

Double J's

A photograph of a building facade. The building has a dark, textured wall with a grid pattern. There are several windows with white blinds. A red door is in the center. The text 'Double J's' is overlaid in a large, stylized, white font with a dark outline at the top. The background shows some greenery on the left and a window with a bell hanging from it on the right.

THINGS ARE NEVER HOW THEY SEEM

Double T's

By Lee Cooper

The shop

Double T's pawn shop was run by Johnny Tucker and "Tam the man" as he was referred to by some characters in the area and there were plenty of them in Torry. It steamed a mixture of citizens, from students to junkies and families to the homeless; it was much more uniquely cultured than the rest of the city.

They were best pals, had been since they met at the tearaway age of sixteen when Tam moved in next door to Johnny in the fishing district of Torry, Aberdeen. Living In a street of dingy old-fashioned bungalow cottages, located on a steep hill that led towards the harbour. Both their cottages, once upon a time, would have been occupied by fishermen. Johnny had taken on his parents' house after they separated and had it refurbished over the years to make it appear more in date, modern and well, homely. Tam's house, on the other hand, had never seen a lick of decoration and rarely did it get a clean either.

When Tam moved in, he kept a life of confidentiality. Choosing to be discreet and distant from the locals in the area, including his neighbour. He spoke in a funny accent. Not quite the Doric but more a mixture of Scots and the odd proper speaking English word in it. Johnny knew he wasn't local but when he felt the need to ask where he originated from, Tam would

answer, “Here and there.” Conversations with Johnny were few when Tam moved to the city and it took him a year to break Tam out of his shell. Doing so, they teamed up as a couple of low key thieves and con men. Tam didn’t have parents to answer to and he lived a lifestyle without guilt or headaches but his partner held a light hearted conscience and a father who tried to rule over him strictly but Johnny wasn’t one for rules.

With a humble and straight forward personality, he was a well-liked member of Torry. Johnny was never shy in aiding people with their problems. There was a homeless guy who dotted around the area and every morning, he would wait outside a baker for Johnny in rain, sleet or frost. Johnny would kindly buy him a pie, coffee and paper without fail. Being soft hearted when it came to the elderly, every Thursday he would enthusiastically visit the old folk’s home, play card games and crack jokes with the old timers. It was probably his happiest time of the week. He would bring along fancy pieces, USB sticks packed with films, some whisky for the men to share while they played their late night poker and most of all, pandrops. The old folks loved pandrops, Johnny said.

Double T’s pawn shop was run with little to no thought of complying with regulations. Johnny was a stand up lad and the brains of the operation and Tam, well, Tam was a little slow in that department and that wound Johnny right up.

It was your average, dull-skied autumn day in the Granite City. Johnny mossed out of his house and took his daily late morning stroll across Victoria Bridge, linking Torry to Aberdeen city centre. Dressed sharp as usual, wearing his skinny look, navy chinos that made his upper body appear more muscled than it was. He had a defined build and walked with a casual swagger, his shoulders doing most of the movement and hands inside his waist length cotton jacket. His brown brogues tapped against the

pavement while he whistled away, his farmer cap sheltering his high cheek-boned face and weekly trimmed hair from the breeze.

Opening of the shop was left to his partner, Tam, and Johnny preferred to close up as he could be assured the shop was bolted down properly.

Johnny was a dapper character who preferred to live a hassle free life. He was assertive with a screwed-on business head until he was put under a degree of stress, then he would flap about like a frustrated child that couldn't reach their dummy. A man who liked to look after himself, keep himself neat for the influx of attention he welcomed from the ladies. Facial moisturisers and grooming devices stocked his bathroom cabinet. He also had an issue with patience, the issue being he didn't have any, unless it came to bedding women, then he would happily play the conniving game of luring them into bed.

The business wasn't doing so well of late. They had purchased fifteen seven-piece sets of cordless Makita power tools from a young drug peddler that were all brand new in the original boxes and worth over a grand a set from wholesalers. The cost of the purchase was three grand and they sold the tools on at £750 per set. They sold a set to a joiner but unknown to them, that man was a brother of a local PC. The PC happened to be round at his brother's house and caught a glimpse. All the goods were confiscated and unwillingly, the money was returned to the customers and the Makita sets confiscated by the police. That was just a risk they took.

The rewards were usually worth the gamble. The collection of Makita assortments had been robbed from a delivery truck, destined for the Bridge of Don B&Q, between Aberdeen and Stonehaven. They weren't ones to grass as they knew how things operated on the street and dealt with the criminal circle with a good degree of tactics and respect. Johnny, being a man who knew most of the city's unlawful, had plenty rogue connections in

his phonebook. The police badgered them for days to release the name of the culprit but they both knew better than to speak; anyway, they didn't know who he was. They simply answered each question with "I can't remember or "I don't know the guy." The whereabouts of that man was an on-going enquiry, the police holding little faith in finding the geezer; either did Johnny and Tam.

The shop was by no means a legitimate business, even though that's how it was seen in the public eye. They just had a recent break-in and a lucky escape. The burglars broke in through the back door and into the back room, attempting to bust into Double T's £400 sturdy safe that was left easy to find at the bottom of a large storage cupboard that stood the height of the room. It couldn't be nicked due to it being bolted to the concrete floor.

It seemed as if they had been spooked as their power drill and assortment of bits were abandoned. The master lock safe had a programmable electronic lock with key override and big chunky bolts for increased security. The lock display had been mangled and removed, leaving the safe only opening with the key. To Johnny's luck, not a single item was stolen from the shop but Johnny took that as a warning and decided to spruce up security. Planning things himself because Tam was no good with the more ethical side of things, he had a new high definition camera system fitted, one on the main floor and another in the back room. Along with that, a burglary alarm was fitted with a police response package. This was ironic as he was a retired thief and not a very gifted one since he had done a two-year stint in Craiginches jail for a failed burglary. He also invested in a heavy insurance policy for the shop, as, getting wiser in his late twenties, he decided he needed to protect his investment. A new safe was purchased as well, much more compact, less expensive than the last. Johnny became determined that no one could locate this one and turned himself into a DIY

expert for a weekend. He jack-hammered a hole the same size as the rectangular safe out of the ground. The safe slotted inside with the key code pad facing up, obviously! Pieces of wooden flooring were then placed over the top and covered with a slice of linoleum flooring. That wasn't enough though. The bottom of one of the filing cabinets was jigsawed out to leave a slightly larger hole than what was in the ground. He did all this properly, wearing a boiler suit, safety goggles, gloves, dust mask and ear protection because he wasn't a fan of getting his maintained skin and hands dirty. He even vigorously filed the bottom of the filing cabinet to save anyone cutting their fingers on rugged edges. The filing cabinet was slid over and screwed to the floor. The safe became accessible by sliding out the bottom drawer and opening it with a key and digit code that was kept by both.

That burglary attempt had happened around the same time of the Makita mishap. Johnny and Tam were pleased that stressful time was over but that Wednesday, Johnny's stress levels were to hit new heights.

Johnny entered the door in a jolly mode. Usually the chimes that Tam insisted stayed up, pissed him off but they didn't batter a thought. Generally, a happy chap as it goes, Johnny was laid back and enjoyed a life of being his own boss and not answering to orders.

Tam was inside the compact hut, standing behind the high raised counter that was built around the till at the T end of the room. In the hut, beneath the till, there was a selection of locked drawers that kept the majority of the more expensive items, like jewellery, phones, tablets, satellite navigation devices, that kind of stuff. At nights, a roller shutter and a locked door to the side kept the hut under extra security. To the side of the hut, at the rear of the main room, a door led to the back, used as their office and more importantly, their tea-drinking area.

Tam stood behind the counter looking well taken, polishing a hideous looking parrot ornament that would look at home on a pensioner's mantelpiece.

“What the fuck's that?” Johnny spouted at Tam.

Tam wasn't the most business minded guy. A bit simple like. Never would you see him with decent clobber, half the time he mimicked a bit of a tink, often coming into work stinking of alcohol from the night before or his breakfast spilled over his clothes as he was that day.

“It's a parrot, Johnny,” Tam answered with dry humour Johnny's aggressive question.

“I can see it's a fuckin' parrot, ye bam! How much you pay for that monstrosity o' a thing?” It was dirty sky blue as if it had been badly painted, black beaked, a cluster of white behind its neck and sized about the same as a male forearm.

“£40”.

“What! What's the thing worth?” Johnny moaned. It was all about the coin for him. He would want to squeeze every last penny from anything he sold in the shop.

“Nae idea, never checked like.” Tam's lack of gumption frustrated Johnny.

“Fuck me, Tam! What was ye doing this morning, rolling round in the park?” Tam looked down at his clothes and shrugged his shoulders. Johnny

shook his head and grabbed the bird.

“Give it here! I’ll google the thing.” Johnny’s good mood soon fizzled out.

Tam’s oval eyes were shifty, heavy and pink, that morning. His clothes were dirty, having an irritating odour of sweat. Another night on the piss, Johnny reckoned. That proper pissed him off. Tam’s nightlife was somewhat of a mystery to Johnny. Never would he talk about his antics or where he had been the night before. He was cagey that way, always carried a certain aura of mystery and in the past couple months, he had been more subdued than normal and seemed to spend most of the time on his phone or wondering his thoughts into open air but Johnny put this down to an unwanted anniversary approaching.

Tam’s past was mysterious but one thing Johnny knew about Tam was, once upon a time, somewhere, somehow, his mother and two younger sisters were murdered in some kind of horrific traffic accident and he witnessed it all. He spilled it out one night after too many whiskies on the anniversary that was fast approaching. He didn’t divulge much detail on the affair, keeping it close to his chest. That anniversary usually meant Tam would turn to being a drunken bum for over a week. Every year he couldn’t cope with the unwanted burden of holding the memories but this year, his mind would be occupied with the events of the next day.

Ragged shaved and slender, built at five-six, Tam had that look of a rough Glaswegian. He could fight like one too. He may have been an uncomplicated lad but well known for having a volatile temper when he had a whisky or ten. Banned from four pubs in Torry and many more in the city. Regular at taking so-called sick days and the odd occasion, Johnny was

Tam's port of call from the cells. Often requiring picked up from court on Monday morning on assault and breach of the peace charges.

Johnny was perched on the wheeled office chair in the back room, trying to find the value of the ornament, drinking his cup of tea, standard. Within a few minutes of googling, he found what kind of bird the ornament was. As he rose to tell Tam, the chimes above the shop door jangled.

One look at the two gentlemen who strolled in told Johnny they'd be trouble and that assessment would be correct.

Dressed in stained jeans and t-shirts that looked fashionable in the nineties, and teenage trainers, they held the look of Gypsy Travellers.

In the pawn shop, whatever travellers passed through the area, there was a ninety percent chance they would cower in and attempt to sell their unwanted (i.e. stolen) items. Usually Tam was left to deal with them. He seemed to speak their lingo, well not speak but understand enough to have a reasonable conversation. Since the recent trouble encountered with the Makita gear, Johnny thought it best to take the lead with this one.

The two cagey guys were having an informal squint around the shop. The one holding a suede sack similar to a Scrabble bag with a degree of weight inside, was named Byron Ansgar. He had a narrow frame with a gaunt, pale face, sucked in cheek bones as if he hadn't bitten into a chicken wing in a while and heighted at five-seven. An untended appearance with straggly, greasy brown hair down to his shoulders like an unhealthy rock star and a bushy moustache.

