

London

1994

### **Hanging in the balance**

They had my attention now. They had me dangling by my ankles over the side of the roof.

‘You need to listen to me and do as I tell you, ‘cos we can come and get you anytime we feel like it.’ Reggie was leaning over the parapet, barely holding his anger.

Now I knew at least they weren’t going to drop me, because they wanted me to do something. Good. I wasn’t going to die tonight. I knew I would be going home, the question now was; in how many pieces?

‘You’re going to go back into work tomorrow and you’re going to tell your boss that you got it all wrong.’ Reggie had to shout over the sound of the rain. You could see he wasn’t enjoying the rain he was blinking a lot and his nice silk shirt was getting all wet. ‘That you made a mistake. That there’s no problem in the department and that everything you found is wrong. You get what I’m telling you?’

So, this was going to end quickly, and what he said also told me that they weren’t going to beat me up too much either. If they needed me back at work tomorrow, then I couldn’t be hospitalised as too many broken bones would lead too many questions.

It reminded me of some of the training exercises I’d had in the army, they made it realistic, but you always knew that your own people would never kill you. So mentally I was already in the clear. This was as terrifying as the school bully trying to stick your head in the toilet. When they tried that on me as a kid I smacked one of them in the mouth and went straight to the teacher and dropped them in it.

But my feet were starting to go a bit numb, mostly due to the pressure from them gripping my ankles. And I could really feel all the blood rushing to my head. I could hear the roaring rush and feel the thumping of my heart as the blood in my head gathered. Sure there was a chance I’d black out if I was hanging around for too long. But there were two of them to do the holding. Fat Boys replacement looked like he might hold on to me for a while, but Leon was starting to sweat and I could feel the tremble in his arms.

‘Yes I understand what you are saying,’ I said loudly and clearly with no real tone and added flatly, ‘Can you pull me up please?’ I was starting to feel really heavy headed.

Leon’s arms suddenly gave out and for one nasty moment I swung from one leg like a pendulum until Fat Boys Replacement grabbed both my legs. Just my luck I’m going to die because these idiots haven’t the strength to intimidate properly.

‘I don’t think you understand what I am telling you. You need to get rid of the report. It has to disappear.’ Reggie was really angry now; this was getting a bit dangerous. I needed to keep them calm.

I kept my tone even, ‘I understand what you are saying, but what I am telling you is I can’t get rid of the report. I can change it. But it’s in the system and I can’t get rid of it. The system knows it’s there.’

I was interrupted by a scream. Now they had Derek hanging next to me. He was shouting, ‘let me up, let me up’ and thrashing around wildly. I glanced at Leon who was really struggling to hold him in place. The strain was showing on his face, getting

flushed and gritting his teeth.

‘Derek! Derek you need to calm down,’ I shouted. ‘If you thrash around he’s more likely to drop you. Look at me, look at me, just be still.’

He was begging now, ‘Please don’t drop me, please don’t drop me’. And he’d wet himself.

‘You need to get rid of the report, or people, like Derek here, will suffer. Do you understand what I am saying?’ Reggie was leaning right over the parapet his face red and full of venom, his mouth full of spit as he roared at me.

‘Okay,’ I promised. ‘I’ll make it all go away. Just pull him up.’

Leon was shaking. His grip wasn’t that good. His left arm gave way. Derek swung about as he thrashed around wildly trying to grab Leon’s other arm, or me, or the side the building. Leon was losing it.

‘Please don’t drop me. Please don’t let me die. Please. Please.’ Derek was wearing jogging bottoms, Leon couldn’t get a proper hold on Derek’s leg. Leon’s hand began to slide past Derek’s ankle, Leon tightened his grip, but all he got was a handful of material. Leon tried to grab Derek’s other leg, but Derek was flaying around too much. The trousers slid from Derek’s leg and within an instant Derek was heading for the ground. Leon was just left holding a pair of trousers like a flag of surrender.

