



## **Botanago**

Ivan B

**Published:** 2010

**Categorie(s):**

**Tag(s):** "Nove" "Robotics" "Romance" "Discovery" "Intrigue"

This eBook is copyright material and must not be copied, reproduced, transferred, distributed, leased, licensed or publically performed or used in any way except as specifically permitted in writing by the publishers as allowed under the terms and conditions under which it was obtained of as strictly applicable copyright law. Any unauthorised distribution or use of this text may be a direct infringement of the author's and publisher's rights and those responsible may be liable in law accordingly. .

Published by barlebooks.net©2010

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events or locales is entirely coincidental.

My grateful thanks go to Tim Massey, who diligently edited this book from a rather haphazard manuscript into a readable work.

# Chapter 1

## Unwanted

Albert ate the last of his buttered toast and brushed the crumbs from his white shirt. He half-filled a cereal bowl of full-cream milk and opened a tin of cat-food, half of which he placed in an identical cereal bowl. He placed the bowls outside of the back door, donned his faithful brown sports jacket, and slammed the back door shut. He walked down his uneven garden path to the old wooden garage at the bottom of his garden, stopping on the way to check that his tomatoes were still growing and that the feral ginger cat that had appeared in his garden was still under the shed. From the garage he extracted his faithful Raleigh bicycle, which he wheeled into the alley that ran between the gardens. Finally, he completed his morning routine by tucking his brown twill trousers into his green cotton socks and mounting his cycle for the ride to work. The journey involved no roads. Once out of the alleyway he crossed over the side-road and then proceeded down a footpath and on to the old railway line, which in times of surplus funds the local council had converted into a cycle-way. This cycle-way took him almost directly to the side entrance of Jeddle Robotics. The journey should take about fifteen minutes, but Albert always allowed nearly forty-five, aiming to arrive at his office just before 10am. This extra time enabled him to stop and observe the wildlife on the way or to pick the odd mushroom. He didn't know it, but as he cycled there were two conversations going on about him at Jeddle Robotics, neither of which was particularly auspicious.

The first conversation was taking place at the top of Jeddle's administration block and was between Robert Hardle and John Draper. Robert was the Head of Engineering, and John the newly appointed Managing Director (Engineering and Manufacture). They were both what Albert referred to as 'the suits.' That is they wore the company dark-blue worsted suits with attendant pale blue shirt and

monogrammed tie. They sat either side of John's imposing desk, and even without the occupant, the desk extruded the message 'I am important' from its polished surface and imposing blotter. At the visiting margins of the desk Robert's small unimposing figure sat uneasily on a chair designed not for comfort or style, but for intimidation. On the control side of the desk John languished in a leather executive multi-movement chair that somehow accentuated his height and confirmed that he was totally self-assured and destined for higher things. They had been discussing John's proposed management restructuring when they came to Albert. So far this had been less of a discussion than a monologue; John intended this style to continue as he flopped Albert's file on to the desk. "And then we come to this chappie – Albert Potterdon. Just what is he doing still working for the company?"

Robert chose to reply on the defensive. He'd already been savaged by John's tongue twice during this meeting and wanted to escape as unscathed as possible. "He's our senior manager with specific responsibility for new ideas. He has saved us a lot of money in the past."

John tut-tutted and gave an expression of impatient tolerance, "in the past, that's just the point; in the past! What has he done recently, and why on earth does this moron also have management responsibility for the canteen?"

Robert squirmed in his chair, "two years ago he came up with a neat mathematical algorithm that enabled us to reduce power consumption on our manufacturing robots by 17%"

John opened the file, "you mean the angular pre-prediction algorithm for three-dimensional movement in fixed base manufacturing robots engaged on repetitive, but time-varying, processes?"

"Yes."

John fixed Robert with a stare over his horn-rimmed glasses, "why is this mathematical nicety referred to as Botanaga?"

Robert shifted in his seat again, "he names all his algorithms – he claims that he had the inspiration for this one while looking at country dancing during a travel programme on Portugal."

John took his glasses off and waved them at Robert leaning forward as he spoke, "this guy is a fruit-cake. He gives names to mathematical formulae, refuses to meet any of our customers and I understand won't start work before ten in the morning."

Robert tried to put up a half-hearted defence, but was less concerned about Albert than his own position. "He's on an old-style contract that allows flexi-time working. As long as he starts by ten and never leaves

till after three he is working his core hours. Actually he seldom goes home before seven; he says he does his best thinking in the late afternoon."

John threw his glasses on the blotter – probably its sole use – and threw himself back into his luxurious throne. "Not been thinking much recently then has he? And why does he manage the canteen for goodness sake?"

Robert allowed himself to smile, "your predecessor decided that he wanted to get rid of him, and as we can't make him redundant – we would need to replace him – we gave him all the management tasks nobody else wanted. So he has the Post-room, the Canteen, Transport, and Security. Oh and he also looks after car-parking arrangements."

John rifled through the file, "so it was his idea to transport the half-built robots on the canal from here to our other manufacturing unit?"

Robert nodded, "saved us a fortune and we halved our fleet of lorries."

John closed the file with a snap and tapped the desk with an immaculately manicured fingernail. "Name one thing – I'm just looking for one thing – that he has done in the last two years."

"He's working on-"

John cut Robert short by holding up his hand and snapped, "Not working on, done!"

Robert stayed quite deciding that he'd defended Albert enough and better start working on keeping his own skin safe. John muttered, "Dead wood, the guy's dead wood."

John looked up as there was a knock on the door and gave a menacing smile, "I've taken the liberty of asking Penelope to join us."

Penelope, the group's personnel manager, entered wearing the female equivalent of the blue suit - a dark-blue two-piece suit with pale blue blouse and a monogrammed flimsy scarf around her shoulders. She was carrying Albert's personnel file. She sat down and gave the briefest of acknowledgements to Robert. He eyed her warily, John was bad enough, but Penelope rightly had a reputation for being acerbic and he had no doubt that she would sell her own mother, let alone him, if it was to her advantage. She smiled, showing even over-white teeth that made Robert think of a great white shark, and started her diatribe. "I've been looking at Albert's file. He is an anachronism. I've been here three years and never seen a contract like his, it's archaic."

Robert interjected, "he was offered a new-style contract again four years ago, but turned it down."

Penelope fixed Robert with a withering look, "and he was allowed to?"

Robert noted the criticism in her voice and shrugged his shoulders; "we were half-way through a contract with the Egyptians and the Chairman told us to back-off rather than risk losing him in the middle of a lucrative deal."

John leant back in his chair and swivelled to face Penelope; "so what's unusual about this contract?"

Penelope turned her attention on him. "His salary is fixed and linked to inflation, he is entitled to an annual bonus that is relative to our profits, and he doesn't have to use a company car and doesn't have to adhere to our dress code when representing the company. His contract also allows flexi-time working and he is allowed to keep the royalties from his patents."

John genuinely looked puzzled, "his patents?"

Penelope grimaced both for the answer and Robert's failure to address it. "His patents. Under this old-style contract he keeps personal hold of the patents he produces and the company gets to use them for reduced royalties while he works for us."

John tut-tutted again and looked at Robert, "how many patents?"

Robert blinked in bewilderment, "no idea."

John stood up, walked around the desk and dropped Albert's file in his lap. "Well, find out!"

He pointed his manicured finger at Penelope, "and I want you to work on a way whereby we can get him out of the company and keep his patents. We need fresh blood in that post and I mean to provide it."

The other conversation regarding Albert was taking place on the other side of the factory site in the outer room to Albert's office which was perched high up in the roof space above the stores. Albert's office was one of five in this building; all of these offices having old-style anterooms for the secretaries. In this little anonymous room outside Albert's office, Josephine was trying to brief Yvonne Jeddle. Josephine was Albert's retiring secretary and Yvonne was scheduled as her replacement. The problem was that Yvonne did not appear to be listening as Josephine tried to explain the filing system. Eventually Josephine gave up and asked, "Any questions?"

Yvonne shrugged her shoulders and moved her chewing gum from left cheek to right cheek; "not really, filing system is the same all over the company. What's he like?"

"You mean Mr Potterdon?"

"Who else?"

Josephine smiled at what she knew was to come if Yvonne had no idea about her new boss. "He's not of this world and yet he is very incisive?"

Yvonne looked perplexed and Josephine continued, "He doesn't conform; whether this is deliberate or just part of his personality I'm not sure. But he doesn't go to the Christmas party; won't wear a suit – especially a company blue one; won't start work before ten in the morning and won't let you type all his mathematical papers."

Yvonne passed her chewing gum back across her mouth, "so what does he do?"

Josephine smiled sweetly like the little old lady she was; "he expects you to be efficient, he expects a cup of tea waiting for him at ten o'clock and he sings."

"Sings?"

"He's in the Cathedral choir and in a barber shop group. Last year he spent his only holiday in Berlin at some barber shop competition."

Yvonne raised her eyebrows, "did his group win?"

"He says they were robbed!"

She then passed Yvonne a neatly typed list, "here's his likes, dislikes and some of his quirks; it may save you from getting off on the wrong foot. He particularly dislikes smoking, no one, not even the Chairman, is allowed to smoke in his office. Do you smoke?"

Yvonne shook her head, "not at work, only social."

Josephine paused, wondering whether she should actually put into words her real thoughts, and then decided that there was nothing to be lost. "There's one other thing. He's not the man of the month. I've been his secretary for four years and in that time two Managing Directors and the Old Head of Manufacturing have tried to get rid of him. So it's down to you to watch his back."

Yvonne gave a careless shrug. "Why? If the others are out to get him what's that got to do with me?"

Josephine replied tartly. "Don't you expect to give any loyalty to your boss?"

She sneered. "He's my fifth boss in two years, I won't be here long."

As befitting a man for whom every micron was important Albert duly arrived at the factory at exactly ten minutes to ten and parked his bike in his car-parking slot - Robert's Ford Granada to the right and Penelope's BMW to the left. He ambled up the bleak stairs to his office

and arrived with one minute to spare. He walked into the ante-room as Josephine walked out. She stopped him and grabbed his hand. "Thanks for the speech you made at my retirement party, and thanks very much for the box of French perfumes – you shouldn't have."

His rotund face split into a broad grin, "of course I should. You've put up with me for four years, for that you should get the George Cross!"

They had their last laugh together and Albert went into his office, Yvonne was nowhere around, but there was a cup of tea on his desk. He picked it up and sipped it – it was disgusting. He sighed, slipped behind his well worn desk, and took from the bottom drawer Yvonne's personnel file. It did not make pleasant reading. She was the Chairman's niece and written between every line of her file was the unwritten statement that she would not have a job here except for her uncle's position and the fact that nobody had the courage to sack her. Comments from her last four managers did not bode well as she apparently often arrived late and sometimes with a hang-over, was disinterested in her work, and had twice been formally warned about swearing at customers and visitors. He slipped the file back into his desk and pondered on what to do. Albert always pondered, he pondered on anything, and everything, Yvonne in this respect was no different to any other problem. He knew that he was quite entitled to refuse her and ask for a better secretary, but that was not his way. He rose from his chair and looked out of his window into the woods on the other side of the cycle-way. Grasping the pair of binoculars that sat on the shelf he peered through them and muttered to himself, 'so there you are, and you've had little ones.'

Yvonne walked through the open door of his office and stood still. Her new boss was using binoculars to peer through the window and was talking to himself. She surveyed him from behind; about five-foot three, baggy brown trousers – still tucked into his socks, which were slightly different shades of green. Still, his socks fitted in well with his sports jacket she thought, which was faded and well worn. As he lowered his binoculars she could see his rotund face and receding hairline topped by greying black hair in the window. She'd seen him before so she also knew that he had a chubby face, bushy eyebrows, and green eyes - she'd especially noticed the eyes. She also knew, from a month covering for John Draper's secretary, that John Draper thought that he was a total dodo. She coughed and he turned round, still clutching the binoculars. "Urban fox with three cubs, that's one more than last year."

He offered her the binoculars, but she shook her head. He smiled, and motioned towards two old armchairs in the corner of his office, "sit

down please Yvonne, I think we need to talk before the day starts, don't you?"

They sat down. Albert surveyed Yvonne. He knew from her file that she was 36, but she was dressed like a teenager with a tight blue denim skirt and an over-tight pink sweatshirt that had 'Open to offers' emblazoned across her tiny breasts. Her feet were no better in his opinion being clad in a pair of designer trainers that would look better on a dance floor. He moved his eyes up to her shoulder length bottle-blond hair that was slightly out of control and hanging partially in front of her face. To him she was painfully thin and her face, though pleasant enough, was bony and neither pretty nor ugly. What was noticeable was the green topped stud on the right side of her upper lip and her matching green eyes. He particularly noticed the green eyes – it was like looking in a mirror. Albert gave what he hoped was an encouraging smile and started, "I've not met you before as I believe that you have been on holiday for a fortnight and Josephine's departure was somewhat hurried – her daughter has unexpectedly had triplets. You're probably aware that we would normally have had a time for a chat together before you actually started."

He paused; she nodded and passed her chewing gum to the other side of her mouth. Albert ploughed on, "so let's get the ground rules for this office out in the open, then we know where we stand and you can decide if you want to work for me."

Yvonne stared at Albert as if he were mad and continued to chew her gum. Albert started ticking points off on his fingers, "Firstly I like my tea made in a tea-pot and left to stand for three minutes. There's a blue china pot in your office and three spoonfuls of tea does for the two of us. Tea is served at ten and three and for visitors in between – I do not bother about biscuits. Secondly if you work for me I would prefer it if you at least looked like a secretary and not a toilet attendant. Thirdly I don't allow my staff to chew gum – at least not in my sight. Fourthly I like my letters typed old-style; that is with two spaces after a full-stop and indented paragraphs. Fifthly I do not like to be disturbed after afternoon tea – that's my thinking time. Sixthly when I arrive in the morning I expect to see three piles of papers on my desk; those I should just sign, those I should read before I sign, and those I should read and consider." He checked to see that she was still listening and decided that it was hard to tell. "Next your office is your office so you can re-arrange it as you like and put up what pictures you like, but please bear in mind that your office also reflects on me so I would rather there are no posters of naked

men. In addition I do not care how you organise yourself as long as the work gets done; if you wish to change the filing system then change it, don't just sit and moan about it. Lastly I read in your file that you have a tendency to come into work late and with a hangover. I don't mind if you are late, but expect you to be honest enough to work over in recompense. If you have a hang-over, that is your problem as long as it doesn't affect the work."

Albert leant back in his chair and added, much to Yvonne's obvious amazement, "and what about you? What do you expect of me?"

Yvonne had never, ever, been asked that question before and was almost at a total loss, but rather than appear a fool she started to reply. "I'd also rather things were out in the open. If I make a mistake tell me, don't mutter about me behind my back."

She thought hard regretting her extra glass of wine the night before; this was, perhaps, her one chance to say what she felt. She continued, "Please don't swear at me or shout at me; I am not deaf."

She paused, wondering how far she should go, then thought 'what the hell.' "And I don't like to be patronised or treated like a child. I especially don't like being told what to wear."

Yvonne did her best to glower at Albert, who just sat in his chair as if he were about to take a nap. Eventually he said, "So now we've cleared the air are you happy to work for me? Or would you rather we tried to find you a different position?"

Yvonne considered her options, not the least of which had been a showdown with her uncle the previous day. They had had a blazing row about her reputation at the factory and at the pub. She had walked out to go and get drunk with her mates, but not before he had warned her that he would personally sack her if she so much as got one more blot on her copybook or if he heard one more fault had been added to her ever growing list. She decided that in reality she had no options, "can we try a three-month trial?"

Albert shook his head, "six-month trial. I think I take some getting used to."

"Very well, Mr Potterdon, we'll call it a deal." she said.

Albert grinned like a child, "fine. And it's Albert. I don't go in for formality. I'd rather call you Yvonne, so that means that you call me Albert."

As they stood up; Albert looked her in the eye, "one other thing. You're my secretary not my whipping-girl. If anyone starts to get on at you, let me know. I will *not* have my staff harassed."

Yvonne wandered out of his office and into what was now her office. She sat down. She smiled to herself, as she reached for another pair of aspirin, 'make the office mine' she thought, 'now where do I start?'

Twenty minutes later Robert walked into Yvonne's office and without even glancing at Yvonne muttered "is he in?" He didn't wait for a reply of acknowledgement, but continued walking into Albert's office. Once again Albert was standing at the window, binoculars in hand. He turned to Robert, "I could swear that there is a red squirrel down there."

Robert gave an inconsequential dismissive grunt and then carefully closed the office door. He went and sat in an armchair and Albert wandered over, "tea?"

"No thanks," Robert replied, "not got the time."

Albert's face fell and he studied Robert's gloomy disposition; "so what's up?"

Robert grimaced, "John the Knife is after your blood, and he's enlisted the Queen of the Hearts as chief vampire."

Albert raised his eyebrows, "why are you telling me?"

Robert gave a hopeless shrug, "because if they're after you they are probably after me and there might be strength in numbers."

Albert waved his hand dismissively, "I don't go in for office politics you know that, they're a waste of time."

Robert sighed, "You always say that. But I still feel that I need to warn you."

Albert just gave a childish smile. Robert decided to address his own personnel problem, "and we have the problem of Jess."

Albert suddenly became attentive, "you mean Jess the post-girl."

"Yes."

"What problem?"

Robert leaned forward and said firmly, "she's just not acceptable."

"Why? Is the mail delivered to the wrong people?"

Robert began to get frustrated and his tone of voice went up a notch. "You know that it doesn't."

"Then what's the problem. She's employed to deliver the internal mail and she does it faultlessly, even coping with the regular office moves. Has she ever lost any of your mail?"

Robert began to talk louder, "she slouches, she doesn't smile, plus she's dowdy and doesn't present the company image. Damn it Albert she never, ever, looks at you, just dumps the mail in the tray, and walks out. Not a bit like Cindy."

Albert smiled and entwined his fingers. "Ah, dear Cindy who would waste half her time talking." He suddenly switched to becoming businesslike and decisive. "We don't pay Jess enough to project anybody's image and as far as I am concerned she does her job excellently. That's why I gave her a good annual review and I suspect that is what you want me to alter."

Robert voice changed to an almost bullying manner. "Won't you add just one word about her demeanour?"

Albert shook his head. "You mean her depression. She has depression – it's not catching, but it is an illness. She can't help it and I won't comment on it, just like I won't comment on anybody else's disability if it does not affect their work."

Robert's face changed to an 'I've just sucked a lemon' look and he said firmly, "Albert you cannot just ignore company image. Visitors see her and wonder what sort of company this is."

Robert's words and manner seem to just roll off Albert, who stood up clearly having had enough of the meeting. "Far better to see her as she really is than see the rest of you suited up to project some sort of false perception. It's the way our robots work that impresses the user, not some false projection, or company culture. You're my line manager, if you want to add a comment to her review then go ahead, but I warn you if it is discriminatory I will personally see that you are taken to task over it."

Robert also stood up and walked to the door clearly furious. "If you adopt attitudes like that Albert, I can't protect you, nor would I want to."

He walked through Yvonne's office and into the corridor. Yvonne watched him go; in his brief visit she had learned one important thing; the walls of Albert's office were paper thin and the armchairs were immediately on the other side of the wall from her. She had heard every word of the verbal interchange. She had seen Robert bully before using his position and his voice to intimidate people, but Albert didn't seem to care. She decided that not many managers would hold their ground against Robert, especially over a very junior member of staff. Perhaps working in this office would be fun after all.

Just before lunch Yvonne knocked on Albert's door and entered his office. He was sitting at his desk looking at a computer printout. She wandered over and laid an e-mail printout in front of him. "It's from John Draper. He want's you to increase Canteen profits by 15% before the end of the year."

Albert smiled, but did not look up. "Thanks Yvonne. E-mail him back saying that there is no problem and I will do as he requests."

Yvonne was quite surprised; she had expected him to resist this in the same manner he had defended Jess. She decided to test him. "Will people be willing to pay that much more?"

Albert put his ancient silver fountain pen down and smiled at Yvonne. "It's only worth fighting battles that need to be fought. Tell him no problem; don't tell him that there'll be no price rises."

He saw the perplexed look on her face and added, with his childlike grin. "The board agreed some time ago that the canteen would be non-profit making; it's hard to get it exactly right so at the end of last year we had made 13p profit. So it won't be difficult to make that 15p this year and exceed John's expectations by," he thought for a moment, "by .38%."

Yvonne smiled to herself, she was amazed at two things; firstly the speed at which he had performed the simple calculation in his head and secondly by the fact that he would so easily risk annoying a Managing Director. She said, hesitatingly, "rather than annoy him won't you tell him the canteen is non-profit making?"

Albert shook his head. "If I do, he will only try and change matters so best let sleeping dogs lie then we can all eat in peace at a price we can afford. And talking about eating..."

He rose from behind his desk, put on his jacket and made for the door. As he departed Yvonne called after him, "your trousers, they're still in your socks."

He waved an acknowledgement and hopped out of the door, freeing his trousers as he went.

Albert spent all of the afternoon and some of the early evening in his office. He was sure that he could improve his Botanaga equation if only he could find the right mathematical transform. He could not seem to get either Laplace or Fourier or any other well-known transform to do the trick. In the end he dashed off a note to a pal of his who was professor of Mathematics at Douglas University. It had to be a note and not an e-mail as it contained mathematical equations and Albert found it easier to write them by hand rather than manipulate the tedious mathematical character formatter in his word processor. He put the note in an envelope and put his jacket on. He decided on his way out to drop the note in the post-room so that it caught the early morning post. He ambled down the stairs and through the corridors to the post-room, which was tucked away at the back of the loading bay. The door to it was locked, but

Albert - as head of security - had a pass-key. He unlocked the door and entered the tiny cluttered room. Rounding the sorting stands on his way to the in-tray he almost tripped over Jess lying on the floor in a sleeping bag sandwiched between some mailbags and an old photocopier.

They stared at each other for a few moments and Albert almost blew a fuse, but one sight of Jess' terrified face made him hold his tongue. He walked back to the door and closed it, more to give him time to compose himself than out of a desire for privacy. He went back and sat on the only chair with Jess still lay on the floor looking as if her world was about to fall apart. However, for once Jess was actually looking at him and not somewhere else. Albert tried to keep his voice even and in as kind a voice as he could manage as he said gently, "what are you doing here Jess?"

Obviously close to tears she replied in a sort of sullen/resigned voice, "nowhere else to go. Had to leave home."

Albert, ever the problem solver, started to think of options, "what about lodgings?"

Jess looked away and said plainly, "can't afford them."

Albert was surprised. "Are they that expensive?"

"You have to give a deposit and a month's rent in advance and I haven't got it."

Albert tried a different tack. "How about going back home then?"

Jess screwed up her already forlorn face. "Mum's got a new partner. He's not too bad but his son is awful. He keeps pawing me."

"Have you told your mum?"

Jess nodded. "She said I had to learn to fight my own battles like she always does."

Albert paused for a moment as the conversation was going nowhere and in any case he'd started it off on the wrong tack. The problem was that Jess sleeping in the post room, not her family. He probed for more information. "How long have you been sleeping here?"

"Three weeks."

Albert was amazed that the security patrols had not found her, but then remembered that the inside of the post-room was not on their daily circuit. He said firmly, "you can't stay here forever."

Jess didn't reply at first, then said, "seven weeks and then I reckon I can get a deposit together."

Albert asked, "What do you do at weekends?"

"Stay here."

“In this room? What about eating, and what about the toilet?”

Jess wriggled in her sleeping bag, “buy sandwiches on Friday; use the sink in the back.”

Albert pondered what it must be like at home to drive a young girl to live like this when it meant so much deprivation. Jess said, “gonna sack me?”

Albert shook his head, “No.”

“Gonna tell?”

Albert almost laughed, “and who would I tell Jess? I am supposed to be your manager.”

“What about old Jonah?” Jonah was the Post-room senior.

“Does he know?” asked Albert.

Jess shook her head. “He just thinks I’m happy to clean up.”

Albert looked at Jess lying on the floor and wondered what to do. He could not just walk away and as her manager he should sack her on the spot for misuse of company property but as a Christian he could not morally cast her out with no-where to go. He also considered her depression, knowing that she found making decisions hard; throwing her out would not help her there either. He made a decision, “how about I look around for you Jess? Try to find somewhere for you to stay.”

Jess didn’t respond, then said, “no hostels. Too many people, too much aggro.”

Albert put that particular thought out of his mind. “How much can you afford each week?”

Jess shrugged her shoulders and started to cry. Albert realised that she could not cope with even this simple question; it was all too much for her.

“I’ll have a look out for you Jess.”

As he got up to go Jess, in a sort of pleading voice, blurted out “can I stay here?”

Albert weighed up the options, “yes, and no. It’s Monday and I’ll try to find you somewhere before Friday, but I don’t think I can let you stay here for another weekend – it’s not hygienic.”

“What’ll I do?”

Albert tried to give a reassuring smile saying, “let’s take one day at a time. You concentrate on keeping out of trouble and I’ll try and do the rest.”

He paused, and then remembered her history. “What about your tablets?”

She pulled a bottle out of her sleeping bag and rattled it. Albert was not satisfied, "promise me you won't try anything silly."

Jess wriggled her arm back into the sleeping bag, shook her head, and replied feebly, "I promise – you know I told you I wouldn't do it again."

Albert recalled when she had first arrived; she had been the only applicant for the job and had only just been allowed by her GP to try and find work after trying to commit suicide by taking her mother's drugs. Albert decided to trust her although in reality he could do little else; "OK, but I want you to see me every afternoon when you deliver my mail."

Jess nodded and Albert left her on the floor, but he was very careful to ensure that he locked the post-room door behind him.

As Albert cycled home he thought what an insidious illness depression was. For almost as long as he could remember his cousin had been depressed. She had been normal – whatever that meant – until her early teens, and then this black cloud seemed to descend upon her and it had never left. She was married, had two lovely children, but rarely really enjoyed life. She had once talked to Albert about the struggle to get through each day, and the constant temptation to end it all. Albert knew that she did not go down that road only because of her children and her husband. She had told him last week that she was trying a new drug – Albert prayed that it would be better than the others.

That evening the Coronation Hall resonated to the sound of barber shop singing as the eighteen strong group practised their latest routines. As the men sang the only woman, Mary Miton, made the tea. She was actually the hall caretaker, but had evolved into being their tea-lady and – much more importantly – their music score technician. Although she couldn't tell a crotchet from a semi-quaver, she put the various scores together for the different parts, working from a notepad of hieroglyphics supplied by the group's leader. She had also organised, and participated in, the group's trip to Berlin. The group practised for just over an hour and then broke for tea. Albert chatted with various men during the break and then sidled over to Mary. He gave her his empty cup, which she, as usual, promptly refilled. Albert lingered and tried a tentative query. "Mary, you told me on the way back from Berlin that you might be on the lookout for a lodger."

Mary shrugged, "be nice. Place is empty after Angela went to New Zealand."

"How is she?"

"Doing fine; she and Alan hope to have more lambs than ever this year."

Albert returned to the subject of his choice, "So you haven't found one yet."

Mary grimaced, "want a female. I tried putting an advert in the local college, but only men applied."

She studied Albert, of all the men here she considered him the most odd, but she had to admit that he had the most beautiful bass singing voice. "Got an ulterior motive for asking? Some little piece on the side you want to tuck away?"

She instantly regretted the final remark as Albert's face went bright red. After a few moments he replied forcibly. "Certainly not! There's a young junior post-girl at work looking for accommodation and I'm just trying to be charitable."

He turned away; Mary reached out and touched him on the shoulder saying, "Sorry Albert, I didn't mean to cause offence."

She paused. "Tell me about the lass."

Albert calmed down and smiled weakly, "not much to tell. She's worked for us since she left school just over two years ago. Apparently she feels that she can't live at home with her new step-family. And she is a depressive."

Mary looked at him oddly. "What sort of depressive? Mild? Maniac? Suicidal?"

Albert shrugged his shoulders. "No idea as she was open about it when I first interviewed her – in any case it is quite obvious. But she has struggled to hold her job for the last two years and she does it rather well."

Mary automatically checked the urn. "Not a bundle of laughs then?"

Albert could see which way this conversation was heading, "and not a conversationalist either, I don't think I have ever heard her say a sentence of more than a dozen words."

Mary shook her head. "I want company Albert and I have no ambitions to be a nursemaid."

Just then the leader clapped his hands together and they reformed for more practise.

As the week progressed Albert and Yvonne settled down into a working partnership and they began to learn one another's foibles. Yvonne had also taken Albert at his word and each morning as he arrived and passed through, he studied Yvonne's office metamorphosing

handiwork. By Thursday it was almost completely transformed. She had placed numerous travel posters on the walls in a sort of artistic manner. For a start, there were five identical posters of Mount Fuji behind her desk in a fan arrangement. She had also thrown away the paper labels on the filing cabinets and replaced them with calligraphy style nail-varnished letters directly painted on the metal. As Albert surveyed the changes he remarked, "Ever considered art-school?"

"Tried that for a couple of years," she replied casually, "gave it up."

Albert went into his office and sat at his desk and waited for Yvonne to bring him his cup of morning tea. Once she had been and gone Albert reached down to the lower drawer of his desk, unlocked it, and extracted Yvonne's personnel file that he had not yet returned. He thought he might be wrong, but he did not remember any mention of art-college in it. He re-read the file, this time with different eyes; last time he had been primarily studying her company history, but this time he read the whole thing. There was not one mention of art-college while, in fact, there were over ten years missing from her history. It finished at the bottom of one page with her A-levels and started at the top of the next page with her joining the company. He had no doubt that her CV had been specially formatted to deceive. He sat back in his chair and pondered; he hated gaps and unknowns. On an off-chance he did what he always did these days, he decided to search the Internet. When Penelope had arrived Albert had done just that and discovered both her CV on a recruitment site, and an article, written by her, on the necessary demise of the person-centred personnel manager. Albert typed in Yvonne's name and pressed the search button. Much to his surprise a simple search revealed nearly fifty web-sites containing her name. He looked at the first one and it contained a simple extract from a newspaper:

*'Yesterday the Thai government announced that, following a review of cases in which Mr Robert Cranz of Woking was involved, they were releasing Miss Yvonne Jeddle, Ms Jasmine Du Point, Mrs Fredericka Stone, and Miss Hilary Hodden from prison. All had been convicted of drug trafficking and all had claimed innocence. Miss Jeddle had been in prison the longest, serving nearly eleven years of her twenty-year sentence. The Thai government has not offered an apology and is unlikely to do so as all the women were stopped in Bangkok airport carrying large amounts of heroin.'*

Albert's blood ran cold. If he had been asked to list the evils of the world, drug trafficking would have been high on the list. He browsed

through some more sites; nearly all of them said much the same thing. Then, just as he thought there was nothing more to be found he opened up a web-site that was designed to give young people who wanted to backpack around the world useful information. On it was a full-length interview of Yvonne by a reporter called Hannah Roberts; he steadfastly read his way through it even though he disliked the reporting style.

**Hannah:** Yvonne. Thank you for being willing to talk to me about what must be a period of time you'd rather forget. Let's start at the beginning; how come you were in Bangkok in the first place?

**Yvonne:** Hello. I don't mind talking about it if it prevents others from making the same mistake. I'd completed two years at Art College in London after a year's foundation course in Bude. I decided that I'd like to have a gap year to see the world, and gain some artistic inspiration before finishing my studies. I started in Scandinavia and backpacked my way across to Thailand. I ended up spending three weeks in Bangkok before I was due to fly home.

**Hannah:** What did you do in Bangkok?

**Yvonne:** Looked at the sights and I met a young man at the hostel who I thought was very nice. He showed me a lot of Bangkok I would never have seen otherwise. He said that he was Canadian; he certainly knew a lot about Canada. He told me his name was Jonathan Greaves.

**Hannah:** So what happened at the airport?

**Yvonne:** Jonathan said that he was flying out on the same day as me and offered to help me to the airport. Just outside the airport building he said that one of the shoulder straps on his rucksack had broken and was clearly having difficulty in carrying all his bits and pieces. I offered to carry a couple of bags for him; that must be the worst decision of my life.

**Hannah:** So what happened next?

**Yvonne:** As we were going through customs I was stopped and searched; one of John's carrier bags had three kilograms of grade A heroin in it. I said that the bag wasn't mine, but Jonathan denied all knowledge of me, saying that we had merely travelled on the same bus. The swine had used one of my old carrier bags to pack the stuff; it was covered in my fingerprints, but had none of his.

**Hannah:** Then what?

**Yvonne:** I went to a Thai court and was convicted of Drug trafficking and given twenty years.

**Hannah:** That seems very hard.

**Yvonne:** To be fair to the Thai's there are signs all over the airport about checking your baggage; they also make the possible jail terms very clear.

**Hannah:** Could you have opted for an English prison?

**Yvonne:** Only after I had served half my sentence, to be honest it never crossed my mind.

**Hannah:** What was it like inside?

**Yvonne:** Just like suspended animation. We all wore little pale blue dresses, with no underwear and no jewellery and no make-up, and a pair of blue flip-flops. We worked six days a week and were supposed to clean our dormitory on the seventh day and cut our hair.

**Hannah:** Cut your hair every week?

**Yvonne:** We all had a No1.

**Hannah:** Were you allowed any personal possessions?

**Yvonne:** I had told the authorities that I was a Christian, so I was allowed to keep my silver cross and chain, and a kind guard gave me a Bible.

**Hannah:** Did you read it?

**Yvonne:** Not much – it was in French, but I still have it.

**Hannah:** You called it suspended animation.

**Yvonne:** We had the same routine every day. I spent two years cleaning toilets and eight years folding pillowcases.

**Hannah:** What were the guards like.

**Yvonne:** Very polite, but very strict. Once you fell into a routine it all sort of merged into nothingness.

**Hannah:** What about your first year, when you had your baby?

**Yvonne:** Difficult, few guards and almost no fellow prisoners spoke English, so I had to learn Thai. I don't want to talk about Sarah.

**Hannah:** So are you fluent in Thai?

**Yvonne:** Only in prison-speak.

**Hannah:** Did any of the guards try to molest you?

**Yvonne:** No, as I said they were very polite.

**Hannah:** How did you hear of your release?

**Yvonne:** I didn't. One day I was folding pillowcases and was told to follow a guard. He took me to the gate house where I was told to change into a set of normal clothes. I was then taken to the airport, placed on a plane and ended up at Heathrow.

**Hannah:** So you had no time to say goodbye?

**Yvonne:** I was allowed to write a note to my fellow inmates and a guard brought me my French Bible.

**Hannah:** What's it been like since you returned?

**Yvonne:** Difficult. I didn't have to make a decision for ten years. I still wake up at six o'clock and still prefer to sleep on the floor. I have also found that I am unemployable.

**Hannah:** Any physical scars?

**Yvonne:** I had fairly constant diarrhoea for a year, but that's all.

**Hannah:** What about mental scars?

**Yvonne:** When I came back I was afraid of crowded places, open spaces and making friends.

**Hannah:** What advice would you give students travelling to the Far East.

**Yvonne:** Pack your own bags. Carry no one else's and trust no one; not even the Pope. If you don't do that you could end up wearing a light blue dress and folding pillowcases for a lifetime.

**Hannah's Footnote:** Yvonne has made light of her stay in prison. When she was arrested she weighed over seventy kilograms, on release she was under forty. She had Sarah eight months after being arrested and three months after being sent to jail; she gave birth in the prison dormitory. Sarah was adopted, by English parents, when she was two-months old. After her release Yvonne eventually took a crash course in computer skills for secretaries and now works at her uncle's factory; no one else would employ her. Jonathan Greaves, alias Robert Cranz, used the same technique with at least five other women, all of whom were arrested; two were found not guilty on technicalities. Robert himself was eventually arrested eighteen months ago on minor charges, but he escaped while on the journey to his trial; he was found guilty in his absence and sentenced to nine months in prison.

**The message is clear:** Pack your own bags. Carry no one else's and trust no one, else your life may get screwed up too.

Albert cleared his computer screen and sat back in his chair. So Derek Jeddle, the Chairman and founder of Jeddle Robotics, must have been in on the carefully formatted CV. He was not surprised as Derek was a good friend of his and Albert knew just how much he valued his family. He looked at the door of his office; he found it hard to believe that the young woman sitting on the other side had been in a Thai prison for ten years. He supposed that it might explain some of her behaviour problems. He went to drop the file into an envelope to return it to the personnel department and paused. If he could spot the flaw in her file then so could Penelope and she would doubtless want to use the information

for her own ends. He put the file back in his bottom drawer and locked it.

Five minutes later Yvonne knocked and came into Albert's office. She was wearing a long black skirt with a white blouse and an over-long grey cardigan. She looked like an advert for Oxfam. Yvonne spoke first, "call for you from a Mrs Mary Miton – she said that she's talking to herself again so can you send your young lass to see her this afternoon? And there's a message from a Professor Saunders, he said," she checked her notes, "Fourier should do, but you need to truncate the kernel. Does that make sense to you?"

Albert nodded, "perfectly."

He paused, and then added, "Yvonne, I think I owe you an apology. I was very rude on Monday when I talked about your personal attire and it was uncalled for."

Yvonne eyed him suspiciously, Albert didn't normally reflect on his behaviour; she shrugged "I supposed someone had to say it to me – I'm going shopping this weekend, these are my auntie's leftovers."

She smiled showing an awful set of broken edged teeth, "more tea?"

Jess delivered the afternoon post at two and put her head round Albert's door. He was studying a pile of notes on his desk and obviously didn't notice her. She knocked on the side of a filing cabinet. Albert looked up and gave Jess a broad smile. "Come over here," he said indicating his window.

Jess walked over and looked out. Albert continued, "You see that pink cottage up the lane on the other side of the cycle path?"

Jess nodded. Albert continued again, "it belongs to a woman called Mrs Miton. She may have lodgings you can afford and is expecting to see you when you finish your shift."

Jess looked terrified and half-wailed. "But if she won't have me and I see her after work I won't be able to get back into the post-room!"

Albert almost patted her on the shoulder, but refrained from doing so. "I'm working late as usual so if you have to come back, come here and I'll take you to the post-room. OK?"

Jess nodded and left the office in her usual plodding manner. Albert hoped that Mary would take her since he had found nobody else.

The following day was an eye-opener for Yvonne. She'd taken to looking out of Albert's window at about ten to ten to watch for his arrival. This meant that she could brew his tea and have it waiting when

he arrived. She considered this a good investment as she had learnt in the very short time that she had been with him that Albert liked routine and if she gave him tea on time the morning tended to run smoothly. She could clearly see the cycle track as it passed by the factory and noticed Albert wending his way to the side-gate; she was just about to turn away when she noticed that he wasn't stopping. She picked up Albert's binoculars and studied him. He was riding his bike on autopilot; you could tell from his face that his mind was elsewhere. She watched him as he disappeared from sight. She put the binoculars back on the shelf and considered what to do. She need not have worried, Albert re-appeared, peddling furiously and shot through the side gate. She was pouring his tea when he entered her office. He took the tea from her and said, "I've had an idea. Can you cancel all of today's meetings and deal with any phone calls? I do not want to be disturbed."

"What about your meeting with-."

She didn't finish the sentence; Albert just said, "reschedule it," as he went into his office and shut the door.

Yvonne pulled out Josephine's little list. Number five on the list was 'If he says do not disturb,' and she read Josephine's advice; "give tea every two hours, put sandwiches on his desk for lunch, on no account try and talk to him. Don't say goodbye when you leave.' She was beginning to respect Josephine's list, number one had been 'look out of window to give tea on time,' and that had been good advice. She went to the canteen and gathered a pile of sandwiches. At midday she took in another cup of tea and placed the sandwiches on his desk. Albert had papers spread all over the floor and was kneeling in the middle of them writing hieroglyphics on a large pad using his fountain pen. Come two o'clock the scene was little different; half the sandwiches had disappeared and he was now at his desk on the computer but still not of this world. Come four o'clock the sandwiches had disappeared, but he was still sitting in front of his computer screen. Yvonne took out the empty cup and plate and considered Albert's actions. Josephine's little list said just go, but somehow that seemed uncaring. She went back to the canteen and gathered up some cakes and cold pizza. At six o'clock she took in another cup of tea and placed the pizza and cakes on his desk before going home. On her way out she pinned a notice to his handlebars to inform him that Jess was staying at Mary's for the weekend. She could still not figure out if there was some sort of relationship between Jess and Albert, or why he was bothering so much over a junior member of staff but in the end she decided that Albert had a little club called the

unwanted. So far it had three members, him, Jess and herself. She wondered if the membership list would grow in the coming weeks. She rather hoped it would, there was safety in numbers.

Unbeknown to Yvonne there was already a fourth member of the club and his name was Richard Yates. Richard possessed one of those over-large birthmarks that covered half his face and as a result of that he had had a torrid time at school. Richard had become one of the night-shift security guards at Jeddle Robotics nine months ago with one of his tasks being to patrol round the site at regular occasions through the night. Currently he did this while accompanied by his longhaired Alsatian bitch Sheeba. Sheeba was not a guard dog, but Richard's pet. At the end of Richard's three-month trial period Richard had mentioned to Albert that he felt vulnerable at night on his own and wished he could have his dog with him. Albert had said that this would be OK and Sheeba had accompanied him ever since. They came on shift at nine o'clock and at least three times a month the light in Albert's office was still on when they arrived; such was the case this Friday. In fact Albert did not emerge from his office until nearly eleven o'clock and Richard met him as he was wheeling his bike towards the front gate. As usual Albert made a big fuss of Sheeba and turned to Richard asking, "how's her back leg."

"Fine. The cut's healed nicely and the fur has now grown back."

Albert rubbed the dog's ears, "well old girl," he said, "You watch out for fishing line on the towpath in future."

Albert then turned to Richard, "everything OK?"

"Yes, thanks Mr Potterdon."

Albert smiled as he mounted his bike, "don't forget – tell me if it isn't."

Albert then rode about a hundred metres, stopped and flicked his dynamo onto the rear tyre, and then rode off into the night.

## Chapter 2

### Revelations

On Monday morning, dead on time as usual, Albert strode into Yvonne's office feeling quite cheerful and met her coming out of his office looking like death warmed over. Her eyes were baggy, her skin pallid and every movement looked painful. Albert paused and said kindly, "does the alcohol help?"

Yvonne replied, "Yes" before sitting down behind her desk with exaggerated care. Albert went to his desk and sat down absent mindedly picking up his cup of tea. He reviewed his schedule for the day and was pleased to see that he was timetabled to meet Robert later in the morning – he had good news for him. Albert was just about to sip his tea for the second time when the door opened, or rather the door was slammed back on its hinges, and Yvonne strode into the room. She bellowed, "Who told you? My bloody uncle I suppose just couldn't keep his mouth shut."

Suddenly she seemed to be stricken with the results of the volume of her own voice and propped herself up against the filing cabinet turning an even whiter shade of pale. Albert rose and indicated for her to sit in an armchair. She tentatively lowered herself in one and Albert sat in the other. Albert said, quietly and calmly, "no-one told me. I noticed a gap in your CV and a quick search on the Internet did the rest; especially your interview with Hannah on the backpacker's web site."

She put her head in her hands and muttered, "Shit, shit, shit."

She looked up at Albert, her green eyes not quite focused; "I suppose this is where you tell me to piss off?"

Albert was somewhat taken aback by the language and her assumption of the sack. "No, I am not going to terminate your employment; if Derek is happy to have you in his company then I am content with his decision. But I am not content with your current medical state, or your language."

She almost nodded and sat with her head cradled in her hands looking as if she was about to pass out at any moment. He said in almost a whisper, "Look there is a first-aid room with a bed in it just down the corridor. In your current state you are no good to yourself or me – go and have a sleep. We will talk on your return."

She nodded and staggered to her feet. Albert returned to his desk. He felt for the young woman. He certainly couldn't imagine what it must be like to lose ten years of your life, but she was paid to do a job and currently she wasn't doing it.

An hour later Robert strode into Albert's office and sat positively in one of the armchairs. "Tea?" queried Albert, but as usual Robert shook his head.

"Where's Yvonne?" he almost barked, "I've been trying to get you on the phone all morning and you haven't switched the phone through."

Albert blinked behind his glasses and replied in an even tone, "She's running a little errand for me. What did you want?"

Robert shifted in the armchair. He found it quite as uncomfortable as Albert's attitude. "I wanted to know how many of your patents we use as a company."

Albert shrugged his shoulders and raised his hands, "I've no idea, but I know a file that does."

He wandered over to his filing cabinet and extracted a yellow file. He carried it back to his armchair and looked in it. "According to the contracts department the company is currently using twenty-three of my patents."

Robert was aghast, "twenty-three!"

Albert studied the piece of paper more closely, "well to be exact seven, but there are ten variants of one and eight variants of another."

Robert rolled his eyes, "we must pay you a fortune."

Albert shook his head, "not I, all my patent money go to the Church Army Children's Homes."

Robert was not to be diverted, "then we must pay them a fortune."

He pulled out a sheaf of papers and dumped them on the coffee table, "read this Albert. It's one of our new style contracts. It offers you more personal perks and-."

Albert waved him down to silence and said firmly "I'm not interested. What would I do with a company car or a company mobile phone? I've said it before and I'll say it again - watch my lips – I am not interested."

Robert bristled and squirmed in the armchair, "you may have no choice."

Albert smacked his hand down on the side of his armchair his patience running thin, "I have every choice. Last time you tried this trick I took it all the way to the Chairman and I'll do the same again if you keep pushing."

They sat for a moment facing each other in a mental stand-off until Albert gave his schoolboy grin and said, "But I do have good news. I've managed to produce Botanago, son of Botanaga."

"And?" said Robert not yet willing to change his stance.

"And it will shave another 2% off of the power consumption and increase the overall movement efficiency of the robots by some 4%."

Robert didn't smile, he just sneered, "cheese-paring. We need a step-function in improvement if we are to stay ahead of the competition."

Albert grinned again. "It's a more efficient algorithm and we can use it on all our robots not just the Mark VB."

Robert sat bolt upright all thoughts of contracts washed from his mind, "are you saying that this algorithm will effectively increase the efficiency of all our non-Mark VB robots by about 20%?"

Albert sat nodding his head like an over-pleased schoolboy. "Are you sure?" queried Robert.

"Sure as I can be, I was in all Saturday running simulations on the computer. All I need now is your permission to try it out on our testing robots and we're away!"

Robert eyed Albert, "and I suppose that you'll patent this as well."

Albert stood up, "no need, it's already covered by my first patent on this procedure and I've just had to file copyright on the software."

Robert stood up, "when are you going to do that?"

"Did it Saturday evening."

Robert made for the door, "do you want to tell John?"

Albert was already wandering over to his desk, "No, you have the pleasure. I want to try one more memory saving tweak."

Robert left Albert to it.

About two o'clock Yvonne reappeared in her office. She looked considerably better, but was still off-colour. She made two cups of tea and took Albert one – he indicated his armchairs. Albert balanced his cup and saucer on the arm of the chair and asked, "How are you now?"

Yvonne smiled weakly, "considerably more compos mentis than before?"

She paused, and then said hesitatingly, "Sorry about barging into your office and shouting at you, I thought that my past was a well kept secret, it was a bit of a shock to find it out in the open."

Albert studied her closely, she looked just about exhausted, and "it's not out in the open. I haven't told anyone and I don't intend to."

She relaxed slightly. Albert took a sip of tea, then said, "I'm feeling benevolent today – I've just had a major breakthrough on one of my ideas. Go home, sleep it off, and come back in the morning."

"If you're sure."

Albert gave a slight smile, "I've had secretaries that had two days a month off with 'headaches' – go home, but come back sober."

She stood up and made for the door, and then she stopped and turned round, "I'm sorry. I know I can't go on like this, but I haven't found a better way yet."

Albert, ever the problem solver, replied, "Try getting blotto on a Saturday night, at least you would then have time to recover on the Sunday."

Yvonne replied as she walked through the door, "this was from Saturday night."

Across the other side of the site Robert was halfway through a conversation with John. John was studying a hasty projection put together by Robert of the profit increase possible if Albert's Botanago formula actually worked. He put the figures down and said, "You mean this dodo at the stroke of a pen has altered our company profile with a possible increase in profits of 10%?"

"That's about it," replied Robert smirking. "So he's not such a dodo as you thought."

John tapped the figures, "then why hasn't he found this out before? If he's so clever what's taken him so long? If he'd been more efficient he would have discovered this years ago and made the company a fortune."

Robert was stunned at this approach. "That's hardly fair! No one told Einstein that he was late producing the theory of relativity."

John tossed the figures back to Robert. "At least Einstein could claim a warp in the space-time matrix. This guy is a lone worker. The world has moved on. He should be replaced by a young team of eager beavers."

John stood up, indicating that the interview was at an end. Then he snapped, "And have you got him to sign that new contract yet?"

Robert raised his hands in despair, "he won't and I don't think we can make him."

“We’ll see about that. Tell him I want to see him at four.”

Just before four o’clock Albert wended his way across to the Administration block. He sort of hopped along with his whole demeanour suggesting that he was a schoolboy about to go to the headmaster’s office to receive a merit award. He arrived at the secretary’s office about two minutes early and smiled at John’s secretary. She sniffed and said coldly, “they are ready for you, go straight in.”

Albert said, automatically, “Who’s they?” as he walked towards the door.

“Mr Draper and Ms Jones.”

Albert stopped dead, turned round and muttering, “Won’t be a minute,” walked to the next door office. He went straight past Robert’s secretary and into his office. Robert was sitting with one of the young engineers from the production line. Albert ignored the engineer and strode up to Robert, “have you told John of Botanago?”

Robert tried for a defensive manoeuvre, “Yes, and I’d rather you didn’t barge into my office.”

Albert totally ignored the remark and said through clenched teeth, “then why have I been called to see John with Penelope in attendance, that woman is bad news.”

Robert held up his hands, “no idea.”

Albert turned round to walk out. “What you mean is you know, but you haven’t got the courage to tell me.”

Albert walked back past the secretary and into John’s office. Albert surveyed the scene; fully one third of John’s office was taken up by a three-seat settee and two armchairs surrounding an oak coffee table. John and Penelope were sitting at each end of the settee waiting for him. There was a coffee pot of steaming coffee and three cups on the table, plus some extra-thick shortbread biscuits. Albert smiled inwardly - this was a set-up. “Come and sit down,” said John, causing Albert to feel like a fly talking to a tarantula.

Albert suddenly remembered a senior management course he had attended years ago, on that course one of the mantras that the tutor had repeated was ‘if you want gain the initiative, do the unexpected.’ Albert decided on his course of action and walked across the room to sit between them on the settee. He leant forward and poured himself a cup of coffee and took a biscuit. This simple positioning act put John totally off of his stride. Albert again smiled to himself, “Coffee anyone?” he asked. Penelope recovered first. “Yes please Albert, I take it black.”

Albert poured her a cup of coffee and passed it to her, he commented casually, "nice to see that our head of personnel does not discriminate," and offered her the biscuits. Albert could see John from the corner of his eye; he had turned a nice shade of red. Albert sat back and dunked his biscuit as they sat in a sort of strained silence. Penelope was the first to give in, she got up and moved to an armchair; John moved to the other armchair a few seconds later. He dropped an employment contract onto the coffee table, "this is our new style employment contract for senior manager, and we now don't allow any others to be in use."

When he paused for breath Albert interrupted, "I know, the company has been using it for eight years now and all new managers have to sign it – but it is not retrospective."

"It is now," said Penelope with a smooth edged tone of enticement, "we've decided that it is much more efficient for the company that all our managers are on the same contract – it makes life so much easier."

Albert took a sip of coffee and dunked a second biscuit. "Who's we, and easier for whom?"

Penelope replied smoothly, "easier for everyone."

John interjected with an edge of frustration in his voice, "you are the only person in the company on an old-style contract, carrying the overhead for just one person isn't worth it so we've decided to put an end to the anomaly."

Albert put his cup back on the coffee table and poured himself a second cup. In reality he hated coffee, but he was not going to let them get the upper hand and he wanted to control the meeting as best he could. He sat back in the settee and said, "I asked, who we is?"

Penelope gave one of her great white shark smiles, "we is the company."

"So this is a board decision?"

John replied with more than a little irritation in his voice, "we don't need to take such trivial decisions to the board; it is quite within my mandate, and that of Ms Jones, to make such decisions."

Albert smiled sweetly, "have you told the Chairman that?"

John finally lost his temper and virtually shouted, "come on man, stop being a Luddite and sign the damn thing."

Albert stood up, "I don't think so."

John barked, "Sit down, we haven't finished."

Albert walked across the room saying as he went, "you might not have finished, but I have."

He walked straight out before they could reply. Penelope and John sat in silence for a minute, and then Penelope said, "I told you he wouldn't be a pushover."

John shook his head in disbelief, "where does he get his confidence from? He's only an employee, not a director."

Penelope shrugged her shoulders, "I once mentioned Albert at a board meeting, and Derek told me in no uncertain terms to leave him alone."

"Why?"

Penelope shrugged her shoulders again, "no idea."

John fixed her with a stare, "well I suggest that you find out, unless you have any better ideas?"

Penelope gazed at the door Albert had just walked out of, "there must be some way of getting him to sign. Everybody has a weakness somewhere; it's just a matter of finding it."

John replied harshly, "well get on and find it. If this new jiggery-pokery of Albert's is as good as Robert thinks we could end up paying him a fortune and I would rather the money went into my bonus than his charity."

Meanwhile Albert strode back to his office and picked up a thin red file from his desk. He placed it in his briefcase and then went to his computer with a look of purpose on his face; he spent a couple of minutes deleting files. He then set the computer to perform its monthly maintenance schedule knowing that this would eliminate all the final traces of the files he had just erased. He tucked his trousers in his socks and locked his office door; he then put his head round the door of the next-door secretary. "Yvonne's gone home ill. I worked all Saturday so I'm going home too. If anyone wants me they can wait till tomorrow." He didn't wait for a reply.

Later that evening Albert was at his barbershop group practice and back into his normal routine with the rigours of the afternoon temporarily forgotten. Come the tea break he tackled Mary over Jess' progress. She didn't look enthusiastic and frowned, "difficult to say, she has about as much conversation as a butcher at a vegetarian's convention."

"But you're not about to throw her out?"

Mary put her tea-towel down. "What's it to you if I do?"

Albert was about to give a sharp retort when he stopped himself - just because his day had turned sour there was no need to take it out on Mary. "I know how hard it can be for a depressive to find the light at the

end of the tunnel. Jess is doing well at work; I just don't want external circumstances to undo what she has already done."

Mary gave Albert a funny look, "she's not your niece or anything?"

Albert laughed, "No, no relation."

"So you really are just being charitable?"

Albert proffered his tea-cup to her, "I'm not good with people Mary. Give me a nice mathematical equation or a music score and I can do my bit, but people leave me cold. I want to help Jess, but the best way of doing that is to find her someone she can relate to and who has the patience to listen to her – and I know that is not me."

Mary refilled his cup and then started wiping teacups again, "but you think it might be me?"

Albert nodded to the people in the room, "I bet you can tell me everyone's name, date of birth, family details, and favourite café."

Mary smiled. "Don't know your date of birth!"

Albert laughed. Mary asked, "what about your friends Albert, surely you know all about them?"

The look of forlorn loneliness on Albert's face was all the reply she needed; friends were obviously not on his daily agenda. This look led her to make a decision which she knew she might regret, "well Albert if you want to know how Jess is, come to lunch with us on Sunday."

Total surprise crossed Albert's face. "Will she still be with you?"

"I'm not going to throw her out just yet – I don't know her favourite café."

Albert blinked, but could not think of a withdrawal strategy. "What time?"

"What time can you make; you sing at the Cathedral don't you?"

Albert stared into space, obviously calculating times. "Service finishes about twelve-thirty so I could be with you by one-fifteen."

Mary smiled and wagged a finger. "Treat yourself Albert, use your car – I know you've got one – dinner will be at one."

Albert gave a sheepish grin, "OK, and thanks."

Albert wandered off towards the regrouping choir and Mary wondered if she had done the right thing. She finally decided that anything would be better than Sunday dinner alone with Jess. She was growing to like the girl, but conversation was a long and drawn out painful exercise.

The following morning when Albert arrived at work Yvonne was deep in conversation with another secretary. He left them talking

and went into his office. His computer was still on and signalling that it had finished its monthly routines. Albert sat down and called up his e-mails. There was one from his old pal Professor Saunders asking if Fourier had done the trick, and if so could he have sight of the answer? Albert sent him a long e-mail explaining the principles of his Botanago Formula, but not the details. Just as he finished Yvonne brought his tea in, "sorry it's late I was catching up on office gossip." She had swapped her Oxfam outfit for a pale blue dress with dark-blue splodgy bits all over it.

Albert fixed her with a blank stare, "I'd rather you didn't waste you time on trivia."

Yvonne grinned and wiggled her eyebrows. "Not trivia, you're the hot news this week."

Albert was taken aback "Me?"

"Apparently you've been winding up the Queen of Hearts."

Albert wondered if he should correct her for using the nickname of a senior member of staff, but was intrigued to know why he was the centre of gossip."

"What are people saying?"

"That you are facing them off over some issue or other and that they don't like it."

Albert sipped his tea, "that's not hot news; it's been going on for years."

Yvonne said quietly, "according to the grapevine they are out to really try and get you this time. Apparently it's no holds barred."

Albert stood up, "thanks for telling me, I think we need to talk."

He pointed to the armchairs. Yvonne didn't move, "can we talk here, the armchairs make me feel like a naughty schoolgirl."

Albert sat down and Yvonne pulled a chair over from the other side of the room. Now it was Albert's turn to be put off his stroke. He had been preparing a cosy chat, but without his beloved armchair he wasn't sure where to start. Yvonne solved the problem by beginning the conversation. "I'm sorry about yesterday. I've never been that bad before."

"And that was from Saturday night?"

"Yes and no. I did go on a binge on Saturday, but I also polished off a bottle or so of Red wine Sunday afternoon. I should have stuck to white."

She giggled slightly and this annoyed Albert. He said stiffly, "it's no laughing matter. You couldn't do your job yesterday and goodness knows what all that alcohol is doing to your body."

Yvonne was quite surprised at the vehemence in his voice and could not work out whether it was because she couldn't work or because he really was concerned about her health. She replied tartly, "I'm not an alcoholic; I don't normally get drunk during the week."

This was not going as Albert had planned and he had enough sense to realise that if he were not careful he could cause a rift between himself and his secretary that would not be helpful. He put his teacup down and said firmly, "I never said that you were. I just don't want you to press your self-destruct button."

She looked t of the window over Albert's shoulder and said softly, "that particular button was pressed almost fourteen years ago."

Albert was now at a total loss and took refuge in finishing his tea. Eventually he looked at Yvonne and tried one of his best smiles. "Right, I think it's time for a fresh start."

Yvonne was clearly perplexed. "Fresh start?"

"As far as I am concerned today is the first day of our working relationship, everything else hasn't happened. You try to do your job as a secretary and I'll try not to be rude."

She smiled weakly, "I can't promise that I won't drink Albert. I'd like to, but it is a way of blotting out the past, and I haven't yet found a better one."

Albert sighed, "Can't you learn to live with it and move on?"

"No."

"Can you at least try not to consume vast quantities of red-wine on a Sunday afternoon?"

Yvonne nodded, "I can try that."

Yvonne started to stand up, but Albert raised his hand, "if we are having a fresh start is there anything else I should know that you haven't told me."

She looked out of the window again, "I'm having trouble with your dictation. I'm not an audio typist. I would find it easier if you talked to me and I made my own notes."

Albert nodded. Yvonne then looked at Albert. "And is there anything you haven't told me?"

She meant 'is there anything in my work that you would like me to change', but Albert took the phrase and entirely different way. He sat perfectly still for a few seconds and went a shade of pink. "My mother died of alcohol poisoning. I've watched one person drink herself into oblivion and I don't particularly want to repeat the exercise."

Albert shifted in his chair, "and I'd rather you didn't put that on the grapevine."

Yvonne looked at Albert, he had suddenly become a vulnerable little boy who wanted affection but knew it would never come. She replied gently, "of course I will not tell anyone, but thank you for telling me."

Albert stood up and went to his window; the conversation was clearly at an end. Yvonne left Albert standing there. For once he wasn't studying the view, but remembering in his mind's eye his drunken mother staggering around the house seeking out more booze. She had also wanted to forget, but had ended up forgetting life.

Over the next four days Yvonne found herself working harder than she had thought possible working for one man. Albert started producing test schedules on Tuesday, test criteria on Wednesday, test benchmarks related to previous tests on Thursday, and a set of predicted results on Friday. These were all produced for the entire range of seventeen different robot types. She was just producing the last set of predicted results at 6:30pm on Friday evening when Albert arrived back from visiting the testing laboratory. He rubbed his hands with glee, "all ready for testing next week."

Yvonne smiled at his boyish eagerness, she felt shattered. "How long will testing take?"

Albert's face fell, "I'd like to spend three months to make absolutely sure, but I've only got the test line for three weeks. We'll have to do the best we can."

He picked up some Dictaphone tapes, and then stopped as if playing the child's game of statues. He straightened up. "Did you mean what you said about my dictating?"

Yvonne nodded as she re-filled the printer with fresh paper. "Yes, I'd rather take notes from you in speed-writing and work from those; it will be faster and more accurate in the end, especially with some of the odd mathematical words that you use which I have never heard before."

Albert grinned again like a mischievous schoolboy. "Well then you'd better come down to the production line and work with us. I will have my laptop and portable printer there and in any case they have a full blown computer system on hand if we can get to use it."

"Every day?" queried Yvonne.

"Every day, but not all day. I usually set the tests up at eight o'clock and leave the line running under the technician's supervision by about eleven. I then return at five o'clock to see the results."

"What time do you leave?"

"If all goes well by about seven."

She said quietly, but firmly, "Albert my hours are nine till five and I don't have any transport."

Albert just went "Oh" and slid into his problem-solving mode.

"Do you fancy some overtime and the use of a company car for a week?"

Yvonne's eye's opened in disbelief, "you're asking me to work an eleven hour day for three weeks and shuttle myself back and forth between here and our other factory, which is twenty miles away?"

