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Stalkers

Written by Paul Finch

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PAUL FINCH

Stalkers

AVON

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For Mum and Dad,
whose encouragement never flagged

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Prologue

The night before, they met up one final time to go through the plan.

They were consummate professionals. Each one of them knew his role to the last. Nothing had been left to chance: they'd researched the target thoroughly; any possible glitch had been considered and accounted for. Timing would be all-important, but as they'd rehearsed exhaustively there were no real concerns. Of course, the target wouldn't be keeping to a schedule, so there were potential problems there. But they'd be in full contact with each other throughout by phone, and one of the things experience had taught them was how to think on their feet and, if necessary, improvise. Another was patience. If the schedule slipped drastically, to the point where there might be genuine variables to deal with, they'd withdraw, regroup and move again on a later date.

It was always best to keep things safe and simple. But good planning was the whole thing: gathering intelligence, assimilating it and then striking at exactly the right moment with speed and practised precision. And in many ways that was its own reward. As job satisfaction went, there was nothing quite like it.

After they'd run things through a couple of times, they treated themselves to a drink; a bottle of thirty-year-old Glen Albyn bought with the proceeds of the last mission. And while they drank, they destroyed all the data they'd accumulated during the prep: written documentation, drawn plans, photographs, timetables, tapes containing audio information, memory sticks loaded with footage shot by mobile phones or digital cameras. They placed it all in a brazier, on top of logs and kindling, doused it with lighter-fluid and torched it.

On the off-chance something did go wrong and they had to start the whole process again – the trailing, the observing, the intelligence-gathering – they would do it without question or complaint. Proficiency was all; they didn't believe in taking shortcuts. In any case, with minds as focused as theirs, much of the key detail would be retained in their memories. They'd only had to delay things once previously, and on that occasion the second run had been much easier than the first.

As they watched it all burn, the hot sparks spiralling into the night sky, they slapped each other's shoulders and drank toasts: for good luck – which they wouldn't need; and for the catch – which they'd enjoy as much as the chase. They'd almost finished the Glen Albyn, but if they woke up in the morning with muzzy heads, it wouldn't matter: the mission was only due to commence late in the day. They'd be fine. They were on form, on top of their game, a well-oiled machine. And of course it would help that the target didn't have an inkling and would get up with the alarm clock, prepared for nothing more than another routine day.

That was the way most women seemed to live. How often it was their undoing.

Chapter 1

There was something innately relaxing about Friday evenings in London.

They were especially pleasant in late August. As five o'clock came and went, and the minute hand progressed steadily around towards six, you could feel the city unwinding beneath the balmy, dust-filled sky. The chaos of its streets was as wild and noisy as ever – the rivers of traffic flowed and tooted, the sidewalks thronged with bustling pedestrians – yet the 'grump' was absent. People were still rushing, yes, but now they were rushing to get somewhere where they wanted to be, not because they were on a time-clock.

In the offices of Goldstein & Hoff, on the sixth floor of Branscombe Court in the heart of the capital's glittering Square Mile, Louise Jennings felt exactly the same way. She had ten minutes' worth of paperwork to finish, and then the weekend officially began – and how she was anticipating it. She was out riding on Saturday morning, and in the afternoon was shopping for a new outfit as they had a rotary club dinner that evening. Sunday would just be a nice, lazy day, which, if the weather reports were anything

to go by, they could spend in the garden or on a drive into the Chilterns.

Louise was a secretary by trade, but that job-title might have been a little misleading. She was actually a 'senior secretary'; she had several staff of her own, was ensconced for most of the working day in her private office, and answered directly to Mr Malcolm Forester, who was MD of Goldstein & Hoff's Compliance department. She turned over a neat forty thousand pounds per annum, which wasn't bad for an ex-secondary school girl from Burnt Oak, and was held in high esteem by most of the company's employees, particularly the men – though this might have owed as much to her shapely thirty-year-old figure, long strawberry-blonde hair and pretty blue eyes as to her intellect. Not that Louise minded. She was spoken for – she'd been married to Alan for six years now, and had dated him for three years before that. But she enjoyed being attractive. It made her husband proud, and so long as other men restricted themselves to looking, she had no gripes. If she was honest, her looks were a weapon in her armoury. Few in the financial sector, of either sex, were what you'd call 'reconstructed'. It was a patriarchal society, and though the potential was always there for women to wield great power, they still had to look and behave like women. When Louise had first been interviewed for a job with Goldstein & Hoff, she'd been under strict orders from Alan to make the best of herself – to wear a smart tight skirt, high heels, a clingy, low-cut blouse. It had got her the job, and had remained her official uniform ever since.

