

## CHAPTER 1

He said to be there at 4 p.m. I was. On the dot. Because you didn't keep Jack Kreeger waiting. The black electric gates closed behind me. The sun slipped behind some clouds, things turned grey. I hoped it wasn't an omen. Someone opened my car door.

“Eddie, right?” I nodded. “It's Eddie Sutton, isn't it? I remember you from the jewellery shop business. The governor's waiting.”

I followed him into the large red brick mansion. Terry hadn't changed much. A pound or two heavier perhaps. But still stocky with that ponytail. An earring, that was new. A small diamond stud in the left lobe, probably nicked. I followed him down a long wide highly polished parquet hall. The monotony of lime-green walls broken every so often by still life paintings, an orchard with red apples hanging from the trees, a windmill on top of a hill. He opened double doors at the end and ushered me ahead.

“Eddie Sutton, guv!”

The library was large; there were wall-to-wall walnut bookcases filled to the gunnels. A Wilton oxblood-coloured carpet deep enough to put a shine on my suede shoes. And there on the edge of a huge mahogany desk sat Jack Kreeger, oval face, silvery thinning hair, a nose like a piece of putty stuck on his face, bushy eyebrows nearly over the eyelids, in a navy mohair suit, blue oxford cotton shirt and maroon tie.

I wondered again what this was about. He'd been cryptic on the phone, saying it was important, very important and urgent. But refusing to go in to details. It's an enquiry agent's lot to listen. Not only to what's being said but to what's not as well. But I couldn't get a handle on what it might be about. And then he said could I be at his house which was just off Hampstead Heath. 4 p.m. would be good. Which in Kreeger speak meant 'Be here then'. He came off his desk and offered his hand.

"Long time no see, Eddie."

"Nice to see you again, Mister Kreeger."

"Jack, please! Have a seat. How are you?"

I dropped into a leather winged armchair. He sat behind his desk staring at me, drumming his fingers.

"Fine, thanks, and you?"

"Could be better."

"Oh?"

"There's a bit of a problem. And I thought you'd be the man to help because of how you handled the jewellery shop business. Mrs Kreeger and I were very impressed."

"How is she?"

He lifted a leather-bound photo holder near him and stared at it wistfully for a while. I was going to say something. But there are times when you just know to keep your mouth shut.

"Mrs Kreeger passed away just under a year ago."

"I'm sorry to hear that. I only met her a couple of times. But she was always nice to me." 'A slice of my apple cake, Mister Sutton. I do all my own baking, you know. There hasn't been a shop-bought cake in this house for years.' And then she'd plonked

a piece on my plate big enough to have given King Kong indigestion. “Very sorry to hear that, Jack.”

“We were married for thirty years. I couldn’t ever remember her being really ill, apart from the odd bouts of flu or a cough. Then one morning my Kitty wakes up, says she’s not feeling so well and a few months later she’s dead from stomach cancer.”

I didn’t say anything. Because what can you say?

He went back to drumming his fingers.

“I suppose you’re wondering why I asked you here?”

“It crossed my mind.”

“Like I said we were very happy about the business with the jeweller, which made me think of you.”

He walked over to the window hands in trouser pockets and stared at the tennis court. At the white lines and the net thrown over itself just visible in the fading light, then puffed a couple of shots from an inhaler. He looked at me looking at it and said,

“Asthma. It’s brought on by anxiety. What the quacks call an anxiety episode. But I’ll be okay. Once I’m rid of the anxiety, that is.”

I was going to ask what a multimillionaire living in a five or six million-pound house in Hampstead would have to be anxious about. But I didn’t get the chance.

“There’s a bit of a problem. That’s why I rang you.”

“What are we talking about?”

“Kidnap!”

“You want me to kidnap someone?”

He pulled a face and said,

“Do me a favour! I’m sixty-three. I’m planning on retiring soon. Not starting a career as a low life. No. It’s my son, Tony. He’s been kidnapped.”

“Shit! How? When?”

“The early hours of this morning. In the car park of his flats.”

“I can tell you right now what to do, Jack. Ring the police.” He shook his head and kept shaking it. “They’re the best equipped, best experienced at dealing with this kind of thing.” I sat looking at him. There was no colour in his face. The lines on his forehead were deep, corrugated.

“That’s the ex-copper in you talking, Eddie.”

“No. That’s common sense talking.”

He buzzed his intercom.

“Lilly, we want ...” He looked over and asked if I wanted tea or coffee.

“Whatever! I don’t think I’m going to be here that much longer.”

“Pot of coffee. Small jug of cream, and sugar.”

“I’m telling you, Jack, 999 tout-suite!”

“If only it was that simple.” He took another couple of puffs and a deep breath. “Cannot do, Eddie. They start putting their size fourteens over things including my life, and well, let’s say I wouldn’t want that. Besides, I think I know who’s taken him.”

“But you’re talking kidnap, Jack!”

“The way I handled the jewellery shop business, for instance. It’s not the first time I’ve used that approach. The cops will

discover I don't do small claims court actions, if you get my drift. And they'll discover other things that I'd rather they didn't."

