

CABRILON BOOKS

HEADERS

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BOXER BOYS BOOK 2: THE EARLY YEARS

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IT'S 1982 AND BIG MO DOLAN HAS A HOST OF WORRIES - ALL INVOLVING THE FAMILY. HIS YOUNG SON IS TOO SOFT, HIS WIFE TOO EASY GOING, HIS FATHER DOESN'T RESPECT HIM AND HIS BROTHER'S JOINED THE ARMY. NOW MO HAS PLANS TO MAKE THINGS BETTER – THE ONLY TROUBLE IS THEY ARE ABOUT TO GET A WHOLE LOT WORSE...

CHAPTER ONE

EVERYONE was scared of Reg.

Reg sat in the back room, his own little domain. He kept himself to himself until trouble flared, then he was quickly on the scene to mete out the punishment. Reg wasn't particular big, but he was squat, unyielding, solid as oak and fear-inducing. He showed no favours. Mo kept him around because it was all about respect and discipline. You couldn't take the piss, or swing the lead, or tell porkies, without big Mo nodding at Reg, reminding you that the enforcer would be called upon if you didn't buck up your ideas.

When Reg was in full swing there was little that could stop him. A cop-car full of Filth tried once, and crawled away nursing their wounds. A postman was on the receiving end another time, and ended up in hospital with two cracked ribs and a nasty concussion just for delivering a parcel to the wrong address. Children, women,

everyday folk going about their everyday lives – no one was immune. Reg offered no mercy once called into action. Named after the legendary Reggie Kray, his reputation on the estate was almost as fearsome as the one the gangster twins had forged in the east end.

At No 625 White Tower, Reg commanded blind obedience, his presence noted in whispered tones. Those incarcerated inside the mould-dappled walls tried to distract themselves with other things, but he was rarely far from their minds, lying dormant but ready to take centre stage at any moment, like a morale-sapping disease in a terminally ill patient. In truth, with family he was strictly a deterrent, the mere muttering of his name enough to make the miscreant confess to the error of their ways and promise to atone for any misdemeanour, real or imagined.

Little Chuck visibly shook at the sight of Reg, even though the enforcer had never touched the child. The boy had seen plenty of his old man's companions come and go - a procession of rock-like men, each possessing the knack of sending a shiver down the spine, even while performing the most mundane of tasks. They were transitory characters, though, here for a while then gone and quickly forgotten. Reg was a constant, a permanent addition grafted onto the family unit ever since dad had brought him home one day from a tour of duty around the spit-and-sawdust alehouses of Ilford, Barking and Dagenham.

“Just minding his own business, he was, sitting in the corner. I thought: he'll do for me,” Maurice Dolan explained when feeling particularly emotional about his most dependable of sidekicks. “Hasn't let me down since. Know what I mean? Ain't let me

down 'ave ya, Reggie old son?" The words were often accompanied with an affectionate pat while Reg himself remained mute, his life one of action, not words.

Long before Chuck saw Reg in action for the first time he had become attuned to a mean-spirited way of life. A particularly small child for his age, he was a concern for his father, who exulted in the nickname of Big Mo. Dad believed he had the perfect cure for his son's lack of stature, swearing by the strangely unscientific idea that somehow his son would grow if he "toughened up".

This long-term project started as soon as Chuck could walk, his earliest memories shrouded in a cloak of casual violence. He remembered one occasion, as a toddler, when he took a liking to a pink pushchair belonging to the daughter of his mum's friend. He had been happily pushing it around in the playground at the back of the flats when the old man came back from tour. Chuck loved his dad and was keen to show off his new toy, so ran across the tarmac on bowed, unsteady legs, the pride shining like a beacon from his cherubic face, the pushchair out in front. The sight of the little boy stopped Big Mo in his tracks. "Da... da..." Chuck said, nodding his head in the direction of the pushchair, a female doll nestling inside. "Look!"

Taking up the invitation Big Mo Dolan sank to his haunches. He looked first at the new object of Chuck's affection then straight into the little boy's eyes. Grabbing his arms a little too hard, Big Mo forced the toddler to release his grip from the source of his happiness. "Chuck, son," he said. "Pink pushchairs are for girls. Are you a little fackin' girl?"

Chuck shook his head vigorously, tears welling in his eyes due to the thick gnarled fingers boring into his delicate forearms. Bravely, despite the tears forming in his eyes, he kept his gaze fixed firmly on the craggy, fault-lined face in front of him, which nestled beneath a roof of short black bristles. Big Mo breathed heavily, a sour smell of hops and smoke hitting his son's nostrils. It was a familiar taste to Chuck's palette, one he associated with his father's unique demonstrations of love.

Answering his own question, Big Mo said more jovially: "Of course not! You're a boy, ain't you? So let's just get rid of this nasty, girly thing." Chuck felt the relief flood through him as his dad released his bruising grip, then hoisted the pushchair up with one of the meaty hands that had just held him in a steely embrace. The fingers were misshapen chunks and covered in black hair, resembling a nest of spiders. Had Chuck been older he would have probably worked out for himself that the digits had been broken many times.

Without waiting for his son, Big Mo marched across to the nearby children's playground where a roundabout was winding down from a spin cycle perpetuated by four teenagers who had moved on to the swings. "Clank!" the noise of metal crunching against metal reverberated around the park as pushchair met roundabout, the sound bouncing back off the hi-rise walls of the flats enclosing it. "Clink!" Chuck stared open-mouthed as bits of metal and plastic went flying, wheels from the pushchair detaching and spinning off, one of them performing ever-decreasing circles beneath the climbing frame, mesmeric in its progress.

Chuck was shaken from his trance-like state by a raised female voice and the familiar sight of a woman in tight white jeans, a flowery purple smock-top and cork-platformed sandals running in the direction of the playground. “Hey! Stop!” The woman was shouting, looking back over her shoulder at the bench where Chuck’s mum was sitting. “Bloody ’ell Beryl, your old man’s gone mental! Look what ’e’s doing to our Jill’s pushchair. Shit! Mo, stop that you nutter! It ain’t yours, it’s Jill’s.”

