

# CHAPTER 1

His brown cords and long sleeved shirt that was once white, were both wrinkled as if they had been slept in. What remained of his white hair stuck up at the back and his chin unshaven. Through the garden of his semi-detached bungalow, Albert Ibbetts slowly strolled. It was a home he shared with his wife, Beth, and had done for many years. Flower borders, which used to be well tended, he recently wished was grass. What flourished now were the many types of unwanted green menace that seemed to be getting the better of him.

“The plants are dead! Long live the weeds!”, he announced loudly and kicked the head off the nearest sedum.

Beyond the medium height flimsy fence panel, his neighbour stood up and rested both hands on his garden fork. “What’s up, Albert? Gardening getting too much for you?”, he smiled, hoping that the bindweed would not make its way through to his side.

“No! ..... I’m fed up, bored, nothing to do! ..... I want to be on the winning side for once”, Ibbetts winged in his London accent. Having enjoyed a life of crime, though, not with a distinctive success rate, this pensioner sadly missed that action.

“Not like the good old days, eh?”, the neighbour reminisced. He too had been a colleague of Albert’s during those days but had the wisdom to avoid jail.

“Yeah! We were some buggers, weren’t we?”, Albert laughed. “Turn over anything. Shop, pub, post office ..... Yeah. They were the good old days” Albert’s smile and voice faded. “..... I need, something to get my teeth into. Something I can be part of. I need something to happen ..... Now!”

.....

The rear passenger eased himself slowly forward and crossed arms on the heads of the front two seats. Resting his clean shaven chin on his folded limbs, Sonny gave a sigh and broke the

silence. “How do you want to handle this one Drew?”, he asked softly, yet with an air of tedium.

From his slumped position in the front passenger seat, self-confessed gang leader, Drew Ibbetts, rasped his reply. “We wait!”.

Still grasping the steering wheel, the driver gently nodded and lightly snored away the hours of watch, attracting disapproving glances from his passengers. Hauling up his stocky bulk to a sitting position, Drew redirected his expressionless stare from the jewelers to his rumbling chauffeur. He poked him hard in the ribs. “Mitch!”, he bellowed in his ear.

Startled into life, Mitch instantly flicked the ignition key and revved the engine. With glazed eyes he loyally declared, “Ready Drew”.

Ibbetts leaned across, switched off the running motor and growled, “Wake up you dipstick”. “I am awake”, he insisted. “Just eager”.

“There’s a first”, sniped Sonny.

Mitch responded as he always did when he and Sonny spoke, playfully aggressive. “Watch your mouth or I’ll .....”.

“No you won’t”, Drew intervened. “You can get each other at playtime. Meanwhile, eye’s front”.

Their boyish temperaments subsided in order to follow Ibbetts instructions.

From the confines of their white Ford Cortina, the three roguish occupants compiled a mental log of the Jeweler’s movements.

Completing another cash transaction, the white haired Jeweler pushed shut the till drawer with one hand while dropping a few coins and a till receipt into a woman’s palm with the other.

Without hesitation the money was deposited into the right side pocket of her beige raincoat and pleasantries were exchanged.

His custom, whenever the opportunity arose, was to scurry to the glass paneled door, grasp the highly polished catch and open it. This tradition of good manners was followed to the strictest of disciplines and he bid her good day. He discretely admired his final customer of the day as she strutted along the uneven pavement, completely unaware that he too was under close scrutiny.

Within minutes the owner emerged, and for the last time that day, the shop door was closed and the metal grills securely fastened. He gave a cautious glance up and down the road before carefully crossing into the street opposite and began walking home. With his head full of the sound of a busy till and clanking change, the dark coated shop keeper brushed passed the stolen car without suspicion.

Inside, the dubious trio attempted to conceal their identities by obscuring their faces with tilted hands. When the man had gone, they lowered their shields and sat quietly for a moment, contemplating the daring deed ahead.

During their exceptionally mischievous lives they had all, at some level, involved themselves in various types of crime. But this was different. This had been put together too quickly, too casually, culminating in uneasiness between the three. Time was passing and each could feel a sense of forbidding, though none would admit it.

Having been incarcerated for hours in this sealed container, inhaling a potentially lethal potion of toxic odours, Mitch took the initiative and slowly turned the window handle.

Apparently seized, he applied more and more pressure until, *crack!* It came away in his hand.

As if nothing had happened, he tossed the unwanted lever nonchalantly onto the back seat.

With his donkey jacket protecting his elbow, he thumped the driver's door hard. The passenger door obliged by instantly dropping its window the full height. With a loud clatter, followed by a timely crashing sound, the glass fell through the bottom of the door and disintegrated on the roadside.

