

LIE IN WAIT

G.J. Minett studied at Cambridge and then spent many years as a teacher of foreign languages. He studied for an MA in Creative Writing at the University of Chichester, and won the 2010 Chapter One Prize for unpublished novels with the opening chapter of *The Hidden Legacy*.

Also by G.J. Minett

The Hidden Legacy

LIE IN WAIT

G.J. MINETT

ZAFFRE



First published in Great Britain in 2016 by
Zaffre Publishing

80–81 Wimpole St, London W1G 9RE
www.zaffrebooks.co.uk

Text copyright © G.J. Minett, 2016
All rights reserved.

No part of this publication may be reproduced,
stored or transmitted in any form by any means,
electronic, mechanical, photocopying or otherwise,
without the prior written permission of the publisher.

The right of G.J. Minett to be identified as Author of this
work has been asserted in accordance with the
Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988

This is a work of fiction. Names, places, events and incidents
are either the products of the author's imagination or used
fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living
or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN: 978-1-785-76058-7

also available as an ebook

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Typeset by IDSUK (Data Connection) Ltd

Printed and bound by Clays Ltd, St Ives Plc



Zaffre Publishing is an imprint of Bonnier Zaffre,
a Bonnier Publishing company
www.bonnierzaffre.co.uk
www.bonnierpublishing.co.uk



Ronald John Minett
03.11.22 – 16.01.16
With all our love



PROLOGUE

NOW: WEDNESDAY, 1ST OCTOBER

OWEN

‘How long now, would you say?’ she asks.

Out of the roundabout, up into third and accelerating away, engine screaming like a harpy till he manages to slam the mule of a gear stick into fourth. Gently doesn’t seem to cut it anymore. Gearbox nearly shot to pieces. Probably got another five, ten thousand miles left in it, according to Vic at the garage. Then he’s going to have to start looking for a replacement. New truck altogether would be nice but a couple of years away at least. Even stumping up for a reconditioned gearbox is going to leave him a bit stretched.

Willie says it’s his own fault for never showing any ambition. *Brain the size of a planet – why the fuck are you pissing around with lawnmowers for a living?* Swears a lot, does Willie. You can pick him up on it as much as you like but it never does any good. Straight back at you – effing this, sodding that.

‘Twenty minutes,’ he mumbles. ‘M-maybe less.’

‘What . . . Worthing or the hotel?’



‘Don’t know the hotel.’ He’s told her this already, wishes she’d listen. Like he’s got nothing better to do than answer stupid questions.

Engine starts to shudder as the needle creeps up to fifty. In the headlights he can make out the number plate of the car in front: GR02 ZMM. Total = 79, the calculation automatic, the irritation instantaneous. *Prime number*, he thinks to himself. So . . . overtake or drop back, one or the other. Anything as long as he doesn’t stay too close. Quick check to see what’s coming the other way and it’s non-stop headlights, so he eases his foot back on the accelerator and watches as the car in front starts to pull away despite itself.

Stupid, he thinks. You wouldn’t drive a car with faulty brakes or with tyres that were almost down to the rim. Why is it that people will happily pour their faith into so many leaky vessels in life – looks, dress code, personality – and yet ignore the certainty of numbers? People lie – they lie all the time. Only numbers are constant.

‘OK,’ Julie says, holding up her iPhone. ‘Just shout when we get anywhere near Worthing and I’ll switch on Google Maps.’

They’re heading out into open countryside now, Yapton and Barnham away to their left. Street lights racing off into the distance in his rear-view mirror. He risks a quick side-ways glance. Can’t really see her face – not clearly. There’s the glow from the dashboard and the oncoming headlights that strafe across her features, causing the lenses of her spectacles to flash for an instant. Otherwise, nothing. Darkness.

Not pretty exactly, he thinks to himself. Wrong word altogether. Pretty is Abi. Always has been. And he can accept it’s maybe not ideal to be using her as a yardstick even now but there you go – you don’t get to choose these things. No, Julie’s



not *pretty*. Pretty suggests petite and she's a good few inches too tall for that. Loose-limbed, athletic. Something of a swagger in the way she holds herself, he's noticed, as if she's ready for a scrap if it comes to it. At least she's here. It's not like people are queuing round the block to help him right now.

Fuckable is Willie's assessment of her. Tells you all you need to know about Willie.

Past the Climping turn-off. Away to the right, Littlehampton golf course and the seaside resort itself huddled down beyond it, dimmer switch turned right down and a strange, murky haze hanging over the lamps which have reappeared at the roadside.

'We getting near yet?' she asks again. Another stupid question. 'Quarter of an hour or so.'

She sighs, wriggles around in her seat. 'Look, I'm really sorry about this but do you think we could stop somewhere for a few minutes? I'm bursting for the loo.'

