

STEPHEN MORRIS AND RALF LITTLE

THE GOLDEN GENERATION

A NOVEL BY STEPHEN MORRIS AND RALF LITTLE

PART THREE

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DEATH OF A DISCO DANCER

23 JUNE 2006, 18.43

“It is about time you paid your way, Jack. I have a job for you.” Lothar said.

“About time.” Stefan smiled, “This kid has had enough free lunches.”

“What is it?”

“I need you to hand-deliver a letter for me,” Lothar informed Jack.

“Why? You’ve got two PAs and there are about sixty thousand people working in the post room at the bank.”

“This is different.” Lothar said.

“This is special.” added Stefan instantaneously

Jack looked from one brother to the other.

“Is it illegal?”

“Not strictly.”

Lothar’s tone was matter-of-fact, though what *was* clear was that it was most definitely illegal.

“Guys, I’m really grateful for the time we’ve spent together. You’re great mates, but I really can’t get involved in anything illegal.”

“Why not?”

“Well, erm... because it’s, well, it’s illegal.”

“So?”

“Well... er...” Jack floundered. It was strange, now that he had to articulate his reluctance to do delve into the criminal world, he found himself woefully ill equipped to

do so. Where did you begin? Obviously it was, well, just, *wrong* - but that would be an embarrassingly weak argument in the face of the brothers' blank stares. Struggling, sinking, he reached for anything solid to stabilise him in the sea of ill reasoned debate, and gratefully clamped his arms around an idea that had served him well throughout his life.

"My parents. I just couldn't do anything that would..."

"What about the high class whores, Jack? There were many of those and I seem to remember you fucking the lot of them. I don't think you have exactly been acting like the ideal son as it is."

"But that's different," Jack protested, albeit feebly.

"Why? Because you enjoyed it? Stop being weak, Jack," Lothar commanded. "This is no more illegal than those filthy tarts you have been screwing, and it too is something you will enjoy. It is *not* serious."

"Well, what then?"

Jack wanted out. But how could he? The Beatles sang "The Best Things in Life are Free" in their song *Money* but Lothar was starting to make it clear that the last few months had not been free at all.

"I need you to deliver a letter to a guy. It is just a tip. A stock tip. It is nothing serious. It goes on all the time. If you were caught, they would let you go."

Jack went white. Not as in a figure of speech, but absolutely, genuinely, bloodless, blanket of snow, ghostly, mountain of cocaine, white.

"Nobody gets done for insider trading in Britain. It does not happen, Jack."

Jack was desperate.

“But what about the “NatWest Three?” What if the United States authorities get me? I’ll be in Guantanamo by lunchtime tomorrow.”

“Don’t be stupid, Jack.”

Lothar’s words were not said to reassure Jack. Like everything else in this conversation, it was a command. Jack had no chips left to bargain with. He’d cashed them in during that first night of debauchery with the brothers.

“The company has nothing to do with America. The transaction will not pass through America and there is no U.S. connection at all.”

“It goes on all the time, Jack,” interjected Stefan. “How do you think we make the money we do? We are certainly smart, yes. But we are not that smart. We always know what is going to happen. Idiots like you are buying shares, pissing in the wind, trying to gauge what may happen, guess what will happen. But people like us are playing with dice that are loaded, and you have not got a hope. By the time you have made the decision to invest, we are already in the Bahamas clinking glasses at the fortune we’ve made from the sale.”

“But what if I get caught?”

“You will not,” Stefan said.

Jack knew the final nail was in position, the hammer poised to drive it firmly into his coffin.

“And you *will* do it.”

Buried alive, Jack simply looked downwards, his eyes fixed on the wooden flooring. Stefan and Lothar stood and placed their brandy glasses on the glass coffee table. They slowly approached Jack; each taking a path at opposite sides of the table until they

flanked him, both physically, and psychologically. Jack had been outmanoeuvred, he knew now, but it too late. As a final insulting gesture of superiority, both brothers patted Jack's head, but couldn't see his expression as he resolutely faced the floor. He knew this was dangerous, but Jack just hoped that his over active imagination was running away with itself as usual, and it wasn't *that* dangerous.

DESTINY CALLING

24 JUNE 2006, 14.11

Jack drove quickly down High Holborn and turned sharply to the right. The back end of the Ferrari swung out and Jack almost lost control. He'd had a few admiring glances from the long-legged office girls making their way to the tube, but had not paid them any attention. It was the first time he'd driven a Ferrari, but he was far from enjoying it. All he could think about was the crime he was about to commit. He was inching closer and closer to it with every gear change and soft press of the accelerator pedal.

Lothar and Stefan had assured him he wouldn't be captured by any CCTV cameras so even if anybody showed an interest - which they apparently wouldn't - there would be no evidence.

Jack had nodded, knowing full well this was manifestly untrue. He stuck by the old adage: *you're only six feet from a rat in London*. As far as he was concerned, since the proliferation of *Big Brother* measures implemented by the Met, you are only six inches from a CCTV camera. We're all *Stars of CCTV*, and Jack was about to play the leading role of an insider trader. It was not the part he felt he'd been born to play.

Jack parked the car directly outside the hotel, and eased out of the door nervously. He moved his shades from the top of his head back to the bridge of his nose, threw his suit jacket over his shoulder, and walked into the hotel. He was supposed to look like a million dollars, but he felt a million lire.

Jack looked around the entire lobby. The whole scene felt surreal, an anti-climax even. People milled around going about their business. The normality of the scene completely contrasted to the magnitude of the crime he was about to commit. By rights, Jack felt there ought to be a pumping soundtrack playing in the background to mimic his heartbeat or to let the audience know that the exciting part of the movie was about to kick in. Somewhat disappointingly, it was just like any other day. But then again, Jack realised, it always was.

In the hundreds of times he'd travelled on the tube, he'd probably shared a carriage with a woman who had just been diagnosed with cancer; a couple who had just discovered they can never have children; a 13-year-old couple who had just realised they are about to be parents and a man who had just witnessed his bride-to-be cheating on him - weighing up whether to call a lawyer, or a hit man. All of those journeys, totally insignificant to Jack, would never, ever be forgotten by other passengers. Jack was an extra in the movies of their lives, a background artiste that had suddenly found himself thrust into the spotlight of his own action film, and finding himself wishing he'd had a script.

Jack scuttled furtively to the bar. He didn't mean to move any quicker than usual, but he couldn't shake the feeling he was being watched. It was nerves more than anything. He ordered a beer as instructed by Lothar. Jack wasn't about to start showing initiative.

If this gig shaped up resembling a certain green fruit, then he wanted to be able to say he had followed orders to the letter.

A woman was at the bar sipping a Bellini. She wore a black cocktail dress and she was alone. A black high-heeled Manolo dangled from a tanned right foot that seemed a lifetime away from her waist. As she re-crossed her legs, Jack caught her eye and she flashed him a mock embarrassed smile. She was a hooker. Expensive too. A few weeks ago he realised he would not have known that.

Jack's nerves were getting the better of him. He was jittery and trying so hard to be inconspicuous he might as well have had a neon sign above his head with the word 'criminal' proudly emblazoned across it. He picked up a copy of *USA Today* resting on the bar. Incredibly, even that paper was leading with a story on the WAGs in Baden-Baden - now so tacky they had named it twice.

Having calmed slightly, Jack spluttered his iced tap water all down the front of his suit when he saw a man walk into the bar that fitted the description Lothar had drummed into him. New York Yankees cap – check, Ralph Lauren blue and white striped t-shirt – check, cream tailored shorts – check. He locked eyes with Jack immediately. His fixed, serious stare sat uneasily with the remainder of his forced jocular face, almost like two halves of different faces hashed together. For a moment, Jack thought he resembled Tony Blair in the early days of his leadership; the everyday Joe with a plastered on perma-smile that forced the attention away from eyes burning brightly with middle-class ambition.

“Hi Mark.” The guy was American. His greeting was addressed at Jack who had adopted a pseudonym.

“Yeah, hi. Good to meet you Chip.”

Jack didn't know whether that was his real name or not, though having met him, he hoped so. What name better fits the All American Man than Chip? It was perfectly suited to his ridiculous attire. This guy's clothing combined with his name couldn't have placed his background anywhere other than America – it would have only been marginally more obvious if he'd been wrapped in a stars and stripes flag.

It was the ideal name for going to a ball game, having a poker night with the guys, or just heading down to the hardware store. In a pick-up truck. The guy from *Home Improvement* should have named his alter-ego Chip. It would have been much more appropriate, and may have saved him from the *Santa Clause* bloodbath.

“So, what about the British?”

“Erm. What?”

Jack was still a slave to his nerves but this question would have thrown him in any event. Was it a discussion jumping-off point? Your *starter for ten* Jack. He thought about saying, “Well Chip, the British have a strong sense of identity, but since devolution many worry that that the Union Jack is being tossed aside and more parochial bias prevails.”

“In the World Cup,” Chip answered.

“Oh, the English football team.”

Chip nodded, but he was clearly uninterested in the distinction. Despite his shot nerves and gut wrenching fear of arrest, Jack still managed to find himself infuriated at the man's casual ignorance.

“We compete as Great Britain in the Olympics, but separately in football,” Jack educated him.

“What? No way. That’s ridiculous, man. You can just pick and choose your strongest teams depending on the event huh? So, in the next Olympics, we’ll have Canada and all of South America as part of our team. They’re attached to us, so they’re the same as those countries are to you, right? So is there a Scotch team as well?”

Jack nodded.

