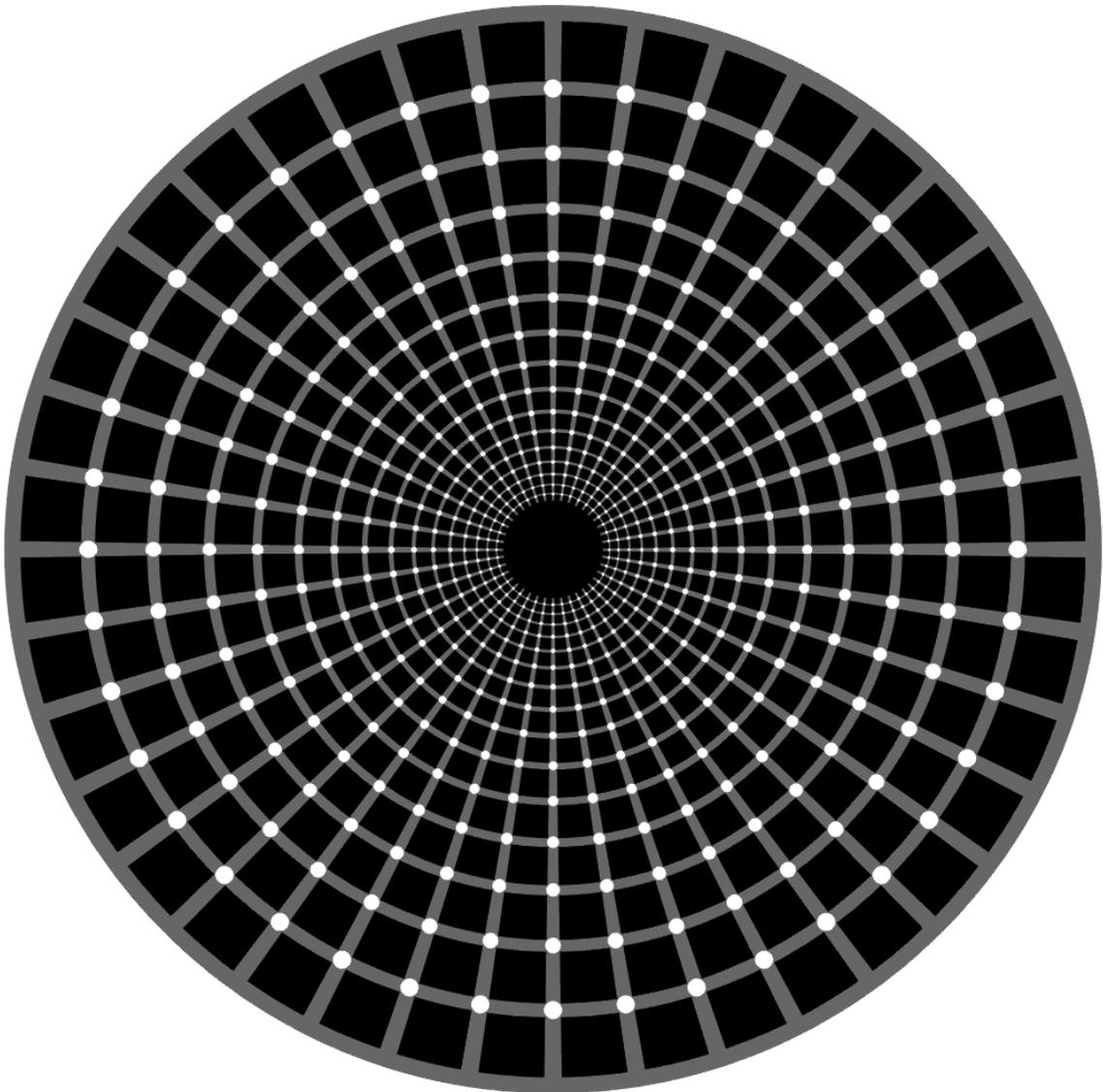


SPHINX

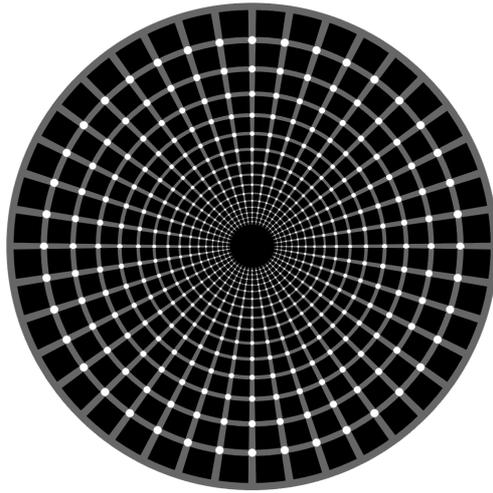


Sphinx (Outsider - Volume One)

The Outsider Looks In

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Written between July 2011 and June 2014 in Edinburgh, Paris and East Lothian



WHEN I WAS A CHILD, I spake as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child; but when I became a man, I put away childish things. For now we see through a glass darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known.

And now abideth faith, hope, love, these three: but the greatest of these is love.

1 Corinthians 13

PART I

LOSING

When I was a lot younger I used to try and understand my dreams but I knew that I was really wasting my time in even trying.

I was never sure if they were meaningful or not, and nor did I ever really fathom what most of them actually meant. For the greater part I knew that images of me floating down stairs, or standing naked in public, or of drowning alone in the sea, or pretty much *anything* that went through my head when I was asleep, ultimately meant nothing at all. It was with a tired kind of resignation that one day it occurred to me that all the imagery really amounted to was the protesting sound of tired neurons firing their electrochemical yawns into the dark emptiness of my mind which, fatigued or otherwise, was duty-bound to try and make sense of whatever gabbling that came its way.

Some people think these nocturnal movies mean something, and to some extent I have sympathy for their ideas. After all, most people's lives are excruciatingly dull affairs of repetition, where the dreams makes the pallid colourful and the monotonous seem like a polyvisuality of light and colour, despite the fact that we seem to enjoy these visions in monochromatic stillness.

The day that I realised this, was a day that I will never forget. It was the day I knew that I had grown up and had become a man – something I probably never thought would ever really happen to me. I clung to my childhood more tenaciously than most, internalising my unwillingness to grow up, probably managing to miss a lot of opportunities that came my way. But in the end, it all boiled down to one morning when I woke up and stared at a pad of paper beside my bed upon which I had just written a stream of unintelligible nonsense and tried to divine meaning from it, like a more primitive man might try to discern the meaning of the universe by looking into the entrails of an eviscerated bird under the light of the waning moon. I knew my time had come.

Which is why I suddenly felt myself reverting back to a place I used to occupy in my head so many years ago, because I knew *right now* – without any shred or trace of doubt in my mind - that I was dreaming. What I was looking at defied all rationality and instead occupied that weird world I used to look into to better view what I thought of as the depths of my psyche.

I woke up about an hour ago. There was a banging on the door and the rattling managed to get me out of a sleep so deep and black and fathomless that it took me a while to realise just what was happening. The first odd thing I noticed was the smell. I didn't have a bedroom that smelled like this. Nothing like it, in fact. And the mattress was too firm and the sheets too tight and the pillows too high and the room too cold. The next interesting thing I realised was that there was no banging on the door at all. It was instead the rhythmic thudding of the pain in my head, the blood pounding hard in my ears as the discomfort clung onto the back of my skull like it was coming apart. Instead of trying to get up, I moved a little then apathetically lay back and knew

that, whatever else was happening, the previous night's excesses would come back to me and this would all make perfect sense.

Except it didn't. This was definitely a strange room, it was dark and I was feeling like death. I had no recollection of what brought me to this place – wherever and whatever it was – and I had no idea why my head was hurting as badly as this. I sat up quickly – which was tricky against the tightness of the firmly tucked-in bed covers - and stared into the blackness. Tight bed sheets? Was I in a hospital? But what hospital keeps a hold of darkness like this?

As my eyes gradually adjusted I saw a lighter patch over to my right. Curtains. Long, probably floor length and heavy dark drapes, blacking out all but the slightest trickle of light around the edges and from the floor. I prised myself out of bed into the oddly scented cold air and tried to pick my way through the darkness towards the source of the grey light, en route walking into a short table that cracked against my upper shin. On reaching the curtains I pulled them open a chink and looked out. Grey light. Probably morning. Rain pattering on the window panes in waves brought by a gusting wind. Pressing my face closer to the glass I looked into the refractive lens of the water resting upon it and tried to discern the place where I had awakened. Nothing. A street. Shops. Hardly anyone about outside. A couple of cars. A lorry trundling past. Nothing else to give away where I was. Even a check of the skyline failed to show me any spires or domes I might recognise. The mystery of my existence congealed around me.

I pulled one half of the curtains open a little more and let some light into the room. The table I had walked into was a low type made of blonde wood and had on it a few magazines and a newspaper, none of which I had ever read before. The bed was made of a matching wood, as was the matchboard around the walls. Whoever owned this place had a sense of interior design that verged upon the monolithic. A small en suite lay on the other side maybe twenty feet away, the door open enough to reveal a bathrobe hanging up inside, casually arranged on the towel rail as though it had been used recently. It was only then that I noticed the 'no smoking' and fire drill signs on the back of the door which showed me right away that this wasn't a house at all – it was a hotel. I was in a hotel room *somewhere*, presumably having been so blind drunk the night before that I had completely forgotten getting here.

The room was cold – really cold. This might be down to the next observation - I was completely naked, which was another little anomaly. I never sleep unclothed, particularly if I had been so out of it the night before that my memory deserted me.

I'm not sure why I clung to that hopeful idea that my mind would return to me. I had never suffered from amnesia before and didn't think I was about to start any time soon, but not only did I not remember getting to the room, I didn't remember where I was *at all*. How much did I drink last night? But...who with? And where? And why? Nothing made any sense to me at all, other than the familiar and insistent feeling downstairs that my bladder was about to burst.

I walked through to the little bathroom and flicked on the light, lifted the toilet seat and started to do what I had done thousands and thousands of times in the past.

Only this time it was different.

What I held in my hand wasn't mine. I just didn't recognise it at all.

Now that I mention it, I didn't recognise the hands either. Or the roll of fat that lay over my stomach.

I looked backwards into the mirror mounted on the wall beside the shower and looked into the eyes of a *complete stranger*, which is roughly the point at which you joined me a few minutes ago.

I was certainly heavier than I remember being, and looked a bit older too. Maybe somewhere in my mid forties? My hair was receding and greying and it looked like I hadn't seen a razor for at least a week. My eyes were blue and bloodshot and my skin pale and vaguely undernourished. I was looking at a man who seemingly hadn't slept properly in all the time he had been there.

I walked up towards the figure in the mirror and looked closer. The pain in my head was knocked into the background suddenly, as my mind was given some more pressing things to consider than mere pain or disorientation. A little observer in my head told me that *I was handling this quite calmly* and I agreed. My hands were shaking and I was dribbling a little of what I had started, but other than that I seemed to be doing *quite well* and behaving *quite calmly*.

I knew why. It was because I knew right now – *without any shred or trace of doubt in my mind* - that I was dreaming. It is certainly unusual to have such a lucid dream, and highly unusual to have a dream within which one is conscious of it being a dream, but it was a reverie nonetheless. All will be good in the morning.

Morning doesn't come though, or at least not in the way I thought it might. I spend my dream-time looking through the closets and find twenty white shirts, maybe a dozen assorted plain ties, underwear and socks in absurd abundance and six plain black suits. In the foot of the larger closet I find boxes of shoes, maybe ten pairs, all black and very *unshowy*. Expensively made doubtless, but deeply conservative and not in the least part like what I would choose to wear myself. But what would I choose? *I cannot name the specifics*.

I check the drawers. Car keys, another bunch of house keys, a watch, a note book with names and phone numbers, a wallet and a few paperback books are in there. I seize the wallet and open it quickly to find a few hundred pounds in it (new notes, Bank of England, all in twenties), a cheap looking mobile camera phone with a dead battery, a swipe card with no name or markings on it other than the magnetic strip, and two credit cards, one Visa and one Mastercard. The name on them is A HAFNER. It's not my name. Trouble is I don't exactly remember what my name *is* so it's a bit of a moot point right now. I just know it's not me. Nice watch though – a Patek Philippe. It shows ten o'clock. I wonder *which* ten o'clock.

The car keys look like they are from an Audi, judging by the badge on the fob. The house keys are for two Yale and a deadlock. The paperbacks are all pulp, nothing as what I'd recognise as *my taste*, a concept as elusive as that was about anything else I

could name about myself. I take the initiative and open the curtains wide and lift the window a crack. The cool air from outside is definitely an improvement on the stale air inside.

Newspaper. The Guardian. Check the date. Wednesday 15th April 2009. I cannot place myself in any space or time, so the date means little to me. If I can wind up inside someone else's dream (or reality) then details like the date won't mean a great deal to me, so I don't see it mattering. Should I dress? Why not?

I put on the clothes supplied, all of which are oddly new and even more oddly, fit me. I check the room again. No dirty clothes to speak of. In fact, no refuse at all. No rubbish. No wrappers, crumpled papers, empty bottles, used tissues, *nothing*. Even the bin in the bathroom is empty – devoid of anything but a very slight amount of dust. It even could pass for *new*. I glance up again into the mirror over the sink and see that weird face looking back at me. I think about shaving, but I know I'd cut that unfamiliar mask as soon as I touch a razor to it, so I decline.

I wet my hair (*my hair?*) and drag a comb through it, thereby taking out more of the rare follicles on my scalp (*my scalp?*), then tie up my tie, slip on my shoes (well made after all...very, very comfortable, yet brand new) and take the room swipe card from the table just behind the door. *The New Ellswater Hotel and Conference Facilities*. Room 242. The card wallet in which the swipe card resides is signed and dated. 13th April 2009, signed 'A Hafner'. I open the door and look out.

It's a long corridor of endless rooms, bending out of sight after about thirty yards to my right. To my left are a couple of other room doors, abutted by a fire escape. *Warning! This door is alarmed*. Handy. I close the door behind me and walk to my right, passing by other closed doors. The newspapers lying on some and the smell of distant bacon tell me right away which ten o'clock we are looking at. I sneak a glance at the newspaper on the doorway. Friday 17th April 2009. Daily Express. Some protester complains about the police in the UK being *like the Taliban*. 'They did this to me'. It's uninteresting, but the date is not. *I've been here for at least four days, it seems*.

I catch a glance of the sign for the desk as I walk down the corridor and turn left into a fairly spacious but oddly empty hotel reception – the sort of place where emptiness and muted pastel lights behind dimmed glass passes as sophistication. The girl behind the long black stone counter smiles at me as I walk past the silent piano by the still water feature. Should I eat? Deep down I know I am pretty hungry, but hunger doesn't seem to be the biggest point I should be addressing right now.

- Mr Hafner?

The voice calls out a stranger's name, but some deep and buried instinct inside me seems to turn to it automatically, in recognition. I feel like I am not fully at the controls here.

- Mr Hafner?

- Yes?

Okay now *that was weird*. My voice is oddly deep and strange to my ears as I speak. I have another face, another voice and no *personal* memories. This history-less dream

world is stranger than I have ever thought possible. I hope I have my wits about me when I wake up and can find a pen and paper to write some of this crazy stuff down.

- You asked for an alarm call, sir. Should I cancel that?
- Uh...yes. That would be a good idea. Thank you.

I have just upset *Mr Hafner's* life by cancelling his wake-up call. I might not control this situation entirely but I can steer parts of it about me. (Hafner needs a wake-up call after ten in the morning? What sort of a slob is he?) That at least gives me some reassurance. There is at least one part of me at the controls.

- That will be fine, sir. Oh and this came for you last night. Telephone message.

I take the folder slip of paper from her elegantly manicured fingers and open it. I see a teenage girl's handwriting, with the words **DAVID BRYANT – CALL ASAP – 07956-788219** written in wide, rounded characters, the loops of which are so disproportionately large that half the letters look the same as one another. The call is timed at 2:00am. Maybe the work of the night shift receptionist?

- Did you take this message?
- No sir - that was the girl on the desk last night. Is everything alright?
- Yes fine, I was just wondering whether or not that was the entire message.
- That's all I was left sir, I'm afraid. I didn't speak to Natalie much after she left.
- Well okay – thank you.

I don't know why I asked all that. Maybe just to reassure myself that I was somehow still in control of the situation, or that I still understood the way the world worked. Maybe I just wanted to speak to someone to not feel quite so alone in this dream. Maybe I just wanted to see if I could direct the dream to give me what I wanted. Or maybe I just don't know why I did that.

This is one seriously odd way to start the day.

