

0% APR – Buy Now Pay Later
(The Devil May Care Financial Package)

And other stories.

By

Jamie Gregory

Copyright June 2006©

List of Contents

0% APR Buy Now, Pay Later (The Devil May Care Financial Package)..... 3

Alter Ego..... 15

The New Mother..... 25

0% APR – Buy Now! Pay Later!

(The Devil may care' finance package).

Clyde Westerley had a dirty little secret.

It was not a drug habit, although he had freely smoked, snorted, shot and popped every narcotic available as well as peddled for extra cash during his undergraduate years. Neither was it the calculated back-stabbing of colleagues for promotion when he joined 'Westerley Construction', the family business. It could have been the uncanny exposure of corruption of competitor firms vying for Government money as part of their inner city re-building programme, whilst flaunting his own back-handers with unbelievable impunity, but it wasn't that. Neither was it the three deaths for which he had been directly responsible, the bodies now forming part of the foundations for the glass skyscraper in which he sat. One could be forgiven for thinking it must be his rampant promiscuity, the way in which he daily rang up the employment agencies asking for a temp for 'a special project', who would duly arrive and within minutes would find herself stripped and humped on his desk, or chair, or floor or in the lavatory, wherever the fancy took him. In the meantime his faithful and long suffering wife, Cordy, would be unawares of his utter infidelity, as she was forced to stay at home to 'give the children a proper upbringing' as he had once instructed her.

It was none of the above or any of the other 'sins' committed with copious regularity, which made up the fabric of Clyde Westerley's life. No, his dirty little secret was that fourteen years previous he had made a pact with the devil.

To be precise it hadn't been THE devil rather a devil. In fact quite a minor one in the infernal hierarchy but it had been sufficient for his needs at that time.

Clyde was a classic spoilt brat from birth. It was true the family still chaired the multi-million pound construction company founded by Clyde's great-grandfather. It was also true that as a result Clyde's father, when money was referred to, would describe his income as 'comfortable' whilst giving a nod and knowing smile. But this alone does not a spoilt brat make! The truth was Clyde was just plain lazy. Although one hesitates to say these days he was over-indulged by his mother and barked at by his father, with no bite Clyde soon learned to ignore the 'regimes' his father would set him. If it was 'bedtime at

9pm' it would last no more than an evening then he would get his way again. This was coupled with the fact his mother believing her 'darling' too hard done by colluded in his escapes. This pattern continued throughout his formative years up to and including his time as an undergraduate at the University of Liverpool studying Business (His father refused to pay for any other course as he told the adolescent Clyde "No-one else will see fit to employ you and if you must come into the business you had better learn something about it first!").

His first year away from paternal control and maternal support, Clyde entered his Byron-esque phase. Growing his forelock foppishly and wandering about in baggy clothes clutching small leather bound volumes and sighing a lot. Clyde set out to live the undergraduate life to the full. With a small coterie of like-minded individuals they weaved a romantic tapestry around themselves believing by looking back they were going forward to make their lives art in themselves. The truth was the philosophy behind what they were doing varied depending on how much binge drinking and the level of narcotics in the bloodstream. Naturally sex too featured highly on the agenda or 'pursuing beauty' as they would euphemistically call it.

The corresponding lack of attendance at lectures meant that Clyde and his 'chums' found themselves facing the end of year exams with the distinct possibility that none would be returning for a second year of prodigality. Clyde may have been lazy but in fact was blessed with brains, clever if not wise. The one thing that could not be countenanced was to have the parental grant withdrawn. His father had given him a large sum, much larger than the loan available to most of his peers. This had been in part a gesture of hope on his father's part that the extra cash would mean they would not be bothered by whining phone calls during term. As the summer term drew to a close and reality began to dawn, Clyde was gradually realising that some kind of remedial action would be necessary. In fact the answer came out of the blue and from a quite unexpected direction.

The university library had a section of rare works that it kept under lock and key and was accessible only to research students (read post-graduates and teaching staff). However it was known that a number of eighteenth century French pornographic illustrated texts were kept there. This cache having been donated by some anonymous donor during the sixties became a tantalising siren to many undergraduates for being kept under lock and key. Clyde overcame this problem by dating one of the assistant librarians. Despite the fact that her job was on the line if caught Clyde managed to talk his way into the restricted section by exploiting her weakness for designer clothing.

Needless to say the French manuscripts were less of a ‘tickler’ that he had hoped. Nothing that could not be bought from the top shelf of the newsagents – the ones wrapped in cellophane. Suffering a disappointment he looked around to see what else had been judged forbidden by the university authorities when a small notebook sized volume caught his eye. As he pulled it out his thought was that it must be at least Renaissance. Upon opening it he noted it was handwritten, a scrawl which he made out was Latin. The page he opened to had a number of odd characters written on it only two of which he recognised, the astrological symbols for Mars and Saturn. Flicking back to the front his broken Latin managed to de-cipher the title as “Of pacts with devils and diverse sorceries”. A wry smile broke out on Clyde’s face. The Byron lifestyle was one thing but Sir Francis Dashwood and his Hellfire Club now that might be interesting. What was more a wild party based on a bit of Black Magic theatre may be a selling point and a way to supplement income further. Clyde pocketed the book without his companion seeing and trusted to the fact that such a volume would not be in high demand and would therefore not be missed for quite some time.

He was a little slower than he would have liked in translating the book, as his Latin was rusty, however Clyde became quite engrossed in the project.