“No fuckin’ way man!” Chip gave a derisive little chuckle at the sheer stupidity of the English, or Great British, psyche. Jack had no argument in reply, and even less stomach for an argument about sport at this point. He wished he hadn’t gotten involved.

“I guess so. I’m not that bothered really, but England have been awful so far. I think we might win it though. We’re bound to get better.”

“Bullshit. You guys suck.”

Chip had clearly aced Annoying American 101.

“Yeah, right mate. Anyway, I’ve got that card for you. Make sure to tell Aunt Lesley to have a great birthday.”

Jack was eager to cut the conversation short and leave. He handed Chip a white envelope.

“Will do, Mark,” Chip answered loudly.

Quietly now, so quietly Jack could barely hear, Chip changed tack.

“So how long have you been a part of the organisation?”

“Not very long,” answered Jack, unsure what Chip was talking about and keen to follow Stefan’s instructions to give nothing away about himself.

“Good guys,” stated Chip firmly.

“Yes, good guys,” responded Jack, unsure whether he was lying to Chip, lying to himself, or even if he was lying at all.

“Do you want another brewski, Mark?” asked Chip, leaning forward, flashing the corner of his black Amex at the barmaid. The girl in the cocktail dress eyed the card immediately, predator like. It didn’t slip by Chip.

“Ah, I see my date has arrived,” Chip commented to Jack, whilst nodding at a woman whom he had clearly never seen before in his life.

“No, thank you, Chip. I must leave. I’ve got an appointment to keep.”

This was the parting line Lothar had told him to use. Jack was adhering to the script, but he was robotic, his acting skills abandoned - more John Barnes than Gary Lineker

“Well, good to meet you, buddy. I’m sure we’ll meet again.”

Jack shook his hand and he was barely out of the door when he saw Chip approach the female at the bar. She brushed her hair slowly from her eyes and smiled as though Chip was the most wonderful creature to have ever entered her universe. Jack knew he wasn’t the only person treading the boards in the bar that afternoon.

BROTHERS IN ARMS

24 JUNE 2006, 16:58

“So how did it go?” Stefan immediately quizzed Jack as he stepped through the doorway of the flat. Stefan usually made Jack wait an annoyingly lengthy age before he opened the door, but this time, he was already standing in the entrance of the flat.

“Fine. No problems at all. Chip’s a bit of a knob though,” Jack said absent-mindedly. Out of nowhere, Jack felt the harsh coldness of the wall against his back and Stefan’s huge hands around his throat. The combination of the hypnotic tensing and untensing of Stefan’s forearm and the pressure on his windpipe made Jack feel light-headed. Stefan spoke quietly, almost inaudibly, in Jack’s ear.

“Don’t ever speak that way about one of my friends, Jack. Ever. Do you understand?”

Jack nodded as much as he could.

“Say it. Say you understand.”

Feeling dizzy, Jack could feel panic swelling inside him, but was just about able to squeeze out an answer.

“I... I... unr..stn”

“Chip has done many, many good and brave deeds for us. Respect him, Jack. Respect him or be gone.”

Stefan loosened his grip and pushed Jack to one side. Jack fell to the floor. He was struggling for air, grasping for breath, his own lungs traitorously failing to provide him with what he needed.

“Fucking hell Stef,” he panted, finally managing a deep hit from the air. “It was only a throwaway comment.”

“You should be more careful what you throw away. The same kind of loyalty that I am showing Chip is the same loyalty that Lothar and I will always show you. We showed it to you with that Toni slut, and again, again. Remember that Jack. It is the sort of unbending loyalty that we give, and the loyalty that we expect to receive. From you.”

Stefan turned on his heels and stalked through to the lounge, pausing only to straighten a painting on his way in. It had looked perfectly level to Jack, but he couldn't judge anything at the moment. He decided it was his cue to leave - everything was crooked, warped and fucked up. Everything was out of control.

I WANNA BE ADORED

24 JUNE 2006, 17:00

The girl had remarkably good teeth. She was chatting meaningless, irrelevant small talk, word after pointless word, and Chip was not listening. After all, he knew she was only plying her trade, he'd heard the high class whore patter a thousand times before. Keeping up the pretence of mutual attraction was part of the service.

He watched her mouth move as if in slow motion; her full lips occasionally sticking together, before being freed by the moisture from her tongue. And her teeth. They were truly incredible. She really did have beautiful teeth. Julia Roberts-like, Chip decided, drawing on his limited knowledge of movies but happily finding a perfect comparison.

Yes, Julia Roberts was right. He'd write that in his report this evening. He'd been slipping of late. The last two hookers he'd bedded were not recorded, and he was not happy with himself. He often preferred to masturbate whilst reading his detailed reports of past encounters than actually procuring new whores, particularly his last few. At least that way he didn't have to listen to the inane waffle currently polluting the air in the bar.

As she continued to talk, Chip removed the envelope Jack had given him from his pocket. He opened it and read it to himself: Mr. Roger Boateng, 46 Portland Place, 20:48.

Chip nodded to himself and put the piece of paper back into the envelope, and back into his pocket.

The girl was still going on about what she planned to do with her life after escorting. Chip cut her off mid-sentence.

“Hey sweetheart. Shut the fuck up. Come with me.”

Chip took her hand and led her towards the hotel reception to book a room.

THE BOY WITH THE THORN IN HIS SIDE

24 JUNE 2006, 17:46

Jack had a mini-epiphany on his journey home. He realised things were far from all they cracked up to be. The fact was, Stefan and Lothar did not act like good people, and Jack knew when he was with them, he didn't either. For someone who took pride in his ability to run self audits and generally make good decisions, admitting this to himself had been quite a shock. Suddenly, he wasn't the good person he had always known himself to be? Fuck. How did that happen?

The problem was he always had such a great time. They had the lot: flash cash, flash cars and flash girls. Jack had always been desirous of the very life he'd lived in the past few weeks. Who hadn't? He'd moaned for years about those pretty girls on the arms of rich blokes that they never would have looked twice at under ordinary circumstances.

But these guys were blessed with extraordinary circumstances and had the wallets to satisfy every item on a pretty gold digger's agenda.

Jack now understood the motives of these girls. Christ, in certain respects, he was almost one of them. Perhaps he didn't repay his debts with sex and status, but with dirty little jobs like today's errand. No such thing as a free lunch? Jack had dined on a free eighteen course banquet with servants, a butler and more fiddly cutlery that he could shake a diamond encrusted stick at. Was he really in their pockets that much? And if he was indebted to them – at what price, and how did they intend to collect?

He was not happy with the path his thoughts were taking him down. Loyalty above all - Stefan had made that quite clear. These thoughts weren't very loyal, and actually, they had taken him under their wing, hadn't they? Who could deny that in the few short weeks since meeting the Great Danes his life was infinitely better than it had been? More fulfilling, more finesse, more... fun.

He decided to ignore his epiphany. Who was he to question the generosity of two successful individuals? Yes they were a bit... direct, sometimes... but that was part of what had made them so successful in their lives. There was no doubt that, from time to time they were a bit bullish, sometimes even embarrassing, and Stefan's behaviour back at the flat was disgraceful... but then again, Stef was taking him to Marbella. That was going to be a great weekend! Never mind the little inner voice begging for attention, never mind the disapproving looks of his parents – what they didn't know wouldn't hurt them, eh? It didn't matter how much his conscience jumped up and down, screamed and shouted, threatened and cajoled, it would fall on deaf ears.

Feeling that some clarity would help, Jack decided he needed a second opinion from someone he could trust. He decided to sound out Mark. He was suffering a bit of a crisis and needed reassurance – Mark would agree that the brothers were good lads, and he could finally escape that annoying knot in his stomach that he suspected was repressed anxiety.

He only got as far as laying out the *prima facie* case against Stefan and Lothar when Mark interjected with the response he didn't want to hear.

“You can't see them again. They have to be criminals of some sort or other. Where else do they get all of their cash from?”

Jack had wanted a “yes man”, not reasonable opinions, and it was pissing him off. Who the fuck was Mark to question his lifestyle anyway?

“Can I remind you that sucking a man's cock is not exactly the action of a law-abiding citizen?”

“That was necessity, dickhead. And thanks for that. Good to see you refrain from the easy insult though. I think you have to give them a wide berth, pal. They sound dodgy to me. Come out with us tonight instead,” said Mark, softening a little. “No deal, no deal,” he suddenly screamed.

“I'm not offering you a deal, you tool,” Jack shouted back.

“I'm screaming at that idiotic girl on the TV. They never, ever, look at the odds against them and play the percentages, do they?”

“I wouldn't know, Mark. I work for a living. Somebody has to pay for this place. What happened to your job?”

“I’m off sick. I had a hangover this morning. I was at the bar till late last night. You should have seen Suzy. She’d been sunbathing in Hyde Park all day. She turned up with just a bikini and a sarong on. The guys’ reactions in there was a treat. It was like a full fridge being shown to a member of *The Babysitter’s Club*.”

“Great metaphor, save that one for Parky” Jack snapped. “She is fit though, but a bit haughty. I tried to pull her and she was having none of it,” he continued with feigned nonchalance.

“So I hear,” Mark responded, suppressing a smirk.

Jack suddenly felt very defensive. He’d obviously been the subject of much discussion and scrutiny at the bar. It made him livid to think that they assumed they had a right to say anything about him – the only one amongst them who had any kind of ambition, any sway in this whole city. How dare they?

“What’s that supposed to mean? Eh? Has she been fucking talking about me? What have you been saying too? Fuck her anyway, she was prick teasing me, little slag. She wanted me to.”