- Can I phone from here?
- Of course you may, Mr Hafner. Shall I charge it to the room?
- Yes, of course.

I drop the slip onto the reception counter and am about to phone the number when I realise that *I don't know my own name*. 'Hafner' may not be enough if David Bryant and I are old school friends, or if we go to football matches together, or if we once shared the same girlfriend. I need to know my own first name.

And I need to know my voice too. It's like hearing a tape playback of yourself; it's your mouth and your words but someone else's mechanics. It is incredibly unsettling. But I need to get a grip – the name is more pressing right now.

A. A. Alexander. Adam. Albert. Alan. Alfonso. Anthony. Asher. Aiden. Abraham. Andrew. Hell it might even be Augustus. Or Adonis. Maybe I ought to just wing it and see. I dial the number, almost hoping that it doesn't ring.

It rings. Once. Twice. Thrice. It's picked up on the fourth ring, just as I realise that I am dialling a mobile number and that I should have used the little mobile I found in the bedroom, which means it might have been recognised by the person I am calling which *might* have avoided the need for names at all. Then I remembered it was dead flat.

- Bryant.
- Hi.

My voice shakes a little. Not really sure why. But his introduction gave me a context. Surnames.

- It's Hafner. I got your message at the hotel room last night.
- Austin?

Wow. Austin. I hadn't figured on *that* one at all.

- Yes, you wanted to speak to me?
- I certainly did. I assume you know why?

I don't want to say over the phone that I have no idea why anything is the way it is, so I play it cautiously.

- Not entirely.
- Ah I see. *Games* is it?
- I'm sorry?
- I am surprised at you. Really I am. Madge is on the warpath with you. She's really disappointed in you, you know. She says you let the team down. And she's right of course.

For a minute I suspected Madge may be my wife, and I concocted a story where Bryant was her brother and I had cheated on her and he was remonstrating with me yet trying to get us back together again....but then the talk of a *team* lets it all back down to earth again. This sounds like professional business. Bryant's way of talking fires off a few archetypes in my mind's eye. I dislike him already, and I don't even know who he is. And I don't even know if I know myself either.

- Well I'm sorry to hear that. What should we do?
- We ought to meet. Are you still in the hotel?
- Yes, just at reception.
- Well I don't want to meet you there if Hartley is anywhere near you. Meet me at the coffee shop down the street by the card shop. I'll be there in half an hour.

The phone is hung up briskly. I replace the phone handset and thank the receptionist who is by now dealing with an extremely fussy elderly couple who seem to be having issues with the amount their bill shows for their use of the minibar. I turn around and head for the glass doors leading to the rather desolate, wet street. And I *still* have no idea what town I am in.

The point of getting to the *coffee shop down the street by the card shop* before the mysterious Bryant has its own logic. If I get there first it lets me scope the place out a bit, get a feel for it, maybe find out where I am and also will give me some needed air, however damp and windy that air may be. It will also let me be spared the angst of having to walk in and pretend to find Bryant without knowing anything about him. Instead, he can come straight to me. There is something about his haughty air on the phone I dislike intensely and which tells me that if he comes to me then it may put the meeting on a different footing, and may even give me a clue what is going on.

The town is a drab one like any other. Closed and inhospitable pubs give way to cake shops, newsagents, charity shops and then finally, on the left about a hundred yards down past the hotel stands a card shop beside which is The Coffee Stop. I enter and find the place nearly empty aside from some elderly women and a couple of bearded young men chatting in a small-scale conspiracy in the corner. I fetch a muffin and coffee and sit down slightly away from the doorway to await the arrival of Bryant whose message indicated that he would still be fifteen minutes away. I paid with cash I found in my pocket. *Whose cash is this? Who gave it to him? Why? When? What did he buy to get this change?*

I was right about my hunger. The muffin is gone inside thirty seconds. I get two more and promise myself something better to eat soon.

Seven minutes ahead of schedule, a person who - by his demeanour - is unmistakably Bryant walks through the door. Why is he so recognisable? Because he arrives in a hurry and is to all intents dressed exactly the same as me. Same conservative clothes, drab tie, fancy shoes and pressed shirt. He walks right up to me. He's maybe in his mid-thirties. He looks flushed. Pressurised. I point to the coffee and remaining muffin and he shakes his head firmly but briefly and sits next to me, popping his briefcase upright on the table seemingly to shield us from the rest of the shop's customers. His manner is abrupt and entirely business-like. We are *not* old school friends, and neither do we go to football matches together. If we ever shared the same girlfriend it would have been a grave misjudgement on someone's part.

I'm going to try to string this along as far as I can, just improvising as I go. Play it easy. I need to get as many clues as I can so I need him to do the majority of the talking. He looks like he loves the sound of his own opinion so that may not be a great problem.

He mutters to me in a low voice

- Madge is hopping mad at you. Have you any *idea* of the *damage* you've *done*?
- Not entirely....
- *Not entirely? Are you out of your mind?*

So much for *play it easy*.

- Sometimes it feels that way, you know.
- You *know* the committees she sits on. You *know* the fact that she has to be kept informed up to date about all of this stuff and yet your mob choose to go tell the fucking *press first* about this bastard bombshell!
- Oh hang on now....
- Oh right...so it was staff and not you...*that's not good enough*. You realise that Barker and Francis are going to be hung out to dry over this don't you? It won't take a great mind to realise that something is really bloody wrong here and once it comes out it just won't be two fat Etonian poofs who will be trying to account for themselves. It will be the whole bastard lot of us. Do you have any idea what the public will make of this?
- Well...tell me what you think, then...
- Well what *I* think is that we'll be raked over by the press, there will be an investigative committee, Barker and Francis will face prosecution, Madge will have to resign and then probably be used as a target for the forces of the opposing artillery. *Not bad for a day's work, Austin*.
- It's not going to be nearly that bad. You're painting this much blacker than it has to be...

Bryant sucked air through his teeth. I was weirdly enjoying this. I was also making mental assessment notes that gave me a fair number of clues already.

- It will be this bad if not worse.
- So what do you suggest?
- What do *I* suggest? *Jesus Christ on a pogo stick, Austin*. Do you think I want to get myself filthy with this awful mess? I am leaving this one down to you.
- Why play it like that?

Bryant suddenly sat more upright in his seat.

- Maybe you are forgetting who is the First Secretary and who is the staff manager, here...

I smiled inwardly. It sort of confirmed my opinions of the man.

- I didn't think you'd bring it down to that level, you know.
- At times we all have to scope out where the lifeboats are, *you know*.

I smile inwardly again. My little notepad in my head has been making notes, as it is supposed to be doing. And this is what it says.

1. Press, resignation, the public, committees, and *two fat Etonian poofs* all add up to one thing only. We're working for the government.
2. This guy has underachieved all his life and is a bully to his staff. He's some place above me and has been over-promoted. He's afraid of his command.
3. More to the point, he's afraid of *me*. If he is above me on the ladder then whatever has happened (see 4) will come back to him.
4. It all sounds like a press leak?
5. He speaks of 'Madge' as though she is way more important than he. So he's weak and afraid of his bosses too.

At least this gives me a strategy. And maybe a few more clues. We return to the game.

- Okay, so you know where the lifeboats are. When are you jumping?
- I've no intention of going anywhere, old man. I'm going to watch this happen to you, I think.
- Ohhhh...I doubt that.
- And what does *that* remark mean?
- That if this affects me and affects Madge then it's going to take in you too. You know it. You're just afraid to show it.

Bryant stammers.

- *Are...are...are you threatening me or something?*
- How can I possibly threaten you? If Madge is mad at me then I can hardly see any way I have any leverage against you. Can you? I mean... who is the First Secretary and who is the staff manager, here?
- That's not the point...I mean...I thought we were friends....

I pause to consider this abrupt *volte face*. Would I trust this man? No, I probably would not.

- Colleagues, maybe David. You were the one looking for the lifeboats a little while ago, were you not?

It does occur to me that I am playing this guy at a game that is his and yet not entirely his and that I have *no clue what the game is about*.

- Oh come on. The department needs damage limitation here. We cannot go out on a limb like this and find out who our friends are all too late, can we?
- So what was all the crap about *not good enough* and *leaving it down to me*?
- Just a bit of banter, Austin. Oh come on. We've been through stuff before. Good grief...are you feeling yourself today?

Oh wow. Irony off the scale there, I think.

- Hmm...but as bad as this? You're changing your tune awful fast.
- No, so you'll need me more than ever. We can ride it out, but some heads will have to roll. We don't want them to be ours do we?

We. I like that.

- It all depends.
- Oh now is this the business about Kelly again? I thought we had put that one to bed? I said something out of turn. It got back. My bad.

Kelly?

- I don't think that one is ever going to go away...

He cuts me off.

- Kelly paid the price for the mistakes we made. And so did Kelly's bloody family. What we did was the least we could have done, and we could have done a lot more. At least Max tried.
- I was sorry for the family.

What a bluff I am playing here.

- Yeah well...it was a mean trick. And we know who was at the bottom of that one.
- How is Kelly's wife?

Bryant smirks. Uh oh. Did I say something too far there?

- You seem to know a bit about that?
- What do you mean?
- Well...there are always those rumours about her. You know. Her and whatshername from the Department of Downstairs?

Suddenly I feel like I am floundering a bit here. I was doing quite well talking in vague terms, but now I said something (what??) specific and I find that I am now in a different whirlpool altogether. Shit.

- I don't know any of those rumours...you know...all that scuttlebutt.

Bryant sniggers. This man changes personality every three minutes.

- You mean Kelly's *wife*? That was your phrase, wasn't it?
- Well?
- Well what?
- Well I mean...what of it?

- Well I mean...would this not be a shock to Kelly's husband? *Bryant sniggers again.* – She has two kids too. Good cover, I should think. But there has always been that rumour about her. So was it true? How do you know?

I am rapidly losing my grip of things here. I can talk with confidence around vague bureaucratic stuff, but getting pinned down in a weird world of personal relationships can lose me fast.

- I didn't mean anything by it, I protest. – I just meant that I didn't like the way that the family suffered over it all, that's all...

Bryant's tiresome sniggering continues unabated.

- Wait until Madge hears that one, he snorts. – She'll like it.
- Does Madge have to hear it?
- Surely she will. Here she is now...

Bryant lazily stands up and allows the entrance of the red-haired woman into our gathering. She's pretty plain of face and looks like she might be underfed, so scrawny is her neck. She wears a long coat that hangs off her, and drops a folded wet umbrella at her feet. Bryant fusses about getting her a coffee and one for himself at the counter, trying to hover indecisively midway between us and the girl serving so he doesn't have to miss anything that might pass between me and this pawn's Queen or, it seems, leave her rarefied orbit. She's wearing Dior. Irish wedding band. Three-stringed pearls. What look like handmade boots. And she has barely *not stared* at me since she entered and saw me.

- So what's going on, Austin?

The phrase *cut glass* defines her accent better than any other I can imagine, although the cut glass also does some cutting of its own. I can size her up quickly and, I think accurately. Hers is a world apart from anyone else's, a world of youthful promise cut down to size by an adulthood of disappointments, and compensated back again by a measured tone of endless hostility against everything that orbits her diminishing trajectory. All the best schools, all the best clothes, all the best investments and none of them paid. Once she'll have been a lawyer, what with that look of *how dare you* scratched into her face. Everything is a confrontation.

Two people look up from their coffees, one nudging his companion and nodding in her direction. She has a *face*. They not only know who she is, but they don't expect to see her here. She holds their silent attention enough to make them forget their pastries.

- Hello Madge, I hear myself say. – Loathsome weather, isn't it?
- *Fuck the weather*, she says in words that may well have been pronounced in italics. – And sometimes the cosy word 'Madge' doesn't fall from your lips too easily, does it? Stick with Margaret if you don't mind. Remember the audience.
- Oh...okay.

Bryant seems speechless behind her. Shaking his head at me as if to steer me away from some topic. God knows.

- So...once again...*what is going on?*
- Well...it seems the press know. And I think it was staff. That's as much as I know at the present.
- Holy God above, sighs Madge dramatically. – I can tell you all of *that*. I mean I assume you had initiated some sort of enquiry into what had gone on so far.

Bryant hovers closer. He stutters out, tentatively.

- We thought that we might want to sound out a few *fourth estate friendlies* to see what the damage might have been.
- Strike *that* idea out, she says without looking at him. – We have no friends there. Or at least none we can trust when they smell the fox ahead of them. I'm more interested in knowing what *your staff manager* has done to help bottle the issue of the leak from *your office*. You do remember what happened the last time we spouted a gout of the Hollybanks business, don't you? They were on us in a heartbeat. We have no friends there, and likely we never have. It's *him upstairs* who made the big idea of courting the Old Fellow and making pretty with him for a few extras boxes. Trouble is, the Old Fellow expects this to be more of a long-term arrangement and looks to have us support his weirdness as long as he supports ours. Don't you even remember this much, David?

Her lasers strike him broadside. Bryant looks totally flinchingly uncomfortable. Now his hovering looks like vacillating indecision made into a few jerky motions. – I'll get the coffees, he retorts in a mumble. I perk up at this.

- I'll speak to a couple I know and trust in the office tomorrow.
- Tomorrow is *Saturday*, Austin. You cannot raise the dead at the weekend, let alone raise an issue like this one. It can wait until next week. Might give you a chance to get to grips with that enormous *something* I have for you anyway.
- Time is of the essence, Margaret. I want to get everything together in my head first and then go after a couple in the office I know can either be trusted or leaned on.
- Then take your time.
- I work well under pressure.
- Well...watch how you lean. We don't want them turned away again, do we?
- No, absolutely not.

She hisses a stage whisper.

- What is *he* doing here? This is supposed to be you and me, what with the *delivery* and all that.
- I don't know – he sort of led me down here. I had no say in it.
- You do remember what this is all about, don't you?

I flail a little.

- Well..yes...
- Then *do not* forget it.
- I won't.

Her normal voice returns.

- Who are you thinking of leaning on? For heaven's sake remember Jessop's *little issues* before you go anywhere near the poor old soul.
- Um...he wasn't who I had in mind, really.
- No, I suppose not. He'd be like pressing the *detonate switch*. Some people think he is the hole in the dyke, but I don't see it myself. He doesn't have the finesse for this. Just because he drives a Volvo doesn't mean he is *that* careful. Besides, I know his dirty little press secrets.
- You do?
- Oh for sure. He might have wound his way down to my personal sec but that's no protection for him or anyone. We had him followed once, a while back.
- Just to find out who he talks to in the press?
- No no...it was when he was having the first florid burst of his *little issues* and was threatening to go all Tonto on us. He has a lot in his head that might be of catastrophic use to the *red tops*. Just the sort of thing for people to go quietly barmy over their egg and chips about.
- They'll wrap fish in it the next day.
- Yes well, they'll wrap us in it as well. Memories may not last forever but we only have eighteen months left and that might be just a little too soon for us to start throwing the Jessop switch. So leave him alone, at least for now.
- Of course. Like I said, he wasn't who I had in mind, really.

We're getting specific again here. Names might be looming. Be wary. And watch genders. Who said Jessop was a *he*? I might have dug *that* particular pit for myself already.

- So who *do* you have in mind, then?

Bryant's unwisely louder voice is behind me, returning with coffees in heavy mugs. I look him casually in the eye. He is giving me no clues. Madge seems to be expecting an answer. *So far my improvisational skills seem to be holding up, though I have no idea how.*

- Well....

I start to speak, but hesitate. Thinking. Improvising. Not wish to simply say *I am not who you think I am, I woke up with someone else's face and I am not sure if I am dreaming or not any more.*

- I'd sooner keep that under wraps, if you don't mind.

Madge seems unimpressed but doesn't interrupt.

- Is that wise, blurts out Bryant. – I mean, isn't transparency a better option?
- I don't want anything said in haste, I retort.
- *Woaa....*that sounds like you have trust issues in the office!
- We do. Isn't that what this is all about?

Madge has just cut him off, again.

- Yes, but Margaret...this is about words between management, not office chit-chat about who has done what to whom.

I take the initiative. It feels like a chess move I have seen coming a while. The Queen's pawn is under threat.

- I don't want anything said *out of turn* and *getting back*, David.
- And what does *that...*
- *Kelly*, I say firmly.

Bryant looks like I had just slapped him.

- Ohhh, says Madge. – Round one to Austin, I think. And yes, you have a point there. Play a quiet game, but spring it on them. The weekend might not be a bad idea after all. Keep it quiet but *keep me informed*.

I smile. I know not why, though. I am playing a power struggle here between two of us over the favours of a woman who is obviously influential but beyond that is a complete mystery to me. It says a lot about human instinct, I suppose. Bryant's silence seems to be echoing a personal slight. Then he cheers up suddenly, as though he had just thought of a stinging retort of his own to land on me.

