

Ask No Questions

by Terri Pine

© Terri Pine 2001

In daylight, he would have seen that it was no ordinary bus and never flagged it down. But had it been daylight, would the bus have existed at all?

Charlie Bryant scrambled onto the road and looked back at the wreckage steaming in the ditch. The car was crumpled beyond recognition.

Shock gave way to the more immediate need for self-preservation and he fumbled his mobile phone out of his pocket. Hurriedly squinting at the green glow of the screen, he dialled the number of a recovery service, wincing as a high-pitched tone pierced the night. Charlie cursed and redialled. The same whistling squeal set his teeth on edge. He would have to find a better reception area.

Standing on the narrow, deserted road, he peered through the drizzle in both directions and swore under his breath; he'd be lucky to see anyone out here at this time of the morning. He held his watch up, angling it to catch the faint moonlight that struggled through racing clouds. Almost three a.m. The job had taken too long.

He grunted as he looked back at his car again, his mind skittering briefly over the contents, assuring himself that nothing incriminating remained in the wreckage. To

reassure himself further he patted the waistband of his trousers and felt the familiar outline of his gun before choosing a direction at random and striding off in search of help.

The stupid thing was, he couldn't even remember how the crash had happened. Had there been some kind of animal in the road? Possibly. Or another car that hadn't stopped? Yeah, that was more like it, and whoever it was didn't even pull over to see if he was alright ... bastards. Charlie allowed his confusion to melt into righteous anger. But why couldn't he remember? He shrugged; he was just screwed up about the job, that was all. Who wouldn't be?

He had been walking for less than twenty minutes when he heard the engine coming up behind. A heavy, rattling diesel engine. Charlie turned and almost fell over his own feet when he saw the bus. It was closer than he had thought and he barely had time to wonder at its even being there before relief took over and he waved frantically for it to stop. It drew slightly past him before halting and Charlie saw at once that it was one of the old fashioned kind with an open entrance at the back and a wide step to swing himself aboard. Thankfully, he pulled himself up by the bar and stepped into the interior just as it pulled away and continued its slow journey down the lane.

Charlie looked around for a seat - something he would have expected to find easily at this time of night, but the bus seemed packed. No one turned to see who had flagged them down all the way out here; they remained, rigidly facing forwards. Nobody was talking. Nobody at all. He wasn't used to travelling on public transport, but even he knew that on a bus somebody always talked to you, whether you wanted conversation or not.

Charlie suddenly wanted to get off - wanted it very badly indeed and, without stopping to analyse this urgent need, he pressed the bell and stepped back out towards the exit platform. A figure loomed in front of him, its face lost in the semi-darkness. Charlie thought he saw the gleam of red eye. Perhaps a reflection from the rear lights... the momentary blood red flash was gone but the shape remained, blocking his way. He pushed forward, knowing deep down that there was going to be no polite apology and an easy exit, but he pushed anyway.

The shadowy bulk of the man remained firm, and a moment later Charlie felt a hand on his upper arm, gripping him tightly until he gasped in pain, his fingers splayed wide. He was roughly turned until he faced back into the bus, and forced into the narrow aisle between the double seats. He tried to glance sideways at the people nearest him, but a cold set of fingers settled on the back of his neck and jaw, making it impossible to turn.

The terror began to build then, starting in his temples until his entire head seemed to swell with it - the pressure behind his eyes was frightening. Panic was close, very close ... Charlie tried to force himself to be rational about this; he'd somehow stepped into the middle of a hijack situation; everyone was scared to turn, to see their attackers in case that made them dangerous witnesses. It was best not to try to look anywhere but directly ahead. Maybe he'd have a chance to get at the gun which, although had seemed close to hand a moment ago, now felt as unreachable as the wrecked car he had left behind.

But through these thoughts his heart was hammering painfully and his head pounded with a deeper knowledge. This was no hijack. This was something even worse, something that couldn't be solved by the timely intervention of some crack

police squad. The grip on his neck eased and Charlie saw that he had been forced all the way to the front of the bus to the single empty seat. Shakily he slid into it, keeping his face fixed ahead as the other passengers did.

The seat was cold under him, the cracked red vinyl split to allow stuffing to escape and he saw an old, carefully folded ticket tucked under the metal strip that ran down the length of the bus. Without knowing why, except that it was a relief to see something so ordinary amidst this strangeness, he picked it out and unfolded it. 'Charles M. Bryant' he read, his throat tightening with a new, colder fear. 'October 2000.'