Big Mo’s facial complexion never changed as he looked at the tangle of cheap plastic, flimsy metal and ripped nylon that he now held in his hands. He switched his manic gaze to the woman arriving in the playground, and for half a moment the small crowd attracted to the scene might have expected him to admit his mistake, apologise and offer to replace the damaged item. Anyone who knew Big Mo, though, knew he didn’t do apologies because he didn’t make mistakes. They were solely the preserve of other people.

“You stupid cunt!” he shouted, stopping the woman in her tracks with the brutality of his words then marching towards her, wreckage dangling from his hand. “You think it’s a good fackin’ idea letting my boy play with a spazzy girly pink pushchair. Here...” He flung the remnants of the toy in her direction, forcing her to jump back hastily to avoid being hit. “Next time you do that, It’ll be you I’m smashing into the roundabout, you hear me, you slag! No one turns my boy into a faggot.”

Chuck noticed that the woman was visibly quivering from the verbal assault. There were tears running down her cheeks as she span on her heels and ran back to the bench, losing a shoe in the process and having to stop briefly to fit it back on. When

she reached her destination she took her daughter from the watching Beryl's hands, clutching the little girl tightly to her chest. Chuck saw his mum mumble something to the woman who, without a word in response, marched off in the opposite direction to the playground.

When Chuck looked back to where his dad had been standing, the old man had gone. There were bits of detritus left scattered around, by-products of the human whirlwind that had just passed through. The kids on the swings were talking excitedly now and though Chuck couldn't understand exactly what was being said, he got the gist. His dad was the main topic of conversation. "God, that was Big Mo! You wouldn't wanna mess with him, he's mental," one was saying.

"They say he carries this big club around, and belts people when he feels like it."

"Yeah," said a third. "Awesome!"

"Come here Chucky boy." It was his mum, arms held out towards him. He waddled over and she engulfed him in such a close, suffocating embrace that he thought his ribs might snap. "Never mind, baby, never mind." He inhaled the aroma of fragrant roses he associated with his mother, as comforting and safe as a warm blanket, and started to feel better again. "Your daddy only wants what is best for you," she whispered. "We don't need silly pushchairs anyway, do we? You've got your own toys at home and they're much more fun. Let's go and play with your cars, shall we?"

Later in the day, lying in his bed, he heard raised voices in the parlour downstairs, right beneath his room. "He's only a little boy!" his mother was protesting.

“He has to learn sometime,” said his dad. “You can’t mollycoddle him forever, it’s a tough world out there.”

“Forever? It’s hardly forever. He’s barely two, for God’s sake! I know you had it tough with your dad but...”

“Don’t bring him up! God. I turned out all right, didn’t I? At least I can look after myself and my own... That’s what he taught me. Look after family. Blood’s thicker ‘n water and all that. Your lot were hardly a good example was they? That fuckin’ woman...”

“Oh don’t start on my mum again, please...”

“It makes me sick though. Snooty cow. All them airs and graces and she fucks off and leaves... Discipline is important and there was none of it in your family. Your old man was far too soft, letting her get away with that. She needed a good slap. To my mind you ain’t never too young to learn. or too old. Fuck! Maybe you could do with learning some lessons yourself, girl.”

“No... no. Don’t even joke about it. Why don’t you settle down, have a beer and stop getting yourself all wound up over silly things. You know it’s not good for your blood pressure and them headaches. Here let me...”

“Fuck, no. You don’t get round me that easy. Reg!!!” his dad was shouting now, his mum pleading. Chuck felt cold, fingers of fear crawling over his scalp. He wanted to shout out, cause a distraction, but knew he wouldn’t be heard, crying or not. He faded off to sleep with his mother’s begging voice ringing in his ears.

HE had just passed his fourth birthday when Chuck witnessed first hand the destructive qualities of Big Mo Dolan's No 1 enforcer, and the memory would be etched on his mind for the rest of his life. One afternoon Mo bundled young Chuck into the van despite his mother's protests. He waved goodbye to her as she held his younger brother Sylvester in one arm and wiped something from her eye with her free hand. As they drove off, Chuck realised a group of his dad's friends were in the back of the van: There was Handsome Frank, a guy known simply as Shooter and a third person Mo always referred to as Cozza, who looked like someone had drawn all over him with crayons. Leaning against the back door was the ever-present Reg, keeping his own counsel. The others felt the need to comment on Chuck's presence. "He's a nice looking lad. He's got your eyes, mate," said Handsome.

"You think?" replied Big Mo. "Hell, it makes me laugh. You know when them bints get together and talk about 'ooh don't 'e look like 'is dad'? I can't never tell. Them babies all look like Winston bleedin' Churchill to me. Still, I think I see the resemblance more now 'e's getting older. Bit on the small side, though. He needs to beef up a bit. Look at our Sly. Big lump, he is."

"Don't sweat it," said Cozza. "I got a picture of our Shaun on the old Joanna at our mum's. Tiny little thing. He's 13 now and shootin' up. We'll have to make a hole for him in the bloody car roof soon... you know, like they did for that dinosaur in the Flintstones?"

"Bloody Flintstones!" said Shooter, letting loose a burst of honking laughter. In a few seconds the van was rocking with mirth, the happy banter continuing until they

juddered to a stop outside an imposing, red-brick building somewhere near the river. The streetlamps were on, the cold, misty air providing ample proof that winter had arrived, docklands London cloaked in a fog as intimate as a lover's embrace. It was late for Chuck to be up and, though he adored being with his dad, he was feeling a bit tired. "Come on Chucky, time you started to learn what life is all about," Big Mo said, lifting him out. On the side of the building was a sign.

"Wapping Tobacco. This the one?" asked Shooter.

"Yeah, hang on." Big Mo removed a key from his pocket, fiddling with a padlock to release it and swing open a small door. "Right boys, in you go."

Chuck's first reaction was to screw up his nose in response to the dank, musty smell that reminded him of the small cupboard in the hallway at home. At the same time his ears detected a constant drip-drip-drip of water not far away. The dark was impenetrable and Chuck didn't like it. "Daddy, I'm frightened."

"Don't be," growled Big Mo. "Time to be a brave, tough little soldier. You know, like your uncle Clive. Nothing to worry about. Wait here..."

Strip lights flickered on, buzzing like an angry wasp caught in a lampshade.

"There... better boy?"

Chuck nodded, looked around. There were packing cases stacked in different corners, old newspapers lying around on the floor.