Both men continued to sweep the room with their intrigued eyes. The framed, autographed Muhammed Ali poster that just leapt up in value, due to his recent sad death and stack of boxing memorabilia surrounding it inside the door to the left took their interest. In the shop window they were well taken with a stack of gleaming alloy wheels. The historical 1984 Aberdeen Football Club signed picture and a signed football, thought to be one used in warm up by the winning European football team of 1983, had fingers pointed at them. The glass chest counter full of moody jewellery got a pass by. After the third pass around the room, Johnny watched while sipping the rest of his tea, standing flat footed, switching his head to Tam behind the counter.

The Travellers, ill-mannered, popped their heads over the worktops and switched their heads to the roof as if they were looking for something specific.

“Can I help you’s?” Johnny asked.

“Aye, ye can, wee lad”.

Byron took the lead and left the other character called Taylor standing guard at the door. He was roughly the same height as Byron and copied the same pale gaunt look but with shorter hair like a nineties boy band hero. These men were brothers and took orders from their father, a man called Cal Ansgar, who carried a fearsome reputation from his previous life and heavily respected by those who knew him. His name translated as ‘the travelling warrior’.

In the past, before having children, he chose to live a lawless life and any man who wished to cross him was a brave one. Once he birthed a family, he changed his ways but was always destined to return to that brutal man due to a vendetta he secretly carried. A man who travelled all over the UK with his family, had three different wives over the years and rabbit caul of siblings to look after.

Byron stank of rolling tobacco and Johnny didn't have a clue what he just said.

“What?” Johnny spouted, staring at Byron.

“He wants to know if ye can help him out,” Tam butted in.

“Wi' what?” Johnny answered, looking at Tam, screwing up his moisturised face as Tam nodded to Byron.

“What do you want?” Johnny asked slowly. The reason Johnny was so blatantly short with Byron was because he was sick of the thieving bastards and the unwelcome hassle from the police after the purchases. The shop usually turned a good profit from stock the Travellers sold while passing through, wishing to offload stuff informally you could say and Johnny knew that. The coin, as he would say, would be his reasoning to deal with them.

The front counter levelled out to the high chest level of Tam, making him appear smaller than he was. The musty dressed, ragged Traveller spilled the contents of the bag onto the counter as Taylor stood by the entrance,

seeming paranoid and on guard. Glaring onto the busy Market Street, ready to stop anybody's advance into the shop.

“Bag of jewels for you, sir?” Byron was abruptly forward but that was normal for his kind. Johnny had no doubt they'd been stolen the second he eyeballed what landed on the counter. His mind jumped into thoughts of cocktails on a beach, him surrounded by seductively half naked women, holding his glass, decorated with multi coloured straws and umbrellas with a big Cuban gripped between his finger, pulling the smuggest smile across his face. He observed the pile with his heart pounding as if he'd just run the 100 metres in record time. He slipped his hand under the counter for the magnifier, not exposing the flooding excitement roaring in his brain at the items he saw. The collection of products landing in front of his inviting eyes was a very profitable one. After the hit taken in the shop from the Makita range and the mass amount of money invested in the shop's security, he was only ambitious to make a killing.

“Quality stuff, man, high quality, top range,” Byron spouted.

Johnny ranged his eyes through the collection of material that consisted of a pearl necklace, female watches, ankle bracelets, earrings, bracelets and rings amongst other lucrative items.

“It's decent,” Johnny said calmly, nodding his head, but on the inside, he was smashing the world record for the 100 meters. It was all great quality, as Byron said. Johnny thought the collection could easily fetch forty grand without taking into account the lottery price, but forty grand he didn't have.

Their bank account was in a sorry state of affairs. What money they had left was locked inside the new safe.

Tam left the hut and started to polish the two long waist-high counters at either side of the room.

“Ok, ‘en. What you wanting for it?” Johnny asked.

“I’ll take twenty for it, and you’ve got a deal, son”. Aggressively, Byron’s hand slapped the desk.” Then it’s yours, boy.”

“Wait here, I’ll be back.” Johnny exited the hut and entered the back room, heading straight for the new safe that he was vastly proud of installing. Once the drawer was slid out, he removed the linoleum, lifted the two wooden slats, typed in the four-digit number combination which unlocked the safe. One thing Johnny never did with this safe was bolt it down. Counting the cash, Johnny realised he only had ten grand and a little change. That was the last of the shop’s funds. He was about to take a massive gamble but knowing he could make a killing, he hesitated no more on the deal.

Travellers liked to trade and if Johnny was to trade, his shop would be in their hands. He returned to the till, finding Tam in steady conversation with Byron on the shop floor. They both appeared to relax with Taylor dropping his guard, leaving his stance at the door.

“How does ten sound and ten in trade?” Johnny took a gamble, being all too aware his offer wouldn’t be accepted.

“You taking the piss, boy? Twenty, that’s what I want,” Byron demanded, while slapping the high counter again.

“Twenty! I’ve nae got twenty,” Johnny paused for five seconds, willing to hear if Byron had any other options. “What if we halved the jewels? I’ll take h.....”

Johnny was interrupted.

“No, no. It’s a package, boy. Take it all or nothing, simple as.”

Johnny picked up on how much Byron desired to shift the goods. Normally he would haggle until he got the product for as least as possible but all he wished was the contents of the sack to be in his possession.

Johnny didn’t want to utter the next sentence but there were no options for him. His necessity for the haul was that bad.

“Is there anythin’ in this shop that you want?” Both men turned necks at the same time and analysed each other before a jerk of the head from Byron took them into a private conversation, speaking in a language that sounded to Johnny as Gaelic but it was actually Shelta, the original language of the Irish Gypsy Travellers. Without taking one glimpse at what was on offer, they darted back to the face of the till counter,

“We’ll take the Ali poster, that set of alloys in the window, the iPod docking station over there, two tv’s, the collection of Johnny Cash records you have on your shelf... Ooh, and four phones, no cheap shit, the ones that’ll last...

with covers on them and!” Byron shouted. “A camera and some USB sticks.”

Tam tried to count the tally up in his head with his dazed eyes and brows raised, wrinkling his forehead and lipping the figures.

Once again, Johnny turned to Tam for some translating. He picked up on some of the demands but he needed to confirm what had been said. Tam translated once he caught Johnny’s ogle.

“How the fuck can you understand that?” Johnny asked Tam.

“They’re nae speaking in Icelandic, quite easily. You just have to tune in.” He counted up the worth of items in his head but it didn’t matter to him. It was a foregone conclusion that the Travellers wouldn’t leave the shop holding the haul.

“Fair enough, ‘en. It’s a deal.” Johnny handed over the cash and the deal was made.

Spetsnaz

2 days earlier

The Russians owned flats, spread around the centre of the city, used as brothels, homes for their men on their books and a strip club, located on Bridge Street, named The Mask. They’d only been in the area for the past

three months and already dominated the sex trade in big ways. The man behind this empire was fifty-three-year-old Evgeni Yakubovich, an ex-general in the Spetsnaz, the special military unit controlled by the Russian secret service (GRU).

Having gone rogue in 1985 on a mission in Beirut, Lebanon, a collection of soldiers of the Islamic Liberation Organisation had captured Soviet diplomats. A counter measure by the Soviets was to capture relatives of the Libyans and torture them until the diplomats were released. Evgeni was in control of ground operations and tore the limbs from the relatives until the diplomats were released. Although this was an order from a higher command., he became a deserter. Some kind of switch flipped in his head that day and he would never be the same man again. Never had he returned to his homeland.

Becoming a missionary, he picked up jobs for violent men across Eastern Europe until eventually he took shelter in Great Britain. Being the trained and resourceful man he was, it wasn't long before he involved himself in the criminal empires of London. The ability to speak Russian, Bulgarian, Polish, German and English meant he was hired to bring in sex workers from Eastern Europe. Once he had built up enough cash and contacts, he went on his own, hiring two ex-comrades from the Spetsnaz, Bogdan and Victor, loyal men in their early forties who answered to his commands in the regiment.

The Russians had been involved in the sex trade in far more cities across Britain than Aberdeen and London. This was just their next port of call. They liked to travel, do their business, make some money and move on.

Pushing men out of businesses and properties was something they enjoyed. They could be described as bullies. Evgeni had just done so in Aberdeen forcing Ronnie MacDonald to hand over his strip club, The Mask, by brutal torture.

The Guided Cradle: an old medieval Russian device, especially cruel due to the extent of pain as well as humiliation it caused. The victims were made to sit on a pyramid shaped stand after having removed their clothes so that the razor sharp point, shaped like a spear, would pierce their genital area, the concept being, to slowly but surely impale the victim on the device by the most painful of processes. The victim would often be lifted and placed on the device again to make sure they felt fresh excruciating pain each time. Often the victim would crumble long before the torture began.

Ronnie had crumbled before his clothes were removed.

In Aberdeen, people like Evgeni and his men were not common and that made the fulfilment of their ambition reasonably easy. Having infiltrated the club, and opened brothels, most of them located in the harbour area, he hired a gang of Bulgarian men to watch over them.

Inside The Mask on a quiet Tuesday night, a group of Travellers entered the club without Cal's say so. It was Byron's idea to spearhead the visit. The group were simply in a foul mood and wished to cause trouble, something their kind was associated with but they weren't in the habit of doing so.

The Mask comprised four levels. A narrow spiral staircase leading to the toilets brought you down to the low level. The second level was the one walked into through the entrance door. A short triangular shaped bar with around six stools and three high-raised square tables adjacent. Coloured lights lit up the area painted in cherry red.

Byron, Taylor and a collection of four other raw men galloped in, taking a stool each at the bar already intoxicated with alcohol. Behind the bar stood a stoutly built Bulgarian bartender, with a cheese ball eight's look, the kind Jean Claude van Damme would be proud of wearing, a glued on black t-shirt and heavily slicked back hair that glistened under more luminous lights under the spirits rack. A chunky silver chain hung around his neck to complete the image. He operated that bar to simulate an air of intimidation but that kind of thing had no effect on the group.

They sat and drank heavily, making unnecessary noise while leading on the strippers, all of eastern European origin. The bartender struggled to understand them and both he and the Travellers became agitated with this. They weren't interested in feeding the strippers money and that kind of thing annoyed Evgeni.

Upstairs, on the fourth level of the club, Evgeni and his two henchmen, Victor and Bogdan, were in the office keeping an eye on the situation. Victor and Bogdan were relaxed on the sofa with a naked seductive stripper each, on their laps. The table in front of them had bottles of vodka and lines of coke ready to be taken. The strippers enjoyed free narcotics, courtesy of Evgeni, and Victor and Bogdan got extra services from the strippers, courtesy of Evgeni.

Evgeni wasn't one to take advantage of the strippers. In his early fifties, he had seen it all in the business. Plus he had a deliciously gorgeous, gold digging twenty nine year old Russian wife at home. His henchmen, on the other hand, were men who drank vodka like water, sniffed coke like nasal spray, took roids like smarties and pounded weights every day.

Evgeni and his men carried a dangerous selection of skills: weapons handling, explosives training, marksmanship, hand to hand combat, special recognisance, sabotage, assassination and blending in as civilians.