The jewellery shop business is how I'd first met Jack. He'd had a robbery at the house and wanted someone to find the missing stuff. He'd asked around and a few faces had recommended me. What had upset Kitty Kreeger most was the theft of her mother's wedding and engagement rings. 'The silver, the cash! That's just stuff. But the rings ...' and she'd become tearful. And if Kitty was upset you can bet your last euro Jack was 'upsetter' because his Kitty was. So he hired me to trace them. And I did, to an antiques and jewellers shop in Blackheath. I explained to the owner they were stolen goods. Even showed him photographs. But he wasn't having any of it. He'd bought them in good faith and if we wanted them back the price was ten grand. He was a smug little bastard. Said we could go through the appropriate channels, police, insurers, but of course they might get sold in the meantime. I told Jack. Jack told Terry to take me back there to identify the shop and the owner. Then he was to have a word with him. The conversation consisted of Terry telling me to lock the door and pull the blind down. Then before I realised what was happening, he'd shoved the shopkeeper's face into a glass-fronted wall-mounted showcase. Blood trickled over the spidery cracks. Some dripped onto the black laminate flooring, drip drop, drip drip, and then onto the owner's nice shoes.

The violence took me by surprise. I was expecting intimidation, maybe even a shove or two. But Terry didn't do half measures. He got hold of the owner and dragged him up the shop

and dumped him in a chair. The poor bastard just sat there shaking, blood from his nose running into his mouth then onto the front of his nice check shirt. He folded his arms and began rocking back and forth. Then his teeth began chattering as if he were freezing though it was a warm summer afternoon.

“You got two rings belonging to my governor,” Terry shouted. I pointed to them sitting on the shelf of another wall cabinet. “Keys,” Terry demanded. “Unless you’d like me to use your head!”

“They’re in the till” were the only four words the shopkeeper spoke throughout.

There was a knock on Jack’s door bringing me back to the present from recollections. I anticipated Lilly being size eight, twenty-eight, five foot eight. I was out by eight inches and about thirty years. She was five foot, in her sixties, with grey hair scraped back so tightly it was a wonder her scalp got any circulation. She plonked a tray on his desk.

“I put some apple cake out as well.”

“Thanks, Lilly!”

“Anything else, Mister Jack?”

“No.”

“Enjoy.”

He poured some coffee and slid it across to me.

“Help yourself to cream and sugar. And now you’ve met the domestic staff. Terry’s my driver and minder, Lilly’s my housekeeper.”

“Whatever! I still say ring the cops.” I stirred in some cream and sugar and took a sip. It reminded me of the coffee his Kitty made. I took a piece of apple cake. Hers had been better. “What d’you mean you know who might have taken him?” I asked.

He drank his coffee with the saucer under the cup and between short little sips said,

“I had a business partner until recently. Ronnie Miller. We’d known each other for fifty years, been in business together for twenty-five. We’d progressed from betting shops to running one of the biggest and most successful independent gambling casinos in London. The Freemont, off the Brompton Road. But you know all this from last time.”

I nodded. It was for the smart set. For those with so much money and class you imagined them putting Perrier in their steam irons.

“So what’s the club got to do with the kidnapping?”

“I’m coming to it.” He topped up my cup. “Never mind not being here too long. Drink up. You want some fireworks in that?”

“Why not! It’s nearly November.”

He took a bottle of Martel from a drinks cabinet and poured a slug in.

“So?”

“Everything’s going fine. We’re making millions. It’s the place to go. The car park’s always full. The surrounding roads are parked Roller to Roller.”

“I have a feeling this story doesn’t end with they all lived happily ever after.”

“They do not. Because of stomach cancer.”

“Mrs Kreeger. I still don’t see,” I replied.

He lifted a palm.

“The quacks in London couldn’t help. Then we heard about a clinic in Philadelphia. So we went there. It didn’t work out. So my Kitty came back to die with the family around her.”

“You and Tony?”

“And Lucy, my daughter. She’s a teacher in Manchester where she lives with her boyfriend, Karl, a dentist.”

“I don’t want to sound unkind, but ...”

“I was away from the club for about six months in all. When I finally got back in the saddle, the place was like something out of Sodom and Gomorra. Ronnie had been dealing drugs. But big time, supplied by a guy named Danny Carlin and fixing up whores for clients pimped by a Leon Doorrell. Well, it couldn’t go on. So I bought Ronnie out, and told Carlin and Doorrell to get lost. Then hired a few extra heavies in the guise of security to emphasise my point in case of repercussions.”

“I bet Danny didn’t take it too well!”

“You know him?”

“Oh, yeah! You certainly know how to pick your enemies! I still don’t see ...”

“Ronnie went to live in Spain. I think he might have sold out anyway in a while. He’d had enough of London and what with the cost of his divorce and everything. Anyway, he was always fearful he knew too much and that one day someone might try and silence him. Run him over, drown him in his pool, poison his food in a restaurant.” He looked me up and down and said, “Don’t laugh, Eddie. The world’s full of un-nice people.”

I took another sip of my drink. The brandy had definitely improved the chicory.

“So Ronnie took out insurance. He kept a notebook, with a list, full of lots of juicy stuff.”