The book purported to give a record of some anonymous French magician’s dealings with one Lucifuge Rofocale described as the Prime Minister of Hell. This came as a surprise to Clyde as it had never occurred that Hell might be ordered into a governmental type system. The little book went on to reveal that underneath the PM were ministers, kings, dukes, earls and countless other aristocratic titles all the way down to local officials. Each station had a list of names of demons with ‘seals’ odd abstract drawings that Clyde gathered were supposed to be like personal signatures used to call them from the depths. At the front were detailed directions on constructing the magic circle and implements plus conjurations for summoning and dismissing the whole hierarchy of this infernal bureaucracy. It seemed obvious to Clyde that before revealing this novelty to anyone he should have a go himself just to make sure the theatrical effect worked. He found a derelict house, not difficult in Liverpool, and broke in using an upstairs room and reckoning that in candle light the ripped remains of the ‘My Little Pony’ wallpaper should be invisible and therefore not detract from the evil atmosphere he hoped to create. He had skimped a bit on the full preparations of implements. His wand had not been cut from an ash tree at dawn on Midsummer using a golden sickle but had been picked up from the kitchen drawer at this digs. It was in fact a wooden spoon with the end cut off and painted red. His ‘sword’ had not been tempered in the cockerel’s gall but was a letter opener acquired from a second hand shop. Still

he was only after the effect, he had not really considered for one moment anything might happen.

Well of course something did happen! He had chosen a local official to begin with called 'Argun' guaranteed to give the magician powers to beguile women to undress for him and to discover an enemy's secrets. Having set the whole thing up to his satisfaction and practiced all the movements and conjurations a few times he was beginning to get the hang of it when from the corner of the room just beyond the light cast by the guttering candles on the circle's perimeter he heard a man clearing his throat. Clyde nearly leapt out of his skin as a slim well dressed dark haired man stepped forward. As it turned out it wasn't Argun but his personal assistant who apologized profusely for the non-appearance of his master but regretted that he was away on other business. Clyde, despite the fact that he had not really expected to meet with a real demon, was inclined to believe the little man for two reasons. One he was only about four feet tall and the other his eyes glowed red with a sort of flickering effect. Having gained his composure Clyde lost none of this unique opportunity and decided to play it for what it was worth. He complained bitterly that he had done all the book was required in good faith and that it was quite unfair that Argun did this no-show. The little man raised his hands in horror and said that Clyde was mistaken to think that his efforts were in vain that he himself was fully authorised to grant the powers and arrange the 'paperwork'. When Clyde inquired about this paperwork it turned out that for the granting of these favours a pact would have to be signed handing over property rights of his soul to Argun after seven years duration. The little man was at pains to point out that contrary to popular belief the handing over of ones soul was a painless operation and nothing to worry about and then proceeded to inform Clyde about the exciting things he could get up to with his new powers. Clyde signed on the dotted line without hardly realising and no blood necessary just a biro with a chewed end that the little man produced with a flourish from his breast pocket.

All went very well for Clyde the beguiling of women was great but the knowing your enemies secrets was fantastic! What this gave him was the general power of clairvoyance and the ability to home in on anyone to read his or her thoughts. This made exams easy as most others had revised which meant it did not matter that Clyde had not. So passing his end of year exams secured his next grant and he saw his education out with a descent degree. This power too proved useful when taken at last into the family business. His father had given him a long lecture about not being given special treatment and that he would have to prove his worth etc. Clyde during all this picked his father's brains only to discover that the rather nice secretary was indeed providing a full and satisfactory service to her boss and promptly made his mind up, in true Oedipal style, to snatch her from under his father's nose.

In this way Clyde was able to make quite a bit of headway up the corporate ladder, impressing his father with his foresight. His colleagues did not feel the same way; frankly they felt he was both unpleasant personally with his tantrums and self-obsessions and uncanny with an ability to know what everyone was thinking. However no one could doubt his effectiveness.

The years slipped by and it wasn't until late one afternoon that Clyde received an e-mail 'From Hell' .

Dear Clyde,

Just to remind you that the seven-year lease on your soul expires on the 23rd of this month and ownership will revert to His Unholiness Argun Chief Officer in the Department of Prolonged Anguish.

We hope you have received satisfactory service from our department over the period. It has been a pleasure to do business with you.

Yours truly,

FitzArgun – (Son of Argun)

For the first time in many years a cold oozed down Clyde's spine. He had forgotten what fear was like. The hairs rose on his neck and for a moment the computer screen seemed to recede far, far away- but only momentarily. Then it rushed toward him and slugged him full in the belly winding him. He made his excuses and quickly left the office.

Cordy sat in the kitchen, it was 5 pm and she was on her second G&T. She liked to get a couple under her belt before her husband came home and complained about how she hadn't cleared up the breakfast things. As she popped the second ice cube into the glass she heard Clyde's car pull up the gravel drive, she hesitated only a moment as he slammed the front door and went straight upstairs without a word. She heard his study door slam and its echo around the cavernous hallway.

Clyde went to behind the picture, the small wall safe and in a moment had it open and the ancient volume in his still shaking hands. His translation notes he had written in the margin but his careful pouring over them for three hours did not reveal any get out clauses. His heart began to sink further into an abyss. Despair welled up into his eyes and following a wave of anger where he managed to tip over a couple of items of furniture he was over come with a deep feeling of pity – for himself.

