

Prologue

Alex sat on a broken sofa, the air in the small, filthy, badly decorated lounge filled with the sweet smell of heroin being inhaled by the other three people lying in an almost comatose state on the litter strewn floor. The cracked voice of a woman who was propped up against the wall by a faded blue cushion under the broken bay window grated on his senses for the umpteenth time that day.

“Give it a try, come on. I tried it when I was your age. Fifteen, you’re nearly a man so try it, you might forget your shit and stop fucking moaning for once.” Laughing at him she looked at a microscopic quantity of powder still sitting in the tiny corner of a small plastic bag used by the drugs gangs for providing ten quid deals, mainly to the people living on the streets.

Turning to face her, he noticed how her long-term addiction to class A drugs had pulled her skin taut around her face, like a living skeleton with pin prick pupils and thin black hair that looked constantly greasy and uncared for. She kept her habit going by getting others to steal things to order and of course dealing heroin to desperate addicts around the city area. He gave his normal answer to her pleas. “I don’t smoke, Joy; it makes me feel sick.”

Giving a chesty laugh she looked at the others as if to explain herself. “It’s his bloody birthday, he needs to be happy.” Pulling out a needle she carefully sucked up liquid into a syringe. “Okay, no smoking needed, I will do all the work for you, just once. Let your hair down and forget all the bullshit that goes with your life. Come on Alex, just once. If you don’t like it, I won’t ask you to do it again. Just see what the magic is all about and understand our life. It’s my birthday present to you.” She leant back, waiting for his response. It didn’t take long.

Looking at the others in the mid-winter late afternoon gloom for a moment and seeing the despair etched on every face, he stood to leave. Even his tiny, filthy bedroom upstairs with no bed, just a stained mattress on the floor, was a better prospect than this. He turned and faced them all. “You will never stop until it kills you; how many times have you tried rehab? The last time it took you three hours before you used again. The courts will throw you in jail the next time you’re caught dealing, and then where will I be? On the streets again.”

This time the other three people laughed, a younger woman, maybe somewhere between twenty and thirty slurring her words as she answered him. “He has a good point, we’re all just fucking useless addicts. Leave him alone, he doesn’t touch drugs, he hasn’t even smoked a joint, Joy. Let him enjoy being a kid for God’s sake.”

Silence once more filled the lounge, and the dirty floorboards creaked under his feet as he left the room and climbed the stairs. Chatter broke out again before disappearing behind the white door with a fist sized hole smashed through the back panel that he had just pulled politely closed. The walls of the staircase peeled with blistered white paint, a thought of refurbishment from a decade ago which had come to nothing and stopped with the next relapse. Broken banister rails told of fights and falls during the long drug-fuelled parties that sporadically occurred after another failed rehab for one or more of the heroin addicted friends. Shutting the bedroom door, Alex lay motionless on his mattress, breathing slowly and allowing the hopelessness of downstairs to evaporate from his thoughts once again. It seemed to get harder each time he retreated to his

sanctuary, and looking up at the once ornate light fitting, he wondered what he had done to deserve this life with his only belongings, a pile of dirty clothes, lying scattered on the floor since someone in the house had sold the wardrobe that morning to a dealer demanding money. Alex had nothing; piece by piece his only possessions had vanished, and he was too scared to confront Joy about their whereabouts in case he was asked to leave this rundown, three-bed terrace house on the outskirts of Oxford that kept the rain from his head. His small tv, smart phone and Xbox went first, and then his designer clothes, all stolen. Luckily, he had hidden a watch that his dad had given him, his most precious possession, in his pocket at all times over the last three months and he brought it out now, rubbing his thumb over the smooth glass on the watch face.

This time the hopelessness and loneliness consumed every ounce of his body, the thoughts hitting him like an icy wind slamming into his exposed face, taking him by surprise at how raw his emotions were...not wanting a life in care, but the alternative now appearing worse. He was trapped. Another few years and then he could join the military and find another home - he just needed to hold on for now. Tears streamed down his face as he remembered the life he had once lived until a tap at the door made him sit up, his back to the wall with the torn wallpaper. He scrubbed furiously at his eyes with the palms of his hands as the door opened. It was the girl.