“How d’you mean juicy?”

He looked as though he was deciding how far he could take me into his confidence. I must have passed muster because he said,

“Serious stuff. Incriminating. Dynamite in the right hands.”

“Stuff?”

“About all the drug deals Carlin had done at the Freemont. Quantities, dates. And the people supplied. Celebs, journalists, sports people. The names of cops on his payroll to look the other way. The name of a solicitor at the CPS and the nature of the blackmail Danny had on her which he used to get her to purposely balls up a prosecution against him.”

“Jesus!”

“And stuff on Doorrell. Cops on vice to develop selective amnesia. A record of A-listers he supplied whores for, and their addresses in case he ever needed to tip off their wives. The names of two DCs paid to frame a pimp for a robbery because he was trying to muscle in on Leon’s territory.”

“And how would Ronnie know all this stuff?”

“There are three activities that loosen people’s tongues. Drinking, gambling and fucking. And he’d have been present at two of them and listening.”

“You ever seen this book?” He shook his head. “So it might not even exist.”

“If Ronnie said it did. It did. I was the PR man in our partnership. The schmooze. He was the fixer. He once told me he had enough shit on enough people for us never to be touched by anyone. That’s why I’m sure we were never bothered at the casino with cops, Health and Safety, or protection.”

“So even if it does exist, what’s all this got to do with the price of fish?”

“Ronnie died just over a month ago in Du Casa where he lived. Heart attack. A legitimate one. He was in his pool. The woman he lives with dived in to help. Managed to drag him out, but ... I’m one of his beneficiaries. He’s left me a box of miscellaneous stuff.”

And then it all fell into place. Ronnie, Kitty, the casino, the drugs, the girls. I sat back in the chair, my head supported by laced fingers and smiled.

“I knew you were bright, Eddie. Knew it from the moment I hired you to find my Kit’s rings. You’ve got it, haven’t you?”

“Yup! The book’s in the box and the book’s the ransom.”

“In spades!”

“What if the book’s not been left to you?”

“It has. He once told me if anything happened to him, he’d let me have it, because I’d know what to do with it.”

“So where is it?”

“Still in Spain. Should be with a firm of City solicitors in the next few days.”

“And you think it’s either Danny, or this Doorrell guy that’s taken your Tony?”

He finished his drink and poured himself another and held the bottle towards me.

“No thanks. I’m driving.”

“My guess is at some time one of them threatened Ronnie or tried to intimidate him in some way and he told them what he had. And now he’s dead they want it. And ...”

“And?”

“They’re the only two I know with the balls to try this.”

“You sure Ronnie’s death was legit?”

“Yeah! We’re talking Ronnie Miller. Not Harry Lime. I spoke to his girlfriend when I heard. I was expecting some dippy little scrubber at the other end of the phone. You know, all gloss lipstick and tits. But she’s English ex-pat, sounded early forties. Very pleasant actually. There’s something in the back of my mind about her having been a teacher. But I might be wrong about that. Anyway! She gave it to me chapter and verse about what happened.”

He was right about Danny Carlin having the balls for it. A property developer whose real money came from dealing. And I don’t mean flats and houses.

“Who’s this Doorrell guy?”

“A very rich pimp. He runs high-class girls from places like mine.”

Dusk had turned to early evening. Tiny yellow lights came on in the trees behind the tennis court, and a spotlight played on a fountain beside it gushing blue- and pink- and orange-coloured water. I sat there looking at him. All that money. All that power

and now over a barrel from a problem not of his making. And then it occurred to me to ask why I was there.

“I want you to find my Tony and bring him back.”

“Yeah, right!”

“Why d’you think I called you! Just to tell you my tale of woe?”

“Me? Not me, Jack! Get Terry, your minder.”

“Terry? If you want to intimidate someone, or beat the shit out of them, Terry’s your man. But this is going to take savvy.”

“Fix up a swap and go there six-handed with shooters.”

He was shaking his head before I’d even finished the sentence.

“Tony has to be recovered without me surrendering the book.”

“Why?”

“It incriminates me by association with Ronnie. And by a couple of other things I got up to that’s sure to be in there. It leaves me open to blackmail and prosecution.”

“What things? You haven’t killed anyone, have you?”

“Do me a favour!

“What things, Jack?”

He hesitated for a while then said,

“Arranging for the breaking of some people’s legs from time to time. Just to let them know we don’t allow cheating at the tables. Bribing a council official to pass a property development planning application or two.” He shrugged. “That sort of thing. Nothing really, really serious.”

“On second thoughts, I think I will have that drink.”

I mulled things over as he poured me another. He was right. He couldn't go to the police. And he couldn't surrender the book. But I wasn't the man for this job.

"I deliver summons, Jack. Follow people. I can even do a bit of classy breaking and entering when necessary. But finding kidnapped people? Sorry. Not in my job description."

"You're halfway there, knowing who the likely kidnapers are. My bequest is going to be with solicitors in the next seventy-two hours or so. Four, five days, it's all over."

"I don't think so. I'll have a word with a pal of mine. Perhaps between us we can come up with a face whose alley this is up."

