This opening extract is exclusive to Love**reading**.
Please print off and read at your leisure.

Hard Man

Allan Guthrie

A HISTORY

OF VIOLENCE

Another hot day in July. That was four in a row. Pretty good for Scotland.

Not so good for the corpse in the boot.

Jacob Baxter put his hand over his nose to mask the smell, forgetting for a moment that his nose was broken. He gasped with pain. Time to take some more paracetamol, but he couldn't swallow the pills without a glass of water. He'd have to wait till he got back home. Why the doctor had refused to give him something stronger, he didn't know. But the doc just told Jacob to come back when the swelling had subsided and only then could he – how did he put it? – determine the extent of the damage. He assured Jacob that his nose wasn't broken, but Jacob wasn't convinced. He didn't have much faith in the medical profession.

He looked up from the corpse. His two sons kept their eyes on it, even when Jacob began to speak. 'We have to stop Wallace,' he said, 'before May gets hurt.'

'We'll try again,' Flash said.

Jacob said, 'Aye, right.'

Two nights ago, although it felt a lot longer, the three of them had gone down to Trinity where Wallace lived alone in the cramped split-level one-bedroom flat he'd shared with May for only a few months. Jacob noticed that Wallace had boarded up the basement windows recently and wondered if he'd heard they were coming. Might have been a wise safety precaution, since the windows were at street level, and easy to kick in, but it wasn't windows they wanted to smash. Anyway, there was no way Wallace could know they were coming. It wasn't as if they'd phoned ahead. No, chances were the windows had been broken already. Somebody else Wallace had provoked, or threatened, or beaten up. Plenty of candidates. Or maybe it was

Copyright © 2007 Allan Guthrie
Published by Polygon / Berlinn Ltd

just a bunch of drunken louts at the weekend. This was a much sought-after area of the city, but it was only a stone's throw from Wardie, which wasn't.

Jacob had glanced at his sons, nodded, then rang the doorbell. He slapped a wrench against his open palm while he waited for an answer. Oh, aye. They were all tooled up, they'd handle Wallace no problem, reputation or not. He was only one man against three, and those three were Baxters. Admittedly Jacob wasn't a huge threat by himself, cause, well, he was sixty-six years old and not as fleet of foot as he once was. Flash, to be fair, was even less of a threat: skinny, small – not to be cruel to his younger son, but the word Jacob was looking for was 'weedy'. Rog was a different story. Hard to believe those two boys had the same parents. Rog was a big lad, weighed over twenty stone, gripped that hammer proudly in his massive fist, and Jacob felt pretty safe standing next to him. Rog was a bouncer. He was used to this kind of thing. And the suit Rog insisted on wearing all the time worked in his favour. Aye, Rog meant business in more ways than one.

Jacob was sure Wallace would cower in front of their combined might. So when Wallace opened the door, all baby-faced and clean-looking and innocent, Jacob confidently pointed his wrench at him and said, 'Stay away from May. Stay away from my family.'

Wallace took his glasses off, slipped them in his shirt pocket. He immediately looked more like his twenty-six years. 'She's my wife.'

True, but she was a poor wee misguided headstrong lass. Jacob said, 'She's only sixteen.'

'Fucks like a woman twice her age,' Wallace said. 'Must be all the practice she gets.'

There was no need for that. Blood pounded in Jacob's temples. There was no talking to this animal. Wallace only understood one thing. Jacob pulled back his wrist and swung the wrench.

And missed.

No, worse than missed. Missed and got caught. Wallace had grabbed Jacob's wrist, and was twisting it. Jacob couldn't hold on to the wrench any longer. He let it go with a howl, but had the presence of mind to punch Wallace with his free hand. Pick on an old man, would he? Jacob hit nothing but air. Again.

You'd hardly believe it, but Jacob was out of breath, felt his chest tighten.

What on earth were his sons doing? They should have jumped in by now. Knocked Wallace to the ground. Started kicking him.

