

# **DEADLY DETERMINATION**

BY  
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## **Dedication**

**For my father Gerard....**

Also By I D Jackson

Dead Charming.

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# **DEADLY DETERMINATION**

“LAYING BLAME AT THE BLESSED FEET OF THE DEAD MEANS LESS THAN NOTHING - THE DEAD CAN FEEL NO MORE GUILT”

## Chapter One

Jimmy O'Dwyer didn't believe in love any more, let alone heart-stopping-can't-breathe-without-you type of love, so the thunderbolt that hit him the first time he saw Sarah was wholly unexpected. He tried to rationalise these new, alien feelings, but his heart trumped his brain and he found himself confused and increasingly vulnerable: something Jimmy wasn't used to.

Jimmy and Sarah met on a dating site, sugadates.com with Jimmy subscribing as a first time on-line dater, and with the firm intention of looking for only a casual relationship. He set his sights on meeting a slim blonde, not attractive enough to overshadow him and someone who wouldn't challenge him intellectually - someone who might even laugh at his jokes. The last thing Jimmy wanted was pressure, and he definitely didn't want to be tied down.

The first time he saw Sarah's profile picture he skipped over it, instantly deciding that she was out of his league. She was a stunning blonde with actress good looks and a body to match – too attractive to fit in with his idea of the ideal casual partner and besides, his slowly growing paunch told him that he needed to fish a little lower in the river.

One of his mates with more experience in the on-line dating arena warned him that such websites often send auto-messages to male users, purporting to be from gorgeous women, so that the punter gets reeled in to buy the most expensive and non-refundable subscription. Consequently, when Sarah contacted him out of the blue he was naturally dismissive - in fact he ignored her message.

Then she contacted him again. She said she was fairly local and looking for a casual relationship and Jimmy, despite his misgivings typed a reply. He was deliberately flippant and offhand; cocky even, but Sarah seemed to enjoy the banter and eventually they talked on the phone. He loved her accent straight away, a mixture of soft Scottish with a twist of Liverpool Scouse and they arranged to meet in town. Somewhere public, she said, just in case she was as bad a judge of character as she was a cook.

Sarah was even more gorgeous in real life than her profile pictures on sugadates.com suggested. She arrived in impossibly high-heeled black patent shoes that made her legs look ten yards long. Her simple crop-top and black shorts hugged her slim figure perfectly. As she moved through the bar, she walked with a lithe, almost bored gait and every head, both male and female turned to watch her go.

When she reached Jimmy her inviting mouth smiled, as did her twinkling brown eyes. She hugged him and kissed his cheek, the perfume she wore overwhelming his senses. Her touch was light, almost angelic, and

he felt his entire being begin to quiver as they sat down together, her blonde hair cascading over her slender shoulders Jimmy's breath seemed to catch in his throat and he was instantly hooked. They talked for hours, Sarah keeping eye-contact, growing shy at the appropriate places and laughing almost every time Jimmy offered one of his dry quips. They talked about their families, their loves and hates and with every moment that passed Jimmy felt more at ease, any lingering suspicions rapidly fading.

When the bar closed Jimmy called a taxi. In the quiet of the warm evening he could hear the beat of his own heart as they stood waiting outside. Sarah took his hand and smiled, telling him that the evening had been far more than she'd hoped for and when the car came she leant in for a kiss. Their lips met for the first time, sending an electric shock through Jimmy that shot straight to his manhood. The kiss lingered, Sarah opening her mouth enough to show enthusiasm, but not enough to invite Jimmy's waiting tongue.

As he watched the taxi's tail lights disappear at the top of the road he was both disappointed and strangely elated that she hadn't asked that the evening continue: she was perfect; he couldn't have known that in a few short days he would be staring at the wreckage that was once her face with his own life hanging by a thread.

