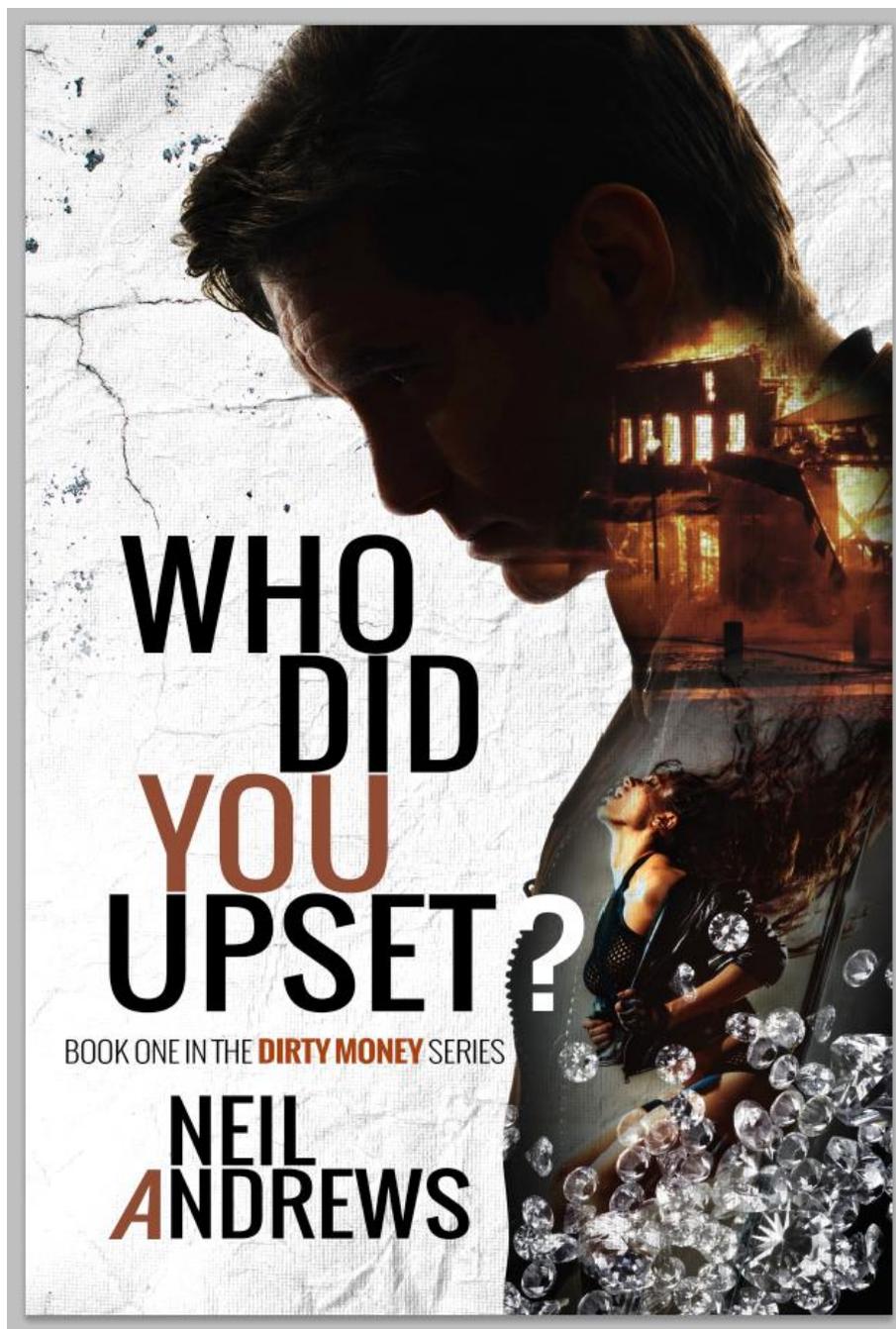


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DIRTY MONEY – Book 1 – Who did you upset?

Foreword

This book would never have been written without the encouragement of many of my friends. My heartfelt thanks to Pete and Sandra who helped me get the story clear in my head; the Barbados crowd for their unswerving encouragement; and Leon for his early name suggestions. Special thanks go to those who volunteered to read the draft, in particular my wife Janice, Barbara and Sandra. Thanks for being willing victims.

The characters and events depicted in this book are fictional and the creation of the author's imagination or have been used fictitiously and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblance to persons living or dead, actual events, locales, business establishments, or organisations are entirely coincidental. We would all however do well to remember that sometimes elements of truth can be stranger than fiction.

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Dedication

To my loving wife who has to deal with the aftermath of my using too much energy writing.

Chapter 1 – Who did you upset?

Max ran around the corner of the building to get to the front of the row of shops, almost bowling over a burly builder before sitting on a bench to witness the scene of devastation.

The man looked Max up and down. “That your place is it, mate?” Max nodded mindlessly. “I’ve already called the fire brigade and the police, they’re on their way, won’t be long now, mate. You were inside were you? Want me to get you an ambulance?” Max glanced up from the bench he was sat on into the stranger’s eyes and then back over his shoulder to the remnants of his burning lap dancing club. Smoke was now billowing out of the lower floor, smearing the blacked-out windows and obscuring the 1950s façade. The car, which was jammed backwards through the front double doors below the Pussycats club sign, was fully ablaze. Max was feeling decidedly shaky. Shortly before the car crashed, he had been about to go to sleep for a few hours in the room above the bar after closing up for the night. If the car had collided just a few minutes earlier it would have wiped him out as he was heading up the stairs. He would never have survived the impact let alone the fire.

“No, I’m fine eh, yeah, I’m fine... Really there’s no need to call an ambulance, just a bit shocked that’s all, what the bloody hell happened, did the driver lose control?”

“Lose control? Are you having a laugh? You must have seriously pissed somebody off big time. Me and me mates had just turned up to begin work on the site over there,” he said waving in the direction of the shops opposite, “when this guy pulls up in a black Toyota and reverses on to the pavement. I says to me mate ‘strange place to park’, then cool as a cucumber the bloke lines his car up with your double doors and slams it in backwards. Fucking amazing.” The builder looked to Max as if he was expecting a round of applause for his description. When none was forthcoming he carried on with the story but with a bit less animation. “Quite a good bit of driving really, he only had a couple of inches clearance on each side.” Looking carefully, Max couldn’t disagree. Two inches to the right and the car would have hit a concrete post; two inches to the left and the framework of the door and window may have slowed his progress. The guy knew just where to park it to cause *maximum* damage taking out most of the entrance and bar.

The flames were now roof high and really taking hold. Max looked down the street to see a fire engine’s blue lights flashing round the corner. The crew were well-drilled and in a short space of time had their hoses trained on the car and shop front. Initially the onslaught of water seemed to be having little impact on the blaze, maybe it just looked worse than it was, when it’s your own property that you’ve put your heart and soul into things look very different.

Max turned back to the stranger who seemed to be enjoying the morning’s show.

“Call me dumb but why did the car burst into flames when it went through the doors? I thought that modern petrol tanks were supposed to have a protection mechanism.”

“Well it didn’t fuckin’ well set light to itself did it?!” The builder lent back hands out wide to emphasise his point. “The bloke driving it climbed out of the sunroof with a petrol can in his hand pouring the stuff everywhere before chucking a match and watching it explode. Fucking amazing he didn’t fry ’imself at the same time. Looked like an Asian guy to me wearing a hoodie with the usual wannabe big trainers, probably about five eight not a big guy, so like I said you must have really pissed somebody off.” The builder paused and Max could see the cogs turning in his brain while he tried to come up with a funny quip. Eventually the light switched on.

“Not been paying your protection money or what?” The stranger sniggered at his last comment as if he was an expert on the underworld. Yeah lap dancing clubs are seedy with more than their fair share of weirdos, pervs, drugs and sex, but things like this just didn’t happen. Not in Basildon, anyway. The odd skirmish over drugs, the odd punter who pushes his luck too far with one of the girls, but that’s about it. Max prided himself on running a clean club. He liked to think that it was a drug-free zone. He’d even installed UV lights at the entrance so the door staff could see if someone had a nose full before entering. In reality he knew better; hell the other week he’d even moved some of the white stuff himself, he just didn’t want other people selling the drug on his turf.

“Fucking Irish Jack...”

The builder’s attention turned back to Max from the fire. “Who?”

“Nothing, mate just mumbling to myself, still a bit shocked...”

Max was saved from further explanation by a fire inspector and two police officers making a beeline towards them to find out what they knew about the fire, either that, or to see what they were gawping at given that not many people were watching the show yet. The builder was straight up on his toes, as excited as a dog with two dicks.

“Alright officer? Saw it all I did.” He jerked his thumb in Max’s direction. “This bloke’s the owner of the club, says he’s alright but I’m not sure, looks a bit dicky to me, only just about made it out he did, lucky he didn’t go up with the place... Not saying a lot, probably just suffering from a bit of shock. What do you reckon then? Is it a Jewish stocktake or a local drugs gang? Fucking good show before breakfast must say.”

The Sarge who looked to be in his mid-forties and definitely had the ‘been there seen that T-shirt look’, straightened to his full height of six foot four inches and looked down sternly at the builder. Max almost laughed.

“Is there something else you’d like to tell me, Sir? Your medical comments are full of insight.” You could hear the sarcasm dripping in his voice. “Are we a bit more than an innocent bystander?” The builder blanched looking decidedly less cocky and started to rapidly back pedal spilling the beans on everything he’d seen and why he was here. Christ, he almost told the guy what he had for breakfast. It’s amazing what a bit of old-fashioned very polite police intimidation can do. It couldn’t be pulled off by everyone and certainly not by the sergeant’s partner who looked very wet behind the ears. Max looked the young PC up and down his thoughts straying from the fire... Where do they recruit them these days, straight from school? Maybe it was just all part of getting older.

Having found that Max was the owner, the fire inspector ambled over exuding calm and efficiency. He explained that he needed to establish what was inside and what hazards his team might be dealing with; the team and the bystanders’ safety were his prime concern. Buildings and physical assets could be replaced, lives could not. Max ran his mind through the club layout and fed him as much information as quickly and briefly as he could.

“The building’s empty nobody else is inside, it’s a two-storey converted shop, around twelve hundred square feet on the ground floor and a thousand square feet upstairs. Downstairs there’s the main bar just behind where the car is sticking out the front. There’s a mixture of comfy sofas, tables and chairs for punters.” He paused clearly thinking. “Most of the sofas are near where the car is so you might get fumes as a few of them are pretty old, umm then there’s two dancing poles...” He paused gathering

his thoughts again. “Oh, and there’s fridges, beer kegs, the usual bar stuff, I suppose the alcohol could be dangerous.”

The fire inspector took everything in quickly, “Do you use gas bottles at all?”

“No... oh shit! I forgot, there’s mains gas in the kitchen on the first floor. The shut off is around the back next to the rear door.”

“Thank you fella, I’ll get that seen to, shouldn’t be too long until it’s under control, looks worse than it is with the flames from the accelerant an’ all. How about the top floor? Anything up there going to cause the lads any grief?”

“No there’s three rooms for private dances, customer toilets and girls changing area that’s all, the girls and staff left about two hours ago.”

“Don’t go anywhere mate, we’ll probably need a debrief and I’m sure the boys in blue will want a statement from you.”

Max was left sat on the bench wondering what on earth was happening to his life. Everything seemed to be going tits up lately. Hey, let’s be honest everything had been going tits up over the last few years, everything he touched had ended up in trouble. The bloody club wasn’t even his idea. His brother Paolo persuaded him to put money into it a few years back... guaranteed return... very low risk... nearly all cash income if you know what I mean... perfect business. Yeah right... yet another of Paolo’s hare-brained schemes that he started and never finished.

The deal was this. Paolo’s long-term and long-suffering girlfriend Cristal danced nightly at the club and would supposedly oversee everything to do with day-to-day running and management of the place. Max, in theory wouldn’t have to do a thing, just sit back over in Spain and collect the cash. Because Paolo and Cristal had past run-ins with the law and a bankruptcy hanging over them, Max and his partner Rachel held the licence for the premises in their names. This licence was hugely valuable as it allowed the consumption of alcohol until gone three – nowadays pubs and bars were lucky to get an extension until midnight. Cristal would operate as the nominated supervisor and it should have been easy money, but Max hadn’t counted on Cristal sticking most of the profits straight up her nose.