“Look, I’m sorry that Joy is trying to get you to take drugs, she did the same to me when I was younger.” Taking a seat on the edge of the mattress, she produced a small wrap of powder. “Can I take this in here? They will want to share it with me if I shoot up downstairs and I only have a ten quid bag.”

Alex watched as she prepared the fix. He had seen this hundreds of times from afar, but never first hand and up close. The process of preparation fascinated him as Pippa heated the underneath of a spoon.

“No, go ahead. I’ll just watch you if that’s okay.”

Tying off a strap around her arm, she found a good vein and glanced over at him. “Are you sure that I can’t give you a little hit?”

Alex stared at her, a thousand thoughts running through his mind. Life was shit enough sober, how bad could it get?”

Chapter One

Fourteen-year-old Alex Harris awoke as his mother nudged him from his slumbers.

“We’re going to be landing in thirty minutes sweetheart, start getting your things together.”

He nodded sleepily while pushing his light blanket to one side of his luxurious reclined leather seat, exposing the zingy yellow designer shirt and blue torn jeans recently purchased from the Bicester Village designer retail park situated forty minutes from their five-bedroom South Oxfordshire home. Raising his hand, he called over one of the cabin crew pandering to the needs of the first-class passengers during the evening flight from London Heathrow to New York JFK.

“Can I have a coke please?” Within seconds a glass fizzing with the poured bubbles appeared, his sister Samantha looking over towards him, smiling innocently as only a ten-year-old does as she quietly whispered to her dad.

“That’s his third coke, Daddy; you told us that we could only have one with our supper.” Her long blond hair almost covered her freckled face, still tanned from a surprise five-day cruise around the Mediterranean a few weeks before.

Daniel only half heard her, the email from his PA at DH Cyber Solutions grabbing his attention before she could finish. “Sorry darling, just give me a minute. I need to answer this quick question.” Typing rapidly, he looked up at his wife, Amber, as she packed things away after the seven-hour flight. She looked back at him briefly, noticing the look of concern on his face as he closed the lid of his laptop.

“Everything okay back at the office?”

He smiled and nodded. “Just some last-minute stuff to finalise with our Saudi friends. The deal has hit a bit of a bump but nothing that I can’t sort out when we get to the hotel.”

Amber knew what this meant; with the present lifestyle the family enjoyed, they needed a minimum of ten thousand pounds in the bank every month just to cover mortgages and private school fees. With the addition of food, bills and entertainment the true monthly expenditure was closer to fifteen thousand but fortunately for them, their new company had soared into life after Dan took the decision to set out alone. But this one deal could be the difference between the millionaire lifestyle that they currently enjoyed, and becoming a real fish in the billionaire pond.

“Sure, I’ll sort the kids out, you deal with the other things.” She rarely pushed the point about money and business with Dan. He was the one who had stuck with her during her drinking problems after university had ended and he was the one who had put up the money for a lengthy period in rehab when all her friends thought that she was working somewhere in the Alps. He was a good guy and there was no need for confrontation.

The thump of the tyres on the runway followed by the power of the giant aircraft braking excited Alex as his eager eyes focused on the sprawling mass of terminals spreading to his left. This was his first trip to the city and one that Mum and Dad had promised him since watching the premier of his favourite superhero film set around the ‘*big apple*’.

Plus, both he and Sam loved the clothing worn by the popular TikTok influencers, and according to the children the only place to buy them was in NYC.

Both Dan and Amber stood as the aircraft came to a halt and tired executives and celebrities filed off out of the gaze of those sat behind in the economy and business class seats. As usual Amber took control of the administration side. She was born to lead and the company she planned to set up to help the rich and famous travel the world and beyond if desired, was in its final weeks before launching. She just needed the million-pound fund to operate with and with the Saudi deal promised by Dan, it would be all systems go with a Park Lane office and three staff waiting for the green light.

