

HEAVEN'S DEVILS



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‘First six months – they’re the worst,’ the longhaired emaciated man snarled. He scratched his crotch and belched at the same time, then sniffed his fingers before running them through greasy hair. ‘Then the next year is pretty awful. After that, the next eighteen months ...’ he made a face like someone had threatened to pull out his eyelashes and turn them into violin strings.

‘Being this way doesn’t get any better,’ Rob Walker whispered. ‘I should know. I’ve been here eight years.’

The longhaired man looked at him in surprise. ‘Thought you might be new,’ he murmured. ‘Look like you’re trying to impress them with that suit an’ all. Anyway, you smell.’

‘What?’

The other shrugged. ‘Some fancy water that might’ve cost a packet. You smell ... false. It ain’t the honest smell of the streets.’

Rob shrugged. *Alcohol and urine? You can keep it.* This wasn’t a scent he’d choose to use. It was something his aunt gave him

every Christmas, as if she was dropping a hint. If he had the money, he would have taken out shares in the company that manufactured the product. His aunt's purchases alone would have made him a fortune.

'Here, you ain't Scottish?' Rob shook his head and the man next to him continued. 'If you're Scottish you've got no chance in there.' Rob nodded. The nation had voted in favour of devolution a decade before and Scotland had become a republic. But sensing change, major employers had been displaced to England. Whisky labels were stamped 'distilled in Frae Bonny England', and Buchanan's Edinburgh Fudge came from a factory outside Skegness.

Animosities had escalated. Now there were strict border controls, economic sanctions, secret negotiations with other nations that had led to the fragmenting of the European Union, and the English had taken to calling the company who owned the oil rigs in the North Sea the 'English Petroleum Company'. Television was arranged by the 'English Broadcasting Company', the EBC. Scotland's most watched programme was now *Telefios*, the Gaelic news. War seemed immanent with Scotland, and the Isle of Wight, inspired by their northern allies, looked like they might also be building an arsenal for their own invasion of England.

The man continued: 'They have detectors. They pick up any accent. And you see the guards at the door?' He pointed with a gnarled finger at the uniformed security officer who turned, just fractionally, watching himself be observed through the corner of his eye. 'The second they pick up an accent, or when you put Aberdeen next to 'Place of Birth', he'll shoot you on sight.'

Rob glanced at his watch, bored. 'Lucky I've nothing to worry about.' He tapped his battered briefcase in a tuneless rhythm, something along the lines of *Why are we waiting?* but stopped when he realised it could be mistaken for the rhythm of *Scotland the Independent*. He looked around nervously. Lines of people were forming in front of the desks like immigration and passport control. People from all lifestyles. People like him.

His name was called. Icy fingers gave his heart a little squeeze, just to let him know they were there. A harsh-faced lady met him. She pointed to a chair. He sat down, slowly and uncertainly and handed her the forms that he had prepared. She stared at them as if attempting to see an image in a stereoscopic picture.

Her expression did not change. The icy fingers reminded him they were there, then mimicked his rendition of *Why are we waiting?* followed by a few bars of the Death March. Rob let his eyes wander momentarily. The open plan office he was sitting in had been subjected to a huge refurbishment, and in the same week, the office had announced a hundred job losses. That was real irony, when the Employment Service was shedding people.

'Says you were born in Aberdeen,' the woman said in a nasal voice. An unspoken signal passed between her and the guard.

'My little joke,' Rob replied. 'Actually I was born in Cambridge.'

'That's almost Scottish.'

'You might be thinking of Carlisle,' Rob said, but the woman had moved on to another part of the form.

‘Can you prove that you’ve been looking for work over the last three weeks?’

Rob was prepared for this. He pulled two reams of paper from his briefcase: photocopies of adverts; letters he’d written; their replies; his replies to them grovelling for work; their replies back telling him to stop bothering them; his replies threatening suicide if they didn’t give him a job; and their solicitors’ letters telling him to leave their clients alone. He had digital recordings of telephone calls he had made and DVDs of interviews he had taken.

She looked through them all impassively, reading every single word, ringing some of the companies who now threatened to sue the Employment Service if they ever heard the name Rob Walker again. She listened to the tapes, viewed the videos, and telephoned a friend of hers in the Police Service to arrange for experts to scour the tapes and confirm that they weren’t faked. Hours later, as Rob wiped sweat from his glistening forehead, she inhaled for her prepared speech.

‘Frankly, Mr Walker, you’ve not done enough to find work. Have you considered a Government scheme to help you? There’s a residential course available: *Camps for Concentration to Search for Jobs*. It’s purely voluntary.’

Purely voluntary, Rob realised was a euphemism for ‘do it or we cut your benefits’, and *cut your benefits* was a euphemism for something more physical.