She paused. "It's not that I couldn't do with the overtime Albert, I just haven't driven that much in the last few years, especially in city traffic."

Albert scratched the centre of his mop of hair. "How about we share the driving?"

Yvonne waved her arms in the air and threw her head back, "I must be mad. I came to work here for a quiet life and a few pennies. OK, I'll give it ago."

Albert suddenly gave Yvonne a sideways look, "I'll pick you up at home on Monday."

Yvonne realised where he was coming from and scolded him. "What you mean is I might still be under the influence and your not taking any chances."

Albert shuffled his feet, "I know I said a fresh start but-"

Yvonne waved him down, "No. I think it is a good idea, I don't fancy driving a car I've never seen in the Monday morning rush hour anyway."

"Good, said Albert, pick you up at seven."

"Seven!" Yvonne almost screamed.

"Well it takes about an hour that time of day to-"

Yvonne cut across him, "I'll only see that time of day if I get paid from the time you pick me up."

Albert grinned. "Done. Bring a couple of notepads and a bag-full of pencils."

With that he disappeared into his office, Yvonne could swear that he was almost skipping. Then she realised that this was all a great adventure for Albert, she only hoped that it didn't end in tears.

Sunday lunch-time Albert drew up outside Mary's cottage and pulled on the hand-brake. He could not think what possessed him to accept Mary's invitation, but despite his best problem solving abilities

he had failed to find a way out of the invitation for fear it would jeopardise Jess' position. He hated eating with people he didn't know. He also disliked breaking his normal routine and yearned for the solitude of the corner booth in the Old Toll House Restaurant. As he walked up the garden path Jess opened the door; she gazed at his car. "What sort of car is that?"

"A 1963 Morris Traveller."

Jess eyed it suspiciously, "why don't you have a newer one?"

Albert laughed. "Because I like this one. It is just as good around town as a new one and it's cheap to run."

Albert went inside and found Mary standing at the kitchen door. He didn't know it but she had been muttering to herself all morning and wondering why on earth she had invited him to Sunday Lunch. Albert presented her with a bunch of lilies and a box of after-dinner mints; she was quite taken aback. "Oh Albert, they're lovely – did you grow them?"

Albert smiled as he shook his head, "no, I only grow tomatoes."

Mary raised an eyebrow. "Only tomatoes? No potatoes or beans?"

Albert shook his head. "No I only enjoy growing tomatoes, but I do grow several different varieties."

They sat down to dinner almost immediately with Mary fussing around. "I forgot to ask if you disliked anything, but I figured that you were a meat and two veggie person so it's roast beef – is that OK?"

Albert thought to himself that things were looking up. "Fine."

"What do you do with all the tomatoes then?" queried Jess.

"Mostly I give them away to various church fetes, but I also eat a fair few."

Mary smiled, she had just about got used to Jess; she was as inquisitive, if not more inquisitive, as most teenagers, but took some time to formulate her questions. "Will you carve Albert?"

Albert started the process of carving the joint, not something he was expert at. When he was about halfway through Jess resumed her conversation, "why grow them to give them away?"

"Albert smiled at her. " It's the growing of them I enjoy. Feeding the plants, treating for aphids, teasing off side-shoots and generally mucking about in the greenhouse. Haven't you ever grown anything?"

Mary went through the process of dishing out the meat and everyone helped themselves to vegetables. "Good services this morning?"

Albert surveyed his overflowing plate. "Sung Matins at nine and sung Eucharist at eleven – I say this meat is excellent – both were well attended although the number of tourists is down this year."

"Do you have to go back for a service this afternoon?"

Jess interrupted, "I grew sunflowers once."

Albert suddenly realised that he would have to carry out two conversations, one with Jess at her pace and the other with Mary at normal pace. "I've grown them too, given the right soil they grow ever so fast."

He then turned to Mary, "no, it's the fifth Sunday of the month so there will be a youth service this evening so the choir will be replaced by a young people's singing group."

"What are the youth services like?" queried Mary, "all noise, and froth?"

Albert laughed, no they are quite good, but I'm a bit old to be called a young person!"

Mary asked. "You always have been high church?"

"Mostly, I enjoy the choral music and you don't tend to find that in low churches, mind you I prefer the sermons in some of them."

"So old people don't go," said Jess.

It took Albert a few seconds to rewind his brain to what Jess was referring to. "We do go, but the service is not designed for us. Personally I go to support the youngsters because they come and support our services. It's a bit like a family supporting one another."

Mary smiled; Albert was coping quite well.

The rest of the meal proceeded in much the same way with Albert and Mary talking on one subject and Jess and Albert talking about another. Once the meal finished Mary made coffee and motioned to Albert that they would have it in the garden. Jess started on the washing up, Albert opened his mouth to volunteer to help, but Mary gave him a warning shake of her head. They went into the garden and sat on a wooden bench in the late spring sunshine. Mary spoke first. "When she came she said that she would do all the washing up because she couldn't pay much. She also volunteered to do her own washing, but there's no point in that as I never fully load the machine anyway."

Albert asked quietly. "Are you going to let her stay?"

Mary nodded. "She's not a bad lass, just had a rough time."

Albert glanced at the kitchen. "Has she talked to you? How long has she been depressed? What medication is she on?"

Mary shook her head saying, "Sorry Albert, conversations are between her and me and wouldn't be right to tell you all about them."

Mary noticed that Albert had relaxed once he knew Jess was staying. "So what's your plan for the afternoon?"

Albert waved his hand in the general direction of the wood, "Glemhurst Abbey are holding an open day and I thought that I'd pop over and see how they are getting on."

Mary looked puzzled. "That's a Catholic Community isn't it? I thought you were an Anglican."

"Yes and no," laughed Albert, "I was baptised a Catholic and they always say once a Catholic always a Catholic. But when I was at University I sort of slipped into Anglicanism because the church close by my digs needed a morning organist."

"You play the organ?"

"Badly."

They both laughed. Mary indicated the wood. "Glemhurst Abbey; don't they also run a hospice?"

"It's another yes and no. The hospice is in the Abbey grounds and the monks look after the building, but the hospice is actually run by an Anglican community of nuns. It's a nice piece of unsung ecumenism."

"So is it the monastery that's having the open day?"

Albert grinned. "Would you believe yes and no? The monastery grounds are open, but the day is organised by the Friends of the Hospice."

Mary had a sudden thought. "Are you a Friend of the Hospice?"

Albert finished his coffee and put the cup down. "Yes," he paused for breath and Mary interjected, "and no."

Albert grinned like a schoolboy. "I have helped them out. Jeddle's also make some hospital equipment, like hoists, and I got the hospice a few when they started up. I also maintain them, but that is all; I'm not an official friend."

Mary changed tack, "have you been at Jeddle's long?"

"I guess since it started."

Just then Jess appeared and came and sat on the grass. Albert became the benevolent father figure, "why don't we all go to the Abbey – it's only just up the road and it's a pleasant walk."

Mary looked uncertain. "How far is a pleasant walk?"

"I guess it's just under a mile."

Mary took this in and said, "OK, it'll make a change."

Jess said, "Abbey, what Abbey?"

They walked to the Abbey and once inside agreed to split up and meet at the cream-tea area at four o'clock. Albert spent most of his time rifling through the books on the second-hand bookstall and looking at the Old Abbey ruins. Mary toured the kitchen garden. Come four o'clock, Mary and Albert met at the tea area; Jess did not arrive. As they finished serving teas at four-thirty Mary and Albert decided to go ahead and enjoyed a cream tea anyway. Jess did not appear until they had just poured out their second cup of tea. "Like a cup of tea Jess?" asked Albert.

She shook her head. "No thanks I had a mug in the greenhouses."

Albert thought for a moment. "I didn't think the greenhouses were open."

After a slight delay Jess replied, "They're not, but they want volunteers to help with re-potting."

Mary raised an eyebrow. "So you've been in the greenhouses all the time?"

Jess nodded. "Want to see?"

They quickly drank their tea and followed Jess round the back and into the greenhouses. Albert had never been here although he knew that they were run by the Friends of the Hospice to raise money and that they sold some of their produce to a number of local garden centres. Jess showed them what she had been doing and was obviously proud of her achievements. "There are lots more to do; I'm going to stay until it gets dark."

Mary became motherly. "You gonna walk home in the dark?"

Before she could answer a voice boomed out from behind; "don't worry, we've got a minibus, we'll make sure that your daughter gets home OK."

They turned round to see a gorilla of a man in green wellies; Albert started to open his mouth, but Mary replied first, "thanks."

Jess wandered off down the other end of the greenhouse and the man held out his hand, "Walter Jones. Head of the Greenhouse Gang." He nodded in Jess' direction. "She's got the patience for this and seems to be enjoying it. Most people find it tedious."

Mary positively beamed at him. "Do you think she'll be welcome as a volunteer?"

He gave a broad smile. "Undoubtedly."

So Mary and Albert walked back alone leaving Jess to the tender mercies of the Greenhouse Gang. At the cottage Albert opening his car door, said “thanks Mary. I’ve really enjoyed this afternoon.”

He climbed in and started the engine. Mary tapped on his window. He wound it down. “Would you like dinner next week?”

Albert nodded. “Thanks.”

Albert drove away and Mary said to herself. “I must be going mad; I thought I wanted a quite life!”

# Chapter 3

## Just Testing

The next three weeks were filled with frenetic activity. Albert and Yvonne settled into a routine; Yvonne drove Albert to the test installation – the traffic wasn't that bad early in the morning - and Albert drove Yvonne back to the office. This allowed Albert to dictate to Yvonne as he drove back and for her to take notes. Yvonne couldn't help noticing that from day one Albert did not lord it over the technicians, rather he chose to work alongside them and to take their advice. She tackled him about this on their third drive to work. He was nonchalant. "I think I know how to run tests and I certainly know what I want, but these chaps run tests every day of their lives. Really, they are the experts and I am the novice. If you go to the test area and don't listen to the technicians then you are a fool."

The tests certainly progressed well and after two and a half-weeks they actually began to think that they might finish early. Then they started testing the last of the current range of production line robots, the Mark VIIB. Albert actually thought that as all the others had improved as expected this one, being the most up-to-date, would be no problem. However, the first test revealed that Albert's modifications caused a decrease in efficiency, and a rise in power consumption. Albert was baffled. As the hours passed Albert grew more and more frustrated, there appeared to be no rhyme or reason as to why the Mark VIIB performed so badly. Yvonne actually thought that at one point Albert was about to pick up an iron bar and physically beat the recalcitrant robot. Then, as luck would have it, on the Friday afternoon Albert heard a chance remark from one of the technicians to the effect that the Mark VIIB was loaded with 48Megabytes of memory and not 56MB as specified. This was an un-logged manufacturing line modification. Apparently it saved some £5 a robot and someone had thought this saving worthwhile. Albert was furious, the entire robot cost in excess of £10,000, and a £5 saving on an unauthorised modification made no sense

to him at all. He had almost instantly phoned John Draper and blown a fuse over wasted time and poor record keeping. By Friday evening Albert had persuaded the powers that be to allow him one more test day and to load the test robots with 64MB of memory. Monday would be make or break day. If Botanago would not work on the Mark VIIB then the company probably wouldn't use it as all new sales were based on this model.

That Monday at 7am Albert called for Yvonne, but elicited no response from ringing her flat's doorbell. Yvonne lived in a block of flats and each flat had a bell push and a poor quality microphone so that the inmate released the front-door lock to let you in. Albert pushed Yvonne's bell several times, all to no effect. He paused and thought for a moment; he then pressed another doorbell on a completely random choice. When the voice answered Albert said a few random words and the inmate – whoever they were - released the door-lock. Once inside Albert went up three flights of stairs to Yvonne's flat. He had not been in the block before and was appalled at the smell in the stairwell and the graffiti on the walls; most of which he thankfully didn't understand. Once he got to Yvonne's front door he pounded his fist on the door, but still elicited no response. He paused wondering what to do next. Finally his concern for Yvonne over-ruled any ideas he had about propriety; he pulled out a thin plastic card from his wallet (really it contained his insurance details) and used it to gain entry. Thankfully Yvonne had only closed the door on the slam type door-lock and had not used the mortise lock; so with a little manipulation he was soon in Yvonne's flat. The flat was deathly quiet and Albert became conscious of his own breathing. He leant against the wall every fibre of his being screaming at him to turn round; many years earlier he had forced his way into his mother's home by smashing a patio door, on that occasion he had found his mother in a coma from which she had never recovered. Albert suddenly realised that he was afraid of history repeating itself. After a few seconds he took a deep breath, pulled himself together, and started to explore the flat. Yvonne seemed to live in a state of organised chaos; the small living room had piles of strategically placed clothes, the bathroom clusters of strategically placed bottles and the kitchen a collection of miscellaneous sized food containers. But there was no Yvonne. Albert surveyed the closed bedroom door. He was just about to push it open when Yvonne walked in through the front door; to say she was surprised to find Albert in her flat would be an understatement, she was absolutely

flabbergasted. Albert recovered first; "I couldn't raise you on the doorbell, I thought..."

Yvonne put her shopping bag down, "you thought that I was as pissed as a newt and in danger of dying in a pool of vomit."

Albert swallowed hard. "Something like that."

He regained a bit of his normal composure, but not much. "I'm sorry; I didn't mean to invade your privacy it's just that-."

Yvonne waved him into silence. "It's all right Albert. I've always worried about dying in my flat and lying undiscovered for weeks; 'cept if the people round here knew I was dead I'd be found lying naked on bare boards." She chuckled at her macabre joke. She smiled at Albert, "since you're here, and I'm on the drag, how about breakfast?"

Albert looked at his watch. "The tests?"

Yvonne gave him one of her toothy smiles. "I'm sure the technicians know what to do, and they don't need us breathing down their necks. I had to buy a pack of four croissants, so croissants and jam plus tea?"

Albert nodded, "how come you're on the drag?"

"Watch has broken – the hour hand has stopped moving."

Albert looked around the living space, there were absolutely no clocks. Albert carefully moved a pile of clothes aside and sat in the only armchair. Yvonne re-appeared from the kitchen about five minutes later and placed the croissants on the table, after first moving a different pile of clothes. "Sorry about the state of the place, we've been working so hard that I haven't had time to do any ironing, or any real shopping." She looked at Albert, "or any real drinking."

Albert sat up the table opposite Yvonne. "It's not that I think you're a sot, I-."

Yvonne interrupted with a casual wave of her hands. "Eat your croissants while they are warm and stop digging a hole for yourself."

Yvonne watched Albert as he ate the impromptu breakfast. He could be irritable, eccentric and had little small talk, but at least he did always try and do the right thing. She put down her knife, "Albert, thanks for worrying about me. I could have been lying on the floor. This time last year I passed out in the bathroom and banged my face on the washbasin, fortunately there was no long term damage."

Albert grinned. "Washbasin's OK then?" Then he turned serious. "Have you tried Alcoholics Anonymous?"

She instantly turned prickly. "No, and I don't intend to. I'm not bartering my soul to a bunch of people who I don't know. I am controlling it more."

She smiled, showing her dreadful teeth. "This last three weeks I have hardly drunk at all. I've been so tired that I've fallen asleep when I would normally be going down to the pub."

Albert glanced at her as he finished off his tea. "You don't drink alone then?"

Yvonne shook her head. "Lone drinking leads to perdition."

Albert looked at his hands and said softly. "Don't start. My mother was reasonably in control as long as she stuck to social drinking – even then she drank far too much – but when she started to drink alone it became a fast downhill vicious spiral."

Yvonne shrugged her shoulders, "I find no pleasure in drinking alone, but put me in a crowded bar and offer me a drink, and I never refuse."

Albert idly toyed with the few croissant fragments on his plate. "So what do you do when you are alone and..."

Yvonne stood up and gathering up the plates said, "I go down to the pub of course."

Once they reached the test facility they found the test technicians drinking tea and looking smug. They passed over a set of results and Albert studied them. He compared the test results with his predictions and shook his head. "It's better, but not good enough, at least not good enough by my standards."

He sat down and poured himself a mug of tea and handed round a bag of doughnuts that he had insisted on stopping to purchase. They all munched in silence; then Albert asked no one in particular, "is there any other manufacturing modifications to the MarkV11B that I don't know of?"

General silence greeted his question; then one of the younger technicians said, "Of course you know that it's under clocked."

Albert smiled; Yvonne thought that he looked rather like an assassin about to pull the trigger, "under clocked? By how much?"

The technician shrugged his shoulders, the computer technician coughed, "I believe that the main computer module only runs at 400 MHz."

Albert reached for another doughnut, "I thought it was intended to run at 500MHz."

One of the technicians laughed and said, "you could run the damn thing at 800 MHz, we use the same main-board and processor in our test gear; it's only under clocked because someone bought a cheap batch of 400 MHz clock-generators."

Albert offered the doughnuts around again, "do you carry clock-generator spares for your test-gear?"

The chief technician could see where Albert was leading. "We do, but if we blow up the insides of this robot there will be hell to pay, we're supposed to be demonstrating it to some sheikh or other tomorrow."

Albert said, "how about I take the risk? If we blow it up I will personally call the Chairman and tell him it was all my idea and my fault. I'll take the rap."

The chief technician wandered over to his desk picked up a form, filled it in and brought it back. He shoved it under Albert's nose. "I believe you wish to draw an 800MHz clock-generator from our stores?"

Everyone laughed and Albert signed the form. Half an hour later they started running tests on the now over clocked Mark VIIB. By mid-afternoon they had run the complete range of tests. Due to the extra processor speed the Mark VIIB performed even better than Albert had predicted although it did not quite have the power saving gains he had hoped for. He did a few calculations on an old notepad and announced, "Well done. That's all the tests over, thanks for all your help, you have all been marvellous."

He turned to the Chief Technician, "whose showing this sheikh around tomorrow?"

"Bates, head of Far-East sales, and the Chairman."

Albert smiled and picked up the phone in the middle of the laboratory knowing full well that whatever he said would be heard by all the test-crew. They heard a one-sided conversation from Albert. "Hello, can I speak to Derek please; tell him its Albert... I am aware that he is a busy person, but tell him I may be able to help him clinch a deal with the Sheikh tomorrow... Hello Derek, how's Anna and the kids... I'm fine thanks. I'm in the testing laboratory running through the tests on the Botanago formula... Yes it all works as predicted, but I think I may have more good news; if we over clocked the Mark VIIB to 800 MHz the efficiency improvement is about 28%... Yes it's quite safe to do this, the test gear here is based on the same computer and they run them all the time at 800 MHz, in fact I believe we could over clock to 1GHz, but the loss on power saving would not make that worthwhile... Yes I'll make sure that they leave the Mark VIIB with the modifications for tomorrow... And Derek, I could not have done all these tests so quickly without the excellent help and support of all the staff down here, they have been wonderful... Yes I will tell the Head of Manufacturing, but when you tell the board of the improvements I would be grateful if you would mention

that we could not have achieved them without the work of this unit...  
Bye."

He put the phone down and said, to no one in particular, "the Chairman sends his thanks and says that you will be mentioned in despatches."

Yvonne gained a sneaky feeling that Albert would be welcome to eat doughnuts with these particular technicians at any time in the future. Later, on the drive home, she said as much to Albert and he furrowed his brow. "They deserve it. They don't know it but that fool in charge of manufacturing wants to contract out our testing. To do so is sheer lunacy. The test-facility may be an extravagance, but to share our testing with other robot firms would only lead to our ideas being poached."

Yvonne considered this; "What about commercial secrecy?"

Albert shook his head. "We'd all share the same test technicians and sub-consciously they would pass on information; you can tell a lot by how someone tests, you don't necessarily have to dismantle their robots."

Yvonne glanced at Albert; "You don't rate Peter Parsons do you?"

Albert shook his head vehemently. "He should never have been made Head of Manufacturing; he is too concerned with profit over product. One day he'll land the company in a whole load of mess because of his short-cuts and cheapskate engineering tendencies."

They arrived back at the factory and Albert dropped Yvonne at the main entrance while he took the pool car back to the garage. Yvonne wandered back to the office considering Albert's behaviour. To him everything was black or white, the test technicians were good, but Peter Parsons was bad. His old employment contract was good and the proposed new contract bad. She wondered into which category she was falling.

The rest of the week yielded no peace for Yvonne. Albert published his test results, fired a missive off to the board about un-logged modifications, wrote an outstanding testimonial for the test-centre, and produced a set of proposed permanent modifications for the Mark VIIB robot. Even worse for Yvonne, while he was doing this he also caught up on his backlog of administration. By Friday evening Yvonne was tired and in need of a long relaxing bath. At six o'clock Albert appeared from his office and he stopped by her desk. "You don't have to do it all now," he said.

Yvonne waved her hand at her pile of notes, "I'll just finish this letter, and then I'll go home."

Albert hesitated, then placed a small box on her desk; "As your watch is broken I thought..."

Yvonne opened the box. Inside was one of the expensive high-quality Swiss watches that the Jeddle's salespeople gave to prospective clients; the watch-face had 'Jeddle Robotics' inscribed in small gold letters. She looked at Albert, who had gone slightly pink in the face; he shrugged his shoulders, "as a senior manager I'm entitled to give them away."

Yvonne smiled and put the watch back in its box. "They're for customers Albert and I'm not a customer."

He gave his schoolboy grin. "Salespeople wear them as an advert for the company. I think you're a good advert for the company and don't see why you shouldn't wear one."

Yvonne took the watch out of the box and slipped it on her wrist. Albert made for the door, then he stopped and turned round; he placed a sheet of paper on Yvonne's desk and said quietly, "I know it won't treat the root cause of the problem, but if keeping busy keeps you away from alcohol you might like to consider this."

He then virtually ran out of the door. Yvonne turned the sheet over; it was an advert from the local Children's hospice asking for administration help at weekends.

Just after one o'clock on Sunday Albert was once again back at Mary's for Sunday Dinner. This had become a regular routine since his first visit. However, there was one major change.

Immediately after lunch Jess rode off on Mary's rickety old bike towards the greenhouses leaving Albert and Mary to wash up. Albert washed the dishes and Mary dried them up. Mary surveyed Albert's efforts on the gravy saucepan and passed it back; "Reject, still old gravy around the outside of the lip." She smiled saying, "My Bill used to always miss that to."

Albert re-washed the saucepan and passed it back. "How long is it now?"

Mary dried the saucepan and hung up the tea towel while Albert emptied the sink. "Six years."

"Do you still miss him?"

Mary filled the kettle with water. "On and off. You learn to live with the fact that they have gone and will never be coming back, but sometimes you see the back of someone in a crowd and for a moment..."

She shrugged her shoulders and warmed the teapot under the hot tap. "You ever been married Albert?"

"No."

"Ever had someone you would have liked to marry?"

"No."

Mary made the tea and they carried the bits and bobs into the garden. Albert, not too subtly, changed the subject, "I see Jess has taken to working in the greenhouses."

Mary smiled. "Yes, this week she's been up there three nights and virtually all day yesterday."

"I'm surprised she enjoys it so much, it must be quite boring at times."

Mary put down her teacup thinking to herself that Albert could be quite naïve. She said gently, "You do realise don't you Albert, that Jess' behaviour is not only due to her depression?"

Albert looked surprised.

Mary sighed; "Let's just say that she is not endowed with the blessing of a high intelligence and she is never going to be a rocket scientist."

Albert said brusquely. "You're saying she's thick?"

"As two short planks Albert. She didn't gain one single GCSE at school and she tells me she had special tuition for the final year. The poor lass can read, but a book you would devour in an evening would take her a fortnight." She paused, "on the other hand she has a remarkable memory for visual images. I once took her round the house showing her all the photographs and telling her who was who and related to whom. Ten days later she took me round and repeated the whole process, she did not get one person wrong."

Albert nodded, "it's the same at work. She has the knack of knowing who is where. They decorated the administration block recently and people were frequently moving to temporary offices. I believe that she did not get one delivery wrong. On the other hand Jonah – he's in charge of the post room – tells me that if she has to do the actual sorting she manages it, but is dreadfully slow."

Mary poured out some more tea. "We have to face it Albert. Jess may never be better than she is now. The greenhouse work is proving good for her as it has given her an interest and it is something she can do well. Intelligence isn't everything; if she's happy that's probably far more important than striving for goals she will never reach."

She gave a motherly sigh. "And of course there might be a secondary motive."

Albert was obviously puzzled. "Secondary motive?"

"I think there may be a boy she fancies."

"How do you know?"

"She's been buying dog biscuits and there is a boy who is another volunteer and who takes his dog."

Albert grinned. "How do you know she doesn't fancy the dog?"

Albert then took Mary to the nearby village of Hunley to see the flower festival and visit the craft fair. He did not make it back for Evensong.

The following morning Albert arrived at work early and caught Yvonne unprepared for his arrival. As he entered he said, "Don't bother about the tea, it's the six-weekly in-fight."

Yvonne looked at Albert's diary, "you mean the think-tank meeting for heads of units."

Albert nodded and Yvonne asked slyly; "Why do you attend, doesn't Robert cover your area?"

Albert poked around in one of his filing cabinets and brought out a fat file. "Your uncle insists I attend. He says that I get paid the same as a Head of Unit so I can jolly well suffer the meeting and earn my pay."

Yvonne grinned, this sounded just like her uncle, "I take it is not your favourite meeting?"

Albert slammed the drawer shut. "It has no objectives. We are all supposed to sit round and discuss where we think the company should be going. Over the last few months it's become like a political point-scoring meeting. Sometimes I wonder if everybody realises that we all work for the same company."

He signed a few letters and walked towards the door. "I'll be back for afternoon tea."

A minute or so after he had gone Peter Parsons, Head of Manufacturing, put his head round Yvonne's door. "Is Mr Potterdon still here?"

Yvonne shook her head. "No, he's gone to the think-tank meeting."

Peter looked at his watch, "Damn; I forgot that Albert always had a cosy chat with the Chairman first."

Yvonne must have looked perplexed because he explained, "meeting starts at ten-thirty, but Albert always has tea at ten with the Chairman."

Yvonne could not resist asking, "Why?"

Peter shrugged his shoulder. "Beats me. None of the rest of us has a cosy tête-à-tête with the Chairman, but then Albert has been around a long time."

"Can I help?" said Yvonne.

"No, I was going to try and elicit his support for keeping our own test centre."

Yvonne was surprised, "he thinks you are trying to close it."

"Not me, Mr Draper."

Yvonne gave Peter a toothy smile, "I don't think you'll have any trouble there. He thinks your test centre staff is wonderful."

Peter smiled and Yvonne studied him a little closer. About six-foot six, late thirties or early forties, would pass for a Viking on a dark night and was wearing a lightweight fawn suit, not the standard company attire.

Peter glanced at his watch. "When will he be back? I do need to see him about some other matters."

Yvonne considered this; according to Josephine's little list Albert was best left alone after these meetings as he always came back in a foul mood.

"If I were you I'd try just after ten tomorrow, this afternoon may not be a good idea."

He persisted, "It is rather urgent."

Yvonne stuck to her guns. "If you want him to listen to you and not throw you out of the window then tomorrow is best. However, if you fancy trying to fly from a third floor window I'll book you in at four."

He finally got the message. "Tomorrow will be fine."

He hesitated, and then asked, "Was he mad over the changes to the Mark VIIB robot?"

Yvonne grinned, "Was Quasimodo mad when he lost Esmeralda, or Captain Bligh mad when he was cast adrift in the middle of the Pacific?"

Peter got the message. "That mad huh? Book me a coffin for the morning."

Yvonne smiled to herself as Peter left. Albert had Peter Parsons firmly in his 'black' category; maybe he was not so black after all.

The think-tank meeting started late as Albert and the Chairman didn't arrive until ten-forty-five, up till then everybody had been enduring a monologue from John Draper on company efficiency. As they entered Albert glumly surveyed the scene, as usual the battle line were drawn by the seating positions. Down one side of the square table were John Draper (Managing Director E&M), Robert Hardle (Head of Engineering), Peter Parsons (Head of Manufacture), and Caroline Stule (Head of Purchasing and Supply). On the other side were, Jonathan Bailey (Managing Director - Sales), Hazel Cunningham-Brown (Head of Sales –

UK), Eric Bates (Head of sales – Europe and Far East), and Jeremy Jeddle (Head of Sales – Rest of World). Finally across the bottom of the table sat Penelope Jones (Personnel Manager), Felicity Smith (Head of Finance), Vernon Black (Head of Customer After-care and Maintenance), and Kevin Frichley (Managing Director – Administration and Customer Liaison). Basically you had Engineering v Sales v Administration. Derek Jeddle walked to the other side of the table and sat next to his secretary, Rebecca. Albert occupied the one remaining spare seat on the other side of Rebecca; next to this spare seat was the third Managing Director, Prissy Bates. Albert always thought of her as the wild card, she had no executive responsibilities, but she did have a large share in the company. Prissy was also Derek Jeddle's sister.

Derek gave his dry cough and opened the meeting. "Welcome. As usual we have no real agenda for this meeting; it is merely a sounding board so that the three managing directors and I can formulate a company strategy. However, I must say that I found the last meeting of this group a disappointment and may I remind everyone that this is not a political forum, but a think-tank. I do not appreciate attempts at point scoring, or personal attacks."

He leant back in his chair. Penelope gave one of her white shark smiles and bowled the first ball. "Can I just check a point of reference; this meeting is for Unit Heads and Managing Directors."

Derek sighed, clearly irritated by the question, "I would have thought that that was obvious. The only person who does not attend is the Company Secretary."

Penelope smiled again, Albert thought of great white sharks, "Then may I ask why Mr Potterdon attends these meetings? Surely as he reports to Robert he is not a Unit Head."

Derek fixed Penelope with a withering stare. "Albert is here at my personal invitation and just as I can choose to invite Albert so I can choose to de-invite anyone who I think will not contribute in a positive manner to this meeting!"

Penelope smiled, but she was obviously stung by Derek's sharp retort. There was a painful silence and then Eric chirped up. "I suggest that we put more effort into Far-East sales. The Sheikh I showed round last week was well impressed with our latest robots performance. Since Albert's been let loose on it, it has become supercharged."

John was quick off the mark, "it's not just Albert, and it's a team effort."

Before anyone else could muscle in Albert interjected, "too true, without the help of the test centre staff we would not have made so much progress so quickly."

Peter leapt on the band-wagon, "having our own test facility is a god-send; if we have any sort of future strategy then maintaining and enhancing that facility must be on our agenda."

Albert sat back and let his thoughts wander. Conversations went too and fro along the usual lines; sales wanted all-singing all-dancing robots at half the current price. Engineering was out to prove that they ruled the world, and Finance was out to prove that they, in effect, controlled everything. Albert allowed himself to daydream until he heard Penelope speak again; then he gave the meeting his full attention. He hadn't actually heard what she had said, but John Draper's follow up gave him the essence of the flow of the meeting. "It is important for company morale and for seamless and efficient administration that we simplify the number of employment contracts currently in use by the company. We can also use the opportunity to rationalise our workforce."

Prissy suddenly sprang into life, in the mode of an eruption of a sleeping volcano. "Are we saying that our Personnel Department is unable to manage properly in the current environment?"

Penelope rose to the bait. "Of course not as we have never been more efficient."

Prissy turned her attention to John. "So what are you saying? What specific contracts do you think we should change, and what staff do you want to send to the dole queue?"

John, who Albert was sure, had a hide like a rhinoceros and a personal ego the size of Jupiter, responded smoothly. "I believe it is time that we had a proper Engineering Research Unit staffed with up and coming young talent. The time has passed where one man and his dog can produce suitable improvements in a fast-changing environment. If one man takes three years to dig a trench, twenty can do it in less than two months"

Prissy muttered, "If they don't trip over one another,"

And Albert asked, "Who's the dog?"

John bristled and retorted. "It's just a manner of speech, you know what I mean."

Prissy, much to Albert's amazement, appeared to do a sudden temporary U-turn and replied, "I agree. We do need a proper Research Unit, but not just for Engineering – after all they appear to be making

some serious strides forward without the need for too much new blood. We also need better research of possible sales areas and on new ways of providing customer after-care."

She stroked her chin, "maybe we need an independent unit that reports directly to the board via Derek." She suddenly slammed her hand down on the table and virtually shouted, "And then we would not have to waste our time on personal agendas and Engineering delusions of grandeur!"

Derek calmly looked at his watch, "time to break for lunch I think."

Lunch was an excruciating affair for Albert; he had never mastered the art of holding a glass, and a plate of food, and managing to eat at the same time. He also has two conversations of note, one boiled his blood, and the other was a surprise. The surprise was Peter Parsons coming up to him and thanking him for supporting the test centre. Peter explained that John wanted to remove the test-centre as part of his rationalisation. Albert tried to take Peter to task over the under clocking of the MK VIIB, but Peter evaded the question. The other conversation was with Penelope; she sidled up to Albert and practically whispered, "You don't have to put up with Yvonne you know. I am perfectly prepared to sack her even if she is the Chairman's niece."

Albert was taken off guard, but then said, "On what grounds? Her work is perfectly acceptable."

Penelope smiled, flashing her even white teeth, "why Albert haven't you realised that she is a dipsomaniac?"

He was about to reply that her drinking did not affect her work, but then decided that even an admission that he knew she drank could be dangerous for her. Albert tried to smile sweetly, "whatever makes you think that?"

Penelope grinned, "Yesterday I was in the Golden Cube, and so was Yvonne."

Albert waited, he was sure there was more to come, people like Penelope always had an agenda. After a suitable pause she continued, "except that I was sitting at my table whereas Yvonne was lying under hers."

Albert shrugged, "what people do in their own time is their affair."

"Not if they're wearing a Jeddle's Robotics watch, it's a bad image for the company."

Albert went to walk away, but Penelope had not finished, “of course, if a senior member of staff colludes with a junior member of staff to cover up a misdemeanour, then they both go.”

Albert turned to Penelope barely suppressing his anger, but doing so because he knew that to lose his temper would be a fatal mistake. He said, in a reasonably loud voice, “are you saying that I should sacrifice my secretary to prevent you from going after me. God forbid!”

Penelope was once again wrong-footed, she had wanted to privately threaten Albert, but he was making it all public. Albert pressed home his attack in an equally strident voice, “if you have something to say about any member of my staff then I would thank you to use the proper channels, I will not have a hard-working member of my staff attacked by you just because you take pleasure in exercising your power.”

Prissy suddenly appeared at Albert’s side. “Children, children.”

Derek looked at his watch and tapped his glass. “Time to reconvene.”

As they sat down Penelope smiled to herself, she thought that she had found Albert’s Achilles’ heel – he was soft on Yvonne.

The afternoon session was even more fruitless than the morning one and by two-thirty even Derek had had enough. He closed the meeting. Albert got up to go, but Derek asked him to stay for a moment. Derek walked over to Penelope and said quietly, but with force and quite audible to Albert, “If I ever find that you, or any member of your staff with your knowledge, are bending the rules to allow personal vendettas to get the better of them I will ask for – and receive – your resignation. Is that clear?”

Penelope smiled, “as if I or my staff would do such a thing, I am surprised that you’d even think it.”

Derek was not to be put off, “well I have thought it. So be warned.”

Penelope smiled again, “please remember that it takes two directors to dismiss a senior member of staff.”

Derek replied warningly, “and you remember that Albert is a senior member of staff. If I remember his contract correctly he can only be asked to leave by me, or two other directors. You cannot dismiss him.”

Surprise filled Penelope’s face, “I’ve read his contract, and it doesn’t say that.”

Derek grimaced, “then you’ll know that the contract refers to an Appendix.”

Penelope smiled brightly, “but the appendix is lost, none of my staff can find it.”

Derek didn't bat an eyelid, "that's because the appendix is in my safe and a copy of it is in Prissy's safe."

"Can I see it?"

"No, not without due cause, and you have not got due cause. Let me make it clear; employing you was not my idea, I think you are too pushy and too concerned with your own future. Now please go away and prove me wrong, and back off Albert. He is forbidden territory. Do I make myself clear?"

By now Penelope was clearly rattled. She turned round and found Prissy directly behind her and obviously privy to the whole conversation. Prissy smiled rather like a coyote about to kill her dinner. "And it's no good asking me for the appendix because I won't show it to you either."

She paused, and then added menacingly, "and if my brother wants you dismissed I would happily sign as second director without a moments hesitation – understand?"

Penelope nodded; she had fallen foul of one of the celebrated Jeddle family pincer movements. Although she was furious she knew that she would not annoy them again on this particular subject – she was too much of a coward at heart. She also valued her job too much.

Albert watched the manoeuvre from the other side of the room. He couldn't hear what Prissy was saying, but he'd seen Derek and Prissy at work before. Penelope's body language said it all. First of all defiance, then bravado, then acquiescence, then defeat.

Derek wandered back to Albert. Albert looked at him squarely, "I hope you weren't fighting my battles."

Derek smiled, "I don't want you fighting battles Bert, and I want you thinking."

Without waiting for Albert to answer he changed the subject. "How is Yvonne? I didn't get a chance to ask before."

Albert relaxed. "Fine. She makes a good secretary and she has worked her socks off during the testing and its aftermath."

Derek watched Penelope leave the room, "I'm not asking you to protect her Albert. I know that she drinks, and she has told me that you know I sneaked her into the company – and why."

Albert sighed and shook his head. "I don't understand it. She knows the dangers of excess alcohol and yet she seems to deliberately seek to get blotto."

Derek probed gently; "How many times has she come to work unfit to drive a computer?"

Albert replied carefully; "Only once – I sent her home. On two other occasions it's been a close call. Over the last month she has not come to work with a hangover at all, at least not as far as I can discern."

"Is she hampering your work? I was furious when I found out that they had transferred her to be your secretary, she was only supposed to work as one of a team."

Albert considered the point. "No. In fact we work well together, she seems to automatically know what I dislike. I am content to leave things as they are."

Derek patted him on the shoulder. "If things should change tell me first, not the Queen of Hearts. OK?"

Albert nodded. He had known Derek for many years, and knew that he tried to put family above all else. But he had also seen Derek dismiss one of his own sons from the company for mismanagement and knew that if push came to shove Yvonne would go the same way.

When Albert got back to his office it was just on three and Yvonne, right on cue, had his cup of tea ready. As she was about to leave his office he called her over. She turned round and came back; he walked round and perched on the desk front. "I believe that you occasionally drink in the Golden Cube."

Yvonne wondered what was coming; "Sometimes, not often – it's a bit pretentious, but it has a gorgeous barman."

"Be warned, Ms Jones drinks there to. She was there yesterday."

Yvonne nodded, "I ended up there, but it was Saturday."

Albert almost snapped. "I don't think the actual time matters; I don't want her getting her teeth into you; once she bites she never lets go!"

Yvonne stepped back at the sheer vehemence of Albert's words. "Message received," she said, "and understood."

# Chapter 4

## Opportunities

The following morning Peter Parsons arrived to see Albert; Yvonne showed him in. As usual Albert's first greeting was; "Cup of tea?"

Peter nodded and Albert called through to Yvonne for some tea. Albert surreptitiously looked Peter over. To Albert he always looked young, inexperienced and in need of a decent shave. Albert motioned to the armchairs and when they were seated began warily. "What can I do for you Peter?"

Peter tried his best to smile, but he was clearly nervous. "First of all I want to thank you again for your support for the Test Centre and its staff. At the moment it seems like it's the area everybody wants to snipe at."

Albert interrupted. "By everybody you mean the unholy trinity of Penelope, John, and Felicity."

Peter nodded adding, "And Caroline has jumped on the bandwagon; I think she can see some nice fat testing contracts to be negotiated."

Albert grinned like a schoolboy about to plan a mischievous prank. "John is the only one to worry about, and if he backs off so will the others. Tell him about Johnson Robotics."

Peter looked puzzled; "Never heard of them."

Albert smiled again and nodded. "Before your time. They were our main competitor at one time, then they decided to recoup some of their investment and leased their test facility to a much smaller company called Smithson Automated Electronic Machinery."

Peter interrupted; "Do you mean Smithson Electronics?"

Albert nodded. "That's what they've become. Anyway, they leased out their test facility and the Smithson employees noticed that the lab was set up for testing pneumatic as well as hydraulic robots. They went back to base and Smithson designed a pneumatic robot in next to no time; within two years they took over Johnson Robotics and the rest as they say is history."

Yvonne arrived with tea and biscuits. (Despite Albert's previous instructions of 'no biscuits' Yvonne had introduced them for visitors; Albert had not complained.) Peter helped himself to a chocolate cream. "And I want to apologise over the Mark VIIIB robot. I had no idea that the modifications had been made."

Albert, clearly not impressed asked "How can that be?"

Peter sighed. "Felicity issued a financial memo, with John's backing, unbeknown to me. They didn't send me a copy, an administrative oversight, of course! The memo said that if anyone made a substantial saving in any company process then the initiator of the idea got to keep 15% of the first year's savings. Needless to say everyone started trying to save money, some in a rather misguided manner. I have now issued a firm memo saying that any changes have to go through quality control – as normal – or the special bonus will not be available. However, it is rather like shutting the door after the horse has long gone."

After a long internal struggle Albert took a garibaldi biscuit. "Thanks for telling me."

He munched on the biscuit. "Actually Peter I'm glad you came as I have a favour to ask."

Peter waved his hand in the air and Albert continued. "Visiting your test centre has reinforced my feelings of inadequacy."

He noted the surprised look on Peter's face and continued. "I'm not bad in using computers for number crunching, but not for robot control. The technology is advancing so fast that I can't keep up; I suspect none of us managers can. However, your computer test technician seems right on the ball. I'd like to borrow him for a month and give him carte blanche on the Mark VII's computing and control system. It was designed three years ago and in computing terms it must now be archaic. I'm sure there are savings and improvements to be made there, especially in terms of the customer interface – but I don't have enough knowledge to even know where to start."

Peter nodded. "I know what you mean."

He thought for a moment, and then consulted his electronic pocket organiser. "Thought so. Joe – that's the technicians name – took two months off earlier in the year as paternity leave plus six weeks annual leave and as a result of that will be around the whole of August. The labs are normally shut then for recalibration and reorganisation, except we are not reorganising this year. How about you have him for August? Do you want him up here?"

Albert shook his head. "I want him to work in his own environment; I'll just pop in from time to time."

Albert paused, stared for a moment, and said, "I thought his name was Josué?"

Peter smiled. "It is as he was born in Barcelona, but everyone calls him Joe, including his wife."

Albert rubbed his hands. "Will you tell him?"

"Yes, and I'll make it clear to the others that they are to give him any help he needs."

"Thanks."

Peter put his cup down, and then said furtively. "Is Yvonne another one of the Jeddle gang? That would bring the total up to six."

Albert gave a non-committal grunt as office gossip was off of his pleasant activities list. "A distant relation."

Peter gave a broad smile and left, closing the office door behind him. He smiled at Yvonne and said, "Thanks for the tip off; yesterday would have been a disaster. How about I show my thanks by taking you out for lunch?"

He tapped his watch since it was just on twelve. Yvonne puckered her lips in thought and then agreed. "I go to lunch at one o'clock for one hour. I'm not an executive."

Peter smiled. "Is that a yes?"

"Yes, but no alcohol; I'm typing a difficult memo and I need all my faculties."

"Done. Back in an hour. Bye."

Yvonne watched him leave, and thought to herself, 'is he inviting my out because I am Albert's secretary, or is it because I am a Jeddle, or does he actually fancy me? I suppose only time will tell.'

At roughly the same time in another part of the factory John Draper's head secretary, Alison, was about to pass over a telephone call to John; it was from one of the Managing Directors of Smithson Electronics, an old pal of John's. John talked for about ten minutes and when the call was over he sat back in his chair and thought hard. He knew what he wanted to do as a result of the call, but he could not do it alone. In the end he had a choice of two co-conspirators, Robert or Peter. He had just had a nasty argument with Peter over quality control, so he picked up his phone and called Robert over to see him – he said it was urgent and confidential. Robert arrived a few minutes later and John sat him down with a cup of coffee and didn't bother with a preamble. "I've just had a

most interesting call from Harry Smith the Managing Director of Smithson Electronics. It seems that he has a brother-in-law who works at Douglas University who has been singing the praises of our Botanago formula."

Robert could not quite see where this conversation was going. "So?"

John gave a reassuring smile. "So, he wants to use the formula and pay us royalties."

Robert looked horrified. "You're not suggesting we do it are you? This formula gives us the edge in the market until they catch up. To allow them to use it would be commercial suicide!"

John smiled again in need of putting Robert at ease, "Harry is not from their robotics division. He is head of their guidance systems division. He reckons that this formula of ours could revolutionise their torpedo guidance control."

Robert shook his head and rolled his eyes. "That's armaments and Albert would never agree to the formula being used for such a purpose; he's quite a pacifist at heart."

John went in for the kill. "Albert doesn't have to know does he?" And before Robert could interrupt he hastily continued, "And they are willing to pay £45,000 up front and £80,000 each year they use the formula, or a derivative of the formula. That would be £20,000 for you and £25,000 for me just for starters."

Robert instantly realised the implications of what John was proposing and sat back and thought; his wife wanted desperately to send their youngest daughter to a private school while his oldest daughter was bleeding him dry at her university. The money was certainly tempting, but he had a few questions. "They sound a bit desperate to offer so much so soon."

John relaxed; the bait had been swallowed. "They are since they're after a large pan-European contract and they think that this would give them the edge over the Americans."

"Why involve me?"

"The sale has to be authorised by a senior manager and countersigned by a Managing Director to look legitimate to Smithsons. In reality of course we will never put the paperwork through to contracts."

Robert put his head in his hands, then he sat up. "But that would mean the payments would be transferred into the company bank account – we would never get the money."

John smirked. "That's why need the extra £5000 as there's an accounts clerk I know I can bribe."

Robert began to have doubts. "I don't know John; it's all a bit risky. If Albert got wind of it he would go straight to Derek and then it's bye-bye Robert and bye-bye John. Remember - he sacked his own son for accepting a bribe."

John got up and walked about. "His son's sin was being found out, not accepting the bribe. I believe you accepted a rather large payment last time we were tendering for a new electro-mechanical parts supplier."

"How the hell do you know that?"

"Because I'm not as daft as I look. In any case if I tell Derek what I know it's bye-bye Robert anyway. So why not be hung for a rather fat sheep instead of a tiny lamb?"

Robert knew he was stitched up; he could not afford to lose his job, especially with his son clamouring to be funded through the next round of the go-cart championships. He mumbled, "So what do we do next?"

John got down to business. "Firstly you phone this man on this number and say we are willing to trade." He passed over a scrap of paper. "That's their Head of Engineering. You will deal with him and finalised the deal. Secondly you have got to get rid of Albert for a while; send him on a training course, send him over to study American robots, anything – just get him out of the way."

"Why does he have to be out of the way? Can't we do it while he is around?"

John sighed, "Smithsons have a month to tender. They are in a hurry; if they get stuck they might call him for clarification; that would be disastrous! So he has to be out of the way for a month at least."

Robert grunted "Not asking much are you?"

John laughed a hollow sounding laugh, "£20,000 for you this year, and £35,000 for a few years after. Who knows, they may use the formula for years and years."

John suddenly sprang to his feet. "Now go and spin your web and I'll spin mine."

Yvonne had just gotten back from an interesting lunch with Peter when Robert arrived to see Albert. Robert entered Albert's office to find him, as he frequently did, gazing out of his window. In his eagerness, and nervousness, to carry out his plan, Robert did not shut the office door, not that it would have acoustically have mattered. Albert seemed lost in his thoughts, "Penny for them," joked Robert.

Albert gave his schoolboy grin. "I was just thinking that their must be a better way of controlling the Mark IVs when they are used in the super-clean medical laboratories, but the ideas just won't come."

Robert smiled inwardly; this was a golden opportunity. He waved Albert's file in the air, "I'm not surprised, it says in here that you only had two weeks leave last year, and the year before, and the year before that. You are entitled to seven weeks a year. You need more than two-weeks to recharge those grey cells of yours. So I want you to take the next five weeks off – no arguments."

Albert went to protest; Robert waved him down and said firmly, "is there anything in the next five weeks that absolutely must be carried out by you?"

Albert murmured weakly, "I'll take a fortnight."

Robert was on a roll. "Five weeks, not a day less."

Albert shook his head. "I can't leave Yvonne enough work for five weeks."

"She can take her leave."

"No!" Albert responded firmly, "she does not have to take her leave just because I am being banished."

"Very well, my secretary will be going on leave in a weeks time, I'll use Yvonne as her replacement; it will be good experience for her - but you're not being banished, just ordered to take what's due to you."

Albert knew when he was beaten and in any case he had noticed a holiday involving singing which he had rather fancied, "OK. OK. I'll get things in order this week and then I'll take a month off."

"Five weeks," replied Robert firmly. Then he added as an afterthought, "and don't leave a forwarding address, I don't want you bothered, just rested."

Robert then left, passing Yvonne who was sitting at her desk. She had heard every word. She did not begrudge Albert his holiday – he did work hard – but she did not fancy working for Robert, according to the grapevine he had wandering hands.

Over the next three days Albert put his office in order. He saw Joe the technician and told him what he wanted, or rather what he didn't want. That is he didn't want to give Joe any guidance at all, he just told Joe to use what he knew to try and improve the Mark VII computing system. Joe was somewhat surprised, but obviously relishing the opportunity. Albert also completed the last items to do with the Botanago formula and had them filed away in his office. By Friday he had left

Yvonne a large pile of work and finally, just before he left the office, he slipped Yvonne's personnel file into his briefcase. He had no doubt that other hands would be at work in his office while he was away, not least the maintenance staff who had been threatening to re-paint his office for the last four years. He checked that Yvonne knew what was expected of her and that she was prepared to act as Robert's secretary for a few weeks before she took some holiday herself. As ordered, he did not leave a forwarding address.

On Sunday Jess laid up the table for three as she had come to do over the past few weeks. When Mary noticed this she told Jess that Albert was away on holiday and would not be coming for a few weeks. Halfway through the main course, Jess suddenly blurted out, "Why didn't he take you?"

"Why should he?"

Jess digested this and replied, "I thought you two were sort of going out together."

Mary stood up to take the empty plates to the kitchen, then she sat down again. She said softly; "He did ring me and offer a holiday at his expense, but I said no."

She saw the perplexity on Jess' face and continued, "I've been in love Jess, I was in love with Bill for over twenty years, but I am not in love with Albert; at least I don't think so. What we have is companionship, both of us have lonely moments, and being together removes some of them."

Mary finally got up and took the plates to the kitchen. On her return with dessert Jess had formulated his next question, "how do you know?"

Mary gave Jess a knowing smile, "because I don't think about him all the time. I'm pleased when he comes to lunch, but I'm not heartbroken when he doesn't."

Jess ate in silence. "I've got a boy I think about a lot. I think he might ask me out."

"So what are you going to do?"

Jess finished her dessert and helped herself to some more. "Go to the doctors"

Mary was somewhat surprised at this response, but fortunately Jess continued, "I want to reduce my anti-depressants. I've felt a lot better since I've been here and I can't think straight when I'm on them."

Mary becoming concerned asked, "Is that wise?"

Jess looked like she was about to burst into tears. "I don't know, but I can't go on like this. I feel like I'm always walking through syrup."

Mary reached over and held her hand. "Then you go to the doctors."

Jess held Mary's hand tightly. "Last time I went the doctor asked me if I had somewhere to live that was... stable. That's it, somewhere that was stable."

Mary smiled. "You tell that doctor of yours that you have. You can also tell him that there is someone there who will keep an eye on you."

Jess let go of Mary's hand and picked up the dessert bowls. "Shame about you and Albert," Mary said. "I think you make a nice couple."

The next week saw Yvonne diligently ploughing through all the work Albert had left, though to be truthful she only really worked for four days as Monday morning and Thursday morning she had too much of a hangover to think properly. As she approached close of play on Friday afternoon she sat back and did some hard thinking. She knew that she could not go on living like she was and that if Albert had been in, kind as he was, she would have risked the sack. She retrieved a tattered scrap of paper from the bottom of her handbag. She had really resented Albert trying to run her life and having the temerity to suggest that she keep occupied at weekends with voluntary work, but she had no other better ideas. After another moment's hesitation she picked up the phone and dialled the enquiry number. After a brief conversation she put the phone down and muttered to herself that they must be desperate to want to see her so soon and closed up the office. She had hoped that Peter Parsons might invite her out again, but following their brief luncheon she had not seen or heard of him again.

By the time Yvonne had got herself ensconced in Robert's secretary's office she realised that she was going to be in danger of being bored. Robert's normal secretary had completely cleared the decks; even the stapler was full. As she was contemplating perpetual monotony, the secretary from next door wandered in and introduced herself as Ann. She gave a friendly smile with a hint of nervousness about it. "I'm Peter Parson's secretary, if you get stuck on any of Robert's weird filing system give me a yell – I was his secretary a few months ago."

Yvonne was surprised, Peter had told her that he had a young and beautiful secretary, but Ann was 60 if she was a day. "Thanks, it seems like James has left me nothing to do."

Ann sniffed. "Count your blessings;" glancing at the door, "he's a bit of a tyrant."

Yvonne couldn't resist asking what Peter was like. Ann smiled. "A poodle really. He is quite laid-back and if you can't finish something he rarely gets annoyed. Mark you he hates any miss-typing, so the rule is accuracy, not speed."

She put her head out the door and glanced down the corridor, then sat on the chair just inside the door from where she could see the lifts. "Mark you I'm not expecting to see Peter this week."

"Is he on holiday?"

She shook her head. "No, he's in Carlisle. We've been putting a new production line in for an engine manufacturer. He got called away urgently last week as it seems the line is not working properly and nobody seems to know why. Peter thinks there must be some sort of unauthorised change to the robot, but has not yet found it"

Yvonne nodded. "Albert – that's my normal boss – said that one day unauthorised changes to our robots would land us in deep trouble."

Ann stood up. "Well, that day has come. Any ideas would be gratefully received."

Yvonne laughed. "Don't look at me. But you could tell Peter he might like to talk to Joe the test technician. Albert has a high regard for him."

Ann gave Yvonne a peculiar look, somewhere between sympathy and curiosity. "Is Albert as difficult to work for as people say? I hear he does not suffer fools gladly."

Yvonne smiled. "His reputation is greatly exaggerated. He has his little quirks and his moods." She shrugged her shoulders. "I've worked for worse and at least he doesn't leer at me or have wandering hands. Mind you, he thinks the impossible is always achievable."

Ann laughed. "Peter is a bit like that; because he has a problem in Carlisle he expected me to be available all weekend even though he knew my grandchildren were coming over from Germany."

They continued to talk of inconsequential things for another ten minutes, all the time Ann stood in the doorway looking at the lifts. Suddenly she straightened up. "Lift is coming up. Your man is on his way."

Yvonne got the distinct impression that Ann wanted to be totally out of the way when Robert arrived, but perhaps this was just an illusion.

An hour later Jess arrived with the post; she passed over Robert's mail and then hesitated. "Would you like Albert's mail delivered here or shall I put it in your normal office?"

Before she could answer Robert's voice boomed out of his office – he liked to leave his door open. “I don't want his rubbish cluttering up my office; deliver it where you normally do, and don't try and make any fancy decisions 'cause your bound to get them wrong; just deliver the mail.”

Jess looked crestfallen and retreated quickly.

Robert walked out of his office. “Wretched girl gives the place a bad look.” He studied Yvonne as if he had just seen her for the first time. “You can open my mail, but if any letters arrive from Smithson Electronics just bring them in unopened – they're personal. OK?”

There was an edge to his voice that Yvonne didn't like; she also thought that he had dealt appallingly with Jess, who had just been doing her job. Robert, however, had not finished. “And don't try doing anything on your own initiative over here. James has it all organised to my liking.”

He turned to walk into his office, but lingered in the doorway. “And just because you are a Jeddle don't expect any favours; if you come in with a hangover you'll leave with your cards. Understand?”

Yvonne didn't reply, but started to open the mail. Robert ambled back to his desk. Yvonne realised that by leaving his office door open she was constantly in his sight. She sighed to herself that at least it was only for a couple of weeks.

Yvonne found the next two days very oppressive. Robert sat in his office and expected her to be at his beck and call, but it wasn't what he wanted done, it was always the way he asked – as if she had just crawled out from under some stone or other. By Wednesday morning she began to wonder if he knew about her past and in her early morning chat with Ann asked if Robert was always difficult to work for. Ann shrugged. “The man's a bully. He believes that managers have to exert their masculinity and that he is always right by virtue of his position.”

“How does James cope?”

Ann gave a broad smile and almost clapped her hands. “Why do you think that Robert has been given the only male secretary in the place? So many of us complained of his behaviour that I suspect James was deliberately employed to keep him in check.”

Yvonne noted the time and put the kettle on. “A bully is a bully.”

Ann gave an even wider smile. “You've obviously not met James. He is well over six feet tall and he plays full-back in a rugby team. Robert

may be a bully, but James is too physically intimidating for Robert to even sneer at him.”

As they were talking Yvonne got a call from John Drapers secretary informing her that Robert had gone to a meeting with John at the other factory site so she could not expect him in for an hour or so. As she was on the phone Jess arrived and placed the mail in her tray. Without thinking Yvonne started to open the mail. She looked at the first letter and as soon as she saw the heading of Smithson Electronics on the notepaper she started to put it back into the envelope, the she stopped and pulled it out again having caught sight of one word that she had not expected to see. She studied the piece of paper. It was a letter, addressed to Robert, saying that they had received the initial invoice for the use of the Botango formula and that payment would be made as discussed. Yvonne paused with the letter in her hands; Albert had said nothing about selling on the formula to Smithsons. She continued to sit still as she thought hard. Robert was obviously not a person to be crossed, and this might be legitimate, but she smelt a rat. She quickly photocopied the letter and placed it in her handbag. She then mentally thanked whoever has mailed the letter because they had only stuck the flap down on the envelope in a flimsy manner – Yvonne was able to re-seal the envelope and make it look almost as good as new. She then went into Robert’s office and looked for a file; the letter had given a clear reference number. There was no file either in Robert’s filing cabinets, or on the computing system. She glanced at the clock and thought; ‘in for a penny in for a pound.’ She tried Robert’s desk drawers; there was nothing of note in any of them. She went back to her office and finished opening the mail. She then placed the opened letters and the apparently unopened envelope on Robert’s desk.

Robert re-appeared around twelve-thirty and virtually threw his briefcase into his office. “I’ve got to take a couple of Do-dos from the local university to lunch. I will be back as soon as I can. Don’t leave the phones unmanned.”

Yvonne smiled sweetly. “What do I do for lunch?”

“I don’t care if you eat the chair covers, but order in some sandwiches if you must.”

With that he made his bad-tempered way down the corridor. Yvonne waited until she heard Ann next door lock her outer door and then she locked her own – from the inside. She entered Robert’s office and examined his briefcase. To Yvonne’s surprise it was not locked, which was

just as well as it was mostly empty. The only item of note was a writing pad and that was blank. Yvonne retreated to the outer office and unlocked her door. She thought about ringing the accounts department, but decided that she did not have enough information to show her hand. In any case she still had no idea if anything was going on – it was just a hunch.

Robert returned to the office just before three and was in an even fouler temper and his hands were covered in dirt. “Some little toe-rag slashed one of my tyres while I was in the restaurant.”

He fixed Yvonne with a disdainful stare. “Can you drive?”

“Yes.”

He tossed her his set of car keys. “I’ve had to put on the space-saver spare so don’t go above thirty miles an hour. Take it to Johnson’s tyres in the high road; we have an account with them. Don’t bend it.”

Yvonne got up from her desk and asked. “What sort of car is it?”

Robert snarling said, “The one with only three alloy wheels,” and walked into his office.

Yvonne went to the car park and found a black Ford Granada – top of the range – with the aforesaid three alloy wheels. She carefully drove it to the garage. When she stopped on the garage forecourt she had a brief look around the inside of the vehicle; it showed all the signs of not-to-careful family use. One of the mechanics gave her a wave and she drove the car into the garage tyre bay. As she climbed out of the car the mechanic was studying the space-saver tyre. Yvonne explained it was a Jeddle’s car and the mechanic opened the boot to retrieve the alloy wheel. Smiling at her he said “Be about fifteen minutes; there’s a coffee shop across the road.” Yvonne took the hint and went for a scone and coffee. On her return the mechanic got her to sign an invoice and casually remarked; “There was a yellow file stuck under the carpet in the boot; I’ve put it on the passenger seat for you.”

Yvonne gave her thanks and drove the car round the corner. As luck would have it there was a free parking bay. She stopped the car and examined the file. In it were half a dozen letters, all between Robert and the Head of Engineering at Smithson Electronics. They made it clear that Jeddle’s were selling the right for the Smithson Armaments division to use the Jeddle Botanago formula for a first payment of £45,000 and £80,000 for each subsequent year they used the formula. There was also a copy of an internal authorisation form, countersigned by John Draper and an invoice to Smithsons for £45,000. Yvonne made a swift decision.

She locked the car and went to the nearby local library and used their public photocopier to make two copies of every document and one further copy of this morning's confirmation letter. She put the copies in her handbag and then placed the file back under the boot carpet. She then drove back to the office and carefully parked the car in the underground car park. When she finally got back to her office, Robert wasn't there, so she thankfully placed his car-keys on his desk. By the time she left at five Robert had still not returned.

.

# Chapter 5

## Revelations

Yvonne did not go straight home from the office but went instead to The Golden Cube and had a stiff drink. Ned, her favourite barman, was there and as he passed over her southern fried chicken and chips. He remarked that she was starting early even by her standards. Yvonne grinned as she tucked into the meal, "not drinking tonight, I've just had a stressful day."

They chatted about nothing in particular, then Yvonne casually asked what Ned thought of Whistle-blowers. Ned eyed her suspiciously saying, "Depends what they blow the whistle for. If it's for their own self-promotion, then frankly not much. If, on the other hand it's to report a crime or to right a wrong, then I think their OK."

Before he could ask a follow up question Yvonne fired another question at him; "What do you know about real ale?"

He chuckled. "Worked for four years in a real-ale pub. Why do you ask?"

Yvonne explained and they talked for about half an hour before Yvonne went home for a shower and a change of clothes.

