Ipseity: using the social identity perspective as a guide to character construction in realist fiction

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Ipseity:
Using The Social Identity Perspective as a Guide to Character Construction in Realist Fiction

Dr. Luke Stott
Loughborough University

Supervisors:
Dr Kerry Featherstone
Dr Brian Jarvis
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The above quotation is from social psychologist Professor John Turner, who is one of the two theorists, the other being Henri Tajfel, most responsible for the Social Identity Perspective, the principle subject of this thesis. The Social Identity Perspective is an approach to Social Psychology that incorporates two sub-theories: Tajfel’s Social Identity Theory and Turner’s Self-Categorization Theory. This thesis is based upon using the perspective for the purposes of creating more realistic and believable fictional characters in realist fiction. For the purposes of this thesis Pam Morris’ definition of realism will be used, that being, ‘any writing that is based upon an implicit or explicit assumption that it is possible to communicate about a reality beyond the writing.’ According to both theories, individuals can develop two principal identities: the personal self, which is to say a collection of idiosyncratic qualities that define them as a unique individual, and a collective self (or social identity) that encapsulates the status and characteristics of the social groups they belong to in opposition to other social groupings. Turner theorised that the personality of a human being is heavily influenced by their social context at an unconscious level. This influence can be made manifest by their parents, by their school friends and work colleagues, by their romantic partners, and especially by the collective cultural expectations native to the area they choose to reside in. Turner put forward the concept that our personality and actions are therefore influenced by society at the level of how the individual defines himself or herself. This occurs without agency on the part of the individual. These social belief systems therefore mould what the individual thinks, their actions, and their motivations.

The origins of the social identity lie in the group mind perspective, as pioneered by Gustave Le Bon, privileged the social over the individual and Le Bon reduced the individual group member to a coded response to societal belief systems. The group mind is a reference to a state of consciousness wholly separate from the mind of the individual. Le Bon’s 1885 text The Crowd is of significance to the theorist interested in the Social Identity Perspective, and indeed the social
psychologist, because it appears to be, according to Giles and Turner, the first major text on inter-group behaviours. Some psychologists initially rejected the idea of social groups as influential on the personal self. This is summed up by psychologist Gordon Allport who, in 1924, argued that, ‘there is no psychology of groups which is not essentially and entirely a psychology of individuals.’

The conclusion of the Second World War and subsequent Nuremberg trials sparked renewed interest in the field of social psychology and a wave of new theorists such as Stanley Milgram, Philip Zimbardo, Solomon Asch, and Serge Moscovici began to conduct studies into such topics as external influences, minority influence in groups and conformity. It was their work that inspired Henri Tajfel and his colleague John Turner to produce first the Social Identity Theory and then the Self-Categorization Theory that together form the Social Identity Perspective.

The Social Identity Perspective and in particular Self-Categorization Theory operates between the two extremes of the individual and the group mind and instead relies on the interactionist approach proposed by Solomon Asch, Kurt Lewin, and Muzafer Sherif. The interactionist approach focuses on clarifying how the self-concept within the individual is socially structured. Social Identity practitioners Brewer and Gardner (1996) suggested that there were three types of self-concept: the individual self which consists of attributes and personality traits that differentiate us from other individuals, the relational self which is defined by our relations with significant others, and finally the collective self which reflects our membership of social groups. What this means is that there are multiple facets of the self-concept that are relevant to an individual’s identity at any one time. Therefore it is possible to be simultaneously defined as a happy individual (an example of individual self-concept), a brother (a relational self-concept) and a British citizen (a collective self-concept) along with the expectations that those definitions bring. According to Tajfel and Turner, how a person behaves depends on which self-concept is most salient (the identity that the individual is most aware of and therefore most influenced by) to a particular social situation. At, for example, a sister’s birthday party, the most salient self-concept may be that of the ‘brother’ whereas in the crowd at the Olympic Games the self-concept most salient may be the collective self-concept (their nationality) and so on and so forth. Once we have identified which self-concept is most salient we can then examine how this identity influences the individual’s behaviour in line with
preconceived expectations and group norms (referred to as ‘prototypicality’7). In short when the individual’s ‘happy’ self-concept is salient they will adopt a set of behaviours that are expected by society of an individual who assumes this identity i.e. they may be smiling, generous, excited, care-free etc. The individual thus conforms to those group norms and, by extension, preconceived expectations without which others would be unable to identify them. Identity is after all a dialectical process. To be able to identify oneself as ‘happy’ makes an assumption that those to whom we are presenting this identity share a similar understanding of what it means to be ‘happy’ and can thus make a positive identification. The self-concept of ‘happy’ therefore becomes a signifier for a collection of preconceptions of society. This function works in much the same way as Iris Murdoch suggested language works in her novel Under The Net where language is reduced to a series of signifiers that allow meaning to be exchanged between individuals.8 This is the basis of what became known as the Social Identity Theory - of which Self-Categorization Theory is an extension.

The Social Identity Perspective focuses upon how these self-concepts and their resultant behavioural expectations come to be adopted by the individual. The salient aspects of these theories will be considered at greater length in the following chapters. Subsequently, their usefulness to the writer of realist fiction will be made clear through the application of theory to practice in the course of this thesis. By definition the central aim of a writer working in the realist fiction tradition is to create a work of fiction that adheres to the real world as closely as possible through construction of plot, character, environment and so on. Indeed the literary critic Ian Watt in his work The Rise of The Novel suggested that a work of fiction if it was to be considered an example of formal realism would take steps to address, ‘the particularisation of time, place and person, to a natural and lifelike sequence of action, and to the creation of a literary style which gives the most exact verbal and rhythmical equivalent possible of the object described.’9 By adopting the principles proposed by social psychology, principles with empirical support, the writer may be able to produce a work of fiction much closer to reality than is otherwise possible and just as importantly, be able to avoid some of the pitfalls of falseness that may hinder the writer in their attempt at creating successful realist fiction. Therefore if the author is to create realistic characters, environments and plots, that the audience find believable and empathetic then the self-conceptualisation of characters becomes extremely
important. The audience are trained through their exposure to human interaction to identify and act upon certain behaviours and infer an emotional reaction and vice versa. By engaging with these behaviour producing self-concepts, and more importantly the social expectations assigned to them, the author can create realistic and three-dimensional characters that conform to reader expectations and are therefore more realistic in their portrayal of the complexities of the human condition. By way of an example of how The Social Identity Perspective can aid the writer we may surmise that if a narrative includes, as the creative segment of this thesis does, a character breaking the law then the author must first put in place social conditions that justify the motivation of the character to perform that behaviour. For the purposes of authorship if the social conditions (the character’s distinguishing features such as race, age, background, occupation etc.) prevalent in the fiction are carefully and deliberately crafted then the reactions, motivations, interactions, and actions of the fiction’s characters will conform to a reader’s ‘real world’ expectations as Turner suggests in the prefatory quotation. The difference between real life social psychology and fiction is that the author can change the political and ideological landscape to craft a desired reaction from their characters. It is the argument of this thesis therefore that Social Psychology is an extremely useful tool for the writer of realist fiction.

This thesis will demonstrate a method of usage for elements of Social Psychology, specifically the Social Identity Perspective that underpins the actions, interactions and motivations of the fictional characters contained within the thesis’s creative element. It is the contention of this thesis that The Social Identity Perspective will assist an author in marrying together ever more realistic characterisation to other areas of writer research already extensively drawn upon by the author such as those projects focused upon creating a more realistic setting in a historical novel for instance. As previously stated it is the intention of this thesis to apply aspects of social psychology to the creation of realist texts only, the findings however may also be of use to authors who write in other genres, after all even the writer of fantastic fiction still requires characters whose actions are fundamentally recognisable and justifiable to the reader in order for them to be able to make sense of the fiction and as Henry James said, ‘one can speak best from one’s own taste, and I may therefore venture to say the air of reality (solidity of specification) seems to me to be the supreme virtue of a novel’. It is the aim of this thesis that its findings may highlight the potential of
using The Social Identity Perspective and other adjuncts of Social Psychology as tools for both plot construction and character development that is completely realistic. This may then lead to other areas of research, some of which are suggested in the concluding chapter of this thesis.

In order to properly illustrate the utility of The Social Identity Perspective to the author, screenwriter, or dramatist working in the realist mode I have produced an extensive creative element that utilises the theory within the construction of its characters. I believe that, given the unfamiliarity of the theory to those involved with the construction of literature it would be prudent to present a tailor-made exemplar of the theory working to shape a piece of fiction rather than a thesis which used The Social Identity Perspective to critique existing literature with regard to its realism. I do however believe, and will illustrate within the thesis, that this is equally possible and useful to literary critics. The creative element itself is a 62,000-word novella written using Social Identity Perspective to inform character psychology, self-conceptualisation and behaviour. The creative element will be referred to extensively in subsequent critical chapters of this thesis. The first critical chapter will provide the reader with a working explanation of the concepts that underpin The Social Identity Perspective. This chapter will offer a brief discussion of the perspective itself including its history and its content. It will then move on and discuss the central tenets of the perspective such as social categorization, entitativity, self-categorization, positive distinctiveness and other such key terms. This section will also include the empirical evidence to support the theory itself whilst highlighting the various ways that The Social Identity Perspective can aid the writer of realist fiction by influencing the construction of character behaviour. The central theoretical concepts discussed within this portion of the thesis will then form the starting point for the following chapter. The following chapter concerns the various ways Social Identity Perspective informs and shapes the creative element itself. This discussion focuses primarily on the unnamed narrator who is the principle protagonist and tracks how the Social Identity Perspective shapes his behaviour as a result of his differing and evolving social context. During the creative element the Narrator undergoes a transition as a result of losing his job as a journalist. Faced with ostracism from an in-group that exerted a heavy influence upon his self-concept (his personal identity or sense of self) and behaviour, the Narrator undergoes a transformation of identity that encompasses a
change in ethics, morality, and behaviour as he passes from his previous self-concept to one more akin to his childhood friend Charlie. The conclusion of the thesis will examine future avenues of research incorporating The Social Identity Perspective into realist fiction, both as a guide to the creation of new work and as a tool for evaluating existing fiction. The chapter will initially focus on using the Social Identity Perspective as a tool for the evaluation of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, a seminal realist text and examine where Twain’s characters may deviate from their expected behaviour given their specific social circumstances. The decision to analyse this novel using the Social Identity Perspective arose whilst I taught this text on an undergraduate module whilst completing this thesis. Despite *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* being a proto-realist text it is also considerably different from the creative element contained within this thesis in terms of social context, narrative, historical period, setting and so on. The variation in these two literary texts is a deliberate attempt to illustrate that this theory can be applied across a wide range of realist fiction, including texts from different periods and different traditions of realism. The second portion of this chapter will discuss how the Social Identity Perspective interacts with a specific genre; in this case the thriller. The creative element of this thesis contains some elements of the thriller genre in terms of its plot and style. Thrillers, according to David Glover in the *Cambridge Companion to Crime Fiction*, are a Type of literature that could be considered formulaic, or that relies upon stock characters or highly conventionalized narrative structures, or whose enjoyment comes from the repetition of certain well-worn themes or devices... what ultimately matters in thriller-writing is ‘plausibility' or verisimilitude, a quality that is largely genre-specific.¹¹

From this quote it is obvious that there is common ground here between what this project aims to demonstrate and some of the factors that are key to a successful example of the thriller genre: ‘“plausibility’ or verisimilitude”. By giving the creative element a thriller aesthetic the project is seeking to address one of the perceived pitfalls of the genre, in this case ‘stock characters’, by emphasising a method of writing that increases the verisimilitude of the piece in terms of characterisation. To this end the concluding chapter of this thesis will include a critical close reading, drawing from the Social Identity Perspective, of the twenty-first century science-fiction thriller *Limitless* (2011) by Alan Glynn to illustrate how adherence to the
principles outlined in this thesis can enhance the novel. It is important however to
bear in mind that the purpose of this doctoral project is to illustrate how The Social
Identity Perspective can be used in the creation of realistic fictional characters, rather
than to interrogate how the Social Identity Perspective may interact with a specific
genre. It would be impossible to accurately represent all aspects of this complex
relationship within the space allowed in this thesis, and consideration of this thesis in
relation to genre fiction as a whole, would warrant extensive further study in its own
right.

The second half of the conclusion will detail other areas of Social Psychology
that may prove useful to the writer of realist fiction. Whilst this thesis has relied upon
group-centred models of the self-concept, there are others that may prove just as
useful and informative to the writer. These other areas, such as research conducted
into aggressive or romantic relationships may, it is hoped, also provide fruitful areas
for further research.

p.4.
5. M. B. Brewer & W. Gardner, ‘Who Is This “We”? Levels of Collective
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Effects of Group Prototypicality and Leader Stereotypicality’ in Small
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Ipseity
I wake to feel cold fingers pressing down on my windpipe.

I kick and buck, fighting to stay conscious, to stay alive. He’s strong though. Revenge will do that to you. His grip tightens around my neck and I feel myself weakening as he cuts off my carotid artery, starving my brain of oxygen. His fingernails are long and they’re digging into my skin as he does this, perforating it. Blood mixed with cold sweat on bedsheets.

I’m getting dizzy. My life is being stolen from me. Spirited away by infirm hands with a firm grip. This was his revenge. I bang my fists against his infirm body, press them against his face but it’s no use. My pulse is ringing in my ears and I’m sure that there’s terror in my eyes.

I need to breathe.

I feel like I’m falling.

And then black.

Chapter One
At a distance, a person is whoever you want them to be. We see ourselves in them and only in our most intimate moments with them do we see whom they really are, wherever we find them. Every afternoon *The Number Seven* was the same little place tucked away in a quiet side street of a quiet corner of London. It had one main room: large enough for twenty, maybe thirty at a push. The heating was always on, even in July, so the girls wouldn’t shiver. Half the place was given over to a bar mounted against a wall. The black marble counter surrounded the barman on every side. Around that were stools occupied by beautiful young women in tiny bikinis or underwear. Each looked slightly bored, with their legs crossed, enduring the afternoon malaise. They peered up from their handbags or the phones they thumbed absentely, their eyes stared questioningly at the new arrival. They each wore a different colour all to themselves: a peroxide blonde in the tiniest blue bikini; a red head in white made up to look like a blushing, but naughty, bride on her wedding night; two brunettes in matching lingerie: one in black, the other purple. I scanned the room for a figure dressed in red. I didn’t find one. That was okay. I was early. She came on at four. I took one of the two seats arranged around a low table. I had a good view of the pole in the middle of the raised platform. The focus of the room, other tables were arranged around it in a semi-circle. Many were empty. It was quiet then. Later it would fill up with other men in suits looking to avoid the worst of the rush hour. A brief interlude between the transversing of their professional and domestic worlds. Some would go home to wives who wouldn’t approve if they ever knew. Others to bachelor pads where there was no one to care.

The first visit had been a fluke. It came back to me in images, like flipping through a press photographer’s contact sheet, each image moving the story forward. A disappointing interview. Retreating to a pub around the corner from Kings Place where *The Guardian* was based. Drunk, I had pointed myself towards the station at about the right time. The neon flickering sign of *The Number Seven* had piqued all the curiosity my booze-addled brain could muster. Underneath the sign Dave stood guard, smartly dressed in grey suit trousers with a matching waistcoat. A quick fumble through my pockets gave me a tenner to hand over. A black leather-glove handed me change. Dave had a serious look but was almost friendly whilst you were sober enough to stand and rich enough to get in. He was also a man who wouldn’t hesitate to show you the door via his size fourteens should either of those characteristics
change. Curtains guarded the entrance and Dave pulled them back for me. He ushered me into the club with an ‘enjoy, sir.’ I knew the sir was customary, an instinctive reaction, like ducking your head under a low doorframe that you know will miss your forehead by inches. Later Dave told me he was told to do it for anybody, even the track-suited bums halfway to the gutter who wandered in smelling of Tennent’s lager and body odour. Still, I thought it was a nice touch. It had been a while since I’d been called ‘sir’.

It was then that I first met Coco. We seemed to have a lot in common and the conversation always felt surprisingly easy. Her passing comment, saying it was strange for a guy dressed in a suit to be in during the afternoon, made me nervous. I stood out but she decided that was a good thing. Even in the tedium of late afternoon there were other patrons. The loudest were builders who had knocked off early. They all seemed to wear the same heavy-weathered white T-shirt and their jeans had tears near the knees, or if they wore tracksuit bottoms they would invariably be stained grey with concrete or white emulsion. Old trainers completed the look. They revelled in their laddish scruff. She never asked why a man in a suit would choose to spend part of the working day in a strip club. Maybe she sensed my reluctance and invented my history for me: a hedge fund manager who worked through the night in tune with the markets in the Far East perhaps, or a footballer with time on his hands after training, at the very least one of their agents. Her imagination would give me wealth beyond possibility in time and money. A fantastic daydream blown in with the afternoon breeze. An unemployable hack would certainly be near the bottom of her list of ideal professions for her fantasy man. It was pretty far down my own list at the time. The conversation rested mostly on her shoulders. Her voice calmed the waves of the liquid lunch that my head floated on top of. Her eyes, a rich hazelnut, stopped me capsizing and slipping beneath the surface, where the sharks lurked. When our time together was over she left offering a standing invitation to return. That was probably customary too. I decided against it. She kissed me on the cheek before she strutted off to the ladies’. The curvature of her figure thrown into relief by the spotlights that scanned the room. I was alone then but not for long. Other girls made their way over to me but they each lacked the miraculous hold over me that Coco had such a gift for. I found myself stumbling through the exit as the suits, the bankers or the lawyers or even the civil servants, began to replace the builder clientele. Late home that night,
“another long day at the office”, I told her. A last minute filler piece, the guy in New York failed to file again. I bet against her noticing the alcohol on my breath or the perfume on my clothes. I wondered what one more lie was worth. I’d lost count.

Coco became an itch. Like an insect bite that would heal if only you could stop scratching it. But you can’t. Errant thoughts drifted off in her direction. Dead time. Moments between stations on the tube. Between the margins of newsprint I could have been writing but wasn’t. Between switching off the telly and getting up from the settee. Between turning off the light and sleeping. The world became filled with triggers: her scent on the air, a song, the redness of a bus. My subconscious fed on all of it. I lasted five days. It was almost like she’d waited. She stood there in her red pumps with a ‘what took you so long’ smile on her face. From then on I was hooked.

Opposite were more tables and chairs. Some were occupied by wallflowers. They sat uncomfortably, waiting for a girl to take to the pole who would dance in the hope of enticing one of the patrons into a private show. They lacked either the money or the nerve to take things to the small room guarded by the head bouncer – who definitely wasn’t taller than a house and I doubt as wide. The lighting was moody and intimate, provided by two chandeliers suspended from a low black ceiling. Each wall held two large framed mirrors that reflected a row of empty tables. Near the pole was a disco ball, its revolutions suspended, its surface dark from an absent spotlight. Somewhere a DJ went about his business, playing records that nobody came to hear. Like music in a lift. Background noise. He lowered it briefly. Addressed the congregation from his pulpit, ‘Ladies and Gentlemen, please welcome the lovely Coco to the pole.’ There she was. Stepping out of my thoughts and into real life for the second time that week. Dressed all in red lace. Her small perky breasts were hidden by a frilly bra with matching panties and her fishnet stockings extended half way up her slender thighs. There was no orange-tinged hint of fake tan on her wiry body. The telltale stripper heels she wore clicked on the tiled floor as she walked to the pole. Her hair was needle straight and sharp. Its inky darkness, almost Latin, swayed behind her as she walked. The ends tickled the small of her back and occasionally hid a tiny tattoo, Chinese calligraphy. Black ink on soft skin. She took to the pole. Circled it. Embraced it. Up and down and around and around wearing a smile painted on. She was no older than mid-twenties, about my age. Invert, Scorpion,
Bow and Arrow. Each move more difficult than the last until she placed herself upside down, legs wrapped around the pole, arms outstretched: the Crucifix. She’d taught me the names. Lonely sets of eyes watched her from chairs and the bar. Hers found mine. She ended her routine early.

‘Ah there you are. I was hoping you’d come in.’ She leaned into me as I kissed her on the cheek, ‘let’s get a drink.’

She led me over to the bar. We took two of the unoccupied stools. The other girls had moved: one to replace Coco on the pole, the others to engage the wallflowers in conversation. They seemed to enjoy the attention the girls were giving them. I took out my wallet. She waved it away, ‘No, Hun. I’ll get these.’ I put my wallet back in my pocket. She reached over the bar and rummaged for something behind the counter. The bar man saw and let her continue. Her arm came back with her purse, silver with a thin strap.

‘What do you fancy?’ She asked.

‘Whatever you’re having.’

She waved at the barman who put down his paper, ‘Hey, bring us two Aftershocks will you?’ Off he went, returned with a pair of glasses and a rectangular bottle from under the bar. Into the glasses went two measures of a pinkish red drink. Coco offered me a glass. I took it, clinked it with hers and tipped the contents into my mouth. She did the same. The taste was vile, like drinking the liquidised remains of a cinnamon tree dissolved in hydrochloric acid. We banged the glasses on the counter. My throat burned with the heavy aftertaste, still sensitive, I’d need two or three before the cough reflex would stop. She shook her head vigorously.

‘You know that wasn’t bad. Wanna do another? My treat. We’re having a dance later right?’

The barman refilled our glasses. Down in one. She shook her head again. Prepared, I managed to arrest the cough as it gargled in my throat. She turned on the stool to face me. Legs crossed with her arms resting on top, fingerling the top of her stockings. The barman went back to his newspaper, ‘So how are you today?’ She said.

‘I’m alright. How are you doing? Can I ask you a question?’
‘Sure.’ No hesitation.

‘What’s your name?’

‘Coco.’ Her lips framed the beginnings of a smile.

‘I mean away from here.’

‘Coco.’ The smile widened but the eyes didn’t follow. A subtle hint to change the subject.

‘Well where are you from?’

‘Originally? The south-west, I grew up near Exeter.’

‘So you’re a bumpkin?’ I grinned.

She laughed, ‘not quite though I did have a bit of an accent which I try to hide.’

‘Bad for business?’

‘I think so, unless they’re from the West Country too. Then it’s fine.’ She laughed again. She put her hand on my knee. ‘You sound like a local, you’re from around here aren’t you?’

‘Originally, spent the last few years in Birmingham. Uni and then work up there.’

‘Uni huh? Smart guy. What made you come back to London then?’

I let the question float between us unanswered for a while as I tried to find something acceptable to report, couldn’t do it. ‘Just fancied a change really. So did you always have this power over men?’

She looked down and away for me. The change in subject had wrong-footed her. She was still looking down when she started to speak.

‘Erm I guess but I used to be a bit of a tomboy when I was young. No seriously! Even now most of my friends are guys. You might say that’s because they all think they can get some, but believe me they don’t!’

She beamed at me. Her voice full of purpose. I didn’t doubt her sincerity.
‘I know people have a preconception about lap dancers but I’m a dancer not a prostitute. I don’t sleep around or anything.’

‘But people expect you to.’

‘Exactly. But it’s crap. My job is to provide a sexy lap dance. Nothing more.’

‘You’re obviously very good at what you do and you’re very attractive.’

Her hand squeezed my knee. ‘Thank you.’ A big smile then, eyes matching.

‘But all women are attractive in their own way. Men have a one-track mind and women can exploit that. I think women aren’t confident enough in their bodies. Men don’t care about cellulite or cup size. At the end of the day they just want one thing.’

‘Which is?’ I asked.

‘A good time of course.’

She might have been blushing but it would have been hard to tell. Her high cheekbones always had a bloom of rose coloured sheen to them. It mixed with the brown of her eyes like strawberries dipped in chocolate. Even without the heavy make-up, the preserve of her occupation, she would have been beautiful. Her skin was soft and warm and she spoke through a mouth that when she wasn’t speaking looked thoughtful and when she was looked almost too small for her face.

‘It must be nice pretending to be someone else, having this whole other persona you can turn to when real life gets a bit too much.’

‘You make it sound more than it is. This is just dress up. I don’t really have to do much. The pu..’ She paused. ‘… Client really does the hard work in their head.’

‘There must be some acting involved though, after all, you are playing a part invented for you.’

‘I ‘spose there’s a bit of acting there but it’s hard not to let your personality shine through.’ She squeezed my knee again, subtly. She need not have bothered. Nobody took much notice of us. ‘It’s much harder to dance for someone like you.’ She reached out and held my chin in the palms of her hands. ‘You always have to hold yourself back from taking it further.’
She leaned forward, took my hand, ‘I think it’s time for our dance, don’t you think?’

Hand in hand we walked toward the private room, guarded by another giant bouncer. The dreadlocks made him look Jamaican; I didn’t know his name. Even bigger close up, his broad shoulders barely fitted inside the black suit jacket with a dark woolly jumper underneath, there to make him look even bigger and even more threatening. He looked boiling. He had to drop his chin and arch his back to speak to Coco. His dreadlocked hair stopped at a pair of huge shoulders. I saw a spotlight behind his head, switched off, and aimed at the disco ball. Between him and us stood a red velvet rope supported by two chrome stands. It belonged in a museum.

‘Ten or Twenty?’ His voice definitely had a West Indian inflection.

This time Coco didn’t push my wallet aside. I took out twenty. Gave it to him. He took a torch, flicked it on, and ran it over the note to check its authenticity. Satisfied, he pocketed it. Coco rummaged through her bag. She found a thin piece of card with a fold down the centre. She gave it to the giant. He marked it with a black biro and handed it back. I’d seen it before. Later on there would be five or six times and figures written down depending on how busy the shift was, the amounts would be circled. For now it had only one entry. She hurriedly put it back in her bag. Took my hand again. It didn’t bother me. How could it? She had a job. Had me beat there. I asked her once if she had a regular job as well. She shook her head then told me how much she cleared in a normal week. It was more than my white and orange payslips, which would drop through the letterbox of the rented Birmingham flat once a month, were ever worth. We were all just doing what we could. No more the exploiter than the exploited. No more so than the restaurateur down the street, or the builder or the man at the bar. Her business was fundamental. Just catering for another basic human need. It’s not like she told lies for a living, not deep ones that wrecked lives anyway. Little chalky white ones lined with silk were her stock in trade.

‘I remind you sir that this is a no touching show, please enjoy.’ The bouncer had the voice of a bored rollercoaster attendant, recounting safety advice for the millionth time that day, the words having lost all meaning for him. ‘Sir’ again. There was just something about the reassurance it gave. The respect its use conferred for just a second without the need for identification. Everyone was a ‘sir’, regardless of whether you deserved it. I reached out and grabbed the freebie. Its presence was fleeting

She led me into the private room. Black fabric brushed her bare skin as we entered. A large lantern hung from the ceiling throwing shadows into the corners. A built-in sofa reached all around the room, its black leather accompanied by a scattering of cushions. Every few feet more curtains, sheer, black, hung loosely to give the illusion of privacy. A dancer was already there, entertaining her client. There were no faces. Just bare skin brushing denim, white lace cast off on a seat and long blonde hair racing down a slender and subtly curving back, ending just above where her underwear had been seconds before. She finished. The punter clapped. My girl gave me a mocking smile and leant forward, ‘I hope I get a clap.’ I grinned back, said something funny. She laughed and forced my knees further apart with the palms of her hands. I didn’t fight her.

‘Do you want me to be gentle or go hard?’ She breathed in my ear. She let her hands drag over my lap, searching for the beginnings of a bulge, before sinking to her knees and arching away from me.

‘Do your worst,’ I said with a smile.

She arched back up. Her eyes met mine. ‘Okay then.’ She popped her index finger in her mouth, sucking the fingernail seductively.

She rolled over. Her front absorbed into the thick claret rug covering the floor. She reared up onto her knees, her chest to the floor, presenting herself. She slid her knickers down to reveal the smallest matching silky thong. Smacked her arse. Looked back to see my reaction.

She sat on my knee and rolled her hands up and down her slender legs. Rested a heel on my other knee. Her bare thigh in my eye line.

‘I love our dances together. It’s always nice to dance for an attractive man.’

She removed her bra, wrapped it around my head before resting it behind me.

‘So do you have the best job in the world right now then?’
She climbed onto me; her head above mine, pressing her chest into my face. She pushed a nipple into my mouth. ‘Oh yes.’

No touching. Hands spread along the top of the sofa. Rooted there, lying still in forced paralysis, remembering the giant just seconds from storming in should a woman’s shout be heard above the music outside.

She turned around and sat in my lap, gyrating her hips slowly whilst I fought the urge to grind back. ‘That feels good. How long you been doing this?’ I said, wondering why I’d never thought to ask before. I relaxed into it, going with the flow, feeling myself harden.

‘About three years. All over the place, not just here. I’m a bit of a club slag.’ Her sultry smile replaced by a cheeky grin.

‘And what have you learnt in three years?’

She leaned into me again. My lungs filled with her perfume. Eyes straining to make out details in the less than perfect light. Ears relishing the seductive tone of her voice as she whispered, ‘I learned that I can make anyone do anything.’

She turned away from me and stood. Her hands touched the floor as she bent from the waist. She allowed them to slide up her legs to the lace of her thong. She elegantly guided the fabric down her legs. When it reached the ground she stepped out of it. Turned to face me. Dropped to her knees and stalked me. She buried her head in my lap, her lips brushing against the bulge. She cupped her mouth around the tip. Bit down gently. Looked up with eyes belonging to someone a lot more innocent than she was.

Her hands clasped around the back of my neck as she brought herself to eye level. She licked my lips. Held my gaze. Breathing hard and fast. Watching me watching her. Stark. Open. Naked. Our faces touched. The smile disappeared. I saw the mask slipping. Detachment giving way to something close to tenderness in her eyes. The final undressing. Stripped bare. She stood more naked than she’d ever been before. Coco had gone. I saw the woman underneath. I felt her breath on my mouth, fresh and laced with mint. Alone together in a moment. Somewhere in my head a piano played
a simple tune. Single notes strung together by loneliness, playing the rest out of the room. Grinding everything to a halt. Business becoming pleasure.

Or not.

All moments pass.

She smiled at me as she dressed after. She sat down in my lap as she hunted for her clothes. First the thong, then the knickers were put back on as elegantly as they’d been removed. Finally she retrieved the bra that had lain, forgotten, behind my head. She was fastidious; making sure everything was perfect for the next time. The next one. Satisfied, she turned to me and, for the first time in a month of knowing her, she looked shy and unsure. I was disorientated, like the earth had moved, ‘you know kissing’s allowed right? No tongues though.’ She inched closer, looking up at me before focusing on my mouth. I felt myself drawn towards her and our lips touched. Polite. Tentative. Unsure. We withdrew. Looked at each other. Kissed again. Deeper. Longer. My hand brushed her cheek. Inviting her to take it further. Curious to see if she’d break her rule.

No.

That moment passed too. Her lip-gloss was slippery on my lips. She looked pleased as we left the room.

I’m back in the bedroom. His hands are back around my neck. Crushing my windpipe. The familiar struggle. Him supernaturally strong, fuelled by vindication. Me weak, weighed down with the guilt.

I’m fighting him but the adrenaline surge isn’t enough. My limbs are failing, floundering against arms that are so much stronger than they look, my hands can’t find purchase to fight him off.
His face is expressionless save for the telltale signs of the effort it’s taking to kill me. He takes no pleasure in this. That is my last image of him.

I’m slipping away.

Falling again.

Into the black.

Chapter Two

‘So you’re a journalist? Well that certainly sounds exciting.’ I couldn’t tell if he was being sarcastic or not. The face the voice belonged to was a mess of angles, like something you’d find in an engineer’s waste paper bin. It had a nose that was overly long and pointy that sloped away from a pair of expensive rimless spectacles. Above it was stationed the last remnants of what was once a head of hair, pruned
drastically short in a rearguard action against the rapidly advancing fault line-sized wrinkles that marched across his forehead and onto his scalp. His cheekbones were high and his jaw was small yet tapered. In fact his entire face appeared rather squashed between two huge ears that jutted out the way ears do when matched with a buzz cut. He wore a tweed jacket over his thin and awkward frame, a cotton shirt, the collar bent and untidy, chequered with blue dividing lines on a white canvas obviously unironed. Around his wrist he wore a watch with a brown leather strap. The face had a golden border and sat behind glass with the telltale scratches of heavy use. The contrast with my own suit that overlaid a crisp white shirt and my most expensive looking red silk tie and polished shiny black shoes was palpable and made me wonder. A red pen twiddled between skinny yet precise fingers, like surgical scalpels. He twirled it over and over, end over end, in his hand as he made his way through my CV. The fault lines deepening as his eyes descended down the page.

‘So I see you finished work at The Birmingham Enquirer six months ago now. Might I enquire as to the reason?’

‘I was sacked.’

An easy question to anticipate but no better circumvention of the truth had come to me on the tube journey to this interview or any of the previous. Better to stick to the truth. Own your mistakes, as my dad used to say. The interviewer, who introduced himself as George when he offered me a weak and somewhat reticent handshake, let my curt response stand. After some time he registered my tacit refusal to elaborate and with a clearing of his throat, as much to shake off his embarrassment than irritation, he moved onto quizzing me on my reading habits and what I did at university. This interview took place in the back of a small place called The Babylon Book Shop in Bloomsbury. The shop was situated about halfway up Museum Street, just around the corner stood the British Museum from which the little pencil of tarmac took its name. There were at most a dozen small shops on Museum Street and all had started life as Edwardian black and white town houses, each three stories tall. This small urban ravine resided in one of these peculiar vacuums where, despite the proximity to the twenty-four hour bustle of Oxford Street and Tottenham Court Road, a genial atmosphere of near silence and sunshine had gained a foothold. An oasis of
calm, the eye of the storm, just one extreme in a city of contrasts. Good for the soul? Yes, but bad for business you would imagine.

The shop itself was the type of place you’d easily miss if you weren’t specifically looking for it. Its quaint red window frames seemed to blend in a little too well with its locale and rather faded into obscurity next to a photography gallery specialising in pretentious modernity and an establishment advertising alternative medicines and Chinese massage. Outside the Babylon Book Shop were two large stalls filled with yellowing second-hand romances, reference texts with studious doodles in the margins, fantasy fiction filled with some of the worst prose ever committed to print and maps long out of date with dog-eared edges. A mish-mash of styles, genres, authors, periods, cultures, without the merest semblance of order or sequence. The curator of the gallery next door might have deemed it a tribute to the randomness of the human condition and its propensity to create chaos if anybody had the misfortune of asking for his opinion. If a customer did somehow manage to locate the text they were looking for, and ventured between the two wooden stalls with their bound goods into the shop to pay, they would be greeted by books stacked from floor to ceiling and in every conceivable shelf, cupboard, counter, and surface in all eight rooms of the entire place. Hundred-year-old periodicals from the British Academy of Science shared shelf space with celebrity autobiographies from Katie Price and Johnny Wilkinson. McEwan rubbed against Chandler, Brown next to Derrida, Dickens beside Picoult. To describe the place as an eccentric mess would have been an understatement, this was evidence of an almost wilful disregard for either order or the customer. Not that one had yet bothered us. I’d been there twenty minutes and the bell stationed above the red door that served as the shop’s entrance had failed to make its presence felt. I was beginning to wonder how the shop made any money at all. George seemed to read my mind, ‘Well we have the shop, and it’s usually busier than this, but most of our trade is through the World Wide Web.’ He tapped the laptop sitting on the desk between us; he’d closed its lid as he’d entered the room. I wondered if he did so out of politeness of secrecy. ‘I’d say around sixty percent of our business comes in through Amazon and eBay and places like that. That would be part of the job description of course, packaging the orders and sending them out. Rather integral to the business I should say. The downside of all this internet tomfoolery is that at times the shop can seem rather extraneous to the business.’ Extraneous was one
word, but redundant would have been more than apt. The smallness of the shop and its picturesque but sleepy location had led me to believe that The Babylon Book Shop was little more than something that Waterstones might one day find wedged in the tread of its corporate shoes, effortlessly digging it out of its cosy niche before tossing it away without a moment’s reflection or effort. A one-off antique book store selling muddled second hand copies of novels long out of print in a world of Kindles and ‘buy one get one half price’ offers. Defiant in the face of hopelessness. That sentiment made it infinitely easier to sympathise with the quaint little shop than its owner who’d let it enter its current state. Once the store might have termed itself a specialist, a bastion of expertise catering to scholars and academics, hobbyists and the generally curious. Now it was decidedly less, which prompted the asking of a question I’d first formed the second I laid eyes on George’s domain.

‘So how long has the shop been here?’

‘Well, we first opened our doors around 1902. My great-grandfather conceived the idea after he got back from India serving with the Royal Fusiliers. He had a hand in the relieving of the siege of Chitral in 1895 and won the General Service Medal. Serving in the colonies proved quite affecting upon his person and he thought this place might become a treasure trove of curiosities and knowledge for people interested in that sort of thing, especially from far-flung lands. He called it Babylon, so the family tradition says, because he wanted it to be mystical. When he died just after the First World War his son, my grandfather, took over and he passed it to dad in the fifties and I inherited it when he died in ‘94. The very definition of a family-owned business you could say.’

After finishing his speech George’s eyes glided down from the ceiling and for a moment locked onto my own before becoming distracted by my CV once again. I wondered what his great grandfather would have thought if he’d have seen his mysterious book shop in its present state.

‘I see, that’s nice. And what did you do prior to inheriting here?’

‘Oh nothing much really,’ came the reply after a lengthy pause. He spoke nonchalantly, clearly addressing the pair of sheets in front of him rather than their
owner. ‘I’d been to Cambridge of course and studied fine art, then after graduation I began here.’

Gradually it made sense.

The patient was weakening yes, but their decline not yet terminal. A change of direction, maybe even an eventual change of scenery could restore the Babylon Book shop to its former glory. The advert had asked for an assistant but what it really needed was a manager, just maybe without the title. George might not be a businessman or even a competent owner but so long as he was essentially harmless, even open to suggestion, the Babylon Book Shop wasn’t a lost cause. With George having fallen silent in favour of further study of my CV I had the time to notice smaller details in the room. Between multicoloured stacks of novels, periodicals, and textbooks each with weathered spines, were take-away brochures for Pizza, Indian and Chinese food. Save for an overly large portrait of a particularly stern British army officer, who I assumed was George’s great grandfather though a familial connection wasn’t obvious, not a single picture adorned the bare magnolia walls. The large window under which this meeting took place was constructed of opaque glass beyond which existed a world out of focus. George had no desire to see the outside world. Had no desire to engage with others, even the man who had dutifully answered his advertisement on Fish4Jobs within fifteen minutes of him having posted it and was now sitting in front of him two days later. Now it made sense why the Babylon Book shop had no customers, why all their business went through the Internet. Having inherited the business you might wonder if its new owner felt imprisoned by the deeds of his ancestors but for George it was a sanctuary. George wasn’t accessing my application for a job but for a visa into his own little fiefdom. Then the training took over. The natural curiosity that I’d been taught to indulge at every opportunity began to stir. If he hated people why advertise for an assistant at all? Had the world got too close for him? Did the job description he’d envisioned include screening him from the world? Did he want to increase the size of his sanctuary or just want an easy life? Too many questions and not enough answers. Somewhere in the back of my mind came a thought, ‘I’ve been wondering do you have any plans to expand the business further, perhaps becoming more of a specialist for academic texts for example?’ I asked. The owner of the little bookstore suddenly looked up from my CV. He seemed slightly taken aback. He mulled the idea, turning over the thoughts in his angular
cranium, ‘Yes that does sound like rather a good idea.’ He paused again, possibly considering if this would involve more human contact for him or less. ‘Yes I like it! We could get in touch with some of the universities or some such. Yes that sounds marvellous!’ Finally I’d managed to get a smile out of George. He continued to toy with my proposal out loud and as he did so my insides began to uncoil and a wave of relief began to crest. It wasn’t a step forwards career-wise, or even a step sideways, it was probably about half a dozen steps backwards in truth but it didn’t matter. It was a starting point, maybe even the start of a whole new career. Journalism wasn’t an option anymore. Vanderbilt and the fantastic Mr. Fox had seen to that.

George must have said something because when I refocused he’d stopped talking and was waiting patiently, his eyes, two black beads with the tiniest glint of expectation, sizing me up. My focus now fully on my potential new employer, I noted that his face no longer sported the smile of before. Its demise had been sudden, like an actor letting his assumed character fall from his person the second he’d retreated off-stage, cast off like snake’s skin. There was a lot in George’s smile. I found myself missing it as the space between us filled with a tension conjured from a silence that had become overlong and increasingly troubling, ‘I have two main concerns with your application. Firstly your lack of specific experience in the field of book retail. I can hardly be expected to offer training to every Tom, Dick, and Harry that walks through the door and wants to sell books.’ His voice had become monotonous and the air of rehearsal had returned to his speech. A bad sign. I searched for an answer that didn’t begin with, ‘Well how hard can it fucking be?’ Having come up short I let him continue onto his second point. ‘And then there’s the issue of your academic record. No doubt impressive as it is, I wonder if someone with your academic standing still possesses the rare business acumen required to succeed in an industry such as my own or whether it has been conditioned out of you by all those certificates.’ He paused before delivering his final summation on my application, ‘I think I need somebody I can mould more into the role. Sorry but thank you awfully for coming.’

Well that was a new one. The pompous prick sat there twirling his half eaten biro, clearly waiting for me to leave yet lacking the gumption to state it outright, as I experienced the full meaning of the term ‘dumbfounded’. I experienced the physical sensation. I felt it course through my body, making my intestines contort into the foetal position and my blood turn frigid. To be filled with astonishment and disbelief.
To be confounded, flabbergasted, shocked, staggered, and astounded all at once. It was a fair summation of the emotional state I felt sitting in the chair opposite George, apparently neither qualified, nor in possession of the necessary acumen, to stack shelves and box parcels for a pokey little shop forgotten by all but its owner.

Dumbfounded.

I know this isn’t real.

He forces me back down into the mattress as he leans over me. His knees are on my chest as his hands find the familiar position for maximum leverage.

My body reacts the same, adrenaline surges as the panic, and then terror, sets in. The room is dark and I can’t make out the details but the bed that I’m lying on is a child’s. As my arms and legs flail they cross they find the edges of the bed
and are met with thin air. I know what comes next. Every time the same. My eyes are wide and my head full of blood, I hear my pulse again in my ears and that same sense of falling as he finishes the job.

Into the black once more.

Chapter Three

I didn’t hear the little bell ring as I let the red door close behind me; my thoughts were elsewhere. Overdraft charges mainly, mixed with how much was left on my Oyster and shock at what was happening to me. As I left the quiet confines of The Babylon Book Shop on the quaint Museum Street I returned to the sounds of the city: the honking horns, the tourists speaking a thousand different languages, the
waiters and waitresses removing the contents of Al Fresco lunches from tables, the sounds of excitement and the vapours of life itself in all its glory but just then I couldn’t take it. I needed quiet. I needed a place to think. I circled the streets around the museum’s grounds in a kind of aimless wandering vigil. Following in a vague sense the stone walls that protected the neoclassical architecture of the main buildings from twenty-first century London. They took me past souvenir shops with their plastic models of Big Ben, tourist maps with cartoon illustrations of famous landmarks, and replica Beefeaters with plastic smiles. Past the pedestrianised zones guarded by traffic bollards. Past the tall former flats that are now offices blocks for PR firms, accountants, and publishing houses. Golden plaques adorned the spaces next to the arched entrances where names like ‘Helen Grantham House’ were stencilled in black lettering, titling the five or six stories of concrete above that overlooks the borough. Past Galleries selling modern art, past other one-offs like The Babylon Book Shop that shared space with a Jessops, a Boots, or a Sainsburys Local. Past the ugly municipal buildings completely out of touch with the area’s well-to-do aesthetic which children of the 50s built to replace housing blitzed out of existence during the war. Past bus stops and zebra crossings, double yellow lines and leafy banks of trees lining roads filled with people. People with places to be. People with jobs. People with purpose.

The daze began to thicken. My feet began to stick to the wide pavements as I reached Bedford Square; the oasis of trees next to the British Museum with its huge aquamarine roof; unique when set against a skyline of multiplying square cubes made of glass and concrete that glistened on sunny days and scowled when overcast. I imagined the view from there on a day like that day. To be so high looking down on the latticework of unnamed and similar streets inhabited by the androgynous millions below. How small we must look to them, existing between the cracks of the pavement as we do. I imagine they might look around their eye level out over the city and see the skeletal frames of construction cranes dot the horizon and serve notice of another imminent erection to modernity, where yet more may peer out on their creation. Central London is punctured with these throughout its urban hide. There are several off Oxford Street and the Bloomsbury borough, a gentle reminder of the green and pleasant land the city has come to supersede in the imaginations of many. Bedford Square was actually a large oval of nature ringed by cast-iron railings cast centuries
previously. At its epicentre sat an ornately crafted, white topped hexagonal pavilion with dark green walls cosily nestled beneath the canopy of large strong Plane trees that might once have been arrow straight but had latterly been bent by time’s irresistible grasp. The pavilion was encased by a ring of loose stone shingle that ended in shrubbery in some areas, immaculately maintained lawn in others. A wooden, well-varnished, bench was situated at the edge of the shingle, its timber and iron construction the same brown and dark green as the pavilion. It was here where I attempted to collect my thoughts below the canopy that rocked in the afternoon breeze, scattering the summer sun’s rays all over the garden. It seemed an affront to nature to feel so hopeless in such an idyllic setting.

They tell you that you’ll find another job. Something done with mundane and consummate ease. Something akin to exhausting one cigarette and flicking the butt away before surreptitiously reaching into a packet for the next. They tell you that it’s just a 9 to 5, that you work to live and not vice versa and besides you’ve worked yourself half to death, you could use a break. But it’s easy to be on the outside looking in, passing judgement. They are the people in the driving seats of shiny sleek examples of German engineering that glide past as you walk home in jeans and a faded T-shirt. Those cars were bought on credit, fuelled by the expectation of a pre-recession salary, and might one day soon be repossessed. The shirts and ties taken off their backs, stored in walk-in wardrobes of houses bought with exorbitant mortgages suddenly unable to be financed. Maybe. You watch as they pass, remembering when you had a reason to dress like them that didn’t involve an interview, court days mainly but a nice looking suit and a flash of the press card is enough to get you into pretty much anywhere. You recall the temporary feeling of power and esteem that a suit can give you with fondness, how a linen shirt felt against the skin. They look at you with disapproval; you fail to meet their eyes, the sense of shame pulling your gaze toward the ground, wondering if you’re the exception or the vanguard.

During the first few months you tell yourself you’re looking for just the right opportunity. The right fit. That this could be good for your career. It could be the impetus you need to finally progress. That optimism doesn’t survive past those first few months. You wake up later and later every morning to find the usual identikit rejection emails mixed in with other equally useless correspondence: newsletters from websites, mail-shots from shoe companies, ASOS and Groupon. You note the similar
pseudo-empathy present in both these types of emails, guesstimate whether you are one of hundreds or thousands that received that message and despair at the industrial scale rejection. You realise you are but a tiny speck in a large analogous stain of decay on a wilting economy. The rejections are read and then deleted. The morning coffee made and several more ‘exciting opportunities’ wait for you to attempt to impress with your ability to use the form fill function on your laptop to complete their standard application form. An hour goes by and two or three more applications have been fired off across cyberspace. Shots in the dark. And that’s how it goes. Industrial standardized applications meet industrial standardized rejection. You’re not fussy. That’s their role. Beggars can’t be choosers and there are an awful lot of beggars about. You swear it didn’t use to be like this and after the last box is ticked, form filled out and sent on its way; more a distress call than an invitation, you remember how it wasn’t always like this.

There was a girl at university called Belle. I met her about five minutes after I’d said goodbye to my mother on day one: tears in her eyes, a mix of relief and shame in my own. Belle was a tall wiry girl with a big smile that some might say contained a few more teeth than strictly necessary. It turned out both of us were there to study English and we would intermittently walk to lectures together throughout that first year. We were friends pretty much all throughout the degree and when I went onto the Masters in newspaper journalism she did a PGCE in Primary education; she’d decided very early on that she wanted to be a teacher. As time went by our circle of friends thinned out, through graduations and placement years, we’d often find ourselves in one another’s company. There, often sprawled half-drunk on stained sofas, we’d recount our how our day had gone, mine concerned mad rushes to deadline, leads plucked from obscurity with hidden meaning that really ‘mattered’, the people whose stories deserved to be known to everybody. Hers were a seemingly endless string of names, each with a tiny snapshot of a life unfettered by the demands of the world outside. She would recall these moments and recount them to me: how Jason made her laugh when he sang the wrong words to a hymn, how Becky’s poem made her sob a little after class, how Richard had clearly opened up to her despite openly hating the other teachers. I’d often watch that toothy smile of hers creep across her face as she remembered these tiny aspects of her day in a little school in a corner of Birmingham where the children wore royal blue jumpers with elasticated ties and
plastic lunch boxes were a must-have item. Where the walls were adorned with handmade posters and every Christmas there was a school play where the kids would show off their costumes, painstakingly made by the proud parents who would later take their places in the audience. I’d see firsthand through the drunken haze how those recollections washed over her like a warm balm that soothed the fatigue that arose from endless lesson plans, excessive travel, lectures, and placement after placement. I saw in her what I felt in me.

Devotion.

Belle had it. I had it. Maybe even George’s great grandfather had had it. The passion and dedication that accompanied an unshakable belief in your chosen future. A niche. A calling. A place to call our own. So much more than just a way of replenishing an ever-diminishing bank account. More than a job. More than a career. A vocation. A purpose. Few people understand that. It’s the reason they chose not to miss the dinners, holidays, and the odd birthday. They chose not to max-out on over-time, and make friends with the cleaners after all nighters fuelled by a high-octane mixture of Pro-Plus and Red Bull. But Belle and I did, and that was strange for the others. I found myself on Belle’s Facebook page a few weeks after the first rejections had made their presence felt. I thought I was looking for a way to ease the anger that robbed me of sleep, to feel something that shared a postcode with hope. I smiled when I read that Belle still taught, a sad smile that struggled against the comprehension of an eviscerating truth, that I’d filed my last copy. The future never stays fixed. It morphs and twirls, spins and defies recognition. From career journalist to career seeker. My future had become an ever more difficult exercise in prioritization.

First I cut down on luxuries, shopping trolleys once filled with Tesco finest meats gradually transformed to their basic range, restaurants became gated communities for the more affluent, travel became a closely scrutinised expense difficult to justify unless for the opportunity of work. The squeeze hit in other places too. Friends suddenly became absent, the social exclusion familiar with constraining finances became difficult to stand in the late afternoons and early evenings, when before there’d be a pub or a bar filled with people with a shared purpose, enjoying a brief vacation from it all, now there was nothing. It’s a strange out-of-body experience, being able to track your inexorable decline through bank statements.
painfully recording your receding finances, feeling the noose tighten around the life you’d built for yourself. How each thing once taken for granted had become a necessity, then a luxury, and finally a memory dwelt on alone in quiet rooms late at night.