Tesco has just flashed past on the other side of the dual carriageway. He maps the next couple of miles in his head. Picks out the Body Shop roundabout. Zeroes in on the Shell station on the opposite side of the road.

'About two or three minutes,' he says.

'That's great. Sorry about this,' she giggles. 'Small bladder.' He blushes, hoping she can't see his face any more clearly than he can see hers.

New traffic lights up ahead, turning amber. He brakes and rams the truck into neutral. Glances in the rear-view mirror again as they roll to a standstill and sees the headlights of the car immediately behind, which seems to be taking an eternity to close the gap. There's a blast on the horn from further back and as the lights turn to green, the car stutters forward as if the driver has been woken from a daydream.



HK12 RCA: total = 53. *Prime number.* His heart skips a beat as he moves through the gears and pulls away once more. *Same car.* He trawls back through the journey so far, pinpoints the locations exactly. Traffic lights near the Martlets roundabout. Then just after they left Bognor seafront, as they went past the beach entrance to Butlins. Now here.

And here comes the rocking – he’s moving back and forth, back and forth in his seat, mumbling the number plate to himself, over and over.

Oi, how many times d’you have to be told? Cut it out.

Owen, dear . . .

You gonna sort him out or you want me to?

Owen, don’t do that, there’s a good boy.

Like living with a bloody half-wit.

Out of the corner of his eye he can see Julie’s watching him closely, puzzled rather than alarmed. ‘You OK?’ she asks, and she reaches forward, placing a hand on his knee. He recoils as if she’s holding a taser, forces himself to calm down, concentrate. Pushes himself back in the seat, shoulders taut, neck muscles braced against the headrest. Needs to ride this out.

‘What is it?’ she asks again.

‘Car behind – no, don’t turn round,’ he says, catching her arm as she twists in her seat.

‘What about it?’

‘I think it’s been following us.’

She pauses before replying, allowing time for this to sink in. ‘Why?’





‘It’s been there since we left. Keeps letting other cars get in between, then closes the gap when there’s no choice.’

She shakes her head. ‘No, I mean why would it be following us?’

No answer to this. He’s told no one about Worthing or the Burlington. Unless she’s let something slip, no way anyone can know about it.

‘Dunno,’ he says.

She laughs, tells him he’s been watching too many films.

‘Let him go past if he’s bothering you.’

Hand on his knee again. Slight reduction in voltage this time but he wishes she wouldn’t do that. He doesn’t know her well enough for that level of intimacy. Says nothing. Takes three deep breaths. One . . . two . . . three. The frantic impulse to rock back and forth is still there but it’s starting to ease off a bit and he’s able to relax his shoulders a little. Runs a finger across his damp forehead. Evenings starting to get cooler now but he can feel a trickle of sweat working its way down his neck and into his T-shirt. More deep breaths. Perhaps she’s right. Maybe he’s imagining it. All the same, he’s not about to take his eyes off the rear-view mirror, watching every manoeuvre made by the car behind.

New housing estate coming up on the left, tucked away in the shadow of the sprawling Body Shop complex. One more roundabout and he’ll know for sure. She’s seen the petrol station up ahead and waves a finger at it.

‘That any use?’ she asks. ‘They’re bound to have a loo there, aren’t they?’ He nods and realises as he does so that he’d rather they went somewhere else. In his mind’s eye he can still see Callum filling the car while his fancy woman disappears inside to pay. Doesn’t see how he can say no though, not with her squirming around on the seat next to him.



‘You need any petrol?’ she asks. He shakes his head. ‘Do you mind popping in and getting me some mints or something while you’re waiting? I could do with something to freshen my mouth up a bit.’

He nods but in truth he’s only half listening. His eyes are on the mirror the whole time, staring a hole in it. There’s thirty metres between the two vehicles when he signals right and pulls across into the outside lane. Two seconds later, he winces as he sees the other driver do the same. Huge Norbert Dentressangle lorry coming from the right. Just time to get out ahead of it and accelerate into the roundabout; then *no* to the Body shop entrance, *no* to the A259, *yes* to the third exit. Copycat has to wait for the lorry and a couple of cars to pass and his headlights are no longer in the mirror as Owen turns left again almost immediately to pick up the access road to the Shell station. He slows for a second or two, half-turning in his seat to get a better look. Watches with some satisfaction as a large estate car drives straight over the top of the mini-roundabout, heading off towards Rustington. He can’t see the number plate from here but he’s pretty sure it’s the same one that was following them. He relaxes, his heart beating a little less insistently.