The couple's second meeting was for coffee a few mornings later. The coffee shop was busy, with students and young mothers occupying most of the seats. While Jimmy stood waiting for the barista to craft two frothing cappuccinos, Sarah found an intimate table in one corner. Amidst the aroma of freshly ground coffee and the sound of incessantly chattering voices they talked as though they'd been friends all of their lives. Jimmy had made an effort for the rendezvous, buying designer jeans, a new shirt and pointed black shoes, but Sarah's timeless style was in a different league. As she sat there smiling at him, her teeth white and her eyes shining as though under camera lights Jimmy found himself asking why she'd got in touch and how anyone as gorgeous as she was could be interested in him.

Sarah's laugh rang in Jimmy's ears like a clear bell in the mountains, corresponding to her soft Scottish accent - *you just didn't seem like the rest of the dicks* – and she took his hand across the table. They talked about her previous relationships and she bemoaned the fact that she always seemed to fall for the wrong guy. Every man she'd met had abused her either physically or mentally and Jimmy found himself unexpectedly angry as her stories unfolded. He surprised himself with his reaction, telling Sarah that she needn't worry and that she'd made her best decision in choosing him. She'd reacted by squeezing his hand

harder and then leant in tentatively, almost shyly, kissing Jimmy lightly on the lips. Before they went their separate ways they arranged to meet again that Saturday, Sarah suggested that they make up a picnic and drive up to Southport, where they could spend the day on the beach and Jimmy readily agreed.

He prepared carefully for a sunny day on the sand, dressing as young as he dared in canvas shorts and a collared tee-shirt, finished off with deck shoes. Studying his face in the mirror, he thought he could probably get away with the thirty-six he'd posted on his internet profile and worked gel into his short black hair for a spiked effect - the product also helping to disguise the grey that was beginning to encroach at the sides.

Jimmy owned two cars. His pride and joy was his red Porsche 911, but so far he'd been careful to hide from Sarah how successful he was. He wanted her to like him for who he was, not what he had, so he chose his second car for the journey - a workaday Audi. When he joined sugadates.com he had been looking for a casual relationship, but he was beginning to imagine Sarah as much more. He wanted to impress her with his charm and wit, rather than his two-million pound house and lifestyle to match.

Jimmy had once been married, and his life had been complete, happy and fulfilled with a woman he believed he would spend the rest of his days loving. Angela was the perfect match for him, both mentally and emotionally and their union had been as close to perfect as any marriage could be. But since Angela was cruelly taken from him he had become very much a loner. There was nothing dramatic about the event that blighted his life - there was no heart-wrenching accident or long, wasting disease – just sudden stark devastation.

Jimmy and Angela had spent the fateful day separately - Jimmy playing golf, whilst his young wife went shopping with some girlfriends. As arranged, they met later at the Cabin Club, one of Liverpool's most famous nightspots. A bitter wind came gusting round the corner as the club opened its doors to a queue of eager punters. The couple were huddling together against the gathering storm and hadn't even had time to speak or greet one another properly when Angela's bright blue eyes suddenly rolled into the back of her skull and she crumpled to the ground at her husband's feet.

At first Jimmy thought she must have been drinking with her friends at lunchtime, so recruiting the help of a willing doorman he hauled Angela to her feet. To his everlasting regret, Jimmy was almost laughing as his wife's head rolled uncontrollably against the bouncer's shoulder. It was when the bald, black-suited security man let go of Angela and she hit the ground for a second time that Jimmy realised there was something wrong beyond too much alcohol.

The stocky doorman instantly took over, assuring Jimmy that he was trained to give first aid. He pressed his ear to Angela's chest whilst grasping her neck at the carotid artery, searching for a pulse. Afterwards, Jimmy remembered the would-be first-aider hesitating before catching his eye and when he said that Angela needed an ambulance, the lack of urgency in his voice gave him all the information he needed.

Jimmy was close to being blown off his feet as he battled to gain the Cabin Club entrance, panic rising within him. He covered the few feet of pavement as though it was miles, each footstep hard-won against the wind, until eventually he fell panting through the door. Somehow finding his voice, he screamed, *Ambulance! Ambulance!* at anyone who would listen.

Angela was pronounced dead-on-arrival at Liverpool Royal Infirmary. It turned out that the love of Jimmy's life had been a ticking bomb. The heart that he thought would grow ever-more loving until the day he died had in reality been a disease ridden muscle, ready to collapse at any moment.