I found a *Pronta Print* just off Tottenham Court Road and gave the attendant, an Indian kid of about nineteen with glasses, the pen drive I’d taken to never leaving the house without. When he’d brought the contents up on screen I asked him to print a dozen copies of file 3. Took a ruffled ten pound note from my wallet and handed it over, hoping he couldn’t detect my subconscious reluctance to part with such a precious commodity. He handed me an assortment of shrapnel, as Dad used to call it, which I quickly pocketed and two minutes later I was out the door. Filled with an energy borne of panic and survival. So out into the world I went, up and down one of the busiest shopping streets in the world, seeking out small placards in glossy shop windows, from the big department stores near Hyde Park to the smaller places, the ones that sold tourist trash, mobile phone covers, or fast food. The time for being snobbish had passed. Minimum wage was still a wage, a stopgap to staunch the bleeding. I marched in and out of each with one less sheet of paper upon which my life had been condensed into its most employable base ingredients, which of course had changed over time. The first draft included a master’s degree in journalism, NCE qualifications, and the two or three awards I’d been shortlisted for but failed to win. I remember rationalising not winning by telling myself there’d be plenty more chances. I had a whole career ahead of me.

Another time.

Another life.

The version George had seen barely had the First from Birmingham on it. Only as the red door closed did my memory serve up an article I’d written when the recession was in its infancy, it occurred to me that I’d heard George’s point of view before. The article was a mid-paper filler piece detailing how job seekers were being encouraged to dumb down their CVs by increasingly overworked Job Centre Plus advisors for fear of being labelled too qualified for the jobs being advertised. I’d doorstepped a Job Centre for quotes from those less fortunate for a bit of colour. Fate is not without a sense of irony. Morpheus was right.
The desperate job search continued until the afternoon gave way to a balmy evening. By the time the swathes of tourists and shoppers had been replaced by swaths of commuters my stores of frenzied and fearful motivation had become exhausted. In their place came a dull despair that froze me even in the summer heat that seemed to rise from the pavements. The urban tide had become just too strong for one man, for that day at least. I felt myself carried along by the throng accompanied by the ceaseless drone of engines, the occasional yet piercing shriek of a siren, half-heard conversations shouted into phones by business men in a perpetual state of tardiness. They bumped and shoved as they buzzed around the edge of the cavernous entrance of Oxford Circus Tube station. Like soap suds around a plughole, they circled the stairway before slowly being pulled into the abyss and finally disappearing beneath the earth, phones safely sequestered in the jacket pockets of tailored suits.

But not all.

In amongst the figures dressed in office-smart black and grey, a pocket of royal blue had formed near the station entrance. A group of teenage schoolboys had positioned themselves against the railings, apparently impervious to the underground’s gravitational pull. They effortlessly fought its magnetism and defiantly showed that they were not of this world, not yet anyway. Undoubtedly, one day the teenagers in the blue blazers would metamorphosize into the PR executives, the art dealers, the civil servants or any of the myriad of professions that swirled around them with ambivalence, paying them no more mind than the sea does to a cliff face, safe in the knowledge that one day soon they too would succumb and drift on the uncontrollable tide of the city. But not just yet. Their misplaced defiance evident in the school ties loosened but not removed, the scuff marks on the expensive yet worn school shoes, the school blazers thrown haphazardly upon oversized backpacks designed for adults, bought by parents too busy to collect their offspring from school, and worn by those unaware of the precariousness of their situation, how the world would tolerate their disobedience only temporarily and would be merciless if they refused to bend to its will. The boys talked amongst themselves. I watched as intermittently their faces filled with laughter or embarrassment, observed how they shouted and pointed, and fiddled with the phones that they’d had to conceal during the school day. Occasionally their eyes turned towards the noisy black canal of frustratingly static metal, its glacial progression towards the gigantic Centre Point building that
overlooked the immediate skyline didn’t yet contain the bus that would take them home. They did all this swaddled in the indifference of the world, their attitude equally indifferent, unaware of their spectacular feat of endurance.

Across the street choked with traffic, a black gospel street preacher had set down his things, and megaphone to his lips, had begun his sermon to an inattentive audience that passed all around him, all eager to avoid eye contact with the holy man. His voice carried well, despite having to compete with the sounds of brakes being applied, gears being shifted, wheels turning, and engines roaring along with the constant unseen siren; a soprano soloist accompanied by a metropolitan orchestra. He stood alone in his brilliant untucked white shirt, top button undone, billowing and spasmodic in answer to the gusts and swirls produced by so much human movement. A black leather-bound book could be seen clutched to his chest in one hand, the aforementioned loudspeaker in the other. His trousers were neatly pressed, a total juxtaposition with his shoes, dulled with age and wear, in a far worse state than those of the school children who were now staring and pointing. I wondered which would come first, their bus or the first shout of abuse from a privileged teenager’s mouth directed at the fanatic rich in only conviction. I’ve never quite understood why people like him feel the best and sanest way to convey their beliefs to an apathetic majority is via loudspeaker in a busy street but still he went on: “God is this and God is that”. He loves us unconditionally if we love him. I toyed with the notion of pointing out this contradiction but, without a loudspeaker, I conceded I’d be quite outgunned and appear just as mad. Whilst I was contemplating this, a bus had materialised and stopped near the boys who had begun to file towards it in preparation for their pick up. ‘God loves me!’ Shouted one of the boys as he boarded the bus, black oyster card in hand. The others laughed. The preacher continued as before, just as indifferent to the boys as the rest. Pretending not to hear. I wonder if he comprehended the irony. I wondered where he got his strength. As the rush hour ticked away around me there I stood. Watching him deliver his message whilst his very presence parted the surging crowds. I began to notice how the world had started to see me in a very similar way. Middle-aged businessmen traced an invisible boundary around me on their way into the tube station whilst younger assistants, associates, interns and other titles pushed and shoved, their messenger bags and rucksacks brushing against my shoulders, chest, and back. I tried to move between them but got myself pinned and forced closer to the
tube entrance. I paused to create some space for myself, and was knocked into hard from behind by another commuter. I turned around to apologise but in that instant the person that shoved me was gone, replaced by another who forced their way past my right shoulder just as hard. Again I tried to apologise but they were already gone and others had taken their place. I started to panic, the familiar feeling of claustrophobia stirring deep inside. I reached out for the railings and pulled myself close to them, out of the stream of people with somewhere to go and away from the steps that led down into the underground station. I found myself next to a Japanese tourist and her husband. She was taking photos of a black cab in traffic completely unaware of the crushing tide of humanity all around her as she enjoyed her holiday. I breathed deeply and looked up at the sky, a technique I’d learned as a child that would usually calm me down. Even by the railings though I wasn’t immune to being in someone’s way and I continued to get pushed, brushed, and shoved until I’d calmed myself down and moved on. Nobody asked if I was alright. Nobody cared. I remember thinking that commuting was never this physical before.

*When I had somewhere to go too.*

It was then I realised. I was persona non grata, unwelcome here. I could hear tutting just audible over the car exhaust. I was the oil that floated on the tide, heavy and insoluble, damaging the ecosystem. They saw through me. The suit, the shiny shoes with increasingly worn soles, the expensive blood-red silk tie, the briefcase now empty, all of it was just a disguise. A false identity. I was no longer one of them. I looked at my watch, 17:46. Coco would be busy and the Number Seven would be filling up. I headed away from Oxford Circus, off into the city, looking for a bar where the change in my pocket could afford me a few hours away from the way the world really was. What I had become. Whatever that was.

I no longer knew.
The terror and adrenaline sharpen my senses. As he strangles me I look beyond my deathbed. Next to it is a bedside table. Two things are on top. One is a digital clock. I can't make out the time. The other is a toy elephant. Carved from a dark wood. I've seen it before, a long time ago.

I've given up struggling. Experience tells me that it's useless to resist. I die quietly. The room is silent, confirming what I already knew, that neither of us were breathing.

I turn my head away from his expressionless face as he finishes his work. I focus on the elephant.
Chapter Four

‘People are desperate to listen to someone, anyone, who will tell them what to do.’ I let the words sink in. They came back to me in waves. Making me think. ‘Laws are meaningless unless people submit to them. They’re nothing but a symbol of our obedience. That is if we allow them to be. They won’t stop people subverting them; they just provide a consequence. They’re designed to stop those so impressed with authority from doing the things they’d never do and why would they? They’re too busy giving respect and credence to anybody who asks for it. They obey the green man at traffic lights. The health warnings on cigarettes. Sheep.’ For a second I was back in the pub with Charlie, listening to him pontificate. I snapped back into reality,
counted the stops between Earls Court and East Ham: twenty-two. Two minutes between stations on the tube. Home in about forty-five. Late again. Dinner probably on the table, cooling, served with another argument. Why didn’t you ring? I wondered as well. The train shuddered its way under the East End.

‘I mean they’re designed to stop bad things happening to good people right? That’s what the big laws are for, the ones with moral authority: don’t kill, don’t steal, and don’t fiddle with your neighbour’s kids. But those things weren’t always morally wrong. Morals are social constructs. We made them so they change, they evolve, they shift, and they disappear and reappear over time like the fucking TARDIS. Julius Caesar would have been done for Statutory Rape if he’d been around now. Every cave dweller from Neanderthal man to Fred Flintstone would be doing time for killing his neighbour or nicking his rug made out of Sabre-toothed tiger hide. Laws are not the concrete immovable things they pretend to be.’ All around me were empty blue and green chequered seats. A few passengers though. Some, not local, had hands on luggage clasped between their legs. They looked anxious. Others, the locals, looked relaxed. A greying man in a black suit flicked through that day’s paper left by an earlier commuter. Others peered at the advertising plastered above their heads: posters screaming slogans advertising car insurance, or exotic holiday destinations, or even kettles, shiny and new. Charlie saw laws and rules everywhere but especially in advertising. To him all forms of advertising are constructed on a solitary human desire: happiness. Happiness is the carrot and someone at sometime found that people will do whatever they can to achieve it, the most powerful country on Earth enshrined the pursuit of it in their constitution. But what happens when following the rules doesn’t bring you happiness? When you wake up from that dream and you’re surrounded by job applications and overdue credit card bills? What if they can’t deliver what they’re promising? What if they never could? What then? An entire generation foolishly believing a lie told to them across every billboard, every glossy magazine or in between TV shows. A lie that pervaded society. Saturated in it, confining the population to the so-called rat race that they had no hope of escaping from. A fate of becoming nothing more than slaves to Calvin Klein and Giorgio Armani. Charlie saw laws and rules everywhere and took great pleasure in subverting them. An old woman in the corner stared at her hands intently like they might suddenly disappear if she looked away for a second. Opposite her were a group of
three. Two men and a woman whose voices carried across the carriage. They got off at Liverpool Street, taking their conversation with them. *How good was the Ipad’s 3G connectivity? What did she think of the end of The Wire?*

‘You think I’m being daft don’t you? Well you know that Mungo Jerry song *In The Summertime*?’ He hummed a few bars. ‘Sounds a little bit Reggae, been on loads of adverts? Anyway have you heard the bit where it goes, *have a drink, have a drive go out and see what you can find*? Forty years ago they called that a good time. Today a judge would call that being in charge of a vehicle whilst under the influence of alcohol.’ I remembered him drawing breath. Up to now his delivery had been calm and measured. Then it started to become faster, as if he had to get the words out of his mouth before they set fire to his tongue.

‘Today it’s morally wrong to sleep with a fourteen year old girl, or drink and drive or even smoke in public but that wasn’t always the case was it?’

‘It cuts both ways of course.’ He looked around the pub. ‘If I kissed you right now people might be surprised. If I did it fifty years ago people might kick the shit out of me for being a faggot. A hundred years ago and I’d be wearing a number.’

He grinned then, ‘times change and so should we.’

Other passengers got on. Some had luggage that had been hauled through Heathrow or Gatwick. Others had fake leather messenger bags from All Saints or River Island. The warning alarm went off as the doors slammed shut before the sudden jolt that told us we were off again followed by a soft whirring sound as the train got up to speed, this was one of the newer ones. I sat there, empty seats either side of me, and thought about the crux of Charlie’s philosophy as he’d told it to me earlier.

‘The point is this. We are slaves to laws and rules; they are the framework for the world in which we live. But they aren’t constant. They change depending on the way the wind is blowing. So if they aren’t constant, if we aren’t judged by the same rules as our fathers were then why should we be likewise constant? If they keep changing then is it really that bad if we break them? After all in a hundred years time all this might be legal. It’s just the redistribution of wealth as Karl used to say.’ Charlie’s booming voice faded into the low rumbling of the train and I let my gaze fall onto the floor of the carriage. It had this speckled finish; multi-coloured like somebody had
pushed a Kaleidoscope through a cheese grater. In the middle of the mess was a pole, like Coco’s but a bright green and not as shiny but it was enough, just the spark my memory needed.

Instantly she was back in front of me. I watched her dance around the pole behind the veil of my eyelids. I drifted on her perfume. Lost in the rhythm. None of it mattered. Not work, not home, not even Charlie and his legal diatribe. For that moment she’d drawn me into calmer waters. Safe in the crack between waking and sleep. With her. We weren’t alone. An old man sat in the corner, enjoying the show. A walking stick by his side. The face hidden by the darkness. He knew. My attention drawn towards the dark corner. The name worming its way into my fantasy. Coco left her pole. Walked over to me, whispered, ‘Be with me’. She led me back to the private room with the sheer curtains. Her arms wrapped around my neck. No bouncers. Touching allowed now. Our bodies swallowed by the tiny fingers of the thick red rug. I dived into her. Into the cloud of a half imagined fantasy. Shapes set against the haze; lacking clarity. The image sharpened at the climax. A lingering embrace as we lay supine together, exhausted but happy. Content. Little details. The soft touch of her cheek on my chest. The warmth of her body wrapped like a blanket around mine. Her lips pressed against my ear lobe. Her whispering, in a voice not her own, that East Ham was the next station. The robotic but oddly feminine voice over the tannoy system forced me to leave Coco and face the real world. The carriage had emptied whilst I’d been away. The overhead halogen bulbs stung my eyes. I disembarked and I didn’t mind the gap. Charlie would have been proud.

A quick rummage through my wallet for the Oyster card. Through the turnstile, bathed by the blinding fluorescent lights of the station. It beeped but let me through. I owed it money. Another creditor. I rushed home. Through a city glowing red by the last of the evening sun. An autumn leaf of a city. Its time finite and drawing to a close. Its tiny veins clogged and stagnant. The central artery, once its life line, ferrying essentials for a thriving organism, now greying and polluted, slowly hardening against the biting wind sure to come. Waiting for the fall. I sympathised as I walked through the grubby streets. Second-hand cars parked up outside ex-council places. The faint hum of rush hour traffic coming from somewhere in the distance. A few kids clumped together on someone’s wall. Hoods up. Bikes cast aside on the pavement. A lazy menace emanated from their direction. What you looking at mate? I
ignored them, walked on. An empty briefcase made it easier. Just for show. I wondered if I’d ever need it again for its intended purpose. I’d been back in London a few months then. The time a depressing mess of job interviews with no call back, dwindling finances and long days and nights spent waiting. It would get worse. That much I was sure of. Eventually I’d sack myself from my sham occupation. Give up the idea of finding a genuine replacement. Spend days at home. Regress completely to the teenager I once was. I’d get to the point where the mere act of showering would be an achievement worthy of a long recuperation.

And then there was Charlie. Charlie, a person for whom the rules didn’t apply, a person with an idea. Who lived by that idea no matter how unacceptable to society. Happy to be the pantomime villain. He kept saying, we only choose to be normal. Life can only beat you if you agree to play by its rules. I’d seen the queues at the dole office before. The tinge of failure in the air there. The sense of helplessness and emasculation in the eyes of the people. The dole office isn’t the type of place that people imagine it to be. Aside from the bright solid colours and false optimism there aren’t any single mothers with armfuls of kids dancing down the steps of the council office like Dorothy from the Wizard of Oz, cheque in hand ready to spend it on a pink velour tracksuit from JD Sports. Instead the dole office is filled with people perplexed as to how they’ve ended up there. People for whom the question, ‘who are you?’ has taken on existential meaning as, for perhaps the first time in many of their comfortable lives, they’re forced to acknowledge the fact that they are no longer quite so sure. The recession took their jobs, it might even take their houses if they are particularly debt ridden, but for all it had taken that central pillar of their identity and left behind a single thorny, maddening, question they had spent a life answering: ‘Who am I?’ The minds pondering that question belonged to bodies that appear as ghostly apparitions of their previous lives. A man in his forties, flecks of grey in his hair, a wife-ironed shirt on his back and a blue silk tie around his neck that said, up until recently, that he was a middle manager with his own office, pension plan, and job security. Now he shifted uneasily in the queue behind a woman similarly aged with specs, a frilly blouse, and a pencil skirt. A phantom journalist perhaps, like me. Maybe in a previous life I’d read her, maybe we all had, but now it didn’t matter. Now she was waiting to be told by the Job Centre Plus that she could retrain as a baker, that jobs were scarce, and besides her qualifications meant very little in today’s
tough economic climate. Then her transformation from Fleet Street fox to unemployment statistic would be complete. They would all endure the ritual humiliation then walk home or take the bus, the car having been sold to pay for their child’s school fees. They would make a cup of Earl Grey and sit down in the conservatory with the *The Daily Mail*, before the subscription ran out, reading the headlines about benefit cheats and the feckless work-shy, unable to summon up the superiority that was once as natural as breathing and wondering if they had become the story. Wondering if they were about to be ostracised by the Chipping Norton set. I knew how it felt to see the world I’d built, the job, the apartment, the life all gone in an instant. A catastrophic implosion sparked by the strike of a pen. The boy done good, but not good enough, and now it was over. Morals, ever changeable and inconsistent, are expensive things to have. Charlie had a point. The only question that remained was whether I was about to fall or had done so already.

At the end of the road was a house with a small knee-high picket fence, painted dark blue, stretched around its borders. Within the fencing a thick layer of concrete had been poured, its edges sloped to meet the pavement and there was a dropped curb so a car could park up. Before Charlie or Hulse Avenue the house had a number 40 on the door, I remembered the summer evenings where the little boy who lived in that house helped his Dad to mow the tiny lawn that was split in two by a brick pathway constructed of hexagon slabs like a honeycomb. The little boy got paid a fiver for his assistance and he spent it on Panini football stickers or penny sweets usually. The two of them would sweep the grass into great black bags that would lie next to a telephone pole for the dustmen to pick up the next day. I remember that little garden but most of all I remember the fence; its rich royal blue juxtaposed with the manila and crème pebble-dashing of the house. It should have ringed a much grander home, something in a gated community in suburban America, not a council estate in East Ham. One of the last things the father of the boy did was to paint it again. He sat there on a Saturday afternoon, with the radio sending country music out of the open front windows and the sun shining the way it does in early summer, and painted the fence. He liked the colour blue and he liked the garden. It made the place look tidy he said. He said it would need another coat before the winter came but he never got around to it. After that the father of the boy didn’t go out of the house much. The fence never did get that second coat of paint. Afterwards, the little boy’s Mum
decided that she wanted to concrete over the front garden and remove the front portion of the fence. Both her neighbours had done it; in fact her house as it was then was almost the only one with any kind of front garden left. She said it would make life easier and the little boy wouldn’t have to mow it. The mother said she needed a driveway for a car. So about two months later a man came and tore out all the grass. The boy, older then and sadder, watched it happen from his bedroom window. He watched as the man wheeled an orange cement mixer with him to mix the concrete and watched him take a spade and put down a thick layer of grey where once there had been green. Once it had dried he looked pleased with his work. His masterpiece was never used though. Not a single car ever sat on that driveway. Maybe that wasn’t the point. Maybe the garden just reminded the mother of her husband and it was too much. The sides of the fence stayed though so maybe the memories weren’t all bad. The little boy was too young to understand. In the years since, long and deep cracks had formed in the concrete and weeds had sprouted from the underneath the concrete so when the boy returned a man, he made plans to rip out all the weeds and fill in the gaps. He couldn’t bring himself to repaint the fence though. Every time he’d go to do it he’d see the brush strokes left by his father and decide not to. They’re all that’s left of him now. The only proof he ever existed. Time would strip the wood eventually; the wind of many years had blown board flakes from the wood leaving the timber below to rot. It was only in the man’s memory now that the fence was the shade of royal blue his father had seen.

To a normal person the house was just like any other: it was bricks and mortar, a mortgage, an investment, but most of all, a home. A regimented box not at all dissimilar in appearance to the others that lined the street despite its blue fence. The front door was situated to the left of a large window where people in the living room could watch the comings and goings on the street if they chose. Above that were two square windows, the eyes on a misshapen cartoon smiley face. The one on the right belonged to the master bedroom. The other one belonged to the little boy who by now had grown up and had moved back home after university. Nobody knew why. Maybe something to do with the recession. That was what a normal person saw but what Charlie saw was something different. What Charlie saw was an opportunity. He belonged to a different world to the rest of us. A parallel world whose occasional agents interact violently with our own. Charlie would notice the first floor window
left ajar, a build up of junk mail on the floor of the tiny porch built from white uPVC, or the lack of rhythmic flashing lights on a burglar alarm in a dark house. It didn’t really shock me when he told me. It should have but I understood the lengths a man would go to in order to survive. Nobody ever stops to ask where the money comes from. They only start looking once it dries up. The world the rest of us lived in wasn’t there for Charlie and he wasn’t there for it. He had his own world with no interviews, no handouts. He didn’t give and he didn’t ask because he didn’t have to. He knew the risks of his world and so did I. I’d spent my fair share of time in the public gallery jotting down shorthand the judge’s reasons for eighteen month sentences for a repeat offender. It didn’t seem very long. It isn’t when you’re not on the receiving end. You watch the days and months stretch out before you into the distance, each new day a homage to the last, the feeling of being trapped in an endless loop. Charlie knew the risks and faced them accordingly. He knew exactly how to deal with people like Vanderbilt.

‘And it’s not just the written laws that are wrong. It’s the unwritten ones. Like you have to get a mortgage, have kids, settle down and get a job. I’ve never been on a single job interview. Not one. What are they like?’ He asked me several days before. It was our second meeting. The first was by chance. He’d seen me having a drink in a pub a pint a few streets away from The Number Seven, killing time before Coco came on. It became clear that our friendship hadn’t ended on Hulse Avenue, merely gone on hiatus. It returned at fate’s most opportune moment and felt like someone had thrown me a lifeline. ‘I wonder how many of them would chuck it in if they knew how easy it was, that they actually had a choice.’ I looked at him with eyes gaining interest. A choice? Only then did I really see the man who was once my best friend. Only then did I see what he had become in my absence. ‘The sun only shines because it has no alternative. Me? I’m the alternative.’ The alternative still had his wavy blonde hair. Watery blue eyes that said mischievous rather than dangerous and were encased in a freckled capsule of a face, round and smooth. A full grown choir boy in designer jeans and a black leather jacket hiding a torso held in an almost constant state of fitness, a result of early morning swimming sessions before school from the age of six. He’d hated them and the constant smell of chlorine in his hair but his parents insisted and beat him if he ever tried to avoid it. When he was old enough to make his own decisions he still kept up the swimming, it was a habit his rebellious
side could not gather strength enough to break. ‘You work a lifetime for money enough to spend enjoying yourself with a body long past its sell-by date. Nine to five, Monday to Friday, every week for fifty sixty years. It takes everything from you and gives nothing back.’

We had met again at Flannigan’s, the fake Irish pub that was rapidly becoming a regular fixture in my day. Aside from being near Coco’s club it was round the corner from the underground as well and quiet on a weekday afternoon. We sat, propped up against the bar as afternoon sunlight stole in through the windows. It bathed the lint that floated through the air in a state of perpetual listlessness. Without purpose. It twinkled with contentment, having achieved that sole and near impossible task of simply existing without comment or purpose. The middle-aged and saggy woman behind the bar paid us no attention. She perched herself on a stool, her hair tied back in a vicious pony tail, and polished pint glasses with a tea-towel that had seen better days. Somewhere in the background a TV flashed images to an absent audience, its sound muted. Charlie shifted his shoulders and leaned in toward me, gearing up for a tell-it-like-it-is speech, his attempt to bring me into the fold. ‘This is your life and it’s ending one second at a time.’ So far so good, can’t see anything wrong with that. ‘The punch line is you don’t know when it’s going to end: tomorrow, or next week, or a decade from now. But some day this is going to end and you’ll ask yourself in that strange crystalline moment if you’ve ever done anything with your life that you really wanted to do. Not what you ought to do. What you, my friend, want to do. It might happen as you stare, mid-way across a busy road, at the car that won’t stop in time or lie in a hospital bed listening as the beeps from the heart rate monitor get further and further apart. It might even happen when you’re sitting in the easy chair at some nursing home barely lucid and watching daytime television. The point is that moment will eventually come and when it does wouldn’t you rather have something to say?’ I looked over Charlie’s shoulder at the muted television. I sympathised with its plight. He’d nailed it. Charlie Conner. The one friend I had left. The one person talking sense. He knew his place. He knew his world. He was master of it like I should have been of mine. Once we’d been equals, now I was the supplicant. A year ago I might have felt a vague sense of misplaced superiority over this petty criminal. I would have been too blinded by my own high-minded seniority to see that he was the free one, not I. Do lions in the zoo dream of escaping their
cages or is it a human thing? Does escape become all they can think of? Does depression set in once they accept the inevitability of their incarceration? Possibly. Yet maybe mine wasn’t quite so inevitable. Not revenge he had said, just a readjustment. Somewhere the lines between his world and mine were crossing, meeting in the middle just a little way ahead.

The journey almost over, I pressed the doorbell of the house that used to have the number 40 on its front door. A figure appeared in the hallway, visible through the opaque glass of the door. They moved towards the front door, the lock clicked. The heavy oak frame swung back, propelled by a person equally annoyed and suspicious.

‘You work any later and I’ll have to cut you another key!’

‘Hi, mum.’ I said.

Chapter Five

All my professional life I’ve told stories. Some were funny. Some were scandalous. Some made the hair on the back of your neck stand on end and some were bitterly sad. But most were mind numbingly boring.

I’m not sure what type this story is.

But it needs telling.

That’s the thing about stories; it’s all down to the reader. I don’t have any control over what you think of it or me, that’s on you. All I can do is tell it right. All I can do is tell it to someone.
I chose to tell it to Charlie.

There really wasn’t anyone else. I would have told Coco but I feared her judgement. Mum could never know the truth and nobody else would care about a failed prick journalist.

At least he listened.

At the offices of The Birmingham Enquirer it was normal practice to hot desk for the brief parts of the day you actually spent writing up. The desks themselves were the only things that stood still in the newsroom. It evolved as the day went on. People came and went but the desks stayed to give the place the nearest semblance of order. Print journalism is in terminal decline so any method of cost cutting to make up for dwindling circulation numbers is seized upon by executives. In practice sharing a desk wasn’t too much of an inconvenience. The life of a reporter is such that they aren’t really based anywhere. They are in a constant state of dissolution. They’re disseminated throughout the office and the small area of the city they call their patch. Bits of them float through hospital wings or waft down streets. They settle on the steps of courts waiting for judgements to be handed down. Then their atoms recombine around the newsdesk sometime near deadline having had just enough time to file their copy before once again being blown across the land like a fine human dust.

I shared my desk with a girl called Lily. She was pretty with shoulder-length curly brown hair and eyes so big they could have belonged to a bush baby. The desk share inspired a kind of false intimacy between us regardless of the fact that we spent so little time in each other’s company. Often there were only allusions to her existence: a phone call asking for Ms. Hemmings, the odd yellow post-it note with barely legible scrawl fixed to the empty chair, ‘So and so has rung, L.’ followed by what could be a phone number or just a test scrawl to see if the pen still had ink. It was hard to tell the difference. I knew some of the finer details though. I knew she made cute animal noises when she was stressed from the few occasions I’d witnessed her frantically trying to file her copy and that her mother, who lived in America, could never get to grips with the time difference so always tended to call during work hours. The only time Lily and I ever seemed to be in the same place tended to be on a Monday morning. On a Monday morning all the dust would be summoned from whatever corner of Birmingham a story had blown it too all the way back to the office.
at Colmore Gate for the weekly meeting with the editor and chief subs. The meeting itself was designed to be a mix of post-mortem on the previous week’s edition (*The Birmingham Enquirer* was a Sunday paper) and progress report for the upcoming week. As reporters, Lily and I would be called into the conference room one at a time to update management on our work and justify why the paper was continuing to employ us. The conference room was a glass citadel in the middle of the newsroom. Turner’s castle where he could survey his kingdom. You weren’t called every week. There’s never time to see everyone. Most weeks the call never came and you were left to peer at your laptop, a flashing cursor over a blank word document without any copy. Mind blank. Waiting for the call. The only entertainment came from the semi-regular bollockings that the editor, William Turner, would give to anyone who failed in the conference room. You’d know what was coming if you had a poor performance. He’d send you back to your desk and there you’d wait. It might be minutes or it might be hours. The wait was part of it. Fear gnawing away. An exercise in power between those with and those without. Finally he’d send his secretary over. She’d call you into the office situated in the corner of the newsroom and Turner would ask you to shut the door. His office was soundproofed. The outsiders looking through the glass could see the spittle flying. They’d see the wild gesticulations as Turner threw himself into a full-on meltdown. Department editors, deputy editors, subs all got the same treatment, not just the lowest on the totem pole. Rule all by fear. Turner knew no other way.

But he also knew that this was pantomime. He played to the gallery of forty or so staffers to motivate as much as to cater to the morbid fascination human beings have for a semi-public flogging. Floggings, which sometimes turned into a full-blown execution. Journalism is still a vocation to some people and there is an endless line of willing replacements ready to replace any one of us if we screwed up or failed to deliver.

Sooner or later we all played the fool. A week before I’d been summoned. Turner took issue with me spending the better part of a week researching a piece on the bedtime of the average British family. It had made the paper but not through my own journalistic *jeu d’esprit*, rather the unhappy occurrence of a slow news week. ‘I don’t quite get this,’ Turner started off from behind his desk, my copy spread out in front of him with page fifteen on the top right corner.
‘I mean what made you think this shit was worth printing?’

A rhetorical question. He liked them. He wore a white shirt short sleeves and a blood red tie that hung loosely from around his neck. This was his ‘getting down to business’ or ‘no bullshit’ look depending on who else was in the room. I thought he looked like a Burger King manager. He continued with the rhetorical barrage. I had no lines in this play.

‘Do you want to work here?’

A pause.

‘Are you just pretending to be a reporter?’

Another pause.

‘Are you fucking up intentionally?’

He stared at me between salvos to see the effect they were having. He tilted his head forward so his view of me was unencumbered by the spectacles that he wore. We all thought their presence was purely cosmetic anyway. They made him look smarter. More distinguished. A monocle on a turd. It might have been that same false sense of vanity that stopped him shaving the untidy grey hairs on his scalp. They defied definition in a collective sense. They were a rag-tag group of survivors from forty years in news. They clung steadfastly to the middle ground between his skull’s two, more foliaged, hemispheres and struck out from his scalp with the noble intension of being straight only to be bent and twisted by greater powers. Life was like that. The collar of the editor’s white shirt strained to hold in the neck that was now bright red, engorged with furious blood. His breathing steadily becoming more audible as he sucked in air and spewed out obscenities that had begun to lose touch with semantic sense:

‘You fucktard cockmong.’

He had a way with words. Perhaps it was just over-compensation. Everyone knew who had the final say. Turner still had the ability to shut a chief sub up who dared to question his choice of front page, sometimes with nothing more than a look. During conferences, department heads would sit in silence unless Turner wanted their
opinion. New and ambitious recruits hated being furniture but Turner wore them
down. Self-preservation meant discretion became the better part of valour. Turner
wore all of us down eventually. This honest conversation, as Turner sometimes called
them, had been coming. In two years I’d not once been able to get a story onto any of
the front five pages. Instead I’d delivered a steady stream of mid-paper filler. Stories
in part drafted from dreary press releases. Anyone could do it and Turner was not so
subtly hinting that they would do it for a lot less than I was getting. He was paying for
a tabloid reporter, not a monkey with a typewriter. He wanted dirt. Originally the term
tabloid referred to a type of medicine that gave you everything you needed in one
bite-sized tablet. You can see why the news barons liked it. Today it meant gossip,
sensationalism, voyeurism, and everything that could be covered by a definition of the
public interest stretched to breaking point. Turner wanted from me the type of thing
that sells papers by the print run and makes editors happy. The Birmingham Enquirer
used to be called The Birmingham Gazette and was a family-run affair for generations
that went back to the 18th century. When circulation took a dip the way circulation
figures are known to do and the owners, The Bunce family, decided to sell up to an
American media group. Out went The Gazette and in came The Enquirer, a paper
modelled (and named after) the American tabloids with the same interest in sensation.
The Americans inherited the editor; a guy called Shelby who did his best to cope with
the new look and modus operandi of the Enquirer but took retirement at the first
opportunity. Turner was truly the Americans’ guy and the paper had enjoyed sharp
circulation spikes when it revealed a Premier League footballer had blown £20k in a
strip club one night (admittedly not even half his weekly earnings but the subs agreed
the figure sounded better on the page) or the former pop star who now rode the Class
A train since she’d been dropped from her record label. The biggest gains in
circulation though usually coincided with a splash on a supposedly wholesome
married celebrity engaging in less than flattering acts with anyone from prostitutes to
hairdressers. Nothing piqued the public’s interest like a good shagging story. All
those under Turner’s watch. He knew where his bread was buttered. So our front five
pages were the scandal sheets and you weren’t anybody until you were getting stories
there. That was where a journalist made their name from trashing the names of others
using the dark arts. The tricks of the trade, all sort-of illegal. All tolerated in the name
of circulation. I’d seen journos mining for a story by calling lists of phone numbers
(all ex-directory and bought under the table of course) and hacking their owner’s
voicemail (which is ridiculously easy as all voicemail features on mobile phone have a default access pin of 1234 which nobody ever changes). I’d heard how one reporter paid a dustman for the contents of a recycling bin of a well-known politician just to see if anything incriminating turned up. There was even talk of the red tops having entire payrolls dedicated to private investigators, bent coppers, nurses, you name it. Standard practice. Industry wide. Just what we do.

I didn’t want to do it. Nobody wants to do it. They don’t teach you about this stuff in journalism school. Despite the inevitability of it I’d tried my best to avoid it initially. I’d gravitate to the safe stuff: the advertorials, the local interest colour, the usual shit as Turner put it. The filler, the stuff people flick through between the scandal and the sport. Nobody gets into journalism to run splashes on faux-celebrities by breaking the law; we’re too idealistic for that. But likewise nobody does it to regurgitate some PR intern’s words either. But the thought of that bastard leafing through his stack of CVs was more than enough. The definition of a necessary evil. I knew that Ethics were expensive even before Charlie and the pressure had been building. I wanted to get on. On the rare occasion when The Enquirer exhausted that edition’s print run the editor would take the front page and have it framed. Five or six adorned the wall of his office behind his desk ready to impress the executives. Each portrait told a story of a famous face caught in the act with a bold and snappy headline that revelled in the embarrassment of its subject. The footballer was there, so too the pop star and the politician. They all featured on his ‘Wall of Fame’, as he called it.

His greatest hits.

He didn’t see the irony. His eye only saw front-page splashes and circulation figures, not the realisation that what brought out the very best in him was the very worst in others. A rat. To him these pages were accolades. Symbols of his editorship successes in the same way that a record producer might hang his gold and platinum discs or an academic might have a shelf of books with his own name on each leather-backed spine. If you weren’t a newspaperman though you would see snapshots of broken lives. Secrets exposed. Ground zero of a career implosion. If pushed, Turner might mutter something about holding others to account or reporting in the public interest. He’d baulk at the accusation of schadenfreude, probably unsure of its meaning. There were dirty and wrong and I wanted one.
I wanted a byline on the wall of fame.

Eventually Turner blew himself out. After a particularly long pause to draw breath and recompose himself he eyed me seriously. His voice quietened and fashioned itself as almost congenial, fatherly and vaguely patronising, as if to illustrate that this episode was a parable rather than a farce, ‘we’ve all got to pull our weight here lad. Papers are a tough game. Not for everyone.’ He looked past me, through the glass, out into the newsroom. His expression had an ambiguous tone, like he couldn’t decide between conveying the hope that I might rise to his challenge or enjoyment derived from fantasising about strangling me with the lanyard of my own Dictaphone. ‘I mean seriously,’ he said as he showed me the door, ‘just give me what I want, exclusives not excuses, there’s a good lad. Now fuck off and do some work.’

When I finally made my exit from the dungeon, as I’d heard others call it, Lily was predictably missing from the newsroom, with its blue carpet, wall mounted flat screen televisions, and desks all surrounded by the glass cocoon that The Enquirer shared with half a dozen other tenants including Vodafone. Colmore Gate itself looked like a giant cube made of glass jutting out from the commercial district of the city. You could see it shimmering half the way to the office on the bus from Edgebaston or it towered over you as you walked out of Snow Hill Station. The office was always like this. I made myself a coffee and wandered over to the window to play a hunch. Across the street were a large semi-circle of steps that looked like it could have been part of an amphitheatre. The lawns and flowerbeds that made up the rest of The Circus Queensway flanked the steps. On Saturdays and during school holidays local kids turned the place into a skate park but during the week around lunch time those that worked in the vicinity would grab a sandwich from the Marks and Sparks or Tesco Express close by and sit there. Even from eight storeys up I could see a miniaturized Lily sitting on the steps, her right hand cupped to her ear and what laws probably a sandwich ensconced in the other. There were other patrons despite it being almost November, the unseasonably warm weather still made Al Fresco dining desirable. I watched her for a while, as God might, a part of the world yet distant from it, detached and isolated, to observe and record rather than participate, looking but not seeing. It was there I stood, wondering in equal turns about my career prospects and what Lily did away from the office when the familiar sound of a nearby phone ringing derailed my train of thought.
‘Hello, Birmingham Enquirer?’

You learned very quickly that answering the telephone was a lot like opening Pandora’s box: you exposed yourself to whatever insanity the world had to offer you that day, or Lily’s mother. In order to have even the slightest hope of getting any work done at all you had to learn quickly how to weed out the liars, the fragrant exaggerators that cold call you looking to be financially indulged in their delusion. If they kept a goldfish as a child this type of person would say their family bred Carp, technically true but infused with their own particular brand of potentially libellous bullshit. A true time-waster. Some were of course unhinged and you’d be left thinking that Area 51 had been relocated to the West Midlands judging by the sheer number of UFO and alien abduction stories that were pitched to myself and colleagues on a fairly regular basis, possibly from the same two or three people. There were of course though the more calculating callers whose desperation mirrored a nervous salesman, the delivery of their sales patter so rapid-fire and ferocious so as to deliberately make replying impossible without the expressed permission of the caller. A swift replacing of the receiver would usually serve as an ample and succinct reply to their tumbling delivery. The best advice I’ve ever been given regarding going ‘fishing’ with a phone line was to simply trust your gut. Or the old man, in my case. Yet the woman who gave her name as Anna didn’t talk about aliens or exaggerate. She didn’t attempt to pitch her story as quickly as possible. She took her time. She spoke calmly, but not too calmly, and her voice had a strange tendency to elongate odd words making her speech sound like jazz improv. The sound rose and fell, slowed and quickened, seemingly without the intention of the speaker. I hurriedly jotted down the details in short hand as she gave them, feeling my pulse quicken with every enunciated word uttered down the phone.

‘Right well erm I think that’s definitely something we’d be interested in running. What kind of proof do you have?... I see… Today?!... Right okay I’ll be there in an hour… Cheers.’

She had a story, one the editor would approve of. I listened and took notes.

Wall of fame.

I gave her the spiel. How we do things.
I tried hard to sound nonchalant as much for my own credibility as to avoid unwanted attention from any of my colleagues who might try and steal the lead. This was big. It would definitely get Turner off my back. It would make the wall if it were true. Maybe even if it wasn’t. Nobody really kept score unless they lost a defamation case, and even then the profits from the print run outweighed any settlement so the paper came out ahead.

Maybe it was crossing the Rubicon or being this close to it. Maybe it was just the fear of the unknown. The next step.

Either way something was off. Call it what you like but something Anna said didn’t sound right. Usually all a source cares about is money. It’s their only motivation for dialling the number on the advert we have in the back of every edition, ‘Got a story for us? Cash paid. Call us on…’ The individual isn’t interested in the common good and we don’t do justice. That’s what the courts are for, sometimes. The man on the street is the same guy who reads the paper. He just wants to be paid and to be entertained. But Anna seemed to forget all about money. She mentioned it as an afterthought, without desire or interest. It just never seemed to occur to her. I looked at the notes I’d been typing up for the story I’d been working on that morning. It was a feature on the Christmas market, now in its 85th year and still going strong. Hardly earth shattering stuff. This was different. An improvement in Turner’s book.

And mine.

Maybe if it came to nothing I’d get brownie points from him, or my P45. But shit: if I were going to get sacked I’d at least try to play the game first. At times like this most people will pause. They’ll wonder about the right thing to do. I’ve known people who make little lists of pros and cons in their minds, others turn it into a group exercise and canvas whoever is unfortunate enough to be sharing breathing space with them, and others clear their minds and just go with their gut feeling. I had a different strategy.

I spoke to the old man.

In the middle of a busy newsroom I closed my eyes and an old man materialised from the black the same way he always did when I closed my eyes. He wore the same clothes in my mind as he did the day he died. A grey dressing gown and slippers. His
hands clasping a walking stick. Almost jaundiced eyes set inside wrinkled skin. In a way he’d helped me decide to be a journalist. The idea came to me one night when I was fifteen. I was searching for the old man’s obituary from a pile of newspapers I’d bought that day. I searched frantically for his name, throwing sheets around the room. My bedroom looked like I was planning to housebreak an elephant. Finally settling eyes on it, I reached for the scissors, and cut it out. It went into a pile with the other clippings of the incident. It was then that a thought occurred to me. I wondered who decided what was true. Who owned the truth? It was then and there that I decided I wanted to be a reporter. I wanted to tell stories. Later than night the old man tried to strangle me in my sleep, a dream that had repeated itself off and on every since. You get used to it. An eye for an eye, I guess. He was a reminder and a sounding board. Just the sight of him made up my mind for me.

In the months since, I’ve thought of the other things I should have done. I should have stayed at my desk and waited for Lily to come back. I could have asked her where in America her parents lived or exactly what animal she was imitating five minutes to deadline every other week. I could have told her about the phone call and asked her advice. Anything to put off chasing after a woman named Anna for a while. I couldn’t have known where I’d chase her. On days like that when you get the whiff of a story like this one there just isn’t the time to think things through. So you rush, go with your gut, and hope the company lawyers can wiggle you free of any illegality. It’s a racing certainty that you’ll be wrong some of the time. You just make the call and hope that when all is said and done that you’ve made more good calls than bad. You accept that some decisions are going to land you in a world of trouble and this one was a blinder. I grabbed my coat and a Dictaphone.

With the editor’s words ringing in my ears I headed over to the newsdesk and relayed the gist of the phone call. Ten minutes later I was heading down a stairwell and out of the offices with Ricky, a freelance photographer who’d come in to pawn some shots of Cheryl Cole getting out of a limousine, in tow. As we passed the reception I reached behind the desk to grab the keys to one of the pool cars. In the car park we found an old red Astra with far too many miles on the clock. There were Mars Bar wrappers in the passenger foot well and a plastic two-litre bottle, formerly of Coca-Cola, but now half filled with piss. Ricky picked it up and tossed into the back of the car. As I pulled out of the car park I heard the piss slosh as the bottle
explored the confines of the backseats. I hoped whoever had used it had made sure to tighten the screw cap before tossing the bottle aside. No time for housekeeping. I turned left out of the car park and headed for a hotel in the city centre. I had an hour.

Chapter Six

In a corner of the lobby of the Hotel Isis were a couple of huge black corner sofas arranged in a loose semi-circle facing a huge plate glass window with the word Isis scrawled upon it in white ornate calligraphy. The design was such that the word formed a perfect ambigram and so could be read equally well from both the busy street outside and the exposed arm of cold leather upon which I sat. An old grey American couple had joined me, their accents thick with the wholesome cheeriness of Ohio, Kentucky, or somewhere else in the mid-western expanse. They had descended from the lifts at the back of the expansive marble floored reception and now sat waiting for the taxi that the hotel’s concierge had dutifully ordered.

‘Just once in a while I wish you’d plan ahead, dear,’ the wife said to her husband. ‘We’re gon’ be late.’ Her irritation was audible. Her husband said nothing, practicing the art of selective deafness that must have taken many years of marriage to perfect. Like meditation. He was Zen. I’d seen many men perform this trick; my own father being one of them. Their luggage lay around them like faithful pets: two Great Dane-
sized suitcases and a silver turtle travel case, its carry-handle neck retracted fully inside its body. For the next ten minutes there the two of them sat, not a word passing between them nor glance nor awkwardness. The old eyes of the woman fixed on a point through the main window up the street, scanning the traffic for the unseen taxi to arrive and thus begin the first leg of a long journey home. I followed her gaze.

Opposite the hotel Ricky was staring out of the window of the coffee shop where I’d instructed him to wait. I’d be doing this alone. He cut a saturnine figure amidst the mid-afternoon throng of cars and shoppers, flesh and metal picking their way carefully through the city streets. His messenger bag containing his digital SLR with the long lens lay on a coffee table within easy reach. He sat in one of two armchairs that had been intimately arranged with young photogenic couples in mind, couples that would become emissaries of optimistic love complete with Starbucks branding.

What kind of happiness would your life contain if it were augmented by Grande-sized lattes and expensive pieces of Millionaires’ Shortbread that you could share with your loved one? Surely the kind of happiness that is sugary to the point of sickness? The kind of rich saccharine that festers in your gut, reacting violently with your stomach acid. A Millionaires’ Shortbread kind of love then, though perhaps the sight of a man in his mid-twenties projectile vomiting a half-digested shortbread against the window wouldn’t sell as much coffee as the image that the exhaustive focus group research had eventually led the global chain to adopt. A shame I thought, though I might have just been bored and feeling vindictive. The store hardly needed a boost in custom anyway. Behind Ricky I could see that the place was almost filled with patrons and the baristas in their green aprons bustled hurriedly from customer to customer, from coffee maker to fridge, from food counter to till like a crowd of bees preparing honey. All the chairs faced toward one of the huge plate glass windows through which those seated can spot a taxi or the approach of a guest for lunch at the hotel’s ridiculously priced restaurant. I looked at the empty chairs and they looked at me.

I sat in the lobby of the Hotel. I waited. I waited ten minutes, then fifteen, and then I waited some more. All around me people passed from the lifts and the stairs, through to the reception, across the marble floor and out the revolving doors into the afternoon sun. Each one with a unique destination, a singular goal, be that the airport, a restaurant, or somewhere else in the honeycomb city. Yet collectively these atomic people formed the world around me. They put up the buildings, drove the roads, and
served the coffee. Their self-interested lives constrained by the city’s grand scheme. What to wear, when to travel, what to buy, where to eat. Charlie was right. This was no freedom. It was only later though that I would see the bars from behind which I lived my life. At the rear of the lobby was a block of four lifts, two on either side. Their stainless-steel doors stood inch-perfect like sentries amongst the marble. A robotic bell struck an optimistic tone at regular intervals as the doors withdrew into the marble and disgorged luggage, staff, and guests toward reception, which was on my right, or the great glass revolving doors that were now well behind me. I waited for the compartment to clear, allowing myself to stand still whilst a throng of businessmen blew past me like a breeze through an old abandoned house. They took care not to bump into me and stood around me like toy soldiers on parade. I looked up at the floor indicator perched above the lift doors that were still open. Metal with a bronze finish. Artificial class, like the fake bell that tolled after each lift arrived in the lobby. I stepped inside the silver box, pressed the button on the keypad marked ‘6’ and came face to face with my reflection in a band of mirrors that ringed every wall. Tired. It’s in the eyes they say. I turned around just in time to see the doors shut, taking the noisy lobby with it. Right on cue my heartbeat began to gather pace, reminding me that I don’t like confined spaces. The levitation of oneself by an unseen force, felt rather than seen, and demanding of a trust that is never willingly or wholly given is a bit too much for my prehistoric fight or flight response to deal with. The thought of the cabin breaking free of its cables and hurtling down the shaft towards a crushing oblivion was a thought too persuasive to completely ignore and raised the heart rate still further as we continued to ascend. I watched the LED display on the keypad next to do the door as a distraction: 2… 3… 4… The businessmen left in ones and twos across all the floors. Lucky bastards. I wondered why I hadn’t taken the stairs. ‘Master your fear’, as they say. Bollocks. I gave my coping mechanisms a work out. First rationality. Of course should the cable that allows us to be suspended in mid-air snap there are all sorts of safety measures designed to prevent such a long drop and sudden stop, the shiny compartment rendered torn and crushed beneath its own inertia. Human beings have long sought to minimise risk to their own safety logically and rationally, and yet, the desire for self preservation remains strong even in environments we have rendered innate, quickening the pulse, tensing the muscles, sharpening the senses. I switched tack, delayed gratification. I promised I’d never make myself ride in a lift again. Never. Ever. I’d take the stairs in every building I’d
ever enter. I felt the wave of panic break. Self-delusion is a wonderful thing. Despite all our best efforts our basic human instinct still overrules the rational thought and logical precaution that have earmarked our civilisation. Underneath all the modernity we are still slaves to our primordial biology. A biology that brought me to The Isis that afternoon, exploring a hunch, a gut feeling, human instinct, and its possible consequence.

‘Ding’, went the bell.

I imagined that the sixth floor of the hotel looked pretty much identical to its fourth, fifth, and seventh floors. Rows of wooden doors with a dark varnish finish extending endlessly down hallways like a piece of modern art. Yellow wallpaper with the same flowery pattern repeated every few feet, claret coloured carpet lit by a causeway of spotlights stretching down every corridor and culminating at a single window through which the mid-afternoon city skyline was visible. When I got to room 608 I knocked twice and waited, noting the swipe card entry system above the handle. The corridor was deserted. I checked the time on my phone, 14:43, and switched it to silent. I was early. I heard the sounds of a television and then footfalls behind the door that abruptly ceased as the doorknob began to turn through 90 degrees. The door swung open with a jerk and I was beckoned inside.

Inside the room, the curtains were drawn and the lights switched on. The sound of BBC News 24 did its best to drown out the sound of an air con working overtime as it tried to manipulate the heavy air in the room. The bed was still made, the welcome chocolate atop the pillow still untouched. The hotel cleaners might not need to bother with this room at all save for replacing the telephone receiver that I couldn’t help but notice was placed deliberately on the heavily polished desk. I already knew who this woman was. I’d seen her before. We all had. We all watched television.

