



# Real Hero

## Dave #7: Settling the Score

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# 1 Prologue

Dave sat outside his semi-detached house in the quiet suburbia that was home, the cool morning air carrying the scent of freshly mowed grass. He watched the birds flutter about the garden, their carefree movements a stark contrast to the turbulent months he had endured. In his hand, a proper cup of English tea warmed his fingers, the familiar comfort of the ritual grounding him in a way he hadn't felt in a long time. It felt good to simply be—to be Dave again.

Having not long turned 40, Dave finds himself carrying more weight around his middle than he'd like. Even with the current change of career, it seems there's no way to shift it. He's acutely aware of the penalty of his previous sedentary lifestyle, spending most of his days sitting at a desk, staring at a screen. His belly hangs over the waist of his trousers further than he would prefer, and his face is a little rounder than it used to be. His age is starting to show in the lines around his eyes and the bags beneath them, making him painfully aware that time is passing.

Since discovering he possessed impossible abilities—strength, speed, and invulnerability—Dave's life has undergone a dramatic transformation. He became an agent with the "Agency," a secret global force for good, tasked with maintaining the delicate balance of world greed and politics. Their mission is to ensure peace, or as much peace as the world will allow. Dave has been on high-stakes missions, saving countries and continents from destruction, actively thwarting the plans of dangerous individuals, a far cry from his previous life spent behind a keyboard and screen. His newfound powers have taken him from the mundane to the extraordinary, reshaping his purpose in ways he never imagined.

Just recently the months of pretending to be Karl Müller, to wear the identity of a man who represented everything Dave despised, had left their mark. It had taken a toll on his mind and soul. Playing the role of the fascist Nazi Karl Müller had forced him to act in ways that went against

everything he stood for. Every moment spent in the guise of that ideology had felt like a betrayal—not just to his mission, but to his own principles.

As Dave took another sip of tea, he reflected on the journey. The work he'd done with the Brotherhood of the Snake had always been about the mission, about taking down a dangerous organisation. But in doing so, he'd been forced to live a lie, to believe in a cause that glorified hate, supremacy, and violence. And for a time, he'd worn that lie like a mask, hiding behind Karl's identity to get close enough to take down the Brotherhood from within.

The moment it became clear to him wasn't when he had faced the chaos of the Brotherhood's downfall or even when he had helped the wounded in the field. It had come when he had watched the others around him, those men who wore their hatred like a badge, and realised he wasn't like them. The Brotherhood's values were the antithesis of everything Dave believed in. They revelled in cruelty, in seeing others as lesser, as tools to manipulate. But Dave—Dave—felt something else. He saw people as people, regardless of their backgrounds, their ideologies. He couldn't just let them die, couldn't let them suffer without offering help.

It wasn't a moment of moral superiority, wasn't about saving the enemy. It was about being human. In the face of everything Karl Müller represented, Dave found his true self. The Nazi ideology of the Brotherhood stood for everything that was wrong with the world, and in fighting against it, Dave had discovered something pure within himself—something that neither Karl nor the Brotherhood could corrupt. It was a compassion that had no place in the world they created.

It had been unsettling to feel that. To realise that the compassion he felt for others was the very thing that made him different, made him better than the role he had played. It meant he wasn't Karl Müller. It meant he was still, at his core, the man he had always been.

Now, as he sat there, feeling the warmth of the tea against his lips, a small smile tugged at the corner of his mouth. The shadows of his past had left their marks on him, but they hadn't broken him. He had come through it, and maybe, just maybe, he was finally free.

The birds continued to sing, the world outside moving in its own quiet rhythm. For the first time in a long while, Dave felt at peace. He wasn't Karl, wasn't a part of that dark world any more. He was Dave Anderson—the man who had fought for what was right, who had survived and found his way back. And for the first time in a long time, that was enough.

## 2 Culture

Dave stood in his hallway, the quiet of the house pressing in on him. The days between missions had been dragging, each one feeling longer than the last. The constant motion of his life—of briefings, debriefings, and the adrenaline of the field—had left him with a gnawing restlessness in the absence of action. For the first time in ages, he found himself with time to kill, and that was a strange kind of discomfort.

He had tried the usual methods to shake off the unease: long walks in the countryside, staring at the ever-shifting horizon, hoping the wide open spaces might offer some sort of escape. But even that had begun to feel like a chore. Nature had its charms, but it wasn't enough to keep his mind from whirring in idle.

Maybe a dog. He'd thought about it more than once. A companion, a reason to leave the house. But it never felt right. He was always away—always gone for days, sometimes weeks. A dog deserved more than being left alone for days on end. It would be selfish, and Dave wasn't the type for selfish decisions any more.

He sighed, pushing the thought aside for the moment. "I'll take a walk into town," he muttered to himself, the decision feeling good already. Something simple. A distraction. A change of scenery. Get some culture, he thought. Visit a museum, or an art gallery. Something to take away the monotony and boredom. Maybe it wouldn't solve anything, but at least it would get him out of his own head for a few hours.

Grabbing his boots from the shelf, he pulled them on with familiar ease, the worn leather soft against his feet. His fingers brushed the coat hanging by the door—a simple, lightweight affair that was more for the crisp air than for warmth—and he quickly slipped it on. As he fastened it, he glanced back at the empty house. The quiet was almost suffocating, and he felt a strange, almost guilty relief at the idea of stepping out into the bustle

of town, even if that bustle was nothing more than a few pedestrians and a quiet coffee shop or two. It would be a change, at least.

He grabbed his keys and stepped out, locking the door behind him with a quick twist. The street outside was calm, the early afternoon sun casting a soft golden light over the suburban neighbourhood. He could take the bus, of course, but there was always that one person, the "nutter," as he thought of them, who seemed to seek him out. It was as if the universe had decided that Dave was some kind of nutter magnet. The bus was always a gamble—one that he wasn't willing to take today.

No, today he'd walk. It wasn't like he had anywhere else to be, after all. The streets were empty enough, the distance between his house and the town centre just long enough to shake off some of the energy that was building up inside him. A walk would give him time to think, to breathe, to let the quiet of the world around him settle his mind.

His pace was brisk, feet hitting the pavement with a satisfying rhythm. His boots echoed lightly as he moved, the sound a small anchor to the world he was walking through. Each step was a small rebellion against the idle time that had started to consume him. Maybe he wasn't doing anything yet, but the walk itself was something. A purpose. A simple mission.

As he passed familiar buildings and quiet streets, Dave let his thoughts drift. Maybe he'd wander into that small art gallery by the river, or the old museum with its dusty exhibits. Both had always felt like safe spaces, offering a glimpse into another world where time seemed to slow down. He didn't have to decide just yet. It didn't matter where he ended up. For now, the walk was enough.

"Something different," he muttered under his breath. A break from the monotony. It wasn't much, but it was a start.

Dave entered the museum with a sense of quiet curiosity, his hand brushing the cool metal of the donation slot as he slid a fiver into it. The small museum, tucked away between older town buildings, was a stark contrast

to the modern world outside—its entrance humble, yet promising a window into a fascinating history. As he stepped inside, the world outside seemed to fall away, replaced by the muted stillness of antiquity.

The space was divided into several rooms, each one dedicated to a different aspect of Roman life in Britain. The first room featured detailed models of Roman settlements alongside reconstructions of everyday Roman life. Display cases were filled with small tools and household objects—bronze combs, pottery shards, coins, and delicate glassware, all telling the stories of the people who had lived here two thousand years ago.

Dave lingered at each exhibit, his fingers brushing the smooth glass of the cases as he peered in. The pieces felt so foreign and yet so intimately human. He couldn't help but admire the craftsmanship of the Romans, especially when he came to the section displaying the intricate jewellery and finely wrought weapons. Even now, those pieces seemed to carry a quiet power, their beauty in the details more than in their function.

What caught Dave's attention most, though, was the section dedicated to Roman engineering and architecture. There, the museum showcased scale models and reconstructions of Roman bridges, roads, and fortifications. The Romans, who had arrived in Britain during a time when most of the population lived in simple, mud-and-straw homes, had built cities of stone and granite. The contrast was striking. The Romans' advances in construction—roadways that still stood centuries later, bridges that crossed vast rivers, and public buildings that dwarfed anything the native Britons had built—reminded Dave just how far ahead they were in engineering.

It was awe-inspiring to think about the scale of the Roman Empire, how they managed to impose their will on lands so far from Rome, and how their infrastructure was built to last. Dave couldn't help but feel a sense of admiration. Even by today's standards, the ingenuity of their architecture and engineering was still impressive. He spent hours lost in the museum, strolling through each exhibit and losing track of time. The more he saw, the more he appreciated the rich history around him.

After two hours, he finally left the museum, feeling surprisingly refreshed. He hadn't expected to be so absorbed by something so... peaceful. Maybe getting a bit of culture isn't such a bad thing, Dave thought as he made his way back to the street.

The town had an easy charm, the narrow roads lined with shops, cafés, and the occasional street artist selling their wares. Dave's thoughts turned towards the canal, which he'd passed by many times but never really explored. Today, he figured, why not? It might be a good way to kill some time, and he'd heard that there were a few small art galleries down by the water, places he'd never got around to visiting. It seemed like the perfect next stop.

As he neared the canal, he spotted a car pulling over sharply, its tyres screeching against the asphalt. Two large men—thugs, by the look of them—stepped out of the rear doors. They were built like walls of muscle, with thick necks and cold, calculating eyes.

On the pavement, about a hundred metres away, was a man in a worn olive green jacket and jeans. The man was clearly frightened, his posture hunched, his hands pressed against his chest in a futile attempt to protect himself. He knew who those men were.

Dave's instincts kicked in immediately, and he slowed his pace, observing the scene unfold before him. The thugs grabbed the man roughly, shaking him violently before shoving him back against the wall. They were yelling at him, but the words were indistinct, too far away for Dave to make sense of. It was obvious enough, though. This wasn't a friendly exchange.

Without thinking, Dave's feet moved faster. He broke into a run, closing the distance between himself and the attackers in seconds. With a solid shoulder check, he barrelled into one of the thugs, sending him crashing into the side of a nearby bench. The other thug, still gripping the frightened man's jacket, turned to face Dave.

"Unless you want a stay in hospital," the thug growled, "you'd best step away."

Dave didn't flinch. He wasn't intimidated. Instead, he took a step forward, his gaze locking with the thug's. "You might want to rethink that."

Before the thug could react, Dave reached out, grabbing his wrist with a vice-like grip. The thug tried to pull away, but Dave twisted the wrist savagely, forcing the thug to release the man with a yelp of pain. The thug dropped to his knees, clutching his arm as Dave continued to hold him down with a strength that left him no chance of escape.

Just as Dave cast the thug aside, the other man, having regained his footing, lunged at Dave, a fist flying toward his face. Dave swatted it away with ease, dismissing the strike like a fly. The force of his backhand sent the second thug crashing to the ground with a thud, his eyes wide in disbelief at the force behind such a simple move.

Both thugs were left reeling, stunned by the overwhelming power Dave had just displayed. As they scrambled to their feet, muttering curses under their breath, Dave stood tall, unshaken. The two thugs stumbled back towards their car, retreating with haste. "You've not seen the last of us, Sullivan," one of them spat, but Dave wasn't concerned.

He watched as the car roared away, the sound of its engine fading into the distance. The man in the green jacket stood there, trembling, his face pale but grateful.

Dave looked at the man in front of him, taking in the state he was in—his hair unkempt, his face battered with a broken and swollen lip, and the telltale signs of a black eye forming around his left eye. He was barely standing, his clothes hanging loosely, and it was clear he had been through a lot. But as his eyes met Dave's, something shifted.

Recognition.

"Dave?" the man croaked, his voice rough. "Dave Anderson?"

Dave's heart skipped a beat. The thugs had called him Sullivan. And then it clicked in his mind—Markus Sullivan. He'd worked with him in the past, back when he was still an IT consultant. Before everything. Before the agency, before everything had turned upside down.

"Markus, I didn't recognise you," Dave said, his voice filled with surprise. "I'd ask how things are going, but I think I know the answer." He paused, glancing over the state of the man in front of him. "Are you OK? Do you need any medical help?"

Markus gave a weak chuckle, wincing slightly at the pain in his face. "No, no. I'll be OK. Thanks, Dave. I never knew you were a black belt," he said, his tone a mix of humour and disbelief.

Dave shrugged, a faint smile tugging at his lips. "Oh, that. That was just a few self-defence classes at the gym," he replied modestly, though the truth was he was more than capable of defending himself—had to be, in his line of work.

He eyed Markus again, really looking at him this time. The guy was rough—his clothes were ragged, his shoes scuffed, and his eyes held a weariness that suggested he'd been knocked down more than once, in both the literal and metaphorical sense. It was clear that whatever had happened since their time working together had taken a heavy toll.

"Markus, you've really fallen on hard times," Dave said, his voice softer now, less about the muscle and more about the person standing before him.

Markus looked down at his shoes, a rueful smile creeping across his battered face. "Yeah, well, life's been... tough. But I'm getting by."

Dave nodded, a flicker of sympathy in his eyes. He could see the struggle beneath the surface, the kind of quiet, long-term battle that didn't get noticed unless you looked closely. And Dave, despite everything that had happened to him, had learned to notice things like that.

"Listen, do you want to go grab a coffee?" Dave asked, his tone more casual now. "Sit and have a chat? There are some places down by the canal. I was heading that way."

Markus hesitated for a moment, but then his shoulders seemed to relax a little. Maybe it was the offer of coffee, or maybe it was the idea of just talking to someone who didn't see him as a victim of circumstance. Either way, he managed a small nod. "Sure."

And with that, the two men started to make their way toward the canal. As they walked side by side, the sounds of the town slowly faded behind them, replaced by the gentle hum of the water nearby. The walk gave Dave a chance to gather his thoughts, but more than that, it gave him the rare opportunity to step outside the high-stakes, adrenaline-fuelled world he had become so accustomed to and reconnect with someone from his past. Someone who knew him when things were simpler.

For a moment, Dave allowed himself to forget about the darker corners of his life—the shadows that always seemed to follow him—and simply focus on the man beside him, an old acquaintance, a friend even, trying to put his life back together in the face of hardship.

"Coffee's on me," Dave said, breaking the silence between them as they reached the canal. "Then you can fill me in on what happened back there."

Markus looked embarrassed as he said, "Yeah, I'm pretty sure you saved my life. But, I'm going to have to ask you pay for this one."

They both smiled, the camaraderie settling in between them as they continued their walk down to the canal. For Dave, it was a moment of unexpected connection, a reminder that sometimes, even when the world seemed distant and cold, there were small chances for warmth, for familiarity. Maybe getting a bit of culture wasn't so bad, after all.

### 3 Shark

Markus and Dave sat across from each other in the quiet coffee shop, the ambient chatter and clinking of cups a distant background to their conversation. Dave cradled his strong black Americano, the bitter warmth filling his chest, while Markus fidgeted with the frothy concoction in front of him, a cappuccino or some other syrup-laden drink Dave couldn't place. Markus, who usually favoured something simpler, had clearly opted for comfort over choice today. His hands shook slightly as he lifted the cup to his lips, and Dave noticed the way he inhaled deeply as if it wasn't just the warmth of the drink he was chasing.

From the look of Markus—hollow cheeks, an edge of exhaustion in his posture—Dave figured the man could do with more than just caffeine. So, he had ordered a loaded bagel and a doughnut, which Markus immediately set about demolishing. It was clear that he'd gone without proper meals for some time.

Dave watched him eat for a moment before breaking the silence. "Wanna tell me what that was all about, Sully?"

Markus paused mid-bite, chewing slowly before answering. "No biggie. Got myself in a bit of debt that I'm struggling to clear, is all."

Dave could tell there was more to it. He could read people well enough—especially those who were trying to hide the deeper issues. The fact that Markus hadn't made eye contact said everything. Dave pressed on, just a little, keeping his voice low and non-judgmental.

"I thought after you left, you'd set up your own business. I heard it was going well."

Markus finally looked up, his eyes briefly meeting Dave's before he dropped his gaze again. "It was," he said, his voice a bit heavier now. "The work was there. The profits were decent. But it was mostly work with

Government agencies—councils, education, and the like. Trouble was, they stretched out their payments further than I could afford. The irony of it was the Government tax man wanting his cash before they'd paid me for my work. After late penalties, and factoring the debts, the profits started to disappear."

Dave nodded knowingly, his brow furrowing in sympathy. "Yeah, that's a tough one. So the business folded?"

"Not quite," Markus said with a dry laugh. "I landed a big Government contract that would cover my losses and balance the books—if it paid on time. They promised it would, but guess what? It didn't. That's when I did something really stupid."

Dave leaned forward slightly, concern sharpening his tone. "Like what?"

"I borrowed some money from a lender I should never have trusted. But with the cash flow history I was showing, no one else was going to take a risk." Markus's words came out in a rush, as if confessing to something he was still ashamed of.

Dave's expression softened. He didn't judge; he understood the desperation that could cloud even the sharpest of minds when faced with a financial abyss. "Ouch. So now you're being harassed by the loan shark?"

Markus let out a bitter laugh, shaking his head. "Yeah, but the really stupid thing is... I've paid back twice what I borrowed, but the interest still keeps growing."

There was a long pause between them. Dave sipped his coffee, letting the weight of Markus's situation settle. He could see how things had spiralled out of control—how one bad decision led to another, and then another. A vicious cycle of debt that fed off itself.

"That's the kind of thing that doesn't let go easily," Dave said quietly, the words carrying a depth of understanding. "These guys don't care if you've paid them back or not. They just keep coming, tightening the noose."

Markus nodded, his gaze distant. "I can't seem to get out of it. Every month, it's just a bit more. And the worst part? The government contract that was supposed to save me—they've promised it would come through, but it hasn't. I'm running on fumes now, Dave. If I don't get out from under this soon, I don't know what I'll do."

The air between them felt heavy now, filled with the unsaid. Dave stared at his coffee, then back at Markus, his mind spinning. The world of debt, loan sharks, and shady lenders was a place Dave knew all too well from the fringes of his own life. People like Markus got chewed up and spat out in that world, and it didn't seem like he had much of a chance unless he found a way to fight back.

"You're not alone in this," Dave said, his voice low but firm. "There are ways out, Sully. It's not easy, but there's always a way. I can help you figure something out, maybe even find someone who can get you the legal protection you need."

Markus seemed to hesitate for a moment, as if weighing the offer, before finally nodding, a look of reluctant hope flickering in his eyes. "Thanks, Dave. I didn't think I'd ever find a way out, but hearing you say that... well, it's something."

Dave clapped him on the shoulder, his touch firm and reassuring. "It's what friends are for, right?"

The two of them sat in companionable silence for a moment, the noise of the coffee shop and the hum of the outside world a distant backdrop to the unexpected reunion. Dave didn't know where this conversation would lead, but for the first time in a long while, he felt like he might have a purpose, beyond just killing time between missions. Helping Markus, getting him back on track—it felt good. It felt right.

Dave leaned forward, his brow furrowed as he listened intently. He knew that Markus was in deep, but hearing the details, the reality of it, made it hit home even harder.

"So, how much do you owe?" Dave asked, his voice low but direct, trying to gauge the scope of the problem.

Markus's eyes briefly met his before looking down at his half-eaten bagel. He shifted uncomfortably in his seat, as if the very question itself made him uneasy. "It doesn't work that way," he said quietly. "I have no idea how much I owe. They just come calling wanting 500 quid each month, and if I don't have it..." He trailed off, the unspoken words hanging heavy in the air. The threat was clear enough.

Dave didn't push for more details immediately. He took a slow sip of his coffee, letting the silence stretch out for a moment as he considered the situation. Five hundred a month, he thought. And no way of knowing the total debt? That's a hell of a lot of pressure to be under.

"Who did you take the loan from?" Dave asked after a beat, his tone calm, but there was an edge of concern there. He was trying to piece things together—trying to understand just how deep the hole was.

Markus hesitated for a moment, his fingers tracing the rim of his cup. "Initially it was a guy in the local. He seemed friendly enough—lesson learned," he said, his voice bitter. "But it either wasn't his debt, or he sold it on to someone else. Someone keener to make it pay."

Dave nodded slowly, his mind working. "And that's when the heavies became involved?"

"Yeah," Markus muttered, his eyes darkening as he recalled the escalation. "I don't even know who I'm paying now. It seems like I part with cash to get myself beaten up, whether I have it or not."

Dave exhaled sharply, processing everything. The situation was worse than he'd initially realised. Markus had walked into a trap, thinking he could manage it himself, but now the whole thing had spiralled out of control. He could practically hear the thugs outside, waiting for their next chance to collect—no matter the cost.

"They're working you like a cash cow," Dave said, his voice hardening with the frustration of it all. "First it was one guy, now it's a whole network, and you're stuck in the middle of it. And you can't even keep up, can you? No idea who you're dealing with any more, just that they come to take what they want and punish you when you can't pay."

Markus didn't respond immediately, but the look in his eyes told Dave everything. He was trapped, in more ways than one, and there was no easy way out.

Dave's mind was already racing, figuring out what he could do. He'd been in tight spots before, though nothing quite like this. But the idea of letting Markus continue down this road, with the loan sharks tightening their grip on him, wasn't something he could sit back and watch.

Markus ran a hand through his hair, a gesture of exhaustion. "Yeah, that's pretty much it. I never thought it would get like this. At first, it was just a few quid to tide me over, but now it feels like I'm drowning."

Dave sat back in his chair, his hand wrapping around the warm cup of coffee. "You're not drowning, Sully. But you're going to need help to get out of this. The longer this goes on, the worse it'll get. You're dealing with people who don't care about the law, and they're not going to stop until you're bled dry."

Markus sighed, his shoulders sagging as he stared down at the table. "I don't even know where to start. Every time I think I've got a handle on it, something else comes up. And the worst part is... every time I get a little ahead, they just raise the amount. And if I don't have it, I pay in blood."

Dave nodded. "You can't keep doing this, Sully. You need a plan. You need someone who can handle this for you. And I don't just mean throwing more money at it. You need to get ahead of them—make them regret making you a target."

Markus finally looked up, a flicker of something—hope?—in his eyes. "And you think you can help me with that?"

Dave's expression softened slightly, a small, reassuring smile crossing his face. "You're not the first person to get tangled up in this kind of mess, Sully. I've seen it before, and I can help you untangle it. But it's not going to be easy."

Markus nodded slowly, a wave of relief washing over him. "Thanks, Dave. I don't know what I'd do without you."

Dave's gaze sharpened. "First thing we do is figure out who we're dealing with. You've got the name of the guy you first borrowed from, right? We start there."

Markus hesitated but nodded. "Yeah, I've got his name. Can't hurt to try."

Dave stood up, tossing a few notes onto the table to cover the bill. "Let's get moving, then. We'll take it step by step. And remember—no more payments to these guys. Not a single penny, understood?"

Markus nodded with newfound resolve. "Understood."

As the two of them left the coffee shop and made their way back down to the canal, Dave's mind was already working through the details, plotting out how they'd dismantle the cycle of debt that had ensnared Markus. There was always a way to fight back against people like this, even if it meant getting his hands dirty. And right now, Dave Anderson wasn't afraid to get his hands dirty.

He wasn't about to let anyone fall victim to the wolves, not on his watch.

## 4 The Dogs

"The Fox and Vivian," or, as the locals called it, "The Dogs," was probably one of the roughest pubs you'd come across. Situated on a forgotten street just off the main drag, the pub was a weathered old building that looked like it had been through more than a few battles. The brickwork was chipped, the windows grimy, and the sign that hung above the door was faded to the point of being almost illegible. Still, it was a place where you could always count on a drink and a bit of chaos, depending on the time of day.

Inside, the atmosphere was thick with cigarette smoke and the hum of low conversation, broken only by the occasional shout or the clink of glass on the bar. The floorboards creaked underfoot, and the dim lighting gave everything a slightly blurred, underworld feel. The air had that stale, old beer scent mixed with something less pleasant—urine, maybe, or just years of neglect.

The regulars were a rough crowd—men and women who had seen too many hard days and had little left to lose. The old pool table in the corner was perpetually occupied by grizzled men who'd long since traded in their suits for scruffy clothes and dirty hands. The dartboard, too, had seen better days, the board fraying at the edges as people threw darts with varying degrees of accuracy and attitude. The clientele had that same energy—angry, weary, and more than a little bit dangerous.

No one here cared much for pleasantries. If you didn't belong, you didn't last. If you were lucky, you'd be left alone to drink in peace, but it didn't always work out that way. The place had a reputation, and it was well-earned. The fights were as frequent as the drinks, and the only rule seemed to be that there were no rules at all.

Dave knew of it well, it had a reputation. The Fox and Vivian wasn't a place where you could ask questions without drawing attention, but if you

were looking for something specific, or if you had the right money to spend, you could find out just about anything.

And right now, Dave needed to find out just how deep Markus's problem really ran. It wasn't a place he wanted to visit, but sometimes, you had to get your hands dirty if you wanted answers. He pushed the door open, the low murmur inside falling away as he stepped into the pub. The heat hit him immediately, a mixture of bodies, old wood, and stale beer. His eyes adjusted to the dim light as he scanned the room.

At the bar, a burly man with a face like an old leather bag and tattoos snaking up his arms was watching the door. Dave could feel the tension rise just by stepping into the place—eyes tracking him, measuring him, deciding whether he was just another fool who didn't know when to leave.

The Dogs wasn't his ideal place for a conversation, but it was the only option. He needed to find out who was pulling the strings behind those loan sharks who'd got to Markus.

Dave made his way to the bar, his boots sticking to the grimy carpet with every step, the heavy scent of stale beer and sweat filling his nose. The worn, faded carpet had seen better days—like everything else in the pub. He wasn't exactly keen on putting his elbows down on the bar, which was a sticky mess of spilled beer, overflowing beer trays, and dirty towels that couldn't keep up with the flow. The whole place had a tired, resigned feel, as though the bar staff had long given up on pretending to care about the customers and were more focused on their own conversations than service.

The barman, a lanky guy with greasy hair and an unshaven face, seemed reluctant to break from the banter with his mates. Dave signalled anyway, and after a moment, the barman reluctantly disengaged and wandered over, his steps heavy, clearly annoyed at the interruption.

"What can I get ya?" the barman asked, his tone flat, as though the question was more of a formality than anything else.

"A pint of Guinness, please," Dave said, trying to keep it simple.

The barman glanced at the tap, then back at Dave, unimpressed. "Guinness is off."

Dave didn't bat an eyelash. "Bottle of cider with a glass of ice, then, please."

"No ice," the barman shot back, his voice laced with sarcasm. "But I can do you a cherry and umbrella." He gave a dramatic roll of his eyes, drawing a laugh from his mates sitting at the other end of the bar.

Dave just looked at him, unamused. "Just the cider will do," he said, handing over the cash with a raised eyebrow.

The barman grabbed the bottle with an exaggerated sigh, popping the cap off and setting it down in front of Dave with all the care of someone who was just going through the motions. Dave ignored the exchange, choosing to focus on the task at hand.

He took a moment before asking, "Do you know what time John 'G' will be in?"

The barman glanced over his shoulder, shrugging with a lazy, dismissive gesture. "Do I look like his PA or summat? How would I know?"

Nice, Dave thought to himself, already getting the feel of the place. Just the atmosphere he was looking for.

He took his drink and made his way to the back of the room, dodging a few rowdy patrons who were too drunk to notice or care. The pub was dark, the walls adorned with faded old posters, and the low murmur of conversation mixed with the occasional shout and clink of glass. The dim light cast long shadows across the worn wooden tables, and the room felt like it was stuck in time—somewhere between decay and forgetfulness.

He found an empty small round table tucked into a corner, far enough from the bar to give him some space, and slid into a hard wooden chair. As he

set his cider down, the table wobbled precariously, threatening to spill the drink.

"Figures," he muttered to himself, rolling his eyes as he adjusted the chair, but it was clear the table wasn't going to cooperate. With a resigned sigh, he picked up the well-used beer mat, and with a practised flick, he swept the majority of the detritus off the table.

Dave settled back into the chair, taking a sip of the cider. It was sweet, but it did the job. He glanced around the pub, his eyes scanning the faces in the crowd. Most of them were too caught up in their own world to pay attention to him. A few people glanced his way—probably just sizing him up, trying to figure out if he was a new face or if he belonged to the place. But he was used to that. It was part of the game.

Now, it was just a waiting game. Waiting for John "G", the man who could point him in the right direction. He wasn't sure how long it would take, but he knew better than to rush things. At places like this, people didn't like to be rushed. They liked their time to come to them.

Dave leaned back in the chair, settling in for the wait.

Not five minutes into Dave's visit, the relative calm of the pub was shattered by a loud shout from across the room. He looked up, his eyes narrowing as a stocky guy in a filthy t-shirt and jeans stood up from his table as he dragged the man sitting opposite him to his feet. The smaller man's face was red with anger as the stocky guy bellowed, "No one talks to me like that!"

The noise of the argument was drowned out by the sound of drinks flying off the table, smashing onto the floor and soaking into the carpet. The two men locked in a furious push-and-shove, fists clenched as they jostled each other, knocking over tables and chairs. The scene escalated quickly—some of the other patrons, irritated by the disruption, shouted threats and insults at the brawlers, while others kept their heads down, unwilling to get caught in the middle of the brewing fight.

Dave took another sip of his cider, not wanting to draw attention but making sure he was ready for whatever came next. He wasn't surprised. The Fox and Vivian was probably always like this.

The barman, who had been busy chatting with his mates at the end of the bar, finally looked up with a sigh. He rang a small brass bell that sat on the counter with a deliberate clang, the sharp sound cutting through the rowdy atmosphere. The pub fell silent for a moment, and the barman's voice rang out, firm and seasoned with authority.

"You know the score, lads!" he yelled, his words a familiar threat that everyone in the pub had heard before. "Outside if you wanna tear lumps off each other!" He slammed something onto the bar with a heavy thud, a cut-down pickaxe handle, worn smooth from years of use.

The brawlers froze, the tension in the air thick with unspoken rules. The stocky guy shot a glare at the barman, his face flushed with anger, but he clearly understood the message. The last thing anyone here wanted was to have to deal with the consequences of wrecked furniture or worse.

The two men exchanged muttered obscenities before they slowly backed off from each other, the fire in their eyes still burning but tempered by the presence of the barman's threat. They righted the table they had knocked over, shoving the chairs back into place with little regard for the mess they had made.

As they sat down again, trying to pretend like nothing had happened, the smaller guy waved at the barman, his voice loud enough for everyone to hear. "Same again, Mark," he shouted.

The barman grunted in acknowledgment, giving the pair a lingering look before returning to his conversation. As the drinks were poured and the fight seemed to fizzle out, Dave couldn't help but notice the atmosphere returning to its familiar, uneasy rhythm. No one moved to clean up the spilled drinks or broken glasses. The shards of glass scattered across the

floor, ignored by the regulars and the staff alike. In here, that was just how things went.

Dave sat back in his chair, quietly observing. It was a mess, both in terms of the physical damage and the deeper undercurrent of tension that hung in the air. But nothing in The Dogs ever really changed. It was just another day in a place where violence simmered just beneath the surface, ready to explode at a moment's notice.

At least it kept people's attention. And if that was what it took to find John 'G', then so be it.

## 5 The Weasel

Dave took another sip of his cider, the slightly bitter taste refreshing as he scanned the room. His eyes didn't linger on the usual chaos of the pub, though. No, today he was watching for someone specific, and just as he was about to take another drink, he spotted him.

John "G" had entered, cutting a figure that immediately drew Dave's attention. He wasn't alone. Behind him was a man who could only be described as a classic heavy—a minder. The man stood at least a head taller than John G, dressed all in black, a long black coat swishing behind him as he moved through the room. He looked every bit the part of a doorman or bouncer, a man who could handle trouble with just a glare. His presence was so out of place here, in a pub like The Dogs, that it was almost laughable. But Dave knew better. This wasn't the kind of guy you messed with.

John G, on the other hand, was the kind of guy you did mess with—if you had the right leverage. He had the look of a keen-eyed weasel, someone who knew how to read a room and how to make himself scarce when things went sideways. His clothes were too smart for a place like this, a tailored jacket and crisp shirt standing out amongst the usual scruffy regulars. Dave could tell immediately—he wasn't here for the beer or the atmosphere. No, John G went where the demand was. And right now, it seemed like he had a lot of demand.

The minder went straight to a table by the window, where two elderly gentlemen were quietly sipping their pints. There was barely a word spoken between them, but within seconds, the older men were getting up and moving, without so much as a protest. It was a classic move—intimidation without confrontation. Dave had seen it a thousand times before.

John G, meanwhile, made himself comfortable on the soft, cushioned seating, his back to the window so he could keep an eye on the whole room. He settled in with an air of authority, as if this were his domain, his kingdom. His eyes scanned the room slowly, taking in the surrounding faces, sizing up who was who. He lifted a brandy to his lips, sipping it casually as he waited.

The minder, having done his job with the old gents, now made his way to the bar, stood near the door, back to the wall, eyes constantly scanning the room, never letting his guard down. He wasn't here to drink, Dave thought. He was here to keep watch.

It was clear now that whatever business John G had here, it wasn't going to be casual. This was about power, control—and probably money. The presence of the minder confirmed it. Dave's instincts were always sharp in situations like this, and he could already feel the tension building in the room, just beneath the surface. There was something in the air today.

Dave watched John G carefully, taking note of his posture, his small movements—anything that would give him a hint of what the man was really up to. He didn't trust the guy, not for a second. But he did know one thing for sure: John G was here to make a deal. The question was, with who—and for what?

With his drink in hand, Dave leaned back in his chair, observing from the corner of the room, waiting for the right moment to make his move.

Dave watched the scene unfold, his eyes trained on John G as he sat in the corner, a brandy in one hand, his posture relaxed but his gaze sharp. He'd seen this before—people desperate enough to seek out someone like John G, someone with the power to either make their problems go away or make them worse.

The first client was a regular in the pub, someone who had come and gone over the years. The man approached John G's table with a nervous shuffle, his voice almost apologetic as he asked if he could sit and speak. There

was an air of desperation about him, his shoulders hunched as if trying to make himself smaller, less noticeable. His tone was timid, deferential—as if he already knew he was walking into dangerous territory.