Putting these skills together with a vast amount of power and an addiction to steroids and cocaine, they were unpredictable men.

In the bar, the gypsies continued to be over boisterous, giving the barman aggro he didn't want. The influx of strippers were sick of their rude manner and gave up trying to squeeze money from their tight pockets, returning to the third floor.

On the screen upstairs, Evgeni picked up on the imminent trouble and sent his boys down to forestall it.

From the top of the third level stairs looking down onto the bar area, Victor and Bogdan stood tall and robust, ogling the six men who were all overstaying their welcome. One of them leaped over the bar and pulled down the neck of the bartender's shirt so his head butted against the surface and another glassed him in a demonstration of intent. The unfortunate

bartender clumped his concussed frame to the ground. The rest of the Travellers noticed the two heavies awaiting them at the top of the stairs.

Victor and Bogdan were both hovering around six feet, long-legged with thickened upper bodies. Short cut grey haired with firm faces, both bruisers with war wounds, facial scars and bullet holes, looking as if their leash was about to be untied. The kind of men who loved the exhilarating rush of fighting as did the Travellers who stood up from their seats and formed a zig-zagged formation between the bar and the tables, glowering upwards at the two men awaiting their movements.

The two Russians tip toed down, one slow step at a time, not removing their fix from the pack of wolves. The Travellers had their fists clenched, with rock in their bodies, itching for a rumble, especially Byron whose face was shaking with anger. All of them were very drunk so the Russians fancied their chances.

The last step from the bottom, Bogdan powered a push kick into the first victim's chest as he approached, lifting his soles off the sticky floor and pulsing him backwards, taking another man with him on the way to the deck. They both struggled to their feet and all hell broke loose. Victor smashed his fist into his first victim as if a loaded piston had a sledgehammer head attached to it, the force enough to shatter his face. With him out of the way, Victor grabbed the neck of the next maniac while being pounded by fists from another. He ignored the onslaught and nailed his unfortunate traveller with a barred powered right hand, then sent the butt of his elbow into the man who attempted to carry on the action.

Bogdan continued, kicking and punching his substantial weight through them like paperweights. Like a caged beast, he was in his element. He'd put two down and was tackling the third. Byron, who was flying his fists around like a wild beast, landed impressive blows on Bogdan but it had no mental effect on the hardened soldier. Filled with narcotics and vodka, the blows bounced off him as if his body was made of rubber. Bogdan paused in mid-attack, his lip burst open and leaking blood. Byron committed the silly mistake of pausing too. Bogdan snorted the blood into a puddle in his mouth, sniffed up some cocaine residue and spat it over the face of Byron. With a thundering right hook, he catapulted Byron's chin to the side as he collapsed to the ground with the rest of his comrades. Victor dropped three victims while Bogdan took care of (the other) three. They were defeated on the floor within a burst of a minute. Some were sparked out like Byron, some were attempting to make it back to their feet before being booted back to the floor. Bogdan, fuelled with rage, always took things too far and moved around the floor, booting anyone who showed signs of movement.

“That's enough, Bogdan!” Evgeni shouted from the top of the stairs. “Get rid of them, close the club. We have to prepare for tomorrow.”

This pack of Travellers didn't take kindly to being overrun. The following evening, they prepared for a retaliation. Passing the foot soldiers and heading straight for Evgeni. They wished revenge for the beating and embarrassment inflicted on them. The plan that they constructed too quickly was to break into Evgeni's house, in the early hours of the morning, 4 am to be precise, and surprise their foe, capture him and take him back to the campsite. This time they had the go ahead for this. Their simple instructions were to capture Evgeni but not to kill him. It didn't quite work out that way.

Inside the five-bedroomed large 19th century granite building, they thought Evgeni and his wife would be soundly tucked up in bed.

In the garden, hiding in the bushes, Byron waited with an accomplice, Tommy, for around an hour. Tommy was another one of Cal's sons. They waited for a light to go out in what they thought was an upstairs bedroom. It didn't. Expecting an alarm system to be fitted, they had to get in, do the business and get out. Quick as possible. With no real plan, no prep work and no clue as to the layout of the inside or which bedroom Evgeni would be in. This would prove difficult.

To the side of the house there was a double garage attached. That seemed to be the best form of entry, figuring there would be a door at the rear. Dressed in black and wearing balaclavas, Tommy, armed with a crow bar, and Byron, with a short barrelled shotgun, meant business. They had been waiting in the bushes expecting Evgeni to return from the club but there was no sign. After some arguing between the two about going ahead, they decided to enter the house and take their chances.

They crept over the grass in the pitch black towards the garage, not noticing a slabbed footpath leading to the front door with gravel at either side. Byron, the first to walk over the footpath, dropped his shotgun, stopped and whispered.

“Shite!:

“What?” Tommy replied then planted his foot in the gravel, tripping over the side of the slab, falling head first onto the grass with his head taking most of the impact.

“Get up, ye fucker!” Byron panicked.

“Aye, I’m trying.” He got up and Byron paced towards the garage again. As he came within fifteen metres of the double doors, floodlights burned holes in Byron’s eyes while Tommy staggered around holding his head.

“Hey! Ye’ fucker, hurry up!” Byron ordered.

They hid around the back of the garage beside the door.

“Stay put for a minute. See if anyone appears.”

They were lucky. No sign their clumsiness was picked up on. The timer for the lights switched them off. Now around the corner from where the sensor would pick them up, they carried on with the break in. Tommy wedged the crowbar into the door frame at the same height as the lock and slowly prised it open. Both men were banking on a loud siren sounding and ready for a quick raid. To their amazement and relief, only the crackle of the wood splinting was all they heard. On the edge of charging in, biding that little bit of extra time, listening for any movement in the house, they waited in silence as thirty seconds passed.

“GO! GO! GO!” Byron shouted, propelling into the garage and then into the house, heading straight for the stairs while Tommy did a sweep around the ground floor. Byron moved hastily to the top of the stairs, gripping the shotgun, trying to locate Evgeni’s bedroom. He heard a faint whistle of opera music. He kept moving in the direction till he stood at a door. He waited for Tommy to join him. He couldn’t hear him downstairs. He wondered if something had happened. Byron waited patiently for much

longer than he wanted. The longer he waited, the more nervous he became. At last he heard a door close faintly and footsteps coming up the staircase.

“It’s clear down there,” Tommy said too loudly.

“Shssh!” Byron gripped his teeth together and tensed his jaw as he whispered, “What were you doing down there?”

“Doing a little maintenance in the basement,” Tommy answered enigmatically. Byron was confused.

“Listen!” Byron said and flattened his ear to the door. Tommy copied.

After a few seconds with their ears to the door, “Ready?” Byron asked.

Tommy held the crowbar to the side of his head like a New York Yankee baseball player and Byron held the short barrelled shotgun by the trigger and barrel. Tommy placed his hand on the door handle, gave Byron the heads up and burst in through the door.

Evgeni’s wife lay butt naked and comatose on the super-sized poster bed, spread out in a star shape with her head buried. A glass of red wine had spilled out of her hand and stained the white silk sheets. An opera track from a CD played faintly. On the bed-side table was a half-bottle of tablets lying side on with pills spilled out. Byron and Tommy looked at each other, wondering if she was dead. A short, slim woman with dark hair and red highlights, her skin flawless and smooth as the silk she lay on. In her twenties, she was a lot younger than Evgeni, looking completely dead to the

world. The Travellers felt safe. But they didn't break in for her. They were looking for Evgeni's head and he wasn't there.

“Check the rest of the house, I'll stay here.”

Byron took off his balaclava, Tommy left his on. Byron gave the room a sweep while Tommy checked the rest of the upstairs.

The bedroom was uniquely decorated with concrete-look grey wallpaper, two toned patterned New Zealand wool carpet, coloured a misty grey with black cross patterns. A shining white marble fireplace and furniture you needed a pair of shades to view from the glare rebounding from the chandelier.

Byron spied the makeup dressing table. With his prey not here, he thought it best to make the most of the situation and fill his pockets with jewels and there was an expensive collection available. Byron knew little about their true worth but he judged by the expensive nature of the house that they'd be worth a bob or two. Picking up a small suede sack from a drawer, he swept the contents of the table into it. Emptying anything expensive looking from the drawers too.

“There's no one in the house, Byron,” Tommy said, entering the room.

“Don't use my name, you fuckwit!”

“Shite! Sorry.”

“There’s no one in the house, Byron, there’s no one in the house, Byron.”

Both men turned a half circle.

“Where the fuck did that come from?” Tommy asked.

“The bird. Look!” Byron stared at an exotic blue bird perched inside a steel black cage that hung from the ceiling by a black chain in the far away corner of the room.

“There’s no one in the house, Byron, there’s no one in the house, Byron,” the bird repeated.

“Shite!” Byron said.

Evgeni’s wife started to show some movement, turning her body to the side, showcasing her finely shaped ass.

“Bollocks! Grab the bird! Let’s go!” Byron panicked while Tommy opened the cage. The bird went into a panic, trying to peck Tommy’s hand off. Tommy struggled, eventually grabbing the bird. He placed the bird’s head over the makeup desk, lifting his crow bar up, preparing to plump it over the head.

“Wait! What you doing?” Byron asked, incredulously.

“What do you think? I’m plucking it for breakfast.”

“We’re not fuckin’ animals.”

Tommy lowered his bar.

“Grab the bird. Let’s go, before she wakes.”

Scouting

Back to Thursday in Double T’s.

Before the two Travellers entered Double T’s, Bogdan and Victor were sent on a scouting mission to gather any information regarding the robbery. Evgeni instructed they visit all shops that took in second hand gold, criminal contacts in and around Aberdeen and check out the local pawn shops. It was pure coincidence that when they were driving down Market Street on their way to Double T’s, they witnessed two suspicious characters leaving, recognising Byron and Taylor straight away from the bar brawl two nights previously. Bogdan parked the car across from the shop on double yellows and called in, speaking in Russian.

“Boss, we’ve found them.”

“Who?”

“Two of the Gypsies that were in the club on Tuesday.”

“Where are you?”

“They have just entered Tam’s place; do you want us to move in?”

“No. I will visit them myself. Follow The Gypsies.”

“Ok, Boss.”

After the Travellers left, Johnny double checked the collection of jewellery and the item that really caught his eye, a ring. It had a sparkling blue sapphire centre stone shaped in a rounded square that popped out. Around the sapphire was a circlet of 1.8 carat diamonds. To the side of that circle were two 16.21 carat diamonds. It was like looking at the fountain of dreams in Johnny’s mind.

After several phone calls and googling, he was in no doubt of what he had but due to its value, he had to triple check. He had to be 100% sure. If there was one thing that Johnny mastered in, it was jewellery. He could tell by the reflection of light off the surface, the texture of the item or its weight if it was genuine. He had a fascination. It was that fascination that led him to do time for a badly planned out robbery on a jeweller’s in Aberdeen.

Over the years, local detectives took evidence into the shop for his opinion and appraisal (for a price, of course), wishing to know the value of the item and where it originated. It saved time and complicated hassle for the police, instead of filtering through the correct channels in their

departments, looking for an answer. A short drive down to Double T's and a little cash under the counter gave them an answer within minutes.

