

CHAPTER 3

The back room at the Old Bull and Bush in Watford hosted Lucy Chen's weekly poker game. It was the kind of room that had seen things, most of them illegal, all of them interesting. The air was thick with the scent of old whisky, stale cigar smoke, and the faintest whiff of Chanel No. 5, which Lucy insisted on spritzing, *to keep the ghosts of bad luck away*.

The players were sitting around a green baize poker table, a relic from a casino that had gone bust in the eighties. The faded, shiny patches around the edges bore testament to the scars of a thousand nervous drumming fingers, as fortunes were won and lost on the turn of a card.

Above the table, the light cast a harsh, interrogative glow, as if the room itself was trying to catch someone cheating. The three chrome pyramid-shaped lamps had seen better days; one of them flickered occasionally and Lucy would swat it back to life.

The room itself was high-ceilinged with ornate cornicing, once the pride of a Victorian craftsman. It now served as a convenient perch for the local spider population, who watched the proceedings with the detached interest. The wall boasted a dark oak panelling, polished to a shine in some distant era. The panelling reached down to a deep pile burgundy carpet so plush that an archaeologist could have examined its depths and found artifacts revealing the pub's entire history.

The fireplace, a grand affair with wood carvings of lions and grapes, hadn't seen a flame since the nineteen eighties. Instead, it was filled with a collection of empty whisky bottles, a rubber duck, and, for reasons no one could explain, a single pink stiletto heel that Lucy had placed there

A small bar in the corner of the room was a masterpiece of bad taste. It was mirror-backed, with shelves groaning under the weight of single malt whiskies. Amongst the fine scotch was a single bottle of Advocaat, glowing like toxic radioactive waste in the dim light. On a high shelf was a row of shot glasses engraved with the pub's name, though over time, many fingers had worn away *The Old*, leaving just *Bull and Bush*, which seemed appropriate given the establishment's raison d'être.

We were playing Texas holdem and on the surface of the gaming table were the three flop cards face up, two of spades, ten of clubs and the queen of hearts. Each of the six players held two cards each face down. Scattered randomly in the centre were a dozen red plastic betting chips each worth five pounds.

"It's your bet, Ricky," Lucy said, staring inscrutably over the top of her cards.

She was wearing a pair of red leggings and a fluffy yellow sweat shirt. She sported a pair of pink tinted glasses and a sun visor. Her dress sense was off duty whore, the rare opportunity to look the polar opposite to her standard look of glamorous and sexy in tight fitting corsets and stockings.

At first, I had wondered why she wore the visor. But now, squinting into the glare of the lights above me, I knew exactly why. It was like a form of torture and if I sat here any longer under those burning lamps, I would break down and tell her everything I knew.

I glanced again at my cards which told me the same story they had two minutes ago. I had the two of hearts and the six of clubs. With the cards in the flop, that gave me a pair of twos. It wasn't going to set the world on fire. I laid the cards back on the table.

"Pass," I said.

Lucy didn't react to my play. She had spent too long as a prostitute, telling lies with her whole body, to ever give away anything at a simple card game.

Sitting next to me was Calbert Leon, six foot four of pure Jamaican menace, beaded dreadlocks and gold teeth, designer suits and alligator boots. Leon liked his expensive suits by someone called Ozwald Boateng. Today he wore a mustard number with a red silk shirt and boots of that same bold colour. A combination which, on anyone else but Leon, would look like a fashion disaster. On him, it looked good. In the short time I had known the Jamaican I had never seen him in anything so utilitarian as jeans.

I had known Leon for only three weeks since I had arrived in England. He had invited me to this gathering, deciding that it was a sad state of affairs for me to be sitting in my apartment alone on a Saturday night and that playing cards with a bunch of Watford's low life was better than watching drivel on TV. I didn't know whether I should feel honoured to be invited or insulted to be considered a suitable member of this group.

Leon glanced across the table at Lucy through his own dark Ray bans. "Ah t'ink you're bluffing, Lucy. You got not'ing in dat hand," he said, tapping his ring laden fingers on his two cards lying face down on the table.

Lucy's expression didn't change. It was like looking at one of those street entertainers who pretend to be statues.

"Put your money where your mouth is, big boy," she challenged.

Leon threw three blue chips into the centre of the table. "Ah raise t'irty."

Lucy's nose twitched in what I guessed was an expression of disgust. Or she might just be about to sneeze. Hard to tell the difference.

"People say you brave," Lucy said. "I think you pussy. Wah you say, Frank? You think Calbert a pussy?"

Next to Leon was Frank McGill, owner of the Old Bull and Bush. The pub was a four story throwback which had long since stopped serving pints and now catered for the hard

working executives, particularly those that required that special executive relaxation service after a hard week in the capital.

McGill was a sixty eight year old Glaswegian. Despite his age he was still muscular and strong. He was bald but sported a pair of impressive white sideburns and his bare forearms were filled with the faded blue of homemade tattoos. He had moved south at the tender age of thirty to carve out his own little empire of betting establishments, brothels and loan sharking. He never touched drugs and didn't like those that did.

McGill cast his own blue chips into the centre quickly followed by a black one. He said, "Ah'll see your thirty laddie and raise yea a tun." He glanced at the Jamaican. "Miaow."

