

PROLOGUE

Look at her. Go on, look. Take a good, long look. Beautiful isn't she; standing there by the swimming pool; five feet six inches of slim, tanned, hard-bodied, healthy young woman. I mean what's not to like about Laura?

Look at the way the water slides reluctantly from her hips as she climbs out of the water in that tiny, little, black bikini. She turns and grabs the long, dark hair that trails down her back and sort of bunches it together then squeezes the water out, before combing it back with her fingers, making it hang straight. Then she looks up and smiles at me. She's got a good smile, warm and naughty and it's making me wonder what my chances are of peeling that little, black bikini off her just one last time before we have to fly home again.

She's bright too, a lawyer and it's always useful to know one of those, particularly in my profession. She knows what I do for a living, well mostly, and it doesn't bother her. I mean it's not as if I'm a gangster exactly, not really, and I don't go telling her the details of my day but she knows I work for Bobby Mahoney, so it's obvious I'm no chartered accountant.

We've been together more than two years now, and I am beginning to think she just might be the one. We'd been bickering a bit lately, a lot actually if I'm honest, arguing about nothing really, but I reckon we were just over the honeymoon period, that's all. We've both been working hard and we needed a rest. This holiday could have been make-or-break but it's been great; lots of late nights, long lie-ins, lounging by the swimming pool, soaking up the sun then back to the hotel for some of that lovely, unhurried, afternoon sex you only ever seem to get when you're on holiday. If only life was like this all the time.

And Laura is loyal, which helps. Loyalty is a rare and underestimated commodity these days. At least it is in my game. You want my opinion? You can't put a price on

loyalty. So I have landed on my feet with Laura, no one can dispute that. Even Bobby thinks she's alright, for a posh bird.

It's funny now, looking back on it, how I had no inkling no instinct whatsoever, while I was lying there by the pool, soaking up the sun that hovers over this part of Thailand like it just loves the place and never wants to leave, that everything was going so badly wrong back home while I was away. I can honestly say that, right then, I really did have no idea just how much shit I was in.

CHAPTER ONE

Finney was there to meet us at the airport so I knew, as soon as I saw his pug-ugly, scarred face that it had all gone tits-up and pear-shaped.

I spotted him easily. He towered over everyone else; the relieved parents collecting back-packing teenagers, the mini-cab drivers on autopilot, holding up their cardboard signs with the names of self-important business men hastily scrawled on them in biro. We were tired by now. The plane from Bangkok to Heathrow was bang on time but the connecting flight back to Newcastle arrived an hour late, which tells you everything you need to know about this country.

Laura hadn't noticed Finney. She was too busy restoring her lifeline, as she called it, attempting to wrestle her mobile phone from her handbag while simultaneously dragging the smallest of our two cases, mine obviously, along behind her on it's little, squeaky wheels. I could hear them squealing in protest with every step she forced them to take, because they were full of handcrafted, wooden nick-nacks she'd insisted on buying but had no room for in her own case. That was full to bursting with the clothes she'd packed in Newcastle but hadn't worn on the holiday because they were too bulky for the heat. I was dragging Laura's case behind me, feeling no happier for being right. "Why do you need three different dresses for every day we are out there?" I'd asked her before we left, as I sat on her case and tried to flatten it.

"Choices," she said in a tone that sounded as irritated as I was becoming, "a girl needs choices David," as if I was proposing to spend the whole ten days in the same pair of cut-off shorts and T shirt.

"Jesus," I said, determined to have the last word but not wanting to turn it into a holiday-wrecking issue. She could be fucking irritating at times could Laura but that was probably not the moment to mention it. Not with the flight just a few hours away. We both badly needed this break.

Now, ten days later, we were back in Newcastle and the look on Finney's face told me everything I needed to know. I was in trouble.

There was no greeting, no small talk from the big man, all I wanted to know was why he was standing there, his huge frame dwarfing one of those flimsy, metal barriers at the arrivals gate, gnarled fists bunched like he was about to start a fight with someone.

"What?" I asked him simply.

"Bobby needs a word," he said in that unmistakably deep and nasally Geordie voice of his, which had been caused by the iron bar that broke his nose years ago. I was reliably informed that it was the last thing the guy with the iron bar ever did.

"Now?" And he just nodded.