Mark laughed and jumped up, hands raised in a conciliatory gesture so as to stem Jack’s ongoing tirade.

“Woah, woah!” He smiled, then in an awful cod Scouse accent began, “Calm down, calm down.” Mark was moving his arms about woodenly and trying not to laugh.

It wasn’t comedy gold, but it had the desired effect. Jack realised he was ranting and sounding frankly unpleasant, and not for the first time found that Mark had the ability to restore him to his usual self. He smiled; he’d missed Mark’s banter, even the weaker moments of it.

“Top gag, Mark. Not exactly *Mr. Light Entertainment 2006*, are you? That gag is only about 15 years old and wasn’t funny in the first place.”

“Ha! Fair enough mate. It just makes me laugh when blokes call girls prick teases. If I were a pretty girl...”

“You were for a while for one of your punters,” Jack laughed.

“Oh, so lame scouse jokes are beyond the pale, but gags about my desperate measures to pay for a meal and a roof over my head are fair game?” retorted Mark, trying once again to map out the ground rules of their odd friendship.

“Anyway, as I was saying”, Mark continued. “I’m surprised pretty girls ever open their mouths. It’s no wonder so many good-looking birds are called boring; the moment they show a bit of animation to a bloke, his misplaced arrogance kicks in and he thinks he’s in. When she sets him straight, telling him she was just being friendly, he gets angry, and furiously calls her a prick tease. They can’t win. Poor, beautiful Imogen.”

“What are you talking about?” Jack exclaimed.

“*Big Brother*, mate,” educated Mark.

“Sorry Mark. I’ve got a life.”

That Jack could make that statement and mean it at least proved he had progressed from those times he’d spent fixating on a group of people lying prostrate in a house.

“That reminds me though. Stef cracked on to one of the girls from that show the other night. That Grace one. She completely blew him out. It was pretty funny - a bit of his own medicine.”

“I’m glad to hear it. Anyway, are you coming with us tonight or not?”

“Not,” Jack replied, allowing the last vestiges of his unjustified anger to coalesce into one final mock childish retort.

Mark, knowing his friend, simply smiled back.

“No, I’m only messing. I might. I was supposed to be taking a bird from the office out, but I might knock it on the head.”

“Another one?” cried Mark.

“Yes, I’ve got them practically queuing up. Being friends with Stef and Loth is the secret to my success with women in London. It’s a better ticket to the top than being Kate Moss’s latest bloke. I may even take up smoking crack.”

“And you took the piss out of my metaphors! Come on mate, it’ll be good tonight. We’re having a few at the bar and then going out in Soho.”

“Go on then, yeah. What have the change-the-world brigade been up to of late? The revolution won’t be televised because not even Channel 5 would be stupid enough to buy it.”

“You know it’s a long process. It’ll take years. You can’t just break into politics, just like that.”

“Now is as good a time as any. People are interested all of a sudden. Remember that Sam bloke Sal said he met? He had some sort of plot to take advantage of an apathetic electorate. Where the fuck do they meet these people anyway?”

Mark shrugged and looked about to answer, but Jack’s question had been rhetorical and he pressed on.

“That Sam guy is fucked now, isn’t he? Everybody is all over politics. Everybody’s talking about Prescott.”

“But that’s the point, Jack. People are talking about Prescott allegedly ironing that woman out. Though there doesn’t seem too much *allegedly* about it. It’s just sex and scandal. It’s the same as the *Big Brother* house. Ten times worse actually. There’s no actual action in there. But because it’s on the political pages, it’s supposed to be more high-brow. People still aren’t interested in the substance. They’ll only show an interest when someone gets caught up in a sleaze scandal. Things haven’t changed mate.”

“Maybe not, but I don’t see Phil, Sal and that lot changing anything. Bless ‘em for trying and fair play if they do I guess.” Jack decided to change direction. If they were to go out this evening, this wasn’t the sort of conversation he saw getting him up for it. “Anyways Tony, shall we get some bottles in to get us in the mood?”

“Sounds good, Gary. And Gary and Tony is much better than Terry and June. Especially when you kept saying I was June.”

LAST OF THE SMALL TOWN PLAYBOYS

24 JUNE 2006, 22:07

“Have you got guest list, Phil?” Sal shouted further down the queue to Phil.

“Yes, I sorted it on the website. I put my name down plus six so we should be fine. We have to be in there before ten-thirty though and it’s fifteen quid each.”

“Wow, I feel just like Vincent Chase,” mocked Jack.

Phil didn’t watch *Entourage* so didn’t get the reference, but he knew the implication. His reply was not jocular. “Oh, sorry, Jack. Maybe you should call your two cock-sucker friends, Goose and Maverick. No doubt we’ll get the Henry Hill - Copacabana treatment then.”

Jack hadn’t meant his comment to sound the way it did. That was the problem when people misconstrued you; everything you said was twisted into a negative no matter how far from the mark it was. Jack hadn’t wanted to sound big time. He hadn’t even intended to sound medium-time.

“Sorry pal. That wasn’t my point. I wasn’t having a go at you. It’s the club I was moaning about. They say you’re on a guest list and yet you still have to be in the bar before the bar staff or they charge you a week’s wage as an entrance fee. I can only imagine how they treat those who aren’t on the guest list.”

Phil smiled at Jack. He had always believed in the power of ‘sorry’. After all, what was the human experience if not a series of interactions and encounters? And it was inevitable that some of thee wouldn’t run smoothly. But when someone had the balls to genuinely hold up their hands and apologise, instead of doing that stubborn refusal to lose

face that some people did, well, that was the mark of integrity as far as Phil was concerned. Yes, Jack was a good guy. After all, Phil had introduced him to the group, and despite his private reservations about the company Jack was keeping of late, he felt sure that Jack would be a valuable addition to their plans, and more importantly, a good friend.

Jack had noticed Phil staring at him with a distant half smile, but didn't have time to comment as his attention was drawn to the figure currently sashaying towards them.

"Hiya Suz," greeted Sal, as she arrived and joined the line.

She air kissed every member of the group. Jack never quite knew how to react correctly to these moments and there was an awkward meeting of noses as she went to kiss his left cheek, and then a pause as he failed to offer his right cheek quickly enough. It was an unmitigated disaster.

The last time he'd seen Suzy, he had not just crashed and burned, but fire crews were only now managing to extinguish the residual spluttering flames while investigators struggled to find the black box. The awkwardness of their first meeting after that night was only intensified by this excruciatingly embarrassing double kiss debacle.

Suzy walked on ahead while Jack stayed behind to regroup, using the opportunity to speak to Sal about the Italy against USA game as handy cover for his discomfort.

Suzy looked truly incredible. Jack wasn't sure whether his perception of her had been artificially enhanced because of her total lack of interest in him. She'd arrived at the club straight from work wearing a trouser suit and a trilby hat. She looked ravishing, stunning, - spectacular.

Her red shirt was an ingenious “carrot and stick” sort of a garment. It was revealing enough to draw a man in, but slapped him on the back of the head if he dared to try to sneak more than a peek.

Jack failed to refrain from worshipping her chest. She was a triumph of overt yet modest sexiness. Her outfit infinitely more alluring than all the scantily clad gaggle of girls by the bar screaming for a second’s attention.

“Are you getting them in, Jack?” Mark asked as Jack lurked near the bar.

“Oh yeah. Okay. Will do,” Jack replied, rather begrudgingly.

He hadn’t bought a beer for that long he found it quite unpleasant that he should have to pay for a round. Jack bought six bottles of Asahi and sat down at a table with the others. Mark and Suzy were locked in conversation. He had his head to the right of hers and was talking directly into her ear. As he looked closer, Jack could see that they were holding hands, and he choked with overwhelming and - he knew – unfair, jealousy. The closeness belied a level of friendship he did not know had developed. Then again, they’d spent a lot of time together while he’d been off with the brothers.

The speaker banged out the Pussycat Dolls hit, “Don’t cha?” Jack didn’t have a girlfriend, not any more, but he still felt the song had been played deliberately to tease him as he looked at, and longed for, Suzy.

He shook himself from his self-destructive reverie, and eavesdropped on Phil and Zoe for a while. He could just about make out the words *David Cameron* and *wolf in sheep’s clothing*. Christ, didn’t they ever switch off? Jack noticed with a smile that Phil was stroking the inside of Zoe’s bare thigh. Perhaps Phil had switched off after all, or at least switched on to a different frequency. Even Phil, Jack reflected, who believed with such a

passion in every political statement he made, was not averse to using his political oratory to ensnare a possible prey. Although this pairing was hardly a surprise. Within the dynamic of the group, Jack thought Phil was the Brandon Walsh to her Andrea Zuckerman - with her glasses, sweaters and inability to discuss anything but serious issues. It made absolute sense they would couple off, maybe with luck, they would even last. Jack hoped that as the nearest thing to the vixen Kelly, Suzy wouldn't swoop in to break their hearts. Especially as he was having enough trouble trying to get Mark away from her.

Sal began to discuss the Czech Republic and Italy game - and Jack had no other alternative - but to succumb. He didn't want to have this conversation when there were so many girls gliding about the club. Chewing the football-fat was no longer his idea of a textbook good night out.

Jack gazed over Sal's shoulder at the dance floor. He could see nothing but shapely, tanned legs as words washed over him. He had noticed one particularly stunning girl and ached to speak to her, but he had no confidence without Stefan and Lothar. The problem with reflected glory is that the sun inevitably sets and goes in.