There was a loud short shout and then a sickening thumping slat. Derek hit the ground head first. There was a pool of blood. It was all over for him. They would be sweeping him up and hosing down the bits for a while.

Leon was wide eyed in shock. ‘I didn’t mean to drop him. I didn’t.’ He was looking at the others, no one was making eye contact with him. ‘Really didn’t mean to, oh God,’ he glanced down and then at them, ‘I didn’t mean to, we only wanted to scare him.’

He was staring at me now. ‘I know,’ I said calmly. A small part of me felt sorry for Leon, but only for a split second, until I thought about the widow Hamilton and Derek’s orphan children.

Leon went quiet and walked away from the edge. For a few moments no one spoke. The only sound was the rain beating down.

‘Am I dropping him too, or do you want him up?’ Fat Boys replacement asked easily. As if he was hanging out washing.

‘Don’t fucking drop him,’ Reggie said wearily. ‘He’s no fucking use dead is he?’ he added with heavy exasperation. Fat Boy’s replacement still didn’t get it. ‘Bring him up.’ Reggie waved his hands, like a magician levitating his glamorous assistant.

They pulled me up clear of the parapet and dropped me onto the floor. Reggie crouched down and inches from my face he hissed, ‘Just remember what I told you. And what could happen to you.’

They bundled shocked Leon in the Ranger Rover and then they fled; my ears ringing to the sound of the squealing tyres on the car park floor. I watched the Ranger Rover disappear, sitting in the warm summer rain waiting for the dizziness to subside. It’s at times like these I wished I owned a mobile phone. I must have been feeling faint I wasn’t completely sure where the car park was. Funny how your hometown looks so

different upside down and five floors up isn't it?

## Flies

Apparently it wasn't the smell of the corpse that the neighbours noticed, but the flies. Hundreds and hundreds of nasty black flies that covered the windows like a dirty net curtain.

It had taken the flies pushing out of the louvers and massing onto walkway before people noticed and reported it to the local housing office. Another week passed before someone went round to check and then the wheels were set in motion.

Of course he'd been dead for weeks. Now all that was left to show that the man had lived on this earth was a body shaped stain on the carpet. Body fluids had leached through and etched into the concrete floor leaving his only permanent mark on the world.

After the body had been moved there was the usual weeping and wailing and gnashing of teeth; how could an old man be left like that? Why had no one noticed? What sort of community was it that allowed this to happen? A few pathetic bunches of flowers wrapped in plastic were left on the door step some with note. "To the neighbour I never knew from the couple who should have cared. We're sorry. Rest in Peace."

Not that the corpse had anything to do with me; that was not my concern. No, what concerned me was a cheque the dead man had.

As the dead man seemed to have had no family the Council arranged his funeral and cleared his flat. A sharp eyed Administrative Assistant had spotted the Housing Benefit cheque. They found the cheque amongst his worldly possessions; a tin opener, a tin of new potatoes, a single electrical ring cooker, a small sauce pan on a single table with a single chair. Sitting on the table top a Sporting Life with the day's dog races and possible winners marked out in a stubby biro. Not much of a mark on the world after 86 years.

So there it was. That damned housing benefit cheque for a Mr. Sandhu for £60. Not that this was a problem in itself but the dead man was called Callaghan.

So why did Mr. Callaghan have someone else's money?

The other issue was the Council didn't pay Housing Benefit by cheque to their own tenants they just stuck the money onto the rent account.

So how did he have a cheque that shouldn't have been raised?

Now like an unlucky parcel the cheque had stopped on my desk. That damned cheque and a little green internal memo slip from the Assistant Head of the Legal Services Department asking the Internal Audit Department to investigate and advice. My boss, 'Stan the Man' left the cheque and a short background memo pinned to it from the Housing Department raising the concern. Stan the Man had scribbled out a note. I still have the sticky. "Probably nothing, but can you just check this cheque?" Stan always tried to be so witty.

