



A troublesome stranger
demands a drink with a difference...

SOLOMON CARTER

OUT OF THE TRAPS

A Long Time Dying Short

Out of the Traps, *a Long Time Dying short*

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Out of the Traps

An exclusive story for LTD reader's group subscribers

Late Summer, 2014.

The Better Flutter betting shop wasn't for the cultured or the feint hearted. Smoking in shops had been banned for nearly a decade by now, but as private detectives Eva Roberts and Dan Bradley made their way inside, both of them caught the sweet, acrid whiff of fresh cigarette smoke in their nostrils. Customer heads turned to enjoy Eva's aquiline beauty, but then they saw Dan's hard edges following behind and they looked away. The sticky floor was littered with screwed up betting slips and half-size blue pens. The carpet was threadbare and dirty. Clearly the shop had seen a lot of foot fall and the company hadn't spent any of their takings on décor. This time of day there was more debris on the floor than customers. It was just after eleven am - before the lunch time influx of working gamblers, so now the shop hosted only the hard-core, the unemployed, the utterly addicted and one big red headed muscle man going by the name of Gerry Corr. Eva had never met the man in person, but she recognised him immediately, her eyes drawn to his lumpy frame. Neither Dan nor Eva believed Corr was the brute's real name, and if they were honest they knew deep down that they would never get the man's real name. Right now names didn't matter. What mattered was that Gerry Corr had called their office that morning with a promise and a threat. His call came after a string of unspeaking heavy-breathing calls. They could have been Corr too, but he'd already denied it. What mattered most now was how they responded.

Dan said he'd wait by the shop door and let Eva do the talking, but Eva knew the value Dan's word when it came to taking a back seat. As soon as they got into the stale smoky air, Eva turned to face Dan.

"You had better wait here, okay."

Dan stayed silent for a second because Eva looked different today. Her hair had fallen just right. Some days she looked spectacular. Today was one of those days. Eva walked away and left him by the door, feeling like a spare part. The shop air was so stale Dan wanted to hold his breath to avoid breathing it in. One of old men in the shop looked at Dan's scarred face and did an unashamed double-take. These were sensitive people. The scars on Dan's face were still sore and healing from his nightmare by the Thames, just a few months before. But since the pain had departed the only thing reminding him of the incident were the lingering looks of others. Dan stared back, and the old man's eyes soon let go.

"Gerry Corr?"

Eva moved close to the square headed Gerry Corr while he hunched over a copy of *The Sporting Life*. The man ignored her and smacked his lips in blissful ignorance.

"Gerry... Gerry Corr?"

The big man looked up. He looked like an extra from a cheap British gangster movie. His hair was red and slicked back into a bad mullet with an exaggerated widow's peak. The faint wrinkles on his forehead and the crow's feet around his eyes suggested Corr was well into his forties, and the glazed look of his eyes suggested a man who was either lost in perpetual thought, or maybe he was simply lost.

"Hello, sweetheart. I didn't say we'd talk here, did I? Go and wait down the Post and I'll be widya in an hour."

The quick words and Irish lilt made Gerry Corr difficult to understand. Eva's brain took a second to crack the code. Then she wasn't impressed with what he'd said. Eva tilted her head and her big red Barbarella hair fell loose to one side. The red hair

seemed to get Gerry Corr's attention. He pushed the Sporting Life to one side and sat himself on an uncomfortably tall looking stool.

"I'm not your sweetheart, Mr Corr. I don't ever go into pubs like the Post, and I don't like spending my time in betting shops, either."

"Is that so? Think you're a cut above, do you lassie?"

If Corr was a friend Dan would have nodded in agreement with his assessment of Eva's personality. But Corr was no friend.

"I don't think anything of the kind, Mr Corr. But I have preferences, like most other people."

"Aye. You're stuck up. Never mind, darling. We all have our crosses to bear."

"Do you want me to run through all of this in here...?" Eva looked round at the rag tag customers who were muttering at the sports screens and looking intently at the creased up papers in their hands. "In front of your friends..."

