Bonded by Blood

Murder and Intrigue in the Essex Ganglands

Bernard O'Mahoney

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About the Author

Bernard O’Mahoney is the author of a number of true-crime books, including the bestselling *Essex Boys*, *The Dream Solution* and *Wannabe in my Gang?* He has also written of his experiences in the army and on a tour of duty in Northern Ireland in *Soldier of the Queen* and of his gradual transition from Nazi thug to Nazi opponent in *Hateland*.

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I dedicate this book to my beautiful wife, Emma Elizabeth O'Mahoney, who died in my arms on 2 December 2004, just four months after we married, aged twenty-six.

I would like to thank the following people for helping me through the darkest days following my loss: Vinney, Siobhan, Glen, Ebony, Lauren, Adrian, Natalie and Karis, Debra, Michael, Carol, Finn, Lilly, Hughie, Kate, Leah, Molly, my mother Anne, Jacquelyn and Ann Lippett, Gavin and Sue, Andy Byrne, Miss South London, Toene Shadiya, Kassy McGuiness, Chop Lambert, Chemical Earl, Page 7 Fella Leo, Baron, Burdo, Good Game, Good Game Boss Eye, Bouldie, Mally, Marcus, Lee, Mark (duck) Green, Kevin Carvell, Darrel Edwards, Auntie Patricia and Uncle Paul, brother Jerry, Amy, Leanne, Tino, Ken Hassle, Liverpool Lenny, Corrine Payne, Peterborough Bobby, Stevie Dee, Brett, Martin (Whizz Kid) Moore, the Cowley family, Julie Ford, Wes and Zoe (He's not with me, woman), Shane, Whizzer, Taffy, Little Tony, Rachie, Jim Dean senior, Jim junior, Mad Jack, Gary Jones, Emma Bailey and her inseparable other half, Erica Els, Tracie d'Cruz, Solicitor Hugh Cauthery and last but by no means least, Dr Wilson, for the time he gave up to be with me and the care he showed.

Until we meet again, Emmie xx

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Prologue

Today, I intend to put the events of November and December 1995 behind me. I have waited more than a decade for this day, this hour, this moment to arrive.

Teenager Leah Betts died in November 1995 after taking an Ecstasy pill that was supplied by my associates. The following month, three of those associates were murdered in cold blood. Those two terrible events have dominated my life ever since. They have dictated where I live and where I spend my time; divided my friends and torn my family apart.

Leah's father appeared on national television and claimed I was responsible for the death of his teenage daughter. His words hit me hard: very hard, in fact, because I was not given the right to reply to his allegation. The police and others suspected me of executing my three former friends: I feared not only reprisals but that I could end up serving a life sentence for crimes I did not commit.

With the advances in forensic science and the countless overhauls of the judicial system following a spate of miscarriages of justice in the '90s people may scoff at the thought of such a thing happening in this day and age. Unfortunately, it did happen; fortunately, it didn't happen to me. I was not the only suspect in Essex Police's misaligned sights for the murder of my three associates. Two other men, Mick Steele and Jack Whomes, became suspects after their one-time friend, Darren Nicholls, levelled his accusing finger in their direction. Nicholls had been arrested for importing cannabis and offered to give police the names of the killers in return for a reduced sentence for himself.

Ten years after Nicholls's dubious evidence secured their convictions, Steele's and Whomes's cases were referred

back to the Court of Appeal. I, along with many others, thought justice would finally be done and they would be freed. After a five-day hearing, their appeals were dismissed. For them, the fight goes on; for me, it's probably over.

That is why I am here today, down the lane where the executions took place. It's not the first time I have visited this ghastly place, but it will be my last. I want closure; I want to clear my mind, exorcise the faces of so many young, dead people that haunt me. The truth will be told one day, but not until the guilty and I have gone to our graves. I am standing on the spot where the three men met their deaths. I can visualise the Range Rover they arrived in making its way down the narrow, uneven, potholed track on the night of 6 December 1995. The snow was falling heavily and had bleached the surrounding fields.