"No. I want you. You're sharp Eddie. You've got contacts. You know your way around. If anyone's going to do it, it's you."

"Sorry, Jack!"

"I'll pay you ten grand up front. And another fifteen when Tony's back."

It did make me think twice. And then he said cash. And that made me think a third time. Not that money's my be-all and end-all. I like money. Especially as I was brought up on a council estate in Clapton, North East London, with very little of it around. I like what it buys. Good clothes, eating in good restaurants, my new Beema. There's something nice and warm and reassuring about having money. It's like a third parent looking out for you. Though I don't let it go to my head. It says in the Bible you should give to the poor, which is right. But it doesn't say you should be one of them.

“Twenty-five grand!” I exclaimed.

“Yes.”

“In cash?”

“Yes. Sounds like you’re up for it after all.”

Jack took a white A4 envelope from a drawer and dropped it on his desk.

“Want to count it?”

“You’ve got an honest face.”

“So, we’re on?”

“I guess so,” I replied, putting it in my pocket.

“Where do we start?”

“At the beginning.”

The beginning was telling me Tony worked at the casino as a pit boss, and was dating a croupier named Zoe. They’d come back at about 4a.m. to his place. Were walking from the car park when three guys jumped out of a van, shoved her over, grabbed Tony, put a hood over his head, bundled him into the motor and took off.

“Anyone contacted you yet?”

“This morning. They used some electronic device to distort the sound. But they said the ransom was Miller’s book. I told them I didn’t have it. That I’d be getting it in a few days. They said to put an ad in the *Times* Personal column when I did. ‘Mr & Mrs Freemont of SW3 announce the safe arrival of a baby son named Ronnie.’ And then I’d be contacted with instructions.”

“This girl, Zoe. How long’s she been working for you?”

“Why? You think she may have something to do with it?”

“Wooo! Don’t let’s jump the gun, Jack.”

“I’ve told him a million times not to get involved with the croupiers. But does he take notice? No. Just goes on banging them left, right and centre. One after another. I might as well talk to the pavements for all the notice he takes. For all the notice he takes about anything I say.”

“What about other friends?”

“Mike Lane. Nice kid. I play poker with his father. They’ve known each other since they were teenagers. And Ricky Houston, a croupier at the club. They seem quite chummy. Why d’you want to know about his friends?”

“Just building a picture. Anyone else?”

“Davina, Ronnie’s daughter. They’re close. We once hoped that they might get together romantically.”

“And?”

He shook his head.

“Never happened!”

“Talking of pictures. D’you have one of Tony?”

He handed me another photo holder. Tony was slim, in his late twenties. He had dark curly hair. Dark eyes set in an oval face. His father’s nose, Kitty’s smile. He was in a white T-shirt and jeans and sat with hands on knees on the stone steps of a church.

“It was taken on holiday this year. So it’s recent.”

There were several other photos on his desk. One of Jack beside a man his age, his size. Grey hair. Not a single strand of black, cut short, almost crew cut. Shadows under small eyes. Prominent nose. The skin taut, unrealistically unlined for someone his age, telling you he’d had cosmetic surgery. The pair

in evening suits side by side smiling. They might have been brothers. But they were just business partners.

“And that’s Ronnie, I presume?” He nodded.

“Anything else?” he asked.

“Tony’s address, Zoe’s and this Ricky’s as well, and their phone numbers. Arrange membership for me at the Freemont, so that I can come and go without a fuss. If anybody asks, I’m advising about improved security.”

“Anything else?”

“And Davina’s details. Who knows about the snatch?”

“Terry and Max.”

“Max?”

“Max Andrews. My general manager at the Freemont.”

“Can you trust him?”

“Her. Sorry. Maxine. Yes.”

“Maybe I’ll meet with her to arrange a cover story for Tony’s absence.”

He came around the desk and stood over me.

“This will turn out okay, won’t it, Eddie?”

“I’ll do my very best, Jack. But like I said, kidnap’s not my best game.”

He took a double puff on the inhaler.

“Fucking bastards!” he cursed. “I get my hands on who did it.....I know people who for a few grand will ...”

“Stop right there! I don’t want to know. Anyone turns up floating in Millwall docks, I don’t need the law knocking on my door. I’ll come back later, if that’s okay, with some telephone recording equipment.”

“Sure.”

“That’s it for now then.”

He leaned over his desk and buzzed a different intercom and Terry appeared.

“Show Eddie to his car, Terry.”

“See you later, Jack” and as I left I noticed he’d gone back to staring at the photo of Kitty.

## CHAPTER 2

Jack phoned me with the addresses and phone numbers I needed while I was driving home. Zoe lived in Greencroft Gardens off Finchley Road, which I was almost passing. So I decided to take a chance and see if she was in.

The houses were all late Victorian, red brick, four and five storeys with square bay windows. Nearly all converted into self-contained flats. Hers was halfway down. First floor, a one-bedder.

She answered on the second buzz. She had a smooth mellow voice that sounded as though elocution hadn't quite knocked the Essex out of it. But it was pleasant enough and I could imagine it having a nice effect on the punters as she took their money. She asked me again who I was. I told her that Jack had sent me to help regarding last night's goings-on.