Max wished he was in Spain now with Rachel. Christ Rachel... he must get round to ringing her, it was over a week since they’d spoken and he really needed to tell her what was going on with the club.

The lap dancing club burning down was obviously big news in Basildon. A small crowd had formed along with a few local reporters and what looked to be a TV crew. Max did a double take. When did bloody Basildon warrant a TV crew? They made a beeline for him presumably tipped off by the junior schoolboy PC sidekick. Looked like it was interview time, what do they say...? All publicity is good publicity? Max manoeuvred himself to make sure that the Pussycat’s Club sign was in full view even if it was looking very sad for itself and very scorched. The fire brigade, flames, smoke and car stuck out of the front wasn’t exactly testing for the cameraman, so after taking ten minutes of general footage, it was down to eyewitness reports. The reporter looked straight at the camera.

“We are here now on scene in Basildon, Essex at the Pussycats lap dancing club which has suffered a catastrophic fire this morning. Luckily no casualties have been sustained but reports suggest that the fire was deliberately started. A black Toyota was apparently used to drive through the entrance doors early this morning. Reports suggest that the driver of the vehicle used an accelerant to set the fire

which took hold quickly.” The reporter had already explained how he was going to open the report and when he was going to bring Max into the conversation but he still found it disconcerting when the camera panned to include him in the shot.

“Mr. Williams I understand that you are the owner of the club and that you were inside when the incident unfolded. This is clearly a shocking experience but what can you tell us about it?” The reporter proffered the mic under Max’s nose and looked on enquiringly as if expecting the answer to $e=mc^2$.

Max stared at the camera and quickly pulled himself together.

“Well, I was in the club just finishing off a few things in the office when there was an almighty crash at the bottom of the stairs. I can’t be sure of the exact time but I’ve been told that it was around seven thirty this morning which sounds about right.” Max thought it best to skip the bit about sleeping over. Since coming back from Spain after an argument with Rachel, he had been camping out at the club sleeping on one of the sofas upstairs. The club had a couple of showers for the girls plus tea and coffee facilities so it wasn’t too bad really. When the car struck he had just walked upstairs and was preparing to go to sleep. In fact, he’d actually been naked and about to get in to his sleeping bag. The crash, and a quick peek down the stairs, forced him into rapid action and he had to scramble to get into his trademark white T-shirt, blue jeans and loafers. He had made a quick escape with just the clothes on his back, his mobile phone and wallet. There was no time to collect or gather anything else as the smoke was starting to come under the fire door and up the stairs.

“See that there fire door?” Max said pointing to the right-hand side of the car and into the front shop well. “That there fire door saved my life it did. I ran out through the back door and came around to the front of the club as quick as I could. I couldn’t believe my eyes. Why would anyone want to do such a thing? It’s hard enough to make a decent living without someone deciding to set fire to the place.” He was fascinated as the mic swung back to the reporter.

“Well that’s the key question, who would do such a thing? Do you have any idea or has there been any trouble at the club recently?” The mic appeared back under Max’s nose.

“I really have no idea. Hopefully if the CCTV doesn’t get soaked we should get a look at whoever did it. The builder who rang the fire brigade said the guy looked Asian and deliberately set fire to the place after ramming the doors, but that’s all I know. We’ve never had any trouble here in the past and have a pretty loyal bunch of customers, some come to see the girls dance others just come for the relaxed vibe and a late night drink, and hopefully we’ll be open again soon.”

The reporter rounded to the camera, “Well as you can see we are on scene at the Pussycat lap dancing club in Basildon where we appear to be witnessing a deliberate arson attack. The fire brigade are rapidly getting the fire under control but as yet we are unable to confirm why this event has unfolded, we will keep you updated as the news breaks but for now, back to the studio.”

Max ran his mind back over the interview pretty pleased that he got the ‘late night drinking and relaxed vibe’ in but cringed at the drawl in his voice when talking about the fire door. You can take the boy out of Bristol but you can’t take Bristol out of the boy. Sod it, all publicity is good publicity. Must try Rachel. He rang the apartment but got no reply, he then tried her mobile but again no reply... *Strange*, he thought, *perhaps she’s in the shower or has headed out early on a job*. Max looked at his mobile again. He had just put it on charge when he had to run for his life. The battery light was

flashing, not much life left. He decided to ring the apartment one more time and leave a message on the answer phone. He hated speaking after the bleep.

“Hi Rachel...” he paused... “It’s me Max. Um, listen. I hope that you’re feeling a bit better about life in general and us than you were last week.” He paused again... “I really would rather talk face-to-face Rachel. I know things haven’t been great between us over the last few months but just to let you know I’m all right, don’t forget I still love you. We’ve um... shit... sorry, um... we’ve had a bit of a fire at the club. No one’s hurt and the fire brigade are here dealing with things. I’ll try to call later and fill in some of the details. Don’t give up on us babe, things will come right... I still love you.” Beep, beep, beep. The battery gave out and Max’s charger was still in the club. He ran his hand through his hair exasperated and began talking to himself. “What a crap day! It never rains but it pours... Fuck, I could do with a stiff drink.”

The Sarge ambled over and struck up a conversation by going over the obvious points from the morning’s events and checking to see if Max needed any medical attention. He pushed the point quite hard as he had seen shock do funny things to people before. They seemed alright and thought that they were fine, but once the adrenaline stopped, people invariably keeled. Shock did funny things to the body and mind.

Max was slightly distracted. His eyes and mind were drawn to the smoke and steam that was still coming out through the doors. There was also a stream of black dirty water washing along the pavement into the drains. He forced his mind back to the conversation.

“I think I’m okay, thanks for asking. What a bloody mess. I should be fine though.”

“Well, if you’re sure... It looks like the fire brigade are going to be here for a few hours yet damping down the flames. It’ll probably be some time after that before it can be declared safe to go back in. Is there anything of value that you need retrieved?”

Max thought about what was in the club, and the less searching around by anyone the better. “No, there’s nothing of real value, well nothing that can’t be replaced, although the CCTV recorder might be useful to you. Because of the strict regulations covering lap dancing clubs, we’ve got cameras covering just about everywhere, the bar, lounge, entrance, dancing rooms and two that cover the outside of the building. Those will hopefully give you a good view of what happened.”

The Sarge noted the CCTV points down in his notebook. “Where can we find the recorder for the CCTV system Mr. Williams? I assume it’s digital given the number of cameras you’re talking about.”

“Yeah, I only recently upgraded the system. The monitor’s on the desk and the DVR recorder is in the cupboard behind the monitor to the right. It’s all pretty easy to move and it should have stayed reasonably dry in there.”

The Sarge finished scribbling down the comments. “Okay, I’ll ask the fire brigade to try to recover it and get them to drop it into the station later where we can tag it as evidence.” The Sarge dropped in his usual catch-all question. “Is there anything else you think I should know Mr. Williams?”

He left a long pregnant pause as he’d been taught. It was incredible how many people found the silence unnerving and said the first thing that came into their mind. Once the cat was out of the bag, there was no putting it back, and normally one thing led to another. Max just stood there looking at him shaking his head, his brain overwhelmed by the scenes of devastation.

“No? Okay, I’m going to need a formal statement later. Could you come down to the station around four this afternoon? Hopefully we can discuss things in a bit more detail and have a look at what we know and what we don’t know. Now, you’re sure you don’t need any medical treatment, or do you need me to call anyone for you?” Max shook his head while standing with his hands in his pockets. For some reason he felt like a naughty schoolboy. He shook his head again. “No? Okay I’ll see you at four. Try and get some rest or sleep. Shock is bound to kick in sooner or later.”

Max hung around outside of the club for another few hours talking to various news reporters to get as much coverage as he could; he even got one or two of the big boys to promise to cover the relaunch. *The Sun* were looking to run a storyline of ‘Page 3 Jihad!’ after the Asian link had been confirmed. Another eyewitness had come forward stating he recognised the guy from the local mosque even though he was more than one hundred yards away at the time. Why let facts get in the way of a good story? It worked for Max, bigger headlines, more coverage, and more publicity!

While he was still hanging around outside he also tried hard to persuade the fire chief to let him back in to the club. No such luck, not today at least. One of his men could retrieve anything personal that he desperately needed but that and the DVR recorder would be it for today. Resigned and tired, he thought about where to put his head down for a few hours. He thought about going to Lynette’s apartment. He’d been there a few times for drinks and to chat about life, the universe and everything; she wasn’t expecting him, but she was one of his best dancers and was more than just a pair of tits and a good body. Punters loved talking to her. He didn’t know much about her private life or background, but he did know that she could hold her own when discussing world affairs, politics, and exotic vacation places. You name it and usually Lynette had some view or could add some fascinating snippet to the conversation. They were pretty friendly and Lynette had offered the use of her spare bedroom if he needed the occasional place to crash rather than staying at the club. He just hoped that she really meant it. She’d mentioned it a few times over the last few weeks hadn’t she? If all went to plan, he would be able to grab a few hours’ sleep and get to freshen up before he had to talk to the police.

Max really needed to clear his mind. Had Irish Jack been serious when he said he could ‘organise’ a refurb program to help deal with his problems? It seemed more of a threat when Jack had been at the club last week. Max didn’t believe in coincidence. Last week’s so-called visit had him seriously on edge. Jack most definitely had not dropped into town to visit an old friend as he claimed... it was more about applying subtle or not so subtle pressure. He’d succeeded; Max’s nerves were fried.

Max paced up and down mulling things over and getting increasingly worried. What if the police or fire brigade started digging through the debris at the club? Would they stumble across any of his dirty little secrets? Well, not little secrets, huge secrets, secrets that could get a man killed. This was not good.

After the story became old news and a team arrived to board up the property, Max found himself passing under the railway bridge next to the station. Lynette’s apartment was just up the street where they’d pulled down the old Ford car showrooms a few years back. He climbed up the outside steps, leaned on the wall and pressed the intercom three or four times. No response, not surprising given that Lynette had probably only been in bed for around six hours. As he rang the intercom for a fifth time, an exiting tenant held the door open and let him inside. Trusting, Max thought, I could be anyone. He took the lift up to the second floor and walked along the short corridor to Lynette’s apartment where he knocked hard.

Lynette opened the door on the security chain and peeked at him bleary-eyed. “Max what are you doing here? Hang on let me get this chain off. Come in.” As Max entered the small hallway he could see that Lynette was not wearing much to cover her charms. He acted the gentleman and looked the other way; it seemed like an intrusion when he was in her home even though he saw her virtually naked at the club on nights she danced.

“Hey, Max... Come in, come in... Let me get the kettle on... What’s going on?” She was quickly pulling herself together as the effects of sleep left her.

“Oh, and Max you can skip the embarrassed gentleman act. I’ll go and put a robe on, but let’s be honest you’ve seen it all before.” Lynette held her arms wide flashing her boobs at him while indicating the length of her body with her hands.

He was ushered in to the modern bright, airy lounge to sit down while Lynette found her bathrobe and made two decent lattes using her newly-acquired coffee machine. She really couldn’t stand the instant crap anymore since getting hooked on ‘real’ coffee from the plethora of new cafes in London. Times had to be desperate for Lynette to drink dried granules from a jar.

Lynette wandered back into the lounge with the upmarket coffees plus a few warmed croissants with butter and jam. “Here Max, help yourself.” She turned to the big aspect window and opened the blinds before curling up in a big comfy love seat designed for two that could rotate on its base. She tucked her long legs underneath her as if she was a big cat, comfortable yet poised if needed. Once she was settled she looked directly at Max perched on the sofa opposite.

“Spill it Max, to what do I owe the pleasure? You know that you’re always welcome to have a bed here anytime, but you should really give a girl some notice so she can tidy up her junk room,” she laughed teasingly. Max ran his fingers through his hair, sat back into the sofa and blew out through his puffed cheeks while looking at the ceiling. Lynette took in his body language and demeanour. “Wow, that bad, huh, Max. Who’ve you killed?” She took a sip of her drink and patiently waiting for Max to pull himself together.

Max was still staring at the ceiling. His hands were locked on his head and he was trying to work out where to start. He took a slug from his mug savouring the warmth in his throat and the strong rich flavour. “Good coffee Lynette.”

“I aim to please Max.”

