

FREE SAMPLE CHAPTER

A Casuals Game by Dean Rinaldi & Roy Larner

CHAPTER 2

As the word spread around the pub, that they were on the move to meet with the Pompey Boys, the pub exploded with a pulse of energy, the roar of voices and the clatter of glasses.

"Let's fucking have it!"

"Spanking time!"

"I'm right up for this!"

The air carried a sharp tang of lager and sweat.

Johnny swallowed down the last of his pint before reaching for his Harrington jacket.

"They ain't no mugs, these Pompey lads," Martin said in a tone barely above a whisper.

"I wouldn't let Buster hear you say that," Russel replied with a scowl. "If you're going to have it on your toes, then you best do it now."

"I didn't say that."

"Good, so sort your bottle out and get with the program."

"I aint bottling it."

"Good, because we have a reputation."

"That's right, Martin, we fear no foe."

The firm, clad in their Casual attire, crowded around tables and leaned over the bar to get that one final pint in. They jostled, good-naturedly and shouted over each other with chants and predictions about the upcoming tear up.

"Buster reckons these boys are right up for it."

"I heard they were going to try and take us here."

"Not a fucking chance!"

The atmosphere crackled with anticipation. Pints were raised high, then knocked back in hearty gulps. Seconds later, the empty glasses were thud down on sticky table-tops.

The familiar chant started on one corner of the pub. It was half sung and half shouted but it swept through the pub like wildfire.

'No one likes us

No one likes us

No one likes us, we don't care

We are Millwall

Mighty Millwall

We are Millwall

From the Den.'

Some of the lads had climbed up onto benches with their fists pumping the air, others laughed or were gritting their teeth as they visualised the up-coming violence.

The volume climbed as they sang a second time.

'You're gonna get your fucking heads kicked in!'

Rapturous clapping.

'You're gonna get your fucking heads kicked in.'

It was tribal, joyful and rowdy.

When a large white box truck passed by the pub window and came to a halt, Buster looked down at his watch.

"Round them up," Buster called out. "We're on the move."

The last of the pints were drained in gulps, fingers were cracked and jackets were pulled on. The pub doors burst open and the firm surged out onto the street in a river of noise, colour and belief with Buster at the helm.

Ox leapt out of the truck and raced around to the back, where he opened the roller-shutter door.

Ox was a man who didn't need to speak to be heard. He stood at 6'3" with the kind of broad hulking frame that ended most fights before they started. That was how we earned his nickname. His muscles were packed and as thick as cable under his skin. His hands were as heavy as hammers. He looked like he had been carved from concrete. In his teens he had trained locally as a boxer and never lost a bout...not once. Once the bell sounded, he would come out the corner like a charging bull. The fights never went more than three rounds. At sixteen, he signed up for the army and after basic training he was deployed to Northern Ireland, where things got real and at pace. Stories had been circulated around the manor about what he was alleged to have done, but none of it came from Ox. He was never a man to boast. When it kicked off, he was always at the front and centre. The man was fierce, dependable and quietly terrifying. He wasn't reckless or unnecessarily cruel. Ox was devoid of fear, no matter what the numbers were. His loyalty belonged exclusively to Buster.

When his time in the army came to an end, he came home and bought himself a 7.5 tonne box truck. Ox started out doing deliveries for local companies but the real profit margin in South London didn't include paperwork and invoices. Jaffa George, the fence, was his number one customer.

As a lifelong supporter, he was welcomed back with open arms and quickly enrolled into the Firm. Ox was a quiet enforcer, a man who got things done without the theatre. South London was his manor and the Firm was his family. He didn't say much, never needed to but when it kicked off and everything was on the line, there was no one you'd rather have beside you.

"Right on time, nice one," Buster said as he motioned the lads to clamber onboard.

Three transit vans came to a halt right behind the truck. Within minutes their back doors were open and the lads were inside.

Buster patted the side of the truck before climbing up inside the passenger side.