Her name was Anna Foster and she sat down upon a floral upholstered sofa, the kinds you see in IKEA catalogues but never give a second thought to actually purchasing, so hotel chains get them in bulk. Her legs were crossed and, even though bathed in the glow of lamps rather than the sun, she declined to remove her sunglasses and the cherry red military coat that ran from a hood all the way down to the back of her knees. Its belt was fastened tightly around her waist, so much so that it pinched the fabric and it must have been uncomfortable. I chose to forgo the space left by my
host on the sofa and perched myself on the corner of the bed. The television had adopted the voice of Andrew Marr and was narrating something about the coalition. Politics, for the most part, bored me. She reached for a remote she’d hidden inside her coat, aimed it at the screen and silenced him. We were alone then in our shared silence. I felt the tension begin to rise. Experience told me not to rush. Slowly slowly catchy monkey. Obviously she looked different to her picture; people always do. Though she was still beautiful, the grace and poise had gone, replaced with a deathly stare and a subconscious fidget that betrayed her nervousness. Again and again she rubbed the fingertips of her left hand together; almost as if to make sure she still existed and hadn’t ceased corporeal form as she sat in this identikit hotel room with a man she neither knew nor trusted. Fight or flight again. I sympathised. We knew why we were both here. I’d been here before. Life was just a series of rooms that you found yourself in. Of course you’re going to run into a few doubles every now and again. After a while and without prompting from me she took off her hood and let her blonde hair spill down her face. She tipped her head back and shook her head violently, like a model in a shampoo ad, until each lock fell away from her face and down her back. Without a word she turned toward me and her hands reached for her sunglasses. Delicately, with a hand on each corner she removed the specs and her naked eyes, flecked with aquamarine, scanned me. She paused in the grip of indecision before opening her mouth to speak, ‘is this what you wanted to see?’ Her voice was weak but sultry and easily shattered the silence that was beginning to make me uneasy. Relief came quickly but was chased almost instantly by a disgust that, though I’d prepared for it, briefly flashed across my face. At first I thought she’d been crying and her mascara had run across her cheeks. My face must have conveyed shock because she turned away embarrassed, her eyes fixing on the silent television whose rapid-fire images continued to pour into the room, though the expression on her face suggested that her attention was elsewhere. Perhaps focused upon the perpetrator of the handiwork that had now coloured her cheeks a disfiguring grey and purple from the flawless shade of rouge she often displayed on television. Her dignity buckled under the weight of my gaze. I could see it happening in front of me. When her mouth was finally able to utter, ‘are you satisfied?’ It sounded more like a plea for mercy than a pointed question. Clearly Miss Foster was in a bad way. Not wishing to prolong the meeting I indicated I was and she turned to face me fully. Dark rims
encircled her blue eyes, the blackness seeping, like tie-dye, into her cheeks. I felt anger rising. ‘And this is his work I presume?’ I said.

‘He’, being Miss Anna Foster’s partner. Dexter Fox.

‘Yes,’ She whispered. Even her voice was failing her now.

‘Why did he hit you?’

‘I don’t know.’ Tears had formed as her voice gave way, cracking under the weight of emotion, shattering the last vestige of her composure, ‘I don’t know. I don’t know.’

She wept.

I changed tack, ‘are you afraid for your safety Miss Foster?’

‘What do you think?’

Her response was curt but contained neither malice nor sarcasm. It was an honest question and still had that air of the cry for help. But it still hurt like a jab between the ribs when taken by surprise. I ignored it. It didn’t matter what I thought. ‘Are you ready for what might happen?’

‘Yes,’ She said, her voice having recovered its composure and lost any hint of hesitation. A good sign. I leant forward and put my hand on her shoulder. She jumped slightly and looked straight at me. Her eyes, despite the bruising and the red tinge from her tears, were still deep and beautiful. They reminded me of Lilly’s.

‘When it all comes out there’s going to be a lot of interest. I’ll chaperone you and stay with you for the first few days in return for any further exclusives that might arise. It’s fairly standard stuff and nothing to worry about. I’ll take good care of you.’ I even managed a smile. She paused, her back seemed straighter, her eyes more steely. She reached for her handbag and removed a packet of tissues, dabbing at her eyes. ‘You are so kind. Thank you really but I think my publicist will be looking after me.’ I tried to hide the sarcasm in my smile. Oh well. So the cake would lack icing. It didn’t make much of a difference. I’d just have to get everything the first time around.

The plan was simple. The best ones often are. Miss Foster would leave the hotel room and be photographed by Ricky as she left the building. Those photos
would then be shown to the newsdesk as an angle to give the man who did this a proper monstering. Of course the newsdesk would bite and get me to investigate further and find some corroborating evidence. When we finally had enough dirt to nail him I’d make the call and she’d get ready to flee the country to a luxury resort somewhere in the Bahamas with a new haircut and bikini, with the paper footing the bill in return for further exclusive access. From then on the story would break and Fox would be finished. Miss Foster would reinvent herself in the sympathetic eyes of the public. The editor might say something to me that didn’t end with the word fucktard. As the perpetrator says on his Saturday night game show, ‘everybody wins!’ Of course the delightful Miss Foster was unaware that Ricky had staked out the entrance to the Isis. She might have said no otherwise and besides it would help her maintain her innocent girlfriend sh*tick a while longer. She needed all the help she could get, I’d seen her soap and she certainly didn’t practice the method. It shot at studios near the university eight months of the year. Probably why she came to me instead of the big guns down south. Convenience. There was also the added complications of a busy newsdesk, or the balls of the editor. Dexter Fox, in the eyes of the public at least, was the epitome of wholesomeness and an embryonic national treasure. Besides the photos wouldn’t necessarily make it into print if the story got mothballed. Fox also had a formidable publicist not afraid of issuing summons. He was however a big scalp deserving of a proper fucking monstering, especially in light of his recent behaviour that was so ‘out of character’ as recalcitrant celebrities, on orders from said PR, are known to utter in moments of faux-repentance on chat show couches.

I’d make him pay.

We exchanged numbers and goodbyes and, once the door had closed behind Anna, I reached for my phone and texted Ricky a short description of what she was wearing and to be ready. After that I switched the phone back from vibrate and lay back on the bed. Given the choice between a noisy desk that may or may not be submerged in post-it notes and a vacant five star hotel room it seemed appropriate. The news had finished so I flicked through the channels. It wasn’t long before the fantastic Mr. Fox made an appearance on Dave. Even through the lens of self-righteous anger you couldn’t help but be impressed by the guy. Clean-shaven, expensive clothing, never fazed, the effortlessly consummate professional seducing the camera with his piercing blue eyes and comforting smile. He had the type of
youthful complexion that would have made even Dorian Gray reach for the anti-wrinkle cream, with a dimple in the chin thrown in for free that gave him the strangest hint of Dick Van Dyke with a Home Counties accent. His cheekbones and jaw line were as sharp as the prow of a cruise liner cutting through the surf. Years before, he’d have been called a matinee idol or some such bollocks. Now he was the face of Saturday night television. You couldn’t deny that the guy was smooth all over. And yet, for years the rumours had circulated, whispers that drifted over from the showbiz desk on the rare occasions the staff weren’t off at a premiere or nursing the resultant hangover that they saw as endemic of their particular post. Bar flies and club skanks made some of the most unreliable fodder for kiss and tell stories, even the ones the publicist had signed off on to quash rumours that a certain celebrity was gay. Given the strength of Fox’s legal team you needed more than rumour and innuendo before publishing and being damned. This was more. I switched off the television, lay back and shut my eyes, letting my ears adjust to the vacuum. Gradually they regained their sensitivity. People who wish walls could talk never take the time to listen. These walls were talking. The one behind the television was mimicking the cry of a baby, the one in front playing both parts of a discussion between two baritone voices. I listened to the melodic rise and fall of each voice, free of any semantic meaning. I allowed them to anesthetise me.

Doubt had crept in.

I was weak.

I swallowed hard and forced it down into my stomach. I knew what Turner would do. Quick as a flash, with no remorse. No doubt.

‘Monster the fuck-stick.’

‘If it bleeds it leads.’

Turner’s sound bites. I’m sure he had them all written down on a notepad somewhere. Probably resting on top of that mountain of CVs. Words to live by if you lived and died in print. I did and now so would Fox. There was a good chance that his career wouldn’t survive this. There’d be a black eye on his public face and the character he’d portrayed for so long would be so badly damaged that resurrection would be impossible. And all for personal gain. To say I was exposing a crime against women
was hypocrisy, if Fox was a nobody I wouldn’t be in this hotel room with a fading soap star. Did he deserve the shit-storm that was about to erupt around him?

No comment.

A thought. Just walk away. Nobody bar Ricky knew about this meeting and wind-ups were common. I’d look a bit daft but so what? I wouldn’t have a job there for much longer anyway. I thought about Anna’s face. I looked at the sofa she’d sat on. I saw the seeping black around her eye and the rage started to resurface. The type of rage that came from witnessing the destruction of something beautiful.

Fuck him.

A text message. Probably from Ricky. The alert ruined the mood and sent a wave of adrenaline through my body. I opened my eyes and felt the forcing of my heart against my rib cage. The aftershocks rang in my ears. Indeed the text was from Ricky. The job was done; he’d wait for me in the coffee place. I toyed with the idea of trying to get a quick nap but decided against it; one morally dubious thing a day is quite enough. Besides, Ricky had waited long enough. Better not give the guy a chance to run a coffee tab up on expenses. You never could trust a pap. Miss Foster had left the key card to the room in the slot by the door that required one in order to power the lights and other electricity. I took one last look at the room, the same as I’d found it save for the lack of a beautiful woman and a singular man-shaped impression on the bed, and shut the door behind me. Downstairs in the lobby much was the same. The hotel porters, in their overly formal purple uniforms and white gloves, had collected near the check-in desk. They talked to the girl on the desk. I heard her laughing over the sounds of plastic wheels and clicking heels making their way towards the revolving door and the hot city streets beyond. Sunlight drenched the entire lobby and I felt the air conditioning set to maximum. A cool breeze descending from the ceiling. Across the road I could make out Ricky still in situ, window dressing for Starbucks, with a cup of something over-priced in hand. In the corner, right where I left them, the American couple with the Great Dane-sized luggage. They sat in silence. Ignoring each other. Staring blankly ahead out of the windows at the journey home.
Chapter Seven

‘So then what?’ Charlie sat slumped on the living room sofa, legs hanging over the side, arm stretched over his eyes blocking the light from the early afternoon sun. His clothes from last night remixed. Hungover to fuckery. He’d thrown up twice already. The second time out of the window as he couldn’t make it to the bathroom in time. Now he just lay there, sighing, trying to be as still as the grave. ‘What do you want to know?’ I said, unsure where this was going. Feeling uncomfortable. I wasn’t nearly as bad as he was. One of the benefits of an anorexic bank account. Maybe Charlie was right and money wasn’t everything? Though it wouldn’t help him now.

‘Ah never mind. Put the kettle on would ya?’ Then he was silent.

I did as I was told.

Always stories, never truth. No such thing as truth, only interpretation. Turner used to say that the only truth worth knowing was the one that boosted circulation.
Capitalist wanker.

Charlie’s voice in my head.

I watched the kettle boil and thought about Coco, her legs wrapped around my waist and her nipples in my mouth. Then I thought about Lily. I wondered if she remembered me or just the story, whether she believed it. Whether it even mattered anymore. Truth is what enough people believe. Not the other way around.

‘So you did kill me then.’ Her voice.

Cups smashing on a tiled floor. Charlie shouting from the other room. Me alone with a dead woman. It always came back to that.

Manufactured truth.

Manufactured in a motorway service station car park, filing copy from the passenger seat of a decrepit Ford Mondeo that smelt like a particularly negligent old peoples’ home. The stickiness of the dashboard and the piss streaked fabric of the backseat made you want to gag in revulsion, but that would mean that you’d stopped typing for an instant, so you didn’t. Deadlines looming like a vulture over a dying antelope. Making the truth somewhat smaller than the ideal.

I make truth. Correction: Made.

I wiped the floor, made two more cups of tea and searched out a pair of Paracetemol. Charlie still lay prone on the sofa. I put both mugs of tea on the coffee table and slumped into the chair next to the sofa, my dad’s chair. For one long moment the room was silent. Charlie dozing, his cup of tea cooling. Sunbeams pierced the window, catching floating pieces of lint that hung in the air as if suspended in time. The world in stasis. Quiet. Apart from the screams of a dead woman. But Charlie couldn’t hear them. My hands shook as I drained my cup, streaks of tea running down the sides of the mug, drops splashing on my jeans. She was just one of many headlining yet another sad story. But she was mine.

Manufactured truth.

I put my empty cup back on the coffee table. Mum had left a glossy on there, its pages curled. I picked it up and started reading. I scanned articles: leaders, interviews,
features. Leading questions, colour, and mindless puff. Not reading the words but
admiring the construction. The art. I wondered if this was how Van Gogh had seen
paintings or Mozart had heard music. Seeing the scaffolding holding up the edifice.
Creating the illusion of truth. Sometime between reading the ten best ways to lose
weight and what Katie Price thought of celebrities, my hands calmed themselves. I
smiled at Price’s column, wondering how much of it was hers. Two words a
sentence? I used to shadow write for a celebrity columnist. Half-written scrawl would
materialise on my desk every other Wednesday afternoon, sometimes under length
sometimes over, sometimes with punctuation sometimes without, nearly always with
the editors corrections containing phrases like, ‘this is cuntswallopp’ and, ‘how much
do we pay this fuckend?’ scrawled in abusive yet almost ineligible red pen in the
margin. It was my job for a while to get whatever crap the columnist submitted that
week into a readable enough state to be published on top of my usual workload. Often
the contribution of the fuckend to the column that bore their name would total enough
words to make a haiku once I’d conducted my own tweaking.

_The genuine scribe_

_Never too soon forgot_

_He remains unknown_

Or something. I never was one for poetry though I remember it not being bad
considering the sleep deprivation that was a near constant back then. At least it
sounded deep. Maybe Price did better, but I wouldn’t put money on it.

So I basically had my own column, just nobody knew it and somebody else
got paid for it. I had to keep the same overall theme the fuckend filed but everything
else was mine. Not that the fuckend ever noticed or complained. I often got the
feeling that the only people who ever read his actual words would be the cleaners who
emptied my desk bin the morning after deadline. They usually came in at around half
five. The first sign of their presence was the percussive tap tap tap of metal bins being
emptied, accompanying the played out tap tap tap of computer keys. By that time the
office lights would begin to dim and finally extinguish themselves as a new day broke
for the world outside. They were automatic and nobody could switch them off
manually, the newsroom being a 24 hours kind of place. They were hardwired to a
light meter on the roof somewhere. I worked this out after the first few all nighters, during one of the five-minute respites I’d give myself to refill the coffee mug and check that my legs still worked. Whilst dreaming up ways to screw with the sensor I’d wander over to one of the other dozen or so working away at their desks, desperate to file before their editor noticed a missed deadline and appeared at their shoulder. Tap tap tap. Little monkeys. The type Turner hated but kept his paper filled. The type that would never amount to much. The place smelled like a zoo as well. Showers strictly optional. Deodorant too, unless it was a freebie. You hate it. But you love it. We all did. A vocation they called it. A higher calling. Power. It made up for the encroachment of deadlines upon our lives, the degrading abuse from the editor and the public, the appalling working conditions, and all for much less than a waiter gets. I’ve lost track of how many times I’ve attended council meetings just for the free buffet or lifted a premiere goody bag from the showbiz desk in search of lunch. They never noticed, they’d be half-drunk as usual, some even asleep and dribbling onto biro pads defaced by black scrawl.

It was a lifestyle.

But still there was the dream. Splashing on something big. A huge scandal, exposing hypocrisy, delivering justice to those who thought themselves above its grip. And yet. *Quis custodiet ipsos custodes?*

Early January, decorations still up. The place still reeking of a Christmas party or a New Year’s party or just a Monday morning. Lily sat opposite transcribing an interview wearing a red jumper, her ringlets framing her face like a gallery portrait. I leaned back on my chair, phone receiver to my ear. My right hand hovering over a note pad, pen at the ready. The newsroom packed and alive, the editor hard for me. Adrenaline flowing. The call tone pulsing into my ear. Toying with the idea of asking Lily out. Each pulse building suspense. Wondering what underwear she had on. A final click, the sounds of a far away place, and then kick off.

‘Good morning Grange Park. Kelly speaking, how may I help?’

Quick as a flash. ‘Hello, am I through to the Grange Park Clinic?’
It wasn’t the Bahamas. You never could predict where they’d go once the story broke and Anna Foster had been off the grid for weeks. My story. My first front page.

‘Foster: Fox beat me’ had broken early December and I’d not been able to get a hold of her since for a follow up. The story wasn’t Pulitzer worthy but it was good enough for half a dozen national titles to run with it and for the editor to call me into the glass office and congratulate me before taking the credit. His pep talk must have inspired me. The prick even managed to sound magnanimous. Lily hugged me, said she was jealous. I offered to swear at her to see if the editor’s magic was transferable. It wasn’t but she didn’t mind. I thought about sending mum a copy, decided against it. I waited for the reply, letting presumption filter through the line. Grange Park was an exclusive rehabilitation centre that appeared to have been transplanted from the banks of the Mississippi and reconstructed in all its southern glory in a small private corner of Devon. Its website was full of soft lit glossy photos of comfortable sofas, soft beds, and the great outdoors. It even offered sailing sessions and tennis coaching to its guests. Centre Parcs for druggies. A brief pause before Kelly’s young but shrill voice answers in the affirmative, a hint of the West Country farmer’s daughter about her infliction. Easy money. I knew this because I’d done the legwork. I’d been chasing her for weeks, feeling myself get closer and closer. Now I was playing a hunch. A few years ago, there was a rumour that she’d been on the pills and liked a drink and that she’d been a guest at Grange Park for a month whilst she got clean or whatever. She was small fry back then so wasn’t worth the splash. Her parents were well off so they footed the bill. Showbiz filled me in after I agreed to pay for a round of Subway sandwiches to replace the goody bag I’d lifted. I guess even drunks can count.

That morning I was hedging that Anna Foster would be relaxing within those crème coloured walls once again. People are habitual after all. I needed to find her pronto. Before the newsdesk got suspicious about why I hadn’t floated a follow-up to my first ever front page. Trying to stay out in front of the story. The first rule: say the minimum. Nothing more. Let the mark’s mind fill in the blanks. That way you can backtrack if you need to. Second rule: always make the mark feel that they are doing their job by helping you. Be credible. That was easy. Just don’t sound like the cranks and nutters that you hang up on every day. ‘Ah, excellent. I’ve been given your number by the agents of Miss Anna Foster. You see I’m Miss Foster’s accountant. The name is Mr. Goldstein of Goldstein, Fauber and Smith.’ Do this routine often
enough and you develop a pretty strong cast of stock characters. I’d first seen it done whilst on a summer placement at the Recorder. Plenty of practice since then. The Jewish accountant was a fan favourite. Stereotypes are just well used clichés with a grain of truth. Manufactured truth. People just expect a Goldstein, rather than a Balogun or a Yamamoto, to discuss their money with. I’d done my homework. Goldstein was real and he really was an accountant. I’d found him online. His first name was Francis and his office was in Highgate. He had more certificates than a graduation ceremony. Goldman Fauber and Smith’s website was a goldmine. I still wonder if the accountant’s secretary ever received strange phone calls from clinics or hotels asking if Mr. Goldstein had received the fax of his client’s bill sent to a number she didn’t recognise. Hard not to smirk. I’d done my homework on Foster too. A necessity.

Do they have an agent? If so what’s their name? What do they look and sound like? I had all this filed away inside my head. Ready when needed. It wasn’t just for show. What’s true for features is true for life. Colour builds trust. Build enough trust and you can get down to business. Then a fishing trip can turn into a full-blown expedition. ‘I trust you’re aiding in her recovery? I’ve heard such good things about your facility and particularly the people that work there.’ A pause. Me sitting there at the desk feeling lucky. About to find out. Lily got up from her seat, grabbed her bag and fixed a yellow post-it to my computer screen. She smiled at me and then she was gone. I watched her walk away. Admiring her legs. Wondering where they were going. I picked up the post-it and read it. Apparently my accent needed work and a kiss. Everyone’s a critic. Before she’d left she’d rummaged through her bag, taking inventory. An empty bag of Doritos and the remains of a pack of gum didn’t make the cut. I wondered what her flat looked like. The bumpkin receptionist brought me back to the task at hand, ‘Oh yes Miss Foster is doing really brilliantly. I mean she’s had a few setbacks and all, threw some furniture around in group I heard the doctors say, but she’s been doing great.’

Bingo.

Kelly’s voice sounded excited. The chair throwing went straight onto the pad. Colour. Surprising. I assumed that she’d just gone to hide out, not to be treated. Gold. I smelt a follow up relapse splash. Time to push on. You learn the basics quickly. Never ask
the mark a direct question, just presume and wait to be corrected. Allow the mark to convince themselves. Slowly slowly catchy monkey. I saw the receptionist in my head. Teenaged or early twenties. Artificially straight blonde bottle job. Skin reeking of St.Tropez. An absent mind with a place mat expression. Total mismatch. Stage two. White noise. Establish authority. Convince her you know what you’re talking about. ‘Since we’re close to the end of the financial year,’ I began, ‘I’m currently tasked with collating Miss Foster’s accounts and expenses to file with the Inland Revenue.’ Sounds official. Completely beyond recollection. ‘This mainly consists of assimilating her yearly earnings with her expenses and inputting them into our database which then allows us to produce the standard E42 form which then needs endorsing and countersigning by both the client, Miss Foster and her elected signatories, in this case myself.’

Even I’d believe me.

A pause on the line again. The sound of Kelly tuning out. Examining her nails. Playing with her hair. Sometimes it took longer but most people only needed a few jargon doses. Like a password. Or a lullaby. It doesn’t have to be real. It doesn’t have to make sense. It just needs to sound legit. Sometimes I read out the back of a scratch card. Same effect. Building trust. Interesting observation. People trust you if you sound like you know what you’re talking about. That goes double if what you’re selling is boring or unintelligible. Human nature I guess. Doctors, Politicians, teachers. They all do it. We trust those we think understand the world better than we do ourselves. Blind child-like trust. We defer to the experts. Life’s easier that way. It works, she barely listens. Me feeling in control. In my head she was staring out the window. Eyes glazed over. Maybe a hand rummaging through desk drawers looking for a nail file or a blood red bottle of nail polish from her handbag. A pile of errant files in brown sleeves on her desk waiting for her once I’d been dealt with. Nothing bores people like taxes. Keep going. Speak slowly. Think monotone. Think lullaby.

‘Now it has recently come to my attention that we might be able to recoup the tax on her stay with you.’

The moment of truth.
‘It would certainly be a nice surprise for Anna when she checks out to know that we’ve been proactive on her behalf and been able to keep the cost of this whole unfortunate episode to a minimum.’ Silence on the line. Twist the knife. Persuade her, ‘especially considering it may be sometime before she’s back in gainful employment, from what her agent has implied.’ Pause. Let that sink in.

‘Uuhh,’ came the reply, quick and more alert than before. Interested.

‘Apparently these types of health problems can linger in the minds of those in the industry, you know, casting people and directors and that kind of thing. Have you met her agent Mr. Vanderbilt? He’s been with her since the beginning. Lovely man. I must say I think this frightful business with Mr. Fox has affected him terribly, him representing them both and all. He introduced the two you see.’ James was over on the sports desk and was pissing himself. He’d heard of Vanderbilt and lovely wasn’t an adjective often connected to that name, cunt was close to the norm though Turner would be more creative. I gave James the finger; he was putting me off my game. Jerry Vanderbilt was an urban legend amongst the press. A super-agent he represented everyone and anyone so long as they were in the public eye. It was an open secret that his stock in trade was the kiss and tell and he’d often broker stories and pictures of his clients and others to the papers, and would negotiate a certain percentage of the resulting sales from the newspaper since his stuff was guaranteed sales Viagra. Better still any unwitting celebrity not represented by Vanderbilt who found themselves caught in one of the exclusives would often feel inevitably drawn to the agent to help get them out of it, such was Vanderbilt’s prowess as a publicist. Vanderbilt would make his money at both ends. It was a perfect scam. And perfectly legal. He even had his own nickname, the Big V. For him Fleet Street was his own personal fiefdom. Every editor of every red top and most of the broadsheets would sell their left nut to be spoon-fed quality scandal. The owners were in on it too so any editor that didn’t tow the ‘keep the big V happy’ party line was out on their ear. He had the power to make or break a tabloid at an absolute whim. Like I said, an urban legend.

‘Oh how horrible. You know I didn’t believe it when I read it in the papers. That Dexter Fox is such a nice man on telly.’ Kelly sounded like she was buying it.

‘Neither did we my dear.’ I forced a sigh. ‘Such awful business. I only hope I can help Miss Foster recuperate by doing my own little bit.’
'Yeah I can imagine.' Kelly’s voice had softened with sympathy.

And with that the moment of truth. Deep breath.

‘I’m calling, you see, to request your assistance in the matter.’

Her, without thinking, ‘sure thing. What do you need?’

‘Would you be so kind as to have the invoice for her treatment faxed over to my office as soon as possible? I’m afraid it’s quite a long and arduous process going through these accounts and I’d rather tie up this loose end as quickly as possible.’

‘No problems, what’s the number you need it faxed to?’

Christmas all over again. Picking my own presents. Front-page splash.

‘Thank you so much Kelly. You’ve been so helpful.’ I meant it.

Kelly should really have asked for a patient number at the least. Follow the protocol. But receptionists never do. It’s like tailgating; everyone is guilty of it at some point. She’s fielded calls like mine a thousand times before and a thousand times again and it’s always been okay. Most of the time it’s a private health care provider that doesn’t have a patient number. She knows that means that she has to go through the list of patients currently staying at the facility by hand looking for it. It exhausts her and she hates doing it. Why make more work for yourself? ‘No problems,’ said Kelly, ‘I’ll do it now. Thanks for calling. Goodbye.’ I couldn’t help but feel that she’d forgotten my name already as I hung up. A good thing. My thoughts interrupted by the sound of the fax machine whirling away at the back of the office over the drone of the working day. I was over there pronto like a fisherman examining his net, evaluating the catch. I wouldn’t be throwing this one back. Later, when somebody further up Grange Park’s food chain asked why their receptionist faxed a sensitive document to a number not on the patient’s file, it’d be too late. If they ever got that far. Not my problem if she lost her job. She should have been more careful. Chances are though that she was smart enough to cover it up once the story broke. Collateral damage if not. Job done. The truth is it wasn’t her fault. She made the same mistake we all do. We trust. Happens every day and nobody ever learns. For all the talk about free will we’re all desperate for someone, anyone, to tell us what to do or what to think. Ironic right?
Celebration time. A massive follow-up scoop to file. A slam-dunk front page for the newsroom’s new golden boy. I thought about asking Lily to come for a drink after work to showcase my blagging masterpiece. Maybe even dinner beforehand. Plans. The future looking bright. Fresh possibilities. The story went to the newsdesk a few hours later. I thought about attributing the quotes to the receptionist. Decided against it. Show mercy. I was on the up and all it cost was a tiny bit of my soul. Play the game. The proper journalism would come. I still hoped that Kelly had the good sense to keep her mouth shut. But then again I imagined the first night of Foster’s stay. The receptionist going home and telling her boyfriend over a microwaved chicken korma about how she’d seen that girl off of Eastenders checked in by her agent that morning. How she’d talked to the day nurses as they passed by. How she’d heard that Foster had got herself hooked on the white stuff. Gossip. All I really did was take her little story and get it down on paper. I guess I just hoped to keep the collateral damage to a minimum.

Of course gossip isn’t necessarily news. But that’s a very fine line and nobody worries too much about crossing it. Just because you draw a line doesn’t mean that every other paper will abide by it. Not when everyone was losing money and, like I said, ethics are expensive. Publish and be damned most of the time. Besides public interest defences nearly always paid off. It’s half the reason why some of the most well paid people in newspapers are the lawyers. Even if a judge did find against us it didn’t matter. If the paper makes 50k on a dodgy story and then pays out 20k when the story’s subject sues well, that’s just good business. I doubted I’d send this front page to mum either.

I didn’t.

It was exciting but it didn’t feel right. Lying down with dogs. Getting results. The ends justifying the means. I spent the rest of that afternoon plotting my career trajectory. Another few months, a year tops before getting a national job off the back of the Fox monstering. I’d have to work on the grin I’d give the editor when I handed in my resignation. Wondering how old those resumes in his drawer really were. No longer quite so afraid of them. Basking in the sun. Then it would be proper journalism. Investigative stuff. Proper difference making stuff. No more Churnalism. Papers were the same as any other industry. You get your name out there. Get yourself known. A good reputation opens doors. I should know; I was in the business of destroying them. Mine included.
The cup of tea was untouched, a faint white blotch growing on its cold surface like an ice cap. On the sofa Charlie continued to sleep off the remains of his hangover. His hand slung limply down, just touching the floor, like a dead woman’s. There we stayed the rest of the afternoon. In the evening we worked. Made plans. Ate pizza. Talked some more. He thought he recollected Anna Foster but couldn’t be sure. The story sounded familiar he said; like a half-remembered whisper but he never paid much attention to stuff like that. To him it was all just a distraction. A diversion. A game to keep us distracted from reality. His reality. I find it easier not to care about anything when Charlie is around. I defer to him. His obsession allows for my apathy; we compliment each other. At least that’s what I hope. I wish I were more like Charlie. There are days when I wish I were Charlie. What would Charlie have done if he were me? Would she have lived? The world washes over me like the Thames tidal flow. Cold. Foul. Muddied. It is uncaring and now I am also uncaring. Maybe I am becoming more like Charlie. If I am then I don’t know how I should feel about that. I don’t know if I should mourn the old me. I doubt anybody else will. Would Charlie? There are times late at night when I lie in bed and wonder where distraction ends and obsession begins. And then I sleep.

Chapter Eight

Back to the story.

An unfamiliar clock on an unfamiliar bedside table read 08:13. The red digits on the display scorched my pupils. From the unfamiliar bed I looked out an unfamiliar window. The light gave my eyes a very familiar pain. I closed them before they combusted, took stock of the situation. In the night a swarm of bees had built a hive in my ear canal, they were busy making honey. Noisily. A large mole had joined them; he’d burrowed into my cranium. My mouth tasted like he’d taken a dump on my tongue. I moved my head and the mole made me regret it. Clearly panicked, he made for whichever exit he could find. Not the ears, they were full of honeybees. His only escape route through the front of my skull. His teeth gnawing away at grey matter and bone. The pain pulsing through my body with each bite. I lay still until his panic subsided and he went back to sleep. I decided against ever moving my head again. I felt bad. I lay there a while under some unfamiliar sheets. Eventually I noticed the unfamiliar lump lying next to me in the unfamiliar bed in this unfamiliar room. Near
the pillow an unfamiliar hand rested. I could see a few eerily familiar looking, curly tresses of brown hair through the letterbox slits I had for eyes. I consulted my memory, searching for a name. Empty. *File Not Found.* The mole had eaten it. Maybe he’d crapped the remnants out in my mouth. It hadn’t eaten the old man though, he sat in the corner. Maybe he tasted bad. Maybe the mole didn’t like pensioners that tasted of prunes so there the old man sat, walking stick by his side. Lips sealed but with a satisfied look. *You’re enjoying this.*

Don’t not think too much. Don’t wake the mole.

I scanned the room for a clue. In the corner on top of an old looking wooden dresser was a picture frame. I opened my eyes a little wider. The sunlight scorched my pupils and blinded me. Stinging. Brave the day. I saw a woman with black hair standing between an older man and a woman, parents. Eyesight fuzzy. Mole making a nest out of my wiring. I couldn’t make out the details so gave up. I looked around for something else. On the walls of this unfamiliar room the unfamiliar owner had stuck old vinyl record sleeves. The Beatles, The Monkees, The Foundations. Lots of ‘The’ bands. My eyebrows rose. The mole twitched. I kept quite still. The clock on the bedside table continued to tick. 08:26. On the floor was a pair of jeans. Mine. A few feet from them, a crumpled shirt. Mine again. At this point I became aware I was naked. Shoes, socks, briefs were probably somewhere between the bed and the front door. I wondered where my keys, phone and wallet were. *In my jacket or my jeans? Where the fuck’s my coat?* Minutes drifted by in a daze. *Can I get my kit on without waking the mole or the lump?* The bees were still at it. No breaks in their honey-making routine. Better to wait a while. Let the mole drift into a deep sleep. Do moles enter deep sleep? *Not now you idiot, you’ll wake him.* Everything hurt. My eyes stung. My head the home of a hungry invertebrate and a hoard of bees. Wondering if there were any Paracetemol nearby. Would have to ask the lump when it moved. It rose and fell rhythmically. Up and down. Breathe in and out. Up and down. The sheets were a cream colour. I could smell perfume. Couldn’t place it. Familiar though. A tease for my memory. I stared at the hair, willing its owner into my mind. Nothing. I carried on staring. It didn’t make the pain worse. Memories stayed eaten.

08:31. Time slipping by. Between yawns. Between pulses of head pain. I remembered why the hair looked familiar. It was Lily’s colour. The bees buzzed
harder and the mole woke. The bastard burrowing deeper than before. Terrified. I groaned. Tried not to swear. Everybody awake now. Everyone except the girl who might be Lily. The racket didn’t disturb her. Not a light sleeper then. Something new. Too much alcohol. For her or me? Whatever had happened the memory of it was long gone. The mole had accounted for it. I wondered if it had been how I’d imagined. Doubtful. Too many questions. Not now, wait for the mole to settle down. One thing was for sure: the mole was female. And pregnant. The lump maybe being Lily had sent her into labour and now there were two mammals burrowing. The mother and her tiny offspring, cutting its claws on my frontal lobes. I lay there a bit more. It definitely looked like Lily’s hair. There would be consequences. There always were. Office shit. Keep it quiet. Tough to do in a room full of hacks. Think positive. I’d have smiled if my face had let me. It still hurt to move. I’d need to be sure. I rescanned the room for pictures, or an ID badge, or anything that might help. It was then I noticed how messy the place was. Beyond my discarded clothes were pictures in frames, similarly scattered haphazardly. Piles of papers stacked on a desk from IKEA. They shared space with lipsticks, nail polish and other tiny bottles with Rimmel and Max Factor on them. Half of the room seemed taken up by a large wardrobe. Its doors pinned open by a cacophony of clothing. Summer dresses, skirts, tops of all kinds, their sleeves hanging from a shelf like vines in a jungle. Amongst the debris though something was missing. On the floor alongside the bead necklaces, bank statements, stray knickers and a tampon was an absence. No telltale wrapper discarded in a moment of passion. Going without, though out of character, wasn’t technically impossible. Did I feel post-coital? I felt dull, wrapped in cellophane. No way to tell. Had I managed it? Maybe not. That could be the reason for the lack of sexual paraphernalia. Nobody cleans up straight after. I could have got drinkers’ droop and then passed out next to a frustrated and regretful partner. Zero chance of a repeat performance then. Well technically not even a first performance. Shit.

My throat was dry. I tried not to think about water as I waited for the memories from last night to resurface. The mother mole would regurgitate them. I’d see them, then be happy for them to be obliterated, swallowed whole by a growing baby mole. Part of it had already returned. Camera stills. Meaningless flashbacks, out of order and context. I set about constructing a narrative. First what we knew. Lily had invited me out to celebrate my second front-page splash that had gone to press the
week before, this one carrying the headline ‘Fox abuse pushes Foster into Rehab’ because in her words, ‘it proved it wasn’t a fluke’. There were a few of us from the start, Ricky the photographer, Tony and Jess from Showbiz, and a few others. We started at one of the pubs round the corner from the office. It was early evening on a Saturday night and Villa had won so the place was rammed. We stood for an hour getting the rounds in before Lily found us a table. Fast forward a few hours and Lily and I left the pub together. Why? Where had everyone else gone? Concentration was difficult but I tried. Slowly it started to come back to me. Ricky had left first as he was covering something on Sunday. Then others had slowly separated amongst the claret and blue mess of football fans chanting and drinking. Finally Jess and Tony had become bored so decided to go and get food. When they’d gone I remember wondering aloud to Lily if Jess and Tony were getting off with each other. Lily asked why the interest and accused me of fancying Jess.

Then what was guessed at. More flashes, memories sliding past like PowerPoint slides. The back seat of a black cab with Lily. Was that at the start or the end of the night? Cerebral gymnastics said the start, definitely the start. I’m positive. Then what? A queue outside a nightclub on Broad Street in the rain. More queuing at a bar for a line of shots as long as your arm. Then a dark corner with someone. And then? Here evidently. Lying immobile in bed next to a woman I might or might not know with more animals in my head than in a Beatrix Potter novel. Still, what was done was done.

This would probably kill the friendship. Would a sexual encounter, even if neither person remembered it, even if it didn’t technically happen, be enough to produce enough awkwardness to kill a friendship? Probably. It sounded like the kind of question akin to hearing a tree falling in the forest. It hurt my head but it also hurt deeper. Lily made life bearable at the Enquirer. I could feel a fish inside my stomach, swimming in the vodka from the night before. Its fins caressed my insides, making them ticklish. It nibbled on the takeaway I must have had at some point the night before.

Then I noticed.

I couldn’t picture the old man.
The mole liked prunes after all.

Thank God for small mercies.

Then the silence got loud and I felt sick, like I’d lost something important.

What if he really was gone?

We’d been through so much. Over the years the old man’s thoughts had become my thoughts. His suggestions became my actions. We had become one. Completely symbiotic. Sometimes my daily existence was like lying next to Niagara Falls and singing Happy Birthday. My voice utterly drowned out by his much bigger, more ethereal one. Now the sudden silence felt concussive like tinnitus after standing too near an explosion. But that was just one more thing to worry about. Pick your battles kid.

A sigh but not from me. The lump was moving. Slowly. Now it was the turn of the fish to get excited. It worked itself into a feeding frenzy. Feasting on my panic. My gut bubbled and swelled as its occupant swished around. That woke the moles who had finally finished their breakfast. The bees just kept on buzzing. Honey would soon pour from my ears. None of that mattered for the moment. It had to be her. It was going to be her. I felt like I was in a car crash in slow motion. Every tiny movement the body made brought the reckoning closer. Fear mixed with vodka in my stomach, stirred together by the fish’s fins. I fought hard not to throw up right there. It bubbled in my mouth for a second, hot and burning, before I was able to swallow it back down. Let’s not make the situation worse right? I thought about running, dismissed it just as quickly. Want to add coward to the list too? Then with a sigh that sounded as loud and as painful as shattered glass I resigned myself to being caught with my nuts in the cookie jar. So to speak. It takes two to tango after all. I took one last glimpse at the bedside clock: 08:41. It was one of those retro looking things with two alarm chimes on each side, which made it throw a Mickey Mouse style shadow against the wall. I watched the second hand tick countdown until our friendship exploded into awkwardness.

The stranger’s head came off the pillow. She was still facing away from me. I heard a long sigh as she looked at the clock. It took a second for her to realise she
wasn’t alone. She rolled over. She looked at me. I looked at her. Her lips grinned at me. Lily’s lips.

We didn’t talk about what the kids would be called. But it wasn’t awkward either. We lay there, a foot between us, and talked about the night before. Curiosity overtook the hangover and potential embarrassment. She remembered more than I did. We’d gone to a club alone. Left about two and ended up at hers because it was closer. She said she couldn’t remember how we ended up in bed or whether we’d slept together. I didn’t believe her. Her voice lacked the sense of mischief that it usually had.

Embarrassment or shyness? I couldn’t tell. There was something about the morning light that made her beautiful though. She smiled more than I thought a hung-over person should be capable of. It made me relax. After a while she got up (she was naked but didn’t ask me to turn around), grabbed a dressing gown and offered me coffee. After she’d gone I searched around the room for my clothes and began to get dressed. I was pretty sure my coat was downstairs somewhere. I was almost ready and searching for a missing sock when my jeans pocket beeped and vibrated. It was a text message from Turner. ‘Foster topped herself. Conference at 09:30. Be there.’

Fuck.

Chapter Nine

I hailed a cab that picked me up from Lily’s flat at Brindleyplace and would take me to the office. It was a fifteen-minute walk if I had fifteen minutes, or felt capable of walking twenty paces without being sick. Lily said she’d follow about half an hour later for obvious reasons. Neither of us sure that the office was in the dark. Better to take precautions. Just in case. The roads were quiet and it took a while before I realised that it was a Sunday. My head throbbed but the text from the editor had sent the animals into shock. I lay in the back of the cab. Eyes closed. Listening to the engine hum. Wishing I could wind a window down. The city yet to wake. Lucky bastards. Closing my eyes somehow made the nausea worse so I stared out the window, it seemed to ease the hangover slightly. We drove past the Birmingham Rep Theatre with the Birmingham Eye Ferris Wheel erected in the square in front of it. The giant Ferris wheel was actually called the Wheel of Birmingham and sponsored by a rival paper, the Birmingham Mail, but everyone called it the Birmingham Eye.
after it’s bigger brother down south. I looked at it then in the cold Sunday morning light and came to the same conclusion I’d always had when I considered such things, Birmingham just isn’t London. London has charm, history, and is one of the capitals of the world. Songs are written about it. Birmingham is just a city in the midlands. It had its highlights for sure, Broad Street, the arenas, the canals, and the Bull Ring but each felt like an homage rather than a statement of identity. Seven years I’d been there, between uni and work, but it never truly felt like home. Once a Londoner always a Londoner I guess or just another arrogant southern cunt. I promised myself if this Foster story paid off I’d leave Birmingham and the Enquirer and get myself a job on Fleet Street. I’d go back to London a new man, not the scared kid from the council estate in the East End but the journalist who took down a monster with a pen. A man who’d actually done some good. That’s all I ever really wanted. Success sure, money would be nice too, but most of all I wanted to make a difference. Lily crossed my mind, maybe she’d like London too but that was thinking too far along the line. There would be time for that. Then the taxi hit a pothole and my stomach was almost in my mouth. Despite the stainless steel sky of a mid-winter’s day, the light was still too bright, even through my eyelids. It hurt to think but I tried anyway. It was then, through as bad a hangover as I can remember, that I realised, the blackness held no old man in a dressing gown and slippers. He was gone. Maybe this was healthy, I told myself. The editor would want a run-down of everything I knew about the Foster situation before her death. Which would be easy, I could just point at the front page about to be framed and erected on his wall. Which made covering her death even more important. As the resident expert on Anna Foster I’d probably be on it. More front page by-lines. Maybe I could get Lily onto the story too. Time away from the office together might be a good idea. It was then that a second thought occurred to me. Hangovers were common when I drank but I rarely felt sick. I wondered what that meant as the car wound its way past the taxis lined up outside of New Street Station, through the city and onto the Queensway.

At 09:26 I was stood outside the tall glass building they called Colmore Gate and that housed The Birmingham Enquirer. I puked before I went inside, through nerves or the hangover I wasn’t sure. Sophie’s choice: take the stairs and definitely vomit again or take the lift and have a panic attack. I took the stairs. Being late was the least of my problems. Through some miracle I made it to the fourth floor without
redecorating the stairwell. Tony was sat by one of the hot desks staring at a laptop, ‘Good night last night?!’ He said smiling. His recent promotion to head of showbiz may have partly been due to his seeming imperviousness to alcohol.

‘Not bad at all mate, should do it again sometime.’

*But not for fucking ages.*

I kept on walking towards the conference room. Through the glass I could see that it was already starting to fill up. Various department editors, the peon that dealt with ad space, someone from maintenance who rumour had it was on the brink of resigning if he wasn’t assigned a parking space and a few subs, one of whom I was sure suffered from dyslexia. They all met weekly on a Sunday morning for a post-mortem of the edition just gone to press and a pre-mortem for the week to come. I slipped into the room trying to be invisible in the way that someone who knows that they don’t belong does. I slumped in a seat and kept my eyes fixed firmly on the desk. Derek, a middle aged Yorkshireman who covered politics and had been there longer than the furniture, tapped me on the shoulder, ‘Didn’t expect to see you here lad. Good job on the Foster stuff. Nicely done. You’ll make some of the guys here jealous if you carry on like this.’ He smiled at me. ‘Yeah,’ I said. Clearly news of Foster’s death hadn’t broken yet. A few minutes went by and the final cluster of people arrived, their conversations clipped as they entered the room. Turner at the eye of the storm, barking instructions to his secretary who walked three steps behind and was busily writing in a large diary. Around the conference table cliques formed, like delegations at the UN. Tony along with the deputy editor John and Max, the sports editor sat in a line opposite Jacob, an old pro who headed up the arts section that six months previous had its pages cut by half in favour of more football. The writing was on the wall for him. Enforced retirement. I remember giving it a year when I heard, so still six months to go to be proven wrong. He looked a broken man, a husk, like his soul had been sucked out. Derek took a seat next to the home and crime editors and their assorted minions who took up a further dozen or so spaces around the huge black conference table. These sections often worked together on stories and saw themselves as more important than Sport. These conferences often happened more than once a week but a minion like me would only be called in if required by a section’s editor to provide specialist knowledge on the story being pitched for space in the paper. I’d been called in to
conference maybe half a dozen times. A damning indictment of my performance before the Foster story. Valery Stapleton, the Crime editor, had fixed me with a questioning stare as she walked in. It was no secret that she wanted Turner’s job and saw Crime as a stepping-stone to greater things. As a consequence, she’d been less than helpful recently. The Foster story had helped shore up falling circulation and helped entrench Turner that little bit more. In a sense the prick owed me one. If Foster’s death were suspicious it would probably fall under Stapleton’s remit where she’d do her best to spike it. Unless she didn’t know either.

I sat through the conference. Not one word about Foster. It was all features stuff, no real news just puff pieces, advertorials, and parking spaces. Twenty minutes went by. Twenty minutes that could have been better spent cradling a toilet bowl. I sat in a daze, revisiting the previous night to take my mind off of the searing pain the fluorescent overhead lighting was having on my eyes. Eventually the meeting broke up. Maintenance had got his parking spot. Valery continued to shoot death-stares at me as she left. I hoped she never got the editorship. ‘Back to the coal face,’ said Derek. He winked at me as he left the room. I’d always liked him. The editor hadn’t moved. His eyes still buried in the diary, tutting and shaking his head. His secretary, Louise, stood at his shoulder waiting patiently.

‘Cancel this. Move him to Tuesday morning. What the hell is this shit?’

‘The memo signing Jeff Black off as long term sick,’ Louise replied, completely immune to the aggression in Turner’s voice. I envied her.

‘His fucking nerves.’

Turner continued to mutter to himself as he signed the memo and handed the diary and its contents to Louise, who promptly spun on her heel and left.

Then all of a sudden it was my turn. Turner remained in his seat. The sleeves of his sky blue shirt rolled up. Full work mode then. Eyes fixed on me like I was about to explode. Sizing me up. I could feel the nausea starting to bubble again. Then he got up.

‘Follow me.’
He led me out of the conference room, through a set of fire doors and out into the stairwell. We passed Lily on the way. She’d stopped by Tony’s desk and was talking to him. If she felt as bad as I did she certainly didn’t show it. Once into the stairwell he lent against the railings and lit up. Smoke began ascending the stairwell.

‘I heard from a friend of mine at the MET. They found her at home.’

I nodded, wondering where he was going with this. Wheels turning.

‘How’d she do it?’ I asked.

‘There hasn’t been a post-mortem yet but they found an empty bottle of pills near the body and a puddle of puke. It wasn’t pretty.’

‘Yeah.’

‘Nasty way to go.’

‘Yeah.’

Then there was a long pause. I barely noticed it. Mind elsewhere.

‘Well?’ Turner asked, ‘are you buying that she topped herself?’

‘I’m not sure,’ I said, the penny starting to drop.

He was wearing his mustard coloured tie this morning. It made the nausea worse.

‘Well maybe you might want to try find out? You fucking new breed lot, you get your cock wet and you think you’ve made it. Well I got news for you sunshine.’ He blew smoke into the stairwell and fixed me with that stare again.

‘A wife beating prick’s career gets royally fucked and then the bitch that did it turns up dead? Should be a wet dream for a guy like you.’ The tiniest smile slipped across his face.

I found myself looking straight at him, fighting the urge to throw up over that horrific yellow tie.

‘We’re running it on Sunday so you’ve got a week. I want updates every day this week and copy ready to go by Saturday night deadline. I want to see what you file
before it goes through the newsdesk, you understand? Don’t let that bitch Valery tell you any different. This isn’t hers. You’re on secondment for me as of now.’

He leaned in closer. I stopped breathing for fear he’d smell the puke on my breath.

‘I like you lad and I’m going to trust you here to get a result. Don’t be like those other piss streaks and fuck this up now.’

I could feel the nausea building.

He gestured back to the newsroom.

‘Well off you fuck then.’

We walked back in together. He headed for his office and shut the door. I went to the nearest toilet to throw up again.

Chapter Ten

My head rested against the toilet seat as I reached for the flush. I heard voices and then the door swing open. ‘I knew you looked green!’ It was Tony. ‘Lily said you’d be in here. You’re going to want to see this quick! Come on get your arse in gear!’

I went over to the sink and washed my mouth out with cold water. I wet my hand and felt the back of my neck. I needed to get home and recover. Today was already too long. I followed Tony out of the toilets and back into the newsroom. Lily was over by one of the televisions suspended from the ceiling in the corner of the newsroom. Reaching up she changed the channel from Sky Sports News to Sky News. The Sports
guys groaned. The yellow news ticker running along the bottom of the screen. *Dexter Fox: ‘Anna meant more than the world to me.’* Lily went for the volume. A Home Counties accent cut through the newsroom chatter. Fox, mid-speech on the front steps of his town house in Notting Hill. Dressed in a suit the colour of coal. Hands clasped in front. Flashbulbs exploding around him. Crocodile tears making their presence felt. He looked as bad as I felt. ‘This is where I say goodbye.’ Say what you will, the guy could deliver a line.

‘And and and…’ his train of thought skipped the tracks. Crashing and smashing his voice.

Words stretched way beyond breaking point. Struggling to contain and represent the torment of loss. He struggled. He fell. Shoulders slumped. He looked down at his shoes. Melting hearts. His agent standing behind him. Stoic. Calculating. Like I said, manufactured truth. My guts burned. My head hurt. Mouth dry. Nausea building. Anger surfacing. Right on cue, Vanderbilt made his appearance, stepping forward to save the day. Everyone on TV, Fox included, is shorter than you’d expect so Jerry Vanderbilt looked gigantic compared to his client. His hair, well maintained and slowly greying, still had a youthful curl to it that confused the eye when viewed next to the deepening wrinkles on his forehead. Strong shoulders though and Jaw-line, probably played squash weeknights. Nobody really knew much about him when he wasn’t standing in front of a camera, unlike his clients. A bit doughy round the middle, though he wore it well, the way some guys when they hit their forties and fifties do. Hard to reconcile the reputation with the man but I guess that’s always the case. There aren’t many bastards in real life that look like a Bond villain. ‘My client wishes that various members of the press will respect his and the Foster family’s wishes to grieve in private. Thank you for your attention.’ His voice was clear, commanding, not much warmth though. His arm around Fox, the agent ushered him back through his front door as the Sky News anchor began narrating. The whole thing felt choreographed to within an inch of its life. Poor little grieving Dexter. I felt the eyes of the newsroom on me. The place silent save the television. I should say something meaningful.