Finding the side table, Max set the mug down and lent forward with a serious look. With his hands entwined and eyes fixed on the carpet, he started to fill in Lynette on the events. She listened intently, stopping him to recap every so often but not really asking too many questions. Max found himself opening up and probably giving out more information than he should. Mentioning Jack’s visit was a slip up and he hoped Lynette hadn’t noticed. He took another gulp of coffee and sat back on the sofa with his head in his hands. His level of stress was obvious.

Lynette swivelled on her seat switching her legs to the other side before speaking. “Jesus Max, what are you going to do? You know that you’re more than welcome to stay here for a few days until you sort things out. I know that everybody says it after a mini-disaster, but really, let me know if there’s anything I can do to help.” She paused trying to get eye contact but failed. “I’ll ring round the other girls later to let them know that there’s no point in coming in tonight or for the next few weeks, just in

case they haven't seen the news. Is there anyone else you'd like me to call for you or anything else that I can do?"

Max was still staring at the ceiling, shaking his head. Lynette took it as 'No'. What she had to say next could prove painful.

"Listen Max, don't take this the wrong way but I need a dancing job to live the high life, and to help keep my mind clear. I like the regular cash and it'll take ages to get the club open again. No offence but I'll probably take Vinnie up on his offer and dance with Cristal at Changers." Max was really not happy about losing Lynette to Changers but what could he say? She was right. It would be ages before the club would reopen.

Lynette was watching the reaction on Max's face. "Come on, lose the serious face, let me give you the big tour of my apartment seeing as you are going to be here for a while. The spare room is full of trash at the moment, well not exactly trash, just my gym gear, running machine and a spare fifty pairs of shoes; so it'll have to be the settee for today, here grab this blanket you can crash out on it later. The main bathroom is through here. And if you need a suit jacket for later, just take one out of the closet by the bathroom door." Lynette waved dismissively at a cupboard before narrowing her eyes looking over her shoulder at Max. Her voice took on a sharper tone. "Carl will not be coming back any time soon, in fact let's say never."

Lynette glanced at the clock. "Listen Max, I've got to go to my day job in a couple of hours so here's a key to let yourself back in, and oh yeah, I'll put your phone on charge in the kitchen – sweet dreams. I've gotta go get ready. See you later."

Chapter 2 – Rachel

Rachel sat on the apartment terrace watching the morning sun sparkling off the sea and golf course while she enjoyed her mid-morning *café con leche*. The Costa del Sol wasn't too bad when the holidaymakers went home, and to be fair, the views from her new-build apartment on the Ronda Road were stunning. Late September was her favourite time, still warm but no apartments to clean, no meet and greets, no maintenance men, just some time to herself to try and get her head together. Clare, who ran the holiday letting business for her when she was away, was holding the phone so it should be a peaceful weekend. It was unbelievable how many calls and emails needed fielding when you looked after the keys, maintenance and lettings for one hundred or so clients. Time to kick back and relax.

She'd been through a few tough months with Max, and she couldn't do it anymore. The last ten years had been fun, but the last eighteen months weren't. They were arguing all the time and Max had become increasingly distant and secretive. It was all so different from the way they'd worked together in the past, then they were a team, united. He used to make her laugh and had wanted to have kids with her. He didn't run when she told him she couldn't, saying it didn't matter as long as they had each other. Now they seemed to lurch from one disaster to another. She'd had enough of Spain, enough of his increasingly strange behaviour, and enough of working her butt off to keep them both. Although to be fair to Max, he'd chip in on the cleaning work and carried out most of the maintenance for clients, but she wanted more. Life had just become too hard. Max still believed he could make the big score, chasing dreams, high-risk investments and projects. He'd made a fortune once and was convinced that he could do it again. Pussycats nightclub had caused a lot of damage to their relationship, and as usual, it should have been easy money but it had gone seriously wrong. Just one of a list of problems over the last year or so that made life an endless grind.

Rachel thought back. Things for a while hadn't been good, but all seemed far worse after Max's long weekend trip to Morocco on Bill's friend's boat. One week later they had found Bill dead in his apartment. Max had changed. It wasn't the first dead body they'd stumbled on, looking after elderly renters made it a bit of an occupational hazard, but this one was different. Bill had been with them for about two years, paid his rent six months in advance and had become a good friend. He was educated and well read, but he seemed lonely. Family was never mentioned, and if you brought it up, he'd politely change the subject. You never knew what skeletons people kept in their cupboards on the Costa del Sol... best not to know.

Max was badly affected by Bill's death; he became distant, pensive. The rows seemed to get worse with the fun getting sucked out of things. He would disappear for a few days here or there supposedly visiting friends but Rachel wasn't so sure. She accused him of having an affair but he swore he wasn't. Something else had gone wrong. She sensed something but couldn't put her finger on it; then a few months after Bill's death, he came up with a hare-brained scheme to drive back to the UK taking some cheap booze to the club. Hello! After eight hundred miles worth of petrol and the cost of the ferry, the booze would no longer be cheap!

He just wouldn't listen so she told him to go. They could do with a bit of space to think things through. Perhaps some time apart would solve the problem, sort of make or break. It was about time that she came first. Where did it all go wrong? Was it the trashy Pussycats club that had eaten up their savings, the long hours of work, the fact that they had made and then lost one fortune or had they just grown complacent and stopped working on the relationship? She never blamed him for what happened with the estate agency business but she was becoming increasingly fed up with the promise

of 'jam tomorrow' and the dysfunctional friends that they seemed to hang out with. Discussing get-rich-quick schemes down the pub was driving her mad. Nobody seemed to be in the real world. Money just didn't fall into your lap, not that it stopped their friends dreaming or telling anyone who would listen how they were going to corner the market and make a killing. Fat chance!

Stability... that was it, she wanted stability and enough money to stop cleaning crappy apartments; finding used condoms under the beds; dealing with sheets covered with god knows what; and shit covered blocked bogs, not to mention the drudgery of washing and ironing countless sets of bedding and towels. Oh, and then finding the dead bodies! The images still haunted her at night and she swore she could still smell the decaying flesh in her dreams.

She was jarred out of her melancholy mood by hammering at the door. "Okay, okay keep your shirt on, I'm coming!"

As she unlocked the door her neighbour Sylvia came crashing through the entrance all panicky and breathless.

"Rach, Rach turn on the news quick! Max is on the BBC local news channel, the club's been fire bombed or something... He looks all right though, says that nobody's been hurt, there's smoke and flames everywhere and some very dishy fireman. I wouldn't mind meeting them in a dark alley if you know what I mean."

Typical, if it wore trousers and had a pulse it was fair game, if it wore a uniform well... game over unless he could run fast. Sylvia pictured herself as an aged Marilyn Monroe, but in reality she was just a pair of big tits with badly died long hair that needed a wash. A trowel for slap didn't come into it, she probably kept her own cement mixer in her bedroom, but she was harmless enough really – at least when she was sober.

Rachel turned on the TV but the news was now covering national politics. She flicked channels trying to find the story but without luck.

"Are you alright Rach? You've gone awfully pale... oh my god didn't you know?" Sylvia smirked. She was going to enjoy telling everyone that she'd broken the news.

Rachel tried to stay calm even though her insides twisted into a knot. After ten years together you would think that Max would have the decency to call, part of the club belonged to her, he claimed that his heart still belonged to her despite her misgivings, things clearly were worse between them than she'd thought... "Bastard!"

She turned to talk to Sylvia but was interrupted by the phone ringing. Jenny her best pal was on the line. She'd seen the news but at least she was more concerned about how Rachel was, whether Max was okay, and if they were insured. She wasn't just ringing to spread the gloom in a 'told you so' voice. By choice they would never have been involved in a lap dancing club, (it was a long story and a set of very odd events), but if Rachel was honest she enjoyed what Max had coined 'the vibe and the late night atmosphere'.

Rachel had poured her heart out to Jenny over the last six months, flying back to England or Jenny coming over to Spain. There was nothing that couldn't be solved or explained with a bottle of Bacardi, a litre of Coke, some ice and a good girlfriend. Nothing but the enigma of Max! No she wouldn't cry. Not while Sylvia was there waiting to pass every bit of tittle-tattle on and no doubt blowing things out of proportion. News travelled fast here and as the saying goes bad news travelled

even faster. She mulled things over in her mind, could things be out of proportion? The man she loved or thought she loved was into the seedy world of lap dancing, mafia and god knows what. She didn't know him anymore. She didn't want to be in Spain anymore. She wanted to be in England with friends and family. She wanted to go on luxury holidays and be pampered.

Sylvia waved from the doorway mouthing, 'Sorry'. Yeah right, sorry. She'd be sprinting across the gardens to her own apartment block to spread the gossip as quick as she could. Rachel put the phone down to Jenny and promised to call back tomorrow.

You never knew who your friends were on the Costa del Sol, everybody had a story, hell; everybody had a problem. Half of them were running away from their past, some thought they could get rich quick, some were dodging tax, others were evading the law. It was like the Wild West. Grudges tended to get settled personally, and the local bar or pub was where everything went down. At least Jenny had always been there for her right from her schooldays. They'd shared good times, bad times and everything in-between. It was Jenny who suggested that she had a trial separation with Max. She'd told her that he wasn't worth crying over every day. She could still hear her words: "Get back out there girl."

She snapped out of her thoughts as the phone rang again. The pattern continued for the next few hours. After fending off numerous phone calls and visitors at the door, Rachel went back on to the BBC News South website to see the story first-hand again without someone looking over her shoulder. She'd poured herself a stiff drink before sitting in front of the PC. There he was; white T-shirt, blue jeans, brown loafers, strong blue eyes and Hugh Grant floppy black hair. No mistaking his Italian genes or looks inherited from his mother. Her heart still melted. Max had been her Italian stallion, her lover, her friend, her confidant, yet he still hadn't called...

"Bastard."

She laughed at his West Country drawl. It seemed stronger. Maybe the pressure he was under brought it out, either that or he'd been hanging out too much with his brother 'Playboy Paolo' or, perhaps he'd been back down to Bristol to see his friends and the rest of the family. His accent became stronger whenever they visited. He even picked up notes of his Dad's broad Welsh accent sometimes. Why hadn't he called? "Sod you Max."

Rachel wiped the tears from her eyes and walked to the mirror in the bathroom turning on the bath taps before critically appraising herself. Thirty-seven years old, long wavy brunette hair, brown eyes that you could swim in, five foot five with curves in all the right places. She pulled her T-shirt over her head and cupped her ample breasts, definitely her best asset. She ran her hands down over her hips while taking off her shorts and checked out her butterfly tattoo etched into the middle of her back just above the curve of her bum. Yep, she still looked good and could party with the best of them down in Puerto Banus. Maybe that's what she'd do tonight. A few drinks at Sinners and the Piano Bar followed by some dancing at VJ's nightclub. Maybe she would call Nick. He worshipped the ground she walked on, had money to burn, and treated her like an angel. He always said that she was the women of his dreams ever since Nicole had tragically died. Maybe things would go further than just dancing, months of no sex gets a girl thinking. Sex with an older man, she giggled to herself before looking carefully in the mirror again, yep, still looking good, apart from the smeared mascara and red eyes.

She took a deep breath. "Pull yourself together girl, time to move on."

She turned off the taps and went to pour herself another stiff drink to help her relax. The answer phone was blinking, probably just more people wanting to gloat. She pressed delete. If it was important they'd call back.

She picked the phone up and called Nick. As ever he was delighted to hear from her, he'd pick her up at nine, head out for tapas, have a few drinks and then hit the club with her. "Oh and Nick, no Ferrari... You can see my legs and panties if you just ask, I don't want to be tripping over my heels trying to get out of the car."

"For you my angel anything, your wish is my command."

Rachel headed back into the bathroom. Time for some gardening, she needed to shave her legs and armpits and her private garden patch was seriously out of control. It needed some work to be presentable for potential public display and so that she felt confident. A neat Brazilian was her preferred mode, but waxing was never her thing, too painful, DIY was definitely preferable. She took a pair of scissors and began cutting away at her soft brown curls and found herself starting to get aroused. Her nipples hardened, she was excited by the prospect of a date and being treated like a lady again. She slid into the bath and soaped up before carefully using her razor to trim away the stubble before moving on to ensuring she was hair free around her delicate folds. No man liked stray hairs if you were going to be wined, dined and sixty-nined. The feel of the razor against her sensitive skin and the clean feel of no hair made her feel really horny. She slowly massaged between her legs and around her lower belly exploring herself with her fingers and gently rubbing her nub. Jesus, it was years since she'd masturbated; it was like being a schoolgirl again. As her pace and urgency increased she tweaked her nipple with her other hand and was shocked at the speed and intensity of her orgasm as she cried out in pleasure. Wow, the afterglow left her feeling relaxed and happy, that and the large Bacardis she'd already had. It was time to hop in the shower cubicle to sort her hair out and rinse off. If this was anything to go by, tonight would be fun!