Next to McGill was Danny Kwok. I had grown up with Danny in Hong Kong. We had been in the same Triad gang together. Some years before, he had married an English woman and returned to England, away from the danger of Hong Kong, to have children and run a restaurant. Living the dream. I had a twenty percent stake in his business.

"Too rich for me," Kwok said, throwing in his cards.

All eyes turned to the next of the group, Robert —nine-bob— Delany. Delany was McGill's head of security. That was his official title. The reality was less conspicuous. Delany was McGill's leg breaker, enforcer, general scary guy. He was five ten, slender and looked more like an accountant in his pin striped three piece suit and gold rimmed glasses. His nickname was nine-bob. The term harked back to the days of predecimalization when there were ten bob (shilling) notes, equivalent to fifty pence. Anyone from those dark, unenlightened days with an alternative view of sexuality were considered to be, 'as bent as a nine-bob note. In Delany's case the epithet was now an affectionate one. He was gay and he was ex SAS. The last person that had expressed a derogatory, homophobic cliché to his face had spent several months in intensive care and regularly set off the metal alarms when

passing through airport security.

"I'll fold," Delany said, skimming his cards into the centre. "You don't pay me enough to lose, Frank."

The play had come full circle back to me. I fingered my cards. Was a pair of twos worth a hundred quid? I had two thousand burning a hole in my pocket.

"What the hell," I said, and cast in a black chip. "I'm in."

Lucy took the deck and flipped the fourth card over, *the turn*, to join its three cousins in the centre. This card was the two of diamonds. I felt a jolt of electricity knowing I now had three of a kind, three twos, a good hand in poker. Lucy was looking at me like she knew exactly what I had in my hand and offered a thin smile.

"You not vely good at this game, Ricky," she told me. "You have big tell."

I smiled back. "Or is my tell a bluff to lure you in?"

"Nah, you not that clever." she said. She cast in three black chips.

Leon drummed his fingers on the table and then threw his cards in. "Maan's gotta know when he's beat," he said. He leaned back and watched the proceedings with the air of a man who knew he'd dodged a bullet.

Lucy snorted. "Like I said, pussy."

McGill turned a black chip over in his fingers, staring intently at his two cards. Then he seemed to make up his mind, placing the chip back on the small pile of them.

"I'm oot," he said, sliding his cards along the baize into the growing collection in the centre.

"Jus' you and me, Ricky," Lucy said. She flipped over the last card, the river card, the seven of diamonds. "Show me wah you got, big boy? Sucky sucky five dollah."

"Nobody talks like that, Lucy," I said.

"The punters love it when I do that oriental shit," she said. "Helps them get it up." She licked her lips and ran a finger and thumb provocatively up and down her column of chips. "I love you long time."

"Quit flirting with him, Lucy," Delany said. "Put the poor bastard out of his misery."

Lucy flicked off five black chips with her lacquered finger nail. They spun in the air and landed amongst the growing pile. "You got any balls, Ricky?"

"That's a bluff play, Lucy," I told her in Cantonese. "You got nothing."

She tilted her head. "Cost you five hundred to find out, gweilo," she replied, using the Chinese insult for a white guy.

"Play the game or get a room," McGill said. "And fucking speak English."

I added five more black chips to the pot which was about fourteen hundred pounds now.

"I'll call," I said, laying my twos down next to the two in the middle. "Three of a kind, Lucy."

She grinned and laid her two tens next to the one in the centre. "Same as me. But my balls are bigger."

Leon whistled. "You bin taken, maan."

"I knew you had three twos, Ricky," Lucy said.

"Were you peaking at my cards?" I asked.

"Nah, didn't need to," she said. "I figured it when you nearly had an orgasm after that two was laid in the middle. Like I said, you not vely good at this game." Lucy scooped up her winnings.

"That'd be a week's wages in the good old days, Lucy," McGill said.

Lucy scowled at him. "Wah you mean good ol' days." She stood and patted her ass.

“Still best tail in this place.”

Lucy was knocking on the door of fifty. She managed McGill’s business and ran the girls. She still had a good figure and half a century of secrets from the orient and had probably forgotten more than the younger women knew. She didn’t work much anymore but would occasionally see regular clients just to keep her hand in.

As the poker game wore on, The clink of chips and the shuffling of cards echoed off the high ceiling, mingling with the occasional burst of reggae from Leon’s phone when a message landed, and the low hum of the ancient refrigerator behind the bar, which sounded like an old man gasping out his final breaths.

I looked at my dwindling stack of chips and wondered if I should have spent the evening watching TV after all. A dodgy soap opera was the worst thing I would have been subjected to, not losing half my money to a woman in pink leggings and a sun visor. Lucy caught my eye and winked.

“Cheer up, Ricky. You’re not the worst player I’ve seen. That would be Frank’s nephew, who thought a flush meant he had to use the bathroom.” The room erupted in laughter, even Leon, who rarely smiled unless he was winning.

Lucy, ever the queen of the table, kept winning. She had a knack for reading people, probably honed from years of managing McGill’s establishment and dealing with punters who thought they could outsmart her. She leaned over the table, her pink glasses slipping down her nose, and whispered, “Poker is like life, boys. You bluff, you bet, you lose, you win. But in the end, it’s all about who has the biggest balls.” She grinned, scooping up another pot, as the room groaned in unison.