



DECK OF CARDS

A series of themed robberies

MAX DRAYTON



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A thriller by Max Drayton

There is strong language, violence and scenes of an adult nature.

Cover by Phil Lewis

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Chapter 1 – A New Deal

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The rain had finally stopped. The clouds were moving ever faster, and it was getting brighter. High in the Scottish Highlands, the wind followed the road cut into the landscape. In places it howled, in others, it sighed. The chill in the air eased momentarily.

The man now calling himself Jeff Dawson huddled behind the bush, sheltered against the wind. His hands chilled despite the gloves he'd been wearing for two days.

The view, under normal circumstances, inspiring, the hills sweeping away below him. An unobstructed vista of the winding road as it glided into the valley and the small town in the distance.

The road was desolate. He'd seen only two cars in the past hour since Gail dropped him off at the chosen location. That was a long shivering time ago. He checked his watch, any minute now.

Jeff opened the small suitcase beside him and switched on the machine. Three lights glowed into life, he opened the compartment and slid in a .22 cartridge, closing it again securely. Despite the hours of testing the device, he was still cautious around live ammunition.

The hand-held radio had remained silent, the police band had little to communicate this far north in the wilds. There was little the police needed worry about this far from human habitation.

Jeff heard engine' sounds above him - they were coming. He placed his finger gently on the fire button. With a panicky reaction, he jerked his hand away as he remembered to switch off the radio. His pulse racing at the near mistake. His finger poised once again over the button. He scanned the countryside for unexpected vehicles to come along the tortuous road.

Len concentrated on the bend ahead. The truck was old, and the power steering needed upgrading. The whole truck needed upgrading. It was over twenty years old and had served as a security vehicle for far too long. He stamped on the clutch and shifted the gear heavily into second.

Music blasted through the old cassette player. He liked rock, and he liked it loud. Nickleback's "Rockstar" was his all-time favourite, and he loved to hear it when he was on a job or got excited. He sang out loud and glanced at his companion to check if he was to be told to be quiet.

'Well, we all just wanna be big rockstars
And live in hilltop houses, drivin' fifteen cars
The girls come easy and the drugs come cheap
We'll all stay skinny 'cause we just won't eat'

In front of him the red Mondeo. Behind, in his rear-view mirror, he saw the blue Vectra. They had arranged themselves precisely spaced for the whole two-hour journey from Aberdeen Airport.

He made a toothy grin at his passenger, his missing tooth right in the centre of his upper set. 'This is the only stretch of straight road since we started!'

Greg nodded and grimaced. He was tired of the journey, the music and the singing. He reached forward and lowered the sound for the fourth time. He was counting the minutes until they reached The Centre. He glanced at his flashy sports watch.

'And well, hey, hey, I wanna be a rockstar
Hey, hey, I wanna be a rockstar'

'How much longer do you think?' said the frustrated passenger, and in desperate need of silence.

Len squinted at his cheap analogue watch and said, 'I don't know. An hour or so?'

Gregg sighed and settled back, fighting to keep his eyes open. 'Call this a bloody job?'

'I've had worse. Sit back, relax. You're getting paid, aren't you? For doing nothing twice a year. I'm doing all the hard work. Take it easy. Easy peasy, Japanesey.'

The bi-annual journey was always tiresome. Three large bales of old, used, high denomination, Bank of England notes was the cargo each time. Twenty miles ahead was the facility just called, The Centre. Here, large shredding machines made short work of the old money. As banknotes become worn, they needed removing from circulation and new notes printed to replace them. These old notes being securely stored in a depository and shipped to the disintegration stations as required. The mulch was recycled into many ecological forms.

The payload was strapped down and couldn't roll with the truck's movement. The doors locked and sealed and couldn't be opened until they reached The Centre. The two-ton payload was way below the truck's capability, so the vehicle drove relatively lightly, its old transmission and running gear was ancient and heavy for the driver. After two hours Len was getting tired.

'You'd think Security Plus would buy a new truck, wouldn't you? This thing's had it! The stereo's shot.' Len said as the straight road allowed his arms a brief respite. 'Typical penny-pinching contractors. I don't know.'