‘Bollocks.’

Maybe not.
Somewhere somebody laughed and as quickly as it had started the pause in the functioning of the newsroom had ceased. ‘Bollocks,’ Lily agreed and went to change the channel. I stopped her and we watched together. The sports guys in the back muttered. I couldn’t quite make it out. After Fox, the headliner of this performance, a petite woman with a blonde bob tied back severely stepped forward and introduced herself as the spokeswoman for Grange Park. She spoke quickly. Recounting the facts that I’d pieced together over the previous few days. Foster was being treated at Grange Park. The script she was reading from didn’t mention why. ‘In the afternoon of the 20th of January Miss Foster checked herself out of Grange Park. At the time of her discharge our doctors were satisfied that she was in no immediate danger. Grange Park offers its profound condolences to the family of Miss Foster and…’

I didn’t know that she’d left Grange Park. ‘So what now?’ Lily asked on the way back to the desk. ‘Turner’s got me digging. At least he didn’t take it off me.’

‘Why should he? You’re the new star.’ It sounded good coming out of her mouth. Her eyes full of suggestion as she said it. The star went over what he, and everyone else thanks to the presser, now knew about Foster’s final moments. Foster had taken a taxi from Grange Park back to London. She’d arrived at her Islington town house about 8pm. She paid the driver who carried her bags up the steps. She locked the front door behind her and was never seen alive again. Her sister found her in bed the next morning; she’d let herself in with a spare key when Foster didn’t answer the door.

There was no evidence of foul play according to the Turner’s friend at the MET. They found the bed sheets stained with vomit and an empty glass that had been taken for tests. Good chance the autopsy would suggest an overdose. *No evidence of foul play.* I repeated the phrase over and over. Lily went to change the channel again. This time I didn’t stop her. From behind us I heard a cheer. *Fuckwits.* All the nationals would be going with suicide in their stories. Me knowing how easily it might not be.

The theory was easy to come up with, I ran through it with Lily checking for inconsistencies. Foster decided she wanted to leave Fox, that much was obvious. Their relationship was a façade. And she wanted the world to know it. She wanted to ruin him, why else get me involved? She runs away to a rehabilitation clinic when the story breaks. She couldn’t have known I’d track her down and run the second story. A week later she leaves the clinic and dies suddenly. This much we knew. Now some
guesswork. Fox had a temper and had beaten her before. Who knew what lay beneath that public edifice? Below the sickness, below the anger, the tiniest sense of a thrill was spreading. This was my shot. Get this right and ride it all the way onto a national newsdesk. To be a real journalist. I was being sent on the mother of all fishing trips on a hunch that there was more to this than met the eye. Foster’s death was sad. Fox was the real catch, if he could be caught. Turner thinking about circulation figures and sold out print runs. His bottom line. Me thinking about the top.

First step was to find the driver. A quick Google search for local firms within a twenty-mile radius of the clinic then a ring round fishing for information. By midday I had results. No need for aliases or Jewish accountants this time, £100 transferred over the Internet for a name did the trick. Money talks after all. Gareth Jones, 59, originally from Newport but whom now lived and worked in Exeter. He was divorced with three kids, twins in primary school, and one in secondary with the names Russell, Lucy, and Katie respectively. The mother remarried and lived back in Newport. Facebook made it all too easy. I worked fast, knowing that I probably wasn’t the only one looking.

Chapter Eleven

By rush hour I was in a pool car, a ten-year-old Ford Focus, driving down the M5. I parked a few doors down from his little council house by 8pm. Engine off, settling in for the night, wondering if there were any empty bottles in the back. His little two-up two-down, which reminded me of home, lacked two things of interest to me. Firstly there was no mini-cab parked up outside and the lights were off. Probably on shift all night but maybe not. Probably just missed him then. No choice but to stay. Secondly and more importantly though, I couldn’t see any other journos parked up in shitty fleet cars that stunk of piss and anger. Just me and a suburban mid-winter’s Sunday evening. Quiet as the grave. I sat there in the dark with nothing but the occasional shiver down the spine for company. Waiting. Watching the empty street,
seeing cats stalk between parked up cars. An occasional set of lights crawled past me on the journey home. But, for the whole evening the space outside number 26 remained stubbornly clear. I thought about Anna. I thought about Fox. I thought about blood soaked under fingernails. I thought about the old man. I wondered if he was gone for good. I wondered if the debt was paid. I thought about Turner’s office with its wall of fame and every front-page that had sold out whilst he’d been in charge. I thought about how my two efforts took pride of place there. I thought about Lily. Wondered what she was doing. Contemplating whether I should text her. Too late in the evening and too soon for phone calls, even though before I wouldn’t have thought twice. The world already felt divided into two categories: before and after. Then I thought about the old man some more. He fell into the before category. He was my guide. My conscience and maybe even my friend. My Mickey Goldmill, Mr. Myagi, and fucking Yoda and he was now gone. Vanished into the ether. I sat there in that freezing cold old Focus that reeked of piss and thought about how I missed him. Stockholm syndrome. Safe to say that I did a lot of thinking that night. Sure as shit wasn’t much else you could do. I fell asleep. A day when your head’s nearly spun clean off your neck will do that to you. I slept a dreamless sleep in a tired heap of shit parked up in an inbred part of the West Country. My right knee hurt from the driving, my gut from hunger, and my head from the stress. My clothes were two days old and I’d forgotten when I last showered. This wasn’t the upward curve in my career that I’d been led to expect.

Then came Monday morning. I woke with a crick in my neck and dread in my gut. The taxi had materialised whilst I’d been asleep. I checked my phone for the time, 09:34. Good chance he was asleep if he worked nights. Fifty-fifty chance I’d get him as far as the door. The clock was on. I went over and knocked on the door. He answered at the fifth attempt. A podgy man in a dressing gown and slippers. One of those guys who look as if he was born with a flat cap on. A hundred years ago guys like him would have spent their lives with a pickaxe down a coalmine; nowadays they’re cabbies. How times change. He let out a yawn so hard that I could count the number of fillings he had. His scarlet jowls shook and swayed as they drooped off his face like he was melting. Where did this guy sleep, a microwave? ‘You alright? What can I do for you this morning?’ He asked when his face had returned to normal. I introduced myself and held my card out. He took it and squinted at it through his
glasses. The street was quiet although I noticed many of the cars had disappeared. ‘Ah you lot. I think you better leave son.’ He said. I didn’t get a chance to respond before the front door slammed in my face. I closed my eyes and let out a sigh that said more than it should have. I had questions that needed answering and I can be very persuasive when I want to be. I went back to the car and searched out my wallet. If you’re going to mug someone a reporter is always a good target. I had £200 in twenties for just such an occasion. ‘She seemed genuinely happy to me like. Talking and everything most of the way,’ said the middle-aged cabby once eighty quid had migrated to his pocket through the letterbox. He was cheaper than I thought. ‘Some punters are right miserable bastards you know, but this one was just fine, chirpy as a little bird.’ He hadn’t bothered to open the door so his answers were shouted back through the letterbox into my Dictaphone. A safe bet then that she was on meds when she left the clinic. Anti-depressants can do a spectacular job of making the world see what it expects. They don’t cure the disease. They just mask the symptoms so the world doesn’t have to look at them. In that sense they’re for the benefit of everyone else, not necessarily the patient. I remembered the ten-year-old boy in me taking them with squash in the kitchen. Poor Anna. ‘You’d never have known to look at her. Said she had a new perspective on life and everything.’

Time to play a hunch.

‘Did you stop off anywhere? Did she have anything with her?’

He hesitated. It was still early for a memory test.

‘Nothing besides the bags I put in the boot. We did stop for coffee though and she bought something at the services.’

‘A bottle?’

‘I don’t know. Might have been. She didn’t get it out that I saw.’

‘Thanks for your time Mr. Jones.’

I’d turned my back ready to leave but I could still hear the old man’s voice through the door, ‘it’s terrible what happened though I bet your lot had something to do with it. Now fuck off I ain’t saying no more to you, scum!’
The words rang in my head all the way back up the M5. People think we’re vultures circling a carcass for the last threads of flesh, the juicy details we euphemistically call ‘colour’. They forget who buys the paper, whose morbid fascinations paid my salary. Newspapers are the reflection of the human appetites, we write what the public want to read, nothing more, nothing less.

And yet.

Chapter Twelve

It had been four days and three nights door stepping, a thousand miles of motorway, dozens of phone calls, text messages and emails, an irate editor, and a knackered out hack. And I had nothing that even hinted at Fox having killed Foster. Turner wanted yet another meeting. An update on what I’d turned up. What I had found out bothered me. ‘We give the reader what they want,’ Lily said as we sat outside the offices, a sandwich in one hand and a can of coke in the other, ‘it’s a job.’ I nodded and bit into my own sandwich that I’d got from the Tesco Express round the corner, chicken and bacon. We both shivered in the cold. Birmingham in January is a horrible place to be, the last place to dine alfresco, but Lily hated eating at her desk and I needed to be wherever Turner wasn’t. So there we were, her in a black coat to
her knees with matching gloves. Me in an Eskimo style winter coat, the sort of thing you see big issue sellers with, standing with forced optimism outside of train stations. I didn’t doubt that it was more than just the coat that made me look homeless. I’d seemingly forgotten how to shave and the fur that lined the edges of the hood to keep the wind out pulled and itched against four of five days face fuzz, so much so that I resorted to having the hood down. It whipped against the back of my neck as the wind took it. We both sat on the concrete steps arranged in a semi-circle outside the office. The flowerbeds were bare save for a few hardy plants that had turned red and the metal railings all around, that all had dents from skateboards being grinded against them, were freezing to the touch. In the centre of the semi-circle a pattern had been laid down in brick, like a mosaic. The newsroom, busy as always, buzzed away above our heads. I wondered if anybody knew or cared that we were down there together. Wondered if Turner, or Tony, or Jess, or anybody was up there looking down. Wondered if it even mattered though we all knew gossip was less than harmless. It can kill people. ‘This job changes you,’ she paused to wash the remains of her lunch down, ‘I mean we see the world how it really is, at its worst.’ She wasn’t wrong. I’d been working on Foster’s death for four days straight and what I knew didn’t sit well with me. She was into the usual drink and drugs. The family refusal to release the autopsy’s toxicology report told as much. You learn to read the signs. Omissions hid truths. Nobody out and out lied if they could help it. Including us. Especially us.

Nobody wanted to talk about Fox either. I’d spent most of the previous day door stepping Foster’s home, ambushing neighbours as they came home. Fighting to get a comment worth printing beyond the usual pleasantries before a door slammed in my face.

‘She was a lovely girl,’ said one neighbour.

‘I still can’t believe it,’ said another.

‘Can’t you vultures just leave her in peace now?’ Said a third.

In short, nothing useful.
It was strange how everybody in Anna Foster’s life had forgotten Fox existed or at the least didn’t want to talk about him, even to denounce him. Who wouldn’t want to blast a man recently exposed as someone who beat his now deceased partner?

Well, as it turned out, nobody.

Since the news conference Fox had been curiously absent, missing in action. This wasn’t normal. The second a damaging story broke we’d receive a phone call, nearly always from a PR agent, giving us a competing side of the story. If we didn’t take it any number of competing titles would do and thus the story would continue. Whoever shouted loudest would win. My first story would have blind-sided Fox. On Foster’s request we decided that we wouldn’t pursue comment from Fox until the story was out there for fear of further violence. Vanderbilt would have been caught in the middle between his two clients and their self-destructing relationship. It was obvious though who needed to come out of this. Foster’s star was fading and Fox was going places, maybe even America. Vanderbilt might have taken care of Foster, but it was Fox that had to survive. Curious.

‘We have to stick our noses where they aren’t wanted so we’re the people’s punching bag. You get used to the hypocrisy I guess. People still read what we write after all,’ Lily said. She crammed the last of her sandwich into her mouth. ‘The real damage is that nothing provokes a reaction after a while. Emotions get the volume turned down. A granny selling coke out of an old people’s home, a ten-car pile up on the M42, it’s all the same. You just feel numb. They aren’t events, they’re just copy.’ Lunch finished, she lit up. The smoke diffusing in the winter air, mixing with her breath as they both drifted skyward.

‘I don’t know if that’s a good way to be really but there you go.’

I didn’t say anything. I stared straight ahead down the street and counted the skeletons of trees arranged either side in neat little rows off into the distance. We talked some more after that. I watched how her lips grew the words she used. How they flowed, sometimes dripping steadily like when I asked her about dinner plans, and other times like a river like when I asked about her own horror stories. She told me how when she was eighteen she’d received a call from a woman who she had interviewed for a subsequently spiked story about her shop closing down. Her thin alabaster hands
clasped the mug as she stuttered through, her voice quiet and uncertain. Her discomfort evident in lips and eyes as she recalled how the woman had threatened to kill herself if the story wasn’t published, how Lily had held the office phone to one ear whilst dialling 999 with her mobile in her other hand. How she’d stayed on the line until she heard the knocking at the door. She’d tried to visit the woman, who was clearly disturbed, afterwards in hospital but was turned away by the nurses in case ‘she set her off’. How the guilt had resulted in weeks of insomnia and questioning of her choice of career. She wondered aloud why she didn’t feel the same now, wondered if the change was permanent. I sat and listened to it all. Was this a confession? She could just as easily have been talking about me. The ‘what ifs’ had started. You tried to control them. Ret-conning history as you went. It started with a question. A single question. This one question that I’d never truly asked myself before. This question that had started to eat away on the long car journeys from the West Country and Foster’s place in London, during the meetings with the editor where he swapped my updates on the story for profanities, and now during lunch dates with Lily. The one question that could change everything. What if Fox hadn’t touched her?

It was the drink that bothered me. Drunks hurt themselves all the time. Sometimes they don’t even remember doing it. If I’d checked the bin after she’d left the hotel room would I have found empty miniatures? Would the mini-bar have items missing? I replayed the audio recording of our meeting, feeling morbid. Checking for slurred speech, nothing. Memory plays tricks on you. Don’t trust it. What if there was a bottle of something next to the phone she used to call me that day? What if that morning she’d had a fight with Fox, got herself wasted and then, with a mind toward ruining Fox, called me and set the whole thing in motion? Alcoholics can certainly look sober and wake up the next morning and not remember a damn thing. It would explain why she wound up in Grange Park again. Perhaps it was more than a case of hiding from the spotlight. Maybe she was off the wagon. It would also explain why Fox’s radio silence and the lack of comeback on the beating story. A failure to deny is an admission of guilt in the court of public opinion. Maybe he really did love her. Sacrificing his reputation to protect hers. I should be his agent. Did Vanderbilt think like this? The narrative had legs. It might even have the benefit of Occam’s razor. It made enough sense to give me one more reason to lie awake at night, past the brink of
exhaustion. Doubt had set in. I needed to tell someone. For the moment though that person wasn’t Lily. In the past I’d have told the old man but he was gone. I missed him even though this way was better. He’d tell me that it wasn’t my job to work out who was lying or not. That my job was to report what I was told. I did my job. And I had the weighty conscience to show for it. ‘You don’t give much away do you?’ Lily asked. Her cigarette hung loosely from her hand.

‘I guess not,’ I said, turning to face her, remembering how beautiful she looked.

‘Shame.’ She checked her phone before staring off down the street. Change the subject. ‘Does it ever bother you? What they make us write?’ I asked.

‘You mean when I went into journalism did I see myself telling shagging stories and write ups of press releases?’

The weight of the world on my shoulders and I could feel a grin on my face. My grin reflected the smile that slipped across her face. For a second nothing mattered. A pause. It made me like her more. ‘Well, what about truth?’ She thought for a while and took another drag on her cigarette.

‘Well that’s a tough one. Truth is just someone’s perspective.’ She flicked her cigarette, sending ash groundward.

‘You believe that?’

‘I have to. We never know the whole story; I don’t think it’s possible. We’re going to make mistakes and when we do we revisit sources, evaluate assumptions, that kind of thing. We print accusation, denial, counter accusation, evidence, and finally admittance. It’s a process that arrives at the truth, or at least the version of it most of the public accepts.’ I thought about what she said. There is no absolute truth. And if there’s no absolute truth then there can be no absolute lie. Charlie wasn’t the only one to think this way evidently. Even then it struck me as a rationalisation. Whoever said every journalist was a moralist wasn’t paying attention. She turned and leaned into me. ‘And if all else fails we remember that nobody reads what we write anyway these days!’ As she said that her hand reached out and came to rest on top of mine. The warmth of her juxtaposed with the biting cold of the concrete underneath. It felt nice. It felt nicer when I realised that Lily might have been the first person to reach out and
touch me in almost a week. I felt connected again. A part of the real world. It was time to tell Turner my new theory. What would happen after that was anybody’s guess. The funeral had finally been scheduled so that would need discussing. A good opener. I leaned toward her. ‘I’d kiss you right now if I could be sure nobody would see.’

‘I know.’

I remember that moment so clearly, frozen in my mind by the January winds. It’s stayed with me in the months since. What might have been. I got up to leave.

‘You know Fox will have friends right?’ Lily said. ‘Vanderbilt especially, this is deep water that you’re wading into here.’

Smart girl that one.

Chapter Thirteen

‘Mr. Turner wants to see you.’

It was his secretary, Emma. I’d nodded off at my desk long enough for my laptop’s screen saver to kick in.

‘What about?’ I said whilst fighting a yawn, figuring he wanted another update. I thought I’d given him one that morning. I couldn’t remember.

‘I don’t know but he doesn’t look happy.’

‘Is he ever?’
She didn’t answer and walked away.

Foster had been dead five days. In that time I’d spoken to, with varying levels of success, the taxi driver, Foster’s neighbours, her family, her friends and even Fox’s neighbours. I’d driven over two thousand miles and was working on a world record expenses claim. When I wasn’t in the car I was on the phone. When I wasn’t on the phone I was on the computer. Chasing leads and fuelling the race with a mix of curiosity and caffeine. I was over-tired, under-fed, and everything was running together. Dream and reality, fact and fiction, two sides to my own coin. Five days worth of chasing. And I had sweet fuck all to show for it. Maybe Foster really was depressed and a drunken pill head, maybe she wasn’t. Nothing made sense and nothing was gaining traction. Too many questions and too few answers. My head didn’t even hurt anymore. The numbness spread from my cranium down my spine and into my stomach. I was spinning the wheels. The smoke clouding the view. The rubber melting into the asphalt. Going nowhere.

I got up and stretched and then fumbled for my notepad. I trudged through the noisy office that must have been close to deadline. It was dark again outside and streetlights twinkled in the distance through plate glass. Without really thinking I detoured toward the kitchen looking for more coffee. I collected my thoughts as the kettle boiled. Turner probably wanted to discuss how we’d handle Foster’s funeral, which was coming up the following week. Where possible we’d avoided all mention of Fox in the coverage, his grieving boyfriend act had resonated with the public. Funny how people do that.

I was sitting in Turner’s office with the door shut. The noisy newsroom muffled but still visible through the two glass walls. Emma was right. He didn’t look happy but he didn’t look angry either. I stared and wondered. Then I recognised an expression I’d never seen on Turner’s face before. He looked disappointed. Not angry. Not incandescent. But almost pained. ‘I got an email from our friends at The Sun this afternoon. This was attached. They want comment.’ Turner pushed a sheet of paper toward me; face down. I turned it over and found myself looking at a mocked up front page. ‘They’re running this tomorrow morning. Best get your tin hat ready.’

‘Fox shock as Foster Nurse kills self’

The words stared back at me in big black letters. I read the crawl.
Dexter Fox, the partner of the late Anna Foster, was left ‘horrified’ last night after the receptionist who accidentally leaked news of Foster’s mental health committed suicide.

Kelly Stone, 21, was found hanged just two days after news of Foster’s stay in a rehabilitation clinic surfaced.

Tributes were paid to the young woman who became tormented by her mistake in giving a newspaper reporter sensitive patient information that may have led to Foster’s untimely death.

Stone, born in Exeter, had been reprimanded by her superiors over the leaking of Foster’s medical information and friends say that she had become depressed over the affair.

‘I’m horrified at the pain and suffering caused.’ Said Fox. ‘Certain sections of the media are hell bent it seems on ruining lives, whatever the cost.’

‘Anna had mentioned how helpful and kind the staff were at Grange Park, I’m sure Kelly was one of them.’

There was a picture of Foster on a red carpet next to a holiday snap of a wafer thin girl on a hotel balcony in Ibiza or Corfu or somewhere. The caption underneath read Stone and Foster: tragic pair. It was obvious to whom they were referring to, it was my byline on all the Foster stories after all. It was equally obvious who was behind it. Deflect deflect deflect. ‘I’m being monstered.’ The words sounded like they’d come from someone else but there was only the editor and I in the room. The door had remained closed. People outside sneaking glances from their workstations. Wondering what was happening. ‘Seems so,’ Said Turner. He hesitated for a moment, ‘it seems there was a note left and one of their lot got a hold of it. She mentions you specifically.’ He pushed a photocopied bit of paper towards me. The note was handwritten but the words were more than easy enough to make out.

I’m sorry to have to do this to you Darren. It’s not your fault. I just wasn’t strong enough. What the papers did to that woman was my fault. It’s my fault.

I love you.
I said nothing. The room started to spin.

‘She had a history of depression,’ Turner said breaking the silence.

‘Don’t we all,’ I mumbled, rereading the note, blood ringing in my ears.

Questions started to come as my brain rebooted.

‘Vanderbilt gave them the note didn’t he?’

‘It would seem so. He’s a nasty shit that man. A real cuntstickle,’ Turner said.

‘Why is The Sun going after me? We don’t eat our own.’

Turner sighed.

‘Vanderbilt has sway with the editor over there. It’s his job. He controls information. He funnels it and trades it for favours. If there’s a story he wants spiked he’ll offer up something equally juicy in exchange. The man’s sitting on more dirt than a garden centre and he’s got it on everyone.’

He nodded at several of the front pages framed behind on the wall and looked at me.

‘Fox is going places. If you think Vanderbilt is just going to sit back and watch you destroy the kid you’re greatly fucking mistaken son. He’s ruthless.’

If I hadn’t known better I’d have said that Turner sounded in awe of Vanderbilt. Maybe he really was.

‘So how do we fight this?’ I asked. ‘I was doing my job. I was doing what you wanted.’

Turner looked beyond me back at the newsroom as if reacting to something he’d barely seen, ‘honestly, I thought you’d be more discreet.’

Then neither of us said anything. Slowly it started to sink in what was happening. I hadn’t seen this coming. It hit me hard, a shot to the solar plexus. I was floored and the count was ringing out.

‘There’ll be an inquest. There usually is with things like this. You’ll be summoned.’

‘Yea.’
I barely heard him. I felt my fingers scratching the dry skin at my elbow. The slight vertigo as my mind made sense of the note, of how it all fit in. My eyes fixed into the thousand-yard stare and it seemed to take an age before I realised that what I was staring at was my first front page. A promo shot of Foster looking angelic with the headline ‘Anna Foster: Fox beat me’ underneath.

He’d beaten me too.

Or rather Vanderbilt had.

‘These things are a circus. Best to lie low over the next few days. Have you got anywhere you can go?’ The editor was still talking.

‘Yea.’

‘Good.’ A paternalistic smile on his lips.

He took an envelope from his desk drawer, the one where he kept all those CV’s and pushed it toward me. I had a good idea what was in it.

‘We know there’ll be a civil case, either from Fox or the poor girl’s boyfriend or both and the paper will settle. It’s going to get expensive.’

He watched me open the envelope and take out the letter addressed to me. It was marked with that day’s date. Rush job.

‘The directors have decided that it might be best for a clean break. It’s a suspension pending an internal investigation but it’s clear that a few a few lines in the sand have been crossed. It’s probably best for all involved if this is the end for you here. We can’t have the actions of one rogue reporter damage the brand. We have to protect the paper.’

Of course they did. That was their job. Damage limitation. Swift punitive action and plausible deniability. Pruning. A head on a newsprint platter, an obituary for one of their own. I wondered whom they’d get to write that story. There’d be plenty of takers, sure-fire page one stuff. I’m sure they wouldn’t be donating the proceeds from my work to the poor girl’s family. No, just throw the journalist under the bus and play lucky dip with a fresh stack of CVs. I looked down at the growing sum of paper
gathering in front of me. ‘There’ll have to be an apology too. One under your name,’ Turner said.

‘Yeah.’

‘We’ll miss you.’

‘Yeah.’

Chapter Fourteen

When I walked out of Turner’s office, the newsroom looked the same. The desks looked the same. The place smelled the same. Rows of people typing, talking into phones, talking to each other, reporting on a world that slipped by them unnoticed. Outside the streetlights had begun flickering into life as the night began. I thumbed around my jacket for my phone. I thought about calling someone. Anyone. Nobody sprung to mind. I put my phone back into my pocket. I slipped through the maelstrom of an approaching deadline. Thought about coffee then thought against it. Thought about screaming. Thought against it. Thought about picking up the computer and hurling it back into Turner’s office via a pane of glass. Thought against it. The ground had started shaking. I felt my knees begin to give. The nausea was slipping back and
my abdominals tensed in preparation. I stared at the ground to make sure it wouldn’t move. My chest felt tight and my head felt as if it was floating free of the Earth. I was falling into the blackness. I found my way to the bathroom and vomited. I lay there cradling the bowl with my eyes closed. I felt concussed. The bathroom continued to spin, bringing up more coffee and a half -digested Egg McMuffin. My shoulders shook between heaves. I lay there, fighting the panic. I lay there until my shoulders were still and my stomach was empty. Some time later I’d found the courage to stand. I stood in front of the bathroom mirror. Water from the sink still ran from the faucet. I splashed it on my face and looked at my reflection. I was older and younger at the same time. Unknown. Uncanny. Unfamiliar. I looked tired. Used up. Dark circles around the eyes, pallid skin. I hadn’t noticed quite how scruffy I’d become. My clothes looked big on me. I’d shrunk down inside them like a tortoise and its shell. I had a powder blue shirt on. It was creased like a glass fracture pattern. I hadn’t spent longer than a few hours at home in the last week. Ironing hadn’t been a priority, neither had eating or sleeping. I had that look. It stared back at me from the mirror. The same look Anna Foster had in the hotel room. Desperation.

The door opened and an intern walked through. He wore jeans, and a white shirt with the sleeves rolled up like Turner. He reminded me of how I’d been maybe just a few months ago. A lifetime ago. The kid took one look at me and walked right into a stool, shutting the stall door behind him. I stared right ahead. Slowly thoughts drifted through my mind. A timetable. A pattern. Fingerprints. Vanderbilt’s fingerprints. Whatever Fox was paying him; he was worth ten times as much. Then, just like that, the pieces started to fall into place. The light bulb went on. Vanderbilt had been two steps ahead of me the whole time. Running damage control. Trying to spin everything just the right way. First there’d been the silence after the first story and Foster’s disappearance to a rehab clinic. Then the press conference after Foster had turned up dead. Although there’d been sympathy for Fox in some circles it hadn’t stopped the questions being asked, did Fox beat Foster? Why was she in rehab? What happened the night she died? All questions that Fox or Vanderbilt had no answers to. And then the receptionist killed herself.

I wondered if he’d smiled when he found out. I saw him in my mind’s eye visiting the girl’s family. Taking tea in the living room. Selling them on Fox and
Foster’s relationship, how they were all victims of a cruel and unfair media frenzy. How they should strike back. Smiling on the inside when the subject of the note she left was raised. I wondered how much it had cost Fox for that note to find its way into the open. There were rules reporting on suicide after all the family would have had to have given permission. That would have cost. He was smarter than me. I’d been chasing Fox’s loose ends and Vanderbilt had gone after mine. He’d beaten me to the punch. He’d seen his chance and had taken it. In one move he’d taken Fox out of the firing line and tossed the media another piece of meat. Gift-wrapped. The nausea had begun creeping back despite my empty stomach. The kid flushed and left the stool.

He walked to the sink next to me and washed his hands. He was out the door seconds later. I didn’t blame him. I had the stink of death on me. I wondered how many people were still outside in the office. I stood there in front of a sink in the office toilets with its tiled floor and its fluorescent lighting, its musky smell of disinfectant and its faded lime green toilet stalls. I stood there staring at a reflection of a man I hardly knew wondering why I couldn’t bring myself to leave. My legs still felt weak from all the vomiting, the knees of my suit trousers wet where I’d dropped to them whilst puking. I felt like a loud fart would blow me over. It made me grip the sink harder. Gradually, like a whisper from the back of my mind, came the realisation. It seeped into my consciousness and made the ground move again. I couldn’t face going back out there. Not because of the shame. It would have taken time but I could have moved past that. No it was more than that. I didn’t want it to end. Not like this. I didn’t want this to be the last time I chased a story. The last time I’d see my name in print. The last time I could make a difference. I thought back to my first day, just a few years ago, when I looked like the kid who’d just ran from the toilets. I remembered meeting Lily for the first time, how her brown hair had looked and how warm she was. Shit, even Turner seemed nice to start with. I remember that day feeling like it was the beginning of something. Something important. Significant. Something good. Then I remembered the day I peered over the shoulder of a middle-aged woman on the bus as she was reading the paper. Curiosity had got the better of me. For the smallest of moments I felt the way I had back then after seeing her reading my first story, a puff piece on a dog walking exercise drive called ‘Bark in the Park’. It was a warm wave of satisfaction that washed away everything else that you felt at the time. Tiredness, frustration, anger, all gone. The reassurance that someone was reading, that you were making a difference, however small. I stared back at my reflection and the feeling
died as quickly as it had come. All of it now it felt so long ago. Flushed away. Wasted. All the things I could have done. Gone just like that. I wondered how it had come to this.

So there I was alone with the strange realisation that, in that bathroom, in that moment, I might be experiencing the final time that I could call myself a proper journalist. Tomorrow I would no longer recognise the face I saw in the mirror. Tomorrow I’d be nothing. Vanderbilt had won. Fox had won. Foster had lost. I’d lost. They would get away with it.

I knew in time the anger would come. I’d get drunk. I’d throw things around the flat. Shout arguments to myself. Rage would descend and feel like it would burst my chest. I’d want to ruin them. I’d fantasise about revenge. See us all burn together. Fox, Vanderbilt, even Turner. They were all complicit. Justice would fall by the wayside. The universe isn’t this moral place based on balance and equality. It’s a cesspit where those with power trample those without; they climb on their shoulders and drown them in shit. The game is just set up that way. There’s no such thing as balance. My hand had begun to shake. The rage didn’t scare me. What scared me was what would come after. The big fucking question mark. Eventually the anger would burn itself out. The molten hate would solidify on my soul and cool. It would be hardened and unrecognisable. One big question mark. I breathed deeply, letting the toilet stink air fill my lungs. My hand’s tremoring began to lessen.


I walked out of the toilets back into the newsroom. I crossed the floor trying to avoid making eye contact. I’d been staring at my reflection for what seemed like forever but at that moment I had no idea the sort of state I looked. I made it to my desk and stared at it. Taking it all in like a tourist. Maybe I should have found Ricky and borrowed his camera. Finally when I was finished I sat back down in the newspaper’s chair, no longer mine, and allowed myself to slump. Nobody came to see me. I was left alone as the newsroom spun around me, the needle point at the centre of a tornado. In moments the tornado would move on and I too would be churned up into its grasp. Spun around and around to land God knows where in God knows how many pieces. This felt like end game. The long cold night had fallen. And then I did nothing. I waited for people to knock off and go home.
I had so few possessions that I didn’t even need a cardboard box, my rucksack did just fine. I took everything that was mine and some stuff that probably wasn’t and when I was done the desk didn’t look much different. I sat in my chair for the last time and looked at Lily’s empty desk chair and the space where her laptop usually was. Things continued to happen around me. The world still turned. People, out of focus shapes, moved from desk to desk. Words were spoken into phones. Papers pushed and keyboards typed. They all moved around me. Too busy with their own careers to notice the smouldering ashes of mine. They were chasing their own stories, making their own deal with the devil. Done with me, Turner had back hold of the diary and was gesticulating wildly to his secretary. He was back to being angry. Jacob from Sport was standing over Tony from Showbiz and pointing at a computer screen. Ricky was milling near the coffee machine in a blue polo shirt and jeans. Jess was typing away, on deadline, stacks of files at her elbow. Lily was gone. I thought about leaving a note, decided against it. I’d probably be seeing her soon. I hoped that I’d be seeing her soon. Then again maybe not.

I was left alone.

Chapter Fifteen

Charlie had cracked a window open. The hot night air carried the sound of the underground into the living room. It was late. Charlie himself still lay on the sofa. My guess was the hangover had faded. He’d listened intently but hadn’t said a word. I struggled to remember the last time he was so quiet. Now the only noise in the room was from the trains on their way into and out of London. Charlie stared at the ceiling, either in thought or in judgement. I couldn’t tell. ‘What was that receptionist’s name again?’ he said calmly, lost in thought. His cup of tea still sat on the coffee table. It hadn’t been touched since I set it down. ‘Kelly Stone.’ I swallowed hard. My throat was dry from talking for so long.

‘How do you feel about her?’
‘I killed her.’ It was true. I had to live with it somehow. Charlie paused, considering the situation.

‘You can’t blame yourself,’ he said after a while.

‘Why not?’

‘Because it wasn’t you. It’s just how you were trained to be. It’s how they made you.’

He still stared at the ceiling, at a crack in the paintwork that spanned from wall to wall, ‘Normal men can do evil deeds and evil men never think that they’re being evil. They think that the ends justify the means. They believe in a greater good. Like you did.’ Charlie smiled to himself as if he’d figured something out.

Did he even believe me?

I didn’t have the patience for riddles. I was exhausted. That night I would go to bed and lie awake and think about the whole thing again. Over and over. Reliving it moment by moment.


…Kelly.

It was easy for Charlie to say it wasn’t my fault. Easy for him to pass blame. I did this. She was dead because of me.

I killed her.

It funny how talking about something can change your perspective. Maybe eight months was just how long it took. Eight months of trying to put it behind me. Eight months to realise that I never will. It had taken me almost a month to tell Charlie. Don’t let them ever tell you that I felt nothing. I wish I did. The shame lasts longer than the anger. Whilst the anger burns itself out the shame whispers to you, keeps you up at night, stops you eating. Keeps you quiet.

I’d stayed in my flat in Edgbaston for almost two weeks straight whilst the Enquirer issued its apology and the other papers monstered me. My quiet suburban street with its trees, its family cars, and its bus stop at the end of the road, had a scrum outside the main entrance to my block for the first twelve days. I’d look out of the
window to my apartment on the fifth floor and make out colleagues I used to know. Half of them had my personal number so I’d switched my phone off once I’d got back from the office. I’d have to get a new SIM card, when I could make it out of the flat. I’d thought about calling mum to warn her but thought against it. She was almost a shut in by that point; the chances of her stumbling upon all this were slim. She didn’t watch the news or read the papers, she didn’t even use a computer and I’d never spoken about her at work. Ironic really. I thought about the possibility of them doorstepping her. It worried me. She’d be frightened and she’d worry. They’d tell her what I’d done. What Vanderbilt and Fox said I had done. It could kill her. That wasn’t going to happen. I hoped it that it wouldn’t happen.

On the first day I woke up about mid-morning, I didn’t wear a wristwatch and the only clock in the flat was in the kitchen attached to the oven. I hadn’t even set it properly since I’d moved in. I kicked a mostly empty bottle of vodka I’d bought on the way home as I got up. It rolled around the bedroom floor and came to rest under the bed. I showered, dressed, toasted a bagel and smothered it with Philadelphia. As I ate I heard something being pushed under the door. No prizes for what it was. It was all part of the game. A hack would blag their way into a building and post a copy of that day’s paper, complete with their phone number written on the front page, through a letterbox or under a door. An attempt to bait me into issuing a statement. The paper, a copy of The Sun with the same front page I’d seen the day before, went straight in the bin. I didn’t recognise the phone number. I made a cup of tea and sat by the window. Beyond the gaggle of reporters the world still went about its business. Cars drove the streets. Planes flew over toward the airport. Pedestrians paused on their way to rubberneck at the group of reporters and photographers and wonder just who they were there for. By the afternoon there were two dozen of them waiting around, smoking cigarettes and talking on phones. Most of the time that’s all the day, milling around and waiting, until someone came out of my building and were engulfed in a flurry of questions and camera flashes. I felt bad for them. They had nothing to do with this. It would be a novelty the first time but would quickly turn ugly. They’d end up resenting me. None of them knew me. I’d moved there straight from university when I first started at the paper and never once had said more than a few words of acknowledgement to anyone I passed in the hallway or on the stairs. It’s just not something we do anymore. Neighbours aren’t really neighbours anymore. By mid-
afternoon the sun had begun to set and the sky had a pink and orange glow about it. I’d had just about the presence of mind to buy a handful of ready meals the night before and the remains of a chicken Korma now sat by the sink. The guys below were hungry too. It felt about feeding time. I reached for the handle to the window. It was one of those big single sheets of glass with a handle that if you twisted one way would only let the window open a crack and if you twisted it the other would slide along like a patio door. I breathed deep and twisted the handle. The door slid across with little effort. I often left the window open overnight during the summer. I could listen to the sounds of the city in the distance from my room, like I did when I was a kid. It felt good to be a part of something, to be so close to life. I leaned out of the window and felt the cold breeze against my face. Look out one way and you see the tall buildings of the city, the other way you can see Edgbaston cricket ground, in hibernation for the winter. Those below hadn’t noticed me yet. I wondered how it all must look to an observer. I thought I recognised a few. Gareth Morris was down there and was sure I could see Ricky, his camera draped around his neck. No Lily though. Maybe she’d refused. I took a few deep breaths of the frigid January air and yelled down at the scrum, ‘you guys can stay out there all you want. I’ve got tea, hot food, a bed and a place to shit up here. I’m in paradise!’ I got a thousand shouted replies and cameras aimed skywards, little pinpricks of light as each long lens zeroed in on me. I counted to ten in my head and then closed the window.

_That’ll do them for now._

I felt confident that at least now they’d stay focused on the flat and not reach out to any relatives. They knew I wasn’t going anywhere. That’s the way it went for the first few days. Periodically I’d stick my head back out of the window, not answering questions, but bantering with those I knew in a former life. I even risked turning my phone on. I scrolled through the missed calls for any calls from home. There were none. Nothing from Lily either. I didn’t know how to feel about that. I ignored the voicemails and the text messages, far too many to count and the handset vibrated for a full five minutes straight with incoming alerts. It felt possessed. By the fourth day I felt the change in me. I forced myself to interact with the guys still on the street. They disgusted me though. They left rubbish on the street, bags of MacDonalds and cigarette butts. They continued to hound everyone who entered or left the building: _had they seen me? What was my state of mind? Had I said anything?_ The
usual shit. Just another thing to feel guilty about. The bin was filled with papers so I’d given up collecting them. The hallway by the door looked like I was house training a puppy. I didn’t read them, even I’m not that masochistic, but the pictures stayed with me. Holiday snaps of Kelly, flattering glamour shots of Foster and Fox, and finally a front page split in two with nearly identical long lens shots of a hearse flanked by mourners dressed in black. Foster and Stone’s funerals artistically arranged. I felt sick to my stomach. I wondered around the flat wondering if it was now a prison cell or a fallout shelter. One kept those inside safe from whatever was outside; the other kept those outside safe from those inside. I decided it was both. By day six it felt like I’d watched every DVD I owned twice, completed every game I owned on the Playstation and watching everything I could find on the iPlayer. I avoided watching the television itself for obvious reasons. I was almost out of food and toilet roll. That night I turned my phone back on and scrolled through my contacts looking for someone to reach out to. Once I’d taken out all of the other journalists I had half a dozen names, only three of which I’d seen in the past six months. I wondered how my life had been condensed into such a neat package. I’d leveraged more than I knew by chasing the dream; nobody was getting out of this without losing something. I was a sociable guy and I had a knack for getting people to talk to me but since university my friendship circle had changed and old friends had drifted away without me realising it. That was probably my fault, long hours and all that. University friends replaced with work friends and that was how I’d ended up with a phone full of contacts and hardly anybody to call. But there were still a couple. I first tried a friend called James, who I’d been to university with and lived with in first year. I asked if they wouldn’t mind dropping some supplies over. I switched the phone back off and took another tour of the flat. After two hours I switched the phone back on. No reply. I moved onto the second choice. I texted another, and then another. I was on my own. That night was the first time I’d understood what I’d lost. It was so much more than a job. It was a way of life. My whole life in fact. I sat there in the dark and finished the bottle of vodka. Then I thought about Lily and wondered what she was doing. If she was at the office. I picked up my phone and found her amongst my contacts. I didn’t dial though. I sat there on a rented sofa in a rented flat and wondered if any of it couldn’t be taken away. I went to bed hungry.
When I woke up I had a text from James already waiting. He was happy to help and asked for a shopping list. I told him to come to the flat late, that way he’d have the best chance of making it to the door without being accosted and that I owed him one. I sent it and switched the phone back off. My mood hadn’t improved and I didn’t even bother to make an appearance at the window that day. I was out of toilet roll. I contemplated leaving the flat and knocking on a neighbour’s door but they’d all be at work, besides I was fairly sure they all hated me now and would tell me to fuck off. I spent the day watching endless reruns of *Top Gear* on Dave. The Internet seemed like too much of a risk to my mental health, same for Facebook and Twitter. Late that night I had a knock at the door. James had come through and handed me two bags of essentials. I hugged him and invited him in. Whilst I’d studied English James had got a ‘useful’ degree in mechanical engineering; and never let me forget it. He’d graduated and began working for JCB just as I finished off my masters degree in Journalism. He’d moved into a two-bed place and had offered me a room when I told him that I was moving back to Birmingham to work at the *Enquirer*. He’d met a girl called Sophie though and things moved pretty quickly. They’d married the previous summer. I’d missed the wedding. Work had come first. I regretted it then and regretted it even more sitting with him in my living room eating a sandwich that Sophie had made. It was only now, in the company of another actual human being, that I realised how disgusting the place must have looked. I had run out of ready meals on day four so pizza boxes had become stacked like a giant game of *Jenga* next to the bin. There were dirty plates in the sink, and the whole place looked like it could do with a good Hoover. It felt weird to actually care. James being James he didn’t pull any punches. He told me the place smelt like my room in halls and that if I was going to be stuck here a while I might as well do some early spring cleaning. I smiled and reminded him why our communal fridge stunk of rotten milk back in halls. For a second it felt like we were undergrads again, before the world got a hold of us. We talked about friends from uni, his work, how married life was treating him. Safe topics. We ignored the elephant in the room. ‘Why did you go into engineering?’ I was running out of things to say, ‘I mean was it something you always wanted to do?’ James laughed, ‘Christ no! It’s just a job. I mean it pays well and I like doing it and I like designing things. But it’s just a job. I needed a career and that was the best I could go for. No brainer really. Why are you a journalist?’
‘I’m not a journalist anymore.’

That was the closest we ever came to talking about why I hadn’t left the flat in ten days and why my name was plastered over every red top and rolling news channel for the past week. I didn’t have control of the narrative. Who knew what was being said about me, or who was saying it. James had obviously kept an eye on the story and would probably have told me if I’d asked but I couldn’t. It wouldn’t do any good. Anyone that believed Vanderbilt and Fox’s version of events was gone. It had got late by the time James got up to leave. I saw him to the door. He stood on the threshold and looked back at me, ‘I know I don’t need to tell you this mate but it’s all bullshit. We never believe a word we read anyway.’ He gave me a smile and slapped me on the back. Then he left. I shut the door. When James had gone I went back to the window and watched him leave the building. He’d taken five steps when a man got out of a car and approached him. I heard James swear at the hack, tell him to fuck off, tell him he was scum and should crawl back under the rock he came out from. I heard him call the reporter all the things I’d been called myself by that Taxi driver in Newport and others besides. I knew it was all just water off a duck’s back to the journalist, just part of the territory that you took because of the greater good.

The greater good. That used to mean something. I hated them all.

On day eight I noticed some of the reporters had gone. The latest news cycle had kicked in and was moving on without me. By day nine only one or two remained and I thought it was almost over. On day eleven though they were back in full force, apparently Fox had made a statement, wondering aloud why I wasn’t facing prosecution. A barefaced effort to keep the story in the news, to keep the public’s sympathy in his corner and their hatred directed toward mine. It took another two days before the last of them had finally left but by then I was ready. I’d had enough time to plan. I’d written a letter to the landlord and had packed up my things into whatever I could find. When I woke up on day fourteen and looked outside, the street looked the same as it did before all of this happened. It looked exactly as it should for early February. The rain came down and I made my move. Half an hour later a rented van was outside and an hour later I was on the M6 on the way back home. Running away or looking for a fresh start. Same difference. I’d realised something. What had happened was more than losing a job, more than losing friends. I’d been betrayed by
my whole way of life. The plan had been to wait until the heat died down and then quietly start looking for a job. A chance to start again. I waited two months before discreetly making some calls. Looking for freelance commissions. Small things to help me rebuild my reputation. No dice. It was only months later than I found out that Vanderbilt had called every editor in the industry and had me blackballed. Evidently, I’d pissed him off. There was zero chance of me ever working in newspapers again. Not unless Vanderbilt disappeared. And that wasn’t about to happen anytime soon. By all accounts the bastard loved his job. And why wouldn’t he? Covering up for murdering celebrities and wielding absolute influence over the fourth estate. God isn’t that powerful. So I was on the outside. Disillusioned and played out, aged 25. Unsuitable for even a job flipping books or burgers (my application to McDonalds hadn’t panned out either). There were days when I wondered if I still existed. Not in the existential way, in the relevance sort of way. I’m not a religious man but I did wonder if any good I’d done outweighed the bad I knew I had. I had red in my ledger. How can you be a trained parasite and not? The last eight months had taught me that I deserved to be on the outside. Ostracised. Hidden away like a dirty little secret. Catharsis was overdue. They say talking heals. I’m not so sure.

Charlie stared at the ceiling and spoke to it, ‘so this Vanderbilt guy he lives in London yeah?’ Thought written large across his features. His eyes scanning the ceiling’s cracks, reading them like runes. He stared at nothing and pondered everything. It must have been at least a full minute before he spoke again.

‘I’ve got just the job for you if you want it.’

Chapter Sixteen

After Coco and I had our dance we took our seats back at the bar. That familiar awkward feeling. Neither completely sure what to do. Two glasses, my round, stood empty in front of us. Blue aftershock this time. It burned just the same as before whilst tasting vaguely of blueberries. How accurate the taste was I don’t know. I don’t think I’ve ever actually eaten a blueberry. The bouncer had given me a look as we left the room. Puzzled or knowing, I couldn’t tell. The room was still very nearly empty. Coco’s idea again to get another drink. Idling away the minutes before rush hour. Slowly she reached for my hand. She wrapped hers inside mine. She looked at
me and said, ‘I’ll be right back. Don’t go anywhere.’ I sat at the bar not thinking about anything. Coco had a knack for melting problems away. I wondered if I would ever see her in the sunlight. If she’d look the same. Or worse. Or better. I hoped better. But then we’d have to really get to know each other, or at least get to know another version of ourselves. She’d cease to be the Coco I knew and become something entirely different, more real than the fantasy yet more alien at the same time. She probably didn’t go by Coco outside these walls either, Shelley perhaps? She looked like a Shelley.

‘I thought I’d find you here.’

Charlie’s voice. I didn’t know whether to feel surprised or embarrassed. He sat down on the stool that Coco had occupied. ‘Oi mate, 2 bottles of whatever beer you’ve got over here, cheers!’ He shouted at the barman who swiftly obliged. Then he turned to me, ‘given any further thought to what we discussed the other night?’

‘I already said no.’

‘No you didn’t. You said you’d think about it. You’re tempted.’

I was. Something had snapped in me. I had a new perspective. Charlie’s perspective.

‘You don’t give up do you?’

I looked round for Coco. She was in the corner by the door in conversation with the big bouncer who often worked afternoons. I think his name was Andy.

‘Not when I think it’s the right thing to do. We’ve done it before,’ Charlie said.

‘Yeah and look how that turned out. I still have dreams about there sometimes.’

Charlie said nothing: recollections are painful sometimes. We were both kids. I’d never told anybody what happened. I was sure Charlie hadn’t either. It was our secret. I’d resolved to take it to my grave and lived with it every day since.

‘Me too.’

He looked at me and made the sign of the cross, balling his right hand and touching his forehead then stomach before both shoulders. It made me smile how someone so Marxist could still put stock in religion. He wasn’t quite Karl Marx after all. Charlie
was full of contradictions, maybe as much out of habit as anything else. It’s why I’d always liked him I guess.

‘You know I didn’t always do this,’ he said changing the subject slightly.

I didn’t.

‘I went to college, got myself a few BTECs, and then I found a job in a lift repair firm. Easy work, okay money, room to climb the ladder in time.’

‘And what happened?’

‘I woke up. We’re such a frustrated generation. I started to wonder what would happen if the older generations stopped seeking to subjugate us.’

‘Subjugate us? Jesus.’

‘Think about it. Want to buy a house? Too expensive but you can pay the baby boomers exorbitant rents for a shitty bedsit. Want a better job? Too bad the older guy who’s barely competent got there first, because experience is way more valuable than ability. Tuition fees, the benefits system, career prospects, the recession, on and on the boomers take, take, take and we just bend over and let them fist us. Most of us don’t know how screwed we really are. We’re a generation of hard working, talented, progressive, and brilliant minds held back by fears of those who we would and should replace. The whole cycle has got stuck and we’re being left to rot.’

It didn’t take much for me to start seeing what Charlie meant in my own experience. The older hack that could barely make deadlines being kept on because he was part of the furniture whilst dozens of graduates better than he ever was begged for unpaid internships. I’d been there. That old hack was still there. Part of the furniture. A deck chair on the Titanic. ‘We don’t live in a meritocracy,’ Charlie wasn’t finished, ‘those in power have a vested interest in the status quo, for themselves, and their children and their children’s children. Not us basically. Those who hold power never willingly give it up. It has to be taken and redistributed. There’s no chance of that whilst we’re all so disorganised and scattered. So I thought to myself. I can either wait for all of us to wake up and mobilise, or I can do it for myself.’ Finished, he drained what remained of his pint. It did make sense, albeit in a Charlie sort of way.
‘And you decided to fight the system by going out on the rob?’

‘Property is theft,’ he said smiling at his own joke, ‘I decided to ignore rules that don’t benefit me. Just like you did.’ He pushed the pint glass away from him, satisfied with his work.

‘Don’t start.’ He was really going to work on me.

‘It’s all the same. You are who you are underneath it all.’

What about people?’

‘What about them? I never take anything that’s vital to their existence. If they attach value to physical objects then that’s their look out. They shouldn’t be so materialistic.’

He smiled at me, sensing the subtle shift going on inside me.

‘We never take anything that matters. Yes?’ He said.

