



Nocturnus

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Chapter 1

Not Just Another Day

John sat in his car looking at the ever decreasing ripples on the lake in front of him. He tried to get his mind into gear. A few hours ago he had been an upright law abiding citizen; now he had just pushed a car, complete with dead occupant, into a gravel pit. He glanced at the unknown woman beside him and trembled as the night's events flashed through his mind.

He recalled arriving in his hotel bedroom the previous morning as scheduled by his seemingly endless round of management seminars. It had been Friday so it was definitely the Hawes Hotel on the outskirts of Norwich. However, the location didn't really matter as he rarely had time to go outside whichever hotel he was in. He recalled mentally congratulating himself for being half-way through his latest lecturing contract and having only two more months to go. Without really thinking he ran through the general itinerary in his head. Mondays - Airport Hotel, Manchester; Tuesdays - Grinmere Hotel, York; Wednesdays - Airport Hotel, Heathrow; Thursday - The Essex Colmare Hotel, Stansted, Fridays - Hawes Hotel, Norwich, every other Saturday - either the Castle Hotel, Edinburgh or the Riverside Hotel, Aberdeen or home. Basically it was an endless round, but it was a lucrative contract with Global Lubricants for whom he was lecturing to their senior executives on 'giving bad news in a positive manner.' He pulled his mind went back to when the day had started to go pear shaped. The seminar was due to start at 11am and he should have been faced with eight stropky executives, most of whom didn't want to give bad news to anyone. He should have been with them all day, including the standard hotel finger buffet for lunch and dinner at seven followed by a session in the bar. Then, had things gone to plan, he would have been up early the following morning to get a plane, train or shuttle-bus to whichever hotel was next on the circuit. He briefly pulled himself together, tomorrow was due to be his Saturday

off and he did not have to go to some god-forsaken hotel and for two days and would be at home, that is if you could call it home.

His flashback continued; he'd done all the normal things, combed his greying hair, straighten his dark blue suit, check his monogrammed ultramarine tie and gone to take the seminar. Except there had been no clients waiting for him, not one. He distinctly recalled the smirk on the face of the receptionist, a stick-like thin faced girl who looked young enough to be at school, as she gleefully explained to him that the Dutch executives had all arrived, and then gone out shopping vowing not to return to the hotel until late evening. The thought had crossed his mind to go straight home, and how he now wished he had followed his instincts. However, being a dutiful kind of guy he had adhered to his contract which stated that should participants fail to appear for the seminars he was still obliged to stay in the hotel and have dinner with them. He'd made his way to his hotel bedroom muttering to himself about selfish American companies to fall on the bed. He supposed he'd almost immediately fallen off to sleep. Oh how he wished he had gone home, or at least stayed awake.

However, he had awoken in the dark, with a start, with all his senses on full alert, wondering both what had woken him and where he was. With hindsight he knew that it had been almost two in the morning as he had laid in the dark with his heart pounding and listening intently to hear, right on the margins of audibility, someone shouting. He recalled swinging his legs off of the bed, groping around for a light switch and feeling hungry. He groaned to himself, that hunger had got him in this mess. He'd intended to search of the Night Porter, but as soon as he opened the door he had changed his mind. The shouting was slightly more audible with the door open and did not sound like a drunken fracas or yobbish behaviour. Out of curiosity he had made his way to the stairwell and walked down the stairs. As he descended the shouting got steadily louder. Eventually he had reached the bottom of the stairs and realized that he was outside the kitchen. A man's words were clearly audible and were being shouted with pure venom loaded into every syllable.

"Clean! You call this clean! My puppy's dog kennel is cleaner than this! A one handed alien from the planet Zog could do better! I pay you to have the kitchen cleaned not have the dirt moved from one place to another!"

Something in the sheer malevolence of the verbal delivery had made John push the kitchen door open. A man in a wrinkled cheap suit had a woman trapped in the corner of the kitchen. He was not manhandling her, but he was shouting at her at a range of a few inches. John recalled seeing the man's spittle flying into the woman's face. He continued his tirade not giving the woman time to answer.

"Two hours your staff have had in here; two hours! I could clean up the entire hotel in two hours!"

To John the kitchen had seemed spotless, but it wasn't his problem and he could have walked away; much to his regret he had decided to intervene. He had coughed politely and now clearly remembered every word of his opening line; "Seems quite clean to me."

John's mind went into overdrive to relive the next fateful moments in real time as if he was a character in a film.

The man spun round and John recognized him as the hotel Under-Manager, normally a man of smarm and charm with the looks of an urban car salesman. His eyes narrowed and he licked a drool of saliva from the corner of his mouth. His voice easily changed to that of silky smoothness.

"Sorry sir, the kitchen is off limits to guests."

John ignored him. "Your shouting woke me up, is it really necessary?"

The woman started to edge sideways behind the Under-Manager, seeking to extricate herself from the corner. John could now see her face clearly; it was full of fear. The Under-Manager managed a watery smile at John and replied in his silky-smooth placatory manner. "Sorry about that sir, just can't get the staff these days."

John, astonished at his manner, couldn't help sarcastically retorting. "I'm not surprised if you shout at them like that."

By now the woman had edged herself onto a stainless steel table and moved crab-wise across it to virtually tumble off the other side and lean against a giant fridge-freezer. The Under-Manager started to advance on John, now speaking with an edge to his voice. "It's really none of your business sir, now please will you leave the kitchen."

The woman's still fearful face took on a look of abject horror, so John held his ground. "Sorry no. I can't leave you here alone with this lady; frankly I don't trust your temper. I will leave when the lady leaves and I will then see you later with the Manager when I shall make a formal complaint about your behaviour."

The Under-Manager's face took on a purple hue and he dropped his silky manner in favour of a warning snarl and a waved fist. "Don't go interfering in things you don't understand, now clear off."

For some reason the man's attitude irked John immensely so he stood firm and folded his arms. The Under-Manager picked up a large saucepan and advanced on John, apoplectic anger harnessed in his voice and written all over his face. "I said bugger off."

At that moment, for the first time, John wondered about the wisdom of his actions. The man was clearly unhinged and out of control. John glanced at the still plainly terrified woman, who had now picked up a circular cast-iron casserole lid. The next few seconds became a blur that he would doubtless endlessly re-live and analyze interminably. The under-manager made an angry growl, raised the saucepan and launched himself at John. The woman threw the cast-iron lid like a vertical Frisbee and John side-stepped the man's charge to push him away. John was terrified of violence and his push was backed by a full charge of adrenaline. It threw the man straight into the path of the flying casserole lid. There was a sickening thud as it hit him behind the ear and he rolled his eyes upwards and collapsed, violently striking his head on the edge of the steel table on his way down. He bounced a couple of times and promptly threw a fierce five-second fit. After that he lay dreadfully still. John took a few seconds to regain some composure before kneeling down beside him. The man's head was at a seemingly impossible angle to his body and John was in no doubt that his neck was broken. John sensed the woman standing beside him. He looked up. "Your flaming casserole lid has smashed his skull in."

She waved her thin arms and responded defensively. "You were pushing him, it was you pushing him that caused him to fall and be banging his head."

John opened his mouth and then closed it, arguing with the woman would get him nowhere. He stood up and faced her. She was a head shorter than him, dressed in a black two-piece trouser suit and a snow-white blouse with a small, dark silk, scarf round her neck. Her name-tag told him that she was Jane Doe, Manager of Doe-mestics Ltd. He looked at her thin face that was dominated by a pair of oversize and prominent brown eyes. For some reason he noticed that her black hair was pulled back into a severe bun and that her olive skin still looked unnaturally pale. He tried to get a grip of himself. "Are you all right?"

She glanced at the man on the floor and tore her eyes away. "Is he...?"
"Most definitely."

She swallowed and leant back against a sink-top, visibly trembling. John knew that he was none too stable either and wedged himself against the table. Her over-large eyes locked onto John's face. "We've killed him, oh hell, oh bloody hell, we've killed him."

John didn't need reminding, but was still trying to come to terms with what had happened as it all seemed so unreal. "It was an accident."

Her eyes became larger and John wondered if her eyeballs would actually pop out. "You going to tell the police?"

John nodded. "What else is there to do? It was an accident, the guy was bullying you and attacking me."

She sucked her cheeks in and temporarily took on the appearance of a living skull. "The family won't believe us."

He took out his mobile phone and went to dial, but she closed her pale coffee coloured delicately thin hand around the buttons and held on. "I said the family won't believe us."

He could feel her trembling through their mutual grip on the mobile phone. "What family?"

Her earnest reply carried a faint whiff of hysteria. "His family. He's the only son and heir to Sir Bernard Hawes. He owns this hotel and five others. As far as he is concerned the sun shines out of his son's bottom and he won't believe us."

John gently pulled on the phone. "It's not up to him, it's up to the coroner."

She became more agitated. "You don't understand. Two years ago this swine mowed down two children with his flash sports car while he was off his head on drugs. He ran away from the scene and left them lying in the gutter. He was a guilty as hell, but the father had it hushed up, paid the kids families a fortune and then hired a smart lawyer who got him off on a technicality. The police may believe you, but Lord Hawes would set out to destroy us."

John saw the fear and despair in her eyes and tried to keep his tone even. "But it's an accident, we didn't set out to kill him, the police will understand that."

She glanced at the door as someone walked by. "His father will never believe that and he's more of an unscrupulous swine than Henry."

John glanced at the body and inclined his head towards it. "Henry?"

She nodded and they stood both stood still, each one holding onto the mobile phone. John had heard of Lord Hawes, mainly because of his business methods; he'd recently closed down a very profitable London hotel merely because he wanted to turn the place into apartments for his

brother's family. According to the newspapers he'd made the decision on a Monday, locked his staff out on the Tuesday and sold off the fittings on the Thursday. Most of the staff were still waiting for their pay and the aggrieved customers were waiting for their deposits back. John eyed the corpse. "What's the alternative?"

She blinked her eyes; it was like the slow opening and closing of a camera lens. "You could dispose of the body and I could clean up here, he hasn't made much of a mess."

The body lay deathly still on the floor as he started to ponder the idea of a cover-up. "No good, if he just disappears and his father is as belligerent as you say then he'd badger the police till they found him."

He closed his eyes, his brain seemed to be full of cotton wool. "We'd have to make it look like he disappeared of his own free will."

He opened his eyes to find her over-large optics boring into his. "How?"

The single word from her carried the overtones of fear and hope. John tried to categorize the problems, but in reality his brain was still in a spin, less than half an hour ago he'd been sleeping peacefully in his bed, now... He ticked points off on his fingers. "His car must go, there must be a reason for his departure and we've got to find a way of ensuring that the father doesn't send a million private detectives after him."

Jane blinked again. "His car is out the back."

She knelt down and rummaged in his pockets, pulling out a set of keys. She dangled them. "Safe keys, we could make it look like he ran off with the money."

John shook his head. "Car-park is crawling with CCTV."

She giggled, despite the seriousness of the situation, or maybe because of it, she giggled; for some reason it annoyed John. She giggled again. "They don't work. There's no videotape machine or control box, they're dummies to impress the guests."

John looked at his watch and unconsciously made the fatal decision. "Right, let's get the body to the boot of his car and clean up in here."

She momentarily hesitated and flapped her skinny arms like an exercising flamingo before she commanded him to stay where he was. She disappeared out of the kitchen door like a frightened jackrabbit. John momentarily wondered if this was the wisest course of action; he could still phone the police couldn't he? He looked at the dead body and decided that this man wasn't worth serving a prison sentence for and made a conscious decision to continue with their vague plan. Jane reappeared

with a couple of clean sheets and a giant linen basket on wheels. Together they rolled Henry in the sheets and then heaved him into the basket. From the kitchen it was a short roll to the staff car park and a quick heave of the body from the basket to the boot of Henry's car, a rather smart silver Jaguar coupé. They quietly closed the boot-lid and took the basket inside. John whispered, "I'll need you to follow me in your car."

She answered in a matter-of-fact manner, as if discussing a journey to the supermarket. "Haven't got one, I'm using the spare van today and at this moment it's being used by some of the cleaning staff to stock up on cleaning materials."

He nodded and thanked his lucky stars that this was Norwich, one of the few hotels where he had his car. "You'll have to use mine then."

They went back to the kitchen and as Jane looked around she passed him the keys. "His office is down the corridor, his names on the door, safe is behind his desk on the floor. I'll clean up here, won't take long"

John found himself walking down the corridor reading door labels as if in a surreal dream. Eventually he found the right office. After furtively glancing around he entered Henry's office. It was all bare and functional, apart from a huge mahogany desk and a luxurious looking leather chair. John self-consciously pulled on the pair of neoprene gloves that Jane had tossed him and made his way to the safe. Next second he was staring at neatly arranged piles of bank notes. John swallowed back his nervousness and pulled the black bin-liner out of the waste bin and started loading money into it. Once all the money was in he thumbed through the papers and decided to take a small bundle of memory sticks and a couple of brown envelopes. If he was going to make the police believe Henry had a reason to disappear it had to be more than money. He hesitated before closing the safe door and swept a last small package into his black bag as his nerve began to fail. He managed to close and lock the safe before scuttling out of the room and virtually running back to the kitchen. He met Jane coming out of the kitchen doors, she eyed his black bag. "Did you put another one in his bin?"

John felt exasperation rise within him and rolled his eyes. "No, after all I didn't know I was going to use it."

She grimaced and went to a cupboard, extracted a new bin-liner, took the keys out of his trembling hand and set off down the corridor speaking over her shoulder. "I'll put this in his bin and I'll see you at his car."

John, who would have jumped if a cockroach had twitched, had marveled at her composure and made for the Jaguar. Jane appeared five

minutes later, just before John wet himself with worry. He handed her his car keys. "It's the red Rover in the corner over there."

She squinted. "Looks more like burnt-orange."

John, his nerves now in total tatters, almost lost his temper, but managed not to scream at her to just get into the car and follow him. They drove out of the car park a few moments later with John already knowing where he was heading. Thirty minutes later they were deep in the leafy Norfolk countryside and he turned up a dirt track towards a field. He stopped at the field entrance and got Jane to join him in the Jaguar. He noticed that she was also wearing neoprene gloves and had a fanciful notion that perhaps she was going to bump him off as well. They drove across the field and up to the edge of a large water-filled pit. He pointed. "Used to be some sort of earth-works or gravel-pit, it's being landscaped for leisure use and stocked with fish. It's very deep and the edges are reasonably steep."

She wordlessly nodded and they climbed out. John retrieved the black bag full of money and held it up. "Shall we leave this with him?"

She shrugged in the half-light. "Shame to be wasting good money."

John heard a noise and looked up as a plane flew high overhead and suddenly felt dreadfully exposed. "Right, cars on a decent slope, I'll take the hand-brake off and we push."

Thirty seconds later the Jaguar rolled into the man-made lake and hesitated, it then floated away from the edge and sat on the lake's surface. John felt like screaming. Then, with great majesty, it slowly slipped beneath the surface taking with it, John fervently hoped, all possibility of Henry's discovery.

John suddenly came out of his reverie to realize that it wasn't a dream or a figment of his imagination. He was indeed sitting in his car with a woman dressed in black, with his legs feeling like jelly. Not too far away, in the grey morning light, was Surlington pit in which he had just disposed of somebody's son. Even if he was a violent swine, he was still somebody's son. All of a sudden, and shattering the silence, Jane spoke. John realized that was what had jerked him out of his meditations. He managed to mumble something and Jane pointed to the pit with a well manicured fingernail. "How did you know it was here, used it before?"

He didn't appreciate the joke. "I live a couple of miles away."

She gave a violent tremble and looked about to faint. "I could murder a cup of tea." She whispered.

John took the hint and drove towards his home. They went through a couple of silent picturesque villages and then entered the outskirts of a third village where he swung into a senior citizen's home and stopped at the tiny gate-house. He held his finger to his lips. "Twenty seven elderly occupants all paid up members of neighbourhood watch."

They walked to his front door and he let her in to a tiny hall with faded wallpaper and three interior doors. He pointed to the first one on the right, "Bathroom."

They walked through the second one into a small lounge with a galley kitchen down one side. She glanced around. "Is this what they call bijou?"

He half smiled. "Well it's certainly small, don't know about the elegant bit though."

She took in the well-worn comfy looking armchair, the tiny television and the pair of stainless steel kitchen stools in one glance. "Live alone?"

"Thought that was obvious."

She flopped into the armchair and he set about making tea. He could have been any of the guests at the hotel with his smart dark suit, well cut greying hair, nondescript nose and blue-grey eyes set above flabby cheeks. Judging by his growing sets of wrinkles she placed him in his late forties or early fifties. He turned round and she realized that he was neither fat nor thin and had not developed the beer-paunch that many of the male hotel guests tried to hide. He placed a cup of tea in a bone china cup on the small functional table beside the armchair and sat on a poufee leaning his back against the wall. The hand that held his tea-cup was shaking, Jane found this somewhat reassuring as her legs wouldn't stop trembling and her stomach was doing somersaults. She sipped his tea, it tasted like holy nectar. "Will you be missed?" He murmured.

Horror swept over her face and she pulled out her mobile to stare at it, incomprehension in her immense eyes. "There's no signal."

He gave a sigh. "Locals won't let the phone companies put up any masts, then they moan that there's no signal."

He tossed her a cordless phone. "Suppress the phone number won't you."

She dialled the 141 prefix and then a familiar number, he watched her close her eyes and make the call. "Hi Sarah, it's me. Look I've been called away on another job, can you take the van home and bring it back to me on Monday." She paused. "Good girl, no nothing I can't handle."

She tossed the phone back. "Sarah's my cleaner in charge at The Hawes."

She returned to her tea and sought normality in its taste.

John yawned, momentarily showing a set of half-decent teeth. "Sorry about that, on a bit of a treadmill at the moment."

He rubbed his eyes to try and think straight wondering why he felt so desperately tired. "You'll have to get your story together, once he's missed you might be questioned."

She bit her bottom lip and both eyes simultaneously swiveled slightly inwards. "I suppose I'll be accused of being the last to see him."

John rubbed his eyes again; he really did feel abominably tired. "Who knows he saw you?"

She considered the question as she cocked her head on one side and stretched her legs out in front of her to inspect her tiny black shoes. "Sarah, she was in the kitchen when he arrived, he was all smiles and seduction with her."

"When did he start shouting?"

"After he inspected the kitchen."

She smiled at him and her mobile cheeks moved upwards and her eyes became merely large rather than enormous. "I'll tell them he inspected the kitchen, had a quick rant and then left in a hurry."

John scratched his nose. "If I were you I'd leave out the 'in a hurry' bit, it could lead to a whole succession of questions."

He surveyed her for a response and in doing so saw her for the first time as a person and not a co-conspirator. Painfully thin, entirely flat chest, with little or no make up, the small gold stud in her left nostril and the fine gold chain around her right ankle being her only hallmarks of femininity. She performed her slow blink and swiveled her eyes towards him; it felt like being tracked by a pair of searchlights. "What do I say about you?"

John was taken aback, she gave a him a slow smile. "If they ask me about when I last saw Henry, they will ask me about you. What was I doing with you? Why was I with you and suchlike? I can hardly say that we had a mutual interest in the disposal of a corpse."

She pointed to the senior citizen's cottages. "After all, if you're right, we've probably been observed."

John wrinkled his brow and muttered to himself. "Why would we be together? There has to be a compelling reason that the police would believe."

They sat in silence for a minute or two until she suddenly burst into nervous laughter. "Of course they would believe it if we said that we were seeing each other."

John stared at her as his brain caught up with the concept. "You mean like boyfriend and girlfriend?"

"Can't say that we're ordinary friends, we don't have a history of friendship and Sarah will know that regardless of what I say as we've known each other for years."

John gave a schoolboy chortle. "Well I suppose it is a natural approach that would be believable."

She nodded and yawned, rapidly placing her hand over her mouth. John watched her; she looked like a limp doll. "When did you last sleep?"

She finished her tea, her hands still trembling. "Yesterday morning. I work nights, eight till eight normally so I can cover all my cleaning staff's different shifts. We specialize in night cleaning, office blocks, department stores and pubs mainly. So I tend to sleep in the mornings and then get up around four in the afternoon."

In vain he tried to suppress a yawn. "Seven days a week?"

"Five usually, I've got a good set of cleaners in charge and little activity over the weekend. But I have to spend Saturdays doing the paperwork." She flashed a smile. "Usually do that Saturday night, body-clock and all that."

John stretched his arms outwards almost touching the walls either side of him. "Don't know about you, but I'm shattered, never realized disposing of bodies was so tiring."

She gave a weak smile, "Probably the shock."

He stood up, "Better take you back to the hotel."

She gave him a dubious look, "I think that you're too tired to drive, could we have a nap here first?"

He pointed, "Bedrooms through there, help yourself."

The room proved to be square with a small double bed (she professionally registered it as a four-footer) pushed in the corner to the left of the door, then a small window and a large double wardrobe in the next corner by another small window. The third corner held a cheap desk that was littered with papers and a shelf above it held a row of box-files. She read some of the titles, 'giving bad news', 'team-building', 'interviewing', 'appraisal', and then lost interest. She hung her jacket on the knob of the wardrobe door, kicked off her shoes and lay on the

bed, automatically noting as she did so that the duvet cover needed changing, the net curtains needed a good wash and that the magnolia walls needed a fresh coat of paint.

After she left the lounge John looked at his watch, it was still only 6am. He tried once again to get his tired mind to actually believe what had happened, but it all seemed like some bizarre daydream. Had he really caused a man's death and then disposed of the corpse, or was it all some macabre nightmare? Would he wake-up any moment to an anonymous hotel room? The sight of Jane's empty teacup on the small table brought him back to reality and he gathered together enough thoughts to realize that he should phone the hotel to keep his hotel room booking for another day. He yawned and considered the amount of floor-space available, finally deciding that he probably couldn't find a comfortable space on the floor in the lounge. He carefully opened the bedroom door and peered in; Jane was lying on the bed pressed hard against the wall apparently asleep. Not fancying the bedroom floor either he carefully lay down on the bed and closed his eyes. Jane felt him lay on the bed next to her and feared the worst, but after five minutes she realized that he was not going to try anything untoward. Without warning she burst into tears; John rolled onto his back. She sobbed and moaned, "We killed him, we really killed him, it's not a dream is it?"

John slipped his arm under her shoulders and she rolled over to bury her head into his shoulder, still crying. He had no words of comfort to say as he too was feeling decidedly wobbly about it all, but at least there was some minimal comfort to be derived from their mutual contact.

John woke up four hours later as a delivery lorry chugged by the bedroom window. He found himself pinioned to the bed by Jane, who had moved to lie half on him with her right leg thrown over his left. He peered down at her face and marveled at the large wet stain on his shoulder. He soon realized that the stain was not all from her tears, but mostly from her mouth for she was dribbling profusely while she slept. He glanced at his watch and wondered if he could extract himself from under her without disturbing her too much. He moved slightly and she sleepily gripped his shirt with her right hand. John licked his dry lips and pondered on the day so far. If it hadn't been for Jane lying on him he would again have been convinced that it had all been a bad dream, product of bad cheese and an over-active imagination. However, it still patently wasn't a dream and in the last eight hours he had indeed

helped to kill a man and then dispose of his body. In the cold light of day he wondered if he should still call the police, but to say what? 'Sorry constable, I panicked and disposed of the body whilst covering my tracks?' He closed his eyes and tried to make sense of what had happened in the hotel kitchen, where had it all gone wrong? He again relived the morning in his mind and became acutely conscious of the black-bag that was still sitting in the lounge. As far as the police were concerned it would look like they murdered Henry for the money. He swallowed, whatever had happened he was now in it up to his neck. He glanced down at Jane as more saliva dribbled onto his shirt. He looked across the room to a picture on the wall. At least Helen hadn't dribbled. She may have argued like a harridan and left him when he needed her the most, but she had definitely never drooled all over him. He glanced down again to see two large brown orbs looking at him. He went to speak before noticing that her breathing was still regular and even. He studied her eyes, noting that the eyelashes were also extra-long and that there were some diminutive wrinkles at the corners of her eyes. He studied her hair, it looked black, but some of her hair-roots were grey; he mused that perhaps she was older than he first thought. She moved her head slightly and John smelt of a mixture of roses and cleaning fluid coming from her hair. A couple of minutes later her eyes slowly closed and John drifted into a fitful doze.

A little while later John re-awoke as Jane changed position. He glanced down into the two wide-open eyes and she responded by smiling and rolling off him. She touched his soaking wet shirt and said sleepily, "Sorry about that."

He sat up and dangled his feet onto the floor. "It's of no consequence," he said as kindly as he could.

He looked down on her, "Do you want to sleep some more?"

She lay staring at him and John began to think that either she hadn't heard, or she was asleep again with her eyes open. Then she stretched and sat upright and shuffled herself to sit next to him. She sat staring with unfocussed eyes. John instantly recalled how his daughter used to look just like this in her early childhood. He stood up and gently manoeuvred her back into a lying position and she smiled and closed her eyes. By the time John reached the door she was once again fast asleep.

John crept into the lounge and made himself a cup of tea. It tasted good, but he wasn't sure if it calmed his nerves. He took a deep breath

and emptied out the black bag and stared at the contents strewn over his white woollen rug. He methodically counted the money, some £8000 in mixed notes. He looked at the contents of the two brown envelopes; one contained a liquor license and the other a picture of a half-naked brunette sitting astride a donkey in front of a villa on some far-away beach. He glanced at the memory sticks and finally opened the small package that had been his last afterthought, freezing in the process. It was full of what looked like tiny off-white sweets wrapped in silver paper, but they were definitely not sweets. He muttered under his breath and re-wrapped the package. John closed his eyes and pictured the safe in his mind. Although he'd been in a panic when he'd closed the safe door he was sure of one thing, he'd left a similar package behind. He groaned to himself wondering for the umpteenth how he had got himself in this mess before giving a wry smile. Maybe, just maybe he'd taken enough from the safe to convince the police that Henry had gone on the run and to prevent Lord Hawes from relentlessly pursuing the truth. He glanced uneasily at the lounge door; but just how long would he have to pretend to be Jane's

paramour to be safe?

Chapter 2

The Plot Thickens

Jane emerged from the bedroom just before one o'clock to find herself alone, both the cluttered lounge and functional bathroom being empty. She opted to make herself a cup of coffee, John having thoughtfully left both cup and coffee jar on the small kitchen surface. He returned half an hour later to discover her sitting in the armchair with unfocussed eyes and an empty cup beside her.

She smiled weakly, "Thanks for the coffee."

He made her another cup of instant coffee and placed it under her nose, she took it from him. John busied himself laying out food while she supped the second cup of coffee. To her surprise he soon placed a plate of rice and fish with peas and diced carrots in front of her.

He grinned, "No point in living near a kitchen if I can't use their food."

She studied the meal, which looked faintly unappetizing.

"Is this what the inmates eat?"

He laughed, a sort of sandpaper on cuttlefish sound. "No, it's what the staff eat; inmates get fed at noon."

She took a mouthful, realized how hungry she was and tucked in. John sat on the pouffe and also started eating.

As he munched he asked, "Will anyone miss you at home?"

She shook her head and swallowed, "No, I live alone, not even a cat. The neighbours are used to me coming and going at odd times because of my job."

They ate in silence, her still waking up and him wondering what to do next.

Eventually she got up and placed her empty plate in the sink glancing in the mirror above the sink as she did so and grimacing at the sight. She automatically started washing up and John joined her, realizing that to some extent she was still running on autopilot. He began to

wonder how long it took her to become fully lucid. As they dried the last dish she nodded to the bag, "Have you checked it out?"

"Roughly £8000 in cash, one liquor license, one picture of a young lady on a donkey, a few memory sticks and a pile of drugs."

She turned her spotlight eyes onto him and echoed weakly, "Drugs?"

He fished the package out of the bag and showed it to her. She sat on one of the kitchen stools, "He was into drugs?" There was disbelief in every syllable of her question.

John tossed the package in his huge hand, "I think I saw another package like this in the safe, if the police find it they might think that's why he has disappeared."

She eyed the drugs suspiciously, her eyes tracking the up and down movement as he continue to toss the package, "What you going to do with them?"

He nodded towards the senior citizen's complex, "They have a medical waste disposal facility, basically bright pink bags that are collected for incineration once a week. Today's the day and I intend to put these in the bag just before it's collected, which should be three o'clock."

Jane's eyes widened to swimming pool proportions, "They collect on a Saturday?"

He looked blank, "Never thought about it."

She glanced out of the window at the senior citizen's home, "How come you live here?"

"Gatehouse was up for sale when I needed a cheap place. It used to be the estate office before the main buildings became a senior citizen's home."

He picked up the black bag, "Want to share out the money?"

She visibly shuddered and shook her head. He opened a cupboard door, emptied the contents off of the bottom shelf onto the floor and took it out. Underneath was a floor safe that he explained was a left over from the estate office. He stuffed the bag in the safe, closed and locked the door and then put back the shelf and its contents. He stood up, picked up the package and left Jane in the kitchen without saying another word.

Once he had closed the door she sprang into life. She fled to the bathroom, swilled her face under the tap, rearranging her hair and washed her mouth out with some water. Following her ablutions she checked out the contents of the small medicine cabinet. Two disposable razors, a small pack of Aspirin, a desperately squeezed tube of antiseptic

ointment and a small plastic tub of toothpicks. Just like him it was nothing out of the ordinary. She exited the bathroom as he came through the front door and a lorry passed by. He grinned, "Mission accomplished."

He smiled down at her from his greater height, "Shall I run you home?"

She nodded and they walked to the car, he opened the door for her and she climbed in. As they pulled away he cocked his thumb at the main building, "So far two old ladies and one member of staff all politely asking who is the attractive young lady in my gate-house."

He noticed her uneasy glance and added, "You did say you wanted to be noticed with me."

She swallowed and he saw her Adam's apple bob up and down in her throat, "Do they think I slept with you?"

He chuckled, "In a manner of speaking you did, but if it puts your mind at ease I told them that you're a good friend and that the floor was very uncomfortable."

She visibly relaxed and he wondered why it was important to her that a group of strangers didn't get the wrong idea. He turned the car towards Norwich, "Where am I going?"

"Head for the hotel and I'll direct you when we get close."

She lapsed into silence and John didn't disturb her thoughts.

Half an hour later he pulled up at a small terraced house. She turned to him, "Would you like to come in for a coffee?"

He hesitated and she stared into his eyes, it felt like being targeted by an x-ray machine. "I want my neighbours to see you."

He understood and she led him down the front path to a pair of front doors. They entered through the left-hand one into a dismal, but scrupulously clean, hall. From here he could see a small kitchen, but Jane diverted him into her lounge. He swiveled his eyes upwards, "Flat upstairs?"

She smiled and nodded, "First floor and attic. Sister lives upstairs with her family."

He glanced around, "Been here long?"

She paused, seemingly uncertain. "Used to live upstairs with my mum and gran, but after they died I swapped with my sister, she'd just had her second child." She swallowed and her Adam's apple did its bobbing bit, "Two years ago."

She swiveled her eyes to look out of the window, but was really staring into the depths of time. She stood like that for a few seconds and then looked back at him with watery eyes, "Coffee?"

He nodded and she fled to the kitchen. John looked around; it was exactly the sort of lounge he loathed. Standard three-piece suite covered in a red velveteen fabric, Axminster carpet, flock wallpaper and enough porcelain figurines to fill a museum. They covered everything, being lined up on the mantelpiece, filling two glass-fronted cabinets and standing on a stubby shelf that ran round the room on top of the picture-rail. He inspected a couple of figurines closely; there was not even a hint of dust. She returned with a small tray on which were two bone-china cups full of coffee and an octagonal plate with two slices of caramel flapjack. He noticed that she was still shaking enough to cause ripples in the coffee. He took the tray from her and she rotated her eyes towards the windows, "I can almost feel the tongues wagging."

He was surprised, as he'd thought she was still trembling from the events of the morning. "Does it matter?"

She stared at him with apprehension in her eyes and then looked away, "I supposed not."

John realized that it clearly did matter and he asked her quietly if she wanted him to leave. She took a cup of coffee from the tray and shook her head. John tried for a neutral subject, "You collect figurines?"

She perched herself on the overstuffed arm of an armchair, "No, it was my grandmother and mother who collected them. I detest them."

John's eyebrows rose, "Well why don't you sell them?"

She looked out of the window, "I cannot."

John realized that she meant she could not as she wasn't yet ready to part with such a significant link to her mother. He nibbled a piece of flapjack and his taste buds violently exploded; it tasted like solid curry of the blow-your-head-off variety. He quickly took a sip of coffee and panicked when he realized that he'd have to eat the rest. She picked up the other piece and took a bite; she showed no adverse reaction for at least five chews. Then both her eyes swiveled inwards and her face took on the expression of a startled rabbit. She spat the contents of her mouth into her hand and shuddered. John grinned, "Somewhat of a surprise isn't it?"

She shuddered again and took a tissue out of a box on the sideboard to wrap the slimy mess in her hand. "It's Catrina's idea of a joke."

"Catrina your niece?"

"She's my sister. She's a good cook, but every now and then she throws a culinary wobbly."

Her complexion changed to that of a seasick child and she rushed from the room; he heard her being sick into the toilet across the hall. He

drank his coffee and studied the photographs on the wall. The family group showed a married couple with three young women sitting at their feet, the oldest was obviously Jane, the eyes were a dead give-away. The first wedding photograph showed the parents with one of the daughters in a wedding dress with her husband next to her; Jane was the bridesmaid. The second wedding photograph was of the other sister; again Jane was a bridesmaid, but there was only the mother in the photograph. The third wedding photograph was of a couple John didn't recognize; then he realized that the small girl holding the bouquet of flowers must be Jane when she was about three. The final photograph was of a young man sitting on a veranda somewhere that wasn't England, scrawled across the bottom was the message 'To Jane, hoping that one-day we'll sit here together- Sanjay.' Jane walked in the room as he was looking at the picture. "Where is this?"

She replied stiffly and in a manner that begged no follow-up questions. "Ceylon."

He nodded, "Now called Sri Lanka."

She stared at him, "It was called that then, but I'll always think of it as Ceylon."

She turned away and John made for the door, they stopped on the doorstep and she looked up at him. He said casually, "How about dinner tonight at the hotel. If we want to be seen together, that's the place to be."

Her eyes glazed over, "Pick me up at seven, I've got work to do later." She suddenly grabbed his hands, and hissed, "You may kiss me, if the neighbours are going to talk I want to give them something to chew on."

He bent down and went to kiss her on the forehead, she tilted her head up and their lips met in a brief rendezvous. She tasted of peppermint mouthwash.

Once back at the hotel John looked around for signs of panic over Henry's disappearance and found none, but as he passed by the reception desk the receptionist called out his name and his stomach performed a major somersault. She gave him a polished hotel smile and a no-nonsense voice. "Your Dutch colleagues were a bit of a handful last night."

He sensed some accusation in the tone. "Sorry, not my colleagues, they were supposed to be on a course of mine, but they didn't attend."

She tapped her pencil on a pile of invoices, "They came back drunk around 3am and had a fight in the hotel bar."

John rubbed his chin, "And did your night porter serve them more drinks after they arrived back?"

She leant forward and said, sotto voce, "They broke half of the tables in the bar and said that we should send the bill to Global Lubricants."

John thought he'd try a bit of probing, "Didn't your night manager try and stop them?"

She laughed, "First sign of trouble and he was off like a jack-rabbit and we haven't seen him since."

John tapped the invoices, "Do me a favour, send my hotel bill first-class and this lot second-class will you."

She grinned, "If I was you I'd avoid Mr James the manager, he's after your blood. I think he holds you responsible, we couldn't find you either and we did try your room."

John temporarily almost lost his composure before he winked at the receptionist, "Other things on my mind."

The hotel phone rang and she picked it up enabling John to make a hasty escape. He'd had good news and bad news. She obviously thought that Henry had been around after 2am; that was good. On the other hand, she knew that he had not been around, that was bad. As he arrived at his room door he realized that he'd have to reinforce the impression that he was having an affair with Jane. In hotel-land that was always a more than reasonable explanation for not being in your own room.

Jane was experiencing her own problem, namely that of fending off her permanently inquisitive sister. Jane rolled her eyes, "Why should my life be an open book to you? Is your life an open book to me?"

Catrina was not to be put off, "But where did you meet him? Such an elegant car!"

Jane tapped the side of her nose and decided to go on the attack, "I'll be surprised if he ever comes here again, those flapjacks you gave me were sheer poison."

Catrina vaguely waved her hand, "I baked them with Hannah, she must have put in the curry powder by mistake, it was supposed to be almond."

Jane raised her eyebrows, "Not an easy mistake."

Catrina seemed unperturbed, "It is when there's no picture on the jar."

Catrina leant forward and poked Jane, "When you seeing him again?"

Jane smiled coyly, "This evening, he's taking me out to dinner."

Catrina's well-manicured eyebrows rose, "So my older sister who has not been out with a man in living memory is seeing him again, does he also work nights?"

Jane stood up, "That's enough information for one day and you'd better take those flapjacks out of your cookie jar before Peter eats one."

Catrina scurried out to the sound of Jane's scolding, "So, feeding a poisoned flapjack to your sister is acceptable, but feeding it to your husband is unthinkable!"

Catrina stopped at the door and made a face before hurrying upstairs. Jane looked at the clock; she had forty minutes to get ready, a limited wardrobe and an impression to make, where should she start?

John arrived exactly on time and walked up Jane's front path; the curtain in the first floor front room twitched and John smiled to himself. He rang the doorbell and the door opened almost immediately. She stood in the doorway wearing a brownish-green sari and green sling-back high-heeled shoes. As she closed the door he put his arm round her shoulders as they walked down the garden path. He opened the car door for her and she elegantly sat down and looked up at him. He closed the door wondering just how much mascara and eyebrow pencil her huge eyes consumed, but he had to admit that she was not unattractive and he did like it when she smiled.

Catrina watched them drive away and turned to her husband, "Well I never thought I'd see her with a man."

He nodded and muttered, "I was sure that she was left-handed."

Catrina screwed up her nose, "Why not say the word, you thought she was a lesbian. You've said so often enough."

He shrugged, "How long have I known you? In all that time has she ever shown the slightest interest in a man? And that friend of hers, that Sarah, the pair are thicker than thieves."

Catrina wiggled her head from side to side and said quietly, "She took Sanjay's death really badly."

Peter put his arm round her, "She was thirteen, that's nearly thirty years ago and you said that your father would never have approved."

She giggled, "He didn't approve of you either."

They watched the car turn the corner at the end of the street and she said wistfully. "She was dreadfully cut up after Sanjay's death, I'd begun to think that she'd never get over it."

Peter squeezed her shoulders, "You were only six, what would you know?"

She said quietly, "I remember her crying in her room for hours. I remember her failing all her exams and I remember her fending off boy after boy that mum produced for Sunday tea."

Peter groaned, "Oh those dreadful Sunday teas!"

Catrina looked down the empty road, "But who is he Peter? What does he do?"

She turned to face him, "And what's he doing with our Jane?"

Peter laughed, "What comes naturally I hope,"

Catrina shook her head, "I don't know, there's something wrong: I'm her sister and I know it's not right. I expect her to be running to me with the news, but she's become secretive. And where has he appeared from? Last week she was by herself, now poof this man has suddenly appeared."

Peter muttered almost inaudibly, "Thirty years is a hell of a time, don't rush her. Emotionally she's probably still a thirteen year old, after all she's not had much practice."

Catrina went to reply, but Hannah burst into the room demanding attention, and for the moment, thoughts of Jane fled from her head.

They arrived at the hotel and Jane made John park round the back and enter through the rear door, not the main one. She grabbed onto John's hand as they entered the hotel and within a few yards of the door bumped into a small Thai woman wearing a thin blue cotton dress. Her eyes practically leapt out of her head as she involuntarily exclaimed, "Jane!"

Jane smiled, "Hello Sarah, everything OK?"

Sarah nodded, momentarily at a loss for words, and eyeing John. Jane swung her hand that was holding John's. "This is John, we're off to dinner."

John smiled and joined in the charade, "Trying to take her mind off work."

Sarah gave a short laugh that sounded more like a cough, "Well I hope you're nocturnal, I don't think Jane's seen daylight for years. I was beginning to wonder if she was a vampire."

John grinned, "Well she hasn't tried to bite my throat yet."

Jane gave his hand a fearful squeeze and John added, "But I have seen her in sunlight."

Sarah laughed and they proceeded down the corridor, he whispered, "Is that why we came this way?"

She grinned, "Most definitely."

Once they arrived at the restaurant he took her to his reserved table and pulled out the chair for her to sit down. She murmured, "Window seat."

"Thought you'd like the view." He replied casually.

The waiter arrived and handed out the menus, after he left she whispered across the table, "He winked at me."

"Perhaps he fancies you."

She visibly shuddered, "I sincerely hope not."

He tapped a wineglass and she shook her head. A thought crossed John's mind, "Are you a vegetarian, I mean..."

She giggled shyly, almost like a schoolgirl. "I'm not a Hindu I'm a Christian."

John relaxed and they ordered their food with sparkling mineral water for him and pure orange juice for her. The waiter left and John watched her huge eyes follow a cyclist as she passed by. She then turned her eyes on him, "So tell me about yourself."

John wondered where to start, so he began with when he left school. "Left school for Engineering College and then joined a firm that specialized in large glass roofs. Spent a few years there and then with my friend John Bassington set up our own company specializing in cantilevered glass roofs. Did well for a quite a few years and then one of our roofs collapsed. Fortunately no one was inside at the time or it would have been curtains for them. Turned out it wasn't our fault either; the building owner had hung huge flower-boxes from the roof-beams and one morning, when it had been snowing all night, the weight-load became too great. Didn't make any difference though, the firm went belly-up in no time at all as all orders dried up and contracted customers pulled out. After that I lectured on cantilever designs a few times at the college and once on customer care. That lecture was heard by an executive of an oil company and before I knew it I had become a peripatetic lecturer on a host of managerial odd and ends."

The starters arrived and John had time to study Jane. Besides her sari she had a sparkly semi-circular ring in her nose that looked like it had genuine diamonds and she'd enhanced her eyes with eye-liner, mascara and dark eye-shadow on the eyelids. She'd also used a dark, almost purple, lipstick and released her hair so that it now hung down between her shoulder blades. She moved her arms and John noticed three gold bangles on each of her ultra-thin wrists. All in all she was quite pleasing to look at and be with.

Jane felt John's eyes studying her and concentrated on her melon, she hoped that her frantic efforts to find something suitable had been worthwhile. She took a mouthful of bland melon. "And what about your private life, a girl in every hotel?"

John chuckled, "No fear. I married a nurse called Helen just after I'd started work with the roofing firm. Basically I fell onto a pile of glass shards and she was the nurse who had to extract them from my bottom."

He suddenly looked away from her, "We parted company when my firm went bankrupt. It was a time of stress all round and I guess that I didn't give her the attention she deserved."

He tackled his pâté with vigour and she gently probed. "Children?"

He beamed, "Daughter called Jacquelyn, she's now teaching in Bristol."

She let him talk on about his daughter while she gave him a serious once over. It made no difference, he could have been any one of a million businessmen who passed through the hotel. Still with a name like John Smith what did she expect? Suddenly she concentrated on his conversation again. "Why did you think she would become a nurse?"

He shrugged, "Mother's a nurse, she was brought up in a nursing home and I thought that like mother like daughter, but she's got her own mind."

Something clicked in Jane's brain, "And the nursing home she was brought up in, is that the one next to where you live?"

He became embarrassed and fidgeted with his napkin, "It meant I could be close. Helen runs it with her husband Colin. Living in the gatehouse meant I could see Jacquelyn whenever I was at home. When she moved away I decided that I'd stay put."

The waiter came and removed the starter debris and topped up their glasses. John smiled at Jane, "Your turn."

She bit her bottom lip and considered where to begin, since he'd started when he left school she decided to do the same; it was a convenient place and left out some parts of her life that she'd rather not talk about. "Left school at fifteen, no point in staying on really as I knew and the teachers knew that I'd never pass any exams. Went to work in a laundry; it was a dreadful job with dreadful pay, but I was young. When I was twenty I found I was asking myself why I was wasting my life washing out others people's dirt for peanuts. I went to night school and eventually got three 'A' levels, English language, art and French."

He interrupted, "English language, not English Literature?"

She smiled coyly, "Language; I am telling you I know my past participles from my present perfect."

The phraseology made him laugh, he'd already noticed that she spoke BBC English most of the time, but occasionally added wording that was straight from the Indian sub-continent.

Sarah peeped through the wicker latticework round the edge of the restaurant and noticed John laughing and Jane smiling broadly in return. She was worried about her friend; last night she had suddenly disappeared and now she had popped up with this man. A man who Jane had never mentioned before – ever, not even in passing. In fact she'd never mentioned any men to Sarah except when they could poke fun at them together. She'd known Jane for more years than she cared to think about and this sudden change in her behaviour worried her. It was just not normal. She hoped that her good friend wasn't being beguiled into some form of amorous relationship with a gigolo, not that he looked like a gigolo, but then what did a gigolo look like? She felt the pass-key in her pocket and decided that they would be in the restaurant for some time and she owed it to her friend to do a little snooping, besides she was dead curious about this chap and his unexpected emergence in Jane's life.

John waited for the waiter to dish out his salmon and then looked at Jane's plate, "Are you really sure that a green salad is all you want."

"Perfectly sure."

"How about a piece of my salmon?"

She looked dubious, "Well just a small piece."

He cut off a third of his salmon and placed it on her plate. He then sipped some water, "You may continue."

She prodded the salmon, "After my A levels I became a junior manager with a cleaning firm, that's when I started to work nights. I soon found out that the better jobs and the better pay in the cleaning business were at night. After a few years Sarah and I – I met Sarah at night school – decided to start our own firm, but she became pregnant and I took over the entire business. It's grown a bit like topsy since then. What happens in my industry is that you bid for a contract and if you get it you usually recruit the staff from the firm that lost the contract. I decided to be different; I have hit teams. Each one has a minibus full of staff and a van

full of cleaning materials. If I gain a contract I develop another hit team, if I lose a contract I usually keep them on. Contracts are always coming and going and there is always a background of staff turnover as nights are not everyone's cup of tea."

She gazed at him straight between the eyes, "I don't want you thinking that I exploit my cleaners. They all get a decent wage and I won't employ anyone without a National Insurance card."

She took a mouthful of salmon and obviously liked it. John asked gently, "So how come Sarah now works for you?"

She stopped eating for a fraction of a second, and lowered her voice, "She lost the child and her husband left her, rotten swine. Still there are men for you. She didn't want to do too much at that time as she had severe depression, so she came on as one of my charge-hands. She now runs the contract here; I only pop in from time to time because the management here insists that I do. Next month the contract here comes up for renewal and Sarah has put in her own bid and I haven't. If she wins she can have the two hit teams we have here, I am not liking the hotel business."

She finished her salmon and John offered her more of his by waving his hand across his plate, she smiled and nodded, "It is beautiful."

John watched more of his dinner disappear down her throat and murmured, "What about outside working hours?"

For a few moments he thought that she hadn't heard, eventually she wiped her mouth on her napkin. Her voice became flat and unemotional, "Not married, no boy-friends and no time to seek one, not that I'm looking. Eight years ago mum was diagnosed with Alzheimer's so the three of us had to look after her. Catrina did the nights, I did noon till eight in the evening and Susan did six in the morning till noon. She died of a massive stroke two years ago and my grandmother died a month after that."

John exclaimed, "But that meant you only got four hours sleep a night!"

She shook her head, "Sarah helped me with the firm, she was a lot better by then. I only worked eight in the evening till three in the morning."

John shook his head as if to clear it, "That must have been hard."

She gazed at him, "It was not by choice, it was our duty."

"Where does your sister Susan live now?"

Jane's eyes became doleful, "She's in India. Her and her husband are software programmers and India is apparently the place to be."

The waiter arrived to remove the plates and conversation temporarily ceased. Jane blessed him for his timing.

Sarah entered John's room and looked around, she'd literally been in hundreds of businessmen's bedrooms and this one looked no different from any of the others. She put aside her natural reluctance to go through personal items and set about a careful search. Jane had stood by her when the going had been tough, really tough, now she was determined to prevent Jane from being exploited, if that was what was happening downstairs. After ten minutes she had to admit defeat, there was nothing here of interest, except a set of tickets for a flight from Stansted to Manchester dated for next Monday. Finally she went through his case and carefully moved his obviously laundered shirts out of the way. She groped around in the various pockets and cubby holes within the case and came up with only a toffee wrapping paper. She put it all back and as a last-ditch effort thumbed through his seminar handouts; under the pile of notes on redundancy she found a letter. She read it and her eyes bulged. She tucked it back under the pile and sat on the bed. There was no evidence of two-timing or that he was married, but she had found out one thing. Trouble was, how could she tell Sarah that this man's brother was a prominent MP?

Chapter 3

Chasing Shadows

John and Jane left the restaurant just after half-past ten and this time exited the hotel past the reception desk. As they walked across the half-filled car-park it John suppressed a yawn as Jane glanced at the starry sky. He'd already noticed that as the meal progressed she had become increasingly lively and the word 'nocturnal' had crossed his mind more than once. They reached the car and she waited for him to open the door for her before she slipped into the passenger seat. He drove out of the car-park and murmured, "Home?"

From the corner of his eye he saw her shake her head, "No, I am fancying seeing the sea."

John's eyes glanced at the clock, she laughed, "We'll be telling people that we went for a late night drive yesterday, well let's do it again."

John glanced at an approaching road sign, "Cromer do?"

She shrugged and hugged her beaded handbag, "Anywhere with the sea, I fancy the smell of salt-water and seaweed."

John turned onto the Cromer Road and headed for the coast.

As they were driving Mr James was slowly gathering courage. He knew that he dare not leave it any late, but really didn't want to go down this road. He sat for a few minutes contemplation possibilities until he finally gathered up the necessary nerve and picked up the telephone to call Lord Hawes. He waited a few seconds as the phone rang and then said into the mouthpiece, "It's Mr James from the Norwich Hotel, I need to speak to Lord Hawes personally."

He listened to the voice on the other end and said, rather more firmly, "No, sorry I need to speak to Lord Hawes personally, if he needs to ring back, I'll wait."

He drummed his fingers on the desk and then suddenly sat upright, "Lord Hawes?"

He got the affirmative and he took a deep breath, "Sorry to bother you m'lord, but you gave us strict instructions. I'm afraid that Henry hasn't turned up for work this evening and nobody has seen him since around four o'clock this morning."

A squawking noise filled the receiver and Mr James screwed up his eyes. "I know m'lord, but I thought it would be unsociable to wait twenty-four hours and then call you at four in the morning."

There was another squawking noise and Mr James physically nodded, "Very well m'lord, I'll call you at ten tomorrow morning, I don't suppose..."

He got a negative reply and Lord Hawes rang off; Mr James exhaled noisily. He now had roughly twelve hours to find Henry. He looked at his telephone pad and dialled the number of a local night-club, might as well start there as anywhere.

About two miles out of town Jane fiddled with the car radio and the cabin filled with the sound of Bing Crosby. She smiled a John, "Radio Norfolk is doing a special series on Bing's early years."

John glanced at her and then concentrated on the road ahead. "Like his music do you?"

"Like any pre-1950's band music."