Chapter 3 – Nick

Nick was one of Rachel and Max's oldest friends on the coast. He had been adopted as a child by a lovely Greek couple in Mill Hill, North London and had been taught the value of hard work from an early age. He was given regular chores helping out in the family deli on Mill Hill Boulevard from as young as he could remember. At thirteen, his father encouraged him to get a paper round on the grounds that if you could get up early every day to go to work in the wind, rain and snow, you would always have a job in life. You learned many lessons as a paper boy: punctuality, service, politeness, even how to handle and account for money when you had to collect payment from the customers on a Friday night. You could do a lot worse.

Despite having a loving family background Nick struggled to accept the fact that his mother had abandoned him. He'd been five at the time and it still rankled with him. Who would abandon a five-year-old? He found relationships with the other sex difficult and became rebellious in his later teens hanging out with the wrong crowd. He was off the rails for a few years much to his father's disgust and even had a few run-ins with the law. He met Nicole when he was nineteen. She helped to put him back on track. He wanted to provide for her and to have a family to call his own and Nicole rescued him. He did well in life. His penchant for hard work, easy-going manner, commanding frame and ability to sell himself meant that he got on quickly. It probably helped that he was six foot three inches tall with a mop of thick blonde hair and hazel eyes. People tended to remember him. Because of his film star's rugged good looks, people assumed that he was a ladies' man but he was never one to play the field, Nicole was the love of his life. To the outside world he was a devoted husband and father.

He came to the Costa del Sol after selling his telecommunications and computing business in the mid-nineties. A friend had started selling new mobile telecommunications to business customers in the early eighties and encouraged Nick to join him. The word mobile was really misleading – they were selling small suitcase or large handbag-size contraptions, with the top-end Motorola model weighing more than seven kilos. Nick and his pal learned the ropes quickly and branched out on their own as they realised that the value wasn't in the hardware but in the airtime contracts and tail end commissions that went with them. They opened their first shop on Marylebone Road and never looked back. As they expanded they moved into the market of what we now call PCs and laptops but back then were thought of as mobile personal computers or desktop work stations. The bestselling Compaq models could run a word processing program, or Lotus spreadsheet from a floppy disk and store the contents for further use later. The machines in reality were anything but portable, luggable would be a better word. The desktop versions were monoliths.

Belying his easy-going manner Nick had an aggressive streak and did not suffer fools gladly. He also wasn't averse to bending the rules or using some muscle to get what he wanted. He made sure that competitors stayed off of his patch by whatever means necessary. Expansion continued at pace given that they were early movers in a fast-growing market. If your business didn't have a PC and shared mobile phone you were nobody in London. Nick swore that half of his clients used the PC on the front desk as an ornament while still using typewriters and carbon copies out back. The handbag-sized phones were displaced by brick-sized mobile phones or car phones and then by smaller but heavy truly portable devices. Everyone of substance wanted a Nokia or Motorola phone for personal use not just for business.

Nick and his partner had already spotted the change in the market opening more retail stores to feed the ever-growing personal demand for phones, laptops and PCs. They employed aggressive young sales staff and gave them stretching targets with the chance of huge rewards.

Given the business' strength in North London they were made an offer they couldn't refuse by a large corporate in the late nineties who wanted to gain market share. Arguably they cleverly sold at the peak, in reality the business had changed too much and Nick wanted out to spend more time with his wife Nicole and son Nico. Long hours of work and late night business entertaining for the corporate account buyers meant that he'd missed much of Nico's early years and he didn't want to miss the next chapter of his son's life. The family ended up on the Costa del Sol after advice from his accountant to become a resident of Gibraltar thus avoiding four million of capital gains tax on the deal in the process. They had holidayed on the Costas before but couldn't say that they knew it well. After some research Nicole settled on residing in a luxury villa overlooking one of the signature holes on the Los Molinos course. This was close enough to Marbella and Puerto Banus for top-end shopping yet near enough to Estepona and San Pedro to integrate into the true Spanish lifestyle. Life was pretty good: three hundred days of sunshine a year; excellent private schools for Nico and more time to enjoy with Nicole.

Nick soon got in with the local business mafia and enjoyed a bit of wheeling and dealing – always on the edge of legal and sometimes downright illegal. He was like a pig in shit but then cancer struck Nicole down. It had been two years since he'd cremated her and every day was still painful, more so as Nico was now away at university. He found himself in the typical expat position, a bunch of so-called friends, a few golf buddies, lots of willing drinking partners, especially if he was paying, but not many real friends to provide company and solace. He was fifty-two years old and for the first time ever was starting to get bored with retirement. Although if he was honest with himself it wasn't boredom, it was loneliness that was affecting him so badly. That and the fact that he had been abandoned by a woman he loved for the second time in his life. Nicole had been taken far too early.

Max and Rachel were some of his only true friends in Spain. They'd met via mutual acquaintances and cemented their relationship through Max's estate agency business. Max invested some of Nick's gambling funds, the money he could afford to lose without affecting his lifestyle, buying up apartments or building plots off-plan before spinning them to new clients one to two months later. Sometimes apartments were even 'turned' on the same day for a five to ten thousand pound profit such was the buying frenzy out there. Everyone knew it was a property bubble that would burst at some stage. It was a bit like musical chairs – you just needed to be out of the game when the music stopped.

Max made his own money on the back of the deals, and after the first few years of trading had four retail offices and a few small developments under his belt. He could have probably cut Nick loose and done most of the deals in his own name, but he kept Nick in the loop spinning deals for him until the market slowed down. Keeping Nick in was a conscious decision. Max would rather have him inside pissing out of the tent than the other way round. He'd heard of more than one event that left a real question mark over Nick's pleasant easy-going persona. The stories and the façade did not sit comfortably.

Nick saw it as loyalty and it meant a lot to him. Max and Rachel weren't just fair-weather friends or the type to try to cream off some of his hard-earned money. When the music stopped he was left with just one apartment to sell in Los Flamingos but in reality he'd made so much money in-between that it

owed him nothing, especially as the majority of transactions were for cash. Max and his business associates were not so lucky, but that was another story.

Rachel had been good to Nick and Nico when Nicole was taken ill – like a mother hen, always dropping in with meals she'd prepared. She spent time with Nicole talking about god knows what, painting her nails to cheer her up, even after the funeral she helped them come to terms with their grief. If he was a few years younger, or she wasn't besotted with Max, who knows what would have happened?

Nick put the phone down from Rachel and turned to his diary. He was supposed to go to a champagne reception at The Hacienda hotel with his wealth management company. He could swing by make a quick appearance and then head back to pick Rachel up. She sounded very flirty on the phone. Maybe there's life in the old dog yet. No Ferrari... Oh well, the Bentley drop top would have to do.

Chapter 4 – Lynette

Max locked the door to the apartment pulling Carl's cast-off leather jacket around his shoulders against the cold wind and headed off past the old Trafford House, under the railway bridge, and across the town square towards the police station. He went through the doors into a small lino-floored hallway with notice boards and 'Stop Crime Now' flyers everywhere. There were two orange plastic chairs facing a sliding window on the opposite wall at chest height with a big hand pointing at a doorbell saying 'Ring for Service'. He was a little early, but hey what the heck. He strolled up to the desk and pressed the bell. He stood for a few minutes without anyone responding so pressed the bell again.

This time he heard shuffling and a chair scrapping the floor before being met by a non-uniformed worker. Max had expected a desk sergeant or PC and was momentarily taken aback.

"Afternoon. Sergeant Greaves, please. I have an appointment at four, I'm a little the early but I don't mind waiting."

The civilian worker looked him up and down as if he was deciding whether he should bother talking to him. He almost sneered as he spoke. "I assume that you must be Mr. Williams from the nightclub in town."

Max decided to ignore the tone in his voice and responded cheerily, "Yep, that's me."

A smile came over the receptionist's face and his attitude lightened up. "There's a message from Sergeant Greaves apologising and asking if it would be all right for you to come in around eleven in the morning tomorrow. He's currently busy interviewing a suspect in relation to your case."

Max was surprised. "Blimey. Well, that's what you call quick work, I'm impressed." His positive comments seemed to loosen the receptionist up further and he had now clearly decided that Max was worthy of a conversation.

"Yeah, with a bit of luck he'll have it sewn up by the morning. He hasn't had a chance to view the CCTV yet but they don't call him 'Greavsy' for nothing. Always puts the ball in the back of the net if you know what I mean. Probably a bit before your time but as one of the football greats surely you've heard of him."

Max nodded. "Yeah, I like my footie. Greavsy was a master in front of goal even if it was a bit before the time that I took an interest." Max started to head towards the door looking back over his shoulder to speak.

"Eleven tomorrow morning then, let's hope the Sarge scores a hat-trick." He winked as he went through the doors.

He stepped out into the cool fresh air and was now at a bit of a loose end. He'd called the insurance company earlier only to be told in no uncertain terms that the building had been made secure and that he must not enter until either the police or the appointed loss adjustor gave him the go ahead. The loss adjustor to be fair was pretty quick off the mark and had already arranged an appointment for Wednesday morning. He also suggested that Max might like to appoint someone to act on his behalf to ensure that there was fair play and that the policy wording was interpreted in a way that was

acceptable to both parties. Max had yet to make a decision. He really needed to clear his head and work out how much of his story he needed to share and what could be swept under the carpet.

He strolled back into the town square and over to the indoor shopping mall with the intention of buying some new white T-shirts, socks and fresh pants. He hated shopping so his jeans would have to do for now and Carl's leather jacket was more than an adequate fit. He looked at his reflection in a shop window and thought that he pulled off the James Dean look pretty well. Vanity had never been one of his strong points. After picking up clothes and some essentials, Max stopped in at the wine store and purchased half a dozen bottles of Sauvignon Touraine, his favourite. Cheaper than Sancerre, where half the time you just paid for the label, but just as much flavour. He got back to Lynette's apartment, slipped through the door sideways with his bags and headed for the kitchen where he dug through the cupboards in search of a couple of wine glasses and some ice.

"Lynette? Hi it's me Max, are you back from work yet?" No reply...

He poured himself a large glass of Sauvignon put a few ice cubes in and then kicked back on the comfy settee. Thoughts rushed through his head and he spoke aloud, "SHIT, what a mess, what the fuck am I going to do? If the police find the drugs hidden in the club I'm done for, I can't exactly claim that a kilo of the white stuff is for my personal use or that I didn't know that it was there. My prints are going to be all over the bag. Maybe it went up in the fire... jeez dumb arse, you kept it in the freezer out back, pretty unlikely that it got burnt. What about the stuff in the car? Should be okay since it's still hidden behind the headlight and his other secret stash of stones should be invisible in among the ice cubes. Christ! What's Rachel going to think? She already thinks that I'm off my head, if any of this came out it would definitely be the end of the relationship." He grabbed his mobile and rang the apartment, no answer, shit. If only he could make her understand that he was doing it all for her.

He gave himself a quick telling off. "Come on Max, pull yourself together, no point in losing your nerve now, do something useful!" He grabbed his mobile and scrolled through for the number of his insurance broker. After fifteen minutes of chatting and being informed that clause 4b contradicted clause 9a and that the business interruption part of the claim would need to be proved in full, he had agreed to appoint an agent to work on his behalf to deal with the insurance claim. The broker told him that an assessor would cost between six and ten per cent of the total claim paid, but given the complexity of the policy wording and the nature of the claim, it should be money well spent. Max had assumed the claim would be covered in full, but after talking to the broker he wasn't so sure. He really didn't have much experience with insurance, normally he just dealt with the house and car once a year. Apparently commercial insurance was far more complex especially when it involved a potentially large claim where insurers had a habit of trying to avoid paying out. That was all he needed to hear. *More trouble.*

He heard the door to the apartment open and Lynette walked through looking stunning.

"Hey Max, starting early without me I see, where's mine? I could really do with a drink."

