Bricewell. Janet Ward's loyalty he felt he had now bought with a promotion that was probably overdue anyway and his new Detective Inspector was as ambitious as he was and as a consequence would not rock any boats. MacAllister's own immediate boss, Chief Inspector Jason Roper, had also been forced to retire early due to long term health problems and he too had been replaced, so in the space of two months he had got a brand new CID office and the rest of the station had been made aware of who was in charge here. As he stared out of his window over the rooftops he was fairly satisfied with life.

In the Lost Ghost that lunchtime there was an unusual amount of chatter and it wasn't just that one of its customers had met a sudden and violent end. After all, alcoholics are far more susceptible to walking under a bus, falling down the stairs or even into the docks and the Ghost had regularly lost customers in this fashion during the hundred years or so since its inception. But this was murder most foul and within fifty yards of the front door. Why, old Maggie Dyer had actually tripped

over the body, still lying in a frozen puddle of its own piss, on her way home and had come rushing back to the pub for help and another glass of gin to get her over the shock. Charlie Nesbitt had reluctantly phoned the police and then none of them had got home for hours until they had all made a statement. In this pub at after eleven o'clock in the evening that had been quite an undertaking, as by that time most of its clientele would have had trouble spelling their names. However, by the evening session the customer's attention would again focused firmly on the important business of drinking and within another twenty-four hours few of the customers would remember the dead youth.

Chapter 24

Christmas Eve had been a turning point in the band's career for Metal heaven. Their first single had entered the top fifty just last week only ten days after its release. They had been star featured in the New Musical Express and today had just finished filming their first television appearance at the TV studios in Manchester for transmission on Boxing Day. Now in the early hours of Christmas morning, they were sat in a motorway service station on the M6 just outside Manchester having an early breakfast before the long drive back to Bristol.

The adrenaline of the occasion was still with them and the conversation had been animated, but now, with the arrival of Colin the Roady with their food, it slowed as they started eating. Sean Combes looked up from his mixed grill to reach for the salt pot and an extremely pretty blonde girl of about seventeen took his eye. He nudged Jason Goodwell who was sitting next to him. The Ulster accent thickened by desire

“Get a load of the tits on her, Jason. I might go over and see if I can pull it when I have finished this.”

The others stopped eating and looked at him. It was Ali who spoke.

“We agreed that after the trouble with the last one, we wouldn't pull any more fanny when we are working and as far as I am concerned that includes travelling to and from gigs.”

Ali's conscience still bothered him about Alison Jenson.

“Bollocks. I didn't agree to anything of the kind. You fuckers out voted me is what happened.”

Jason put his hand on his arm.

“And you know why, Sean. We only got this contract by the skin of our teeth and it has a clause that says any further problems with under age girls or rape accusations and the contract is killed. Hell man. You want fame and fortune more than any of us so it's for your sake as much as ours. All it means is that you do your shagging in your own time.”

Sean glowered.

“Well fuck that. The best time to pick them up is when you are in the spotlight and they know who you are, and that's when we are on a gig. Shit! Who would know us from Adam in Manchester high street.”

He stabbed a sausage angrily. The sudden argument had dissipated the euphoria they had been feeling and they ate in silence, Sean's expression dark and angry. They only looked up when a shadow crossed the table. It was the blonde girl, holding two menu cards and smiling nervously. The accent was West Country/Bristol.

"You're Metal Heaven, aren't you. I saw your bus outside. Would you sign these for me and my friend?" She indicated a thin skinny redhead sat at the table across the isle. "She thinks your great as well."

Sean's face cleared and he took the menus and proffered pen with a smile.

"No problem."

He signed with a flourish and passed them on to Jason before turning his attention back to the girl.

"Where are you from?"

"Swindon."

"Driving down, are you?"

"Its my friends car."

"Then why don't you... Christ! You bastard Rasta."

Rasta had not taken part in the previous conversation, but in anticipation of what Sean had been about to say had kicked him hard on his bony shin. He now took and signed the two menu's being held out to him by Ali and gave them and the pen back to the girl. He looked her in the eye.

"Now get lost."

The girl looked shocked, but the expression on Rasta's face brooked no argument and she made her way back to her friend. They spoke briefly and then picked up their bags to go. The blonde turned to face them and holding the menus out in front of her, tore them into several pieces and then dropped them to the floor and they left without a backward glance. Sean snarled at Rasta.

"You didn't have to kick me, you bastard."

Rasta leaned across the table and took Sean's wrist in a grip of iron.

"Listen to me, you Irish pillock. The last time we all had a girl in the bus all that you got was a free shag and some minor hassle from the law. I personally suffered a broken nose and a fractured rib when I met her Daddy and then she stuck a boning knife through my left bollock. I spent nearly a week in hospital when they had to remove it and I may have to take pills for the rest of my life to increase my hormone level, if the tests they gave me say so."

He tightened his grip a little more and Sean started to gasp.

"No piece of fanny is worth that so I am telling you now so you know where you stand. You ever bring another girl to the bus on a gig and I will personally rip your balls off in front of her. Now eat your fucking breakfast."

He released Sean's arm, who immediately started to rub it to bring the blood back. Sean looked at the others for their reaction, but Jason Goodwell just shrugged and turned back to his food while Ali refused to even meet his eyes. He fumed inwardly, but knew he had lost. He pushed the unfinished breakfast away and getting to his feet stalked off back to the bus. Jason spoke without lifting his eyes from his plate.

"You were pretty rough on him, Rasta."

"He is a pillock with his brains in his trousers."

“We all used to enjoy getting the girls in the back of the bus. You too, as I recall.”

“Yeah. Well if he had been the one to take all the shit after the last one, maybe he would be ready to call it a day as well. Me, I just want to make enough so that I can afford all the pussy I want without having to keep visiting the bloody hospital and the police station afterwards.”

They finished their breakfasts in silence and then made their way back to the bus. Sean was lying on one of the top bunks with his back to them and nobody spoke to him. Once they were all settled in the back Colin the Roady fired up the engine and they rejoined the motorway. It was half past four on Christmas morning.