Johnny kept repeating to Tam what the ring was worth. Tam didn't believe him. He kept rubbing his untidy head and appearing almost unsure, as if it was too good to be true.

"You're telling me; this ring is worth over half a million?" Tam asked.

"Aye, for the twentieth time, Tam, six hundred thousand in any auction, nae probs. And the rest o' this bag is about forty grand. What we have here will end any money worries for years to come, Tam."

"Fuck me, how we shifting this?" Tam slowly started to absorb the information as the pound signs became apparent but he seemed keener to get rid of the ring than Johnny.

"Tam, we can't just sell this to any cunt. We'll need to find out where it came from first, we'll sit on it for a week or two. I'll stick it in the safe for the time being. If this belongs to some big time rich oil twat or some kind o' noble lord then aye, I'll sell it no bother but if it belongs to some hard cunt en' we'll have to go about it discreetly."

"Discreetly?" Tam responded, while he slid his phone out of his pocket and started to write a text.

"We're nae going to open a fuckin' stall in the market or stick it in the window, for fuck's sake!"

Johnny shook his head at Tam's stupidity. "I'll need to take it down south to shift it, like London."

"Ye got any contacts down there?"

"Nae at the moment, but I'll find some." Johnny paused, turning his back, placing his palm high against the hut door, taking a deep breath, gathering his thoughts. "Let's put it in the safe. As far as we know, that travellers had nae idea what they had and we'll keep our ears open for any rumours floating around as to who it belongs to."

He turned round to Tam who was holding the ring up to the light with one hand and his phone in the other, closing one eye and squinting with the other.

"Put it down, ye bam! Don't want everybody in the city to see it," Johnny moaned.

"Just havin' a look, mate, calm doon. Can't see what the fuss is about." Tam's highlights in life were going home from work, cracking open a Stella and loading up the porn hub. There wasn't much in life that saw him animated but Johnny's heart rate felt as if he was riding in the Grand National. That ring would set them up for years to come. Johnny placed the ring in his pocket and filled the sack up with the loose jewellery emptied out behind the counter and left it there.

"We need to put this shit in the safe, now! Fuck it! I'm locking the door." Johnny galloped over to the door, flipped over the sign to 'Closed' and

locked the door. He caught a stare from a man strolling across the road with his eyes fixed on the shop.

Evgeni had a calm and collected stride. His hands inside his dated black waist length coat with a fur collar flapping and ending at his lower chest. A triangular-shaped, roughened face with a thick, slick beard that joined onto his fading, flared, silver fox hair being windswept to the side due to the wind. His plump body at five eight in height. His concentrating eyes, cold, telling the story of his hardened life. Halting his approach at the door, he looked at the 'Closed' sign and tapped the glass with his Russian Spetsnaz ring on his index finger.

"We're closed, see," Johnny pointed at the sign. Evgeni leered through the glass, straight faced and tapped again.

"Look! Closed," Johnny repeated. Two taps on the glass again. Johnny opened the door past his body. "Can you not read? See, closed." Johnny tapped his finger on the door where the sign hung.

Evgeni ignored the statement, looked vacantly through him and walked past, eyes focused and hands still slotted in his coat pockets. His shoes clumped heavy and ogre-like on the varnished wooden floor.

"Can I help you with something?" Johnny asked, switching his head to Tam behind the counter as Evgeni ignored him and strode into the middle of the shop floor, rudely keeping his back to Johnny. Evgeni headed straight for the counter where Tam had his head in his phone again. A few more clumps

of the shoes before he stopped. Hands still slotted into his pockets and shoulders relaxed.

“Mr Yakubovich,” Tam said. Johnny had never heard Tam refer to anyone as Mr. He knew then that Evgeni wasn’t a pleasant character.

“Tam, nice to see you. You haven’t been in the club for a couple of weeks.” Tam was a regular at The Mask. On first name terms with Bogdan, Victor and the strippers. He always greeted Evgeni with a respectful “Mr”.

“Been too busy in the shop, Mr Yakubovich.” Tam spoke with a degree of respect and fear. Johnny watched and listened as he was all too aware of the ring in his pocket and how it could be connected to Evgeni. He didn’t see it as a coincidence that this cold character turned up at the same time he was standing with a £600,000 ring in his pocket.

“I’m here for a reason, Tam. I returned home to my house early this morning to discover a very unfortunate individual, or maybe individuals - ” his hand left his pocket for the first time as he lifted it to shoulder height with his palm open to the ceiling. “ - has decided to invade my home and steal some very sentimental items from me.”

Tam’s brows lifted and mouth opened, his look appeared interested as if he was about to say something that would enlighten Evgeni’s dilemma. There Johnny started to brick it, the sack was hidden by the counter, the ring in his pocket and Evgeni was a metre away from both. His heart raced, his nerves fluttered but on the outside, he held a still face and hoped Evgeni didn’t wish to converse with him. By Tam’s reaction to Evgeni’s appearance

in the shop, Johnny thought Tam was about to reveal the bag of jewellery and their fortune would never be. He kept a sober face behind Evgeni, hoping that wouldn't be the case.

“I would like to know if anyone has sold such items to you today.”

“No one as I know. If we hear anything, I'll pass on the information, won't we, Johnny?”

Johnny was caught off guard, shocked that Tam so calmly involved him in the conversation.

“Of course we will,” Johnny answered.

“Excellent.” Evgeni twisted his body to check Johnny's position. He returned to Tam. “Good, I'll be on my way now, gentlemen.” As he headed to the door, Tam let his breath exhale, exchanging a look of relief with Johnny. Just as Evgeni opened the door, he closed it again and turned into the room, unbuttoning his coat.

“What is it about the weather here? It reminds me of when I was, young boy in Chechnya. I sat outside my house, waiting for mother to return home from the market. I was happy that day. I had nearly finished a packet of chocolate biscuits I earned from shovelling coal all morning. I had two biscuits left. I was saving them for my mother. A Mr Mikhailov passed me and grabbed the bag. Instead of eating the biscuits, he crushed them and poured the crumbs onto the floor, mocking me. I remember feeling such hatred towards the man. A week after, I sat in the same place with similar

biscuits in my hand. He grabbed them again, sent the crumbs to the floor. Each week I waited with biscuits and each week the man took them until one week, on a similar kind of dull day as today, he chose to eat them and that was the last I knew of that man.”

He buttoned up his coat and left.

The door closed, Johnny walked over and once Evgeni was out of sight, he made sure the door was locked.

“Who the fuck was that?” Johnny asked Tam.

“That’s Evgeni,” Tam replied.

“Evgeni, the fucking magician? Evgeni who?” Johnny continued.

“Evgeni! As in the Russian, ex Special Forces Evgeni, who owns The Mask. Evgeni……. Evgeni whose £600,000 ring we now own,” Tam answered.

“Holy fuck! This ain’t cool.”

“Put it like this. If we don’t get rid o’ this ring, we’ll end up like that man wi’ the biscuits …”

“How the fuck do ye know him?” Johnny asked, catapulting his neck back and forward.

“His strip club. I go ‘ere now and again, you know, as you do.”

“You’re a bit of a dirty bastard, Tam. That’s what ye do at night?”

“Well, I’m banned from all the pubs I like and his strippers are, well, hot.”

“Have a wash now and again and get a bird ‘en?”

“What’s this got to do wi’ the ring?” Tam asked.

“Absolutely fuck all, Tam. I’m just curious to how ye know an ex special forces Russian that’s goin’ to fuck me up with some kind of chocolate biscuits if he finds out we have his sentimental fuckin’ jewellery”.

Johnny had to think and act quickly. He needed the cash but at the same time wasn’t equipped as a human to deal with the trouble holding the ring would cause. Greed would cause him to conjure up a plan he thought might work. He figured Evgeni knew something, that’s what led him to the shop and that meant he couldn’t take any chances. He knew Tam wouldn’t be any help when it came to a plan so that weight lay on his shoulders.

He only had to hope things would plan out the way he wished.

A slow walk

The reason Evgeni wasn't at home while his house was burgled was because he was in Glasgow, negotiating a deal for a new collection of prostitutes from Bulgaria to re-stock his brothels around the harbour. That was purely unlucky for the Travellers.

When he returned home, his first reaction was to lose the plot with his wife. She was a raging coke addict and alcoholic and liked to mix that concoction with any other types of narcotics within arm's length. Evgeni put up with her because she was a Russian beauty and well, he was about as attractive as a sloth after a four-day bender. One thing he was particularly irate about was the disappearance of his bird. He was quite attached to it. Stolen from a wealthy English lord along with the ring. It was thought to be one of the most expensive rings in the world. Evgeni kept it tucked away in a safe and tried to keep possession of it. In fact, even the lord didn't know it was in Evgeni's possession. Due to his wife's unstable drug and alcohol binges, she often took it out and wore it, mimicking she was some kind of higher princess and that's why it was so nonchalantly left on the dresser with the other selection of jewels she was lusting over while she got out her face.

On leaving Double T's, Evgeni checked back in with his two foot soldiers and instructed them to meet him back in the club.

On the top floor of The Mask, inside his office in the early afternoon, Victor and Bogdan entered and occupied their customary pew on the sofa. Evgeni placed three shot glasses on the table and a full bottle of vodka, the Russian kind; they wouldn't touch anything else. He opened the bottle and poured three shots. This was a tradition before carrying out jobs. The foot

soldiers sat stiffly on the sofa, only moving their bulked bodies to top up their glasses. The plan was discussed and gone over a few times, double checking they were on the same wave length. Victor and Bogdan had followed the Travellers, once they left the shop, to a campsite located at the beach links.

Before Evgeni could deal with the Travellers, he had to re-unite himself with the ring and the bird he so sorely missed. He came up with a plan to rob Double T's and recapture the ring. He explained the plan which was by no means foolproof but there was no time waste.

“Bogdan, there is a back door, down an alley that leads you into the office. Bust in, but don't set the alarm off. It will take you a bit of time to locate the ring, I'm not worried about the other jewels but if you find them, take them. There must be a safe in the shop somewhere. I trust you will find it?”

“Boss, you can count on me,” Bogdan answered before downing his third shot.

“Victor, you wait in the car. Park it up Shiprow Lane. Be the look out. If the alarm goes off, don't get caught. Wait a couple minutes and then get out of there. If anyone approaches that looks shifty, take them down. Don't kill them, just knock them out or knee cap them or something. Don't want unnecessary heat.”

“And what about a vehicle?” Victor asked.

“I’ve made a call. One will be left for us in the Union Square car park. You can pick it up and Bogdan, sort out any tools you will need for tonight. I know the front of the shop is fitted up good but the back, I don’t know. I’ll expect you back around 5 am.”

There was a fine line as to when to carry out the burglary. It had to be late enough so any drunks didn’t spot them and early enough so the bakers, postmen and any early risers didn’t cross paths on the way to work.

“I’ll be prepared, boss,” Bogdan answered arrogantly.

Evgeni moved on to the major and most callous part of his plan, topping up the shot glasses again.

“After we have the ring back, we will then visit the campsite and finish this feud. I’ll get the Bulgarians to prepare a burial ground, make sure the bodies don’t surface again. I’ll need to dust down the Kalashnikovs just in case. Once you have the ring, return here. I’ll be waiting and I don’t want complications. Now that’s enough vodka. Get out of here and prepare.”

