

CHAPTER 9

Home But Not Alone

ALDO

‘What the fuck wis that?’

Layin oan the bed, stripped doon tae ma joggies, ah mute *The Sopranos*. It soonds like someboady’s movin aboot doonstairs. Cannae be though. Roxy’s taken Jennifer and wee Bruce tae spend a fortnight at her parents in Peebles. It still a sare yin, obviously. Chrimbo oan ma tod, ah mean. But Rox understood that this time ae year is the maist hectic oan the business front. Anywey, probably best ah hud back fae throwin a self-pity pairty. Straightenin up at the double ah listen carefully fur any sparks ae life in the hoose. Then, ah hear the creaky flairboards in the hallway. ‘Fuck this,’ ah tell massel, whilst ah quietly rake aboot fur some soart ae blunt instrument. Alas, ah come up huddin nuttin mair than ma dick. Chances are it’s simply some junkie dippin their smelly hand in ma cookie jar fur an easy cash injection. Or less likely it’s an auld grudge come tae collect. Irrelevant weighin up the list ae suspects ah suppose. Whoever decided tae spoil ma Saturday night. It’s aw gid, eh? cos they willnae be leavin this hoose withoot a harsh lesson in respectin others’ property and a thorough interrogation.

Ah’m left hinkin what’s gonnae gie me the element ae surprise until ah hear fitsteps comin up the staircase. Times up, so ah stash massel behind the half-closed door, primed fur a little hand-tae-hand combat. Seconds tick by and the doors finally pushed open. Efter which in slithers a chancer dressed in aw black. He casts his torch aroond the room. Entirely ignorant ae the fact that ah’m aboot tae set this bastard straight. Tiptaein behind the dodgy cunt, treadin carefully. Ah fire oaff a solid right hand when he goes tae turn in ma direction. The punch is delivered perfectly, foaldin

him better than an iron board. His lights go oot and the torch flies oot his hand. But aw that pent up rage comes pourin doon oan him when ah start maulin the prick.

‘You picked the wrong fuckin hoose!’ ah keep screamin, grabbin him by his collar as the sharp blows continue tae land. Each soond ae the punches kin probably be heard at the other end ae the street. He’s fucked, claret everywhere, likes. And his loaf hus ballooned tae the size ae a fuckin watermelon.

Ah hover over his battered boady. Ma hand’s taken a poondin. Ma knuckles are practically pokin through the skin and blood is flowin oantae the flair. It cannae be broken, ah decide. Impossible. Cos ah kin still clench ma hand.

Ah turn ma thoats back tae ma uninvited guest, by deliverin an ominous message. ‘Whatever yae dae, son,’ ah caution him. ‘Dinnae you go dyin oan me. We’ve still goat a loat tae discuss, eh? And this time ah’m no gonnae be sae gentle wae ma methods.’

Strapped tae a kitchen chair in the livin room his mooths gagged, n aw. Managed tae rustle up a few ‘treats’ fae ma blue Makita toolbag restin oan the coffee table. Rootin around through the hing ah soon bring oot a Stanley blade, a screwdriver, a claw hammer, a power drill, and a decayed hacksaw. Plus, a pair ae baw cutters ah foond in the gairage. Efter they’re aw neatly lined up ma attention lands back oantae the man ae the moment. Ah stuff the Stanley blade inside the poacket ae ma trackies, before ah rip oaff his maskin tape gag.

‘Oi, fuckhead!’ ah tell him. ‘Time tae open yur eyes!’

He barely flinches, eh? Well, apart fae makin a muffled moan, that is.

‘Jist fuckin great.’ ah mutter aloud. Mibbie ah gave him a harder time than ah first thoat.

After collectin an ice cauld cup ae water fae the sink in the kitchen, ah come back, flingin it straight intae his puss.

‘Rise and shine,’ ah tell him. ‘Ah reckon it’s about time we hae a chat, don’t you?’

Dizzy and confused, aw's ae a sudden he starts comin tae life, shruggin oaff the Baltic water. Liftin his hunched heid, he starts puffin heavily.

'What's going on?' the young guy asks, wrigglin in his chair.

'Ah hink it's me who should be askin that question, eh?' ah say, pullin up the chair in front ae him. 'You ken who ah um?'

