

Box Clever

by Sam Hepburn

I've always been a dreamer – the nerdy kid hunched over his Playstation dreaming of being popular, the geeky teenager in sweaty boxers dreaming of hitting the big time with his latest bit of software, the broke student who dreamed of getting off with Natalie Farmer and couldn't believe his luck the night she let him walk her home from Annie's bar.

Poor Nat. My beautiful, golden haired, sweet-faced Nat.

I still miss her.

Still have our wedding photo on my desk.

Still talk to her now and then, just to let her know how things are going.

It only seems right, seeing as how she was the reason I first met the Kerrs – that's if 'met' stretches to being strung up on a meat hook by Archie Kerr's not-so-tame psycho, Andy McFee, while Danny Kerr twisted my balls, snarled in my face and demanded a full cash refund. Fifty thousand quid. That was a lot of money back then, 'specially when I'd only agreed to do the drug drop because I was skint – a one off act of madness to buy a car to impress Nat. A red Fiat Spider I'd seen advertised in Loot. I was going take her to France and drive her along the coast, me in dark glasses, one hand on the wheel, elbow resting on the door and Nat at my side with her hair up, white scarf fluttering in the breeze, like in that old movie Nan used to watch.

I should have known any drug deal I got involved would go wrong. But when you're young and in love you think you can get away with anything.

I'm still not sure how I managed to spit out the broken teeth and stay conscious long enough to persuade Danny Kerr to let me work off the debt. But we were heading for a new Millennium, the world was changing fast and even an old-school thug like Danny was beginning to realise it was going to take more than money and muscle to keep him on top of his game. And there I was, super geek Martin Dobbs – available, cheap and desperate. So he told me to come back next day with a list of the gear I needed – money no object – and then, to grunts of disappointment from Andy McFee, he cut me down.

They laughed as I picked up my piss-sodden jeans, sniggered when I groped around for my broken glasses and nearly choked themselves when I tripped up in my hurry to get out of there.

I remember the first time I walked into the Kerrs' Epping mansion and heard the front door clang shut behind me – three inches of bomb-proof steel beneath the gloss-painted wood. I stood in the black and gold hallway, eyes on the marble floor while Danny Kerr informed me that failure was not an option. One tiny mistake and I was dead.

If I hadn't been so scared I might have got a buzz out of setting myself up in the flashy apartment he gave me in the annexe. But when it comes down to it, once you turn off the lights and switch on the screens one room is pretty much the same as any other. I mean, even now I hardly notice this oak paneling or the antique furniture and plush carpets. It's the tech that matters.

As I unpacked the brand new cables, drives and monitors I convinced myself that this was my big chance to innovate and stretch my skills to the limit. So over the next couple of weeks I totally went for it – encrypting the Kerr's communications, hiding their profits behind impenetrable cyber walls, devising systems to track their vehicles and employees and – though I say it myself – developing a security system that was decades ahead of the curve. I was good. The best. And I consoled myself with the hope that with time the Kerr's would come to appreciate my worth and start treating me with the respect I deserved.

How naïve was I? The day I got summoned down to Old Man Kerr's study – the inner sanctum, the holy of holies – I walked in there expecting a pat on the back and a big fat bonus. Instead I got a boot in the gut from Andy McFee and while I was still doubled up, Danny rammed me up against the oak paneling and told me I'd better get used to the idea that I was his forever because I knew too much to ever leave the Firm.

That was the moment my fear turned to hatred.

He sensed the shift in me, winked at Andy and told me to forget any thoughts of jumping a plane to Rio or – belly laugh all round – snitching on the Kerrs, because they were the Firm and the Firm was them, and they would get their revenge from prison or the grave.

He wasn't kidding. I'd done my research. In the sixties Old Man Kerr's father spent ten years running the show from the top security wing of Wakefield Jail and the last associate who'd tried to double cross Danny arrived home with his body in a Louis Vuitton suitcase and his head in the matching hold-all.

So I just had to accept it. I was the Kerrs' drudge, their creature, their property and that was the way it was going to stay until they decided to drop my bones into a vat of wet cement and upgrade to a newer model. They were so sure of themselves they even let me out at weekends. On Friday nights – like a performing elephant, too broken-spirited to snap its flimsy tether and flee from degradation – I'd take the train from Essex to London to see Natalie and first thing Monday morning I'd be back at the mansion. But there was an upside. For the first time in my life I had money in my pocket, decent clothes – and yes, I admit it, a bit of a swagger I'd picked up from watching the Kerrs. So when I popped the question, Nat said yes.

Danny had a right laugh when I told him I was engaged and Andy McFee said that any girl who agreed to marry me had to be a minger and a desperate one at that. He soon changed his tune when he saw her. They all did. You should have seen Danny Kerr turn on the charm when he sat her down and gave her 'the talk' about buying in to a lifetime of loyalty to the Firm and Old Man Kerr was so taken with her he gave us a couple of nights in one of his glitzy hotels as a wedding present.