“Sam, take my hand. Alex, follow Dad. When we get through passport control, we have a car waiting to take us to the hotel.” She checked her watch; it was just past one in the morning.

“Straight to sleep when we get there. Busy day tomorrow, we are going around central park in a horse and carriage and then SHOPPING!” Both children cheered and Dan watched Alex with one eye as they followed Amber, absolutely focused on a recent message that had just pinged up on his screen. Financial paper in one hand, phone in his other hand he read frantically while still trying to keep pace with the others as Amber and Sam blazed a trail ahead. It was clear to everyone that he was troubled by what he was reading as he collided with an angry passenger, apologising profusely while still attempting to type a response. Amber looked round at the shouting and shrugged it to one side. Everyone was rushing, of course people would collide while in a hurry and besides, whatever Dan was contemplating would just be a temporary problem. The upcoming deal would catapult both of them into a different league; there were no big issues, at least nothing to destabilise the good times.

Reaching the winding line for passport checks she looked back at her husband. Dan’s face was shrouded in concentration, Alex just an appendage on the end of his arm. The pure stress on his face shook her into reality and anxiety finally hit her stomach. She hadn’t had that feeling since her doctor prescribed her medication after a debilitating bout of mental confusion following her mother’s death. Suddenly she needed a drink. The cravings had been coming for weeks, and she had secretly taken a glass or two of wine to calm herself down, but this urge was bigger than ever. She cursed her lack of fortitude when dealing with her addiction. The side effects of her methods for dealing with bereavement, a glass or two of chilled white wine a night while Dan was out, had numbed everything the pills couldn’t.

The feeling of needing alcohol gripped her for a second time, shaking her hard and sending a bead of cold sweat trickling down her back until she controlled herself again. That drink could wait for a while.

The long queue at passport did little to help her situation although Dan at least looked as though he was back with them. Passing through customs and out into the arrival hall, he looked up and saw the driver. “This way everyone, the car is here.”

The lights of the city soon mesmerised them all as they drove along the perpetually busy roads. The hypnotic effect captured Dan and Amber each time they visited and for Alex and Sam it was magical. Times Square appeared like a Hollywood set sparking a yell of excitement from Alex. “This is from the film we saw last night!” Two blocks later the car pulled up at the entrance to a majestic hotel, the car door opened by attentive staff and luggage quickly transported to the reception area.

The vastness of the hotel foyer spread around them, a cathedral-like feeling of space and opulence seeping from every stone column and statue staring down at them. An immaculately dressed woman welcomed them to the VIP booking-in desk with a smile.

“Good evening, we have the penthouse suite available to you at no extra cost Mr and Mrs Harris and I hope that you have a beautiful stay in our hotel. If I can just take your card details while the bell boy delivers the luggage to your suite.” Dan handed over his card and typed in the number. The woman looked down at the screen with a small frown before returning the card to him.

“I’m sorry sir, the card has been declined. Do you have another?”

Amber gave him a confused look. “Try your business card, Darling. I’ll check with the bank tomorrow. It may be just a security glitch because we are in the US.”

A gleaming smile from the receptionist told him that this card had gone through safely. “Thank you, sir, please follow my colleague up to the suite where he will show you how to get the best experience from your stay with us.

With the children crashed out in bed, Amber poured two glasses from the complementary bottle of Champagne. She saw the disparaging look on Dan’s face as she took a large gulp. “Come on, it’s just a glass of bubbles, stop worrying.”

Taking his glass, he took a sip. “Just take it easy, you shouldn’t be drinking at all.”

Shrugging off the comment she continued. “You need to transfer some money into our bank account; we’ve gone overdrawn somehow.” The smoothness of the alcohol hit the spot immediately, her nerves calming and a feeling of normality returning.

Dan looked perplexed. “How much do we owe the bank?”

Amber drained her glass before refilling it and finishing that too, “Twenty-five thousand and the bills haven’t come out yet. We need the Saudi money ASAP my friend.”