If I'd have had any sense I would have ripped it up, stuck it in the bin and told them not to worry. But I was younger then, more naive. Had I known it was going to cost me my job, my girlfriend, my home and very nearly my life I would have given it to a colleague to deal with. But I was always too clever for my own good.

I should introduce myself really shouldn't I? My name is Caleb. At the time I was

sitting at my desk studying the cheque it was the summer of 1994 and I was still in my twenties, I working for the London borough of Striving-to-be-Average as Internal Auditor and accountant. Sexy eh?

Well it should have been steady work, easy work and a lot less life threatening than the army was. That hadn't worked for me as well as I had hoped, I'd gone all the way through university sponsored by them, played soldiers at the weekends messing about on Salisbury Plain and all that, trained as an accountant with them too. I got bored and sort active service. But it was that that finally did it for me, I'd seen stuff I wished I hadn't and come too close a couple of times to never seeing anything again and decided enough was enough. Got out, looked around, had a few jobs and then found this role.

I'd been with the Council a short time, made my mark very quickly, and unknown to me a few enemies even faster, but that was in the nature of the work sometimes. Even so I had got into a bit of a rut. So the cheque was a godsend. Something different, something requiring investigation, something needing applied intelligence, and who knows where it might end?

But I digress, let me tell you my tale.

I remember that morning well. I had arrived early as always with my breakfast. First one there and often the last one home, particularly if my girlfriend was away; young, keen and wanting to make a mark. I prised open the floppy plastic lid on my coffee and was enjoying the lovely almond filling and beautiful aroma of my fresh baked croissant. So it started, like all my projects, with a cup of coffee and a think.

Housing Benefit cheques. No point in going to the cash office to see if they knew about the cheque as it had not been cashed. Maybe Housing Benefit; the Council Department which dished out national money to tenants who were having problems paying their rent. It was also the only national benefit which was administered by local Councils and so everyone at the Town Hall was very touchy about it being done properly, as they were watched very closely by Whitehall. I reached for the phone. I could ask George White for help.

George was older than time itself, he'd been in benefits for years, he was methodical, knowledgeable, a perfectionist and a complete bore. There was unfortunately no alternative. I rang him, it was my unlucky day; he was free to see me.

'Well young man,' George took off his glasses very slowly and folded them for effect and let the lace around his neck hold them as he folded his arms and rested the glasses on shelf of his substantial pot belly, 'This worries me.' He leaned back into his chair warming up to what was going to be along lecture if I didn't act quickly, 'This person should not have this cheque.'

I interrupted, 'Yes I realise that. That's why I need your help.' He didn't like to be interrupted; he was hiding his annoyance though. He was "old school" and still quite wary and fearful of the auditor's department, he'd seen "many a man brought down by audit". 'I was hoping you could tell me how this cheque was raised and whether or not they are still being raised?'

'Of course I can,' he beamed sensing a moment of glory coming his way, 'All our

output is traceable that's the beauty of the system which I installed, did you know that before 1986 it wasn't possible to....'

'Actually Mr. White as a matter of fact your ideas are legendary around the organisation. You have a considerable reputation.' For utter tedium was what I wanted to add. 'That's why I am here. So who raised the cheque?'

'Let me see.' Very slowly he put on his glasses back on. They were half-moons which he peered through whilst with great precision and very slowly he began to type with two fingers looking into the VDU as if it were a crystal ball which could see into everyone's misdeeds. After several minutes of wrong entries he had managed to call up the front menu. 'I am not exactly sure who raised this particular cheque,' he bluffed, as he picked up the phone. 'Ah hello? Accounts? Could you help this young man from audit please?' He warbled on and then replaced the phone. 'I am sure they will be able to help.'

Even a task as dull as this had an upside. It would mean going the Accounts Team in the Housing Benefit office. It would mean talking to Debbie. Devine Debbie as she was known. She was stunning; I mean catwalk-model stunning. I grabbed my coat and headed for the cabins. Devine Debbie was an early bird too.