Jacob turned, suddenly realising his wrist was free, saw Wallace standing in front of Rog. Wallace wouldn't be so brave now. Somebody nearer his own age. Somebody

Copyright © 2007 Allan Guthrie
Published by Polygon / Berlinn Ltd

bigger than him. Aye, somebody who'd rip his limbs off, one by one. Somebody who'd teach him not to mess with the Baxters.

But, no. Jacob straightened up and saw that Wallace was smiling. Rog held his hammer aloft, not smiling back. Wallace held up the wrench he'd taken from Jacob. Still smiling, he dropped it. Deliberately. It clanged onto the path. Rog opened and closed his mouth, but no words came out.

'Come on, then,' Wallace said. 'Let's see what you've got, big guy.'

Rog looked at Flash. Mistake. Jacob saw it coming, and cried out, but too late. Before anybody could react, Wallace had whipped towards the big fella, smacked him at least twice in the stomach, brought him to his knees, swiped the hammer out of his hand, and gave his brother a blow in the gut with it.

Rog and Flash stared at each other, gasping for breath.

Jacob's gaze returned to Wallace. Had that just happened?

'I told you lot to mind your own business,' Wallace said, kicking Flash in the face and knocking him over. 'I wish you'd pay attention.' With the back of his hand, he punched Rog in the mouth and blood sprayed across the path. Rog didn't topple over, though. Kneeled there like a tree stump.

'Okay,' Jacob said. 'Enough.'

'I don't think so,' Wallace said, and Jacob's nose exploded with pain. 'Dad.'

Jacob's eyes streamed. Through his tears, he saw Wallace taking his mobile phone from his pocket.

Before he dialled, he grabbed Jacob by the hair and bent over. Despite the blood starting to trickle down his left nostril, Jacob could smell Wallace's sweat. Or maybe it was his own. Wallace said, 'I'm going to make your sick family wish it never existed.'

Sick? Jacob's family? Jacob would have laughed if his nose hadn't hurt so much.

Wallace let go of Jacob and spoke into his phone. 'Police. Yes. I'd like to report an assault. I've just been attacked. Huh? Outside my own house, would you believe.'

The three of them had spent a night in the cells. The indignity of it. The first time in Jacob's long life.

Rog had to have a couple of stitches in a cut just above his upper lip. They were being removed next week. Flash got away with body bruising and a sore chin.

Copyright © 2007 Allan Guthrie
Published by Polygon / Berlinn Ltd

Wallace hadn't broken sweat. All that ju-jitsu training May had warned them about. They should have listened, but when you're angry, you don't pay attention, do you?

Ah, well. Here they were, wondering what they should do now.

'He's loco.' Flash slammed the boot shut, cut off the stink. 'He's gone too far this time.'

Rog picked at some crap on his suit. 'What we going to do now?'

'I don't want to think about what this means,' Jacob said.

'We have to,' Flash said. 'This is a fucked-up situation.'

'I mean,' Jacob said, 'what'll he do next? He made threats against the family.'

'As long as May's safe,' Flash said, 'I don't care.'

'But is she?' Jacob said. 'How do we know this'll be an end to it? It's her he's riled at.'

'Speaking of May,' Rog said, running his finger over some grime on the boot, 'who's going to tell her that Louis's dead?'

Pearce wondered why a hulking blue-suited figure with a stitched upper lip was framed in the sitting room doorway. His doorway. The fucker was in his fucking house and Pearce had just got out of the shower, only a towel wrapped round his waist. 'Who the —?' was all he managed to say before the stranger grabbed hold of his wrist, dragged him over the threshold and spun him towards the settee.

Pearce was really unimpressed with himself. Should have been quicker, sharper. As he was spinning he noticed a second guy, skinny, lurking in the corner. The second guy hadn't been invited either.

