

SIMON FENECH

WITH NEIL BRAMWELL

'Gripping and gritty'

Raphael Rowe,
host of Netflix's *World's
Toughest Prisons*

A portrait of Simon Fenech, a man with a shaved head, a goatee, and multiple tattoos on his arms. He is wearing a black t-shirt with a graphic of a hand in prayer. He has his arms crossed and is looking directly at the camera. The background is dark and out of focus, showing what appears to be a car.

BREAKING GOOD

A HARROWING JOURNEY TO ICE-FUELLED HELL AND BACK

PROLOGUE

THE ROOM was a shithole. The congealed remains of takeaways were piled next to a mattress partially covered by a crumpled sleeping bag and a sweat-stained pillow. Ashtrays overflowed and the smell of unwashed men sat heavily in the air. Dirty crack pipes poked out from between the cushions of two tattered sofas and lay conspicuously on the floor. On the coffee table was a lighter, some clear Ziploc bags and a torn Magic Eraser sponge, while a set of digital scales sat on top of the open safe.

This was my office, my bedroom, my den – the hub of my dark existence.

In the corner, away from the window, I sat and stared at a 55-inch monitor. The screen was split into ten different feeds – all coming from the security cameras I'd recently installed inside and outside the factory and on the roads leading to my wrecking yard. Two mobile phones and a cordless landline lay inactive next to my laptop and printer. On a separate table was a two-way radio

on a wavelength dedicated to wreckers and tow-truck operators. There were Post-It notes everywhere: *Ring Tyson; Troy H – \$300*; a mobile phone number with no name attached. Open document binders spilled onto the shelving units and stacks of papers perched precariously on every available inch of desk.

I need to get on top of this, I thought, *but just not now*. One slow 360-degree swivel of the leather chair and I was back where I'd started – a restless inactivity. From downstairs came the soundtrack of a successful wrecking business; the clank of metal on metal as a stubborn car part finally budged; the screech of a demo saw chewing through a car door; the chatter of commercial radio; and the banter between the two lads working for me that day. This background noise was a rare reference point in a life without any order.

Axel, my pit bull terrier, nosed his way into the room and fussed around my ankles for attention. 'Not now, mate,' I said. 'Can't you see I'm busy?' His face dropped and he skulked down to the workshop floor to pester someone else. *Now, where was I?* I thumbed purposefully through a stack of papers, finding nothing that needed attention. *Check the phones, just in case*. No messages. *Send/receive emails*. Nothing new.

Any other small business owner would have taken the cue to wind down for the day and turn their thoughts to a bit of downtime: a night with their feet up in front of the telly; a meal out with the missus and kids; or maybe a few beers down the pub. But I hated downtime. It made me anxious. I had to be doing something, anything. *It's been an hour since my last hit. A quick puff and then I'll go downstairs and check on the boys*.

The kit was in the top drawer of my desk. A standard crack pipe

wasn't for me. A mate had warned me that standard pipes were a sure-fire way to fry your brain. I preferred the way the Asians smoked heroin – chasing the dragon. My kit was specialised, for a pro smoker: a homemade, self-blown glass pipe in the shape of a miniature saxophone, some hairdresser's aluminium foil and a modified lighter.

From the safe in the corner of the room I chose a decent-sized shard from my stash. There was probably about seven grams in the safe, with a street value of \$2000, and there was about the same amount of cash, too. This rock would have weighed about three points (a point is a tenth of a gram), enough for a few big puffs. One point would have sufficed just a couple of months earlier. I ran some water from the sink in the washroom next door into the mouth of the sax, enough to fill the base an inch deep. I caught sight of myself in the mirror – dark rings around my eyes like a giant panda. That's what two or three hours of sleep a night does to you. *Go easy on it tonight*, I warned myself.

I tore off a section of foil. The stuff hairdressers used was much thicker and more manageable than regular cooking foil and transferred the heat more uniformly. Another trick was to use the smallest possible flame by taking the chrome cover off the top of a lighter and sticking a broken syringe needle into the jet to reduce the gas flow. This ensured the ice didn't cook. Often the flame had to be lit with a separate lighter and occasionally the modified lighters blew up. The foil was folded lengthways down the middle and a flat section was shaped at one end for the rock.

