

Prologue – The Gathering Storm

10th May 2011 – The night of the Storm.

Sorrows gather around great souls as storms do around mountains; but, like them, they break the storm and purify the air of the plain beneath them. – Jean Paul Richter.

A storm was coming, I could feel it. The air was charged with particles of electricity that crackled with unspent energy, portents of the thunder and lightning to come. A patchwork of uneasy stratospheric alliances danced overhead, woven into the very fabric of the atmosphere. The moisture hung like a fog in the humid air; heavy and overpowering, like the purple velvet curtains that were pulled roughly closed across the large French doors of the ballroom behind me.

The swing seat was creaking softly, as I rocked myself imperceptibly backwards and forwards. The veranda had been the main selling point for me, the final seal on the deal. I'd lost count of the number of modern houses I'd viewed, but as the car had glided down the long unkempt driveway, the huge white mansion had emerged from the early morning mist in all its pomp and colonnaded splendour. She'd hooked me from the start. She was a faded princess, decaying and slowly dying, but I didn't care. She was a bit like me really. She had seen a lot of life, and her well worn patina showed on every wall and floor.

Louisiana was about as far removed from my normal sphere of operations as it was possible to get, and this had been the other hook to reel me in. It had been very expensive, but money was about the only thing I had in plentiful supply.

My mum had loved *Gone with the Wind*, especially the grand and ostentatious *Tara*. She had made me promise, almost as many times as we'd both watched it, curled together on the battered leather sofa, that I would buy her a place like that when I was a millionaire. A couple of times, especially toward the end of her life, when our communication was as distant as the ocean that separated us, I made the promises again. Advanced senility had made her a stranger, but even so, I clung to those promises like a life jacket, and even began to believe them myself.

In the half light of the dusk, I could just make out the family cemetery that had come with the property. Apparently, it had put off a lot of the potential buyers, but I loved it. Generations of the Roussel family were buried in the plot, differentiated through the decades by nothing other than the dates on their simple granite headstones. I chuckled slightly as I remembered the look on the face of the local stonemason. I had commissioned a new headstone.

Mary O'Neill, beloved mother, died 21st March 1990.

It sounded silly, but I felt by that one act, I had kept at least a tiny bit of my promise to her.

I would often wander through the vibrant flower filled plots, watching the sun set in the distance, remembering happier times. Occasionally, if the impish mood was upon me, I would also speculate on the relationships between the many deceased, and try to guess at their causes of death.

But it was my own death I was contemplating tonight.

At first, the anxious thoughts had been easy to dismiss. I was not a coward and never had been. But now, in the cold light of a May evening, I knew it was only a matter of time before they found me.

Looking back on it, I would not have done anything differently. In truth, I couldn't have done anything differently. I was a marked man, simple as that. I knew better than anyone that the Mancini brothers did not have a retirement plan. I used to action their pension arrangements myself. You couldn't just stop working for them. And I had been their most trusted lieutenant, welcomed into the inner circle, party to all manner of unsavoury and dangerous information.

At first I had thought this would save me; would make me untouchable. The note I'd left Guido had outlined my reasons for leaving and why I would not be a threat. The following day, I'd been sitting on a mottled and musty bedspread in a run-down motel, just off interstate 95. I'd been intently reading the plain white folder that was my only luggage, when an image flashed into my head. It was a picture often repeated during my long employment, an image of a man in the grip of unrequited anger and intensity. Only then did I realise the plain unequivocal truth; in writing that simple note, I had signed my own death warrant and sealed it with my own blood. They did not do rejection.

I had been an enforcer for the brothers for two decades, so I knew where people would instinctively hide and conversely the best ways to stay hidden. They had called me *the Street* or *Street* for short; as stark, brutal and uncompromising as the neighbourhoods we ruled. It was a moniker that stuck with me throughout my career. It had originally appealed to my youthful and impetuous ego and I'd loved it. It implied status and power and pretty soon people forgot my given name and I didn't encourage their memories of it.

