



Chapter One

“What the—? What are you doing?”

“What do you think?” He smacked the heavy chunk of wood across his hand. “No one, especially a little shit like you, goes asking questions about me. You shouldn’t have poked your nose into matters that don’t concern you. Your brothers told you, I told you, but no, you wouldn’t listen, would you?”

“And what are you going to do about it? Kill me too?”

His answer was to bring the wood down hard. Blood fountained into the cold night air. Bone cracked against the stone wall.

Droplets of warm, sticky blood landed on his face, but that was okay. He’d soon wash it off.

He clenched the wood tighter in his hand and brought it down again. There was more blood and another satisfying crack as the skull splintered. Blood oozed from a motionless mouth. He was probably dead, but there was no point taking chances.

He used the wood and his boots to great advantage for a full five minutes. When he finally stopped, he was pleased to note that he hadn’t even broken into a sweat.

He stood for a moment, drawing in deep calming breaths. Then, after one final kick at the lifeless body, he took a couple of handkerchiefs from his pocket and wiped his boots clean. Confident he wouldn’t leave bloody footprints, he turned and walked briskly down the dark alley until he emerged onto Cromwell Street. It was dimly lit, which suited him perfectly.

He walked on to the railway bridge that spanned the narrow river. Underneath that bridge, he paused long enough to take off his gloves and his long black overcoat and wrap them around the murder weapon. With his bundle under his arm, he walked on until he came to the gated entrance of

Meredith's Joinery Business. In the yard, a couple of skips overflowed with scrap wood waiting to be hauled away.

He squeezed through the gap between gate and hedge, and tossed his unwanted clothes and his trusty weapon into the nearest skip. The photos went in too. There was plenty of litter blowing in the wind and he grabbed a handful of flyers, mostly for local fast-food outlets, and threw those in the skip. He took his Zippo lighter from his pocket, lit the paper and moved back to the shadows of the building.

The smile of a job well done curved his lips as he watched the wood catch.

He let himself out of the yard by the same way he'd entered and walked casually along the street, turning only once to see flames reaching up to the sky.

Meredith's wouldn't be too worried. They'd put it down to an act of vandalism by bored kids and would be secretly pleased they didn't have to pay to have the wood taken away. The police were so used to such incidents that they wouldn't even bother to investigate.

The evening's work was done.

He walked on to the brightly lit town centre. Youngsters with hoods pulled over their heads to ward off the cold January frost ambled around, looking for mischief. Half a dozen young men came out of a pub and stopped to light up cigarettes. Two girls emerged giggling from the Chinese takeaway. One clutched a white bag heavy with food and the other girl was in charge of a bottle of wine.

It was a normal Thursday night in the northern town of Dawson's Clough.

Chapter Two

Joe thought there was something familiar about the man sitting on the barstool next to him. Something unusual too. Instead of eyeing up the tempting array of flesh on display, this man chose to stare morosely at the drinks.

Saluka, a tall Moroccan girl, walked onto the stage and was soon wooing the men in the crowded room. All she wore was a white G-string that existed merely to hold crisp notes close to her body. Dark skin gleamed beneath the pulsating lights as she gyrated to the thumping music. Her eyes, as black as the devil's soul, missed nothing.

Tempo was proud of its reputation for being the loudest nightclub in the northwest of England. It wasn't the noise that had brought in the customers though. It was a combination of the floor show and the promise of cheap drinks until ten o'clock.

Joe knew better than to mess with the dancers and he could take or leave the cheap drinks, but he presumed the latter had brought this man to the club. As he was balanced on a barstool it was difficult to tell, but Joe

would put him at five-ten or maybe six feet tall. He looked to be in fairly good shape too. He was about forty, his blond hair was in need of a cut, and a few weeks' worth of untrimmed beard hugged his face. He wore round glasses that looked a little ridiculous. But perhaps he'd been a fan of John Lennon. His leather jacket had been quality but was battered through years of wear. An equally well-worn pair of denims plus grubby running shoes completed the outfit.

"Whisky, please." The man banged down his glass on the bar. "You'd better make it a double."

The barman considered this. "One more," he said, "and then you're on your way, mate. Okay? You've had more than enough already."