It was about an hour later, as they were driving down the two-lane section of the M5 out of Birmingham, that the dark blue police transit appeared. There had been no other traffic around for the last thirty miles until its lights had suddenly appeared behind them. Everyone but Colin was asleep in the bunks, the late night filming session and the subsequent travelling having exhausted them. They never woke up when the unmarked dark blue Transit van pulled in front of them and a blue clad arm holding a torch waved them down, or when Colin the Roady brought the bus to a gentle halt and sat there looking for his driving licence and the insurance certificate that he always kept in the glove box under the dashboard.

In the light of the headlights he watched the tall, well built sergeant climb out of the transit's passenger seat and walk back towards him. It was the paintwork job on the bus that did it, he thought to himself. The psychedelic angels were great advertising, but they attracted the law like a load of moths to a Tilley lamp. Roll on when they were famous and would have to travel anonymously. He switched on the interior light and slid back the window, feeling the cold night air on his face as he watched the sergeants breath misting as he breathed. The man reached the window and stopped, his teeth gleaming white in the ebony of his face as he smiled up at Colin. Colin held out the papers, his broad Bristol accent and rosy-cheeked face full of concern.

“Morning, Sergeant, what's the problem then?”

The sergeant lifted two fingers to touch the brow of his cap in salute.

“Good morning and a Merry Christmas to you too, Sir. Sorry to pull you over, but you seem to have a bit of a problem with your rear lights. They keep flickering on and off every time you hit a bump.”

Colin's heart sank. He wanted to get home as quickly as possible so that he could get his head down for a few hours before he picked up his girlfriend, Lizzie and went around to his mum's house to have his Christmas dinner. If the bloody lights were playing up they could be here for hours before they got some one out to fix them. After all, he wasn't be too keen on working Christmas morning himself so he knew how anyone else would feel about it. His disappointment must have shown in his face for the sergeant took pity on him.

“Don't look so worried, friend. Its probably only a connector come a bit loose.”

He seemed to hesitate and then came to a decision.

“Tell you what. Our depot is only a couple of miles away just off the next exit. There's not much traffic about so you won't be too much of a hazard in that short

distance. We are not supposed to repair civilian vehicles, but considering the time of year I think we can stretch a point this time.”

Colin was not the greatest fan the police force had ever had, but at this point in time he felt positively grateful to the tall black sergeant. Perhaps he would get home in time after all. He wondered if he ought to tell the boys in the back, but decided not to wake them. He put his papers back in the glove box and grinned at the sergeant.

“Thanks Sarge. You're a bloody brick. I certainly didn't fancy waiting here on the hard shoulder for hours while we waited for some bloke to drag himself away from his family on Christmas morning. Thanks a lot. Shall I follow you?”

“With your dodgy lights you had better go first and the Transit will bring up the rear. I will just go and tell my mate what is happening and then I will come back and ride shotgun, so you don't get lost.”

The tall figure walked back to the transit and leaned into the window. After a few seconds he came back and with a gentle hiss of compressed air Colin opened the front door and the policeman climbed aboard. Colin put the bus in gear and pulled out past the Transit and onto the motorway. As they travelled the two miles to the next junction the sergeant asked a few questions about the band, but it was clear he was just making conversation and soon they travelled in silence until they reached the junction. Here the sergeant started to direct him. The lane they turned into was surprisingly narrow and overgrown, but probably quite wide enough for patrol cars and Transits. They drove carefully along it for what seemed like more than two miles, during which time it started to deteriorate alarmingly before the sergeant indicated he should stop. It was just as well as the road went no further. He pointed to the old farm gate picked out by the headlights.

“Take it straight in there.”

Colin turned with an angry question that died on his lips as he looked down the barrel of the pistol the policeman was holding. He felt fear wrench at his stomach and a feeling of complete disbelief that this should be happening. Despite the sweat that had broken out on his brow and in his armpits he screwed up his courage. The words spewed out.

“What's going on then? You're not a copper, are you? What do you want with us? I think you must have made a mistake.”

The other just grinned at him and gently touched the barrel of the pistol to the side of his nose, pushing his head back to face the front and causing the cold sweat of fear to instantly drench him again from head to toe. He wiped his sweaty hands on his jacket and watched as a big fat man with a beard and long straggly hair appeared from the side of the bus and started to open the farm gate. He must have been driving the Transit. The gun barrel tapped him twice on the shoulder.

“Drive into the yard and stop the engine.”

Colin did as he was told, but his leg was shaking with fear and he stalled the big vehicle twice before he managed to kangaroo it into the yard. The sergeant, laughing softly at his fear, produced a set of handcuffs.

“Push both your hands down between the spokes of the steering wheel.”

Colin did so and the man clipped the handcuffs first to his right wrist and then around the thick steering column before clipping them to his left wrist. He moved back and examined his handy work. Colin swallowed hard.

“Now What?”

The black face lost all trace of humour and became like stone.

“Now you sit there quietly and behave yourself and nothing else will happen to you, except you will probably miss your Christmas dinner. Believe me, Sonny Boy, you are the lucky one. But you make one sound in the next ten minutes and I will come back here and make a louder one. Understand?”

Placing the barrel of the pistol under Colin's nose he used it to turn his head until he was staring straight into the others eyes. As Colin nodded frantically Khorta reached forward and removed the keys from the ignition, but left the lights on before operating the door and leaving the bus. Colin felt the cold early morning air waft into the bus through the open door, but would not have dared to close it even if he could have reached the lever.

Khorta walked back to the Transit tucking the pistol under his tunic and reaching inside picked up a sawn off, pump action shotgun from the passenger seat before walking around to the rear of the bus. Samuel Cullings, dressed in an old leather jacket and jeans, appeared from around the other side of the bus carrying a similar weapon. Khorta nodded and Cullings reached out and pulled open the door that had been set into the side of the rear half of the bus. When it was fully open he switched on the powerful torch and shone it into the interior.

The band was awake. Colin's leapfrogging entrance into the farmyard had seen to that. They had been climbing from their bunks and rubbing the sleep from their eyes when the door had been thrown open. The beam of the torch cut into their eyes, blinding them and they turned away from it.

“Police. Everybody out of the bus.”

The torch left their eyes and lit the two steps down from the bus. They started to make protests, but the steely voice cut them off.

“Listen to me, people. This little toy you see in my hand is a sawn off shotgun and at this range two shots should be enough to wipe out the lot of you. Now get out of the fucking bus.”

Ali hastened to obey. He stumbled down the steps with his hands raised high urging the others to join him.