Sarah represented a long overdue new start, and even if their meeting at the beach turned into a relationship which ultimately failed, Jimmy felt proud of himself. He felt as though he might finally be moving on; he wanted to learn to trust the world again and he was ready to take a chance. After Angela's death Jimmy had thrown himself into work, making his already successful technology business into a household name and he'd reaped the benefits financially, but deep down he knew there was something missing in his life - perhaps that something was Sarah.

Jimmy drove from his house in Woolton Village, easily the smartest address in Liverpool, to pick up Sarah at her flat in the city centre and the moment she levered her long, tanned legs into the car, the electricity between them intensified. She laughed happily at the things he said, and her eyes were alive and sparkling; Jimmy reciprocated with the easy charm and wit that he knew she was beginning to enjoy. The twenty mile journey passed in a heartbeat and Jimmy drove onto the beach - flat sand stretched north, with the dunes rising gently to the south.

"Flat or hilly?" asked Jimmy casually, willing Sarah to choose the dunes so that the couple could share some privacy. Despite the fact it was a Saturday, the beach was almost deserted with no more than a dozen groups dotted around the flat sand - mostly families, and with the odd walker throwing sticks into the water for a dog to retrieve.

"Hilly," replied Sarah, a smile broadening her lips.

Jimmy drove south along the sand for a quarter of a mile, well away from Southport's promenade and static fairground, eventually inserting his Audi between two huge sand dunes that looked like they'd never seen another human being. Sarah got out of the car immediately, kicking off her sandals and stretching her long arms above her head. Jimmy watched as she arched her body, ending up on tip-toe and showing off her perfectly formed bottom and long, tanned back. He was almost drooling as he stepped out of the car and into the heat of the day. Sarah began to climb the nearest sand hill and Jimmy watched as she quickly disappeared. He followed her bare footprints in the virgin sand, eventually coming upon her as she settled herself into the golden landscape.

"I've got rugs and a picnic," said Jimmy, trying to keep his voice even, despite the surge of passion that threatened to break it at any moment.

"Ok, great - I'm starving!" said Sarah and he carefully laid out the rugs and opened the picnic basket he'd prepared.

"I've got pate and biscuits to dip, chicken sandwiches and cheese," he said as he rummaged through. "Oh, and this!" he added pulling out a bottle of champagne with two glasses.

She laughed as Jimmy popped the cork and poured the frothing Bollinger into the flutes. He handed one to Sarah and the couple touched glasses.

"To us!" Jimmy found himself saying.

"To us!" reciprocated Sarah, and Jimmy's face broke into a smile that he thought might shatter his cheeks.

Lunchtime slipped into mid-afternoon as the couple ate, drank, swapped childhood stories and began to dig into each other's lives. Every story that Jimmy told, Sarah laughed in the appropriate places, stroking his arm or touching the bare skin of his leg and sending sparks through his entire being.

With the champagne finished, they found themselves sitting as closely together as two humans could, the outside of Jimmy's left leg square against Sarah's right. The laughter stopped long enough for Jimmy to hold Sarah's gaze; her shining brown eyes seemed to impel him forward and he moved his lips slowly toward hers. In response, Sarah's head moved toward his, as though magnetically attracted, until their lips met in a hungry, passionate kiss.

The thrust of her passion forced him backward until she lay on top of him, her mouth working his with her tongue, flicking him into frenzy and he forced his head off the ground, kissing her harder and longer. His hands found the clasp to her bikini and as he felt the fastening give, he was relieved when she didn't push away, but instead reached for the button of his canvas shorts. Sarah smiled as her hand dug down to find

Jimmy ready for her and she pushed his shorts to his knees before straightening her back to a sitting position. Slowly she repositioned herself, allowing Jimmy's willingness to slip inside her. Despite the fact that she'd taken control, Sarah's face showed a slight embarrassment which set Jimmy's libido on fire. Her touch, whilst commanding was light with gentle persuasion and as she moved rhythmically, her moans were genuine with delight.

