

Heavy Duty People

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The only reason for doing this is to tell people what I've learnt over the years. So keep it simple, don't exaggerate it with the sort of crap that people always write about us.

I want it told straight, just the way I've told you.

People can either take it for what it is and like it, or they won't, in which case they can fuck off.

Damage 2008

PART 1

Monday 25 April 1994

All clubs that have ever existed are either dictatorships, run by a top guy until someone comes along and knocks them off their perch, or democracies, run on the basis of consensus.

They always have been, and always will be.

Damage 2008

1 THE OFFER

I killed the engine and instinctively let the big machine sink underneath me, the long side stand sliding across the cobbles of the courtyard until it found its stable resting place. Still sitting I pushed my goggles up onto the brow of my lid, pulled off my leather riding gloves and reached under my chin to release the strap of my helmet and pull my faded chequered scarf from across my nose and mouth. Then I swung the handlebars hard to the left, feeling the bike settle again in a sort of aftershock as its centre of gravity shifted, and turned the key in the ignition to lock the steering.

Only then dismounting, I turned to face the club house, squinting against the harsh light of the security lamp above the door which threw the bikes filling the yard into a jumbled network of black shadows.

Gloves stuffed into my lid, I pulled my scarf loose around my neck as I walked across the yard towards the warmer yellow light spilling out from where the steel security door was ajar, semi-silhouetting in a cloud of cigarette smoke Spud the striker¹, who was on yard duty tonight. He stood aside as I walked up and nodded a greeting as I reached him that I didn't bother to return. He was wrapped in a thick fleece jacket under his cut off. He would need it, he would be there all night until the meeting broke up, keeping an eye on the bikes outside and acting as security.

Strikers always had to work their passage, demonstrate their commitment to the club by taking on all the crap jobs that came their way until after a year or sometimes two, they had a chance to be voted up to full patch status, if they ever made it.

¹ Across all 1%er clubs there are distinct classes of association that can lead ultimately to full membership. Potential recruits go through a period of association with the club (usually known as being a 'hang around' or something similar) before, if they seem suitable, a member may put them forward for consideration. They will then go through a period of trial or apprenticeship which lasts for at least one and sometimes more years before their membership is voted on. The Legion used the description striker for guys at this stage (a term also used in Australia and some US clubs) as the equivalent of a Hells Angels' 'Prospect', or a 'Probationary Outlaw'. NB: All footnotes by Iain Parke.

As I pushed the door shut again behind me I nodded to Wibble, one of the other current strikers who was relaxed, feet up on the desk inside the door beside the CCTV monitor, and headed on into the warmth and noise of the bar.

The third striker, Fat Mick, was nowhere to be seen. I guess he was out on patrol as part of the security detail.

You never normally saw a striker sitting at all. It was all fetch and carry. Some of the guys just used them like personal slaves. They were deliberately treated like shit but they all knew what was coming, what they'd signed up for in talking a bottom rocker. As a tagalong they'd have seen how it worked.

It was also fun to watch. You could tell the smarter ones, they quickly developed a skill in just melting into the background when a particularly crap job was in prospect, being around and doing what they needed to, to serve their time and prove themselves, while leaving the dumber ones to catch the dumber shit. You could respect that, the nous to work the system. It was all part of the game, although it wasn't just a game. This was deadly serious. It was a test.

We wanted to make sure they had what it took, the total commitment needed to join the club.

So we would run them ragged, work 'em from pillar to post, fetching beer, cleaning the clubhouse, stomping round outside in the cold, night after night on guard duty, doing whatever the shit a member told them to do. It was a time of working like a dog and just sucking it up to show what they'd got, what they were made of. That they had the self-discipline and dedication we were looking for.

Would they pass the test?

To do so the club came in front of family, work, friends, everything. A striker had no friends outside the club any more.

But once they'd got patched, then they'd got that knowledge, that self-assurance that they had made it, that they had won their way through to a place in the elite; that from then on they weren't going to take any shit, any more, from anyone, ever again. Then that was what made it all worthwhile.

So seeing Wibble sitting with his boots up on the desk was a rarity. But then Wibble was nearly there, he'd done almost a year, he'd shown what he could do, what he could put up with, what dedication he could put in to making the grade. It was almost time to vote on him and I guessed Tiny his sponsor would be putting him up soon.