"Sure."

Joe watched him pay for his drink, paying particular attention to where he put his wallet. The idiot put it in the back pocket of his jeans, the easiest place in the world to lose it.

Joe had picked pockets since he was ten years old, and almost forty years later he was still an expert. He soon had the leather wallet, worn thin from years of use, in his hand. Its owner was too busy staring into the bottom of his glass to notice.

He held it out of sight, behind the man's back, to open it. Inside he found a train ticket stub, a betting slip, a driver's license and a tatty five-pound note. Regardless of the barman's views, this man was too short of cash to get any more drunk than he already was.

Joe checked out the driver's license. *Well, well, well.*

He closed the wallet and tapped its owner on the shoulder. "You dropped this." He had to shout to make himself heard above the booming dance music. "Hey, I'm sure I know you."

"I shouldn't think so. I'm not from these parts." The man took his wallet from him and shoved it in the same pocket, ready for a less honest pickpocket to come along. "Thanks."

"Me neither," Joe said, "but I never forget a face. Here, let me get you another drink. The prices will double in a couple of minutes."

"I can't afford to be proud so I'll take a drink from anyone, but you're confusing me with someone else. I guarantee we've never met."

Joe won the barman's attention. "One more for us both. They're on me. Oh, and don't worry about my friend here. He won't cause trouble. I'll make sure of that."

"This is definitely his last," the barman warned, but he filled two clean glasses with whisky and put them on the bar. Profit came a long way above the law in this place.

"Well, I never." Joe tapped his new friend on the shoulder. "I've got you now. I told you I never forget a face."

"Yeah, yeah." He lifted his glass. "Cheers."

"You're welcome, my friend. So what brings you north, Dave?"

“Eh? How do you know my name?” He leaned so far back on his barstool, he was in danger of falling off.

“Down in the Smoke. We’re going back about five years. No, it’s closer to eight. It’s Joe. Joe Child. You must remember me. We met when we were both working for McCoy. You can’t have forgotten.”

Dave Young narrowed bloodshot eyes to peer more closely at him. “I remember McCoy.”

“Then you must remember me.” Joe laughed. “How many whiskies have you had?”

“Joe. Joe Child. I vaguely remember—oh, yeah. Bloody hell. It’s Joey. Right?”

“That’s it.” Joe slapped him on the back. “We had some times, didn’t we?”

“I remember. You fleeced me for a load of cash at poker. Christ, that’s going back a bit. You were McCoy’s right-hand man.”

Child shrugged. “We got along okay.”

“I was only doing some driving for him.”

“Yeah,” Joe said. “I remember.”

“McCoy’s dead, you know. A couple of months ago. Well, you’ll know that. Can’t say I’m too upset about it. It’s thanks to that bastard I got sent down.”

“Oh? I didn’t hear about that.” Joe had made a run for it before the shit hit the fan. He’d been too busy waiting for someone to grass him up to worry about Young.

“Remember the night he got busted?” Young said. “I was doing a delivery for him. One fucking delivery and I ended up doing eight months.” He took a big swallow of his drink. “You were on holiday in Ireland, I remember. Convenient, that. Still, it’s forgotten. We’re best out of it. The money was good, but I can do without getting banged up again.” He swayed on his barstool and leaned in close. “So what brings you up here, Joey?”

“Me and the wife felt like—you remember Doll, don’t you?”

“Doll? ”Course I do. You’re still together then?”

“Till death do us part, Davey boy. Well, we felt like getting away from London. I’ve changed, you see. I’ve put those dark days behind me. Look—” He took a card from his shirt pocket and handed it over. “You can find me here now. There will always be a welcome for you.”

Young squinted at the card. “A home for the soul? What the fuck’s that about?”

“I’ve seen the light.” Smiling, Joe tapped the side of his nose.

“Eh?”

“God’s shown me the way. He’s taken care of me over the years so now I’m giving back. I’m trying to show others the light.”

“You’re a fucking Bible basher?”

Joe shook that off with a smile. He’d been called worse, much worse. “I’m teaching God’s Word to those who need to hear it.”

“Fuck me.”

“Perhaps you need to hear it. What did you say you were doing up here?”