Holding the foil in one hand and the lighter in the other, with the mouthpiece of the sax between my lips, I fired the flame underneath the crystal. When it melted, I tilted the foil so that

the liquid ran down the V-shaped funnel. As the liquid hit the cooler foil, the ice smoked and I chased the trail along the foil with the open end of the sax, sucking the fumes through the water. If there was enough left at the end – and enough air in my lungs – I could chase it back in the reverse direction. It was a wasteful way of smoking, because a lot of the ice vaporised, but it also burnt off some of the toxins. The water acted as filter for other impurities so that the smoke that I finally inhaled was much purer.

Whether it's your first ever meth experience, or the tenth of the day, there's always that *wow* moment when your hairs stand on end and every nerve in your body pulses with pleasure. But the addict needs more and more to reach those intense highs, which then don't last anywhere near as long. As always, this one briefly hit the spot. *Fuck paperwork and emails, I'm ready to take on the world.*

Anyone could see that business was booming. Racks of shelves, packed with salvaged parts, lined every wall of the workshop. Each item was meticulously colour-coded for make, model and year. Bigger items, such as full engines or doors, occasionally wheels, hung from the roof beams to create more space. Up the road was a paddock crammed with around two hundred cars, almost always Holdens and V8s in particular. Hoppers Crossing, a large suburb twenty-five kilometres south-west of Melbourne, next door to my home suburb of Werribee, was a Holden stronghold. People here took pride in their cars and were always on the lookout for that customised part which would improve performance or make their motor stand out from the crowd. My approach was simple – if I bought all the available cars, there'd be nothing left for the opposition. There was decent coin to be made and, although I was

personally hurtling towards rock bottom, I somehow managed to run a good little business. The twenty-hour working days probably helped. But the exhaustion and numbness caused by my addiction meant that I was working hard, not working smart.

Dave, a young guy in his mid-twenties from Werribee, was different to a lot of the fellas who worked for me. He was clean and I trusted him not to steal from me. He kept his head down, his nose out of my business, picked up his wad of cash at the end of the week and never caused me any trouble. I didn't need to know whether he also signed on at Centrelink.

A new bloke, Billy, was sleeping in one of the other bedrooms upstairs while he sorted his shit out. He was an addict and basically worked for his next fix. I did plenty of deals like that. Perhaps I was seen as a soft touch because I often supplied ice on tick or sold to my regulars at nearly half the street value. But I was never short of buyers – one-point customers, two-point customers, one-gram customers. Even at this level of discount, dealing paid for my next stash, my own habit, enough for the boys who were working for me, and a free smoke for almost anyone who dropped by. More often than not, these guys would then introduce a mate at some point.

'All good down here?' I asked Dave, as Axel stirred from his afternoon nap and trotted after me through to the work area.

'Yeah, mate. I'll have finished stripping this one in half an hour. Okay if I knock off after that?'

'No worries. How's Billy working out?' I asked under my breath.

'So so,' said Dave. 'Bit weird, but he knows his way around a car.' Meth feeds paranoia, so I always kept a close eye on the new

blokes. This Billy fella had been working for me for about two weeks and nothing was missing, so far. Most guys started off not wanting to bite the hand that was feeding them their ice, until they became desperate.

I did have a couple of good reasons to be paranoid. Three months earlier, a team of cops in divi vans and unmarked cars had raided the joint the day before my mum's funeral. They were certain I was running a chop shop for stripping stolen cars. You bet your life the bastards timed it deliberately, when I was deranged with grief and smoking anything I could lay my hands on. On that occasion I managed to hide my main stash in the nick of time and their search for stolen cars was fruitless. They were pissed off and it was obvious they'd be back with a vengeance. Also, there'd been a couple of break-ins at the factory and also in the paddock. A week ago my guard dog, a staffy-pit bull cross called Black Betty, had been beaten senseless when someone broke into the paddock. So I was on high alert, constantly looking over my shoulder.