An hour passed, with the couple becoming more comfortable exploring each other's bodies, touching every inch of bare skin with gentle fingers or caressing lips until Sarah eventually broke off giggling to lie on Jimmy's chest. The couple were naked, the sun beating against their bare skin.

"Ever done it in the dunes before?" she asked, as her long slender finger spelled out her name through Jimmy's chest hair.

"Nope, it's a first for me!" laughed Jimmy. "Lucky no-one came by."

"I'm not sure we'd have noticed," giggled Sarah.

The couple lay silent for a few moments, enjoying their closeness.

"I can't believe this," said Jimmy eventually.

"What?" asked Sarah. "The fact that no-one saw us, or that it didn't rain?"

Jimmy laughed, "No, the fact that you're amazing and we're here together," he said.

"I'm far from amazing, believe me," said Sarah leaning up on one elbow, showing a breast that remained firm against the gravity that must be forcing it downwards.

"Don't worry – they *are* mine!" giggled Sarah.

"So are mine!" said Jimmy, and Sarah laughed as he jiggled his own breasts around.

"So, where do we go from here?" he asked.

"Back to Liverpool and reality?"

"This could be our reality, if you wanted it to be," said Jimmy quietly. Sarah let her fingers run through Jimmy's black hair.

"I thought you wanted casual?"

"I thought so too," and he lifted himself on one elbow to begin kissing her again.

Engrossed in each other, neither of them heard footsteps approaching across the soft sand. Their stalker was dressed unseasonably all in black, with a wax jacket and heavy boots - the face was encased in a black balaclava, revealing nothing but dark, dispassionate eyes. One second Jimmy and Sarah were alone, naked and enjoying each other, and the next there was a double-barrelled sawn-off shotgun aimed at their heads. Sarah saw the weapon first and immediately broke off, falling backwards in a tangle of limbs. When Jimmy instinctively turned

to see what was happening he found to his horror that he was staring down the barrels of the gun.

The sun was squarely behind the intruder, bringing the gunmetal into sharp focus. Jimmy could suddenly feel each grain of sand in his fingers as they subconsciously clawed into the ground and the earth seemed to stop revolving as each second that passed seemed to last an hour.

The stalker paused, silently assessing the pair lying naked in the sand. Jimmy could only watch as the gloved finger began to apply pressure on the trigger and then release again. His eyes took in every detail of the smooth, black leather as the fingers inside twitched again, as though trying to find their courage. He could almost feel the indecision as the index finger again coiled around the small metal trigger, and his body tensed to almost rigid as the stranger's inner turmoil seemed to resolve itself and deadly determination took hold: then the finger began to squeeze.

The noise as the gun went off was deafening at close quarters; the flash from the barrel blinded Jimmy, and the smell of cordite was overpowering. A mixture of disbelief and horror washed over him as he turned to Sarah. Her face, pockmarked with black pellets, had disintegrated into a mess of ripped skin and blood; her eyes, nose and mouth were gone and her head twisted from side to side for what seemed like an age before it stopped moving, blindly facing up to the baking sun.

Jimmy turned to the murderer. With tears streaming from his eyes he mouthed a *why* before the unbelievable horror dawned that the gun was now pointing at him.

He froze.

## Chapter Two

Liverpool Crown Court, an imposing eight-storey building, stands at the head of Derby Square. The brown brick seat of justice was constructed in the 1970's, an unconvincing pastiche of the castle that occupied the same site from the 13<sup>th</sup> to the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

"For the benefit of the court, would you state your name and rank please," asked the young female barrister.

"I am Detective Sergeant Michael Strand, attached to the Matrix Serious and Organised Crime Investigation Team based at Canning Place in Liverpool."

The courtroom was the largest available, newly refurbished in light oak. The judge was seated high above proceedings, with the counsels for

defence and prosecution facing him and the jury sitting in two rows of six to his right. Accused men and women were encased in a Perspex box, seemingly suspended in the centre of the room, and there were galleries for spectators and journalists to the left and at the back of the room. It was Friday, and today the courtroom was largely empty of spectators, save for a few members of the accuseds' families and two journalists.