"This it then?" said Shooter, pointing to some of the crates. "This the stuff you got me out on quiz night to lug about for you... Dot wasn't happy, I tell you."

“Aaah, wasn’t she now? Shame. See, here’s the thing...” Big Mo curled a finger, indicating for Shooter to approach him, as if he had a secret to impart.

“What is it Big Mo?”

“Closer. I need to ask you something.”

Chuck noticed the light was reflecting off a damp patch on the man Shooter’s top lip, as if his nose had been leaking water. A tall, gangly character dressed in mechanic’s overalls, he walked forward to where Maurice Dolan was fiddling with something in his pocket.

“What is it, Big Mo?”

“Tell me,” said Chuck’s dad. “Where are my lips?”

“What?”

Big Mo’s hand appeared from within his coat pocket, his fingers encased in a metal contraption which fitted snugly around the knuckles. Without warning, it clattered into the side of Shooter’s face. A shocked expression froze there as the man staggered back into Cozza and Handsome, who grabbed an arm each to steady him.

“What the..?”

“You heard the question, you mong. Where are my lips?”

“Your lipsh?”

Smash. Blood dripped from a wound the size of a 50p coin on the side of Shooter’s temple. He bucked and pulled in a wild attempt to escape the vicious assault, but was unable to shake off his two bodyguards.

“Fackin’ ’ell, am I speaking Swahili boys?” demanded Big Mo of his two accomplices. They shook their heads and muttered in the negative, knowing to play along when Big Mo’s famous temper made an appearance. They didn’t want to be the next ones on the receiving end of the knuckleduster. “My fackin’ lips, I said. Where are they?”

“Jeez, Mo. OK, OK! Your lips are on your mouth, of course.”

“Show me.”

“What?”

Smash. There was a slight ‘tick, tick’ sound as something hit the floor and Chuck looked in confusion at the two white things lying near Shooter’s feet. They were teeth. Their previous owner now wore a crimson beard where his mouth had been not long ago.

“Point to ’em.”

“I... I can’t.” He indicated his trapped arms.

Big Mo flicked his head and Handsome released his grip.

“Well, they... they’re here... your lips.” Shooter stuck a shaky finger out in the direction of Big Mo’s mouth, suspecting that if he got too close it would be bitten off.

“That’s right, Shooter, me old mucka,” said Big Mo. “That’s exactly where my lips are. Have a gold star.” He gave a mirthless chuckle, paused then delivered the punch line with perfect comic timing. “Seems to me, though, you thought my lips was between my legs. Only reason I can think of you’d treat me like a cunt.”

Everything was still, silent, the only noise coming from the prisoner snorting blood as he tried to clear his airwaves enough to speak.

“Wh... what sh’you mean?”

“Ripping me off, for starters,” said Mo. “Taking more than your fair share. I know what you got from that raid. You owe me a lot more and I think it’s a bloody cheek to expect me to make do with less. I ain’t happy and I need to make an example of you, so your little gang don’t get ideas above their station and think I’m a soft touch, ready to be ‘replaced’. I really am sorry about this Shooter, truly. I thought you were a loyal soldier and a good mate. Shows you can trust no one these days. You tried to rip me off and you fucked up, so now you got to learn. Handsome? Keep hold of him. Cozza, go get Reg, would ya?”

“Oh shit. No!” pleaded Shooter. “Not Reg. Look, I’ll make it up to you. Pay you extra, if that’s what you want. Do another job specifically for you. It wasn’t on purpose, honest, I’d never do that to you, Mo, you know that. I must have miscalculated is all I can think...”

Chuck let out a whimper. He didn’t really know what this was all about but he didn’t like to see his daddy so cross. Big Mo looked at him and winked as if to say: “It’s all right son, none of this is real. It’s all pretend and that isn’t blood just tomato sauce like you have at home on your chips.” Then he turned back to face his prisoner. “Honestly, Shooter, I don’t know what Reg is going to make of this whole unfortunate business. Somehow, though, I’m pretty sure he will be pretty bloody angry.”

HOURS later back in the flat Chuck was in bed, having cried himself to sleep. Big Mo told his wife the youngster was overtired. They had popped into the pub after their 'bit of business', just to take the edge off things, and Chuck had fallen asleep across one of the wooden benches. When she tried to ask the little boy if he'd had a nice time with his father she found it odd that he barely uttered a word. Normally the hard thing was to shut him up. Tired? she didn't think so. Beryl Dolan looked at her husband.

"You've made him a part of it, haven't you?" she said. "I asked you, even begged you, but you couldn't help it. You had to 'toughen him up'. I can tell what you've been up to. You took that... thing... with you. Look, I can see the blood. Covered in it. Saturated. It's dripping all over the bloody carpet and there's a trail of it on the tiles in the hall."

Big Mo looked out from beneath thick, black caterpillar eyebrows, pushed his hand wearily through the bristles on his head. He didn't feel like justifying his actions. It had been a long day. He had done what he had done, and in his mind he had made the right call. A row with the Mrs was the last thing he needed. He lifted himself from his favourite armchair and turned his back on her, reaching over to turn the television on. As the figure of a well-dressed man standing in front of a weather map came into view, Maurice Dolan paid scant attention, bending down to lift a three-foot long piece of oak which had been propped beside him on the sofa. She was right, he thought, noting the blood stains for the first time.

In his mind, though, it just added to the character, like when you had a champion conker as a kid and the more messed up it looked, the more scars it had, the more you knew it had done its job. He walked out through the sliding glass partition doors, swinging the piece of wood casually as he went. It was a sawn-off curtain pole with a spherical ball on the end, solid and hard. He'd rub a hot cloth over it in the morning, get rid of any 'evidence'.

Standing it in the corner of the small, parlour room he patted his weapon of choice lovingly.

"Night, Reg," he said.

CHAPTER TWO

October, 1981

BIG MO parked up on the double yellow lines outside a rank of scruffy looking shops and a doctor's surgery in the East London area of Forest Gate, stuck the badge in the windscreen and strolled across the road. The parking sticker had been given to him by an acquaintance at the council who owed him a favour and wanted to stay in the big man's good books.