So the new owner of *Augustine Mansion* had been registered as Thomas Eugene O'Neill; hiding in plain sight. The young Thomas had been a bright eyed and innocent twenty year old, when I'd first docked in New York all those years ago. Kathleen had begged me to stay in Ireland, and when that hadn't worked, she had begged me to take her with me. I had promised that I would send for her when I'd made my fortune, both of us realising that the likelihood of either happening was extremely slim.

I'd taken any and every job that I could; all of them unskilled, low-paid and rarely guaranteed. But just when I thought that weeks of breadline existence would turn into months and then years, a savage beating at the hands of a Latino gang ultimately changed the course of my life.

Guido and his brother Ernesto happened upon my inert body, lying in a pool of blood in an alley in Brooklyn. They intimated a way that I could get revenge and then provided the means and the opportunity for me to do it. And in that one action, they inextricably bound us together for eternity; the holy trinity. I never once questioned

aloud how they managed to be in a position to find my badly beaten body so conveniently; I already knew.

Not that I minded.

I gained immediate respect and wealth beyond my wildest dreams. But I was always respectful, to my employers and to my targets. I was a professional. I did not do torture; it was not my thing. I would calmly explain what it was that the brothers wanted, and what would happen if they did not get what they wanted. Most of my targets understood and most of them complied. The ones that did not, died; it was as simple as that. And not in a hail of bullets either, always a single shot to the head. In New York, it was known as *the Street shot*; my very own urban legend.

So, who would the brothers send to tidy up this particular loose end? Even though I could almost feel the white heat of their anger, I knew how realistic they were. They didn't have anyone in their current stable that was as good as me, and they knew that I knew it too. They would not make a mistake and they would make sure the job was done properly. I was forty five years old, not the enforcer of old. It would be someone I didn't know; a man from the outside, a new recruit to do their bidding. One thing I did know. He would be a twenty-something mirror image of me; of that I was certain.

My hand strayed to the underside of the table. I had duct-taped my favourite 9mm in place, hidden from casual view by the dainty lace table cloth, a delicious irony. If he found me, it would be a case of the best man winning, and I would not go down without a fight. I wasn't afraid; I had long ago said any goodbyes that needed saying, and I was sick of running.

Forked lightning lit up the sky, followed by a tremendous rolling roar of thunder, jerking me out of my sentimental reverie. Huge drops of rain started splashing down on the driveway. You could hear the staccato beats on the roof of the veranda, like a thousand manic drummers. But as I watched the celestial lightshow play out, I glimpsed a different type of light on the horizon.

A car was moving steadily up the driveway, the headlights flickering as it passed the willows that lined the long ornate lane. The driver was uncertain of the lie of the land; the car was moving very slowly, and it only speeded up when the driveway opened out onto the gravel parking area in front of the house.

As the young man got out of the car, I immediately knew he was the one; the angel of death. He had an aura of invincibility about him, an arrogance that only youth and supreme self confidence can bring. It was indeed like looking into a mirror that faced back in time.

He reached into the back and removed his light linen jacket, making no attempt to shelter from the massive raindrops. By the time he had shrugged himself into the suit and made his way slowly to the veranda, he was literally dripping wet. It was a sublime performance of machismo.

He was trying to impress me.

'Hi there,' he said slowly, and I suppressed a smile.

They'd even sent a Paddy. It fitted in with the twisted sense of humour that the brothers often displayed.

'Hi there,' I said in reply. 'Lost?'

'Maybe,' he replied.

I gestured to the chair opposite me.

‘Please sit down,’ I said, my newfound southern hospitality kicking in. ‘Can I get you a drink of anything? Iced tea? Coffee? Something stronger?’

‘I’ll take a beer if you have one,’ said the stranger, settling himself into the chair opposite me, watching the drips pool on the polished teak of the veranda floor.

I headed for the kitchen and returned in a couple of minutes with two bottles.