A couple of hours later Yvonne knocked on the door of her uncle's house. She hoped that he was in; it had taken her some time to decide that this was the right course of action and even now she was not sure. The alternative was to wait for Albert's return, but that was nearly a month away. Her aunt Prissy opened the door and gave one of her sarcastic smiles; "Why it's my errant niece, do come in if you're sober."

Of all the people Yvonne did not want to see Prissy was top of the list; somehow they had never hit it off - even as a child Yvonne had felt uncomfortable with her. Prissy led her into the lounge where the family was obviously having after-dinner coffee. As usual her Aunt Anna greeted her enthusiastically and she was soon seated and hearing about all the latest exploits of the Jeddle children. After about half an hour

Prissy left the room and Yvonne turned to Anna and asked quietly, "Is Derek around, I really need to see him."

Anna gave one of her super-benevolent smiles. "He's upstairs in his study, but I fear he is working."

Yvonne gave Anna what she hoped was a serious look. "I really need to see him – it's important."

Anna sighed. "You can try. The study is upstairs, first door on the right."

Yvonne practically bolted out of the room; she wanted to see Derek without her aunt Prissy interfering. She climbed the stairs and knocked on the study door; she opened it before she got an answer and slipped inside, shutting the door behind her. Derek was sitting at his computer studying a spreadsheet with a cigar in his hand. He turned and looked at Yvonne, he did not immediately speak, but at least he smiled. Eventually he said; "Hello Yvonne, what brings you here?"

Yvonne fished in her handbag and brought out a sheaf of papers. "I thought that you'd better see these."

Derek did not move. "Why?"

Yvonne swallowed hard; this was harder than she thought. "Because I think that Robert is doing something underhanded."

He still did not move, but replied; "He's always trying to do something underhanded."

Yvonne thought to herself that this was not going well at all; she decided to jump in with both feet. "Like selling the rights to a formula he doesn't own, and to Smithson Electronics."

That galvanised Derek into action, he reached out his hand, and Yvonne gave him the letters. While he read them she sat down in an old armchair. After about ten minutes Derek asked, "Where did you get these copies – I assume that they are copies."

Yvonne nodded. "The last letter I inadvertently saw this morning and the others are copies of letters held in a file that is kept in Robert's car-boot. I had to take his car to the garage for him and the mechanic found it."

He gave her a hard stare. "Do you know if Albert is involved?"

She vigorously shook her head. "Not that I know of. Robert told him last week to take five weeks holiday; looking back I think he may have wanted Albert out of the way."

"Did Albert leave a forwarding address?"

"Robert told him not to. He said that Albert needed an undisturbed holiday."

Derek mused, "If I was going to do this I'd want Albert out of the way too. He has a deep faith in God and selling one of his equations to an armaments firm would be like a red rag to a bull."

Derek tapped the copy of the invoice. "Do you know who this Quinton Hargreaves is?"

"No, he is just listed in our phone book as being in accounts."

Derek put the papers down and looked at Yvonne. "Why bring this to me, why not wait for Albert?"

Yvonne shrugged. "There seems to be a sense of urgency in the letters and Albert won't be back for a month. I could hardly take the papers to John Draper could I – he countersigned the authorisation, so he must be in on whatever is going on."

Derek leaned back in his chair, "I fear you might be right, but there is a problem. Botanago is Albert's formula; I have to be absolutely sure that it's being sold against his wishes."

He brooded a little and eventually told Yvonne to stay where she was and left the room. After a while Yvonne got up and wandered around the study and in doing so glanced at the spreadsheet on the computer screen. Jeddle's was a private company and as such few people held shares. The spreadsheet listed the shareholders and their holdings. Derek owned 25%, John Draper 8%, Jonathan Bailey 8%, Kevin Frichley 8%, Prissy 18%, Anna 8% and, much to her absolute surprise, Albert was listed with 25%. She was still staring at the screen in disbelief when Derek walked back in with Prissy. Yvonne turned bright red. "I wasn't snooping, I just saw the screen and..."

Derek grimaced, "I should have closed the screen down."

He then said to Yvonne, in a manner that booked no refusal. "You have just become privy to one of the best kept secrets in Jeddle's – don't spread it around."

Yvonne felt confused. "I don't understand."

Derek looked at her for a moment, then said; "If I explain then perhaps you'll know why we keep the share-holdings quiet."

He sat on the edge of his desk. "Albert and I were at University together; he was always the swot and I was the playboy. I scraped a second class degree; Albert got a first class honours degree. When we left University we decided that Robotics was the way to earn a fortune and we formed Jeddle's. There were three of us then, Albert, me and Prissy – we each put in equal amounts. Albert's parents had died so he used their money and borrowed some more. Prissy and I sold the family furniture. We caught the market just right and it seems that in no time at

all we were expanding the company beyond all recognition and on the way we discovered a few things about ourselves. I like managing, but I am a lousy engineer. Prissy liked being involved, but not too much involved – she preferred to travel; and Albert disliked managing intensely, but he loved getting his hands dirty on the machinery. It was Albert's idea to colour-code all the main components for easy maintenance, and it was Albert's idea to keep the robots functional and not go for style. We won our first major contract directly competing against a German firm, but they had made their robots look sleek at the expense of overall efficiency. As Albert predicted the purchasing company couldn't care what they looked like, they just had to do the job and be easy to maintain. When we opened our new factory we needed some more capital and we allowed the managing directors to invest some money; so Prissy Albert and I then each owned about 25%. Prissy gave Anna 8% of the shares when we got married. However, over the years it became very clear that Albert did not want to be a Managing Director. In the end we came to a compromise, he could work on the engineering he loved and he would not be an active member of the Company Board; Prissy and I vote on his behalf. Even that did not work out and in the end we had to appoint a Head of Engineering so that Albert could play with his toys and think."

Yvonne laughed. "So that's why Albert can just cock a snoop at Penelope."

She turned to Derek. "Don't worry I won't tell. Albert knows my secret and now I know his."

Derek grunted and then stood up and muttered. "I need a drink." He walked out leaving Prissy and Yvonne alone.

Prissy fidgeted with her handbag for once looking uncomfortable. "Derek hasn't told you the whole story." She paused, "we don't only owe Albert because of his engineering skills, he also saved my life."

Yvonne was dumbfounded, but Prissy didn't notice as she was staring somewhere into the midst of her past history. "I had a dreadful final year at university. I was studying geography, but I just could not tell my strata from my substrate. I also had an affair with a married tutor that ended in tears. I got blind drunk and went out on the roof of the local church tower to throw myself off. As fortune would have it, or as Albert would say 'as God had planned it,' Albert was in the very church I entered practising on the organ. He followed me up the tower and stopped me from jumping by hanging onto me. He hung onto me until I passed out; then – somehow – he got me home and phoned Derek. Needless to say I failed my exams, but the boys still took me on as their

sales manager. I guess they thought that they could keep an eye on me that way."

She suddenly fixed Yvonne with a stare. "I made a mistake and lived to tell the tale. I eventually put it behind me and got on with my life. It's about time you did the same; wallowing about in a drunken stupor of self pity does no-one any good, least of all the drunkard in the middle."

Yvonne was about to give a sharp retort when Derek re-appeared carrying a tray of coffee; he gave a weak smile. "Anna thinks we should have a drink of the non-alcoholic sort."

Once they were settled with their coffees Derek became businesslike, "I've outlined the problem to Prissy, and she agrees with me that we need to contact Albert."

"How?" Asked Yvonne.

Prissy smiled, "that's your problem. You find Albert and get him to ring in. I'll investigate this Quinton fellow and Derek will work on his contacts in Smithsons."

Yvonne said; "It won't work. Robert will smell a rat if I swan off looking for Albert."

Derek gave a dry laugh. "Oh no he won't. We are in deep do-dahs with our Carlisle contract. Peter is screaming for help, but there is no-one listening. In normal times we'd send Albert. So the story is that you're hunting Albert to help us in Carlisle."

Yvonne was still not convinced. "What about money?"

Derek nodded. "Thought of that. I'll apply on-line tonight for you to have a company credit card. Our bank promises a twenty-four hour service, so you should have the card by Friday morning."

He gave her a seriously brutal look, "it will have a £5000 limit, and I don't want to see a penny of it spent on alcohol."

Prissy butted in. "Have you got a mobile phone?"

Yvonne dug in her handbag and pulled out her ancient handset. Prissy was not impressed and said to Derek. "Order her a company mobile phone as well."

Yvonne joked. "Do I get a matching luggage set as well?"

Derek didn't even smile. "No, but you do get a company miniature laptop computer. If you do find Albert I want him to be on-line as soon as possible; Carlisle may be our cover story, but it is turning into a nightmare."

Prissy walked across the room and opened the door. "Time for you to go hunting and leave the adults to play with the miscreants."

Before she could move Derek interrupted; "And thanks Yvonne. You did the right thing in coming to us. The company would not lose any money over this, but our reputation as honest brokers could suffer and that is almost more important."

The following morning Yvonne was wondering how to both break the news to Robert and to go about finding Albert when Robert arrived. She made him his coffee and took it in; he was on the phone. When he finished the call he went and stood by Yvonne's desk. "So little missy is going to play detective."

Yvonne smiled, but only just. "Mr Jeddle thinks that as I am his secretary I stand the best chance of finding him."

"Waste of time and effort," said Robert walking back into his office saying, "and how am I supposed to cope with no secretary?"

Yvonne almost laughed, but managed to contain herself. "I believe that Miss Greenslade has been asked to come out of retirement for a couple of weeks."

Robert looked as if he'd been pole axed, "Miss Greenslade! Oh great, that's all I need! An interfering busybody of a spinster."

Yvonne couldn't help rubbing it in. "I'm told that she is very efficient."

Robert glared at her. "When you dictate to Miss Greenslade she not only takes it down in immaculate shorthand, she corrects your diction as she goes along!"

Yvonne left Robert muttering in his office and went back to her own. She rummaged through the mail hoping for a postcard from Albert, but there was nothing. She went to enter his office, but found it bare; as Albert had feared, the decorators had moved in. She was contemplating her next move when Jess delivered the mail. Yvonne couldn't help noticing that Jess has begun to smarten herself up. As Jess was about to leave Yvonne said, "I don't suppose you know where Mr Potterdon is do you?"

Jess considered the question, "No, but Mary might."

"Who's Mary?"

"My landlady; she and Albert have Sunday dinner together every week."

Yvonne thought to herself, 'it can't be this easy' and said to Jess; "How do I contact her?"

Jess did not reply at once, and then said. "He's not in trouble is he?"

Yvonne was touched at her concern. "No Jess, the company needs his help urgently."

Jess walked into Albert's bare office and over to the window. She pointed and said, "You see that pink cottage up the lane on the other side of the cycle path? That's where I live"

Yvonne asked; "Is there a telephone?"

Jess smiled. "Of course!"

"What's the number?"

Jess shrugged her shoulder. "Don't know, it's not my phone."

Half an hour later Yvonne knocked at the door of the little pink cottage, but she gained no response. She walked round the back of the garden and found a sort of homely plump woman attacking the small lawn with an old fashioned push-mower. The woman stopped and wiped her brow; she then noticed Yvonne and said; "Sorry dear I don't need any double glazing."

Yvonne laughed and replied; "I'm not a salesperson I'm Albert's secretary."

Mary peered at her intently and then fished a pair of old glasses out of her pocket and put them on. "Is Albert all right?"

"I expect that he is fine, it's just that we need to contact him."

Mary tutted to herself. "Can't you let him have a holiday?" She sighed. "Sorry dear. It's probably not your fault. Sit down and I'll make a cup of tea and have a think."

Yvonne sat down in the small garden and surveyed the magnificent view of the countryside. It was hard to believe that she was less than half a mile from the factory. After about ten minutes Mary reappeared with a tray and some tea, she placed it on the old garden table and said; "Did you say your name dear?"

"Its Yvonne; Yvonne Jeddle."

She smiled, "I'm Mary."

She busied herself pouring the tea and Yvonne tried to imagine Albert and her having lunch together; and failed. Mary suddenly said; "Why come to me?" As she passed Yvonne a cup of tea.

"Jess said you may know where he is. She told me that you have Sunday Lunch together. It is rather urgent that we contact him, do you know where he is?"

"No idea luv," she said sipping her tea; Yvonne suddenly realised that she was hamming it up.

Yvonne decided that honesty might be the best policy. She said carefully; "Mary, I'm not only trying to contact him for the sake of the

company, I also need to tell him something rather urgent and rather personal."

Mary smiled and suddenly became workmanlike. "I can honestly say that I have no idea where he is at present, but I think I might know where he will be on Monday."

Yvonne waited, sure that the information would come. "He asked me to go with him you know."

Yvonne decided to humour the old biddy. "Really, why didn't you?"

Mary suddenly burst out laughing. "We have Sunday Lunch and enjoy the companionship, but that is as far as it goes and that is as far as it will probably ever go. Holidays don't come into it, least not just yet. Besides, I would want to pay my way and Albert would want to pay it all."

Mary paused and then said; "Next week there is a vocal worship week at Iona Abbey; you know one day singing canticles and the next singing goodness knows what. I think Albert intends to attend."

Yvonne relaxed, "where's Iona Abbey?"

Mary gave Yvonne a queer look, "where you been all your life? It's in the inner Hebrides just under the isle of Mull."

Yvonne paused with her teacup halfway towards her mouth. "You mean off of the West Coast of Scotland?"

"That's where they were last time I looked."

"But I went to the Isle of Mull years ago with my parents and I never saw an Iona Abbey."

Mary smiled. "Then you weren't looking."

Yvonne shook her head in disbelief. "He's taken his old Morris Traveller all that way?"

Mary laughed. "I don't think so dearie, knowing him he's taken the bus."

Yvonne got back to her office just after lunchtime. She had spent well over an hour talking to Mary and learned one or two things about Albert that she hadn't known before. Firstly, he had got Jess her lodgings with Mary. Secondly, Albert had left his precious tomatoes in Jess' tender care. Thirdly, that Mary obviously had a soft spot for him and finally that he would probably be at Iona Abbey in three days time. She spent the next hour on the Internet finding out about Iona and working out how she would get there if she had to. On an off chance she telephoned the community at Iona, but although they were very helpful all they could really tell her was that Albert was not staying with the

community. Yvonne did enquire about trying to get a message passed on, but the process seemed uncertain and Yvonne eventually decided not to try that route. She was just coming round to the view that she would have to go to Scotland when Geraldine, one of the in-house computing team, walked through her door burdened down with a multitude of bits and pieces. She placed them carefully on a side-table and sank into the visitor's armchair. She smiled, "it's your lucky day, and I've come with your pile of goodies."

Yvonne indicated the kettle and Geraldine nodded. Yvonne looked at the pile, "what have you got for me."

"Top of the range laptop, company mobile phone and a selection of carry-bags."

Yvonne poured out a cup of coffee for Geraldine and asked, "Where do we start?"

Geraldine laughed, "how about a bit of gossip. I'm dead curious to know why the Chairman's secretary should ring me up first thing in the morning and say that we must get this gear to you pronto and that it must be top-flight."

Yvonne smiled, "I'm going executive hunting. We've got big trouble with a contract in Carlisle and I've got to find Mr Potterdon so he can solve our problems. Mr Jeddle thought that he might need a laptop."

Geraldine laughed. "He certainly will as he is our only executive without one."

Geraldine saw the expression of Yvonne's face and added; "Mark you he has an up to date desktop at his home that is directly wired into our company network."

Yvonne said. "I suppose he uses it to work at home."

Geraldine gave a knowing grin. "And some. He got us to load, on the QT, a sup-a-doopa flight simulation programme onto our mainframe. He probably sits at home and flies all round the world."

Yvonne was somewhat amazed. "Do other people use it?"

"No fear. It's programmed to run only at evenings and weekends – you should witness the amount of processor time it takes up - and Albert has the only password."

Yvonne chuckled conspiratorially. "Come on. You computer guys must have had a go."

Geraldine laughed. "I tried to fly a glider – I lasted three minutes!"

She put her cup down. "Now to work. We'll start with the carry bags. You have a choice of real leather, fancy canvas, the luggage look, or a carpet type bag."

Yvonne looked at them. "They don't look like computer carry bags."

"They're not supposed to. Put these laptops in a standard carry-bag and it screams 'come on steal me!'"

Yvonne pointed to the carpet style bag. It looked just like a slightly oversized handbag.

Geraldine smiled. "Good choice. Everything fits in here just fine, and there is room for your normal goods and chattels."

She fished in her pile of goodies and pulled out a miniature laptop that she placed on Yvonne's desk. It had a footprint about the size of an A4 piece of paper and was just over 3cm thick. Geraldine went into a patter routine. "This is a beautiful piece of Korean engineering. It's fully functional with built-in CD-ROM and floppy disk drive; it also has a few other tricks and I'll show them to you in a minute."

She opened the case and the computer sprang into life. "Battery will last you about five hours – that's usually more than enough. If you need to get on the Internet press the green button and the computer will do the rest."

Yvonne interrupted. "Don't I have to find a phone socket?"

Geraldine shook her head. "No, it has a built-in mobile phone unit."

Yvonne was perplexed. "Isn't that expensive?"

"Depends how you look at it. The mobile phone signal is encrypted so that no-one else can eavesdrop, use a hotel phone socket and you never know who else is listening."

Yvonne thought of where she was going. "Suppose there's no mobile phone signal?"

Geraldine gave her a benevolent smile. "Unlikely, but if it happens just drop this flap, pull out this little widget and stick it in a phone socket. There's no cable it's connected by wireless."

Geraldine burred on about the various bibs and bibs ending up by saying, "it's loaded with all the software Mr Potterdon would ever need, plus your favourite word processor and an interactive road atlas."

Yvonne was beginning to get brain-overload, but she asked; "How do I charge it up?"

"Ah," said Geraldine, "that's the bad news."

She pulled out a small plastic case that looked identical to the laptop. "You don't have to carry this accessory case around with you all the time so you don't need to put it in your carpet bag; it fits in the back of this small suitcase made of the same material as your carry case. This little darling contains all the leads you will ever need, a charger, spare battery,

a miniature printer and – believe it or not – a humble notepad and pencil.”

Yvonne smiled, so she did get matching luggage. She said; “This is all a bit swish.”

Geraldine gave a huge grin. “You can thank Prissy Jeddle. She’s always banging on about how our salespeople and engineers must look and be the part. She’s always saying that you can’t sell a million-pound deal from a piece of scrap paper. She says if the image of our front-line staff is wrong then our customers will imagine that our products are also wrong.”

Geraldine dived once again into her now decreasing pile and produced a mobile phone cum electronic organiser and she handed it to Yvonne. It seemed no bigger than a small bar of chocolate and was considerably smaller than its charger. Geraldine went into her patter routine again. “Leave the charger at home. There’s a socket for the organiser in your accessory case; in any case the battery will last you all week.”

Geraldine packed her own things away and said; “Got all that?”

Yvonne smiled and shook her head. “Probably not, can you go through it all again, and slowly.”

Geraldine spent another hour talking Yvonne through the various bits and pieces. She ended up by saying “There is a complete set of manuals on our web-site, but you’ve got executive treatment; any problem –day or night – phone the twenty-four hour help-line.”

Yvonne felt like she had been through a mental mangle, but she had one final question to ask out of curiosity. “How come you’ve got this all together so fast, you can’t exactly have this sort of equipment sitting on the shelf?”

Geraldine burst into a fit of giggling. “Just don’t go near Mr Parsons. He booked this as a replacement for his old laptop weeks ago and has been screaming for it ever since. He hasn’t had it delivered as he’s currently in Carlisle. I got permission to divert it to you and added a few pieces of software.”

Geraldine went to walk out the door and suddenly stopped; she pretended to bang her head against the doorpost. “One final thing; when you open the computer up after it’s been at rest for more than twenty minutes you have to enter a password, yours is YodelAE0. Don’t go writing it down. Good hunting!”

Yvonne spent her evening at home playing with her new toys and thinking about finding Albert. According to the lady from the Iona Community they were expecting a minimum of two to three hundred people per day of their Songs for Worship week and that was on top of the normal visitor tally of a couple of hundred. She thought that she may get to Iona, but she could still miss Albert.

The following morning Yvonne arrived at her office to find a second small carpet covered suitcase on her desk; it exactly matched her computer carry case cum handbag and accessory case. The note attached to it read, 'sorry forgot this last night – Prissy Jeddle insisted you have it; also forgot last goodie – see inside;' it was signed Geraldine. Yvonne opened the case and inside was a slip of paper with the combination to the suitcase. The goodie turned out to be connecting cable with a computer plug on one and a peculiar plug on the other; the note attached to it read 'Jeddle universal connecting cable for all robots except model 49C.' Yvonne tucked it away in a pouch inside the case – she had never heard of robot type 49C. She had just got settled when Prissy walked into her office; Yvonne jumped to her feet. Prissy gave her usual smirk and placed a credit card under Yvonne's nose saying—"Sign here."

Yvonne duly signed and then held onto the card. Prissy asked; "Any luck?"

"I think he might be going to a singing festival on Iona next week."

"Figures," Prissy replied, "now that he doesn't play the organ it's his only musical outlet."

Yvonne considered this and asked; "Why doesn't he play the organ any more?"

Prissy studied Yvonne closely. "Because ten years ago he was fiddling with a test robot when some silly clot turned it on and it broke all the fingers of his left hand. Fortunately the clot was quick enough in turning it back off to prevent Albert's hand being crushed to a pulp."

"Painful," said Yvonne.

"But you know what," continued Prissy, "Albert wouldn't even let us even reprimand the twit. Albert said that it was his fault in that he should have removed the safety interlock before working on the robot."

Yvonne realised that there must be something significant here that she was missing, so she asked who it had been.

Prissy smiled. "Robert."

Once Prissy had left Yvonne tried to book a flight to Glasgow, but to no avail. The two airlines she could use both said the same thing in that all tickets were taken due to the Glasgow Arts Festival. It was much the same story with Edinburgh. In the end she booked herself onto the overnight sleeper to Glasgow for the following night. This meant boarding the train in London, but that was not too onerous, there were plenty of shops in London and she could book a hotel for this evening with her precious company credit card. Her second problem turned out to be hire cars; again the presence of the Festival had caused a serious shortage. She tried all the major companies, and then some minor ones, all to no avail. In desperation she called a firm called '4x4-for-all.' They could supply her with a diesel Land Rover, but they warned her that it was not very modern. Yvonne decided that she really had no choice but to book it and hope that it would be alright, especially if she was going to get to London and, as she planned; take in a West-End show. Yvonne was still considering the wisdom of this car-hire when Joe, the computer test-technician appeared at her office door. He sauntered in and gave her a floppy disk, "this is for Albert, it's got all my test results on it."

"Been to Carlisle," queried Yvonne.

"Only in a virtual manner. I've tested the robots via the Internet and studied their movements using a web cam."

"Any solutions?"

He shook his head. "Not a clue."

He hesitated; "But you can tell Albert that there is one peculiar thing I can't explain." He paused again. Yvonne waited. "Tell him that the robots are going in for synchronised dancing."

Yvonne echoed. "Synchronised dancing?"

Joe shrugged. "There are eight robots in Carlisle and all are more or less identical so they have identical test routines. Normally when you start off two identical robots at the same time with the same test routine it only takes a few minutes for them to lose synchronisation unless they are deliberately coupled together. The eight robots up there are all independently controlled, but no matter how you start them off after about half an hour they perform their routines in unison. It's really weird; it's like some form of robotic synchronised swimming."

Yvonne was intrigued. "Do they stay dancing together?"

Joe nodded. "Peter left them running the test routine for three hours; after twenty minutes they were in unison and they stayed that way from then on."

He paused again. "It sounds silly, but we all know that this macabre behaviour holds the key to our problem, but as yet none of us can figure it out."

"Is it just something to do with Albert's new formula?"

Joe shook his head again. "No. We tried them without Albert's formula and then half-and-half. It makes no difference; they just want to dance together."

Following Joe's departure Yvonne started to gather her things together to leave. Robert suddenly appeared from his afternoon meeting with John. He fixed Yvonne with a stare and took in her pile of bibs and bobs. He almost sneered. "Off Albert hunting are we?"

"Someone's got to do it."

Robert took a pace towards her. "If you find him tell him to get lost after Carlisle. I don't want him thinking he's indispensable."

His manner irked Yvonne. "But he is indispensable isn't he? No one else has solved the problem at Carlisle have they, that is unless you intend to go yourself."

Robert's face turned nasty. "Don't you get sassy with me young lady. Albert may have the chairman's protection, but you haven't. You just tell him to finish his holiday – understand?"

He didn't wait for a reply and stormed off into his office, slamming the door behind him. Yvonne muttered a few choice words under her breath and went home to pack. By six o'clock she was drinking a cocktail in her London hotel and waiting for the hotel porter to bring her the tickets for her chosen show.

The following day she had a successful days shopping and time to take in an early evening show before returning to her hotel to collect her luggage and shopping from the porter. The journey to Glasgow turned out to be simplicity itself; once on the train she settled down and read a book for an hour and then put herself to bed. She lay in the tiny bed thinking 'this will not work', especially as the train rattled out of the station. The next thing she knew was the porter knocking on her door and saying, "Seven o'clock madam."

She was amazed at the ease with which she had slept. After leaving the train she caught a taxi to a nearby hotel and had a wonderful Scottish cooked breakfast. She settled herself in the hotel lounge and used her new mobile to call 4x4-for-all and waited for the promised half –an-hour delivery as she read the morning paper. Sure enough half and hour later a young man walked into the foyer and called, "Miss Jeddle." She

waved and he came over and sat down; he looked a bit embarrassed. "You've hired our reserve Land-Rover?"

Yvonne felt in her bones that she was about to be told something she would rather not hear. "Is there a problem?"

He smiled shyly; "No problem, it's just that you don't look like the normal type to drive our rovers."

She swung her bony arms around; "No bulging biceps and no wellie boots."

He laughed. "Something like that. It's in the hotel car-park. May I carry you baggage?"

They walked out into the hotel car park and Yvonne stopped dead. The Land Rover, a short-wheelbase two-seater, had clearly seen better days; not only did every panel on it seem to be embalmed with dents; it was almost totally covered in mud. The young man coughed and said, "it only came back ten minutes ago."

"And what were they doing in it, chasing hippopotami?"

She surveyed the ancient vehicle, which was probably good at doing what it was designed to do, but not really useful to her. "Does it have power steering?"

"No."

"Air conditioning?"

"Only the free sort."

Yvonne eventually shook her head. "I'm sorry, but no."

The young man did not seem surprised, but rather relieved. "There is an alternative."

Yvonne thought that any alternative might be preferable. "What, a traction engine?"

"We have a sister company, Sports-cars-for-all and they have a car free."

Yvonne laughed. "Don't tell me it's an old E-Type?"

He shook his head. "No, it's a two year old MGF."

Yvonne perked up. "Are you serious?"

He nodded. "I'll take you to the garage."

He put the luggage in the back and Yvonne climbed in the passenger seat. The short ten-minute ride convinced her that she had made the right decision. The cab smelt of rotten seaweed and the diesel engine was not what one might call soothing on the ears. When they reached a sort of walled in yard they pulled to a stop. In the yard was a little green MGF sports car with a hard top. They climbed out and Yvonne became suspicious, "how come this hasn't been hired out?"

The young man blushed slightly, "we don't usually hire it out, my wife uses it, but she won't be using in for a month or so."

"Why?" asked Yvonne, out of curiosity.

"See for yourself, here she comes."

Out of a door on the far side a young Indian woman appeared, even her brightly coloured sari could not hide the fact that she was heavily pregnant. She came over and said hello and introduced herself as Anisha. They all went into a tiny office and Yvonne signed the relevant papers and handed over her credit card. Anisha studied it closely. "Jeddle Robotics? My sister works for them."

Yvonne went through the motions of appearing interested, "really, what's her name?"

"Geraldine Holmes, do you know her?"

"You mean Geraldine who works in our computer department?"

"That's her. She built our web-site for us, we went on-line last week."

"So you've seen her recently?"

"Oh no, she did it all from-"

Anisha stopped mid-sentence aware of what she was going to say. Yvonne laughed. "Don't worry, I won't tell."

Anisha returned to studying the credit card. "I don't suppose you would pay the deposit by cheque? The credit card firm take 2.5% of all our transactions."

Yvonne laughed again. "Then inflate the price by 2.5%, I'm not paying."

Anisha duly swiped the credit card and while they were waiting for the acknowledgement Yvonne asked; "When's the baby due?"

"Sometime in the next four weeks, and they tell me its twins."

The machine chattered and spewed out the receipt; Yvonne duly signed on the dotted line. They went back outside and the man opened the boot. Yvonne was quite surprised, "it's not very large."

He chuckled, "it's a mid-engine car. The engine is between the boot and the seats. There is also some storage space under the bonnet. He got her to sit in the driving seat and he showed her the controls. "It's what they call a Step speed. If you put the gear lever here," he moved the gear lever to the left, "it runs like an automatic. If you move it here," he moved it to the right, "it becomes a sequential gearbox, push forward to change up one and pull back to change down one. You can use the buttons on the steering wheel to do the same thing. There are six gears and be warned it goes like stink; it has a 1.8 litre engine and accelerates like

an Apollo space rocket - Anisha usually frightens the life out of me." He paused and Anisha said over his shoulder, "Treat her with care."

Yvonne smiled. "I will, and thanks for hiring it to me."

Anisha looked at her husband's watch. "You'd better leave if you want to miss today's carnival, they will be closing the main roads in half an hour."

"Which way do I go for North?"

The man laughed. "What sort of north?"

"Loch Lomond."

"Out the yard, turn left and keep going to you come to a set of traffic lights. Turn right and just keep on going. You'll end up on the A82 and meet Loch Lomond in under an hour."

Yvonne put the gear lever over to the left and pulled away gently. Until she left the city behind she decided that she would use the automatic gearbox for safety's sake. By the time she was skirting Dumbarton she was beginning to enjoy herself, after all she was heading into the Scottish countryside in a magnificent little sports car with a company credit card in her pocket and an open brief to search without limit; what more could she ask for?

# Chapter 6

## Journeys

Yvonne kept the car in automatic mode until she arrived at Luss on the West Bank of Loch Lomond. On deciding that she'd like a break she carefully parked the car near the visitor's centre, taking care to use the immobiliser and set the car alarm; she was not only worried about the car, but also about the laptop that she had stored in the boot. After five minutes she returned to the car and picked up the carpet carry-bag that contained the laptop and reset the car alarm. Try as she might she did not have the courage to leave it in such a desirable car. She wandered around Luss, had a look in the visitor's centre, and eventually found a little teashop where she could buy a filled roll and a cup of tea. She was not in any hurry. She did not intend to get to Iona until Tuesday, so she had plenty of time.

A short time later she left Luss and drove, now using the manual gear-change, towards Fort William. She had been this way before many years before with her parents and she still found the countryside fabulous; the hills were high, the greens remarkable in their various tones and the meandering roads a joy to drive on. The more she got used to the car the more she liked it. She had expected a normal sports car bumpy ride, but instead found that it was firm, yet enjoyable. After a few more stops on the way she pulled into Fort William in the early evening and made for the large hotel in the centre of town. She had been tempted to stay for the night at the Inverlochy Castle a few miles up the road, but had decided not to push her luck. She booked into the hotel and had a wander around finishing up in the West Highland Museum in Cameron Square. After that she did not linger too long. She had a meal in the hotel; a not too long night's sleep, an early breakfast, and was on her way eastwards towards Glennfinnan before eight o'clock. She had deliberately decided to take the scenic route. She could have got to the Isle of Mull – the stepping off point to get to Iona – much quicker by

using the Oban-Tobermory Ferry, but instead opted to drive down the Morvern Peninsula and use the shorter Lochaline-Fishnish Ferry. This probably added over sixty miles to her route, but she didn't care. The last holiday she had ever had with her parents had been in the little town of Strontian and she intended to at least visit it while she could. The drive from Fort William to Strontian via Inverailort took her nearly three hours; she could have done it faster, but she kept stopping to savour the view and to remember her parents. She lingered in Strontian for just over an hour and visited the couple of shops in the village. She then ate the packed lunch that she had scrounged from the Hotel and finished her drive to Lochaline. Two hours after her lunch-stop she was booking herself into one of the Tobermory sea-front hotels. She had an early lunch and meandered along the edge of the dock to finish up sitting on the short pier and just watching the sun go down. The feeling of peace and tranquillity was overwhelming. She could think of no better place to be.

As she sat her mind went back to her last visit. Then she had been filled with anticipation of the journeys to come – so filled that she had not even taken in the local geography and had been unaware of Iona just the other side of the Isle of Mull. Her parents and her younger sister had spent two days and one night in Tobermory and she mentally relived that holiday and her life from that point on. She had kissed them all goodbye and boarded the Oban ferry. From Oban she had taken a coach to Aberdeen and a ship to the Shetland Isle. She lingered there a few days and then caught the ferry to Bergen. She had spent a month in Norway and then crossed Sweden and Denmark by train and bus to end up in North Germany. After that she travelled almost constantly for three months, never spending more than a couple of weeks in the same place. She had washed dishes in Hamburg, mucked out stables in Switzerland and picked up litter in Italy. After that she had worked her passage as a galley help on a cargo boat that meandered down the Adriatic and across to Israel. She had found the Holy Land decidedly unholy and worked as a ship's cook on a tramp steamer, finally leaving the ship in Bay of Bengal and travelling to Calcutta. From there it was a sort of hopscotch passage across Bangladesh and Burma and into Thailand. By the time she had reached Thailand she had been almost flat broke and she had encountered her first major problem; whereas it had been easy to find menial jobs in Europe and the Middle East, Asia had provided her with few and Thailand none. She watched the sun finally disappear and pondered on her trip. She had said it was for artistic inspiration, but

it had turned into a spiritual quest; she had known that she had unrest in her soul and had explored just about every mainline religion on the trip --she had adopted none by the time she had reached Thailand. She had also not found the inner peace she had sought, rather the opposite as she had become woeful at seeing many others supposedly experiencing the peace she could not find.

Her thoughts suddenly jerked into the present time and she became aware that she was alone on the pier, except for two rather scruffy young men who were watching her. They stood between her and the shore and she instantly realised that she was no match for them. She swore to herself; she had managed to travel the world and not get mugged, but it looked as if she was penned in here with no room to manoeuvre. One of the men approached her and spoke in the soft highland accent, "excuse me, are you all right?"

She relaxed a little, but remained somewhat on guard. "Yes thank you, I was enjoying the sunset."

He was not to be put off so easily, "and that is all? I mean..."

She laughed, "Don't worry, I'm not maudlin and I don't intend to throw myself in the sea."

The men began to move away and Yvonne said, "But thanks, I might have been, it's nice to know someone cares."

The second man replied in a gentle Irish lilt, "that's all right, God always cares."

Once they had left the pier Yvonne walked back to her hotel and, after picking up a large glass of wine from the bar, went to her bedroom.

She moved the armchair in her bedroom to the window and sat down looking out onto the harbour and the twinkling lights of the boats. After a few sips of wine she resumed her mental journey, jumping to her arrival home. Her first port of call had been her sisters, and she had received a very frosty welcome;. In fact it had been worse than Arctic. The resulting conversation and scene was etched in her mind and, as many times before, she relived them. She had knocked on the door and her sister's six-year-old daughter had opened the door. Yvonne said to her "Hello. You must be Jeannie; I'm your Auntie Yvonne."

The girl shook her head and said, "I ain't got any Aunts."

Yvonne's sister Jasmine appeared and told Jeannie that it was time for bed. Yvonne had been appalled by the way she had aged. She had last seen her in Tobermory aged seventeen, she was now twenty-eight and

looked forty. Jasmine didn't invite her in or say anything; she had just carried Jeannie upstairs. As they went up the stair Jeannie said to her mum, "is she really my Aunt?"

Jasmine had replied, "Not a real one."

Yvonne placed her small backpack in the hall and went into the lounge. It was a tip. Toys were strewn everywhere and there were articles of clothing all over the place. She stood by the radiator and warmed herself up. Less than twenty-four hours ago she had been in the tropical heat. Jasmine came downstairs and into the lounge; she shut the door and faced Yvonne. "Don't you go telling Jeannie or John that you are their Aunt. Your not."

Yvonne tried to say something, but anger overflowed from her sister. "Let's get a few things straight. While you were sunning yourself in the Bangkok Hilton things were difficult here and as far as I am concerned you got off easy. I had to cope with mum worrying herself to a frazzle and then having a serious stoke. Where were you? Nowhere. I had to nurse her and cope with Dad. I had to give up my A levels. I had to look after Dad when Mum died. I had to bury Dad – you didn't even send a sympathy card. When I got married you didn't do a thing, not even a note – I suppose they do allow you to write notes in prison? Did you ever consider trying to get transferred to England? Did you ever consider anyone else? NO! As far as I am concerned I want you to walk out of that door and never come back. Do you understand? I never want to see you. I never want to hear from you. I never – never, ever – want you to communicate with my children. For all I care you might as well sod off back to Thailand."

Yvonne shrugged. "I've got nowhere else, sis."

Jasmine fairly boiled over, "I don't care if you end up in the gutter – in fact that would probably be too good for you! And don't call me sis; I hated it then and it's disgusting on your lips now."

She opened the lounge door and pointed. Yvonne walked out. Looking back it was easy to say that at the time Jasmine's marriage had been falling apart and that anger over that had spilled into her view of Yvonne, but the pain for Yvonne was still there. After that confrontation Yvonne had walked into a local pub and got blind drunk. She had woken up with a head filled of steam-hammers in a dirty police cell.

Yvonne finished her glass of wine and wiped the tears from her eyes. Salvation had come in the form of her paternal grandmother who had been overjoyed to see her and to let her move in with her. Although

the grandmother tried Jasmine steadfastly refused to acknowledge Yvonne's presence; she became true to her word - there had not been one communication between them since that first meeting. Grandma Jeddle had been wonderful; she had tolerated Yvonne's drinking and difficulty with re-orientation into society. She had helped her relearn how to make decisions and had badgered her son, Derek, into giving her a job when all else failed. Her funeral was the only one of the families that Yvonne had been able to attend. Even that had had its painful moments as Jasmine refused to attend because she was there. On her Grandma's death she had to leave her house and live in the council flat in the tower block. She had little money and although technically she owned half of Jasmine's house as it was her parents home and had been bequeathed to both of them she knew that she would never claim her inheritance. Was this some form of appeasement for the pain that she had caused Jasmine? She didn't think so, but as she thought of Jasmine the tears started flowing again and she longed for a way back. Yvonne shifted in her armchair and wiped her eyes on a soggy tissue. She reflected that she had journeyed many miles since she was last in Tobermory, but it was the acres of empty space between her and her sister that was the ground she would most like to reclaim; the money didn't matter.

It would have been too easy for Yvonne to get drunk that night – as she had many nights before when considering the same subject – but she knew that she had an early start in the morning. Instead she left the hotel and walked up and down the sea front a couple of times; it didn't make the misery go away, but it did help.

The following morning she had an early morning walk followed by a leisurely breakfast and after that drove around the island to Fionnphort for the ferry to Iona. This turned out to be a much longer journey than she expected, some 35 miles, and it was nearly all on a single track road; but with the little sports car and the scenery it was a journey she thoroughly enjoyed. At Fionnphort there seemed to be cars parked everywhere, but she managed to squeeze the MG in-between an old Ford and a scruffy Mazda. She checked that there was room for the other cars to get out, and for their drivers to get in, set the car alarm and proceeded to the jetty. The ferry trip was short, which was just as well for the ferry had a flat bottom and what could be described as an interesting motion. On disembarking she followed the other passengers and signs towards the Abbey. It proved to be a gentle uphill slope all the

way. She had read a simple tourist guide while at her hotel and knew that the town she was walking through was called Baile Mór or Big Town though it wasn't very big, but great care had obviously been taken to ensure that it didn't lose its natural character. As she walked she noticed a couple of shops and a craft centre, but she did not divert as she had now fixed her mind on finding Albert; shopping, she hoped, could come later. Eventually she came to the Sandstone Abbey with its squat tower. She entered the building via the large wooden doors and slipped into a vacant chair a couple of rows into the building. Her plan was to sit here and watch everyone as they left the building at lunchtime. A minute or two after she sat down the music stopped and nothing happened; that is nothing except silence descending. The Abbey was fairly crowded and yet Yvonne became aware of her own heartbeat and the absence of intruding noises; here there were no Lorries chugging by or motorbikes declaring their presence – there was only silence. Yvonne suddenly realised that this was a Holy Place; she had been in 'holy places' many times on her backpacking trek, but this was different – God was present. She felt that if she moved her arm she could reach out and touch Him. The silence became not a silence due to the absence of noise, but a silence due to the nearness of God. She knew that it wasn't a psychological trick as ten minutes before she had been considering getting a drink in the St Columba Hotel. She had not heard one single word spoken or the words of any songs; she had just walked into God's presence. She both wanted to run from the building and to stay there forever. Then, at some unseen bidding, the choir, and the congregation began to sing a Taizé chant. If it had been any other chant she may have been able to ignore the spiritual turmoil in her life, but not this one. As it was being sung Yvonne opened up her heart to God and He responded.

When the chant was over and the French priest had given the blessing – in French – Albert sat still for a moment and reflected on the experience of singing in a Taizé service. He had found it profoundly moving, more moving than even singing in the Cathedral Choir at Easter. After a few minutes he gathered up the music in front of him and placed it on the growing pile at the end of the choir stalls. He had decided to skip lunch as he had had a huge breakfast at his hotel; instead he intended to once again visit the Iona Book Shop. He walked down the aisle taking in the church architecture when he noticed a young woman crying near the back of the church. He took a few more paces and then, when he was almost abreast, glanced again. He came to a dead

stop. His retardation was so sudden that the person behind him walked straight into him and there was a slight momentary confusion as they sorted out their relative directions. Albert approached Yvonne and could see that she was alternately sobbing and taking great gasps of air; he had no idea what Yvonne was doing here, but he knew she needed help. He backtracked up the aisle until he reached the choir stalls and tapped the female minister, who was gathering up the music, on the shoulder. He had talked with her the previous lunchtime and thought that she was a good listener; if he remembered correctly her name was Kathleen. She turned round and faced Albert. He pointed down the church. "I don't like to bother you, but there is a young lady at the back of the church crying her eyes out and I think that she needs to talk to someone."

Kathleen looked towards the back of the church and spotted Yvonne. "Has she asked to see someone?"

"I don't think so."

Kathleen looked at Albert. "Do you know her?"

"Yes, she's my... a friend."

Kathleen looked at Yvonne again. "We usually find that God speaks to people better than we can, but I'll keep an eye on her."

Albert hesitated, not sure what to do next. Kathleen sensed this. "Look you go and sit by the large stone cross outside and I'll tell her you're there when she's ready to hear."

Albert made his way out of the church; Yvonne was still sitting in her seat with her head in her hands – he could tell by her body language that she was still crying. He felt concerned and anxious for her and yet powerless. He went outside and sat on the grass by the stone cross and waited, all thought of visiting the book shop had fled from his mind.

About forty minutes later Kathleen came out of the front doors and walked over to Albert. She smiled and sat next to him. She paused trying to find the right words to say. "Your friend has had what I would call a profound religious experience; to be more accurate I would say that she has met God face to face." She paused again choosing her words carefully. "She is somewhat emotionally fragile, but she wants to talk to someone and if you go into St Columba's Shrine over there" – she pointed at the little stone chapel nestling against the abbey walls near the entrance – then I'll bring her to you and we can talk in private."

Albert's heart missed a beat. "Me?" He shook his head. "I'm no good with people; I never know what to say."

Kathleen smiled. "Then don't say anything, just listen. She wants to talk, but she was adamant that she also wanted you to be there."

Albert was somewhat pacified. "So you'll be there too?"

"Of course."

Albert got up and walked over to the small chapel his mind trying to grasp the strange turn of events. Inside the chapel was Spartan and, as Kathleen has said, more private than the Abby itself. After about ten minutes Kathleen and Yvonne walked in and Kathleen hung a 'Sorry temporarily not available' sign on the door. Yvonne had obviously been to a washroom somewhere because her make-up was back in order. They sat down and after a couple of minutes silence Kathleen said; "Would you like to tell us what happened?"

Yvonne nodded and looked at Kathleen after the shortest of glances at Albert. "I can't give you all the background, but I came here to find Albert – I'm his secretary. However it may be useful for you to know that I spent ten years in a Bangkok jail."

She paused and wiped her nose on a pink tissue. "It was the music – the last chant. I came into the church just before the silence and during it I knew that God was here – do you know what I mean?"

Kathleen nodded gently saying "The monks used to call it a 'thin' place, meaning the distance between man and God seems somehow transparent here."

Yvonne blew her nose. "Then it was the music and the chant, just one line 'Jesus remember me when you come into you kingdom'. It's the words from the thief on the cross and their special to me."

Yvonne wiped the corners of her eyes and Kathleen repeated softly, "Special to you."

Yvonne nodded and said, "Jésus, souviens-toi de moi, quand tu viendras dans ton règne."

She gave a quick sob followed by a sharp intake of breath and after a few seconds continued. "I had a French Bible in prison and that phrase had been underlined by the previous owner. My French is not good, but I somehow knew what the passage was and every night I said that phrase as a prayer. I always said it in French because somehow that didn't seem too presumptuous, but I figured that if that thief could be forgiven then perhaps so could I."

She stopped talking and started crying. Albert opened his mouth to say something, but Kathleen placed her hand on top of his to stop him. Yvonne cried gently for a few minutes and then turned to face Albert.

“You see Albert; I have been living a lie. I knew what was in that bag at the airport and I didn’t care, I just wanted the money.”

She gave another of her quick sobs and gasps for breath. “When Jonathan, or Robert or whatever his name really is, gave me that carrier bag outside the airport I instinctively knew what was in it. I could have handed it back, or dropped it into a litterbin, instead I told him I would only carry it through for \$2000 in cash. He gave me the money and told me that he would deny that he knew me if I was caught. I opened up the carrier bag to check the contents – that’s why my fingerprints were all over it. I didn’t think where the stuff was going, or the misery it would cause, I just thought about myself and the money.”

Tears started rolling down her face again, but she continued talking, “So I was guilty as charged. I deserved to be convicted and I deserved to be caught. I initially made up the tale of naïve innocence to try and wriggle off of the hook I had placed myself on. After that I couldn’t bear to tell my parents the truth and the lie somehow became reality.”

She turned to look at Kathleen again. “When they finally caught Robert he signed a confession and listed all the girls he had duped into carrying the stuff through customs --I was not on the list, but the authorities released me anyway. I didn’t deserve that, it was release under false pretences; I should still be there folding pillowcases.”

She gave some more quick sobs and blurted out, “I caused my parents to die early. Mum became over-anxious and then had a stroke; Dad just entered a world of his own – he sort of blotted everything out. My sister gave up her life to look after them and...”

But she could say no more for a few moments and then almost cried in anguish, “and then God goes and remembers me and does the one thing I can never do.”

Yvonne stopped talking and blew her nose and wiped her eyes.

Kathleen asked gently “and what is that.”

“Forgive me.”

They sat in silence. Albert’s mind was in turmoil. Yvonne was not the innocent victim; she was the calculating drug carrier. She didn’t drink to forget prison, she drank to try and assuage her guilt. Normally he would feel disgust at her actions, but if somehow God had forgiven her – and he had no doubt that Yvonne had met with God in the church – then who was he to condemn her?

After a couple of minutes Yvonne asked Kathleen if she could use the private bathroom again and Kathleen nodded. When she had

gone Albert said, "I think she is wrong you know, God didn't have to remember her, He probably never forgot her."

Kathleen gave him a benevolent look. "We're not here to correct her theology Albert, we're here to listen and support her. She had been touched by God's love and forgiveness; she'll sort the rest out in due course."

Albert looked at his watch and Kathleen put her hand on his shoulder. "You're not even thinking of singing this afternoon are you?"

He gave a weak smile. "It never crossed my mind."

Yvonne entered the chapel again and stood in the doorway facing Kathleen. "Thanks."

Kathleen just smiled and touched her hands to Yvonne's. "Take care. Don't leave Scotland without coming back."

Yvonne suddenly hugged her and said, "I won't. I promise I won't."

Albert felt like a spare part, but got up and followed Yvonne out of the door. They walked into bright sunshine and into a flow of people entering the Abbey. Yvonne walked a few yards and perched herself on the edge of the stone well as Albert placed himself next to her. She said quietly. "I will understand if you give me the sack."

Albert had already resolved what to do. "No, I won't give you the sack, after all," he said, "let he who is without sin cast the first stone."

Yvonne closed her eyes as if in pain and murmured "I wish you hadn't said that."

Albert became even more mystified. "Why."

"Que celui de vous qui est sans péché jette le premier la pierre contre elle."

Albert was still mystified and Yvonne said quietly "there were three phrases underlined in the French Bible, your quote was the second of them."

Albert became curious. "What was the third?"

Yvonne squinted at the sun. "I'm not saying."

They sat side by side for a little while and then Albert asked, "Why are you here? You said something about looking for me."

"Two reasons: I've got some papers for you to read and we need help at Carlisle – it's all gone pear shaped."

Albert suddenly realised that Yvonne had the strap of a carpet-style handbag thrown over her shoulder and asked, "Is that company issue?"

Yvonne nodded. "And I've got a company credit card, and a company mobile phone."

Albert stared at her. "So this is serious business?"

She nodded while staring absent mindedly at the abbey. "Yes, it's serious business."

Albert realised that she was talking about her experience in the Abbey. He tried a different tack. "Where are you staying?"

"Tobermory."

"Me to. I wanted to stay in one of the island hotels, but I booked far too late."

Yvonne stood up. "I'd like to go back to my hotel. I left the papers and the laptop there and I am feeling a bit drained."

Albert immediately replied, "When did you last eat?"

Yvonne smiled. "I don't need food Albert, just sleep."

Albert looked at his watch. "I'm not sure when the next bus is due."

Yvonne looked at Albert in amazement. "You came all this way by bus?"

He gave his schoolboy grin. "Train to Glasgow – I stayed there for some of the Arts festival, they had a barber shop competition – then train to Oban. From there it was Ferry to Tobermory and bus to Fionnphort."

Yvonne gave a wide grin. "Well, I've got a hire car."

Albert's eyebrow's rose. "I'm surprised that you got one. I tried to get one for a day when I was in Glasgow and had a hell of a task."

Yvonne grinned again. "This one," she said, "is something special."

They walked back to the Jetty and took the ferry back to Fionnphort and Yvonne took Albert to the car. He stared at it in admiration. "Is this the one with the sequential gearbox?"

Yvonne shrugged her shoulders, "the man at the Hire Company called it a Step matic."

He ribbed his hands together. "Can I drive?"

He looked like a schoolboy about to embark on a wild adventure. "Sorry, no. We need to fax a copy of your driving licence to the company first; I checked when I hired the car."

Albert's face fell, but he soon recovered. They climbed in the car and Yvonne started the long drive back to Tobermory. They had gone about two miles when Yvonne murmured "talk to me Albert, I need to keep awake."

Albert sprang into life. "What do you think of the car?"

Yvonne smiled. Albert was a typical man. The first thing that entered his head was the car. She replied, "It's wonderful. If ever I get enough money to buy a car it will be one of these."

"Would you go for a soft-top?"

"Only in my dreams. The hard-top is more practical and less of a security risk."

"How do you find the gearbox?"

"Excellent. Using the buttons on the steering wheel takes some getting used to – I still prefer to use the gear-stick – but it's responsive when you need it and allows for lazy driving when you don't."

"Would you change anything?"

"The radio; it's not RDS and has a cassette player not a CD." She mused, "And I'd like a wooden steering wheel; if you are going to have an MG it must have a wooden steering wheel."

They drove for about a mile and Albert suddenly became conscious of his keep-awake duties. He asked, "What's wrong at Carlisle?"

"No idea, except that the robots won't work at full efficiency. Peter has been there for nearly two weeks and Joe has given the computers a complete shakedown plus a clean bill of health. However, there is one weird thing; apparently the robots dance in unison."

"Pardon?"

Yvonne smiled at the absurdity. "Joe tells me that no matter what sequence you start the robots off on their test routines they always end up dancing in unison, he called it robotic synchronised swimming."

Albert said, "My formula shouldn't do that."

"It's not your formula. Apparently it makes no difference if they are loaded with Botanago or not."

Albert pondered the problem and would have loved to think it through, but he reasoned that it would wait; he could not think and talk to Yvonne at the same time.

"You said there were two reasons."

"I've got the papers back at the hotel."

"Give me a clue."

Yvonne drove into a passing place to let a couple of motorbikes overtake and pulled out again, "we think that John and Robert are trying to sell your formula to Smithsons."

Yvonne had been reluctant to tell Albert this because she feared that he would throw a wobbly, but he didn't he just sat still and a slow smile grew on his face."

"Whose we?"

Yvonne pulled off the road and onto the edge of a field. She stopped the engine and faced Albert. "I discovered some papers when I was working for Robert and smelt a rat. I took them to Derek and he involved Prissy. Robert just thinks I'm hunting you down because of the

trouble at Carlisle, but Derek said he couldn't do much until you confirmed that you had not given them the OK. Apparently it is your formula, not the companies – not that that makes much difference.”

Albert shot her a searching look. She held up her hands in mock surrender, “I saw something I shouldn't have at Derek's; the company share-holding, and Derek told me the rest. I haven't told anyone, but I am burning with curiosity.”

She added, “Perhaps I should have waited for you to return, but Robert and John seemed in such a hurry.”

Albert put his hand on her shoulder. “That's all right, you did the right thing.”

She re-started the engine and continued on the journey, just after the first bend she yawned and Albert sprung back into action. “I suppose you're wondering why I won't have my share-holding made public.”

Yvonne swerved to miss a lump of wood; “It does seem rather odd.”

Albert smiled again. “It did not take me long to realise that I don't like management; I'd rather invent things and potter about with technology. It also didn't take me long to figure out that if the company was to be successful then we needed a lateral view.”

Yvonne noticed that Albert was gripping the sides of his seat and she slowed down, “lateral view?”

“People often only tell managers what they think they want them to hear. Bad news rarely travels far up a management chain until it is too late. If I stay where I am I get a better picture of what is actually going on. Take Robert for instance, you and I know that he has a tendency to be a bully, but John doesn't know that and Derek certainly wouldn't if I wasn't around.”

Yvonne pondered this and Albert suddenly asked, “How did you know where to find me?”

“Mary told me.”

Albert's eyes became like saucers, “you know Mary?”

“I didn't. I asked Jess, she told me about Mary and Mary said that you might be here.”

Yvonne watched Albert out of the corner of her eye, he had ceased to grip the sides of his chair and looked a little more relaxed, but she wished he would unfold his arms. She said casually, “Mary seems quite nice.”

“She's stubborn. I offered to take her on holiday and she refused on the grounds that she couldn't pay half, as if the money matters.”

Yvonne grinned as she powered the MG round a bend. "It may not matter to you, but she doesn't realise that you're worth a fortune and she has her pride."

"I just wanted to thank her for taking in Jess and giving me Sunday lunch."

"Yvonne laughed. "Then buy her a powered lawn-mower since she'll kill herself pushing the one she's got."

Suddenly they arrived at Tobermory and Yvonne tucked the car into the small hotel car-park. She asked Albert, "Do you want the papers now?"

He shook his head. "No, just lend me your company mobile."

She smiled. "No point, there's no signal."

Albert hesitated for a moment, "if I call at seven will you have dinner?"

She nodded. Albert walked away and Yvonne realised that she still did not know where he was staying. She went inside the hotel and up to her bedroom. She set the alarm clock and flopped onto the bed. She felt absolutely exhausted, as if some emotional vacuum cleaner had removed all her inner turmoil and with it all her energy. Just before she went to sleep she automatically said "Jésus, souviens-toi de moi, quand tu viendras dans ton règne," then she smiled and said her third, and final, phrase from her French Bible, "Mon seigneur et mon Dieu" – 'my Lord and my God.'

## Unfolding

While Yvonne was peacefully sleeping three conversations took place. The first was between Albert and Derek where Albert assured Derek that he had no knowledge of the sale of his formula. At Albert's insistence they agreed not to do anything until Albert returned, except for Derek intercepting the payment cheque. Derek had already tracked down the accounts clerk and visited him at his home address. Like Robert he had a secret to hide and John had used this to exploit and cajole him into laundering the cheques for the sale of Botanago. He had actually been relieved to see Derek and for it all to come out in the open, but Derek had insisted that John's plan continue and that the account clerk's original misdemeanour be discussed another time. The second conversation was between Albert and Peter Parsons. Albert assured Peter that he was on the case and asked for a set of current versus time graphs for each robot as they came into phase and started their synchronised routine. He also told Peter that he would personally come to the factory, but not before Monday.

The third conversation took place in John's office after his secretary had left for home. Robert entered John's office and said, without preamble, "We've got a problem."

John's eyes didn't move away from his computer screen. "Can't it wait until tomorrow; I've got to finish my board report."

"I didn't want your secretary to overhear us since it's about Smithson's."

John swivelled round to face Robert, who continued, "Albert's formula doesn't work."

John raised his eyebrows. "Of course it works; you've seen the improvements in our robot's efficiency ratings."

Robert sat down. "Oh the formula works for us, but it doesn't work for them."

John snapped; "Why not?"

Robert shrugged his shoulders. "I'm not a mathematician, but it appears that the formula has to be seeded with a base of twenty-four numbers. I've checked and each of our robot types uses a different set of numbers."

John stood up and circled the desk; he perched on the front of it, automatically towering over Robert. "Where do the numbers come from?"

"Albert. I've asked the computer technicians and they say he gave them the list of numbers and then revised them after the first set of tests."

John gave an unreassuring smile. "If Albert can calculate them then so can we; it can't be too difficult, he's not Einstein."

He stood up to further intimidate Robert. "The information on how to calculate them must either be on Albert's computer, or in his files – go and look."

Robert looked extremely uncomfortable. "But that means searching his office."

John snarled; "You're his manager aren't you? You have the right to look in his office for data that he has not correctly passed on."

Robert whined, "But the people in the adjacent offices will notice."

John rolled his eyes. "Then do it when no-one is around. Must I think of everything?"

Robert mumbled, "I don't suppose we could just pull out."

John grimaced. "No chance. Just suppose they approached Albert directly?"

John moved back behind his desk and resumed his position at the computer screen; after a minute or so Robert left the room like a man condemned.

Yvonne awoke to the sound of her alarm; she staggered into her bathroom and had a cold shower. She emerged feeling more human and put on her makeup. She then chose a dress – not a difficult choice as she had only brought one – and got ready for dinner. She realised that she felt hungry, she also realised that she didn't want dinner with Albert; she would rather have had a quiet meal in her room and reflected on her day. Her family problems and her past had not changed, but somehow she felt happy and content – a state she had not been in for far too many years, if ever. At five to seven she went down to her hotel foyer and found Albert reading the daily newspaper. She sat down on a chair

opposite him and he neatly folded the paper and put it back in the under-table rack. "Good sleep," he asked.

"Fine, I feel much better."

"I've booked a table at a restaurant down the street, is that OK?"

She nodded. Albert looked slightly embarrassed and then pulled out a couple of sheets of paper. "Have you got one of those miniature printers with you?"

She nodded again, "I haven't used it yet, but it doesn't look too difficult."

He passed over the papers. "Would you mind typing these?"

"Of course not, I'm not on holiday."

Albert sat back in his chair and gave his boyish grin. "Well not quite. I need to get to Carlisle on Monday, you have the hire-car, and I haven't packed my driving licence. So enjoy your time here, I suspect you might need the break."

He looked at his watch and stood up as Yvonne stuffed the papers in her carpetbag. They walked out the hotel and turned towards the pier; two buildings down from Yvonne's hotel Albert pointed towards a green door. "I'm staying at that B&B."

The restaurant turned out to be directly opposite the pier and they were shown straight to a table in the window. The young waiter, probably a student, gave them each a menu and automatically asked if they would like a drink. Yvonne saw Albert stiffen and she almost burst out laughing. She replied, before Albert could speak, "I'll just have some sparkling spring water please."

Albert relaxed. Yvonne smiled at Albert and said, "I don't mind if you drink Albert."

He shook his head and studied the menu. When the waiter returned Albert ordered a fish salad and Yvonne ordered a Chinese chicken with rice. The waiter, almost smirking, looked her in the eye, "Would madam like chop-sticks?"

She smiled sweetly and replied, "Yes please."

It took her a few minutes to realise that he wasn't smirking because he thought that she couldn't use chopsticks, but because she was eating with Albert. Albert was staring out the window at a small boat being pulled up the beach. She became curious; "Have you eaten here before?"

He nodded while taking a sip of water, "Last two nights."

Albert took off his glasses and cleaned them on a small cloth he kept in his top pocket; Yvonne had worked for Albert long enough to know that this was a prelude to something Albert did not really want to address.

Eventually, his glasses spotless, he asked her how she was feeling. Yvonne relaxed; she had thought that he was going to mention Bangkok. "I don't really know, I haven't had enough time to think." She paused and then asked; "You're a Christian, did you meet God all of a sudden?"

Albert fiddled with his napkin before he replied. "No, I sort of grew up with him. My parents were Christians and took me to Church every Sunday for all my childhood. When I went to University I thought that I could leave Him behind, but I couldn't. He's a part of my life."

Yvonne reflected upon this. "You make Him sound like a Siamese twin."

Albert smiled at the analogy. "He's not a bad part of my life; it's just that without Him I'd be a far lesser person." He paused, "I used to envy people who have had a sudden experience like you, but one day I realised that I've been privileged to have Him walking alongside me all my life and that put a different perspective on the matter."

Yvonne pondered on this. "Does He ever tell you off, or is He a benign presence?"

Albert smiled. "Far from it! Every heard of the phrase 'this is your Conscience speaking?'"

Yvonne twirled her glass in her hand. "Then at least I know that my Conscience is speaking."

"And what is it saying?"

She gazed out of the window. "When I came home from Bangkok I went to my sisters and we had a row. I've always subconsciously blamed her for that row and thought that she was a selfish bitch for not understanding that I'd spent ten years of my life not watching people growing up and not being involved in family life."

She looked at Albert. "But a lot of the fault is mine of course, but I'm not sure what to do about it."

"Try talking to her," responded Albert, "dialogue always helps."

