

## Chapter XI

### THE GUNNERY

Saturday, 28 September 1996

Gore didn't like to stare, yet he could hardly ignore the veritable elephant in this particular parlour. A hulk of a man, shaven-headed, absurdly muscled, was trundling tank-like through the modest crowd of late Saturday afternoon – not boorishly, but with a clear, calm surety that lesser bodies would step out of his way. Mid-to-late thirties, Gore reckoned, though the bluish sheen of his clean scalp perhaps added years to an ostensibly younger face. His faded jeans bulged as if to burst, his navy-blue polo shirt stretched drum-skin tight by the barrel chest and slab-like biceps that put Gore in mind of nothing so much as the marbled flanks in a Bridport abattoir to which he once accompanied Roy Jeavons.

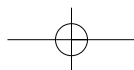
'So, uh, what do you think, John?'

'Oh I think it's terrific, Bob.'

Spikings flanked Gore by the door of his church hall, wherein the weekly jumble sale had reached its peak hour of trade. Gore counted eighteen or nineteen stalls, a turnout of eighty or ninety bodies. The elderly were notable, as were the parents of noisy children. But it worked, by God – it was orderly and cheery. And none seemed more genial than the Incredible Hulk, now making a big show of buying from this stall and that, his over-biting grin like that of some cartoon shark circling a bony castaway on a buoy-like desert island.

'Well, glad you think so,' said Spikings. 'Car-boot sales are quite the thing now, but we're fighting back. This is nicer, I think. You do see some pretty, uh, ragged elements at the boot sales.'

*As opposed to the Mighty Quinn over there,* thought Gore. Now the



Hulk was whispering into the ear of a plump lady, she pulling a delightedly scandalised face.

'And this turnout, it reflects your congregation?'

'Pretty much. Attendance is up three years running now. Just a little each time, but my God you notice. It's not a *revival*, nothing like the righteous Mr Barlow would argue. He can talk, uh, such crap.'

Gore smiled. An old lady was touching the Hulk's arm tentatively, cooing at him, and he inclined his domed head the better to hear.

'... No, sometimes I think we're just getting people out of their houses. Otherwise they sit by the telly and worry about crime and what-have-you. And we're cheaper than a seat at St James's Park. I mean, that's how it is these days, John – you've got to see it from the punter's angle. Find out what people want, try to give it them.'

Drawing near, thin and eczematic under a sponge of frizzy red hair, was Spikings's verger, Henry March, to whom Gore had been introduced in the foyer as he dispensed raffle tickets.

'How we faring, Henry?' Spikings asked.

'Pretty good. Forty-two sold.'

'Splendid. Now half of that will go straight to your cause, John.'

Gore murmured thanks. Well and good – albeit not so diverting as the two small children running gleeful circles around the Hulk's trunk-like legs, until he stooped and scooped first one then the other into his great arms. Only then, as the kids squirmed and bounced, did a momentary wince twist that grin of his. *Bad back*, thought Gore. *Achilles heel?*

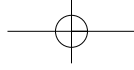
'It takes all sorts, doesn't it?'

'Sorry, Bob?'

'That fellow you've your eye on? Quite a sight, isn't he? His name is, uh . . . gosh, I'm blanking. Clarkson? Bit of a character at any rate, locally.'

'That I can imagine.'

'Do you know, last year he called me up out of the blue. Said he was a businessman, wanted to come in for a meeting, about



“church funds”, he says. I thought, fine. Then *that* shows up. You can imagine my face. But I realised, I’d seen him here before, at eventide. And what he did – I was stunned – was hand me a big fat donation for a new communion table.’

‘Gosh. That’s not to be sniffed at.’

‘Lord, no. Cash, too. You don’t forget that. Very *intense* he was about it. Said he wasn’t much of a churchgoer himself but the Church meant a lot to him. Heaven knows why. Didn’t give the impression he would brook any argument. And it was decent of him, I must say.’

‘He seems to have friends here.’

‘I’ll bet there’s not one he’s met before. Some people just have that way about them, don’t they? The world is their friend. No, he’s not doing any harm. Good job. I couldn’t ask him to leave, could I? I might get seven bells knocked out of me.’ Spikings chortled as they began to dander down one side of the room, until Gore’s arm was gently taken and he encountered some keen selling from a lady presiding over a table of crockery and tableware.