John G barely acknowledged him, his eyes still scanning the room, but his fingers moved inside his jacket, pulling out a small notebook and pen. With a casual flick, he began leafing through the pages, his expression bored until he found what he was looking for. He made a small note in the book, barely glancing at the man across the table.

The client seemed to deflate even further, his shoulders slumping as he started speaking faster, his words tumbling over each other. It was clear to Dave that the man was pleading for something. An extension on a loan, perhaps—maybe even a new loan altogether. Whatever it was, it was something John G could control, something he could grant—or deny. The man looked almost frantic now, as if he was walking on the edge of something much worse.

John G nodded, his pen still poised above the page. The man gave a final desperate plea, but it wasn't enough. John G didn't even need to speak—his mere nod seemed to signal the end of the conversation. The client stood up immediately, defeated, his head lowered. Without another word, he turned and walked out the door, the bell above it jangling lightly as it swung shut behind him.

Before Dave could settle into the quiet again, there was the bell as the door opened. The man's appearance was different—more suited up, more refined than the usual clientele. As soon as he stepped inside, John G's eyes flicked toward him, and he gave a slight nod. The minder, standing guard at the end of the bar, immediately tensed and followed the man as he made his way to the table.

The next client seemed even more agitated, his steps hurried, his eyes darting around as if he were looking for an escape route. The minder stayed close, looming like a shadow, his bulk overshadowing the client's

smaller frame. The conversation that followed was whispered, urgent, and brief. Dave couldn't make out the words, but the desperation on the man's face was unmistakable. He wasn't asking for an extension or a loan; this was a man who was in real trouble. His hands trembled as he spoke, his voice low and shaking. It was clear that whatever deal was being struck here, it wasn't going to be a simple one.

The minder's huge hands settled on the man's shoulder, and the subtle pressure was enough to make the client visibly shrink under it. His nods became quicker, more frantic, as John G continued to talk. The man seemed to be agreeing to whatever was being said, as if the words were the only way out of whatever hole he was in. Every once in a while, the minder would lean in closer, a silent enforcer of the terms being made.

Finally, the man stood up, his face pale, his shoulders slumped as he walked away from the table, his back hunched in defeat. His movements were slow, reluctant, and Dave could see that he had no intention of looking back. As he made his way to the door, the minder followed, standing just behind him, casting a long shadow over the client's path. The pub seemed to hold its breath, the weight of the moment lingering in the air like smoke. The client slunk out the door, disappearing into the night under the watchful eyes of the minder.

Dave leaned back in his chair, his mind whirring. He had seen enough. It was clear now that John G was managing loans. The loans, the deals, the desperation of the people who came to him for help... this was where they came to orchestrate the business, but the cash transactions done somewhere else. Dave needed to find that part of the chain.

Dave stood up from his seat, taking a steadying breath as he made his way across the room. He saw his opportunity when John G was momentarily alone at the table, his minder stationed at the bar, keeping a watchful eye but seemingly distracted. John G sat facing the room, Dave could feel the man's sharp gaze. This wasn't a man who missed much.

Without a moment's hesitation, Dave slid into the seat opposite John G. The move was quick and confident, leaving little room for resistance. For a brief moment, John G didn't acknowledge him—his brandy glass raised to his lips, his eyes elsewhere, scanning the room. But the irritation was quick to surface.

"Do I know you?" John G asked, his voice clipped with annoyance, eyebrows furrowing. His sharp features tightened, and there was a cold, condescending edge to his tone as he finally looked Dave in the eye.

Dave didn't flinch. He held John G's gaze, steady as ever. From the corner of his eye, he saw the minder begin to shift his position, his hulking frame pushing through the crowd toward their table. But just as quickly, John G gave a small upward nod, and the minder stopped, standing still just behind Dave, his eyes fixed on him without saying a word.

"No, you don't know me," Dave said flatly, his voice calm but carrying a quiet certainty. "But you do know one of my friends."

John G gave a dismissive shrug, his gaze drifting to the minder behind Dave. His look was brief but loaded, a silent exchange between them. "I know a lot of people," G muttered, before glancing back at Dave. His eyes narrowed slightly, his lips curling into a thin smile, but there was an edge to it now, as if he was already sizing up the situation.

"I'm a busy man, so Terry, here, is going to show you out. Unless you've something worthwhile to say," John G continued, his tone dismissive.

Dave could feel the tension building as the minder—Terry—moved closer, his heavy footsteps echoing in the quiet pub. Terry's bulk loomed behind Dave like a shadow, waiting for the moment when the conversation would turn physical.

Dave, however, wasn't backing down. "Terry's going to be looking for another career after today," Dave said, the words sharp as a knife.

The crowd in the pub—already accustomed to the chaos that sometimes bubbled up in this place—suddenly went quiet. Their attention shifted toward the table, eager to see what would happen next. Dave knew the pub was full of people waiting for a show, hoping for some drama, expecting Terry to drag him out by the collar.

But Dave wasn't giving them what they expected.

He stood, pushing his chair forward and trapping John G in his seat with the edge of the table. Then, without a word, he turned to face Terry. The menace in Terry's posture was unmistakable—his hand reached for Dave's shoulder, intending to shove him out of the way. But Dave was already one step ahead.

"You know why they call thumbs remote controls for idiots?" Dave said with a smirk, just loud enough for Terry to hear.

Terry, taken aback by the strange comment, paused for just a moment, confusion flickering in his eyes. That was all Dave needed. In one fluid motion, he grabbed Terry's thumb with his right hand, twisting it back with a savage yank. Terry's body jolted in pain as his thumb made an audible pop, the joint giving way under Dave's forceful grip.

Terry's face contorted in agony, eyes bulging as his body staggered backward, following the direction Dave was forcing him to go. The pub was still silent, the crowd waiting, but now, it was more than just a game. Dave was in control.

As they neared the entrance, Dave spun Terry around, twisting his arm upward behind his back, forcing Terry's face into the wall with a brutal slam. The force of the blow left Terry gasping for air, his knees buckling slightly.

"I suggest you sit this one out, Terry," Dave said coldly, his voice low and full of quiet menace. "It won't end well for you."

Terry groaned, his face still pressed into the cold brick, his body frozen in pain and shock. He didn't move, barely able to breathe with the pressure on his shoulder and wrist. He was done. Dave wasn't playing any more.

With one final shove, Dave released Terry, letting him crumple to the floor in a heap, before turning back to face John G.

John G sat frozen in his chair, his earlier smugness gone, replaced with a look of shock and a faint tremor. He was still processing the sudden shift in power, unable to comprehend how quickly the tables had turned. He spluttered, clearly trying to regain some semblance of control over the situation. But Dave could see the fear in his eyes—the realisation that he wasn't the one in control any more.

Dave didn't waste any more time on words. He stood there, his posture confident, his eyes hard. The room was still silent, but now it was different. The crowd could feel the change in the air. Dave had shown them what real power looked like.

As Dave stood over John G, his eyes cold and unwavering, he could hear the faint shuffle of movement behind him. There was a sudden thunk—the unmistakable sound of something solid hitting flesh—and Dave's body instinctively tensed as he turned. The Barman, looking more than a little perplexed, was holding the pickaxe handle that he'd just swung down at Dave's shoulders.

The blow should have been enough to knock any man to the floor, but Dave didn't even flinch. He stood still, staring at the barman as the wood hovered above him, a foolish expression on the bartender's face. He couldn't process what he had just done.

Before the Barman could react further, Dave reached out with lightning speed and snatched the pickaxe handle from his hands. Without even breaking stride, he broke it in two with a single snap, the pieces falling to the floor with a hollow thud. The Barman stood there, utterly confused, not knowing whether to step forward or retreat.

It didn't matter. Dave's attention was already shifting.

From the corner of his eye, he saw John G making a break for it—slipping toward the door, his figure darting through the crowd as quickly as possible. Coward, Dave thought, watching him with a cold, almost amused detachment.

"Sorry about the chair," Dave muttered aloud to the barman, as though everything that had just transpired had been as casual as ordering a pint. Then, in one smooth motion, he grabbed an empty chair from a nearby table and, with a swift flick of his arm, launched it directly at the fleeing John G.

The chair soared through the air, catching John G just as he reached the door. There was a clatter, the sound of wood snapping as the chair broke into pieces on impact with his back. John G stumbled forward, his momentum shattered by the blow, and crashed to the ground with a heavy thud.

The entire pub was silent for a beat, all eyes on the scene unfolding in front of them.

Dave wasn't done yet.

He strode over to the fallen John G, his boots echoing on the floor as he grabbed the weasel by the collar and yanked him upright. With a brutal shove, he pinned him to the wall, the force knocking the wind out of John G as he gasped for air. John G's face was a picture of confusion and fear, his mouth opening and closing in a futile attempt to speak.

Dave reached into John G's jacket, his fingers brushing against the small, worn notebook. With a swift motion, he extracted it from the man's chest pocket. The weight of the notebook in his hand felt like the final piece of the puzzle falling into place.

For the whole pub to hear, Dave spoke clearly, his voice cutting through the hushed room. "All debts are forgiven," he said, loud enough for everyone to hear, a simple statement, but one that carried weight.

Some of the crowd cheered, the regulars who had been waiting for the inevitable explosion, eager for the spectacle. Others, however, looked confused, unsure whether to applaud or stay out of it.

Dave didn't care. This wasn't for them. This was for him, for Markus, and for the others who had been victimized by people like John G.

Without saying another word, Dave marched John G toward the door, still gripping the man by the collar with one hand. The pub seemed to hold its breath as Dave pushed through the door, dragging John G outside into the cool night air, the sound of the door slamming behind them echoing in the silence.

The crowd remained inside, left to digest what they'd just witnessed.

The street outside the pub was quiet, the night air crisp and still. Across from the pub, beneath a streetlamp and a large, gnarled tree, sat a neglected bench, a spot that had clearly been abandoned by anyone with sense. The bench, poorly positioned beneath the tree, was covered in pigeon droppings, the birds using it as their own personal toilet. It was a fitting place for John G to sit, Dave thought, as he guided the trembling man to the bench for a "chat."

John G was in no better shape than when Dave had dragged him out of the pub. His shoes were scuffed from the fall, the knees of his trousers covered in grime and stains from the pub floor. His shirt and jacket were crumpled from the manhandling, giving him the dishevelled look of someone who had just been dragged through a storm.

Dave stood in front of him, arms crossed, eyes cold and piercing. "Sullivan. Markus Sullivan. Is he in your book?" he demanded, his tone low and menacing.

John G flinched, looking down at the ground, clearly uncomfortable under the weight of Dave's stare. "I don't know, I don't know," he mumbled, his voice shaky with fear.

Dave's eyes narrowed. He stepped closer, leaning down so that his face was just inches from John G's, his voice dropping to a dangerous whisper. "If you lie to me..." The sentence hung in the air, the unspoken threat clear.

John G's face contorted with panic. His hands trembled as he looked around, clearly trying to buy himself some time. "Let me see, let me see," he muttered, his voice rising slightly in desperation.

Without a word, Dave reached into his coat pocket and handed John G the notebook. It was a simple gesture, but it sent a clear message: this was Dave's game now, and John G had no choice but to play by his rules.

John G flipped through the pages quickly, his fingers trembling as he searched for the name. He stopped on a page, eyes widening in reluctant recognition. "Yes," he said, his voice almost a whisper, his gaze flicking up at Dave's face, trying to gauge his reaction. "Yes, he's in here."

Dave's anger spiked, the words now a razor's edge. "Wait, wait," John G stammered, holding up his hands as if to ward off the impending storm. "He's in here, but... he's not one of mine. I sold it on."

Dave's eyes hardened. He wasn't about to let John G squirm his way out of this, not after everything he'd done. "Who to?" Dave asked, his voice a low growl.

John G hesitated for a moment, but the pressure in Dave's gaze was too much to bear. He knew it was only a matter of time before he cracked. As much as he wanted to hold back, he could feel the walls closing in. Finally, he sneered, his expression shifting from fear to reluctant defiance. He realised who he was up against now—and it wasn't someone he could easily deceive.

"Ralph. Ralph Little," John G said, the name coming out with a twisted smile, as if he thought Dave's pursuit was about to end in a dead end.

The name landed with a weight that shifted the entire dynamic between them. Dave's expression didn't change immediately, but the anger bubbling under the surface was impossible to miss. Ralph Little.

John G, thinking he'd gained some ground, looked up at Dave, his smile almost smug as if he thought the whole thing was over now. "You've got no idea who you're dealing with, do you?" he said, still trying to maintain some semblance of control, but there was a tremor in his voice now.

Dave stepped back slightly, a slow smile creeping onto his face. It wasn't one of amusement—it was the kind of smile that came just before a man knew he'd won. "Ralph Little," Dave repeated, his voice calm but with an edge of satisfaction. "I know exactly who I'm dealing with."

The game had just changed. Now, Dave had the name he needed—the link that would bring him closer to the heart of the operation. John G had unwittingly led him to a bigger fish, someone with far more power than the scrawny loan shark sitting before him.

Dave leaned down, looking John G dead in the eye. "I suggest you take some time to think about your future, John. Because Ralph Little is about to find out what happens when you cross me."

With that, Dave reclaimed John G's notebook, turned and started walking away, leaving John G behind, trembling and beaten, with nothing left he was ruined, and the shadow of the storm was about to hit.

## 6 Flash Back

The name Ralph Little hit Dave with a sudden, sharp clarity. It was a name that brought everything rushing back—the reason he was even here, dealing with loan sharks and racketeers. Markus. His friend. The man who had got tangled up in Ralph’s web. This wasn’t just about business or some shadowy government mission any more. This was personal.

Dave remembered his first encounter with Ralph’s crew just last year. Back then, he’d been discovering his abilities, learning what he could do and how to control it. He’d crossed paths with a couple of Ralph’s thugs running small-time extortion rackets, and even then, Dave had put a stop to it—breaking up their operations, forcing them out of the businesses they were targeting. It hadn’t been anything major, just a few street-level thugs.

But now, Dave was dealing with the man behind it all. Ralph Little wasn’t some untouchable crime boss. He wasn’t an adversary that Dave had to unravel for some bigger mission. No, Ralph was a problem—Markus’s problem. A man whose rackets had preyed on Dave’s friend, bleeding him dry with loans and unrelenting interest. Dave knew exactly who Ralph Little was, and what kind of damage he had caused to people like Markus.

This was personal.

Markus had tried to do the right thing, tried to keep his head above water, but the moment he’d fallen into Ralph’s grip, the whole thing had spiralled. Dave wasn’t about to sit back and let a friend drown in this mess. He wasn’t going to let Ralph get away with it.

Dave had been waiting for a chance to take down this low-level mob boss, to clean up the mess Ralph had made of Markus’s life. The loan sharks, the debt, the threats—it all led back to Ralph. And now, Dave had a direct line to him. There was no question in Dave’s mind—Ralph Little was going down, and Dave was going to be the one to do it. For Markus.

As Dave thought about it, the anger bubbled up again. Ralph wasn't just some faceless criminal. He was the one who had pushed Markus to the brink, the one who had ruined his life for the sake of a quick buck. And now, he was going to pay.

Dave wasn't going to rely on anyone else to handle this. This wasn't about agencies or the bureaucracy of whatever shadowy organisation had kept tabs on him. This was about Markus. And if Dave had to tear Ralph's empire down piece by piece, he would do it, no hesitation.

Ralph Little had crossed the line. He had made it personal. And Dave wasn't going to stop until he'd made Ralph pay for every part of the suffering he'd caused.

Dave's phone rang, and within moments, he was listening to Markus's voice on the other end, thick with anxiety. It was a conversation that had been coming for a while now. Dave had the information he needed, and he needed to share it with his friend.

"Markus," Dave said, keeping his voice calm, "I've found out who's behind all this. Ralph Little. He's the one running the rackets, pulling all the strings. It's all in his book, just like I thought."

There was a long pause on the other end of the line, and when Markus finally spoke, it was with a deep, resigned sigh. "Oh, man. This really is big trouble," he muttered, his voice rough. "I know who Ralph is. He runs the town from his nightclub, The Velvet Room. It's where all the deals go down. The guy's got fingers in every pie. Sorry, for getting you into this, Dave. I'll just keep paying. I'll figure it out."

Dave's jaw tightened. He didn't want to hear that. He wasn't going to let Markus get deeper into this mess, not after everything he'd already been through. "No way," Dave said, his voice firm. "Ralph is a businessman, but that's all he is. I'll go talk business with him. We'll settle this once and for all."

Markus was quiet for a beat, before a nervous laugh escaped him. "You can't, Dave. You don't know who you're up against. These are serious people."

Dave smiled, despite the weight of the situation. He could hear the fear in Markus's voice, but he wasn't about to back down. "I can be pretty serious when I want to be," he said, his tone not giving away any hesitation. "Don't panic. I'll sort it."

There was a shift on the other end of the line, and Dave knew Markus was probably pacing, trying to figure out what was going through his friend's mind. "Look, I know these guys," Markus said, voice wavering slightly. "They don't mess around, Dave. Ralph's connected. He's got a lot of muscle and influence. These people... they don't just walk away from something like this."

"I know," Dave replied, his tone flat, unwavering. "But they haven't met me yet."

Markus didn't say anything for a moment, and Dave could hear the strain in his friend's voice. "Just... be careful, Dave. I don't want you getting caught up in something worse."

"I'm not getting caught up in anything, Markus," Dave said with quiet conviction. "I'm ending this."

Markus exhaled, a sound that was somewhere between a sigh and a groan. "I know you're not gonna listen to me, but if things go south—"

"They won't," Dave interrupted, his words leaving no room for doubt. "I'll handle it. Just sit tight. I'll take care of Ralph, and this whole mess with him and his thugs will be over."

Another silence passed before Markus spoke again, quieter now. "Just... be safe, alright?"

"I will," Dave said, then added, "And don't worry. I'll be the one calling the shots from here on out."

As the call ended, Dave slid his phone back into his pocket, his mind already working through the next steps. Ralph Little may have thought he was untouchable, a kingpin with his hands in everything, but Dave wasn't intimidated. It was time to pay a visit to The Velvet Room. It was time to show Ralph exactly who he was messing with.

## 7 The Velvet Room

Dave approached the door of The Velvet Room, his steps steady, his purpose clear. As he reached the entrance, a hulking bouncer stood in his way, dressed all in black. He was the picture of intimidation—broad shoulders, a square jaw, and an unwavering, cold stare. Behind him were two other muscle-bound men, each standing like immovable statues. One was particularly large, with veins bulging from his neck and forearms, and the other had the look of a man who spent most of his time lifting weights rather than using his brain. Together, they formed an intimidating wall of muscle.

The lead bouncer, his arms folded across his chest, looked Dave up and down, his lips curling into a half sneer. “Oh, yeah. We know who you are, and Ralph doesn’t want to see you,” he said, his voice low and dismissive. The other two men didn’t say anything, but their stony faces and posture spoke volumes. They were there to back up their colleague, making sure no trouble got past them.

Dave didn’t flinch, his gaze hardening as he locked eyes with the bouncer. “How well do you know Terry?” he asked casually, keeping his voice steady.

The bouncer scoffed, a laugh escaping him. “You think what you did to Terry bothers me?” He was barely holding back a grin, as if he’d already written Dave off as another problem that would be dealt with quickly.

Dave stepped forward slightly, his expression impassive. “Not at all,” he said, his voice even. “But I just wondered if he'd visit you in the hospital.”

The bouncer’s eyes narrowed, the smile vanishing instantly. Without another word, he reached forward, trying to grab Dave and shove him away. But Dave was already ready.

As the bouncer lunged, Dave's reflexes kicked in. He caught the bouncer's wrist in a vice-like grip, twisting it with practised ease and preventing the bouncer from pulling it back. The bouncer's eyes widened in shock, but before he could react, Dave snapped his other hand up, capturing the bouncer's free wrist as well. The bouncer froze, unable to move, his arms locked in Dave's unyielding grasp.

Dave's eyes never left his. "I don't have an appointment," he said calmly, "but I strongly suggest you take me to Ralph."

The bouncer, realising he couldn't break free, sneered. "I don't think so."

In a move that could only be described as one of the dumbest things the bouncer could do, he drew his head back and slammed it forward in a brutal headbutt aimed at Dave's forehead.

The crowd behind him looked on with smug smiles, expecting Dave to crumple under the force of the impact. But what happened next was far from what they expected.

Dave's forehead met the bouncer's skull with a sickening crack, but instead of Dave stumbling backward, his body barely moved. The bouncer, on the other hand, was the one who felt the brunt of the impact. His eyes widened in shock, and his knees buckled. It was like slamming his head into a concrete wall. The sheer force of the headbutt, combined with Dave's own head, resulted in the bouncer's mind shutting down almost instantly.

The bouncer's eyes rolled back, and his body went limp, crashing to the floor unconscious.

For a long, frozen moment, the two other hulks standing behind him stared in shock. The whole sequence had happened so fast that they hadn't even had time to react.

Dave, with a smooth, controlled motion, released the bouncer's wrists and let his body slide to the floor in a heap. The two backup musclemen

stepped forward as if to intervene, but Dave was already moving. He wasn't done yet.

His gaze shifted back to the two men who had remained silent until now. They could see it in his eyes—the game had just shifted, and they were no longer in control. The lead bouncer wasn't just knocked out; Dave had proven that his strength was not to be underestimated. It was the last thing they expected, and now they had to make a decision: fight or flee. But either way, Dave wasn't about to let anyone stop him from getting inside.

Dave stepped forward, his eyes locked on the two hulking bouncers who were still trying to wrap their heads around what had just happened. Their faces were a mix of confusion and disbelief. They had watched their friend go down in seconds, and now they were faced with the reality that this unassuming, middle-aged man—someone they clearly thought would be an easy target—wasn't just any ordinary guy. He was dangerous.

Without missing a beat, Dave's voice was low and firm. "Move... I won't ask again."

The two bouncers exchanged a glance. The larger of the two, standing to the left, was clearly the more experienced, but he hesitated. His eyes flickered to their fallen comrade, and for a brief moment, doubt crossed his face. They had seen what Dave was capable of, and it was clear now that they had miscalculated. But pride—stubborn, reckless pride—won out in the end.

The bouncer on the right, a thick-necked brute with a shaved head, cracked his knuckles with a loud, deliberate snap, trying to intimidate Dave. His stance was wide, his arms flexed as if he could overpower Dave through sheer size alone. Dave could feel the tension in the air as the thug sized him up, but he wasn't intimidated. He knew this was a dangerous situation, but he was not looking for a fight—only a way in.

The moment the thug lunged forward, Dave reacted, moving instinctively. When the thug's fist swung toward him, Dave dodged the blow and

sidestepped, his movements quick and measured. As the thug overextended, Dave's hand shot out, grabbing his arm and redirecting his momentum. In a fluid motion, he spun the bouncer around, using his weight and momentum against him, and shoved him into the larger bouncer, sending them crashing together with a sickening thud.

In the chaos of the collision, Dave used the opportunity to twist the thug's arm downward, to neutralise him. There was a sharp, painful pop as the bouncer's shoulder dislocated, the sound like a snapped twig. The thug cried out in pain, but Dave wasn't finished. With a controlled, firm grip, he forced the man to his knees.

Dave stepped back, keeping his distance now. He hadn't thrown a single punch; his movements were only about self-preservation. The two bouncers were now on the ground, disoriented and in pain. Dave's eyes scanned the alleyway, wary of any more threats, but his stance remained defensive. He wasn't looking for a fight, only to make sure he wasn't taken down by these two.

His partner, still stunned by the speed of the attack, looked like he was ready to move in and retaliate, but the reality of the situation was setting in fast. The final bouncer, his fists clenched in frustration, stood frozen for a moment, clearly realising that any further conflict would be futile.

The man's face twisted into a grimace, but after a long, tense moment, he raised his hands in surrender, slowly backing away. "You... you can pass," he grumbled, voice dripping with reluctant respect.

Dave didn't spare him another glance. With the two bouncers now incapacitated and unwilling to fight, he brushed past them, his gaze steely and unwavering. The one with the dislocated shoulder was groaning in pain, clutching his mangled arm, but neither of them dared to stop him.

As Dave made his way to the door, the final bouncer muttered something under his breath, but it was clear: the fight was over. The Velvet Room wasn't going to be a simple job after all, but Dave was certain of one thing

—Ralph Little was about to learn that messing with him had been the biggest mistake of his life.

The door swung open, and Dave stepped into the darkness of the nightclub, the low hum of music and laughter muffled from the other side. He didn't need to be invited in any more. He had already made his point. Now it was time to finish what he'd started.

Dave passed through the Velvet Room, the interior more understated than he'd expected for a club that seemed to run a rather tight operation. The space was large, with a dimly lit ambiance that would soon come alive when the night crowd poured in. The floor was being mopped by cleaners who moved in smooth, synchronized motions, making sure every inch of the hardwood gleamed. Tables were being rearranged—polished wood, chrome accents, and plush velvet seating—each table being carefully set for the evening's clientele. In the back, bar staff were loading fridges and shelves, stocking up bottles, preparing the ingredients for the cocktails that would soon flow. The bottles of premium whiskey, rum, and gin reflected the low, ambient light, ready to be poured into glasses later on.

The place was still in that transitional phase—too quiet, too clean, before the noise and chaos of the night kicked in. The atmosphere was controlled, professional, and the staff were all busy at their jobs, clearly accustomed to the routine. Dave felt no need to maintain his aggressive stance any more; the threat had been neutralized outside. The staff weren't part of the problem, so he decided to play it cool, keep his interactions professional.

As Dave approached the bar, he could hear the soft clink of glassware and the faint hum of low conversation as the staff moved about. He leaned against the counter, giving a quick glance to the barman, who was stacking bottles with casual efficiency.

"Which way to the office?" Dave asked, his voice even and direct, the tone not demanding but firm.

The barman didn't hesitate, looking up from his task. "Door to the left and up the stairs," he answered, nodding in the direction of a set of stairs leading to a hallway behind the bar.

Dave nodded in acknowledgment and made his way toward the stairs, the soft murmur of staff and the ambient sound of clinking glass fading as he moved. The stairs creaked under his weight, and the narrow hallway above was dimly lit, the walls lined with framed photographs of past events—likely VIPs or some of the bigger acts that had graced the Velvet Room in its years of operation.

He reached the door marked Staff Only at the end of the hall, and without hesitation, he pushed it open, stepping into the quieter, more functional part of the building. The air was colder here, more sterile, the hum of club life replaced by the echo of his boots against the concrete floor.

He didn't have to go far. At the end of the hallway was the office. And standing guard in front of the door were two men who looked like they'd been cut from the same mould as the bouncers outside—bigger, broader, and clearly made to intimidate. They were both standing tall, arms crossed, their gaze fixed on Dave as he approached. The kind of muscle that made you question just how many of these guys Ralph had at his disposal. Where do they get them all from? Dave thought to himself, eyeing them with mild curiosity. Some kind of rent-a-muscle agency?

As he closed the distance between them, Dave could see the two heavies visibly preparing for action, their postures stiffening, and their eyes narrowing, clearly ready to escalate if needed. But just as they tensed, a voice rang out from inside the office.

“Let him through.”

The muscle stepped aside with barely a glance, the air between them thick with tension, but they made no move to stop Dave. He passed them easily, his movements smooth, his focus fixed on the office door ahead.

As he entered the office, the environment shifted once more. The door shut behind him with a quiet thud, and Dave's eyes quickly adjusted to the dim, low-lit room. The furniture was expensive, with dark wood desks and rich leather chairs, a contrast to the raw, aggressive tone of the men outside. In the back, Ralph Little sat behind a large desk, his fingers steepled as he looked up from the papers in front of him. His sharp, calculating eyes took in Dave's presence without any immediate reaction.

Ralph Little, sits with slightly slouched posture that hints at a life of indulgence. His body is on the heavier side, with a noticeable paunch and signs of excess, marked by a round face, pale skin, and the first wrinkles of ageing. His thinning, receding hair is carefully styled in a vain attempt to hold onto his dignity, though he's not bothered by the baldness itself—just the reminder of his fading youth. Ralph's dark, calculating eyes reflect a mind always scheming, and his piercing gaze can quickly assess others, revealing a life spent in high-stakes games, always looking for leverage.

Though his physical appearance shows signs of decline, Ralph maintains a polished exterior, dressed in high-end casual attire that hints at wealth and status. His tailored clothes cling to his paunch without drawing attention, and his accessories—a shiny watch and polished shoes—add to his sophisticated look. However, beneath the confident stride of a man who once held power, there's an underlying anxiety. Ralph's swagger may still demand respect, but it's clear his influence is slipping, and he clings to appearances to mask the insecurity that comes with it.

Ralph sat behind the desk, his posture relaxed yet confident, an almost predatory look in his eyes as he observed Dave. But it wasn't just Ralph in the room. Standing near the far side of the office, closer to the door, was another man—smartly dressed in a tailored suit, his demeanour cool and calculating. He had the look of someone who didn't need to rely on brute force or physical intimidation. The sharpness in his eyes, the calm, steely composure—everything about him screamed professional.

Dave sized the man up immediately. He wasn't a thug like the bouncers outside. This man had the air of a hired gun, someone who could kill on command without hesitation. His sharp, calculating gaze never left Dave, as though he were already considering the best way to end this conversation—swiftly, efficiently, and without drama.

Dave recognised the type. A gun for hire. Not someone who threw punches, but someone who could make decisions in a split second. Someone who would kill without flinching, all in the name of business.

Dave sat in the chair opposite Ralph without waiting for an invitation. He wasn't intimidated, not by the lavish office, not by the man sitting across from him, and certainly not by the muscle still lingering outside. His mission was simple—get the debt closed, save his friend Markus—but it wasn't going to be that easy.

Ralph looked up at him with a wry smile, his eyes flicking briefly to the CCTV monitor on the wall, where the bouncers from outside were still picking themselves up, groaning and clutching their injuries. The one who'd headbutted Dave was still unconscious on the floor. Ralph turned his gaze back to Dave, as if measuring him.

“That was quite a display,” Ralph said casually, his voice dripping with sardonic amusement. He seemed more impressed than bothered by what had happened outside.

Dave's eyes locked onto Ralph's, his voice calm but with an undercurrent of threat. “It didn't need to go this way.”

Ralph's smile didn't falter, but his tone shifted, the warmth in his voice replaced by cold calculation. “You go around manhandling my people, then come here. What were you expecting?”

Dave didn't flinch. “Fair one. But now I have your attention.”

Ralph's eyebrows raised slightly. He was intrigued, but not for long. “So, what's this about? Who sent you?”

“It’s just a personal matter,” Dave replied, his tone firm, unwavering. “I’m looking to buy a friend’s debt that you hold.”

Ralph leaned back in his chair, folding his arms. He was trying to gauge Dave, but his face betrayed none of his thoughts. “All this is about a loan? And you’re working alone?”

“Yeah, I don’t like my friends getting hurt,” Dave said, his eyes narrowing slightly. “For that, we’re about even. Now you just give me the number, and we close the debt.”

Ralph’s lips curled into a slow, malicious smile. He stood from his desk and began to circle around it, his eyes never leaving Dave. “You’ve proven you’re a hard man. You can handle yourself, sure. But for me to let you come in here and threaten and intimidate me? That’s not happening.”

Dave remained calm, not letting Ralph’s posturing throw him off. “No threat. No intimidation. I’m just telling you how it’s going to be. Then you’ll never see me again.”

Ralph stopped pacing, his eyes narrowing with calculation. He was sizing Dave up, his hand tapping rhythmically against the edge of the desk. “You realise, once you give me your friend’s name, you’ll be signing his death warrant?”

Dave’s expression didn’t change. His voice dropped, even and calm. “I told you it didn’t have to go this way. You close the book on the debt, walk away, and I don’t tear down the rest of your operation. Right now, it’s personal, and you don’t want me to make it my business.”

Ralph stepped forward, leaning over the desk, his eyes cold with malice. “You think you’re in control here, huh? You think you can walk in and make demands like this? Let me tell you something, Dave.” He took a step closer, his voice dropping to a dangerous whisper. “The moment you walked into my club, you signed your own death warrant. And your friend? He’s already dead.”

Dave's eyes hardened. "What the hell are you talking about?"

Ralph's smirk widened. "You think I'm going to let you threaten me? No. Markus is nothing more than a pawn in my game, and he will pay for his debts. You think a man like you can just waltz in here and negotiate his life? I'm not some petty thug you can bully."

It was clear John G had put a call in, made Ralph aware of Markus, before he'd even stepped in the door.

The tension in the room thickened. Dave could feel the anger rising, but he held it in check. "You think you can just kill him and walk away?"

Ralph's laugh was short and humourless. "He's already dead, Dave. You've given me no choice. Your friend owes me more than just money now. He's mine." He stepped closer again, his tone mocking. "And you? You're nothing but another dead man walking. You won't be able to stop me."

Dave's fists clenched, his jaw tightening with fury. "You're wrong, Ralph. This ends now."

Ralph smiled, stepping back. "You want to play? Fine. But you better be ready for the consequences." He turned to the hitman standing at the side of the room, signalling to him with a nod.

The atmosphere in Ralph's office had shifted in an instant. The cold, professional air that had filled the room moments before was now thick with the palpable tension of imminent violence. Dave could feel it, every muscle in his body primed for action. The man Ralph had by his side, the hired gun, had made his move. He was fast—too fast for most—but not for Dave. Not any more.

Before the hitman even had a chance to finish drawing his gun from his jacket, Dave was already out of his seat. The suppressor was a good plan, but it added milliseconds to how long it took to draw it, milliseconds the hitman didn't have. It was a blur of movement, a flash so fast that it almost seemed unreal. The hitman's hand had barely drawn the pistol when Dave

grabbed it, his fingers wrapping around the wrist in a vice-like grip. The fingers of the hired gun twisted painfully, cracking with a sharp crunch that made him grunt in agony.

The hitman's face contorted with shock and pain, but the cry that followed was quickly silenced as Dave's other fist connected with his jaw. The punch landed with such precision and power that it knocked the hitman cold, sending him crashing backward into the sofa behind him, his body slumping in a heap. The gun dropped to the floor with a dull clink, useless now.

