

## Smokescreen

Richard was a good kind man; He was reliable; rarely told a lie, and had only once been in trouble with the police. As a teenager he had been the passenger in a stolen car. He had been charged, fingerprinted and DNA tested, but all charges were dropped once it became obvious that he was totally innocent. Even at that young age, he had been so embarrassed by the event that he dropped his group of friends, (one of whom had taken the car without permission.) He had nightmares about the incident for almost a year, and it took a long time before he felt able to gradually begin socialising again.

Now, fifteen years later he was married to his childhood sweetheart Olivia, and as an engineer, earned enough money to keep her and their beautiful daughter Maisy happy. They lived a simple but happy life. Most evenings after putting Maisy to bed, Richard and Olivia chatted, listened to music or watched tv. Each weekend they would take a picnic and go out walking in the local countryside. Once a month they would finish off the weekend with a takeaway dinner. The couple saved what they could each month, and once a year went on a short break to Cornwall. They enjoyed their simple but full life.

Richard had had a difficult upbringing, being the son of an alcoholic father, and mother who suffered from extreme anxiety. He had seen and experienced many things in his young life, including domestic violence and poverty. As a child He had spent many an hour sitting outside his dad's local pub, with nothing to eat but a pack of cheese and onion crisps for dinner. Considering his background, he had grown into a lovely caring young man, who volunteered with vulnerable youngsters at the local football club. He wanted to show them that whatever your background or upbringing, you could make something of your life and be an upstanding member of the community. If he saw a youngster struggling, he would go out of his way to find out what was going on. He had even been known to buy football kits for lads who had no way of buying their own.

Richard wanted to be the good parent that he had missed out on, and both he and Olivia were just that; very good loving parents who knew how to set firm but fair boundaries.

One evening Richard got home from work, threw his coat onto the hook inside the front door and shouted his normal greeting; 'I'm home'.

Maisy toddled towards him calling 'Da Da, Da Da.' Richard picked Maisy up as he did each evening, and swung her around in the air. He loved the sound of her giggling. Livvy announced that she had some exciting news. She made him a cup of tea and as he sat on the floor playing with Maisy and her soft ball, she broke the news that she was expecting their second child.

Richard should have been delighted; however, he had that day been given the devastating news that he was being made redundant with immediate effect. He had no idea how or when to deliver this bombshell to his happy wife, but today was definitely not the right moment. That right moment never did arrive. He had no idea what to say or what to do. He did not want to upset Livvy whilst she was so early into her pregnancy. She had already miscarried a baby which had devastated them both and he was determined to take no chances this time.

For three weeks Richard left home at 6.30am as usual. He wandered the streets and spent hours in the local library using their computers to search for work. As the days wore on he began to feel more and more anxious. He was so stressed that he bought himself a packet of cigarettes. His first in ten years, but he reasoned that one or two cigarettes would calm his mind. It wasn't his normal newsagent; he didn't want to go anywhere he would be recognised. He didn't want anyone to ask

why he wasn't at work, or why he was buying cigarettes. As he paid for the pack, he couldn't help noticing the huge wad of notes in the till.

The days turned into weeks. The mortgage was due, he had no money, he still couldn't tell Livvy. He could feel the panic rising through his body like a tidal wave.

The morning after that first panic attack, Richard had hardly slept. He left the house in the dark at 6am, earlier than normal. He wrapped a scarf around his face, picked up a banana from the fruit bowl, placed it in his jacket pocket and headed across town. He was so worried about the mortgage payment and unpaid electricity bill. As the thoughts repeated over and over in his mind, an idea suddenly shot across the top of them. He didn't even question it. It came from nowhere and appeared to be the only solution to his problem.

Smoking a cigarette to calm his nerves, he flicked the end onto the pavement outside of the newsagent and walked calmly into the shop just as it was opening. Quietly but firmly, he instructed 'Hand me the money or...' He indicated the gun shaped bulge in his coat pocket with a flick of his head. And that was how easy it was.

The local newspaper ran a story the next day 'Shopkeeper robbed at gunpoint'. Olivia saw it first. 'Look at this Richard, this is only two miles away. It is awful. This shopkeeper was held up at gunpoint and two thousand pounds was taken. That poor man.'

