

# Denial of Credit

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**Sample of first ten chapters**

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*Denial of Credit*

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## Prologue

The door creaked. He slipped inside, easing it part-way shut.

Dim light filtered from high above. Shapes loomed, not solid objects. Gradually his eyesight adjusted. Near him stood a tall vehicle with oversized wheels – a mechanical digger perhaps, or a very large tractor. Beyond it, hints of other large vehicles, mostly lost in gloom.

He edged over to the first one and touched its metal surface. It was thickly coated with dust.

Then voices outside. His eyes darted around, seeking refuge. Nothing suggested itself. Should he duck behind these wheels? Then what? Discovery could come too easily in this uncluttered space.

Instead, he glanced upward. The tractor had a glazed cab, tapering towards the top. Could he hide in there? He seized a grab rail and hauled himself urgently up the steps, lunging for the door handle. It was unlocked. He flung himself inside.

The door to the building opened; the voices grew louder. He shrunk into the driving seat, trying to duck out of sight.

He half-heard a brief muttered discussion, then the voices retreated and the outside door closed. He sat up straighter, stretched his legs, breathed in and out. A narrow escape.

Then the sharp sound of the outer door opening again, more abruptly this time. He froze. There was a clunking sound – an electrical switch being thrown – and strip lighting flickered on, flooding the space with intense white light and filling it with an electrical hum.

He could see now that the cab door was glazed from top to bottom. He was not concealed after all.

“So there you are.” The voice held bleak satisfaction. “I told you there was no point in running away.”

## Chapter 1

“How would you feel about ghosting an autobiography?”

It wasn't the question I was expecting. I'd hoped this phone call might be an invitation to return to my part-time job. Apparently not.

A little fatuously I said, “What – you mean yours?”

“Heavens, no.” Bob Latimer gave a short laugh. “I haven't lived long enough for that, and I doubt if I would ever have anything interesting enough to say.”

I felt like disagreeing. Bob was chief executive of Latimer Logistics, the business his grandfather had founded. In a few short years Bob had transformed it from a modest regional company based in Cornwall into a flourishing nationwide concern. His personal dynamism was legendary.

I said, “Oh, right. Whose autobiography then?”

“Have you ever met Alan Treadwell?”

“I know who he is. Millionaire. Philanthropist. Former head of Wayfarer Logistics. He was awarded the OBE a year or two back. I've written about his company in magazine articles over the years, but I've never actually met the man.”

“Well, I was sitting next to him at a dinner last week, and he was telling me he's decided to write his autobiography. But he's come up with a problem. He was working with a ghost writer, but now the writer has dropped out, so he's looking for someone else to do the job.”

“And you think I should step up to the plate?”

“Well, I wondered if the idea might appeal. You know the business, after all. And you could think of it as another of your thrillers – except that you wouldn't have to make up the plot. Alan has already done that for you by living his life – and I should think it's been pretty colourful, one way or another.” He laughed dryly.

I hadn't explicitly told Bob about the mystery thriller that I'd self-published as an e-book two years before, but he'd found out somehow, and had seemed amused by it. He hadn't actually read it, but he'd told me his wife had.

I said, “It's an interesting thought.”

“Anyway, I'm more than happy to recommend you to him if you'd like to approach him about it.”

I did some fast thinking. What did I know about writing autobiographies? Nothing. But writing was writing, wasn't it? And I'd been a writer most of my adult life. How difficult could an autobiography be? Besides, the job sounded intriguing. If I could forge a new writing credential for myself, it might stand me in good stead for the future.

And quite apart from that consideration, I saw Bob's proposal as a tentative olive branch. Last year we'd had a falling-out, and if I turned down this suggestion it would probably seem like a snub.

I said, “That would be great – thanks.”

I ended the call with a sense of wonder. I wasn't surprised that Bob was speaking to me; he'd been ever courteous, even after telling me he couldn't keep me on his team. But I was surprised that he still had my interests at heart.

At the start of the previous year I'd been doing regular work for him, writing articles and press releases about his business. It was this job that had made my move to Cornwall viable. Back in London, I'd worked as a freelance journalist, writing specialist articles for national transport and logistics magazines and websites. Here in Truro, work like that was much harder to organise. Commissions had dropped off, but the work for Bob Latimer had more than filled the gap. Now it was gone.

As usual with Bob Latimer, intent quickly turned into action. Within fifteen minutes he called me back. "Alan would love to talk to you about the book. Give his personal assistant Agnes a call." He read out the number.

After the call ended I stared at my phone. Was I really going to do this? Temporising, I opened my laptop and called up my bank account. I wanted to remind myself just how much I needed this project.

The answer was glaringly obvious. My balance was lower than at any time since I'd moved to Cornwall. Admittedly I'd now sold my house in London, but after I'd cleared the mortgage there'd been suprisingly little cash left over. The interest it was earning was derisory. What would I earn from ghosting an autobiography? Presumably a few thousand at least. Whatever it was, it would come in very useful.

All the same, I had qualms. Alan Treadwell had a reputation as an abrasive leader. I could only hope he had mellowed a little in semi-retirement. More concerning was my sense that an autobiography would require a rather different approach from either a novel or a magazine article – and Treadwell would probably interfere more than the most intrusive editor. Not exactly a recipe for a peaceful experience.

Too bad. I realised I'd already talked myself into it. Taking a deep breath, I tapped out the number Bob had given me, and Treadwell's PA Agnes answered. It turned out that Treadwell lived in a farmhouse somewhere in the Cotswolds, a couple of hundred miles from my flat in Truro. It would be a long trip to make speculatively, yet before I knew it I'd found myself arranging to go there two days later.

## Chapter 2

It wasn't the best of beginnings. I arrived at Alan Treadwell's farmhouse nearly half an hour late, and approached it with foreboding. I had the sense that I would need to prove my worth before I would be welcomed.

It was an extensive stone-built property somewhere on the Gloucestershire-Oxfordshire border, and it stood alone at the end of a private lane flanked by fields. On any other occasion I would have been admiring the sunlight on the weathered grey stonework, and savouring the unexpected softness of the winter afternoon. Today, though, I felt drained after the long drive, and also unexpectedly nervous.

I parked to the side of the extensive gravelled frontage, which perhaps had been a farmyard at some point in its history. I climbed out of my car, stretched, and walked over to the gabled porch.

The door was opened by a middle-aged woman dressed smartly in a grey skirt and a cream blouse. She conveyed an instant sense of capable good nature, which she reinforced with a warm smile. "Michael Stanhope? I'm Agnes, Alan's personal assistant. Secretary by any other name. We spoke on the phone. Welcome to The Haven." She held out her hand. "Come on in."

The interior reminded me of a period country hotel – dark beams at odd angles, white walls, horse brasses. However, the lounge had a more natural feel: same style, but less mannered, more homely. She ushered me to a winged easy chair facing a hearth surmounted by a giant TV screen.