Tucked into a windowless room in the rear of the camp of portable offices, in the corner of the car park, was the Council's Housing Benefit offices and Debbie. Debbie normally protected herself by working behind a barricade of ream upon ream of computer printouts. Some of the reports, she once told me gravely, took hours to print out overnight, just to get the sum figure off the last page.

Debbie and I went a long way back. We'd been at school together and had an unstated pact not to share each other's past, and mistakes, with anyone else. That included the fact that we'd gone out together a long time ago, before I went to college and the army. At some point she met someone else, but there was a little part of me that still, well you know, carried a flame?

'Good morning light of my life,' I beamed. There she was sat at her desk surrounded by boxes and boxes of printouts. In those days before Windows and PCs the computer system used to churn out reams of paper reports that needed to be checked and sent across the organisation to the individual staff for whatever they wanted.

'Out. Whatever it is I have no time. It's Thursday. I am always busy Thursdays. It's reports day. So whatever it is; out. Go. Leave.' She was waving her hands as if ushering a cat out to the back door, but she was all smiles.

'Oh don't be like that I come bring distractions.' I told her what I knew; whilst she listened she took the cheque and began entering numbers into the computer.

'Yes is not right. First I thought a one-off mistake, printing a cheque, it could happen. Some of these temporary assessment officers we have in at the moment, God they are dreadful. We spend half the day correcting entries. But we need the resources with the number of claimants we have now.' Other members of her team had begun to appear. 'Yeah that's for Team One on that desk, two three and five. Four is still running can you tell them please? And can we get this stuff out of here please? Thanks.'

She was back with the screen again. What she saw was obviously a concern for her as she was doing that thing with her necklace again. She wore a crucifix on a fine long gold chain and when she was really concentrating on something she would put the cross in her mouth and roll it her with tongue against her lips so that it span from side to side across mouth. She had been doing it since the third year at school when she got the cross for her birthday. I spent every double physics lesson watching her do it; she had to concentrate hard on physics. Now was not the time to interrupt, I knew an answer would come shortly.

Every so often she would let it fall out and it would drop into her cleavage, she caught me gawping; she smiled 'Excuse me?'

'Sorry.' I blushed.

'Are you ever going to grow up?' She rolled her eyes and tutted jokingly. It was a good job the rest of the team had been sent on errands.

I chuckled. I shrugged my shoulders. 'You tell me.' I smiled and pointing to the screen. 'What have you got for me?'

'Nothing. I am in a happy long term relationship as you know,' she chuckled, 'Oh you meant work didn't you?' She laughed at her own joke. 'There seems to be a lot of these cheques regularly issued, all by one person. Leave it with me and I'll make you a report and give you a call when it's ready.'

I left mission control and made my way through the back office. Half nine and there was almost no staff in, the front counter opened to the public at ten. There was already a long queue standing in the rain waiting for opening time. I could see why there was so much talk about outsourcing this work to a private company.

The reception area was a mess too; the mix of old printed posters for various voluntary and self-help groups, the posters that someone had written in a marker pen and photocopied. "No documents; no claim. No claim; no money. Bring your income proof to support your claim." Hum nice tone. But the one that really said it all; "We will not tolerate rudeness, threats or violence. The police will be called." What were we doing to make people behave that way?

I left the portable buildings and pulled my coat up to fend off the rain and the wind. Someone had wedged the fire exit open at the back of the New Office block. Called the New Office it was already thirty years old and showing its age. During the White Heat of Wilsons' technical revolution I am sure it had been cutting edge. Now the cutting edges were all over the place on the splintered wooden banister rails, or the door handles with over large screws that caught your hands when you tried to open them. I took the stairs that only went up the one floor and was forced to walk through the Accounting Department.

