



SUNSHINE MEADOWS

by Pete Rossi

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Smashwords Edition

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Thank you for your support.

Once again, my mate Derek is on hand to proof read and correct as appropriate. Cheers, mate.

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Crime doesn't pay. Or does it?

If you can't afford to buy something, you can just go and steal it, can't you? You'll probably get away with it. Unless you are really unlucky. Then you'll have to live with the consequences, whatever they may be.

This is the tale of a robbery gone wrong.

Jen lives right in the middle of a massive run down council estate with her fifteen year old son. For years, she has dreamed of leaving for a better life, but simply doesn't have the money to do so. Until she wins the lottery, that is. But will that win be the start of good or bad luck?

Sunshine Meadows

When you hear the name "Sunshine Meadows", what image is conjured up in your mind? Fields of corn, shining golden in the morning sunlight as you speed by on an express train, maybe. Or perhaps the image of lambs, frolicking in a field, jumping for joy, chasing each other without a care in the world. Or it could be a barn owl, flying majestically through the sky at the dead of night, sleek and graceful, searching for its next meal with its piercing yellow eyes. Maybe a little field mouse, with his eyes darting, rushing back home to his burrow and safety.

What it probably doesn't bring to mind is a council estate in a grimy town in the north of England. However, Sunshine Meadows is the name that was chosen many years ago. The estate contains row after row of identical terraced streets, dating from the 1930s, followed by street after street of identical semi-detached houses built shortly after the second World War, and finally, the crowning achievement, three high rise tower blocks from the 1960s.

Around half of the houses in Sunshine Meadows are empty now. Most of the residents, like the meadows themselves, are long gone. The only wildlife you will see when passing through now, hopefully in the safety and warmth of your own car, are rats, and if you're extremely lucky, maybe a fox or two, scavenging from the litter that is strewn about everywhere.

You won't be surprised to hear that crime is a serious problem, encouraged by the empty houses. In an attempt to keep the resourceful youths out, council workers have started to wait outside each house for the last tenants to depart, checking watches and smoking, before making each house secure. Electricity and gas is shut off straight away, 'Gas Off' scrawled on the façade. Originally, windows were boarded up and additional padlocks were added to the doors, but this didn't prove to be anywhere near enough of a deterrent for the local youths. More recently, the workers have taken to welding metal shutters over all possible entrances and exits, on doors and windows, on the ground floor and higher, but even this has not proved a good enough obstacle. All appliances that can be removed are, but this doesn't cover everything. Valuable copper piping remains, cast iron radiators in each room, far too much of a temptation for the local youths who can easily sell them to scrap dealers for a little extra cash. Every new method to secure the houses is defeated within hours - it's like a game to them.

The locals current favourite entry method involves scaling the wall of the house using a ladder and is usually carried out in the dead of night. The ladders are climbed, roof tiles are then ripped off and thrown down onto the street below to make a hole big enough to climb through. It's reached an epidemic, almost like a little cottage industry - get in, get as much as you can and get out. Be done in half an hour and move on to the next house. They stand little chance of being caught.

Street lamps that work are rare. Those that are still functioning are often smashed before entry is made into a house. The police have long since decided that they are better off staying out of the area unless they come in

large numbers, and even if they do come, there is little they can do. Tiles rain down onto the officers and their vehicles.

The houses that are still occupied are coming to the end of their useful lives. The terraced ones were well built, but have suffered generations of abuse by uncaring tenants. The war time semis, not built to the same standards, are in poor condition, with many becoming damp, and others starting to subside.

But it is the tower blocks that are in the worst condition of all. Built on the cheap, with substandard materials. Heralded as being the future, they will be pulled down soon, and that is all they deserve. Graffiti covers both the inside and outside. The lifts rarely work. Glass from broken bottles litters the stinking urine stained corridors. A number of arson attempts have taken place, with bottles flung through the windows of some of the flats on lower levels.

The small shopping precinct located below the flats had thrived initially, but only a single shop remains open now. The others still stand, many gutted. The newsagent, open from six in the morning till midnight is still well supported, and well defended. The owner keeps a baseball bat behind the counter, just in case. It regularly sees action.

Only a single pub remains on the estate as well. The Duke of York has survived eighty years, and opened its doors for every single day, all through the war - bar a forced one month closure when a rare police raid had occurred at exactly the same time as a particularly large drug deal was going down. The three days of rioting that followed ripped the heart out of the dying community.

Sitting in the middle of all this, at home with her teenage son in one of the damp semi detached houses, was Jen. She was relaxed on the sofa after a long day job hunting. Jen was a single mother, the father of her son disappearing as soon as he found out she was pregnant, aged only fifteen, never to be heard from again.

Born and bred on the estate, Jen wanted nothing more than to leave. As soon as possible. Her education had come to an abrupt halt with the arrival of her son, Ben. At thirty two, standing five foot four inches tall, she had a good heart, unlike many on the estate, and hadn't given up on life. She was determined to bring better times for herself and her son. Still, she had her vices, and the money she receives on benefits is regularly frittered away on cigarettes and alcohol.