Pearce landed on his side and sank into the cushions. Braced himself to block a flying fist. He was alert now, prepared. But nothing happened. The big guy apparently wasn't about to trade punches. Pearce's towel had flown off, dropped to the floor. He relaxed. Well, as much as he could, given that he was bollock-naked in front of a pair of strange men. Young men. Who clearly weren't here to ask after his health. At least they weren't naked, too. That would have been really uncomfortable.

Pearce's dog, a three-legged Dandie Dinmont terrier, poked his nose round the doorframe, had a quick look, and hopped away. Little bastard was wise beyond its years. Pearce would have to have words with him later. Surely a warning bark wouldn't have been too much to ask for. Pearce ought to take him back to the Cat & Dog Home, see how he liked that.

Copyright © 2007 Allan Guthrie
Published by Polygon / Berlinn Ltd

Pearce levered himself upright and rested his arm on the back of the settee. Faced the big guy. The fat bastard was in deep shit, even if he did look capable of bench-pressing three hundred pounds without breaking sweat. He was lucky he'd caught Pearce off-guard. Another day, if Pearce hadn't been distracted, Fat Boy would have been in pieces all over the floor.

Fat Boy's tongue tracked over his stitched upper lip. He was holding a knife in his big paw.

Pearce was still damp under the scrotum, in the arse crack and between the toes. If he couldn't have a fucking shower and dry himself off in peace, he might as well still be in prison.

He didn't like being reminded of prison.

He glanced at the other guy. Slim was bony-faced, dressed like a prick. The arse of his jeans hung down to his knees, thick gold chain round his neck, trainers with the laces untied, trying to look cool as he scraped his chin stubble with his knife. Yeah, both of them had knives, the weapon of choice amongst Edinburgh lowlifes. Slim's was very nice. The serrated blade was seven, maybe eight, inches long. The hand holding the knife trembled slightly. Slim might be trying to look cool, but Pearce knew he shouldn't be here. Could tell he was out of his depth.

Zero threat.

Pearce ignored Slim and asked Fat Boy, 'What are you doing in my house?'

Suit, tie, gleaming shoes. Fat Boy even had a briefcase. Thug, or accountant? Bit of both? Definitely not the hard man he was pretending to be. Pearce wouldn't have been surprised if Fat Boy cut himself with his knife. Maybe that's how he got the sore lip.

Jesus. Pearce was pissed off with himself. If he'd been paying attention when he'd opened the door, he could have splattered Fat Boy all over the carpet. Now he'd have to wait and time this right. Pearce chewed the inside of his cheek. He'd slipped up. He was getting casual, and that would never do.

Fat Boy said, 'We believe you might be able to help us.'

Poncey language. Could be a lawyer, right enough. 'I doubt it,' Pearce told him.

'Well, we thought we might stay a while. Have a little chat.'

'I don't feel like talking.'

'Just listen, then.'

'I don't feel like listening either.'

Copyright © 2007 Allan Guthrie
Published by Polygon / Berlinn Ltd

'Now, that's really too bad. We were hoping you'd cooperate.'

'You finished?' Pearce asked him.

'Finished?' Fat Boy said. 'Haven't even started.' He turned to Slim. 'Flash?' he said.

Flash? What kind of name was that? Some kind of street name? Pearce should get one of those. What could he call himself? He couldn't think of anything. 'Pearce' would have to do.

Flash marked the end of his dry shave by tossing the hunting knife into the air. It landed point first, puncturing a floorboard. That was the kind of pansy-arsed showy bollocks that might have impressed a three-year-old. Probably been practising it for days, too. But if you wanted to create an impression, you didn't lob a knife in the air and watch it fall. No purpose in that. Flash watched the blade quiver for a bit, smirking. 'I've heard you're a pussy, Pearce,' he said. 'Went soft when your mummy died.'

How fucking stupid was this scrawny prick? Mother of Christ.

'Heard you got shot in the stomach,' Fat Boy took over. He was much bigger than his friend, but he certainly wasn't any smarter. 'Didn't have any appetite for violence after that.' He grinned, looked at Flash. 'Get it? Shot in the stomach. Lost his appetite.'