"Take another look, darling. Do you see anyone in here you'd want to call a friend?" Eva looked around, but didn't comment.

"Have it your way then, Mr Corr. Here's as good as anywhere. I got the heavy breathing calls. Then they stopped. Then last night you called me and hung up without saying a word. Twice."

"No I didn't." The man made an indignant screwed up face.

"Yes, you did, Mr Corr."

"How did you ever come to that conclusion?"

"Because the number you used last night was the very same number you used this morning when we spoke."

Gerry Corr, master of subterfuge.

"Whatever," Corr said, with a shrug. "The heavy breather's nothing to do with me, either."

"You called and said you would like to meet us. You told me we're in danger."

“Aye, that’s true.”

“Is it, Mr Corr?”

“I said so, didn’t I?”

“I’m listening.”

“I’ve got an Irish accent, but I haven’t set foot in Dublin since I was six. I’ve lived in London and Essex ever since. What I’m trying to tell you is that I’m not with the people who are going to cause your problems, sweetheart.”

“Right. You’re just an innocent bystander caught up in someone else’s game. Don’t shoot the messenger, and all that claptrap.”

“Exactly, Missie. But I know people who know people, and they asked me to pass on a message to you.”

“Come on messenger, speak up.”

“You know, I could kill for a drink and something good to eat right now. And I sure could do with a note or two to get me through the day, times are hard, so they are.”

“If you spend your days in the betting shop and the Post, they must be.”

“Would you consider helping a man who is set on helping you?”

By the door, Dan’s inner temperature was rising. Dan shook his head and strode across the dirty shop. He stopped short of Eva and stayed at her side like a big dog straining at his leash. Gerry Corr shifted on his stool and gave Dan a visual appraisal. Corr was a big man, maybe a pub brawler once upon a time and he didn’t seem to be afraid of Dan, which Dan liked just fine.

“So, you don’t like helping others when they’re down on their luck. Those sort of people, eh?” said Corr.

“No. We’re just the sort of people who don’t pay others for passing on idle threats. I don’t know many of that sort, do you Dan?”

“No, strangely, none at all.”

“Let’s get this straight, while we start. These threats aren’t idle.”

“Tell him to stick the threats where it doesn’t shine. Whoever *he* is...” said Dan. But Dan knew. Every cell of his Dan’s body already knew.

“No. I wouldn’t be saying that, and neither would you. If you had any sense, that is.”

“Stop the riddles, Corr. Talk if you’ve got something to say.”

“Aye. That I have. Down the Post, so come on.”

The big man flopped off of his stool, and walked towards the door, quickly rounding the couple before Dan could stop him. The air outside was cool for late summer. A strong breeze shoved at their backs as they walked down the street past the train station and a clothes shop. Corr walked with an exaggerated bounce in his heels, like he had an old injury, or had once been a Monty Python fan. Corr bounced along quickly. A hundred yards further on and he turned right through the big double doors into the epic landscape of the pub called The Post. Dan and Eva followed. The pub inside was vast and cavernous, with a very high ceiling, and the predominant colour was red. The Post was filled with stilted chatter, and the clink of glasses being shifted by bar staff. Where the betting shop had been full of the odour of smoke, in The Post was full of the odour of stale beer.

The Post spread the length of one entire block. Gerry Corr bounced along through the entire length of the pub, the landscape altering as he progressed, opening and shrinking again like some vast Cathedral as they made it to the other end. Dan and Eva endured the staring narrow looks and bloodshot eyes of the town’s early drinkers. Most wore faces which hadn’t seen sleep since closing time last night.

Gerry moved to the edge of the bar nearest the exit doors. He propped himself up at the edge of the shining granite bar and waited for Dan and Eva to join him. Gerry gave a little nod to his left side as Eva and Dan drew up beside him. The nod wasn’t for Eva or Dan. Eva followed the direction of Gerry Corr’s head, and saw a booth table surrounded by three big, untidy men. They were looking in Gerry’s direction, and now their eyes- glassy, small and mean- met Eva head on. They were middle aged,

big limbed and strong looking, the kind of men who looked like they had spent too many years on building sites. Each man had a pint before him. The table was full of creased up tabloid newspapers, mostly open on full-colour sports pages.