"Hey, you... Hey, excuse me old chap!" For a brief moment Big Mo ignored the rather posh-sounding voice, convincing himself that the words weren't directed at him. After all, there were few with the bare-faced cheek to speak in such disrespectful tones to a bloke standing 6ft 4ins in his stockinged feet and tipping the scales at close on 16stone. If that wasn't enough, the close-cropped hair tended to discourage interaction. Unfortunately, his inquisitor appeared too slow-witted to weigh up these matters carefully in his head before letting the words escape his

mouth. When he didn't get a response he made matters infinitely worse by continuing to shout.

"Yes, you... you in the sheepskin coat with the cropped hair... You do realise you aren't supposed to park there, don't you?"

Mo stopped in his tracks half way across the street, his actions greeted by a screeching of brakes as a taxi pulled to a shuddering halt, other traffic squealing to a standstill behind it. A cacophony of car horns filled the mid-afternoon air. Winding down his window the taxi driver, a young Asian, looked out, preparing to question the human roadblock about his unusual course of action. Before he could make his protest, though, something in the roadblock's face warned him it wouldn't be a wise move. He wound the window back up and sat back, prepared to wait. In front of him Maurice Dolan turned with the deliberate awkwardness of a heavily laden oil tanker and fixed his inquisitor from across the street with an icy stare.

"You talking to me?" he asked, regurgitating the Robert De Niro line from one of his favourite films, *Taxi Driver*, in which the actor plays a psycho war veteran who continually poses the question to himself while looking in a mirror.

"Yes, man... you," said the scrawny looking character, failing to appreciate the imminent danger in which he had placed himself. Mo noted the bloke's rimless spectacles and pinstripe suit. Bank manager, accounts clerk or office know-it-all, he guessed. "Look, I don't know how you came to be in possession of that, um, badge in your window," his accuser continued regardless. "It seems perfectly obvious from where I'm standing that you don't have a disability of any sort and that you are quite

capable of parking somewhere else and walking to your destination. There are other people who need that space far more than you. It's right outside a doctor's, for goodness sake. Be a good chap, why not come back and move it to the car park around the corner? For a fit young man like you it will take just five more minutes of your time." As others gathered to watch the one-sided exchange of views, a look of smug, self-satisfaction spread across Mr Pinstripe's face, as if he was making a stand for every decent citizen.

Taking up a steady pace, the scraping of the metal segments attached to the bottom of Big Mo's brogues performed a relentless tattoo on the tarmac as he headed back in the direction of his car. Behind him, the traffic started up again, the horns dying down. Believing he had succeeded in his quest, Mr Pinstripe began walking away, only for a rough cockney accent to grate in his ears. "Oi, geezer! Would you like one of these disabled discs for yourself? Where did you have in mind I put it?"

He looked back over his shoulder to see Maurice Dolan with his back to him, rummaging around in the boot of his Daimler. "Eh? Well, no... I don't have a disabili..." The word stuck in his throat as Big Mo jacked himself up to his full height then turned with what appeared to be a thick wooden curtain pole in his hand. The colour drained from the responsible citizen's face, an uncomfortable feeling of fear wrapping itself around his midriff and forming a knot in his stomach. He broke wind involuntarily, failing to notice the toxic fumes that surrounded him as a consequence.

"That can be arranged," said Mo.

“Now... steady on old chap... wait... you can’t...”

Mo began cutting the distance between them, swinging the club over his shoulder like a Neanderthal. “Can’t what, eh? Can’t what?” the shouted, angry lines contorted Mo’s bullet-shaped head. Realising reasoned argument couldn’t save him, the scrawny target decided a strategic withdrawal was in order. Breaking into a run, the man’s feet slid around as he attempted to find some purchase on the grubby pavement. His comfortably expensive slip-on shoes were nice enough for strolling but not suited to a sprint. Determined to put distance between himself and the maniac with the offensive weapon, he began pleading for assistance. “Help! Police! Someone call the police!”

Mo continued to eat up the ground, never breaking into a run. He was able to gain on his quarry, though, due to the fact that pedestrian witnesses were impeding the running man’s progress while giving the bulkier individual a wide berth.

Just as Mo got within 100 feet of his quarry the man reached out as a last resort, pulling over a display of ripe grapes, plums, tomatoes and bananas in an effort to form a temporary barrier between them. A burly woman shopkeeper ran out to remonstrate with the culprit, presenting Mo with an equally formidable obstacle. As he sought to avoid a collision, the beloved segs in the soles of his shoes became his downfall, combining with crushed grapes and tomatoes to send him flying. He landed flat on his back on the pavement, but was too psyched up at that moment to feel any pain. “Fuck!” he swore, pushing himself up like a gymnast so that he was back on his feet almost immediately.

Unfortunately he wasn't quick enough to avoid the irate shopkeeper. "Look what you've..." Enlisting the help of Reg, he poked the woman in her flabby stomach, pushing her backwards across another of her displays. "Push off you fat slag," he said, immediately refocusing his attention on his real prey just as Mr Pinstripe disappeared through a train station entrance.

Brushing crushed fruit from his beloved Sheepskin coat, he realised pursuit was futile. "Fuck!" he screamed again, using Reg to smash a watermelon rolling around the pavement so that juicy lumps of fruit flew everywhere, sending passers-by cowering for cover.

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"If you will permit me to say so, Mr Mo sir, you seem a bit tense today." Sunil Prabhakar dug his fingers into the knots on Mo's shoulders, working the taut flesh as if he was kneading dough.

"Not fuckin' surprising Suni, I tell you," said Mo. "Everyone's taking the piss these days. They seem to think they got the divine right to make a muppet out of Mo. What's that about eh? On the way here I had a little altercation with some string bean who thought it was his God-given right to prove he was better than me. Insulted me about me parking he did and after that... well, see for yourself, he's made a complete mess of my clothes. The jacket's fuckin' ruined if you ask me."

"Sorry to hear that, Mr Mo, sir," said the Indian, who was wearing white shirt and trousers, white trainers and a knee-length apron which might have previously

belonged to a butcher. He continued to massage the tense areas of the big man's shoulders. "Hey, you heard about that IRA business?"

