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Reflections – Monologues and muses of modern times

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Chapter 1

Bill's lament

So, I start another day, sat here in my small dark lounge in my big, faded brown, leather armchair looking out of the front window, again.

Watching, nothing really. It's cloudy, a bit grey and colder than usual for a late Spring afternoon. We had rain yesterday but not today although, there is a threat of it, but the weather girl on the BBC says it'll remain dry. I'm not sure though, you can't always believe what they say, especially when they talk about what's going to happen in a few days' time. I don't think they really know, it's all guess work, that is until the day of the forecast when I can just look out of my window anyway, like I'm doing now, at nothing in particular, but I know it might rain later. Not much else happening, it's quiet, I live in quiet road, in a quiet town, nothing happens. Well, there is some stuff going on but it's mundane, ordinary, usual.

This is where I have arrived isn't it, mundane, ordinary Bill. I've had a life though, I've seen things, had a few adventures, met people. Spent my money, earned some more, lost even more then, earned more again and it's all brought me here after 79 years to my own ground floor apartment with two bedrooms, a small lounge and compact kitchen in this old Victorian building. It's got a nice back garden that I can sit in and watch more mundane stuff happening and a front lawn with a cherry tree in it that somewhat blocks my view of the road.

It's a bit battered this old chair, I've had it for 20 odd years, bought it new from a shop on the high street. The missus went mad, said we didn't need it, it wouldn't last, and we couldn't afford it. Turns out she was wrong; it's seen her out and still serves me well even though it's a bit tatty. Its soft and comfortable, more so with my cushion on the seat, in spite of the fact that the leather is worn and a bit cracked. It's wide and I can sink into it with my cup of tea and the free paper and I sometimes drop off into a light snooze, waking myself with a start, when I snore.

Margaret was only 64 when she died, 15 years ago. Cancer. Of the lungs but she never smoked ever, in her whole but short life. It was passive they said, just like Roy Castle the nurse said to me in that shouty patronising way some people adopt when speaking with old folk. As if we're all deaf, or slow or just stupid. And I just looked at her, this nurse, hurt, distressed that I was being handled in this manner, not knowing what to say or do. I just said thank you and closed my eyes, hoping she'd go away to attend to someone else and she did, quite quickly as it happened. My son took care of it all after that. We only had one child, Margaret thought that was enough. She didn't like being intimate, she didn't like being pregnant, she didn't like giving birth, she didn't like being a parent really. She didn't like kids, ours was just about ok, but she just couldn't stand other peoples. Funny really, she was quite religious and talked about caring and loving the Lord and all His people, but she wasn't that good at practicing the theory. Margaret knew it all, all that bible stuff and the church groups where she smiled and said kind words but then, I doubt she listened to what she was saying. She'd come home from one of the groups where she was treasurer, or chair, or secretary. Margaret was always one to get involved but only when she could have some authority, put her point across, be in charge. Yes, that's when she smiled the most, when she oversaw something or someone. But she'd come home and moan about everyone in the group, what they were doing, or not doing, what they were wearing, what they said, what they meant, it went on and on. I asked her once why she went if she didn't like it. I regretted it afterwards. Not because I was sorry to have asked, but because she turned on me. I was stupid, I was inconsiderate, I didn't understand, I didn't attend church and so I was fundamentally a bad person. It all came flooding out as though she'd held it all in, pent up

bubbling away like a volcano only to burst free at that moment in a venomous lava, a torrent of dislike. She was 38, we both were. Since that outburst we hardly spoke, not in a civil way, not like a couple of people who got married when they were both 20 and had grown up together. We had endured 18 years of what was already a distant relationship. Our son didn't make things better or easier. She christened him Gabriel, I'd have preferred Gary or Ian but even then, in those early days I had nothing to do with it. We were young, possibly too young but I was actually looking forward to becoming a dad. Margaret from the word go, hated it. Outwardly, to the groups and acquaintances, even other family, she said all the right things, but it was me who had him on my knee. It was me who attended to him crying when he needed changing. I fed him, formula milk from a bottle, day, and night. She headed off any thought of natural breast feeding as we left the hospital, despatching me to the shops to stock up. She needed to get fit quickly, get back to being in charge of her various groups, she needed her sleep. More than me apparently. And I let her have her own way because...I don't know. Just because. Because that's what happened with Margaret, she got her own way at everything. The consequence of her not getting her own way was just too much to put up with.

Anyway, that is how it was. I brought up Gary, that's what I called him when she wasn't around, and she got on with her groups and her religious do-gooding.

The postman is here now, just walking up the path. We exchange our usual wave; he posts the mail and off he goes. Normal, mundane post for me. Important information from someone selling furniture or stair lifts or garden sheds or loft insulation. Mrs Riley upstairs gets much more interesting looking stuff. We share the hallway, so our post gets delivered together. When she picks it up, mine is left in the pigeonhole outside my front door. Sometimes I get there first, usually when she is out, and put hers on the step that leads to the door of her apartment. She gets a lot of bank mail, and from solicitors, I can tell from the post marks and logos. She's quite well off so I'd imagine they are updates on her investments. Anyway, she got there first, I just heard her going back upstairs. I'll pick up my post later when I get up to make a brew.

I hope he closed the gate today, the postie that is. He didn't last Wednesday. It kept swinging in the breeze, squeaking, and banging on the gate post. I watched it for an hour or so, I was getting so mad that he could just leave it, swinging like that, without a care for the impact on people. That's a problem with today's world, so uncaring, no thought for anyone else. I rang the GPO or whatever they call it these days, to complain. I told them, the gate might be damaged, the gate post might get damaged, it wasn't what I expected of a national service. I don't think they were really bothered, they kept saying sorry and that it wouldn't happen again, but I think they just wanted me off the phone. He said that a report would be sent to the manager of the local sorting office and that I might get a call if they wanted more details. No one rang, but then no-one ever does. Gary gave me a little mobile phone; so, I could get in touch with him if there was an emergency but there won't be one and anyway, it's ridiculously small and complicated. I have my phone on the table I said to him, it's a good one and I can manage the buttons. I can take his one out with me when I go to the shops he said. Why, I don't know. I take it with me when I go to Tesco on a Tuesday and a Saturday, but I forget to switch it on, I don't know how it works really. The gate is closed so he must have gotten a telling off.

He is 55 now, Gary. Married with grown-up kids of his own. I don't see much of them, they live too far away for me to drive and they have busy lives. He rings from time to time, but we don't say much. How am I, what have I done, do I eat the right food. It sometimes feels like it's a chore for him. Gary's wife is a nice girl, Lucy she's called, I think and their boys Shaun and Matthew. I get a card from them at my birthday which is nice, always in Gary's handwriting. I keep them though, they're in my box. I have a few boxes with my things in them, it'll be easier for Gary when I go. I

mean, he'll be able to find things that he'll need like my insurance policies. I've got two, to make sure he has a bit to remember me by and help with immediate finances. Two policies and a bit left over from Margaret's life insurance and pension. Not that she ever thought about leaving anything for anyone, it was me who organised that. I doubt she knew it existed. Even when she had the fall, the only thing she thought about was herself. I say 'fall', she tripped, at the top of the stairs, head-first down to the bottom. She split her skull on the stone floor. It was a right mess; the ambulance was very quick and managed to revive her and take her to the hospital. I went too, in the ambulance. I remember just sitting there as the lady worked on Margaret. Tubes and injections, I recall. She was trying to make conversation, the nurse, but I didn't know what to say and it was just tittle tattle in truth. How long had we been married? that sort of thing, what did it matter? Even in the hospital room, they were making small talk, just to keep my mind off it, I think. Gary turned up after an hour or so and he dealt with it all from there on. Gary is good like that. I was sat next to Margaret watching her sleep, with all the equipment beeping and flashing and I was just hoping that we wouldn't be long. When she opened her eyes, I looked at her, hoping she wasn't going to be mad. When her eyes focussed and she recognised me she sort of looked away, out through the curtain towards the window. She asked me where Gabriel was, quietly in a strained rasping voice and I said I didn't know who that was. I felt strong for the first time ever and I quite liked it as I could see the rage in her eyes, on her horrible hate filled face but she was helpless and couldn't move. She recovered enough to go home after about three weeks, but she needed care. I got used to her being around again and the hostility that filled the air in the house when she was there. Her carer was a lovely lady, Julie. She was almost angelic and was experienced enough to be able to control Margaret and her moods, the fact Margaret now struggled with her mobility helped. She was still loud and spiteful towards me, but Julie had an effect on both of us and I found myself looking forward to the times each day when she would merrily appear at our house. We talked and got on well and it was possibly the nicest time I'd had living in that house. It was Julie who first remarked that Margaret's cough had gotten worse and perhaps we should get the doctor round as a precaution. She kindly organised that and Dr Gill quickly had Margaret admitted to hospital, as a precaution and undertake a few tests. Margaret was in hospital for a few days, Julie popped by to make sure I was ok and make me my dinner and we talked some more. Turns out Julie had been a carer for 20 years and loved her job which I struggled with, seeing as how she had to deal with people like Margaret. That said, she had a nature that was calming and interested, very endearing was Julie. After three days in hospital, Margaret was diagnosed with stage 3 lung cancer. Julie stopped coming after that which was a shame, but her work was to care for people in their homes, people with specific difficulties and I could manage on my own, or so they said.

The Asian man from the Indian takeaway just posted a leaflet through the letterbox. They have an offer on this week; 10% off the family meal for 4. It all sounds genuinely nice but it's no use to me, I'll leave it for Mrs Riley to find. She might use it when some of her friends come round. I've never had Indian food, Margaret wouldn't allow it in the house, she didn't like the smell and couldn't cope with so much spice in her food. It gave her an upset stomach. I don't know how she knew as she'd never tried it and as such, neither had I. Gary says it's nice. I have a pizza from Tesco now and again, chicken and sweetcorn. I quite like it and it can be tasty if I don't burn it. I like toast with egg and baked beans, I have that a lot. With a cup of tea. No sugar if you're making one!

The consultant at the hospital suggested that the cancer had been dormant for some time and the recent fall might have contributed to its rapid development. The stress of it all may have taken its toll and Margaret, who whilst usually strong had quite a delicate defence system. In fact, he went on and on, waffling about what may or may not have caused it, given she was a non-smoker and a god-

fearing woman, whatever that had to do with anything. Anyway, I got to the end of my tether and just asked him how long we had. Two weeks took me aback to be honest.