‘Can you let me out here?’ she asks. As he pulls over towards the rear of the building, she points out of her window. ‘That tyre-pressure thingy – if you park over there I’ll just go and find the loo. I’ll only be a second, I promise.’ She flashes him a rueful smile. ‘Really sorry about this.’

He waves away her attempt to give him the money and she jogs off past the red Biffa bins before disappearing into the darkness at the rear of the building. He turns in his seat, more interested in whether the driver’s going to realise they’ve turned off



and double back. Wouldn't surprise him one bit. You don't shrug off prime numbers that easily. 53 is one he's always had trouble with. Year his father was born? 1953. Callum's mobile? 07977 642452 – total: 53. These signs are there for a reason. You don't just ignore them.

Gives it a few more seconds, then drives round to the front and parks next to the tyre-pressure gauge as she's suggested. *Mints*, he thinks to himself. Checks he's got his wallet, then gets out of the truck, leaving it unlocked in case she's first back. Nothing in there worth taking anyway. Smart thing would be to leave the keys in the ignition and hope someone drives off with it.

Busy inside. Gum-chewing lad at the checkout, serving a queue of people: girl in a white blouse and black jeans, holding everyone up while she tries to get her credit card to work; woman holding the hand of a small boy and making a point of keeping herself between him and the row of sweets and chocolates; middle-aged man in oil-stained overalls, tapping his feet and mumbling about his chances of getting out of here before Christmas. He joins the queue and looks through the choice of mints while he's waiting. He hasn't any idea which sort she'd prefer. Decides to get several different packs. Can't go wrong that way.

The girl finally leaves and they all move forward one place. The boy has noticed him now and is staring at him. Little children can't seem to help themselves. Jack and the Beanstalk. Hagrid. Shrek. Stares back at him and the boy toughs it out for a second or two, then clutches his mother's leg. She nudges him away with her knee, too busy tapping in her own credit-card details to take much notice. The boy's not so interested in the sweets and chocolate anymore.





Front of the queue at last. Puts the five packets on the counter and rummages in his pocket for the right money. The lad serving him makes a sort of snapping sound with the gum in his mouth, looks at all the mints and grins.

‘Worried about your breath?’

He frowns, shakes his head – *no*. Such an odd thing to ask. Counts out the coins . . . carefully. The lad shrugs his shoulders and asks *any fuel*? Shakes his head again, pushes the exact sum across the counter. Then he picks up the mints, turns and walks back to the pickup truck. A Toyota drives past and the little boy turns to stare out of the back window, bolder now he knows he’s safe.

She’s not there when he reaches the pickup. Thought she’d be back by now. He was in the shop long enough. Throws the mints onto the passenger seat and decides to stay outside, leaning against the bonnet while he waits for her. Five minutes crawl by. Six. He thinks this is a bit odd. Doesn’t see how a simple trip to the toilet could take this long. He pushes off from the truck and walks round to the rear of the petrol station, eyes adjusting to the darkness as he seeks out where he assumes the toilets will be. Nothing. He completes a full circuit of the building. Still nothing. No outside toilets at all. Inside, then – she must have gone in while he was parking the truck.

Different people in here now. The lad behind the counter doesn’t look up. Too busy laughing and joking with two women who won’t see forty again but are dressed as if they think they will. One other customer – man in a suit, tie tugged loose, checking the sell-by dates on a range of sandwiches left over from this morning, bottle of Irn-Bru dangling from one hand.

The toilet must be in the recess in the far corner. He fakes an interest in the crisps aisle and then, when he’s sure no one





is looking, walks through the alcove and knocks on the door. Calls her name quietly. Knocks again, a little more insistently this time. Still no reply. Tries the handle and it's locked so he calls a third time and bangs on the door with the flat of his hand. Everyone's awake now.

'Oi. 'Scuse me.' The attendant has managed to tear his attention away from the women at the counter. Seems to think he ought to be doing something about this. Owen bangs again, shouting now, calling Julie's name.

'Is there a problem here?' the lad asks, a little more politely once he's emerged from the other side of the counter. He's less sure of himself out in the open. Thinks maybe aggressive isn't the smart option here as he sizes Owen up.

'She won't c-come out.'

'Can you not do that, please?' the lad asks as Owen slams his hand against the door again. 'There's no one in there, OK? It's locked.'

'JULIE.'

'It's *locked*, OK? The key's behind the counter.'

The man in the suit is there now and the two women have clattered their way over on heels that border on suicidal. He's not happy about the audience.

'She c-came in to use the toilet,' he says, aware that the pounding is starting up again in his temples. The rocking won't be too far behind.

Everyone's joining in now, trying to help the attendant get the message across. She can't be in there. It's locked from the outside. It's only unlocked if someone wants to use it and to do that they have to get the key from the counter. No one's done that in the last couple of hours or so. Does he understand? They're talking very slowly. He hates it when people do that.