"Can you give the court an overview of your career please?"

DS Mike Strand was experienced at giving evidence and his response was flawless.

"I attained a First Class Honours Degree in Criminology and Forensic Science from the Institute of Criminology at the University of Cambridge before joining the Police Service. For the first fifteen years of my career I was stationed in Colchester, Essex, where I became an authorised firearms officer and a member of the Police Firearms Officers' Association. I have reached the rank of Detective Sergeant, and have been honoured with various commendations, including the Queen's Commendation for Valuable Service - relating to my involvement in helping to control the Brixton Riot. I joined the Matrix Team in Liverpool three years ago."

The prosecuting barrister adjusted her robe and took a moment to scan the jury. Kate Jacobs was pleased that she'd been allotted this case. In her view it was uncomplicated, with a better than average chance of leading to a conviction. Satisfied that the twelve jurors had listened and understood, she continued.

"Thank you, Detective Sergeant," she said, the credentials of her witness now indisputable. "Now, could you relate to the court the events of January the eighteenth this year?"

DS Mike Strand produced a note-book from the breast pocket of his neat grey suit jacket and began to read.

"I responded to a complaint from a member of the public who called to inform the police that shots had been fired at or near 66, Eldridge Road in Netherton, a suburb of Liverpool. The call was duly relayed to Matrix Headquarters at Canning Place at 9.43pm, and as I was the duty officer-in-charge I organised a Matrix Response Unit to attend."

"For the benefit of the jury, Detective Sergeant," interjected Jacobs, "could you explain to the court how the Matrix team operates, and how they normally respond to complaints such as the one you have described?"

"The Matrix Disruption Team, led by Chief Inspector Lawson, consists of units made up of inspectors, sergeants and constables," said Strand. "Each unit provides a Level Two response to gun crime, faction based criminality and cash-in-transit robberies. They are the first response to any instances of organised criminal activity within the Merseyside Police

Force area. Matrix officers are specifically trained to deal with a variety of disorder situations, especially firearms and organised crime.”

“Thank you Detective,” said the Barrister. “So, returning to the night in question, you mobilised a Matrix Response Unit and responded to the complaint?”

“Yes,” said Strand. “A typical unit will consist of six highly trained armed officers. We arrived at 66, Eldridge Road nine minutes after the initial complaint was made, secured the area and entered the house.”

“What did you find?” asked Jacobs, confident that her witness was competently guiding the jury, who were satisfyingly perched on the edge of their seats.

“Upon entering the house we carried out a room search, discovering two men,” Strand referred to his notes, “Winston Evans in the kitchen and Andrew Kovak in a downstairs toilet. We also discovered a Browning Buck Mark pistol that appeared to have been recently discharged, an assortment of knives and a quantity of a Class A drug, later identified as cocaine.”

“For the benefit of the jury,” asked the Barrister, “are the two men you discovered at 66 Eldridge Road present in court today?”

“Yes, they are,” replied Mike Strand, and dutifully pointed to the dock where two men with sullen expressions sat caged within the Perspex.

“You say a quantity of a Class A drug was discovered?” went on Jacobs. “We will hear from an expert witness as to the exact nature of the find, but in your opinion, Detective Sergeant, was the quantity found in keeping with personal use?”

“No,” replied Strand. “There were several stashes found at the house during our preliminary search which amounted to more than the scope of personal use.”

“Thank you,” said the barrister, “and can you enlighten the court regarding the nature of the fire-arm?”

“The Browning Buck Mark is a semi-automatic pistol firing point two-two long rifle ammunition with a magazine holding ten rounds. The gun is lightweight at 34 ounces and easily concealed, being just nine and a half inches in length. Upon discovery of the weapon, the magazine contained six bullets and had recently been discharged.”

“Can we have Exhibit A1 please?” asked Jacobs.

A court usher solemnly responded, retrieving a plastic exhibit bag appropriately labelled and containing the alleged gun, which he passed to Mike Strand in the witness box.

“Is this the firearm that you discovered Detective Sergeant?” asked the barrister.