He lurched to his feet, clutching the ticket with whitened fingers. Stumbling, he turned towards the exit and froze as he saw the faces of his fellow passengers.

Some were young, some were old ... and all were very clearly dead.

A scream started somewhere in Charlie's brain but got no further. The shape which had blocked his way and which now stood at the back of the bus again turned to face him fully and Charlie felt himself grow light, his vision narrow, his muscles weaken. He tried to reach out, to grasp the back of his seat to stop himself from falling, but his fingers had no strength and, as he fell forwards into the aisle, the ticket fluttered from his hand and landed beside his slack face on the floor.

Charlie Bryant had taken up his current employment soon after the army had kicked him out. It was logical. He was due for a move anyway; even a dedicated regular like himself was well over the hill at thirty-two. And the past few years of specialist training in The Mob meant he was made for the job.

It wasn't so much a career change, he rationalised, as a move to the private sector.

Charlie wasn't one to think too much, to ask too many questions. First his old dad and then the N.C.O. s had knocked it into him ... "You're not paid for arskin' fackin' questions Bryant. Yours is just to do an' die mate. Wotter yer not paid for, Bryant?" "Askin'fackin'questionsCorp!"

"An' don't forget it. Nah, switch off that light and build that fackin' AK back tagevver... left 'anded this time. You got thirty eight seconds." Bryant heard the pin pulled and the knobbly grenade wobble across the floor of the bunker as the corporal's boots clattered out, the harsh voice counting back as it faded,

'Thirty *seven* ...'

Then, while everyone his age was cashing in on Thatcher's boom in the early eighties, he found himself unemployed and broke. And there wasn't much call in Civvy Street for his kind of training. This job he *could* do and it was lucrative. What more did he need to know?

His best mate, Warren, had been a squaddie too. Same outfit. But ... well he didn't like the wet stuff. He'd taken the golden handshake just about a year before Charlie had taken the boot up the arse.

'So, what'd they get you for in the end?' Warren had asked him as they leaned at the bar.

'It was just a fight.' Charlie accepted a cigarette and lit up with a deep drag. 'But it happened at the wrong time, in the wrong place and I half-killed the wrong person.' He shrugged. Warren raised a questioning eyebrow; Charlie exhaled in a sigh.

'Soddin' adjutant!!'

'Nice move, Charlie!' Warren had laughed. They hadn't discussed Charlie's dishonourable discharge any further but, after several more drinks, Warren had fixed him with a shrewd look and asked if he had any plans for the future.

'Make some money. Have a laugh,' he'd replied vaguely. 'Why; you got any ideas?'

'Oh yes, my son. I have an idea - and you'll make plenty of money. Can't promise the fun though.'

'No problem. I'll make the money now, have the fun later. Talk to me.'

The strange thing was, he hadn't needed the fun, not after the money started to roll in. He abandoned all thoughts of socialising, of having a normal family life, he lived for the job now, it suited him perfectly - except for the first time. The first time had been a nightmare.

Two days after their conversation Warren had delivered an envelope containing a name, address, description and a down payment. Fanning the money in his hand, Charlie had been scarcely able to believe this was only half his profit and he grinned to himself.

Later that night he'd thought he would never smile again.

It had gone badly. Nerves. He'd missed with his first shot and aimed just as badly with the second, although he had at least hit the target somewhere. He stood over the screaming man, his mind spinning, his stomach churning with disgust; disgust at himself and what he had done, but also at the sight of the writhing, stinking person at his feet. The middle-aged man had soiled himself as Charlie had pulled the trigger and, since the bullet had punctured his groin, massive amounts of blood had mingled with the faeces and the third and fourth bullets had failed to silence his screams.

Now there was more blood from a huge, ripped wound in his side and one in his

chest, and Charlie had stepped forward to end it, not trusting his own shaking aim any longer.

He stood over the man, who stared back up at him in agony and terror, his eyes pleading for help, for some explanation. But how could Charlie explain what he had not been told? He had been contracted to kill this man, that's all he knew, and he had screwed it up. Oh, man, had he ever screwed it up ...

Charlie aimed the gun at his victim's head and forced himself not to close his eyes as he squeezed the trigger once more. Finally, blessedly, the man was silent. With a last look at the carnage he had created, Charlie Bryant left the house, gagging as he unscrewed the silencer from his gun and tossed it into a nearby skip.

With trembling fingers he had pulled off his gloves and stuffed them deep into the pockets of his coat, before getting into his car two streets away and fumbling for the ignition key.