Single mothers are common on the estate. A child living with a father, especially his own, is the exception rather than the rule. The school, as you may imagine, is not a paragon of learning. The students have never known anything outside the estate, so didn't aspire to better themselves. Ben would be lucky to get 2 GCSE's when they came up for him at the end of the year. Most students would leave with none.

Jobs were hard to come by. Money was tight. Christmas and birthday presents were usually small and, in bad years, nonexistent.

At least Ben was home with Jen tonight, listening to music on his iPod rather than hanging out with his no-good mates outside the newsagent, pestering any adult who walked past by asking them to go in and get them some cans.

The lottery was another of Jen's vices. The idea of spending twenty or thirty pounds on lottery tickets was too hard to resist when the prize could be

several million pounds and their ticket off the estate to a better life. As the draw time approached, she walked over to the hulking great CRT in the corner of the room, the remote long since vanished, and changed channels.

"Welcome to the midweek lottery draw. Let's get straight down to business. First out of the lottery machine tonight is 24. That's ball 24," said the draw master, his voice high with fake excitement. One matching number for Jen.

"Next up is 37. First time that one has been drawn out in a month." Two numbers out, two numbers matched. A good start.

"And which ball is next out in our midweek draw tonight? It's number 8. And next up, it's 25."

"We've got four, all four so far," screeched Jen. "Just two more numbers and I'll have eight million quid. Just think what I could do with that, son. We'll be out of this council estate faster than Linford Christie."

"And next out," the announcer continued, maintaining his fake enthusiasm in front of a cheering audience, "is 11. That was drawn last week as well."

"Five! Five! We've got five numbers. Just one more!" Jen shouted to her son Ben, her voice raised another octave. Ben still sat hooked into his iPod, barely paying attention. *That* had appeared one day, presumably taken from a weaker child at a neighbouring school. Sometimes best not to ask where things have come from. "Come on!" she shouted.

Jen held her breath. Clasped her hands together. Crossed her fingers. Ben just sat there, still listening to his music. Ben was fifteen, a typical teenage boy, interested in the things that most teenage boys are, namely football, hanging around with his gang, getting as much alcohol as possible, and trying to get as many teenage girls panties down as possible.

"And the next ball, the last of our six before the bonus ball is forty seven."

"Oh, bollocks," Jen exclaimed. "One frigging number off. Forty eight, I have. Forty eight. Can't believe it."

"Not over, mom. Bonus ball." Ben obviously *was* paying attention as money was involved.

"And for you lucky people who have five matching numbers, you need the bonus ball for a much bigger prize. And it is," the announcer said, pausing as though he was ready to announce the next contestant to be voted off X-factor, "is twenty nine."

"Oh, god, don't believe it. One out again!" Jen grabbed a cigarette from a nearly empty pack and lit it. Would have thrown the remote control at the TV if it had still had one.

"Mom, don't sweat," Ben said. "Still won something."

"Wonder how much? If you want me, I'll be in the pub with Caz and Ange." She stormed out of the room.

Jen liked a good girls' night out, and Wednesday was ladies night at the Duke of York. She much preferred spending the night with her mates than stuck at home in front of the TV, with no man and a son to worry over. That was the reason they still had a fifteen year old hulking grey monster in the corner of the living room instead of a 60 inch flat screen HD TV like the rest of the houses on the street.

Yes, she enjoyed an evening with her girlfriends, steadily getting more and more pissed on cheap booze. The worst thing was that they had to go outside every time they fancied a smoke. And it always made sense to go the pub with her mates - after dark, you didn't want to be out alone around here. Always safety in numbers.

"Girls, won the lottery," she told her mates.

"How much?" Caz asked her.

"Don't know, but I got five numbers. Only one out on the bonus ball as well."

"Can I borrow a grand?" Caz asked, joking.

Loud mouthed Ange, already well on the way to getting hammered at barely half past nine, shouted, "drinks on Jen tonight for all. She's won the lottery." Cue a rush to the bar.

"I reckon it's about ten grand," Jen replied. "I'd have liked more, then I could be gone from here."

"More like twenty," Ange said as she headed over to get another round to go on Jen's tab, pushing her way through the growing queue.

"Think it could even be thirty or forty," Caz said. "If it's eight million for six numbers, it's going to be thirty grand at least for five, surely."

"What you gonna spend it on?" Ange asked as she came back with three pints.

"It'll keep me in fags and booze for a couple of weeks," Jen joked, "but I'm going to get Ben something. It's his birthday tomorrow."

"What you getting him?"

"Thought I'd get him a nice new TV and then Sky Plus. The one we've got is knackered. I'm fed up of getting up to change channels. Might keep him in on an evening."