Coco, done talking to Andy the bouncer, reappeared at my shoulder.

‘Oh hi, nice to meet you. I’m Coco.’ She faced Charlie and her arm arched down my lower back, her hand resting on my hip.

‘I’m Justin. How are you?’ Charlie lied.

I nodded, draining my bottle. I wasn’t surprised Charlie didn’t want his real name bandied about.

‘So how do you two know each other then?’ Asked Coco, not a hint of the West Country in her voice.

‘We went to school together, me and ‘im. Yeah, known each other donkey’s years.’

Introductions over I found myself in the middle of a standoff. The three of us there in silence. Charlie grinning at Coco. Coco wearing a fake smile topped off with anger in her eyes. Both waiting for me to choose. I looked at the bar, at the moisture circles that formed at the base of Charlie’s and my bottles. How the droplets had slipped down the sides of the glass and onto the black bar. It made me wonder what it would
be like to not be sentient. To just exist. ‘I’ll be five minutes.’ I tried to sound reassuring and hiding my own annoyance at the situation.

‘Nice ta meet ya darling.’ Charlie had a sneer in his smile.

I like to think that she looked upset but that might just be my own ego talking. Even if she was disappointed it could just as easily been frustration at losing an easy couple of quid from a pathetic client. ‘I’ll leave you two to it then,’ she said as she sauntered off. Her arse swaying to the music. I noticed. So did Charlie. I fought the urge to hit him. Swallowed it. Made me feel slightly less spineless. ‘Your cockney needs work.’ I said finishing my pint. Charlie ordered two more. ‘She’s got her claws into you all right,’ he said landing a pint glass on the bar in front of me.

‘Her name’s Coco.’ I tried not to sound too defensive.

‘Mate I bet that isn’t even her real hair let alone her real name.’

‘Whatever, Justin.’

Having said his piece and finished his second drink Charlie left me to it. He said he had somewhere to be. I knew Vanderbilt’s office was about a ten-minute walk across town where we were, I wondered if Charlie knew that too. I’d just about finished my own when Coco tapped me on the shoulder, ‘has your friend gone already? Cheapskate didn’t even buy a dance.’

‘He was here for me. Business proposal, of sorts,’ I said, finishing off my drink.

‘Oh so you do work. I was beginning to wonder.’ She winked at me. I smiled back.

‘I’ve been wondering what it is that you do,’ She began, taking the seat Charlie had sat in. Today she was wearing a white Basque with garters and looked incredible. ‘I’ve got it narrowed down to a banker or PR,’ She smiled in the way she often did when she wanted to get me to pay for another dance, ‘am I close?’

*PR? Christ.* ‘No I don’t work in PR, I used to be a journalist though, with *The Enquirer* up in Birmingham.’ The ‘used to’ didn’t feel quite so foreign all of a sudden. Like the pain had dulled slightly. ‘I don’t buy newspapers that often. What
sort of thing did you write about?’ Her elbow was on the bar and her head rested against her hand so that it was on a tilt. Her hair falling over one shoulder. She looked perfect.

‘All sorts really, human interest stuff, public interest stuff and stuff that wasn’t.’

‘Ah okay must have been fun,’ she said, so did you ever do like kiss-and-tell stories?’

Something in her voice put me on edge.

‘Sometimes,’ I said.

‘So how does it work? Would girls just ring you guys up and give you the story?’

‘Sometimes,’ I said.

‘Touchy subject?’ There was concern in her voice. Two worlds colliding once today was enough, twice was pushing it.

‘It’s fine. It’s just not what anyone gets into the job for. Hurts a lot of people and you feel like shit for doing it afterwards. Part of the reason I stopped.’

‘Ah I see. Isn’t that just part of it though, the guilt?’

‘Not always, probably not for most hacks but it stays with you if you aren’t cold, what’s the interest?’

‘I don’t know,’ said Coco, ‘I like thinking about what you do outside of here, makes you more of a person to me.’

She was always so damn hard to read.

‘I like to think that most of the time the girl that sold the story regrets it,’ I said.
‘Why?’ Said Coco, way more interested than I wished that she were.

‘If they’re smart they go to a publicist first who will sell the story to the papers on their behalf or even sell your signature on a non-disclosure form to the person you’re ratting on.’ If she was going to do this then she needed to know what could happen. ‘If you do end up selling the story to a paper there’s no guarantee that you wont have the world’s biggest spotlight shone on you and then who knows what happens, you get chewed up just as much as anyone else and all for ten grand or less.’

‘Lucky for me then that I’ve got someone looking out for me.’ She put her hand on my arm, touching was become a habit of hers.

‘You do alright here though right?’

‘Oh yes, I probably earn more than you do.’

‘I bet that you do.’

‘Next round is on me.’

The barman had disappeared so Coco let herself behind the bar and brought back the entire bottle of Aftershock and two shot glasses. She put them down on the bar in front of us and poured two shots. I could see through the reflection that we pretty much had the place entirely to ourselves; the DJ had somewhere else to be and Dave had made his way back outside. Only the man with dreadlocks who guarded the private room was still around and even he was sat playing with his phone. ‘One more question’, she asked after drinking her shot and refilling the glass. ‘Do you miss it?’
Chapter Seventeen

First I had to get through Charlie’s apprenticeship. Apparently pulling a job is like any other skill, be it shorthand, making cocktails, or burglary: it takes training to be proficient. Charlie already had a target. He’d found a house in Tooting that belonged to an accountant and was putting a plan together. He wanted me to come along and watch. I think on some level Charlie wanted me to see the thought and preparation he put in to his chosen occupation. I think he wanted to show off. It really was like an apprenticeship really, or work experience. Shadow and learn. Pick up the skills, start to see the world the way a professional does. I think he got a kick out of me asking
questions. I think it legitimised him somehow. I asked him how he’d picked out this particular guy. He told me he didn’t pick people; he picked houses. The people, he said, were just incidental details. Charlie thought about the property rather than the person who lived there. That made sense, to depersonalise. The people didn’t factor into his business plan. So it was all about the house. What attracted Charlie to this particular house I would find out later when he took me to scout the place out. It was a very ordinary looking Victorian end of terrace place with a small front garden paved over with a small tree in the corner. The house’s brickwork had faded and browned as the years had slipped by. It had a large bay window painted brilliant white that matched the plastic front door and took away from the almost gothic impression the rest of the house gave. On the first floor were two windows with curtains drawn, indicating the house had three bedrooms. A satellite dish protruded from the side of the house, pointed up towards the heavens. I’d never been house hunting before. Hardly anyone our age had. Blame the recession, or blame the older generations as Charlie did. Either way this was a new experience. Why this house in particular?

Charlie motioned to the side of the house where there was a decrepit wooden red door that looked half rotten. Beyond it Charlie told me was the back garden that had two large evergreen trees that stopped the house being overlooked by its neighbours. It was this privacy that first attracted Charlie. The most dangerous part of the job was the break in. If a neighbour or passerby saw you they could phone the police and you’d be none the wiser. You’d be arrested in the house and that would be that. Anything to help reduce the risk was more than welcome as far as Charlie was concerned. The next step was to observe the house for a few days and those who lived there. Information is power and the more the better: did a family live there or a singleton? Male or female? Did they have any pets? Were they always out of the house at a certain time? The list was exhaustive. The final part of selecting a target was to follow the inhabitants to their workplace. From there you could form an educated guess as to their earning potential and therefore what kind of haul you could expect when you finally went in.

Then and only then did we decide to go in.

I wouldn’t be going in. That was part of the deal. My job was strictly to observe whilst Charlie did the heavy lifting. We picked a Wednesday morning to do it. At a quarter past ten I found myself walking past the house in Tooting that
belonged to an accountant I’d never met and bore no ill will against, checking to see that his car was gone from the parking spot outside the property that it usually occupied. He lived alone, we’d discovered, and worked in a depressing industrial estate near Croydon. On Tuesday evenings he would go out for a run around the neighbourhood but most evenings he’d come home, have dinner and spend the rest of the night in front of the television or working. The bedroom light would go out around eleven and he’d be out the door again by half seven the following morning. That was the life of Mr. Benjamin Jenkins, but it could just as easily have been the life of anybody else. So unremarkable and mundane. Compartmentalized and frittered away for someone else’s’ benefit. Charlie’s words in my head. As I walked past the house I checked for signs of the neighbours. No old ladies chatting, no one trimming hedges or talking to the postman, no young mothers walking push chairs. Roughly two thirds of the cars that were parked on the street the night before had vanished. The street was the perfect Suburban wilderness save for a lone figure who’d just turned into the street. He wore a hoody and dark jeans and an empty backpack was slung over one shoulder. Completely non-descript. I walked past him and nodded. Charlie nodded back.

It was on.

I carried on walking up the street until I got to the end. There I waited. Watching. My phone in my hand. At the first sign of trouble I’d drop call Charlie and disappear. I remembered Charlie’s words of advice, ‘Always stay calm, always walk, don’t slouch to try and hide your face, just put your hood up and tell yourself you’re off down the newsagent for a paper and a packet of fags.’ An alarm sounded. Charlie had tripped it. Days ago I’d have ran then and there like the frightened teenager I’d been before. Charlie told me that ninety percent of burglar alarms are triggered accidentally: power cuts, pets, people just programming them wrong, you name it. When people hear an alarm today they don’t come rushing to investigate, they mutter under their breath about the annoyance and go about their day. They’re the perfect illusion of safety. So I stayed. I watched and nobody came to investigate. No sirens off in the distance creeping closer and closer. Just the sound of an alarm that nobody would answer. Charlie was a genius. I wondered what he was doing in there. Why it was taking so long. Five minutes had passed since I’d seen him disappear behind that old door at the side of the house. The adrenaline was pumping now. Time had slowed
to a crawl and my muscles felt tight and coiled. I leaned against the front wall of a house and waited. The alarm continued to sound. Seconds ticked by. Charlie was right about one thing. This was nothing like before. Nothing like Hulse Avenue. That, at least, was a relief. And then Charlie appeared again at the side entrance. He pushed the door to and walked down the path that led to the street. He strolled along the pavement towards me. This time with a full backpack. When he got to me we walked together but didn’t speak. Charlie handed me the backpack as he took off his hoody and put it in the bag. Then we walked as far from the house as possible towards our destination. The din of the alarm faded into the humdrum of urban white noise. We walked for about fifteen minutes in near silence. Every second I almost expected to come face to face with a pair of coppers with handcuffs. But none appeared. No helicopters circling overhead. No evidence of anything other than a normal Wednesday morning. Still we walked. Through an estate, then past the underground station until we reached Wandle Park. The perfect place to take stock and wait. Multiple exits and no chance of being snuck up on as all entrants had to walk through open ground to where we sat. As we walked through the gates I felt myself begin to relax. The day was just starting to become warm and the sun shone brightly way above our heads. We made for a line of trees that ringed a sailing lake. We got there and sat down. Charlie walked over to a nearby bush and fished out a second backpack with two spare sets of clothes. We sat down after we’d changed. ‘Here.’ Charlie handed me a joint, ‘Our victory cigar.’ We’d gotten away with it.

The nagging pain like a stone in your shoe had now disappeared. That feeling of wasting time, wasting potential, had gone. I was steam, hot and full of energy, bursting through a cracked pipe. Unable to be constrained, forcing my way violently toward freedom. Bending steel to my will. I filled whatever space I could. Owning it. It was mine. It wasn’t just the money. It wasn’t just the anger at the system that fell away when it was needed most. It was the thrill of it all. The thrill I found in Coco’s eyes when I first started to see her but more so. The thrill of landing a story from under someone else’s nose but still more. Now the thrill, that fire breathing ecstasy, was there constantly like armour against all that had gone before. It fed on taking everything I could, on seeing how far I could push life before it pushed back. I watched Charlie expertly pick his way through the back pack’s contents, working out
what could be sold on eBay, what would need to go to a pawn breaker or be collateral for a loan that would never be repaid. I could see his eyes guestimating the value in his hands. For the first time in months I was no longer bored. I was taking the mundane iLife outside and kicking its law-abiding, turtleneck wearing, service-plan-requiring head in. As morning became afternoon we lay in the grass stoned. Planes flew overhead, their white vapour trails criss-crossing in the sky. ‘I think we’re ready to go after him, Vanderbilt. I think you’re ready,’ Charlie said, almost to himself.

He passed me the joint. I took a drag and watched the wisps of smoke climb and disappear above our heads. ‘I almost want him to know it was us,’ I said.

‘Not the best way to operate really now is it?’

He had a point.

There we sat for I don’t know how, long chain-smoking weed and thinking about what was to come. Poor Benjamin Jenkins was firmly in the past now, though periodically Charlie fiddled with the haul, a laptop, an iPad, A sat nav, and other assorted electronics. There was also an expensive looking watch that bore no inscription which Charlie had bagged. He said if the watch had been inscribed he’d have left it as it might have had sentimental value. It would also have been easier to trace so I didn’t give him too much credit. We’d planned to head home during rush hour. To melt into the crowd. I was starting to get the munchies when Charlie sat up, looked straight at me as if to confirm I still existed, and then said, ‘You know I couldn’t sleep the other night so I got up and Fight Club was on Film4 so I watched it through till three’. He blew smoke so thick from his mouth and it filled the air between us, almost obscuring him. It made my eyes water. ‘You know that scene where Brad Pitt is explaining what Fight Club is to everybody, I mean what it really stands for, and he says that they’ve all been raised on television to believe that one day they’d be rock stars or movie gods but they won’t be and they’re all pissed off?’ I nodded. It was a good film. Helena Bonham Carter was fit in a way that was both posh and filthy. ‘Well exactly when he says that line he’s standing in front of Jared Leto who was the lead singer for 30 Seconds To Mars. So you’ve got this big speech about how we’re all pissed off because we aren’t Rock stars or Movie gods and it’s being said by Brad Pitt and Jared Leto is in the same fucking shot with him!’
‘I think they call that a meta-joke, mate,’ I said, trying to wrap my tongue around words that were familiar that morning but now seemed strange and difficult to pronounce. ‘It’s like the director is making an in-joke and you have to be a serious film freak to get it.’ Either Charlie was too stoned to hear me or on too much of a roll to derail himself from his chosen path.

‘It’s so hypocritical you know? I mean here’s a character that says no to being perfect, no to buying decent clothes and working out. Yet he’s played by Brad-fucking-Pitt who walks around in an expensive leather jacket and perfect hair all the time and is ripped to fuck! It would have been more accurate if Tyler Durden had been played by someone fugly and pissed off at the world. Tyler Durden should have been played by Mickey Rourke or someone.’

He started laughing then. A big throw your head back and go for broke laugh that filled the room better than the smoke ever could. It was infectious. We might have laughed all night we didn’t care. We laughed like free men. Properly free. Running like gazelles on the plains of life. Just out of reach of the lion and cheetah’s claws. Enjoying that fact and living because of and for it. Over and over again the laughing would die down and we’d go quiet for a minute. Then a little giggle and we’d be off again. It must have been hours before the laughing finally stopped and didn’t restart. We lay there on the ground in a blissful stupor. The ground oddly comfortable. After a while Charlie spoke, ‘Tyler Durden is a fucking hypocrite. Fuck it. I want to look how I want to look and I want to look cool. Tomorrow we’re going to buy leather jackets.’

And we did.

I am Jack’s woefully underused sense of style.
Chapter Eighteen

First things first. The phone beeped as it made the connection. As the ringing tone began I imagined the character. Thought about how he’d sound. Calm. Relaxed. Maybe a bit cockney. It all felt calmly familiar. ‘Hello, Vanderbilt and Associates. Amy speaking. How may I direct your call?’ She had a prim and proper voice. Not at all like Kelly’s. If it had been I’d have bottled it entirely.

‘Allo there, my name’s Frank. I’m from UPS. Is there any chance I can speak to a Mr. Vanderbilt?’
‘No Mr. Vanderbilt is unavailable at the moment. Can I take a message?’

It hadn’t taken me long to come up with the plan, I enjoyed it actually. It was like a thought experiment. It filled the day and made me feel like I was contributing. I wasn’t doing much else. Even jobs to apply for had become scarce lately. ‘Well basically I’m outside Mr. Vanderbilt’s house with a delivery for him. Says here that someone would be home but there doesn’t seem to be anyone about. I thought before I head onto the next one I’d ring the contact number on the sheet and double check. Maybe the Mrs has gone to have her hair done or something?’

‘Oh I see, well I’m afraid he’s out at the moment. I can get him to give you a call when he gets back?’

‘Ah I think it’ll be too late by then. This is my last drop out this way and I’ve got a truck full of other deliveries. We don’t usually get much out this way so I don’t know when I can be back here to try again. Might not be for weeks the way things are going, very busy elsewhere.’

‘Oh right well I am sorry there isn’t more I can do for you. I suppose you can’t leave it with one of the neighbours?’

‘Fraid not. It’s a biggun’ this one. Electrical by the looks of it and I’m not allowed to leave stuff anyway. Company’s liable you see, if it gets lost, so it all has to go back on the truck if I can’t deliver it.’

I waited a few seconds before playing my card, ‘tell you what. Whilst I got you on can I quickly double check the address? Sometimes there’s a mix up at the depot.’

‘Yes I think that’ll be fine. Hold the line whilst I have a quick check.’

Before I could lose my nerve there was a click and a brief void of sound like she’d cut me off. Then a strange tune faded in over the silence. Jingle music, the stuff that belongs in a lift or a supermarket. The same humourless chorus interrupted on occasion by the merciful sound of static on the line. The seconds ticked by. The adrenaline made my hand shake. The phone plastic shell vibrated against the side of my head. Finally the soulless tune, the static, and the rattling ceased with a click and
the sounds of a busy office closely followed by the voice of Mr. Vanderbilt’s secretary, ‘sorry it took me a little while to find. The address we have here is 35 Green Hill. Does that much what you have?’

‘One second I’ll check.’

I scribbled frantically onto the pad I’d left on the table, the writing barely legible but legible enough. Relief loosened the knots in my intestines that made my stomach juices fight back up my throat, the address sounded common enough. I prepared for the next step without missing a beat, ‘erm yes, that’s what I’ve got here. What postcode?’

‘Let me see. N5 3JU.’

More rushed scribbling then a sharp intake of breath ready for the coup de grace, ‘oh for god’s sake! It says here N4! They’ve bloody sent me to the wrong place entirely. Typical wild flaming goose chase. I dunno why they employ these idiots, I really don’t. Can’t even get a postcode right. Anyway thanks for your help but it looks like I’ll just have to bring this lot back anyway. I’ll get the muppet at the depot that cocked up to ring Mr. Vanderbilt to rearrange delivery another time. I’m sure he’d like the chance to speak to him. I know I would.’

I’d like to thank the academy…

‘Oh hard luck. Sorry about that. Well, goodbye now.’ Suddenly she sounded busy.

The line went dead half way through me saying, ‘Bye and thanks, you’ve been really helpful,’ which was a shame really. It was the only sincere thing I’d ever say to her. Charlie was pleased.

The next step was to scout the place out so that afternoon Charlie and I took the underground out to Finchley. About fifteen minutes walk from the station the houses that lined the main road began to grow and be set back further and further from the road. The sun was shining and the road, despite being a main artery through Finchley, had a mid-afternoon lull and only occasionally was the bird song interrupted by engine exhaust, and the sun had the chance to dance on a car bonnet or the front of
a red double-decker bus bound for central London. I always loved the summer, the way it made everything seem just that little bit more relaxed and peaceful. I felt the warmth on my forearms and breathed deeply. You couldn’t see 35 Green Hill Avenue from the street. You could only make out a large expansive angular roof with four dormer windows, two in the centre and one at either end, which ran for almost the entire length of a twelve-foot high red brick wall that separated the property from the street. Vanderbilt valued his privacy. At the far right of the wall was an electric gate made of wrought iron that opened sideways and was wide enough to accommodate both his Audi estate and the Land Rover his wife used to ferry their two kids to and from school. I took out my phone and started taking photographs through the green bars of the gate. Beyond the gate was around thirty metres of gravel driveway that cut its way straight through a lush garden of emerald green grass, dark green shrubbery, and brown tree trunks that sprung from flowerbeds at the perimeter of the wall. Towards the house the driveway opened out splashed against the red brick of the house itself. It being early afternoon his silver Audi estate was parked in an underground car park opposite his office, thirty-three minutes from his home according to Google maps, forty-five plus in rush hour. His wife Susan’s black Land Rover stood guard beside steps that led to an archway that had two front doors painted dark grey between two granite pillars. It looked like a homage to Greek or Roman architecture, I couldn’t tell which. Beside each front door was some greenery in a big stone pot that matched the pillars. The house itself was designed to look Georgian. It stood alone amongst the trees and the flowerbeds in bloom and had three storeys. Two tall windows flanked the front door on each side and there were six windows arranged into pairs on the first floor. Each window was set into wooden frames that matched the colour of the stone pillars. It had square foundations and was almost a perfect cube of bricks and mortar. It was a grand house for sure. An expensive and modern house. A house worthy of the man that owned it for more reasons than maybe he had anticipated. In many ways the strangest thing about it was the complete juxtaposition between it and its smaller, more conservative neighbours. It looked imposing and expensive, detached and cold. I zoomed in on my phone and grabbed a shot of the Land Rover’s license plate. Then we moved on, scouting the neighbours, counting cars parked in driveways, pedestrians passing us on the street. Information is power.
That night we sat in my living room and Charlie assigned us both jobs. Vanderbilt’s house was obviously modern and would have needed planning permission so Charlie would track down the plans. I had little doubt he’d find them. Charlie was proving himself resourceful beyond expectations. I think he wanted to get into that house more than I did. In fact I was sure of it. My job was to trail Vanderbilt’s wife Susan who, we concluded after exhaustive research on social media, was a housewife. This made her movements key. Vanderbilt worked long hours at his office near Leicester Square. He’d be nowhere near the house when we broke in. But she might be unless we knew exactly where she’d be. So I’d observe and note down her comings and goings, looking for patterns. People are creatures of habit Charlie told me. We’re predictable if someone pays close enough attention. My job then was to sit outside the house and watch. Same shit, different day. Charlie would tail Vanderbilt. He had good reasons for keeping me as far away from Vanderbilt as possible. I’d be more likely to be recognised, Charlie obviously had more experience and was just better than me at tailing someone and lastly, and most importantly, neither of us really knew what I’d do if and when I came face to face with the man who had destroyed my life. All undeniably good reasons. There was also the fact that I was much more at home doorstep someone. Even if I did hate it. Nobody likes doing it. It’s right up there with proofreading and apologizing. It’s the boredom, the waiting with no guarantee of a pay-off, and the nagging thought that your time could have been better spent elsewhere. In some ways I missed even that. So I agreed. It was a good way of making myself useful after all. So two days later I took the underground back to Finchley and back to Green Hill Avenue.

It was just after rush hour on a particularly overcast and humid Thursday. After taking a quick walk around the block to sample how busy the area was I sat myself down under a bus shelter about fifty metres from the Vanderbilt house. And I waited. I watched. I’d learned early on at the Enquirer that nobody really looks at the world around them unless they have reason to. We make assumptions all the time about life and so long as nothing challenges those preconceptions we see no reason to look any harder. To those that joined me on at the bus stop I was just waiting for the 62, or the 84, or the 25. Just part of the furniture. As a cub reporter I’d gone along to my first doorsteping with an older journo called Jimmy Perkins. He was one of the old boys all right. Smoked two packs a day and was always semi-inebriated. We
parked opposite the family home of this Tory MP who’d been caught on tape suggesting half of his constituency should head back home to bongo-bongo land. Unsurprisingly, he wasn’t in the mood to give a statement once the tape had leaked to us and we called him asking for comment. It was our job to ambush and provoke him into talking. This was real journalism and exactly the sort of thing I wanted to do with my career. To hold people accountable. I practically beat down Turner’s door before asking if I could chase down the MP for comment. Turner gave the job to Perkins but thought it would be a good idea if I went along, for the experience as he put it. He trusted Perkins and didn’t want this fucked up after all. Bongo-Bongo Land would be big and we had the chance to scoop before anyone else could. Exciting times. Or so I thought. After twenty minutes of sitting there twiddling my thumbs in the passenger seat of Ford Focus I started to get antsy. I asked Jimmy if we should circle the block and come back so that people don’t get suspicious and call the old bill. ‘Come off it lad. We stay put until that arsehole leaves the house.’ Came the reply. Jimmy had a green parka coat on with fur around the collar. He looked warm and along with the grey beard made a fairly good Uncle Albert impression off of Only Fools and Horses. I did not look warm, wearing only a white shirt and a leather jacket. It was only early October. First thing I learned about door stepping, always wear the right clothing. ‘Aren’t we looking a bit suspect sitting here?’ I asked.

‘Will you calm down son,’ he said, probably wondering whether or not baby-sitting me was worth the scoop if all of this panned out.

‘If we go for a wander sod’s law we’ll miss him trying to do a runner. So shut up and chill out. You can run over to the newsagents in a bit of stock up on supplies.’ I nodded. Perkins continued to stare at the house of the Tory MP. ‘I like Yorkie bars,’ he said.

Ever since then I always kept in a desk draw a set of skiing thermals to go underneath my work stuff and a stash of chocolate bars which I periodically had to restock once Lily found them. I kept both just in case that day’s work involved waiting for hours outside in the cold for someone who really didn’t want to talk. I was wearing the thermals now, even at the height of summer. The chocolate was long gone. Susan was home, and had been all day. When I was alone at the bus stop I’d wander down to the house and look through the gates from across the street. The Land
Rover was still there but no other vehicles passed through the gates. I guessed they didn’t employ a maid. Good for us. Around midday I watched a postie buzz on a keypad set into the stone wall when he came to deliver a package. The gate swung open and he wheeled his trolley in with him. That was it until about quarter to three when all of a sudden the gates swung open and out drove Susan in her Land Rover, off to pick the kids up. I looked at my watch and made a note of the time as the car drove past me and up the street. I’d no idea what school she was heading to. That wasn’t important. What mattered was to establish a timeline of daily movements. Around quarter past three children in school uniforms began to drift down the road. I took another walk to the house and looked through the gates. It was Charlie who decided to concentrate on Vanderbilt rather than go after Fox. Fox led a life where additional security was de rigueur and the paparazzi regularly camped outside his home hoping to get a shot good enough to flog for a few hundred quid. He’d been doing well since Foster had died off the back of the sympathy vote. For obvious reasons he’d enjoyed universal positive press coverage for months and this had sent his career into orbit. He was reinvented as the survivor who overcomes tragedy. A human feel good story, his success reflected well on all of us. Honestly, newborn babies and puppies had lower approval ratings. He now presented the X-Factor and there was speculation that he’d shortly be off to try and break America. That’s show business. He made me sick. He’d killed her. So naturally I’d suggested we go after him. Charlie didn’t think it was a good idea. He was right of course. There was no window to hit Fox, no routine to his movements, and a constant threat of being observed by the public. Even if we did get in what could we take that was expensive yet untraceable and that we couldn’t get some place else? In short it was pointless. Besides he said, Fox was no more than a pawn; Vanderbilt made the decisions and wielded that power out of the public eye. Which made him vulnerable. I wasn’t sure quite how vulnerable though. Looking through the gate and going over the photos on my phone the house looked impressive. The place was huge, a big grand cube that forced nature around its existence. It was a vault. And for all I knew just as impregnable. I hoped to God Charlie knew what he was doing. For a moment I allowed myself to hope that somewhere in that big house there was something to pin on the two of them. I’d no idea what. And if there wasn’t. Well Charlie would see to it that I received substantial reparations for the trouble Vanderbilt had caused me. I looked at the house with its red brick walls, stone pillars, and sharp angles and
wondered what was inside. I wondered where Vanderbilt kept his study. Charlie could have whatever he wanted. He could take his fill of jewellery, electronics, clothes and whatever else he could get his hands on. But he had to go through the study first. That was our deal. I wanted laptops, pen drives, anything that so much as looked important. If Vanderbilt had dirt on so many he had to keep records of it someplace, photographs, invoices, love letters, whatever. I wanted it as collateral. It seemed oddly poetic that I’d use Vanderbilt’s own methods to get myself back into work. And then I’d bury him and Dexter fucking Fox. It might take me the rest of my life but it would be worth it.

Revenge always is.

I walked back to the bus stop. At twelve minutes past four a black Land Rover appeared at the crest of the road. It drove straight past me. I could see Susan driving and the outlines of two kids in the back. The car slowed as the electronic gate swung open and swallowed the Land Rover whole. And then it was gone. I got up and walked down the road to the house and peered through the gate once more. I saw a mother and two kids, one a little blonde boy of about eight or so wearing shorts, the other his taller sister with long brown hair like her mother’s. All three got out of the car, ascended the steps and went into the house. The doors shut and I was left alone. My phone beeped out a text message. It was from Charlie. ‘V just left the office.’ Time to go. I walked past the bus shelter with its red plastic bench and onwards towards the station, knowing I’d be back there again tomorrow.
Chapter Nineteen

I’m pretty sure that my next door neighbour is a drug dealer. I figured that out on a Sunday night whilst I lay in bed, fighting the insomnia that had become more and more commonplace since Charlie and I had settled on hitting Vanderbilt. Every time I’d close my eyes all I’d see were children getting out of Land Rovers. I’d hear them laughing and running into the house as their mother followed them up the steps. That image kept me awake, watching the hands chase each other around the clock face. Guilt does that to you I guess. Or shame. It was almost twenty past two when a car pulled up abruptly on the street outside. It was another warm and sticky night in June so the window was wide open. The noise of a car door clicking open and the sound of feet pounding pavement travelled into the room on the slightest of breezes. I got out
of bed and moved to the window. Our street is almost half a mile of two-up two-down down houses jammed together in rows of a dozen or more. All uniform in their utilitarian council-house existence. That particular evening every house within my eye line was dark and peaceful. The footsteps continued but I couldn’t see their owner from my vantage point. The car sat idling in the middle of the road, abandoned rather than parked with its driver side door still wide open and light from inside of the car spilling out, mixing with the orange of the street lamps. I watched the car idle and guessed that it belonged to a pizza delivery guy. It seemed to fit the facts. I got back into bed. As my head hit the pillow I heard knocking on our front door. Mum was asleep in the next room. I began to rationalise. I jumped out of bed, threw on some trackies and a grey superman t-shirt and headed downstairs, quickly. It would be Charlie. It had to be. He’d want to go out and scout the roads late at night to see if that would be a good time to do the job. We’d drive slowly Vanderbilt’s place making yet more notes on the security and the solitude. It was a better offer than insomnia. I unbolted the front door and opened it but it wasn’t Charlie. Outside I found a white kid of about eighteen. He had a shaven head beneath a blue baseball cap and was dressed in a blank grey tracksuit, like the type you imagine Rocky wore when he did his step climbing shtick. ‘Is Kate here?’ He asked. His voice sounded young, like it had only just broken. It wavered.

‘No mate, there’s no Kate here.’ I tried not to sound surprised or overly cautious. I wished we had an intercom.

‘Wait, erm, this is number 48 right?’ Suddenly he sounded unsure of himself. A little kid knocking on the wrong door in the middle of the night. His arms were by his sides and a roll of bank notes was clutched firmly in his right fist. I was confused. Then a thought. ‘Ah, I think you want two doors down.’ I motioned with my arm down the street, ‘Green door.’

‘Thanks man.’ And he was off, his old cream Ford Escort still idling in the middle of the road between the streetlamps. Its headlights just catching the edge of a green door that its owner was now approaching, cash in hand. I closed the front door and locked it. This estate’s really gone to hell.

Most of the other neighbours I knew growing up had moved away. Either side of us used to be two families with kids a few years younger than me. Gone now
though. I guess the kids had gone to uni or gotten their own places and the parents had decided to uproot. The old couple across the street had either moved on or died. I felt sorry about that. They’d always sent us a Christmas card every year, from Gladys and Henry. Kate was a girl I’d gone to school with. She dropped out though after her GCSE’s. She had a dog and we’d occasionally run into each other over the park whilst she walked it. She wasn’t the brightest spark but she was friendly and was proud of getting a job at an estate agency and was being trained up to be a negotiator. A few minutes went by, and still the car’s engine idled, as it stood stationary in the middle of the road. It became part of the background after a while so you barely noticed it. With every passing moment its guttural sound was assimilated into the tone of the night. Then I heard a car door slam tyres screech as the engine burst into life as the car sped to the end of the street and turned left, towards the main road. Seconds later the sounds of the engine faded, the tyre screech reduced to a whine, and then it was quiet again. Homeostasis restored. One of the reasons Kate dropped out of school was because she always wanted her own money. I wondered if she’d managed to become a negotiator in the end. Then again maybe it didn’t matter. The recession had hit the housing market particularly hard, even in London and agencies shut up shop by the dozen. I’d seen her around, walking the dog again, but I hadn’t spoken to her since I’d been back home. Everybody needs a job though, or so they say. It was the way the boy just left the car, engine on and door open in the middle of the road, ready for a quick getaway that screamed drug deal to me. I’d been spending too much time with Charlie not to see these new angles to human behaviour. If she were a dealer then she’d be the first female one I’d heard of. It was an intimidation business. Even the celeb hacks used to talk about the guys that hung around the edges of launch parties who everyone knew had enough pills on them to open up a pharmacy. There was no look to them, no drug dealer chic, but they were always men. Women bought and never sold. But then again. In our world the recession is still on. Like Coco, I wondered if I had any right to judge Kate for what I assumed she did. I’d been doing a lot of thinking lately. I’d been wondering where we all fit on the ladder. Where we all ranked in the world and if it was compulsory or optional. I wondered where Charlie would fit in. Above Kate? Below? Did it even matter? I wondered where I’d be. Where I had been. How far I’d fallen.

I wanted out. Out of the same old societal construct. Out of the pathological need to justify my existence to others. I wanted to be me. Everything else was façade; masks put on and discarded as the social wind dictated. I’d been unmasked. I’d felt rejection. Shamed and rejected. I lived without a mask but wasn’t sure what lay beneath. The image in the mirror was someone I didn’t recognise. We’d never been formally introduced. I didn’t know this stranger. I didn’t know who he was or what he was capable of. But I wanted to find out. And yet I doubted I could live with the consequences. That’s personal growth for you.

Chapter Twenty

The next evening, a Monday, Charlie came over after I’d got back from Vanderbilt’s house. We’d settled on going in whilst Susan was picking up the children from school. The quickest she’d gotten back to house was just under an hour. Fifty-two minutes to be exact. Charlie liked to be exact. I knew what he wanted. He was coming to tell me that this stage of the job was over and a new stage was about to begin. The thought made my blood run cold. Charlie was laughing as I opened the front door to him.

‘I read something today. You know those games we used to play on the Playstation? Like Quake and all that?’
‘Yeah.’ I shut the door behind him and followed him into the living room.

‘Well I read that a guy created a deathmatch with just bots, you know like computer-controlled characters, just to see what would happen because apparently in this game these bots learn how to beat the human player. He wondered what would happen if the bots had to learn how to beat each other.’

‘Yeah.’

I was tired and barely listening. I’d been waiting at a bus stop all day staring at the Vanderbilt’s house. I wanted to watch TV and lie on the sofa; I didn’t want to listen to another one of Charlie’s rants. Charlie didn’t seem to notice. ‘So anyway, this guy forgets the game and leaves it running for years. So like four years later he’s cleaning through his computer and sees the game still going.’ Charlie talked excitedly, the words falling out of his mouth and me along for the ride. He was either having an epiphany or he was stoned. ‘So he looks at what’s going on and all the bots are just standing there, weapons on the ground. Like they’ve just all decided to stop fighting,’ I was close to calling bullshit on this urban myth but I let him continue. He sat on the green leather sofa with his white trainers dangling over the sofa’s arm. They were a crisp pair of Adidas Originals, clearly brand new. I wondered where he’d got them from or if he’d paid for them, ‘and they’re all just standing there. The guy thinks the game’s fucked so decides to enter the game. He walks around a bit in the game and all the bots just look at him. They don’t attack or anything. They just turn their heads and watch him like something out of the exorcist. So the guy’s thinking he’s got to take this to the next level. He grabs a grenade launcher and wastes a few of these bots. The rest immediately go scarpering for the nearest gun and pretty soon the guy’s wasted and then all the bots just drop their guns and stare at each other like before. You know what that means?’ It was a rhetorical question. Charlie grinned at me. ‘It means that they’d realised something, Killing and being killed wasn’t as valuable as not being killed and not killing. They’d figured out that the only way to beat the game is not to play. It’s that simple man. So simple that a few useless fucking lines of code could figure it out. World peace man, it’s so fucking simple.’

‘You should write that down, send it to the UN.’

‘Yeah,’ He laughed, ‘Fucking politicians.’
He paused to clear his throat before looking straight at me. ‘You know I’ve been thinking about something else.’ His face was serious all of a sudden. I ruled out him being stoned. ‘Vanderbilt’s place. It’s bigger than anything I’ve hit before. I think I’m going to need another pair of hands if you’re interested?’ I stared at the floor. ‘So what do you think?’ Charlie asked. I had no idea. I felt the importance of the moment. In moments like this I think humans reveal who we really are. We drop the pretence and fall back on old identities like a safety blanket. I reached for mine and held on tight.

‘Tamburello,’ I said.

‘What?’

‘Tamburello. It’s the name of the corner at the Imola racetrack where Ayrton Senna died. He hit the wall and the impact broke suspension on his right front tyre. A jagged bit of the joist punctured his helmet and went straight through his head.’ Charlie sighed loudly. He knew where I was going with this. I ignored it and pressed on, part of me wondering what route my mouth was now meandering along without my expressed consent. ‘He was the best. He was untouchable. Until he wasn’t. If that bit of metal had hit six inches lower or higher he would have walked away. But it didn’t and now he’s dead.’ I paused, wondering if Charlie was buying this, ‘all luck runs out.’

‘This isn’t like before, that won’t happen again,’ said Charlie.

We’d gotten away with it once before. A long time ago at Hulse Avenue. And we lived with what happened. We might get away with it again but on a long enough time line the chances of success would drop to zero. There were just too many balls in the air, too many variables. And then there were the children. Vanderbilt’s children. What if we got it wrong and they were there? What then? And what if we went through with it? There’d be tears in the eyes of those children I’d seen laugh. They didn’t deserve that. Charlie said nothing. I’d caught him off-guard. I guess he thought I’d be grateful for the chance to get even with Vanderbilt or that I’d developed a taste for subverting the law but he was stumped for a minute. Up to now I’d been a tourist in his world on a student visa, now he was offering me citizenship. I guess what
happened at Hulse Avenue affected me more than it had him. He looked almost offended.

‘So you’re saying you want to stop? You want to go back to begging for jobs and living with your mum? Let that fucker get away with screwing you over? Is that what you want?!’ He said. ‘It’s like this,’ I said after a deep sigh, to buy myself time as much as anything. The shock sent adrenaline coursing through me, turning the link between my mouth and brain into a motorway. ‘No matter how good you are things will always happen that you can’t control. Sometimes you’re just a passenger. Life is unpredictable no matter what kind you lead, but especially ours. Especially this. That might be okay for you but it isn’t for me.’ I slumped in the chair and stared at the ground, knowing I was disappointing my best friend, ‘I want out mate. I can’t do this. I’m sorry.’

Charlie said nothing. He let his eyes do the talking, two balls of blue filled with an unbending resolution doing their staring at the ceiling routine. There was no room in his philosophy for conservatism or pragmatism. No quit-while-you’re-ahead mentality. It was take the house or be cleaned out. I envied his clarity but I also feared its arrogance. The system worked but my professional cynicism gnawed away at me. To me the consequences weren’t a hypothetical to be pushed to the periphery. I’d seen them. ‘You’re a fucking coward,’ Charlie spat. That’s one way of putting it I guess. He was on the edge of the sofa now, coiled and tense.

‘All your life you’ve talked about changing things. Shaking things up. And the minute you actually get the chance to you pussy out. It’s just history repeating with you. You’re a coward.’

‘What the fuck are you talking about?’ I felt anger rising up. An east wind coming.

‘When you were a reporter did you do one thing to change how things are or did you just parrot out the status quo?’

‘Piss off. What the hell would you know about it?’

‘Yeah what would I know?’ He smiled; like this was all some big joke then he dived across the room and grabbed a hold of me. The chair I was sitting on overturned and we fell onto the floor. He had me in this hold. One leg wrapped around me. His knee
pushed into my shoulder blade. A hand over my wrist ready to bend it backwards and wrench my arm from its socket. Holding it there under pressure. Making it hurt. He pinned me with ease. He was strong. A body that had swum thousands and thousands of lengths of a pool for years on end. Trained.

Dangerous.

‘You don’t want to do this because they don’t want you to do this. It isn’t about breaking laws. We both know you’ve had plenty of practice at that.’ He spat the words. Spittle against the back of my neck. He had his other hand over my face, feeling for my eyeballs. I screwed my eyelids shut. I kicked and struggled but he only made the pain in my arm worse. Further and further back he pulled. Further and further back it went. Sinews and ligaments stretched to their limit. I could taste blood in my mouth. My blood.

‘No this is because for once in your miserable fucking life you’re about to do something for yourself. Something beautiful and you’re scared. The laws don’t apply to us. We don’t have to follow them. The world doesn’t care about us so why should we do what they want? The laws benefit the rule makers so long as we obey them.’ He stopped grabbing for my eyes and went for my hair. Somewhere someone was screaming. It might have been me. I wasn’t sure. I’m still not. ‘You want Vanderbilt to suffer. I know that you do. You think he’s everything wrong with your world. You think he gives a shit about morality?! About his fellow man? Fuck no. The law says you should let him walk well fuck the law. Fuck morality. Start living for you.’

He banged my head into the carpet. I could feel the friction of the fibres against my forehead, burning the skin, ‘You’ve lied. You’ve stolen. You’ve screwed people over and they let you do it and think it was worth it because it benefited them. You’re just a pawn.’ His voice filled the room, cutting through the pain. He pulled my head back by the hair, ready to ram it back into the carpet for a second time.

‘They aren’t feeling guilty so why should you?!’

‘Stop!’ I shouted through the pain. ‘Please!’

He held my head there for a second in mid air. I hoped the next blow would knock me unconscious. He let go of my hair and my arm; both fell to the ground and my arm
twitched. Battered but still attached, barely. It lay their frozen under its own weight, immobile. Like its owner, a broken puppet, strings all tangled up. I heard Charlie reset the upturned chair and sit down. I imagined him staring at me, as I lay crumpled on the carpet in front of him. I kept my eyes closed tightly. Wishing myself somewhere else. Seconds passed. Then minutes. I lay there. He stared. His heavy breathing subsiding leaving an anguished expression etched on his face. ‘Enlightenment through suffering mate.’ His voice calm and controlled once more, ‘I’m sorry to add to yours but I can’t see you carry on like this.’

The words left his mouth quietly, almost like a prayer. No need to shout now. He had my complete and undivided attention, ‘this is your chance to do something for yourself. Your chance to be the person you were born to be. To be free. To do what’s best for you for once so stop being weak.’ I couldn’t see him speak. My face was buried in the carpet but I could feel pain in his voice. Disappointment. He was wrong. Or at least a year ago I’d have been sure that he was. A year ago I’d have gotten up and swung for him. Now though things were different. Now I had a common thief lecture me on ethics. And I couldn’t disagree. I’d been used. I’d done things I was no longer proud of. I’d been twisted and remoulded in the job’s image. I’d become what they wanted me to be. Done what they wanted me to do. It wasn’t what I’d done that was wrong in Charlie’s eyes; it was that I did it for someone else. When I was a boy I’d always felt like I would do something important when I grew up. That I’d change things. Journalism was a way of doing that. It made me look past all the moral compromises. The ends justifying the means. I still believe that many journalists think like that. But I wasn’t a journalist any more. I hadn’t been for a long time. I felt the tears on my cheek streak down to my chin only to be replaced with new ones. I screwed my eyes shut tighter, wishing it all away. ‘You’re just a victim. You didn’t know what you were doing, not really. You played their game and you lost.’ Charlie’s voice again sounding far off and almost dream like to me. I heard footsteps and then felt a his breath against my ear. My whole body tensed, anticipating a beating. ‘The only way to beat their game is not to play by their rules.’ He got up and made to leave the room. At the threshold of the hallway he stopped and turned around. ‘It won’t be like the last time if that’s what you’re scared of. I promise.’ I heard the front door slam.
I lay there for a while. Broken on the floor. In shock. He was right. In his own fucked up little way he was right. Blood dripped from my nose where it had been ground against the carpet. In time some of it dried against my skin. Some of it fell into my mouth. That desperate mix of iron and salt. Time passed and emotions hardened, aged, and scarred over. I picked myself up off the floor and hobbled upstairs to take a shower. The water washed away the blood and droplets stinging as they ran over cuts and grazes. Cleansing is painful. I shut the water off. Wrapped a towel around my waist and walked into the same room I had slept in since before I can remember. It was smaller then than it once was and getting smaller still. Almost claustrophobic. The window was still open and the street outside deathly quiet. Even Kate must have been asleep. The heat from the day hadn’t dissipated. It seeped in through the window like smoke from a fire. Stifling the air. Making it heavier than the broken heart of a broken man. Choking me and not for the first time. The type of night where shower water evaporates and beads of sweat take its place. The type of night where the air isn’t inhaled, but drunk. The type of night where sleep is in short supply. I lay there that night in my childhood bed on another hot muggy night, and waited for the dawn.

Chapter Twenty-One

The keys to any good story: who and his brothers, what, where and why. It’s the first rule of journalism. That, and know where the bodies are buried. I know both. The who is simple. That would be Charlie and me. And Arthur. Without him this wouldn’t have happened. Where and what are just as obvious. It’s the why that people have trouble with. It’s the why that’s never obvious at the time. It taps you on the shoulder. Hides from you. Taunts you with its mystery. A locked box atop of a mountain of keys. Even years later it’s not certain. It keeps me up at night, amongst other things. Ultimately you can tell the story without knowing why but that makes it only half a story. Half a narrative. Charlie was always obsessed with that house. God knows why. I don’t. Neither did Charlie. Our friendship, the result of pushy parents. Two mums wanting their eleven-year-old kids to walk home together when they
started secondary school. That’s how we became friends, Charlie and me. Parental convenience. Every day for five years the same route to and from school. The house at the end of Hulse Avenue looked like any other for the first few years. As we both hit fifteen it began to change. Every day we watched the place fall apart. We saw the front garden turn wild as spring became summer. We watched the dirt build up on the front windows, curtains always drawn. One day tiles fell from the roof and smashed on the paving below. We ate Mr. Whippy ice creams bought from a van parked outside the school gates as we watched. Saw the weeds reach out from under the paving, hiding the debris. The gate had fallen off its hinges by the time England got knocked out of the World Cup in Japan. Free papers and junk mail littered the front porch.

By the six weeks holiday the place was fucked. No cars parked outside. The whole street looking the other way. Charlie started to get obsessed. Like it was ours. Never mentioning it around other people. Our secret. For our eyes only. I liked that. Sometimes we’d leave early for school and spend half hour staking the place out as other kids walked by. Then rush off at the last minute. Late more often that not. Mum got a letter. Told me to sort myself out. I was a good kid, in the main. I didn’t smoke (Charlie didn’t either then). Never in trouble much at school. Had a few fights when I was younger, kids taking the piss out of my uniform or my Dad. Being friends with Charlie stopped that after a while. There were other kids to go for. Kids that wouldn’t fight back. Neither of us ever got in trouble with the Old Bill either. Like I said, we were good kids, in the main. That summer the Soham murders happened. It became a series of snapshots repeated over and over: the two girls posing in Man United shirts, that stretch of road where they found the bodies, Ian Huntley being interviewed on Sky News over and over. Every day through August Holly Wells and Jessica Chapman. TV, papers, radio, blanket coverage 24/7. Inescapable. Mum glued to the telly every night. Morbid curiosity mixed with encouraged paranoia. She bought me a phone for when I went out. A Nokia 3210 to keep in touch whilst she was at work. I played Snake on it, I texted Charlie with it, we talked about the house. It was hot that summer. A summer spent kicking off duvets and waking up covered in sweat. A summer of constant thirst. Days spent wandering about. Kicking a football around the park. Hanging round street corners. Boredom. We started visiting the house. Dares. I dared Charlie to open the porch door, tough to do with all the junk mail. He dared me
to play ‘knock down ginger’. No answer. Next was the side alley. First pushing the
gate door. Then along the path to the back of the house. Then looking inside the
kitchen window. I did that last one. Poked my head around the corner and saw a small
room. Old. Dated. Vinyl flooring and seventies style fitted units. Dull yellows and
beige. Worktops empty and clean, like the show houses mum and dad used to take me
to when I was younger. It looked sterile like the owners had moved away. Gone in the
middle of the night. We talked about it on the way home. Maybe the place was rented
out. Maybe they’d emigrated. Questions. They took root. Festered in the absence of
anything else. Anything else apart from Holly and Jessica. Then Charlie went on
holiday for a couple of weeks. Spain or Greece, I don’t remember. Me and mum
stayed put. No holidays since Dad. Not enough money. Sometimes I wandered by the
house but it wasn’t the same without Charlie. Mostly I stayed home. Flicked through
music channels. Wondered why MTV never played any music. Nursed a hatred of
Pop Idol singles. Wondered where Blazin’ Squad came from and if any of the
Sugababes were that fit. Played Playstation. Got bored. Charlie came back just before
school started. He had a tan.