There was the sound of a gunshot, that echoed around the hills. They heard it even above the music.

Len slammed on the brakes, skidding to a halt on the damp road. The Mondeo ahead had slowed to a rapid stop. Len had stopped only metres away from hitting the car.

Gregg was instantly alert. He peered out the windscreen at the quiet and barren landscape. 'What's happening?' he blurted. The cab now silent.

'How do I know?' said Len checking in his mirrors. The Vectra had also stopped a long way behind. 'Both cars just stopped. Get 'em on the radio.'

Gregg thumbed his switch and spoke into the handset. 'It's not working. Try yours.'

Len tried to raise the other guards, but there was silence, not even any static. 'The radio's dead. Try the mobile phones.'

They both tried to use their mobiles while observing the guards getting out of the lead car. Gregg opened the truck door and stepped onto the road. His pistol in one hand and mobile silent and dead in the other.

Luis Garcia approached the truck, his eyes searching the hills.

'What's happening?' said Gregg.

'No idea. Our radio and phones are down.'

'Ours too. Ambush, you think? I heard a gunshot!'

'Me too. Where are they? If they're going to hit us, the surprise element has gone. Stay alert. Stay with the truck.'

Gregg climbed into the cab and told Len what Luis had said. They watched Luis jog down the road to talk to the two other security guards in the Vectra. A few minutes later he was jogging back. Gregg wound down the truck window.

‘Are your watches working?’ asked Garcia.

Gregg peered at his sports watch and frowned. He shook his wrist. All the dials were blank or frozen.

‘Mine is.’ said Len. ‘Why?’

‘Everyone’s watch has stopped, something’s immobilised both cars. Nothing, no electrical equipment, the engines won’t start. Nothing.’

‘What’re we going to do?’ asked Gregg.

‘The truck’s still running.’ said Len with a grin. ‘Good old diesel, good old-fashioned technology.’

‘Well, that’s something.’ Garcia mumbled.

The sound of the diesel idling was loud in the quiet of the hillside. Wildlife sounds were soft in the background.

After a long pause for thought and a glance at his working watch, Len said, ‘We can keep going with the truck, we’re sitting ducks here otherwise.’

Garcia was still trying to decide the best plan of action.

Gregg said, ‘We’ve no tracking devices, Luis. No one will know we’re here for at least...’ he frowned at his dead watch, ‘an hour or two. Then they’ve got to send someone out. It’ll be two or more hours till someone gets here.’

Garcia said, ‘They’ll know we’re late in about an hour and call the police to find us.’

Len said hesitantly, ‘That’s assuming there’s a police car available. This is very remote.’

Gregg said, ‘We should’ve had a tracker on the truck, at least.’

Garcia showed his frustration, ‘Satellite services cost a fortune. You’ve no idea....’

‘Just saying.’ said Gregg.

‘Okay. Okay.’ Garcia was trying to decide. ‘You go with the truck. Get to The Centre as soon as possible. Stop as soon as you find a phone box, or anywhere to borrow a mobile. Gregg, stay in the truck, weapon ready at all times. Len, find a phone and call HQ. Call the police too, it can’t harm. Okay. No. Wait. I’ll come with you.’

Garcia stood on the step and tried to get into the cab. It was obvious there was no room for three men in the tiny space of the ancient truck.

Garcia stepped down. ‘Gregg, you stay here. Wait for help. Tell them what we’re doing. If you can get the cars to work in the meantime, catch us up. Come on. Get out.’

‘Let’s just hope it’s a freak accident, rather than an attempted robbery, eh?’ said Gregg climbing down from the cab.

‘It had better bloody be.’ said Garcia as he heaved himself into the cab. ‘Go. Drive. Let’s get this thing done.’

From his high vantage point, the chilled Jeff Lawson watched the truck grind its way towards the next bend, leaving its escorts stranded. He smiled as it was now safe to switch on the radio. The electromagnetic spike induced by the machine had burnt out all circuit boards for a radius of half a mile. The cars, mobile phones and radios had all the circuits fried, making them obsolete. Modern vehicles and equipment cease to work without the technology of circuitry. The old truck was unaffected by the pulse.