“Come on you guys, do what he says. Its either a mistake or they want to steal the instruments or something. It will all be covered by insurance anyway. Just do what he says, please.”

The last was on a note of pleading and the others started to climb out of the bus. Rasta hung back, but Khorta would have none of it.

“You too, Fairbrother. Get your arse out here quickly and don't get any ideas. Sam, you go over and switch the lights on in the shed.”

Cullings disappeared and there was the noise of a small generator starting and then lights sprang on in the low building on the other side of the yard. Khorta herded the now wide-awake band through the gate and across the frozen mud of the yard to where an open doorway beckoned and at Khorta's command they entered and found themselves inside an old cowshed. It was a low single storey building about ten yards deep by some fifty yards long with a two tier concrete floor. The upper tier was some six inches higher and was divided into individual stalls, but the bottom floor was a clear expanse running the length of the building. It was lit by two bare bulbs suspended from the roof beams on cables that ran

directly to a small generator just inside the door. The only other features of the building were what looked like two crowd barriers bolted to the floor in the middle of the lower tier and several new ring bolts either side of it. Just on from these were a pile of nylon rope and strangest of all, a pig's head, staring at them with glazed dead eyes from the top of a forty-gallon oil drum.

Khorta followed them through the door while they were still looking apprehensively around at their surroundings and then closed the door behind him. The bang it made as it shut caused them to jump and gave him their attention. He gave a humourless smile.

"Just in case you fellows get any ideas about being heroes me and my partner here have arranged a demonstration."

He fired the shotgun from the hip. The noise and smoke in the confined space were terrifying and even Cullings who was expecting it, jumped. When the prisoners realised that they were all right they looked around to see what the target had been. The pig's head had been blown to a bloody mess. In order that they could fully appreciate what had happened Cullings moved the drum and let the light shine on the remains. They looked at it in disbelief and turned back to Khorta. It was Jason Goodwell who spoke.

"This isn't a robbery is it?" Fear was in his voice. "What is going on here? What do you want from us?"

Khorta leaned back against one of the dividing walls of the cow stalls. His face was expressionless.

"If you people don't want to end up like that pig's head you have just two minutes to get your cloths off."

He lifted the shotgun and levelled it at Jason Goodwell's stomach and after a few seconds of disbelief they scrambled out of their clothes, accompanied by Ali's quiet sobs. Rasta put a hand on his shoulder.

"Don't let the fucker see you cry, Ali. Don't let him see you cry, man. Don't give him that pleasure."

Khorta gave no reaction to what he said, but continued to watch them carefully. When they were standing there naked he nodded to Cullings who went and picked up the pile of thin nylon rope.

"Now old Sam here is going to tie you guys face down across those barriers. If you don't do anything stupid I guarantee you will live to play those instruments another day. Fuck us about and you're pig meat. All right, Sam, take Fairbrother first."

Cullings took about four minutes to tie Rasta face down across the barriers, doubled over with his feet spread wide, but close to the barriers on one side and his arms pulled out together in front of him on the other. Despite his nakedness Rasta was sweating. Within fifteen minutes they were all tied in exactly the same fashion in a line. Khorta went and tested ropes and then satisfied walked to the doorway. He turned and looked at the four pairs of naked buttocks facing him.

"Nothing personal in this, you people. I am just getting paid for doing a job. Its all yours now Sam."

It was Rasta who realised first what was going to happen to them and started to struggle like a man possessed. His back muscles stood out like iron bars, but the barriers were well bolted down and did not move. Sean Combes, who until then

had been the only one not to say a word, began for the first time in many years to say his prayers. This mingled with Rasta' continual stream of obscenities and Ali's sobs, became one long jumbled sound. Only Jason Goodwell was silent, but he too was crying. Khorta took an envelope from his pocket and gave it to Sam Cullings who opened the flap and then looked up at him sharply. Khorta nodded.

"I know its a couple of hundred more than we agreed, but its because things have changed. I am going to leave separately because I have another little job to do, that's why I have a motorbike in the back of the Transit. When you have finished here you can take the Transit on your own, although I don't recommend you keep it long as the Roady will tell the police about it. Now get on with what you are being paid for."

Leaving the cowshed he shut the door behind him and walking over to the bus and took out his pistol from his tunic and shot out both front tyres. The shots coming from just outside the cab where he sat doubled over the wheel, almost caused Colin the Roady to wet his trousers. Then, going to the front of the Transit and opening the passenger door, he carefully laid the sawn off shotgun on its side on the passenger seat facing the drivers door.

When he was happy with the angle he used two elastic luggage straps to lock it into position, taking them over the gun and linking them together by their hooks under the seat. He then closed the passenger door and made sure that the handle of the shotgun rested firmly against the door panel. Next he went round and climbed into driving seat and taking a length of nylon fishing line out of his pocket, by the light of the interior light he tide a small loop in one end of the line and slipped it over the trigger of the shotgun. From there he then ran it through the handle of the passenger door and back across the cab, before putting the line down on the driver's seat and climbing out. Once out of the cab, holding the drivers door half open with his knee he picked up the line and tied it firmly to that door handle. Then, making sure he was out of the line of fire he slowly opened the door. The line tightened at the half open position. He smiled and gently closed the door again. Then he locked the passenger door before replacing the keys in the ignition, making sure that the only access was through the driver's door

He went to the back of the Transit and quickly shed the police uniform, which he rolled up into a ball and climbed into a full set of black motorbike leathers. This was not without some difficulty as the rear of the van contained a large Honda motorcycle. He finally removed the brown coloured contact lenses from his eyes before donning gloves and a crash helmet and opening the back doors pushed out an eight-foot plank, which he used as a ramp. He picked up the police uniform and placed into one of the bike's panniers and took a last look around to make sure he had not forgotten anything. Then quietly mounting the bike inside the van and pushing it off its stand, he carefully rode it down the plank and allowed it to roll down the slight incline of the lane for some two hundred yards before pulling it back on to its stand and returning to the yard.

As he entered the yard loud screams were coming from the cowshed and he assumed the Anglo/Indian kid was getting Cullings's attention. He felt a brief flash of compassion for the poor bastard, but it wasn't his problem. His problem was getting that bastard MacAllister off his back and getting out of the country. He made his way over to the bus and climbed aboard. Colin shrank back into his seat

as the black clad figure climbed the three steps up into the bus and mutely shook his head; the screams had evidently unnerved him. Khorta laughed.