Okay, on one hand it might be a little demeaning to consider that you'd only advanced through life because you were gorgeous, but that was never the whole story. Louise was highly qualified, but so were numerous other women; in which case, anything that gave you an edge was to be embraced.

It was just after six when she got away, hurrying across the road to Mad Jack's, where Simone, Nicola and Carly, her three underlings – all of whom had been released at the generous 'Friday afternoon only' time of four-thirty – would be waiting for her.

Mad Jack's, a onetime gin palace dating from Dickens's day, had been refurbished for the modern age, but still reeked of atmosphere. Behind its traditional wood and glass entrance was a dimly-lit interior, arranged on split-levels and filled wherever you looked with timber beams, hardwood panelling and exposed brickwork. As always at this time of the week, it was crowded to its outer doors with shouting, besuited revellers. The noise level was astonishing. Guffaws echoed from wall to wall; there was a clashing of glasses and a banging of tables and chairs on the solid oak floor. It could have been worse of course: Louise had started at Goldstein & Hoff before the smoking-ban had been introduced, and back in those days the place was fogged with cigar fumes.

The four girls made a little enclave for themselves in one of the far corners, and settled down. They ordered a salad each, though with a central order of chips accompanied by mayo and ketchup dips. Louise made sure to drink only a couple of Chardonnays with hers. It wasn't just that she was the boss and therefore had a responsibility to behave with wisdom and decorum, but she had to drive some of the way home. Nevertheless, it was a part of the week that they all looked forward to; a time for the sort of rude quips that were strictly forbidden during company hours (at least, on Louise's watch). Occasionally other colleagues would drag up stools and join them, men to drunkenly flirt or women to share tasty snippets they'd just picked up. At some point that evening it would assume the dimensions of a free-for-all. By seven-thirty, Carly was onto her sixth Southern Comfort

and coke and Nicola was in a deep conversation with a handsome young chap from Securities. The ornately glazed doors crashed open as yet more City guys piled in. There were further multi-decibel greetings, increased roars of laughter. The place was starting to smell of sweat as well as alcohol, and, checking her watch, Louise decided that she'd soon be on her way.

Before heading for home, she went downstairs into the basement, where the lavatories were. The ladies was located at the end of a short passage, alongside several other doors – two marked 'Staff Only', one marked 'Gents'. When she entered, it was empty. She went into one of the cubicles, hiked her skirt up, lowered her tights and sat down.

And heard someone come into the room after her.

Louise expected the normal 'click-click-click' of heels progressing to one of the other cubicles or to the mirror over the washbasins. But for the briefest time there was no sound at all. Then she heard it – the slow *stump* of flat shoes filled by heavy feet.

They advanced a couple of yards and then halted. Louise found herself listening curiously. Why did she suddenly have the feeling that whoever it was had stopped just on the other side of her door? She glanced down. From this angle it was impossible to see beneath the door, but she was suddenly convinced there was someone there, listening.

She glanced at the lock. It was fully engaged.

The silence continued for several seconds, before the feet moved away.

Louise struggled not to exhale with relief. She was being absurd, she realised. There was nothing to worry about. She was only seven or eight feet below the brawling bedlam that was Mad Jack's on a Friday evening.

Once more the feet halted.

Louise listened again. Had they entered one of the other

cubicles? Almost certainly they had, but there was no sound of a door being closed or a lock being thrown. And now that she was listening particularly hard, she fancied she could hear breathing – steady, regular, but also deep and husky. Like a man's breathing.