Yvonne said quietly. "She won't talk to me and now I can't say that I can blame her. My actions drastically affected her life for the worse. She had to give up school and bury my parents; she then fled into the arms of a man who didn't love her."

Albert went quiet for a moment and went into problem solving mode "Then write to her and tell her that you are sorry and that you still love her --you do I assume?"

Yvonne nodded. Albert hesitated for a moment and fiddled with his napkin again. "When I was a teenager I suddenly found out that I had

an Aunt I didn't know about. Mum never talked about her and I discovered the fact by accident. When I tackled her about it she said that there are some things you can't forgive. Being an obnoxious teenager I challenged her with the fact that she said the Lord's Prayer every week – 'forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us' – so how could she say that she could not forgive?" He paused, "I don't know to this day what the row was about, but I do know that my mum wrote to her and I do know that they were reconciled." He paused again; "Mark you, it took courage on both sides to leave entrenched positions and make themselves vulnerable and open to more hurt."

Yvonne was glad at that moment the young waiter appeared and served the food; the subject was getting too sensitive and she was beginning to feel tearful again. They both started to eat and Albert watched her as she deftly used the chopsticks to eat the meal. He remarked; "You're good at those," indicating the wooden sticks.

She replied, "I had plenty of practice."

Albert turned a nice shade of pink and said, "Sorry."

She reached out and touched his hand. "Don't be. We ate with our fingers in the prison. I meant I used them as I travelled around... But perhaps I should talk about it more rather than trying to bury the subject and pretend it never happened."

"Was it like you said in that article?"

"More or less. Probably less." She paused, "But prison did one good thing for me – it cleaned me up."

The expression on Albert's face indicated that he clearly didn't understand the expression; Yvonne wiped her lips on a napkin and explained. "By the time I got to Thailand I was already on heroin. I'd started in Burma and quickly got hooked; one of the reasons I was attracted to Robert is that he could get heroin easily. By the time I was arrested I was well and truly addicted; I guess that's one reason why they singled me out for closer inspection. By throwing me into prison they removed my supply line and I came off the hard way. I'm glad because it meant that Sarah was not born an addict and that I did not slide into the drug addict's abyss."

Albert's eyes were like saucers; this was a world totally outside his experience. "I was always led to believe that drugs were freely available in prisons."

Yvonne gave a wry smile. "They are if you know the culture and the language; I knew neither. By the time I did I had been well and truly frightened off and I was six months pregnant." She paused, wondering

just how much Albert could take and then added, "And Anna made sure that I stayed clean even through the worst cravings."

Albert asked, as Yvonne knew he would; "Who's Anna?"

Yvonne tried to keep herself under tight control; "She was a young Burmese woman who took me under her wing. When I arrived in prison I was in a dreadful state, I was still undergoing severe withdrawal symptoms, I was totally disorientated, and I was nearly six months pregnant. Anna and I shared the same dormitory with six others and initially we cleaned toilets together. We also slept together for three years; we weren't lesbians or anything like that, but we both needed the reassurance of someone close and night times are the worst times when you are lonely and in a foreign country. Anna knew that I wanted to stay off drugs and she made sure that when I had weak moments I kept to my word."

Albert had stopped eating. He managed to ask; "Where is Anna now?"

Yvonne looked out of the window at the sky and said quietly, "In heaven I hope. She died of a drug overdose in the prison toilets. It's ironic, but she worked like a Trojan to keep me clean when she herself was unable to come off; by the time we met she had been an addict for five or six years. We always knew it would get her in the end."

Yvonne could see that Albert was having trouble in digesting these facts; "Don't be too surprised Albert; drug addicts are people too you know. What's the expression - 'there but for the grace of God?'"

Albert chewed on his fish for a while and then said, "But your child was born OK?"

Yvonne nodded and then said in a strained voice, "Sorry Albert, but can we change the subject? I'm not ready to talk about her yet."

Albert turned pink again and then said, "So how come you were in Thailand in the first place?"

Yvonne gave her toothy smile, "Would you believe I started from here?"

While Yvonne talked Albert through her travels, Richard and Sheeba were conducting their nightly rounds at the factory; all was quite normal until Richard was heading back to his security hut past the stores. His subconscious was telling him there was something wrong, but he couldn't place it; then he realised that the light was on in Albert's office, but it was usually cleaned on Mondays and Thursdays. He was certain that Albert was away and the decorators had finished. He stood still in the car park wondering what to do and decided to follow what he

had been trained to do. He fished out his hand-held walkie-talkie and called up his companion in the gatehouse. He informed him that he felt there was a possible intruder in the stores complex offices and that if he didn't call back in ten minutes the police were to be summoned. Richard made his way up the staircase with Sheeba padding patiently behind. He walked down the corridor to Albert's office and found the outer door shut; he held tightly onto his large torch and opened the door. The outer office was empty and the inner door was shut. He crept over to the door, gathered his courage, and opened it. Inside the office was a small dark-haired man in a company suit bending over one of the open drawers of a filing cabinet; Richard thought that he looked decidedly shifty.

Robert stood up when the door opened and a young security guard stood in the doorway, he managed to snap, "What do you want?"

Richard said hesitatingly, "May I ask what you are doing here?"

"None of your damn business now go away."

Robert advanced towards the door with the intention of browbeating Richard, but he changed his mind when he spotted the dog; browbeating a young guard was one thing, taking on his large dog was quite another. He ceased his forward motion and said unpleasantly, "I'm Robert Hardle, Head of Engineering and I just need some files from Mr Potterdon's office."

Richard did not move. "Can you prove that sir, I am afraid that I don't recognise you."

Robert took out his wallet and flung his company credit card at Richard, "Will that do?"

Richard bent down and retrieved it, keeping a careful eye on Robert all the time. He studied the card and said, "I'm sorry, but it won't do. May I see your company photographic identification card?"

Robert snarled, "I haven't got it on me and I am not going to waste time in getting it."

Just then Richard's walkie-talkie squawked and Richard pulled it out of his pocket. Robert couldn't hear what the other person said, but he clearly heard Richard's reply of "There is an intruder in Mr Potterdon's office who doesn't appear to have a company identification card so you had better call the police."

This was the last thing Robert wanted so instant humble pie appeared on his menu. "My card is in my office in the administration block."

Richard eyed him suspiciously and then said into his walkie-talkie; "He says that he has a card in his office in the admin. block; I'll take him there and once we are in the main corridor monitor us on the CCTV."

Richard put his intercom back into his pocket and stood to one side. Robert walked passed him and the dog and walked to his office; he was acutely conscious the whole time of the dog a few paces behind him and the CCTV cameras along the way. Once in his office he reached into his briefcase and handed Richard the identification card. Richard studied it and said, "You have grey hair here."

Robert became furious, "But it is clearly me!"

Richard studying the picture again and handed it back to Robert saying, "Thank you Mr Hardle. I'm sorry for the inconvenience, but we can't be too careful."

Robert went to make a vitriolic retort and then thought better of it as he decided to try and play down the incident. He growled; "No, I guess we can't, but you'll recognise me next time."

Richard smiled, "Of course sir. Good night."

Richard then completed his rounds and went to his security hut, where he filled in his nightly log and recorded the incident. He also asked his colleague to save the CCTV tape. The man definitely was the Head of Engineering, but he was definitely shifty about something and Robert was going to tell Albert of the incident as soon as he returned.

Yvonne and Albert moved to some armchairs for the coffee; the positive side of this was the comfort of the chairs; the negative side is that they did not have a sea view. When they had settled, Yvonne asked Albert what he was going to do the following day. He gave his school-boy grin. "Well I'm not going to sing. The morning is dedicated to singing some of the new choruses coming out of Australia and the afternoon is programmed for 'Modern Music for Today.' This means that the whole day will be led by some loud music group with guitars and such-like." He shot a glance at Yvonne, "I'm not saying that the worship is not helpful to some people, it is just not helpful to me. So I had planned to go to Iona and walk to the south of the island; there are some interesting ruins there at St. Columba's Bay plus the remains of a quarry."

He paused and then asked; "And you?"

She smiled, stifling a yawn, "If you don't mind, I'm going to take things easy and spend a day here. I love Tobermory and I also need time to come to terms with today." She paused for an instant and then said, "May I ask your advice?"

Albert nodded and Yvonne continued, "I've got my French Bible, but that is not much good to me beyond the few phrases I have learnt. I

need to buy a Bible and I need to read it, but what sort of Bible and where do I start?"

Albert pondered, "The best thing you can do is chose a couple of passages and go into a good book shop and read them in a number of Bibles; you'll soon find the one you like. There's a cracking book shop on Iona that has a decent selection of Bibles."

He deliberated for a few moments and added, "Oh, and I wouldn't start at Genesis. I'd say start with a gospel like Luke or Mark and then read Acts. And have a dip into the Psalms; I always find them uplifting."

She made a mental note of his advice and then asked, "What do you use?"

He replied, rather sheepishly she thought, "I use a Revised English Bible; it's an update on the New English Bible. I can't say that I like the political correctness they've forced into the translation, but I do like the English."

Yvonne pounced, "And what's wrong with political correctness?"

They discussed the merits of the matter over coffee and then Yvonne yawned again and Albert walked her back to her hotel. They agreed to meet at six the following evening and Yvonne went into her hotel. She went to the bar and picked up a large glass of white wine before going to her bedroom. She got ready for bed and stretched out for the glass of wine; before her fingers touched the glass she stopped in mid-reach. Since her homecoming she had been using alcohol as a prop; she decided that it was not so much a prop as a millstone. If God was as good as people said then she would not need the alcohol any longer; she decided to try an experiment and picked up the wine and tipped it down the sink. She sat back on the edge of her bed and said, "Well there you are. You've remembered me, now help me do what is right," and flopped back into the bed. She did not wake up until nearly noon the following day.

Just before Yvonne woke up John and Robert were having another one of their discussions, this time in John's office. Robert put a fat green file on John's desk. "This is Albert's Botanago file, it covers all the derivations attempts at using various transforms and then the solution, – it is a purely mathematical file." He dumped a thinner blue file on the desk. "This is Albert's implementation file; it covers all the installation procedure for all the robots and the code for the various computers." He dumped another fat file on the table, this time with a purple cover. "This

is the test results – you should read his comments about unauthorised modifications.” Finally he dumped a thin beige file on the desk. “Finally this is his data file; it lists the twenty four numbers to be used to seed each different implementation.”

John said impatiently, “Well were they any help?”

Robert looked like a bulldog that had lost its bone. “No. I thought that the beige file would, but it only gives the numbers, not how they are derived.”

John peered at the pile of files. “You mean that this is not the full story.”

Robert shook his head woefully. “No. According to the index there should be a yellow file; I guess that is where the derivation formula for the numbers is recorded.”

John virtually snarled, “And you missed it.”

Robert snapped back, “I did not miss it. I searched every nook and cranny of that office – and got spotted by the security guards - the file is not there.”

John leaned back in his chair and put on his superior look, “I guess that Albert didn’t produce the numbers out of thin air, or on the back of a fag packet; he must have used his computer – did you check that?”

“Tried, but its password protected.”

John smiled and looked at his wall safe. “Well I have the password. It’s company policy that all executives leave their passwords in a sealed envelope in case they get run over by a bus.”

He walked towards the wall safe, but Robert stopped him in his tracks. “It’s no good giving it to me. I’m off to London to give a talk at the Institute and I won’t be back till the morning.”

John threw his hands into the air and said exasperatedly, “Well I guess if you want a job done properly... What time do you leave?”

“Two.”

John smiled his non-reassuring smile, “Then you have time to fax twenty-four numbers to Smithson’s.”

“What twenty-four numbers?”

“Any twenty-four numbers! It will get them off our backs and tomorrow I can send them the proper set and say that we had a mix up at this end.”

Robert muttered, “I don’t think that is particularly moral.”

“Neither is selling a formula we don’t own.”

John rounded the desk and patted Robert on the shoulder. “Don’t worry; just think of the money.”

Later in the afternoon Robert faxed off twenty-four numbers to Smithson's; rather than invent numbers he just used the same set as listed for the Mark VIIIB robot. As far as he could see once you got beyond the Mark V the numbers all looked roughly in the same area and the differences were minimal. He then caught a train to London and worked on the final draft of his talk on 'Ethics and the Engineering Manager.'

Yvonne had a light lunch and a mooch around Tobermory; she visited the chocolate factory and a number of shops, but her heart wasn't in shopping, or sightseeing, for the time being. She went back to her room and typed up the papers that Albert had given her and printed them off. Her first attempt produced only draft quality, but she soon got the hang of the printer and produced some nice, lush, copies for Albert. She then made herself a cup of tea and recovered the Gideon's Bible from the bottom of the bedside cabinet. She had totally forgotten what Albert had said about reading the Bible, except to start in the New Testament, so she started with the Gospel according to Matthew. She awoke much later with a start when a fishing boat sounded its whistle. She checked her watch, it was five-thirty; she checked the Bible, it was still open on her lap halfway through the feeding of the five-thousand. She had obviously fallen asleep in the armchair and now felt like a piece of worn-out machinery. She once again staggered to the bathroom for a cold shower and to freshen up to meet Albert at Six.

Uncharacteristically Albert didn't arrive until nearly half past six. He sat down looking mildly flustered. "Sorry, I missed the ferry and the hotel bus – I got a lift back with one of the tenors from Monday's choral session."

Yvonne passed him the papers she had typed; he examined them and said, "Perfect."

He looked at Yvonne, "Have you checked to see if any e-mails have arrived?"

She shrugged her shoulders. "Sorry, no signal for the mobile phone and I wasn't listening when Geraldine told me how to use a land-line."

Albert gave a shallow smile. "Have you got the laptop?"

She went back to her bedroom, retrieved the laptop, and took it back to Albert. He took the laptop and opened a small flap on the back; he extracted a small plastic plug and walked over to the hotel reception. He held up the plug and asked the receptionist to plug it into a telephone

socket while assuring her that it would not cost the hotel anything. He came back, sat down, and opened the laptop, which sprang into life. He enquired, "What's the password?"

"YodelAE0."

Albert grinned at Yvonne, entered the password, and pressed the green button. As the machine was dialling out he said, "It's called wire-free technology; put the plug in a phone socket and the wireless connection does the rest; in some large hotels you don't even need to put the plug in, they are pre-wired for the technology."

The computer screen suddenly changed and e-mails began to be listed on the screen; Albert read the titles and then opened two to read them. When he had finished he said, "There's a couple for you."

Yvonne was quite surprised, as she was not expecting any. She took the laptop off of Albert and looked at her own mail. The first was from Geraldine reminding her to tell Albert that she had a universal connection lead; the second was from Derek thanking her for finding Albert so quickly. She deleted her mail and said to Albert, "I've been reminded to tell you that I have a universal connection lead for you."

Albert looked up from his papers, "What type?"

Yvonne shrugged. "Its label just says 'Jeddle universal connecting cable for all robots except model 49C.' Have we got a model 49C?"

Albert laughed. "No. It's a code phrase. We have three types of connecting cable; one for the factory engineers – that won't let them alter the in-built computer programmes, only enter, and correct their own data. One for our engineers that will just about let them do anything, except modify the speed restrictions – that's for safety reasons. And one for just about anything; they are all labelled the same, except the first one ends in 49A and so on."

Yvonne said, "So it's no big deal."

Albert gave her a peculiar look. "Oh yes it is. It is instant dismissal if any of our engineers leave their cables unattended in a factory."

Yvonne was totally amazed. "Why?"

"Industrial espionage. Most factories have a mixture of robots and if one of our more unethical competitors got their hands on a cable 49B or 49C they could download all our software, with all its in-built trickery, and examine it as leisure. In one download we could lose practically all of our competitive edge."

He paused, "Where is it now?"

"In my suitcase."

"Is it still labelled?"

"Yes."

He smiled. "Next time you go to your suitcase can you remove the label and throw it away, and then if we lose it no-one knows what it is."

Yvonne laughed, "I hardly think that Tobermory is crawling with robotics engineers."

Albert gave a knowing smile. "It may not be crawling, but on Monday I sang bass with a Smithson's sale representative who used to work for us and I have also spotted a lecture in robotics at Kings Lynn University."

He could see that Yvonne was quite surprised at this and grinned. "Industrial robotics is a fairly small world and we all tend to know one another."

He took the laptop off of Yvonne and pounded out an e-mail, as he was typing Yvonne casually commented, "I bet you learnt to type on a manual typewriter."

He looked at her, "How did you know?"

"Because you're trying to push the keys through the base of the laptop; the key-board is touch sensitive, you know."

Albert gave a sheepish smile and sent off the e-mail; he then closed the laptop and retrieved the telephone plug from the representative to re-install it into the back of the laptop and handed the laptop back to Yvonne, who placed it in her carry-bag. Albert looked at his watch and said, "I've booked us lunch at the hotel up the road, is that OK?"

"Anywhere away from that supercilious waiter."

Albert replied, "Don't be too hard on him. On Monday night he spotted a woman sitting on the pier late at night and made two of the visiting trainee ministers go and check her out in case she was suicidal."

Later, as Albert and Yvonne tucked into their desserts Richard was once again making his rounds. When he got to the stores area he had a sense of déjà vu; Albert's office lights were on once again. He did not fancy another encounter with Mr Hardle, but on the other hand he could not just ignore the lights. Once again he called up his colleague and walked up the stairs to Albert's office. This time the outer and inner doors were open and as he arrived Richard could see Mr Draper working at Albert's computer. John noticed the movement in the doorway and looked up. On seeing a young security guard with a birth-marked face John gave him a fearsome stare. Richard started to back away, "Sorry to disturb you sir, just doing my rounds,"

John would not have aroused any suspicion in Richard's mind at this juncture and if John had kept quiet it is doubtful if Richard would have entered it in his nightly log. However, John just had to try and exercise his authority and snapped, "Wait!"

He rounded Albert's desk and went up to Richard, keeping a wary eye on the dog. He hissed at Richard, "If asked you haven't seen me here and you didn't see Mr Hardle here last night. Do you understand?"

"Very clearly sir, you were both never here."

Satisfied John went back to his task of investigating Albert's computer files. So far he had found nothing of interest. He had even run a little computer utility that was supposed to list, and possibly retrieve, all recently deleted files, but to no avail. There was absolutely nothing on Albert's computer regarding the derivation of the Botanago numbers. He moved over to Yvonne's computer and did the same search, again to no avail. In the end he swiped his fist on the desk and swore. As his swear-words were fading away Richard was writing up his nightly log; he did not neglect to enter the fact that he had seen Mr Draper in Albert's office, or the fact that he had been told to ignore it.

The following morning, following an unbelievably early breakfast, Yvonne drove Albert to Fionnphort. They did not speak much on the way; Yvonne concentrated on her driving and Albert concentrated on not screaming. A couple of miles from Fionnphort Yvonne said, tongue in cheek, "It's a shame you didn't pack you're driving licence, I'm sure you would have enjoyed driving this little beauty."

Albert grunted. Yvonne decided to try and get Albert to relax. "What's on today?"

Albert replied, almost through gritted teeth, "There's a folk Eucharist this morning. Then a Jazz praise after lunch and following the afternoon break a meditation set to the blues."

"You mean 'I woke up this morning' blues?"

"Yes, something like that."

"So are you singing today?"

"Not really. I intend to go to the Eucharist and the meditation, but I'll probably give the Jazz a miss. What do you intend to do?"

"I'm not sure; probably look in the shops and take a walk this morning and see what the afternoon brings."

Albert remarked, while he hung onto his seat for dear life, "I always find it odd on Iona, once you've walked no more than a few minutes away from the town there's virtually no-one about. Yesterday I only saw

six other people all afternoon as I was exploring the south end of the island."

Yvonne grinned, "I'm not going that far, I haven't got my walking boots; I just intend a gentle stroll beyond the abbey towards what the guide books call the Duchess Cross."

To Albert's great relief they arrived at Fionnphort and Yvonne parked in the car park. Albert, ever the organiser set the agenda for the day, "Well the blues meditation is scheduled to end at four-forty-five; so shall we meet at the Jetty just before five?"

"Sounds good to me."

They walked to the ferry terminal and immediately boarded the ferry for the crossing. Half way over Yvonne dived into her carpetbag and offered Albert a bag of sandwiches; "Scrounged them from the hotel."

Back at the factory John was interrogating Geraldine's boss, Sanjit, on the phone. He was trying to ascertain if the computer department could remotely fire up Albert's home computer so he could search its hard disc for the files he now so desperately needed to recover. Unfortunately for John the answer was in the negative. It was technically possible, but Albert had obviously unplugged his computer, for safety, while on holiday. Even the best software in the world could not remotely plug the machine in. John briefly considered a spot of evening burglary, but decided that it was too risky. He then had a brainwave and phoned the computer department back. Immediately Sanjit came on the phone and John asked, with his fingers crossed, whether or not Albert followed the company's back-up procedures.

Sanjit replied instantly, "Of course! He's very strict about it, especially as he wrote it."

John relaxed slightly, "Is it possible for me to trawl through that back-up?"

Sanjit was silent for a minute or two and then said, "I'd need authority from a Managing Director."

John's fragile patience snapped and he virtually shouted down the phone, "I am a Managing Director!"

Sanjit smiled to himself, "Send over your secretary, and I'll give her a Zip disc with the most recent back-up on it. It will just have the data, not any commercial programmes."

"What the hell is a Zip disc?" Snapped John.

"Just stick it in the slot below the floppy disc drive on your computer; when you open 'Explore', the files will be on drive G."

John sat back and relaxed; maybe now he would find the derivation formula.

Yvonne spent a pleasant morning looking in the various shops and ending up in the Iona book shop. After much scrutiny she chose herself a Bible and then got lost in exploring the other books; she never had her northward walk and only just managing to gobble down her sandwiches before the jazz praise began. She was almost immediately disappointed as Jazz to her meant Dave Brubeck and Wynton Marsalis, and this was obviously going to be full of traditional jazz. After a few moments she slipped out and took her northerly stroll, returning for the Blues meditation. This too was not what she expected, but this time she didn't walk out. The session opened with an unaccompanied rendition of 'nobody knows the trouble I seen' by a male solo bass singer and finished with the entire congregation singing, 'O Happy Day;' with various other blues numbers and styles in between. Before Tuesday she would have enjoyed the service as a spectator; now, she suddenly realised, she was involved.

Just as Yvonne was enjoying 'O Happy day,' John was having far from a happy day. First off there were far more files than John thought it possible for one person to produce, and secondly the files were compressed, and had abbreviated titles, so every time he wanted to look at one it took about 30 seconds to decompress. This may not sound like a long time, but by the time he had investigated fifty or so files it was beginning to vastly annoy him. He knew there must be a better way to search through the back up, but he was too vain to ask for help. By five o'clock he thought he was only two thirds through the back up; he gritted his teeth and kept looking. He opened another file and nearly screamed; he suddenly realised that he had been browsing through exactly the same set of files as the previous night. He had asked for Albert's computer back up, not Albert's home computer back up. He rang the computer centre and got Geraldine; he asked for Sanjit. Geraldine gave a smooth professional reply that Sanjit was now not available.

John tried to keep his temper in check. "This morning Sanjit supplied me with the back-up disc for Mr Potterdon's computer, please can I have the back-up for his home computer as well."

"Now?"

"Yes now."

There was a pause and then Geraldine said, "I'll need-."

John interrupted by virtually shouting down the phone, "I am a Managing Director!"

Geraldine was not to be put off and she started again, "I'll need authorisation from Mr Jeddle or Miss Jeddle in his absence."

John could not believe his ears, "Why?"

"Because we operate the same procedure for Mr Potterdon's home computer as we do for senior executive's laptops in that as they might contain personal information of a sensitive nature it needs authorisation from the line-manager's superior."

John ground his teeth, "Mr Potterdon works for Mr Hardle who works for me, so I am his line-manager's superior and I am running out of patience with you young lady. Just get the disc over to me pronto."

Geraldine merely replied, "Hang on please," and left John fuming.

She came back to the phone a couple of minutes later. "Sorry to leave you sir but I had to open our fire-safe to check the original card index. I'm sorry, but Mr Potterdon's card has been endorsed by Mr Jeddle to the effect that he needs to be consulted before any back-ups of Mr Potterdon's home computer are released." She paused, "would you like me to contact him I know he's still on the premises?"

John managed to say, "No thank you" before he slammed the phone down, but only just. This simple sale was turning into a nightmare. He walked over to his executive bar and poured himself a brandy while muttering to himself 'there must be a way – there is always a way.'

As Yvonne walked back towards the jetty Albert fell into step beside her. He asked, "Did you enjoy that?"

Yvonne nodded. "It wasn't what I expected, blues to me means Eric Clapton or BB King, but I did find it absorbing and..." she sought for the right word, "uplifting."

"Did you go to the Jazz praise?"

"Walked out – not my sort of jazz."

Albert smiled, "Nor mine."

They caught the ferry back and Yvonne started the long drive back to the hotel. The return journey was somewhat slower as they were traveling in a convoy of different sorts of vehicles; Albert did not seem to mind, Yvonne wanted to blast away, but realised that that would be impossible given the roads. Half way round the island Yvonne said, "It's the last day of your singing convention tomorrow, do you want to stay in Mull 'till Monday or travel to Carlisle in short hops."

Albert envisaged a 200-mile direct journey with Yvonne driving and said, without hesitation, "Small hops I think."

Yvonne grinned, knowing perfectly well that her driving was scaring the hell out of Albert, but the car just needed to be driven with passion. She said, "Shall I book us a hotel in Oban for Saturday and one in Glasgow for Sunday?" She paused, "and what about Carlisle; will we need to stay?"

Albert replied, somewhat over-confidently Yvonne thought, "No. I'll leave by train mid-afternoon and you can stay in Carlisle and then take the car – in one piece I hope – back to the hire company; I assume they won't pick it up in Carlisle?"

"No, they are only a small company."

They drove for a few more miles and Yvonne said, "What's on tomorrow?"

"Rock 'n' roll praise in the morning and Iona style Eucharist in the afternoon."

Yvonne said, "Are you serious?"

Albert replied, "Deadly. They are setting up the outside stage as we speak." He added, dryly, "I suppose we could always pray for rain."

Yvonne laughed, not only at the first real humorous comment that she had heard Albert make, but also at the vision of Albert bobbing up and down to raucous rock 'n' roll.

They pulled into the hotel car park and Albert said, "You don't need to work too hard to book Oban and Glasgow, just wander down to the tourist office and they will do most of the hard work for you."

Yvonne did as Albert had said and it proved just as easy as he had predicted.

When she got back to her hotel she found Albert in the foyer and at his request brought down the little laptop computer so that they could check the e-mails. As the machine was setting up the connection Albert said, "They're showing a film in the village hall tonight and I thought that I would grab fish 'n' chips and then see the film."

"What's the film?"

Albert seemed to squirm a little and then answered, "Star Wars."

Yvonne almost laughed, but managed to say, "I've actually not seen the original Star Wars, mind if I join you?"

Later, as Albert walked Yvonne back to her hotel after the film, John was standing in Albert's back garden. He had surveyed the front of

the house and had not seen any burglar alarm box on the wall. He hoped that Albert's house did not have the type of sophisticated alarm that silently informed the police of an intruder and walked up to the back door. He decided that the door was – to him – virtually impregnable. It was the same with the rear windows; they were all double-glazed and, by the look of it, had deadlocks. He wandered down the side of the house and spotted a small frosted glass window, but it was too small. The path down the side of the house ended in a cull de sac against the rear wall of an old style brick and glass conservatory. It was single glazed and the glass was held in by thin wooden beading. John pulled a screwdriver out of his pocket and paused; the trouble was he could think of no other way of obtaining what he needed. In the end he started to delicately prise the beading off; the conservatory was so old, and so rotten, that the beading came away easily. He then spent nearly half an hour teasing the glass out of the frame; in the end he managed to get it out in one piece. He eased himself over the windowsill and into the conservatory, he cursed himself for not bringing a torch, but at least the moonlight was bright. He carefully crossed the conservatory until he came to an ancient pair of Georgian style French doors; even without a torch he could see the key on the inside of the lock. This time he removed the putty from a small pane of glass in the door and prised the window out. He thought to himself, 'this is a piece of cake' and reached in to turn the key. He then tried to open the door, but to no avail as it was bolted top and bottom. An hour later and he had removed two more panes of glass and unbolted the door. He held his breath and pulled it open. He quickly ran his gloved hand down the inside of the door to see if there was an evidence of a burglar alarm – he could find none. He carefully, and slowly, walked across the room; judging by the furniture it was some sort of lounge. He crept about the house until he found Albert's study in one of the upstairs bedrooms. He sat at Albert's computer desk, on it were no less than three monitors; John mentally snorted, who – he thought – who needs three monitors? He reached down, plugged in the computer, and turned it on, as it was booting up he pulled the curtains. He sat down and muttered to himself, 'so far, so good.' As the middle screen sprang into life it asked for a password and John entered the one he had found in his safe. The machine digested this, and then asked for the password to be confirmed; John entered it again. The machine immediately began to make a loud wah-wah noise out of its loudspeakers and all the screens flashed on and off in sequence. John leapt for the mains plug and pulled it out, plunging the

room into darkness. He groped for the curtains and on opening them saw a police car gliding silently to a halt outside the house. He broke the world record for running through the house and dashed through the conservatory, virtually leapt through the conservatory window and ran down the garden. Halfway down the garden sense prevailed and he slid to a halt by the greenhouse and entered it to crouch down among the tomato plants. A few seconds later a young policeman walked down the garden shining his torch around. When he had gone down the side of the house John left the greenhouse and went into the alleyway that ran between the houses. He quickly walked down the alleyway until he spotted a house with no lights on and a side entrance to the road on the other side of the block from Albert's house. He thanked his lucky stars for the moonlight and walked down the garden on the convenient grass and along the side of the house. He checked that there were no police cars in the street and exited onto the pavement. He tried to look casual as he walked back to his car. Fortunately his wife was staying overnight with his son so he arrived home unobserved. Once indoors he removed all the old clothing he was wearing, including the shoes, and placed them in a plastic bag that he put in his wheelie bin. He went into his kitchen and poured himself a stiff Brandy; he swore at himself for a good ten minutes.

John stayed at home until the dustmen collected, and emptied, his wheelie bin and then he drove to work. Once in his office he asked his secretary to get Robert to come over. Robert walked into the office like the cat that had just eaten all the cream. John growled, "What gives you the right to be so happy?"

Robert gave the door a furtive glance and said in almost a whisper, "I've just had a call from Smithson's; the formula appears to be working perfectly. They've only done simulations so far, but are going to try a couple of live tests in a torpedo test tank next week."

John stopped himself from swearing and replied, "Good, but we need to get the proper numbers for them as soon as Albert returns."

Robert nodded, "I guess we struck lucky."

John, remembering his close escape of the previous night, replied, "You don't know how lucky."

Albert was browsing in the Iona Book Shop trying to ignore the noise from outside; even with the sound system pointing out to sea the racket was inescapable. Despite his best prayers the day had dawned

fine and the rock 'n' roll praise had started about forty minutes ago; he consoled himself that that meant there were only another fifty minutes to go. He was wrong, the session over-ran by half an hour, but eventually he met Yvonne at their pre-arranged meeting place by the Post Office. She looked all hot and sweaty and quite exuberant. Albert asked, "What did you think of that?"

Yvonne gave a wide toothy smile, "I never realised that being a Christian could be so much fun."

She showed Albert a sheaf of CDs, "Book shop is doing a roaring trade."

They walked towards the jetty and found a place to sit down. They ate their sandwiches and then had an ice cream. Yvonne leaned back on the bench seat to warm her face in the sun and said, "And to think, I'm getting paid for this."

## Just Desserts

Just before eight-thirty on Monday morning, Yvonne drove the little sports car into the car park of the Carlisle factory where they were having problems. She had made the trip from the centre of Glasgow in just over an hour and a half. Once they pulled up Albert sat still for a minute and said, "Thank you for the drive Yvonne. I am sure that it has done my blood pressure and prayer life the world of good."

They walked over towards the reception area and Yvonne remarked on the fact that the car park seemed virtually empty. Albert managed a weak smile, "The factory is closed for the holidays; that's why we're installing the robots now."

They entered the reception and said who they were. A young spotty faced youth led them across the site to the production area. They found Peter Parsons and two of his engineers tucking into a pile of bacon sandwiches. Peter offered a plate to Albert, who shook his head. Peter mumbled, "Do you want to look at the test results?"

Albert shook his head. "No thanks, I don't think they will tell me anything new. I'll just go and have a look 'round – you feed Yvonne."

Peter introduced his two technicians, David and James. Yvonne sat down and took a bacon butty; they were really rather good. Albert took off his jacket and wandered into the production area and just stood still staring at the robots; he took a doughnut out of a brown bag he was holding and started munching. David said, "£10 it's a two-doughnut problem."

James grinned and replied, "My £10 says three doughnuts."

Peter chuckled when he saw Yvonne's face. "Albert's problem solving visits are legendary. One doughnut means a difficult problem; two means an obscure problem and three doughnuts means it's an almost unsolvable problem."

"What's four doughnuts?"

They all laughed and the David answered, "He's never got to four doughnuts."

Yvonne grinned, "Can I join in? My £10 would be on one doughnut."

Peter chuckled again, "That leaves me with four doughnuts, but as we've been here for well over two weeks I think I may be in with a chance."

Yvonne took a second sandwich and they all watched Albert. He munched his first doughnut slowly and carefully almost as if he was in telepathic communication with the silent robots. When he had eaten the first doughnut he placed the brown bag on the top of a computer unit and wandered out of sight.

Yvonne said, between munches, "What's Carlisle like?"

David and James moaned that they had not had enough time to look round because their slave-driving boss never gave them the time and Peter said that he reckoned that it was a lovely, but largely undiscovered, city.

Albert wandered back into sight and over to the computer unit. He picked up the brown bag and peered inside, but he did not take a doughnut; instead he came over and said to Peter, "Can you get me the production manager?"

Peter wandered off and Yvonne couldn't resist asking, "Solved it?" Especially as Albert had so far only eaten one doughnut.

He reached for the last bacon butty and said, "I think so. I believe that our robots are all working fine."

David, who was currently behind Albert's back, made a circling motion just above his ear – he clearly felt that Albert had lost his marbles.

Peter returned with a middle-aged man who looked like a traffic warden on a bad day. Before Albert could speak he made his position clear. "I want this problem solved and I want it solved quickly. We're already a week behind schedule and if you don't get it fixed we'll be asking for compensation."

Albert stared at the man as if he were some sort of alien and replied quietly, "I think you have the wrong end of the stick, it's we who should be considering compensation from your company due to inadequate facilities."

Yvonne thought that the Production Manager was going to blow a fuse when Peter hastily intervened by saying, "Would you care to expand on that Albert?"

Albert pointed to the robots. "We asked for an unregulated, three phase power supply capable of supplying fifty amps on each phase."

The production manager turned a nice shade of salmon red, "And that is what you've got!"

Albert smiled again, Yvonne thought he looked like a gladiator about to swat a fly; "Not quite. Our three-phase supply is run off of your junction box over there. He waved his hand vaguely in the air, "and that is supplied via an anti-surge unit over there; that means that it is not unregulated."

The production manager blustered, "We always use anti-surge units!"

Peter caught on, "But most anti-surge units monitor the rate of change of the current supply and when our robots demand a swift current increase your unit will deny it to them in the short term. Thus they will not move as swiftly as they should." He smacked his hand on his forehead saying, "It's so obvious."

Peter paused, Albert grinned and Peter resumed his spoken thoughts; "And that means that the robots slow down as they make violent movements in the test routine allowing the other robots to catch up."

"Which means," said Albert taking up the story, "they all catch one another up in the end and are simultaneously caught in the current trap; hence synchronised dancing."

Albert looked at Peter and the technicians. "In reality it makes no difference as during real operations the factory here only plans to use our robots at two-thirds capacity where the anti-surge unit doesn't come into play."

He swivelled round and looked the production manager in the eye, "Which means that you have been holding us to a specification you knew we could not meet whilst knowing that it's your anti-surge unit that is causing us the problem."

The production manager turned red, but Albert seemed oblivious to his demeanour, "And I think you have tried this trick before; weren't you the shift-manager at Clean Cloth Industries when they tried the same trick on Smithson's?"

The look on the production manager's face said it all. Albert went in for the kill "We shall be invoicing your company for our time lost while investigating this fallacious fault and let that be the end of the matter."

The production manager tried to bluster, but Albert was at his belligerent best and would have none of it. "I think," He said, "it is time for us to go and see your Managing Director."

The Production Manager leant against a convenient pillar, "No need just send me the invoice."

Peter pulled out a piece of paper, "Shall we go to the office and sign our completion certificate?"

Peter and the Production Manager walked away and Albert left looking for a loo. Yvonne held her hand out and the two technicians each placed a £10 note in her palm. She gave a wicked grin. "Money from children; money from children."

She reached out for a doughnut from Albert's bag and munched her way through it as David and James packed away their goods and chattels.

Albert and Peter arrived back simultaneously and started a discussion that contained so much jargon that Yvonne gave up trying to follow it. She retrieved her laptop from the carry-bag and opened it. She idly pressed the green button and two e-mails immediately appeared, both marked urgent. The first was for Albert saying that his house had been burgled and the second was a copy of an e-mail to Peter saying that Emily had broken her arm. Yvonne looked at the screen; so Peter was married – she felt a twinge of disappointment. She interrupted the conversation and showed Albert his e-mail and lent him her mobile so he could make some phone calls. She then showed Peter his e-mail and studied his reaction. He merely muttered, "Oh no, not again."

Yvonne, curious, asked, "Does your wife make a habit of breaking her arm?"

Peter gave her a sour look and said, "Emily is my daughter, she has a mild version of brittle bone syndrome; it may be mild, but she has broken her arm about four times in the last seven years. Last month she cracked two ribs by rolling out of bed."

"Good grief," she said, "how does your wife cope?"

Peter gave her a peculiar look and then said, "My wife died four years ago."

Yvonne felt a fool and mumbled an apology. Peter shrugged. "It's all right – I thought everybody at the factory knew."

Yvonne was saved from any further embarrassment by the return of Albert, who handed back the mobile phone; "Nothing lost, apparently a very amateur burglar."

He glanced at the still open laptop and saw Peter's message; he paused and turned to Peter, "Are you going back home now, I could do with a lift?"

Peter shook his head, "Emily is with her grandparents in Alnwick and in any case I came up with David and James, but they will give you a lift back if you like."

Albert suddenly gave a wicked smile and turned to Yvonne, "Have you booked yourself into a hotel yet?"

"No."

He turned to face Peter again. "If you've got nerves of steel I could ask my secretary to run you to Alnwick."

Peter wondered if he were about to receive a poisoned chalice. "Why would I need nerves of steel?"

"Because she has hired a racy sport's car and has been scaring the life out of me – and enjoying the fact – for the last week."

Peter went to decline the offer, but Yvonne jumped into the conversation, "I don't mind. I rather fancy shopping in Edinburgh before I wend my way home."

Peter asked, "Are you sure?"

"Of course."

Albert gave Yvonne a knowing smile and said, "I don't want you to break your neck; so I don't expect to see you in the office until Thursday lunchtime."

Yvonne thought a moment and said, "Mind if I take a few days leave and turn up on Monday? I'd like to spend some more time up here; don't worry I'll return the car as soon as I can."

Albert gave his characteristic vague hand-wave, "I'm sure that a few extra days on the car-hire won't cause any heartache."

He then turned and patted Peter on the shoulder saying "Be sure and say your prayers before you leave."

Peter and Yvonne finally managed to get away from the factory at just before noon. The drive to Alnwick proved to be a delight. They stopped just outside Hexham for a light lunch and then wiggled their way through Rothbury Forest towards Alnwick. Contrary to Albert's predictions, Peter did not seem to have the need to grasp the edges of his chair - although he did have some difficulty in getting his long frame in and out of the MG. As they approached Alnwick it became obvious that this was Peter's stamping ground; he guided Yvonne through the small back-roads of Rothbury Forest with ease. Yvonne didn't talk much on the journey, but she did get Peter to talk and delicately teased out the information she desired to know. She reflected on what she had learnt as she waited outside a pub for Peter to emerge from their toilets. Peter's

wife, Charlotte, had died of cancer; this was diagnosed during her pregnancy and Charlotte had refused radiotherapy or chemotherapy until after Emily was born. This had proved to be a sacrificial decision as the therapies were then too late to be fully effective. As Peter put it, she had three good years with Emily, two mediocre years and one desperate year. Halfway through the first mediocre year Peter, Emily and Charlotte had combined their house with that of Peter's older sister and her family. Since then Peter and Emily had lived with Lynne, Jack and their two children, Hannah and Dean, with Lynne becoming the prime carer for Emily. Emily, according to Peter, was a brilliant ten-year-old, but she did have a mild marble bone disease; the major effect of which was a slight brittleness of the bones, whereas other children's bones might bend a bit, Emily's snapped. Yvonne suddenly realised that Peter had said practically nothing about himself, only his daughter – on whom he seemed to dote – and his deceased wife; this, she decided, would just not do.

When Peter finally emerged and squeezed himself back into the passenger seat Yvonne recommenced to journey towards Alnwick. After a mile or so she decided to probe a little and asked, "Did you meet Charlotte at University?"

She had to concentrate on the narrow roads and did not see Peter's pained expression, he replied with a terse "No."

Before Yvonne could ask a follow up question Peter put in one of his own, "I'm curious," he said, "it's not normal for the company to send a secretary haring off around the countryside in hire-cars with expensive laptops, no matter what the excuse. Am I missing something?"

Yvonne paused to consider her reply and tried for a diplomatic response. "Apparently you were asking for assistance and Mr Jeddle thought that Albert was the best person to help."

Peter laughed, "Good try. But you found Albert on Tuesday and it took a week for him to come down to Carlisle, so I suspect that whatever the urgent reason was, it was not my problems at Carlisle."

Yvonne stayed quite for a minute, her thoughts racing. In the end she tried for another diplomatic answer, "You're right, but it's down to the Chairman if the reason is going to become public."

Peter asked directly, "But you do know?"

"Yes, but I am not at liberty to say."

Peter brooded for a while and then mused aloud, "what is it with Albert and Mr Jeddle? I worked out that Albert not only has a tête-à-tête

with the Chairman before the think-tank meeting, but also before every Board meeting."

"Albert and Derek have known each other a long time and Derek respects his views."

Peter laughed. "You should try for the diplomatic corps."

Fortunately before Peter could ask any more questions he suddenly blurted out, "Take the next entrance on the left, it will be labelled 'The Rothbury Country Lodge Hotel.'"

They pulled into the grounds of what looked like a large country house and Yvonne said in amazement, "This is your parents place?"

Peter gave a huge grin. "In a manner of speaking, they manage it."

They pulled up at the front of the house and as Peter extracted himself from the car a young girl rushed down the steps and into his arms. Her plaster cast identified her as Emily. A homely looking woman and two more children followed her. Peter untangled himself from Emily and said to Yvonne, "Meet my Mother and my niece, Hannah and nephew, Dean."

Peter's mother gave a casual wave and said, "Call me Dot, everybody else does." She then gave Peter a hug and said, "Dad's got some tea waiting for us on the lawn."

As they walked round to the back of the building Yvonne murmured to Peter, "How did they know when we were arriving?"

"Cause I phoned them while I was in the pub."

Tea proved to be a selection of sandwiches, scones and cream, and as much cake as you could eat. Peter's father, Fred, proved to be an exact replica of the archetypal butler with black suit and grey hair. Yvonne also soon realised out that he had a wicked sense of humour. As tea progressed Peter caught up on his family's life and was soon dragged off by Emily to see her new bedroom in the attic; Hannah and Dean went too as their bedrooms were also in the recently added roof space. As soon as they were out of earshot Dot asked, "Have you known Peter long?"

Yvonne recognising the mother's curiosity and guessing her possible motive finished her éclair before replying as casually as she could manage, "We've met on and off at work; really I'm just the chauffeur to get him here as he was concerned about Emily."

Dot's face visibly fell, "Oh."

To cheer her up Yvonne added, "But he is rather dishy."

Fred joined in the conversation, "Is that your MG?"

"Wish it was, it's a hire car; I've got to take it back to Glasgow."

Fred looked at his watch, "Not tonight surely?"

Yvonne shook her head. "No I'll stay somewhere on route and drop it off on Wednesday."

Dot suddenly sprung to life. "Why not stay with us? We've got three vacant rooms at the moment."

Fred grinned. "You can have a twin bedded en suite, a double bedded en suite, or the bridal suite."

Yvonne laughed, "I don't think I'm ready for the bridal suite just yet, but thanks for the offer, I'll take one of the others."

Dot pondered for a moment and turned diplomat. "You can take your choice; you can eat in the dining room or join us for dinner," she paused, "we won't be offended if you opt for the dining room. You don't have to listen to our family tittle-tattle."

Yvonne was touched by her sensitivity. "Do you mind if I eat with you? I spend too much time eating by myself."

Fred and Dot both stood up. "You just stay here in the sun for a few minutes and Fred will get your room ready. When you're tea's gone, there is a swimming pool and sauna in the basement. We'll eat at eight; just keep going up the stairs until you're under the roof, then follow your nose."

Fred grimaced. "She means walk down the corridor until you come to our living room."

They left and Yvonne sat in the sun; she moved her chair and leaned its back to a sloping angle and closed her eyes. A little later she had that sixth sense that she was not alone and she opened her eyes; Emily was watching her. "Hello again," said Yvonne.

Emily didn't say anything, she just eyed her suspiciously. After a few minutes Yvonne began to feel uncomfortable and said, "Did your dad like your room?"

Emily pouted and said petulantly, "Dad said he was working, he didn't say he was out with you."

Yvonne sensed some hostility and replied gently, "He was working at a factory in Carlisle; I've been in Scotland and took my boss to meet him in Carlisle." She paused and then added, "I just drove him here as a favour to my boss; your dad's been telling you the truth, he hasn't been out with me."

Emily digested this and then asked, with child-like bluntness, "Are you married?"

"No."

"Why not."

"I guess I haven't met the right man yet."

“So you’re kissing toads.”

“Pardon?”

Emily tossed her head, “My granddad says that you may have to kiss a lot of toads before you find your prince.”

Yvonne laughed. “Sorry to disappoint you, but I’m not kissing anyone; especially toads.”

Emily suddenly changed the subject and said, “Do you play the piano?”

Yvonne smiled. “No.”

“My mum used to play the piano; we’ve still got it at home.”

“Do you play?”

“Taking lessons, but it’s boring.”

“Does you dad play?”

Emily gave her a peculiar look. “Of course not, he’s an engineer, not a musician.”

“And mum was a musician?”

Emily nodded, “I’ve got pictures of her playing at concerts.”

Just then Dean leaned out of an upstairs window and waved a piece of green cloth. Emily jumped up and said, “Sorry, got to go. Dad’s playing Spangleman 3 with us.”

She ran off across the lawn. Yvonne walked round to the front of the house and retrieved her suitcase from the car and entered the hotel. The receptionist gave her a key as she walked through the front door. When she finally got to her room she found that she had the twin bedded room. Fred’s description of a twin bedded en suite was a little understated. The bedroom was huge having a pair of armchairs and a double sofa as well as the two beds; besides which there was enough room to swing several cats. The bathroom was huge with the biggest bath Yvonne had ever seen as well as a giant walk-in shower cubicle, bidet, washbasin, and WC. Yvonne smiled to herself and thought ‘now this is the life.’

Just before eight o’clock she climbed the stairs and followed the corridor to the family dining room. The family, apart from Fred, were all assembled and within a few minutes they were sitting down to dinner. This was all delivered via a dumb waiter from the kitchen four floors below. Over dinner she sat opposite Peter and was able to observe him and Emily, who was sitting next to him. As the meal progressed she began to realise that father and daughter appeared to have no obvious hereditary links. Peter was a blond, whereas Emily had jet-black hair.

Peter had pale blue eyes; Emily dark brown. Peter had a pale whit skin; Emily's was a couple of shade darker. Peter had small ear lobes and a Scandinavian nose; Emily had huge ear lobes and a Middle Eastern nose. Yvonne surreptitiously glanced around the table; no one else in the family looked remotely like Emily, she was a one-off. During dinner, as Dot had predicted, the family talked of the hotel requirements and life in general. They did not exclude Yvonne, rather the opposite, but the conversation was not taxing. After dinner, Peter went off with Emily to read her a story, and Fred, who had joined them for the main course, took off with Hannah and Dean to do likewise. Yvonne was pointed in the direction of the family lounge by Dot, who was loading up the dumb waiter with the dirty crockery. Dot told her that coffee would be on its way in a minute or so. Once in the lounge, Yvonne wandered around looking at the family photographs. There were the usual collection, Fred and Dot's Wedding, Lynne and Jack's wedding, photos of all the grandchildren at various stages, and a photograph of Charlotte and Peter's wedding. Yvonne studied this photograph closely and in the end was in no doubt that either Charlotte was very ill or she was at least ten years older than Peter. Finally, on the top of a Welsh dresser, there was a photo of Charlotte close up; the photograph was in black and white, but there was no mistaking pale eyes, blonde hair, and small ear lobes. Suddenly Dot said quietly from behind Yvonne, "So you've worked out our little secret."

Yvonne turned round. "Not quite."

Dot gave a weak smile, "But you're getting close."

They sat down in two armchairs and Dot poured out some coffee. "There's a photograph missing; that of my daughter Lynne and Yoseph."

She handed a coffee cup to Yvonne and said, "Let me tell you the family scandal before you work out the wrong solution."

"Lynne and Yoseph married the year before Peter went to university. I thought Lynne was too young, she was only just nineteen, but it wasn't my choice. Yoseph was a clarinet player and worked full time for a travelling orchestra; Lynne travelled with him most of the time working as a sort of roadie. Yoseph introduce Charlotte to us and during the summer recess and she ended up playing here at the hotel, hence she met Peter. They married when Peter left university and he got a job at a local engineering plant. She gave up the orchestra to play as a session musician. Four years down the line from their wedding Lynne and Yoseph's marriage ran into a rough patch, but try as I might I was not

able to get any sense out of Lynne. As far as I knew Peter and Charlotte were very happy and then Charlotte fell pregnant. You probably know about Charlotte's illness, but as soon as Emily was born I knew something was dreadfully wrong. Within the month Lynne had left Yoseph and Charlotte was undergoing chemotherapy, so believe me I didn't know which way to turn. Lynne bounced into Jack's arms, he was our under-manager, and thankfully it proved a good match. She told me later, in fact during her pre-wedding hen night, that she had caught Yoseph sleeping with Charlotte in the second year of their marriage after she had suspected for many months that he had a mistress. Lynne thought that Yoseph had put an end to the affair and that they had put it all behind them, but when Emily was born it was obvious that the affair was not dead and was now out in the open."

Dot sighed and drank some coffee. Yvonne didn't know what to say. Dot then resumed her monologue. "Peter seemed oblivious to it all. I think he loved Charlotte so much he would have forgiven her anything; in any case he has never treated Emily as anything other than his own daughter. When Charlotte was getting unable to cope, Lynne suggested the idea of an extended family. Her and Jack were managing a hotel near your factory so they all moved down there and Peter got a job at Jeddle's. Lynne has amazed me. I don't think I could show so much love for my ex-husbands illegitimate daughter of her ex-husband's lover, but she says that Christian love should know no bounds. I really do believe that she loves Emily as much as her own children."

Dot leant back in the armchair and said quietly, "So now you know. I hope you don't think the worse of us."

Yvonne shook her head, but sought for the last item of information. "Where is Yoseph now?"

"No idea. He went back to the Middle East and has never got in touch. Frankly I don't care; he caused both my children much pain and I hope that I never, ever, set eyes on him again."

Yvonne paused before deciding to ask a further question, "Does Emily know?"

Dot closed her eyes. "None of us could bear to tell her, but we knew one day that we will have to and that moment will probably be sooner than later. They have been doing some basic heredity studies at her school and she got a book out of the library. In the back it had some beautiful diagrams of how eye-colour is passed on. She asked her teacher how come she has brown eyes when her mum and her dad, and

grandparents, have blue eyes. Fortunately the teacher told her that was because she was very special and then told us. Peter will have to tell her before she goes back to school and he is dreading it."

Yvonne considered all these things and then lent forward; "Why are you telling me all this? I'm sure that you don't tell every stranger who wanders into your home all the gory details."

Dot refilled the coffee cups. "No, but I suspect you might be special to Peter and I didn't want you to feel locked out of the family."

Yvonne raised her eyebrows. "How can I be special to Peter? I've had a short lunch with him once and drove him here on the orders of my boss?"

Dot smiled, "Then why is my son trying to persuade me to let you stay in an ever so expensive hotel bedroom until Sunday?"

Before Yvonne could reply Peter entered the room, grabbed himself a cup of coffee and slumped into the sofa. "Asleep?" asked Dot.

"Not yet, but give it ten minutes."

"Is her arm all right," asked Yvonne.

Peter nodded as he sipped his coffee, "I think so."

Dot suddenly stood up saying, "I'll just go and check on Fred;" as she left the room she closed the door.

Peter put his cup on the tray and then looked straight at Yvonne. "I saw you looking at Emily and me over dinner."

Yvonne tried a toothy smile. "She may not look like you, but she has your mannerisms."

He stared at her for a few seconds and then rolled his eyes. "Oh damn! Mums given you a full report."

"How are you going to tell Emily?"

Peter groaned. "Don't you mean how am I going to tell Emily without turning her life upside down? She idolises her mum and frankly I don't want to destroy the image of her that Emily can remember."

"Why destroy the image? Can't you tell it like a romance and say that Charlotte's heart was big enough for both of you?"

Peter sighed. "I'd thought of that, but what happens when she tells her best friend? It won't be long before one of her friends realises the truth and ... and children can be so nasty to one another"

Peter buried his head in his hands and then muttered, "I bet you come from a nice straightforward family and have led a nice straightforward life; you're not the daughter of a robber baron are you?"

Yvonne stayed quiet for a few seconds and then decided that she'd opt for honesty, something she would not have done a week before. She replied, as casually as she could managed; "Not a robber baron's daughter, but I have spent ten years in a Bangkok jail for drug running and until Tuesday was on the verge of becoming an alcoholic."

Peter looked up and said; "You're kidding me?"

But the look on Yvonne's face said that she wasn't.

While Yvonne was giving Peter a résumé of her life history Albert and Derek were sitting in Albert's study drinking cocoa. Derek summarised what he had learnt so far to bring Albert up to speed. "So the upshot is that Robert and John have sold your formula to Smithson's Armaments Division and have invoiced for £45000. I have no idea what annual charge they will be trying for, but I bet that will not have gone for a single payment. The cheque has arrived, but I've temporarily waylaid it."

Albert asked, "What of the accounts clerk?"

"Two months ago he walked out of a shop without paying for two CDs. He says it was an accident, but the shop prosecuted. In the end the case was not followed through, but he got an official police caution. Apparently John noticed a small article in the paper where the shop listed all those it had prosecuted in the last month and he recognised the name, goodness knows how. John then put pressure on him to launder the money or lose his job – the chaps got a three month old baby."

Albert thought for a moment. "So you reckon that John is the prime mover behind all this?"

"Too true, but the fellow is clever and it is Robert who appears to be heading up the deal."

Albert laughed briefly; "We're not operating a court of law here; we don't need definitive proof, just sufficient to force him to resign."

Derek put down his cup and saucer. "So how do you want to proceed from here?"

Albert scratched his left ear lobe. "What I can't understand is why Smithson's aren't shouting foul from the rooftops. The formula needs twenty four numbers to act as a seedbed, but Robert and John don't know how to calculate them."

"Maybe they guessed and struck lucky."

"They would have to be very lucky. The numbers don't have to be exact, the software modifies them on the run, but they do have to be within a certain narrow window or the whole thing goes haywire."

Derek waited as Albert thought, finally he spoke. "I've got a meeting with Robert tomorrow morning; time to turn the tide I think."

Albert outlined his basic plan and within an hour they had their strategy ready, all that was needed now was to spring the trap.

The following morning Albert was ensconced in his office when Miss Greenslade buzzed him on the intercom and informed him that Mr Hardle was waiting to see him. Albert smiled; even Robert the bully could not get past Miss Greenslade. "Show him in please."

Robert came in and sat down with a large and heartfelt sigh. "I've had nightmares about that woman. Piece of luck your Yvonne's decided to have a holiday."

Albert gave a comforting smile and said, "I quite like her, she is ruthlessly efficient - and totally honest, which is more than I can say about some people."

Robert totally ignored Albert's remark; in fact he probably hadn't heard it, as he was busy pulling Albert's files from his briefcase. "I've got a bone to pick with you Albert me lad," he said, "I thought it was your formula sending the machines whacko in Carlisle, but your files are incomplete - that's bad practice."

Albert placed the invoice for the Botanago formula on the table in front of Robert and said quietly, "But not such bad practice as selling something that isn't yours."

Robert tried to bluster his way out. "Sorry Albert forgot that you personally keep the patents."

Albert tried his best to stay calm. "Rubbish Robert; you know all about my contract, you've worked hard enough to try and get me to change it."

Robert opened his mouth, but Albert gave him no space to interrupt. "No more lies Robert, we've got you dead in the water," and placed the rest of the ever growing Botanago fraud file on the table.

Robert sat very still and blushed ever so slightly. He eventually managed to try for a way out. "Would it help if I said I was coerced into it?"

Albert became ruthless. "Were you?"

"Yes."

"By whom?"

"John."

"What hold did he have over you?"

"I've taken a couple of small sweeteners and somehow he knew."

"You're a fool! Why didn't you go straight to Derek or Prissy?"

He shrugged his shoulders. "I thought I needed the money."

Albert went in for the kill. "So it wasn't just plain coercion. I bet the money came first and the coercion as a lock-in, not the other way round. Am I right?"

Robert didn't answer and Albert banged the flat of his hand on the table and shouted, "AM I RIGHT?"

Robert nodded and buried his head in his hands muttering something incomprehensible.

Albert took a few deep breaths; he had not meant to lose his temper. After a minute or two Robert looked up and said, "I'll resign straight away."

He looked so miserable that Albert almost took pity on him, but he followed the plan that he had agreed with Derek. "You've got till Thursday to hand your resignation to Derek, otherwise on Friday morning your dismissal will be on your desk. You can't work your notice, but the company – much to my annoyance and against my advice – will give you three months' pay. You will be able to cite us for a technical reference, but not a personal one. Is that clear?"

"I'm due six months pay on resigning."

"Count your blessings; it's either three months pay or instant dismissal for fraud, take your pick."

Robert rallied himself round a bit and started to argue; "You've no right to make these conditions."

Albert pointed to the phone. "Phone Derek if you like, but we agreed our strategy last night and I do not think that he is in the mood to change his mind."

Robert got up to go; Albert motioned him to sit down. "Please stay in this office for the next half an hour."

Albert picked up the Botanago fraud file and made for the door. Robert whined, "Where are you going?"

"For a very interesting meeting between Derek, myself and John – care to join us?"

Robert shook his head. "No thanks, I'd rather stay here."

As Albert went through the door Robert heard him say to Miss Greenslade, "Robert will be occupying my office for the next half an hour at least. I think he could do with a cup of very strong tea."

Robert put his head back in his hands; just how was he going to explain this to his wife?

Ten minutes later John Draper walked into Derek's office and sat at the conference table. He was expecting a meeting about the next

Egyptian contract and was somewhat surprised to find Prissy and Albert waiting at the conference table with Derek. He deliberately looked round the table. "Is Jonathan coming?"

Derek grunted. "Not for the moment, we wanted to keep this discussion to ourselves at present."

He slid the Invoice for the sale of the Botanago formula across to John. "Can you explain this?"

John feigned surprise. "Good grief no; what has Robert been up to?"

Derek slid across the Company's authorisation form with John's signature at the bottom. John picked it up and squinted at it. "This is rather a good forgery."

Prissy purred. "So you say you know nothing about this?"

John shook his head and said firmly. "Robert will have to go; we can't have this sort of thing going on."

Derek grimaced and said, slowly and carefully; "You're not the only person with contacts at Smithson's you know. I've been talking to Old Samuel Smithson and they don't want to be part of an illegal sale any more than we do. Their side of the story is that Harry Smith contacted you in the first instance and again when they had trouble with what he calls the seeding numbers. I also have no doubt that you severely leant on one of our account clerks and blackmailed him into co-operation. You were also found – along with Robert – going through Albert's office. You are up to you neck in this one and it does you no credit to try and shift the blame onto Robert."

John sat and considered his options; in the end he decided to bluster his way out. "So what are you going to do about it? I'm not an employee I'm a company stakeholder."

Albert almost lost his temper again, but this time he managed to control it before he replied in as even a tone as he could manage; "If you push us we will take you to court and have you barred from being a Managing Director here, or anywhere else in Europe."

"You won't get the charges to stick."

Prissy smiled malevolently. "Perhaps we don't need them to stick; the publicity would be enough to discredit you. Remember robotics is a small world and mud sticks rather firmly."

John sat and re-evaluated his tactics, "I want my money out of the company by Friday."

Derek gave his dry cynical laugh. "You're in no position to negotiate. Here's out terms. You walk out of this office, off the factory site and never come back. Your salary stops from this instance and you will get your

money out of the company in six months time as per your signed agreement.”

“What about the company car?”

“It’s already been picked up by our transport unit and your company credit card has been suspended from one hour ago; and just in case you do not think we’ve been vindictive enough your company mobile phone has been barred and your health insurance terminated.”

Prissy tapped the table and stared him in the eyes. “This company is built on trust, and we don’t trust you. You opted for fraud and now you must reap the consequences.”

John sat very still and then went for damage limitation. “What will you say in your press release? You can’t just hide that one of your Managing Directors has left.”

Prissy responded sharply, “We’re calling it an internal disagreement over policy, but if you try and start any smart rumours to the contrary we will give the entire fraud file to our friendly journalist who works for The Automation and Robotics Review.”

John stood up. “Well there’s nothing more to say is there?”

Albert replied, “What about an apology?”

John looked at him and made an unrepeatable rude remark. Derek pressed a button on his intercom and two of the company’s security guards came in. Derek pointed to John. “Please escort Mr Draper off of the company premises. He is not to make any phone calls, go to his office, or speak with anyone. He is not to be allowed back on site for any reason, and certainly not without my express permission and an escort.”

