

The beggar awoke, startled by a man sprinting past him. He started to say something rude but his voice failed him. Frowning, he stretched his legs, shut his eyes and tried to sleep.

‘Get out of the way!’

Another man quickly swam into focus and tripped over the beggar’s legs, careening into the wall and hitting his head. With his legs giving way from underneath him, he collapsed into a heap.

‘Shit’ the beggar said, crawling over to check the stranger, his irritation at the first man quickly dissipating. A well-dressed stranger was prone before him; how fortunate.

‘Mate?’ the beggar said, quietly, trying not to stir him, his eyes drawn to something shiny protruding from the stranger’s jacket pocket. Reaching out, his fingers gripped the object; slippery, smooth, but too heavy to move. The man stirred and groaned, causing the beggar to release his grip and quickly shuffle backwards.

‘What?’ the man mumbled, nonplussed and exhausted. He picked himself up off the floor, shaking out the tail of his jacket. ‘Sorry about that. I was chasing after him... and now I seem to be covered in...’ he lifted his jacket to his nose ‘coffee? Why do I smell of coffee?’ He picked at a few stubborn pieces of refuse before rubbing down his jacket.

‘You knocked over my cup,’ the beggar said, shuffling a little further away. ‘But it was cold, don’t worry.’

‘I’ll fetch you another; it’s the least I can do.’ He smiled apologetically down at the beggar, already forgetting the damage done to his expensive jacket. Reaching down to right the spilled cup, he noticed the dog ends of some cigarettes and other assorted jetsam in the cold, light-brown slurry of coffee. It smelt a little alcoholic too -- interesting, he thought, that a beggar could afford such luxuries. Shrugging, he stepped out of the alley and looked around for his friend.

‘Gabe?’ he shouted, waiting for a response. When none came, he bent over to catch his breath. With his head between his legs he could see that the beggar was gone.

‘Anthony!’ Gabriel called from the doorway of a café further up the street, ‘Over here!’ With the low cloud occluding his vision, he could only just make out Gabriel’s silhouetted form.

Slowly straightening himself, Anthony began to walk. Placing one foot in front of another, down the cold, cobbled street, he fought the cramps and the exhaustion. In those 100 yards to the café, Anthony wondered how he’d ended up here, in the middle of a deserted street. A deserted street in a small English town; a town seemingly so far removed from civilisation that it didn’t even have street lamps.

He stopped at the bright entrance to the café, smiling wearily at Gabe who was sitting down at a table, already nursing a hot cup of coffee, his favourite. Smiling, after everything they’d been through. It was that infectious enthusiasm – that ready, cheeky grin – that had dragged him, kicking and screaming, along for the ride. Yet again he had been reeled in by his enigmatic fervor to set off on another reckless flight of fancy.

‘Perhaps ‘friend’ is too strong a term,’ he muttered to himself as he stumbled across the plastic flooring and slumped into the chair opposite Gabriel. Catching the eye of the only other person there, the owner, Gabriel quickly ordered another coffee.

‘You know I don’t like coffee.’ Anthony sighed; they’d done this dance before. It felt like they’d done this very same dance in every café in England. ‘Tea. I like tea. Well brewed tea, with a little milk. Tea.’

‘I’ll convert you eventually, trust me,’ Gabriel said with a grin; that same grin that Anthony had seen all too often. Through America, Ireland and now England it had been that grin, accompanied by his unerring, unswerving confidence that had secured the information they had so desperately sought and fought for. It was the same information that had led them, at great cost, to this dingy café. Anthony nodded a thank you at the wrinkled owner of the café as she retreated back behind the counter.

‘You know, I won’t enjoy this,’ Anthony said, lifting the cup of coffee, the slightest trace of a grin forming at the corner of his lips. He couldn’t help but

mirror Gabe's grin. There was something about him, something which made arguing a thoroughly fruitless exercise. He sipped it quietly. 'You know, it might taste like shit, but, right now – and don't quote me on this – it's just what I need.'

'It couldn't be helped, Ant. Sometimes it's unavoidable.'

'It's always avoidable! And Gabe?'

'Yeah?' He was still grinning.

'Don't call me Ant. You know I hate it almost as much as I hate this coffee,' he said, gulping the rest of it down with a grimace. 'You said this time things would be different.' He paused, thinking. 'Mind you, you always say that; I know I shouldn't be surprised, but...'

'Look, we got what we needed! Surely, in the grand scale of things, that's all that matters.' It was a statement, not a question. Anthony had been here before; he'd *heard* it all before. Different town, the same nonchalance – and the same, damn coffee.

'We didn't even go back to check on the kid...' Anthony was staring down into the dregs of his coffee, unable to look at his friend. Through the corner of his vision he saw Gabriel's grin quickly fade and his brow furrow. He was actually sad; an emotion Anthony had seen in his face only a handful of times since they were kids. Gabriel gently put down his cup and reached into the pocket of his leather jacket for some money. By the time Anthony looked up he was grinning again, though some of the impishness was gone.