He turns to face the wall, pressing his forehead into it. Tries to concentrate, squeeze out all the distractions – the growing audience, the stupid questions, the clucking expressions of concern. One of the women catches hold of his arm and tries to lead him back towards the till but he shrugs her off. He just needs a few moments on his own, a chance to think this through. If she's not in here and never came in at any stage, where did she go? And why? And what's he meant to do now – drive off and leave her? If they'll just leave him alone for a few minutes . . .

He can hear them whispering among themselves, pushes past them, knocking over a display stand of chocolate bars in the rush to get outside. Runs over to the pickup truck – she's not there. Mints still on the front seat. And next to them . . . a brown A4 envelope that's materialised out of nowhere. He whirls round suddenly, hoping to catch sight of whoever left it here. Reaches in and picks up the envelope. Tears it open, watching as its contents spill out onto the seat.

Photos. Four of them. He turns on the interior light and examines them, one by one. And as the attendant calls out to ask if he's OK, he barely hears him. He's already in the driver's seat, fingers fumbling with the ignition key as he tries to ram it into the slot. The engine's reluctant to catch, takes three attempts before it finally fires up. Then he puts his foot to the floor and races out of the forecourt, working his way through the prime numbers, shouting them at the top of his voice to drown out their insistent gloating and strip them of any powers they think they might have over him.

He's reached 317 – 66th number in the sequence – before he realises he hasn't fastened his seat belt or even turned on the headlights.

PART ONE





1

EARLIER: FRIDAY, 22ND AUGUST

ABI

‘Oh my God, Abi.’

Mary stepped back to get a better view, one hand to her mouth.

‘You like it?’

‘*Like* it? Are you kidding? It’s . . .’ She broke off, apparently lost for words which, for a novelist, seemed anomalous enough to pass for a compliment. Abi busied herself with the empty box, head bowed. Replacing the lid, she carried it over to the draining board and placed it next to her car keys.

Her motives for doing so were baked from a complex recipe of disparate motives: one part practical (this way she’d remember to take the box with her), one part tactical (always allow the customer to provide the soundtrack) and maybe just a sprinkling of embarrassment. It wasn’t like this was her first cake and yet here she was, tongue hanging out for approval. Mary hardly needed a nudge of any kind. Even allowing for her hyperbolic tendencies, the glistening at the corner of each eye was testimony enough to how impressed she was.



‘Honestly, Abi – you’re so talented. I wouldn’t have the faintest idea how to go about something like this. You really ought to do it professionally.’

‘You haven’t forgotten that you’re paying for it, have you?’ she joked.

‘No, seriously. I mean full-time. Why waste your time working in a bookshop when you could be doing this for a living? Oh Lord, look at that!’ She pointed to the upper tier – a model of a huge book with lines of print running across the open pages. ‘That’s . . . those pages are taken from the new novel.’ She traced the title at the top of the page with her finger – *The Hard Way* by Mary Kowalski. ‘How on earth did you manage to reproduce the pages?’

‘Photocopied,’ said Abi, pleased to have a chance to explain. ‘You can copy onto edible printing paper nowadays if you have the right printer. You’d be amazed what you can do.’

‘And is it all edible?’ asked Mary. ‘I don’t know why I’m even asking. I can’t imagine cutting this up. It would be like . . . I don’t know, slashing a Vermeer or something.’

‘Well, you can keep the models if you like,’ explained Abi, checking an arm here, a leg there to make sure they were still adequately supported. ‘They’re just sugar paste. Everything else, I’d cut it up if I were you. You’ve probably got a week or so to eat it unless you decide to freeze it. Just don’t keep it in the fridge, OK? It’ll make the sugar paste go all wet and shiny.’

Mary took one more lingering look, then turned to hug her.

‘I’m not paying you enough,’ she said. ‘This must have taken you hours. I’m going to parade it round the garden and make you take a bow. You are coming tonight, aren’t you? Both of you?’



Abi picked up the nuance – the last three words carried about them more than a whiff of reluctant afterthought. ‘Of course. Callum might be a bit late but I can be there to help you set it up if you like.’

‘If you’re sure you don’t mind,’ said Mary. She raised one finger to suggest a light coming on. ‘You’re not in any hurry, are you? Have you got time to come and look at something?’

Abi checked her watch: ‘I’m OK for five minutes or so.’

Mary took her by the arm and led her to the back door. ‘You’re not going to believe this,’ she said, opening the door and stepping outside onto the patio. ‘You saw this place when we first moved in, right? Remember what a shambles it was out here and how Max promised he was going to get it all sorted by the end of the summer? Well . . . tell me what you think.’

