

CHAPTER ONE

A boring, empty afternoon in a darkened cinema, and my leg hurt. Puncture marks either side of my thigh, courtesy of next door's cat.

Mrs Figgis didn't even thank me. Hughie, she called it, as if it were a sweet, adorable fluffball instead of an ill-tempered, snarling demon. It even attacked the postman, which is why he'd opted to leave the parcel with me.

It was the second pair of pants that cat had snagged. I ought to make her have the damned thing put down, but I knew I'd never do it. Soft, that's what you are, Cornelius. Soft in the head. Well, what do you expect from someone named after a chimp, for Christ's sake? Thanks a lot, Mum. Apparently, she was mad on *Planet of the Apes* at one time. So what was wrong with Charlton?

The movie was by way of a distraction. It was the scruffy old cinema nobody liked, but it had the advantage of having armrests that could be lifted out of the way to give you a bit more room. They were having a *Star Wars* bonanza and the place was empty except for half a dozen kids and a man with a passing resemblance to Al Pacino on the middle row.

Wouldn't it be good if you really could waft your hand in front of someone's eyes and make them believe whatever you wanted? Think of the places you could use a trick like that: *I've already paid/You don't need to see my driving licence/I'm not really this fat...*

Course, waving my hand about like that, I knocked over my bucket of popcorn. I swear those kids were laughing at me, but I'm used to that. Had a lifetime of it.

Sticks and stones, Mum used to say, as if that was any help. They threw stones as well. *It's your personality that counts*, she told me.

And what did Dad say? *Get off your fat arse and do some exercise.*

If I ever have a son, I'll be more understanding. Not that I'm likely to have one. Anyway, would it be fair to pass these genes on to some innocent child - make him desperately unhappy all his life? The way things were going, my genes were going to stay exactly where they were. I should have been a priest. People don't mind fat priests. It's kind of expected - and I've already got the celibate part off pat.

What was I doing in here?

Al Pacino gave me a little wave as I passed.

I stopped, halfway across the bridge that overlooked the motorway. The afternoon breeze ruffled my hair and brought the scent of petrol to my nostrils.

Some birthday, eh? Thirty years old and I still hadn't...ach, didn't want to think about it. In all those years at Brutus High, I managed to say hello to a girl once. Lisa Carlotti. Don't think she heard me.

According to Facebook, she'd married Brad. What was she thinking? She'd never be happy with someone like him. She needed someone who would care for her, discuss important matters with her, appreciate her finer qualities - not fart loudly and waft it in her face.

Look at them all, down there. They're going somewhere. That's what I ought to do; just get in my car and disappear. I've always fancied Arizona.

Home was empty. I didn't want to go.

Noz's flat: clothes, dirty plates and mugs everywhere and Parmesan cheese trodden into the carpet...at least, I think it was Parmesan cheese.

"What's up?" He glanced at me through a curtain of stringy hair.

I waited till I got my breath back, then eased myself onto the sofa, my eyes focusing briefly on the TV. *Chicks and Bricks*. Noz's favourite. Scantly clad girls working on a building site. Some guy in a hard hat stood yelling at a blonde.

"Got a cigarette?"

Noz watched as the flustered blonde staggered across the screen with a shovelful of sand. "You don't smoke."

"Thought I'd start."

"Don't be stupid." The blonde dropped the shovel, slapped the man hard and marched off the site. "Is this about your weight, again?"

"You could say that."

He gave a long sigh. "Get over it, Tuck. You've been at this as long as I've known you. You is what you is."

"Yeah, but the trouble is, I don't like what I is."

"Well, do something about it, then."

"Don't you think I've tried?"

"Not up here," Noz said, pointing briefly to his head, then picking up his can and taking a swig of lager.

People always thought that - even your friends, who were supposed to know you. "Any more of those in the fridge?"

"You're driving," he reminded me. "There's some blackcurrant cordial next to the sink."

There was, but it looked kind of foamy. I decided not to risk it and went to have a look in his fridge. "Hey, Noz," I called from the kitchen, "fancy going out for a drink?"

"Can't, mate. Got Alicia coming round."

"Who's Alicia?" Noz's fridge was pathetically empty. I picked out a tub of Ardennes pâté. Smelled unusual - a bit smoky, with a sweet tinge to it.

"Girl I met last night."

I took the pâté back into the living room. "Last night, at the so-called office party?"

He grinned at the TV. "Yeah. She's really neat - has a degree and everything."