In the driving seat was 26-year-old Craig Rolfe. Earlier that afternoon his partner, Diane Evans, had been busy wrapping Christmas presents when he returned home with their daughter, Georgie. The couple had spent about an hour and a half together before Rolfe announced that he wanted Diane to be ready by seven o'clock because they were going out. Rolfe said he had booked a table for six at the Global Net Café, a restaurant on South Street in Romford. They would be joined by two friends and their girlfriends. Rolfe then dropped Diane off at Lakeside shopping centre so that she could buy a new dress to wear that night. Diane was never to see him again.

Tony Tucker, 38, another of the would-be diners, sat in the front passenger seat of the Range Rover. After dropping off Diane earlier that evening, Rolfe had picked him up from his house. Tucker's partner, Anna Whitehead, recalled that her boyfriend was wearing jeans, a white vest, a North Sails sweater and Caterpillar boots. He was also carrying his Nokia mobile phone. Like Diane, Anna didn't think her partner would be away long because they were due to be in

Romford, a 20-minute journey from their Basildon home, later that evening for their meal. Anna was never to see Tucker again.

It was surprising that Tucker and Rolfe had an appetite because earlier that afternoon they had enjoyed a meal at the TGI Friday's restaurant in Lakeside with friends Peter Cuthbert and Pat Tate.

Tate, 37, sat immediately behind Tucker as the Range Rover made its way down the track. Tate had started the day in a foul mood. He had rowed with his ex-girlfriend and the mother of his son, Sarah Saunders. She had asked him for a new car because a Volkswagen Golf Tate had given her a few weeks earlier was proving to be unreliable. On more than one occasion, Sarah and her young son, Jordan, had been forced to walk along busy roads after the vehicle had ground to a halt. Tate, on the other hand, was driving around in a Mercedes that he had acquired after using Sarah's details to get a bank loan. When Sarah finally lost her temper and pointed out this injustice to Tate, he went berserk. Tate, Tucker and Rolfe drove around to Sarah's mum's and 'repossessed' the Volkswagen, then Tate, in a blind rage, threw all of Sarah's possessions into the street. Concerned for her safety, Tucker and Rolfe had physically grabbed Tate and bundled him into their car. It was the last time Sarah was ever to see Tate alive.

By the time Tate had joined Tucker and Rolfe at TGI Friday's his mood had changed dramatically: few can recall ever seeing him so happy. Tate had given the waitress a tip and asked her for a date. They had exchanged phone numbers. Tate promised her he would be in touch. It was a promise that would unwittingly be broken.

The Range Rover lurched from side to side as it made its way slowly down the farm track. The occupants laughed and warned Rolfe to watch where he was going.

At a quarter to seven, Tate's mobile phone rang. It was Sarah. She wanted to apologise for the row they'd had

earlier. Tate couldn’t have been more polite.

‘Oh, don’t worry. I am sorry for going mad and everything else,’ he said. Before Sarah could reply, he continued, ‘Listen, I can’t talk at the moment, I’m with people, give me a call tomorrow and we’ll sort it all out.’

‘OK, goodbye,’ said Sarah. The line went dead. Tate had hung up. He would never get the chance to ‘sort it all out’.

The ‘people’ Tate had mentioned to Sarah sat alongside him in the rear of the Range Rover. A co-conspirator lurked nearby, watching and waiting; eager for the prey to fall into the deadly trap that had been set.

The car stopped where I am now standing. In its path stood a locked five-bar gate. A sign facing the car and its occupants read: ‘Countryside premium scheme. Farming operations must still take place, so please take special care to avoid injury. The use of guns or any other activity which disturbs people or wildlife are not allowed on this land. Enjoy your visit.’ Nobody was going to take any notice of it. The time now was approximately ten to seven. Diane, Anna and Tate’s date for the night, Clare, would have been glancing at their watches as they put on their make-up and their finest threads. They would have been thinking that the boys would be home soon to take them out to dinner. This was to be no ordinary meal: they were all going out to celebrate becoming millionaires.

Tucker, Tate and Rolfe had bragged about their ‘big deal’ for weeks. Their minds mangled with drugs and their common sense blinded by greed, they genuinely believed tonight was the night they were going to become rich. Fucking mugs.