The drove a few miles in silence until, without warning, she started singing along to the music; she sang both in tune and in rhythm. She obviously knew the songs well. When the news came on she turned the volume down, "Do you mind?"

John chuckled, "No, not in the least. Prefer Baroque Music myself, I like the twiddly bits, but I must admit you can't sing along to it."

She smiled and then turned the volume up, it reminded John of journeys with his pre-teenage daughter, then it had been pop music not 1930s swing, but the uninhibited singing had been exactly the same.

They entered Cromer and followed the signs to the sea-front, John parked as close as he could to the promenade and they walked down to the sea-shore and looked out at the waves. She pointed, "They've still got a pier."

"Pier and lifeboat station, haven't you been here before?"

She grabbed his hand, "No, last time I left Norwich was..." She screwed up her face and then shrugged, "Before I started night work."

They walked along the promenade and she seemed sublimely content. She abruptly stopped and exclaimed, "I am thinking that I am liking it here."

John suppressed laughter at the expression, "I'm glad, can you smell you seaweed?"

She sniffed, "Probably not."

They sat on a bench and she became serious, "How long before our Mr James goes to the police?"

John was momentarily fazed by the abrupt change of both mood and subject. "Not long and I'm beginning to feel a like a bit of a heel."

She frowned and he continued, "Monday I'll be off to Manchester and you'll have to face the police alone, do you think you can do that?"

She bit her bottom lip, "I'll have to, any change of routine and they'll become suspicious, but I would like to be able to talk to you on the phone."

He noticed the slight quaver in her voice and let go of her hand to put his arm around her shoulder, he could feel her shoulder joint under his hand, "I'll give you my mobile number and times when you can get me, if I'm lecturing or flying I'll be out of touch."

The sat looked at the sea for half an hour or so and then, by mutual consent, got up and started back along the promenade.

When they got back to the car they found a policeman standing by it writing in his notebook. When close enough John asked him if there was a problem. The policeman looked them both over before answering, "No problem sir, just caught a young man loitering by your car and I was checking that he hadn't broken in."

John nodded, "Thank you."

He gave them the once over again and nodded, "Goodnight sir, I take it your moving the car now?"

John nodded and the policeman gave Jane a smile, "Take care sir, empty roads are not always safe roads."

He walked off at a measured pace and they got in the car. John murmured, "Well if we wanted to be noticed we've achieved our aim."

Jane giggled, "Did you see the look he gave me?"

They drove out of Cromer and the journey home was accompanied by the melodies of Brenda Lee and Connie Francis; Jane proving herself to be a mine of information about late night radio.

Mr James finally put the telephone down and rubbed his eyes, he knew that he'd have to get some sleep soon. He'd made nearly thirty phone calls, no-one had seen Henry or had any idea where he was. He would liked to have phoned the police, but Lord Hawes had given very strict instructions and until he got the go-ahead he dare not call them. He decided on one last call. When the receiver was picked up he said quickly, "Brenda, it's me, David, sorry for the early morning call, but I'm searching for Henry."

He listened to the reply and responded gently with a "Thanks Brenda, sorry to have woken you," and put the phone down. He now had one more piece of information, Henry's on-off mistress hadn't seen him for three days, so he wasn't there and to his knowledge Henry didn't have another girl-friend on the go at the moment. He sighed and decided to get some sleep in an unused bedroom; he was going to have a difficult phone call to make in the morning, a very difficult phone call.

As they entered the outskirts of Norwich Jane turned down the radio, "Can we go to yours?"

John, who could barely keep his eyes open muttered, "If you want, but I'm shattered."

She gave him a coy look, "I want to sleep at yours. I want to keep up the image."

John mentally took this in, "What about your reputation?"

She looked out of the window at a passing sports-car with a blonde driver, "I fear that is already lost."

She rubbed her nose causing the nose-ring to wobble and sparkle in the oncoming headlights and added quietly, "That is I want to sleep at yours, not sleep with you."

John laughed and shook his head, "Oh no, I'm not giving up my bed and sleeping on the floor. I've got to drive to Stansted Monday morning and I don't want to feel like death warmed up."

He noted the look of horror on her face and added, "But if you can bear sharing, we'll do the same as last night."

She swallowed and her Adam's apple did its bobbing bit, "No hanky-panky – you promise?"

"Scout's honour."

She mentally did an appraisal of the situation. She wanted enough evidence to convince the police that she was having an affair with this man, but nothing more. Could she trust him? She'd heard enough stories from her staff to make her toes curl and knew that often what men

said and what they actually did was frequently different once the primæval sexual urge took over. On the other and she was secretly terrified of being questioned by the police. She'd heard too many late night radio plays not to know that they were experts at what they did. She managed a smile, "Then I guess I'll have to trust you."

They arrived at his tiny home just after two o'clock and it was obvious that John could barely keep his eyes open. As they entered the lounge Jane said kindly, "Why don't you go to bed, I'll join you later, my body clock is not yet ready for sleep."

John gave a tired grin and nodded, she placed a hand on his arm, "Could I borrow a tee-shirt? I didn't come out expecting to sleep over."

He nodded again and staggered out of the lounge: Jane put the television on low and looked at the clock, in fifteen minutes the Road to Morocco movie was on and it was one of her favourites.

About four-thirty Jane finished taking her make-up off and looked into the bedroom. John had left a bedside light on and a tee-shirt over the end of the bed, she held it up and wrinkled her nose, she muttered to herself that he probably hadn't worn it in years and retreated to the kitchen to find an iron. Slightly later she re-entered the bedroom wearing her freshly ironed tee-shirt and eyed the bed. John was fast asleep and pressed against the wall. She paused and, after fetching some cushions from the lounge, laid herself out on the bedside rug with her head on the cushions. She could not bring herself to climb into bed with him and it was a warm enough night to sleep without bedclothes.

John awoke just after nine o'clock and rolled over to see Jane sleeping peacefully on the floor; he instantly felt guilty that he'd had the bed and wondered if that had been her intention. He folded the bedclothes right back and knelt on the other side of her, gently scooping her up and laying her in the bed. He was amazed at how light she was. She hardly murmured. He folded the bedclothes over her and, on instinct, lightly kissed her on the forehead before stepping back and grimacing; he's stepped into a piece of soaking wet rug and guessed that she'd been dribbling again.

John was deeply immersed in an enthralling test match when Jane emerged from the bedroom, still wearing his tee-shirt that was

many times too big for her. She stood in the doorway with eyes wide open, but not doing anything. John gently took her by the hand and led her back to the bed; she snuggled down and slowly closed her eyes. Within a few seconds she was sleeping peacefully again.

The test-match had suspended play for tea when Jane re-emerged, this time in her sari, but in bare feet and zero make-up. John suppressed a laugh and got up to make her some coffee. Two cups of coffee later he casually remarked, "You know you've still got the tee-shirt on under your sari?"

She looked down at her arms and grinned, "I'm always a bit slow when I wake up. I never used to be like this."

John nodded, "You've probably worked nights for too long. Breakfast?"

She considered the thought, "Have you got some cereal and skimmed milk?"

John produced a bottle, "Full fat non-skimmed, but please don't tell me you're watching your weight, the draught from a butterfly's wings could knock you over."

She produced a weary smile, but ate the cereal all the same. She looked at the television, "What's the score?"

"England all out for 325, India so far on 279 for three."

They watched a couple of overs and she exclaimed, "That was never out! It would have missed the stumps by a mile."

John wagged his finger at her, "Never guess which side you're on."

Two overs later the play stopped for rain and John turned the TV off. She looked at the clock and grimaced. John took the hint, "Want to go home?"

"Please."

He pulled the TV plug out of the wall socket, he didn't trust TVs on stand-by. "What's your normal Sunday routine?"

She stretched her slender arms outwards, "Normally go to the early evening service at my church and then midnight communion at the parish church. They started holding a midnight service especially for shift workers a little while ago. After that a late night movie before bed at dawn."

"When do you eat?"

"After the evening service, I usually have a Sunday evening meal with Catrina and her husband." She suddenly gave a huge smile, "I'll miss

the evening service this week, but why don't you join us for dinner, I'm sure Catrina wouldn't mind, but you'd probably get the third degree."

John considered his options. If it was just a matter of being with Jane he'd probably have made an excuse, but there was also the matter of Henry and the more people that considered that he and Jane were a couple the better. He managed a smile, "Sound's great, but hadn't you better warn her?" A grim thought suddenly flashed through his mind, "Hang on, is this the Catrina who cooked the flapjack?"

The look on his face made Jane giggle, "Don't worry her cooking is fine."

She fished out her mobile, realized it wouldn't work and picked up the cordless phone. John busied himself clearing away the cups and pretended not to listen to her side of the conversation. "Hi sis, it's me. Do you mind if I bring a friend to dinner tonight? No, it doesn't have to be formal, we just need to eat. I don't know, hang on."

She looked at him, "Any forbidden food?"

He shook his head and she continued speaking, "He has a deep aversion to curry flapjack, but otherwise will eat anything. No, no wine please, especially not Peter's rhubarb I remember it from last Christmas."

She put the phone down, "All set for seven-thirty."

He came and sat next to her and handed her a piece of paper, "This is my itinerary for the week, well every week at the moment. I've marked when I'll be near my mobile phone and have it switched on."

She looked at the paper and her eyebrows rose, "Don't you ever stop travelling?"

He half laughed and half grimaced, "Mondays – drive to Hotel at Stansted, park the car and then fly to Manchester. Tuesdays – train to York. Wednesdays – train to Heathrow via Paddington. Thursdays it's a shuttle-bus back to Stansted. Fridays - drive to Norwich. Saturday possibly off, or fly to Aberdeen or Edinburgh via Glasgow, Sundays – hopefully – home."

He changed the tone of his voice to one of concern, "I really am sorry that I can't stay here and that you'll have to face the police alone."

She nodded, "I am also thinking it is necessary to keep our routines normal."

She looked at the clock, "Now I need to go home and have a bath."

He thought for a moment and decided that he had to do something to maintain the image of their relationship while he was on the road. He took her hand, "Come with me."

He led her round the back of the gate-house to where there was a tiny garage, he opened the wooden doors to expose, plum in the middle of the garage floor, a green 1960s Citroen 2CV van. He smiled sheepishly, "Used to be my transport when I was at college. When I left and got a company car no-one would give me anything for it, so I kept it. Few years ago I decided to restore it. You told me that you had to lend your van to the hotel team because someone had stuffed their normal van into a wall, so why not use this?"

She was taken aback; it looked like something out of a wartime movie.

"I can't park it under cover, it'll get wet."

He shrugged, "Cars are meant to be used and I can't drive two. I only take it out a couple of times a years, a prolonged outing will do it good."

Jane eye's took in its various rustic aspects while she considered her options. Under normal circumstances she wouldn't be seen dead in a car like this, but these were not normal circumstances.

"That is very generous of you, but I insist I put it on my insurance tomorrow."

John laughed, "Well you can try. If you don't managed it my insurance will cover you, it's actually insured for business use in case my Rover ever breaks down."

He drove the car from the garage and then took her around the block and showed her the controls, especially the push-pull gear-stick. Eventually he sat her in the driver's seat and patted the roof. "Now take care, remember it leans a lot, but that's OK. It sounds noisy, but that's OK. And she's a wee bit sluggish if you're in the wrong gear, and it needs lead replacement shots from the can in the back added to unleaded petrol, one shot for each gallon."

He glanced up to the nursing home and then put his head near the folded down window, "We're being watched, mind if I kiss you?"

She succeeded in smiling and their lips met for their second brief rendezvous of the weekend.

Ten minutes after Jane left there was a knock at the front door. John smiled to himself and responded by opening the door with a large smile on his face. A tall blonde woman with a bouffant hair style, a bright orange dress with matching eye-shadow and matching impeccable nail-varnish stood with arms crossed, drumming her fingers on her upper arms as she waited. John raised his eyebrows, "Hello Helen, to what do I owe the honour?"

He did not invite her in, but she entered anyway and turned to face John. "Did I just see somebody drive off in your precious 2CV?"

"You did."

Helen sniffed as if smelling a bad odour, "And were they female?"

"I sincerely hope so."

She drummed her fingers in a silent rackety tattoo on her upper arm, "Can't we hold a conversation like civilized people?"

John didn't flinch, "I rather thought that you had no part of my life now, you've made that quite plain on a number of occasions."

Helen rolled her pale-blue eyes, "Oh come on! You bring a woman home for two nights in a row and expect me not to be interested?"

John said quietly, "You may be interested, but you have given up the right to be informed."

Helen's face took on a hard look, "Well perhaps if you have found yourself some trollop you'll be moving out and I can use this place for my staff."

John gave a malevolent smile, "Don't see why, the two of us could live here quite easily."

Helen huffed and made for the door. She paused on the doorstep, "She is Indian isn't she?"

John repeated his malevolent smile, "Actually I believe she's British."

Helen made a face and stepped out of the hall, she paused for a fraction of a second, "You're a swine do you know that? You never let me drive your precious 2CV and now you've let some foreign bint drive off in it just to spite me!"

John opened his mouth to retort that she only held a driving license for automatics, but she was already heading down the path. John closed the door and looked at the clock. He had forty minutes to get ready, a limited wardrobe and an impression to make, now where should he start?

Catrina was once again peering through the curtains and talking to her husband. "But it looks like a corrugated chicken shack on wheels; you can't tell me that's a classic."

Peter laughed, "Chicken shed or no chicken shed I tell you that is a classic. If he's leant it to her they are more than mere acquaintances."

Catrina puckered up her nose, "She didn't come home again last night, do you think she was with him?"

Peter put his arm round his wife and gave her a cuddle, "She's an adult. Yesterday you were pleased she was seeing a man, now you are moaning about it."

She went to respond, but Peter added, "Anyway, you'll see him over dinner."

A look of despair crossed her face, "Dinner! And I am not ready!"

She fled for the bedroom yelling, "Stir the gravy before it goes into meltdown."

Peter smiled and looked at the 2CV again; it really was a magnificent vehicle.

Mr James wriggled in the grossly uncomfortable armchair as Lord Hawes, the epitome of a miniature blustering colonel, fixed him with a stare. "So you're telling me that Henry hasn't been seen since four o'clock on Saturday morning, hasn't been to any of his usual haunts, hasn't rung in and has the safe keys with him?"

Mr James nodded woefully. Lord Hawes continued unrelentingly, "What about his mistress," adding when he saw the look on Mr James' face, "of course I know about his mistress, I'm not stupid. I make damn sure I know what colour underpants he wears."

Mr James took a deep breath, "Not been there for days."

Lord Hawes interlocked his fingers and flexed them towards him with his palms outwards, "And you knew the spare set of keys was in his safe and yet you did and did nothing about it?"

Mr James opened his mouth, but Lord Hawes was in no mood to listen. "Well you'd better call out a locksmith then hadn't you?"

Mr James wriggled again, "What about the police?"

"Only when the safe is open and only if I decide."

Jane opened the door to John and ushered him inside. She'd swapped her sari for a sleeveless white dress with a low neckline and her diamond studded nose-ring for a single gold disc that looked rather like the top of an ornate drawing pin. John smiled to himself, the dress had a low neckline, but there was nothing to reveal. All in all she looked like an animated matchstick. She ushered him into her lounge and whispered, "I am thinking that my sister will be dead curious. She will want to know chapter and verse. How did we meet, what do we have in common etc. etc."

John almost laughed at her anxiety. "Well, we'll have to play it by ear and make it up as we go along."

He tried to make it sound reassuring, but this was in truth a test; if they could past the sister's inquisition they could probably pass the inevitable police questioning. She led him back to the hall and opened a door in the wall that led directly to the foot of the stairs to Catrina's part of the

house. She muttered, 'Into the valley of death rode the six-hundred, questions to the left of them...'

Lord Hawes peered into the safe and snorted as he rooted around, "So anything missing?"

Mr James had a look and swallowed, "For starters there's no money, there's normally over six thousand by the weekend." He checked the contents of the safe more closely and then swore. "The memory sticks have gone. They contain the accounts for the bar-turnover for the last six years."

He looked in the pile of brown envelopes and almost swore again, "And the liquor license is missing."

Lord Hawes jabbed Mr James with his finger, "Stop messing about, check the contents with the safe inventory."

Mr James swallowed back some bile, "Henry never kept one."

Lord Hawes pulled out a small brown package and tore it open, white powder spilled onto the floor from a split silver-paper wrapping. He stared at it, before looked at Mr James while taking the black bin-liner out of the waste-bin and re-wrapping the package. "Put this in your safe will you?"

Mr James hesitated and then shook his head, "No, if it's what I think it is I want no part of it, I'm not even touching the bag."

Lord Hawes stood up, "I'll look after this, you call the police," he fixed Mr James with a poisonous stare, "And you won't say a word about this, understood?"

"Understood."

Lord Hawes marched out of the office holding the bag, but what was on his mind was not the drugs, but a photograph of a young woman on a donkey. Somehow Henry had got hold of it and threatened to show it to Lady Hawes. Lord Hawes was in no doubt that Henry had taken it as an insurance policy, well now he had his own insurance policy and once the police found the nasty little brat he'd be in a position to trade.

Dinner at Catrina's came to the end of the main course, so far Jane and John had managed to keep the dinner conversation on fairly neutral subjects, but John wasn't fooled, Catrina had that glint in her eye that told him she wanted information not small talk. Jane stood up and picked up the dishes, "I am thinking I am smelling your pie incinerating!"

Catrina followed her out and John smiled at the phraseology. Peter noticed the smile, "I blame the grandmother," he said, "Their mother was born in this country and took great pains to speak BBC English. However the grandmother came here when she was twenty-odd and spoke what I can only describe a Raj-English. The girls used to speak Raj-English to her and BBC English to their mum, sometimes it gets all mixed up. It's one of Katrina's endearing features and Jane is not much different, but she only tends to do it when she's stressed or poking fun."

John nodded, "It's the mixture that catches you out."

He stood up and went to inspect some photographs on the wall, he turned to Peter, "Your handiwork?"

Peter grinned, "It's what I do for a living, mainly family photographs, wedding, parties and the occasional town bash."

John studied a picture of the three sisters all wearing the same sari (the one Jane wore last night John noted) and sitting semi-sideways on a bench and posing in an exactly identical manner. They looked like an all girl pop group or a group of models or, if you could forget Jane's eyes, a set of triplets. Peter came and stood beside him, "Aunt's wedding last year, the three sisters were bridesmaids just before Susan went to India. Hell of a bash, goodness knows what it cost."

John read the names underneath the photo, Jane-Charu – Susan-Tanushri – Katrina-Harshini. Peter tapped the nameplate, "Same mixture, mother wanted English names to help them blend in and Grandmother wanted them to have Ceylonese names to help them with their traditional identities."

John moved to an individual picture of Katrina sitting in an armchair, then to a picture of Jane sitting on a garden swing and wearing a wrap-round white blouse with a pink paisley skirt. For all the world she looked like a teenager having fun. Peter murmured, "Give you a copy of that if you like."

John cocked his head on one side, "I'd like that."

Peter became professional, "Do you need a hard copy, or would a JPG file be OK? Is so I could give you that today."

John grinned, "JPG would be fine."

Peter looked at the picture, "Don't tell Katrina I said so, but Jane's the most photogenic of the three, it's something to do with the out of proportion eyes."

John glanced at the individual picture of Susan and then studied the group photo again, "Are they close?"

Peter pondered his answer before replying as he brushed his hand over his bald head; "Yes and no. When they're together you can't tell them apart, but they have all chosen individual lives."

Catrina appeared carrying an over-brown brûlée, "Stop ogling boys and sit down." She commanded.

Jane appeared with some cream and they dished out the deserts. Catrina said, over-casually, "So how did you to meet?"

John was temporarily lost for words, but Jane gave a sweet smile, "At the hotel."

Catrina was not to be put off, "Not where, how?"

She looked at John, "Peter and I met at a wedding."

Peter laughed, "I was taking the photographs and she was getting in the way."

Catrina looked at Jane, "Are you telling me you have never met?"

Jane smiled and looked her sister straight in the eye, "Actually we met in the kitchen there. I was cleaning and he wanted some breakfast."

Catrina stared at her in disbelief, "But you're not a cook."

Jane shrugged, "It was 3pm and there was no room service."

Catrina turned to John, "So then what?"

John tried for a casual smile, "I took her out for a drive in the moonlight."

Peter almost choked, Catrina's eyes tried to imitate Jane's for size; "Just like that?"

"Just like that."

Jane joined back in the conversation, "You should try it, driving through the countryside as the sun goes up. Last night we went to Cromer and walked on the beach and tried to count the stars, it was beautiful."

Catrina opened her mouth, but Peter had already begun to change the subject, "Jane says you travel a lot."

John settled down into an easier conversation, "Yes and no. I travel a lot, but mostly to the same places..."

No too much later John stood on Jane's doorstep, he whispered, "You did well in there."

Jane rolled her eyes upwards, "She will be being after more titbits, I'll keep you informed."

John grinned and nodded, "You do that."

She grabbed his hand, "Drive carefully."

He gently squeezed hers, "You take care as well and look after my little 2CV."

He went to go, but Jane hung on, "How about a kiss for the neighbours?"

Their lips met for a third rendezvous, one that was momentary, but not brief.

Chapter 4

Conversations

Monday at six-thirty, right on their pre-arranged preferred time, John answered a call from Jane. She started with a neutral subject. "Are you in the hotel? Was your journey as expected?"

"Fine, plane was on time and for once the hotel bus was waiting. How's it with you?"

"Catrina gave me the third degree last night, she thinks that I'm either stupid for getting in a car with you in the early hours of the morning, or out of my mind and besotted with you."

"What did you tell her?"

"That I am finding you very attractive, what else? Anything less and she would be more than suspicious."

John smiled to himself and winced at the same time. "Did you get your work done last night?"

"A little, after the midnight communion, enough that I'll easily catch up."

There was a silence and John filled it by saying, "I'd better go and check on my course participants. Take care."

"You take care to. Bye."

"Bye."

Jane arrived at her storehouse just on 8pm, there were already three vans loading up with cleaning materials. What she called her storehouse was really the enclosed loading bay of an old warehouse, the rest of the warehouse now being used for a gymnasium. She walked across the floor to the desk in the corner to greet a middle-aged woman wearing a brown two-piece suit and looking like a tailor's dummy. This was Christine, the only non-night-time staff. Christine worked three mornings and two evenings keeping stock levels right, doing general administration and, most essentially, the payroll. Jane checked a few

papers and then looked up as Christine put the phone down, "Everything all right?"

Christine screwed up her ample nose, "Mostly. The hotel paid us at nine this morning, not midnight on Friday and I need you to talk to our latest recruit."

Jane nodded, "Do me a favour and tell Sarah about the hotel payment will you?"

Christine looked wary, "You are still OK about me doing the accounts for Sarah if she gets the hotel contract aren't you?"

Jane gave her a big smile. "Of course I am, we've worked long enough together for you to know if I'm not. What's the problem with the recruit?"

"She's on Greta's team and she wants her money paid into her dad's bank account."

Jane raised an eyebrow, "Is there a problem with that?"

Christine looked around and lowered her voice, "He came in with her to get the job application forms. He's a huge brute of a man with the biggest beer-gut you have ever seen and breath sour enough to wilt flowers. He looks the sort to keep the money for himself."

Jane sighed; they'd had this sort of problem before, but usually husbands demanding the money, not fathers. "Where is she?"

Christine pointed, "Reading our health and safety manual."

Jane set out for the other side of the storehouse and stopped halfway to talk to Roger, the team-leader of her only all-male hit-team. After a brief chat she pointed to the huge open roller-door, "Could you get one of yours to load that van for me, usual mix."

"He looked across and said automatically, "Ten crates?"

"If they'll go in, prefer twelve."

He peered over his glasses and burst out laughing. "You can't be serious, not a 2CV."

She mockingly scolded him by wagging her finger, "It is very serviceable and highly economic, if successful I'll get one for your team next."

Roger's craggy face split into a smile, "Not before hell freezes over."

She left him laughing and found the new recruit. Jane sat on the chair next to her. "Jasmine? I'm Jane."

Jasmine's bony face took on a terrified look and Jane immediately sought to put her at ease, "Thought I'd say hello. You should see me around at least once a week as I try to visit every team at least once. If you've any problems speak to Greta or speak to me. We try to act like a family and look after one another, OK?"

Jasmine nodded, Jane looked her in the eyes. "Christine tells me you want the money paid into your dad's bank account, is that right?"

She nodded warily. Jane smiled, "Suppose I said no."

Jasmine's eyes took on a haunted look. She swallowed nervously. "He said I must."

Jane studied her dowdy appearance, though because of the job it might not mean much. "How old are you Jasmine?"

"Sixteen"

"Why when you've got your life in front of you do you want a cleaning job?"

She shrugged defensively and then muttered, "I'm no good at reading, the words all jump about."

Jane tapped the manual, "So you were pretending?"

She nodded miserably. Jane tried to give her an encouraging smile, "No problem, I'll get Greta to tell you what's in it."

She reached out and held Jasmine's hands, "You don't have to have the money paid into your dad's account if you don't want to. Christine can get you a bank account set up before Friday, or if you like I'll pay you cash for a couple of weeks."

Jasmine puckered her mouth and shook her head, "My dad would kill me."

Fear was written in every fibre of her body.

Jane held onto Jasmine's hands and said quietly, "You don't have to live like this you know. I can get you a place in a woman's refuge that has lots of other teenagers."

Jasmine shook her head and said softly, "He'd find me."

"How would he know? We won't tell him."

Jasmine looked on the verge of tears as she mumbled, "Can I think about it?"

Jane nodded, "Look, it's Monday so you've got a few days to make up your mind. If you want to talk Greta has my phone number and it's also on the back of your identity card, can you read that OK?"

Jasmine turned the identity card over and squinted. Jane took the card off of her and wrote her phone number on it in big evenly spaced writing. Jasmine nodded. Jane said kindly, "Ring anytime, but if you ring between eight in the morning and four in the afternoon I may take some time to answer. OK?"

Jasmine nodded again and Jane went to find Greta, this one would need close partnering until she knew how to use the different cleaning fluids by heart.

Monday, just before midnight, John's phone rang and he answered automatically being almost asleep. Jane soon startled him out of sleep. "John? The police have questioned me."

John sat bolt upright. "Where? When?"

"They tracked me down at one of our office blocks about an hour ago. It was a young police constable."

"And?"

"And she wanted to know the last time I saw Henry. I told her 2am in the kitchen. She asked me if I saw him after that and I said no as I wasn't at the hotel. I told her I was with you and she wanted your name. Sorry I had to tell him."

He took a deep breath and tried to sound reassuring, "Don't be sorry, it's what we agreed. Did she give you any information?"

"Only that they are treating it as a missing person."

"Well that's good news."

"I hope so."

"Thanks for telling me."

There was a noise and she whispered "Must go, take care."

"You too."

Tuesday John called Jane at 6pm, she answered on the second ring. They exchanged minimal pleasantries before John got down to the reason for his call. "Police called me today on the hotel phone. Asked me if I'd seen Henry and about you."

Jane's squeaked something unintelligible and John sought to calm her down. "I told them what we agreed; that I hadn't seen him that night and that we left the hotel at three. It was a short conversation and the police constable sounded totally disinterested."

She sighed, "Let's hope that's an end to it." She paused, "What you doing now?"

"Gazing at a close-up of you, Peter gave me four photographs on disc. You on a swing, you sitting in an armchair, you lying on a settee and the close-up of you gazing at the camera."

"What are you going to do with them?"

John smiled, "made the one of you on a swing my laptop's wallpaper and the close-up the screen saver."

There was a silence before she asked coyly, "And what do they make you think?"

"That I'm glad I met you, but wish the circumstances were different."

There was more silence followed by her quite voice, "Have you got a photo of you on your machine?"

"Only an identity type shot."

"Will you e-mail it to me?"

"Of course."

"Take care."

"You too."

Wednesday evening John waited for a call, but it didn't come until nearly seven. An agitated Jane and got straight down to business. "Police have been back to the hotel and re-questioned all the hotel staff and my cleaners."

"And you?"

"I wasn't there, Sarah told me. Same questions, different police."

"They're obviously getting nowhere."

"I hope your right."

John paused, "Did you get the e-mail."

"Yes, it's rather fetching, shame about the hair-style."

John chuckled, "It was a windy day and I forgot to comb my hair before I went in the photo booth."

"Well I like it anyway,"

"Must go, hungry wolves waiting to devour me. Take care."

"You too."

The mobile phone rang and Jane didn't recognize the number that was phoning, did John have two phones? "Hello."

"Is that Miss Doe?"

"Yes."

"I've been thinking over what you said and I would like my own bank account."

"Is that Jasmine?"

"Yes."

"I'll be at the storehouse at 8pm tomorrow before your team goes out, see me then and I'll get the ball rolling."

"Thank you."

"I'll have to pay you in cash this week, will that be OK?"

"Yes thank you."

"Goodbye Jasmine, see you tomorrow."

"Good bye."

The young woman in the denim skirt and faded tee-shirt walked down the street carrying a brown take-away food bag, when she reached a green Saab she got into the passenger seat. She passed a burger and a coffee over to the hard-faced man in the passenger seat; he didn't look at her but kept his eyes on a block of flats. The woman took out an orange juice for herself and took a sip. They looked almost like any other couple who would eat a breakfast in their car. He in his early thirties with bottle-blond crew-cut hair, rugby shirt, well worn jeans and a thin face with pronounced cheek bones. However, his steel blue eyes told you not to mess with him. She in her late twenties with ear-lobe length short natural blonde fine hair, ancient denim skirt with a faded Minny-Mouse tee-shirt and a friendly face with eyes of an almost translucent blue. They ate in silence like any couple until the man spoke, his harsh Essex accent making the words cold and hard. "How you getting on with your teenage shoplifters?"

She glanced at him, then back at the flats. "Nearly wrapped up. Three of them will get a caution, the fourth, that Jones girl, was been charged with twenty-three counts; she's already got a suspended sentence." Her West Sussex accent made the words flow easily and sound convincing, that was exactly what she wanted.

He gave the briefest of nods. "And the traffic job?"

"No progress, both lads say the other was driving and that they knew nothing about the dead sheep in the boot."

He grunted, "And the Lord's son?"

She took an apple out of her huge handbag and started to polish it, "Something's not quite right there."

He sniffed and blew his ample nose into the paper napkin, "Tell me about it."

"Well on first look it seems he's done a runner. Took the money from the safe and the records of the accounts. Can't find the car and, according to his manager, he was definitely edgy about something. On the other hand there are a number of things that don't stack up."

His eyes didn't leave the flats, "Such as?"

She started ticking the points off on her fingers, "Such as we turned his flat over and found two thousand pounds in cash stuffed in his sock drawer and traces of cocaine on his kitchen work-surface. Now why do a runner and leave cash behind? And, by the way, he didn't take his toothbrush, shaver, passport or driving license."

He shrugged, "Fled in a panic."

She ticked off another finger.

“Such as he’s got three-thousand pounds in his bank account and since the day he disappeared hasn’t taken a sou out of it, or used either of his credit cards, or his mobile phone.”

“Look for another account or a second identity.”

“I am. Then there’s Lord Hawes, a rich, famous and powerful person who is known to throw his weight about, but he’s acting like a fluffy lamb. Finally there’s his car. It’s a silver Jaguar coupé, not a car to blend in. It hasn’t been spotted on any speed cameras, congestion charging cameras or car-park camera. We’ve not picked up its number-plate on any recognition system and it’s not at any airport or port as far as we know and definitely not at his home, Lord Hawes mansion or his garage. As a bonus it’s fitted with a tracker, but that’s not been activated so the car’s not been stolen.”

She paused, “Oh, and his mistress was expecting him Saturday lunch-time for a tête-à-tête, needless to say he didn’t show.”

He scrunched up the paper bag, eyes never leaving the block of flats; “When was he last seen?”

“Good question. The cleaning manager gives a definite meeting at 2am. One of the other cleaning staff thinks they saw him about 2:30am walking down a corridor and the receptionist thinks that he was talking to a group of rowdy Dutchmen at 4pm. After that nothing. I’ve had the staff questioned twice, just in case anyone remembered anything, but no change. I’ve also tried questioning the Dutchmen on the phone, it was a waste of time as most of them were so blotto the queen could have passed by and they wouldn’t have noticed.”

He took out a small or of binoculars and peered through them, “Anything unusual at the hotel?”

She laughed, “It’s a large hotel, you know what that means. Two Mr & Mrs Smiths booked in, both secret liaisons. No less than four ladies of ill-repute in the bar, actually they’re a good source of information, they all knew our Henry Hawes, none of them liked him and none of them saw him at all after 10pm. Then, would you believe, the cleaning manager and a guest went for a ‘drive’ at three in the morning to watch the sun come up.”

The man smiled, “They should be so lucky.”

He put the binoculars away, “Are you saying that you think he’s not just missing but that he’s been abducted or murdered?”

She bit into her apple, “Yes, it doesn’t smell right. Abduction for ransom would explain Lord Hawes’ attitude and murder would explain the lack of activity on his mobile etc.”

He grunted, "Well, we'd better tell the inspector – hold on, he's coming out, get ready."

The drove off after a rusty Vauxhall and all conversation about Henry Hawes ceased, for the moment.

Sheela Vance checked her short spiky blond hair in the car mirror and evaluated her make-up. She took another deep drag on her cigarette and stubbed it out in the over-full ashtray before climbing of her nondescript Nissan and making here way up to the imposing door of a Victorian mansion. It was opened by a tall man doing a passable impression of an unhappy undertaker. He managed to turn the corners of his mouth up by a millimetre or so, "Miss Vance?"

"Yes."

"Lord Hawes is expecting you in his study, second left down the hall, the door is open."

She traipsed down a hall that horror movie directors would die for and walked into a study that would have done a Victorian explorer proud. Lord Hawes was sitting at his desk doing nothing in particular except look like an advert for brown tweed suits. He indicated to a chair on the other side from him and she sat down. She felt like a schoolgirl about to be reprimanded for a petty misdemeanour. Lord Hawes stared at her with bloodshot eyes before starting. "Freddy recommended me to you, seems you tracked down his son-in-law."

Sheela's face became expressionless, "By Freddy you mean Sir John Danes."

"Yes, we always called him Freddy at school on account of his bowling."

He pushed a fat brown envelope in her direction, "Want you to find my son, he's done a bunk."

She didn't touch the envelope, "How long ago?"

"Week."

She made a face, "Trails soon go cold."

Lord Hawes sneered, "You found Freddy's lad after four years."

She sighed, "He liked messing about with radio-controlled helicopters, that's a bit of a small network."

She fixed him with a stare, "If it's only a week the police will still be involved."

He have a derisory snort, "They won't find him and they won't look too hard. He's not liable to be charged with anything so why should they bother?"

He took out a cigarette and, noting the longing in her eyes, passed one over. She lit it, inhaled deeply, blew the smoke out of her nose and smiled, "Give me the bare facts."

"He's junior hotel manager at my hotel in Norwich, responsible for the bar and special bookings, and oversight of the cleaning and maintenance contracts; nothing too grand as he's a bit of a pratt. Last Friday morning he disappeared, took money from the safe, plus memory sticks with the past bar accounts on and just disappeared."

She nodded and decided that Lord Hawes looked like a squashed pig. She preferred the Welsh way of identifying people, so Lord Hawes was Hawes-the-pig. She gave him a questioning look, "Much money?"

He shrugged, "The money doesn't matter, it will all become his when my heart gives up."

She didn't reply and he added, "Only son, no other children and I mean no other children, there's none in any closet I know."

She tapped some ash into an ashtray, "If he's not around who would inherit?"

Lord Hawes scowled and her squashed pig impression was reinforced. "My younger brother I suppose, but I'd rather give it to a cat's home."

She moved her jaw to one side and pushed out a cheek with her tongue, "What aren't you telling me? If you want me to find him and not the police I need everything you've got."

He stood up and pulled a black plastic bag from the safe behind him and tossed it to her. "This was in his safe."

She inspected it and then put it back on his desk. "Did you know he was into dealing drugs?"

"He might not be dealing."

"Awful big supply for one person."

Lord Hawes gave her a serious look, "No, but I knew he was getting money from somewhere."

"Not your accounts?"

"Not if my auditors are up to scratch."

She half reached for the envelope, "Freddy told you what I charge?"

"There's £5000 in the envelope, that's four weeks of your exorbitant charges I believe. If you can't do it on that I reckon you won't find him."

He leant forward, "Let me make myself plain, I'm not worried about the drugs or the money. I want to know that he's alive and I want from him a picture he has, it's a holiday snap of a woman on a donkey. If I get that picture, whatever trouble he's in I'll get it sorted, or buy him a one-

way first class ticket to South America; a man can get lost in South America.”

She didn't believe a word of what he said, but all the same reached out for the envelope, he suddenly placed his hand on it. “Whatever you find is for my ears only.”

“Of course.”

He let go, “I've put in there a list of his usual haunts, his friends, such as they are, and a set of his house keys.”

She stood up. “One last question, is he dangerous?”

“Only if you're female and if he can get you drunk.”

She left and went back to her car, pulled out a picture of Henry and looked at it. “Well.” she said, “well where are you my boy; living it up in some foreign place or lying in a concrete jacket at the bottom of the river?”

DC Green and her sergeant DS Middleton entered their Detective Inspector's office just before three in the afternoon, both were feeling jaded (on duty since 6am) and elated (caught a very slippery pair of con merchants red handed). The Detective Inspector, a slim forty-something brunette, with a well-scrubbed face, came round the desk and sat on the edge of it. “Well done for this morning, been after that pair for a couple of years.”

She picked up a bulging file, “You wanted to talk about Henry Hawes our missing heir to the aristocracy.”

DC Green nodded, “The thing is...”

The Inspector held her hands up, “The thing is the regional crime squad were looking at him. Had a call an hour ago from their,” she consulted her notes, “their DI Jacobson. Seems they thought he was a middle man in a minor drugs operation. They've even had one of their men in the hotel for a time pretending to be a tourist, apparently he got on rather well with the young barmaid.”

She looked at Green and Middleton, “Upshot is our undercover man was probably rumbled, hence the swift exit of dear old Henry.”

DC Green tried to hold her ground, “But I don't think it was a swift exit, I think it could be murder.”

The Inspector puckered her lips and put on a no-nonsense face. “Got a body have we? Got a motive? Got a suspect?”

DC Green mumbled something incoherent and the Inspector tossed the file back onto her desk. “Not enough; guy was a first class shit according to his staff and frankly we've better fish to fry. Not that I'm

making a value judgement you understand, but I am making a judgement about sensible deployment of manpower. The regional crime squad have said that they'll keep an eye on this for a while, they stand a better chance than us of turning him up if drugs are involved and I can use your excellent pair of brains elsewhere for a while."

She grinned, "And in any case Lord Hawes has informed me, out of courtesy, that he's put a private detective on the case, so we'll let someone else do the digging for a while."

She picked up a slim file, "Meanwhile, following your great success this morning, I've got this little gem for you. It's all about a peculiar increase in the trading of Green Water Melons..."

DC Green finally got off duty at four-thirty and went to the local café for a cold drink before going home to face yesterday's washing up. She'd been sipping her milk-shake for less than a minute when a spiky haired woman joined her at the table. She was instantly suspicious as there were plenty of unoccupied tables. She gave her a filthy stare, the woman merely smiled, "Taking a well earned rest are we DC Green?"

DC Green's eyes narrowed, "What's it to do with you?"

She slid a card over the table, "Sheela Vance, Private detective, currently searching for Henry Hawes on behalf of Lord Hawes, I believe you used to be doing the same."

DC Green shook her head, "Go away, I can't tell you anything."

Sheela drew an imaginary circle on the table, "I hear that you're unhappy at being taken off the case." She leant forward, "Look, we're both after the same thing, well almost. I want to find Henry and you want to find out what happened. How about a trade? I let you know if I find anything remotely criminal and you tell me what you know. I can probably catch up with you given a week, but by then we both know that any trail will be getting very stale indeed."

DC Green finished her milk-shake still highly suspicious, this woman knew too much. "How come you know so much?"

She leant back in her chair and tapped the side of her nose, "Used to be a DS, but got fed up of the red tape."

DC Green made a decision, "It's not what we know, it's what doesn't make sense..."

John got his expected call at six-thirty, Jane sounded a bit down, "Hi, no reason to call really, nothing new has happened at this end."

John opened his laptop to look at her picture; somehow it made the conversation easier. "You don't need a reason to phone do you?"

"Didn't think you'd want to talk about trivia."

"What's trivia? I rather think trying to tell six executives from Spain that they must be able to impart bad news with a degree of diplomacy when all they really want to do is watch the Spain-Italy football match on TV, is a real lesson in imparting relative trivia."

She chuckled, "Bad seminar?"

"The worse. Yesterdays bunch were eager to learn, this lot couldn't care."

He did some calculations in his head, "Where will you be at midnight?"

"I ought to be at the hotel; I ring the changes week by week and tonight I've penciled in the Hotel for its weekly visit from midnight till two am."

"What on earth do you do for two hours?"

"Talk to Sarah, talk to the staff and make I'm seen by the hotel management."

"Fancy seeing the sunrise in the country?"

She perked up, "You serious?"

"Yes, I'm not expecting any of my next batch of Dutchmen to arrive so I can have a late night, but not too late mind."

He heard a commotion in the background and Catrina's voice saying something. Jane quickly said, "Must go, radar ears arriving. Take care."

"You too."

Jane arrived at her storehouse and automatically re-stocked her van. The 2CV was growing on her, it wasn't fast, but it was fun. The only downside was that she had to pack the open crates of cleaning materials very carefully because of its tendency to lean a lot on corners if she took them above walking pace, even then she couldn't be sure. Once it was loaded to her satisfaction she headed for Christine's desk, only to be waylaid by one of her team leaders. Jane patiently listened to her. She tended to be a bit of a whinger, but she did a good job and was especially good with new recruits of the uncertain type. Jane eventually smiled at her, "Sorry about that Diane. I have told the owners of the office block that they have a cockroach infestation in their paper storage cupboards, but they don't seem interested. Look, there's only two more nights on that contract and then your switching to the Huddleson out-of-town department store, can you just ignore those rooms for two nights?"

Diane put her hands on her ample hips, "That's not very professional."

"Look upon it as an opportunity to spend time checking everyone is up on health and safety."

Diane grimaced, but nodded. Jane put a hand on her arm, "Look, can I ask a favour? I've got a sixteen year old who I think is going to go into a woman's refuge and will have to switch teams, the man she is hiding from knows she's on the county-council team. Will you take her under your wing? I also think she's dyslexic, so you'll have to take extra care that she understands about the different fluids and when not to mix them."

Jane watched Diane's face. Diane herself had fled from a brutish husband, but only after putting him in hospital. Of all the team leaders she was the best one to offer Jasmine the greatest protection and treat her with care. Diane tossed her head, "And I suppose you'll take away my best worker in the meantime."

"I'll not take away anyone, you'll get two more for Huddlesons and she'll be a third until Joan retires in three weeks time."

Jane deliberately lowered her voice, "The Huddleson contract is important to us, I wouldn't trust it to anyone else."

Diane's ample bosom swelled, "Send her over, I'll do my best."

Jane nodded, "She'll join you on Monday."

Diane nodded and waddled off. Jane aimed for Christine's desk and flopped down in the spare chair. Christine raised an eyebrow, Jane smiled, "Can you move Jasmine from Greta's team to Diane's on Monday. Ursula is coming back off sick and I want her to go back to what she knows."

Christine made a note, "How long was she off?"

"Three months, but I still want her on light duties, no stacking chairs or suchlike."

Jane watched Roger's team do a mock haka before they set off and smiled. They may be a weird bunch she thought, but they had a good camaraderie and worked like Trojans. She turned to Christine, "Is it CleanUp who's taking over from Diane?"

Christine nodded, "Score this year so far, we've lost six to CleanUp and they've lost eight to us."

Jane laughed, "Bet it's even by the end of the year."

She picked up the phone and talked to Bill Krelt, the manager of CleanUp Ltd, and warned him about the cockroaches. Christine wagged her finger when she had put the phone down. "Warning the competition?"

Jane idly looked at the duty rosters, “We may fight like cat and dog over contracts, but it’s always useful to share unwelcome information. Cockroaches don’t care who’s trying to clean them up.”

Christine smiled and then turned to deal with a team-leader signing for their materials stock-up. Jane, not for the first time, wondered what she was doing here. She liked the buzz, but she’d been on continuous nights for nearly twenty years. Did she really want to spend the rest of her life talking about cockroaches, evaluating the really best toilet cleaner and never being awake at midday?

Chapter 5

Lull Before the Storm

John arrived at the hotel at five minutes to midnight. He felt totally drained. His Spanish course participant may have been reluctant pupils, but they were exuberant dinner companions, especially as Spain had thrashed Italy five-nil. As he walked in the rear entrance he bumped into Sarah, she gave him a sly smile, "Looking for Jane are we?"

He was instantly on his guard; something about Sarah instinctively told him that she was not convinced about his 'relationship' with Jane. He managed a tired smile, "Why else would I be here at this time of night?"

She held onto her broom with both hands and leant onto it, "She's in the office area or the kitchen."

John gave a casual wave and set off down the corridor and went straight into the kitchen. Jane was standing still and staring at the spot where Henry had ended up, she turned to look at him. "It did happen, didn't it? Somehow it seems like a bad dream."

He noted the mop in her hands, "Been cleaning up again?"

"Making sure, last week I was in a bit of a hurry."

"Hasn't your cleaning team been in here six times since then?"

Her big eyes swiveled onto him, "My head knows you're right, but my fear knows no bounds."

He walked over to her and put his arms around her and murmured, "Sorry I couldn't be by your side this week of all weeks."

She nestled in his arms as a passing Sarah glanced through the window. She was still not convinced about the pair of them, but he had obviously just driven a long way to be with her, and she was obviously glad to see him.

Jane stood back and looked at John, "you look dreadful."

He gave a weak smile, "Thanks for that round of applause."

Jane gave her heart warming smile, "As much as I would love to see the sun come up, how about a change of plan, what about breakfast

together? You go to sleep in your room and we'll go for breakfast at eight."

"Would you mind?"

"Course not."

John made his way back to the car, extracted his suitcase and booked himself into the hotel. He was asleep within a minute of hitting the bed.

Sheela pushed away her file of papers and lit a last cigarette before she went to bed. She'd been trained to look for the unusual and there were three unusual things worth pursuing in the case Lord Hawes had given her. Firstly there were the drugs; drugs in the sort of quantity Lord Hawes had shown her required money, certainly more money than Henry supposedly had. So was he merely minding the drugs or was he selling the drugs, in either case had he been playing straight with whoever was financing the racket? Secondly there was the amazing rapidity of his disappearance. There was no last minute grab for money from a cashpoint machine, no taking of his passport and, most interesting of all to Sheela, his unobserved disappearance in the early hours of the morning. At that time, when there are few people around, those that are around tend to get noticed, but Henry had not been noticed either leaving the hotel or driving his wonderfully identifiable car. Finally there was this peculiar anomaly of the cleaning manager and a guest going off for a drive. According to the chatty receptionist, Mr Smith had been to the hotel every Friday for just over two months and there had been no hint of a relationship with Miss Doe. She smiled to herself, John Smith and Jane Doe, she didn't fancy their chances of booking into a hotel without questions being asked and eyebrows raised. She got back to the matter in hand, as far as she was concerned this was a change in behaviour for both of them and changes in behaviour were always worth investigating.

John had just finished tying his shoelaces when there was a knock at his hotel door. He rapidly combed his hair before opening the door. Somehow Jane had changed from her two-piece trouser suit into a fetching combination of pale yellow top and light brown skirt that had a gold swirly pattern all over it. He took her down to the restaurant and they found a corner table. Once they had ordered he gave her a closer look. She'd obviously gone to a great deal of trouble to get ready; full make-up, three gold bangles on each wrist and a minuscule diamond stud in her nose. She suddenly smiled at him, "Do you approve?"

"Sorry was I staring?"

"Just a little."

"Yes I do approve, more than approve. How come a pretty girl like you hasn't found a boyfriend?"

She looked away from him, "Unsociable hours; I'm not a girl anymore and being a cleaning lady is not very attractive."

She looked back, her eyes honing in on him; "How come you never re-married?"

He chuckled, "You may work unsociable hours, I'm never there, home that is. Take this week for instance, in seven days I'll be home less than twenty-four hours."

The waiter arrived and served up the food, John stared at Jane's plate. "You can't tell me that one slice of toast with a few shriveled mushrooms is enough for a woman who's just finished a twelve hour shift?"

She made a sweeping motion with her hands, "Breakfast for you, light supper for me."

"Seriously, how about some bacon, or a sausage?"

She eyed his plate, "Well the bacon does smell good and eggs are always nutritious."

He moved a sausage and his lone fried egg over to her plate and they started eating. Between mouthfuls they talked about their respective weeks. When he reached the toast he gently asked her how she was feeling.

She nibbled her bottom lip, "Better now you're here. I keep imagining that they'll come and sweep me away to some dreary cell and I'll never see the light of day again. But it's different when you here, safety in numbers I suppose."

She added softly, "Are you staying here, or going home?"

He grimaced, "Contracted to stay here, I'll probable do some paper-work in my room; I have my laptop and my portable printer with me."

She toyed with a grain of brown sugar, "Would you mind dreadfully if I slept in your room? Just being near you makes me feel better."

He reached out and held her hand, "Of course not."

She gave a coy smile, "I'm prepared this time, I've got a small bag in the 2CV."

He'd forgotten about the van and he gave her an enquiring look, "How are you getting on with the beast?"

"I like it, it's not as fast or as easy to drive as the modern ones, and the brakes need a really good shove, but it's fun to drive and you get noticed. I just wish I had some of my stickers on the doors."

He finished his coffee, "Well put some on, I guess they peel off easy enough."

She looked surprised, "Are you sure?"

"Absolutely."

He smiled at both her expression and the thought of Helen seeing his 2CV with Jane's stickers on it. Jane suppressed a yawn and he stood up, "Time for bed."

They trooped upstairs via the 2CV where Jane collected a bright pink vanity case from the back. Once in the room Jane disappeared into the bathroom and then re-appeared ten minutes later wearing a pair of gold silk pyjamas. She slipped into one of the two single beds in the room and John sat on the edge of it. "You sure I won't disturb you."

"No, I want to know that you're here."

He readjusted her bedclothes and then lightly kissed her on the forehead before leaving her to sleep. Ten minutes later he looked round from his laptop and she was fast asleep, gently dribbling into the pillow.

Meanwhile Sheila was in the back of a different van sitting on an uncomfortable pile of potatoes. One of the two men in the van with her stopped looking out of the smoked glass rear window and came and sat close to her, they spoke in murmurs. The man, otherwise known as DI Jacobson of the regional crime squad, wiped his nose, "Damn hay-fever."

He tucked his grubby handkerchief away and fixed Sheila with a stare, "You've got a brass neck, I'll give you that, especially after dumping me in it before you left."

She gave a casual wave, "Seem to remember that you dug your own pit to fall into by knowingly allowing your DC to sleep with the prime suspect's daughter in the hope of gaining information."

He scowled and said menacingly, "My time is limited."

She dropped a small wrap of silver paper into his hands, "Courtesy of Henry Hawes, he had about half a kilo of them in his safe."

Dave squatted back onto his haunches, "So the little squirt was dealing."

"Or was he or was he minding?"