“Its all right, Colin. Its not your turn now.”

He held up two keys.

“These are the keys to those handcuffs and the ignition keys for the bus. It won't go far with the front tyres down, but you should make it back to the motorway junction. I am going to put them down here on the floor where you can reach them, but I don't advise you do it until you see the other guy leave the building and drive the Transit away. Remember, he has a shotgun as well. Happy Christmas.”

Colin stared unblinking as the black figure left, as if he felt even to blink might make him change his mind and come back. He sat face down across the wheel rock still, staring at the door. Khorta walked back to where he had left the motorcycle and climbed on. He operated the starter and the engine burred powerfully, but quietly into life. He kicked it into gear, released the clutch and with a low growl of power, vanished into the night.

Back in the bus Colin was distracted from his vigil on the bus door by the flash of light as the door of the cowshed opened and then closed again. Into the beams of the still blazing bus headlights came the other man, the one the black man who had dressed as a policeman had called Sam. Sam walked passed the bus obviously heading to where they had parked the Transit. Colin hadn't heard it start up so it must still be there. Then the sudden silence that had fallen over the night, the screams from the cowshed having stopped now, was shattered again by a shotgun blast and a further scream that died to a gurgle. Then it was silent again.

Colin sat there for twenty minutes before he dared to move and then the only thing that moved him was the bitter cold, followed by the fear for his band. By standing up he found he could just push his hands down through the wheel far enough to reach the key to the handcuffs if he turned his head sideways against the spokes of the steering wheel and stretched his fingers to the limit.

Holding the keys in his right hand he didn't dare straighten up again in case he dropped them again where he couldn't reach them so with the blood pounding in his ears he took three tries before he managed to open one of the bracelets. Free again he stood and then fell backwards into the seat and gratefully straightened his back for the first time in nearly an hour. He unlocked the other bracelet and with a sudden burst of anger threw the handcuffs into the night through the open door. Then he bent down and retrieved the ignition keys from where they lay by the steering column. He started the engine because the headlights had started to fade a bit and he was concerned for the battery. He didn't fancy walking out of here with that black maniac loose somewhere. Besides, the lads would be frozen and they would need the heater.

Once out of the bus he forced himself to walk over to the transit. The passenger door was wide open and had a huge chunk just below the lock blown away as if some maniacal machine had taken a large bite out of it. He heard a whisper from behind him and looked around. Sam Cullings was lying on his back some three yards from the Transit where the blast from the shotgun had thrown him. In the

feeble reflected light of the bus headlights, Colin could see a large dark wet patch where the left hand side of the chest had been. He knelt down and felt the body and immediately turned away again and threw up the contents of his stomach when his hand touched bare broken ribs. He wiped his sticky fingers frantically on the frozen ground to get rid of the blood while he took great gasps of freezing air to prevent him from vomiting again. After steeling himself he returned to the body and felt at the neck for a pulse. There was none and the skin was already cold. The noise had just been air leaving the dead lungs as the body cooled. Colin stood up and forced himself to walk towards the cowshed.

Chapter 25

Boxing Day was proving to be as quiet as the grave and Jackie Ward wondered if the new Guv'nor had called her into his office for a pep talk just to pass the time of day or because he was bored sitting around waiting for something to happen on this unusually quiet Christmas. It was a funny thing, but it didn't matter how often she saw Peter Grinton there, she could not get used to some one else sitting behind what to her mind, would always be MacAllister's desk. Detective Inspector Peter Grinton wasn't a bad Guv'nor compared to some she had known, even if he was a bit of a book soldier, but he wasn't MacAllister, although he had given in to them calling him Guv'nor. Perhaps Marcus Lomax had been right all along. Perhaps she had had a bad case of boss fixation and had been too blind to realise it. She pulled her attention back to what her new boss was saying with some difficulty. That was also a part of the problem. This one did bang on a bit before he came to the point, by which time her mind had gone back to the case he had just called her away from. She made another effort to take in what Grinton was saying. Today he was going around the houses more than normal and he looked a bit embarrassed.

“So as they all come from Bristol they have asked me if we could look through our records and see if we could come up with anything that might throw some light on the subject.”

As she still didn't have a clue what he was talking about Jackie decided to force the pace.

“Let me see if I have got this right, Guv. A rock band gets assaulted in Birmingham and you want me to check and see if there is anything on them at this end?”

Grinton nodded.

“Well if I knew what they were called it might help me.”

“Oh yes, sorry, Jan. They are called Metal Heaven.”

She forgot to be angry that he insisted on calling her Jan instead of Jackie, as her head came up with a jerk.

“Where did you say they were beaten up, Birmingham?”

“Yes and I didn't say beaten up. I said assaulted.”

His eyes refused to meet her face and she got mad.

“Look, Guv'nor. I am a big girl and I don't have to be protected from the bloody world. In eight years on the force I have seen murder, rape, sodomy, arson, perversion and armed robbery, so I know what it is all about. What you are doing is treating me as the little woman who needs protecting and that is just bloody chauvinism. And while I am at it, the name is Jackie and not Jan. Now what happened to these guys?”

Grinton waved his hands in surrender at her outburst and the fire from the big eyes.

“All right, Jackie, Sergeant, I apologise. Lets start again from the beginning shall we?”

He looked at his note pad.

“In the early hours of Christmas morning Metal Heaven were returning to Bristol from a late night recording session in Manchester. Just to the south of Birmingham their bus was waved down by a police sergeant in a dark blue Transit van who told them their rear lights were defective. Being Christmas the police sergeant offered to take them back to the police motorway depot and get the mechanic there to have a look at the lights instead of calling out a breakdown service and the driver of the bus gratefully agreed. He didn't fancy waiting hours for someone to drag themselves out to the motorway on Christmas morning.”

He waved a hand towards the notepad.

“It seems that while all this was going on, the rest of the band were asleep in the back of the bus. However, where they ended up wasn't a police motorway depot, but at a derelict farm. Here, the transit driver, who wasn't in uniform, joined the so-called police sergeant, who had stayed on the bus to give directions, and weapons were produced. The four band members were then woken up and led away to one of the farm buildings.”

He checked his notes.