Max got up and headed to the kitchen to refill his glass and pour Lynette her first of the day. He was taken by how sexy she looked, the stovepipe jeans and cute butt made her legs look as if they went up to her armpits where he could see her pert breasts just peeking over her crop top. It was amazing how clothes accentuated her curves. She looked better with clothing on than she did when she was showing everything to the world, or perhaps it was just because Max automatically shut down his senses when he was working at the club. He had a strict 'do not touch the merchandise rule' for all staff – although

his brother Paolo had rarely taken any notice. Paolo was the typical sleazy owner, keen on very full interviews shall we say. Given his reputation it was a wonder that he didn't have a season ticket to the local STD clinic. Max had never been like that, in his younger days maybe, but eventually all boys grow up, don't they? Maybe not. His thoughts turned to the issues he had with the club as he stared out into space clutching his wine to his chest.

He had thought that his relationship with his brother was over when he told Cristal that she had to go and that she no longer owned any part of the club. She'd more than spent her share and left the business bankrupt. He needed to clean up the act at the club, no more cocaine, no more ketamine, and no more cash out of the till before paying the bills.

During the summer of last year, he had received a call from the bar manager telling him that a bailiff was on the premises on behalf of the Performing Rights Society (PRS) demanding payment of ten grand and that the electricity company was there to cut off the mains supply. He tried to pacify everyone over the phone and Rachel dropped him off at Malaga Airport so he could catch the first London flight. As expected the airline fleeced him for the ticket, but he arrived at Gatwick Airport early and was able to get trains into Victoria and out of Fenchurch Street to get him to the club at ten the next morning. When he unlocked the front door he had to push back a pile of mail, the number of red lined envelopes marked 'URGENT' and 'FINAL REQUEST' did not bode well.

He picked up the mail and headed inside. Working with the bar manager by phone on the way to the airport, he had managed to convince the bailiff and electricity company to come back the following day, when he would be on-site to resolve any misunderstandings and pay the bills. It wasn't easy. The bailiff had insisted on taking a walking possession order in relation to all stock and on being paid for time listing the stock and talking with Max on the mobile. Three hundred and fifty pounds later he agreed to come back in two days for payment or he would be removing this now carefully inventoried stock. The electricity company weren't much better. They had insisted on a substantial payment on account otherwise the supply would be cut – no matter how much he jumped up and down. The bar manager took the last thousand pounds from the safe as cash and paid it into the local bank to get a stay of execution. Luckily the previous night had been a good one and the night's takings together with petty cash just about covered it.

Max breathed in deeply. They could still trade but what other skeletons were hidden in the cupboards or more precisely the piles of paper in the office and unpaid demands he had held in his hands?

It had taken Max the rest of the morning to just look through all of the papers hidden away in drawers and stacked in neat piles. He found the PRS documentation and court order for payment. Why the fuck had everyone ignored it? It was there in black and white addressed to Cristal personally. There was no doubting that without payment they could no longer play music at the club. No music meant no dancing – no dancing led to no girls and no girls meant no business. They were fucked. Cristal had done a real number on him. Max continued working his way through the papers after grabbing a cup of tea. He had to keep a clear head. What had happened to the fifty grand that she was supposed to put in to match his investment? The bank account was empty, last year's corporation tax was unpaid and the VAT returns had been missed for the last two quarters. How had he just sat back in Spain accepting that all was well? His brother Paolo was supposed to watch his back, what the fuck had he been doing? Fucking the staff probably and ignoring everything else.

He had to shut the club down for a week while he tried to get the plan together to save it. He found a website offering royalty-free music that could be played in public places which wasn't ideal but for a

small joining fee at least there was something for the girls to dance to. He persuaded two of the girls to go through all of the tracks to select those that were consistent with the club's atmosphere and the type of music they used to play. They ended up with five discs full of tracks which offered enough variation in sound and allowed him to open. He just had to get money coming back through the front door.

Over the course of the next six months or so Max had to invest another seventy thousand pounds of his and Rachel's hard-earned money to keep the club afloat, clear creditors, get the taxman off their backs and to buy a new PRS license. Given the club's track record, everyone seemed to insist on payments being made at least six months in advance, which was a real cash flow killer. It used up the last of his and Rachel's reserves putting an end to overseas holidays and for plans to change their old car. She was not happy. It was not the first time that they had been screwed by his family. If he was honest with himself, having to put in the extra cash and having to spend so much time in Basildon really took its toll on their relationship. Rachel just could not get her head around the fact that Paolo had encouraged them to invest their funds knowing that Cristal didn't have the cash to match theirs. Blood was supposed to be thicker than water but as ever Paolo was being led around by his dick. The old saying 'balls for brains' seemed very apt.

After a good few days going over things with the accountant, it was clear that Cristal's part of the equity and her part of the payment to the previous owner had come out of the funds left in the company itself which were there to pay the outstanding creditors, VAT, and Corporation Tax. Cash generated day-to-day had been used to fund her party lifestyle with Paolo, who never questioned where the money came from. He just enjoyed swanning around at the bar and fucking any of the girls that would let him. Why would he want it to end?

It took a lot of work to turn the club around with Rachel helping to recruit staff, man the bar and to deal with the day-to-day management while Max concentrated on sorting the historic mess. The head lease remained in the company that they purchased, but for some reason Cristal had been running the business through a separate Pussycats' bar account. In some ways it made it easier to close her out and rearrange things, but in other ways it just complicated who had been contracted by whom. They had worked long hours together and for a week or two enjoyed the lifestyle that the bar provided each night, but the days were more problematic trying to sort out the reality of their finances and legal position. An agreement was eventually reached to shut down Cristal's new accounts and trade on with the existing company. It was looking increasingly likely it would take a very long time get a return on their investment.

Max took another slug of his wine while continuing to stare off into space.

"Max, Max, hello Earth to Max... Come in Max. Can you hear me Max...? MAX!"

He came round from his stupor, grinned inanely at Lynette and apologised. "Sorry Lynette, I was lost in my own little world trying to work out how I got into this bloody mess."

Lynette pulled her feet up underneath herself and crossed her arms in front of herself giving Max her best 'you've been a naughty boy' stare. "Where are you? On a different planet? A girl can get offended you know. Come on, drink up, let's head over to the festival park on the other side of town, have something to eat and perhaps catch a movie. Anything to get your mind off the club and whatever else is troubling you. We can catch a taxi by the station."

Max hadn't realised how caught up he was in his own troubles. Rude really. Here he was with a pretty girl who had allowed him into her home and the least he could do was buy her dinner.

Fifteen minutes later they were directing the taxi driver to the American Bar and Diner where the food was predictable, but satisfying, and normally there was a decent buzz. Max stared out of the window as the cab drove along Nethermayne and turned into Cranes Farm Road.

"Almost there Max, do you want to stop at the bowling alley or cinema or just head straight for some food?"

"Food and another drink sounds good to me. I seem to have forgotten to eat anything today. Listen I'm really sorry for being so distracted and thank you. Thanks for being a friend and putting me up for a few days. I'll try to get out of your hair as soon as I can."

They pulled up in front of the brash American Bar lights. Max paid the cabby and opened the door to the restaurant for Lynette to walk through. He was trying hard to be the gentleman, that and it gave him another chance to ogle her luscious curves without her noticing. Max watched carefully as Lynette slid her pert backside on to a stool and lent over the bar to catch the bartender's eye who was busy serving another couple. Tony's face split into a big grin as soon as he saw Lynette and Max. He finished with the other customers and walked over with a couple of large tumblers of Jack Daniels over ice in his hands placing them on the bar.

"Looks like you two could do with a drink! Here on the house." He turned back to serve another customer who seemed to think that he'd missed his turn.

Tony was a regular at the club after he finished his shift – looking for somewhere to wind down. He wasn't one to pay for private dances. He was just part of the late night drinking crowd who preferred to spend the night awake and day sleeping, one of many in Basildon that enjoyed the vampire lifestyle rarely spending time out in the sun. Tony was no looker. Probably in his mid-to-late forties, he definitely ate too many loaded potato skins with onion rings on the side and overindulged in bottles of beer. His paunch though belied his strength and it was obvious he worked out. He had a deep chest, strong biceps and broad shoulders. Despite Lynette being in a different league Tony had a bit of a thing for her; he just adored her long legs, deep honey-brown skin and regal looks, something she had inherited from her Barbadian father and good-looking English mother. Whenever she was dancing at the club he followed her around like a lovesick puppy.

The bar crowd thinned out before they had finished their first drinks and Tony wandered over with another couple in hand. "Hey Max, hey Lynette." He paused, making eye contact with them both. "Really sorry to hear about the fire at the club, good news that nobody got hurt, it could have been much worse. No worries about your drinks tonight I'll just keep them coming until you say stop. You look like you both need to drown your sorrows and hey Lynette, you know you can cry on my shoulder anytime." Tony grinned and blew a kiss.

Lynette's smiled at Tony over the bar. "In your dreams Tony, in your dreams, but hey if you're offering free drinks is there any chance of a couple of bottles of Sauvignon? Jack gives me a wicked headache."

Max and Lynette probably spent too much time at the bar drinking wine, sharing a few plates of ribs and chicken wings and reminiscing about the good times at the club with Tony. Lynette wisely was alternating between wine and water to help keep a reasonably clear head. The conversation got flirty

and on to the subject of casual sex. Tony was lapping it up as Lynette defended the rights of a woman to use a man for sex – what was good for the goose was good for the gander. The boys were less liberated but both admitted they would if they had the chance. When it came to paying the bill Tony was as good as his word and refused to accept anything. Max, while grateful for the free drinks, thought that no matter what bar owners did to control what was served and paid for in a bar or restaurant, the staff would always find a way round it. ‘Skimming’ in the entertainment business was an occupational hazard.

During the course of the evening Tony mentioned a room coming free the following week at his place. He offered to rent it for a hundred pounds per week, and subject to seeing it, Max had put down his marker to take it. Tony assured him that the place was neat, clean and the room a decent size. He’d even get a shower room to himself.

Max and Lynette headed out of the bar into the cool night air and caught a cab back to the apartment feeling upbeat and slightly merry after what was actually a pretty disastrous day. Max was just hoping that his head would clear before he had to meet with Sergeant Greaves tomorrow. He was pretty sure that he would be in for a monster hangover in the morning.

As they walked through the door Lynette reached over cupping Max’s face in her hands and kissed him passionately. “Come on Max take me to bed. I don’t want to sleep alone tonight. Call me a wanton woman that wants casual sex.” Max didn’t need a second invitation passionately returning her kiss and seeking out her tongue with his before guiding her towards the bedroom. He caressed her face whilst nibbling her ear and bringing his hand up on to her breasts. Their slightly merry state made it all seem very relaxed and natural if a little unbalanced.

Lynette slowly unbuttoned the fly of his Levi 501s freeing his cock from his pants while looking directly into his eyes with a wicked grin on her face. “Mmm, someone’s ready for action. Better slow down big boy I’m gonna teach you what brown sugar is all about.” She picked up the remote to her Bose unit which began to play Rolling Stones songs as if they were on demand while Lynette slid her jeans down her long legs kicking them under a chair in the corner of the room.

“C’mon Max I’m heading to the shower first to freshen up. We could always start in there; it’s big enough for two and there’s plenty of hot water.” She blew him a kiss and licked her lips while beckoning him with her index finger.

Max was transfixed, gawping at her body. He pulled his T-shirt over his head and ran his fingers through his hair. Yes he’d had a fair bit to drink but he couldn’t believe what he was about to do. No stopping now Max he thought to himself. Anyway I’ve always wanted to know what the song ‘Brown Sugar’ was all about. Max followed suit kicking off his jeans and heading for the shower. He stood and stared at Lynette in the cubicle covered in foamy soap. She had shoulder-length naturally curly hair, big brown eyes and a wicked grin. She looked like she’d stepped out of a modelling agency or top shelf magazine. As she gently soaped her body Max followed her hands and noticed that her snatch was completely bare. No body hair, no tattoos just a small gold barbell piercing through the sheath above her nub. He found it a real turn-on and slipped in to the shower cubicle with her. He cupped her down below and whispered into her ear.

“That’s some hot body Lynette. I can’t wait to taste how sweet you are and tease you to death with that stud.”

