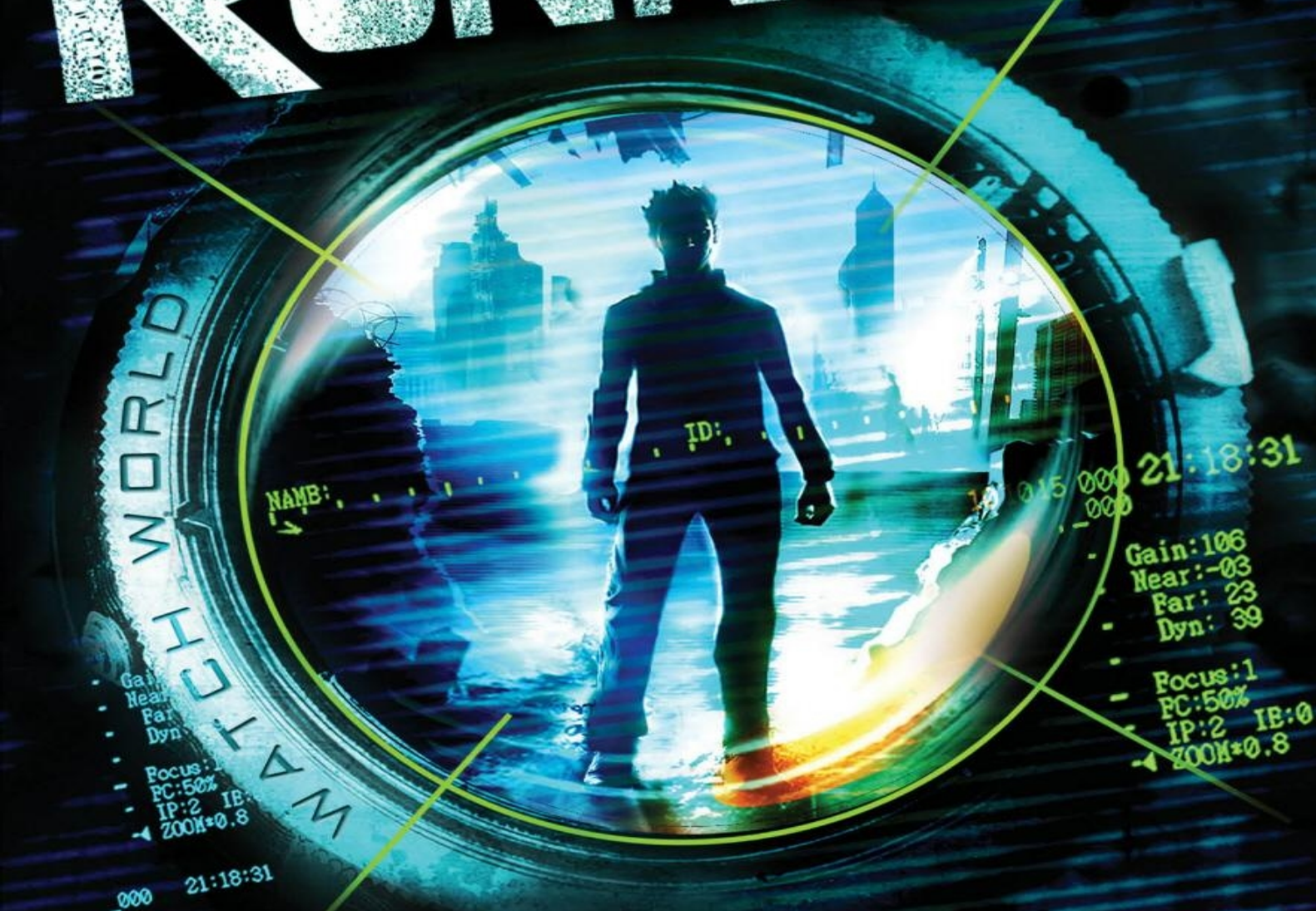


IF YOU'VE NOTHING TO HIDE,  
YOU'VE NOTHING TO FEAR.

# RAT RUNNERS



Oisín McGann

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Praise for Oisín McGann

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## About the Book

*Four young criminals. One simple task: to steal a mysterious box from the daughter of a dead scientist. They have to follow her, bug her phone, hack her computer, search her home, all without her knowing.*

But WatchWorld runs this city now. On every street are cameras, X-ray scanners, microphones. Terrifying Safe-Guards can follow you around, see through walls, hear your heartbeat, analyse the smell of your sweat.