She was moved quite quickly to a hospice where she had her own room. She knew little about it given the drugs and appeared to be comfortable. I visited every day, it got me out of the house, and I was getting on well with one of the carers. He was my age and we had similar interests according to the little chats we had. He liked his Jaguar and the horses, and I liked my Mercedes and the horses too. In all honesty it was a good distraction for me, and I think he liked the break from his routine, which must have been quite difficult most of the time.

When I arrived on that Tuesday morning the hospice was really quiet. It was usually respectfully quiet but there was always a gentle buzz as the staff and visitors went about their business but on that day, it was very still. Even Courtney on reception appeared a bit subdued. She was quite young and had a natural, bouncy disposition. Very pretty and chatty, always had a nice word to say and a pleasant smile. Even today she had that smile, but it was somehow different. Perhaps in hindsight, it was just me subconsciously preparing for the day ahead. I went to see my carer friend in the canteen area, but he wasn't there, just a tired looking middle-aged lady, holding her coffee close to her chin with both hands. I smiled, she smiled. Margaret was asleep when I entered the room, or that's what it looked like, her eyes were closed, and she was still. So, I sat on the large chair in the corner, facing the window and watching the view. It was a nice one of open countryside, green with trees and birds. I'd been there about 15 mins when Margaret asked me why I came every day. I was startled and turned to see her looking me. She said she'd watched me since I entered the room and had noted I hadn't looked at her or checked the notes to see how I was. She asked me why I bothered coming out to see her when I clearly had no feelings for her. I told her she was right and that I came not out of a sense of duty to her, not to see how she was, but to get out of the house and speak with people, nicely. She struggled breathing and her heart monitor machine beeped faster as she spat out some venomous words that I didn't understand. She steadied herself and tightly screwed up her face. I didn't know if it was through pain or hatred, of me. She hissed at me and asked where her son was. I leant over the bed and again for the second time in my life, I felt in control of our relationship. I told her that Gary was on his way, he was due to visit today and would be about half an hour. I saw for the first time ever what looked like a tear in her eye. She asked me to come closer and still being the obedient, subservient fool, I had been all my life, I did so. She spat in my face and then said she wasn't sorry, not for anything.

Gary walked through the doorway just at the moment she died. Neither of us cried. We held each other for a moment, in fact it was more than that, we hugged each other, and Gary said its ok now dad, she's gone. The nurses came rushing in with a doctor and Gary dealt with them.

Mrs Riley is going out, looks like she's going to see someone special because she has her best coat on, and I think lipstick too. She waved at me as she went through the gate and I waved back. We spoke a few weeks ago in the back garden. We share that too. It was only a short conversation, but I enjoyed it. I think she in her 50's, she lives on her own, a widow without children. She has friends and lots of visitors though, most days there are people knocking or ringing the bell to her flat. They sometimes ring mine by mistake which can be annoying but at least I can open the door and say hello to someone.

After Margaret's funeral Gary sold my house and bought me this place. I liked the funeral, there was about a 100 people there, not many cried. There were church types and people from her other busy body groups all saying what a good job she did and how much she'd be missed, and how sorry they were for me and that I must keep in touch with them and if I ever needed anything, anything at all I

must let them know. I remember saying to Gary that no-one said how nice she was or how funny she was or even how loving or Christian she was. He laughed. The church put on a buffet and I paid for some wine and that was it. No more Margaret, no more pain.

Gary thought it best that I had a ground floor place. No stairs to fall down, lesson learned sort of thing. When we were moving out of the old house, Gary sat for a rest at the top of the stairs. I wasn't sure if he was thinking about his mother and her fall or whether he was genuinely tired. He and the removal men carried on and moved my things out over the course of the day. The things I wanted came to my new flat and the stuff I didn't want went to the family or a clearance sale. I gave the money from the clearance sale to Gary for his boys, it wasn't a lot, a few hundred each maybe. It was nice to get a thankyou card from them; written by Gary I think but nice all the same.

It was a few days after that Gary asked me if I knew what the screw holes were in the banister at the old house, at the top of the stairs. I told him that I had no idea and after living there all those years I'd never even noticed.

I'm thinking now, as I'm sat here in my tired old leather armchair, looking out of my tired old window at nothing in particular, speaking to nobody other than myself. I'm thinking if that were my opportunity to confess that I'd put down a trip wire across the top of the stairs and watched as Margaret tripped over it that day, falling head-first to what I hoped had been her death. I regret not telling him because if I did, maybe I would be in a real prison now. A prison occupied by people, with a cell mate and someone to cook proper food for me. If only I had thought about it, maybe I wouldn't be in the prison I am in today.

Chapter 2

Tea with Sheila

I spend most of my time here in our kitchen diner, cooking, thinking, dreaming, and listening to Radio 2. I like Ken Bruce and Steve Wright; they play my sort of music. Abba is on now, 'the winner takes it all...' which is quite apt when I think about it.

I love to cook; it gets me away. I mean it's more preparing food these days, 'to cook' suggests ingredients and herbs, spices that sort of thing which I can do but...not so much now that I'm not working and he's on part time. He does three days, 8:30 to 4, Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday but goes in everyday Monday to Friday. He reckons it's so the neighbours think he's full time and that he's out from under my feet. Also, if any extra work does turn up on the site, he'll be there to pick it up; not that he ever does, or if he does, I don't see any benefit. £100 a day, £300 a week is what it brings in and we manage on that and benefits to keep us all in the manner to which we have become accustomed ha-ha, which isn't anything fancy, but we survive.

And when I say 'gets me away' I don't mean literally of course; I mean in my mind. Yes, I drift off, especially when making tea or is it dinner? The one you have early evening. We call it tea up here in Lancashire, but I know some in the South call it dinner but that's a mid-day barm cake for me, with ham on or corned beef. That could be a bap, or tea cake or even just a soft roll to you. I don't know why it's so complicated, in a funny way, why can't we all agree on one term for things? It'd be boring then though wouldn't it? Anyway, I drift away to places, abroad usually, that I'd like to visit, and I wander around looking at things I think would be there and would be nice to look at. Sometimes I go to places closer to home, London, or Liverpool perhaps and I talk to people in the shops and in the museums about what they are up to and what their lives are like. I go through things that have happened as well, like when my brother came round last month and after a while, he asked to borrow £20 and Billy, my other half, said no and told him to fuck off and go and get a job. It got a bit rowdy and shouty and Ron, my brother left slamming the front door, so the house shook. I've run that through in my head a couple of times now, not with a different answer because we just don't have £20 to lend or give actually 'cause we'd never have got it back. No, I change the running order and I get in before Billy, in a more rational way so that it didn't escalate into an argument, so that Ron didn't feel more humiliated than he had done when he first arrived asking for the money. I'd have said to Ron that we didn't have any spare, but we could have helped him eat that day, our sausage and chips would have stretched to another. I think Ron would have been ok with that. I worry about him, Ron that is. He's older than me but he's really younger if you know what I mean, in his mind, mentally, he's younger than most adults of 31 years old.

Ah, this takes me back, The Pretenders, Brass in Pocket. I remember when it first came out, I didn't really like it, I couldn't understand what she was singing, Chrissie Hynde, and I still don't know what 'deeter leanin' is.

Ron has a flat on the main road, it's a bit rough and the front door doesn't close properly, the wallpaper is peeling in his open plan lounge/diner/kitchen and he doesn't have a wardrobe or bedding. He gets his rent paid by the social and lives on universal credit, like a lot of us. He survives mostly but every now and then he gets a bit needy and I can't help as we have nothing either. I do cry a bit.

I wish Billy hadn't been so aggressive but then he is and always has been. There aren't many round here that would mess with my Billy. He shouts a lot and swears and scares people, especially if he doesn't like them or they put him in an awkward situation. It's his way I suppose. Funny thing is

he's not good in a fight, he's not really a tough hard man. He once shouted his mouth off at a bouncer in town and got laid out with one punch. He said afterwards that the bouncer had been lucky and caught him off guard and everyone agreed, but I knew. It makes me laugh sometimes, the way people are, and the perception people make up about what they see. There's him shouting and swearing and threatening all sorts and so people, especially round here, give him a sort of weird respect but if any of them pressed him, sure he'd fight them, but he wouldn't win. God no, he's soft really that's probably why he shouts a lot, to disguise it. Our kids are scared of him though, both of them. He's hit them both in his time, and me, more than once, when things have gotten to him and he struggles to get his head in order. Usually when he runs out of thinking space and he can't find the words; bang, he just lashes out and then he goes to his deep, dark place to hide until morning when it's all over and it's as if nothing happened. And we never mention it again. I prefer to go abroad though, its nicer and less painful.

So today, I've been to Spain, Alicante. It's one of my regular go to places as I think I'd like the people. They mostly speak English, I imagine, so I can have a conversation, and its lovely to walk round. Especially down by the beach towards the marina.

Steve Wright is playing Lola by the Kinks; I love this it makes me laugh and I had a thing for Ray Davis in my teens. If only eh...

I'm 'cooking' mince with peas and oven chips for tea. Last time we had it Billy kicked off, not violently, just shouty again. He said it was bland, couldn't taste anything other than the ketchup on his chips. I've put some curry powder in this time so it'll have a nice smell and should be really tasty. The tin of peas helps pad it out in the oxo gravy and gives it some colour too. It should be nice with some bread and I'll get him a cup of tea before he sits down so he doesn't go straight for the last tins of lager in the fridge.

I spoke with a nice lady in a café near the marina. Hello, I say, I'm Sheila from Lancashire. She was there on holiday on her own. I said she was brave, but she just laughed. It was her escape from the family. She has two boys too and a husband, but he doesn't like abroad, so she leaves them for a week every year and they get on with it. She dreaded going home though as the place is always a mess and they live on chips from the chippy or Chinese take away. Best not to think about that I said to her, just enjoy being here by the sea, with a cup of caramel latte and a cream cake. She did just that. I could do that. But of course, I couldn't, even if I had the money Billy would go mad if I suggested going away on my own, even a day out on my own to Blackpool. No, he'd put his foot down and then we wouldn't talk about it again so there is no point even starting that as a conversation. I'll just visit Spain from my kitchen when I feel like it, it's better that way, and cheaper.

Shall I do six or eight slices of bread? Not much bread left so I'll have to nip out later, so he's got some for breakfast before he goes to his job. I'll do six I think, if they want more, I can get it. He works as a labourer just now, its part time but cash in hand every Thursday. We can just about scrape through with that and what we get paid from the social every week. That is as long as there are no emergencies, or he doesn't drop in at the pub on his way home like he did the other Thursday. We had two days without the leccy that week, but we got through it. We're getting used to managing things, emergencies and just the everyday stuff. It's like we just get through whatever it is and carry on to the next situation.