I hated Accounts. It was run by a triumvirate; fusty, dusty and crusty. Each member of the team had a separate wooden desk that was surrounded by shelving from floor to ceiling some twelve feet with rakes and stacks of old boxes and files containing the ledgers and records needed for the accounting process. They were still talking about computerisation. Council Tax had gone on line last year as a priority to get a handle on

the arrears of Poll Tax. This lot wouldn't last in that environment. I smiled and waved at a few of the team as I passed, it was like visiting the natural history museum.

I walked past the locked office that the External Auditors and the District Auditors used when they were in town. We called it the 'Isolation Ward'. With the size of the Council there was nearly always someone from the Auditors on site. They were nice individuals, particularly their leading man Arthur, but you didn't go anywhere near their work unless instructed, or unless you wanted to whistle blow. They had their own room, their own rules and everything was under lock and key. But if you spotted them in the coffee room they'd talk your legs off. You had to run fast, I'd already learnt too much about Arthur's love of weekend sailing to last two lifetimes.

I took the two flights of stairs to the internal audit offices. We were a small band and we were seen as an avant-garde. We had been offered the chance of a pilot scheme for PCs and networking and grabbed it with both hands. A few of the team still had some papers; I stood out, the only desk with nothing on it. Some people used to say that was because I had nothing to do. Bloody luddites!

I busied myself preparing for another audit from my programme schedule, this one an audit into the housing allocations system. The Council wanted to check the rules it used to rationing out its housing, that the rules were being correctly administered as per written policies and procedures. Straight forward stuff, but they also wanted to check that the current system was compliant with housing case law. That bit was a mine field, just when I thought that I understood the case law another case would appear changing everything. I was coming to the conclusion some sort of system to capture and control the legal changes and enforce decision making was what might be needed instead. I would have to talk to a load of people about how that could be made to work.

I must have been engrossed in my thoughts as I hadn't realised how much later in the morning it was and that a vision of loveliness was standing before me again.

'Yes all of these claims have been passed by one person,' Devine Debbie pasted me a piece of paper with a name written on it. Being an open plan office this was a smart move. 'The real question,' she leant forward in a conspiratorial whisper, a move which offered an uninterrupted view straight down her shirt. I struggled to maintain eye contact. 'The real question is how he managed to raise the cheque?'

'Hum', I offered profoundly. Now I found myself now hypnotised by those beautiful blue eyes.

'So everyone knows when the IT team run the system to produce a cheque. Everyone knows that this must be done in a certain time frame. Everyone also knows that any amendment requests have to be done within an hour of that deadline and everyone knows that they aren't checked by the team as there's no time. So everyone assumes that you can just slip any old nonsense into the pile. What no one knows is that we keep an audited track of any amendments which are held on file and can be checked.' She produced with a smile a wedge of paper. 'I got Amelia to check this through against that name and she highlighted those in orange for you. You can keep that.'

As she passed the papers to me her hand brushed my arm. It felt something more

than a touch, or perhaps I just wanted to think that. We chatted for a bit as she left the office and walked down the corridor to the lift I blurted out, 'Have lunch with me?'

'I don't think that's a good idea Caleb,' she sounded slightly cross. 'Caleb I'm married now, and you've got a girlfriend.'

I was flustered. 'It's a thank you,' I offered tentatively, then warming to the idea, 'You've done a great piece of work and I am very grateful and...'

'I think you're desperate not grateful,' she laughed slightly and patted my arm gently, but dismissively.

'I'm grateful to you,' my tone was earnest, 'And even if I weren't any man in their right mind would ask you for lunch. They wouldn't be desperate.' I smiled.

'Stop.' And with a smile she added firmly. 'I am flattered, but stop.'

She was right of course, I felt terrible. 'Now I've upset you. I'm sorry.' Then I chuckled. 'Now let me buy you lunch as a thank you and an apology too? Bring a friend with you, they can chaperon?' I raised my hands in an open gesture and smiled.