Although there was another security camera feed in the downstairs office, which doubled as a lounge area, I went back upstairs and settled behind the desk just as an olive-green Holden Commodore pulled up. It wasn't unusual for new customers to arrive unannounced so there was no immediate cause for alarm, especially when I recognised two of the three blokes who got out the car.

The first was a mate of Dave's, a burly guy with a shaggy red beard, wearing a hillbilly black-and-white flannelette shirt, jeans and work boots. Red was a Holden fanatic and a regular at the factory, so I often sold him parts at just a shade above cost. His son

was into bikes and had brought a couple of his Harleys round to show me. Red had become something of a mate, but I was more wary of the second guy. He'd been released from prison about two weeks earlier with a reputation much bigger than his skinny frame. Stevo had been sent down for a series of knife attacks and was a mad bastard by all accounts. Word was out that he'd been trying to form his own gang and Red wanted to be a part of it. When Red asked me if I could help Stevo out with some work, I was willing to give him a chance. I even loaned him one of the scrap cars, which still had a couple of months rego remaining, so that he could travel to and from work. But on the day he was due to start there was no sign of him. *The car's only worth \$200*, I thought. *No point tracking him down for that*. I should've known never to turn a blind eye when someone was taking the piss. It's seen as a sign of weakness. I didn't mention it when I went downstairs to meet them.

'G'day Red, what's going on, mate?' I asked cheerily.

'Not much, bro. I'm looking for a black centre console for a Berlina. Got one in stock?'

'Think so,' I replied. 'Just let me check upstairs on the computer. Be down in a minute.' I bounded back upstairs past Stevo, who avoided eye contact, and the third guy, their driver. He looked Eastern European, of medium build with long, scruffy hair. His body language was edgy, hostile even. Both he and Stevo were dressed in the standard urban uniform – black hoodie, tracky dacks and the latest kicks. The driver wore a thick gold chain around his neck.

Sure enough, a couple of consoles were in stock, so I made a note of their code and went back downstairs. Red had wandered

through the open roller door, which was chained off for staff access only, to talk to Dave. There was nothing unusual about that, but the other two had followed him inside and were hanging around one of the wall racks, near where the forklift was parked. Something felt weird as I approached them to locate the part.

‘Where’s the money?’ said the driver with a quiet menace that prevented the guys at the back of the factory from hearing.

‘Eh? What money?’

‘You owe us two grand,’ he said.

‘The fuck are you talking about? I don’t owe nobody no fucking money.’

Without another word the driver pulled a pistol out of the double pocket at the front of his hoodie and fired two shots. Fury fogged my brain. *You fucking dog, nobody pulls a gun at me!* He was about five metres away and as I lunged towards him, he aimed the gun at me again and pulled the trigger. The thing jammed and, panicking, he threw it to Stevo. I charged at the driver, grabbing him around his waist and wrestling him towards the roller door until he fell backwards. I landed on top of him, lashing out like a madman. There was blood everywhere, a lot coming from his face because I got in a couple of good punches. Out of the corner of my eye I spotted the shovel that I kept handy to clean up Axel’s shit. As I staggered towards it, I realised that one leg of my overalls was torn and wet. A bullet had passed through my thigh but in that pure rage, I hadn’t even noticed. The combination of ice and the adrenaline masked the pain.

I heard a cry behind me and turned to see Axel, who’d sprinted the length of the factory, launched himself at the driver and sunk his teeth into the prick’s shoulder. I would never have guessed that

my dog, everybody's best mate, had it in him. But he'd transformed into a ferocious killing machine and would have torn the driver limb from limb had he not seen me stumbling towards them with the shovel in hand. Axel must have thought he was in for a beating because he let go and bolted, just as I smashed the driver across the head. Next I sensed someone coming at me from behind and turned to see Stevo holding a homemade shiv, a sharpened metal file with tape wrapped around the handle. He hesitated, weighing up his chances. In that split second the driver struggled back onto his feet and pulled a twelve-inch kitchen knife from the sleeve of his hoodie. He plunged the blade into the flesh at the back of my neck. Reality was starting to become fuzzy and the second slash almost seemed to happen in slow motion. Then there was a third thrust, which felt completely different. The tip of the blade landed in one of the links of my thick, silver necklace and, instead of slicing into my flesh, just yanked the chain tight around my neck. But I was still barely aware that I'd been stabbed at all.