John snarled, “What about my personal possessions in the office?”

“They will be sent to you in due course.”

John walked out, with his escort, and Prissy closed the door behind them.

There was silence in Derek’s office as they reflected on the last few moments. The silence was broken by Derek’s assistant secretary bringing in coffee and biscuits. Prissy verbalised the question on all their minds. “Where do we go from here?”

Albert replied first. “We return the cheque to Smithson’s accompanied by a letter from me explaining why the Botanago formula is useless for their torpedoes.”

Derek patted his friend on the shoulder. “Is it really, or is it that you don’t want it used in such a device?”

Albert smiled. "The formula is designed to work in robots that move in three-dimensions, but that have a stable base; after all our robots are bolted to the floor and unlikely to move. A torpedo is not a stable base in that it is affected by currents and water density. Torpedoes with Botanago will probably work fine in a static test tank or in calm water, but use them in deep water where there are cross currents and you would be wasting your time."

"Could it be adapted?"

"Not by me."

"Then what" said Prissy.

Derek screwed up his face and replied; "We have to find a new Managing Director; remember it took us six months to find John."

Albert fidgeted for a few seconds then, "Why don't we ask Peter? I think he is naïve in some areas, but smart enough to learn fast. He also gets the best from his team by motivating them in a positive manner rather than by coercion or bullying."

Prissy's eyes narrowed. "He's a bit young."

Derek laughed, "But ten years older than we were when we started the company on a wing and a prayer."

Prissy pursed her brow. "Would he be able to buy his way in?"

Albert shrugged his shoulders. "We won't know if we don't ask."

They went quiet for a minute and Prissy said; "What about replacing Robert?"

Derek replied easily. "Albert will have to stand in," and on seeing Albert's face added, "whether he likes it or not. In any case I don't think that it will be for long, rumour has it that Smithson's is closing down its Irish subsidiary and that means there will be some good people on the market."

Albert laughed. "By rumour you mean Old Samuel Smithson."

Derek shrugged his shoulders.

"Well that settles that," said Prissy.

"Not quite," Albert responded. "There are two more people involved. Yvonne and the accounts clerk."

Derek nodded. "I'll suggest to the Finance Director that the accounts clerk have a caution placed on his record for six months, but not be dismissed. He was blackmailed into the fraud and although he should have reported it I haven't got it in my heart to dismiss him."

"Seconded," said Prissy.

Derek turned to Albert. "Why do you mention Yvonne?"

“She blew the whistle when she could have kept her head down. She risked losing her job by copying company papers. If it had been a legitimate sale you would have called her an interfering busybody, or something worse and maybe even dismissed her on the spot.”

“What are you suggesting?” Asked Prissy.

“I don’t know; but I’ll think of something.”

## Chapter 9

### Doubts and Fears

By Thursday morning the news of Robert and John's departure had completed its tour of the factory and had winged its way to Peter at the Hotel via e-mail. He sat in the family living room with his laptop on his knees considering the situation when Yvonne appeared running on her pre-breakfast autopilot. He had realised by now that Yvonne was not what you might call a morning person; if the following two mornings were anything to go by it would take at least two cups of strong coffee to kick start her metabolism into normality. Peter closed his laptop and finished his breakfast; once he was reasonably confident that she was compos mentis he said casually, "Looks like there's been trouble at the mill. Both John Draper and Robert Hardle have resigned, or been pushed."

Yvonne didn't bat an eyelid and this made Peter suspicious. "You've been expecting this haven't you?"

Yvonne stopped munching her toast and said, "I knew something was in the air."

Peter rolled his eyes and waved his arms in the air, "Will you stop being so ruddy diplomatic and tell me why?"

Yvonne drank the dregs of her second cup of coffee and poured a third. "Didn't your e-mail say?"

"Would I be asking if it did?"

"What does it say?"

Peter sighed. "That those two had gone, Albert is covering as Head of Engineering, and moves are afoot to find a new Managing Director (Engineering). I have also been commanded to phone Derek at ten o'clock this morning on pain of death."

Yvonne smiled at him. "Have you considered that you might be the moves afoot?"

Peter laughed and said, "Don't change the subject. Come on, forewarned is forearmed; why have these two erstwhile members of the Jeddle echelons been asked to leave?"

Yvonne came and sat on the sofa next to Peter and snuggled up beside him. "I can't say – sworn to secrecy on pain of death."

Peter was about to open his mouth when Yvonne continued; "But hypothetically speaking, what would you expect the Board to do if it found two members of its senior management selling what they did not own?"

Peter nodded sagely and replied, "Hypothetically answering; it would kick them out of the door at high speed." He deliberated for a moment and then said, "But how would Albert be hypothetically involved?"

"Who knows, but he does invent an awful lot of things the company deems precious."

Peter ruffled her hair, "Thanks for the tip."

"Remember I haven't said anything."

Peter looked at his watch. "I've got a phone call to make, finish your breakfast and once Emily appears were off to Holy Island."

Peter left the room and Yvonne picked up the morning paper. The last two days had been sheer heaven. First of all she was living in the lap of luxury in a family that just seemed to accept her. Secondly she was getting on famously with Peter. She had been worried that her impromptu revelation of her past might put him off, but had decided that if they were going to have a relationship then it ought to start on the right footing. In fact Monday night he didn't respond, they just talked about their families - he about his problems with Emily and her about her problems with her estranged sister. The following day the whole family had gone to Bamburgh Beach and after dinner Peter had at first talked to her, then hugged her. Wednesday had been a family outing to Berwick and the evening had brought their first real kiss. In fact, Peter had proved to be an odd mixture; superficially he was at ease with the opposite sex, but close up he was shy and reticent.

Yvonne's thought were interrupted by the appearance of Emily, who - as usual - virtually bounced into the room. She came to an abrupt halt when she saw Yvonne and spun round to peer down the corridor to the families living quarters. She then said to Yvonne, in the direct manner that only a ten-year-old can manage, "Are you coming with us again today?"

Yvonne put down the paper well aware of the hidden agenda. "Would you rather I didn't? Be honest, I understand if you want your dad to yourself for a change."

She shook her head, and the rest of her body. "No, I don't mind you coming; dad's more fun when you're around."

Emily pulled out a tattered photograph album from somewhere and placed it on Yvonne's lap. "These are my photographs of my mum."

Yvonne dutifully looked through it; there were the usual assortment of photographs including one of Charlotte sitting at a grand piano. Emily said, carefully not looking at Yvonne, "Of course I know that she's not my mum."

Yvonne was momentarily dumbfounded and instantly wished Peter would re-appear. She replied cautiously, "Whatever makes you say that?"

"All my family's got blue eyes so whoever is my mum must have brown eyes, the book says so."

"Books can be wrong and if I remember right it is possible for two blue eyed parents to have a brown eyed child."

She tossed her head in the air, "But it is very rare, especially if the grandparents have blue eyes. I checked it out."

Yvonne pondered this while desperately trying to remember her biology lessons of years ago, "How?"

"On the Internet. I entered eyes and colour and babies into a search engine – we learnt how to use them at school and Dads always using them while I watch him."

Emily paused and said, with the absolute certainty of youth; "There is no other answer."

Yvonne wished even harder that someone would reappear, but eventually managed to reply, "Surely a baby can inherit brown eyes from either parent, not just a mother?"

Emily replied, "Of course, silly; but it *must* be my mother who had brown eyes or my dad wouldn't be my dad would he?"

With the matter closed she put the photograph album away and skipped out of the room chanting, "Emily's hunting daddy! Emily's hunting daddy;" leaving Yvonne in a dead sweat.

Peter reappeared several minutes later; his skin had taken on the colour of faded parchment and he looked shell-shocked. He poured himself a coffee and slumped back onto the sofa. Yvonne gave him a minute to drink some of the coffee and then queried, "Problems at the mill?"

He put his cup back on the table; Yvonne noticed that his hand was trembling. Eventually he managed to say, "You were right in your hypothetical predictions. Derek isn't saying much except that both are no longer to be considered as part of the company and are *persona non*

grata from this moment on. He added that if I am approached by anyone from Smithson's regarding Albert's Botanago formula I am to refer them straight to him or Albert and no-one else."

He paused and Yvonne murmured, "So there's nothing really new there. So what's caused you to look like you've seen a ghost?"

Peter turned and looked at her, "Derek asked me if I'd consider being Managing Director and filling the vacancy left by John."

"Surely that's a compliment?"

"You don't understand it's..."

Peter ceased talking as Emily's chanting voice could be heard approaching down the corridor. He suddenly hissed to Yvonne, "later," as Emily appeared in the doorway

Holy Island was initially a great disappointment to Yvonne. She had hoped that it would be like Iona, but it was almost completely different. There was a Priory, but it was in ruins and you had to pay to look around it. There was no large Christian community living on the island and the church, while a haven of peace and quite, suffered the constant coming and going of tourists. After wandering around for an hour or so Peter and Emily set out to walk to the other end of the isle to visit the castle. Yvonne had a leisurely coffee in a small hotel before skirting the back of the ruined Priory and walking to the beach. When she got to the beach she turned right and walked along a small footpath; before she knew it she was walking alone. She eventually sat down on a grass knoll and enjoyed the sunshine. She was not thinking about anything in particular when it suddenly struck her how peaceful it was; she realised a few seconds later that this was again not peace due to the absence of noise, but peace due to the presence of God. She leant back against the grassy bank and thought to herself that this must be another 'thin' place. She did not consciously pray, but somehow in the peace and tranquillity she communed with God. Iona had given her a traumatic and sudden revelation; this was a gentle reassuring encounter. She felt as if God was saying, "Don't worry, you're back in my fold now." She was awoken from her musings by Emily, who popped up from nowhere flapping her arms. "Dad says that we have just got to leave now, or we'll be here for five hours."

To Yvonne's utter amazement she found that she had been sitting less than a hundred yards from the town and yet had been enfolded in peace while the town behind her bustled with tourists. They made it off of the

isle, but only just before the tide covered the causeway and isolated it from the mainland for a few hours.

That evening Peter and Yvonne did not eat with the family, but went down to the restaurant for an early dinner. The food was the same, but there was just the two of them. They talked over the day and Yvonne told Peter of her unnerving encounter with Emily. He rolled his eyes, "I've explained to her the process of eye colour and that each parent probably contains both types of coloration and-."

Yvonne laughed and cut Peter off in mid flow, "It's not science she's after Peter, it's reassurance. I think she has a grasp of the science, but it's the implications she can't face."

"You mean that her mother was unfaithful?"

"No, I don't think that has crossed her mind. The implication I think she doesn't want to face is that you are not her dad."

Peter opened his mouth, but Yvonne ploughed on, "And I don't think it's the fact that you're not her biological father, it's the fact that you might cease to be there for her. I've been here for only a few days and in that time I've had two lectures from her on friends whose fathers have walked out and now this morning's little episode. I suspect she is worried that if you know what she thinks she knows then you might just up and walk away from her."

Peter's eyes opened in amazement, "I'd never do that!"

"Then tell her that – she needs to know it."

Peter went quiet and munched on his garlic bread. When Yvonne could bear the silence no longer she said, "What were you trying to tell me this morning when little madam appeared?"

Peter gave Yvonne a steady look as he finished his chilli as if deciding whether or not to be forthcoming, in the end he put down his fork. "It's a matter of timing. The family have a grand plan and my staying at Jeddle's isn't part of it."

"Isn't it a matter of what you want?"

"Yes and no, primarily no as I have Emily to consider."

He paused and then looked Yvonne in the eye. "We own this place. My grandparents bought it for a song in the 1950s. At that stage it was basically a derelict wreck. They built it up into a hotel and when my parents took over they continued the process and have made it into a five-star hotel and some. They intend to take a well-deserved retirement next summer. Dad will be sixty and they want to see some of the world before they die; running a hotel is a pretty relentless treadmill, but they

now have contacts all over the globe. As part of this plan they transferred the ownership of the hotel to Lynne and me eight years ago; that's the part of the plan to avoid death duties. Lynne and Jack have been learning the hotel management trade at the rough end, working for a cut-throat American hotel chain. The plan is that they move up here next summer when the schools break up and take over fully in September; that's the prime reason why we've been spending so much money on re-converting the unused under-roof space into rooms. We're halfway there with only two more rooms to be completed."

Peter suddenly toyed with a few grains of rice left on his otherwise empty plate and Yvonne finished off the unspoken part of the story. "If Lynne, Jack and the children come here then Emily comes as well; and if Emily comes then so do you."

Peter looked at her bleakly, "I can't have her here and me hundreds of miles away. I couldn't even guarantee to be up every weekend. I'd satisfied myself that this is the right move and then Derek ups and asks me to be a managing director."

"And you'd love the job."

Peter nodded, "Chance of a lifetime; a Director in the largest privately owned robotics company and in a place I like."

Yvonne said quietly, "And you'd sacrifice it all for Emily?"

Peter nodded again and said, "Silly isn't it?"

Yvonne replied in a just audible whisper, "No, it's not silly. Every hormone and emotion in me wanted to cling onto Sarah, but I had to do the right thing by her and give her a chance of a better life without a junkie jailbird for a mum."

Yvonne wiped the corners of her eyes and said, "Why move? Can't you and Emily stay where you are?"

"She's grown up with Lynne as her maternal figure. She needs a female in charge; I just can't suddenly turn her world into that of the single parent family and especially this single parent."

The waiter appeared and cleared away the plates. Peter ordered a slice of cherry cheesecake and Yvonne ordered a small lemon sorbet muttering that if she stayed here much longer she was beginning to doubt if she would ever be able to get into her MG again. Yvonne decided to tread on unspoken ground. "There is a third solution. Find a good woman and marry her. Stay at Jeddle's and all live happily ever after."

Peter looked up horrified. "You don't think that I asked you to stay because..."

Yvonne put her hand over his. "No, silly, of course I don't, but it has obviously crossed your mother's mind."

Peter sighed. "She's been trying to pair me up for the last two years, but I wasn't ready."

"Are you ready now?"

Peter looked at their entwined hands and said softly; "Not until I bumped into you in Albert's office; even then I nearly didn't ask you to lunch because I feared you might think I was trying to ingratiate myself with your family."

Suddenly Yvonne realised what was partially driving his mixture of hesitancy and carefulness. "Do you still worry about me thinking that?"

He shrugged his shoulders. "You are a Jeddle and the minute I invite you to stay I get invited to be a Managing Director with a stake in the company."

Yvonne was about to give a sharp retort when Peter burst out laughing; "On the other hand you've told me enough about your family ties for me to realise that your uncle employed you under sufferance and your Aunt Prissy is less than complimentary about your conduct."

Yvonne smiled and replied, twirling her glass of mineral water, "Former conduct – remember I am a reformed person."

Peter grinned and then suddenly became serious. "I don't want you to think that I'm wooing you as a prospective mother for Emily; it's not like that."

Yvonne gave a toothy smile. "Is that what you're doing; wooing me?"

They finished their lunch at nine and went upstairs; the plan was that Peter would put Emily to bed and then join the family for coffee. When they arrived upstairs they found Dot looking harassed; she immediately asked Peter to nip down to the kitchen and help Fred with the hotel's air-extraction unit. Peter assured her that he'd go down as soon as he'd read Emily her bedtime story, but before Dot could reply Emily joined in the conversation. "That's all right dad. I'm sure that Yvonne will read me a story."

Reading Emily a story after the mornings unnerving encounter was about the last thing on Yvonne's mind, but she smiled and followed Emily to her bedroom. Once inside Emily pointed at a small armchair and commanded, "Sit there and I'll get changed." She went out the other side of the bedroom into what was obviously a private bathroom. Yvonne surveyed the bedroom, the walls were decorated with posters of pop stars she had never heard of, the bookcase was lined with children's

books she had never read and the duvet cover had pictures of cartoon characters she had never seen. She suddenly felt very out of place and for the first time for many years wished Anna was with her. Emily re-appeared and climbed into bed; Yvonne said, "This is a nice bedroom."

Emily grimaced; "It's not as nice as my one at home, but granddad and grandma are doing their best."

Yvonne was surprised. "What don't you like about it? You've even got your own bathroom."

Emily looked surprised and answered in a no-nonsense tone; "It's not where I LIVE, it's where I VISIT."

Yvonne took a gamble. "Would you like to live here?"

Emily's eyes became like saucers as she deliberated for at least two seconds. "No. My friends are at home and daddy lives at home."

With the matter closed Yvonne said, "What would you like to read?"

Emily gave a devious smile and leapt out of bed. She delved under the bed and pulled out a book; she got back into bed and handed the book to Yvonne. It was a children's science book on genetics. "I've got to chapter five – hair colour," she said.

Yvonne smiled and, hoping that the floor would swallow her up, replied, "This is a science book, wouldn't you rather read a proper story?"

Emily looked her full in the face and said, "I'd rather someone told me the truth."

Yvonne put the book on the floor and said, "I think you should talk to your daddy."

Emily shook her head. "He changes the subject; Auntie Lynne changes the subject; Granddad changes the subject. They don't want to tell me something and I thought you might."

"Why?"

Emily shrugged her shoulders and looked as if she were about to burst into tears.

Yvonne said, "What are you worried about?"

Emily didn't answer; she just sat in her bed looking miserable. Yvonne felt trapped and was pretty sure that Emily was smart enough to have deliberately trapped her, but Emily's miserable face and obvious fears were enough the tear at the heartstrings of a stone statue. Yvonne took a deep breath, "What do you think makes a daddy?"

Emily considered the question and then surprised Yvonne by answering, "Someone who works to earn money to pay for the bills and look

after everyone," she paused and added, "and someone who loves you even when you are naughty."

"Does your dad do that?"

Emily nodded.

"Does your dad do that even though you have brown eyes and he has blue eyes?"

Emily nodded.

Yvonne suddenly grasped Emily's small hand and said, "And I know that you dad loves you very much."

Emily nodded and whispered, "But supposing there was something that made him not love me? Susan's dad just left her when he found out that her mum was visiting the dentist. It wasn't Susan's fault and she didn't even get a birthday card this year."

Yvonne squeezed Emily's hand making sure she didn't break any bones, "your dad knows why you have brown eyes, but that doesn't stop him loving you and I am absolutely certain that he will never, ever, walk out on you."

"Never ever?"

"Never ever."

Emily went to ask a question but Yvonne put her finger to Emily's lips. "You must ask you dad – it's a family thing."

Emily nodded and snuggled down under her duvet, she smiled at Yvonne, who got up to go having resisted the urge to give Emily a bear hug. As she reached the door Emily said, "And I wouldn't mind a mum with green eyes."

Yvonne spun round, but Emily had closed her eyes and was pretending to be asleep. She left the room, closed the door, and promptly leant against the wall muttering to herself about breaking Peter's neck.

Come Friday evening Peter and Yvonne were having their evening drink as they watched the sun go down. They were sitting side by side on top of an air-conditioning unit on the parapet of the hotel roof; they had chosen this location so that the rest of the family could watch the TV and they could have a final tête-à-tête before travelling back home the following day. Yvonne had not been with Peter all day; she had been shopping in Edinburgh and he had taken Emily to Rothbury Forest. After some general discussion about her purchases Yvonne asked, "Did you tell her?"

Peter put his mug down and picked up her hand, "Yes."

"How did she take it – it has been worrying her for months?"

"Like water off of a ducks back. She seemed more interested that I had known she was not my biological daughter for years and that it was not a surprise to me."

"She's was worried that you'd leave."

Peter looked at Yvonne, "She said that you had explained that I wouldn't leave her and that seemed to satisfy her."

"Don't be fooled."

Peter grinned, "We had a number of discussions at various points in the morning. She would broach the subject and then drop it, only to come back to it later. He sighed, "I don't really want to go back tomorrow, but I haven't got much choice. She didn't talk about it all afternoon apart from asking one question."

"Which was?"

"You don't want to know."

"Now I'm even more curious."

Peter gave a lopsided grin. "She asked if you and I were, as she euphemistically put it, 'an item'."

Yvonne squeezed Peter's hand, "And are we?"

He squeezed back and Yvonne almost screamed as he said tenderly, "I hope that we will become so."

Yvonne retrieved her hand and gave it some life-saving massage. She looked at Peter and finalised the decision that she had made earlier. "Peter can I ask you a personal question?"

"Fire away"

"Are you a Christian?"

Peter gave her a sideways look and replied, "I trust so. Mum and Dad brought me up to go to church so I had a full Sunday school experience. When I went to University I decided that I would be a free thinker and walked away from the church." He paused. "Then when Charlotte was diagnosed with cancer I walked into a church and had a good shout at God."

"What happened?"

"A Catholic priest shot out of the confessional and asked if I wanted to talk – I was very rude to him." He paused again for a longer period; "later that week I went back to apologise; I ended up pouring out my heart to him. Over the next six years he stood beside me and I learnt to hold the hand of God; I've never let go."

"So you go to church."

"Yes, and Emily goes to a Sunday school."

Yvonne took a deep breath, "I've been thinking, and I've come to a decision."

Peter raised an eyebrow, "What's that?"

"I've decided not to decide, but when to decide."

Peter raised the other eyebrow, "Decide what?"

Yvonne grabbed hold of his hand again. "Correct me if I'm wrong, but if you decide to accept the position of Managing Director you have a six-month trial period and then if both you and the Board are happy you buy out John's stake in the company. If not you walk away."

Peter nodded and started to speak, but Yvonne put her finger to his lips and continued, "And you told me that you haven't yet told Emily about moving here and don't intend to until Easter next year."

Peter nodded again obviously mystified as to where this was leading. Yvonne toyed with his fingers, "So in effect you don't have to make a decision about moving here, or permanently taking the managing director's job for six months; you can decide either way then." She hesitated, and then ploughed on, not looking at Peter for fear of his reaction, "So I've decided to decide in six months time."

Peter sighed with frustration, "Decide what?"

"Decide whether or not to marry you."

Peter's jaw dropped open and Yvonne kept on talking before he could interrupt, "If the answer is 'yes' we can make a joint decision about what we are going to do before your Easter deadline with Emily; if I decide 'no' neither of us has lost anything."

She went quiet, unsure of what Peter's response would be and fearing both that she had pushed things too far and a flat rejection. Eventually Peter murmured, "You can't set a deadline on love."

"I can set a deadline to decide whether or not I am in love."

Peter digested this and asked, "And what is your preliminary decision?"

Yvonne gave a toothy grin. "There's a difference between falling in love and being in love. I'm falling for you, but there are complications."

Peter groaned, "You mean Emily?"

Yvonne shook her head. "Not with Emily, with me. I've got to come to terms with living with God as part of my life. I've got to discover whether or not I can live without alcohol. I've got to discover what it is like to live in the present while openly acknowledging my past – and that means telling your family about my past sooner rather than later." She stopped for a moment and then finished off by saying, "And I've got

to discover if you love me, warts and all, in a normal everyday existence and not here in a vacuum of luxury."

Peter put his arm around her shoulders and they sat watching the crimson red sun sink behind a group of hills. "Remember this moment," he said. "It will never come again, but if life is kind to us we might try to re-live it in years to come."

Yvonne snuggled up to him and chuckled, "We'll never get our Zimmer frames on the roof."

He squeezed her shoulders to the point of dislocation and said, "Remember I'm an engineer – I'll install a lift!"

The following morning Yvonne said farewell to the family and headed the MG towards Glasgow. As she drove across the countryside her thoughts were in turmoil, so much had happened since she had picked the sports car up a fortnight ago. She eventually found the home of '4x4 for us' and drove into the little yard. Three modern Land Rovers now occupied it and two old fashioned Jeeps. She parked, walked over to the office, and found Anisha inside; she handed over the keys and signed the credit card slip. She looked out of the window at the MG. "That is one excellent vehicle."

Anisha nodded, "But I fear I may not have it for much longer."

Yvonne looked at Anisha as she rubbed her tummy and continued, "I fear I will have to buy something more practical; I'm certainly not taking these two in that Old Land-Rover!"

Yvonne laughed. "If ever you do sell it get Geraldine to let me know."

Yvonne left the office and walked across the yard towards a waiting taxi thinking to herself what a ridiculous thing to say. Even if she could ever afford such a car, if she parked it outside her block of flats it would never survive its first night.

As Yvonne flew home Peter was having a hard time. First with Emily and then with his parents. All of them wanted to know his intentions as far as Yvonne was concerned, but he had no real answers. Yvonne had her doubts concerning herself and Peter had his doubts concerning himself. Could he trust himself to another woman? Could he trust his emotional instincts? Could he entrust Emily into Yvonne's care? Would he manage as a Managing Director? Should he divert from the great family plan? Above all was what he felt for Yvonne; the stirrings of love or the result of latent carnal desire?

# Chapter 10

## Opportunities

On Monday morning Albert arrived at the office at ten o'clock as usual. He breezed in, accepted his cup of tea from Yvonne, and informed her of a meeting at ten-thirty with him, her, and James. Before he got into his office she hastily interrupted him and before he could respond entered his office and stood by his desk. Albert looked at her for a moment or two and she blurted out, "I think it is only fair that you know that I am currently going out with Peter Parsons. I wouldn't want there to be any misunderstandings."

Much to Yvonne's surprise Albert gave a huge smile. "Well good for you; and thanks for telling me – I'll try to keep my remarks about Peter in the civil region."

Yvonne had not finished. "Did you recommend him for Managing Director?"

Albert's smile all but disappeared. "It was a Board decision, but I do think he will make a good director." He paused, "you haven't told him about my position in the company?"

Yvonne gave a toothy smile; Albert almost grimaced, her teeth really were dreadful. "No, I promised I wouldn't and I haven't and before you ask I have told him about Bangkok – everything about Bangkok – I wanted to start on the right footing."

Albert smiled again. "Good."

Albert sat down and Yvonne went back to her office. She had wondered for a fleeting moment if Albert fancied her- the boss-Secretary thing - but his reaction over her announcement had quashed her fears; he was genuinely pleased.

Yvonne was quite right; she was not on Albert's mind, but Mary was. Mary had told Albert casually over lunch the previous day that her landlord had informed her that the cottage was up for sale. Initially it was up for sale with her as sitting tenant and she feigned

casualness about the whole affair, but underneath she was obviously worried and concerned. To compound his worries Jess had also had a quiet word with him as she was also worried about Mary, but for a different reason; apparently Mary had started having what she called 'wobblies'. To Albert it sounded like heart failure. Jess had tried to persuade Mary to go to the doctor and had got nowhere – Mary hated doctors and that was that. He glanced at the clock and picked up the phone; there was time for one call before his meeting.

Just before ten thirty James walked into Yvonne's office. He was just as Ann had described, tall, muscular and with a face like a bulldog; on a dark night Yvonne felt sure that she could mistake his neck muscles for a tree trunk. They entered Albert's office and he sat them down. He picked up some papers and began. "There's been some changes and it's left a few holes in the management structure so we've got to make do and mend for a time. I'll be covering this job and Robert's old job for at least two months, so here's how we are going to play it..."

Albert droned on for ten minutes outlining who was doing what and how James and Yvonne were to distribute the mail and the underlying tasks. He then changed tack. "John has also left the company, but his position as Managing Director (Engineering and Manufacture) is being filled by Peter Parsons..."

Yvonne's heart leapt; so he had taken up the offer. Yvonne listened closely, "...Peter will not be performing a dual role, and Rachel Holmes will be acting as Head of Manufacture. I would be grateful if you would give them both your full support, any questions?"

James asked one or two questions on a couple of personal initiatives that Robert had started; Albert's reply was characteristically blunt, "bin them. Whoever takes over from Robert will need to do their own thing and we haven't got time and effort to pursue Robert's pie-in-the-sky ideas"

Yvonne and James left Albert's office just before noon. As they closed the door James whispered to Yvonne, "How on earth do you work for him? It's like interacting with an active volcano."

Yvonne grinned. "He's OK. I find him a good boss; he has his strange ways, but then most of us do."

James gave a silly grin and murmured; "Fancy him do you?"

She shook her head and grinned back; "I have a boyfriend, but if I didn't I might be tempted."

Before they could interchange any more niceties, Albert shot out of his office like a jack-rabbit. "I'm taking an early lunch; back before one – I hope."

Albert took Robert's old company car and drove into the city centre. He parked outside a posh office block and, after consulting the menu board in the lobby, rushed up to the second floor and into the offices of Peachy, Parsons, and Pretty Estate Agents. He told the receptionist that he had an appointment with Mr Peachy and was shown into his office. Mr Peachy turned and smiled. "Hello Albert."

Albert did a double take and realised that Mr Peachy sang tenor in the Barber-shop group, but had not known his second name. He replied, "Hello George, I've come about the cottage."

"Missed you for the last couple of rehearsals."

"Been on Iona singing different types of hymns. There was this fabulous Barber shop group called The Intonals from Perth and they let me have some of their music."

They discussed music for a few minutes and then George pulled out the plans of the cottage. Albert studied them. "How old is it?"

"Not sure, but there is a cottage recorded on Slade's Farm in the early 1600s. Personally I think this one dates back to the late 1700s or early 1800s, but my colleagues disagree with me – they think it is older."

Albert studied the plans carefully, "so it includes the current garden and the small paddock behind the cottage."

"Yes, the present owner thought that he'd be able to build a house there, but he's been refused planning permission three times and given up. He obviously hasn't got the right connections."

Albert gave George a quizzical look and he winked. "Don't quote me, but it is rumoured that a big housing developer is after the fields opposite and promising the council the earth in return."

Albert allowed himself an inward smile. He'd come wearing two hats; firstly out of concern for Mary, but also because he knew that Jeddle's owned the fields opposite; Derek had originally purchased them with a view to extending the factory, but – much to Albert's delight – he had been refused planning permission, even on appeal.

"How much?"

George shuffled some papers, "current asking price is £225,000."

"What?" barked Albert, "That's daylight robbery!"

George gave a weak smile. "It's a bijou eighteenth century cottage in a rural location with a paddock suitable for a horse during a period of rising house prices."

Albert's face took on a hard look. "Cut the cackle. It's a dilapidated cottage in need of a new thatch and with no garage – and no prospect of a garage. It has a sitting tenant, a septic tank and is in urgent need of re-wiring."

George gave another weak smile. "You needn't worry about the sitting tenant; you can always get her out by re-thatching the roof and upping the rent."

Albert almost lost his temper and said, "£ 160,000 cash."

George's eyebrows almost disappeared into his hairline; or rather they would have done twenty years ago before he went bald. "I don't think my client would drop so low."

"Ring him and ask him. I am prepared to buy the cottage – without a survey – and complete within two weeks."

George stared at Albert in disbelief. "No survey?"

"It's stood for 300 years so it's hardly likely to fall down tomorrow."

George picked up the phone and dialled. He talked to his client, whom he called Joseph and put in Albert's offer. He eventually nodded his head, put his hand over the mouthpiece and said; "He won't drop below £200,000."

Albert gave a malevolent smile; "Then tell Joseph that I'll report him to the council for renting out a cottage that has sub-standard facilities and is in bad need of a re-thatch, with any luck they'll slap a court order on him before he can sell it to anyone else."

George began to look very unhappy, but he uncovered the mouthpiece and repeated Albert's warning; there was a loud squawk from the other end of the line and a torrent of words. Eventually George covered the mouthpiece again and said, "£ 180,000."

Albert smiled again, "£165,000, in cash in two weeks time and remind him there is no survey."

George did as he was told and after much too-ing and fro-ing said; "You have to take the tenant."

Albert nodded and the deal was sealed.

Albert arrived back at his office; feeling pleased with himself, just as Yvonne was leaving for lunch. Albert gave a wicked grin. "Give Peter my regards."

Yvonne laughed. "I'm having lunch with Ann, his secretary. Peter's having lunch with Derek, Prissy and the other Managing Directors - way out of my league."

Albert settled down and started to wade through his mail; after a few minutes his stomach informed him that he hadn't eaten. He popped round the corner to one of the sandwich machines and bumped into Geraldine, who was trying to extract an overstuffed baguette through a minimal slot. As she tugged and pulled Albert said. "Thanks for loading the compiled version of the flight simulator; it does perform so much better."

Geraldine finally claimed her much damaged baguette and said, "That's OK. Thanks for giving us the passwords."

She walked off down the corridor. Albert played safe and bought a standard sandwich and walked after her. As he entered Yvonne's office he met Geraldine coming out. "Just left a note for Yvonne," she said smiling.

Albert's insatiable curiosity got the better of him two seconds after she rounded the corner. The note read, 'Anisha is selling the MG. If you are interested phone before Wednesday.' Albert re-read the note and allowed himself a chuckle; maybe it was his day to be a doubly good Samaritan. He buried the note in Yvonne's 'must-look-at-sometime' tray and went to his desk. He picked up Yvonne's expenses claim, extracted a phone number, and started dialling.

That afternoon Albert enjoyed his pre-board meeting tête-à-tête with Derek. They initially talked about the managerial re-arrangements, and then Albert asked Derek about the fields. Derek went quiet for a moment and then said, "I'm not going behind your back Bert, I know how strongly you feel about those fields and the fact that they should remain green-belt. The truth is that I have asked Penelope to sell them; we can't use them, but we could use any money they raise. In any case you needn't worry as they are ring-fenced green-belt and by the look of it no-one will ever get permission to build on them."

Albert grimaced. "I'm not so sure, a little bird told me that a developer is wooing the council and offering sweeteners."

Derek wiggled his bushy eyebrows. "You mean bribes?"

"Not as such, but how about the developer building a brand new school for the council at cost price? Supposedly part of their community liaison programme."

Derek deliberately didn't look at Albert when he replied, "That might bring us in more money."

Albert was not going to be put off. "Mind if I keep a watching brief?"

Derek gave a shallow smile. "I don't suppose I'd be able to stop you, but please don't cost us too much money Bert, with John leaving and Peter not willing to buy in for at least six months we could have an interesting cash-flow situation in the not too distant future."

Albert gave a short barking laugh. "You know that's not true, both you and I could sell some of our investments and cover the shortfall, we've both made a tidy packet over the last few years."

Derek grimace again. "Speak for yourself. My investment is mainly in my children and that is non-recoverable!"

They both laughed and Albert changed the subject. "You know I said we should reward Yvonne for her part in the John/Robert fiasco, well I think I have the answer." He then outlined his proposal and Derek gave his approval. Finally Derek asked Albert if he had heard back from Smithson's following his letter proclaiming that Botanago would not work with torpedoes. Albert threw his hands up in despair. "They claim that it is working fine. They have even tried some test-firings at sea and it performed well. Apparently the next step is to try simulated underwater attack between two submarines, I only hope it fails."

Derek asked quietly, knowing the sensitivity of the subject. "But what if it passes with flying colours? Will you withdraw permission?"

Albert shook his head. "We both know that we can't afford to. It would cause a hell of a row and could tarnish the company's reputation. We've spent years building it up and I don't want us to lose it overnight, but I must admit it sticks in the throat."

Derek relaxed, ten years before they had made the bold step of selling on trust. They did not use complicated contracts as most of their clauses only came into use if something went wrong and arguments ensued; instead they sold on a simple one-page agreement. However, the whole thing was dependent on the client's trusting Jeddle's word and Jeddle's trusting their clients. Loss of trust could be potentially catastrophic to future sales.

As Albert was leaving Derek idly remarked, "By the way both our miscreants have already got jobs."

Albert was quite surprised. "Where?"

"Asiatic Underwater Robots."

Albert furrowed his brow. "Aren't they based in Vietnam?"

“They are in the process of opening a London office; apparently John is going to head it up. Robert is moving to Vietnam.”

“With his family?”

Derek shrugged his shoulders. “Don’t know, but it’s a hell of a move.”

“Have Asiatic asked you for references?”

“That’s the odd thing, they haven’t mentioned it. I was talking to their chairman the other night and she didn’t mention a thing.”

Albert said quietly. “Do we need to maintain good relations with them?”

“I should say so; they currently use us as their European source for stepping motors; I imagine that they’ll make their own in a few years now that they have Robert, but we need to make hay while the sun shines.”

Albert nodded. “Then have a quiet word with your chairman friend – I hate to say it but I think John is capable of writing his own references on our notepaper.”

Derek pushed his hand through his hair – always a sign that he didn’t relish a task. “She’s not my friend and I find her rather difficult to talk to, but I’ll see what I can do.”

Albert pushed home his request. “We can lose our reputation in more ways than one.”

Derek nodded and sighed, “I’ll get on to it.”

“Today.”

“This week.”

Albert turned again to leave and Derek stopped him again. “And thanks Albert for not kicking up a fuss about the sale of Botanago.”

Albert flashed a wicked smile. “There’s more than one way to skin a cat.”

A week later, Yvonne was feeling exceptionally content. She had not had a drink since Iona and had been able to cope, quite able to cope; she had also found a friendly little Baptist church and was settling down into the congregation. Above all it was her 37<sup>th</sup> birthday and Peter had given her a super present of a solid silver St Bridget’s cross with a central diamond and a matching pair of ear-rings, plus a bottle of her favourite French perfume. She was still fingering the cross when Albert arrived and she had to leap for the kettle. When she took his tea in he gave his boyish smile, handed her an envelope and said happy birthday.

She opened it to find a birthday card with a mad-driver cartoon and a pair of keys. She instantly recognised the larger one. "Is this what I think it is?"

"It's parked round by the loading bay."

She was appalled and said in a feeble voice and feeling exceptionally embarrassed. "Albert I can't possibly accept this from you; it's a nice thought but-."

Albert's grin cut her short; she knew he had something up his sleeve. "It's not from me," he said, "it's from the company by way of a thank you for exposing the fraud and saving our skins."

Seeing the confusion on her face he continued. "If it makes you feel better, in reality it's down as my company car with you as an authorised main driver – call yourself my chauffeur - but don't expect me to sit with you too often!"

She jangled the keys. "What's the small one?"

Albert grinned again; he enjoyed it when things all came together. "It's a lock-up garage under the private flats next to your tower block; we couldn't have you parking a company car in the road could we?"

Yvonne felt like giving Albert a hug, but restrained herself for fear of embarrassing him. "Oh Albert I never expected..."

Albert grinned again. "Go and have a look, you can park it in my slot most of the time, but leave me room to lean my bicycle against the wall!"

As she was scurrying out he added. "And my present will be in front of you."

She almost ran to the loading bay and the MG was sitting next to one of the company's vans. She opened it up; on the driver's seat were the rest of the car-keys and the car's handbook. She sat in the driver's seat and looked around the interior with a feeling of immense pleasure. She began to realise that it was slightly different from before. For a start, the interior had been professionally valeted. She made a mental list; the old cassette player had replaced by a CD/Radio with a USB port, a small notice announcing that the car was armed with an automatic tracking device was stuck to the back of the sun-visor and there was a new set of posh car-mats. All of a sudden she realised what Albert had meant; she was holding a wooden steering wheel with a beautifully inset MG motif. For a few moments she was overwhelmed. Her 36<sup>th</sup> birthday had been marked by one of the worst hangovers and a dreadful sense of despair, but now... She started the engine and peered at the dials and then burst out laughing – the fuel gauge showed that the petrol tank was all but empty.

That afternoon Derek wandered in to see Albert; Yvonne shot to her feet to warn Albert, but Derek laughed and said, "He knows I'm coming – how's the car?"

She blushed. "Wonderful."

Derek became serious. "You deserve it." He paused, "I also hear that you're on the wagon."

She gave a toothy smile. "Not a drop since I was in Scotland."

He glanced at Albert's closed office door. "Does Peter know about...?"

Yvonne nodded. "Yes and so does Albert. I've stopped trying to hide the fact that I wasted ten years of my life; on the other hand I'm not shouting it from the rooftops."

Derek gave a swift couple of nods. "Good." He paused with his hand on the door handle, "Peter's coming to lunch on Thursday evening, we're entertaining the chairman of Asiatic Robotics and her husband, why don't you come along?"

Yvonne grinned. "That depends on what Peter wants, and in any case shouldn't it be Chairwoman and husband?"

Derek made a grunting noise and moved in to Albert's office. Albert was already sitting in one of his armchairs and Derek joined him. Yvonne shut the outer door and sat down; this could be an interesting conversation to listen to. Derek opened the batting, "I contacted Sweta Pera, the chairman of Asiatic Underwater Robots, and you were right. John gave them some glowing references on our notepaper."

"So what did you tell her?"

Yvonne heard Derek's dry cough and then the reply, "I told her the truth, and I added that I thought that Robert was a good engineer and they could benefit from his expertise, but that John was a rotten apple."

"And?"

"And she said that they were still going to keep him on; she feels that they need a ruthless so-and-so to get the office up and running and reckons that it will take John a year. Then she intends to sack him on the grounds of false references and deny him any bonus."

"Ouch"

Derek coughed again. "Well, we've done our part. In fact she's coming over to England tomorrow and is eating with me on Thursday evening, I don't suppose you'd-?"

"No."

There was a period of silence and then Derek said, "But I haven't come here to talk about that, I have a different and more pressing problem." He paused before continuing in a sort of third-party voice, "I've got to go into hospital on Friday Afternoon and I may be off-line for a little while."

Albert gave an instant and concerned response. "What for? How long?"

Derek cleared his throat. "They think I've got some sort of growth in my windpipe and they need to take it out."

"Cancer?"

"Probably, but they don't know if it's malignant."

Albert almost spat. "It's those bloody cigars! We've been telling you for years to give them up."

There was silence and then Albert said, in a tone that conveyed deep concern. "How long have you known?"

"Had problems breathing in bed for a few months. I had a scan last week and they had a peer at it with some optical device. They'll operate on Saturday and then they've promised me some radiotherapy and perhaps some chemotherapy. I might be off-line for a couple of months, perhaps more."

Albert didn't respond and Yvonne got the distinct impression that there was a deeper implication here that she didn't understand. In the end Derek said, "You know what that means."

Albert almost groaned. "Can't Prissy run the company?"

Derek put on a firm voice. "She's not an engineer or a manager, she's good at finding customers and keeping them, but you and I and her know that she could never be Chairman, even for a couple of months. I'm afraid we have to face the fact Albert that your period of blessed seclusion is over – you've had nearly twelve years in the back row. I wouldn't trust the company to anyone else; we built it up together, now you've got to take your turn at running it."

There was silence and then Derek's cough followed by; "Remember we did agree that if ever I was indisposed for more than a month or so, or run over by a bus, that you would take over."

There was more silence and Yvonne began to get a conscience about listening in, but the acoustics were such that she could not now stop listening. Albert eventually responded; he had obviously slipped into problem-solving mode. "Well, we haven't got much time for a hand-over, so I'd better start reading myself into your role."

Derek cleared his throat again. "As always there is another twist to the tale. Rebecca is going on holiday for three months – I've promised

her a long holiday to see her family in South Africa and Japan, and I don't intend to renege on my promise."

Albert replied, "Rebecca is your senior secretary isn't she, surely you'd booked a replacement?"

"Fraid not. I found it easier last time to let the two juniors manage as I knew what to expect."

Albert said decisively; "Then I want to take Yvonne with me. She knows my quirks and is a quick learner."

"Peter and Julia won't like that."

"Would they want to work directly for me?"

Derek laughed. "You've got a point there!"

Yvonne caught the squeak of one of the armchairs; Derek had obviously stood up. She heard him say in a low voice; "Pray for me Albert, I'm bloody petrified."

"I've never *not* prayed for you all, I'll just pray a little harder. There's no monopoly you know, you *can* try it yourself."

Derek grunted and opened the door; Yvonne busied herself with some on-screen editing and Derek passed her by. When Derek had left Albert came out to see her, before he said anything Yvonne confessed. "I know – the walls are paper thin."

Albert smiled. "I know. I overheard your interesting conversation with Ann the other day."

Yvonne turned a nice shade of pink; it had never occurred to her that Albert could hear what she said just as much as she could hear him. Albert didn't dwell on the office acoustics or Yvonne's listening habits. "Well it saves me explaining, looks like we're shifting offices; I only hope that it is only for a couple of months."

Yvonne studied Albert's face. "You really are concerned about Derek."

Albert gazed into the far distance. "Friends – real friends – are hard to find. He's always stood by me; even let me off the management hook; now it's my turn to stand by him."

The next few days went by in a blur for both Yvonne and Albert. Despite his tête-à-têtes with Derek there was still a remarkable amount of information for Albert to absorb; meanwhile Yvonne had to win the confidence of Peter and Julia. Fortunately, once they realised that she had got the temporary position because she was Albert's choice, and not because she was a Jeddle, all began to go well. By Friday evening both were exhausted; Yvonne left at six and Albert was just about to

follow when he received a phone call from Eric Bradstone of Bradstone's Robots. Bradstone's were not in the same market as Jeddle's in that they made robots that worked in harsh environments, not production line robots. Albert was at a loss at the start of the phone call as he had never crossed paths with Eric. Once Eric started to speak Albert realised that he must have come from Yorkshire. "Is that Derek Jeddle, Chairman of Jeddle's Robotics?"

"No, its Albert Potterdon acting chairman, Derek is indisposed."

"Well 'e be back soon? I met him at a do in London and I'd like to talk to him."

Albert smiled, he had always avoided the London meeting circuit, but Derek swore that it was a source of good contacts. "Could be two or three months. Can I help?"

They was a pause and then a blunt statement, "'Dunno. The fact is the company's having a bit o' a hard time and I'm trying to find a buyer. We employ upwards of four hundred people and I don't want to lay them off."

Albert's brain slipped into gear, Bradstone's had set up shop in the mining area of Yorkshire just after the collapse of the mining industry, no wonder he was sensitive about making people redundant. "What makes you think we can help?"

"You're big and might just fancy a bit o' diversification."

"Why is your company in trouble?"

"Borrowed too much money at too high an interest rate to make stock for a government order that hasn't yet materialised."

Albert nodded to himself; Bradstone had fallen foul of the curse of the small firm – cash flow. "How long before you can't pay your staff?"

"Managed this week, probably managed next week, then it's up to the bank and you know what that means."

Albert thought for a moment to get his strategy together. "Why wait so long? The writing must have been on the wall some time ago?"

Eric didn't answer straight away and eventually replied in a not so blunt manner; "We were talking to Smithson's, but they've pulled out with troubles of their own – their closing their Irish subsidiary next month and it's rumoured that their Swedish manufacturing plant will soon undergo a management buy-out. You're my last hope."

Albert made a swift decision. "Come and see me Monday afternoon, with your Company Secretary, your Head of Finance and your Personnel manager and we'll talk – no promises mind you – I just want to fully understand your situation."

“But you’re not saying no.”

“Let’s just say I haven’t said yes.”

Eric rang off and Albert pulled out Derek’s tatty notebook and thumbed his way through Derek’s notes until he reached ‘Bradstones.’ Derek’s notes were, as usual, terse but to the point; they read, ‘financially wobbly, need to rely less on government contracts, no overlap with us, might be a good investment. Eric is not an electrical engineer he is a chemist, but gave a good lecture on harsh environments.’

Albert spent the best part of Saturday reading through the application papers from candidates who wanted to take over Robert’s job. Penelope had short-listed four candidates for interview on Tuesday. Two were obviously strong contenders for the job, one even came with a glowing recommendation from Old Mr Smithson; the third candidate seemed to Albert to be a wild card - obviously a good manager, but little or no manufacturing experience. The final candidate was Rachel Holmes, who was known to him as she was currently acting as Head of Engineering; he had a high opinion of her technical expertise, but she had had little or no managerial experience - she was also, in Albert’s opinion, frightfully young. In the end Albert put the job papers away and re-read the contract for the purchase of Mary’s house; he had signed this the previous day and the formal exchange and completion of the deal had taken place earlier in the day. He was quite pleased; he had not only purchased the house and the paddock, but also – at relatively little extra cost - the farm-track that ran down the back of the paddock behind Mary’s cottage. His next problem was-should he tell Mary or not?

Albert’s Sunday turned out to be interesting. Out of cowardice, or prudence, Albert did not tell Mary that he was her new landlord. However, as he had lunch he made a mental note that the thatch would have to be replaced this summer, and the wiring replaced before somebody got electrocuted. The prime interest came from two other areas. Firstly Jess had been allowed by her doctor to reduce her anti-depressants and, although still not a source of sparkling wit, the difference in her demeanour was tangible. Secondly, Richard joined them for lunch before he and Jess went to the hospice nursery. As soon as Albert appeared, Richard became obviously nervous, having Albert as a boss was obviously one thing, whereas sitting down to lunch with him was quite another. In the end, when Richard had gone to the toilet for the second time, Albert asked Jess why Richard was so nervous. Jess laughed. “I

told him that as I never saw my father you had to approve our relationship, it was only a joke, but he seems to have taken it to heart!"

On his return Albert kept a straight face and when Jess went to collect the desert talked to Richard about his work at the hospice and put his mind at rest over Jess by saying that he hoped things worked out for them. Once they had departed he and Mary settled down for a comfortable afternoon in the garden. Albert made sure that he mowed the lawn and did the strenuous activities and Mary potted about in the flower beds. After about an hour Mary suddenly sat down and fanned herself as she went an interesting parchment colour. Albert watched out of the corner of his eye, after about fifteen minutes she got up and continued. Albert tackled her about her sudden pause in activity over tea and scones. Mary was adamant; she would not go to the doctor. Albert tried a different tack. "How about if I paid for you to go private?"

She shook her head. "I know what it is Albert. My arteries are all furred up and my heart is too weak to pump the blood through, plus my blood-pressure is probably way too high."

Albert opened his mouth, but Mary reached out and touched his hand, "I don't want to be pulled about by doctors – I saw what they did to Bill; they gave him a few extra months of life, but at a terrible price. I'd rather enjoy life while I can and then die when my time is up."

She paused, "But there is one thing, I'm making a new will, would you mind being the executor?"

# Chapter 11

## Alliances and Liaisons

Yvonne took notes at the Monday meeting with Eric Bradstone; as requested by Albert, Eric brought along his Company Secretary, a rather dour man called Edward; his Personnel Manager, a young Scot called Duncan and their Head of finance, a diminutive woman named Patricia, she was dressed in a smart blue two-piece suit, but had grey hair that looked like a pad of over-used steel wool. Albert had invited Prissy, Felicity, and Penelope. Albert started the meeting by introducing his side of the table and then allowing Eric to introduce his staff. Albert then glanced at his notepad. "Thanks for the e-mail of your company accounts, outstanding orders, and potential orders. Am I right that in the long-term you have the potential to turnover 20 Million pounds business at 25% profit, but in the short term have to service debts of nearly one and a half million?"

Eric nodded glumly. "'bout sums it up."

Albert glanced at his pad again. "You said on the phone that you could probably pay your staff this week; how?"

Patricia stirred. "By selling the company silver."

Albert leant back in his chair; he wanted to appear relaxed and radiate a take-it-or-leave-it impression. "You mentioned a buy-out; we wouldn't buy you out, but we might be persuaded to amalgamate you at no cost."

Eric's mouth dropped open and Albert kept talking. "This would mean your staff get paid and probably no lay-offs – though I couldn't guarantee that at this stage. But we would make some economies of scale and use you plant to produce some components that we currently buy-in."

There was a stunned silence. Eric suddenly leant forward; "You takin' the piss! Bradstone is worth a small fortune."

Albert smiled. "Your assets as listed in your company accounts are impressive, but only to an asset-stripper; to realise them you would have

to close down the company and I take it that is what you exactly don't want?"

Patricia slid a piece of paper Albert's way. "That is only true in the short-term; in six month's time our bank-balance will be healthy as we will have received our Government payments and possibly gained another contract."

Felicity suddenly stirred; "But you haven't got six months have you? By the look of these accounts you haven't got six hours. I had a chat with your payments section; you are currently paying bills in three months that you should pay in 28 days; if word of this gets out then you're dead in the water."

Patricia tapped the table with a badly manicured fingernail. "I didn't expect underhand snooping."

Felicity gave an apology for a smile. "I didn't snoop. We sold you twenty-two stepping motors four months ago and have still not been paid; I merely chased up the order."

A stand-off silence ensued, and then Albert nodded to Prissy. She slid some papers across the table; "This is what we propose. We do not intend to take you over and we do not intend to try and muscle our way in at no cost. Rather what we propose is an alliance; we will support you in the short-term and you can pay us back when the going gets better for you – mark you there are strict limits to what we will finance and over what period."

Eric stroked his chin. "What's in it for you?"

Prissy smiled. "Our sales force will sell your robots and yours will sell ours; so at the stroke of a pen we will have increased our market potential by 25% and you will have almost trebled yours."

She paused, "But there are three conditions. Firstly we run your sales force through our training programme and equip them properly. Secondly we share our technological expertise – for instance our guys in manufacture would love to know how you make such diabolically perfect watertight glands. And thirdly we place a non-executive director on your management board."

Edward looked up from the papers Prissy had produced. "Do we get one on your board?"

Albert smiled. "Of course! Alliances are built on trust and that, as far as we are concerned, means mutual trust."

Penelope looked at her watch. To tell the truth she was still in a slight daze; as far as she was concerned Albert had appeared from nowhere and taken over the company in Derek's absence. She had found out – to

her horror – why this was and was now carefully watching her back. She felt that she had already made an enemy of Albert and therefore needed to redeem herself and this could be her chance, especially as Albert had trusted her with the next phase of their ‘operation.’ She spoke; “I propose we take a break. You need to study our proposal and I need to eat. How about I take you all to lunch and then give you an hour or so in our executive boardroom to talk it over?”

Eric looked at Albert, who tried to give a reassuring smile. “Penelope is empowered to talk on our behalf; ask her what you like.”

Eric was not impressed. “So we are not worthy of your attention?”

Albert looked glum. “I’m sorry, but I have a million other things I must attend to, and I need to find out how our Chairman is.”

Eric nodded. “Rough deal that.”

He stood up and shook hands with Albert, and then the Bradstone’s group all trooped out. Prissy turned to Albert. “You sure we can trust her? She might try and sell us down the river for a profit.”

Albert shook his head. “She might be over-ambitious, but she does have some redeeming qualities. We all have to learn and I hope that she has learnt a few lessons over the past weeks.”

Prissy smiled. “I enjoyed telling her you were taking over and that’s the truth. I think I’ll remember the look on her face for many years to come.” She stood up to go and so did Felicity, Albert turned to her; “Can you stay a minute Felicity? There’s a couple of things I want to talk about.”

Felicity sat down and Prissy left. Albert studied Felicity; she always struck him as a grey person. Grey clothes, grey eyes, grey hair, grey demeanour. Because of what he was going to say to Felicity he had also studied her personnel file; she was spinster roughly some five years younger than Albert. She had lived with her ageing mother until her death sixteen months ago. Even before the mother’s death she had always worn grey. Albert cleared his throat. “I believe in straight talking so I want to say two things. Firstly while I am acting Chairman I do not want to see any more memos encouraging staff to make unauthorised cost-savings, and secondly, I’d like you to be the non-executive director for us on Bradstones board.”

She did not even smile. “Why me?”

Her voice carried the intonation of one condemned to a life in prison. “Because their troubles are financial and you are knife-edged sharp in that area; we also trust you.”

She still did not smile. “Can I think about it?”

Albert was taken aback, and slightly annoyed. "I thought that you'd bite my hand off."

She toyed with her jotting pad and then looked up; "Your trust is misplaced."

Albert opened his mouth and then decided that listening might be the best course of action so he closed it. She looked down at her pad and spoke softly. "I didn't write the memo on cost-savings, John did, I just signed it."

Albert had a horrid thought; "Did he have something over you?"

She shook her head. "My mother had just died and he just kept on and on about me signing the damned thing; in the end I couldn't cope and I acquiesced. I know that you think of this as a reward for work well done, but I let John browbeat me and then coerce a member of my staff without me noticing; that's not a good track record."

Albert said softly; "I still would rather you went on the Bradstone's board than anyone else."

"You mean by a process of elimination I am the only one you can spare."

Albert was about to make a sharp retort when a thought crossed his mind. "You are not the only one left but you are my first choice."

She closed her eyes. "I would still like to think about it."

Albert sighed. This was why he hated management; numbers were so black and white. "OK, but in the meantime I will tell Bradstones that you're our provisional choice."

She suddenly smiled, the smile transforming a dismal face into an attractive one. "That's if they agree."

Now Albert smiled. "They will; they have little choice."

Felicity shuffled her papers into a small pile; "Why didn't you go for the take-over? They are there for the picking."

Albert shrugged. "Then we inherit a resentful management team, this way we will all want the alliance to work."

She stood up and walked towards the door; Albert said to her retreating back; "One week. I'll need the answer in a week."

She didn't turn round or acknowledge the statement; she just walked out of the door. Albert sighed and decided that he would never understand women.

Seven o'clock they did the deed and the Jeddle's-Bradstone Alliance signed. Albert invited everyone to dinner, but Eric and his entourage pleaded the need to inform their staff of the alliance before it got into

the press; Albert was not disappointed, he hated working meals. Following The Bradstones departure Prissy took Penelope off for a drink, leaving the tea-total Felicity behind. As she gathered her papers Albert asked casually, "Any decisions?"

She shot him a glance that made him realise that he had made a tactical error. He held up both his hands in mock surrender. "Sorry, I didn't mean to badger you."

She suddenly sat down. "Do you really value my opinion?"

"Yes – of course."

"Then in my opinion the company's iniquitous treatment of partners ought to end; this is the twenty-first century."

Albert was stung. "What iniquitous treatment?"

"When the sales staff, or any staff for that matter, travels abroad the company allows them to take their spouse and pays for their travel. This applies to husbands and wives only and not to partners – I think that is wrong and in fact causes resentment from the staff. You ought to either include partners in the scheme or include no-one; the current state of affairs is iniquitous."

She paused for breath and then continued, "I know you and the Jeddle's try and run the company along Christian principles, but this rule has now become untenable."

She suddenly ran out of energy and Albert pondered the matter. "How would we know they are partners and not freeloaders?"

She snorted. "Don't you trust your staff? In any case if they have nominated them as next of kin that should be good enough."

Albert digested her statement. "How about if they are registered as next of kin for three months?"

She snorted again. "Would you say the same for someone with a marriage licence?"

Albert held up his hands in mock surrender, "OK. OK. I get the point. There's a board meeting next week and if you bring the matter up I will support you."

She gave one of her brief smiles; "And if the listed next of kin is the same sex?"

Albert opened his mouth and then closed it; he had been neatly stitched up. His brain suddenly went into overdrive and he asked himself some questions. Why was she bringing this matter up now? In her mind was there some link between this and the possible board position at Bradstones? He decided on an honest answer. "Personally I find all this difficult Felicity; that's why I prefer to stay out of the limelight. But

you are right, this is the twenty-first century and I would not want to cause any staff to feel that they are being discriminated against – go ahead and change the policy. I will tell the board that it has been carried out on my say so.”

“Even for same-sex?”

Albert swallowed hard; “Even for same-sex.”

She leant back in her seat; Albert wondered if he had passed the test. She stood up and picked up her briefcase. “In that case I will sit on the Bradstones board.”

Albert relaxed slightly. “Fine, but what’s this all about Felicity, why are you championing this cause and not Penelope – surely this is a personnel matter, not finance?”

“It’s a matter of equality; but since you ask, Penelope couldn’t champion it without being accused of seeking personal advantage and she is already in your bad books.”

Albert’s mouth opened and closed; Felicity filled the silence; “Just because she also got taken in by John don’t apply double standards. If you can continue to trust me you must do the same for her. She is a good Personnel Manager and she needs to know that you trust her or the company will lose her and be the less because of it.”

She sighed. “There, I’ve had my say.”

Albert managed a smile. “Good and I want it to stay that way. I don’t ever want you to feel that you can’t have your say; the day board members only get fed good news and a platitude is the day the company starts to sink.”

She walked out; Albert began to pity the Bradstones’ board.

The next fortnight passed in a blur for both Albert and Yvonne. On top of the Bradstones’ alliance there were foreign contracts, customer meetings, finance meeting, personnel meetings; in fact as many meetings as you can think of. By Thursday of the second week Albert had had enough; if this is what Derek had to put up with however did he cope? That afternoon Albert called all the three Directors plus Felicity, and Penelope to his office. He sat them down at Derek’s long table and after the usual cross-table conversations Albert tapped the table with end his tea-spoon. “Right. I have been in this chair for nearly two weeks, it feels like a year. There is too much being passed up the chain for decision making, you are all on the board, and I do not need to make every decision or attend every meeting. You are executives so execute your

authority; if you find you are too busy get your departmental heads to execute more of their authority."

There was a stunned silence; Kevin started to say "Derek..."

Albert cut across him. "Derek is not here and I have no idea how he will manage when he comes back – have you heard the tumour was benign – even then I do not want him driven into an early grave." He paused, "and I am suspending the think-tank meetings, instead we are going to have 'catch-up' meetings where we all tell the others what has been going on; that way we can still ensure we are all pulling in the same direction. And that means no politics – I can't stand office politics – we all work for the same company. OK?"

There were murmurs around the table, but general agreement. Albert turned to Penelope, "I've been reading the application papers for Peter's replacement, and I've decided that I am the wrong person to chair the interview panel, I'd rather you did it."

She looked up, disbelief in her eyes. "Do you want me to refer the panel's choice to you for ratification?"

"No I do not! You are in charge and you make the decision."

Kevin sat up straight; "But this is a senior appointment!"

Albert locked eyes with Kevin. "And Penelope is our Personnel manager. I will endorse whomever the panel she chairs recommends."

Albert noticed Felicity smiling from the corner of his eyes; he only hoped he was making the right decision, but if he was being honest he hated interview panels. The meeting broke up a few minutes later and Penelope lingered behind. She looked at Albert. "Do you mean what you say?"

"Of course."

"Who would you like me to appoint?"

"The best person for the job."

She pressed the point. "Any particular best person?"

Albert shook his head. "You decide."

She tossed her head. "There are three people on the interview panel."

Albert laughed. "You know and I know that the panel chairman can sway the decision if they want to."

Penelope stayed silent for a minute and then started a sentence. "Albert I know that you don't..."

Albert held his hand up; "The past is the past; I'm more worried about the company's future and that future includes you as Personnel Manager. Now go forth and manage and remember you don't have to try

and impress me or the other board members, just use your skills for the good of the company."

