**Money for New Rope 2 by Michael McCarthy © copyright Michael McCarthy 2012**

The man who is going to kill me is looking at me from my screen saver.

I turned on my computer and there he was.

If there was somewhere to run to, where he would never find me, I'd be there.

But there isn't.

What he does, killing people, he does for his own fulfillment.

It really is that simple.

I know him. I know what makes him tick.

Killing.

There is no trigger.

He just does what he does.

I'm a writer and ironically my impending demise has lubricated my creative juices and, of course, my topic is my executioner, Yeats.

Briefly, we encountered each other a short while ago when I was trying to break my writer's block. He was trying to sell me disturbing images, one of which proved to be of a particularly grisly murder.

I realized, then, that I was next, or at least somewhere on his list, and destined to become one of his images.

I can't avoid him forever and so I've decided to put my house in order. My three siblings are scattered far and wide and, although I'm not the most successful writer ever to put finger to keyboard, I've made a few bob and that and my royalties will be distributed amongst them.

I've made an appointment with a solicitor friend of mine; ironically I first met Yeats in a spare office in his practice.

Irony seems to govern my life.

Living under this threat, it's amazing that there are still distractions that can take my mind, albeit temporarily, off Yeats.

A new couple moved in to the flat upstairs from mine. Young, well dressed, radiating the aura of success.

In the mornings I heard them passing my door, or rather I heard him. We also passed each other on the stairs most days. Like me, they avoided the lift.

They looked good for it.

The first time we passed she gave me a lovely, demure smile. She's just my type, blonde and pert.

I gave her my 'in need of mothering' smile, women lap that up. She certainly did. I can tell. I know women.

Her partner just ignored me completely. He's always jabbering into his smart phone.

Anti-social bastard. He certainly doesn't deserve her.

Anyway, we're becoming quite friendly now, me and her. I was the driver in this, smiling and nodding, slowly increasing the size of my smile, until my jaw began to hurt and I began to wonder just how big a smile could become. Then I found out.

I met them on the way out of my local pub, they were on the way in. This time I gave her the full wattage. I could tell she was touched, the way she glanced shyly down at her feet, but I could also see she felt inhibited by her partner's presence.

He never noticed. I get the distinct impression he treats her like some kind of chattel, doomed to traipse docilely in his magnificent wake.

One morning, I heard him braying into his phone, he woke me up actually, but I didn't hear her.

I lay back imagining her lying in bed, under a crisp, colourful quilt, with just the top of her head visible. Beginning to stir and stretching those lissom limbs. I don't think she's the negligee type, I can see her wearing boxer shorts and a t-shirt.

Then rubbing her eyes and yawning. Suddenly she springs into life, kicks back the duvet, jumps out of bed and starts her exercise programme. Lots of bending and stretching and Pilates.

I can imagine she likes a little musical accompaniment, nothing too hectic, but a bit of melody, something to help her gradually get her thoughts together.

Then it's into the shower. She doesn't wash her hair every day. Doesn't need to. It's got that lovely, vital, natural bounce to it. It hangs just below her jaw line which, by the way, is exquisite, and that little snub nose, well...

That's the joy of her, I just lose myself in her.

Now, I'm sitting on her bed observing all this. She comes out of the bathroom, wrapped in a towel, collects a glass of juice from the kitchen, swings open her wardrobe and ponders what she should wear today.

For me, she could wear a bin bag.

She's not one of those who lays her clothes out the night before, no, she's spontaneous, she doesn't know how she's going to feel tomorrow.

She dances around the room, almost floating, choosing her ensemble for the day and then, suddenly, she's not there.

I stood outside my friend`s legal practice - he's a one man band - at the appointed hour. The door was locked, which is most strange, he's usually an early starter.

'Come on Terry. Get your act together. We're supposed to have an appointment,' I yelled through the key hole after about five minutes knocking on the door.

I rang him on my mobile. I could hear his phone ringing inside. All I got was his ex-girlfriend's dulcet tones asking me to leave a message.