He glanced at his Rolex it was 4 am. He had been there for nearly twelve hours with no respite. He realised his exhaustion, both physically and emotionally, and in that moment slumped down onto a green chesterfield sofa. How long he sat like that he did not know when suddenly a shadow fell across the light from the desk lamp. With a start he looked up and before his could stop it a shriek flew from his lips.

The four-foot woman in neat pinstripe skirt suit also jumped back a bit but regained her composure and managed a smile. Somehow this did not detract from the weirdness of her scintillating red eyes but she was obviously trying to make the effort not to frighten him. She apologised for appearing unannounced and assured Clyde that she had not come for the debt but to offer help. Clyde now gave his full attention.

Pulling herself up to her full height she proudly announced that a new product was now available for those clients who were coming to the end of their pacts. After some spiel about how terrible it was to be dragged off to hell at the end of seven years of having it all your own way, she said that many customers had expressed regret at how short the time was for something so immortal as a soul.

“So we decided why not give the option of increasing the loan so as to consolidate the old debt and give a few extra powers thrown in for good measure? Now doesn't that sound like something you might be interested in Clyde?”

Well, Clyde had to agree that it was, but how could this happen, what did it mean and most importantly what did it cost?

With dexterity she came and sat close to him, her heavy perfume beguiling him and as she explained he allowed her smile and obvious enthusiasm for the new 'product' to calm his nerves. It meant that a new pact would be drawn up but with a much more powerful devil, higher up the hierarchy, than Argun. This

new 'lender' as she was at pains to point out "devil is so anachronistic, don't you think?" would settle the debt and the loan would be transferred. Plus because the new lender is more powerful he can grant further powers for the fulfilment of many more pleasures and desires than the old one. "But why would you do this?" Clyde asked.

"You must understand that each devil works independently he receives commission for each soul gained so there is considerable competition between devils to win souls even off each other. This is why a few enterprising demons recognised a niche in the market for soul bartering. This way it can give extended time for humans to enjoy their hellish benefits and an opportunity for up and coming devils to win souls by making better deals than their peers. I have to tell you (she positively swelled with pride at this moment), it has created quite a revolution down there after many years of entrenched traditional soul-selling.

Clyde could see no other option and having flicked through the brochure of alternate lenders with which she helpfully provided him, a new 'lender' was selected. His name was Belezel, a duke no less, with additional powers of blighting neighbours crops (she confessed that some of the older devils had not quite got the hang of current market needs but upgrades were happening all the time), and smiting ones enemies. Clyde could definitely do with some of that. All his old powers would also be preserved.

Another seven-year deal was drawn up and e-mailed to him. Clyde even put his virtual signature on it (the small print said this was acceptable). Clearly Hell was determined to move with the times.

Clyde, back to his old self, went from strength to strength. Not only did he rise to push out his father from the business (quite literally, his father suffered a fatal fall down the staircase at home alone. The verdict was accidental, although the coroner did comment upon the strange cloven bruising on his buttocks but disregarded it in connection with the death as there was no evidence of foul play). The business too flourished and rival firms fell like nine pins, Even when one tried to frighten him off by hiring gangsters to rough him up the three perpetrators ended up as part of the concrete foundations of the new Westerley Tower that eventually graced the skies over the financial district of the city.

But the arrow of time does not stay still and unlike Zeno's arrow arrives at all destinations sooner or later. And so at the end of the next seven years another courteous e-mail arrived 'from Hell' notifying Clyde his time was once again up.

However this did not unduly perturb him as he imagined he could strike a similar deal as the last one.

His dismay was equally profound when having made tentative enquiries he discovered that under new infernal regulations only two pacts could be made for any one soul. The letter he received explained that the regulations had to be brought in to prevent 'certain unscrupulous elements' taking advantage of the ensuing free-for-all of de-regulation.

This was how Clyde found himself sitting at his desk at 9pm at the top of his glass Babel watching the digital display on the lift indicate his most unwelcome creditor on his way up to collect the debt- finally.

It is sometimes said that human beings work best in a crisis and it was at this critical juncture that Clyde had a brainwave. He dashed from his desk and ran toward the emergency stairs. He was fifty floors up and the lift indicator was still in the thirties. Jumping down the concrete steps in the icy air of the shaft he took them two at a time. level 49 ,and 48 passed him by and still he dashed down and down his laboured breath in his ears. At level 42 he heard the door bang open some floors above him now. He guessed they were now after him and the clip-clop footsteps above him confirmed the fact. Just two more floors to go, he racked his brains for the override security code and remembered it just in time as he landed on level 40. The footsteps above we closing as he punched them into the key pad. The electromagnets on the door buzzed as the door unlocked and Clyde slipped through closing the door behind him. He did not delude himself that it would hold off his pursuer for long but he was nearly at his destination.

Westerley Construction used only the two top floors of the Tower the rest had been sold off. At the time the Catholic Church had bought some floor space from him he had smiled to himself, if only they knew! When he discovered the office space was for Opus Dei he laughed out loud. The office manager had been to see him and been very welcoming showing him around Clyde saw they had even set up a small chapel for workers to pray during breaks and on days of obligation to attend mass. This was his destination.