He came home smelling of ale, his tea was cold even though I'd put it back in the oven to keep warm, but he didn't want it. I asked him where he'd been till this time and he just went off like a bomb. He said he needed a break, needed a release, that he was entitled to go for a drink with his

mates, the lads, once in a while. Shouting he was, I'm sure next doors could hear every word and I just stood there in front him, a little bit scared, waiting for him to lash out as he ran out of words, as his rationale for spending our weeks food money got mixed up in his head. I didn't say anything else, I just let him go on until he'd finished. I was thinking, what about my bloody break Billy, what about my entitlement to a social life Billy, when can I be an irresponsible selfish prick, Billy? I never said those things though, just watched and waited.

His punch caught me flush on the cheek and knocked me backwards, over the kitchen chair so I landed on the floor on my arse with my calf across the chair seat. It really hurt but I didn't make a noise, I just looked up at his raging face as he stood there glaring down at me, clenched fists hanging by his sides as he thrust his chest out in an attempt to make himself look hard and aggressive. I saw the tear in his eye just before he screamed once more that he'd told me loads of times not to patronise him and then he turned and stormed upstairs to bed. I was surprised he knew the word 'patronise' and wondered who had said it to him and how that conversation had ended. I say I saw a tear; it could have been just his eyes watering from the effort of his rage but like I said, he's soft as shit really so it could have been. I had a bruise for most of the week and didn't go out until it had faded. Billy wouldn't have liked that; people would have talked. I waited an hour before going to bed, just to make sure he was asleep, and he was. He got up as normal the next day and we never talked about what happened. He didn't apologise or acknowledge my bruise; he didn't ask why I winced when I caught my leg on the table. For him, it was like nothing had ever happened.

This mince smells nice, I think he'll like it. He'll be in at ten past five, he gets a lift from one of the lads at the yard who drops him at the top of the road. He'll come in, get a wash, and sit down at the kitchen table just as I'm plating up and ready for me to place his tea on the table mat in front of him. Don't judge us though, I know it's very 1960's but it's how we are, it's how we've always have been, and Billy likes it that way.

I can't help dancing when Uptown Top Ranking is on and doing that high pitched 'ooh' on the second verse, or is the chorus, what happened to those girls I wonder?

I went to France yesterday; I saw it on a TV programme about buying a home in the sun. Brittany, which is in the North, just across the Channel and about an hour and a half by plane. Two minutes in my head ha-ha. It was really nice as I walked down a country lane into a small traditional village which had a café bar and small bakery and a little butcher. I can't remember their French names, but they look very pretty I thought. I had a coffee outside the café and spoke with an old local lady who was telling me she'd lived there all her life; 67 she was and that it hadn't changed all that much in that time. Apart from visitors, tourists who brought some money into the area and some of them bought houses nearby which she thought was a good thing. I agreed. We spoke English but I suspect in real life we wouldn't. That's a benefit of my version of tourism; everybody speaks my language, and another benefit is that I'm here to answer the door when the bell rings.

It was Jim the cash man. He calls every week for our instalment, its only £11.55 for 26 weeks. We needed a quick £150 a couple of months ago to buy a new fridge and washing machine, our old ones both stopped working during the same week. What luck eh, it never rains...! Billy has a mate who sells them reconditioned so we were able to get replacements quite cheaply, the fella took the old ones away too which was good. Jim is a godsend really, we'd used him before, last year to buy some shoes for the lads. I know we pay back double, and he gets a bit heavy if you miss a week but he's our only option. We can't go to a bank; they'd laugh at people like us.

So, where was I? Yes, France. I liked it but I prefer Spain, by the seaside in that lovely soft sand and bright blue sea. I'll go one day just you see.

The boys have just got in. The front door banged, and they shout hello as they run up the stairs like a couple charging rhinos. Harry and William, just like the two princes. Just as handsome too they are, and popular at school which is good. Harry is the bright one, he breezes through the tests and the teachers have high hopes for him when he does his GCSE's later this year. God knows what comes after that though as there aren't many jobs around here. I just hope he doesn't go into labouring like his dad. He talks about joining the Police or the Army; Billy said we'd disown him if he became a pig! He says he hates them, the police that is, but he has no real experience of dealing with them. It's just another one of them things he does and says to make him look hard. Anyway, I said to Harry to ignore what his father says and that if he wants to follow that path then we'd support him and be proud of him whatever he does. Wills on the other hand doesn't get school at all. He doesn't like it and he says he just can't do it. He gets frustrated with the structure of it and the stress of trying to learn things he doesn't see the need for, like maths and history. I say to him that he needs to be good at maths to get along in life, but he doesn't agree. He can add up, take away and multiply and in his world that's enough. Maybe he has a point and he's brilliant at art. Anyways, they'll be down in half an hour for tea.

The chips are in.

Do you remember The Sparks? That creepy guy on the keyboard, staring and scowling, I was a bit scared of him. 'This town aint big enough for the both of us....'

I used to work. It was as good job too in the account's office at the factory around the corner. They made cartons and boxes that went into different countries around the world to support farms and agriculture. Ten of us worked in the office, sorting invoices out, sending them out and chasing them up. We were a good team, had a laugh but got the job done. I'd been there 8 years so was getting towards a senior position which would have meant better money. Billy was uncomfortable with it though. I was earning as much as he was, more some months if his work wasn't great. He didn't like the hours I was out; he didn't like that he had wait for me to make tea when I got in, he didn't like the blokes in suits that I worked with, he hated the social part where we all went for drinks on the last Friday of the month. He said everyone looked down on him and that they all thought they were better than he was. To be fair, he had a point, but then he scared them and didn't speak to anyone. He just drank his pints of best bitter and got drunk, quickly. We were usually the first ones to leave and I could feel a relaxing in the atmosphere as he stood up and walked to the door of the pub. No-one said anything to me, at work, but I knew they didn't like Billy, they just tolerated him for my sake. I remember going in that Monday and being called up to a meeting at 9:30. It was on the top floor, in the large meeting room. All the tables and chairs had been taken out so everyone could get in and there was a small podium at the front where the boss, Mr Barber, stood and told us the firm was going into receivership and that the factory was closing, today. It was like a massive kick in the stomach. We got a bit of redundancy but had to wait ages for it and that was it, no work, no money. Billy said the management were useless and it was all their fault, but the truth was that we just couldn't compete with China. It's still locked up and empty, the site is derelict and desolate. Billy didn't want me to go back to work and discouraged me from looking, I think he prefers me to be here looking after the house and him. I'd like to work though; I know I could get a job down the shopping centre or in the offices on the industrial estate, but I doubt Billy would like it.

And talk of the devil, right on time, in he walks and upstairs he goes to get a wash. I shout hello and he grunts back something I don't understand. Tea for four made and on the table, cup of tea

brewing for him and juice for the boys. Another day done, another cross on the calendar another day closer to Spain or France or wherever. I wonder what the evening has to give, after I've cleared up and washed the pots that is. We'll watch the telly, Billy will decide, I hope the football isn't on again, I hate it. I just don't understand it, but he does, and he shouts and screams at the screen. It's probably that which I don't like rather than the football itself; it's Billy though and this is family life, it's what we are...

I'll switch the radio off before they get down, halfway through Thin Lizzy, ironically it's 'the boys are back in town'...Billy doesn't like Radio 2.

Chapter 3

Doing time

Yes, I did the crime and so yes, I suppose I should do the time. But ten years? That's a bit steep, even the screws think I've been hard done to. My brief is preparing an appeal against the sentencing, it should be ready for submission any day and I'm confident that after that my time will be cut. Maybe by half which in practice would mean I serve two and half especially on the back of good behaviour. I'm just going to keep my head down and my nostrils perfectly clean, look after numero uno and then get out and back to planning my next job. Next time, I'll work alone or at least with professionals who know what they're doing, that is as long as my reputation hasn't been too tarnished by the muppets who got us nicked last time out. The judge described it as a most comical attempt at robbery that had ever been brought before his court. He said, it was the most inept, amateur mish mash, yes, he used those words, bloody 'mish mash' of a job in the recent history of criminality. Embarrassing it was, and then he gave me ten years as the ringleader. The gasp in the gallery was clearly audible alongside the sniggering and laughing that is. The other two got 6 years each and if I'd had been the judge, I'd have given them double or three times that, idiots. The driver got away scot free of course as no-one knew who he was, and being pro's, to a degree, we would never grass him up. It was his incompetence that was one of the reasons we got caught though and if I had my time again, I'd find someone more reliable. He'll be paying for it when I get out, for sure he will.

It was my idea to turn over the bank, the little one just off the High St and I'd got two guys who I knew quite well from the pub interested in helping me. They both came recommended as excellent 'frighteners'; lads who were quite handy and looked fearsome. A bit slow in the brain area to be honest but all they had to do was threaten the bank staff sufficiently for them to let me through to the vaults and pick up the cash. It was going to be a big pay day, I reckoned a quarter million of which I'd get £100k and the other two and the driver, who we still had to find, would split £150k between them. If it was more or less, we'd work on that ratio and everyone was happy.

I met Ian and Dylan in the Red Lion one Wednesday evening after I'd discreetly sounded them out the week before. Ian was in his early 40's, about 6ft 4 and heavy set, probably about 20 stone. He was nice enough when you'd got beyond his natural suspiciousness. Dylan was younger, mid 30's, shorter at about 5ft 10 but he looked nasty. He had a sneer that could hurt you from across the road and when he spoke, he snarled and growled like a rabid dog. A bit intimidating to anyone who didn't know him which fitted the bill perfectly. So, we got a drink and settled into a corner table in the pub so I could explain what the plan was. With hindsight, I should have cancelled the gig then. Not only were we on the pub's CCTV, but we were also captured by the CCTV by the bus stop outside as well, both of which were used at the trial to prove we had some sort of relationship. Not only that, but about 6 people came over to the table during the night and had some form of interaction with Dylan; he was given cash for passing onto to someone else, he was given cash for a job he'd done the day before, he was handed cocaine and cannabis for distribution to 'dealers down the chain' and almost everyone asked him what job we were planning. It was remarkable and to the large number of people in the pub, probably obvious that we were up to no good and sure enough, it turned out we had been seen! The cops had a statement from an anonymous grass who claimed to have seen us 'colluding' on that Wednesday night. When I look back, it was really a disaster waiting to happen.

