



# **CITY ON FIRE**

GRAHAM BARTLETT

# 1

‘I said strip,’ boomed the voice from behind the pistol, which was trained rigidly between Ged’s eyes.

‘Jesus. Fucking calm down mate,’ said Ged, trying to steady the wobble from his voice. ‘What is this? I thought we were sweet.’

‘You’re either a grass or a fed,’ the man said as a statement, not a question, in the faux-patois lilt that without the barrel so close, Ged would have mocked.

He glanced around, weighing up his chances of flight or fight. The basement looked – and smelt – like a disused beer cellar. The reek of stale yeast and the chill suggested that it was months, maybe years, since a jolly publican had scurried down here to change the lager.

The only door was guarded by a masked-up meathead who, by the way he held his Glock pistol across his chest, had clearly watched too many episodes of *Narcos*. Surrounding Ged were three others, all of whom looked desperate to rip his head off should he try to escape. There was even one stood under the beer-drop hatch as if, even at his most athletic, he could possibly scale the clammy bricks to launch himself out of that.

His only option was to style it out.

‘Let’s not get excited,’ he said. ‘I know you have to be careful, but we’re all in this game together and you seeing my todger, such as it is in these temperatures, might scar you for life.’

‘Fam, if you don’t strip now I swear to God, I’m going to plug a bullet right through your brain.’

Ged couldn’t allow the gunman’s anxiety to become contagious. There was no telling what the other numpties would do if a drop of adrenaline found its way into their bloodstreams.

‘OK, but bear in mind what I said about it being cold down here.’

First he unzipped, then slowly removed, his grey hoodie. He was about to drop it on the floor when a girl’s voice to his right snapped, ‘Chuck it here.’

Ged looked round, genuinely shocked. He turned back to the mouthpiece with the gun. ‘Really? Does she need to see this?’

‘You ain’t shy boy, are you?’ the gunman sniggered.

Ged shrugged. No point arguing, but to be called boy by a scrote young enough to be his son was taking the piss. He launched the top over and the girl caught it in both hands.

‘Keep going,’ said the gunman.

Each time Ged removed an item of clothing and threw it over, there was a shuffle from a different direction as if the ring of steel were growing anxious that they were running out of reasons to kill him. He strung the striptease out as long as he could until he was butt naked and shivering.

‘Happy?’ he said, his hands out in supplication.

‘I’ll tell you if I’m happy, but you’ve got some reassuring to do.’

‘Ask away mate but I promise you, I’m much better company with my clothes on.’ As he was saying this, another of the lieutenants stepped up and, with his mobile phone torch, checked every inch of Ged’s naked flesh. ‘Each to their own,’ said Ged.

A couple of minutes passed before the excruciating exercise was over

and the man with the flashlight and the girl checking the clothes grunted that they'd found nothing.

'Get dressed,' came the command.

Ged complied as quickly as his icy fingers would allow. As he zipped up his jacket, the man jabbed the pistol into his side. 'You ever cross us, fam, we won't be so nice. You get me?'

Ged stepped back and turned. 'Listen pal, if this thing is going to work, we have to show some mutual respect and . . .' He cast his hand around. 'You didn't need to do that.'

'I ain't taking no chances.'

'And what's this shit about being a grass or fed?'

'Fam, I trust you for now. No wire, no piece.'

'So, are we doing this?' said Ged.

'Sure. The brown should be here by the end of the week. You got the "ps"?'

'I don't carry money like that. Not on me, as you've just seen, but I'll get it.'

'£250k by tonight, the rest when we deliver.'

'Sure, like we agreed,' said Ged, his inner terror only now starting to dwindle.

The boss set out the terms and where the drop would happen. Ged nodded and checked some details which, as only he knew, were completely irrelevant.

Fifteen minutes later and having succumbed to the temptation to blow the thug manning the door a kiss, Ged was back on the street pacing to his next meeting.

Having doubled back a few times, stopping suddenly to look in shop windows and jaywalking the bustling high street, Ged disappeared down an alley and in through a nondescript door. Taking the stairs two at a time he burst into a room to be greeted by his cover officer, Nick, holding a Starbucks Americano and a doorstep bacon sandwich while busting a gut to stifle his giggles.

‘Just fuck off,’ Ged said as he grabbed the coffee and sarnie. ‘And stay fucked off.’

‘I’m sorry mate, but put yourself in my shoes. Or any shoes come to that.’

‘Ha, fucking, ha.’

*‘You seeing my todger, such as it is in these temperatures, might scar you for life. Fucking priceless, mate.’*

For the first time Ged cracked a smile. ‘You’ve no idea how cold it was down there. Then the bloody bird piped up. Shit, I wish the ground could have swallowed me up.’

Nick chuckled, then switched into work-mode. ‘Well, the good news is, we got it all on tape.’ Ged subconsciously twiddled his ear stud. The only thing on him they didn’t search, thank God. ‘Obviously the bad news is that we still haven’t got a nailed-on drop time. You going to be able to work on that?’

‘I reckon so. Providing they don’t make me go through that palaver again, I think I can start getting a bit impatient.’

‘Just be careful of Code C,’ said Nick, referring to the Police and Criminal Evidence Act guidance that was the bible for undercover officers.

‘You didn’t get an egg and straw with that booty, did you?’

‘No one’s teaching you to suck eggs. I’m just doing my job as your cover officer to ensure the right people end up in prison.’

‘Fair dos,’ said Ged just as the encrypted app on his undercover phone buzzed. Ged opened the screen and scanned the message, a beam lighting up his face. He turned the phone to Nick. ‘We’re on,’ he said just as his mind started to race about how he’d work this, the final stage of the two-year operation.