“Yes, it is,” replied Strand and the usher dutifully relieved him of the weapon before moving over to the foreman of the jury and presenting him with the package to view and then pass amongst the others.

The young prosecuting lawyer waited whilst the weapon was circulated amongst the twelve jurors, most of whom turned it over in their hands as though they had discovered some precious diamond. Mike Strand continued to give his evidence for a further half hour until Jacobs was more than confident that the two increasingly nervous defendants would be certain to review their Not Guilty pleas in the light of the weight of evidence against them.

After lunch DS Mike Strand again took the stand for the formality of cross examination. The evidence placing Evans and Kovak at the scene, together with the discovery of Class A drugs and the firearm, was watertight. The added presence of cordite engrained in the fibres of clothing removed from Andrew Kovak gave Strand the confidence that his session in the witness box would be brief.

The barrister with the onerous task of defending the clearly guilty men rose slowly. Dressed in a black gown and with stiff collar-bands and horse-hair wig, Anthony de Ferrers was an old campaigner from an ancient Liverpool family law firm who had built a well-earned reputation through generations of tradition, defending criminals against prosecution and with some notable successes.

De Ferrers took his time, sifting through his notes and ensuring that he had the full attention of the jury - he wanted his questions to count.

“DS Strand, just to recap,” he began dryly, “you say that you received a complaint from a member of the public that shots had been fired at 66, Eldridge Road, Liverpool on Friday the eighteenth of January this year at approximately 9.43pm and duly attended with a Matrix Response Unit of six men, including yourself.”

De Ferrers again consulted his notes, drawing an almost imperceptible sigh from the presiding judge monitoring proceedings from his lofty perch.

“Upon entering the house, you discovered my clients and arrested them accordingly.”

“That’s correct,” said Strand nervously, unsure as to whether a question had actually been asked.

“When did you give your warning?” asked Anthony de Ferrers.

“When we entered the property,” replied Strand, his brow furrowing in perplexity at the question.

De Ferrers wearily turned to face the jury, “*When we entered the property,*” he said, drawing his eagle-like eyebrows as far toward his horse-hair wig as his features would allow.

Strand felt his confidence begin to wane, not because of the question that had been posed, which was innocuous enough, but because of the barrister's reaction to his answer. The fact that Anthony de Ferrers then began to rummage through his papers again, leaving Mike Strand to stand waiting in the witness box for a full minute, did nothing to settle the detective sergeant's nerves.

"In your statement," continued De Ferrers eventually, "you say that you gained entry to 66, Eldridge Road with the use of the Enforcer Kinetic Breach device which, for the benefit of the jury, is a tool commonly used by a Matrix Response Unit to compromise the door of a property and thereby gain a surprise entry. It is accepted that where shots have been fired and there may be an immediate danger to life, a warrant to enter a suspected property duly signed by a judge is not required."

"That is correct," stated DS Strand.

"Might it not have been more prudent to wait?" suggested De Ferrers. "Perhaps covering the two main exits to the house and using communication methods to persuade the occupants to evacuate the property in a peaceful manner?"

"I didn't think so," countered Strand. "It is established practice to adopt the Merseyside Police zero-tolerance policy when dealing with complaints of a firearm having been discharged in a suburban area."

"I see. But surely there are rules and guidelines that must be followed? One of which being clearly to warn occupants of a property of your intentions **before** you proceed to gain entry in such a violent manner?"

Strand gained eye contact with Kate Jacobs, only to find that her puzzled expression mirrored his own.

De Ferrers turned to the jury.

"In the face of the facts, nobody can deny the success of the zero-tolerance policy adopted by Merseyside Police, and especially the role therein of the Matrix Disruption Team. It is generally known that violent crime in the city has fallen by almost forty percent since the adoption of this policy. However, Members of the Jury, there are certain rules and procedures that must still be strictly observed in order to ensure that police entering a property do so lawfully, otherwise who knows what might happen? Perhaps a Matrix Response Unit might crash through your door one evening in response solely to a malicious call from a neighbour."

"My Lord," interjected Jacobs. "I must object to this line of questioning!"