- Oh, Margaret. Guess what. On the subject of Phillipa Kelly, guess who here has some of the inside track info on her?

Madge smiles and turns to me. I'd sooner she hadn't smiled. She looks less threatening when is trying to look threatening. It's the sort of smile you might receive just as the blade gets rammed in between your ribs. She looks at me like I am prey ready for picking off.

- *Oh?*
- Yes, Austin has some goss. Turns out that Graham's theory on her was right all along.

- Well now, is that the case? So tell me David, who was the *lemon*?
- Well, says Bryant, I don't think our Austin here has gone quite that far as to name her yet. He seems cagey on names today, doesn't he?
- Just a bit, yes. I always guessed Phillipa was one for the Birkenstocks and dungarees, but I never knew that anyone had any evidence on it. So from which particular *coupe de la fourrure* does she sup, Austin?

Names again. I'm guessing my mistake was assuming Kelly was a man's name but it turns out to be a woman's surname. I dug a deep hole for myself and now I am down inside it looking up at the light above me. Two curious faces peer down and block it out.

- Ah...mum's the word, you know.

I smile. Madge seems a bit disappointed.

- I was hoping you'd say more. We still might need some ammo against her in the future if she ever wants to come back at us. It's a dirty trick but that wouldn't stop the Ministry pulling it on her if they had to.

Bryant seems to be a little triumphant over his tiny victory here.

- And of course Austin always plays his cards close to his chest. No names, no pack drill, all day long so far. Are you *really* a team player, then?

His smirking is annoying me again.

- A team player protects his team, I reply. – I am not about to name names on any account just to satisfy your rather prurient curiosity.
- Oh touché, says Madge. – Which is why I am going to give you *this*...

She hands me over a large envelope that has been sealed down with some sort of thin blue tape. It seems quite full. She looks me straight in the eyes and says – It's a copy of the *briefing on the matter that was passed to the DAC last week*. We spoke about it before, remember? I want you to read it all and digest it thoroughly. And remember, it's eyes only. Yours. *Yours*. Most important that last point, yes?

Bryant seems distraught. I seem to detect subterfuge. Madge's eyes are signalling that it's perhaps not as it seems. She glares at me. Bryant seems too simple to detect this.

- Wait a second...is he to see this and not me? I'm his line, for heaven's sake!

His squawk has alerted the others in the room – even the conspirators – to our presence, and to the fact that prior to that our conversation had been decidedly muted.

- It's not that I am briefing *against* you, David. It's that this is *need to know* and right now you don't *need to know*. You're the line. You manage the situation. You don't have to work the coalface. That's what the little people are here for.
- Thanks Margaret, I say, smiling at the last remark. – It's safe with me. Like David says, I play my cards close to my chest so nothing here is going anywhere.
- Good, then it seems we have a trust going on here.

David is still unhappy.

- Really...I have to protest! How can I manage *him* if I am not fully in the picture about what he knows or who he talks to? I really have to object to this, Madge.
- Oh dear...you too? It's bad enough no one much calls me *Minister* these days without calling me something my mother used to shout from the kitchen window when it was time for dinner. David, just deal with it. I have faith in Austin and his abilities. I don't want you toying with the situation any more. Heaven knows, the whole debacle is bad enough without us playing games over who has the biggest willy in the office. We are *at stake* here. We cannot let a bit of bureaucratic nonsense stand in our way, can we? Okay?
- Okay...sorry. David looks dejected, his words sullen and insincere.
- Right. That's sorted. Now Austin, we had a leak. I want you to find out *who*. I want you to find out *how*. And I want you to find out the *source* and *plug* it. We will work on discrediting it before the news breaks, and break it will.
- What about... (*I struggle to remember the names*) ...Barker and Francis?
- They are *screwed*. They acted stupidly and let their greed get in the way of their duty. I think we are disinclined to help them out in any way at all. Besides, if we did so then we are associating with two people who are most likely to be looking at the wrong end of a jail sentence for corruption or conspiracy or both. No, they are being left to dangle.
- I see. Isn't that a pretty brutal thing to do?
- Yes, it is.

Madge's voice drops, *sotto voce*.

- And, on that subject...if anyone from your office has to be treated in the same way then you will have my backing. This is a mighty great problem we are facing and we have to diagnose and decide which diseased parts have to be sliced off to save the rest of the body, yes?
- I hear you.

Madge bends down to pick up her umbrella.

- And now I have to go. I have Johnson and that irritating little bridge troll Morris a brief to tell them where we are at. After that, business as usual. Enjoy the weekend. I suppose you'll be busy, Austin so make the most of your time. How is Jenny these days?

Well this is like a brick in the face. Jenny? *Who in the raving name of sanity is Jenny?* My wife? My daughter? My mother? My cat?

- She's well, thank you Margaret.
- Well – glad to hear she is on the mend. I'll pass that on to Tim. He never speaks of her, even yet. I find it difficult to be hard on him, but still...and say hi to Cory.

Cory? A suddenly flurry of back-stories hits me at once.

- Tim is Madge's husband, and the brother of Jenny. There has been a family feud. Hence, Madge and I are related, somehow.
- Tim is Jenny's ex and is bitter about the split. Hence, Madge and I are related, somehow.
- Jenny is my sister and Tim my brother. God knows what happened, but Madge and I are related, somehow.

Most make sense. Maybe this explains a little why Madge was not as *hopping mad* as David made out. It also explains his need to wedge between us. It also explains the '*remember the audience*' remark she made when I called her Madge. This gives me a real advantage. Well - it gives Austin Hafner a real advantage. I'm still as lost as ever.

- Well..time up. I have to get out this provincial slime pit and back to the motherland for a rather awkward briefing. I will see you at two as we arranged, David. Austin, you keep me posted on what is happening.

Madge stands up and says her goodbyes and leaves. A car I never noticed waiting outside takes her away. Bryant and I are alone again. He speaks.

- Well...that went quite well, all things considered.

I cannot help laughing.

- You're such a toady to her, David.
- I know you two are cosy, but you have to remember who she is!
- I do. It depends on where one places one's priorities, don't you think? Family or business?
- I thought we were never going to mention that, Austin.
- Well you do ask for it sometimes. Anyway... *I pat the envelope* ...I have reading to do back at the hotel. Lots of reading, I think.
- I still object to that, you know. How can that be fair at all?
- I think Madge sees you as a loose cannon on the deck, David.
- Er....shall we return to the matter of whose department this is all about, do you think?
- I think Madge made it clear that it was about yours *and* mine. Anyway...we aren't getting the job done. I have people to lean on this weekend.
- Will you tell me at least enough to know what you are doing?
- Of course. But I won't give you many specifics.
- You're a hard man to like sometimes, Austin.

There is a moment of silence between us.

- What was Madge talking to you about when I was getting the coffees?
- Nothing much, really. Just thinking about who in the office might be worth talking to about the inside track on where the gen came from.

Bryant sucks air through his teeth noisily. I am impressed at my command of the vernacular.

- High stakes game, that. You actually up to it? I mean...*no offence* but you've never been put in this position before, have you? You've not been with us in ACR for that long, and some people still resent the way you were delivered unto us.
- Are you trying to get your hands on this delightfully full envelope I have in my hands?

Bryant makes a thing of looking shocked and put out.

- Oh no no no...if Madge wants you to have it then it's down to her and you. There could be all kinds of dirt on anyone in there.
- I see. I pause a little for dramatic effect. – Anything on you, do you think?
- Me? God, I hope not. The fire of suspicion has fallen on us all in the past but we can pass through the flames unscathed if we just apply ourselves.
- You're right.

His metaphors are ridiculous. And he is reeking of jealousy. There is another lull in the talk which he *anxiously-but-without-being-anxiously* breaks.

- Did..er...did Madge mention *W-W-W-Wibbly Willie* at all?

This is a new one. It sounds like a disease if you say it the wrong way.

- That sounds like a disease if you say it the wrong way.
- Ha bloody ha. Did she suggest that he might be the man at the centre of all this?
- Willie? *A quick bit of improvising there.* – What makes you think that?
- His past, of course. There are a lot of people who think he is the mark.
- Why would he do it?

I'm playing for time. I suspect that this may be 'Jessop' but I have no idea.

- The money of course. He's potless and his second SO left him when he went Radio Gaga the last time. He'd be looking to shore up a pension that isn't going to be around for much longer.
- Is this because he drives a Volvo, David?
- Oh...Madge has taught you well.

This verbal shadow boxing sounds tremendous fun. If only I had a clue what any of it was actually about.

- You know we are closer than most.
- Yes, but not by anything other than a series of weird accidents.
- Maybe, but anyway – I don't think he has the finesse for the job. Do you?

I want to stalk this horse. For laughs.

- Hmm...maybe. He has his issues, as they say.
- Well maybe I am not that close to him to know how to approach it, David. What do you think?
- I think you might be right. Perhaps you could leave him to *my discretion*.
- Perhaps I could. Madge needn't know, I suppose.
- No matter how 'close' you two are?
- Of course not.
- Then I'll speak to him today and let it seep into him over the weekend. Just a few hints here and there. Then by Monday he'll be soft enough for either a confession or to put on the hood and point the finger.
- Nice thinking, David.

Bryant stands up in a fluff of self-importance and walks out the door. I sit there for a second and realise that this dream is a very vivid one. I now have another life to lead until I wake. Suddenly, it feels like a trap around me. But a weirdly enjoyable one, nonetheless.

I walk down the street back towards the hotel.

Only at this point do I read the name of the town I am in on the side of a van loading up outside a bookshop nearby. I never even recognised it.

My only point of any recognition here is the hotel, but I hesitate in going back there so soon. Something tells me that my movements (for whatever reason) are being observed by someone out there – maybe a chance remark of Bryant's made me aware of that. Either way, it seems that I don't have any guarantee of privacy.

It also seems like I don't have the guarantee of this not being real. I feel the rain on my face. I feel the chill of the air. The passing conversation of strangers, the perfume of women walking past me and the smell of the bakery, the coffee shop, the diesel fumes...everything. Too much depth. Too many variables. *I'm not in control of this.*

Why am I not panicking?

Why am I taking this all so easily?

Am I Gregor Samsa?

I have no idea.

I don't get a lot more time to think of anything much before someone crosses the street to my immediate left and grabs my arm in a firm but what appears to be friendly grip. I turn to face my assailant and find him a kindly - if a little dishevelled - man of somewhere between a debauched forty or a youthful sixty or so. He smiles.

- Hello again Mr Hafner, out and about again are we?

He almost sounds like a doctor trying to patronise an errant patient.

- I watched you and Bryant in the coffee shop so I am guessing more tea and muffins won't do you much good, will it?
- Excuse me, but what is....
- Oh you know the drill by now, Mr Hafner. We'd best get off the street before we can talk sensibly. Won't really help either of us if we get lifted now, will it?

He leads me down the street a little and off down a narrower street to the right behind what appears to be some kind of a warehouse where a couple of extremely large and preoccupied men are wrestling with a big bit of mysterious machinery whose purpose is unclear. Adjacent to this sits a dark car, which my new acquaintance opens to let me into the passenger seat. I get in and find myself in amongst a litter of cigarettes packets, slips of paper, CDs and food wrappers. The car is an expensive mess. He nimbly goes around the front and jumps into the driver's seat, turning to face me. He seems pleasant enough.

- Sorry, but I just noticed you along the road and realised that you were not exactly working to the schedule we discussed, he smiles. Did you learn much from Bryant?

Well...here we are again.

- Uhm...yes....some. When did...when did you get here?
- Oh I thought you knew that I was in the Ellswater already. Didn't I tell you?
- No...no you didn't.
- Could have sworn I did the first night in the bar when we met. Maybe not. We'd had a few, right enough.
- Yes....we had, I smile back at him.
- Did Bryant call you up this morning?
- He left a note at reception asking to meet me this morning, I reply. I didn't know he was going to want to talk to me until then.
- Well, I don't suppose it's exactly unexpected, what with us going to be running the story this early.

Running the story? Dear god...is this a *journalist*? I try to enquire evenly.

- Where is it going to be running?

- Oh the usual places. Anywhere they enjoy a bit of unpleasantness and corruption, that sort of thing.

He smiles as though he is revelling in it. He cracks the window down and bit and lights a cigarette, but doesn't offer me one.

- Sorry, but I am gasping. The syndicates hate you smoking in these things cause the leases don't cover defumigation but I say *fuck it* because after all we are what gets them their cash in the first place and I don't care anyway 'cos it will be returned to them by the end of the three months. Tight bastards.

Time to reassess. Some government department for which I work has a problem and this has been leaked to the press. *Heads will roll*. Now I find – with me already right in the middle of the affair – that I am in a car with someone I assume to be a journalist. Either way, Austin had better watch himself. It is looking fairly bad for him....

- Um, tell me something...
- Sure?
- What would you like to know, exactly?

He springs a rather hearty laugh on me.

- Never had you pegged as a comedian, Mr Hafner! *You* know that *we* know all we *need* to know. We just need you to confirm bits and pieces to us before we can join all the dots and make the prize. It might be enough as it is, but we really need you to say to us 'yes' or 'no' or better still '*not quite*' and get the rough edges off everything. Didn't we go over this the other day with you enough? You said it was all crystal to you at the time. Are you having second thoughts about this now?
- No, no, no....I just need to be clear how far you want me to go, that's all.
- Well we discussed it all last time, and later you confirmed it to me on the phone. If you're going wobbly on us it would mean the end of everything we've been working on for the last seven months for fuck's sake!
- No, I just want to be...certain. It's a big step, you know.
- Of course I know. If I get this wrong I'll be for the block as well, you know. I know most people still think they hang you for treason and they'd be wrong, but they don't exactly send you to Butlins either.

Treason?

- Of course. That's why I want to get it right and not be regretting anything I might regret saying...or not saying...later.

He stares at me intently. I can feel his eyes drilling inside me, judging and reassessing.

- For someone in your position you'd think you were capable of making a fucking decision and sticking to it.

- Well....government isn't actually like that....
- You can *jolly well* say that again, *old boy*.
- ...because it's all about compromise and balance. I know it sounds indecisive and wishy-washy....but it's what I am and what I need to be. I need you to understand that.
- Yes. I understand. *So*. Are you saying yes or no?
- I'm saying 'yes' but on condition that we are crystal clear about boundaries and that I am also crystal clear – maybe doubly so – about what exactly you need me to let you know.

The man sits back in the driver's seat and stares hard out the windscreen. He imperceptibly shakes his head and utters something I cannot hear but know won't be complimentary towards me. He turns his face to me again, the back around to see the workmen outside who are still engrossed in their task. Then back to me. Then back to the windscreen. He oaths again, then starts the car and moves it in a quiet low gear around the lot and further off the main road, all the time watching around him for....something. We travel down a narrow road by the side of a canal that opens onto a rough area of gravel and dirt beside what is either a small river or canal, then brakes, leaving the engine running. The rain picks up again and waves across the water's surface, lazily spraying over the windscreen and pinging down off the metal roof.

He turns the radio on. Some pop station. I assume that he thinks he might be sitting in a trap, being recorded.

- I can only say all this stuff one more time before I have to assume you are either fucking me about or have lost your bottle, okay?
- Yes, I understand. You must also understand my position, yes?
- I sure do understand you. You're about as revolutionary as the Duke of Gloucester, aren't you? Deep down, is this just a thrill for you or do you really believe it? All this mucking in with the cabbages and piddling in bigger ponds?
- It's both...I admit it.

Jesus. How I am winging it now. But I recognise my heart is picking up the pace somewhat. This feel...*exciting*.

- Right. I don't want you to write this stuff down so you are going to have to try and remember it, right?
- Yes, of course.

And then he speaks.

- First, we need to know just how many private files you are holding on finances relating to *Gertrude*, okay? We have the details...we just need the numbers. Then we need to know what sums of money were paid between *Brian* and *Stanley*. We know when, we just need the sums. Then we need confirmation that anything that passed between *Stanley* and *Oliver* was unauthorised by

anyone in government or within Buckingham Palace, okay? And finally, we need to know the depth of the connection between *the dark guy* and the *white woman* and whether or not their *unknown political associations* extend as far as we think they do. We just need you to confirm that they do. We think the *white woman's family* was involved in Operation MONTEGO in 1943 and that they shipped out enough *dark contingent* to last the *arab monkey* long enough to rebuild the *plastic empire* he is still planning on releasing in the next six months.