"What is it?"

He looked over at Laura, who was still a few yards behind me but preoccupied by voice mails from her girly mates and her bloody mum.

"It's the Drop," he said and I immediately thought, oh shit.

Laura didn't take the news well. "He needs to see you now?" she asked, as if I'd been called in at late notice by my inconsiderate supervisor, for a shelf-stacking shift at the Co-Op. "Christ David."

I realised she was jet-lagged but then so was I and I could have done without the grief, because she was embarrassing me a little in front of Finney. I might have been a new man compared to most of our mob but, if she carried on like this, the word would go out that I was pussy-whipped.

"You know who I work for." I hissed the words at her and was relieved when she fell silent. Finney lifted Laura's case into the boot of her Audi and I added the other one. She didn't thank either of us.

"You don't know when you'll be back?" she asked, though she already knew the answer to that stupid question.

"No," I said through gritted teeth, my mind already on Bobby Mahoney and the reasons why he had sent his top enforcer out to the airport to meet me and bring me in. Why did he not just leave me a message or send some low-level member of the crew with a car, unless this was serious and I was somehow to blame for it? What the hell had gone wrong with the Drop? Was it light? Had Cartwright gone completely out of his mind and skimmed off the top. No, he'd have to be mad. It would be spotted immediately. So, if not that, then what?

We waited till Laura drove away with a face like thunder then we walked over to Finney's 4x4 and climbed in. He drove us out of the car park and away.

I had a little over ten minutes to get to the bottom of what was going on before we were back in the city. I hung on for what seemed like an eternity then finally asked, "So, you going to tell me what this is all about or do I have to guess?"

"I'm not s'posed to say. It's..."

"Don't be a total cunt." I was deliberately talking down to him, like he was being a complete wanker for holding out on me like this, which he was. I only had a short drive to convince him he could safely let me know what had happened. "I'm not going to let on, am I?"

It was a bit of a risk talking to a man like Finney like that and he gave me a look. We both knew he could have ripped my head off my body without even breaking sweat. He was a huge guy with a barrelled chest and fists like mell hammers. His face was gnarled and marked with the scars from a thousand fights, all of which I am willing to bet he won. Put it this way, I have never heard of anybody beating Finney, not once, not in the illegal, bare knuckle boxing bouts, which is how he came to Bobby Mahoney's attention in the first place, not inside, when he got his ten stretch, commuted to six, and certainly not on the streets. Nobody has ever taken down Finney on the streets. He is the firm's main muscle and I take him anywhere where there might be even a hint of trouble. People soon stop giving me jip when he walks in.

He didn't say anything at first, just watched the road ahead. Then finally he quietly told me, "It's the Drop."

"Yeah, you said," and while I was racking my brains wondering what could possibly have gone wrong, he added,

"It didn't happen." And I am not afraid to tell you that, right then, the blood in my veins ran to ice.

"Fuckin' hell,"

"Exactly."

CHAPTER TWO

Bobby Mahoney has meetings in lots of different places. He has to; in the back rooms of the pubs he owns, or the spa he has a stake in, on his boat, in the offices of friendly businesses, like his lawyers for example or down at the Cauldron, the first club he had before he went on to control an empire. It's safer that way and makes it hard for the local plod or SOCA to get anything on tape. We sweep every location twice a week obviously, we're no mugs and Bobby Mahoney isn't some John Gotti figure, shooting his mouth off all over Tyneside until they get enough to put him away for life. He doesn't piss about does Bobby and it's part of my job to make sure he never takes chances.

I'm not too surprised when Finney tells me we are meeting at the Cauldron. It's a sort of home from home for Bobby and I suspect he views it sentimentally, like some huge retailer who returns to his first corner shop every now and then to recall the good old days when he had nothing but naked ambition. Well, that and, in Bobby's case, the proceeds from the robbery of an armoured car, his fledgling crew turned over back in 1973. They stormed in with stocking masks over their faces and sawn-off shotguns, which they brandished under the noses of the unarmed security guards. Those guys were paid a pittance and they were hardly going to act the hero.

That's how you got started in those days. You'd take out a wages van to secure the funds to start you off. It was the first step on the ladder. Nowadays if we need to be more liquid we talk to venture capitalists. It's a funny old world.