'Leave him!' Stevo yelled. 'He's fucked up.'

'I'll show you who's fucked up,' I said, catching my breath.

'No, seriously, you need to get yourself to hospital,' Stevo said. 'You're bleeding heaps.'

What the fuck is he on about? The leg wound's just a graze. Then I touched the back of my neck and realised that my T-shirt was wet. But I still felt no pain and had no awareness that I was wounded. When I saw the driver making a dash for his car, self-preservation was the last thing on my mind. I was going to make this fucker pay.

By the time I reached my car, a Holden Clubsport that was my pride and joy, the olive-green Commodore was at the bottom

of the driveway and heading for the Princes Freeway slip road. It was afternoon rush hour and the traffic was backing up. If he'd joined the queue, he knew I would've chased after him on foot and caught him. So he swung the Commodore onto the grass verge and flew down the inside of the stationary vehicles. I had no option but to follow. Although the traffic was heavy it was moving and I quickly caught up, close enough to slam into his rear. I was still not thinking clearly, but probably wanted to spin him ninety degrees to a standstill. If I'd clipped him harder, it could have caused carnage, but he managed to keep control and speed away again. Using the inside lane, I pulled alongside. I wanted him to see the whites of my eyes, to witness the monster he'd unleashed. But he fixed his stare on the road ahead. Suddenly, there was a slow-moving truck in front of me and I had to swerve onto the hard shoulder to avoid ploughing into the back of it.

As I skidded to a stop, I became aware that my racing bucket seat was soaking wet. *Fuck me, this interior is ruined.* Almost as an afterthought, I touched the back of my neck again, and everything felt wrong up there. *Shit, I do need a hospital, and fast.* By then I was starting to feel really dizzy. I was about five kilometres away from Werribee Mercy Hospital. It was too risky to re-join the traffic so I put my foot down and sped down the hard shoulder, cutting straight across the next exit and onto the Princes Freeway.

At the hospital I pulled in at the entrance to the Emergency Department and stopped where the ambulances offload their patients. Gently, I eased myself out of the car and lurched, hunched like a wounded bear, through two sets of automatic doors and into the reception area. The queue to the receptionist's window

was ten-deep and there wasn't an empty seat in the waiting room. But, at the next window along, a nurse was catching up on some paperwork behind a 'position closed' sign. As I stumbled through the rows of waiting patients and their families, I could hear gasps of horror. One poor kid screamed at the top of her voice. It must've looked like someone had tipped a bucket of blood over my head. When I reached the closed window I slumped on the counter. The nurse looked up from her work and almost retched.

'What happened?' she asked, petrified.

'I dropped a big piece of steel on my neck and I'm bleeding bad.'

'Turn around and let me look. Pull up your T-shirt.'

'I will, but maybe ask everyone else to look away.'

'Look, you're in a bad way, just do it.'

I turned round, undid the straps on my overalls and reached behind to peel away the shreds of T-shirt. Blood spurted from my back like an artery had been cut. Droplets hit the window, the counter and the face of the traumatised nurse.

'Code red, code red!' she shrieked.

Within seconds a team of nurses descended on what must have looked like the scene of a grisly massacre. They bundled me onto a trolley and out of the reception area, straight to a resuscitation bay. I was rolled onto my stomach and told not to move a muscle. The rest of my clothes were cut off as intravenous drips were inserted and wires attached to my arms and legs. I'm not sure if I was conscious the whole time but I do remember hearing a copper enter the room and, scoffing, telling the medics that this was no work accident, as if they didn't already know.

SIMON FENECH

A young male doctor bent over me and whispered, 'You're going to be all right, mate, you're going to pull through.'

Nah, mate. You're wrong – I'm fucked. I'm gonna die. My poor kids. What's going to happen to my kids?