“The coach driver was then handcuffed to his steering wheel and didn't see anything else, but what happened was that the second man,” he looked down again, “identified as one Samuel Cullings, an unemployed dock worker from Liverpool, systematically sodomised all four band members who had been tied across a crash barrier that had been installed in an old cowshed just for that purpose.”

Veteran of CID or not, Janet looked shocked.

“Bloody hell.”

“Yes Jackie, bloody hell. So you see Birmingham are rather anxious to know we can give them any help with this one.”

She nodded.

“Martin Jenson.”

“Who is he?”

“His daughter was involved with the band and claimed they raped her. It happened last August. Her father is, or was, a Royal Marine and he beat up one of the band quite badly after the affair, a West Indian called Rasta Fairbrother. Not content with that, Alison Jenson, the girl who claimed she was raped, stabbed him through one of the testicles with a boning knife and he later had to have surgery to have it removed.”

“Bloody hell” It was Grinton's turn to be surprised. “And you think they are now having another go.”

“Not the girl, Guv. She got six months in Pucklechurch for stabbing Fairbrother and isn't due out for some weeks. But her father was all fired up about her being put away and is easily capable of doing this. Two of the members of that band have black blood and Jenson hates blacks. Probably thinks they have sullied his daughter permanently.”

Grinton sat back and rubbed a hand over his face. He gave a deep sigh.

“All right, Jan, sorry, Jackie. Can you let Birmingham have all the details, but I don't know if it will help them that much. The man who posed as a police sergeant was black himself.”

She looked surprised. Then she brightened.

“Can't we pick up this Sam Cullings if we know he was involved? Surely that is our best bet.”

“We did pick him up, Jackie, but unfortunately it was in a body bag. Our black friend the phoney police sergeant booby trapped the Transit with a sawn off shotgun before he left and Cullings got a hole blown in his chest you could put a rugby ball into.”

“Bloody hell.”

“As you say. Bloody hell.”

She duly rang Birmingham with her information and three hours later she heard from them that the local police in Martin Jenson's village confirmed that he had spent Christmas in the Hebrides with a cousin and could not be connected with the crime in any way. However they thanked her for her help. She shrugged and forgot it. She had enough problems on their own patch without getting involved with other peoples.

Jason Howlett opened the Garage door and then spent some thirty seconds just letting his eyes enjoy the sight of the 250cc Kawasaki motorcycle resting on its stand. Since the court case his father and mother had been like putty in his hands. It was like magic the way they did what he asked now that he had learned how to handle them. The secret had been to stop confronting his father head on. That only got his male pride going and sent him into his leader of the pack act. No, the way to handle Howlett Senior was to be contrite and then go quiet and sad for days. Mope around the house giving big sighs, but denying anything was wrong. It was what his mother always did and she got everything she wanted so he had tried the same thing. The result was sitting before his eyes. It was his birthday being so close to Christmas in early February that had really swung it. The bike was an expensive present even by Rex Howlett's standards, but by asking for it as a combined birthday and Christmas present he had managed to get it. He had passed his test at the first try just two days after his sixteenth birthday, after his dad had given one of the clerks in the Testing Centre a discount on a new Focus to push him to the top of the waiting list, and here he was. Three days after Christmas he still got a thrill from just looking at the machine.

He reached up, took down his crash helmet from its peg, and donned it before pushing the bike from its stand and wheeling it out onto the drive. The helmet was a trifle loose because he normally wore it on his Go Kart with a fireproof Nomex

balaclava underneath, but his hair would soon grow enough to fill it. Leaving the garage door for some one else to close he climbed aboard the bike and pressed the starter. The engine rasped into life. He revved it gently until all the gauges showed the right readings and then he snicked it into gear and letting in the clutch went down the drive and along the lane like a bullet.

The Howlett home was placed on the outskirts of Bristol and only just came within the city boundaries. To reach the city centre and his mates, Jason had to traverse some five miles of winding lanes before joining the motorway in the vicinity of the Polytechnic. It was the part of the journey he liked best. Head down behind the fairing with the headlights making a bright tunnel in the darkness, he would take the bike through the lanes as fast as his nerves would let him, the race bred engine howling like an angry bumble bee beneath him. In an even five minutes he reached the main road and dropped his speed to the authorised fifty miles an hour.

The Bristol police had not forgotten Jason and he already had one speeding ticket hanging over him that had been given to him by a spitefully gleeful motorway policeman for doing just seventy six miles an hour. Until the man had read his name on his license Jason was sure he was just going to give him a bollocking as he had been quite friendly until then, making jokes about some one called Geoff Duke and admiring the bike. When he read Jason's name that had changed and he had written out a ticket in stony silence, only the sneering smile when he handed it over showing how pleased he was to be able to do it. Jason would remember PC Bob Evert.

A minute and a half later he was on the M5 and back up to seventy miles an hour. He never saw the car that hit him, just caught sight of a black shape out of the corner of his eye before the world somersaulted around him, followed by a brief moment of searing agony, followed by blackness. The impact had sent him and the Kawasaki across the hard shoulder, down the steep embankment and into the five-barred wooden fence at the bottom. A herd of cattle that had been chewing the cud in the field on the other side of the fence reared about a bit as the bikes headlight momentarily illuminated them as it somersaulted down the slope. Then they settled and came back to stare at the boy and the bike for some moments, in the curious manner cattle have, before going on with their eating. It was seven o'clock on the twenty ninth of December. Jason regained consciousness briefly some two hours later in great pain, the constant stream of headlights cutting through the night above him and the bitter cold the only things letting him know it wasn't a bad dream. Eventually he slipped back into a semi-conscious doze.

It was a motorway gang that found him the next morning just as daylight was breaking. By this time there was an all car alert out for him as his frantic parents bombarded the local police station with calls and then visits before Rex Howlett finally elected to camp out in the waiting room. It was more by luck than judgement that they found him as the gang were putting cones out in piles ready for road works scheduled to start in early January. Jason's leathers were in the dark green and yellow colours of his sponsoring oil company to match his Go Kart, but fortunately the Kawasaki was painted red, blue and white and showed up even in the long grass at the bottom of the bank. One of the crew scrambled down the

steep bank to have a look and came back shaking his head and they called in on their mobile telephone. His headshake was premature for when the paramedics arrived they found Jason still alive, if not exactly well. They lifted him gently onto a stretcher and hauled him back up the bank to the hard shoulder where they could examine him properly. Once they had administered the various drips and injections to counteract the shock they cut away the leather from his shattered right leg. One look was enough for them and they loaded him aboard and headed for the city centre with lights and sirens on full bore. By seven o'clock that night he was out surgery, out of immediate danger and tucked up snugly in a private ward sleeping off the anaesthetic, his doting parents by his bedside. They were relieved to have their son returned to them alive, but were wondering how they could break the news to him that for the rest of his life he would have to manage with only one leg.