Richard read the article and scoured it for any sign that they knew who the criminal was. He reached the part that read 'CCTV footage is being examined' and 'Police suspect local criminal' it went on to say that there was a video of the gunman walking away on foot, so he appeared to be local to the area.

After the initial panic, Richard managed somehow to calm his racing mind. He had taken a phone call that day from the human resources department of his old company who said that they were of course sorry that they had made him redundant, and whilst they couldn't offer him a permanent job, they did have some work to offer him on a temporary basis. It was even five pounds an hour more than he had been earning before. By focussing on the idea of the new job due to start a few days later, Richard was able to push down the thoughts of his terrible deed. When it did surface through his positive thoughts, he became adept at justifying his actions 'Anyone else would have done the same. It wasn't even a gun, it was a banana for God's sake, I don't know what all the fuss is about.'

Richard started his new job. He was so thankful to be back at work instead of roaming the streets trying to kill time. He was so relieved. No more lies, no more making up stories about what they had talked about at work. Now he had real stories to tell again. He began to feel mentally stronger and calmer. He started planning for the new baby. He and Olivia went to buy paint to decorate the nursery. Things were finally returning to normal.

Returning from work one evening, Richard picked Maisy up and swang her around and around in the air. As normal she squealed in delight. Olivia laughed as she walked into the hallway 'I am so happy to see you doing that again, you haven't done it for a while. I was getting worried about you.'

'Oh I'm fine darling, I just had a few things on my mind with the responsibilities of bringing a new baby into the world.'

'I understand, I have been a little worried myself, but Maisy was such a good baby, I don't envisage any problems with another little one. We may have to cut out our monthly takeaway, but we will be able to manage I'm sure. How was it today?'

'We had a bit of a laugh. Some of the lads set up a sweepstake for the football so they were all taking the micky out of each other about their teams. Tom the old boy twisted his ankle so he will be off for a few days. We had a new order come in so there is plenty of work to keep us going. I may even be offered some overtime next week. How about you, what's your news?'

Olivia was stood at the sink peeling potatoes. 'Well, the biggest news of the day is that man who was held up at gunpoint has died. It turns out that the night of the robbery he had a heart attack. He has been in hospital since it happened apparently but died today. If they ever find the person responsible, he will be charged with manslaughter.' Having her back to him, she did not see the colour draining slowly from his cheeks. His legs began to shake and he sat down heavily at the kitchen table.

'Oh God, how awful' he could hear the words uttering from his lips but his mind had gone blank. He simply couldn't think straight.

Olivia went on 'They have now released the CCTV footage, but it is hard to see a face, as it was covered with a scarf. All you really see is him dropping a cigarette and going into the shop, so not a lot to go on. I reckon it must have been a druggie needing money for his habit, but that poor man, and his family. He had two young children as well.'

Richard could hear the words, but could not understand what she was saying, it just wouldn't sink in.

Over the next hour or so, however hard he tried, Richard could not stop thinking about what he had done three weeks earlier, or the consequences had he been caught. He would have gone to prison and lost his wife and daughter, as well as the new baby. It went round and around his head creating ever expanding circles like the repetitive pattern of skates scratching into ice. He could not stop the thinking. 'I should confess to a Priest; this is driving me mad.' But he could not risk telling anyone, not even a man of God.

Richard went into autopilot. He bathed Maisy and put her to bed. He ate his dinner but hardly tasted a thing. Olivia asked once or twice if he was ok. He reassured her that he was just a bit tired. He washed the dishes and put them away, then looked at his phone to see if there was any more information on local social media, but all he saw was a short clip of very grainy footage of a man with covered face dropping a cigarette and entering the newsagent, then walking out again a minute later. He repeated to himself over and over again 'Calm down Rich. No one can see It's you. No one even knows that you smoke. You would never be suspected, not in a million years.'

He distracted himself by switching on the television. It was a programme he normally enjoyed, a documentary showing criminal investigations leading to prosecution. He had just seen a clip where the police had received DNA results from a cigarette end which had been discarded at the scene of a crime. The police had a record of the criminal's DNA from a previous incident several years previously. 'Oh shit.....' he tried to convince himself 'No, I am worrying for nothing'

As he angrily pressed the controller's "off" button, there was a sudden very loud bang on the front door. Maisy awoke and screamed '**Daddy!**' which was followed by a male voice bellowing 'This is the police, we know you are in there. Open the door.'