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## **Prologue**

The naked, pallid body meandered its way through the murky water. The morning summer sun had risen over the Essex lowlands and begun to burn the lingering mist from the banks of the river. Sunlight dazzled off the aluminium-clad Thames Barrier towers, Gregor Bartok's final obstacle before the tide tried to pull his lifeless body to the freedom of the choppy seas of the English Channel.

His obese frame had provided an early morning feeding frenzy for many of the estuary's scavengers as it drifted aimlessly and unnoticed past the Millennium Dome, Greenwich and towards the iconic Barrier. The water cleansed him of any trace evidence as to who had killed and mutilated him before setting him off on this final scenic journey.

The river narrowed towards the Barrier, the funnelled water sped up and moved towards the giant towers with greater force. The body spun and pitched in the eddies and faster flowing current as it silently floated towards the driftwood and debris-cluttered at the base of the central tower.

Gregor's outstretched foot reached the tower and debris first, snagging amongst the river detritus anchoring the body to the tower. The fast current pushed at his rotund frame, dragging it round and leaving the body trailing in the water. The body rose out of the water, pushed up onto the debris by the fast flowing river. Lying exposed at the base of the tower the dead man now revealed the full extent of his grisly demise.

## Chapter One

“Find her! I don’t care what you do or how long it takes... track her with a sodding sniffer dog for all I care! But fucking *find* her!” Barry yelled.

At the other end of the line, Ramon heard only the unemotional click of the dial tone. He didn’t hear the receiver being slammed down with a reverberating bang, he didn’t witness Barry pick up the phone and hurl it against the wall. He didn’t hear Barry’s unnecessarily loud yell of “useless fucker,” nor the multiple kicks aimed at the unarmed and innocent wastepaper basket.

It had been a bad day for Barry. Actually it had been a bad week and you could even go so far as to say, that on balance it had been a bad year. Business had slumped, there had been mistakes, mostly just small ones, but one or two big ones – they all added up.

Barry Hunt could feel the pressure mount each day, weighing down on his narrow shoulders. When he looked at the sad tired face that greeted him in the mirror each morning, he realised he wasn’t the man he hoped he would become, the gnawing realisation that what little he had achieved would soon be destroyed only made his mood worse. His manor, his piece of the South London underworld, had many rivals and now they were moving in for the kill. He doubted he had the muscle or belief left to fight them off.

Barry wasn’t desperate, but he was down the road to desperate. The scruffy third floor of the Duke of Bedford pub served as his office. Not flash, never mind trendy or smart, merely functional. The Duke was the archetypal East End pub, although it was south of the river in Putney, where it stuck out like an American theme pub in downtown Baghdad.

Barry had bucked the trend of taking his organisations into respectable modern office-like premises. At fifty five Barry had settled into the ‘old dog’ stereotype, his compact frame supported an easy living gut, and a penchant for Merlot and single malt whisky had given his jowly face a crimson hue. He didn’t have the capacity nor inclination for change.

“Mickey...Mickey...” Barry barked out in the direction of the corridor outside his office; he knew his oldest ally would have heard the commotion.

“Yeah?” came a gruff muffled reply.

“Get your arse in here...I’ve got a job for you.”

Barry remained seated as Mickey eased himself into the room. At forty five, he was a little slower than he had been. But with greying temples and a maturing body came an experienced mind. Massive, that’s how people thought of Mickey Finn. A truly massive, scary man. He’d boxed as a professional but the rules and discipline had never suited him. He had the physical attributes to succeed, six foot five and close to nineteen stone, some fat now, but still a whole lot of muscle. His square head sat on a tree trunk neck, no matter from what angle you looked there was no discernible division from one to the other. It was as if he had swallowed a Welsh dresser: shoulders, waist and hips formed an almost perfect rectangle.