It had been three days before he was able to contact Warren McKinley for the remainder of his payment. He dreaded retribution, but McKinley waved away the apology.

'Forget it; it was your first time. Call it your apprenticeship. You did it, that's what matters, and you didn't get caught. The scent's been well and truly directed elsewhere. Wanna know where?'

Charlie hesitated: "Nah," he said. Then: "But ... well ... who was he, what did he do?' Charlie had to know now, after the mess he had made. He heard the man begging for an explanation in his mind and bit down on his own lip to silence the phantom voice.

'Didn't *do* anything. He was the main shareowner in a company that our client wanted to take over. Now he's out of the picture, our client can proceed with his business plans.'

'That's all? He was just ... shit. Forget I even asked.'

"Yeh," Warren said sharply. 'Don't ask, it's better that way. Now, you want me to get you more work or what?'

For three months Charlie had refused, but gradually his mind began to chip away at the layers of sick loathing he had built up, and the memory of the smell and the screams faded. He contacted Warren.

After that it got better. The next hit was a retired teacher who'd been giving his pupils after-school lessons they could well have done without. One such pupil had finally had enough after a young adulthood plagued by nightmares and paid Warren handsomely to help him win his revenge. Warren told him all this over a few pints. Charlie was only half listening as he poked a finger into the corner of a sealed envelope and finger-counted the tenners stuffed inside.

For twenty years he received his orders and his envelopes. During that time Charlie Bryant was responsible for the deaths of eighty people. He never took a partner, he never said 'no' to a contract. He was a professional. His, not to reason why ... he never asked questions after that first time. Warren soon abandoned even trying to interest him in trivia like who and why he'd killed.

In the autumn of 2000, after Charlie had celebrated his fifty-second birthday, he took his last contract. Just over a month ago he had killed a young man, the shot had hit him in the abdomen instead of the chest and Charlie had to shoot him again. It had been the first time since the beginning that the hit hadn't gone to plan and as

usual Charlie didn't know anything about this victim, but it had shaken him just the same. He had seen the shock and pain in the young man's face, although he hadn't been close enough to be seen himself and as the man - Jarvis, his name had been Jarvis, he remembered - had folded to his knees, something had roared in Charlie's head that this was the end.

'I'm quitting, Warren.' He'd told his friend. Warren hadn't seemed surprised; he'd simply nodded and handed Charlie a fat envelope as they sat by the boating lake.

'Yeah, I know,' he said. He caught Charlie's surprised look and laughed quietly. 'I've been watching you, watching the questions start to build up again. You know you should never ask, and when you need to, it's time to get out. This'll be the last.'

Charlie nodded slowly. He pocketed the envelope he knew would contain the balance of payment for the Jarvis job and details of his last assignment and reached out his right hand to shake Warren's for the last time. 'Don't contact me again, Warren. Not for anything, okay?'

'Understood. You'll find full payment for your final job in there.' He patted Charlie's jacket where the envelope bulged. 'You've been good at this, Charlie, you know that. I pulled the work but I could never have pulled the trigger the way you could. I'm for retiring too, Pal. I won't contact you. You've got my card.' The laugh was flat, emotionless, but Charlie saw something like regret in his old friend's eyes, and he stood quickly. Feelings he could do without - at least for now. He had left those behind twenty years ago, and now he had one more job before he could allow them back into his life. After that, who knew? Maybe he could begin some kind of normal life.

Back home he opened the envelope, extracted a thick wad of banknotes, then shook out the other contents. A black and white photograph fell out, along with a piece of paper noting the name, address and known movements of the target. He picked up the photograph and felt his scalp tighten. His heart speeded up and he dropped the picture back on the table.

Warren's face smiled back up at him.

This was no candid shot taken by a secret camera - this was posed and deliberate. Along with the name, details and address was a card with a printed message.

'Don't ask, Charlie.'

Charlie didn't.

Ten forty-five p.m. October 12, 2000.

Charlie Bryant sat in his car, screwing the fresh silencer onto his gun and trying to conquer the rising horror that threatened to push reason aside. He was about to kill his best friend - not in a rush of passion or the heat of the moment, but in cold blood because that very best friend had contracted his own execution. It had to be a sickness. It *had* to be. Warren was dying and he wanted to end it before the pain got too bad, that must be it. What better way to cheat dismal fate than to get the one man who never said 'no' to whack you instead? The one guy he could trust.