‘Nothing to tempt you, John?’ Spikings prompted. ‘Not even something for your new place?’ Sotto voce he added, ‘You only make one first impression.’

Gore picked up the most plain-looking vase on display, a yellow ceramic number, and parted with a fiver.

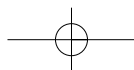
‘That’s the spirit,’ purred Spikings, as his phone trilled about his midriff. The next table was entirely populated by soft toys, and Gore had all but turned his face away when he spotted a saggy brown donkey with long fleecy ears and excessively doleful eyes. A daft impulse seized him.

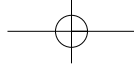
‘Oh, I’ll have *him*.’

‘Fiver alright for you?’

‘My lucky day.’

He sauntered out to the foyer, firing out broad smiles in every direction. Spikings was muttering into his phone, but he concluded the call and slotted the device into a pouch on his belt, easy as a workman’s tool. ‘Have you not got one of these yet? They’re awfully useful.’





'I'm a bit suspicious. They seem to make you a slave. A bell rings and you have to answer.'

'I wouldn't see it, uh, quite so drastically. When one is called, it's usually meaningful. My, that's quite a prize you have there.' He indicated the fluffier of Gore's purchases.

'Oh, I'm all for the donkey,' said Gore, surprised by his own cheeriness. 'A useful and good-natured creature.'

Spikings feigned a short laugh, clearly a bridge to discourse over the wreckage of a remark that had baffled him.

'That's a line in Dostoyevsky.' Gore smiled. 'Big favourite of mine.'

'Right,' said Spikings, his warmer smile suggesting no new understanding, but plenty of reassurance.

'Bob, while I'm here I wondered too if I might ask you a favour?'

'Anything. Well, you know, within reason. At a price.' He patted Gore's forearm.

'I think I need a loan of a few good items. Proper things. For my service.'

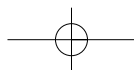
'Oh! For sure. We have spares. What are you in need of?'

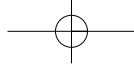
'Well, a good altar cloth, certainly. Maybe a ciborium?'

'Hmm. Can you bear to wait around? Henry could sort you out after the raffle.'

Gore elected to stroll out of doors, down the Nun's Moor Road for a breath of air. On his return, the sale was finished, stalls were being packed up. He could not see Henry March. Thus he stepped aside, through connecting doors, into the chapel. Spikings had spoken with quiet pride of his burnished brass lectern, a rather special choir stall and a fine old three-manual organ. Gore fancied he might steal a moment to peek around the nave before evening communion.

The sight that met him was that of Henry towering over some sheepish and unkempt old fellow in a stained sweatshirt. Voices were raised, most especially Henry's. Gore set off down the aisle toward them, but the old man broke away and stomped past, his face madly ruddy, eyes wild, beard yellow-grey. As Gore reached





Henry's side he turned and together they watched the tramp lurch out of sight.

'As if there weren't enough on,' Henry sighed, 'I find *that* kip-ping in the pews . . . Oh, and God I *knew* it, I mean, look at that. The dirty mare . . .'

Gore understood as the stink assailed him, and covered his mouth with his sleeve, recognising the thoroughly regrettable shape on the ground, the piece of wretched ordure to which Henry pointed a short distance hence.

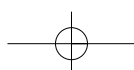
The verger's voice became a pained hush. 'Bob doesn't want to hear about this, see. It's like it's part of the job, right? They're all part of "the community".' March wagged his fingers in the shape of inverted commas. 'So who's left holding the baby, eh? I don't mind the doors being unlocked, but this is what you get. Dossing and drinking and . . . urgh. I wouldn't mind if he'd gone in his own trolleys. Oh bloody hell, I'd better go get the pail and shovel. We're not paid enough for this,' he muttered. 'Oh, and you want something too, don't you?'

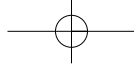
'In your own time,' said Gore.