But he'd also shown he'd got the smarts. After all, he was the one sitting down. I liked that.

I wasn't sorry to see that Spud had drawn the short straw tonight again. He was an arsey little wanker, too cocky for a striker I thought, and that Butcher was his sponsor was the final straw as far as I was concerned. I'd be voting against him when the time came. It wasn't just that I disliked him. It was more than that. When you were deciding on whether a guy could become a full patch you were making a judgement call. You had to be sure that he would be there for you, to get your back whenever and whatever the circumstances. And if you weren't sure you shouldn't be saying yes.

Even though I was a well respected member, that on its own wouldn't be enough to keep him out, I'd have to explain my objections. But one more dissenter, one more black ball and that would be it. Two votes against and he would be out automatically and it would be another six months as a striker before he could reapply.

The club house was out in the wilds, right on top of the Pennines about five miles up into the hills above Enderdale, and as everyone said, it was a fucking good club house. We had bought it out of club subs as a half derelict ruin about five years ago just after the merger, and then we had all worked on it to get it right. Set back in a dip in the ground high up a track

across a field from the road and screened by a thick belt of trees, the old farm house offered privacy, with the space in the fields below and above for partying when we hosted other clubs. The club house itself faced onto a cobbled yard that offered secure parking for the bikes, flanked along either side with barns that gave room to take them inside and work on them if needs be, together with the kennel for Wolf the guard dog.

Buying our own club house and the land around it had been a great move.

Whenever we were out in a bar or somewhere there always some tension. Not that we went looking for trouble when we were out. But not that we backed down from it either. If you acted with respect, you got treated with respect. But there would always be some wariness, someone with a potential attitude in the crowd, some dickhead, somebody who fancied themselves, someone who made a comment, someone who provoked and who had to be answered.

Because if you acted like an arsehole, you would get treated like an arsehole.

In our own club house, there was none of that. In the club house we could relax, josh, play fight with each other with no one calling the plod. In our out of the way old farmhouse with its bit of land in the hills we knew we could go and get wasted, party, and host other clubs without getting any hassle.

We got on OK with the locals normally. We were about two or three miles from the nearest village so there were only a few isolated farms around about us. We kept ourselves to ourselves and they didn't interfere so there wasn't any issue really. After all, a lot of us were brought up round here, Billy Whizz and I used to play in the woods below the road when we were kids for example, we'd been to school with the other local kids so he and I knew most of the local farmers and sorted out any problems that might crop up. They were used to the fact that on a couple of weekend evenings over the summer we would be hosting a bash and there'd be music and noise but otherwise we didn't cause any problems locally.

It had been a traditional uplands farm, with a small square two storey farmhouse and adjoining byre. Inside on the ground floor of the house there was a bar and a kitchen-cum-canteen while the byre had become a pool room with its visitors' wall decorated with plaques and badges presented by clubs we had hosted. Upstairs the bedrooms offered space for any member who needed to crash, while we had made the first floor of the byre into a meeting room big enough for club business. Which was why tonight we were all going to be here.

Beer in hand I settled in to chat to some of the guys and wait.

Over the next twenty minutes the occasional roar of bikes pulling up outside in the courtyard announced the arrival of other members as the clubhouse filled up with patches. But tonight there were no tagalongs. This was billed as a serious meeting about club business so tonight it would be insiders only. Other than full patches the only people who would be here would be the three strikers, and they wouldn't be in the meeting, they would stay out of it, handling security.

By half past seven the bar was pretty full and I guessed we would need to get started soon. Billy Whizz said that he thought Tiny was through in the pool room, so together we threaded our way across the crush around the bar and, bottles in hand, pushed our way through the adjoining door into the stairwell and then through the second door into the old byre.

Standing just inside the door, we could see that on the far side of the room Tiny, the President, and Butcher, Sergeant at Arms, were deep in conversation; with the one outsider who I had seen would be here tonight.

Most of the bikes outside were in variations on the Imperial colours of purple and gold, but I had seen the one parked up by the door suggesting that its owner had arrived early, its red and black paintwork harsh in the glare of the halogen. I knew the bike and its owner. It

belonged to Dazza, President of The Brethren MC's north east charter² for the last six or seven years although thanks to Gyppo I'd known him on and off for more like ten or twelve.

'What's Dazza doing here?' Billy asked quietly as we looked across.