He had almost called him to refuse the job but his memory was tugged back to the gentle regret in Warren's eyes as they sat together on the park bench for the last time.

'You've got my card...' he'd said. Oh yeah, Charlie had his card alright ... and his photo and itinerary for good measure.

'Forget it,' Charlie told himself out loud. Questions ain't part of the job. The reason why's Warren's business.' He knuckled away a tear that stubbornly hovered in the corner of an eye; Charlie checked his weapon and tucked it away into his shoulder holster. He didn't know whether to hate Warren or himself more. How could the bastard do this to him, knowing he was quitting? But then - who better?

'Stuff it,' he muttered. He didn't hate Warren *or* himself. It would be like hating the gun that he held, the trigger that he squeezed.

Finally, glancing at his watch, Charlie climbed out of his car and quickly walked the usual two streets, this time to Warren's home. Making sure he wasn't seen, he slipped into the large front garden and made his way around to the back of the house. There was movement in one of the upstairs rooms, and after a while the kitchen light came on right beside Charlie's head. He hissed a breath and ducked down out of sight, before laughing shakily. What was the point in hiding? Warren knew he was coming. His wife and daughter were both out tonight, the contract had said, so it had to be the man himself who had come into the kitchen.

When Charlie let himself in through the back door, Warren turned to him and the pleased surprise on his face made Charlie hesitate for the briefest moment, before professionalism took over and he brought his gun out, aiming it at Warren's head. Be quick, he told himself, it's the best way... as he began to squeeze the trigger, a movement in the corner of the room distracted him briefly and the shot went wild. A woman stood there in her dressing gown, a hot lemon drink in her hand, a tissue pressed to her nose as she stood, paralysed at the sight of the gunman in her home.

The next shot was more audible than the dull 'whump' of the first and Warren had moved. The bullet took him in the left shoulder and he screamed as he went down.

Charlie was horrified. Not Warren, this shouldn't be happening to Warren. The memory of his first kill came back to him, threatening to drive all other thoughts from his head, the shrieks, the blood, the smell - God, the smell. He smelled hot blood again now and the nausea rose in him. His hand shook as he screamed at Warren to lie still, still, dammit ...

But Warren was scrambling feebly backwards, his face a mask of pain, terror and bewilderment.

'Charlie... what's... Christ, man, please! What ...?'

One more bullet and the questions were over. Susan McKinley was dragging in sharp, shallow breaths, the tissue still pressed against her face, her eyes wide and blank as she stared past Charlie, unable to move in her terror. Never before in his career had Charlie taken a life he wasn't contracted for, but he had no choice now. He swivelled his gun towards the stricken woman and shot her once. A small, dark red hole appeared in the centre of her forehead as she fell to the floor, and Charlie had a moment to wonder bitterly why he had been unable to do as well for Warren, before another shape appeared in the back doorway. He saw with the low tingle of alarm that this time he was the one with a weapon sighted on him.

Warren's daughter, a cool twenty-three year old, stared at him over the barrel of her father's hunting rifle. It looked incongruously large in her slender hands, but Charlie had no doubt she would use it, and use it well.

'Well well.' She said slowly. 'I seem to have stumbled on a terrible murder scene. I might have to defend myself.'

Charlie stared back at her, confusion fighting with an unaccustomed sensation; fear.

'Caroline, you're supposed to be out with ...'

She smiled coldly and moved into the kitchen. '... with my mother,' she finished for him as her gaze fell on the woman who lay by the other door. 'According to the contract. Pity she caught that stupid cold.'

'What are you talking about?' Then, as realisation set in, Charlie felt his heart stutter. 'Oh, my God... it was you? The card, the photograph ... you wanted me to kill your father?'

'Well what did you think? That he was suffering from terminal cancer, like in some crappy 'b' movie? Come on, Charlie. How long have I known you - I credited you with a little sense.' With trembling fingers, she held up a brown envelope identical to the one that had contained Charlie's final instructions.

'This is the contract you were supposed to have, I swapped them before he left to meet you.'

'But why?' Charlie felt his own hands shaking almost uncontrollably, but he held the gun as firmly as he could, feeling it slip slightly in his sweaty palm.

'Ask no questions, Charlie. Not important. The thing that you should be worrying about now is what I tell the police? We do have a choice here.' It had the feel of a prepared speech, and the chill in her voice transmitted itself to Charlie's heart. She stepped around the body of her mother, carefully avoiding the spreading pool of blood under the mat of dark hair on the floor. The gun she held wavered but didn't drop.