"Too right! My brother's based there. Chelsea barracks. How they managed to smuggle in a nail bomb is beyond me. I keep telling our Clive he's put himself in danger, signing up, but he won't hear of it. It all happened right in the heart of Westminster. Not just soldiers affected either. They were the targets but those bloody left footers managed to off a bunch of civilians? Disgraceful." Mo considered himself a patriot and was particularly wound up by anyone threatening to rock the establishment and insult the royal family. The Irish Republican Army was top of his hate list at the moment.

"On the bright side, at least it was Chelsea Barracks," said the guru. Though he knew it wasn't a laughing matter, he smiled. The guru was making a football joke – him being an Arsenal fan and Mo supporting West Ham. The two men shared a particular brand of dark humour which was why Mo felt comfortable coming here. If he hated anyone nearly as much as Irish Republicans it was Chelsea. Football had become one of a vast array of topics they discussed during Mo's monthly visits, which had begun two years earlier.

Their association had come about when Maurice Dolan had consulted his GP about regular headaches and was diagnosed with seriously high blood pressure. The doctor offered medication but Mo wasn't keen on the idea of being "pumped full of pills" for the rest of his life. With few other remedies to offer up, the doctor suggested alternative forms of medicine.

“Why not try this bloke for a nice head and shoulders massage?” said the GP. “His name is Sunil, Indian chap, bit of a guru. To be honest, I see him myself...”

Mo had been extremely sceptical at first, the bloke being a bloody foreigner and all, but had changed his tune pretty quickly once the guru got to work. His massages were pretty full on, and the way he dug his fingers into the temples almost provoked Maurice to punch him on his first visit. For once, though, he bit his lip and showed restraint, amazed at how well he felt having undergone the rigmarole. He was even happier a few days later when he realised he hadn't been plagued by migraines at all since the initial visit.

Not only was Sunil a wizard with his hands, he was also a damn good listener – a bit like a priest, thought Mo, who didn't really have a religious bone in his body. He found their conversations liberating and, in a strange way, considered them to be bound by the same oaths of secrecy as a Catholic Confessional.

“How's the Mrs then, Mr Mo?” asked Sunil in his wafting, musical voice.

“Very good ta, Suni.”

“Any, um, problems like we talked about?”

“Well... you know how it is. It's all about the young uns for her at the moment. I ain't saying I feel rejected because, as you pointed out, I shouldn't expect to get the same care and attention – I don't need that kind of protection. But I can't help the nagging feeling I need something just for me at times.”

“Then why not go out and find it,” suggested the guru.

“What, you suggesting an affair? Oh, I don't think I could do that to Beryl.”

“Some of the greatest men who ever lived had concubines to, um, ease the tension,” said Sunil, warming to his theme. “Look at Kennedy, for instance... a great man, but a man with a wandering eye, history will tell you. Personally, I don’t believe men were made to be monogamous. What about all those army generals, far from home, protecting us? Do they not find another way to relax and, um, ease their tensions with their wives hundreds of miles away? If it isn’t up your street, as they say, then I’m sorry I mentioned it, but I can certainly think of cases where families have actually benefited because the breadwinner returns home not so strung-up as usual.”

“Well, you may have a point,” conceded Mo, allowing the calming effects of the treatment to spread through his aching body. “I hadn’t thought of it quite in those terms. Mind you, if my Mrs did find out... well, I rather value my balls.”

The two men laughed. “Anyway, what about that Mr Tebbit eh?” said Sunil, once again demonstrating his knack of being able to alter the subject in the blink of an eye. “He wants us all to get on our bikes to find work. I tell you, Mr Mo, you wouldn’t catch me cycling out there in this bloody horrendous traffic.”

“I don’t think he meant it quite that way, Suni old son. He was just suggesting you go where the work is.”

“You agree?”

“Well, let’s put it this way, I can carry out my business from most places,” said Mo. “I don’t have to stick around here. Others wouldn’t entertain the thought of a hard day’s graft if they couldn’t fall out of bed and land straight in a decently paid job. I

must say, there's certainly something about this Thatcher. She's a strong woman. She's gonna sort out a lot of things, with that tough guy Tebbit at her side."

"Like the invasion of all these bloody foreigners," interjected Suni.

Mo had to use all his willpower to stop himself bursting with laughter, the irony striking a chord. Fortunate he was lying face down, so the guru didn't notice his amusement.

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Feeling much more relaxed, Mo left the guru's apartment and headed back to the car. Soon he was driving through the traffic-clogged streets on the outskirts of Ilford. It was just as he approached the town centre near the station that he noticed something which made his eyes light up. A thin figure in pinstripes carrying a briefcase was just departing a local newsagents, a copy of the Evening Standard tucked under his arm. "Well I never," said Maurice Dolan, searching the interior of his car.

Unfortunately he had deposited Reg back in the boot and he wasn't sure the enforcer would be much good anyway, unless he was in a position to park the car and follow his quarry on foot. That was a policy fraught with danger, though, as he realised earlier in the altercation at the vegetable store. If he didn't act now, while driving, he might lose his target again – this time forever.

Pulling down the flap to the glove compartment he reached inside and found just the sort of thing he'd been looking for. It was perfect. He hefted it in his hand. The weight was just right. It was a decent size but not too heavy, so he was sure he

could target it correctly if he could just close down the distance between them slightly. When there was a break in the traffic he manoeuvred across into the left hand lane so that he was parallel with the target. Winding down the window, he took a deep breath and prepared himself.

“Oi, disability boy!” he shouted. A few heads turned but not Mr Pinstripe who obviously didn’t register that the slur was aimed at him. “You! The fucker in the pinstripes who looks like an arsehole!” he shouted this time. The man suddenly registered the intrusion, shook his head and looked up, confusion wrinkling his brow. At the last minute he locked eyes with Big Mo Dolan behind the wheel of the Daimler, passenger side window open to the elements, and the colour drained from his face. “Catch, you cunt!”

The large, square battery caught him right in the middle of the forehead, and the last thing Mo saw was him sinking to the floor, a crowd of people gathering around trying to discover what had happened.