Jack felt an arm around him. It was Mark.

"Are you going in, Goose?" Mark joked.

"Some wingman you'd be if I was," Jack moaned. "I've been sat here watching you talk to Suzy for nearly two hours."

"Jealous, are we?"

"I don't know about *we*; the others may be, but I couldn't care less."

Jack's mouth and facial expressions were singing from completely different song sheets. While his mouth may have played a harsh "fuck you" hip-hop track, the rest of his face crooned a betraying love ballad. It was a totally contrived performance, and the disappointed crowd were having none of it. He was Milli Vanilli.

"Whatever mate. There's nothing going on between us. She blew me out the other night too. That girl is unpullable."

Suzy's allure moved up 47 notches.

"I'll pull her," Jack stated.

Where his confidence came from, it was difficult to say. Certainly not from his dealings with Suzy to date, that was for sure.

"I'll tell you what; I'll even get another job if you do pal. And stick it. Not like the others."

"Yeah? Fair play mate, that's good to hear."

"No, it's just that's how confident I am that you won't."

THE VIEW FROM THE WINDOW

24 JUNE 2006, 22:07

Chip opened the hotel room window and sat down on the chair he had moved from the dining area of the suite to directly in front of the window. The hooker – Jane? Julie? Chip wasn't sure – had left thirty minutes ago. The only remaining evidence of her was her red g-string, which Chip now wore underneath his shorts. He knocked the top off the

bottle of Peroni, delivered by room service five minutes before, and rested the rifle on the windowsill.

Ordinarily, Chip was meticulous in his preparation. It was one of the reasons he could command such astronomical fees. But today had been an extraordinary set up. The prostitute hadn't been planned and the liaison had thrown his itinerary out of kilter. He hadn't been able to come. Fuck, he was horny as hell, *still*. He'd had no chance to size the job up and reccy the best vantage point to take the shot. In fact, his preparation was so shambolic, he wasn't even sure if it was number sixty or sixty-two. Chip took the note from his pocket, re-read it, shook his head in self-reproach, and re-aimed his rifle.

Chip checked his watch. He still had a good five, or so, minutes, but his experience had taught him always to be ready to shoot at any moment. To date, only one of his marks had actually been there at the appointed time. Chip knew that security advisors often deviated from an itinerary to safeguard their charges from the likes of Chip.

Then Chip noticed a door opening across the street. A man in a suit emerged, flanked by two bodyguards. Chip had a quick glance at his laptop, which displayed a photograph alongside vital statistics - height, weight, eye colour, etc. To an untrained eye this man looked like the Ambassador he had been instructed to discontinue. However, Chip's eye was extremely well trained, and he could immediately tell it was a look-alike - a decoy.

Seconds later, Chip spotted another man skulking out of the building in a baseball cap and layman's clothes, a tradesman, if anything. It was the height that gave him away. Of all the attributes that can distinguish a man, height was the one Chip considered the most useful. It is quite a skill to be able to tell a man's exact height from sixty yards, but Chip

possessed that ability. The decoy was at least an inch and a half too tall - an amateurish effort.

The man cocked his baseball cap ever so slightly. Chip had only a millisecond to assess his eye colour and nose structure, but a millisecond was at least half a millisecond more than Chip needed. Chip compressed the trigger, slowly, smoothly. The body hit the floor before the bodyguards had even realised a shot had been fired. The solitary bullet had penetrated the voice box and blown a hole in the Ambassador's throat. The blood poured out on the ground like Veuve Clicquot at a rap star's wake.

Chip smiled.

"Pour out a lil' liquor for the Ambassador," he laughed.

Clinical performance. One solitary bullet. Chip's bullets were largely untraceable, but there was always that chance; the more bullets fired the higher the chance of being detected. He drained his bottle of Peroni, packed up the rifle and walked out of the bedroom like the chilled out, über-cool assassin he knew he was, only slightly spoiling the effect by pausing to pull the red thong out of his buttocks.

Leon would not have been impressed.

YOU'D BE SO EASY TO LOVE

25 JUNE 2006, 01:19

Phil and Zoe seemed even more animated than they'd been before.

Jack worried about them slightly. They were obsessed with politics and he thought that couldn't be good for them in the long run. Firstly, because it was unlikely they would get

on to the starting line at all. The chances of them breaking into politics were, after all, pretty slim. Secondly, even if they did ever manage to find their way into the race, Jack considered their lack of interest in anything but politics could precipitate a Mary Decker-esque stumble on the home straight.

Jack knew that most people wanted somebody they could relate to. The fact was that Phil and Zoe's obsessive political fervour actually made them no better than the current crop who had spent their entire lives immersed in Westminster – first as researchers, then Junior Ministers, then MPs and finally, without even a glimpse at the “real world”; graduating to the Cabinet.

As it turned out, the source of this particularly animated chatter was something more shocking.

“The Ambassador of Rwanda has been shot,” Phil told Jack and Mark crouching next to them with his arms around their shoulders.

Mark and Jack exchanged blank looks.

“So, what's that got to do with me?” replied Jack, annoyed he was no nearer to schmoozing Suzy, and completely oblivious to the irony of his question.

“Well, nothing I guess,” Phil replied honestly, looking a little disappointed that his nugget of excited gossip hadn't quite elicited the stunned reaction he had been hoping for. Equally - and not altogether surprisingly - the irony had been lost on him too. “But it's still pretty interesting.”

“Phil, get a life,” laughed Jack.

Phil laughed too, aware that his feeble attempt to resuscitate the wow factor of his information had been pretty poor. Encouraged, Jack decided to test him out to see if he really had turned into the political android he feared him to be.

“So what’s going on with you and Zoe? Are you shagging her?”

“Never kiss and tell, mate. As the late, great Brian Coughlin said: *Never tell tales on a woman, she’ll hear you no matter how far away she is.*” Phil laughed. “But fuck that, yes I am.”

Phil and Mark all laughed uproariously, and Jack laughed with relief.

“Oi, I heard that,” shouted Zoe, mock punching Phil in the bicep.

“Case in point, my friend,” Phil said.

Jack thought they must be pretty close to have such an open jocular approach to their blossoming sex life. In Jack’s experience being rumbled for bragging to your mates was a sackable offence; punished by a torrent of wrath usually accompanied by a stern slap to the face. He’d committed similar crimes twice, and the punishment doled out had been thoroughly consistent on both occasions.

“Right, on that bombshell we’re off back to my bar,” Phil announced to the group, grabbing Zoe’s bottom. Zoe giggled and Phil, playing the Sid James part, chased her out of the door.

Jack couldn’t envisage a similar exit for him and Suzy this evening. He was yet to even speak to her.

All of a sudden he saw a glimmer of hope.

“I’m shooting too. I’m off to Covent Garden. I’m meeting a girl I got chatting to in a record shop this afternoon,” Mark said before leaving, flashing Jack a smile on the way out.

Mark’s departure had opened the goal up ever so slightly. Jack was still a good thirty-five yards out, but he could see a small gap in the defensive wall. If he could just curl it through the gap towards the top right-hand corner - and the keeper stepped to his left - there was a chance, just a chance, he might still notch.

Then his odds shortened even further. The wall started to crumble.

“Sulking are you?” Suzy teased as she sat next to him.

Jack quickly scanned the bar. Sal must have left as well. It was just the two of them.

“No. Why would I be sulking?”

Jack had decided to play the amnesia card.

“Because your “Big I Am” didn’t work out the other night.”

So much for the amnesia card, Suzy had a high ace and a stacked deck. Jack went for plan B, the common strategy adopted by men across the world and throughout the ages.

“Ah. Thing is Suz, I was absolutely mullered.”

Textbook. Beautifully executed. When a boy makes a drunken pass at a girl he has secretly fancied for ages, and the girl rejects him; blaming the alcohol consumption is always a good face-saving technique. God knows Jack’s face had been rescued time and again by this simple ploy and he eased into it with the assuredness of a past master. Usually, the girl will play by the rules and laugh it off, making a show of reluctantly accepting the apology, but accepting it nonetheless.

Hopefully things can progress normally now as though the original incident had never happened, but sometimes Jack had known that the initial preservation of dignity belied an impending long-term relationship breakdown. This usually happened when both parties know full well it wasn't anything to do with the alcohol at all, and the incident remains looming over them like a towering Dr. Who monster of misunderstanding and resentment. Thus they will be unable ever to act naturally together again.

The boy will realise that the girl he loves is forever out of bounds and soon afterwards they will, inevitably, drift apart. After all, a relationship cannot be sustained under such circumstances. Pandora has no intention of being frogmarched within a ten-mile radius of the box that has imprisoned her for an eternity.

In this case, however, Jack still felt confident his trusted technique would work its magic.

"I didn't mean a word." He continued, pressing home his advantage, "Sorry if I offended you."

"Yes, you did."

Suzy wasn't playing by the rules. Surely she must know them?

"You meant every word. If you were a chocolate Jack O'Neill, you really would eat yourself. You act like a real wanker sometimes."

Hold on - now this certainly wasn't right. Jack was shocked. The game he had been playing had been rated a PG; a childish, infantile, 'boy meets girl' game - fun for all the family. Abuse and swearing were not part of its remit. Stunned, he tried something he hadn't thought about since meeting Stefan and Lothar, a dark, dangerous, and hitherto unbidden technique. It was time to dabble in humility, and honesty.

“I know. I know.”

His eyes moved to the floor. He took a long, hard slug of his Japanese beer.

“It went to my head a bit.”