Dave gave a sly smile, "Now there's a loaded question."

He gave her a deadly stare, "Don't you go treading under our feet or interfering – Understand?"

"Loud and clear."

"We think he was minding, basically to feed his own habit, but he wasn't a major user; yet."

Sheela continued fishing, "Minding? Who for?"

Dave sighed, "Remember what I said, get in my way and you're for the chop. Minding for Sid Foulkes."

Sheela raised her dyed eyebrows, "Sid-the-slimy? I thought he'd left the drugs racket for illegal immigration."

"Well we think he's back and for the last few days he's not been a happy bunny, that's why we're watching him, unhappy bunnies sometimes make mistakes."

He glanced out of the window, "And before you ask I'd lay a pound to a penny Sid had nothing to do with Henry absconding; if I were you I'd look at his love life."

Sheela opened her mouth, but Dave was moving away, "That's your lot, now out the van please, use the passenger door and don't come back unless you've got something concrete."

Sheela left like a lamb, she always knew when it was time for a strategic retreat.

Jasmine cleared away the detritus from around the settee in her living room. She sprayed an air-freshener around, but the smell of stale lager and cigarette smoke was firmly ingrained in every part of the room. She proceeded to clean up the kitchen and washed up the crockery that had obviously been dumped in the sink following a late-night take away. She heard a movement upstairs and froze, but it was only a door banging in the wind. She checked the food-stained calendar on the table and nodded to herself. Her dad was due at the pub at six o'clock for an away darts match; if she wanted to pack and leave home that was the time, after all she was getting paid in cash this evening. She looked round the downstairs of the house. She'd tried her best since her mum died five years ago, but the house was a tip. Her father never did anything but drink and sleep; decorating or helping around the house were definitely not on his agenda. And he'd started to get violent with her since her brother had left home a year ago, so far he hadn't beaten her up, but she knew she was living on a knife edge. She remembered the rows between him and her mum and just how many times her mum had told her that she'd fallen downstairs. She looked at a faded picture on the wall and said softly, "Sorry mum. I promised you that I'd look after him, but I can't. He doesn't want me as a daughter, just a slave. I've got to go, I know you understand."

Sheela sat in Henry's office chair and considered her day so far. She'd just given the office a thorough once over, she hadn't expected to find anything new and her expectations had been fulfilled. She lit a cigarette and spoke to no-one in particular, which was just as well as she was alone and smoking inside the hotel was strictly forbidden. "So Henry, did you run or were you pushed?" She knew that creating a double identity was not difficult, but what was difficult was leaving no traces of it behind. You had to be very clever to keep the two identities going until you dropped one and ran with the other. Henry was not clever, least not in administration and she doubted that he was clever enough to keep two identities from overspilling into each other. She lifted a few files on his desk, but it was hopeless as his office was an administrator's nightmare; nothing was filed properly, there were unfinished documents all over the place and she'd noticed the same thing in his house. Ergo Henry did not have a double identity or she would have had a clue by now. In addition he'd been wooing the red-headed receptionist and had booked to take her out to dinner on Saturday evening; men like Henry didn't normally run from such amorous liaisons. She stubbed out the cigarette on the side of the waste-bin, "So," she muttered, "If you didn't run, that means that you were forcibly removed." She stood up, "but removed where?"

She exited the office and went down the corridor to Mr James office, he was sitting at his desk methodically looking through a pile of ledgers. She instantly thought of him as James-the-dull and sat down in front of him, "Find anything yet?"

He looked up, "Nothing, absolutely nothing. If Henry has been skimming off money from here I'd love to know how he did it."

Secretly she didn't think that Mr James would find anything the secret, if there was one it had gone with the memory sticks. "I want to have a good look around, just in case."

"Just in case of what?"

"Just in case his body's been stuffed into a cupboard."

Mr James turned up his nose, "Unlikely."

"But possible. How many of your rooms are cleaned by professional cleaners?"

He sat back and tossed his pencil on the desk. "Usually all the bedrooms and upstairs corridors are cleaned by our own staff between bookings unless the bedroom occupant is working nights. We get a few of them from the radio station down the road. The kitchens, conference

suite, swimming pool, gymnasium, Jacuzzi, ground floor corridors and offices are cleaned overnight by contractors. Occasionally, if we're short of our own staff, or have a particularly unsavoury guest, the contractors clean the bedrooms, but that hasn't happened for several weeks."

She nodded, "And none of them has screamed over a cadaver, but I guess a hotel this size has plenty of nooks and crannies, did the police do a search?"

He shook his head, "Not as such, they had a brief look around, but they were sure he'd gone AWOL."

She held out her hand, "Can I have a pass key and a porter for an hour?"

He looked dubious, she added, "I can get Lord Hawes permission if you are unhappy."

He sighed and handed over a pass key, "When do you want the porter?"

She stood up, "I'll meet him in the car-park in an hour."

Mr James raised an eyebrow; she added, "Drains, I literally want to have the drains up. You've got three large manhole covers in your car-park, what better place to dispose of a body than a nice large easy to open drain?"

John finished typing a submission to a concrete suppliers for a round of seminars on interviewing techniques and as it printed out he glanced at Jane. She was still asleep, but had turned over twice in the last half an hour, maybe she was waking up. He looked out of the window and then looked again. A youngish woman with spiky hair and attractive hips had two porters lifting the manhole cover in the corner of the car-park. Once they had lifted it to one side she peered down the manhole with the aid of a large torch. She said something and they put the cover back, moved to a manhole in the middle of the car-park and repeated the operation. John had no doubt what they were looking for and that whoever the woman was, she was being thorough, very thorough. There was a noise behind him and he turned to see Jane sitting on the edge of the bed, but clearly in her zombie mode. He put the kettle on and she gave a fragile smile.

Sheela had the porters close the last manhole cover and thanked them. She'd searched all the cupboards in the basement, been through all the obvious nooks and crannies, checked the drains and even checked the walk-in deep freeze. All to no avail. She considered her options and

went to the kitchen, the chef was obviously starting to lay out vegetables for preparation. She got no further than one metre inside the kitchen door when he yelled at her in a thick Glaswegian accent. "Stop! Stop right there lassie, I'm not having you contaminate my kitchen."

She froze and he walked over. She tried her best smile, "Sheela..."

"I know who you are, you've been poking around in mah deep freeze."

She swallowed, "I believe your Mr Slaiber, head chef?"

"That's right, and I've got food to cook and ovens to heat."

She took a deep breath, "Can I ask you a stupid question?"

"Is it considering that apology of a manager called Henry?"

She nodded, "I'm considering all options, tell me, if he was murdered, could he have been cut up in here?"

He roared with laughter and eventually waved his mammoth hands around still chuckling, "Have you any idea how much mess that would make?"

She doggedly pursued her line of questioning, "Could they have cleaned up after?"

He roared with laughter again and the thought 'Slaiber-the-Slayer' flitted through her brain. He towered over her, "We have contractors, they clean the place from top to bottom every night, they leave no stone unturned, not even a grain of pepper escapes them. If anyone did slice up our dear Henry they could never have achieved that standard when they tried to clean up and I would have noticed, believe me I would have noticed."

She nodded, what he said was logical. He turned away, then he turned back and said belligerently, "But if ye likes riddles I'll tell you one thing. The night he went missing someone touched mah casserole lids."

She wondered if he was unhinged, "Pardon?"

He pointed a rack of lids, "I always put them in the rack with their names on top, but last Saturday the second one was upside down."

She edged towards the door. "Cleaners?"

He scowled at her and furrowed his expansive eyebrows, "The dunna touch mah cooking my utensils."

She decided on another strategic withdrawal.

Jane finished her second cup of coffee and assumed a more human appearance. John sipped his tea, "Feel better?"

She nodded, "Best night sleep I've had all week."

She looked at his pile of letters, "You've been busy."

"Working on the contract after next."

"What's next?"

He grimaced, "Another oil company. Seminars for their newly recruited undergraduates on basic management and diplomacy. Two weeks in London, two in Aberdeen, two in Bergen and two in Newcastle."

She looked anxious, "But no weekends?"

"No, course finish lunch-time Friday and start lunch-time Monday, but I'll probably stay in Bergen."

He went and sat beside her, "I've got Aberdeen tomorrow, why don't you come?"

He had two motives for asking, firstly when he was with her he realized how lonely he was and secondly, and far more importantly, he wanted to keep her out of the way of the woman with spiky hair. Her brain was still not up to full speed and she sat looking vacant for about a minute and then spoke in an uncertain tone, "Aberdeen Scotland?"

"Yes, we'd fly out on a scheduled flight from Norwich at 8.25am tomorrow morning and hitch a flight back on a Global Lubricants charter flight at six the next day. Be back at mine before eight."

Her eyes instantly dilated, "Are you sure? I mean are you sure you'd want me around?"

He nodded, "Might be a bit lonely for you while I'm lecturing, but there's lots to see in Aberdeen and I'm told the shopping is wonderful."

He quietly, added "And you wouldn't be alone."

Her smile practically split her face in two, "Need to pack."

"Less than 24 hours, your vanity case would do as long as you don't mind wearing the same dress two days in a row."

She gave him a distasteful look and he hastily added, "I keep it to hand luggage, makes the whole process less painful."

She stood up, "Then I am thinking I need to go home."

Once Jane had left John took a walk to the reception area, but it wasn't full of private detectives, in fact it wasn't full of anybody, even the reception counter was vacant. He returned to his room and booked Jane onto the flight to Aberdeen and made sure that she could come back with him on the Global Lubricants flight. After that he decided that he felt hotel-crazy and went back to reception. The red-headed receptionist had appeared and was now chewing gum behind the reception desk. He handed over his key and made for his car. She watched him leave and

then picked up her phone. Ten minutes later Sheela walked up to her, "You're sure he's out?"

The red-head tucked a piece of chewing gum into the corner of her mouth. "She left forty minutes ago, he drove out ten minutes ago."

Sheela handed over a fiver, "Ring the room if he comes back."

Sheela made her way to John's room only pausing to pull on a pair of neoprene gloves. This was a long shot, but she liked to be thorough and she felt that the behaviour of these two was at least worth a small look. She entered his room and carefully went through the room's contents. The woman had left her vanity case in the room and her pyjamas. He had all the paraphernalia of a peripatetic lecturer. She opened his laptop and it sprang into life showing the picture of Jane on a swing. Sheela closed it again. It looked like these two were playing nooky, however she felt there was something wrong, but she couldn't put her finger on what it was. Sheela checked the room over again and then stood in the doorway. One bed with disturbed clothes, one vanity case, one laptop with her picture as wallpaper, two used cups and three empty little plastic milk cartons. It all seemed to indicate two lovers. She sighed and decided that this was a dead end, another dead end, and slipped out of the room.

"You're going where?" Squealed an incredulous Catrina, "Aberdeen? For one day?"

Jane gave her excitable sister a reassuring smile. "We want to be together and he's got to be in Aberdeen."

"But you've never been further than Kings Lynn and that was when you were twenty-two and only then because our Uncle lived there."

Jane tossed her head, "Maybe it's time I started seeing the world."

Catrina changed tack, "What do you know about this man? He could be a serial killer for all you know."

Jane took a deep breath and tried to calm the conversation down, "Look sis, it's taken me forty-three years to find a man, perhaps taking a few risks of worth it, not that I do think it is a risk."

Catrina went to give a sharp reply when she realized that Jane had not mentioned Sanjay in her chronology; she reached forward and hugged her sister, "You be taking care do you hear?"

Jane sighed with relief, but Catrina had not finished. She stood back from Jane and looked concerned, "And be telling me, what precautions are you taking?"

The look on Jane's face said it all to Catrina. "Well you can't be leaving it to the man,"

Jane regained her composure, "That's for me to know and you to worry about."

Catrina gave her another hug and whispered in her ear, "And when you're back I want to know everything, all the gory details."

Jane laughed, "You'll know what you're told."

Catrina gave a wicked smile, "Well your just have to tell me it all then won't you!"

The back door of the public bar swung open into the room beyond and closed behind Vernon as he made his way over to a table and sat down. Sid Foulkes, who could have been taken for a successful stock-broker, snarled, "You're late."

Vernon shrugged, "Couldn't park."

Sid eyed Vernon in his snow-white short-sleeved open necked shirt and jet-black sharp-creased trousers and decided that he was getting too cocky. He gave Vernon a hard look, "So, have you got the drugs back from Henry?"

Vernon didn't turn a hair, "You know very well he's done a runner and, by all accounts, taken the drugs with him."

Sid sneered, "Not my problem is it? Henry was your minder, you vouched for him and the loss is yours. Never liked the guy myself, too shifty."

Vernon sat up and leaned over the table, "What do you mean my loss?"

Sid snarled, "I mean your loss. I put the drugs into your care and I want them back, or the money I laid out for them."

The third man in the room, a gangly youth called Garry Rivers, made a sharp chortling sound, but shut up as soon Vernon turned to look at him. Vernon turned back to Sid, he said carelessly, "And if I don't?"

Sid made an expansive shrugging gesture, "Then I have to tell my backers that you've let them down and that I suspect that you're trying to start up a rival concern."

Vernon shot back, "You wouldn't."

"Try me."

"You'd loose your reputation."

"You'd loose your kneecaps."

A small film of sweat appeared on Vernon's brow, "But that's ridiculous, the guys long gone."

Sid smiled, "Then go after him."

Sid leant forward and tapped the table, "Three weeks, I can hold them at bay for three weeks, after that..."

Vernon got up and walked out, Garry smirked, "That told him boss."

Sid turned his attention to Garry, "Don't smile too soon laddie, why hasn't the latest consignment of doctored vodka arrived?"

Sheela sat down on a white-leather sun-lounger and waited while Brenda fetched a couple of cool drinks from the kitchen. Sheela watched her briefly through the kitchen window and judged that she was somewhere in her mid-thirties and that she must spend a small fortune on manicures, massages and body-rubs. She looked like a catwalk model, except that she was too short by about a foot; Sheela smiled, perhaps a miniature catwalk then. Having tagged Brenda as Brenda-the-pampered Sheela gave the garden the professional once-over; immaculate lawns, exquisitely pruned roses and a selection of bedding plants in flower. She smiled to herself and decided that Brenda had a professional gardener in a couple of time a week. Brenda re-appeared and sat down in the other sun-lounger. Sheela nodded to the roses, "Lovely garden."

Brenda smiled, "It's my only hobby, spend every minute I can out here."

Sheela discretely peered at Brenda's hands, they told her nothing, but didn't look like a gardener's hands. She smiled, "I'm looking for Henry, his father's employed me."

Brenda gave her a sad eyed hound dog look, "I think he'll never come back this time."

Sheela's ears pricked up, "This time? Has he gone before?"

She took a sip of her Martini, "Not from work, he has from me."

Sheela tried her gin and tonic, it was beautiful in temperature and texture, "How long have you and Henry..?"

She smiled sexily, "You mean how long have I been his mistress? About seven years."

She looked at Sheela over the top of her glass, "And yes, that means he was going with me when he got married and when he had his divorce."

Sheela's feminist streak broke through her normally tough skin, "And you didn't mind?"

Brenda leant back, "Mind that he was using me, not a bit."

She saw the expression on Sheela's face and added, "Not that he didn't ask me to marry him several times, but I always said no."

Sheela raised an eyebrow, "Why."

Brenda made a small shrugging motion causing her designer blouse to flap in the breeze, "Because I knew he could never be faithful and frankly in that situation I'd rather be the mistress than the wife."

She curled her disproportionately long, elegant, legs underneath her, "Besides, being Henry's mistress is fun, you'd be surprised how much fun, but being the wife would be deadly; you'd never be sure where he was."

She fixed Sheela with a knowing stare, "Henry is a bit of a ladies man, you could say he has a girl in every hotel room, but he always comes back to me bearing gifts and wanting to tell me all about it."

She patted her leather sun-lounger, "Courtesy of a liaison with a receptionist; she's gone now."

Sheela decided to get down to business, "Has he been having any liaisons recently?"

Brenda smiled and licked the rim of her martini glass, "I only know after the event darling, at least that's what he thinks. He was trying to chat up the cleaning manager, what's her name?"

Sheela held her breath, then Brenda nodded to herself, "Sarah, that's her name. But she apparently wasn't having any of it; before that he had a secret liaison with a sales rep for pet-food – that was just after spring. Christmas... let me think... Oh yes, the pharmacist at the chemist down the road."

Sheela squinted at her, "And you didn't mind?"

She shrugged, "What's to mind? I'm not his wife."

Sheela tried another line of questioning, "Any ideas where he's gone, or why?"

She sipped her drink and the sad hound-dog look reappeared, "Not really. He's was a bit edgy the last few days I saw him, that was the weekend before and Tuesday night, well the early hours of Wednesday morning. Otherwise I've no idea."

"Has he ever talked of running away?"

She gave a low throaty laugh, "He's talked of buying a place in the South of France, but it's all talk. He hasn't got the get up and go to get up and go if you know what I mean."

Sheela played her last card, "Did you know about him and drugs?"

She shrugged, "He occasionally snorted cocaine, but that's all."

She surreptitiously looked at her watch, "Look I don't want to be a pain, but my husband is due back from his oil-rig this evening, so I've got to get ready for him."

Sheela eyed her, "*His oil rig?*"

Brenda smiled, "Oh yes, he's got three."

John arrived back at his hotel room about half-past five and had a quick shave, before putting on a fresh shirt and pausing with a slight sense of *déjà vu*. He had that feeling, for the second time in a week, that someone had been through his things. He decided that he was becoming paranoid and finished dressing just as Jane arrived with a carrier bag dangling from her hand. She sat on the bed and lifted out the top tray of her vanity case and packed a few items underneath. She looked at John, "Will I be able to change here before we go? I have got to work tonight."

He shook his head, "I'm due to book out early and they've got a party of German tourists arriving at 8am. I was planning to leave here with you in the 2CV and park it in my garage and leave from there around seven; you can change there if you like?"

She rocked her head from side to side, "Sounds fine."

She looked school-girlish all of a sudden, "You are sure about this?"

He sat down next to her, "Of course I'm sure, I've fixed the flights up already."

She handed him the vanity case, "For your car."

He took it from her and placed it at the top of the bed, "I was wondering about eating. I bet you haven't eaten anything since your skimpy breakfast. But, I don't really fancy the hotel."

She nodded in understanding, "There's a good Chinese up the road from my storehouse."

He stood up and held out his hand, "Then shall we eat?"

Sheela arrived back at the hotel just in time to see John and Jane leave. She watched John open the car door for her and then drive off, she was still not entirely convinced about them. She wandered back to reception and handed in a small envelope containing the pass key, she turned round and noticed DI Jacobson grinning like a Cheshire cat. She ambled over and sat down, he passed her a cup of coffee. She took it, wariness in her eyes. He smiled, "How you doing then?"

She wagged her finger, "Not in the force now."

He still grinned and she had the urge to hit him with her substantial handbag. He said enticingly, "Do a trade."

She leant back, "Then you first."

He blew his nose on the same grubby handkerchief, "You always were mistrustful. Just thought you'd like to know Sid is as mystified as anyone at Henry's disappearing act. I guarantee he had nothing to do with it."

Sheela frowned and then understanding flooded her brain, "You've got the back room at the Dog and Duck bugged at last."

His face took on a solemn look, "I wish, we still can't get a warrant out that blasted judge."

Then his gaunt face cracked into a wide smile, "On the other hand illegal immigration is a serious offence and Customs and Excise have got a warrant and in the spirit of inter-service co-operation..."

He sat back, "Your turn."

"Is that all?"

"It's a taster."

She wondered what else he knew and settled into her soft armchair. "Been over this place with a fine tooth comb, not as thorough as a squad of uniform mind, but I'm convinced his body is not stuffed up some chimney or other. Talked to his mistress, she's as baffled as the rest of us. Talked to a couple of his recent conquests and the red headed receptionist who was to be his next; no insights there. And I've talked to Lord Hawes, I'm sure he's holding back something, but I genuinely believe he hasn't got a clue, or had any warning either. Finally looked at Henry's private life and there's absolutely no sign of a double identity so either he was very good or he didn't have one. My money's currently on him not having one."

"So your conclusions?"

"Guys been bumped off, don't know by whom, or where, or why, but I think he was murdered."

DI Jacobson rubbed his chin, "Any suspects that make your nose twitch?"

"Mr James for starters; he obviously saw Henry as Lord Hawes' spy and as an incompetent fool. Second would be his mistresses husband, but he's supposed to have been on an oil-rig in the Gulf; and there's an odd couple, John Smith and Jane Doe, something's not quite right with them, but it may have nothing to do with this case after all this is a hotel and we both know what hotels are like."

"You're kidding, John Smith and Jane Doe? They should be arrested just for their poor choice of names."

"Checked, they *are* their real names, I suppose someone has to have them."

DI Jacobson sighed and started to nibble a bourbon biscuit, "I must admit I'm beginning to think along the same lines."

Sheela's eyebrows rose, "So you're going to make this a murder enquiry?"

He sighed and stretched, "Not till Monday, overtime and all that."

"Aren't you worried about loss of forensics?"

He gave a short scoffing laugh, "Have you seen the cleaning contractors at work here? I have and they're a bunch of fanatics. If there were any forensics they are either long gone or so well hidden that another couple of days won't matter."

Sheela decided to throw in a wild card, "Do you think you can kill a man with a casserole lid?"

He eyed her as if she were carrying a deadly virus, "You can kill a man with a paper-clip if you want to. Found a bloodstained casserole lid have we?"

"No, but the cook says that one of his was upside down the morning after Henry disappeared."

He rolled his eyes; Sheela gave a sarcastic smile and asked, "And your other info?"

He stood up, "You're not alone in the Henry hunt. Sid has set Vernon on the run after him, or rather after the drugs, with rather a large personal motive for finding them."

Sheela looked blank for a fraction of a second before comprehension dawned, "Oh hell, you don't mean Vernon the pretender to Sid's dubious throne."

"One and the same, Vernon Miles; commonly known by your endearing tag as Vernon-the-vicious."

He suddenly looked concerned, "So you be careful, you've not got the force to back you up if you seriously run up against him."

Sheela noted his concern, "Thanks for the tip."

DI Jacobson purposefully strode off and Sheela pondered her next problem; if Henry was dead, where were the contents of his safe?

Chapter 6

High Pressure Area Approaching

Jane sat in the seemingly tiny aircraft at the end of the runway and looked nervously out of the almost opaque window. She gripped John's hand tighter, he may do this for a living she thought, but I don't. What was less than helpful was the young man in the seat in front, he was driveling on to his young female companion about how the most dangerous times in a flight were take-off and landing. She knew that, but didn't want to hear it stated at this particular moment. She took a sideways glance at John, who seemed composed and at ease. She reminded herself that she was here to be with him; it was absurd as she hardly knew him, but being close to him made her feel that all was safe and well. Being alone currently made her feel like the police were on the other side of the door with a full snatch squad getting ready to take her away to a dim dark dank cell for a good beating and a tenacious interrogation. There was sudden increase in engine noise and a burst of acceleration that pushed her back in her seat followed by her stomach deciding to do a loop the loop while her balance mechanism in her ears told her that she was falling sideways. She inadvertently let out a small gasp. John leaned over, "Sorry, should have told you, they often do an abrupt turn directly after take-off." She managed a wan smile just as the young man in front of her turned an interesting shade of green and dashed to the toilet in spite of the 'seat-belts on' warning sign still being lit. The plane leveled off, as did her stomach, just as they broke through the clouds into brilliant sunshine. She gasped again and pointed, "It's just like flying over cotton wool."

John smiled again, for him the wonder of his first flight was aeons ago; he pointed to a break in the clouds, "See, we're over the sea already, must be the Wash."

Jane spotted a small trawler chugging its way beneath them. She tried to tear her mind off of engine failure or mid-flight collision or sudden decompression or... "What's our itinerary again?"

“Land at around nine-thirty, then the hotel shuttle bus. I should start my seminar at 11am and finish around 6pm, then you can join us for lunch if you want to.”

She automatically nodded and John, who could still feel the tension in her hand and decided to keep her talking for a moment. “Your storehouse looks huge.”

She gave a nervous smile, “It’s smaller than it looks, but there’s plenty of parking and easy access to get the materials to and from the vans; it’s also cheap as the lady who owns the gym in the warehouse was glad to let me use the loading bay and get some rent.”

John continued talking, “How many teams have you got?”

“Twelve, eleven all female and one all male.”

John was surprised, “What do the men do?”

“Three swimming pools, a theatre and a dance studio.”

She suddenly grinned, it was like the turning on of a bright light, “They polish the dance floor with their feet. One of their wives made eight pairs of socks out of sheepskin with the wool still on it. They sweep the floor and then shuffle backwards and forwards in-line polishing the floor.” Her grin grew, “I’ve provided polishing mops and such-like, but they prefer to do what they call their line-dance.”

She giggled, “It’s got a huge mirror down one wall so the dancers can practice together and using it they’ve developed their own form of haka – you know the dance performed by the New Zealand Rugby Team. The owner caught them at it one night and was so intrigued he helped them choreograph it, you must see it some time; it has to be seen to be believed.”

He could feel the tension in her hand decreasing, “So I guess your major asset is your vehicles?”

She gave him her wide-eyed look, “No it is in my people. They have to work well or I don’t stand a chance of keeping the contracts. We try and look on it like a huge family and support one another, working like that stops people being shoddy; if they don’t do the work properly their letting their whole team down.”

“But you do own twelve minibuses and twelve vans.”

She shrugged, “Thirteen vans if my bent one ever comes back from the garage, they say they’re flying spares over from Korea, personally I think they’re being transported by geriatric camels.”

She moved her head slightly from side to side, “And I am not wasting the minibuses, I am hiring them out to schools during the day, I could be hiring out twice as many.”

A penny dropped in John's mind, "So that's why you mini-buses are painted bright yellow."

She didn't have time to reply as the steward brought them each some coffee and a plastic breakfast. Halfway through the breakfast bun she swiveled her eyes on him, "I know what you were doing, you were keeping me talking."

He laughed, "Feel better?"

She eyed the open sky through the window, "I'll tell you when we're on the ground."

Sheela rolled out of bed to sit upright with her feet on her sheepskin rug and surveyed herself in the mirror. She was never certain that she liked what she saw. Heading rapidly towards her mid-forties, failed marriage, failed career as a policewoman and failed attempt at a couple of new relationships. She'd now been eighteen months and four days without being asked out on a date and well over three years from being on a date with anybody remotely attractive. Was she over the hill? Her only asset was her body, she still looked like a thirty-something thanks to working out in a gym and paying attention to her clothes. She went to take off her frilly light cotton night-dress and froze halfway. She exclaimed to herself, "She had pyjamas, the woman had pyjamas! If I was playing nookie I'd have a skimpy silk night-dress, not silk pyjamas."

She wriggled out of the night-dress and muttered, "That's of course if I intended to wear anything at all."

She checked her back in the mirror and then proceeded to touch her toes and stand upright and stretch her hands as high in the air as possible. She repeated this procedure twenty times, each time the livid red bullet wound scar on her left shoulder blade bobbed up and down like a small bouncing ball.

The plane landed with a bump and Jane exhaled, she had already decided that flying was not her preferred form of travel. People started to stand up and John reached into the overhead locker and passed to her the small pink vanity case before pulling out his oversized briefcase. They shuffled down the plane and out into bright sunshine. John led her through the maze of the airport to the waiting hotel bus. Now she had landed and her adrenaline had stopped Jane began to feel tired. Once at the hotel John led her by the hand up to the reception desk. He smiled at the bright looking uniform clad receptionist, "Hello,

John Smith and Jane Doe, we have some reservations. Mine is with Global Lubricants and Miss Doe's was phoned through yesterday evening. The receptionist didn't quite snigger, but her eyes said, 'oh yeah?.' Jane reached into her handbag and dumped a credit card on the counter surface, "My name is Jane Doe, check if you like."

The girl turned a gently shade of pink, "Sorry Miss Doe, it's just that..."

She consulted her diary, "You're in room 12 Mr Smith and Miss Doe is in Room 14."

John spun his credit card across the desk, "room 12s on Global lubricants, room 14 on that card please."

She examined it and then swiped it through the card-reader, the other staff would just not believe this, a real John Smith and a real Jane Doe.

Jane's stood in the doorway of her room and surveyed it. It was small, but well fitted out. She turned to John and looked upwards into his eyes, "Have you got a twin bedded room?"

He shook his head, "Not here, they actually have proper single rooms and I prefer them because of the view towards the hills.

She became childishly demure, "I don't suppose I could sleep in your room?"

He was slightly baffled as he'd moved heaven and earth to get two adjoining single rooms and they were exactly alike, "You mean you want to swap rooms?"

She held his hand, "I mean I want to sleep in yours, it's the comfort factor of knowing it's your room."

John smiled and acquiesced, even though he hadn't the faintest idea of what she was on about. As before she disappeared into the en-suite bathroom and reappeared in her gold silk pyjamas, she looked dreadfully tired. He tucked her in and sat on the edge of the bed, "When do you want to be woken?"

She pointed to her vanity case, "Alarm's set for three, that will give me a couple of hours shopping and sightseeing."

He chortled and picked up the hotel information pack, "It's a Saturday, most of the big shops are open until seven."

He leant forward and kissed her on the forehead murmuring, "Sleep tight."

She smiled, turned over and closed her eyes; he thought that she was asleep before he left the room.

Jasmine was also settling down to sleep after her night's work, but not in her own bed. Christine had found her a place at a woman's refuge and even picked her up after work to bring her here. The manager, a slightly plump woman called Martie, had welcomed her with seemingly open arms and almost immediately brought her to this bedroom. It was tiny and basic, but scrupulously clean and safe; above all it was safe. Jasmine listened to the noises of the house, she'd been told that there were six other teenagers here, two of them with babies. As she listened to the movements around her she too fell asleep.

John gave the receptionist a blank stare, "What none of them?"

She shrugged, "Message just said that the charter flight from Shetland had been delayed due to fog on the runway."

John looked at the clock and then back to the receptionist who was still wary of him following the incident over Jane's surname. He plumbed the depths of his muscle reactions to summon up a smile, "Could you do us a favour and ring Sumburgh Airport and see what the conditions are now?"

She nodded and picked up the telephone, John wandered over to the other side of the reception desk and looked out onto the lake, it appeared so tranquil. He remembered the lake of a week before where he had disposed of Henry and shuddered; would his life ever be the same? Did he want it to be the same?

Sheela struggled on, she'd promised herself that she'd run five miles today on the treadmill and so far had only managed four. She gritted her teeth and pounded on, but not for long. The gym supervisor appeared beside her, took one look and turned the rolling road down to a slower speed; Sheela automatically adjusted her pace. He gave her a keen look, "Wind down to a trot for half a mile and then stop, I don't want you having a heart attack, it's bad for my image."

She did as she was told and then went to lie on a mat to recover. Her chest was heaving and her heart pounding. After five minutes the gym supervisor reappeared and thrust a bottle of water into her hands, she took a long drink. He said quietly and firmly, "The idea of coming here is to keep a certain level of fitness, it is not to push oneself to destruction."

She didn't reply as she was still gasping for air. He shook his head in exasperation, "Lie there and don't move, apart from doing some stretching exercises, the last thing you need now is cramp."

Sheela didn't argue, she literally didn't have the breath.

John turned round as the receptionist called. He walked over and she gave him a nice fresh hotel smile, "Airport is still closed and they reckon there'll be no change for at least a couple of hours. Your charter flight's been cancelled."

He wasn't surprised as this had happened once before; once the fog settled in over Shetland it could stick for days. He gave the receptionist a nice fresh seminar leader's smile, "Well I guess that means that you've got eight rooms that won't be used. Can you also cancel the finger buffet and the evening meal. Instead can you book me a table for two in the corner."

The receptionist hesitated and became conspiratorial, "I can book you a table, but you might like to consider the Mary Strom. She sails at eight to head towards Stonehaven Bay and back. The forecast is for a fine evening with a dead calm sea, you can eat on-board and the food is rather good, so I'm told." She lowered her voice, "it is also very romantic."

He considered his options. "Can you book us on?"

She smiled so broadly that we wondered if she was on commission. "You'll find a menu in the welcome pack in your room, because of limited galley facilities you have to choose your meal by seven."

He nodded, "Thanks, and thanks for the tip."

He wandered upstairs and let himself into his room. Jane was sleeping soundly and for once not dribbling. He sat in the only armchair, pulled a novel out of his suitcase and began to read.

Sheela was still lying down when the gym supervisor returned, she sat up. He gave her a stern schoolteacher look, "You ran out of wind. In other words you were not passing enough oxygen through your lungs into your blood."

He tapped her handbag, "You have to make a choice, if you want to run further, and probably live longer, give up smoking; sooner rather than later."

She grimaced, "But I'll get fat."

He echoed her grimace, "Well eat less and live longer, besides you could put on a few pounds and no one would be the wiser."

She sighed, "I would."

He shook his head and sighed in disapproval, "It's your choice then, vanity or life."

His face changed to a kindly expression, "Look I know that giving up smoking isn't easy, but you're an intelligent woman, you know the score."

She nodded he gave her the professional look up and down, "Now lie back down, do a few more stretching exercises, drink that water and think about your future. You should easily be able to run five miles at a reasonable pace, but not if you smoke."

He moved away and she lay down. She'd given up smoking once before, and stayed off the weed for the eight years before her divorce, but could she do it again?"

Vernon gave the red-headed receptionist another drink. He'd taken her into the hotel bar during her lunch hour, but she would only drink fruit juice. "You say everyone's been asking after this Henry bloke?"

She nodded and sipped her juice, "Local police, private detective and some other copper."

His face assumed a look of wonderment, "And he just disappeared – poof!"

She licked her lips, "Well I wasn't on duty, Roger was, he's the night porter and he doubles up as a receptionist after midnight. He says that he heard Henry shouting at the poor Cleaning Manager around two and then he reckons that he saw him again talking to a group of rowdy Dutchmen about four, after that nothing. No one saw him leave and he wasn't missed until about seven and everyone assumed that he'd left early."

"Did he often do that?"

She smirked, "As often as her could, he hated the night shifts, in fact he hated work."

He pretended to grin at her statement, "What about the CCTV, surely it spotted his Jag leaving."

She shrugged, "Doesn't work."

She leant forward, "Are you really an Earl or are you 'aving me on?"

Jane woke up at exactly five to three, that is to say that her eyes opened and she sat up; the wakefulness of her brain was somewhat less certain. John plied her with two cups of coffee and a lack of difficult conversation. By three-thirty she was sufficiently back in the land of the living to stagger to the bathroom for a shower. John didn't really fancy an

afternoon shopping, on the other hand he was bored with hotel-life. Jane emerged from the bathroom wearing the embossed cotton wrap-around blouse of the swing photograph and a matching brown wrap-around calf length skirt with the same embossed floral pattern; while from her ears she had golden dangly bunches of miniature grapes and her favourite selection of three bangles on her wrists. She looked stunning, at least to John's eyes. He stood up, "You look marvelous, too good for shopping."

She picked up her golden clam shaped handbag, "Nothing can be too good for shopping."

He smiled tolerantly and as they left the room he casually asked, "Shopping for anything in particular?"

"Some of those marvelous Scottish jumpers."

His jaw almost fell open, "But it's mid-summer!"

She involuntarily shivered, "One must be prepared for the long cold winter nights."

"But you work indoors."

She laughed, "You don't think the managers of those swish office blocks would par my contract income to the bone and then leave the heating on do you? The only places that are heated overnight are the hotel and the swimming pools."

They reached the front of the hotel and climbed into the taxi, Jane with her mind on jumpers and John with his mind on Jane.

The pale semi-bearded youth in the hooded blue New York Eagles sweatshirt jiggled his way down the road. Under his raised hood his earphones blazed out the Reggae tunes of Bob Marley and his hips swung in rhythm to the beat. He rounded a corner and almost instantly turned around to come back, but a hand on his shoulder prevented him. The youth turned slowly round and Vernon smiled at him for a distance of less than half a metre. "Well if it isn't Fuz; fancy meeting you."

The youth took his earphones off and the distorted sounds of Bob Marley squeaked their way out of his hood. He sniffed and continued his jiggling from side to side it now being triggered by some unseen rhythm in his head. "Mr Vernon! Don't want no stuff, I'm clean."

Vernon gave a semblance of a smile, it was more of a cross between a grimace and a leer, "And I'm the queen's daughter. Word on the street is that you're still selling and it ain't mine that you're selling."

Fuz continued his side to side jig, now more out of nervousness than rhythm. "Supply and demand Mr Vernon, supply and demand."

Vernon reached out and grabbed a handful of sweatshirt, "I supply Fuz, you don't demand anything."

Fuz stopped his personal dance, "No disrespect Mr Vernon, no disrespect."

Vernon tightened his grip, "Well I'll tell you what Fuz, you tell me who your supplier is and I'll won't break your nose."

Fuz restarted his jig, "Aw Mr Vernon you know..."

Vernon twisted his hand and the sweatshirt tightened, Fuz decided that discretion was the better part of valour, "Marianne, she's been getting the goods."

Vernon put his face right up to Fuz's, "Just you remember, when you want to come back to me for your goods the price has just doubled."

Without warning he kneed Fuz hard in the groin and walked away leaving him writhing on the ground.

The boat backed slowly away from the quayside and turned towards the open sea, Jane looked at the receding shoreline and turned her searchlight eyes on John, "That's two firsts in one day, first flight and first trip on the sea."

John laid the desert menu on the table, "Really?"

She nodded, "Never been out of Norfolk, absurd isn't it?"

"Not if you're happy there, travelling isn't all it's made out to be."

She didn't respond, instead she totally threw him by changing the subject. "I've been thinking about the money."

He smiled benevolently, "I said I'd pay, it's not often I take an attractive woman out to dinner on a boat."

She blinked slowly and leant forward, "I mean the money, the money you have under your floorboards."

"Oh, that money."

She nodded seriously, "I'd like to give my half to the Under 21s Woman's Refuge."

He selected a roll and started to butter it, "Why them?"

She twitched her nose and the diamond ring sparkled, "Well they are supposed to be part funded by a council grant, but the part funding is only partially available and that means that there's a part that needs covering and I'd like to partly pay towards the part that's missing."

John's stopped buttering his roll as his brain grappled with her statement, "pardon?"

"The refuge is supposed to be part funded by a council grant, but the part funding is only partially available and that means that there's a part

that needs covering and I'd like to partly pay towards the part that's missing."

John kept a firm grip on his roll, "I think I got that."

She sighed and tried again. "The refuge is part funded..."

John held his hand up, "You mean that they have a funding shortfall."

She nodded, "The council have promised them that the part which is currently unavailable will become available when charity funding is made available by the budget committee, but that it won't be available until the end of the year, when it will be available for them to make use of."

He began to wonder if she was trying to poke fun at him, but her face was deadly serious. She suddenly smiled and her eyes sparkled, "That's exactly what the letter that they received last week said, word for word."

"You mean the available and unavailable."

She nodded, "I am thinking that I must take a degree in English as she is wrote by the Council."

He roared with laughter and she joined in. When they had finished he managed to ask how much they needed, she became serious again, very serious. "They do a really good work and a few thousand pounds would be like manna from heaven to them."

He chewed a piece of roll and instantly regretted his decision to select a granary roll, it tasted like crushed chipboard. "Then we'll give them all the money, I don't want any of it."

Her already large eyes widened, "But you don't even know them!"

He smiled broadly, "I'll trust your judgement, but how do we get them money to them, you can't just walk in with a bag full of notes."

"£500 a week in cash for sixteen weeks should be good enough."

He was amazed at her confidence, "Won't the ask questions?"

"They'll be grateful for the money, trust me."

He wiggled his eyebrows, but stayed silent; in truth he just wanted Henry's money out of his safe.

Helen checked Mrs Miles for the second time that evening, she'd caught her hand in a car door and Helen wanted to check that it was all right. Mrs Miles held out her hand and stated firmly, "Load of fuss about nothing."

Helen checked Mrs Miles' fingernails, "Just wiggle your fingers for me will you?"

Mrs Miles obliged and Helen let go of her hand, "Now any trouble in the night and your to call the night nurse, OK?"

Mrs Miles rolled her eyes, "If you say so."

A glint came into her eye, "I see your ex-husband is still with the little Indian lady."

Helen sighed, she'd heard this particular story from three of her residents already. "Apparently."

Mrs Miles gave a knowing grin, "She's even driving that funny van of his, and it's got her name on the doors now. I thought you said that he never let anyone touch it?"

Helen stood up to go, "He must have changed his mind."

Mrs Miles nodded, "He must be very lonely you know, living in that tiny bungalow."

Helen made for the door, "I really don't know, he's not my husband anymore."

She let herself out of Mrs Miles flat and cursed the day she'd bought the home and let John buy the gate-house. It had seemed a good idea at the time, especially for Jacquelyn, but now it was proving to be more than just a little awkward.

Just after midnight as the boat approached the Aberdeen quay-side John and Jane sat on deck finishing off a pair of cold drinks. She gazed at the moon and the abundance of stars, "I never realized that there were so many."

John's eyes wandered around the sky, "No street lights, you can get the same effect in the Norfolk countryside."

She sighed, "But it's so much more romantic on a boat; thanks for a wonderful evening."

He said carefully, "Glad you enjoyed it."

She turned her eyes on him, even in the dark it felt like being tracked by radar, "Didn't you?"

"If I'm honest I thought the food was terrible and I was totally embarrassed by what they gave you. On the other hand the company was excellent."

She giggled, "Well I did ask for a fish salad."

He gritted his teeth, "One sardine sized pickled herring, two slices of cucumber, one cherry tomato plus a single lettuce leaf hardly constitute a fish salad in my book."

She suppressed a laugh, "You should have seen your face when they put your dinner in front of you."

He shuddered, "One small chop with a mint leaf on top, a tiny pile of grated carrot and one, just one mind you, potato the size of a pigeon's egg!"

She began to laugh, "You've missed out the two small pieces of mange tout."

He sighed, "I should have known when I saw that the boat was owned by an English company and that none of the locals were coming on board."

She reached sideways and held his hand, "Food isn't everything, it really was a wonderful evening."

He released his hand and put his arm round her bony shoulders, "Glad you enjoyed it."

They sat in silence as they steamed into the harbour until she spoke as if detached, "I won't sleep with you you know. I feel safe when I'm with you and I really did enjoy being with you this evening, but I won't sleep with you."

John was appalled that she'd even thought that he might be using the boat-trip to seduce her into bed with him. He said over stiffly, "It was not my intention to..."

She leant against him before he finished totally throwing him off course, "I know that silly, you're not that kind of man. But you are a man and I like sleeping in your bed, I just didn't want you to get the wrong idea and however I say it it'll come out wrong."

John took a deep breath and tried to get his brain in gear, wherever had she got that idea from in the first place? He'd always been careful not to have too much physical contact. In truth he was tired whereas she was fully awake and he felt like snapping at her, except that the smell of her hair as she leant against him said that would be a wrong approach. He managed to say gentle, "Does your sister think that I'm a dirty old man intent on seducing you and having my wicked ways?"

He felt her shake her head, "No, she rather likes you. It's just that she and Peter slept together before they were married and she expects everyone to behave the same."

He grinned to himself, "So she thinks that we're tucked up in bed together having sex."

She moved slightly to look at his face, "I know I should have told her otherwise, but how can I tell her that we're together because of a dead body. Besides I like her thinking that you and I are..."

He finished her sentence as he gently hugged her shoulders, "Lovers."

She nodded and looked away, "It sounds so romantic, lovers; like in the books. 'The two of them were lovers.'"

He suddenly realized that she was crying, he murmured, "Is it that bad?"

She turned her wet eyes onto his face again, "It is bad because we can never be lovers, Henry will always get in the way."

He replied gently, "We could always view Henry as the catalyst that brought us together, he need not remain with us."

She barley audibly replied, "Perhaps, but I am not convinced."

Neither was John, but he didn't say so.

Vernon entered the Cat-a-go-go Night Club and made his way to the long bar that ran along the back of the dance floor. He signaled the barman and said something into his ear, it had to be directly in his ear as normal conversation was impossible. The barman pointed and Vernon swayed his way across the dance-floor carefully avoiding the inebriated dancers until he came to a fire exit. He pushed through the door and climbed up a damp stone staircase that smelt of vomit and urine. At the top he knocked on the closed door wondering if anyone on the other side would hear his knock above the thump of the music from downstairs. The door opened about two inches and a lone blue eye stared at him. He shouted above the music, "Marianne, I'd like to see Marianne."

The door closed without a word from blue eye and Vernon waited. After what seemed like an age the door opened again, but only just wide enough for Vernon to squeeze through. Once the door closed fairly normal conversation was possible. The bouncer who'd opened the door, and who possessed a pair of neat blue eyes plus the physique of a barn door, frisked him and led him along a Spartan corridor into what passed as an office. At least it had a desk and a filing cabinet, otherwise it looked more like a prison cell. Vernon involuntarily shuddered. A woman in her mid-thirties looked at Vernon, she didn't smile or offer him the one free wooden school-chair. She swept her bottle-blonde hair over her ears and turned her chickenpox marked face to look at Vernon. "What brings you here Vernon, Sid sent his puppy-dog on an errand?"

She sipped some whisky, but didn't offer him any. Vernon tried his best to be intimidating, "Word on the street is that you've started dealing drugs."

She raised an eyebrow, "Dealing drugs in a night-club? Now that would be a novel idea."

He scowled, "On the street Marianne, on the street."

She shrugged, "Just a little oversupply problem."

He sneered, "Your little oversupply problem doesn't come from a spot called Henry does it?"

She deliberately laughed in his face, he could smell her dreadful whisky, tobacco and garlic laden breath. "You mean your minder that's done a runner?"

Vernon's eyes narrowed, "How do you know that?"

She gave her false laugh again and smiled showing a set of crooked yellow stained teeth, "Henry used to spend a lot of time here, I thought about using him once, but he struck me as being..."

She paused for effect, "Unreliable."

Vernon gave her a poisonous look, Marianne didn't seem to care. She said offhandedly, "You can tell Sid that my slight oversupply problem has got absolutely nothing to do with Henry. If he'd tried to bring me anything I wouldn't have touched it with a bargepole."

Vernon sneered, "How can I be sure of that?"

Her face took on a hard look and she wrinkled her little pink nose, "You'll just have to take my word on it."

Vernon gave the slightest of nods, "Why did you think he was unreliable?"

She snorted, "Too many women and too much booze. Henry's view of a secret was that it was something you told one person at a time, preferably the person you were in bed with."

She turned away and her blue-eyed companion opened the office door and silently led Vernon back down the corridor. When they reached the far end he turned to face Vernon, "He used to hang around here with a girl called Felicity, tall, pink hair in dreadlocks, brown eyes. Shouldn't be hard to find."

He opened the door and Vernon exited onto the stinking music-filled staircase conscious that his time was ticking by.

Jane turned off the television at the end of the old movie and unplugged her earphones, John was fast asleep in his bed. She tried to analyze her feelings for him. She definitely liked being with him, but was that because she felt safe with him or because she liked his company? Could either turn into love? She decided that she definitely liked his touch and his gentleness, but... She looked out of the hotel window at the dawn and continued her thoughts; but where was the passion, or was passion just for celluloid? She knew there was something stirring

within her as she was looking forward to his return every Friday, or was it just the return of her knight in shining armour? She quietly sighed and decided that only time would tell.

Sheela woke up at six when the sunshine burst through the gap in her shrunken curtains and played onto her face. She groped on the bedside table for her cigarette packet and then remembered that she'd stopped smoking. She lay in bed trying to ignore her body's craving for nicotine and muttered to herself, "It's just a matter of will power, just a matter of will power. I've done it before and I can bloody well do it again."

After ten minutes she decided that action was better than inaction and walked through her maisonette to the kitchen, made herself a cup of coffee and sat down to read through her file on Henry; within two minutes she was totally absorbed. Ten minutes later she closed the file and said aloud, "Somebody must know where he is, even if he is dead."

She sat back and crossed her legs, "Now, who is most likely to know?"

Chapter 7

Distant Peels of Thunder

John had just settled down to watch the Grand Prix when the doorbell rang, he sighed and went to answer it, knowing that it could only be one person. Helen stood on the doorstep for a fraction of a second and then barged past him, "This won't do, it just won't do. I can't have you living here any longer, it's just too embarrassing."

John strove to understand what she was ranting about. "I rather don't see what it has to do with you, this place is mine."

"Do with me! Do with me!" She yelled, "The fact that you bring your Indian piece of tat here for all my residents to see, that's what it's got to do with me!"

John passed her and leant against the wall, "I rather think you relinquished any claim on my behaviour when you divorced me."

Helen took a deep breath and John realized from the well known signs that she was just getting into her stride when a gentle voice was heard from behind. "Actually I'm British and my grand-parents came from Ceylon, not India."

Helen spun round to see Jane, still clad in her gold silk pyjamas, leaning against the bedroom door. Helen's mouth fell open and John filled the silence, "Jane, this is my ex-wife Helen, who does not own this house and has no claim on my life."

Jane gave a tired smile, "You are waking me up with your shouting, why exactly are you objecting to John seeing me, is it my colour?"

Helen regrouped herself, "I don't care if you're green with spots on, it the blatancy of it!"

John began to lose his temper, "So you shacking up with Colin three days after you left me wasn't blatant?"

"I didn't do it on your doorstep!"

"You can always move!"

They stood glowering at one another until Jane squeezed between Helen and the wall and came to stand alongside John; she tucked her

arm through his. "I am sorry if we are disturbing you, but you can't hold onto what isn't yours anymore."

Helen's moth opened and closed like a goldfish and she turned to leave. John sent her a parting shot. "And don't forget Helen, I not only own this house, but also the flower-bed in front of it, the piece of road and the flower-bed and wall on the other side. Right of access to the home is at my gift, don't force me to withdraw it."

She glowered and stomped away. John calmed down and felt embarrassed for Jane, "Sorry about that, sorry you got involved."

She smiled demurely looking like one of her porcelain dolls, "Do you really own the road?"

"The gate-house may be small, but the ground includes the flower-beds and road for twenty yards, basically until it widens out into the lawn area in front of the home."

"And it is being the only access?"

He gave a low laugh, "No, there is an access on the other side of the home down a pot-holed dirt track; Helen does own that."

He sat her down, "Coffee?"

She sort of nodded. He said gently, "Your three hours early, do you want to go back to bed?"

She gave an absent-minded smile and he led her back to the bed room and settled her down. She sleepily murmured, "How does it feel?"

"How does it feel what?"

"How does it feel to be fought over?"

He went to reply, but she had closed her eyes. He stood up and walked to the door; through the window he could see Helen talking to a resident in the garden. His eyes flicked from Helen to Jane and back again, the problem was that he knew Helen was tough and that once she got a bee in her bonnet she never let go. Just how tenacious was Jane?

Sheela was trying to be tenacious with some errant wallpaper and actually stick it on the wall of her front room, however, she was fighting an increasingly irritable battle with the paper in the process. When the doorbell rang she tossed the paste-brush into the bucket and headed for the front door. DI Jacobson smiled, "I can see you're having fun."

She scowled and let him in, he tut-tutted at the screwed up wallpaper on the floor, "Having problems?"

"As soon as you paste this stuff it falls apart, I'd be better off with toilet paper."

He shook his head in mock exasperation, "When in doubt read the instructions, with this stuff you paste the wall, not the paper."