As eight o’clock drew nearer, Tucker, Tate and Rolfe’s anxious dinner dates began to call their men. A message left on Tucker’s answering machine said, ‘Hello, babe, give us a ring and let me know how you’re getting on. I’m all ready now. Bye.’ The calls were in vain: dinner was going to be ruined and the boys were going to be late – very late.

When the Range Rover had pulled up in front of the locked gate, the man sitting next to Tate in the rear of the car got out, claiming he had a key to open it. The man who had been lying in wait emerged from the bushes with a pump-action shotgun in each hand. The interior light had come on because the Range Rover door was open, thus ensuring those sitting inside the car couldn't see what was going on outside because it was pitch-black.

The man holding the shotgun handed one to his accomplice before leaning through the open rear door of the Range Rover. From less than two feet away, he fired his first shot into Rolfe's neck, leaving a huge open wound. The shotgun barrel was so close to Rolfe's head the explosion caused burns to his neck and the seat headrest. The second shot hit Tucker in the right side of the face near his cheek. Tate, in the back of the car, was then shot in the side of the chest, damaging his liver. Rolfe hadn't suspected a thing: his hands remained on the steering wheel, his foot wedged firmly on the brake pedal. Tucker remained relaxed, sitting in an upright position, his legs crossed, his mobile phone in his hand.

Tate, who had witnessed his friends being slaughtered, began to squeal like a baby, pleading with the assassins to spare his life. In a vain attempt to make himself a smaller target, he tried to crawl into the corner of the car, bending his knees and covering his face. Panic-stricken, he smashed the rear passenger-door window in a hopeless effort to escape. The gunman coolly reloaded and turned the smoking barrel of his gun away from Tate, then shot Rolfe behind the right ear. The blast exited between his eyes, totally disfiguring him: one eye hung down on his cheek.

Tucker was then shot on the right side of his face again, this time just above the jaw. The blast exited through the left side of his mouth; pieces of his jawbone, teeth and tissue splattered all over the dashboard and windscreen. A third shot slammed into the back of his head, causing his

skull to fracture so severely a gaping fourth wound appeared above his right ear. The pathologist later said that Tucker's head had 'exploded'.

Tate was screaming throughout the onslaught, begging for mercy, but he was never going to be shown any. The gunmen had agreed upon a pact whereby each of them would fire shots into the victims' bodies so one could not give evidence against the other should they be arrested.

During the executions, one of the weapons fell apart. One gunman grabbed his accomplice's pump-action shotgun and shouted, 'Give me some cartridges! Give me some cartridges!' When they were given to him, he reloaded, then walked around the car to the window nearest Tate and shot him through the back of the head at point-blank range. Tate received a second shot to the head, but this only caused a superficial wound. When the weapons fell silent, the gun smoke cleared to reveal the carnage. Rolfe, Tucker and Tate lay dead. Flesh, bone and brain tissue were sprayed throughout the car. Blood poured from their wounds. It was a gruesome scene.

Throughout the night, Tucker's loved ones, unaware that he was dead, left messages on his mobile's answering service. One female in tears pleaded, 'For God's sake, Tone, phone me. Speak to you later. Bye.' Another caller said, 'We are worried, ring as soon as you can.'

The following morning farmer Peter Theobald and a friend, Ken Jiggins, scraped the ice and snow from their Land Rover and set off to feed their pheasants. Driving down Workhouse Lane from the farm, they saw the Range Rover parked in front of the gate. They thought it might belong to poachers. Jiggins got out of the Land Rover and tapped on the passenger-side window because he thought the occupants were asleep. He didn't think the vehicle had been there overnight because there was no ice or snow on the windows, unlike on his vehicle, which had been parked only a few hundred yards away in identical conditions. There was

no response, so Jiggins peered inside. He saw the blood-soaked bodies and rang 999 on his friend's mobile phone. The call was logged at 8.05 a.m.

In a state of shock Jiggins explained to the emergency operator, 'We just drove down our farm track to go and feed our pheasants and we came across a Range Rover with three people in it. At first, we thought they were poachers, but when we looked inside we realised they were dead. There is blood all over the motor and all over them.'