A degree? What did she want with a man who worked in a garden centre? Was it the long hair? We're talking about a man with a big schnozz, thin legs and hands like shovels. And he wore an apron at work. Then again, so did I. But women didn't drool over me - only over what I served.

I dipped my finger in the tub and had a taste. Interesting, if mildly repulsive. More like tobacco than pâté.

"She's from Harrogate and....yahh," Noz screeched, his mouth forming a Steve Tyler grimace. "What're you doing?"

I nearly dropped the tub. "What? What is it?"

"You can't eat that," he yelled. "It's my...uh...new rooting compound."

I put it down, quickly. "Well, what the hell's it doing in the fridge?"

"Never mind. Just put it back there. Gandhi's balls, Tuck. I swear if I had dog food in there, you'd eat it."

He had me worried, now. "Is it poisonous? Only...I've tasted it."

"No, it's not poisonous," he grunted, as if I'd done something to annoy him. He shouldn't have put his precious rooting compound in a pâté tub then, should

he? It'd confuse anyone.

I scanned the room. "Aren't you going to tidy this place up? You know - before this girl arrives?"

He looked puzzled. "What do you mean – tidy it up?"

"And you've only got cans of lager."

"She likes lager."

"Well, shouldn't you at least change that tee-shirt?" I could smell the armpits from three yards away.

His nose poked angrily at me through the hair. "Hey - I don't go around criticising your elasticated pants."

I looked down. "They happen to be jogging pants."

He scowled. "When do you ever go jogging?"

I still remembered the last time. I'd been about fifteen with Dad, barking at me from behind, telling me to pick my feet up. "Old bastard," I muttered.

Noz leaned back into the dingy sofa. "Tell you what," he said. "Your next night off, we'll go out together - you and me. A few pointers from your old pal, Noz and you might just get lucky."

I'd had enough pointers and I didn't want to get lucky. I already knew what would happen. I'd stand around in some sleazy nightclub while Noz magnetically attracted all the women. "You do it your way and I'll do it mine."

He looked up at me through squinty eyes. "There's only one problem with that," he said. "Your way doesn't work. Angels don't fall out of the sky. You've got to get out there and find them. Like I did with Alicia. Incidentally - that's a hint."

"Hint?"

"As in - she's on her way here and I'd rather not have you hanging around. You've got your own place now. Remember?"

How could I forget? I'd been avoiding it all day.

The *King's Teeth* was just around the corner from where I lived: Scratched, half-painted walls, fingerprint-tainted glasses, mice skittering under bar stools, but after eleven whiskies, I stopped noticing.

On the way home, the pavement suddenly turned spongy. I staggered to one side and fell against the park railings. One arm went through. I sniffed. What was that smell? Brought my hand out. Dog shit. Quickly wiped it off on some damp grass and hauled myself back to a more or less upright position.

“Are you okay?”

She spoke in a soft voice with an unusual accent – a muted, accent. I turned my head round...

...and gazed into the face of an angel; doe eyes, soft, glowing skin, hair like a golden halo.

“Cornelius, isn’t it?”

Welsh? Irish? I was crap at accents. “You?” I swallowed. “We? Uh...do I know you?”

She smiled. “Not really. Summer. Next door but one.”

Summer; a sound like music, bees humming, honey and the scent of rosemary and lavender. The muscles in my face weren’t responding the way I wanted them to, which is why my voice had that drag to it. “Whass a lovely girl like you doing out here at ziz time’f night?”

She frowned. “It’s only half-past seven.”

I lifted my wrist. Who the hell had taken my watch?

“Been to the corner shop for some bread,” she explained. “Sure you’re okay?”

Now why wouldn’t I be? I was standing next to the most beautiful creature the world had ever seen.

She took my hand. “I’d better get you home.

West Country – that was it. Cornish?

“Got your key?”

I couldn’t seem to locate it. Her hand slipped into my pocket and a thrill of fire shivered through me.

It also rippled through my stomach.

“Oh. God.” She held the bread at arms’ length. Stinking yellowish liquid dripped slowly off the wrapper.

“God, I’m sorry.” I was, but it seemed kind of funny.

She looked around quickly, then shoved the loaf under a rhododendron.

“Come on.” she took my arm. “Lean on me.”

Don’t remember getting back home. I do remember the ecstasy of her closeness, her gentle scent, the swish of her skirt and her perfect, angelic toes.

She murmured softly to me as she settled me onto the sofa, but I didn’t know what she was saying because of the whistling in my ears. The room revolved a

couple of times. I heard the tap run, then felt something cool and moist on my forehead. Ah, let me die like this.

