



CHAPTER 1

James, *call me Jimmy*, Bishop braced himself against a Georgian window frame. Blue moonlight spilled from the clear night sky, casting a distorted shadow against a burnt orange wall.

He stared into the street below.

A man, brown paper bag in hand, pissed against a street lamp.

Out of his fucking skull he was.

A taxi rounded the corner.

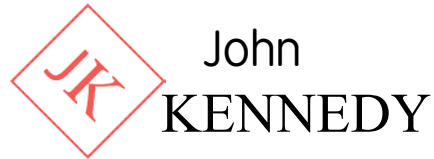
The man raised an arm.

The taxi did not stop.

The man gave a two-fingered salute and returned his attention to the bag. He tipped it toward his mouth and chugged. Wiping his hand across his mouth, he tossed the bag over his shoulder.

Jimmy caught the faint pop of shattering glass, barely audible through the thick panes of the window.

A boozy chorus of “Molly Malone.” Followed the man as he staggered across the road.



Jimmy, transported back to drink fuelled nights at the local boozier, mouthed the words, “*In Dublin's fair city, where the girls are so pretty, I first set my eyes on sweet Molly Malone.*” He stopped himself before he got to the chorus, mindful of just where he was.

Jimmy tugged at his World War 2 commando issue balaclava, bought for twelve shillings and sixpence at the local army and navy store, pulling it away from his nose and mouth. The wool trapped bad breath smell. Jimmy toyed with the ends of his Pancho Villa moustache. A liberal covering of pomade acted as a sweat producer. The smell of beeswax from a freshly polished floor offered a brief respite. He machine gun spat, dislodging itchy fibres stuck to his lips and tongue and stared at his reflection in the window. The beginnings of a rash formed on his cheek – fucking wool. He gently dabbed a gloved finger, grateful for the relief the cool leather brought.

A man, bruiser big, stepped from the half shadow. White light, from an army issued TL122 angle head flashlight reflected from the glass, momentarily blinding Jimmy.

Billy Martin, better known as Mongo but only when the missus was out of earshot, frowned. He lifted the eye slit of his balaclava away from his skin and patted a handkerchief against the purple bruising surrounding the socket of his right eye. He carried a limp hessian sack with Royal mail franked on the side. ‘Yeah, you still look beautiful. Let’s get on with it.’

The subject of Jimmy’s anger turned from the coarseness of wool to Mongo’s black eye. He warned him, but no, Mongo had a touch of moralitus. Three days before the job and he challenged Mad Dog Moxton to a bout of bare knuckled fisticuffs for calling his wife, Jenny, a slapper. Moxton was fucking nuts, dangerous when fuelled up on a cocktail of black bombers and alcohol. It could have gone tits up, as it was the fight was short. Mongo nearly killed the bugger. Fists, head, feet, Moxton spark out before the end of the first round.



Mongo read Jimmy's mind. He clenched giant fists, knuckles, raw and swollen. 'Yeah, like you would have done anything different.'

Reluctantly, Jimmy pulled the balaclava back down.

Rubber-soled boots squeaked on the parquet floor as he toe-turned and stepped toward his first victim.

'Not so funny now is it, laughing boy?' said Jimmy.

In the skylight infused light of the gallery stood his adversary, full of swaggering self-confidence, rosy cheeks and all too effeminate lips.

'What, no comment?'

'You've lost your marbles,' said Mongo. 'You *do* realise you're talking to a painting?' he aimed the flashlight at the painting – no light. 'Fuck,' he said juggling the switch in frustration.

Jimmy hammed it up, putting on a la-de-da accent. 'My dear boy, not a mere painting, but art. May I introduce you to the *Laughing Cavalier*?'

Mongo tipped an invisible hat. 'Nice to meet you.' He tapped the flashlight against his thigh.

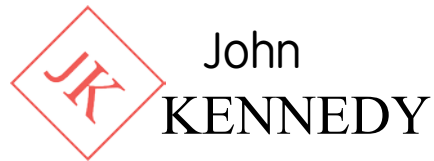
'Now listen, you may learn something.' Jimmy raised a crooked finger to his lips and cleared his throat. 'Art is the conscious production or arrangement of colours, forms, movements, or other elements in a manner that affects the sense of beauty.'