Ian drank like a fish; he must have had eight pints in the couple of hours we'd been there. That did worry me a bit, and I made a conscious effort to meet up with him again the day after to see what

his hangover looked like. I must admit to being relieved and a little bit envious when he arrived for breakfast on time and as fresh as a daisy.

Both of them were up for the job though and very enthusiastic. I'd explained that they were to be aggressive, loud, and scary, no shooters or knives, and that the aim was for me to gain access to the vaults where the cash was. When I was in there, they were to block entry into the bank by any customers and make sure the staff didn't raise the alarm. It was easy and we'd do a few dry runs to get familiar with the layout of the bank (I already had a map of it) to check things like timings and work out which day and time of the week was the quietest in terms of customer visits. Ian in particular was very keen and a bit excitable. After breakfast, the day after we'd met in the pub, me and Ian decided to make our first visit to the bank. Now, remember this guy is a big unit and hard to miss. We walked the half mile from the café and reached the junction on the High St and Bank Rd, yes it really is called that. We stopped across the road and surveyed the area for cameras. I asked him if he knew of any or could spot any and when I turned to look at him, I nearly fell over. He was gasping for breath, sweating profusely, massive sweat marks had appeared under his armpits and across his massive chest. His face was a pulsing mass of bulbous redness. He said, he was just a bit excited and this always happened when he was planning a job, but he'd be past it by the actual day. I should have stopped right there and then and to this day, I don't know why I didn't. Rather than carry on and enter the bank, I decided to call it a day and I left him recovering at the crossroads.

At the hearing, the CCTV showed him gasping for breath and clinging onto a lamppost and then being helped by a little old lady with a poodle, to the benches by the bus stop.

That afternoon, I arranged to meet Dylan outside the bank to do a reccy. He was bang on time which was good to see and dressed inconspicuously in combats and a denim jacket. On meeting, I said to him that the purpose of this visit was to get a clear view of the obstacles to getting behind the counter and into the corridor to the vaults and also to get familiar with the faces of the people. He seemed to get it and I entered first, with him following closely on my heels. I casually walked around the display shelves that offered help with savings and mortgages and that sort of stuff, pretending to look at the leaflets whilst getting my first look at the counter layout. As I'm looking at the end of the counter with the locked hatch that leads to the back office a voice shouted 'excuse me sir, can you remove the headwear' I looked to where the voice was coming and one of the cashiers was stood up pointing, not aggressively, at Dylan. I turned to see him stood there in a black balaclava, staring up at the ceiling into the CCTV camera.

In court, that scene brought one of the biggest laughs of the whole hearing. The recording shows me leaving the branch quickly, grabbing Dylan by the arm as I went.

Outside, around the corner, after he'd removed the balaclava, he said he was only trying to be professional and didn't want his face to be seen. After I'd bollocked him and told him he wasn't Butch Cassidy I expected a smack, but he just looked a bit forlorn and apologised. One thing I've learned about this type of 'co-worker' is that they do respect authority, and the boss is always the boss. Until it all goes tits up that is.

We had another meeting one night a few days later in McDonalds. We were the only ones sat in and left relatively alone. One of the staff recognised Dylan though, and kept trying to speak with him; turns out he wanted a job and hoped Dylan could find him something. He was an ex-con who was out under licence, his probation officer knew the franchisee of the restaurant and got him a placement. He was clearly out of place though, being mid 30's, with a wild crop of long dark hair and unkempt beard whilst everyone else in the place was teenage or early 20's. I was a bit irked at first

but then I thought this bloke might be ok as a getaway driver and after we'd finished planning our next visits to the bank, I invited him over. He had a full licence and had worked as a driver before. I offered him a role at a 10% cut of the purse, I'd split the rest between me and the other boys. He accepted and we agreed to meet the following Monday, I decided to keep any dealings with him separate from the other two for security reasons; I thought it better we weren't all seen together.

So, me, Ian and Dylan met outside the bank each morning of the next week just after 9am. We sat at the bench on the bus stop and watched, figuring out that Wednesday or Thursday would be the quietest times for the bank's business in terms of footfall and we just had to agree when specifically on those days we would put our plan into action. After a few hours of counting people going in and out and me doing a five-bar gate on a pad, we noted that it was fairly quiet after 10:30am up until about 11:45, and after discussing it in detail, on the Friday morning, we agreed that was sufficient planning and data gathering, and so, that was that. During our reconnaissance though, Ian was like a kid, pointing at people as they walked in and again when they came out, standing up, sitting down, he just couldn't settle. And again, sweating like a pig, he was soaking after an hour.

In court, the CCTV showed the three of us sat there over the course of the week, like the three stooges, arguing, looking at our watches, me making notes and gesticulating at Ian to sit down and be quiet. The gallery laughed, a lot.

During that week, I think it was the Wednesday, we decided to go into the bank again to get a closer look at the mechanism for opening the counter. Without headgear! It was mid-morning after our daily bench meeting and we all went in all-together; Ian tripped over the step which made everyone stop and look at him...and us. He recovered without going to ground luckily and managed to get upright and into the queue without too much extra fuss. Dylan somehow got to the front of the queue; I say 'somehow'; he did what he usually did and just went there knowing no-one was going to challenge him and then he got called to the counter by one of the staff. My heart skipped a beat as I didn't know what he was going to do next, we hadn't discussed it as this was a passing through visit to gather information on the layout. But Dylan played a blinder, he asked, albeit in his aggressive growl, how he could open an account. The guy serving him was clearly a little bit intimidated but left his place, went to the end of the counter, unlocked it with a key that was dangling on a chain attached to the lift board, came through and guided Dylan to a small room that I hadn't noticed before. I got a full demo of how the hatch operated and where the key was! He sat in that room for 10 minutes going through an application form before coming out with a big grin on his face. During that time, I had enough time to glance beyond the counter to clearly see where the entrance to the vaults was and Ian had got a leaflet about a pension scheme. We all exited at the same time and had a debrief in the café up the road. We got there with Ian about to collapse from nervous exhaustion, again, covered in sweat and with his face glowing like the embers of a fire at midnight. We each had a coffee and patted ourselves on the back for a job well done. We'd leave it a week and then do the job the following Wednesday. I'd see our driver on Monday and get him ready for the pickup and drop-off.

In court, the CCTV footage showed Ian's comedy trip entrance, Dylan freely giving his name, address, post code and phone numbers to the guy in the bank whilst I was peering into the corridor of the bank behind the counter. Even my brief sniggered.

On Monday, I met with Dean who insisted on being called Deano, at McDonalds as we'd agreed but as he was working the conversation didn't go quite as smoothly as I had expected. I was nervous that unlike our earlier meeting the restaurant had more than half the tables occupied and Deano seemed to be attending to most of them. I thought this was a self-service place, but he seemed to be

popping around the large majority clearing up and talking to the diners. It took about 20 minutes for me to realise he was dealing drugs; the 'customers' were buying a drink, sitting at a table, Deano appeared took their 'order', moved away a cup which obviously had cash in it, disappeared for a few minutes before returning with small parcels that he dropped into one of the remaining cups and the 'customer' left. Ingenious really but annoying for me as I needed to get him concentrating on our plan. He took a break and came over with a coffee. I asked him what he was dealing and was surprised when he didn't deny it. He quite openly told me that he could get anything I wanted, most of it was already here on site. He spent half his break time telling me about the varied customers he had, from magistrates and police to doctors, teachers, and mums. This is another time when I really should have backed away, but I felt he was good, and we were too far into things to safely change the plan. It was straight forward anyway. We would make our own way to the bank, do the job and as we exited, he was to be outside the door with a untraceable car ready to take us to a lockup garage that was owned by my uncle. My uncle was on holiday and I had the key. We would split the money there and go our separate ways. I said we'd need him to be immediately outside the door at 10:40am which gave us 10 minutes inside with an allowance of another 5 – 10 minutes contingency time. He was comfortable in getting the car, he already had one lined up, a silver 3 series BMW and we were both very clear on what was happening and when. I actually left with a nice warm feeling, knowing that the plan was coming together.

I confirmed the arrangement with Ian and Dylan, and we all agreed that we wouldn't see each other or contact each other before we met outside the bank next Wednesday morning.

I then got three text messages from Ian confirming if it was ok that his nephew was dropping him off near the bank, he knew that I'd bollocked Dylan for wearing a balaclava but was it ok to wear one on the day and finally where was the lock up and was it close to a bus stop. In the end I had to go to his house and tell him to stop contacting me on his phone, indeed stop contacting me full stop.

Dylan then sent me message on Facebook saying he needed to speak urgently. Yes, public, traceable, the police's favourite tool, Facebook! So, I went to his house and he also wanted to know if he could wear his balaclava this time. I did shout a bit to be honest and as I walked away, steaming mad I thought about cancelling the job. But I didn't.

I went to see Deano on the following Tuesday, conscious that I'd not been in touch for a week and I thought it best that I check for my own sense of well-being that he still knew what he was doing. I found him good spirits but even busier as it seemed he'd been promoted and was now a team-leader looking after a group of spotty youths. I wondered what hope they had in life but then who am I to judge. Being busy with ordering his team about, clearing up and dishing out drugs, our conversation was limited but he did confirm that he had taken time off tomorrow and was eager to go. The car was running perfectly and had a full tank and he grinned when he told me that he'd easily out-run the police if needed. That made me a little bit edgy as I wasn't expecting any reason to deviate from the plan to get to the lockup, but I figured or hoped, he was just playing. Anyway, he seemed confident enough and so I was happy and returned home where I had something to eat and went to bed. Not that I slept much, the plan was running over and over in my head and the excitement of counting the money and then getting away from it all for a few weeks. That was my plan. I was going to run to Spain and rent a little apartment just outside Barcelona. Who knows, I might have stayed longer...