"I agree," responded the judge. "Mr De Ferrers, please kindly confine your questions and observations to the facts of the case without speculating as to the future safety of the jurors."

De Ferrers nodded deferentially before continuing.

“Very well - D.S Strand, I ask you again, when did you give your warning?”

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An hour later DS Mike Strand was in the bathroom on the sixth floor at Canning Place, Liverpool Police HQ. As he washed his hands he found himself staring into the mirror. Producing a short comb that was missing several teeth, he drew it through his thinning black hair and noticed not for the first time that there seemed fewer strands on top of his conical shaped head to cover his scalp. He used his fingers to push down the grey sideburns that framed his face and checked his yellowing teeth for any debris remaining from the ham and cheese sandwich he'd eaten between appearances in the witness box.

“I should have told that De Ferrers to piss off,” he muttered to his reflection. “Don't know who the fuck he thinks he is. Hope he chokes on the dinner his fat wife cooks for him.”

At the image of Anthony De Ferrers choking to death over dinner a sly smile crept across Strand's lips, turning his features in an instant from fox-like to rat-like, with his long nose taking centre stage.

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The Matrix Serious and Organised Crime Investigation Team was housed in a suite of brightly lit offices on the sixth floor at Canning Place. As a Detective Sergeant, Mike Strand was based in a shared office with colleagues of the same rank. His desk, computer and personal filing system were against one wall, affording him a degree of privacy, but he despised his peers and he was certain he deserved more respect than his position in the office suggested.

“Cocked up again?” asked DS Pete Dolan as Strand reached his desk, which was the closest to his own.

Dolan was overweight, unkempt and outspoken, and was the main cheerleader amongst the Matrix team that Strand was a liability. Strand didn't reply, stopping behind his seat to stare at his desk.

Anger blazed as he saw a rubber chicken sitting up against his computer screen; a note was pinned to it, crudely written in red - *Cockney Cock-Up*.

“Who the f...” he began, before quickly regaining control over his initial sense of outrage.

He knew that if he showed he was bothered by such a childish insult, the jibes would continue for a week.

Turning to face his peers, he was aware of the concentrated stare of twenty experienced officers, who had all stopped what they were doing to watch his reaction. Strand managed a grin, thin at first before spreading slowly across his face and producing a forced, but otherwise genuine-looking smile of delight.

“Thanks fellas,” he said. “I can always rely on you guys to keep me on my toes. You’re the best team ever.”

The smile remained on his face until his colleagues lost interest in the disappointing result of their mockery and turned back to their work, shaking heads or tutting to themselves. Strand continued to smile as wide as he was able, until even Dolan returned to his computer screen with a chuckle.

*Bastards!* Thought Strand - *I hope you all fucking die in a hail of bullets!*

“Strand,” boomed a voice behind him, “my office please.” DS Mike Strand didn’t need to turn around to identify who was summoning him.

“And get rid of that bloody chicken.” said the voice.

Stuffing the offensive item into the wastepaper bin under his desk, Mike Strand followed the sound of the voice and headed for the door marked Chief Inspector Lawson. When he went in Lawson was already back behind his desk as though he hadn’t moved. With his head buried in a file he said without any preliminaries,

“Close the door behind you, and sit.”

Chief Inspector Lawson was head of the Matrix Disruption Team and cherished his record with pride. He’d been instrumental not only in cutting crime across the city, but also controlling organised gangs and limiting their impact on the community. The zero tolerance policy adopted by Merseyside Police had been Lawson’s brain-child, and he wore his success like a badge emblazoned on his smart blue suit. Mike Strand did as instructed and took his place in front of his superior’s desk, settling into the faux leather armchair for the dressing-down he was sure he was about to receive. Eventually Chief Inspector Lawson abandoned the file, and removing his steel-rimmed spectacles began to stare at Strand as though he had discovered the ability to melt flesh at will. Strand shifted uncomfortably in his chair, feeling, not for the first time, as though he were back in the headmaster’s study waiting patiently for a lecture before receiving his no doubt well deserved six-of-the-best. Lawson’s office was spacious but sparsely furnished with a huge desk, four chairs and random book shelves loaded with Police Almanacs and text books. The only nod to any life outside of the office were three framed pictures that stood on his desk facing away from any visitors, keeping the images private.