"Good trip?"

"Not bad, thanks." I shrugged apologetically. "I'm a bit late. I should have started out earlier. It's a long way from Cornwall to the Cotswolds."

"Don't worry, he's been busy all day. I don't think he's even noticed the time. Can I get you some tea?"

"That would be wonderful."

I settled back in the chair and glanced around. The room was tidy but clearly well used. There were folded newspapers and magazines on some surfaces, and an open paperback lay face down on the coffee table near me. With a start, I realised it was my own novel. Originally it was only on sale as an e-book, but more recently I'd made it available in print, courtesy of the magic of print-on-demand. Only a handful of people had bought it in that form so far, but evidently Alan Treadwell was one of them. He must have bought it as soon as I'd fixed this visit.

I resisted the impulse to pick it up. Instead I looked round the room again, admiring the leaded windows and the antique rosewood cabinet in the corner. The furnishings conveyed a timeless charm. Somewhere a clock ticked.

Agnes returned promptly. "He's ready to see you now. Follow me. I'll bring the tea in when you're settled."

She led me along a corridor and round a corner, and we fetched up in a room at the back of the house that was as different from the one at the front as it could have been: polished wooden floor, unadorned white walls, modern office furniture, dark leather seating. Angled to the side of a full-height window was a stylish contemporary oak desk with nothing on it but a laptop computer, and behind it sat Alan Treadwell, OBE, founder and former head of Wayfarer Logistics,

He rose as we approached and walked round the desk, holding out his hand. "Good of you to come, Mike. Pleased to meet you."

His look belied his words. It conveyed tolerance rather than enthusiasm for the encounter. All the same, I had to maintain the charade. I said, "Likewise."

There was a glass half-moon table to the side of the room, with three chrome and leather upright chairs pulled against it. He put a hand on my shoulder and motioned me over to it, and took a seat next to the wall, leaving the spare chair between us.

Agnes said, "I'll make the tea," and withdrew discreetly.

For a moment there was silence, then Treadwell said, “So, Mike. You’re a writer.” His accent was difficult to place – slightly transatlantic, but with West Midlands overtones.

I looked at him cautiously. Was he talking about my book, or about my day-to-day job as a journalist? Or was he raising some deeper philosophical question?

His face was familiar from pictures in the national press: more lined now than I’d visualised it, but at sixty-eight he still had a good head of silver hair. He was a large man – substantially built rather than conspicuously overweight – and was wearing an open-neck check shirt and tan trousers with a surprisingly ornate belt buckle. It made him look a little like an off-duty cowboy. I’d heard the term “maverick patrician” used more than once to describe him, and I could see now that visually at least, the term seemed to fit.

I said, “I noticed you’d bought my book. It was lying on the table in your lounge.”

He gave a fleeting half-smile. “Yes, I thought I’d better see what you get up to in your spare time. A bit of homework, if you like.”

“The novel writing is just a sideline at the moment. Really I’m a journalist.”

“So I understand.”

He sat back and stared appraisingly at me. I was aware of an intensity in his gaze, which never wavered. Finally he said, “So, Mike, have you ghost-written many autobiographies before?”

Well, he was cutting to the chase early on. I couldn’t really blame him. I tried a self-deprecating smile. “No, none at all.” When he said nothing I thought I’d better make it sound like a definite plan. “This will be my first.”

He gave me another blast of that intense stare, then said, “So I’m to be your guinea pig, am I?”

I felt myself swallowing. “Well, that’s for you to decide. I’m not hustling you here. Bob Latimer reckoned I could handle it. I’m more than willing to give it a go.”

“He seems to be doing all right for himself with that logistics business of his.”

“A very energetic guy.”

“And he seems to think you have the right qualifications for this job.”

“Well, as you can see, I’ve tried my hand at fact *and* fiction. I think I’ve got a handle on the sort of thing that you’ll need.” I gave him another smile. “So here I am.”

He responded with a deadpan look. “I wasn’t actually planning on putting any fiction in my autobiography.”

It seemed I’d been right. This project wasn’t going to be any walk in the park.

\* \* \*

Treadwell talked to me for a little longer about the broad parameters of the book, and explained the kind of relationship he wanted with his ghost writer: a hands-off relationship, it seemed to me. I would do nearly all the initial writing, then he would amend it when it was ready.

However, the entire conversation seemed somehow provisional, as if he’d never expected to reach an outcome today. This was confirmed when he said abruptly, “I hope you’ll forgive me, Mike. I’ve got an international call scheduled for four o’clock. Can we continue this tomorrow?”

I would have been floundering if it hadn’t been for Agnes. She’d warned me that I might have to extend my visit to a second day, so I’d booked myself into a motel a few miles down the road.

I stood up to leave, and he came with me to the front door and shook my hand as I left. He looked as though he considered this a substantial favour. As I walked away I reflected that Agnes had never arrived with the promised tea.

## Chapter 3

That evening I ate in the fast food restaurant adjoining the motel, then sat staring at the TV in my room without taking in what I was seeing. My mind was running over the conversation I'd had this morning with Ashley, my girlfriend. I'd set things off on the wrong tack with my opening gambit.

"Will Matt be at the conference?"

I'd thrown out the question casually while we were preparing breakfast. I wanted to seem unconcerned. Ashley was fiddling with the kettle, and didn't turn to reply. "I'm not sure. He might be." She'd stepped away from the counter-top, brushed her hands together and looked at me. "Why do you ask?"

I should have been ready for that one. I wasn't. "Just curious."

I knew this raised more questions than it answered. Why was I curious? And if I wasn't curious, why had I brought it up? I held my breath, wondering if Ashley would call me on it.

She let it go, and instead gave one of her idiosyncratic little shrugs. "The conference is about marketing. Not really Matt's thing. He's a management man." She seemed to reflect for a moment. "But he's on site, so he might dip in, I suppose."

And there was an example of why I'd asked the question. She was volunteering more information about Matt than my enquiry demanded. "I don't know" or "possibly" would have been enough – but not apparently for Ashley.

In recent weeks I'd become aware that Matt was cropping up increasingly in our conversations. I'd only ever met him once, but I felt I was learning more about him by the day. He'd joined Latimer Logistics, where Ashley worked, several months ago, and she seemed to have been telling me about him with growing enthusiasm ever since.

"He's like a breath of fresh air compared with the dork who was there before him," she'd told me more than once. "If all the managers at Latimers were like Matt, we would win every contract we bid for."

Initially all this seemed no more than work-related chit-chat, but gradually I'd sensed that something else was going on. And my reaction, initially just boredom, had changed accordingly.

Where does jealousy begin? How do you tame it, flatten it down to good-natured tolerance? How do you stop it ballooning into something disproportionate? Currently I was having a tough time with that.