“I’m doing nothing. Sweet fuck all. The girlfriend buggered off and—” His voice was becoming increasingly slurred. Once again, he leaned in close to Joe’s ear. “Me and a mate did a job, only a small one, but the heat was on so I legged it. I took a train north, but I fell asleep on the fucking thing and instead of getting off in Manchester, I ended up in this shit hole. What’s the name of it again? Dawson’s Clough? What a bloody place. I only got here this morning but I’ll be gone tomorrow.”

“Gone where?”

“Fuck knows. Anywhere. Manchester, if I can hitch a lift.”

“This place isn’t so bad.” Joe tapped the card. “Call in at the refuge before you leave. It’s a couple of miles out of town. You can’t miss it. Come and say hello to Doll. She’d like to see you again. And if you need somewhere to sleep, we can fix you up. Work, too.”

“What sort of work?” For a moment, Young looked interested.

“The honest sort. A bit of building work at the refuge. Or serving hot food to the homeless in town. We all pitch in and do what needs to be done.”

“Thanks, but that doesn’t sound like my sort of thing, if you get my drift. I like to keep myself to myself.”

“You can do that,” Joe said. “There’s plenty of time for privacy, reflection and talking with God.”

“What the hell would I have to say to God? I can’t see him listening to me, can you?” He laughed at the idea. “Why not? He’s listened to me, Davey. I did some bad things—”

“So? Christ, we’ve all done bad things. You served your time, didn’t you?”

“Oh, I’ve been banged up a few times, but some things—well, let’s just say I’ve done things I didn’t get locked up for, things I’m not proud of. I’ve seen the light, and now I’m helping others find the right path.”

“You won’t catch me talking to—” Young broke off when he saw that two uniformed coppers had entered the building. “I thought I could smell fucking bacon, Joey. Can you? What are those pigs doing here?”

Joe put a restraining hand on his arm. “Leave it. We don’t want any trouble, do we?”

“Hey, you!”

“Leave it,” Joe said again. “They’re not here to bother anyone.”

“What? That’s all they fucking do. Eight months I did, thanks to those fuckers. Oi, over here!”

“You did eight months for moving Class A drugs around.” Joe knew he was wasting his breath because Young was too drunk to care, but he had to try. “You earned a lot of cash while you were doing it too. Come on, forget it. You don’t want to spend the night in a cell, do you?”

His words were pointless. The police officers were heading straight for them.

“David Young?” the taller officer asked, and Joe groaned.

“Who wants to know?” Young asked, flexing his muscles.

“Are you David Young?”

“I might be David Young and I might be the king of Siam. What’s it to you?”

“David Young, I’m arresting you—”

“Oh, no you’re not, sunshine. I’ve done nothing wrong. You can fuck right off.”

“There’s been no trouble, officer,” Joe said. “He’s with me. I’ll see he gets home quietly.”

“Fuck ’em, Joey.” Young grabbed an empty bottle from the bar and smashed the neck against the metal stool. He brandished the lethal weapon in the copper’s face. “Come any closer and you’ll get this, you bastard. Come on, then. What are you waiting for? Come and get me.”

Joe tugged on his sleeve and tried to grab the bottle from him. “Put it down, Davey. See sense, man. You’re drunk.”

“Fuck ’em.” Davey continued to wave the jagged glass at the coppers, daring them to get close enough to cuff him.

It took both coppers, Joe and a furious barman a good five minutes to disarm and cuff him. Young staggered against Joe. “I know what this is about, but if I hadn’t fallen asleep on that fucking train, I wouldn’t have got in an argument with the inspector, would I? I tried to explain, but he wouldn’t listen. Of course I didn’t have a ticket further than Manchester because I hadn’t wanted to go past fucking Manchester, had I? He was—” The coppers dragged him away. “See you, Joey.”

“You know where I am,” Joe called back.

Young wasn’t listening. The idiot was too busy hurling abuse and kicking out at the coppers.

Men like Young never learned. They did small jobs here and there, spent half their lives in jail, and continued to dream of the big job that would set them up for life. They weren’t bright enough to realise that the only way to beat the law was to outwit it. That was what Joe did. He always stayed one step ahead of the law.

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