'Beats me,' I shrugged. 'Not a clue. Thought you would know if anyone did?'

'Not me mate. Way above my level. In fact the whisper I hear is that he's moving up in the world. About to transfer over to The Freeman.'

The Brethren, otherwise known from their black and red colours as the 'Menaces', were one of the big six international clubs, up there with the Angels, Bandidos, Outlaws, Pagans and Rebels. Each country where there was a Brethren club had a national charter from the mother club in the US and so here their members wore a national bottom rocker saying Great Britain. Within the country they then had a dozen or so regional charters, but most were spread across London, the South, and the West Midlands, with Dazza's charter as a northern outpost.

Over and above these local charters were The Freeman, an independent charter in each country, not tied to any single locality. Each country was broadly left to run its own affairs but generally The Freeman charter's members were the national management of the club, they were The Brethren's elite, a club within the club and very much the top of the tree. They were also generally a self-selecting group, membership by invitation only and rumoured in many countries tending to be those within each national club who were into serious business.

Somebody had obviously said something or noticed that we were there as, looking up, Tiny raised his beer bottle and beckoned me over.

'See ya later,' I nodded to Billy, as I acknowledged the invitation and headed round the table.

'Yeah, watch yourself,' he answered, turning back towards the bar.

'And you know our Road Captain, Damage here,' Tiny said, as I joined them.

'Sure!' said Dazza smiling and sticking out his huge hand for a surprisingly formal handshake that then opened up into a proffered hug that gave full sight of the leering silver black *Totenkopf* badge on the left breast of his cut off just underneath his President title, 'Yeah, I know Mr Clean and Organised here.'

I smiled at the familiar jibe. It was a long standing joke between us. As I say, I had history with Dazza, we went way back. We embraced, slapping backs.

He was right though. You have to be organised to be the club's road captain, sorting out the runs and all the hassle. The job also went to me because I had a relatively clean record since the road captain usually ended up dealing with any plod issues on a run.

'Not seen you since our last party back in the summer.'

'Hey I'm good. Busy planning next weekend.' The Mayday bank holiday weekend would be our first full club run of the year.

'Good to know, always good to have tight people around you.'

Patches and rockers of course were club property and the back of your cut off had always been strictly regimented as the club's uniform, proclaiming your membership and your charter. But in the early days there was a lot of individualism otherwise. Club officers would have their President or Sergeant at Arms tabs, and members might have some other club specific badges, but guys across all the clubs wore all sorts of other stuff on the front of their cut offs; bike logos, weed, swastikas, whatever they wanted.

But as clubs gradually became more disciplined these slowly disappeared so that the front of your cut off became more club focused while the club became ever more all involving and defining.

Flash nowadays was almost always just club business; you would only wear tabs awarded

² The more correct term for what is usually referred to in the press as a 'chapter'.

to you by the club. And since tabs were club business, no outsider to a club should ever ask a club member what a particular badge meant. After all, if it was club business, it was club business. But guys within affiliated or friendly clubs were always expected to just know as though by a process of osmosis. The *Totenkopf* tab on the front of Dazza's cut off declared, without saying anything, his membership of the feared Bonesmen.

And then it was time and the bar emptied as the crowd of guys filed dutifully and noisily upstairs to the meeting room, leaving Wibble in the lobby on the cameras and Spud outside in the cold.

As one of the club's officers, by tradition I was always one of the last in. Standing at the bottom of the stairs waiting for him, I heard Tiny say something to Dazza about roll call.

'No problem mate. We in The Brethren of all people respect other clubs' traditions. Just give me a shout when you're ready.'

*

Upstairs a few moments later the guys were packed around the edges of the room. There were about three dozen of us all told. As the biggest of the founding clubs, we ex-Reivers made up the largest contingent with about dozen of us as the Borders cohort from the valley and the dales. There were ten of Gut's Westmorland cohort from over the border into Cumbria, another eight or so from Popeye's Northumberland cohort from up along the North Sea coast, and finally the half dozen of Butcher's feared Wearside cohort, universally known as the cleaver crew from Sunderland. Some were perched on a selection of battered chairs, some were standing. Billy Whizz was sprawled on the floor rolling a smoke. We could be raided at any time by the plod so the general rule was you could bring anything you wanted to the club, but only if you could swallow it if needed.

