

## Chapter One

His body became conscious before he woke up. A heavy headache the colour of stained concrete, a gnawing pain in his right shoulder. There was a snake of bile and acid slithering up his gut. His mind awoke. The snake pushed up, he ran to the kitchen, stomach muscles clenched, just made it to spew transparent hot liquid into the sink.

Then empty retch on retch without the splatter, empty but triggering liquid heat in his bowels. He made it to the downstairs toilet nearly too late, almost soiled himself as he pulled down his trousers. Stink. A grotesque face stared back at him from the mirror above the washbasin. Sunken eyes like fertilized fried eggs. He splashed cold water across the sweat on his face. He hated that image in the mirror. He hated himself.

Before the finer aspects of mind such as memory resumed, his body walked him to his study. He slid open the bottom drawer of the filing cabinet, pulled out the whisky and drank from the bottle. He sat. His total focus was on keeping his stomach from ejecting the alcohol. After a few minutes, he settled, drank more. The clock above him told him it was twenty to seven. The components of his mind were beginning to assemble themselves into some sort of order, sufficient at least for him to realise with horror that he was drinking at that time of the morning.

A more immediate problem faced him in the living room where he'd woken up stiff and ill on the sofa. The big television screen was showing an American ice hockey game. He remembered watching the West Brom - Brighton cup game with Simon last night. He remembered that he'd lost £1,000 betting that Sturridge would score in each half. The player had gone off injured after just three minutes of play. Worse than this, much worse, was the large wine stain on the carpet. He must have knocked over a bottle. The red stain was more than a foot long and nine inches at its widest. An empty glass lay in the corner of the sofa, its contents spilt across the expensive upholstery of the middle cushion. He turned the cushion over.

Although he knew full well that with Maureen's fanatical eye for detail down to the inch it was a pretty useless thing to do, he pulled the sofa eighteen inches forward to cover the carpet stain. But she was away with "the girls" until tomorrow on a London weekend. *Girls* is right, he thought: dressing up and living on pocket money.

Plates, crisp packets, crumbs everywhere, three empty bottles. On autopilot, he carried the bottles as quietly as possible, through the kitchen, turned off the security light, out the back door to the glass recycle bin. He raised the lid, tried to place the bottles quietly. A fox shot out from between two bins, and he dropped the bottles, the noise dreadful. His heart tried to jump out of his chest. The fox stopped on the lawn and stared at him, its eyes glittering silver. He moved towards it waving his arms. The fox walked nonchalantly into the darkness.

Returning indoors the kitchen was too bright and clean, steel and chrome and iron order. The refrigeration hummed, the central heating clicked and whirred quietly. He didn't like the kitchen. He was sure the kitchen hated him. He felt like an inferior life form in a space laboratory. He felt it more strongly just now, ill and guilty and ashamed. Everything

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around him was pristine, everything in its place. But not him, he felt out of place in his own home. Like a stain.

With brush and pan he swept up the crumbs and bits in the lounge on hands and knees. Standing up, breathless, dizziness took him, the room swam before his eyes. He collapsed onto the sofa taking deep breaths. His body was trembling as he took the dustpan into the kitchen, emptied it into the stainless steel bin. Coffee, he needed coffee. He filled the machine and set it working. Expensive Italian machinery began to hiss and bubble, steam and gurgle. He poured himself a strong espresso and took it to his study.

Study! They'd bought the house from a barrister, and the estate agents had made much of the study. They were aiming at a clientele who would appreciate a study. When Maureen showed guests around, she proudly pointed out the study. Yesterday morning she'd demanded he clean it up, said it was disgusting the mess it was in. The idea of a study to him was a ridiculous affectation. But he couldn't deny it was currently in a mess.

And among the mess, he sat now. He topped up his coffee with some whisky: the bottom drawer of the filing cabinet did have things in their proper place: whisky, mouth freshener, a bottle of Valium, body spray, deodorant. Elsewhere, papers and boxes were strewn across the floor along with a bin bag containing footballs; shelves carried tools, books, two torches, a tin of wild lilac emulsion paint, Christmas wrapping paper and general debris from the past year. The desk was piled with more papers, folders, magazines, takeaway menus.