I watched as Ashley poured instant coffees for the two of us and finished making toast for herself. I loved the delicacy of her movements, the distinctive way she shifted her weight on to one hip, the fall of her dark hair round her neck. It was still a wonder to me that she was with me at all, and that I was living here in Cornwall, within a couple of miles of her own flat. Two years ago I'd been on my own in south London, depressed and unable to see any way forward in life. Then I'd met Ashley, and everything had changed for the better.

Yet I was old and wise enough not to wander round with my eyes closed. The fifteen years I'd spent with my previous partner (eventually my wife) had given me plenty of practice with the ups and downs of relationships – and that was one which, in retrospect, had never truly felt right. With Ashley, everything was infinitely more intense.

So when she'd started to express unexpected interest in the new man at Latimers, I couldn't bring myself to dismiss it. I still didn't know her well enough to decipher this kind of thing. I knew she was a person of sudden impulses, but I couldn't decide how to handle them. Should I simply take them in my stride, or should I worry? The fact was that Matt Harrison seemed to be injecting something into her life that I was failing to provide. That knowledge was eating away at me – and somehow the conference had brought my feelings to a head.

We sat down at the kitchen table, and Ashley placed her phone on it and started flicking through her emails. Until lately I would have observed this process fondly, if with some bafflement. For my own part, I was inclined to postpone my exposure to work pressures until I



was forced to confront them, not bring them forward like this into my own time. But today I felt mildly frustrated that Ashley had such a ready means to escape further conversation, even when she was sitting inches away from me.

She looked up at me from her phone. “Matt *will* be sitting in on the conference today,” she said. “He’s giving a talk. They’ve circulated the final agenda. Happy now?”

She accompanied that last comment with a friendly if slightly perplexed smile. It seemed completely sincere, except for one thing. About ten days ago she’d abruptly stopped mentioning Matt at all. Until I’d asked about him this morning, he’d disappeared totally from our discourse. Had she really lost interest in him almost overnight? Or had she finally noticed how much she was talking about him, and decided she’d better stop parading her interest in front of me?

I was relieved to be heading off for the meeting with Alan Treadwell. I wanted to distance myself from all this. I needed room to breathe.

## Chapter 4

When I returned to Alan Treadwell's house the following morning he was a little more forthcoming about his book.

"The truth is I'm in a bit of a fix," he said. "The original ghost writer seemed pretty organised, but then he buggered off without so much as a word of apology. He really dropped me in it. There are deadlines."

"This was Joe Naismith?"

"Yes, Joe." He looked curious. "Do you know him then?"

"No, I'd never heard of him until now. I think Agnes must have mentioned his name on the phone."

"Right. Well, I thought we were making good progress together, but he obviously didn't."

"Have you asked him why he dropped out?"

"I can't get hold of him. The pusillanimous bugger is keeping his head down."

I nodded. That was what Agnes had said.

"The publishers have proposed two other writers from the pool that they use, but one of them is too busy on another project, and the other one ..." He tailed off.

I raised my eyebrows.

"The one weakness with Joe was that he didn't know anything about logistics. I had to explain it all to him. It slowed everything down. The same would have applied to these other writers that the publishers have put up. I've had enough of that."

Logistics was the fancy term for getting goods to people who wanted them. It meant trucks, warehouses, delivery vans, plus the equipment and know-how to make it all work. Alan Treadwell had made his fortune in logistics, so it was obvious that his autobiography would be full of it.

He leaned forward. "I assume you do know about logistics, do you Mike?"

It felt a strange question to be asked. For most of my journalistic career I'd made logistics my speciality, and I had the sense that by now it must be written on my forehead. Logistics occupied a vast sector of the economy – at least five per cent, by some counts, and even as much as ten. There were a lot of angles to be covered, and there were a lot of people working in the industry who seemed keen to read about it.

I replied, "I should. I've been writing about it for fifteen years, give or take."

"So Bob said."

I decided I had nothing to add, and Treadwell seemed to relax a little. "If we go with you, you'll need to be in touch with the publishers. They're the ones who will actually be paying your bill."

"So I have to convince them as well?"

He gave a humourless laugh. "Not if I have anything to do with it. No, I'm not having them mess me about over this. Too many delays already. If I say I want you on the job, that's what'll happen – trust me on that."

He said this with an intensity that made it difficult not to believe. I said, "So what next?"

"I'd like to see you write a provisional chapter, just to get a feel for whether we're going to be on the same page with this."

"OK," I said cautiously. "So will you give me an initial briefing, so that I have something to go on?"

"I thought you could use Joe's notes. We'd already gone through my early life. No point in covering the same ground again."

I should have protested immediately, but instead I merely asked, "So he passed his notes over to you, did he?"

"No, not at all. But he must have them stashed away somewhere. I thought you could get them from him."

I tried to resist an incredulous laugh. Why would Joe give me his notes? Would I be able to make any sense of them even if I had them? How could they substitute for the tone of voice and personality of a face-to-face interview with the man himself?

Treadwell must have picked up my sceptical look. He said, "He made recordings of some of our conversations as well. You should get the feel of them from those."

"Well, I could ask him, assuming I can get hold of him."

Tersely, he said, "Give it a go, would you?" This was clearly an instruction, not a request. The subject was closed as far as he was concerned.

Suddenly I didn't like this conversation. I wasn't used to working for people who threw their weight around like this, making peremptory demands. I had a sudden impulse to stand up, turn down the job and walk away. But before I could summon the resources to put this into practice, Treadwell had more to say.

"There are the interviews to do as well, of course. I presume you're all geared up for that aspect?"

"Interviews?" I eyed him warily.

"With people who worked alongside me in the past. Didn't Agnes mention them? It's to flesh out the book a bit – to add extra depth. We'll print their memories about me alongside my memories of them."

"It's an unusual way to approach an autobiography, I would have thought."

"Exactly. That's why I like the idea." He sat forward, showing a glimmer of enthusiasm for the first time. "It'll make my book stand out from the run of the mill." He allowed himself a small self-congratulatory smile. "I'll give you a list. Joe was lined up to talk to a couple of these people, but you'll need to deal with them all now."

"What do the publishers say?"

"They like the idea. They say they could present the memoirs as – what do they call it? Box-outs? Special panels on the pages? You'll know the kind of thing."

I did, but I could also see a problem. "Do you mean face-to-face interviews? You would want me to travel around and see these people in person?"

"Well some of the conversations could probably be held on the phone, but yes, I think you'd need to see the others in the flesh."

"It sounds quite a bit of extra cost. Are the publishers prepared to stump up for this?"

A frown crossed his face. "Possibly not. They're leaving me to make it happen. They'll sub it to some extent, but I'm prepared to make up any shortfall myself. I'm not doing this just for the money."

I nodded. That was becoming increasingly clear. "And will these people all be saying good things about you, do you think?"

"We'll have to find out, won't we?" He said this with a glint in his eye.