Evgeni continued to drink vodka and smoke his e-cigarette, pondering an end to a feud going back decades with the Travellers and their family tree.

All Evgeni had to do was sit tight, open his club for the evening, carry on as normal and wait for the return of his men and most importantly, the ring.

Bogdan and Victor

Victor parked the car as far down Shiprow Lane as he could so it wasn't seen from Market Street. Bogdan slowly exited, having a look around at 4.30am. The streets were dead and the air chilly.

Bogdan, dressed in the standard issue burglary all-black with a woolly hat and a pair of skin tight gloves, was armed with a smiling shark, a pair of snips to chop the phone line to cut communication to the alarm centre, screwdrivers and crowbar to bust the door open and a lock picking tool. He strode past the shop front, having a peak in on his way past. It looked clear. He turned left off Market Street then onto Hadden Street. About half way down, there was an open lane two metres wide, where all the shops' back doors and bins were located.

It was dark and he became confused as to which door was the back door to the shop because there were more doors than shops. It was like a pick and mix. To his surprise, he found a door already ajar. Not broken in but left open. He suspiciously jittered in, staying on guard.

Inside was pitch black. Using his training, he kept a stealth-like quietness. He heard a sound from the front room. Switching his feet sideways, he saw onto Market Street from a gap in the door. The street lights gave the room a light glow. He immediately recognised it was Double

T's. The rummaging continued as he heard drawers being broken into. Someone was robbing the shop. He slid his smiling shark from his combats, awaiting this body to enter the back room. He knew they would have to leave the same way they came in. Bogdan waited patiently and calmly.

The rummaging ceased and the door was pushed open. All Bogdan saw was a man take two steps into the room and stand idle, stare at him as if he knew exactly who he was. He swung the smiling shark at his head with a violent growl. The man ducked under as if he had seen it coming and that would have been hard, considering the darkness. He swivelled around Bogdan's body before thumping him across the guts with a heavy object. Bogdan swung the baton back, hitting nothing but fresh air. Turning quickly, attempting to locate him, he ended up rotating 360 degrees and that heavy object clumped across his head and knocked him out. The balaclava man checked Bogdan's pulse. He was still alive.

Victor's job was to stay in the car. Victor had done so for twenty minutes before becoming increasingly paranoid there was something wrong. He got that eerie feeling that something wasn't right. That sixth sense some people acquire after being in this business for years. He left the keys in the car and made his way to the shop, stopping for a look in the front window. At first glance it looked like the place had been cleaned out. Some merchandise was left abandoned on the shop floor and the shelves with tipped over items, appearing mostly empty. Then he knew something had gone tits up.

He ran round the back. He had the same problem of locating the door. This time the door had been busted in, hanging on one hinge. He switched the light on. Bogdan lay on the floor, on his front with a big lump on the

back of his head. He didn't panic like a normal man would; he'd been in wars, seen the deaths of many of his friends over the years but this one was a little more personal.

He flipped Bogdan round. He didn't have to check his pulse. He knew he was gone. He then had a dilemma. Did he contact Evgeni? He knew he would be waiting in the club office. As a former army comrade, there was only one thing he would do. With great difficulty, he started to drag the body across the floor and out the door. He nipped out to the street and saw a van parked with the engine running, outside the baker's. He had to take the car round. He decided to retrieve it. By the time he returned with the car, the newsagent was opening up not far from the baker's. Then he knew he wouldn't get Bogdan out of the shop. He returned to drag Bogdan back inside Double T's before returning to Evgeni.

Morning after

Johnny had carried home the un-wanted burden of what to do with the ring. Overnight, ideas of what to do had addled his mind, pondering outcomes to various situations. His greed told him to deny any knowledge of the existence of such an expensive item. On the other hand, he mulled over the ridiculous idea of coming clean with Evgeni and explaining how it came into his possession. He was well aware Evgeni knew something and the last thing he wanted was to hand himself over and give up the ring.

Before Johnny locked up the day before, he had placed the sack of jewellery in the new safe with Tam as a witness. He liked to think the safe was hidden well enough that no one would find it. It appeared a far safer idea than taking home the haul. There was always a chance one of Evgeni's henchmen would nip round, beat the truth out of him and he'd buckle under the punishment before handing it over. He wasn't sure if he wanted to do that.

Thursday, the morning after the purchase of the ring and jewellery, Tam opened the shop bang on ten, as usual, his eyes engrossed on his phone. Once he unlocked the door, the alarm didn't sound. He found that odd. Johnny was always particular about the alarm being set before leaving. Tam was sure he had set it but he didn't witness him doing so. He thought Johnny must have been distracted by the events of the day before.

One step into the shop and he realised they'd been done over. The stock was scattered over the floor as if a toddler had escaped from his playpen, the contents of the shelves tipped over and strewn everywhere. There were many items missing and the door to the office was ajar. It looked more like a vandalism mission than a robbery, due to the mess. The newly installed camera in the corner that pointed onto the room was still on, with the red light blinking. He approached the back room door.

As he drew closer, he was able to see over the counter and noticed a head on the ground through the gap in the door. On closer inspection, he realised it was Bogdan lying dormant, face down with an injury on the back of his head. He didn't panic. Calmly he checked Bogdan's pulse but the cold feel of his skin was enough to tell Tam that Bogdan had been dead for a few

hours, at least. Then he noticed the back door hanging on one hinge. Tam's mobile was still in hand and he called Johnny. While the phone rang, he noticed the bottom filing cabinet drawer pulled out from its slot. Walking closer, he saw the safe had been stolen. Evgeni's sack of jewels, his priceless ring and the small dribs of notes were gone.

Johnny was taking forever to pick up. The call went to 'answer phone' so Tam hung up and tried again. While the phone rang again, he checked the drawers under the till. The drawers had been broken by a heavy tool as the splits of wood were vast. With the shop robbed and jewels gone, they were completely whipped out.

"Tam, what's up?" Johnny answered the phone.

"You better get down to the shop!"

"Why, what's up?"

"We've been robbed!"

"WHAT!"

"Aye and that's nae all."

"What's nae all?"

"Just get a move on! You'll see when ye're down here". Tam didn't wish to say the words 'dead body' over the phone.

While Johnny was rushing to the shop in his car, Tam started to tidy up and assess the damage in more detail. Not once did he panic about the situation, knowing his partner would do all the flustering. The dead body didn't bother him either. Johnny parked right outside the shop door, causing major traffic problems.

He marched into the shop. Already he was anxious, worrying overnight about the predicament he found himself in. That added problem was not welcomed. He went into panic mode.

“For fuck sake, Tam, what the fuck’s happening?”

“They’ve cleaned us out, mate, the drawers, they’re teem and the safe’s been stolen!” Johnny had his head in his hands.

“No, no, no, this isn’t right!”

“That’s nae all. Take a look in the back room.”

Johnny opened the door and tripped over the body.

“Jesus, fuckin’ Christ!” He navigated around Bogdan’s body. Tam sat down on the wheeled office chair in front of the laptop, letting Johnny soak things up. “Holy fuck, who’s this?”

“Well, I don’t want to point out the obvious but it’s a dead Bogdan, Johnny.”

“And Bogdan is?” At that moment, Johnny didn’t require Tam’s attitude.

“He works for Evgeni.”

“What! Evgeni’s employee, lying on ma fuckin’ floor, stone fuckin’ dead!”
He rubbed his head again. “This is fucked up, something’s nae right here.”

“I think we need to tell Evgeni about this,” Tam stated.

“Are you off yer head, man? He’ll kill us.”

“Aye, he might but what choice do we have?”

The sound of the door chimes. It was Evgeni and Victor. They both walked past all the clutter and into the back room, standing silent, leering at Tam sitting there and didn’t bother to look at their man on the floor. Victor began to empty Bogdan’s pockets as no one dared to speak. Evgeni spotted the worktop with the kettle. He glided over then picked the kettle up, shaking it to his ears, checking the water level and then proceeded to step over his murdered employee without so much as a care. Into the toilet, he topped up the kettle. He returned, placed the kettle back on the base, pushed the toggle button down to start the boil then tapped it three times slowly, preparing himself for what he had to say. He spooned coffee and five sugars into a cup.

With his back to the others, “You have till this kettle boils to tell me what is going on here. If it’s not what I know you’re going to tell me -” he slid a machete from his waist holder and stabbed it into the worktop “- I will butcher you till I can use your bodies as pigeon feed”. Johnny gulped and

exchanged a worried look with Tam. Tam still sat unfazed by the situation at hand. A dull whine started on the kettle.

Tam started to speak, “Two Travellers came into our shop yesterday and sold us a sack of jewellery. Last night someone robbed us, stole our safe and the jewels are gone.” Johnny switched his look between Tam and Evgeni, shocked at Tam’s forwardness.

“And when I was in your shop yesterday, you had my jewels behind the counter, did you?” The kettle began to boil too quickly for Johnny’s liking and he wished he’d never bought such an efficient one.

“Aye, we had the sack.” Tam answered. Johnny couldn’t believe how cool his partner was. Perhaps he lacked the intelligence to be scared. Johnny’s guts had dropped out; certain he was about to be used as pigeon feed. Victor gathered a collection of items from Bogdan’s pockets and placed them on the worktop. He then crossed his hands over his waist, straightened his back and waited for his next set of instructions.

“Most of the contents of that bag belong to my wife. Some of it belongs to me, but it’s one item in particular that I require and if it doesn’t make its way into my possession, I will be most upset, gentlemen, and my reaction to that will more than likely lead to a -” he rocked his head from side to side “- retaliation that you won’t survive.”

The kettle began to simmer. Johnny hoped Tam would carry on speaking.

“So, gentlemen, please tell me how you thought telling me such lies would benefit you?” Evgeni asked as he swivelled his hands around in mid-air, trying to understand their stupidity and glimpsed at the kettle as the steam started to issue from the spout.

“We’re skint and our greed got the better of us, that’s it, pure and simple. The bag’s worth over forty grand to us,” Tam said, keeping the fact that they didn’t know the ring was in the sack was a dangerous move. Evgeni didn’t know Johnny was an expert in the jewel trade and he knew Tam wasn’t the brightest. As far as Evgeni was concerned, they didn’t know.

“Mmh, what do you think, Victor? Pigeon feed?”

“Give them the Cradle,” Victor answered, in a pleasurable tone.

Johnny started to shiver in fear at the callous nature of these men and didn’t wish to know what the cradle was.

“We’ve just been robbed. We can help you find out who done this. Could that help?” Johnny desperately tried to help his situation.

“Do I look like a man that needs help with this kind of thing?” Evgeni walked right up to Johnny and rifled in a harassing stare into the soul of his eyes. Johnny felt the cold nature of the man as the heat from his breath whirled into his face. The whine from the kettle got louder. He didn’t know if he should answer. Once the kettle was boiled, that was it, he thought. The rushing panic that ran through his body took away his ability to think straight. Evgeni turned sideways and stepped over Bogdan’s body before

swivelling round to face Johnny again. Tam stayed silent and chose his time to speak wisely. It seemed as if he had been in the company of men like that before.

“The cameras. I’ll show you the footage from last night,” Johnny spat out. Tam stood up almost instantly from the computer chair. “I’ll be able to show you who robbed us!”

Victor moved towards Tam, nudging him back with his intimidating steps, twirled the chair round, leaving it open for Johnny. Johnny waited for Evgeni’s permission to sit.