It didn't take Nat long to turn our flat in the annexe into a real home – cushions, candles, pictures on the wall, the works. She seemed happy enough doing her catalogue modeling in the day and a bit of secretarial work for Danny Kerr in the evenings and I actually started to think that with her at my side I could live this life. Me and Nat – two love-birds trapped in a gilded cage. What an idiot! It must have taken me the best part of six months to realise Danny Kerr was screwing her, and that was only because I upgraded the CCTV and caught them on camera.

It struck me, as I watched them writhing and panting, that I'd only ever felt two strong emotions in my life. One was love for Natalie Farmer. The other was hatred for Danny Kerr. Living in that house, watching them on the monitor night after night, knowing there was no escape was my worst nightmare made real. My own room 101.

Then one wet windy night a call came through from the hospital saying that Danny Kerr had crashed his Ferrari and was in intensive care. Seeing as Danny was fit, strong, and had the luck of the devil we all assumed he'd bounce back with a slight limp or a couple of scars to enhance those rugged good looks. So it came as a total shock when the hospital announced he'd been left paralysed and would never move or talk again – locked in syndrome they called it. Archie Kerr went crazy, storming round the house, screaming at his bodyguards and smashing up the antique furniture.

But I was ecstatic. Nat would be mine again, that bastard Danny Kerr had finally got what was coming to him and, since the Old Man had a dicky heart and couldn't last for ever, I could finally see an end to this nightmare existence trapped beneath the iron-spiked thumb of the Kerrs. Needless to say my elation was short-lived.

Next day Archie Kerr called a meeting of all his employees and informed us he'd raise Heaven and Earth to find a cure for Danny, but if – God forbid – he failed, he'd picked Andy McFee – a Neanderthal with the IQ of a damp flannel who hated my guts – as next in line to take over the Firm.

He installed a hi-tech hospital room in the mansion and hired in Deirdre Morrish, a specialist nurse, to oversee Danny's care. The minute they brought him home Nat dashed down to see him. I didn't object – what harm could it do now? She came back and – I'll never forget it – looked me straight in the eye and said she wished it had been me. That hurt. That hurt a lot. Then she ran off and locked herself in the bedroom. I gave her a few minutes to calm down before I kicked down the door. She'd left a note on our bed:

I will always love Danny Kerr and I'd rather die than see him this way.
Natalie

I stormed into the en suite and found her sitting on the edge of the bath crying her eyes out, a bottle of whiskey in one hand and tub of aspirin in the other. I still wonder if she'd have gone through with it if I hadn't been there to stop her.

So there we were. Danny Kerr trapped in a body he couldn't move, me trapped in a life I couldn't escape and that animal Andy McFee throwing sly looks at Nat and champing at the bit to take my suffering on to a whole new level.

Seeing Danny lying there like a wired-up wax work, most people would have given up hoping for a miracle but not Natalie – she was down there every day stroking his hand, whispering in his ear – and not Archie Kerr. One night he summoned me in to his inner sanctum and told me that Danny had opened one eye and was able to blink. Through tears of tender emotion he ordered me – on pain of death – to develop the technology to enable Danny to use this movement to communicate.

It was an interesting challenge one, which under any other circumstances and without Old Man Kerr hovering over my workbench day and night, I might have relished. After weeks of painstaking work I created a

keyboard on a screen, scanned by a constantly moving cursor that Danny could stop by twitching his eyelid to activate an infrared switch at his bedside. To speed things up I linked it to a word prediction algorithm – not difficult with a vocabulary as limited as Danny’s, added a memory so he could prepare longer speeches in advance and – the piece de resistance – attached the whole thing to a voice synthesizer modeled on recordings of Danny’s distinctive growl captured on the in-house CCTV. I packaged the whole thing up in a smart brushed-steel casing and named my invention ‘Danny’s Voice Box’.

It wasn’t an easy process to master. The effort involved in stopping the cursor in exactly the right place often exhausted him but with Nat at his side, patiently urging him on Danny Kerr managed to get the hang of it and, after a couple of months, he was back running the Firm. It was weird to hear that familiar voice barking out commands while his hulking body stayed immobile. And galling to know that I was the one who had unlocked the door of his prison and let in the light.

Now that Danny could communicate Nat spent even more time with him, in fact she barely left his room. I could have stood it (just about) if she hadn’t come upstairs one night and told me that even the way he was now, Danny Kerr was still more of a man than I would ever be.

I couldn’t take it any more. I wanted to kill Danny Kerr and put an end to my misery. But I knew that Andy McFee would just step into the vacuum and make my life a thousand times worse.