"Here, my husband can get a nice TV for you. Hundred quid, no questions asked. Interested?" Ange said.

"I would, Ange," Jen replied. "Thanks for the offer." She wasn't averse to getting knocked off kit every now and then. It's stupid to spend money when you can get the same item for a tenth of the price from someone down the pub. "But for once, while I've got some money, I'll buy something legit."

"Caz," she asked, "can I come round to your house and order one off Amazon on your computer. I need it tomorrow before Ben gets home from school."

"Sure. My other half can fit the dish for you," Caz replied back. "I'll send him round soon as it arrives."

"Cheers Caz."

"You'll have to hide the adult channels or he'll have half the school in his bedroom watching Babestation."

"Not worried about that. He's fifteen. Probably screwed half the slut girls in his class already. I'd rather have him at home getting off on Babe channels than with his mates outside the newsagent."

"Has he had any more trouble with the police then? Since last time?" Ange enquired.

Jen shook her head. "Not yet. Not since that crash he was in last year in that nicked car. The crash and the bollocking I gave him afterwards seemed to work. He couldn't sit down for a week. I'm worried he's slowly drifting back into bad habits again."

They chatted and drunk for another hour or so, shouting to each other, when the karaoke started.

"We ready to go home yet? It's getting late," Caz said to the girls later.

"Just time for a few more, then we'll all walk home together."

At half past ten, the girls had smoked their way through several packets of cheap fags, drank their way through several bottles of wine, knocked back quite a few beers each, murdered a few songs, and were ready to head home.

They left the pub, crunching through the broken glass in the car park. No cars ever parked in here. If you parked here and were very lucky, all you'd get is a puncture. If you had less luck, you would come back to a car with no wheels, smashed windows and the CD player ripped out. Or worst of all, come back to no car. Jen had a suspicion that Ben's joyride had started in this very car park, and although he had never told her, she was right.

The wind was cold, but wearing a coat was seen as a weakness, so the girls hugged themselves to keep warm as they walked home, their tiny skirts cut maybe an inch below their buttocks providing little cover from the elements.

They crossed the road, past the phone box that hadn't worked in years and would probably never work again, past a couple arguing with their windows open about who had been caught screwing who, and then past a couple of six year old kids demolishing a fence to gather wood for bonfire night. Long past the bedtime of a normal six year old, but you didn't find normal six year olds on this estate.

They passed boarded up houses, houses with half the roof tiles missing, most shattered lying in the middle of the road from a raid the previous night, past the burned out hulks of old cars. Past mountains of decaying rubbish lying outside the newsagent, a large brown rat making a dash across the road in front of them with half a burger in its mouth.

The girls got a few wolf whistles as usual, Caz giving the finger to anyone who dared to whistle at *her*. A car flashed past without lights, five teenage boys squashed inside, the radio at a deafening level, the horn blaring as they shot around the corner. Ange lifted up her top and flashed her breasts at them which brought a large cheer that could be heard over the radio as they went by.

Don't do that. It just encourages them, thought Jen.

"Bet that's nicked," Caz said.

"Course it is," Jen replied. "Least Ben wasn't in it. I think."

They reached the end of their street, the street name sign defaced with obscenities, and Jen and Caz walked off one way, Ange the other. Nobody would dare tackle Ange alone.

Caz lived next door to Jen, Jen in the left half of the semi and Caz, husband and six noisy children in the right. Jen breathed a sigh of relief. "Got back safe again. Thank God."

Caz got her key from under a flower pot. No room for a pocket in her figure hugging top and certainly not in her skirt. She thought underwear spoilt the look as well.

She jammed the key in the lock, twisted it, gave the door a good kick, leaving a muddy footprint on the white PVC. A second kick sent the door flying backward, smashing into the wall, taking out a lump of plaster, and they were in.

Caz walked in to the living room. Her husband, Don, was sat in front of the TV, watching Shameless. This place is just like that, Jen thought. Don held his can of lager up to Jen as she came in. All the greeting she was going to get. Either that, or he was asking her to get another one for him.

The girls walked upstairs to Caz and Don's ramshackle bedroom. The computer was on. It was a top of the range iMac, and had apparently 'fallen off the back of a lorry' a couple of months ago. That was Don's excuse when he arrived back with it one day anyway.

The huge monitor was still showing the last website that Don had been on. "I'll kill him, the perving bastard," Caz said. "Look what he's been looking at." The monitor was showing a picture of two young girls playing with themselves in the bath. "You're disgusting you are," she shouted down the stairs.

The iMac stood out in the room. It didn't go well with the tatty decor and stained bed sheets, it was blindingly obvious the computer had not been bought and paid for legitimately.

Caz grabbed the mouse and navigated to the Amazon website. The girls spent ten minutes or so going through the huge range of TVs they had on display.

"I'm so shit with technology. Do you know what's good and what isn't?" Jen asked.

"You don't need to know. Just look for what has the most five star reviews. How much are you going to spend Jen?"