I can barely speak. *I've never heard such utter gibberish in my life.*

- *Gertrude?*
- Yes, number of files. Just the number. Right?
- Right.
- The monies between *Brian* and *Stanley* are most important. Really critical. You see, if it's over *critical mass* then we can prove *interesting coalitions* between their places and the other places and we'd immediately have a conspiracy. And *that* means we can crack the rest.
- I see.

I actually don't. I really totally and actually don't. Also, I don't.

- And as for *dark* and *white* we need to know how far they are in bed together. That one stretches back as far as 1943, as you know.
- Yes....yes I do.
- And it explains a *lot* of deep shit that would crack open so much of what is happening over the water that they would just sooner never know about.
- Of course...yes.

He smiles to himself.

- I was never briefed on it all, unlike you. I'd just love to know why *white traveller* had him killed like that in Dallas that year, but I guess that's just irrelevant.

I gulp at the reference a little.

- I'd love to be inside your head only for ten minutes.

Actually, you might get a shock if you were.

- Still, we need to understand the significance between one and the other, you know?
- Yes. Absolutely.
- So can you do this or not? We *need* to move on this and move fast.
- What...what assurances will I get?

- Same as we discussed. We can make it look like this all came from Burns or Barker. Have you seen Barker lately?
- No, why?
- He looks like he is on the point of a drunken death. We had him followed down to his little bolthole he shares with the fragrant June. It's all mounting up on him now. He's a silly boy. People say *June doesn't deserve all this* but really they don't know her like I do. Same goes for that Celia woman. *Poor this, poor that...*they are all part of the big machine, and they deserve to be shown up for it. So *fuck* Barker, and the silly boy that he is, bathing in his gin and clucking to his missus.
- Sometimes...I feel like *I* am being a silly boy.

His eyes flashed at me again.

- You know that uncertainty will mean we will move on, don't you?
- Yes...I expect so, I flounder.
- And that means no money...
- I guess so...
- ...and no protection.

I was wondering when personal danger was going to come in to this.

- Now listen hard. I have changed my number. You still have the same old phone?
- I...um...
- The cheap little bit of crap you laughed at?
- Oh that....yes.
- OK..well I am sending you my business card again. Don't call me other than to say yes or no, then we can meet. Assuming it's 'yes' of course.
- I understand, yes.
- OK.

I mention one other thing that has been bothering me for a while.

- And...what is in this for me?

He smiles at me again in a sort of matey way, the type of manner where you know no *real* trust lies.

- A clear conscience? That and the share of the proceeds...which you know will be substantial. We still can clear you two and a half, tops.
- I see. I understand.

He sighs. His cigarette has burned out without him having touched it much. He takes the car around the gravel path and heads back to the main street. He nods to me at the junction, indicating that I had best get out the car. I nod back and climb out into the cold driving rain. His car moves off quietly and I am left wondering just what in the name of blazes I am doing. He has a parting shot.

- Give my regards to kind Mr B.

My instinct is to go back to the hotel.

I have nowhere else I can go and staying out will mean I will get saturated. I still have the package that Madge gave me, so I could read that and find out perhaps what all of this is about. Or maybe it will be even more confusing. Who can tell? I seem to be in the midst of a bunch of people who are incapable of giving straight answers, who enjoy talking in oblique sentences using archaic metaphors and who seem to positively revel in bathing in the murky waters of secrecy, where knowing more than the next man means that you get more points than him.

I am wandering the streets some fifteen minutes later, finding myself aimless and still mulling over the words that the journalist - I still assume he is one - told me and the extraordinary rubbish he has asked me to confirm to him. The rain is bouncing back up off the concrete blocks of the pavement, running off in micro-currents into the gutter and into the flooded drains. The slightly marked leather soles of shoes will start shipping water soon if I am unlucky. My jacket and shirt are sticking to me, and the big taped envelope is darker than it was before. What if the ink runs on whatever is in it? What if it's written on rice paper? What if the envelope is empty?

The streets *are* empty. I skip through the spreading puddles and head back to the imposing grey building that I emerged from about ninety minutes ago. The chimes from a far-off and unseen clock marks the half-hour, but far from feeling hungry my stomach aches with a kind of emptiness and knotted despair that would make eating anything seem like an impossible task.

It doesn't take me long to negotiate my way back (though my sense of direction being what it is, even this takes me longer than I ever anticipated) and once again into the hotel reception where I take careful stock of those around me. Same desk clerk, same baggage guy as last time too. Two people emerge from the restaurant with clipboards. I feel like I am invisible. This place feels strangely deserted - void of all real life.

I decline the elevator and make my way up the stairs to 242. Along the way, housekeeping carts filled with bedding and toiletries are parked. No signs of any housekeepers. I slip the card into my door, and I enter.

The room has been made. Bedding folded, towels replaced, the bathroom wiped down clean. *Odd. It wasn't before?* I glance up at *that face* again in the mirror. Still there. Same look. Same face. Not me. It's taking on an unnerving gaze now, as though it too is judging me. I'm being judged by the stranger within whom I dwell.

With that reminder, I move over to the tired looking bureau and pick up the cheap little phone I had found earlier. I try for some reason to switch it on again but of course it was still dead. A brief hunt provides the charger which I plugged into the wall socket and introduced to the phone, which acknowledges it with a brief *beep* and a picture of an animated battery filling up on the screen.

I drop the envelope onto the bureau and take off my wringing wet jacket and drape it on the back of the spare chair. Kick off the shoes. Slide them away from sight. I sit down at the desk and open the envelope carefully, peeling away the blue tape which - despite the rain - is still very sticky and holds the package together.

Inside it I find a folder - a pretty plain and straightforward one - which I let slide out of the padded package and fall onto the desk in front of me. It's unmarked apart from the alarming and huge black letters **TOP SECRET: EYES ONLY** printed onto it just exactly as you might expect it to look, and one further word in far more understated bold type on the front cover

SPHINX

The name reeks of mystery and suspense.

Under this title I find the numbers

JFF-BBB/TALISMAN/12021999/33775DF1/JBOX

I open it and find only a very few pages bound on a single treasury tag within - maybe twenty or so - all typed closely and uniformly and (to my surprise) on a typewriter, not on a computer. Was the author so paranoid about its content that he didn't wish to commit it to the possibility of being copied? Didn't Margaret say that this was a copy of a briefing? This is no copy at all. Neither is it a briefing. It's some kind of report. She is either mistaken or lying. Or covering something up so other ears - seen or unseen - wouldn't follow the story. *These people.*

The pages are tabbed with yellow plastic markers that emerge from the right hand side of the paper. Three of them. Three titles.

BACKGROUND

FOREGROUND

FUTURE

I don't even pretend to know what this all means. I flick through the pages without reading them, just scanning them. All the typing the same. Some words in bold. Some pages are rubber stamped with a red marker bearing the name of a government division. Others are unmarked. Nothing seems to be redacted with the sort of black pen marks you see in copies of official documents. Some of the pages have folded corners or holes where a staple might have been. It all looks so *common*.

Additionally - the words are in English but the meaning is strangely obscure; I just don't entirely fathom *how*. That notwithstanding, it makes sense enough to me as though I can read the Rosetta Stone and pronounce its meaning by first-hand knowledge. I inhabit an interesting head. I wonder how many strange languages I can speak.

The inside cover shows a library or reference number or something, plus the name of the same division and the authors' names – B B BARKER AND J F FRANCIS plus the date of the document: 12th February 1999. That means it is not even new if the newspapers are to be believed.

I take stock again. In front of me I am holding a weirdly-phrased, classified document which was handed to me by a person who seems to be a current or former government minister. There is a talk of a leak in an office where I have some kind of management responsibility. I have also been speaking to someone that would appear to be a journalist. Only at this point – *I am so naïve* – does it even occur to me that Madge is setting me up for a fall, to be the person to take the hit for whatever leak there is. After all, I speak to journalists, I am in a position of some minor authority (it seems) and have been promised *a share of proceeds* if I come up with the goods. Suppose that this document has been tactically leaked to someone, but that it is utter nonsense? If that someone takes the bait and spills it in the press then the leak will lead back this way to whoever had access to the information in the first place...and that would point to Austin Hafner, would it not?

I have means (I have the document here), motive (the 'proceeds') and opportunity (I spoke to the press already). I look down at the envelope again. The tape seems to be some kind of security binding. I guess this way they can show that I opened the damned thing. And by opening it I suppose they will assume I read it all. Oh well. Cat's out of the bag now.

I stop *wobbling* and open the pages out to read.

Two and a bit hours, two read-throughs and three cups of tea later I know that I now know things that will change my life forever. The document is written in a terse and yet florid form of *civil-servicese* which defies any logical or even *rational* explanation, and which appears to be almost wilfully difficult, but that is much in keeping with the content of the document. Once you enter the cadence of the text – and somehow I just could *by instinct and with complete facility*, it seems – I got through it in no time. It just defies all belief and flies in the face of everything I could possibly imagine. If this were a work of complete fiction then I would never give it any form of believability at all, and yet the source of this information seems to be good and verifiable and is from someone that not only seems to enjoy a level of trust and responsibility, but who shares a trust with me. And yet I cannot get out of my mind the sort of irreversible detonation that would go off if any of this stuff was known to anyone less responsible.

Madge said that it was 'a copy of a briefing'. It's not. She's lying in front of Bryant, hence her stage wink as she gave it to me. *This is enormous*. Bryant isn't in the picture here. I wonder who else is. Is anyone? Is this a secret between her and me? Why is Bryant kept out of this? Moreover...why am I in her confidence?

The first section was really a preamble, concerning codenames, protection and sources. None of it meant much to me. The document only really got going when I reached the fifth or sixth page and my jaw nearly hit the floor.

I managed to work out which member of the UK Royal Family was referred to as GILBERT only by a reference to that person later on in connection with another whose code name was more obvious - JANNEVA. I know now about the weird set of beliefs they now enjoy, who they are related to and why they are offering protection for a group of people so far removed from them (by appearances at least) and which holds views so repugnant that it confronts credence. The greatest shock may be, though, that the ties that hold them all together go back as long as it did – way back past the Reformation.

Which in turn explains the church's position in all of this. It becomes pretty obvious who WHITEKNIGHT is and just what part he played in a series of murders that were otherwise unconnected until now. And yes, it involves a series of red-necked Americans too as well as the blood transfusion services in *eight* countries. What can you do with 10,000 litres of human blood? Ask the European Monetary Fund. They seem to know. *They bought it.*

I also get to see the *awful* secret about just what it is that the Bank of England holds in its vault. Not only is it not anywhere near Threadneedle Street, it's not even gold. Well it is...but not just gold. It's *way* more. The name that comes up here a lot of the time is EFFIGY. Later on they mention THOMAS and JUDAH. These names come up all the time.

The law barely fares any better. I wonder just how many High Court Judges out there carry out their business, unaware that they are the unwitting tools of both CASINO and HORSE (both organisations, not people) and are effecting their will on the people of Europe. And of course, their offshoots are printing and publishing nearly every newspaper in the world, and are disseminating their word via public broadcasts through every news medium that there is.

Oh. And Europe. That bring me to HYDRA (which is a very obvious reference indeed) and just why they are doing what they are doing in the name of a belief system that no one would *possibly* believe is still in existence and which is carrying out an extraordinary act of influence on another country and causing *it* to wage warfare on others for reasons you could scarcely credit thinkable. Which links me to GILBERT and JANNEVA again, both of whom appear to be in thrall to the whole damned process. And guess who is in charge of the whole deal? He's named in the document as JUDAS. Some of the rest of it is a clue too. He has a sidekick named HARDY and another named DANTE. And they buy more than just countries and banks and people. *Way* more.

The moon landings were not *faked*; they were a means of escape.

Pope John Paul II was shot in May 1981, but blaming Mehmet Ali Ağca for it was like blaming the fireman for the fire. How could anyone miss the critical symbolism? And what was Chrysler's interest in all of this?

And how did anyone else not know the links between diamond mines in South Africa, a prison in Serbia, five hidden temples in Gambia and *what they had to bury beneath an ancient Scottish lake*? Who knew about it? And why?

They were digging at the wrong pyramid. Or so it seemed. They found *wonderful things* indeed, but now I know why an eye looks down from above it.

And this just dips into the surface of it.

The whole thing makes my mind reel. There are dozens and dozens of code names. Just about every institution mentioned – some of which I can guess at, others I cannot – seem to be wrapped up in something that at first reading seems to be utter madness, but which on second reading seems to be so malevolent and evil-minded that even holding the thoughts in my mind make me cold inside. I was prepared for conspiracy, maybe. I was *not* prepared for the unified theory of conspiracies, which in itself is just so outside reality that I can barely grasp it. I feel both lost and privileged and so, so *vulnerable*. My only safety is that I am not who I think I am. Or I am that person, but just don't look like him. Or something like that.

My phone has charged enough. I turn it on and it reveals that I have a few messages waiting, but reading them makes no sense for now. One however, is a note of a name and phone number that I was sent this morning. The name on the screen is HARTLEY. The time is approximately the same time I was in the car with the journalist, so I have to assume this is him. I also remember that name from earlier, in the conversation I had with Bryant.

'I don't want to meet you there if Hartley is anywhere near you'

Bryant knows this journalist by name? *Has he seen me with him? Does he know something?*

I open the drawer again and pull out the notebook and flick through its pages, scanning them for any trace of the one name I need. There are two entries. One is in London, the other in Wales. I guess the former must be correct. I am about to use the mobile when I remember whence it came, and instead move to the room phone and hit 9, followed by the number. It rings.

- Extension 332, says a young male voice at the end.
- Good morning, Austin Hafner here. Margaret Hayes-Williamson please?
- Hello Mr Hafner. I'm sorry but the Minister is in a DAC meeting right now and may be a while yet. Do you have a message I could pass on to her?
- Yes....can you tell her that I have *been briefed* and that I need to speak to her as a matter of urgency. It's critical.
- Certainly. Does she have your number?

I pass the hotel phone number and room number. The conversation ends. I return to the awkwardly named document – whose title is now more than apparent – and read through it again.

This time I make notes on hotel notepaper. Nothing overt, just a series of bubbles and connected links which all point towards the fact that the biggest financial institutions in the world are controlled in their entirety by three people, and are essentially a front for something *far* more sinister.

I work on this for a while until the room phone rings. I pick up the receiver and don't even get a chance to say 'hello'.

- Austin? It's Madge. You read it?

She's breathless. Whatever the meeting she was in, she got out fast.

- Madge...yes. Yes, I have. Maybe three times now.
- I see. Look, I'm *really* sorry about the subversion and cloaks and daggers and all that but I really had to lie to Bryant about what it was all about because he's a turd and despite his appearances has a few influential buddies out there who can make things tricky for the rest of us.
- Oh...I see.
- He's more formidable than his outwardly cowering appearance might betray. Now....what did you want to speak to me about? I assume it's the sudden weight on your mind that the blasted magic lamp has just dropped on you?

Wow. I get the reference. The papers beneath me almost glow with malignance.

- Madge – this document. I mean...this is *big*.
- I am *told* it's maybe the biggest, yes.
- It seems to involve...well...everyone. I mean you never see their names, but it's pretty clear who they...wait a sec. What do you mean you're 'told'?
- I've never read it. I don't even know what's in it, other than in the broadest terms. I just know that it is pretty devastating stuff.
- How can you not have read it?
- Are you serious, Austin? Give that bazooka to me and I'd likely fire it over the parapet. No, that little weapon is far too dangerous to give to anyone like me.
- You've never been tempted?
- It's probably written in some *Barker and Francis mumbo-jumbo* I'll never understand anyway. Temptation isn't really an issue. What are your first impressions?

Her interest in my opinion sounded weirdly like she was changing the subject, a little.

- Jesus Madge....this is just *huge*. How can Pandora's Box be a real thing?
- Good Lord...*is it*?
- Well this seems to say so...and it's linked with the French airliner that was brought down by the North Vietnamese over...
- Austin, *please* remember this line is insecure at your end. We *cannot* discuss this right now without assuming someone else is listening in. And probably not with me *at all*. I'm trying to stay away from all this, remember?
- Oh...yes. Of course.
- How quickly can you get to London?
- Urm...London?

- Yes, you know...this place. Government. *Where you work, Austin.* God man, what has got into you these days? Has this thing put the zap on you?

These days. Not this day.

- Sorry, yes alright. I'll be there as soon as I can. How about tomorrow?
- That will be fine. I have the DPM meeting with me this afternoon about stuff connected to this.

DPM. Even *I* know that means Deputy Prime Minister.

- How much does he know?
- He knows less than I do and I know nearly nothing other than that *this exists and it is real.*
- Madge...I need to ask you a straight question.

She gives an uncharacteristic pause. Or maybe my question was uncharacteristic for Austin. Either way, it catches her off guard.