"Are you alright Martin?" Johnny whispered, as the truck pulled away.

"Yeah, I'm good."

"We've got a proper mob," Johnny continued. "They won't know what's fucking hit them."

Johnny inhaled deeply before bracing himself inside the rattling truck. The thrum of anticipation in his chest felt louder than the engines growl. Around him was a tight pack of lads, proper casuals. Their faces were set, voices were loud and the banter was sharp. It matched the energy pulsating through his veins.

Johnny was buzzing.

This was it: the clobber, the firm and the casual scene. The rhythm of terrace culture, the swagger of it all and...the unity.

The truck felt like a charge just waiting to detonate as it rolled through the London traffic towards Waterloo Station. It was all far more than just a weekend. It was the ritual, the identity and the adrenaline rush. Johnny lived for it. Every jolt from the ride just wound him up further.

The box-truck and three transit vans came to a screeched, sudden halt outside Waterloo station. The trucks heavy brakes hissed sharply as it jolted to a stop. The transit vans pulled in tightly to form a small convoy

Buster turned to Ox and winked before slinging the door open and leaping out onto the pavement without hesitation. As he strutted along the side of the truck, patting the side panels.

"Come on, liven yourselves up!"

Ox was out the driver's side and had sprinted to the rear of the truck. He turned the handle and with a clutter and grind, he yanked the roller shutter. Inside, the truck was packed wall to wall with South London's finest. They stood shoulder to shoulder with their faces set with focus and anticipation.

"I fucking live for this," Russell muttered as he leapt off the truck.

Johnny, Martin and the others began piling out, some jumped while others clambered over each other in a hurry to hit the ground. Johnny and Russell were bouncing lightly on the balls

of their feet. They pumped their arms and exhaled sharply, trying to settle the surge of adrenaline firing through their veins.

The lads from the transit vans pounded over and stood around Buster.

Buster stood tall as he surveyed his battle-hardened troops. Over sixty heads and each one with the heart and the bottle to stand firm when it kicks off. There could be no room for hesitation and no space for doubt. Buster understood that terrace warfare wasn't just about fists and fury. It's mental psychology, an unspoken game of dominance where weakness is hunted like blood in the water. Buster would never flinch and never falter. His stare alone would set the tone. It was sharp and unwavering and had been carved out of years of standing his ground and leading from the front. Pride wasn't just a feeling for Buster... it was his duty.

Keeping the firm in the top slot wasn't just an achievement but a lifestyle. Week in and week out, rain or shine, Buster ensured that when they stepped out, everyone knew exactly who the top boy was.

Buster took a small step forward into the centre of the group and raised his hand. His presence was enough to quiet the noise. He jerked his chin towards the inner circle, Johnny, Russell, Ox and Smudge. They immediately closed in around him.

There was a quick and hushed exchange of words.

Ox leapt back onto his truck and began to carry back and forth several heavy boxes. He tore one open and exposed three-inch, rusted, heavy gauge steel bolts.

Having communicated the plan to his top boys, Buster ordered them to disperse and wait for the signal.

The lads, nodded, filled their pockets with the bolts before melting away into the busy train station

"Do you reckon Debbie will be at the Arms tonight?" Martin asked.

"Its Saturday, mate. Almost certainly."

"What's this then, Johnny said with a feigned laugh. "Fancy your chances?"

"Maybe."

"Just go for it mate," Johnny thought. "Every other fucker in the pub has been there."

"Just don't go falling in love," Russell said in a serious tone.

"Here we go," Johnny interrupted with a chuckle. "Another slice of Russell's wisdom."

"I'm serious Martin," Russell persisted. "Don't be the mug that tries to reform a ruined bird."

"Ruined?" Martin asked with a quizzical expression.

"You know what I mean," Russell said bluntly. "Finding a good sort from the start is cheaper and comes with a lot less aggravation."

"I aint looking for love," Martin retorted. "Just some casual, no strings sex. It has been bloody months!"