They crossed the patio, tiptoed their way along a path littered with gardening tools and half-empty compost bags and turned left into what, only four months ago, had been little more than an overgrown, weed-ridden, bramble-infested jungle. Now it was completely transformed. For one thing, the whole area had been cleared and flattened which was no small achievement in itself. Bushes had been uprooted, trees cut back and years of neglect by the elderly couple who had lived there previously had been reversed in a matter of months. Then borders had been dug and planted on either side of a footpath which led to a brand new summer house, perfectly positioned at the end of the garden to catch the early afternoon sun. It was a different garden altogether.

‘I’m not even going to ask if Max did this,’ Abi said, shaking her head in amazement.



Mary laughed. 'As if. No, it's this guy I came across a while ago. Found his card in the post-office window, believe it or not.'

Abi looked again at the summer house and thought how bland their own back garden was by comparison. Drab. Uninspired. It needed a radical overhaul, nothing on the scale of what had been done here maybe, but if someone who knew what he was doing were to take hold of it and devote some time and imagination to the project, the potential was definitely there.

'His name's Owen,' said Mary. 'Owen Hall. I can give you his number, or he's got his own website if you prefer. Just Google *Hall Gardening Services*.' She paused, noticing the quiet smile on Abi's face. 'What?'

'No, nothing,' said Abi. 'It's just I used to know an Owen Hall, years ago. We were at school together.'

'An old boyfriend?'

'Owen,' Abi chuckled. 'God, no.'

'Well, this guy's six foot six and absolutely ripped. Don't tell Max but I've been spending hours sitting at my writing desk on the off chance he might take his shirt off, so if it's the same boy you went to school with I'd have to ask how come you didn't nail him there and then. That sound like him?'

Abi smiled again, shook her head. 'Not really. No.'

DANNY

The first he saw of the girl was when she was about a hundred or so metres away. She'd come to a halt in the middle of the cycle path and was peering anxiously at her front wheel. There was room for him to pass on either side if he wished but as he drew



closer she threw him a beseeching look and spread her arms to make it clear she needed help. He braked hard and stopped a few metres in front of her, his rear wheel swinging round in a satisfying skid.

‘Everything OK?’ he asked, lowering the bike to the ground and walking over to her. ‘Can I help at all?’

The girl thanked him for stopping and explained that the wheel felt as if it might be coming loose. ‘I’m worried it’s going to send me flying over the handlebars or something.’

‘Here,’ he said, squatting next to her and checking the wheel carefully for excessive play. ‘Let’s have a look.’

While he was doing so, a black Mercedes pulled out of the queue of traffic and came to a halt on the grass verge. The rear door opened and a shaven-headed youth, probably a couple of years younger than Danny himself and dressed in wife beater and joggers, walked over to them. Danny looked up, grateful for the implicit offer of help, and was surprised when the supposed Samaritan walked straight past them both and picked up Danny’s bike. He swung his leg over the crossbar and bounced his backside off the seat two or three times as if checking it out for comfort.

Danny climbed slowly to his feet and walked over to him.

‘You mind?’ he asked, fairly pleasantly under the circumstances. ‘That’s my bike.’

‘Piece o’ shit,’ mumbled the youth without even bothering to look at him. ‘Wanna get yourself some decent wheels.’

‘Well, thank you for that,’ said Danny. ‘You think you could get off now? I’d like it back.’

The youth tugged at the brakes and pushed hard, causing the back wheel to lift into the air. ‘Get in the car,’ he said.



‘What?’ Danny turned to look at the Mercedes. The back door was still wide open but he couldn’t see clearly enough to make out who else might be inside. He wondered what the girl was making of all this and was surprised to see that she’d remounted her bike and was now leaning on the handlebars, watching closely, as if intrigued by what would happen next. She mouthed the word *Sorry*, and flashed a quick smile which conveyed all the sincerity of a game-show host. *What the hell was going on here?*

‘I said, get in the car, Danny.’

‘You serious? I’m not getting in any car.’ He stopped suddenly, his brain only now catching up. ‘And how come you know my name anyway?’

The youth stopped playing with the brakes and looked Danny in the eye for the first time. No hint of a smile. No hint of anything. He got off the bike and lowered it to the ground with exaggerated care.

‘I’m asking you nicely. Want me to say please?’

‘No,’ said Danny, stepping forward and trying to reach past him. ‘I don’t want you to say *please*. I want you to give me back my bike before I –’

The speed of the assault was what did for him, although there was something about the slickness of the move that suggested the outcome would have been no different even without the element of surprise. One minute they were brushing shoulders, the next he’d slumped to the ground and was lying across the rear wheel of his bike, struggling desperately to suck air into his lungs. The punch had slammed into his kidneys, just below the ribcage, with stunning force. He hadn’t seen it coming, had made no attempt to protect himself, so the aftershock was immediate

and excruciating. He wasn't sure where his next breath was supposed to come from.