It was noticeably colder as Gore wended his way home on foot, and the lights of Hoxheath's pubs seemed unusually warm and welcoming, however smeared the glass or grubby the curtains. Passing a few open doorways he heard sounds of inchoate rowdiness, but also bonhomie. Saturday night was Saturday night, however it was sliced – time for good cheer, for a little light relief. Turning his key in his door, he knew he had nothing to pass the evening other than reading, not even a stroke of meaningful work. Feeling a mite fool-hardy, yet mildly hopeful, he dialled Jack Ridley's number, and got his wife on the line. 'Oh, he's eating his tea, John . . .'

When Ridley came on, he sounded like a man gripped by heart-burn.

'Jack, I'm just calling on the off chance. When we popped into the Nelson the other week, I found it very useful, meeting every-one and so forth? And I fancied I might head out to a pub or two around Crossman tonight. I just wondered if you'd be at all inter-





ested in joining me for a pint? A rematch on the old dominoes maybe?’

‘No, thank you, John, we’re settled in for the night now.’

‘Of course you are. Sorry.’

‘You say you’re off drinking round *Crossman*?’

‘Just to show my face. I’m all for pubs, as you know.’

For some moments only ambient Ridley household noise came back down the line.

‘Okay then, John. But mind yourself when you’re out. And divvint drink too much, hear? Good night to you.’

Gore set down the receiver, much the worse for having taken it up.

He heard noises, made out shapes, figures, in a doorway, and his pulse quickened as he made haste past the Crossman Youth Centre. Thirty yards ahead lay its squat detached doppelgänger, the Gunnery pub. A few cars were parked in its forecourt, and Gore felt a chuckle escape him, for one of these was a fancy jet-black Lexus – alloy wheels, creamy leather upholstery, tinted windows, bold as a bull in a tea-room given the wrecks all around it. He had to stop and walk around this immaculate vehicle in wonder, and it struck him that anyone with a house-key and a bad attitude might be tempted sorely to wipe the wealthy smile from the owner’s face.

‘Had a good fuckin’ look then, have ya?’

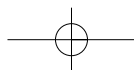
The challenge came from behind and Gore twisted sharply, only to see a youth’s face, a puffy truculent buffer under lamplight – a bristling little version of a man, smoking sourly, acting like this were his property, his ride. It was beginning to seem to Gore that this boy and he had been twinned for a higher purpose.

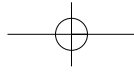
‘It’s Mackers, isn’t it? Mackers?’

‘What’s it to yee?’

‘Well – I thought we were pals. Before your mate stuck one on me. Didn’t I take that corner for you? In the park last week?’

‘He’s not me mate. You’re alreet, you. Just leave off eyein’ the motor, aye?’





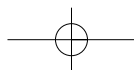
The hard look was nearly funny. 'Fine,' Gore murmured and turned away.

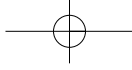
The Gunnery pub was sullen under the sodium light, exuding a certain eventide menace, a keep-out to passing trade. There were perhaps a hundred instant reasons to stray nowhere near, and Gore pressed them out of his mind as he pushed through the doors. Within? Just another drab boozier – a glum, unwelcoming, seemingly all-male haven for heavyweight drunks. At the bar two indecently red-faced men, in similar anoraks and tracksuit bottoms, were loudly speaking ill of an absent associate. Woodchip climbed the walls to a dado rail, above which the plaster was painted – smeared – in the manner of a dirty protest. Pushed up in rows askew around the wall were framed monochrome photos of local industrial scenes. A scattering of pension-age drinkers looked extremely ill over those drinks. For the moment, at least, Gore decided, he would not be initiating any conversations.

He ordered a bottle of brown ale from a dilatory barman who glanced at his clerical collar but found no interest there. Where, then, should he settle himself, which spot was least uncomfortable? Past the bar and to the left was an enclave of alcove tables, but a raucous manly hubbub was issuing from same. To the right, a dim corner table presented itself, and yet he couldn't but feel it would present him in turn, conspicuous as a prize lemon. He stood his ground, toyed with his half-pint glass. How long would he stay? How long to drain a bottle? Where next? His night out was off to a sluggish start.

