



BOOK EXTRACT

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Chapter 1 The Seeds are sown

I'm sitting in a room full of people playing cards and the cash is flowing.

I watch fascinated as their mood changes when they win or lose. I see elation, laughter, fun, disappointment, camaraderie. It's a real atmosphere when this bunch of people come together - a time of excitement and fascination.

I'm five years old.

Friends and family have got together. And they may only be playing for pennies, but it may as well be thousands.

Anyway I was already an old hand at gambling. For the past year I'd been visiting the betting shop, another place of wonder.

My childminder, an Asian woman, was a regular there.

As a four-year-old I absolutely loved everything about the place: the writing on the board (though I didn't know what 'odds' meant), and people shouting and coming out with little tickets. I can still remember the smoky atmosphere.

So you see, even from a young age, the seeds were sewn.

I was born John Hewston in a little flat at 28 Underhill Road, Alum Rock, Birmingham on 17th August 1962. Dad owned the flat. Though I was too young to realise, life was strange right from the start.

My mum Phyllis and dad Harry weren't married. And in those days that was strictly taboo. To make matters worse, mum had been married before and had a daughter, my elder sister Stephanie, from that marriage.

Even worse: dad was still married to someone else - and already had four children.

Mum worked in dad's hairdresser's shop and I was the result of an affair.

Then they had another child together, my other sister Samantha, who was born a year after me.

Me, mum and my older sister all lived in that little flat where I was born. Then when I was three years old, dad bought us a semi, next to a shop at 66 Birmingham Road, Water Orton, Birmingham.

He didn't marry mum - and still kept his other family going. As kids, we had no idea about dad's other family.

I only saw my dad once or twice a week, but was too young to realise why. Mum said he was at night school. When I did see him he was gambling with his friends at our house.

With my child's logic (and we're talking about age three, four or five here) I figured if I gambled I would see more of my dad!

I think the first time I actually won pennies was sitting on his lap playing three card brag. As a little kid ending up with a handful of pennies I was just so excited.

Dad was a gambler, so I guess gambling was already in my blood.

Despite our strange lifestyle, as an adult I look back with some admiration. Dad actually did a good job looking after two 'ordinary' working class families and I have a lot of respect for him.

Little did I know then, that this had a lot to do with the experiences he had with his own father. But more of that later.

It may sound odd now, but this was normal life for me. Even at that young age I could see the effect that money had on people. It intrigued me that money could have control on people's mood swings. People were happy when they won; sad when they lost. Money can be the making of people, but can also be the root of all evil and bring about their downfall. People can be bought. I learnt that at about the age of five.

At that age there were other influences. My Uncle Ronnie (by dad's other marriage) used to turn up at our working class house in a Rolls Royce. He always wore the most expensive new watches - and as a kid I was very impressed. I didn't know then how he got these possessions.

Flash cars, beautiful watches: I thought that was what life was all about.

And there was 'Doc', a friend of dad's. At least he said he was a doc' when I cut my finger at the age of six. His name was Alec Logan, and he was to feature largely in my life.

But even in adulthood I called him Doc until the day he died.

I couldn't wait to grow up. I realised there were things out there. But in the meantime I was happy to be excited about having an orange in my Christmas stocking, having our first colour TV, man landing on the moon and England winning the world cup.

I had a difficult start at school, and it took a while before anyone realised I couldn't see the blackboard.

I had to have glasses, and as I was a clumsy child that wasn't good because I was constantly breaking them.

When I broke yet another pair, my dad finally lost his temper and chose the hot water bottle to wallop me with. Unfortunately it broke and the scalding water burnt me so badly I ended up in hospital.

But some good did come out of it. All my classmates wrote to me, and at such a young age that made me feel really important.