

“SAFE HOUSE”

Jimmy Mathers ran through the dark night cursing his fate, which had a tendency to only run in one direction. He was a man who had plenty of luck, it was just a pity that every stinking inch of it was brown and smelly.

He left the car behind him as he tried to put as much distance between him and the stinking turd that was currently spewing white plumes of smoke from under the car's bonnet.

Bobby D had secured the car and had promised him faithfully that it was in top shape, but he should have known better; Bobby D was so full of shit that he squelched when he walked. Bobby T had planned the job and it was all supposed to go off without a hitch, but as usual there had been more hitches than an asthmatic suffering an attack. It was often a pain when the two Bobby's worked together, but they were inseparable and always came as a pair.

The jewelers on King Street was a small family run shop that dealt mainly with the bottom end of the market but with a friendly touch. As such, they carried a decent amount of stock but nothing worth taking the risk of robbing. Somehow however Bobby T had heard that they were going to be holding a shipment of uncut diamonds for another arm of the business that was strictly upmarket. Bobby T swore on his mother's grave that the info was genuine. Apparently one of the jeweler's sons had a tendency to place bets bigger than his pockets could handle and had gotten in deep with Dave The Shark, and Dave was a not a man that you owed money to, at least not if you wanted to keep all of your limbs intact. Bobby T had bought the debt in lieu of some inside info from the son as to the impending deposit at his father's shop.

Jimmy's shoes sank into the mud and he left one behind as he yanked his leg free of the sucking hole in the ground. The rain pounded down mercilessly hard, stinging his face every time that he dared to look up and try to get his bearings. The wind was howling across the moors and in the distance he thought that he could hear the faint sounds of sirens that surely heralded his doom.

The jeweler's son was supposed to let them through the back door after closing. The kid would get a bit of a slapping to make it look real and then Jimmy and the two Bobby's would be on their toes with a bagful of uncut diamonds. It should have been simple, but Jimmy had forgotten the cardinal rule - when a job seemed too good to be true, it probably was.

“What the hell have you got that for?” Jimmy hissed, as Bobby T withdrew a walnut handled sawn-off shotgun from inside his long black overcoat.

“You never know,” Bobby T shrugged.

Jimmy looked over at Bobby D who only shrugged in compliance. Bobby T was a big man with a short temper; not a good combination, especially now that he was armed.

“You sure that he's gonna open up?” Jimmy asked, nodding towards the door as they all huddled around the rear entrance trying to shrink into the insufficient shadows.

“Don't worry,” Bobby T replied. “He knows the score, it's all going to be fine.”

Jimmy groaned inwardly wondering just how he had managed to get roped into this in the first place. Bobby D was a pleasant enough guy, but he had a tendency to be unreliable. Bobby T on the other hand had a

reputation for diving in head first regardless of the consequences and then dragging everyone else down with him.

Bobby T banged twice on the door, left a pause and then banged once more. The door squeaked open gently and a nervous face poked out from inside. Jimmy could see that the kid was worried and he opened his mouth to offer words of comfort when Bobby T kicked the door hard into the kid's face. Jimmy winced as blood spurted between the young man's fingers as he grasped his split lip.

"Inside!" Bobby T ordered while Jimmy pushed his way in wanting to get in first to try and establish some kind of control.

"Mmmmm..." the kid mumbled incoherently, pointing behind him into the building.

"What the fuck is he on about?" Bobby T snapped, looking around.

"Well I could ask him if you hadn't busted his bloody mouth open!" Jimmy barked back in spite of his better judgment.

"What did you say, bitch?" Bobby T snarled. .

"Hey, screw you man," Jimmy said low and hard. He knew that guys like Bobby T could smell weakness with a sixth sense and would be on you like jackals if you ever showed it on the surface.

"You know, I'm starting to think that dividing the score by two is a whole lot easier than three," Bobby T said menacingly.

"Easy fellas," Bobby D interrupted trying to keep the peace, "let's remember why we're here."

"Back there," the kid said with great effort as he dribbled blood and spittle onto the floor.