But Nimmo, Scope, Manikin and FX, who work in the blind-spots of the city's shady underworld, are soon caught in a maze of deception, treachery and murder . . . will they make it out of the rat-runs alive?



# RAT RUNNERS

Oisín McGann

RHCP DIGITAL

*For Mags, Jenny, Aoife, Patricia, David, Nessa, and all the  
fantastic book people who make Children's Books Ireland  
what it is.*



## **CHAPTER 1: TAKING THE CASE**

NIMMO HEARD THE whistles and immediately stopped what he was doing. People on the ground floor of the tenement were warning those above. There was a Safe-Guard in the building. He looked at his watch, noting the time. Six-fifteen – two hours before sundown. He needed to be gone before seven, or he'd have to leave the job for another night. If the Safe-Guard was just here to wander around, it might take half an hour or more to reach Nimmo's floor. If it had an assignment, it would go straight to the apartment it wanted. There was no way of telling which, without going looking for it. There was no way he was about to do that. In Nimmo's line of work, it didn't pay to get noticed.

He had his trainers off, and was fitting one with the kind of raised insole you used for flat feet, the type with a lump under the arch of the foot to support it. Nimmo did not have flat feet. And he only put an insole in the left trainer, leaving the other one as it was. Putting on the shoes, he walked around until he was satisfied that the arch support was having the desired effect. Taking the insole out, he stuffed both of them into the small backpack he kept near the door. Then he put his trainers back on.

Pulling on his scuffed black leather jacket and his grey woollen hat, he slung the pack onto his shoulders and headed for the door of his dingy but well-kept apartment. A kid his age should not have been living alone, but there was no need for the authorities to know. With his lean, sombre face, tall wiry build and close-cut red hair, he could pass for older if he needed to. He had several identities to match. He was reaching for the latch when a knock on the door caused him to freeze. A flicker of thoughts went through his head. Had the Safe-Guard somehow been assigned to him, despite the rules? What then? Stay there and look innocent? Try and bluff his way past? Get out now, by the window?

Nimmo shook his head. If it was the Safe-Guard, it could see through the door. It could see his skeleton, hear his elevated heartbeat. If he'd had dental records, it could have identified him by his teeth. There was no point running. The knock sounded again. He opened the door.

Watson Brundle was standing out in the drab, faded yellow corridor. A few inches over six foot, Brundle was a narrow, angular man with wide cheekbones, dark eyes and a curly mop of black hair. He always had a restless manner, moving with a twitchy energy. His large hands held a small flat leather box out in front of him; it was a little over twenty centimetres square, the kind you might use to hold an expensive necklace.

'Hey, Nimmo. I need a favour.'

'I'm going out,' Nimmo replied.

'This is a pretty serious favour. I'd owe you a great big fat one.'

'Gnarly. Ask me when I come back.'

'No. I need you to hide this for me, now.' Brundle was sweating as he thrust the case towards Nimmo.

'You want me to *hide* something for you with that peeper downstairs? You think I'm a complete gombeen? No way.'



‘It’s nothing illegal. Not technically,’ Brundle said softly, desperately. ‘It’s just . . . questionable. Look, I got a tip-off, all right? The Safe-Guard is here for me. It’s coming to my place, not yours. Just take this thing from me and I’ll let you off a month’s rent, OK?’

Brundle owned the whole building, and rented this small apartment to Nimmo for cash, no questions asked.

‘What’s in it?’ Nimmo asked.

‘I can’t tell you. But they’re not looking for it, and it’s not illegal. Not really. Look, come on, we haven’t much time. That peeper is probably coming up the stairs right now.’

‘Six months’ rent,’ Nimmo said.

‘What? Are you havin’ a laugh? Listen, I need to get out of here for a while, just until it’s gone. And I can’t take this out with me. How about two months, OK?’ Brundle looked down the hallway towards the door to the stairwell. The elevator hadn’t worked in over a year. The Safe-Guard would have to climb the stairs.

‘How about six?’

‘Don’t be a complete sod. Three months off, and you take this right now, all right?’