Within a short time, the quiet farm track was swarming with police, as the investigation began. Tucker's answering service continued to record appeals from his loved ones to contact them. They would soon realise that reports of three men found dead in a Range Rover appearing in the news bulletins could well be Tucker, Tate and Rolfe.

A female left a message saying, 'Tone, it's only me, time now is five past ten. I still have not heard from you. Could you ring, please, and let us know you are all right because at the moment I think you are dead. They have just said on the television that there are three men dead in a Range Rover. I think it's you.'

All traces of what happened down the lane that night are now gone. The five-bar gate has been replaced and the sign warning walkers about the use of guns on the land has also been removed. A new sign advises the public of a different kind of danger: 'Warning – snakes.' Fortunately, the biggest snakes ever to visit this lane are long gone.

Although there is nothing to see, I felt a need to come here. Walking away from the scene of those grotesque executions, I feel relief tinged with sadness. Relief because the nightmare is over, sadness because every other step I take on my journey back to the main road brings to mind an incident or a face from my dismal past. Disco Dave bowling to the front of the queue outside Raquels nightclub; Larry Johnston, currently serving a life sentence for murder, launching himself at some unfortunate customer he deemed

to have upset him; Chris Lombard, a gentle giant, saying for the hundredth time that he was giving up working the door at Raquels because his girlfriend thought it was too rough. Chris is now dead, cut down in a hail of bullets. Kevin Whitaker, murdered by Tucker and Rolfe, his body discarded like rubbish in a roadside ditch. John Marshall, shot dead; Kevin Jones, Andreas Bouzis and Leah Betts, poisoned in their prime by Ecstasy supplied by my associates. I am recalling names as if off a war memorial and then picturing the face of each fallen comrade or foe in my head. The victims, of course, didn't fall in any war, but at times it felt like we were fighting one. It's hard to understand how so many young people connected, directly or indirectly, to such a small circle of friends could end up dead or imprisoned for life.

I'm at the top of the lane now. Cars are driving along the A130, taking commuters to work in Chelmsford and Basildon – normal people going about their everyday business. That's what I want to do: be fucking normal. I'm tempted to turn around and look down the lane for a last time, but I don't. I have to look forward and keep on looking forward if I am ever going to escape my past. I first told this story six years ago in a book called *Essex Boys*. A few of the incidents surrounding the murders remain as I told them then, but fresh evidence concerning the murder convictions of Whomes and Steele and startling revelations about the victims' tyrannical behaviour have only recently come to light and, until now, have remained untold. I am therefore going to tell this story for the last time and then I am going to try and forget that the terrible events described in this book ever happened.

Chapter 1

Like all parents, Jack and Pam Whomes wanted what was best for their five sons – Terry, Jack, John, William and David – and daughter Jayne. When Pam and Jack had been kids, the East End of London had been a relatively safe place. The fact everybody knew one another within the close-knit community of Canning Town, where they lived, ensured that. But in the 1970s, families began to move out of the East End to new towns, like Basildon in Essex, to be replaced by immigrants. The mood in east London began to change.

Pam and Jack talked about starting a new life elsewhere, but it remained just talk until one afternoon when their eldest son nearly lost his life. Terry, then aged 11, was confronted by an Asian youth on his way home from school on the Barking Road in Canning Town and stabbed in the face. His parents decided enough was enough and moved out to rural Suffolk the very next weekend. Jack Whomes senior set up his own business as a motor mechanic and after two years the family purchased a property with thirteen acres of land in the village of Haughley Green.

The family's arrival was met with resentment by some members of the community: these locals felt their idyllic way of life was being threatened by East End migrants – or East End yobs, as they often referred to them. The parish magazine reported that Haughley Green was being targeted by families moving from London to escape city life. But the Whomes family soon settled in and eventually people in the village did warm to them. Children would flock to their house because Terry, Jack and John had motorbikes and old cars that they drove around the fields. This interest in cars and motorbikes developed as the Whomes brothers grew

older, and they all became extremely good mechanics. Jack, in particular, was very proficient.