Maybe it was a member of staff, a caretaker or repairman? She was about to clear her throat, to let him know that there was a woman in here, when it suddenly struck her as a bad idea. Suppose it *wasn't* a member of staff?

The breathing continued, and the feet moved again across the room; more dull heavy thuds on the tiled floor, getting louder. Whoever it was, they were backtracking along the front of the row of cubicles.

Unconsciously, Louise raised a knuckle to her mouth. Was he going to stop outside her door again?

But he didn't.

He *stumped* heavily past, veering away across the room. A second later, she heard the lavatories' main door open and close. And then there was silence.

Louise waited. Still there was silence.

Eventually she stood, pulled her tights back up, pushed her skirt down, cautiously disengaged the lock, and peeked out. She couldn't see everything, but she appeared to be alone. She took a breath, then rushed across to the door, opened it and went out into the passage – and stopped in her tracks. Halfway up it on the right, one of the other doors was ajar. It was one of those marked 'Staff Only' and a thin slice of blackness was visible on the other side. Louise stared at it hard. Was that faint movement she could see through there? Was someone partly concealed but staring back at her?

The door crashed open with a violent bang.

But the man who came through it was young and wearing the pressed black trousers and olive-green t-shirt of the bar-staff. He was carrying a plastic tray filled with gleaming wet

crockery. When he saw her and realised that he'd made her jump, he grinned apologetically. 'Sorry love.'

He sauntered away up the stairs, towards the bar area.

With one hand on her heart, Louise ventured forward and glanced through the door as it swung slowly closed. Beyond it, a darkened corridor with boxes down one side connected with a series of lit rooms, and at its far end, with a door opening out into one of the service alleys behind the building. Several other members of staff were moving around down there.

Feeling foolish, she hurried on upstairs and rejoined the others.

Louise finally left the premises, briefcase in hand, just before eight. It was a five-minute walk down to Bank, where she took the Central Line to Oxford Circus. There, she changed to the Bakerloo.

She rode down the escalator to the northbound line, and when she got to the bottom found that she was alone. This might have been odd at any other time of day, but it was now Friday evening and most travellers would have been headed into town rather than away from it. The arched passageways were equally deserted, yet Louise had only walked a few yards when she thought she heard footsteps somewhere behind her. She stopped and listened, but now heard nothing.

She strolled through onto the platform. Again, no one else was present. A gust of warm wind blew a few scraps of waste paper along the gleaming tracks. And then she heard the footsteps again – apparently drawing closer. Discomforted, she gazed back along the passage, seeing nothing but expecting someone to come into view.

No one did. And now the footsteps stopped. It was almost as though whoever it was had sensed that she was waiting for him.

A train groaned into the station behind her.

Relieved, she climbed aboard.

At Marylebone, back among commuters, she bought an evening paper and had a coffee before boarding an overland train to High Wycombe. It was now close to eight-thirty. There was no real rush – Alan, who owned his own insurance company, spent his Friday afternoons on the golf course and would be in the clubhouse bar until well after eleven, but it was always good to feel you were almost home. She glanced through the window as she sped along. In the smoky dusk, the drear West London suburbs gradually blended with the woods and fields of the Home Counties. Darkness was encroaching fast; twenty-five minutes later, when she left the train at Gerrards Cross, it had fallen completely.

She was alone again, and it was very quiet. But she wasn't worried – this was entirely normal. Gerrards Cross was a typical South Bucks country town, so small that it was actually more of a village. Being the most expensive postcode outside London, it was way too upmarket to have a lively night-life, even on Fridays. Its main street, which ran through it from one end to the other, boasted a few bars and restaurants, but these were quality establishments; pub-crawlers and binge-drinkers never darkened their doors.

Louise left the station, which was unmanned at this hour, and followed a hedged side-path down towards the parking area. Gerrards Cross railway station was built in a deep cutting, on a much lower level than the town itself, so its car park was a dark, secluded spot at the best of times. Now, as she descended the steeply sloping path from the station, she noted that several of its electric floodlights were not working. What was more, as the car park came into view she thought that her car was missing.