'There you go,' said the youth, bending over him as he struggled to find anything resembling a comfortable position. '*Please . . . get in the fucking car.*'

'Thank you, TJ. I think we'll take it from here.' The voice, cultured, measured, utterly incongruous under the circumstances, came from somewhere deep inside the Mercedes. 'If you could just help Mr Locke into the car, that would be excellent.'

Danny was still gasping for breath and in no position to offer any resistance worthy of the name as the youth grabbed him under the armpits and, with a strength which belied his slender frame, hauled him into an upright position. He slumped forward again, clutching his ribs, and a second man stepped from the Mercedes to offer assistance. Between them they half-carried, half-dragged him over to the car and tossed him into the back seat where he landed next to a sharply dressed middle-aged man who clearly bought and applied his aftershave by the vat. The second man climbed in next to him; the youth in the wife beater hovered by the door.

'How long do you and Sonia think you'll need?' Mr Armani Code asked him.

'Arun Leisure Centre? Twenty minutes, maybe.'

'I'll ask Trevor to take a bit of a detour and we'll meet you there. You might like to take off your cycle helmet, Mr Locke,' he added, turning to address Danny directly for the first time. 'I think TJ's need will be greater than yours for the next quarter of an hour or so.'

'He's broken my ribs,' he managed to gasp.

‘Oh, I very much doubt that,’ came the reply. ‘For a young man, TJ has a lot of experience of this sort of thing and if he’d wanted to break your ribs, I think we’d know all about it. There could well be some bruising there in the morning though. I’d get some ice on it when you get in tonight, if I were you. And you might like to sit up a little straighter and take a few deep breaths just now. Get a bit of wind into your sails, yes?’ He clicked his fingers. ‘Helmet, please?’

Danny briefly weighed up his options and decided there were none. He unfastened the helmet and peeled it slowly from his head, thinking that sitting up straight might be easier said than done. He retained enough of his wits to wonder why no one was coming to his assistance. There was so much traffic around – surely someone had to have seen what was going on.

He watched as the youth took the helmet and started cycling off down the path with the girl alongside him. They were both laughing.

‘Where’s he going with my bike?’ he managed to ask, each word spent like marked currency.

‘Don’t worry – it’s quite safe, I assure you. It’ll be waiting for you at the leisure centre when we drop you off. In the meantime, Trevor here will take us for a little drive along the seafront. Much nicer than sitting here on this grass verge. Don’t want to draw attention to ourselves, do we?’

The indicator started to tick quietly as they waited for a chance to pull back into the stream of traffic on the A259. Then they set off towards North Bersted and Bognor, barely managing to keep pace with the cyclists for the most part. They certainly weren’t gaining on TJ and the girl who had long since disappeared.

‘I don’t understand what’s going on here?’ he groaned. ‘Who are you? What do you want with me?’

‘I apologise. You’re obviously alarmed, which is not that surprising under the circumstances. Perhaps if I were to introduce everyone?’ If this touch of civility was intended to come across as reassuring, it somehow missed its mark. ‘The gentleman behind the wheel is Trevor,’ he continued. ‘He’s the perfect chauffeur, really – safe, steady and hears only what he’s supposed to hear, don’t you, Trevor?’

‘What was that, Mr Cunningham?’

‘Very good, Trevor. Very droll. And next to him is Marshall . . . that’s his Christian name incidentally, not his surname. Parents obviously had an off day. He’s a bit of a whiz with all matters pertaining to finance, is Marshall. Don’t pretend to understand any of it myself. He could be cheating everyone left, right and centre for all I know but somehow I very much doubt it, don’t you, Marshall?’

Marshall smiled and said nothing.

‘And the gentleman sitting next to you is Mick. Big lad, isn’t he? I probably don’t need to tell you what he does. As for me, my name is Ezra Cunningham. You won’t have heard of me. I’m not anyone important. Just a sort of . . . well, factotum really, I suppose you could call me. You know what a factotum is, Danny? You don’t mind if I call you Danny, do you?’

He shook his head, a response which Cunningham interpreted as covering both questions.

‘So . . . factotum. Dogsbody, really – yes, that would be the best way to look at it. I like to think of myself as a bit of an all-rounder, jack-of-all-trades, but I’m probably flattering myself. Anyway, I digress. The point is, I’m employed by Mr Bellamy to

keep an eye on things – Mr Freddie, that is. Mr Joey isn't around much at present owing to an unfortunate misunderstanding which we're hoping the authorities will put right very soon. Maybe you've heard of them both?'