He was shifting so as to face the door rather than any hard look when he saw, coming round the bar from the seating at back, a face he knew. For this colossal man was not forgettable. *What was his name? Clarkson?*

Tonight he had packed his bulk into a good single-breasted suit of dark blue, with a crisp white collar flying open, so framing that bulwark neck of his. He thumped on the bar without malice, but the barman hastily snuffed his fag. Gore made eye contact, then his eye darted aside, for he saw the big man's eyebrows knit. Eye contact was a mistake, wasn't it? He didn't suppose his clerical





suit gave him Red Cross immunity from aggro. Still, he glanced back – and Clarkson was looking at him most fixedly. Impulsively Gore raised his half pint, tried a smile. Now the Hulk was striding round and at him, purposefully, and Gore's pulse jumped. He had meant no affront, and tried now to fight a wild-racing notion that he was about to be hoisted up bodily, tossed out through the double doors. Clarkson was nigh, raising a ham fist almost to his shoulder. *He's going to punch my arm.* Gore quailed, rooted to the spot. The fist came down, the arm extending, and turned into an open hand, into which Gore reflexively inserted his own, and so found himself part of a pumping handshake.

'Reverend Gore, aye? Am I right? I'm right, aren't ah?'

'Aye,' Gore blurted. 'That's me. You are?'

'I'm Stevie, Father. Stevie Coulson. Good to know you.'

'You know my name?'

'Aye, I saw you with the Reverend Spikings this afternoon, I meant to come owa, but you'd nipped off, hadn't you?'

At last Coulson relinquished Gore's hand. But there remained something strangely grave and decorous in his bearing, like a diplomat greeting the monarch, or an undertaker on duty. *Surely not for my sake,* thought Gore. He couldn't see himself as the recipient of dignities from this powerhouse, with his hard-worn hands and fighter's face and broad over-biting smile.

'So,' Gore tried, 'you wanted to say hello? This afternoon?'

'I did. You did us a good turn, see. Th'other week? I say "us", what I heard is you took care of a young friend of mine.'

Gore made a lightning-fast mental account of his recent activities in the area. No ball was dropping.

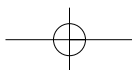
'It were young Cheryl MacNamara.'

'Oh! Cheryl.'

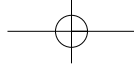
'Aye, her mam's a pal of mine, see, and she were proper grateful you brought her in th'other night. So I'm grateful to you an' all.'

'Well, it was nothing.'

'Ah but see, Father, it's not everybody thinks like that. Now you'll have another of them there, eh?' He gestured to Gore's bottle.







'Oh, sure.'

'And you'll come sit yer 'sel wi' us in the back, right?'

Resistance, clearly, was useless. And so, after all, Gore had company for the evening. He found that he was served sharply this time, and carried his two glasses carefully to Coulson's table, where the man sat at the head of four brawny broad-shouldered fellows. Three still had their own hair, one of these clearly the junior of the gang. The other skinhead wore a low brooding look of such enmity that Gore suspected he had wrecked the man's evening. In their jeans and tee-shirts they were scruffy next to the suited and booted Coulson, though stacked to one side of the party in the shelf of an alcove was a little hillock of leather coats, clearly new or nearly so, giving off the good aroma of a tanner's shop.

'Now this,' Coulson announced, 'is the Reverend Gore I telt you's about.'

'Hullo. Call me John.'

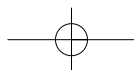
'This here's Simms. That man's Dougie? That sour-looking toerag is Shack. And who are you again?' This was directed at the youngster, but with a sporting cackle that the group echoed. 'Nah, that there's Robbie. New start, see. I say Robbie, he's Smoggie to me, cos he's Middlesbrough, aren't ya?'

Robbie bobbed his head bashfully – either an uncommonly forbearing soul, or a lad of limited faculties. Gore eased himself down onto a stool, shaking all hands as he went.

'Now divvint tak' a word of bother out of them, John. There's not one of 'em as hard as they give out. And they all work for me, so they know to behave.'

'You do your preachin' round here then, do you?' muttered Shack.

'Actually I'm what they call "planting" a new church . . .' And Gore stumbled into his stock speech, unsure of the true interest from his interlocutor, whose mouth stayed tightly pursed around his tab, the scar tissue under his eyes very pronounced at close quarters. Shack was not built to such fearsome proportions as Stevie, yet there was perhaps a surpassing hardness to him, a sense of more callous materials employed.