As he said it out loud, Jack realised that this wasn't a ploy at all, but the truth. It felt good to actually say it, to vocalise something which he had known all along but buried beneath layer upon layer of denial.

“That's okay Jack.”

Suzy, meanwhile, was a little taken aback. She had thought he would slip back into his cocky, bit of a lad routine - and for a short while, he had. But she had been determined not to let him off the hook by pleading drunkenness. During her heart to heart with Mark - who she liked a lot, albeit not romantically - a few nights earlier, they had agreed that Jack needed to be dragged down a peg or seventy-six. Not maliciously, but for his own good before the wind changed and his face got permanently stuck in the ugly grimace of self satisfied arrogance.

“You've obviously been an idiot lately.” Suzy continued, and decided to use Mark's basic but succinct description. “A total knob, in fact. But most lads are when they're trying to come on to women.”

Jack stared into nothingness while he replayed his actions over the previous months with a clear head, and found that he had to concentrate hard to avoid physically grinding his teeth in cringing embarrassment at his behaviour.

“I felt so powerful with so many girls throwing themselves at me.” He said, shaking his head in disbelief. “Will had the same thing when he first left that reality TV show. Look at this dance floor.”

Jack motioned for Suzy to turn her attention to the tiles.

“Look at all those stunning girls. As a bloke, you stand in the bar and try and give them the eye. They’re gorgeous and you think you deserve to meet them, and have a real chance at pulling them. But they’re looking around the club, not even noticing you, trying to lock eyes with the six feet three inch tanned Italiano units. They are thinking the same things you are thinking. In the looks stakes, I’m not even in the same weight category as them, so why do I always think I can mix it with the heavyweights?”

Suzy knew when someone was fishing for compliments, and this wasn’t it.

“You’re not bad looking yourself, Jack.” She smiled. “Anyway, there’s so much more to it. There’s humour and personality and lots more important things.”

“Not in here, Suz. This is ruthless. These types of clubs are dog-eat-dog. Well, bitch-eat-bitch if you look at half of this crowd.”

Suzy raised a perfectly plucked eyebrow.

“Sorry, just joking. But I’m speaking the truth. No summer pop, rom-com storylines are played out in these bars. Being with Stef and Lothar gave me a chance to step into the ring with heavyweights like her and her.”

Jack pointed to two girls preening themselves in the mirror at the side of the dance floor. They were so obviously soul-less Jack was amazed they even had reflections.

“Who wouldn’t take a ticket to the Big Show and headline the gig when they’ve spent their life on the under-card?”

“True, but it still turned you in to a grade A wanker. When Mark told me what you did for him, taking him in, looking after him; I couldn’t believe this was the same bloke I had

met. It didn't square with the champagne Casanova image. He also told me you've only just split from a long-term girlfriend."

"It's been a while now, but I guess so. It was just before I met Mark. I'd actually split with her a few hours before I met Phil on the train. The truth is we'd finished a long time before that though. We just hadn't admitted it to each other; or to ourselves really. I actually used to fantasise that she had met someone else. That way she would finish me and I wouldn't have any regrets. How sad is that? I was such a wimp. She's living in London somewhere now."

"Do you think you'll get back with her? When you've finished your quest to sleep with every girl this side of the Watford Gap?"

Jack grinned.

"No chance. Although, funnily enough, I do miss her. I couldn't wait to see the back of her, but we were good friends. I think... no, I know, it's only as a friend that I miss her."

"So, you're looking for love then?" asked Suzy.

"Why? Do you know where I might find it?"

Jack looked straight into her eyes and found his ability to be charming and funny came from a confidence that was entirely his own. It had nothing to do with arrogance, nothing to do with reflected glory, and nothing to do with Stefan and Lothar.

Suzy tried to hide a smile behind the lipstick-stained rim of her glass of vodka. She looked away towards the dance floor as if to hide any sign of interest.

Jack moved his right hand slowly to her left leg. It was a gamble, certainly, but as a better man than him once said, 'He who dares, wins.' Suzy didn't respond, but then

again, she didn't pull away either. The time had come. Now or never. Do or die. As Suzy turned back to face him, he leaned in and quickly kissed her bottom lip. Suzy was surprised. Jack was too. Neither pulled away. It was a soft kiss, and led to more soft kisses, which in turn led to many things, including neck nibbling, drink spilling and taxi ordering. But, ultimately, it led to Jack spending the rest of the evening at Suzy's flat.

WHAT BECAME OF THE BROKEN HEARTED?

25 JUNE 2006, 04:01

Mark knew he owed Jack for handing him his life back. He felt like a normal young guy again. He was enthused by an entirely new concept – that life held an enormous number of possibilities for him, and any one of them could be in his grasp. So far his existence had been one based on survival, an inescapable cycle of misery and self-loathing.

For the entire time he'd been on the game he had felt like the lowest of the low. Every person he had come across - from punters, to the police, to magistrates – had made him feel like vermin, totally worthless. But now he felt alive again. He jumped out of bed every morning - although since he'd jacked his job in he often jumped straight back into bed again. However, he planned to complete the rest of this renaissance himself; starting with this girl he had just met.

Mark loved drifting around London. Even when he had been turning tricks and touting for scumbag customers; he had loved to gorge himself on the finest architecture in the world.

Mark had kissed this girl for the first time on London Bridge - his favourite vantage point in London - with an eye on the illuminated Tower Bridge. And now he was about to sleep with her and hopefully kick-start his first post-prostitution relationship. She slid her black g-string off with her fingertips and removed it completely by sliding her right foot all of the way down her left leg. She pulled him towards her and suddenly there was no *about* about it.

What the entwined Rick Blaine and Ilsa Lund didn't know was that a Victor Laslo was about to crash the party.

THE LADY IS A TRAMP, OR IS SHE?

25 JUNE 2006, 10:06

Jack bounded up the stairs to the flat. The sex with Suzy was the best he had ever experienced. He wasn't exactly sure if he could pinpoint what had made it good, nor in other circumstances, bad. "He's a good lover," you'd often read in kiss-and-tell stories - although on hearing Will's story Jack knew he would never believe a word of one of those tales again.

But why? Sex is not like sport where you can refer to the Opta Index for reference. 'Jack has a 6.2 average for cunnilingus, whilst Mark's is only 5.3'. Jack and Suzy had both reached orgasm, and surely that was the only benchmark. The end was all-important, and the means, irrelevant. There were no marks for assists; it was all about goals and trys. Then again during that *ménage à trois* at Lothar's flat, Jack had to concede that the twin sister definitely deserved credit for her performance in aiding and abetting.

Jack decided - as corny as it was - the reason the sex had been so pleasurable with Suzy was because it had been the first time in a long time for Jack that the sex had gone hand in hand with real romantic feelings. Even with Sarah, there had come a time when emotion had slipped out of their lovemaking to be replaced by functionality.

Jack reached the door of the flat and opened it quickly. The door swung wide open. Two naked bodies dived for the shelter of the bed covers.

"Get to the Job Centre, my friend," Jack boasted.

“Hang on a minute, I know that body shape” screamed the mini Eminem jumping up and down on Jack’s right shoulder.

“Of course you do, it’s your flatmate,” replied the mini Dr. Dre on his left shoulder.

“Now tell him about last night with Suzy,” he instructed.

“No, the girl,” the voice screamed into his right ear.

But Jack didn’t need anybody to tell him the girl peering out from underneath the sheets was the girl who had shared his bed for over two years.

“Right, grab the bat, a knife, anything,” shrieked mini Eminem.

Three, then four seconds elapsed. Mark was embarrassed, but only slightly. It wasn’t a hugely significant moment. So Jack had caught him on the job? So what? He was concerned for the girl’s dignity, of course. She was a sweet girl and he knew she would be embarrassed about being caught *in flagrante*.

Mark liked her and wanted Jack to pick his jaw up from the floor and get the rest of the body attached to it out of the flat so he could apologise to this girl he had rather fallen for. What was the matter with Jack? It was no big deal.

Of course, if Mark could have seen the girl’s face he would have noticed that her expression completely mirrored that of his flatmate’s.

Jack did not have a clue what to say or do. He wanted to walk over and give Mark five knuckles between the eyes, but he had already surmised from the look of surprised horror on Sarah’s face, and the sheer gormlessness on Mark’s that he had no idea of the link between Jack and Sarah. It would be a bit unfair to punish him for a crime he didn’t know he was committing. There had to be *mens rea* to go with the *actus reus*.

In silence, Jack walked to the sink and ran the tap. He filled himself a glass of water. And still he hadn't spoken.

"Jack, do you mind? I know it's your flat too, but would you please give us a chance to get dressed in private?" Mark asked.

Jack took a large mouthful of water. He needed to moisturise his parched mouth. His tongue felt like it weighed five stone and he needed some liquid to move it. Finally, he felt ready to speak.

"Don't worry mate. It's nothing I haven't seen before."

"I realise we get changed in front of each other mate. There's not much room for skittishness in this cardboard box, but there is a lady present."

Mark was still absolutely oblivious. He shot a sheepish glance at Sarah, who returned it with a look of abject horror. Bit of an over-reaction on her part, Mark thought.

"Yes, I've seen everything the lady has to offer too, Mark," Jack responded.

The information entered Mark's brain and after he'd quickly processed the mental calculations he came up with the correct summation.

"Oh fuck."

Neither Jack nor Sarah could have said it better themselves.

"Well, how do you think I feel?" asked Sarah, speaking for the first time.