'No,' he alleges. 'Why should I? I'm sorry. I honestly thought the place was empty. The house was in complete darkness.'

'That's gid, right?' ah communicate. 'Mibbie, there's still hope yul no leave this room in a binbag, efteraw. Mean, correct me if ah'm wrong? But you dinnae exactly strike me as some marble mooth junkie. Yuv goat yur ain teeth, a decent grasp ae English and yae dinnae possess the personal hygiene ae a stray dug. Makes me wonder if yae wur sent here by a certain somebody.'

'Sent? By whom?' his puffed up and blood splattered puss mutters. 'Why haven't you phoned the police yet?'

'Ah kin see yuv been watchin too many films, eh?' ah tease him, gesturin tae ma 'toys' oan the coffee table. 'Ah've goat ma ain process tae deal wae cunts who come tae take a pop at me.'

'Jesus Fucking Christ,' he squirms, fiddlin aboot in his seat. 'I told you. No-one fucking sent me. This has all just been a horrible misunderstanding.'

Quickly, ah've goat the Stanley blade in ma hand. Ah hud it within reach ae his jugular. 'Yin final time. Who sent yae? Danny and Ray? Those fuckin Russians? The Ramirez Cartel? Talk motherfucker?'

'Please, mate,' he pleads. 'Lower the weapon. I don't have a clue what you're talking about. I'm starting to think I've walked onto the set of a Breaking Bad episode.'

Ah lower the tool. Much tae his relief. Rammin it back intae ma joggies poacket.

'Okay,' ah say sittin back doon, noddin. 'Tell yae what um

gonnae dae. Suttin ah never normally dae and that's gie yae a second chance. You tell me how yae came tae be a snivellin wee hoosebreker. If it's convincin enough it'll relieve me fae carvin yae up like a Turkey oan Christmas Day. Now, tell me a story kid?

'You're right,' he moans, regainin his composure. 'I'm not a fucking junkie. Believe it or not. From the age of eighteen I was in Army, the Parachute Regiment. Recruited into the elite 16 Air Assault Brigade. I served in multiple tours in Afghanistan.'

'Paratrooper, eh?' ah say, strikin him as impressed. 'Soonds like yae wur the real deal. Win any piece's ae tin across there?'

'Yeah,' he quickly clarifies. 'Awarded the Military Cross for gallantry, lot of fucking good it done me.'

'Cleary, yuv goat a pair oan yae,' ah reply fiercely. 'Ah'm still somewhat miffed as tae why yae ended up brekin intae ma hoose, though?'

The slit-eyed, smashed puss ae his, stares back at me in the midst ae a panic attack, 'I.... I...I'm very sorry about that. When I returned home in 2021, I came back to no family, zero support from the government. Just a daily battle with PTSD and a certificate to show for my service. I've spent the past four years on the streets. Those politicians forget to mention in the Army brochure that the real test starts when you return tae civilian life.'

'Ah git it, mate,' ah say smilin, huddin ma hands up in the air. 'We aw dae what's necessary tae survive, eh? You've goat the minerals tae take what yae need. Shit ah wid take that over cash any day ae the week. You really caw tae mind someboady ah kent durin ma younger days.'

'Really?' he grimaces due tae his fat gapin split lip. 'Who's that, then?'

Ah leave him hangin fur a bit while ah grab ma ciggie packet and lighter fae the large grey TV unit. Along wae the ashtray oan the shelf underneath it. Settled back in ah start gien him a history lesson.

‘There wis this boay, a bonified fuckin madman,’ ah share wae him, whilst sparkin up. ‘He made a livin robbin drug dealers, puntin gear, jist a little shit kicker like yourself. Anywey, there wis this auld heid cawed Shadow. He wis king ae the volcano, it didnae matter if yae wur sellin a twinty quid bag ae powder oan a street corner or robbin the RBS ae a few mill. Anyboady, who strayed oaff the tracks peyed him fur the privilege cos they aw lived in in his shadow, hence his nickname. So, yae ken what this young guy did?’

‘No, what?’

Ah take a protracted drag ae the smoke, flickin a dollop ae ash intae the ashtray rested oan ma lap.

‘He goat word yin ae Shadow’s toap guys wis conductin a major drug deal. So, this boay decided connected or no he wis gonnæ rob thum, which he did. You ken what he did wae the cash and merch?’