Penelope looked uncertain; Albert tried to give his best smile. "Let's just go for a fresh start. I'll forget that you think I'm a Luddite and you forget that I think you're sometimes too personally ambitious."

Penelope laughed. "I'm not sure how to take that – and thanks."

As she walked out Albert mentally crossed his fingers, he only hoped that he was making the right decision.

Ten minutes later Yvonne wandered in and found Albert reading a magazine in one of the armchairs; she placed a cup of tea on the small table. He looked up; "how's it going?"

She sat down on the edge of the other armchair; "hectic, but OK."

"Julia and Peter holding up?"

"They're marvellous."

Albert sensed there was something else; Yvonne rubbed her hands down the sides of her dress. "Will you pray for me Albert; I'm going to meet my sister this weekend."

Albert positively beamed. "You've established contact?"

"Of sorts; I wrote a long rambling apology and she sent me a postcard."

"But she is willing to meet you?"

"I hope so."

"That's good."

Yvonne didn't move, instead she sat a little farther back in the arm of the chair. "On another matter. I know you don't like gossip, but I think there is something you should know."

Albert almost scowled. "Know because it's useful or know because it's tittle-tattle?"

"Know because it might stop you putting your foot in it."

"As if I would! Fire ahead."

"Felicity and Penelope have listed each other as next of kin."

Silence descended and Albert said quietly, "and how do you know that?"

"Because they've both updated their entries in the emergency file and made it generally known that they are living together."

Albert was mystified. "What emergency file?"

Yvonne grinned, at last she had found out something that Albert didn't know. "Apparently we lodge an electronic file with the police and fire service so if there is ever a major incident here the essential details

about staff are known. It contains blood group, any medical peculiarities, identification marks, next of kin and various other bits and pieces. You must have seen your entry; you have to sign it off at every annual review."

Albert smiled, "I don't have an annual review."

He then stopped for a second before giving Yvonne a knowing smile. "OK, what's on my emergency page?"

Yvonne turned slightly pink and didn't answer. Albert gave a bigger grin and he said in a jocular manner; "Come on, I bet you couldn't resist reading it."

"You're blood group AB positive, have a two-inch scar on your left buttock and Prissy is listed as your next of kin."

Albert sat like a statue for a minute and then said softly; "That page must be at least twelve years old."

Yvonne said; "Eighteen; would you like to update it?"

Albert didn't reply, or move. In the end he muttered, "I'm still AB positive; the scar's not gone away and..."

He tailed into silence. Yvonne suddenly realised that he didn't have a next of kin. To save him embarrassment she stood up. "So what are you going to do about Felicity and Penelope?"

Albert came out of his meditations. "What should I do? They're adults and whether I like it or not it's not really my business."

Yvonne sighed. "Let me ask you a hypothetical question. If Peter and I became engaged what would you do?"

Albert answered immediately. "I'd send you a large bunch of flowers and congratulate Peter."

"If - hypothetically speaking - I announced I was moving in with Peter as man and partner?"

Albert held his hand up; he could see where this was going. "What are you suggesting?"

"Send them a bunch of flowers; they've moved into a new flat together so if you wanted to it could be a flat-warming present, but it would indicate that you know and you're not going to blow a fuse."

Albert again went quiet, and then he said anxiously; "Would it matter to them if I did blow a fuse?"

Yvonne leaned forward; "You can be fearsome at times Albert; poor Vernon is dreading his meeting with you tomorrow, he's rung me at least six times to check that he's not on the carpet."

Albert digested this and said with feeling. "Oh I hate this Yvonne, give me a nice simple equation anytime any day."

Yvonne smiled. "On the other hand Albert you can be good at man-management; remember you've got the test-area staff eating out of your hand."

Yvonne got up to go, Albert stood up as well. "Send them a large basket of roses; you can use that company credit-card of yours that you think I have forgotten about."

He hesitated; "And thanks Yvonne, every man needs someone to tell them the truth sometimes."

Yvonne left and closed the door behind her. She walked across a small lobby and then into the secretarial office. She smiled at Julia and Peter and sat down. She looked at Julia. "Who do we buy flowers from?"

Julia's eyes opened like saucers. "You didn't go and tell him to send flowers?"

Peter stopped typing. "Talk about entering the dragon's lair unarmed."

Yvonne smiled. "I keep telling you that he's a good guy at heart, a little crusty on the outside at times, but a decent person on the inside."

Julia grinned. "Who roasted me alive for not using a teapot?"

Peter laughed. "And who practically tore me apart for not using two spaces after a full stop."

And Yvonne thought, 'and who took the time to find a young post-girl lodgings.' She smiled. "You'll learn; just wait till anybody else tries to tell you off – they'll rue the day. Now, which florist?"

Albert, however, was still sitting in the armchair with the magazine on his lap and he was still desperately trying to think of who to name as his next of kin. He had completed his emergency page when he was courting Prissy, at the time it had seemed the thing to do. However, the relationship only lasted a few months as they had soon come to their senses and realised that they were vastly incompatible. He was disturbed from his contemplation by the telephone. He walked across the room and picked up the receiver. It was Eric Bradstone, who rambled on about the alliance details for a few minutes and then obviously got down to the reason for his call. "Saw the Robotics Review this morning, your article on 'Angular pre-prediction algorithms for three-dimensional movement in fixed base manufacturing robots engaged on repetitive time-varying, processes,' was interesting."

Albert was surprised. "You read it?"

Eric laughed. "Couldn't get beyond the first two equations. However, correct me if I am wrong, but isn't this the chappie that you call Botanago and that you've installed in all your robots?"

"That's right."

"Bit risky isn't it, publishing so soon?"

"I've said what it is and the concept is not new, but I haven't said how we do it."

"So other people could be using similar algorithms?"

"Not that I know of, but yes – if we can think of it so can they."

Eric mused aloud. "Asiatic are rumoured to be installing such routines in their beasties; if that's true we'll be at a serious disadvantage."

Albert laughed. "No need to fish Eric, we're commercial partners; you can use our formula any time you like."

Eric suddenly became business like. "How soon? There's another government contract coming up for grabs and any improved efficiency is worth throwing at them."

Albert thought. "How many robot types?"

"Six."

"Is that six as in six or six as in one and five variants?"

"Six as in five and one variant"

Albert shut his eyes. "That gives me a problem; I'm running the company at the moment and I don't have a mathematician to run the routines to work out the seeding numbers – it's a nineteen variable equation with defined limits and it needs mechanical data from your robots, I just haven't got the time."

Eric was obviously surprised. "You don't have a mathematician working for you?"

Albert sighed. "Not in that area and not one who understands control theory rather than just trusting known equations and procedures."

Eric laughed. "How about I send you one?"

Now it was Albert's turn to be surprised. "You've got one?"

"How else would we stay at the cutting edge; she's part of our research team."

"OK, you send her down and I'll show her what I have done and we can hope that she can adapt it to your machines."

Eric chuckled. "Don't worry, if there's a way our Sarah will find it."

Albert wasn't so sure. "And she's a mathematician?"

"Actually no, she's an astro-physicist who couldn't get a job and came to us as a stopgap twelve years ago."

Albert laughed. "Have you ever seen the equations astro-physicists use? Send her down."

Albert put the phone down and went home; as he cycled he just could not get the idea of who to name as next of kin out of his head.

The following morning Albert arrived at just on ten o'clock as usual and found Felicity standing in his lobby. She gave him an enormous smile, "I just came to thank you for the roses, and they are wonderful and quite unexpected."

Albert smiled at her pleasure. "What did you expect?"

"She shrugged her shoulders. "We were not sure – it's a risky business coming out. You are never sure who your real friends are and who will want to see you fall."

Albert could not believe the transformation in her demeanour, or her confidence. He made another of his instant decisions. "You have any trouble in the company, you let me know. I must confess that I am not sure about the whole of this same-sex thing, but I am sure that I can't go around throwing stones."

Felicity was obviously perplexed. Albert smiled. "He who is without sin cast the first stone?"

She burst into laughter. "Albert, I can't believe that you have any sins to worry about."

They turned round just as Julia was bringing in Albert's cup of tea; Felicity thanked Albert again and left. Albert entered his office to find Julia on her way out; he stopped her. "Yvonne tells me that you did all the preparations for the meetings I had last week."

Julia nodded; clearly terrified. Albert smiled. "They were excellent. I had just the right papers with just the right information. Has Yvonne told you that I'm changing the think-tank meeting to be a different sort of meeting?"

Julia nodded, still speechless. Albert smiled again. "I would like you to come to that meeting and take the notes."

Horror crossed Julia's face. Albert continued; "I have discussed it with Yvonne and she has far too much work to do because we are still trying to run my old office as well."

Julia stammered, "I... I'm not sure."

Albert nodded. "Think about it; if you don't want to face it then I'll understand – I don't particularly want to face it either."

He looked at Julia. "Do you think I am making too many changes?"

She managed to reply; "I don't know, but if you make many more we won't be able to cope."

Albert nodded. "Let me know if we reach that point won't you; too many changes causes too much confusion and nobody gains."

Julia went to make her escape; Albert said to her receding back; "And can you send Peter in."

Peter arrived two minutes later, apprehension written all over his podgy face. Albert motioned him to sit down; he did so with trepidation. "I believe that you can also type mathematical papers."

Peter nodded, "I did half an A level maths course. I can usually type the papers, but I don't understand them."

Albert grinned. "I'm not sure any of us do. Look, we're going to have a lady mathematician coming down from Bradstones to work with me. She will need a secretary while she is here – do you fancy giving it a go?"

Peter pondered the matter. "Julia's senior to me, she's been here two more years – she should have the chance."

Albert was slightly surprised, and pleased with the reply. "I did think of that, but Julia does not type mathematical papers and it would be unfair of me to ask it of her. Don't worry she's not being overlooked and your concern for her is commendable."

He smiled, "I've got to work with her. Yes I'll give it a go but..."

He hesitated. Albert said, "But what?"

"But won't that make us short; we're barely coping as it is."

Albert leant back, "what would you recommend?"

Peter's eyes fairly bulged. "You could employ a temp, or you could use one of the general office staff."

"And where am I going to put you?"

Peter thought and then gave a mischievous grin. "You could put the lady in your office and I could work in Yvonne's that would leave a gap for one of the general staff to move in over here."

The same thought had crossed Albert's mind, but he didn't say so. "Good idea – as they say in the best films, 'make it so.'"

As Peter went to leave Albert muttered, "Can you get Yvonne to come in?"

Yvonne duly appeared. Albert grinned like a schoolboy, "Peter will be disappearing to your old office whenever this lady appears and – I hope – Julia will take the minutes at the next staff meeting."

He paused, "you'd better go and see one of Penelope's staff and pinch a good clerk."

Yvonne gave a seriously toothy smile; "Been there and done that; we're going to get Annabellina."

Albert's eyebrows rose. "What sort of name is Annabellina?"

Yvonne laughed, "She's known as Bella."

Albert said, with a twinkle in his eye, "One day you'll try and out-smart me one step too far."

Yvonne retreated to the secretaries' office to find Peter and Julia deep in conversation. They rounded on Yvonne, "Does he always ask people what they think?"

"Usually, and usually he really wants the answer – that's what sets him apart from other managers; he listens."

Ten minutes later Yvonne poked her head round Albert's door. "You have a visitor, a Dr Vespachi."

Albert looked up, "I wasn't expecting anyone."

"She's from Bradstones, travelled down last night apparently."

Albert nodded and Yvonne disappeared. Two minutes later Sarah Vespachi walked into Albert's office and he caught first sight of someone who was destined to change the course of his thinking. She was tall, somewhere over two metres in her high-heeled Italian boots and she was also dowdy. Her grey skirt had seen better days, her black turtle-neck top looked like it had been washed a million times and boots were showing signs of serious wear. Albert studied her long and thin face; proud roman nose, brown eyes, high cheekbones topped by lank shoulder length grey hair and a large mouth that appeared set in a sort of superior look. As far as he could tell there was no make-up; she also slouched as if standing up straight was too much effort. Albert was not impressed. She in turn eyed Albert suspiciously from beneath her black meet-in-the-middle continuous eyebrow. Albert stood up and walked round his desk and held out his hand, she took it in hers and they shook hands. Her hands were long and thin, entirely devoid of jewellery and ending with carefully manicured short nails. Albert took her to the arm-chairs. "Welcome, would you like a cup of coffee?"

She shook her head. "Yes please, and nice and strong."

Albert left his office and walked to the secretaries' office and poked his head around the door. "One pot of coffee and..."

He stopped because Yvonne was pointing to a small battered leather suitcase in the middle of the floor; it was covered with more stickers than Albert thought humanly possible. Albert retreated to his office and sat down. "I'm surprised you came so quickly."

“Eric is keen to have your Botanago formula; he thinks it will give us a decisive edge.”

There was something in her voice, possibly a tinge of disbelief. “You disagree?”

“If Asiatic already has the software installed and tested I do not think we will catch up in time.”

Albert smiled, “Ah, but I don’t think they have. You see they have an executive that used to work here and I think he took the formula with him, but I doubt that he knows how to adapt it correctly.”

She raised one edge of her continuous eyebrow. “Surely you have copyright?”

Albert sighed. “We may have copyright, but I’d have a hard time proving that they didn’t invent it at the same time and I’d have to rely on International law – it’s not worth the effort.”

Julia brought in a small jug of coffee and a pot of tea plus some chocolate-chip biscuits. Sarah surveyed the plate; “Do you have and plain biscuits, ones without rabbit droppings?”

Julia suppressed a smile and scurried from the room.

Albert stirred the tea in the pot and then started to put milk in the cups; with great speed she placed her hand over hers, “black – I take it black.”

Albert poured the coffee and tea and Julia brought in some plain biscuits. Albert picked up his cup and saucer and leant back. “We’ve got you an office and I’ll loan you one of my secretaries whose good at mathematical typing; you probably saw him in the office on your way in.”

She raised the other edge of her eyebrow. “A man? You’re giving me a man secretary – I prefer a woman.”

Albert was amazed; this woman seemed to have no etiquette at all. “He’s good and he’s available.”

He thought that she was going to protest, but instead she sipped her coffee. “Does he make coffee as good as this?”

“Of course.”

Albert tried again. “And you’ll be using my office; it has a state of the art desktop and a full network connection to our number-cruncher.”

She looked round the room, “I’ll be using this office?”

“Sorry, but no. This is the chairman’s office; my office is on the other side of the site and is somewhat smaller.”

She wrinkled her eyebrow – it really was the most expressive part of her body. “But I thought you were the chairman?”

“Acting chairman, my colleague is on sick-leave.”

She digested this and two plain biscuits. To break the silence Albert tried to make conversation, "Have you booked into a hotel?"

"I don't like hotels; they bring out the worst in people and food. I'd like to be booked into a farm based B&B."

Albert almost choked on his tea. "There aren't many farms around here, but we could try and find somewhere."

She put her cup down and poured herself a second cup of coffee, draining the jug. "I don't drive."

Albert felt a mild irritation. "How did you get here?"

"Overnight coach."

"Then I think it would be difficult to find you a farm B&B, but I'll ask my secretary. He left the office and went to see Yvonne. "She wants us to book her into a farmhouse B&B that's close enough to walk." He rolled his eyes as if this was an impossible task.

Yvonne gave him a toothy grin, "OK. I'll try and book her into Topping Farm just beyond Glemhurst Abbey, they do B&B."

"How on earth do you know that?"

"Jess told me."

As he entered his office Albert found Dr Vespachi reading the Robot Review Magazine. She pointed to his article; "Just enough to tease, not enough to go on; why did you write this?"

"Because Smithson's are using my formula in their torpedoes and I don't want them to – it's a long story. I'm hoping that by making it plain that the formula is for static robots it will give them cold feet."

She wiggled both ends of the eyebrow. "Depends what you mean by static. Surely it would work in a slow-crawling robot that stood still to perform its tasks?"

Albert thought and agreed. "As long as it is standing still when it's working – but the task also has to be repetitive."

She replied; "And blowing up a ship is hardly repetitive" and laughed. Her laugh was like an opera singer tuning up in an empty bathroom.

"How about Peter takes you to your office and you can read the files. Would you like to meet for lunch?"

She looked at him. "Is that lunch as in roast beef and two veggies or lunch as in a light salad?"

"Whichever you prefer."

She turned to walk for the door. "I prefer lunch as in a decent open sandwich." She stopped at the door, "and I hope it will be a working lunch, I do not want to waste time."

She closed the door and Albert wondered if he could get out of lunch.

Albert was slightly late returning for lunch; he had been to the testing laboratories to survey Joe the test technician's labours. Joe had taken the Mark VIIB robot and tweaked the on-board memory management and added a voice recognition system. The robot now not only worked more efficiently, it would also obey a set number of commands. People were already referring to the robot as the Mark VIIJ, where J was for Joe. By the time he reached his office Sarah was already tucking into an open beef sandwich, which to Albert's eyes seemed covered in an absurd amount of horse-radish sauce. Albert had barely picked up his sandwich when Sarah spoke. "Your formula is a nice piece of work; why didn't you write a reiteration algorithm to save you the bother of calculating the seeding variables for every different model?"

Albert suspended his first bite; "I simplified the calculation routine, but it still uses nineteen variables besides needing some mechanical data from the robot's design."

She digested this and a quarter of her sandwich, "I could not find the seed calculation formula in your files."

"I have it here in the safe; I will pass it to you before you go."

She then proceeded to fire a series of mathematical questions at Albert. Why had he done this? Had he considered that? What about... and so forth; by the end of lunch Albert was exhausted. In the end he passed her the yellow file on seed-calculation and hoped she would go away, but she hadn't finished. "I think I can write a reiteration algorithm incorporating all your variables. I would like to do it this weekend; can I use your main computer?"

Albert pondered the matter; he trusted Bradstones up to a certain point, but as yet their alliance had to mature, letting her loose on the mainframe computer could be a licence to spy. His reluctance was obvious to her; "You do not trust me?"

"Would you let someone you had never met loose on your mainframe and at a weekend?"

She managed to wiggle both ends of her continuous eyebrow in alternate directions. "Then have you got a satellite computer with a co-processor that automatically uses the mainframe for its computing power?"

Albert said he would check and rang up the computing department; Geraldine laughed at his question. "Of course we have Albert, we have two. One in the test-centre that is currently rigged for analysing the movements our customers require the robots to undertake and one in your house – remember we fitted it with two co-processors to improve it

for you! I bet it now runs the flight simulator beautifully and – of course – undertakes you're number-crunching with ease."

Albert explained why he was asking, Geraldine became firm. "I would advise, strongly advise, that she uses yours. Because yours is remote we have various security filters in place; the one in the test centre has full and unrestricted access only a password away."

Albert put the phone down, he now had a real problem; he did not want to – absolutely not want to - nursemaid this woman all weekend. He went and sat down. "Good news and bad news. We do have one you could use, but it is in my house."

This brought on a full eyebrow wiggle, "at your house?"

"I sometimes work from home."

She shrugged her shoulders; "Doesn't matter as long as it works. Can I walk to your house from the farm?"

"Take you just under an hour."

" Good, draw me a map and I'll be at your house at nine."

Albert tried evasion tactics, "I'm afraid I'm already committed to sing. We have an eleven o'clock wedding and a three o'clock service for the licensing of Readers."

She gave him a glassy stare, "you do not need to be there, I am quite capable of working on my own."

"I didn't mean that, I meant I would not be being deliberately impolite."

"I don't care if you're being polite, impolite, or obnoxious; I just want to use your machine and go home."

Albert was once again taken aback by her effrontery. "If you're that keen to leave why did you come in the first place?"

"I am not keen to leave, but I am keen to get to a decent observatory while data from the Hermes probe is still arriving."

Albert racked his brains, "Hermes probe? Isn't that the one that is studying Mercury?"

"Yes, and it is fighting an unequal battle with the pull from the Sun."

"What's your interest?"

"The gravitational interaction between Mercury and Phoebus."

"Phoebus, but that's one of the moons circulating Mars?"

"Yes. Compared with the Sun's influence Mercury is small, but I believe that it has a significant effect, especially in the creating of the peculiar grooves on the surface of Phoebus."

"Do you have to go to an observatory; can't you pick up the data here?"

She laughed, "There's about 20 Gigabytes of it."

Albert, once again in problem solving mode, said, "Well we have an optical broadband link to the Internet and my home computer's got a spare hard disk – it has four, but I only use three."

He stopped speaking and instantly regretted what he had said. She was onto him like a ravenous vulture, "And you would not mind if I did that?"

Albert almost bit his tongue. "Of course not."

She leant back in the armchair and almost smiled. "Then my hurry has just evaporated."

Albert internally grimaced; just what was he letting himself into?

# Chapter 12

## Different View

Saturday morning, just before nine o'clock, Dr Vespachi turned up on Albert's doorstep and he showed her into his study. She surveyed his desk with the three monitors and an aeroplane style joystick; she raised one edge of her eyebrow, "Ah our company chairman plays at flying aeroplanes."

Albert was not amused, the tone of her voice got right under her skin. "Have you ever tried it?"

"I do not play games."

Albert bristled, and she had only been in the house less than three minutes. "You can't tell me you work all the time; you must do something to relax."

She considered the question; "I have no need."

Albert persisted; "Doing something different refreshes the mind."

She looked down on him from her greater height. "Is that why you sing?"

"Partly, and partly to worship God."

She turned away, "I worship God by looking at the stars."

"You believe in God then?"

"Too much order out there and too little chaos, yes I believe in God; though I am not sure he cares about man who is less than a pinprick on an insignificant planet in a wide universe."

Albert smiled. "And yet this insignificant planet has life and so many others do not."

She looked at him and raised both ends of her eyebrow, "if God cares about man then why death? Why disease? Why inequality?"

Albert looked at his watch, "I'll ask God when I get to heaven; now my computer. The password is 'cantata21inBflat' all one word with only the 'B' in upper case. However, and this is important, you must depress the left hand pedal under the desk when you enter the password and the right hand pedal when it seeks confirmation."

She peered under his desk. "These pedals are part of your flying game?"

"Yes."

She pulled a DVD out of her handbag. "Can I load this software; it is a mapping program from the Geological Survey that has been adapted to map algorithms."

"Yes, but run it through the virus checker first."

She put her hands on her hips and stretched to her full height, "I can assure you that it is virus-free!"

Albert almost quivered, "I don't doubt it, but if our virus checker doesn't add a tag to it to say that it has been checked it won't run. It's not that I don't trust you it's merely a matter of company software procedure."

Albert then ran her through the available software and the procedure for calling up the power of the mainframe to assist her. After half an hour she tapped the screen, "And which hard disc for my astronomy?"

"Use Drive F, if you want you can format it first; it only has old flights on it."

She grunted and Albert was more than glad to make his escape.

At roughly the same time Yvonne was sitting in the lobby of a small country hotel waiting for her sister Jasmine. The venue was Jasmine's choice and Yvonne thought that she had probably chosen it to be well away from her children and clearly established as a 'neutral' venue. Yvonne had been waiting for half an hour when Jasmine suddenly appeared from the Dining Room. To Yvonne's eyes she looked considerably better than before, now in her mid thirties and looking like she was in her twenties. She came over and sat down, "I've ordered coffee – I suppose you do drink coffee?"

Yvonne managed to squeak out a 'yes', suddenly realising how nervous she was; a lot hinged on this meeting. Silence descended and Yvonne eventually broke it by saying, "I meant what I said in the letter – I am sorry."

"Sorry you ruined my life."

Yvonne managed a weak smile, "I did a damned good job on my own as well."

Jasmine suddenly closed her eyes and leant back in her chair. Yvonne noticed that Jasmine was gripping the sides of the chair with a vengeance. "How are you now?"

“Improving. I’ve stopped drinking, got a solid job, go to church, and am courting a man.”

Jasmine didn’t open her eyes, but smiled, “Peter Parsons, one of the Managing Directors at Jeddles.”

Yvonne was surprised. “How on earth do you know?”

“Aunt Prissy has taken great delight in making sure that I knew all about what was happening to you whether I liked it or not.”

Yvonne said gently. “She told me that you’re divorced and now living with a lovely man called Ian.”

Jasmine opened her eyes and looked at Yvonne and then closed them again. Yvonne said, “And I wanted Prissy to tell me – I needed to know how you were.”

“Why?”

Yvonne swallowed. “Because you’re my sister and you mean the world to me.”

She hesitated, “I’ve missed you sis.”

Jasmine didn’t answer and after a few moments the porter brought some coffee and laid it out before them.

Jasmine reached out for the coffee-pot and stopped, Yvonne noticed that her hand was trembling.

“You pour.”

As Yvonne poured the coffee, sloping generous amounts in the saucers because she too was shaking. Jasmine made a sort of moaning noise. “I don’t know what to do Yvonne. We’ve got too much history; too many hurts, too much unfinished business.”

Yvonne put the coffee-pot down, after a minute she said quietly; “My boss is a bit of an oddball...”

Jasmine laughed. “You mean the irascible and eccentric Albert – Prissy has told me all about him.”

Yvonne smiled. “Yes, Albert. He has this concept of a fresh start. Not forgetting what’s gone before and repeating the same mistakes, but starting again. Could we do that? Go for a fresh start?”

Jasmine said in a husky voice; “You mean I forget you left the family in ruins and you forget that I threw you out when you probably needed me most?”

Yvonne nodded. “But if we are going to have a fresh start you need to know something.”

She paused; “I deserved to go to jail, I was carrying drugs and I knew I was carrying drugs and I was a drug addict at the time. I can’t live the lie any more.”

Jasmine picked up her cup of coffee and added to the slops in the saucer; "And you need to know that I've regretted throwing you out every day, but I have been too proud to tell anyone and too stubborn to call."

Yvonne picked up her coffee-cup and raised it in the air. "Fresh start."

Jasmine picked up her cup. "Fresh start."

Yvonne looked around. "Why here?"

Jasmine smiled. "Because I've had a twinge of conscience and I'm marrying my Ian next week and we will stay here after the wedding – we've not announced it and you're the first to know."

She drained her coffee cup and said all too casually; "Drink up. Ian and the three children are in the garden."

Yvonne was startled. "Three children?"

"He's a widower and has a son of eight."

"What's he called?"

"Little Ian."

Yvonne stood up and followed Jasmine. She knew that there was still an invisible barrier between them, but now there was a chance to break through it. Yvonne suddenly stopped after Jasmine rounded a corner; ten seconds later Jasmine reappeared. Yvonne was standing still and bawling her eyes out. Ian found them a few minutes later hugging one another and both crying like babies – he left them to it and took the children for a swim in the hotel pool, he figured that they needed some time together.

Albert arrived home at about six o'clock; he opened the front door to be greeted by silence. He relaxed; he went to the kitchen and put the kettle on; there were three dirty mugs in the sink. He went upstairs to check his study and found Dr Vespachi lying on the floor. He stopped dead in the doorway; she was lying on her back with her hands folded under her head and her knees bent, she was breathing. Albert said the first thing that came into his head; "Dr Vespachi, are you all right?"

She stirred and sat up. "Yes, thank you. I was merely thinking myself into your formula; I think better lying down. And I do not mind being called Sarah, this is your house and there is no need to be formal"

Albert was perplexed. "Thinking yourself into my formula?"

"Yes. You imagine that you are one of the variables and fly through the formula as the others change, come I will show you."

Albert, who by now was sure that she was certifiable, followed her to his desk. There on the screen was a landscape resembling something out

of a bad computer game. There were hills, troughs, deep holes, and canyons. She spoke without looking at him; "This is your formula if you keep the mechanical variables and time static, the landscape is generated by the other three variables."

Albert was amazed. "And you imagine this?"

She looked at him with absolutely zero expression. "I imagine walking through it. The program is useful, but it has its limitations. You can change the reference point but the motion is not continuous."

A wicked thought occurred to Albert, "Is this algorithmic landscape contained in a file?"

She shot him a glance. "No. If I were to calculate it for the full range of the three variables it would be a huge file."

"How huge?"

She pondered; "In excess of 80 Gigabytes."

Albert smiled. "Set your sums going and store the results on drive MV."

She gave him the both edges of the eyebrow raised look. He smiled. "Trust me."

She looked at her watch, "I estimate that it will take about an hour to run through the routine, and that assumes I have the full power of your mainframe. Even then I will have to use fairly large increments."

Albert grinned; he was going to enjoy this. "That's OK; I have a smoothing routine that works on the fly."

She entered a few numbers and sat back. "Now we wait."

"Now we eat," said Albert.

An hour and a half and one Chinese take away later, they went back to the study. As they ate Albert had mistakenly asked Sarah to explain her theory about Mercury; it had taken her forty minutes to explain and he had got lost three minutes into the conversation. Sarah peered at the centre monitor, the only one she had switched on, "Ah it finishes in about three minutes – your computing unit must be running another program at the same time."

Albert sat in the chair and turned the other monitors on, "what did you call the file?"

She said, without any apparent humour, 'Alberts\_Folly'

Albert called up another software program and said to Sarah; "Pull the other chair over and sit down, you will need to be able to see all three monitors."

She brought the other chair over and sat next to him. Albert said, trying to keep the chuckle out of his voice. "We will be flying a tiger-moth through your landscape. I will start as if we are flying in a blue sky and the landscape will appear before us."

Albert started the flight simulator program running and immediately there came the familiar engine noise from the loudspeakers. Within a few seconds the algorithmic landscape appeared on the horizon and Albert expertly flew the plane over it. It was like flying over a landscape from another planet. He was suddenly conscious of Sarah's face right next to him; they were in effect cheek to cheek – he could smell the sweet and sour sauce on her breath. She said in an excited whisper, "Can you fly lower."

Albert spent ten minutes flying around the various peaks and troughs. Suddenly she said, "There, go down there – to the hole."

Albert flew lower and circled a hole in the landscape; Sarah whispered, "That's why your reiteration routines failed, they all led to this hole rather than the undulating valley."

Albert felt mischievous, he suddenly dived the plane into the hole, all the monitors went black, and there was a thunderous crunching noise from the loudspeakers. Sarah squealed directly into his ear - Albert in turn almost leapt through the ceiling. She gazed at the blank screens, not moving away from Albert but still cheek-to-cheek. "You said that you recorded your flights; how does it do that?"

"Not very sophisticatedly."

She suddenly said, "Could I drive?"

Albert made a few adjustments to the flight simulator and sat her in the chair moving to sit directly behind her on a stool. "Just use the joystick to go left and right, I've set the throttle controls to a mid-setting. Just press the blue button on the joystick to start."

All of a sudden they were back at the start in a blue sky approaching an alien landscape. She managed five minutes before she crashed into a hillside. "Why did I crash?"

"You're supposed to be in a tiger moth, they can't turn through right angles!"

"Can you put me in something that can?"

"No, this is a flight simulation programme we are using and only flying saucers turn through right angles, the nearest thing I can give you would be a micro light, but you wouldn't last a minute."

She made a huffing noise. "Why not?"

“Because the programme is designed to take account of the landscape and will introduce up-draughts and thermals.”

She murmured “imaginary up-draughts and thermals from an imaginary landscape in an imaginary aeroplane.”

Albert smiled to himself. “You can fly over anything, give me a file of the landscape of Mercury and we’ll fly over it.”

She suddenly swung round. “Are you serious?”

Albert shrugged. “The flight simulator will let you fly over anything. The landscape is merely an array with four variables for each point giving location height above an imaginary sea-level and colour.”

She whispered to herself, “I could use colour as a fourth variance.”

Albert was about to answer when the phone rang. It was Geraldine from the computer centre. “Albert, what are you doing? You are using so much computing resource that our Saturday run of the payroll programme is now three hours behind.”

Albert was slightly taken aback; “My flight simulator doesn’t take that much resource.”

Geraldine huffed, “no, it’s the other two programmes; the algorithmic smoothing program is intermittently calling for large slabs of resource and the one called Mercury Rising that has been ticking away all day would take over the machine if I let it. It seems to be receiving vast amounts of data over the Internet, running through a number-crunching routine and then transferring the data to your machine. According to our read outs it’s got through about 60 Gigabytes of data and transferred about 10 Gigabytes to your machine.”

Albert sighed, “Would you like us to suspend operations?”

“Please, but you can leave Mercury Rising running – though we will have to throttle it back a little more. We should then be able to finish the payroll and other background programmes by three tomorrow.”

“Three in the morning?”

“No – three in the afternoon!”

“Would it be OK then to resume? We’re trying out a new way of looking at multi-dimensional formulae.”

“Yes, but please ring in first – I’m sorry if I’m being a pain but...”

Albert laughed, “You’re not being a pain, you’re doing your job – and thanks for telling us.”

He put the phone down. “Sorry, we’ll have to stop flying for the moment, but we can leave your Mercury program running.”

Sarah stood up, “it is just the same at Bradstones, not enough computing power.”

Albert tried to defend his company. "Apparently your Mercury Rising routine is consuming a lot of the CPU."

She threw her hands up in the air. "It is trivial!"

Albert looked at his watch, "would you like me to run you back to the farm?"

"I am quite capable of walking."

Albert looked out of the window. "It is dark and it is raining. The cycle-path is unlit and I personally would not walk there at this time of day."

She wiggled her eyebrow. "Very well, I will accept your offer. I presume you will be at Church in the morning, so if I come at nine I assume you can let me in before you go."

"I'm sorry but you won't be able to do any major computing before three."

She tossed her head. "I need to compose a programme to extract the data from your disc and convert it into a form I can use. This will not tax your precious computer unit as I can do it all on this machine."

Albert wondered if he would ever be free of this woman. "Will you excuse me a moment."

He dashed downstairs and into the kitchen and phoned Mary. His intention was to explain to Mary that he had a visitor so he could not come to lunch; somehow Mary got the wrong end of the stick and said that he could bring Dr Vespachi with him. He put the phone down in despair and said aloud, "Women! They come from another planet."

A voice from behind said, "No, it is men that come from the other planet, and it is so insignificant that we are yet to find it."

Albert jumped, got his car keys, and drove Sarah to the farm; he wished that he was driving her to the airport for a plane to some far away alien landscape.

Yvonne and Peter were not driving in the rain, but standing in it. They were actually waiting for a taxi, but as usual when you need one you can't find one. Eventually a taxi arrived and they sat in the back. Peter leaned forward and mumbled something to the driver. Yvonne poked him in the ribs, "where are we going?"

"The new Norwegian Restaurant by the old cinema."

She leant back in the seat and snuggled close to him; she felt totally worn out. Peter sensed this. "Tired?"

"Emotionally tired, don't worry I won't fall asleep in the restaurant."

Seemingly in no time at all they were seated in the restaurant and ordering food. They now had an unspoken agreement – only mineral water was to be drunk. When the waiter had gone, Peter asked gently, “How did it go?”

Yvonne sighed, “Far better than I ever imagined. We decided on a fresh start and then I spent the afternoon meeting the children and Ian.”

“What’s he like?”

“Tall dark and remarkably ugly. On the other hand he has a wonderful personality and is good with the kids; Jasmine’s children obviously adore him.”

They stopped as the waiter laid a cold-fish platter before them. Yvonne tried the peppered mackerel; “Hmm this is good. By the way you’re invited to a wedding next week – Jasmine and Ian are getting married. Emily is invited as well, if she would like to come.”

Peter prodded a piece of pickled herring, “try this, it is unbelievable, you mean that Ian is making an honest woman of her?”

Yvonne stopped chewing. “Don’t mock it Peter; this is a big step for Jasmine; she’s had one sour marriage and doesn’t want a second. And it’s not so easy for Ian; second marriages must be equally difficult.”

She suddenly swallowed having realised what she had said, “I didn’t mean...”

He reached over and touched her hand. “It’s all right, you are quite correct, but it’s not the same. Charlotte swept me off my feet; I knew that she had a reputation as a hussy, but I didn’t care. We had a good marriage and apart from her affair with Yoseph I believe that she was faithful. She was certainly faithful to Emily. Many mothers would have taken the option of chemotherapy; Charlotte gave her life. Meeting you is different; it’s like having had a binge of Beaujolais you suddenly discover Champagne.”

Yvonne rubbed the back of his hand with her fingers. “Faithful to me means faithful. One man and no others.”

He smiled and was about to speak when the main course arrived. After they had started eating Yvonne said, “You were going to say?”

He put down a forkful of venison, “I was going to say that it’s not only one man, its one man and his daughter.”

Yvonne smiled. “At least it’s not one man and his daughter and a dog named spot.”

Peter laughed. “Now you come to mention it...”

Albert could not fully concentrate on his singing the following morning; he kept thinking of lunch with Mary and Sarah. She had arrived at nine o'clock and Albert had made the mistake of asking her if the Farm B&B was OK. The edges of her continuous eyebrow turned down. "It's supposed to be a farm breakfast, but there was no black pudding and I had to ask for fried bread."

He had left her at his computer checking the progress of Mercury Rising and muttering about extraction routines. All too quickly for Albert he was back at his house picking up Sarah. As they pottered down the road she looked round the inside of the car, "quaint little machine, but somewhat odd for a company chairman."

Albert gritted his teeth, "I do have a company car, but choose not to use it."

"Too big?"

"No it's an MGF, my secretary uses it."

Albert couldn't see, but this caused a double eyebrow wiggle. Sarah tried to get her long legs more comfortable. "With whom am I having lunch?"

"A friend of mine called Mary and the young girl who lives with her – there might also be her boyfriend."

She sighed as if from impending boredom. "Does she work for Jeddles?"

"No, she's a hall caretaker and looks after the music for a barber-shop group. Jess does work for Jeddles, she's a post-girl, and Richard – if he comes – is a security guard."

She sat up and banged her head on the roof. "So Mary is not a company executive."

"No."

"So dinner will not be all robots and company profiles?"

"Definitely not."

She sighed again. "How refreshing."

Albert smiled, Jess was improving now that she was on less anti-depressant, but she still took time to reply to questions and she was becoming incurably nosy. They pulled up and made their way into the cottage; Sarah had to stoop. As usual Mary had dinner waiting to be served and they all sat round her small dining table and tucked into roast lamb and two veggies with Yorkshire puddings and thick gravy. They talked of nothing important and then ten minutes into the meal Jess' curiosity got the better of her. "You're Dr Vespachi from Bradstones, are you a medical doctor?"

Sarah didn't twitch. "No I'm a doctor of Astro-Physics."

Jess went quiet to digest this and Mary asked Sarah if she wanted more gravy. She almost smiled; "No thank you, but this is delicious. I eat too many plastic meals and it is a real treat to have proper food."

Mary smiled at the compliment. "You don't cook for yourself then?"

Sarah shrugged. "I don't have the time."

Albert helped himself to another couple of roast potatoes and Richard offered some more to Sarah, she helped herself to one.

Jess suddenly appeared to wake up; "What's Astro-Physics?"

She paused; "And why don't you have the time?"

Sarah wiggled her eyebrows and ignored the first question, "I have my work, my studies of Mercury, and I also visit my mother once a week."

Mary stirred the extra gravy and offered it around. "That's nice dear, where does she live?"

"Milan."

Albert, who had not been paying much attention, suddenly took notice. "Milan, Italy?"

She nodded as she chewed on the lamb, "I work a time-shifted week; I have Wednesdays and Thursdays off and fly out Wednesday morning to arrive in time for breakfast, then I take her to a mid-week Mass and a meal at a hotel. We might go shopping in the afternoon or do something else; I leave it time to arrive home by midnight."

Albert was stunned. "Every week?"

"Every week; she is my mother."

While Mary and Sarah talked about the health of her mother the penny dropped for Albert. Flying to and fro each week must cost her a fortune; hence the coach travel, dowdy clothes and request for a cheap B&B. Albert was in for a second surprise over desert. Jess announced that she was going to do a sponsored walk for the hospice; the full walk was from Lowestoft to Aberystwyth, but she intended to do 100 miles over four days. Albert was impressed. "Who's organising this?"

Jess looked at him as if he were totally out of touch. "You're Yvonne."

Albert stopped eating; "My secretary?"

Richard laughed. "Don't tell me she hasn't told you? She's been working on it for weeks, its part of a cross-country walk organised by the national hospice movement; one lot walks from Liverpool to Southampton and another from Lowestoft to Aberystwyth. They apparently meet up in Birmingham for a beer festival. Yvonne is co-ordinating people walking for our hospice and has something to do with the beer festival."

Albert was at a loss. "She hasn't said anything."

Jess stared at him. "You mean you don't know that she's been working in the hospice office every Saturday morning?"

Fortunately Albert did not have to answer as Richard suddenly looked at his watch; Mary turned round and looked at the clock. "You two better get off, we'll do the washing-up this week."

They scrambled to their feet and made a swift exit; Richard suddenly poked his head around the door. "You're sure about the dog?"

Mary smiled. "Just go and enjoy yourselves."

Albert looked at Mary, who just fussed over the dishes. "Richard's brother has invited them to watch the football; somehow he's got an executive box for this week only."

A little later Sarah and Mary were having their second cup of coffee in the lounge; as they sat sounds of washing up and classical music drifted from the kitchen – Albert had insisted on washing up alone.

Sarah stretched out. "Have you known Albert long?"

Mary considered the question; "The Barber shop group have used the hall for about eight years, but I only really got to know him earlier this year when I took Jess in as a lodger at his request."

Sarah said lazily, "Is she his daughter or his niece?"

Mary laughed, "Neither m'dear. She is just an employee who needed to find accommodation and was having a hard time. Jess says that he should have sacked her for sleeping in the post-room, instead he got me to take her in."

Sarah waved her hand, "So he is Saint Albert."

Mary laughed even louder. "Oh no! He can throw a wicked tantrum, just like a two-year old – I've even seen him stamp his feet."

Sarah raised her eyebrow; "Whatever caused that?"

"The conductor wanted Albert to sing in B flat, but Albert thought that C Sharp was more appropriate."

Sarah's eyebrows attained higher heights. "Is that all?"

"And I once saw him throw his music at another member."

"Why do they put up with him?"

"He sings like an angel, sight reads music and can translate music scores at the speed of light."

Sarah stretched again, and patted the dog that was lying at her side. "So not a saint after all."

Mary put her cup down. "On the other hand I know for a fact that he personally provided the local hospice with nearly all its hoists and," she

glanced at the kitchen, "and I'm not supposed to know but he bought this cottage."

Sarah looked quizzically at Mary, "I rent it, and I told Albert one day that I was worried that it was being sold. Next thing I know the cottage has changed hands and my new landlord has the place re-thatched and they start re-wiring next week."

Sarah was amazed. "What did he say to you?"

"Absolutely nothing: I got the information – on pain of death – from another member of the Barber Shop Group. Albert hasn't said a word – and I don't think he will."

Sarah gazed at the shut kitchen door. "He must love you very much"

Mary's laugh startled Sarah. "He doesn't love me – we enjoy each other's company; I think he is very lonely. I also think that he wanted some stability for Jess, there is a place in his heart for her."

"But Jess is not a relation."

"No, but he does care. It's something to do with depression; Jess is depressed – but she is improving – and Albert seems to understand what she is going through."

Silence descended as Sarah digested this; she then said quietly, "That's my mother's problem really. She has always been depressed, even when I was a child she would never smile."

Mary said, "Why don't you move her to England? It must take a fearful toll on you, all this weekday travelling."

Sarah wiggled her eyebrow. "She is Italian, she speaks only Italian, and she thinks only Italian."

"Than why don't you move to Italy?"

Sarah sighed deeply, "I can manage my mum one day a week, but if I was close and saw her every day I think I would soon be as depressed as she is."

Mary smiled. "It's not catching."

Sarah half rolled her eyes; "You've never met my mother."

All of a sudden they could here singing from the kitchen, whatever was on the radio, Albert was singing to it. Mary looked at Sarah; "You got a man?"

"No time," she said firmly, "no time."

Mary said, "When you do have time you could do worse than him – he leaves the saucepans spotless."

Sarah almost smiled. "And what would I do when he had tantrums?"

Mary grinned, "Do what you would do with a child, send him to bed!"

Before Albert finished the washing up – he always marvelled at how one meal could generate so much dirty ovenware – Sarah slipped out to walk to Albert’s and see if her precious Mercury Rising program had finished; it was taking far longer, and producing more data, than she had expected. By the time Albert emerged Mary was asleep in the arm-chair; he smiled and took the dog for a walk. When he returned Mary had a pot of tea on the go; Albert looked at his watch, “I really should check on Sarah.”

Mary smiled, “I think she is big enough to look after herself.”

Albert eyed the tea and accompanying scones and sat down. Mary poured and looked at Albert, “She is an interesting woman.”

Albert did not look like he was so impressed, “frankly Mary I don’t know what to do with her. She arrived this morning with her dirty washing and requisitioned my washing machine; she has already commandeered my computer and I shudder to think what’s next.”

Mary merely smiled. “You know she lives in a hostel don’t you? She probably has nowhere to do her washing.”

Albert abruptly appeared to wake up. “What do you mean lives in a hostel?”

“As far as I can make out it costs her nearly every penny she has to keep her mother in her nursing home and to see her once a week. She lives in a hostel and keeps even that cost down by being the emergency night contact.”

“But she insisted on paying her share of the Chinese take-away we had yesterday!”

“She has her pride Albert – and I probably shouldn’t have told you about the hostel.”

Albert leant forward and started to butter a scone. “No wonder she is so miserable – have you noticed she never smiles.”

Mary touched Albert on the back of the hand causing him to look up. “Could be medical Albert, have you noticed she trembles. She always uses two hands to pick up a cup.”

Albert sat back and started chewing on his scone, “Mark you she has a brain the size of an elephant, you should see the speed with which she absorbs information.”

Mary murmured, “She is more than a human computer Albert, she is a person; perhaps people fail to see that.”

Albert looked at Mary. “Go on then.”

“Go on what?”

“Tell me when her birthday is – you always find out.”

Mary laughed. "Next Sunday." She put her cup down, "Will she still be here next Sunday?"

Albert grinned. "She may have a brain the size of a small planet, but even she can't adapt my program for all Bradstone's robots in a week."

Mary smiled. "That's settled then. Bring her to lunch again and I'll bake her birthday cake."

Albert was about to say something when Mary interrupted before he could begin, "Or rather Jess will bake her a cake; I've been teaching Jess how to cook."

Albert looked concerned. "Is that safe?"

Mary giggled, "She won't poison us Albert."

"No; I mean safe to have her in the kitchen, she can be slow to react."

"They've reduced her tablets and I'll be there."

She paused, "You do care about her."

Albert gave a sheepish grin. "She's had a rough deal of the pack, but she seems to have settled here OK."

Mary said casually, "when I die, do you think my new landlord would let her stay on?"

Albert appeared to consider the question, "I guess they could be persuaded."

By mid-evening Albert had lost all of his teatime contentment and was delving into his inner resources of patience, which were being severely depleted in the process. Sarah was pounding on the keyboard of his computer and his tumble-dryer was drying her clothes; he felt a visitor in his own house. Salvation can in the form of a TV programme on super-volcanoes; Albert always enjoyed listening to other experts and watched the hour-long programme with interest. When it finished a voice from behind him said, "I hope they are wrong, I have visited Stromboli and seen Etna erupting, I would not want to be around if one of them went off."

Albert leapt to his feet. "Sorry, didn't see you there."

She nodded. "That's all right. I've finished for the day and left a small routine running; it should be finished by about 1am tomorrow – I would like to go back to the farm."

"Are your clothes dry?"

"Yes thank you and I borrowed your iron."

Albert went to say that he had not used it in years; he used the washing machine for his 'smalls' but sent the rest of his clothes to the

laundry. Sarah beat him to it, "I had to clean it first, and it was in a terrible state."

Albert ran her to the farm, went home, and spent two happy hours, alone, 'flying' a glider over the Sussex countryside.

Albert arrived in his office at his usual time and Yvonne had his tea waiting. She had also laid out his mail and listed people who had phoned him. He looked at the pile on his desk with horror. "Can't I delegate some of this?"

"I've already sent reams to other people."

She went to leave; Albert said, mischievously, "Are you going to walk to Birmingham then?"

She spun round, "Who told you?"

"Didn't think you could keep it quiet did you?"

She gave him a toothy grin. "Seeing as this came out of the charity job you dropped on my desk I shall expect you to heavily sponsor someone, or do the walk yourself."

"When is it?"

"Next Easter."

Albert thought for a moment, "Will it avoid Holy Week?"

"It starts on Bank Holiday Monday."

"Then I'll walk."

Yvonne was surprised. "You'll walk!"

"I'm not quite decrepit yet."

Yvonne laughed and walked across the office, she paused at the door, "I'd ring Geraldine first, she sounds mad."

Albert rang the computer centre and instantly got Geraldine. She was not in the best of moods. "Don't like to moan Albert, but that Vespachi woman is driving me over the edge. Not only did she leave some program running that ate up resource like it was a hungry polar bear she now wants us to upgrade your office computer. And I'd like to remind you that your office computer is state of the art, but is that good enough for her – oh no! She wants a faster co-processor; she wants a high-speed graphics card; she wants..."

Geraldine stormed on for another two minutes and Albert let her run her course. In reality there were few people who could talk to Albert the way she did, but Albert both had some sympathy for her and knew that she was good at her job. In the end he managed to say, "What does she want this for?"

"How should I know? She doesn't take me into her confidence she just issues commands!"

"I take it what she is requesting is difficult to provide?"

"Not if I want to spend most of my computing budget, no."

Albert smiled, "I'll have a word with her, and if I agree she can have the equipment it will not come out of your budget. OK?"

Geraldine simmered down slightly, "Yes OK," there was a pause, "sorry Albert, but she really got under my skin."

"Is her hungry routine still running?"

"No, it finished at seven o'clock, when I came on duty the night shift were going ballistic."

"Why didn't they stop it or at least throttle it back?"

There was a pause, and then Geraldine said truthfully, "Because they thought it was you – it is your home computer."

Albert laughed, "While Dr Vespachi is around they are to assume it is not me and if the same thing happens tomorrow they can throttle her program back to near extinction."

He thought for a moment, "If they thought it was me running the program why didn't they ring me?"

Geraldine didn't answer; Albert guessed, "Because last time they rang me I was a little short with them."

"Something like that; your mind was probably focused on other things, but you can be fearsome. Please remember that good staffs are hard to find and be kind to them."

"Tell them I'll try to be better mannered next time and give them my apologies."

He put the phone down. The next person on the urgent list was Eric Bradstone, Albert phoned him and they talked money transfers for a few moments. When that was over Albert probed for information, "Can we talk about your Sarah for the moment?"

"Not causing problems is she?" Eric said with a chuckle.

"Is it right she has Wednesday and Thursday off as her weekend?"

"Yes."

"And she flies to Milan every Wednesday?"

"Yes, she has a season ticket with the airline and a frequent flyer discount"

"While she's down here does she claim expenses?"

There was a silence at the other end, then Eric coughed, "no, we cut back on expenses because we couldn't afford them – pay came first. She gets a £20 allowance a day."

"But she is one of you senior staff!"

"We all get the same, and incidentally she is not a senior staff member. Our senior staff meetings are on Wednesdays and she won't attend. Strong willed is our Sarah."

Albert tried a diplomatic approach. "She is going to be down here for a few weeks, how about Jeddles picking up her expenses tab."

Eric was obviously in some discomfort over this. "As I said, we all get the same; if you make a special case for her then..."

"How about if I said that she was a visiting expert?"

"We have other experts who will visit you."

Albert thought hard, "Let's take a step back for a moment. If my staff visits you, they are on full expenses. If your staff visit me they are on £20 a night."

"Correct."

Albert sighed, "That's no good, we're supposed to be equal partners, and ergo our respective staffs deserve equal treatment."

There was a pause, then Eric said slowly, "We haven't got the cash. You've seen the figures, give us two or three months and we'll start pulling out of the red. If I give full expenses it will take longer."

Albert pictured the finance graphs in his head. "Even if you are generous, it will only take a week longer."

Eric remained silent and Albert suddenly had a flash of inspiration. "You're worried about our funding agreement and going over the agreed expenditure boundary."

"Check."

"And you're worried that if you do, we'll pull the plug."

"Check."

Albert relaxed, "I'll write to my finance unit and tell them that expenses expenditure is not included in that boundary, how would that be?"

"Wonderful, especially as some of our staff are now being briefed by your Prissy about looking and being the part."

Albert smiled; he knew what Prissy's briefings were like. "So will you talk to Sarah, or shall I."

Eric chuckled. "Seeing as you have made a generous offer of picking up her expenses, I'll leave it to you."

Albert went to protest, but decided to let it lie; in the great scheme of things the money amounts were insignificant. He said carefully, "is there something else you should be telling me about your Sarah?"

This request was greeted by silence. "Look Eric, I'm working with her on a day to day basis and she's already managed to upset my computing staff – that's no mean feat!"

Eric remained silent for a moment and finally said very carefully, "I'll say two things. Firstly she can be impolite. She isn't vindictive she just gets focused."

After his recent conversation with Geraldine Albert stayed quite. Eric hesitated for a second and then continued, "And you ought to know, she is prone to epilepsy."

Albert was horrified! "You've sent us an epileptic and then let us put her on flickering VDUs and under fluorescent tubes!"

"She hasn't had a fit in years; she's on some type of medication. It is her choice that she does not have special equipment and she'd kill me if she knew I'd told you, but I do have a duty of care. And she informs me that it is not true that all epileptics have fits due to flickering lights and VDUs."

Albert's mind raced; "Exactly when was her last fit, and under what conditions?"

"Four years ago, she had it in the airport at Christmas; there was some sort of floor show going on with strobe lighting. She says it wasn't the lighting, but that she'd forgotten to take her tablets to Italy and was considerably overtired – the plane was twelve hours late. Before that she had one in our restaurant; I was scared stiff."

Albert put the phone down and for few moments sat thinking. He then immediately called Geraldine, "Geraldine I have a special request. I want two monitors in my office and on my home computer changed to flat-screen plasma monitors and I want it done today. Call it part of special treatment for the chairman or anything you like, but get it done."

Geraldine almost squealed, "But you have 19" monitors, flat screen plasma versions that size cost a small fortune, and if you want them today we'll have to buy them down the local computer shop and I'll soon have all the Managing Directors screaming at me to..."

Albert cut in, "Geraldine, this is a special request; I would not ask if I did not have a very good reason."

Geraldine was quiet for a few seconds and then said "Oh - Dr Vespachi! Is she an epileptic?"

Albert groaned, "Please don't let her know why we are making the changes. I'm not supposed to know, but the company has a duty of care."

Geraldine said kindly, "There's probably no need, according to our handbook only a small percentage of epileptics have seizures triggered by flicker. However, I'll get it done Albert and I'll find a suitable excuse; I guess you would like better resolution for your flight simulation."

Albert groaned again. "Plasma screens don't necessarily give better resolution."

"They do if you give them the right graphics card; leave it to me."

Albert put the phone down and phoned the maintenance section, as he dialled his brow furrowed as he tried to remember someone's name. "Is that Jamie?"

There was an indistinguishable sound at the other end.

"Albert Potterdon here."

The voice at the other end said, "Oh yeah, and I'm the Queen of Sheba; come off it Lonnie you don't sound anything like him."

Albert smiled, "it's not Lonnie, and it is the Acting Chairman. I seem to remember that you sorted out the anti-surge power supply in my home for me and have white tea with two sugars."

Albert could almost hear Jamie turning red. "Oh crikey! Sorry Mr Potterdon."

Albert laughed, "That's OK, you weren't expecting me to call. Look I have a special job for your team. Tonight, after Dr Vespachi has left will you install non-flicker lighting tubes in my office."

"This female doctor is working in your office – right?"

"Right and she's not to know that you're changing the lighting."

"She might notice when she turns them on, they don't flicker on start-up."

"I'll take that risk."

"Consider it done. Anything else?"

Albert thought, "Do the same in the outer office."

He put the phone down, to find Geraldine ringing him almost immediately. "If we are going to do your office, we should do your secretaries screen as well, that's only a 15", but looking at the specs I ought to give him a 17" – is that OK?"

"Good thinking, change the graphics card too."

Geraldine groaned, "The computer store is going to make a fortune out of us!"

"Quite – and I do realise that I am probably over-reacting, but I want to sleep at night – and thanks."

Geraldine eventually chuckled. "That's OK – now which of your budgets did you say this was coming off?"

“Try the Chairman’s discretionary fund.”

Albert put the phone down, sat back, and looked at the clock. So far this morning he had done little but fight Dr Vespachi’s expenses battle and phone around changing her environment; and he was supposed to be Chairman making executive decisions. He picked up the phone, “Yvonne, I’m going to have to go over to my old office – don’t worry I will tackle the pile on my desk when I get back. And my eleven o’clock meeting with the directors – tell them I’m not coming and that they are to talk among themselves about my request for more executive action from them. Make sure you impress on them that I mean talk and not fight.”

He put the phone down, now there was one bonus – he was missing the meeting!

An hour later, and following an impossible meeting with Sarah that made him wish he’d gone to his first meeting, Albert arrived back at his office; he put his head round Yvonne’s door. “Yvonne, can you book Sarah into Dawson’s Hotel from Friday morning – bill to us; and can you phone Geraldine and tell her to undertake the modifications she requested to my office computer, once again on my discretionary budget.”

Yvonne smiled, “lost the battle did we?”

“Let’s call it a strategic withdrawal.”

Yvonne laughed, “Penelope wanted to see you – said it wasn’t urgent, but it is time-critical.”

Albert nodded and wandered down the corridor to Penelope’s office; her secretary was making a cup of coffee, Albert racked his brains to remember her name. “Hello Phyllis, is Penelope free?”

Phyllis looked up; she rivalled Mrs Greenslade in fearsomeness and efficiency. “She was trying to contact you Mr Potterdon, but your secretary said that you had gone walkabout.”

Albert smiled as Phyllis rang through on the intercom and looked up. “She is free – do you want to see her here?”

“Why not, hate to spoil her coffee.”

Phyllis huffed and put the kettle back on, “Tea is it Mr Potterdon – I do use a teapot.”

“Thanks.”

Albert entered Penelope’s office; he felt rather like it was entering the lair of the great white shark. The walls were white, the furniture was white and the carpet was white, the only thing of colour was a blue sculpture of a shark’s fin sticking out of the carpet.

Penelope stood up, "Thanks for the time Albert – and thanks for the roses."

She indicated her meeting table, laid out on which was a large-scale map. Penelope smiled; Albert almost winced – the smile of the great white shark to go with the rest of the decor. "The building contractor who wants to buy our land has indicated that he needs to know if we are going to sell by the end of this week."

She quickly ran on, "Derek did tell me that you wanted to be kept informed and I know that you are not keen on the idea, but..."

Albert finished the sentence; "But the company can't use the fields, but could use the money."

He indicated the map. "What are we selling?"

They leant over the map, heads almost touching; Albert could smell her delicate perfume. "As you know we own these nine fields. I think we should keep the three adjacent to our property and sell the other six."

Albert eyed the map. "Would that be enough for them to make a profit? Those six fields are only just equal to the three you want to keep."

She nodded, causing small flakes of dandruff to settle on the map. The contractor apparently has the option to buy these two large fields." She pointed to the map; the fields were both side of Mary's cottage and adjacent to the road. Albert considered the map, "have they any plans for this cottage?" he tapped the map.

Penelope laughed, "Only to give it a reasonable margin. It's old and could easily be listed – incidentally our post-girl Jess lives there."

"How do you know that?"

"Ran a check through our computer – have to be careful about accusations of duplicity if the planning permission fails; I don't want them to have any leverage to try and wiggle out of the deal."

Albert admired her efficiency. "Why should planning permission fail, my sources say that they have got the council in the palm of their hand."

Penelope shot Albert a quizzical look. "It's this farm track behind the cottage. To get planning permission they have to be able to turn it into a road – it's the old 'two ways of entry' rule in case of a serious fire."

Albert smiled and so did Penelope. She went to speak, but Albert held up his hand. "Stop there. Between you me and a load of gateposts I own this cottage," he tapped the map, "so I could be regarded as having an interest in what happens. So you close the deal and use Prissy or Felicity as the other signatory on behalf of the company."

Penelope's immaculate eyebrows rose an inch or two. "You own Jess' cottage?"

"It's not Jess' cottage it's Mary's cottage. She is a good friend of mine and I bought the cottage to save her – no, them – from being evicted. And as I said I would not want anyone else to know that."

Penelope frowned. "Do you know who owns the farm track?"

Albert smiled. "Let the building contractor find that out of their own, but if they want a fast deal, give them a fast deal."

Penelope stood up, "I was wondering about holding out for more money – they are obviously keen"

Albert patted her on the shoulder. "Take the opportunity of a lifetime within the lifetime of the opportunity."

She took two paces back from the table and gave Albert a funny look; "That's what Felicity said to me when..."

She tailed off into silence, and then suddenly became the efficient personnel manager again, "And you won't oppose the sale at board level?"

"Definitely not – it's within your remit, I will not interfere."

She gave Albert the odd look again. "What's happening Albert; all this delegation of responsibility and authority?"

Albert folded up the map so that Phyllis could put the tea and coffee down on the table. "You can't give people responsibility unless you are prepared to give them the authority that goes with it. When the company was small the three of us used to make decisions in Derek's shed; now don't laugh; it was a convenient meeting place. So the three of us were involved in all the decisions. As the company has grown we shared some of those decisions around, but not enough. We're in danger of putting too much reliance on decisions by the chairman on behalf of us all, it's time we spread the load – and it's better for the company."

Penelope pondered this and then said, "I'd like to make a decision that you won't like."

Albert felt uneasy, but replied, "Fire ahead."

"I didn't agree with all John did, but he did have some valid points. I'd like to hire a few bright boys and girls to form a Development Unit. What is true about Derek is also true about you. The company relies too heavily on you as our main agent for change. As you said, we should spread the load."

Albert walked over to the window and looked out, to be greeted by a view of the warehouse next door. He turned round, "Hung by my own petard."

"Then I can do it?"

“Bring some figures to the board to show there is financial sense in the idea and I’ll back it.”

He went to leave; Penelope had one final shot. “We’ve chosen the new Head of Engineering.”

Albert turned round. Penelope grinned, “Rachel Holmes.”

“Why her?”

“She was the best candidate, and is doing the job magnificently.”

Albert shook his head, “she looks dreadfully young.”

Penelope laughed, “She’s two years older than me!”

Albert made his second strategic withdrawal of the day.

