

The Crime Trade

Simon Kernick

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'Where's the money?'

'Where's the gear?'

'Gear?'

Stegs kept his expression neutral. 'The dope. The drugs. The stuff we're buying.'

The Colombian allowed himself a tiny smirk. It reminded Stegs of the expression Barry Growler, a notorious bully at his old school, used to pull before inflicting one of his famous punishments. 'It's close to here,' he said.

'So's the money.'

'OK. That's good.'

'I'm going to need to see the gear first, before I hand over any cash. I'll have to test it, see that the quality's right.'

'You don't trust me?' asked the Colombian, his hands raised in a gesture of jovial innocence. The smirk grew wider.

Stegs didn't like the look of it at all, but that was the thing in their game. You couldn't trust anyone, and not only that, you could never tell how they were going to behave either. This was his first time dealing with Colombians and he couldn't help thinking about the scene in that old Al Pacino film, *Scarface*, when Al and his mate, Angel, go to a Miami hotel to buy some coke from a group of Colombians, only for the sellers suddenly to pull guns on them and use a chainsaw on Angel's head in a (surprisingly futile) bid to get Scarface to reveal the whereabouts of the money. Stegs was not enjoying this meeting one little bit.

Neither was his colleague, Paul 'Vokes' Vokerman. Vokes was sitting in a chair next to Stegs, across the table from the Colombian, Fellano, and he was fidgeting big-time, like he had crabs.

Fellano, on the other hand, was oozing confidence, but then he also had three bodyguards scattered about the hotel room, and Stegs would have bet a grand no problem that they were all packing firearms. Under those circumstances, he had pretty good reason to be confident.

Now it was Stegs's turn to smile. 'It's not like that, Mr Fellano.'

'Jose, please.'

'Jose.' Jose. Typical. It had to be fucking Jose. 'It's not like that, but you have to understand my position. I have to satisfy myself, and my partners, that the goods are genuine. We've only done business once before, on a much smaller scale, and I don't want there to be any complications or misunderstandings this early in the relationship.'

'Of course. You are right. We don't want any . . . misunderstandings.'

Stegs didn't like the way Fellano emphasized the word 'misunderstandings'. In fact there wasn't anything he liked about him, and he knew Vokes felt the same way. Fellano was about forty-five, possibly a couple of years older, and well built with a large, square-shaped head and features that were berry dark and more South American Indian than Hispanic. He was dressed very smartly, but without

ostentation, and he had an amiable air about him which Stegs had seen on serious criminals plenty of times before, and which he knew would disappear faster than a bun at a weightwatchers' convention the moment you got on the wrong side of him. Stegs was keen for that not to happen.

He pulled a weighing machine out of the bag and put it on the desk, hoping that it would act as a hint, which it did. Fellano turned in his chair and nodded to one of the bodyguards, who was leaning against the opposite wall, next to the kingsize bed with the silk sheets. The bodyguard, also wearing dark glasses (in fact, Fellano was the only one of them who wasn't), left his post and walked into an adjoining room, emerging a few moments later with a briefcase. He brought the briefcase over to the table and handed it to Fellano. There was a moment's pause while Fellano fiddled with the locks, then the briefcase flicked open. He put it on the table with the open part facing Stegs. There was a single kilo bag of coke in there.

Stegs stared at Fellano. 'Our deal was for twenty kilos, not for one. I was under the impression you were a major player.'

'Come on, Steve, we're wasting our time here,' said Vokes, using the codename for Stegs he always liked to stick to.

Fellano didn't even look at him. Instead, he addressed Stegs. 'You talk about trust, Steve, and I understand that, but tell me this. How can I trust you? You could be anyone. You could be a police officer for all I know.'

'I think my colleague might be right, Mr Fellano. Maybe we are wasting our time here. I thought I'd provided you with all the credentials you needed, plus twenty grand of our money for that first kilo. If you still don't think I'm kosher after all that, then there's nothing I can do about it.' Stegs started to stand up. 'Maybe you ought to look for another buyer.'

'I have the rest of the consignment nearby, but I now wish to see the money.'

'OK, but I want to see the rest of the gear at the same time.'

Fellano nodded. 'Sure, I understand that.'

'The money's not here, but it's also nearby. I'll show you it, Mr Fellano, and one of your men, but I'm not going outside with all of you. It's too risky. We'll arouse suspicion.'

'Then your partner will need to stay here.'

Vokes looked at Stegs, his expression one of concern. 'I told you this was a waste of time, Steve. We don't need to deal with people like this.' He stepped away from the table.

Stegs put his hand up. 'Hold on, Paulie. Wait a minute.'

'What's the point? We're just getting taken round the houses here.'

'Because I didn't drive all the way over here for nothing, that's why.' He turned to the Colombian. 'All right, Mr Fellano, here's what I suggest. My man stays here with two of yours, then you, me and your other guy take a walk down to wherever you've got the stuff. You show it to me, and after that, if you want, I'll take you to the money. Then we return here and make the transaction. How does that sound?'

Vokes wanted to say something, but Stegs gave him a look that said 'Come on, don't blow this,' and Vokes appeared to relent, although he didn't look too happy about it. But that was the thing about the drugs business, particularly the high end. The complete lack of trust meant that even a routine retail transaction required a half-hour debate and more than a couple of heart-stopping risks.

Fellano thought about it for a moment. 'OK,' he said, nodding slowly. 'That sounds fair.'

Stegs turned to his mate, who'd now sat down again. 'Are you all right with staying here for a few moments, Paulie?'

'No, not really. Maybe you should stay here.'

'We've decided,' said Fellano with some finality. 'You stay here.'

Stegs patted Vokes on the shoulder. 'I'll only be gone a few moments and I don't think Mr Fellano here is reckless enough to cause any problems in a hotel room with thin walls in the middle of Heathrow. Am I right, Mr Fellano?'

'I want this deal done as much as you do, Steve, even if your friend is not so keen.'

'He's just cautious, that's all.'

'A man can get over-cautious.'

'Not in this game,' said Stegs, with a cold smile. 'So whereabouts nearby is the other nineteen kilos you promised?'