On the day of the job, I arrived first and had my two holdalls, one inside the other, which were to carry the loot away with. I sat on the bench watching the traffic and the odd person enter and leave the bank branch. It was a nice morning, the sun was up, it was warm and there was a nice gentle

breeze. Dylan arrived next, he was relaxed and appeared happy, for him. He sat next to me without saying a word and we just waited for Ian. And we waited and waited. Dylan remarked that Ian had obviously bottled it and wasn't coming but I didn't agree. I thought I'd give him another 5 minutes before deciding what to do but then just as we were thinking that he'd changed his mind, Ian appeared calm as you like, in a taxi. He jumped out of the black cab waving at us and shuffling up to the bus stop. I'd never seen him looking so calm and as he sat down, he apologised for being a bit late and swung a rucksack off his shoulder offering it to me for carrying the cash. We sat for a minute then off we went; I stood, and they followed me across the road. They had both put their balaclavas on by the time we'd got to the other side and I pulled on a hat and scarf over my nose and mouth. 'Ready boys' I shouted and off we launched into the bank. I went in first, Dylan pushing me aside as I got through the door, shouting, and kicking over the displays getting to the counter he started banging wildly on the glass divider. As all this started, Ian tripped over the step and hit the ground with a huge thump. He hit his head on the display cabinet that Dylan had kicked over, and he just lay there spark out. Before I got to the opening in the counter, the alarm went off and every one of the staff disappeared behind a darkened security wall. I glanced out of the window for a quick second and realised that I couldn't see our silver 3 series BMW and with a sense of impending doom, I stepped over Ian and shouted to Dylan that he might want to get out...quickly. I stooped and rolled Ian over just as he was coming around, he had no idea where he was or what he was doing but he managed to get up to his feet just as the first police officers entered.

It was a total shambles and over within 5 minutes. It turned out that they were waiting for us; the bank manager recognised us as we sat on the bench opposite and called the police as he'd been instructed to do the previous week having reported his suspicions following our visit. The cops were heavy handed and roughed us up a bit before slapping on the cuffs and literally throwing us into the waiting cars. They booked us in and kept us in individual cells before carting us off to the magistrates the following morning where we were put on remand pending a court date.

As I look back, I recognise that I had many opportunities to call it off and should have. The team I had were just not up to the job and the whole project was bound to fail. Anyways, lessons learned I'll be much better prepared next time. Do you know what the worse thing about the whole sorry tale was though? It was the driver; I didn't really know him and chose him as an easy option which was the wrong thing to do. As we were bundled into the cars and driven away from Bank Rd we came to the junction and stopped at the red traffic lights at Bank Crescent where there is a big bank on the corner. It takes up nearly the whole terrace with its floor to ceiling glass windows, giving an excellent view of the goings-on inside. As I sat in the back of the car surveying the scene, I noticed a fracas going on between a traffic warden and the driver of a silver 3 series BMW that was parked on the double yellow lines outside the bank. The driver was dressed in a McDonalds uniform complete with 5-star name badge. As we pulled away, that driver and I made eye contact and I cursed the day I'd ever met Deano.

Chapter 4

Survival

I'm ok today, I have been for a few weeks now. I am myself as some might say, on good form and able to smile and laugh and produce witty repartee at the drop of a hat. I can take control of situations and be the centre of attention, I *can* be arsed with life and living. There isn't any debilitating feeling of self-consciousness, my eyes sparkle bright and I quite like who I am.

It isn't always this way though and I don't know how or when the change happens. There is no lead in time, no warning, no planning that I can do to catch it and prevent it from taking over and changing my world, my outlook, and my persona. It's not a spooky or spiritual thing either, I need to say that to be clear, as those who are very close to me will understand more, especially when I say that I am a bit weird because I have an ability to 'connect' with a spirit world, and receive and relay messages from people of our past to people of our present. But this 'ability' doesn't affect my mental health, not in a negative way anyway. As far as I know, when this heavy cloud strikes, there isn't a tangible being or a ghostly apparition that creeps up and flicks on the dark switch in me. I just don't know what it is that gets me so anxious and creates an atmosphere in my head and body that is so thick and sticky that it drives me and my self-consciousness deep underground. I only know that mentally, it wears me down and tires me out, and makes me irritable and challenging and in truth, not a nice person to be with or to interact with. It makes me dislike me and afterwards I feel desperately sorry for anyone who has had to put up with me during my absent time. I hate it, whatever it is, and I really dislike the person I become.

It's like being inside a Perspex box sometimes. I'm visible and look normal to everyone around me but inside my box, inside my cocoon, inside my soul, I'm aching, my head is pounding, and I feel like my insides are twisting themselves inside out. All the time, it's relentless and physical, I can feel it in and around my being. I don't know why though, it's a sense, a feeling of absolute dread that creeps up on me and then envelops my being leaving me inoperable for long periods of time, sometimes days on end. And during those times I can't communicate properly, I can't think properly, I don't sleep when I should, and I desperately try and fight off sleeping when I should be fully awake. Through all this I am conscious of how I am, what I am, and what it must look like, but I just can't change the feelings that control me, it is like I'm some sort of humanoid robot. It gets very dark too, shutting myself off from humanity, I can think clearly enough to plan certain types of things, dark and horrible things that normal people just wouldn't consider. Things I'd do, to myself not anyone else, to switch this thing off and stop it all from coming around and taking over my world again. It's not nice and when I'm outside and looking back, it frightens me to be honest, and I desperately don't like it.

Like I said, I can be happy enough, getting on with living and struggling through everyday life. Looking for work, making sure the cash funds are sufficient, planning my pension, seeking out the house abroad that we look forward to having and living in over the next couple of years. A positive plan and a nod to the future, a real, positive future of

achievement and hope and happiness. All normal run of the mill stuff that everyday folk have and contend with, just as I do and then something small happens like I get a rejection letter, or there are no new roles on the job boards, or it might be a comment from someone, anyone, that is innocuous enough and possibly even well meant, but it hits the very centre of my brain and my senses react intensely, in some deep and hidden zone that I have no conscious awareness of, and then whatever it is, starts encroaching across my whole living being. I can feel it building inside me, slowly at first. Anxiety, which is ever present but usually controllable, grows in stature and strength and it starts to speak to me, warning of disasters that might be around the corner. It's funny, I despair when I hear people talk about the 'debilitating effects of anxiety', when they refer to it, anxiety, as a medical condition that requires treatment and qualifies for benefits, stops people working and yet they can still meet up with friends, go to the pub, buy fags, play bingo. I hate it when people appear on TV talking about how they can't face their daily existence and how they can't work and do this or that, because I AM anxious too, always and I manage to work, and live, and exist...but then this happens. And I fight hard to do my normal things and to some extent I do actually manage it, but I know I am different. I must appear to be different to everyone around me and I scream at myself, silently, to sort myself out and stop being a dick, but I can't stop it. Alongside the anxiety I get a sense of fear and foreboding that really stupid, remote, highly unlikely things might be about to happen but obviously, speaking about that now as a rational level-headed man, I know they won't, and they don't. Things that vary in their severity like someone is about to steal my car, break into the house, throw a brick through the window all the way up to a kidnapping my wife or a murder or someone close to me having an accident or getting hurt in some way and I am unable to help and they end up dying. I think deeply about how I can stop those things occurring and if I can't stop them, what I might do to react to such an incident. I find myself checking the doors are locked and windows closed, several times over an evening and during the day. I check I know where my car and house keys are, I know when I go to bed where my clothes are just in case I need to get up quickly and get dressed in the dark, my mobile phone is on hand so I can call the emergency services sooner rather later. These thoughts aren't obvious to others, at least I don't think they are.

When I am just me, the normal me, I have an irrational phobia of strong painkillers and I hate them being in the house because of the thought of what they can do to people who aren't themselves, it scares me, actually makes me feel sick sometimes as I imagine being alone in one of my deeply darkened days and reaching for the small box, swallowing them quickly and that then being some sort of ridiculous cure to the awful, horrible times I endure. When I am me, I often reflect upon the distress I'd be leaving behind, the mental scars that would be inflicted upon the very people I'm trying to care for, when they discover me lifeless and 'cured'. The emotional and financial effect in the years that follow when I'm gone, the practical matters of dealing with emergency services, maybe even the press, who come sniffing around hoping to elicit some mileage out of the suffering. I can be rational, when I am me, but I worry that when the darkened cape arrives and envelops me within its sinister world, I am anything but coherent and rational.

I can't talk about it though, as it won't let me find any words to describe it. Not that I understand it in any event. Like I said, it's very controlling and much stronger than I am; I don't know what would happen if I stood up to it and tried to bash my way out its influence.

I move about in my 'protective' case, existing within the household but outside of it, if that makes sense. I hear my family speaking; I hear the words they say but often the words don't register in my immediate environment and just bounce off my defensive screen. I wonder to myself, if the spoken words were a question or a statement requiring a response, but I honestly don't know; especially when I'm in the deepest part of the occupation, the words don't actually mean anything. They are just words; sounds, that reverberate around my head making a fuzzing sensation where my eyes roll and my ears tingle. I sometimes respond, asking for a repeat of the sentence or asking what the guy on TV just said and I concentrate really hard on the response so I can try and offer a sensible reply, a coherent answer that actually relates to the question. More often than not though, I sit and consider it in my head, and it takes so long to compute that the chance to reply just passes by and then the anxiety kicks me and laughs out loud as I struggle to control the disappointment at not being there in the moment and be able to interact properly, normally as ordinary people do. What a failure, what a waste of space, what a disappointment.

I can't talk to anyone about it because I've got to be the strong, lucid one, the one who is looked upon as the problem solver and listener and finder of solutions. I can't talk about this as I can't, and I don't really want to as I don't know how to, I don't have the words to openly describe the feelings of weakness that I endure, and the sadness involved whilst I am in that state. And then again, when I'm free of it, I can feel an almost greater sense of sadness and a fear that the damage that has occurred to people and relationships is irreparable. And critically, I don't want to be told that I need to see someone to get treatment. I hate the thought of medication; it kills people as it did my best friend. Or at the very least it was the proximate cause of his passing. He took his own life after medication took away his rational senses and turned him into a man who struggled with his existence and effected his grasp on the real world to the extent that he came to a tragic, early end that has affected us all deeply and continues to do so, long after the event. Yet, looking back at that tragedy, the signs were there for all to see and no-one picked them up. Only afterwards did anyone say they wished they'd realised or were better informed of what to look for, how to spot the signs and act, maybe this and maybe that, probably...

I won't be seeking any medication as I don't need it. I know that this controller of my psyche will pass me by eventually and move on to another victim and then I'm back in the normal world with the screen gone and my thoughts are all mine again. I can think clearly and rationally but for a short period of time, I hate myself for allowing the controller in and turning my household on its head for a day or two. I hate it, for daring to call unannounced and steal my time, my head, and my body. I feel stupid at allowing myself to get into that state because I'm a successful person, I've worked in business and earned good money. I have a great family and a nice house, a fancy car and we go on holidays, often. The real me has no explanation around what happens to create the dark me and it's that, that makes me feel vulnerable, scared, uncertain yet I stand up, stay calm and carry on as they say. I do just

that and ignore the other guy whilst he's packed up, concealed, safely tucked away and unable to do any harm. After a day or two of the normal me, I can sense the atmosphere around the house slowly return to its ambient best, and the warmth of a loving family overtakes the dark coldness that prevailed, allowing me and those around me to be 'normal' and chat, watch TV, hold hands, go for a walk or a drive to somewhere nice. I can't do those things in the gloom, but I suppose the fact I can see that right now, is some sort of therapy?