Bobby T marched forward past Jimmy, fixing him with a blood chilling stare that told Jimmy this wasn't over. He wasn't a man that enjoyed violence; it was just an unfortunate side effect of the business. Bobby T wasn't a man to mess with especially when his blood was up and he had a shotgun in his hands, but Jimmy knew that Bobby T was legendary for remembering any perceived slight. He was going to have to handle Bobby T before the night was over, one way or another.

"Hey Bobby," he called after the big man and ran to catch him up.

The darkness was shattered by the flash of a gunshot and Jimmy stumbled forward into the main shop just as Bobby T staggered backwards.

"You bloody hoodlums!" an elderly man wheezed from the centre of the room, cradling a shotgun of his own as smoke drifted up from the twin barrels.

Bobby T fell into Jimmy's arms and they both collapsed to the floor. Jimmy was overtaken by shock as he felt Bobby T's insides slosh onto his trousers and down to the floor.

"I'll show you," the old man said shakily. "I'll show the bloody lot of you! Terrorize my boy, threaten my family, steal from me!"

Jimmy tried to push Bobby T off of him as the old man advanced forward with a sheen of panic and anger making a potent mix in his grey eyes.

"Put it down you old bastard!" Bobby D shouted from the doorway.

From the floor, Jimmy twisted around and saw Bobby D holding the jeweler's kid in front of him with a small black pistol pressed to the young man's temple.

"Put the shotgun down fella or I'll blow junior's head off," Bobby D said, trying not to sound as scared as Jimmy thought he must be.

Jimmy extricated himself from underneath Bobby T as the big man's breath hitched and slowed as blood seeped out onto the hardwood floor.

"My son told me everything that you were planning," the old man said, leveling the shotgun with some effort. "He told me that you had threatened him if he didn't help you, but he's a good boy and he told me."

"Why doesn't everyone just take a breath and calm the fuck down?" Jimmy said, as steadily as he could muster.

"I'll shoot you both," the old man wheezed.

"I'll put a bullet in this little sod's head," Bobby D said, twisting the kid's neck painfully to one side.

"No you won't!" Jimmy said with authority to both of them. "No one is going to shoot anyone; we're all just going to take a breath and go our separate ways," he said, with both hands out calling for sense.

"I'm going to shoot this little fucker!" Bobby D barked. "He got Bobby killed, Jimmy."

Jimmy winced at the use of his name. "You don't need to," he stressed, turning to Bobby D. "You're going to let him go."

"The hell I am; I let him go and that old bastard is going to shoot us both!" Bobby said incredulously.

"No he's not, he's got a double barreled shotgun, and he fired both rounds into Bobby T," Jimmy explained.

"You sure?" Bobby D asked.

"Positive," Jimmy replied, feeling the tension in the room drop a notch.

"Good," Bobby said and lifted the pistol away from the kid's head. Jimmy felt that maybe they were going to at least get out of the room alive; he'd worry about the police after that.

The new silence was shattered as Bobby D aimed the gun at the old man and fired. Jimmy recoiled in shock as the back of the old guy's head exploded and landed on the wall behind.

"What the hell did you do that for?" he hissed to Bobby D.

"You said it yourself, he was out of rounds," Bobby D shrugged. "I thought that you were telling me to do it."

"No, you maniac! Of course I wasn't!" Jimmy said, desperately trying to think. "Alright kid," he said, addressing the jeweler's son, "where's the stuff?"

"Damn straight," Bobby D grinned.

Jimmy watched on as the kid led Bobby D on shaky legs to the back of the room and started to open the safe. Jimmy had no stomach for even casual violence, let alone murder, but they were in it now and if they left empty handed it somehow made the deaths worse.

The kid reached into the safe and brought out a small brown canvas bag. Jimmy took it from him and opened it gently. He reached in and took hold of a handful of cool diamonds that glinted in the light as he lifted them out.

"Holy shit!" Bobby D whispered. "They sure are pretty."