Her already black mood deepened. DI Jacobson put his hand in his pocket and pulled out a cigarette packet; she practically screamed, "Don't you dare not in here!"

He looked bemused and then grinned profusely as realization dawned, "Oh we've not given up again have we."

"I only restarted when I joined your lot, now besides poking fun why have you come."

He put on a sarcastic voice, "Well isn't it nice to see you Dave and thank you for the expert advice on paper-hanging Dave, perhaps you'd like a cup of tea Dave?"

She glowered at him and went to the kitchen and put the kettle on. Dave looked around, "Nice place this, good location, good school and good amenities; are you settling here?"

She banged the mugs down, "Well I wouldn't be tearing my fingernails off wall-papering the sodding lounge if I was leaving would I?"

He shook his head and wagged his finger, "Temper temper."

She placed both hands on the edge of the work-top about a metre apart, leant on them and breathed deeply. He leant against the doorpost, "You could always try nicotine patches you know."

She shot him a venomous look and made the tea, they sat down at her tiny kitchen table, she wasn't letting him anywhere near the bedroom she used as an office. He sipped the tea, "Courtesy call really, just to let you know that we're considering Henry's disappearance to be a possible murder as of 8am tomorrow morning."

She leant back against the wall and tried to suppress the desire to light up a cigarette, "Why tell me?"

His eyes shied away from her, always a sign of unpalatable news, "You'll probably be interviewed."

Her eyes narrowed, "What I know you know."

He shrugged apologetically, "Local plods doing the enquiry, not me, well not exclusively me. Guv'nor said that it had to be a joint enquiry, besides I could do with the uniform help."

She held her tongue and sipped her tea before opening her biscuit barrel and offering him a biscuit. He reached in and pulled out a dusty digestive. She hesitated and took an identical biscuit and dipped it in her tea. She munched on the soggy crumbs and tried to be considerate. "Why are you leading the murder hunt, thought you had bigger fish to fry?"

Dave stopped chewing, "Customs mob called me this morning, Sid was talking to that lout Garry, seems Henry was minding two packages, not one."

"So?"

So, if your Lord Hawes only has one packet, where's the other?"

Sheela tapped the table with a broken fingernail, "He might have lied to me, clients usually only pass on as much of the truth they think I need or a version of the truth they think I will swallow."

He rubbed his chin, "Well do us a favour lass and ask him."

Sheela eyed him, "Still not answered my question, why you and not some local DI?"

He wiped his tongue over his teeth to clean off the stray biscuit crumbs, "'Cause I asked."

"You asked?" She was incredulous. "You asked for a piddling murder when you're Regional Crime Squad?"

He puckered his lips and looked away, "Want a bit of nine to five, or at least eight till six."

Sheela stared at him and after some rapid thought slowly smiled, "Alayna?"

He nodded, "Regional squad is fun for me, but hell for her, especially after that shooting fiasco. Time I considered her for a while."

"Are you transferring out?"

"Not yet, giving my post to a DI from Edinburgh for a few months, good for him and good for me."

Sheela pursed her lips and said quietly, "People rarely go back, you know that and I know that; your next natural move would be National Crime Squad or Scotland Yard."

He looked away again, "There's other things in life besides promotion."

Sheela couldn't quite catch his mood, "Well thanks for telling me, there was no need."

He stood up and said quietly, "Can I take it that you will never tell Alayna about the night we..."

"Never, you have my word, I'm not exactly proud of that night's work either."

He moved to go and Sheela suddenly exclaimed, "We won't find his killers you know, trail is too cold."

He stared at her, "Unless they're still around and we scare them out of the woodwork. I've sent the word out, everyone is to be treated as if they were the only suspect; I want to see if I can sweat them out."

She looked into his eyes and was briefly glad that she wasn't a suspect, he had a knack of spotting guilt at a hundred paces and then exploiting that knowledge to the full.

Jasmine lay back on her bed, she stretched and sighed, the whole refuge had been out fruit picking. It was back-breaking work, but she'd never done it before and it had all been an adventure. She'd already made a sort of friendship with a girl called Evie and she'd been given some posters to put up in her room until she bought her own. She wondered briefly how her father was doing before she fell asleep.

John pulled up outside Jane's and waited for the 2CV to pull in behind him. They walked down the path together and she recited, "Into the valley of the death rode the six-hundred rode for a second time."

He snorted, "Can't be that bad."

She turned her bulbous eyes on him, "My sister doesn't need matchsticks under the fingernails or a hot poker, she's quite capable of a reasonable interrogation with the minimum of materials."

They stopped at the front door and she said in a conspiratorial tone, "Remember, we're both going to evening communion, so we can escape at ten-thirty, otherwise there's a tunnel from the downstairs kitchen I dug with a teaspoon in moments of solitary confinement."

He roared with laughter as Peter opened the door, "Back from foreign parts are we?"

Sheela waited in Lord Hawes study and was conscious of Lord Hawes' servant with the disposition of a melancholic funeral director watching her every move. Lord Hawes bustled in and sat down, she had clearly disturbed him while getting ready for some black-tie function or other. "Got something for me?"

"Not yet, but I thought you ought to know that the police are turning Henry's disappearance into a murder hunt led by an extremely experienced officer."

He didn't bat an eyelid, but his eyes fixed on her. "You could have told me that on the phone young lady."

She leant forward, "And that drugs package you have in the safe, is it one, or one of two?"

He bristled for a moment, she half expected him to start snorting. "One of one."

"Still got it?"

He nodded and she added, "The police will want it."

He drummed his fingers on the desk and she noted his bitten back fingernails; he leant forward to intimidate her, "How will they know?"

"Because they will ask me and I shall tell them, better you tell them first."

He opened his mouth, but Sheela over-rode him, "Don't be a fool Lord Hawes, the police know about the drugs from another source; if you throw them away you'll be charged with deliberately destroying material evidence."

He glared at her, "I take it you have sources within the force?"

"Naturally."

He nodded slowly and then nodded again, "OK, I'll call them later, but young lady I do not, I repeat, do not, want them to know about the photograph. Understand?"

"Clear as day."

He got up and walked out without any farewell pleasantries; Sheela wondered, not for the first time, what exactly was so special about this photograph.

Catrina smiled politely and put the water jug down, "So just when do you intend to marry Jane?"

John almost choked on his sip of water. Katrina smiled and continued as sounds of Jane and Peter could be heard stacking the dishwasher. "After all if you've deflowered her you cannot possibly leave wilting her by the wayside, or is that your intention?"

John drank some more water to gain time to think. He answered stiffly, "I rather think my intentions towards Jane are a matter between me and her."

Catrina gave her sweet smile and continued as if they were talking about flower arraigning, "And if you throw her to one side like a used condom who has to pick up the pieces?"

John lowered his voice and said intently, "I don't intend to throw her away like a used anything, but it takes two to tango and have you considered that it is she who may cast me aside?"

Voices could be heard coming back from the kitchen and she swiftly hissed, "Get her to talk to you about Sanjay."

"Is it important?"

"Very."

Jane arrived back and looked from Katrina to John, "See what I mean about not needing hot pokers?"

Vernon sat outside the Cat-a-go-go and watched the youngsters starting to enter. He didn't expect the pink-haired girl to come tonight as Sunday nights were not a popular night-club night, but he had no better ideas. Whichever way he turned Henry seemed to have just disappeared into thin air. His only crumb of comfort was that the police obviously also thought he'd absconded as they hadn't launched a murder enquiry; if they did that he was well and truly up a creek without a paddle.

John waited for Jane in the cool of her lounge and re-studied the picture of Sanjay. He looked at the clock and decided that now was not the time to broach the subject and he moved away to look at an isolated water-colour that was hung on a wall beside a window so that it would not be faded by direct sunlight. From within the frame Jane's face stared at him with a small innocent smile. Jane came up behind him, "My sister Susan painted it when she was twenty-one, she was always the artist."

He cocked his head, "She's captured you nicely; enticing and enigmatic with a hint of mystery."

She tossed her head, "I am thinking that you have been being kissing the Blarney stone."

He chuckled and turned to face her, she was in her sari again. "Where are we going to?"

"St James down by the park, it is a mere five minutes walk."

They set off and John wondered why he had ever agreed to go to church with her in the first place. The last time he had been to church was when his daughter had been eleven and playing the Virgin Mary in a nativity play.

Sheela waited at the back of the church feeling uncomfortable, conspicuous and out of place. She'd only come because she'd gleaned the snippet of information from one of the night-time hotel cleaners that Jane came here. She was hoping to be able to sit alongside her and strike up a conversation. She'd not met Jane, but had been told that she would be easy to recognize as apparently she had the eyes of a myopic owl. Sheela watched the congregation as they filed in, they certainly were a mixed bunch and not at all what she had expected.

Quentin Lyons sat in the church vestry with his head in his hands. He was tall, at just over six foot, but currently he was hunched over and cradling his thin well sculptured face in his hands because he

was afraid that he was so tired it would loll from side to side if he didn't. His day had started with eight o'clock communion and he'd had three services, two sick visits and an afternoon Baptism since then; he was absolutely shattered. This late night service had seemed like a good idea at the time, and it obviously filled a need, but if he was honest he would rather have been in bed. His verger, a rather portly lady of spherical dimensions, slipped a cup of coffee under his semi-pointed nose, he nodded his thanks. She left to light the candles in the chancel and then returned to find him still sitting with his head in his hands. She said gently, "This is your ten minute warning."

He sat up and drank the coffee, but not quite out of his mind.

Sheela noticed the sari first and then the eyes, she also noticed the rather nondescript man by her side. She muttered to herself that this was a waste of time as she'd never get close to Jane if John was with her and she didn't want to risk tackling the two of them together. She was about to make an unobtrusive exit when a bag-lady, complete with dog, walked up and sat on the end of her pew. Sheela moved to the centre of the pew and realized that she was trapped as the other end was blocked by what looked like the jolly green giant. She gritted her teeth and settled back for the service to start, at least from where she was she had a clear view of John and Jane.

Vernon almost missed her as she was in the centre of a crowd of women that first hovered outside the night-club and then scrambled into the pub across the road. He waited five minutes and then entered the pub. She was sitting at a table with her group, but got up to grab a tray of peanuts from the bar and take them back to the table. He watched the group until she got up again to go to the toilet. He followed her down the grotty corridor and as soon as she had entered her toilet he pulled the 'toilet is being cleaned, please use the disabled toilet' bollard out from the wall and stuck it in front of the door. He waited until he heard a hand-dryer and then walked in. She looked up, "oy, men's is next door." It was a beautiful clear and strident Essex accent

"I know luv, it's you I'm after."

She put her hand in her handbag and he snarled, "Don't go ringing anyone, I just want information."

Her brown eyes flicked up and down him and she shuffled backwards in chunky shoes with at least two inch thick soles. "What information?"

"Believe you know Henry, he's gone missing."

"Not my fault."

He sighed, "Not saying it is your fault ducky, have you any idea where he's gone."

She shrugged her sequined shoulders, "Search me."

"What about drugs, did he ever talk to you about drugs?"

She eyed him suspiciously, "You the fuzz?"

"No."

"Don't suppose you'd say if you were."

He tried to stay calm, this was not going well and it was taking to long, "Would the police come and ask you questions in the loo?"

She considered the point. "Said he had a lot in his safe, stuffed full he said it was."

"Did he ever give you any?"

She seemed affronted, "Course not! Drugs is dangerous, he only kept them because they were going abroad to help the poor in Africa."

Vernon decided that this was a dead end, he took a couple of paces forward and hissed, "Now don't you go telling anyone about this conversation or..."

She suddenly extracted an aerosol can from her handbag and sprayed it in his eyes, he closed them and then found that he couldn't re-open them, whatever it was it smelt of heather and made his eyes smart like hell. As he stood with his hands flapping around his eyes she stepped back, took careful aim and kicked him hard in the groin. Vernon doubled over and in the process cracked his head against the hand-dryer. She walked past him and smiled, this is what she liked about undercover work, you never quite knew where it was going next.

Quentin stood in the pulpit and waited for people to sit down for the sermon. He smiled at the congregation and began. "Killing people is a sin, it is always a sin and will forever be a sin that excludes you from heaven and sends you directly to hell."

John felt Jane tense beside him and quickly grabbed her hand. Quentin paused for effect, "We continue our look at the commandments and as you might have guessed tonight's commandment is 'you shall not kill', or to be more accurate 'you shall not murder' as there is a world of difference between pre-planned premeditated murder and inadvertently killing someone who runs directly into the path of your car on a motorway. And what about those who kill in the line of duty to protect others, where do they fit in to all this?"

Sheela would have noticed Jane tense and jump slightly at the start of the sermon if she had not done the same. She'd been lulled into a false sense of security by the liturgy and the choir, now this wretched vicar was talking directly to her. How did he know she was here and how on earth did he know that she had shot an unarmed drug dealer less than a two years ago?

The uniformed police constable found Vernon sitting on the toilet floor with blood streaming from the side of his left eye and both eyes still firmly shut. He did not look well. The constable crouched down, "Bit off more than we could chew did we sir?"

"I didn't touch her, I didn't bloody well didn't touch her."

The constable sniffed, "Cornered her in the toilet after deliberately ensuring that you were alone, hardly intending to ask her for a dance were we sir?"

Vernon repeated his mantra, "I didn't touch her, I didn't bloody touch her."

The constable sniffed again, "Vernon Miles isn't it, we've crossed paths before. Well you'll be glad to know that the young lady is not pressing charges."

Vernon shook his head in disbelief causing small blood droplets to scatter, "She's not pressing charges, what about me!"

"Well if you like I could charge you with attempted rape."

Vernon swore profusely for a good two minutes and then snapped, "All right all right I know when it's a stitch up."

The constable stood up, "Very well sir, we'll leave it at that."

Vernon rubbed his eyes, "Hang on, just what did she spray into my eyes."

"According to her, sir, it was best quality deodorant, apparently it dries the eyes nicely and causes the lids to stick to the eyeball. She says if you rinse your head under a cold water tap for ten minutes you should be OK."

The constable walked out leaving Vernon sitting on the floor. The tall girl was standing in the corridor. The constable smiled and whispered, "Wish it had been me. He's not going to go very far and he'll have a lovely shiner tomorrow."

She grinned, "Thanks Luke, I wanted him checked over just in case he'd cracked his skull."

Luke chuckled, "Well I couldn't exactly check his eyes for signs of concussion, but he's got a thick skin and probably a thick skull to go with it."

He turned round, "Take care Beatrice."

Beatrice fixed a couple of ear-plugs in her ears, now she was ready for the Cat-a-go-go, with any luck she'd have the case wrapped up by Tuesday and Marianne and her cronies tucked away with her in a nice cold prison cell.

The service finished and the congregation filed out, Sheela noticed that John and Jane were amongst the first to leave, but she had other things on her mind than following them. She waited until the entire congregation was almost out of the door and then tagged on the back of the queue. She patiently waited for the vicar to shake hands with people and watched him spend a seemingly disproportionate time with the bag-lady and dog. Finally she stood before him and he reached out to shake her hand, she took his long thin hand and held on. "Nice sermon, how did you know I was going to be here?"

He gave her a tired smile, "Sorry, I've no idea who you are and I certainly didn't know you were going to be here, how could I?"

She didn't let go, "You preached about those who kill in the line of duty and cited the recent case of policewoman who shot an unarmed drug dealer by mistake."

He tried to gently wriggle his hand free, "I also talked of people who kill in self defense and those who kill in blind anger."

Sheela wouldn't be diverted, she'd been severely rattled by the sermon and wanted explanations. "If you didn't know I was going to be here why did you labour the point that those who kill by accident often suffer themselves."

"Because it's true."

They stood holding hands and Sheela looked into his eyes, "You honestly didn't write the sermon with me in mind."

"I hope I wrote it under divine inspiration, but I can honestly say I wasn't thinking of you, after all we'd never met."

She went to let his hand go, but now he held onto her, "I take it you are the policewoman who shot the unfortunate drug dealer."

Her face hardened slightly, "He wasn't unfortunate, he made a living off of making people drug addicts and them getting them to undertake criminal activities on his behalf."

He said gently, "Have you talked to anyone about it?"

She half-shrugged, "Mandatory counselling, helps you come to terms with what happened, but doesn't help you with the bigger questions."

Quentin nodded, "If you ever do want to talk I'm always here, anytime."

Sheela turned to look out of the church porch into the dark night, "Do you mean that?"

"Of course."

"Then how about now?"

Quentin inwardly groaned, he was totally tired out and could hardly keep his eyes open, "I may not be at my best at the moment."

Sheela watched the shadows, "It's either now or never."

He took a deep breath, "Would you mind coming to my vicarage next door, the vestry here is rather Spartan."

She nodded and he waved to the verger, who was locking up the far end of the church, and led Sheela to an old Victorian house next to the church. With the dim moonlight, the overgrown undergrowth along the house's frontage and the lack of any house lights she could have been an extra in a vampire movie. He opened the door and flicked the light switch revealing a spacious hall decorated with a fading violently floral wallpaper of huge poppies and tulips. He opened the lounge door, "Sorry about the decoration in here, choice of the vicar's wife before last."

Sheela grimaced, "How does you wife live with it?"

He gave a weak tired smile, "Dunno, haven't met her yet. Coffee?"

She nodded and he paused, "Actually I'm going to have a hot Chocolate."

"Sounds fine."

He went of into the bowels of the house and she cast her professional eye around the lounge. If he hadn't already told her that he wasn't married she would have guessed from the lounge's furniture and décor. It looked more like a dilapidated church hall than a lounge, containing no less than five sagging two-seater settees of different designs and dubious vintage arranged in a rough circle and with not one cushion between them. The floor was bare boards and the walls totally devoid of any pictures, apart from a cheap print of Rembrandt's 'Return of the Prodigal' that was propped up on the mantelpiece. She went and studied the picture, she hadn't seen it for years, probably she'd avoided it as it had been one of her selected paintings for her Art 'A' level many years ago, even then she had found it disturbing.

John stopped outside Jane's front door and they stood poised in an uncertain association. She whispered, "Thanks for a lovely weekend."

He replied equally sotto voce, "I enjoyed it too; see you next Friday?"

He saw her nod in the dim moonlight, "May I ring you?"

"Of course. You don't have to ask."

The conversation at an end they stood awkwardly facing one another until John bent down and lightly kissed her on the lips, she did not resist.

Quentin returned with two steaming mugs of Hot Chocolate and passed Sheela one, they sat down in adjacent settees. Sheela smelt her hot chocolate, "I'm beginning to feel a fool, perhaps I'd better go."

He blew across the top of his mug, "Well you're here now, why waste an opportunity, I've got to drink the hot chocolate anyway?"

She sucked the froth off of her hot chocolate, "You were wrong you know, I didn't intend to shoot him, I was aiming at his brother, he had a sawn-off and was threatening to use it on some poor girl who was in debt to him."

He leant back in the settee and resisted the temptation to close his eyes, "And you missed?"

She shook her head and looked at the floor, "The DI with me fired first, but he had been jogged by another policeman tripping over behind him. He shot me in the shoulder and I accidentally pulled the trigger on my gun, missed the holder of the shot-gun and shot his brother through the heart. One bullet, one shot, one death, but I couldn't actually ever tell him it was an accident, poor guy was out of it before any of us reached him."

"What happened after that?"

"Chap with the shotgun blew his own head off, he had enough cocaine in him to sink a battleship; in fact they both did."

He stirred slightly, "I meant with you."

"I had a body shield on and even though it was close range the bullet only just penetrated my shoulder blade. It was red-hot though and hurt like hell."

She took a small swig of chocolate, "Police enquiry exonerated me and said that I'd acted with great bravery, didn't bring the kid back to life though did it?"

"But you save the girl's life."

"Not for long, she died of an overdose before she could testify at the police enquiry."

Quentin took a swig of chocolate and licked his lips, "So what disturbed you this evening?"

She tried to look through the gross lace curtain and into the garden, "Is that it? Bang and your gone forever? Or is there an afterlife? Or do I come back as a toad or a marmoset?"

She fixed her eyes back on him, "I know your views, you were crystal clear this evening, I just wish I could believe them as well."

She suddenly put her empty mug down and reached for her handbag, "Sorry to keep you up, that was mean of me."

He managed a smile, "I said anytime, but if you really want to discuss the meaning of life you could always join our Tuesday discussion group."

She shook her head, "Sorry, don't do public angst."

He fished out a calling card from his back pocket, "Then call."

She took the card and he went to stand, "On duty tomorrow?"

She looked away, "Not in the force anymore, I left and started on my own; Private detective and all that."

His bushy eyebrows rose, "Never met a real life private detective, what do you do, divorce and suchlike?"

"Missing people, I specialize in finding missing people."

He froze midway between sitting and standing and then sat down, "How much do you charge?"

"£800 a week plus expenses, if I can't find them in a month then they are well and truly missing; why lost somebody?"

He licked his lips again, "My sister, well my half-sister."

Sheela made a rapid decision, "You get some details together for me and I'll have a quick look around, only a preliminary search mind."

He looked hesitant, "I er... Well I can't afford..."

She made for the door, "I'll do it for free, call it compensation for a late night visit."

She left and Quentin flopped back into one of the settees and briefly closed his eyes, by the time Sheela was passing the church he was asleep. She was actually rather pleased that he'd lost a sister, it would mean that she'd see him again, and he was rather worth seeing.

The Storm Begins

Mr James arrived at work ten minutes early to find a large white articulated lorry manoeuvring across one edge of his car-park and seemingly myriad's of uniformed police standing around. He parked his car and walked into reception to be met by DI Jacobson and acting detective sergeant DS Green. They held out warrant cards as one, "Detective Inspector David Jacobson," "and Detective Sergeant Judith Green."

Mr James looked from one to the other, but for the warrant cards they could have been any of the hotel guests. Bemused he mumbled an offer of help while dearly wanting them to disappear and leave his hotel in peace. The Inspector pointed outside, "We have decided to treat Mr Hawes disappearance as murder, my uniformed colleagues will wish to search the hotel and I expect you to give them every assistance."

Mr James eyes darted from side to side, "I don't suppose you can wait till ten when breakfast and checkout is over?"

"You suppose right."

Before Mr James could answer the Inspector gave a wave and the uniformed police started moving towards the hotel entrance. The Inspector turned back to Mr James, "And we'd like to interview you as soon as possible."

Mr James' blood ran cold, "My office in ten minutes?"

"Make it five."

Mr James walked away and Dave turned to Judith and smiled, "That's got him on the hop, how does it feel to be acting sergeant?"

Her translucent blue eyes watched the uniformed police pour in, somehow Dave had got thirty constables by having half over-run their shift and half start their shift at the hotel, it wouldn't last, but the impression was awesome. "Weird, I past my sergeant's exam six months ago and didn't expect to find a post for at least a year, even then I thought it might be back in uniform or in traffic."

He nodded as he watched the red-headed receptionist fiddle with her computer, "Well remember that it's only temporary because I'm on secondment to your lot for the duration of the investigation."

He turned his deep eyes on her, "Liked your original file and your conclusions, anything you didn't say?"

"I didn't say that since I wrote it I've talked to a private detective, Sheela Vance, used to be one of us."

He nodded and decided that if he was going to gain the trust of this acting sergeant he'd better tell her a bit of his history. He pointed to some armchairs and they moved across the reception area and sat down. He leant forward, "Point one, I know Sheela Vance because she used to work with me. Point Two I have also given her information that may be relevant to the case, it's probably good to have another hare running and believe me she is very good. Point three she left the force because I shot her and she couldn't take the aftermath."

Judith's eyes widened slightly, "You *shot* her?"

He shrugged, "An accident, some plod fell into me as I was aiming at someone else and I hit her. Bullet only got as far as sticking in her shoulder blade, but being shot is a salutary experience, so I'm told."

Judith opened her handbag and took out a small packet of mints and offered one to Dave, he shook his head. She leant forward, "So do we treat her as friend or foe?"

He resisted the temptation to smoke, "For the moment as friend, but I'll deal with her. Except," he put his head close to hers, "except for her interview, you can do that with a member of uniform. I want it formal, polite and friendly; she is not a suspect, but she may well lead us to one."

Judith's eyes widened again, "But aren't I already compromised?"

"Not in my book and not on record."

He looked up, "He's had his five minutes, let's start grilling."

Sid sat in the back room of the pub and smirked at Vernon, "Nice little shiner that; if that's what she can do in daylight I'd hate you to meet her on a dark night."

Vernon scowled, his head felt like it contained a disco unit with full bass boost and his eye throbbed incessantly. Sid drummed his fingers, "Little bird told me the police have gone into the hotel mob-handed, full murder enquiry now it seems."

Vernon twitched and Sid changed the tone of his voice from conversationalist to thug. "Mandate's changed, look for the drugs, but I also want you to make sure that there is no link, absolutely no link, to me.

Vernon took a deep breath before replying, "Look boss that may be impossible, better to go for damage limitation."

Sid leant forward and hissed menacingly, "I am, if any shit comes my way it's going to end up in your lap, after all he was your minder."

Vernon swore under his breath, his day had just moved from worse to wretched.

Mr James tugged at his over-tight sweaty collar as DI Jacobson wrote in his notebook and then looked up, "But you admit that you'd made it clear to the staff here that you thought Mr Hawes was incompetent, in fact grossly incompetent."

Mr James raised his hands, "No harm in that."

DI Jacobson leant forward, "You are also quoted as saying that you'd like to get rid of him by any means possible."

Mr James blustered, "But I didn't mean murder him."

DS Green stepped in, "But you made no secret of the fact you wanted him out of the way and that he was, quote, 'a waste of space.'"

"The chap was an incompetent fool, but I didn't murder him, good grief I was miles away when he was murdered."

DI Jacobson raised an eyebrow, "Oh, so you know when he was murdered, that's more than we do."

Mr James put his head in his hands, "I was in Ipswich from nine o'clock on the Friday evening to seven o'clock on the Saturday morning . I was at my grand-daughter's first birthday party, you can check."

"We will. Now there's the matter of the safe inventory; it's strict company policy to keep an inventory, but it seems that you let Mr Hawes not only fail to keep an inventory, but also chose not hold a spare set of his keys, why was that?"

Mr James tugged at his collar again and longed for an interruption, any interruption; even the hotel burning down seemed like a good idea at this moment.

Jasmine's father lolled into his kitchen and put the kettle on. He extracted a cup from the far reaches of a cupboard and ignored the growing heap of dirty dishes in the sink. He peered into the empty tea-bag tin and decided on a cup of coffee, there was just enough in the jar for one medium strength cup. As he drank his coffee he said to no-one in

particular, "Just you wait till you come home my girl, you're for the high jump."

Once coffee was over he placed the cup on the heap of dirty dishes in the sink, ignored the festering take-away packaging on the work-top and went back to his bedroom. There he selected his least dirty tee-shirt from the floor. As he dressed he decided that he'd visit the betting shop calling in on a cashpoint machine on the way, after all Jasmine's wages should be in his account by now.

The breakfast chef stared at the policewoman in disbelief, "You want to what?"

She smiled in the polite manner of a bailiff about to take away his last penny, "I want the forensic team to go over the kitchen for possible forensic evidence; murderers love kitchens, lots of sharp instruments and convenient sinks."

He threw his hands up in disbelief, "But he disappeared over a week ago, do you think we don't clean the place?"

She became firm, "Nevertheless, I want my team in here."

"Now?"

"Now."

He closed his eyes as if not wanting to see impending doom, "Can you at least wait till ten, I'll have finished breakfast by then and there will be a slight lull."

The policewoman drummed her fingers on a stainless steel work-top, "Nine forty-five."

He nodded and then his eyes opened wide, "I say, you will be out of here by eleven won't you?"

She raised an eyebrow, "Doubt it, we've got to look for the nooks and cranny's that no-one cleans."

He leant back on a table as if suddenly overcome with a tremendous weakness, "But the head chef starts at eleven today, we've got a conference of 120 businessmen to cook lunch for."

"Give them fish and chips for all I care, this could be a crime scene and once we come in we only leave when we are good and ready."

He rubbed his hands over his face, "Would you mind telling our head chef, Mr Slaiber, that? I've got two children and I'd rather like to see them again."

Sheela sat in the interview room of the mobile police unit and had both a sense of déjà vu and a sense of unexpected apprehension, she

had never been on this side of the table before. She looked up as a young policewoman came in and sat down. Judith smiled at her and checked the tape machine was off. "Sorry about this, my DI insists we interview you."

Sheela managed a grin, "Dave always was one for making sure that the record-book would show that he's left no stone unturned."

She glanced at the door, "Do you want me to include my collaboration with you and Dave so far?"

"Dave asks that you play it straight and that he'd be grateful if you didn't mention the meetings with us at this moment. We'd also like to make it clear that we'd rather work together and share information as far as we are able."

Sheela nodded as a uniformed police constable entered the room and immediately put a pair of tapes in the tape machine before turning it on and sitting down. Judith became formal, "Interview on Monday 5th July 2004 at 11 am, present are Acting Detective Sergeant Judith Green and..."

"Police constable George Johns."

Judith resumed the preliminary spiel, "For the tape would you please say who you are?"

Sheela moistened her lips, "Sheela Vance, currently working as a private detective."

Judith smiled, "It should be noted that Miss Vance has kindly agreed to co-operate with the police and inform us of the results of her private investigation into the disappearance of Henry Hawes."

She looked Sheela straight in the eye, "I would remind you that what you say is voluntary and that you are free to walk out at any time. Do you understand?"

Sheela nodded, the constable perked up, "For the tape please, do you understand?"

"Yes."

Judith got out her notebook, "Can you start by telling us when you got involved in this case and how?"

Sheela looked at the clock, "Lord Hawes rang me..."

John's phone rang at just after eight o'clock when he was halfway through his desert, he looked at the phone's small screen and turned to the Brazilian executive next to him, "Will you excuse me a moment."

He walked into the bar area and pressed the receive button, Jane's anxious voice immediately assailed his ears. He listened for a minute and said firmly, "Hold on."

He walked into the reception area and out into the car-park, "Now say again."

Jane sounded anxious and upset as she blurted out her words in a semi-hysterical manner, "Sarah's just called me, there's a dirty great mobile police control room in the hotel car-park and police everywhere; they've already started questioning my staff."

John tried to get his brain in gear, but two glasses of white wine were not helping. "When are you due to go there?"

"Tonight."

"Is it imperative?"

She became a little calmer, "It is never imperative, I only go because the contract says I must. Sarah is more than able to manage without me."

John began to get his thought process going, "Does anyone know you're due there?"

"No, normally I would tell Christine, but she was off this evening."

"Then don't go till Thursday night and I'll try to get there before midnight, or even better hold off till Friday night."

She became semi-apologetic, "I don't want you to alter your schedule."

"I'm happy to alter my schedule."

She became agitated again, "But what should I do?"

"Do nothing, become elusive, at least to the police, and stick to your story, we've told it enough times already."

She sighed into her phone, "It makes me feel better just talking to you; it was just a bit of a shock, I thought that they'd just list him as a missing person."

"Fat chance when Lord Hawes is his father, but I think we ought to put the donations to the refuge on hold, at least for a while."

"But I have got £500 in my handbag!"

John weighed up the options, "Well go and get rid of it to them now."

There was silence from the other end and he added in a gentler tone, "Shall I phone you at midnight?"

"Please." There was pleading in her voice.

"Talk to you then, take care."

"You to."

Eight o'clock the following morning DI Jacobson and DS Green met for a pre-briefing tête-à-tête. They sat in the hotel lounge and he poured out some coffee; Judith took her cup, "At least this is civilized."

Dave leant back in his armchair, "So where are we?"

Judith added some more cream to her cup, "Nowhere, least nowhere new. Henry just vanished from the face of the earth, he might as well have been abducted by aliens for all we know. No-one saw him leave, no-one saw his car leave the car-park, no-one saw anything."

Dave smiled, "Let's be logical shall we? Last sighting?"

Judith didn't even have to refer to her notes, "Definite at 2am by the cleaning contractor's manager, after that it's all a bit indefinite. The cleaner who before was certain she'd seen him in a corridor at 2.30am is now not so certain, it's become a 'might have been.' The wretched Dutchmen are also no help and the porter cum receptionist who was on duty now only thinks the manager was talking to them."

Dave refilled his coffee cup, Judith decided he must have asbestos lining in his throat. He checked his notes, "Are you sure about the 2am sighting, has this cleaning manager been re-interviewed?"

"Not yet, but the receptionist admits seeing him at 1.45am when he was passing through reception and he's definitely definite about that."

Dave sniffed his second cup of coffee as if seeking inspiration from the odour, "So what's you feeling?"

She rolled her eyes, "Oh I wish I was Sherlock Holmes is what I'm feeling. Coming here I was thinking about loose ends and we have five. One: why did the bar account memory sticks disappear from the safe when the manager here swears there is nothing amiss? Two: why was a casserole lid upside down in the kitchen? The head chef is adamant he always places them the same way up and looking as his kitchen I believe that. Three: Are the drugs relevant to his disappearance or irrelevant, after all it would appear that Sid is as baffled as we are? Four: what about this sudden liaison between the cleaning manager and a hotel guest and a drive to see the sunrise? Five: Why isn't Lord Hawes screaming blue murder? We had a case last year where someone stole a rose-bush from his front garden and you would think it was made out of gold the fuss he made, but his son goes missing and he's not even harassed us once."

Dave nodded at each point, then commented, "I can't believe the casserole lid is relevant, that is unless forensic turn up some blood in the kitchen. I'm also not sure that the liaison between the guest and the cleaning manager is relevant either; hotels are funny places and that sort of

thing is almost normal. But I have found out one thing, our erstwhile guest Mr John Smith is brother to Donald Smith."

"You mean Donald Smith the Shadow Home Secretary?"

"One and the same, so if you do interview him or this Jane Doe treat them with kid gloves, I don't want any politicians screaming down my neck."

Judith rolled her eyes, "Message received and understood."

Dave nodded an acknowledgement, "But you're right about Lord Hawes, his response is totally out of character."

Judith put her cup down, "So what's your plan of action?"

He pondered and cleaned some wax out of his left ear as he thought. "One: we must establish an exact and definite last sighting; so you're off to Holland. Two: it's time I talked to Vernon. Three: we extend the body hunt to half a mile around the hotel. And four: I'm putting DC Fowler undercover here, they've got a receptionist vacancy and she's already applied."

Judith showed surprise, "Bit unusual that isn't it?"

Dave shook his head, "There is a drugs element here somewhere and she finally wrapped up her Cat-a-go-go case a day early, caught the erstwhile owner red handed with over a kilo of crack in her backpack and filmed her, and her sidekicks, dealing on the dance floor."

Judith leant forward, "Receptionist is the wrong place for her, she'll be tied to the reception desk, why not get her onto the night cleaning staff? The woman in charge of the contractors here said that she's short handed at the moment. As a night-time cleaner she can wander all over the place and Henry did disappear in the early hours of the morning."

Dave smiled, "Excellent idea sergeant, I'll get our Beatrice onto it straight away."

Sheela was sitting on a brick wall staring across the river and trying to get just one worthwhile thought on lateral approaches to finding Henry to appear in her brain when her mobile phone rang. She checked the screen, then answered, "Sheela Vance."

There was some clattering and a thump, then a voice, "Sorry about that, dropped the phone. It's Quentin here."

Sheela racked her brain, "Quentin?"

"Reverend Quentin Lyons from St James."

She mentally swore at herself for not recognizing his voice, "Sorry, mind's elsewhere."

"If you were serious about doing a quick look for my sister I've got some details together."

"When can I pick them up?"

She heard him turning over pages in a diary, "Well I'm here for the next half and hour then... Then I'll be back at six for half an hour then... Then I should be back at eight after choir practice."

"Eight o'clock then?"

"Fine, would you mind checking I'm here before you come in case I get waylaid?"

"Fine."

She put the phone down, this is just what she needed, something to distract her from Henry, then she might be able to think about tracing him more clearly, that's if he was alive.

Jasmine's father was not in a good mood. He had a friend's booze up to go to and absolutely no clean underwear, not even any of the re-wearable kind. To compound his black mood he had only a few pounds to keep him going till Friday. He'd been relying on Jasmine's money arriving and spent his benefit money at the betting shop and pub, now he was skint as her money had not appeared in his bank account. He threw a dirty cup against the kitchen wall and swore.

Jane phoned John at six, as arranged. She had nothing new to say about the police at the hotel, but she had another problem; the 2CV was playing up. She tried to explain it to John, "It's the gear shift, I have to give it a good heave to change from second to third or to put it in first."

John smiled, he'd had this before. "It's the soundproofing under the bonnet hanging down, the gearshift is over the top of the engine and when the soundproofing hangs down it obstructs its passage. Just open the bonnet and stick it back, or take it off and I'll put it back at the weekend."

"Is that all?"

He laughed, "It's as simple as that."

She sighed, "I was beginning to think that I had killed your gearbox."

He changed the subject, "Where you going tonight?"

"Swimming pools and to check out a possible new contract at another hotel."

"Thought you didn't like hotels."

"I don't like the Hawes hotel, this one has a conference centre, two reception suites for parties and the biggest ballroom you have ever seen."

"Well I hope it goes well, look after yourself."

"I will, take care."

"You to."

Sheela stepped out of the shower and picked up her phone, Quentin answered on the second ring. She listened as he went through his 'this is St James vicarage patter.' "Hi, It's Sheela, just checking that you're there. OK to come round in twenty minutes?"

He hesitated for a fraction of a second. "Fine, but I managed to miss eating earlier on, so I might be having dinner when you arrive."

She made an instant decision, "Have you cooked it yet?"

He sounded embarrassed, "Well I tend to go for cold meat and salad."

"How about I bring in a pizza?"

He audibly perked up, "Sounds fine, but please no anchovies or garlic."

"Give me half an hour."

She immediately rang her favourite pizza parlour and ordered their top of the range pizza before scrambling to get ready.

Jane visited Huddleson out-of-town department store on the way to her possible new hotel. She banged on the back door and was let in by a security guard, who checked her identification before he let her in. She scolded him in a mocking manner, "Do I look like a robber?"

He merely shrugged, "Can't take the chance."

She pointed to the 2CV, "And would I try to get away in that?"

This time he laughed, "OK, I'll know you next time. Your lot is spread throughout the store."

"Know where Diane is?"

"Which one's Diane?"

"Team leader, usually wears pink trainers."

He grinned, "Oh you mean the large one; top floor in Domestic Appliances."

Jane set off up the stairs and as she entered the top floor bumped into Jasmine who was polishing the glass screen between Domestic Appliances and Hi-Fi. Jasmine immediately took on the expression of a frightened rabbit. Jane stopped by her, "Nothing to worry about Jasmine, I visit all my teams from time to time, I'm looking for Diane."

Jasmine managed a weak smile, "She's in Computer Games."

Jane said gently, "How's the new accommodation?"

Jasmine brightened up, "Great."

"Have you filled in your bank account forms?"

She nodded, "Greta helped me. Why did you move me, did Greta complain?"

Jane leaned against a washing machine, "Of course not. Diane needed more help here, Greta had a team member coming back off sick-leave and I thought you might like it here."

Jasmine became hesitant, "So am I permanently on this team?"

Jane wondered what lay behind the question, "Don't you like it?"

She glanced towards the door, "I didn't mean that, I do prefer this to office cleaning, I just don't want to be in the way."

"Well you're not in the way, your part of the team. As far as I'm concerned you're in this team for the duration, but you can always come to me if you're unhappy. OK?"

Jasmine smiled, "OK. Diane says that this could be my area, Domestic Appliances, Hi-Fi, Computer Games, and the coffee shop in the corner plus the staff toilets."

"Sounds good."

Jasmine glanced up, "Do they watch us all the time?"

It took Jane a few seconds to realize what she meant, "They're not on. The only cameras that work at night are those looking at entrance doors and in the stairwells."

Jasmine visibly relaxed and started re-polishing a perfectly clean piece of glass. Jane sought out Diane who was sitting on the carpet using a small steam cleaner to try and remove some chewing gum. Jane squatted beside her, "How's it going?"

Diane glanced up, "Fine, just don't talk to me about CleanUp, I don't think they removed a single piece of chewing gum."

"It wasn't in their contract, that's how come we won it."

Diane rolled her eyes and Jane asked quietly, "How's Jasmine?"

Diane gave her a funny look, "She's a good girl, did you say she was dyslexic?"

"Think so."

Diane shook her head and her flabby cheeks rippled with the after-shock, "Needs glasses more like. She can read the large signs around here, but not when she's up close. Reckon she's so long-sighted that she can't even see her own hands properly."

Jane wiggled her eyebrows, "But she must know."

Diane sighed, "Apparently her dad told her that her eyesight's OK and she believed him, I bet the swine didn't want to pay out for glasses."

Jane looked anxiously across the shop floor, "Is she safe?"

Diane chuckled, "I'll keep an eye on her, she's going to have her eyes tested here tomorrow, they do a same day service."

Jane grinned, "And I bet your holding her hand."

Diane shrugged, "She's like a little lost doll."

Jane watched Jasmine cross Domestic Appliances and start dusting the display of irons. "Ask her first, but she can have the bill for the glasses paid by Christine and I'll deduct £10 a week from her wages till she's paid it off, she can't have the capital for glasses at the moment. Make sure she has a decent pair."

Diane nodded and scrapped off some more chewing gum, Jane left her to it.

Sheela arrived at Quentin's vicarage with a hot pizza, a pre-packed tossed salad and a half-bottle of red-wine, he opened the door before she reached it. She stepped inside, "This place is creepy, like something out of a Hammer horror film."

He took her carrier bags and led her towards the dining room, "They keep saying that they'll buy a smaller more manageable place, but can't find one in the right location."

She paused for a second and quietly removed the hall telephone handset from its cradle, she was determined to have him to herself. She caught him up and looked around the dining room, to call it minimalist would have been over-describing it, "Plates?"

He dashed out and she checked the one photograph on the mantel-piece, it was of his mother.

Ten minutes later they were both chewing pizza, eating salad and sipping wine. He smacked his lips, "Gorgeous pizza, where did you get it?"

"Hasan's by the Pig and Flute."

He pondered and eventually shook his head, "Don't know it."

"Guess it's not in your parish."

He shrugged, "Only been here two years, parish is a rabbit warren of roads and alleyways, found a school yesterday I didn't know I had."

She momentarily stopped eating, "You can't be serious?"

He grinned mischievously, "Dance school, tap-dancing for the under sevens."

She sighed and held the back of her hand to her brow, "Guess that rules me out."

"You and me both."

He offered her the last of the salad and she shook her head, it disappeared down his gullet with alarming speed. She tapped the table, "When did you last eat, eat properly I mean?"

He finished his glass of wine, "You mean sitting at this table?"

She nodded and he furrowed his brow before holding his hands up, "No idea."

She tut-tutted, "Eating on the run is bad for your health, I should know I did it for long enough."

He sat back and picked a piece of lettuce out from between the gap in his front teeth, "On the other hands first Sunday of the month I eat with the Harrisons, second Sunday it's the Frobishers, third Sunday..."

She laughed, "OK, I get the idea, your parish feed you."

"Only on Sundays and about once a week, but it means that I get my greens."

He scooped up a last pizza crumb from his plate, "Now you who's casting stones, you tell me when you last ate a proper meal."

She held her hands up as if handcuffed and put on an east-end accent, "Fair cop guv, guilty as charged."

He smiled, "coffee?"

She nodded and he left the room with the empty plates before poking his head back through the door, "Go into the lounge, try the one to the right of the front door."

She followed his instructions and walked into a cosy lounge that was the antithesis of the rest of the house, being tastefully furnished and well decorated. He followed close behind with two mugs of coffee, she waved her arms, "This is nice, bit different from the rest of the place."

He smiled broadly as her put the mugs down, "Only room I've had time to decorate, this and my bedroom."

Sheela gave a sly smile, "It shows a feminine touch."

He casually waved a hand, "oh, that's Laura."

"Laura?"

"My Verger, her husband's a professional decorator."

"Ah, so he did the wallpapering."

He looked affronted, "Certainly not, all my own work."

Sheela sighed, "Well you're doing better than me, I'm trying this new ultra-fine print stuff and it's almost impossible to hang."

He took on a smug expression, "You have to paste the walls not the paper."

"Tried that, instructions say 'paste walls and slide gentle into position.' I pasted the walls and it immediately sticks to them like it was super-glue."

He wagged a finger, "Bet you haven't sized the walls."

She gave him a blank look, he explained. "You go over all the walls with a diluted wallpaper paste, it gives it a gloss finish and then, when you paste the walls a second time, it slides."

Sheela rolled her eyes, "Hope your right, I've got no surplus left."

He picked up a file by his side, "Tell you what, I'll come and help you; do me good to do a bit of practical work and you can take it as a thank you for this."

She smiled from ear to ear, "Done."

She picked up her coffee, "Now tell me about your half-sister."

Jasmine's father came home penniless and drunk. He somehow staggered upstairs and collapsed on the bed. Ten seconds later he vomited all over the side of the bed and the floor. Somewhere in his drunken state he knew that he'd have to clear the mess up in the morning as Jasmine wasn't around. He hiccupped and resolved that this would just not do just before he passed out.

Just before midnight Sheela rose, "I shan't keep you past midnight this time, I'll let you know what I find, if I find anything that is, twenty years is a long time."

He gave a tired smile, "And I'll pop round Thursday evening after scouts, say about eight."

She took a gamble, "Would you like some food?"

"How about I bring a pizza?"

Sheela shook her head, "Wouldn't hear of it, pizza has too many carbohydrates."

She turned to face him, "You said you had a picture of your sister when she was seventeen."

He hurried upstairs and she surreptitiously put the phone receiver back on the hook, her mission for the evening accomplished.

Exactly on the stroke of midnight Lord Hawes sat in his drawing room drinking after dinner port with his solicitor, Jeremy Barratt-

Jones, who was also a family friend. Jeremy tapped the sheaf of papers on the table, "Are you sure about this Bernard?"

Lord Hawes nodded sagely, "Just in case, if the lads disappeared for good I need a second string to my bow, I do not want my estate going to my younger brother, I'd rather burn it down."

Lord Hawes sniffed his port, "And I don't need to say Jeremy that what I have told you remains between us."

Jeremy began to look uncomfortable, "It's all a bit close to the knuckle Bernard, if the police knew what you've told me..."

Lord Hawes cut across him, "No-one Jeremy, no-one."

Jeremy took a deep breath, but he had his professional reputation to keep, "I hear you for the moment, but if the police investigation turns towards either of the people you've mentioned in this will than I might have to re-evaluate my position."

Lord Hawes scoffed, "The police! They couldn't find a beer-mat in a brewery."

Jeremy sighed again, "I hope your right Bernard, I hope your right."

Chapter 9

Thunder

Thursday morning DI Jacobson and DS Green were once again sitting in the lounge before the morning briefing. She looked tired, he looked harassed. He poured out the coffee without speaking, she took a cup and closed her eyes as she sniffed it. He said quietly, "Bad time in Holland?"

She sighed with feeling, "The worst. The police over there were marvelous and without them I would have really been sunk, but basically none of the executives who were here wanted to talk to me and when I finally cornered them, with a suitably large Dutch policeman in tow, they had nothing to offer."

Dave leant back, "So a dead end?"

"Basically they were all so drunk when they got back to the hotel at 3am it's a wonder they could stand, by 4am and the alleged sighting you can forget any evidence that would stand up in court."

"And out of court?"

She sipped her coffee, "One executive call Van Burgh, he's South African not Dutch, remembers talking to a member of the hotel staff, but he was insistent that the guy was wearing brown shoes."

Dave leant back, "So not our Henry."

"No, sorry I couldn't get more. How's it been here?"

"Absolutely nothing, zilch, zero. Extended search turned up bugger all except for a dead dog in a skip. No-one here knows anything. Lord Hawes is giving me the run-around and the Regional crime squad had asked me to back off Vernon until tomorrow."

He stretched, obviously equally tired, "At this rate we'll be pulled off the job by tomorrow. We've no proof that he was murdered and not a shred of evidence as to where he has gone."

"She suppressed a yawn, "No forensics then?"

"Place is cleaner than Buckingham Palace."

He stood up, "Get some sleep and this evening I'd like you to try and track down this nocturnal cleaning manager, might as well tie up the 2am sighting."

Judith yawned, "What about Beatrice?"

Dave smiled for the first time, "In place, starts tonight, that's the only piece of good news I had."

Sheela was in trouble, dead trouble. She'd gone out of her maisonette to pick up the milk from the bottom of the outside concrete staircase and her front door had slammed behind her. She was now standing at the door, milk bottles in hand and with a gentle breeze blowing her skimpy dressing gown all over the place. She put the milk bottles down and swore to herself, this was just the sort of start to the day she didn't need. She considered the alternatives; either borrow the long ladder from next door and wriggle through the open bedroom window or smash a pane of glass in the top of the door. Resisting the latter she opted for the former, at least she knew that she'd make her neighbour's day.

When John arrived at The Essex Colmare Hotel near Stansted Airport there was a message waiting for him in typical Global Lubricants cryptic style. It was simple and to the point; 'Shetland managers who missed the Saturday seminar have been diverted to Norwich for tomorrow, this will be within the standard payment terms of your contract.' John groaned, he'd rather been looking forward to his 'free' day.

Sid and Vernon met on the river towpath, Sid looked both ill and worried. Vernon on the other hand just looked bad, his left eye was still half closed and he had a huge blue-black bruise around it. They started walking, Vernon took out a piece of gum, "Why here boss?"

Sid sniffed, "Don't trust the back room no more, Garry got turned over last night."

"Was he carrying?"

"Wasn't drugs,. It was marked money. He was set up and three of the shopkeepers paid him with marked money."

Vernon whistled, "So the police knew in advance."

"Exactly."

Sid sniffed, "And I guess you've heard about Marianne, taken clean out."

Vernon nodded, "No wonder you're worried."

Sid vehemently snapped back, "Who said I was worried?"

Vernon decided to stay quiet and tried to figure out how to make the most from this opportunity.

Jasmine's father rolled out of Jasmine's bed, he knew that he ought to clean up the mess in his own bedroom, but he'd deal with that later. Today, he decided, he was going to find Jasmine. He stood up and the room span, he laid down again, 'later' he promised himself, 'I'll find the little cow later.'

Sheela tucked the ladder away and congratulated herself. All her immediate neighbours were at work so she'd borrowed her neighbour's ladder, successfully wriggled through the bathroom window, washed, changed and now returned the ladder. The bonus was that she was sure that she'd managed the whole procedure unobserved. She went back up to her maisonette and as she reached the top of the stairs she was assailed by an interesting thought; if she was able to break into her own house totally unobserved in broad daylight then how much easier would that have been in the early hours of the morning? She sat down on the top step and had a think. Just suppose she'd bumped off Henry in the early hours of the morning, what would she have done? She muttered the key points to herself, "Clean-up if there was a mess, dispose of the body and if possible lay a false trail so people didn't know I'd bumped him off." She smiled to herself as she followed the line of thinking out loud, "If it was like that then who was best placed to dispose of the body, after all the place is crawling with cleaners and guests so..." She stopped; the place was crawling with cleaner and guests, but what if the cleaners and guests combined?" She laughed at herself, why would they? This wasn't an Agatha Christie novel. Then she remembered the words of her first police sergeant when she was truly wet behind the ears, 'Remember boys and girls, life is stranger than fiction, a lot stranger than fiction, in fact fiction doesn't even come close.' She muttered "Cleaners and guests together, that's our John Smith and Jane Doe, perhaps I should take a little more interest in them."