CHAPTER THREE

Big Mo sat at a scarred bench near the door of the 3 Wishes in Dagenham, cursing under his breath between large gulps of pissy lager. His current ire was being directed at the flamboyantly dressed teens gathered in the corner, pooling their pocket money in order to put all manner of tuneless garbage on the jukebox. Currently his ears were being battered by the 'pop sensation' of the moment, a weirdo called Adam Ant who had obviously spent too much time as a kid plastering on his mum's make-up and wearing her clothes. For some reason the yodelling Nancy boy thought this bizarre game of "dress up" entitled him to the label Prince Charming. "Princess Arse-Bandit, more like," mumbled Mo, listening to the line suggesting "Ridicule" was nothing to worry about. Maybe not, he thought, but a meeting with Reg would surely make the little warbler mess his pants.

It had taken barely seven hours for Maurice Dolan's buzz from the de-stress session with his guru to wear off. When he had first started the treatments, the feelgood factor had lasted a whole week. Sadly it seemed the longer he continued with them, the less effective they became. He guessed it was no different from getting used to a particular brand of painkiller, shovelling handfuls of them down your throat until their effectiveness wore off completely and your body became immune. What about illegal substances, too? Those addicted to certain drugs complained they could only replicate the original high by indulging in the poison at more and more regular intervals afterwards. Mo held no truck with narcotics or those who sold them, but he could see how dealers maximised their profits. With the increased dosage costing more money, it was no wonder those in the business were doing a roaring trade.

The word poison reminded him of his dad. He had popped in to see Billy 'The Kid' Dolan after picking up Chuck. It was a pre-arranged visit so that Billy and his stepmum Viola could get their weekly chance to fawn over their eldest grandson. The love-in was mutual. Chuck doted on his grandpa and took every word he said as gospel. This turn of events was completely natural, of course, but did nothing to calm Big Mo's in-built paranoia. In irrational moments he feared his son loved his grandpa more than him, his own father and, with an astute ability to hone in on a person's weak spots, Billy never failed to prop up Mo's fears. Disguising his barbs as 'jokes', Billy was ruthlessly efficient at seizing any opportunity to lower Mo's self-esteem in front of his No.1 son.

A few hours ago, for instance, Billy had opened the door to them pleasantly enough and led them through into the study. Going to the ornate mahogany drinks cabinet that took up an entire corner of the room, he had pressed a button which sent electric gadgetry whirring within. After seconds, a door slid open automatically and a few bottles and glasses magically appeared on a circular tray from within the contraption. Billy liked to show off, honestly believing that such fancy tat put him on a par with the likes of the city's big businessmen, not to mention the Lord Mayor himself.

"What's your poison, my son," he had said, lifting a bottle of whisky and holding it up to the light for inspection. You are, thought Mo, but kept his own counsel. "This is a good one," Billy had continued, reading the label. "A wonderful oaky single malt. It was a present from one of my pals in the Highlands. Not to everyone's taste though, only the discerning palate. I imagine you would prefer a beer."

The first put-down delivered right on cue, Mo had felt the tension creep across the back of his shoulders. In an attempt to show the slur had failed to find its target, he had replied: "No, no... whisky's fine."

It was at that moment Chuck chimed in. "Look! Look grandpa!" he said, waving around a pencil drawing of something that vaguely resembled a multi-coloured train with other scribbles around it. A child of the 60s, it reminded Mo of one of those weird psychedelic cartoons, like the one that appeared on the front of the Beatles' Sgt Pepper album.

“That’s fantastic, Chucky boy,” Billy had said, taking the rolled scroll and opening it up so that it was extended in front of him. He nodded approvingly, as if the piece of scribble might fetch a fortune in one of the big galleries downtown, patting the boy on the head like an obedient dog. “Do you know the only thing your dad used to bring home from school were letters from the headmaster telling me he had been naughty. Can you imagine?”

Chucky had joined in his grandpa’s laughter before looking up at Mo for confirmation he was doing the right thing. For the boy’s sake Mo had manufactured the briefest of smiles while inside him a knotted ball of angst was rapidly forming. Later, grandpa Billy used the picture as a weapon with which to beat Mo’s ego again.

“What’s this Chuck?” Billy had asked at the tea table after Viola had provided them with some sandwiches and an indulgent chocolate cake.

“That’s the garden, with lots of nice coloured flowers in it here,” Chuck had explaining excitedly. “Then there is a swing for the children and a roundabout over here too.”

“Is it your garden, Chuck?”

“Naaah!” Chuck had exclaimed, “We don’t have a garden, Grandpa.”

“Oh, that’s a shame, what with there being two big boys in the family now. Children really must have somewhere to go out and play where they are safe, in the confines of their own home.” He looked over the dark rim of his NHS specs. “If maybe daddy bought you a bigger house, perhaps you could run around to your heart’s content.”

The words were directed at Chuck but aimed at Mo. He looked around at the spotless interior of the dining room in this relative palace in Chigwell and felt like crying. His dad had only been able to afford this place once the kids had grown up, helped by the insurance he had claimed after his first wife, Mo's mum, had suffered an untimely early death through breast cancer and the proceeds of a bank job which had been skilfully laundered abroad. Mo and Beryl had already set up home on their own by then and Chuck was on his way. In his younger days Maurice and his brother Clive had lived in relative squalor, a garden something they only saw in story books.

When Chuck had left the table to watch his grandma decorating a cake for Grandpa's birthday, Mo decided it was time to unload his frustrations on the old man. "What was the point in that, dad. Eh?"

"What's that, son? Don't remember saying anything to upset you."

"About the garden... "

"Oh that... I was just thinking out loud, that's all. Those kids really need somewhere better to play. That playground at the flats is a right shithole. On the rare occasion I've taken them over I've seen used needles, empty beer cans, spirit bottles, the works... Of course, the boys can come here any time they like, but it's not always convenient for you to drop them over, I know."

"How do you propose I conjure up this house with its nice garden then?" Mo had asked, being more challenging to his father than was wise. "You going to let me in on the 'big job' you're planning? I'm sure..."

"Big job? There isn't one. Who told you that?"

“People talk. Rumours get around. I don’t know. One of my crew had heard... probably off one of your crew.”

“Can no one keep a soddin’ secret around here?” Billy had said, raising his voice for the first time. Mo chalked up an imaginary point on his side of the board. “Hey, don’t you dare go blabbin’ your mouth off, you hear? You always were a...”