"Jack who?"

"Jack. As in your boss."

"First floor" and she buzzed me in.

Her flat door was ajar with a safety chain across it. She asked for ID. I gave her my driving licence. She peered at it then said,

"How do I know you are who you say you are? You could have got this with half a dozen Cornflake tokens."

"I don't eat breakfast." I held my mobile phone out to her with Jack's name and number in the window and told her to ring him. She slid the chain across and let me in.

She was tall, mid-twenties. She had a long slender face that ended in a cleft chin. She had large brown eyes with long black

lashes and a smouldering sensuality behind them. Magenta-coloured hair cut short, boyish, though there was nothing boyish about her. There was a parting, then the hair was swept off her face to one side. I sniffed the perfume, sharp, classy, Miss D'Ore if I wasn't mistaken. And I'm usually not, because knowing your 'smellies' can be handy in my line of work.

"Is there any news? Has anyone heard anything?"

"No," I lied.

"I was expecting the police. Why'd he send you?"

"He knows they're so busy these days. He didn't want to bother them."

"You don't do stand-up as well, do you?"

She wore tight-fitting grey running shorts that most guys would have done a four-minute mile to get inside of and a long-sleeved navy sweat top that almost covered her hands. There was a magnetism about her even for someone so young. It was the way she moved. As if she knew most blokes would like to jump her bones, so she had nothing to prove.

"Jack's asked me to help."

"Why hasn't anyone heard anything? Why isn't anyone doing anything? I'm really worried."

"They will."

She led me into her living room. Magnolia-painted walls with framed Warhol prints. Jackie Kennedy, Elvis, and lots of plants.

"Nice flat. Lived here long?"

"Nearly two years. But I spend time at Tony's as well."

“What happened?”

“You mean last night?” She padded barefoot over to a leather settee and plonked herself on it, tucking long, long legs under her.

“It’s like I told Mister Kreeger. We left the Freemont just after three. No one hearing anything is bad, isn’t it?”

“Not necessarily. Go on.”

“We parked up in the car park, were walking towards the flat. I asked him if he was hungry or was he going straight to bed. Then these guys came out of nowhere. It’s getting on for four in the morning by then, right! Quiet everywhere, and it’s like they weren’t there. Then they were. One shoved me and I went sprawling, another put a hood over Tony’s head and then they bundled him into a van and took off. I mean, the whole thing was over in seconds.”

“How many guys?”

“Three. I think.”

“Ever seen them before, at the casino maybe?”

“They wore masks.”

“Did the van come in after you got out Tony’s car? Or was it waiting?”

“I, I, I, I’m not sure. No. It must have been there already, or I’d have heard it.”

“So they shoved Tony in the van, then what?”

“What d’you mean? Then what? I’m sprawled on the ground. What d’you think I did. Take out a pad and pencil and take notes! He will be okay, won’t he?”

“Then what happened?”

“I asked you a question. Tony will be all right, won’t he?”

“I hope so.”

“Hope so?”

“What happened next?”

“I went up to the flat.”

“How d’you get in?”

“I have keys, Colombo!” She rearranged herself on the settee.

“I poured myself a drink, then rang Mister Kreeger at the casino.”

“And?”

She told Jack what had happened and he and Terry had come over. I asked why she hadn’t rung the police instead of Jack.

“Natural reaction, I suppose. Jack’s his father, a shaker and a mover. Besides the impression I have of Mister Kreeger is that he doesn’t do police, à la you!”

“You’re pretty sharp, Zoe. Anyone ever tell you that?”

She pulled a face that was a kind of a physical sardonic version of ‘you’re too kind’. This one you just knew had had a lot of boyfriends and was used to them dancing to her tune.

“Please tell me he’ll be okay.”

“Me, Jack, Terry, we’re doing all we can.”

“Good. Thanks.”

She said there was coffee on the go and asked if I wanted a cup. The kitchen was open-plan to the living room with a breakfast bar between, so she was able to talk while she poured. I noticed a small pink-coloured box marked Omeprazole at the end of it.

“You ill?”

She looked over and said, “No. They’re Tony’s. He has a stomach ulcer.”

“Serious?”

“Only if he has a dodgy curry or too much to drink.”

“Is he in trouble without them?”

“No. He can sort the pain with a pint of milk. But he prefers the capsules, especially if he has a bad episode. How d’you take your coffee? White or black?”

“White, two sugars please.”

She came back in and handed me a mug.

“Tony rowed with anyone lately at the casino, or in his private life?”

“How would I know!”

“So after the attack you came back here, right?” She nodded.

“How?”

“Cab.”

I took a sip of coffee. I didn’t like the taste.

“Zoe Fontaine! That’s quite a handle. Is that your real name?”

“Why, you going to do a police check on me like they do in the cop shows?”

“Would I find anything?”

“Only that I changed it. Because I’m an actress. Working nights means I can get to auditions.”

“What was your name?”