‘Domestic okay?’ I asked him, as I handed him the chilled Miller.

He laughed.

‘Not domestic where I come from.’

‘No, right enough not,’ I replied. ‘And where would that be exactly?’

‘Oh come on,’ he said, giving nothing away. ‘Same place as you; Ireland for sure, no?’

I nodded an affirmation. He was quick, I’d give him that.

‘So, what can I do for you?’ I asked.

‘I think you know who I am,’ he said.

God, he was brazen. And there was something else behind the eyes. It was well hidden, but it seemed to be almost a sense of joy, even exaltation; like he had finally arrived, or was about to.

‘So, I think you know well why I’m here,’ he finished enigmatically.

He wasn’t holding back, that was for sure.

I decided to play him along for a while.

‘You have the better of me, young man,’ I said. ‘Maybe introductions would be in order first?’

He seemed to relax slightly.

‘My name is Alan, Alan Murphy,’ he said, tipping his beer bottle toward me in a substitute for a handshake.

I held up my own beer in a silent return salute.

‘Pleased to meet you Alan, my name is Thomas,’ I replied.

‘I know who you are,’ he said.

It was not the answer I had been expecting.

‘Ok,’ I said, finally relenting, as I sat back down directly across from him. ‘We both know why you are here. I’m not going to beat around the bush any more. But let’s be adult about it. You can walk away now and neither of us will get hurt.’

‘I’m not walking away from this,’ he said slowly. ‘After all the effort I put into finding you? You’ve got to be joking.’

He put his empty bottle deliberately on the table and then in an instant his hand darted inside his jacket.

So, it comes down to this, does it?

For a split second, I contemplated a future without running; being able to walk down a street without constantly scanning the crowd; a normal life. But it was only a split second.

Two decades of mental training kicked in and almost before I was aware of what I was doing, the gun appeared in my hand. A flash of lightning lit up the tableau, and I saw a flicker of uncertainty on the young man’s face, before the impact of the single shot sent him backwards out of his chair. He tumbled awkwardly down the veranda steps, to land in an untidy and ungainly heap.

I walked down to where his body lay, unheeding of the lashing rain. He was stone dead; after two decades as a harbinger of death, I recognised it immediately. But this time it seemed unfair somehow. I felt cheated.

It had been too easy.

I opened his jacket to extract the weapon, but instead, his hand was grasping a plain white envelope. I gently prised his fingers off it. The outside was stained and greasy; easy evidence that the contents had been removed and replaced over and over again.

I extracted the letter and smoothed it open. Small sections of it leapt out at me. *Dear Mr Murphy*, it began. A sentence further down the page had been highlighted. *We think your search may be over.*

As the rain started smudging and blurring the ink all over the paper, I realised that there was another document still left in the envelope. I pulled it out and as I did so, I immediately knew what it was. An Irish birth certificate, with its ornate harp logo at the top, was unmistakable. I looked across at the name of the mother, already half guessing what I would find; Kathleen Murphy.

I stood there as the rain obliterated the documents in my hand. I had seen the name of the father, standing out in stark capital letters; mocking me. I felt nothing. I was numb. The lightning crackled and the thunder roared, and still I stood there; unmoving, unyielding.

I didn't see the dark suited figure sidle up behind me, as agile, nimble and silent as a cat. I only felt the pressure of the barrel on the back of my neck, as the lightning lit up the body at my feet for one last time.

'Guido says goodbye,' he whispered in my ear, as the thunder roared overhead, punctuated only by a single sharp crack.

Chapter 1 – Awakening

10th April 2011 – One month before the Storm.

Death; the last sleep? No, it is the final awakening. – Sir Walter Scott.

I placed the steaming mug gently onto the kitchen table. I was always careful to centre it onto the white ring, a mark that had etched itself indelibly into the soft veneer of the cheap pine. I often idly contemplated cleaning it off and then always managed to find something better to do.