When Gore was done, Coulson very solemnly clapped his hands. 'Good man, you. I tell you what, Father, you set a good example and you'll find people sharp follow it.'

'Well, I hope. If anyone shows up.'

'Whey, you'll not have bother. Plenty good people round here, good honest families and that.'

'Aye, Stevie's got family round here,' announced the one called Simms, seeming to think himself a wit, for a grin lit his babyish features, these with the regrettable look of having been crushed into the middle of his face as if by a vice. Stevie shot Simms a dead-eyed look in reply. Gore could almost smell the sheepishness among these big men, a seeming acceptance that, for all their equivalent size, one alone was the dominant dog in the pack.

'What's your line of work, then?' Gore asked between sips of beer.

Coulson opened his hands as if this were a complex matter, one on which he was often questioned closely. 'What I am mainly, what I *call* myself now, I'm a security consultant.' He dipped into the top pocket of his jacket and produced a business card, designed in blocks of black and white, bearing the legend SHARKY'S MACHINE.

'It's a lotta things these days, security. You've the pubs and clubs and that. Then you've businesses, minding premises. And there's bodyguarding, if we have to.'

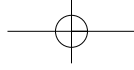
'Right. Gosh. How long have you been at it?'

'Whey, for what – ten, fifteen year? Started on the pub doors me'sel. Just a hired hand, y'knaa? Now look at us. I've got employees, man. I have to pay tax and national insurance on these lumps here.' His look of long sufferance was comical. 'Aye, I ought to put this boozier down on wor card, man, it's like wor second office, y'knaa? This here corner right here.'

'You should pay owld Peter ground rent, Stevie,' offered Dougie.

'Aye, or compensation, like,' Simms hooted. 'For wearing all the covers off the seats with wor arses.'

Stevie showed another hard face. 'Eh, Simms man, what sort of talk is that?'



Gore raised his glass, sniffing a chance. 'Don't mind me. We've all got arses.'

Mild jollity, and Simms gave Gore a thumbs-up. Gore saw too that Coulson, between casting imperious stares about the table, always met his own eye with a wink.

'So you gentlemen keep the peace all over town, is that it?'

Again Coulson appointed himself spokesman. 'Aw aye. You get a lot of bad uns about, John, specially in the bars and clubs and that. Worky tickets, y'knaa what I mean? You've always got some want keeping in line. Some want a right fettlin' an' all. For their own good.'

'Aye,' grunted Shack. 'It's a public service.'

'Some of them buggers, it's a bliddy pleasure.' Dougie smirked, as if imparting the trade secret that manners normally forbade. But Gore chuckled and reached for his glass. He was starting to enjoy himself.

'Have you got plans up your sleeve, then?' Coulson asked. 'For getting folk along to your church?'

'Well, I reckon at least it's a day out. Cheaper than a seat at St James's.'

'Eh, now you're talking.' Simms whistled through his teeth. 'Eh, *Stevie* gans to all the games free, but. Cos of his big mate. Did y'knaa that, Smoggie?'

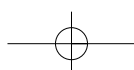
So addressed as the idiot child, young Robbie made a startled face.

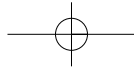
'Aye, Rob,' said Dougie, 'and did you know it's your bliddy shout?' He waggled his sudsy pint glass, and Robbie hastened to his feet, clutching his head. Simms watched him go and then, with surgical precision, poured the dregs of his beer onto the seat of Robbie's low stool. 'Ye canna get the help these days,' he snickered.

'Aye, but guess what, Fatha,' said Dougie, leaning into Gore mock-conspiratorially. 'Stevie gans to the Toon but he's a Mackem, y'knaa?'

'Oh? You're from Sunderland?' said Gore.

'Washington, County Durham,' Stevie replied somewhat reluctantly. 'Before it was part of Sun'land.'





'Aye, so. A Mackem supportin' Newcastle, like,' Dougie persisted.

'Fuck off out of it, Dougie man.' Coulson reddened, then rounded on Gore. 'I'm sorry for that one, Father, just popped out.'

'Not at all. I understand the, uh, passions of it. The rivalry.'