Jasmine's Father rolled out of bed just after mid-day, staggered downstairs and flopped in a kitchen chair. He checked the three beer-cans on the table and emptied the inch of so of dregs in the last in down his throat. He smacked his lips and decided to set about tracking down his errant daughter, he didn't think that it would take him long.

"Friends," he mumbled to himself, "Friends." He sat still for a full five minutes, but not one of Jasmine's friends names popped into his head. He went back to her bedroom and rooted about in the drawers, for the first time he began to realize that she had not just popped out with a friend, but that she might be gone. All her drawers were empty. He opened up her wardrobe and smiled, it still seemed to be full of clothes; however on closer inspection he realized that they were either his late wife's or Jasmine's cloths of younger times. He slammed the wardrobe door with enough force to cause an empty shoebox to topple off of the top. Then, all of a sudden, he gave a wide lolling grin; work, he'd find her at work.

Vernon was back on the riverbank, this time with a huge mountain of a man who would easily have passed on any night, let alone a dark one, for a Viking. Zeb Bröost looked around, "Where's Sid."

Vernon gave a cunning smile, "Thought you'd like to know that Sid's past it. Place has been going mad round here, Marianne has been wiped out, Sid's lost a minder with two of your packages of crack and his left hand man got taken in last night caught red-handed with marked money. It's just a matter of time before the police blow Sid too, so I reckoned that you need a new man on the block."

Zeb smiled revealing a set of white, even and carefully manicured teeth. "Well man, why should I trust you with my investment."

"Haven't got the police on my back, not ambitious for your job, and I'm good."

Zeb gave a dry humourless laugh, "But you're ambitious for Sid's job."

"Man is a fool, why risk running your own rackets when you can be milking one good one."

Zed poked him in the shoulder with his finger, it was like being hit by a hammer, "Well I'm not sure about you man, maybe you've blown Sid away and I don't like people that stick out and you stick out." He said these last words while pointing at Vernon's large black eye.."

Vernon gave a suitable sheepish grin, "Proves I'll leave no stone unturned."

Zeb stopped walking and turned to face Vernon, he moved closer, "Don't prove diddly-squat."

He sneered, "Tell you what, I'll give you a trial. If your man's lost two packages you go and find them. When I have them in the palm of my hand your in, otherwise your history."

Zeb turned and walked away, Vernon sat down on an old tree-stump and swore, he'd now been cursed with the same problem as before, find Henry or else.

A, H, J, X, G, O. intoned Jasmine as the optician checked her eyesight through the optical machine that was set to Jasmine's prescription. The optician moved the machine away from Jasmine's eyes, "That's good. I'm prescribing varifocal lenses, but in reality their almost plain glass for straight ahead – just a little correction for astigmatism in your right eye, and they will only work for reading when you move your eyes downwards to look through them. We'll get them made up in an hour, then come back and I'll check them and show you how to get the best out of them. Can I suggest that you use out 'buy one get one pair free' offer to have a pair of pure reading glasses, you'll find it easier if you want to study."

Jasmine blinked to try and clear her eyes of water, "I'm not studying."

The optician shrugged, "I'm not surprised you couldn't really read the chapter headings, let alone the text, in any normal book, but you'll be OK now."

She turned to her paperwork, "As your sixteen you can have an NHS grant towards the cost, I just need your parent's signature. Jasmine opened her mouth, but Diane winked at her, leant over and scribbled an incomprehensible signature across the bottom of the form. The optician frowned at her, "And I must say that Jasmine should have had her eyes tested years ago, I can't believe that you didn't notice her eyesight characteristics. I would have much preferred to see here when she was starting school, not finishing it."

Diane flapped her hands and Jasmine whispered to the optician, "My dad said I didn't need to and that I was perfectly normal, don't live with him now."

She nodded, "OK, go and choose some frames and then see me when the glasses are made up, and for the varifocal one's don't choose the tiny slit lenses, their not deep enough."

Jasmine nodded and went to the glass-frame stand, she whispered to Diane, "Are all opticians a bossy as that?"

Diane picked up a pair of red frames, Jasmine put them back. Diane whispered back, "She's just concerned for you and how you've managed."

Jasmine looked at Diane, "My dad told me that everyone had difficulty reading after they were eleven I just believed him."

Diane grimaced, "And your mum?"

Jasmine looked away, "She died when I was ten."

"What about your school teacher's didn't they notice?"

Jasmine shrugged, "Didn't go to school much, had dad to look after."

Diane kept quiet and discretely added the red frames to Jasmine's growing pile of possibilities.

Beatrice walked across the storehouse and found Christine at her desk, she smiled, "You must be Beatrice."

Beatrice nodded and wondered how to play this. Christine handed her an identity card, "Stick the passport photograph we asked for on the semi-sticky bit then peel off the backing from the other side and press it down."

Christine passed over a form, "This is a confidentiality form that says you won't snoop into other people's things and this," she produced another piece of paper, "Is confirmation that we'll pay your wages by direct debit into your bank account."

Beatrice tucked the pieces of paper away and thought to herself that this was too easy to be true. Christine consulted her check-list, "I have to tell you that we always take up references and that your current employment is dependant upon them and that you'll be on the hotel team under Sarah Lambert."

Christine pointed across the storehouse floor, "She's the one with the Egyptian style black hair and she'll run you through how we work."

Beatrice mumbled, "So she's the boss."

Christine smiled tolerantly, "Your boss, not *the* boss. That's Jane, you'll see her around she floats about all the teams."

Beatrice shuffled her feet, "How will I know her?"

"She wears here identity card, just like you will."

Beatrice walked away and Christine watched her. The dress was cheap, the trainers dowdy, the hair just slightly unkempt and dyed a sort of offish blond colour, she blended in with many of the staff, but Christine felt uneasy. She'd seen literally dozens of staff come and go and there was something not quite right about this one. She glanced at the application form and decided that tomorrow morning she'd chase up the references.

Sheela watched as Quentin made up some size and brushed it on the wall around the fireplace, he was burbling on about doing this first so that it could dry while they were eating. She had a Shepherd's

pie in the oven and some strawberries and cream in the refrigerator. While he was concentrating on not getting the size on her fireplace surround she stealthily picked up his mobile phone and slightly dislodged the battery. She moved it just enough to disconnect the power and turn it off, she wanted a second, interrupt free, evening with this man.

“...and the Met Office has issued a severe weather warning for Norfolk and Lincolnshire, severe rain is expected for most of the night moving northwards. Currently the rain-storms are in Suffolk and just an hour ago 25mm of rain was recorded at Ipswich in just under half an hour, so be careful out there and remember to use your rear fog-lights in conditions of heavy spray.”

John grimaced at the radio announcement and muttered, “Thanks for the warning.” He peered through his windscreen; he had his windscreen wipers on top speed, was only doing 30mph and his air conditioning unit was on full blast, even so he could only just see the road ahead, if the rest of the trip was going to be like this it would be a nightmare.

Beatrice watched Sarah demonstrate the wet/dry vacuum cleaner. “We don’t often use this, just to get rid of stains and suchlike and you’ll usually find that someone drops a cup of coffee somewhere each day, but of course not always in your area, so we’ve only got one. The hotel’s also got one and we can use that as well, it’s kept in the cupboard by the kitchen that I showed you earlier.”

She lifted out a Perspex bucket and put it back, “Normally I wouldn’t show you this on your first day, but it’s raining heavily, that means that guests dash to their cars out of the fire-escapes, which owing to a cheap design, they can’t close behind them. So we’ll probably be extracting water from sodden carpet most of the night.”

Beatrice screwed up her nose, “That’s a bit thoughtless of them.”

Sarah half-nodded, still concentrating on the demonstrating the vacuum cleaner, “Not half as thoughtless as being sick on the carpet, this little beastie is good for that too because it not only sucks up fluids but also, if you press here, releases soapy water from the lower tank which...”

Quentin put down his fork, “that was delicious.”

Sheela pointed to the baking dish that still had some left; he was as polite as ever, “Do you want any?”

“No thanks, go on finish it up.”

He reached out and emptied the remains of the shepherd's pie on his plate, briefly he reminded her of Bruce her ex-husband, she pushed the thought away. "Obviously your parishioners aren't feeding you enough."

He shrugged as he ate, "Not their fault, there's just too much work to do."

She thought about cracking the 'only works on a Sunday' joke, but decided it was too passé, "Is there that much to do in the parish?"

He put his fork down for the second time, "Two parishes. I've got St James and the next door parish of St Jude and I'm supposed to be helping out at St Mary's-on-the-hill as their new vicar doesn't arrive till Christmas."

"Have you always been a vicar?"

He laughed, "No, actually I studied engineering at university and worked for a while in a car design and fabrication area of a major manufacturer."

"What made you change?"

He looked her straight in the eyes, "God."

Sheela shivered and stood up, deciding that it was time for the desert.

Dave sat on the sofa with his arm round Alayna and was content, they were ostensibly watching the 'European Football Extravaganza'. Dave let her nestle closer, "so Daphne is definitely going?"

"Yes, she's book a flight next week and she's taking some of my samples with her to THAT WAS NEVER A FREE KICK, THAT LINESMAN'S BLIND!"

Dave smiled, he was used to his wife's sudden outbursts and her passion for football, he should have been as they had met at a football match where he was supposed to have been on crowd control. She automatically picked up the thread of her conversation, "to show the publishing house in Helsinki, who knows I may get ARGHH some illustration work over there."

"You fancy going to Helsinki?"

She curled her feet under her and leant against him, "Do it all by e-mail and fax. HE'S FAKING IT, OH COME ON REF, HE'S FAKING IT!"

She resumed normal conversation, "how about you, how's your case going? OH BEAUTIFUL"

He sighed, "It's not. Too many dead ends and unknowns, I rather suspect that if we don't come across any major clues tomorrow it will all be

wound down, after all in truth we don't really know that he's been murdered."

"PENALTY! THAT'S A PENALTY? GOOD GRIEF WHAT'S THE GAME COMING TO?"

Dave resumed, "No matter, I'm staying with the locals for the time being."

She briefly looked into his eyes, "You sure about that?"

"I'm sure."

"And I'm glad."

Dave smiled, he was glad too. "RED CARD, OH NOT A RED CARD! HE ONLY TAPPED HIM."

Quentin stood on the small steps and looked in disbelief at the strip of torn wallpaper in his hands. "That shouldn't happen."

Sheela smiled and sat on the dust-sheet that was on top of the arm-chair, "Told you it wasn't easy."

He stood staring at the wall, "This can't be that difficult, after all thousands of people use this stuff."

Jasmine's father swore as he peered through the misty wind-screen of his mate's old Simca estate. So far he was not having a fruitful time. First off the County Council security guards wouldn't let him into their office block, then he found out that Jasmine wasn't there anyway. Secondly the loading bay the cleaner's used had been all shut-up for the night, his only stroke of luck so far was that he had managed to peer through the side-window and read the white-board, according to that the cleaning manager was due to be at the Hawes hotel around midnight. He swore and swerved left thinking that he'd spotted the hotel car-park sign at the last moment. To his frustration he'd spotted the goods delivery sign and was now wending his way round the back of the hotel, he thought. Almost miraculously the rain eased from steady total downpour to a mere torrent and he spotted an open doorway. He swerved the car into a parking bay and scampered straight across a flower bed and into the hotel corridor via an open fire escape. Well he was in the hotel, now where was this manager?

Two minutes later Beatrice walked down the same corridor and almost screamed; the fire escape door was open, rain was streaming in and, to cap it all, someone had left a series of huge muddy footprints on the carpet. She slammed the door shut with a vengeance; she'd already

mopped up that particular piece of carpet twice and now she'd have to wash it as well. She sighed, she really wanted to go on the prowl, but if unthinking guests kept leaving the fire escapes open...

John arrived at the hotel just before midnight and parked his car round the back of the hotel, he would have parked out the front, but the first three rows of parking spaces were full and the police lorry took up another two rows, so he'd have had a long dash across the car-park. However, he knew that round the back he could probably park within twenty feet of the rear entrance. He sprinted across the car-park and in through the rear entrance, stopping only to thoroughly wipe his feet on the doormat. He walked through to reception and picked up his room key. The red-headed receptionist gave him a knowing smile, "She went that way about ten minutes ago looking for Sarah."

John thanked her and went up to his room, dumped his case and proceeded back down to find Jane. He wandered down the deserted corridor that served the manager's offices and heard a noise. He froze and listened, it was Jane's voice, but all high pitched and querulous. He hastily followed his ears towards a small unmarked door at the end of the corridor and pushed it open to find Jane pinned against the wall by a huge man in a filthy tee-shirt and with the biggest beer-gut he had ever seen. He was holding Jane against the wall with his hands holding her wrist and her arms outstretched in cruciform style. "Just tell me where she is," he snarled in her face. John noted for some absurd reason that Jane was wearing a pair of neoprene gloves; he briefly wondered whether the best course of action was not to get involved, but just to call the police. However, the man banged Jane's wrists against the wall and he saw red. He picked up a CO₂ fire extinguisher from the floor, broke the tag, pulled the trigger and aimed the stream of freezing cold carbon-dioxide fire retardant straight into the man's face. The man instantly staggered back and flapped his arms taking in huge breaths of the freezing gas. John was angry and relentless, he kept the stream of gas flowing into the man's face and followed him as he staggered back across the room. Finally John had him against the far wall and backed against a fire-escape door, which obligingly opened behind him. The man tottered out backwards and John shot forward and slammed the door shut. He put the fire extinguisher down in front of the one by the fire escape and Jane threw herself into his arms, burying her head in his chest.

Ten seconds later Beatrice exited the service lift carrying the wet/dry vacuum cleaner that she'd seemingly followed around half the hotel. As she walked by she glanced through an open doorway, she briefly slowed and did a double take, she'd not yet met Jane, but she knew her, and John, by their descriptions in the briefing file. She smiled to herself, they were certainly keen on one another judging by their body language.

Sheela burst into a fit of giggles as a fifth piece of wallpaper hit the floor. Quentin placed his hands on his hips, "This is ridiculous."

Sheela hugged her knees, "Want to give up, it's nearly midnight."

A look of surprise crossed his face, "Really?"

She giggled again, "Doesn't time fly when you're having fun?"

He flopped into the other armchair and yelled, rolling himself onto the floor. She held her sides, "Brass ornaments, best place to store them."

He sat upright muttering, "This place is lethal, that hurt!" Before bursting into laughter.

Jane hugged John for all she was worth and he could feel her trembling through his chest. He wondered if she could feel his knees shaking. She took a deep breath and stepped back, but grabbed hold of his hands when she tottered. John looked at the fire escape door, "Who is he?"

She trembled visibly, "Father of one of my staff, she's left home and gone to a woman's refuge. He wanted to know where she was."

"And you wouldn't tell him."

"No chance."

Beatrice passed the door to go to the cleaning cupboard and get some shampoo, and glanced in again, they were now standing hand in hand gazing into each other's eye, how romantic she thought. Jane saw Beatrice pass and pulled a duster out of her pocket and cleaned the fire extinguisher that John had used before putting it back. John grabbed her, "Hey, what you doing?"

She let out a sob, 'I promised Sarah that I'd help her out and clean in here.'

John looked round, "What is this place?"

She couldn't answer and he pulled her to him again.

Sheela showed Quentin to the door and handed him his mobile, he peered at it and pushed the battery home. He then seemed to falter and looked at her, "Did you really want to see *The Seven Samurai*?"

"I'm told it's a classic."

Tomorrow night the Arts Cinema is showing it along with the original version of *Some like it Hot*, would you like to.... I mean if you're free...?"

She gave him a huge smile "I'd love to."

He smiled and left, she closed the door and paused before punching the air while screaming, "yes - yes - yes!"

John held Jane close and murmured, "Can't leave you alone for five minutes."

She shuddered. John tried to look out of the small window next to the fire-escape, but it was too dark outside and the rain was still streaming down. He was worried that the guy would come back, if so he wouldn't be off-guard and John knew he could not deal with him in a straight fight. He whispered in her ear, "Come on, let's go to my room."

He led her by the hand down the corridor. Beatrice looked up from her task of removing footprints and saw John leading Jane down the corridor hand in hand, she smiled, she had no doubt what they were up to.

Once in the bedroom Jane once again fell into John's arms. John manoeuvred himself to sit in the armchair with Jane sitting on his lap; he needed to do this as his legs were growing increasingly weak, she needed to follow him as she didn't want to let him go. They sat holding one another while Beatrice finished cleaning the carpet by the fire escape. She stood up straight, placing her hands on her lower back and stretching. She hoped that this undercover job didn't last long, it was too much like hard work.

Chapter 10

Lightening

Friday morning DS Green arrived at the reception area first and stood her umbrella in the stand by the door while she took off her raincoat. DI Jacobson arrived, at the run, ten seconds later. He took off his sodden lightweight anorak and cursed the rain.

They walked to their now familiar armchair spot and the porter almost immediately brought over three cups of coffee. Dave smiled at Judith, "Hope you don't mind but I've asked Sheela Vance to join us, I hope she's doing better than we are."

Judith poured the coffee and Dave looked at his notes, "Today I'd like you to corner Lord Hawes, take DC Taylor with you. I'll tackle Vernon, he should be rattled by the time I get to him; the regional crime squad told me they were picking up Sid for questioning this morning."

He tossed the file onto a vacant armchair, "Otherwise we're up the creek without a paddle, Lord Lucan eat your heart out."

Sheela arrived and gave a bright smile and dropped her handbag beside a chair, "This is almost like old times."

Dave rolled his eyes, "What have you got to be so happy about? Solved it for us?"

Sheela didn't have time to reply as a very wet police sergeant dripped up to them, Dave gave him a black look. The sergeant appeared not to notice, "Sorry to bother you sir, but we've found a body."

"Where?"

"On the flower bed between the guest's car-park and the delivery area."

Dave seemed surprised, "In the flower bed?"

The sergeant put on a patient look, "Not *in* the flower bed sir, *on* it."

Dave sighed, "Why are bodies always found in the rain?"

As if on cue the sun peeped through the clouds as they stood up, Sheela picked up her handbag, "Mind if I tag along?"

He gave a curt nod, "Just don't get in the way and remember that you're a guest."

They trooped round the outside of the hotel to the flower bed where two uniformed constables were poking about in the flower bed. The body lay on its back and Dave's heart sank, he turned to Judith, "This isn't Henry, goodness knows who it is, but it's not Henry."

He turned back to the sergeant, "How long has he been here?"

The sergeant shrugged, "We don't think he was there at ten last night."

Dave gave him a scornful look, "Don't think? Aren't your people supposed to walk round the grounds every hour?"

The sergeant held his ground, "It was rather wet last night sir, the rain was so heavy we could have missed the Titanic sinking in the car park."

Dave rubbed his face, "All right all right, there's no need to be sarcastic, I've been in uniform to you know."

The police doctor turned up and they all stood around watching for want nothing better to do. She stood up and looked at Dave, "He's dead."

Dave virtually exploded, "I can see that, but was it natural?"

She shrugged, "Wait for the post-mortem, there's no external indication of trauma."

Judith looked at the body, "How long?"

The doctor shrugged again, "More than two hours, less than two days; tell you more later."

Judith bent down, took a deep breath and went through his trouser pockets, they contained a fifty pence piece, a torn lottery ticket and nothing else. One of the constables looked at Judith, "There's a beaten up old Simca in the staff car-park with the keys still in the ignition, we're checking it out; could be his, it's none of the staff's."

Dave came to a decision, "Right, we're going to treat this as murder until we know otherwise, so I want a fingertip search of this area and everyone who was on duty last night to be interviewed by noon, and I don't care if you have to wake them up to do so."

He turned to Judith and said quietly, "Ring Beatrice and ask her if she saw anything."

He looked around the hotel car-park, if this was murder was it connected to Henry's disappearance in some way and if so how?"

John stood at the window of his hotel bedroom looking out of the window at the most oblique angle he could manage, there was

something going on down there and he'd love to know what. As he watched the sun suddenly disappeared and a few large raindrops started to fall. He turned round and looked at Jane, she had fallen asleep on his lap and he'd managed to lift her to the bed and then lie beside her and get some sleep. She was still asleep and his shirt was sodden from her dribbling. He quietly went into the bathroom and washed, he only hoped that starting to sleep at just past midnight wouldn't ruin her body-clock's nocturnal setting.

Vernon stood in the shadows of the public bar of the Dog and Duck and watched the police turn the back room over. He didn't recognize any of the faces of the policemen and figured that it wasn't the local boys, so it was either the drug squad or the Regional Crime Squad. He heard what was obviously the lead policeman tell one of the constables to contact Customs and Excise and watched them all leave towards their cars. This added to his confusion, the lead policeman was obviously Scottish, surely they hadn't brought a squad down from Scotland just to catch Sid?

John emerged from the bathroom and checked Jane and then quietly made his way to reception, he desperately wanted to know what the commotion was in the car-park and he was sure that the receptionist would know. As he approached the receptionist she gave him a weary smile, "Am I glad to see you. How many are you expecting today?"

John had to get his mind back into work mode, "Eight from Shetland coming down by charter flight so I don't know when they will arrive."

She tapped her pencil on the counter, "Well they're here and at the moment enjoying our breakfast hospitality. However, I've also had a phone call from," she consulted her notepad, "a Mr Spinelli confirming that there will be eight executives from Holland arriving in an hour's time, that would make sixteen."

John groaned, of all Fridays today was not the one he wanted to be tied up all day with a double-sized course.

"Can you fit them in?"

"Yes, but not easily. I suppose you'll want a large finger buffet, more coffee and seventeen for dinner."

He finally got his brain in gear, "Make it eighteen for dinner and put the extra place on my personal bill."

She nodded, he said, over-casually, "What's going on in the car-park?"

She sniffed and passed her chewing gum from one side of her mouth to the other, "Found a body haven't they."

John's blood ran cold, "A body?"

She nodded, "Won't say who it is, except that it's not Henry."

John was still stunned, "Where?"

She half turned away keen on altering the bookings for the day, "In a flower bed I'm told. If it's the one round the back the undergrowth is so thick it could have been there since the war."

John left her and hot-footed it back to his room. He let himself in quietly; Jane was still sleeping. He flopped into the armchair, what should he do? He had only been defending Jane, but surely you couldn't kill someone with a fire extinguisher could you? Once his heart rate subsided he decided that he'd wait to find out whose body it was, after all it might be that of a tramp. Jane turned over and opened her eyes, for once she became fully awake almost instantly.

"Hello, is that Beatrice?"

"Who's that?"

"DS Green, sorry to wake you up, but we've got a problem at the hotel."

Beatrice groaned, "Well I hope it's not wet carpets."

"We've found a body, yet to be identified, in one of the flower beds near the delivery entrance. Did you see anything odd last night?"

"Not been there long enough to know what's odd. It's a weird place at night with guests padding around and hotel staff all wandering about doing some task or other."

"So you didn't see anything."

Beatrice chuckled, "Only the pair of love-birds. Jane Doe and John Smith, about midnight they were necking in one of the offices and about ten minutes later I saw them going up to his hotel room, I could guess what was on their mind."

"Sorry to have disturbed you. What did you mean about wet carpets?"

"Rain was hissing down last night, you wouldn't believe how many guests run in and out of the fire-escapes. I spent a large part of the night trying to keep the carpet dry by the doors; the hotel had one of their night-porters doing the same."

"You mean that the front and rear entrances weren't the only ways in and out."

"Correct."

“Shit, we’ve got CCTV front and back now, but if people could come and go through other door that’s useless.”

Beatrice turned over, she just wanted to sleep, “Going out more than coming in. When they leave they can’t shut the fire-escape door behind them so it gets left open; you can’t come in through a fire-escape if the door’s shut, they don’t have knobs on the outside.”

“Do you think the doors could have been open for long?”

“Not if Peter, he’s the porter, and I had anything to do with it.”

“Thanks for the tip. Bye.”

Beatrice put the phone down and was asleep within the minute.

Jane put her coffee-cup down, “You don’t know if it’s Mr Worth, it could be anybody.”

John looked ashen and nervous. “But if it is, what do I do.”

Jane bit her bottom lip and pondered for a moment with her large eyes staring past him. “Nothing, I am thinking you should do nothing. We don’t want to get tangled up with the police, just talking to them makes me nervous. By the way I had a thirty second interview with a female detective yesterday, she only asked for confirmation of the last time we saw Henry.”

John was clearly not convinced and Jane rose and went and knelt at the side of his chair placing her elbows on the arm so that she could hold his hands. “We can say that you found me in the room and then we came here, we needn’t mention him, I don’t think anyone in the hotel had seen him or they would have stopped him.”

John closed his eyes, “You make it sound so easy.”

She rubbed the lower part of his left arm, “I know that Beatrice, she’s one of my new cleaners and I know it was her because Sarah said that she was tall; I know that she saw us in the room holding hands, she could verify that we were there alone.”

He kissed her on the forehead, “But what am I going to do about you? I can’t have you running around if it wasn’t this bloke Mr Worth; I’m not having you attacked again.”

She stood up and sat on his lap, “Believe me I am not thinking of going anywhere, I am staying with my gallant knight and not letting him out of my sight.”

DS Green sat in Lord Hawes study and fumed, they had been waiting for nearly half an hour. DC Taylor merely re-crossed his

immaculately clad legs and looked as if he had all the patience in the world. She hissed, "He's giving us the run around."

He gave a half-smile, "Putting us in our place more like."

Lord Hawes suddenly burst through the door with another man in tow, "Sorry to have kept you waiting, this is Jeremy Barratt-Jones my solicitor."

DS Green feigned surprise, "I didn't think that this interview needed a solicitor present sir."

Lord Hawes replied brusquely, "Well I do."

DS Green sighed internally, this was not going to be easy.

Vernon re-checked the street and decided that his house was clear. He made his way to the front door, but he'd only just got the key in when there was a voice behind him. "Excuse us Mr Miles, do you mind if we have a word."

Vernon turned round and decided that he couldn't make a run for it, "Yes."

"Inside sir?"

"Outside, I want to neighbours to see what's going on."

DI Jacobson gave a professional smile, "As you wish sir. We wish to talk about your relationship with Henry Hawes."

"Who?" Exclaimed Vernon in mock misunderstanding.

"Henry Hawes, hotel manager at the Hawes Hotel."

Vernon narrowed his eyes, "Oh him."

"So you do know who I mean?"

Vernon nodded, "Yeah yeah, he's been in a couple of poker hands with me, owes me some money."

"May I ask how much?"

"You can ask, but I don't have to say."

DC Dawson joined in, "You are aware that he's disappeared?"

Vernon sneered, "'Course I am, as I said the toad owes my money."

DI Jacobson sighed, this was getting nowhere.

"Right gentleman," said John to settle the group down. The sixteen executives were crammed around the table and looked like a belligerent lot. "Good morning, I'm John Smith and I'll be leading today's seminar, we'll go round the table in a minute, but first let me introduce Miss Jane Doe a compatriot of mine whose sitting in today. She is the owner of a cleaning company and has a great deal of experience in giving bad news."

A blond headed young executive scoffed, "Oh yeah?"

Jane smiled, "Would you like to tell a volatile and excitable French chef with a large machete that the cockroaches had been at his foie gras?"

He grinned, "Point taken."

John smiled and settled down into his stride.

DS Green checked her notes and tried to hide her frustration, Lord Hawes was not being uncooperative, but he wasn't being helpful either. "Finally Lord Hawes would you mind telling who would be your major beneficiary should you pass away?"

"Why?"

DC Taylor gave a suave smile, "We are just trying to build up a picture of who would benefit from your son's death."

Jeremy put a hand on Lord Hawes arm, "Until Lord Hawes son went missing, and I don't believe you have any proof that his disappearance is anything other than that, he was the sole beneficiary. However since then Lord Hawes has changed his will and the secondary beneficiary would not know that they are a beneficiary and that they would benefit from Henry's demise."

DS Green digested the statement, "So if you hadn't changed your will who would have been the secondary beneficiary?"

Jeremy answered again, "That would have been Lord Hawes younger brother."

DS Green decided to take the gloves off, "You mean the husband of his ex-wife?"

Lord Hawes growled something regarding the laxity of the current marriage laws and Jeremy smiled. "Yes, and before you ask I've checked, he's still in Monte Carlo and has not been in England since his marriage to Nanette two years ago."

DS Green leaned forward slightly, "Lord Hawes I get the impression that you're not telling us something that might assist us in our enquiries."

Lord Hawes sat back looking smug, "Really, I thought that I'd been most helpful."

DS Green sighed internally again, this was proving to be almost a complete waste of time.

Jane managed to extract herself from the verbal clutches of two Dutch oil executives that looked more like a pair of Bingo callers and sidled up to John. She whispered, "Are this lot real? Do they really

believe that a slap on the back and a phrase like 'Sorry John we've got to let you go' is diplomatic?"

John smiled, at least having her in the seminar was taking her mind off of being attacked again. "Sad isn't it? Look do you feel up to a bit of role play, I'd rather like to put that blond chap from Shetland on the spot."

She glanced across the room, "The one with a neck like a tree trunk?"

"That's him."

"It will be a pleasure."

She took a chicken leg from the finger buffet, "This is fun, beats working for a living."

DI Jacobson arrived at the mobile headquarters and went straight to the control room, "Anything for me?"

"Mr James from the hotel informed us, out of courtesy you understand, that the Fire Alarm was being tested at ten this morning and that they would also be checking all the fire extinguishers. I think he wants to impress on us that he's running a good hotel, yesterday he had the first-aid kits checked and the day before the gas engineers doing a service on the boiler."

Dave laughed, "And just maybe we've pricked his conscience!"

The duty sergeant tossed him a file, "And this is all yours."

Dave caught it, "What's in it?"

"We think the chap is Edward Worth, known as Bert. One of the constables thinks that they recognized him, chaps a regular down at the Fish and Pullet and sometimes a bit violent."

"Any formal ID?"

"Not yet. We've also looked at the Old Simca in the car park. It's not taxed and according to Swansea it was scrapped five years ago. The owner at the time, a Mrs Smart from Reading, says she took it to a scrap yard outside Swindon and the scrap yard owner said that he'd deal with the paperwork. We're currently checking for parking tickets and the like."

Dave grimaced and hoped that this was a death by natural causes, he didn't want a second murder with no leads to speak of. "Any word from the doctor?"

"Post-mortem in progress as we speak."

"And that's the lot?"

The sergeant pointed out of the window, "Still raining cats and dogs, makes for a difficult finger-tip search."

DS Green staggered in and threw down her umbrella, "Stuff the aristocracy."

The sergeant wagged his finger, "Now now don't denigrate your lords and masters."

He swiftly ducked as she threw a soaking wet raincoat at him.

Jane rolled her eyes and wailed, "Letting me go! You mean your sacking me – turning me out!. It's harassment that's what it is, it's because I'm coloured isn't it, or a woman." She threw her hands up in the air, "Oh no it's not; it's because I wouldn't succumb to your advances at the Christmas party last year. I shall tell them, I shall tell them all."

The blond executive was clearly taken aback, "Tell who?"

"The industrial tribunal that's who, you can't do this, you can't sack me just because I won't be your sexual plaything."

He groped for a way out, "Who said anything about you being my sexual plaything?"

"Did you invite me to a tête-à-tête at your house merely to play Scrabble? I shall sue."

John stepped in and looked at fifteen grinning executives, "Now let's hold it there. Just where did this interview start to go downhill?"

Someone remarked, "When he first opened his mouth," and everybody laughed.

John calmed them down, "Actually I think he started well, but after he'd tried to put the lady at ease he..."

Sheela sat in the hotel lounge just a few yards away from the reception desk and considered what she had learnt. She had confirmed that none of the hotel had noticed anything between Jane Doe and John Smith until after Henry's disappearance. In fact Sheela believed that they had never even met before that night, that meant that either John was a fast worker or something else had throw them together. On the other hand what motive would they have for killing Henry? She sat back and considered the options, surely they couldn't have killed Henry by accident and if not accident then what? She spied the red-headed receptionist walking out of the staff loo and decided on a little more questioning.

During afternoon coffee Jane's mobile phone beeped and she inspected the screen and frowned. She turned to John, "My general assistant wants to talk to me, apparently she's in the lounge!"

John nodded, "You sneak off, I'm not going anywhere."

She walked out of the room and into the lounge, she found Christine in one of a pair of armchairs, "How were you knowing that I was here?"

Christine smiled, "Educated guess."

Jane blinked and then threw a hand in front of her face, "Is everyone knowing?"

Christine gave an embarrassed smile, "Not everyone, I asked Sarah, she was most discrete."

Jane slumped into an armchair, "What brings you here?"

Christine leant forward, "This," she held up a file. "I thought that there was something odd about our latest recruit, Beatrice, so I followed up the references this morning."

Jane's eyes widened, "On your day off?"

Christine ignored her. "She gave two references. The first is supposed to be a shop at 129 High Street and the second a taxi firm at 67 Canal End." She lowered her voice, "129 High Street is the police station and 67 Canal End is the police community office for the Council Estate. Now why should the police provide her with references? I think our Beatrice is a policewoman, makes sense if there's a murder enquiry going on here."

Jane felt like screaming and running from the lounge, "Why place her with us?"

Christine nodded to the reception desk, "Freedom to move around, if she worked for the hotel she'd be stuck in one place."

It made some kind of weird sense, except that Jane wondered if the police knew more than they were letting on. She thought for a minute and decided that they didn't, after all if they wanted to watch her personally then placing an undercover cop in once place was not a sensible thing to do. "Thanks Christine I'll take it from here, and you be sure to put in for overtime."

Christine leant forward and touched Jane, "Don't you worry about people knowing about you and John, I think that it's dead romantic."

Jane thought that 'dead' was an appropriate word. "Thanks."

Sheela watched the red-head down her vodka and tomato juice. "So Henry was a bully?"

She smacked her lips, "Not to the hotel staff, Mr James wouldn't have it, but he was always nasty to the outside caterers and the cleaning contractors and you should have heard what he had to say to the bus-driver who drives the shuttle bus to the airport!"

Sheela sipped her mineral water, "What else was he like?"

The red-head smiled, "We always used to say he had a girl for every week of the year, but he could be so nice when he wanted."

Jane sidled up to John while the oil executives were doing a task in small groups, she motioned that she needed to talk. John led her to a corner, the small groups were making so much noise that they wouldn't be overheard. He stood close to her, "What's the problem?"

"The police have put an undercover cop in my cleaning team here, that's the problem."

John's eyebrows rose, "To watch us?"

She glanced around, "I doubt it, but it makes me uneasy."

John smiled at a group that were fooling around, "If we weren't up to our necks in it what would you have done?"

She smiled, "Stormed across to the police control unit and asked them what they were playing at."

"Then do it, remember we are perfectly normal and have nothing to hide."

He saw the look of horror on her face, "Want me to come with you?"

"No, you wouldn't under normal conditions, I am quite capable of fighting my own battles."

He became worried, "You don't have to, we could just sit tight."

She shook her head, "Christine knows so I must do something."

She looked at John, "I'll do it now, before I faint."

He looked at his watch, "I'll be wrapping this lot up in ten minutes, see you in our room."

She gave a smile to a good looking Scot and left.

John called them to order and started his summing up.

Sheela watched the red-head depart, she'd downed three vodkas in the space of forty minutes and was still able to walk straight. Sheela finished her mineral water; did she now have a motive? In fact she had a choice of three, either bullying or sexual harassment or possibly anger at being dumped, but she doubted that particular one. If she had now knew the motive, what about the means?"

Jane stormed into the mobile control unit and faced the sergeant, "Who's in charge here and I want to see them now."

The sergeant didn't bat an eyelid, "DI Jacobson is in charge of the enquiry madam, shall I see if he's free?"

Jane fixed him with a steadfast glower, "Tell him he is being most discourteous."

The sergeant smiled and went to the back office, closing the door behind him. "Dave, we've got Miss Doe, well I think it is Miss Doe, at the front desk, I rather think that she'd like a spot of your blood."

Dave raised an enquiring eyebrow, tossed his notebook on the desk and followed him out. Jane didn't waste time, "So you're the officer in charge are you? What do you mean by placing a policewoman on my staff without telling me? Is that courteous? And should I pay for her twice, once through the rates and now with a pay-packet?"

Dave held his hands up, "Whoa, whoa, please not out here, come through and I'll talk to you in here."

He led her to the empty interview room, she shuddered at the thought of being here, but steeled herself to continue, "I am waiting."

Dave sighed, "OK, I'm guilty as charged and I'm sorry if you consider it discourteous, but I am trying to investigate what happened to Mr Hawes. This is a murder enquiry and having her on your staff seemed like a good idea at the time."

Jane crossed her arms, "So I pay for her to swan off and play Shirley Holmes do I?"

Dave put on his best professional smile, "Of course not, we don't expect you to pay her, but I would be grateful if you'd let her stay."

Jane drummed her fingers on her arms, "I will have to tell the team leader otherwise she will become suspicious when the girl disappears from her post."

Dave rolled his eyes, "If you must, but please no-one else."

Jane appeared to simmer down, "How long?"

"Who knows? Certainly no more than a fortnight."

Dave decided to push his luck, "Any chance you could give her a job that allowed her in most of the hotel rather than one area?"

Jane smiled wickedly, "Of course, we have the perfect job."

Dave sighed in relief and decided to pump for information, "How did you know?"

"The references, my general assistant checked the addresses out, it was then obvious."

Dave made a note of this and smiled again, "Thanks for your co-operation."

Jane uncrossed her arms, "Always willing to help the police. When they ask!"

Dave held up his hands, "Point taken."

Jane turned to go and, as an aside, Dave asked, "By the way, what will our lass be doing."

Jane gave her wicked smile again, "Cleaning toilets, after all there are toilets all over the hotel!"

Vernon sat in his silent house and considered his plight. With both Marianne and Sid gone he now had the best opportunity ever to muscle in on the drug distribution business in a big way. However, he needed to find the packages he'd given to Henry to mind on his behalf, or he needed to replace them with look-alikes. He sighed, he didn't have enough money to buy look-alikes and he certainly wasn't going to borrow it. So he needed the originals or he needed to steal enough money to fund his enterprise. He knew instinctively which one he would choose.

DS Green arrived back from another fruitless afternoon's enquiries and went into DI Jacobson's office. He looked up, "Glad you're here, this is now a double murder enquiry."

Her eyebrows rose, "He was murdered? Here? With a mobile police unit on the premises?"

Dave nodded and shrugged at the same time. "Well it's a possible murder, we haven't yet had a coroner's enquiry, but the pathologist said that although the guy had an enlarged heart, lungs like a coal mine and a liver full of hob-nails he almost certainly didn't die of natural causes. She said that the indications were that he died from lack of oxygen, but as yet can find no physical evidence of strangulation or smothering, but she's running some more tests.. She also said that there are slight burn marks around the face and in his mouth, frostbite burns mind you, not burn burns, and evidence of carbon dioxide poisoning, although we haven't got a full toxicology report yet. Time of death sometime between eleven yesterday and two this morning, can't be certain because of the cold rain, apparently it mucks up their carefully compiled charts."

Judith sat back and thought, "Not smothered?"

"No bruising to the face?"

"Choking on own tongue?"

"Apparently it was in the right place."

Dave smiled and scribbled on the file cover, "I have a theory; two years ago I was on a job and my coat got covered in whisky and set alight. Colleague put it out with a CO₂ extinguisher, I tell you it was bloody cold."

Judith's eyes opened wide, "Your not seriously saying that he was killed on a flower bed by a fire extinguisher in the middle of a rain-storm! Even Agatha Christie didn't try that one."

He shrugged, "Perhaps I'm grasping at straws, any better ideas?"

She sighed, "Not at this moment. Look if your right it should be easy to check, we just have to walk round the hotel and pick up every CO₂ extinguisher with a broken tab."

John slapped his forehead, "Oh shit, the fire company was here today checking all the extinguishers, I bet they've swapped all the used ones for good ones."

Judith rolled her eyes, "Which company, perhaps we can at least get them back for fingerprints."

Dave groaned, "I have no idea, Mr James sent us a courtesy message."

Judith gave a satisfied smile, "Well he's our first suspect then, for getting rid of the evidence."

Dave picked up the phone muttering as he did so, after all he had been hoping for an early night

Jasmine looked at herself in the mirror, she was amazed at the difference the glasses made, she was also annoyed at herself for struggling for so many years and not realizing her eyesight was so poor. Other girls wore glasses so why hadn't she even thought that she might benefit from them? She sighed as she knew the reason, her father had been most adamant that she didn't need them and that wearing glasses made your eyes go bad quicker. She turned and picked up a magazine that Evie had leant her and briefly wondered what her father was doing before she got lost in the first page.

Chapter 11

Lull

Jane released herself from John, "I never want to have to do that again."

John held onto her hands, "Well you made your point and by all accounts and now have a free pair of hands to clean the loos."

She laughed, "Serves them right."

John looked at the clock, "Sure you want to join us?"

"Why not, but if you sit me next to that blonde bloke with the thick neck I'll scream."

They walked down to the restaurant where there was a table for eighteen all laid out, but no oil executives. John and Jane stood at the bar sipping the free mineral water for about ten minutes before the hotel porter came up to them with a message. John read it and nearly blew a fuse. "They've all gone out!"

"Where?" Jane asked.

John turned slightly red, "To the Castlette Club."

She giggled, "You mean the striptease club."

He nodded and Jane laughed. John cocked his head to one side, "Is there something I'm missing?"

She nodded hardly containing her laughter, "It's Friday night, that's ladies night with male strippers."

John beamed, "Serves them right. Hang on, how do you know?"

"Used to have the cleaning contract, but now they're an all night club and don't shut till 6am so I let CleanUp take it over."

John, lowered his voice, "So what do you want to do now? We could eat here or go to my place, or your place or..."

Jane touched his arm, "Your place would be fine, if we go by the supermarket I'll cook us a meal."

John wordlessly led her away from the bar to pick up their goods and chattels from his room; an evening in sounded just fine.

Quentin arrived for Sheela dead on time, she breezed out and closed the door behind her, then turned to look down her staircase. "What on earth is that?"

Quentin waved his hand towards the sleek bright yellow sports car, "It's a real sport's car, a Caterham Super Seven with a 1600cc double overhead cam engine producing around 150bhp, 6 speed gearbox, de-di-on rear axle and lightweight chassis, all of which means that it goes like stink. It's a fine evening so I thought we'd take this and enjoy the ride."

Sheela looked at him, "Why do we need to go like stink?"

"Oh didn't I say? The films are on at the arts cinema in Ipswich."

Sheela looked at her flimsy cardigan and sleeveless dress, "I'll freeze to death!"

He smiled and walked towards the car, she followed. He handed her a leather jacket, he smiled again, "Glad it's a short skirt, it's got rally type harnesses, not a lap-type seat-belt."

Sheela began to doubt the wisdom of going to the cinema in this, but she put on the jacket and allowed herself to be strapped in by Quentin, he had a very light touch. A minute later she felt a punch in her back as he accelerated away from the kerb, she almost screamed.

Dave Jacobson waited while the man from FireEx opened the door to his storage compound. "There you are guv, all the CO₂ extinguishers that we've picked up in the last few days."

Dave's heart sank, "How many?"

"'Bout eighty."

Dave peered at them in the evening light, "They all look very clean."

The chap nodded, "Run 'em through a power washer before we store 'em for refilling; you wouldn't believe how dirty some of them are."

Dave felt like screaming, eighty scrupulously clean CO₂ extinguishers would get him nowhere.

Sheela also felt like screaming, but screaming from exhilaration. She knew that they were only doing just above seventy mile an hour, but sitting this close to the road it felt like a hundred. She yelled to Quentin, "This is out of this world!"

He yelled back, "Thought you'd like it."

He swerved round a dead hedgehog and Sheela marveled at how the machine changed direction. She glanced over to Quentin, somehow lightweight specialist sports cars didn't fit in with the image she had made of him, she set about hastily reviving it. "How long you had this?"

"Pardon?"

She tried for a louder yell, "I said how long have you had this?"

"Three years, bought it to race at first, but then decided I couldn't afford to bend it."

"So what do you do with it now?"

"Hill climbs."

All of a sudden the noise level dropped as he throttled back to thirty mile per hour to enter the town. She looked at the controls, "Where's the heater controls?"

"What heater? She's rather basic I'm afraid."

He slowed to a mere crawl and went over a sleeping policeman, it felt like being pounded on the rump by a sledgehammer. She looked at the streets, "Where you going to park it?"

Instead of answering he drove into the police station car-park and turned the engine off. "Desk sergeant here went to school with me, can't think of a safer place can you?"

She smiled sweetly and thought of all the drunks and jobs that would be entering and leaving the police station and the cheap and fuzzy CCTV the place normally had, "Probably not."

They climbed out of the car and she took the jacket off, he put it in a carrier bag and stuffed it behind the seat. He then held out his hand, "Come madam, your film awaits."

Sheela took his hand and they strode off; of all the ways she had imagined this evening this wasn't one of them, but she decided to take it as it came and enjoy what she could.

John put his plate beside the small sink, "That was delicious."

She wiped her mouth with a napkin, "Beats hotel food."

She looked at him and noticed that he was not his normal placid self, "Still worried about the man who attacked me?"

John made a slight shrug and wrinkled his nose, "Not like last time. With Henry it was all a bit fast and an accident all round. With this chap I deliberately attacked him and I could have turned the extinguisher off early. I was just lost my rag."

Jane moved over beside him as best she could given the limitations of the lounge furniture and squatted on the pouffe next to his chair, "He was attacking me. I shudder to think what he would have done if you hadn't come along."

John grasped her hand, "But should I go to the police now?"

Jane replied carefully, "You have to ask what difference would it make apart from putting yourself through a load of hassle and perhaps letting the cat out of the bag over Henry?"

John trembled slightly, "It would stop the police wasting their time."

Jane reached into the carrier bag she had brought in the supermarket and pulled out an evening paper. She turned to page 5 and showed it to John. There was a large headline 'Body found in hotel car-park' and a short piece of text. John read it and looked up, "It says here that they still don't know who it was, but look at the description they've issued; 'white male about six foot six, faded brown tee-shirt with the slogan 'Boozers' on it and having rather a large waist measurement.' It's our man all right."

He suddenly put his head in his hands and Jane sat patiently wondering both what to do and what had this done to their relationship? He inhaled deeply, "And what about you staff member, how's she going to feel when she finds out?"

Jane said softly, "I'm sorry, I'm so sorry I got you into this; I've been nothing but trouble for you."

John sat up as if jolted by electricity, "Well I'm not sorry, not sorry I met you that is. I honestly could do without Henry Hawes and this Worth guy, but I would trade both of them for you."

He stopped, surprised at the strength of his own feeling, she clasped his arm, "Do you mean that?"

"Every word."

She nestled against him, "I'm glad too."

They sat in silence for a couple of minutes enjoying each other's touch, then John said, "Well it's decided then, I'll do nothing. I'm not going to rock the boat now that were both in it, but," he turned to look into her eyes, "but if the police charge anyone with his murder, or Henry's murder I'll have to step in."

She murmured, "I understand," and they both fell into a reasonably comfortable silence, that is comfortable with each other, but not comfortable about the surrounding circumstances.

Quentin looked at the notice on the door of the cinema in disbelief and automatically read it out loud, "Friday evening classic film night cancelled due to rain."

Sheela felt like laughing as he looked so amazed. As the cinema was part of a complex of halls she wandered over to a nearby usher and pointed at the sign. He nodded sagely, "Sorry about that madam, we had

about twenty families flooded out, they're temporarily bedded down in our main hall and we're showing cartoons to the kids in the cinema."

Quentin spoke from behind her, "Does that mean that the restaurant is closed as well?"

"Fraid so sir, have to feed them somehow."

Sheela could almost see Quentin's plans crumbling away. She grabbed his arm, "How about fish and chips by the sea? Felixstowe is not too far away and there are a couple of decent fish and chip shops on the sea-front. He looked bleakly at her, "I rather wanted to do something better than that."

She smiled at him, "Well save it for next time, sea air, fish and chips, and a walk in the evening air are good enough for me."

He became decisive, "Right then, back to the car it is." He hesitated for a fraction of a second, "We could walk back the way we came, or we could walk back through the shopping mall, it's open till ten."

She gave him a sideways look, in her experience men didn't normally volunteer to go through a shopping mall. He grinned sheepishly, "There's a decent shop that deals in leather jackets and mine's a bit past its prime."

She poked him in the ribs, "You mean that thing I wore on the way here is your only leather jacket? I thought it was something you kept in the boot to stop things rattling."

He said dryly, "I've had it some time, one gets attached to these things."

They walked off and the usher smiled and watched them bantering while he wondered how long they had been married.

Jane stirred and murmured, "I should be at work."

John kissed her forehead, "They'll cope without you for one night."

"They'll wonder where I am."

He ruffled her hair, "The hotel cleaners will think that you're at the office block. The cleaners there will think you at the swimming pool..."

She half giggled, "But it would be nice to be missed."

"Leave me and I'll miss you."

"Then I'll stay."

Quentin and Sheela sat on the sea-wall where they could both gaze across the sea-front gardens to the sea and keep an eye on the car which was parked behind them. Sheela finished her fish and chips and scrunched up the wrapping paper, a few seconds later Quentin did the

same. She wiped her mouth and fingers on a paper napkin, "They must be the greasiest chips in the universe, but they were scrumptious."

Quentin tossed his paper wrappings into a waste-bin and then tossed in Sheela's, "Somehow fish and chips are always better in the open air."

Sheela slapped her arm, "The midges like the open air too."

He stretched his arms upwards, "Warm evening, promenade lights, plenty of flowers, perfect for midges."

He jumped off the wall and lifted Sheela down, "Time to go I think."

He passed her the brand new sheepskin lined leather jacket that she had bought in Ipswich. It matched his new one perfectly as they had bought them together to get the 25% reduction for a his 'n' her special offer. She felt a bit of a fool putting on such a thick jacket on a summer's evening, but knew once they got going the wind-chill would soon start to work. He passed her a blue woollen bobble hat and she cringed, "I'm not wearing that."

He smiled, "Well put it in your pocket in case you change your mind, keep the head warm and you feel warm."

They climbed in and Sheela strapped herself in; Quentin roared the car away from the kerb a few seconds later. By the time they reached Ipswich she sheepishly reached into her pocket and pulled on the bobble hat.

The landlord of the Fish and Pullet looked at the body on the mortuary slab, "Yeah, that's Bert Worth, scar above his left eye is a dead give-away."

The police constable nodded to the mortuary attendant, "Well thanks for coming Mr Ames, we couldn't find a next of kin."

The publican scratched his nose, "'Es got a daughter, teenager I think."

He stood still as if plumbing the depths of his mind, "Got a name like a flower."

"Rose?" Ventured the constable.

He shook his head, "nah, nothing normal."

"Do you know which school she's at?"

He shook his head again, "Nah 'e never talked about her much."

They'd reached the door and the constable opened it, "Well thanks again Mr Ames and if you do remember his daughter's name will you let us know?"

He grunted and left. The constable closed the door and shuddered; fancy having to be identified by a pub landlord, he hoped that never happened to him.

Quentin pulled up outside Sheela's and turned the engine off, she resolved that her next purchase after a decent head covering would be a pair of warm gloves. She turned to face him, "Fancy a coffee?"

He released his harness, "Great."