Dave stood there for a moment, his eyes still locked on Ralph, who was standing by his desk, frothing at the mouth with rage. His face was contorted with disbelief and fury as he stared at his now unconscious hitman. He was livid, his breath coming in heavy bursts, a far cry from the confident, calculating man Dave had walked in on.

"Your friend's a dead man!" Ralph snarled, his voice dripping with venom, his fists clenched tight at his sides as he seethed in fury.

Dave didn't flinch. His gaze was cold and unyielding as he turned his attention back to Ralph, his voice cutting through the anger like a knife. "OK, we do it your way."

Ralph's eyes narrowed, but he was still too angry to speak clearly, his words coming out in a jagged, incoherent rush. He stood there, fists shaking, his face a mix of rage and disbelief that his carefully arranged defences had crumbled so easily. But Dave didn't give him the satisfaction of watching him crumble. He turned toward the door, his movements fluid and calm, as if this entire meeting had been a mere inconvenience.

As Dave stepped out of the office, the two henchmen standing outside watched him with puzzled expressions. They hadn't seen what had just happened inside, and their confusion was evident as Dave walked past them without a word, his stride purposeful and unwavering. They didn't

make a move, not yet understanding the full extent of what had just occurred.

As he walked through the empty club, his boots echoing softly on the polished floors as he made his way toward the exit. The staff were still busy preparing for the evening ahead—cleaning, arranging tables, and stocking the bar—all blissfully unaware of the violent encounter that had taken place upstairs. The lights were dim, casting long shadows across the dance floor, a far cry from the chaos that had just unfolded in the office.

As Dave moved through the club, he passed by a pair of familiar faces standing near the bar, chatting idly while watching the staff prepare for the evening. Steve and Mick, two of Ralph's goons from the past, hadn't seen Dave approach. They were standing near the back, dressed in their usual attire—Mick in a leather jacket, looking as tough as ever, and Steve with a blank stare, probably thinking about his next meal or some insignificant detail.

Steve's eyes widened when he saw Dave walking toward the door, his mouth hanging open slightly in shock. "Did you see who that was?" he asked, his voice low and laced with surprise.

Mick, meanwhile, didn't even look up, still more interested in something on the bar or in his own thoughts. "Who?" he asked, his voice indifferent, completely missing the significance of Dave's presence.

Steve looked back at Mick, his eyes narrowing in disbelief. "Are you blind? That's the guy—the guy, the one that gave us all the grief last year." His voice was rising slightly now, the realisation hitting him too late.

Mick, still not paying attention, shrugged as he absent-mindedly scratched his head. "Whatever, man," he muttered, completely unaware of the gravity of what had just happened. He wasn't the type to overthink anything, his world seemingly small and simple.

Steve stared at Mick for a moment, confusion and frustration clear on his face. He opened his mouth to say something else, but by then, Dave had already passed them, disappearing through the door and into the street. The club's doors swung shut behind him with a soft click.

Steve stood there for a second longer, his mouth still slightly agape, realising the full weight of the situation a moment too late. By the time he looked back toward Mick, Dave was gone, and the atmosphere of the club, unaware of the storm that had just passed through it, settled back into the dull hum of pre-party routine.

Dave hadn't come here to destroy everything—yet. But he had sent Ralph a message. He had made it clear that no amount of muscle, no amount of intimidation, would be enough to stop him.

As the door to The Velvet Room swung closed behind him, Dave walked down the quiet street, the sound of his boots echoing on the pavement. Inside the club, Ralph was probably still sputtering, but it didn't matter. Dave had what he needed. This wasn't over yet, not by a long shot—but it was a start. A message had been sent, and now Ralph would know: Dave wasn't someone to be pushed around.

## 8 Marbella

Dave's phone buzzed with Markus's number, and he answered it after a single ring, trying to keep his voice steady despite the chaos swirling in his mind.

"Sorry mate, it didn't go to plan," Dave said, his tone strained but calm. "Ralph's more stubborn than I expected."

Markus's voice cracked through the line, panic seeping into his words. "Oh, my god! What did you do?"

Dave exhaled slowly, rubbing his temple as the weight of the situation pressed down on him. "Let's just say he wasn't willing to settle the debt. He also doesn't like me very much," Dave continued, his voice cold with frustration. "I think it's best if you get out of town for a while. Do you have somewhere you can go?"

Markus's voice trembled as he responded. "Not really. What am I going to do? He's going to kill me!"

Dave softened his tone, trying to reassure him despite the urgency of the situation. "Sully, it's OK. I'll sort this."

He paused for a moment, thinking. Markus needed to disappear. But where could he go? And how far would he need to run? A part of Dave felt a sharp stab of guilt, knowing how far he had to push things, but it was for Markus's own good.

"Do you have a passport?" Dave asked, quickly trying to figure out his next move.

"Yes, why?" Markus replied, sounding slightly confused but still panicked.

Dave leaned back, already coming up with a plan. "I think you need a couple of weeks in the sun. How does a Spanish holiday sound?"

Markus was silent for a moment, then his voice rose with disbelief. "Are you kidding? I'm broke, totally skint, and you want me to go on holiday?"

Dave's voice remained calm and measured, trying to keep Markus grounded. "Sully, look, it's on me, OK? I'll fund it and give you some spending cash. But you have to go ASAP. Tell no one where you're going. I'll book the flights now, pack your bags, come round tonight, and I'll set you up with the cash."

Markus's breath hitched on the other end of the line. "Dave, why are you doing all this? There's trouble in it for you now."

Dave sighed, his voice quieter now, tinged with an edge of frustration and resolve. "I don't like bullies."

The silence on the line stretched for a moment, before Markus gave a soft, incredulous laugh. "I don't know what to say."

Dave's voice was firm as he wrapped up the call. "Pack your things. Get to the airport, and don't look back. I'll handle the rest."

That night, Dave got to work booking the trip for Markus. He found an all-inclusive two-week stay at a resort in Spain, one far enough away from Ralph's reach but close enough to give Markus a real break. He went online and arranged the flight, and booked a decent enough room, no frills but out of harms way. Next was a trip to the cashpoint for enough cash for Markus to survive without needing to worry, just to make sure Markus had some comfort in his time away.

By the time Markus arrived at his place the next evening, he was a mix of grateful and overwhelmed, but Dave could see the relief in his eyes. He handed Markus an envelope with the flight tickets, a grand in cash, and a final word of advice.

"Don't tell anyone where you're going, change the cash at the airport, don't worry about the fees." Dave said, his tone firm. "Just disappear for a couple of weeks, get your head down, and I'll take care of things here."

Markus, still overwhelmed, nodded. "Dave... I don't know how to thank you for this."

Dave clapped him on the shoulder. "No need. Just come back safe, and leave me to figure out the rest whilst you're gone."

The next morning, Markus boarded the flight to Spain, the first step toward getting away from the storm Dave had created. He was just another tourist now, blending in with the other holidaymakers, leaving behind the chaos of the city—and more importantly, the looming threat that had hung over him.

For Dave, there was still plenty of work to do, but for now, he'd done what he could. And that was enough.

## 9      **Angles**

Dave knew he couldn't have confronted Ralph directly in the club—at least not without turning the place into a bloodbath, with all the CCTV cameras watching his every move. Ralph was too well-protected, and any violent altercation on his turf would've been a one-way ticket to jail or worse. There was no way Dave could take him out without it being all over the news. And that would've been a mistake.

The Velvet Lounge had been a sounding out, a way to gauge Ralph's willingness to negotiate and to send a message. It was clear now: Ralph wasn't going to play ball. He didn't want to settle the debt, and he certainly wasn't about to let some stranger stroll in and dictate terms. No, Ralph wasn't the type to let someone like Dave walk away unharmed after such an intrusion.

But Ralph's refusal had sealed his fate. Now, Dave had no choice. It wasn't about just buying the debt any more—it was about protecting Markus. And to do that, Ralph had to be taken down. It was the only way to put an end to the cycle of violence and threats. If Dave didn't act, Markus would never be safe.

As Dave had passed through the club, Mick and Steve hadn't gone unnoticed on his way out. Dave had spent enough time on mission to know that connections were everything, and timing was critical. Mick and Steve weren't the brightest, but that was exactly what made them useful. Mick was quick to anger and always looking for a fight, while Steve was as dim as a 10-watt bulb—easily manipulated, and even more easily scared. Together, they were an ideal set of pawns in Dave's plan.

It was all about knowing who you could use and when. If Dave could get to Ralph through them, the whole situation could be turned on its head. Mick's violence and Steve's incompetence could be the perfect leverage to expose Ralph's weaknesses—especially if they thought they were doing

the dirty work for him. But to make it work, he'd have to play his cards just right. Timing was everything. He had to bide his time and wait for the perfect moment to pull the strings.

Dave paused on the pavement for a moment, his mind working through the possibilities. He knew where to start—Mick and Steve were far from subtle, and they were probably already starting to talk about what had happened with Ralph. They'd seen his face, and their loyalty to Ralph might be just enough to make them think twice when the right incentives were applied.

But the real challenge would be getting to Ralph. Ralph wouldn't leave his safe zone for just anyone. Dave would have to make it personal—make Ralph feel cornered, like he had no other option but to come out and face him. If he could push the right buttons, it might just be enough to draw Ralph out into the open.

"Think, Dave," he muttered to himself, eyes scanning the street ahead as he began walking toward his car. "It's not about a head-on fight. It's about playing the game, using the right pieces at the right time."

Dave's mind was already calculating the next steps. Ralph had refused the deal, so now it was up to Dave to show him that the cost of doing business his way was far more dangerous than taking the deal. And Mick and Steve? They were the starting point—his way in. All Dave needed was the right moment. He wasn't just going to eliminate Ralph; he was going to make it so Ralph had no choice but to fold.

It was a memory from some time ago, but the details were still sharp in Dave's mind—Thursday night at The Hanged Man, the dingy little pub in the corner of town where the lowlifes, wannabes, and misfits gathered – a place Dave often enjoyed a quiet pint. Dave had seen Steve and Mick there before, and he remembered the tension that had simmered between them during their last encounter. He'd warned them to stay away from him then

—made it clear that they weren't in his league—but now, things had changed. Now, Dave needed them.

They were linked to Ralph's operation in some way. Mick and Steve were small-time goons, but they knew things, and in Dave's world, that made them valuable. They'd be able to provide the kind of information he needed about Ralph's business—the kind of inside knowledge that could give him an edge. But the trick was getting it out of them.

Steve, Dave knew, was the weak link. Not the brightest tool in the shed, easily spooked and likely to spill if the right pressure was applied. Mick, on the other hand, thought of himself as a hard nut. He had that stubborn, brash streak—a desire to prove himself in front of anyone who might be watching. Last time they'd crossed paths, Mick hadn't backed down when it would've been smarter to do so. But tonight, Dave was hoping Mick's bravado would work in his favour. Mick's pride could cloud his judgment, and that's when Dave would pounce.

Tonight, Dave wasn't going to chase them. Tonight, he'd wait. He'd let them come to him.

The Hanged Man was the perfect spot for this kind of thing—dimly lit, worn down from years of use, with the faint smell of stale beer and smoke hanging in the air. It was the kind of pub where nobody asked questions, and the regulars kept to themselves. It was a place where people came to forget, not remember. And that suited Dave just fine.

He entered the pub with a quiet confidence, nodding briefly to the bartender who had seen him around enough times not to question his presence. Dave didn't need to announce himself, not in a place like this. He grabbed his usual pint of Guinness and made his way to his usual corner table, a shadowed spot near the back where he could watch everyone without being seen. The table was familiar, worn from years of use, the edges chipped and scratched—just like the rest of the place.

Dave sat down, leaning back in his chair and surveying the room. It was still early, so the crowd was thin. A few lone drinkers nursing pints, a couple of men talking in hushed voices near the bar. Dave's eyes narrowed as he scanned the room, waiting for the familiar faces to appear.

He knew Mick and Steve would be along sooner or later. The Hanged Man was their kind of place. It was just a matter of time before they walked through the door, looking for their usual fix or a quiet spot to get away from Ralph's shadow.

Dave sat patiently, his eyes flicking occasionally to the door, his mind focused on the task ahead. He wasn't here to make friends, wasn't here to drink. He was here to get what he needed from Mick and Steve, and once he had it, they'd be left with nothing.

The minutes ticked by slowly, the dull murmur of conversation filling the background. Then, finally, the door opened, and in walked Steve and Mick, loud as always, without a care for who was watching.

Mick Halstead, the type of man who relies on his presence to command attention, often using his physical appearance and tough demeanour to get by. Mick's well-toned, athletic build, though not overly muscular—just fit enough to make people notice when he steps into a room. His trademark leather jacket is always on, a constant part of his image, something he believes adds to his "tough guy" persona. Despite the jacket's polished exterior, it's clear Mick isn't afraid to get his hands dirty, quick to escalate any situation to violence without a second thought.

Steve couldn't be more different, wiry build, looking like he's always on edge, as if the world is conspiring against him. His nervous energy is hard to miss, constantly scanning his surroundings and twitching at every sound. His wide-eyed, uneasy expression seems to suggest that he's always expecting something bad to happen. When he's with Mick, however, Steve finds a sense of bravado, though it's clear that his boldness is borrowed from Mick's domineering presence.

Dave waited for Mick and Steve to settle in. They hadn't noticed him at first as they walked into the Hanged Man, chatting casually. Mick, the more confident of the two, made his way to a table in the corner, while Steve went straight to the bar to grab drinks. Dave watched them from the corner of the room, his usual corner table offering him the perfect view.

He took a slow sip of his pint, watching Steve fumble around at the bar, as Mick slid into the booth, leaning back with a smug expression on his face. Mick had the same tough-guy attitude that Dave remembered, but that wasn't what mattered right now. What mattered was how easily they could both be used to get to Ralph.

Once they'd settled, Dave finished his pint and went to the bar for another, before walking with casual purpose toward their table. Steve looked up from the drink he was holding just as Dave arrived, his face freezing in shock as he registered who had just walked up.

"Look," Steve said, his voice nervous, "you said you'd leave us alone. We've stayed out of your way."

Mick, however, wasn't as easily rattled. He turned on Steve with a sharp glare. "Shut up!" Mick barked, his gaze now focused entirely on Dave. He straightened up, his body language tense but still exuding defiance. "What do you want?"

Dave grinned, his expression cool and confident. "Do you mind if I join you?" he asked, his tone polite, but the underlying command in it left no room for argument. Without waiting for an answer, Dave slid into the seat opposite Mick, his posture relaxed as he made himself comfortable.

Mick bristled, but Dave ignored him for a moment, taking another casual glance at Steve, who had begun to look uncomfortable. Dave leaned in slightly, his smile never faltering. "I need some information."

Mick snorted, clearly unimpressed. “You can get stuffed.” His voice was louder, brimming with bravado, but there was something unconvincing in it—an undercurrent of nervousness Dave didn’t miss.

“Life’s all about choices,” Dave replied coolly, his eyes locked onto Mick’s. “Make the smart one today.”

Mick’s face darkened, and he opened his mouth to retort, but Dave cut him off. “Last year, when I stopped your little car heist, gave you a taste of what I can do, didn’t it?” he continued, his voice even but carrying weight. “I wasn’t interested in your schemes after that. But today’s different.”

Mick’s jaw tightened, and Steve shifted nervously in his seat, his eyes flicking between Dave and Mick.

“What if I were to make it known you were the source of the leak that led me to the Ostler’s job?” Dave’s voice lowered slightly, just enough to be threatening. “And the electronics heist at the rail yard?”

Steve opened his mouth to protest, but Dave silenced him with a glance. “But that wasn’t us,” Steve muttered, his voice weak and defensive.

Mick’s voice snapped out, filled with irritation. “Shut up, Steve!” He turned back to Dave, his hands gripping the edge of the table, trying to hold onto his bravado. “You got nothing on us.”

Dave smiled, his eyes narrowing slightly. “You so sure of that? You think Ralph will believe you?” he asked, his voice low but sharp. “Or do you think there’ll be that nagging doubt in his mind, wondering if you were the ones who talked?”

The silence between them stretched for a moment, the weight of Dave’s words hanging in the air. Mick’s defiance faltered as the reality of the situation began to sink in. He wasn’t as untouchable as he liked to think.

Dave leaned forward, his voice becoming even more menacing. “Either way, you’re not my target. I want Ralph, and if you’re not going to be the willing participants in that, I’ll make sure you’re taken down with him.”

Mick was still trying to process what Dave had said, his face reddening with a mix of anger and fear. Steve, on the other hand, seemed to shrink under the pressure, his eyes darting nervously between Dave and Mick.

“You make the right choice today, and I’ll make sure there’s a payday for you, too. Seems a fair offer seeing as I’ll be putting your boss out of business.” proposed Dave.

Mick finally opened his mouth, but the fire was gone from his tone. “You don’t know what you’re doing, Dave,” he muttered, his voice losing the edge it had held before. “Ralph’s not a guy you mess with. You should know that.”

Dave’s grin didn’t falter. “Yeah, well, he’s going to find out just how much of a mistake he made, isn’t he?”

The finality in Dave’s voice was unmistakable. He wasn’t just talking about Ralph. He was talking about Mick and Steve too—because in this game, there were no sides. You were either with Dave, or you were in the way.

Mick shifted in his seat, glancing around as though to ensure no one else was paying attention. He leaned forward, lowering his voice as if the walls might have ears. "Saturday night," he began, his words deliberate. "Ralph's got a job arranged. I don't have the details—'cause we're not part of it, but I know it's big." He paused, his eyes flicking nervously toward Steve, who looked a little puzzled by Mick's sudden shift in tone.

Mick caught the look and quickly clarified, “You see, it’s one of those jobs that Ralph’s been setting up for a while. And it’s not just some petty thing. It’s big, Dave. And I mean big.”

Dave kept his gaze fixed on Mick, showing no emotion, but his mind was already calculating. This was the break he needed. A big job like that could give him the leverage to finally take Ralph down. The information Mick

was offering was invaluable, and Dave could feel the pieces falling into place.

Steve, who had been quiet up until now, looked at Mick, still unsure of what was going on. "Wait, Mick, what's this about?" Steve asked, his voice hesitant, not entirely following the conversation.

Mick, not bothering to explain further, turned back to Dave. "If I can get you the info, you'll leave us out of it, right?" he asked, a note of caution in his voice. He was playing a dangerous game, but Dave could see the fear flickering behind the bravado.

"Sure," Dave replied smoothly, his voice low but confident. "You have my word. I'll make sure you're out of it."

Mick seemed to relax slightly, though his unease still hung in the air. He reached into his pocket and pulled out his phone, handing it to Dave. "I'll call you later, fill you in. But don't go causing any more trouble, alright? I'm just trying to get us out of this mess."

Dave took the phone, typing his number into it with a practised hand. "No trouble," he said, flashing Mick a grin. "I just need what you know, Mick. That's all."

Mick nodded, his posture still tense, but he seemed to feel a bit more at ease now that they had an agreement. "Alright, Dave. I'll be in touch," he said, standing up, his movements slightly more cautious than before.

As Mick and Steve made their way to the bar, Dave sat back in his chair, his mind already working through the new information. Ralph was planning something big for Saturday night—something that could be the key to unravelling everything. Mick had given him his way in, and now Dave had a plan.

Ralph wouldn't know what hit him.

## 10 Work of Art

Ralph had been preparing for this job for months, carefully laying out every detail. The target? The Cambridge Contemporary Art Gallery. The gallery housed several rare pieces that were once part of the Tudor Court's art collection—priceless treasures lost or stolen during the turbulent periods of the English Civil War and the Nazi occupation of Europe during WWII. These artworks weren't just valuable for their artistic merit, but for their deep ties to English royal history, making them highly coveted not only by collectors but by those with a vested interest in heritage, wealth, and power.

To Ralph, they were the perfect target. Their connection to royalty made them even more desirable. A simple art heist would net a pretty penny, but these paintings held the potential to set Ralph up for life. The kind of buyer Ralph had lined up wasn't just a collector; they were someone with deep pockets, with connections that spanned across continents, someone who would pay a fortune for the paintings—and Ralph knew exactly how to get them.

Ralph had organised a small but highly skilled team for the job. The plan was straightforward: get in, grab the paintings, and get out without a trace. They'd be using a secure facility within the city that was off the radar, far from the reach of ANPR systems and CCTV cameras. A van would drive in, load the paintings, and disappear—leaving the authorities with nothing to follow. A few days later, the art would be moved from the city and delivered directly to the buyer. No one would be the wiser.

Mick, however, had learned more than Dave expected. Ralph's usual operations involved more brute force—intimidation, loud disruptions, the usual heavy-handed tactics. But this job was different. It was clean, professional, and for once, Ralph wasn't playing his usual game of scare tactics. Instead, he'd been meticulous, planning every move with the precision of someone who knew the value of the paintings and the high

stakes involved. Mick had gathered all the details, including the location of the warehouse where the paintings would be stored temporarily. He'd shared it all with Dave.

Dave sat back in his chair, processing the information. The job didn't sit right with him. "This isn't Ralph's usual MO," he muttered to himself, still digesting the details.

Mick, on the other end of the phone, seemed a bit too eager to share. "No, but he got a request, and the job seemed straight forward, so he went for it," Mick explained, almost as if trying to justify Ralph's decision to take the job.

Dave's mind was already racing. The paintings weren't just a crime; they were a ticking time bomb for Ralph. If he pulled this off without getting caught, he could be set for life. But if Dave could pull the right strings, the entire operation would fall apart before it even started.

Dave leaned forward, his voice steady but sharp. "OK, keep your head down," he said. "Ralph's in for a disappointing weekend."

The connection ended with Mick's half-hearted, "Yeah, yeah, I got it," as he no doubt prepared to lie low, as per Dave's instructions.

Dave set the phone down on the table and stood up, pacing for a moment. He was done playing nice with Ralph. This wasn't just about protecting Markus any more—it was about making sure Ralph didn't get away with something this big, something this dangerous. The stakes were higher now, and Dave had the leverage he needed.

He didn't need brute force to take down Ralph—not this time. He had a different plan. The warehouse location, the van route, the lack of CCTV coverage—it was all laid out for him. Dave had everything he needed to set Ralph up for a fall. He could take down the entire operation, and when Ralph had nothing left, Dave would make sure he'd never come after anyone again.

Ralph's "secure" plan wasn't so secure after all. And Dave was going to make sure he learned that the hard way.

The night was thick with shadows, the air cool and still as Dave crouched in the darkness across the street from the Cambridge Contemporary Art Gallery. The city was unusually quiet, the kind of silence that only came when everything was holding its breath. The gallery stood in front of him, its grand exterior now eerily quiet, with no sign of the usual hustle of daytime visitors or tourists. The soft glow of street lights cast long shadows across the cobbled streets, and the only sounds were the occasional rustle of wind through the trees and the distant hum of the city's far-off traffic.

Dave kept his eyes fixed on the building. He wasn't worried about Ralph being there—this was about sending a message, making sure the operation was exposed for the failure it would inevitably become. The plan was simple: let the heist play out, follow the crooks to the warehouse, and when they tried to stash the goods, that's when Dave would move in. He wasn't even worried if Ralph wasn't there. The embarrassment and fallout from his men getting caught would be enough to damage him for a long time.

His eyes narrowed as he observed the streets carefully, watching for any movement. Then, just as the clock struck the hour, a van pulled up to the front of the gallery. The engine cut off, and the low, almost reverential hum of the vehicle ceased. Two figures stepped out of the van, their silhouettes outlined by the street light. Dave's breath caught for a moment. It was time.

One man was tall, broad-shouldered, and walked with a heavy swagger, carrying a pump-action shotgun slung casually over his shoulder. His companion, shorter but just as stocky, moved with purpose, wielding a large sledgehammer. Dave's eyes flicked to the weapons—they weren't the tools of a professional, quiet, skilled crew. This was something else. The entire operation was supposed to be discreet, quick and quiet, but this was messy. Something didn't add up.

He watched them move swiftly toward the front door, the sound of their boots echoing in the stillness. The man with the shotgun raised it to the door, and with a single, deafening blast, the thick glass of the gallery door exploded inward, sending shards flying across the pavement. The sound of the gunshot shattered the silence of the night, and Dave had to fight the urge to move. He needed to stay patient, stay in the shadows, and let the show unfold.

The man with the hammer swung it into the frame of the door, clearing the glass from the wrecked door frame so they could step inside. Dave's eyes flicked to the rear of the building, and he knew they were on a time crunch. The alarm blared to life, its shrill wail cutting through the quiet night. Without hesitation, the two men rushed toward the back of the gallery. The sound of their footsteps was loud against the silence as they headed toward their target, no attempt to be subtle, no finesse.

The man with the shotgun reached the rear section of the gallery and immediately went to a flat wooden crate—a standard for shipping valuable paintings. Dave watched closely as they grabbed the crate with hurried movements, the two men now on high alert but still making no attempt to hide their activity. They didn't care about being quiet or subtle. They were in, and they were taking what they came for. The crate was loaded into the van without a second thought, and the men quickly jumped into the vehicle. The engine roared to life, and the van sped off into the night, its tires screeching as it tore down the narrow streets of the city.

Dave didn't hesitate. He'd been waiting for this moment. He pushed off from the shadows and followed them, keeping a safe distance, his car a silent shadow behind the van as it made its way through the winding streets of the city. The roads were narrow, twisting, and old, the kind that felt like they were built before anyone had thought about modern-day cars. The van's headlights cut through the darkness, but Dave kept to the shadows, using his experience to stay out of sight.

The van eventually made its way to the edge of town, where the buildings began to thin out, and the streets grew quieter. Dave knew this area well—an industrial zone with an old warehouse district that had long been abandoned, the perfect place to hide something, or someone. The van pulled off the main road and slipped into a narrow alleyway that led to a cluster of warehouses, their broken windows and cracked walls showing the wear of years of neglect.

Dave slowed his car, keeping a few car lengths behind, making sure to stay out of sight as the van pulled into a dilapidated warehouse. The men jumped out, their movements swift as they carried the crate toward the building's rear entrance. They hadn't noticed Dave, still safely hidden behind the shadows of the streets.

He waited for a few minutes, watching the warehouse, his mind working through the next steps. The heist was happening exactly as planned, and it wasn't going to end well for Ralph. Dave's eyes narrowed with purpose. Soon, it would be over, and Ralph's operation would be exposed for what it truly was—a haphazard mess held together by brute force and desperation.

As he sat there, the soft hum of his engine idling in the distance, Dave allowed himself a small smile. This was just the beginning. He had them exactly where he wanted them.

Dave slipped out of his car, keeping his movements deliberate and quiet as he approached the darkened warehouse. The van was parked inside, and the lights were off, casting the entire building in an oppressive silence. He'd seen them drive in, but now it seemed as though the operation had slowed. The heavy doors were shut, and no one was visible. He knew they'd be moving fast—likely taking the goods out of the van and setting up for a quick getaway. If he waited too long, they'd disappear, and he'd lose his chance to catch them in the act.

The large main doors were secured from the inside—too much noise, too much risk trying to deal with them now. He'd have to go for another entry

point. His eyes flicked to the side of the building where he knew there was a smaller office door, off to the right. Quiet, unnoticed, and the type of entrance he needed.

He approached it cautiously, careful to stay out of sight. The door was locked, but Dave had no doubt it would yield to a bit of force. A soft grunt escaped him as his hand gripped the door frame. He applied pressure, the familiar sense of calm in his movements, and with a final push, the frame splintered slightly, the door giving way under the force he could apply with ease.

The office was pitch black, but Dave didn't need light. His vision shifted as his senses sharpened. A familiar shift in his sight—everything turned into shades of grey, outlines, and contours. The darkness was no longer an obstacle. He could see everything in perfect clarity. Moving swiftly but cautiously, Dave crossed the office, his boots silent on the ground as he made his way to the rear door. The door opened with ease, revealing the large warehouse beyond.

Inside, the space was vast, and as his eyes adjusted to the shapes within, he could see the large empty warehouse floor. The only thing occupying the space was the van—doors wide open, sitting quietly in the centre of the floor. No sign of anyone else. Dave knew that didn't mean they weren't inside. They'd likely be getting ready to leave.

He approached the rear of the van cautiously, moving with precision, his senses heightened. The crate was visible inside, its wooden edges poking out from under the tarpaulin. Dave moved to the rear of the van, checking the area one last time for any sign of movement. His fingers grazed the edges of the crate. Inside, he could feel the weight of the paintings, a small but valuable cargo that had now become his ticket to taking down Ralph.

As he stepped back from the van, a distant rumble reached his ears. The sound of a high-revving engine. Dave's body tensed, his instincts kicking in. He looked up just as the warehouse doors exploded outward with a

deafening crash. The blast echoed through the empty space, and a large van sped into the warehouse, its metal frame shuddering with the impact. The sound of the engine was deafening as it roared through the opening, screeching to a halt.

The rear doors of the van flew open, and two men—clad in black body armour—burst from the vehicle. Their movements were fast and deliberate, H&K G36 assault rifles levelled, scanning the room for any threats. Their eyes flicked to the van, quickly assessing the situation. Dave's heart raced as he shifted his position, taking a cautious step back, but it was too late.

"Armed police!" one of them shouted, his voice cutting through the chaos. "Drop your weapons!"

Dave froze, his hands still hovering near the van. The sound of the shouting officers echoed off the walls, but his mind was already working to process the situation. At the office door, two more armed officers stepped into the warehouse, weapons raised, sweeping the room with practised precision. It was too much. It was a trap, and Dave was caught in it.

Well played, Mick, Dave thought bitterly, his mind racing as the realisation hit him like a punch to the gut. Mick had set him up—he had fed him the information, knowing full well that Dave wouldn't pass up the chance to take down Ralph. Now Dave was standing in the middle of a setup.

There was no easy way out of this. The officers were closing in from all sides, their guns trained on him. Every exit was blocked, and the chances of escaping without a fight were slim.

Dave stood perfectly still, his mind racing as the armed officers closed in, their weapons trained on him. The situation was precarious—too precarious for him to act on instinct. He could easily take down these officers, his skills, and abilities, far surpassing their own, but the consequences would be costly. There would be injuries, and worse, they'd be seen as victims. These weren't the bad guys. They were just doing their job.

It wasn't the right time to fight—not yet, not when he could still work the situation to his advantage. His breath slowed, steadying himself as he weighed his options. He knew the rules of the game well. Sometimes, you had to play along until the odds shifted, until you could regain control.

As the officers surrounded him, Dave kept his movements slow and deliberate, making no sudden moves. He raised his hands, showing no threat, his stance relaxed despite the tension in the room. His gaze flicked between the officers, calculating, assessing.

"Down on the ground!" one of the officers barked. The command was sharp, urgent. Dave complied, lowering himself slowly, deliberately to his knees, keeping his hands visible in front of him. The air in the warehouse felt thick with tension, the smell of metal and the acrid scent of adrenaline mixing in the space.

As Dave's knees hit the floor, he caught sight of the two men who had entered from the rear doors of the van, their expressions cold, eyes unwavering. The H&K G36 rifles were still aimed at him, but there was something in their posture that told him they weren't eager to pull the trigger. They were professionals—calculating, watching, waiting. They didn't want to get their hands dirty unless it was absolutely necessary.

"Hands behind your head!" another officer ordered. Dave complied, sliding his hands behind his head and interlocking his fingers, the position uncomfortable but necessary for the moment. He couldn't afford to make any more waves.

As the officers moved in closer, cuffing his wrists with swift efficiency, Dave's mind kept working. He knew the trap had been set by Mick—he'd walked right into it, no question. Mick had fed him just enough information to get him here, knowing full well Dave would take the bait. Now Mick's little game had ensnared him, and it would take some careful manoeuvring to get out of it.

The officers finished securing him, their movements precise, professional. Dave wasn't worried about the cuffs. He could get out of those when the time was right. What mattered now was not panicking, not reacting the way he wanted to. He needed to keep his composure. He needed to bide his time.

"Take him out," one of the armed officers ordered, and Dave felt a grip on his arm, pulling him toward the back of the warehouse.

As they marched him outside, the cool night air hit him, the sounds of the city distant behind him. The van doors were still open, and Dave could hear the murmur of the officers' radios, the sound of movement in the distance. They weren't rushing. They were playing it safe, making sure nothing slipped by them.

But Dave wasn't done yet. He knew how this would go. Once they took him into custody, once the paperwork was done, the story would shift. The trap would be set for Ralph, and Mick's betrayal would start to unravel.

All Dave had to do now was wait. The game was far from over.

Dave sat in the small, dimly lit cell at Central Processing, the sterile, concrete walls closing in on him. He'd been here before, but never quite like this. The events of the night—walking into the trap set by Mick—had escalated quickly, and now, here he was, caught in the system. It had all gone wrong. He hadn't planned on getting arrested, but the situation had spiralled.

The cool metal of the cuffs had been removed when they'd placed him in the cell, but it didn't matter. His mind was still chained to the choices that had led him here. He'd been in the wrong place at the wrong time, and though he hadn't fought back, hadn't said a word except for his request for a phone call, it didn't change the fact that he was stuck.

Time crawled as he waited. His thoughts were a mix of guilt and frustration. Markus, his old friend, had been in deep trouble, and Dave had

tried to do the right thing, but somewhere along the way, he'd let his own personal mission cloud his judgment.

The cell door opened with a loud creak, and the officer's voice cut through the silence. "Anderson, come on, you're out of here."

Dave stood up and followed the officer down the narrow hall to the custody desk. There, standing in front of him with an easy, knowing smile, was Cecilia. Dave's breath of relief was barely noticeable, but he felt the weight lift off his shoulders as she nodded at him, her presence immediately calming him.

In her mid-thirties, is a warm yet professional woman from Ghana, with a very dark complexion and a "sing-song" accent that brings a light-hearted tone to her otherwise serious and focused demeanour. She has a fuller figure, with large chest, wide hips, and full thighs, giving her a commanding presence. Her black shoulder-length hair frames her face, complementing her infectious laugh, which can brighten even the most tense situations.