Essentially, being able to recognise all the above surely must make me stronger and better able to take some sort of control when I sense the cloak descending. That must give me hope as I stand here before you, recounting this, in a positive manner with a positive outlook knowing that I must be better prepared to guard myself and my family from the harm this causes. And I'm sure I can...but the thing is, I just don't know when it's coming, or what it looks like or where it comes from and I can feel a tension deep in my stomach because of that. In all honesty, I just don't know what to do...

Chapter 5

Nell Gwyn, The lady upstairs

I've missed the postman again, damn. Why can't he keep to a routine and deliver my post at least around the same time each day? I know it's probably not his fault and depends on the volume of letters and parcels he's given each day, and which route they take him on but really, it's so inconvenient when I miss him. Bill, the man in the flat downstairs, gets to it before I do and I know he snoops at my mail, I've seen him studying the post marks and branding on the envelopes and on the few occasions we speak he often makes reference to my bank, or solicitors or my friends from London or abroad. It really is infuriating. When I get there first, I sort the letters into his and mine and leave his in the pigeonhole on the wall, for him to find when he ventures out. He's a bit strange, a bit of a recluse, lives on his own after his wife died from cancer. I mean it must be difficult having been in a relationship for as long as he and his wife were, but he doesn't seem to make any effort to get out into the community and interact with the neighbours. It wouldn't do for me; I know that much. I need social intercourse, contact with people, to speak with, have a laugh, take a drink or a snack or a meal out, or in. I love being with other people and listening to their wins and woes, hearing about the things that go on in their lives, big and small, children, grand-children, relationships, work, retirement. The whole of life is happening, and I don't want to be like Bill downstairs, hidden away, oblivious to it all, I need to be in the middle of it. It's crucial for my work anyway, or used to be, in the good old days when I worked the big city and its hotels. They were good for my business back in the day, well paid businessmen staying over for their important meetings during the week and then more reliable, regulars on Fridays and the weekends. I made good money and built up a loyal band of customers, some of which still keep me 'in the manner to which I have become accustomed' today. I only work with people I know these days, it's safer and when you get to my age it gets harder and harder (so to speak) to get new clients. Not that I want or need any new ones, my appointments diary is sufficiently populated and new clients are just hassle; building an understanding, creating trust, being unsure about them and their background and their motives for wanting to use my services...no, I'm happy with the Twenty or so I've been seeing for the last five to fifteen years. They are reliable, safe, comfortable, and generally stick to a routine that I can manage. Occasionally I get a call giving me an hours' notice but that's few and far between these days, most book their next visit before we part, which is convenient for both of us and means I can forecast my months income in advance and plan accordingly. I own this first floor flat, paid it off years ago and so I'm now saving for the day when I decide to give it all up and move away, somewhere sunny. I fancy Greece, Santorini is lovely, I stayed there a few times over the years, just outside the old town in a lovely hotel. I don't work when I'm on holiday, it's too risky on a few fronts; my health, my welfare, and above all, the hotels don't appreciate it. I did one year and made enough to pay for the holiday, and more, but I got roughed up a bit by a 'gentleman' who was at first all la-di-da, well to do, well-spoken and softly mannered but when it came to him leaving, to go back to his wife, he got all tough guy and wanted his money back. He threatened to tell the hotel what I was up to and then go to the police. I refused of course and he quickly lost his temper and smacked me right across my face, catching the bridge of my nose and under my eye. He watched as I fell to the ground and then left fairly quickly. I decided then that I wasn't taking anymore busman's holidays. I had a nasty bruise which took me ages to cover up, but I lived...and I kept his money. Funnily, I didn't see him again over the remaining week which was a bit strange as he wouldn't leave me alone beforehand. You live and learn I suppose.

Anyway, I'm seeing one of my older regulars this afternoon. We meet twice a month, which isn't unusual with my clients. This one is every other Thursday at the Marriot up near Heathrow. He

stays a few days each week on business and I go for dinner and drinks with him, before we go to his room. He's exceptionally good to me and always gets me a taxi home afterwards, he is such a proper gentleman and calls me Nell, after Nell Gwyn, which is a bit cheeky and says a lot about his ego, but there are some similarities between me and her I suppose. He's very tidy too, and caring, he likes to take his time and makes sure I am comfortable, which is nice. He has a business that supplies concierge services to the wealthy and some well-known VIP's; everything from providing a Bentley for a day to organising 5-star breaks in far off exotic places and lots of things in-between. He's very well connected, and I've known him for about 10 years now. 10 years twice a week at £450 a visit, not a bad source of income I'd say!

I'll get dressed up and put my face on and Bill will wave as I go down the path, from his mouldy old chair in the bay window. I'll smile my sweetest smile, flashing my bright white teeth against my darkest red lipstick and wave back; he'll be in bed when I return. I bet he wouldn't wave if he had any idea where I was going or why. I once told him, in one of our brief garden encounters, that I had regular business in London and I could see him putting that together with the bank and solicitors branding he'd seen when snooping on my mail and deciding I was some well to do, businesswoman. It suits me I suppose.

I've got Martin tomorrow morning, another twice a month regular. He is my youngest customer and he's been a client for almost seven years now. I know his mother; we were old friends from school, and we've stayed connected over the years. She is a nurse and had Martin when she was in her early 20's and then her husband left them both about a year after the birth. Obviously, she struggled to live for a while but she's tough and somehow managed to bring the child up and create a good career. I've got a load of respect for women like her, strong women who succeed in the face of harsh adversities. She's a real inspiration, down to earth, determined and takes no shit from anyone. Martin is deeply shy and reserved and has always struggled with social situations and making friends. When Marie, his mother became ill, she was besides herself with worry, not just because it had what was a debilitating illness that made her immobile for a long while but because she had no idea how Martin would cope on his own. So, from her hospital bed, she organised a group of professional people to look after his various needs and a trusted friend to act as a paid carer, looking after the house and Martin's finances. The house was paid for, so it was a case of acting as a trustee, paying Martin an allowance, seeing that the bills are paid, making sure he had food that sort of thing. She had it all organised and everything went smoothly, allowing her to recover and get better.

Marie called me one day after she'd got home for a chat. The call was a long one and we spoke about the old days, at school, when we played together and sat in class together, then when school was finished how we went out together to pubs and clubs and how our respective careers started and developed. She was one of the few who knew how I've made my money, and she's never judged. Anyway, the conversation came around to Martin and how as he was getting older, his moods were getting more difficult to manage and his urges were making him angry and frustrated. He'd never had a girlfriend; he couldn't even speak with someone of the opposite sex without getting all tied up and stumbling over his words. She asked for my help in the hope that I could in some way ease some of his anxieties, especially as he got older. I agreed to do what I could and so, she came round to the flat with him and we chatted for ages about all sorts of things, and then they left. Then they came around again and after a while Marie left him alone with me for an hour and I spoke to him, gently, in a friendly way, trying to put him at ease and gain his trust. After a few weeks he was relaxing and started to interact with me, so one day Marie sent him in a taxi on his own, and he managed it. Here and back home again. And during that time, I made him feel happy

and eased his tension, twice. So that was it, twice a month since then he visits as part of his routine and we spend some special time in my bedroom, with me in my silky black underwear and him leaving with a smile. It works well for all concerned and Marie created a standing order for me for as long as the arrangement continues; I don't take a full rate though, no, a lady must have some morals!

Marie still works at the hospital; she's got a senior position on the NHS Trust and earns a good salary. She still suffers from her illness though and often has to take time out to recover, I don't know what the condition is but its erratic and manifests without much notice. She goes into hospital or sometimes just goes away for a few weeks, and everyone just steps in and gets on with looking after Martin, who seems used to it all now. I don't know what will happen when she dies though, that's at the back of my mind every time she has a turn, and I'm sure it bothers her as well. My other worry with this arrangement is what I do when I retire. I've got a few ideas and a particular lady in mind to take over but it's not for now, I'll make sure that he's cared for properly.

One of my client's is the senior partner at a well-known solicitor's office up in the city. He sends me payment by cheque from the office account which is why I get regular letters with the firm's postmark on it. Bill must think I'm in trouble a lot or have shares in the business, which of course I do in a way. We meet in his local wine bar where we share a cold bottle of Sancerre and then go to his apartment around the corner. He's friendly and polite but not heavy on conversation to be truthful which is strange for a lawyer! He is straight to the point though and not into anything weird or fancy which is good, and I usually spend an hour, maybe two with him. No cash changes hands as he doesn't like to carry any but he's regular as clockwork with the cheques and he always puts a nice note in the envelope thanking me for my time, which I always think is terribly formal. I do wonder what he puts this regular cost down to on the expense account; entertaining maybe or consultancy fees perhaps?

This dress fits nice, I've had for a couple of years and it still looks like new. That's a benefit of buying the best I suppose as the quality never goes out of fashion and the fit stays true. I'm lucky really as I've kept my figure over the years, a comfortable size 12 with all the important bits keeping firm and perky. I suit this deep scarlet colour too, even if I do say so myself, it goes really well with the dark stockings and patent leather shoes. Yes, very sexy in a stylish sort of way and perfect for my King Charles II!