“Doreen Entwistle. I did it by deed poll. I mean, you can’t see them at the Dolby in LA saying ‘and best actress Oscar goes to Doreen Entwistle’, can you?” She drank some coffee and

plonked the mug down on the bar. “There’s no law against changing your name.”

“Did I say there was?”

“I been on telly, you know. *Corrie*, and *The Bill* when it was running.”

“How long ago?”

She studied her fingernails and said it had been a couple of years.

“Well, three maybe. I’ve done modelling in lads’ mags. And TV ads,” she added smiling. “I’m walking through Brent Cross Shopping Mall discussing my constipation with a girlfriend, like you do. Then there’s a shot of me coming out of a pharmacy all happy and smiles and a voice-over says ‘If your bowels are tight move them like clockwork with Shite Right.’ Or whatever the hell the product was called,” she added.

“I must have missed it. But then I don’t have the problem.”

“No. I don’t suppose you do. You look pretty fit. What are you, late thirties, forty?”

“Forty-one.”

“You must work out. I go to a gym. I like watching the guys there, especially if they’re good-looking, seeing the sweat run off their faces, down their bodies and biceps soaking into their T-shirts.”

I imagined the sweat between us after a couple of hours in bed rolling between her breasts. Her back damp. The sheets moist. The fantasy was interrupted by her mobile.

“I’m busy. I can’t talk. I’ll ring you back.” She clicked off and asked me if there was anything else.

“You definitely didn’t see the guys that took Tony?”

“I told you. They wore masks.”

“How long have you and Tony been dating?”

“About three months.”

I imagined she’d seen Tony sweat quite a bit.

“And how long have you been at the Freemont?”

“A year or so.”

“I guess that’s it for the moment.” I gave her my card and told her to ring if she thought of anything.

She flicked it with her well-manicured black-painted thumbnail.

“Edward Sutton, Enquiry Agent and Certified Court Bailiff. Does that mean a private eye?”

“If you like,” I said buttoning my jacket.

“Aren’t you supposed to stop just before leaving, hold your fingers to your temple and say, ‘Oh, yes! There was one other question, miss?’”

“You watch too much television, Zoe.”

She gave me the face again. And I realised what it actually meant. Which was, fuck you!

I got to the door and stopped. There actually was one last question.

“Can I borrow Tony’s flat keys for a couple of days?”

I sat in my Beema running the interview in my head. I wondered about their relationship. I caught my reflection in the driver’s mirror. I suppose I wasn’t in that bad a nick for forty-

one. Six foot, blue eyes, no bags under them, square jaw, black cropped hair almost crew cut, not a strand of grey in it. Not bad looking. Quite handsome when you smile, an ex-girlfriend used to say. Well, even if I wasn't. At least I didn't scare the neighbours!

### CHAPTER 3

Steve's snooker club in Kilburn High Road is where I hang out a lot. It's a good place for picking up gossip and getting the whereabouts of faces that need tracing. I walked down the avenue of tables to the refreshment bar from behind which Steve, an ex-copper friend of mine, who'd been my DCI at Mile Lane in the East End, runs his little gold mine. I sat on a bar stool and waited as he finished serving two guys in jeans with shaved heads. The smell of alcohol and sweat hung in the air. An explosion of laughter or swearing occasionally rising above the sound of voices and balls cracking against each other or cues rasping against tables, wood on wood.

"How you doing?"

"Not bad! You?" He pulled a pint and set it on the counter.

"Want a game?"

"I'm working."

"Oh?"

"Got a call from Jack Kreeger."

"The Freemont Kreeger?" I nodded. "I thought he'd retired to Spain."

"That was his partner."

"Shows you how you lose touch."

"D'you ever have anything to do with him?"

"Nicked a bloke coming out of his casino once. That was, let's see. I've been out of it four years, so we're talking, oh a good

while back.” He wiped up some spilt beer and wrung the cloth out in a sink under the bar. “Four years. Jesus! Can you believe it!”

“Well, I’ve been out of it for five. So I suppose it must be.”

I took a swig of the beer, enjoying getting rid of the taste of Zoe’s coffee.

“D’you miss it?” I asked.

“Not any more,” he said, looking around the hall. “I did at first. Not easy making a new start.” He stretched an arm out, embracing the hall. “Those bastards that broke my hands that night didn’t know what a favour they were doing me. Ending up with all this.” He looked at his fingers, which were long and thin with knuckles that sat a little too high on the surface, the index and the pinky even now not straight. “What about you?”

It was a question I asked myself often. What if I was still in the force? Maybe I’d have made DI by now. But I wouldn’t have the kind of money I have. Or the flat. A smart three-bedroom conversion in Camden Town just on the edge of the West End. One end of the road leading to ever so sedate Regent’s Park. The other end to Parkway, where for the price of a pint or a cappuccino, you can sit, take the weight off your feet and watch some serious talent strolling by. But I still miss the camaraderie. The Met’s like a family. I have no parents alive. Only a younger brother. So no one older for support. I would like to have been part of a large family. Perhaps that’s why I joined the force in the first place. That’s maybe why Steve and I got on so well from day one. Because I saw him as an older sibling. Whatever it was, or is, I know I can trust him. He can trust me. He’s balding now, poor

sod. The dome of his head has hardly any hair on it. But it gets thicker to the sides and back. Black flecked with grey. Back then he was clean shaven. Nowadays he has a beard which matches his hair colouring. He has small dark eyes that don't miss a thing, set in a round face that smiles a lot.