For two nights I sat up turning the problem over in my mind. On the third night I keyed in the code to release the electric locks on the Kerrs’ gunroom and picked out a small black pistol. I loaded it, took it down to Danny’s room and pushed open the door. Nat was in there, wearing one of the dresses I’d bought her for her birthday – the blue one that showed off her cracking figure – and she was leaning over Danny Kerr murmuring to him and smoothing back his thick dark hair. She didn’t look up as I walked in and she didn’t say a word as I went over and made a minor adjustment to Danny’s voice box. Why would she? It was something I often did to keep it functioning at peak efficiency. She didn’t notice me pull out the cable as I stood up, and her dreamy blue eyes were still fixed on Danny’s slab of a face when I shot her in the head. She fell onto the bed, softly and silently – always elegant my Nat – just a neat little trickle of blood spurting from her temple. I wiped my fingerprints off the gun, slipped it into her lovely little hand, pulled out my phone and called the cops. I was lying across her body, crying real tears for the lost love of my life, when Kerr’s bodyguards rushed in – led by that muscle-bound oaf Andy McFee.

I could see Kerr’s eyelid twitching like there was no tomorrow – trying to tell Andy what had happened but of course, no sound was coming out of his voice box.

The cops, headed by a Detective Inspector Burnley, arrived in double quick time – probably hoping they’d finally got something concrete to pin on the Kerrs. I showed them Nat’s suicide note and told them I’d rushed

downstairs the minute I'd found it, and burst into Danny's room just as she pulled the trigger.

I could see Burnley wasn't really buying it. He looked even more dubious when Nurse Morrish – a vindictive old bat who'd always idolized Nat and seen me as surplus to requirements – bustled in and announced, with a dark look my way, that Danny must have witnessed it all and was perfectly capable of using his 'voice contraption' to answer the Inspector's questions. Burnley stared down at Danny and said – quite sensibly in my opinion – that if that was the case why hadn't Mr Kerr uttered a word thus far?

I pointed to the cable lying on the floor and suggested it must have got pulled out when I lurched forward to stop Natalie pulling the trigger. I plugged it back in and agreed to wait outside with a minder while they questioned Danny.

The minute I was through the door I told the minder I was going to throw up, headed for the nearest bathroom and pulled my laptop from behind the fake antique cistern. I checked to see if the override I'd just set on Danny's voice box was working – it was – then I tuned into the CCTV feeds from his room. I had a pretty good wide shot of Danny and Nurse Morrish and a decent close up of Burnley listening intently while she explained how the system worked and told him to expect a short delay after each question while Danny spelled out his answer. Good thing she'd reminded me. In the state I was in I might have typed too quickly and triggered suspicion. I forced my fingers to slow down and got a strange thrill as I listened to *my* answers booming out of Danny Kerr's voice box. I said that Natalie had been very upset when she'd arrived in his room, and corroborated the story about me bursting in just as she got out the gun. I even threw in a line or two about Danny having no idea that Natalie had been in love with him and that his heart went out to her husband, his trusted friend and valued employee Martin Dobbs, whose technical genius had given him back the gift of speech.

Next day 'Danny' got busy. He arranged a lavish funeral for Natalie – only the best for my Nat – and, after a heated discussion with Old Man Kerr, ordered the 'termination' of Andy McFee's employment. I won't go into details but let's just say where Andy was headed he wasn't going to need a P60. Danny also quadrupled my salary and convinced me to move in to his old suite in the main part of the house.

Five years on the Firm is thriving like never before and here I am, sitting at my computer in what used to be Old Man Kerr's holy of holies. I took it over when Archie passed away last year. He died happy, knowing that the business was safe in Danny's hands. For a while after he'd gone I toyed with the idea of making Danny retire and hand the business over to me, lock, stock and numbered Swiss bank accounts. But I quickly realized two things. One, I was much safer, locked away in this darkened room with Danny out there to take the rap if anything thing went wrong and two, loathe as I am to admit it, I needed Danny Kerr.

You see, Nat was right all along. There really is some inextinguishable air of authority about him; a natural charisma that even now inspires the kind of love and loyalty that a man like me could never hope to command.

So there he is, arch gangster Danny Kerr on the screen in front of me, issuing orders to a minion who has no idea that it's my words and my orders coming out of his boss's voice box. The only signs of Danny's frustration are the jagged line on the bedside monitor measuring the furious beating of his heart, and the rapid twitching of his left eyelid sending out a cry for help that no-one will ever hear.

But the situation isn't easy for either of us – him imprisoned in his frozen body and me sitting here in the gloom, tethered to the computer pretty much twenty-four seven. But with Nat gone, the Firm is all I've got left to live for. I know some men can switch from woman to woman like changing a shirt. Not me. Nat was my one and only. So in the darkest hours of the night when the grief gets too much I turn Danny's volume to a whisper, lean in to the screen as I type and let him console me for my loss. You see, he's the only one who knows what it was to love her. The only one who understands why I had to kill her.