Butcher as Sergeant at Arms pulled the doors shut and the hubbub of voices died to a hush as he strode to join me, Gut the VP, and Popeye the secretary-treasurer, in flanking Tiny, standing behind two tables facing the assembled brothers.

Prayers, our weekly club meetings, were compulsory and unless you were down or incapacitated, if you missed more than one in a row, you could be fined. Miss more than two and you had better have a bloody good explanation or you could be looking at your patch. But since the empire covered such a wide area, each of the cohorts had their own weekly prayers. We only got together for High Church at the beginning, middle and end of the riding season, or on special occasions.

This was a special occasion, High Church, a full dress club meeting. Attendance was compulsory for all patches. That meant everyone had to be there, unless you physically couldn't make it like Prof laid up in hospital with a broken leg and Little Matt and Scottie, both on remand charged with GBH after a run in with The Hangmen last week.

Whether weekly prayers or High Church, every meeting started the same way, with the roll call as Tiny as President read the register in alphabetical order and we answered.

'Andy?'

'Here,' came a voice from the back.

'Damage?'

'Here,' I said.

Tiny continued to ask as he worked his way slowly and regularly through the list with replies returned from around the room until at last he got to, 'Gyppo?'

'On the road,' I intoned.

As Road Captain it was my responsibility to answer for each of the fallen brothers whose pictures adorned the far wall of the club room, in the same way that Butcher as Sergeant at Arms answered 'Down but not broken' for the guys that were inside, who were also always with us in spirit.

It was just strange that Gyppo was the first, in both ways.

With the register finished and the roll call taken, we waited in silence as Tiny closed the book on the desk. I and the other officers pulled out our chairs from under the tables and sat down.

Tiny remained standing, and seemed to take a moment to gather his thoughts before leaning forwards, knuckles planted on the table he announced, 'I've got something to say.'

This was it at last. The reason for the urgently called High Church meeting. You could feel the expectation in the air.

'You've all seen that Dazza from The Brethren is downstairs so you'll have guessed why we're here tonight as a club. Dazza called me last week and asked if he could speak to us. So according to our rules I need to ask you for your permission to invite a stranger to address a club meeting.'

*

A few moments later, Butcher escorted Dazza up. In silence, Gut ushered him to a space that had been made for him to stand beside Tiny who nodded in greeting, while Butcher closed and locked the doors from the inside.

Tiny waited for Gut and Butcher to resume their seats before speaking again.

'You all know Dazza here. So I guess I'll just let him say what he has to say.' He turned to Dazza and with a gesture gave him the floor as he pulled out his own chair to sit down.

Dazza nodded to him and looked out across the room, calmly meeting the guys' eyes as they stared at him.

Dazza had a presence. You could never deny that. And it was a very calmly delivered speech, very businesslike, almost a formal diplomatic address delivered to a hushed hall.

'Well firstly I'd like to start by thanking you guys for the opportunity to talk to you here tonight at your club meeting. I know you like to keep club meetings private, so do we in The Brethren, so I appreciate being invited in.'

Very polite. Very correct. We waited.

'We in The Brethren have known you guys now for many years, we know that you are stand up guys that we can respect and we've always had good relations.'

It was like hearing the ambassador from a powerful country address the parliament of a smaller, but fiercely proud, friendly power. He obviously had a message to deliver and would do so courteously but firmly, and despite being alone in this room, he was calm, protected by the knowledge of what an assault on him would mean.

I was still thinking about that *Totenkopf* skull and crossbones on his cut off and what Billy had said. Being a Bonesman didn't automatically entitle him to membership of The Freemen, otherwise he'd have been in what, six or seven years ago? But it was widely understood as being a necessary qualifier.

'Obviously some of us have long standing business relations with some of you, and we don't do that lightly.'

'Some of us' was a bit of a generalisation on his side of the house. I knew full well that Dazza was the main guy in the north-east charter who dealt. Since Gyppo, I wasn't involved in any of that any more but I knew he did deal with many of our guys as a way of moving his product into our club's territory. Billy for one, but Sprog and a number of others who either dabbled for a bit of extra bread, or dealt more seriously, mainly in whizz or blow as their main lines, together with acid and E for the dance crowds, although rumour had it that supplies of snow was starting to become much more available as well.

So what was coming here I wondered?