‘I’ll take it right now,’ Nimmo told him, ‘when you give me six months off. I don’t play the shell game with Safe-Guards, Brundle. Nobody does, if they’re smart. So you’re asking me to do something stupid when I know better. You’re up to no good and looking for company. Six months, rent-free.’

Brundle nodded frantically and pushed the box into Nimmo’s hands.

‘Bloody hustler! OK. Take it!’

Nimmo took it and closed the door. He heard his landlord stride down the hallway. Brundle was probably hoping to hide in one of the other apartments next floor down and let the Safe-Guard go past, and then leg it out

and down the street. That was just dumb – he'd only bring suspicion on himself. Brundle wasn't normally dumb.

Having saved himself rent for the next six months, Nimmo could afford to give tonight's job a miss. Dropping his pack on the floor by the door, he slipped off his jacket and hat and hung them on the hook. As he did these things, his mind was searching the apartment for somewhere to hide the box. He tried to open it, but it was locked, and the edge was sealed with some kind of plastic resin. If he forced it, Brundle would know. That wasn't enough to stop him – he didn't normally handle something if he didn't know what it was – but there wasn't time to start trying to crack it open now.

The flat was a small two-bed place, though one of the rooms was little more than a box room. There was a living room with a kitchenette at the back, one large window looking out on the enclosed courtyard six storeys below that boasted a run-down playground and a basketball court. The bedrooms were both off to the right, with a large cupboard just to the left of the front door. All the walls were painted an anonymous beige. There wasn't much in the way of decoration – a few film and band posters, some black-and-white framed photos of London landmarks, a few ornaments lying on the sideboard and the mantelpiece. Nothing that would have told you much about the owner's personality. There was no television. The battered Weinbach piano might have come with the flat, but anyone who tried it would have found it perfectly in tune.

Nimmo looked at the box again. There are two main ways of concealing something. Either hide it where it cannot be seen, or put it somewhere it can be seen, but cannot be recognized. If you want to hide something from someone with x-ray vision, the first option is extremely difficult. He flipped the box over, looked at the underside, which was almost exactly like the top, and then turned it back. It didn't look like anything else in his apartment.

Brundle had a number of boxes like this in his laboratory next door. They held various scientific instruments that he used. This was where he spent all his time, although his living quarters were across the corridor. Pulling on a pair of latex gloves, Nimmo wiped any trace of fingerprints off the box with a soft cloth. Then he took a pair of sunglasses from the pocket of his leather jacket, which hung on the hook by the door. Nimmo opened the front door and walked along the hallway. The scientist had knocked through the walls of three apartments on this floor to build himself a large laboratory, and had sealed off two of the doors. The third door looked normal, but Nimmo knew it had a solid steel core. The two locks were pretty standard, however, which Nimmo had always thought was a bit careless. He unhooked the legs of his sunglasses from their frame. This simple disguise was a handy way of hiding and carrying two of his lock-picks.

The two locks took him less than a minute to open, and then he was inside. He had figured out Brundle's alarm code some time ago – the date of his daughter's Bat Mitzvah – and tapped the six-digit number into the keypad hidden in one of the cupboards, disarming the security system.

As he passed one of Brundle's office desks, the sound of a dog barking right next to him nearly made him jump out of his skin. He spun round to find a life-size pug dog toy sitting on the desk. It was the type that could make sounds, triggered by one of those infra-red sensors that detected people walking past. Its head was nodding idiotically.

'Little git,' Nimmo muttered, with a grim smile as his heart settled down again.

Brundle loved his gadgets, but this one was new. Nimmo quickly found some variously sized cases of scientific instruments piled on a worktable, coated in a thin layer of dust. He slipped the leather box in amongst the pile, wiped some dust off one of the windowsills and sprinkled it over

the leather-covered box to hide its polished sheen. It looked completely at home.

This was the best place for Brundle's 'technically-not-illegal' box. It didn't *look* as if somebody was trying to hide it, and yet the mixture of metal and plastic parts in the other boxes would help conceal its contents from a Safe-Guard's x-ray vision, unless the thing inside was a shape the watcher was specifically looking for. And this way, Nimmo wasn't taking the risk of hiding it in his own apartment.