“Anyway it was different for me,” I said at last. “I never had an option.”

“You was a good DC, Eddie. I still say they should have treated you better. You should have appealed.”

“Against what? The guy ended up in hospital. It's all piss down the lav now, as far as I'm concerned!”

“There wasn't a copper in the nick that didn't want to give Farmer a right-hander or two.”

“But it was me that did it.”

“So why'd Jack ring you?”

I made sure there was no within earshot, leaned forwards and told him that someone had kidnapped his son, Tony.

“No shit!”

“He wants me to find him.”

He poured himself a half, drank the head off and said,

“Don't get involved, Eddie.”

“Too late. I've taken the king's shilling. Well, twenty-five grand actually.”

“Fucking hell! Wake up, mate! He wouldn't have paid you that much if it was going to be a piece of piss.”

And of course he was right. I saw that now. But twenty-five grand's twenty-five grand!

“It'll be all right. But I need to pick your brains.”

He went off to serve a customer with a tea and a meat pie.

Came back, took a sip of his beer and asked how.

“You still in contact with any snouts?”

“A couple from time to time. Why?”

“Anyone you can trust?”

“Maybe.”

“If there is, give him my number. I want to know what the gossip is about Jack, Tony, the Freemont.” I finished my beer, offered to pay but he wouldn't take it.

“I should really, seeing as you're so flushed.”

“See you later!”

“Eddie.”

“Yeah?”

“Be careful, mate!”

## CHAPTER 4

I stood in the car park of Tony's block. The bays, numbered one to twelve marked out in white. Entrance in. Exit out. Come and go as you please. No gates. No electric operated arms. His flat was on the second floor. In the movies they open Yale locks with a credit card. In actual fact you need a piece of plastic, credit-card thick, about fifteen inches square. You slide it into the lock and shove the door with your shoulder at the same time. The easiest way, of course, of getting through a door is with keys, which why I'd borrowed his. It transpired I needn't have bothered with either key or plastic, because someone had jemmied it open and it just rested to. I pushed it with my foot and said a loud 'hello'. But there was no response. I said 'hello' again. Nothing, and I stepped gingerly inside.

There was a big hall with rooms off. The first I came to was the kitchen, ultra-modern with dark grey granite worktop surfaces. Granite-topped island. White wooden wall and floor units all open. All the crockery and cutlery had been turfed onto the floor, and boxes of cereal poured on top of them. The contents of the fridge were on the floor as well. As were the contents of the larder. The bathroom had had a medicine cabinet ripped off the wall and its contents including a box of Omeprazole strewn everywhere. And oddly enough an expensive-looking brown carpet pulled up at the corners.

I stepped cautiously into the bedroom, which had also had the treatment. It was a large bright room; there was a king-size bed with cream-coloured sheets and pillows that smelt of Zoe's perfume, strong, sharp, expensive, carrying the subliminal message of 'I can give you an erection to remember'. A mental image of them at it, her long legs wrapped around him, him thrusting, her laid back, taking it, flashed momentarily through my mind. Then I was back to the aggro. The mattress had been slashed. His suits and any clothing that had pockets had been pulled out of the wardrobes and cupboards and dumped, presumably after being searched. A bedside table's drawers had been pulled open, the contents – condoms, football programmes, a couple of hypodermics – scattered. The edges of the green carpet also lifted.

The living room had taken the worst of it with the soft furnishings and settees slashed. A room unit with TV and hi-fi yanked out of its housing, the contents of shelves strewn everywhere. There were a couple of framed prints on the walls, a Lowry and a beach scene. I lifted them away with a penknife to look for a safe. But there wasn't one. Whatever had been sought had been well hidden, assuming it hadn't been found. It was small enough to hide in a cereal box or slide under the edge of a carpet. It wasn't money or drugs. So what, then? Jewellery? But would you go to all this trouble to find some?. A ticket for something then. Or photo? But for what. Or of what?

I went back into the other rooms, but couldn't see where else you could hide something small that hadn't been searched. The best place to secrete something from someone is right under their nose. That's what made me look at the walls. I banged a couple. But they were solid. I stood there in the middle of it all, looking at the chaos, glad it wasn't my place. I started to leave. Stood in the hall for one last glance and noticed there were three lots of double power points. Three didn't strike me as odd, just a bit over the top for a hall perhaps. Then I noticed the middle one sitting slightly crooked compared with the other two. I tapped the fascia with my penknife. Hollow. There was a hairline gap between it and the plaster, only visible if you really put your nose to it. I stuck the blade in the gap and pulled and a drawer slid out from the wall. I'd heard of these dummy power point hiding boxes. But never actually seen one. It was cute and clever and I thought I might even get one for myself.