She stopped, surprised, but then spotted it. It was the only

vehicle left and it was down at the farthest end, under the low, leafy boughs of a very ancient chestnut tree. Thanks to the damaged lights, that particular corner was deep in gloom. She set off walking.

And heard footsteps again.

She halted and glanced over her shoulder.

The path curved away behind, so she could only see twenty yards along it. There was no one in sight, and the footsteps abruptly stopped.

Louise continued to peer behind her. The slope of the station roof was visible over the hedge. Beyond that, higher up, there were lights along the balustrade of the bridge – it was possible she'd heard someone crossing it on foot. But again, there was no sign of anyone.

She started out across the car park, which was perhaps two hundred yards long by fifty wide and was bordered on its right-hand side by thick undergrowth. Louise now imagined she could hear movement in this undergrowth: a persistent crackling of foliage, as if something heavy was pushing its way through. An animal, she told herself. This part of the county was alive with badgers and foxes, especially at night.

Then she saw the figure sitting against the trunk of the chestnut tree.

She stopped short, a cold chill down her spine.

Was it a tramp, a hobo of some sort? You rarely, if ever, saw anyone like that in this exclusive district. He was slumped and ragged, and wearing what looked like a dirty old coat, tatters of which were moving in the breeze.

But then she realised what she was actually seeing.

The ragged, bundled object 'seated' against the tree-trunk was nothing more than a bin-bag stuffed with rubbish and waste paper.

Again feeling ridiculous, Louise hurried on.

The car was still half-hidden in murk. Its near-side, where the driver's door was, was up against the undergrowth, and the narrow gap this afforded was completely hidden in shadow. But now Louise just wanted to get home. She was spooking herself with all these daft, pointless worries. So she went deliberately and boldly around to the driver's side, acutely aware of the deep undergrowth at her back as she fiddled with the key-fob. But she could no longer hear movement in it, and even if she could, so what? It was summer. Birds would be roosting in there. She was only a few hundred yards from the Packhorse Common, where wild deer had been sighted. In any case, there was no sound now.

She unlocked the car, threw her briefcase into the back and climbed in behind the wheel. A moment later, she'd gunned the engine, and was on her way out.

She left Gerrards Cross via the B416, heading south towards Slough. At Stoke Poges she turned right and continued west along narrow, unnamed lanes. It was a breezy but warm night, so she had her window partially wound down. Moths and other bugs fluttered in her headlights. The eyes of a cat sparkled as it slid across the road in front of her. At Farnham Common she swung south towards Burnham. Belts of trees growing on either side of the road hemmed her in a tunnel, their branches interlacing overhead like fingers.

Louise had relaxed again. She was only three miles from the snug comforts of home.

But with a thunderous *bang*, she lost control of the vehicle. It lurched violently downward and slewed across the road, the steering wheel spinning in her hands. She jammed her brakes on, skidding to a halt with a fearsome screech.

When finally at rest against the verge, she sat there, stunned. The only sound was the engine ticking as it cooled. She jumped out.

What she saw left her astounded: her front two tyres hung in shreds around their wheel-trims. It was the same with her rear tyres. They'd literally been ripped to pieces; spokes of broken ply-cord poked out from them. She walked around the vehicle in a circle, scarcely able to comprehend the misfortune of it. One blow-out would have been bad enough; she'd never changed a wheel before and thought she could probably do it, but here – in the middle of the woods, at this time of night? Not that it mattered now, because she didn't have spares for all four of them.

She fumbled in her jacket pocket for her mobile phone. She'd have to call Alan. Okay, he was at the golf club and would probably have had too many drinks to drive, but there might be someone who could come and pick her up. If not, he'd know what to do.

Then Louise spotted something else.

The phone was now in her hand, but her finger froze on the keypad.

About forty yards behind the car, something glinted with moonlight as it lay across the road. She walked slowly towards it, but stopped when she was only halfway.