- Yes?
- Straight answer?
- Yes....but remember, this line....
- I know. It's just a yes or no, okay?
- Okay...
- Am I being set up to take a fall here?
- How do you mean '*fall*'?
- Well...if this should leak and it's known that *I* had access to it when no one else seems to know about it, will that mean I am likely to take the hit?
- Oh. Oh I see. I hadn't actually considered that. I gave you the file because I guessed you were the only one in the office I could trust. I suppose that removes the element of me suspecting you as being the leak too, don't you think?
- Yes, but you see my point?
- Yes....I see. My assurances might not add up if I get implicated as well. I've notarised the master records to say that I withdrew the item I gave you, even though it was withdrawn for me. I didn't mention giving it to you.

Trying to keep up here...

- That could look like I stole it from you, couldn't it?
- I suppose, yes. But neither can I say I passed on something like this to anyone else. This is tough.

- It is.
- I will speak to you tomorrow about it.
- OK. One other thing...just how much does the press know?
- Right now? Nothing *high level* I suppose. They will work it out in time, I am guessing. They usually manage to.
- OK.
- Why...do you know something?
- No, not really...it was something else.
- What?
- Well...do you know someone named 'Hartley'?

I can almost see the shock on her face down the phone.

- If that is who I think it is then he and his editorial team are determined to bring us down. The little shit nearly did that on the basis of Hollybanks. We just escaped that one and not much else. Have...have you spoken to him?
- No, no, I lied. – I don't know him at all. It was Bryant who mentioned his...
- That little *shit*...if Bryant has spoken to that fucking awful little man about *anything* I'll personally fuck him into the middle of next week. What did he tell you about Hartley?
- Just that he's seen him about, I think. When I spoke to Bryant on the phone this morning to set up the meeting he said he didn't want to meet here if Hartley was anywhere about. The name just rang a bell with me.
- Yes, well. Let me deal with Bryant on that one. Hartley is utter poison to us and to the entire scope of things right now. That dreadful little *private eye* is trying to worm his way into too much already. He's freelance.
- Does he have anything on us?
- I don't know, Austin. I think he is more concerned with HRH's involvement than HMG's.

My first direct reference. I was not far from the mark at all.

- HRH?
- Yes, His Royal...you know...
- Madge...I thought you said no one else knew about this document's content – certainly not you anyway.

Her voice rings with indignation.

- Yes? And?

- Well...how do you know about HRH being in it? And how does Hartley, for that matter?
- Austin – *that's the leak*, don't you see? Can't you keep up?
- Sure...but from where?
- Well if we knew that...

I interject.

- But wait...if the press knows about something that is only in the document, and you know it too then why is something ostensibly so damaging in common knowledge.

She pauses.

- Things were said in the TALISMAN committee. You know. Rumours. It's just stuff in the wind.

That's a backpedal. And TALISMAN - the name from the cover.

- I see.
- And this turd Hartley is going to take it for all it's worth.
- No, quite....
- His readers may be the plebeian sect but they are a motivated body when they want to be. God alone knows what would be said if they found out if they knew who were all doing what about this little matter together.
- Um Madge....the line, remember?
- *Screw* the line. I'm going to tear Bryant's head off for that. Be here tomorrow for his summary execution. And don't let those papers out of your sight.
- I won't, Madge.

The phone is dropped at the other side. Sounds like things are hotting up... which is why I turn to the little cheap mobile phone beside me and pick it up. *I might be needing this sooner than I thought.*

I take the pages of the report from the binder and fold them carefully, then remove one of the bottom desk drawers beside me. I stash the report carefully under the drawer runner, then replace everything. I hunt in the drawers for more notepaper and find a standard block in faint, otherwise unmarked. Perfect. I take out twenty or so sheets and place them carefully into the file, then replace it into the envelope and do what I can to make the security tape secure to an average passing glance. I fold it up as well as I can and place the newly constructed package inside my mildly damp jacket pocket which is still on the back of my chair.

The phone behind me rings. I pick it up and a cheery woman's voice on the other end greets me by name.

- Mr Hafner?
- Yes?
- Transport admin for you here. We have a car coming to get you to bring you to London at Ms Hayes-Williamson's request. Are you aware of this?
- Yes, I am aware of this. When can you get me?
- She has asked for you to be here by 10am, so the car will be at your hotel by 8am. Is that convenient for you?
- Yes, that will be fine. Thank you.

A couple more pleasantries and the phone is cradled.

Bryant's earlier words echo in my ears. *I don't want to meet you there if Hartley is anywhere near you.* This could be played to my advantage.

This is a fine dream to be having.

I pick up the little mobile phone and click over the newly received number when I see it. There is a long pause, followed by a short ring. He's onto the phone right away.

- Yes?
- Hartley?
- Yes – do you have the information?
- Yes I do. But first I need to ask you a couple of things.
- Fire away.
- How well do you know David Bryant?
- Bryant, did you say?
- Yes. B-R-Y-A-N-T.
- Never heard of him. Who is he?
- He's first secretary in my office. I'm surprised you never heard of him.
- Is he worth a push?
- Oh he is, as long as you are discreet about where the push came from.
- Trust me on that one. We're pretty well-practised at that. Your golden egg is far too special for any other treatment.
- Fine.
- How can I get him?

I quote the phone number to him.

- That's his personal number. He is first secretary to Margaret Hayes-Williamson. She knows a fair amount about this as well, of course.
- Well sure...as you might imagine. Should I spear her?
- Christ no, Hartley. Going after a Minister like this would expose both of us. No, Bryant is a softer touch. He's a civil servant who has been cascaded upwards beyond the level of any shred of competence and he hates being thought of as anything other than the team captain. The truth is that he's on the sub's bench.

Hartley cackles at this. I take a bit of educated guesswork next.

- Hayes-Williamson knows this and inherited him against her wishes last shuffle. I think she has found him out though, so his job may be on a shaky tack and this could be the last thing he can get to do before he's shown the door to another less sensitive office.
- Or the jail. Okay. Seems fair to me.
- One other thing – who else have you tried to contact about this?
- No names. Just players.
- Good – that would be the best approach for now. I know you need to break all this stuff soon but there is more.

I could hear him pause.

- More? Like what?
- Like *much more*. What we spoke about today was chicken feed compared to what else I could slip you.
- I'm all ears.
- Not so fast, I think. You're all ears, pen and paper. I think this stuff may need to come from another source, otherwise I will be left dangling, as they say.
- Can you give me a taste?
- I could tell you that this stuff soars above governments worldwide, if you like.
- I like the sound of this.
- You will. And it will make you *fabulously* wealthy.
- Or fabulously dead?
- It may do.
- I mean...this is already big enough to ensure that anyway, isn't it?
- It's a risk we all face, I suppose.
- What should I ask Bryant?

- Ping his phone a couple of times to make sure he is answering it. Don't speak to him. Then later ask him about GILBERT and JANNEVA. Don't introduce yourself just yet. If you can, fake authority with him. Try and fake rank, even. He'll buckle. He's a dreadful toady and has almost no will of his own. Can you do that?
- That I can do. Who are Gilbert and Janneva?
- Are you still interested in Brian and Stanley?
- Of course I am...
- Well GILBERT and JANNEVA are *much* more interesting, and from the same stable.
- Money stuff, you mean?
- Money, blood, deceit...how far do you want to go?
- Jesus wept...how far can *you* go?
- To the top. Brian and Stanley could be ignored – I mean *completely* – if you get these other two.
- Look...I have to ask just for verification here...how far up the pole are we talking?

I give him a knowing silence.

- Bryant could tell you.
- Will you?
- Well...let's say that getting any higher might be problematic, unless you happen to ignore the rules of church and state.
- Jesus *wept*...this will need evidenced.
- I have the evidence.

There is a *much* longer pause.

- Where?
- Nowhere near me. It's in London. I am heading back there tomorrow.
- When should I call this Bryant fellow then?
- Later this afternoon. Remember, a couple of pings then speak to him. Are you calling from a known number?
- Of course not – this is pay-as-you-go.
- Excellent – then don't hide your number from him. Let him call you back, even.
- This is all *really* mysterious.

- It's protection stuff, Hartley. You might not get it.
- What was that?
- I said that it's protection stuff which is hard to follow, maybe.
- I didn't mean that, I meant what's with '*Hartley*'?
- I don't understand.

Ohhhh. That cold feeling again.

- Well...what happened to '*Johnny*'?
- Oh nothing, I...
- Are you trying to distance yourself from me already?
- Good grief no...
- You *know* you can trust me, right?
- Of course
- We do go back some, so it's not like I'm asking you much that's unusual.
- No, I know.
- Alright then. I'll call you when I know more.
- Right.

The phone clicks off. *Shit.*

And Hartley and I *go back some*. The fall is heading this way. I can smell it.

The rest of the night moves along fairly smoothly. I try to unwind in the restaurant over steak and a bottle of something indefinite and red but I find myself checking around me to see if anyone is watching. So far no one seems to be, other than the over-attentive and under-employed staff.

The other patrons barely notice anything around them, being engrossed in electronic devices, books or their own little cloud of self-worth. Most of them look like they are called Geoff and are from out of town on passing business *en route to Peterborough*. Others talk in over-matey professional tones dulled only by the anodyne music that comes gently from the speakers above our heads. There has to be a conference on this week. They look like the sort of salesmen who would be annoying to *double-glazing salesmen*. Soft knitwear and open collared shirts. I know more about you than you do, I think to myself. If only you knew what I know...this would all be so *pointless*.

I can barely finish the meal. The steak was overdone and the wine badly needed to breathe, but it never got a chance. I just need a drink.

I chat at the bar with a couple of young girls who are passing through the town en route to some music festival I have never heard of in the Midlands. I remark on their weird route there, but they let me know that the route they are taking is the one that is being made available to them, and they don't judge it as to its directness or not. They just want to get there.

- That sounds very Zen, I say to them. – To travel in hope rather than to arrive.
- Actually, that's Robert Louis Stevenson, not Zen. You might be thinking of the Taoist saying '*the journey is the reward*'.
- No, we just don't want to be bourgeois about it all, the other replies to me. – Being at a place at a set time is so not what we want to do. It's the sort of thing people expect from you.
- Yet you want to be at the festival and not miss it, right?
- Yes, true.
- So that seems to counter-effect what you just said. I can understand that you might like to take the scenic route to get there, that times and dates are *for the man* and that people older than you don't get it, but ultimately you'll have paid a price for a ticket that says '*be here at this time*' and so you will, right?
- Oh well the festival goes on for days. If we don't see the start or end I don't mind. I just want to be there for some of it.
- Well...I hope you make it.
- We need to feel that love, says one.
- Yah..we need more of that in this world, says the other.

The conversation drifts on like this, with them being clever and young and vague and thinking they are original, with me trying to appear interesting to them but not *one* of them. In the end we seem to lose the thread of where we were going with this. Maybe this is why I have never particularly wanted to have a relationship with anyone this young. They have all the depth of a paper cut and the life experiences of a sardine, yet they think they are right about everything there is to be right about. And somehow, people like me are wrong about nearly everything.

Part of me wants to kick them up their doubtless perfect arses and scream at them about why the Ford Motor Company knows more about child abductions over the last fifty years than anyone else might ever guess, but I realise that this form of indiscretion would be a catastrophe *in excelsis*. So I sit tight, and listen to them drone on about their concepts of liberty and freedom and hippy definitions of why the world is headed in a downward spiral because of a lack of basic human *emotions and connections*.

At this I sort of wake up and sit up to rejoin the conversation, instead of being an audience.

- Now that's interesting.
- Yah, it is.

- Do you believe in holistic medicine?

Puzzled faces.

- You know...holistic. Where treatment of a particular medical condition has to take into consideration the rest of the body too?
- Oh sure, yeah.
- It does that because...well...we're all connected inside. You cannot think about treating one thing without thinking about others too, yes?
- Sure...

They seem less certain.

- Well don't you think it's possible that the world is connected like that too? That someone growing wheat in Panama has a direct connection to a lawyer in Brooklyn who has another direct connection to a car assembly worker in Poland?
- I'm...not sure...you mean like they are...*related*?
- Or that one big organisation has an effect on another big organisation in another continent because they have strong direct ties, despite there being no obvious overlap in their business?
- Um...sure....

I try to pin them down more, but I realise that I must seem to them like I am rambling. I say as much.

- Oh no sure, you're fine there.

I try to smile but it's tricky.

- So what is so good about music festivals?
- Oh you know....the feelings and stuff. I guess people just like being together.

I guess they do. I make excuses and return to my room.

The smell of the fall still reeks strongly to me.

Oddly, the stranger's face in the mirror in the unseen mirror isn't what overtly bothers me. It's the voiceless sounds of clawing from under the drawer runner, coming from a hidden knowledge that is slowly changing me – whatever 'me' might be – from a creature of innocence to something more malignant. I know what this thing is; it's a weapon of quite *unimaginable* destruction. Who wrote it? What malevolent genius had the foresight to put this confluence of incongruent notions together into an amalgamated total and suddenly make the world a much more dangerous and unbalanced place? Who knew? *Who knew?*

A rather impulsive thought occurs to me and it's not a great one: if this *is* so dangerous then it's not a complete secret, and if it's not a complete secret then someone is going to come looking for it. Anyone thus motivated is going to have a serious wish for it and hence are likely to do almost anything in their power to get it, regardless of consequence, time or effort. They will be inspired, they will be perilous to contact and they certainly won't give a damn about me, and likely not about any organisation of which I am supposed to be a part. Okay, so the last notion doesn't worry me *that* much as I have no sense of *belonging* but I do have a sense of self-preservation, even if my knowledge of what I am has taken a serious knock amidst in the last few hours. Perhaps a mild form of attack is a decent defence.

I reach over and lift the receiver on the bedside phone, then pause for a considered thought and let it down. Jumping up from the bed I grab the keys from the table, open the drawers and take out the little bundle of papers that might cause so much grief. I could destroy them, but there might be worse repercussions if I were to do that, so I drop them into my jacket pocket with the keys and pick up the little camera phone, picking it apart and pulling the little card from inside it. I'm starting to think.

I leave and check around me, then amble along the long winding corridor until I reach the lifts and there, as I might have expected, is a courtesy telephone whose solitary connection is to the front desk. I pick it up and it rings twice before a voice answers.

- Reception?

Another young girl, different from the last one. She has a slight accent, maybe Italian. I check my keys again, just to be sure.

- Good evening, this is Room 242. A simple question for you – do you offer office facilities?
- Office facilities? I'm not sure I know what you mean, sir.
- I mean like printing and copying.
- Oh you mean *document* facilities. Yes we do – we have a photocopier and printer down at the reception office which you can use if you like. Is it urgent?
- Oh it's just for something I need to prepare up for tomorrow – a sort of presentation. Can I use it now?
- I don't see why not, Mr...Hafner. It's pretty simple to use.

She hesitated over my name. Hopefully just checking my name against my room number.

- Great – I'll be down shortly. Thank you.

I replace the receiver, check around me and take the lift down to the ground floor. Metal and shiny, surrounded by mirrors all of which are filled with one face which chooses look determinedly away from me. Silence but for the winding gear and the flexing of metal.

I don't recognise the girl at reception, so she doesn't know who I am. Definitely Italian. She wears her clothes well, even if they are the same rather functional hotel outfit every

other woman in the place is wearing. Maybe it's her perfume. I present my keycard to her and remind her of a conversation we have less than two minutes ago.

- It's just in this little alcove, sir. I switched it on for you. You want to print something.
- No, I need to scan something.
- Okay – well, if you need any help then I'll just be here. We have to charge this to your room, I'm afraid. Fifty pence a sheet per scan. Seems like quite a lot to me, I know.
- Oh it will be fine, thanks.
- Just put what you need scanned onto the glass and press this button. What you copying this to?
- A storage card.
- Just put it in the slot here. Any problems, give me a shout.

She busies herself at the desk almost immediately to my left and I busy myself by selecting the *scan to card* option on the printer, sliding the little camera card into the slot and feeding all the sheets of the document through the printer until they have all been written. All twenty pages are ejected and are folded into quarters back into my pocket. A small beep comes from the machine and both papers and phone are rebundled and put together before I round the desk, smile at the pretty girl and tell her that I had just copied thirty pages. She smiles back and business is done. Back up the lift to the second floor, along the corridor and back to my room where I tuck the pages away where they were before within the hidden confines of the desk. In an amused aside I leave the phone on the desk in plain view. I sigh a deep sigh of relief. Drink gave me an idea and a bit of bravery there but has also made me pretty weary.

I lie on my bed fully clothed with the lights on.