'I'm here to offer you guys a choice. The world is changing, you've seen that. The Duckies are organising in Scotland and now we hear that they have been talking to The Hangmen.'

There was a stirring amongst the guys. The Duckies were The Rebels MC, The Brethren's

main rivals over here. In addition to Scotland, this side of the border they had charters that ran in a band across Liverpool, Salford and over the Pennines to Leeds where they ran into The Dead Men Riding, as well as down across most of Wales. Their patch featured a screaming eagles' head that The Brethren insultingly dismissed as looking like a duck.

The Hangmen however were very much our regional rivals and *bête noirs*. They had charters in Lancashire and South Cumbria so we regularly ran up against them in a border war that had been simmering and flaring up at odd intervals for the best part of ten years or so now. A link-up between The Hangmen and The Rebels could make us the meat in the sandwich and potentially lead to a serious escalation in hostilities.

But over and above our local beef with them, might it also mean that a wider war was in the offing? The Brethren were currently the top dogs nationally and they would refuse to let that change. If The Rebels absorbed The Hangmen that would strengthen their presence significantly and might even make them numerically the largest club in the country. The Brethren want to prevent that happening which meant that they might either be looking to recruit extra troops to fight, or just to ensure they retained numerical superiority.

'The regional independents are being rolled up – you've all seen it happening. So guys like you sooner or later are going to have to choose whose side you want to be on.'

So I could see what was coming. We and The Hangmen had in effect provided buffer states between Rebel and Brethren territory. If The Rebels made moves to absorb their buffer, then The Brethren would have no option but to respond in kind.

'You might say why do we need to choose? Why can't we just stay out of it, stay independent? Well that's a mistake. You can't.'

He certainly had balls coming in here and saying that to the guys' faces. If he wasn't who he was, he would probably have been stomped. And it wasn't that we were scared of The Brethren that was stopping anyone. It's difficult to describe to an outsider, but it was like I say, a respect thing. Almost as though he was here to parley under a white flag. He was an envoy. So it was like a tradition, his person was inviolable as he came here to speak. If we fought them later over this we would stomp him without question if we caught him. But here and now, we would hear him out and he would unquestionably walk out unharmed.

'If you try to stay neutral in a war, you will end up the losers. And the losing side in the war won't be able to help you, while the winner won't have needed you to win or have any reason to value you.'

'But don't get the wrong idea here. I'm not here to threaten you guys.'

'We don't recruit, we recognise.'

'And I'm here to tell you, as guys we respect, we want you on our side.'

'So as I say, I'm here to offer you all a choice.'

'It's time to step up to the big time. Time to join the international Brethren world.'

Oh fuck, I thought, so that was what was coming.

'We want you to patch over. We want you to join us to expand the North-east charter across the region.'

Oh fuck. The what happens if you don't was unsaid. Once The Brethren had made an offer like this we were either in or against them. It was not a choice being offered but an ultimatum, however quietly and smilingly delivered. It was join us or disband.

And it was always a onetime offer.

Once Dazza had finished, Tiny stood up to formally respond. He thanked Dazza for coming out to see us and for setting out what he had to say so clearly. Obviously there was a lot to take in and we as a club would need to consider what he had said; to consult; we would need to ask the brothers inside who weren't here tonight what they thought; we would need to come to a view.

'Of course,' said Dazza. 'That's only natural. Now I could hang around but I know that

this is something you guys will want to discuss amongst yourselves so I suggest I leave you to it. Obviously you guys know where I am if there's anything you want to talk to us about.'

Butcher stood up to escort him from the room.

'But before I go, there is one thing I would like to say in conclusion.'

The room waited in silence.

'Just don't take too long.'

The storm of noise and voices broke after he left the room.

It was a heated discussion, freewheeling was always the way in the club. But immediately, it was difficult to put a finger on it exactly, there was already a bit of a change in atmosphere. The discussion was perhaps just a shade less open than it would have been normally. I just got the feeling that some people were being more careful about what they said than they would normally be. That this was serious, that the wrong words here could have serious consequences later on, of interests being assessed, of positions being considered.

Irrespective of what we thought of him or the message, as a representative he had clearly given a good impression for his club. As the evening wore on I heard a number of people say more or less the same thing:

'He has balls coming in here like that.'

'He was pretty cool about it.'