He appears stumped by the question, ‘Eh...he did a runner?’

‘Nah,’ ah say, stubbin the cig oot, before pittin the ashtray doon at ma fit. ‘He turned up at yin ae their nightclubs and handed it aw back tae Shadow in person. No a gram or a penny shy Shadow wis that impressed by him he wis broat intae the foald. His guy brokerin the drug deal wis killed oan the spoat fur fuckin up. Shadow taught this up and comer a valuable lesson that day which is the business doesnae forgive mistakes. Low and behold he rose tae inherit the keys tae the kingdom.’

‘Where’s the guy you knew now? and this Shadow?’ he asks wae a keen interest in his voice.

Ah stand up, starin doon at him, cheesin, ‘You’re lookin at him. As fur Shadow? We’ll pit a pin in that story fur another day. You seem genuine enough. So, here’s what ah propose you come work fur me. The main man gave me a crack at the title so ah’ll dae the same fur you. Is that suttin that wid interest you?’

His puss lights up wae a smile, ‘You serious? I would love that, thanks.’

‘Only hing,’ ah warn him. ‘In ma line ae work sometimes yul need tae git yur hands dirty. You gid wae that?’

He looks intae ma eyes, wae a serious expression, 'In the Army my hands were never clean, mate.'

'In that case, welcome oanboard,' ah tell him. 'Ah'll jist git a knife tae turn yae loose.'

Ah come back fae the kitchen brandishin a steak knife. Reachin behind him ah cut the thick ropes keepin his hands secure. Then ah help Mr Roadkill up tae his feet. He stumbles like he's hud yin too many beers. Almost fawin flat oan his puss until ah steady his balance. Fuckin hell, eh? ah showed nae mercy oan the perr prick. His puss is smeared in claret and baith eyes are virtually swollen shut.

'You gid, mate?' ah ask, monitorin him carefully.

'Yeah, I'll be fine,' he says, rubbin his inflated nut.

'You sure?'

'Definitely,' he writes back. 'Ah've survived worse.'

'Gid stuff, Mibbie gie it a couple ae days until yuv rested up. But stoap by Johnson Construction which is based in Musselburgh. Ask fur Mark, he'll be expectin yae. Fae their we kin find some work mair suited tae yur skillset, Dinnae worry it'll no involve any bricks or cement. Will yae be awrite findin the buildin?'

'Yeah, don't worry, I'll be there,' he says, still appearin dazed. 'Thanks again for this opportunity.'

'Nae bother at aw,' ah insist, pullin a bundle ae notes fae ma poacket before stuffin it in his hand. 'There should be aboot a grand there. Book yourself intae a B&B and git a decent munch.'

'Cheers, it's really appreciated,' he replies, grinnin, pittin the dosh in his poacket.

'Wae sae much excitement in the air. Ah furgoat tae even ask yae yur name, what is it? Mines is Adolfo Ali.'

He sticks his paw oot and ah shake it, 'My name is Ross Stevenson, pleased to meet you.'

'Likewise, mate,' ah say. 'Ah'll show yae oot. It's late and ma missus left me strict instructions tae keep the hoose neat and tidy whilst her and the bairns are away. Place is overdue a bit ae a cleanup.'

Ah pit ma airm aroond ma new recruit's shoulder guidin him through tae the hallwey.

'Kindae feel bad aboot gien yae such a hard time earlier, mate,' ah tell him. 'Ah'm too much ae a fuckin hoatheid, eh?'

He breaks free. Before he turns back at me, he says, 'Don't worry about it, Aldo.' 'If I were in your position. I would have reacted the same way.'

Pretty soond ae the cunt tae take his hiddenin like a man ah tell massel. Nae complaints, proper auld school mettle. This Ross tries tae turn the key lodged inside the front door loack but it's no budgin yin bit. Wae a quick glance behind him, he reveals suttin, that hits harder than a Terrence Crawford uppercutee.

'I hope Roxy, Jennifer, and Bruce enjoy their break,' he casually droaps intae the conversation.