I have a few customers who visit me here at the flat. I don't really like them to and charge extra but the half dozen or so who do are all courteous, quiet, and respectful. One of them, Patrick, who is now in his sixties always forgets which is my doorbell (or so he says) and every time he visits, he presses Bill's for the flat downstairs. It must annoy him as its every time but Patrick says he just apologises and they both laugh about it and then I hear him climbing the stairs so I can open the door before he gets to it. Bill looks up from the foot of the stairs and waves, like he's looking out for me and I say, 'thanks Bill' and let Patrick into my lounge. Patrick is really quite sweet, and he uses most of his time to just chat these days. He's another lonely old man, no family to speak of, his wife passed away a decade ago and he's never created an alternative social life other than coming to see me or popping round to his local pub a few days a week where he sits and drinks alone whilst watching the sport on TV. It's such a shame as he's a nice gentle man with such an interesting background. He tells me about his life selling sports cars to the rich and famous and all the exotic holidays he enjoyed with his wife. I hear about his family who all live abroad and what his neighbours have been up to since we last talked. I say 'talked' as I just listen most of the time, acknowledging the important bits and making appropriate noises to approve or disapprove depending on the story. He likes me in ivory white lingerie under a red silk robe which I slip off over

my shoulders, letting it fall to the floor when he gives me his wink of the eye 'I'm ready' sign. I also wear long elbow length lace gloves too that help him get properly ready and then after a short caress it's over in a few minutes. Then he gets his trousers back on, whilst I make him a cup of tea with a splash of brandy in it and we chat for another half hour. Sometimes we put the tele on and watch the news together and then he goes home. We don't discuss money, ever. He just leaves an envelope on the side before he goes, and I pick it up as the door closes, and read the lovely thankyou note he had written and confirmation of his next appointment time, before wrapping the cash in it. Like I said, he's such a nice, sweet man and it's a shame that he has no-one to share his days with.

Another who visits me here at the flat is Oliver. He's been a client for over 15 years actually and I met him at a race day corporate function organised by a mutual friend. He was quite drunk on the day and had been flirting with me the whole time since I arrived. Towards the end, during the second last race he cornered me in a corridor near the rest rooms whilst everyone else was watching the horses. I wasn't about to entertain him in that environment, but I told him what I did and if he wanted to pursue 'a relationship' he would have to visit me and pay the going rate. To my surprise he took my card, stole a kiss, and disappeared back into the melee of the group of other businesspeople. The following morning, I got a call from him to book some time and we met a few days later at what was to be the start of a long-standing and very enjoyable arrangement. We, at that time, moved in similar business and social circles and often bumped into each other at various event. I've broken one of my golden rules with him on more than one occasion; the one that goes, never have a 'relationship' with a client but, I have a few times with Oliver as I find him attractive, exciting and if the mood is right, well, I trust him! I try not to think about the home lives of my clients, specifically their marital or relationship status. I take the view that it's not my business to interfere and these men are all grown-ups with a grown up conscience but one day, only a few years ago I was at a champagne reception hosted by a finance company (I 'know' one of the directors!) and I was approached by a lady I didn't know but had seen once or twice at these events. She introduced herself as Denise and said, 'you're Shirley Riley, aren't you?' which took me by surprise. We chatted about the evening and seemed to get on well. After about half an hour she said that she knew me and who I was and before I had time react, she told me to relax and that she was Oliver's wife and wasn't judging or about to cause a scene, in fact she thanked me for saving her marriage as without my services, her and Oliver would have separated a long time ago. They hadn't been intimate since after the birth of their son as she just couldn't face it and as she put it, he still has his needs. They had checked me out after the race day all those years ago and she had approved. So she knew about us from the very first day. I was astonished, and as she slowly walked away, I was left watching as she and Oliver, holding hands, waved, and then left.

I'm sure not all my clients are as open about me as that.

I'm nearly ready now, just trying to find my Channel. It's No.5 of course, bought for me by a lovely man called Jasper. He got it for my birthday last year, knowing it's my favourite. Jasper is a bit of a strange character as he is married and makes no secret about it to me, although we both must keep our council about the relationship we keep. His spouse is called Keith and they both live in flat near Croydon which they bought just before they were married, four years ago. I've known Jasper for about six years, he is an electrician and did some work for me when this flat of mine needed some re-wiring work. It took him a few days to do the work and we got on really well so when he asked me what I did for a living, I felt confident enough to tell him. At the end of the job, he asked me more about the work I did and what my charging rate was and then, the following day turned up with the cash! He was lucky that I didn't have an appointment that morning, so I was able to

accommodate him, but he books properly these days. Him and Keith are both active with the pride movement and are well known through their work in the fight to bring about diversity and inclusivity. Keith often appears in the press, sometimes with Jasper in the background, speaking about the events that have been organised to promote their LGBT+ cause. He's a lovely, caring, softly spoken man and is clearly passionate about the struggle and his love for his husband. I don't think he knows that Jasper exercises his passions in a slightly different way, but I suppose Jasper takes the view that being diverse and inclusive is all important to everyone no matter which part of society they represent. When Jasper first told me about his public persona and his gay relationship, I found it hard to believe that this burly, unshaven, muscle man could be anything other than straight. Especially after witnessing first-hand how well he can conduct himself when the curtains are closed, but there you go. It's absolutely true that you never know properly, who you might be standing next to in a bus queue or speaking with but that's all part of life's rich tapestry and it's kept me living comfortably for most of my adult life.

Right, that's me ready, I've just enough time to get the tube up into Heathrow.

Chapter 6

Doing my duty

It's extremely tough being in the heat of battle. It's kill or be killed, and I have to live by my wits; understanding the enemy and having my own truly clear strategy is paramount to my survival and crucial for the success of each mission. But, so far, it's working and here I am in this disused industrial building in the middle of a war zone, shielding myself from missiles and bullets behind a bombed out concrete wall. I can hear the zip of tracer shells whipping just inches above my helmet and feel the vibration of rounds hitting the wire and concrete that stands ragged, worn, and damaged all around me. I'm taking a few minutes to consider my fate as I feel out-numbered this time, it's not unusual to be honest and I've been in this situation many times. I reckon I'm one of the more experienced fighters in this battle; I must be. I'm 31 and have over 10 years' worth of this type of guerrilla work under my belt. I've seen many campaigns and fought many battles, I know my stuff and I have loads of contacts, colleagues who will help me out when I get in trouble just as I've helped them over the years.

I'm working with two other guys this time, Jay who is older than me at 38 and Budgie who is just 23. Both are good blokes and they each have plenty of hours active service, we've been together on a few missions before, we make a good team, and we are making good progress so far today. We got our mission orders and met up earlier this morning, just on the outskirts of the city. We need to get across the half mile battle zone to the river that is 45 degrees west from this building I am stuck in right now. Fifty yards further west than that is a suspension bridge that presents itself as our target. Our ultimate mission is to blow it up and stop the supplies of ammunition and food for the enemy fighters that stand in our way. I don't know how many enemy fighters there are, but I'd estimate given the noise from guns and mortars they must be a small platoon of about thirty. They seem to be a mixture of individual hidden snipers and small subgroups of 4 or 5 hunters who are firing off random rounds of gunshot and shells trying to sniff us out.

It's taken us an hour to get into our present location in the city centre without much direct engagement. There has been some lucky random shots coming our way and a couple of prospective mortar shells but nothing for us to worry about. We've taken out a small unit that were guarding the entry route into the main part of the area, they were a bit lazy to be honest and didn't know we were there until it was too late. We hit them hard and fast from a position of stealth and it was over within a few minutes. We're moving quietly and swiftly but came under fire from a sniper which is why we ended up in this big old, broken building. I say 'building', it's really just a shell of concrete that's been hit many times and is just about standing, in parts, it's enough to give us a high-level view of the surrounding streets and just enough protection to hide us from the sniper. We need to be quick getting out though as he will already have alerted his team on the ground and they'll already be on the move to come and greet us. We just need to adapt and assess this situation and find a way out. Jay has just identified the snipers position up on the roof of the building opposite, he'll go up a few floors to get a clearer shot and take him out. Me and Budgie need to get out of this room, and I've radioed my partner to say I'll provide covering fire while he gets a move into the corridor and to the stair well which is well protected. I crawl over the rubble strewn floor and position myself under the hole in the wall that used to be a window. Pointing my sub-machine gun towards the sniper position I shout Budgie to go and open up a relentless volley of rounds that splatter around the roof line opposite. I can see the plumes of smoke rising as I manage to ping the exposed concrete blocks, keeping the sniper away from the edge. Budgie moves quickly and gets to his vantage point within a few seconds. I stop and retreat back under the ledge and immediately feel the wrath of my enemy as a string of bullets hit the wall in front of me and fly in through the

opening, smashing into the floor and far wall making a strangely neat pattern of holes in the debris. I'm stuck, shit!

Then it's quiet again. A jubilant Kay shouts over the intercom that he's plugged the sniper and my way is now clear. I move without a second thought and rendezvous with Budgie on the stair well. He is making his move down the stairs as I appear, there is no time to stop and high five here, not just now anyway. I follow him closely, watching ahead and listening out for the next wave of fire that can only be minutes away. Jay has spotted a Land Rover approaching fast with a driver and four heavily armed fighters on board. He fires at them from his lofty position to try and hold them off and they stop to take cover as we exit the building from the way we entered, at the back. Running hard we both trace along a wall on our right and follow it down the main road to a small brick-built structure of about 8 feet by 10 feet with a wooden door hanging on its hinges. We come to a stop and take a position either side of the door, I nod to Budgie and he kicks the door hard and I point my gun inside, holding the trigger and firing off rounds as I leap inside. I am greeted by the sight of a single soldier who is dead by the time I see him, falling heavily to the stone floor, dropping a sighted rifle onto the bloodied floor as he went down. I radio that we've taken out another sniper and Jay responds with a howl that would scare a wolf. We have a very quick discussion and agree that we are aiming to meet on the edge of a clearing about 40 yards in front of this brick outhouse.