Mickey sat down in the chair across from Barry’s desk. It groaned in protest. He had worked with Barry Hunt for twenty years. He had always liked him. Barry had funded some of his fights and had always found him work. Occasionally he’d given Mickey money when he’d needed it and he’d even kept in touch when Mickey went inside. Not that Barry had had any real obligation. Mickey had been working for another firm at the time, but the job he was on had gone tits up, a stupid and unnecessary balls-up that had left Mickey holding the money when the shit came down. He’d taken the fall, of course, and done the time. That was what you did. And he’d expected to be looked after – that *used* to be how it was done. But it hadn’t happened that way. That had really pissed Mickey off. Barry and Mickey were old school, and it was Barry who’d looked out for him, stood by him.

Mickey Finn *liked* that.

Barry paced around behind his desk, nibbling at his fingernails like someone picking at a tasteless appetiser. He hadn’t been like this for a long time. Not since the Brazilian whore incident of ’95. Mickey had cleaned that mess up as well.

“It’s Melissa...I can’t find her. I know what you think,” he put his hands up to stop any comeback, “No surprise... but she hasn’t gone alone this time.”

Mickey nodded slowly, knowing that only a woman had this effect on him. Barry had taken a shine to Melissa...he always fell for the wrong ones. Melissa was a whore. Literally and metaphorically always on the take. She did nothing, said nothing or even acted without calculating what was in it for her.

Mickey had a sneaking admiration for the girl. She looked like butter wouldn’t melt, nice tits too.

“What she take?” Mickey asked.

“The Bartok fund.”

“Oh fuck...” said Mickey.

## Chapter Two

Adam sat in his car. The air con hummed out its icy tune, the windows shutting out the world as well as the stifling heat of the day. His car thermometer read that it had hit 30 degrees outside, day three of a mini heat wave. As usual, the complaints poured in, “too hot, can’t work”. These, the same people that a week before had bemoaned the week of light irritating showers and grey skies. “What kind of summer is this, I hate our summers.” Adam disliked the hypocrisy and seemingly addictive habit of people to moan and complain. He liked it hot, it felt good to feel the sun on your skin, to have that desire to strip and leap into rivers or lakes. Kids would do it, he had, leaping into the river Itchen by the water meadows at the St. Cross Monastery, but as an adult you hold back, you become so conservative.

He looked at the map. Croydon to Winchester, no matter which way he went, it would be slow. He revved up the Renault Megane – the diesel engine apologetically simpered into life as he indicated and pulled out from his parking space and onto the main road. He did a lot of driving, the Megane had proved to be a sensible car, he could get nearly 600 miles out of a tank and he didn’t need to impress anyone with the look of his car. If anything, a modest car made him more likeable to his financial clients. He understood that as an independent financial advisor a stereotyped image followed him, but he wasn’t from an accounting or banking background, he was different.

The car suited Adam Warriner physically, like it, he was compact and efficient. His long body and short legs made him appear shorter than his near six foot, his midriff had that familiar lazy paunch of an idle twenty something and it came not from excessive drinking or overindulging, but more from a case of relaxed muscle. It would be safe to say that Adam had not entered into physical activity or even run in anger for a good ten years.

As he drove he flicked on the Bluetooth earpiece and waited for the beep. “Messages” he said, activating his mobile to retrieve his voicemails. He had two. One from his mum and one from Jake. He called his mum.

At fifty, Mrs Kathleen Warriner devoted herself to her two pride and joys, the first, her garden, continuing the green fingered vision of her late husband; the second of course was her only child, Adam.

She answered on the third ring.

“Hello”

“Hi mum”

She called him every day. He didn't always answer, he rarely answered in fact, but that didn't matter. She liked to call; she liked to let him know all was well.

“Hello sweetheart,” she replied in faintly mock surprise. “How has your day been?”

“Same as always. Talking to desperately dull people, about dull things they don't understand and earning money for filling in forms.” Adam had delivered the speech before. He liked to be sardonic about his job.

“Glad you're still loving it.”

Adam had always been something of a loner, his job suited this, what few friends he had she rarely saw. Girlfriends proved rarer still.