"It's just a friendly warning," Russell said. "From my experience, the more birds you go out with, then the more you get see the patterns, same games and the same silly bollocks but from different faces. These birds all try to act like they're unique or something special but, mate, believe me when I tell you that they're all running the same script."

"You have to be the most cynical bloke in South London."

"I've seen good men fall, trapped and left in tatters."

There was a moments silence.

"I'm just saying," Russell continued.

"I just want a bit of the other," Martin said as he shrugged his shoulders.

Buster checked his watch. rain was on time and due in on platform three.

The distant hum of the incoming Pompey train grew steadily louder. Its wheels screeched softly on the iron rails as it curved towards the end of the platform.

All across Waterloo station, the South London lads began to stir. They had been loitering in small groups of twos and threes or tucked away behind the pillars and shops. But now, like iron to magnet, they converged. The signal was unspoken and instinctive.

It was game time.

At the gate, the ticket collector stiffened as the hoard of young casuals approached in a wave of bodies and adrenaline. With Buster up front, the ticket collector stepped aside and let the Casual army sweep past with their eyes fixed on the slowing train.

"Don't you fucking move, right?" Smudge hissed as he passed the ticket collector.

"Got it."

The train came to a halt with a long sigh of brakes and metal grinding to stillness.

Buster's firm spread out in a line across the exit.

Johnny could feel a deep, steady resolve tightening his chest. There was fear, sharp and undeniable but it was held firmly in check by his overwhelming duty to the Firm. His heart began to pound and yet he felt calm in his purpose. He was excited and relished the opportunity to mix it up with like-minded weekend offenders.

Then...CLICK-CLACK and the first doors sprang open and out they came...The Pompey Boys.

A tide of pent-up energy and flushed faces from sinking tinned beer on the journey. They immediately began to mob up, and yell out while others fist pumped the air.

"Now that's a proper mob," Russel muttered.

“You have to hand it to Pompey, they’re always up for it.”

The Pompey lads spilled out in force until they mirrored their adversaries.

‘POMPEY...POMPEY...POMPEY!’

Their battle cries echoed off the platform walls. The lads were hugging, shoving and laughing in a glorious, chaotic surge.

‘POMPEY...POMPEY...POMPEY!’

Buster’s firm moved in a single, pulsing body. His was a violent, disciplined army of highly capable young men. They stood firm, with no sign of fear... and they were ready.

“No one, and I mean no one make a move until I give the signal,” Buster ordered.

‘POMPEY...POMPEY...POMPEY!’

Buster took two steps forward and raised his right hand above his head.

‘POMPEY...POMPEY...POMPEY!’

He dropped it.

The firm launched their first attack. Hundreds of steel bolts whistled through the air. They were dense, fast and unrelenting. They plunged down on the Pompey boys with a terrifying force. They thudded down on shoulders, chests and heads. The brave battle cries quickly turned to shouts of alarm and surprise.

“Argh!”

“Fuck!”

“Shit!”

The heavy gauge bolts tore through flesh and cracked bones.

They cried out and covered their heads and faces. Some had taken to the ground to protect themselves. The tightly packed group were in panic mode. There was no shelter, only the flat expanse of the platform. The hail of heavy gauge steel bolts had come thick and fast. The noise of the bolts pounding down on the concrete, was deafening.

“First blood!” Ox yelled out as he watched a lad running in a circle cradling his bloody face,

The Firm let out a collective, ferocious a roar.

Some of the Pompey boys had clung to each other in a desperate bid to stay upright and on their feet in defiance to the attack. Others had dropped to their knees or curled themselves on the ground for protection. There was utter confusion and urgency, but no place to run.

Then, Buster raised his hand and the assault ceased.

There was just silence. One by one the Pompey lads began to rise. It was slow and with caution. Some were cradling their arms while others pressed swelling bruises and cuts...but they stood...shaken, sore and yet unwilling to stay down.

The camaraderie remained with a hand here, a nod there while checking each other.