"I don't know. A grand maybe?"

Caz's eldest daughter, Beth, popped her head in the door. She was eighteen and just out of the shower. She had a pink towel wrapped around her head, another wrapped round her ample figure. She was getting ready for a night out on the town. "You need to get Full HD, mum," she said. "As big as you can."

Another one of Caz's offspring, her eldest son, Harvey, bounded up the stairs and straight in to the room. He hadn't realised the three girls were in there. He looked up, his face a picture when he realised they were using the computer. "I was just..." he said

"So it was you," Caz said. "Thought it was Don who had been on the computer. I've told you before. You need to stop looking at them frigging porn sites or it will fall off." Harvey's face reddened, turning to the colour of beetroot. He got out of the room as quickly as he could, clearly feeling very uncomfortable. Having his half naked big sister in there with his mother and her best mate didn't exactly help matters either. He'd be getting a good lecture for that later. Probably a lot worse than the one Caz had given him when she

found a picture of Megan Fox with her bits out in his geography homework book.

After another quarter hour or so, going purely by the reviews left by many reviewers, the perfect television had been chosen. Fifty two inches of flatscreen Full HD glory, 3D, internet access. It had everything. For only fifteen hundred quid.

Jen typed in her credit card details and selected next day delivery. Job done. She left and went next door, back home.

Early the next day, shortly after Ben had left for school, Jen set off out to the newsagent where she bought her stack of lottery tickets every week. Not the only reason she was going there, though. She needed another five packs of Marlboro Lights and a six pack of Stella to last her through the day.

Behind the counter was one of Jen's best mates, Kelly.

"Hiya love," Kel said to Jen. "The usual?"

"As always. Actually, no. Make it ten packs of Lights, I'm celebrating."

"You're splashing out."

"Won the lottery last night. That's why." She handed over the winning ticket. "Can you pay me from your till? How much have I won?"

"Let me see," Kelly said, tapping away in to the till. "You have five numbers. Not bad, hon. And you've won £795."

"Seven hundred and ninety five pounds. Is that it? For five balls. Are you sure? Are you quite sure?" Jen shook her head in disbelief. "I've got a four hundred quid tab from last night in the pub, and I've just ordered a TV that costs fifteen hundred quid for Ben's birthday."

"That's it, I'm afraid, love. We get a lot of that from people coming in here. If you had the bonus ball as well, you would have won sixty grand."

"Sixty grand. And I've won seven nine five, you say?"

"Yes. *And* I can't even pay you. It's too much. You need to go into town, to the Post Office and they will give you the money."

Jen rushed out of the shop and made her way home as quickly as she could. She had never run as fast since she had been in school doing the dreaded cross country running. Her abiding memory of school sports was the day that the boys had burst through their changing room wall as the girls were showering, causing chaos. The wall had never been properly replaced, and only planks of wood now divided the boys and girls changing rooms.

She hammered on Caz's front door until it was answered by her daughter Beth who had just woken up after a long and raucous night out the previous day, arriving back home after dawn.

"I've only won a few hundred quid Beth," she blurted out, breathing hard from the unexpected exertion. "Got to cancel that TV order."

The girls rushed upstairs and into the bedroom, Don still lounging half asleep in the bed, beer belly on show. They logged back in to the Amazon account and Jen hit the "Cancel Order" button. Breathed a sigh of relief.

"What are you going to do for Ben's birthday now?" enquired Beth.

"I don't know. He knows I've won the lottery so he's going to expect something. And it's too late to order anything else now."

"Don't know if you're up for it, but I know something you could do," Beth told her.

"What?"

"If you really want to get him a new TV, I can help you out. Come along with me to the pub, I'm meeting a few friends there in an hour. Come and see what you think."

Half an hour after that, Beth and Jen were walking through the estate together. Both were dressed in red tracksuits and tops, supporting the local underachieving football team. Beth and Jen could easily pass as mother and daughter. A fake tattoo of a rose had been applied to both Beth and Jen's arms. As they walked, they moved away from the centre of the estate. Leaving behind the scruffy terraces, they crossed over a main dual carriageway, cars speeding by well over the posted speed limit, and were back in to private housing. At one time, these houses had been in a prime location, looking over the unspoilt meadows, and had been very desirable, but as the council estate grew ever further outwards, they became less and less attractive. Now it was just a single road that divided the two estates.

The girls crossed through a car park, no glass and litter here, and entered the local leisure centre.

They paid for two tickets to the swimming pool and entered the ladies changing room to get undressed. Apart from Beth and Jen, the only other person present in the changing room was a female technician who was working with the locker doors.

"We've been having some trouble with the lockers, girls," she said. "When you put your smart card in to open them, it hasn't been working right. They don't open. But of course, you know that!"

"Sure, honey," Beth said, and to Jen, "she's one of us. There is nothing wrong with the lockers at all. All part of the plan. If you see someone in a uniform who looks as though they should be there, you'll believe nearly anything they say."