Dan put his glass down barely touched. “I’m not sure that the deal is going to happen. I think that we have a slight cash flow problem at the moment but I’m working on it.” He took a breath, knowing what was going to come back at him, before continuing to fill her in on their current financial state. “We only have two hundred thousand left in the business account. When it’s gone, it’s gone, we have no more cash left to move around. We can cover school fees and maybe five months without work but after that we have a problem.”

Amber’s initial calmness evaporated as quickly as the ice cubes in her newly poured gin and tonic.

“What do you mean the Saudi deal isn’t happening? My business is reliant on that cash, you said that it was a done deal. Bloody hell Dan! You need to get something going, and fast.”

The look on his face spelt out that this was a far worse problem than Amber had anticipated. “The business is in trouble, the Russians have undercut us for all accounts and we only have one client left on our books.” His frown grew deeper as he watched her take another large gulp of her drink. “I wish that you didn’t drink. It’s not good for you. You are a recovering alcoholic so let’s remember that point, Amber. Years and years sober and now you’re drinking again. For God’s sake, when will you learn?”

Amber drained her glass before exploding. “Don’t tell me what I can or can’t drink. Why the hell didn’t you tell me about the business? I trusted you, Dan. I believed you when you said that everything was going well. What are we going to do?” She thought for a second. “Oh Jesus Christ, the Park Lane office! The letting company want twenty-five

grand next week and I'm tied into a contract. If we don't pay, they'll sue us for the full amount. I signed the contract and the staff I've employed will all want paying next month. That's another three hundred grand. We are ruined Dan."

He held his finger to his lips. "I only found out mid-flight, let's not scare the children. We need to figure a way around it....the house is worth at least four million."

Amber scoffed at the thought of this. "And we owe the bank that amount for the mortgage alone. We've borrowed the maximum amount available to get your dream afloat, so the house is worthless to us."

Holding his head in his hands Dan raised his voice. "What do you suggest? You like the lifestyle but it has cost us everything. The holidays, expensive food every day, shopping, country house, top schools.....how do you expect to fund it all?"

Without blinking she hissed back the answer. "Do your fucking job. When you left the secure position on the board with Universal Cyber Solutions and started up on your own, you promised me the world. You were the bloody Operations Director, Dan, with so much to lose. That's why I agreed to the gamble and it's up to you to deliver. Now get on your phone and make some deals, and while you're doing that, we are going to enjoy our last holiday while you sort your shit out." Slamming her empty glass down she headed for the bedroom.

The sun had barely risen when Sam and Alex came into their room. Amber was in the shower while Dan sat working on his laptop. He glanced up and gave them a brief smile. "Hey guys, Mum will be ten minutes getting ready. I need to do some work so enjoy your shopping trip and I'll see you tonight."

Alex looked at him. He could tell that his dad hadn't slept, he was still wearing the same clothes he had travelled in the day before.

"Dad, you promised that we could chill out and see a baseball game - you promised me."

Dan didn't look up. "Can't do it mate, I need to get this stuff done to pay for your shopping trip. Give me a break please Alex."

The kids turned to leave the bedroom. They had heard empty promises before and knew work always came first. When Dad had left the company in the city, he had promised everyone more of his time but if anything, things had got worse. "Whatever Dad. Why is it always the same story?" Alex muttered as they left the room.

His dad's face twisted in anger as he bellowed back. "Because I'm the only one keeping this family going, that's why."

A frostiness spread around the hotel suite and it lasted the entire long weekend, spoiling what had promised so much. And the days always followed the same pattern; everyone sat having a big breakfast before Dan headed back to the room to work, leaving the others downstairs in the restaurant. The children hated the atmosphere but while the credit card kept appearing, they didn't really care who was with them just as long as the shopping bags got filled.