“Well! Are you waiting for something?” Evgeni asked. Johnny rushed to the chair and took the laptop off ‘standby’, logged into his surveillance footage and rewound to the night before. He took the time back to ten pm figuring no one would be stupid enough to rob the place before that. The recording fast forwarded in the quickest speed. While it did so, Evgeni made his cup of coffee and smoked his e-cigarette.

“Stop! Go back,” Tam said. Johnny was in so much a panic he had passed the moment the rear door opened. “There, look! That’s someone coming in.”

Evgeni stood behind with Victor in anticipation of finding out who he’d have to kill in this situation. They watched as the culprit walked in through the door and then Johnny realised he had forgotten to lock the back door.

“That’s no right, he just walked in,” Johnny said. “Shit! I never locked the door.” Johnny also realised that he had forgotten to set the alarm. That was

tremendously out of character for Johnny.

“Not very smart are you, Johnny five?” Evgeni said. Johnny switched the viewing to night mode so they could gain a better glimpse of the unknown character.

“What the fuck is he wearing?” Tam said, peering at the small screen. The culprit was dressed in grey jogger bottoms and hoodie. Protruding over his eyes was a pair of night vision goggles. He carried a short crowbar and a rucksack on his back. Once in, he headed straight to the door that separated the back room from the shop floor. They watched as the culprit struggled, taking over five minutes to prise the door open with his crowbar.

“The man is an idiot, an amateur,” Victor said, with his arms crossed as Johnny looked annoyingly at him.

“I know who this cunt is,” Tam raised his voice. “I bet it’s that cunt who tried to rob us,” Tam presumed. Johnny began to explain the failed robbery from a few weeks back while, on screen, the culprit continued to break into the hut, ransack the drawers and fill his bag.

They looked attentively as Bogdan tiptoed into the room. They could see him being cautious and struggling to see in the dark. He had his smiling shark with him but couldn’t turn it on for obvious reasons. They watched as the culprit confused Bogdan and knocked him flat out with a crowbar to the rear of his head. The culprit panicked, checking Bogdan’s pulse. Then it took him no time at all to locate the new safe and crack it open. The camera angle only showed the person’s back and it was hard to see what he was

doing with the safe. He fumbled around with it for a couple of minutes and took his rucksack off, looking as if he was emptying the contents of the safe into his bag. He pulled the door closed behind him when he left.

Bogdan was left on the floor. Everyone was confused. The front of the shop wasn't touched, except the drawers in the hut and the safe was still in its place. Evgeni walked back over to the kettle worktop, pulling out his machete. Tam took steps backwards towards the rear door and for some reason, he took his phone from his pocket. Johnny's seat wheeled back onto the desk, trapping him.

"No, wait, 'ere must be something else that happens," Johnny said.

"This is not some kind of gangster flick, Johnny five. I've had enough of this fucking about."

"He's right, boss. I think we should continue watching then cut off their limbs." Victor rarely butted into his boss's actions but he knew something weird had occurred.

As the tape ran on, the rest of the story was revealed. At just 4.42am, Bogdan began to wake up and find his way to his knees. Concussed and confused, it took him time to figure out why he was waking with a sore head. As he was doing that, three Travellers burst in, leaving the back door hanging on one hinge and switched the light on. They were recognised straight away. It was Byron, his brother Taylor, and another one who hadn't been seen yet. They watched as the new face approached Bogdan and without hesitation, clumped him over the back of his head with a steel pole

about the length of a junior putter. Evgeni's mouth opened, his coffee spilled over the side, his face dropped to the floor, his machete hung loose by his side. He knew who the third man was.

“Victor, go to my house. In my basement you will find Kalashnikovs and a bag with handguns and ammo. Return here. Don't go anywhere else but back here.” Evgeni handed him the keys and Victor left, marching out the back door.

Evgeni then made some other calls and returned to the video. By now, the third Traveller hovered around the new safe and yanked it out of the hole. Byron and Taylor destroyed the front room and stole as much as their hands could carry.

Evgeni entered a quiet place in his mind and seemed to forget about harming Tam and Johnny. He showed a slice of unsought fear and tried desperately to keep it hidden. Tam sat down next to Johnny. It looked as if their names weren't quite ready to be scrolled onto a gravestone.

“How the fuck did they know where to find the safe, Johnny?”

“Fuck knows, Tam. Like I said, something doesn't fit here.”

“Gypsies are underestimated individuals. They come across as reckless and irresponsible. Whatever it is they have been doing here, it's been planned.” Evgeni spoke as if he had past dealings with Travellers. Tam and Johnny gawked at each other and both thought the same thing. How the fuck did they get into this situation?

Nothing is as it seems

Part 1

Bogdan was left on the ground, becoming a second thought behind the need to locate the Travellers.

Victor returned to the shop. Johnny and Tam locked the shop door and were instructed to accompany Evgeni and Victor. They sat in the back of the car as it travelled towards the camp site at the beach. Both were sure they were being escorted to a show down with the travellers in broad daylight. The bitter vendetta that Evgeni bore towards the Travellers resulted in his losing his thought pattern. He didn't care if there were a hundred witnesses to what he was prepared to do.

Johnny wished the journey would take longer; he wished he had never bought the sack of jewels. He wished he had told the two Travellers he wasn't interested but his greed had taken over.

Evgeni carried on making phone calls on the way to the site, speaking in Bulgarian. It was broad daylight and the camp site at the beach links was hardly inconspicuous to the public eye. It was located on a large patch of flat

ground next door to the beach leisure centre, in the shadow of Pittodrie football stadium. As far as Johnny knew, Evgeni was about to shower the site in a barrage of Kalashnikov shells. He had no idea what his role would be or if one of those shells was meant for him. Tam stayed silent, staring out of the window, thinking this might be his last day. Johnny kept glancing across at him wondering what was going through his head.

As the motor approached the beach links, two cars pulled out from the roadside and followed like a train carriage. Two cars, full to the brim with Bulgarian thugs, followed until the cars pulled in close to the beach leisure centre. It was clear to see that the group of Travellers had done a runner. The campsite was abandoned. The collection of rubbish swirling around the field due to the coastal wind told them that.

Evgeni turned frustratingly quiet as his anger boiled to a new level but he wasn't ready to give up yet. He exited the car in a childlike rage as he stomped over to the cars behind, the sea front wind causing his coat to wave about in mid-air. His arms flapped and fingers pointed at the drivers of the vehicles behind him. One by one, they sped away on their mission to locate the group. Johnny felt that Evgeni was about to take his frustration out on him as he opened the door and riveted his upper body in, sticking his reddened face into Johnny's, causing him to cower back onto Tam's shoulder.

“What is it?” Evgeni said, as he slid his machete out of the plastic sheath that was down his waist and pressed the point into Johnny's crotch. “In my life, I have trusted what I can smell under my nose, and you filter out a sewer stench of shit.”

The sharp blade pressed in, causing Johnny to slither backwards into Tam and then upwards until his head pressed against the roof of the car in complete fear of losing his tackle.

“Wait, wait! I’ve fuckin’

“Fuckin’ what, Johnny five?” Evgeni growled, the blade cutting through Johnny’s trousers, drawing blood from his ball sack.

“I have the ring! I have the ring!”

Evgeni’s face relaxed and his head tilted to the left. He looked at Tam deeply.

“And you, Tam the man, what have you got to tell me?” The machete dug that little millimetre deeper as a high pitched howl left Johnny’s mouth. Evgeni saw an opportunity to elicit the information he knew they were hiding.

“I didn’t even know he had the ring,” Tam slid forward in the seat and swivelled round. “You have the ring, since when?”

“It’s in the shop. It never left.”

Evgeni switched his eyes between the two Individuals who were pushing his buttons. Thinking who he was going to chop up first. But he couldn’t yet. He needed to know where the ring was.

“Out the car and sit in the front!”

Without question, Tam took the order from Evgeni, exited the car and walked around the rear before taking the front seat. All the time Evgeni staring calmly into Johnny’s eyes. Evgeni’s change of temper was chillingly evil. He withdrew his machete from Johnny’s crotch with Johnny instantly relaxing, sucking in the air and sliding back down the seat.

“Slide over.” Evgeni took his seat. “Drive, Victor,” he ordered in English. “So Johnny five is still alive, where will my ring be? Each time you lie to me” He gripped the handle of his machete, lifting it from his thigh. “... You will lose a something valuable to you.”

“It’s in the shop. It’s always been in the shop.” Tam looked over his shoulder at Johnny as he returned his look.

“Back to the shop, Victor.”

Victor wasted no time in returning to Double T’s. Evgeni sat with the machete gripped in his hand. Johnny dared not move and Tam was quiet as usual. Johnny was shitting himself, wondering if Tam felt the same. Evgeni fine-tuned his anger. It looked as if he could flip at any time. His patrol of men were out hunting for the Travellers.

This time, when they returned to the shop, the car was parked in a legal parking space. They exited, Evgeni popped the boot open and unzipped a bag. Inside were four Kalashnikovs and some hand guns. He picked up a Kalashnikov and hid it in under his coat. Tam’s eyes spread open and neck

pulled back, the first reaction that he was scared. Johnny, well, he couldn't have been more scared. He knew as soon as he handed over the ring he was toast and Tam too. The sight of that Kalashnikov told Tam he was calendar material.

All of a sudden, Tam turned shady, his head kept switching around him, looking for that chance to run but with Victor by his side, he didn't stand much chance. They walked to the shop through a haze of bodies on the streets. Johnny was on the verge of running, checking his shadows for a split second, just before he was about to throw a citizen into Evgeni's path.

"I know what you are thinking, Johnny five, and I wouldn't if I was you." Evgeni landed his head on Johnny's shoulder when he said that. They passed the shop. Victor grasped a punishing grip of Tam's arms as he smiled weasel-like at him. They turned onto the side street, walked to the entrance of the lane where Johnny and Tam halted with a widowed cast across their faces.

"Down the fucking lane!" It seemed Victor was getting a bit irate. The steps down the alley were appearing to be their last or so they thought. Johnny tried to glide, wishing to lengthen what time he had left.

They all stepped into the back room. Bogdan's corpse had done a vanishing act. Evgeni stepped into the middle of the floor and pulled out his Kalashnikov. He marched back to Johnny and pressed the barrel into his head. His eyes opened, his chin trembled with anger. Victor stepped aside, because he didn't want to be splattered with blood. Tam glued himself to the floor within a metre. Johnny fought the urge to piss himself. Strange,

your final moments of life. The only thought whisking through his mind was that he was supposed to be sitting in the old folk's home playing cards, not sat with a Kalashnikov indenting his forehead.

Evgeni drilled a callous glare into Johnny's soul. Still he didn't pull the trigger.

"It's in the old safe, in the big cupboard!" Johnny panicked. Without looking at Victor, Evgeni tilted his head.

Victor calmly strolled over and opened the cupboard, seeing the safe on the ground. The only thing that opened the safe was a key.

"Key?" Victor ordered. Evgeni still had the gun buried into Johnny's head.