To the fake technician she said, "You'll let us know when you see some likely candidates coming won't you."

"Course I will. Liz on reception is in on it as well. When you hear her make a loudspeaker announcement asking Mrs Rose to come to reception, that's your cue. Get back in here as fast as you can."

Now changed in to swimming costumes, the girls left the changing room and headed for the pool. Beth, her tanned body barely fitting in to a tiny white bikini top drew appreciative glances from the men she passed, and annoyed grimaces from most of the women, jealous of her figure.

Beth headed off to do length after length of the pool, while Jen messed about in the shallow end. Beth was still enjoying the attention, men turning their heads to stare at her figure through the shimmering water, when only a short time later, Jen heard the announcement being made.

On Beth's next pass by, Jen got her attention by poking her in the ribs, and the two women left the pool, all of the men watching with eyes focussed on Beth's bikini bottoms as she climbed the metal steps out of the pool. She

ran her hands through her sodden hair as the two walked back to the changing room.

Once back inside, the two ladies quickly stripped naked and headed in to the showers. "Don't understand why we have to get naked."

"It makes them feel more in control of the situation, Jen, makes us look vulnerable," Beth told her. "You'll see."

"Now," shouted the technician as the door handle turned.

Two young women, looking well to do with perfect hair and designer clothes, entered the changing room as Beth and Jen left the showers and walked naked back over to their towels and clothes.

"Ladies," said the technician to the women who had just entered. "The lockers are broken. There are only two working at the moment, so I'd hang on for a few minutes until these other two women have got dressed and finished with them. You don't want to leave your valuables unlocked in here, anyone could take them."

"But we've got a court booked at two for an hour, and it's two minutes to now."

Being clothed, the two ladies felt they had an advantage over the two naked women, so when the younger voluptuous one said, "we'll be dressed in five minutes, we can lock your bags away for you. Just take your smart cards with you," the two were only too glad to accept her generous offer. They changed and left with their squash rackets, chattering away about an upcoming garden party.

"And just how easy was that," Beth said, fishing through one of the handbags and coming out with some car keys and a driving licence. "Bingo! They'll be gone for an hour, and we'll be long finished with their car by then."

Jen, already feeling guilty, said "I don't know if I'm going to be able to go through all the way with this."

"You'll be fine, honey, don't sweat."

With that, they dried off, dressed, put the handbag, minus keys and purse, into the locker, and slammed the locker door shut, jamming a towel into the gap as it closed. "That will hold them up even longer." They left and walked out of the leisure centre. The technician pulled a baseball cap over her blonde hair to hide her face and followed a few minutes later.

"What next?" asked Jen. She was seated in the passenger seat alongside Beth, who was driving through the quiet weekday streets. They were in a top of the range black Vectra, one that shouldn't be missed for at least an hour.

"To the rendezvous at the warehouse."

"Can we get rid of these fake tattoo's now?"

"Yes. They just scrape off. When those ladies contact the police, they are the first thing they will remember about us."

"What's going to happen in the warehouse?"

"First, new registration plates are going to go on this car, while we change our appearance."

"I'm still not that comfortable doing this," Jen said.

"I know, but it's going to be okay."

"What about the car?"

"It will get dumped somewhere and burnt out, probably."

Jen grimaced. "I thought that we said that it was a company that was going to be targeted, not just a normal member of the public."

"Well, yes, but our finger prints are all over this car now. What did you think we were going to do with it?"

"Just dump it somewhere."

"No, we can't do that. If we did, it might come back to bite us later."

"I want out. I can't do this." Jen was starting to panic about what was going to come next.

"Too late for that now. You know what we're doing. You know who is involved. You know it's not legal. The best way to buy your silence is to implicate you in as much of this as possible, so if you do go to the police, you'll be going down for a long stretch with us as well."

"I don't think I'll be able to pull it off. I've never done anything like this before."

"You have to. If you screw this up, you could pull us all down."

The girls drove on in silence for a while.

"Have you done this before Beth?" Jen asked.

"Once or twice," she admitted. "Where do you think the iMac came from? And the TV. And the stereo."

They drove in to a quiet industrial estate. Most of the buildings appeared empty, many hadn't been occupied for years, and little traffic was about. Beth turned left, right, then left again, and in to a cul-de-sac. As they approached a warehouse, the rusty metal roller door rolled up and Beth drove through. The door creaked its way down again, clanging loudly when the bottom reached bare concrete again, as soon as they were inside.

"How did it go girls?" a man inside asked them as Beth braked to a halt. The man was the landlord of the Duke of York, and the brains behind the day's operation.

"Like clockwork, Dexter," Beth answered.

"Well done, ladies," he replied. "Go and get changed for the next part of the operation."