I didn't know what to make of that, but I couldn't think how to pursue it. Instead, I said, "So will there be many of these interviews?"

"Oh, no. Maybe half a dozen, I thought. Ten or twelve at the most."

It sounded a lot to me. I said nothing.

Eventually I persuaded him to tell me enough about his early life to knock out a first chapter. He seemed grudging; I was already realising that he had little patience, especially when it came to going over the same ground twice. I concentrated hard, and scribbled down every scrap of information he offered. Next time maybe I would suggest recording the conversation. This was too much like hard work.

## Chapter 5

As I headed off down the M5 towards the South West I was thinking about Ashley again. When I'd met her nearly two years ago, we'd hit it off in a big way. There'd been the small matter of her engagement to her boyfriend Jack to contend with, but eventually she'd broken it off with him. Our relationship had seemed solid and compelling, and once it was clear that she had no desire to quit her life in Cornwall, I'd decided to take the initiative and move there from London. However, she'd kept her tiny flat, and I'd rented one of my own on the outskirts of the town. We were taking things step by step.

Everything had seemed to be working out, but then Bob Latimer had despatched me north on an extended project, and it had exposed strains in our relationship. I thought we'd patched them up, but lately I'd sensed that something was wrong. Whether her interest in Matt Harrison was a symptom or the cause, I hadn't yet decided.

Over supper at her flat that evening I couldn't resist pressing the issue further. I asked her, "How was the conference?"

She grimaced. "OK, I suppose. In-house conferences can be useful, but this one went on too long. A single day would have been enough."

"And how did Matt Harrison go down?"

She gave me a long look. "All right. He was there to tell the sales staff not to promise solutions they can't deliver."

I didn't really need to know this, but a demon was prodding me to make her talk more about him. I wanted to see how she looked when he was the topic of conversation – to sense any nuance in her tone of voice.

I asked, "Do you think they got the message?"

"Pretty much. Matt's a good communicator."

"Right."

She picked up her wine glass, studied it for a moment, then put it down again. "Why do you keep asking me about Matt?"

"I don't keep asking about him."

She snorted indignantly. "Yes you do! You should hear yourself."

"Well it's probably because you keep talking about him non-stop."

There. I'd said what I hadn't meant to say. I looked warily at her.

"No I don't! What a strange thing to say." She took a sip of wine. "If I didn't know you better, I would say you must be jealous."

"Yeah, right." I attempted a smile. "But you really have told me a lot about him. You probably haven't noticed yourself doing it."

"No more than I have about the rest of the bunch I work with." She said this somewhat tartly, but then didn't pursue it, perhaps sensing that it wasn't quite true. Instead, she said, "He's a good guy. We seem to be on the same wavelength." She gave me a reproving look.

"Fair enough."

"Well it doesn't seem fair enough to you." She seemed to reflect for a moment. "If it's any reassurance, I don't think I would be in a great hurry to take on a married man with a two-year-old child."

"I didn't know he was married."

"Separated, but at the moment he has custody."

It didn't seem to occur to her that citing this obstacle undermined her position instead of reinforcing it. Implication: she might be taking a different view if he were single. I decided no happy resolution was about to emerge from this conversation, and I sat back. "Shall we change the subject?"

She gave me another long look, then said, "So tell me about this book."

I struggled for a moment to strike a more upbeat note. Finally I said, "Alan Treadwell is a tough character. I suspect he takes no prisoners."

"But you already knew that."

"True, but it's a wake-up call when you experience it for yourself."

"Do you reckon you can work with him?"

"I think I'll have to."

"Pity you're having to wait for the money for your house."

She wasn't talking about my own house, but a house I'd inherited unexpectedly last year in North Yorkshire. It promised to bring me a substantial windfall once I sold it, but there had been a succession of legal and practical delays, and there was apparently no prospect of an imminent resolution. I said, "I can't live my life on the expectation of that. I've got to assume it won't happen."

"It must do in the end."

"It's a shame Bob Latimer is so unrelenting. If he gave me back the regular editorial work, my finances would look a lot better."

"You just have to hang in. At least he set up this book referral for you. That must tell you he hasn't given up on you."

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When I checked my voicemail later I found a message I'd missed from Alan Treadwell. It was terse and to the point. "I hope you picked up enough material to get going on the sample chapter. When can I expect to see something?"

I had an uneasy sense that this kind of impatience was probably a foretaste of things to come.

After the interview and the long drive back from the Cotswolds I was fading fast, but tiredness seldom put a damper on my ardour when I was with Ashley. However, once we were both under the duvet in her rather narrow double bed she was reluctant. "Maybe not tonight," she whispered.

It was scarcely a surprise. My approach had been tentative in the first place. I lay awake in the dark for a long time, wondering how we were going to come back from this. I sensed that she was probably doing the same.

## Chapter 6

*Nobody told me when I left school at fifteen that life was what you made it. That would have meant planning ahead, and the only planning I was doing involved getting some money in my pocket for a few nights out with the lads.*

*Did I ask my dad for advice? The hell I did! He worked in a factory down the road, making motorcycle parts, and the only advice he would have given me was to get a nice secure job like his. Not that it was. The factory closed two years later, and he was out of work for five years after that.*

*You have to be adaptable – that was the one motto I soon fastened on. I watched that factory close, and wondered why my dad couldn't get some other kind of job. He was too rooted in his ways, that was his problem. He couldn't see the bigger picture.*

*Nor could I – not at first. I had fun in my first job, I sowed my wild oats. Is driving a forklift truck the most exciting thing you can do in life? Maybe not, but I'll tell you what, I could put those machines through their paces. You should have seen me lifting the wheels round the chicane at the end of the aisles. None of my work mates could do that.*

*But I soon came to realise they were a sorry lot. Grand lads in their own way, but it seemed to me they'd bought into the same world my dad grew up in. Oh, they thought they were contemporary and cool – listening to the latest music, impressing the girls, pimping up their Ford Escorts and Cortinas – but they had no ambition, no sense of where they were heading.*

*I knew. They were heading for the nearest high-rise council estate, or a two-up two-down and a hefty mortgage, and a life sentence with a woman they'd married far too young. They would still be in that warehouse twenty years later, assuming the warehouse was still there by then.*

*I wanted more. Much more.*

I sat back and reviewed what I'd written so far. The words had flowed surprisingly easily. Did that make them predictable and shallow, or was I on a roll? I wasn't sure.

I'd decided to adopt the sort of approach I'd seen in some of those extended feature articles in the Sunday papers – starting with a bang, then jumping around from one angle to another before settling into a narrative. I didn't like it, but it seemed to be an accepted way of grabbing the reader's attention. I had the sense that Treadwell's style was more tabloid than *Times Literary Supplement*. My text could shift subtly into patrician mode further down the track.

I stretched, glanced at my notes, then wrote three or four more pages along the same lines. When I read them through, I felt I was establishing a strong sense of the man. I'd surprised myself.

