

Chapter 1

What have I become?

'Someone has broken in!'

It was my first thought as my eyes flickered open and I remembered the broken window catch downstairs. Instantly, every nerve was buzzing and I was alert for danger. It was 3 a.m.

I had been awake for days, high on amphetamines, before finally falling into an exhausted, uneasy sleep. I had learned how to sleep and still be ready for whatever might happen in the dead of night. They call it sleeping with one eye open.

As usual, I had left the lights on; darkness always made me uneasy. That night, in fact, I had put on as many lights as I could, instinct warning me that something was wrong. In the world that I inhabited, a world of violence and murder, a world without rules, you had to be able to look after yourself. Anything could happen.

The bedroom door opened and a bulky, muscular figure entered. *Stephen!* My heart pounded as I realised who it was. We had been such close friends - but things were not good between us right now and I knew very well what he wanted. Nerves tingling, I braced myself for what might come.

Steve's eyes bored into me, angry and unblinking. Without a word, he moved swiftly towards me and before I could do anything to defend myself, he was on top of me, pounding his fist into my face. He is over 6 feet tall, a hard, powerful man with hands like shovels.

Well-used to heavy violence, he had spent a lot of his life in prison. I was a hard man myself, but just then, I was helpless as a kitten in his grasp.

I had been working in a notorious drugs ring as a runner. It was my job to pick up packages of drugs, keep them safe and deliver them to the right people. We were often followed by the drugs squad and I knew that my house was under surveillance. When I handled large quantities of narcotics, the safest thing to do was to bury them until the dust settled and I thought I was not being watched. Then I could dig them up and deliver them to our clients. But this time, something had gone terribly wrong. I had lost a package of drugs worth more than £5000 on the streets.

Stephen and Mark had taken me to a quiet location, a field, to bury a couple of packages. You had to jump over the gate to get in and in the corner there was woodland, providing a good place to hide the gear. As usual, the other two men waited for me in their car. I looked around to make sure that no-one was watching, then ran to the corner of the field and buried the two packages. Adrenaline pumped around my body; I knew that, at any time, the police could arrive on the scene and that, if I was caught, I could spend a few years in prison. We had often discussed whether, if they did turn up, we would fight them or try to lose them in a car chase. This was a dangerous game.

I ran back to the car and we spun off fast, adrenaline still pumping. The boys dropped me off at my house and then we all split, going our separate ways and allowing things to settle down. We always waited for a couple days before going back, not wanting to attract attention by driving along the same country lane too many times.

When it was time to retrieve one of the packages, I went to the spot where I thought it should be, and dug. Nothing! The earth had been disturbed, but I could not tell whether someone had been there or whether cows had trodden the area. Panic and horror rose in me. This could get me into a lot of trouble!

‘Where is it?’ My mind searched desperately for answers. ‘It’s not here!’

Frantically, I fell to my knees and started to dig with my bare hands, not daring to go back and admit what had happened. The nightmare in my thoughts grew worse as hope faded that there was anything left to be found. After about twenty minutes, Mark and Stephen came to see what I was doing. I had to tell them the truth.

‘It’s gone! I can’t find it!’ I admitted miserably.

‘What do you mean “gone”?’ they demanded. Both of them, my trusted friends, had suspicion in their eyes and it made me feel very uncomfortable. We searched for a while longer in the darkness, but it was hopeless.

‘I’ll have to look in daylight,’ I said, stating the obvious.

As we left the place and made our way across the field, I tried to ease the tension between us, but it was a very awkward moment.

Next day, another guy from the gang helped me search. We tried all morning but found nothing, though we dug up every inch of the area involved. Frantic questions flooded my mind. Who had taken it? Was it another dealer? A local addict maybe? Had the farmer seen me? Had the police followed me and removed it? Would I be arrested? Above all, would Mark and Stephen think that I had taken it?

Addiction changes people and, because of that, trust is always difficult. Nice people could become thieves or prostitutes to finance their habit. I had seen it happen too many times. I knew that Mark and Steve were bound to wonder whether I had set something up in order to steal this package.

Now Stephen’s pounding blows were proving it to me.

‘Where is it? Where has it gone?’ he demanded roughly, his face close to mine. For the moment, the beating ceased.

‘Steve, I don’t know,’ I protested, trying hard to sound convincing.

Quite suddenly, he walked out of the room. I sat on the edge of the bed trying to get my head around what was happening, my heart pounding. Had he gone? Was it over?

It wasn't - and I was not ready for what came next. When Steve came back, in his hand was a long knife from my kitchen.

'Where is it?' he demanded again and raised the knife. He had just come out of prison, convicted of involvement in a stabbing. I knew he was capable of wounding me, if not killing me. He was angry enough and anything can happen in those moments. Where would this end?

'Can we talk about this?' I begged. 'I swear I would not cheat you!'

I was telling the truth. I was doing a lot of drugs and they made me forgetful, so that I had made more than one mistake recently, but I would never have stolen that quantity of drugs, especially from friends.

'How are you going to get rid of a dead body?' I pleaded, tears in my eyes. I thought I was going to die and I had no pride left, only a desperate desire to live – or, at least, not to be killed by my trusted friend.

To my intense relief, after a long moment he put down the knife.

Hard man though I was, I put my head in my hands and cried helplessly. I had been running too fast for too long and the pressure was too much. What hurt most was that I knew I was becoming unreliable. Even my closest friends thought so. I felt like I was on the verge of a nervous breakdown again. I'd had a few of those, so I knew the signs.

Stephen sat beside me on the edge of the bed and said, almost apologetically,

'This was the only way I could know for certain that you did not take the package.' When I had calmed down, he added, 'Where is the tick list?' This was a list of people who owed money for drugs.

Stumbling into the bathroom, I pulled up a loose floorboard to expose the place where I stashed things I didn't want the police to find. To my horror, the tick list was not there.

'Oh, no! Where is it?'

I tried desperately to think straight. This was not a good moment to be forgetful! Then I remembered. I had put it in a drawer in my bedroom. I found it and handed it over and Stephen scanned the list. There was quite a lot of money to come in and this cheered him up. The tension between us eased.

Stephen moved towards the door. He paused and looked at me.

"What has happened to you? I just can't trust you anymore! It is because you are using needles.'

With that, he left as quietly as he had arrived.

Stephen's words hit me more forcibly than he could know, more forcibly than his iron fists. There had been so much trust between us and I would have gone to prison rather than betray him. But I was a junkie. Even my best efforts to get free had failed and I was trapped in a cycle of addiction and crime, despising myself and yet helpless to change.

'*I am a junkie!* That is not just *what* I am but *who* I am. It has become my identity,' I thought. My lifestyle as a dealer and addict had caught up with me. I had been living on borrowed time, heading for disaster, and now not even my closest friends could trust me.

As I thought about all this, I saw myself as I used to be, before I surrendered my life to addiction – fit, fun to be with, reliable, maybe even a nice guy. Not for the first time, I was overwhelmed with longing to be that person again.

I closed my eyes and fell at once into a deep sleep. My body and mind were exhausted and I was on the verge of complete emotional and physical breakdown. How could I have let myself get into this state? My uneasy dreams sent up image after image of friends and

enemies, broken relationships, stabbings, theft, quarrels, drug trading, as the past that so often churned around in my thoughts came once again to haunt me...