"Pretty good, I would have thought," replied Jack's acid tongue, his eyes burning brightly with intense hatred as the catalyst.

"Don't look at me like a tart, Jack. Mark told me about his Lothario flatmate who had bedded half of London in the past month. It doesn't sound like you've installed a chastity belt, or done much wallowing."

In her haste to get her point across, Sarah had sat up quickly; unaware that she was now on display from the waist up.

“Yes, you don’t look like much of a tart, Sar,” Jack shot back.

Sarah looked down at her bare breasts and grabbed for the bedcovers to cover up. It was a cheap shot, but had maximum impact. Cheap shots generally do, that’s why they’re such good value. Sarah began to cry.

“Yes, go on, start crying. I’m not allowed to cry, am I? Yet I’m the one that’s found my flatmate in bed with my ex-girlfriend. I was never allowed to cry, was I?”

Mark stood at the back of the room. He was still naked, although this was only a secondary reason for his current state of skin-crawling discomfort. He didn’t know what he could offer to the conversation. He didn’t feel like it was his place to comment.

Without saying another word, Jack stormed out, slamming the door on his not too merry way.

Sarah’s crying intensified and Mark tried to hug her. She pushed him away. Suddenly, she felt like a cheating wife. Mark sighed. A blossoming relationship seemed unlikely.

LITTLE BY LITTLE

25 JUNE 2006, 10:21

“Jack.”

Sarah tried to get Jack’s attention. Jack was sat on the curb trying to toss stones into the grid on the opposite side of the road. It was a few minutes since he’d stormed out of the flat. He could have been a few streets away by now, but he didn’t see the point.

“What?”

Jack didn't look up. This scenario had been played out between the two of them so many times – first the argument, then the storm out and then the refusal to talk to each other. Jack had no stomach for it nowadays. He decided to be mature about it. He'd had a bit of time to think since he had walked out.

“I'm sorry for the way I acted in there.”

Sarah was taken aback. Was this really Jack? Her ex-boyfriend? The same boy who had thrown the remote control out of the window after an argument over what to watch? This tantrum had forced them to manually switch the channels for the rest of their tenure at the flat.

“Erm, thanks,” Sarah said, vaguely disappointed. She had been psyched up for a huge row. She had a pretty good argument, after all.

“Yes, I was bang out of order,” Jack continued. “I take it you didn't know Mark was my flatmate.”

Sarah flashed a fiery look at Jack, using all the force of feeling she had developed whilst prepping for a massive kick-off.

“Sorry, I was just checking,” Jack held both hands up in his own defence. “So what have you been up to?”

Jack wanted to smooth this over. He wanted it to be as amicable as possible. That said he was struggling to contemplate a conversation about her liaison with Mark.

Sarah sat down next to Jack on the kerb and picked a few stones up. She tossed the first one and it slipped through the middle gap in the grid.

“Nothing but net,” she bragged.

“Typical,” Jack muttered. “You always were competitive.”

“Play to win, Jack, or not at all. That’s what my dad taught me.”

Jack smiled.

“Oh yes, how is my biggest fan? Has he conquered the world yet? I’ll bet he was devastated to see the back of me.”

“I can’t say he was too disappointed,” Sarah replied.

“I’ll bet he called me rotten. Every name under the sun.”

“I would never let him, Jack. Or anybody else.”

Sarah meant that and Jack knew it.

He suddenly felt familiar warmth between the two of them. He knew he wouldn’t let anybody say a bad word about her either; he would jump in front of a car for her.

“Thanks. I know you wouldn’t. So what have you been up to? I’ll ask again.”

“Not much really. I’ve moved into a nice flat in West Hampstead with a really nice girl. Actually, she’s female, between 18 and 35 and living in London - you’ve probably slept with her,” Sarah goaded with a smile.

“Very funny.”

Jack looked at Sarah and was relieved to realise that there was no sexual feeling between them, just a genuine enjoyment of each other’s company. Christ he was glad to see her. Suddenly all those things that had been so irritating about her when they had split up seemed, well, petty and insignificant. Although he was relieved to note that she had shed her most infuriating habit and managed to refrain from making every sentence a question.

“That’s about it.” She continued. “I’ve been getting out and about. I’ve been back up to Liverpool, all of the normal things. Mark was telling me about his flatmate last night. He is worried about you. He said you’re hanging around with some really nasty people.”

“Oh, not this again. Who *hasn’t* he told?”

“He’s concerned, that’s all. He loves you you know, he thinks you could walk on water. He’s only looking out for you.”

“I know he is. He’s a top bloke. He just doesn’t know Stef and Lothar. They’ve got a bit of a side to them, but they’re okay, really. I’m going to keep them at arm’s length from now on anyway.”

“You know best. Just be careful. I worry about you.”

It was good to have somebody to worry about him. Sarah pre-dated all his experiences from the past couple of months. She had known him before any of it. Nobody knew him better than her – not even Mark.

“I will be. I’m on to it now.”

“So, I don’t really want to ask this, but what next?” Sarah asked tentatively.

“I don’t know.”

He really didn’t know. It all depended on what happened with her and Mark. It was really nice seeing her again, and it had been good to patch up old wounds, but if he was honest, he would be pleased to part ways from here. Did they really need to see each other? It probably wouldn’t work out in the long run, so it was probably best to quit whilst they were still on speaking terms.

“What’s going on with you and Mark?”

It was the crucial question. He really hoped the answer would be “nothing”.

“Would it be too weird if we started seeing each other?”

Jack plastered a poker face on and prepared to tell a huge lie.

“I guess not. I mean it would be strange but I’ll deal with it. I just want you to be happy.”

There it was. Jack was lying; or more accurately, not being totally truthful. He did want her to be happy, but not if it made him unhappy. Given a choice between his own, and Sarah’s happiness, he would choose his own. Was that selfish? When he was younger he would have said yes, but age and experience had taught him that, when all’s said and done in life, you have to protect yourself. As *The Streets* so eloquently put it, no one will look out for you when the last garrison falls, no-one but yourself, that is.

“Whatever you want to do Sar. I’m happy if you and Mark are happy.”

“Bloody hell. You’ve matured in the past year. You’re like Tom Hanks in *Big*. Only instead of aging physically over night, you’ve matured about 20 years in just a few weeks. You were like an eight-year-old when we lived together.”

“Look who’s talking. I seem to remember you setting your alarm early so that you could get up and toast the last two pieces of bread so I couldn’t have them for my breakfast.”

“You knew I did that on purpose?” she asked.

“Yes. It got pretty bad between us, didn’t it? Mark and I have had our moments but we’ve been getting on generally.”

A thought crossed Jack’s mind. An evil thought. Mini Eminem whispered in his ear telling him to fill Sarah in on Mark’s former trade. That would sort the situation out no doubt. Jack quickly dismissed the thought. Mini Dr.Dre smacked mini Eminem around

the back of the head and he tumbled off the shoulder leaving Jack with only positive thoughts.

It was a good job Jack hadn't succumbed to his evil side. Not only would Sarah have seen right through it - she knew Jack inside out, and would have known that he was only telling her out of nastiness - but Mark had confessed all to her the previous night.

Mark had wanted the evening to be the start of something and had vowed to be truthful from the off. That had meant coming clean. She had been a little concerned at first, about disease and such, perfectly naturally really, but Mark had put her at ease. He had told her he'd had a full check-up only two weeks before, and was completely clean.

Ninety per cent of Mark thought that he would lose Sarah following his confession, but on the contrary, she had been totally engrossed and heartbroken at the story. She had wanted to know all about it - from his abandonment as a young lad to his eventual rescue. She had shed tears and hugged him tightly. He fell for her there and then. She really cared about him.

Back on the street, Sarah stood and laid a friendly hand on Jack's shoulder.

"Okay, well, we'll see how it goes," Sarah said. "I'm really glad we had an opportunity to talk. I could have thought of better circumstances, but it did the trick. I would have always regretted us splitting up the way we did - ruining all of the good times we had together. And there were a lot of good times."

"There were. You're right." Jack said, weighing up the statistical truth of this statement, and suspecting there had been more bad times than good. But, he decided, that wasn't the point.

Sarah kissed him on the cheek. “I’ll get back inside then. I’m going to get a shower and get back to my flat.”

“Okay.”

Jack turned and watched her walk back into the flat. His flat.

A TANGLED WEB INDEED

25 JUNE 2006, 21:56

“I get no kicks from champagne, mere alcohol...,” Frank Sinatra’s voice belted out of the speakers in the bar. Phil had called them all there. Except now, there were more of them. Sarah was sat on Mark’s lap. No formal introductions had been made, but it appeared that everyone knew the full story, presumably through gossiping to each other. It was, as Jack had expected, ultra-weird. Suzy sat next to him trying to hold his hand, but he didn’t let her. He knew he was being stupid, but it just didn’t feel right with Sarah there.

Jack attempted to take his mind off the situation by looking around the bar. It really was perfect. Jack loved it as much now as he had done the first night he’d seen it. All it was missing was women, but in a way that was the charm. You could go to that bar, sit there with your friends, listen to proper music - no cheesy manufactured pop - drink good quality alcohol, in a dark, atmospheric bar and chat, without the constant distraction and self-imposed pressure of always being on the pull.

He could be himself at this bar. Although he would have been more able to relax if his ex-girlfriend hadn’t been there sitting on his flatmate’s lap; and if he hadn’t caught them in bed together; and if he could get the image of them naked together out of his mind, and

if he could suppress his urge to punch Mark in the face and fuck Suzy right there on the spot.

Apart from that – he could be himself at this bar.