Purchased in Holland, it’d cost 10,000 euros, but the compact EMP machine had proved invaluable. The Electromagnetic Pulse had been generated by a cartridge, the force of the explosion causing the electronic spike that devastated any active electronic equipment.

The radio produced static, but no police messages. So far, things were going to plan. Jeff closed the EMP case and locked the catches. He had to watch and wait again.

Len felt his arms tiring as another bend made him haul the unwieldy old truck up the winding pass. His thin frame struggling to manhandle the heavy vehicle that

lacked power-steering. There was sweat on the brow of his narrow head. 'We must get a new truck, Luis.' he said

'Just drive.' Luis answered without humour.

'So...this bubble of yours hasn't been popped yet, has it?' another toothy grin.

'What do you mean?'

'Well, since I arrived, they've told me how good the record for this run is. What is it...twenty uneventful journeys?'

'Just drive.'

'What the....!' exclaimed Len as he slammed both feet on the brake pedal. The truck slid, but stopped several metres short of an Ambulance Car, stopped in the middle of the road.

The car had two doors open, and a medic was bending into the rear seat. At the sound of the brakes, she pulled clear and ran to the truck driver's door. With a glance at Luis, Len wound down the window. Luis's grip on his gun tightened.

'Thank goodness, someone's here. My patient. We *have* to get her to hospital. Now!'

Luis studied the intensity of the woman's face and the tight grip she had on the window sill of the truck. Her knuckles showing white through the rubber gloves, covered in blood. In the car was a woman slumped in the back seat.

Len stared at Luis before saying, 'I'm sorry, we really mustn't stop.'

'She's haemorrhaging fast and I can't stop it. She needs a hospital, now!' The woman was in her mid-thirties and her frustration brought tears to her eyes.

Luis said, 'I'm sorry, but for security reasons.....'

'She'll die. Look at her!'

Luis glanced pointedly at Len and opened his door. The medic stepped down and moved to the car. With a nod to Len, Luis got out of the cab. Len wound up the windows and locked the doors, as protocol dictated in any emergency stoppage situation.

The injured woman in the car was elderly and wrapped in a blood-soaked blanket. Her gloves were wet with blood, which covered everything she wore. Blood was also seeping from her mouth.

'You can't let her die.'

Luis knew he couldn't. Neither should he take her with them.

'I'm sorry, madam....we just can't.' The patient coughed, and more blood flowed from her mouth.

'There's a cottage hospital in the next town, three miles away. They're expecting her, they're ready to help save her. You must get her there, it'll take you minutes. It'll save her life.'

Luis stood back and stared at the silent hills around him. This was becoming a bad day. He felt no threat of ambush anymore, just a sense of control being wrested from him. Of course, he couldn't let this woman die, but neither should he risk the cargo.

Len called out from the truck, 'Luis. We have to take her.'

Luis knew that too. 'Okay. Help me get her into the cab.'

The two men eased the frail patient into the cab and Luis stood on the step and realised the next problem. He glanced at Len, who knew what he was going to say.

'Len. No room for me and I can't drive this thing. Get her to hospital. Get a phone call in. STAY there. You'll be in a public place, it should be safe. Wait until you get support. Can you do that?' Len nodded. 'Okay. That's the plan. Off you go, quick as you can.'

The patient reached out a hand to touch Luis's arm, which he withdrew quickly, blood was not a thing he tolerated. She mouthed thank you and the medic said it for her.

'We both thank you. You're truly heaven sent. Go, please go. Hurry.' Len slammed the truck into gear and pulled away towards the next bend. The medic sagged with relief against the side of the ambulance. She quietly said, 'Thank you.'

Luis was still looking intently around, and he said equally quietly, 'The least we could do.' He nodded at the car, 'Breakdown?'

‘Just died on me. The radio and mobile phone too. I don’t even know the time; my watch has stopped. I thought she might die on me, I really did.’