By lunchtime I was ready to send the sample chapter off to Treadwell. But was I happy with it? If this were a novel I was writing I would want to let the words mature. I would keep revisiting them for days or even weeks.

Too bad. I had the impression that with Treadwell, speed was everything. He wanted to see a result, and I suspected that even he would be surprised to receive something from me so soon. If I'd got my approach right, we would be off to a flying start. If I hadn't, at least I would know. I composed a short accompanying email and clicked Send.

Now what? I had no freelance articles in progress, and in fact nothing else to do. It was a strange and unsettling situation to have reached. I picked up my phone and scrolled down to the number for Jason Bright, my contact at the biggest magazine I wrote for.

"Mike, how's it going?"

I could tell from his tone that he had time to chat, which wasn't always the case. I said, "I'm good. I just wondered if you had anything in the pipeline for me?"

He hesitated, then said, “It’s tricky, with you being out there in the wilds of Cornwall. The stuff I’ve got mostly involves visits in London and environs. But I always keep a lookout for pieces you could do on the phone.”

“I know. I appreciate it, Jason. But I *can* travel, you know. I’m not permanently stuck here.”

“Of course. Point taken.” There was a pause. I had a sense that he was shuffling papers on his desk in search of something. He said, “Yes, here’s one thing you might like to get involved with. We’re planning a series of articles on top logistics companies. Interviews with the CEOs, profiles of what they get up to, that kind of thing. I did have you in mind for that. You might be able to take on some of the pieces, either by phone or with visits.”

This was a strange coincidence. I was already about to do the rounds of senior logistics executives on Alan Treadwell’s behalf. Now Jason wanted me to interview the same sort of people for him. I just had to hope there wouldn’t be any overlap. It would certainly be cost-effective if there were, but juggling the different objectives could prove tricky.

Trying to hide the reserve in my voice, I said, “Sounds good to me.”

On reflection, it struck me that overlap was probably unlikely. After all, there were plenty of logistics companies out there – maybe half a dozen international giants like Wayfarer, then at least a dozen other seriously big players, plus numerous fast-growing regional contenders like Latimers. And that was leaving aside the big transport-based companies like Brian Ogilvy’s, and all those small and medium-sized operators specialising in home deliveries. The market was vast.

“We’re not quite ready to kick off with it yet,” Jason was saying, “but I could keep you in the picture.”

After we ended the conversation I felt mildly encouraged. New work was evidently on the horizon, even if there was nothing on offer in the short term. Still, the book project should take care of that – assuming I got the job.

\* \* \*

After lunch I phoned Ashley at work.

“I’ve just realised we didn’t arrange whether we’d meet at your place tonight or at mine.”

In my early days in Cornwall we’d spent most of our nights in Ashley’s flat. It was smaller than the modern place I’d rented, but it was more homely, and there were far more pubs and restaurants within easy walking distance. However, we had no hard and fast rules about this, so we tended to make our arrangements by the day.

Immediately I sensed hesitation on her part. She said, “I’ve got this project on. I’m behind with it because of that conference, so I’ll have to work on it in the evenings. Would you mind if we wait till the weekend to get together?”

I suddenly felt uneasy. On the face of it, her suggestion was perfectly reasonable. We didn’t live in each other’s pockets, and we should survive perfectly well a day or two apart. But in the past she’d never offered this kind of excuse to avoid my company. If one of us was working, the other would just hover companionably in the background. This was something new.

Feeling wrong-footed, I said, “Really?”

“Well, it makes sense, doesn’t it?”

I nearly protested, but I was wary of sparking a row. We didn’t do rows. Weakly, I said “OK, let’s leave it until Friday.”

I knew I was being over-sensitive, but I also recognised a problem when I was confronted with one. This was a problem, and I had no idea how to resolve it.

As I disconnected, my laptop pinged and I glanced over at it. Alan Treadwell had replied to my email.

“I’ve read your draft. No big problems with it, as far as I can see. You’ve got the job. Give Agnes a call, and fix a visit to the publishers in London. You’ll want to know how they’re handling the details.”

Damned with faint praise, but presumably this was the best Treadwell had to offer. I was sanguine; I wasn't taking on this job for the glory. I picked up my phone again and scrolled down to find Agnes's number.



## Chapter 7

“The idea of the interviews is a bit unorthodox. We’ve said we’ll go along with them, but we might have a shot at pruning them down a bit.”

Roger Hurst, one of the team at Alan Treadwell’s publishers, sat back in his swivel chair and gave me a confiding smile. He was an affable man of around forty, with neat slicked-back hair and a fresh complexion. He was wearing a dark suit and a tie, which seemed to fit nicely with the Edwardian office behind Hammersmith Broadway.

“How do you mean?”

“Well, he’s probably told you he wants you to talk to various individuals – maybe ten in all. But if you were to find that three or four of them were refusing to cooperate, or didn’t have the time ... well, let’s say we wouldn’t lose any sleep over it.”

“He doesn’t seem like a man who’s easily swayed from his intentions.”

“No, I’ll grant you that, but he’s on a deadline. I don’t quite know why – he’s the one who’s been setting the pace, not us. But the fact is that he wants the book out in double-quick time, so we’ve drawn up a very tight schedule for him. He won’t want to hold things up for lack of those interviews.”

“It must have been a setback when Joe Naismith dropped out.”

He gave me a pained smile. “Very strange behaviour, I have to say.”

“Had you worked with Joe before?”

“Yes, on another book – the autobiography of an athlete. It was that ‘nearly-made-it’ guy everyone loved – the one who was always winning bronze in the track events while the nation waited for him to go gold. Joe did a good job for us. Very professional. On time and on target.”

“And he never offered any explanation for backing out of the Treadwell project?”

“None at all. We kept trying to contact him of course, but eventually we gave up. Whatever caused him to withdraw, it was clear he wasn’t going to change his mind. Technically he’s broken his contract, but there’s not much mileage in hounding him over it. Basically we want a book out of this.”

I asked him about the fee I’d be getting for the book, and was pleasantly surprised; it was a lot more than the two thousand pounds I’d been visualising. I said, “That works nicely for me.”

“It’s fairly standard for a work of this type.”

I nodded. “Incidentally, how are you handling the by-line? Do I get any credit?”

“I’m afraid not.” This time an apologetic smile. “Sometimes these autobiographies have a second author’s name. You know – ‘By Joe Bloggs with Fred Smith’. But not this one. He just wants his own name on it.”

“Fair enough. It’s not a big deal with me.”

He gave a small smile. “I see you’ve already made a bid for fame in your own right.”

“You mean my novel? I didn’t realise you knew about it.”

“We had to check you out a bit – make sure you actually knew how to string two words together. We couldn’t really take it on Alan Treadwell’s say so, could we?”