'Nice one,' Flash said. 'That's very funny. Don't you think so, Pussy?'

Pearce said nothing. He had no idea why they were trying to provoke him.

'I asked you a question,' Flash said.

Pearce stared at him and said, 'You're a dumb fuck.'

'Hear that?' Fat Boy said. 'Pussy's mad.'

'Better watch we don't get scratched, huh?'

The pair of buffoons were so busy laughing they didn't react when Pearce dived off the settee. At arms' stretch he clawed at Flash's knife, managed to grab the handle and pluck it out of the floorboard before Flash took a step towards him and said, 'Hey!' But by then it was too late.

Pearce brought the blade up between Flash's legs. Straight through the seam of his low-slung jeans, thrusting the blade through a good few inches. Almost hit home. It was close. Fuck, yeah, it was close. Pearce reckoned there'd been a fair chance of him screwing up. But life was all about taking chances, wasn't it?

'What was that about getting fucking scratched?' he said.

Copyright © 2007 Allan Guthrie
Published by Polygon / Berlinn Ltd

'Ah, shit.' Flash looked down between his legs, his face turning pale green.

Unusual, but Pearce had seen it once before. Happened in prison to an eighteen-year-old who'd wanted to show what a big man he was and ended up smoking more skunk than he could handle. His face may have turned green, but everyone called him Whitey after that.

Flash shouted, 'Dad?'

Crying for his daddy now, poor kid. Pearce wondered if he shouldn't just let go, get out of the way before Flash spewed all over him. Nah, fuck it. He'd take the chance, but there was no harm in issuing a warning. 'Puke over me,' he said, 'and I'll get really pissed off.' He applied a little more upwards pressure. 'You wouldn't like that.' Then just a bit more.

Flash yelped.

Touching skin now.

'Lose it,' Pearce said to Fat Boy.

Fat Boy looked at his hand in surprise as if the last thing he expected to see there was a knife. He glanced around, bemused. 'Where shall I put it?'

Jesus Christ. 'Over there,' Pearce said, indicating a safe area away from himself and his hostage.

Fat Boy tossed the knife. 'Let my brother go,' he said. 'Then we'll tell you why we're here.'

'Not interested,' Pearce said, wondering how these two could possibly be brothers.

Fat Boy said, 'Dad!'

Jesus, they were both at it. Pearce tensed his arm and Flash squeaked and Fat Boy shut up. 'I'll deal with you in a minute,' Pearce said to Fat Boy. Looked up at Flash, said, 'Ever wondered what it feels like to have your happy sack sliced in two, Flash?' He paused to give Flash a moment to think about it. 'Course, I might miss. Not get the middle of your ball-bag. End up cutting one of your nuts in half. That'd hurt, don't you think?'

Flash was making a mewling noise. Pearce was tempted to ask him who the pussy was now but he restrained himself.

Fat Boy's jaw had descended. Poor fucker looked like he'd been hit in the face with a stiff cat. Repeatedly.

Flash looked even more likely to throw up. And threats weren't going to stop him. Sod it. Pearce raised himself onto one knee and eased the knife out of Flash's

Copyright © 2007 Allan Guthrie
Published by Polygon / Berlinn Ltd

trousers. A look of relief spread across Flash's face. His cheeks looked less green in no time. The transformation was short-lived, though.

Pearce balled his fist and slammed it into Flash's crotch.

Flash bent over, wobbled, toppled to the floor. After a second, he made a gagging sound and his cheeks puffed.

Pearce left him heaving while he strode over to Fat Boy.

Fat Boy hadn't moved an inch. Still wore that stunned look. Pearce placed Flash's knife on the floor, sure he no longer needed it, and smacked Fat Boy as hard as he could on the side of the head. Fat Boy rolled to the side, hovered on the edge of the settee, then hit the deck like the useless fucking fat sack of shit he was.