Dexter delved in to a plastic Tesco carrier bag and came out with a screwdriver. Carefully, he undid the screws on the rear number plate and took it off, and then did the same to the front plate. Put them both in his carrier bag. Then he pulled out another set of plates and started to screw them on to the car. Once this was done, he got in and checked the glove compartment. Inside was an MOT certificate and an insurance cover letter. These were pocketed. Also, there were some mints and CD's. Michael Buble. These were safe to stay.

Back out of the car again, he walked over to the boot. Opened it up and searched through. Nothing of consequence in there. An umbrella, some walking shoes. Nothing to show who the car really belonged to.

He headed to the back of the warehouse, and the small toilet room where the girls were changing. Hoping to catch a glimpse as they were getting ready. No such luck though, Beth opening the door as he was about to quietly nudge it open and take a peek inside.

"Ah," he said. "Do you have the driving licence?"

"Yes I do," Beth replied and gave him the purse.

Beth was now dressed in a very short black skirt, and her hair which was naturally brown was now covered by a long blonde wig. Blue contact lenses changed her natural hazel eye colour. The rose tattoo had been removed. High heels added another few inches to her height.

"If I didn't recognise those big tits, Beth," Dexter said. "I'd never know it was you."

"I feel such a fool wearing this," Jen said emerging from the toilet in similar apparel.

"We have to look like waitresses from the Crown. All part of the plan."

Dexter took the driving licence over to a table. It was an old style paper licence without a photograph on, which was just as well. "Love these old paper licences," he said. "We don't even need to go to the bother of getting a photo that looks like you. We're good to go with this, as is." He handed the licence back to Beth, but not before he had rifled through the purse, pocketing the cash and credit cards that were in there."

"Hang on. I need some money in there," Beth said. "It's going to look weird if there is none in and I need to go in it for some reason."

"Okay," Dexter grimaced, and handed her back a twenty.

"Knock 'em dead, ladies. You've got fifteen minutes to get in position. I'll give you a ring when I need you to move."

Ten minutes later, the girls were in position, a short distance away from the local retail park. "This is the most crucial part of the whole day," Beth instructed Jen. "You let me do all the talking, and just act the way we agreed, okay?"

"If I have to."

"You do have to. You're in too deep now."

"Is everything going to work out okay?" Jen grumbled.

"I don't see why not. Always has before. It's always quiet around the back of the shops. Delivery trucks are about the only thing that drives through here during the day, apart from the shop staff. They park round the back as well."

Waiting was not one of Jen's strong points. She fidgeted, ran her fingers through her hair, or rather the wig that was covering her hair. Glanced in the rear mirror. Fidgeted some more. She was starting to annoy Beth.

They waited. Barely another five minutes later, Beth's mobile rang. One ring. Then it stopped. "That's the signal," she said.

Beth accelerated away, leaving tyre marks on the road. Timing was critical. She sped up and reached a T junction between two of the larger stores. She looked right. Didn't look left.

Jen knew what was going to happen next. She tensed in preparation for the upcoming impact, trying to stifle a small scream.

Beth shot out of the T junction, right in to the path of an oncoming Comet delivery truck. The main target of the whole operation. The passenger side of the car took the main impact. Airbags deployed. The side window came through. A horrible crunching metal sound could be heard as the van hit the car, pushing it for twenty feet, thirty, fifty. The van driver hardly reacted at all. With no time to slam on his brakes, the initial hit was hard. The impact was

much larger, much more violent than both women were expecting. Even Beth let out a startled yelp, following by a string of swear words.

"He's half asleep," Beth said, breathing in deeply. "Hope the car is okay. That was a much bigger impact than before. We need to drive it away."

Jen was silent. Beth spoke to her again. No reaction. She tapped her on the shoulder, and Jen jumped, a surprised scream coming from her.

"You okay?" Beth asked. Still no reply. Must be in shock, she thought.

The van driver too was sat at the wheel of his cab, just looking ahead. The car, side on, had been pushed a long way by his truck. The front bumper had managed to wedge itself under the side of the car. Thankfully, it hadn't rolled over.

After another thirty seconds, Jen had composed herself slightly more. Her face was still pale. Her hands were still shaking. She looked as though she was going to throw up. She had a few small cuts to the side of her face, but no injuries other than that. Finally she spoke. "God, that was awful," was all she said.

Beth could see an ambulance approaching in her mirror. A St John ambulance. These ambulances are staffed by volunteers and can usually be found at major events throughout the UK, such as football matches, air shows and concerts where a large crowd is expected. A good bit of luck that one was so close by, or was it?

Two medics got out as the ambulance braked to a halt, and rushed over to the damaged Vectra.

"Hi Beth," one said. "You two okay?"

"Jen has some cuts, and I think she's in shock, but I'm fine."

"Yeah, she doesn't look good does she. Silly cow. Think I'll have to get her in the back of the ambulance."

"Don't do that! She might say something she shouldn't when you've got the delivery driver in there," Beth argued back.

"It'll look weird if she's not in the ambulance though."