This was the first reference Hurst had made to the fact that I’d been wished on him by Treadwell in preference to the writers he’d proposed. I said, “I suppose not.”

“Your book reads well, I must say. You know how to write.” Another small smile. “We were relieved. With self-published novels, you never know what to expect.”

“I’m glad to hear it.”

“If you don’t mind me asking, why didn’t you find a publisher for it?”

I couldn’t resist an ironic laugh. “Have you ever tried that? I’d have been searching until kingdom come.”

He nodded. “I can imagine. We don’t get much involved in fiction here.” He looked at his watch. “I’ll need to get Jean in, so that we can go over the contract.”

Talk of a contract made me nervous. I couldn't remember ever signing my life away like this in the past – not in these circumstances. Hurst seemed to sense my hesitation. "Don't worry, it's all very painless. We don't cut our authors off at the knees if they miss the deadline by a few days. It's just to concentrate the mind."

I nodded appreciatively.

"We do need to get hold of your copy in time for our legal people to pore over it. Knowing Alan Treadwell, I suspect some of his comments will go pretty close to the bone. We need to be sure we won't provoke a load of libel cases."

I said, "As a matter of interest, do you stand to make a lot of money out of this? I realise Alan Treadwell is a pretty well-known figure, but all the same ... the life story of a logistics leader – it's not scorching stuff, I'd have thought."

"Well, we're rather hoping you'll make it scorching." His beam seemed a little sterner this time. Then he relaxed. "Between you and me, we've done a deal with him. There's a fallback clause in his contract. If we don't break even after an agreed time, he makes up the difference, and thereafter we split the proceeds." He sat forward. "But I think it has a fair bit of potential. I'm sure you won't let us down."

\* \* \*

I'd spent an awkward weekend with Ashley at her flat. On the surface all was sweetness and light. On the Saturday evening we'd gone out to see a film at the Plaza, Truro's only cinema, then on the Sunday we had a buffet lunch in a city centre pub. But by tacit agreement, intimacy was off the agenda, and our conversation was self-consciously cheerful. Matt Harrison definitely didn't feature; we both made sure of that.

This morning Ashley had dropped me off at the station to catch a train for the five-hour trip to London. "Good luck," she'd smiled as she gave me a brief kiss. For a moment it felt just like our early days.

After my visit to the publishers I caught the District line to west London, where I was staying with Daniel, a college friend who was now assistant art director for a women's magazine. He and his other half Hal could afford a bijou terraced house in Parsons Green.

Hal was away on business, but Daniel provided a willing sounding board for my concerns about my relationship with Ashley. I hadn't meant to bring it up, but sitting over a glass of wine after supper, I found I was opening up to him despite myself. He'd never met Ashley, so he might have been inclined to take my side, but in fact he proved remarkably open-minded.

"If you don't mind my saying so, you're sounding like a jealous teenager," he commented at one point. "Surely Ashley is allowed to have friends of the opposite sex? Isn't that what happened last year with you and that woman in Newcastle? It seems to me you're applying double standards here, quite apart from the fact that you're making something out of nothing."

I saw all that. I couldn't deny it. Yet I also remembered the animation in Ashley's face when she'd started to talk about Matt several weeks ago. It was something she couldn't hide, and I couldn't bring myself to ignore it. Was this how our life would always be? Would there be another Matt, then another? Was that how my relationship with her was going to work?

Strangely, I'd never run into this kind of situation when I was married. I was reminded again that my relationship with Sandy, my ex-wife, had never been as intense as the one with Ashley. Being brutally honest, it wouldn't have mattered much to me if Sandy had developed a crush on a work mate. It would simply have underlined our basic incompatibility. Instead, our marriage had struggled on long past its sell-by date.

Ashley had rekindled emotions I'd lost sight of, but at the moment it seemed there was a price to pay.

## Chapter 8

After Daniel had left for work the next morning I pulled out the file I was building on Alan Treadwell and examined my scribbled notes. Treadwell's PA Agnes had given me Joe Naismith's phone number, and I'd already tried it several times, but it simply rang out with no answer. I called it again now. Same result.

I glanced back down at my notes. Roger Hurst at the publishers had looked up Joe's street address for me, and it now occurred to me that I could beard him in his own den. It was somewhere in Camden Town, just to the north of central London. I checked my watch. I had an appointment in the City this afternoon, but that left me the morning to kill. I made my mind up. I would see if I could catch Joe at home.

The tube trip to Camden Town was easy enough, and I was there in well under an hour. I emerged at the top of Camden High Street, a broad Victorian shopping street, marvelling at the way apparently self-contained townships like this could exist so close to central London.

Joe's address was in a side street not far from the town centre. It turned out to be a smart white-painted Victorian terraced property with a couple of steps up to the front door. There were three flats listed on the entry phone, and I buzzed the one for Joe.

No response. I tried again. It was soon clear that no one was going to answer. Now what? I had no Plan B in mind. On a whim, I pressed one of the other buttons. Again, no answer. Hardly surprising; the occupants were probably out at work.

Without much hope I tried the third button, and after a moment a woman's voice answered scratchily, "Hello?"

I wasn't prepared. Improvising, I said, "Hi. I'm sorry to bother you. I'm trying to get hold of Joe Naismith. I'm ... a work colleague. Do you know him?"

"Yes, I know Joe. I haven't seen him lately, though. I think he must be away."

"And you don't know how else I could contact him?"

"You could try his phone."

I took a deep breath. "Look, I realise you don't know me, but could I talk to you for a minute? I really need to get a handle on how to track Joe down."

There was a pause, then she said, "You *are* talking to me." There was a slightly wry undertone to this. I felt encouraged.

"I mean in person. Would you be able to come down for a minute?"

There was another pause, then she said, "OK, hang on."

After a longer wait than I expected, the front door opened and the woman smiled out at me. I couldn't guess her age – anything between about twenty-eight and forty, I would have said. She had pale, frizzy-looking hair that hung past her shoulders, and was dressed in wafty bohemian style.

She said, "So you work with Joe?"

I thought honesty was probably the best policy. "Not exactly. We're both writers. He was working on a book project, but he's ducked out of it, and I've been recruited to take over from him. I'm supposed to confer with him about it."

Her eyes narrowed slightly. "So you don't actually know Joe?"

"To be truthful, no. I'm just concerned that I can't contact him."

"But you're taking his work away from him. You're the enemy, in fact."

I gave her what I hoped was a complicit smile. "OK, you've sussed me. But I don't see it like that. He's ditched the project mid-stream, and the publishers are simply trying to get it back on track."

She looked at me for a moment, toying with the beads round her neck, then seemed to relent. "I don't know Joe very well. We've just had the occasional coffee. But he seems a nice guy."

"When did you last see him?"

She considered this. "It must be quite a few weeks ago, now I come to think of it." She glanced behind her. I could see a row of pigeonholes on the wall. "There's loads of mail stacking up for him. I've been wondering when he's going to deal with it."