It was a 'stinger' – at least, that's what she thought they were called. One of those retractable beds of nails that police use to stop getaway cars after bank robberies. Someone had deliberately left it across the road.

Louise realised that she was shaking. She backtracked towards the car. Had some hooligans done this, some idiotic bunch of kids who had no better way to waste their time? Or was it something more sinister? Not allowing herself to think about the latter option, and certainly not glancing into the unlit reaches of woodland on all sides, she scrambled back to the car and yanked open the driver's door.

She paused briefly to consider: she couldn't drive on her hubcaps of course. But she *could* lock herself in. Yes, that

was what she'd do. She'd lock herself in and call for help. She climbed behind the wheel, closed the door and made to apply the locks when she sensed the presence, just to the left of her.

Slowly, she twisted around to look.

He was in the front passenger seat, having clearly climbed in while she'd been distracted by the stinger. He was of heavy build and wore dark clothing: a bulky leather jacket and underneath that a 'hoodie' top with the hood actually pulled back. His hair was thinning and he had a pair of huge, jug-handle ears. But he had no nose – just a gristle-filled cavity – and no eyelids, while the rest of his face was a patchwork of puffy, raddled scar tissue.

Louise tried to scream, but a thick hand in a leather glove slapped onto her mouth. A second hand, also gloved, fastened around her throat.

And began to squeeze.

Chapter 2

It was typical Bermondsey – scrap yards, wasteland, litter, graffiti running over everything.

Heck drove through it with a jaundiced eye, thinking only that his battered old Fiat Brava matched this decayed environment perfectly. To his left somewhere lay the river, delineated by the occasional crane or wharf-tower. He passed a row of boarded-up buildings on his right. A bag-lady sat on the kerb, her knees spread indecently wide as she drank from a bottle of cheap wine. Directly ahead, derelict tower blocks – bleak edifices of stained concrete and broken glass – were framed on the slate-grey sky.

He drove on, too weary to be oppressed by such a scene.

The appointed meeting-place turned out to be a crossroads close to a low railway arch. Corrugated steel fences hemmed it in from all sides and there was a single streetlight, its bulb long smashed. On the left, a mound of flattened brick rubble provided sufficient room for parking. However, Heck cruised on past, surveying the place carefully. There was nobody there, which, checking his watch – it was now ten minutes to six – was not surprising. He was early for the rendezvous, but at this hour on a Sunday morning there was

unlikely to be anyone about in this desolate neck of the woods. He passed under the arch and drove another three hundred yards until a broken fence and a patch of scorched ground afforded him a turning-space. After that, driving slowly this time, he made his way back.

At the crossroads, another vehicle was now present. A maroon Bentley had parked, and a tall, lean man was standing against it, reading the *Sunday Sport*. He wore a black suit and had short hair bleached a shocking blonde. When Heck saw the car and the man, he groaned with disbelief. In truth, he hadn't expected a great deal from this meeting. The voice on his office answering-machine had been abrupt and to the point, stating simply that it had information he might find useful. It had then given a time and place, and had rung off. When Heck had traced it, the call had been made from a payphone somewhere in South London. He'd received dozens of similar things over the last few months, but on this occasion, perhaps because he was so dog-tired, he'd started thinking irrationally; he'd wondered if maybe he'd get a break simply because he was due one.

Not so apparently. It was another false dawn.

He pulled up on the opposite side of the crossroads and climbed from his Fiat. He knew that he looked like shit: he was groggy with fatigue, sallow-faced, unshaven. His jacket and tie were rumpled, his shirt stained from drips of late-night coffee.

Heck idled across the road, hands in his trouser pockets. The tall, blond man, whose name was Dale Loxton, glanced up over his newspaper. This close, his otherwise smart appearance was belied by the ugly, jagged scar down his left cheek and the fanged snakehead tattoo on the side of his neck. He wore black leather gloves.

Heck sensed that another figure had appeared from a concealed position to his right. It was Lennie 'the Loon'

Asquith: he was burly, almost ape-like. He too wore a black suit and black leather gloves, but he had long, greasy red hair and a brutal face pock-marked with acne scars. Neither of the men was smiling.