A young male bar tender arrived, and Corr ordered. "A pint of Crow's. These two are paying," said Gerry Corr, flicking his hand towards Eva and Dan.

"I wouldn't bet on it," said Dan.

Eva wanted the game over with; arguing the cost of a beer didn't seem worth it. The bar tender returned with a pint of soupy-looking beer with foam on top, and she slapped a note on the bar top.

"Cheers now, darling" said Corr. Dan shook his head at Eva in disgust at Eva's charity, and folded his arms.

"I don't like this place, Mr Corr. And so far I don't like you. Enough's enough. Tell us what this is about."

"Aaaahhhh. There you go, spoiling a man's fun. People these days are always in such a hurry. No one makes time for a little chat and friendship."

"I'm getting tired of this guy, Eva. If you give me two minutes with him, I'll find out what's going on. No more wasted money, no more bullshit."

"Your man reckons himself, doesn't he?" said Corr. "He's full of shite and lightning. You try it with me, son, and I'll put you down flat and then those boys over there will finish the job."

Dan looked at the booth table surrounded by the big wrinkle-browed, duffle-coated has-beens. The has-beens stared back with piercing looks. Dan snorted and laughed.

"I'm telling you now, man, change your tune," said Corr. "We know all about you, and no one's scared of you here Mr Bradley. It's best you start using that detective brain of yours and figure out why not."

Dan stopped laughing. Eva looked up and saw a flicker of concern on Dan's face. These men knew Dan and now they were claiming to have insider knowledge.

“Enough playing the Mysterious Irish stuff, Mr Corr. It’s time to talk seriously,” said Eva

“I’m talking now, aren’t I? Like I said, I’m just the messenger, the go-between. It’s those fellas over there who want a word.”

The three men stood up right on cue, and downed their drinks one by one. The tallest of the bunch, a gaunt-face, grey haired man with monster eyes walked across, tucking his newspaper into his inside pocket. He didn’t bother with pleasantries.

“Things have been quiet for you, haven’t they? But you’re not as lucky as you think,” said the man with a smoker’s gravelly voice. There was an accent there too, Irish maybe, but not quite like Corr’s. Dan shifted to face the man, taking a half step in front of Eva, his body still angled to cover Corr if he made any kind of aggressive move.

“We’ve always made our own luck,” said Dan, his body tensing up in preparation, his heart rate shifting up into another gear.

“So, you make bad luck.”

“And you make bad threats. I mean that. I’ve been so bored by you guys already, I’ve been piecing this one together just to pass the time. So here’s my theory. Want to hear it? You’re with Gillespie. The Bad Boy isn’t too happy with what went down in Hammersmith a couple of months back. His wife is still giving him a hard time. Maybe he feels a little ashamed that we beat him so easy, so now he wants to make up for it. Either way, he and his boys must be really busy, because he sent you third rate goons to put the frighteners on us. So, how did I do?”

“I can honestly say,” said the grey-haired man with a sincere grin. “If there weren’t CCTV cameras all over this joint, I’d break you in half right where you stand.”

“Then I’m spot on,” said Dan with pride, nudging Eva. She rolled her eyes.

“Mind if I sit this one out, lads?” said Gerry Corr, moving away with his pint. He slid away unchallenged.

“You shouldn’t be so rude about Mr Gillespie. Things are working out well for him in London. He’s a big thing now. Half the city is his, and before long, the other half will be too.”

“He’s a just any big man, a classic gangster, just like the previous big man before him. And remember what happened to him?”

“Bad Boy Brian is what happened to him, remember? And when he comes back, Mr Gillespie is going to happen to you too. We are just here as a reminder.” Bad Boy Brian Gillespie: everybody’s favourite nouveau riche gypsy-king-pin.