"Is he often away like this?"

"He travels, but not usually for this long. Not that I keep track of his comings and goings. He does as he pleases."

"Does he live alone?"

"Yes, except when his girlfriend comes round – which isn't very often, as far as I know."

"Does he have a lot of other visitors? Would his friends know how to find him?"

She was starting to look uncomfortable. "This is beginning to sound like an inquisition. I'm not sure that I should be answering all these questions."

"Sorry, sorry." I tried another complicit smile. "It's just that I don't know what else to do."

"Maybe he doesn't want to be found."

"True."

For a moment neither of us spoke. Finally she said, "I wouldn't call Joe a party animal. He's very quiet, in fact. He doesn't have a lot of visitors. He's the ideal neighbour, really."

"What about his girlfriend? Do you know how I could contact her?"

"Sorry, no. Just that she lives in Maida Vale. Angela, her name is."

I seemed to be running out of ideas. I would have been intrigued to see Joe's flat, but I was fairly sure this woman wouldn't let me in, and in any case presumably I wouldn't get past Joe's front door. I pulled out a business card and offered it to her. "Just in case you need to get in touch with me again."

She took it a little reluctantly and glanced down at it.

"Cornwall?"

"Long story." I started to turn, then turned back. "Do you mind if I ask your name?"

"Amanda." She gave me another of those long looks. "Amanda Paisley."

## Chapter 9

Derek Critchley's gleaming metallic desk stood in front of a row of floor-to-ceiling windows. From the eleventh storey, a dramatic cityscape stretched away to the horizon – overlaid this afternoon with a persistent late winter haze.

Critchley eyed me from behind the desk with what looked like amusement – a man of about fifty with taut features and no spare flesh. Like most of the chief executives I'd met in my job, he radiated confidence and authority. His look said he didn't mind talking to me because he had nothing to fear and no one to defer to.

He said, "So what do you want me to say about Alan Treadwell?"

I'd surprised myself by succeeding in arranging this meeting at very short notice. Critchley was one of ten people on Treadwell's interview shortlist. Currently he headed a logistics group much like the one Treadwell had founded, but in the past he'd worked alongside Treadwell. I had no idea what to expect from him.

I said, "I don't think I should put words into your mouth. It's up to you what you'd like to say."

He leaned back in his black leather office chair, apparently musing on this. "I could tell you he's the most miserable bastard who ever walked god's earth, but if you know him at all, you already know that. I suppose you want something more insightful."

"Is that what you actually think?"

He gave a short laugh. "It's what everyone thinks. I'm sure I'm not giving away anything by saying that. He got where he is – or rather, where he was until he was shoved out – by manipulation and bullying. It's a well-trying formula, trust me."

"So you didn't like him?"

"Like him?" He considered that. "I don't think Alan is someone you actually *like*. You *endure* him." He smiled to himself as he said this. "Yes, 'endure him' pretty well sums it up."

I raised my eyebrows. "Is there a positive in that?"

"Of course there is. Alan is an achiever. He gets things done. And he gets more out of his people than they think they have in them. The ones who survive end up fit for anything the job is likely to throw at them."

"But then they leave – like you."

"Some do. Others stay. But I have to say they're probably the masochistic ones. It's all very well saying 'What doesn't kill me makes me stronger', but that only takes you so far. At the end of the day, you also need a bit of self-respect."

"So are you glad you worked with him back then?"

"Of course I am. I learned so much from him. He's a charismatic leader. You want him on your side. You certainly wouldn't want him on someone else's side. I've gone up against him with contract pitches a few times since I left, and it's no easy ride."

I consulted the crib sheet I'd created from Treadwell's briefing. He'd explained to me that there had come a point when the board of Wayfarer Logistics had felt the time was right for a public flotation. However, Treadwell himself, the biggest single shareholder, had opposed the idea. He thought they should wait a couple more years, by which time he believed the shares would float at a much better price. But somehow his hand had been forced, and now he was trying to work out exactly who was behind this.

The flotation had made him a rich man, so his complaint wasn't that he'd been robbed, merely that he hadn't been able to control the timing. Moreover, in the jostling for power during the months after the flotation he'd been ousted from his position at the head of the company. Clearly that rankled more than anything.

Cautiously, I said to Critchley, "Do you have any theory about who led the charge to go for Wayfarer's public offering? Could it have been Stephen Morton?" This was another name on Treadwell's interview list.

I watched him carefully as I asked this. I was supposed to look out for any tell that would indicate guilt or complicity. I could see none.

“Is Alan still grumbling about some plot? Well, I wouldn’t know – I’d already left the company by then.”

“Alan says he knows who it was, and he’s going to reveal it in the book. But he hasn’t told me yet, and he’s curious to know what other people think.” Treadwell had primed me to say this, though it grieved me to feel I was so willingly acting as a pawn in some game he was playing.

“Well good for him. I don’t have a view.” He frowned. “I wouldn’t put it past Stephen Morton to have stuck the knife in over the flotation. He’s a belligerent bastard if ever there was one – and *don’t* quote me on that or you won’t get any more help from me. But I don’t have any evidence.”

I was already wondering if part of Treadwell’s motivation for planning this book was specifically to unmask the supposed traitor in his midst. But if so, I couldn’t see any way in which Derek Critchley could help me.

He gave me another twenty minutes, throwing in some useful anecdotes about Treadwell along the way. One that I particularly liked involved him sacking a driver on the spot for some relatively innocuous offence, then sending a large bunch of flowers to his wife. I wasn’t sure what it said about the man, but it was certainly memorable.

Crossing the gleaming atrium on my way out of the office building, I spotted a face I vaguely knew – a woman of around thirty-five, dressed smartly in a light raincoat and wearing a frothy scarf round her neck. I couldn’t immediately place her, but I had a strong sense that she was a fellow-journalist. She caught my eye as I was passing through the hinged security barrier, and nodded slightly in acknowledgement. Well, I wasn’t the only one allowed to interview the great man.

\* \* \*

It seemed a reasonable start. Critchley hadn’t exactly been consistently flattering about Treadwell, but at least he’d given me some positives to take away. I had to assume the others on the list would do the same.

It had dawned on me that all the interviewees were likely to be people of a certain age: mostly men, and mostly achievers in their own right – some of them no doubt lean and focused like Critchley, others probably bloated by years of success and the indulgence it often seemed to prompt. It was an irony that I spent large parts of my journalistic life talking to such people, and now I was having to do it again for this book – with more or less the same people.

At least on this project I was allowed to take a different slant. And at least it was helping me earn my keep.

I’d arranged to stay a second night with Daniel. As I was walking in at his front door my phone rang.