This lab consisted of a long room, taking up about half of the footprint of the three original apartments. It was filled with computer equipment and workbenches; electronics tools such as soldering irons and phase testers lay among the clutter, along with circuit boards and other bits and pieces. Different types of microscopes stood along one table. Through an airlock door system was a smaller room. It was a 'clean room', where Brundle did his micro-technology work. No dirt or dust could be allowed in there. You had to wear a coverall 'bunny suit' and a mask to keep the air clear of contaminants. There was an electron microscope in there, and a lot of other expensive gear.

A picture of Veronica, Brundle's daughter, stood in an attractive walnut frame on the desk in the centre of one wall. 'Nica', she preferred to be called. She was dark-haired, dark-eyed and coffee-skinned, like her father, and pretty in an offbeat kind of way. But her looks were marred by the port-wine birthmark over her left eye and the top of her cheek. Her father was devoted to her, but separated from her mother. Nica lived with the mother.

Nimmo only knew a little bit about Brundle's work – the scientist's research was legitimate, carried out for some private client, or so he'd said. It had something to do with RFIDs – Radio Frequency ID tags – those multi-purpose micro-transmitters that were on everything nowadays, from clothes to cargo containers. They had replaced barcodes

and added many other functions into the bargain. They were everywhere, and Brundle was working on some way of using them in skin implants or something. That was as much as Nimmo knew.

Quickly resetting the alarm, he had barely slipped back out of the lab and locked the door again, when he heard footsteps on the stairs. Seconds later, he was back inside his own apartment, with the door closed. He recognized Brundle's tread, and someone with him who took shorter, quieter strides. It seemed the scientist had failed to evade the Safe-Guard.

Sitting down on the worn but comfortable armchair in the small living room, Nimmo closed his eyes, and listened carefully as Watson Brundle unlocked the door to the lab, and let the Safe-Guard in.



## CHAPTER 2: THE CATERPILLAR JOB

MANIKIN SAT ON a black-painted steel park bench, facing a litter bin ribbed with wood that stood on the far side of the path. Her eyes were on the book she held in her hands, but she kept her attention on the tarmac path that passed in front of her, following the perimeter of the small green area that offered shelter from the rush of the city beyond. The small park was surrounded by tall mature trees, and a dense hedge. A gate opened into the park thirty-five metres up on her left. The mark would come in that way. He would exit the park through the gate at the other end of the lane, off to her right. There was another gate behind her, just visible over her left shoulder. Outside that gate, in the shadow of a multi-storey car park, her two partners waited for her signal.

The patch of green was one of the few public spaces in the city centre that were almost entirely obscured from security cameras. Only one camera, on the wall of the car park behind her, watched over this space. Manikin knew that camera would not be working. Her brother would see to that.

She looked at her watch. The guy they were waiting for was late. Manikin realized that she hadn't turned a page of



her book in several minutes and did so now. It was at that moment that she saw a Safe-Guard walking down the lane on the far side of the park. Her blood ran cold – if the mark appeared now, they would have to let him pass. Just as she always did when she saw a Safe-Guard, she ran through a check of what she had on her person, in case the peeper looked over at her. Nothing too suspicious. She was wearing a strawberry-blond wig, but the watcher wouldn't spot that unless it was very close. The same went for the tinted contact lenses that made her eyes look blue instead of green. The pockets of her khaki-coloured mac were empty – so that the coat could be cast off in a hurry if need be. Beneath the coat she wore a pair of unremarkable black jeans and a grey wool sweater. Nothing too distinctive. She carried nothing illegal – except for her fake ID, which was of an extremely high quality. She was always careful about that when she was on a job. The work was dangerous enough without doing something stupid like carrying a weapon or some stolen property.

Even so, she felt a chill as the blue-grey, cloaked figure turned the glass visor of its helmet in her direction. She hated the way they moved. They were trained to glide, walking slowly and smoothly. She never saw one looking hurried or agitated. They were taught to show as few human qualities as possible, to be walking surveillance posts and nothing more. They couldn't even talk to you without permission from their Controllers. It didn't look at her for very long, but she still felt that disturbing sense they always gave you – that they could see through you, see anything you were hiding. The stare that said they could tell when you were up to no good.

Then it was gone, leaving through a gate on the far side of the park. That wasn't gone enough for her liking, but at that moment a boy her age appeared through the gate on her left, swerving onto the lane on a skateboard. His lank brown hair hung over a spotty, petulant face, much as his

baggy jeans hung off his backside. His tense expression and watchful eyes gave him away. This guy was on duty. He was carrying a cuddly toy under his left arm, a rather hungry-looking caterpillar with a metre-long skinny green body, a large red head and multi-coloured legs. It was time to go to work.