The light snapped off.

A moment later, it snapped on again. I felt myself being pushed onto my side; heard her grunting with the effort. I tried to roll onto my back again but there was something hard and uncomfortable stopping me.

Unconsciousness hit me like a sledgehammer.

In my dreams, I sometimes go back home. Not to this place, but home-home; to the little terraced house in Accrington, before they knocked the street down to build a Tesco's. Mum was still alive, singing and playing her guitar and Dad was decorating.

But this dream was a disturbing variation of the standard, involving C3PO, an orang utan and a bucket of wallpaper paste.

I woke, trembling and sweaty and squinted at the clock. It wasn't there. That was because I wasn't in my bedroom. I dragged my mobile out of my shirt pocket. Yeuk. Why did my fingers smell of dog-shit. O-three fifty-four.

I smacked my lips. They felt like dry parchment. My tongue felt like it was stuck down. I managed to loosen it from my bottom teeth and released a taste somewhere between sweaty feet and Stilton. They say four a.m. is when your body's at its lowest ebb. That's when the secret police arrive and take you away.

I was still wearing my clothes, although somehow, I had managed to take my shoes off. A damp tea towel had made a moist patch on the shoulder of my tee-shirt. I tried to sit up and something sharp-edged and cold was dug into my back. I fumbled with it and brought it out. My Ganesh ornament? What the hell was that doing there?

No time to worry about that now. I desperately needed a glass of water.

My head throbbed as I staggered into the kitchen. I drank the first glass in one gulp, then filled a fresh one. The moon shone a cold light onto the park railings. Stars pricked the sky like beads. A plane soared overhead, its lights blinking on and off against the midnight blue.

I leaned against the sink. Here I was, almost thirty years old and with remarkably little to show for it, apart from a foul-smelling stain on the front of my shirt. What had I been drinking? Whatever it was, it must have been off. I didn't usually drink a lot - not even in my young, foolish days.

Night clubs. Trying to pick up women. The music's deafening and you don't

understand what the hell's going on, but you stand there nodding and smiling and pretending you can hear what she's saying and all the time you're thinking she's just doing you a favour talking to you.

And you're right, because when the sound lowers, she's asking where your cute mate disappeared to.

Couldn't face going through all that any more. What was the point?

When it came down to it, was there much point in anything any more? Against the darkness outside, my ghost shadowed me in the kitchen window.

Thirty years old and three hundred pounds.

The way things were going, I could see myself ending up alone, feeding the pigeons with scraps of bread and coming home to an empty house with only the TV for company.

Depressing, isn't it, me old flower?

I whirled round and waited for my head to stop spinning. "Who said that?"

The air shimmered like a heat haze and something began to materialise: A person. A man.

Al Pacino?

In drag?

And speaking in a broad, Lancashire accent?

"In future," he said, wagging his finger, "I'd advise thee to stay off t'whisky. And owt peculiar tha finds in Noz's fridge."

I gulped and nodded. He was wearing a Maggie-Thatcher-type powder blue skirt and a cream blouse with frills at the neck. If this was the kind of hallucination I was going to get, I'd definitely stay off the booze from now on. "Uh...what exactly -?"

"Now what did they tell me?" He scratched his head. "Oh - that's it: I'm a manifestation of tha inner self."

I didn't know whether to be pleased or deeply disturbed by that.

He folded his arms and stiffened his spine. "Sort thisen, lad. Th'answer's inside thee. Tha's only to drag it out."

Drag? That explained his crazy outfit. "What do you expect me to do?" I spluttered. "Women hate me, my life's going nowhere and I look like the Jabba the Hutt."

He stared at me for a moment. Then he took a step forward, raised one hand and passed it, Jedi-like, in front of my eyes. *Tha can't taste a thing.*

Water seemed to swallow me in a swirl. I lost the ability to tell up from down. My head dizzied like a blizzard in a snow-globe, my eyes fogged, my knees

went. I flopped against the sink and slid to the floor.

Someone thumping my forehead woke me. Ah, no. It was someone knocking at the door. What time was it? I peered, bleary-eyed, at my phone. Ten fifteen.

“Who is it?” I croaked, throat-sore, and tried to scramble to my feet.

“Hi,” she called, “it’s me, Summer. From next-door but one?”

Next-door but one? That house had been empty for months, after the Sanderson twins moved out. Who the hell was Summer?

Before I could open the door, she came breezing in. It occurred to me that I might have forgotten to lock up last night?