"It's in the front room, it's hanging on the door chimes." Victor proceeded into the front room and plucked the key from the hanging chimes. He returned and placed the key in the safe. Johnny closed his eyes, fearing that was it for him. Victor pulled out the same sack that carried the jewels. He looked confused. The Travellers should've had the sack. He slackened the ties. Johnny's eyes were still closed and his RIGHT hand was inside his pocket. Victor rattled the bag then looked inside. It sounded like a cluster of steel. He slipped his hand inside and pulled out four firing pins and bullets from a handgun cartridge.

"Boss!"

Evgeni turned his head, lowered his gun and stomped over to Victor, grabbing the firing pins and looking in the bag with his back to Tam and Johnny. Johnny relaxed and turned to Tam who had a satisfied look. Evgeni lifted his head from the bag, turned around sharply, switched his angered eyes from Johnny to Tam, lifted his gun and pulled the trigger.

At that moment, the front door opened, Evgeni dropped the gun to the floor and slid his machete out. Byron, Taylor and two other Travellers barged into the back room with short barrelled shotguns, holding them at the barrel and handle, pointing them firmly at the Russians. Nothing but a bewildered silence hung. Johnny realised he was still breathing, while Tam didn't need to realise anything. He knew it all.

Part 2

Just at that instant, I swivelled from the back door frame holding my arms crossed, looking onto the room. Evgeni had his back to me and focused on my four sons.

“Mr Yakubovich, it's been a while.”

Evgeni scowled over his shoulder. His gaze returned to the front, his eyes on the floor in acceptance that it was me; his grip on his machete loosened. The man who had been hunting him down for years. He slid the soles of his shoes across the linoleum floor until his frame faced me.

“Cal Ansgar!”

“Glad you remember me, you fucker.”

“Credit where it is due, Cal, I did not see this coming.” I rallied straight to the point of introducing him to my family.

“Have you met my sons there?” I pointed over and took my first steps into the room.

Johnny had a look of complete bamboozlement and relief that he was still alive. My sons stood with their guns pointed, ready to pull the triggers if necessary. I could see Victor’s head ticking away to some kind of escape. There would be no escape here, for no Russian. I walked past the two Russians and stepped between two of my sons, placing a hand on each shoulder.

“These two are Barkley and Paddy. You’ve maybe seen them but you won’t know them. They’re from my second wife, Grace. You don’t know Grace.”

I moved onto my third son.

“This is Taylor. I believe you’ve met him before.” I moved on to my next son.

“This is Byron. I believe you’ve met him before.” I stood between them.

“These are two of my sons from my first wife you murdered exactly on this day thirteen years ago. You remember her, Michelle?”

Evgeni's head tilted ever so slightly to the side, flinched his cheek as if to appear he may have forgotten but he hadn't. He didn't wish to go through the proceedings. He only wanted me to fast track to the inevitable, his death. I moved onto my next, and last, son in the room.

“And this is Tommy, or as you know him, Tam. Son of Michelle and brother to Tiffany and Tina, my two daughters you also murdered.” I cherished that moment and the look on Evgeni's face as I'd out thought him. Evgeni's jaw tightened.

Tam's mission was complete and he no longer had to be optimistic of Evgeni's capture. He watched me walk the room like a king who had just reclaimed his throne. Happy to be in my company again and I was proud to call him my son. Tam wasn't as simple as Johnny assumed. Johnny's fear had subsided and he relaxed back into himself but wallowed with a confused look. He must have been re-running the events of the past day through his head for some answers. Now surely he must have clicked on that it was the same anniversary that Tam struggled to cope with over the years.

“Hold the boat here. You two are father and son?” Johnny queried with an aura of surprise in his pattern.

“Aye, Johnny. We are that.” Tam's accent changed from the Aberdonian one he had adopted, to a rawer mix, like my other sons'. That was a reason he hardly spoke in the first year he moved into Torry. He didn't want to be singled out as a foreigner or as the locals would say, a 'Gypsy'

“So, can you explain to me what the fuck’s happening?” Johnny asked Tam.

“I’ll explain it all, once we tie these vermin up,” I interrupted

Gagged

We gagged them, tied their hands and feet up and left them kneeling on the floor. Byron made everyone some tea, adding a little whisky for a wee celebration. Johnny took a seat, still waiting to be told what the fuck was going on.

Thirteen years ago, on moving my family across the Irish Sea, we settled in a place on the west coast of England called Southport, north of Liverpool. We needed a fresh start due to some family squabbles in Southern Ireland. It caused me to do things I don’t care to speak about. Before I started a family, I was an abusive alcoholic who bore an erratic temper. Having got my family into a lot of hassle, I swore to them that when we moved across the sea, I would change.

I was happily married to my first wife, Michelle, and had five well-mannered kids, Byron (12), Taylor (10), twins Tiffany and Tina (6) and my eldest Tommy (16) or as he became to be known, Tam. We weren’t one of these groups of travellers who caused trouble. We were friendly people who worked for our cash. We asked permission to settle on the lands or persuaded owners of campsites that we were not hostile gypsies because that’s the first thing people thought when they saw us. When we moved to Southport, we offered to help the community by fixing fences, tidying up parks, doing skip or scrap runs, fixing gutters or gardening for old people

who were too feeble to manage. We weren't thieves or wrongdoers, we kept the peace but the events of what happened in Southport changed our moral code for years to come. We became a bitter family.

At that time in Stockport, there was a big war between two mobs. Evgeni's outfit and a Chinese gang that we were no part of. I won't go into the detail over the feud but after a coming together in the Chinese restaurant, Evgeni was in heated sprint out the door on a straight line to his car with a knife sticking out of his thigh. Michelle, Tiffany and Tina were leaving a shop after gathering some food supplies for our site. Tam was there too, but lagging behind because he had forgotten something. The girls crossed the road holding bags of shopping, making their way to the car while Evgeni did a u- turn on the road; with tyres squealing and rubber burning, he planted the foot and brutally ran them over with Tam witnessing it all. Tiffany and Tina were pulled under the car and squashed like a juice can and died instantly. Michelle was taken to hospital and fell into a coma. I sat by her bedside for four months until eventually the doctors had to switch off the life support machine.

The moment she died changed me.

A fire burned inside for vengeance and I started my search for Evgeni. Twice over the past thirteen years, coming within touching distance of him but he managed to wriggle away. That's the reason he jumped from city to city over the years. I think he knew how far a man was prepared to go to avenge his wife's and kids' deaths.

The sight of the twins' bodies on the road will forever be moulded into Tam's head. Holding his mother in his arms as she was slipping away tore him apart. The months after were hard for everyone. Arguments and grief drove the family apart. Tam went on a silent drunken rampage for weeks and never really returned to himself again, none of us did. Tam decided he didn't want to be a Traveller anymore. Leaving the clan was something massively frowned upon and very rarely happened. I tried to discourage him from doing so but it had little effect. Tam was a stubborn man, like me, and once an idea entered his head, there was no getting rid of it. I informed him, once he left, that was it. There would be no way back for him. He would go his own way and that was that. When he left, I thought he would return to Ireland but for whatever reason, he chose Aberdeen. Before he left, I handed him a few grand, thinking I'd do one decent thing by him. That money aided him in settling into the cottage house next door to Johnny.

A couple of months ago, after some time spent attempting to get hold of me, Tommy made contact through a group of travellers passing through Aberdeen and needless to say, I set plans in motion for a trip to Aberdeen.

Evgeni was a smart man, because, twice over the years when I got close, he figured out I was on his tail and managed to slip from my grasp. He knew who I was, he must have done some enquiries before he disappeared from Stockport. I knew I had to take him out of his rhythm. I never bargained on a £600,000 ring being the reason. I couldn't just walk up to his house or into his club and blow his head off. Besides, I had a little more planned than just killing him. The pain he inflicted on my family had to be avenged in a vindictive way.

The night my sons went to The Mask was not by my wish. Byron, Taylor and my other sons got a bit hot headed after drinking a couple of bottles of whisky. I was out, visiting Tam at his house trying to conjure up a plan to ruffle Evgeni's feathers so I wasn't able to stop them.

It was lucky for me that Evgeni never clicked on to who they were but he didn't have reason to. He had never seen them.

After they got a pasting at the hands of Bogdan and Victor, I decided we shouldn't wait any longer in capturing him.

Firing pins and lost bullets

Outside Evgeni's house, Tommy and Byron argued in the bushes for more than an hour whether they should enter the house. Taylor waited in a van on the next street down. Byron was a fiery character and Tommy was ruthless, an after-effect they suffered from the accident. I had plenty faith that they would bring him back to the site but I didn't expect them to come home with a lucrative bag of jewellery or a talking bird that wouldn't shut the fuck up. Turns out that parrot was to be a goddam blessing. It squawked, whistled and talked all day, mostly in Russian. I left it with my wife, Grace, and she told me that it kept repeating a set of numbers and an address. I didn't pay any attention to my wife until I heard the words with my own ears. I typed the address into the maps on my phone and it came up with a storage facility in London. The numbers 108506 must have been for some kind of lock.

While Tommy was doing a sweep of the bottom floor of the house, he located the basement and a small collection of arms. Tommy tussled with the idea of stealing them but for some reason and I didn't know why, he removed the firing pins from the four Kalashnikovs inside the gun cage; he emptied the bullets from the handgun magazines and returned them to the guns. He was a genius, Tommy, pure genius.

When Byron stole the jewellery, I wasn't too happy about it but thought I'd make a quick buck. I then thought I'd help out Johnny by selling the haul to the shop and he could double his money. Tommy told me of the shop's recent bad luck and I was obliged to help out. I had no idea that there was a ring worth over half a million in there. I only found out after Tommy texted me, then realised I'd have to reclaim it. That was a lot of money - honest people or not, we wanted it back. The problem being, I knew Evgeni knew it was inside the shop. Why else would he be there? I didn't wish any harm to come to Johnny and neither did Tommy. He spoke very highly of him and said he was a good cunt and he is.

Evgeni's men were following me but in fact, it was the other way around. I was masterfully cautious after I found out the ring's true worth. I stuck a man in a hotel room to catch Bogdan approaching the shop and all we had to do was wait for the shout, raid the shop and do Bogdan over. But we were totally knocked off course by the mysterious man in a balaclava who got there before us.

There was one thing I didn't understand though. Where the fuck was the ring, because it wasn't in the safe we stole? I didn't have it, Tommy didn't have it and neither did Evgeni.

As the two Russians' hands and feet were tie-wrapped up and mouths duct taped, I explained the whole story to Johnny. After his asking me many questions, it was my turn.

“Johnny, I have to ask. Where’s the ring?” Johnny had to have it, who else would? He got up from his seat, staring at the helpless Russians on their knees; he looked at Tam. He nodded with acceptance that if he had the ring, he should hand it over. Johnny slipped his hand into his tight chinos fifth pocket and pulled out the ring.

Evgeni’s eyes were ablaze, fuming that the ring had been in Johnny’s pocket all that time. In fact, it had never left his pocket. Why would anyone think to search him? It was so idiotic to carry an item of that value in your pocket, no one would think to look there.

Evgeni growled through the duct tape.

Johnny held the ring out, placing it teasingly on his palm right in front of Evgeni’s jealous eyes then handed it to me.

“Sneaky fucker,” Tam said.

“Thanks, Johnny, it’s appreciated.” After hearing the story of our family’s past, he was more than happy to hand it over.

Just as he was about to shake my hand, he said, “Wait a fuckin’ minute here. Where’s all my stock that’s been nicked?”