It was inevitable. The week after we were back at school Charlie said we
should go inside. We paid more visits. In the beginning we’d walk past it acting
inconspicuous. By September we just sat outside on the kerb in front. String bags full
of books discarded next to us. Looking at 54 Hulse Avenue through the two huge
evergreens in the front garden. Before, they’d been pruned to within an inch of their
lives. By September they were unkept and wild. They overshadowed the lawn. Dead
grass replaced with weeds. A giant organic green mess. Like life. Our house. We
decided to do it on a Friday. Charlie suggested four. Late enough for all the school
kids to be home, early enough for everyone else to still be working. Charlie had an
idea how we’d get in. A foolproof plan. Maybe. He wouldn’t tell me. Friday
afternoon. Fourth period. English. I watched the clock, bad idea. Doodling boxes on
my homework diary. Tick. Pretend interest in why Iago was a motiveless malignity.
Tock. Staring out the window. Tick. Imagining what Carly Jones looked like naked.
Tock. Building things out of the stuff in my pencil case. Tick. Wondering what her
hair smelt like. Tock. Thinking what could go wrong. Tick. Imagining what was
inside. Questions. Empty or not? What was Charlie’s plan for getting us inside?
Counting down to an answer. Excitement. Tock. The bell rang. Show time. Home in

Hulse Avenue. Our house a little way down. A few cars parked but not outside 54. Sweaty. Hot in the hoodie. Warm September sun with nowhere to hide. Autumn pretending to be summer. We walked down to our house. Hoods up. Gloves from home on. Quick look round. Nobody there. Off round the back. The garden had gotten more overgrown. Weeds gaining a foothold on a cement patio near the back door. Grass that came up to your knees everywhere else. Six-foot wooden fence panels on three sides. A black wheelie bin left in a corner. Empty. Charlie took out a mangled safety pin, stuck it in the keyhole of the back door. Shit. I could have smacked him. He called it scrubbing. He looked like a dick. I left him to it, crouched behind the bin. For fuck’s sake. There I sat. Waiting to hear shouting. Wondering how long to give Harry-Fucking-Houdini before going home. Gutted. No one saw us. Just another Friday afternoon. Traffic from the main road. Birds chirping. Trees swaying in the breeze. Charlie swearing, saying the lock was different to what he’d practiced on. Like that was the reason. Twat. Then a click. Charlie grinning at me. Reaching for the handle. Adrenaline hitting me all at once. Deep breath. No going back now. Into the kitchen of 54 Hulse Avenue. The place had that old smell. Stale. Musky. The kitchen was as advertised. Worktops empty save a coating of dust. The dull yellow and beige units spotless. A dining table with four chairs pushed underneath it. The linoleum on the floor had been swept at some point. Stained in places. Reminders of a home. Someone’s home. Past tense. Ours now. Charlie moved into the hallway. I followed. Bare floorboards, sanded and varnished a shiny dark brown. Magnolia walls. A mirror hung at head height. Light pouring through the opaque glass in the front door. A closed door on the left. The living room. Charlie turned the handle gently. Pushed the door, heard the creaking of the hinges. It swung open with a push. The bottom brushing past cream carpet. Shapes under white sheets. A coffee table. Two chairs. Settee. Charlie pulled the sheet back off one of the chairs. Red leather. Magnolia on the walls again. Curtains drawn. I pulled at the corner of one. Looked through a dirty
window. Through a gap in the trees I saw where we’d sat on the curb. I saw an empty street. No sirens or alarms. No nosy neighbours. Suburban quiet. Life went on without us. None the wiser. We’d done it. Charlie had wandered off. Footsteps on the stairs. I went after him. Caution left somewhere outside, curiosity replacing it. The steps were bare too. My footfalls just as loud as Charlie’s. Kings of our castle. Masters of our universe. He’d paused at the top, wanting to explore upstairs together. My hand on a rail with wood banisters coming up to hip height. Oak or Ash or something. Stained dark like the floor. They ran up the stairs and around a landing with three doors, all open. The first was at the top of the stairs and led to the bathroom. There was a window open slightly. Caught on the latch. Bird sounds and the wind in the trees.

Charlie had lapsed into full on commando. He motioned me to look inside the first room. He’d take the second. He pointed with his hand like they did in Saving Private Ryan. We’d seen it in History. Afterward Charlie got his dad to buy the video. He’d watched it over and over. Got thrills off it. He liked the blood and guts, especially when it hit the camera. It made me feel sick. I liked Star Wars. Charlie didn’t, no gore. Playing along I moved into position. Darting across the door. Back against the wall. Charlie on the other side of the doorway saying something like, ‘Go on then’. Kids stuff. I poked my head round the door. Boxes. Cardboard boxes. Old boxes filled with things. Piled on top of dressers. Piled on top of each other. Memories. Someone’s possessions. Boxes to remind me that this wasn’t our house. That this was a dumb fucking idea. I should have bolted. If I had then it wouldn’t have happened. But I didn’t. I should have. But I didn’t. I felt the thrill. Knowledge is power. Memories. Memories stored in boxes in back bedrooms. Me sorting through them. Examining. Picking up. Putting down. Casting aside. Someone had collected them. Editing their identity into holiday snaps, books with perfect spines and last minute souvenirs bought in airport gift shops before the plane ride home. Me living the dream. Their dream. What their life could or should have been. Not what it was. Lies. Lies in the form of hand crafted model elephants with trunks sticking out of the box. Lies in the form of photo albums full of posed pictures of happy families circa the 1970s. I flicked through one. A holiday somewhere in Africa. On safari. Two children. A mum and dad. Too many questions. I tossed the book on the floor. I found a model elephant, its wooden trunk stuck out of a box. I dragged it out. Held it. Polished. Dark brown. Carved or sculpted. Whittled with a knife maybe. The body in one hand. The trunk in another. Pulled. Snapped it in two. Threw the pieces on the


Run away?

Get him off Charlie.

I grabbed hold of the stick, attempting to pull it out of his grasp. The old man starting to turn, shouting to anyone that might hear, ‘Get off of me! This is my house!’ I dragged the stick along with the old man onto the landing. He bucked and twisted, struggling to keep hold of the weapon. Charlie lay forgotten on the floor, moaning, screaming. Every time I close my eyes I can see the old man’s face whether I want to or not. Old. Wrinkled. His skin an unhealthy yellow. Eyes fiery; fuelled by anger and fear in equal parts. Alive. We struggle on the landing. Grunts and straining. Charlie’s screams drifting away. Zoning out and zooming in all at once. Suddenly calm like I was back on the playground, fighting kids trying to take my dinner money or asking where my dad was. I lurched forward hard, caught the old man by surprise, knocking him off balance. I drove the stick across his chest, forcing him against the banisters,
pinning him. His frail body pressed flat against the wood. I couldn’t see Charlie anymore. ‘Help!’ I think I shouted, but it might have been the old man. Some bits of memory fade, others stay razor sharp. Life’s like that.

‘Help!!’

He fought back. Finding new strength. Fight or flight. The stick came an inch off his chest. Then another. Superhuman strength. He got away from the banisters, forced me back. Fear started to bite me, made me strong. Killed his momentum. His body started to fail. The anger burning out of his eyes. Fear taking over, him getting weaker. Muscles pushed past breaking point. End game. Back against the banisters. I heard them strain, giving a little. I screwed my eyes shut and felt a hard shove from behind, Charlie. I went with the shove and heaved forward with gritted teeth. Pushing the stick back across his chest. Just below the neck. I felt him overbalance. I stumbled forward as my shoulder hit the banisters and buckled. No pain. Too buzzed. Eyes open, for a second seeing a falling man. A life flashing before the eyes of a child. Mine and his. What might have been. Then I heard it.

The thud.

I still hear it every now and again, someone slamming a car door or something falling off a desk at work. It echoes through my life. It happens and I’m plucked from wherever I am. Back to where I first heard the sound of a falling man’s fate.

We ran. Out of the house. Just remembering to slam the back door. Home as fast as we could. Half way home I realised I still had his stick in my hand. Completely forgotten about until then. I kept hold of it. Told Charlie to get out of those clothes and bring them to mine. Got home. Quiet, almost silent. Washing machine going in the kitchen. Mum not in yet. Went upstairs. Threw up in the toilet. Showered. Tossed textbooks out of my string bag. Threw up again. Put the clothes in a black sack and forced them inside the string bag. I sat on my bed trying to stop the shakes. Waited for Charlie. He came back five minutes later with his clothes. I threw them into the bag too. He went home. I went to the park. Almost dark, a few gangs of chavs and the odd dog walker. I stuffed the clothes in a bin. Lit some matches I’d taken from the kitchen. Threw them in with the clothes. Waited till the flame caught. Sprayed a can of Lynx into the fire to speed things up. Ran as the flames licked the side of the bin.
Threw the stick in the lake. It sank with the last of the light. Got home. Mum was in this time. She asked where I’d been. I said Charlie’s. Lost all appetite. Fought the urge to be sick again. Went to bed early. Said I felt ill. The shaking stopped eventually. No sleep. Bad dreams when I did. I don’t remember them. Mum telling me she heard me talking in my sleep. Wouldn’t tell me what I said. Stayed home all weekend. Paranoia setting in. Newspaper headlines. Manhunt for pensioner’s killers. Blue and white police tape blowing in the wind. The house shot from a distance. The front filling TV screen in living rooms across the country. Finally mug shots of Charlie and me. Sky News vans parked outside my house. Microphones harassing mum as the Police led me away. I waited. Days cooped up like when I had the flu. Days to imagine every possible ending. The more I thought about it the more inevitable it seemed. Days to sit and wait for the end.

Mr. Arthur Dobson. That was his name. Eighty-eight. Lived in the area all his life. I read it in The Recorder, one of those weekly free papers they stuff through your letter box whether you want it or not. I did a placement there before heading off to university. It was a pretty short write up squeezed between ads. They missed out a lot. No mention of the toy elephant broken in the back bedroom. No mention of an absent family. Definitely no mention of the boy that killed him. The word ‘relief’ just doesn’t cut it. They called it an accident. Died after a fall at his home. Technically right I guess. The coroner recorded a verdict of accidental death and that was that. No media frenzy. No blanket TV coverage. No newspaper front pages with mine and Charlie’s faces. Just half a page in The Recorder. Getting away with murder. Simple. We decided to forget it ever happened. We never talked about it. Even changed our route to school. I went past 54 about a year later one night. It wasn’t our house anymore. Lights shone from behind drawn curtains. A car on the driveway. New stories. A fresh start. I wanted out. Decided on university. Buttoned down. Days spent in books or going through revision guides. Meals eaten at Library desks. A year lost to revision cards, guides and exams. Half the reason Charlie and I drifted apart. He found other friends. After A-levels I went to Birmingham for uni. Just felt right I guess. Power is addictive and I’d seen the power words could have. He stayed home. Not much of a plan. We lost touch. Neither of us fought it. Easier that way I suppose.

Charlie put it behind him. Managed to get on with his life, or at least that was how it seemed to me. It shocked me how much it never happened to him. I couldn’t. I
had dreams. The first time was a few weeks after I found the obit. I remember his fingers, gnawed by time, like twigs blown out of trees. I felt them around my neck, digging in. I owed him that much. The dream world faded to black. Enveloped me as I fell through its grasp. Slowly. Grudgingly. The guilt eased a little. That’s how it was for a while. I’d wake up shivering, the sheets soaked in sweat. Rub my neck half raw trying to forget the sensation. Months went by. The choking dreams still came but the fear subsided. He, like the dreams, became part of the furniture in my head. Just there in the corner. Sitting down on an unseen chair, walking stick by his side. Keeping watch. A doting father. *The old man*. The best *why* I can come up with. The circle finally complete.

**Chapter Twenty-Two**

It was time. Charlie and I sat at the bus stop just a little way up from the Vanderbilt residence for the last time. We waited. We watched. Deep down I was glad Charlie had knocked on my door just before I was about to eat lunch. A ham sandwich sat on a plate untouched as he told me that we’d be going in today and that I should get ready. The exact day we’d be doing the job Charlie had kept to himself. He said that he didn’t want me worrying myself too much and not sleeping if I knew exactly when he’d planned for us to do it. He was wrong. I felt like I hadn’t slept properly in weeks. I’d guessed it would have to be soon though. The summer holidays were almost here for the Vanderbilt’s kids and if we waited any longer we’d have to start planning all over again. I went upstairs and changed into the clothes I’d picked out for that day weeks before. I couldn’t remember the last time I’d deliberated so
much about what to wear. Gok Wan would have approved. I’d read online that there a new trend called ‘normcore’ that was replacing the hipster look. The concept of normcore was to blend in rather than standout; to wear clothes that with an intentional blandness that defined the style. It was a response to hipsterism and the scene kids that bought the clothes but not the philosophy of difference. Normcore sought to avoid identification by clothing, to embrace what made people the same rather than different. We can all wear a pair of Levi 501s or a plain white T-shirt. Now that’s a trend that a career thief can get behind. So off went a pair of shorts and on went some dark blue jeans, and a plain white T-shirt. I hunted around for a pair of white trainers and put those on too. I looked in the mirror and saw a mugshot. I forced the thought from my head and examined what I saw. I didn’t see a journalist anymore. I didn’t see someone unemployed, nor somebody’s client or somebody’s son and I didn’t see a burglar. I saw a twenty-five year old man. Plain. Ambiguous. Filled with unrealised potential. Plastic. Perfect. The ham sandwich remained uneaten. If I’d even tried to eat it I’d have brought it straight back up. Downstairs I could hear snatches of conversation as Charlie made small talk with mum. I’d barely been able to string a sentence together since I answered the door. The guy was a pro. I could hear them both laughing away. Ready to go, I made my way downstairs. Charlie was dressed in the same jeans he always wore. He had a black T-shirt and old faded trainers. Student-chic. He might have been here to play video games or smoke pot or get drunk in the afternoon sun. He looked serene, completely in control. His confidence washed over me. It kept me calm. Like watching a flight attendant during turbulence. In Charlie we trust. ‘We’re just going out mum. Work stuff.’ There was a response but I didn’t hear it. I was too focused on what was to come. Nothing else mattered.

Two hours later we were at the bus stop. We walked past the house, only the black land rover stood on the gravel drive. Nothing unusual. Nothing out of place. Charlie said nothing and kept walking. Game face on. As we left my house he’d handed me a rucksack. Inside were a balaclava, a red jumper, and some black leather gloves. The backpack rested against my leg as we waited. Charlie sat completely still, his eyes fixed ahead, mentally rehearsing what we were about to do. Accounting for opportunities and unexpected obstacles. Countenancing the latter and exploiting the former. Completely calm and in control. People joined us intermittently. They sat beside us, or stood and examined the timetable or stared up the road for the bus that
would take them away from there. Charlie and I sat in silence. We waited. We watched. At 15:04 the black electric gate of the Vanderbilt residence creaked into life. It slid back behind the wall and a black Land Rover edged off the drive and onto the road. It sped past us. I watched it until it turned a corner in the distance and was gone.

Go time. Charlie already had his gloves on, ‘we’ve got twenty minutes in and out. Set a stopwatch on your phone.’ I complied and then put my gloves on. He took one last deliberate look to check the street was clear and set off for the house. The electric gate was still open. We snuck inside and ducked behind the wall for cover. Vanderbilt hadn’t bothered to install security cameras; perhaps he felt that they clashed with the house’s aesthetic, so all we had to worry about were pedestrians. I could still see the tyre imprints where the Land Rover had stood a minute previously. Before us was the Vanderbilt place in all its faux-Georgian glory. Its tall windows and dark grey front door between imposing granite pillars. The rule-sharp edges to the property, engineered to perfection like the flowerbeds that contained the improvised nature that grew within. It was still impressive, still ostentatious, but now completely unguarded. Charlie led me down the side of the house along a path of paving slabs. We came to a fence that linked the Vanderbilt house to its neighbour. A wooden door made of the same fence panelling barred our way. Charlie slung his rucksack over the fence and then with one jump boosted himself over the wall and out of sight. He undid the lock, a simple catch, and held the door open for me whilst I entered the back garden. The first thing I noticed was the pool in the far corner. About twenty metres long and ten metres wide with bevelled edges it covered barely a quarter of the huge garden. A precisely cut green lawn stretched from flowerbeds to the stone that ringed the pool and the patio in front of the house to the fence at the far end of the garden. There were two huge trees, evergreens, and a rope swing hung from one of the boughs. There was also Jungle Jim with a slide and monkey bars and finally a shed, or more accurately a workshop which was almost a scale replica of the house, made from varnished wood, was situated the other side of the garden to the pool. Charlie paid no mind to any of this and had made a beeline for the kitchen door. He looked through the glass at the kitchen beyond, and smiled to himself. He crouched beside the backpack and took out the hoody he planned to wear after the raid. He wrapped it around his elbow like a tourniquet then drove it into the glass pane nearest the keyhole. It smashed loudly but no alarm followed. He paused a second to make sure,
all I could hear was my own breath over the sound of the wind through the trees. He
wrapped the hood around his hand and reached through the shattered pane. The key
was still in the lock and he turned it expertly. The clock on my phone told me it had
taken us less than two minutes to go from the bus stop to the kitchen door. It felt
longer and shorter. My knee began to shake with the adrenaline surge. My skin
prickled and my stomach felt hollow. Charlie looked at me, checking up, ‘deep
breaths’, he said as he pulled on his balaclava. I breathed deeply and did the same. A
second later we crossed the threshold of the kitchen.

No going back.

I tried to avoid stepping on the glass that now littered a black tiled floor. The
kitchen itself was large and open plan with an island in the centre of the room that
contained a hob and oven. The colour of stainless steel everywhere, from the large
American style fridge freezer, to the sink that was encased within worktop the same
jet-black colour as the floor. Even the blinds, which Charlie instructed me to draw,
had the same shiny grey pallor about them. All that steel gave the room a sterile
quality and you could imagine finding the exact same kitchen in an IKEA catalogue
and yet here and there were reminders that this place was a family home. There was a
corkboard in the corner mounted on a wall, letters and bills fixed to it with drawing
pins and on that huge fridge were magnets, one of a dinosaur and two made of Lego.
By the window there was a vase with flowers that might have been picked from one
of the garden’s many flowerbeds and as the sound of my own breathing dissipated I
could hear a dishwasher rumbling away in the background. As soon as Charlie
stepped into the house he had made straight for a room on the side that I hadn’t
noticed. It was the larder with shelves on every wall from floor to ceiling and Charlie
reappeared seconds later with four bottles of wine. Two went into his pack, the others
he handed to me. ‘Why these?’ I whispered, unsure why.

‘Look at the vintage.’ Charlie spoke at normal volume, his eyes already searching for
the next target. I looked at the bottle. The label read, Domaine de la Romanee-Conti
Echezeaux Grand Cru, 1983. It meant nothing to me. ‘Expensive wines are hard to
trace and can be worth thousands.’

‘And is this one?’
'Probably, look around you.'

I did. This house was the most expensive place I’d ever been in. Clearly Vanderbilt liked to show off. I stowed the bottles in my rucksack. They clinked together as I put the rucksack back over my shoulder. I watched Charlie rummage through drawers and did the same, unsure of what I was looking for. In one of the drawers I found a knife set that looked worth taking. Charlie had grabbed a blender and was hurriedly deconstructing it and stashing it in his bag. ‘Blenders aren’t that expensive surely?’ I asked.

‘Not really,’ he said, ‘but I want one. Let’s see what else is here.’

We made our way through into the main hallway. The front door ahead of us and a staircase to one side. ‘I’ll take the upstairs. You stay down here. If anything happens you know what to do.’ I knew but tried my best not to think about it as Charlie made his way up the stairs. Should something happen we would both make our way to the rendezvous separately. There we’d wait until the other turned up or it got dark. Whatever happened first. I checked my phone. We’d been at the bus stop six minutes ago. Into the living room. Not too messy, not too tidy. Lived in. A forty-inch flat screen mounted onto a magnolia wall. Two lazy-boys and a sofa. All clad in black leather and looking new. They stood on a thick carpet, off-white, maybe cream. A glass coffee table in the middle of the room. A few magazines stacked on top, two copies of *GQ*, the June and July issues, his, both looking heavily thumbed through. Hidden underneath the two lads’ mags was a third, a *Marie-Clare*, this month’s, and a copy of Iain Banks *Complicity*. I’d read it myself; I liked it. That too had been thoroughly pored over. The magazines shared space on the table top with a coffee mug, almost empty, lukewarm. There were pictures on the mantelpiece. Two commemorated the first day at school for each of the two Vanderbilt children, shorts instead of trousers, milk teeth smiles. There were family portraits too, a few from summer holidays, and others the result of a professional photoshoot. The last had an old couple and looked faded, grandparents. The man looked like Arthur. They all do to me now. A crash coming from upstairs. Charlie in the bedroom. Silence, then more crashing but quieter this time. It echoed through the house and I felt the prick of adrenaline surge. My heart beat loud behind my eyes and for a second I heard sirens. The sun lit up the room from behind net curtains. I peeled them back and looked
outside. The street looked the same as before we left it. Nobody had heard Charlie’s
controlled demolition upstairs. My gut loosened slightly. I looked around for anything
valuable and portable. Unlike Charlie I made sure not to break anything. In the corner
was a glass cabinet filled with decorative plates and wine glasses. There were backing
lights to the cabinet and when you switched them on the contents shimmered. Each
plate was mounted so it faced you and each had a portrait of a bird of prey delicately
painted upon it, Hawks, Eagles, and Falcons. I thought about it then reached in and
took half a dozen. They were heavy but fitted. The scraped together in the rucksack. I
left the wine glasses, they were certain to break in the bag. I carried on searching the
room other items of interest. Nothing. That’s the weird thing about people’s houses.
Most of the stuff we keep in them is worthless. Their only value the memories they
inspire. I contemplated taking the Blu-ray player but it was far too big. I checked my
phone. We’d entered the house eight minutes ago. I gave up with the living room and
went looking for the study. I imagined the blueprints of the house that Charlie had
found. About ten years ago Vanderbilt had built a ground floor extension where once
there was a conservatory. Behind the garage.

I left the living room and went back into the hallway. To my right was the
front door. To my left led back towards the kitchen. I could still here Charlie’s
footsteps upstairs. In front of me was a third corridor that led underneath the stairs
towards the garage. I walked along it. At the end there were two doors. One facing the
front of the house I guessed was the garage. The one facing the garden I guessed was
the study. I turned the knob and pushed the door. Locked. This must be it. The
adrenaline made my hands shook as I retreated four or five steps until my back was
pressed against the garage door, ready to shoulder charge the wooden door that barred
my way. A jolt of pain went through my body as I made contact, the door didn’t
move. Nothing broken, I tried again. The hinges gave just a little before coming to a
rest. One more try. I could almost sense the burst blood vessels in my shoulder and
upper arm, turning my white skin a darker shade of blue. I had to get through that
door. I saw a Land Rover picking its way through traffic, sailing through amber traffic
lights, kids playing in the back with video games or eating sweets. The car moving
ever closer. I retreated once more, half a dozen steps this time and charged headlong
at the door. The pleasing sound of wood splitting accompanied me making contact
and the door flung open. I hit the ground of Vanderbilt’s study and came to a halt on a rug that sat above wood panel flooring.

I was in.

The door had flown open with such force that it had knocked over several pictures that had previously sat upon a filing cabinet. These were different from the ones in the living room, no pictures of family here: Vanderbilt with a soap star, Vanderbilt with a Tory minister, Vanderbilt with footballer. Each image of Vanderbilt frozen in the same expression, a big toothy, almost folksy, smile juxtaposed with those cold calculating eyes. Aside from the mess I’d made with my entrance the room was fastidiously tidy. A bookshelf that ran the height and length of one wall was completely filled with hardbacks of all colours, volumes on military history, a few biographies, no novels that I could find, and a few first editions. They went straight into the rucksack too. There were more framed photographs hanging on the opposite wall. Vanderbilt with more of the good and the great. Vanderbilt with that same unsettling smile. Vanderbilt had his desk below these photographs. Two large screens sat between stacks of paper and stationary strewn across the desk. In front of the monitors was a void where his laptop had been the previous evening. Shit. I looked out the giant screen window at the garden’s immaculate lawn and tried to put myself in Vanderbilt’s shoes. Imagining him sitting in his desk chair calming Fox down over the phone, putting together his escape plan, smiling to himself as the press turned on its own. I forced myself to breathe deeply, trying to keep the panic as far away from me as the Land Rover. I looked at my phone’s stopwatch; we’d been in the house for twelve minutes. Eight to go. There must be something here. I tore at the desk drawers, ripping them from the desk, rifling through the contents, files, old magazines, prescription pills. Nothing useful aside from two phones and an expensive watch, which promptly joined the first editions in the backpack. With six minutes left I went back to the bookcase and started to pull the books out, hoping they were obscuring a file or something I could use against Vanderbilt. Anything. I was getting desperate. Tears began to form in my eyes and I felt like screaming. For some reason I heard Turner’s voice in my head, calling me a fucking embryo in his office, ‘Tinkerballs’. Me looking at the framed stories on the wall. Me now thinking how Vanderbilt and Turner had the same taste in décor. The same narcissism.
Three minutes.

I dropped the books and walked over to the photographs on the wall, not really sure what I expected to find. I took the first from the wall and looked at it. Vanderbilt was sat at a table in a tuxedo, his arm around a premiership footballer, Giles something. I remembered him, he was French and played for Arsenal for a few seasons, midfield I think. I couldn’t recollect him ever getting in to trouble the way footballers are apt to do, hookers and hotel rooms mainly. Probably why I couldn’t remember his name. Both of the men looked drunk but Vanderbilt’s expression suggested Giles was a client rather than a friend. I struggled to think of a social circle that might include the both of them. My phone alarm began to sound. I looked at it and switched it off. Upstairs I could hear Charlie, his alarm also audible in the otherwise quiet house. I hoped he’d had more success than I’d had. Time to go. The photograph was still in my hand. I thought for a second about rehanging it. Fuck him. I turned the photograph over, hoping to see a note that identified the footballer. Taped to back of the frame was a pen drive. I tore it from the frame and put it in my pocket. I dropped the photograph; it smashed on the hard wood floor. I grabbed the backpack and left the room. Charlie was on the stairs, his backpack clearly full, its contents jangled as he took each flight of steps. A small, satisfied, smile on his face.

Everything else happened in a sort of blur. Remembered images. Adrenaline does funny things to memory. First we retraced our steps. Hallway, dining room, Kitchen. Out through the kitchen door. Back around the side of the house. Paused to remove gloves and scout ahead. Coast clear. Then we headed across the still empty drive out onto the road. Head up, casual, off to catch a train. We walked down the street past returning school children. Not too quickly. The backpack was heavy. The straps dug into my shoulders. Charlie was silent. I prayed not to see a black Land Rover driving towards us. Small mercies. We made a left off the main road down a side street. We walked on. Senses straining to hear a shout, or a siren, or footsteps charging towards us. I was desperate to run. Charlie kept me walking. Slowly. In Charlie we trust. I fondled the pen drive in my pocket trying to take my mind off what was happening. I turned it over with my fingers, felt the edges of metal end with my thumbnail. I tried to speculate about what the drive contained but my brain didn’t have the capacity. The world beyond the next step was unknowable to it and just as irrelevant. I looked at my phone and saw that we’d left the house sixteen minutes ago. Susan and the kids were
probably pulling into the drive. The Land Rover’s tyres squeaking on the gravel. Maybe they were already inside and a tearful Susan was on the phone to the police or to her husband whilst the children wept. I pushed the thought away. They’ll be fine. It’s only stuff after all. I thought about Vanderbilt taking the call. His face as Susan listed what was missing. Him asking if we’d gotten into his office. On and on we walked. Then the park came into view way off into the distance. It’s big gates open and welcoming. Our destination. Beyond the gates was a hill. I could make out people walking their dogs, couples walking hand in hand on top of it. We walked through the gates along a path. We passed people. I forced myself to make eye contact and give one or two a casual nod. As we passed others I stared across the lake to our right, little sailing boats bounced on the surface, a line of them moored to a wooden jetty. Orange buoys floated in the centre of the lake, a target for school children to sail to before returning once again to the jetty. The incline built as we made our way further and further up the path towards the hill’s summit. There was a bench at the summit. We sat there and looked out back towards a London in the grip of rush hour. The wind brushed my hair but carried no sirens. Breath came to me just a little bit easier than it did over the past few hours and I filled my lungs. It felt like I’d been holding my breath without realising it. The adrenaline was starting to dissipate, replaced with euphoria. I wanted to shout. To raise my hands aloft and celebrate. Charlie smiled and started to laugh. He put his backpack down and started to examine his haul. I took out the pen drive from my pocket, my brain finally getting curious.

Job done.

Chapter Twenty-Three

The pen drive could so easily have been nothing. But it wasn’t. It could just as easily have contained holiday snaps or a tax return. But it didn’t contain any of those either. What it contained was audio recordings, hundreds of them. It turned out that Vanderbilt had a habit of recording all of his conversations with clients. Most were completely mundane but not all and certainly not the ones he had with Fox in the weeks leading up to Christmas. You could recognise Fox’s voice anywhere, that smooth, slightly posh accent. But in these tapes it lacked its usual warmth that you
could hear every Saturday night. Instead it had been replaced with language that could have made even Turner blush. Fox was angry with Anna. Apoplectically angry. Just after I’d broken the story of Fox beating Anna he and Vanderbilt discussed at length with Fox about what was to be done. It was Vanderbilt that suggested sending her to Grange Park. It didn’t appear that Anna had a choice in the matter. I couldn’t find any recordings of his conversations with her. Perhaps he’d deleted them after she’d died. I spent half the night transcribing Fox’s increasingly paranoid and vicious Anna-inspired rants to Vanderbilt. The guy was paranoid as fuck, borderline psychotic, and more than once I heard the sound of objects smashing against floors and walls. There were dozens of such recordings. It appeared that Fox had spent most of Christmas wasted and whiled the time away on the phone to Vanderbilt, cursing and threatening his ex-girlfriend. More than once Vanderbilt had talked him out of visiting Anna at Grange Park out of fear over what Fox might do. For his part Vanderbilt kept meticulous records. Just because Fox was his client now didn’t mean that he’d always be. Information is power after all, and whenever listening to Fox’s ranting ceased to be lucrative he’d have more than enough on the rising star to keep him in his publicist’s pocket. By this time I had little doubt that the vast majority of stories about a Vanderbilt-represented star had Vanderbilt at their source. It’s just how the game is played and how Vanderbilt managed to retain his influence over so much of Fleet Street. Each file was time-stamped and set in chronological order, yet there were no telltale signs of whose voice would be contained on the recording. That meant going through them individually, one at a time. It was a slow process but there was plenty of variety. Vanderbilt had a very rich and varied clientele. Footballers, reality TV stars, rent-a-gobs all turned up in between Fox’s rants. I made a note of them and then carried on chasing the Fox.

It was about midnight when I got to a conversation between Fox and Vanderbilt that took place about the time I was being bundled into a Taxi with Lily that night in January. I checked the date. Vanderbilt had recorded this the night Anna died. The conversation wasn’t long. ‘Christ, Dexter have you got any idea what time it is?!’ That was Vanderbilt’s voice. Clear and pissed off, probably wondering if Fox was worth the trouble. Usually Fox would scream and shout down the line, demanding Vanderbilt do something about the constant doorstepping and paparazzi following him everywhere. This conversation though started with nothing more than
sniffing at the other end of the line and footsteps. ‘Dexter why are you calling me?’ Fox asked the static on the line. Still more sniffing, the footsteps had ceased. Finally Dexter Fox spoke, his voice soft and tentative, broken, ‘Jerry, you’ve got to help me… it’s Anna.’ Even drunk and slurring Fox’s voice was still clear over the recording. The vocal training was worth it.

‘Okay Dexter, calm down. What about Anna? Where are you? Is she there?’

‘She came back,’ there was a long pause and then a deep breathe, ‘Jerry, she’s not breathing!’

‘Well call an ambulance!’ Vanderbilt shouted down the phone.

There was another long pause before Dexter spoke, ‘I can’t.’

‘Why not?’

‘I just can’t. I think the stupid bitch is dead. You’ve got to help me.’

Through my computer speakers I could hear Fox starting to sob louder. Bawling his eyes out the way you didn’t see or hear at the press conference. Dexter Fox seeing his whole career, his whole life, disappear in an instant. You almost felt sorry for him. This went on for almost a minute, Fox’s tears and wails, Vanderbilt saying nothing. I imagined his mind turning over the situation. Looking for the right course of action. ‘Where are you?’ said the publicist to his best client.

‘I’m here,’ Fox said, unhelpfully.

‘Where is here?’

‘At Anna’s.’

‘Okay stay there. I’ll have someone come meet you.’

‘Okay.’ Fox’s voice was almost completely inaudible; I had to turn the volume up.

‘Dexter?’

‘Yeah.’

‘It’ll be okay kid.’
And that was it. The first time I heard it I couldn’t believe it. I listened to it again, and again. Until I could transcribe it from memory. Which I did. I’d been right. What came next could only be guessed at. I don’t know who met Fox at Anna’s place but I was sure it was a fixer. Someone who would spirit Fox safely away and make Anna’s death look accidental. That would explain the coroner’s report. The police never look past the obvious. Charlie and I both knew that from past experience.

So this was the proof. Fox was at least involved with Anna’s death and Vanderbilt helped cover it up. I was right. The euphoria didn’t last long. Anna was still dead and she shouldn’t have been. Kelly Stone was still dead and that was on me. That there were other contributors didn’t matter. You were either responsible or you weren’t. I was as guilty as anyone else. After I’d transcribed Fox’s conversation with Vanderbilt the night Anna died, I listened to the next file. Then the next. And so on. It was about dawn when I got to the tape Vanderbilt had kept of his conversation with Kelly’s boyfriend. I listened to it over and over until Charlie told me to stop. ‘What’s done is done’, he said. ‘Leave it alone’. Charlie had stayed the whole night through listening to the more recent files. He put names to voices like it was some sort of game of ‘Guess Who?’ He’d really taken to transcription. That was a good thing. There were thousands, possibly tens of thousands of recordings to go through. Vanderbilt seemingly recorded every phone conversation that he could. Luckily Charlie thought it pointless to plan another job for a while. Best to stay low.

‘Besides,’ he said, ‘this was more interesting.’ There was nothing in the papers about the burglary, which was surprising given Vanderbilt’s pseudo-celebrity status but it made sense when you thought about it. If Vanderbilt were using the tapes as leverage he wouldn’t want anybody to know or even suspect that he no longer had them in his possession. There was a good chance that he hadn’t gotten the police involved either. Charlie thought he’d committed the perfect crime.

It felt good to imagine how that bastard must have felt. To be so angry and powerless at the same time. To be victimised, knocked off your perch. I’d been there. He put me there. Revenge is indeed as sweet as they say.

Charlie and I debated what to do with the tapes. How best to get them into the public domain. Charlie wanted to do a Wikileaks-style job. Upload them all to a server for everyone to see. I liked that idea but worried about exposure. The tapes
would be too easy to dismiss as forgeries. We needed legitimacy and exposure. We also needed a way of minimising blowback. I had a better idea. We made copies and put them on another pen drive. Then we waited. I let Charlie take care of fencing the haul, that kept him busy and after a few weeks we were over ten grand richer. Whilst I was breaking into the study, Charlie had found plenty in the upstairs of the Vanderbilt residence. He’d found Mrs. Vanderbilt’s jewellery box and emptied it, coming away with half a dozen rings and three necklaces, all of which went to a local jeweller who could never turn down a bargain. Charlie had left anything engraved alone, for obvious reasons. Across the bedrooms he’d found two more iPads, a laptop, and a Playstation Four with various games and joypads. Add that to the vintage bottles of red he’d found in the kitchen and the stuff I’d lifted from the office and living room and we’d done very well for ourselves. I kept the watch I’d found. Charlie estimated that it was worth over a grand but I wanted a souvenir. Just knowing that it’s there, safely hidden away in a drawer at home has always made me smile. I’ve hardly worn it since it came into my possession; it’s just for special occasions. The first time I wore it out of the house was the last night of August. That night I took the pen drive and placed it in an envelope along with a letter explaining its contents. I walked down the stairs and passed the living room where mum was watching Downton Abbey. The night was cooler than it had been recently. It was a night on the edge of change, warmed only by the dying embers of summer. I walked to the end of the street to a big red post box. When I was a kid and Dad sent me to post a letter I’d have to jump to be able to reach the slot. No problems now though. Instantly the letter disappeared into darkness having just begun its long journey to bring its contents into the light. I had no regrets. The wheels were now in motion and there was nothing I could do to stop it. Even if I’d wanted to. I walked back home feeling lighter; the chips were about to fall where they may.

**Chapter Twenty-Four**

A few days later my mobile phone rang. Loud enough to wake me. I’d swapped the SIM card and only one person had the number. I’d been expecting the call but I’d been dozing. The book I’d been reading sat square on my chest as I lay flat on my back. The park I was in was practically deserted. It was always like that on
a Monday afternoon. I stretched out on the grass. It was warm and slightly ticklish. A thousand tiny green matchsticks against my skin, and just as flammable. It hadn’t rained in weeks. Way above my head, flights bound to and from Heathrow played hide and seek amongst the wispy clouds. Their vapour trails crisscrossing the sky, white slices in the baby blue. I watched them diffuse into the invisible vapour. In the distance the trees shimmered, their leaves full bloom and proud against the beating sun. The trees rustled whilst sparrows and robins began their intricate solos, seeking each other out. Marco. Polo. Marco. Polo. Nobody else was there to enjoy this. They were far away. The only clue to their existence the steady drone and whine of engines far off in the distance. Soon it would grow louder as mid-afternoon gave way to rush hour. A helicopter passed by overhead, speeding from one part of London to another. In fact I could barely register its presence. I was thinking about Coco and imagining who she really was, underneath it all. The helicopter was past before I knew it was really there. It might have been a police chopper or an air ambulance. I didn’t know, you couldn’t tell in the sunlight. Whatever it was it paid me as much interest as I it and that was fine. A little while ago I’d have broken into a cold sweat and waited for the sounds of sirens, but not anymore. Instead I just got more comfortable on the grass though it continued to tickle my bare neck and later I’d complain of sunburn in September. Like everything it was temporary, like everything else it didn’t really matter. None of it really mattered. I was outside of the wheel. Out of the cage. I was staring back at the whole menagerie, watching the other animals. Purely an interested observer. Awake now, I scanned the horizon. There was a jogger following the park fence that held back the cityscape beyond. For a second I found myself thinking about nature reserves and wondering if the fences were there to keep the animals in or the world out? I wondered if the jogger might suddenly stop running wherever the fence took him. But he didn’t, they never do. He probably did that same route every day. It’s comforting I guess. We’re creatures of habit.

The phone was still ringing. I’d disabled the voicemail. I looked at the phone screen, a private number, but I know who it was. ‘Hello, Lily.’ On the other end of the line I could hear the muffled sounds of a busy office.

‘How’d you know it was me?’ I’d missed her voice.

‘I have my ways. What did you think of the care package I sent?’
Lily Hemmings now had in her possession every taped conversation between Vanderbilt and Dexter Fox. More than enough to monster them both and probably spark a criminal investigation in Anna’s death. It would make Lily as a reporter.

‘Well it’s all a bit of a mind-fuck. Where did you get this from?’ I ignored that. There were more important points to cover. ‘Have you told Turner?’ I asked.

Your letter said not to. Are you after a way back in from the cold?’ God knows I’d thought about it. I’d even talked to Charlie about it. But after a while it was pretty clear what I was going to do. ‘I think I might freelance for a while.’ I told her and didn’t feel even the slightest bit of regret. I was thinking clearly. I’d been out of work for almost nine months by then. That’s a lot of time to reflect. I’d had a long time to think about Fox, and Vanderbilt, and Turner. The whole dirty business. Was Turner ever really going to let me nail Fox to the wall? Was he fuck. Running a story on Fox beating up his girlfriend was one thing. Telling the world that he had a hand in her death? That’s a story that Vanderbilt would do anything to prevent reaching the public domain. My bet was Turner was going to use anything I dragged up on Fox as leverage over Vanderbilt. With access to Vanderbilt’s information Turner would have a steady stream of exclusives, driving circulation and enhancing his reputation. He’d be able to ride that all the way to a national title, maybe even move into television. Become the new Piers Morgan. All based on a dirty deal with Vanderbilt. Vanderbilt had just beaten him to the punch. It was his job to be one step ahead after all. Which led back to the original problem. What to do with the tapes? That’s where Lily came in. ‘After you publish, the police will want to investigate. No sweeping this under the rug. Vanderbilt has everyone in his pocket, celebrities, editors, you name it. It’s going to get hairy, Lily. When the police come for the tapes let them have them just keep my name out of everything. I’m a confidential source.’

Lily the features girl. Lily the optimist. It grated that Turner would benefit in the short term. He’d have more front pages to frame and stick on his wall. He’d become the editor that discovered Lily Hemmings whose name was on the byline of all his big exclusives. Eventually though her star would rise enough and she’d be promoted up the ladder at the Enquirer or head hunted by one of the national titles. She might even take Turner’s job. She’d make it. That was something. She was better than me. She hadn’t gotten herself sacked for a start. ‘Of course,’ Lily replied, ‘I don’t know why
you’re letting me take credit though? This is your ticket back in.’ It felt weird to hear someone expressing concern for me. I’d do just fine out of this arrangement. For my part I planned to make a steady income from the payments I’d get for the stories I gave to Lily. I’d also get to see Vanderbilt and Fox go down for Anna’s death from afar. I hoped deep down Vanderbilt knew it was me. Yes I’d do just fine out of all this. ‘I don’t think I want to be back in, Lily. I think I’m happy where I am. Let me know progress as it happens. I’ll keep an eye out for the story.’ I said, still staring up at the sky. ‘Somehow I don’t think you’ll miss it! Speak soon and thanks.’ The line went dead.

I looked at my watch, his watch, and smiled. Like I said, I only wear it for special occasions. The wind swept through the trees. It would be autumn soon. We were approaching the edge. The world was beginning to change once more. With Vanderbilt gone there would be a vacuum. A vacuum that someone would eventually try to fill. It’s the way these things work. Over and over again. The cycle repeating itself in perpetual motion. It made me sick. It wasn’t for me anymore. I don’t know what my future holds. But that doesn’t scare me anymore. Charlie is right. We aren’t the job we do. I’m no more a burglar than I am a journalist. Charlie no more a thief than a swimmer. We aren’t pawns of the powerful or victims of the society that favours them. We choose to abide by their rules. We choose to live in their society.

But, I am who I am.

**Introducing The Social Identity Perspective**

This chapter introduces central ideas relating to the Social Identity Perspective. These ideas are key to the approach towards character formation that this thesis proposes, and by extension narrative formation, in realist fiction. It is important to note that this chapter focuses only on the key ideas pertinent to the thesis and so has been
necessarily restrictive in its scope. Some of the excluded components of the model that are not examined here are suggested in the conclusion of this thesis as avenues for future study. The Social Identity Perspective itself is primarily constructed of two sub-theories. The first sub-theory is called ‘The Social Identity Theory of Intergroup Behaviour’ or simply *Social Identity Theory* and owes its origins to research conducted mainly by Henri Tajfel. The second significant strand of the *Social Identity Perspective* grew from Social Identity Theory and is known as *Self-Categorization Theory*. First proposed by Turner, Self-Categorization Theory may be more accurately described as ‘The Social Identity Theory of the Group’. The two theories are grouped together in The Social Identity Perspective since they form a symbiotic relationship in their attempts to explain social behaviour, Social Identity Theory helps to illuminate group formation and group identity. It focuses upon ideas of discrimination and different types of intergroup behaviour such as conflict or cooperation and uses the concept of self-enhancement through a positive social identity as the motivating factor for inter-group competition. Self-Categorization Theory analyses how group identity influences individual identity, what causes an individual to identify with particular social groups, and categorizes others in terms of groupings as well as manifest group behaviours.

The Social Identity Perspective is part of and influenced by the wider field of social psychology and in particular the field of intergroup relations. Although theorists such as Muzafer Sherif had conducted experiments into Social Influence as far back as the 1930s it was only after the Second World War and the resultant Nuremberg trials that serious research into the effect of external influence on the individual was conducted. These experiments, conducted by theorists such as Solomon Asch (the Conformity Experiment, 1951), Stanley Milgram (The Milgram Experiment, 1963), Serge Moscovici (Influences of a consistent minority on the responses of a majority in a colour perception task, 1969) and eventually Philip Zimbardo (The Stanford Prison Experiment, 1971) became hallmarks of an increasingly popular school of psychological theory. Some of those studies are discussed later in this chapter. Like Milgram, Zimbardo and other social psychologists, Tajfel began his research into the areas of prejudice and social identity as a result of the rise of Nazism prior to the Second World War. From that starting point Tajfel branched into the area of intergroup relations where, in collaboration with
John Turner, he developed Social Identity Theory in 1979. Turner would then propose Self-Categorization Theory in 1987 as a means of supporting the Social Identity Theory and thus forming the Social Identity Approach or Perspective, as it is referred to within this thesis. The Social Identity Perspective postulates that individuals use a process of social categorization to correctly identify, and otherwise make sense of, their environment. This process can reduce an individual’s uncertainty about their environment, uncertainty that could contain threats to their personal safety or otherwise lead to disadvantageous scenarios for the individual, and can regulate social interaction between individuals. As Hogg suggests, even in a western society that prizes individuality, group influence is obvious:

There is much made, particularly in Western societies, of individuality—how people are uniquely different from one another. However, if you observe a group of teens, or some friends at a restaurant, or a large crowd at a soccer match, you will also be struck at how similar people are to one another in dress and behaviour. Groups and situations seem somehow to submerge uniqueness in a sea of commonality, and the same person behaves differently as he or she moves from situation to situation and group to group. Indeed, groups and situations have their own behavioural attributes that regulate the behaviour of people in the situation or belonging to the group.

As Hogg states, behaviour is one of the key attributes used to categorize individuals into groups, and for observing individuals to modify their behaviour according to preconceived notions of the observed group. If a tribeswoman out foraging for food sees a member of her tribe attacked by a man from another tribe, in the absence of any confounding information, from the point of view of the woman, the behaviour of the attacker is used to characterize the behaviour of his entire tribe, this is known as a group norm and the attacker is a prototype of that group norm. A day later the woman encounters another member of the same tribe responsible for the attack. As a result of associating violence towards her tribe as a group norm for the members of this other tribe, the woman avoids the tribesman, having categorized him as dangerous due to her prior experience of witnessing a similar tribesman attack a member of her own tribe. It is the word similar here that is key as the two tribesmen are, of course, not the same person. Although a simple example, this illustrates the utility of such social categorizations; they are shorthand for known quantities in an inherently uncertain social world. The observer forms these categorizations through interaction with other people, and this in turn means our social categorizations are not fixed but instead
evolve as the social world around us evolves. The rest of this chapter will now explain how the Social Identity Perspective suggests these categorizations are made and the empirical support which has been collated to underpin the theory.

Social categorization describes the process individuals employ unconsciously to identity social groups and, in turn, their own membership within or exclusion from said groupings. Individuals achieve this through identification of what have been referred to as prototypes of group behaviour; these prototypes represent a rough collection of attributes that define a group in opposition to other groups. They identify similarities between members of the same ingroup and differences between those with ingroup membership and those belonging to other groups. Another way of explaining this observation is that prototypes,

accentuate intragroup similarities (assimilation) and intergroup differences (contrast) and thus transform a bewilderingly diverse social stimulus domain into a smaller set of distinct and clearly circumscribed categories. Group prototypes submerge variability and diversity in a single representation that characterizes an entire human group.7

For the realist fiction writer who is tasked primarily with providing their characters with believable behavioural traits this process of prototypical behaviour and group membership becomes a valuable model. If human behaviour is defined by various salient group memberships and the members’ perceived similarity to group prototypes then it becomes advantageous for the writer of realist fiction to adopt a similar philosophy in their character construction with regard to the social context they place them within, a form of neo-naturalism it could be argued. As Hogg goes on to detail in his essay, ‘Social Identity, Self-Categorization, and the Communication of Group Norms’, prototypes obey the metacontrast principle in the sense that they maximise the ratio of intergroup differences to intragroup differences and in doing so enhance perceived entitativity which first Campbell in 1958 and then Hamilton & Sherman in 1996 found in their studies.8 Hogg defined entitativity as ‘the property of a group that makes it appear to be a coherent and distinct entity that’s homogeneous and well structured, has clear boundaries, and whose members share a common fate’.9 In order to illustrate how many of these ideas work before applying them directly to the creative element of the thesis, a simple example can be given concerning Liverpool and Real Madrid football teams playing a match whilst being observed by a supporter. The supporter utilises a process of social categorization to identify the two teams.
They know that the prototype Liverpool player plays in a red jersey and the prototypical Real Madrid player plays in a white jersey so on that basis the supporter is able to successfully identify the two teams and attribute further group characteristics they associate with the two groups. These group characteristics might include for instance that Liverpool FC are an English team and that Real Madrid are a Spanish team. Despite the fact that both teams might feature players who are neither of these nationalities, the process of entitativity overrides such details and allows the supporter to view each team as a homogeneous representation of the team’s nationality. This example also illustrates how prototypes are context dependent. The representation of the two sets of players will be completely different if an individual were comparing them with Rugby players or, say, monkeys. In those contexts the prototype may simply be ‘football players’ or even ‘humans’ and so, with membership characteristics being far more inclusive of the human population, they create a much larger ingroup whose entitativitiy minimises the differences between football players or humans (intragroup differences) and maximises the differences between football players and rugby players or humans and monkeys (intergroup differences). I will return to this example periodically throughout this thesis in order to illustrate other facets of the theory. By applying this to an existing literary example we see the importance of social categorization and how assumptions based on those behaviours can be exploited by the writer for dramatic effect. In J.D Salinger’s *Catcher in the Rye,* for example, the central protagonist Holden is offered a room at the home of his favourite English teacher Mr Antolini. Previous to this event Holden had categorized Mr. Antolini as somewhat of an ally and protective influence. When Holden awakens to find Mr. Antolini stroking his hair, a gesture Holden categorizes as indicative of homosexuality it prompts Holden to feel uncomfortable and he leaves as a result of Mr. Antolini displaying behaviour not consistent with the social categorization within which Holden has defined him. Holden then goes on to question whether his assumptions about Mr. Antolini’s advances were correct. This example shows how social categorization is represented within novels and how this drives both plot and characterisation. In the case of the footballers, their individual nationalities, and the nationality of the team, there is a tendency in social categorization to depersonalize and reconstruct a representation of the players in order to satisfy a context-dependant prototype of the group. In this example Liverpool supporters might ignore the fact that most of the players representing Liverpool FC on the pitch hold no
personal connection to the city of Liverpool, a player characteristic highly valued amongst the team’s followers. Each player’s identity is instead recast and reconfigured by the fan so as to become part of the ingroup of ‘Liverpool FC’ be that as a supporter or player. This process effectively depersonalises all who have membership of the ingroup, they are no longer viewed individually but rather as a collection of elements that embody the group prototype. In this case an observer might look at the colour of the shirt both fans and players are wearing and depersonalise all of those people into one homogenous group, in this case Liverpool supporters. To take this phenomenon one stage further Hogg suggests that,

Since group prototypes specify how people feel, perceive, think, and behave, social categorization generates stereotypical expectations and encourages stereotype-consistent interpretation of ambiguous behaviours. This effect is more marked as a function of the degree to which you feel the person is group prototypical. 10

Therefore according to Social Identity Perspective, individuals base both their personal behaviour, and interpretation of the behaviour of others, on members of the ingroup who serve as prototypes for that group. They do this in order to retain membership within the group so when the football example if an individual witnesses a football player wearing a red shirt that individual would expect the player to be attempting to win the game for Liverpool FC. This is of course an example so basic that it verges on the commonsensical, but it is instructive to develop it further in order to demonstrate the theory in practice. In comparing Steven Gerrard, a long-time Liverpool FC player with a strong personal connection to the city with another Liverpool FC player, for example, Phillipe Coutinho, a Brazilian player who has only played for the club for a short period of time, social categorization suggests that Steven Gerrard (though his personal long standing connections to the city) is more prototypical of a Liverpool FC ingroup member than Phillipe Countinho. This very prototypicality will increase stereotypical expectations upon Gerrard relative to Countinho by other members of the ingroup. This has a further consequence for all members of the ingroup and the second strand of the social identity perspective (self-categorization theory) explains these consequences will be discussed in greater detail later in this chapter. Social categorization nearly always incorporates the self or is used in reference to the self. In the same way that an observer will categorize others according to the rubric of social-categorization so too does the observer categorize
himself or herself, they self-categorize as Turner theorised. As a result they de-personalize themselves when they self-categorize in the same manner as when they categorize others. However, as Hogg describes, self-categorization goes even further:

It not only transforms self-conception and generates a feeling of belonging and group identification, but also transforms how we actually feel and behave to conform to the group prototype. Self-Categorization causes our thoughts, feelings, perceptions, and behaviour to conform to our prototype of the ingroup.11

These prototypes quickly become group norms which are shared between groups, both in terms of ingroups and outgroups, and these are in turn repeatedly reinforced as Moscovici (1976) points out in his earlier research on minority influence within groups.12 A further facet of these prototypes is that an ingroup will not only share their own ‘ingroup’ norm but also the expectations and stereotypes that categorize that particular ingroup’s perception of other outgroups. For example, an observer might look at some of the stereotypes rival football club fans have of each other: that Liverpool fans are work-shy, that Manchester United fans have no connection with Manchester, that Chelsea fans used to support another club but have been drawn to Chelsea through its recent success. These shared beliefs, these group norms, serve to galvanize the ingroup that believes in them as much as to characterize and identify an outgroup as research by Turner suggests.13 Muzafer Sheriff (1936) used experiments to demonstrate the formation of a group norm as socially produced by a psychologically internalized frame of reference. Participants were placed in a deliberately ambiguous situation (in this case participants had to estimate the movement of a point of light in a darkened room despite the point of light in fact being stationary and the auto-kinetic effect (the phenomenon of visual perception in which a stationary point of light in an otherwise dark environment appears to move, producing an optical illusion of movement) firstly as individuals alone in order to produce a particular range of responses for each participant. Participants were then subjected to the same conditions once more but this time whilst present with participants whose individual range of responses were significantly different from their own. As a result of the group interaction the range of responses for each of the participants began to converge until a shared range of responses was established. These common norm ranges were specific to each group tested and Sherriff concluded that they must be a social product of interaction between group members.
and therefore ‘new and supra-individual qualities arise in the group situations.’\(^{14}\)

Upon once again exposing members of the group to the same test as individuals, Sherriff found that members continued to act in accordance with the group norms previously established. Later research conducted into this phenomenon has revealed that autokinetic norms such as those highlighted here are extremely enduring.