Manikin tapped the top of the bench with her right hand. As the skateboarder sped towards her, two people on roller-blades swept out from the gate behind her, coming up on her left. They were going too fast to stop. The skateboarder twisted to avoid them, but the guy with the bleached-blond hair and the ox-blood leather jacket hit the skater hard enough to knock him off the path. The spotty kid might have stayed on his feet if the red-headed girl hadn't fallen over her boyfriend's sprawling legs and slammed right into the unfortunate skateboarder. He collided with the litter bin, dropped his cuddly caterpillar and tumbled onto the grass. The redhead staggered up into a standing position, wobbled on her roller-blades, and stood on the side of the skater's knee. He let out a yell. She fell over onto him again, her elbow hitting him in the face.

'What are you doin'?' he protested. 'You muggin' me or do you, like, *normally* skate like a drunk baby? Get off me!'

Manikin was already on her feet, as the guy in the leather jacket stood up on his roller-blades, his face contorted into a snarl. His name was Punkin, and he was a short fifteen-year-old, with a pale, pinched face, premature bags under his eyes and cropped, bleached-blond hair. He stood over the spotty kid, his right hand clenched into a fist.

'Watch where you're goin', you little scrote!' he barked. 'You skatin' with your eyes open, or are you, like . . . usin' the Force? Hey, I'm talkin' to you, arse-face!'

The skater was distracted for a moment by Punkin as Manikin picked up the caterpillar. She reached for the litter bin as she walked behind Punkin, who stood between the

bin and the skater. The spotty kid stretched to the side, looking past Punkin and focusing his entire attention on the cuddly toy in Manikin's hands.

'Hey, that's mine! Let go of that! Let it go!' he cried, his voice a little too shrill.

'Sure, sure,' she said, handing it over as he stood up. 'I saw what happened. You OK? It was all their fault, they ran right into you. I'll testify to that if you need to make a claim. Are you hurt? Is the caterpillar OK?'

'Yes! No! Just . . . just leave me alone,' the skater said, obviously shaken, and holding onto the cuddly toy like a toddler meeting strange relatives. 'I just need to go.'

'Hey, this isn't over!' the bleached-blond guy snapped. 'You run into me, you're gonna apologize! You and your caterpillar both!'

'Apologize for what? You got a whole park to roll through and you hit the only other person in it? I gotta apologize 'cos you can't steer straight? That what you're tellin' me?'

'Yeah, let's 'ave it!' his girlfriend backed her man up. 'You an' that bug gonna show us some respect'.'

The girl, whose name was Bunny, was a manic-faced strip of a thing, with a wild mop of ginger hair and near-permanent look of frustration. The same age as her boyfriend, she was slightly more stupid, and just a little bit more of a psycho. She always spoke as if her knickers were painfully tight. Manikin would not have been working with either of them if she hadn't been desperate. Bunny moved forward as if to push the guy, and Manikin stepped into the way. Manikin felt a hard shape under the girl's jacket and frowned. Looking down, she saw the butt of a black plastic handle sticking out of Bunny's waistband. Manikin hid her shock well. Turning back to look at Punkin, she noted the way he held his right hand down near his waist. He was carrying as well, the idiot.

'Leave him alone!' Manikin told them. 'I saw the whole thing - you weren't watching where you were going, either

of you. You ran him right off the path! I should call the bloody police, although they've probably seen everything already.' She pointed at the camera up on the wall of the multi-storey car park. 'Go on, get the hell out o' here.'

But it was the skater who moved first. With one glance up at the security camera, he kicked his skateboard back onto its wheels, jumped on and rode away down the path.

Manikin spun round, hissing quietly through her teeth: 'You could have blown everything, you stupid bloody fools! Guns? You bring *guns* to a *switch*? Are you out of your tiny little minds? Get lost, and meet me back at the van. And try not to get arrested on the way.'

'Mind your tone,' Punkin grunted, showing her the handle of the automatic he had in his waistband. 'I know how to use this.'

'Really? 'Cos the only thing that's good for is putting us all in *prison*,' Manikin growled. 'FX and me brought you in on this 'cos we thought you had savvy. Now, if it's not too much trouble, try and get back to the van without bringing every bloody copper in the city down on top of us. I'll see you there.'