There was something wrapped in a blue check tea towel. I opened it to find a Colt .38 snub-nosed revolver, nicknamed the Detective Special. It was black with a walnut hand-grip. I knew a lot about the snub-nose. Because I owned one myself that I kept wrapped in foil hidden in a cheese box in my fridge. The six chambers were empty. But there was a box of shells beside it. I left it as found and slid the power point fascia back into place, wondering why a rich, middle-class 28-year-old would have a gun hidden in his flat.

Jack had mentioned that Davina, Ronnie's daughter, and Tony were close. So I decided to check her out. I rang her three times, only getting voicemail. So I decided to call on her. Her address was a very expensive and exclusive mews flat in Bayswater. As I parked, it was clear something was wrong. But I had no reason to think it was to do with her. There were police vans kerb to kerb, either end. And a silver-grey BMW police response nearby. Blue-and-white police scene-of-crime tape secured lamppost to lamppost and in front of that a ROAD CLOSED notice board with a couple of PCs in hi-vis vests milling around as another couple with clipboards knocked on doors.

I walked casually along, planning to slip through a gap between lamppost and wall. I knew I'd be challenged but I had a story prepared.

She was twenty-something, a little tubby with a wisp of blond hair sticking out from under her cap.

"Sorry, sir. You can't come through unless you live here."

"I do. That's to say, I'm staying with a friend, Davina Miller, number five."

"Sutton!" boomed a voice. I turned in its direction. "What you doing here?" It belonged to Tom Stafford, a DCI from Kensington nick whom I'd known for several years. "Well, well, well! Where there's trouble you'll find Eddie Sutton. They go together like peaches and cream, Sherlock and Holmes."

"That should be Holmes and Watson!"

"What are you, a fucking literary expert all of a sudden?"

"How are you, Detective Inspector?"

"All the worse for seeing you!" I stretched out my hand. He took it and smiled.

He wasn't as tall as me. But what he lacked in height he made up for in presence. A bull of a man with a barrel chest. We ran across each from time to time. And helped each other if we could. Me supplying him with bits of gossip I'd picked up about aggro committed on his manor. The whereabouts of faces. Who was drinking with whom lately. Not regularly; but often enough to get a favour or two when needed. I liked him and his sarcastic sardonic attitude to the world. I wasn't sure if he liked me. Maybe the best anyone could expect was to be suffered by him.

“Let me take a wild guess, Eddie. You're visiting number five.”

“How d'you ...?”

He told the WPC to let me through the tape. Then beckoned me to follow past another standing guard outside the front door.

“Holmes and fucking Watson,” he mumbled under his breath.

Her flat consumed the whole of the ground floor of the house. He led me through a large square hall of jade- and gold-coloured tiled flooring lit up by a three-tier crystal chandelier that would have put the sun to shame. Her bedroom was even larger than the hall. It had cream-coloured velvet banquet seating skirting the walls. Long arch-shaped windows framed in matching velvet ceiling-to-floor curtains. An Adam fireplace, beside a seven-foot-square bed.

She lay on the floor propped against a wardrobe like a Guy Fawkes. Legs outstretched, arms either side resting on the beige

carpet. Her head flopped to one side, eyes closed. There were cuts to her cheeks and dark mauve bruising around the jaw with tiny irregular vermilion shapes in it. Her long auburn hair was dishevelled. She had a round face, long slender nose and full wide lips. Fluid had dripped from them and dried on her chin. Because bodily fluid drains out of a cadaver whichever way it can. Some of it had slipped onto her green silk shirt, leaving light-grey streaks. And all around her there was movement and industry. SOCOs in white boiler suits with tweezers and small brushes and polythene bags. But nobody touching her, flashbulbs exploding as others photographed everything. Two guys in plain clothes, CID, talking to a WPC. And in the centre of the room a uniformed Inspector watching that everything was being done correctly.

“The doc reckons she’s been here about a day. Reckons she was punched a couple of times. One of the punches sent her backwards and fractured her skull on the corner of the wardrobe.”

“Who found her?”

“She has a woman comes in once a week, cleaning, laundry, bit of shopping. She was loading the dishwasher, came in here to see if there was any crockery and nearly had a fit. I’ve got a WPC giving her TLC in the kitchen. Poor cow! What a way to start the day!”

“Forced entry?”

“No.”

“She couldn’t have been more than twenty-five, twenty-six,”

I said for no particular reason

“Twenty-seven.”

Tony kidnapped. His friend dead. Murdered, as throwing yourself against a wardrobe isn't a usual way of committing suicide. It didn't necessarily follow her murder was connected to Jack's bit of business. I told myself. It could realistically be connected with any number of things to do with her life. But I'm not a fan of coincidences. There was no point in me staying. I knew the form. I'd only be in the way. So I thanked him and said I'd let his people get on with things. I was waiting for the question. Because that's why he'd allowed me access. I got as far as the door when it came.

“By the way, Eddie! Why'd you want to see her?”

“To offer my condolences for her father.” I couldn't tell if he believed me.

He gave me his usual hangdog expression.

“You knew her then?”

“I knew Ronnie.”

“Why didn't you ring?”

“I did. But just kept getting voicemail.”

He nodded in the stern and thoughtful way coppers do. And I knew he absolutely didn't believe a word of it.