“Where’s Phil?” Will asked.

“He’s on his way over,” Zoe answered.

Presumably they had surgically removed him from her hip.

“Hey Will.” Sal said. “I read in the paper this morning you are going into *Celebrity Big Brother* next year.”

“So my agent tells me,” Will replied.

“You still have an agent?” Mark joked. “How have you got the credibility for that? You haven’t been on the TV in twelve months. You live in Quasimodo’s bell tower above this bar for Christ’s sakes.”

Mark was laughing. It was just banter. Mark was fond of Will, as was everyone. He was quintessentially likable.

“Hey, I’m top of the list. At least people will know what my claim to fame is before I explain it. Most of the others were famous about 15 years ago, and not even very famous then.”

“People, people, people. We’re on the road. Our foot is on the ladder.”

Phil had arrived and stood in front of the group, addressing them all.

“I’ve managed to convince an incumbent MP with a safe seat, that we are a valuable asset as are our ideas. He is going to bring some of us in as part of his staff.”

Jack was underwhelmed. So were the others – apart from Zoe and Mark. Zoe looked up adoringly at Phil. Jack decided it was a good job Phil was a normal guy, otherwise

Zoe could have been in trouble. She believed in him so completely, she would have done anything for him. He could see how David Koresh's flourish.

She stood, almost trance-like, and kissed him lovingly.

"That's fantastic darling," she said when their kiss broke off.

"Yes, it's superb, Phil. I'd love to be one of the chosen few on the staff, but I understand if not," Mark said sounding genuinely excited about it.

Sarah hugged him, excited for him too. Jack saw this and burned with jealousy.

Jack wasn't going to express any dissent. It wasn't exactly Guy Fawkes-like. But to give Phil the benefit of the doubt, it was a step forward, and in all fairness, this was a difficult project to spearhead.

"What are you doing tonight?" Suzy whispered in his ear.

She purred. It didn't get much more erotic.

"I've got to nip to see someone, but I'd like to see you, if you're offering."

"Okay. Send me a text and you can come over to my flat. I'll wear that outfit we discussed."

Jack was in total lust. Sarah noticed it in his eyes too as she watched him and the girl, Suzy, whispering to each other. She was surprised to feel slightly jealous. It was unexpected. She didn't think Suzy was his type. She was pretty, but, Sarah concluded, a bit *obviously* pretty.

Jack decided not to tell Suzy, or any of the others that he was going over to see Stef to discuss the all-expenses, five-star trip to Marbella. He still thought they were good blokes. He was starting to see chinks in the armour of their friendship, but after all, how

could he complain after everything that they had done for him? He couldn't bite the hand that was feeding him, and feeding him so well.

“Do you fancy staying at mine tonight? I'm not wearing any underwear,” Sarah whispered to Mark. Only she was slightly too loud, and Jack overheard it. She had a habit of doing that as her hearing wasn't great and she was unaware of the volume of her whisper. This time, she had done it on purpose. 1-1.

Jack shuddered. That was a conversation he really didn't need to hear. He decided it was time he left. Jack kissed Suzy on the cheek and left the bar.

Suzy watched him leave. He wasn't typically her type, but he had a certain something. Maybe it was the way he showed every thought in his face. Most people went through life as though wearing a mask, their inner thoughts and feelings hidden from the big bad world. Jack was different. She wasn't even sure if he knew he did it, but the fact was that Jack betrayed every mental and emotional process – for better or worse - as obviously as if his face were an ordnance survey map. Suzy found it incredibly endearing, and oddly alluring. There was something so pure about someone who hid nothing, and so rare.

Suzy realised with a sudden shock that she was falling for Jack, and this was followed by an equally surprising concern. If Jack was going to become the Brad Pitt of her life, then how was it going to affect things now his ex-girlfriend was back on the scene? Angelina Jolie wouldn't hang around with Jennifer Aniston, she was certain of that. Suzy sighed. This was sure to get complicated.

WARNING SIGNS

25 JUNE 2006, 23:24

Jack noticed the door to Stefan's flat was partly ajar, propped open by a Prada lace-up shoe, which looked like it had never been worn.

He shouted to Stef, calling his name three, four times checking the bedrooms and bathrooms. Nowhere to be found. Jack could hear music. As he stepped into the huge lounge he discovered why Stef hadn't heard him. Stef was naked, save for huge earphones, attempting to mix a Kanye West tune. He looked up and noticed Jack. He signalled to Jack to listen closely. Jack did. Then suddenly, another song kicked in, much louder, and the music reverberated around the flat. Jack knew little about mixing music but this sounded good. Really good.

Stef removed the earphones.

"Like it?" he asked.

"Quality. I didn't know you could mix," commented Jack.

"I couldn't. I bought these decks yesterday."

"Bastard," Jack swore at how perfect Stef's life was. He could seemingly do absolutely anything.

"We've bought a bar in the West End and I've decided I'm going to be resident on Saturday nights. I'll have the women all over me."

"Like that's a problem for you, anyway."

Stef smiled and put one part of the headphones to his left ear. Then he fiddled with something on the system - Jack couldn't see what - and the room started to bounce.

“I ain’t saying she a Gold Digger but she ain’t messing with no broke...”

It sounded awesome. Stef threw the headphones off and walked towards the kitchen.

“Wicked mate,” Jack acknowledged.

“Yes, I should start a club in this flat. We never use it so I’ve never bothered furnishing it. The acoustics are off the hook. I’d pack them in.”

Jack knew he would. He could do anything. Jack felt he could do nothing at all.

“Stef...”

The voice came from the front door.

“Stef, Stef...”

It was an American voice.

Chip stepped into the lounge.

“My friend,” Chip addressed Stef, and they high-fived. Chip drew Stef into a shoulder-touch and a hug. It was a bit much for Jack. Chip wore a purple Ralph Lauren t-shirt, a Lakers cap and shorts. Stef had dressed quickly in shorts and a GAP baseball cap, which he had collected from the kitchen floor.

“Jack, my buddy.”

Chip walked towards Jack. He was a couple of paces away. Jack froze, rabbit in the headlights. He had no idea what to do. He was bad enough with air kissing and the like, but that male convoluted greeting ritual he’d just witnessed was way beyond him. Not to worry, Chip just raised his left hand and high-fived Jack instead. Jack shivered, and almost collapsed to the floor in a heap, such was the intensity of the cringe that washed over him.

“Until the day we die, Jackie, we’re going to testify.”

Jack had no idea what Chip was talking about. Certainly he had understood the individual words, but when placed in a sentence in that order they had ceased to have any coherent meaning to him. Actually, Chip talked bollocks almost all the time, so Jack merely smiled, but then realised Chip was just singing along to the song playing in the background.

“When are you going back to the States, my friend?” asked Stef.

The references to *friend*, *buddy*, *brother* every two seconds annoyed Jack. It was hackneyed beyond comprehension.

“Later this evening if you have no more work for me. Flying colours again Stefan, even if I do say so myself. One shot,” Chip said shaping his right hand into a pistol, moving his thumb to mimic the pulling of a trigger.

Jack was confused. He glanced at Stefan and saw a look of red faced fury directed at Chip.

“What’s that Chip?” asked Jack.

“Oh nothing, Jack.” Stef answered very quickly, cutting Chip off as he was about to speak.

“What was it then?” asked Jack as nonchalantly as possible.

“I said nothing.”

Stef was stern and Jack decided not to pursue it – for now.

“Anyway, Jack and I are going to Marbella. We are going to sail the yacht up there. You have not seen anything until you’ve seen the way women react to a yacht. They go absolutely crazy. They are wet before they get on board. And I do not mean on account of the ocean.”

Jack did not need the coarse clarification. As appealing as it sounded, Jack found he was neither excited nor interested. In fact, to his own surprise, he wanted out. His impression of Chip wasn't any better; and something about the little scene with the mock gun had chimed uneasily with him.

"But in the meantime, where are we hitting tonight, Jack? Chip, are you joining us for a night out?" Stef asked.

"I need to go actually," Jack said trying to excuse himself. "I'm meeting a girl. Marbella sounds brilliant though. I can't wait."

"Ah, a girl. Suzy again, is it, my young charge? I hope you're not falling for her."

"How do you know about Suzy?" Jack asked, quick as a flash.

"You told me about her."

Jack knew he hadn't. Instinctively, he had kept any details about his friends away from the brothers. So how did Stef know about Suzy?

"Oh did I? I forget. Anyway it's nothing serious with her. I probably won't see her again after tonight," Jack lied.

He felt he was protecting Suzy by lying. He was acting on instinct again. But why did he sense that Suzy needed protecting from Stef? After all, Stef was supposed to be a friend.

"Well, it was great to see you again, buddy"

This time Chip did go for the hug and engulfed Jack. Jack felt tiny and swamped by Chip's body.

"Yes. And you," Jack replied, red-faced from the hug, "I'll send you a text tomorrow Stef," he said, walking towards the door.

“Yes, do that,” responded Stef, and Jack felt sure that he had detected very little warmth left in his ‘friend’s’ voice.

TORTURED BY THE SUN

26 JUNE 2006, 00:14

On the tube on the way to Suzy's flat, Jack was concerned. Actually, Jack was not far from terrified. Even worse, he didn't really know why. There was obviously a lot more to Chip than he was aware. Stef hadn't even really tried to cover it up. He had merely silenced Jack and cut short his questioning. It was clear to Jack that Stefan didn't consider him worthy of an explanation and didn't need, nor deserve, to be given any further details.