Cecilia has a distinctive style, dressed in black trousers paired with quality brand clothing. While she doesn't opt for high-end designer labels, her wardrobe is carefully chosen, showcasing a flair for style that is both professional and confident.

"Come on, you got a story to tell," she said with her signature Ghanaian sing-song accent, all business but with that warm undertone he knew so well.

Dave, looking a bit sheepish, followed her as she walked toward the exit, the officer's gaze lingering behind them as he left the building. The door to the outside world felt like freedom, even if he wasn't quite out of the woods yet.

Once outside, Dave slid into the passenger seat of Cecilia's car, feeling like a naughty schoolboy being led away from the headmaster's office by a

parent. He was in trouble, and she was here to fix it. The engine purred to life as she started the car, the headlights cutting through the night as they pulled out of the lot.

Cecilia glanced at him briefly, her face soft but serious. “What’s this all about, then? You know you can’t get caught up in this stuff.”

Dave sighed, leaning back into the seat. “Cecilia, look, I’m sorry about this. It’s a personal matter that got out of hand.” He ran a hand through his hair, feeling the weight of the situation pressing down on him. “It wasn’t meant to involve the agency. How did you...”

Cecilia's eyes flicked over to him, a knowing glint in her gaze. “We have flags on all our people. You get in the system, we get you out. Want to tell me what it's all about?”

Dave exhaled, rubbing his temples, and began explaining. “It’s Markus, my friend. He’s in trouble. Real trouble.” He looked out the window as the street lights flashed by, struggling to keep his thoughts clear. “He got into some debt with some bad people, and I thought I could help. He was getting harassed by loan sharks, so I decided to step in. It was supposed to be simple—get him out of it. But... I made a bad call. Got played by Mick, one of Ralph’s guys. Mick fed me some fake intel, set me up to walk right into a trap, and next thing I know, I’m sitting in a cell.”

Cecilia stayed quiet, letting Dave talk. Her grip on the steering wheel tightened ever so slightly, but she didn’t interrupt. Dave could feel the weight of her gaze as she listened, her expression unreadable as she processed the story.

“I just wanted to help,” he finished, looking over at her. “But it all spiralled out of control. Now I’m here, caught up in a mess, and I still need to fix it.”

Cecilia nodded slowly, her expression softening. "You've got a big heart, Dave, but sometimes you've got to think bigger than the immediate fix. But don't worry, you're out now, and we'll handle the rest."

Dave nodded gratefully, but there was a gnawing feeling in his gut. He'd done something wrong. He'd let his emotions guide him instead of his logic, and now he was paying the price. But as long as Cecilia had his back, he knew he'd find a way out of this.

"Thanks, Cecilia," he said, his voice quiet but sincere. "I won't forget this."

"I know you won't," she said with a small smile, her focus back on the road ahead. "Now, let's get you out of trouble for good."

Cecilia kept her eyes on the road as they drove, the soft hum of the car filling the silence between them. Dave sat in the passenger seat, feeling a mixture of gratitude and frustration. He was out of the holding cell, but the real work had only just begun.

After a few moments, Cecilia spoke, her tone as calm and controlled as always. "You know I can't use agency assets to help, right?"

Dave sighed, leaning back in the seat. "Yeah, I know. It's fine. I'll work it out."

But Cecilia didn't stop there. Her voice remained steady but firm as she glanced at him briefly. "No, that's not what I'm saying." She paused, as if choosing her words carefully. "Dave, these agency operators... they aren't just agents. They're your friends too. I'm certain that if you reached out to them, some of them would be happy to help. I just can't get the agency involved."

Dave turned his head slightly, his eyes meeting hers for a moment. He could see the concern in her face, the weight of the situation pressing on her as much as it was on him. Cecilia wasn't just a colleague; she was a friend, and she had already done more than enough to help him out of a tight spot.

“Oh,” Dave said, his voice softer now, the realisation sinking in. “Right, yes, sure. I get it. You’ve done enough, thanks, Cecilia.”

Her gaze flicked back to the road, a slight but knowing smile tugging at the corner of her lips. “Don’t mention it,” she replied quietly. “You know I’ll always have your back, but I can’t pull the strings on everything. You’ve got this. Just... be careful.”

Dave nodded, feeling a rush of appreciation for her support. He knew she was right. This wasn’t just about the agency any more. It was about the people around him—the ones who had stood by him, the ones who could help him navigate the mess he’d found himself in.

“Yeah,” Dave said, his voice a bit steadier now. “I’ll figure it out. I just need to reach out to the right people.”

Cecilia gave him a brief, supportive look before turning her attention back to the road. “Good. Just don’t let it get out of hand again.”

As they continued driving, the weight of the situation still lingered, but for the first time that evening, Dave felt a little more hopeful. He had his connections, his resources, and now he just needed to take control of it all. He wasn’t in this alone. Not any more.

# 11 Friends

Dave sat back in the passenger seat, watching the streets slip by as Cecilia drove. His mind was already working through his next move, and there was no question in his mind that the first person he needed to contact was Anya. They'd worked together on plenty of missions before, and if anyone could help him take down Ralph and fix the mess he'd got himself into, it was her.

Anya had always been the steady one—the cool head in the middle of chaos. Analytical, resourceful, and quick on her feet, she knew how to handle herself in tough situations. Not to mention, she had a deep sense of loyalty. He knew if he asked her for help, she'd be there, no questions asked.

With a quick glance at Cecilia, Dave pulled out his phone and dialed Anya's number. The phone rang twice before she picked up, her voice calm and cheerful as always.

"Dave!" Anya greeted, her tone warm despite the distance. "It's been a while! How's everything? How've you been?"

Dave smiled slightly, hearing her voice brought a sense of comfort. "Hey, Anya. I've been alright. Same old, same old." He took a breath, leaning back into the seat. "How about you? What have you been up to since our last mission?"

Anya laughed lightly. "You know, the usual. Keeping the tech side of things running. Been working on a couple of interesting projects, but nothing too exciting. How's life treating you, Dave?"

Dave paused for a moment, his gaze shifting out the window as the weight of the situation settled back onto his shoulders. It was time to get to the point. "Well, here's the thing, Anya. I didn't just call to ask how your day's been."

She was quiet for a second, clearly sensing the change in his tone. "I figured," she replied, her voice now more serious. "What's going on?"

Dave took a deep breath and filled her in. "I've got a bit of a problem. A local loan shark, a real crook named Ralph, has been threatening a friend of mine. The guy's got connections, and he's tied up in some dirty business. I need your help to take him down."

Anya's response was immediate, without hesitation. "Of course, Dave. I'll help. You know that."

He could hear the shift in her tone, the determination already building. "I don't know anything about this Ralph and his operation, but I've dealt with plenty of bullies before. Any friend of yours is a friend of mine. I'll be there."

Dave felt a wave of relief wash over him. He hadn't even had to finish asking for her help. Anya had already committed. She was in this with him.

"Thanks, Anya. You don't know how much this means to me." He paused, the weight of the words hitting him as he thought about the situation. "I really could use someone like you right now."

"Don't worry about it," Anya said smoothly. "I'll book a flight and be on my way. What's your address? I'll need to know where I'm going."

Dave quickly rattled off the details, knowing that once Anya arrived, things would start falling into place. There was no longer any question in his mind—he wasn't alone in this.

"Alright, I'll get everything set and see you soon," Anya said, her voice filled with that familiar confidence. "We'll get this Ralph taken care of."

Anya's voice came through the phone with its usual warmth, but there was a playful edge to it when she spoke again. "You know Dan's in the UK right now? I'm sure he'd help."

Dave paused for a moment, a reluctant sigh escaping him. There was a slight hesitation in his voice when he responded. “I dunno. You remember he shot me the first time we met. I’m not sure if he really liked me.”

Anya laughed, the sound light and easy, clearly amused by Dave’s unease. “Yeah, I remember. That was a classic first meeting, wasn’t it? But honestly, that’s just Dan, being Dan. He’s a bit... enthusiastic sometimes, especially when it comes to doing the job right. Let me give him a call.”

Dave shook his head slightly, rolling his eyes, even though Anya couldn’t see it. “Sure, but no friendly fire this time, okay?” he said with a touch of humour in his voice, trying to make light of the situation. The memory of their first encounter, when Dan had put a bullet in his arm, was still fresh enough to bring a wry smile to Dave’s lips.

Anya chuckled again, the sound warm and reassuring. “No promises, Dave, but I’ll make sure he’s on his best behaviour this time.”

“I’ll believe it when I see it,” Dave muttered under his breath, a smile tugging at the corner of his lips despite himself.

Anya’s voice softened slightly as she continued, “I know Dan can be a bit much, but he’s a good guy, and he knows how to get things done. He’ll be a good ally in this. I’ll reach out to him now and let you know what he says.”

“Alright, thanks, Anya,” Dave said, his voice genuine. “I appreciate it.”

“I’ve got your back,” she replied. “Let me make the call, and I’ll get back to you.”

As Dave hung up, he leaned back in the seat, feeling the weight of the situation still hanging over him, but for the first time in a while, there was a sliver of hope. With Anya already on her way and possibly even Dan helping out, things were starting to move in the right direction. He wasn’t alone in this any more.

As the call ended, Dave sank back into the seat, a quiet sigh of relief escaping him. Anya would be there soon, and with her skills and expertise, they'd be able to take down Ralph and put an end to the threat against Markus.

"Thanks," Dave said to Cecilia, feeling a little lighter. It wasn't just the agency's resources or his own skills that would get him out of this—it was the people who had his back.

Dave sat back in his chair, the warm mug of tea cradled between his hands as he looked across at Anya, who was sipping her coffee, her gaze focused on him. The front room of his house was quiet, the only sounds were the faint hum of the kettle in the kitchen and the occasional rustle of paper as Dave continued to brief her.

Anya, lithe yet muscular build, her sharp, angular features giving her a striking and intimidating presence. Her jet-black hair pulled back into a tight ponytail, keeping it practical and out of the way. Her piercing grey eyes are always assessing her surroundings, giving off the impression that she is always a step ahead of everyone else, often making people uncomfortable with her intense gaze.

"So," Anya said, leaning forward slightly, her voice calm and analytical, "you don't want to go in and just tear the place up, smash everything and everyone?"

Dave gave a small, almost imperceptible grin, his eyes glinting with a hint of mischief. "That's definitely an option, and I have considered it." He paused, taking another sip of his tea, savouring the taste. "But I think I need to apply more brain power to this than muscle."

Anya raised an eyebrow, her expression thoughtful. "Smart choice. It's not always about who can hit the hardest. It's about strategy." She set her coffee down and shifted forward, as if eager to dig deeper into the plan.

“So, Ralph and his operation... tell me more about your history with him, and how Steve and Mick fit into this.”

Dave set his cup down and began to outline the situation again, this time focusing more on Ralph’s connections and the history he had with the two goons, Steve and Mick. The more he spoke, the clearer it became how this whole mess had spiralled out of control. He was tangled in a web of lies, bad decisions, and old connections, and the only way out was to make sure Ralph went down with it all.

Just as Dave finished detailing how Mick had played him, there came a knock at the door.

"That’ll be him," Dave muttered under his breath, a slight grin pulling at his lips. He stood up and walked over to the door, swinging it open to reveal Dan standing there, a large kit bag slung over his shoulder and a grin plastered on his face.

"Dave, how goes it, mate?" Dan said, his voice booming with the same easy confidence that had always made him an unforgettable presence. Without waiting for a response, Dan walked past him, dropping the bag by the door and heading straight into the living room, his gaze immediately locking onto Anya.

"Anya, good to see you," Dan greeted, his tone warm but tinged with his usual sarcastic edge.

Anya gave him a small nod, though she didn't seem entirely surprised. "Dan," she said, a slight smile playing on her lips, "Always a pleasure."

Dan turned to Dave, his expression suddenly turning teasing. "Now what's all this about not wanting to call me when you need?" he said, crossing his arms and leaning slightly forward.

Dave looked at Anya, a sheepish smile tugging at his lips. “You told him?” he asked, raising an eyebrow.

Dan's grin only widened. "Look mate, I'm unarmed," he said, motioning to himself with exaggerated innocence. "But seriously—if you need something, just call. I might be a bit full on at times, but I'm here when you need me."

Dave shook his head, chuckling lightly. "Thanks, Dan. Appreciate it."

Dan glanced around the room, taking in the scene with a mock frown. "So, I've been stood here for five minutes, and no one's got the kettle on?" he said, breaking into a broad grin.

Dave smiled at the light-hearted banter. He could always count on Dan to cut through the tension. "Alright, alright," he said, heading towards the kitchen. "I'll make the tea."

As Dave moved to prepare the kettle, he could hear Anya and Dan exchange a few words behind him, their voices low but friendly. He knew that despite the jokes and playful banter, both of them were taking this seriously. They had always worked well together, and now that Dan was here, it felt like they might just have the firepower and the brains to take down Ralph's operation once and for all.

Dan, only a little older than Dave, in his early 40s, is athletic, lean and agile rather than bulky. His short, brown hair is beginning to show grey at the temples, complementing his sharp features, square jawline, and light stubble. His piercing green eyes are always scanning his surroundings, giving him a vigilant, alert presence.

Calm and composed, Dan exudes a level-headed demeanour, never showing stress in high-pressure situations. Always alert, he remains unflappable even when tensions rise, making him a reliable and steady presence during difficult moments. Just what's needed on this mission.

Minutes later, with the tea ready, Dave sat back down in the front room. He picked up his mug, taking a sip before continuing where he'd left off. He repeated the details of Ralph's operation, focusing on the warehouse and

how Mick and Steve were involved, just as he'd explained to Anya before. But now, with Dan in the room, the dynamic had changed.

Dan leaned forward, his face a picture of curiosity as Dave spoke. "I'm guessing we need to make a plan," Dan said, his tone serious now, the usual humour replaced with a more focused demeanour. "Sounds like this Ralph's been hiding behind too many layers for far too long."

Dan looked between Dave and Anya, a knowing look in his eyes. "Alright then. Let's get it done."

With that, the plan started to take shape in the small, quiet room. No more second-guessing. No more mistakes. With Anya, Dan, and himself working together, Dave felt a sense of resolve settle over him. He wasn't alone any more. This time, he was going to take down Ralph for good.

The trio sat in the small front room, the weight of the situation hanging heavily in the air. Dave had just finished laying out the rough plan, but now it was time to dig deeper, to get the intel they needed to bring down Ralph's operation once and for all.

Dan, ever the pragmatist, leaned forward, his hands steepled in front of him as he surveyed the group. "First off," he began, his tone low but focused, "let's get some intel gathering in place. We won't be able to work the angles if we don't know the game."

Anya nodded, her brow furrowing slightly as she considered the next step. "Exactly," she said, her voice calm and analytical. "We need some access to his comms. Phones, computers—anything we can get our hands on."

Dave shifted in his chair, rubbing his temples as he thought about what that would entail. "I'm not sure what he's got set up," he said slowly. "But I suspect it's going to be the usual burner phones, maybe even indirect comms via one of his henchmen. He's probably paranoid enough to keep things off the grid, but we're going to have to find out."

Dan grinned, a sly look on his face. "Not 'we', Dave. 'You'. You're going to have to get back in his office and plant a listening device or two."

Dave paused, considering the suggestion carefully. "Not sure that's a smart move," he muttered. His gut twisted at the thought of putting himself back in Ralph's territory, even under the guise of planting equipment. Ralph might not have been expecting him, but it was too risky. A direct approach like that could blow everything wide open.

Anya met his eyes, her expression calm but insistent. "If you don't plant the devices, we're blind. We won't have access to anything internal. The burner phones won't give us much without knowing who they're calling, and Ralph's comms are probably tight."

Dave leaned back, thinking it over. She was right, of course. They needed a way in, and if planting the devices was the only way to get that intel, then he'd have to do it. It wasn't ideal, but it was a necessary risk.

"I don't like it," Dave said finally, his voice tense. "But I get it. I'll go in, plant the devices, and get out. But it's not going to be easy. Ralph's office isn't a walk in the park."

Dan's grin widened. "I'll be honest, Dave, you've got the skills for it. You've been there before. Just keep it low and clean, and we'll get the intel we need."

Dan clapped his hands together, a sound that broke the tension in the room. "Right then," he said, his voice cheerful. "Let's get you set up. You plant the devices, and we'll start tracking the signals once we've got them."

As Dave sat back in his chair, the plan began to take shape. It wasn't going to be easy, but with Anya's tech skills and Dan's connections, they had the right people in place to make it work. He just had to get through the first part—the most dangerous part—and after that, the pieces would fall into place.

"Let's get this done," Dave muttered to himself, a sense of determination rising within him. They were going after Ralph, and nothing was going to stop them.

## 12 Owned

Dave stood outside The Velvet Lounge, staring at the entrance with a sense of distaste. The last time he'd been here, it had been a mess. The bouncers, the chaos, the entire scene—it was the last place he wanted to be. But he had a job to do. Ralph's operation needed to be exposed, and the first step was getting into his office, planting a listening device, and getting eyes on his plans. Without that, they were flying blind.

With a deliberate step, Dave walked towards the front door, his expression set, cold, the kind of look that told anyone in his way to move or risk getting steamrolled. The queue stretched along the side of the building, people chattering and laughing, impatiently waiting for their turn to get inside. Dave didn't waste time looking at them. He knew where he was headed, and nothing was going to stop him.

As he neared the entrance, the bouncer—a familiar face from the previous day—stepped out to assess the situation. He must have recognised Dave from their last encounter, the one where he'd wiped the floor with his colleagues. The bouncer's expression shifted immediately, a mix of fear and hesitation. There was no way he was going to try to stop this guy—not after what happened the day before.

The bouncer took a cautious step back, raising his hands slightly, and without a word, he stepped aside. Dave gave him a sharp nod of acknowledgment, but otherwise, didn't spare him a second glance. With a quick stride, he passed through the door, and as he did, he could already see the bouncer pulling out his phone, likely calling in the reinforcements.

Inside, the club was an assault on the senses. The music pounded in the air like a living thing, bass vibrating through Dave's chest. The flashing lights moved in rhythmic patterns, cutting through the haze of cigarette smoke and the heat of bodies packed tightly together. People were dancing, talking, and laughing, but the energy of the room was edgy—people high

on something, looking for distractions, acting as if the world outside didn't exist.

Dave moved through the crowded interior, his eyes scanning the room, not stopping to engage, barely giving anyone the chance to notice him. He had a clear objective. He didn't need to play it cool any more; the people around him parted with little more than a glance, not wanting to get in his way. His stride was purposeful, cutting through the crowd like a man on a mission.

The blaring music pulsed through the walls and floor, vibrating the soles of his shoes. The strobe lights painted the faces of the revellers, flashing over people in quick bursts of colour. But Dave didn't flinch. He kept his eyes locked on the stairwell ahead.

He was almost there when he bumped into a guy standing in a circle with his friends. The man, clearly annoyed by the contact, turned on Dave instantly, spilling his drink in the process. He cursed and swung around angrily, but Dave didn't stop. Without a word, he brushed past the irate customer, ignoring the shouted insults that followed him as he reached the door to the stairs.

With a hand on the handle, he didn't waste any time. The man behind him continued shouting abuse, but Dave had already moved on, focusing only on the task ahead. The door to the stairwell opened before him, and he slipped through, not even bothering to look back.

Upstairs, the pulse of the club's music seemed to drown out the outside world, the bass reverberating through the floorboards. The office was only a few steps away now, a small, unassuming door marked Staff Only. The moment Dave reached it, he noticed that it wasn't being guarded. No hulking bouncers standing in the way. It seemed unusually quiet. Dave's gut told him something was off—either the bouncers had been reassigned or were too busy inside dealing with the crowd.

He tried the door handle. It was locked. But that wasn't going to stop him. He twisted the handle, his fingers tightening around it, and then with a firm shove of his shoulder, he forced the door open.

The steel reinforcement and heavy hinges groaned in protest, but they didn't stand a chance against Dave's strength. The door creaked, bending slightly before giving way. It wasn't subtle, but it didn't matter. Dave stepped into the dimly lit office without hesitation, the weight of the situation finally settling in. This was it—the heart of Ralph's operation.

The room was empty. Dave took a quick glance around, noting the sleek desk, the filing cabinets, and the array of tech equipment strewn across the room. No one was here, but he knew it wouldn't be long before someone realised he had slipped inside. He moved swiftly, pulling the small listening device from his pocket.

With precise movements, he found the perfect spot to plant it—beneath the CCTV monitor, where there were other cables to mask the small device even if it were noticed. It was an ideal position, one that would allow him to pick up everything from phone calls to conversations that Ralph's crew might have. It wasn't much, but it was a start.

As he finished placing the device, he allowed himself a brief moment to breathe, knowing that the next steps would be far more difficult. But for now, he had what he needed.

Dave sat in the chair facing Ralph's desk, the sound of the club's music muffled by the walls. This was where the real business would go down. He wasn't sure how much time he had, but he knew Ralph would be arriving soon—after all, the doorman had already called ahead to warn him.

It didn't take long. The bent and broken door swung open, and Ralph strode in, flanked by one of his hulking, black-clad heavies. Ralph's gaze settled on Dave, and there was a moment of tense silence before he spoke.

“I would have thought that being here was a breach of your bail conditions,” Ralph said with a smug smile, his tone dripping with contempt. He took a seat behind the desk, his heavy-set body settling in with the confidence of a man who knew he was in control.

Dave didn’t flinch. He just met Ralph’s gaze evenly. “Yeah, well, I won’t tell if you don’t. Oh, wait, you’re the one that speaks to the police, and got me taken in.”

Ralph’s expression shifted slightly, but he remained calm. "You brought it on yourself. Now, what do you want?"

Dave’s jaw tightened, but his voice remained steady. "I’m giving you one last chance to resolve this matter, before things get messy."

Ralph chuckled darkly, shaking his head. "So, you’re here to make more threats. Not gone so well for you so far, has it?"

"Remember, you brought this on yourself," Dave said, his voice cool. Without another word, he stood up from the chair and turned to leave, the tension hanging in the air between them.

As Dave stepped back into the noise of the club, the bass of the music and the flashing lights hit him like a wall. The chaos of the place swirled around him as he navigated through the crowd. But as he neared the door, he felt a tap on his shoulder.

The guy he had bumped into earlier—his drink spilled and his anger still fresh—stood there, looking at Dave with a sneer, his friends gathered around him like a ring of vultures. Dave immediately recognised the signs. They’d underestimated him, just like everyone always did. They saw an overweight middle-aged man and thought he was easy pickings.

The guy was puffing out his chest, trying to look intimidating, but Dave wasn’t interested in playing their game. He turned to face him with a calm smile.

"I'm sorry about earlier," Dave said, raising his hands in a mock surrender, his voice steady. "How about I buy you a drink to make up for it?"

The guy's friends laughed, clearly thinking they had the upper hand now. The man looked Dave up and down, his face filled with an air of superiority. "You think a drink's gonna get you off that easily?" he sneered. "I think you should buy us all a round."

Dave's smile didn't falter. He spoke louder now, cutting through the noise of the music, his tone unyielding. "I offered a drink. You really don't want to push this further."

The guy's friends snickered at the absurdity of an old man talking back, the crowd's laughter growing louder. But that only seemed to egg the man on. His ego ballooned, and his arrogance boiled over. "Buy the round or else," he demanded, his voice raised.

Dave didn't move at first, allowing the tension to build. Then, with a calmness that contrasted with the rising tension in the air, he reached out. His hand closed around the guy's shoulder, his thumb pressing firmly behind the collarbone, just below the neck. He twisted slightly, applying pressure, and the guy's expression shifted from arrogance to sudden panic.

The man's eyes bulged in shock and pain, his breath catching as Dave squeezed. Dave leaned in close, his voice low and firm. "Remember, you decided to push this, not me."

With continued pressure, Dave drove the man to his knees, the man's body bending under the pressure. The guy gasped for air, a tear welling in one eye as he realised just how outmatched he was. His friends, still standing around him, were frozen in place, eyes wide with disbelief. The room seemed to fall silent for a moment as Dave released the pressure, stepping back. The man knelt there, panting, eyes filled with fear, tears streaming down his face as his friends looked on helplessly.

Dave didn't even look back as he walked out of the club. He passed the bouncer at the door, who seemed to hesitate before recognising him. With a sharp nod, Dave left the club behind him, the echoes of the club's loud music and flashing lights fading into the distance.

Dave sat back in the chair, his fingers tapping idly against his mug as he relayed the details to Anya. They had a bit of breathing room now, with the bug planted securely in Ralph's office. But the lack of a computer system left Dave with more questions than answers.

"The bug's in place," Dave said, his voice low and measured. "But I didn't see any sign of a computer system, other than the CCTV monitor. Looks like Ralph doesn't keep his business online, or at least not in the office."

Anya's voice came through the phone, calm and professional as ever. "The audio's coming in loud and clear. It's a start. And even if he's not keeping his business online, there's still value in having the audio feed. It's the first step to finding a weakness."

Dave nodded, his thoughts already moving forward. "Yeah, I hear you. The bug will give us access to his private conversations, but it's not the complete picture. Without seeing the paperwork or knowing what he's actually dealing with, we're still flying blind."

There was a brief pause before Anya spoke again, her tone reassuring. "Don't worry, Dave. Once we start picking up more, we'll be able to piece things together. It's just a matter of waiting and being patient. Ralph's operation has to have cracks, and we'll find them."

Dave sat in the quiet of his home, his mind working through the plan as he mulled over the information he had. He knew they had a good start with the bug in Ralph's office, but to truly get the full picture, they needed more. A different angle. And that angle was Mick.

"There's another bug we can place that may get us a different angle," Dave said to Dan, his voice steady as he leaned back in his chair.

Dan, always eager for action, perked up. "Where?"

Dave didn't hesitate. "Mick. If I can find him, I can pin a bug on him, and with the circles he moves in, maybe we get the other half of the conversations with Ralph."

Dan's grin widened at the prospect. "Smart. Mick's the key to getting close to Ralph without him even realising it."

"Exactly," Dave said, already thinking about the best way to track Mick down. He didn't want to make a scene or tip anyone off about what he was doing. The last thing he needed was to have Ralph's men on high alert, or worse, have Mick catch on before the bug was planted.

The first place Dave decided to check was The Hanged Man, the pub where he knew Mick and Steve often frequented. It was a place Dave had frequented for some time, and while he wasn't particularly fond of ruining his quiet drinking spot with work, it was the most likely place to find Mick.

He walked into the pub, the familiar creak of the door greeting him as he stepped inside. The place was quiet for the moment, with only a few regulars nursing their pints at the bar. Dave moved subtly through the crowd, looking for an opening, trying to blend in. He approached the counter, ordered a pint, and casually struck up a conversation with a few of the locals.

"Hey, you guys seen Mick around lately?" he asked, keeping his tone light. "Or Steve? Haven't seen them for a while."

The bartender didn't seem particularly interested but gave a short nod. "Mick? Yeah, I saw him earlier. He and Steve'll be collecting from Victoria Street today." He said it in a tone that suggested he wasn't thrilled about the whole thing.

Dave's ears perked up. "Collecting?"

“Yeah,” the bartender replied with a shrug, “you know, extorting the shops for protection money. Fast food joints, convenience stores—same old routine. ‘Course, it’s a bad business. Gets people worked up every time, but Mick’s always been smooth with it. Doesn’t make it any less dirty.”

Dave nodded, feigning indifference. "Thanks," he said, slipping a tip onto the counter before heading back toward the door.

As he stepped out onto the street, he reflected on the information. Mick and Steve were out on Victoria Street, doing their usual racket, extorting local businesses under the guise of “protection.” That was his in. If Mick was collecting today, there was a chance he could get close enough to pin a bug on him.

Dave made his way across town, taking the familiar route to Victoria Street. It wasn’t far, and as he walked, he kept his eyes peeled, looking for any signs of the two goons. He could already hear the sounds of the street—cars driving by, people chatting outside shops, the hum of a busy neighbourhood—but he knew exactly what to look for: Mick and Steve’s usual intimidation tactics.

When he arrived, he took a moment to assess the scene. There were several shops along the street, and he knew that Mick and Steve would likely be hitting each of them for their usual “protection” money. Dave made sure to keep his distance at first, watching from the corner of the street.

He could already see a few people lingering outside shops, probably trying to avoid confrontation, while others hurried inside, clearly wanting nothing to do with the extortionists. It wasn’t long before Dave spotted them. Mick and Steve were walking toward a fast food place, clearly engaging in the usual routine. Mick was talking to the shopkeeper, his posture leaning forward in that familiar aggressive way, while Steve stood nearby, arms crossed, eyes scanning the street.

Dave stood in the shadows of the alleyway, hidden from view as he watched Mick and Steve approach. The sound of their voices echoed

through the street, their laughter and conversation carrying clearly. They were completely oblivious, too caught up in their banter about the day's shake downs to notice Dave lurking just a few feet away.

Steve's boisterous laugh carried through the air, while Mick chattered on about the shops they'd hit. "Easy money," Mick was saying, his voice smug. "They're spineless. Just pay up, and we leave 'em be." Dave's jaw clenched at the words. It was the kind of scum he hated—taking advantage of the vulnerable, thriving on fear.

As they crossed in front of the alleyway, Dave moved in quickly. He stepped out from the shadows, his movements swift and deliberate. Before either of them could react, he lunged forward, grabbing Mick by the shoulder and flinging him into the alley.

Mick let out a surprised yelp as he hit the ground, but Steve, like a coward, took off at the first sign of trouble. He sprinted down the street without a second glance, leaving Mick to face the consequences alone.

Scrambling to his feet, his face twisted into a sneer, though there was a flicker of fear in his eyes as he straightened up. "Got what was coming to you, did ya?" he spat, wiping the dirt from his jacket as he straightened.

Dave didn't waste time on words. He crossed the alley in three long strides and grabbed Mick by the collar, lifting him off the ground and delivering a swift punch to his gut. Mick's face contorted in pain as the air rushed out of him, and he doubled over, his lunch—probably the free meal he'd "earned" through extortion—spewing onto the pavement.

Mick gasped for breath, still retching, his stomach heaving as he struggled to regain control. Dave stood over him, unbothered by the display. The satisfaction of delivering a lesson was evident in his eyes. Mick had crossed a line, and now he was going to pay the price.

Still gasping, Mick tried to get to his feet, but Dave wasn't done. He grabbed Mick by the collar again, lifting him upright. "You think it's so

funny now?" Dave's voice was low, his words slow and deliberate. "If you cross me again, it'll be the last thing you ever do."

Mick's eyes widened with fear, but before he could respond, Dave shoved him hard against the alley wall. Mick hit it with a thud, his body sagging in exhaustion, the air completely winded out of him. He couldn't even stand straight, his arms hanging limply at his sides.

Dave took a step back, looking at Mick for a moment. There was no sympathy in his gaze—only cold, hard resolve. He didn't need to say anything more. The message had been sent.

Without another word, Dave turned on his heel and walked away, his footsteps echoing through the empty alley as he disappeared into the street. The confrontation had been swift, decisive. Mick wouldn't forget it. And neither would Steve, if he had the guts to show his face again.

## 13 Listening In

Dave sat back in his chair, the day's events still fresh in his mind. He'd handled Mick—delivered the message, made his point clear. But now, the most important part: the intel. He needed to know what Mick was up to, where he was going, and what he was saying.

Back in the comfort of his home, Dave filled Anya in on the confrontation. "Mick's always in that jacket," Dave said, his voice flat but with a hint of satisfaction. "At least every time I've seen him. He was too busy throwing up to notice me put the tracker in his collar."

Anya gave him a quick glance from across the room, then her fingers danced over her laptop's keyboard. A few key presses, and she looked back up with a nod. "Tracker's active. Sound's coming in clear as a bell." She turned the volume up slightly and leaned back in her chair. "We'll know where he is. Let's just hope he gets into some useful conversations."

Dave smirked. "That's one thing we can rely on with Mick—he can't keep his mouth shut."

Anya nodded, her eyes narrowing in concentration as she listened to the feed. "Right. Let's see what we get."

It didn't take long. The speakers on Anya's laptop crackled to life, and the sound of Mick's voice came through, muffled but distinct.

"He showed up throwing his weight around," Mick's voice said, clearly reporting to someone. "Trying to put me in my place, but he soon backed off. Got nothing."

Anya adjusted the volume, trying to catch every word as the one-sided conversation continued. Mick was obviously on the phone, possibly speaking to one of Ralph's underlings.

"Tell the boss," Mick continued, his tone a little smug, "I don't think he'll be back."

Anya turned the volume up slightly, her eyes scanning the screen as she processed the information. "Well, he couldn't be more wrong, could he?" she said, glancing at Dave, a slight smile creeping up on her face.

Dave chuckled, the corners of his mouth lifting. "That's Mick for you. Too cocky for his own good." He glanced at the screen where Anya was keeping an eye on the feed. "He's probably assuming the whole thing's over now. That I've learned my lesson."

Anya raised an eyebrow, clearly amused. "He won't be expecting you to come back for round two. Let's see what else he's got."

The tracker was picking up Mick's movements now, and Dave was more than ready to follow his lead. They had the perfect inside track on Ralph's operations, and Mick, with his loose lips, was about to be the key to pulling it all apart.

The Velvet Lounge loomed in the distance, its neon lights flickering against the backdrop of the evening. But it wasn't the club that had Dan's attention today—it was Ralph's operation. The more intel they could gather, the more solid their case against him would be.

He'd spent the day milling around the area, trying to find any cracks in Ralph's operation. And today, luck was on his side. Sitting across the street from the Velvet Lounge, Dan spotted Ralph's black Range Rover parked outside, its personal driver sitting at a café table, sipping coffee while he waited for his next move.

It was the perfect opportunity.

As Dan walked towards the café and crossed the street, blending into the normal flow of pedestrians. He moved with purpose but didn't draw attention, keeping his eyes on the car and the driver as he approached. A

few more steps, and he was past the vehicle, barely a glance at the black Range Rover as he slipped by.

In a quick motion, Dan crouched slightly, attaching the tracker to the rear wheel arch of the vehicle. His fingers worked fast, applying the tracker with a super-sticky two-part compound that he had already activated while crossing the street. It wasn't the most traditional method—magnet trackers often weren't reliable on modern cars with plastic and aluminium components—but this setup wouldn't fail. The tracker would stay in place, and as soon as the vehicle moved, they'd know where Ralph was heading.