Jimmy turned his head too slowly towards his surviving partner as Bobby D's attention was taken away from the jeweler's son. "Watch him!" he started as the kid reached back into the safe.

Bobby D turned just as the kid withdrew a small silver revolver. Jimmy reached for it as did Bobby D. They grabbed the kid who started to struggle frantically and the three of them stumbled across the room. The gun went off and Jimmy could only tell that it wasn't him who was hit.

They fell to the floor in a collective heap and Jimmy looked around frenetically for the gun. He couldn't see it until Bobby D raised it and fired point blank into the kid's head. Jimmy managed to close his eyes just in time as warm blood spattered against his face.

"Got him," Bobby D said happily.

"We gotta go," Jimmy replied, dragging himself up and then Bobby D.

The big man felt heavy and limp as Jimmy pulled him up. Bobby D looked down at the spreading patch of dark blood around his middle.

"Jimmy? I think I'm hit," Bobby D said in disbelief.

"You're fine," Jimmy said unconvincingly. "It's just a flesh wound."

Jimmy grabbed the fallen bag of diamonds and slipped an arm under Bobby D as they staggered towards the door. This wasn't the best neighborhood in the world but even here someone would have reported the gunshots by now.

They limped over to the waiting getaway car that Bobby D had obtained and Jimmy loaded the big man into the passenger seat. He ran around the front of the car and started the engine; in a flash they were heading back up the long deserted alley where they had parked. He kept the lights off and drove slowly so as to not attract any undue attention.

Bobby D had started to cough and wheeze in such a manner that Jimmy knew he wasn't going to make it without a trip to the hospital. The problem was that they were currently making their escape from a crime scene that had left three dead bodies behind and he couldn't afford a detour.

He could hear the sounds of approaching sirens closing in as he left the alley and joined the main road. A police car rounded the corner and screamed down the road towards them. In his panic he forgot to put on the headlights and the police car screeched to halt in the middle of the street.

Jimmy sat there sweating profusely as the police car waited ominously, its driver sitting in the dark. Jimmy let the car idle in gear, dipping the clutch and resting his foot on the accelerator. The second that the cop's interior light came on when he opened the door, Jimmy floored it. The getaway car leapt forward and Jimmy drove straight at the cop figuring that it was him or them now. The cop was squashed between the getaway car and his own door as Jimmy struck it hard. He kept accelerating and the car gained speed leaving the crumpled cop behind in the rear view mirror. He couldn't see a partner, but if the cop had one then they would be preoccupied by saving his life rather than pursuing them.

This was supposed to have been a quick and easy inside job without any fuss or bloodshed. As such they

hadn't thought to provide any sort of escape route. Now Jimmy was just driving away from the scene with no idea other than to get as far away as possible. He was already starting to realise that Bobby T had the connections to offload the diamonds, but that was before he'd had his insides blown out.

They headed out of the city, deep into the night leaving behind everyone that Jimmy knew. Bobby D slept or was passed out; Jimmy didn't care which as long as he had time to think.

Before long they were in the middle of nowhere, devoid of lights and other traffic and Jimmy was only just starting to wonder where the hell they were. The car suddenly started to shudder and slowed involuntarily, the temperature gauge was up in the red and he cursed himself for not noticing sooner. The car jerked and the engine stalled; slowly, they rolled to a stop.

Jimmy started to thump the steering wheel in anger, frustrated that everything had taken such a shit turn in such a short space of time. He looked over at Bobby D and saw for the first time just how pale the man had become. He reached over and tried to feel for a pulse like they did on TV, before he realised that he had no idea what he was doing. Instead, he slapped Bobby D across the face and waited for a response.

Bobby D murmured and Jimmy wondered for a moment if he was pleased or disappointed that the guy was still alive.

"I gotta get to a hospital, Jimmy," Bobby D mumbled, barely above a whisper.

Jimmy stared long and hard at the guy; Bobby D might be an okay sort of guy but his reputation wasn't that of being particularly smart or resilient. Jimmy thought that the guy would roll over in next to no time, either out of stupidity or self-preservation.