'Do I tell them that I disturbed you and you ran away? That I didn't see you? Or that I found you here standing over the bodies of my parents and I shot you in self defence?'

Charlie couldn't answer her; his mind was still struggling with the knowledge that this girl had arranged the murder of her own father and her mother. He thought they had been close ...

She smiled suddenly, but her long hazel eyes were still icy. 'So which is it to be? That you ran and I didn't see your face, or that I had to shoot you?'

'What's in it for you if you let me go? Why not just shoot me anyway since you've done all this groundwork?'

'Letting you go means less questions from the police. If I have to shoot you it'll all become ... more complicated,' she sighed. 'So why don't you just go now? We both know that's what it'll be since we seem to have a bit of a stand off going on. We could always shoot each other, but I don't think you want that.'

'You're a cold, vicious bitch, Caroline McKinley. Your father was my best friend, and you made me kill him.' Charlie heard the self-pitying tone in his own voice and wondered at it even as he spoke. For the first time, Caroline's composure broke.

'And *he* had you kill my fiancé.' She spat, bright tears springing to her eyes. Charlie stepped back, caught off guard.

'What?' he whispered.

'You heard me - two months ago: Robert Jarvis ring any bells? But why would it? You don't care. If you cared you'd have asked about him, you'd have known and maybe refused the contract. But you never do ask do you? So I knew you wouldn't this time.' She wiped her eyes furiously.

'Get out, Charlie. Get out and never, ever, come anywhere near me again. I swear there will be no choices next time.'

Charlie left, half expecting to feel a bullet slam into his back, but realised that it would hardly look like self-defence if Caroline shot him now.

Tucking the gun into his waistband, he walked the two streets quickly and jerked open his car door, sliding behind the wheel as he fought to control his racing heart. God, he'd killed Warren and Susan McKinley; just gunned them down in their own house ... it suddenly came to him how many times he'd performed the same cold-blooded act on people he didn't know.

Charlie lowered his head onto his hands as they gripped the steering wheel and breathed deeply as he fought the urge to weep. What right had he to cry now for those faceless people? For their families? None. He gunned the engine and drove away into the night, heading south back to London and home.

Charlie began to stir. His face, pressed against the floor of the bus, was numb with the cold and as he opened his eyes he saw the ticket lying face up beside him. At once the fear and disbelief returned and he closed his eyes tightly against reality. A moment later he felt a hand close on his shoulder, digging long, thin fingers into the muscle there. He bit back a shriek of pain and terror, struggling to his knees to try and alleviate the sharp agony.

From where he knelt he saw the cold, dead faces staring at him and as his mind cast aside all other considerations he began to recognise them. There - that was the old schoolteacher who had been playing after school hours, there was Robert Jarvis, the side of his head curiously flattened - but really, not so curious, was it? The

second bullet from Charlie's gun had torn away half his face. The owner of the bony fingers squatted beside him, and Charlie moaned as he saw again the face of Warren McKinley.

'You did it, Charlie.' Whispered Warren. 'You really believed I'd want you to kill me? Did I look sick to you? Did I?'

'Warren, I'm sorry, I ... thought that ... I didn't know ...'

'You didn't ask,' hissed Warren.

'You told me not to!' cried Charlie miserably. 'Never ask! Christ, you said it often enough.'

'No, Charlie. I agreed with you. Just the once when you made it clear -- ask no questions and get told nothin' you might not wanna hear. What you didn't know couldn't hurt *you* Charlie,' Warren's voice rose to a scream, spittle spraying from tight, white lips and beading on Charlie's face.

'It was Caroline ...' whispered Charlie. He reached up to wipe away the moisture from his cheek, and felt his hand gripped and bent backwards at the wrist, further and further until the bones in his fingers and forearm started to burn. Warren's voice was calm again.

'Nah, Charlie,' she was no more the killer than I'd been all those years. *You* were the triggerman. *You* were the guy who worked in the wet.' Charlie heard the bone snap, the pain was instant and huge. He almost greyed out, but was brought back to reality by Warren gripping his cheek and twisting until he was certain that the ghost was going to tear him apart where he knelt. Even the pain of his broken wrist was almost eclipsed by this new and unlikely agony. He was pulled to his feet by the skin

of his own face, and pushed forwards until he was standing in front of the nearest 'passenger'.

'Simon Bignall.' Warren told him, holding him tightly by the back of his neck, as before.