She grabbed his manhood slowly pulling back his foreskin while washing his tip with her soapy hands. Max gasped in pleasure, if he didn't have so much alcohol in his system to dull his senses he wasn't sure that he'd be able to control himself. He put a blob of shower gel in his hands and gently rubbed her breasts, stomach and back whilst alternating between kissing her and giving little nips under her jaw and down the side of her neck. Only when her nipples were hard and taut did he allow his hands to stray further down gently inserting two fingers into her delicate folds. Lynette gasped arching towards him whilst throwing her head back. He continued to stoke her slowly varying the pace and occasionally flicking the little gold bar with his fingers before concentrating on her swollen nub until she had a shuddering orgasm.

Lynette draped her arms over his shoulders lightly biting his neck. "Mmm. Max, this is going to be a long night."

She turned the water off and led Max out of the shower cubicle by his cock before dropping to her knees and taking him into her mouth. She could taste his salty pre-cum and feel the excitement in the tightness of his balls. She cupped them in her hand while working her mouth up and down his shaft. Max was moaning with pleasure his breathing getting fast and heavy and his stomach muscles tightening towards a crescendo.

"Oh, jeez, Lynette, I'm not sure I can take much more, if you don't stop I'm going to come."

She stopped briefly and flicked his tip with her tongue. "That's the idea Max, don't worry you'll still be performing for the rest of the night... Enjoy."

She took him back in her mouth cupping his sac tightly and positioned three fingers behind his balls. As she felt his body tense and his cock twitch she let some of his semen start to rise up his shaft before pushing hard with her three fingers at the back of his sac. Max groaned with pleasure but the expected release of ejaculation never came, just one small spurt. The intensity of the feeling was the same but he was still rock solid and ready for action.

Max slowly manoeuvred Lynette towards the bed while kissing and exploring her body. "I'm going to drive you crazy with my tongue until you beg me to stop." He lifted her and placed her on the bed before running his tongue up the inside of each leg and round her beautifully shaven mound, blowing hot little breaths on to her piercing and nub. He continued until she began to wriggle and complain. "Max!" He took her lips in his mouth sucking strongly before delving inside with his tongue. Lynette gasped and thrust her hips towards him. "Max!" she called impatiently while pushing her hips forward. He mumbled back, "Have patience." He slowly left a little trail of kisses along her body as he worked his way slowly up to take a perfect nipple in his mouth. He sucked hard and tweaked her nipple with his teeth, at the same time he put his right hand over her mound exerting gentle pressure but not letting his fingers enter her or brush her more sensitive parts. "Max!"

Max relented and slid down her body concentrating on her swollen nub with his tongue. As she got close to coming Max moved up her body again and took her nipple back into his mouth whilst using his fingers to make sure her orgasm was intense. Lynette arched her back and cried out in pleasure.

Max kept her nipple in his mouth teasing her until the effects of the orgasm began to subside before reversing his travels, heading back down to once again lick at her juice-covered nub. She gasped as he took her piercing in his mouth and played with it with his tongue. Unusually she seemed to have little control over her body and could feel herself building to orgasm again before getting caught out coming loudly as he took her nub into his mouth.

He pulled himself up her body kissing her mouth. She could taste her sex on him. He moved on to his knees and positioned himself to enter her but was stopped by Lynette grabbing his shaft “Uh, uh not bareback big boy.” Lynette grabbed his shoulders flipping Max on to his back before delving into a bedside drawer. She came out with a strawberry flavoured ribbed condom, some beads on a leather string and a tube of KY gel. Max’s eyes widened.

Lynette opened the packet and put the condom in her mouth before skilfully positioning it over his tip. He gasped as she took his full length into her mouth whilst rolling the condom out along his cock. She pulled his right leg up placing his knee against her body to get better access to his anus and slowly massaged KY around his ring and inside his sphincter. “Relax Max, I won’t hurt you.” Max had never had anyone invade his anus before and had no idea what to expect. He found it strangely erotic and scary at the same time and could feel himself getting harder and more excited by the minute. He was taken by surprise as he felt Lynette push the ceramic beads inside him stimulating his prostate. He let out an involuntary moan. “Steady Max, don’t tense up.” She pulled on one side of the leather strap and Max felt the beads straighten into a long line. His senses were on fire. His thoughts were racing *she is one kinky bitch.*

Lynette sat astride him and positioned the tip of his cock between her folds. She had the cotton belt off her robe in her hands and told Max to place his hands above his head so she could tie him loosely to the bedstead. Max complied lost in the eroticism. As soon as his hands were bound Lynette slid down his shaft gripping him with her tight muscles, he gasped and pushed up to meet her. “Uh uh, Max, lay still until I say so.” Lynette proceeded to ride him slowly enjoying the sensation of his cock spreading her wide. As she could feel her orgasm beginning to build, she leaned back cupping Max’s balls with one hand and flicking her stud with the other. “Watch me Max, watch me cum.” Max was in heaven and only just holding on when Lynette grabbed his hair pulling him forward so he had to watch his cock sliding in and out whilst Lynette moaned in pleasure, she felt the telltale sign as his cock twitched and grew slightly ready to release his semen and pulled hard on the leather strap causing the beads to follow suit stimulating his prostate and sphincter. Max came so hard he went dizzy as he collapsed back on to the pillow. “Fuck me Lynette.”

Lynette grinned. “I thought that’s what I’d just done Max, don’t tell me you want to play again.”

“Jeez no, my head is spinning, I’ve never cum like that in my life.”

Lynette released his hands from the bedstead and went to the kitchen for some water for both of them. She proffered the glass and a couple of headache tablets. “Drink up Max and no bad head tomorrow.” The thought was wasted, Max was already asleep, the used condom tied off neatly and dumped on the bedside cabinet. Gross.

Max woke in a dreamy state unsure of where he was or what time it was. He looked around to get his bearings and realised that he was sprawled on Lynette’s bed with only a sheet covering his dignity. The images of last night’s passion suddenly flooded through his mind and just as quickly the guilt that he had cheated on Rachel left a hollow feeling in his stomach. There was no denying he had been a very willing participant and that he had enjoyed every minute of the evening. He thought that he was an experienced lover but had learnt more than a few new tricks last night. The intensity of his second orgasm had almost made him pass out.

Lynette called through the bedroom door. “Max... Are you decent?” He pulled the sheet up over his body as Lynette came through the door with a cup of coffee and toast for him. He sat up staring at her wide-eyed. “Thanks Lynette, and thanks for last night; talk about intense!”

“Max, just think of it as a one-off. I don’t make a habit of sleeping with the boss or older men, and you qualify on both counts. Let’s say that you more than fulfilled my needs last night and it takes two to tango, but you’ll be in the spare room once it’s ready for you tonight.”

Max didn’t really take in the significance of the comment but just looked at her from top to bottom with a huge grin on his face. “What’s with the suit and the glasses? Are you going into a boardroom meeting? Saying that, it’s certainly a good look.” Lynette was wearing a pencil black skirt with a white tailored blouse that had a strong collar folding out neatly over a jacket that matched the skirt. She wore a pair of patent leather high heels, finely rimmed black glasses framing her eyes and subtle smoky make-up. It was a style that would’ve made any businesswoman proud.

“Not too far off. I’ve got a meeting this afternoon at the London Business School to go over my master’s dissertation on the positive impacts of crowd financing and charitable loans on the war on African poverty. It’s the final part of my degree in finance with a bias towards e-commerce. With a bit of luck, the business suit and showing a bit of leg will keep the number of questions from the male panel down.” Lynette gave a twirl and pushed her backside out provocatively.

“You know what they say Max, people form an impression of you in the first thirty seconds of meeting you. They may change that opinion or reinforce it by talking to you, but if you start off on the right foot things nearly always go better. First impressions really do count. I learnt that from my Dad. He was a bit of a stickler. By the way, help yourself to anything else in the fridge or cupboard. I’ve got to catch the train in about half an hour or so.”

Max’s face was a picture. “You never said that you were studying for a master’s degree, I didn’t even know that you had an ordinary degree! What was that in?”

Lynette smiled, “You never asked Max, I’m not just a pretty face. You don’t think that I lap dance for fun do you? It’s how I paid to get through my law degree and pupillage. Now it’s allowing me to finish my master’s. If things go to plan I’ll be cutting right back on dancing in a year or so and taking up a place in chambers. I don’t want to be dancing after thirty Max. If you want to get on in life you have to ‘do what you need to’ and plan ahead to ‘do what you want to’. It’s an easy philosophy but not an easy route.”

Max pushed his fingers through his hair and shook his head. “Blimey Lynette, I never realised that you were so focused or let’s be blunt – educated! You make me sound like a right doughnut. Listen, I know that you’ve got to go but I really would like to talk more later.” Max shook his head and mulled to himself. ‘A bloody master’s and a law degree, who would have credited it?’ He shouted from the bedroom. “You’ve gotta spill the beans later Lynette, I’m gonna make you talk!”

Lynette smiled as she turned to head out of the door. “Talking’s fine Max. Just don’t expect anything else.”

Chapter 5 – Puerto Banus

Nick stood on the terrace of the hacienda looking out over the tenth tee of the golf course and lake. He was hardly listening to the conversation going on around him; running on autopilot, really only responding when he was asked a direct question. He'd spent an hour at the champagne party drinking sparkling water and mingling with retired expats from along the coast. He passed on the endless supply of canapés proffered by waiters and probably wasn't great company given he was distracted and kept looking at his watch. He'd shown his face and told his host and his wife that he would have to slip out early. Face was saved all round and he could soon head out to pick up Rachel.

He felt a little formally dressed for a night on the town, tailored black trousers, a white silk and cotton double-cuffed shirt with silver cufflinks, a black faced Submariner Rolex and a black grey weave Armani sports jacket. Very coordinated and very monochromatic. He could lose the Armani sports jacket later if need be, he'd only put it on because the invitation to the reception had said 'Smart casual'. He hated the phrase. What was smart casual supposed to be anyway? He caught his host's eye and waved before indicating to the door, they both lifted their glasses in return mouthing '*thanks for coming*'. They could have been twins rather than husband and wife they were so in tune.

He walked through the large glass doors and turned right past reception where he had parked his car on the double yellow lines out front. If you were driving a Bentley or Ferrari, nobody bitched about you parking on the double yellow as it just added to the cache of the hotel. Well, that and there was no way he was going to try to negotiate their appallingly designed underground car park. He gunned the engine enjoying the sound of the exhaust note. Not as good as the Ferrari but if he was honest the car was far more practical. The night was balmy for the time of year, so much so that he had left the roof down. He pulled out of the entrance and headed over the horrendous traffic control bumps towards Cancelada and the N340. As he joined the dual carriageway he put his foot down for the three or four miles before turning up the Ronda Road towards Rachel's apartment. He was feeling alive for the first time in ages.

Rachel had dried her hair and applied her make-up and was now looking through her underwear collection and wardrobe trying to decide what to wear. Definitely the black lace high-leg knickers and push-up matching bra from Victoria's Secret – they'd go perfectly with the short lacy black dress with the plunging neckline which made the best of her assets. A pair of stilettos, a gold necklace and large gold hoop earrings rounded off the outfit. Rachel inspected herself in the full-length mirror while sipping her third large Bacardi and Coke. She looked like a modern-day gypsy temptress with her long locks falling around her shoulders.

"Looking hot girl," she said out loud to herself. She checked her watch, five minutes to nine. Nick should be here any moment he was a stickler for punctuality – unusual in Spain where people seemed to be habitually late for everything. She looked over her balcony and saw Nick's immaculate black Bentley with its beautiful pale cream leather interior winding its way up past the clubhouse and towards the front gates of her apartment block. Rachel picked up her small clutch bag, checking the contents; mobile, house keys, lippy, tissues, money (not that she was likely to need it with Nick but it was polite to offer), and ID. "Yep, all ready."

She walked into the hallway set the alarm and closed the door behind her before heading into the lift and pressing B for *bajo*. She still found herself sometimes pressing S for *subterrano* by mistake ending up in the underground garage. Why couldn't the buttons follow an English convention? After

all eighty per cent of the apartment owners were English. Rachel exited the lift and strolled across the gardens towards the main gates, the clip-clop of her steel-tipped heels echoing around the courtyard. She pushed the buzzer to release the door and walked through to the top of the steps looking down to where Nick had just pulled up.