She chuckled and shook her head. 'When you've got rid of this person.' She taped the papers I was holding. 'And if you sort your life out.' She held my gaze sternly and then smiled. 'I'm going now.' The lift doors closed on her.

How could I have been so stupid? It was truly crass behaviour, I'd let our past get in the way. An apology was needed. A sorry card? No nothing in writing that could embarrass her further, and another call today would be a mistake. Hum, probably best to leave it for a while.

I leafed through the pile of papers. Debbie had put some notes on it too. It showed that the cheque was not the only one; there had been hundreds mostly made out to the same dozen people and all raised by one member of staff; Derek Hamilton. There was about hundred and fifty thousand pounds worth on these sheets over about a year. I needed to check whether, or not, the dozen people were real, I suspected not. I made myself a coffee and turned on my computer and warmed up the housing system. My job allowed me to use any main frame system the Council had.

Two coffees and a few phone calls to my contacts in the Housing Department proved me right, none of the people were tenants now, but all of the cheques had been cashed. Time to get Mr. Hamilton an appointment, advise him that the interview would be under caution and that he might like to bring some representation, or in his case someone with some legal expertise, with him.

Lunchtime, even if that was going to be a lonely sandwich.

### **And Another Thing**

The alarm went off. Seven o'clock. Summer; the sun shoving its full glory into the bedroom around the edges of the curtains. Thankfully it was summer as we still didn't have central heating installed. It was still a bit nippy for being as naked as I was. I looked around our large bedroom that spread across the whole front of the terrace house we owned. The walls of half removed old wall paper; I really had to do some more decorating this weekend. I rolled over. We had scraped off the polystyrene tiles and now the ceiling was a mass of old brown blobs of dried up glue and a grid of brown stains from the nicotine that had seeped up between the tiles. A kind of mad spotty tartan; McGrubby?

I swung my feet out of bed and walked across the room. Every third floor board still needed to be nailed back down, the wood worm sprayers had left months ago and it was another task that I had not done. It was like walking across a xylophone; at first Gerri had thought it was funny when I did Tom Hanks Big piano impressions as I walked across them. Now it was just a pain in the arse.

I made my way along the short corridor to the bathroom. The house sounded cavernous and it was pretty much empty, me, Gerri and the dog Benji rattling around the three bed terrace. When we bought the house, nearly a year ago, it was a dump and we'd spent thousands and it was still a dump; only with lots of new pink re-plastered walls. Gerri had decided it was an investment, but it was a project that needed more time than we had and it was becoming a chore.

I opened the bathroom door a wave of steam washed over me. She'd obviously been up some time, got showered and dressed. I must have slept right through it all.

Whatever time of year it is, first thing in the morning is always dreadful for me. I always find myself reminded of my own mortality and the fragility of life, rubbing the sleep from my eyes and peering at myself in the mirror, trying to work out if that's grey hair appearing, or some fluff in my fringe.

There was a hole in the bathroom floor, not very big, were some old pipe work had been removed. It looked down into the kitchen. It made communication too easy.

'About time you were up you lazy bugger,' Gerri called from down stairs. 'Listen to me now; I don't have much time, the cab will be here in about five minutes. I had a call this morning and they want me to go to Budapest.' Gerri worked for FastAir the discount travel company, based at Heathrow, her job in internal audit took her all over the world, she was doing well too.

When I first met her she was working in a junior role in their accounts department and studying, within six months of qualifying as an auditor she had leapfrogged into a fairly senior role. She had a fearsome reputation and they would send her in when a blood bath was needed. She was used to giving instructions, particularly to me.

'I'll be a few days I reckon, whilst I am away I want you to call the bathroom and kitchen company, the numbers are on the papers under the magnet on the fridge. Get the lazy feckers here and get the stuff installed. Next week would be good, the week after will do. Anyway I want it done before I come back from Hong Kong at the end of the

month. Do you hear me?’