Kay is out of the building and has gone wider to the left than us, skirting the adjacent lane, which seems a risky strategy to me as it's overlooked on both sides and littered with debris. He seems to know what he's doing though and he's amazingly fast. I can hear gun shots going off and know it's directed at Kay, so I radio in to find out if he's ok. I don't get anything back and start to worry as me and Budgie get to the clearing without incident. We both take a position behind a green privet hedge, we are about 10 yards from each other, scanning the grounds ahead and behind. As we do, the sound of an engine overhead makes my blood run cold, it's a reconnaissance plane, probably looking for us. It passes by but circles low and seems to take ages to pass us again. If it has heat seeking cameras we're done for, I'm hoping that it's an old-fashioned two-seater with a guy with binoculars; the incoming shells tell me that isn't right though and we're on the move again but back into the wooded area to give us some form of cover from the troops on the ground. We're heading East, the wrong way but there is no other possibility, we'll just have to circle back when we can. Budgie comes to an abrupt stop and rolls to the floor so I follow, looking up to see what might have caused his reaction. He points and I see a shadow in the bushes about 20 feet in front of us. The form is facing away but backing his way closer to us. Budgie raises his gun and aims at the man's head, waiting for a clear and closer shot. I hold my hand in the air ready to give him the instruction to fire, "hold it, hold it, hold.....no don't" I whisper into the intercom, Budgie looks over to me, angry that I've stopped him getting the kill but as he does so Kay turns around and waves, we hear his voice, relieved at having found us he squats next to us and we open the map to plot our next route. Budgie is a bit sheepish, but we don't have time to discuss what just happened and anyway, it's just a product of the intense circumstances we find ourselves in. The plane is banking in the distance and doing a return journey, we're going to be up against it shortly so need a plan. It's not possible for us to run across the clearing as we'll be sitting ducks for the teams approaching us, so we decide to split. I'll take the right-hand route, heading further East until I get to the row of burnt-out buildings at the edge of this clearing. In front of that should be the river so I'll turn back and head West up the edge of the road and make it down to the bank. Kay will run left and head straight for the bridge which is just visible in the distance and Budgie will take a different route skirting the Western edge of the clearing and then over the road to find the riverbank. We should be able to make it to the bridge inside an hour. Three, two, one, go! And off we scramble just as the plane comes overhead. It circles and I watch it as I run, it's seen Kay for sure and it swoops even

lower over his path as he dives into the undergrowth. The gun fire starts and selfishly, I can only hope that it isn't directed at me. It sounds like it's to my left and I can't feel anything hitting the shrubbery that is supplying my cover. I run, stooped low and staying alert to anything that might be ahead until I reach my destination. I drop to my knee and radio in my position as I survey the next phase of my task. I look at an opening to the corner building that stands diagonally to the left of my position. Its roughly 15 yards but open and exposed but if I get there, I will be in a good vantage point that will help me decide if I run for the river's edge or stay on the road. Budgie radio's back to let me know he's not yet got to the edge of the clearing as he's under fire from behind and Kay radios to say he is being pinged at by a couple of guys in a troop carrier. I hear a massive explosion as Kay lets us know he's fired his bazooka and blown the vehicle to smithereens with the two guys in it, but that has attracted some attention from another unit who are now hunting for him. He's managed to get himself holed up in a tower block with a good all-round view but he's going to struggle to get out on his own. I'm running for my life across the open road and dive headfirst into the corner building, luckily I seem to be on my own and I think I've got a few minutes to catch my breath and plan my next move.

Budgie has taken a hit, he's down but not yet out. One of the chasing group fired off a lucky round into the trees and it hit him in the leg. We talk over the intercom, but I know that he isn't going to be much more use to us in this mission. I tell him to get deep into the undergrowth and wait, quietly. We'll pick him back up on the way out by which time I'm hoping we'll have transport of some sort. The enemy must have a Landy or troop carrier that I can steal, maybe...

As he acknowledges the plan, I am stunned to hear the bullet smash into his face; he didn't make a sound which I was thankful for. At least when the time came it was quick and unexpected so he wouldn't have felt it, but we're now a duo. Kay momentarily gets a bit emotional but recovers quickly and sounds now even more determined to see this one through. 'Let's do this for Budgie now' he growls over the intercom and off he goes to complete his leg of this operation.

From my position I can see the river is about 25 yards in front of me and as I look Westwards, I can see the bridge spanning the wide expanse of water, suspended on its supports by heavy strands of rope like iron and steel. The riverbank will give me protection from any city-side marauders and allow me a clear view of the fields on the opposite bank which luckily, have recently been cut by the farmers so its flat for as far as I can see. I get to my feet and prepare to sprint the relatively short distance to the bank, securing my ammunition, rucksack, and rifle to my back. I take a deep breath and off I go, running at full pelt, as low as I can stand, it takes me what seems like an eternity to get into the ditch by the side of the riverbank. In practice it was just a few seconds, but I've never felt so exposed and scared in all my time fighting for the cause. Hitting the soft earth, I roll and come to a stop on my stomach, with the water lapping behind me and a good bank of earth in front of me. It's about three feet high on average but undulates quite markedly. I can see it is quite exposed in places but only for a few feet at a time. I feel confident for the first time today as I start to move down the river's edge towards the bridge. If I am undisturbed, I can be there in 15 minutes. I tell Kay and he acknowledges but says I'm on my own as he is surrounded. Fortunately, the enemy can't establish which building he is in and he has been able to pick off three of them so far from his hideaway. I can hear the firing over to my left and I don't know how he will manage to escape, there will be more troops joining that area soon, attracted by the fire and reports that one of us is trapped somewhere in the vicinity. I carry on, getting closer to my target with each step and starting to feel excited at the prospect of planting my incendiary devices underneath the structure and watching as it blows, firing masonry, steel and water high into the air. I'll worry about getting out of here and helping Kay after that, but for now I can smell success. I start to think about how fortunate I've been and how

relatively unscathed I am, I must be an exceptionally good fighter to get this far without much of a challenge not to mention a great strategist and in spite of losing Budgie, a superb leader. I can't wait to get through this one and move onto a new challenge, a new mission, in another part of the world next time, somewhere warmer. I'm grinning as I move steadily, over the wet soil, ducking low behind the ridge, occasionally stepping into the winding river water. The grenade took me completely by surprise as it whizzed over my head and hit the water, exploding loudly, and sending the water and mud in all directions. Another one followed quickly after and landed closer but still in the water. I push myself into the bank and pull myself as low as I can, keeping out of sight and trying to think quickly. I know I can't stay here as another grenade is bound to pop over the ridge very soon so I crawl on my belly as fast as I can just as that expected grenade lands about a foot away from where I was just led. I need to find out where the guy is, he can't be far away to be throwing grenades with that degree of accuracy. I come to a low point in the banking and get to survey the road. At the edge of my vision, I see him, crouched down behind a small wall across the road. I shudder as I recall my first plan of running that side of the road realising that I would probably be dead if I had, as he would surely have seen me coming. I can just about get in position and I steady my gun sight, so that his head is firmly in the centre of my view finder. I set myself still, and gently squeeze on my trigger sending off several rounds into his skull. He fell like a sack and probably didn't even realise what was happening until he felt the thud crack his head open. I waited still, quiet, breathing lightly just to make sure no-one else was with him. Sure enough, his mate came running out of the building just as I squeezed my fingers tight again, sending him flying off his feet and crashing lifeless to the ground. I led there for a few more minutes and watched the road; I could hear some sort of vehicle driving along the streets quite close by, probably looking for me. It was getting closer, so I stay where I am as I have a good view of the road and am well hidden from sight. I have the advantage if anyone or anything was to appear. As I wait, I decide to check in with Kay who sadly is in a bad way but in his words, holding his own. He is under heavy fire from at least six heavily armed militia who now know which building he is in. He is fighting fiercely and has taken another one out, but the shells are getting closer and I don't think he's going to see the fight out. We talk over the intercom, his voice is rasping, tired and frightened, his words positive but the manner in which he delivers them, seem to me to feel resigned to the fact that the end is near. He tells me that he is looking forward to seeing me after the bridge is blown and I'm on my way back to base, I still don't know how that is going to happen! I tell him that he's doing a great job and to hang in there and then silence. The radio goes as dead as Kay probably is and I reflect on the adventure we've had and previous successes we had, all three of us. We made a great team and always thought that we were invincible, until now that is. The realisation that I'm the last one left hit me hard. I'm shaken awake and startled as the open top jeep drives past my position, it has a driver who is scanning the roads as he takes it slowly along the bomb scarred tarmac and another person in the back on a heavy artillery gun bolted into the base. I say 'person' as it's a girl, she's in fatigues with a beret and long dark hair streaming from under it. The light shines in her face and reflects the deep dark red lipstick that adorns her grimacing mouth. She also scans the area and the buildings, looking into the window holes and up into the roof. Neither look in my direction and I think about taking them out. Shifting slowly so I can get my gun in the right direction, they stop in front of the two dead bodies that lay in pools of blood on the side of the road. The driver jumps out to get a closer look and my view of him is obscured by his vehicle. The girl, however, is now in my sights and I hesitate a few seconds to see if they are going to drive off. They don't and the driver walks around to the middle of the road and looks up and down it as if waiting for a bus. I open fire and he gets hit by half a dozen rounds before either of them can react and by then it's all over as I realign my aim to the girl as she grips her gun in panic and surprise. Two shots to her head finish it off and once again, I'm alone and still and waiting. I now have a dilemma; do I carry on shuffling around the river's edge

to the bridge or do I go and get the jeep and drive there? If I grab the jeep, I will have a way of getting out of this place once the deed is done but I run the risk of attracting unwanted attention. Then again, it'll still be there after I've blown the bridge. I decide to carry on with my more covert choice, crawling on my knees shielded by the mud bank and almost within reach of my destination. I'm shaken a bit from the events of the last 15 minutes but now even more determined to get to the end zone and deploy my surprise. I round the final bend and at long last I'm knelt under the first support beam on this huge metal structure, undoing my rucksack and taking out my explosive unit ready to fix it to the underside of the iron roadway. I start to slowly wade out into the river and head to a central point, moving only a few yards as the water is getting quite deep and I can sense the strong current flowing around my legs. I reach my target area when that damn plane appears in the distance, heading towards me. I don't have long left. As I start to strap the device to the surface, I feel my mobile phone vibrating in my pocket, damn who is this? I try and get the phone out of my pocket but can't manage it, I need both hands to complete the task with this bomb. The phone stops but then buzzes as whoever it is leaves a message, I'll check it out when I've finished here.

The plane is low and flying along the outline of the river and as it goes overhead and spots me, a grenade is dropped by one of the occupants. It falls quite a way from me but it's clear I've been spotted; I need to get a move on and find a safe place from which to detonate the device which is now secured to its target. Running now, I'm back on the bank, my feet slipping because of the water I've collected on my boots and trousers, but I manage to remain upright...

The bedroom door flies open banging hard against the plaster wall and startling me so much that the headset falls off my ears and hangs limply around my neck. I look up and receive a volley of verbal abuse delivered at amazingly high decibels from my wife who is stood in the doorway with her coat on and her phone in her hand. She waves it at me aggressively, swearing loudly still and her face a harsh red and contorted in a rage I haven't seen before. I retrieve my own phone from my pocket to see 11 missed calls and 4 text messages all from Suzie, my wife! The text messages inform me that her car broke down at the supermarket and she needed help. Then, the breakdown recovery firm had been and taken her car to a garage, so she needed a lift home, with the shopping. The third one was to say she couldn't pick Dillan up from nursery and could I go, that was 30 mins ago and the final one was a list of swear words and threats that I really shouldn't repeat.

I'm in some bother here! I send a quick apology to the lads who are waiting to start a new mission and switch the Xbox off ready to enter another battle zone, but this one could result in me getting hurt. Why doesn't she just understand...?