He pushed open the polished teak door with their gleaming brass handles and fingerboards and entered at the same time he heard the door to the emergency stairs splinter and crash inward. He hoped his gamble was correct, as the automatic doorstop hissed to a close behind him the husky panting and thud-thud of hooves on carpet disappeared to a whisper. Clyde moved away from

the doors and listened to the sound of snuffling that seemed to be like a dog checking rabbit holes. A faint scratching then a howl that chilled the blood. The sound blew Clyde flat on his face however he realised then that the creature could not cross the boundary into the chapel. It seemed some of the old tricks still worked!

He was trapped of course, and morning would not see any respite either Clyde did not believe that these were the sort to vanish with the first rays of dawn, no, they had come to collect a debt and he seemed to remember that God allowed that sort of thing, this sanctuary was only temporary, however all was not lost.

The tales of selling souls to the devil is as old as Christianity and during the last couple of weeks Clyde had seen fit to do a bit of research about others who had gone before along this same way as himself. He guessed that at some point someone must have been able to outwit Old Nick and he was going to do the same or go down trying. Then he had found it, an old tale that gave the answer so obvious really he wondered why he hadn't thought of it before. There was a man who having fallen in with bad company had sought the help of the devil to make him rich and powerful. This had been granted in exchange for his soul. On his deathbed he confessed to the attending priest what he had done and the priest exhorted him to appeal to the Blessed Virgin Mary for succour. She answered and the devil was thwarted. It was the bit about dying that had made Clyde hesitate he wasn't ready to shuffle off this mortal coil yet. However, eternity was a long time and he wanted to be sure that a place was reserved for him on the right side of the fence. He would see what was on offer so ignoring the growling sounds from the other side of the door he moved to half way down the chapel where the shrine to the Blessed Virgin Mary had been erected. Clyde noted it was the usual gaudily painted plaster statue on a plinth about four feet tall in blue and white robes with seven golden stars in a tiara around a beatific face. Her lips were parted ecstatically, and eyes gazed lovingly but blind to a space where the adoring devotee would be kneeling on the leather kneeler placed conveniently before her. Her arms were down near her body but flaring out from her sides in a welcoming gesture to her supplicants. It was the worst sort of religiosity that made Clyde want to heave, but needs must when the devil drives. He almost chortled to himself but instead lay prostrate before the statue and begged "Our Lady, Blessed Mother" for his soul. This went on for some time and despite the urgency of the situation Clyde realised that he must have fallen asleep because as he awoke he realised that he was bathed in opalescent light coming from above him. For a moment he wondered if someone had switched the light on but as he raised his head he heard the melody of a beautiful song, the words just escaping his hearing. It was She!

The statue was alive! Her garments wafted gently in some ethereal breeze and the stars shone with a golden lustre around her head. The ecstatic smile, though, had been replaced with a pout and the soft eyes had hardened no longer blind but with Clyde in their sights. Then she spoke

“So Clyde, still running to Mother to pay off your debts, after all these years?”

“Holy Mary, Mother of God pray for us sinners”

“Spare me the pleas! Even I don’t have that much patience.

“ No really! I mean it Queen of Heaven.”

“I can believe that! There’s a demon on the other side of that door that’s just waiting to take you apart to retrieve his master’s property as soon as you set foot beyond the threshold. Face it Clyde you have no where else to go and you want me to get you out of the sticky stuff!”

Clyde tried vacillating but it was to no avail. He hadn’t quite expected her to be so rough he guessed that’s what happens when you believe the propaganda.

“OK,OK, I am up to my neck in it is there any way out?”

She arched an eyebrow and a hint of a smug smile played over her lips.

“You’ve been an utter wretch and deserve nothing!”

Clyde began to feel better at once. He knew these insults were a positive sign why bother telling him how low he was if she wasn’t going to bail him out? As soon as the thought flashed he saw her face harden – damn! He was a fool; she could read them of course!

“You’re right sunshine; I will be bailing you out but don’t think it comes cheap”

Clyde had gotten himself up by this time the prostration had made it difficult to plead and now he thought he was going to negotiate it didn’t seem like a good position to start from.

“What’s the deal?”

“I want your life in return for your soul. It’s a hard time for those of us in the Faith business. Everyone has their own take on religion these days no one wants to dedicate their life to it. Everyone wants ‘spirituality’ but its cheap,

superficial, no one wants to make sacrifices for it anymore. Give me the old days anytime!”

She looked almost wistful.

“Sure, sure” Clyde was getting impatient and the howling from the door was getting on his nerves. “Cut to the chase”

She pursed her lips and with snake eyes laid her cards on the table.

“We’re short of priests, convert, ordain, take over a parish and I’ll call that two legged hound off you” She indicated the door with a nod of her head.

Clyde had not expected that but thought better of replying to that effect. If that was all that was on offer then at least he would have his life and his soul.

“Can I think about it?”

“No, it’s on the table for the next thirty seconds then it goes, I go and sanctuary is withdrawn your drooling friend gets right of entry.”

He was going to have to say yes and work things out later, the howling had increased, Clyde guessed his pursuer could hear the exchange and was not happy about having a soul snatched from his jaws probably loses a hefty commission. That last thought made up his mind.

“OK, I’ll do it”

“Good boy, Clyde” she smiled for the first time and snapped her fingers. The howling was suddenly cut short.

With his oppressor gone Clyde regained his stature once more.