Albert settled back in his office, ate the sandwiches provided by Yvonne and tackled the mountain of work. He was disturbed by Sarah at just before six o’clock as she towered over his desk. “You said that I could use your machine again this evening – I have been onto your computer unit and a nice man called Sanjit said that I could start running large programmes in about half an hour.”

Albert inwardly groaned, “Don’t you ever stop work?”

Her continuous eyebrow rose along its full length. “I am here to do a job, not waste my time.”

“Have you eaten today?”

She shrugged, “Peter brought me some sandwiches.”

Albert smiled. “Same as me. We had better eat before we...”

She almost stamped her foot, “I want to get my programme’s running as soon as possible.”

Albert mentally counted to ten. “Tell you what. I’ll get my secretary to run you to my house and I’ll get a take-away. By the time I arrive you should have started at least one of your programmes off.”

She glared at him, “not Chinese; I’ve had my monosodium-glutamate quota for this week.”

“Indian?”

She turned her nose up.

“Pizza?”

She rose to her full Imperial height, “the English do not know how to make a pizza.”

Albert’s patience began to wear thin, “then you choose.”

She creased her eyebrow in the middle, “I’d rather like fish and chips, and I prefer hake or plaice.”

“Do you think you could put a couple of plates in the oven when you arrive – I hate food on cold plates.”

She nodded; Albert made the arrangements.

Five minutes later Yvonne was taking Sarah on the short drive to Albert's house. Sarah surveyed the car, "not very practical, where do you sit your children?"

Yvonne laughed. "Not married, no children."

She watched Sarah out of the corner of her eye, "how about you?"

Sarah stretched her arms with her fingers interlaced, "no, and neither."

Sarah looked at Yvonne, "Your boss, has he ever been married?"

"Not to my knowledge, why do you ask?"

"He has a picture of him and a woman on his piano."

"That's his cousin; I think they are quite close."

Sarah wrinkled her nose, "how do you know?"

"Been to his house once, we were working in the test-centre and he forgot a file from his computer."

They suddenly came upon a set of road works and a short queue; Yvonne stopped the car and waited. There was silence for a few moments and then Sarah asked regally, "do you like your boss?"

Yvonne sought for a diplomatic answer. "He has his moments, but his heart is in the right place. He generally tries to do the right thing."

"Because he goes to church and thinks it is the right way to behave."

Yvonne glanced at Sarah; she was intently watching the temporary traffic lights. "Because he is a Christian and tries to live out his faith."

"So you think he is genuine?"

"Undoubtedly. Why do you ask?"

"Because he has been meddling in my life. All of a sudden I am on full expenses, then the computer screens are changed and when I left the office there was an electrician waiting to change the light fitting."

Yvonne edged the car forward a few car places, "I don't understand."

"Stupid man thinks that I should be mollycoddled."

Yvonne shook her head, "I still don't understand."

Sarah turned her Imperial gaze onto Yvonne. "He has not told you? I thought that you were his right hand woman?"

"He wouldn't tell me if it was confidential."

Now Sarah shook her head. "What a funny little man. Eric has probably told him that I am a mild epileptic; so he goes about and changes things without even discussing them with me – does he think I am a child?"

Yvonne tried a smile, "No, but he probably does think that you would be mad if you found out."

She gesticulated with her arms, "how would I not find out? The man is an imbecile."

Suddenly the lights turned green and they skirted the road works. Yvonne said quietly, "I do not think he is an imbecile, sometimes misguided and sometimes undiplomatic, but not an imbecile."

Sarah rubbed her nose, "Perhaps I used the wrong word; he is impossible."

They pulled up outside Albert's house; he had not beaten them home. Yvonne turned to Sarah, "I admit he can be difficult at times, but I do believe that he has a heart of gold and that he really cares about people. He changed your display units because he cares."

Sarah opened the car door and started to climb out, "I do not need your funny little man to fight my battles."

Yvonne leaned over the passenger seat to look Sarah in the face, Sarah's manner finally getting to her. "Sometimes it's nice to have someone looking out for us or is life for you such a battle that you must be constantly ill-mannered?"

Sarah's nostrils flared, "Ill-mannered! I am never ill-mannered?"

Yvonne grabbed the door handle, "you could have fooled me!"

She slammed the door and drove off, leaving Sarah standing on the pavement simmering with rage. She stamped her foot, "stupid woman. Stupid, stupid woman."

Yvonne saw her in the car's mirror and guessed what she was saying; little did she know that Sarah was not shouting at her, but at herself.

# Chapter 13

## Mélange

Albert also got stuck at the road works, fortunately that was before he got to the fish and chip shop, so he arrived about ten minutes after Sarah; even so she was on the computer and deep in thought when Albert disturbed her. Sarah had remembered to put the plates in the oven and they were soon tucking into the food laid out on hot plates. After a few mouthfuls Sarah remarked casually, "I see the computer people have put plasma screens here as well."

Albert made a noncommittal noise. Sarah ploughed on, "there was no need to change them, I assume you changed them because of me."

Albert stopped eating with a piece of fish poised for consumption on the end of his fork, "sorry Sarah, but I couldn't take the risk."

She wiggled her eyebrow and tapped the handle of her fork against the plate, "it is my risk!"

Albert put the food in his mouth and shook his head, "it is my risk. You are my guest, I would not forgive myself if I by being negligent I caused you to have a..."

Albert tailed off, trying to find the right word. Sarah snapped back at him, "It's called a seizure."

Albert went to open his mouth, but Sarah suddenly went "damn!" And pounded the table with hard her left hand. She looked at Albert, "I apologise. Your secretary told me that I was being ill mannered and she is doubtless correct. Diplomacy is not one of my strong points."

Albert swallowed a chip, "I didn't mean to offend either, but I thought I was acting for the best."

Sarah sighed, "I have worked on a standard VDU for years without any seizures; you needn't have bothered – you have wasted a lot of money and should have talked to me first. She went to eat a chip and stopped. "And talking of money Eric informs me that you browbeat him into giving me full expense."

Albert went to open his mouth, but Sarah got in first, "that was kind of you. The farm B&B is nice, but cramped - and the bed is less than two metres long."

Albert finished his piece of cod. "You are right; I should have discussed the changes with you first. I too didn't mean to offend."

Sarah pushed her plate away, "my mother is always telling me that I am contemptuous of other people. She is wrong, but I know that sometimes I can be discourteous; I don't mean to be; I just get..."

She paused and Albert smiled, "focused. You just get focused."

Sarah raised an eyebrow, Albert continued, "I guess I am the same - a very courageous young lady in the computing department told me off this morning for being brusque with her staff - she politely said that my mind was focused on other things."

Sarah nodded, "you get a problem in your head and a half-solution and you just have to hang on to it in case you forget and then..."

She stopped and they both burst out laughing. She suddenly looked at her watch, "and talking of problems I want to work on my Mercury Rising data; is that OK with you?"

Albert nodded; go ahead, I've brought some paperwork home to leaf through so I'll work in the armchair."

They both set to work and settled down to their respective tasks; sometime later Sarah murmured, "I can't solve this." She got up from the computer and went to lie on the floor; Albert peered over the spreadsheet he was holding, "why don't you lie on the settee in the lounge, then I won't bother you and you will be more comfortable."

She didn't reply, but walked out of the room; Albert went back to his spreadsheet. He was convinced that there was something wrong with the Bradstone's accounts, but couldn't put his finger on it.

Albert awoke with a jerk sometime later; his back was protesting as he had slid down in the armchair as he slept. Albert looked at his watch; it was 1:30am. He staggered to his feet and walked around his desk to look at the computer screens. A program called Mercury Striations MkIII was running, but nothing else. Albert turned the screens off, but left the machine running. He staggered downstairs to the kitchen and had a drink of water; his mouth felt like the bottom of a lime-pit. Once refreshed he turned off the kitchen light and deadlocked the front door. Halfway up the stairs he paused; he'd tacitly assumed that Sarah had gone home and left him sleeping, but what if... He walked down the stairs again, put the hall light back on, and peered into the

lounge. Sarah was fast asleep on the floor, sprawled across the hearth-rug and breathing gently. Albert went back to the staircase and sat down to consider his options. He could wake her up, but what then? It was too late to take her to the B&B and the spare bedroom was full of miscellaneous junk. However, if he left her sleeping on the floor it seemed vaguely uncaring. In the end he retrieved the spare duvet from its hidey-hole and laid it over her; she would then be aware that Albert knew she was in the house and he had at least done something. He went to bed and was soon sleeping like a baby; that is a baby with a snore like a rampant pig.

Just under six hours later Sarah began to wake up. In the warm-and-cosy stage she idly considered in her deep subconscious the hardness of the hostel beds and the peace of the morning. Ten minutes later she opened her eyes and vaguely took in her surroundings. One minute later she was sitting up virtually wide-awake. From somewhere upstairs came a sound like a suppressed buzz-saw and from the kitchen the gently hum of a refrigerator, otherwise all was quiet. She looked at her watch and frowned. She began to take stock of her body; she felt stiff from sleeping on the floor and her feet ached from being in high-heels all night. She rolled over onto her knees and stood upright; she staggered into the kitchen, picking her handbag off of the settee on the way, and poured herself a mug of water. She extracted a small bottle of pills from her handbag, placed two tablets in her mouth, and washed them down with water; a look of total disgust briefly crossed her brow. She stretched, scratched her nose, and opened the 'fridge door. She surveyed the contents; half a bottle of milk, half a jar of plum jam, an almost empty jar of marmalade, some butter, and about four dozen tomatoes. She mentally groaned and opened the freezer with little more success: two mangy looking microwave meals for one, half a bag of frozen peas, a single piece of frozen fish – probably from the ark - and three boxes of chocolate ice-cream cones. She smiled at the vision of Albert eating nothing but chocolate ice-cream cones and tomatoes and shut the freezer door. She leant against the sink unit and sluiced her face with cold water. The intermittent sound of snoring was still drifting down the stairs so she unlocked the back door and walked out into the morning sunshine.

Ten minutes later she reached the small parade of shops that she had noticed the previous night, not surprisingly all the shops were

shut, but there were signs of life inside the butchers. She tapped on the window and a small rotund man in a snow-white apron appeared, looked at his watch, and shook his head. She tapped again and made a pleading motion; he opened the door. "Sorry madam, but we're closed."

Sarah tried to look appealing, "I know, but I have a problem. I slept round a friend's last night and took some of these this morning; I must take some every twelve hours."

She produced her small pill bottle and shook it. "I'm supposed to eat within an hour and my friend's 'fridge is empty."

The man shrugged. Sarah suddenly pointed to a small poster on the wall of the shop, "my friend has one of these posters in his window."

The man turned round and then back, "who you staying with then?"

"Albert Potterdon."

The man seemed to find this enormously funny, but managed to say, "What do you want then?"

"Some bacon, couple of sausages, perhaps some black pudding..."

The man disappeared into the back and returned after a few minutes, "eight rashers of bacon, four beef sausages, half a dozen eggs, a few mushrooms, some cooking fat, and one piece of black pudding."

Sarah raised her eyebrow; the man laughed, "Albert doesn't eat black pudding – I had breakfast a few times with him in Berlin."

She reached for her purse, the man held up his hand, "have them on the house, I owe Albert one."

Sarah was perplexed, "owe Albert?"

"When we were in Berlin my daughter became ill. We'd all travelled by coach and I didn't have enough cash to buy an airline ticket. Albert paid for me and he even arranged for a taxi to be waiting for me when I arrived back in this country."

Sarah, somehow, was not surprised, "is your daughter all right now?"

"Yes thanks, but it was touch and go for a while."

Sarah walked back to Albert's house and quietly entered the kitchen; intermittent rasping noises still drifted on the air. She hunted about and found two frying pans; she had to wash them before she dared to use them.

Albert stirred in his comfortable bed and turned over. In the warm-and-cosy stage of waking up he idly considered in his deep subconscious the sound of rainfall and the peace of the morning. Minutes later he opened his eyes and vaguely took in his surroundings. One minute later he was sitting up virtually wide-awake. It was not raining

noises he could hear, but sizzling noises; and he could smell bacon. He quickly put on his dressing gown and stumbled downstairs; Sarah was busy at the gas-stove. She shot him a glance, "I can't find the coffee."

"That's because there isn't any."

A brief signal of total disbelief crossed her forehead, "then make tea will you, I can't do everything."

Albert, still in a half-soporific state, did what he was told. The timing was perfect, just as he poured the tea Sarah dished up the fried breakfast with toast. The both tucked in and did not speak until their respective plates were wiped clean by the application of bread. Albert licked his lips, "that was wonderful. I only normally have a slice of toast, but that was wonderful."

Sarah stretched her legs causing Albert to tuck his under his chair. The kitchen table was small and there was only enough room under it for Sarah's extensive legs. Albert poured out some more tea, "sorry I left you on the floor, but I didn't know what to do."

She almost smiled, "the duvet was a kind thought."

"If you want a shower there is one in the bathroom."

"You don't mind?"

"You must feel all sticky from a night on the floor."

"Thanks, I'll do that."

She rose and walked towards the door. Albert called out, "what do I owe you for the food?"

She turned round, "nothing. The small butcher with a pointed nose said that he owed you one."

She exited down the hall and Albert surveyed the kitchen. The sink was stacked with two frying pans, a couple of bowls and a saucepan, all covered in grease. As he placed them on the draining board prior to filling the sink with water while suddenly realising that the butcher in question was undoubtedly Stanley Hopegood, the baritone. He then realised that it was inevitable that in no time at all, the entire barber-shop group would know that Sarah had spent the night at his house and they had had breakfast together. Conclusions would be drawn and inferences made; Albert groaned, wherever this woman went caused disaster and mayhem. He suddenly stopped and smiled; however, the breakfast had been good.

Meanwhile Sarah scrutinised the contents of Albert's bathroom. All in all there was not much to scrutinise. Just as the 'fridge and freezer had been an almost blank so was the bathroom: one tablet of

sticky soap, one bottle of anti-dandruff shampoo (two-thirds empty) and one small towel. She retraced her steps to the airing cupboard and took a look inside; she raised the corners of her eyebrow a small fraction and took out a large bath-towel, it felt wonderfully soft. She glanced along the hallway to Albert's open bedroom door: single bed, small bedside cabinet, with Bible, and little else. She marched into the bathroom and started her shower. Halfway through the rinse stage she suddenly froze, sponge poised above kneecap. She muttered to herself, 'we're on the wrong side of the transform; I'm trying to perform the iterations on the wrong side of the transform.' She muttered to herself some more and then suddenly straightened up. She stepped out of the shower, wrapped the enormous bath-towel around her, and walked into the study; she wiped her hands on the towel and started typing.

Albert finished washing up and went upstairs, when he got to the landing he stood still. The bathroom door was open, the shower was still running and there was a trail of water leading from the bathroom to his study; steam was everywhere. Albert went into the bathroom, carefully stepping over Sarah's clothes, to turn off the shower and then followed the trail of water into his study. Sarah was standing, wrapped in his blue bath-towel, at the computer tapping away and muttering to herself; she sensed his presence, but did not turn round. "We're doing the iterations on the wrong side of the transform; if we work in frequency, not time, the problem is far easier to resolve."

Albert transferred his mind from breakfast to mathematics, "but it's a horrendous Laplace transform."

She shook her head, "use Fourier."

He shrugged, although Sarah didn't notice, "just as difficult."

She shook her head again, causing her body to undulate and the towel the flap, "use Fast Fourier."

"What about the ripple?"

"Use the smoothing routine from your flight simulator. We don't have to be accurate; we only have to point the iteration program in the right direction."

Albert's brain slipped into gear; he moved up behind her. "Don't make it too heavy, we only need to work to three decimal places to start with, any extra precision is worthless."

They muttered to each other for ten minutes and Sarah dutifully typed their ideas into a document; the important thing was to capture the ideas; the generation of mathematics could come later, it was the

direction that was important. Eventually Sarah stopped typing and whispered; "if this works then one chip does all. We just have to produce one microchip with the formula and load it like a co-processor onto the robot's motherboard."

"Only for static robots," replied Albert.

Sarah furrowed her brow, "what is motion but a series of connected static points separated by time, but we are working in frequency."

They stood staring at the screen, both aware that the need was to capture the essence of the idea, him in his dressing gown and she in her towel. They were disturbed by a movement at the door, Albert swung round; Geraldine was standing in the doorway with her mouth wide open. She managed to stammer, "Sorry I thought you'd be at work; I came to replace the graphics cards – I didn't mean to..."

She ran out of words, Albert said the first thing that came into his head, which in reality was still full of mathematical possibilities. "How did you get in?"

"Your spare backdoor key – remember we usually maintain your computer once a month."

Sarah said casually, "just let me e-mail this document to the office and the machine is all yours."

Albert looked at Geraldine and smiled, "can you give us ten minutes? There's plenty of tea in the kitchen, help yourself."

Geraldine felt highly embarrassed, "how about I come back tomorrow?"

Albert nodded, "you do that."

Geraldine needed no second bidding, she scurried downstairs; as she passed the lounge she glanced in, there lying on the hearth-rug was a duvet. She stood still and listened, upstairs there was the sound of much scurrying around. She went out through the kitchen, it smelt of fried breakfast and washing up liquid. Just what had she walked into?

Albert arrived at work, very late, feeling that they were on the brink of something. Yvonne brought him his tea immediately; he said to her, his mind still elsewhere, "can you get Felicity to pop over?"

He then realised that Yvonne was not moving and brought himself back to reality, "you OK?"

"Can we talk for a moment – I need some advice."

Albert was surprised and flattered, "come and sit down."

Yvonne shook her head and perched herself on the side of his desk; Albert noticed that she was dreadfully white. "When Sarah was adopted

it was done through the British Embassy in Thailand and Suffolk Social Services. I needed the Embassy involvement because I was in prison and they used a Social Services department to locate suitable parents."

She paused and took a deep breath, just as you would following a sob. "The Embassy phoned me this morning, goodness knows how they tracked me down, and Sarah wants to see me."

Albert already began to feel out of his depth; "Why?"

Yvonne looked surprised, "because I am her mother."

"Sorry," said Albert, "I meant why now?"

Yvonne rubbed her hands up and down her thighs, "I don't know."

Albert changed tack, "have you talked to Peter about this? Or your sister?"

"I'll talk to Peter tonight." She hesitated, "do you believe in prayer?"

"Of course, but we don't always have the answers we would like."

She burst into tears and wailed, "Albert I'm so frightened; I've prayed that I'll know that she is all right and then this happens. What if..."

At that moment the door opened and Bella walked in; Albert looked straight at her, "GET OUT!"

Bella didn't need a second command and virtually jumped through the doorway. Yvonne wiped her eyes; Albert said gently, "let's try the opposite question. How would you feel if you said no and didn't see her?"

A look of horror crossed her face, "I couldn't... I mean..."

"Then you have your answer."

Yvonne sniffed and nodded; she wiped her eyes. Albert said kindly, "would you like the day off?"

"No thanks I'd rather try and work, but thanks for the offer."

She hesitated, "But if I disappear you won't mind will you?"

"Of course not."

She blew her nose, "now I'd better find Bella."

Albert grimaced, "tell her to knock next time."

Yvonne gave a half-smile, "then you could have yelled 'go away' through the door."

Albert looked at Yvonne, "can I ask you something?"

Yvonne nodded. Albert made a sort of circular motion with his hand, "am I that difficult? Yesterday Geraldine politely told me off and you're implying that Bella is scared stiff of me."

Yvonne sought for a diplomatic answer, "it's not quite the same, but what you see in Sarah Vespachi others see in you. It's the same total fixation on a problem to the exclusion of all else, even social niceties. You

don't mean to offend – and I know that you have a totally different side – but you can sometimes offend all the same.”

She paused, “I hope I haven't said too much.”

He shook his head, “if no-one remarks, behaviour never changes.”

He looked at the clock, “I must get on. Please phone Felicity and phone the florists – I think Bella is due a bunch of flowers. Oh and phone Peter; Dr Vespachi normally has Wednesdays and Thursdays off; she might want transport to an airport.”

Albert sat down and thought of Sarah and all her irritating points, but ended up thinking of her in a damp blue bath-towel.

By mid afternoon Albert was fed up with reading reports and decided to go walkabout. He liked to walk round the factory and see for himself what was going on. He'd actually had complaints about this habit from two of his managing directors, but had told them that they ought to do the same thing. He reached the door of his office when there was a tiny knock and Bella put her head round the door. “Miss Smith is waiting to see you.”

Albert sighed, that was the end of his walkabout. “Show her in.”

Bella stood mesmerised, “and thank you for the flowers Mr Potterdon.”

Albert smiled, “please call me Albert. I call you Bella not Miss Green; you call me Albert not Mr Potterdon.”

She took a deep breath, “do I have to?”

Albert was taken aback, “I suppose not.”

“Then I am much more comfortable with Mr Potterdon.”

She hesitated, “and you ought to know that Miss Jeddle has left for home, she said you'd understand.”

Albert nodded, “do you take dictation?”

A look of absolute horror crossed her face, “not really, but I can audio-type.”

She deliberated, “I suppose with Miss Jeddle not in the office you want to dictate some letters. I'll give it a go but...”

Albert held up his hand, “don't worry I won't shout at you.”

Her eyes became like saucers, “but you shout at Miss Jeddle.”

Albert was surprised, “do I?”

She nodded and looked like she was about to be marched to the guillotine, “we can hear you through the wall.”

“Well I won't shout at you; come in after Felicity has left.”

He went and sat down and muttered to himself something about it being open season on his behaviour.

Felicity entered armed with sheaves of paperwork. Albert led her to the meeting table and they sat down. He slid over the Bradstone's accounts. "Can you take a close look at these, there's something wrong and I can't put my finger on it."

Felicity seemed surprised, "Oh, I didn't think you'd noticed. It's the corporation tax for the past three years; they're paying almost twice as much as they should."

The penny dropped in Albert's mind, "or they've made twice as much profit as they've declared to us."

Felicity's mouth opened and then shut and then opened, "can I use your computer for a minute?"

She wandered over and interrogated some Internet pages, and then laughed. "The cunning so and so."

Albert waited, sure the explanation would come. "They've split the company – it's all in the company's register. There's now Bradstone's Robotics plc and Bradstone's Automation Software plc. I guess that they made most of their profits on software so they split the company once they started to run into trouble."

Albert smiled, "same board of directors?"

"Same board of directors."

"And I suppose our alliance is only with Bradstone's Robotics?"

Felicity frowned, trying to remember the details of their alliance, "I guess so, least that was the intention."

"Thanks Felicity."

"What will you do?"

"Not sure, but I will tell you before you go up for your first board meeting."

Felicity left and Albert spent an hour dictating to Bella. Instead of taking notes like Yvonne she typed Albert's dictation straight onto the computer; it proved both faster and more efficient. At six o'clock Sarah interrupted them; Albert looked at his watch and was mortified. He turned to Bella, "you should have told me it was past your home time."

He then shook his head, "no I should have realised, I am sorry. How do you get home?"

She replied weakly, "the factory bus to the town centre and then the number 42."

Albert stood up, "thank you for the typing. Now go home by taxi. Ring Blundle's Taxis and have them take you and send the bill to us – they are used to us."

Bella looked scared stiff, "I could walk."

"You could not walk, you will take a taxi. I kept you past your time and the company should ensure you get home safely – and don't forget to claim the overtime."

Bella smiled; carefully saved the letters she had typed and left the office. She was going home in a company taxi with a bunch of flowers; maybe Yvonne was right, perhaps he wasn't so bad after all.

Sarah watched Bella leave, "that was nice of you."

"I scared the life out of her this morning, it is the least I could do."

He suddenly realised it was Tuesday evening. "Shouldn't you be on your way to Milan?"

"My mother is on a coach tour. The nursing home takes them for a holiday a couple of times a year; by now she should be in Rome."

"So what are you going to do with your days off?"

She shrugged. Albert decided to do some fishing. "Tell me do you work for Bradstone's Robotics or Bradstone's Automation?"

A look of bewilderment crossed her face, "Bradstone's Robotics, I have never heard of Bradstone's Automation, who are they?"

Albert smiled, "it seems that your Eric has a trick or two up his sleeve."

She shrugged, "I have no interest in business affairs."

Albert looked at his watch, "I suppose you want to work on your Mercury theories."

She shrugged, "there's not much else to do until my filtering programme stops running."

Albert pondered on being hospitable to her; she was after all a guest. "Look, I'm performing tonight. The Barber Shop group is singing at the local art's centre, why don't you come along? There's a buffet afterwards, you could come as my guest."

She stroked her chin, "I have seen the posters – thank you, that would be nice, but I have nothing to wear."

"It's not formal."

She hesitated and Albert realised that the mode of dress may have been a polite excuse. "Sorry, I didn't mean to be pushy - you'd probably hate it."

She suddenly stood up and towered over him, "if I have to suffer your barber shop will you accompany me to the opera Thursday night, there is a touring company singing Verdi's Il Trovatore."

Albert shuddered, "sounds like a deal."

Bella was waiting for her taxi clutching her precious bunch of flowers when Albert and Sarah passed her heading for Albert's Morris Traveller; she thought that they looked nice together and hoped in a romantic sort of way that they were happy. She also hoped that they didn't shout at each other too much.

Yvonne was at home in her poky flat sitting in the dark. Sarah's request via the embassy had unleashed in her all the pangs of grief she had suppressed when she had given her away. At that time it had been the logical thing to do; now it was a dreadful and heart-rending deed. Yvonne suddenly sat up and went to the door; someone had knocked. She opened the door to find Emily on the doorstep; Yvonne looked past her, "how did you get in the stairwell?"

"Bloke moving in downstairs has the door propped open."

They stood staring at one another on the doorstep, finally Yvonne said, "how come you're here, I thought you had orchestra practice tonight?"

Emily shrugged, "cancelled; conductors got 'flu. I thought I'd come and see where you lived?"

"Does your dad know you're here?"

"Not yet."

Yvonne stepped to one side and Emily entered. Yvonne got a couple of fizzy drinks out of the 'fridge and gave one to Emily, who was peering at Yvonne in a funny manner. "You look like you have been crying."

"I have."

Emily's eyes widened and she waved her arms, "dads not upset you has he?"

Yvonne managed a smile, "no."

"Then what's there to cry about?"

Yvonne wondered just how much Emily could take, she decided on honesty. "Emily I have a secret, well it's not a total secret, your dad and a few close friends know."

She paused, "when I was young I was very foolish and ended up in jail."

Emily sat bolt upright, "a real jail, one with wardens, and all?"

"A real jail, but not in this country, but in Thailand."

Emily screwed her face up; geography was not her strong point. "Thailand is the other side if India from us."

Emily nodded, "go on."

Yvonne swallowed. "I was there for a long time and I knew I would be there for a long time."

Emily interrupted, "because you had been very naughty?"

Yvonne smiled, "very naughty. The thing is I had a little girl while I was in prison and because I knew I would be there for a long time I gave her to some other people to look after. Prison is not the place for children."

Yvonne paused, after a moment Emily said, "Did the little girl go with you into the prison, and was she naughty as well?"

"I mean I had a baby – I gave birth in prison."

Emily digested this, "why didn't you give her to her father to look after?"

Yvonne began to regret starting this conversation, "because he was naughtier than I was."

Emily sat and thought, "What's the baby called?"

"I called her Sarah; her new parents may have changed her name?"

"Why would they do that, she is your baby?"

"Because I thought I would be in jail for a very long time and Sarah needed a good home I gave her to the nice people to bring her up as their child."

Yvonne suddenly realised that Emily had no concept of the time frame involved and probably thought that Sarah was still a baby. "This was all a long time ago Emily, Sarah will be nearly fifteen now."

Emily opened her mouth, "but that's older than me!"

"I said it was a long time ago and long before I met your daddy."

Emily put her head on one side, "you said daddy knows."

"I told him before we started going out."

Emily swept back her hair, "then why are you crying now?"

"Because Sarah has asked to see me and I don't know that I did the right thing."

Emily toyed with the ring-pull on the fizzy-drink can for a moment, "did you live in a cell?"

"With ten other women."

Emily opened her can and took a slurp, "did any of them have children?"

"Not in the prison."

Emily suddenly drank the whole can of drink in one go. "Well I wouldn't have wanted to be brought up in a prison. I like to go swimming and run in the park, you couldn't do that in prison, you have to scrub floors and muck out the toilets."

Yvonne almost laughed, "They wouldn't make children do that."

Emily became defiant, "they did you know; I've seen films."

Yvonne realised that Emily was confusing her studies on Victorian life with Yvonne's statement that it was a long time ago. Emily, however, suddenly had a moment of childish perception, "and you're scared because you think Sarah may not like you and think that you are a wicked mother."

"Something like that."

Yvonne turned away, she could not stop the tears flowing, it was the phrase 'wicked mother.'

She suddenly felt Emily next to her and giving her a hug, "I wish you were my mother."

Yvonne put her arm round Emily, "do you miss your mum?"

Emily nodded, "but I don't remember her much, not really. I sometimes try to remember but I only see the photographs and remember bits and pieces."

"What can you really remember?"

"I remember mum in the kitchen one day; she was trying to cook something, but the cooker wouldn't work. She was very mad."

Emily paused and then said softly, "and I remember her in hospital, she was always in hospital."

Emily burst into tears and Yvonne did the same.

Albert was also fit to burst into tears, not tears of sorrow, but tears of frustration. Sarah had spotted a late night shopping mall on their way to the arts centre and had told Albert that she would not be five minutes; that was nearly twenty minutes ago and Albert was due on stage – after changing – in less than forty minutes. Just prior to him exploding with rage Sarah appeared from the shopping centre carrying a large shopping bag, she climbed in the car, "sorry Albert they only seem to have clothes for midgets."

What stopped Albert making a vehement retort was the fact that Sarah was wearing a body-hugging dress. It was made of a shimmering black material, starting with a V-neck and finishing in a tight skirt that had a discreet slit at the bottom. That, and the accompanying silk scarf tied round her neck, transformed her from a dowdy physicist into an elegant

lady. He was also sure that he could smell perfume. He put the car into gear and drove off, "it's all right, there's plenty of time."

Albert fortunately found a car-parking space behind the arts-centre and soon settled Sarah into a seat before dashing behind the scenes. Sarah wriggled in the seat and then smoothed the dress down with her hands; buying the dress, the scarf, the cosmetics, and the perfume was a total extravagance, but she had not had to pay the air-fair to Milan and for once had some surplus money. She smiled to herself; she was especially pleased as the dress had been at a ridiculously low price in a clearance sale; after all who needed a dress that long? She checked her appearance in a small mirror and waited for the singing to begin. She didn't know quite what to expect and the evening's entertainment was listed in the programme as four different groups; an English folk group, a recorder group, a string quartet and finally Albert's Barber shop group. All the groups were due to perform twice, once before the interval and once during the end session. When the barber-shop group took the stage Sarah had a job not to laugh, they were dressed in brown plaid trousers, white shirts, red waistcoats, spotted bow ties, and straw hats. She counted eighteen men; there were no women. However, their performance was faultless and –to her – almost enjoyable, that is until the encore. After the clapping died away Albert and the butcher and two others stepped forward and sang a four-part harmony. They were note-perfect and obviously enjoyed their singing, their enjoyment flowed into the audience, and into Sarah; she was suddenly glad that she had come.

After the performance Sarah joined Albert for the after-show buffet and they sat down with Mary at one of the tables. Albert was lucky that he did not overhear several conversations on other tables and in particular the one involving Stanley the butcher, Lionel the estate agent and their two table companions. It started with Lionel discreetly pointing at Sarah. "Who's the tall woman with Albert?"

Stanley swallowed his sausage roll; it was either that or spit it out. "Dunno her name, but she slept at Albert's last night. She came to my shop at just gone seven to buy a cooked breakfast."

Companion number one, a railway guard called Will, muttered, "well he's a dark horse, she's a smasher."

Companion number two, a sales executive called Alex took a peak, he was sitting with his back to them. "'E can't come up to her chin – puts his head in the right place for a snog though, what a bosom!"

And they all laughed. Will picked up a soggy sandwich and put it back on his plate, "serious though do you think Albert's got a woman at last?"

"Have to have the patience of a saint." From Alex.

"Have to be a saint!" From Lionel.

Stanley chewed on a piece on unrecognisable fowl, "seriously chaps Albert is a good guy really."

Alex looked at him as if he were mad, "would you marry him?"

They all fell about laughing. Will sampled a cocktail sausage and instantly regretted the action, "probably just his sister, or something. I did hear that he goes to Mary's for Sunday lunch."

Alex said, in his rich Welsh accent, "Sunday lunch with Mary and breakfast with his bimbo, I wonder where he has supper?"

More hilarity ensued.

Lionel's laughter could be heard at Albert's table. Mary smiled, "boys are enjoying themselves."

Albert pushed his plate away, "not with this buffet their not – this is dreadful."

Sarah relaxed and put her plate down; she had – for once – tried to be polite. "I'm glad you think so, I've tasted better shoe leather."

Albert wandered over to the buffet table to see if there was anything edible. Mary said quietly, "lovely dress Sarah. It must have cost a fortune."

Sarah leaned back in her chair and poked her long legs way under the table, "every now and then one must give way to whims of fancy. It will be back in the work-house too soon."

Mary wiped her mouth on a napkin, "don't you like your work then?"

"Sometimes I feel that life is more than mathematical squiggles."

Mary fixed her with a gaze, "you go for what you want girl. Before you know it you're old and you spend your time looking back and wondering what happened to your life."

Sarah stopped watching Albert and looked at Mary, "you have regrets?"

"I regret marrying my Bill so late in life. I regret having only one child. I regret that I'll probably never see my grandchildren, but otherwise no. I had a good marriage and I've had a good life, you can't ask for much more."

"Do you wish that Albert would ask you to marry him?"

Mary burst into laughter, “no dearie certainly not. As I told you before he’ll make someone a good husband, but not me. He needs someone on his wavelength. He’d want to discuss his latest ideas and I wouldn’t have a clue.”

Sarah clasped her hands and stretched her arms, “I don’t know about that. My cousin is a business executive and she married her gardener – they seem very happy.”

Mary smiled, “sometimes love conquers all, and sometimes it needs a little help.”

Albert wandered back empty handed. “That’s it. I for one am going to a restaurant, who’s coming?”

Mary instantly declined on the grounds that she had eaten enough, besides she hated restaurants. To Albert’s chagrin the first restaurant he and Sarah came to was an Italian one; he did not feel that he could be so rude as to pass it by. Sarah seemed almost ecstatic; she interpreted the menu for Albert, ordered in Italian, spoke Italian to the waiter, and seemed to suddenly relax as if she were at home. Albert made some remark about her living in England and she winked at him. “I love England; it’s thinking in English I can’t stand, it’s such an inexpressive language.”

Unbeknown to Albert, Yvonne and Peter were sitting on the other side of the same restaurant toying with their deserts. Yvonne was speaking, “...it was the way she said that she wished I was her mother, it nearly broke my heart.”

Peter watched her carefully, “I sometimes wonder what she really remembers. For me the images are crystal clear, but she was terribly young.”

Yvonne looked up, “do you dwell on those images?”

“At first – it’s all I had to hold onto. Now there are other things to hold onto.”

“Such as?”

“You.”

Yvonne closed her eyes, but I can’t live up to her Peter. She sacrificed herself for her child; I sacrificed my child for myself.”

Peter did not answer. She threw her spoon down, “it’s true Peter. Your Charlotte knew that by having Emily she was probably signing her own death warrant – that’s what I call real motherhood. As for me, I disposed of my child as soon as I could – what sort of mother does that make me?”

Peter reached out and grabbed her trembling hand, “you’re being unfair on yourself. The situations are entirely different. It could be said that you make a courageous decision.”

Yvonne shook her head, “it could be said, but it would be untrue, courage had nothing to do with it.”

Yvonne went to move her hand away, but Peter held onto it. “You told me that you know that Jesus has forgiven you – can’t you forgive yourself?”

“I don’t work miracles, he does.”

Peter retained his grip on Yvonne’s hand, “I would trust my Emily with you anytime, anywhere, and I don’t compare you with Charlotte. She wasn’t a saint you know, she had a viscous temper and she did sleep around.”

Yvonne locked eyes, “what greater gift is there but to give your life for another?”

Peter responded gently, “and there remains faith hope and love, and the greatest of these is love.”

Yvonne looked miserable. “We could quote the Bible at each other all night; it is what I feel inside that is churning me up.”

“And what is that?”

She closed her eyes again and held them tight. “Failure. I had a loving family and I failed them. I had a child and I failed her. I had a wonderful friend in prison and I failed her too – I knew why she had gone to the toilet and I didn’t try to stop her.”

She opened her eyes and looked at Peter, “my track record isn’t good, and I’m worried that I’ll fail you and Emily.”

“I’m willing to take that risk.”

She sighed, “I’m not sure I am. What if I fail Emily and screw up her life, what if I take to the drink again, what if...”

Peter took the back of her hand and kissed it. “Too many ‘what-ifs’. What if we had never met?”

Yvonne withdrew her hand, “then I might not have caused you heartache.”

He looked her in the eye, “there is no heartache. All this self-angst, it’s because of being contacted by Sarah isn’t it?”

Yvonne nodded, “seeing Jasmine was one thing; seeing Sarah is quite another.”

“You’ll be OK.” He paused, “Would you like me around?”

She nodded. Peter smiled reassuringly, “then I’ll be there.”

He sat back and looked across the restaurant, only to rapidly lean forward. "Good grief there's Albert on the other side of the restaurant with a beautiful woman."

Yvonne smiled in disbelief, "you must be mistaken."

"No I'm not. She's tall and Italian looking and in a skin-tight dress."

Yvonne turned round and had a swift look, "that's no beautiful woman that's Dr Vespachi; she's Albert's female doppelganger."

Peter grinned, "I've heard about her, apparently she managed to annoy all the computing team and the admin staff in one day."

Peter looked again, "she seems harmless enough."

Yvonne grabbed Peter's hand, "don't go too close, you might get your head bitten off."

Peter glanced again, "she certainly is tall and she certainly has all the right curvy bits."

Yvonne kicked him under the table.

Albert finished his desert and sat back in his chair. The meal had been a lot better than he had expected; he had trusted Sarah to order for him and she had chosen well. Most of the meal had been spent with Sarah describing her life in Milan. The coffee arrived and Sarah pushed the cream over to Albert, "where was I?"

"At University."

Sarah's eyes twinkled; she had known perfectly well where she had got up to, she was just checking that Albert was listening. "Then in my second year I fell off a horse."

She paused, this was the tricky bit, the last man she had told this to had disappeared out of her life at the speed of light. "I fell backwards and the back of my head hit a concrete post hard. I initially thought that I was OK as I had my helmet on, then half an hour later I passed out."

She casually took a sip of coffee, "I came round five months later."

Albert stopped blowing on his coffee cup, "five months?"

She nodded, "and I promptly had a seizure and was out for another two months."

Albert looked concerned, "that was your first seizure?"

"And my second worst seizure so far. While I was out the second time they operated again and took the risk of removing bone splinters from my brain. It was a difficult operation and they damaged my spinal cord slightly, but not dramatically."

Albert sipped his coffee and was obviously listening intensely, so she continued. "I was out of university for a year – I call it my year out."

Then I resumed studies and got a degree in Italian Art. I failed to get a job, we had not found the right level of medication, and I was either like a zombie or having seizures at inopportune moments.”

“What did you do?”

“I opted for more surgery. My mother brought me to England and to your wonderful hospital in Cambridge. They used a different medication, the number of seizures fell dramatically; in fact for a time I thought I was free of them, but it was not to be.”

She sipped her coffee, “but I was not well here,” she tapped the side of her head, “I felt insecure away from Cambridge so I stayed and studied Astro-Physics. I stayed for six years and got a PhD. In all that time I did not have any seizures at all and I began to relax. Then my father became ill and I had to go home to help my mother.”

She gazed into some other dimension, “after my father died, mother was dreadfully depressed so I stayed in Italy for a time.” She looked away, “then one summer I took a weekend break to Florence. In the hotel I tapped the back of my head on the shower-head - it was nothing really. Two hours later I had the mother of all seizures. Problem was I had it at the top of a staircase and banged the back of my head again on the way down. Later the consultant called it a series of continuous seizures rather than just one, but I was devastated all the same.”

She paused; Albert didn’t say a word. “They took me to the nearest hospital and it soon became apparent that the doctor in the emergency unit didn’t have a clue and the hospital was too small to have a neurological department.”

She made eye contact with Albert, “if I’ve ever prayed I prayer then. I was absolutely terrified, away from home and in a small ill-equipped hospital and liable to have another seizure at the drop of a hat - perhaps the final seizure.”

She paused. Albert hadn’t touched his coffee; he waved his left hand, “what happened?”

“The doctor was not the fool I took him for; he phoned Milan to try and talk to my consultant, but he was away. He then phoned Cambridge to try and talk to my English consultant, but he was also away. Fortunately he left messages at both hospitals. In less than an hour both consultants were standing by my bed – they were on the same medical convention at the Florence Conference centre. They examined me and then told me that they were in agreement that I needed instant surgery, the x-rays showed that there was something wrong on or near the old operation site. They thought that I’d probably had a minor blood-blister

and the tap on the shower head had been enough to burst it; they admitted that they had no other idea why I should be suddenly having seizures.”

She continued to look into the far distance as if she could see into the past. “So I had a major operation with two internationally renowned consultants. I’m told they took many hours. I then occupied one of only two intensive care beds in the hospital for two weeks.”

Albert finally sipped his coffee; it was obviously cold. “And the operation was a success?”

“Yes and no. Yes in that I lived, no in that they were operating near my brain stem and gave me the equivalent of Bells Palsy. The nerves to my cheek muscles don’t work too well, and I have a thin metal mesh across the back of my skull just under my skin, apparently the risks if I break my skull there again are not worth contemplating. And for some reason neither consultant can explain both my hands and feet tremble slightly.”

She looked Albert full in the face, “and I still have seizures; not many – three in six years – but still some.”

Albert didn’t bat an eyelid, “was that your last operation?”

She made a small laughing sound, “no. One product of having frozen face muscles is that the edges of the mouth droop; I had some cosmetic surgery to correct that. Call me vain, but I didn’t want to walk around looking a complete sourpuss. It was a struggle though – I’ve come to loath hospitals.”

“So how did you end up at Bradstones?”

“The English consultant said that he wanted to monitor my condition, I think I was some sort of guinea pig for him. I wanted to be sure of what was happening as well. So I came to England, but my mother by now was in her nursing home, that was costing a fortune and eating up the family silver. So I had to get a job and Bradstones was the first firm to actually offer me a job.”

“How many did you try?”

“Fifty three application forms, twenty three job interviews, sixteen medicals, and one job offer.”

“And you never thought about going back to Milan.”

She wiggled her eyebrow like a snake, “I am a great fan of your NHS, and to be honest Milan has nothing for me now.”

She suddenly stretched her arms and looked around, “isn’t that your secretary on the other side of the restaurant?”

Albert took a look, "yes, she's with Peter Parsons one of our Managing Directors."

She gave Albert a questioning look, "I rather thought that she was keen on you."

Albert burst into laughter, "she's an excellent secretary and she doubtless gets away with murder, but there is nothing between us."

The waiter brought the bill and Albert immediately snatched it from the tiny saucer, "my shout I think."

Twenty minutes later Sarah shoehorned herself back into Albert's Morris Traveller and Albert started the engine, "Dawson's hotel is it?"

A look of horror crossed Sarah's eyebrow. Albert almost pounded the steering wheel, but restrained himself, "don't tell me you haven't changed the booking from Friday?"

She shrugged, "they might still have a vacancy."

Albert pulled an antiquated mobile telephone from the glove box and rang directory enquiries for the phone number of the hotel. Two minutes later he turned it off and sighed, "They're full."

He went into problem solving mode, "where's your clothes?"

"Back at the factory in my – sorry your – office."

Albert did a U-turn and headed for the factory; Sarah looked bemused, "sorry Albert I didn't think that we'd be so late and I meant to book in the hotel before the concert."

She looked at the direction they were going, "you're not going to the factory at this hour? Surely they won't let you in?"

Albert smiled, "Well I suppose I am currently the chairman and I am also head of security."

They pulled up at the factory gates and Richard came out of the gatehouse. He was in uniform and all formal. "Good evening Mr Potterdon."

He leant down and looked in the car, "Good evening Dr Vespachi."

Albert for some reason suddenly felt foolish, like a teenager discovered drinking beer behind the potting shed. "Dr Vespachi has left her suitcase in my office."

Richard took this in, "is that your old office?"

Albert nodded; Richard held up his radio, "John and Sheba are in that building at the moment, I'll get them to bring it over."

Albert got out of the car and chatted to Richard about night-time security and soon John came over with a small suitcase. Albert bundled it

in the car and made a swift exit, Sarah laughed, "you look like a naughty schoolboy."

"I feel like a naughty schoolboy."

She laughed again, "and how are you being naughty?"

Albert grinned, "By driving around in the early hours of the morning with a beautiful woman by my side. You do realise that Richard will enter our arrival in his nightly log don't you?"

"And do you mind?"

Albert thought about it, "no."

Sarah appeared to relax, "where are we going?"

"Home. I have a spare bed and we can soon make it up; though I'll have to move some old boxes around first."

"I could always sleep on your hearth-rug, it was very comfortable."

Albert took her seriously for a moment and then realised that she was joking, he relaxed and laughed. Then he grinned at a sudden thought, "Mark you there is a payment."

She raised one edge of her eyebrow, Albert continued, "There's enough food left in the 'fridge for another breakfast."

Sarah smacked him across the shoulder, "in your dreams Albert, in your dreams."

# Chapter 14

## Fusion

The following morning Albert did indeed have a déjà vu experience, although nearly an hour later than the day before. It had taken them to nearly 2am to make the spare bedroom habitable; Albert had entirely forgotten about half the stuff he had crammed into the spare bedroom, which actually was no bigger than a box room. This late-to-bed effort meant the late-to-rise experience later that morning. Late or not, Albert enjoyed his second fried breakfast of the week. He also suffered his second intrusion from Geraldine. This time she walked into the kitchen as they were eating; Albert was in his dressing gown and Sarah in a flimsy silk bathrobe. As before her mouth dropped open. Before she could say anything, Albert said, "Try a little later."

She swiftly left and Sarah chuckled, "that won't do much for our reputation."

Albert gave her a mystified look and she rolled her eyes, "two mornings in a row she has caught us in what could be loosely termed 'compromising situations', at least this time I was partly dressed."

Sarah then burst out laughing; the look on Albert's face said it all; he had not even considered the matter. Sarah gathered together the dirty plates and dumped them in the sink, "I will wash up later after I have put my clothes in your washing machine."

Albert looked at the clock and then his watch - panic on his face. Sarah became bossy, "you go, and I'll wash up."

Albert stood up, poised to race to the bathroom, "what are you going to do today?"

"Shopping and resting and thinking about Mercury and Mars."

Albert hesitated and then blurted out, "you could sleep here tonight you know."

Sarah wiggled her eyebrow fiercely, "is that an invitation?"

"Yes."

"Do you mean it, or are you being polite; with you Englishmen I can never tell."

"I mean it."

"Then thank you I will."

Albert left for work twenty minutes later and Sarah surveyed the pile in the kitchen sink. She wondered what had possessed her; she absolutely loathed washing up!

Albert arrived at work to be waylaid instantly by Yvonne before he got to his office. "Cutting it fine aren't we?"

Albert was bemused, "fine for what?"

Yvonne gave him a look of total exasperation, "fine for mingling with the Bradstone's board – they're meeting in our boardroom and you're supposed to join them for coffee."

Albert was none the wiser, "what are they doing that for?"

Yvonne giggled, "Because you told them to."

Albert blinked, "I did?"

"Remember you said that they should consider meeting here once a quarter."

Albert ran his hands through his hair, "I only told them they should consider it."

Yvonne gave a toothy grin, "Albert you are the chairman and if you say they should consider it then you should consider it done."

Albert sighed and went to move on, he suddenly stopped. "Yvonne, do I shout at you when I am dictating?"

Yvonne blushed, "yes and no. You do shout occasionally, but I think it is out of the frustration that what I read back to you is not what you meant to say in the first place."

Albert went to open his mouth, but Yvonne got in first, "go and get ready for the board, – you've got ten minutes."

Albert walked into his office and stopped dead, "and what are you doing here?"

Derek gave a sheepish smile, "I'm going up the walls at home. They're not going to do chemotherapy or radiotherapy – no need – so it's time I started back."

Albert was not convinced, "you had a major operation."

"In the end it was minor, not even a scar – they went in down the windpipe with a special cut'n'grab device."

Albert sat down, "I won't say that I'm not glad to have you back, but not full time, not just yet."

Derek growled, "Thanks for your concern. I see not much has changed; you've just reorganised the decision structure, formed an alliance with Bradstones, and appointed a new head of engineering."

Albert laughed, "But now your workload should be more manageable." He became serious, "half-time for a fortnight, I'll keep hold of manufacturing and development you take the rest."

Derek nodded; Albert smiled, "in that case you can mingle with the Bradstone's board in five minutes and sort out this Bradstones Robotics and Bradstones Automation business."

Derek smiled and gave a mock salute, "OK boss, but on one condition. I keep Yvonne."

Albert raised his eyebrows, "is that for ever or until Rebecca reappears?"

Derek gave a lopsided grin, "rumour has it our Rebecca is pregnant."

Albert made a sour face, "only if she agrees."

Derek leant back in his chair and stretched, "and how is the alliance with Bradstones working out?"

"Early days, but it looks promising."

"And have you found time to think?"

Albert grinned, "Sarah and I think we may be able to get Botanago to work on a single universal microchip."

Derek looked at the clock, "Sarah?"

"Dr Vespachi; Bradstones mathematician."

Derek smiled, "Ah the petulant Italian woman."

"You know her?"

"I had the misfortune to chair a conference where she was a speaker; she told an eminent scientist that he was stating the obvious and the head of research at Smithsonian's that he ought to go back to school."

Albert laughed; Derek grinned, "don't laugh too much I seem to remember that you once told the head of the American Robotics Institute that he was a fool if he believed that linear models were anything other than an approximation."

Albert smiled at the memory, "the man was a fool."

Derek started to walk towards the door, "I would have thought that the two of you would have spent all your time yelling at one another."

Albert rubbed his hands together, "it is an interesting relationship."

Derek got nearly out the door and Albert said earnestly, "it is good to have you back Derek, but ease yourself in; I don't want you overdoing it."

Derek turned, "thanks – and thanks for your prayers."

Albert went behind the desk and rang through to Yvonne and asked for a cup of tea. She brought it through in record time, "you're not going into the board meeting?"

"Derek is back part-time, he's gone, – he'll be better at it than me." Albert grinned, "He won't shout at them."

Yvonne went to leave. Albert stopped her, "hang on I want to ask you something."

Yvonne turned round, "it's all right Albert, I know you're not shouting at me personally, it's just the work."

"It's not that. Derek wants to hang onto you, I guess until Rebecca returns. I said that it was your choice."

Yvonne sat down and thought. In the end she said quietly, "that's not really fair. If I say I'll stay you'll be offended. If I say I'll come back with you, Derek will be left with no senior secretary and one inexperienced member of staff."

"Do you like being here in the centre of things?"

She nodded. Albert nodded in sympathy, "then you stay. I've been lucky enough to hold onto you for this length of time and who knows when Rebecca comes back, if she comes back, you may return to the fold."

Yvonne gave a toothy grin, "I do enjoy working for you Albert, but here there is a wider scope of work."

Albert sighed. Yvonne suddenly frowned, "what will you do for a secretary?"

"I was thinking of asking Bella"

Yvonne had a fit of giggles. "You can't be serious. She doesn't type mathematics and she is totally scared of you."

"Is that a bad thing?"

"You need a secretary who will answer you back."

Albert thought, "No, I'd still prefer Bella. I'll be working with Sarah for a while and Peter can type the maths; I still need someone for the general letters."

Yvonne looked doubtful; Albert took the hint, "look you ask her, then she won't feel browbeaten by me."

Yvonne stood up, "can I still use your parking space?"

Albert laughed, "You're still officially my secretary, and Bella will be a temporary replacement."

Yvonne made for the door and Albert said gently, "Yvonne."

She turned round. "Have you decided about your daughter?"

She nodded, "I'm meeting her on Saturday afternoon. It all seems very fast; I phoned the embassy and Suffolk Social services phoned me back within fifteen minutes."

Albert gave her a concerned look, "I'll pray for you. It must be difficult."

She gave a false smile, "that's an understatement."

Derek finished his cup of coffee and mingled smoothly with the Bradstone's board members; eventually he got round to Felicity. "How's it going?"

"OK. I thought that they might be reserved about certain things, but I've not noticed anything."

Derek smiled inwardly. "Did you opt for this job or were you pushed?"

"Albert tempted me into it."

At some unseen signal the board members all started sitting down. After a few moments Eric Bradstone cleared his throat, "we'll you've all now met Mr Jeddle and I must say that it is good to see him back behind the board table. I've asked him to say a few words."

Derek leant on the table and looked round the faces, "before I do," he said, "just let me get my facts right, is this a board meeting of Bradstones Robotics or Bradstones Automation?"

You could have heard a pin drop.

The same could not be said of the secretary's office. "He wants me!" said Bella in horror, why not Julia?"

Yvonne replied patiently, "because Julia is a spreadsheet expert and she cannot be spared from this office."

Julia on overhearing this beamed in delight. Bella tried another mode of escape, "but I've only been here a week."

"Then we've not taught you any bad habits."

Yvonne paused and said kindly, "look you could regard it as an opportunity. Albert is in effect the second most senior executive in the company."

Bella did not look convinced. Yvonne looked her in the eyes, "he may shout a bit and he can definitely be both short-tempered and blunt, but underneath he is a good man. He does something not many managers do – he really cares about his staff."

Bella considered the flowers and how Albert had asked her opinion about some of the letters he had written; he had also listened to her replies. "Can I give it a go and come back here if it doesn't work?"

"Of course – and you will not be alone, Peter will be in the same office or close by."

Bella nodded and Yvonne went to talk to Albert. Julia looked at Bella in amazement, "you must need your head examining; spreadsheets or no spreadsheets I would not be his personal secretary if he were the last man on earth."

Before she could reply Yvonne returned, "He wants a word."

Bella got up and looked like she was about to enter the lion's den. Yvonne touched her on the shoulder, "a piece of advice; don't be like a piece of putty. He needs a secretary who will answer him back and will tell him if she thinks his wrong. I've told him to expect you to be as blunt to him as he is to you."

Bella nodded, "could you do one thing for me before I go?"

"What's that?"

"Teach me how to make a cup of tea using a teapot?"

Geraldine, for the third time in two days, let herself into Albert's house. This time she was sure that he was not around, she had checked with Julia that Albert was firmly ensconced in his office before leaving the factory. As an additional precaution she had phoned the computer centre from her car, according to them Albert's computer was off-line. She stood in the kitchen studying the washing up on the draining board and listened. On hearing nothing she climbed the stairs; to her surprise there seemed to be a large pile of boxes on the landing near the door of the spare bedroom, almost sealing it off. She walked into Albert's study and instantly froze. Dr Vespachi was lying on the floor dressed in only her silk bathrobe and in such a skewed position that she was obviously not just asleep. Geraldine knocked loudly on the door, "Dr Vespachi, are you all right?"

With no response from Sarah the first-aider in Geraldine took over and she crossed the room and felt Sarah's pulse; it was nice and slow and regular, as was her breathing. "Dr Vespachi, can you hear me?"

No response. "DR VESPACHI CAN YOU HEAR ME?"

Still no response. Geraldine expertly rearranged Sarah's limbs so that she was in the recovery position. Geraldine suddenly realised that her hand was wet and wrinkled her nose; there was a smell of urine. She sat back on her haunches and considered what to do. Geraldine was sure that Sarah had had a seizure and was now in the normal post-seizure deep sleep, but she could not be sure. Her best option was to ring the

emergency services, but Dr Vespachi may not thank her for that indignity. She walked over to Albert's desk and called him.

Albert was in the process of explaining to Bella that he would be pleased if she became his temporary secretary when Yvonne interrupted. Albert was about to say something, but the look on Yvonne's face stopped him. "Geraldine's on the 'phone, she says it's urgent and about Dr Vespachi."

Albert took the call, Bella watched him closely. Albert suddenly took on a look of panic, "is she OK?"

Bella watched his face change to extreme concern, "don't call an ambulance, stay there I'll be along as soon as I can, but if there is any change, don't hesitate."

He vigorously put the telephone in its cradle. "Sorry Bella, I've got to go – tell Yvonne I might not be back."

Albert cycled home at full speed; all day he had had two images in his mind, one of Sarah in his blue bath-towel and one of her in her slinky dress. Now he found himself frantic with worry. The logical side of his mind said that the worry was absurd as epileptic seizures were not normally too harmful and she was only a colleague. The much under-used emotional side of his mind had a totally different opinion. Albert completed the cycle home in record time and ran up the stairs; in his study Geraldine was sitting on the floor next to a prostrate Sarah. "Any change?"

Geraldine's face took on a look of relief, "no."

Albert crouched down and felt Sarah's pulse, nice and slow and regular. He sniffed. Geraldine muttered, "I think she's wet herself – that's not in the book."

"Which book?"

"Our first aid manual."

Albert considered this, "probably nothing. Such manuals can't contain everything and drift towards the average."

He felt Sarah's forehead, "did the book say how long this phase lasted?"

"Only in vague terms – I'm not an expert Albert; I've never actually seen anyone have an epileptic seizure."

"How come you read the book?"

"I mugged up when John arrived – he's in my first aid sector."

"John?"

"John Banke in finance."

"And he's epileptic?"

"Yes."

Albert took his eyes off Sarah. "Give him a ring."

Geraldine was surprised, "pardon?"

"Give him a ring, he probably knows far more about epilepsy than most GPs."

Geraldine did as bidden and Albert heard the start of the conversation. "Hello John, this is Geraldine from computing. Look I am off site tending an epileptic following a seizure and I wondered if you have any advice?"

After a few minutes Geraldine came back to Albert's side, "he says let her sleep, but if it's more than an hour you should at least call a GP. He also said that when she does come round she will probably be disoriented for a while."

Albert nodded, Geraldine hadn't finished, "he was most adamant that whether or not she wakes up naturally she should see her GP today or tomorrow."

They squatted in silence then Sarah moaned and moved slightly. A minute later she opened her eyes and mumbled something in Italian. Geraldine grabbed hold of her hand. "Dr Vespachi, this is Geraldine, you've had a seizure, just relax."

This elicited no response except some more mumbled Italian. Then, without warning, she tried to sit up. Albert put his arm around her shoulders to stop her falling over and she leaned against him. She mumbled something unintelligible and then hic-cupped before she vomited her fried breakfast over Albert. Albert whipped out his handkerchief and mopped her lips and chin. He seemed oblivious to the mess all over his trousers. They sat in this tableau for a few minutes and the Sarah mumbled something. Albert held onto her, "it's all right Sarah, you had a seizure."

He was rewarded with a second stream of vomit. Geraldine went to Albert's desk and brought back some tissues. Albert again tended to her mouth. Then, slowly recognition came back into Sarah's eyes and she looked around. She took in Albert and Geraldine and tried to sit up by herself; Albert hovered close, just in case. "How long?"

Albert answered quietly, "do you mean how long have I been out?"

Sarah nodded and hic-cupped, but this time was not sick.

Geraldine answered, holding her hand, "I found you about eleven thirty, that's forty minutes ago."

Sarah closed her eyes, obviously trying to think and then gave up. "Can I have a drink of water?"

Geraldine shot off and Sarah slumped against Albert. On Geraldine's return she drank half the glass. "In my handbag – my tablets."

Another excursion for Geraldine and two tablets for Sarah, she swallowed them. "I'd like to sleep – I'll be OK."

"Do you want doctor?"

"No – I'll be OK."

"Are you sure?"

"I said I'll be OK."

Albert turned to Geraldine, "we'll put her in my bed, we'll never get here past the boxes into the spare room."

They helped Sarah to her feet and half carried her into the front bedroom, just before they let her flop in the bed Geraldine took of Sarah's bathrobe and night-dress. They dropped her naked on the bed and covered her with the Duvet. Geraldine rubbed her shoulder, "lay on your side Dr Vespachi – on your side."

Sarah obligingly turned on her side and snuggled down into the pillow. They tiptoed from the room and surveyed the mess on the study floor; Albert began to realise that the smell was dreadful. He looked at Geraldine, "thank you, I'm in your debt."

Geraldine shrugged, "I just happened to be here."

"Thanks all the same."

Geraldine smiled, "now what?"

Albert went into his problem-solving mode. "Dr Vespachi's clothes are probably in the washing machine, could you go out and buy her a pair of jeans and a top – oh and another night-dress. She's probably got a dress in her room you can get the size from that, though I think it is a bit on the small side. Hang on I'll give you a list."

Geraldine looked at the drying vomit; Albert grimaced, "I'll deal with that, let me write a list and give you some money."

Albert toddled over to the desk and quickly produced a list and then handed over £150. "Will that be enough?"

"Plenty."

Geraldine went down the landing and into the small bedroom, immediately spotting the dress hanging up. She smiled to herself; Albert had a single bed and Sarah was obviously sleeping here, so much for images of secret liaisons. Geraldine smiled again when she studied the dress, it was made of a stretchy material and obviously meant to be skin-tight, and Albert just thought that it was small!

Two hours later Geraldine had returned and left, Albert had cleared up the vomit and washed Sarah's bathrobe by hand. The night-dress had been committed to the washing machine; he'd rinsed his trousers and left them in the outhouse for later delivery to a dry-cleaners. Albert had followed this by making himself a pot of tea and ensconcing himself in a small armchair in the bedroom so he could keep an eye on Sarah while he vainly tried to read a book. It was after yet another hour that Sara stirred and then opened her eyes, this time there was no confusion. "Hello Albert."

"Hello Sarah, how are you?"

She stretched her legs; her feet poked out from under the duvet. "Wobbly. I feel all churned up inside."

She paused and puckered up her nose, "have I been sick?"

"I'm afraid so."

"Did I wet myself?"

"I'm afraid so."

She went to sit up and then flopped back. "I need a shower."