"I won't say anything, man," Bobby D said, reading his mind. "I promise, Jimmy, I can keep quiet."

Jimmy felt the stress taking over. Despite modern day fables, there was no real honour amongst thieves and there was no sense of community; they were all rats biting and clawing trying to survive. He steeled himself and reached out his hand. He clamped down hard across Bobby D's nose and mouth as the big man struggled weakly. Mercifully, the whole thing was over in a couple of minutes but they were the longest two minutes of Jimmy's life. At the most inopportune moment, car headlights suddenly illuminated them from behind as a vehicle closed in and Jimmy was framed in a murderous portrait.

He grabbed the bag and ran blindly out into the night, away from the road and into the darkness beyond.

The sound of sirens soon travelled across the moors on the wind and he just knew that they were coming for him. It was just his usual bad luck playing its part.

He wanted to stop running and just give himself up, he wanted to sit in a warm jail cell rather than wade through the cold mud. He started to turn back towards the road when suddenly he spotted a faint glow in the distance. Something drew him to the sight and he could only pray that after a lifetime of bad fortune it was finally going to turn in his favor.

He clasped the bag of diamonds close to his chest and pushed himself forward towards the light. Eventually the place came into view as he manfully struggled across the moor. The rain was finally starting to ease and he was able to make out a sign swinging and creaking outside of a house. It read "Wolf's Creek Bed & Breakfast".

Finally, Jimmy thought as he made his way up the path, *things are going my way*.

He rang the doorbell and waited as patiently as he could, which was all of about two seconds before he

pounded hard on the door.

Shuffling footsteps moved slowly towards him from the inside and the door opened a crack. An old woman's face peeked out nervously from around the corner. "Yes?" she asked apprehensively.

"Hi there," Jimmy replied, putting on his best smile. "I'm afraid that I've had some car trouble and I got caught in the storm."

"Oh dear, come in, come in," she gestured as she opened the door fully. "I can see that you've managed to lose a shoe into the bargain," she smiled kindly.

"Oh, it's been quite a night," Jimmy said and almost laughed aloud at the understatement.

"Everything okay, Mrs. Doyle?" a man's voice boomed from down the hallway.

"Oh yes Timothy, just another lost boy I'm afraid," Mrs. Doyle answered.

Jimmy's heart sank at the extra voice and it sank further as the man made his way out into the light. He had expected to find an empty B&B and the old woman looked like little of a challenge if push came to shove. The man that walked slowly down the corridor looked anything but a pushover. He was a big man with a shaved head and a face full of wild hair. He was broad shouldered and barrel-chested and he had naked suspicion written all over his face at the sight of Jimmy's bedraggled form.

"This is Timothy, my other current guest," Mrs. Doyle said, introducing the large man. "And you are?"

"Bob," Jimmy automatically lied as his eyes locked with the other man. Timothy looked familiar and Jimmy was sure that he knew the guy from somewhere but from some time ago. "You on holiday?" he asked the big man, never dropping his gaze.

"Just a stopover on my way home; I've been away for a while," Timothy smiled with a grin that never touched his eyes. "You?"

"Car broke down up the way some. It's a miracle that I found this place," Jimmy said as they verbally danced.

"You must be a long way from home," Timothy said.

Jimmy stared hard back at him. *Yeah you're a bad guy but so am I, but you know that don't you?* he thought. "A little," he answered.

"We'll let's get you dry and I'm sure that you could do with something hot to drink," Mrs. Doyle said as she motioned for Jimmy to follow. "All of my boys end up here; we've had quite the collection over the years."

"No bags?" Timothy asked Jimmy innocently enough but with a small tight smile.

Jimmy stuck his hand into his pocket subconsciously and squeezed the diamond bag for security. "Left them in the car," Jimmy shrugged.

"Well I'm sure that we can find you something. You'd be amazed by what some of my boys leave behind in their rooms," Mrs. Doyle said as she climbed the stairs.

"Don't I need to sign in or pay?" Jimmy asked.