It was when I turned away that I noticed the acrid stench of tobacco hanging in the air.

I waited for Terry to ring. I rang again a few more times.

I went round to his flat, a couple of days in a row, and rang the bell and banged on the front door.

But nothing.

All I succeeded in doing was raising the ire of one of his neighbours.

'You know, you can come around here a hundred times a day and disturb us by banging and shouting up at the window, but if he's not in, that isn't going to make him be in, is it?' An aged, ex- army type with sleeked back white hair shouted from the window of the flat beside Terry's.

'Well, do you have any idea where he is? Or when he might be back?' I asked.

'This is obviously going to come as a big surprise to you, but I'm not your friend's keeper.' He slammed his window shut.

The next morning I heard Mr. Smartphone cursing loudly under his breath as he barged his way down the stairs, but there was no sound of, what shall I call her?

She looks like a Jessica.

Maybe she was still in bed.

I peeped out of the window and saw Smartphone with a suitcase, a briefcase and what looked like an iPad, struggling to hail a taxi while barking into his phone.

I found myself standing outside Jessica's flat door. I didn't know what I was doing there.

*Just ring the bell and let inspiration strike.*

Weighed down by his luggage, impatient and as distracted as ever by his appliance, Smartphone had pulled the flat door to, but had not closed it.

It was slightly ajar.

At this juncture in my life, it's probably sage advice to live according to the old maxim, 'Who dares, wins.'

Their bedroom door, like mine, was directly opposite the flat door, separated by a small hall, and it too was open, although just a few inches. I entered the hall and stood in front of the bedroom door.

I felt like I was just about to make one great leap for mankind.

If nothing else, I could probably use this for a future story, if there are to be any more.

I stood just outside the door breathing in that stale sleep smell. Her odor was probably still mingled with Smartphone's, which would soon fade.

He could at least have opened the window before he left.

I waited and then I detected her true scent. A fresh, understated, flowery emanation which, I must admit, I found quite beguiling. I bet he never noticed her smell, just took her for granted.

I could hear her breathing, with just a slight snoring effect, as the air caught somewhere in the back of her nose. Not disruptive. I could learn to live with that.

Then, she spoke.

I felt my heart freeze, mid beat.

'Is that you?' she asked. Her voice a little croaky.

I realized that was the first time I'd actually heard her speak.

Alluring.

Although I'd have to make allowances for the fact that she was still half asleep.

'Yeah,' I grunted.

That's how he spoke into his phone. The same lack of respect for whoever he spoke to. I'd heard it enough. I'd even repeated it, after hearing him, so I knew my rendition was pretty accurate.

'Is something wrong Roger? Did you forget something?' she sleep slurred.

I made another guttural sound.

I heard her rolling over in bed.

Changing her position, probably for the hundredth time.

I could tell she was uncomfortable, restless, unhappy.

I left as silently as I had come.

She'd be none the wiser.

The next morning I was awoken by the warbling of my phone.

I held it to the side of my face under the covers.

'Um,' I yawned.

Then I retched.

The handset reeked of cigarette smoke.

Before I flung it across the room, I thought, or maybe I imagined, I heard a gentle lilting titter coming down the line.

I busied myself with research on mass murderers for the next couple of days, just tying up a few loose ends for my epic about Yeats.

But I was becoming more and more disconcerted about the disappearance of my solicitor friend and the growing re-appearance in my life of something I was still not prepared to acknowledge.

Smartphone was back from wherever he'd been. He'd probably been at some unimportant seminar, getting his leg over some junior, infatuated member of staff, who was eager to make an impression and secure her long time career prospects.

But he came back to an empty flat.

I hadn't seen Jessica for a couple of days and, naturally, I was a little concerned.

I'd really been putting in the hours on my research, so it was impossible to say how long it had lain there.

But it was on a toilet break that I saw what I thought was an envelope, apparently slid under my front door.

It was actually a photograph.

At first, I thought it was of the magician, Houdini.

On closer inspection, I realized it was my friend, the solicitor.