“Michael? It’s Amanda Paisley. From Camden Town?” Her interrogative tone made it sound as if she wasn’t sure herself. “I’ve just remembered I have a mobile number for Joe’s girlfriend, Angela.” She read it out. “He gave me it once for some reason. I think he just wanted someone else besides himself to be contactable in case of emergency.”

“This is really good of you.”

“I’m not saying this is an emergency, but it *is* odd that he’s stayed away so long.”

“Absolutely.”

“I don’t know if that number is still current, but it might be.”

## Chapter 10

Joe's girlfriend answered my phone call quickly. Her tone was clipped, her accent middle class.

I was better prepared for this conversation than I'd been when I encountered Amanda at Joe's flat. I'd discussed strategy with Daniel over supper.

"Hi Angela. My name is Mike Stanhope. I'm a writer and journalist, and I'm working for the same publishers as Joe Naismith. I'm trying to get hold of him, but he's not answering his phone or his emails. I don't actually know Joe, so I was wondering if you could help?"

"How did you get this number?"

That wasn't the response I was looking for. Cautiously, I said, "A lady called Amanda gave it to me – a neighbour of Joe's at his flat. I saw her this morning."

"Oh, Amanda. God, yes." Raised and dismissed in two curt phrases – but at least this seemed to promise some fellow-feeling. She added, "So you've actually been there, to Camden Town?"

"Yes – and no sign of Joe. Do you know where he might be?"

"Not a clue, sorry."

It sounded as if she was prepared to leave it at that, but I said nothing, hoping she would break the silence.

It worked. After a moment she said, "Look, I don't know what you've been told, but Joe and I ..." She struggled for the right words. "We're not together any more. I haven't seen him in a while."

"I'm sorry to intrude."

"It doesn't matter." Another silence, then she said, "So you're telling me Joe's not around? What makes you think that?"

"He's broken a contract with the publishers to work on a book. They've been trying to contact him for weeks, but they're not having any luck. And Amanda told me this morning that she hasn't seen him for a long time. His mail is stacking up."

"This is weird." I could almost hear her thinking aloud. "It's not like Joe to mess his customers around." More thinking time. "I wonder if I should take myself round to his flat tomorrow? I've still got a key."

It didn't seem my place to advise her, so I said nothing. She said, "Sorry, this isn't your affair, but you've got me worried. He hasn't been answering my calls either, but I thought ..." She tailed off in a self-deprecating laugh. "I thought he didn't want to speak to me. Sounds daft, doesn't it?"

"I see." I wondered what else to say. "Have any other friends of his contacted you about him?"

"No, but I don't really know them. He keeps himself to himself, pretty much."

"Right."

A little distractedly she said, "Hang on a minute." I waited. "He hasn't posted anything on his Facebook page for six weeks. That's odd, too." Joe hadn't sounded to me like a Facebook person, but what did I know?

I said, "Roughly when were you last in touch with him, if you don't mind me asking?"

"Same thing – around six weeks ago. This is really weird."

"Look, I know it's not my business, but if you do go to his flat, could you possibly let me know if you find out where he is? I'm supposed to get some notes from him – about the book project."

"Yeah, OK. I've got your number now. Look, I need to think about this."

And she was gone.

\* \* \*

I was due to return to Truro the next morning, but before I set off for Paddington station I had a task to complete. Julia Mason, another of the people on Treadwell's interview hit list, had agreed

to speak to me at short notice, but in this case only on the phone. She was a senior executive at a global logistics consortium, and the only woman on the list. I had to make the call at ten o'clock.

Julia's personal assistant answered, and asked me to call back half an hour later. It was par for the course. I checked my emails, replied to one, glanced at the BBC news website, then made the call again.

This time she answered in person. From the echoing sound of her voice I deduced that she was using some kind of hands-free conferencing device, which meant that the beginning of each utterance was often clipped, and I had to concentrate hard to follow her meaning.

"Remind me what this is about," she demanded. Actually it sounded like "Mind me".

"Alan Treadwell is writing a kind of autobiography, with short inserts from people who have known him and worked with him – more or less in their own words. I'm editing the whole thing. He felt you would be an ideal person to feature in one of these inserts."

"Did he now? I wonder what made him think that?"

I hadn't expected this instant negativity. Like Derek Critchley, Julia Mason had worked with Treadwell at Wayfarer Logistics, but more recently than Critchley. She'd been there during the initial public offering, but had left soon afterwards, and I'd read that she and Treadwell had been on opposite sides in the dispute about whether to proceed. Nevertheless, presumably Treadwell thought she would have something positive to contribute.

I said, "I'm only relaying what Alan told me."

"So I'm supposed to come up with nice things about what a great leader and worthy citizen he's been – is that the idea?"

"If that's what you think."

"It certainly isn't. He's a thoroughly nasty man with no redeeming features. Donating to charity doesn't make him a better person. It's just a lot of window dressing."

"That would be a 'no', then?"

"Ha!" She seemed to mellow with this. "You're not going to print what I just said, I assume?"

"Probably not. Not in Alan's book, anyway."

"Maybe you should. Someone should tell it like it is."

"If you don't mind me asking, what was it about him that you disliked so much?"

"What's not to dislike? Don't get me started. He's a manipulative, overbearing tyrant. He's always right about everything. He never thanks anybody for anything – just takes what he's offered as his right. Do I need to go on?"

"His company has performed remarkably well over the years. That must say something about his abilities, I would have thought."

"It just says that a lot of people have tried very hard to work round him – to turn his impossible expectations into something achievable. The best thing I ever did was to bail out of that company while I still had my sanity."

Bracing myself for some vehement riposte, I broached the issue Treadwell wanted me to bring up. "Alan makes it sound as if he was more or less blackmailed into caving in over the IPO. He says he's going to reveal in this book who it was that forced his hand."

"Is he now? Well jolly good for him. And who was it, if I might be so bold as to ask?"

"He hasn't told me yet. He wants me to approach the issue without any prior assumptions."

"That's typical of him – keeping you in the dark. It was one of his favourite techniques: management by incomplete information."

It seemed pretty clear to me that this exercise was going nowhere. I kept on pressing her for a few minutes longer, but finally decided I might as well call a halt.

"Just to be clear, should I take it that you don't want to be involved in his book project?"

"Haven't I made myself plain enough? As far as I'm concerned you can tell Mr Treadwell what to do with his blasted book."

"Well thanks for your time."



I thought she was about to disconnect, but then she added, “You should ask him about that farm where he lives. It was a typical example of just how two-faced he can be.”

“How do you mean?”

“I’m not saying anything. Just ask around.”

Before I could question her any further she’d gone.

*80 more chapters follow ...*

## About the author

Peter Rowlands was born in Newcastle upon Tyne, but has lived almost all his adult life in London. He edited and contributed to transport and logistics magazines for many years. *Denial of Credit* is his third published novel, and the sequel to *Alternative Outcome* and *Deficit of Diligence*. All three books are available in paperback and e-book format from Amazon.