Jackie Ward was in the Canteen when she heard about the accident to Jason Howlett. Bob Evert had been on the motorway patrol that morning when they pulled the boy out of the ditch and ever mindful of his desire to join CID he made a beeline for Jackie with his information when he saw her having her coffee in the canteen. She thought it over as she walked back to her office and concluded there may be a God in heaven after all. She wondered if MacAllister had heard and decided she would ring him and tell him. It would give her an excuse to pick his brains about a couple of other things that were puzzling her and MacAllister had been in CID so long he could think like a villain now. She rang his number, but got the disconnected signal. She rang Directory Enquiries and they confirmed that the number had been disconnected. Curious she rang post office telephones and after she told them who she was they revealed the information that the house still had a phone, but a new number had been issued when its new owners had moved in. MacAllister had sold it then. She felt strangely sad with the thought that she would only ever again have contact with the Guv'nor if he wanted it. He really was finally gone.

In his rented flat MacAllister was just tipping the baked beans over the toast when the mobile phone rang. The voice on the other end was cold, clear and to the point.

“MacAllister?”

MacAllister had only given the number of this phone to one person, but he was cautious anyway.

“Who is this?”

Khorta's voice grated in his ear.

“Don't fool with me, MacAllister. The job's done and I want what I've got coming. That's ninety thousand pounds and a certain item of equipment you are holding, and I want it now.”

“All right, Mitael. Why don't I meet you in the car park of the motorway service station at Lee Delamare at around six? What car will you be driving?”

The return voice was hard and angry.

“Don't piss me about, MacAllister. There is a lay-by on the Portway just after the suspension bridge, the one with the mobile cafe in it. I will be there at ten o'clock

tonight. I hope you will be there as well or I may just start killing people for pleasure as well as money.”

“OK, Mitael. Ten o'clock.”

There was a grunt on the other end and then a click and a buzz as the connection was broken. MacAllister gave a grim little smile and went back to his beans on toast. When he had eaten that he had some things to do. The place that Khorta had mentioned was on the busy main road that ran from the city centre down to the motorway and the docks, but the meeting place was right under the cliffs. At that time of night the mobile cafe would be locked and in darkness and they would be far enough from the road to attract any attention from the traffic on the Portway. He wondered why Khorta had picked such an out of the way place, but felt he probably knew the answer.

He spent the next hour or so packing all his clothes into two new, large suitcases and generally tidying up the flat. He spent several seconds looking at a family photo. It had been taken on Kirsty's eighteenth birthday and the four of them were standing in the back garden holding up glasses of champagne with silly grins on their faces. Blinking rapidly he packed it away with the rest of his things. He had rented the flat and paid two months in advance so the agents would not be sad if he left it earlier and they could let it again. He had a bad moment when he took down from the mantle shelf and packed the last family picture of all of them, taken when they were celebrating in a restaurant because Gavin had just passed his “A” levels, but he fought it off.

After carrying the suitcases and a large black briefcase out to his hired car and locking them in the boot, he went back into the flat and checked again that the gas and electricity were both switched off and all the windows properly closed and then he locked it and put the keys in an envelope. He had two hours until his appointment with Khorta, but first he had to find a phone to make tomorrow's travel arrangements. He also had to drop off the keys through the estate agent's letterbox with an accompanying note and then pick up another item from an acquaintance from his police days, a man who a couple of months before would have avoided MacAllister like the plague. However, he himself was now in the same position as the villains he had spent most of his life trying to put away. The driving licence he had produced when he had hired the car and the name inscribed on it were both forgeries. That wasn't the only item he had obtained and he was grimly amused at his use of the highly illegal facilities the city boasted. Facilities he had previously spent so much time and energy pursuing and trying to close down.

It was nearly half past ten when MacAllister drove the hired Ford Focus into the lay-by; he had got rid of his old Vectra some time before, practically given it away to the young couple that had bought his house. Perhaps it was because the price was right or maybe it was because they just did not know about Jean's suicide, but they had bought without a mention of it. He was now some fifteen minutes late for his appointment with Mitael Khorta because he had driven up and down this part of the Portway, the city's main connecting road with the docklands area and the M5, several times to make sure that Khorta was there and alone. The dark blue BMW that sat in the lay-by alongside the now closed tea and sandwich stand

looked identical to Khorta's, but MacAllister knew that it wasn't his from the registration number. Therefore, Mitael Khorta was up to some nastiness and he, MacAllister, was to be the recipient. Winding his passenger window fully down he drove into the lay-by and pulled up alongside and so close to the drivers door of the BMW that it was impossible for the other to open it. The driver's window of the BMW hummed down and Khorta's hard, ebony face looked out.

"You're late, MacAllister"

MacAllister grinned.

"Just making sure I wasn't going to get any nasty surprises, Mitael. You're not exactly number one on the list of people I would trust with my life."

"You got my money?"

MacAllister held out the red nylon sports bag and Khorta reached out into the Focus and took it. He unzipped it and briefly examined the contents. Satisfied he zipped it up again and put it on the passenger seat and MacAllister noticed that he too was wearing gloves.

"What about my gun?"

MacAllister held out Khorta's pistol at arms length in his gloved fingers and Khorta reached out and took that also. He checked the action. MacAllister grinned.

"Its not loaded, Mitael."

Khorta gave him a smile that would have put a tiger to shame.

"Then it's a good job I brought another one."

A large automatic pistol had appeared in Khorta's hand as if by magic. It had started to swing round towards MacAllister and was half way through the one hundred and eighty degree arc required when MacAllister lifted and fired the shotgun he had been holding across his knees in his gloved hands. The barrel had not been cut down very much and over the small distance it had to travel the shot remained in a compact group of not more than three inches in diameter. It hit Khorta in the neck, severing his spinal cord and literally blowing his head off before taking out the far window of the car in a shower of blood, bone, flesh and glass. Blood from severed arteries spurted everywhere, turning the inside of the BMW a sticky purple/black in the light from the sodium street lamps. MacAllister looked at the headless carnage he had created for some three or four seconds before he spoke.