Pearce glanced at Flash, but he was no danger. Thumping a man in the gonads usually knocks the fight out of him. The skinny wee shite had dragged himself into the corner where he was curled up, moaning. He caught Pearce's eye and cried out for his daddy again.

Pearce picked up his dropped towel and draped it round his waist. He grabbed Fat Boy's briefcase and snapped it open. Inside was a picture. Nothing else. Full-length body shot of a blonde teenage girl: shades, cropped top, bit of a belly on her but that was okay, shorts, sandals, arms folded under ample breasts, pierced ears, nose, belly button and God alone knew where else. She wasn't Pearce's type, but he could see how Fat Boy might find her attractive. She was young, though. Probably no more than eighteen.

On the back of the photo was a phone number.

'Excuse me,' said a new voice. A man's voice, mature, local accent. 'Mr Pearce?'

Pearce smiled. There he was again. Not paying attention. He turned to look at the man who'd stepped into the sitting room. Did a double-take. This guy had a piece of raw meat where his nose should be. Which maybe wasn't quite so bad, since it drew attention away from the wrinkles crosshatching the corners of the old man's eyes, the grooves chiselled into his leathery cheeks and the lines running from the corners of his mouth to the point of his chin.

'Come in,' Pearce said. 'Open house today.'

'My name's Baxter.'

Pearce listened to Baxter breathing. Trace of a wheezy rattle. Sounded like he smoked too much. 'You got a surname?' Pearce asked.

'Baxter is my surname.'

'You got a first name, then?'

Copyright © 2007 Allan Guthrie
Published by Polygon / Berlinn Ltd

'Jacob.' He held out his hand. Pearce stared at it, but didn't move. 'I'm a bit late,' Baxter said, looking around. Fat Boy was still out cold. Flash was hugging himself, groaning more quietly now. Pearce gave Baxter no encouragement, but he went on, 'I was supposed to stop Rog and Flash getting hurt.'

Rog? Well, Fat Boy was full of surprises. Might as well call himself Pansy. Pearce said, 'You seem to have failed on that score.'

'I was outside.' Jacob pointed his thumb over his shoulder. 'My boys were supposed to call for me if things got hairy.'

Now Pearce knew who he was. Dad. My boys. A real family get-together. Pearce said, 'They did.'

Baxter tutted. 'I'm a bit slow, now and then,' he said. 'No fun getting old.' He pulled a packet of cigarettes out of his pocket and said, 'You mind?'

Pearce replied, 'As long as you don't mind me coming over to your house and pissing on your carpet.'

Baxter frowned, which wasn't a pretty sight, and, judging by the old guy's reaction, hurt his nose a bit. He tucked his fags back in his pocket.

Pearce put the photo back in the briefcase and slammed the lid shut. 'Baxter,' he said, 'I don't take kindly to people breaking into my home and threatening me.'

'I know. I'm sorry about that. Really, I am. If there was any other way ...'

'Fat Boy and Slim here could have knocked first.'

'Didn't they? Look, I'm sorry ...'

'No matter. I taught them some manners.'

Flash shouted, 'Cunt!'

Pearce looked at him, looked at the briefcase. Well made, sturdy. He stepped over to Flash, landed a swift blow with the edge of it to the rude little fucker's head. Flash moaned. Pearce hit him again and Flash stopped moaning.

'Mr Pearce,' Baxter said, grabbing his arm, 'please don't hurt them.'

'Bit late for that.'

'We need your help. That's all we want. Just some help with a little problem.'

'You could have asked.'

'We wanted to see if you could handle yourself first.'

Copyright © 2007 Allan Guthrie
Published by Polygon / Berlinn Ltd

'This some kind of test? These two? Don't make me laugh. They've never been in a fight in their lives, have they?'

'Not quite true.' Baxter was silent for a while, then when Pearce didn't prompt him, he said, 'Rog is a bouncer.'