“Hi Nick, spot on time as usual.” Once she had his attention she pulled her short dress up above her panties and gave him a full twirl before pulling the hem back down again. “Just thought I should keep my part of the bargain seeing as you brought the Bentley rather than the Ferrari.” Nick had a Cheshire cat grin and Rachel developed a fit of the giggles. She took a deep breath. *Don't peak too early girl* she thought to herself.

Nick offered his hand to help her down the steps. “Rachel you look absolutely stunning.” He kissed her on both cheeks and guided her towards the passenger door of the car.

“You scrub up pretty well too Nick, love the jacket.” He opened the car door and Rachel slid into the soft cream leather seats with the flying B Bentley badge embroidered in their back in contrasting colours to match elements of the dashboard and paintwork, the heels of her shoes sunk into the rich luxury pile of the carpet. She could get used to this – far nicer than her old jalopy full of clients’ dirty washing.

“If it’s okay with you Rachel I’ve booked us a table at Enrique’s for some tapas and champagne before we head into the port for some nightlife.” Nick glanced over to gauge Rachel’s reaction. “We can stay there as long as you want or just make it a quick visit, entirely up to you. You’re the boss tonight.”

Rachel loved the fact that the decisions had already been taken. “That’s good with me Nick I’m in your safe and capable hands.”

Nick pulled away from the front of the apartments with just the low growl of the Bentley’s engine as background music. They both waved to the guard at the security gates before turning on to the Ronda Road and heading towards the coast. Small talk came easily to both of them and before Rachel knew it Nick was slowing down for the turning to Puerto Banus exiting left towards the bullring. As the Bentley came up the hill, the attendant outside Enrique’s lifted the barrier to the car park and guided Nick into a prime spot outside. Being a regular customer and good acquaintance of the owner had its benefits. They were welcomed at the entrance doors enthusiastically by Antonio who led them to a prestigious table overlooking most of the diners and the entrance to the bar. The restaurant was one of the places to be seen in the Marbella area and a scan around the room showed the usual mix of ‘C’-list celebrities and lower division footballers now that it was out of peak summer season. In July and August there were usually some proper celebrities in the room.

Nick didn’t even bother looking at the menu but checked first with Rachel. “Still love prawns and fish?” She nodded.

“Could we have a bottle of Laurent Perrier rosé vintage champagne, *gambas pil pil*, some butterfly king prawns and some *boquerones*, please.” Antonio nodded and turned towards the bar when Nick had an afterthought waving to catch his attention. “Antonio. Better bring the *pil pil* last as it will kill the taste of the champagne.”

Nick turned towards Rachel and looked into her big brown eyes and got straight to the point. “Come on then Rachel. Spill the beans. As much as I love going out on the razzle with you it doesn’t exactly

happen every day does it?” Nick tilted his head to one side trying to keep eye contact. “Is the old man giving you grief on the phone from England or what?”

Rachel twirled her hair round her fingers. “Maybe... or it could just be that I fancied a night out.” She laughed, disarming him completely. Strange that Nick mentioned grief from England. Maybe he’d seen the news. “I know, second choice escort as usual,” Nick pouted playfully.

“Nick! That’s so not true, well... okay maybe a little bit.” Nick stayed quiet and just carried on looking into her eyes waiting until it all started to bubble out. The champagne was being poured by a waiter which meant that the silence stretched out even longer making Rachel squirm a little in her seat. Nick always seemed to see through her. “Cheers Rachel, lovely to see you.” They chinked glasses and sipped.

After leaving the silence until it was getting uncomfortable Nick decided that a prompt was in order. “Well then...?” He jiggled his eyebrows hoping to take the strain out of the moment.

Rachel took a gulp out of her glass before setting it down on the table “Oh, Nick you’re so annoying, why are you always right? But how about we forget my problems and concentrate on having fun?” Nick flicked his long blonde fringe away from his eyes and stared back towards Rachel. She took another gulp of champagne even though she knew that she was drinking too fast. As she set the glass back down it was quickly topped up by the waiter, another sip and she caved.

“Okay, okay, you win. You know that Max and I have been having a bad time and a bit of a trial separation? Well, things have been really bad lately and I just don’t know where we’re going.” Rachel took another sip of champagne. “So here I am out testing the waters as a single girl again. It’s really scary Nick. I’m thirty-seven years old and just about to start life all over. I suppose I’ve got the apartment and the business that brings in a regular income, but I’m just not enjoying it anymore. Spain’s just been bloody hard work for the last few years.” Rachel sat back in her chair trying to break out of whinge mode. “Please let’s not talk about me. I don’t want to put a damper on the evening. C’mon let’s try to relax and have some fun.” She pouted at him playfully until he raised his eyes to the ceiling. “Change the subject. Tell me what Nico’s been up to.”

The butterfly king prawns with curried mayonnaise was mouth-wateringly good. Rachel asked for more of the sauce to go with the *boquerones* while listening to Nick’s tales of his son’s exploits at Newcastle University where he was reading economics. To judge by the stories it sounded like he would also be receiving a degree in partying. Apparently the city was famous for its nightlife around the big city centre market and along the quayside. Any place with eleven thousand students between two universities was going to be lively, and Nico was clearly taking full advantage of every opportunity to have fun. He had his dad’s good looks and knew how to work hard as well as party hard, but since his grades were kept up, Nick didn’t complain too much about his son’s party lifestyle. Rachel was happy just to listen; it took her mind off of the troubles in her own life. She was laughing for the first time in ages and really beginning to enjoy herself. Time seemed to fly by and Rachel’s glass seemed to be continually topped up. Had Nick ordered another bottle?

They left the restaurant at around half past eleven and drove the short distance down to the port itself. Nick raked through the glove compartment for his entry pass to get past the barrier and waved it at the machine. Rather than parking up right outside the bars he stopped and reversed into the second-line street opposite the Armani store. As they walked the down to Sinners arm in arm, Rachel could see why they had left the car where they did. People were spilling out from the front of the bars, but given the time of night nobody seemed much inclined to move and let cars through. If you did manage to

park then it seemed to Rachel that your roof or bonnet just got used as a drinks tray. Nick waived over the crowd catching the bartender's eye and mouthed 'champagne' which promptly arrived without him having to leave Rachel's side. Given the effects of fresh air on her drinking session so far, she was pretty pleased to have Nick to lean against to keep herself steady on her high heels. *Had she really drunk that much?* Probably, but hey it was fun to be out.

The crowd seemed to be the usual mix of grey haired 'uncles' with surgically enhanced 'nieces' hanging on their arms and on every word they said, late season holidaymakers, early season golfers and various locals. She wondered what she looked like hanging on to Nick's arm thinking, *'please tell me I don't look like a desperate prostitute'*. The level of ladies of the evening in Banus seemed to have climbed tenfold over the last few years. More and more Russian money poured into the sunshine coast and the various mafia-led businesses dealing in sex, drugs and money laundering followed behind. The influx of the new kids on the block also led to some vicious turf wars and disappearances weren't that uncommon. The change in demographic was best illustrated by the local vans and tradesmen – all advertising their services first in Russian then English and Spanish. Money was doing the talking.

Rachel was absently hanging on Nick's arm sipping champagne while he chatted with some guy about a possible land deal. He was well known on the coast as an investor, and it seemed that whenever they went out, somebody always tried to sell him their latest hare-brained scheme. Just over an hour later when they should be heading on to the nightclub leg of their evening, Rachel was virtually asleep on Nick's chest still clinging to his arm for dear life.

Nick felt Rachel's head droop and gave her a gentle shake. "Rachel, Rachel, you okay sweetheart? Sorry the conversation got a bit involved, the guy's been trying to talk to me for the last month and I've been trying to avoid him. Looks like I got nailed. You sleepy kiddo?"

Rachel couldn't string together much of a reply. "Mmm, take me home please Nick, I'm really tired. I think I've had a bit too much to drink." The crowd had thinned out probably heading to the nightclubs or warehouses leaving a clear path to go and settle the bill and tip the bartender generously. It always solved queuing at a later date and guaranteed snappy service in the future.

Nick had barely poured Rachel into the car before she was asleep. He really shouldn't have bought that second bottle of champagne at the restaurant but he wanted to make sure that she enjoyed herself and had a night out to remember. He'd have to wait and see how much of the night she would recall in the morning. Hopefully she wouldn't have a hangover as the champagne was decent. With Rachel crashed out in the passenger seat Nick pulled out into the traffic and headed for his house. He had decided to put her to bed at his place as he didn't like the idea of her being alone when she was drunk. You never knew what could happen.

He slowed the Bentley to a crawl as he pulled up outside the villa pressing the remote control to open the gates. Rather than stick it away in the underground garage he parked straight outside the front door before opening it and disarming the alarm. Rachel was still curled up fast asleep in the passenger seat oblivious to the fact that they'd stopped. He lifted her into his arms and carried her into the guest suite where he laid her down on the bed before going back to lock up and to raid the kitchen for some headache pills and water.

He knelt next to her and put the glass to her mouth. "Here Rachel, come on be a good girl and drink this for me." Rachel mumbled but complied without even opening her eyes, Nick slipped off her shoes before prompting her again. "Come on Rach, help me get your dress over your head, lift your

arms up for me.” After a bit of a struggle with Rachel keeling over to the left or right each time he tried to get to her zipper, Nick eventually managed to get her tucked up in bed. He left the large glass of water on the bedside cabinet and a bowl next to the bed itself just in case she felt sick in the night. So much for a romantic evening, but he blamed himself for keeping the drinks flowing especially as he was hardly touching the stuff given that he was driving. As Rachel snuggled down under the sheets Nick turned out the main lights and headed to his room. Tomorrow was another day.

Rachel woke in the night desperately needing the bathroom, she had no idea where she was but the shaving light had thoughtfully been left on to guide her to the door. She emptied her bladder, rinsed her hands, and headed back to bed on autopilot drinking the half pint of the water before falling back into a deep sleep. It must have been ten in the morning when she eventually began to stir. Looking around she realised that she was at Nick’s place with the two house cats, Rufus and Rupert, happily curled up against her. She stretched out her hand and scratched behind their ears eliciting deep purrs from Rufus whilst Rupert grumpily turned round in a circle to get comfy again.

“Hello boys, have you been keeping me company? If you’re here I assume your daddy put me to bed by myself. Thankfully I still have my undies on but I think I’m going to be eating humble pie. Auntie Rachel got a little over-refreshed!” The room she was in was huge, probably more than half the size of her apartment. To the right of the entrance was a massive relaxation area with a captain’s writing desk, a flat-screen TV and a cream leather L-shaped sofa with a matching chair. The cream colouring contrasted beautifully with the rustic terracotta floor and wood beamed vaulted ceiling, soft furnishings and subtle paintings completed the ‘design magazine’ look. Strange that she couldn’t remember seeing this part of the property before.

The security of the cats against her body briefly made her consider putting her head back under the covers and going back to sleep but she knew that she really should get up and face the music. Besides, the smell of bacon being cooked in the kitchen was enticing even if she wasn’t too sure that her stomach would appreciate it. As she was about to snuggle back up with the cats, Nick poked his head around the corner carrying a tray with a mug of coffee, Solpadeine, water and a couple of vitamin C tablets.

“Morning Rachel, wakey-wakey.” Rachel decided that he was far too cheerful. As Nick took in the scene he blanched and froze to the spot as a wave of emotion came over him. He set the tray down on the desk while staring at the bed.

“What’s the matter Nick? Are you okay?” It took Nick a short while to get his composure back, he picked up the tray setting it down besides Rachel before perching himself on the side of the bed with his left leg tucked underneath him. “I’m fine, honestly, it was just a bit of a déjà vu moment. The boys here used to cuddle Nicole in just the same way but have never got up on the covers since she died. It caught me by surprise that’s all. They clearly appreciate the company and don’t think that I’m worthy. Bloody typical when I feed them every day.” He stroked Rupert aimlessly.

“Oh... I’m sorry Nick.”

“Nothing to be sorry about Rachel. Come on, take the pills and pull yourself together before the day disappears. I’ve left a couple of Nicole’s old casual sloppy joe outfits on the settee with some flip-flops on the floor. Not exactly high fashion but definitely dressed enough for breakfast. See you on the kitchen terrace when you feel up to it.” Nick pulled a bit of a face. “And Rach... I’m really sorry that I fed you too much champagne.” Rachel just laughed.