No one but a complete numpty would take out a security van these days. There's nothing like as much cash about for one thing, everybody gets their salary through BACS transfer and the wage packet stuffed with tenners is a distant memory. Police intelligence is a lot sharper as well, gangs get spotted early, their members put under round-the-clock surveillance and, if they do make a move they get taken out by police marksmen with itchy trigger fingers, who all think they're Al Pacino in 'Heat'.

We watched one botched, armed robbery unfolding on Sky News the other day, at least the aftermath of it. The cops weren't content with arresting the dumb shits, who hadn't realised things had changed since the days of Regan and Carter and a gruff shout of

'you're nicked son'. As soon as they pulled a hand gun on the security guard they were dropped, calm as you like, by snipers they never even saw, leaving passers by to catch images of their bodies on hand-held, mobile phone-cameras, so they could sell the grainy footage to the 24-hour news channels. It seems we are all journalists these days. Everybody knows you can get a few bob for footage of blood on the walls of your local building society.

Bobby watched it all with interest before pronouncing, "Aye, things have definitely changed since my day," before taking a sip of his whiskey and adding, "'course we weren't fucking amateurs."

Back in Bobby's younger day, the proceeds from one or two vans would set you up with a controlling stake in a club and enough readies to invest in slot machines, stolen booze or fags and good old fashioned, honest-to-goodness whoring. As Bobby told me, "Men have needed women since time began but it's still illegal thank god and long may that continue, or they'd be offering you one when you went for your groceries at Tesco's," and he mimicked the sing-song voice of some simple minded check-out girl, "'That's ninety quid sir. Oh, got your loyalty card have you? I see you've enough points on there for one fuck, two blow jobs and a tit-wank. Would you like them now while the wife gets your petrol?'" and he'd laughed, "do you think they wouldn't do it if they could? They sell everything from TVs to insurance and you can buy a vibrator on every high street these days. Where would we be if they really let retailers sell sex, eh? I've made more money out of massage than I have out of armed robbery. It just takes a bit longer, one hand job at a time."

We were back in the city way too soon. It was the start of another weekend and people were out and about, forgetting their cares for a few hours in the pubs and clubs of the Bigg Market and the Quayside; dozens of lasses done up to the nines and lairy lads out on the prowl looking for their one-night-Juliet. The bridges on the Quayside were all lit up, so the evening's revellers could tell which direction they were staggering.

I'd been thinking about Bobby's violent start in life for a reason. He was still a hard bastard. If he felt aggrieved, he was not afraid to use some of that famous ruthlessness on

any man, even one of his trusted lieutenants. I was worrying quite a lot about that in fact because this time the trusted lieutenant was me. I am not as used to violence as the other guys in his crew. They've all been around a lot longer and they've had to scrap their way into his outfit. They all got their hands dirty at one point or another but me? I'm a lot younger and I'm strictly white collar, an ideas man. I have made Bobby Mahoney a lot of money over the years and he always made sure I got my slice but none of that matters now. The Drop didn't happen and frankly, I admit it, I am shitting myself.

"Not a fucking word to Bobby, you hear me?" cautioned Finney, "no matter what he says."

"I said, didn't I?"

We parked outside the dirty, red-brick, windowless façade of the Cauldron, a stone's throw from China Town and a goal kick from St James Park. It was Friday night, just after traditional pub kicking-out time and, even with extended hours; the punters seemed to be operating on an inner alarm clock because they were already massing outside to get into the Cauldron. It's not our coolest spot but it's cheap and has a pretty loyal following. They were queuing two or three deep; teenage girls dressed in skirts so tiny they looked like they were fashioned from their granddad's hankies. Their tight shirts were buttoned or tied just far enough up the middle to leave an acre of bare, white-fleshed cleavage spilling out over the fabric. Christ, I thought, they must be freezing. Then I realised how old that made me sound. The young don't notice the cold. I remembered my poor, late ma saying the same thing to me every time I left the house without a coat on. "You'll catch your death one day, you will."

Finney chucked the keys at one of the bouncers and he moved the car off the double yellows. The other one hastily unclipped the red, velvet rope that was meant to give the old place a veneer of class and stepped back out of our way to admit us. We walked passed the lass who took the money, Julie I think her name was, and she smiled at me. I found myself wondering if she would testify if I didn't make it out of the building alive. Would she fuck.