Casually turning, Drew looked the opening up and down. Facing outwards, he remarked sarcastically to his driver, “What’s next Mitch? Do the wheels fall off and the bonnet and boot pop up? ...Eh? ... Christ, can’t you nick something more up market? ... This is the one Dell Boy Trotter traded in!” As his voice crecendoeed, an elderly lady struggled passed with a full bag of shopping and stared in his direction.

Drew faked a smile and in his best English said, “Hello there”.

In her wisdom the woman suspected insanity and scurried off.

“Technology”, claimed Mitch.

Drew turned to face him. “What?”

“Technology! Car makers, they’re to blame. Bastards are getting too cunning. Security conscious, you know, locks and that”.

“I know what is”, snorted Drew in return. “I only wish you did ... then we’d be sat in a classier motor, wouldn’t we?”

Choosing not to argue, Mitch knew that his car stealing talents were much less effective against modern vehicles and his methods were by far outdated. Slightly embarrassed, he fingered with his thick bushy sideburns and heavily oiled DA hair style. He had kept this well-groomed since his teens. It may have been out of fashion but he was proud of it.

Although only twenty nine, Mitch regarded himself ‘born too late’ and suffered from acute Teddy-boyism. Even today, beneath the top half of his navy blue boiler suit, he wore his lucky boot-lace tie. The one embossed with Buddy Holly, as this was his idol. A gentle rub or two on this cast bronze knecker could be seen before every little act of skullduggery.

“Got the time Sonny?”, asked Drew, tapping his own temperamental timepiece.

“The time?”, whined a reply from the back seat.

“Yes? Time? You did get yourself a watch, didn’t you?”, he scowled. “Time is most

important in this game”. As if a master craftsman instructing his apprentice, Drew relished passing on his knowledge.

“Yes”, Sonny squeaked. “But I think I might have over wound it”, he admitted sheepishly. Frustrated at the incompetence that surrounded him, Drew sighed and murmured, “Almost pitiful”.

Tapping him on the shoulder, Sonny offered an estimated ray of hope. “... It’s not 1.03 is it?” “No! It bloody isn’t!”, Drew roared. “The jeweler’s gone home, it’s twenty to five!”. He sighed again.

Across the street, movement caught Drew’s eye. Office staff, hundreds of them, all rushing to their cars and fumbling with keys at the locks. Who would be first, each had the same thought in mind, ‘I’ve got to beat the five o/clock traffic’. Several engines revved at once, impossible to say who was first but it certainly wasn’t the blue Metro driver. She lost her keys down the drain and was trying to cadge a lift from a colleague.

Drew didn’t much care about the order providing they all removed themselves from the front of the Jewelers shop.

They’re off! Cars pulled out from all angles, horns tooting, lights flashing. Who cared, they were all determined to be first. There was some evidence of quite a few aggressive, rather unladylike hand signals during the start of the Tuesday night Northampton grand prix. They all finally got away, leaving those mundane duties for the morning. Except the blue Metro driver.

Drew hung on until she had walked out of sight before handing out the black balaclava’s and asbestos gloves from the glove box. “Here, get ready”.

In unison the three rolled on the thick woolly masks. Sonny tried to speak but it was muffled, distorted, totally inaudible as if spoken on a kazoo. Mitch replied with equal clarity.

A couple of grunts of varying tones were given by Drew while glancing to the Gods before

scorning the others in a perfectly clear voice. “Every time, isn’t it? Every time we wear these itchy condoms, we have to endure this same petty charade. It’s like working with Morecombe and bloody Wise”.

“Sorry Drew”, they each bleated.

The street had been quiet for two or three minutes, there seemed to be not a soul in sight. The time had arrived.

“Mr. Danare?”, Ibbetts asked, using Mitch’s Official name. Mitch hated it, he loathed his name. ‘Mark Danare’, he always claimed that he was named after a slick American quiz show host.

“That big window over there, the fancy sign written one?”, Drew began, while pulling on his gloves.

“Yes”

“That’s where I’d like you to park the car. Hit it hard from the left”, he instructed, releasing the door catch and nimbly leaping out onto the path.

Inhaling deeply to rid himself of any last minute worries, Sonny then quickly followed.

Leaving behind a glistening swamp of ‘Mobil super oil’, the car smoked and coughed it’s way around the block with Mitch at the helm, on what was a much needed run up. Hardly surprising with the extra weight the old banger was carrying. The R.S.J. bolted behind the front grill must have equaled the weight of two men in itself. This little alteration may have appeared excessive, but certainly necessary if they were to gain entry in a hurry.