In 1990, Suffolk Police arrested Jack and John Whomes in an early-morning raid. The brothers had two cars and a van, which had been stolen and their registrations and engine numbers changed. Jack and John denied any involvement in the thefts, so the police bailed them pending further inquiries. Those further inquiries dragged on for two years until eventually Jack and John were charged with conspiracy to obtain property by deception and handling stolen goods. The brothers stood trial at Ipswich Crown Court.

After three weeks, they were convicted and bailed so that pre-sentence reports could be compiled. In February 1992, they returned to court, where they were both sentenced to 16 months' imprisonment. It was, to say the least, a shock for the brothers, as it was the first time they had been in trouble. At Norwich prison, John and Jack were given the job of working on the servery at meal times, but, after just ten days, they were moved to an open prison called Hollesley Bay in Woodbridge, Suffolk.

In 1887, Hollesley Bay was founded as a colonial college that trained people intending to emigrate. When the Whomes brothers arrived, its purpose was to provide different regimes for adult Category D offenders: life-sentence prisoners at the end of their custodial time and young offenders. It was the largest prison farm within the Prison Service and had a stud of Suffolk Punch horses, which were shown at local, county and national shows. Inmates were pretty much free to roam for up to two miles around the grounds, which included an area of the local beach. It was a prison to which inmates did not mind being sent.

John and Jack were put into a wing called the Cosford Unit. One evening, while queuing for their meal, they got talking to a man who introduced himself as Darren Nicholls.

Nicholls had appeared at Chelmsford Crown Court on a charge of distributing counterfeit currency and was

sentenced to three years' imprisonment. Eight months earlier, he had been invited to a meeting with two men he believed were faces from Basildon's criminal fraternity. The two men dropped the names of Basildon hard men and claimed they wanted to get their hands on as much counterfeit money as possible, as they were planning to 'pay' for drugs off a rival gang with it. Nicholls, an impressionable loudmouth, told the men he could supply them with £250,000 worth of counterfeit £10 notes at a cost of £2 each. Nicholls was purchasing the notes for £1.50, so stood to earn £25,000. The deal was struck and the conversation turned towards the drug deal rip-off the two men said they were planning. One of the men asked Nicholls if he was concerned about getting ripped off himself. Nicholls laughed and said, 'Listen, right, I've got a gun at home. If anyone ever tried to rip me off, I'd blow their fucking brains out.'

Nicholls agreed he would meet the men at a hotel at the South Mimms service station on the M25 once he had got the counterfeit notes together. When Nicholls arrived at the hotel a few days later, he was surrounded by armed police and arrested. The two 'Basildon faces' he had done the deal with were undercover police officers.

After a short spell at Chelmsford prison, Nicholls was transferred to Hollesley Bay. Despite the relaxed regime and stress-free environment, he proved to be extremely unpopular with the other inmates. Many of them believed he was informing on them to the prison officers. This conclusion was reached because Nicholls seemed to spend more time trying to win favour with the officers than he did socialising with his fellow prisoners. However, a month after Nicholls began his sentence, his luck changed dramatically. There was a protest by the prisoners over the quality of the food they were being served. They insisted that it be replaced. They shouted, banged tables and refused to move until their demands were met. The prison officers listened to

their grievances at first but eventually told the inmates that if they did not comply with their request to leave the canteen, they would have them shipped out to a closed prison where they would lose all of the privileges they enjoyed at Hollesley Bay.

Nicholls and three other inmates were the only ones who refused to budge. Finally, the prison governor went to speak to Nicholls and his fellow protestors. The governor listened, examined the food they were complaining about and agreed he would look into the matter. As none of the four had eaten, he arranged to have fresh ham and cheese rolls prepared for them. When the men sat down together to enjoy their food and their victory over the prison officers, one of them, a large, intense-looking man, leaned towards Nicholls and held out his hand.

‘Michael Steele. But you can call me Mick,’ he said. From that moment on, Nicholls’s life in prison changed dramatically. Steele, who was well respected by the prison staff and other inmates, took Nicholls under his wing.

