

The Falcon on Sunday

Fighting crime is a seven-days-a-week job...

Jim Peregrine was glad to be home. The crazy events of two months ago – in Berlin, the Caribbean, South Africa, Moscow; the plane rides, car chases, combat, all to defeat a deadly terrorist attack – seemed a long time past. Calm had returned, and the various governments had kept to the media cover story – a suicide bomber had blown himself up prematurely in a thwarted terrorism plot. With one exception.

Somehow it had leaked out that an Englishman had been involved. His identity wasn't known; only his nickname. All he had left behind was a business card, blank but with a printed drawing on it. The story had gone wild in the media. JP didn't mind. He was too busy to care. And the story had eventually petered out. He had bought a new home with the proceeds from the job, a big house overlooking St James's Park. It was to be his new headquarters. It was within easy reach of everything London had to offer; close enough to his friend Charlie Melton at MI6; and he could be at Heathrow within an hour, where his Learjet crews rotated on permanent standby.

Today was Sunday. He had been to dinner with friends at Greenwich, and was driving home in the Jag. Heading for Vauxhall Bridge, he saw the supermarket was still open and he needed some gin anyway. The store was empty apart from two people behind the counter. One was a girl, late twenties, in jeans and a blouse, her long black hair reaching almost to her

waist. The other was a man, older, tired, bald, his reddened face still flushed with anger, his arms trying to comfort the girl. She looked up. 'Oh, Jimmy.'

She ran out and put her arms around JP in a quick embrace. 'Thanks for coming. I'm so glad...'

'Hey, Parvie,' JP said giving her a hug. 'What's up? I got the message.' He could see she'd been crying. 'What's going on?' She stepped back, took his hand firmly and led him over. 'Father, this is my friend, JP. Jimmy, my dad.'

'A pleasure, Mr Jilani,' said JP, as the two men shook hands.

'Please, you must call me Azim.' JP smiled. 'Thank you for coming. Parveen, close the door and lock up. We'll go upstairs.' The girl quickly shut the store and led the way up to the flat above.

A tea was made, some niceties exchanged, a comment referring to when Parveen and JP met at university. Then Azim spoke. 'JP, I have been in business in this country for almost 40 years. I have worked hard all my life, I had nothing at the beginning, now I own four stores in South London. I do well, I have raised a beautiful daughter alone since her mother died when Parveen was 10, and my son, who is now in Karachi. I have never had trouble like this before. Never.'

'And it happens every week now,' added Parveen. 'Every weekend.'



'Yes,' said Azim. 'They're just thugs. Usually three, sometimes four come in and demand the money. One week it's £300; the next £400; whatever they feel like. Today they took £550. It started late one Saturday evening, they smashed counters, pushed me around, said this is now their area, and for me to stay and keep my shop I have to pay them. I refused, and that's when the violence started. Of course they took out the CCTV. The next week they roughed me up again.'

'Have you seen any of them before, do you know them?'

'No,' said Azim. 'They're from eastern Europe. Russians I think maybe,

they're just horrible men. The head one is called Vladimir. My daughter came back to help; tonight they even threatened her.'

'It was really bad, JP,' said Parveen. 'They pushed me and shoved Dad again.'

He could hear cries, shouts, moans – then everything went quiet

Then helped themselves to the money.' 'What charming people. What about the police?'

'I spoke to them, of course,' said Azim. 'But they've done nothing. They know of this gang. As usual, they can't do anything, because they don't see a crime yet. These people stay out of sight and come back when it's clear. So I just pay. Sometimes I even have to take it to them. Like a whipped man, a lackey. Just pay. It's the same for all the shop owners on the High Street. Nobody knows what to do.'

'I thought you might be able to help, JP,' said Parveen. 'You told me once about how your family knew some CID people. Flying Squad, you called them. So I told Father, and then called you.'

'I can't go on like this,' said Azim. 'It's crippling me financially, and my life is a misery.'

'And I have to go back to work at the paper in another two weeks,' said Parveen, 'so Dad will be on his own again.' JP nodded. He sipped at his tea.

A few minutes later a man passed by at the end of the street taking his dog for a late walk. He stopped at the sound. He could hear some cries, shouts, moans, some breaking wood, a few screams, and then crashing glass as the dim figure of a man came flying horizontally out of a ground floor window. Then everything went quiet. The man scurried hastily away with his dog.

JP surveyed the wrecked premises. He took out four of his business cards and tucked them inside the ripped shirts of each of the unconscious men. Then he quietly left. At the car JP reached for the door handle but stopped midway, staring down at his hand. His mind flashed back. 'Give us the wallet.' He stared more, the years raced. He was six. 'Give us the wallet.'

'Just wait here, Jimmy.' A huge hand from the tall figure gently pushed the small boy behind him and up against the tiled wall of the deserted underground station. 'This won't take long.'

'Give us the wallet,' someone said

again. A knife gleamed. The tall figure in the overcoat stepped forward towards the gang. Thirty seconds later the three men were on the ground, with various cuts, contusions and fast-swelling lumps, moaning profusely. The tall figure walked back to the boy. 'Come on, son.' The boy looked up at his father. He was like a giant, the outstretched hand huge but warm and enveloping. They walked past the men on the ground and on through the underground passage. The boy turned his head to look back briefly. JP smiled. He opened the car door, and drove home.

'They've gone, JP,' said Parveen excitedly, on her mobile. She was leaving to go back to work. 'Nobody's seen Vladimir or any of his mates since you visited them. They've vanished.' 'Good,' said JP. He had explained to Vladimir this would be his only visit where Vladimir and his friends would come out alive, and had suggested they leave. 'I'm glad they saw reason.'

'What on earth did you do?'

'Oh, we just had a chat. I think they appreciated my kindly words.'

'And it's not just Dad, the whole area is clear again, people are so happy. I can't thank you enough, Jimmy.'

'Any time, I'm pleased it worked out.'

'Where are you, there's a lot of background noise?' asked Parveen.

'I'm at the airport. Got to go away for a quick trip. By the way, I've sent you a little present.'

'Oh, you're really sweet. Thanks. Oh! Oh, I think it's here!'

'Ok, well I have to run. Bye Parvie. Say bye to your Dad.' 'Bye, JP, and thank you!'

She hung up the phone, a big smile on her face. She signed for the bouquet and smelled the flowers. She saw the card, and turned it over in her fingers. Then she let out a gasp. One side of the card was blank. On the other side was a picture. It was a bird. Of a Falcon. The fastest Falcon. A Peregrine Falcon. 'The man from the papers... the terrorist plot... the one they call The Falcon... It's JP? JP is The Falcon?' She looked up from the card, staring into space.

The smile became a grin. She shook her head a little, and said quietly to herself, 'Thanks, Falcon.' However, now she had another problem. When she was back at work, should she write about it? Or should she keep it quiet? She wasn't sure. In fact, it wouldn't really matter either way. The word was spreading. The Falcon was in town. Even on Sundays. ■



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