He was hanging, his handcuffed hands over a hook secured into the ceiling of a semi-darkened room or cellar.

My eyes were drawn to his face.

Now, I've seen some sights.

In my line of work, I sometimes have to view the latest explicit horror movies, for research purposes only, you understand.

And sometimes I've followed links to the real thing.

The expression of sheer, naked terror etched into the face of my friend trumped anything I'd ever seen before.

I threw the photo to the floor and actually stamped on it, in a fit of impotence, frustration and a slowly growing feeling of guilt.

Now my concern for Jessica was gradually turning to a fear.

I bolted to the fridge and upended a bottle of vodka down my neck, coughing and swallowing at the same time.

I slumped to the floor and tried to evaluate the situation.

What's to evaluate?

He's back.

He's never been away.

Options?

Zero.

What about my friend?

Call the police?

If I know Yeats, and I'm sure I do, my friend is already beyond help.

If I go to the police, even if I could convince them to go after him, I'd be finished.

Forget the police.

Jessica?

That's up to Smartphone.

I tried to fill my days in a normal manner. But that was impossible. When you can't sleep at night, how can you function in any way approaching normality?

I collided with Smartphone a couple of days after the appearance of the photograph.

'Sorry,' I said.

He just glared.

'I haven't seen your wife around lately. Is she OK?' I asked.

He ignored me, jammed his smart phone to his ear and growled into it. 'Yeah.'

To be honest, his reaction made me feel a bit better. About Jessica.

Then he disappeared.

I asked around among the neighbours, whether anybody knew if Jessica and Smartphone had gone on holiday.

I was met with blanks every time. Although some hinted darkly that she had run away.

'You only have to look at him,' one said.

One early morning as I sat cradling a bottle of vodka, the phone snapped me out of my inertia.

This was to herald the tone for the next few days.

Every time I answered it, I was met by the stench of cigarette smoke and then the line went dead.

It actually seemed to be emanating from the phone, as though he was exhaling directly into the instrument and it was emerging through mine.

Now I know a lot of people smoke. But none quite like him.

Yeats enjoys smoking. I mean he revels in it. It's like his calling card.

So when he rang, always in the early hours, I'd automatically look to the door and there, with sickeningly regularity, would be another photo of my friend shoved under it.

Included among the images of him, he was shown: rolled up defensively in a ball, with his cuffed hands covering his face on a shiny wet floor; chained spread-eagled to a damp white wall, with his eyes squeezed shut; and hanging upside down, from the hook in the ceiling, hands secured behind his back, over some kind of open box.

Even from the photo it was plain to see how my friend was trying to recoil from whatever was in the box.

In the background on some of the pictures, I could see what looked like a video screen but a cloth had been draped over the centre. On either side of the cloth I could see what looked like the blurred, frozen edges of a film.

Presumably what my friend had been forced to watch.

On each picture the expression on my friend's face took on a new dimension of absolute wretched, hopeless fear.

He'd undergone or witnessed something his mind was evidently trying to bury away somewhere, something unimaginable that he would have to somehow learn to live with.

But never would.

There was still no word about Jessica and Smartphone and I felt the crushing weight of my own ego smothering me.

They had, it began to seem, also fallen victim to Yeats.

When it didn't seem as though matters could get any worse, they did.

One early morning a delivery van was seen pulling slowly away from the building housing my friend's offices.

The driver was not apparently in any hurry and so it did not attract more than passing attention.

The load he delivered did.

When they took a closer look.

A coffin shaped and sized box had been dumped on the pavement.

Because of a series of suspicious noises coming from the box, the police were called.

They quickly established that it contained a live body.

Gagged and manacled.

At about the same time, my phone rang and stopped, causing me to glance to my door, as another photograph came sliding across the floor.

I half stumbled to the door and prised it open, just in time to see a halo of cigarette smoke slowly descending to the floor.

Sitting in the doorway, shaking, I slowly turned over the photograph.

It was for me the most alarming of the pictures Yeats had recorded.