“This is a down-payment,” said another man, younger than the tallest, and with a head as battered and worn as an antique brief case, the corners and edges all worn.

Eva stepped up beside Dan. “Gillespie doesn’t frighten us. Nor do we want a running dispute with him. That’s finished and he needs to know that. We’re moving on, and hopefully, Mr Gillespie will move on too. Pass the message along, will you.”

“No can do, sweetheart. Mr Gillespie’s not one to forgive and forget when he’s been wronged.”

“If you carry on like this, you’re going to get wronged too,” said Dan.

“So what do you intend to do exactly? Take us outside and beat us up?” said Eva.

“No, that’s what I intend to do to them,” said Dan.

The grey hair grinned and prodded a thumb at Dan. “You’re a real piece of work. You were a boxer or something once, weren’t you? But not good enough for the ring, I heard.” said the tall man.

“I didn’t go professional. But I was good enough to put twenty fighting men on their backs. So what’s your record, wrinkles?”

“You’ll find out.”

Eva’s handbag started to buzz. She looked at Dan, then raised her eyebrows at the three roughnecks.

“It’s my phone. Can I take this call?”

“Go ahead,” said the leader.

Eva slipped the phone out. The screen displayed an 0845 number calling. There was every chance it was a cold call, or a recorded message about PPI. Eva quickly pressed the call-reject button, and deftly opened a speed dial call to the office, where her assistant Jess should have been waiting.

Eva kept up the pretense of receiving a call. She put on a business like air.

“Eva Roberts Agency, how can I help you?”

But the phone was still ringing. Damn it, where was Jess?

“Well, we can take a whole range of cases, from domestic disputes, to missing persons, to financial irregularities. Really? No, that wouldn’t pose a problem. Ah-ha. I see. Can you give me some more detail?”

The office phone rang on unanswered.

“How difficult for you...”

The tall man looked at Eva and made a little circle with his hand, telling her to wind up the call. Eva ignored them, and turned to her side. Now she faced Dan side on. Dan’s face stayed neutral, but there was a quizzical look in his eyes. Eva saw Dan sensed her acting.

The ringing stopped, and Eva heard her own voice-recorded message start up. The beep came and she carried on talking in the same conversational style.

“Well, I can’t do that right away. I’m with some unexpected clients at the Post, the big pub in town. Something’s come up. But I could really do with your help with this later, if you don’t mind. Maybe you could bring some of your official colleagues too? Yes. Great minds think alike, don’t they? See you soon then. Bye.”

Dan’s eyes had a glimmer of amusement in them, but he played along and said nothing. But the tall grey hair wasn’t happy.

“You think this is such a joke that you can take work calls and keep us on hold? You’ve trodden on some big toes. Both of you have. You get that, right?”

“Look boys. I’d gladly fight with you, but the lady here has more style than me. So let’s buy a drink and talk this through, instead” said Dan.

“Will ya look at this! The man wants to buy us a drink now. Seems to me the boxer’s getting cold feet.”

“Maybe his feet started getting cold when they stuck a cheese-grater over his face.”

Dan’s mouth went flat, wide and tense. He plastered a smile across his anger. Dan didn’t like those insults. And since his time in the cellar, he hadn’t liked the look of his face much either. Right now, Dan didn’t want to buy anyone a drink. He wanted to bore holes in three wiseguys, but Eva had some kind of plan.

“Funny. You really are funny,” said Dan. “And there I was thinking you guys were just *funny looking*. My mistake, so what are you drinking?”

“You can buy us a drink, sissy. But we’re still going for a walk together afterwards.”

“Aaahh. You’re the romantic type. Yes, the seafront’s good for a stroll. But I won’t hold hands.”

Dan leaned across the bar and stuck a folded note in the air. The bar tender nodded, and began to wander across.

“We’re from Roe Park. Remember that.”

“Of course you are.” Roe Park, the walled off area ten miles away where the travellers ruled and the police feared to tread. Where Bad Boy Brian was close to being a king - the undeclared king of the gypsies. “What are you drinking, boys?”