Albert became firm, "there is no way I am letting you in a shower."

Sarah giggled, "Then it will have to be a bath."

Albert considered this; Sarah pleaded, "Please Albert I can't stay like this."

"Stay there."

She nestled down, "there's some foam-bath in my suitcase."

Albert ran her a bath and then came back. She sat up and put her feet on the floor, when she stood she swayed and Albert immediately grabbed hold of her. He half carried and half supported her to the bathroom. She seemed oblivious to her nakedness. Once in the bathroom she sat on the side of the bath and then swung round, eventually sliding into the bath, causing a mini-tidal wave to break over the end of the bath. Albert went to leave. "Don't go!" There was panic in her voice.

Albert paused, "please stay, just in case – I'm frightened of being alone."

Albert realised that she meant just in case she had a seizure in the bath and drowned. He sat on the toilet and Sarah languidly washed herself; she then settled down into the water, her knees sticking above the foam.

"Why are baths always so short?"

Albert chuckled, "maybe it's because you are so long."

She relaxed in the bath for a short while and then looked at Albert, "please help me out."

Ten minutes later, after a vigorous rubdown and a quick change of bed-sheets, Sarah was back in Albert's bed. "I'd like to sleep."

"Do you mind if I read in the corner, I don't like to leave you."

Sarah's arm appeared from under the duvet and she grabbed his hand, "I'd like that. I probably won't have another seizure now, but it's best to be safe."

"Do you want a drink or anything?"

"Not yet, just sleep."

Albert settled down to guard duty and when she was asleep crept out and phoned Geraldine. "She's back in the land of the living, you can stand down."

"You're sure she's all right?"

"Positive."

"Take care of her Albert, according to John she will feel like the inside of a jelly."

"I will and thanks."

He crept back into the bedroom and turned to chapter thirteen of his book called 'The duffer's guide to Astro-Physics.' If this is a duffer's guide, he thought to himself, whatever is a full explanation like?

Sometime later Albert woke up with his book still at chapter thirteen, he immediately looked over to Sarah; she was still sleeping and breathing evenly. He looked at his watch and mentally berated himself; he'd been asleep for almost two hours if anything had happened to Sarah he would have never forgiven himself. He watched her sleeping for half an hour and then crept from the bedroom and went to the kitchen via his study. According to Geraldine, Sarah's next tablets were due around 8pm and she was supposed to take them with food. Albert surveyed the results of Geraldine's shopping excursion and decided to cook Sarah poached cod and creamed potatoes; he hoped that would be light enough for her to digest and satisfy the requirements of the tablets.

At almost exactly 8pm Albert carried a tray of food into the bedroom. Sarah was sitting on the side of the bed inspecting a small pile of clothes, "where did these come from?"

"I sent Geraldine out shopping; most of the clothes you brought with you are in the washing machine."

He balanced the tray on the end of the bed, "supper, and your tablets."

She obligingly swung her legs back into the bed and took the tray. "Where's yours?"

"Downstairs, I thought you might like some privacy."

She wrinkled her nose, "no thanks; please eat with me."

Albert disappeared downstairs and Sarah examined the food. For one fleeting second she wondered if she could get to the loo and flush it away before Albert returned. Then the sense of smell over-rode the sense of sight and she picked up her fork. Albert returned and they ate together in silence; Sarah decided that it might look like a mess of pot-tage, but the taste was OK. When she finished she laid back on the pillows, "thanks Albert, sorry if I've been a nuisance."

Albert just smiled, "do you want to sleep again?"

"No, I'd like to talk."

Albert removed her tray, "still wobbly?"

"A bit, it will wear off by the morning; it's a combination of the extra tablets and the seizure."

"Coffee?"

"Cold drink."

Albert left the room and for the first time Sarah properly surveyed it. Single bed, single wardrobe, single armchair, single rug, just about single everything; it could have been her room at the hostel. She picked up his Bible from the bedside cabinet, it was well worn, and there was a book-mark in Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, chapter 13. She nodded slightly and put it back just before Albert came in with some fresh orange juice and two creamy yoghurts. "Not for me Albert, just the orange."

They sat in silence for a few moments and then Sarah said, "you heard all about me last night, tell me about you."

Albert talked of an alcoholic mother, a father who died of a massive heart attack and the blossoming of Jeddle's Robotics. They then talked of various things in no particular order, just happy to talk to one another. Without warning Albert reached out for the uneaten yoghurt and started eating it. He looked at Sarah, "do you ever do anything impulsive?"

She wiggled her eyebrow, "I brought that dress yesterday."

Albert smiled, "and I bet you considered the cost, durability and how many times you were likely to wear it."

Sarah laughed, "It seems you know me too well already."

"That's because I think we are two of a kind."

He put the empty yoghurt pot down, "no I mean really impulsive; something so out of the ordinary that people would think you have gone temporarily insane."

She deliberated on the idea, "no, my life is well ordered and regular. Totally impulsive actions are not a part of it, but the concept is alluring. Have you anything in mind."

"Marrying you."

She seemed surprised, "and that would be totally insane?"

"I don't mean marrying you after a long relationship, or marrying you next year; I mean marrying you before the week is out."

She stared at him, "was it something in the yoghurt?"

He laughed, "No it's something in the hormones. All of a sudden I have found a sole-mate, someone who talks and thinks on the same wavelength."

He hesitated wondering if he was going to seem quite demented, "someone who I know I could love beyond all others."

"But we have only known one another for less than a week."

"That's what makes it impulsive; there would still be so much more to discover about one another."

"I am Catholic and you are Protestant."

"Same God."

"I tend to state my mind too clearly for diplomacy."

"I tend to shout."

"And you snore."

Albert seemed affronted, "no-ones ever complained."

"Who would there be to complain?"

She idly re-arranged the bedclothes, "I believe in the sanctity of marriage. Once married always married and always married to the same person."

"So do I and that's partly the point. I'm sure that if we just stay as friends then we could easily annoy and offend to the point of destroying the friendship, but if we are married we will both want to work at it."

She half laughed, "You said this was impulsive, you've thought about it."

"Only while you were sleeping, just before I went to cook."

They sat in silence for a minute or two, him contemplating the utter foolishness of his suggestion and she coping with the surprise. In the end she broke the silence, "how fast?"

"How fast?"

"How fast could we get married? In Italy you have to register your intention to marry weeks in advance."

Albert replied easily, "today is Wednesday; I think that in theory we could get married tomorrow afternoon."

She seemed taken aback, "how?"

"Common licence. If we used banns then you have to pass three Sundays, but I believe there is no such restriction for a common licence. In any case they are recommended for a UK citizen marrying someone who does not have a UK passport and does not live in the parish."

She sniggered, "you either have a wonderful memory for trivia, or you've been sneaking a look at the regulations."

He smiled, "I had a quick look on the Internet between here and the kitchen."

"I'd want a church wedding."

"Of course."

She abruptly leant forward, twisted round, and plumped her pillows, "it is a totally absurd idea. Off of this planet. From out of the school of the ridiculous. But I like it."

"Do you just like the idea, or is that a yes?"

She didn't answer, but said softly, "you do realise – you really do realise - that my epilepsy could get worse and you could be saddled with a very sick wife. Whatever they did inside my head, it might not last."

"Does it matter if it's the right wife?"

She looked him in the eye, "this is a foolish notion Albert, but I must admit it is exciting."

She closed her eyes for a brief second, "yes, let's do it – as fast as possible and before we tear each others throats out."

Albert couldn't believe his ears, "you really mean it?"

"Of course, I always mean what I say; I am an Italian Physicist not an English Diplomat."

She moved over slightly, "and now you may kiss me."

Albert sat on the side of the bed, slowly leant forward and kissed her forehead. She waved her arms in the air, "Oh you English! I mean like this!"

She grabbed Albert and gave him the full treatment.

Once they had parted Sarah said, "And now we must organise."

Albert grabbed some paper and they made a short list, followed by a long list. "And there are some decisions," said Albert, "what about your mother, do you want me to fly her over?"

Sarah rippled her eyebrow, "no, we will go and tell her next Wednesday, she is always saying that I need a taller man."

"You mean taller than you?"

"Most definitely."

"How tall are you?"

"Just over one metre ninety."

Albert smiled, "in your parlance I'm just under one metre sixty."

Albert went back to his list, "bridesmaid?"

"I'll ask Geraldine – I take it you will give her time off to shop?"

"Most definitely."

Sarah chipped in, "best man?"

"Derek."

Albert screwed up his eyes to remember weddings he had gone to, "reception, we'll need a reception and guests."

Sarah laughed, "Dear old Eric is staying at your precious hotel tonight, I'll surprise him in the morning."

"Honeymoon," said Albert, "where would you want to go?"

The edges of Sarah's eyebrows turned down and if Albert was right about the new eyebrow- semaphore he was learning that meant disapproval. "You don't like the idea of a honeymoon?"

She said quietly, "not yet. I'd rather take a holiday around Christmas. I'd like to stay here." She suddenly brightened up, "and we can spend the money we are not using on a honeymoon to brighten up this dowdy house!"

Albert feigned distress, "my house - dowdy?"

"Most definitely."

The both laughed like a pair of sixteen-year-olds.

The following morning, starting at 8.30am there were a series of phone calls to stunned recipients. Albert's Cathedral Dean was first. "Hello Howard, it's Albert here, I'd like a favour."

Howard stood in his underpants in his kitchen muttering under his breath about eccentric choir members, "what is it Albert?"

"I'd like to get married this afternoon."

Howard did a rapid sanity check; yes his wife was still sitting at the kitchen table. "Pardon?"

"I'd like to get married this afternoon."

Howard became condescending, "banns take three weeks."

"We're getting a common licence, my intended is Italian. I believe once it is issued it is instantly valid."

Howard became pastoral, "marriage is not something to rush into you know Albert."

"And it is not something to avoid – can you do it?"

Howard consulted his diary, "4.30pm and don't be late, I can't marry you after six."

Howard rapidly thought, "She's not divorced is she?"

"No."

Howard got his act together, "I'll need the fee up-front and what about the choir and what about hymns?"

"I rather hoped that you'd contact the choir and the choirmaster can choose the hymns; I'm a bit pushed for time."

Howard put the phone down and turned to his wife, "you're just not going to believe this..."

Second on the call list was Yvonne. "Hello Yvonne, glad you're in early. Three things: first I'm taking a week off and so is Dr Vespachi; secondly can you, Julia, Bella and Peter be at the Cathedral for 4.30pm and thirdly can you arrange a hotel reception for about forty at around 5.30pm. Make it a sit-down meal, but nothing too grand and impress upon the hotel that the two main guests are teetotal."

Yvonne pinched herself, "have you been drinking Albert?"

Albert laughed, "No. Sarah and I are getting married this afternoon."

Yvonne's head went into a spin, "let me get this straight; you and Dr Vespachi intend to get married at the cathedral at 4.30pm, and you want me to arrange the reception and bring the staff to the wedding."

"Correct."

"Which Peter?"

"Pardon?"

"You said bring Peter, is that Peter as in Dr Vespachi's secretary of Peter as in Peter Parsons."

"Both."

Yvonne put the phone down and turned to Julia and Bella; "you're just not going to believe this..."

Sarah's phone call to Eric and Albert's phone call to Derek had much the same effect. Then Sarah phoned Geraldine. "Hi, Geraldine, Sarah Vespachi here."

Geraldine put down the ham baguette she was about to murder for breakfast, "Oh Hi. How are you today?"

"Bit wobbly still and in need of help."

Geraldine rolled her eyes; she had a pile of work and didn't want any more. "What sort of help?"

"I'm going to become Dr Potterdon this afternoon at the Cathedral and I'd like you to be my bridesmaid and come shopping with me."

"Pardon?"

“Albert and I are getting married this afternoon and I’d like you to be bridesmaid and help me shopping.”

Geraldine felt that she had been daydreaming; Sarah continued to talk, “Albert says that you can have the day off and that you can borrow a pool car. Can you be here in an hour?”

“Yes, I’ll be there – and thank you I’d love to be your bridesmaid.”

She put the phone down and turned to Sanjit, “you’re just not going to believe this...”

Mary was the only one for whom there was no real surprise, her response of, “Oh Albert I am glad, and of course I’ll be there,” was the sanest of the day.

The most bizarre was Jess. Albert tracked her down while she was on her delivery round and she took the call while in Felicity’s outer office. Albert took it nice and slow, “hello Jess this is Albert.”

“Hello Albert, sorry Mr Potterdon.”

“Jess, Dr Vespachi, and I are getting married this afternoon at the Cathedral at 4.30pm. I’d love you to be there and I’d like you to sit at the top table, with Richard, as my special guests.”

“But it’s a Thursday and people usually get married on a Saturday.”

“They do Jess, but we want to get married today. Will you come?”

“Will I have to make a speech?”

“No.”

“Then I’d love to come.”

She put the phone down and then shrieked “they’re getting married,” at full volume.

Felicity scurried out of her office like a scalded cat, “you all right Jess?”

Jess bounced up and down in excitement, “Mr Potterdon and Dr Vespachi are getting married this afternoon.”

Felicity smiled benevolently, “there must be some mistake Jess, they’re not even engaged.”

“He’s just talked to me on the phone – I’m to be one of his special guests.”

Felicity decided that the poor girl had gone insane and asked her secretary to get Geraldine as the senior first-aider. The secretary made the phone call and then put the phone down, “sorry Miss Smith, Geraldine is not there, apparently she’s gone shopping with Dr Vespachi, and she is going to be her bridesmaid.”

Jess grinned, “Told you.”

Felicity was at first bemused and then smiled, "this I have got to tell Penelope."

From late-morning Albert and Sarah went their separate ways. They had obtained the licence, bought their wedding rings, plus an engagement ring, and been to the bank; now they had individual shopping lists. Albert met Derek and hired a pair of wedding suits – 'yes I do want them for this afternoon' – and then met up with Prissy for lunch. Prissy was happy to join them; in truth she couldn't stay away. They sat in a small restaurant eating a light snack. Derek carefully watched Albert – he seemed ten years younger. "You are sure about this Albert; it's all a bit sudden."

"Life is too short for every decision to be logically processed."

Prissy leant forward, "has she cast some kind of spell on you?"

Albert laughed, "Only the feminine kind."

Derek rubbed his nose, "marriage isn't a flippant decision you know Albert, it's a serious business. It's not like one of your equations; you can't rub it out and start again."

"Not without a lot of anguish," chipped in Prissy.

Albert smiled, "thanks for your concern, you really are good friends, but we do know what we're doing."

"Will you be giving half your share of the company to Sarah?"

Albert looked up from his soup, "I haven't thought about it, but that's marriage isn't it, sharing what you have?"

Prissy muttered, "That would give her an awful lot of power."

Derek was more direct, "I like you being a 25% shareholder along with me, then between the two of us we can fend off any attempted buy-outs."

Albert smiled, "If I end up with 12½%, between the three of us we'd still have 55½%"

Derek and Prissy looked at each other, "do you think that Sarah would be a sleeping board member just like you?"

Albert recollected a past conversation, "probably, you'd have to ask her."

They seemed to relax. Prissy looked at the clock, "Anything I can do?"

"Can you check out the flowers in the Cathedral?"

She nodded and they departed.

Geraldine and Sarah were having much more fun. At the bank Albert had pressed £3000 into Sarah's hands for the shopping, much to

her surprise and against her protestations. She and Geraldine were now doing their best to spend it. Sarah eschewed the idea of a wear-once-and-store-forever wedding dress and they opted for an identical pair of cream dresses, identical cream high-heels, and almost identical hair-styles. Geraldine was none too sure about this and had tried to reason with Sarah, "Are the high-heels sensible, I mean you're tall in the first place."

Sarah just laughed, "My dad always said to accentuate the positive, so I am positively tall."

"Won't you tower over Albert?"

"Most likely, he doesn't seem to mind."

"But the wedding photographs!"

"The photographer will just have to get us to stand on different steps and use a long lens to make us appear together."

Geraldine gave up as they approached a jeweller. Sarah looked in the window, "can they piece my ears and put those in?"

She pointed to a pair of small diamond earrings. Geraldine shrugged, "don't know, I did my own."

Sarah looked at her in amazement, "how?"

"Ice cube, Surgical Spirit, and lack of money."

Sarah decided that such an approach was not for her and they entered the jewellers. After much discussion, and a small tantrum, Sarah left with newly pierced ears plus a matching drop necklace and Geraldine left with a pair of matching earrings. By 3pm they had spent nearly all the money and were sipping coffee in the cathedral coffee shop. Geraldine looked at Dr Vespachi; she looked a different woman, but the tantrum in the jeweller's had reminded Geraldine that underneath she still had the same volatile personality. "How are the ears?"

"Throbbing – remind me why did I go for the second pair of holes?"

"Because you said that the jeweller had put the first pair in the wrong place – but they look fine. In the end the jeweller won you know, he sold us three sets of diamond ear-rings – you blew nearly £1000 in there alone."

Sarah giggled like a schoolgirl, "I'm sure he doesn't want any change."

Geraldine smiled, "looks like he's not going to get any."

Sarah pointed to Geraldine's ears, "you keep them of course, and the clothes, call it my thank-you."

Geraldine blushed, "I can't possibly... "

Sarah reached out, "you were very kind to me yesterday, and I haven't enjoyed myself so much in years."

Geraldine looked at the clock and said gently, "if you really are going through with this then it's time to change and for me to do your make-up."

Just as Sarah was about to stand up a well-dressed woman came up to her. "Dr Vespachi, I'm Martha Keyes the Dean's wife. Howard said that he had spotted you here, would you like to use my house to change?"

Sarah nodded and raised both ends of her eyebrow, "that is very kind."

The three of them left and at a nearby table two women turned and watched, then put their heads close. "Is that the woman you think, the one who's marrying Albert? Fancy choosing such a tall bridesmaid makes her look like a midget."

The other one nodded, "and she's so much younger than him."

"Suppose the tall one might be her mother."

She shrugged, "guess we'll know from the seating in the Cathedral."

They both nodded sagely and departed for the choir robing room.

Albert arrived at the Cathedral, as instructed, nearly an hour early. He saw Howard, paid the wedding fee, and realised that he felt dreadfully nervous. Howard put the money in a tin, "you are sure about this Albert? The licence is valid for three months."

"I'm sure."

Howard looked at the clock and relaxed, "known her long?"

"'Bout six days."

Howard sat bolt upright, "six days!"

Albert nodded; Howard felt faint. "You're marrying someone whom you didn't know a week ago!"

"Yes, exciting isn't it."

Howard sought for a diplomatic reply, "marriage isn't only about falling in love it's about being in love."

Albert fidgeted and smiled – the wedding suit was a bit tight – "it's more like growing into love."

Howard groped around for some firm ground, "I say this isn't an arranged marriage is it?"

Albert laughed, "Relax Howard, it's not arranged in your sense of the word, but I hope it was arranged in heaven."

Over at the house Sarah was allowing Geraldine to put the finishing touches to her make up; Martha was fussing in the background.

Geraldine stepped back, "all done. Now I'm going to the loo, then you're going to the loo and then we'll be ready."

Geraldine left and Martha's curiosity rose to the fore. "All ready then?"

"As ready as I'll ever be."

"Been engaged long?"

Sarah wiggled her eyebrow, "about seventeen hours."

Martha seemed to go into a state of suspended animation, "seventeen hours? Oh my dear you don't feel that you have to get married because..."

She tailed off and Sarah enjoyed her perplexity, "no I don't have to get married for any other reason than that he asked me."

Martha relaxed, "took a long time to get round to it did he?"

Sarah nodded, "about one hundred and twenty five hours."

Martha became confused, but Geraldine returned and Sarah went upstairs. Martha turned to Geraldine, "is she pulling my leg, she says that they got engaged yesterday?"

Geraldine smiled, also enjoying the woman's perplexity. "That's right."

"And they met last week? Surely they knew each other before – were they childhood friends?"

"As far as I know they'd never met before last Thursday."

Martha sat down, "and he swept her off her feet? How romantic!"

Geraldine smiled, she couldn't imagine Albert sweeping anybody off their feet, but then she wasn't Sarah.

Derek looked at his watch for the umpteenth time and muttered to Albert, "by the way where's the reception?"

Albert gave his schoolboy grin, "no idea, Yvonne's arranging it, knowing her sense of humour it could be in the local transport café."

Derek immediately looked around and spotted Yvonne; he dashed up the aisle and then instantly returned.

"We're OK; she's chosen a Motorway Service area."

Albert burst out laughing and Howard, dressed in his full regalia, smiled; whatever Sarah had done to him it was an improvement. Just then the verger waved from the doorway and Howard nodded to the organist and the wedding began.

As cathedral weddings go it was a low-key affair with only two-thirds of the choir, the reserve organist and a relatively small congregation, but what it lacked in finesse it made up for in delight. Eric

gave Sarah away (a last minute addition to the schedule) and both bride and groom seemed genuinely to enjoy the experience. The vows went off without hesitation and the choir seemed to sing with added gusto. The only additional pieces of liturgy can from Howard; firstly asking them both in a quiet voice if they were absolutely sure they wanted to go through with the wedding and secondly producing a special wedding blessing that the congregation could join in. The reception turned out to be in the arts centre with a proper outside caterer and the speeches were admirably short. Sarah did not throw her bouquet; instead she handed it to Jess, who was infinitely pleased. The guests danced to a swing-band and Albert and Sarah slipped away before 10pm; everybody assumed that they were going on honeymoon, but actually they went home.

# Chapter 15

## Loose Ends

Early Friday morning at the factory Derek had Yvonne, Bella, Julia, Peter, and Bella's replacement, Denise in his office along with Felicity and Penelope. They had been discussing the changing secretarial arrangements and finally Derek asked if everyone was happy. Felicity was the first to speak, "I don't mind Denise working here for a while, but I would like her back as soon as you recruit a new assistant secretary, Helen can only cope on her own for so long."

Derek nodded and Peter slightly raised his hand, "what are we going to do about accommodation for Dr Vespitchi, sorry Dr Potterdon, on a permanent basis."

Derek had obviously not considered the matter, but Peter was right, she would now want to work here. Penelope had an idea, "there's an office next to Albert's that doesn't have a resident; it's currently used as the office for the visiting Health and Safety inspectors so it is decorated and clean. Sarah could use that and Peter could use the outer office; I even think that the computer network is wired into there."

Derek was not convinced, "that would put them next to each other, they may not be good for the company, or for their marriage."

Felicity flapped her hands, "they are supposed to work together; isn't that the whole idea?"

Penelope laughed, "If we go ahead and staff a bigger development unit we would take over the other offices above the stores as well; those two will always be in close proximity if they work in the same area."

Derek looked out of his window, "OK, let's set to it. I know it's a tight time-scale, but I would like it ready for her by Thursday."

Felicity rolled her eyes, "Oh don't just ask for the impossible; ask for the..."

Derek interrupted, "OK I know it will cost more if we do it quickly and that the computer unit will probably throw a major wobbly, but I

would not want to be the person who told them that they had to share one desk."

Yvonne laughed, "That would definitely not be good for marital harmony."

Derek looked at Peter, "can you handle getting the office together? I'll spread the word that you are to have the full support of the estate unit and I'll talk to the computing unit."

Peter nodded, "can I have Bella's help, we'll need to move some files around?"

Yvonne nodded and they went to break up, Bella remarked that they would now have one Dr Potterdon and one Mr Potterdon and Derek grinned. "Actually we have two Dr Potterdons."

Yvonne was surprised and it must have shown on her face. Derek moved his hands in an 'I don't understand gesture.' "About eight years after we started Albert wrote a wacky piece on human-robot bonding for the lunatic fringe of a conference. The University of Wisconsin wrote to him and offered him the opportunity of submitting a thesis on the subject. Eight years later – and following three refits at a car factory – Albert submitted his thesis and was awarded a PhD. However, things are not always straightforward with Albert. When he was due to be awarded his doctorate the University were also awarding an honorary degree to an African president who was somewhat notorious for suppressing organised religion, be it Christian or Muslim. Needless to say, Albert did not go and later received his certificate in the post, but he really is a doctor."

Penelope smiled, "then in the interests of marital harmony we had better put 'Dr Potterdon' on both their doors."

Derek grimaced, "you are probably right, but I shall redirect all enquiries on the matter to you."

On the way back to their offices Felicity and Penelope walked together, "should we buy them a wedding present?"

Penelope shrugged, "it's not as if their friends."

Felicity walked a few paces and said quietly, "he was kind to us when we came out and said we were living together, he didn't have to do that. It also stopped a lot of muttering, if the chairman was sending us flowers then all was well; I'm not sure that Derek would have done the same thing."

They stopped outside Felicity's office; Penelope came up with an idea, "how about we reciprocate. Sarah hasn't got any friends down here, how about we send her a basket of flowers Italian style."

Felicity smiled and nodded, "grand idea, I'll do it right away."

Penelope walked on, she hoped that Albert and Sarah was as happy as she was, even if she was at the same time apprehensive about having two most highly irascible executives in the universe in one place at the same time.

Mid morning on Saturday Yvonne sat in a bare white room in the local Social Services department all thoughts of Albert's wedding having fled from her mind. She was alone, but Peter was waiting outside for afterwards – he might have to pick up the pieces. Yvonne had been waiting ten minutes, with an increasing rise in inner tension, when the door opened and Mrs O'Mahony from Social services showed in a young woman; Mrs O'Mahony had been the first surprise, she came from Pontyp-ridd, not Suffolk. Yvonne unconsciously took in a deep breath. If you forgot the age difference it was like looking in a mirror, bony face, thin body, green eyes. Mrs O'Mahony said to the girl, I'll leave you alone, but I'll be just outside the door – you're sure that's what you want."

"Yes."

Yvonne noted the sullen tone in the reply. They sat down in two uncomfortable shiny plastic armchairs with an accompanying uncomfortable silence. The girl spoke first, "so you're my mum, my biological mum."

The girl's voice was pure south Wales, rich in intonation and vowels. Yvonne nodded; there was a large lump in her throat. Eventually she managed to say, "Why did you want to see me?"

The girl tossed her head, "don't you want to see me then?"

"Of course I want to see you; I've wanted to see you from the day I arrived back in this country."

"Why didn't you?"

"Cause I didn't know where you were and Social Services wouldn't tell me."

The girl turned up her nose, "you did try then?"

"Yes, but I knew from the start it was impossible and probably unwise."

"Why's that?"

"Because I was bad news. You do know why I gave you away?"

"Mrs O'Mahony said that you were in prison."

"And that's all?"

"That's bad enough – you actually were in prison I suppose, it wasn't something made up to keep me quiet?"

Yvonne swallowed, "I was in prison in Bangkok, I was serving a twenty year sentence and you were born in my first year; I was pregnant when I went in."

Sarah's green eyes locked onto hers.

"So when did you get out – a few months later on some legal thingamajig?"

"I served ten years and only got out because the Thai government thought that I might be innocent."

"Were you?"

"No."

A thought crossed Yvonne's mind, "when did you find out?"

"That I was adopted?"

"Yes."

"Five months ago, when I was taken into care."

Yvonne was appalled, "this year! And why are you in care?"

She gazed at a blank wall and recited in a toneless voice, "my parents were killed in a car crash, and they were both only children with no living parents or grandparents."

"Oh Sarah, I am sorry."

Back to locking green eyes, "my name's Melanie; Sarah is my second name."

"I didn't know."

There was another painful silence; finally Yvonne asked gently, "where are you now?"

"In a foster home."

"Are they nice people?"

"They are to me, but not to Tommy."

"Who's Tommy?"

"My dog."

Yvonne swallowed, "what do you want of me?"

Melanie looked at the blank wall and shrugged, "I wanted to see what you looked like."

"Are you satisfied?"

She shrugged again, "guess you're my biological mother all right; green eyes an' all."

"Is that all you wanted?"

Melanie started to draw imaginary pattern on the table-top with her finger, "have I got any brothers or sisters?"

"No."

"Are you married?"

"No."

"So you live alone?"

"Yes."

"What do you do?"

"I'm a secretary at a local robotics firm."

Melanie continued to draw patterns and studied them closely, after a minute or two she said softly, "I've nowhere to go. I've got to leave where I am and I've nowhere to go."

Melanie suddenly looked up and gazed into Yvonne's eyes. "Her outside said that it was pointless coming here. She told me to wait till I was eighteen, but I need somewhere to live now."

Yvonne composed herself; this conversation was running along lines she had not expected. "And you thought you might live with me?"

Melanie made a noise between a sigh and a suppressed sob; she pointed to the closed door. "She said it was pointless; you didn't want me then and you wouldn't want me now."

Yvonne took a deep breath, "but I did want you then, believe me I did want you then. I just couldn't have you then. Prison is no place for children and I thought that I'd be there for twenty years. If I hadn't been released early I'd still be there working in the laundry."

Melanie studied her hands, "what about now?"

"The question is would you want me? And would you want to live here away from all your friends?"

"Couldn't you come to Wales?"

Yvonne sighed from the heart, "I probably couldn't get a job in Wales. Ex-prisoners find it hard to get work Melanie, even harder if their crime is drug-running."

Melanie tossed her hair, "if their real friends they'd stay in touch."

Yvonne briefly rubbed both hands over her cheeks and eyes, "it wouldn't be easy Melanie. We don't know each other and I'm not exactly rich."

Melanie looked at her feet, "I've absolutely no-one else."

Yvonne held back the tears, "so I am the last resort?"

Melanie shrugged her shoulders, "something like that."

"Will you answer me one question?"

Melanie nodded, still not looking up. "If you didn't have to leave your foster home, would you have contacted me?"

Melanie looked up, "definitely, it's her out there who's been dragging her feet. I asked five months ago"

Yvonne gave a feeble smile, "they probably couldn't find me or assumed I was still in Bangkok."

Melanie suddenly locked eyes again with Yvonne; in them was the unspoken question.

Yvonne breathed deeply to try and ease her tension, "let me speak to Mrs O'Mahony."

Melanie walked to the door and yanked it open, "she wants to talk with you."

Mrs O'Mahony entered and said through the doorway, "sit down and wait, don't try to leave the door is locked."

She came in and sat down, "have we burst her pipe-dream?"

"You don't think I'll have her?"

Mrs O'Mahony said quietly, probably so that Melanie could not overhear, "I don't think you can have her. You'd have to foster her, to do that you'd have to pass a fostering panel and there is not a hope in hell that you would do so."

Yvonne was taken aback, "I'd have to foster her! But that's absurd, she's my daughter!"

"Not legally."

Yvonne sat back as if punched, "why does she have to leave her foster parents?"

"She doesn't; they can't cope with her dog and she won't be parted from it."

Mrs O'Mahony let this sink in and then almost snarled, "let me ask you a few questions and you'll see what I mean. Have you any criminal convictions?"

"Prison sentence for drug-running, but not here, and two cautions for being drunk and disorderly."

"Doesn't matter whether it is here or not. When was the last caution?"

"Six months ago, but I am a teetotaler now."

"Are you in stable employment?"

"Yes."

"How long?"

"Just over two years."

"Do you have a spare bedroom where you live?"

"No."

Mrs O'Mahony tapped her fingernail on the table, "not a chance in a million. You would need to be able to prove that you hadn't got drunk beyond control for at least three years and been in employment for longer than two years; you would also need a spare bedroom. My

advice is give up on the idea now; you'd raise the girl's hopes and you could never have her. She needs a stable foster home not a poky billet with a single drunkard."

Yvonne could take no more; she rushed from the room nearly bowling Melanie over in the process. Mrs O'Mahony put her head in her hands and asked herself for the thousandth time why she did this job.

Peter was standing on the steps outside the Social Services eating an ice-cream cornet. He'd sat in the car reading, or trying to read the paper, and seen the newsagents over the road and fancied an ice cream. He was halfway through the biscuit bit of the cone when the front door opened and Yvonne shot out like a jack rabbit; she ran straight into his arms. She burst into heart-rending sobs and made some incoherent noises; Peter guessed that the interview had not gone well. After a moment Peter could make out only two words, "not" and "fit."

The front door opened again and a war-weary woman came out followed by a young girl. Peter was instantly in no doubt who the girl was; it just had to be Yvonne's daughter. The woman walked down the steps past them, but the girl stopped. The woman turned round, "come on Melanie, we have a long journey home."

The woman marched on and the girl did not move. The woman retraced her steps, "come on Melanie, there is no point in staying here."

The girl gave her a vehement look, "piss off."

The woman stood at the bottom of the steps and put her hands on her hips, "I said it is time to go."

The girl looked at her and yelled at the top of her lungs, "PISS OFF, THIS IS MY LIFE YOU ARE SCREWING UP YOU STUPID, STUPID WOMAN!"

Peter noticed a head pop out of a nearby window and shoot back in. As the woman and girl continued their stand-off a smartly dressed female came through the front door, "what's going on here?" It wasn't a question, it was a command.

The girl ignored her and sat down on the steps, "I'm not leaving without talking to her," she pointed at Yvonne.

The woman at the bottom replied, with a great degree of suppressed frustration, "There is no point, absolutely no point."

The smart female did not like being ignored; she walked down and stood between the girl and Yvonne, who was still sobbing hysterically. "I said what is going on here?"

Peter looked at her, "who are you?"

"I am Miss Samantha Rogers and I am the head of Social Services here."

The woman at the foot of the steps made as if to make a move on the girl, who once again yelled, "PISS OFF" at full volume.

Miss Rogers decided to take a hand, "there is no point in yelling at each other on the street, it's not good for you and not good for the image of my unit, why don't we all go inside."

In the absence of a better idea they all went inside, this time to a room set out like a normal lounge with armchairs and a settee. Peter managed to get Yvonne to sit down and she leaned against him, tears still cascading down her cheeks. Miss Rogers went to the corner and put the kettle on; Mrs O'Mahony simmered in one armchair and the girl perched on the edge of the other one. They stayed in this tableau for a while and then the girl said to Yvonne, "I never meant to upset you; I'm sorry."

She turned away and pulled a tissue out of a nearby box. Yvonne shuddered beneath Peter's arm and calmed down enough to coherently respond, "It's not your fault," just before Miss Rogers came back with a tray full of coffee and some biscuits. She sat on a wooden chair and took command. "Right, let's say who we are – I'm Miss Rogers, head of Social Services, call me Sam."

She looked at the woman, "I'm Mrs Sian O'Mahony from South Wales Social Services, this is..."

Sam held up her hand, "let her speak for herself."

"I'm Melanie Jones," she pointed to Mrs O'Mahony, "she is my social worker," she pointed to Yvonne, "and she is my biological mother that she," the hand moved back to point the other way, "won't let me talk to."

Yvonne blew her nose on some more tissues, "I'm Yvonne Jeddle."

"And I'm Peter Parsons, Yvonne's fiancé."

Mrs O'Mahony tried to take command. "This has nothing to do with Mr Parsons, I suggest he leave."

Yvonne gasped, "I want him to stay."

"So do I" echoed Melanie, just to annoy Mrs O'Mahony.

Sam fixed Mrs O'Mahony with a no-nonsense stare, "describe to me what's going on in one minute."

"Miss Jeddle gave birth to Melanie while she was in prison and had her adopted through the British Embassy in Thailand and Suffolk Social Services. Mr and Mrs Jones, Melanie's new parents, moved to South Wales less than a year later. They died in a car crash five months ago while Melanie was on a school holiday; they leave no dependants or

close relatives except Melanie. Melanie has been in two foster homes since then; one emergency and one long-term, but since she refuses to be parted from her dog that placement is due to come to an end. She requested to see her biological mother in the misguided hope that Miss Jeddle would take her in, but that is not possible since Miss Jeddle would never get clearance from a foster panel to become her legal guardian."

"What's the problem with the dog?"

"It's an Irish Wolfhound crossed with a barn door."

Sam turned to Yvonne, "has it been explained to you why you would not be able to pass a fostering panel."

"Yvonne sniffed, blew her nose, and replied bitterly, "because I am an ex-prisoner who was once on the road to alcoholism and who lives in a one bedroom flat. But the drink was to blot out the pain of the mess I had made of my life and Sarah's, sorry Melanie's. I am on a different footing now."

Melanie suddenly exploded, "this is *my* life we are talking about, I am not a sack of potatoes."

Sam suddenly metamorphosed from efficient head-woman to sympathetic listener. She crossed the room and knelt on the floor beside Melanie, giving her the higher position. "Sorry Melanie, I'm not ignoring you I just wanted to find out what's going on. What do you have to say?"

"I didn't know I was adopted. When my parents died my Godmother told me that I had been adopted, and she thought I should hear it from her rather than find out by accident. I don't want to live in a foster home; I don't want to live with people who are paid to look after me."

Sam said gently, "there may be no other choice."

Melanie exploded again, "I AM NOT STUPID! Everybody treats me as if I am stupid. I know everybody says there is no other choice, but that is not true."

She took a tissue and blew her nose and then briefly locked eyes with Peter. In an instant he saw in her eyes a badly frightened young girl whose life had fallen apart and who was clutching at straws. He had seen that look once before in his own daughter's eyes. Peter turned to Mrs O'Mahony, "is there absolutely no way Yvonne could look after Melanie?"

She slowly shook her head, "if she was married and had been married for a couple of years then maybe, but with her current lifestyle, and criminal record, an application would be a waste of everybody's time and raise false expectations."

Peter felt Yvonne shudder and tremble under his arm, "I take it you have a surfeit of foster parents for teenagers in Wales?"

Mrs O'Mahony glared at Peter, "of course not, but we do have established guidelines."

"Can't you bend them?"

"Miss Jeddle is so far outside them that I would have to enter a different universe."

Silence fell and the whole matter seemed irresolvable, then Peter suddenly interjected, "could I foster Melanie?"

Following Peter's question everybody seemed to freeze, and then Mrs O'Mahony rolled her eyes, "it is not our policy to give young girls to single men to foster for obvious reasons."

"I don't live alone; I live with my sister and brother-in-law and our three children."

"You won't have the room then."

"We've got two spare rooms and we own a hotel with 42 very nicely furnished spare rooms."

Mrs O'Mahony became fully exasperated, "you're spitting in the wind."

Sam suddenly returned to being the efficient female, she stood up and re-crossed the floor. "Let's pause for a minute."

She turned to face Peter and Yvonne, "when do you intend to get married, – I notice that Miss Jeddle is not wearing an engagement ring?"

Peter replied before Yvonne could speak, "we haven't set a date – and you're wearing a wedding ring, but call yourself Miss."

Sam smiled, "touché. Do you reside and work here?"

"Yes, I'm a Managing Director at Jeddles."

She turned to Mrs O'Mahony. "I understand that the girl is in your care, but Peter and Yvonne reside here and it would be our foster panel that had to agree to them having Melanie. If they were married and we approved of them, for this one-off case, would you allow Melanie to live with them?"

Melanie, who had been slouching in the chair with her knees drawn up, suddenly sat up and looked anxiously at Mrs O'Mahony.

She was clearly not convinced. "The whole matter would be fraught with danger. An adolescent fostered by a recently married couple with a member who has once rejected her. I am not sure."

Yvonne snapped, "That's not fair, I had no choice. Would you bring up your child in a prison?"

Sam looked Mrs O'Mahony in the eyes, "have you a better solution?"

Mrs O'Mahony tried not to answer the question, but spoke to Peter, "and what about the damn dog."

"My daughter has always wanted a dog in the house."

Mrs O'Mahony rolled her eyes again, "You've already got a daughter; O great!"

Sam would not be diverted, "have you a better solution?"

Mrs O'Mahony pulled a face, "not at this minute."

Sam looked at Melanie, "We might have a solution, and we might not. Mrs O'Mahony and I have to work within a legal framework and in some aspects our hands are firmly tied, no matter what we would like to do. Sometimes this seems to fly in the face of natural justice, but we can only do our best within the limits that we have to work within."

She turned to Peter and Yvonne, "when you are married – and not before – I will accept an application from Peter to become the legal guardian of Melanie. I will put your application on our fast track, as you will be seeking to foster a specific child who is biologically related through marriage. I'm sorry Yvonne, but it has to be Peter; I wish with all my heart that it could be you, but Mrs O'Mahony is right in that you are too far outside our normal criteria for me to bend the rules. However, if you support Peter in his application it can do nothing but good, you are Melanie's natural mother and even within the crazy world of adoption and fostering law that must count for something."

She paused and smiled, "and it is not for me to give you advice, but do remember to put on your application that you had no real choice but to put Melanie up for adoption."

Sam turned back to Melanie, "I want you to understand that there are no promises here. This may all fall through and you may have no option but to stay in Wales; if that happens it will not be for want of trying on my part. Do you understand?"

Melanie nodded.

Sam turned to Mrs O'Mahony, "just how long can Melanie stay with her current foster family?"

She wrinkled her forehead, "I guess I could try for a month, but you can't do much in a month."

Sam smiled, "that depends on the motivation."

Peter decided to try and push his luck, "I read in the paper that you sometimes place children with their prospective families before they are cleared by the fostering panel, something to do with shortage of people prepared to foster..."

Sam laughed, "Don't push it. For Melanie's future let's follow the correct procedure; we wouldn't want the application thrown out because of inappropriate assumptions of success."

She paused, "and we do have Melanie's welfare to consider above all else."

Melanie sat on the front of her chair, "how long? Once Peter and..."

She paused wondering what to call Yvonne, "Yvonne leaned forward, "call me Yvonne, I don't think it right that you call me anything else."

Melanie continued, "How long from when Peter and Yvonne put in their application to it being granted?"

Sam wagged her finger, "it might not be granted; I won't be on the panel as I could be said to have had a prior involvement. But on the fast track system we try to give the answer in a month, but that is usually in the case of a long term partner applying to foster and where there is already a long-term association with the child."

Everybody seemed to realise that they could go no further. Mrs O'Mahony looked at Melanie and opened her mouth; Peter got in first, "can I take you and Melanie to lunch?"

She shook her head firmly, "we have to go, and it's a long journey."

Yvonne leant right forward, "please – I would at least like a lunch with the daughter I haven't seen for fourteen years."

Sam broke in, "There's a fried chicken place across the road. Why don't you eat there? It shouldn't take more than half an hour and I think it is a reasonable request."

Mrs O'Mahony looked at her watch, "We have to be at the railway station by quarter to, so we *must* leave here in forty minutes, otherwise the next train would be two hours away, and that is not direct."

They got up to go and just as Yvonne was passing Sam she felt a touch on her shoulder and turned. Sam said quietly, "I hope it works out." Sam then squeezed her arm - Yvonne for some unknown reason felt immensely reassured.

They trooped across the road and Peter picked up the tray of food and they went upstairs, he carefully manoeuvred Mrs O'Mahony into a table for two and sat with her, allowing Melanie and Yvonne to sit together at a different table. Mrs O'Mahony glared at him, "I hope you know what you are doing, that girl needs a stable home, a very stable home, can you provided that?"

Peter smiled, "define stable."

Just over half an hour later Yvonne sat a table with remnants of a fast-food chicken experience before her while Peter got some coffee. He returned not only with coffee, but also some more chicken; he thrust it under Yvonne's nose, "don't think that I didn't notice that you gave your portion to Melanie."

Yvonne smiled weakly, opened the box, and started nibbling; she did not feel hungry. After consuming a few micrograms she focused her attention on Peter. "You said you were my fiancé."

He grinned, "Freudian slip – it's how I think of you."

"But we've only know each other for a few months."

He pinched a chip, "days, weeks, months, years; it doesn't matter when you know here;" he thumped his chest.

She consumed a few more morsels of chicken, "did you really mean it, that you would apply to be Melanie's foster parent?"

He rubbed her shoulder, "if I didn't mean it I wouldn't say it."

She nibbled on, "changes the dynamics though. Not just me and you and Emily, but me and you and Emily and a stroppy teenager."

"How do you know she will be stroppy?"

"Because I was. Did you see the way she yelled at Mrs O'Mahony and then exploded in the meeting room, it reminded me of me."

Peter made a successful dive and gained another chip, "I think that she is just frightened. Her whole world has fallen apart. Mrs O'Mahony told me that her father was a self-employed French Polisher; he didn't leave Melanie anything but a pile of debts, she'll be lucky to come out of it with £500. Not only has she lost her parents, she's lost all stability. The only thing of substance she has is the dog"

He paused to sip the coffee, "what did you talk about?"

"She told me about her school and her music, she plays the clarinet. I told her about my job and how you had swept me off my feet."

They sat in silence as Yvonne finally consumed the rest of the chicken and wiped her mouth on a napkin. She still looked pale and worn. Peter held her hand and gently massaged it, "why don't you take some time off?"

"No thanks; I'd rather work. If I sit and think about the future too much I might reach for a bottle."

"Is marrying me such a bad prospect?"

Yvonne didn't laugh, "My life is changing Peter. I've just got used to coping as a single person in the big wide world; I'm not sure that I'll cope as a mother and a wife in one go."

Peter drained his coffee cup, "Albert always harps on about breaking problems down into solvable units. First question; do you want to continue going out with me?"

"Yes."

"If I asked would you marry me?"

"I said I would decide in April."

"You probably haven't got that luxury. Forget April, what about now?"

She sat still and Peter probed gently, "if it was just me and you?"

"Yes, without hesitation yes."

Peter took Yvonne's untouched coffee and stirred it with a swizzle stick. "That brings us to Emily."

Yvonne looked into Peter's eyes. "Emily is no problem, not for my heart; I've already begun to love her and if I broke up from you I would already have a double heartache."

"But she is a problem for your head?"

"I screw people's lives up Peter. Look what I did to my family, I wouldn't want to do that with you and especially not to Emily, she's had enough heartache."

"You're a reformed character."

"Only time will tell."

"You've got God on your side."

"He'd have to be."

"And you've built bridges with your sister, which took courage," once again he rubbed her hand, "why not give love a chance?"

She held onto his hand with both of hers and looked into his eyes, "then there's Melanie. How can I ask you to sacrifice for her?"

"It is no sacrifice. I come to the relationship with Emily, you come with Melanie."

She gazed into his eyes, "but not at the beginning. If when you first met me I'd had her with me would you have chased after me?"

"Undoubtedly."

Yvonne scraped a few greasy bread crumbs from the box in front of her and licked her finger. Peter kept quiet; he instinctively realised that she was about to make a decision. Three long minutes later she turned to him, "are you asking?"

"Asking what?"

"Me to marry you?"

"Yes."

"Shouldn't you discuss it with Emily?"

"I already have."

"Then the answer is yes; quick as you like and before I get any more colly-wobbles."

Peter gave her a hug, after a moment she pushed him away, "but there is one thing, no secrets."

He nodded; she gripped both his hands, "would you rather be in Northumbria?"

Peter rolled his eyes, "I'm on my way to being a full Managing Director."

"I know, I also know that you don't like it."

"Does it show that much?"

"It does to me."

"Would you mind if I stayed at Jeddles long enough to become a foster parent, and perhaps for Melanie to gain her GCSEs, and then move north?"

"As long as I'm with you I don't care if we moved to Timbuktu."

Peter laughed, "I'm sure that could be arranged."

Monday morning Albert woke up first and stretched. He opened his eyes and checked that he had not had an absurd dream; he'd started to do this every morning. Sarah was lying next to him and they were on the hearth-rug under a duvet. They had tried, and given up on, sharing a single bed and resorted to the rug and duvet. Albert, as he stretched, earnestly hoped that the new bed would be delivered on time tomorrow. He enjoyed looking at Sarah for a while and then slid out from under the duvet, rolled onto his knees and stood up. He tiptoed out and went quietly into the kitchen, he opened the 'fridge to get some milk and smiled; it was stuffed full of food. He shut the 'fridge door and opened the freezer to be met with similarly filled shelves. Sarah had already taken him on two shopping expeditions, one for food and one for furniture, especially an extra long double bed. Albert opened a cupboard and extracted a shiny new china container full of coffee beans, a small electric grinder, and a caf tiere; he set about preparing breakfast. Sarah emerged just as he was putting some warm croissants on a plate. They kissed and then sat at the kitchen table in silence and ate their breakfast, he with tea and she with coffee.

After two cups of absurdly strong coffee Sarah said, "It still hasn't really sunk in, we really did get married?"

Albert nodded, "seems like a dream, but yes we did."

They sat in contented silence until Sarah said, "have we a plan for the day?"

Albert shrugged, "not really, at some time we need to go to the bank and to my solicitors."

She raised her eyebrow, "I can't wait."

Albert laughed, "We need to convert my account into a joint bank account and get the house and some Jeddles shares in joint name."

Sarah gave him a serious look, "you have not asked me if that is what I want."

Albert was taken aback, "sorry, I just assumed..."

She gave her eyebrow equivalent of a smile, "with me assume nothing and I will assume nothing of you."

She reached out and held his hand as if he might suddenly disappear, "why a joint bank account."

"I seem to remember saying that I would endow you with all my worldly goods."

She nodded, "but I don't want to share your account. I would like us both to keep a single account and open a new joint account."

Albert was at a loss, "why?"

"Because I have a weakness. I tend to spend all the money I have in a bank account. If I have £100 I will spend £99.99 of it, or more likely £100.01. So I need limits, money in a joint account yes, but specific reasons for it being there."

Albert nodded, "I still can't believe you got through £3000 in four hours."

She buttered a piece of croissant, "you haven't had the bill for the flowers yet."

"OK, one new joint bank account; now the house and the shares?"

"I am ambivalent."

Albert realised that this would be hard going, "it would be more prudent. If I died you would have to pay less death duties."

She considered, "I think I would like the security of having half the house, but not the shares – how much are they worth anyway?"

Albert thought for a moment, "it depends how you value them, remember Jeddles is a private company. I suppose they're worth about £1,400,000 if we just sold the basic assets and about 14 million if the company was sold as a world leading going concern with a large customer base."

Sarah poised with a croissant between her lips, she placed it gently back on the plate and said quietly, and "you're casually talking about giving me seven million pounds worth of shares?"

Albert shrugged, "in a sense it's only on paper; you could never actually use the money without selling the shares and I'd never want to do that."

Sarah was still bewildered, "you invested that much money in the company?"

Albert laughed, "No, we started the company by each throwing in £20,000; it's grown beyond our wildest dreams. Mark you none of us took a great salary, and we re-invested everything we could for many years."

Sarah said in a whisper, "and on account of a small piece of paper you would give me half of what you have striven for?"

Albert smiled, "it's not just a piece of paper, there's vows before God and the fact that you are my wife and I want to share everything with you."

She gave a full eyebrow wiggle, "and just what have you got in the bank?"

Albert gave a sheepish grin, "about £8,000 in my current account, £25,000 in a savings account – though it was much more last Monday and a portfolio of shares. I also own the house, there is no mortgage."

Sarah snorted, "You're worth over £30,000, and you walk about in a jacket that should have been put out to pasture years ago!"

Albert shrugged, Sarah wrinkled her forehead, "and if I do allow you to give me the shares, can I sign a piece of paper to allow you to manage them on my behalf."

"I expect so."

She nodded, "then it makes practical sense, but I am overcome with the concept of becoming a millionaire overnight."

Albert laughed, "Just don't try and spend it – it is paper money, especially if Jeddles went bankrupt tomorrow."

Albert took off the teapot lid and scowled. "About the house, I wondered if you wanted to move."

Sarah gave her eyebrow semaphore for surprise, "I've not even moved in, why would I want to move out?"

"I thought that this is 'my house' and I want you to have 'our house' if you know what I mean."

She shook her head, "I would rather make this house 'our house', by the time I am finished you will not recognise it."

Albert shuffled his feet, "and there's the problem of my study..."

Sarah's eyes twinkled, "you don't want to share your precious study with your wife? You give her enormous sums of money, but the study is a step too far?"

Albert became embarrassed and Sarah laughed, "I rather thought that I would turn the conservatory into my study; it has good light, I may even try to paint again."

"Probably a no-go, it's freezing in there during the winter."

"We could have it double glazed."

"There's no power."

"And get an electrician."

"It's below the damp-course."

"And raise the floor level."

Albert rolled his eyes, "that would cost a fortune."

Sarah took on a full eyebrow wiggle, "how much would it cost to move?"

Albert made a few mental calculations, "about £12,000."

"And how much to change the conservatory?"

Albert shrugged, "probably about £10,000."

"Then I have saved you £2,000."

Albert considered this crazy accounting and then laughed, "OK, if that's what you want."

Sarah scooped out some coffee grounds from her cup onto her finger and licked them, "what about the cottage?"

Albert's eyes fully opened, "how do you know about the cottage?" He then slapped his forehead, "Mary knows."

"She is not a fool. If I had not come along what would you have done with it?"

Albert became embarrassed, "probably given it as a wedding present to Jess."

Sarah sighed, "what a lovely idea – you do really care for her don't you?"

Albert nodded.

She fixed him with a serious gaze, "now you should know what I am putting into the equation."

Albert gave an inquiring look; Sarah looked at her plate. "I have £72 in my bank account and a mother who costs many Euros a month."

Albert reached out and held her hand, "then I'll take the £36 and share the cost of your mother."

Sarah shook her head, "I cannot ask that."

Albert squeezed her hand, "you don't have to ask, it's in the contract."

She leaned back in her chair and Albert said gently, "talking of your mother, I must come with you on Wednesday."

She nodded, "and I must tell her that I will be seeing her on Saturdays in future."

Albert reached over the table and touched the back of her hand, "won't that be an unwelcome change in routine?"

She shrugged: Albert had an idea. He said tentatively, "why don't you work part-time? Mondays, Tuesdays, and Fridays. You could then see your mum mid-week and we could have the weekend together."

She gave him her 'are you serious' eyebrow semaphore, "first you tempt me into marriage, now you tempt me into idleness."

"I'm sure you won't be idle."

She kissed the back of his hand and then said quietly, "talking of being idle, do you mind if after we have been to your places we come home? The party Mary gave me yesterday was wonderful, but I'd like to have another lazy day; I am tired and when I am tired I am vulnerable. I'd just like to look at your house and imagine."

Albert smiled, "our house Sarah. Our house, our money, our life together."

Sarah gave a slight nod and Albert said, "Since we are sorting things out, what about your name? Do you want to use Dr Potterdon or remain Dr Vespachi?"

"Are you ashamed of me so soon?"

Albert chuckled, "of course not, it's just that you are known as Dr Vespachi in your professional circle and a change of name can sometimes mean a change in the level of respect."

"I think Dr Potterdon is quite respectful enough, but I will probably publish a few papers under the name of Vespachi-Potterdon to highlight the change."

Albert took her hand, "then it's our house, our money, our life together and our surname"

Sarah gave her equivalent of a smile and they sat holding hands. Breakfast took an awful long time.

# Chapter 16

## **Reprint from the Automation and Robotics Review**

### **News round up: Brief news and views from the world of robotics**

This weeks column should be dedicated to Jeddles Robotics, you'll see why below!

#### **Goliath finally swallows David**

After two years of being in a declared alliance Bradstones and Jeddles have finally announced a full merger. In reality this is Goliath swallowing David and most pundits in the industry wonder why it has taken so long. The official line is that providing stability for the Branstone workforce was a paramount factor.

Readers of this column will, of course, know the real reason for the merger. Since the surprise marriage of Albert Potterdon and Sarah Vespachi resulting in the formation of one research unit it was inevitable that the companies came closer together as they were doubtless sharing the same technology.

#### **Botanago chip finally released**

And talking of technology, Jeddles has finally announced that it will sell, under strict conditions, its infamous Botanago microchip. This smart piece of technology, originally invented by the Potterdons, has helped Jeddles become one of the worlds leading Robotics companies.

## Profits up

Talking of Jeddles (and we shall be), they have announced, for the third year in a row, a substantial increase in profits. But don't rush out to buy shares; the company is still in private hands. Unsurprisingly the majority holding in the company resides with the Jeddle family and the pair of Potterdons. It is rumoured that this pair – known universally as the 'Potterdon two' – recently turned down an amazing offer from Smithsons.

### *Not quite good enough*

That company (Smithsons) has finally announced its withdrawal from Torpedo manufacture. This is another inevitable announcement following the spectacular failure of their supposedly revolutionary Mk22E torpedo, which in testing turned on its own submarine with relentless precision. Management changes in the company are yet to be announced, but will no doubt be substantial.

## All Change

On the subject of management changes, with the supposed merger of Bradstones and Jeddles, Eric Branstone becomes a Managing Director of Jeddles and Peter Parsons is leaving the company. He is also leaving robotics. Peter, his wife Yvonne and their two children, Melanie and Emily, are moving to Northumbria to help in the family business – one of the most exclusive hotels in England. Jeddles will not only miss Peter, but also his daughter's dog Tommy. This beast, which would not look out of place in a Sherlock Holmes story, went to work every day with him. But do not despair; Tommy had a secret liaison with one of the guard-dogs - the resulting Tommettes are liberally spread throughout the workforce. The Potterdon pair took the largest pup and its first sensible act was to consume a computer manual!

## Fly away

Talking of computers, have you seen the latest addition to the Real-Time Flight Simulator Suite? It is a flying saucer! If you read the small

print on the box you will be surprised at the author – none other than Albert Potterdon of Jeddles!

## **Three's company?**

Staying with Jeddles. Not only is Jeddles swallowing Bradstones it is also consuming the ailing Irish subsidiary of Smithsons. As usual there is a fearsome logic, doubtless driven by Derek Jeddle, to this move; Jeddles lacks a manufacturing unit for high-pressure hydraulic pumps and this particular unit of Smithsons makes them for most of the industry.

## **Oops**

On the other hand most of the industry will not be surprised to hear that Asiatic Underwater Robots have just announced the closure of their London office. It is rumoured that John Draper (he who left Jeddles in a hurry) has taken a substantial financial hit. Staff in the office (but not John) is being offered jobs in Vietnam with a generous package. Here is another potential market for the Jeddles Botanago microchip. Asiatic tried to manufacture their own, but what they in gained in efficiency of movement they lost in power consumption due to the lack of any real mathematical understanding of what they were attempting. One pundit likened it to attempting to brew beer while ignoring the condition of the hops.

## **Special brew**

Talking of beer (did you like the link?); the Birmingham Brewery this year – and for one year only – produced a special brew called “Jeddles”. No they are not celebrating robots, but they were celebrating the second year of a very successful Beer festival that has become the centre-point of many charity based sponsored walks. So why Jeddles? Well the prime organiser behind the event was Yvonne Parsons (nee Jeddle); this was her last event and the brewery just wanted to say thank you. It is doubtful if she will taste the brew, however, for she is strictly a teetotaler! She

just describes her involvement in the project as caring for those who by their walking are caring for others.

## **Who cares?**

On the subject of caring for people, Jeddles continues to give a formal press release for every birth, death, and marriage in the company. This is staff nurture gone to extremes. If you care (and who does apart from those involved) this week they announced the impending marriage of Jess the post-girl and Richard the security guard, plus Annabellina and Peter the secretaries of the Potterdon two. I'm not sure if those particular secretaries should be given a marriage certificate or a couple of medals for valour above and beyond the call of duty.

## **That twosome again**

As if there had not been enough about the Jeddles and the Potterdons in this column, we should offer our congratulations to the Potterdons. Not only is it their second wedding anniversary, but they have picked up a shower of accolades. First off they have been awarded honorary doctorates in Robotics (because of their Botanago microchip); they can hang these on the wall next to their degrees in Engineering Mathematics, Astro-Physics, Industrial Psychology, and Italian Art. Albert has also won a prize for singing and Sarah has taken up a new post. Albert's prize was in the European Barber shop championships (Four part harmony class). They apparently wooed the judges with a spectacular rendering of 'That Ol' Man River.' Sarah has become the president of the Epilepsy Club; a society dedicated to helping young epileptics live a full life. She is already patron of 'The Cranks;' which seeks to encourage precision in cranial surgery techniques.

## **Hits the spot**

Precision has also been on the agenda in the annual children's competition to build a robot for under £25 that can carry an egg unscathed over a mini assault course and place it, undamaged, in an eggcup. This year's

winner was Juliet Hardle. Is there a connection with Jeddles? You bet there is – two in fact! Robert Hardle worked for Jeddles for many years until he briefly worked for Asiatic underwater Robots. He is now a design engineer for Smithsons. And, of course, Jeddles have sponsored the competition ever since Prissy Jeddle took on the mantle of the president of the Foundation for Junior Engineers.

### **Case closed**

Prissy Jeddle has also been taking on the mantle of defendant in a high court action. The Consolidated Building Company failed to have Jeddles convicted of fraud. The aforesaid building company took umbrage at the fact that some land Jeddles sold them could not be used for building purposes because a vital access track was owned by one of their directors (dear old Albert). However, Prissy eloquently explain that when they sold the land the purchaser never actually said they wanted it for building and that Dr Albert Potterdon had not been involved in any part of the transaction. It is rumoured that as a goodwill gesture Jeddles offered to buy the land back, but at agricultural, not building development, prices.

### **And finally**

If you can't get enough of robots then pay a visit to the Birmingham Art Gallery. They are currently having an impressionist's exhibition and two of the paintings are by Sarah Potterdon. Mrs Dr. Potterdon returned to painting following her marriage and her decision to work a three-day week. The two paintings you can study are 'Robot in Sunlight' (a portrait in the style of Degas) and 'Robots Dancing' (after Renoir). This last painting shows two surreal robots cavorting across an extremely alien landscape, but this should not catch us by surprise; after all most people in the industry think that the Potterdon pair must have originated on another planet!

**PS:** The Potterdon pair asked that all in the industry who recently sponsored them for the walk from Lowestoft to Birmingham pay up.

Perhaps next year we can all sponsor them for a walk to Mars and stop Jeddles taking over the world!

## 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 Ratatooee (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 Heavenly 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 lurned 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.

#### *Nocturnus (2010)*

John Smith and Jane Doe (yes that's their real names) are ordinary people living separate lives. He as a peripatetic lecturer and she as a night-time cleaning manager. In the normal course of events their paths would probably never cross. However, some events are far from normal and the two get thrown together to dispose of a corpse.

The question is can they get away with it? Especially as it's not just the police after them.

But the story is more than just a simple tale of misdeed and misdemeanor. Jane leads her nocturnal life for very good reasons (well good to her) and John prefers to travel rather than stay at home for equally valid reasons (well valid to him.) So as their lives are forcibly intertwined are their reasons still valid or are they redundant?

#### *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.

#### *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...



**[www.feedbooks.com](http://www.feedbooks.com)**  
Food for the mind