I was a creature of habit.

I took my first sip, and winced at the heat and the taste; forgot the sweetener again.

What an idiot.

As I pulled the sugar bowl over and stirred in a couple of spoonfuls, I turned my attention back to the job in hand. The shoe box had already been removed from the closet, a daily eight-fifteen obsession.

I emptied the contents gingerly and then carefully unfurled the soft cotton cloth that wrapped the items. The heavy material folded out and spread over the surface, but fell short of the edges; like a table cloth that was slightly too small.

I arranged the metallic objects, newly liberated from their daily slumber, creating uniform patterns on the table. It was always the same pattern; no deviations.

I surveyed the finished display, truly a work of art. A stunning triumph of design and functionality, each individual part crafted and machined to perfection. And yet; perfect as each individual piece was, it could not function individually. It could only contribute to the balanced and lethal whole.

I set to work with the cleaning solution and oils. I flipped the egg timer over; tapping it gently to make sure the sands of time started flowing.

Seated in my favourite chair, I proceeded to clean, oil, and assemble at the same slow and steady pace I always used. And just as the last grain of sand dropped into the lower vessel, I pulled the slide back with an abrupt metallic clunk.

Gently increasing the pressure on the trigger, I felt the slight buck in my hand and heard the satisfying click of the hammer. There was something primeval about a gun, something only men could relate to; a reflex buried deep in our primitive warrior subconscious.

My first daily ritual was over; a habit born out of two decades of paranoia. I held a lifelong superstitious belief that I was the architect of my own survival or destruction. I

always worked that way; it was one of the primary reasons I was the best at what I did. I left nothing to chance. I made my own luck; there was no lady present.

I engaged the safety and laid the weapon aside. Picking up the box of ammunition reverently, I selected nine rounds at random. As I looked at them, glinting in my hand, I went through my other morning routine.

Carefully inspecting each round for signs of warping, I checked for suspicious markings or scratches on the sides or bottom, laying them in specific piles; left for rejection and right for selection. As I rejected, I selected another from the box and repeated, until I had nine items in a neat row to my right.

I scanned them visually, before hefting each one in my hand, to check for overall balance and feel. You'd be surprised at what you could ascertain, just by hefting a bullet in your hand for a few seconds.

I had seen the effects first-hand at a local firing range, once. Mr Ego behind me in the queue had scoffed and laughed at my superstition. As he'd loaded my rejected rounds, he'd winked to his girlfriend and his mates; he was going to make his point. And make it he did; bullet number three jammed, blowing his hand clean off. It had not been a pretty sight. So, the discarded ones are routinely disposed of; I won't allow rejected ammunition back into circulation.

Once I'd finished, and only when I was completely satisfied with each individual item, I pressed each round carefully into the magazine. I only ever used nine bullets; even if the gun could take more, nine was my limit. It was my talisman; I had no intention of ever changing it.

For me, it was always about the numbers. How many targets are there? How many shots to kill? How much will I get paid? But it went deeper than that.

I always regarded the numbers one through nine as pure; anything higher than nine was a combination of numbers and my superstition wouldn't allow combinations. If I needed more than nine bullets, then the time had come to retire.

Once the magazine was fully loaded, I visually inspected it one last time, and then I laid it softly next to the gun. Like love and marriage, you couldn't have one without the other.

I picked up the mug again and drained the bitter sweet liquid in a long final swallow. I snatched the two items from the table and slammed the magazine into the gun with a gratifying click. I eased the weapon into my shoulder holster, shrugging on my thousand-dollar linen suit jacket. It was specially tailored for me, so it would not show any embarrassing bulges. Guido and Ernesto had immaculate taste in clothes and expected the same of their employees.

I walked over to the CD player, repeating the same two albums over and over again. I smiled at the line that was playing as I approached; it was prophetic really.

I'm a book keeper's son. I don't want to shoot no one.

I clicked off the stereo. He had been a solicitor, not a book keeper.

