

Cats in a bag

By Dante Harker

It didn't matter how many times Jamie looked at the letter in his hand the words carried the same pain, 'Suspended pending investigation.' Jamie sank further down into the car seat hoping that the faded grey fabric would finally tear open and pull him inside. It didn't. 'That would be too easy,' Jamie said to the empty car. Well, it was not entirely empty; the back seats were down and the car was packed with boxes that he had barely had time to unpack.

On the top of the heap he could see one of his psychology text books. It was pristine and he imagined the new book smell and the promise it represented when he had peeled away the protective plastic wrap it had arrived in. 'You got all As. ALL As! Oh God, what am I going to do?' This time Jamie didn't just scream to the inside of the car he screamed at the whole world. No answer. Though he did startle a dog walker who picked up her pace and scurried away.

I can't just sit here, Jamie thought as his eyes traced the words of the letter. 'Sending explicit photos to a minor' - Who the hell knew that sending pictures to a 17 year old when you're 18 could get you in so much trouble? Jamie

thought - Once he reached the Vice Chancellor signature he traced the extravagant loops that made up the L in the Philip of Sir Philip Harman and said to the car 'clearly Sir Philip Harman did' he then looked over at the dirty white PVC door stood guardian over his childhood home.

Folding the letter and putting it back in its crisp white envelope Jamie noticed a droplet of blood fall from his hand and onto the front of the letter, the bright red expanding and obscuring his name. 'I am such a freak, such a freak,' Jamie said as he looked down at his wrist. Without realising, he'd been picking at the scab he had there and it was now trickling blood down into his hand.

Opening the glove compartment Jamie reached in and pulled out a rag he used to clean his windscreen and began dabbing up the blood. 'You already in there, mate? What you doing?' said a deep northern voice accompanied by a heavy tap on the car window that caused Jamie to jump and let out a small squeal.

Great timing, Jamie thought as he jumped out the car before his old school friend bashed on his window again. 'Friend' was probably a little strong. More Ian lived on the same street as Jamie and they used to go to the same school. 'You all right there, mate? Looks like you've cut yourself?' Ian said as he stepped round the car and got a little too close for Jamie's liking. Jamie stepped back and pressed

the rag hard against his cut. The pain galvanised his thoughts, pulled them away from the stupid letter and the hell about to be let loose when his dad found out what had happened. 'Yeah, I'm great mate, just caught my wrist on one of the boxes.' 'Catch it a few times there did you?' Ian asked as he saw the small wounds, in various states of healing, running up Jamie's arm. 'I'm clumsy, it's a curse,' Jamie said offering a bright smile that he hoped would move the subject on. He pulled down his sleeve to cover the other marks. 'Lot of boxes in your car? I thought you were off at Uni doing psycho something or other?' Ian said as he lent heavy against the Ford Fiesta's wing.

Jamie wanted to say, 'what's this, the inquisition? Mind your own business, you drop out, sandwich factory working piece of scum,' but he didn't because it seemed excessive.

Instead he went with 'psychology, I'm studying psychology.' 'Oh right, so psychology students don't need much stuff then if you're bringing all that back.' Ian had that aggressive tone many men had in the north of England. His mum would always tell him that the boys in his school weren't really aggressive, they were just cursed with an accent that made them seem so.

His mum was from the south and had unfortunately found herself on an ex-mining estate with a man who, at best, could be described as lacking. That was one of the many

reasons she hadn't survived into her thirties.

Walking to the boot of his car gave Jamie a second to come up with an excuse for why he had so much stuff. It wasn't that he thought he owed Ian one, but he had to say something. 'You know what London's like, everything is so small and so expensive that I couldn't get all my stuff in.' Jamie hoped that Ian would have no clue what the capital was like as he probably shared the same view as Jamie's dad that 'there's nothing they have there that you can't get here'.

His answer did the trick and Ian replied simply with, 'oh, right,' and then went on to ask, 'so do you need a hand with all this?' Jamie suppressed a gasp at the idea, it was bad enough he turned up out the blue at his dad's but bringing a relative stranger with him would send his dad into a screaming fit. That was something that Jamie was sure would happen anyway but he hoped that he would at least have chance to make a cup of tea first.

Ian hadn't waited for an answer and was in the back of Jamie's car hooking his rough fingers around one of the boxes. 'NO mate, it's good, I can manage.' Ian ignored him and started to pull out the box. 'Just LEAVE IT!' Jamie snapped and pushed the box back in the car. 'All right, mate, I'm just trying the help,' Ian said stepping away, adding 'I'm not a cat you know, I'm not so easy to get rid of.'