Danny most certainly had – and the temperature in the car dropped by several degrees in a matter of seconds. There weren't many people in the Bognor area who hadn't heard of the Bellamy brothers. He'd never had any direct contact with them but he knew plenty of people who had and, even allowing for a certain amount of exaggeration, he was more than happy to stay off their radar.

'I still don't understand what you want from me,' he said. It sounded horribly like a whine and he wished he could try again. 'I'm nobody. I've never met you – any of you. I'm not looking for trouble.'

'... which is what we like to hear,' said Cunningham. 'There's nothing for you to worry about here, Danny. All this ...' he spread his arms wide to take in the situation as a whole '... just look upon it as Mr Freddie's way of introducing himself. He likes to establish contact with all those he does business with. To break the ice, so to speak.'

'What business?'

'Always important to make sure everyone's singing from the same cliché, don't you think? And in your case he wants to be absolutely clear about the repayment structure.'

'What repayments? I don't know what you're talking about!'

'The loan you took out a while ago for ...' He snapped his fingers.

'Five hundred pounds,' said Marshall.

'Five hundred pounds. Exactly. With a repayment plan for ...?'

There was a brief rustling of papers as Marshall searched for the exact figures. 'The loan was taken out over three months at an APR of 345 per cent which means Mr Locke is due to pay £643.75 on the fifteenth of next month.'

'Which, unless I'm very much mistaken, is just over three weeks away?'

'Three weeks on Monday.'

'But that loan was with Arun Readies,' protested Danny. 'It never said anything about Freddie or Joey Bellamy on any of the documents I signed.'

'Indeed. Unfortunately, however, Jimmy Vince, who set up that particular company, has decided to sell up and move into other more profitable and, dare I say, less hazardous corners of the business world. As a result, all of the loans already agreed by said Jimmy have now fallen under Mr Freddie's remit and he has asked us to speak individually with every one of the good people concerned to establish ground rules and make sure there are no misunderstandings. All we need from you just now is some idea as to your intentions when it comes to repaying the loan. He's more than happy for you to settle with us this evening if you have it and that will mean our business relationship is terminated – at least until such time as you need to call on us again. But we do understand that immediate repayment may be neither convenient nor even feasible, in which case we have Mr Freddie's authority to let you have until the agreed date of the fifteenth of September to settle the debt in full. You have to understand however that this will incur additional costs and the original loan will have increased to . . .'

'One thousand and four pounds –'

'What?'

‘And forty-five pence.’

‘A grand?’ gasped Danny, and this time the pain in his ribs had nothing to do with it. ‘You’re joking!’

‘Danny –’

‘I’m only meant to be paying six hundred quid. I never signed up for a grand. Jesus, if I could lay my hands on that sort of money at a moment’s notice, I wouldn’t have needed to take out the loan in the first place.’

Cunningham tugged at each of his cuffs in turn. ‘I’m sure you’ll understand that *how* you go about reimbursing us isn’t really any of Mr Freddie’s concern.’ He couldn’t have come across as less interested in Danny’s dilemma if he’d tried. ‘I’m sure you’ll find a way if you put your mind to it. Just keep reminding yourself of the important things in life. Like Evie, for example.’ Thin air again. Cunningham had a way of sucking the oxygen out of the car with no apparent effort.

‘Evie? What about her?’

‘Barely out of her teens and a second baby on the way already? Early December, isn’t it?’

‘How do you –?’

‘And little Kayla,’ continued Cunningham. ‘Such a sweetie, I’m reliably informed. But she can’t be more than about eighteen months old. That’s a lot for a young mum to be coping with and you all the way out here at work all day. She must be desperate for company half the time.’

‘Leave my wife out of –’

Again, the blow seemed to come from nowhere. This time it took the form of a short, sharp slap to the face, delivered with the open hand. It stunned him momentarily and when his senses unscrambled themselves, his initial reaction, oddly enough,

was one of relief that he hadn't taken another blow to the ribs. Neither did he want to think about the damage this slap would have done to his face, had it been delivered with a closed fist.

'That's unfortunate,' said Cunningham, in the same measured tones that were definitely starting to get on Danny's nerves. 'Mick does get a bit concerned when voices are raised. I think he sees it as threatening. Anyway, as I was saying, I really admire your Evie. Nice girl, if a bit too trusting. I mean, leaving all the family finances in the hands of someone who thinks there's such a thing as a system that will allow him to win big on Betfair – I mean, I ask you. You'd have to say that's asking for trouble. Does she know you maxed out the credit cards recently?'

'How in God's name do you –?' This was like a subtle variation on the old Chinese water torture – one piece of information after the other, working away at his defences, drip, drip, drip.