Once the tracker was securely affixed, Dan stood up and walked back to the café. He ordered a simple cup of tea, and sausage sandwich with brown sauce, and sat down with his sandwich, eyes still flicking toward the parked Range Rover. His casual appearance belied the focus behind his calm demeanour. This was just another day of surveillance, but the stakes were high. Ralph's every move would now be under their watchful eye.

As he ate, Dan kept an eye on the driver, who was busy scrolling through his phone. That was when the real magic happened. Dan pulled out his own agency phone, a discreet device that allowed him to monitor wireless signals in the area. His eyes narrowed as he found the Bluetooth signal of the phone the driver was using. The model name flashed on the screen—HUAWEI90125.

Dan tapped a few quick keys, sending a text message to Anya. "Found a phone we need to hijack. HUAWEI90125."

The reply came almost instantly: "On it."

Dan smirked, knowing that when it came to tech, Anya was unmatched. She could work magic with electronics faster than anyone else he knew. Anya, routed via Dan's phone connected to the Bluetooth device and within seconds breached its security.

If you had said 30 years ago that one day we'd all be fitted with tracking and listening devices, the country would have been in uproar. Privacy would have been a major talking point, protests would have filled the streets, and the thought of anyone carrying a device that could track their every move or listen to their conversations would have seemed like the beginning of a dystopian nightmare.

Yet, here we are, in a world where those same devices, the ones once feared, are now an essential part of daily life. Mobile phones, once a luxury or a novelty, are now ubiquitous, with everyone carrying one in their pocket or bag. And with each device comes a built-in tracker and microphone, offering not just communication, but a real-time map of where we are and what we're doing.

Barely a minute passed, and another reply flashed up on his screen: "Done."

Dan let out a quiet breath, impressed as always. With the driver's phone now in their control, they didn't need a tracker or listening device. They could monitor everything that was going on in real time. No need to keep relying on the outdated methods when Anya could provide direct access to the heart of the operation.

He finished his sandwich and tea, casually leaning back in his chair and pretending to take in the café's ambiance. But in reality, he was already mentally preparing for the next step. With the driver's phone compromised, they could tap into his calls, messages, and even track his location. Ralph's network of contacts and operations was about to get a lot clearer.

Dan stood up from the table, his movements smooth and casual. He took a final glance at the Range Rover, then made his way out of the café and back onto the street, blending into the crowd. He had what he needed, and now it was just a matter of waiting for the pieces to fall into place.

Anya sat at her desk, the glow of her laptop screen illuminating the quiet room. She had access to a wealth of intelligence now, but there were still gaps. The bug in Ralph's office had yielded some audio, but it was mostly mundane—the kind of conversations you'd expect in any back office: task assignments, staff rotas, bar takings, and the usual threats to keep his "business" running smoothly. Nothing too revealing. Nothing that could really expose Ralph or his operation in a way they could act on immediately.

Despite the damning nature of some of the content—such as Ralph's treatment of his employees, the threats and intimidation—it wasn't enough. It was clear that Ralph had been smart about keeping his operations offline. His office had no computers, no internet connection, and no phone line. It was as though he'd built a fortress of face-to-face dealings, a place where no electronic trace would be left behind. It felt like an old-school mafia operation, one that relied on personal meetings, not digital communications.

But Anya was methodical, and she refused to let that stop her. "Everyone these days has access to the internet. So why not Ralph?" she mused as she continued to monitor the feeds.

Her fingers flew across the keyboard, adjusting filters, reviewing audio streams. But the usual project management talk continued, mundane details about staff schedules, deliveries, and the occasional reference to someone who'd "stepped out of line." Nothing worth noting. They needed a break—a clue that would lead them to something more substantial.

That's when the change came.

She saw the signal flicker on the GPS tracker attached to the Range Rover. Ralph was on the move.

Anya quickly switched over to the driver's phone feed. She had complete access now, from location tracking to audio streaming. As Ralph climbed into the vehicle, the phone automatically connected, and the sounds of the

car's interior began streaming through her speakers. She could hear the low hum of the engine and the faint click of a phone being unlocked.

Then, she heard Ralph's voice.

"Yeah, I'm just about to head out to the spot," he said, his voice calm, collected. "I'll handle it from here. Make sure the boys are in position." There was a brief pause, followed by the sound of him taking a breath, before he continued. "What's the deal with the cars? The manifest's on my email, right?"

Anya's heart skipped a beat. Ralph had just slipped up. He had mentioned email.

She replayed the segment, quickly checking for any other details. Ralph was clearly talking to someone on the other end of the line, but his words were more telling than anything she had picked up so far.

"He's got the manifest. It's in my email. I'll send it over once I'm done here," Ralph said, as if it were the most routine thing in the world.

This was huge.

Anya immediately sent a message to Dave. "Ralph's email's on the phone. He's using it for business."

She quickly checked the audio again, but Ralph was still talking. "Just check the latest cars coming in. We need those lined up by Friday. The client's getting antsy."

The realisation hit Anya hard. Ralph wasn't as offline as they'd believed. He had been hiding in plain sight—using the phone only when necessary, keeping it off when he didn't need it. His email was not just any email—it was the key to everything.

First, she needed to piggyback onto the device. This wouldn't be easy, but it was doable. She had the right tools, the right software, and the experience to handle it. As she started scanning for the driver's phone, she

hit a brief technical snag—there was always some level of security, and Ralph was savvy enough to keep things locked down.

But Anya had a breakthrough. She managed to piggyback onto the driver’s phone and began searching for any way to connect it to Ralph’s device. If she could access the driver’s phone, she could open the door to the phone Ralph was using. The problem was Ralph had already finished his call, and he immediately powered the phone off.

Anya leaned back in her chair, frustrated but not deterred. She now knew the phone existed, which was a vital clue. But she didn’t have time to waste. She could only wait until Ralph powered the phone back on. It was a waiting game now.

The minutes dragged on, and Anya didn’t let her attention waver. Hours passed, and it seemed like the day was dragging along with it. But then, her patience paid off. She heard Ralph’s voice again, this time from inside the car, muffled but clear enough to tell he was on the phone once more.

Anya’s heart rate picked up. She quickly engaged the driver’s phone, accessing the connection again. This time, she was determined to make use of the opportunity. She ran a deeper scan, probing for the phone’s data streams, trying to get a fix on the connection. The phone’s security would be a problem, but she was used to working through this kind of challenge.

What she found wasn’t easy. Ralph’s phone wasn’t just untraceable—it was deliberately locked down. No Wi-Fi signal. No Bluetooth. He was clearly being cautious. It wasn’t a mistake—it was a calculated effort to avoid detection. Ralph had been taught how to stay off the grid, or at least limit his exposure.

Anya cursed under her breath. “No Wi-Fi... no Bluetooth. Just 4G or 5G data. This is going to be tricky.”

She tapped a few keys, pulling up the phone’s data usage patterns, hoping to find some other weak point. If Ralph was using cellular data, it made

things much harder. She'd be working with a far more secure connection than usual, and without access to Wi-Fi or Bluetooth, there would be no easy way to hijack the connection from afar.

Still, Anya didn't give up. She narrowed her focus and began working through the phone's cellular data protocols. There was still a chance. She'd faced tougher challenges before, but this was definitely one of the more difficult situations she had encountered.

With Ralph speaking into the phone, the window of opportunity was small. Anya had to be patient and precise. She couldn't afford to make a misstep. Every second counted. She had to find a way into Ralph's phone before the call ended and before the connection dropped.

"Come on, come on," she muttered, her fingers flying over the keyboard as she worked on getting past the barriers. She'd need to break through the security layers, but if she could get through, she'd have the keys to Ralph's communications.

The minutes seemed to stretch on forever, but Anya remained focused. She'd already proven that she could crack the most complex systems. This was no different—just another obstacle to overcome.

Anya sat back in her chair, frustration bubbling up as she watched the audio stream cut out once again. Ralph had ended the call and powered off the phone, leaving her with little more than the echo of his last conversation. The window of opportunity had slammed shut, and with Ralph's cautious use of 4G or 5G data, bypassing his phone's defences was proving to be far more difficult than she'd expected.

"This is getting frustrating," Anya muttered to herself, tapping a few keys as she tried to track any remaining signals. She could tell Ralph was careful, no doubt aware of the risks of electronic surveillance. But there had to be a way to get through. She wasn't in the Congo, and Serj wasn't around to scale a cell tower and plant intercepts. She needed something more subtle, more immediate.

Her mind started working through the possibilities, her thoughts clicking together as she recalled the tools at their disposal. There was a solution—one that might just do the trick.

“A Stingray,” Anya said out loud, as the idea came to her. It was risky, but it could work.

## 14 Car Jacking

The Stingray was effectively a mobile cell tower that acted as a *Man in the Middle* device, tricking Ralph's phone into connecting to it instead of the real cell tower. The beauty of the Stingray was that it could downgrade the security on the connection between the phone and the fake cell tower, giving Anya a way to intercept the signal without Ralph even realising it.

But how could they get it close enough to Ralph's phone? Anya thought for a moment, chewing on the details. There were two options, but both came with their own set of challenges.

"The first option would be to drive around following Ralph, keeping the Stingray close enough for it to catch his phone's signal when he connects. But that's a lot of risk," Anya said, speaking out loud as she worked through the strategy. "We'd need to stay undetected, maintain distance, and ensure we don't attract attention."

She paused, her fingers tapping against the desk.

"The second option is to plant the Stingray in Ralph's Range Rover itself," she said, her voice tinged with more confidence. "We'd have to wait for the right moment—catch a time when Ralph's not around, when the car's stationary for a while, and then plant the device without being noticed."

The plan was clear, but it required precision, timing, and someone who could pull it off without drawing attention. For the job of planting the device in the Range Rover, Anya knew just who to call.

"Dan," she muttered, reaching for her phone. "He's the one who can get in and out of a vehicle without leaving a trace."

*The phone call between Anya and Dan was brief but critical. As the details of the plan unfolded, the complexity of the task became more clear. Anya spoke with precision, laying out the specifics.*

"The Stingray will need to be wired into the vehicle's electrical system," Anya explained. "It's not a difficult or lengthy task, but it requires more than five minutes to complete."

Dan's voice came through clearly, thinking ahead. "I reckon we get it into the workshop for some overnight work. Nothing too drastic, just enough to make it seem like something's wrong—something that needs parts. That should keep it in overnight without raising any suspicions."

Anya's mind was already working through the logistics, trying to anticipate any complications. "Perfect. It's crucial we get it in overnight. If we have to rush it, Ralph might notice something's off, and we'd lose the opportunity."

Dan's tone shifted, knowing the next step was going to need extra hands. "Hold on a sec," he said, and then clicked the speaker phone on. "Dave, you're going to want to hear this."

There was a brief pause before Dave's voice came through, smooth and calm. "Hi, Anya."

"Hey, Dave. Got a question for you," Anya started. "Do you think you could break the suspension on a Range Rover?"

Dave chuckled lightly, the sound of his confidence evident. "Sure. I think I could do that. No more than drop under it, give the sway bar a yank, and job done."

Dan smirked at the easy confirmation. "Alright, that's the plan then. We'll follow the tracker, and late afternoon—say, 2 or 3 pm, Dave springs the trap."

Anya nodded. "That way, they won't have enough time to fix it, and it'll be sitting there overnight. We can use the time to get in and plant the Stingray."

Dave chimed in again, voice slightly more cautious. "But what if it takes more than a day? Are we okay with that?"

Anya thought for a moment, weighing the risks. "It's tight, but we need to get on this before Friday. I think we can afford to take the chance. Let's go with it and see what happens."

After a few more details, the plan was solidified. Anya hung up the phone, confident that everything was set in motion. It was time for Dan and Dave to execute the plan.

Later that day, Dan drove the car carefully, keeping a discrete distance behind Ralph's Range Rover, the tracker guiding them. He kept the pace casual, ensuring they wouldn't attract attention, all while staying close enough to make sure they could act at the right moment. Dave sat in the passenger seat, his eyes scanning the road ahead, his mind already on the task. His hands rested casually in his lap, but his posture was tense, ready for the moment when he'd spring into action.

The Range Rover turned down a narrow street, and Dan followed with ease. It wasn't long before they came to a quieter stretch of road, away from the main hustle of traffic. Dan gave Dave a quick look, silently acknowledging that they were nearing the moment to strike. The car slowed as Ralph's vehicle turned into a parking area. This was it.

Dan muttered quietly, "Alright, you're up."

Dave nodded, slipping out of the car with ease. He moved swiftly, blending into the background as he approached the Range Rover. The goal was simple—get under the vehicle, yank the suspension sway bar to break the joint, leaving just enough of a rattle to ensure Ralph would notice it.

With practised precision, Dave slid under the Range Rover, a moment of calm before the task. He gave the bar pull, the joint snapped cleanly under Dave's immense application of force. Just enough to cause damage without making it too obvious. The rattle was unmistakable—no doubt Ralph would hear it once they drove off.

Dave swiftly retreated back to the car, not lingering, his movements fluid and confident. He jumped into the passenger seat of Dan's car, and they both drove off, maintaining a steady distance as Ralph's Range Rover started back up. The trap had been set.

Now, it was just a matter of time. They needed Ralph to notice the issue and take it in for repairs. If everything went according to plan, they'd have the overnight opportunity they needed to plant the Stingray and intercept all of Ralph's communications.

Dan glanced over at Dave, a smirk playing on his lips. "That should do the trick."

Dave's expression was unreadable, but he felt a sense of satisfaction knowing they'd just bought themselves the time they needed. It was now a waiting game.

*The sound of the knocking from the rear of the Range Rover was unmistakable. Ralph and his driver had just got back into the car when the strange noise from the suspension became evident. The car rocked slightly with every bump, a rhythmic thudding coming from the rear as they started driving. The driver frowned and spoke to Ralph, clearly concerned about the issue.*

Anya, having tapped into the audio feed from the vehicle, heard the conversation clearly. Ralph's voice could be heard in the background, grumbling about the noise as the driver quickly picked up the phone and dialled the garage.

The garage responded like clockwork, telling the driver that it was getting late, and they probably wouldn't be able to fix the issue on the spot. But they assured him that they'd look at the car first thing in the morning and take care of it. The driver confirmed the drop-off location, and with that, Ralph was left with no choice but to park the Range Rover at the garage.

Ralph made his way to the Velvet Lounge, no doubt to unwind and deal with whatever business was on his mind. Meanwhile, the driver headed straight to the garage to drop off the Range Rover for inspection.

Anya, listening in on everything, couldn't help but feel a sense of satisfaction. "OK, it's all set," she said, dialling Dan and Dave. "The Range Rover's parked in the workshop at the arches' estate. You've got your window. You need to get in there and install the Stingray tonight."

Dan's voice crackled through the speaker, confident as ever. "No problem. We've got it covered."

Later that evening, under the cover of darkness, Dave and Dan made their move. The arches' estate wasn't far from the garage, a tucked-away industrial area filled with old warehouses and disused buildings, long since forgotten by most people. The air was thick with the smell of oil and rust, the faintest trace of dampness hanging in the cool evening breeze.

The estate was a maze of metal gates and rusted fences, many of the buildings locked up tight for the night. But there was one key access point—a small wicket door on the far end of the estate, next to a building that had seen better days. The area was often quiet, but it had its share of activity. A security van with faded lettering drove around the area every hour or so, the soft growl of the guard dog in the back of the van the only other sign of life as it circled the perimeter.

Dave and Dan approached cautiously, sticking to the shadows as they moved. The security van had just passed down the main road, and the night was quiet. Dan kept his eyes on the guards' movements, noting the gaps in their patrol route. They had enough time to get in, but they couldn't afford to be careless.

The wicket door was padlocked, the heavy steel lock standing as a small but solid barrier. Dan moved to the side, watching as Dave stepped forward. With a quick motion, Dave applied a vice-like squeeze to the lock.

There was a brief creak of metal, then a sickening crunch as the lock crumbled in his hand.

"That'll do it," Dave said quietly, before launching the mangled lock into the distance, never to be found. They both slipped inside the narrow gap in the gate under the cover of night.

Once inside, the estate was eerily quiet. The faint hum of a nearby street light was the only sound, casting long shadows across the dilapidated buildings. The Range Rover was parked in one of the deeper parts of the workshop, hidden from casual sight. Dan switched on a head torch and moved quickly towards the rear of the vehicle, his hands working swiftly and precisely.

Dave stood watch, eyes scanning the shadows, alert for any movement. The only sounds were the faint buzz of insects in the air and the occasional distant hum of traffic. It was perfect—nothing more than the quiet of the night and the hum of the workshop's ventilation.

Dan worked quickly, setting the Stingray into the rear compartment of the Range Rover. He carefully wired it into the vehicle's electrical system, making sure the device was hidden and secure. It only took a few minutes, but every second mattered. The device had to be unobtrusive, undetectable. The last thing they needed was someone noticing the interference or the device during routine checks.

When the job was done, Dan gave a quiet nod to Dave. "It's in."

Dave didn't hesitate. "Let's go."

With the Stingray securely installed, they moved swiftly back to the wicket door, slipping through it just as quietly as they had entered. They didn't look back. As they made their way out into the night, the workshop behind them was silent once again, with the Range Rover now hijacked and ready for the next phase of their operation.

The job was complete, and now all they had to do was wait for Ralph to use the phone.

## 15      **Jackpot**

*Ralph's cunning wasn't lost on Anya. He had always stayed one step ahead, covering his tracks so thoroughly that it was almost as if he anticipated every move they'd make. His offices were clean—no computers, no files. Everything was offline, designed to make it look like he had nothing to hide. The same was true for his car, which only housed his phone and a few other standard items. But Anya, patient and meticulous, saw this as a challenge, not a dead end.*

She had managed to gain access to Ralph's phone, which was, on its surface, a goldmine for intelligence. However, once she dug into the data, it became evident that Ralph wasn't storing anything of importance directly on the device. There were no contacts, no messages, no personal files or documents. The phone was stripped clean—just a communication device.

At first, it seemed like a dead end. A phone with no data, no secrets. But to Anya, it was exactly the opposite. She knew that someone as clever as Ralph wouldn't have relied entirely on just his phone. If there was nothing to find here, it meant one thing: the real information—the valuable data—wasn't stored on the device at all. It had to be somewhere else.

"The cloud," Anya muttered to herself as she sat back in her chair, her fingers still hovering over her laptop. "If it's not here, it's on the cloud."

She knew that Ralph, being the paranoid operator that he was, had likely stored all his sensitive data off the phone, safely tucked away in a cloud storage system. And if he ever lost a device or had it compromised, it wouldn't matter to him—he would simply get a new phone and connect back to his cloud account, just as easily as logging into his bank.

The key was finding that cloud, or at least the connection to it. And to do that, Anya had to dig deeper.

She began to track Ralph's phone activity in real-time. He was active, making calls and using the internet, and Anya could see the data traffic that he was generating. She leaned forward, her mind clicking through the possibilities. If Ralph was connected to the internet, there had to be a digital footprint. And by tracking his connections, she could figure out where he was accessing his cloud storage.

Using a combination of network analysis tools and her hacking skills, Anya began following Ralph's activity. She accessed the data stream and started mapping his connections. It wasn't easy—Ralph was clearly using encrypted channels, hiding his tracks with a combination of VPNs and proxy servers. But none of it was a match for Anya's expertise. She had faced tougher challenges before and had cracked tougher systems.

As she dug into the network traffic, she noticed a few things. The first was that Ralph wasn't accessing the cloud directly from his phone. He was using a secondary service, a third-party app that linked his phone to an encrypted cloud server. Anya smiled to herself. This was the key. She didn't need to break into the cloud itself; she needed to find the credentials Ralph was using to log in.

"Gotcha," Anya whispered under her breath as the data stream led her to a series of encrypted login credentials. She watched as Ralph's login attempt flashed across her screen. With some deft manoeuvring, she intercepted the credentials in real-time as Ralph entered them.

She had done it. She had his login credentials. Now, she could access the cloud, the vault of information that Ralph had so carefully hidden.

Anya paused for a moment, taking a breath. She knew this was a major step forward, but she also knew that it wasn't the end. The cloud was likely filled with encrypted files, protected by multiple layers of security. She'd have to break through those, but now that she had access, she was in a far better position than before.

With Ralph's credentials in hand, Anya smiled to herself. She knew exactly where he was storing his sensitive data, and now she had the key to unlock it.

Ralph had been smart to keep his information out of sight, but he had underestimated one thing—Anya's ability to outsmart him. She wasn't just cracking codes; she was playing the long game.

She quickly began the process of gaining full access to Ralph's cloud. The data was coming in fast, and soon, she would have everything. All the secrets, all the operations, every file Ralph thought he had hidden away.

In the back of her mind, she knew one thing for sure: Ralph's time was running out.

Back at Dave's house, the trio gathered around the table, each of them deep in thought as they discussed the next phase of their operation. The atmosphere was charged with the tension of everything that had been set in motion. Anya, now fully inside Ralph's digital world, had an arsenal of tools at her disposal—tools that could wreak havoc on Ralph's upcoming deals.

Anya leaned over her laptop, her fingers flying across the keyboard as she scanned the data. "I've got full access to his shipments," she said, looking up. "I can alter things, move containers around, create confusion. We can mess with Ralph's operations, but it needs to be done carefully."

Dave nodded, thinking through the possibilities. "We could divert the stolen vehicles to another port. Send them to Iceland instead of the UAE. It would really hurt Ralph, but that would take too long. We need something quicker, something more immediate."

Anya's eyes narrowed as she scrolled through Ralph's shipping records. "You're right. Changing the port would be a long game. But I've got something else. The manifests... they're already in place, with the shipping containers organised. I've got full access to everything, including the list of

cars he's expecting. There are 32 vehicles—high-end luxury and sports cars."

Dan, who had been listening closely, raised an eyebrow. "So what do we do with them?"

Anya, seeing the connection, continued, "This shipment is clearly something Ralph's banking on. The cars are probably already sold to clients in the UAE, but there's another twist. The insurers will likely pay out a substantial reward if these cars are stolen. We could leverage that."

Dave's face lit up with the idea, a grin spreading across his face. "I think we could kill two birds with one stone here. Ralph will lose his cars, but Mick will be the one who looks responsible for it."

Dan looked confused for a moment, tilting his head. "How do you mean?"

Dave leaned forward, his hands clasped together. "If we report the stolen cars through the correct channels, it could look like Mick was angling for the large insurance reward. He's the one who's been making noise about big scores, and if we plant the idea that he's behind this, Ralph will go after him. Mick's reputation will be ruined, and Ralph won't trust him again. It could end up costing Mick everything."

Anya smiled, liking the way Dave was thinking. "Nice. So we hurt both of them. Ralph will lose the shipment, and Mick will get the blame. Ralph might even make Mick disappear—he certainly won't want him around any more. This will turn everything upside down for them."

Dave's grin widened as he nodded in agreement. "Mick will make himself disappear, if he knows what's good for him. This is exactly what we need to take them both down, and we can do it fast. We don't need to wait for the shipment to land or for Ralph to make a move. We can hit him now, when he's at his most vulnerable."

Anya already had her fingers on the keys, preparing to send the first wave of changes to the shipping records. "I'll make the adjustments to the

manifest. I'll alter the records to create an anomaly that will hold the shipment pending investigation, and I'll make sure everything points to Mick's involvement in the report. It won't be hard to make it look like he's after the insurance payout."

Dan looked over at Dave, grinning. "This could get interesting." Dan leaned in, intrigued by the strategy. "So, we don't just steal them back. We make sure they get stuck and raise suspicion. Ralph will lose the cars, and his whole operation will come to a screeching halt."

Dave stood, ready to take action. "It will. Let's hit Ralph where it hurts and watch Mick scramble. We move fast, we stay clean, and we hurt both of them at once. This is just the beginning."

The plan was in motion, and everything was set for Ralph and Mick to face the consequences of their own greed and carelessness.

The dimly lit interior of The Hanged Man pub hadn't changed much since Dave's last visit. The flaky painted sign outside gave the place its signature grimy charm, and the thick smell of stale beer hung in the air, familiar and comforting. It was one of those spots where the locals didn't ask questions—people came in, had a drink, and kept their heads down. Tonight, though, Dave wasn't just here to relax. This pint would serve a purpose.

Dave looked over at Dan and Anya as they approached the bar with him. "How do you guys feel about going for a pint at one of the local seedy pubs?" he asked, a hint of a grin tugging at his lips.

Dan cracked a smile, the thrill of the operation still fresh in his mind. "Seedy pubs? Always my favourite. Adds a little character."

Anya raised an eyebrow but followed along, her eyes scanning the room as she walked. "Long as we don't get involved in anything messy tonight."

Dave chuckled and nodded. "It's all part of the plan, Anya."

They walked into the familiar gloom of the pub and Dave made his way to the bar. As he passed the tables, he noticed a few familiar faces and a few

strangers, all of them too wrapped up in their own business to pay much attention to the newcomers. Dave felt a slight disappointment when he saw that his usual corner table was occupied, but the table they chose was just as good, if not better for what they needed.

Taking a moment to settle in, Dave stepped up to the bar, where the bartender, a no-nonsense man with tattoos and a permanent frown, barely acknowledged him. Dave leaned forward, the plan in mind.

"I'll have a pint of Guinness," he said. "German lager and a vodka and tonic."

The bartender moved with practised efficiency, grabbing the drinks and handing them over without a word. Dave paid, pocketing the change before returning to the table with the drinks.

The three of them sat down, their voices louder than they probably should have been, but it was working. Dave made sure to speak in just the right tone, dropping hints for the nearby patrons to pick up on.

"So," Dave began, keeping the conversation flowing smoothly but loudly enough for the others around them to hear, "Mick's promised a fat payday, real soon. He's been talking big about this score, said it was going to be worth a lot. Once he gets the cash, he's got plans to lie low for a while. Won't be hearing from him for a bit."

Dan chimed in with a low chuckle, "Yeah, he's going to be pretty flush, but you know how these things go. Easy come, easy go."

Anya took a sip of her vodka and smiled knowingly. "Guess he won't be around much, then."

The locals sitting nearby, a few grizzled men and a woman nursing her pint, exchanged looks. They were listening now, catching the edge of the conversation and putting two and two together. Mick was going to get his payday, and it was something big and risky. The implication was clear, even if it wasn't explicitly said. Mick had scored something big, but it

seemed like a deal with consequences. And they were hearing about it firsthand.

Dave glanced around the pub, noting the subtle shifts in posture from some of the nearby patrons. The word was getting out. The whispers would spread, and the heat would soon be on Mick. That was the plan—to make sure Ralph and Mick both understood the consequences of their actions.

For now, it was all about setting the stage, letting the right people hear the right things. A few more words here and there, and Mick's reputation would be as good as gone.

Dave leaned back in his chair, satisfied with the outcome. "When Mick resurfaces, he's gonna be in for a rude awakening."

The following day, Dan and Anya followed the tracker on Mick's phone to a pub called The Rainbow, located on Victoria Street. At first, they assumed it was part of Mick's usual extortion racket—a place where he would meet with victims, intimidate shop owners, or collect his "protection money." However, as they watched Mick walk in and settle in with Steve, it became clear that this wasn't just another shake down—it was a regular hangout for Mick.

Anya turned to Dan, her mind already working. "We can use this place to extend the credibility of the insurance scam," she said, a thoughtful look on her face. "I've got an idea. Let's wait for them to leave."

They parked a discreet distance away, keeping an eye on the pub. After about an hour, Mick and Steve finally emerged, no doubt heading off to their next target. Anya had seen enough. It was time to act.

"Stay here," she said to Dan, giving him a nod as she got out of the car. She walked across the street toward *The Rainbow*, the quiet murmur of the city around her as she passed the corner. This wasn't the first time she'd stepped into a place like this, but she was used to blending in, to making her presence seem natural.

As she entered the pub, she immediately noticed the cosy atmosphere. The air was warm, and the faint scent of wood and old leather filled the space. The furnishings were a mix of old wooden tables and mismatched chairs, and there were vintage beer adverts on the walls. It was the kind of place that looked well-loved—clean and neat, but with a certain lived-in charm that spoke of a history far older than most places in the area. The low hum of quiet conversations and the clink of glasses added to the calm, familiar environment. Despite the pleasant setting, Anya knew this place had its darker undertones, especially considering who frequented it.

She moved through the pub, her eyes scanning the room as if she were looking for someone. She spotted the barman behind the counter, wiping down glasses. He looked like he had been here for years, an older man with a weathered face and a no-nonsense attitude. She approached him slowly, taking a deep breath before speaking.

"Hi, I'm looking for Mick Halstead. Do you know him?" she asked, her voice soft but carrying enough authority to draw the barman's attention.

The barman's expression hardened slightly at the mention of Mick's name. He paused for a moment, clearly processing whether he wanted to engage with her. "Yeah, I know him. Many around here do," he said with a bristle in his voice. "You just missed him. But he's been in most evening recently."

Anya smiled politely, her plan already in motion. "Oh, I was supposed to meet with him, but got caught up. I'm not sure that he has my new mobile number. I wonder if you'd be good enough to pass on my card if you see him?"

She slid a business card across the bar, her fingers lightly brushing the surface of the wood. The card read "Ruby" with a mobile number printed underneath. She kept her expression calm and casual, maintaining the perfect balance between being friendly and business-like.

The barman picked up the card and looked at it for a moment before asking, "Can I tell him what it's about?"

Anya nodded with a practised smile. "Car insurance. He'll know who I am. Thank you so much."

The barman seemed to accept the explanation, nodding gruffly. "I'll pass it along if I see him."

Anya gave a small nod of gratitude before slipping away from the bar and heading back to the door. As she left the pub, she felt a sense of satisfaction knowing that another piece of the puzzle had been set in motion. Mick now had a new name and number to reckon with—one tied to the insurance scam they were about to use against him.

She returned to Dan, who was waiting for her outside, and smiled as she approached.

"Another nail in Mick's coffin," she said, her voice calm and confident.

Dan, who had been watching the pub from across the street, gave a small grin. "Nice work, Anya. We're getting closer."

As they got back into the car and prepared to leave, Anya couldn't help but feel a sense of momentum building. Each step they took, each piece they added, brought them closer to their goal. Mick's world was about to implode, and they were making sure it would happen at just the right time.

The trio walked into Dave's house, a sense of purpose hanging in the air. Anya was already strategising the next move, while Dan looked like he was enjoying the process of slowly chipping away at Mick's and Ralph's empire.

Anya dropped her bag on the table, her eyes scanning the room. "Come on, let's get back to Dave's. I've got a finisher in mind." Her voice was light, but there was a certain edge to it, like she was holding back something she knew would tip the scales in their favour.



## 16 Honey Trap

Back in Dave's front room, they settled in. Dave had been busy, monitoring the audio feeds from Ralph's office and the Range Rover. As he flipped through the data, his expression darkened. "There's some disturbing stuff on here," he said, rubbing his temple. "I guess we suspected Ralph would be involved in more than just stolen cars, but this... this sounds like people trafficking."

Dan and Anya exchanged a glance, a chill running through both of them. It wasn't just the cars. Ralph was clearly deeper in the criminal underworld than they'd initially thought.

Dave called up the relevant parts of the audio feed, his fingers hovering over the keyboard as he selected the file. The sound of Ralph's voice filled the room, and Anya leaned in closer, her eyes narrowing as she listened.

Ralph's voice was calm and calculated. "We've got a new batch coming in next week. I've arranged the usual accommodations, bed and breakfast setup. They'll need to be ready for work by the end of the day. Got jobs lined up in farming, logistics, hospitality. Some of them will be cleaning, others will be on the fields, and the rest will be packing." He paused, his voice dropping slightly. "Get them in line, make sure they know their place."

The words hit like a ton of bricks. It wasn't just trafficking; it was exploitation on an unimaginable scale.

Dan's face hardened. "Sounds like slave labour. Field work, packaging, hotel maids... it's sick. These people are being treated like cattle."

Anya's jaw clenched as she processed the information. "That would explain some of the transactions in Ralph's records. It's all linked. I'll dig a bit deeper and see what else we can use. But tonight..." She stopped, her tone shifting slightly, mischief flickering in her eyes. "I have a date."

Dave looked up from the screen, his brow furrowing in confusion. "What?"

Dan grinned knowingly, sensing the playful mood shift. "Yeah, I think I know where this is going."

Anya leaned back in her chair with a smirk. "I've got plans to complete Mick's fall from grace." She let the words hang in the air for a moment before she continued, "I've planted enough seeds now. It's time to make sure Mick is completely tied to this, and there's no way out. We'll make sure Ralph takes the bait, and Mick's reputation will be ruined."

Dave leaned forward, eyes narrowing as he processed what Anya was saying. "And how exactly do you plan on finishing him off?"

Anya grinned, clearly pleased with her plan. "I've got a few things in mind. I'll mix with the right people, drop the right hints. By the time Mick realises what's happened, he'll have no choice but to run—and by then, Ralph will have already cut ties with him completely. There won't be any way for Mick to clean himself up."

Dan looked impressed. "This is going to be a good one."

Anya walked downstairs into the front room, where Dan and Dave sat, sipping their brews. The moment she entered, the air in the room seemed to change. This wasn't the Anya they were used to seeing. Today, she was dressed in a way that was both striking and subtle, a blend of casual and deliberate seduction. She wore a low-cut, tight top that accentuated her figure, with a cropped leather jacket that added an edge to her look. Her tight, faded blue jeans clung to her shapely thighs, paired with high heels that clicked softly as she walked. Her long, lustrous black hair fell around her shoulders, and her understated makeup made her blue eyes pop, giving her a captivating appearance.

Dan looked at Dave, his expression both amused and slightly incredulous. "Close your mouth, Dave."

Dave, caught off guard, blinked and quickly looked away, realising he had been staring. "You look..." he stammered, a bit flustered. "...amazing."

Dan chuckled, shaking his head. "Mick won't know what hit him."

Anya flashed them a knowing smile. "Let's just hope he turns up at the Rainbow again tonight."