Steele was serving a nine-year sentence for drug importation. In the early ’80s, he had purchased a 33-foot motor cruiser in which he would sail over to Ostend once every two weeks. Upon his arrival, he would purchase a large quantity of tobacco from a shop near the harbour, load it onto his boat and sail back to England. Once the route and technique were tried and tested, Steele switched to smuggling cannabis. It’s a fault of human nature, I suppose: whatever we have, we always want more. Mick Steele is no different. He used the profits from his trips to purchase a single-engine Cessna aircraft for £38,000. Soon, he was flying back and forth to the Continent, importing large loads of cannabis into England.

Customs officers had been tipped off about Steele’s activities and mounted Operation Water-ski in an effort to catch him. But Steele, a very intelligent man, realised he was under surveillance and decided to outfox Customs

officers rather than cease his smuggling operation. With financial restraints on their surveillance team, Customs couldn't afford to follow Steele all of the time. They reasoned that if they just watched his plane, they would catch him red-handed importing drugs. Steele realised what Customs were up to and purchased a second aircraft, which he kept at a different airfield. Steele would drive out of his home and notice the Customs officers following at a discreet distance in his rear-view mirror. If Steele drove in the opposite direction to the airfield where his first plane was kept, Customs would pull over and leave him be. Within just a few hours, Steele could fly to Holland using the second aircraft, pick up the consignment of drugs, unload them and be back home with Customs thinking he had just popped out to do some shopping.

But in May 1989 Steele's luck ran out. He arrived at the Albert pub in Colchester to hand over his latest consignment, which he had transferred from his plane to a white Fiat van. Two Customs officers had followed him but didn't have the back-up to arrest him. Steele noticed them and drove off at speed. In desperation, the Customs officers tried to ram Steele's vehicle, but he managed to avoid them by crossing the central reservation and driving the wrong way down a dual carriageway.

Steele laid low for weeks, but meanwhile his mother fell ill and the police knew Steele would risk everything to ensure she was OK. They put a surveillance team in the hospital where Mrs Steele was being cared for. When Steele walked onto the ward, one of the officers approached him and asked him who he was.

'I'm Jeff,' Steele replied, 'I'm trying to find my wife.'

For a moment, the policeman hesitated, but Steele looked so composed the officer thought he couldn't possibly be the man they were looking for. 'OK,' the policeman said, 'off you go, it's not you we are looking for.'

‘I hope you catch him,’ Steele replied, before walking off towards the exit. Just as he was about to step outside, another officer shouted, ‘That’s Steele, you fucking idiots, grab him!’

At his trial, Steele faced ten charges of smuggling. He pleaded guilty to one – the one he had been arrested for – and not guilty to the other nine. Those that had been accused of assisting Steele with the drug importation said they thought he was smuggling in tobacco. They were all acquitted. As the case unfolded, the jury were shown surveillance pictures which Customs claimed showed Steele and others unloading drugs. Steele pointed out that Customs were wrong. The pictures couldn’t have been taken where or when Customs said they had been. In fact, it looked as if several of the pictures had been taken at a later date than Customs had claimed. The evidence against Steele began to crumble, and eventually the prosecution case collapsed.

Steele was cleared of nine charges, but he still had to be sentenced for the one to which he had pleaded guilty. The judge sentenced him to nine years’ imprisonment and ordered that the courts seize £120,000 of his money, half of his former marital home, £15,000 from his mother’s home, his 33-foot motor cruiser, his £38,000 aircraft and his Toyota Land Cruiser. To Steele, it may have seemed like a harsh sentence: little did he know his association with drug smuggling was going to cost him even more in the future.

The man who was going to use his knowledge of drug smuggling against him was using Steele from the day he met him. Darren Nicholls, boosted by his ‘friendship’ with Steele, bragged to the Whomes brothers about the clout he had in the prison. He told them if they wanted anything, whether it be alcohol, drugs or bodybuilding steroids, he was the man to see. Nicholls was not the type of person the Whomes brothers wished to be associated with. Jack was vehemently against the use of drugs. Some considered him

an oddball because he did not drink or smoke, but it was just the way he was. Despite this, the Whomes brothers did not ignore Nicholls because after a few days they noticed he was constantly on the phone to his wife, crying about not being able to cope with prison life. They realised his boasts about being a big drug dealer in prison were a mask for the fact he was weak and unable to do his time. In short, they felt sorry for him.