“I could always have said no... Give me half an hour or so.... I’m going to be a slow mover this morning and thank you for putting me to bed and looking after me, although I don’t think I’ve ever slept with two boys before.” She smirked while stroking the two cats.

Chapter 6 – Sergeant Greaves

After Lynette had been gone for half an hour or so Max showered, made himself some fresh coffee and dressed in his newly-acquired pants, socks and T-shirt. He sat in the lounge mulling over things again in his mind and wondering what the morning would bring down at the police station. It had been an incredible twenty-four hours, one he would rather not repeat. Well, maybe last night... but Lynette seemed to be making it clear that it was a one-off. Hell, I don't mind being used and discarded for a night like that he thought.

He locked the apartment and started a leisurely stroll through the town towards the police station. Rather than heading there directly he decided to swing by past the club, it would only be five or ten minutes out of the way. He arrived and sat on the same bench as yesterday looking at the smoke stained front, the blackened pavement and security boarding over the windows. The car had been towed away and presumably was in the police pound or scrapyard; there were still scorch marks indicating where it had stuck out from the front doors.

He pulled his mobile out of his pocket and tried Rachel's number again, to hear the usual international dial tone and then a response in Spanish which he assumed meant that the phone was unobtainable. He had spent more than ten years in Spain and still could only really say hello, goodbye, see you later and a few choice swear words. The only time he seemed to use Spanish was to ask for the bill in a restaurant. He tried her again just in case something had gone wrong with the dialling process, still no luck. He scrolled through the screen again until he found the number for the apartment and pressed the green telephone sign, hopefully he would be able to leave a voicemail but all he got was another voice in Spanish which he couldn't decipher. If only he had bothered to learn more of the language he would have realised that his call was being forwarded to Clare. He would just have to try again later.

"Damn, where could Rachel be?" Max put the phone back into his pocket and walked through the town square towards Broadmayne and the front of the police station. He went through the doors and up to the desk to be greeted by a different civilian worker.

"Hello, my name's Max Williams. I've got an appointment with Sergeant Greaves, if you could let him know that I'm here please." After a fairly nondescript response Max wandered over to the notice board aimlessly looking through home security advice and information for local neighbourhood watch groups, anything to kill a bit of time. The notices were so dull that he decided to take a seat and just wait, but the downside was that he kept running thoughts about events through his head. It was probably another ten minutes before Sergeant Greaves stuck his head round the door and called for Max to follow him to an interview room. He shut the door of the room behind them and indicating with his hand for Max to take a seat on the opposite side of the table.

"If it's alright with you Mr. Williams, I need to get a written statement from you covering what you recall of the morning's events and anything else that you might think is pertinent to the case. I've filled out the top of the form with the case number and date and I'll get a couple of cups of coffee rustled up while you get started. Oh, I might be a bit as I need to get a recorder or laptop to play the CCTV back." With that he walked out of the door without so much as a by your leave.

Max felt decidedly uncomfortable as if he was being tested. In reality that was exactly what was going on. 'Don't pass any information on unless they are in the need to know', Sergeant Greaves' rule one. Until Max was cleared of any involvement he wasn't in the need to know, it was as simple as that.

Rule two. Leave them in an empty room to sweat a little. It was surprising how different things looked when people were sat in a bare stark room by themselves.

Max decided to go for brevity and just write down exactly what had happened, excluding the bit about sleeping over at the club, nothing else, certainly not anything to do with drugs or Irish Jack's visit.

By the time the Sarge returned to the room, Max had finished writing. A mug was pushed in his direction in exchange for his written masterpiece. Sergeant Greaves scanned through the page. "No surprises then... apart from the fact that you were at the club at an extremely funny time of the day." He stroked his chin as if mulling over a problem. "I thought that you were supposed to close up at three in the morning."

Max shifted in his seat uncomfortably. "Nothing unusual in being there in the early morning, there's always loads to do once the punters have gone home. Last drinks are at three and then we need to encourage the last of the punters to leave plus the girls often hang around to chat and talk about how the night has gone. I suppose it was about five when everyone left and then I decided to cash up and complete a bit of paperwork before leaving."

The Sarge looked up from the sheet of paper. "I see." Everything Max had said was consistent with what the sergeant knew, but something was still nagging at the back of his mind. He had picked up the suspect yesterday after tracing his home address from the number plates of his car. The guy hadn't been at the front of the queue for brains. Using his own car to set the fire was pretty dumb. Given the evidence provided by the CCTV cameras and eyewitness reports, the suspect was banged to rights whether he admitted his guilt or not. He was currently full of bravado denying any involvement but once he had finished with the duty solicitor, Sergeant Greaves was confident that he would decide to plead guilty. His sidekick PC was following up a lead from a petrol receipt in the suspect's pockets indicating a purchase three days ago at a local garage. They hoped that the suspect would be seen on the forecourt cameras buying a gallon of petrol providing yet more evidence to link him to the crime.

"Well Mr. Williams is there anything else that you would like to add before we go over the recordings from your security system? As far as I can tell everyone is suggesting that this was just a random act but in my experience there's no such thing as coincidences. Something always sparks off the crime." He paused looking at Max over the top of the sheet of paper again leaving an awkward silence. He opened the door and left to collect a laptop and the CD containing an extract of the recording without saying another word. While he was gone Max continued to sweat. What if forensics had gone back through the history on the disc? Would they see him walking into the club with an ice cream container full of cocaine? He chastised himself mentally. 'Get a grip Max all they would see was him carrying an ice cream container, why would they think that was suspicious?' His mind raced again. 'What about the ice cubes, would they have seen him putting the small packets of diamonds inside the big bag? Ah, fuck it Max pull yourself together and just hope that forensics get what they need and don't look any further. What a mess just keep shtum Max, keep shtum'.

Sergeant Greaves came back into the room set the laptop on the desk and pulled his chair around beside Max. "Right Mr. Williams, I'll play it through at normal speed the first time and then I'd like to freeze on some of the scenes to see if you can identify the suspect." Max watched intently as the clip began to play.

He saw the black Toyota Avensis pull up at the curb before reversing carefully around on to the wide pedestrian walkway. The driver put his head out of the window to check the alignment of the car before calmly revving up and reversing straight through the doors. Max was wide-eyed but what came

next surprised him even more. The driver of the car opened the sunroof and proceeded to climb out of it opening a green plastic can full of petrol as he squeezed through the gap. Once he was on top of the roof he began to pour petrol through the sunroof, over the bonnet of the car and up the sides of the doorway. He threw the empty can back into the car before retreating ten yards and trying to light the petrol trail with a match. His first attempt failed as the match blew out before it hit the ground, so he pulled a piece of paper from his pocket lit it, waited until it was well alight and threw it on to the glistening trail of fluid.. The explosion was instant and pretty spectacular. The suspect stood for a moment watching the flames take hold before looking straight at the camera lens and then casually turning and walking away. No panic, no running, he was just cool, calm and collected as if he had been out to get the Sunday papers.

The clip continued to roll showing the flames grabbing hold of the front of the building and the smoke rapidly building up. Not much later Max spotted himself running around the corner wearing his white T-shirt and blue jeans. He was clearly very agitated, pacing backwards and forwards in front of the club, pulling at his hair and sweeping his hand back over his head. His anxiety and shock was clear for everybody to see, so why was Sergeant Greaves giving him the third degree? Odd. Sergeant Greaves left the clip running until the fire brigade came into sight then it abruptly ended.

As the clip finished the Sarge stood and began pacing round the room as if sitting still was a chore. He peered through the small window in the door whilst delivering his analysis. “Well that’s just about it, as you can see cool as a cucumber. He’s also using a classic mafia technique to firebomb your club. They reverse the car in so that the boot takes most of the rear end impact and the seat cushions the driver greatly reducing the risk of injury from impact. Ram-raiders tend to have the same MO. Once he’s through the doors the car interior provides plenty of inflammable material... especially when you add an accelerant.” He turned back to face Max making sure that he had his full attention. “So in my old school book it looks anything but a random act Mr. Williams. Shall we go back through it slowly and see what else you might be able pick out?”

Max shook his head. There it was again the implication that this was part of something much bigger. He tried to divert the Sarge’s attention by asking to run through the clip at normal speed once again. There really wasn’t much more to add, there was no doubting that it was deliberate, very well planned and very well executed. The doubts about who knew what began to run through his head again and settled firmly on one person.

‘Fucking Irish Jack!’

The Sarge pulled him back to the here and now as he spoke, he’d ignored the request to play the clip at full speed again and brought up a still shot instead. “Here we go Mr. Williams. This is where the accused looks directly at the camera towards the end of the clip; I’ve also so got it on a hard copy here if you find that easier.” He slid a sheet of A4 photographic paper across the desk.

Max drifted again noting the change in language from suspect to accused. Maybe things were looking up and it would be a simple open-and-shut case. He was prodded out of his stupor by a direct question. “Do you recognise him Mr. Williams?”

“Um, no not really, should I?”

“Probably not. Although he says that he has been in your club more than a few times.” The Sarge raised a questioning eyebrow.

Max sat back in his chair and chose his response carefully. “We have a lot of people who come a few times and never return again. If I can have a copy of the CCTV clip and still photo I could ask the girls and bar staff if they recognise him. I’m not there every night so he could have easily have come in when I wasn’t on duty... He’s definitely not a regular. Do you know who he is or have you been able to get a lead on him?”

The Sarge looked very pleased with himself and sat forward. “Better than that Mr. Williams he’s in the cells down the corridor.”

Max played the game. “Brilliant. What do you know about him then?”

“His name is Mohammed Akbar although he goes by the name of Mo to most of his friends and acquaintances. He’s not the sharpest tool in the shed and he’s had a few minor run-ins with us in the past for petty theft and drug use, but this is the first time that he’s stepped up to something like this. We picked him up yesterday afternoon once we’d traced the number plates from the car.”

A grin spread across the Sarge’s face. “Using your own vehicle for an arson job and staring right into the camera is not the most sensible idea. The evidence is pretty compelling. I’ve also got PC Groves trying to close the loop by getting CCTV footage of him buying the can of petrol at the local garage. We found a recent receipt in his pocket.” Sergeant Greaves paused. “What I can’t seem to get to though is why would he do it? Was he paid by someone who has a grudge against you? He’s going to probably go down for somewhere between four and ten years depending on what type of arson we can prove which will be either ‘reckless endangerment of life’ or ‘arson with intent to endanger life’. Either way he’d still have to have a pretty serious reason to do it. So far he’s denying everything but the duty solicitor should have talked some sense into him by tomorrow.”

“Odd don’t you think.” The Sarge stood and began pacing round the room again with Max’s eyes following his every move. “Any ideas Mr. Williams...?” He used the same tactic of leaving a pregnant pause while pretending to stare out into space.

Max shifted uncomfortably. “I can’t think of a reason why he would want to torch the place unless of course he’s a religious nutter with his own personal jihad against lap dancing clubs. Let’s be honest they’re anti-alcohol, anti-daughters, wives and girlfriends showing any flesh but they’re some of the biggest spenders we have.”

The Sarge, scowled. “We don’t use that sort of language here Mr. Williams, we have freedom of belief and it’s up to a psychiatrist to decide if there’s something mentally wrong with him and if I may ask who are you referring to by ‘they’?”

Max felt like a naughty schoolboy who’d had his hand slapped. “Look I don’t mean to be rude Sergeant Greaves but let’s just say that some of our best paying customers are Asian and African men who pray to Allah by day and spend their money with us at night. I’m not racist; I have good Asian friends, and a fantastic mixed race girl dancing for me. I just don’t like extreme attitudes or people restricting other’s rights... It’s a free country let’s keep it that way.”

Max hoped that his little speech would get him off the hook while secretly thinking *if someone blows a place up risking his own life and anyone else that gets in the way, you’re a nutter no matter what language you use or how politically correct you want to be.* Another long pause made him feel that he had to fill the gap. “From what you’ve said there doesn’t seem to be any other rhyme or reason why

the club has been targeted, so maybe it is a religious thing.” End of speech Max thought now just stay quite.

The Sarge stopped pacing and sat back down. “Very well Mr. Williams, let’s finish up for today. You can call in later in the week to collect a disc and photo.”

As Max was leaving the station he caught the eye of the first cheery civilian worker. “Looks like you were right mate. Greavsy’s scored a hat-trick with the accused already in custody. I just hope he doesn’t go all politically correct and let the guy off because he had a bad childhood. See you.”

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