With that, she and Dan drove out to the pub, parked a discreet distance away, and settled in the car to wait. The street lights flickered outside as they kept their eyes on the entrance, watching for any sign of Mick. As they sat in silence, Dan's phone pinged with a message from Dave.

"Looks like he's on his way. Trackers getting close."

Anya checked the time. Everything was on schedule. She leaned back in her seat and gave a small nod. "Perfect."

A few minutes later, the familiar figures of Mick and Steve pulled up to the pub. Anya gave them time to settle in—10 minutes to make sure Mick was comfortable and unworried before she made her move.

Anya checked her appearance one last time, then stepped out of the car, walking with purpose toward the pub. The door creaked open as she entered, and the low hum of conversation mixed with the sounds of the jukebox in the corner. It was quieter than usual, but she still needed to stay focused.

She walked up to the bar and ordered a tonic with ice and lemon, her voice soft but confident. As she waited for her drink, her eyes scanned the room, looking for Mick and Steve. The pub was still fairly empty, so it didn't take long for her to spot them at a corner table. She could see Mick was already looking her way, a flash of interest lighting up his face.

Anya bided her time, waiting for the right moment. Then, just as she had planned, she casually approached their table, ensuring Mick would be in her path. She slowed down, making sure he had no choice but to bump into her. The glass in her hand tipped over and spilled across the floor.

Mick reacted immediately, jumping to his feet with an angry look on his face. "What the..." he muttered, his voice rising. But as his gaze shifted to Anya, he froze. His expression softened as he recognised her.

Anya put on a look of feigned frustration, exhaling loudly. "You spilled my drink."

Mick, suddenly apologetic, reached out. "I'm so sorry! Here, let me get you another."

Anya tilted her head slightly, her smile mischievous. "That's very chivalrous of you..." She paused, letting the silence hang between them.

"Michael, but everyone calls me Mick," he replied quickly, eager to please.

"Nice to meet you, Mick. I'm Ruby." She extended her hand, giving him a friendly yet flirtatious look. "It was a vodka tonic, ice and a slice." she added, smoothly.

Mick's eyes lit up. "Yes, of course. Steve, go get the lady a drink."

Anya was pleased with how easily he'd taken the bait. She sat down across from Mick, keeping the conversation light but with just the right amount of flirtation to keep him interested. She told him about how she'd been supposed to meet friends for a girls' night out, but the plans had fallen through. It wasn't long before the two were chatting away, sharing bits of their histories. Mick seemed to hang on her every word, completely charmed by her.

They spent the next hour talking, with Anya dropping little hints and keeping the conversation flowing smoothly. She leaned in slightly as she spoke, allowing her laughter to spill out, the kind of laughter that was warm but also just a little teasing.

As the time passed, Anya slowly began to work her magic. She made it clear that she was intrigued by Mick, even though she kept the conversation casual. Finally, after about an hour, she leaned back, glancing at her watch.

"I have to go," she said, her tone softening. "But here, let me give you my number."

Mick looked disappointed, but he quickly perked up when she asked him for his phone. He handed it over eagerly, unlocking it without a second thought. Anya keyed in her number, then dialed it. Her phone rang in her back pocket. She smiled as she handed the phone back to him.

"There you go," she said, her voice playful. "Now you have my number. Call me."

Mick's face lit up with excitement. He slipped the phone into his pocket, completely unaware of the trap he'd just walked into.

They exchanged goodbyes, and Anya turned to leave the pub. As she stepped out, she caught Dan's eye through the car window. He grinned, knowing exactly what she'd just done.

Anya slid into the car and gave a satisfied smile. "What a sucker," she said, shaking her head. "I even left the call connected so he can't explain away a long phone call to an insurance investigator as a misdial."

Dan couldn't help but chuckle. "Mick's going to be wondering what hit him when it all comes together."

Anya leaned back in her seat, crossing her arms. "By the time Ralph figures out what's going on, Mick will be too deep in it to get out." She turned to Dan, her expression confident.

As the car pulled away, Anya's mind raced with the next steps. Ralph and Mick were in for a rude awakening, and she was about to make sure they couldn't escape the mess they'd created.

## 17 *Cloud*

Anya sat at her desk the next morning, eyes focused on the series of connections she was building inside Ralph's cloud. The information she had gathered so far was enough to make anyone uneasy—offshore holdings, shell companies, and properties spread across multiple counties. Ralph had done a decent job of hiding his wealth and operations, but Anya's skills were more than a match for his level of sophistication. His countermeasures, while effective at keeping local law enforcement at bay, were little more than rudimentary obfuscation tactics compared to the global level of sophistication she operated on.

Ralph had been playing a game of cat and mouse with the authorities, but now it was his turn to be hunted.

She was already deep into his business dealings, tracing money through his various accounts, but what she really needed were the bank accounts. Knowing where the money was being funnelled was a good start, but getting direct access to those accounts would be the key to bringing Ralph to his knees.

But it wouldn't be easy. Anya knew that Ralph would likely use the same precautions most savvy criminals did—two-factor authentication, VPNs, and encrypted connections—anything to keep the authorities or competitors out of his financial business. Her best shot was to catch him actively using his online banking system, at the moment he was logged in and connected to the network.

Anya leaned back in her chair, pulling up the Stingray feed. She could already see that Ralph was connected, his phone in hand as he went through his usual business routine. The device he was connected to was the same one that would allow her to gain access to his session.

"Here goes," Anya muttered to herself, her fingers quickly typing commands into her terminal as she prepared to join Ralph's encrypted data

stream. As she slipped into his connection, there would be no hint to Ralph that anything was amiss—his device would act as if everything was normal. The banking system wouldn't show any sign of a breach. All the traffic would appear to be coming from the same device Ralph had logged in with, with no way for him to detect any unauthorized activity.

Her heart rate quickened as she carefully rode the session, ensuring every action she took was undetectable. The next step was the tricky one—she needed to add her own credentials to the bank account, which would give her full control. To do that, she would need Ralph to approve the addition, and it would require his multi-factor authentication to get past the final hurdle.

Anya's fingers hovered over the keyboard as she waited for the pop-up notification to flash on Ralph's phone. Her timing was impeccable. The request was for Ralph to approve the login attempt to his banking account—an additional credential being added to the session. The pop-up appeared to be a standard security feature, tightening the bank's protocols, and it looked completely legitimate.

Ralph, as expected, didn't hesitate. Without a second thought, he clicked "Yes" to approve the login attempt, believing that the bank was simply tightening its security measures.

Anya watched the notification tick away, a smile creeping onto her face as the system processed his approval. "Gotcha," she whispered, fingers flying across the keyboard as she inserted her own credentials, locking them into the account. It was done. She was in.

She sat back in her chair, breathing out slowly. It had gone off without a hitch. Anya now had full access to Ralph's bank account, and the door to his financial empire was wide open. If this worked as smoothly with the other accounts, Ralph wouldn't stand a chance.

Anya ran a hand through her hair and closed her eyes for a moment, savouring the victory. She had what she needed—access to Ralph's

accounts, his holdings, and his financial networks. With this kind of leverage, they could cripple him. No more hiding behind shell companies or offshore accounts.

But she knew that this was just the beginning. She had to keep the pressure on, make sure Ralph didn't see this coming until it was too late. The game was on, and Ralph was playing in her world now.

## 18 Felixstowe

The first phase of the plan was in place. Ralph had done what he did best—coordinated the delivery of the stolen cars across the country, organizing the shipment of these luxury vehicles into containers at various locations. They were on their way to Felixstowe, the bustling port on the south-east coast of the UK, where they would be transferred to a ship bound for Khalifa in Abu Dhabi. Ralph likely thought everything was running smoothly, just as he had planned.

But Anya had made sure the authorities were already in the loop, with the proper safeguards in place. As the containers arrived at Felixstowe, they were offloaded from the trucks, and the flag Anya had triggered with the National Crime Agency (NCA) immediately went up. This wasn't just another load of goods coming in from abroad. These containers had already been marked, and the authorities had been ready and waiting.

The NCA agents had set a careful trap. They allowed the truck drivers to make their deliveries, keeping a low profile, not interfering with the cargo at all. It was crucial that they didn't tip off Ralph or his crew too soon. Arresting the drivers or detaining the shipments prematurely would have been a mistake. It would've raised alarms and alerted Ralph that something was wrong, potentially causing him to take evasive action, scatter his operation, and disappear into the shadows.

The drivers, completely unaware of the trap they'd walked into, delivered their loads as normal, going through the motions of their usual business. Markers were discreetly dropped on their files, building the case for future evidence gathering. For now, the authorities remained unseen, blending into the background as they tracked every movement of these shipments, waiting for the right moment to strike.

As the containers were offloaded and moved into their designated holding area, they were separated from the countless others stacked across the vast

expanse of Felixstowe's busy docks. These containers wouldn't just be lost in the sea of goods awaiting shipping. They had been carefully marked for monitoring, making it easier for the NCA to keep a constant eye on them.

The stolen cars were now sitting in an isolated part of the port, just waiting for the authorities to move in. The NCA agents didn't rush—this operation required patience. They needed to make sure that everything, every vehicle, was accounted for. They would wait until the last piece of the puzzle was in place, ensuring that all of Ralph's assets were recovered, and any loose ends were tied up.

Anya watched the operation unfold, a quiet satisfaction creeping in as the plan came together. They had managed to deceive Ralph into believing everything was proceeding as usual. He hadn't even noticed that the web was closing around him.

It was only a matter of time now. Ralph was about to lose everything.

## 19 Herding Cats

Taking the vehicles from Ralph had been relatively easy. They had set the trap perfectly, ensuring Ralph's stolen cars were delivered directly into the hands of the authorities. The operation was smooth, and now Ralph's illicit shipments were accounted for, ready to be seized, and his reputation would soon take a major hit. However, the next part of the plan—the human trafficking—was a much more complex and difficult task.

Ralph's "bed and breakfast" properties were a separate beast entirely. While the stolen cars were a tangible, traceable asset, these properties were nothing more than a network of decrepit, run-down houses. To Ralph, they were just another tool to exploit, a place to house the illegal immigrants he had smuggled in as slave labour. The term "bed and breakfast" was a gross misnomer. These houses were poorly maintained, most without basic necessities like heating or lighting, filled with mattresses crammed into every available space. People lived on the floor, their lives confined to overcrowded rooms with barely enough room to breathe, let alone exist.

Anya had uncovered the web of properties Ralph owned, nearly fifty of them, all traced back to various shell companies. The scale of the operation was staggering. These weren't just a few isolated cases of human trafficking—they were part of a larger, far-reaching criminal enterprise. In every single one of these properties, up to thirty people were being held against their will, working for little to nothing in appalling conditions. They were forced into back-breaking work in fields, warehouses, or even hotel cleaning jobs, treated no better than cattle.

The authorities had encountered these kinds of housing situations before, but this was something else entirely. It was industrial-scale human trafficking, and Ralph was at the heart of it. The records Anya had pulled from his cloud and the data feeds had provided the crucial links, pointing directly at Ralph as the mastermind behind the operation. The evidence

was irrefutable. Yet, getting the operation shut down wasn't going to be as simple as raiding a few properties.

The sheer number of properties, spread across multiple counties, made a coordinated raid on all of them a monumental task. The logistics alone would be complicated—too many locations to cover, too many people to account for. The operation would have to be executed with precision, and even then, not all the victims would be rescued.

In the field, things would be chaotic. Some of the people in these houses had been brought in from overseas and didn't speak the language, didn't know the systems, and most likely didn't trust anyone who wasn't part of their circle. They had been conditioned to obey, to hide in the shadows, afraid of speaking out. The victims who managed to escape would find themselves out in the cold, no better off than when they had entered. If they didn't get rounded up, they would simply find themselves caught in another cycle of exploitation, working for nothing, just trying to survive.

The real difficulty, though, was that those who were rounded up wouldn't be able to provide useful testimony. Most of them had been smuggled in on false papers, or had entered the country illegally. The authorities could arrest them, but they were unlikely to be able to provide much information that would link Ralph to the broader criminal network. They might even be sent to detention centres for illegal immigration, facing deportation and a return to the same miserable conditions they had fled. If they were lucky enough to be released from detention, they might just end up in another low-paying, dangerous job—perhaps working for the same kind of people who had originally trafficked them.

It was a sobering thought, one that made Anya's stomach turn. The law could only do so much, and in this case, it wasn't enough to undo the damage already done. It was an imperfect system, one that couldn't even begin to heal the trauma these victims had suffered. And even as Ralph's world began to crumble, the true extent of his exploitation would remain

hidden in the cracks, buried beneath paperwork, bureaucracy, and the systemic failures that allowed this kind of operation to thrive.

For Anya, the weight of the operation felt heavy. The stolen cars were one thing. They could be seized, sold, or dismantled. But the people trapped in Ralph's grip, those who were exploited and abused, needed more than just rescue—they needed a chance at rebuilding their lives. The reality of how many would never get that chance weighed on her. Even with all the planning, the intelligence, and the execution, there were too many people in the system who would slip through the cracks, leaving Ralph's tentacles far-reaching, despite the agency's best efforts.

She glanced at Dan and Dave, who were preparing for the next phase of the operation. "We need to make sure we get to them before Ralph has a chance to cover his tracks," she said, her voice steely. "We're not just taking his cars. We're taking his empire down, piece by piece. And that means making sure no one else gets caught in his web."

## 20 Crashing Down

The evidence they had gathered was airtight. The stolen vehicles were the first domino to fall, and Ralph would have nowhere to hide once it all came crashing down. The intelligence they'd pulled from Ralph's own cloud storage had provided everything they needed—the stolen cars, the offshore accounts, the shell companies. Every piece connected, building an undeniable case that would dismantle his operations. But it wasn't just the vehicles that would take Ralph down—it was the people trafficking. The exploitative system he had built, using low-cost, illegal labour under the guise of “bed and breakfast” housing, was just as damning. It was a monstrous part of his empire, and now it was linked directly to him, leaving him with nowhere to run.

But the final part of the plan, the one that would truly cripple Ralph and ensure he couldn't rebuild, was the bank accounts. His wealth, hidden away in a network of international accounts and funds, was the lifeblood of his empire. If they could drain those accounts, Ralph's empire would be bankrupt before he even realised what had happened.

Anya's skills were the key to this final move. Thanks to the credentials she had managed to sneak into his accounts, getting into his banking system was a walk in the park. The initial access had been relatively easy—riding Ralph's online banking session had allowed her to add her credentials with a simple click of approval. Now, it was just a matter of making the moves that would destroy his financial infrastructure.

With the access she had, Anya began siphoning funds from Ralph's primary accounts. The money flowed freely through the system, and it didn't take long before Anya started routing it to offshore accounts—hidden in jurisdictions that would make it near impossible for anyone to track down the funds. It wasn't just about draining Ralph's accounts—it was about making sure that the money would disappear into layers of financial red tape, buried deep in international borders.

By the time anyone connected the dots, the money would be long gone. It would be impossible to trace it back to Ralph without years of bureaucratic red tape and legal hurdles. His funds would be scattered across so many international banks, in so many anonymous accounts, that trying to retrieve it would be a hopeless task.

Anya grinned to herself as the last of the funds moved into place. Ralph's empire was financially bankrupt, the stolen cars were gone, and the human trafficking operation was exposed. Even if Ralph managed to escape the immediate legal consequences, his wealth was gone, his reputation shattered. There would be no way for him to recover from this—he was left with nothing.

Dave, who had been monitoring the operation from his side, leaned over. "Is it done?" he asked, his voice steady but tinged with curiosity.

Anya sat back in her chair, the satisfaction of a job well done radiating off her. "It's done," she said with a smile. "Everything's moved. By the time Ralph figures out what's happened, he'll have no way to access his money. And the stolen cars are already accounted for. It's over."

Dan, who had been watching the screen over Anya's shoulder, looked up with a grin. "Not bad. Ralph's empire just went bankrupt without him even knowing it."

Anya nodded, fingers hovering over the keyboard, ensuring every last transaction went through without a hitch. "Bankrupt, broken, and exposed. His empire's crumbled. It's just a matter of time before he realises it."

The three of them sat in silence for a moment, the weight of their actions settling in. Ralph, once a powerful criminal mastermind, was now reduced to a shadow of his former self. His wealth was gone, his operations in tatters, and his reputation permanently ruined. There was nowhere for him to go. No way for him to rebuild.

Dave said, “I’d like to be a fly on the wall when Ralph finds out he’s broke.”

Ralph sat in the back seat of his Range Rover, the quiet hum of the engine barely audible as his phone vibrated in his hand, alerting him to a series of messages. He had barely paid attention to them at first, thinking it was just some routine notification from one of his many business dealings or perhaps another reminder about some mundane task. But as the messages continued to flood his inbox, Ralph’s brow furrowed in confusion.

One message caught his eye, and he swiped it open. His heart sank as he read it: *Account balance: Zero*. It was one of his offshore accounts, the kind that held millions of pounds in assets, carefully stashed away.

“Must be some mistake,” he muttered to himself, rubbing his temples. *Probably just a system glitch on one of the foreign banking servers*. He quickly glanced at his phone again, but the next message was from a different account. Again, the balance was reported as zero.

*This can’t be right.*

Ralph’s eyes darted between the screen and the road ahead, his mind racing. He checked the other account, his fingers trembling slightly as he swiped to open the app. Again, *balance zero*. His pulse quickened as the screen showed numerous transfers to various unknown bank accounts—none of which he recognised. The transactions were large, far too large to be any kind of mistake. He hadn’t authorised any of them.

“Son of a...” Ralph cursed under his breath, frustration mounting. He opened another account. The same result. Balance zero, and another series of unfamiliar transactions draining his funds.

Ralph could feel his chest tighten as panic began to settle in. His mind raced. This wasn’t just a glitch. *Someone has done this intentionally*. Someone had got into his accounts and siphoned off his money. His

financial empire, the very thing he had spent years building and hiding, was being dismantled before his eyes.

Quickly, he checked another account. *Zero*. Then another. *Zero*. Every single one of his accounts, every hard-earned penny of his illicit empire, was gone.

“What the hell is going on?” Ralph muttered, his voice thick with disbelief. Sweat started to form on his brow, his fingers now frantically swiping through the accounts, checking every transfer, every withdrawal. But it was the same story across all of them—large sums, routed to unknown accounts. *There’s no way this is just a coincidence.*

His mind raced. Who could have done this? How could they have got to him without triggering any alarms? *Was it the authorities? Had someone tipped them off?* He scanned his phone for any signs of notifications or alerts from his bank’s security, but there was nothing. Just the empty balance staring back at him.

*They’ve drained everything.*

It hit him with full force now. The money—his most valuable asset—was gone. Without his funds, Ralph had nothing. His connections, his properties, his operations—all of it was tied to the flow of money he had been running for years.

In a fit of anger, Ralph slammed his fist against the seat, the reality of the situation sinking in. His empire was crumbling, and there was nothing he could do to stop it. The phone in his hand felt heavier now, like it was a reminder of how vulnerable he truly was.

He needed answers. But as his mind raced to find a way out of this, it was clear: whoever had done this to him had played him like a pawn. He had been carefully manipulated, unaware that his own financial empire had already been dismantled. They’d got to him before he even knew what was happening.

For a moment, Ralph thought about taking matters into his own hands—about using his remaining power to fight back. But deep down, he knew the truth. The game was over. Whoever had done this had outsmarted him, and there was nothing left to do but face the inevitable collapse of everything he had built.

Ralph's mind was racing as he gripped the phone tighter. There had to be a way to fix this. *This couldn't just be happening.* His empire—his money—was gone in an instant, and he was desperate to find some solution, some loophole. The weight of the situation pressed down on him, but he couldn't give up now. He needed answers, and fast.

His fingers dialed the number for his accountant, Miles. It was after hours, but he didn't care. He paid Miles a small fortune to handle his financial matters, and if anyone could get him out of this mess, it was him. The phone rang, the sound grating in his ear. He could feel the panic rising, but he forced himself to breathe steadily as the line connected.

"Miles," Ralph snapped, his voice already sharp with frustration. "I've got a bit of a situation..."

There was a long pause before Miles's voice finally came through, muffled at first and sounding half-asleep. "Ralph? It's late. What's going on?"

"I've been hacked, Miles," Ralph continued, his voice edging towards a shout. "All my accounts, everything—cleaned out. I'm talking about millions. This can't just be a mistake. Something's wrong. There's gotta be some kind of fraud prevention—how do we fix this? How do I get it back?"

Miles, now fully awake, sighed heavily. "Alright, calm down, Ralph. You need to slow down and think about this. You sure it's fraud? Could be an error on the bank's end, but I'm guessing it's more than that." He hesitated before adding, "What exactly happened?"

Ralph's frustration boiled over. He leaned back against the Range Rover, his face flushed. "I checked every account. One by one. Every last one of them—balance zero, and a whole bunch of transfers to unknown accounts. This isn't some system glitch. It's theft, Miles! The money's gone!"

Miles didn't sound as panicked as Ralph expected. Instead, there was a certain calmness to his reply that made Ralph even more uneasy. "Alright, listen. I'll be honest with you. You're not going to get those transactions reversed easily. Especially not with the kind of setup you've got. You know how we did things with those foreign accounts—offshore, jurisdictional protections. It's a double-edged sword, Ralph. They protect you from the authorities, but they also make it nearly impossible to recover stolen funds."

Ralph's stomach turned. "What do you mean, 'nearly impossible'? You're telling me it's gone forever?"

"Pretty much," Miles replied, his voice now uncomfortably steady. "Those accounts were set up to be untouchable, designed to shield your assets from legal scrutiny. They're in countries with strict privacy laws. The banks aren't exactly going to be jumping to listen to your complaints about fraud or theft. They're likely to tell you there's nothing they can do unless you can prove the money was taken by someone within their system—and you won't be able to do that."

Ralph's mind reeled at the words. "You've got to be kidding me. Miles, you told me these accounts would protect me. That's why I put everything in them. You said they'd keep me safe from this kind of thing!"

There was a long pause. "I said they'd protect you from the authorities, Ralph. Not from fraud, not from thieves. I can't do anything about it. I'm sorry. The fact is, the banks aren't going to help you trace the funds, and even if you could get someone to investigate, it'd be a nightmare. The money's gone, Ralph."

Ralph's hands clenched into fists, his frustration boiling over. "I pay you good money to manage this stuff. And now you're telling me there's nothing I can do? All my money, gone, and you can't even do anything about it?"

The cold truth settled over Ralph like a weight. Miles's calm voice only made it worse. "There's nothing anyone can do, Ralph. It's a dead end."

Ralph pulled the phone away from his ear, staring at it as if the device itself had betrayed him. His empire had been built on secrecy, on hiding his wealth where no one could touch it. And now, it had all been pulled out from under him. *Gone*.

Ralph's mind began to spiral, the enormity of what was happening hitting him like a freight train. Everything he had worked for, all the money, all the connections, was gone. And now he was left with nothing—no assets, no way to recover the funds, and no one to turn to for help. Miles had given him the cold, hard truth, and Ralph couldn't deny it. He was finished. His entire empire was destroyed.

The call ended with no further words spoken. Ralph sat there in the back seat of his Range Rover, his mind whirling as he tried to process the impossibility of it all. He had been outsmarted, outplayed, and now he was paying the price.

There was no escape.

Ralph sat there in the back of his Range Rover, the phone still held loosely in his trembling hand. The unsettling silence that had followed his conversation with Miles seemed to grow louder. His mind was racing, desperately trying to make sense of the avalanche of bad news. His financial empire had been ripped apart, his money siphoned off by an unseen hand, and now it seemed like his entire world was coming crashing down.

The phone's screen flashed again, this time with an incoming call. Ralph's heart skipped a beat when he saw the number—it was John, his solicitor. *Of all the people to call now*, Ralph thought bitterly. It seemed too much of a coincidence, almost like the universe had decided to pile on.

He swiped to answer the call, trying to steady his breath. “Ralph, it's John. I've got some worrying news from some of my legal sources,” came the voice on the other end, sounding tense and urgent.

“What do you mean?” Ralph asked, his voice hoarse, the panic that had been bubbling beneath the surface finally starting to show.

John's tone was clipped, as if he was talking through clenched teeth. “It seems someone signed off on a lot of warrants recently, and they all have your name linked to them. I don't know what you've done, but you need to lie low. Go somewhere you can't be found until I know more.”

Ralph's stomach twisted in knots. Warrants? His name? What the hell was going on? He had been careful—no direct connections, no traceable links. He had planned everything meticulously. *How could they have connected him?*

“What kind of warrants?” Ralph demanded, his voice rising in a mixture of disbelief and fear.

John hesitated for a long moment, and when he spoke again, there was a coldness to his words. “Sorry, Ralph. That's all I've got. I've got to go.”

The line went dead, the finality of the click echoing in Ralph's ear like a hammer blow.

His mind reeled. Warrants? What had he got himself tangled in? First the money disappearing, now this? Whoever had been behind the theft of his funds clearly wasn't just after his wealth—they were coming for him, pulling at every thread of his operation. How had they found him? Who had given the orders for these warrants, and what were they looking for?

Ralph's fingers tightened around the phone, his chest tightening with a sense of helplessness he hadn't felt in years. He was used to controlling situations, manipulating people, but this was something far beyond his reach. He had underestimated how deep this operation had gone, how well-organised it was. Whoever was behind it knew how to cover their tracks, and now they were moving to take him down piece by piece.

His thoughts began to race, his chest constricting with anxiety. *Where can I go?* He had assets stashed away in various places, but it was becoming increasingly clear that nowhere was truly safe any more. And even if he did go into hiding, how long would it take before they found him?

He stared blankly at the phone in his hand, his thoughts spinning. He was trapped—isolated in a corner of his own making. The empire he'd built, the web of secrecy and wealth he'd wrapped around himself, was now being unravelled in real-time.

As Ralph slumped back in his seat, the reality hit hard. There was nowhere left to run, no way out. The consequences were now coming for him, and there was no escape from the net closing in.

Ralph's mind was a storm of thoughts as the Range Rover rolled through the darkened industrial estate. He couldn't shake the weight of the past hour—the call with his accountant, the news from his solicitor, the sudden and inexplicable emptying of his accounts. His every move felt more frantic, more urgent. *Where do I go from here?* he thought as the car rolled to a stop outside a nondescript industrial unit, one of many hidden in the shadows of the estate.

“Take me to the lock-up,” Ralph ordered, his voice tight. The driver gave a short nod, not questioning his employer, as the vehicle turned into the estate.

The Range Rover pulled to a stop outside the unit, and Ralph didn't wait for the car to fully park before stepping out. His mind was already racing to the next steps, trying to find some semblance of control in the chaos.

“Leave me here, I’ll make my own arrangements.” he told the driver, not looking back as he slammed the door behind him.

The vehicle drove off, and Ralph stood in the darkness for a moment, taking a deep breath. He had to lie low—there was no point in keeping a car that was known to be his. He couldn’t trust anything right now, especially not something as obvious as his Range Rover. It was time to move quietly, without attracting attention.

He fumbled for the keys in his pocket and walked toward the lock-up, his hands shaking as he slid the key into the heavy lock. The door creaked open, and he stepped into the dimly lit space. The lights flickered before fully turning on, revealing the room inside.

The unit was cramped, but well-organised. Shelves lined the walls, piled high with all manner of things—tools, parts, boxes of forgotten odds and ends. Nothing unusual to the untrained eye. But Ralph knew exactly what was hidden here. In the centre of the unit was a green tarpaulin, stretched taut across what was clearly something of value—something that might just save him now.

His heart beat a little faster as he moved toward the back of the unit, pushing aside a half-filled oil drum to reveal a hidden safe embedded in the concrete floor. It was a small thing, inconspicuous, but Ralph knew it was there for just this type of emergency. The safe was his emergency backup plan, hidden in plain sight.

He found the small key on his key ring and unlocked the safe with a satisfying click. Inside, there were a few thick padded envelopes, a set of car keys, and a couple of passports, each with matching driving licenses. Ralph’s hands were trembling slightly as he grabbed one of the envelopes, tearing it open to check its contents. The thick wad of twenty-pound notes inside was exactly what he needed right now—liquid cash, easy to spend without drawing attention.

He pulled out two of the envelopes and pocketed them, then grabbed the car keys from the safe. It was a small, simple operation, but it had been enough to get him out of a jam before. He locked the safe again, making sure it was securely hidden under the oil drum before turning to the tarpaulin.

Ralph approached the covered object, his heart thudding. He pulled back the fabric, revealing the car beneath. It was an old Mercedes saloon, one that had been stashed here for years—well-maintained, fully serviced, and with current MOT, tax, and insurance. But more importantly, it wasn't connected to him in any official capacity. This car wasn't traceable to Ralph. It was the perfect backdoor escape plan, designed for exactly this kind of situation.

The car was an insurance policy, plain and simple. It had never drawn attention because it didn't officially belong to Ralph, and it certainly wouldn't trigger any ANPR systems. The authorities would never connect it to him. It was legally registered, but not in his name. He climbed into the driver's seat, relieved by the familiarity of the interior. The smell of leather and the quiet hum of the engine as he turned the key offered a brief sense of normalcy.

The engine rumbled to life smoothly, almost silently, and Ralph felt a small sense of comfort in the moment. He drove the Mercedes toward the large roller door at the front of the unit. The door rattled as he opened it, the street lights casting long shadows across the quiet road outside.

Ralph drove the car out into the night, the street empty and dark, a perfect cover for his escape. He closed unit's roller shutter behind him, before climbing back into the driver's seat. The sense of relief was fleeting, but for the first time in hours, Ralph felt a semblance of control returning to him. He needed to be calm, and controlled. Keep a clear head to see this thing through.

He drove away into the night, unsure of what the next hours or days would bring, but knowing he had to keep moving. For now, the car—his backup plan—was the only thing standing between him and complete ruin.

As Ralph drove through the empty streets, his mind raced with possibilities. The weight of everything that had happened in the past few hours still hung heavily on his shoulders. The stolen money, the warrants with his name on them, the collapse of his empire—it all seemed like a nightmare he couldn't wake up from.

But the one thing he had left, the only thing that would give him a chance to start over, was his “Go” bag. The small, nondescript bag was hidden in the boot of the Mercedes. It contained everything he needed to disappear, to leave behind everything he had spent years building. Clothes, shoes, toiletries, and a few essentials—all chosen with the idea of blending in, of going unnoticed in the places he would go next.

Ralph glanced in the rear-view mirror, checking for any sign that he was being followed. There was nothing. No flashing lights, no patrol cars tailing him. The silence was reassuring, but only just.

His mind kept going back to the same thought: *Where do I go from here?* His usual haunts—the ones where he could hide in plain sight—were now risky. Everything had changed in a matter of hours. If he wasn't careful, this would be the last time he ever saw freedom.

As he turned off the main road and onto a narrow, winding country lane, a slight sense of calm washed over him. The countryside was quiet, and Ralph needed that silence. He needed a place where he could think without constantly looking over his shoulder. The world was a lot bigger than his city-bound empire, and it was time to retreat into it.

The drive took him out into rural England, the rolling hills and sprawling fields stretching endlessly under the grey evening sky. There was something soothing about the isolation of the countryside, the solitude that would allow him to plan his next move without interference. A hotel,

somewhere isolated but decent, would be the right place to regroup. A few nights off the radar to give him time to figure out his next steps.

As the car passed a couple of small cottages, Ralph spotted a sign for a quaint-looking inn tucked away along a side road. It was small, rustic, and the kind of place where no one would look twice at him. Perfect.

He turned into the small car park, ensuring his car was parked in a place where it wouldn't be easily noticed. With his hands steadying his breath, he took the "Go" bag from the boot of the car. As he walked up to the entrance, the smell of old wood and the faint scent of cooking from inside greeted him. The low murmur of voices from within made the place feel alive but not bustling. It was just what he needed.

Inside, the receptionist greeted him with a polite, neutral smile. Ralph gave her his best casual smile in return, trying to keep his voice steady as he asked, "Room for the night? I'll pay cash."

She nodded without a word, and after a moment, handed him a key. "Room 4, at the back. Quiet, away from the other guests."

"Perfect," Ralph said quietly, sliding the cash across the desk. He didn't give her his real name—there was no need. He was already someone else in this place. A man trying to escape, trying to start again. No one needed to know who he really was.

With the key in his hand, Ralph made his way upstairs, pausing just once to glance over his shoulder and make sure no one had taken notice. The walls were thin, but the privacy was exactly what he needed. Room 4 was small but comfortable, with a simple bed, a worn-out armchair by the window, and a bedside table with a lamp.

Ralph set the bag down on the bed, looking around the room as he tried to collect his thoughts. There was a certain finality to being here. It was a moment of pause, a moment of respite before he had to make the next

decision, whatever that might be. For the first time in what felt like forever, he allowed himself to exhale, his body relaxing just slightly.

He took a shower, the hot water washing away some of the tension, before changing into a fresh set of clothes from the “Go” bag. The clothes were unremarkable—just a simple shirt, jeans, and comfortable shoes. Nothing to attract attention, nothing that screamed Ralph.

Sitting on the edge of the bed, he pulled out the phone and checked for messages. Nothing from anyone important, but there were a number of missed calls from his solicitor. Ralph scowled. He didn’t want to deal with him right now. Not until he figured out his next move.

He turned the phone off and slipped it into the drawer beside the bed, then leaned back against the headboard, closing his eyes.

For now, he was safe. But that would only last so long. It wouldn’t be long before the world caught up with him. He needed to move quickly. The stolen money was gone, and his empire was shattered. The only thing left was survival.

Tomorrow, he’d think about his next move. Tonight, he’d rest, and try to accept that the world he knew was over.

## 21 Regrouping

Ralph stood at his hotel window, absently adjusting his tailored shirt over his paunch as he scanned the countryside outside. The reflection in the glass showed what he tried to hide—a man whose body betrayed years of excess, whose slicked-back hair couldn't quite disguise his receding hairline. But it wasn't vanity that made him frown at his reflection. It was memory.

He remembered standing in this same spot fifteen years ago, lean and hungry, watching his first legitimate loan shop open. He'd promised himself he'd never be like his father—a proud man reduced to begging for extensions on bills, slowly crushed under the weight of mounting debt until there was nothing left of him. That image had driven Ralph, shaped every decision he'd made since.