'What the fuck is that supposed to mean?' said Mongo, as a bright yellow beam haloed the upturned moustache of the *Laughing Cavalier*.

'Fucked if I know,' said Jimmy.

'I'm sure they'll ask for your expertise on *Going for a Song*... let me guess another Kieronism?'

Jimmy nodded.



Kieronism: the ability to talk out of one's arse whilst sounding like one had swallowed a plum.

'I might have bloody known,' said Mongo. 'He's become a right little *fucking* Lord Fauntleroy.'

'Doesn't look like he's got too much to laugh at, dressed like that,' said Mongo.

Mongo had a point. Jimmy preferred pop art, a bit of Warhol, a touch of Peter Blake, not this old master shit.

Jimmy reached out and gripped the elaborate gilt frame. Thin chains, mounted to the upper face of the frame, reached up to a rail mounted just below a decorative crown moulding. Jimmy yanked the frame and an explosion of plaster dust filled the air, covering his black boiler suit in white snowflakes.

The frame slipped from his grasp, and bounced from the floor with a dull thud.

Fuck it,' said Jimmy

'Now we know what he was laughing at,' said Mongo.

'Grab hold,' said Jimmy.

Jimmy pushed on the corners of the canvas, easing it from its frame. He delved into a breast pocket and removed a small envelope of butcher's wrap, containing a selection of safety razor blades.

Selecting a blade, he sliced into the canvas, cutting around nails that held it on to the wooden stretcher.

The canvas flopped to the floor.

Mongo reached inside the mail sack and removed a cardboard tube.

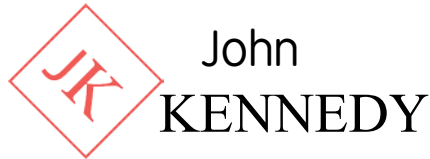
He popped off plastic end caps and Jimmy slid the rolled canvas into the tube.

Mongo held the sack open.

Jimmy caught a flash of gold.

'What's that? Come on, open your paw.'

Mongo uncurled fingers to reveal a small gold box.



‘You don’t even know what it is, do you?’ said Jimmy.

Mongo dropped his head toward his chest.

‘You’re like a bloody magpie. Just what were you going to do with it, sell it on Camden market, or perhaps admire it on the mantelpiece? Try and explain that to the fucking neighbours.’

Mongo blew into his cheeks. ‘Just a present, a little something for Jenny.’

From a deep cargo pocket, Jimmy extracted a burgundy coloured brochure. ‘In case you haven’t noticed, this is not a fucking souvenir shop.’ Jimmy thumbed pages. An essence of pear odour wafted from black circles, outlining pictures of selected masterpieces. Jimmy inhaled. He could get hooked on marker pens. ‘Let’s stick to the shopping list, shall we?’

Mongo shuffled toward a marble-topped oak commode and set the box on its surface.

‘Properly,’ said Jimmy.

Mongo attempted to close his swollen right eye. Playing the fool, he gun sighted the box into position.

‘Oi, enough, da Vinci, we’ve got work to do,’ said Jimmy.

They moved from gallery to gallery, filling the sack. Titian, Canaletto, Rembrandt, exclusive names on an exclusive shopping list.

A hexagonal glass ceiling-light emitted a pale-yellow glow, illuminating fluted columns of the main landing that stood either side of the wrought iron balustrades of a staircase.

Marble busts, mounted on black oak pedestals, watched on.

‘Just a mo,’ said Mongo. He dropped the sack to the floor and sat on a leather covered circular sofa.

‘I’m getting too old for this malarkey.’ He smiled. ‘Now, I know how fucking Santa Clause feels.’



Jimmy, leant against a marble column and checked off items from the brochure. Somehow, he couldn't quite see Mongo in a red suit and white beard. Jimmy couldn't get the sound of Brenda Lee signing "Santa Clause is Coming to Town," out of his head.