'You killed me in 1987. No reason.' Bignall said, his voice calm, even. 'You took out my eye,' he went on. Suddenly on his feet, he shot out his thumb and jammed it deep into Charlie's left eye socket. Charlie's knees gave out and he stumbled, clapping his uninjured hand to his eye, feeling blood seeping through his fingers.

He heard himself sobbing, but Warren dragged him on to the next seat on the bus, where Rob Jarvis was sitting, his head bowed, his hands clasped across his waist. Without warning Jarvis sat bolt upright and with one horrifically strong movement he drove his blood-soaked fist into Charlie's stomach, his expression contorted with disgust at the mewling sound Charlie made as he staggered back.

'Think that hurts, do ya?' Jarvis spat, and sank his clawed fingers into Charlie's mouth, pulling it viciously to the side. Blood gushed as his left cheek was torn apart.

"I fell in love with his daughter," Jarvis laughed hollowly. "But I wasn't good enough for scum like him. Or that bitch ..." Jarvis poked a finger in the direction of a middle-aged woman in a night-gown. She had a small, red third eye in the centre of her forehead. 'Hello, Charlie dear,' Sue McKinley said, tipping the hot lemon drink from her hand onto his ruined face where the citrus burned like sulphuric acid into the raw wounds.

The ragged flaps of flesh which had once been Charlie's cheeks stretched obscenely apart as he moved the visible jawbones. "Why not *them* then?" his remaining eye pleaded.

Jarvis understood. "*You* killed me, Bryant. *You* pulled the trigger. Your bastard partner *believed* he had a reason. But he couldn't kill. Left up to *him*, I'd just be a nasty thought but still walking around.' He swung out his arms to take in the entire busload of dead. 'We *ALL* would! But you ...you don't ask questions ... not even when you're looking your man in the eyes. No thoughts, nasty or otherwise. Left to *you*, I'm a corpse."

It began in earnest then. Charlie stumbled away from Jarvis only to find himself surrounded by his victims. One by one they exacted their revenge on Charlie's body, biting, scratching, clawing and all the while shrieking their manic accusations. The sound was deafening, mind-twisting, the agony deeper and more savage than he could ever have imagined pain could be. He could feel the skin hanging in shreds on what remained of his face, his teeth loose and spraying blood as he screamed wordlessly, his tongue lay useless where it had been ripped apart in his mouth.

The lid had been torn from his single eye denying him any chance of shutting out the horror around him, but, dear God, there had to be a way out of this torment ... a flare went off in his consciousness, there was one hope left. Grunting, gasping, feeling blood bubbling out of his mouth, he dragged the gun from the waistband of his trousers, and turning it on himself with a scream of triumph he jammed the barrel against his forehead and pulled the trigger.

He felt it all. Felt the heavy, dull impact and his own blood and gore spilling down his face, felt the horrifying sensation of the bullet mashing his brain and splintering his skull, blowing the back of his head away, ... but there was no release. Just more intense agony and the dark, screeching laughter as his tormentors closed in tighter.

Then, at the rear of the bus, the open platform gaped like a black maw and his reeling mind saw his sole means of oblivion.

He ran the gauntlet of eighty souls, ripping, slashing. He groped past the last few rows of seats, feeling his fingernails peel back as he snatched at the metal rails to claw himself forward. He felt raking talons like scalpels down the backs of his legs, the flesh there parting with sickening ease, and as the blood gushed under his feet he slithered in the sticky wetness. He gave short, regular grunts of effort and desperation, but moving forwards in the leopard crawl he had perfected in the army he slithered on, flat on his belly until a sabre of pain sliced his body in two. Suddenly light-headed with the most extreme pain of all, he turned and recognised the pale, chubby man who spat Charlie's own mangled testicles into his face. It was his first kill. The messy kill. The kill he had shot in the balls.

The blood from Charlie's ruined face flooded his remaining eye and turned the nightmare crimson. But the black hole of escape from hell's bus was inches away now ... just inches ... he gathered the last ounce of force in his shattered body, forced himself forward over the fiery coalpit that was his groin and launched himself into the blackness ...

Charlie Bryant scrambled onto the road and looked back at the wreckage steaming in the ditch, The car was crumpled beyond recognition. Shock gave way to the more immediate need for self-preservation.

He couldn't remember how the crash had happened. He was just screwed up about the job, that was all. Who wouldn't be?

In daylight, he would have seen that it was no ordinary bus and never have flagged it down ...

The End.

The right of Terri Pine to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