Gerri had been born and brought up in London, but her Irish accent was strong, you’d have thought she had just come over “from the old country”. She was part of large clan, five brothers and one elder sister; she probably had to shout to be heard as a kid.

‘Would I dare do anything else?’ I muttered.

‘What was that?’ she snapped. ‘Speak up will you.’

‘Yes, call the people, get it fixed up next week,’ I bellowed.

I turned on the stopper on the end of the garden hose that was our current cold water tap and filled the plastic bowl that had become the bathroom sink. As I began to fumble for a razor and shaving cream Gerri appeared in the mirror behind me standing in the doorway. Even now when I think of her my mental picture of her is always as she was then; fully made up and immaculately dressed. She was wearing a classy jacket suit and a simple white silk top. Perfect make up, not a hair out of place, obviously ready to leave for the day. She was everything that I wasn’t; ambitious, successful, glamorous, well paid, and well traveled. And I loved her for it.

She was flicking through her appointment book holding it like a vicar holds open a prayer book about to list the announcements for the week. ‘And get the stuff in for the barbeque. There’s space in the freezer, I don’t want to be doing the shopping last thing. And get some of this decorating stuff sorted will you please? I don’t want my family seeing the house like this for the third time. Are you hearing me?’

‘Yes darling, of course I hear you. I hang on every word you say.’ She hated it when I did that in my Cary Grant voice.

I dressed in some jogging gear and went down stairs. There were signs of frantic breakfast preparation having taken place, but there she was, elegantly dressed, faultless makeup and doled up one small wheelie bag at the ready. A sink brimming with breakfast things, only person I ever met who would eat a full fried breakfast each day and still be skeletal. She noticed that I was looking at the sink. ‘You can deal with that. You’ve time. And your dog needs a proper walk,’ she added pointy.

‘It’s our dog,’ I tried to correct her; she was having none of it.

‘No I never wanted a dog. He’s your job. That’s my taxi. I’ll see you. If you have time there’s some other things that need doing listed on the fridge.’ And with a click clack of heels and the xylophoning of loose and fixed floor boards and the rattle of trolley wheels she was through the front door and away.

In total she’d been home less than forty eight hours, we had argued three times and she had started sex and changed her mind twice. A more sensitive man would think maybe something wasn’t right, I couldn’t see it at the time.

We’d been together nearly three years. We had met on an auditors training course. Holed up in a hotel the course had been dull as hell, I can’t even remember what it was about, but I remembered Gerri. Not only because she was very sharp, correcting the lectures slight errors and always double checking any points that weren’t crystal clear, but as we sat opposite each other on one of those horse shoe arrangements so beloved of trendy trainers, I had spent the entire first morning studying her fantastic legs and in the

afternoon she kept smiling and checking me out too. The evenings on the course were our own to fill. The two of us ignored everyone else and went out for dinner and drinks. By the second evening we were inseparable, you could call it love at first sight, we'd been together ever since. We found out we both lived in the same part of London. Within weeks we moved in together and about a year ago we had bought the house.

Although we did the same kind of work and had some similar interests, actually we were very different people. I like the odd party and can be sociable now and again, but for most of the time I liked it to be quiet, I'd seen enough action for more than one lifetime. I wanted to take life more gently; I was in a happy easy going mental place.

Gerri was five years younger than me and still liked to party and was very clear about what she wanted. She was driven and ambitious, but not that you would tell that. At work she was focused but not brash, she could charm, but it never felt false, even when I knew she didn't really care about the person. She wanted someone who would come along for the ride and also I think someone who could help her to get there.

It was becoming clear that that I wasn't what she was really looking for. For the last few months I had felt as if I was on probation; change my ways, or she'd be changing me. I wasn't sure if I really wanted to, but I was too lazy to make up my mind.

I put on my trainers and a jacket, grabbed the house keys and a lead and whistled Benji.