He followed her up the stairs and into her hallway and then, without warning he stopped just inside the closed front door. She turned to face him and he looked uncertain. She walked back to him, "Problem? I won't eat you or shoot you by mistake."

He said softly, "I don't know that I trust myself."

She was surprised at his hesitancy, "In what way?"

"Alone, at night, with a beautiful woman who set my hormones screaming for action. It could be a recipe for disaster."

She unzipped his jacket, "I am surprised at you, being a vicar and all that."

He grabbed her hands, "I am a man and you most definitely are a woman."

Her thoughts raced, this was a situation she had never had to handle before; men who wanted to whisk her in the bedroom, yes; a man who wanted to not whisk her in the bedroom, no. She rubbed his fingers, "How about we go back to the rule my mother gave me when I was a young teenager? Do what you like, but don't take any clothes off."

He swallowed, "You do understand it's not that..."

She stepped forward and kissed him, he responded by pulling her to her. The amount of passion in his kissing surprised her, but after all the barren months it was an extremely pleasant surprise.

Jane turned off the television and rubbed her eyes, it was only 2am but she was already tired. She made herself a hot drink and settled back into the armchair. They had spent the evening talking, not just sharing words, but beginning to share their lives. However, she knew that they had skirted round some important subjects. He hadn't talked about Helen beyond the merest faint broad details and she hadn't mentioned Sanjay. Even after all this time just thinking about Sanjay tore at her heart strings. She'd coped by filling her life with work and by avoiding men, but she knew now that she'd have to face her memories, deal with her emotions and talk to John about Sanjay. She drained her cup and sighed, and then there was the future. Was their relationship going anywhere? They felt comfortable with each other and in fact she longed for the weekends when she could be with John, but beyond a few light

kisses there was nothing physical. She hugged her knees; was she sending out the right signals? Indeed what signals did she want to send out? Was she just after a platonic relationship? By 3am she was totally exhausted and crept into the bathroom to change. She emerged in her silk pyjamas and stealthily entered the bedroom. John was asleep on an old duvet he had laid on the floor. She picked the duvet off of the bed and laid it over him, then she slid under it and snuggled up against him deriving comfort from his nearness and confidence from his warmth.

The policeman's truncheon smashed the lowest glass pane in the back door and Dave reached through and turned the door handle. He turned to the policeman, "DS Green and I will have a look around, can you fend off the neighbours?"

Not waiting for an answer he entered with Judith closely behind, she screwed her nose up, "Grief, what a tip!"

They took in the shambles of the kitchen. The entire sink and accompanying draining board were covered in dirty crockery, the table and small work-top had wrappings from various take-aways and the waste bin was overflowing onto the floor. Dave sniffed, "Not exactly house proud was he?"

They left the kitchen to enter the lounge, this was not much better being the home of empty beer cans, overflowing ash-trays and a collection of dirty glasses. Judith gingerly picked up a couple of open letters, "Slovenly doesn't come close. Bills here from the electric and the telephone company, unpaid of course."

The bedroom was a stomach churning experience, there was dried vomit down the side of the double bed that was a breeding ground to a mini-swarm of flies and dirty clothes just strewn around. The Box room was totally different, apart from the disturbed bed it was clean and tidy. Dave opened a few drawers, "Obviously the daughter's bedroom, but she's flown the coop; look the drawers are empty."

Judith was rooting around in one of the slid-under bed drawers, she stood up, "Her name's Jasmine. Jasmine Ursula Worth. Couple of old school letters here addressed to her dad and asking why she wasn't at school."

She rooted around a bit more and produced a medical card, "She's sixteen."

Dave nodded, "So probably left school."

Judith said quietly, "We've got to find her Dave, he may have been a slob, but she has the right to know before we make a formal announcement."

Dave nodded, "Fancy the bathroom?"

Judith grimaced and pulled another letter out of the drawer, "bingo! Letter here from Doe-mestics Ltd confirming that she's got a job with them."

Dave looked up, "Doe-mestics? That's the lot that clean the hotel at night."

Judith tapped the letter, "My my, what a small world we live in."

John woke up to the sound of a mobile phone playing the St Louis Blues in the lounge and wondered if he should wake Jane. He squinted at his alarm clock and decided that he'd let Jane sleep, he was still worried about disturbing her internal body clock. He lay on the floor with Jane drooling over his shoulder and realized that he was content. Jane had none of the rampant passion of Helen, but she was all the better for it. He lay in the comfortable warmth of the duvet sandwich and thought about the future. Where was this relationship with Jane actually going in the long term? He shifted his aching shoulders slightly and remembered the talks of the previous evening. He had not dared ask her about Sanjay and skirted around talking about his relationship with Helen; both these subjects he knew must be covered if he and Jane were ever going to forge any sort of emotional tie. The phone rang again and he instinctively tensed in case it woke Jane, but it stopped after a minute or so.

"No answer."

Judith placed her phone back in her handbag and looked at Dave, "Now what?"

He rooted about in the other under bed drawer and then gave up as it appeared to be full of nothing but Christmas decorations. He straightened up, "Try the other number on the headed notepaper."

"On a Saturday morning? Who's going to be in the office at this time of day?"

However, she did as she was told and dialled out on her mobile, her call was re-directed and eventually a voice answered. Meanwhile Dave had gone off to the bathroom, wished he hadn't and then investigated the sideboard in the lounge. It revealed very little, except for a dog-eared death certificate and an even more tatty marriage certificate.

Judith appeared at the doorway looking frustrated, "The woman who answered won't talk to us about Jasmine on the phone. We have to meet her at the mobile unit at the hotel."

Dave slammed the sideboard door, "Nothing here of interest."

"Do you want forensics in?"

He shook his head, "Seal the door and have a policeman stay there, but I reckon there's nothing here except a million germs."

Sheela woke up and remembered the night before with a smile and then galvanised into action. She needed to get, before the next morning, some warm gloves, some leather slacks, a decent tight fitting warm hat and some thick socks. Quentin had invited her to a hill-climb the following morning and they were leaving at 5am to drive to Sheffield and she knew it would be a cold journey. She also knew that it was one of his rare Sundays off and that he was inviting her join him in something special. She looked at herself in the bathroom mirror and decided on a face-pack, after all she wanted to look her best even if she was going to be dressed up like a 1920s Arctic explorer.

Christine went into the interview room with DI Jacobson and DS Green. She gave them a wary look, "Hope you don't think I'm being over cautious, but I don't normally talk on the phone about staff matters to people I don't know."

Dave gave her a broad smile, "Very commendable."

"So how can I help you?"

Judith showed Christine the letter she had found, "We need to talk to Jasmine urgently."

Christine nodded, "Was it her father's body you found here? I've just read the description on your notice board behind the desk."

Dave replied quietly, "I'm afraid it was, we've had it identified by a friend of his."

Christine took a deep breath, "She's staying at the Fugere Refuge in Dawson Street. When she joined us her father wanted her wages paid into his account. His intentions were obvious and our manager, Miss Doe, persuaded Jasmine to leave home and go to the refuge; not that she needed much persuading that is.

Judith's eyebrows rose, "Do you think he knew that?"

"I doubt it, although he was searching for Jasmine on Thursday night. He tried looking for her at the council offices, but our manager had changed her to another team when she went in the refuge, just in case."

Dave broke in, "How do you know?"

"Greta, she's our charge hand there, told me. Apparently he made quite a fuss at the front door, but the security guards wouldn't let him in. Greta talked to him through the glass door and said that she was glad the security guards were there as he was not a happy bunny and she thought he might become violent."

"Do you know what time this was?"

"Before eleven as I was still at our storage depot when Greta phoned, but only just; I go home at eleven on Thursdays."

Judith made a few notes and looked up from her book, "Have you ever met him?"

"Once and he's a disgusting man, all beer gut and bad breath."

They rounded off the interview and Christine left. Dave sat on the table, "So once again we have our Jane Doe in the proximity of a murder."

Judith sought out a piece of chewing gum from the bottom of her handbag, "We don't know that Henry was murdered and it could all be a coincidence. And remember, Beatrice was on the team by then and she says that our Miss Doe only has eyes for one John Smith."

Dave swung his legs, "Could have happened before our Beatrice saw Miss Doe and Mr Smith together. Oh I wish we had a more accurate time of death."

Judith chewed on her gum, "Well the ground under him was wet, so he died after ten when it started raining in that part of Norwich."

Dave nodded, "Let's assume he was at the Council offices around eleven, although I'd like you to get an exact time from the guards later. If he was there at eleven, when did Beatrice see Jane and John together and where?"

Judith looked dubious, "But where's the motive? As far as we can find out there is absolutely no connection with Henry and Mr Worth or either Jane or John, and why would they kill Bert? Just because he has bad breath?"

Dave laughed, "People have died for lesser reasons. Look I'll work on a timing chart, you go and see Jasmine, take PC Kliner with you."

Judith scowled, "Thanks for nothing."

He smiled his gladness at not having to impart bad news showing on his face, "Come better from you."

Judith still scowled, she absolutely hated breaking bad news, especially to young girls.

Jane woke up at three o'clock and found herself in bed, she stretched and smiled, John must have moved her and she was touched by his concern for her welfare. She meandered her way into the lounge to find John counting out handouts for his forthcoming courses. He stopped and turned, "How are you? Sleep well?"

She nodded and turned the kettle on, "Yes thanks, and thanks for moving me; your bed is really nice."

He stretched, "I did leave it for you to use."

She turned her slightly unfocussed eyes on him, "I wanted to be near you."

He changed the subject, "Working tonight?"

"No, never work Saturdays and Sundays. We only have a couple of skeleton teams out for a couple of restaurants and the city baths; they don't need me around."

John offered her the arm-chair, but she chose a kitchen stool. He said, in a sort of casual off-handed manner that indicated real concern, "I've been thinking, when's the last time you took time off? Why don't you come round with me for a week? I'd love to take you away from all this and go to Hawaii, but I can't get out of lecturing for another seven weeks."

She sipped her coffee, "I am thinking that I am awake enough to be seeing through your scheme. You mean why not come with me while the police are crawling all over the hotel. Do you think I would drop you in it?"

His eyes opened wide in horror, "Nothing of the sort. I admit that getting you away from here for a bit did cross my mind, but I never, ever, thought that you'd drop me in it, as you so delicately put it."

He lowered his voice, "And I really would value your company." He paused, "No more than that, I really want to be with you."

She sipped her coffee again, "Let me think on it. I need to wake up, but I must admit that the idea has certain attractions." She smiled showing her white teeth, "If I can call you an attraction that is."

Judith looked around the lounge of the Fugere Refuge. It looked like the lounge you would find in any family house, in fact the whole place seemed nice. Jasmine entered the room with another young girl. Judith gave them the professional once over. Jasmine looked like a little girl lost, the other one looked like a tough little cookie, all scowl and dreadlocks. PC Kliner took the lead, "Hello Jasmine I'm PC Sarah Kliner

and this is my colleague Detective Sergeant Judith Green, I'm afraid we have some bad news for you."

Jasmine's face took on a look of horror, "Not about my brother James?"

Sarah noted the reference to the brother, but parked it for the moment, "No, I'm sorry but it's concerning your father. We are pretty sure that he died on Thursday evening."

The second girl crossed her arms and exclaimed, militantly, "What do you mean pretty sure? Was it him or wasn't it?"

Sarah smiled tolerantly, "We're as near certain as we can be. The landlord of the Fish and Pullet said he was certain that it was your father."

Jasmine didn't move for a few seconds, then she said in a husky voice, "He didn't die at home did he? Not from an accident in the kitchen?"

"No we don't think so. He was found in the Hawes Hotel car-park."

Jasmine sat on the arm of a chair and the other girl took up a defensive position beside her. Sarah smiled at her, "I'm sorry, I don't know your name, but will you stay with Jasmine for a while?"

The girl tossed her dreadlocks causing them to jangle, "Name's Evie and of course I will, that's what friends are for isn't it?"

Jasmine gave Sarah a concerned look, "Where is he now, I mean..."

"He's at the coroner's mortuary and you can see him if you want."

She shook her head, "No thanks."

Judith said quietly, "Do you want us to contact your brother for you?"

She shrugged, "Haven't seen him for ages. He left home after mum died, dunno where he is."

"Doesn't he write?"

She shook her head, "He's in the army – I think."

Sarah sat on the arm of another chair so as not to tower over Jasmine. "Have you any idea why your father would be at the Hawes Hotel?"

Jasmine gazed out of the window and Sarah thought for a moment that she had not heard, then she turned and looked at her. "Have the Hotel got a dart's team? Dad was in the dart's team for the Fish and Pullet."

Sarah shook her head kindly, "No, they don't have a dart's team."

Jasmine shook her head. Judith asked her if she'd been home recently and Evie almost exploded, "Look, can't you leave her alone! It's not fair asking her questions now, it's just not fair!"

Sarah stood up, "Your quite right Evie, we'll go now."

She turned to face Jasmine, "But when you do go home we'd like to go with you."

Jasmine nodded and the policewomen left. Outside Judith turned to Sarah, "Thanks Sarah, you're much better at it than I am."

Sarah took out her handkerchief, "Poor lass; brother run away, dad dead, living in a refuge, what sort of life is that?"

Judith looked towards the horizon, "Perhaps a better one now than it was before. By all accounts the man was a pig. No less than seventeen call-outs for fracas in various pubs in the last three years, four call-outs for domestic violence, but the last was seven years ago."

Sarah turned to look at Judith, "He may be a pig to you, but he was still her father. How would you feel if you walk out on him one week and he's dead the next?"

Judith sighed, "Probably bloody awful."

"Exactly. I know that you'll have to check her whereabouts, but I bet it wasn't her, the look on her face said it all."

Judith had to agree with Sarah, whatever Jasmine felt about her father, she was not an obvious suspect for his murder.

Jane returned from the bathroom looking much fresher and more ready to face the world. John was sitting at his desk checking his potential seminar participants for the coming week; before he could say anything she came up behind him and draped her arms around his neck. "I have done my thinking, yes I would like to come, but I would also like to try an experiment and be awake when you're awake."

He reached up and held her hands, "You sure? Changing from twenty years of being awake at night may not be easy."

"Nevertheless I want to try."

John kissed her arm and instantly realized that the bone lay directly beneath the skin. "So what's the plan of action?"

Jane screwed her nose up, "I would like to go out this evening. The cinema, the theatre, live music, anything. I do not want to be thinking all the time about dead people. Tomorrow I must tell my sister I am taking a week's holiday with you."

"Is that so bad?"

She nibbled his ear, "Not for me, but for you she will not be pleased. She will think that you are trying to allure me off of the straight and narrow onto a corrupt path to total debauchery."

John remembered his last conversation with Catrina, "I will just have to convince her otherwise."

Jane said softly into his ear, "Can we lay a few ground rules."

John turned round to face her and she released her grip on his neck, he grabbed hold of her hands. "I know what you're worried about. And I promise, I will not take advantage of you."

She looked into his eyes, it was like staring into a pair of Jacuzzis, "I know you mean what you say with your head, but are your hormones listening?"

He rubbed her hands, "I know it's important to you."

She nodded, "Intercourse is for marriage only."

She suddenly stopped and looked away, then she looked back, "I must tell you something."

She wriggled free of his grip and backed off to sit on the pouffe. She bit her bottom lip and obviously steeled herself for something difficult. "You've seen the photograph of Sanjay; he and I were lovers, we should not have been, but we were. He was a second cousin of mine and five years older than me and we fell in love. We became lovers when I was thirteen and he was eighteen. We met when he was seventeen and moved in with us as his parents had gone back to Ceylon. Once he had his 'A' levels he intended to go out and join them. I'm not saying it was love at first sight, but it was no more than two months before we realized that we were meant for each other. We had fourteen months, one week, two days and five hours together. During the summer holidays before he left we became lovers. My parents didn't know, they would have been terribly ashamed for me, and my sisters didn't know. I think Susan suspected, but Catrina was too young. I know what your thinking, that it was just a schoolgirl crush and that he took advantage of me, but it wasn't like that at all. I planned to leave school at sixteen and go out to join him. After he left we wrote to each other every week."

She suddenly stopped and looked terribly mournful, as if going on would be a betrayal. She looked away from John and continued in a quiet sad voice. "Then his letters stopped. I received that photograph and his letters stopped." She continued bleakly, "Three weeks later my mother told me he was dead. The rebels came to take away all the farm produce and Sanjay and his father tried to stop them." Her voice went so soft that John had trouble catching the words, "In the name of freedom they slaughtered him, his parents, his two year old sister and the one month old baby his parents were looking after. They said later that their cause was honourable, I do not believe that any cause justifies such butchery."

She said in a matter of fact tone, "I went to pieces. I wished that we hadn't taken precautions and that I was pregnant. I wished that I was

dead, I think if it hadn't been for my father and my Sunday School teacher I would have tried to commit suicide."

She swung her eyes back on John, "You see I loved him with all my heart and with a love that was so fierce it consumed all. They say it is better to have loved and lost, but they never talk about the pain of that loss. It wasn't till I started night work that I really began to come to terms with his death, you see the nights were the worst time and somehow sleeping during the day is different. So I need to change back to sleeping at night to be sure."

John went and knelt before her and held her hands again, "To be sure of what? That he has become a memory? That you can sleep at nights?"

She shook her head, "To be sure that I can love again."

John nodded as he understood far better about loving again than she realized. She bit her bottom lip again and looked away, "So I am also being a hypocrite. I talk of intercourse being only for marriage when I have already let a man love me who was not married to me."

John held onto her, "But you did intend to get married."

She nodded and John let go of her hands and put his arms around her, "Then whose going to cast the first stone?"

The hugged for a minute and then John sat back on his ankles as he remained kneeling in front of her. "Somehow it the same for me, but not the same. After I met Helen I put all my emotional investment in her and later into her and Jacquelyn. In all the years I was married to her I can honestly say that I never even considered going out with another woman or leaving her. I'm not saying that the marriage was perfect, it was turbulent at times, you've seen how forthright Helen can be, but she was always the girl for me. Then my firm ran into financial difficulties and the very time I needed support she ran out on me and left me flat. I know I had been working eighty hour weeks to try and keep the company going, but when it folded I expected her loving support. What I got was a swift exit and a petition for divorce within a week, even worse the address she filed from was that of her new lover who is now her husband. To say I felt betrayed would be a severe understatement."

He looked into her eyes, "So I also need to know if I can love again. Can I risk putting all my emotional ties into one person or am I now so wary of betrayal that I'll never be able to do it?"

They reached out and held hands both wondering if they had within them the capacity and trust to love the other, or at least take the first step on the road to loving the other. However the they both also new that the

seeds of a new life were already present within them as they both derived great comfort from each other's presence.

Chapter 12

High Pressure Area Imminent

Sheela sat on a dry-stone wall drinking coffee from a plastic cup and watched the mist slowly disperse from the valley car-park. Apparently next on the agenda was a walk up the proposed hill-climbing course; judging by the map they had been issued this would be uphill all the way and with some interesting gradients and bends. She was glad that Quentin had advised her to wear walking boots and that she had chosen to buy leather trousers rather than skin-tight leather slacks. The three hour drive to get to this forlorn place somewhere between Newark and Sheffield had been both exhilarating and boring, and would have definitely been on the chilly side were it not for her leather gear. She looked over at Quentin who was talking to a course marshal and knew it was worth it. He patted the marshal on the arm and came up to her, "That's settled, you're now a bona-fide co-driver."

She grinned, "That means I get to ride up with you."

"Most definitely, I'm not bringing you all this way to leave you in the car-park."

His face split into a broad smile, "It also means that you can have a go if you want later in the co-drivers competition; your police advanced driving course swung the day."

She almost dropped her coffee, "You'd let me drive your precious car? Suppose I go off a cliff?"

He patted the front wing of the car, "It's meant to be driven."

There was a burbling noise from somewhere in his leather jacket and he pulled out his mobile phone and answered the call. "Hello John, what can I do for you?"

He glanced at his watch, "Difficult, I'm just outside Sheffield."

He grinned to no-one in particular, "Sheffield in Yorkshire."

His grin rapidly disappeared, "Look John, it's a Sunday off for me and both you and Michael knew that I would not be at church. If you haven't

made other arrangements that is not my problem. One of you will have to open the safe or pass on the keys to someone who is going to church."

He listened for a minute and turned red under the collar, "No I will not be back for the afternoon Sunday Club. It's a Sunday off; I will be back in time to take the late night communion, but that is all."

He ended the call and looked sheepishly at Sheela, "One of my churchwardens. I booked this day months ago, but he's decided to have a mornings gardening and not go to church and apparently the other churchwarden has decided to take his grandchildren to the zoo. Net result is that there is no-one to open the safe and get the communion silverware out for the visiting priest."

Sheela crumpled her cup and threw it in the waste bin, "They didn't seriously expect you back for this afternoon?"

He gave a shrug as the mobile rang again, she barked, "Don't answer it, turn the damn thing off."

He looked bemused, "I'm not sure that..."

She took it out of his hand, pressed the off switch and dropped it into her handbag, "It's your Sunday off! Just how many Sunday's off do you get?"

"Six."

"Then this one isn't being ruined for you."

He smiled, "My you are masterful!"

People started drifting out of the car-park and Quentin grinned, "Time for a little stroll I think," and offered her his hand.

She took it and they started to walk up the gently uphill slope towards the start, her eyes rose up to look at the hill before her and she realized that this was not going to be a gentle walk in the park.

Catrina smiled at John, "Glad you could join us for dinner this week."

He gave her a wary look, "Actually I'm beginning to feel like a bit of a freeloader."

She plonked a large slice of fatty lamb on his plate, "Don't worry about it, we always feed Jane's paramours, it allows us to give them the once over."

Jane deftly removed the fatty lamb slice from John's plate and replaced it with a leaner one. "Put him down Katrina, he's my guest."

Catrina augmented his slice of lamb with a second one and passed him a bowl of roast potatoes. "Jane says that she's taking a holiday with you,

where are you going?" The menace in her voice was just below the surface.

John tried for a reassuring smile, rather like a man already condemned. "Manchester, York, London, Essex, Norwich and Edinburgh."

Catrina's carving knife hovered in mid-air, "Not Hawaii or Florida or Greece, but Manchester?"

"It's a very nice city, much under-rated."

Jane tapped the table, "She knows very well that I'm going round with you on the seminar tour."

Peter intervened, "I went to Manchester a few years ago to photograph a silk weaving exhibition, it..."

Quentin hung on for dear life as Sheela screamed the Caterham round a sharp left hand bend and floored the accelerator pedal. She snaked across the road as the rear end of the sports car wiggled on the damp surface, but she did not back off. She swung to the left hand side of the road and almost threw the car into a tight right hand bend yanking on the hand-brake as she did so. The car slued round the bend and she released the hand-brake and floored the accelerator again. The gradient suddenly began to steepen and she expertly changed down two gears and took the engine up to near the red line on the tachometer. They swept round the final left hand bend and flew over the crest of the hill and past the finishing line as she took her foot off the throttle and brought the car back down to a reasonable speed. Quentin realized he was holding his breath, "Good grief that improved my blood pressure."

Sheela gave him a wicked smile, "Now you know what it feels like. How did we do?"

He looked at his hand, "Didn't press the stop watch, guess my hand was shaking too much."

"You mean you didn't want to find out if I beat you."

He laughed, "No chance. That was a good run, but you lost traction too many times and weren't always going where the car was pointing."

She drove the car round the lanes designated to return them to the bottom of the run and eventually pulled into the car-park and stopped. She looked at the time board and realized that he was right, she was twenty-three seconds slower than him and only third on the co-driver's leaderboard with seven cars still to go. She patted the steering wheel, "That was fun."

He nodded, "Good outlet for aggression."

She undid her harness and slid herself from out under the steering wheel, "How long till your final run?"

"'Bout an hour, depends how long the soap-boxes take."

"Soap-boxes?"

They are gravity powered hand-crafted machines that start at the top and roll to the bottom, believe me the competition is fierce."

She cocked her head to one side, "You have got to be joking!"

"No, some of the major manufactures even have entries, they can reach speeds of up to sixty miles an hour at the bottom."

She was still uncertain if he was actually telling the truth and not spinning a yarn. "This I have got to see." She pointed to a burger van, "Buy you a burger on the way."

He rubbed his stomach, "Might help it settle down, did the police teach you to drive like that?"

She grinned, "No, try driving through Norwich City centre at five-thirty when the world-cup starts at six."

He laughed and followed her towards the burger van, he was glad that he had taken the risk and brought her. The last woman he had brought to a hill climb three years ago had been sick before the second bend and had taken the train home.

Peter leant back in his chair and extracted a small pile of photos from his back pocket, "Thought you might like these."

John glanced at several photographs of Jane, "Thanks."

He nodded towards the kitchen, "Don't mind Catrina, she's really intrigued at Jane's behaviour. Jane's been as predictable as an atomic clock ever since we've been married then all of a sudden you come along and she becomes as unpredictable as an English summer."

He suddenly leant forward, "On the other hand I haven't seen her smile so much, ever, so you must be doing something right."

John didn't reply as Catrina and Jane reappeared carrying a bright red concoction that he assumed must be a sorbet of some kind. He suddenly realized what had been bothering him all through the meal. "Where are your children?"

Catrina smiled, "With Peter's parents all weekend."

John became embarrassed, "Oh, are we intruding? I mean if you want time alone in peace and quiet..."

Catrina tapped his hand with the back of an ice-cold spoon, "Peace and quite can come later, but thanks for the thought."

Jane smiled, "John knows all about children, he has a daughter."

Catrina froze in mid-serve her eyes all agog, "You're married?"

Quentin pulled into to the forecourt of a restaurant just east of Kings Lynn and stopped. Sheela looked at the restaurant and squirmed in her leather trousers, "Bit posh isn't it? I'm not exactly dressed for dinner at a place like this."

Quentin slid out from under the steering wheel and perched on the edge of the car, "Well we can eat inside if you want, but I was going to eat round the back."

Sheela looked around, "What's round the back, a transport café?"

"My brother's flat, he's head chef here."

Sheela almost wailed, "You want me to meet your brother looking like this?"

He reached over and held her arm, "You look splendiferous to me."

She allowed herself to be led round the back of the restaurant in up to a small door; Quentin pressed the bell and they waited. The door opened and Sheela's jaw almost dropped, Quentin put his arm round her shoulder, "Sheela meet Frank."

Frank wiped his hand on his white apron and held it out, it was like looking at a reflection of Quentin. She shook his hand, "Are you two twins?"

Frank laughed, "No fear, he's two years older. Now come into my parlour, I'm afraid you two will have to eat alone as we're a little bit pushed this evening, sudden coach party from the Boston WI."

He ushered them into his lounge and turned to Quentin, "Just pop through when you know what you want, I've left you a menu, but you know the drill."

There was a distant shout and Frank turned round and bellowed, "I'm coming, just turn it down!"

He smiled at Sheela, "Sorry must go, we might be able to join you for coffee if this lot settles down," and left.

Sheela looked at Quentin, "We?"

"Him and his wife Xiu Mei, they run this place together."

She took off her jacket and handed it to him and he handed her a menu, "Have what you like and you can mix and match as much as you want."

She took it off him and looked at the prices, "My, you *do* know how to give a girl a good time."

Jane snapped her vanity case shut and looked at the small pile of clothes beside it. This would not do, she'd promised John that she'd only carry hand luggage, but her vanity case was obviously too small and she didn't possess a suitcase. She sighed, she'd have to borrow something from Catrina. She moved to go through the connecting door to Catrina's part of the house as Peter and John came in from the garden. Jane decided on a different approach and stopped Peter from passing, "Have you got a small suitcase, one suitable for hand-luggage?"

He shook his head, "Nope, but I have got a large photographer's bag I don't use anymore, it's probably small enough to be classed as hand luggage."

He disappeared through the connecting door and John grinned at Jane, "That was wicked the way you slipped in that I had a daughter, did you see Catrina's face?"

Jane swung her head from side to side, "I love my sister, but sometimes she can be very over-inquisitive, I thought that I'd give her something to chew on."

Peter returned with a brown leather photographer's case with a shoulder strap. Jane opened it and surveyed the internal compartments and the pockets in the lid. "This will be perfect, do you mind if I borrow it?"

"Be my guest, it spends most of its life in the bottom of my wardrobe."

Jane disappeared into her bedroom and Peter disappeared upstairs leaving John alone in the hall. He wandered into the lounge and took the photograph Peter had given him out of his pocket and looked at them. The last but one was of the three sisters in their matching saris doing some sort of dance, Jane looked sublimely happy and content. The last picture was of a much younger Jane holding a baby and looking forlorn and wistful. Somehow it captured the longing in her heart that she might hold a child of her own. Jane said softly from beside him, "I was nineteen and the baby is a neighbour's, she now has children of her own. It was a Christening and I am her Godmother. I wished with all my heart that it had been my child by Sanjay."

John turned round and took her in his arms. As he held her it occurred to him that if she was to have a child, and want his child, then the biological time-clock was ticking and they could not afford to take an eternity to decide whether or not they could love each other.

Sheela waved and Xiu Mei closed the door, she turned to Quentin, "She's nice, but she's so small and fragile looking."

Quentin gave a short barking laugh, "Don't you believe it, my brother was a bit of a gadabout before he met her, she's done him a power of good. She really runs the place here, Frank just does the cooking."

She licked her lips in memory of the guinea fowl, "Do you cook like that?"

"Fat chance. My specialty is made by a supermarket and cooked for five minutes in a microwave."

She laughed and then remarked, "He said that that you were always the brother he loved to copy, were you a gadabout too?"

He stopped by the car and said seriously, "At one time and probably more of a gadabout than Frank. I'd seriously lost my way when God took hold of me and put me straight."

Sheela sighed, "Ah, the God bit."

He let go of her hand and shrugged, "What would you expect from a vicar?"

Sheela grabbed his hand again, "I don't think of you as a vicar, I think of you as a bloke."

He glanced at his watch and took her over to a convenient low brick wall and sat down. He looked straight at her, "I am a bloke, but I'm also a vicar and it's not like a nine to five job, it's a vocation, a way of life. I've learnt the hard way that you cannot easily split who I am and what I do, the one intrudes on the other. It's alright out here with the phone off, but back home in my parish it's not so easy."

She nodded, "I understand, I've been a policewoman remember? The job can eat you up, especially CID."

He watched a motorcyclist weave past his car, "Same, but different."

He turned to look at her, "Look what I am saying very badly is that I've really enjoyed your company today, but if we try to enjoy each other's company back home it might not be so easy. We may have a meal planned and Mrs Bloggs decides that's it's an opportune time to die, or we may be in a restaurant and be buttonholed by a parishioner with an axe to grind. It's not that I'd plan for us to be interrupted, but it can happen and I know a lot of women resent it."

Sheela wondered where this was leading, was he trying to say goodbye? "Same with CID. I remember being with my partner once in a restaurant and realizing that the criminal my colleagues were watching was at the next table."

There was an uneasy silence and Sheela said quietly, "Are you trying to say 'it's been a swell day, but let's leave it there?'"

He put his arm around her, "Definitely not, I was just warning you what it will be like if we continue to see each other."

She tapped his thigh, "No-one, but no-one should be expected to work twenty-four hours a day. I'll put up with valid interruptions if you turn off your mobile when we're together."

She saw the hesitation on his face and continued gently, "Just suppose; just suppose we ended up married. As wife would I be expected to have the dross of your life? Is that what your God expects?"

He seemed surprised, "Of course not! Family life is of supreme importance."

He suddenly laughed, "OK point taken."

She put her arm round his back, "So that's settled then."

They kissed for a few minutes and then a look of horror crossed Quentin's face, "Grief, the time!"

They leapt off the wall and trotted to the car, as they slid into their seats he said, "You coming to the communion?"

She shrugged, "If you want, I'm not sure about this God thing."

He turned to her and gave a mischievous smile, "That's another problem we've got to solve."

Her reply was lost as the engine burst into life.

An e-mail dropped into John's inbox at exactly one minute to midnight. It told him that the Edinburgh seminar scheduled for Saturday had been cancelled and that as the cancellation was within six days he would not be paid for the lost seminar. It also reminded him that he was due at Norwich on the Friday and casually mentioned that some of the Edinburgh participants may arrive at Norwich instead.

Sheela sat at the back of the church and watched John and Jane arrive and take up the same pew as last time. She had banked on that and was sitting just two pews behind them so that she could observe them closely. They certainly didn't look like killers, but then in her experience few did. Quentin processed in behind the choir and she realized how different he looked when wearing his robes, sort of serene and out of reach.

Vernon put down the local free paper and smiled. He needed money and he now knew where to target and when. He just needed to figure out how.

Quentin stood in the pulpit and smiled. "This week we come to adultery, or more correctly the commandment 'You shall not commit adultery.' The dictionary defines adultery as 'Voluntary sexual intercourse between a married person and a person other than his or her spouse.' So does that mean if two people are living together and are committed to each other, but not married, then they cannot commit adultery? Where does the core of this commandment lie? And does it include preclusion on casual sex between single people?"

He paused and looked around, "Let's start at the beginning, why did God give us a sexual drive in the first place?"

John felt Jane's hand tighten in hers and wondered why she came here if every week it made her feel guilty. He had begun to realize that her faith was important to her and as the vicar droned on her reflected on his own faith, or lack of it. God was fine, he could believe in God. Jesus was almost fine, he could believe in the historical Jesus, but was uncertain about a resurrected Jesus. As for the Holy Spirit he had no idea. He suddenly sat up and listened to the vicar again as he entered a new phase in the sermon. "So where are we? If two people are totally committed to one another, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, what difference practically does a piece of paper make apart from to the tax-man and the pension fund? If the answer is none then sex outside that relationship is adultery, we can use no other word for it. So, where does God fit into all of this, well..."

John lost interest again, mainly through tiredness and watched the choir ladies surreptitiously pass round a packet of wine gums.

Sheela listened to every word and syllable that Quentin uttered. They told her that Quentin would probably be regarded as a liberal by the establishment and also that intercourse with him was a definite no-no. Firstly because he was principled, and his principle was no sex outside of marriage, and secondly because she knew if she did managed to get him into bed the sheer hypocrisy of his actions over his convictions would drive him away from her and possibly away from the church. She began to wonder at his conviction; could God be that real to a person that their entire life was governed by that relationship? Quentin finished his sermon and the congregation was asked to stand to say the creed together. She managed to recite through the first stanza, 'I believe in one God, the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all things, visible and invisible.' However, when she reached, 'And in one Lord Jesus Christ', the words stuck in her throat. She instantly knew that she

had a major problem; Quentin did believe – absolutely and unreservedly – believe in Jesus Christ and if she didn't where did that leave their relationship? Sheela dropped out of participative mode and went back into observer mode; especially noticing that Jane went forward for communion, but not John; and she wondered if Jane was happy with that.

Monday morning Dave and Judith sat down for their pre-briefing meeting. Dave poured the coffee and Judith recited to him what had happened over the weekend. "Jasmine, that's Bert's daughter, in the end insisted on doing a second identification. She confirmed that it was her father. Forensics had a quick look at his house, but backed off and said that they would only tackle it if it was really necessary, can't blame them really. Apparently Bert also has a son called James who left home a year ago, we've tracked him down, he's in the RAF Regiment currently stationed in Germany, so he's well out of the frame. Jasmine's story of being at work stacks up and so she's out of the frame as well."

Judith smiled, "But I'll tell you something interesting. Our Beatrice saw John Smith and Jane Doe smooching in the accounts office, it has a fire escape, guess what we found on the other side?"

Dave sat up, "Not Bert's body?"

"Got it in one."

Dave unconsciously licked his lips, "Forensics?"

Judith wrinkled her nose, "Been over the room with a fine tooth comb and they found nothing, even worse the room is only cleaned once a week so if there was any evidence it wasn't removed by cleaners."

She consulted her notebook, "Finally, thanks to serial numbers, we tracked down the CO₂ extinguishers that were at the hotel, and again nothing."

Dave sighed, "Can't you give me one crumb of comfort?"

Judith shrugged, "It's all down to timing. According to the receptionist John Smith was in the building for fifteen minutes before he was spotted by Beatrice cuddling Jane. We have no idea when Bert arrived, but he could have arrived and been bumped off by them before Beatrice saw them."

Dave rolled his eyes, "Might! Possibly! A judge would love that. Who else was in the building when Henry disappeared and Bert died?"

Judith licked her pencil, "We don't know the two events are connected, but obviously John Smith and Jane Doe, Frank Chard, the porter cum receptionist, all the cleaners, three other porters, six other guests and a barman."

Dave sighed, "So we're getting nowhere fast. One body, one missing person and absolutely no clues."

Judith stretched, "Perhaps we're missing the obvious?"

Dave took a sip of cold coffee, "Perhaps, but at the moment even the obvious doesn't seem to be evident."

They sat drinking their coffee in silence, each wondering what they had missed.

At ten past nine Sheela entered the Christian Book-shop in Norwich, she was on a mission. She walked about the shelves looking at the maze of books, eventually she must have looked so perplexed that a young assistant came up to her. Sheela turned to her, "I want a book on Christianity."

The girl's eyes flicked round the shelves and Sheela realized what a ridiculous question she had asked. She tried again, "Look, yesterday in church we said something called the Nicene Creed, I'd like a book that explains that, and a book that gives me the basics of Christianity and a book on the ten commandments."

The girl smiled, "Excuse me asking, but do you want something fairly simple, or something deep?"

Sheela laughed, "How about words of less than one syllable?"

The assistant smiled and produced three books, *A Simple Guide to the Creeds*, *Whatever happened to the Ten Commandments?* and *What Christians Believe and Why*. Sheela looked at them, "I'll take all three."

The assistant nodded, "Excuse me asking, but have you got a Bible, it might make reading these books easier."

Sheela rolled her eyes at her obvious oversight, "No."

She looked at about six shelves all laden with different translations and almost groaned. The assistant produced two off of the shelf, "This one's easily readable and this one is a little more stilted, but more correct to the original, it also contains some useful appendices on where to find common phrases and core statements."

Sheela nodded, "I'll take both."

The assistant packed up the books, "I've also slipped in your bag a couple of free books explaining why Jesus is important."

Sheela paid up, "Thanks."

She walked out and aimed herself towards the town centre and the nearest coffee shop. She wasn't meeting Quentin till Wednesday and she wanted to have read at least one of the books by then.

Late that evening Beatrice straightened up from what seemed like her millionth WC bowl and stretched her back. It was only 9pm and she had already decided that she would have a few words to say to DI Jacobson when this job finished. Suddenly the outer toilet door opened and Beatrice realized that she had not put the 'toilet being cleaned' sign on the door. She sighed, locked the cubicle she was in and sat down on the WC lid. This was a men's toilet and her presence would not be welcome. The outer door opened again and a second man entered, he immediately spoke as he walked to the urinals, "So what do you think of the last candidate?"

The first man zipped up his trousers, "Not sure I like him, something shifty in his eyes and I definitely don't like the six month gap in his CV. How about you Lord Hawes, what did you think?"

"Dreadful, probably couldn't manage a fry-up in a chip shop."

There was a silence as hand-washing noises progresses to the sound of tandem hand-dryers. Then the one identified as Lord Hawes spoke, "So how's our little police hunt going?"

There was a short laugh, "You were right, they're getting nowhere. Have you handed over the drugs package?"

"Forced to, otherwise my private detective would have spilled the beans, she plays on a straight wicket, silly cow."

"Did you tell them about Henry's recent run-in with that Jones fella?"

Lord Hawes gave a short barking laugh, "No, what they don't know won't hurt them."

His voice took on a malevolent tone, "and I don't want them knowing about that waitress Josie, that's all dead and buried – understand?"

"Understand."

They exited and Beatrice emerged from the toilet cubicle; five minutes later, from the seclusion of a ladies toilet, she rang Dave.

Tuesday morning Jane and John spilled off of the Manchester-York train and walked towards the barrier. John walked beside Jane carrying his oversized briefcase and her photographer's bag over his shoulder. "So, what's on your itinerary today?"

"York Minster, the shambles shopping area and the Viking Museum."

John smiled, "For someone who hasn't travelled you sure know what you want to do."

Jane shrugged as they walked out of the station, "Used the Internet tourist site; where's the hotel?"

"Over to our right."

As they negotiated the traffic John pondered on the fact that Jane seemed to have effortlessly shifted her body clock to be back into a normal day-working pattern; he was sure that he could not have so easily shifted into a night-working pattern.

Lord Hawes man-servant opened the door to DI Jacobson and DS Green, his face took on a look of utter distaste, rather like he'd sucked a lemon while drinking salt-water. "I'm sorry, but Lord Hawes is unavailable."

DI Dave Jacobson gave a professional smile, "Kindly tell him that he either sees us here, or I'll arrest him for obstructing the police."

The man-servant went to close the door, but DI Jacobson stepped into the hallway. Five minutes later they were shown into Lord Hawes' study. Lord Hawes was brusque, "I don't like being threatened young man and I have been fully co-operative with you and your colleagues."

Dave held his ground, "Really, then kindly tell me about Josie Bradshaw, I believe she was once a waitress at the hotel?"

Lord Hawes growled, "I don't see what that's got to do with Henry's disappearance."

Dave spelt it out, "We asked you if you knew anybody who might bear a grudge against Henry, I rather think that the football-hooligan brother of a waitress whom Henry allegedly tried to rape would fall into that category."

Lord Hawes poked his chest out, "She was drunk and withdrew the allegation."

Judith chipped in, "Drunk and in hospital, I believe from being punched round the head, her story at the time was that Henry lost his temper with her and beat her up."

Lord Hawes smirked, "She didn't press charges I believe; she later said that she fell down the hotel staircase due to losing her balance while being intoxicated."

"Was that before or after five thousand pounds got transferred into her bank account?"

Lord Hawes didn't reply but lit a cigar; eventually he said, "Anything else or do you wish to waste further amounts of my time?"

Judith consulted her notebook, "And would you mind telling us about Mr Jones?"

Lord Hawes chewed on the end of his cigar, "He had a fight with Henry."

"Over?"

Lord Hawes looked pained, "His wife, accused Henry of trying to seduce her."

Dave smiled, "We heard that it was the other way round, Mr Jones threatened to cite Henry in divorce proceedings and Henry lost his temper and attacked Mr Jones. By all accounts it took the combined efforts of the manager and your rather large head chef to pull him off."

Lord Hawes didn't reply. Dave looked him in the eye, "It would seem to us that your son was of a somewhat volatile nature and renown for losing his temper, who else had he antagonized over the last few months?"

Lord Hawes verbally exploded, "Good god man do you want a list! He'd always had a temper, it had just got worse lately because he was trying to cut down on his drug habit."

Judith consulted her notes again, "More than a temper isn't it Lord Hawes? From what we can glean, it was a matter of if he couldn't have his own way he lost his temper. The list seems endless, attacking a teacher at boarding school, manhandling a woman he accused of queue-jumping at the off-license, serious verbal abuse of a traffic warden. All in all you must have spent a fortune buying off the various people with whom he had an altercation at some time or another."

Dave chipped in, "And yes we do want a list, a comprehensive list and I want it dictated to us now."

The study door opened and Jeremy Barratt-Jones walked in, Lord Hawes smiled with relief, "These two detectives want a list of all the people Henry annoyed, is that reasonable?"

Jeremy puckered his lips, "In the circumstances, yes."

Lord Hawes scowled and pulled towards him a couple of sheets of note-paper, he looked at his man-servant hovering by the door, "This could take some time, you'd better make some coffee, but we won't be having biscuits, I'm not in the mood."

John kissed Jane and wished her a good day and left their twin-bedded hotel room. She waited ten minutes in case he had forgotten anything, then she slipped off her dress and slipped between the bed-sheets after setting the alarm for three hours time. She was still having trouble shifting to a day pattern and had found that a morning nap served wonders. She hadn't told John because she knew that he would fret, in any case she was spending half the day awake.

Vernon sat back in his armchair and peeped through his lace curtains. The odd looking black van that had mysteriously turned up two days ago was still sitting at the end of his road. He grinned to himself; so what if the police were watching him, all the better for the next phase of his plans.

Sheela closed her notebook and then closed her eyes, for some reason she was desperately tired. She'd virtually come to the end of her assignment for Lord Hawes and she had just decided that there was only one more card to play. She would confront John Smith and Jane Doe as if she knew everything. In reality she knew nothing, she only had a hunch, but these were not hardened criminals and she hoped that a surprise confrontation may scare them into at least one mistake. She picked up her notebook and grimaced, she'd have to wait till Friday when apparently they always met at the Hawes Hotel. She smiled to herself, now there was the perfect place for the confrontation and the place at which they would feel most uneasy. That is, of course, if they were guilty of anything in the first place.

Chapter 13

Squalls

Sheela and Quentin separated and gasped for breath, Sheela untangled herself from Quentin's arms, "Time for a breather I think, I'll make some coffee."

She left Quentin sitting on the settee wondering how Sheela had managed to arouse so much physical passion in him in such a short time. He was also grateful of her breaking off their embrace as he wasn't sure where it would have lead to otherwise. As he regained his equilibrium he spotted some books on the under-tray of her coffee table, he pulled them out for a closer look. She came back while he was looking at them, she half-smiled, "Be interested in what your partner finds interesting."

He looked up from the books and said quietly, "It runs deeper than mere interest."

She sat down next to him and said sensitively, "I know, give me time."

He held her hand and looked into her eyes, "You can't just take an interest in Christianity because of me. It has to be real for you, part of your life, not part of my life lived in you."

She nodded, "I know, I've got that far already, there's no such thing as second-hand Christianity as far as relationships are concerned."

Quentin groaned and let go of her hand, putting his head in his hands. He mumbled, "You've no idea what you've done to me. I always said to myself that I'd take every relationship slowly, you know keep control. But I can't get you out of my head, I dream about you, I think about you all the time, I just want to be with you."

Sheela rubbed his shoulder, "I'm no angel you know, please don't put me on a pedestal."

He looked at her with haunted eyes, "My head tells me that a relationship with you is fraught with danger. Danger that I might lose control and end up in bed with you, danger that I may want to take the relationship on faster than you and danger that because you're not a Christian we're incompatible anyway. But my heart says 'full steam ahead', 'this

is the one', 'go for it', 'don't let her out of your sight', 'hang on to her at all costs' and 'take the opportunity of a lifetime within the lifetime of the opportunity.'"

He rolled his eyes, "I must sound like a lovesick teenager, but that's how I feel."

Sheela tucked her feet under her and held his hand, she returned his gaze and said gently, "I promise that I will not let you take me to bed. I promise that if you are moving too fast for me I'll tell you. I promise that while you are taking me out I will go out with no-one else and I promise I will try and understand your faith."

He held onto her like a man drowning man in a sea of his own emotions, "Promise?"

"Promise."

He closed his eyes and sighed with relief. Sheela teased him gently, "Never had a girl-friend before?"

"Never had one that drove me wild."

Sheela decided to change the subject, "So what's this I'm letting myself in for on Saturday?"

He grinned wickedly, "The annual summer fayre. It keeps the roof over our heads, the congregation's heads that is."

Sheela picked up her coffee, "Saw the article in the free press, raised £6000 last year did it?"

Quentin nodded, "And some; though how you can raise that sort of amount by selling bric-a-brac and providing 'splat the rat' games beats me."

Sheela giggled, "Maybe there's some divine intervention."

Quentin grinned, "You'll see on Saturday. £6000 from the hodge-podge of stalls we provide must require something more than just goodwill. There's nothing expensive, seemingly few people around and yet the money pours in."

Actually the more Sheela heard the more she didn't want to be there, but if Quentin was going to be there then so was she.

Jane lay in one of the single beds listening to John's breathing settle down to a regular pattern, then, as during the previous nights, she slipped out of bed and went into the loo. She quietly ran herself a steaming hot bubble bath and settled into the water book in hand. She still felt wide awake, but knew that a nice relaxing hot bath would make her feel tired, then she could slip into John's bed and snuggle up to him. She

was still not sure if this was a matter of love or comfort or security, but whatever it was so knew that she would sleep soundly by his side.

Beatrice squeezed out her mop and left the loo door propped open both to warn potential customers that the floor was wet, and to allow the air to circulate. She decided to leave her mop and bucket in the doorway and went on the prowl; this was the office area and she was certain that there would be things to find. First off she went into the accounts office and stood inside trying to picture in her mind just how she saw John and Jane in here the night Bert died. It got her nowhere, she turned round and quickly found the Doe-mestics file in the filing cabinet. It was peppered with letters from Doe-mestics complaining about late payments and notes from Henry moaning that something or other had been missed. She pondered on this, she had worked with the Doe-mestics staff for a few nights now and knew that they both took pride in what they did and were if anything over-efficient not under-efficient, so the notes didn't run true to form. She checked another couple of files, one for the catering supplies and one for the gardeners, both revealed a similar mix or moans about late payments and complaints from Henry. She checked a few more files, muttered to herself about some people never being satisfied and slipped along the corridor, duster in hand, into Mr James office. She went up to the filing cabinet labeled 'staff' and tugged at the drawer, as expected it was locked. She fished a master key out of her overall pocket and, wondering how Dave had obtained the key in the first place, opened the cabinet. She hunted for Henry's file and not surprisingly found it missing. She locked the cabinet and turned her attention to Mr James desk. In the thin top drawer were miscellaneous pencils and a small tin containing the keys to the rest of the desk. In the third draw she tried she found Henry's file. She skimmed through it and then her eyebrow's rose. She decided to take a risk and took the file back to the accounts office, copied six pages and then returned it to Mr James desk drawer. She carefully locked the drawer, cleaned the key and replaced it. She then polished the desk drawer fronts and the filing cabinet drawer fronts, she had no warrant to search and decided that it would be best if she left no trace of her search behind.

Jane settled into the seat of a luxury air-conditioned shuttle-bus and John, after putting their luggage into the rack, settled beside her. "I'd swear that your case was getting heavier."

She smiled sweetly, "How long to Stansted?"

John sighed, "Depends on the M25 and the M11, there's usually plenty of time, trouble for you is that the hotel we'll end up at is truly an airport hotel, there's absolutely nothing else there."

She stretched, "Not staying there, I'm going to catch the Stansted express to Ely, I've always wanted to look at the cathedral there."

They automatically held hands, "Take a walk up the high street and round the back of the cathedral, there's a lovely coffee shop set in the grounds."

She sighed, "I might just do that."

He glanced out of the window at a low flying 747, "Enjoying the tour?"

She grinned and grimaced, "It's a bit of a bind all this travelling, how ever do you cope week after week? On the other hand it is a good break for me and at least I am with you some of the time."

John watched the traffic as they pulled out of the airport complex, "We could still go to Edinburgh on Saturday if you wanted."

Jane shook her head, "Tempting, but I promised the Reverend Lyons that I'd help at the church fête if I was around."

"Doing what?"

"If it's the same as last year, the second-hand book-stall. Very reasonable prices, you ought to come along."

John internally grimaced, "I might just do that."

Dave and Judith both looked at the copied pages Henry's file that Beatrice had brought to the pre-briefing meeting. Judith eventually put her copies down, "No wonder Henry was an angry man if he wasn't getting paid."

Beatrice nodded, "It's all there. Lord Hawes' letter to the accounts department saying that Henry was to be paid 20% of his nett salary and the rest was to go to Lord Hawes personal account until the sum of £12000 had been paid off. Then a letter from Lord Hawes to Mr James telling him that he was having Henry and that he was working to pay off his clinic fees that had been paid for by Lord Hawes. And a letter from Mr James to Henry saying that it was outside his remit to reduce the monthly payments to Lord Hawes account and Henry's vitriolic reply."