She walked towards me, a little hesitantly: a small, dumpy woman – about thirty-five or so, with mousy hair and perfect teeth. As if that wasn’t bad enough, she sounded Irish? American? “Just called to see how you were.”

I scratched my head. “Fine, I guess.”

“Only, I was a bit worried.” I must have looked puzzled because she added. “You know, after last night.”

Last night?

She answered the question without my having to ask. “You had a little too much to drink. I brought you home. Remember now?”

I didn’t, but nodded anyway. What was the deal with Ganesh? “The ornament -?”

“Yes, I put it there to stop you from rolling over onto your back.” She made a grimace that wrinkled her nose. “Didn’t want you to choke on your own vomit.”

I nodded, soberly. “Thanks.” She hadn’t been in the neighbourhood five minutes and already she was doing a fair impression of Mother Teresa; one of those selfless people that went out of their way to help others. Probably a religious freak. Type that really got on my nerves.

She smiled and it made her look almost pretty. That ankle-length skirt didn’t do much for her, though; made her look even shorter. The flat sandals didn’t help, either, even though she’d painted her toenails and added a few toe-rings.

She waved a small yellow sachet at me. “I’ve brought some camomile tea. Good for settling the stomach. I’ll make it for you, if you like.”

I cleared my throat. “Think I can manage now, thanks.”

“Oh. Okay.” She let her head drop forward a little. “Well,” she said, after a pause, “I’d better be getting back, then.” She pulled a mock frown. “Still got some unpacking to do.”

“Want some help?” Well, I guess I did owe her one.

“Thanks,” she said, beaming down at me, “but you’re in no fit state to do

anything yet. Why don't you take it easy for now and I'll see you this afternoon – say around four?"

"This afternoon?"

"Your birthday. Drinks at my place - remember?"

Drinks? I frowned. "How'd you know it was my birthday?"

"You mentioned it once or twice." For some reason, her cheeks pinkened.

"Along with a few other things."

What other things? What had I been saying?

She left in a drift of print skirt and cheesecloth, before I could think of an excuse to opt out. So it was Summer who'd managed to drag me back home and put me to bed. Shit - I should have said I'd made arrangements to go out.

Should I drop in later – tell her I couldn't make it? Seemed a bit mean, especially as she was trying to be friendly. Anyway, how long could drinks last? One...two hours, at most. Couldn't be longer than that.

I stumbled into the kitchen, found the paracetamol in the middle-drawer and swallowed a couple. The day was bright, like an HD picture with cotton clouds skimming the air. My sinister neighbour, Mrs Figgis, was standing by the gate chatting to some woman with hair like a rusty Brillo pad. Old Bob on the dexter side stood, hoe in one hand, bouquet of weeds in the other. How did the man get around? He was all skin and bone. Looked like he'd been mummified? Nobody knew his exact age, but he had to be at least ninety.

Which is about as old as I felt at the moment. Old and sick. And to top it all, I was going crazy. How else would you explain last night's Al Pacino dream? Or had it been a hallucination? On reflection, perhaps the *King's Teeth* hadn't been the best choice of venue. I should have expected something like this when the landlord poured his whisky from a bottle labelled *Distilled in Tel Aviv*.

Wait a minute; no wonder I felt off. I hadn't had any breakfast. Hm. More like time for brunch. Something substantial, seeing as I probably wouldn't get anything to eat at Summer's - and if I did, it would only be bean sprouts and seaweed. All right, then – what should I have? French toast? Bacon? I had some lamb's kidneys in the fridge. And porcini mushrooms.

I poured out some corn flakes while I was deciding, added half a pint of milk and a sprinkling of sugar...

Tasted like wet cardboard.

Not really surprising for cornflakes. Okay. Maybe something tastier - more nourishing. An omelette? I cracked three eggs into a bowl, got my frying pan nice and hot and in a couple of minutes, I had rustled up a nice, fluffy one.

I took an eager forkful... It was like eating warm rubber. What the hell?
I scrabbled in the fridge – brought out pancetta, threw in butter, garlic and
button mushrooms. The smell filled the kitchen, which meant I should be able to
pick up some sort of taste – right?
I scooped some up with my fork.
Zilch.
Bloody Jewish whisky. What had it done to my palate?
My eyes flickered back to the window. What had Old Bob found under that
rhododendron? Looked like a loaf of bread, but the way he was waving his
arms, you'd have thought it was a grenade or something. Weird old sod.
Probably going senile.