Mick Steele's cell was opposite the Whomes brothers' and inevitably they would exchange pleasantries. After a short period of time, Steele learned that Jack, like him, was fascinated by anything mechanical and the pair soon became good friends. John, Jack, Steele and Nicholls began to spend more time together. Steele would often talk about a good friend of his named Pat Tate, whom he had met at Swaleside prison on the Isle of Sheppey in Kent earlier in his sentence. Tate's then girlfriend, Sarah Saunders, used to visit him there and on one occasion recognised a fellow visitor, Jackie Street, in the waiting room. Jackie used to own Longwood riding stables in Basildon where Sarah had once kept her horse. The two got chatting and both were surprised to find their partners, Tate and Steele, had become friends in the prison. After that first meeting, Sarah and Jackie would meet up before each visit and spend an hour or so outside the prison talking to each other. The two couples soon became friends. Eventually, Tate and Steele were moved to HMP Blantyre House, an old country home in Goudhurst, Kent. They shared a cell, and Steele had taught Tate how to use computers.

Steele told the Whomes brothers and Nicholls that Tate had been going through a difficult time and Steele had written to him urging him to apply for a transfer to Hollesley Bay. Tate, he said, had now done this and had been accepted, so he would be joining him there soon.

When Tate arrived, Steele introduced him to John, Jack and Nicholls, and they all began to socialise together. Tate

worked as the prison gym orderly and he would supply inmates not only with steroids but also heroin, crack cocaine, speed and cannabis. Nicholls, an unfit, podgy man, was encouraged by Tate to work out and soon he had acquired a steroid-enhanced muscle-bound frame. This new look, combined with the stature of associating with Tate and Steele, gave Nicholls confidence and he began to talk and act like some sort of gangster. Nicholls and Tate became particularly close, training at the gym together and spending time in each other's cells. Tate told Nicholls that he had been in trouble for as long as he could remember. At the age of 12, Tate said, he had found a wallet with more than £300 in it on the roof of a parked car. It turned out that the money was intended for a Christmas party being held by the local police. Tate spent the money on a leather coat, a record player and taxis and restaurants with his friends during trips to Cambridge.

When the police caught up with Tate, he was charged with theft and sent to an approved school. Tate confided in Nicholls that his time there and his childhood in general had been pretty awful. He felt aggrieved about the way he had been treated, and so vowed to dedicate the rest of his life to waging war on the law-abiding members of society.

In December 1988, Tate had robbed a Happy Eater restaurant in Basildon. He had arrived there off his face after a weekend of non-stop clubbing with Sarah Saunders. After the couple had eaten, Tate got into a dispute with the staff about his bill. To compensate himself, he punched the cashier and snatched £800 from the till. When he was arrested, Tate was found to be in possession of small amounts of cocaine, cannabis and speed which he said were for his personal use.

On 29 December 1988, Billericay magistrates decided that Tate would see in the New Year within the confines of Chelmsford prison. Tate, however, had made other plans. He jumped over the side of the dock and made for the door. Six

police officers joined the jailer and jumped onto his back, but he broke free and ran off. One WPC received a black eye and another officer was kicked in the face, as they tried to block Tate's escape. He ploughed his way out of the court to an awaiting motorcycle. Roadblocks, which were immediately set up, failed to trap him. His escape was so speedy, the police couldn't say what type of motorcycle it was, or whether he was alone or had travelled as a passenger.

Several days later, Tate surfaced in Spain. He remained there for a year but made the mistake of crossing over into Gibraltar, where he was arrested by the British authorities and later sent to prison.

Since Hollesley Bay was an open prison, there was no shortage of contraband. Alcohol and drugs, even sex with visiting females, were readily available. Steele, Tate, Nicholls and the Whomes brothers would often have alcohol and Chinese takeaways smuggled in to them and sit up late into the night eating, drinking and having a laugh.