Excellent, Jamie thought, as he realised he had been back less than an hour before someone had brought up the cats. That was such a long time ago. Mostly. 'Sorry, mate, I'm just tired, been a long drive. I'll need to clear room at my dad's first before I take anything in.' 'Well if you will choose a Uni at the other end of the country, you've only yourself to blame,' Ian said. 'Well you know how it is, mate, I just wanted to get as far away from here as possible,' Jamie said as he shut the boot of his car.

Ian's tone lightened and, taking on as much of an air of sympathy as he could muster, he said, 'yeah, of course, mate, we still see Dave, pissed as a fart stumbling down to the late shop before it shuts.' There was no reaction from Jamie at the comment. His dad's drunken antics had been formed into an insult throughout his teen years and the words now just bounced off his thickened skin. And it wasn't as if Ian had meant anything by it other than to give a nod to why being miles away from the village was a good idea.

As it didn't look like he was going to be able to return to the relative comfort of his car, not with Ian hanging around, Jamie said his goodbyes, took a breath and headed towards his front door.

The dog was barking before Jamie had made it to within ten feet of the door. Jamie picked up his pace but it was already too late, from the other side of the door he heard his dad

shout at the dog to shut up and then the fumbling of keys. 'What are you doing here?' Jamie's dad snapped as he opened the door just far enough to let him in.

Nice to see you, too, Dad, Jamie thought as he squeezed himself through the door way and into the house. Thankfully, the dog's frenzied fussing and a barrage of, 'sit down, Lucky...come away, Lucky... stop making such a fuss, you dumb dog,' allowed Jamie to make it through to the kitchen and get the kettle on before he had to answer.

Not such a Lucky dog are you, boy, in this mess, forever breathing in clouds of smoke and living with an alcoholic, Jamie thought as he gave in and bent down to fuss over the dog.

His dad pushed his way past and starting making drinks. 'What you doing here, then? That snotty Uni of yours not keeping you busy?' Dave had hated his son going off to Uni mostly because he thought it was a complete waste of the money Jamie's grandparents had left him when it was clear the boy would amount to nothing.

Jamie ignored the question again, he just kept stroking the dog and hoping his dad would move on. He didn't. 'What you hiding? You've done something, haven't you?' 'Christ, dad, why do you always have to think the worst of me?' Jamie said. He then grabbed his coffee intent on storming

out of the room. The cup was a little over filled and as he moved, the coffee leapt over the side of the mug and covered his hand. He didn't scream, nor did he look back. Instead he let the pain wash through him. The burning liquid eating into his skin caused his skin to react and turn red. But Jamie only clenched his teeth and held everything in until he was in the front room, out of sight of his dad.

Once there he dropped himself down onto the settee and Lucky climbed on at his side. As the dog's head flopped into Jamie's lap in search of attention Jamie opened his mouth and let out a silent scream.

His jaw cracked and resisted Jamie's first attempt to close his mouth. The burn on his hand needed attention but, as that wasn't going to happen, the silent scream would have to do. And much like the cuts on his wrists and arms, Jamie let the pain clear his mind of the constant barrage of intruding thoughts that urged him to do stupid things.

His dad thundered in, his excessive weight nearly taking out the room's wooden floor boards that were half rotten after absorbing one to many split beers. 'You're going to have to tell me at some point. What the hell have you done?' Dave's graceless figure entering the room and looming over Jamie sent Lucky cowering off into her tatty basket. 'You've always thought the worst of me,' Jamie said as he moved along the settee making room for his father. He could feel his dad's

rancid breath on his face and it brought back too many childhood memories to stay in smelling range for long. 'It's 'cos you have always done something. You're a freak and no amount of fancy schooling is going to change that. Please, God, tell me you didn't fill your halls with dead cats?' Jamie made it to the third cushion of the settee but his dad followed. Each word spat from his dad's mouth cut him with a pain worse than he could ever inflict on himself. 'Is it worse than that? Should I be expecting the police again? They won't let you off with a caution this time.' Ignoring the attack, Jamie yelled, 'I knew this was a bad idea, how stupid was I to think you'd be any help?' When he got up to leave, Dave blocked his way. 'You're not going anywhere until you tell me what you've done.' 'Get the hell off of me,' Jamie yelled and batted the hand away. 'I don't have to tell you anything and, when I leave here this time, I'm not coming back.' 'Yeah, yeah, James. I've heard that one before.' With two hands Jamie pushed his dad backwards. 'You bastard, you don't call me James, you never call me James.' James was how his mother had always referred to him. In the letter she'd left him to read after she had died, she had written, 'you'll always be James to me'.