“Oh by the way Clyde don’t think he can’t come back if you don’t play ball. I want you to be a priest yes, but you give it the full commitment. You’re going

to have to learn a lot.” Her smile became positively malicious “But then you have every incentive to do so”

She watched him turn and walk out of the chapel. She was sceptical about this new method of recruiting. In the olden days people had come forward for the love of God, now if you didn't scare them half to death they hardly got off the sofa. But the new 'Friendly Deal' between Heaven and Hell had opened up new possibilities and certainly as far as recruitment was concerned the numbers had started looking up.

He had gone and the chapel was quiet once more. One last time the Blessed Virgin looked around the chapel, darkening, as she began to withdraw her light. It sure was a long way from those heady days when she had first started out.

The light extinguished like a door closing leaving the faint aroma of roses in its wake.

THE END

This story was inspired by an article from the London Evening Standard about two women who did take on alter-egos when chatted up in a bar. The article was written by one of them about how her alter-ego began to take over and develop a new personality of its own as the evening went on. Of course the story itself and events are purely fictitious – rather like alter-egos!

Alter Ego

I saw this programme on TV once about space and time. I remember this bit where it said that although we live in three dimensions of space there are many more. It seems the reason we don't see them is that they're all rolled up.

I can tell you the same is true for people too. At least so I've discovered. Less than a month ago I would have said that I've a pretty good idea of who I am y'know, what I'm like and so on. I once put an ad in Loot the lonely-hearts section. It was only half serious and it was my friends who suggested it, as I'd come out of a relationship of three years, pretty intense! They said it would be a laugh and help get some confidence back to go out on a couple of dates. So we all sat round a table in a pub and after about two hours came up with an ad that everyone said gave a fair idea of who I was. It said something like

'Petite brunette Barbara Streisand look-alike, 29, city legal sec, shy but GSOH, WLTM Russell Crowe Gladiator for action-packed adventures.'

I had two replies neither were it, more Kirk Douglas or Roger Moore as they look now (yeah, I know only one is still alive!).

The thing is people think they know you and even if they don't know all of you, you think you know you but sometimes something happens and one of those other dimensions unfurls then you just don't know anymore and when it begins to take over then it became scary!

All this probably sounds a bit confusing so let me start by introducing myself, at least as I was then. The name I was born with was Sarah Monaghan, I'm 32, at least that hasn't changed, and apart from having a dalek in my living room I was just like anyone else. I watched the same TV programmes, went out to the pub

with my mates, phoned mum and dad once a week (in Horley, Sussex), and bit my nails. That's about it, nothing special!

It all started when I met up with one of my mates after work. Her name is Jackie and she's a journalist. She gets to meet a few celebs and had been interviewing someone from the Big Brother house. We were both working a bit late that evening so we agreed just to have a couple in the West End before going home. There's a place I know just off Soho Square that does happy hour on cocktails so we arranged to meet there. I was early so I got both of us a drink in and a comfy sofa for two in one corner. We hadn't seen each other for a while and she had just come back from a holiday to St. Lucia so there was plenty to catch up on when she arrived shortly after.

I guess we had been there about an hour, I'm not really sure, you know how the time goes when you're lost in conversation. Suddenly the barman came over with two more cocktails and tells us that these two guys standing at the bar have bought them for us. I have to say although this isn't totally unknown it's pretty rare. I crane round to see who they are but Jackie rolls her eyes and is non-plussed about it. She's in a relationship that is quite serious and hoping it will get a bit more serious. I'm having a bit of fun with a guy I met about six months ago, mainly just sex but we go out together as a couple too now and again.

Anyway, I could see straight away that they weren't English, maybe Australian or Kiwis. As it turned out they were South African, but we learned that later. They both looked quite nice and I raised a glass and mouthed my thanks across the noise.

Jackie suggested we downed the drinks fast and move on before they moved in but I said 'no' we could always give them the brush off. So we just continued chatting. About another half hour later more drinks arrived and as we looked up the two were making their way across the bar towards us.

I don't know what prompted her but Jackie turned to me and whispered

"Look, I don't want to give them my real name so I'm Clarissa and I'm a lawyer from New York, OK!"

I must have looked like a goldfish out of water when the two of them arrived at our table and sat themselves down opposite us. But Jackie just beamed a huge

smile in their direction and with the worst accent you've ever heard introduced herself as "Clarissa, and this is my friend.." At that moment out stammered "I'm Kelly" in an accent that might be halfway between Karen from Will & Grace and Marge Simpson. "We're from the Big Apple where the hell are you guys from?"

Well that was that, we were committed to the act. They introduced themselves Paul and Don, from Durban over here on a holiday-cum- stag outing as Paul was due to be married that October. Paul was dark and Don mousy in colouring but both of them were big guys, looked like farm-hands but turned out to be in IT. So Jackie, or should I say 'Clarissa' and I both nodded and smiled thinking they must rumble our dreadful accents but they didn't seem to notice. I couldn't believe it!

I have to say this, and if there are any guys reading this I'm afraid this is true that men like to talk about themselves and like women to ask them to do so. In fact it usually takes a bit of time for men to get round to asking a girl anything about herself. So I let him go on and telling me about his work and his fiancée but despite him making out how it was all going on this year for him I could tell he was bored with his life. It was the way he seemed restless and his smile never touched his eyes. Then came the next part of the charade because his eyes did light up when he told me he was writing a book, a novel. It was some kind of gangster yarn, based in London, East - End of course all modeled on the Krays but set now. He really came alive. As he was telling me about it and I was going "Yeah" and "Suuure" in my dreadful accent I could feel this idea rising from the pit of my stomach, I swear I tried to suppress it but it just popped out.

