

Word to the Wise

He waited in a pub in Brighton. On the table in front of him were a drink and a mobile. He checked the time just as someone took the seat next to him.

The newcomer smiled. "Hello Dad. Long time no see."

He didn't smile back. "I thought I told you if I ever saw you again I'd kill you?"

The other person nodded at the mobile. "Waiting for a text to say your truck's arrived in Dover? Well, I'm afraid there's been a change of plan..."

He cupped his hand around his mug of coffee, wishing it was whisky instead. He should have known it would be that sort of a day; beginning with an ache and a pull in his back as he'd dragged himself out of bed, moving on to the disappointment of an empty coffee jar and the end of a week-old loaf that was turning green at the edges. And now this.

"Didn't know you knew about Dover."

His son grinned.

"All seeing, all knowing me."

"Aye...some things never change, eh?"

He glanced across at his boy, who was no longer a boy but a man of thirty. Michael's hair was short, thinning slightly at the crown, much like Don's own. Stubble sprinkled over his chin, but nowhere else. Odd, thought Don, must be the fashion these days. Michael flipped a coaster between his fingers, and Don saw the bruising across his knuckles. He'd seen some recent action then; looked smart though. The suit was quality, and his shoes shone against the grimy carpet of the bar. He must have worked his way up the ranks a bit by now. He ought to feel proud. He didn't.

He picked up his mug of coffee and blew across the surface gently, buying a little time. Just how much did Michael know? He thought he'd been careful this time: using only trusted sources, changing his mobile number frequently, never revealing his real name and covering his tracks. He hadn't tried for a big score in a while, not since the last one went so wrong, and he couldn't lose this time. He was getting old, and failure just wasn't an option. Not if he wanted to be trusted again.

"How's mum?" said Michael, tap tap tapping the coaster against the wooden table.

"You should call once in a while. Then you'd know."

Don could almost feel the anger course through Michael's body as he shifted in the seat beside him.

"You know I can't. Not with the way things are with your...lifestyle choices."

"My *lifestyle choices*?" laughed Don, his laugh turning into the phlegmatic cough of an elderly man. Michael reached over to pat him on his back, but Don brushed his arm away. He drank some of his coffee. It tasted old. Next to him Michael sighed, petulant.

"It's your fault anyway," he pouted. "You're the one who told me to stay away, remember? You said I'd only get her into trouble again. That you'd kill me if I so much as called. This is all on you..."

Michael relinquished the beer mat and reached out for Don's phone instead. Don snapped his hand over it and the two looked at each other, eyes wary and alert.

Another grin and, reaching into his pocket, Michael flipped out a silver lighter. Don recognised it as being his father's, surprised that the boy still had it.

"You can't smoke in here you know."

"Does it look like I'm smoking?"

He flipped the lid open, then snapped it shut, running his thumb across the design etched into the metal casing.

"I just like to hold it. Feel the weight of it. It makes me feel safe."

Don glanced again at his son. He'd sounded like a child, the way he'd said that, and he flashed back to the nightmares that Michael had had as a little boy, sweaty and tangled in the duvet, screaming himself awake over dreams of dragons and evil wizards. They may have ended up on very different paths in life, but he was still his son.

"Your mam's fine. Misses you, mind. Spends her life worrying about the pair of us."

Michael relaxed.

"But she's happy? Everything got...sorted?"

"Aye. She's good."

He hesitated. His wife was no more than five minutes walk away, sitting on a bench looking out at the sea, awaiting the start of their long-promised holiday and allowing Don a fifteen minute break to sort out his 'bit of business' as she called it. He could tell Michael right now. They'd be with her in an instant, and Don could imagine the smile on her face when she saw her boy. She'd probably cry. Then he remembered the last time, and the tears she'd cried then. No.

"Will you give her this from me?" said Michael, holding out the lighter.

"You keep it. It's yours. I gave it to you."

He pocketed it again, and stood up, brushing his trousers down.

"I'll tell her you're alright," said Don.

Michael nodded, grateful.

"Dad?"

Don looked up. He saw now that Michael's jacket hung loosely from his shoulders, and down the left side of his face ran a long, fresh scar. The shadows under his eyes were almost purple. He felt a wrench inside, a twist of emotion. Knowing that even now, after everything, he loved his boy like no one else.

"Michael...I can help. I could fix things for you. They'll believe me, I'm sure, especially if today goes well. I'm not in Dover because, well, they thought it would be safer...but anyway, I can help. If you'd just..."

"Dad. Stop."

Michael ran a hand over his hair, and Don saw a flash of the tattoo on his inner wrist. He brushed a finger over the scar on his face and Don wondered whether he'd pick it later, like he used to. He caught his son's eye, looking away quickly, across at the jukebox machine in the corner, then down to his hands. He twisted his wedding ring, round and around, then stroked his fingers over the smooth skin of his own wrist.

Michael straightened his shoulders, shoved his hands into his pockets.

"Your truck - I heard that it's coming into Portsmouth instead. They got wind of a raid...changed the plans. You've got about an hour, so tell your mates. Best not mention you got this from me though, eh?" Michael grinned, raised his hand, and then slipped out of the door.

Don sipped his cold coffee, wondering if he'd ever see him again. He picked up his phone.

"Superintendent Milner? It's Inspector Brooks. We need to get anyone who's free in Portsmouth down at the docks now...there's been a change of plan - that's where the truck is coming in. Yes sir, I have it from a reliable source."