I took one last look at that face in the mirror again. For the first time, that look gave me a tangible taste of real fear. But I know that it won't last. I know that face will be reunited with its owner soon enough. *This cannot be reality.*

I'm going to try and sleep now, I think.

When I wake I'll be myself again.

This has been an entertaining dream, but it has hit a note of despair.

I shut my eyes and exhaustion takes me in seconds.

I don't dream.

The phone rings very loudly next to me. I bolt up and feel around in the semi-darkness and find it due to the strange diffused glow it is shedding from under the discarded newspaper. I am under a tight tuck of blankets.

- Yes?
- Mr Hafner, we are having a spot of bother down here...

I drop the phone. I both recognise this place and don't recognise it at the same time.

When did the lights go out and how am I back here again?

Walls close in.

I get out of bed and make for the bathroom, where I flick on the light. The same unfamiliar face looks back at me, with the same look of confusion that I feel. I peer back into the room and through the darkness I see the light of the phone still glowing, and a voice faintly trying to speak at the other end.

When did the lights go out and how am I back here again?

I walk slowly through the darkness, all at once unafraid. Anyone could be hiding here, but they should know that *I* am the monster. The shadows fear me.

I sit still for a while then pick the phone up and replace it on the cradle. At once it rings again. I pick it up.

- Mr Hafner?
- Yes?

The voice at the end sounds stressed. The voice flutters.

- Reception, sir...I'm sorry to wake you at this time. I have a call for you. The caller says it is urgent.
- OK. Put it through.

Clicking on the line.

- *Sphinx...*
- ...Hello?
- The code is *green*.

I wait to see if this statement is elaborated upon.

- Who is this?
- The code is *green*.
- I heard you the first time. Who is this?
- The code is *green*.
- What code?
- The code is *green*.
- Are you going to say anything other than this?

- The code is *green*.
- OK....the code is green. What do I do with this...

The line clicks and goes dead.

I realise that I am right at the centre of something and that I *may* have made matters worse for myself. I'm just about to move to the desk when I pick up voices. Whispered voices, outside my door.

The door is knocked. I peer through the spyhole and see a man in a plain business suit standing there with a sports bag in his hand. His face is unremarkable and his demeanour is that of a man waiting for a bus. Did I ask for a call this morning? I don't remember. He seems to be whispering to himself.

He knocks again, a little more firmly. This guy is determined to see me, so I have a brief internal debate about opening the door. If I don't open it then he'll stay there until I do. If I do then he'll be in here anyway. He obviously knows where I am. So I take a deep breath in and open the door, putting on the room light at the same time in an effort to disorient him with the glare of the bulbs against the mirrored shelves of the entrance.

- Hello?
- Hello again. '*Code green*'.

I look back to the phone then back to him.

- I had better come in, I think, he says. – We have a few things to discuss.

I let him into the room without much resistance. He strides in and wrinkles his nose at the stale smell in here. I make a muttered apology and move to the window to open it. It's dark outside.

- Sorry, you caught me quite asleep.
- We called you. I thought you'd be awake after getting the call.
- Uhm....yes. It woke me from a deep sleep.
- Okay. What time are you leaving today?
- The car is here at eight. I falter a little. – Are you the car?

He smiles at the suggestion and drops the bag onto the bed.

- Wow. Were you bathing in it last night? No, I am *not* the car. It's almost five o'clock. Now get yourself together. Can I make you a coffee?
- Yes...coffee would be good.

He moves over to the counter and picks up the kettle, then walks over to the en suite and fills it at an awkward angle in the shallow sink. His voice comes from the other side of the wall.

- Slight re-think about Strategy Two. We have a *burger van* situation. Drebs has been tracking the place for ages. She's found something. She reckons it's a 2-14 between here and the west but Carter's Crew disagrees. We'll go with my fix, I think. All pretty hazy now really. The yellow dog agrees. That's what matters.

I realise that my mouth is hanging open. I close it before he can come back through and see it.

- Oh..sure.
- Get much sleep last night?
- Some, yes.
- You stink of drink, you know. What did you do last night?
- Oh...talked to two student girls about some festival they were going to.
- Where about?
- Oh I don't remember. Maybe Glastonbury or some place like....
- No., I mean where did you speak to them?
- Oh...uhm...in the bar downstairs.

He comes through with the half-filled kettle and peers at me quizzically.

- Can you describe them?
- The girls?
- Yes. Can you describe the girls?
- Really?
- Yes, really. What were they like?
- Oh well....let's see. Maybe in their early twenties or late teens. Not *bad* looking. Scruffy hippy sort of dress. One of them was dirty blonde with those long braids...you know, West Indian type....
- Dreadlocks.
- Yes. I forget what she was wearing. The other was in green combat fatigues and black boots. She was darker. Sort of swarthy.
- Names?
- I'm not even sure they told me. I'm useless at names.

He eyes me, again judgemental. – You sound useless, *period*. Did they ask you about anything else?

- No, nothing.

- Did they come back here?
- Good grief, no. They just blithered on about *feeling the love* and stuff about music shows. It was nothing.
- Did they come to you?

I strain to remember. – Yes, they did.

He tuts and resumes the coffee-making. – I think you might find they are not nearly as innocent as you might believe.

- How come?

He ignores my question. – Are they staying here?

- That's what they said, yes.
- Now try and remember this – did they say anything about *not sticking to agendas*?

I gulp. – Yes, they did actually. Something about timekeeping being bourgeois or something like that.

- Then that settles it.
- It settles what?
- You were hoodwinked. Check your pockets to make sure you have everything.

He throws my trousers at me and I check them absently, deeply puzzled. – Who are they?

- I'm not sure, but that's a lead line if ever I heard one.
- A lead line? We were just chatting.
- You're getting soft. Anything missing?
- No. What are you planning for them?
- We'll have to visit them.

That doesn't sound good. – That sounds a bit...dramatic.

- We do what we have to do.
- Good god, they were just two girls I met and we talked about music. They were nobodies. Just two young girls.
- Yes, and they led you on and you bit. Are you *sure* they weren't back here?
- Yes, I'm sure!
- Then man up about this. You cannot take chances.

He hands me a deeply coloured cup of instant coffee which I pause a beat before taking.

- That's so harsh.
- It's *necessary*.
- Why?
- Because this is too big to take many chances over. Now, before we get lost in the *big ethical debate* can we get down to the practical?
- Okay...
- You going into London today, are you?
- Yes.
- Who are you seeing? Gatsby?
- No, I'm seeing Margaret Hayes-Williamson for something about...

He looks away in disgust, and moves towards me. I flinch by instinct, but he is simply moving for the radio which he switches on to the surprising sound of *The Lark Ascending*. As he withdraws he slaps my face, taking me properly by surprise. He *stage whispers* me.

- Are you alright in the fucking noddle? Are you always this stupid in the morning?
- I don't know what you....
- *Code names*, you fucking idiot. Don't refer to her by name. She has a *code name*. You know. Intel 101. Fuck *me* - are you always this dim? Or were you that pissed last night with your new lady friends? If I search this place will I find three dirty glasses and *another* contaminated mirror?

I'm getting lost again.

- Code name? Whose code name?
- M H W – also known as GATSBY.
- Oh....sorry.
- Were you caning it last night?
- No, of course not. I just don't think I was expecting to be pulled out of my bed at five by...you.
- Finish your coffee and get into the shower. Make it colder than usual. Wake *the fuck* up and get lively. You're going to have a bitch of a day today.

I try to finish my coffee but it's still way too hot.

- So what are you here to do aside from wake me up and make me coffee?
- I was sent here because there has been a development. A pretty drastic one too. You'll need to be forewarned, and the phones here are hot.

- So why am I staying here?
- It's a sound hole and the cover is good. I thought you had been here before.
- Not here, no.
- Alright then. Well it's safe enough, just as long as you don't go mouthing off to impress a couple of young girls from the bar you want to squire.
- That is *not* how it was.
- I hear you, he says, without any conviction in his voice. – You've been out of this game a while. You're soft. We can't have this.
- So what does that mean? You're going to 'visit' me too?
- Oh stop being so melodramatic. This is just a practical measure. We have other cogs wheeling right now.

He stands there and looks at me, again critically. Measuring. Thinking.

- You know, if this was a darkened room I'd swear you were not the same person.

I nearly drop my cup.

- Who is being melodramatic now?

I manage a recovery, but inside I can feel my heart hammering. I wonder if he can hear it.

- Whatever. Anyway. Developments.
- Yes...what developments?
- REMIX is dead.

I pretend that I find none of this confusing. It sounds like the end of a musical genre that no one will miss very much.

- When did this happen?
- Yesterday evening. His wife phoned for an ambulance – it seems he decided to hang himself from a beam in the attic.
- Oh...any ideas why?
- He was being leaned on, we think. He was phoned about five in the afternoon, just as he got home. Our man says he got pretty agitated about something or other and took his car out right away. He was followed down to a post office nearby, then he went straight back again. His wife came back later on and found him.
- Poor bastard.
- He's damaged goods already, as we all know.

- Any idea who he spoke to?
- Maybe a journalist. The facilities aren't that hot in his place. His people think he carried a lot in his head but if he ever did it has been dulled down by years of drink and prescription drugs. How long did you know him?

Hmm...

- Um...not sure. We were never that close really.
- Well that means that everyone under GATSBY's regime is going to come under scrutiny again, so you have to know before you go in for the meeting today.
- Alright...thanks.
- Who is she meeting with apart from you?
- I don't know – she didn't say.
- I'll assume it will be with her 2IC and others in the DAC. She'll want to take you along as a crutch and as a brief.
- Probably.
- So...shall we mention the elephant in the room at this stage?

I look genuinely puzzled at him – not that this takes an awful lot of effort.

- Enlighten me?
- The report. She gave it to you, yes? She gave it to you so could brief them all this morning.
- She gave me something yesterday, yes.
- Well...where is it? This is what this is all about, after all.
- Yes. I didn't know what to make of it at all. Neither will you.

I reach into the jacket on the chair and pull out the folded envelope.

- Is that *it*?
- Yes. I reassembled it as best as I could for a reason.

This is *wild improvising*. I put the report back together in case anyone was going to steal it from me. Now I find I am handing the damned thing over to someone whose loyalties in the whole deal is – at best – fluid.

I give him the envelope. He takes it and opens it, peeling off the blue tape from the edge. He tips the paper onto the desk and is silent for about thirty seconds and he separates the sheets with the fingertips of one hand. I cannot see his face.

- *Are you taking the piss here?*
- No...that's what she gave me.

- When did you open this?
- Yesterday morning. I came up here with the envelope and opened it right where you are now.
- If that's true...then why didn't you contact us right away?

This might take a bit of effort.

- The only phone I have here is the hotel line and that is hot, as you know. I couldn't leave here with that and I didn't want to leave without it, so I remained here.
- So when you were out last night with the dollies, where was it?
- In my jacket pocket. I didn't leave this building.

He turns to face me. He features dark and deeply unsettled.

- Look at it from *this* point of view. Someone you know and trust hands you something. You take it. We come to collect it and it has...gone. And you cannot explain why.
- That's what she gave me!
- Maybe you can say why?
- I can't. I don't know. Maybe...maybe....maybe it's a test. Or she didn't trust me that much?
- Listen....do you hear what you are saying?
- Of course.
- I don't know what exactly went down with you two in the past, but that's an incredible assertion to make.
- I cannot explain it.
- Have you talked to GATSBY about this?
- No, I couldn't.
- Yet you called her from this room last night.

A deeply cold feeling has just washed over me.

- Yes.

He steps towards me and narrows his eyes.

- Did you just lie to me?
- No. I didn't mention this to her.
- She just handed...

He breaks, leans over and turns the station up a little louder.

- She just handed you what she *says* is the biggest fizzing explosive device *in the world* and you tell me that when you get it, the pages are blank and you don't even mention it to her when you and she speak?
- No. I'm guessing you know what we said.
- You're guessing is getting better.
- I didn't mention anything specific. I was trying to drop her a line to see if she'd take the bait, or signal me somehow or...something. She didn't. She seemed to be of the opinion that what she gave me was kosher. Remember – she said that she said she hadn't read it either. I don't think she knows that what she gave me was...*that*.

I nod over towards the papers.

- Nice try. Sadly though you mentioned *two* very definite 'specifics'.
- I did?
- Yes, something about a bird coming down somewhere and an even *more* specific thing about a certain tin box containing all our woes.
- I was guessing...
- ...and you mentioned them both before you knew she hadn't read it.

I flounder. I think *he* is guessing. He cannot have memorised my conversation *that* well. Unless he transcribed it, and even then he's have to be able to remember the sequence in which we said things. I can take the risk.

- No, I mentioned them both afterwards. I think she even said something about the line being insecure.
- I think we both know you're on shaky ground here, he says. – Have you any idea how they are going to take this?
- None.
- And if she knew she was giving you a blank set of sheets how in the hell are you going to be able to brief the DAP this morning? This shit of yours just doesn't add up.

I *need* to find out what DAP stands for...

- I have no idea what she expects of me. Remember, we are winging it here.
- *One* of us certainly is.

His eyes continue to meet mine and don't flinch. I cast back his gaze.

- I'm calling this one in, he says. – This is another little development that isn't helping any.

- I realise.

Inspiration.

- Who was it who packed that for her?
- Packed what?
- The package. Who gave it to her to pass to me? I'm just thinking that if she was willing to resist any temptation to look then she'd have had someone else put it together for her. She told me she didn't draw it herself.

He pauses. Processing. Considering.

- You mean they might have switched it without her knowing?
- Isn't it possible?
- Hmm...maybe.

I sense an improvised victory here. It's in my grasp at last.

- I can ask her today when I see her.
- No! That would tip our hand to the fact that we don't have the thing. But we need to know through whose hands it has passed.

I snap my fingers.

- Wait a sec. She said that she had marked the records as having withdrawn the file.
- So?
- She's a government minister – she said she didn't draw it herself, remember? Someone in the office would probably be that person. Would the records be marked to reflect that? What sort of person would do that?
- Well?
- I'm not sure.
- *Come on, man. You work there!* Does she have a PA of sorts – or maybe a private secretary?
- Well...(mind racing back)...could it be ...Jessop?

He looks shocked.

- *Could* it be?
- It could be. The guy is damaged and only gets to do personal assistance about the office for the Minister. Fetching classifieds for her would probably fit the bill.
- And he has clearance, after all.

- Yes. He does.
- Maybe that explains why he was found hanging.
- And maybe...he went to the post office to send off an important document he had stashed? Or instructions?
- Oh *shit*...

I gulp again. Major coincidence. Major fortune too. I watch him back off and wander into the room, pensively biting on the end of his thumb. He is five feet from the desk. Five feet from exactly what he is looking for.

- Maybe he didn't hang *himself*, I suggest to him.
- Impossible. There was no one else in the house. No one else came or went. We had six eyes on the place.
- What about his wife?
- Have you met her?
- No.
- Obviously not. She wouldn't be able to hook up the noose, let alone do anything about it. She can barely manage the toilet on her own.
- Well...maybe he did it himself. Guilt or something?
- It's possible. I'm calling it in. And *you* are not out of the woods by any stretch yet.
- I know *nothing* about this.

More truthful words would be hard to produce.

- We'll see.

He nods towards the sports bag.

- That's all yours in there. I don't think you'll need more than that, but let us know if you do.
- Thanks.
- Alright. I have to go and call this. Keep in contact. *And phone us if anything weird happens.* This is the biggest deal of our lives. Don't fuck this up.
- Of course not.
- We'll tail you down to London in three cars, double lanes using parallels. You'll have a security driver at the wheel so don't worry. We have a back-up car at the same time.
- Okay. Thanks.

- The key is in the side pocket. Usual drop, the number is in the same pocket. Use and destroy.
- Okay.

Usual drop?

- I have to go. It's getting on. Get some breakfast and keep us briefed about the meeting.
- Right. I'll be leaving at eight.
- Good luck.

He eyes me again, then turns and leaves. I try not to exhale rapidly, but the temptation is too great. I lock the door, then wander to the en suite where I wash away the cold sweat from my body in the shower. It wakes me but doesn't affirm anything other than the strangeness of cold water on another person's skin which I just happen to be able to feel. No soap. No shampoo. I stand under the downward blast and reach out to turn the tap to the blue, gradually.

Still.

When did the lights go out and how am I back here again?

On my return I slump onto the bed and find I have stopped shaking. The sports bag beside me, I unzip the top. It feels heavy, but not full. I open it and peer inside.