"Oh we'll sort all that out later," she smiled.

An hour or so later, Jimmy climbed out of the bath feeling human again. The diamonds were never out of his sight and the bag sat on a chair in the bathroom, teasing him with their value but dancing out of reach at the lack of Bobby T's fence. Timothy's face was the other constant question that fluttered around his mind. He knew that he recognised the man from somewhere but he couldn't quite place him which was unusual for him; normally he never forgot a face.

He dried and dressed in a pair of jogging bottoms and a hooded top that Mrs. Doyle had provided. They were a little big but they were more importantly dry and warm.

He stuffed the diamond bag into the pocket of his top and exited the bathroom leaving the dirty towel on the floor. He backed into the corridor and followed the noise coming from downstairs.

He found Mrs. Doyle and Timothy sitting in the lounge in front of the TV. They were watching the news that was showing the aftermath of the robbery. Mrs. Doyle tutted and reached out to change the channel.

"No!" Jimmy shouted a little too loudly. "Sorry," he corrected himself. "I just wanted to catch the story." He knew that Timothy was looking at him a little too closely and he mentally scolded himself for the slip.

"Such terrible things in this world" Mrs. Doyle said, shaking her head.

Jimmy nodded in agreement as he sat down in one of the plush armchairs.

The news report showed the images from outside the jewelry store. They flashed up family photos of a smiling jeweler and his son, as well as an old mug shot of Bobby T. Interestingly there was no mention of Bobby D or the car that he had abandoned. The reporter did however mention that the police were seeking any information concerning Bobby T's accomplices, but there were no descriptions.

Jimmy started to wonder if he had even heard sirens on the road when he had abandoned the car and ran off across the moors. Maybe the car that had come up behind them hadn't even bothered to stop. He knew that he wouldn't have, there were too many dangerous nutters out there. Maybe Bobby D was still sitting in the car undiscovered; the thought was tantalisingly hopeful.

"Some score I bet you, judging by the coverage," Timothy said to no one in particular but Jimmy suspected that it was directed at him. "Don't you think so, James?" he asked, confirming Jimmy's suspicions.

"It's Bob," Jimmy said quietly.

"Oh yes that's right, Bob," Timothy grinned to himself.

Jimmy now had no doubt that he knew the guy, but also that Timothy knew him. He racked his memory banks for a name to go with the big guy's face but still couldn't place him. It wasn't made any easier given that most of Timothy's face was covered in a thick bushy beard obscuring part of his features. Now, sitting closer to him, he could see what might well have been surgical scars around the ears. Scars like that would have been from cosmetic surgery and given Timothy's relatively young age it seemed more likely that it was surgery aimed at altering his face rather than fighting the ravages of time.

"What would you say to a little hot chocolate, Bob?" Mrs. Doyle asked.

"Sure," Jimmy replied absently.

"Oh and I'll get you to sign that pesky checking-in book if you don't mind, otherwise I'll have the tax man crawling all over me again." She laughed but Jimmy wasn't listening; he was picturing Timothy without the

beard and with a slightly different face.

"You know, James, this could be your lucky day," Timothy said as soon as Mrs. Doyle was out of the room and earshot. "I'm guessing by the look of you when you stumbled in here that your day didn't quite go as planned, right?"

Jimmy was weighing the guy up when the name popped into his head and straight out of his mouth. "Terry? Terry Daws?"

"Shut the fuck up!" Terry instantly snarled. "You don't mention that name, not ever, understand?"

"Sure, sure," Jimmy said soothingly. "Holy crap, I thought that you were off in sunnier climes?"

"Yeah well, I've got business back home; I was just hoping to slip in and out without anyone noticing. My old mum's not so well and it might be my last chance."

Jimmy sat back in his chair and almost laughed at the sudden upturn in his fortunes. Terry Daws was one of the biggest villains in the area. The guy had been a legend in their business, a legend that only grew in stature when he had pulled off a bank job said to be in the millions and flown the country. This was of particular interest to Jimmy because no one knew more about the business or had more contacts than Terry Daws. The bag full of highly valuable but unloadable diamonds suddenly came back into play.