‘I’ve done it once,’ Rob said. ‘It didn’t do any good.’

The unspoken signal passed between her and the guard again. He turned to see the Security Officer placing a guarded hand over his pistol.

His shoulders sagged, as though a death sentence had been

passed on him. Warily he pointed to his CV that outlined details of the numerous schemes he had tried, the same thing, just known by a different name. None of them had helped. They covered the same ground, taught the same skills, and all had the same cheap coffee, meticulously spooned into a Nescafe jar.

The gavel fell. Sentence was passed and the woman strode away leaving Rob alone to clear up the mess. Then he was given a police escort to the van that would take him to the secret location of the scheme.

It was dark in the van. Sixteen men and women sat on uncomfortable wooden benches in silence. The only light emerged from a frosted skylight overhead. After a while the van's engines cut, motors continued to roll. The sound of chains ground against metal and the smell of fish, oil and salt lingered in the air.

'They're taking us to bloody France,' someone said.

Rob shifted uncomfortably on the bench. 'Could be worse. They could take us to Scotland.'

'Quiet back there,' one of the wardens barked. The van immediately fell back into a despondent gloom.

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The doors opened to a blinding, glaring light. Rob felt like a mole in a disco. Before he knew what was happening, he was being ushered along windowless, sterile corridors into a seminar room. He blinked, eyes watering, trying to focus on his surroundings.

'Mr Walker,' the Job Search Seminar woman said with a beaming smile that failed to reach her eyes. 'May I welcome

you to your first day at the Residential Job Seminar?’

‘No,’ Rob said and stormed past her, snatching a buff folder from the desk, exactly as he had several times before. He opened it quickly to see if the contents had changed. They had not; still accusatory words blared at him: *Get a Job!* They might as well have added ‘You Lazy Bastard’ after them.

He sat down, looking at the characters dotted around the room. God, they were a wretched looking set of reprobates. They were mostly older than he was, another example of ageism in employment. The reward for years of faithful services in underpaid jobs was a ‘voluntary’ redundancy, and their self-esteem whittled so low that depression quickly kicked in and they completely neglected their personal appearance. They looked like students did all the time. A few Styrofoam cups had been left on a tray, and the most adventurous of the group had ventured to pick one up before sitting down.

The man next to him leaned across and held out his hand, smiling pleasantly. When he spoke, it was like looking at an excited rug. ‘The name’s Keith Meeks.’

‘Sod off,’ Rob replied pleasantly.

The woman from the desk walked in, gave a mendacious but confident smile, and introduced herself as Alison Wilks. No one paid any attention. They sat sipping their coffee. Rob glanced at his watch. They had been here ten minutes or so. He’d give them another seventy seconds to realise that they’d been duped and it wasn’t Nescafe.

Alison explained: one by one they were to stand up and introduce themselves. ‘Not bloody likely,’ Rob muttered, thanking a non-existent God that his name was at the other

end of the alphabet.

Then he cursed the same non-existent power when Alison said she'd be doing it in reverse order, because she was normally left until last.

Rob heard his name called first. He stood up and regarded everyone in the room, holding their gazes for an uncomfortably long time.

He sat down again.

'Is that all you've got to say?' Alison wondered.

'It's all that's important enough for these people to know.'

'You've a low opinion of yourself, Rob. Let's assume most people haven't given you a second glance. Perhaps one is blind. I'm sure there's a multitude of things you could tell us about yourself.'

Rob stood up with an enigmatic smile on his face. 'I'm sure there are. All right, ladies and gentlemen. I'm Robert Walker and I'm a miserable bastard. I have been,' he paused searching for the right words, "Not Employed" for eight years now, since I was twenty. The only thought keeping me sane is if I lose my marbles, my ex-wife might find a way of getting back into my life.' He stared at a woman who wasn't looking at him, and waited to catch her attention before he spoke again. 'As you can see, I'm not much to look at. About five nine, not over weight, not underweight. I haven't swindled the Government, I've just slipped deeper into debt with a major credit card, and the bank now keeps my gonads as collateral against any withdrawal I might like to make.

'I tried to convince the Employment Service that I was doing something worthwhile with my time. I wrote articles for *Country Life*; actually I only wanted to see their rejection slips.'

Someone sat bolt upright, as if the Employment Service had passed a high voltage current through his genitals. 'This isn't Nescafe,' he declared.

Rob grinned and grimaced at the same time, like being forced to eat lemon and like it. There was a warped humour in the fact that these people were performing as he'd expected. At the same time, he felt it hard to believe that they would all be broken and would become miserable automata. One thing he was sure about, and that was that he wasn't going to stay behind these bars for long. This time he was going to escape.