"Honey, you know I'm a literary agent, crime's one of my things, why don't you let me have a look at it?"

I swear, even 'Clarissa' swerved to look at me gawping in disbelief, but his face, if it was lit up before, became almost radiant.

There is something about stepping over a line, you don't really know you've done it until it's too late and then anything becomes possible.

By the end of three cocktails the alcohol too was loosening us both up and any reservations Jackie had were long gone so when the two invited us to a party they were to go to we said yes straight away.

We poured ourselves into a cab and made our way over to Earl's Court to some rented property where another South African couple was throwing a soiree, I can't even remember them saying for what occasion.

In the cab I was flirting like mad, despite, or maybe because of him being engaged. His embarrassment only made me worse. I was really enjoying the

change of role, normally I am really quiet when I meet anyone new and worried about what they might think but I just could not have cared less. In fact I wanted to behave badly. A couple of times 'Clarissa' gave me some real looks and I toned it down for a bit.

The hostess met us on the doorstep and greeted Paul and Don who introduced us. As I shook her hand in my 'Karen' accent I said

"My God! Have you been sleeping in that dress?"

There was the really awkward silence as you can imagine. I just couldn't believe I'd said such a thing! But I waltzed past and into the living room. After that I was so shocked at my own behaviour that I toned it down - a lot. I thought Paul would refuse to speak with me but no! Not a bit of it he became really attentive, talking about the book and asking me about who my clients were. I told him that was confidential, by now I was feeling really guilty about lying to him and just wanted to leave. After about three-quarters of an hour I caught Jackie's eye and she came over. I told her that I wanted to split. So we make our excuses to leave but Paul and Don insisted on escorting us to the tube station. When we got there Paul asked if I really meant what I said about reading his draft novel. I tried to make some excuse about being very busy at the moment and perhaps it not for the best. But he just gave me a card with his name and mobile on it and said if I changed my mind he would be eternally grateful then he kissed me!

OK, I know you cynics would just say he was just softening me up but it was the look in his face of hope - all I can say he was being really sincere.

Which made me feel even worse!

Jackie was hooting with delight all the way back into town and I was swearing 'never again'.

That should have been that, throw away the card, London's a big place no need to worry about bumping into either of them again; so no problem!

Two or three days went past and it wasn't until I was scrabbling around for coins to pay for a group lottery ticket at work that I came across his card in the bottom of my bag. As soon as I put my hand on it, before I had clapped eyes on it my heart lurched and I got really excited. I know it's stupid but even though I knew it was completely the wrong thing to do for all the reasons that you can imagine, I also knew in that moment that I would call him again for certain. I went off to one of the unused meeting rooms with my mobile, God! if anyone had walked in on me they would have thought me mad! Walking round and round having this conversation with myself trying to talk myself out of it. But underneath was this volcano about to erupt I was this tiny figure dancing on top trying to keep it all down.

There was one moment when I could see quite clearly just how badly this could all end and then I heard myself say "What the hell!" and I dialed his number. I

remember hoping that his phone would go to voicemail then I could ring off and tell myself that I'd made the call and leave it there throwing away the card. But, of course, he answered.

He was really pleased to hear from me, he told me, and from his voice I could tell it was true. "Yeah, we'll meet up" and "Yeah, I'll take a look at the manuscript" and that was that!

When I rang off I wondered if I might still be able to stand him up but realized that after my call he would have my number now.

I was to meet him that evening; he mentioned a bar, The Glassblower's just off Regent Street.

It was on the way there that I decided that I needed to demarcate myself from myself into Kelly, so on impulse I stopped off at another bar just between Shaftsbury Avenue and Chinatown and ordered a bottle of wine with two glasses. I managed to find a table with two stools even though the place was filling up rapidly with post work drinkers. I loaded up both glasses and drank from one "That's Sarah" then I moved over to the other stool took a sip and in my mock accent said "And, this is Kelly, darling!"

This became my little ritual each time I changed into her and before each meeting with Paul, it seemed necessary not just to slide into role but to make it a definite change. I think even then I felt worried that the boundaries were becoming blurred.

Paul was already there when I arrived and as soon as I sat down he drew out a folder and handed it to me. I told him I would take it and read it but asked him to outline the story. He didn't need any more prompting. I've read a few crime novels so I'm not ignorant of the genre. To be honest from his description it sounded pretty cheesy and later when I did read it; well let's just say – 'The Long Firm' it ain't!. It was the story of a rising star in the East End gangland circa 1950's but in modern times if you get my drift. The main character Mickey Halliday (see what I mean?), a general low life with ambition works his way up double-dealing and shooting everyone in his way until he becomes 'The Daddy'. It's all testosterone, drugs and vice girls you probably got the picture already.

By now I'm in full Kelly mode and in no mood to be my usual nodding quiet self so I tell him what I think, what I really think. I could hear myself speaking but the words weren't mine, not my usual vocabulary at all! I tell him he's broken the cardinal rule not to write about something he knows nothing about and it's obvious he knows nothing about any underworld let alone the London one of the period. So Kelly starts taunting him and he gets wound up. He doesn't say much now that his crest has fallen but his look is dark. I/Kelly feel exultant like I've really achieved something. So I ask him, as he talks about the drug scene if he's ever tried any he says some grass and ecstasy a couple of times. No! Certainly not dealt it. Then there are the prostitutes that Mickey regularly sleeps with what about that. He rolls his eyes and shakes his head.