'Did you get it?' Bunny asked, ignoring Manikin's expression of disgust.

Manikin reached into the litter bin, pulling out the black plastic bag that sat within it. This was not a garbage bag - she had placed it in there herself. Inside the bag was the skater's green caterpillar. The one he was hurrying away with was a dummy, which she had switched for the real one as she passed behind Punkin's back. She nodded, showing them the toy before closing up the bag and tucking it under her arm.

'That camera's about to come back online.' She tilted her head towards the wall of the car park. 'Let's move.'

As Punkin and Bunny went one way, and she went the other, Manikin was already working over the angles. Her 'partners' had not needed the guns for the job. Manikin and

her brother had planned it that way. In a city filled with x-ray cameras and the super-senses of the Safe-Guards, even a complete moron would avoid carrying a gun unless they had a really, *really* good reason. And there was only one reason Manikin could think of.

She and her brother were about to be reseeded.



### **CHAPTER 3: GETTING REESED**

FX FOLDED HIS console as he saw his older sister approaching the minivan. The server controlling the cameras in the underground level of the car park would stay offline for another ten minutes – plenty of time to get out of there. There was a scattering of other cars parked on this level, but it was late in the evening, and very few people were working in the office block attached to the car park. FX had hacked into, and crashed, the surveillance server seven other times in the last two days, to make sure the security guards who monitored the car park were thoroughly sick of the malfunctioning system before the day of the job. Another crash would be unlikely to cause much alarm. He had also knocked out a single camera, on a separate system. It overlooked the park behind the building – and the lane that ran along one side of that park, where his sister had just finished their latest job.

Now that he could see Manikin coming towards him through the shadowy car park with a black bag slung over her shoulder, he knew it was time to go.

FX was short for his age – as his sister was always keen to point out – and his round face and the spray of freckles on his brown cheeks did little to relieve his youthful



appearance. His curly black hair was gelled into a carefully sculpted mess atop his head and his teeth were a little crooked at the front. And he was becoming doubtful that his wiry build would ever be particularly muscular. But then, FX was never going to be the muscle on any job. He was too useful in other ways.

Manikin slid open the side door of the metallic-mustard minivan, dumped the large black plastic bag on the seat and whipped off the wig of strawberry-blonde curls. She pulled the pins out of her own straight black hair, letting it fall over the collar of her khaki mac.

‘Gimme the dye pack,’ she muttered, as two figures hurried up behind her.

‘Did you get the thing?’ he asked.

‘Did you hear me?’ she asked back.

‘What happened?’ he tried again.

‘Give. Me. The. Bloody. Dye. Pack. You. Wazzock,’ she said slowly and softly, in a voice she only used when they were really in trouble.

He drew a wad of twenty-pound notes from his bag and handed it to her. Inside the hollowed-out wad was a type of anti-theft device used by banks. If Manikin had decided to use it, the job had gone badly wrong. She slipped her hand into the top of the plastic bag and placed the bound lump of notes somewhere inside. FX opened his mouth to ask her what had happened, but she cut him off:

‘The switch went fine. Punkin and Bunny knocked the mark off his feet, just like they were supposed to. Born to fall over, those two were.’ She shook her head, colour rising under the tanned skin of her face. ‘While they were all untangling themselves, I switched his caterpillar for the dummy in the litter bin. The courier didn’t cop it, I’m sure of that. He whined a bit, and took off holding onto the dummy like his life depended on it.’

‘So?’ FX pressed her. ‘What’s the problem?’

Punkin and Bunny rolled up behind her on their roller-blades, and Manikin looked sourly at them.

‘These monkeys brought guns.’

FX’s jaw sagged open, and he stared at their new partners in disbelief. The arrogant smirk hiding just below the surface of Punkin’s face told FX why Manikin had wanted the dye pack. They were about to be reseeded.

‘That’s right,’ Punkin said, drawing a nine-millimetre automatic from his ox-blood-coloured, Italian leather jacket. The guy figured himself for a Mafia-style gangster. ‘We’re done bein’ rat-runners. It takes a proper villain to pull off a job like this.’

He wasn’t pointing the gun at them, but he wasn’t pointing it away from them either.