Dave sat back and shook his head, "What sort of father, who is a millionaire twice over, orders his son to work to pay off a clinic debt?"

Beatrice yawned, "There's a couple of other things. I had a snout round the accounts office. Suppliers all moan about being paid late and Henry moans about just anything; he even complained to the gardener's

that the roses didn't look smelly enough! And," Beatrice paused for effect, "and nearly all the women complain that he had wandering hands and that he took the view that if they were staff they were his for the picking. And that's not just the hotel staff; the temps who have worked here say the same. There's also a good rumour of at least two funded abortions, funded by his father that is"

Dave screwed up his eyes, "No shortage of suspects then."

Judith laughed, "Earlier this week you were moaning we had no leads to follow."

Dave ignored her and looked at Beatrice, "Work on this till the end of the week and then leave."

Beatrice smiled, "At least I'll get a pay packet then."

Dave grimaced, "Ahh, there's something you ought to know..."

Sheela spent Thursday morning searching the Internet archives for Quentin's lost half-sister. On the premise that tracing men was easier (they didn't usually change their surname) she concentrated on tracing her step-father. He was fairly easy to follow round the country for a few years and then suddenly disappeared off of any public records. Sheela checked the man's profession and on a hunch tried the emigration files at Australia house, to no avail. She sat back and sighed, there were other countries to emigrate to, but none had files as easy to access as Australia. She went back and checked the man's parentage and smiled, he had an Irish mother. Fifteen minutes later she sat back and wondered. The man's name was Seamus Browne and he was a dentist. The woman she was looking for was called Siobhan and in the yellow pages for Dublin there was a dentist called Seamus Browne with a partner called Siobhan Carter. Since Siobhan and Seamus were common Irish names she could not be sure that this was the woman she was after, but if this had been a normal case for her it would have warranted a visit. She glanced at the clock and picked up the phone.

Quentin sat uncomfortably in his lounge talking to his church treasurer and not quite believing what he was hearing, "What second safe?"

The treasurer's face took on a look of extreme patience, "The safe in the basement under the church hall. It used to be the church safe, but we replaced it about ten years ago as it was too small once we needed to keep our new communion silverware in it as well as the old stuff."

Quentin winced, the 'old stuff' was 17th century and exquisite, but fragile. "But why aren't we depositing the money in the night safe of the bank as we did last year?"

"Because this year the stuffed shirt they call a manager won't give us free use of it and wants to charge a £100 per deposit fee. Last year we visited the bank four times to keep the cash on site below £1000."

Quentin sucked in his cheeks, "Can't we use a building society, they're open on a Saturday?"

The treasurer made a non-committal gesture with his hands, "Possibly next year."

Quentin sighed, "So the procedure is that we remove the surplus cash every two hours, count it and store it in this old safe. Then on Monday you and two others take it to the bank, that's rather a lot of cash to be carrying."

The treasurer shrugged, "Might do a couple of trips, bank is just down the road."

Quentin sighed again, still clearly unhappy. "This year only Fred, I want something else in place next year. I don't like the idea of octogenarians carrying large amounts of cash."

Fred smiled, "You're the boss."

Quentin tapped him on the shoulder, "Thanks Fred for all the work you've put in on this."

Fred smiled, "Can't do much these days, but I'm happy to do this."

Fred left the vicarage and Quentin watched him hobble down the road swinging his stick in a jaunty manner in time with his footsteps. Quentin was not convinced that they had found the right solution for handling the cash from the fête, but he'd have to live with it for this year.

Sheela fretted inside her Irish taxi and hoped that the dentists would be open when she arrived. She had decided not to phone ahead when in Norwich and now regretted that decision. She stretched and realized that she was already tired. She'd driven like a mad-woman to Ely, caught the two minutes past two train to Stansted airport and arrived in time to catch the three-twenty to Dublin. She'd thought that she'd have plenty of time, but it was now five-fifteen and she had no idea how close to her destination she was. The taxi driver suddenly swung up to the curve and pointed, "There you are miss."

Sheela paid, dashed across the pavement and to her relief found the door open. She entered and went up to the reception desk. The man she took to be the receptionist looked up at her and smiled, he had the

complexion and wrinkles of an old oak tree. Sheela smiled back, "I'd like to see Siobhan Carter please, it's a personal matter."

He gave her a sideways look, "May I ask who you are?"

"Sheela Vance, I'm a private detective."

He stood indecisively behind the desk and Sheela added, "It's not bad news and I have nothing to do with debt collection."

He nodded and walked off down a short corridor; Sheela contemplated following him, but decided to trust to diplomacy.

He returned with a woman in tow and Sheela's heart sank; the female she was looking for would be in her mid to late forties, this woman looked as if she'd just entered her twenties. Sheela smiled, "Siobhan Carter?"

The girl nodded, Sheela smiled again to put her at ease, "Sorry you're not the person I'm after."

Siobham's face creased into a smile that magazine photographers would die for, "You can tell just be looking? My there's private detection for you." Her accent was pure Dublin Irish.

Sheela shrugged, "The Siobham I'm after was born over forty years ago in Suffolk, I don't think you qualify."

The girl threw a hand up in front of her face and the man gave her a quizzical look, "What you after her for?"

Sheela decided to humour them, after all she had burst in upon them. "I'm working on behalf of her half-brother, he lost touch with her when she was thirteen and would rather like to re-establish contact."

Siobham looked at the man and he held out his hand to Sheela, "Seamus Browne, I guess you're looking for my daughter Siobham, this is my grand-daughter."

Sheela's mouth almost fell open, "Mother and daughter with same names?"

He nodded, "Confusing isn't it, my Siobham, that's my daughter. She now calls herself Chev to save confusion."

Sheela needed to convince herself that she had the right family, "So you were married to Chev's mother Catherine?"

He nodded, "Married her when Chev was two and her ex was courting his future intended. Always let him visit Chev, he came every Saturday until the day he died; used to bring young Quentin with him to give his ol' girl a break. Since they had the same dad I used to let them see each other after that, no point in making Chev suffer just because her parents couldn't get on.

Sheela nodded, "And you moved away when Catherine died?"

He shrugged, "Couldn't work and manage a teenager, moved up North to be with my sister."

He took on a shifty look, "Moved over here when Chev was twenty."

Siobham laughed, "Come on grandad." She turned to face Sheela, "Mum was single when she had me, she married my step-dad when I was three and I adopted their married name." She turned back to grandfather, "there's no shame in it granddad, not these days."

Sheela now understood how Chev had lost touch with Quentin. Sheela checked her watch, "Look, I haven't got much time, but I'll need to know if Chev wants to get back in touch with Quentin, if she doesn't then she remains unfound."

Seamus scratched his ear, "Can't see why she wouldn't, she's in Limerick at the moment, due back on Saturday."

Sheela handed him her card, "Get her to give me a ring. I can tell you it would make Quentin a very happy man if he heard from her."

Seamus gave a serious nod, "Didn't like splitting up brother and sister, but I had to move on, couldn't cope with living in Suffolk, it was Catherine's county not mine."

Sheela chatted for another few minutes and then started her return journey; with any luck she'd catch the seven-thirty-five flight and be back to Stansted before nine. But she knew already that the journey was worth it.

John and Jane arrived back at the Hawes hotel just before ten o'clock and John immediately went up to reception, "Have I got any takers this week."

She checked her computer screen, "Not so far, you're supposed to have three from Edinburgh, but I think they'll cancel; Edinburgh flights are running at least ninety minutes late due to a bomb scare in the terminal building, it's been on the news."

John for once hoped that they wouldn't come, "Let me know will you."

The receptionist sniffed, "If the two of you are going to sleep in the same room you'll have to pay extra."

John fixed her with a glare, "Extra on what? Global lubricants pay extra single supplements for the twin-bedded rooms, does that mean I get a rebate?"

The receptionist turned a shade of pink and John walked away. Twenty minutes later he heard the news that his Edinburgh executives

had cancelled; he kicked off his shoes and laid on the bed. He joked, "I could sleep for a week, must be carrying that bag of yours."

Jane sat on the other bed and he rolled over to face her, "Want your morning nap?"

At first she looked surprised and then she slowly smiled, "How do you know?"

"In York, I popped up to get my calculator and you were fast asleep."

She moved over and lay next to him, "You don't mind that I didn't say?"

"Course not."

She lay her head on his shoulder, "What you going to do?"

"Absolutely nothing. Global lubricants insist that if I want to get paid for today I must stay in the hotel until the seminar would have ended, that's six o'clock."

"So their paying you to do nothing."

He stretched, "Wish all my contracts were like this."

He lay for a minute considering the absurdity of it all and then realized that his shoulder felt wet; Jane was already fast asleep, he joined her ten minutes later.

Quentin stood in the church hall and decided it was more like a war zone. The Mother's Union were in full swing and, in co-operation with the Men's discussion group (meeting every Friday night at the Cat and Jackdaw) were setting up the inside stalls for the fête. Quentin avoided being caught up in the mêlée and made his way over to the hatch halfway down the far wall, as he arrived a young woman emerged carrying what looked like bed linen. He'd been down into this basement only once before and that was during the building tour after he first arrived. As he went down the steps someone called out "Watch you head Father" and he waved a reply. Once down in the basement he remembered why he hadn't repeated his visit. For some peculiar reason the hall floor was suspended on double beams and the height under them was definitely well below his personal head height even if the height between them was OK. This made progress difficult, so he crouched and walked over to the old safe, it looked like a giant tin can. However, it seemed robust enough and could probably do the job they wanted. A young mum popped up beside him, "Make a grand place for a teenage meeting room this."

He sat on the safe, "Beams are too low I'm afraid and there's only one way in and out."

She looked around, "Shame, they could do with a place of their own."

He brushed some dust off of his trousers and realized that it was falling through the cracks above his head, "I have asked the church architect about the church crypt, but we've got to make sure about the ventilation before we can get the go ahead."

She laughed, "My Jack will be dead and buried before you get an answer from that lot; they took two years to say that we could safely have a mother and toddler's group in the ringing chamber."

Quentin joined in the laughter, "OK Mary, I'll chase them up, but it's six years before your Jack is a teenager."

She grinned, "Just planning ahead vicar, just planning ahead."

Lunch-time John and Jane were finishing their sandwiches in a secluded corner of the lounge and enjoying each other's presence when a spiky-haired young woman came and joined them. John was immediately suspicious, this was his female inspector of man-holes. She placed her coffee cup on the table, "Let me introduce myself, I'm Sheela Vance, I'm a private detective and I'd like to ask you why you killed Henry."

Jane went an ashen colour and John had trouble swallowing, Sheela immediately knew that she was on the right track. Jane tried for a feeble recovery, "I am not knowing what you are talking about."

Sheela leant forward and tapped the glass table with her fingernail, "Your face says it all."

John, still startled by the abruptness of her unexpected statement, took longer to react, when he did so he was more positive. "That's a serious allegation young lady, can you prove that in a court of law?"

Sheela smiled, "No and neither can the police."

Jane visibly trembled and shrieked in a hoarse whisper, "The police! The police! They are knowing?"

Sheela shook her head, "I don't think so, they need absolute proof and are probably following a million lines of enquiry. I don't need absolute proof, but I would like some answers."

John looked around and made a quick evaluation, he also needed some time to think. "Not here, room 442 in ten minutes."

Sheela gave them a stern look, "Don't do anything stupid and don't try and concoct a cock and bull story. Be straight with me and I'll be straight with you."

She got up and left, Jane grabbed John's hand as if it were her last grasp at freedom. John muttered, "How does she know? She's a private detective, not the police, so how does she know?"

John felt Jane tremble again and she whispered, "I don't think that she was knowing, but she is knowing now because we are knowing and telling her with our looks."

John digested this and put his other hand over Jane's hand, "Then she's a clever woman and knew that she had to startle it out of us."

They stood up and walked towards their room as if heading for the guillotine.

Jasmine stood on the threshold of her house and poised with her key almost in the door lock. DI Jacobson waited patiently, he'd hoped to delegate this task to someone else, but Judith had been called back to the station to do some French translation and he had the rest of his team trawling through Lord Hawes' list. Diane manoeuvred her large frame around DI Jacobson and stood next to Jasmine, who finally pushed the key home and opened the door; they were greeted by the buzz of flies. DI Jacobson coughed, "Don't forget, if there's anything unusual I want to know. Jasmine walked in, closely followed by Diane. Jasmine stopped at the kitchen door and almost burst into tears, it was a tip of dirty crockery, discarded take-away wrappings and a myriad of flies. Diane turned to DI Jacobson, hands on her immense hips, "You left the place like this? Have you never heard of hygiene?"

DI Jacobson mumbled something about it being a crime scene and Diane snorted. They looked in the lounge; more mess and more flies, and then went upstairs. The bathroom was passable, just, but once in her father's bedroom tears did come from Jasmine's eyes. The congealed sick had attracted yet more flies and dirty underwear lay everywhere. Jasmine retreated to her bedroom and sat on the bed, she wiped her eyes on a tissue and looked at DI Jacobson, "Nothing's missing as far as I can tell."

He handed her a pile of letters, "Would you mind?"

Half was junk mail, six were bills of one sort or another and one was a threatening letter from a betting shop. Diane turned and face DI Jacobson again, "Is this place still a crime scene or can we clean it up?"

He hesitated for a fraction of a second and in that moment Diane took a step towards him, "You are not thinking of leaving this place as it is are you? What is it, protect the garbage week?"

DI Jacobson decided that diplomacy was the best policy. "Now Jasmine has been here with us she can do what she likes, I'm willing to de-classify the house now."

Diane thrust out her chin, "Good."

She turned to Jasmine, "Pick up what is important and we'll clean this place this evening."

Jasmine looked surprised and Diane said gently, "We'll get the whole squad here, do it in no time. They won't mind, you know the motto, 'One for all, all for one.'"

Jasmine shook her head, "I can't ask them to come into this, it's so degrading."

She burst into tears and Diane understood. She puckered her lips for a minute as she thought. "How about I ask Roger's team to come in first and do the mucky stuff, he won't mind, he owes me one."

Jasmine nodded, Diane took out her mobile phone and said quietly, "Throw all his dirty clothes away?"

Jasmine wiped her eyes, "And his bed-linen and the mattress and the pillows and that disgusting rug by his bed and the carpet if they have to."

Diane put her arm round Jasmine and said kindly, "Shall we leave now?"

Jasmine allowed herself to be led out of the house, pausing only to retrieve her mother's picture from the wall. She hugged it all the way back to the refuge.

Sheela entered John's hotel room and sat in an armchair, John and Jane sat on a bed holding hands. Jane suddenly jumped off the bed, "Are you recording this?"

Sheela shook her head, "As I said, I'm not the police."

Jane held her ground, "I want to be sure."

Sheela went to the other bed and turned her handbag upside down causing a pile of miscellaneous items to tumble out. Jane picked up a voice recorder and removed the battery. She then eyed Sheela, who raised her arms, "Frisk me if you like, I'm not wired for sound."

Jane declined and sat back on the bed. Sheela sat back down, "Right let me first say that nothing you say will be repeated by me outside of this room, but if I judge you to be guilty of murder I will go to the police and tell them to interview you."

She suddenly smiled, "But if my theories are right, it wasn't murder, it was some sort of accident."

John licked his lips, "It was an accident. I caught Henry screaming at Jane and told him to back off. He came at me with a saucepan, I pushed him away and he fell over cracking his skull, and breaking his neck, on a metal table-top as he fell."

Jane's large eyes swiveled onto John and Sheela almost burst out laughing, this couple could keep nothing secret. Instead she said sternly, "I said no bullshit, you've forgotten about the casserole lid."

Jane hung onto John like grim death, "You are right. What John has said is true, but I also threw the casserole lid at Henry and hit him above the ear."

Sheela exhaled and longed for a cigarette, "So you both have a dead body, then what?"

Jane said flatly, "We decided that we didn't want to tangle with Lord Hawes, so I cleaned up what little mess there was and we disposed of the body."

"How?"

John seemed to come out of a trance, "Put him in the boot of his car and drove it into a flooded gravel pit."

Sheela now decided to tackle her prime interest, "And what else, what about covering your tracks?"

Jane's Adams apple bobbed up and down, "We took some items from his safe to make it look like he was running away."

Sheela nodded, "And have you still got them?"

John gave her a quizzical look, "You couldn't give a damn about Henry could you, it's something from the safe you're after."

Sheela shrugged, "By all accounts Henry was a nasty piece of work and I'll not mourn his passing, but I have a commission to fulfill; now we were talking about the safe contents I believe?"

Jane took up the story, "We took a small packet of drugs, but we didn't know they were drugs. Some cash, the liquor license, a bundle of memory sticks and a photograph."

John looked her straight in the eyes, "We disposed of the drugs, are in the process of giving the money to a local charity, we want none of it, and the rest is in my safe at home."

Sheela sat and looked at John and Jane. Unbelievably this pair of extreme amateurs had disposed of a body without trace and created enough diversion to cause serious doubts as to whether Henry had been murdered or run away.

Jane stirred, "So what will you be being doing?"

Sheela picked up her handbag and started re-packing it. "Take me to you safe, I want the photograph, nothing else."

John said hesitantly, "And the police?"

"I won't tell them."

Jane shivered, "But will they find out? If you can find out so can they."

Sheela decided that it was time for some reassurance, "Look, I'm a private detective and as such I can follow my hunches and don't need absolute proof and definite leads. I knew that you were in the right place at the right time, but you are the wrong people, seriously the wrong people. Henry was involved in drug dealing, seduction and general seediness, you two are none of those things and the police won't look twice at you; they have other fish to fry. You stay quiet and don't make any sudden changes to your lifestyle and as far as they are concerned you're part of the background."

John rolled his eyes, "So in the lounge you knew nothing?"

Sheela clipped her handbag shut and nodded, "Just a hunch, as I said your faces told me."

Jane visibly trembled again and Sheela touched her on the shoulder, "You're in the clear, you've even got an undercover policewoman vouching for you."

John raised an eyebrow, "How can she vouch for us?"

Sheela half turned towards the door, she wanted to get her hands on that photograph. "The night that other chap died in the car-park, she saw you two smooching in an office and then going to your hotel room."

She caught sight of Jane's face and froze, she said in disbelief, "Oh no, you didn't, not another."

John gave her a bleak look and Sheela flopped down to sit on the bed, "So what happened that time?"

An hour later Sheela drove away from John's house and John put his arm around Jane, he murmured, "I wonder what's so important about that photograph?"

Jane shivered, "I don't care, today I have been frightened for my life."

She turned to cuddle into John's chest and he heard some muffled words regarding the fact that Sheela wasn't going to the police. John automatically hugged her close as he wondered about Sheela's motives. Was it that she just wanted the photograph, or that she wanted to come back at sometime in the future. Come back that is to blackmail them, for he realized, with horror, that she was in a perfect position to do so.

Chapter 14

Life is a Roller-Coaster

After leaving their department store half an hour early Diane's cleaning team arrived at Jasmine's house. They piled out of the mini-bus as quietly as possible and trooped into the house. Evidence that Roger's team had come and gone was proclaimed by a still glowing bonfire in the overgrown garden. Jasmine went upstairs and caught her breath as she entered her father's bedroom. The carpet, bed, dirty clothes, rug and bed-linen had all disappeared to be replaced by a set of disinfected and scrubbed floorboards drying gently in the warm morning. She dared to go downstairs and found the kitchen piled high with clean crockery and the smell of a serious fly-spray. She made her way to the lounge to find it clear of debris and minus the settee; there was a note from Roger on the mantelpiece, it informed her that the settee had been alive with fly maggots. Roger also wished her well and hoped that they had been of help. Diane read the note over her shoulder and said gently, "He can be a funny ol' stick, but his hearts in the right place."

She became business like, "Right then lass, what do you want?"

Jasmine was taken aback, "Anything would be welcome."

Diane nodded, "Right consider it done, that's eight teas and two coffees."

Jasmine looked at her in horror, "I don't think that there's anything..."

Diane grinned, "Go and look."

Jasmine hurried to the kitchen and looked in a large cardboard box, it was full of tins and jars and a note from Roger's team saying that they were looking forward to her summer B-B-Q. Jasmine looked at Diane in bewilderment, Diane smiled, "It's his way of getting you off to a good start."

Jasmine looked at the note, "But I'm not having a summer B-B-Q."

Diane put her arm round her, "I think you are now, be a good start for you here, don't worry we'll all muck in, you just provide the garden."

Jasmine almost wailed, "But it's all overgrown!"

Diane smiled, "Then we'll make it a gardening barbecue, you know come for an hours gardening and then eat; we've done it before"

Diane cleaned the kitchen cupboards while Jasmine put the kettle on and started to make tea; she was beginning to realize why everyone referred to Doe-mestics as a family and wondered what would happen next.

By midday the summer fête was in full swing with both John and Jane behind the second-hand bookstall. She had insisted on coming and John wouldn't let her out of his sight, so they had both come. During a lull he said quietly, "How are you?"

She turned her large eyes on him, "Wobbly from inside out after yesterday, I keep expecting the police to rush in and arrest us."

She lowered her voice, "And what is *she* doing here."

John glanced over at Sheela, "Bric-a-brac."

Jane elbowed him in the ribs, "You are knowing what I mean. Is she spying on us?"

John laughed, "No, I rather think she's seducing your vicar."

They watched as Quentin came over to the bric-a-brac stall and talked to Sheela, the body language said it all. Jane tidied some books and sniffed, "I don't think that she is suitable for him at all."

John tut-tutted, "Your prejudice is showing."

Jane thumped a fat book into a narrow gap causing a mini-dust-storm, "I don't care, she makes me nervous."

Quentin wandered over to them and browsed the books, "Anything interesting?" He said idly.

Jane smiled and placed a book in front of him, *The Illustrated History of the Lotus 7*, Quentin's eyes lit up as he took the book. He smiled at Jane, "50p for hardbacks isn't it?"

Jane rolled her enormous eyes, "Normally yes, but for really special books and first editions we have a different charging system."

Quentin's eyebrows rose, "Really?"

Jane nodded, "Now that is a very special book, limited edition, first issue, irreplaceable colour plates, full history and in almost mint condition."

Quentin raised up his hands in surrender, "£2."

"£3."

Quentin groaned, handed over the money and took his prize off the show Sheela. John looked at her in amazement, "That was a bit hard wasn't it?"

Jane shrugged, "Well he shouldn't have brought that woman here," she then gave a sly smile, "and he shouldn't have thrown the book out in the first place, it was in his vicarage contribution."

John shook his head in disbelief, "You mean that you sold him back his own book?"

Jane nodded and they both managed a laugh.

Evie came down the stairs and looked at Jasmine, "And this place is all yours?"

Jasmine nodded as she finished off her ice-lolly, "Council house really, but according to Diane as my dad was first tenant it can be passed on to me."

Evie looked suspicious, "Did he pay the rent?"

"They took it straight from his benefit."

Evie's eye's narrowed, "But you're under eighteen."

Jasmine looked blank and frowned in concentration, "Diane said that she'd get Doe-mestics to act as guarantor and if the council wouldn't accept that she would."

Evie perched herself on the edge of the table as Jasmine carefully placed the lollipop stick in a small waste-bin by the fireplace and turned to face her. "How do you fancy living here?"

Evie responded with a look like a startled goldfish, "You serious?"

"Can't afford to live here by myself, Diane and I did some sums; with two we could manage, be better with three."

Evie smoothed down her dreadlocks, "Only got my benefit, still at college and I want to get my GCSEs this time."

"Be enough though, 'specially if we got a third."

Evie screwed up her face, "Well I wouldn't want to be in that third bedroom you've got now, it's like a broom cupboard only smaller."

Evie suddenly smiled and rummaged through the evening paper she had brought with her to show Jasmine the appeal from the police about her father's whereabouts on the Thursday he died. She pointed to an article, "See this, the council's appealing for tenants of three bedroom houses who don't use all the bedrooms to swap to a new place in city centre flats. You know, where that garage was."

Jasmine made a face, "No garden, I like a garden."

"Roof garden."

Jasmine looked at the faded wallpaper and decided that a fresh start might be a good idea. "Won't let us live together, probably give me a one-bedroom hovel."

Evie crossed her arms. "Not if I set my social worker on them, you should see her haggle in the market, and she got the college to take me back after I threw a cup of coffee over the lecturer."

Jasmine decided that it was worth a try, "OK, but I'm not giving up this place without seeing these flats first."

Evie waved her paper, "Open day today."

Jasmine jumped up, "OK, lets have a look, but I'm warning you I've got to have time to hold a garden B-B-Q before I leave here, I'm not..."

The door slammed and her voice faded away, fifteen seconds later a mouse scuttled out from behind the fireplace and was disappointed to find that its seemingly endless store of maggots had vanished.

Vernon peeped out of his lounge window and smiled, the black van had been replaced by an old maroon Renault with a driver supposedly reading a newspaper. He'd been carefully cultivating his police tail for the last few days by meeting the street dealers, but doing no trading; now he was going to use the ever watchful police for his alibi. He used a pair of plug-in timers to set up the lounge and kitchen lights to go on later. He expected to be home before it got dark, but better safe than sorry; he needed the police to believe that he was still in. He then went upstairs and changed into a pair of nondescript jeans, faded trainers and plain dark green tee-shirt. He stuffed a baseball cap and a silk scarf in his pockets and pulled down the loft-ladder. Once in the loft he pulled the ladder up behind him, shut the hatch and pushed a bolt home. He waited for his eyes to adjust and then turned on his torch and started to walk across his loft. Once on the other side he squeezed himself through a small hole and carefully made his way across the next loft. Five lofts later he dropped silently onto the landing floor of the end-terraced house. The house was currently unoccupied and the perfect unseen escape route for Vernon as it had a large overgrown hedge in the front garden and a broken down fence that allowed him direct access onto a playing field. He slipped onto the field and carefully stayed out of sight of the policeman in the maroon car and anyone watching the back of his house. Ten minutes later he'd stolen a bicycle and was heading into town.

John dropped down into Jane's settee and groaned, rubbing his back at the same time, "I never thought we'd get all those books down into that basement."

She smiled tolerantly, "Well we only put back half of what we brought up, so that's progress."

He reached out for her, "Do you want to eat out tonight?"

She pointed upstairs, "Catrina and the tribe are at Peter's parents, some sort of soiree for their anniversary, so how about an evening in?"

"Sounds wonderful."

She pointed down the road, "Fish and chip shop straight down the road, mines a haddock and chips, but only a child's portion mind."

John heaved himself to his feet and gave a mock salute, "Anything you say ma'am."

As he got to the door she shouted, "And a tub of mushy peas."

John closed the door and decided that it felt just like being married.

Fred sat back on the old rickety chair, "that makes £6866.54."

Quentin shook his head in disbelief, "That's amazing. Is that all profit or do we have to pay some bills?"

"£27 for the hire of the propane boiler for the outside tea stall and £75 for the hire of the bouncy castle, that's half price."

Quentin did the sum in his head, "So that's £6765.54 clear profit."

Fred gave a satisfied smile, "Best yet and we've still got the sponsorship money to come in."

Quentin looked at the open basement hatch, "Money's all in the safe?"

Fred tapped his pocket, "All locked up."

Quentin looked uneasy, "All cash?"

"More or less, and mostly in one and two pound coins, and there's also the £65.08 from Mrs Murphy's mountain of 2p coins."

Fred stood up, "Leave you to lock up vicar, I'll make sure that the money's banked safely on Monday."

Quentin watched him depart and sought out Sheela who was looking through a pile of abandoned CDs. She proffered one to him, "Make an excellent bird-scarer if you hang it in a bush, just don't insult your CD machine by trying to play it."

He looked at the cover, "The twenty most amazing muzac tracks, ugh!"

He flicked off the light switches, "Just need to close the hatch and we're off."

They wandered across the hall and Quentin closed one half of the hatch cover, as it thumped into the floor he muttered, "Made to sink the Titanic." Something made him look up and he froze in horror as a man in a baseball cap and a scarf over his face ran across the hall wielding a

short scaffold pole. The man yelled and Quentin found himself unable to move. Sheela spun round and instantly evaluated the situation, her police training taking over. She waited for a couple of long seconds for the man to get closer and then she deliberately ran towards him as the swinging scaffold pole passed the mid-point of its arc, knowing that such a weapon is virtually useless in hand-to-hand fighting. The man side-stepped and put his foot onto the non-existent floor over the hatchway. Quentin watched the whole thing in seemingly slow motion. The man running across the floor, Sheela lunging at him, the man side-stepping and then toppling slowly into the open hatchway thumping his shoulder on the back of the hatch and then dropping his scaffold pole and spreading his arms to prevent himself from falling right through. Without really thinking Quentin kicked the man in the face, he automatically pulled his arms in to protect his face, falling through the hatch as he did so. There was a few seconds silence and then a roar of anger from below and the man's head emerged from the hatch, Sheela kicked him this time using a sideways kick and the sole of her trainers; Quentin thumped the open hatch cover with his foot and it swung over the vertical to crash onto the man's head, once again he disappeared. In the silence that followed evening sunlight streamed through the upper hall windows highlighting motes of dust in the air as if nothing was amiss. Sheela and Quentin stared at each other. Sheela regained her composure first, she pointed to the hatch cover, "Stand on that."

Quentin obeyed as she ran to the door and peeped out, she then left the hall to return a minute later, it seemed like an eternity to Quentin. She walked swiftly up to Quentin, "I think he was alone."

Quentin's eyebrows rose, "There might be more?"

Sheela's eyes checked the front of the hall through the windows, nothing stirred. "Might have had a getaway car waiting."

She picked up the scaffold pole, "Open the hatch."

Quentin stepped off the hatch, grabbed hold of the two brass rings and heaved the hatch open, no-one emerged and no sound came from below. Sheela took a deep breath, "Any other way out?"

"No."

She edged forward and then peered into the depths. She dropped the pole, "Oh shit!"

Quentin looked over the hatch, the man was sprawled at the bottom of the steps, blood oozing from his head. Sheela went down the steps, leapt over the prostrate man and the pool of blood, and turned to check the pulse in his wrist. She moved to check the pulse in his neck and as she

did so looked at his head, it had been crushed like a broken egg. She looked up the steps and figured out that his head must have been cracked between the hatch cover and the edge of the first tread. She saw Quentin fish out his mobile phone and yelled, "Stop! Hold it right there!"

Quentin's white face looked down at her. She carefully climbed the steps avoiding the blood marks and missing the top two steps completely. She tottered at the top and Quentin grabbed her, he muttered, "Ambulance?"

She shook her head, "Undertaker."

Quentin stared at her in disbelief, "Dead?"

"Brain all over the floor."

Quentin turned and threw up, Sheela instantly regretted her choice of phrases. Quentin sat down on an old pew and Sheela, now feeling equally wobbly, sat beside him. They sat in silence for a few seconds holding hands till Quentin recovered slightly; he looked at his phone, "Better call the police."

Sheela put her hand over the phone, "Wait, I need time to think."

Quentin looked surprised, "It was an accident, he attacked us and we defended ourselves."

Her eyes took on a hollow look, "But was it reasonable force? Did I have to kick him the second time, did you have to shut the hatch on him? We'd probably already foiled the robbery, did we need to keep on?"

Quentin looked blank as well as ashen, "Sorry. I'm not following you."

Sheela sighed, "A year before I left the force I was called to a house, just a normal house with a normal family in a normal road. The man of the house had caught a burglar on the landing and had chased him downstairs and then jumped on top of him. That jump broke the burglar's windpipe, the man of the house didn't intend to kill him, but he did. The judge decided that the jump was unnecessary use of force as he'd already disturbed the burglary and probably done enough to cause the burglar to run away. He got three years, his wife had a nervous breakdown and the two kids were put into foster care; the family never recovered."

Quentin put his head in his hands, he mumbled, "We can't just walk away and leave the body there as if nothing has happened."

Sheela contemplated this action and decided that if she were the investigating officer it would take her a few microseconds to determine the cause of death and that due to the design of the hatch-stays it could not

have happened without outside intervention. Beside the print of her trainer would be clearly visible on his face. With a sudden shock of realization she stood up and said firmly, "Stay there and don't do anything."

She went back down and turned on the basement lights, she then looked at the man and sighed. She went back up, "Guy's name is Vernon Miles."

Quentin was amazed, "You know him?"

"Drug dealer, probable pimp, low life. I know him because we had him in the station a few times, couple of girls beaten up, shopkeeper with an arm broken, that sort of thing. No one would ever testify against him after one witness had a visitation one dark night and had an ear cut off."

Quentin shivered, "Does it make a difference who he was? We still killed him."

Sheela held onto him, "Don't go all theological on me."

He put his arms around her and they held onto each other. After a few minutes she untangled herself. Quentin looked bleakly at the hatch, "So what do we do?"

Sheela tried to get her brain into gear, now the action was over shock was taking over and her thought process was slowing down. She reached for Quentin's phone, "I don't know, but I know someone who might."

Jane's mobile phone rang as they were finishing their coffee, she automatically answered it and then gave a curious look and turned to John. "That was Sheela Vance, she's with the vicar in the church hall and wants to see us now, and she said bring the 2CV."

John only half comprehended the message, "We've got to pick the vicar up?"

"No, he's there already."

John's blood ran cold, "Perhaps she's decided to tell the police after all."

Jane stood up, "Well we'll never find out sitting her."

John stood up and held her hands, looking into her giant eyes, "Whatever happens, I'm glad I met you and if it's the police for us that doesn't matter as far as my feelings for you are concerned."

Jane moved the cuddle into his chest, "Me to."

They pulled up outside the hall about ten minutes later and, hand-in-hand, walked into the hall, both convinced that Sheela had

decided, after a discussion with Quentin, to go to the police. Such thoughts were instantly dispelled as soon as they saw Sheela and Quentin. He was sitting ashen faced on an old pew while Sheela, who also looked decidedly white around the gills, was ineffectively trying to mop up some vomit. John and Jane glanced at each other and walked over, Sheela looked up, threw the mop down and came over. "Am I glad to see you two, I think we need your help."

Quentin sprang into life, "Hang on." He gave them both a serious look, "Helping is optional, you can walk away and I wouldn't blame you if you did."

John was mystified, both at the appearance of the two and their jittery nervousness. He cleared his throat, "What's the problem?"

Sheela pointed to the hatch and John and Jane peered over the edge; Jane threw a hand up in front of her face. Sheela stood beside them and said, in hushed tones, "He attacked us with a scaffold pole, probably after the day's takings. One thing led to another and he died. John dragged his eyes off of the body, "Why us and not the police?"

Sheela glanced at Quentin, "We're worried that a judge might think that we overplayed our hands. I kicked him when I probably didn't need to and Quentin dropped the hatch cover on his head after that."

Jane's eyes swiveled to Sheela, "What are you wanting us to do?"

Sheela swallowed, "Help us disposed of the body and clean up."

Jane's eyes swung round and examined the hall, all the curtains were closed; "Anybody see?"

"No-one's called the police, they'd be here by now."

John took another peep and swallowed to prevent himself from being sick, "Who is he, do you know?"

"Petty criminal., met him when I was a policewoman."

Jane whispered, "Has he got a family?"

"No, thank God."

Quentin stirred and tottered to his feet, he looked ghastly, "I meant what I said, you don't have to get involved."

Jane glanced at John and he half nodded, she turned to Quentin, "Yes we do, Sheela was prepared to stay quiet on our behalf, now we must help you."

She took her jacket off and carefully laid it on a pile of chairs, she turned to John, "In the back of the van is a box of disposable paper overalls, can you bring in four and the box of mixed plastic bags, a box of neoprene gloves and a roll of the grey sticky tape."

She turned to Sheela and Quentin, who were now standing together, "First we put on overalls and gloves and plastic bags over our shoes, we've got the proper shoe-bags for this just in case we have to deal with a flooded toilet."

She steeled herself and peeped over the edge, "Quentin and John will have to go down there and bag him up, after we wipe the blood and gunge from the steps."

Sheela wondered if she should tell Jane that the gunge was probably brain and decided to keep quiet. Quentin nodded as if on another planet, "Then what?"

"We spread out one of those large white plastic cloths we used at the fête and place him on it and everything we use for cleaning, it will all have to go."

Quentin stared at her with glazed eyes, "Go where?"

Jane wrinkled her nose, "One thing at a time."

Sheela looked at the steps, "Scrub them?"

Jane shook her head, "Definitely not, there's enough varnish on those steps and the hatch cover to provide a waterproof surface. We wipe it off and then clean up using a mild bleach solution, then we polish; after we've got the body up."

John reappeared laden with boxes and they all suited up with Jane showing them how to tie the plastic bag overshoes. The women then started cleaning the steps from the top down by hanging over the edge of the hatch and using a mop. John pulled Quentin to one side and whispered, "Did he have a car?"

Quentin trembled and sat down, "We don't think so, Sheela went out and had a look while we were waiting for you."

John closed his eyes, "Damn, much easier if he had a car."

Quentin took on a haunted look and then muttered, "There's an old wreck out the back of the hall, someone dumped it there a month or so ago, keep meaning to call the police."

John decided to give Quentin a task outside of the hall, "Can you hot-wire it?"

Quentin stood for a moment and then nodded, "Easy, I'll also put some petrol in it from the lawn mower."

"Then get to it."

Quentin stumbled out and John went over to the women, Jane was expertly using a wet-mop from above to finish cleaning steps beneath her. She put the mop in a bucket and turned to John, "Where's Quentin?"

"Arranging transport."

Jane swallowed, her Adam's apple bobbing up and down, "We need to bag the body."

Sheela visibly shuddered, "I'll help, are you up for it John?"

John's brain screamed that he decidedly was not 'up for it.' "Of course, let's get started."

With manhandling they slipped a bag over his head and shoulders and taped it to his blood soaked shirt. A second bag covered his legs and was similarly taped to his waistband. Jane passed down a bag she had slit open and they wrapped that around the middle, again taping it on. Jane tossed down another three bags, "again, we don't want it leaking."

They repeated the procedure and John stood up, carefully placing himself between the beams, "How do we get him up there," his thumb jerked upwards.

Sheela grimaced, "Brute force."

They manhandled the body to be at the bottom of the stairs and John sat on the steps with his legs spread out. He grasped the body and lifted while Sheela pushed, they moved it up one step. So with John lifting one step at a time and Sheela holding the body in place while he moved they got the body up to the top. Eventually they rolled the body onto the plastic sheet and Sheela sat on the floor gasping for breath, just as Quentin reappeared, "I've backed it up to the fire escape."

They all stood still for a moment and then Jane took control again, "Right, coveralls off and onto the sheet."

They piled the coveralls onto the body and then rolled it in the white sheet, once again taping it up. Sheela groaned, "All this bagging will help preserve what's inside."

Jane put her hands on her hips, "Then the boys must make sure it's never found, but if it eases your mind the bags are not plastic but shiny paper, it's specially treated to be waterproof but break down in a couple of years, so are the overalls."

They turned the lights off. Quentin opened the fire escape and John's eyes bulged, "It's a fiat Panda!"

Quentin nodded, "Put the back seats down, so it'll go in."

John, Quentin and Sheela manhandled the body into the back of the Panda and stood back. John whispered, "We need to cover that up before someone sees it."

Sheela shot off and reappeared with a box of bric-a-brac, "This was destined for the tip," she emptied it out on top of the body. Three boxes

later you couldn't tell what was in the boot. John turned to Quentin, "You up to following me if I drive?"

Quentin nodded, Sheela tossed him her car keys, "Use mine, yours is too conspicuous."

John sat in the drivers seat of the Panda, Quentin started the engine for him and whispered in his ear, "Don't think the brakes are much cop and the clutch slips like anything."

John grimaced, but this was intended to be a one-way trip. They drove off leaving the women behind; Jane turned to Sheela, "Right, another set of coveralls and we'd better get back to work."

Sheela took her to the hatch and pointed to the floor of the basement, "What do we do about that, it's stone and the blood's seeped into it?"

Jane nodded, "Use my carpet cleaning vacuum cleaner with cold water and take it from there."

They set to work looking like two lab technicians coping with a biological waste spillage.

DC Mills answered his cell-phone when it rang, he listened for a few seconds and then answered. "No, he's still in the house. Bedroom light went out twenty minutes ago." He finished the call and opened up his second pack of sandwiches, they'd never told him when he applied for CID that boredom was on the menu.

Sweat trickled down from John's forehead and he swept it away. It wasn't the humid evening that was causing his to sweat, but the Fiat Panda. Quentin had been right, there were virtually no brakes, even pumping the brake pedal achieved little. In addition there was so much slop in the steering it was more like steering a boat than driving a car. He glanced at the dashboard, the oil warning light was still on, the fuel gauge still read empty, but the water temperature warning light was now beginning to flash on and off. He noted that he was doing somewhere between twenty and thirty miles an hour as the speedometer needle oscillated back and forth and he checked his rear-view mirror; Quentin was still behind him. He passed a village sign and knew that he was getting close to the gravel pit, he only hoped that the car would make it. Five minutes later he turned off the narrow country lane onto the dirt track that led to the gravel pit, halfway down it he came to a stop. A barrier had been built across consisting of a fat wooden pole that was pivoted at one end and firmly locked with a padlock at the other. A sign hung from it proclaiming that scrambling bikes were forbidden by

the council. John stopped the car and climbed out, he was not prone to swearing, but he felt like doing so now. Quentin pulled up behind him and got out of Sheela's car to join him. They gazed at the pole in the feeble headlights from the Panda. Quentin checked the lock and shook his head, he then checked the pivot and came back to John. "Think we can take the pivot out."

John heard in his voice the cry of a desperate man. Before he could answer Quentin went to Sheela's car and came back with a wheel-brace. Using a penny to fill the gap between the brace's socket and the pivot's nut Quentin managed to undo it. John lifted the weight of the pole and Quentin pulled out the pivot. Then together they lifted the pole out of the U shaped end of its support and swung it round to clear the track. They got just over halfway before they could swing no more. John looked at the gap they had made, "I can get through there, you lock Sheela's car and we'll go in the Panda, it's about half a mile."

They climbed back into the Panda and John negotiated past the pole and then drove on down the track, across the field and up to the edge of the pit; following his experience of last time, he chose to stop on a steeper slope. They climbed out and Quentin produced a penknife, he whispered, "Sheela said to cut slits in the white plastic tablecloth and plastic bags."

They opened the back hatch, Quentin closed his eyes and cut slits in the wrapping over the body. John wound the driver's window a couple of inches and then took off the hand-brake, about the only thing that worked properly on the car. They went to the back of the car, which had already started rolling and pushed to increase its speed. It hit the water with a tremendous hiss and proceeded to slip into the water. John swore, "I've left the bloody lights on."

They watched the car slip under the water and the lights slowly disappear from view. Quentin hissed, "How ever did you find this place?"

John grimaced, "Yellow pages under body disposal."

They walked back to the barrier, reversed their procedure and re-instated the pivot. John then drove Quentin back to towards the hall judging that Quentin was really in no fit state to drive. A mile away from the pit Quentin made John stop, he rolled out of the car and was violently sick in a ditch. John felt for him as he knew what it was like, one moment your living a normal life, the next you think there is a policeman behind every tree waiting to arrest you. Quentin pulled a bottle of water from out of Sheela's passenger door bin, washed out his mouth and spit the residue into a hedge. He climbed back in, "Sorry about that."

John set off again, Quentin turned to look at him, "Sheela said that you've done this twice before."

"Once, only once. Jane and I inadvertently killed a chap trying to take my head off with a saucepan; he's in the pit with his Jaguar. Second time I didn't know that I'd killed the chap, he was attacking Jane and I saw red. I didn't know he was dead till the morning after when he was found in a flower-bed; we were lucky that time, we did nothing to cover our tracks, but no-one knew how the guy had arrived at the flower bed, so we were safe, I hope."

Quentin leant back and closed his eyes, "How do you live with it?"

John pulled into the entrance to a field and stopped, he turned to Quentin. "You get used to it, and the longer you are not arrested the easier it gets." He paused, "And it sort of highlights life, makes you want to ensure that you are doing what you really want to do. Somehow it confirms that our time on this soil is limited and life is there to be lived."

Quentin swallowed and for a moment John thought he was going to be sick again, "I meant how do you live with the knowledge that you've killed a man?"

John gazed out into the darkness which was almost complete as the moon was now behind some thick rain clouds. "I asked myself some questions."

He turned to look at Quentin, "Did you plan to kill this fellow?"

"No."

"Did you pick a fight with him?"

"No."

"Did you invite him into your life?"

"No."

"Do you consider that you were just defending yourself, and Sheela?"

A moment's hesitation from Quentin, followed by, "Yes."

John returned his gaze to the dark landscape, "And is this incident worth ruining your life and Sheela's life? Or would you rather get on with life and make the most of it?"

Quentin sat still in the darkness, eventually he muttered, "Rather a selfish question that."

John considered Quentin's answer and tried a different tack, "What about your flock? All the people who depend on you? Should they be deprived just because some thug decides to try and steal their money and you stop him."

He lowered his voice, "It's not murder Quentin, I'm not sure it's even manslaughter. For me both deaths were accidental by-products and they have spurred me on to make decisions I would otherwise have put off."

Quentin took a sharp intake of breath, "So that's what we put on his tombstone is it? Died as the result of an accidental by-product?"

John realized that he was getting tired, "No, the epitaph should be, 'He chose his way of life and died as a result.'" He reached for the ignition key, "I'm not saying that all the guilt was his, but I am saying that you are not entirely responsible, probably not even half responsible."

They both jumped as John's mobile phone beeped.

Sheela and Jane bagged up the last of the discarded cleaning materials in some bright pink waste bags. Sheela looked at them, "Now what?"

"I'll just dump them with my firm's waste-bags, by Monday evening they'll be on their way to an industrial incinerator."

Sheela looked surprised, "Not a waste tip?"

Jane sighed, "No, we have to pay for our waste to be incinerated, too many toxins in the cleaning materials to put in a landfill."

They sat down on the old pew and Sheela ran her hands over her face, "What's the time?"

"One-thirty."

Sheela groaned, "Feels like six, remind me never to clean for a living."

Jane eyed the open hatch, "Bit of a special job this one."

Sheela started to shake, on impulse Jane put her arms round her; she could feel Sheela trembles as she grasped her. Sheela muttered, "I thought I was hardened to this sort of thing. I spent nine months on motorway patrol and I thought that I'd seen it all."

Jane whispered, "It's different when you're involved and you know that you're partly responsible."

Sheela half wailed, "I didn't ask him to come into the hall, I didn't ask him to attack me with a scaffold pole and I didn't ask him to bloody well die!"

Jane held her as she cried. Eventually Sheela sat up and pulled a tissue out of her sleeve and dried her eyes. She blew her nose, "How did you cope?"

Jane studiously studied Sheela's ankles, "I learnt to rely on John. I decided that I had to go on living; I couldn't let Henry screw up my life, if I did he would have won."

She paused, "Of course, it's not true, Henry has affected my life. He's made me look at what I was doing and made me evaluate my life. I wasn't living, I was existing. Henry's legacy is that he's helped me to want to live not just exist."

Sheela glanced at Jane, "So what's changed?"

She replied so quietly that Sheela could only just hear. "Nothing yet, but I will marry John when he asks me and I will sell my business and live in the daylight."

She suddenly changed her tone of voice, "You need to put your trainers and socks in the waste bag, they've got blood on them."

Sheela looked into her eyes, "You and John, did Bert's death throw you more together or make the relationship edgy?"

Jane smiled, "More together of course. It was a shared experience. You'll see this will be good for you and Quentin in the long run."

Sheela's face took on a look of horror, "Where are they? What's taken them so long?"

Jane patted her hand, "They'll be OK, why don't we go back to the vicarage and wait for them there?"

Sheela grimaced, "Haven't got a key."

Jane shrugged, "There's one under the flower pot, he leaves it for there for his cleaner."

She pulled out her mobile phone, "I'll send them a message, but if they are where I think they are they won't get it until they're approaching Norwich."

Sheela rubbed Jane's arm, "Thanks Jane."

Jane smiled and pondered the vicissitudes of life, if John wasn't around she might have been pursuing someone else for a life time relationship.

Chapter 15

Fallout

DI Campbell slipped into the passenger seat beside DC Mills. DC Mills thought for the hundredth time that he looked more like a refugee from a caber tossing contest than a policeman, he had arms like tree trunks and neck muscles like captive boa constrictors. DI Campbell pulled out a piece of paper, "Right laddie, you can come and join the fun."

DC Mill's eyebrows rose, "You got a warrant? Has Sid started to sing?"

DI Campbell shook his massive head, "Not him, Garry. Lad's a thick as two short planks, but he's worked with Vernon. According to Garry, Vernon keeps drugs stashed behind his gas fire and under the cupboard floor in the kitchen. Marianne has also fingered him for supplying drugs to teenagers in the club; so we got a warrant."

D C Mills scoffed, "That's rich, it's Marianne who supplied drugs on the dance floor."

DI Campbell waved the warrant, "We think that, but the judge..."

They climbed out and walked down the street, there were already two other policeman loitering behind a large hedge. DI Campbell nodded and the two trotted up the path, momentarily poised by the front door and then used a sledge-hammer to take it off its hinges. They all piled in with a uniformed police sergeant in body armour leading the way up the stairs. Mayhem ensued for a couple of minutes and then, at some unheard command, all activity ceased. DI Campbell turned and gave DC Mills a fierce look, "You said he was here laddie."

DC Mills nodded, "Light went out just before midnight, nothings happened since."

DI Campbell turned to look at a female DC, "Well?"

She shrugged, "Had the CCTV camera from the factory across the road panned on the back of his house since yesterday morning, he's been to the dustbin once and thrown out bread for the birds twice, and that is all."

DI Campbell swung round, "Right you lot, off. DC Mills back to you car and let us know if you see him returning, but don't, do you hear me, don't tackle him by yourself."

He turned to the female DC, "Right DC Barnes let's have a look round."

As they pulled up outside the vicarage Quentin said, "What decisions?"

John's brain was tired, "Decisions?"

"You said that the effect on you was to make some decisions."

John got his brain into gear, "Going to take up an offer of teaching at the local management college, money's not so good, but it's regular and there's minimal travelling. And I'll probably ask Jane to marry me sooner rather than later."

Quentin looked at the vicarage, the downstairs lights were on and he knew that Sheela was inside, "Goodness knows what Sheela thinks of me, I rather went to pieces."

John patted him on the shoulder, "Believe me she'll need support over the next few weeks, action comes first, anxiety comes later."

Quentin gave a nervous laugh, "At the moment I'm anxious enough for both of us."

John got out and felt some large spots of rain, "My advice is be honest with each other, don't pretend you've got it all under control when you haven't. And remember there's safety in numbers."

DI Campbell sat on the stairs fuming, not only was Vernon not here, neither were any drugs, that is if you didn't count the 85 tranquilizers in the bathroom cupboard. He was in no doubt that Vernon would have a perfectly plausible explanation for them. He growled at DC Barnes, "Did you check the cisterns?"

"Nothing, and there's nothing in the mattress or under the bath. But there is some good news and bad news. The good is that he might not have decamped as in an old tin we've found £550 and a credit card made out to Iain Jones and a passport made out to the same name with a passable picture of Vernon in it. The bad news is that we've also found another tin that's empty, so he may have had two spare identities."