"Let's just say for argument's sake that someone might have a certain bag of valuable possessions but ones from questionable sources?" Jimmy ventured.

"I'm listening," Terry replied.

"Here we are," Mrs. Doyle announced as she re-entered the room. She set down a steaming mug of hot chocolate for Jimmy and handed him the checking-in book.

Jimmy took the book and scrawled his name, remembering to stick to the alias. He handed it back to her without paying much attention; something tugged at his mind, something strange, but he ignored it with more pressing concerns at hand.

"Can I get you anything else, Timothy?" she asked Terry.

"A coffee would be lovely," he answered, eager to get her out of the room again.

As soon as she was gone, Terry leant forward. "Let's not piss about, Jimmy. I remember you from the old neighborhood. You were just a pup back then but I never forget a face. What have you got?"

Jimmy quickly took the bag from his pocket knowing that the contents were of little use to him without someone to fence them.

"Very nice," Terry said, holding one up to the light. "Very nice indeed, Jimmy; uncut and almost flawless."

"What are we looking at?" Jimmy positively drooled.

"Fifty-fifty split, I figure maybe three million apiece," Terry mused.

"Pounds?"

"No bananas," Terry scoffed. "I'll tell you another thing, for a few quid more I could sort out your extrication from the country as well. I can use my guy to get you out before anyone knows that you're gone."

Jimmy fought the urge to kiss the man; instead, he wrapped his lips around the hot chocolate barely able to keep his excitement hidden.

Mrs. Doyle appeared again and Terry managed to palm the diamond before she saw it. She sat a cup of coffee down on the table next to him and he nodded in thanks.

"Well you boys seem to be hitting it off. It's always nice when my boys have company," she smiled. "If you'll excuse me, I have some things to attend to."

Jimmy watched and held his tongue until she was out of sight. "What about her?"

"What about her?" Terry asked with a raised eyebrow.

"She's seen my face and yours. I don't know about you but I don't want to run that kind of risk, not with three million quid at stake," Jimmy said seriously.

"You think that you've got it in you to do the old lady?"

"Yes."

"I find that difficult to believe, James," Terry said, blowing on his coffee and taking a sip. "Give me a reason why you think you'd be up to the task."

"I'll give you three million reasons," Jimmy smiled cruelly. He sat back and drank from his cup feeling more relaxed than ever.

"I suppose it makes sense," Terry said, yawning.

Jimmy felt his eyelids drooping and realised with horror that he was close to nodding off. He looked down at the mug and it suddenly dawned on him that he had been drugged. "You bastard, Terry," he slurred. He should have known that it was all going too well. Terry Daws had no doubt made him for a right mug and he was right. Chances were that if he ever woke up again, it would be minus the diamonds. More likely Terry was going to bury him and the old woman before skipping the country again.

He tried to stand and his legs betrayed him. He collapsed to the floor sending the offending mug smashing onto the carpet. He was lying on the floor with the room spinning when he distantly heard a crash and felt Terry inexplicably land next to him on the floor.

The next time Jimmy opened his eyes, he was dimly aware of being dragged across a hardwood floor by his heels. He heard a door open and felt himself being pushed through by elderly, but surprisingly strong, hands. He looked up into the kindly face of Mrs. Doyle that was now creased with straining effort.

"This does get harder every year," she grunted. "And I'm no spring chicken anymore you know, but don't worry about the dark, there are plenty of my boys to keep you company down there. Although most probably aren't that talkative by now."

As Jimmy felt himself being propelled through the cellar door opening, his first thought was to realise that there were no stairs. His second thought was an odd flashback to earlier when he had been handed the checking-in book. Just before he hit the dirt floor and landed next to Terry's body he realised there were plenty of names in the checking-in column, but none in the checking-out.

The door closed high above him, extinguishing the last light he would ever see and he prayed that

whatever drugs the old woman had given him would take him long before the unmistakable scuttling of his new rodent roommates reached him.