'Where *you* from then?'

'Framwellgate Moor.'

'Aw aye? A Durham lad and all? Do you follow football?'

Gore nodded gamely. 'I'm black and white.'

'Good man. Like Tony Blair, aye? *He's* Durham, but he's black and white. Most of Washington's black and white, man, it's sound. Washington, Consett, Chester-le-Street . . . I mean, you get a bit both, you'll have seen that, aye?'

Gore nodded, though he had never much cared for the distinction.

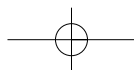
'Naw, it's alreet, Sun'land,' Coulson persisted. 'Got some canny bits to it, like where me nana lives. Me grandda, now he was true mackem. Worked on the ships. He used to come in at night and sit in his old chair with his cap on, just bloody *ragged*, man. I couldn't believe such a skinny fella could work that hard. He'd say to us, "Stevie, lad, them ships gan off into the sunset but me, I stop here. Bloody shipwrecked." It was all true, but – they mack'em and tack'em.'

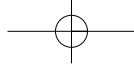
'How soft is that?' Dougie crowed. 'Being proud of summat people slag you for?'

'Nowt wrong with it,' Stevie insisted. 'That was the start of the rivalry, that was, the Tyne and Wear. Fighting owa the ships.'

'Balls, man,' frowned Shack. 'It was cos of the bliddy civil war, wasn't it?' Coulson's men seemed to want to fight this one out. Robbie returned with a tray of pints, set them down and reclaimed his seat, his face then twisting in outrage as the others sniggered. 'Aw ye *buggers* . . .' Somewhat apart from the high-jinks, Gore found that he had all of the boss's attention.

'I meant what I said, John, earlier. I can tell, see – you're a professional, you are. And a good man. I respect that. Here's to you.' Coulson raised his iced drink and clinked Gore's ale bottle.





'Well, I hear you're a man for a good turn yourself.'

'Says who?' Coulson's eyes narrowed partially.

'Bob Spikings?'

'Aw aye. I used to kip in that church of his some nights, y'knaa? When I was a lad?'

'You slept rough?'

'Aye. Y'knaa how it is. Got wrang at home, so I ran off. Ended up round here. This is near on twenty year ago, mind. But this here boozier, it was me first proper job for money. Then I met some people, thank God, they looked after us – you know how it is, when you're young, you need someone to shout for you, don't you?'

Gore nodded keenly, though he had no clue what Coulson could be talking about. In respect of youthful role models, he supposed they had admired different sorts.

'Are you still a churchgoer, Stevie?'

'Not so much. Not so much. There's only so much I can stay on top of. We're all backsliders, aren't we's? A bit, like?'

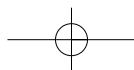
'Oh, we surely are.'

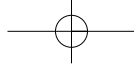
'As long as you're doing right by people, in the main, eh?'

'Without a doubt.'

Stevie nodded, satisfied. 'Cos I want to be square, y'knaa, by the man upstairs?' He raised his eyes, waved a finger. 'Against thee and thee only have I sinned.' Gore smiled, mindful not to rile his new friend's po-faced calm, and wishing he could place the biblical allusion. 'Naw, but I find it very peaceful in church. It's a good proper quiet you get. Private time. Time to think. We all can do with a, what'd you call it? A place like a *sanctuary*?'

Coulson lowered his chin to his chest, pensive for a moment. Gore contemplated the profile. A shaven scalp had always seemed to him a vulnerable sight, fragile, like an egg, and yet Coulson's looked as if it might deflect an axe blow. He had never encountered such a jumble of elements in one man, solemn and fierce and jocular. Nor such a gargantuan frame. *A bit of a character*, yes, no question. Now he met Gore's eye once more. 'Listen, would you do us a favour, John?'





'What can I do for you?'

'Owld friend of mine, her name's Eunice, Eunice Dodd. Lives local. She's getting on, see, and I've not been round a while. Used to pop in regular. Bit bad of me. She'd be ever so glad of a visit.'

Gore shrugged. 'Well, would you like me to call in on her?'

'Would you? Aw, good man, you. It's Biddle House on the Crossman Estate. Number seventeen.'