DI Campbell smiled, "Let's hope that he only he one quick escape pack, rare for people to have two. Let's prop up the front door best we can. Turn out the lights and wait."

"Want me to check the loft?"

“Later.”

Ten minutes later they sat in the lounge listening to the faint road noise from cars on the A47 and they settled down for a long night.

Quentin waved goodbye to John and Jane and closed the vicarage door, he leant against the wall. “Did she really pour that great vat of baked beans left over from the fête down the steps?”

Sheela rested her head on his shoulder, “Yes and I almost screamed. We’d spent over an hour cleaning every nook and cranny of those damned steps and they were spotless, absolutely bloody spotless, then she appears with this urn full of beans and tips them out!”

Quentin gave a feeble grin, “Good cover story though. Makes perfect sense us calling on Jane to help clear up that sort of mess and it gives a reason for the basement floor by the hatch looking so clean.”

Sheela placed her arms round his chest, “She’s very thorough, do you know she even bleached the toilet bowl where we had been tipping the water from the wet and dry vacuum cleaner away.”

Quentin wrapped his arms round her, “Sorry if I lost it.”

She enjoyed his touch, “You did well, getting the wreck working, dumping the body and all.”

He kissed her on the forehead, “But I left you to deal with getting the body out of the basement, that’s unforgivable.”

She kissed his cheek, “Well you’re forgiven.”

They stood in the hallway cuddling and intermittently kissing for a little while, then Sheela said, “I’d better go, it’s nearly three-thirty and you’ve got eight o’clock communion.”

Quentin turned white and his eyes took on a haunted look, he moaned to himself and slid down the wall till he was squatting on the floor. “How can I preside over communion after that?”

Sheela squatted beside him, “This book I was reading, it said that we are all sinners and that sin is sin no matter if it is stealing your neighbour’s tomatoes or killing a child. If you can preside on a normal Sunday having carnal thoughts about me what’s the difference now? Don’t you expect your God to forgive you?”

He looked at her trying to gather his thoughts, “It’s not quite like that, that’s a bit of a simplistic approach.”

“Why not be simple for one Sunday?”

He sighed, “You’re probably right, I’m too tired to argue.”

Sheela got up to go, he grabbed her, “Don’t go, stay.”

She swallowed, she wanted Quentin to make love to her, but not like this; not as a diversion from other thoughts. "I promised I wouldn't let you take me to bed, remember?"

He held onto her, "I don't want you in bed, not tonight; I just need you in the house, I need you close."

He burst into tears and Sheela hugged him, she whispered "What happens if you wake up too sick to take the communion?"

He snuffled, "I phone Tom Pearce at St Mary's, he'll send his curate down or come himself, they don't have an eight o'clock."

"Then I rather think that you will be ill, you're certainly in no state to take a service at the moment."

She let him cry on her shoulder, "You were sick in the hall, I rather think that you have a case of food poisoning."

She disentangled herself, "Now go to bed, I'll sleep on a settee."

He made his way up the stairs, halfway up he paused, "I do have a spare bedroom."

"I'm removing temptation for both of us and sleeping down here."

He slowly disappeared round the top of the stairs, Sheela went into the lounge and slumped into the least disgusting settee. She set the alarm on her mobile phone to wake her up just before seven and closed her eyes.

Around the same time Jane looked at John sleeping in his bed, he was lying right on the edge. She bit her bottom lip and contemplated the floor, but she knew that she needed John's close presence. She'd already tried sleeping once and every time she closed her eyes she saw the blood and gore on the steps. She carefully crawled up the bed between John and the wall and then snuggled in beside him, rested her head on his pillow and carefully placed her arm over him; he gently murmured. She closed her eyes and tried to imagine herself walking down the aisle, she was asleep before she reached the altar.

DI Campbell woke up as the morning sun streamed into Vernon's lounge, he quietly got up and sluiced his face under a cold tap before returning to the arm chair. He clapped his hands and DC Barnes woke up. She rubbed her eyes, DI Campbell remarked, "Did you know you snore?"

She blearily looked at DI Campbell, "You been awake all night sir? Sorry guv."

“Aarrg didn’t need both of us to stay awake, thought I’d let you get some beauty sleep.”

“Thank you sir, I guess he hasn’t come back?”

He stood up, “Correct, now just let’s check the loft and then we can be on our way.”

Sheela woke up with her alarm at 6:45am. She took a few moments to realize where she was and then rolled off the settee and stood up; she felt dreadful. She estimated that she'd had about three hours sleep, that still didn't stop her aching as a result of the lumpy settee, plus the fact that her body was screaming for an input of nicotine. She went into the kitchen and put her head under the cold tap. She dried her face on a tea-towel of dubious vintage and tiptoed upstairs. Quentin was fast asleep on his single bed in a bedroom that was too devoid of furniture even to be called Spartan. After turning off his alarm clock she went back downstairs and found Tom’s phone number in Quentin’s diary. She stood poised by the phone for a full minute and then phoned Tom, to her surprise he answered on the first ring. She explained the position, namely that they had had a church fête, Quentin had been sick and not got to bed till after 3am. Tom laughed, “I think it should be obligatory that every vicar gets the day off after a church fête. It’s no problem, I’ll do the eight o’clock, what about his nine-forty-five and eleven-fifteen?”

Sheela hesitated, “I don’t know, he’s still asleep and I’m loath to wake him.”

The line went silent and she could hear the sound of rustling pages, then Tom spoke, “Looks like I can leave my curate here for our one morning service, he’s got plenty of back-up. So I can come and do your two, but you can tell Quentin when he wakes up that he owes me one and I’ll probably be collecting in a fortnight’s time when I need someone to do mid-week communions for me when I’m on holiday.”

Sheela thanked him profusely and put the phone down. After a moment’s thought she crept out of the vicarage and went home for a shower and a change of clothes.

DI Campbell climbed down the loft ladder, “Well now we know how he evaded our prying eyes.”

DC Barnes pushed the ladder away with a hooked steel pole, “Now what sir?”

DI Campbell sighed, “We stop the investigation right here. I’ll tell the locals that if he returns we’ll want to know and issue and all ports alert

just in case, but that's a bit late now. He'll come back; his sort always do, and we'll get him then. We've got Sid and Marianne in the bag and the Customs and Excise case against Zeb is building nicely, Vernon is really just small fry."

He hitched up his trousers and for a moment DC Barnes imagined him hitching up a kilt. He continued, "You go home and report back tomorrow lunch-time, there's a new job brewing at Felixstowe docks so we'll meet in the station there."

She picked up her bag and left, he made a few phone calls calling his staff off and asking the local CID to keep a watching brief, but not bother too much. He was confident that the waiting game was the most economic course of action. Bad pennies like Vernon always turned up and invariably got caught doing something illegal. He walked out into the morning sunshine and decided that he'd visit the Norfolk Broads, someone had told him that they were mini-lochs and he hoped the fishing would be good.

Sheela arrived back three-quarters of an hour later and although now showered and spruced up on the outside she still felt like death warmed up on the inside. She checked a recumbent Quentin and went back downstairs to lie on the settee. She woke up some time later to a tapping noise, she focused her bleary eyes on the window where an old lady was tapping with a coin. She opened the door and the woman gave her a top to bottom perusal and whispered, "How's Quentin?"

Sheela must have looked bewildered, for she added, "Father Tom took our eight o'clock and said that he was ill."

Sheela whispered back, "Sleeping, but he was really sick last night and some of those burgers at the fête were a little bit on the raw side."

The woman gave Sheela's face a close scrutiny, "You been sleeping on that settee all night?"

"I was worried about him. Food poisoning can turn really serious."

The woman nodded, "Had three weeks of deadly diarrhea following some dodgy prawns last autumn, thought I was destined for another world."

She turned to go and then turned back, "Don't know your name."

"Sheela Vance, I'm a friend of Quentin's."

She nodded, "You were helping out at the fête yesterday."

"And clearing up after, that's when Quentin was sick."

She thrust her chin forward, "You make sure you look after him, good vicars are hard to come by."

She waddled off down the drive and Sheela closed the door, at least the woman had found her asleep on the settee, so Quentin's reputation was safe.

John opened his eyes and knew from the feeling of damp on his shoulder that Jane was laying next to him. He enjoyed the touch of her body and ran over in his mind the night before. As far as he was concerned there was one good thing about it, Sheela was no longer in a position to blackmail them, not that he now thought that she ever would have done; but it was a worry cleared. He eased himself out from under Jane and went for a shave; another new day.

Quentin eventually emerged just before noon, he discovered Sheela delving into the depths of his freezer. She looked up, "Oh hi, you've surfaced at last."

Quentin slumped down into a kitchen chair, "Did I dream it, or did last night happen?"

Sheela shut the freezer door, there was nothing in here except fish-cakes and peas. "It happened all right. How are you?"

"Still a bit wobbly; I take it you phoned Tom."

"He did all three services, says you owe him one, well two, midweek communions while he is away." She consulted a scrap of paper, "And Mrs Carrington-Smythe phoned to say that she understood that you wouldn't be coming to Sunday dinner today and a Mr Chandler rang to say that they'd cope at the afternoon Sunday club if you didn't feel able to come. Besides that there have been four calls all to wish you well."

Quentin closed his eyes for a second and Sheela thought that he was about to nod off, he opened them again in alarm, "And you took all these phone calls, did anyone ask who you were?"

Sheela threw the paper into the waste-bin, "No, but some old lady who visited after the eight o'clock service did. She woke me up while I was asleep on your settee."

Quentin looked aghast, "What did she look like?"

"Small, grey haired, large mole under her left eye."

Quentin sighed, "That's Mrs Vine, she's alright."

Sheela said quietly, "Is my being her an embarrassment to you?"

He grabbed her hand, "No. Definitely not. It's just that churches tend to be rumour mills and by now we were probably making mad passionate love all night."

Sheela laughed, "Chance would be a fine thing. Look Mrs Vine saw me asleep on the settee and I made it clear that I'd been there all night."

Quentin relaxed, Sheela murmured, "What about the midnight communion, have you got a reserve for that?"

He looked at her, "No, and I'll preside. As you said yesterday we are all flawed and I'm just a little bit more flawed today than I was last week. Besides if I thought that presiding at communion rested on my life being sinless I'd never preside in the first place."

Sheela smiled, he was becoming a little more rational as the shock of yesterday wore off. She pointed to the freezer, "Not enough in there to feed a mouse."

He felt the stubble on his chin, "There's some rice in the small freezer compartment of the fridge and some tins of sweetcorn in the larder."

She did some culinary combinations in her head, "How about I do a fish stir-fry while you get shaved?"

He stood up, "Great."

He ambled towards the door and suddenly did a u-turn. He put his arms around her and wordlessly gave her a rib-crushing hug before resuming his passage towards the bathroom. Sheela began a hunt for a wok, or anything that resembled a wok, or even a decent sized frying-pan.

Mrs Vine passed the salt to Mrs Fields, another resident of her senior citizens home and a member of the St James' congregation. "You know that she'd been asleep all night on that disgusting grey settee of his."

Mrs Fields nodded, "Not his, didn't the Reverend Fisher have it?"

"And he got it from the Carrington-Smythes when they changed their suite. No, I mean she'd been in the house all night."

Mrs Field looked at Mrs Vine for more information, "So? Wasn't she looking after him?"

Mrs Vine rolled her eyes, "Exactly, it's nice to see some young 'ens observing a code of decency."

Mrs Field mopped her mouth with the edge of the tablecloth, "What did you say her name was?"

"Shelia Vance."

"Oh, is that Gerald Vance's third great-granddaughter?"

"No, that's Edna, I don't think they're related."

Mrs Field digested this, "what's she like?"

"Nice face, shame about her hair, looks like she's wearing a dead hedgehog."

Quentin pushed away his empty plate, "That's made me feel a whole lot better."

Sheela smiled, "I've got something else that will make you feel better as well. You did say that Tuesday was your mid-week day off didn't you."

He nodded. Sheela picked up his empty plate, "Anything planned?"

"Not yet."

"Good, I'll pick you up at eight, got something special planned."

He looked surprised, "Eight in the morning?"

"Yes."

"On my day off?"

"You had a lie-in this morning."

He rolled his eyes and then sprang up, "Leave that, you're not my skivvy."

Sheela surveyed the blackened cast iron frying pan, "I don't mind, after all it is my handiwork."

"Not entirely, I've had a few goes at ruining its surface as well."

He took the pan from her, put it down and then put his lips on hers. When they came up for air he tenderly whispered, "You just don't know how glad I am that I met you."

She nestled in his arms knowing that the feeling was mutual.

Jane watched John buy two ice-creams from the ice-cream vendor by the side of Wroxham Broad. He came back and passed one to Jane, "Sorry, no chocolate topping, coffee OK?"

"Anything cold is OK."

They sat beside the broad watching the boats potter by and licking their ice creams. Jane finished her ice-cream and watched as a middle aged man struggled to get the canopy of his boat down to go under the low bridge. She wiped her fingers on a tissue, "Makes you think."

"Makes you like what?" John replied lazily.

"Makes you think, here today and gone tomorrow."

John slipped his arm around her, "I know, makes you think about what you are doing with your life."

"And if I died would anybody miss me?"

John hugged her bony shoulders, "I'd miss you."

She swiveled her eyes onto him, "Really? We've known each other for less than a month; seems more than that, but it is only a few weeks."

"Some people make a big impact in a short time."

She moved her eyes to watch a scantily clad young woman row out onto the broad, "A month ago I was content with my life, happy to live and work in the dark. Now in the space of a few weeks I'm not content anymore, I want to be normal, to live in the day and to have a life to live."

John empathized, "Know what you mean. I've realized that I'm fed up with the travelling treadmill; it's a way of earning money, but not a means of enjoying life."

He squeezed her again, "It's not just Henry and the others, it's you; you bring out the part of me that wants to settle down, to share my life with someone else. Someone worth sharing it with."

She watched an Adonis of a man jump in the broad and swim to one of the moored motor-boats. She nestled against John, "For better, for worse..."

"For richer, for poorer."

They were silent for a time and then Jane spoke very softly, almost as if the words were only reach to reach John and then fade away in his middle ear. "You will be patient with me, it's been a long time since I allowed anyone close to me and since I wanted a particular someone close to me. I'm used to being one, not part of a shared two."

He replied gently, "Patience is my middle name."

They sat in the sun, both content with the presence of the other and trying to forget the circumstances that had brought them together.

Jasmine sat back on her haunches and tried to focus her mind. She and Evie had been going through the house and filling up bin-bags. In the bottom drawer of her dad's chest of drawers, under a conglomeration of odd socks, she had found a pile of letters addressed to her. They were all from her brother and they catalogued his progress in the RAF Regiment, her father had obviously opened them and then stored them away without showing her. Evie tapped the note-paper Jasmine was looking at, "Look, he's got an e-mail address, why don't we pop back to the refuge and you can send him one."

Jasmine bit her lip, "Won't he think it weird that I haven't answered until now?"

"Tell him why. You're mean ol' dad's kept them all for himself."

Jasmine turned to Evie, "Will you show me how to send an e-mail, never done it."

Evie rolled her eyes, "Where have you been all your life!"

Quentin stood in the pulpit and swept his gaze over the mid-night communion congregation. "Steal? Of course I don't steal. Copy CDs? Well now and then, but that's not exactly stealing is it, after all I give the original back. Income Tax? Well what they don't know won't harm them; it's not stealing is it, it's just creative accounting? Video films off the tele? Well of course, but that's not stealing?" His eyes swept over the congregation again, "As you've probably guessed we're onto the commandment, 'You shall not steal', but what is theft? Do you agree with Pierre Proudhon that 'property is theft,' if so why do you have a mortgage? In our modern society just where do we draw the line between acceptable acquisition and theft, or is there no fixed boundary and the dividing line is set by the society we live in?"

John settled down to listen to Quentin and gently held Jane's hands, enjoying the warmth radiating from the palm of her hand. Sheela sat on the other side of Jane and was alternately concentrating on Quentin's words and holding her breath, for she alone knew the effort of will that it had taken for Quentin even to come to church. After all less than twenty-four hours ago they had all been covering up a killing.

After the service John walked Jane home and they ended up sitting in her lounge drinking hot chocolate. At one-thirty Jane took her head off of his shoulder, "I don't want to chuck you out, but you have got to drive to Stansted tomorrow."

John stretched and smiled, "Unfortunately. If I had my way I'd rather stay here."

He put his hand in his jacket pocket, pulled out a small box and proffered it to Jane. "Something to remember me by while I'm away."

Jane tentatively took it and opened it. She swiveled her eyes from the box to John, "For me?"

John looked sheepish, "I just wanted to give you something to show how much you mean to me."

She took out a gold bangle about an index finger's width with an ovoid cross section and a filigree design on the top surface plus the words 'To Jane with all my love, John' engraved on the inside. She beamed at him and threw her arms around his neck, "It's beautiful, where did you get it? I've not let you out of my sight the last week."

John grinned, "York. I ordered it from the hotel reception, they have a tie-in with a local jeweler's shop."

She untangled herself and put it on, it was a perfect fit. John pointed to the clasp, "I made sure that it had a safety clasp, I didn't want you losing it down somebody's loo."

Jane whispered, "It's wonderful." And kissed him on the cheek before he finally left. After he'd gone she went and sat in her lounge and thoroughly inspected the bracelet. She had seen them in the display cabinet in the hotel in York and therefore knew just how much it cost even without the engraving. However, it wasn't the money, it was the action; John had moved from platonic companion to wooing suitor and the thought made her heart leap for joy.

Chapter 16

It's a Wrap

Monday morning DI Dave Jacobson and acting DS Judith Green met for their now traditional pre-briefing coffee in the hotel lounge. As Dave poured out the coffee he told Judith that both Beatrice and Sheela would be joining them. She raised an eyebrow, "I can understand Beatrice, but why this Sheela Vance, she's not on the force?"

Dave shrugged, "She's a lateral thinker, I'm hoping that she's made some connections regarding Henry that we haven't."

Beatrice arrived a minute or so later and flopped down. Judith gave her a quizzical look, Beatrice scowled, "Night-work can ruin your social life."

Sheela breezed in as they spoke and poured herself a coffee, Dave gave her the once over. "What makes you so happy?"

Sheela shrugged and hoped that her brave face on life was working. "Not being on the force and the love of a good man."

Dave grunted and got down to business. "Right the situation is this, I got called in to the Super's office before I came here and unless we've got something new to offer we're being pulled out."

Judith looked surprised, "But this is a murder enquiry, we can't just walk away!"

Dave scowled and ticked points off on his fingers. "Just what proof have we that Henry's been murdered? None. Have we enough proof to show that Bert was murdered? No, even the coroner obviously has doubts as he recorded an open verdict. Are we any further forward on either case than we were last week? No. Do I trust the information from Lord Hawes? No. Do I believe that Lord Hawes knows exactly where Henry is? Yes."

Judith remained unconvinced, "What about the freeze burns of Bert's mouth and the CO₂ in his blood?"

Dave rolled his eyes, "According to the pathologist you could get the same effect from eating an ice lolly straight out of the freezer and as for

the CO₂, he could have been somewhere with a faulty boiler. Face it Judith we just haven't got enough"

Beatrice stirred. "Carbon monoxide from a faulty boiler, not dioxide."

Dave ignored her and carried on. "On top of all that there's been this triple murder over at Yarmouth and the crime scene there is so large that it'll take forensics a month of Sundays to process it; so bang goes any hope we have of getting forensic back-up for at least a fortnight."

Judith nodded and looked glum, she'd been made acting sergeant to partner DI Jacobson, but if he was pulled back to the Regional Crime Squad then she would revert to DC. She didn't even bother to open her notebook, "Well I've got absolutely nothing, everything we touch about Henry is a dead end. As for Bert, the guy was a slob, his friends are slobs and his lifestyle was gross, every lead ends up in a fog of loose ends and empty beer cans."

Beatrice stretched and yawned, "Nothing. Henry was known as a bully and obviously disliked his job, but there's nothing I've found that would indicate that he's been bumped off. I'm more inclined to think that he got in over his head somewhere and decided on a fresh start somewhere warm and far away."

Dave nodded and turned to Sheila, "How about our private sleuth?"

She smiled, "Plenty of conjecture, but nothing I'd want to give you."

Dave nodded and stood up, "Excuse me for a moment."

He pulled out his mobile phone and wandered down the lounge. Beatrice looked at her watch, "Sorry, must go, apparently Kings Lynn have a job for me."

Judith laughed, "More loo cleaning?"

"No fear, this is about a timeshare scam, not just any old timeshare but timeshare mansions."

Judith wondered how Beatrice managed to keep up her undercover stories when she changed jobs so frequently, "So are you a pseudo-buyer?"

She stretched, "A super-rich pseudo-buyer, so I'll be in a five star hotel and living like a lady, believe me this job may take some time."

Both Sheila and Judith laughed as Beatrice left them.

Dave wandered back and after refilling his coffee cup sat down. He suddenly looked haggard, "Right, there was more to my early morning meeting with the Super than just this case. We've got a possible abduction of a child at Taverham. Father picked up his own children yesterday for his monthly access; the parents are divorced. Arrangement

was that he picked them up at nine in the morning and dropped them at six in the evening, or before. He actually dropped them off at their Sunday school at three, problem is that according to his kids he'd picked up another child who he didn't drop at the Sunday school. He's not been seen since, neither has that child."

Sheela held up her hand, "I think I'd better go."

Dave shook his head, "Can you stay for a moment, this is the real reason I called you this morning." He resumed his story, "As you can imagine the parents are frantic. The missing child is thirteen going on fourteen and according to the two small children she seemed to know their father well, so this may not be a straightforward abduction, but a disappearance by collusion. Anyway we're off there with the mobile incident room."

Judith refrained from smiling, "So I'm still acting DS?"

John offered her a biscuit, "Wouldn't work with anyone else."

He turned to Sheela, "You know the guy apparently, he's called Paul Augustus Marriot."

Sheela screwed up her face and reached into her handbag for a cigarette, only to realize that she'd stopped smoking. She forcibly dumped her bag down on the floor, "Wife hired me two years ago to find him as he wasn't paying his alimony. Took me two weeks and her brother paid my bill. If I remember correctly he was living in Amsterdam with a blonde mistress when I found him. Wife's brother set a European solicitor onto him and he paid up, then a year later he came back and requested access, the rest you know."

Dave nodded, "Can you give DS Green all you have, we need to find this guy and fast."

Sheela nodded, "Of course."

Judith turned to her, "How did you find him?"

"He's an engineer who specializes in wind turbines, you know the sort you see out at sea. That's a small world and one in which he can't change his name as he needs to have a decent CV to prove that he is qualified to do such work. I traced him via the Internet as project manager for a Dutch power generation project."

Sheela instantly went up a few notches in Judith's estimation, she knew that she would never have thought of that angle.

Evie sat with crossed arms, Jasmine sat in bewilderment and a poor harassed council worker rolled her eyes in disbelief as Evie's hippie looking social worker got into full swing. "It's quite simple, you get a

three bedroom house back for use, Jasmine gets a replacement flat at a rent she can afford and Evie doesn't have to apply for social housing. Won't that save you a lot of paperwork and solve a number of problems at the same time?"

The council worker shook her head, "Jasmine's too young to have one of those flats."

"But not too young to get her father's rent book. Bit absurd isn't it? You'll let her have a three bedroom house at a rent she can't afford when she's single, but not a two bedroom flat with another young woman to keep her company at a rent they can afford."

The council worker tried another tack, "We don't allow sub-letting."

The social worker was merciless, "Not asking you to do that, merely to allow them to have joint rent-book with Jasmine as the prime tenant. I know that you allow such tenancies as you use them for men and women living together, you call them coterie tenancies and even use them for groups of students."

The council worker went back to her original tack, "But she's too young."

"She's old enough to bury her father, old enough to work and they would both be monitored by me."

The council worker put her head in her hands, this was not going well, it had all started off as a simple rent-book transfer between a deceased father and his only daughter, somehow it had all gone pear shaped. Evie smiled, she knew from the council lady's demeanour that her social worker was beginning to wear her down and win the day, it was now only a matter of time.

Sheela half-turned to Judith as she rummaged through her filing cabinet for the case notes on Paul Marriot. Trying to keep her voice even she casually asked, "How about Vernon Miles, has he turned up anything? His methods may be a little more unorthodox than ours."

Judith laughed and rolled her eyes, "Oh Regional Crime has egg all over their faces; they lost him."

"Lost him?"

"They followed him for a week and he used a classic ruse. First he led them into a false sense of security by being easy to follow. Then he parks himself at home and while The DCs are sitting outside he escapes through his loft to the house down the road and scarpers. It took them eight hours to realize he'd gone, by then he could be in America, let alone Europe or Scandinavia."

Sheela tried to look surprised, "Are they searching for him?"

"Not worth the bother or the cost; he'll either come back and we'll get him, or he'll settle somewhere else and as far as we are concerned it's good riddance to bad rubbish."

Sheela nodded and pulled out the file thinking that surely it couldn't be that easy? The police were obviously sure that Vernon had gone on the run and they didn't have the manpower, or the inclination, to follow up on his disappearance. She was suddenly glad of her early morning call from Dave and the peace of mind it would give Quentin.

Jasmine and Evie walked out of the council building. Evie grinned, "Told you we'd be OK. Miss Anson could argue for England."

Jasmine virtually skipped along the pavement, "And she got us a flat on the top floor with views over the river."

Evie's grin grew wider, "Did you like that argument. As young women we'd have better security there than in a ground floor flat with windows next to the lawns and as the second floor is all three bedroom flats it had to be the top floor."

Jasmine smiled, "Shame all the two bedroom flats on the third floor are on the river side."

They both laughed.

Sheela stood on the doorstep of Lord Hawes mansion and fumed, his pet undertaker had not even invited her in while he went to 'see if Lord Hawes was at home.' Eventually she was shown into a small lounge, she wondered why it wasn't the study. Lord Hawes arrived five minutes later, he was still in his dressing gown. He sat down and snarled, "Well have you something to show for my hard earned money?"

Sheela decided that she'd had enough of this sort of treatment, she tossed the photograph onto his lap. "One photograph of Mademoiselle Clementina outside her home in Cannes, or should I say your niece, or is it daughter? Difficult to know when it's the child of you and your brother's ex-wife, although she wasn't his ex-wife when Clementina was born was she?"

Lord Hawes went red under the collar and snapped, "How do you know that?"

"Photographer's name on the back of the photograph with a print number. He said who it was and the French registration district said who her parents were. Bold of you that, putting both your names on her

birth certificate before you had her permanently farmed out to your cousin."

He glowered at her, "I suppose you want money to keep quiet."

Sheela shook her head, "No, you've paid my fee. However, I would point out that should Henry be dead she is your legal heir, I do hope that you don't intent to disenfranchise her."

Lord Hawes made a sort of deep throat guttural noise, "You're off limits young lady."

Sheela held her ground, "Oh, in that case I might make a little trip to Cannes and tell her that her real father is an unscrupulous bastard who's trying to avoid his obligations."

Lord Hawes turned a sort of puce colour and vehemently growled, "Not that it's any business of yours young lady, but I've named her in my new will and I've paid the bills for her education and medical insurance since she was born."

Sheela nodded and Lord Hawes returned to a near normal colour. He muttered, "So you'll say nothing."

"Nothing, but only for the child's sake, not yours."

He lit a cigarette and every fibre of Sheela's body screamed for nicotine. He exhaled smoke, "And what of Henry? Is he living out his miserable life in some dark and dingy hovel? I do hope so."

Sheela chose her words carefully, "I can't pinpoint his exact location, but I fear that your new will was worth writing as he will never claim his inheritance."

Lord Hawes took the statement without a flicker of emotion. "You're saying that I shouldn't expect him to walk back into my life and demand more money?"

"Exactly."

"Ever?"

"Never."

Lord Hawes stood up, "Can I sue you if you're wrong?"

"Indubitably."

He reached into his dressing gown pocket and tossed her a bundle of notes. "Your £1000 for a successful outcome, now go away, keep your mouth shut and never come back."

Sheela decided on one of her strategic withdrawals and Lord Hawes went back into his study. He took a photograph of Henry off the wall and looked at it. After a mere few second he took the frame apart and tossed the photograph into the waste bin; he put the photograph of the young girl in the frame and hung it back on the wall. He then resumed

to his perusal of his latest take-over bid, content that if he succeeded the proceeds wouldn't be going to Henry.

Jane walked into her storehouse and talked to a few people as she crossed the floor, she arrived at Christine's desk as she was talking to Jasmine. Jane waited and listened until Jasmine smiled and walked away, she looked a thousand times more self-confident than when she first started. Jane handed over some invoices and had a quiet word with Christine before leaving to check up on Roger's team.

Sheela drove out to Surlington pit, parking by the pole across the track and walking to the side of the pit. Two fishermen were sitting in the evening sunlight watching their floats; it was obviously a place of peace and tranquility. One of the fishermen turned and gave a cross between a grin and a leer. "Going for a dip missy?"

Sheela shook her head, "No thanks, it looks too cold. What's the fishing like?"

"Getting better, we were worried at first that there wasn't enough food for them down below, but now they seem to be thriving. Give it a couple of years and we'll be pulling them out on a piece of string and a bent pin."

Sheela shivered at the mention of 'food below', but she had just had to come to the pit to look at the last resting place of Henry and Vernon. She nodded to the wooden jetty, "Going to be boating here?"

"Model boats, but they're a bit of a nuisance; scare the ducks frighten the fish."

Sheela walked a few hundred yards along the lake and said a quiet prayer for Vernon and Henry. She pulled a small potted rose bush from the carrier bag she was carrying and planted it about six feet away from the lake next to a bench; it didn't seem right to just let them lie at the bottom and nobody care.

Christine took a cup of coffee off of Jane and sat down in one of the armchairs in the Hawes hotel lounge. Jane sat down in another and Sarah made up the triad by sitting in the third. Christine tasted her coffee and put it down, "What's all this about Jane, you've never had us meet here before."

Jane's eyes moved from one to the other wondering where she should start. She decided that honesty was the best policy. "I wanted to tell you

two first as you've worked for me longest and I might have an offer for you."

She swallowed and Christine and Sarah waited.

"I've decided that I want to sell the business and I wondered if you two wanted to buy it."

Christine's mouth dropped open and Sarah froze with her cup between saucer and mouth. Christine recovered first, "Goodness knows what your business is worth, but I couldn't afford it."

Sarah carefully put her cup down, "Are you talking about assets, buying out the contracts and a payment for the good name of the business?"

Jane licked her lips and said quietly, "I am thinking about selling you the business over a number of years, let's say five, and I am only thinking of assets. You helped to make the company's name good so why should I be charging you for that? As for the contracts they come and go and to ask you to buy them out would be a travesty. So I am thinking we get a straight valuation of assets as of now, divide by five and you buy me out over five years."

Christine's brain got into gear, "That still means money up front for the payment for the first year."

Jane sipped her coffee, "You are my friends and I trust you, I would accept payment in arrears, so in effect you run the company for me for one year and then start buying me out. I've worked it out, if you make a reasonable profit you should not have to put too much of your own money in, but it would not be self funding even I can't stretch that far."

Sarah watched her friend for a moment and touched her on the arm, "What's brought this on Jane, the company's been your life's work."

Jane gave a weak smile, "I've decided to live in daylight."

She stood up, "I guess you two will want to talk, I'll throw just one more thing in the pot, if you two don't think you can do it by yourselves think of Roger. He's been with us almost as long as you two, he'd be little use with the financial management, but he's good with people and he gets the best out of them."

She wandered off and they watched her drive the 2CV out of the car park. Christine turned to Sarah, "Is she serious?"

Sarah nodded, "I've seen it coming. She's now got John in her life and the company is beginning to take a back seat. I was rather afraid that she'd let it run down, it never occurred to me that she'd sell it to us."

Christine pulled a piece of hotel notepaper out of a convenient rack, "We had the company assets valued for the last year's finance report, now if we take that figure and..."

Jane drove round the corner and parked. She'd not told John of her decision and she knew that he would urge caution, but she'd decided to throw caution to the wind and seek a normal life.

John was actually being far from cautious, he was on the phone to his friend Alan who was a professor at the local university school of management. He lay back on the hotel bed and marveled at the clear connection to Canada. "Yes I'm serious Alan, I've decided that I've had enough of the peripatetic life and want to actually live at home for a while."

John concentrated on the reply, it would have been all too easy to fall asleep. He then nodded to himself, "Yes that's right, I'd be willing to start at the university mid-September and begin lecturing this October."

They spoke for a few more minutes and John put the telephone receiver down. His call had been fortuitous as Alan had been offered a lecture tour in Canada and wanted someone to fill the gap left behind while his assistant professor took his place for a year. John smiled to himself, that was his job sorted, he only had to find a way to get Global Lubricants to release him from his contract and he was home and dry. Ten seconds after he started thinking about that he fell asleep.

Tuesday morning Sheela picked up Quentin, as arranged, and headed North out of Norwich. Quentin looked round Sheela's car, "Funny smell in here."

"I had it steam valeted last week, it reeked of tobacco."

Quentin smiled, "Sense of smell coming back then?"

She grunted and then relented, "It's in the glove box."

"What is?"

"Your breakfast."

Quentin pulled out a small box containing two chocolate croissants and a small plastic tumbler of orange juice, it took him less than five minutes to consume the contents. "Any chance of knowing where we're going?"

"No."

John arrived at his hotel in York and checked in. He confirmed that he had five executives checked in for his course and smiled, this was just the sort of news he needed. He went to his room and rang the Global Lubricants training department in London and got put through to the

manager. He said a quick prayer, this would need careful handling. "Hello Roland, it's John Smith here, I'm in the hotel in York."

He pause and listened "Weather's fine thank you, but if I'm honest I'm getting a bit cheesed off. I've not had the correct numbers of students for the last ten courses. I did explain when I set up the series of seminars with you that I need eight participants per course, or at least an even number so that they can work in pairs. For eleven out of the last twelve seminars I've not had a full compliment and for the last five odd numbers."

He paused to listen. "I understand the problems from your end, but frankly I can't do a top-notch job with odd numbers and the mix is all wrong with less than eight. Yesterday I had four participants from the same office, where's the mix in that?"

We waited to listen to the manager speak some nonsense about the company's dedication to personal development of its staff.

"I'm not sure I agree with you that something is better than nothing. If I do a less than professional job because of low numbers and poor mix it's your executives and my reputation that suffers and bear in mind that they are probably less likely to go on any future training if the experience is bad this time."

He paused to listen again.

"If you remember doing it over the summer was not my choice, but yours; something to do with your financial cycle."

We paused to listen to a longer monologue from the far end.

"Well that may be the best course of action, in six months time you will know how many executives you have left to train."

John licked his lips.

"I take it that if the contract ceases at the end of the week you will not try and enforce your penalty clause on me for not finishing the series as it is your decision to pull out?"

This time he listened and smiled. "What about my bonus for finishing? I will have completed well over half of the allotted courses."

He waited for the bleat to finish.

"If you calculate it pro-rata on executives attended that's rather unfair as I have no control over attendance; I would accept pro-rata on number of seminars as an act of goodwill."

Pause and listen and broad smile.

"Agreed. Will I have any participants for Norwich?"

Pause.

"I rather thought you might. I'll send you my final invoice next Monday by e-mail."

He rounded off the conversation and put the phone down; now the deed was done, from Friday onwards he'd be temporarily unemployed and was rather looking forward to the prospect.

The plane bumped down at Dublin airport and Quentin looked out of the small window, "I still can't believe that you're taking me to Dublin for a day out."

"Thought that I'd treat you to something different, but I have got an ulterior motive."

"Which is?"

"You'll see."

They made their way through the arrivals terminal and into the general mêlée of the airport building. Sheela led Quentin across the floor to a small coffee bar, spotting Seamus Browne as she approached. She took Quentin towards the counter and at the last moment diverted to the table with Seamus and three others at it. She turned to Quentin, "Quentin Lyons meet Siobhan Carter, your half-sister I believe."

Quentin's eyes bulged, Siobhan stood up and kissed him on both cheeks, the rest of the table clapped and Sheela smiled, this was a job really well done.

Five hours, two meals and one happy reunion later Sheela and Quentin were back in the air leaving Irish airspace. Quentin sighed, "I like her husband, nice chap that."

He turned to Sheela, "I really don't know how to thank you, I've been searching for her for years."

"Piece of cake."

He flexed his fingers and massaged her hand that he was holding. They didn't talk for a few minutes and Quentin's face registered deep thought. As they crossed the west coast of England she turned to her, "And I've been searching for you for years too. Not you specifically, but a woman I could love. A soul-mate, someone who I know I want to be with for ever."

He looked into her eyes, "Marry me Sheela."

Her spine tingled and her heart leapt, but her brain lagged behind. "You've only known me a couple of weeks, I can't yet claim to be a Christian and I can almost hear you telling couples wanting to be married that they must choose wisely as marriage is for life."

His eyebrows rose, "Are you saying no?"

"She squeezed his hand, "Of course not, I'm asking are you sure? After all didn't William Congreve say, 'Married in haste, we may repent at leisure?'"

He resumed his eye contact, "I'm sure, I'm very sure."

Sheela's heart did a double somersault as her brain screamed out in protest that she'd fouled up one relationship and shouldn't embark on another at such reckless speed. On the other hand circumstances had somehow melded their lives together faster than usual. "I shall expect a proper engagement ring."

"Of course."

They kissed until the cabin steward came to give them coffee.

John arrived back in Norwich just before midnight on the Thursday, to his utter disappointment Jane was not at the hotel. He checked in and turned round to find Sarah looking at him. She motioned to the side of the lounge and they went over to a secluded spot behind a pair of potted plastic palms. She gave him the look she reserved for errant shopkeepers and litter louts. "Are you serious about our Jane or are you playing about?"

John was momentarily taken aback by her bluntness. "Pardon?"

Sarah took half a step towards him, "Look, Jane's a good friend of mine and she's at a vulnerable age. Are you serious about her or not?"

John kept an eye on the broom she was holding, "Serious, deadly serious."

Sarah looked him up and down, "you know she wants to sell the business to me, well me and Christine."

John shook his head, "No idea, why would she want to do that?"

"She says she wants to live in daylight, I think she means that she wants to concentrate on you. So if you're not serious back off now before she has no business and no life."

John pondered on this, "If it's any comfort to you I've also decided to make a change and stop travelling for a living, I've got a job at the University."

Jane's voice came from behind, "Not for me I hope!"

He swung round, "Of course for you. I've made mistakes in the past and I'm not travelling about so much that I'll never be with you."

He paused and watched her face, "Are you really selling your business?"

Jane shot Sarah a fearsome look, "I would have told you."

"Is that because of me?"

"It is because of us."

Sarah looked at Jane, "Sorry, but I wanted to be sure that he was serious."

Jane smiled, "I know he is serious."

She waved her bangle and Sarah nodded, "Good."

Jane went up and whispered something in Sarah's ear and she smiled and left them alone by the potted plastic palms. She walked over to John and he wrapped her in her arms and whispered, "You sure you doing the right thing?"

"Certain. You?"

"Certain."

Sarah paused by the reception desk and looked back. They were entwined in each other's arms and she knew that they were both right for each other and destined to stay together. She picked up her broom, the night-work had to go on, but she wished them well in their future life in the daylight.

Chapter 17

St James Weekly Newsheet

Quinquagesima Sunday

Welcome to all of you attending our services today. We hope you enjoy your time with us and you are most welcome to join us for coffee after the service in the hall opposite.

Going, but not leaving.

Today is a special day as it is the last Sunday for our vicar, who leaves us to become chaplain at the local prison. However, he is not leaving! He, and his wife Sheela, will continue to live in the vicarage and Quentin will still be presiding at the increasingly popular midnight communion. We wish Quentin well in his new post. Needless to say we shan't be letting them go without making a fuss and all members of all the St James' congregations are welcome at the buffet lunch at 1pm in the church hall where they will be presented with a large token of our appreciation for Quentin's ministry and Sheela's sterling background work.

Coming, but not arriving.

On Friday evening at 7.30pm we have a special service where Bishop Ivan will be licensing the Revd Shirlie Missinger as our new vicar. This must put us in the record books as having the shortest interregnum on record! This is possible as Shirlie is well known to us and up till last month was the chaplain at the local prison and she has worshipped with us for some time. She will continue to live in her current house by the river.

Congratulations.

To Harry and Ethel Harris who are celebrating their 60th wedding anniversary this week and to Quentin and Sheela who will be celebrating

their second wedding anniversary on the day Quentin takes up his new position.

Congratulations

are also due to our treasurer, John, and his wife Jane on the birth of a daughter Natasha- Charu who weighed in at 3.5Kg. For the uninitiated Charu means beautiful.

Lent

The period of Lent starts on this Wednesday (Ash Wednesday) and there will be a communion service at 7.30pm (Revd Tom Pearce presiding).

Throughout Lent there will be a series of evening Bible studies and meditations on the cross led by our new vicar and based in our old vicarage (i.e. Sheela and Quentin's house.)

And Finally,

The parish of St Jude at Surlington are appealing for help from any scuba divers out there who are licensed to dive below 90 metres. On their glebe land they have Surlington Pit which they have turned into a nature reserve and fishing haven. Unfortunately they are getting small amounts of oil on the water and they want someone to have a look to see what's at the bottom of the pit. So come on all you divers, come and take a dip in Surlington Pit.

From the same author on Feedbacks

Felburgh (2010)

Felburgh is the story of a vicar (Peter) and his life in a new parish; one that he has not chosen and that has not chosen him. The parish is set in seemingly idyllic Suffolk seaside town of Felburgh somewhere between Felixstowe and Aldeburgh. The parish, like most parishes, is only normal on the surface and has underlying tensions and vast social differences. The church itself has a third of a million pounds in the bank, some of the congregation are downright antagonistic and quite a few have interesting pasts. The church has previously seen a rapid succession of vicars, who have been driven out, escaped or just disappeared, this has left a legacy of distrust and discontent. Finally, like the Parish, the vicarage itself also has an interesting history, one which soon impinges on Peter's life and not necessarily for the better. All in all it's a mixture most vicars would run from, but Peter has no choice but to stay as he has nowhere else to go, so can he make a success of it or will history repeat itself once again?

Barnabus Makes Someone Smile (2010)

Barnabus notices a small child who does not seem to smile, ever. However, with a little lesson from a peculiar cat Barnabus learns how to make him smile.

Vignette (2010)

Brian is a vicar on the edge, the edge of suicide that is. He has a number of rural parishes and they all contain farmers who are on the edge, or over the edge, of bankruptcy. It is all out of his control and try as he might he cannot deal with all the pain and angst and it has finally got to him. But he is not allowed to find relief in the comfort of a cold bullet via circumstances that are again out of control. However, as his life spirals downwards there is one chink of light, perhaps, just perhaps it will provide him with a way out.

Barnabus Prepares for Bonfire Night (2010)

Fireworks can be pretty and bonfires can be warming, but to hedgehogs they can be deadly. Barnabus works out a plan to keep the hedgehogs safe, but it is not that simple.

Barnabus and the Lost Spider (2010)

Barnabus, the church mouse, believes that everything in his church is in exactly the right place. Then he opens the boiler room door and finds...

Barnabus and Loadza Mice (2010)

Barnabus is bored, in fact Barnabus is very bored. So he decides to invite a few friends over for a video party, unfortunately ...

Barnabus Trusts a Cat (2010)

Barnabus, the church mouse, doesn't like cats very much and certainly wouldn't normally trust one with his life, but one Christmas...

Barnabus and the Inheritance (2010)

A Barnabus Church Mouse Story.

Barnabus gets a surprise letter telling him he's got an inheritance. What can it be? His mind runs wild, is it money? A Mansion? Perhaps it's a ...

Barnabus and the New Year (2010)

It's New Year's Eve and Barnabus is all alone in his church basement home. Have all his friends gone out and left him? he feels really miserable, and then...

Barnabus and the Winter Supply (2010)

Barnabus has been a diligent Church Mouse, he has stored enough food to feed all the mice in his church for the whole of the winter, but then it starts to rain up North and other mice are in trouble, what should he do?

Alien Gel (2010)

Henry is a perfectly normal person in a perfectly normal world, then he is forced by circumstances to buy a weird hair gel. From then on his life begins to change as the hair gel starts to interfere in its own peculiar way. The question is: can Henry keep it under control?

Barnabus Meets Ratatouee (2010)

It's Christmas Eve and all is well in Barbabus' church, that is until there is a scratch on the door and the appearance of a very hungry Romanian rat. Should they say there is no room, or let him and his companions in?

Wilfred's Heavely Journey (2010)

Wilfred, the churchyard rat, is feeling off-colour and down-hearted, so he decides to go on holiday. He chooses a cruse, but it turns out to be not quite what he expected.

Spike and Mother's Day (2010)

Spike the hedgehog has a problem, a real problem. It's two days before Mother's day and he hasn't got her a present, and even worse has no idea what to get. Can his friends help him or not?

Spike Learns to say Sorry (2010)

Spike the hedgehog absolutely loves cycling, but his father has given him two basic rules to obey and one day Spike forgets them, it leads him into all sorts of trouble.

Spike Plays Hedgehog Rugby (2010)

Spike the hedgehog has been made captain of the local hedgehog rugby team, but will his first decision at his first match be a big mistake?

Barnabus needs an Albatross (2010)

The church needs money to repair the church tower and Barnabus and his friends hatch a plan that they hope will give the church the money it needs. Trouble is it all depends on finding a rare and special bird.

Boris the Dancing Beaver (2010)

Boris is a beaver like no other. Forget swimming, forget chopping down trees; Boris loves to dance. But, just what future is there for a dancing beaver? His brothers think he's a nuisance, but Boris is sure dancing, somehow, is his future.

Barnabus and Hank the Armadillo (2010)

Barnabus, the church mouse, is looking after his church as normal and has an American guest, Hank the armadillo. However, they

do not get on very well until the church boiler begins to throw a fit.

Barnabus and Risk Management (2010)

Barnabus, the church mouse, has to entertain his friend's Aunt. She is a bit of a snob and loves to find fault with the state of Barnabus' church. She discovers a box of soft toys in the wrong place and has a good moan, but Barnabus has an unusual answer; one involving sky-diving!

Sarah has a problem (2010)

Sarah the skunk has a couple of problems; one being her temper. She just can't keep it and when she gets angry those around her get squirted with her special smell liquid. It's not a recipe for keeping friends, so she hasn't any. Then one day...

Arboreal Love (2010)

Can trees feel for human beings as human beings feel for trees? Not everybody thinks so, but one old lady holds a secret: a secret of a love and passion for a tree that knew no bounds. But could this love be infectious?

The Last Assignment (2010)

They are highly trained operatives. They have been specially prepared for any mission. They are kept under tight reign. But there is this special assignment, could it be their last?

Cold (2010)

Jim Tarrent is an ex-army sergeant turned private investigator following his untimely departure from the army. On solving his first case he gains a partner and together they look like they will make a go of his business. However, Jim has a traumatic past that he cannot seem to leave behind and his partner is probably no better off. Then two cases hit them that could change their lives, and their detective agency, for ever.

The Rectory (2010)

Stephen Holmes is the type of person for whom every silver cloud has a black lining. Up to now he has led a fairly uneventful life. Uneventful that is if you forget that everything he touches has a

knack of turning to dust or biting back. So much so that after nearly a decade as a bank clerk he has not progressed more than one tiny step up the promotion ladder; so much so that he's really given up on living and thinks of himself as just existing; so much so that you'd hardly call him a good catch or for that matter any sort of catch. However, a surprise letter offers him the chance to change all that and to begin a new life, nay a new wealthy life. But he knows that every time someone fills up his glass with beer it has a habit of leaking out through unnoticed cracks, so can it all be true, and are there really new horizons ahead?

Lumen in *Let Your Little Light Shine (2010)*

Lumen is a glow worm with attitude. Currently he's fed up with being a glow worm and turned his lights off. But there is a problem, if his light doesn't shine, just where does his energy go?

Book Woman (2010)

Mary is the Manager of a private lending library in the sleepy Suffolk coastal town of Eastburgh. She originally wanted to be a journalist, but following a dreadful accident that she was forced to realign her career aspirations. Mary has a reputation of being rather short with people and fending off chances of friendship, not that she has much chance of friendships as she works full time and cares for her elderly mother.

However, Mary's nicely ordered world of books and home is slowly turned round thanks to an unexpected discovery, a young girl and Mary's changing inner needs.

The Soulmate Agency (2010)

The Soulmate Agency is a dating agency with a difference. Instead of pairing people up they invite groups of people away for a week and run them through a series of exercises to help them get to know one another. However, that is not to say the owner doesn't have a hidden plan of possible matings. But one assorted group, as soon as it arrives, starts to defy the odds...

Trembine Halt (2010)

Trembine Halt is a tiny Cambridgeshire village. Like most small villages the dozen inhabitants have their various foibles, but they have learnt to live together and support one another when

necessary, even coping with the odd transitory interloper. However, lurking underneath are emotional hang-ups, hidden relationships, suicides and selfishness. All would remain as it was, except on one snowy day a freight train gets stuck in the village and the addition of the extra person starts off a train of events that will have long term repercussions.

The Face (2010)

Brian is the type of guy who likes to have everything cut and dried and his life on a well-ordered track. He's been in the same teaching job since leaving university and spends every summer holiday house-sitting for his cousin George. However, this summer, after seeing a woman's face in a supermarket, his life starts to change in ways he would never have contemplated. However, there is more to come and his well ordered life starts to spiral way out of control, the problem is that he rather begins to like it that way.

Botanago (2010)

Botanago refers to a mathematical formula, which is invented within a robotics company by an eccentric and irascible middle aged research engineer called Albert, who is not all he seems. All would be well if they left him alone to think his mathematical thoughts, but in Jeddle Robotics lie people with ambition and downright managerial ruthlessness that Albert detests. So while he strives to perfect his cherished formula, he must also deal with the rest of his life, and that is nowhere near as easy.

Ruth (2010)

Ruth is a runner with a unique sexual chemistry that combines in almost near perfection with the story-teller; but she says little and wants nothing else. However, as far as he is concerned this is enough, then the unexpected happens and life gets turned on it's head...

Bitter (2010)

Jim Tarrent and Jenn Tarrent are settling down to a new routine in their detective agency following their marriage.

They have the usual mix of cases, but also pick up a case for

military intelligence involving two dead service personnel discovered in unusual circumstances while Jim (who still dreams of his army past) plugs away at solving a child hit and run mystery no matter what it costs.

However, both cases lead them into murky territory where simple objectives have morphed into potential scandals that no-one on high wants revealed.

Jims unusual evidence gathering skills and Jenn's organisation lead them further on than anyone else, but perhaps the outcome is not worth the trouble involved.

(Bitter is a sequel to 'Cold')

Sydney takes a stand (2011)

Sydney the frog only has a small muddy puddle as a home and now the council want to take it away - there comes a time when every frog has to make a stand. Unfortunately this time the stand is against a giant digger; can he survive?

Barnabus can Fly! (2011)

Barnabus the church mouse has got himself into a pickle again! He's been teaching the mouslets all about bats, but now he can't find one and his class are beginning to disbelieve him - can there be a solution?

Barnabus and the 'Swerve' (2011)

Barnabus has a lot on his mind; the church want to sell off their ancient pipe organ and he needs to find a way to beat the Red Rodents at Mouse Volley ball. The answer could lie in something very different...



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