The loan shop had been honest work at first. He'd helped people the banks wouldn't touch, understood their desperation because he'd lived it. But then he'd seen how the system really worked—how the wealthy stayed wealthy by keeping others down. His father hadn't failed because he was weak; he'd failed because the game was rigged. So Ralph had decided to rewrite the rules.

Now, watching his empire crumble around him, that old fear of powerlessness clawed at his gut. His dark eyes narrowed, calculating his next move. He'd spent decades building his position, transforming from the skinny kid who counted every penny into the man who controlled them all. His body might have softened, his hairline might have retreated, but he'd made sure his mind stayed sharp as a razor.

He straightened his expensive watch—a reminder of how far he'd come—and felt the familiar weight of anxiety settle on his shoulders. Everything he'd built was at risk, and he was damned if he'd let it slip away. He'd rather burn it all down than go back to being powerless. After all, monsters

weren't born; they were created by necessity. And necessity had taught Ralph that survival meant being the one who held the leash, not the one wearing the collar.

Ralph sat at the small table in the hotel's dining room, pushing the half-eaten toast around on his plate, his mind still grappling with the overwhelming weight of the situation. The comfort of a warm meal couldn't settle his nerves—he was still fuming from the devastation of the past day. His financial empire had crumbled, his assets stripped away, and now the authorities were closing in on everything he had built. He had hoped for some respite, but there was no escaping the reality of his situation.

The quiet of the morning only added to his sense of isolation. He had to act, but first, he needed information. *What was happening? How far had they gone?*

Ralph reached for his phone, dialling John's number. He didn't have time for pleasantries or pleas for patience. The longer he stayed in the dark, the worse it would get. The call rang once, twice, before John finally answered.

"Hi John, it's Ralph," he said, his voice tight, controlled, though his anger simmered beneath the surface.

"I've been calling, trying to get hold of you. I didn't want to leave messages," John's voice came through, laced with frustration.

Ralph sighed. "That's OK. What do you have for me?"

John's tone shifted, now sounding far more serious than before. "It's not good news, Ralph. The warrants— they were for the properties you call 'bed and breakfast.' The authorities have all the details of the shell companies and the relationship to you. I don't know how, but they have everything."

Ralph felt his pulse spike. *The B&B properties*. His heart sank, his mind racing with the implications. Those properties were the backbone of his operations—the places where his illegal workers lived, the source of the profits that funded everything else. If the authorities had that kind of access, if they could tie him directly to the operations, it meant they had already pieced together his entire criminal network.

“Someone’s doing this to me,” Ralph muttered, gripping the edge of the table. “First the money, then the business. When I find out who...” His voice trailed off, the rage threatening to spill over.

John's voice was calm, but there was a weight to it that carried the full impact of the news. “They’ve petitioned to take the properties under the proceeds of crime. They’ve filed for everything you own, Ralph. But that’s not all. They’ve also seized a shipment of stolen cars that they’ve linked directly to you. This is a lot of serious crime they’ve got lined up, and they’re ready to pursue convictions on it.”

Ralph’s stomach churned, the magnitude of John’s words settling over him like a heavy blanket. His stolen vehicles—the ones that had been carefully concealed for months, with every detail meticulously hidden—had been seized. And they had somehow connected them to him.

“That’s it, then,” Ralph said, his voice hollow. “They pretty much have everything. My empire is falling apart.”

A heavy silence hung between them. Ralph closed his eyes for a moment, trying to steady himself, fighting the wave of despair threatening to take over. He could feel his anger growing again—anger at the situation, anger at the people who had taken him down.

“But I’m not taking this lying down,” he growled, his voice hardening. “I’m going to find out who’s responsible for all this, and when I do, I’ll tear them apart.”

John paused, then spoke carefully. “Ralph... you still have the Velvet Lounge. If you want to keep a foothold in this, you could use it. You have some leverage there. But...” He hesitated, as if weighing the words before delivering them. “You know it’s going to be hard to run that from a prison cell.”

Ralph clenched his jaw, his thoughts spinning. *The Velvet Lounge*, his crown jewel, a place of power and influence. It was the one thing that remained untouched—so far. But if things continued the way they were, he’d never see it again.

“I’m going to get whoever’s behind this,” Ralph said with grim determination. “Then I’ll disappear. I can’t stick around for whatever’s coming next. Let me know what else you can find out, John. I need to be ready.”

The line was silent for a moment, and John’s voice came through, a little softer this time. “I’ll keep digging. But you need to stay off the radar, Ralph. For now, keep a low profile and don’t trust anyone. I’ll let you know if anything else comes up.”

“Thanks, John,” Ralph muttered, the words feeling strange coming out of his mouth. Trust had always been something Ralph had hoarded, like everything else in his life. But now, he wasn’t sure who to trust any more.

The call ended, and Ralph sat back in his chair, staring at the phone. His world was unravelling faster than he could control it. Every action, every move he’d made to protect his operation, had come crashing down.

But the one thing Ralph knew was this: he wasn’t going down without a fight. Whoever had set him up, whoever had orchestrated his downfall, they’d made a grave mistake.

“David, it’s Ralph,” came the voice on the other end of the line, strained with frustration but still sharp and demanding. “You’ve probably heard

what's been going down. I need you to do some digging. Find out what you can about who's behind this. I need to know anything—and fast.”

Ralph didn't wait for David to speak before continuing. His voice was terse, cutting through the line with the urgency and anger building inside him. “I don't want to hear about who's going to be affected or how this will disrupt anyone's life. I don't have time for that. The only thing I care about right now is finding out who's responsible for all this. Everything's falling apart, and I need to know who set this trap for me.”

David, on the other end, hesitated for a moment. He could hear the tension in Ralph's voice, the raw desperation mixed with anger. David was one of the few people Ralph still trusted, and he could feel the weight of the request. “Understood, Ralph,” David finally replied. “I'll start looking into it. I'll find whatever I can. You'll have an update soon.”

Ralph's eyes narrowed, the thoughts swirling in his mind as he heard the click of the line ending. David would get it done. Ralph knew that. But the idea of being on the back foot, having to rely on someone else to uncover the truth, gnawed at him. His world had always been one of control, where he made the rules and pulled the strings. Now, it felt like everything was slipping through his fingers.

He ran his fingers through his hair and stood, pacing the small hotel room. His empire was in shambles, and his mind kept coming back to the same question: *Who had done this to him?*

The stolen cars, the authorities closing in on his properties, the disappearance of his bank balances—it was *all connected*. Whoever had orchestrated this knew exactly what they were doing, had covered their tracks, and left him with nothing but scraps.

His phone buzzed in his pocket. He glanced down, irritated, then checked the message. It was from another one of his contacts, someone trying to find out what was happening. Another person who didn't understand the

severity of the situation. Ralph read the message, feeling his blood pressure rise. They were asking if there was anything they could do.

Ralph slammed the phone down on the desk, his frustration boiling over. He wasn't going to waste time on anyone's misplaced sympathy, not in the mood for their questions about who would get hurt. He was the one at the centre of it all, and he didn't care about anyone else until he got answers.

The only thing that mattered was finding out who was pulling the strings, who had set the wheels in motion to dismantle everything he had worked for. *Once I find them*, Ralph thought grimly, *then I'll deal with everything else*.

He let the silence of the room settle over him for a moment, trying to collect his thoughts. He needed to stay focused. There were no distractions any more. Only one thing remained: *revenge*.

The game had shifted, and Ralph was no longer the one in control. But that didn't mean it was over. It wasn't over until he said it was.

Ralph sat on the edge of the bed, his phone pressed to his ear, listening intently as David spoke. His mind was a whirlwind, trying to piece together every scrap of information that had come his way. *Anything*, Ralph had said to David. *Anything* that could give him a lead. And this... this was all he had.

David's voice was steady, though Ralph could hear the weariness in it, the weight of the situation. "The only thing I have relates to the cars. I've heard some whispers, nothing concrete, but it might be enough to work with. Mick's been talking about a big score, and apparently, he's due for a serious payout. Word is, he's going to need to lie low after he gets it."

Ralph's pulse quickened. *Mick*? He had been an opportunist, a small-time player in Ralph's world, but this? Could he be behind it all? Ralph clenched his fists, his knuckles turning white as he listened closely.

David continued, “There’s also something about him meeting with an insurance investigator. They seemed pretty buddy-buddy. It didn’t sit right with some people. They were talking shop, but they were too chummy for it to be anything strictly professional.”

An eyebrow arched on Ralph’s face as the pieces started to come together, though he didn’t fully believe it. *Mick*? The idea that Mick had the smarts—or the balls—to orchestrate something of this scale seemed impossible. The crafty bastard could take advantage of a situation, sure, but planning something as complex as this? Against Ralph?

“No way,” Ralph muttered under his breath. “Mick might be clever with a quick deal or two, but he’s not the brains behind this. Someone’s pulling his strings. He wouldn’t have the nerve to cross me like this, not on his own.”

David’s voice was calm, but he sounded uncertain. “Could be. But right now, he’s the only lead you’ve got. It’s something to go on, at least. You might want to check it out.”

Ralph sighed deeply, running a hand through his hair in frustration. He had been hoping for more, something concrete. But this was it. If Mick was involved, he needed to get to the bottom of it. And quickly.

“Alright,” Ralph said, his tone sharp and final. “Thanks, David. Keep digging, but I’ll take it from here.”

He ended the call and immediately dialled another number, this one for someone who could take care of matters without raising suspicion. His contact picked up after the second ring, a voice full of authority and readiness.

“Get someone on Mick,” Ralph ordered, his voice cold. “I don’t care how, just find him. Pick him up, take him somewhere quiet. Somewhere he can’t run. I need a word with him.”

The line was silent for a moment before the voice on the other end replied, “Understood. We’ll get on it.”

“Good,” Ralph said, his voice steady now. “And make sure he doesn’t leave until I’ve spoken to him. If he knows something, I’ll find out what it is.”

As Ralph hung up the phone, he leaned back against the wall, closing his eyes for a moment. *Mick*, the one person who had always been on the periphery of his operations, had suddenly become the key to everything. If Mick had played a role in this, or if he was simply a pawn in someone else’s game, Ralph needed to know.

He couldn’t afford to waste any more time. He needed answers, and he needed them fast.

## 22 Realisation

The evening air was crisp as Dave walked towards the Rainbow pub, his footsteps steady and deliberate. The pub, nestled on the edge of a quiet street, seemed like the perfect place for Mick to hide in plain sight. Mick had always been an opportunist, and the Rainbow—being a relatively low-key establishment—was just the kind of place where he could blend in without drawing too much attention. Dave didn't need the tracker to tell him Mick would be here; it was where he always went when he wanted to lie low and avoid people like Dave.

As Dave approached the entrance, he could see through the windows that the pub was bustling with the usual crowd—locals chatting, the hum of conversation and clinking glasses filling the air. Stepping inside, the warmth hit him immediately, and the familiar smell of beer and fried food hung in the air. The pub was a large one, dimly lit with a few pool tables in the back, but Dave knew exactly where to head. He made his way towards the bar, his eyes scanning the crowd.

Dave approached the bar and ordered his usual pint of Guinness, paying with cash and receiving a change he didn't need to count. He took the pint in his hand, feeling the cold of the glass against his skin as he brought it to his lips for a long, satisfying sip. He glanced around, taking in the faces of the regulars, some familiar, some not. His eyes finally settled on Mick. He was seated at a table with Steve, his usual sidekick, in the far corner near the back. Mick looked uncomfortable, glancing around the room as though he was expecting something—or someone.

As Dave made his way across the pub, he caught sight of a large thug, dressed in black, heading directly towards Mick. Dave could hear snippets of their conversation as the thug leaned over the table, his presence immediately imposing.

“You need to come with me,” the thug’s voice was low and commanding. “Ralph wants a word.”

Mick, looking visibly unsettled, tried to sputter something in response. “I—I’m not sure this is a good idea, mate. With everything going on right now...” he stammered, his voice wavering.

The thug wasn’t having any of it. “Ralph doesn’t care. He wants to talk, and you’re going to talk to him.”

As Mick looked up at the towering figure, he seemed to realise the gravity of the situation. His face turned pale, his hesitation obvious. It was clear he didn’t want to be dragged into the mess Ralph had created, but the thug wasn’t about to take no for an answer.

Dave had seen enough. He was close enough now to catch the last of the exchange. Without a word, he stepped forward, placing himself directly between Mick and the thug. The thug stopped mid-step, looking at Dave with a flicker of recognition that quickly turned to a flash of panic.

“He’s with me,” Dave said coolly, his voice unwavering as he took another sip of his pint. “Now get lost.”

The thug’s eyes widened, and Dave saw the instant recognition in his expression. This wasn’t just any thug—this was one of the heavies from the Velvet Lounge, the same ones that Dave had torn through at the door. The thug hesitated for a moment, his gaze shifting between Dave and Mick, before he slowly raised his hands in surrender.

“I’m out,” the thug muttered under his breath, before he turned and quickly backed away, heading towards the door, his head low and his shoulders hunched in defeat. The moment he was out of sight, Dave casually took another sip of his pint and turned to Mick.

“I think you and I need a chat,” Dave said, his voice calm, but there was an edge to it that made it clear there was no room for argument. He didn’t wait for Mick to respond. Instead, he slid into the seat opposite him and placed

his pint on the table, the faint clink of glass against wood cutting through the moment of tension.

Mick shifted uncomfortably in his seat, his usual bravado gone. Steve, never far from Mick, shot Dave a wary look but didn't say anything, knowing that confrontation wasn't something he wanted to invite. The two of them sat in silence for a moment, as Mick visibly squirmed.

Mick's face was a mix of confusion and fear as Dave's words hit him like a hammer. He had thought he could spin his way out of anything, but now, it seemed the walls were closing in faster than he could think.

Dave took another sip of his pint, letting the silence stretch between them. His voice was calm but laced with authority as he recited the tale he'd woven. "Well, Mick, turns out you've been a very naughty boy. Ralph thinks you've done a deal with an insurance investigator called Ruby. You remember Ruby, don't you? You made quite a few calls to her, and even spent an evening here, at this very pub, with her."

Mick's face paled. He opened his mouth, then closed it, eyes darting nervously around the table. The name Ruby did ring a bell. But he hadn't spoken to any investigator, and the evening he spent with a woman at the pub was nothing more than a few drinks and some idle chatter—certainly not some shady deal. But now, with Dave's insinuations, Mick could feel the weight of the lie wrapping around him like a noose.

"No," Mick stammered, his voice cracking, "that's not true. I—I didn't do anything like that. I don't know any insurance investigator."

Dave's gaze didn't waver. "Word is, it sounds like you're going to be very wealthy from an insurance payout for recovering a lot of stolen vehicles. Vehicles that Ralph had in his control."

Ralph's eyes widened at the mention of the stolen cars. His palms began to sweat as the panic set in. "Now, wait a minute, that's not how it went. I

mean, I never... It's not true," Mick tried to protest, but he knew his protests were as weak as they sounded.

Dave leaned back in his chair, taking his time with the next words, letting the tension build. "But Mick, I'm not the one you'll need to convince. I'm sure Ralph will be very understanding."

Mick's face twisted with frustration and fear. He stood up abruptly, his chair scraping harshly against the floor. "This is you, all you..." he muttered, his voice trembling with panic. "You set me up. You're behind all of this!"

Dave's eyes narrowed. "I gave you an opportunity to get out from under this, Mick. But you double-crossed me. Now, you're in it up to your neck. I wouldn't want Ralph to catch up with me if I were you."

Mick's breath quickened, his eyes darting around the pub. His mind raced as he tried to piece everything together. What had Dave done? He'd never been involved in anything that deep, no shady insurance deals, nothing that would put him on Ralph's radar. But now, everything was twisted, and the lie Dave had spun had him in a vice grip. Ralph would never believe he was innocent, not with what Dave had planted in his mind.

Mick's eyes flicked to Steve, who looked more uncomfortable than ever, but neither of them said anything. Mick took a step back, his hands shaking. "I didn't mean it. I didn't know who I was messing with! You don't know Ralph—he's dangerous. He's gonna kill me, isn't he?"

"What do you want from me?" Mick asked, his voice cracking, barely above a whisper. The fear was palpable in his tone, the reality of the situation sinking in. He knew he was in deep, but he wasn't sure just how deep.

Dave's expression remained cold and detached. "I don't want anything, Mick," he said slowly, deliberately, as if the words were being weighed

carefully. "I told you to stay off my radar. You didn't listen. Now, you're in the middle of a mess you can't get out of. If I were you, I'd just disappear."

The words hung in the air, like a verdict. Mick felt a cold sweat forming on his back as the gravity of Dave's message hit him. He wasn't going to be given a chance to explain himself, not to Dave, and certainly not to Ralph. If Dave was right—and Mick had a sinking feeling that he was—Ralph would be the least of his problems. If Dave wasn't the one to finish him off, it would be Ralph, with far less patience for excuses.

Mick didn't know what to say. He opened his mouth, but the words stuck in his throat. He wasn't even sure what he was trying to ask any more. *Disappear?* The idea of vanishing, leaving everything behind, seemed both like a coward's escape and his only option. But where would he go? What would he do?

Dave stared at him in silence, the tension thick between them. He was done with words, done with Mick's excuses. The decision had already been made. Ralph wouldn't care if Mick had been manipulated, and he was just a pawn in someone else's game. At this point, the damage was done, and Mick had dug his own grave.

Without another word, Dave got up and walked away, leaving Mick in the corner of the pub, his future uncertain, and his world completely shattered.

## 23 Catching Up

Ralph leaned back in his chair, the weight of the situation settling on his shoulders like a heavy cloak. The previous night's developments had thrown him off balance—Mick, the supposed weak link, now had the attention of someone far more dangerous than Ralph had anticipated.

“Turns out your door staff aren't all they were made out to be,” David had said earlier, his voice tinged with disbelief. “He found Mick and his sidekick in the Rainbow. Went to take him aside, but then some guy showed up and made him back off. Said you'd know him. The guy that came to the Velvet Lounge and beat up your other door men?”

Ralph's stomach churned as the name dropped into his mind like a stone. “Dave,” he muttered, the realisation dawning on him. *Dave*, the name reverberated in his mind, unsettling him.

He had written Dave off as a nobody, a small-time player with no backing, no affiliations, a loner. *Just a guy who couldn't help being a do-gooder, to help out a friend*, he had thought. But now? Now it seemed Dave had orchestrated all of this—this mess, the stolen cars, the wreckage of Ralph's empire. All of it was a by-product of something personal, something that had spiralled out of Ralph's control.

“Wait a minute,” Ralph said aloud to no one in particular. “This can't be about some few poxy grand loan his mate had taken out... what was his name again? Markus, that's right. But Dave, surely he's not doing this over a loan. This... this feels personal. A vendetta, over some small-time deal. A few slaps for lack of payment, maybe. And now, he's coming after me.”

His thoughts raced, trying to piece everything together. A small-time loan, something that had seemingly spiralled out of control, and a man named Dave who had apparently decided he wasn't going to let Ralph walk away with his dirty dealings unscathed. What had begun as an irritation had now escalated into full-blown retaliation.

First, Ralph would get the full story on Dave—who he really was, where he came from, what motivated him. No stone could be left unturned. He couldn't afford to underestimate Dave again. From what David had shared, it was clear Dave wasn't just some random guy, and this wasn't just about the money. Ralph needed to understand his adversary completely.

“OK, David,” Ralph said, his tone now colder, more deliberate. “This is what I need you to do...”

“I want all the information on Dave. Where he's been, who he's worked with, everything. I don't care how you get it,” Ralph said, his voice hardening. “And I want Mick and Steve. Make sure they don't talk, you understand what I'm asking?”

He laid out the next steps of his plan, his voice steady and calculating as he dictated the course of action.

Ralph ended the call, his thoughts swirling with plans, calculations, and contingencies. He wasn't going to let some nobody tear down what he had built. No, this was far from over. He would play his cards carefully. Dave thought he had the upper hand, but Ralph wasn't out of the game just yet.

Before Markus left for Spain, he'd needed a suitcase for his trip—one that was larger and more sturdy than his usual luggage. He didn't own one, so he casually went next door to borrow one from his neighbour, who he'd spoken to a few times over the years.

The neighbour, friendly but a bit nosy, was more than happy to lend it to him. They chatted briefly while Markus packed, and in the middle of their conversation, Markus—without thinking—let slip the date of his return. He mentioned, almost offhand, when he'd be back without even realising he had done so. It was just a passing comment, a small detail that Markus thought nothing of.

The neighbour, not realising the significance of this information, nodded and wished him a safe trip, completely unaware that this seemingly innocent exchange would play a pivotal role in what was about to happen.

Ralph's investigator, David had been working tirelessly, trying to dig up anything that would give Ralph the upper hand. As the situation around Ralph's empire crumbled, David knew the stakes were high. Unable to get any details about Dave, David resorted to tracking down Markus. They knew where he lived, but he'd disappeared – a smart move with Ralph's current mood. Finding Markus was going to involve old-fashioned footwork. It was footwork that paid off, when David set about visiting Markus' neighbours.

Mrs. Jenkins had lived next door to Markus for three years. Their relationship was the kind typical of modern neighbours—collecting each other's packages, a quick chat in the hallway, the occasional borrowed item. So when the well-dressed man showed up asking questions, she thought nothing of mentioning the suitcase she'd lent him. After all, it wasn't unusual—Markus had taken in countless Amazon deliveries for her over the years.

She'd even joked about it as he packed for Spain. "At least I won't have to sign for your parcels for a couple of weeks," she'd said, and that's when he'd mentioned his return date.

Markus had enjoyed his time away, even if the circumstances had forced him into hiding. Spain, with its warm sunshine and coastal beauty, had been a welcome distraction from the mess he had left behind. The days had been easy, spent lounging by the beach with a cold drink in hand, letting the sound of the waves crash against the shore drown out the noise of his worries. The constant heat had relaxed his tense muscles, the feeling of the sun on his skin soothing him in ways he hadn't thought possible.

The small seaside resort had been quiet, offering the kind of solitude he hadn't realised he needed. No one asking questions, no reminders of the

mess he had got tangled in back home. He had been able to breathe for the first time in what felt like forever, his mind temporarily free from the looming threats. Without Dave's intervention and that sudden plan to get him out of the country, Markus knew exactly what would have happened. Ralph's would have bled him dry, or left him face down in a ditch, probably both.

The Spanish sun had worked its magic on Markus. After a week of genuine relaxation—the first he'd had in years—the thought of returning home filled him with dread. He'd sat on his small balcony, watching tourists meander along the beach front, and pulled up the airline app on his phone. Changing his flight wouldn't be difficult. The resort had vacancies, and his peaceful existence had felt too precious to give up.

He recalls how his finger had hovered over the "modify booking" button. The warmth of the sun, the gentle sea breeze, the complete absence of pressure—it all beckoned him to stay. Here, Ralph and his thugs felt like a distant nightmare. Here, he could breathe.

Then reality had crept in. The cash Dave had given him wasn't going to last forever. The longer he stayed, the more he'd eat into those funds.

There was also his flat to consider. The heating would be coming on soon with the timer he'd set, and his plants—though mostly hardy—would need attention. Little threads of his old life pulled at him, demanding his return.

His brain in a fog, a day later, he'd found himself checking flights again, but this time for an earlier return. The waiting was getting to him. Maybe if he went back sooner, he could sort things out, get his life back on track. Dave had promised to handle everything, after all.

In the end, though, Markus stuck to his original plan. The original return was fine, not too long, not too short. He'd had his break, found his peace, and now it was time to face whatever waited for him back home.

But here, under the bright Spanish sun, the turmoil of real life had seemed so far away. He had taken his time—just enough to keep himself out of sight but not so much that he lost track of reality. It was an odd kind of freedom, one he didn't fully trust, but it had given him a much-needed break.

Now, as his plane landed back in the UK, Markus was torn between relief and the creeping dread of what awaited him. He stepped off the plane, weary but ready to face the consequences, his case trailing behind him. He had kept his head low in Spain, and as he boarded the train back to his small rented flat, he tried to shake off the last vestiges of his holiday's peace.

Arriving back at the flat, Markus took a deep breath as he unlocked the door. The familiar creak of the hinges sounded almost comforting, but it was overshadowed by the heavy weight of what was waiting for him. He needed to speak with Dave to find out what was happening. He dragged his wheeled suitcase into the hallway behind him, his steps sluggish, his heart rate picking up as he crossed the threshold.

He paused for a moment, listening. There was something unsettling about the silence. The flat felt too still, too quiet. He didn't know what he expected, but this wasn't it.

As he closed the door behind him and turned to leave the suitcase in the hallway, his gaze landed on the armchair in the front room. A figure sat facing the door, dark, imposing, and utterly out of place. The man was huge—massive, the size of a small mountain, and his presence in the room immediately triggered an icy spike of panic in Markus's chest. His heart began to race, but before he could react, another figure appeared behind him, stepping from the bedroom.

The second man was just as massive, even more so than the first. Markus froze, his breath caught in his throat, a cold shiver running down his spine. There was no escape now. They had him cornered, and he knew exactly

who they were. Ralph's heavies. These were no ordinary thugs—these were the kind of men who didn't ask questions, who didn't let you go easily.

The behemoth in the armchair stood, and the other stepped forward, forcing Markus to step back toward the door. They didn't say a word, but their actions were clear. There was no choice in the matter, no bargaining or pleading. They guided him outside with no hesitation, their hands on his shoulders, their grips like iron. Markus's heart pounded in his chest as he was forced toward the waiting van.

The side door of the van slid open with a metallic screech, and Markus was shoved inside, the cold, harsh metal of the van's interior pressing against him. He barely had time to register his surroundings before one of the heavies climbed in with him, slamming the door shut behind them. The other climbed into the driver's seat, and the van rumbled to life.

Markus sat there, trapped and unable to escape. The ride was long, the van's engine a constant roar in his ears, but it wasn't the noise that consumed him—it was the sheer terror of not knowing what was coming next. One thing was clear: he was in deeper than ever before. And there was no one to help him now.

Ralph's mind raced as the words sank in. *They have Markus.* The news came through from David, his voice calm but laced with that unmistakable edge of excitement—Ralph's most troublesome piece was finally in his hands. The relief was immediate, but it was quickly overshadowed by the boiling rage he'd been suppressing ever since everything had started unravelling.

£30k. That's what this all boiled down to. That paltry sum—less than Ralph had lost in a card game on one night—and this was the reason everything had gone sideways. Dave, this small-time nothing, had somehow managed to orchestrate a series of events that had stripped Ralph of nearly everything: the stolen cars, the money, his connections, even the

respect of his own crew. It all came crashing down because of a loan, a debt Markus couldn't pay.

The audacity of it all, the sheer nerve that Dave had, to not only drag him into this mess but then orchestrate the slow, methodical destruction of his empire, left Ralph seething. He couldn't fathom it.

But now, with Markus in his grasp, Ralph had the leverage he needed. He could feel the power shift back in his favour, the dark anticipation bubbling inside him as he imagined the reckoning. *Now, it's my turn*, Ralph thought, his fingers gripping the edge of the desk, his knuckles white with the force of his anger.

Markus, it was time to send a message. To Dave. To anyone who thought they could cross him and get away with it. Ralph wasn't just going to take Markus for himself—he was going to use him to make Dave understand the gravity of the mistake he had made.

Ralph picked up the phone, his fingers still trembling with the promise of retribution. He dialled David's number. The phone rang once, twice.

"Yeah?" David answered, his voice sharp.

"Is it done?" Ralph said, his voice low and controlled, a smirk spreading across his face. "If you have Markus. It's time to settle the score."

David hesitated for a brief moment, and Ralph could hear the gears turning in his head. "Yes, but you know what this means, right? You're playing with fire, Ralph."

Ralph leaned back in his chair, his eyes cold. "You don't get it, do you? This is bigger than just money. This is about the principle. They thought they'd bring me down. It's time to send a message."

The silence on the other end was heavy, but David finally spoke. "Understood. I'll get him to you."

As Ralph hung up, he felt the weight of the next few hours settle on him. When Markus arrived, things would take a darker turn. He wasn't just going to punish Markus—he was going to use him as leverage to draw Dave out, to show him just how far Ralph was willing to go. He didn't care what it took. Dave had crossed the wrong person, and now Ralph would make sure he paid for it.

As Ralph stood from his desk, his eyes narrowing with resolve, the first hints of a plan began to take shape. This was going to be his most personal message yet. And when Dave finally came for him, Ralph would be ready.

## 24 Broken

Markus groaned, the sound barely making it past his swollen lips. The world was spinning, or maybe it was just the pain, relentless and suffocating. He wanted to scream, but even the effort to move his tongue was too much. His mouth felt like a foreign land, the taste of rusty iron, the blood mingling with the sharp sting of what must have been broken and missing teeth. His left eye refused to open, glued shut by whatever had dried in the mess of cuts and bruises, while his right only let in half the world—a world that was now too bright, too sharp.

His body felt heavy, sluggish, as though every ounce of energy had been drained away. His head swam in and out of focus, the dizzying sensation compounded by the soreness of his neck, the muscles feeling tight and knotted from an unnatural position. It was clear he had been left in this state for a while. How long? He couldn't tell.

Markus tried to move, to push himself up, but the pain that radiated from his wrists stopped him. They were bound, tightly—too tightly. The burn from the ropes or cuffs, whatever they were, felt like fire crawling into his skin, and his fingers were numb from the pressure. The sensation in his forearm was even worse, a constant grinding ache of bone against flesh. Markus had never broken a bone, but imagined this is what he was feeling. He couldn't move it—couldn't even wiggle his fingers to test the limits of his pain.

His thoughts drifted, barely making sense. *Where am I? How did this happen?* He remembered the van, the ride, the heavies dragging him without a word. The last thing that made sense was the terror creeping up his spine when he realised just who was behind this.

Ralph.

Markus had heard the stories of what Ralph was capable of when he was crossed. But nothing prepared him for being caught up in it. He'd thought

he could get away, that Dave was going to make things right, to make him disappear.

The pain intensified with every thought. His mouth was still full of the taste of blood, and now his jaw ached so much it felt like it might fall off entirely. He wanted to speak, wanted to beg, but his lips barely moved, and the sound that came out was a strained, choked noise that only mocked his helplessness.

*Focus*, he thought. He had to focus. If he could just open his left eye, if he could just push through the pain, maybe he could see where he was. Maybe someone would help him. But his body refused to listen.

Through the haze of agony, the cold reality began to seep in. Ralph was out there, and he was angry. Ralph didn't forget, and if Markus was here—if he was alive—it meant the plan was still in motion. Whatever the plan was, it would involve Markus.

He just didn't know how much longer he could take this.

Dave's heart slammed in his chest when he heard Ralph's voice on the other end of the phone. For a moment, everything around him seemed to freeze—his breath, the beat of his heart, the flow of time. Ralph's words cut through the air like a knife, sending a chill down Dave's spine.

“Hello, Dave. If that's your real name.” Ralph's voice was smooth, too smooth, dripping with venom, each word weighted with the satisfaction of having the upper hand. “Markus is a little preoccupied right now, and I'm not sure if he can speak to you—or anyone just now.”

Dave's fists clenched, his entire body tensing. His mind raced, thoughts scattering in every direction, trying to piece together what was happening. *Markus*—Markus was with Ralph, and something in Ralph's tone told him that it wasn't good. He could hear the smugness, the twisted glee that Ralph got from knowing he had the power. The control.

“Markus...” Dave began, his voice rising, but Ralph didn’t let him finish.

“I don’t think you’re in any position to threaten me any more, Dave,” Ralph interjected, his words laced with condescension. “I’ve got nothing else to lose, but you do. You see, my friend, you’ve pushed your little game too far. And now you’re going to pay for it. All of it.”

Dave felt the fire of rage flare up inside him, his teeth gritting together as his anger boiled over. But that anger was tempered by guilt, the gnawing feeling that he had led Markus right into Ralph’s clutches.

He had sworn to take care of his friend. He had promised that nothing would happen to him. But now, Ralph was in control. It was a bitter pill to swallow. He had made a promise to protect Markus, and now Ralph was using that against him. The guilt hit harder than anything else. He had failed. And Ralph knew it.

Dave could feel his breath growing heavier, the sense of powerlessness creeping up his spine. “If you’ve hurt him...” Dave started again, his voice low but full of barely contained rage. “I swear, what’s happened to you so far will seem like a picnic compared to what’s coming.”

The threat hung in the air, but Dave knew, deep down, that words meant nothing. He wasn’t going to intimidate Ralph with his bravado—not like this. Not when Ralph had the upper hand, and Dave’s friend was at his mercy.

Ralph chuckled, a low, cruel sound that only intensified Dave’s frustration. “You really think you’re in a position to make threats now, Dave? You can’t touch me. You’ve done your best, but now the tables have turned. And trust me, you’re not going to like what happens next.”

Dave’s mind raced, his heart pounding in his ears as the weight of the situation threatened to crush him. He had got Markus into this, and now Ralph had all the cards. It was the perfect trap. Dave’s worst nightmare

come to life. But there was one thing he couldn't let go of: he wasn't going to let Ralph win. Not this time.

He took a breath, steadying himself. He couldn't let Ralph hear the doubt in his voice. "You'll regret this, Ralph," Dave said, his voice finally even, though the rage simmered beneath. "I'm coming for you, and you'll wish you had never crossed me."

Ralph's laugh echoed through the line. "We'll see, Dave. We'll see how long Markus lasts before you realise you've got nowhere to go."

The line went dead, and Dave stood there in the silence, the weight of Ralph's words sinking in.

The situation had changed, and Ralph now held the upper hand. But Dave wasn't done. He had to think. He couldn't act rashly, not yet. Ralph was playing a long game, but Dave would figure it out. He had no choice.

The fire of determination burned brighter than his guilt now. He wasn't going to let Ralph break him, and he wasn't going to let Markus suffer because of the mess Dave had made.

Dave stood still for a moment, his mind racing with a storm of thoughts. His fists clenched as he looked at Anya and Dan, trying to steady himself, to focus enough to articulate the depth of the disaster they now faced.