I trotted briskly down the stairs and out of the front door of my sleek brownstone, located in one of the better areas of Midtown; a fringe benefit of my job. I took the steps two at a time, replaying the orders from the previous night; going over in my head what I was expected to do today.

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'There is a pharmacy at 630 Lexington Avenue,' said Guido softly.

He glanced at me and then muttered to himself under his breath in annoyance.

‘Hey Street,’ he shouted suddenly and with venom. ‘Are you listening to me?’

I jerked in surprise; irritated at myself for drifting off. My mind was somewhere completely different; certainly not in this room. It had been happening a lot recently. Too much for my line of work, and especially where the brothers were concerned. I was a detail oriented person; details were the difference between life and death.

Pay attention, this shit will get you killed.

‘Sorry boss,’ I said. ‘Long day, I guess. What were you saying?’

He coughed.

‘Do I have your full attention now? Good! Focus, for fuck’s sake.’

He exhaled in disgust.

‘Anyway, as I was saying, there is a pharmacy at 630 Lexington Avenue,’ he repeated.

‘There is a dude working the prescription counter, name of O’Reilly; John O’Reilly. One of your lot I think,’ he said, directing the comment towards me with the beginnings of a smirk.

I nodded to indicate my understanding.

He had an Irish sounding surname. Big deal, he was probably Irish-American, so way more Irish than a real Paddy like me. But it did make it easier for me sometimes; if they were ethnic, it gave me an in.

‘He owes us a lot of money. We know people don’t carry that kind of cash around with them, and we know he doesn’t have it in any of his checking or savings accounts. We know his credit rating and circle of friends; we know his share portfolio and what assets he owns. In short, we know every godamn thing about him, so we also know that there is no way on God’s green earth that he can pay us back.’

He smiled at the last statement.

‘So, normal persuasion job, then,’ I replied. ‘Lean on him a little, let him know the lie of the land?’

‘No, not this time,’ said Guido, surprising me. ‘Normally it would piss me right off. I would love to lean on this little fucker and show him he can’t fuck with the Mancini family. But in this case, lucky for the little SOB, his debt is the very thing that makes him useful to us.’

He stopped to compose himself; eyes closing briefly as he brought forth the memories.

‘He has racked up a huge gambling tab which he can’t pay. We were about to send some heat over to him; these suckers normally crumble like shortcake. But, before we could send anyone over, he made direct contact with us. It surprised the shit out of me, to be honest.’

Ernesto nodded curtly; silently corroborating the information.

‘So, we have temporarily sanctioned his ongoing debt, with the proviso that it does not get any bigger, and we are going to collect in a different way.’

Guido paused for breath and to assemble his thoughts. His hawk-like stare pierced the picture window as it framed the Manhattan skyline, the buildings shimmering in the late evening sunlight. His eyes moved constantly, darting left and right, taking everything in, as though he was searching for prey. Nothing got past Guido.

‘So, lucky for him, he thinks he has something we would be interested in,’ he continued, ‘and much more importantly for him, we *know* we would be interested in it. Otherwise, the little cock-sucker would be in Bellevue by now.’

He grinned at me.

‘I *think* you might be able to persuade him to part with it. If it is as valuable as he thinks it is....’

He left the statement lying there and looked across at me quizzically. He was almost impossibly tanned, with a face unlined by life; miraculous for one of sixty two with his type of lifestyle. Botox and UV lamps played a big part in Guido’s daily routine. But, his cobalt blue hawk-eyes were fierce in their intensity, set off against the dark eyebrows and framed under a sleek shock of slicked back silver hair. He was the archetypal mobster and even if he wasn’t, you would instinctively assume that he was seriously connected.

You didn’t fuck with Guido.

‘Any hints as to what I am supposed to ask him for?’ I asked, a tad shortly.

The brothers exchanged a quick glance. Ernesto’s eyes darted to me for a split second and then flitted away again as quickly.