'I'll pay for both of us,' Gabe said, as if that would somehow make up for the atrocity that Anthony and Gabriel had just perpetrated. Anthony nodded; he was still too numb from the recent events to argue. He reached into his jacket and touched his fingers gently to the wound; it was warm and sticky. The bleeding had started again.

'I must've torn the stitches back in the alley,' Anthony said, wincing as his fingers continued their gentle prodding. 'Why did you have to run? Running draws attention. That beggar –'

'Because we had to get away quickly. Trust me.' Gabriel quickly rose to his feet and strode over to the door, his enthusiasm fully restored. He opened the

door and a siren could be heard in the distance; he grinned even wider. ‘We should get going.’

‘Is that a fire engine?’ Fragments of the last hour were bubbling up from the groggy depths of his memory. Slowly he pieced them together to form a complete vision. He flinched and gaped at Gabriel, aghast at what his friend had set in motion.

‘I told you, we should get going.’

The beggar got up slowly and dusted himself off. His legs ached from all the sitting and he needed to stretch. He’d been promised a small fortune to sit and wait for the perfect chance, but it had come while he was asleep. The promise of money; the promise of clean clothes and food and warmth had just been squandered. With blood returning to his legs, he trudged towards where the men had come. Sniffing and looking upwards to the rooftops, he noticed an acrid, oily smell in the air. A tall building was alight, illuminating the thick fog. Quickly, a spark of hope returning, he reached for the phone in his pocket. The buttons were small and hard to work, a problem exacerbated by his cold, calloused fingers. Hopping impatiently he waited for someone, *anyone*, to pick up. The object he’d seen earlier, touched even – had he really come that close? Could they really have done it? A nagging, chilling feeling of uncertainty was creeping along his fingers and his arms. He shivered. The uncertainty he harboured was instantly replaced by dread when someone answered the phone.

‘They got it.’ The whisper escaped his lips louder than he had hoped.

‘How?’ Agitated whispers could be heard.

‘I don’t know. And I can hear sirens. I think they torched the museum!’

The whispering continued, hushed and unintelligible. ‘Follow them.’

Gabriel and Anthony were walking slowly now, away from the burning museum. Gabriel looked to his left, up at the sky.

‘It was necessary.’ He looked at Anthony.

Anthony kicked at a rock and slowed his pace. He stopped, sighing. ‘I just hope it’s worth it.’ He slid his bloody fingers into his jacket pocket for reassurance. ‘Do you have any idea what it’s worth?’

‘A lot, but...’ It was Gabriel’s turn to kick a stone towards Anthony.

‘Is it worth more than the museum we – *you* – torched?’

‘Let’s hope so.’

‘This is the bit where you say it’s just about liquidising the assets...’

Anthony walked on, leaving Gabriel behind him.

‘This time,’ Gabriel tried to catch up, ‘I’m sure we’ve got the right one.’

Anthony continued to walk ahead; his legs were longer than Gabriel’s.

‘Ant.’ Gabriel stopped and wheezed, out of breath.

Anthony turned, his gaze softening. ‘I’m the one with a knife wound, remember?’

Something quietly exploded in the distance, rattling nearby windows.

Anthony flinched and glared; Gabriel hadn’t moved a muscle.

‘Surprise.’ Gabriel was still trying to catch his breath.

‘Always with the fireworks...’ Anthony wrapped an arm around his friend and found himself grinning again, this time at Gabriel’s unhealthy love of explosives. ‘Tell me, is she going to be in the car?’

‘Is it going to be an issue if she is?’

‘No.’

Gabe turned his wrist and looked at his watch, ‘We should hurry, we’re late.’

Anthony tightened his grip around Gabe and picked up his pace.

Wounded, physically and mentally, but still the one doing the heavy lifting. He let his feet do the walking, they knew where they were going. He’d been here before, years ago. It had been lighter, less foggy, but the dark umber brickwork and tall windows of the houses were instantly recognisable. Taking a shortcut through a side-alley, Anthony found his thoughts wandering to the girl. Distracted, his grip on Gabriel weakened.

‘Ant?’ Gabriel nudged him.

He was quickly jostled out of his reverie and turned to look at Gabriel. “Yeah?” He tripped on a rounded, ankle-breaking cobble, but kept his balance. Thoughts of the girl vanished. ‘If there’s one thing I won’t miss, it’s these damn cobbles.’

‘I love this place.’ Gabriel grinned, running his hand over the rough brickwork. He turned to Anthony. ‘Can I see it?’ There was a slight tone of pleading in Gabriel’s voice.

Anthony shook his head and automatically moved to cover his pocket. ‘Later, when it’s safe.’

‘I wouldn’t steal it, you know that.’ Gabriel moved a little closer.

‘I know.’ They looked at each other and shared a moment from the same memory. It was a lie, a small one, but significant. Only once had Gabriel stolen something from Anthony. A girl. ‘We should wait until it’s safe.’

A car’s full beams cut through the mist, lancing into their eyes, blinding them both. The roar of the engine grew louder as the car drew closer. Memories from their shared childhood were triggered and instinctively Anthony moved in front of Gabriel. The car slowed and swerved, pulling up. The door popped open, spilling light from the interior.

‘Get in.’ It was a female voice. One they both recognised.