It is how these group norms influence the behaviour of a depersonalized group member that is of particular interest to the social identity perspective, and in turn, as this thesis argues, the writer of realist fiction. If the writer comprehends that it is group membership that dictates behaviour then more time should be spent on identifying what social groups a character may have membership of and what consequential behaviour would ensue. To ascertain which behaviours may manifest within an individual, an observer must first be able to correctly identify which social category is salient as the basis for perception and self-conception within the individual. In the Liverpool versus Real Madrid example, the observer must first identify which ingroup an individual feels part of and therefore what behaviours are normative for that group. The main principle for identifying social identity salience concerns two distinct criteria - accessibility, and fit - and was developed by Oakes (1987). In short, the social categorization that has both optimal fit and accessibility becomes psychologically salient in the context (social situation or ingroup) within which it presents itself.\(^{15}\)

The Social Identity Perspective suggests that individuals use social categorizations to make sense of society. These social categorizations have two types of accessibility; they are either chronologically accessible or situationally assessable. Chronically accessible social categorizations exist within an individual’s memory, the individual values them and they employ aspects of the self-concept. A good example of this may be an individual’s relationship to their birthplace. Situationally accessible social categorizations are clearly self-evident (Liverpool fans wearing Red) and always salient within a given social situation. There are also many social categorizations that can be both chronically and situationally accessible. These might include, as Mackie, Hamilton, Susskind, & Rosselli found in a 1996 study, both race and gender.\(^{16}\) This brings us to the second criterion of Oakes’ method of identifying social salience, fit. Individuals incorporate accessible social categorizations to make sense of their society. They evaluate each possible categorization in terms of its ability to account for similarities and differences
between other individuals. This process is called *comparative fit*.\textsuperscript{17} The individual also looks at how well a prototype accounts for the behaviour of an individual. This process is known as *normative fit*.\textsuperscript{18} There may be an individual in attendance at our football match who is wearing a red shirt (a situationally accessible social categorization as she is at a Liverpool football match and an example of comparative fit when compared with the Real Madrid supporters who will be more likely to wear white) and when Liverpool score a goal she celebrates (an example of normative fit as the individual is conforming to the prototype of a Liverpool supporter). Based on the Oakes’ method of identifying social salience an observer might conclude that the identity most salient for this individual in such a situation is her identity as a Liverpool FC supporter. It is worth pointing out though that this model is a form of negotiation with regard to the person assigning social categorizations, an individual is categorized according to the categorization that they best fit rather than fit exactly. For example the observer may later learn on speaking to our Liverpool supporter that she actually comes from Derby. The fact that she does not entirely match the prototype of a Liverpool supporter is unimportant here in our categorization of her as such.

Self-Categorization Theory posits that individuals categorize themselves in much the same way as they categorize others, through Oakes’ accessibility and fit process. An individual depersonalizes themselves to fit with a prototype of their salient social categorization. That social categorization, or rather our salient social identity, allows us to identify with other ingroup members through accentuating our similarities with them and our shared differences with other groups (the outgroup). This in turn creates greater perceived entitativity and eventually leads to shared group and inter-group patterns of behaviour that conform to already established group norms. In addition to this, members of the same ingroup demonstrate a tendency to favour each other over members of an outgroup. Tajfel, alongside with Flament, Billig, and Bundy (1971) conducted a study into the minimal conditions within which ingroup members would show a bias toward each other as opposed to members of an outgroup.\textsuperscript{19} They classified this phenomenon as ‘intergroup discrimination’. Tajfael’s team created an experiment with a clear ingroup-outgroup dynamic so arbitrary that they expected no discrimination from participants chosen to take part in the study. The intention was then to introduce variables to provoke favouritism amongst ingroup
members. Two sets of participants were created at random and no social interaction between or within groups was allowed. This ensured that group membership remained anonymous, the individual was aware of their own personal group identity but they were unaware of the group identity of any other participant. The research team then assigned the participants the task of privately deciding to assign sums of money to pairs of anonymous others. These others were identifiable to the participants assigning money only by their group membership and their personal code number. Unexpectedly the study found that, even in this utterly arbitrary and highly controlled group setting, participants would discriminate in favour of ingroup members to the detriment of outgroup members. This led to the conclusion that social categorization inevitably leads to psychological group formation, even in the absence of any external evidence to support such a notion. As Turner himself concluded, the participants ‘seem to like the people in their group just because they are ingroup members rather than like the ingroup because of the specific individuals who are members.’

This was in spite of knowing the personal identities of those other members of the ingroup as Tajfel pointed out. This result has been corroborated many times using different participants and variables. One such example was a study conducted by Josue Tinoco in 1998 who looked at young religious people in Mexico City and found evidence of ingroup bias within four distinct religious groups. When questioned by Tinoco members of each group revealed that they were far more likely to participate in an activity with another member of their religious group (their ingroup) than they were with a member of any of the other religious group (the outgroups). This led Tinoco to conclude that this study offered proof of Ingroup Bias and supporting evidence for Self-Categorization Theory. With the obvious rewards (security, shared resources, success etc.) that ingroup membership promises an individual, social identity perspective suggests that the group is a powerful influence upon the individual.

Theorists have long studied the concept of conformity. The Social Identity theorist Solomon Asch, in a series of studies cited earlier in this chapter, focused on conformity amongst ingroups. Taking his cue from Sherif’s work on group norm formation, Asch observed how Sherif’s subjects had a tendency to average out their decisions into a range of group norms. Asch then sought to identify if this phenomenon was replicable. In the most famous of his studies, now simply referred to as ‘The Conformity Experiment’, participants were asked to make judgments on
simple tasks. The participants were shown lines of various lengths on a card and asked to decide which of the lines was a match for a target line. The decision-making process in this example is so obvious that errors are virtually non-existent and there is never any uncertainty over the correctness of their choices. The participant is then invited to undergo the test again but this time as part of a group with seven other participants. Whilst still making their own judgment they are allowed to witness the other participants (who were confederates following the instructions of the research team) giving unanimously the incorrect answer. As a result 32% of the participants conformed to the group decision and selected an incorrect answer. Although a significant number, 32% suggests that on the majority of occasions the group had no effect on the participant’s decision making. However, just as importantly, the participants experienced uncertainty surrounding their, obviously correct, answer contradicting that of the group’s obviously incorrect one. Nearly 70% of participants stated this explicitly in post-study interviews. It appears that the participants’ uncertainty is a social product of disagreement, the subjects disagreed with other members of the study that they expected to agree with because they classified the other participants as members of the same ingroup as themselves (in this case, in terms of their eyesight). Other studies, such as that conducted by Perrin and Spencer in 1980 who recreated Asch’s experiment with British university-level engineering students, a group known for their preciseness of measurement. The results of this study found very little evidence of conformity and thus Perrin and Spencer attempted to characterise Asch’s study as a ‘child of its time’ as it was conducted with American male university students in the 1950s, a time when group conformity was extremely valuable due to the political atmosphere produced by McCarthyism. However as Turner convincingly argues,

\[ \text{[t]he fact that for the most part people do not conform behaviourally, therefore, does not indicate that the incorrect group does not have persuasive, informational power, but simply that the naïve subjects are not finally persuaded, that try as hard as they might to see things from the group’s point of view, to be persuaded, they cannot in fact change what they see and so are unable honestly to agree.}\]

This theory is further supported by the work of Felix Neto (1995), who replicated Asch’s procedures but this time on a computer and using female psychology students in a Portuguese university, and found that a degree of conformity to a unanimous peer
group remains observable. In addition, participants reported considerable distress whilst under group pressure.

In addition to a sharing of beliefs amongst ingroup members it has been demonstrated that ingroup membership also has an effect on member behaviour. It is primarily this facet of The Social Identity Perspective that this thesis is most concerned with and forms the basis of the characterization for the creative element’s protagonists. The assumption that a prototype of a particular ingroup extends far beyond purely physical or extraneous characteristics but also to physical behaviour as well is a revelatory one for the creative writer and it is not difficult to see the potential applications of this theory to both characterization and plot. If plot is led by character development, which in turn is led by the social context in which the character finds themselves, then the Social Identity Perspective’s explanation of human behaviour can be reverse engineered to create a social context in which otherwise unbelievable or superficially uncharacteristic behaviour can be justified. The creative element incorporates characters behaving in a way that advances the plot but at the same time would be deemed unacceptable to the majority of society and therefore is more likely to be deemed unbelievable to the reader as a realistic option for that character to choose. However we can make these choices more believable by ensuring that the character comes to decide upon this course of action, not in a vacuum where the reader’s own social categorizations are salient, but in a rich social context where the character’s behaviour is fully justified. This rich social context will feature details that inspire behaviour that in other contexts might be out of place, one character killing another character might be considered unrealistic until we consider that the rich social context might be a conflict and the two characters opposing soldiers. Then it becomes decidedly more realistic, murder therefore becomes an expected behavioural trait in that specific social context. In these terms we might define a rich context as one that allows justifiable character behaviour to be based upon it. In the creative work below the narrator turns to burglary as a viable career choice. Under normal every day circumstances this decision seems extremely uncharacteristic of an individual living in a society with a rule of law. Indeed it appears discrepant with everything we know about the Narrator’s character thus far. However, because he has developed a new self-categorization, typified by his friend and fellow thief Charlie who serves as this ingroup’s prototype, the decision to engage in criminal acts becomes a viable group
If the Narrator didn’t take part in these illegal acts his prototypicality towards the ingroup would come into question and therefore his membership of that group put at risk. The social identity perspective suggests that ingroup prototypes not only illustrate behaviour but also prescribe it to those who wish to be considered group members. If you want to be described as a Liverpool FC fan you should celebrate when they are successful and commiserate when they are not. Outgroup norms can also effect ingroup norms. This is especially the case if there is limited information governing the ingroup categorization. There is evidence to suggest that an ingroup can be constructed as the antithesis of the outgroup norms. This has been discussed by Turner, Wetherall, & Hogg (1989). Once established, that ingroup then gains members through the same process of Self-Categorization as any other ingroup. This is a good explanation of the group polarization phenomenon commonly seen in society, a phenomenon which can manifest itself in various counter-cultures present today such as Hipster or Goth, all developing through a rejection of mainstream culture otherwise known as societal outgroup norms. The persuasive force of the prototype is likely to increase depending on how valuable ingroup membership is to a particular individual, in other words how valuable that categorization is to the individual’s self-conception. Research by Christensen, Rothgerber, Wood, & Matz, (2004) also found that group members are more likely to behave prototypically when the group’s value, definition, or even existence are in question. This mirrors what is proposed by The Social Identity Perspective which suggests that ingroup prototypes define and illustrate who an individual is because they also govern their self-concept. A threat to the group is therefore a threat to the self-concept, something viewed as extremely valuable to the individual.

This complex relationship between the self and the group is at the heart of The Social Identity Perspective. How the self-concept and social categorization are linked and why people define and categorize themselves into such groups, or categories, can be answered in terms of positive distinctiveness which Turner described as ‘the relative prototypicality of the ingroup on valued dimensions of intergroup comparison’. It is due to this intrinsic desire for positive distinctiveness and the resultant depersonalisation in order to become fully assimilated within the group that limits agency on the part of the individual. Tajfel explains how this fits within the wider construct of the Social Identity Perspective:
[t]he evaluation of one’s own group is determined with reference to specific other groups through social comparison in terms of value laden attributes and characteristics. Positively discrepant comparisons between ingroup and outgroup produce high prestige, negatively discrepant comparisons between ingroup and outgroup result in low prestige.  

Abrams and Hogg have studied this phenomenon and developed their own illustration of how positive distinctiveness occurs in the real world: ‘the enthusiastic support people feel for athletes of their own nationality during the Olympic Games or their interest in how many gold medals each country receives, is explicable in terms of the desire to experience (national) social identity positively.’ They go on to explain that a sense of ‘involvement, concern, and pride’ can be derived from such sharing of a social category with others. It is through this social act of sharing that individuals seek to obtain positive distinctiveness. As subjects go through life they instinctively aim to define themselves positively by means of their social identity, individuals define themselves by way of contrast with other individuals. It is a basic assumption of Social Identity Theory, and indeed social psychology as a whole, that individuals are intrinsically motivated to achieve so called positive distinctiveness. As Turner surmised, ‘there is a general tendency to seek positive distinctiveness for oneself at any salient level of self categorizaton.’ This tendency to seek positive distinctiveness is then manifested in ‘an upward directional drive which leads us to compare ourselves with others who are similar to or slightly better than ourselves on relevant dimensions.’ This contrasting tends to occur on an ingroup/outgroup basis where the group to which the individual belongs (the ingroup) is defined as stereotypically positive. An association with that positive ingroup creates positive distinctiveness for the individual concerned. Positive distinctiveness is sought and achieved by their respective social identities and the achievement and maintenance of a positive social identity is a lifelong pursuit. By way of a brief example, the narrator in the creative work below initially draws positive distinctiveness from his membership of the ‘journalist’ ingroup (see discussion in the following chapter on how The Social Identity Perspective impacts the creative element). Often positive social identity is dependent on how the individual’s ingroup appears when compared to other groups, and social identity theory postulates that there is often a hierarchy between various groups who are forced to compete for status in relation to access to rights, power, and resources. To draw upon a further literary example in The Great Gatsby we see that Jay Gatsby draws his positive distinctiveness from the socialite ingroup that he
attempts to be prototypical of. It is through membership of this ingroup that he hopes to attract the attention of Daisy who, to put it in an indelicate way, is a ‘resource’ in the way the theory describes. A paper by Amelie Mummendey discusses how the seeking of positive distinctiveness often causes social discrimination. To return once again to a sporting example, it can come as no surprise that professional sports clubs who are successful tend to draw larger crowds to their home games and have larger fan bases than those who are not. Whilst success is definitely not the only possible metric of positive distinctiveness it certainly provides an obvious example. However, it is worth pointing out that positive distinctiveness can only be achieved if an individual is capable of successfully categorizing both the world around them and themselves.

The Self-Categorization Theory, as described previously, attempts to answer questions of how group formation takes place and how the entity of the group can have such marked effects on those within it. It deals primarily with the self-concept of an individual and how that self-concept is constructed by comparisons with both other people and social interactions. In short Self-Categorization Theory attempts to explain how and why individuals are able to act as a group at all. The theory itself is made up of several key assumptions which Turner wrote about extensively in Rediscovering The Social Group: A Self-Categorization Theory (1987). Some are shared with the wider school of social psychological thought such as the self-concept being the cognitive component of the psychological system referred to as the self, that the self-concept comprises many different concepts of the self, and that the functioning of the self-concept is situation-specific. For example, an individual will possess many different self-concepts and will choose the salience of one depending on the social situation in which they find himself or herself. There are however more specific assumptions of the Self-Categorization Theory that make it unique and complementary to the wider social identity perspective. Firstly, Self-Categorization Theory suggests that the cognitive concepts of the self are the result of self-categorizations by an individual as a result of social stimuli. This means that the individual, having observed a grouping, has decided that they have the same identity as the group in contrast to other groups that are observable by that same individual. This is as a result of perceived characteristic similarity on the part of the individual between themselves and those who have membership of that group. Secondly, self-
categorizations exist within a hierarchy rated in accordance with how inclusive they are. The higher the inclusivity, the higher the level of abstraction. It is important to note though that a higher self-categorization has to include a lower level of self-categorization entirely within its definition. To return once again to football, Liverpool fans are one level of abstraction (the subordinate level), the next level would be football fans from all clubs (the intermediate level), and the level above that might include fans of all sports (the superordinate level). In this way each subsequent category includes the preceding one entirely within its definition. Self-Categorization Theory also assumes that there are at least three levels of abstraction as detailed above. The superordinate level is devoted to the self as a human being and encompasses self-categorizations based on an individual’s identity when compared to other human beings as opposed to other species. The intermediate level is devoted to similarities and differences between competing social groups of human beings that define an individual as a member of a particular ingroup. Finally, the subordinate category is a level of personal self-categorizations based upon differences between the individual and fellow members of an ingroup which thus define someone as a distinct individual. Turner, in theorizing these various levels of abstraction opined that, ‘[t]hese levels can be said to define one’s ‘human’, ‘social’, and ‘personal’ identity respectively, based on inter-species, intergroup (i.e., intra-species) and interpersonal (i.e., intra-group) comparisons between oneself and others.’ It is important to note though that the personal identity of the subordinate category has no primacy over any other level of abstraction. However it is also true that different levels of self-categorization exist in functional antagonism with one another. The salience of one self-category has a marked effect on intra-class similarities and inter-class differences upon which other levels of categorization are based. For example, if you characterize yourself on one level as a fan of stadium rock music as opposed to other types of music at the subordinate level of categorization, that will effect how you self-categorize at both the intermediate and surperordinate levels of categorization. For example, you would identify as a lover of rock music at the intermediate level of abstraction and a fan of music in general at the superordinate level. To explain how this impacts on the characters in the creative work below it can be seen that the Narrator is a journalist at a newspaper (the subordinate level of categorization) and as a result of that identity he is also a member of the print journalist intermediate social category and finally a member of the media at the superordinate social category. The
Narrator is a member of each category and each category becomes salient (and its consequential behaviour) depending on the social context the author places them within. If the Narrator is with Lily (who also works as a journalist at same newspaper as the Narrator) he might identify the two of them as an ingroup as opposed to a print journalist at another paper. If the two of them attend a press conference with print journalists and broadcast journalists they will identify with the other print journalists and accentuate their group characteristics as opposed to the broadcast journalists. Finally the Narrator would identify with all the journalists and assimilate with them when compared to the police officers who may be holding the press conference. His behaviour constantly changes depending on which identity is salient. It is also important to note that when the narrator loses his role as a print journalist he not only loses his subordinate self-categorization, but also his intermediate and superordinate identities as well, it is in this sense that various identities impact upon one another.

Which self-category becomes salient at which level of abstraction is a result of the interaction between the individual’s characteristics and the characteristics of the situation in which they find themselves. It is important to note that a categorization cannot form unless those being compared have been deemed alike at a higher level of abstraction. This is completed through a process known as ‘metacontrast’. This process highlights the assumption that any collection of stimuli is likely to be grouped together (categorized) when the similarities between those stimuli are deemed to be greater than their differences. This is also how prototypes are designated and it is assumed by the theory that comparison takes place amongst groups using the least abstract category that includes all potential ingroup members. For example an office full of people may be categorized as an ingroup on the basis of the company they work for which is the least abstract category that includes all of those working in the office. Social psychologists have used a metacontrast ratio – see, for example, Campbell in his previously cited study ‘Common Fate, Similarity, and Other Indices of the Status of Aggregates of Person as Social Entities’ - to provide a quantitative measurement of this phenomenon.

Finally, Self-Categorization Theory assumes that the salience of a particular self-category leads the individual to accentuate intra-class similarities and inter-group differences of other people as their personal characteristics are inferred from the identity of their ingroup. For example, an individual is more likely to assume that a
fan of Liverpool Football Club has a connection with the city. This inference is based solely on the knowledge of the subject’s fandom. This particular consequence of Self-Categorization has been extensively studied by Tajfel, 1969; Tajfel and Wilkes, 1963; Mugny and Doise, 1978; Eiser and Stroebe, 1972; Wilder, 1984. These assumptions, as Turner calls them, lead to several hypotheses. Firstly, Self-Categorization Theory suggests that ‘there tends to be an inverse relationship between the salience of the personal and social levels of categorization.’ Therefore how an individual views themselves, from a unique individual (maximum intra-personal identity and maximum perceived differences between the individual and an ingroup) to a paradigmatic member of an ingroup (maximum intra-group similarities and maximum inter-group differences from outgroups) occurs along a continuum. This further illustrates the relationship between personal self-identity and ingroup-outgroup categorizations in the sense that whilst they may both operate simultaneously, their perceived effects may be inversely related. This means that factors, which enhance the salience of one level of abstraction, for example the ingroup-outgroup categorizations, will increase an ingroup member’s perceived identity as a member of that group at the expense of their personal self-identity. This is the explanation for the process of depersonalization that The Social Identity Perspective espouses. These individuals self-categorize themselves as interchangeable with other members of the ingroup rather than as unique individuals distinct from other people. This led Turner to conclude that it is this process of depersonalization of the self that is responsible for all group behaviour from co-operation and altruism, to the shared norms that have been discussed elsewhere in this chapter and in the conclusion of this thesis.

This chapter has provided a description and explanation of the key ideas contained within The Social Identity Perspective. These aspects have included key concepts such as social categorization, depersonalization, and group formation and have illustrated how the social identity perspective explains group formation and how the characteristics of a group identity can influence its members behaviourally. These are all key concepts for the writer of realist fiction. In discussing these concepts here, the thesis has prepared the ground for the discussion that will take place in subsequent chapters. The ideas discussed in this chapter are integral to The Social Identity Perspective and as such are used extensively within the creative segment of this thesis. The next chapter will be tasked primarily with illustrating how The Social
Identity Perspective has shaped the characters that inhabit the creative work in order to demonstrate the value of using The Social Identity Perspective to the writer of realist fiction.

20. Rediscovering the social group: A self categorization theory, p. 28.
32. Rediscovering the social group: A self categorization theory, p.62.
33. The Social Identity Theory of Intergroup Conflict, p. 34.
35. Rediscovering the social group: A self categorization theory, p.45.
Using The Social Identity Perspective in *Ipseity*

This chapter will examine how the creative writer can apply some of the aspects of this model of behaviour to realistic character-driven fiction. The benefit of using a social psychological paradigm for human behaviour as a reference for fictional character behaviour is intuitive: a model of characterisation based upon observed human behaviour will, almost by definition, help prevent the introduction of
unbelievable behaviour being exhibited by fictional characters, behaviour which may cause the reader to reengage their sense of disbelief and thus cause the work of fiction to be less effective in its depiction of character. Whilst depiction of character is not necessarily the only goal of realist fiction, the disbelief brought about by failure to depict characters realistically may have detrimental effects on empathy and whatever else the writer is trying to deliver to the reader via their characters.

When discussing the effectiveness of the fiction I am specifically referring to realist fiction which has the stated aim of reflecting society as one of the key criteria of its effectiveness, to give the work an ‘air of reality’ to borrow Henry James suggestive phrase, suggestive, in part, because it reminds us how insubstantial the real can be.¹ A failure of realist fiction to accurately represent and recreate human behaviour in its characters would therefore make the realist novel less effective by definition. This point of view is supported by the critic Georg Lukács whose views on realism Terry Eagleton summarised in his essay entitled ‘Pork Chops and Pineapples’.

Georg Lukács believed that it was both at once: for him, a work of art which was realist in a descriptive sense was also aesthetically superior. Realism in this Lukácsian or Hegelian sense means more than simple representation, as well as more than ‘actually effective’. It means an art which penetrates through the appearances of social life to grasp their inner dynamics and dialectical interrelations. It is thus the equivalent in the artistic realm of philosophical realism, for which true knowledge is knowledge of the underlying mechanism of things.²

It is this desire to understand the so-called underlying mechanism of things that inspires this thesis. The creative segment of this thesis will be used as an example of how a narrative can be developed using The Social Identity Perspective as a tool for realistic character construction. Within the creative segment each character is shaped through the prism of the social situation in which they find themselves embroiled. In this sense it can be said that it is not the character whose actions change their environment but rather the environmental circumstances changing the character’s behaviour. Whilst it is true that the majority of people when placed with a particular set of circumstances will react in a predictable way (and for an example of this we need only look at Milgram’s infamous experiment on obedience to authority), this is not to say that The Social Identity Perspective expects all individuals to react exactly the same when presented with the same circumstances. The Social Identity Theory suggests that an individual’s identity is made up of a large number of prototypically
possible identities that exist in a state of functional antagonism. The individual subconsciously decides which identity has the best fit with the social situation within which they find themselves (they literally find themselves in the situation). Crucially, the repertoire of prototypes can vary depending on the subject concerned. For a clear example of this in the creative element we need only look at the differing relationships the narrator and Lily have with the ‘dark arts’ of journalism. Whilst the narrator is more than willing to perform unethical and illegal behaviour he views as prototypical of his profession, Lily, possibly due to her identification as a ‘features girl’ rather than a reporter, does not engage in the same behaviour. This can be explained by Lily having a different prototype to which she conforms, possibly one that she encountered prior to working at The Enquirer. To return to experiments discussed in the preceding chapter such as those conducted by Milgram, Zimbardo, Asche, and others, none of these experiments had a 100% success rate at predicting the behaviour of their participants and this was attributed to individual differences. It is the position of this thesis that the more contextual information we have for a character, the better the reader becomes at predicting their behaviour when confronted with an external (in relation to themselves) stimuli: in this case a plot event. If a character then behaves in a manner which is coherent with the SIP, this confirms for the reader that the character is, in Glover’s term, ‘plausible’ (see page 7). Apart from addressing the issue of plausibility that Glover identifies in the thriller genre specifically, this allows SIP to guide the writer in the creation of individual characters, rather than ones which obey the generalisations of some models of social behaviour.

To illustrate the benefits of using the social identity perspective as a basis for a new form of character construction this thesis will now look at a behavioural analysis of the creative segment’s central character: the Narrator. Whilst the ‘first act’ of the creative element (chapters 1-4) might be characterised as focusing heavily upon the inner monologue of the principal character, this is necessary for the to illustrate how the theory can be used as the basis for characterisation. It is only by accurately and explicitly placing the narrator within his social context that the reader can begin to understand how his social circumstances affect his behaviour. This is not to say that it is impossible for a writer to create a rich social context to which Social Identity Perspective might be applied in a more gradual way that allows for other stylistic
qualities of the novel, but it was considered prudent to create an obvious illustration here. As the most obvious example of how social environment influences behaviour within the creative segment a secondary advantage of using the Narrator for this analysis is the first person perspective used by the novel which allows us to examine thought processes as well as actions within the work of fiction. At the novel’s outset the unnamed narrator is a man in his mid-twenties, single, born and raised in London, university educated, from a single parent family, heterosexual, and formerly working class. These are all attributes that can be used to describe aspects of the central protagonist. Using the terms of the Social Identity Perspective these attributes can be said to be identities that the Narrator can make psychologically salient depending on the social situation in which he finds himself. They are examples of ingroup membership that define the Narrator in a social world. The reader uses these attributes to socially categorize the Narrator into the fictional social world of the novel, a world that is designed to be an analogue of the real social world. The rules of the real social world therefore apply to the fictional construct, as is the case with all realist fiction. By socially categorizing the Narrator, the reader forms expectations about his behaviour and beliefs. We expect, in the absence of contrary information that the character will behave in accordance with this social categorization. If our expectations are challenged without reasonable justification then we may find the narrative to be unrealistic and thus the quality of the realist novel, how good a job the novel does in presenting the world as it is, comes into question. The attributes listed previously that describe the Narrator are facts and the list is far from exhaustive. Each attribution, it can be hypothesised, will affect the Narrator’s behaviour in a certain situation, either explicitly or more subtly. Moreover, each attribution may be rejected or accepted into the Narrator’s self-definition, the group of attributes that make up his ‘self’, which is henceforth known as his self-categorization. In the same way that his behaviour is subject to the social context in which he finds himself, so too is the narrator’s choice of language a historic record of the various social contexts to which he has been exposed. His style of reportage and the language he chooses to use are an example of the idiolect that is the product of his self-categorization. It is understandable (yet not a hard and fast rule) therefore that a journalist retelling his narrative may resort to some of the more commonplace phrases prevalent in his previous social contexts. In the case of this narrator those social contexts would be the newsroom at the Enquirer and his own working class background growing up in East London.
As The Social Identity Perspective suggests, the Narrator’s self-categorization is in a constant state of evolution depending on the social situation in which he finds himself. As the novel progresses the Narrator undergoes several changes in his self-categorization as alternate identities become salient or redundant. These changes, and the resultant behaviour which is key to the novel’s plot, are the result of the character’s actions being subject to the ideas of The Social Identity Perspective. It is the expressed aim of this thesis to highlight how this exposure aids the writer of realist fiction in constructing realistic character behaviour. If we make our way chronologically through the novel we find that the Narrator initially felt drawn to a career in journalism after witnessing the power the profession could wield upon himself. This is characterised by the fear of discovery the Narrator feels after the death of Arthur at Hulse Avenue. The Narrator is plagued by the fear that the manslaughter of Arthur will be exposed by journalists and his life destroyed as a result: ‘Stayed home all weekend. Paranoia setting in. Newspaper headlines. Manhunt for pensioner’s killers. Blue and white police tape blowing in the wind.’ (p. 183) However, upon Arthur’s death being attributed to misadventure, with the Narrator and Charlie escaping punishment, the Narrator’s fixation on the media begins to take hold, shaping his later life as he transforms himself into an archetypal journalist: ‘I wondered who decided what was true. Who owned the truth? It was then and there that I decided I wanted to be a reporter. I wanted to tell stories.’ (43) It is important to note that, even though for the narrator his career identity is more salient, that may not always be the case. This is typified by the Narrator’s friend James for whom identity salience resides somewhere other than with his career, ‘It’s just a job. I mean it pays well and I like designing things. But it’s just a job.’ (p.142)

The transference of salient identity for the narrator (from idealist journalist to one willing to subvert the rules to a social outsider to a burglar) happens on numerous occasions throughout the novel as the Narrator develops a new prototypical group and attempts to reinvent himself to accurately reflect that group identity. A study conducted by J.M. Rubin from the University of Newcastle, Australia and published in *The Journal of Social Psychology* in 2012 found that:
Participants perceived high-status groups to be significantly more prototypical than low-status groups. Consistent with Self-Categorization Theory's cognitive analysis, these results demonstrate that the relation between group status and group prototypicality is a relatively basic and pervasive effect that does not depend on social identity motives.  

What this means to the creative writer is that, because a person will instinctively seek to align themselves with a high status group, logically so too should a realistically written fictional character. Both the person and the character will therefore see that high status group as more prototypical than a low status group from the same superordinate category. To use the creative segment of this thesis as an example, the Narrator sees the media as a positive superordinate category given the power it displayed over him during his childhood. Given the seductiveness of the superordinate category (the media) the Narrator seeks to identify with the highest status group that best represents that superordinate category, settling on the role of the print journalist. He then seeks to mould himself to the prototype, behaviour that Hogg et al. explain occurs because the ‘self and others [and ingroups and outgroups] are evaluated positively to the degree that they are perceived as prototypical (representative, exemplary, etc.) of the next more inclusive (positively valued) self-category (in terms of which they are being compared).’

Returning to the creative element of this thesis, the Narrator seeks to become a print journalist because he sees that profession as representative of the larger self-category (in this case the media). The question as to why the Narrator decides that print journalists are more prototypical of the media than other professions such as news readers, photographers, illustrators etc. and why his perception of print journalists is wholly biased can be attributed to ingroup projection. As Machusnky and Meiser say in the introduction to their paper ‘Cognitive Components of Ingroup Projection’, ‘Ingroup projection refers to the phenomenon whereby people perceive groups to which they themselves belong (i.e., ingroups) as more prototypical of a superordinate category that includes both the ingroup and the outgroup than groups to which they do not belong (i.e., outgroups).’

Machusnky and Meiser’s evidence for this assertion comes from numerous studies of nationality. These studies (Bianchi, Machusnky, Steffens, & Mummendey, 2009 and Bianchi, Mummendey, Steffens, & Yzerbyt, 2010) have shown, for example, that Germans feel that their ingroup (Germans) are more prototypical of Europeans (the superordinate category) than an outgroup such as Italians. To build on this point Germans also have been shown to believe that Europeans are more ‘hardworking and
efficient’, this is in comparison to the belief shared by Italians who, when questioned, believe Europeans to be ‘warm and sociable’: two characteristics that are typified by prototypical Italians. Therefore both German and Italian ingroups perceive the larger superordinate category of Europeans to possess characteristics more akin to their own personal ingroup than any outgroup that may share with the superordinate category. So in line with this theoretical position, the Narrator identifies the superordinate category that he wishes to become part of, in this case the media, and then he identifies the most prototypical ingroup of that superordinate category i.e., a print journalist. At the outset of his time at the Birmingham Enquirer the Narrator believes that the values of his ingroup, for instance honesty, hard work, and responsible reporting in the public interest, are prototypical of the wider superordinate category of those journalists at the Birmingham Enquirer.

When it becomes apparent that the behaviour of the most prototypical ingroup member includes use of illegal practices, euphemistically dubbed ‘the dark arts’ as well as a willingness to report scandal over public interest stories, the Narrator experiences a seismic shift in the rules that govern his identity within the paper. He has a realisation that his ethical considerations are pushing him away from prototypicality. He is faced with a stark choice: either continue with his ethical considerations and face ostracism (here manifested by loss of employment) as his membership of the prototypical ingroup lapses, or abandon any vestige of his identity that clashes with the ingroup in order to retain a positive social identity.

Nobody gets into journalism to run exposés on faux-celebrities by breaking the law; we’re too idealistic for that. But likewise nobody does it to regurgitate some PR intern’s words either. But the thought of that bastard leafing through his stack of CVs was more than enough. The definition of a necessary evil. Ethics are expensive and the pressure had been building. I wanted to get on. (p.70)

Unsurprisingly, for someone so heavily invested in the social identity of ‘journalist’, it is not a difficult choice for the Narrator but rather one that is relatable to an audience as this is how many decisions are made in real life, as evidenced by studies such as Milgram’s famous experiment on obedience and the Zimbardo study which will be discussed in greater detail below. The narrator allowing himself to slip into using unlawful practices to obtain stories was a key character development with huge implications for the plot so providing a realistic and believable motivation for this to
occur was extremely important with regard to the novel’s overall realism. The rationalisations we see the Narrator make in an attempt to justify participation in behaviour that he knows is illegal are also accounted for by social psychological theory. This is explained in much the same way as the defence sometimes offered by wives for their abusive husbands. Whilst there is a distinction made by Tajfel and Turner regarding groups and interpersonal relationships there is clear evidence that both parties in an abusive relationship would share an ingroup identity if they share friends, co-habitat, have a family etc. Therefore categorization membership bias may exist. If a member of the group (the husband, or in my example, fellow journalistic colleagues of the Narrator) behaves badly, the correspondence bias, which causes negative behaviours to be attributed to dispositional factors, is reduced to prevent a favourable impression of the subject from breaking down. Vonk and Konst suggested this in their 1998 study. In much the same way that Vonk and Konst found that a woman with a violent husband is more likely to attribute his behaviour to situational factors, so too does the Narrator use this behaviour to account for his and his colleague’s unseemly behaviour.

Of course the delightful Miss Foster was unaware that Ricky had staked out the entrance to the Isis. She might have said no otherwise and besides it would help her maintain her innocent girlfriend shtick with Fox a while longer. She needed all the help she could get; I’d seen her soap and she certainly didn’t practice the method. (p. 82)

Studies have consistently shown that people are more lenient towards ingroup members who exhibit violence towards a partner in an isolated incident (Harrison and Abrishami, 2004). This effect is even stronger when the person strongly identifies with a particular group as Hinkle and Brown concluded in their 1990 study. This theory also helps to explain why the editor of the *Birmingham Enquirer*, the newspaper for whom the Narrator works, is so influential upon him. Put simply, the editor, William Turner, is the most prototypical example of a print journalist that the Narrator can find. He is certainly more prototypical than Lily Hemmings for whom the Narrator’s subsequent indulgence in illegal practices is a cause of distance between the two characters. If Lily was a more influential (i.e., seen as more prototypical) journalist within the Narrator’s social setting he would be far less likely to engage in the illegal behaviour that indirectly resulted in the deaths of Anna Foster and Kelly Stone. When Turner puts pressure on the Narrator to generate more
scandalous and salacious copy he also gives tacit approval of the use of illegal practices in sourcing those stories, ‘He leaned in closer. I stopped breathing for fear he’d smell the puke on my breath. ‘I like you lad and I’m going to trust you here to get a result. Don’t be like those other piss streaks and fuck this up now.’” (p.110). The Narrator, still seeking to retain his membership of the ingroup of journalist (in this instance made more manifest by the threat to his employment if he does not comply), therefore feels no hesitation when the opportunity arises to investigate just such a story. In this sense his presumed reaction to this development has been wholly influenced by changes in the social group and is therefore easier for the reader to comprehend and sympathise with.

After his dismissal from the newspaper, and consequential rejection from by his former ingroup, the Narrator no longer feels subject to categorization membership bias and goes from a position of consistently defending the illegal and immoral actions of himself and other members of his profession as a necessary evil, to openly acknowledging the immorality he has endorsed, questioning the status quo, and rejecting his previous way of life:

When James had gone I went back to the window and watched him leave the building. He’d taken five steps when a man got out of a car and approached him. I heard James swear at the hack, tell him to fuck off, tell him he was scum and should crawl back under the rock he came out from. I heard him call the reporter all the things I’d been called myself by that Taxi driver in Newport and others besides. I knew it was all just water off a duck’s back to the journalist, just part of the territory that you took because of the greater good. The greater good. That used to mean something. I hated them all. (p.143)

After his wholesale rejection from the ‘Journalist’ ingroup, in this case typified by his loss of employment and ostracism from the ingroup via the termination of his employment, the Narrator attempts to re-establish his sense of identity. With the central crux of his social categorization (that of a journalist) missing, the Narrator describes his sense of detachment from society, this culminates in his affinity with other characters who could be subject to similar ostracism such as Coco and the street preacher he observes in central London.

I didn’t notice until later how the world had started to see me in a very similar way. Middle-aged businessmen traced an invisible boundary around me on their way into the tube station whilst younger assistants, associates, interns and
other titles pushed and shoved, their messenger bags and rucksacks brushing against my shoulder. Tutting just audible over car exhaust. (p. 54)

The reason the Narrator struggles to redefine his social identity and find membership with a new ingroup is again explained by the Social Identity Perspective and in particular Self-Categorization Theory. As discussed in the preceding chapter, social identity is defined as ‘the individual’s knowledge that he/she belongs to certain social groups together with some emotional and value significance to him/her of the group membership’11. It is through this membership that individuals might seek to obtain positive distinctiveness. It is a basic assumption of The Social Identity Perspective, and indeed Social Psychology as a whole, that individuals are intrinsically motivated to achieve so called positive distinctiveness and do so through ‘an upward directional drive which leads us to compare ourselves with others who are similar to or slightly better than ourselves on relevant dimensions.’12 As already highlighted this contrasting tends to occur on an ingroup/outgroup basis where the ingroup is defined as stereotypically positive. Therefore an association with the ingroup creates positive distinctiveness for the individual concerned. As a direct consequence positive distinctiveness is sought and achieved by their respective social identities and the achievement and maintenance of a positive social identity is a lifelong pursuit. Positive distinctiveness can only be achieved though if an individual is capable of successfully categorizing both the world around them and themselves. In his work *Rediscovering the social group, a Self-Categorization Theory*, John Turner surmises that ‘individuals seek to differentiate their own groups positively from others to achieve a positive social identity’, or positive distinctiveness.13

When an individual is confronted with the loss of an ingroup as the Narrator is when he loses his job, and therefore his source of positive distinctiveness, it can serve as a catastrophic loss of identity as he is no longer prototypical of the ingroup to which he once belonged. He has become a member of the outgroup. Suddenly for the Narrator there is a vacuum where once there were central tenets of his identity.

So there I was alone with the strange realisation that, in that bathroom, in that moment, I might be experiencing the final time that I could call myself a proper journalist. Tomorrow I would no longer recognise the face I saw in the mirror. Tomorrow I’d be nothing. (p. 133)

As a result of his dismissal and the subsequent ‘doorstepping’ he endures at the hands of his former colleagues the Narrator keenly feels his ostracism from his prior
ingroup. However, still motivated by his intrinsic need for positive distinctiveness, the Narrator begins his search for a new group in which to categorize himself and gain membership. This journey towards a new ingroup and a new self-categorization that will bring positive distinctiveness, symbolised in the novel by his efforts to gain new employment, proves long and difficult.

I wanted to be me. Everything else was a façade; masks put on and discarded as the social wind dictated. I’d been unmasked. I’d felt rejection. Shamed and rejected. I lived without a mask but wasn’t sure what lay beneath. The image in the mirror was someone I didn’t recognise. We’d never been formally introduced. (p. 168)

Although the narrator has a ready-made new identity, that of the unemployed, he does not gain positive distinctiveness from it and this heightens his identification angst. He discusses how those of his aspirational ingroup look negatively upon the unemployed or those who are the recipients of state benefits and would rather forgo state aid than be stigmatised by their ingroup and run the risk of losing membership.

They would make a cup of Earl Grey and sit down in the conservatory with The Daily Mail, before the subscription ran out, reading the headlines about benefit cheats and the feckless work-shy, unable to summon up the superiority that was once as natural as breathing and wondering if they had become the story. Wondering if they were about to be ostracised by the Chipping Norton set. (p. 61)

As a result of this fear of stigma the Narrator lies to his mother about his employment situation and avoids discussing it with other characters such as Coco. On the surface this lie may appear unnecessary but The Social Identity Perspective theory lends valuable justification to the Narrator’s actions as already discussed.

With his former journalistic identity no longer salient, the Narrator is inclined to identify himself as long-term unemployed, an identity from which he is unable to draw positive distinctiveness and so he actively works against allowing this identity to become salient and a self-categorization. The world the Narrator inhabits is one encompassed by a social hierarchy and the Narrator’s loss of his former identity has resulted, from his point of view, in significant downward social mobility:

Like Coco, I wondered if I had any right to judge Kate for what I assumed she did. I’d been doing a lot of thinking lately. I’d been wondering where we all fit on the ladder. Where we all ranked in the world and if it was compulsory or optional. I wondered where Charlie would fit in. Above Kate? Below? Did it
even matter? I wondered where I’d be. Where I had been. How far I’d fallen. (p. 167)

There is an interesting parallel here between the Narrator’s situation and that of Coco with both characters running the risk of ostracism from the larger ingroup as a result of their current self-categorization. For the Narrator that self-categorization is that of the long-term unemployed and for Coco the self-categorization is that of an exotic dancer. This is an assumption built upon evidence that Coco provides in her conversation with the Narrator:

‘I know people have a preconception about lap dancers but I’m a dancer not a prostitute. I don’t sleep around or anything.’

‘But people expect you to.’ I said.

‘Exactly. But it’s crap. My job is to provide a sexy lap dance. Nothing more.’ (p. 35)

Her perceived need to defend herself against the assumption is evidence enough that the threat of ostracism is a powerful motivator and one that provokes Coco to redress the Narrator’s suspected perception of her. It is clear here that the pressure and fear of a social categorization is enough to influence the behaviour of a character in a realistic and believable way for the reader.

As already demonstrated, individuals are motivated to retain their ingroup membership and this results in the prototypicality of the ingroup identity proving exceptionally influential. After undergoing his crisis of identity the Narrator eventually adopts a new categorization and finds a new ingroup when he reconnects with his childhood friend Charlie. As a result of finding positive distinctiveness within this ingroup and also viewing Charlie as prototypical, the Narrator’s attitudes towards society once again evolve. The Narrator, having been persuaded by Charlie to recognise that society has turned its collective back on him, decides to adopt a new group identity to replace his former identity as a journalist. It is important to note that this inherent seeking of positive distinctiveness by an individual is a central assumption of The Social Identity Perspective. According to the theory, individuals are intrinsically motivated to achieve this and swap identities unconsciously to maximise their positive distinctiveness in any given social situation. The new self-categorization that the Narrator adopts can be tentatively labelled in this thesis as that of a societal outsider. This is characterised by a disdain for societal rules that the
ingroup finds disadvantages them personally and an anarchistic philosophy that prompts a resistance towards the ruling hegemony. The ingroup is characterised by an anti-capitalist and anti-consumerist philosophy and in this sense represents a significant divergence from the western society that the Narrator resides within. The result is a form of counter-culture that provides an example of the group polarization phenomenon mentioned in the previous chapter. It can be observed that, like most counter-cultures, this new ingroup is defined as the antithesis of the outgroup rather than any other factor. This new ingroup features Charlie as its prototypical member and the ensuing chapters of the novel document the Narrator’s slowly changing self-categorization away from his prior identity of journalist, through his identity crisis experienced during the novel’s opening chapters, and on to his exposure to and eventual assimilation within, Charlie’s ‘societal outsider’ ingroup. As with any ingroup there are behavioural expectations placed upon its members. These behavioural expectations are made explicit in the opening exchanges between Charlie and the Narrator as the former justifies his philosophy and chosen way of life.

‘We are slaves to laws and rules; they are the framework for the world in which we live. But they aren’t constant. They change depending on the way the wind is blowing. So if they aren’t constant, if we aren’t judged by the same rules as our fathers were then why should we be likewise constant? If they keep changing then is it really that bad if we break them? After all in a hundred years time all this might be legal.’ (p. 58)

As the Narrator finds more positive distinctiveness through membership of this ingroup his societal attitudes and eventual behaviour also begin to closely resemble Charlie’s. The two develop a shared desire to strike back at those they perceive have undue power over themselves or who have profited from the status quo. From the point of view of the Narrator the Vanderbilt character personifies this injustice and the new self-categorization that the Narrator has chosen for himself allows him to pursue this vendetta. This course of action would only be possible if it was seen as prototypical of the ingroup of which the Narrator is now a member.

As the social identity perspective shows, with a new Self-Categorization comes new expectations as to what behaviour reinforces that identity. To return to the football example from the previous chapter: one of the expected behaviours of a Liverpool FC supporter is to celebrate when they score a goal. This behaviour is not open (if the member wants to retain their ingroup status) to a supporter of the club
that Liverpool FC scored against for instance. There is evidence to suggest that deprivation of social categorization can lead to erroneous behaviours from the ingroup. Audience members attending performances of the immersive theatre production *Sleep No More* by the ‘Punch Drunk’ theatre company are instructed to wear anonymity-providing masks and observe the performance (that takes place across six floors of a disused warehouse) in darkness in an attempt by the artistic directors Felix Barrett and Maxine Doyle to free them from the social bonds that exist outside the theatre. This is clearly an instance removing any external influences that might provoke self-categorization and therefore nullifying expectations of prototypical behaviour. In an interview conducted for the *Freakonomics* podcast, Barrett and Doyle reported that behaviour of an anonymised audience differed significantly from a typical audience group. Freed from any behavioural expectations examples of a *Sleep No More* audience’s behaviour include throwing objects at a glass box that contained the Lady Macbeth character performing within it, handling the props with one audience member claiming to have worn a prop dress during the performance or even stealing them entirely, engaging in sexual intercourse, and even interrupting the performance entirely, often to save or protect the characters. None of these behaviours are typical of either a traditional theatre-going audience who would expect to sit in seats and observe the performance on the stage, or even for the public at large since some of this behaviour is against the law. This is, therefore, clear evidence to support the theory that a loss of self-categorization can influence behaviour in drastic and extreme ways. In the novel all that it takes for the Narrator to view burglary as a justifiable and practical behaviour, that to the reader may seem both reprehensible and immoral, is for him to self-categorize with an ingroup where that behaviour is viewed as prototypical. He does this by drawing positive distinctiveness from that association as we see in these comments after committing his first burglary:

The nagging pain like a stone in your shoe had now disappeared. That feeling of wasting time, wasting potential, had gone. I was steam, hot and full of energy, bursting through a cracked pipe. Unable to be constrained, forcing my way violently toward freedom. Bending steel to my will. I filled whatever space I could. Owning it. It was mine. It wasn’t just the money. It wasn’t just the anger at the system that fell away when it was needed most. It was the thrill of it all. The thrill I found in Coco’s eyes when I first started to see her but more so. The thrill of landing a story from under somebody’s nose. Now the thrill, that fire breathing ecstasy, was there constantly like armour against
all that had gone before. It fed on taking everything I could, on seeing how far I could push life before it pushed back. (p. 153)

It would have been inconceivable to imagine the Narrator describing his reaction to such an event in these terms whilst he was a journalist but his association and assimilation into Charlie’s ingroup has successfully modified both his behaviour and value system. This is one of the central tenets of the creative project and is repeatedly visible with respect to the Narrator as the groups he self-categorizes himself as a member of influence his behaviour. As discussed in the preceding chapter, studies have shown that human beings have a predisposition towards group membership, even on the most arbitrary of criteria. Given the behavioural influence that a chosen ingroup can have upon its membership the process of actually choosing which ingroup to aspire to gain membership of takes on added importance. The largest factor impacting upon this decision is the ability of the individual to gain positive distinctiveness from their group membership, to gain success by association. The narrative of the fictional section of this thesis documents the Narrator’s transition from one identity (tabloid journalist) to another (societal outsider). This transition is symbolised by his chosen behaviour and if they differ from that of other social categorizations for example a journalist, the unemployed, a businessman and so on.