I studied him as he gazed out of the same window. He was slightly taller than his brother at six feet even, with the same shock of silver hair. But his eyes were green, and his complexion was lighter and less tanned. He didn’t go in for the same cosmetic treatments, so consequently his face looked like well worn leather. His eyebrows were white, and the overall effect made him look softer and more serene than Guido. I only ever made that mistake once. I subconsciously rubbed the large circular scar on the back of my hand; I always learnt from my mistakes. But I did know one thing. The brothers were hiding something from me; I could always tell.

‘It’s a white ring binder,’ said Ernesto quietly.

His eyes snapped back to me and his stare never left mine, his demeanour suddenly deliberately threatening. I was equal to the challenge, holding his eyes and daring him to take it further. He nodded eventually and looked away.

‘Street, this means a lot to us,’ he said, and I was surprised at the earnestness of his statement. ‘So please don’t fuck it up, for his sake and for yours.’

He didn’t elaborate and I didn’t expect him to.

‘So how do I recognise this binder?’ I asked. ‘How do I know he isn’t pawning me off with some old newspaper cuttings or baseball stats?’

Guido pointed to the picture behind his desk. The photographer was either brave or foolhardy, traits Guido loved and loathed in equal measure. The image revealed a tornado that had just touched down, literally carving a house in two. Guido’s favourite piece of the picture was the three cattle you could just make out in the top left of the wind funnel, swirling about, legs and tails flailing. He had a bit of a twisted sense of humour.

He glanced at me and saw the confusion on my face.

‘Storm,’ he said. ‘The word *Storm* will be on the cover and watermarked across every page.’

As I left, I failed to see the look that passed between the brothers. If I had, I would have known exactly what it meant.

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John O’Reilly was nervous, without knowing exactly why. He was always getting premonitions. It had been that way since his early teens, and he always obeyed

his subconscious. But this was different; this wasn't directional as much as a sense of foreboding.

'What the fuck am I supposed to do with these?' asked the middle aged lady at the front of the queue, holding up a packet of laxatives that he had absently thrown into her prescription bag.

He muttered an apology under his breath. She looked long and hard at him for a few seconds, opened the package slightly to check the drugs she really wanted were inside, and then snatched it off the counter with a flourish. As she stalked out of the door on a wave of self righteousness, he exhaled the breath he didn't realise he'd been holding in a big stream.

He tried to catch Cathy's eye, eventually having to resort to waving his arms like an idiot, while the Latino man at the front of the queue swore and muttered under his breath.

Cathy hurried over.

'Listen Cathy,' he said rapidly.

She put her head on one side as she listened.

'I just got a call from the school,' he continued, lying seamlessly. 'One of the kids is being sent home, and Anne is out of town this week at a convention.'

He saw the light of concern in her eyes, and for a brief second, felt a tiny bit guilty at his little white lies. He remembered the words of the Mancini brothers and the guilt dissolved like an early morning mist on the beach.

She nodded her understanding, making the universal signal for *get out of here and do what you have to do* and took his place at the counter. She smiled brightly at the annoyed Latino customer, diffusing his anger immediately with her charm and poise.

He slipped down the corridor and out onto the rear fire escape platform, which they also used as a makeshift smoking area. As the fire door closed behind him, he extricated the cigarette packet and lighter from the breast pocket of his smart white lab coat. It was crisply starched and ironed *every* day. Anne was as exacting in her standards as his mother had been. It was a pity the two of them never got to meet; they would have liked each other instinctively.

He shook a cigarette into his hand, marvelling at the perfection of shape, texture and colour. There was just something about cigarettes that made them so aesthetically appealing to him. He slowly passed the sleek white cylinder under his nose, revelling in the sweet tobacco smell.

The harsh scraping of the flint animated the small lighter. As he held the blue and orange flame to the unfiltered end, he heard the faint crackle, a bushfire in miniature, as the cigarette flared into life. He always went through the same routine, delaying the surrender; that beautiful moment when the nicotine was dragged deep into his lungs.