Stevie leaned back in his seat. Gore, too, considered the transaction a success, for the commitment seemed a simple one.

It was then he sensed that Coulson's good humour had been displaced somehow. Now, in repose, his great bulk seemed the very substance of displeasure. Glancing about their neglected tablemates, Gore saw that they remained jovial, save for the dour Shack, whose grim disposition seemed terminal. Like Stevie, though, Shack was looking to the bar, and Gore followed these baleful gazes.

Three men stood there, in showy coats and shiny shoes, evidently new arrivals, seemingly desirous that all of the Gunnery's meagre clientele be made aware of their advent. Certainly it was impossible not to hear that they were making a garrulous job of getting in their drinks, browbeating the barman for an apparent failure to oblige their preferences.

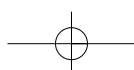
'Haven't you got it in bottles? Nah, draught's horrible. Piss.'

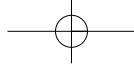
'What about that glass of wine, our kid? Have you not got a list?'

Then they stood back, these three, and surveyed the room, bold as brass knockers. The tallest, catching Gore's curious eye, raised his glass. Gore looked aside and made to drain off his ale. He had achieved a nice little bit of progress here, undoubtedly. It seemed prudent to quit while ahead.

'Well, that's me, I'd say,' Gore announced to the table, setting down his glass. 'Two is my absolute limit.'

Stevie's smile was clenched at best but Gore saw no grounds to take it personally – no more than Shack's odd distracted gesture of sniffing at his fingers before accepting Gore's hand as he offered it round the table.



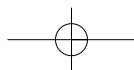


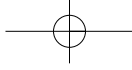
Out of doors, twenty yards hence down the keenly nipping dark of Hoxheath Road, Gore turned on his heel momentarily and peered back at the facade of the squat pub. No question, it was fatally unappealing to the eye, but not nearly so bad within. And it felt like territory gained, a flag planted, if provisionally. His steps were sprightly, for he was consoled in himself, confirmed in his abilities, reassured a little in his purpose.

Stevie was properly put out. So much for the quiet evening. Banter had been building nicely, now it was flattened, and for the sake of three numpties, three smug ugly faces in a row. His mobile should have rung, his lookout should have done the job assigned him, but that was past. His professional vigilance had rebooted. Saturday night was work-night once again.

He had assessed and named them. Big Chief Numpty, the eldest, the broadest, likely the hardest, undoubtedly the one in charge. His probable deputy? Shoulders, broader there than in the chest, but potentially a handful. And then the Squirt – physically negligible, making up the numbers, therefore most likely to be hiding tools about his person. Hardly the world's most shit-scary troops. It was their very presence, though, that rattled him – here, of all places, at this unlikely hour. On whose intelligence? Worse, he had been warned, he could not say he hadn't, he had frankly discounted the threat, and now here it was.

Shack, at least, had seen it too. Why was it only ever Shack with his eyes and his wits about him? The rest of them talked like they were combat veterans. And yet here they sat, yacking still, horizons no higher than the next round, the next pub, Keegan's best eleven, what one would pay for a cordless drill at Argos. Lately he had thought a fair bit about the role of delegation in leadership. Nights such as these reminded him sharply that he remained the chief asset of his business. At 9.47 p.m. he stood, pushed back his chair, vodka-tonic in hand, and strode toward the trio at the bar. The two juniors made to drain their glasses in unison, a pleasing





sign. The eyes of Shoulders darted to the door. As for the Squirt, both eyes and body seemed to jerk in that direction – a bag of nerves, Stevie decided, the sort who would fill his lungs before throwing a punch. But Chief Numpty stood firm in his black suede jerkin, meeting Stevie's eye. A roll of cash lolled before him on the bar, as if that was cool. How much was he acting it? How true the show of strength? This much Stevie was bent on establishing.

'Ye's not for another there, lads?'

'No chance pal, just dropped in,' said the Chief. 'Reckon we can do a little better than this old shithouse the night, right?'

'Where've you's come from?' North-west was what Stevie was hearing.

'Roundabouts,' said the Chief.

'What's it to you?' offered Shoulders, another Manc.

'Divvint let us see you back in here.'

Silence. The Chief seemed to be chewing over the challenge.