'Yeah? Could have fooled me.'

'He's not used to people fighting back.'

'How long's he been a bouncer? A week?'

'He's very good at his job. Just got a pay rise. Look, they're game lads. Good lads, my boys.'

No way was Rog a bouncer, but Pearce let it pass. 'You shouldn't let them loose with knives. They might hurt themselves.'

Baxter said, 'Can we talk money?'

'We can always talk money.' Pearce wondered what was coming. 'How much?'

'Four grand.'

'What do you want me to do for four grand? Mow your lawn?'

'It's all we can raise.'

Pearce said, 'My heart bleeds.' Truth was, he could use the money. Four grand wasn't a fortune, but it would help. He had a mortgage and no job. 'What do you want me to do, Baxter?'

'Protect my grandchild.'

Pearce thought for a moment. Then said, 'From what?'

'Not "what". Who. >From its father. You've seen the photo.' He inclined his head towards the briefcase.

'What about it?'

'The baby's my grandchild.'

Pearce opened the briefcase again, studied the picture. Shook his head. 'She's young,' he said, 'but she's no baby.'

Pearce listened while Jacob Baxter explained the situation.

Copyright © 2007 Allan Guthrie
Published by Polygon / Berlinn Ltd

The girl in the photo was May, his daughter. She was sixteen, even younger than she looked, married to a man ten years older than her, and she was three months pregnant. Unfortunately, not with her husband's child. When Wallace, her husband, found out, he'd slapped her around and threw her out into the street. Fair enough, Baxter said, if only he'd left it at that. Baxter might have forgiven him for hitting her, maybe, under the circumstances. But subsequently, Wallace hadn't been able to leave her alone. Sending her threatening texts, leaving messages on her voicemail, turning up at her house, at school.

Pearce gave Baxter a hard stare. 'Married, pregnant, and at school? That's wrong.'

'Not her fault,' Baxter said. Then added, 'She's very bright.'

'What's she doing?'

'Looking for a summer job.'

Pearce nodded. 'You've told her husband to leave her alone?'

Baxter told him about the night they'd confronted him with hammers and wrenches, and how he'd given them all a pasting.

Didn't surprise Pearce in the least. He said, 'What do you think he wants?'

'What do you mean?'

'Does he want May back? Is that why he won't leave her alone?'

'He threw her out.'

'Pride?' Pearce suggested.

'He wouldn't take her back.'

'You sure?'

Jacob shrugged.

'So, what's his game plan?' Pearce asked.

'Revenge.'

'Against May?'

'Primarily. But he's after the rest of us, too. There was never any love lost between us anyway, but he really hates us now.'

'What about the baby's father? His biological one?'

Copyright © 2007 Allan Guthrie
Published by Polygon / Berlinn Ltd

'Done a runner. Not just from May, but disappeared completely.'

'Isn't that a bit extreme?'

'Not if he wants to stay alive. You don't know Wallace.'

'Very true,' Pearce said.

'Will you give us a hand?' Baxter said, looking towards his sons. He was doing a not-too-bad job of appearing calm and composed, not giving a shit. But he didn't fool Pearce. Maybe Baxter wasn't the type to bring flowers and grapes to a hospital bedside, but he wasn't hard. He had a face that was hard, but his mind was soft as a baby's bottom.

Of course, Pearce could be completely wrong.

Pearce helped Baxter prop Flash up against the wall and check that Rog hadn't swallowed his tongue or something. He put a cushion under the big guy's head.

'So what exactly do you want me to do?' Pearce said.

Baxter said, 'Just keep an eye on May.'

'You want a babysitter?'

They were standing in the middle of the sitting room now. Both men had their arms folded. Pearce let his eyes focus on Baxter's and wasn't at all surprised that Baxter couldn't hold his gaze.

Baxter said, 'I was thinking more of a bodyguard. Keep that sleekit Wallace away from her.'

'For how long?'