He booted up the desktop computer, a machine that was largely a complete mystery to him. The whisky had settled him. It was five to seven, and the previous 15 minutes of panic and dread were forgotten as the alcohol levelled him. Saturday, thank God, so he'd get through the day without too much pressure. A measured approach to drinking, just enough to keep him steady. Tomorrow he'd go dry. His problem as he saw it was one of cash flows. The house, the business. He logged into one of the bank accounts that Maureen knew nothing about. The last of it, the final safety net. He transferred the total balance, £12,352.63 to their joint account. This was the money he'd promised to lodge with the company as a director's loan. The business was in dire straits. He and his two partners had agreed to pump in £30,000 just to pay wages and running costs. It would have to wait. He'd sort it somehow. Something would turn up.

He splashed an inch of whisky into his cup, went to the kitchen and added coffee, put two slices of bread into the toaster and went out to the patio for a cigarette. Night darkness was lifting, and over the hills the sky was lightening pink. He was feeling good, his body and mind settled. A few problems to fix like many others in his lifetime then all would be well. Cigarette finished, he went back in, put more coffee on and buttered the toast. Horrible wholemeal bread with seeds in it. Why couldn't they have good honest white toastie bread?

Back in the study he sat down and set to work again. Using his six credit cards, he paid £20,000 in cash transfers into another private account. He'd reached his limit on legal borrowing, 22% interest on the cards but it was all just a cash flow issue, nothing to get worked up about. A few lucky rolls of the dice and he'd be sorted.

Seven o'clock and he turned on the radio as the news headlines were being read. Police and forensic accounting teams had mounted a dawn raid on the offices of the Thistle Bank in Edinburgh while seven men believed to be executives had been picked up from their

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homes for questioning. Three killed in a crash on the M25. At least a hundred dead and scores injured after a suicide bomb in Kabul. The Scottish Football Association is investigating corruption charges in three clubs. The Princess Royal has tonsillitis.

He wasn't listening but going through the stack of paper in front of him, pulling out what needed attention. A letter from the GP surgery dated five days ago saying his blood test results were in and he should make an appointment as soon as possible. One from Simon's school requesting £1300 by the coming Wednesday for his two weeks soccer coaching vacation in the States, A polite but firm final reminder from the Wheatsheaf Hotel demanding immediate payment of £4900, Lauren's coming 21<sup>st</sup> birthday bash. Sundry invoices totalling £4500: gardener's bill, a white baby grand piano to go into what Maureen calls "the drawing room", golf club membership, wine, the monthly domestic cleaning charge. By eight o'clock he'd paid the lot by bank transfer. All sorted, neat and tidy, he felt the pride of a job well done. Money left over. Then, hearing Simon coming down the stairs, he rummaged in the filing cabinet and sprayed his mouth his mouth with minty chemicals, with deodorant under his shirt.

Simon was in his Courloch United Juniors kit, shiny, bright and clean, sitting at the big oak kitchen table with his muesli and orange juice. 'Hi, Dad.'

'Morning, son. You're up early.'

'Got to be at the ground for the minibus by half eight.'

'OK, give me ten minutes to get ready.'

But as the shower ran over his body, a lurch of anxiety hit his guts. He'd forgotten that Simon was going over to Perth for a tournament. He kept forgetting things lately. Probably over the legal limit by five or six times, he'd have to drive carefully. Maybe it was the drink that had been making him forgetful, he'd been hitting it for a fortnight. Money worries, the business in trouble, Maureen's chronic nagging. He'd been done for drink driving three years ago when he was getting pissed every night. AA had done nothing for him, but he'd managed to stop drinking completely without any support. Until now. He promised himself to cut it out from today.