Tam butted in. “We had to make it look like a solid robbery, Johnny, you’ll get it all back.”

“And how the fuck did that firing pins end up in the old safe?”

“You tell me, Johnny, because you’re the one who hid the sack in the old safe.” Johnny was too greedy for his own good. He wanted the sack of jewellery and the ring.

“I did, aye, but how did you know that?”

“When you left last night, locked the doors and set the alarm, I came back in through the back door, switched off the alarm and watched the camera footage. I saw you put the sack in the old safe, lock it and hang the key on the chimes. I replaced the sack with the firing pins and bullets I took from Evgeni’s basement. It was a bit of a gamble, but it paid off. We predicted Evgeni would rob the shop and predicted you would play the footage for him. What I didn’t predict was you robbing the shop before anyone else got here and pretending you were stealing something from the new safe which, in fact, was empty.”

“Well, if you had let me in on yer plan then obviously I wouldn’t have bothered, Tam!” Johnny answered, a little annoyed at his partner’s deceit.

Johnny had been the mysterious man in the balaclava and night vision goggles who robbed the shop. All the time he thought he was double crossing everyone involved but in actual fact, he was just an extra piece of a

bigger puzzle. When they watched the re-run of the camera footage, Johnny was squatted where the new safe was, appearing as if he was stealing the contents and filling his pockets. In actual fact, there hadn't actually been anything in the safe worth stealing. It was all an act for the camera so that Evgeni would think some chancer had gone away with it.

The reasoning behind Johnny using the old safe was because the front was so mangled by the failed burglary a few weeks back, it would seem unusable hence the reason he thought it smart to put the sack of jewellery in there. After Tommy realised that the ring wasn't in the sack, we had to keep a good eye on the shop and everything going on around it.

“So what the fuck happens now?” Johnny asked.

“Now, we have to visit a burial plot,” I replied.

Burial

The burial plot: Evgeni had his Bulgarian entourage dig a hole five metres long, one and a half metres wide and four foot deep. Located in a vast muddy open field four miles from the city, under a lonesome tree without a house or Samaritan in sight. The rest of my family had already captured the Bulgarian men who broke their backs digging the hole and were waiting at the graveside. We blindfolded Evgeni and Victor so they didn't know where they were being taken even though it didn't matter because they wouldn't be leaving. Once we got there, we dragged them to the graveside and made them kneel at our feet. We threw Bogdan's body in first. Johnny, Tommy, the rest of my sons and family all stood and watched

as I removed the blindfold from Victor's head. He was calm, looking at me lividly with fearless eyes.

There was no panic or begging for his life. Instead he accepted his fate. A man not scared of death. I moved to Evgeni, removing his blindfold. He ogled my feet before lifting his head. He looked at the crowd that had gathered. A glimmer of hope found him as his Bulgarian men were present. He gawked and hoped they would come up with some kind of rescue but his hope was wasted.

“Drop the guns, boys.” My sons and fellow clan members lowered their shotguns and the barrels faced the ground. Evgeni's head sprung round to the squad of Bulgarians, shocked as there was no reaction. Their bodies idle and expressions empty. Evgeni shuffled on his knees and I let him struggle to his feet. At full height we eyed each other.

“My brother will find you!” His jaw tightened as he spoke with passion.

“How do you know your brother's still alive?” Once again, Evgeni noticed I had done my homework. His silent response told me so.

Victor kept a fixed stare, letting the air fill his lungs, knowing his breath would soon disappear.

“One more surprise for you before you become worm feed, Mr Yakubovich.” His eyelids drooped, his body deflated and his heart sickened by my superiority.

“Tommy, the papers.” Tommy trudged forward, handing me the papers that would change ownership of all Evgeni’s properties to Ivan, the man in charge of the Bulgarians.

“This here is a legal document that Tommy, or should I say Tam, has constructed, that will hand over all your assets to Ivan.” The hope Evgeni held onto dissipated as he dropped back to his knees. Not only had I caught him, I’d done it in a way that humiliated him. Johnny continued to see how smart Tam actually was. It made sense to him now as to why Tam was so distant in the past couple of months and how much time he had spent on his phone, in constant contact with me and his brothers.

Now it was time, time to end a burden I’d carried for too long.

I walked over to Byron and removed the shotgun from his hands. I held it an inch away from Victor’s face, as he lifted his chin, flared his nostrils, puffed his top lip and started to tremble. I pulled the trigger and watched his head blow into the air, fragments of blood and skull plastering Evgeni.

Johnny started to be sick in the background. The Bulgarians looked displeased at what they had witnessed. I think they didn’t realise how far I was prepared to go. My boys didn’t flinch; they knew this had to be done.

Evgeni staggered to his feet. I watched as it amused me to see such a hard man’s pride dissipate and change to desperation. He started to pathetically run right into Tam’s path. Tam’s oval eyes narrowed, and his right fist fired in a punch he’d been saving up for some time. Evgeni was back in the mud again. Tam lifted him up by his fur collar, walked him back to the edge of

the burial plot and whacked him on the side of the head with the butt of the shotgun. Evgeni slumped over from his waist while his head scraped the muddy ground. I lifted him back up and stood over his soon to be deceased body.

“My wife was a lovely woman, Evgeni, kind, generous, beautiful in more ways than a man can imagine. You took her away from me and my girls. I should’ve spent the rest of my life with them. You killed my children and broke my family apart.” He had no response, no apologies. It would’ve been nice to hear one.

I blew a hole in his thigh. Evgeni had recourse to his Russian vocabulary of callous words as he fell backwards into the grave alongside his mangled, headless employee. I jumped in, then caught two more shotgun shells that Byron threw at me. I re-loaded.

“Thirteen years!” I roared, “Thirteen fuckin’ years of unforgettable pain, pain you will now suffer in your dying minutes, you cunt!” The saliva spurted out from the sides of my mouth as my anger took over. I blew a hole in his other thigh. Now he howled like a werewolf at the break of a full moon, trying to suck the air in. He held his hand up, begging for the end. I blew his hand off. I stood above him, gloating at his pain. Taking seconds to remember why I was doing this. It was savage, I knew that but when you carry a burden like that on your shoulders for so long, it changes you. Revenge, it’s a flood of impatient fury that can swallow you up, make you do things that are inhuman to a good hearted man. I listened to the short blasts of whistling air echo from his wounded body. The shock had taken over. His eyes stared up to the grey sky as he looked onto the next world.

There would be no guardian angel coming for him. He would have to face the fact he'd be dancing with the devil.

Tam's hand came into the grave. I grabbed it and climbed out. My boys all waited for the go ahead.

"Fill it up!" I said, as Byron, Taylor and Tam started to shovel in spadefuls of dirt slowly and I watched each one with satisfaction. Tam's tears hopelessly flowed out with each spadeful. I left him to it. This was his, mine and my boys' closure. They all had a mixture of emotions on their faces. Byron and Taylor battled the tears and used the shovelling to distract themselves. I watched each load of dirt cover the rotten scum and with each load, I was a step closer to the relief of redemption.

The final spadeful covered Evgeni's last breath as he coughed up a puff of dirt and I watched each grain fall and knew it was over. My relief was pure, knowing he wouldn't walk this earth again.

I walked over to Ivan and handed him the paperwork. He shook my hand.

"Anything you need, Cal, give me a call."

"There's one thing I need?" Ivan nodded. "Empty Evgeni's house and give the contents to Johnny."

"What about his wife?" Ivan asked.

“Deal with her, call it a contract clause.”

“No problem, Cal.”

At that, he took his men across the muddy field onwards to their cars parked over a mile away. With the hole getting close to being filled, I instructed Byron to fetch the van. Johnny had removed himself from the event, plumped down in the muddy field, turned green, unsure of how he got here. Unsure of who Tam really was.

“Johnny, I’ve got something for you.” He was stunned with a vacant glow over his sickened face. “Stand up, boy.”

He stood and I took out the piece of paper with the address of the storage facility in London and digits that could only be for some kind of passcode. I handed it over.

“What’s this?” He asked.

“It’s an address, Johnny.”

“An address to what?”

“Not sure. It might be worth checking out.”

“It’s in London,” Tam strolled over, his eyes reddened by the tears he had just shed.

“Johnny, feeling better?” Tam asked.

“Aye, top of the pops, Tam! Don’t think I’ll ever feel better after what I just saw. Who the fuck are you?”

“Trust me, time heals. Me, I’m just a normal Joe, you know that. Anyway you’ve got a shop to tidy up so you better sort yerself out.” Johnny shook his head.

“What! Are you nae comin’?”

“No, Johnny, my time in Aberdeen’s done. I’m leaving with me family. I’ve had enough of the shitty weather up here.”

“What about the shop?” Johnny knew Tam like a brother and didn’t quite want the wee cunt to leave.

“The shop’s yours, brother. Do as you please with it, I’m done.”

“And what about all this carry on? What am I supposed to do?”

“Johnny, there’s nothing to worry about. The Russians are buried, the Bulgarians will watch your back and you see that van driving down the road over there?” In the far distance, across the open field, Byron parked the van at the roadside.

“Aye.”

“That’s got the stock from the shop and the Bulgarians are emptying Evgeni’s house and giving the contents to you. So things are sorted.” Tam stated but things were far from sorted. Almost instantly, Johnny’s thoughts turned to money as calculations started to take over his brain.

“Johnny, it’s been brief but I’m glad I met you and hope there’s no complications in your life after this. I suggest you cover your tracks for the past couple of days,” I said as I was feeling a bit sorry for him because he became so involved in this affair.

“Can’t say the same, Cal, but a father of Tam’s, is a friend of mine.”

“Johnny, we’ve got to head off now. Byron’s left the keys in the van for you,” Tam said.

“What? That’s it? Yer just doing a runner?”

“No, I’m not running anymore. I ran away from the grief years ago but now it’s over and there’s nowhere I need to run to anymore. I’m back with my family and that means I’m home. I moved to Aberdeen because I thought it was far enough away that I could make a new life, forget the past but it didn’t matter how far anywhere was. It would always follow me around. There’s nothing in Aberdeen for me now.”

“Tam, you better make sure you come back and visit now and again.” Tam didn’t answer; there would be no truth in what Johnny wanted to hear.

We both shook hands and I joined the rest of the group who were eager to leave. Tam walked away with a reassuring smile.

Johnny stood idle, placing his hands in his pockets and watched us plod through the mud. Just as we were making progress, Tam stopped and shouted, “Shite! Johnny!” He pulled a business card from his pocket and slotted it in the mud. “You might want to give this guy a shout when you get to London.”

Johnny plodded through the mud as Tam walked away without an explanation. Johnny picked up the card and saw it advertised a pet shop in London which specialised in exotic birds.

“What the fuck’s this?” Johnny yelled as we ignored him and kept walking.

Johnny would have spent the entire time walking to the van wondering why Tommy would leave that card in the dirt. However, as soon as he slid the side door of the van open, he would have seen Evgeni’s blue mutation yellow-naped Amazon which was totally identical to the ornament that Tommy bought. He would also know its true worth at £20,000 because he had googled it right before Byron and Taylor walked into his shop the day before.

I guess Johnny had a trip to pack for.

“Where we off to, da?” Tommy asked.

“Looks like we’ll have to pay the Passenger a visit, son.”