'Regular double-act, you two, aren't you?' Heck said.

Loxton folded his paper. 'Mr Ballamara would like a word with you.'

'And I'd like to get home and find Jessica Alba making my breakfast wearing only an apron and high heels. What are the chances of that, do you reckon?'

'It's just a little chat,' Loxton said, opening the Bentley's rear off-side door.

Asquith had advanced until he was very close and now stood there like a rock, his big arms folded across his barrel chest. Heck knew he had no option. Not that he fancied it. Even 'little chats' with Bobby Ballamara had a habit of turning nasty.

He climbed in and Loxton closed the door behind him. The car's interior was plush, all fragrant leather and varnished woodwork. Ballamara, as always, immaculate in a pinstriped suit with a shirt and tie of pink silk and a pink handkerchief peeking from his breast pocket, was engrossed in a copy of *The Times*. He was an elderly man, maybe sixty, rat-faced, with close-cropped white hair and a white, pencil-thin moustache. To all intents and purposes he looked like an ordinary businessman, until you saw his eyes; they were dead, flat, ice-grey in colour.

'Ah,' he said, in his only slightly noticeable Cockney accent. 'Heck.'

'My friends call me "Heck". To you it's "Detective Sergeant Heckenburg".'

Ballamara smiled to himself and closed the newspaper.

'What do you want?' Heck asked.

'How's it going? You making any progress?'

Heck reached up to loosen his tie, only to find that it was already loose; it hung at his throat in a limp knot. 'Do I look like I am?'

'You've certainly been putting the hours in. There's no question about that.'

'Been keeping tabs on me, have you?'

'Now and then. As a scrupulous tax-payer, I like to know my money's being well-spent.'

Heck feigned surprise. 'They tax drugs and prostitution now, do they?'

'Let's try and keep this friendly, Heckenburg.'

'You asking me that, or telling me?'

Ballamara's smile faded a little. 'You know, these snappy comebacks may win you kudos with the secretaries in the CID office. But I'd remind you that my daughter has now been missing for two years.'

'And I'd remind you that a large number of other people's daughters have been missing for a similar period of time, if not longer. And I'm no more personally answerable to them than I am to you.'

'You still the only officer on the case?'

'You know I can't divulge information regarding an ongoing enquiry.'

Ballamara nodded thoughtfully. 'Which means you *are* the only officer on the case. In the whole of the Metropolitan Police only one detective is working on my daughter's disappearance.'

Heck sighed. He felt like they'd been over this ground umpteen times. 'I'm not in the Metropolitan Police anymore, Mr Ballamara. I'm with the National Crime Group, as you well know. That means we have less manpower and we're not only investigating crime in London, we're investigating it in the whole of England and Wales. However, the point is a good one. So why don't you lodge your complaint with

Commander Laycock at New Scotland Yard? Believe me, I'd like nothing better. Now, if that's all there is, I've been on a surveillance operation all night, I have about six hours of paperwork still to do, and after that I'm off to bed.'

He opened the door and made to climb out, but Asquith was standing on the other side, and slammed it closed again. Heck pulled back sharply, only just managing to avoid smashing his face on the window.

'Heckenburg, there's something you should know about me,' Ballamara said. It was said casually; a simple statement. But the gang leader's flat, grey eyes had now hardened until they were more like coins. 'I have personally used the foundations of motorway bridges to bury coppers who were much tougher, much cleverer, and much, much higher up the food-chain than you. You think I'm just going to sit back and let some low-rank pipsqueak keep fobbing me off while my daughter is suffering God knows what?'

Heck rubbed his forehead. 'I'm doing what I can.'

'It isn't enough.'

'There's no case, alright?' Heck stared at him as earnestly as he could. 'I've told you this before. Your Noreen went missing. I'm sorry about that, but she was nineteen and a big girl. She had money, she had her independence – she's hardly what you'd class as a vulnerable person. You need to accept the possibility that she might have disappeared because she wanted to.'