'As long as possible.'

'Four grand won't last long.'

'Till Wallace has calmed down. A month should do it.'

'What hours would I be working?'

'All the time.'

'Day, night, weekends?'

'Stay with us. We'll feed you, give you a bed.'

'I'm not very sociable.'

Copyright © 2007 Allan Guthrie

'We won't be paying you for your conversation.'

Pearce breathed out slowly. 'Where did you get my name?' he asked.

'Guy I know recommended you,' Baxter said.

'What guy?'

'My nephew. Cooper. Said you had what it takes. Said you'd do an honest day's work.'

Cooper, huh? Loan shark. At one point he'd been Pearce's boss. He was in the nick now. Eventually got what he deserved. 'That right?'

'To be exact, he said since you'd lost your sister and then your mother, he thought that maybe now you really didn't give a toss about anything.' Baxter unfolded his arms. His hand crept into the pocket where he kept his fags. Fiddled about in there for a second, then reappeared, empty. 'Do you?'

Pearce wondered if Cooper was right. Could be. 'If you're worried about her safety, why don't you contact the police?'

'After what just happened?' Baxter pointed to his nose. 'They'll think I'm setting Wallace up. Probably throw me in the cells again for harassment or what have you.'

Pearce nodded. 'Let me think about it, okay?'

Baxter looked hopeful. Then his brow ridged as Flash stirred. He glanced at his son, then back at Pearce. 'Did you have to hit them so hard?'

'That wasn't hard,' Pearce told him.

Baxter shook his head, lips tight. 'I'm scared,' he said. 'I don't mind telling you. I'm scared for May.'

'I'm sure she'll be fine,' Pearce said. 'Guys like Wallace like to talk. But that's usually all they do.'

Flash spoke, a little breathlessly, 'Not in this case.'

'How's the head?' Pearce asked him.

'Like shit.'

'And the balls?'

'Fuck off.'

Copyright © 2007 Allan Guthrie
Published by Polygon / Berlinn Ltd

Had to give the scrawny fuck some credit. He was still game. But Pearce decided to use Flash's reply to get rid of them. He didn't want to get involved in this. He didn't think from what her dad had said that May was in serious danger. And Pearce didn't think he'd make much of a babysitter anyway. And he definitely didn't want to stay with this lot for a month. Not for twice the money.

Pearce prodded Rog, who moaned, snorted. Pearce poked him again. 'Hey, get up.'

'What's the matter?' Baxter said.

'I've thought about it. I'm not interested.'

'What?' Baxter said.

Pearce poked Rog again. 'I want you out of my house. The lot of you. Right now.'

Baxter said, 'When you meet Wallace, don't be fooled, Mr Pearce. He's older than he looks. Twenty-six, but looks not a day over eighteen. He's tough, though. Maybe even tougher than you. He's had training.'

Training, huh? Well, now. If Pearce was a bull, that was a red fucking rag.

Baxter said, 'Let's get my sons back on their feet. If you have a moment to spare, I'd like to show you something that might convince you the threat posed by Wallace is very serious indeed.'

'You a dog lover, Mr Pearce?'

'Got a terrier.'

'I didn't notice.'

'He doesn't like strangers.'

'Well, brace yourself. Go on, Rog.'

The side of Rog's face was swollen. Looked like he'd had a fight with a lunatic dentist. He glanced around. The coast was clear so he popped the boot. Held it open a foot or so.

Pearce hunkered down and peered inside. A black mutt's body was crammed in there, looking ... dead. Certainly smelled like it was dead.

Yeah, Pearce liked dogs. But he preferred them alive. Dead dogs didn't have quite the same appeal.

Pearce stood up. 'Is that yours?' he asked.

Copyright © 2007 Allan Guthrie

Baxter nodded. ‘Just look at the way his throat’s been cut.’

Pearce didn’t much want to look again. He said so.

‘Go on,’ Baxter said.