One afternoon, Tate and John Whomes were walking back to the unit after meeting John's brother, Terry, who had dropped off new T-shirts and a couple of bottles of whisky. John had put on the T-shirts and hidden the whisky in his jacket pockets. Tate and John had then given Terry an order for Chinese food, which he was going to deliver later that evening when it got dark. As Tate and John neared the unit, a prison officer came out and asked, 'What have you got on you?'

'We haven't got anything,' Tate and John replied.

The officer said that he had watched them meet somebody, and therefore if they did not come clean, he was going to search them. John took his prison sweater off, then the T-shirts his brother had given to him. 'Here,' he said, throwing them at the officer to catch. 'That's all I was given – T-shirts, which we are allowed to have anyway.'

The officer said that without prior permission nothing was allowed to be handed in, therefore John would be charged. He told Tate and John to follow him before turning and marching off towards the unit.

‘You can’t nick John for those T-shirts,’ Tate said.

‘I can, and I’m going to,’ replied the officer.

‘You don’t understand. I’m telling you that you can’t and won’t nick John for those T-shirts, or I will fucking kill you.’

The officer did not reply, he just continued walking. When John entered the unit, he took his jacket off and gave it and the whisky to another inmate. John and Tate were then called into the office, where Tate began to tell the senior officer what he could and couldn’t do regarding John and the T-shirts. ‘He’s just a young boy,’ he said. ‘If you nick him for that, it will increase tension on the unit and there will be trouble. Serious fucking trouble.’

The senior officer said that the matter would be considered and they would be informed of any decision in due course. Tate and John left the office and went up to their rooms. Later that night, Terry arrived outside the rear of Cosford Unit with the Chinese meal. Jack leapt over the balcony, ran over to Terry, collected the meal and made his way back to John, Tate, Steele and Nicholls, who were already busy consuming the smuggled bottles of whisky.

The next morning, John was working at the prison stables when two officers arrived and told him that he was being taken to the punishment block. A few minutes after being placed in a cell, John heard shouting and realised Tate was also going to be put in a cell. Unlike John, six officers were escorting Tate because he was being uncooperative, calling them wankers and arseholes. Tate and John spent the night in the punishment block but were able to talk when let out of their cells for meals and showers.

Tate told John that nothing would happen, that they would only be reprimanded. But the following morning they were told they were being sent to HMP Camp Hill on the Isle of

Wight. Tate told John that he was going to feign a back injury so they would diagnose him as unfit to travel. He lay on the cell floor, writhed about and screamed in agony while clutching his back. John alerted the prison officers and they called for the prison gym orderly, who was trained in first aid. The orderly entered Tate's cell and, after five minutes, emerged saying that Tate was unfit to travel to Camp Hill. The only prison Tate could be sent to was one with a prison hospital. HMP Highpoint, which they were told was just as relaxed as Hollesley Bay, had a hospital and was just down the road in Newmarket. The following morning Tate and John were handcuffed and taken from Hollesley Bay in a van.

Later, Tate told John that the gym orderly who had been to assess his 'injured' back was a member of staff he had in his pocket. 'Some of the screws I worked with in the gym let me do anything I wanted,' Tate said. 'When the officer came in the cell, I told him I needed him to say I had a bad back. The officer just laughed and said no problem.'

On the way to Highpoint prison, the van transporting Tate and John broke down. A piece of debris on the carriageway caught the brake pipes and tore them off. The driver was forced to pull over and inform the police of the situation. Although Tate and John were handcuffed together, while they waited for assistance the officers agreed to take the cuffs off as it was dangerous for them to sit manacled together in the van on the side of a busy main road. The only safe place to wait was on a grass bank on the other side of the carriageway. Tate and John scrambled to the top and sat in the sunshine eating fruit Tate had brought with him in a bag. When a police car arrived, the officers sat and talked with Tate and John while they waited for a replacement van. Tate kept asking one of the prison officers if he could read his confidential prison file because he was concerned his latest outburst would affect his chances of parole. At first, the officer was reluctant to do so, but then