“Now, your birthday is only a month away. I need to plan for the dinner, I presume you are coming?”

Adam smiled, another year and another birthday meal.

“Yes I'll be there. Steak and chips as usual please!”

“Well God forbid we should try anything new, hey? Anyone else you want to invite?”

She always asked and he always said no. As a supposedly joyous occasion his birthday meal lacked any real fun. They toasted his father, the only joint active moment of mourning they performed each year.

One year they had met in his friend Jake's bar before going out to eat, changing the tradition. It hadn't worked out as planned. Adam had wanted, selfishly he later realised, to take the situation away from the family home, away from the memories and try to make it a happy occasion. He misread the importance, for his mum, of having it at home, surrounded by those memories.

“Funny mum, real funny. You'll be the first to know if I meet someone special, promise,” Adam paused, bit his bottom lip before starting again – “Look I wanted to tell you that I won't be round tonight as I promised. I know you need the

light sorting out in the bathroom, but I have only just left Croydon and, well, there's something I need to take care of..." He trailed off.

He could almost hear the disappointment in his mother's breathing. He hated letting her down, he knew how much his little but often visits meant to her. It also made up for only one extended Sunday visit each month.

"I know you're busy. It can wait until Sunday darling."

"Cheers Mum, I have to go as I'm driving. I'll see you at 12.00 on Sunday."

With that they exchanged their customary sign off and the phone went dead. He hadn't lied to his mother, he really did have something to take care of, but he still felt guilty.

Adam's father passed away shortly after his 21<sup>st</sup> birthday. Adam had spent the six years since the funeral trying to remember his face without the need to be reminded by a picture; it became harder with each passing year.

He called Jake using speed dial one.

Jake answered in two rings. "Hello sir?" he said in his customary manner.

"You rang me?" said Adam – both clearly not used to indulging in small talk.

"I did. I have considered your dilemma and after careful consideration I have reached a conclusion."

"Please articulate," Adam replied.

"With pleasure. I think you should tell the silly bitch to fuck off!"

"Just like that?"

"Well you could punch her as you throw her out, but I rather think that would be overkill. She's trouble, always was and always will be ... do you need that back in your life again?" Jake, as usual offered his opinion bluntly.

"Well I'll take your point of view into consideration. But I think a more diplomatic approach may prove more fruitful."

"Really."

"Yes Jake... we can't all adopt your blunt militaristic approach to life," Adam said.

"I suppose... but Adam, be warned. The damsel in distress routine is simply a load of bollocks. Don't get suckered in, she probably wants money again and maybe even a place to hole up while she sets up the next loser to rip off. My worry, my friend is that you're the next loser in her sights."

Adam smiled to himself. Jake always looked out for him. He didn't need reminding about her, trouble followed her, and it always would. But when someone you loved needs your help, you help.

"You don't know her Jake... you judge her on what my mum says about her."

"..and the stories you have regaled me with. I remember her from the bar as well... if nothing else I know the type. I appreciate Adam, that you shouldn't judge based upon the opinions of others..."

Adam sighed, "If you knew her...well look anyway it's my life isn't it..."

"That it is... be careful though. Have you finalised on the house?"

"Don't worry I know what I'm doing. The house..? Nearly... need to set a date for exchange that's all."

There was a moment's silence, neither man felt the need to speak, Jake had offered Adam a way to terminate the increasingly uncomfortable conversation.

"She'll be gone by Saturday," Adam said wearily, ".. and we can all forget about her. Melissa Henderson isn't getting back into my life."

Jake let out a faint ironic chuckle, "Adam we're discussing her, she's coming to stay... she's therefore, already back in your life".

### **Chapter Three**

Mickey walked out of the office and shut the door slowly and calmly. No histrionics. Boxing had taught Mickey many valuable lessons, the most important being patience, never rush at a challenge, think it through. There'd be plenty of time to panic later. By and large, he had been a successful fighter, mostly in the no-holds barred and bare knuckle format, where the less limiting rules suited his more brutal style. Mickey won not just because of his immense size and power, but also because he was never intimidated. Still, he knew that, sooner or later, you always meet a better man.