The thought kept going round and round in my mind; the Drop didn't happen so, right now, I was about as popular in Newcastle as Dennis Wise. I was already wishing I was on the return flight back to Thailand.

We climbed a steep flight of stairs covered in sticky, lager-encrusted, maroon carpet and I got a brief glimpse of the dance floor ahead of me with its low ceiling and eighties style smoke machine, billowing till the place looked like it was on fire. The club was slowly filling up with pissed-up, randy young blokes and bored looking but equally drunk lasses. They were gyrating to Rhianna's 'Disturbia'. For some reason it sounded jarring and ominous, the bass thumping at probably the same rate as my heart, but I knew that was just my overwrought mind fucking with me.

I caught the eye of one girl in particular. I don't know why she stood out but she looked desolate. She was sitting on her own and had more than likely just realised her friend wasn't coming back for her, probably getting her tits felt in the taxi rank outside. She'd soon be on her way back to some apprentice sparky's flat because he'd told her he played for Newcastle reserves. I looked into her sad, doleful, hurt face and I wanted to tell her 'pet, you think you've got problems?'

It was two more flights to the inner sanctum and when I got there Bobby was sitting behind his big, solid oak desk, waiting for me. There were a couple of senior members of the firm there with him; Jerry Lemon, as usual in a T shirt, all bare arms and prison tats, filled with so much pent up aggression I was always expecting him to have a heart attack at any moment. Standing next to him was Mickey Hunter looking uncomfortable in a supposedly smart jacket with a tie strung so loosely round his neck you could see the top button of his shirt. I wanted to march up to the big fella and pull it taut so he didn't look like such a scruff. He obviously felt obliged to dress smart in Bobby's nightclub but it just didn't suit him. He ended up looking like a manual worker forced by his missus to wear a good suit at his niece's wedding. You could tell he couldn't wait to get out of it.

Even our bent accountant Alex Northam was there, in a tweed suit that was far too old for him. He was one of those middle aged guys who can't wait to get old so they can tell everybody how far they go back.

I'd known these guys for a long while but they all avoided my gaze now. I wondered if any of them had put in a good word for me or if they couldn't wait to dance all over my grave. No honour among thieves.

While not quite as violently psychotic as Finney, Bobby Mahoney was still a man to be reckoned with, even in his late fifties. He might have had the grey hair and lined face of a man who might naturally be contemplating retirement but you could still put him in a room full of twenty year olds and I'd bet he'd be the only one left standing at the end.

He didn't look pleased to see me.

"Alright Bobby?" I said, knowing that he wasn't.

"Where the fuck have you been?" the big booming voice silenced every one else immediately. It was so sharp it made Northam twitch in alarm.

"Thailand." I told him as defiantly as I could manage. He knew where I'd been and, rightly or wrongly, since I'd done nothing wrong I was gambling that my best form of defence was a little bit of defiance, mixed with a healthy dose of bemusement, "why?"

Bobby climbed to his feet and came out from behind his desk. Jerry Lemon and Mickey Hunter parted like the Red Sea so he could get at me. My mouth was dry and I didn't like the way his enormous fists were balled up like he was just about to use them on me. I was preparing myself for a bad beating.

"What happened to the Drop?" he asked me outright.

And this is where it got difficult for me, because I wasn't supposed to know it hadn't happened but Finney knew that I knew and he was standing there with me, so I had to be convincing. If I started looking shifty because I was denying all knowledge of what had happened to the Drop then Bobby might start to wonder why and draw the wrong, dangerous conclusion; dangerous for me at any rate.

"I don't know, I was away. I've been on holiday remember," Then I acted like it was just sinking in, "what do you mean what happened to it?"

"You were responsible for the Drop!" the volume rose to a dangerous level. He crossed the floor towards me and the others started looking elsewhere; their shoes, the

framed prints of half-naked Pirelli calendar girls on the walls, anywhere but at me, "don't take me for a cunt Davey," he hissed at me when he was right up close.

The situation was serious enough for me to immediately stop acting defiant. "Yeah, I know Bobby, but I was on holiday so Geordie Cartwright said he'd do it," I said this quietly, hoping to calm the big man down, "just like he always does when I'm on holiday. He said he'd clear it with you and he'd take Maggot down there with him."