‘The wheels rather spoil the image,’ Manikin said, looking down at his feet. ‘I imagine they’d spoil your *aim* too, if you had any to begin with. I can’t believe you’d be so stupid. Even *you*. Any scan-cam we passed driving in here could have detected those things. And we still have to drive back out. What if we pass a bloody Safe-Guard? They can see right through the van, you tick. If they spot those pieces, we’re all going down.’

Her face was flushed, but her green eyes were cold. FX could see she was in a spitting rage. He was silently hoping her temper wasn’t about to get them killed.

‘You don’t got no problem then, do yaw?’ Bunny said, pulling a snub-nosed six-shot revolver from the waistband round the back of her jeans. She aimed it straight at Manikin’s chest. ‘ ‘Cos you ain’t goin’ out wiv us. Right, Punkin?’

‘You got that right, Bunny,’ Punkin said with a smile. He crossed his arms, laying his pistol across his left bicep. ‘You two are stayin’ right ‘ere. Out of the van, FX. Dolly, hand over the caterpillar.’

‘Don’t call me Dolly!’ Manikin snapped at him, as her brother climbed out behind her.

‘What are you shouting at him for?’ FX said, thumping her shoulder. ‘You want to get us shot?’

‘Shut your face! You should be taking my side,’ she retorted, pushing him against the door of the van.

‘I’m on whatever side doesn’t get *shot!*’ FX shoved her back, nearly knocking her into Punkin. ‘You shut *your* stupid face, yeh windbag!’

‘Both of you, shut up!’ Bunny barked, switching her aim from brother to sister and back again. ‘Somebody’ll hear!’

‘Oh, well *shoot* us then,’ Manikin sneered at her. ‘That’ll cut right down the noise, won’t it, you wazzock? I can’t believe we got these clowns involved. I mean, how could working with such a pair of pissin’ lobotomy cases be anything other than a complete cock-up?’

‘Will you please stop dissing the morons holding the guns?’ FX cried.

‘Who you calling morons?’ Punkin snarled. ‘Knock it off and give us the soddin’ caterpillar!’

‘When are you going to grow a pair of balls, ya weedy short-arse?’ Manikin exclaimed, pushing her brother against the van again.

‘When you gonna develop higher brain functions?’ he roared back at her, shoving her back hard.

She stumbled, nearly losing her balance, and collided with Punkin. She would have fallen if she hadn’t caught hold of his waist. He twisted and knocked her away. Bunny pointed her gun in the air and let out an incoherent shriek. Then she fired her gun three times into the concrete ceiling, and she was almost knocked off her roller-blades by the weapon’s recoil. The gunshots were deafening in that hard, echoey space, and dust drifted down from the holes in the ceiling. Everyone stood frozen. Bunny was breathing hard, terrified and ecstatic over what she’d done.

Somewhere nearby, some microphone out on a street would be transmitting that sound to WatchWorld Control. It would be isolated, filtered and analysed. They would be

able to identify the calibre, perhaps even the model of the weapon. And if more than one mike had picked up the sound, they would be able to quickly triangulate, and nail down the location. Seconds from now, a police jump squad would be skidding out into the streets, headed this way.

‘Bunny . . . honey . . . pet,’ Punkin said softly, reaching out to her. ‘You’d . . . you’d best give me the gun.’

She looked at him in hurt surprise and shook her head. He nodded, raised his eyebrows and stretched out his hand. After a moment’s hesitation, she reluctantly handed over the gun.

‘The bloody caterpillar, now!’ he said through gritted teeth, as he pocketed her gun and aimed his own weapon at Manikin’s head.

She didn’t react immediately, taking the blonde wig from the seat first, and stuffing it into the pocket of her mac. She wrenched the belt tighter round her waist, and reached into the black plastic bag that also lay on the seat. Then she handed over the large cuddly toy. The stuffed, multi-legged creature was over a metre long, and was heavier than it looked. That was because of the wide rubber tube shoved down its body, filled with hundreds of notes in high denominations. Punkin grabbed the toy, gave a grimacing smile, and waved Bunny into the van. FX snatched his console out of the back just before Bunny slammed the sliding door shut. Punkin rolled around the front of the van and got in behind the wheel. He started the engine, overrevved it, spun the boxy vehicle round and headed for the ramp. FX was impressed. It seemed Punkin was well able to drive while wearing roller-blades. Not bad for a guy who was still just a kid. He probably did a lot of joy-riding.