Pearce bent down again. Fido’s head was hanging by a flap of skin, just a hair short of a beheading. Pearce said, ‘Pretty nasty, I’ll give you that. But I don’t see what a dog with its throat cut has to do with May being in danger.’

Baxter looked around him. The car was parked down at the beach end of the street. Other cars were pulling in, driving off; couples strolled past arm in arm along the promenade in front of the car.

Pearce wondered if it was against the law to have a dead dog in your boot. Probably wasn’t. Ought to be, though.

Baxter said, ‘Too public here.’

Rog eased the boot shut.

Baxter got in the car. Flash hobbled into the back, hands hovering over his bruised groin, and Rog joined him. After a second or two, Pearce climbed into the passenger seat.

Pearce had closed the door before he realised how much the stench of dead dog had permeated the air inside the car. Felt as if he was sitting on top of the carcass. He breathed through his mouth.

Baxter reached into his pocket and took out his fags. He offered Flash one, and Flash shook his head. ‘The dog was a message from Wallace,’ Baxter said.

‘And a warning,’ Flash said, rubbing the back of his head.

‘An omen,’ Rog said.

Pearce said, ‘Make your minds up, guys.’

‘Found him there yesterday morning. Right there. In the boot.’

No wonder the fucking thing stank. ‘What are you going to do with it?’ Pearce asked.

‘We’ll bury him. When we’re ready.’

‘Better hurry. He’s ripe.’

Baxter shrugged. ‘We’ve been busy trying to console May.’

Copyright © 2007 Allan Guthrie
Published by Polygon / Berlinn Ltd

'Could have found a few minutes to dump it somewhere. Let it rot in peace.'

'We thought it would be good for you to see it firsthand,' Baxter said. 'Anyway, Louis is fine where he is. It's my car. My dog. My nose.'

And Pearce thought, yeah, enough of this shite. 'You can sit in this stink if you want,' he said. 'But I don't have to.' As he turned to get out of the car, he felt a hand on his arm.

'Please' – it was Rog – 'for May. Louis was her dog.'

Pearce looked at the fat fingers on his arm. He stared at them until they moved away. He said, 'What makes you think I won't end up in your boot like poor Louis?'

'Maybe you will,' Baxter said. 'Wallace wouldn't think twice about killing you if he had to. And he's more than capable of doing it.'

For fuck's sake. You'd have thought the ugly bastard could have tried a bit of flattery. Did he want Pearce to accept this job or not? 'If that's what you think, why do you want to hire me?'

'We can't afford anyone else.'

Nice.

The smell was really getting to Pearce now. Dead dog and cigarette smoke. It had soaked into his skin. He wanted to scrub his cheeks till they shone. He opened his window. It made only a little difference, letting in the rumble of traffic and children's shouts and a trace of barbecue smoke which momentarily masked the other smells in the car. He looked to see if he could spot anyone having a barbecue. But whoever it was, they were further up the beach, out of sight.

Baxter picked at a fingernail. 'Mr Pearce,' he said, 'my daughter's husband is one nasty piece of work. You've seen what he did to my dog. We've told you what he did to us. You can see the evidence for yourself.' He indicated his nose. 'And he's already hit my pregnant daughter.'

'Wallace has a rep,' Flash told him. 'A serious rep. Ask around.'

Pearce looked away. Silence in the car for a while. He listened to the distant crash of waves, the beep of a reversing bus in the station away to his left. He stared out to sea. Gulls swooped for morsels at the water's edge. He had the strange feeling of timelessness. Like this could have been a hundred years ago. Then he heard the drone of a plane passing overhead. Shattered the illusion.

Just as well. He was turning into a bit of a fanny for a minute there.

'He hit May. He beat us up. He killed the dog. There's a progression there. That's worrying, man.' A muscle twitched in Rog's cheek. 'He's going to kill somebody.'

Copyright © 2007 Allan Guthrie
Published by Polygon / Berlinn Ltd