As he exhaled the thin stream of smoke through his nose, he contemplated both the burning tip and his current predicament.

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The fourth child had been their downfall. They had been marginally ahead until that point; up one month and down another, but always just about even at year end. But this had been the tipping point for their perilously poised scales, delicately balanced for years, until a tiny increment in one direction had set off a chain reaction. Their

household bills exponentially increased to the point that, even with their two salaries coming in, they could not cover all their outgoings.

In the middle of all this upheaval and chaos, he'd been invited to a mid week poker night at a local club with some old frat buddies. He never went out; never socialised with work or old friends, but the pressure was getting to him. It was Anne who'd suggested it might be a good idea; release the valve on the pressure cooker for one night at least.

He went into the evening filled with trepidation. He hadn't been out as a *single* man for years. He was not a big drinker or a big gambler, but the sense of freedom he'd felt was amazing. The release from the bounds of his closeted life made him feel like a million dollars. The more he drank, the more he wanted to drink, and his rising debt situation made him bold at the tables. At the end of the night, he'd ended up taking home the guts of three thousand dollars in winnings from a one hundred dollar stake, and the telephone numbers of two different women.

It had paid off a lot of bills, and his earnest headshaking at the initial disapproval and anti gambling lecture had seemed to pay dividends in the bedroom, too.

For a while, he left it alone; the tonic of that one visit seemed to be what they needed as a couple. Lady luck had visited and bestowed her gifts of plenty. But it couldn't last and after a period of about three months, the bills started to increment with such renewed ferocity, that one night after work, he found his feet directing him past the Metro stop and back outside the self same casino club.

He should have realised; he was a stable middle aged professional man, the type who worked through his problems, not a reckless, feckless idiot. But they seemed so nice. They remembered his name at the door; they even remembered the type of drink he liked. And the first few bets were on the house; that was the only hook they needed. From then on he was theirs. He was an addict.

He found his feet beginning to stray toward his new mistress, more and more often; as dangerous and insidious as any femme fatale. The excuses over the pressures of work mounted and Anne bought them hook, line and sinker. She had no reason to doubt him; he was a genuinely hard worker.

For the first few weeks or so, he won and won big. It seemed like the sun was starting to rise, casting a warm glow over the slightly sick and guilty feeling he always carried into the club. But then, about a month into his newfound shadow life, the tide turned like a tsunami.

Rather than cut his losses, as most normal non addicts would do, he decided to wait it out; to play through the slump and win big again. But even here, the club were most obliging. They seemed to understand his needs and started him with a hefty line of credit. He was one of their most valued clients, they told him. It would be their pleasure to accommodate him. And accommodate him they did; over a six month period, he managed to rack up a debt to the tune of one hundred thousand big ones.

He'd been escorted into the manager's office, high above the gambling pit, with its line of security monitors, acres of mahogany, and plush leather chairs. His teeth had been chattering as he sat down. He knew what happened to people who accumulated large gambling debts; he may have been self deceiving, but he was not totally stupid.

Two older gentlemen sat in the corner and watched as the manager poured him a coffee. The manager's smile never wavered, but it was clear that the words coming out of his mouth were not his own. John could see it in his eyes; could almost read what the manager really wanted to say, the ferocity of the delivery, the spittle flying out of his

mouth like little bullets of water. But even though there was plenty of intimation and lots of flowery language, it was made crystal clear to him that the debt had now reached a level where it was unsustainable. It was *imperative* (the manager's word) that the debt be scaled down to a more manageable level. He was given a month.

As he walked out, numb to the core, the two older gentlemen smiled serenely at him and then at each other. It was like printing money for them; a guarantee of another hundred grand in the bank. John and all the other middle class pricks like him had no real fight in them. They would rather put their families out onto the street than risk losing a pinkie finger. P T Barnum had been right; there truly is one born every minute.