Then, just as the group began to gather, Buster dropped his arm again.

The second-wave of heavy gauge bolts fell, faster and even more fierce. They hit the group with a renewed frenzy. The lads scattered, covering their heads with teeth clenched against the ferocious sting. The bolts hammered down, it was raw and savage but still the Pompey boys endured it with nothing but grit, closeness and the determination to 'have it' with South London.

"We are Millwall...expect no mercy!" Buster cried out.

Ox exploded away from the firm like a missile. His massive frame thundered down the platform. It was like the concrete beneath his trainers trembled with each step. His breath came in ragged bursts and a low growl bubbled in his throat as he zeroed in on the biggest of the standing Pompey lads. In his mind, Ox was back in Northern Ireland, this was the battlefield and he wanted blood.

The big lad, didn't have a chance as Ox launched a powerful right hander. There was a sickening crunch before the lad went flying like he'd been hit by a demolition wrecking ball.

"Come on, let's have it!" Ox roared as he continued to charge into the mob.

The second lad wasn't just knocked over, he was driven down onto the concrete with Ox stomping on him as if the lad had insulted his mother. The third lad caught a knee in the gut and flipped backwards in a graceless sprawl and the fourth was kicked with full-force straight into the stomach. The lad was down, gasping for breath but Ox didn't care. With wild eyes and snarling, he launched one ferocious blow after another. His attack had been raw, unfiltered and wrapped in muscle and rage. His military training had taught him to dominate, to break and to be feared. He stood up momentarily and turned to see if Buster had watched him take out four of the invaders...he had.

Johnny had been bouncing lightly on the balls of his feet when the firm surged forward. He was controlling the rhythm that was pulsing through his frame like a war drum. His jaw was tight and his eyes narrowed. The raw buzz of adrenaline clawed away at his insides. He clenched both fists hard and squeezed the jitters into his knuckles and exhaled sharply.

One of the Pompey lads had Johnny in his sight. He bolted towards him like a wild dog. His teeth were gritted and he swung his fists wide with fury.

Johnny didn't flinch. He had sized him up in a blink. The lad was too wild, too open and too eager. Targeting Johnny had been a mistake.

Johnny struck like a sniper, his powerful right hook was surgical and savage. He followed it up with a speedy left hook.

CRACK!

Then a ferocious right cross.

SNAP!

Johnny launched an uppercut that lifted the lad clean off his feet. The last punch had folded the Pompey lad like a deck chair. He hit the cold concrete like a dead weight. His eyes were blank and his limbs twitched. The lad was out cold, spark out.

Johnny stepped back; his breathing was now steady. It was just another spanking handed out with blood and precision.

SMACK!

Johnny had just been given a right hander. A second punch whistled past his head with ferocity.

"You, cheeky bastard!" Johnny said with a wry smile.

SMACK!

Russell was on him and delivered a devastating blow. There was a crunch of broken bone and it was all over. He smiled at Johnny before soldiering on to his next victim. Martin had held his own, while Buster punched and kicked his way through the failing mob. He was relentless in his pursuit of blood and victory. Within minutes it was over. The brave Pompey lads were beaten. A couple of the younger lot were still kicking at those lads who had fallen.

"That's enough!" Buster shouted out.

The buzz and excitement of the tear up was beginning to fade.

"Let's move," Buster called out.

He was still high on adrenaline.

Johnny, Russel, Smudge and Ox were quick to fall behind Buster as he led his troops out through the platform exit, across the station and out to the waiting vehicles.

"The old bill will probably be here any minute," Johnny said before clambering into the back of the truck.

Buster shook his head and chuckled.

"Not a chance. I had a couple of the lads phone the old bill and report a series of robberies, domestic violence and a mugging, miles from here. It bought us the time we needed."

Pompey had come with fire and ambition. South London had answered with fists, blood and an unbreakable will. The battle of Waterloo was theirs by the resolve of those who refused to be beaten.

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