He walked right up close and stopped just in front of my face, so he could take a long look at me to see if I was lying. They say Bobby Mahoney can smell a lie. "Well He didn't fucking clear it with me and he didn't take Maggot with him." He was up so close to me I could smell the stale tobacco on his breath.

"You've spoken to Maggot have you?" I asked.

"Oh yeah," said Finney wryly, "we spoke to him alright," and by his tone I realised they must have put the fear of god into the poor bastard to make sure he was telling the truth. Finney was noted for the biblical nature of his persuasive powers, his trademark weapon of choice being a nail gun. He had a fondness for putting nails through people's hands, leaving them stuck to their kitchen tables, garage doors and, in one memorable case, the skull of a deceased accomplice.

"You didn't ring me," I offered, surprised that this was not the first thing he thought of. I didn't have a fancy mobile with an international connection but I wasn't hard to trace.

"We phoned the hotel you gave us," said Jerry Lemon, "they said you weren't staying there,"

"That's bullshit," I said, "I was there. I've been on the same fucking resort for ten days. Laura brought back half the gift shop. Course I was fucking there." And then a thought suddenly struck me.

Laura.

Laura made the booking.

Oh Christ.

"So, what's happened then?" I asked, looking to deflect them from the subject of my strange absence from the hotel register and, for a second, I thought Bobby was going to belt me and when Bobby Mahoney starts belting people he doesn't stop. Believe me,

I've seen it. It takes Finney and all his mates to drag Bobby off once he's started and by then it's usually too late.

"Nothing happened!" he snarled, "the Drop certainly didn't happen and Cartwright's disappeared."

"Shit!"

"Yeah, shit's the word. A whole heap of shit and we are all in it, particularly you. The first I hear about it is when I get a call to tell me the Drop's late. The Drop's never late so I know something's wrong straight away and I look into it sharpish? Turns out nobody can find Cartwright and nobody can find the money. Only thing anyone knows is it didn't fucking get there. So my question, once again, is where the fuck have you been?"

I am bright enough to realise that he is not talking literally. I know if I even say the words 'holiday' or 'Thailand' again I am liable to get a beating that would not entirely be undeserved. "I'm sorry Bobby, I really am. I fucked up," he doesn't seem to know how to react to that level of honesty. He's clearly not used to it, "I should have made sure the Drop was in safer hands than Cartwright so you had nothing to worry about."

"I'm not worried about Cartwright. I've know him for years and he's fucked either way son. It looks like someone's killed him and taken my money. That's my guess and, if it's not that, it means he's so stupid he's stolen it himself, and *I'll* bloody kill him. Don't worry about Cartwright, worry about yourself because the Drop is your responsibility. I thought I'd made that pretty clear. Now you get out there and you find Cartwright or you find his body. I want to know what happened to him. I want to know who's behind this and I want my fucking money back then I am going to let Finney cut whoever's responsible into tiny pieces while they are still breathing. You have got two days to sort this mess out. I want my cash back on this desk on Monday morning. Nobody takes from me, nobody, you know that!"

Christ, my heart sank on hearing that. I already knew my chances of finding Cartwright, or his rotting carcass, and Bobby's money by Monday were slim to none but I was definitely not going to tell Bobby Mahoney that right now. If I did, I reckoned he would have killed me, so I took the path of least resistance and I bought myself some time.

"Yeah Bobby I know that. Leave it with me. I'm on it."

"Go on then," he said and I didn't wait to be told twice, "and take Finney with you."

Finney lumbered after me, which I could have done without. I needed some time to think. Some time on my own but now I'd got Finney with me I was going to have to start making enquiries, darting round the city on a Friday night like a lunatic. Jesus, where would I even begin?

"Where too?" asked Finney as soon as we'd left the room. I was starting to get the funny feeling he was secretly enjoying this. The 'whiz kid', as he used to refer to me when I first joined the team, had been firmly put in his place and was clearly shitting himself at the prospect of a good kicking or worse. I had no idea 'where to'.

"Simple," I said with as much nonchalance as I could muster under the circumstances, "known associates," he frowned at me like his simple brain couldn't quite digest the concept, "his nearest and dearest. We quiz them all. Let's get the car," I was keen to halt his questions about my plans. I didn't have any.