"You have had that coming a long time you evil bastard."

The voice was flat and without much emotion. He threw the shotgun like a javelin through the open window of the BMW and starting the engine put his car in gear and drove off without a backward glance.

Chapter 27

In Pucklechurch detention centre for female juveniles Alison Jenson was watching a news programme. It was currently covering the death by suicide of one Ali Khan, of the up and coming local rock group, Metal Heaven. He had sat in his

car and drunk most of a bottle of whisky before connecting up the exhaust to a hosepipe and gassing him self. Nobody knew why. Alison watched it through in silence and then sat back and gave a small sigh of satisfaction. She too didn't know why Ali Khan had killed himself and she didn't care, but it was one more of the bastards who had got his come-uppance. She looked again at the letter on the low table in front of her, the one from her father asking her to come and live with him up in Scotland. He must want his head examined to think she would even consider it. After all, where the hell had he been when she needed him. One interview with the filth and he had wimped back off to Scotland. Stuff him. She would make her own way and it would not be in some God forsaken hole in the wilds. She smiled to herself. She had been the sole of co-operation since she had arrived here and with any luck she would be out for the New Year if her Probation Officer and Social Workers kept their promises.

In the CID office at Bricewell, Detective Sergeant Jackie Ward had finished the previous days paperwork and was about to get up to get a cup of tea in the canteen when Marcus Lomax dashed into the room, breathless. He obviously had something pretty earth shattering to tell her to make him abandon the aura of super cool he usually affected.

“Sarge, the motorway patrol coming back up the Portway about half an hour ago stopped to check a suspicious looking car parked in a lay-by. Thought perhaps some joy riders had nicked it and left it there. After they looked inside it they called us and the Guv'nor sent me and Frank Lintsey down there.”

He folded his arms and leaned against the doorframe, relaxing now and picking up his normal persona once more. When he continued it was the usual Marcus.

“Well, inside the car we found a black male with his head blown off by a shotgun, the head was in his lap and he still had a bloody great pistol in his hand.” his voice told her he was still shocked by what he had seen, “the shotgun we think they used was also in the car. On the passenger seat we found a red nylon sports holdall that we thought at first was stuffed with money, but actually contained a lot photocopies cut up to look like packets of money with a few genuine fivers stuck on the outsides. That's all at forensic with the guns.” He continued. “We had a look through his pockets, quite a messy business, and came up with his driving licence. Subject to some confirmation it's Mitael Khorta. Seems one of his shady friends succeeded where we failed and that the Guv'nor was right all the time.”

He gave her his flashing smile expecting one in return, but she was now immune to the dark Celtic charms of Marcus Lomax and merely nodded and turned around to the filing cabinet. His smile faded and he left.

It was later in the same morning after the Khorta killing had made the local radio and TV news that she received the phone call. The caller was one crooked Bookmaker by the name of Dave Pike. She listened to what he said for some minutes and when she put down the phone she sat in thought for some moments more thinking over what the caller had just said to her. Then she shook her head as if to clear it and got on with what she had been doing. It was a ridiculous idea to think that MacAllister could possibly be involved in any of this. He was the best

copper this Nick had ever seen. Then she put her pen down again and picked the phone up. If she was that sure of the Guv'nor why not just cover her back. Neither Peter Grinton or any other senior member of CID was in the building as it was New Years Eve and only the lesser ranks were holding the fort in CID, so she decided she had better kick it all the way upstairs.

In his ivory tower on the seventh floor Bill Reid had quite a shock as he listened to Jackie Ward. Damn MacAllister. Was the man going to haunt this station forever? He had done his best to remove the man's influence completely. Clive Sayers has been promoted to Inspector and automatically transferred and Janet Ward had been made up to sergeant, which should have put her firmly on his side. He kept her standing in front of his desk waiting for a few moments while he thought furiously before he gave his answer. When he did it was in a voice that was meant to be reassuring, but just a little surprised that she felt this was serious enough to bother the Station Commander.

"Look, Jackie. I hear what you say, but I don't believe it. I may not have been MacAllister's greatest fan, but he was a very good copper and the thought of him running a one-man vendetta on behalf of everyone that may feel aggrieved at the results they have received from the justice system is a bit far fetched, you must agree. This man who called you, this Bookmaker, this Dave Pike, is a known criminal and associate of criminals and was pretty thick with the late Mitael Khorta. He has no real proof whatever except for what he says Mitael Khorta told him, but what it comes down to is that we have is very little real evidence. Khorta is dead and we are left with the half-baked suspicions of a convicted criminal. The other things you mention are nothing more than a series of coincidental events involving people who's only common point is that they all had contact at some time with our CID office."

He shook his head in wonderment.

"And the idea that MacAllister was blackmailing Khorta is ridiculous. After all the man was talking of suing MacAllister and us for wrongful arrest a few weeks ago, and quite rightly. We had no evidence against him worth talking about and certainly not enough to charge him with anything. So what was MacAllister supposed to be blackmailing him with?"

He gave her the smile of a superior intelligence explaining the obvious to the lesser intellect of his subordinate. Jackie Ward shrugged.

"I don't know, Sir and neither does Dave Pike. All he knows is that Khorta told him if he died suddenly to ring the CID here at the Bricewell and tell them that MacAllister was blackmailing him. Knowing how you feel about the force I thought it best to bring it to your attention at once and the other, what you called, coincidental events of the last week or so."

Reid shook his head, a little smile playing on his lips.

"You get this Pike in on Monday and listen to him make his case. Then let him see that you think it is all a bit far fetched, but that we will investigate what he says. Then get rid of him and we will go back to trying to police this patch of ours. By the way, how is the new job going, Detective Sergeant?"

He went through his letting the troops know he was behind them routine for a few moments longer and then made his excuses. After she had gone he went over to the window and resumed his view of the roofs of Bristol as he went over the

conversation he had just had with Jackie Ward for a second time in his mind. Then satisfied, he went back to his desk and the endless reports and paperwork. After all, he had only come in this morning to make sure that this month's crime figures were sent to Division on time. Bloody MacAllister had been a loose cannon that could have caused a lot of trouble, but he had dealt with him. No maverick was going to endanger Billy Reid's career. No way. As for Ward, she was just being a bit over cautious, the result of her recent promotion no doubt.