Getting dressed in his room, he felt wobbly, the whisky was wearing off. He went into Maureen's room to get a shirt, most of his clothes were still in wardrobes there. His room, her room, when did that happen? Who'd been the first of them to not bother with a Valentine card? If it wasn't for Simon.... But he was paying through his nose and suffering too much for the kid's sake. Worth it though, he'd constantly tell himself, constantly struggling at the same time with a fantasy of being free of it all. Thoughts and feelings are never simple though, so everything was mixed with the knowledge that he and Maureen had brought up Lauren and Ian to be happy and doing well. Simon would be 18 in five years, probably at university – that or playing midfield for Celtic -- and everything could change, he could free himself.

Simon was ready by the front door when he went down, sports bag and designer drink bottle. Jim nipped into his study to retrieve the bottle of Valium, swallowed two 5mg capsules and put the bottle in his pocket. He backed his Mercedes G-class from the double garage. The vehicle, more of an off-road jeep, was Jim's pride and joy, one thing in his life that was scrupulously clean and looked after. He loved driving, a certainty that he was a professional ran through him like an iron bar. So what if he was technically "drunk"? The two

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miles drive to the ground and back would be a display of perfection. Driving lulled Jim into a place of peace and control so he didn't hear Simon first time.

'Dad! You gone deaf?'

'Sorry, son. What did you say?'

'Can I have my twenty quid?'

'What twenty quid?'

'From my bet. You put a fiver on for me, Brighton to beat West Brom 2-0 at three to one.'

Jim remembered then. He'd been a bit drunk and given in to his son's pleas to put a bet on.

'That's the last time, Simon. Stay away from betting, mate. And for Christ's sake don't tell your mother.'

'You bet all the time.'

'Aye, well I'm a grown-up and know what I'm doing.'

'And you get pished.'

'Son, once in a while I have a few drinks to relax.'

'Last night you were in a coma when I went to bed. And snoring like a pig.'

'Fair enough. Point taken but you have to remember I've had a very tiring week at work. Don't tell your mother.'

'And before you crashed out you were calling Mum for everything.'

'Well don't tell her about that either.'

'That's three things you want me to stay quiet about. I could blackmail you easily.'

'There's no one in this town you couldn't blackmail if you dug a bit below the surface. I could blackmail you, son, for trying to blackmail me, and for illegally and knowingly procuring an adult to place bets under the age of 18.'

Simon took long enough to think of a witty reply for Jim to change the subject.

'What time d'you want picking up?'

'God, Dad! You're going senile. I'm staying at Jamie's tonight so his dad will bring me back. Jamie's dad's coming to Perth to watch us. Unlike some fathers.'

'I forgot, son.' Again, a mix of feelings: pleasure that he would have the night to himself; fear that once again his memory was going; guilt that he wasn't going to watch Simon play. But in with the mix, a background calm induced by Valium. 'Sorry I can't come and watch, but I'm up to my eyes in work.'

They pulled up in the carpark at the ground. Simon jumped out and ran, excited, to be with his teammates. Most of them were a lot bigger than Simon who was still growing by the day but who was fast, skilful and strong enough to turn out for the under-15s. Jim joined the other fathers who greeted him like one of their own.

'Just the man,' said Davy Muir, Jamie's dad. 'Can you fit in five of the younger lads who're coming up to watch?'

'Afraid not, mate. Not going myself. Bloody work.'

'Not to worry, we'll sort it. I'll drop Simon back at yours tomorrow about four o'clock, ok?'

Davy turned away, marshalling the boys towards the minibus and other vehicles.

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Brian Coates took a cigarette from Jim. 'You ever been up to the St Johnstone training complex, Jim? Four all-weather pitches, floodlights, the lot. Makes our ground look like a dump.'

'It is a dump,' replied Jim flatly.

'Aye, but it's our dump. At least it is for now. The way things are going it could all be a retail park in five years.'

'Tell me about it.'

Such had been the pessimistic comments around Courloch United for the past decade.

Then sparkling-eyed optimism appeared in the form of Simon who rubbed thumb and forefinger together as he winked cheekily at his dad.

With a sigh, Jim took out his wallet and gave his blackmailing son twenty pounds.

Minibus and cars turned and left him alone in the carpark. It was 8-35. Jim O'Brien had the day and the night to himself.