Manikin was already striding towards the stairwell that led up into the office building beside the car park. Going out the front, onto the street, would be a really dumb move about now. They’d have to find another way out. The police

would be here in minutes – she could hear the sirens in the distance, getting steadily closer.

‘Back to square one,’ FX said as he caught up with her. ‘Should have known they were going to reese us. Bloody trolls.’

‘We had to take the chance,’ she replied. ‘We’ve only got a few days before Move-Easy comes looking for us to make our next payment. I just never thought those clatterheads would be thick enough to bring guns. They probably won’t get a hundred metres down the street.’

Her phone beeped and she took it out of her pocket, looking at the screen.

‘I dunno,’ FX grunted. ‘They’ve managed to stay free so far. Must be blessed with some of that supernatural good luck reserved for fearless idiots.’

‘Yeah, well, *we’re* not, obviously,’ Manikin said as she pushed open the door to the stairwell. She held up her phone so that he could see the screen. It was a spam email, offering excellent deals on a new drug that treated fungal infections. The email would have been received by hundreds of thousands of people, but only those who worked for the gangster known as Move-Easy would recognize the summons for what it was. She gave her brother a bitter grin. ‘Looks like he’s calling us in.’

‘Jeez, we’re just not getting any breaks, are we?’

‘Well, I did manage to pinch Punkin’s wallet when I bumped into him,’ Manikin replied, smiling as she held up a fold of leather.

‘Not bad.’ FX smirked. ‘But wait’ll you see what I’m going to do to his MyFace page. You’d be amazed what you can do with imaging software and a few pictures of farm animals . . .’



## **CHAPTER 4: THE PEEPER**

NIMMO HAD NEVER been tracked by a Safe-Guard – he was too young to be listed on the citizens’ register – but he had heard from enough people who had to know what it was like. Right now, right next door, Brundle was expected to go about whatever he had been doing as if the Safe-Guard wasn’t there. Every action he took, every little movement or decision he made would be recorded by the stranger in his home. Any radio station he listened to, any television programme he watched, anything he ate or drank or smoked, any product he used, anyone he spoke to on the phone or contacted online, any website he visited, anything he said out loud or wrote down would be studied by the Safe-Guard and its supervisors in Control. And it would all be analysed in great detail by the massive surveillance system that was WatchWorld.

If Brundle wanted to go to the toilet, the peeper had the authority to stand there and watch him doing his business. Once a Safe-Guard was assigned to you, they could observe you until your time was up and then they moved on.

If you refused to let them into your home, you could face a ‘Life Audit’. And nobody wanted that. Nimmo listened to Brundle moving about in the lab. It must have grated at the



scientist's nerves to be followed around like that – he was reluctant to talk about his work, and only put up with Nimmo being in the lab from time to time because Nimmo was even more secretive than he was.

Having a Safe-Guard next door had put Nimmo on edge, and he couldn't stay still for long. Feeling an urge to get some fresh air, he stood up and opened his front door, stepping out into the hallway and closing it behind him. His apartment was at the end of the corridor, near the door that opened onto the stairs leading to the roof. Opening this door, he started up the steps and then slowed and stopped. His head was just level with the top of the stairs, and he could see the thin line of daylight under the door leading out onto the roof. A shadow passed across the sliver of light. Someone was on the roof.

There was a way on and off the roof without coming through the building. Nimmo had made sure of this before moving into the apartment. You risked being spotted from the street, but whoever was up there now had not come past his door – he was sure of that. So it had to be someone who was trying to get in without being seen. The door at the top of the steps was solid, but would be no obstacle to anyone who was good with locks . . . or a team of coppers equipped with a battering ram. Nimmo made his way slowly down the steps and back to his apartment. He'd moved to this building to avoid being noticed. Now, all of a sudden, everyone was taking an interest in the place.

Closing the door of his apartment, he wondered about the intruder on the roof. Nimmo had enemies, but he was pretty sure none of them knew where he lived. He was very careful about that. Did the intruder know there was a peeper here? Probably. Were they interested in Brundle too? Nimmo would prefer it if they were. It could just be some burglar trying his luck. But if it was Nimmo they were coming for, he could make for the front door, go out one of the two windows in the apartment, or fight it out here if he