The rainy touchdown in London didn't add to the adults' good mood. They had barely spoken since the first night and Amber's use of the mini bar hadn't helped the situation. Alex and Sam, weighed down with a new suitcase of fresh designer clothing, hadn't registered the rift that was occurring in front of their eyes, or the fact that they were seeing Mum drink for the first time in their lives. Alex had set a mental target of how much money he could get his mum to spend; one of his school friends had managed to persuade his

own parents to shell out ten thousand pounds on clothing alone. So far Alex reckoned they were up to seven thousand between them - not a bad effort and worth sharing on the WhatsApp group set up by a friend a few months ago called *'Spend big.'*

"Mum, can I wear some of these things to school on Tuesday? Everyone will have new trainers and jackets so no one will mind if I wear them." As the words left his mouth, he immediately realised that a wet taxi rank outside the airport was possibly not the best time to enquire.

Before Amber could reply, Dan snapped back. "No you can't, that's two month's wages for a normal family, and you spend it as though you have earned it. When you earn your own cash, you can do what you like with it. In the meantime, you wear the uniform that we bought for you, the rest of your overpriced clothing is for going out. Understand?" His loud words drifted out over the puddles on the tarmac as their taxi pulled up.

Sam glared at Alex; even at such a young age she realised that this was a time to stay silent. Alex just nodded. "Yes Dad, sorry."

Their cab pulled forwards, the rain splashing from the wide black tyres and onto the pavement, taking the sting from the conversation for a moment. Dan lifted the cases and placed them in the large boot of the car, despite the driver trying to help. "I can manage thank you driver. Brightwell-Cum-Sotwell please, in Oxfordshire. This is the address." He handed the bald-headed driver his card.

"No problem, sir, the price will be around a hundred and thirty pounds."

Dan nodded and opened the sliding door of the eight-seater, ushering the family in before easing his own six-foot one athletic frame into his seat. They had moved into the village two years ago, Dan and Amber quickly settling in and becoming members of the tennis club, the president delighted that two young, fit people were so enthusiastic about the sport. Dan also opened the batting for the village cricket team on a Sunday and it appeared to the locals of the Red Lion public house whenever the family dropped in for a Sunday lunch before a game, that they were the perfect family, sporty, educated, social and very wealthy. After all, if you owned the Old Rectory in the heart of the community, you must have a well-paid city job, or at least have considerable resources in the bank account. That had been the case at first although the picture today was seemingly very different.

Amber woke up with a jolt as the taxi hit a pothole and noticing that they had just pulled off the main Didcot road into the smaller lane leading to the house where rows of quintessential English village properties sat in beautifully cared for gardens, she nudged everyone awake. Dan checked his phone as he rubbed his eyes.

"I was sound asleep. I need to go into London later today, the Saudi contact wants a meeting at four thirty. Maybe we can resurrect some kind of deal. I'm taking Katie with me; we'll meet up at Paddington."

Amber rolled her eyes. "It always seems to be Katie - what about the other two guys? Do they ever get a look in?"

Her frustrated tone was lost on Dan. "Because she's the account manager for this contract while the other two are trying to get some more business flowing. Come on, you know the importance of this one; by the end of today we'll know if your company can take the Park Lane office. There's a lot riding on it."

Amber wheeled a case towards the front door. "So long as that's the only thing Katie is riding on," she said sarcastically as she unlocked the door and headed inside with the children.

Ignoring the remark, Dan went back to the cab and paid the driver. “One hundred and fifty okay for you mate? Thanks for the smooth drive.” The smell of the diesel fumes clinging in the early morning air drifted away as he picked up the last case and crunched up the gravel path towards the cottage. Looking up at the newly thatched roof he saw the first trace of wispy white smoke emerging from the elegant chimney as the log fire recently reopened in the oak-beamed lounge was lit. He couldn’t lose this place despite the mounting financial pressures; he had to make it work.

Too tired to argue, he went through into the lounge and placed his arms around his wife as she placed another log on the fire.

“Come on Amber, this is business. You know that the only people I need in the world are right here, we just need this contract to go through.” He hugged her, kissing the top of her head. “You’re the only woman in my life, if you want Gavin or Grant to come with me today, I’ll tell them. Katie will get over it.”

Amber shook her head and looked into the red flames, warmth already reaching out into the dimly lit room. “I’m tired Dan, that’s all. I’m just spouting off silly stuff. Take Katie and get that bloody contract signed.”