"Ralph's got Markus," Dave said, his voice strained but determined. "He's got him, and I... I failed. I should've seen this coming. I should've been one step ahead."

Anya's expression softened as she took in the weight of Dave's words, her eyes hardening with focus. She had seen Dave like this before—caught in a situation he couldn't easily fix, but she knew him well enough to trust that he wouldn't stop until it was resolved.

"Dave, don't. This isn't on you," she said, her tone firm. "We'll get him back. We'll figure this out. But we need to know what we're dealing with."

Dan, standing off to the side, hadn't said a word yet, but his jaw was clenched. The tension in the room was thick. They all knew how dangerous Ralph was, how unpredictable. But they also knew Dave wasn't about to back down.

Dave paced for a moment, his mind trying to pull together the pieces of this mess. "Ralph's ditched everything. His life, his operations—everything. He's gone off the grid. There's no trace, no way to track him. He's been careful, covering his tracks. Markus is the only thing he's holding onto, and now that he's got him... we need to find Ralph before he moves again. Before he decides to finish what we started."

Anya stepped forward, her eyes narrowing as she processed the information. "Okay, so Ralph has effectively disappeared. But he's not invisible. Everyone has a pattern, a routine, even Ralph. We just need to dig deeper."

Dan nodded slowly, his mind already working through the possibilities. "We know Ralph's a businessman at his core, right? His operations, the stolen cars, the people trafficking—those aren't small-time deals. And we know his ego's tied to this whole operation. We take that away, we can start to break him down."

"Exactly," Dave said, his voice steady. "If we go after his connections, we hit him where it hurts. We can't just let him stay in the shadows. We need to bring him out."

Anya glanced at Dave, then at Dan, her eyes flashing with determination. "I can access some of Ralph's old business connections, make some calls, dig into his past operations. It's not a clean slate he's working with. There's always something left behind, something we can use."

Dan cracked his knuckles, a gesture of readiness. "I've got people I can talk to too. Old contacts, ones that may know Ralph's operation. They may not know exactly where he is now, but they might know someone who does."

Dave felt the adrenaline start to surge as they all began to speak with purpose, aligning themselves on the next steps. "We need to put the pressure on his network. His ego will make him slip up eventually. We can't let him control the game any more." He paused, his mind still fixated on Markus. "We must get him back. I gave him my word. This is on me.. But we need to act fast, before Ralph decides to finish things and disappear for good."

Anya nodded. "I'll set up a plan to dig through Ralph's connections. We'll see who's still loyal to him, and who's looking for a way out. We'll find the cracks and make them wider."

Dan looked at Dave, determination in his eyes. "You're not alone in this. We'll help you finish this. We'll make sure Ralph pays for what he's done."

Dave exhaled slowly, his shoulders relaxing for the first time since he got the call. He still had a long way to go, but with Anya and Dan at his side, he knew they had a shot.

"We find Ralph, we find Markus. And we end this once and for all," Dave said, his voice filled with a quiet resolve.

They had a plan, and now they just needed to execute it. But the first step was clear—finding Ralph. And they would stop at nothing to bring him down.

Anya sifted through Ralph's contacts stored in his cloud account, trying to identify the key players he interacted with most frequently. She began mapping out potential targets to pursue. First, there were the organisers of the migrant work gangs, but they weren't useful for the moment—most likely in hiding themselves. There were also numbers overseas, possibly linked to the shipment of stolen cars. Then there were a few other contacts—less frequent, but worth investigating now—his solicitor and accountant. Anya was certain Ralph had been in touch with them, but she suspected it was too late to uncover anything useful. There were also some heavies in

the contacts, likely the ones Ralph had used to drag Markus in and rough him up. Unfortunately, all Anya had was phone numbers—no addresses.

Dave, listening intently, said, “Give me their names. I know who we can apply some pressure to.”

Dan, already prepared, added, “I’m coming with you.”

Anya nodded, focused on her work. “I’ll keep following the leads and keep you posted as I find anything.”

With that, Dave and Dan set out, determined to track down the answers.

Dan asked, “Where to?”

“Straight to the Velvet Lounge,” Dave replied, his focus sharp.

As they arrived at the club, Dave immediately spotted what he was looking for.

Dave pulled up outside the Velvet Lounge, his mind focused and sharp. The usual flashy neon signs flickered under the dim light of the evening, casting eerie glows onto the pavement. The low hum of bass-heavy music leaked out of the club as they parked. He could feel the tension rising in his chest—the knot of anger and frustration that had only grown since Ralph took Markus.

Dan gave him a knowing glance as they both got out of the car. “Go easy, Dave. We want answers, not broken bones.”

Dave didn’t respond immediately, his eyes scanning the club’s entrance. The bouncer on the door was a familiar face. The same one who’d been there when Dave stormed through the Velvet Lounge before. He knew that guy, knew how Ralph used his heavies to handle “business” when things got out of control. And right now, everything was out of control.

“He’ll know something,” Dave said, his voice low but firm. “He was the one sent to bring Mick in. And Ralph’s not the type to keep things quiet—he’ll have spilled something to him, something useful.”

They approached the door, and the bouncer noticed them immediately. Dave wasn't sure if it was because of the way he carried himself or the reputation he'd built up in the past few weeks, but there was no hesitation in the bouncer's eyes when they made eye contact. A flicker of recognition passed over the man's face.

"Not here for trouble," Dave said, his tone cold, his hand on the door frame. He leaned in slightly, his eyes never leaving the bouncer's. "Just want to ask you a few questions."

The bouncer's expression shifted. He'd seen plenty of trouble, but Dave was a different level of trouble. He opened his mouth to say something, but Dave cut him off, his voice steady, firm.

"I know Ralph sent you to bring Mick in. That means you've got some answers. So we're going to talk. And if you're smart, you'll cooperate."

Dan stepped up beside Dave, arms crossed, the subtle threat in his posture making it clear they weren't here for games.

The bouncer shifted uneasily, his hands twitching at his sides. His eyes flickered nervously between Dave and Dan as if trying to weigh his options. There was no need to say more. The unspoken threat was enough. Dave didn't have to raise his voice or act out of turn. He simply let the silence build and watched the bouncer squirm, waiting for the moment when the man cracked.

They followed the bouncer around the side of the Velvet Lounge, where the noise from the club grew muffled. The area was quiet, dark except for the flickering light of a nearby streetlamp. The bouncer stopped at a small, secluded alley behind the club, looking over his shoulder nervously before finally speaking up.

"I don't want any trouble, alright? I don't want to end up like the others on the door the other night. Ralph's lying low—far out of town, I swear it. Not many people know where. But he's been real careful lately."

Dave nodded, his focus sharpening. "Keep talking."

The bouncer shifted on his feet, then finally said, "Ralph reached out to Daryl and Wayne a couple of days ago. You know them, right? Daryl and Wayne—the brothers. Big, ugly brutes. They're the ones Ralph calls when things need... well, when they need a nuclear deterrent. He trusts them. Tells them everything. But they don't live close by—they're even further out. But Ralph's been in contact with them."

Dan's jaw tightened. He was already moving mentally, processing the bouncer's words. But Dave held up his hand, signalling for Dan to stay quiet for a moment.

"Where exactly?" Dave asked, his voice a bit colder. "Where's Ralph lying low? What do you know about the brothers?"

The bouncer swallowed again. "I don't know where Ralph is exactly. But I know he's staying out in the countryside—way out of town."

His voice faltered as if he feared saying too much, but Dave's stare remained unwavering. "And the brothers?" Dave pressed.

The bouncer hesitated. "They're based in a warehouse just outside town – I don't know where, honestly. The kind of place you wouldn't think twice about—real quiet, no fuss. They're dangerous, and they've got people who do... things. If Ralph's reaching out to them, then whatever's happening next is big. I don't know much more, I swear."

Dave took a moment to absorb the information. Ralph was hiding somewhere distant, deep in the countryside. And the brothers? Well, they were known for their brutality, their ability to handle any kind of job Ralph wanted to be handled. This was not something Dave could ignore. This was the key to finding Ralph—perhaps even ending it all right there.

"Alright," Dave said, his voice calm now, but carrying a weight that made the bouncer shift uncomfortably. "Anything else?"

The bouncer nodded quickly, his eyes wide with fear. "No, no, that's all I know. I swear."

Dave motioned for Dan to follow him, and they walked away from the shaken bouncer, back into the dim light of the street.

Without definitive answers from the bouncer, all Dave and Dan had were two names they already knew—Daryl and Wayne—but no location. And if Ralph was using those two heavies, Markus was in even more trouble than they thought. Dave stepped outside to make the call to Anya, updating her on what they'd learned and hoping for any additional leads that could get them closer to Ralph's hideout.

As he was talking, Dave's phone buzzed with a message. He checked it, and his stomach dropped. It was a photo from Markus's phone—Markus, looking absolutely battered. His face was swollen, bloodied, and his eyes were half-closed, clearly unconscious. He was tied to a chair in a poorly lit room, with grey brick walls behind him. The caption accompanying the image sent a chill down Dave's spine: *"I want my money."*

Dave showed the photo to Dan, who was already on edge. "Send that to Anya. See what she can do with it," Dan suggested.

"But there's nothing to see," Dave said, frustration edging his voice. "It's just Markus in some grey building."

Dan was insistent. "Just send it."

Reluctantly, Dave sent the image to Anya and waited for her to respond. It didn't take long before her call came through.

"This is from Markus's phone," Anya said immediately, as if she had already recognised the situation.

Dave's pulse quickened. "So, we can track it?"

Anya's voice was sharp with focus. "No, we don't need to track it. It was taken on Markus's phone, and the photo's meta-data includes GPS

coordinates.” There was a brief pause, then Anya added, “Looks like Ralph’s dropped the ball here.”

A sense of hope washed over Dave. *So Ralph wasn’t as untouchable as he thought.* This could be the break they needed.

“Send me those coordinates,” Dave said, his tone shifting from frustration to determination. “We’re getting Markus back. We’re done waiting.”

Dan’s words hung in the air, and Dave considered them for a moment. *What if it was a trap?* It made sense that Ralph would want Dave to come after him—putting Markus at the centre of it all was the perfect bait. Dave clenched his jaw, pushing the thought away. He couldn’t afford to let fear of a trap slow him down. But Dan was right—they had to be careful. This was no longer just about rescuing Markus. It was about ending this once and for all.

“You’re right,” Dave said, his voice steady now. “Let’s step back and think this through. He wants me to come after him. But he doesn’t know anything about you or Anya. We can use that.”

Dan nodded, his eyes focused. “Exactly. We go in smart. No need to charge in blind.”

“Let’s do a recce of the place first,” Dave said, his voice firm with resolve. “We’ll see what we’re dealing with.”

They headed back to Dave’s house to meet with Anya, the tension thick in the air as they geared up. Dave’s movements were efficient—he didn’t need body armour; his own skin would take care of any physical threats. But Dan and Anya were already donning their black combat gear, fastening armoured chest rigs, and securing weapons in their holsters.

“I wasn’t expecting to use this here,” Dan muttered as he pulled out his H&K G28, fitting the suppressor and adjusting the scope. The sniper rifle felt natural in his hands, and he checked the ammo carefully. The look on his face was one of calm readiness.

“We’ll need to be prepared for anything,” Dave said, his voice cool and calculated. He could feel the weight of the upcoming confrontation, the knowledge that they were on the cusp of ending everything. But they couldn’t rush it. Not now.

With everything in place, Dan drove them to the coordinates. The drive was quiet except for the soft hum of the engine and the occasional click of their gear shifting in the back.

As they neared the location, Dave’s gut tightened. The industrial estate lay just outside of town—desolate, quiet, and far enough from prying eyes to be perfect for Ralph’s operations.

The area was dimly lit by flickering streetlamps, casting long shadows across the rows of warehouses and abandoned factories. A few vans were parked haphazardly around the yard, their owners likely long gone.

Dave’s gaze swept across the place as Dan parked the car at a safe distance. This wasn’t the kind of area you’d casually wander into without expecting trouble.

Dan killed the engine. “Let’s see what we’ve got.”

They got out, moving quickly and quietly. The plan was to scope out the area first, identify exits, entry points, and any signs of activity. Dave, with his heightened senses, led the way. Every sound, every movement, was noted, processed, and stored for later use. Anya stayed close, her eyes scanning every corner, every shadow.

“Two buildings,” Dave muttered, his voice low. “The one on the left looks like it’s in better condition. The one on the right—broken windows, door ajar. Maybe it’s abandoned.”

Dan adjusted his rifle, scanning the area from a distance. “I can’t see anyone inside yet. But I don’t like the look of the right building. If it’s been used recently, it could be where they’ve got Markus stashed.”

They moved toward the right building, sticking to the shadows, communicating silently. As they approached, Dave motioned for them to stop. A couple of figures were moving around the building, but their forms were hidden from view.

“Stay low,” Dave whispered, feeling the adrenaline spike. “We’ll wait for the right moment.”

For now, they remained still, watching, waiting. They needed information. They needed to know how many people were inside, where Markus was, and how they could move in without being spotted.

It was time to put the plan into motion, and Dave knew one thing: They were taking down Ralph tonight.

Ralph and his thugs weren’t used to this kind of game. He had spent years navigating the world of thugs, rackets, and the law—always dancing just close enough to the line to avoid getting caught. But this? This was something else entirely.

He was up against a group that didn’t play by the same rules he was familiar with. An elite tactical team, a crew unbound by legal constraints. While Ralph operated with the understanding that the law had rules—warrants, due process, all the red tape that slowed things down—he was now facing a situation where no such rules applied.

And he had no idea what was coming.

Meanwhile, Dave and the team were executing the recce flawlessly. They were too experienced to overlook any detail, too methodical to take anything for granted. They split up to cover every angle, ensuring they could identify any threats before they moved in.

Anya was the first to report in. She moved silently, fluidly, through the rear yard, ducking between rows of metal components. The shadows worked in her favour, and she moved with the stealth of a predator. Her eyes scanned

every corner, every crevice, but there was no sign of countermeasures. No hidden patrols. No extra muscle. It was quiet. Almost too quiet.

Dan was up next. He worked the front of the building, keeping to the shadows and the cover of hedgerows, careful not to make any noise. From his vantage point, he could clearly see the front of the building. The large, rolled-up door was wide open, offering an unobstructed view into the unit. It was clear this was the place where Markus had been photographed. The grey brickwork behind him in the image matched perfectly. The only light in the entire industrial estate was spilling out of this unit. Movement inside confirmed it. The place was active.

Dave took up position on the right side of the building. His eyes scanned the area carefully, looking for any potential threats or surprises. Nothing moved. It seemed like they were still in the clear. The building was isolated. No one else was around.

Over the comms, Dan reported his findings. “Four people inside,” he said, his voice low and steady. “Two big guys in black gear. Looks like heavies. Two smaller ones, clearly packing pistols in their waistbands. Real gangster style.”

Anya checked in next. “Nothing to report at the rear. It’s all clear back here.”

Dave’s voice came through next, equally calm. “Right side’s clear. No movement.”

They were ready. Dave could feel it. The team had covered all angles. Every possible risk had been accounted for.

The heavy hitters inside were obvious. They were likely muscle for Ralph, but Dave didn’t expect them to be much of a problem. The smaller ones—those were the real threats. Armed and ready, they would likely be the ones to react the fastest if anything went wrong.

But this wasn’t going to go wrong. Not tonight.

“We’re going in,” Dave said, voice firm. “No more waiting. We take them now.”

He checked in with Anya and Dan. “Stay sharp. We move in fast, hit them hard.”

With the plan set, and every angle covered, the team moved in.

Dan’s voice crackled over the comms, “Wait one,” his tone sharp and measured. Dave instinctively froze, waiting for the next update. Dan was positioning himself for a better vantage point, and Dave knew every second counted.

Moments later, Dan’s voice came back with more urgency. “It’s Markus. I’ve got eyes on him. He’s tied to a chair, and he doesn’t look good.”

A chill ran through Dave’s body, the image of Markus—beaten, bruised, and helpless—fuelling his rage. But this wasn’t the time to act on pure emotion. They had a plan, and they needed to stick to it.

“I’m going in. You cover Markus. I’ll distract them,” Dave said, his voice calm despite the adrenaline coursing through him. He could already feel the focus shift inside him, every muscle tightening in preparation.

But then Dan’s voice interrupted, a subtle tension in his words. “Hang on. Car coming in.”

Dave’s heart skipped a beat as he looked over his shoulder. A dark-coloured Mercedes rolled onto the estate, its headlights cutting through the night. It stopped at the open door of the unit, blocking Dan’s line of sight. The car door swung open, and out stepped Ralph.

“Eyes on Ralph,” Dan reported, his voice lowering as he adjusted his position. “I lost sight of Markus. I’m moving for a better angle.”

Dave’s eyes narrowed. Ralph was here. This was it. The moment of truth. But Ralph’s presence had just thrown a wrench into their timing.

Dan's voice came again, low but clear. "I've got a better angle. There's an awning over the door of one of the other units. It'll give me the height I need."

Dave quickly weighed the risks. Dan could be seen from that angle, but the benefit outweighed the potential danger.

"Do it," Dave replied firmly. "We can't afford to miss this."

Dan moved quickly, his steps light and calculated as he approached the other unit. He found the awning and began to climb, every movement a blend of urgency and caution. Dave stayed low, watching Ralph, making sure not to give away their position.

As Dan reached the top of the awning, he crouched down, setting himself in position. He could now see everything. Ralph, the heavies, and Markus in that damn chair. The scene unfolding before him was a ticking clock, and Dan knew they had to act soon.

"Eyes on. I've got a clean shot on Ralph and the others. Waiting for your signal," Dan said over the comms, his breathing steady despite the situation.

Dave's eyes flicked to Ralph. It was now or never. The stage was set, but they couldn't afford to hesitate. "Hold tight," Dave said quietly. "If you need the shot, take it. I'm moving in. We end this now."

With the plan set in motion, it was time to bring the chaos to an end.

Dave moved swiftly and decisively, leaving his gun and holster behind. He knew that going in unarmed wasn't the safest choice, but he also knew it was the best one for Markus's chances. Ralph was out for blood, and if Dave didn't play this right, his friend would pay the price. The stakes couldn't have been higher.

Stepping lightly but with purpose, Dave made his way toward the open door of the unit. He kept his movements calculated, ensuring he stayed out

of Dan's line of sight, giving his sniper the clearest shot possible should things go south. Every muscle in his body was tense, poised for action.

As he entered the unit, Dave took in the scene. The dim lighting revealed Ralph standing in the centre, flanked by Daryl and Wayne, the two hulking brothers. Markus, bruised and bloodied, was tied to a chair near the back of the room. His eyes were barely open, his body a mess of pain. Dave's heart clenched, but he steeled himself. This wasn't about revenge—it was about survival.

Ralph's cold voice cut through the silence. "I see you got my message. Now, where's my money?"

Dave stood firm, meeting Ralph's eyes with a confidence he didn't quite feel. "The money's gone, Ralph. It's all over."

Ralph sneered, his face twisted with anger. "You're clearly not listening. Daryl, Wayne, ask him about my money."

The larger of the two brothers, a towering figure of muscle and brutality, stepped forward. His eyes narrowed, sizing Dave up with a look that said he didn't care about any past reputation. This was going to be a fight, and he was ready to break Dave in half.

"You might be tasty when it came to a few bouncers," the brother growled, "but we're a different league."

Before Dave could react, the giant launched a southpaw punch at his head. Dave's reflexes, honed to unnatural perfection, had already picked up on the telltale shift in his stance. He ducked low, letting the massive fist sail over his head. The brother's punch missed by inches, leaving him open for a quick counter.

Dave's left fist shot forward, catching the giant in the stomach. The blow landed with brutal force, and the giant immediately doubled over, gasping for air, his face contorted in pain as he staggered back, retching.

But Dave didn't get a chance to follow through. The second brother had already sprung into action, not waiting for his sibling to recover. With a forceful swing, he kicked Dave square in the chest. The impact sent Dave reeling backward, slamming into a large toolbox nearby. The metal clanged as tools scattered across the floor, the noise adding to the chaos.

The second brother moved in fast, intent on capitalising on Dave's momentary loss of balance. But Dave's speed far outmatched the brute's size. As the brother's fist shot forward, Dave sidestepped, his movements fluid and precise. He caught the massive wrist mid-swing, twisting it with terrifying efficiency. Before the brother could react, Dave brought his left forearm down in a brutal arc, smashing it into the already-wrenched arm. There was a sickening snap as the bones in the brother's forearm shattered, and the dislocated elbow gave way, causing the man to scream in agony.

The second brother dropped to his knees, clutching his shattered arm, his face twisted in pain. Dave, moved quickly to put distance between himself and the fallen enemy.

The first brother, still gasping for air from the gut punch, tried to regain his footing. He staggered to his feet, eyes blazing with fury. He wasn't ready to accept defeat—not yet. Without hesitation, he charged forward, fists flying in a rapid barrage, hoping to land something—anything—on Dave. But Dave was already a step ahead, his reflexes sharp and unyielding. Each punch came at him like a slow-motion replay, and Dave swatted them aside with ease, almost as if they were nothing more than bothersome flies trying to get in his way.

Frustrated and enraged, the brother quickly transitioned to a kick, aiming for Dave's midsection in a move that was meant to knock the wind out of him. Dave saw the attack coming long before it made contact. In one fluid motion, he countered, his foot shooting out and connecting with the knee of the leg the brother was standing on.

The impact was brutal, and the joint snapped in the wrong direction with a sickening crack. The brother howled in agony as his leg buckled beneath him, collapsing to the ground. He clutched at his knee, writhing in pain, tears streaming down his face as he screamed out, unable to do anything but roll on the floor in pure torment.

With both brothers incapacitated, Ralph was left standing, staring at the scene in complete disbelief. His massive enforcers, who had crushed every threat they'd ever faced, were now nothing more than injured shells of their former selves. Their attempts to take down Dave had been pathetic, leaving them both in agony on the ground, helpless.

Dave stood tall, his voice calm but laced with a biting edge. "I take it these were the gorillas you had beat on Markus?"

Ralph didn't respond right away, his eyes wide with shock, his mind struggling to comprehend what had just happened. This wasn't the kind of battle he was used to. This was something entirely different. Ralph had always been able to rely on brute force, intimidation, and his monstrous henchmen. But now? Now, he realised, he was dealing with something far more dangerous than he'd anticipated.

Dave's gaze didn't waver from Ralph's stunned expression, and he stepped forward, his next words carrying the weight of finality. "It's over, Ralph."

Ralph's fury was palpable. He stared at Dave, rage burning in his eyes. "I'll say when it's over," he spat, his voice thick with venom. At his signal, one of his gangsters, pulled a pistol from his waistband and aimed it at Markus's head. Markus unable to flinch, his head rolling back as he remained unconscious, unaware of the impending danger.

Dave's eyes locked on the gun, his voice cold and measured. "Wait."

He stood unwavering, his gaze fixed on the gangster with the pistol, his words carrying a weight that threatened to suffocate the room. "If anyone so much as lays another hand on Markus, I'll take them apart... slowly."

The other of the two gangsters sneered, laughing as he drew his own pistol and pointed it squarely at Dave. “You’ve got some balls coming here making threats like that,” he mocked, his finger twitching on the trigger.

Dave’s tone remained flat, emotionless. “I’m just telling you how it is.”

Without warning, the gangster fired, the sound of the shot echoing through the unit. The bullet struck Dave square in the thigh. He didn’t even flinch, didn’t so much as twitch. He simply stared down at the hole in his trousers.

“You’ve ruined my trousers,” Dave said flatly, his voice almost amused by the absurdity of it all.

Ralph’s disbelief was mirrored in the face of the other gangster, who hesitated for just a split second. But that hesitation didn’t last. The thug fired again, this time twice into Dave’s chest, each bullet slamming into his body with a sickening thud.

Dave stood there, unscathed, his expression unchanged. His chest, which should have exploded with blood from the force of the shots, remained as strong and unyielding as ever.

Ralph’s shock turned to confusion. “What the hell?” he muttered.

Before anyone could react, Dave exploded into motion. In the blink of an eye, he lunged forward, grabbing the gangster’s gun with terrifying speed. The man’s wrist twisted violently, and with a sickening snap, Dave broke his forearm, the gangster’s scream filling the air. Dave didn’t stop there. He shoved his heel of his palm into the thug’s sternum, delivering a crushing blow that sent him hurtling across the room. The gangster collided with the wall with a sickening thud before slumping to the ground, unconscious and defeated.

Dave turned his gaze back to the other gangster, the one still holding the gun to Markus’s head, his grip uncertain. Dave’s voice was a low growl, unrelenting. “You really want to lower that, if you want to live.”

With an eerie calm, Dave pointed to his chest, and the gangster's eyes followed the motion. The man's eyes widened as he realised the situation. The red laser dot was hovering ominously over his heart, a deadly threat that could end him with a single pull of the trigger.

"I'm giving you one chance," Dave said, his voice calm, deadly. "Lower the weapon."

The gangster, now completely outmatched, dropped the gun slowly, knowing full well that if he didn't, his life would be over in the next few seconds.

Dave stepped forward, his eyes never leaving the man. "Good choice."

Ralph, standing helplessly behind, had never expected things to unfold this way. His grip on power, his carefully controlled environment, had just crumbled in front of him.

Ralph's panic was palpable as he scrambled into the driver's seat of the Mercedes, the engine roaring to life with an angry growl. His hands shook with rage, his grip on the steering wheel white-knuckled. Without hesitation, he slammed the car into reverse, tires screeching as the vehicle shot backward, desperate to make his escape.

But Dave wasn't about to let him get away. His heart pounding, he sprinted into the road, ending up in front of the stationary car. Ralph's eyes locked on him, and with a growl of determination, he slammed the gas pedal to the floor. With tyres screaming, the Mercedes hurtled toward Dave, and in the blink of an eye, he was smashed onto the bonnet, his body pressed against the sleek hood as the car tore down the road.

Ralph's face twisted in a rictus of fury, his focus solely on Dave as he continued to accelerate, intent on crushing him. The car sped along the estate, screeching over the tarmac as Ralph's mind fixated on one goal—obliterating Dave.

The car careened toward the edge of the estate, the wheels bouncing off the kerb with a violent jolt. The vehicle was launched into the air, its trajectory taking it straight into a galvanized steel fence. The metal rails bent with a deafening crunch as the car slammed into them, coming to an abrupt halt. Steam hissed from the ruptured radiator, filling the air with the acrid scent of coolant.

Inside, Ralph's body was jerked violently forward. The airbag exploded in his face, knocking him unconscious instantly, his hands still gripping the steering wheel even as the car came to a halt.

Meanwhile, Dave, pinned against the fence by the wrecked Mercedes, felt none of the injuries he should have sustained. Even for his invulnerable state it was an odd sensation, he felt strangely invigorated, energized. The impact, while it wouldn't have been painful to him, had left him feeling more alive than he had in a long time. His muscles seemed to bulge and flex with a new-found power. Like the most amazing adrenaline rush pumping through his veins, it fired his senses, making him feel even more invincible than he was.

With a quiet grunt, Dave effortlessly pushed the wrecked Mercedes off him, the car sliding across the tarmac with ease. He stepped away, looking back at what he now realised was an electrical substation they had crashed into. Sparks arced from the exposed substation wiring, arcing into the puddles of water from the broken radiator. He'd just taken the full force of power from an electrical substation.

Dave wiped a bead of sweat from his brow, surveying the scene. Ralph, unconscious in the driver's seat, was no longer a threat. His plan had worked. For all the pain and hardship he had endured up to this point, the moment of victory was now within his grasp.

Ralph might be down, but there were still pieces to clean up. And Dave had made a promise—to end this once and for all. He looked back at the

wreckage of the Mercedes, then at the horizon, knowing that whatever came next, he was ready for it.

Dave stood over Ralph, his mind still racing from the intensity of the encounter, and the buzz from the energy still coursing through his veins. Ralph was unconscious, slumped in the driver's seat, with a bloody nose, his chest rising and falling in shallow breaths. But Dave wasn't going to let him slip away if he had the chance. No, Ralph was going to face the consequences of his actions. He wasn't done yet.

With a cold, methodical motion, Dave leaned over Ralph's motionless body and grabbed the seat belt mechanism. His hands squeezed the metal and plastic components with an ease that would have been impossible for most. The mechanism creaked and groaned under the pressure before it snapped and folded flat, trapping Ralph firmly in place. There was no way Ralph was getting out of that seat without someone cutting him free. Dave made sure of it. He wasn't going anywhere.

Turning away, Dave left the wrecked car behind and sprinted back to the unit. The night air felt cool against his skin, a sharp contrast to the heat that had surged through him during the confrontation. His mind was laser-focused as he entered the building, where Anya had been working swiftly to ensure Markus's safety. She had already cut Markus loose from his restraints, and she was tending to him as best as she could under the circumstances. With the power out in the entire estate, she'd resorted to tactical torches to check Markus's condition.

Markus was lying on a makeshift bed, pale and bruised, but breathing. Anya was doing everything she could to stabilise him, cleaning any wounds that needed attention. It wasn't much, but it was enough to keep him alive.

Dan was on the phone, already in motion, calling for ambulances and the police. He gave Dave a quick nod as he continued to speak with the operator. "The situation is under control. Ambulances are on the way, and

I've got the police alerted," Dan said as he hung up the phone. "We'll have Ralph in custody soon enough."

Dave exhaled deeply, his hands still trembling slightly from the adrenaline. The immediate threat was over. They'd neutralized Ralph's key enforcers, and Ralph himself was incapacitated. The police and ambulances would be here soon, and things would begin to fall into place.

Anya looked up from Markus, her expression calm but focused. "He's stable for now. It's a good thing we got to him when we did," she said, her voice steady despite the chaos of the night.

Anya glanced towards the open rear door of the unit, nodded towards it, her expression focused but calm. "There's another guy out the back," she said, indicating the direction with a subtle tilt of her head. "Some guy came barrelling out like his ass was on fire. I clotheslined him as he ran past."

Dave barely spared the back exit a glance, his focus still on Markus. He knew that anyone trying to flee now was little more than an afterthought. "He's a nobody," he said dismissively, his voice steady as ever. "We have Ralph and his gorillas. The rest is just flotsam."

## 25 Epilogue

With Ralph in custody and his empire collapsing, Markus was finally free of the hold the gangster had on him. His rehabilitation would be a long and painful process, but at least he was alive, and for that, he could be grateful. Dave sat by his bedside in the hospital, watching his friend try to make sense of what had just happened. Markus couldn't understand how a man like Dave—someone who had been an IT consultant, a regular guy—could stand up to someone like Ralph and win.

Ralph had always been meticulous with his money, controlling every transaction with an iron grip. So when the news came that his accounts were drained, it hit him harder than anything else. The theft was swift, silent, and methodical—nothing he could do to stop it. But what he didn't know was that every penny of the money siphoned from his accounts hadn't been taken for personal gain or hidden away in some offshore investment. It hadn't gone into a slush fund for a future criminal enterprise or a luxury villa on some remote beach.

No, the money had been redirected—diverted into something he would never have imagined in his wildest, most paranoid nightmares. Every single penny had been indirectly funnelled into the hands of those he'd wronged: the very people his criminal enterprise had preyed upon. Anya, using her skills, had taken the funds from his accounts and channelled them into local charities, ones that specifically dealt with the kinds of damage Ralph had inflicted on the community.

The money went to migrant charities, those working tirelessly to support people who'd suffered under Ralph's exploitation. Shelters, food, legal aid—all the things that Ralph had once used for his own gain were now helping the very people he'd enslaved. It went to organizations that helped people escape the grasp of loan sharks, giving them a lifeline, a chance to rebuild without the burden of oppressive debt. It was sent to food banks and homeless shelters, providing those without homes or work the basics

they needed to survive. People who had been left destitute by the very system Ralph had manipulated were now getting assistance, all thanks to the cash he thought would be used to fund his retirement.

The funds also flowed into addiction services, gambling and alcohol treatment programs, and debt relief charities. The very organizations that helped those struggling with addiction and the people whose lives had been torn apart by Ralph's loan sharking activities. These groups were receiving an injection of cash that they would never have dreamed of, allowing them to support even more individuals in desperate need of help.

In all, it was a major redistribution of wealth—a punishment for Ralph, one that hit him where it would hurt the most. It didn't just cause a financial blow; it undermined everything Ralph had built, turning his stolen money into a force for good. For every penny he'd taken, every life he'd ruined, the money now funded causes that would help rebuild what he'd destroyed.

Dave looked at Markus, his face marked with exhaustion, but the faintest hint of satisfaction at the victory. "It's over now, Markus. You don't have to worry about Ralph or the debt any more."

Markus's weak voice brought him back to the present. "You really are something else, Dave," he said, the exhaustion in his tone mixing with a quiet admiration. "I don't know what I would've done without you. Thank you."

Dave smiled back, a quiet understanding between them. He didn't need the thanks. He'd done what he had to do. But it felt good to hear it anyway.

Cecilia, as expected, made the team's involvement disappear from public record. It was part of their unspoken arrangement. The agency kept their distance, and in return, Dave and his team handled things in a way that kept the authorities off the radar. No one would ever know the full extent of what had transpired, and that was just how Dave liked it. For now, they could all rest easy.

But the conclusion of Ralph's downfall had left Dave with a lingering curiosity. The last piece of the puzzle, the final strange twist, had been the moment when he'd been electrocuted at the substation. His body had taken the full force of the surge, but instead of being harmed, he felt... revitalised. Invigorated, even. The electricity had coursed through him, not only leaving him unharmed, but also giving him an unexplainable sense of power and energy.

It was a strange discovery, something he hadn't anticipated. He'd encountered the physical effects of his powers before, but this was different. The surge of energy, the way it had felt, was something new. And Dave knew that he had to investigate it further.

Cecilia had already been looking into the strange developments in his abilities, and now, it seemed, there was more to uncover. He didn't know how far this would take them or what it would reveal. The unexplained power he felt, the strange exhilaration.

For now, though, there was peace. Ralph was behind bars, Markus was free, and the team could take a breath. But for Dave, there were new questions, unanswered mysteries, and the feeling that something much bigger lay ahead.