That wasn't good enough for Jack. At the best of times he was a nosy bastard. If he thought there was a bit of gossip about his 82-year-old next-door neighbour then Jack would have killed to find it out. But this was different. There was something very wrong about this situation, and even though Jack couldn't know for sure, he was convinced it was serious.

Jack had already known that Chip was involved in Lothar and Stefan's shady insider dealings, but he had begun to suspect that the big American was involved in something more sinister. What, he could not begin to guess – but not something Jack wanted to be a part of.

Jack spent the evening at the flat of his new love interest. Suzy had given off the impression that she didn't care a jot about guys, but he was now discovering a really sweet, caring side to her. When Jack walked through her door, he was hit by the heavenly scent of a roast dinner. During pillow talk, Jack had previously mentioned in

passing that he hadn't tasted his favourite meal since his mother had cooked for him. It was clear that Suzy had spent the entire evening preparing it for him.

This was why Jack missed having a girlfriend. His miserable final months with Sarah had led him to question why he would want to share his life with anyone. Now he remembered why. It wasn't just having somebody to look after him, to do things for him; though in the most selfish upper part of his conscience, he admitted there was a degree of that. No, it was the feeling that somebody cares about you and cares about your happiness; occasionally even more than their own.

He managed to forget about the brothers, Chip - about it all. It never once crossed his mind during the meal, during the sex, or the post-coital chat. But then he found himself unable to sleep. His bed partner had slipped into a deep slumber immediately, her head resting on his chest. She looked beautiful and he was happy to watch her sleep. That lasted exactly two minutes and four seconds, until he became frustrated, tetchy and miserable at the stifling heat in the room. Although they were sleeping next to an open window, it didn't seem to make any difference. There wasn't even a hint of a breeze. In his experience, night-time air in London was always dead and heavy, and he often struggled to sleep under its oppressive weight.

Once Jack had established the heat as the biggest thorn in his side, he began to think about what had happened in Stef's flat earlier.

There was something going on, and Jack had to know. The evening turned into the morning, and the sun rose and began to beam through the open window, down on to Jack's sweating, frustrated body. He had spent the last few hours concocting some

fantastical background stories for Chip but he felt that if he didn't get to the bottom of this, he would never be able to sleep again.

Jack's mind had been racing all night, but at least it had reached somewhere. By the time Suzy stirred and stretched, it was done.

Jack had a plan.

FRIENDS IN LOW PLACES

26 JUNE 2006, 14:11

Phil had rushed halfway across London for this meeting. Thirty-two minutes to hot foot it from the West End to High Road Wembley was not bad. Tom had sounded despondent.

Tom Wright was the perfect man to launch Phil's project - a disillusioned MP willing to stand as an independent. He was only 33 and was very impressed with Phil and his vision. Phil's plan was to re-brand Tom and use him to launch the new party. He even had a tagline for him: The Great Wright Hope.

Phil opened the door of the JD Wetherspools and walked towards the bar. Tom sat on a bar stool, his head drooped, nursing a pint of Guinness. The solitary barman wiped around Tom's glass with a cloth. Tom did not look up to acknowledge the cleaning job. He clearly had more important things concerning him. That was what Phil had feared.

"Tom," Phil called as he approached the almost mannequin-still MP. Phil had decided to be positive from the outset, no matter what news Tom gave him.

"I see they're putting England's quarter-final on a big screen at the New Wembley. There's posters everywhere. I'd heard they were going to do it for the final, but it looks like they're doing it earlier. The stadium looks awesome."

"Hmm," Tom grunted, almost inaudibly.

There was quite clearly no mileage in Phil's upbeat attempts at conversation. Phil pulled up a stool next to him.

“A lager shandy please,” Phil said to the barman, wanting a bit of privacy with Tom. “What is it, Tom?” Phil whispered keeping his tone measured and neutral. He neither wanted to sound overly concerned, nor uninterested.

“It’s all fucked.”

“What is?” Phil asked, although he felt he already knew the answer to the question.

“My career. Your plan. It’s all fucked.”

Phil awarded himself a gold star and ten house points. He knew it had been bad news the second he had heard Tom’s glum message on his answering machine. All he could hope for was that it - whatever it was - wasn’t as bad as Tom thought.

“Tell me what’s happened. Is it a girl? Drugs? What have you done?”

“It’s none of that. It’s a photograph.”

He wasn’t giving much away and Phil didn’t want to have to extract information bit by bit. He didn’t want the piecemeal approach. He needed all the details so he could assess the situation and put some sort of contingency plan into place.

“Okay. Well, what does the photograph show?”

“Me. Fighting.”

This conversation was turning into a jigsaw puzzle, except without the lid. Phil was frustrated. He wanted to see the whole picture.

“So? That’s hardly the end of the world. There must be more to it than that.”

“It’s a front page photograph that was published in *The Daily Veritas* in 1998.”

“That’s no big deal. People don’t even believe the date in that paper, Tom.”

“Phil, it’s the second biggest tabloid in the country. It’s huge. Everybody sees the front page, even if they don’t read it. And I’m on it - right in the middle of the photograph.”

“You weren’t even really involved in politics in 1998. Why did you warrant a front-page splash? What’s the story?”

“It was during France ‘98. I went out there with a few old uni mates to watch the World Cup. A black kid was beaten up. Really, really, badly beaten. He was put in intensive care. I was right next to it. I had nothing to do with it, but a friend of mine was dragged into the fighting by three blokes who hit him with a bottle. Well, what could I do? I didn’t even throw a punch; I just piled in and dragged him out of the middle of it. I got him to safety, but obviously, I was snapped by a photographer.”

“That’s nothing, Tom.”

“You don’t understand. You’re new to this game. You don’t understand the way the press machine works. The front page shows my face, with blood all over it, like a warring barbarian; my England shirt is ripped and I’m foaming at the mouth like some feral, wild animal. To make matters worse, the night before, I had passed out pissed and my mates had shaved my head raw. The headline of the newspaper is, “How long can we let these animals disgrace our country?” It was a call to arms for all right thinking people in the country. And I’m the face of it. I’m that fucking bloke with the tache and the pointing finger in the “Your Country Needs You” poster. Only I’m asking the public to come and fight against me, to root wrongdoers like me out.”

“Wow” said Phil. “Fuck”.

It was bad.

“I thought it was all in the past but a toe-rag hack rang me last night to tip me off about a photograph he had dug up from my past and asked me if I wanted to comment. There is no way he could have connected that photograph to me without a lead. It’ll be my ex-wife. She was one of the only people that knew about it and she will do just about anything to hurt me at the moment.”

Phil put his damage limitation hat on.

“Okay, it’s bad. I’ll give you that, but I can sort it. I’ll ring the journalist and ask him to name his figure. I’ll throw ten grand at it. At the end of the day the initial story is a scoop, but the story behind it discredits it. I’ll tell him we’ve got witness statements from the other people that were there and if he doesn’t accept the money then we’ll come after him for libel.”

Tom laughed and sipped at his Guinness, which was still largely untouched. It was the laugh of a condemned man.

“You still don’t understand. I’ve been touted as one of the brightest stars on the left for months. The right-wing press have been gunning for me ever since. Taking me down is a massive scalp to any aspiring hack. Every paper in the land will run that story. If they have to print a two paragraph apology six months later they won’t care less.”

“But that’s the point. The public will know. We’ll put out our side of the story. It’ll be okay. I promise you, it will be okay.”

“It won’t be okay.” Tom spoke with the confidence of a man who had seen this scenario before.

“Let me ask you this question, who killed JFK?”

Phil was baffled. Was this Tom’s twentieth Guinness?

“What are you on about? We have more important things to discuss.”

“I’m trying to explain it to you. Tell me, who killed JFK?”

“The CIA, Lee Harvey Oswald... Oh, and that Clay Shaw bloke.”

Tom smiled.

“Therein lies the point. Lee Harvey Oswald acted alone. That movie presented all the other theories, but it was deliberately inaccurate. It was a *drama*. It wasn’t supposed to be true. Do you know that a huge inquiry was launched after the release of that film because so many people were convinced of a cover up? The gospel according to Oliver Stone, and of course, the sermons from Mount Hollywood have to be believed. Thousands of man-hours, documents and personnel proved beyond a shadow of doubt that Oswald acted alone. Now let me ask you another question - did you know about that report?”

Phil was honest. “No, I had no idea.”

“Exactly. Because nobody wants to know the truth. Not when fiction is more interesting. Nobody hangs around for the explanation. If the full might of the U.S. government and the security services can’t get the public to listen to an explanation backed up by reams and reams of evidence, what chance do you think I’ve got here? Westminster will have moved on to its next rising star before the week is through. I’m washed up. It’s all over.”

Now Phil could see Tom’s point. Tom was a dead duck and his own project had nowhere else to go. As promising as this opportunity had been, this was his last throw of the dice. It was a shame, and hopelessly unfair. Tom was a good man, a really good man, and he could have been great, but it didn’t matter. It was impossible for him to go on and

both men knew it. Even the barman knew it. He'd heard every word, and would no doubt be cited in the front-page article the following day as a direct source. Phil shook hands with his fallen saviour, patted him on the back and left the pub.

END OF PART 3

**PART FOUR OF THE GOLDEN GENERATION AVAILABLE ON AUGUST 27
(STEPHEN'S BDAY). THINGS FALL APART COMPLETELY FOR JACK AND
THE EVENTS THAT YOU HAVE READ ABOUT FOR THE PAST THREE
WEEKS ALL COME TO A HEAD.**