"Oh, go on then, just don't let her say anything." Beth scowled as she realised he was trying to look down her top.

"Okay, we'll stick as close to the plan as we can. I'll get the driver in to the back of the ambulance, you see if you can get the car unstuck from the front of the truck. Be ready to go on the signal."

Beth opened the driver side door, that side of the vehicle being totally undamaged. Jen's door was directly against the front of the truck, so Jen was helped over the front seat so she could get out of the drivers side door as well.

One medic walked Jen over to the back of the ambulance, reassuring her as they went, as the other went over to the truck. He tapped on the window with his knuckles. Got no response from the driver. The medic tried the door handle and opened the door.

He spoke to the driver. "Are you okay sir?"

"I, er, I don't know what happened," he replied back, stammering, still looking blankly out of his windscreen. "I was just driving along, and the next thing I know, I was pushing this car along. Don't know where the hell it came from." He shook his head.

The medic gave the driver a brief examination, asking if there was any pain or if he suffered from any medical conditions. He determined that the

driver was okay to be moved. No pain in his neck or back. Getting the driver in to the ambulance was crucial. Even if he did have pain in his back he would have moved him.

"I'd like you to come and sit in the ambulance, sir. I think you may be suffering from shock." The medic chaperoned the driver over to the back of the ambulance, closing the door to allow them some privacy.

As Beth saw the ambulance rear door close, she quickly rang a number on her mobile and reported all was clear. Seconds later, a white van pulled up alongside the vehicles, and backed so its rear end was a few feet away from the back of the truck. The truck that was jammed full of brand new electrical appliances. TVs, laptops, iPads, Blu-ray players.

Four men got out of the van's rear door leaving the white van driver sat in the cab, blocking the view between the ambulance and delivery truck's rear doors, should the ambulance door be opened.

The men ran to the front of the delivery truck and manhandled the Vectra, freeing it from the truck. No mechanical damage to the car, thankfully. One window was smashed, the side well dented in and scraped, but the tyres were still inflated and properly on their rims. The surrounding roads were still remarkably quiet, few vehicles headed around the rear of the retail park where deliveries were made, but those that did would still be able to pass by. None had so far. If any did come, seeing an ambulance on site already, they would pass through without stopping. Emergency services had already been called and had responded. Nothing for them to do.

The men swiftly opened the rear door of the Comet truck. It had automatically unlocked when the vehicle detected it had been involved in a collision. They began to unload the contents of the delivery truck in to their own white van. A well choreographed team. Almost as well organised as a Formula 1 pit stop crew.

Barely three minutes had passed since impact, but already the unloading was finished and then the white van sped away, leaving only Beth in the damaged Vectra.

After another five minutes, the back door to the ambulance opened and Jen came out, looking more composed. She had been asked to pretend she was in shock, but no pretence had been necessary. Jen got in to the rear driver side seat and Beth pulled away. She had been crying.

"They got everything loaded okay."

"I feel so guilty," Jen said. "That driver could have been injured with what we did."

"He'll be fine. He's probably just in shock like you are."

"What happens now?"

"We meet back at the warehouse to unload the goods, then I dump this car. Then someone will come along and burn it."

"What about the truck driver? Won't he notice stuff is missing?"

"He will, but not for a while yet. They'll drive him straight to the hospital and he'll be kept there for ages."

"Won't he phone his boss or something and say the truck has been left in the street?"

"He might. But we're long gone by now."

"But he has our descriptions."

"But not the right ones. You're not blonde, you don't have blue eyes, you won't be wearing those clothes again."

"But what if someone has a description of the car."

"If they have got the licence plate, it's wrong. And it'll be burnt out in less than an hour anyway."

"Are we really going to get away with this?"

"Don't see why not, we've done similar things before with no trouble. Just relax, you'll have a flash top of the range TV in before Ben gets home from school."

"But I feel so guilty. It's one thing just buying something you know is nicked down at the Duke of York, but we've nicked the things ourselves. And we could have hurt people."

"People we don't know and don't care about. They don't matter. Look, just get hold of yourself, okay," Beth said, now visibly annoyed. "Don't screw this up for us."

"If it's one thing he's going to remember, though, it's me isn't it. I was sat in the back of the ambulance with him for ten minutes."

"Well that's your own fault, you were never meant to go in that frigging ambulance."

"But they were cleaning up these cuts on my face. What am I going to say if anyone asks me where I got them?"

"I don't frigging care. Just make something up. Say you fell over or something."

By now, they had arrived back at the warehouse. Barely forty minutes had passed since they were last here. The warehouse door rolled up as they approached, and closed again after they passed through. The white van was already inside, but most of the merchandise was already long gone, after being split up in to smaller chunks and ferried in many directions by a plethora of vehicles. Only one item remained inside the white van - a top of the range TV with a huge screen, still in its box.

"You go home in the van now, and I'll dump this car somewhere. See you later." Beth left in the damaged car. Jen following shortly after in the van with her new television.