The letter had been a huge apology, accepting that she should have been a better mother and really how could she call herself a mother at all as mothers don't stay quiet when their husband was doing what he did to their child.

The memory of the letter flashed through Jamie's mind and blurred his vision red. 'I named you, you stuck up cat-killing bastard, I'll call you what the hell I like.' Dave shoved his son back. 'You didn't name me, by all accounts you were drunk for my birth and used it as an excuse to stay hammered for a week.' This time he shoved his dad hard enough to push him down into a chair.

The look on his dad's face was one he'd seen before. It was the one that covered it after he had closed the door on the policeman's visit. On that occasion he had punched Jamie so hard a rib cracked. That wasn't going to happen again.

As Dave leapt from the chair, Jamie's eyes scanned the room, his head darting left to right until he spotted the brass statue.

He grabbed it and, as Dave lunged forward, he swung it with such force his dad crashed backwards, knocking over the 1930s glass cabinet that had been left to his mother by her great grandma. You could see part of Dave's brain. The blow had sheared off large chunk of skull and taken a hefty slice out of the grey mush beneath.

Jamie dropped the statue to the floor, half hoping that his dad would sit up and tell him off for dropping one of his prized brass ornaments. He didn't sit up, so instead Jamie sat back down on the settee and called over Lucky. The dog

took some coaxing as she knew full well that when the fighting started it was best to run for cover. 'Well, that didn't go so well,' Jamie said to the now quiet room.

After a minute of stroking the dog, Jamie got up, poked his dad in the eye with his finger and when there was no movement he sat back down again. There was much too much blood to take a pulse and, if there was no reaction from being jabbed in the eye, then it seemed a fair assumption that his father was dead; certainly when you took account of the chunk of brain that rested near his father's feet. 'So, girl, what are we going to do now?' Jamie said to Lucky. There was no reply other than a look that Jamie took to mean, 'what are you going to do now?' Thankfully, there were one or two bonuses of being a little strange or a 'cat-killing sociopath' as his dad liked to call him. Psychiatrists would probably have labelled him a sociopath, too, if his Dad hadn't always been drunk on the days Jamie was meant to go for his assessments. The main advantage was that he was able to think clearly during times of extreme stress, like now when your dad's brains were lying on the carpet and a thick ooze of blood was soaking into the already rotting floor boards. 'I need options, Lucky, do you think you could eat the body? I could pretend I arrived home and you'd gone all mental'. The sad eyes of a rather unlucky dog told him that was hardly an option. 'I could go on the run - that always seems fun on the TV. Though I have no money and I doubt there's anything in this place that would cover more than my petrol to the edge of

the village.' One plus that just occurred to Jamie was that he knew his dad's neighbours were out at work. That meant no one could have overheard the fight. They had been his dad's neighbours since before Jamie was born and Jamie knew full well that if they had been at home and heard the shouting they wouldn't have been able to resist banging on the paper-thin walls and telling them to keep it down. Disturbing the viewing of a soap opera was a mortal sin on the estate where Jamie grew up. 'I could chop him up,' Jamie said and smiled. He liked this idea, it didn't actually help the situation but he knew that it would at least give him a few moments of happiness before the police caught him. 'Lucky, this is getting us nowhere - we need an actual plan, silly dog. And no, I'm not going down the insane route by taking a dump on his body - stilly animal.' Jamie stroked the dog as he mocked her for her silly ideas.

Then two relatively viable options came to Jamie. Both, he thought would land him in prison but both seemed worth a try. The first, he could drag his dad to the top of the stairs, throw him down and say that he slipped. Though as he thought this over it became clear that it was flawed on too many levels. According to TV the police can tell if a body has been moved. There was now a huge blood stain in the front room and how would he get rid of the brass statue. He guessed he could see if the 1970s would take it back.

Jamie laughed out loud and then said to Lucky. 'this is no time for humour, we have to be serious.' Jamie gave Lucky one last stroke, her last, got up picked up one of his dad's beer bottles, one that was already broken. Came back over to Lucky and with one quick blow he stabbed her in the head.

He then got up and rang the police. 'My dad went mental, he killed our dog, and attacked me,' Jamie cried down the phone. ---