Ah say suttin, dae nuttin tae, apart fae cloack Bruce's leash hangin oan the coat rack. In nae time ah've snatched it, windin the hing aroond the prick's scrawny neck. Yankin him back wae every bit ae strength that ah possess the moment the door unloacks. He defo gits top marks fur effort in tryin tae brek free. But it's wasted energy. Fur aw it does is strengthen the chokehold ah've goat securely aroond his neck.

'What's going on? I thought we were good?' he says, gaspin fur air.

'How the fuck do you ken the names ae ma faimily? You scummy bastard!' ah explode intae his lug.

'You told me.'

'Bullshit!' ah yell. Loosenin ma grip ever sae slightly so he kin say his peace, spit flyin everywhere. 'This wisnae some random hoose brekin wis it? You gie me that Boay Scout routine again. Oh, ah'm jist a broken doon soldier lookin fur a few quid. Ah promise ah'll scoop yae up and we'll continue this chat in the warehooose ah own in Gilmerton, very isolated. And ah swear ah'll git Biblical wae yae. Ah'll even gee yae a fuckin blood transfusion if it means prolongin yur agony. Yul wish the Taliban snipped yur baws back in

Kabul. If yae wur ever in the fuckin army? Now who sent yae?’

‘I...I was in the Army all that’s true,’ he begs and pleads.

Ah fasten ma grip before liftin his feet slightly oaff the groond, ‘That wisnae what ah asked yae. Who fuckin sent yae tae bump me oaff? Tae show yae ma herts in the right place. Be straight wae me and ma offer still stands yae kin come work fur ma firm.’

Ah slack the leash before he takes his final breath, ‘It wis the Colombians,’ he croaks. ‘They wanted to hit back at you for stealing their cash and blow. They’re planning on taking over Edinburgh. Gilberto one of the Cartel’s top guys is in the city to oversee the expansion. Your wife and kids were never the targets. He doesn’t believe in touching families. Please, I can help you find them?’

‘Dinnae worry, mate,’ ah breathe intae his lug again. ‘Ah’ll be seein thum real soon. You remember when ah telt yae Shadow taught me that this business doesnae forgive mistakes?’

‘Yeah?’ he wavers.

‘Well,’ ah say. ‘You committed the cardinal sin by takin a shot at me. Dinnae sweat it though yur employers will be joinin yae doon under very soon.’

‘No, please!’

Too little and certainly too late. In a jiffy ah reinforce ma firm grasp as he collapses tae the flair fightin fur breath. But nae rest bite fur him as ah proceed tae strangle the life oot ae him. His hale boady starts spasmin and he begins wheezin. Almost immediately, he becomes limp, so ah lit the prick go. Ah then check his neck fur a pulse tae make sure he’s broon breed. Fuck me, ma hand is aw busted up and gushin in blood.

Ah fetch ma mobile, ringin up Markie. He answers at the first attempt.

‘Aldo? What’s up?’

‘Ah need you and Nate tae git tae mines now. Bring some surgical gloves and bleach, contact “The Magician”. Tell him

tae meet yae here. Ah hud a private pairty at the hoose and hings goat a little messy.'

'Eh...Okay, we'll be there soon.'

Forty minutes ah spend peekin oot the front windae. At last, his motor pulls up in the driveway. Ah heid through, openin the front door tae welcome him and Nate.

'What's aw the fuss about skip?' Markie says.

Ah step aside, the sight ae the boady in the hall gits his and Nates tongues waggin.

'Deary me,' Markie chokes, as they step inside. 'What the fuck happened?'

'That's a story fur another time,' ah stress. 'Jist git shot ae the cunt. And what about 'The Magician' is he oan his wey?'

'Aye,' he replies, his eyes unflinchin fae that Ross. 'He'll be along shoartly. It'll be soond. Time, he works his magic it'll be like this never happened.'

The six fitter that's Nate refocuses oan me. 'We kin cut him up at Richie's meat-packin warehoose.'

'Aye, gid shout,' ah acknowledge. 'Remind me tae take a raincheck oan eatin anymaire steaks fae there.'

As they git ready tae disappear soldier boay ah gie Markie yin final instruction.

'Listen, mate,' ah tell him. 'Efter yae git rid ae him. Phone aroond aw the crews.'

'Sayin what?' he asks me.

Ah step forward, eyebaw tae eyebaw, 'Tell thum wur at war.'