Clothes, mostly. Outdoor stuff, like woollens and a waxed jacket. Under this there is a layer of cottons and then...*oh my...*

I take the little gun from out of the bag and hold it in front of me in two open hands. I've never seen a handgun in my life other than in an exhibition, far less actually held one. It's a Glock – it says so on it – and seems to be mostly made of plastic. It weighs nearly nothing. Inside the case I find six magazines, both of them loaded with ammunition. Further inside are two plastic boxes filled with yet more bullets. I look around my room, cautiously, as though expecting to be watched by someone. The shaking returns a little.

Further in the bag is a large brown letter-sized envelope filled with papers. And beneath that is a small block of paper wrapped in sealed plastic that on further inspection reveals itself to be banknotes. A block of fifty pound notes, which I note from the seal amounts to ten thousand pounds. A further look about the interior reveals a mobile phone, some toiletries, an audio recorder, a small laptop computer and a couple of blank notebooks with pens.

I empty the bag completely and find that the inside base is the usual type which can be lifted. Without thinking through exactly what I am doing, I go to the desk and pull out the drawer, then lift from it the document that's of so much interest to so many people. The pages feel suddenly *portentous* in my hand...like some sort of Cassandra declaring our mutual destruction. I know someone will be in here after me, raking about. I don't want to risk them finding anything that's going to hang me.

I put the document into the base of the bag and refill it more or less as it was delivered, other than keeping the mobile phone which I turn on and put on the desk. Having second thoughts, I reach in and take out the cash, breaking open the tight plastic with my door key. From it I take a few thousand pounds or so and put it into my trouser pockets, then place the rest into the bag which I then zip up.

Deep exhalations.

I dress quickly and look around the room. I have doubts I will be coming back here again. I slip on a clean jacket, pocket the mobile phones – the new one and the cheap one - wallet, car keys and the envelope containing the blank pages, pick up the bag and head down for a buffet breakfast. Instinct tells me that I may as well fuel up as I have no idea where I am going to be or when I am going to eat again.

I leave the radio playing. Seems sort of homely like that.

A little before eight the new phone rings. Just a number displayed, no name. I answer it and find that the car is here for me. I wash down the last of the tea, pick up the bag and head for the exit. As I leave I am relieved to see the two girls from the previous evening coming down the stairs towards the restaurant. I don't say anything, just keep walking to the entrance.

Outside a grey Mercedes sits waiting. The driver pops out from his door and signals to me to come across to him, which I do, dumping the bag in the boot first.

- Sorry if I'm a little early, Mr Hafner, he says. – but I was told that we really have to get a move on this morning.
- Yes, it's going to be a busy day today.
- I bet. Here's my ID.

I hadn't thought about asking him. He flashes me a card which seems to come from a government department. His face is on it, along with the name *William Girvan*. That sounds suitably solid and Scottish. I thank him, get in the car and we are off.

He drives like the wind, shading red lights just on the turn and barely pausing at road signs which indicate that we ought to be giving way.

- We're in a bit of a hurry, aren't we?
- Well, yes. I'm on instructions. Other than that I don't know anything.

He smiles over at me and I return the gesture.

- You and me both, I laugh.

He thinks I am joking.

We leave the town and hit the outskirts on some ring road where he takes the outside lane and, despite rush hour, manages to navigate skilfully through it without much problem. I recall our meeting; He didn't recognise me and had to wave to me to get my attention, so I assume Mr Girvan and I don't know each other.

- You been doing this long, William?
- Oh sure. I was a security driver in the services for ten years. Got all that defensive and offensive stuff down pat. It's second nature when you know how.
- I'm sure it is.
- Never had one accident in all that time. Had a couple of people rear end me but that's not my doing. Clean licence, clean insurance. This is what I do. An easy life, really plus you get to meet people and see places too.

I peek over at the speedometer and see he is doing something *well* over the speed limit. Then I remember who he is and where we are going. I surmise that *dull laws* won't slow him down or discourage him a whole lot.

- You mind if I put the radio on?
- William, it's your car. You do as you please.
- Thanks.

He flicks the radio on and finds the Today programme on Radio 4. Somehow it grounds me, linking me with a sense of reality again. I lean my head against the window and look out at the passing greenery around us, catching sight of my own reflection in the secondary door mirror. *Whoever that person is, his life is a full one.*

I'm starting to wonder just what sort of a dream this has to be now.

Ninety minutes of current affairs, John Humphries, general chit-chat and high speed later we are driving down Tottenham Court Road, turning down Great Russell Street. William pulls the car over just beyond the zebra crossing on the left side of the thoroughfare right in front of the British Museum.

- First stop?

I am very, very puzzled.

- Here? I thought we were heading for Westminster?
- Yeah, we are later. My route was redirected here for the first stop-off. You asked for it, I believe? *A drop?*

I fake recognition, but am in the dark. Then the words *usual drop* return to my mind. I *assume* this means the bag...but how and where? In my excitement over the money and firearm I had forgotten to consult the side pocket with the key. There must be someplace in here I can deposit the bag.

I exit the car and pick the sports bag out the boot, then walk up the pathway to the pillared magnificence of the Museum, where already crowds are gathering. Through the main gate, facing the main entrance where crowds of people are gathering to do whatever it is they do there. Then it strikes me – a steady stream of them is coming to or from the cloakroom which is signposted on the lower ground floor. I follow them to the immediate left after the entrance and to my amazement I find a check-in desk with a cloakroom, and behind the desk are two rather overworked looking middle-aged women who look like they might sooner be anywhere else in the world than right here right now. I reach into the side pocket and look for the key. There isn't one there. Then I realise why – the key is in fact three fifty pence coins. Key indeed. And the 'key' doesn't have any instructions or information on it, but instead has a mobile phone number written on a piece of yellow sticky paper in the same place. I take the number and pocket it.

The others jostling around me won't notice this for a second. I unzip the bag, dip my hand in deep, lift the base and take out the document. I stick it in my pocket quickly, then zip the bag again in one swift motion. I wait patiently beside the sign that informs me that my bag *may* be searched by staff. I try to ignore this as best I can.

- Yes?
- Can I leave this please?

She takes it in one hand and doesn't even seem to care anything about what's in it. Meanwhile, to my left a young man whose bag seems to weigh more than the regulation maximum weight is having to open his case and take out various books and drop them into a carrier bag, whilst muttering about something all but incomprehensible. I try not to fix a beatific smile of *je ne m'inquiète pas* but I realise that it's far less preferable to one of utter and complete indifference. Then I start to think about indifference and realise that my facial contortions will be drawing attention to me.

- One fifty please.

I drop her the three coins and she tears a bright yellow ticket in half lengthways, giving me a section that notes the time, date and some kind of serial number in large bold numerals. Then she is off to the next customer eager to drop off his rucksack before ascending to the lithographs, mummies and oriental art.

Heart beating faster, I make my way into the cavernous artificial outdoor space of the main concourse and look around me, trying hard not to feel as agitated as I actually am feeling. There are people moving towards the right, over to the columnated façade beyond the marble horserider, so I follow them as though I was one of them. Above me the absurdly large doors say ROOM 1, so I walk in. Inside I find a dull room, filled with a rising number of the curiously incurious, all fascinated by the treasures within but paying each other such scant notice that almost all of them could be there alone, and this suits me find. I walk smartly into the room to the left and look about for a likely spot. The glass cases in the middle of the floors house a variety of artefacts but also house huge bound leather books beneath them to which no attention is being given. Perfect. I move over to Case 20 named '*Magic, Mystery and Rites*' (it's certainly a mystery so far, I'll grant you) and try to draw as little attention to myself as humanly possible as I slide the thin folded pages of the document from my pocket into the tight spaces between the second and third volumes there, leaving only the merest trace of the paper. A quick look

about me shows no one was watching. The whole operation took me less than five minutes.

I take the new phone out my pocket and quickly photograph the case, then the space around it, then the view of the entire room from this point. I make my way back across the ground floor at a brisk pace and back out the main entrance and back to the car, fighting past crowds of tourists all snapping away merrily and apparent without discernment of any kind. The car waits patiently.

- Sorry I was a little longer than I planned there. It's a bit crowded.
- Perfectly okay there, Mr Hafner. I've waited half an hour there before now.

He puts the car into gear and we slide southwards down Shaftesbury into Whitehall where we draw up outside the Ministry of Defence offices.

- Here we are, Mr Hafner. Reception is expecting you.

Odd. I wasn't expecting this place.

- Thanks, William.
- I've not been told if you will need the car to return. Do you know?
- I don't, I'm afraid. This meeting is pretty open-ended. We'll be in touch, I am sure.
- That's fine. Have a good day Mr Hafner.

And he glides off with me on the pavement wondering what in the world I am doing here.

I pull the new phone from my pocket and dial the number for Margaret's office again.

- Extension 332, says the same young man as before.
- Good morning, Austin Hafner here. Margaret Hayes-Williamson please?
- The Minister is over at Whitehall right now. I think she is expecting you.
- Ah right – I wasn't sure if she was there already or not.
- Ask at reception for her. They are expecting you urgently.

That remark just *reeks* of James Bond.

- Thank you.

I hang up and walk up to the determinedly faceless and unpleasant building, through the main doors and into the entrance. I approach reception and give my name and business. Within fifteen seconds I am being escorted up a flight of stairs and up to a corridor by a bright young man with a flashy red tie and an impossibly black suit.

- Sorry sir, you're on your own now, he says when we arrive.
- I'm sorry?

- Security meeting, sir. I can't come into the corridor.
- Good grief. What room is it?

He gives me a room number and head down the corridor, conscious that I am walking on a sort of hallowed ground where people are simply *not allowed*. The nearby offices are empty – they all look like deserted meeting rooms, with the same faux red leather, dark wood desks and carpets that look like remaindered lots. The place smells of paint, furniture polish and just general *decrepitude and age*. The new paint smell makes it feel like an old man wearing an unwise cologne. I have the impression that it might not be the place but the *people*.

I reach the room. The door is ajar. I knock and poke my head in to see Margaret at a fair sized dark oval table with five other suited men beside her. I recognise none of them outright, but one of them does look like someone I ought to know but who doesn't place, maybe because a three-dimensional face has a different aspect to one on the television - or maybe because they all just look like *government people*. Tailored suits, plain ties, unfussy shirts, none of which look like they really fit properly: the unmistakable look of the provincial lawyer *done good*.

- Hello, Austin. Thanks for coming along.

Margaret stands up and shakes my hand and leads me to the room.

- Gentlemen, this is Mr Austin Hafner from my office. He has the full brief on the document and has it in his possession. He is, as you know, fully cleared up to the required levels.
- Thank you.

It's the only thing I can remember to say. I am introduced to the others in the room but I remember none of their names longer than about fifteen seconds, maximum. The one I thought I knew was actually unknown to me. They cast these people from moulds. Little wonder.

The silver-haired guy at the far side of the table fills his water glass (a bad sign) and makes a short speech all about the importance of what we are doing. Then he turns to Margaret, giving her a cue.

- Well Chair, it's an odd situation to be in. The document was received from a DPA source known as THERESA, who we know to be a combination of intelligence agencies operating under the umbrella of the operation called TALISMAN. All information within it has been checked and double checked and then pieced together and revalidated to ensure that it is absolutely correct and that all information within it and all assumptions and connections made are in fact subject to the harshest scrutiny. All of it has been borne out by both observation and analysis. We also have information sources placed within a variety of named organisations and JCRs which confirm elements of the story at either personal or global levels. In short, the document has been validated and shown to be accurate and despite all accusations and theories is resilient to adverse judgement.

She drinks from her glass.

- I won't dwell on the content as I will reserve that effort for my colleague Mr Hafner, but I will say that it details some claims that at first would seem to be an utterly bizarre and extraordinary conglomeration of events, people, organisations and wills, and which would be the ultimate expression of the wild-eyed conspiracy theorist. It's almost a 'unified theory' of that subject and contains what I am told are some things of such dark and mystical and almost *religious* overtones that it's hard to swallow. It is global political dynamite of the *first water*. Yes, Trevor?
- You said '*I am told*'. Have you read the document, Minister?
- No, I have not. I had the only extant copy taken from storage and handed to me in a sealed condition for transmission on to Mr Hafner for digesting and briefing purposes. I felt that its content would be too...damaging...to let me anywhere near it. If power tends to corrupt and absolute power tends to corrupt absolutely, then complete knowledge would tend to corrupt completely. I am human enough to know that I am not immune to that accusation.
- So why hand it to Mr Hafner? Is he superhuman?
- I gave it to him, John, because I know he is intelligent enough to be able to digest it, but also entirely prudent in his dealing to keep it to himself, and also restricted in his abilities of office to be limited in what he could do with the knowledge. He's not superhuman, but he's a better person than I am.

She turns and smiles briefly to me; a look of deep affection. I am touched.

- He is also perhaps the only person who can actually make out what the document says. It's written in fairly *dense terms*. He is...*uniquely gifted*.
- Alright then, says the silver-haired man. – Can you tell us what has happened to the document?
- Mr Hafner has it in his possession.

I can feel eyes looking at my person - *scrutinising* me.

- Do you have a case with you, Mr Hafner?
- No, I don't, I reply. – I haven't brought anything with me.
- Well...wait a second. Is this document in your pocket?
- In a manner of speaking. It's not in this room, but under my sole control.
- That sounds like you have hidden it.

I can sense Margaret's eyes staring at me in what must be utter disbelief. I swear she's *irradiating* me. This woman's mood seems to flip from nought to sixty faster than a Lamborghini using rocket fuel.

- That's exactly what has happened to it.
- Well...forgive me for saying this, says John – but that means we have to take your word for its content, does it not?

- Perhaps, but it must also be verifiable. Other have to know what is in it too. I didn't anticipate requiring it here as I didn't expect others to be reading it at this meeting.
- Margaret? Any light on this? It sounds *extraordinary*...

Their question breaks the spell that has Margaret staring at me.

- Yes. Well...no. The report was compiled from many, many sources by two people from within the Home Office...
- Barker and Francis? I assume they are the cipher for THERESA?
- ...yes. And they realised what the importance of all this was and tried to cash in on it.
- In what way?
- Well...they tried to blackmail the Prime Minister's office.

There is a round of *harumphing*. Preposterous! Unbelievable! Incredible!

- Francis wrote the report and typed it up himself. Francis used Barker as his primary source handler and used him to corroborate its content.
- Who sanctioned their involvement?
- I was asked to provide two trusty civil servants, so that was down to me.
- Well then, asks an as-yet silent thin man near me, - why are you not lying impaled on your sword, Margaret?
- It would be of no use if I were to do that. I'm more use here than back in Hereford. Besides, that solution would hardly satisfy justice.
- Yes, but it may satisfy concerns about your judgement, Minister...

Silver-haired man calls a halt to this.

- That's not helpful, Iain. We need to deal with what we have and what we know. Now Margaret, how long has Mr Hafner had to digest this document?
- He's had a day. The report is only twenty or so pages long, and the meat of it is contained in one section which is relatively brief. Among Mr Hafner's many positive qualities is the ability to read a document, know what is valuable and what is not and summarise it on that basis. He is...*uniquely gifted*.

Points lost for *repetition* as well as probably *deviation*.

- Formidable.
- Yes. Mr Hafner wrote me the brief for both the COVERSQUARE and RUBYRED operations, both of which required him to assimilate a mass of data in a very short space of time. It was on that basis - as well as his personal prudence - that he was selected for this task.

- No other reasons?
- No, none.
- Not that you are both known to one another outside of this office and therefore may be able to share information *sub judice* of any hearing?
- Emphatically *not*. Mr Hafner's probity is beyond question, as is mine I should hope.
- We cannot ask unreasonable questions, pipes up the fat man sitting like a slobbering simulation of a dissolute Buddha opposite me, - but we need to know what we are dealing with. This is, as you described earlier, '*global political dynamite*' so we have to be careful.
- You all know my *bona fides*, Alastair.
- Maybe, but I just have to say 'Haffil' to remind you of once-trusted people whose cannons shoot from the rails, Margaret?
- Ah...*touché*.
- Now, starts the silver-haired man – shall we get to the main issues? Firstly, how secure is the information and how many people know of its content in its entirety?
- Well, begins Margaret – aside from Barker and Francis, only three people. One is Mr Hafner. The other two are the DPA staff who passed it after validation and legal corrections. Barker and Francis have been somewhat *taken out of the proceedings*, so that leaves those three people. The two staff members probably don't know its content individually but will as a pair. However, they don't know who each other is. In any event, both are beyond all reproach and are at this moment in our offices, and Mr Hafner – whose knowledge is probably the greatest of all – is with us now.
- Of course that will change when Mr Hafner gives us the briefing, but until then you are sure that this is all?
- Absolutely certain.

Silver hair then addresses the room.