'What's the matter wi' *yee*, like?' piped the Squirt, in broad Gateshead.

'You fucken know, you little bollox, so shut yer yap.'

'Well, see, Steve, we saw that Lexus of yours outside, so we had to look in.' And Shoulders grinned, as if the knowledge revealed implied mastery.

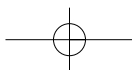
Stevie levelled a finger. 'You'd better not have touched that, mind.'

Chief Numpty laid a comradely hand upon Shoulders. 'Look, here's what it is, Steve. We'd a friend of yours in our local the other night. Lad name of Mickey, yeh?'

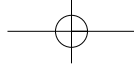
Inwardly Stevie kicked the wall. These days he had more associates than he was comfortable with, and Mickey Ash was not the one he would have chosen to represent him in a tight corner.

'Where the fuck's your local then? Old Trafford?'

'*Waallsend*, Stevie, *Waallsend*,' said Numpty, in a gruesome stab at an accent. It was contemptible, yes, but Stevie's spirits were rising on the assumption that this shifty shower of shit was the best that Big Mister Skinner of Manchester could send in his direction. The threat had declared itself, but with merely a fraction of the







heft he had been keyed up for. Were matters graver, then Shoulders would not have his hand so near the heavy glass ash-tray on the bar – though the detail was certainly noteworthy.

'Aye, right, so you saw Mickey, so the fuck what?'

'Well, he didn't stop. Ran off again sharpish.' As if this Numpty would stand his ground in all weather, outnumbered by however many. 'Now, *he's* the one you wanna tell not to be back,' he added, terse. 'Best do that, Steven.'

'Am I your fucken messenger boy?'

'You've been telt,' offered the Squirt, squeakily excitable.

'And this'll be from Lawrie Skinner, right?'

'You've been *telt*, man.'

'I hear you. Just tell us who I'm telt off.'

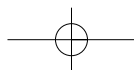
'I speak for meself, Steve,' said the Chief, chest forward.

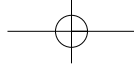
'Whay you maybe do, but you divvint think I'll listen to a word out of a long streak of piss like you?'

The Chief took a step closer, which Stevie thought intriguing. 'I'll tell you this, Steven. We see any more of your ratty little scrote pals round where they know fine well they're barred – we'll have to give 'em a proper spanking, yeh? Then we'll have to take it up with you. And we'll find you. If it means coming back to this shit-house. Then there'll be more of us, knobhead. And if *that* happens, Steven son, then *you* – are fookin' – *dead* – yeh?'

Stevie didn't weigh up the singsong threat: in truth he hardly heard it. He had decided to deck this insufferable cunt during the trashing of Mickey Ash. The mere talk, the rash swagger, had dispelled his worry about weapons inside those down-filled coats. And now – like a rank amateur – the cunt had only done him the favour of stepping into Stevie's sweet spot, just a little to his left, where any excuse for a right he might throw would take about a week to land, time in which Stevie could play at leisure. His choices made, Stevie switched his drink to his left hand, reweighed and confirmed his advantage, then took the executive decision to ram it home.

He jerked his left wrist, tossing what remained of the vodka into the face of the hated one, who was blinking and spitting still





as Stevie dropped the glass and raised his fists. The glass shattered as Stevie threw the right-hand jab, breaking Numpty's nose – he felt the pleasing give – and dumping him onto his arse. As Shoulders ran at him, Stevie was atop his momentum, shoulders relaxed, all power in his hips, and he pivoted smartly, swung a left-leg roundhouse kick to the abdomen, booting the twat, who crumpled and crashed back into the Squirt – a poor outcome for the pair of them. Now Stevie heard scraping chairs behind him, knew without looking that his boys were up and at his back. Shack would shortly be wading in. He glanced to the door, for the front bar was fast emptying of its patrons, much too fast for the Squirt to push his way through to the street. So now he was groping in his coat, and – yes, there it was, predictable as rain – a flashing blade, of an evil length. Stevie revised his estimate quickly, but not dramatically. There was no conceivable outcome – not a cat in hell's chance – but that the Squirt and friends were bound for the General tonight. They would not be home for *Match of the Day*.