At three fifteen, King James Comprehensive kicked out for another day. Two thousand pupils streamed out from the gates. A fleet of buses took many pupils home. The roads around the school were blocked with parents cars collecting their offspring. A group of fifty or so headed straight toward the nearby Catholic school, intent on causing trouble as usual.

For once, the weather was fine. Ben sauntered down toward the school gate, in no great hurry to get home. Sure, his mum had won something on the lottery, but she didn't care about him, did she? No point hurrying home to find out there was no present sat waiting.

He was caught up from behind by Gemma, Beth's younger sister and his next door neighbour. "Haven't seen you all day," she said as she drew alongside. "Got a little present for you."

"Thanks Gem," Ben said. "More than my mum will have got me." He unwrapped the small package. Found a small piece of tin foil with a couple of

white tablets inside. He shoved them quickly in to his pocket before anyone could see. "What are these?"

"Dunno. Found them in Beth's bag this morning. They're not her birth control pills."

Ben popped one in to his mouth and offered the other to Gem, which she took.

As they passed through the school gates, a black Vectra shot by on the road outside, narrowly missing a group of kids taking their time crossing the road who stuck up their fingers as it roared away.

"Sure that was Beth," Gem said as the car flew past. Red brake lights flared up ahead, and the car turned right, through an opening in to an empty field. A second car followed shortly afterward, making the same turn.

Gem jogged to the gate, and in the distance she saw her big sister get out of the Vectra. Ben had caught up by now. He quite liked the idea of a car journey in close company with Gem's big breasted older sister. Not that Gem was lacking much in that department either.

They both saw Beth get in to the other car and it sped towards them, mud being flung up in to the air. It shot past them without slowing.

"That was Beth in there, wonder what the hell that was all about," exclaimed Gem.

"Fancy a ride?" Ben asked her. He jogged over to the car. "Looks pretty knackered," he said, "the side is all smashed in. It'll be more wrecked before I've finished with it."

"Keys are inside," he said as Gem peered through the smashed window. "Get in, I fancy a drive."

"We shouldn't," she said. "Beth will have seen us."

"Doesn't matter," Ben replied back. "Get in." He turned the keys and switched the engine on."

"Have you driven before?"

"Yeah." He neglected to mention that his last driving escapade had finished with a totalled Ford Escort and a trip home in the back seat of a police car.

Gem got in, her short skirt riding up high. "Might have another present for you," she said, licking her lips. She reached over to Ben and looked into his eyes. She put her arm round the back of his head, locked her mouth against his. Ben's hand crept up to undo the buttons on Gem's blouse.

"Not here," she said. "Take us somewhere quiet."

Ten to six in the evening. Jen was sat in the living room watching her new TV. It almost seemed too big for the room. Don, Caz's husband had finished fitting the satellite dish half an hour ago and Jen was flicking through the channels. Ben still hadn't come home yet. What a surprise he was going to get when he arrived.

There was a knock at the door. Jen got up. Wondered who this could be.

She went to the door, left it on its chain, and opened it an inch or two. Two policemen stood there. She slammed the door again. Refused to open it.

There was a crash as one of the policemen attacked the door with a steel battering ram. It didn't give just yet, but looked as though it wouldn't take

much more abuse before it did. Sure enough, a second hit was all it took as the cheap PVC door disintegrated.

Now the door was open, Jen could hear the police helicopter overhead. At the bottom of the drive stood another policeman, holding back an Alsatian.

They barged through the battered door, one pushing past Jen and in to the living room as the other stood with his hand on Jen's shoulder.

"It's in here," the first shouted.

The other grabbed hold of Jen's arm. Got out his handcuffs. "You do not have to say anything. But it may harm your defence if you do not mention, when questioned, something which you later rely on in court. Anything you do say may be given in evidence. We are arresting you on the suspicion of receiving stolen goods."

"Stolen goods?"

"Yes. Stolen goods. In particular, that TV."

"But I've had it months," Jen protested.

"No you haven't," said the first officer. Jen was struggling against the handcuffs, so he twisted her arms over the back of her head.

"You're killing me here," Jen groaned.

"That TV is a display model. And it's got a satellite tracker in it. The second you turned it on, we were on to you."

Jen swore. "Satellite tracker?"

"Yes. A number of these have been stolen before."

Seconds later, another officer entered the room.

"Miss Dawson"

"Yes."

"Miss Jennifer Dawson."

"Yes."

"I'm afraid I have some distressing news for you. Your son Ben has been involved in a car accident. I'm sorry to say that he has passed away."

"He's sixteen today. He can't drive. It can't be Ben."

"He was in a black Vauxhall Vectra. It was reported stolen a few hours ago. He was driving. There was a girl in the car as well, a Miss Gemma Roberts. She has also succumbed to her injuries."

Jen fainted, pulling one of the policemen down to the floor with her.

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