“A what, dad? Eh? A what? Christ. You can’t label me a blabbermouth. None of us could get a word in edgeways at home, in the court of ‘King Billy’.” He had spat out the last two words venomously. “Come to think of it, there you are pouring shit over my school work to my son, when I don’t recall you taking much of an interest in it at the time. In fact, I remember you and mum pulling me out of school on regular occasions to look after Clive and Cilla while you went gallivanting off down the West End. Shit!”

“Calm down, son, don’t have a bleedin’ heart attack for Christ’s sake,” Billy Dolan had said. “Me and your mum ain’t getting any younger...”

“Stepmum.”

“OK, well we ain’t getting any younger anyway and we’re the ones who would have to tidy up the mess if you dropped down brown bread. How heavy are you? 16 stone or something? Tsk tsk. You should trim down, boy. You look a likely candidate for the old ticker quitting if you ask me. Why don’t you cut down on the eating and maybe...”

“I can save enough money for a fackin’ house? In London? You’re shittin’ me, right? You do KNOW how much they cost these days, do you? Still, I’ve got an idea.

Why not let me get a piece of the action you're planning and I'll move your grandchildren into a new house? Deal?"

The question was greeted with a moment's silence, Mo breathing heavily having got the rant out of his system. After what seemed like minutes, Billy gave his reply. "You know I can't do that son. We've got our team and we don't need any substitutes or new signings... even if they are family. The bus is full. Sometimes, Maurice, you got to do things yourself, not rely on a leg up..."

"Leg up?" Big Mo exploded, the few remaining bubbles of calm escaping in the form of spittle at the corners of his mouth. "You've never raised a tiny finger to help me in my fuckin' life, let alone a whole leg! You put me down or show me up at every opportunity. All I've ever wanted was a chance to prove myself but you slammed the door in my face. Now you're telling me I have obligations to my family but haven't given me the slightest clue as to how I should carry them out. Well, why don't you let me in on the family biz, eh, Billy The Kid? I'm sure there will be plenty of money to go around. And I can keep my mouth shut... unlike some."

"Sit down, son," his dad had ordered, calmly. "That's the trouble with you. You've always been a hothead, see? That's how you ended up in that borstal a few years back... losing it with someone. I don't know where you get it from. I'm quite calm. I can only imagine it's from your mother's side of the family. There was a bit of Italian in there... a bit of the Latino blood and that's never a good thing when you want to keep the peace, or carry out a job with a cool head. Remember Romeo and Juliet and the state they got in?" Mo looked at his father blankly, hardly able to believe

what he was hearing. The old man interpreted the expression as meaning something else. "Oh, sorry son, you weren't really a reader now, were you?"

Another put down, and finally Maurice Dolan had run out of energy to fight his corner. His school record might not have been much good, but who was to blame for that? He was hardly encouraged by Billy, who rarely failed to boast about his own prowess at science, English and maths. At that moment Mo vowed he would be entirely supportive of his own children, giving them every opportunity to surpass him when it came to the learning game. If he was a gangster it was because it was the only real option left to him in a world that failed to respect you if you didn't have a few letters scrawled on a sheet of paper under the headline: Qualifications.

Mo was still fuming long after he left the house, dropped Chucky home and wandered off to Dagenham to drown his sorrows.

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"Hey good looking, what can I get you?" the girl's blonde hair wound itself around her head and stretched upward to a point, reminding Big Mo of a Mr Whippy ice cream cone. There was a hint of pink running through it, like the raspberry sauce in a ripple.

"Same again... Lager," he said, leaning against the bar and refocusing his attention on the youngsters, who were mock-fighting in the corner. Handbags. He wondered whether they would be quite so full of their own bullshit if Reg intervened to knock it out of them.

"Wow, you're the talkative one."

“Sorry?” He refocused on the barmaid who was leaning across towards him now, heavy breasts fighting for space inside her low cut red dress. She had a finger coyly dangling from the corner of her mouth, chewing on a cuticle. Pleasant green eyes with an air of wickedness about them.

“It’s a joke, lover,” she said. “I can see you’re the strong silent type. Will Stella do you?”

“Eh?”

“You know, the lager... Stella?”

“Oh yeah. Course.” He watched her wiggle off to the far end of the bar, skirt stretching tight across a shapely ass and finishing mid thigh, fishnet stockings filling the gap to a pair of impossibly high stilettos. He felt guilty for ogling, then justified his actions by figuring she wouldn’t be dressing in that manner if she wasn’t expecting to attract male admiration. On cue, the words of the guru that morning came back to him. Surely he could look, couldn’t he? Where was the harm? If it was good enough for Kennedy... Still, there was no point in ordering offal, when you had steak at home, he reasoned, and there was no-one more tender than Beryl. The click, clacketing of the returning barmaid’s heels interrupted his internal debate.

“Here you go.” She put the pint down in front of him and he handed over a fistful of coins. “Are you a regular?” she asked.

“Yeah, I suppose,” he said, seeing no harm in conversation. “I drink here, The Hope in Barking and sometimes over in Ilford. I haven’t seen you in here before, though.”

“No,” she said, returning his change. “I’m new. Tommy, the landlord, agreed to give me a stint behind the bar: thought I might be able to attract a classier brand of customer.” She posed in profile, hands on hips and nose in the air, only realising her mistake too late. “Oh shit, sorry, that came out wrong, didn’t it? I’m not having a go at you. God, you’re the best-looking, classiest bloke in here.” She blushed, but carried on talking in an effort to cover up the embarrassment. “Better than those little scrotes over there, that’s for sure. Spent about a fiver between the lot of them. One drink each then occupy the rest of their time battering our ears with this tuneless crap.”

“Not a fan, then?”

“Hell, I’m more a rude girl.” He raised his eyebrows. “Not in that sense, silly, though I must admit...”

“Audrey! Hey... don’t chat up the clientele, it stops ’em drinking,” a voice interrupted. “Sorry, Big Mo, but there are customers waiting down this end.”

She leaned across. “Better go... don’t want to get the tin-tack on my first day.”

“I wouldn’t worry. I can’t see him sacking you, you seem to have quite an audience.” He inclined his head to the right, where a group of leering faces were climbing up the sides of the bar in an effort to get a better look, paper money being waved in front of them to signal they were men of means when Mo suspected their brood of kids were fighting over fatty cuts of cheap belly pork at home.