'She was out with her mates in the West End,' Ballamara reminded him. 'It was their usual Saturday night get-together. All she had with her was her handbag and the very skimpy clothes she was standing up in. The next day I searched her flat, myself. The wardrobes were still full. All her suitcases were there, her passport was in the fucking drawer, for Christ's sake.'

Heck didn't really know how to reply. They'd had this

conversation over and over, and in any case the gangster was preaching to the converted. Heck also believed that Noreen Ballamara had fallen victim to foul play, and, in that respect, his toeing the 'official' line was becoming thankless and tiresome.

'Look Ballamara,' he finally said, 'you need to understand . . .'

'*Mister* Ballamara, while we're insisting on formalities.'

'Mr Ballamara, it's not me you've got to convince. But with no body, no crime scene and basically no evidence of anything at all, I'm pissing in the wind. At present, all we can do is class Noreen as a missing person.'

'And what about all the others?'

'The same thing. There's no proof that any of these disappearances are connected.'

'You don't think it's a hell of a coincidence?'

'Look at the bigger picture. Thousands of people drop out of sight every year, but only a fraction of them in suspicious circumstances.'

Ballamara nodded at this and smiled. 'In which case, why are *you*, an officer in the NCG's Serial Crimes Unit, looking into these particular forty cases?'

'That's what my gaffers are wondering.'

'It isn't good enough, Heckenburg. I want answers.'

'What do you think I want?'

'*I don't give a flying fuck what you want!*' The gangster leaned across and peered into Heck's face with lupine intensity. He'd now blanched to a very unhealthy shade of white and was so close that his breath filled the cop's nostrils with a reek of peppermint. When he spoke again, it was in a low, menacing monotone. 'Now you listen, my son. I've had it up to here with this bullshit. So from now on, you aren't just working for the police – you're working for *me*. Consider the fact that you're still walking around with an intact spine

your salary. Now get out and get back on the job, or I'll personally rearrange your face so your fucking mum wouldn't recognise it.'

Right on cue, the car door opened again.

Heck found himself being helped out by Asquith, though, with a bunched fist gripping him by the back of his collar, it was the sort of help he probably didn't need. The door closed with a *thud*, and then Heck was standing in the road watching as Asquith sidled around the vehicle to the front passenger door, and Loxton made to climb behind the steering wheel.

'Don't suppose you lot have been looking for Noreen, have you?' Heck asked them.

Loxton eyed him as though he couldn't believe a copper could ask so stupid a question. 'Course we fucking have.'

'Any leads you'd care to share?'

'Dale!' Ballamara shouted from inside the car. 'Stop jawing with that fucking waste of space. He hasn't got time for idle chat.'

Heck stood back as the Bentley swerved off the rubble and drove away in a cloud of dust and debris. In truth, there was any number of things he could have charged Bobby Ballamara with. That morning alone he was good for wasting police time, threatening to kill, unlawful imprisonment, and so on. But these were Mickey Mouse offences, arrests that would only distract from the main story, which was the thirty-eight missing women that Heck had been looking for since the beginning of 2010. What was more, Bobby Ballamara and his boys who, by their own admission, were keeping their ear to the ground, had a potentially useful role to play in this, so alienating them even further would be self-defeating. Besides, for all his bravado, Ballamara was unlikely to whack a copper. He was strictly old school. A vicious, violent racketeer, he wouldn't hesitate to have a

fellow lowlife's brains beaten out of him if he felt like it. But his traditional gangland ethics made him seem anachronistic in this age of crazy, gun-toting killers who'd think nothing of massacring school-kids should they get in the way.

Heck walked back to his car, only to spot that its front nearside tyre was flat. For an angry moment he assumed that either Asquith or Loxton had got bored while he'd been in conversation with their boss. But then he saw the rusty nail sticking out of it, almost certainly picked up on the patch of burned ground that he'd used as a turning-space earlier. Irritated with his own carelessness, and feeling way too tired for the physical effort now required, he went to the boot for his spare.

That was when it began to rain.