“Three pints of Crow.”

“You want some whisky chasers with that? My treat?” said Dan.

“It’ll take more than drink to soften us, boxer man. We were weaned on whisky at Roe Park.”

“Yeah? Funny. Now you mention it, it kind of shows. Your faces are as red as a baboon’s butt.”

“Bastard,” said one the smallest of the three. The small man’s shoulders were hunched and his head was twitchy. Dan liked the look of this one. None of this trio were ruthless terminators, and the tense one was the weakest link in the whole chain. His shakes and tense shoulders spoke of shot-away confidence. Right there, Dan saw a target sign marked on his head.

“It’s okay,” said the tall one. “We can drink his money, then we’ll give him the message. There’s no need to hurry, boys.”

Dan ordered up the drinks and ordered up a glass of water for himself. The three men each took hold of a tumbler of whisky first, and each downed them with a hiss and a suck of their teeth.

“Not bad,” said the tall one.

“Good. And if you liked that, you’ll love this,” said Dan, picking up a pint and he handed it towards the tall man. As the pint arrived it stopped in mid-flight. Dan flicked his wrist, and the entire pint gushed across the tall man’s chest, stomach and jeans. The man stepped back, too late. He was soaked, his clothes clinging to his skin. Dan smiled. The small wound up man swore again.

“It was an accident, man, calm down. I’ll buy him another.”

“Bastard.”

“You like that word, don’t you, small fry?”

Eva stared hard into the side of Dan’s head but he ignored her. Whatever plan Eva had would be smart, but smart wasn’t always fun. Especially when three jerks were delivering insults about your painful facial injuries.

“Sod this. Let’s give him the message right now,” said the tall one.

“Uh-uh-uh. Not in here, CCTV remember,” Dan pointed up to the high ceilings and their little dome cameras.

“We’re from Roe Park. We don’t give a-“

“But you’re not in Roe Park today. Let’s do this the traditional way, gents, outside. Step right this way.”

“Dan!” said Eva, snapping at him. “Wait!”

“No, darling,” said the third guy. “Your man wants his message now. Don’t worry. You’ll get yours next. But yours might just come with a kiss.”

Dan stomped towards the exit, and tossed open the heavy wooden double doors. The brightness and the breeze filled his face. People were spilling past from the nearby high street heading for early lunches at the greasy café opposite. Dan planned his next moves.

“This way. Eva. Boys.” He waited for Eva to step up beside him, then he moved quickly create a break between them and the gang so they couldn’t easily strike from behind. Dan turned an abrupt right then right again into a narrow delivery depot behind the pub – nothing more than a small red brick car park. On one side was a high brick wall. On the other was the glass walled conservatory of the pub, lined with net curtains.

“Why the hell did you do that, Dan?” snapped Eva. “It was under control, and now it’s not. Damn it.”

“Eva, back in that dungeon I swore I was never going to tolerate any bullshit ever again. Not from anyone.” The three messy men appeared again, blocking the view of the street. The only route to safety was through them.

“Here he is, the maggot,” said the tall grey-hair, stepping out to lead the others in an arrowhead formation. The tall man stank of beer. The short tense guy looked like he was going to combust, his face muscles working overtime on a twitch around his eyes. Dan gave him a nice big smile to fester on, as the tall man came forward.

“So, what you got, boxer boy?”

The tall grey hair was far too sure of himself. Yeah, he must have been tough once, but this wasn’t once. This was now. Dan wasn’t in the mood for taking his time. As