'Or that you squirrelled five hundred pounds out of the savings account which is why you had to go to Jimmy V in the first place? I mean, maybe she thinks the world of you but there have to be limits, wouldn't you say? What's the plan, anyway? Have you already blown the money you borrowed from us?'

'No.' *None of your business* is what he wanted to scream but he wasn't sure which part of his body Mick might work on next and wasn't keen to put it to the test. 'I used that to get the savings account back to where it was before.'

'Ah . . . did we know that, Marshall?'

'No.'

'No. Well, that's good news anyway. Nice to know you're finally embracing a modicum of financial responsibility, Danny – even if it is rather late in the day. And you're still working at Estelle Roberts, I take it. That's something, I suppose. Fancy

jeweller like that – pity they don't pay you a little more, isn't it? Ah, the sun-drenched holidaymakers wending their weary way home,' he sighed, turning away as the lights at one of the innumerable pedestrian crossings on the seafront brought them to a temporary halt. 'You ever had a Butlins holiday, Danny? Can't imagine anything more ghastly, can you?'

Danny interpreted the question as rhetorical and said nothing.

'Anyway, I assume, since you say you've topped up your savings account and presumably don't have any other cash to hand, that you won't be going for option one and paying off your debt this evening. Am I right?'

Danny nodded, shoulders slumped in defeat.

'And just out of interest, on a scale of one to ten, how likely do you think it is that you'll be in a position to settle your debt in full on the fifteenth?'

He shook his head.

'The original deal, I might have come close. A grand? I don't know.'

'We'll call that a two then. Ah well, it's not a problem from our point of view if you need another month,' said Cunningham, 'but I'm sure you'll understand that it's not going to come cheaply. These APRs . . . never can get my head round them but Marshall here just laps it up and he'll be happy to let you know exactly what that would mean. Could probably do it without even using a calculator.'

'I'll get the money, OK?' snapped Danny, careful not to raise his voice at the same time. 'You'll have it.'

'Maybe a six then? Yes, well, I think that would be your best bet . . . if you'll excuse the unfortunate choice of words. Ah, here already,' he said, with all the cheerful bonhomie of a tour guide

announcing that they'd reached their destination. 'And there are TJ and Sonia with your bicycle, just as I promised. You see, Danny – we always keep our promises. It's always worth remembering that.'

Mick slid out of the back seat to allow Danny out of the car.

'You mind how you go now,' said Cunningham. 'And make sure you look after that good lady of yours, yes?'

TJ held out the helmet for him to take and kept hold of the bike while he fastened the strap under his chin. All smiles. So helpful. No way anyone passing could possibly imagine what he'd been through in the last quarter of an hour.

'Enjoy the ride home, fuckwit,' whispered TJ before clambering into the Mercedes with a smirk that simply begged to be scraped off his face.

Danny watched as they drove away, the girl pedalling furiously after them.

PHIL

Quarter past nine in a deserted Arun Valley Shopping Centre, empty corridors echoing to their footsteps. Two hours done and dusted, another ten to go before the end of their last evening on nights. Seven o'clock couldn't come soon enough – there was something intensely liberating about stepping out of the twilight zone and back into the real world for a few weeks. He could almost imagine he was connected somehow.

'Your turn,' Anna said, as he held the door open before stepping through after her. He started to climb the stairs, switching on his lapel mic as he did so.

‘Sierra 5 to Mic 2, Sierra 5 to Mic 2 – over.’

Pause. Click.

‘Mic 2 here,’ came the tinny reply in his earpiece. ‘Go ahead Sierra 5 – over.’

‘Ground Floor clear. Moving to Level 1 – over.’

‘Roger that, Sierra 5. Over and out.’

‘Roger that,’ she mimicked, shaking her head. ‘Dick!’

Phil grinned. ‘You really don’t like him, do you?’

‘Nice work, Sherlock.’

‘Any reason in particular?’

‘You want a list? The guy’s like . . .’ She gave an exaggerated shudder. ‘I dunno, he’s . . .’

‘Oh. Well, that clears that up.’

‘He’s a dick.’

‘So what’s he done to upset you – apart from getting promoted?’

‘Got nothing to do with it,’ she said, slapping his arm. ‘He was a dick before. Sticking a badge on him isn’t going to change anything. Just makes him a dick with a badge. If they’re stupid enough to make him Assistant Head of Security, why should I care?’

‘Yeah, well, you sound like you’ve taken it pretty well.’

She rattled the door to one of the clothing outlets, a little more vigorously than she needed to.

‘Some people, you know? They get a bit of responsibility, mainly because there’s no one else prepared to take on the shitty job in the first place, and all of a sudden they’re off on some power trip like Hitler or something. It’s pathetic.’

‘You didn’t go for it yourself, then?’

She stopped in her tracks and glared at him.