It was with some shock that twenty four hours later he listened to Detective Inspector Grinton telling him that one of the two guns found in Khorta's car, the body had now been positively identified as that of Mital Khorta, was the same weapon that had caused two of the deaths in the Swindon bank raid earlier in the year. The five-pound notes used to disguise the bundles of photocopied notes found in the holdall had also been traced back to the same crime. Reid was forced to concede that MacAllister had been right to suspect Khorta, but wrong to arrest him before he had positive proof. He shied away from the thought that if MacAllister had found proof of Khorta's guilt he would have had good grounds to blackmail him. He rang Jackie Ward and told her that when Mr Dave Pike the Bookmaker visited the station he was to be asked about the alibi he had given Khorta at the time of the Swindon job. She in return told him that Dave Pike had turned down her offer to visit the station and make a statement. Did he want them to bring him in? Reid thought about how the Swindon case was nicely wrapped up as it was and decided that as they had little chance of bringing a successful case against Pike it would be best to let it lie. Why risk spoiling a good result, or a scandal that might threaten the career of a brilliant man like Bill Reid.

Down in the squad room Jackie Ward had hardly put her phone down when it rang again. When she answered it her face first showed pleasure and then astonishment. She listened in stunned silence for about two minutes giving only the odd nod before finally saying only "all right" and then replacing the receiver. She then got to her feet and picking her coat from the back of her chair left the office.

Chapter 28

In the comfortable green leather wing chair of his study John Morton was reading the local paper with intensity. There were two items that were causing this unusual degree of study. The first was an item about the death of one Ali Khan from the rock band Metal Heaven. The tabloid told in its usual style of lip smacking enjoyment how the young man had been a keyboard player with the group that had just broken into the big time, making his suicide all the more difficult to understand. Drugs and various other dark things were hinted at without actually being mentioned clearly enough to give his family grounds for legal action. Morton had not known anything about the members of the band, just its name. However, he thought that Ali Khan's suicide was evidence enough that

Khorta had kept his contract with Martin Jenson. He felt a slight sadness for the young man whose picture stared up at him from the page, but it soon passed. He read on, but the rest was only quotes from the rest of the band about what a great bloke Ali had been and how they would miss him and what a great musician their new keyboard player was.

The second item was much more interesting. It gave full details of the discovery of the body of one Mitael Khorta and gave all the gruesome details of his fatal injuries. Morton read it for a second time, particularly the part where it told of some of the money from the Swindon bank raid being found in a sports bag discovered on the passenger seat next to the dead man. There was some speculation about where the rest of it had gone and lots of speculation that this death was probably the result of thieves falling out. Eventually Morton put the paper down and sitting back in the chair picked up his glass of malt whiskey from the table alongside. He raised it to the warmth of the fire.

“Here's to you, John MacAllister. I hope you spend our money wisely and safely.”

It was the first day of January and the giant Air New Zealand Boeing 747B stood on the Heathrow tarmac like a grounded eagle, looking ungainly and out of place out of its natural environment. The cabin crew were greeting the first class passengers with the usual smiles and good mornings and occasional Happy New Year as they came aboard the aircraft from the collapsible corridor joining it to the airport buildings like a giant umbilical. The stocky man with the curly dark blonde hair, blue eyes and the soft Scottish accent made his way to the first class compartment where one of the prettier stewardesses was on duty and showed him to his allocated seat. He allowed her to fold his Macintosh and place it in the overhead luggage compartment, but would not give up the bulky briefcase he carried. She explained it was only for take off and that he could reclaim once they were airborne, but he looked at her like some fierce bird of prey and they compromised by placing it under his seat. She gave him a glass of champagne to mark the first day of the year and went to assist the next passenger who was having trouble finding her seat. Boarding of the lesser classes was then allowed to commence and some thirty minutes later the giant aircraft was released from its earthly ties and allowed to taxi out. At the next to final waiting point before the main runway it pulled up and sat waiting. Five minutes went slowly by before it moved on again and shortly after that they were hurtling down the runway and into the air at over two hundred miles an hour.

It wasn't until the big plane was an hour out from Wellington, New Zealand that MacAllister relaxed. His thoughts turned to the surprise his sister would have when she saw him. He really should have let her know he was coming so she could have met him, but he would find their place somehow. Then he would have to find somewhere he could invest the money that was currently stashed away under his seat in the brief case. He felt backwards with the heel of his shoe until it made reassuring contact with the brief case. Then he gave a great big sigh and relaxed a little for the first time in more than four months. It was strange that now it was finished he could hardly believe what he had done. If you had asked him before he would of told you he was not capable of such actions. Well he had been

capable and he had done it. He felt no remorse, but knew that while he was engaged in those activities the balance of his mind had been less than normal and that realisation shocked him somewhat. Then he shrugged mentally. It was done and if he was to pick up the pieces of his life he had better start looking to the future.

What he hoped was his future was sitting three rows behind him staring out of the window eagerly trying to catch her first glimpse New Zealand. Janet Ward smiled as she looked at her watch and working out the time differences reckoned that any moment now Commander Bill Reid would be reading her letter of resignation and reflecting on what an ungrateful bitch she had turned out to be. She looked up to where MacAllister sat and wondered what had made her do it. "Boss fixation." said a small voice inside her head and she laughed causing the elderly woman next to her to look at her strangely.

Chapter 29

Outside the Watershed Exhibition Centre down by the Bristol docks, computer programmer Gerald Bonner slowed his Nissan Primera down to a stop as it approached and drew level with the young girl leaning back against the wall of the Exhibition Hall smoking a cigarette. Her long hair was down past her shoulders; her sheer blouse was open almost to her navel while her short skirt almost showed her panties. He smiled out at the ripe young figure who stared levelly back at him.

"Are you waiting for someone, then?"

Alison Jenson threw the cigarette down into the gutter and walked over to get a good look at him. He seemed OK and she switched on a big smile.

"I was waiting for some one that could afford me actually." She looked at the ring on his wedding finger. "Do you have fifty pounds that your wife doesn't know about?"

Gerald Bonner looked at the long legs beneath the tight skirt, the firm breasts less than eighteen inches from his nose, and decided he had.