‘Don’t worry. The same happened to us, too. Len’s reliable, he’ll get her there.’

‘Thanks. The hospital’s only a few miles. You could even walk it.’

Luis stared at her and frowned. ‘I could, couldn’t I!’

‘You’d be there before any help arrived here, I guess.’

‘I don’t want to leave you out here alone....’

‘Don’t worry about me. I have to stay with all the drugs and equipment in the car, I doubt if I can lock it with all the electronics screwed. But what’s there to worry about miles from anywhere? You’ve your own concerns. Catch up with your colleague. Tell the hospital where I am, and they’ll send out a tow truck. Go. Off you go. You look fit, jog. The speed he was driving at, you might even catch him up.’

Luis knew it was the course he should take but still hesitated.

She reached inside the car and handed him a folder. ‘Take these. It’s the patient’s notes. It’ll help the medical staff know what happened to her and what I’ve done. Go. They need these.’

‘Okay.’

‘If anyone drives past going your way, I’ll flag them down and get them to pick you up. Okay?’ Luis took the folder and ran. ‘Pace yourself. About two miles. Up the hill then downhill all the way.’

Within moments Luis was around the next bend.

With a smile, Gail got in and closed the car doors. She waited until Luis was out of earshot and started the engine. She eased the car forward, heading the opposite way to Luis.

She waited until she was nearing the pre-determined bend before switching on her lights and sirens. She swooped round the curve and screamed past the two stranded convoy vehicles. They just had time to wave for her to stop before she was past them and screeching around the next bend. They’d have no hopes of assistance when an emergency service was on a blues and twos call.

A few more bends before she switched off the sirens and lights. Further on she slowed and stopped. She got out of the car and stood next to Jeff. They stared down at the two cars on the road, less than half a mile from them, and smiled at each other. With a nod from Gail, Jeff loaded his small case into the boot and they stripped the vinyl markings off the car. Within minutes it appeared to be the ordinary white Volvo it originally was. Once tidied up, they eased away for the next rendezvous.

The old truck rumbled on with the accelerator flat on the floor. The hill was too steep for the venerable vehicle to travel at speed, but Len was now in a hurry.

Len said, 'You look a mess. There are tissues between the seats. Get yourself cleaned up.'

'You should try it.' said the elderly lady. 'This stuff's supposed to taste of strawberries, more like shit. How long before we're there?'

'About fifteen minutes, we pull off the road in a mile. Good performance.'

'Thank you. My days in Rep are over, but I can still convince the crowds. Do you have any water?'

'With the tissues. I thought you'd need something to celebrate with.' He laughed with his toothy grin and she joined in with hers.

Once off the tarmac road, the truck rolled heavily on the rough track. Up ahead they recognised the rough wooden construction of the barn. They'd be glad to stop the bone-shaking ride.

Damien Dwyer stood at the open door. An athletic man in his mid-thirties he displayed an over-intense aura while waiting for his project to develop. He reflected that most of his work seemed to come down to just anxiously waiting. Waiting went with the job, though he knew job was not the right word. It was more of a profession, a calling – a trade.

He twirled the large gold sovereign ring around his finger and put it back into his pocket. It calmed his nerves a little.

His heart raced as he first heard the diesel engine, then watched the swaying vehicle come over the brow. In the barn he saw Lee waiting with the oxyacetylene cutter. To one side waited Dan, looking apprehensive. Dan was new to the team and Damien was not sure how he'd react in an emergency. Let's hope there won't be any emergencies, he thought.

The planning had taken well over a year and he'd anticipated every possible situation. There should be no nasty surprises as the trickiest part was already over.

As soon as the truck entered the barn, the passengers got out and Len excitedly hurried to hug Damien. Dan syphoned petrol out of the truck, to make sure there was no danger of fuel leaking with naked flames nearby. Once completed, he helped Lee weld cables to the roof.

An old battered tractor was ready for use, and Damien backed it away from the truck, the cables attached and tightening. With a stubborn refusal, the vehicle remained upright. The three men threw their weight against the side and it rocked. It reached the critical pivot point and finally crashed on its side, with a roar and a cloud of dust.