'You've got to admire his balls, walking into our clubhouse to deliver a message like that.'

We broke up that night without any formal decision being taken. I hadn't expected it would be. We were a strangely democratic group in many ways, we were brothers and we tended to naturally seek to reach a consensus. With most things Tiny would take soundings, discuss the offer with small groups, and gradually we would come to a view as to what we, as a club, would decide to do.

*

It was a crisp cold night under an inky black sky filled with millions of brilliant white stars and the ride home from the clubhouse took twenty minutes or so.

I loved riding on my own at night.

There was something about the blackness, the cold wind biting my face, the streaming smear of light on the road ahead, the howling solitude, the unthinking way that I followed the road, long grooved with memories, testing each familiar curve just one more time, that made me feel as though I was riding towards the end of the world; by myself in my own private bubble of time and space.

Alone in a dream I roared up and across the high empty moors. Then the dry stone walls started to close in on either side of the road's curves as I left the high ground behind and descended through the curves into the rolling foothills with their fields and occasional yellow-windowed dales farms.

Down here, the road home was along a mix of straight old Roman roads that just begged me to gun the motor, the wind whipping past my ears singing the strange music, and sudden twisting curves familiar through years of instinctive riding, requiring fierce braking at the last possible moment, the bike drifting, using all of the available road to get the right positioning to hustle through them, the bike heeled over to maintain the speed and set me up for the acceleration that pulled me upright again as I set up for the next bend. Before the glow of the first streetlight ahead signalled the start of the final drop down the long straight into the valley, the lights of the town opening up before me as the machine and I roared out of the dark.

It was the type of riding I always enjoyed. It was very Zen somehow. The speeding solitude, with just the sound of the wind, and the mix of unthinking instinct, and fierce full mind and body concentration required on the here and now of the riding freed my mind to wander, it gave me time to think.

But tonight was different.

It had been fascinating, sitting back to hear and see Tiny our pres, and Dazza theirs, in operation and to mull over the difference.

All clubs are either dictatorships, run by a single dominant individual until such time as someone successfully usurped their rule, or democracies, run on the basis of consensus. They always have been and always will be.

We in The Legion were a democracy, certainly the ex-Reivers' part was, some other cohorts less so. That was why Tiny had called the meeting tonight. If there was something important to be said, we all needed to hear about it if we were to decide what we as a club were to do.

Dazza by contrast ruled his charter with a rod of iron. A bit like Butcher did with his boys down in Maccamland. I'd never been surprised that those two got on so well.

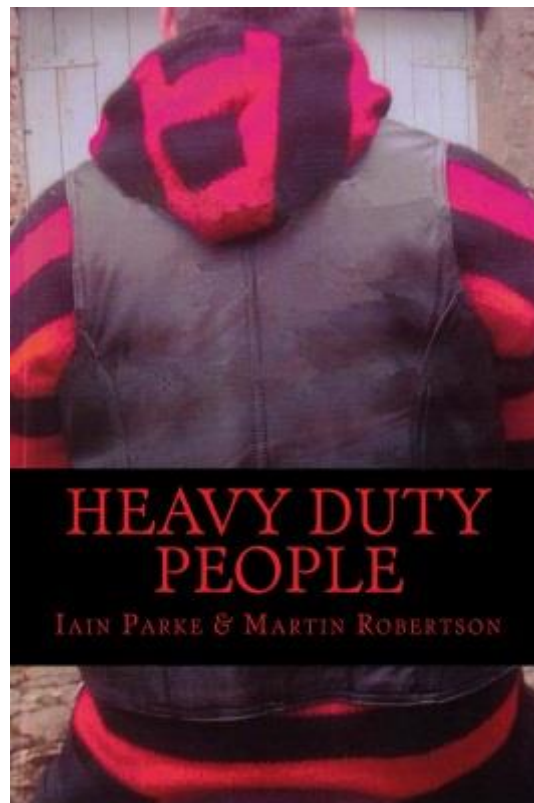
It was gone eleven when, bike locked up around the side, I walked in through the back door and parked my lid on the table.

'How did it go? What's up? Can you tell me?'

Sharon was an old school old lady. She knew that club business was club business and that sometimes I couldn't tell her everything.

I hadn't yet decided how much I would tell her. But I had to say something.

'In a word? Trouble. With a capital F!'



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