Upon review of the Narrator’s new self-categorization and what it might mean to the individual in terms of both behavioural expectations within the group and the perception of groups members by the outgroup, a reader might question why the Narrator gains any positive distinctiveness at all from this new ingroup. This observation would be, presumably, based upon Charlie and the Narrator’s perceived lack of access to resources due to their social status as ‘outsiders’. In Social Psychology the term ‘resources’ refers to any product of intrinsic value to the growth and survival of the ingroup, this could be as simple as easier access to food, or shelter, and suitable mates, through to more modern interpretations such as financial considerations, career prospects and social status and access to resources is a traditional measure of a group’s hegemony over others. Again the Social Identity Perspective can provide an answer to why the Narrator does indeed gain positive distinctiveness from his assimilation into Charlie’s ingroup. Instances of an ingroup struggling against a powerful hegemonic outgroup are numerous in both real life and fiction, as evidenced by Charlie’s suggestion of leaking information about
Vanderbilt’s clients in a ‘wikileaks’ style. Minority special interest groups are commonplace in the political sphere and the rise of social media has contributed hugely to niche groups ascertaining greater influence over a much larger outgroup. Unsurprisingly, given the obvious dramatic pretence of the situation, this is still more common within fiction and examples exist across all genres, from direct instances such as those found in *Fight Club* to more indirect instances of resistance such as those found in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* concerning Huck Finn’s attitude towards racism. How The Social Identity Perspective might be used as a tool for literary criticism in terms of evaluating realism will be discussed more fully in the concluding chapter of this thesis. Despite the commonality of its occurrence, on the surface the idea of a minority ingroup being able to exert influence over a dominant outgroup is illogical and could be another example of plot leading characterisation and yet, because it is so common in real life, there must be a social psychological explanation that can aid the writer when constructing similar fictional scenarios. The theory of self-categorization indeed allows the author to account for behaviour that runs counter to traditional wisdom concerning influence and power relationships. Traditional Marxist doctrine (along with some theories of social psychology such as social dominance theory and social justification theory) suggests that power relationships run in a top to bottom fashion from those with power, in the form of access to resources, to those without. Furthermore studies such as Phillip Zimbardo’s famous Stanford Prison Experiment (SPE) conducted in 1971 seemed to suggest that ordinary people assigned arbitrarily to roles such as prisoner and guard would naturally and unconsciously accept these roles and modify their behaviour accordingly to conform to a preconceived notion of identity that matches those assigned roles. In the SPE those without power (the prisoners) were subjected to steadily more degrading practices at the hands of those with power (the guards) until the experiment was halted due to safety concerns. These studies serve to reinforce the notion of a solid and unchanging society where those without power are perpetually subservient to those with power. This conclusion leads to one of the three main metaphors present (the other two being society as organism and society as theatre) in social science concerning society, that of society as a prison in which individuals must slavishly enact and interact with others in accordance with predefined social scripts. It portrays human beings as passive and simply conduits for social structures which eliminate both free will and choice as Turner elaborates upon, ‘Behind the
tyranny of the prison guards and the abasement of the prisoners in the SPE, there is a
view of human beings as the psychological prisoners of society, in turn a working out
of a dysfunctional and inescapable human nature.\textsuperscript{17} However, as already discussed,
in reality this consistency of position is patently not the case. A follow up study to the
Stanford Prison Experiment was conducted in 2002 for BBC television.\textsuperscript{18} As a result
of the study the researchers Reicher and Haslam demonstrated that internalised group
membership could be a basis for resistance to social determination rather than merely
an enabling factor for it. The researchers selected 15 participants (5 guards, 10
prisoners) for their study with a proposed duration of 10 days. Participants were
informed that a prisoner would be promoted to the position of guard on the third day
of the study. However, after day 3, the prisoners began to exhibit strong signs of
group identity and by day 6 a commune had been established between prisoners and
guards. However the final days of the experiment saw opposition to the commune
grow and 4 participants sought to re-establish the hierarchical guard-prisoner regime
but under harsher rules. The experiment had to be terminated on day 8 due to ethical
considerations. The researchers discovered that group conformity amongst the guards
did not occur to the level of expectations akin to the guards in the Zimbardo study.
Indeed there appeared to be no evidence of participants assigned to the ‘guard’ role
naturally conforming to expectations, in fact there were participants who actively
resisted conforming and commented on how the uniform encouraged them to act
differently. Furthermore the participants who took on the role of ‘prisoner’ fostered a
group identity amongst themselves that enabled them to resist the guards’ influence
and ultimately to stage an escape from the confines of the experiment. In a
commentary on the role Self-Categorization Theory plays as an explanation for this
behaviour John Turner observed that, as opposed to what occurred during the
Zimbardo study, in the Reicher and Haslam experiment,

[i]t was the dominant group that felt uncomfortable and guilty with the social
hierarchy and the prisoners who asserted their self-interest and identity
aggressively to overthrow it (SDT's \textit{behavioural asymmetry} in the wrong
direction!). Nobody said ‘let's put ourselves down to maintain the hierarchy’
and wonder of wonders for a social psychology experiment, when participants
had the chance, they changed the system. Anyone reading the mainstream
literature on power and prejudice in social psychology could be forgiven for
thinking that collective revolt and social change never happen. Theories like
SJT [Social Justice Theory] and SDT [Social Determination Theory] invoke
specific motives to explain why social change does not happen.\textsuperscript{19}
In short, Turner suggests that society is constantly evolving and those who become active agents in this evolution are hardly ever those who retain power within the status quo. This is illustrated within the Reicher and Haslam study by the ‘guard’ participants who, whilst openly stating their preference not to be guards, refused to give up the privileges that come with the position. Instead it was the prisoners who gained power from the guards by staging a prison breakout and attempting to set up a self-governing commune amongst all participants regardless of role assignment. This behaviour is similar to that in which Charlie and the Narrator are engaged. Engaging in behaviour similar to the prisoners of the Reicher and Haslam study, by this stage in the novel Charlie and the Narrator share a group identity of lower social status. For them it is the outgroup, characterised by people like Vanderbilt, that hold power over the lower status group. As a result of Reicher and Haslam’s study the researchers concluded that their study supports the thesis of the Social Identity Theory, which states there are three criteria for predicting group resistance. The first concerns permeability and the individual’s perceived ability to move from one group to another. In the case of the Narrator, perceived permeability is low in terms of moving from his social outsider group to one with more intrinsic value to him. As this is the case, social identity theory predicts that the Narrator will be more likely to positively identify with the social outsider group. The second criterion concerns the individual’s belief that the inequalities between various groups are justified. In the example of the Narrator, a belief in the illegitimacy of group inequality is obvious. Thirdly, Social Identity Theory asks if there are cognitive alternatives available to group members. Cognitive alternatives are instances where a lower-status group, such as the social outsider labels of Charlie and the Narrator, become aware of methods of redistribution and restructuring in order to enact social change. The cognitive alternative that the Narrator and Charlie adopt is their practice of burglary of homes in order to redress the balance between groups on a financial level. As can be seen here the Narrator satisfies all three of these criteria for social resistance, which helps to make his behaviour both empathetic and realistic to the reader.

Through their acts of burglary the Narrator and Charlie attempt to resist the status quo around them. Superficially it may be challenging for a reader to comprehend why a rational character would make such an extreme choice but, as
already demonstrated, it is the environment that shapes characterisation and in turn plot. In commenting on his own work John Turner suggested that,

[t]o understand social change, one must look at the psychological group as well as the social individual and at both their difference and interdependence. It is the group through which people are able to change things collectively and politically, and hence ultimately change personalities and individual attitudes.

In much the same way, this thesis proposes that, if realistic fiction is the goal of the novelist, then the writer must create characters that comply with the same social constructs that human beings do. This helps to further bolster the case made for the Social Identity Perspective to form the basis of a new method of character construction.

Further Social Identity Perspective Applications and Areas for Research

The previous chapters of this thesis outlined the theory that underpins the Social Identity Perspective in addition to the empirical evidence that supports it. The thesis has gone on to demonstrate how the Social Identity Perspective can serve as a guide to the writer of realist fiction in their pursuit of realistic and believable
characterization and character-driven plot. Whilst the primary aim of the thesis was to demonstrate the utility of the Social Identity Perspective within the writing of realist fiction, this conclusion will also propose further possible applications within the field of literature. I will do this by firstly applying the principles of the theory to the popular literary classic and proto-realist text *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* in order to demonstrate how the Social Identity Perspective can be used to evaluate realism and secondly, I will demonstrate how use of the theory can be of use to the writer of genre fiction; specifically those that work within the Thriller genre, using Alan Glynn’s *Limitless* as a primary example. In addition to the applications to realism and the thriller I will also highlight several other areas of Social Psychology that this thesis, for reasons of scope, was not able to address, or to deploy, in the writing of the creative element. These areas include other explanations of the self-concept as well as more detailed research concerning specific aspects of human behaviour such as aggression, romantic relationships, and prosocial behaviour. These other areas may provide further assistance to writers designing characters in realist fiction. These three areas of application may prove suitable topics for future research into how social psychology can complement both existing literary criticism and existing creative writing practice. Building upon the work already achieved by this thesis, further study of the Social Identity Perspective might elect to focus upon literary criticism as the theory may also prove to be an interesting way for literary critics to read characters within the social context provided by the author. One of the most important characteristics of successful realist fiction is the believability and recognizably human verisimilitude of the characters that inhabit that particular narrative. It is a tradition of realist fiction, indeed of the novel itself, to gravitate towards the realistic as opposed to the symbolic. In his essay, ‘What is Realism?’ Henry Levin states that,

> We can see how every great novel has attempted – mutatis mutandis – to distinguish what is real from what is counterfeit. [Daniel] Defoe’s narrations, he invariably assured his readers, are not fiction but fact; and [Denis] Diderot pointedly entitled one of his stories *Ceci n’est pas un conte*. To convince us of his essential veracity, the novelist must always be disclaiming the fictitious and breaking through the encrustations of the literary.¹

What better way to attack the so-called ‘encrustations of the literary’ than through the
application of empirical psychology to characterization? Realist fiction has created some of the most well-rounded figures in narrative fiction, each of whom display psychological complication, multi-facetedness and a mix of competing emotion and motivation. Henry James’ Daisy Miller and Dostoyevsky’s Raskolnikov are two such examples of extremely complex characterisation. In their pursuit for characters that reflect as closely as possible the complexities of the human condition it is not difficult to imagine the utility of an understanding of human psychology. By using some of the components of the Social Identity Perspective as a tool for analysis the literary critic would be in a position to begin to analyse a work of realist fiction in terms of an investigation into how far characters conform to the theory as a way of seeing how the writer has embedded them in a range of contexts in the world of the novel. In short, how close fictional characters come to behaving in ways a reader would expect of real human beings. The Social Identity Perspective might be used, for example, to offer a reading of the extent to which characters in realist fiction conform to what we know of social psychology in self-identification. This is not, however, a recent development. Roland Barthes suggested that when ‘identical semes traverse the same proper name several times and appear to settle upon it, a character is created… the proper name acts as a magnetic field for the semes.’ A seme is a unit of meaning and Bathes describes how multiple semes cluster within a character and develop a personality trait of that character. The Social Identity Perspective account of social behaviour is therefore remarkably similar to the literary realist critic’s explanation of character as set out by Pam Morris:

To a remarkable extent, ‘character’, which is so often taken as a privileged index of individual particularity, is largely the location of a network of codes, and, of course, novels themselves not only draw upon these cultural semes of personality but contribute powerfully to them.

An examination of these cultural semes of personality within the context of the novel requires close reading so I have included within this thesis a brief discussion of Mark Twain’s The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn. This classic American novel displays many facets of the realist aesthetic and was in fact published at a time when realism was just starting to become prevalent in novel construction. Realism as a term first began to flourish as an artistic term in the early 19th century with the first use of the term réalisme occurring in 1826. Realism fell politically into the zeitgeist of
European political culture as class tensions came to the fore as Rachel Bowelby explains:

Realism was in the spirit of democratizing movements of the nineteenth century, bringing into literary or painterly view common worlds of experience that had previously been aesthetically unseen, disregarded, or out of bounds… Ordinary people were portrayed as going about their daily working lives – as rural laborers or factory workers or coal miners or office clerks or servants.5

Realism’s literary manifestations can be traced back to the works of the Charles Dickens and Elizabeth Gaskell in the 1840s whilst its influence is clear in works by Gustave Flaubert (The Painter of Modern Life) and Charles Baudrillaire (Madame Bovary) it was George Eliott, through her novel Adam Bede, who best made the argument for realism:

‘This Rector of Broxton is little better than a pagan!’ I hear one of my lady readers exclaim. ‘How much more edifying it would have been if you had made him give Arthur some truly spiritual advice. You might have put into his mouth the most beautiful things – quite as good as reading a sermon.’

Currently I could my fair critic, if I were a clever novelist, not obliged to creep servilely after nature and fact, but able to represent things as they never have been and never will be… but you must have perceived long ago that I have no such lofty vocation…6

In America realism became prescient through the slave narratives of those freed from oppression. Prior to works such as The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglas, An American Slave the life of Douglas (who developed a strong friendship with Twain) and others were also unseen, disregarded, and out of bounds to borrow Bowelby's words. These narratives, told in a realist aesthetic that became the antithesis of the antebellum romance of slavery, show realism’s utility and the need encompass nature and fact, as Eliott puts it, within the literary. I first became aware of how The Social Identity Perspective could shed new light on Huckleberry Finn as part of the teaching I undertook whilst completing my thesis and what follows are some preliminary thoughts as to how The Social Identity Perspective can add to some pre-existing critical arguments concerning The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn. It is important to note at this juncture that this analysis of the text using The Social Identity Perspective is not meant as a tool with which to judge the literary merit of The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn in an overarching sense but rather in the limited terms of whether or not the text is consistent in its desire for a realistic portrayal of character self-
identification. That is not to say that Twain’s portrayals of the characters of Huckleberry Finn or Jim are devalued by their incongruence with reality, merely that this incongruence exists and its existence may then prompt an examination into the purpose of that incongruence. However, that is a topic far outside the parameters of this thesis. Indeed this inconsistency has already been commented upon by others such as Steven Belluscio who suggested that Twain was an author, ‘whose realist aspirations would continually be rendered problematic by a wild romantic imagination.’ In many ways The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn is a novel firmly rooted in its time and is in keeping with Twain’s wish to, ‘call it back and make it as real as it ever was’. It is, one can safely surmise, a work of realist fiction. Indeed many critics have postulated that ‘Twain’s literary opinions have been tied to realism because they seem to be based on an ingrained hostility toward romantic literature.’ Twain goes to great lengths to describe the setting of his novel in a detailed and precise way in much the same way as most realist fiction. To give one example: when Twain describes a sunrise over the river he does so in intricate detail with a colloquialism keenly utilized by other realist writers that followed him,

The first thing to see, looking away over the water; was a kind of dull line - that was the woods on t’other side; you couldn't make nothing else out; then a pale place in the sky; then more paleness spreading around; then the river softened up away off, and warn't black any more, but gray; you could see little dark spots drifting along ever so far away-trading-scows, and such things; and long black streaks-rafts ... and by and by you could see a streak on the water which you know by the look of the streak that there’s a snag there in a swift current which breaks on it and makes that streak look that way; and you see the mist curl up off of the water, and the east reddens up.

So with these observations made it is appropriate to term The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn a realist novel. However there are flaws to the realism offered by Twain. Chief amongst those flaws concerns an issue at the heart of the narrative: racism. Twain goes to great lengths to differentiate Huckleberry Finn’s racial attitudes from those of other characters, characters which a social psychologist would class as prototypical of the society into which Finn is born. These differing racial attitudes are manifested within the novel by Finn having a far more empathetic view of Jim, the escaped slave with whom Finn develops a friendship. It is however worth noting that even Finn cannot fully move beyond racism by the novel’s end exemplified by his continued use of the term ‘nigger’, yet the mere presence of his softer tone towards Jim prompts tell-tale signs of the author’s fingerprints upon characterisation for
purposes other than realism. Despite that caveat, Finn’s behaviour and attitudes towards race are pointedly and deliberately set in opposition to the values taught and exhibited by his father:

It was fifteen minutes before I could work myself up to go and humble myself to a nigger, but I done it, and I warn't ever sorry for it afterwards, neither. I didn't do him no more mean tricks, and I wouldn't done that one if I'd a knowed it would make him feel that way.\textsuperscript{11}

There is ample evidence in the text to support the assertion that Huckleberry Finn displays racist attitudes throughout the novel that run strongly counter to the prototypical ingroup. However, there is precious little textual evidence to support the genesis of those views, something that The Social Identity Perspective would expect. That is not to say that a reading of the text from a Social Identity Perspective precludes sentiment being expressed by a character that runs counter to that displayed by society but rather that a divergence in opinion between the individual and his ingroup requires further explanation on the part of the author. In Huckleberry Finn there is no such explanation present as to why Finn displays such a contrary viewpoint to other characters who may be more prototypical of the ingroup and thus be in a position to influence Finn such as Jim’s former owner, Miss Watson or his father who in Chapter Six states: ‘When they told me there was a State in this country where they’d let that nigger vote, I drawed out. I says I’ll never vote again… I says to the people, why ain’t this nigger put up at auction and sold?’\textsuperscript{12} Huckleberry Finn’s more nuanced view of Jim is crystalised in the choice he makes at the beginning of the novel; concerning whether he should assist Jim in his escape from slavery or be complicit in his recapture. It is also on this subject that The Social Identity Perspective might inform existing criticism, as is the case here in the work of John Alberti:

Huck’s two options – aiding Jim in his escape or turning Jim in – represent two difference sources of personal empowerment. Helping Jim escape is not just an act of friendship; as Huck realizes, it is a profoundly political and revolutionary act, branding Huck as a ‘low down Ablicationist’ (one of the few overtly political references in the work), and involving him not just in the eradication of race slavery, but also in efforts at the social reconstruction of race. Turning Jim in will win him not only approbation of the white community, but it will also secure his white status and clarify his own position as a non-slave.\textsuperscript{13}
Blending The Social Identity Perspective into this line of enquiry is a relatively seamless process and further supports the case Alberti is making with the empirical evidence discussed in the preceding chapters of this thesis. Huck has to decide whether to conform to the expectations of his ingroup which, as Alberti states, is the white community. In doing so Huck would reinforce his positive identity with the ingroup that he shares the most influential characteristic with, in this case ethnicity. The fact that he elects to aid Jim rather than turning him in suggests that this course of action is diminished in terms of its realism. Indeed Alberti refers to his time teaching Huckleberry Finn to students and noted how,

> When considering the relation between Huck and Jim, most students will immediately align themselves on one side of the other of the colour line, even when denouncing prejudice or bigotry. In fact, such as alignment is often a necessary condition of making such judgments.14

Applying the principles of The Social Identity Perspective to both Alberti’s students and Huck himself, indeed holding them to the same standard of realism, suggests that Huck’s decision to aid and abet Jim is rather incongruous with realistic behaviour as members of ingroups instinctively conform to group norms of prototypicality. One may argue that, similar to the narrator and Charlie in *Ipseity*, Huck and Jim form their own ingroup as a result of their ostracism from the dominant white ingroup as a result of their running away. However this ostracism, whilst complete for Jim, is not for Huck. Throughout their travels together Jim and Huck encounter various examples of white society. Often we see that Huck disguises himself to avoid being recognised, firstly as Sarah Williams and latterly as George Jackson. Huck chooses to conceal his identity but is always integrated within white society; the same cannot be said for Jim. This divides the pair and sets up a hierarchical relationship with Jim always being subservient to Huck. Put simply at any time Huck can turn Jim in, safe in the knowledge that he will be welcomed back into the ingroup of white society. This is the key difference between Huck and Jim as a pairing and the narrator and Charlie within *Ipseity*. Whereas the Narrator and Charlie are forced to rely upon each other as a result of their shared ostracism from the ingroup, there is evidence to suggest that Huck can return to the ingroup at any time. Therefore his relationship with Jim becomes even more problematic in terms of realism as it is an optional one rather than one borne of necessity. This all suggests that Twain chose, in this instance, to prioritise plot or a wider thematic message, over strict characterisation.
It is on the subject of Jim himself that Twain’s commitment to realism is once again called into question. Unlike almost every other character within the novel on the surface Jim appears to be reduced to a mere caricature that has attracted criticism amongst academics. As Andrew Levy states: ‘[c]ritics denounce the minstrelsy in Huck Finn, claiming that a ‘real,’ or at least empathetic, portrait of Jim, the African-American man at the heart of the book, disappears beneath a ‘stereotype mask.’’\

But does Jim disappear beneath the stereotype mask as Levy states that some critics suggest? Is Jim no more a character than a severely limited collection of biases? It is after all clear that Jim conforms to the famous ‘Sambo’ stereotype popular amongst antebellum society at the time quite perfectly, at least when he’s directly observed by Huck. On the surface the Sambo-like nature of Jim is clear to see and it is hard not to think of Jim within the description that John Blassingame provides on the characteristics of the stereotype:

Sambo, combining in his person Uncle Remus, Jim Crow, and Uncle Tom, was the most pervasive and long lasting of the three literary stereotypes. Indolent, faithful, humorous, loyal, dishonest, superstitious, improvident, and musical, sambo was inevitably a clown and congenitally docile. Characteristically a house servant, sambo had so much love and affection for his master that he was almost filio-pietistic; his loyalty was all consuming and self-immolating. The epitome of devotion, sambo often fought and died heroically while trying to save his master’s life. Yet, Sambo had no thought of freedom; that was an empty boon compared with serving his master.\

With these characteristics in mind, looking at the impassioned speech Jim gives to Huck upon their reunion, we see how his character is influenced by the stereotype,

‘My heart wuz mos’ broke bekase you wuz los’, en I didn’t k’yer no mo’ what become er me en de raf’. En when I wake up en fine you back agin’, all safe en sou’n’, de tears come en I could a got down on my knees en kiss’ yo’ foot I’s so thankful. En all you wuz thinkin ‘bout wuz how you could make a fool uv ole Jim wid a lie.’\

This speech conveys an almost childlike manner and reasoning on the part of the adult Jim, two qualities that simultaneously reinforce the notions of Sambo. Since we only ever hear about Jim’s character through Huck (and this retelling is subject to the cultural biases within Huck himself) it is difficult to get a sense of the underlying layers of Jim’s character. If we were to take Huck’s depiction of Jim at face value we would conclude that there is clear evidence that Huck’s Jim is not representative of his historical community (African American Slaves) and is therefore unrealistic.
However, the more we learn of Jim the less the Sambo stereotype rings true as a genuine depiction of Jim’s character as we come to suspect that Jim’s adoption of the Sambo stereotype may be for Huck’s benefit rather than an accurate portrayal of his character. What we do find out from Huck concerning Jim marks the slave out as having high status within his community as a conjuror, a storyteller, and a healer. Huck tells the reader that, ‘Niggers would come miles to hear Jim tell’ about being ridden by witches¹⁸. He goes on to add that those in attendance at one of Jim’s storytelling events would ‘stand with their mouths open listening to this wonder.’¹⁹ The fact that slaves would travel extensively to hear Jim despite the strict controls placed upon slaves in antebellum society is testament to his reputation within that community and, as John Blassingame suggests, one way to be at the top of the slave social hierarchy ‘was to be skilled in what folklorists call the verbal arts.’²⁰ This is possibly due to the oral nature of slave culture and therefore the educational value of a skilled storyteller. In addition to this it is Jim who is able to successfully deal with his rattlesnake bite on Jackson island through his knowledge of folk remedies and he insists that the five-cent coin he procured from Tom Sawyer when the latter left it as payment for some candles and wear around his neck on a string, ‘would cure anybody and fetch witches’²¹. The fact that Jim appears to have the reputation as that of a healer is also characteristic of someone with elevated social standing in the slave community, ‘since the primary concern of all people in the nineteenth century was the maintenance of good health, the black physicians were near the top of the slave structure.’²² This evidence, produced almost as an afterthought by Huck, hints at the other identities Jim may inhabit away from Huck and also gives clues as to how he would self-categorize himself within his community. Clearly his status as a healer and storyteller indicates that he is a man of education (for a slave) and influential within his community. Indeed Miss Watson is prepared to sell Jim to another owner on account of his popularity amongst other slaves, ‘Jim was most ruined, for a servant, because he got so stuck up on account of having seen the devil and been rode by witches.’²³ There are clearly aspects of Jim’s character that instead of being wholly Sambo, in fact conform closer to other stereotypes of Antebellum culture, like that of the Nat or Nate slave who Blessingame describes as:

Among the slaves accorded the highest status in the quarters was the rebel, the bondsman who resisted floggings, violated the racial taboos, or who ran away from the plantation. Described as ‘high blooded’ or ‘bad nigger’ by their
admirers, these bondsmen found a central place in slave lore and songs. One indication of the rebel’s status was that antebellum blacks often dated important events in their lives in relation to Nat Turner’s insurrection.

So it begins to appear that Jim has adopted the Sambo categorization out of necessity rather than it being an identity he adopts within his own community. It very likely that Jim was aware of the Sambo stereotype (it was well known within the slave community) and viewed it as prototypical of the behaviour black slaves displayed amongst white people. His adoption of it as his salient identity with Huck is in accordance with self-categorization. Despite Huck being thirteen years old and Jim an adult male, the societal conditions present in Antebellum society dictate that Huck is the more powerful of the two, Huck can of course turn Jim in to the authorities as a runaway slave at the slightest provocation so it is somewhat unsurprising that Jim would adopt the most non-threatening stereotype of all the black behaviour possible in order to appease Huck. This is a clear example of positive distinctiveness as without the ingroup that Jim and Huck form, his chances of survival and evasion of the law are greatly lessened. To Jim, freedom is the key to positive distinctiveness so by adopting the Sambo stereotype he is more likely to achieve this. Here the social identity perspective helps to shed light on the various identities Jim holds within the novel. By presenting himself as a sambo-style character type to Huck, Jim is bestowed with a set of behaviour characteristics that he must inhabit in order to maintain that identity. Likewise Huck is able to recognise the Sambo character type and is put at ease. Both characters are aware of the consequences adoption of this characterisation places upon both of them. Jim has categorised Huck as a white person who has the power to enslave him or worse based on his previous experiences of other white people (social-categorization) and has therefore set about to appease Huck by appropriating the sambo stereotype. It is in essence, a protective measure. For his part, because Jim has adopted this categorization Huck is able to see Jim as an ally as opposed to an enemy and a partnership is allowed to form. If Jim had chosen to adopt the Nate stereotype for instance, a categorization which he may self-categorize with amongst the slave community, it is unlikely this partnership between himself and Huck would occur. What Jim is wearing then is literally a stereotype mask but rather than Twain placing the mask upon Jim with a sense of dismissal, the sambo-traits that Jim portrays illuminate his character precisely because he adopts it
and the Social Identity Perspective aids in this unveiling of his true self by justifying why this takes place.

Moving on from *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, I will now demonstrate how the Social Identity Perspective can be of use to the writer of genre fiction, specifically the thriller writer. I have included work on this genre here due to the creative element of this thesis sharing many thematic elements with the thriller genre. When discussing this type of fiction it is important to emphasise that there are many types of sub-genre that exist within the umbrella-term of ‘Thriller’; crime thrillers (*Gone Girl* [2012], by Gillian Flynn) to spy thrillers (*Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy* [1974] by John La Carre), psychological thrillers (*Misery* [1987], Stephen King), military thrillers (*The Hunt for Red October* [1984], Tom Clancy), mystery thrillers (*The Girl on The Train* [2015], Paula Hawkins), and noir thrillers (*The Big Sleep* [1939], Raymond Chandler) all possess the thriller suffix. All of these different titles share what Glover termed ‘plausibility or verisimilitude’ (see page 7 of this thesis for the full quotation) and may transcend more than one sub-genre. *Ipseity* is similarly incapable of being classified as a single sub-genre, and instead straddles several. *Ipseity* is superficially a crime thriller as dealings of illegality by multiple parties are a major plot device within the novel, but equally, *Ipseity* could also be labelled a mystery thriller given that the pursuit of knowledge (in terms of the narrator’s knowledge of himself as well as the facts of Anna Foster’s death) is the principle driver of the plot. Rather than conforming to a single archetype, *Ipseity* draws from many sources. Some of the thematic elements *Ipseity* has in common with the thriller genre include the use of the cover-up plot device as utilised in any number of other examples of the genre such as the *Red Riding* (1999-2002) quartet by David Peace, the *Myron Bolitar* (1995-) series by Harlan Coben, and *Falling Off Air* (2004) by Catherine Sampson. The novel also makes use of, what Alfred Hitchcock later termed, the macguffin (in this case the macguffin is Vanderbilt’s audio recording of his clients) in a similar way to Dashiell Hammett’s work *The Maltese Falcon* (1929) (where the macguffin is the Falcon itself) or in Thomas Harris’ *Silence of the Lambs* (1988) where the macguffin is the kidnapped senator’s daughter. *Ipseity* also incorporates some structural devices common to the thriller genre within it; principally the use of foreshadowing passages at the beginning of each of the first four chapters. These are present in order to add pace and the sense of suspense.
common to the genre and, like the foreshadowing passages found in Iain Banks’ *Complicity* (1993), take the form of dreams.

By far the most critical element Ipseity has in common with the thriller is the subject of identity. Many thriller novels have identity issues at the core of their plots. These can range from the Jason Bourne novels, where the protagonist’s lack of identity drives the plot, to the more conventional who-dun-it where the plot is driven by the search for the identity of the killer. This extremely well worn literary device is exhibited in any number of novels from the work of Agatha Christie (The Hercule Poirot and Jane Marple series of novels for instance), or Arthur Conan Doyle (The Sherlock Holmes novels) through to more unconventional examples such as Dennis Lehane’s *Mystic River* (2001). This search, primarily by the ‘detective’ character involves ascertaining the means, motive, and opportunity for the killing and then matching them to a suspect. This process can very easily be explained as an example of social categorization as discussed in the social identity perspective. Therefore, the most believable killer will be the suspect who is categorized within the ingroup of ‘murderer’ the most successfully. In other words, the killer is the person who has achieved the best normative fit for the ‘killer’ ingroup in the eyes of the detective. This application of the principles common to the Social Identity Perspective to the thriller genre gives the critic a vital tool for evaluation of the novel.

The Social Identity Perspective can also be used for the close reading of a text. Alan Glynn’s 2001 novel *Limitless* offers fascinating opportunities to illustrate how the Social Identity Perspective can be used as a tool for critical evaluation, principally because the central facet of the novel relies so heavily on ingroup and outgroup dynamics. In addition to the novel having similar thematic elements to my own work, I have chosen to use *Limitless* as my primary example for this exercise because it is generally considered to be an example of a modern, commercially successful, thriller. In terms of the novel’s sub-genre of thriller, *Limitless* could be identified as techno or science fiction. Despite its techno leanings however *Limitless* is still undeniably a thriller according to the rubric Glover provides. The novel is formulaic in its construction, makes use of many stock characters (far more so than is true of *Ipseity*), has a commitment to verisimilitude, and employs literary devices with the intention of creating suspense which are all traits common to the genre. The central plot of *Limitless* involves the character of Eddie Spinola, a writer living in New York who
suffers from a mixture of procrastination and writer’s block. Following a chance meeting, Spinola is introduced to a new drug, known as MDT-48, which functions as a super-powered smart-drug that, when ingested by Eddie, renders him extremely focused, intelligent, industrious, and receptive to information. Like the narrator in *Ipseity*, Spinola begins Glynn’s novel as a member of the ‘societal outsider’ ingroup and it is this self-categorization that is salient. This is evidenced by his appearance; he is overweight and wears ill-fitting and haggard clothes, all contextual signs the reader picks up on that the character does not currently conform to characteristics, which the reader may consider desirable. However, upon taking the drug for the first time, Spinola industriously cleans his entire apartment, reads several books, produces thirty-five pages of notes and a 10,000-word draft of an introduction to the project he has been commissioned to write as well as a detailed plan for the rest of the book. In Spinola’s words, ‘during this last hour or so I had actually done more solid work on my book than I had in the entire previous three months.’ This portion of the novel is extremely important to the reader’s expectations of Spinola’s behaviour whilst he is under the influence of MDT-48. As a result of the drug Spinola legitimately becomes another character entirely due to his shifting social categorization on the part of the reader. Spinola’s shopping trip is a telling example of this. Having decided that he needs a new wardrobe to accompany his transition in social groups he makes the trip to SoHo. However, upon finding himself dissatisfied with what he finds there he instead goes to the shops around Fifth Avenue and makes a string of expensive purchases such as a charcoal wool suit, a plain cotton shirt, an Armani silk tie, a pair of tan leather shoes at A. Testoni on Fifth Avenue, and some casual items from Barney’s. All of these items are expensive and designer, and thus increase and advertise his prototypicality and aspiration to membership of a new ingroup. The reason this is worth commenting on is that clothes are an obvious method an individual uses to assert their self-categorization: clothes and ingroup membership are deeply intertwined. Indeed it is the entire reason the concept of uniforms exist, so people can identify and differentiate people and thus make other categorizations about a person’s values, behaviour, occupation etc. based on an external factor. It is important to note that Spinola refers to a group of day-traders who work at Lafayette Trading as ‘baseball caps’; their choice of headwear being the single external characteristic that is indicative of a certain set of behaviours that result from membership of the ‘baseball cap’ ingroup.
It was more money that I’d ever spent on clothes in my entire life, but it was worth it, because having new, expensive things to wear made me feel relaxed and confident – and also, it has to be said, like someone else. In fact, to get the measure of myself in the new suit – the way you might test-drive a car – I took to the streets a couple of times, and walked up and down Madison Avenue, or around the financial district, weaving briskly in and out through the crowds. On these occasions, I would often catch glimpses of myself reflected in office windows, in dark slabs of corporate glass, catch glimpses of this trim-looking guy who seemed to know precisely where he was going and, moreover, precisely what he would be doing when he got there.²⁸

This quotation is perhaps the most telling example of self-categorization in the entire novel. Spinola has not only bought clothes from outlets that he equates with success but he ‘test-drives’ them in an environment that caters almost exclusively to the ingroup he is hoping to gain membership of. In a very literal sense here, the clothes maketh the man (or to cite more precisely from Hamlet, “for the apparel oft proclaims the man”)²⁹. By walking around the financial district and Madison Avenue, Spinola is evaluating whether or not he is now prototypical of the ingroup and coming to the conclusion that he is, takes further steps to solidify his new membership. As both the narrative, and his taking of MDT-48 progress, Spinola not only updates his wardrobe but also loses weight, becomes wealthy, multi-lingual and learns to read music and play the piano. Most importantly though in terms of his social categorization, he becomes more socially accepted as evidenced by his rapidly widening circle of friends and numerous romantic encounters. All this reinforces the perception that, in the world created within the novel, Spinola has now been successfully characterised as prototypical of a highly desirable hegemonic ingroup; that of the successful man as defined in the western capitalist tradition. In many ways MDT-48 does much more for Spinola than merely making him smarter or more focused, instead it is a passport to a world of social acceptance that was hitherto unreachable. Take for instance his relationship with his father, which becomes stronger, thanks to the influence of MDT-48:

I also spoke to my father a couple of times during this period, and that was worse. He was retired and lived on Long Island. He phoned occasionally to see how I was, and we’d chat for a few minutes, but now all of a sudden I was getting caught up in the kind of conversations with him that he’d always craved to have with his son – the kind that his son had always ungraciously denied him – idle banter about business and the markets… At first, I could detect a note of suspicion in the old man’s voice, as though he thought I was making fun of him, but gradually he settled into it, seeming to accept that this, finally – after all the arid years of bleeding-heart, tree-hugging crap from his
boy – was the way things were meant to be. And if it wasn’t quite that, it
wasn’t a million miles off it either. I did get involved, and perhaps for the first
time ever I spoke to him just as I would speak to any other man.\footnote{30}

Due to the effects of MDT-48, Spinola suddenly displays characteristics that make
him prototypical of the social-categorization of ‘son’ in the eyes of his father. This is
just another example of the positive social interactions that occur once Spinola
becomes a part of the ingroup as opposed to the social outsider he was at the novel’s
outset.

The above discussion demonstrates that the central facet of \textit{Limitless} relies
heavily (however unwittingly) on the principles of the Social Identity Perspective.
Indeed it can be argued that the novel is least effective when it compromises these
principles for the sake of furthering the plot. Whilst it is certainly possible for a
thriller to be commercially successful whilst falling into these traps (Ian Fleming’s
James Bond novels being clear examples of this) the resultant novel is hamstrung in
terms of its intrinsic literary merit. In a similar vein to Glover’s comments on the
nature of thrillers, in an article on Raymond Chandler, George P. Elliott suggested
that the thriller diminishes “what is of the very essence of the novel: it manipulates
the motives and relationships of its characters for an artificial and trivial end.”\footnote{31} One
such example of this manipulation of motive and relationships occurs during the
initial stages of \textit{Limitless}. As his forays into the financial market become more
profitable, Spinola begins to entertain various methods of capitalization. At complete
odds with everything we know about the character and for reasons that are never
explained by the author, Spinola decides to obtain a loan from a dangerous loan shark
called Gennady with ties to the Russian mafia. He does this instead of obtaining the
funds necessary from more conventional means or even deciding against the necessity
of a loan at all. It is important to note, though, that this relationship with Gennady,
which drives much of the later plot of the novel, is highlighted as extremely
problematic when analysed using the Social Identity Perspective. The decision to
engage in such risky behaviour runs completely counter to the reader’s expectations
of Spinola, which are drawn from the novel at that point. It is also worth noting that
twenty pages prior to him making a deal with Gennady, when weighing up methods
of supporting himself financially, Spinola seemingly rules out engaging in various
activities precisely because of the risk:
What was I going to do with the 450 or so tablets? Some of them could be sold at $500 a piece, so the obvious thing I considered doing was, well… dealing them- and dealing them myself. But how, exactly, was I going to do this? Hang out on the street corner? Hawk them around nightclubs? Try and shift them in bulk to some scary guy with a gun in a hotel room? There were too many complications, and too many variables.32

It is ironic to note that the character of Gennady cannot be described as anyone other than a scary man with a gun and that is made clear from the outset. ‘Nester looked directly at me. “These guys are crazy, Eddie. I’m telling you. They’ll cut you around the waist, peel your skin – peel it all the way up to over your head, tie a knot in it and then let you fucking suffocate.”’ The reason that this behaviour is so jarring to the reader is that Spinola is not conforming to the prototypicality of the ingroup that has just been created for the reader. Given that the ingroup (that of the MDT-48 user) characteristics include being highly intelligent, with a high level of business sense and feel for the financial markets, alongside already demonstrated persuasive and attractive social traits, Spinola is clearly behaving unrealistically by placing himself in the debt of an individual who has a reputation for brutality. As discussed at length elsewhere in this thesis, characters can change their beliefs and behaviour given the right evolving context, as the narrator does in Ipseity and it is a fundamental tenet of the underlying Social Identity Perspective that plausible behavioural change requires the catalyst of an external stimulus. This does not occur in the novel and accordingly Spinola’s sudden change of heart regarding his actions is little more than reckless, ill-conceived, and ultimately foolhardy; precisely the antithesis of the behaviour one would expect to see from an MDT-48 user based on what the novel has previously outlined.

What the Social Identity Perspective would suggest Spinola might decide to do at this juncture would be to pursue an alternative strategy. When examining his other options Spinola concludes that, “Not having much of a history with my bank manager, I didn’t feel like trying him. Neither did I imagine that anyone I knew would have $75,000 to spare, or that any legitimate loan company would shell out that kind of money over the counter…”34 However, given the overwhelming evidence of Spinola’s persuasiveness and his newfound personable nature, not to mention his exponentially increasing intellectual and cultural resources it is hard to countenance these being the only options left to the character, or that those options are not at least worth consideration. Considering how Spinola treats Gennady when he meets him
(insulting him, playing on his vanity) it becomes harder not to imagine him successfully persuading his bank manager to offer him the loan he wants using the powers of persuasion he has already demonstrated in the novel. Furthermore, since extreme-risk taking behaviour (at least on a personal physical level as financial speculation can be high risk, it could be argued, although not at the same level as risking actual bodily harm) is not signified in the novel as a particular character trait of the ingroup that Spinola aspires to join and he may have instead decided to pursue a smaller loan amount from a reputable source or even not pursue one at all. By mid-morning on the day he decides to meet Gennady he has made $35,000 dollars on the stock market from only a couple of days’ work. This means that if he had taken out a smaller loan or just stayed at home that day rather than meeting the nefarious loan shark Gennady, he would have been no more than a week to ten days behind the financial position he eventually adopts with none of the accompanying severe risk. It is important to note that there is ample evidence in the novel to suggest that trading stocks and share on the financial markets is not at all risky behaviour for Spinola since he has an unerring ability, not to mention an accompanying physical sensation, to select the correct stocks to purchase and sell. Given that the entire conceit of the novel is that Spinola, under the influence of MDT-48, is able to develop super-human levels of intellectual prowess the fact that he engages in such ultimately foolish behaviour in order to further the plot leaves the reader in a position where their suspension of disbelief is not only challenged, but may be irreversibly countered.

The lack of plausibility in this character’s behaviour also demonstrates how an adherence to the principles outlined by the Social Identity Perspective can be of use to the writer. For an example of a novel where character behaviour is supported by the traits of their membership groups we might turn briefly to Iain Bank’s *Complicity*, a novel where a journalist is accused of a crime he did not commit and must apprehend the killer to prove his innocence, Banks works hard to portray his central character, Cameron Colley, as a member of a counter-culture; he has an addictive personality (drugs, drink, video games) and enjoys BDSM and cuckolding, all risky behaviours which tend not to be present in the hegemonic ingroup of the novel. This portrayal of Colley as a character on the fringes of society, both behaviourally and politically, adds credence to the possibility of him being guilty of several murders that take place during the novel, with suspicions of his involvement being held by both the police and
the reader for most of the novel. His status as a member of the societal outgroup therefore enhances *Complicity*’s realism. Furthermore, when Colley is accused of these murders the reader is unsurprised when he employs those characteristics that give him membership of the journalistic ingroup in order to find the real killer. This behaviour would be more surprising to the reader if Colley belonged to a different profession that lacked these characteristics and had he not previously demonstrated his extreme proficiency in them. There are clear parallels here between Colley and the unnamed narrator of *Ipseity* as both possess the skill sets and motivation, as indicated by their social categorizations, to engage in behaviour that, whilst unconventional and extraordinary, is also in keeping with their established characterisation. In relation to the creative element of this thesis, it is clearly the case that the social identity perspective could be a tool for avoiding the criticisms that commentators such as Glover have made in reference to the thriller genre. Where my creative work diverts from the conventions of the thriller genre, it does so in order to deploy, via the social identity perspective, a more plausible, character-led plot that has the verisimilitude lacking in some examples of the genre, as demonstrated in the case of Glynn’s work.

This conclusion will now examine other ways that The Social Identity Perspective and other aspects of social psychology might benefit the creative writer. This thesis has primarily focused upon The Social Identity Perspective as a means of producing believable character behaviour in realist fiction. However the aspects of Social Psychology studied within this thesis are not exhaustive and there are many other avenues that Social Psychology theorists have studied that may be of use to the writer of fiction. For example this thesis has focused on theories of group comparison in the sense of how a character first identifies with, and then reacts as a result of group stimuli and thus creates their self-concept. However there are alternative models for self-concept creation and as the current thesis has demonstrated, how a character defines their self-concept is extremely important with subsequent realistic behaviour. The first of these models of self-concept creation are theories of self-comparison such as the Control Theory of Self-Regulation proposed by Carver and Scheier (1981, 1998) and the Self Discrepancy Theory (Higgins 1987). The Control Theory of Self-Regulation proposes that the self is compared to a relevant standard: either private, such as their personal values, or a public standard, such as the values held by members of their social cohort. In this sense the regulation of self is a
cognitive feedback loop. If the individual perceives himself or herself to be failing to meet the required standard then they will take steps to redress the balance. Higgins’s Self-Discrepancy Theory takes this a stage further and includes an individual’s emotional response towards perceived discrepancies between the self and the relevant standard as a motivating factor towards behavioural adjustment. Higgins proposed that there are three types of self: the *actual self* (how the individual is presently), the *ideal self* (how they would like to be), and the *ought self* (how they should be). The individual is motivated to ensure that their actual self matches their ideal and ought self. However the further apart the actual self is from the ideal and ought self the greater the degree of psychological distress experienced by the individual. Whilst it is beyond the scope of this thesis to consider the implications of these theories, the current study has shown that the fundamental ideas of the field are useful in the practice of writing realist fiction. One such example of this utility is how the theories of self-comparison highlighted previously can be used to reinforce realistic responses from a first-person narrative’s characters, especially through a stream-of-consciousness literary device. Further alternatives to both theories of group comparison and theories of self-comparison are known as ‘Theories of Individual Comparison’. These are chiefly Social Comparison Theory (Festinger, 1954) and the Self-Evaluation Maintenance Model (Tesser 1988). These theories suggest that an individual defines their self-concept by comparing themselves with other individuals. Social Comparison Theory suggests that behaviours, beliefs, and feelings are subjective rather than objective. There is no objective standard from which comparisons can be drawn internally so individuals must instead rely on subjective standards provided for them by others. These may occur downwards (the individual comparing themselves with someone demonstrably worse than them by a certain measure) or upwards (comparing themselves with someone demonstrably better than them by a certain measure). The Self-Evaluation Maintenance Model suggests that people react to external comparisons in one of two ways: Social-Reflection and Social Comparison. Social-Reflection occurs when the accomplishments of other people close to the individual are used to boost that person’s self-esteem. This occurs when the individual’s own accomplishments in that area are not taken into account for reasons of irrelevance or due to the accomplishments of others adding to those of the individual. For instance, the individual may occasionally play golf once or twice a year with their friend who is a professional golfer. The individual must also be certain

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of their accomplishments in the area being compared for Social-Reflection to occur (in this case their level of golf playing ability as measured by a handicap). However when those conditions are not present (the individual doesn’t have a handicap), the other’s area of accomplishment is relevant to the individual, it does not add to that person’s own accomplishments, and the subject is uncertain of their own abilities in this area Social Comparison is likely to occur. This can be detrimental to the self-esteem of the person if the comparison is of the upward variety. When this occurs the subject can employ a number of strategies to regain a positive self-concept. These strategies include: exaggerating the ability of the successful target, changing the target of comparison, distancing the individual from the successful target, and devaluing the dimension of comparison. Once again, if the writer of realist fiction is aware of these theories they may provide significant assistance in the stated goal of realist fiction: to replicate the real world as closely as possible.

Building on the work already produced within this thesis, there has also been significant research conducted by Social Psychology theorists concerning more specific areas that may be of interest to the fiction writer. These areas include work on aspects of the human condition such as romantic relationships, aggression, and prosocial behaviour. Research into romantic relationships has suggested the existence of two types of love in particular, passionate love, and compassionate love. Passionate love can be described as all consuming and is characterised by an intense longing for another individual experienced at the onset of the relationship. Aron, Paris, and Aron found that individuals in love often report a variety of positive experiences in their lives, including increases in self-efficacy and self-esteem. Compassionate love was proposed by Hatfield who proposed it to be the affection felt by partners toward each other when their lives have become deeply entwined. It is thought of as far more enduring than passionate love. In terms of explaining aggressive tendencies, The Cognitive Neoassociationalist Model produced by Berkowitz suggested that aggression only occurred when there was an appropriate cue within the individual’s environment, such as an object or person that has been linked to anger or frustration previously. Berkowitz also discovered and coined the ‘weapon effect’; the phenomenon whereby weapons not only provide the means to cause violence but also increase the chances of a violent act occurring merely from their presence and function as cues for aggression based on prior experiences.
the subject of prosocial behaviour, Emswiller, Deaux, and Willits conducted a study in 1971 where they found that people are more likely to help a victim if they perceive the two of them as belonging to the same ingroup. This was exemplified in the study by the victim’s choice of clothing. In 2001 Ellis and Fox repeated this study but using sexuality and found that heterosexual bystanders were more likely to help a person identified as heterosexual than an individual identified as homosexual. Aggression, romantic relationships, and prosocialism are all aspects of behaviour that feature prominently within realist fiction and further examination of the findings of these studies may yield guidance that could be applicable to the formation of characters that exhibit these behaviours in a fictional setting.

Further study, building upon the work already undertaken in this research project, concerning how Social Psychology might assist the writer of fiction may choose to focus upon these areas although the topics suggested here constitute far from an exhaustive list. These theories all provide frameworks and pointers for the writer as to what social contextual conditions should be in place within a work of fiction in order to provoke an action by a character that reads as authentic and justifiable. The more successful the piece of fiction is at replicating authentic human behaviour the more successful the piece of fiction is in satisfying its realist goals. Furthermore, at several intervals in this thesis I have hinted at the depth and complexity of relationship between the demands and conventions of genre fiction (such as those of the thriller) and the conditions necessary to produce verisimilitudinous characters. A further research project could choose to examine this relationship in more detail.

In the preface of this thesis it was suggested that a writer might be able to produce a work of fiction much closer to reality than is otherwise possible and also avoid the pitfalls of false representation by drawing upon social psychology as a tool kit. This research project has sought to demonstrate the utility of this model. By incorporating aspects of the theory such as entititivity, social categorization, depersonalization, self-categorization, positive distinctiveness and others into the mix of motivations that define identity this thesis has hopefully created characters more reminiscent of the human condition. In offering a chapter that explains the origins, evolution, and scientific support of these terms the work here has offered a model of characterization to the realist writer based upon an evidence-based model of human
behaviour. Furthermore this work has included a creative element that uses The Social Identity Perspective as the guiding force for the construction of its characters. It has therefore not only outlined the potential application of the theory but also incorporated the theory into a character driven novella by way of example, therefore successfully demonstrating the advantages to the author that a knowledge of Social Psychology can bring. This project has then gone on to detail exactly how the theory has shaped the narrative of the novella, illustrating how the key terms already discussed manifest themselves within the narrative and serve to shape not only the characters themselves but the plot and setting as a consequence. By using The Social Identity Perspective this thesis is able to successfully justify the lead character’s behaviour and thought processes throughout the novella. Nowhere else is this more typified than in the Narrator’s transition in identities, from the career-orientated tabloid journalist to the anti-capitalist criminal at the novella’s end. The Social Identity Perspective not only provides a justification for the character’s self-identity in this context but also is an invaluable resource in suggesting what contextual conditions would be required in order to elicit such a behavioural change. Finally the work here has explored further areas of research that could follow on from this initial project. These areas broadly fall into two categories, the first of which is continued research and application of The Social Identity Perspective and related social psychological theories into the field of realist fiction writing. This would involve looking at other areas of The Social Identity Perspective not detailed in this project. The second area of research would be into other applications of The Social Identity Perspective and related areas of Social Psychology towards the field of literary criticism. By using The Social Identity Perspective as a gauge of character realism a literary critic may be able to identify and classify realist texts from other literary traditions.

12. *Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn*, p. 188.
30. *Limitless*, p 87
32. *Limitless*, p. 89.
33. *Limitless*, p. 107
34. *Limitless*, p. 105

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