He pulled out the mobile phone and pressed speed dial three. It rang for two rings; then, predictably – voice mail.

"Jonno...it's Mickey. TURN YOUR BLOODY PHONE ON, Muppet! Please tell me you had someone on Melissa this week. Tell me what you know. Also prise Ramon off whatever girl he's on and tell him if he wants to hang onto his Spanish balls he needs to call me in the next ten minutes!"

He clicked the phone shut and strode into the pub's main bar. The pub served as the legit cover for much of Barry's and the manor's business, but with the sponsored boxing gym down the road, it was a bit too Lock Stock for Mickey's taste, but Barry thought he had an image to uphold. He sat at the bar and caught the barmaid's eye. She ignored the other punters and brought him an orange juice and lemonade. He took a sip and the phone rang.

"Ramon! ....Button it you greasy little ponce. Just answer *my* questions - When did Melissa go? ...Right, so that was the *last* night she worked? ... Why didn't *you* tell *me* she had "gone to visit her mum"...You what? You told Barry? You fuckwit...just answer the questions and stop fucking *thinking*. Got it? Good. Now listen carefully...check her room for any personal stuff, picture, letters whatever. Collect everything you can and have it ready in an hour."

He put the phone down and subconsciously wiped his hand on the bar towel. The phone rang again. Jonno this time.

"Spill the beans," Mickey said curtly.

"I didn't have a regular tail on her – but luckily I did that day." A nervous tinge of fear ran under what he said. "She left The Palace at about six p.m. She went straight to The Duke, went upstairs to see Barry, stayed mebbe ten minutes and then she headed off to Waterloo Station – no other stops. Got on the train to Bournemouth, with stops at Basingstoke, Winchester, Eastleigh, Southampton ...I think that's the lot."

"And..."

"And what?...My man didn't get on the fucking train with her, my task was to report activity, we weren't on fucking protection duty, sorry if we screwed up Mickey, but if I'd put one of the boys on the train we would've been one man down on the doors and Barry would've gone spare..." The voice wavered, confident in its rationale but fearful of the consequences.

"Fair enough. Get over to The Palace, Ramon is sorting through her gear, go through it with him, we need to find out where she may have gone. Have a word with the dizzy blonde bint, you know the one?"

Jonno didn't respond, unsure which dizzy blonde bint at The Palace Mickey meant. Mickey screwed his eyes shut, trying to recall the girl's name. "The one with the big tits and saggy arse...nice face...what's her bloody name?...Gemma!...yeah

that's her. Always good mates those two...she may know something... and Jonno...*be nice!*"

Mickey didn't move from the bar. He finished the remains of his drink in one swift glug, and then banged the glass onto the bar and when the barmaid looked up at the sound, he nodded for another. Mickey didn't run about anymore. That's what you had monkeys for.

"Were you working Monday night?" he asked the barmaid.

Judy moved down the bar and focused on Mickey. She gave him her best 'I'm game if you are' smile.

"Yeah, I was on the back bar."

She leaned forward over the real ale pumps hoping mighty Mickey Finn would notice her ample cleavage. Mickey's eyes never strayed from her face.

"Did you see Melissa come in and visit Barry – would've been about 6.15pm."

Admitting failure Judy stood upright and answered.

"Yeah I saw her go up, but she didn't see Barry."

"What do you mean she didn't see Barry?"

"Not Monday night, Barry wasn't in Monday. He switched his meet with the Turks. Met them Monday night instead of Wednesday. I guess he left at five mebbe earlier".

"Who the fuck was upstairs minding the office?"

"No one really – Anton was minding the back bar door and minding the stairs as well I suppose. But you know Anton Fat Cock, could'a been there, could'a been in anything."

"Oh yes I know fucking Anton, where's the useless prick tonight?"

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