Without hesitation, Lee slipped his visor down and cut away at the underside of the truck. He had to clear away the framework and braces before attacking the flat pan of the floor. The bright light blazed as he worked quickly and professionally.

The sound of another engine made Damien glance up. The white Volvo bounced along the track and entered the barn with a squeal of breaks, creating another cloud of dust. A buoyant Gail leapt out and hugged Damien. Jeff eased himself out of the car with a self-satisfied smile on his face.

'So far, so good, eh?' Gail said.

Damian eased her off him and said, 'We're not out of the woods, yet, Gail. Get ready to give us a hand once he's finished.'

They helped spread a large plastic sheet on the ground and had scissors, knives and tape laid aside. They were ready by the time Lee had cut a hole in the floor, large enough for him and his cutting equipment to enter the truck, through the least armoured part. Once inside, a headband light gave him enough light to cut away the strong hinges from the reinforced doors. Within minutes he shouted and the team outside pulled at the doors.

At first with a creak, then a crunch, they wrenched the lower door off its molten hinges. Then the second, with a louder crash it fell in a cloud of dust. The back of the truck lay wide open. The team stared with growing delight at the four huge bails of used banknotes as they lay in the back of the truck.

The cubes were so heavy that the men took the strain and forced each onto the plastic sheet. While the two women cut away the biodegradable plastic and tape holding the bail together.

It took five minutes to get all the bails onto the floor and a half an hour before each one was reduced to much smaller bundles. Each capable of fitting into the hundred sports holdalls waiting at the side, stolen from a sporting goods store a year earlier, untraceable to any of the team. They stacked these into a medium sized white van near the door.

On the side of the van was a fictitious fishmonger's name. Large letters implied the van was refrigerated. This to deter anyone from asking to open the doors.

Damien studied the documentation attached to each bail in the truck. He smiled as he added up the total money they'd stolen. The team were watching him, keen to know.

He grinned. 'Four million.' Their expressions of delight was obvious. Damien glanced at his watch. 'We've been an hour. Clear up, let's get going.'

They put all loose items into the boot of the Volvo, including the cutting tools. Damien took a last glance around and checked they were all still wearing gloves. 'Time to go.' he said.

Lee started up the fishmonger's van and backed it out. Damien closed the barn doors and took a reflective check around the site before getting into the van. Gail drove the Volvo with three passengers.

The journey to London was as carefully planned as the rest of the project. Damien had made the trip often and knew all the cameras on the motorway. He'd decided on the rest stops and had checked where CCTV cameras covered and where to park to avoid them.

When they stopped, the car was always positioned to watch the van which was always occupied. One occupant left to get food and relieve themselves while the other stood to guard. Similarly, the car, but two on, two off. The two passengers separated once out of the car and not seen together by the cameras.

Whilst on the motorway, the Volvo varied the distance around the van. Sometimes in front, sometimes to the rear. But always in contact via a series of mobile phones, each being discarded along the way. By the time they reached their destination, it was dark, as planned.

The Volvo drove into the mews in east London and two of the passengers got out. One opened the large garage doors and swung them wide. A few moments

later the other man drove out a small inconspicuous car. The white van then arrived and drove quickly inside.

A few minutes later, both vehicles drove away from the locked garage. Their project for the day accomplished without a hitch. The mews became dark again and silence settled.

A few hours later, before the sun rose, a small van crept into the mews. It drove up to the garage doors and someone got out and opened the lock with a key.

Once inside he unlocked the van with another key and loaded the holdalls into his own van. He felt fatigued by the time he'd locked everything up and drove away. The mews returned to the dark silent atmosphere of early morning.

The following day the mews was bright in the autumn sunlight, birds filling the air with a cheerful sound.

Damien and Len drove up to the garage and Damien opened a door. Len kept watch outside while Damien opened the back doors of the van.

Damien swore, bringing Len in at a run. The van's interior was almost empty, just five holdalls remained. The rest had gone.

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