“What happened today exactly?”

“I gave evidence at the Evans and Kovak trial and came straight back here, Sir,” replied Strand feigning confidence.

Chief Inspector Lawson was a big man. Standing six feet seven and weighing in at more than twenty stones, his physical presence was overwhelming.

“Yes, yes, I know that,” he said, barely able to disguise his irritation. “I meant during your evidence! Did you tell the defence that you had forgotten to give a clear warning of who you were *before* you battered down the door of 66, Eldridge Road?”

Mike Strand suddenly felt like a cornered animal.

“Not exactly, Sir,” he said.

“Well, what exactly *did* you tell the court?” asked Lawson speaking slowly as if he were addressing a half-wit.

Strand took a moment to compose himself, pulling his note book from the inside pocket of his grey jacket and flipping it open to find the correct page to refer to.

“We called our warning before we entered the property,” he said.

“Well, Miss Jacobs the prosecuting barrister contacted the Director of Public Prosecutions Office to let Michael Adams QC know that the case had all but fallen apart because you implied in court that you had in fact given your warning as you entered the property, and *not* before. Adams then duly telephoned me,” Lawson paused to allow his words to hit home. “To summarise a very heated discussion, I am now due to appear in the witness box to testify as to the integrity of my team in following procedure.” Lawson paused, his stare intensifying to the point where his pupils seemed to withdraw leaving blood red orbs popping from his face.

“What do you think I should tell them?”

During this burst of rhetoric the chief inspector’s body had slowly, but inexorably moved across the desk towards Strand, who now seemed pinned into his seat and half his height of five feet eleven.

After a few intense seconds Lawson slumped back into his groaning chair and began finger-combing his straw like hair, shaking his head back and forth so that the loose skin that hung from his jowls bounced rhythmically from side to side.

Strand sat up straight and considered the man sitting opposite. He imagined himself producing a Glock 17 pistol and calmly walking round the desk before pressing the nuzzle firmly into the back of his superior’s head. *Pulling the trigger would be the easy part, he thought. Cleaning up the fat bastard’s brains off the floor would be the real problem.*

“So?” said Lawson at last. “What do I tell them?”

With the image of Lawson’s brains spattered all over the pictures of his family, Strand found the confidence to parry his accuser.

“You can be certain, Sir,” he began, “that I gave a clear warning *before* the team entered 66, Eldridge Road.”

“Why didn’t you say that when questioned in the witness box?”

“I’m sure I *did* Sir - De Ferrers, the defence counsel, somehow made it seem as though I hadn’t.”

“Yes, he can be a clever bastard,” agreed Lawson, his posture showing that he was mellowing.

Strand had been well aware that De Ferrers was playing a game, trying to clutch at any straw in the face of insurmountable evidence against his clients, and this last-ditch attempt to have the trial thrown out on a technicality would fail if Strand maintained that he had shouted a warning. Seeing that Lawson was somewhat placated, Strand merely nodded silently, he didn’t want to open his mouth again and say something that would inadvertently land him back in hot water.

Lawson stood up, making a point of walking round the desk, and Strand stood too, realising that his dressing-down must be over.

“Look Mike,” said Lawson, “I need officers that love their work and that I can rely on to do the job right first time.”

“I think I’ve proven over...” began Strand, but Lawson waved his platitudes away.

“The other sergeants think you’re a liability,” he went on, “and I’m not sure. You’ve been with us here in Liverpool for three years now and I expect more from you.” Strand stayed silent.

“I’m teaming you up with DI Bellows and DS Dolan - just so you’re in the know, I’ll be asking them to appraise your performance over the next few weeks.”

Now it was Strand’s turn to become angry, “I’m not a probationer!” he said. “I don’t need to have my hand held by Dolan.”

“This isn’t your first mistake,” said Lawson, his voice becoming firm again. “You need to prove to me that you’re still right for the job.”

“Or?”

Without answering the question, Chief Inspector Lawson opened the door to let Strand out.