He's mad and I think any moment now he's going to blow me out, this mouthy bird who is ripping apart his 'baby' but there's no response. So I say to him

"Well, don'cha think ya should try it honeeey?"

He looks me square in the face "All right then."

I'm on this roll, don't miss the beat "Well let's go find one" And we get up to leave the pub.

I can't believe what we are doing but I feel in charge, this is my protégé, it's like I'm teaching him about real life but I know nothing about this side of life either, so who's in charge?

I know exactly where to go, some phone boxes near Piccadilly Circus full of those cards with 'Busty Blond 18 and new in town plus phone number. Every kind you can imagine. The fact that she's probably 29, with dyed hair and press-ganged from Romania is not mentioned.

"Ring one," I challenge him folding my arms keeping the door open with my body as he clutches the receiver.

"Which one?"

Now I roll my eyes like some life-weary know-all and pull one at random off its blu-tack dot and give it to him.

He calls and gets an answer almost immediately I can hear the details. What he wants, the cost, where to go, the voice on the other end does a practiced selling job of the merchandise and we're off through the back streets of Soho. The door is between two shops an intercom with one button with 'Press' in black marker ink. I put my hand over the button and look him in the face.

"When you done this, you can right about it, y'see?"

He looked at me, I swear like a kid about to take part in his first school play that wants to do it but needs his confidence boosting. I press the button and he's buzzed in.

"Will you wait?"

"Ah-ah!" I shake my head "Call you tomorrow".

After he went inside and closed the door behind him I went to a cafe a bit further down the street mainly to stop shaking and to collect myself together. I am my old self again. This may seem lame but I didn't feel guilty about what I was doing it was as if it was someone else doing and saying all this, like Kelly was real and temporarily in control. And to be honest, for the first time, despite myself I quite liked her. She scared me! But she was sure interesting to be with!

I call him the following day during my coffee break, he's with Don and they're sightseeing in Windsor. He can't talk but we arrange to meet that evening in a bar near the British Museum.

After doing my little ritual I go to meet him and this time I'm the first to arrive. I wondered what mood he was in but Kelly was clamouring to keep up the pressure. "You have confidence in what you're doin' an' he'll have confidence in it too". So that's that then!

When he comes in Kelly gives him the smile the teeth the whole personality. He's smiling, looking a bit sheepish but otherwise seems none the worse for the experience. I ask him about it and he says the sex was crap but he's in love with the idea of the seedy underground thing. I congratulate him and he's lookin' at me like he wants to know what next. A puppy dog eager to get on with his training. I tell him the excitement he feels is the same as Mickey's when he does his business; he's beginning to understand his motivation. He nods and goes into some long spiel about doors opening for him into his characters how they're coming alive for him. I know what he means.

"So let's go a bit steeper, the point about being a reckless gangster is, well...being reckless. Wanna try heroin?"

It wipes the smile off his face but I tell him not to go chicken on me, this is research, this is his career what he wants to do for the rest of his life and anyway no-one gets hooked on one hit. He takes a bit of persuading but he eventually goes for it.

I'm on a roll again, I feel hot excitement, and I've never felt so much in control, like I can make him do anything. There's a tingle between my legs.

Quarter of an hour later and we're hanging around the corner of Oxford Street and Tottenham Court Road just opposite Centrepont trying to catch the eye of one of the hoodies hanging around there. We make contact and he goes over, there's a bit of a wait then he comes back and Paul goes off with him. I feel a pang of fear, what if he's mugged? But in ten long minutes he's back with his plastic pouch. We get a cab back to the hotel. I tell him for this its better if he's 'at home' so he can crawl to bed when he's finished. I go to the shop and get the tin foil, straw, matches and night light candle. He asks me if I'm going to join him but decline say someone has to keep her wits about her to look after him and make sure he's OK.

He chases the dragon and his eyes don't see me anymore even though they're open. I wait about a half hour then, as he's on the floor put a pillow under his head and a blanket over him. I get rid of the remains down the toilet and put the used equipment in my bag to dispose of on the way home. Putting on a bedside lamp, I switch on the TV, flick off the main light and pull the door too behind me.

The next night I come round to his hotel and we have sex. It's good.

He tells me he's going back home in a couple of days but there's time for one more 'outing'. I've already worked out what it will be and this time there will be no coming back. This will be his secret life; he'll never be the same again, not quite.

"Hold up a bank"

"Are you mad?"

I pass him back the cigarette and flick the ash from my pillow. I don't mean make off with the cash just make the teller put money in the bag and then split. It will be over and you'll be out before anyone can hit the panic button.."

"And then what?"

"Then you fly home. Look ain't about taking money or getting anyone hurt just so you know what it's like to hold up a bank and demand money. All you have to do is wear a baseball cap and pass over a note saying you have a gun and to hand over the cash. You don't even have to show any weapon."

The moment's hesitation was all I needed to keep going. I knew he was thinking about it and I made it appear like it was so easy and I would have a car nearby so he could run like hell and we could drive off and then one last fling before he went back to his 'normal' life.

It was settled for the next day. I called in sick to work to be honest I was feeling ill with nerves anyway. We would be driving east to make our 'heist' where else? Having cleared out my car I passed it through a car wash and with my cover story for Paul about it being hired went and picked him up from outside St. Luke's on Old Street. From there I drove down Commercial Street to the Highway and out to East Ham. We cruised the High Street and I saw a likely target a building society. It was nine forty-five and still quiet.