the tall one stepped forward, Dan took a couple of nimble steps forward, shifting all his weight into his hip, letting it surge up through a hip-twist into his shoulder and arm, delivering it straight into a right cross full of brute force. The strike clattered through the big man's weak guarding, and landed full force on the side of his head. The man swung unsteadily on his feet. Suddenly he looked drunk. Dan shoved the tall man back against the third man, and set his eyes the other target - the short man with the even shorter fuse. He was all hunched up a like a coiled spring. His face was tight and his eyes were all anger and fear, flitting between each emotion like a pin ball. Maybe this guy was just here to make up the numbers. Either way he was a very bad choice. Dan closed in on him like a laser guided missile. But at the last second, he saw the guy's eyes get wide and wild, then he saw the shining blade appear in his hand. Dan hesitated, then gambled. He kicked the guy hard and low in his shin. The man's tense face became loose, his mouth opening into a wild 'O' of pain. Before he could adjust to the pain, Dan dropped a hammer fist on the knife hand. A half-second later, and he threw another hammer through the guy's head, catapulting his head back with whiplash. Mr Tense went down, lights out.

The tall grey man was lolling around on his feet, but still wanted to fight. At his side, Dan saw Eva by the conservatory peering through the glass into the pub. Dan saw there were people staring out from the other side. Something was wrong here. He caught a glimpse of a face behind the glass. A jarring face he didn't want to see. Dan froze in confusion and anger. "What the...?"

Before Dan finished, the tall man's fist smashed into his head and sent him reeling. The fire exit doors opened, and five men in black uniform with neon vests surged out. "Police!" The sixth man emerged into the car park all calm and serene with his raincoat tails splayed behind him. Damn him. Sat on his backside on the car park surface, Dan was less than impressed. The serene man looked down upon him with an ironic smile carved onto his big ugly face.

“Fancy seeing you down there,” said Rowntree. It was Detective Inspector Gary Rowntree. Dan’s guts twisted in embarrassment, and then burned with indignation. The uniformed officers were all over the men from Roe Park, two-a-man, while the fifth cop tended to the man on the floor. Dan got to his feet and looked at Eva. He shook his head. “What the hell did you involve Rowntree for? How many times has this guy messed us around?”

“Eva knows that when people like this are on my patch, I need to know about it.”

“I didn’t want any help from you, Rowntree. Your help always come with a price attached.”

“That’s a shame, Bradley. Because brawling in public like this, I’ll have to do you as well. Have you seen the inside of the station lately? We’ve given the cells a nice lick of pink paint. Pink keeps the prisoners calm, apparently.”

All fight had gone out of the men from Roe Park. Clearly, they knew better than to take on the law. Eva was relieved, her message idea had worked. “Boys. Can we put the macho stuff aside for a half hour, please? Thanks for coming, Gary.”

“Always a pleasure, Eva. Looks like Brian Gillespie hasn’t forgotten you. I think I should keep a closer eye on you.”

“Don’t bother, Gary. Keeping an eye on Eva is my job.”

“Are you sure? It’s pretty difficult to keep your eye on anyone at all when you’ve been knocked on your arse, wouldn’t you say?”

“You’ll get yours one day, Gary. I guarantee it.”

“And so will you, Bradley.”

A white police van filled the void at the car park gate. The five officers led two travellers away slowly, but the tall man twisted round to face Eva, Dan and Rowntree, struggling as he went.

“You got the message, right?”

“Loud and clear!” said Dan. “What about you?”

As DI Rowntree gave Dan a look of derision, and as Eva gave Dan the usual face of concern and exasperation, Dan wasn't annoyed or ashamed. In his mind he did exactly what needed to be done. And one day soon, Dan was going to get rid of the biggest thorn in their side. Dan gave Rowntree his best beaming smile, and the big cop looked suddenly uncomfortable.

Eva looked on as the police van pulled away. She looked at DI Rowntree and saw a man detached. He didn't have to worry about any of this, he was safe. And Eva still couldn't find any sign of worry on Dan's face. Eva realised she would have to worry enough for the both of them. Up to this very day, Eva had imagined it was all over... Standing outside the greasy spoon café across the road, was big Gerry Corr, watching them as silent as a ghost. Corr's eyes met Eva's for just the briefest moment. Then the big man turned and walked away. *Only the messenger?* No way. Eva Roberts knew that Gerry Corr was much more than a messenger. Gerry Corr was the herald of bad times.

To be continued...

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