'Sweet Jesus!' said a voice from the shadows.

A flashlight beam spotlighted the slumbering shape of Mongo as he unscrewed the battery cap from the torch.

Jimmy swivelled. His nose inches from the heavily lined face of a security guard standing atop the staircase. Heat radiated from his flashlight. Jimmy raised a hand against its blinding white beam.

Caught unawares, the guard stepped backwards.

The flashlight, free to choreograph its own trajectory, spiralled high in the air as he tumbled backwards. Mid spin, captured in freeze-frame, he goldfish mouthed the words, "help".

Jimmy reached for the guard's outstretched arm – too late. He grabbed air.

The man, swallowed by darkness, crashed to the foot of the marble staircase. Sounds muffled by a thick pile carpet.

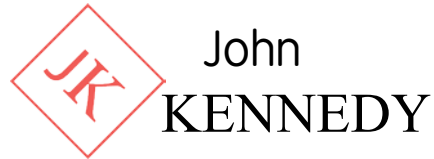
Jimmy followed, passing discarded objects that mapped the man's fall: a security cap, batteries from the flashlight, a set of dentures.

The prostrate figure lay crumpled at the foot of the staircase; Auschwitz thin in a one-size-fits-all uniform. His right foot wedged between the balustrade and a gold statue of a Griffin.

Jimmy knelt beside him. Moonlight from the main entrance cast a square block across the man's body.

Jeez wheeze Louise - what was he, eighty?

A black line trickled from a bony nose to thin colourless lips.



Jimmy pushed a sprig of thinning sea-salt hair from the man's eyes. His pallid skin dotted with liver spots.

'Hold on, fella.'

Hollow, denture free cheeks bellowed, sucked air. The security guard's eyes fluttered, rolled upward, and he fell into unconsciousness.

Shit.

The last thing Jimmy needed was to have the old bugger die on him. He slapped the guard across his cheek.

'Come on, wake up you dozy cunt.'

A presence hovered.

'Did you see granddad's teeth?' said Mongo, screwing the flashlight back together.

Jimmy tilted his head. Mongo, with exaggerated loops of his arm, imitated the descent of the falling teeth.

'It's not funny,' said Jimmy.

A dark patch spread from the guard's groin. The air reeked with a heady scent of wool, mothballs and urine.

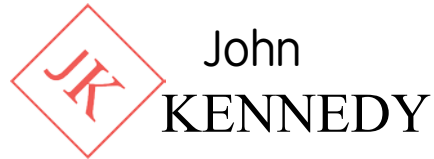
Gnarled fingers clawed at Jimmy's knee.

'What the fu-' Jimmy stared down into bulging bloodshot eyes.

An arc of light traced across the floor, up the wall, coming to a halt on the ceiling.

'No,' hissed Jimmy, catching Mongo in a strike pose. The flashlight raised above his head.

The guard gasped as he fought for air. He turned blue.



The old fart was gonna die unless... Jimmy plunged fingers into the guard's mouth, gripped the lump of meat and pulled.

Air passage clear, the guard wheezed as he sucked in a lungful of air.

Jimmy sat back on his haunches, staring at saliva tipped gloved fingers. His hands shook.

'Holy fuck, batman.' said Mongo, 'You saved the old bugger's life.'

The guard's breathing subsided to a shallow asthmatic whistle.

Jimmy unhooked the guard's foot from the statue. He tugged at the cuff of his boiler suit and dabbed the old man's mouth.

Mongo dug steel-like fingers into the soft flesh under Jimmy's collarbone. 'Come on, Florence Nightingale, let's go.'

A raised eyebrow from Jimmy was all it took to release Mongo's grip. 'Can't leave him here.'

'No, no, no,' said Mongo. 'What about the time? We only got two hours.'

'Time, what do you think we'll be doing if the other guard starts snooping and finds grandpa. No, can't risk any alarms.' Jimmy placed his arms under the guard's shoulders. 'Grab his legs. We'll dump him behind the staircase.'