"Remember, don't wait for the money just deliver the note and when the money has been put into a bag just split. Probably won't even get reported, anyway that's not what it's about OK?"

Paul was breathing hard but nodded. We drove off the Main Street and I found a place to park that looking on the map gave us a clear exit so he could jump in and then we could be off back to his hotel. I was beginning to tire of the butterflies in my stomach and was looking forward to dumping Kelly once Paul was gone. It was fun but her sell-by date had passed and I was craving my old life back.

I watched him go back to the Main Street in the wing mirror. It had been fun but now it could all be put to bed. Looked like Paul had enjoyed it too and he could go face his bride and their future together with this under his belt. I guess in our dotage we could both look back at this time, something we had shared with no-one and no-one would know, at least from my lips. I switched the radio on the Scissor Sisters' Comfortably Numb calmed my nerves and I must have drifted off into some kind of reverie.

It was the sound of hurried footsteps approaching behind me. I didn't have time to look before my door was pulled open and Paul stood there, cash bag in hand, he was breathing heavily and his face was red.

"Move over!"

"What the hell..?"

"Just move over"

I was mad, what was he doing with the cash bag the fool!

"No way what the hell did you bring that for?"

Suddenly I saw the gun in his other hand, he raised it and pointed it straight at me.

"Just move over, I'm driving."

We sped away, I had to give him directions, it was surreal; a gun lay between his legs, I had a bag spilling cash between my legs and an A-Z in my hands in the passenger seat.

"Where the hell did you get that from?"

"I had some adventures of my own, there's a change of plan"

"Shit we're in big trouble now"

He just grinned

"Do you realize what you've done?"

"Crossed the line and you with me too Kelly or whatever your name is?"

He just kept grinning stealing sideways glances at my face.

"What do you mean?"

"I followed you home the other night, you were sitting in the cafe when I finished with the call-girl you didn't even see me but I saw you go and I followed. I know where you live and anyway your accent stinks. It keeps changing; where you from really?"

"Sussex" I confessed

"Not any more"

"What do you mean?"

"You're Kelly now and you're coming back with me"

I had had enough the bile rose in me

"You're out of your mind, you get out of my car, take your money I never want to see you again."

"No, I've made sure you can't go back Sussex- girl. I left your baseball cap back there it has both our fingerprints on it. It's all right I wanted it to happen, all of

it. This is the life I want now and it's you I've got to thank for it. "Without you I would have only half-lived but now, together, it's going to be perfect!" His grin turned my anger into fear. I didn't know what to say and then underneath a feeling of pure relief swept over me. It was Kelly the plan had worked. I thought I was going to dump her but somehow, behind my back, the two of them had conspired to dump me.

Kelly and Paul drove to Waterloo station via Sarah's home where Kelly picked up a few clothes and Sarah's passport. Kelly boarded the train for Paris. Paul gave her a passionate kiss and a hug; he gave her money to buy a plane ticket for Johannesburg, he would meet her there.

Kelly settled back into her first class seat as the train pulled out of the station, what a week! The waiter came over.

"Complimentary glass of champagne M'am"

"Sure thing honey, only make sure you leave the bottle."

THE END

This is a re-telling of an old English folktale, probably from the 19th Century. It seems like the kind of morality tale used to frighten children into behaving but somehow the build up to the final image produces something really quite scary.

The new mother with the glass eye and the wooden tail

Once upon a time there were two children a boy and a girl who were always good and well behaved. One day they were out playing when they went over the brow of a hill and saw a little girl outside a Romany caravan. The little girl took out a violin and began to play. As she did a little man climbed out of the instrument and danced a jig. The two children were so entranced that they begged the gypsy girl to give them the violin but she said "Oh no, only children who are really naughty can have this violin". The two responded that they could be naughty and they went back home and began to misbehave. They refused to put their toys away and made a terrible mess in the nursery despite their mother's exhortations to clear it up.

The next day they went back and again the little girl played the violin and the little man climbed out of the instrument and danced the jig and again they begged her to give the violin to them. But she laughed when they told her what they had done and she said "Oh that's not very naughty at all! You will have to do better than that!"

So back they went and they screamed the house down and fought with each other and their mother was beside herself what to do. Finally she turned to them with a grave face and said "If you keep on this way I will have to go away and you will get a new mother; one with a glass eye and a wooden tail" But the two children could think about nothing but getting their hands on the violin so they just carried on and back they went to the little girl who again laughed when they told her what they had done. "Oh you must really be very naughty if you want to have my violin."

So back they went and this time they smashed the plates and threw their dinner all round the room. The mother sobbed and pleaded and finally she said "Now I must go away and you must have the new mother." But the two hardly heard what she said so fixed where they on that wonderful violin.

This time they ran back convinced they would not be refused. But when they got to the place the little girl with the violin and the Romany caravan had gone.

Now they remembered what their mother had said about the new mother and they grew terribly afraid to return home. They stayed out all day until early evening when it began to grow dark. Finally they had no option but to return home. As they approached the cottage they could not see any lights on inside, but as they drew nearer they could hear someone, the new mother, rocking in the rocking chair. They stood on tiptoe and peered in to the dark kitchen and saw the firelight glinting off her glass eye and heard the thud, thud, thud of her wooden tail.

THE END