She smiled and rested her hand on his, perhaps a second longer than necessary. “Thanks, lover,” she said. “I’ll see you later. Oh, and if you wanted to change the tunes on the jukebox... I like Ghost Town. The Specials?”

She turned around to see if the request had registered, but the customer had already gone.

CHAPTER FOUR

“HEY, watch it mate!” the youth with the long, greasy brown hair swung around, the beer stain creeping across the front of his white ruffled cotton shirt. Dark brown eyes looked out from below lids painted in glowing pink, a black outline ringing the lashes. Mo wrinkled his nose as a stench of BO hit him, mingling with the sour aroma of the spilt pint. Somewhere in the bouquet he detected the pungent scent of joss sticks, the incense designed to cover up the equally revealing smell of dope.

“Well, get out of my fackin’ way then!” said Mo, pushing the boy again. The kid was about five years younger than him, but a world apart when it came to fashion sense. The way he was dressed suggested he saw himself as a modern Dick Turpin, the highwayman who, according to legend, led a reign of terror throughout rural Essex a few centuries earlier. There were even boozers named after him out Epping way.

Big Mo couldn't imagine anyone naming a boozier after this skinny runt, though. He was pretty sure Dick would be turning in his grave at the sight. He didn't imagine the highwayman held much truck with wearing make-up, and unless this kid had a couple of six-shooters in his pocket then he was in no position to put the fear of God in anyone. "Look, I only wanna put something on the jukebox," explained Mo, calming himself. "I'm sorry if some of that nasty beer splashed on your pretty clothes but just because you dress all fancy don't give you the right to dictate what music is played in here." The boy raised his arms and stepped aside. Mo bent forward, pressing the buttons on either side of the jukebox as if operating the flippers on a pinball machine, watching the cards tick around until he saw what he wanted. "Specials: Ghost Town". He put in 20 pence and was informed he was entitled to five songs.

"Come on, mate, get a fuckin' move on," someone shouted behind him, but he ignored them. Continuing to look through the possible selections his eyes lit up when he saw a song that reminded him of his visits to Youth Club in the late 60s and early 70s. The artist was Prince Buster and the song "Al Capone". He pushed the appropriate buttons and was about to make his third choice when a pain shot through his kidneys. Cheeky little bastard, he thought. Someone had punched him!

He turned, a mixture of surprise and anger bubbling up inside him, to be confronted by a youth with short, blond hair. He was about the same height as Mo but more wiry and wore a large hoop earring which dangled down the left hand side of his face. He was dressed in some kind of old-fashioned army uniform, blue coat

rimmed with red piped white collar and cuffs, with red lapels, cuff flaps and shoulder straps, augmented with brass buttons. "Mr big man, are you?" the new arrival shouted in his face, "Think you can just barge in among us and push Pete here cos he's a bit different? That's out of order."

Raising his fists in response, Mo felt another shove from behind, followed by a couple more as a chorus of heckling started up.

"Fuck off, bully boy!"

"Why don't you pick on someone your own size, skinhead!"

"Fuckin' fascist pig!"

Unsure which way to turn and feeling hemmed in and claustrophobic, Mo thrust his arms backwards, making contact instantly on both sides and hearing a crashing sound. Looking over his shoulder, he saw a teenage girl with bright purple plaited hair lying prone across a collapsed table, blood streaming from a cut across her eyebrow where she had been hit by flying glass. "Beating up girls now are we? Such a big man," shouted the blond bloke.

"Shit! That was an accident," Mo responded, suddenly unsure of himself. He wasn't used to being put on the back foot. "You lot were attacking me... what do you expect?"

The bloke in the blue army jacket pulled back his arm and aimed a haymaker in Big Mo's direction, but it lacked accuracy and grazed his shoulder. He thought about cutting his losses, making a break for it and rounding up some of the troops or, at least, grabbing Reg from under the table where he had left him. The problem was he

was trapped in another corner of the pub, his brightly dressed accusers blocking any hope of a getaway. Regaining his composure he thrust out a fist, heard the blond boy expel breath from his lungs and saw him double over. The younger man held a hand to his ear through which blood poured out, the hooped earring stained red and lying forlornly under the jukebox, parted from its owner. "My fuckin' ear, you've ripped it open!" Mo read his lips, but the words were drowned out by a familiar sound. "Al Capone's Guns don't Argue!" barked a heavy, echoing voice, followed by the chick, chick, chickity, chick, chick rhythm of the Prince Buster Ska classic. As the three familiar notes of the horns broke in it was as if Mo had suddenly switched to automatic pilot. Like a dancer, he turned and twisted, firing out punches in time with the beat.

"Don't call me Scarface..." Bang! Blood flew from a split lip attached to a stunned face on his right. "... I'm Alias Capone." Crash! Another new Romantic rocked backwards, knocking over a wooden stand, coats and umbrellas scattering across the floor. "C... A... P... O... N... E. Capone!" Blam. Shit! That was the landlord. He'd cuffed him in the ear.

"Sorry, Tom, I didn't..."

"Think you better go, Mo," shouted the Landlord over the loud music and the din created by the bar fight. "Not your fault! Hell, I'll make sure these fuckers are banned from now on. They don't spend anywhere near as much in here as you for starters, and they're turning a proper pub into a fuckin' youth club for poofs." As if to emphasise his prejudice he pulled the guy called Pete towards him and sent him

reeling back with a head butt. "Give me a chance to get things straightened out here," Tommy said, continuing the conversation and breathing heavily. "Come back in a couple of days and I'll have a pint waiting."

Mo turned in an effort to leave, only to be confronted by the girl with the purple hair, a screaming banshee lunging towards him with a small, broken babycham bottle. In his beleaguered mind all Mo could think was "Fuck, do they still sell that shit!" She was about to capitalise on the element of surprise when someone grabbed one of the purple plaits and clouted her around the ear with a closed fist. A woman's fist. "Thanks for the tune, mate!" said the barmaid he had been talking to earlier, shaking her hand to relieve the jarring pain she had felt the moment her fist impacted with the girl's face. "Like Tommy said, it might be time to go!" She stood aside and a gap in the crowd materialised. Mo didn't hesitate, walking through it and retrieving Reg before taking his leave from what now resembled a war zone. "Fackin' 'ell Reg," he said, "You missed all the fun."