My friend was pictured kneeling, his wrists chained to his ankles, which in turn were secured to the floor. His neck was enclosed in a form of collar, attached to a steel pole bolted to the floor behind him, so his head was locked in a position where he was forced to look upwards, into the camera.

And, judging from the angle, the video screen.

Apart from his expression - which I am unable to describe, I just don't possess the vocabulary to record his pain - tears were streaming down his cheeks.

Yeats has form in breaking people, reducing them to empty husks.

Later, I found out what little there was to find out.

Terry had been well fed and given sufficient to eat and drink. He was clean and dressed in fresh clothes, royal blue overalls.

There was not a mark on his body.

But he was so severely traumatized that doctors could not begin to hazard a guess as to when, if ever, he could be interviewed.

I waited for the inevitable phone call and it came, quicker than I'd thought. I'd fully expected him to prolong my agony.

'Hallo Yeats.'

I had deliberately consumed as much vodka as I could, without being physically sick.

I needed something to support my wavering resolve.

I sat sobbing in front of the television, watching the report on the discovery of my friend and, not unnaturally given my profession, wondering how I could exploit it for a story, and then realizing what I was considering and bashing myself on the head as hard as I could with the bottle.

Yeats knows I'm writing about him and yearns for my book to come out - it is that good, believe me. I know he won't do anything to me until it comes out.

He feels it will bring him instant notoriety.

And no, he's not worried about the police. He's never left a clue. Ever.

Identification? He doesn't care. He's not one step ahead of the law, there's a whole marathon separating them.

So, as long as I hold out, I'm safe, with the added bonus that I'm frustrating the hell out of him.

'What do you say?' he asked as though speaking to a small child.

'I can think of a number of things,' I answered cockily.

'Didn't you learn as a child to say thank you when somebody does something for you?'

I knew what he meant. He was telling me I should be grateful to him for supplying me with a series of images for my writing.

'Actually, Yeats, I think you need me more than I need you.'

Even on the phone you can sense, even hear when somebody's bravado has been punctured.

Then, while he was off balance, I asked him about Jessica.

'Where is she, Yeats?'

'Who?'

'A good friend of mine has disappeared.'

He may be a lot of things; actually he's only one thing, a killer. But he would have told me.

If there was anything to tell.

He giggled and lit a cigarette. I could hear the click of his lighter and then, after his deep inhalation, I could almost feel the blast of the smoke as he filled the receiver with his exhalation.

'Don't play with me writer.'

In my research, I had found out that people like Yeats, with some massive personality disorder, often have an almost overpowering need for control.

'I know you know I've been writing about you. Well, I`m not going to bring it out.'

There was a long pause.

'You will.'

'I won't.'

'Then, I will...'

'You wouldn't know how.' I cut him off, taunting him. For the first time, I felt I was getting the upper hand.

'You misunderstand,' he whispered.

He waited for my reaction. I tried to wait him out. I couldn't. I had to fill the empty gnawing silence.

'What do you mean?'

'Then, I will... make you bring it out.'

'You don't scare me.' I swallowed, audibly.

'Yes I do.'

Of course he did. I put the phone down, gently. It was the only thing I could do to him.

At least, I seem to have bought myself a little time.

Although, at my worst moments, I just want it to end.

I literally tremble when I think what he's dreaming up for me.

I began to wonder if Smartphone had actually done something to Jessica, and wondered how I could persuade one of my fellow tenants to contact the police.

Then the police came to me.

Jessica had reported me to the police. They gave me an unofficial warning; they would be watching me from now on, they said.

She reported that some perv had come into her bedroom and had hovered in the doorway, grunting and breathing heavily. She couldn't prove it was me, she stressed. But I had made her feel uneasy, because I had leered at her a number of times on the stairs and in town.

She hadn't mentioned her suspicions about the identity of her stalker to Smartphone. He had a record of shooting first and asking questions later and would be looking at a custodial sentence if caught again.

Now they'd moved out.

And I had nothing else to do but wait.