- Well what Mr Hafner is about to tell us is, need I stress it, something that is about as sensitive as can be. I know we are all cleared to the appropriate levels, but I must stress once again, however the temptation, that nothing we hear in this room can be repeated to *anyone* included spouses, trusties, confidantes, staff....anyone. The only people outside this room to be told any of this will be the PM and the DPM. The PM has also invited me to remind you that any breach will be considered a contravention of the OSA and will be struck with the maximum penalty permitted.

A general assent among the room. Nodding and even one '*hear hear*'.

- Now before we leave this topic, Margaret, there is the issue of provenance. You already described the creation of the report. Once the report was put together how was it handled?
- It was M12ed and filed in a J box under a double keyed system. I understand it was filed by Francis personally. It was withdrawn by me and handed to Mr Hafner.
- Did you withdraw it personally?

Margaret pauses.

- No.
- Well...who else touched it?
- My personal secretary. I told him to recover the document within the sealed glassine binding and put it into an M12 envelope and secure it with blue tape, then hand it to me.
- And she did this?
- *He*. Yes, he did.
- Why did you not do it yourself?
- Because I was called to the PM's Office to brief him on this and some other matter and could not be excused for obvious reasons. The person I sent is a trusted and cleared member of staff and knows the meaning of security. He was also a part of TALISMAN way back.

Margaret's voice shows the edge of strain and irritation. She's trying to hold it in, but the indignation leaks out.

- Well, that's fine. Thank you, Margaret. We know about the leaky goings-on in your office so far. Has anything of this document leaked out so far?
- We're unsighted on that. The press know *something* about it, but on a very low scale.
- How did they get a sniff of this?
- We don't know yet. We guess THERESA but we are not certain.
- Alright then.

Attention swings over to me. Silver-haired guy smiles and starts talking to me as if he was addressing an intelligent child who might show a bit of promise if given the correct tuition.

- Mr Hafner, the Minister has told me much about your abilities and intelligence. Did you receive the M12 envelope as described?
- Yes, I did.

- Was it still sealed and intact?
- Yes, it was.
- Where did you receive it?
- In a Coffee Shop where I arranged to meet a colleague of the Minister's. The Minister turned up in a car later and handed me the envelope.
- What were you asked to do with it?
- I was asked to read it and give a brief. Not much more.
- Were you asked to provide another report on it?
- No, not yet at any rate. Merely a brief...a *précis*, if you prefer.
- I see. Where did you open the report envelope?
- In my hotel room in the New Ellswater.
- And did you find the document as the Minister has just described it?

I clear my throat for a moment that has been coming a while. I mentally play a drum roll. There is a spotlight playing above my head. The crowd are rapt.

- No.
- No?
- No. The document was *not* as she has just described.

Mutterings. More *harumphings*. Even one *extraordinary*.

- So...in what condition was it found?
- The pages were all blank. I was given blank paper.

The lull before the storm was a silence that sounded like half a dozen faces being struck in the face with a cricket bat. Then some more general bemused mutterings of outright astonishment. Margaret's eyes were burning into the side of my face. I flick her a glance and her face is red as boiling lobster. My face is bread being toasted by a luminous crustacean.

- *Austin...what in the fuck...?*
- Minister...please, protests silver haired man.
- This needs clarification!

The fat guy is very agitated, as is the weird looking man to my right who has been silent so far. - I can hardly *believe* this, Margaret!

I talk over them all.

- There was no glassine envelope. All I received were twenty or so blank pieces of paper.
- Margaret?
- Denis?

Her voice appears to have acquired a stammer. The silver-haired man addresses her again.

- I suppose you have something to say?
- Denis...I have *no idea* what Mr Hafner is saying and I have *no idea* why he is saying this. We discussed the content of the report in broad strokes only yesterday on the telephone! He did not mention this to me at all. Mr Hafner is...well...he is *lying*!

The word is screeched at me like gunshot. I turn to Madge and smile wanly.

- I'm sorry, Minister. It's true. The pages are blank.

Silver Hair readdresses the issue.

- Minister, can you explain this? I mean...this directly contradicts what you said before.
- No I cannot!
- So if we assume Mr Hafner is speaking the truth then it means two things. The first is that we cannot be briefed and the other is that the report is at large. Neither is any possible shade of good news. Your office has really failed us badly here if this is the case.

Muttered voice sotto voce – *it also means she cannot run her own fucking office...*

- Denis...for the last time, this is utter *madness*. The document was handed to Mr Hafner personally, by me.
- But not *withdrawn* by you. And it should have been, regardless of meetings. Did you see what was in the envelope?

Madge moves to speak, but then seems to realise the weakness of her position.

- No.
- And the only person to see it was your personal secretary, yes?
- It appears so.
- So if it was filed intact then it follows that your secretary has caused a compromise of the document. Is that not a reasonable assertion?
- *If* we assume Mr Hafner is telling the truth. And my secretary was...*is* beyond all doubt. I will stake my own reputation on that.

Muttered voice sotto voce – *Oh! Her 'reputation...'*

Silver Hair didn't hear that. Iain strikes up.

- It may come to that Margaret, he says, more than mildly enjoying watching Margaret's extreme discomfort. – So far it seems that your staff is letting you down all over the place. And it seems you don't know the who or the why of it. Minister, I am gravely disappointed in you.

Margaret's face is red and she seems to be hideously wounded. Silver Hair appeals for calm.

- Perhaps we could examine all options. First of all, we need to contact your secretary.

Madge's face falls. For the first time in the few hours I have known her I see her go weak and stammer like a child caught in a lie.

- That...won't be possible.
- Why not?
- I received word late last night that my secretary...is dead.

Another round of muttering. Even one *this gets worse and worse*.

- *Dead?*
- Yes. He appears to have committed suicide.

Fat man shakes his head. Weird-looker opens his mouth.

- Is that not an *incredible* coincidence?
- I don't know, says Madge. – We don't know why he did it. He left no note.
- This is just unbelievable!
- He was a faithful servant to HMG and a long-time personal friend. Please at least have some respect for the man. He was a *friend*. He was an *elected member*.

Muttered voice sotto voce – *The member with the election. How Chinese...*

Denis of the Silver Hair interjects. – We certainly don't want to disrespect the dead, Minister, and you of course have our sympathies. (A chorus of muttered asset...none of it feels sincere) – But we need to know what has gone on here. Is there *any* danger that the document was passed on to anyone else by your late colleague?

- No! None!
- Are you sure about that?
- Yes, I am.
- *How* can you possibly be sure of that? You obviously weren't with him all the time.
- I know that man. Knew him. I'd vouch for him to the Moon and back again.

- He met no one else in all that time?
- No, he didn't. No one.

I haven't said a word. I cannot let on that *I know*.

- Well is there any indication as to what happened?
- No, none.
- Did this happen at his home?
- Yes.

Denis turns to me.

- Mr Hafner. I really have to ask for your candour. I need to be assured of your honesty.
- Sir, I can not only confirm the facts, I still have the package as it was delivered to me.
- Do you have it with you?
- No. Again, I have it securely stored.
- We may be able to identify the persons who have touched it by some form of biological analysis. We need to recover it from you.
- Certainly. May I also add at this point that I have no doubts about the fact that the Minister is telling the truth. I don't think anyone here has the least doubt over her rectitude and honesty.

Assenting *proto-bovine* mutters from all round.

- In which case, says Denis – we must focus on the secretary. One has to assume that something has happened to him or that someone got to him that caused him to turn like this and to take the grievous actions he carried out. I'm sorry Minister, but a pragmatic view of the situation would suggest this. We therefore must assume he was contacted by someone, and then find out who he spoke to and what happened to the report.
- Agreed, says the fat man.
- Agreed, says Margaret in a weak voice. She seems to be staring at me still.
- In view of the fact that Mr Hafner has not seen the report, I suggest we pass this matter back to the appropriate authority and defer this meeting until some point in the future when we can speak with knowledge on the subject. Anyone object?

Mutterings around the table in agreement with the proposal.

- Fine. This meeting is postponed until that time. I will be in contact with you all for the reconvention, hopefully sooner rather than later.

Everyone stands, makes their apologies and leaves. Some have quiet consoling words for Madge. A hand on an arm. Open gestures. They file off out the door down the corridor in silence. Madge and I are left behind. She checks outside, then shuts the door and turns to me, her face scarlet, eyes verging on the inventively malevolent. She spits out her words in a ferocious whisper an inch from my face. I reply in quiet whispers.

- *Explain yourself.*
- I can. I have the report. It's safe.
- *What?*
- I have the report. It's safe.
- *I heard you! I just don't follow you at all! We just lied to the fucking DAC!!*
- I have been approached, Madge. The report is not safe. I have to protect it. I am not sure these people are our friends.

Madge's face changes from one degree of gobsmacked to the next.

- Where is it?

I look about the room theatrically, tracing a finger in a wide arc. I think I've seen this gesture once a long time ago, maybe in a film. I conclude with a sort of dramatic finger twirl close to my head.

- In *here*?
- No, but I am not about to say it *out loud*.

Madge is speechless. She also looks completely furious. Possessed. Afire.

- *Come with me.*

She stomps off down the corridor and down the flight of stairs I had only just ascended. I pursue her down a few other corridors – she can put on an alarming burst of pace when she is angry – and into a fairly bare room which I notice is numbered 277A. She walks inside, turns and lets me in before she shuts the door firmly behind me.

- Right. You have *a minute* to explain yourself completely before I kill you *to your bastard lingering death*.

I take a deep breath.

- I have the document hidden safely.
- Where?
- It's in the British Museum.

She winces and shakes her head as though I had just slapped her on the face.

- The British *what*?

- Museum. It's in Great Russell Street near the...
- *I fucking know the fuck where the fuck the fucking British Fucking Museum fucking is. Why the Holy Cunt of Mary is the report fucking there and why the fuck are you fucking making a fucking prize fucking dick out of me?*

There is something about the *cut glass accent* that makes all this outpouring of oaths and utterances sound almost musical and poetic, as though rehearsed for years as part of a familial tradition kept up by royalty. I admit that *the Holy Cunt of Mary* is not one I had heard before. She shows imagination. The only thing that I am worried about is the very real possibility that she might sink her talons into my face.

- I'm not. I told you – I was approached.
- Who by?
- I don't know.

She has the same physical reaction as before. If she gets fired from this job then she'll do well in a career in slapstick if the call ever comes through; she can double-take like James Finlayson. It seems to take the vinegar out of her.

- You're 'approached' by someone – you don't know who – and so you take the most damaging document ever written in the history of civilised humanity and decide to hide it in a place which happens to be the biggest tourist attraction in the city? *At what point since yesterday did you lose your bloody mind?*
- I haven't. I am behaving in the most rational manner that I could under the....
- You're an *idiot*. And I was the bigger *idiot* for trusting you with it. What in the WORLD was I *THINKING OF?*
- Madge...calm down. It is not lost. I was approached in my hotel last night by some guy who clearly thinks he knows me and that I know him. He asked for the report. Fortunately I had stashed it before then.
- You fled to and from London yesterday to stash it in a museum?
- No, no. I had hidden it elsewhere. I replaced it with blank pages and passed it off as whatever you gave me. I still have the report.
- So who was this '*some guy*'?
- Like I said - I don't know. He came to my room with a sports bag and gave that to me. It contained a bunch of money, a gun and ammunition and some personal effects.
- A *gun*?
- Yes, some kind of handgun.
- This is just madness. *Madness*. Did you give him the report?
- As I said, I told him that the 'blank page' version was what you had given me and that I hadn't even opened it.

Margaret walks about the room as through she is waking up from being concussed. I have to say that I have sympathy for her. I feel much the same way, but maybe for different reasons.

- Have you been suffering from some sort of amnesia, Austin?

I could always tell her the truth right now. *Yes, I woke up yesterday and not only didn't know who or where I was but I appear to be living inside someone else's body in someone else's life and that Austin Hafner is a stranger to me.* On reflection, that doesn't sound like the best possible way of addressing the situation.

- No. This guy knew *me* and obviously thought I was running some sort of a spy mission for him.

She stares at me. – This is utter insanity, you know. I could maybe even have you arrested for this. Sectioned. Shot. Sectioned *and then* shot. And then *shot again*.

- For what? Protecting information like this? I don't think so.
- Well we have to get the document back as soon as possible, whatever the risks.
- That might be risky. I don't know I'm not being followed.
- Jesus Christ, Austin, we are the government. We have means as well, you know.
- I realise. Oh, and Hartley was onto me again yesterday.
- The tatty journalist. He's a fix. We're using him to squeeze the leak out of him.
- So why did you tell me that he was to be avoided because he was hell-bent on bringing us down?
- I was being overheard. Besides, you ought to know that already. He is trying that trick. We're using him without him knowing he is being used. He thinks he is striking a blow for humanity or something.
- Oh...I see.
- What was this guy's name who approached you last night?
- I have no idea. He never told me.
- He never *told you*? When were you going to ask him *who the fuck are you and why are you in my hotel room*?
- It wasn't as clear-cut as that...
- *Nothing* seems to be clear cut here. Nothing at all. All I know is that leaks are one thing but this is just too much. We *have* to get the report back *immediately*. There are no copies of it at all, anywhere.
- I still don't think that....

Her phone rings. She picks it from her tailored jacket pocket and answers it smartly. Although the conversation is brief, her only word uttered ('*Shit..*') does tend to suggest

it's not the best news. She snaps the phone off and goes to a phone on an empty desk. She furiously presses a bunch of numbers and then speaks.

- Helen? What's the story? (pause) Already? (longer pause) Fuck and damnation. Where and when? (pause) Can you tell him we are busy right now? (brief pause) Well tell him anything – that we are conducting research or something. Anything. (longer pause now) Right. (sigh) Give us ten minutes.

Down goes the phone.

- You're really making this day go *swimmingly well*, Austin.
- I'm sorry, Madge. You may have behaved the same way if you'd have been in the same position.
- And yet I also may *not*.
- We will get through this.
- *We*? Oh sure *we* will. We seem to have Westminster hopping mad within the space of fifteen minutes of your little bombshell upstairs.
- Let them be hopping mad. It really doesn't matter if they are...

Madge sneers at me. – Have you *met* the Deputy Prime Minister, Austin?

- No, I haven't.
- Then good. This will be another new experience for you.
- What will?
- We've been summoned to see him *now*. And we're walking.
- Is this bad news?
- It's not good news. His summons tend to reek of the executioner's block.

We walk the short distance down the riverside to the imposing and beautiful Palace of Westminster – such a contrast to the sleety grey of Whitehall - where we enter the building via a small entrance I didn't recognise (or had never seen) and are taken upstairs by two men in *much* better suits who lead us into a lift which takes us up what feels like two floors.

Margaret keeps shooting glances at me, maybe trying to assess whether or not I am up to the task ahead of us. He keeps tapping on her brown valise and shows all the signs of someone under the outer edges of stress. We are led up a short carpeted flight of steps, along a deeply carpeted hallway and up to a heavy oak office door. One knock by one of our escorts and we enter, our presence announced to the occupant as if we were entering a debutantes' ball. We are whisked inside. As an afterthought – so it seems – we are informed by our escorts that the occupant of the room is the Deputy Prime Minister.

The man inside greets us without shaking hands, or indeed much humanity at all. Broad northern accent. Very fat, with what appears to be a scowl chiselled onto his face. He wears a good shirt and a well-knotted plain tie, but his suit is a well-cut mess as though it was perfectly made for someone else of an entirely different shape. He indicates we sit at a dark leather suite in front of a glass coffee table.

- I've got tea coming, Margaret.
- Fine. Thank you, Gerald.
- I've also asked Brian and Mark to sit in on this meeting. We'll start when they arrive.
- I understand.

I gaze around the room and see that it's well-appointed. Dark leather suites, large partner's sized desk at the far end of the room. Papers everywhere. Glass cabinets on one wall. A long dark sofa on one side upon which are seated four people. They make no sound and merely gaze ahead of themselves, as if detached from everyone else. One woman, three men. All in standard suits, all with pads and papers. One appears to have some sort of recording device. Middle-aged people. One guy with a military bearing, the others nondescript. Just like how you'd imagine the oiled wheels of secrecy to rotate. One even slightly descriptive cog in the mechanism and the whole machine falls apart.

- Oh and don't mind the guests. Just observers. You know.
- I guessed, Gerald. From the *other place*?
- Yes, well...you know. We have to be transparent these days.
- Yes...no matter how opaque *they* may be?

The DPM smiles at some privately shared joke.

- Well yes, exactly. They don't say a lot, but they have to be here. Rule twenty seven and all that guff.
- I thought we were superceding all that walloo.
- Well, yes we were but since *Cosgrove* we have to retain it. That sort of woke it all up again.
- Oh really? I thought the review was already in for that?
- I wish it was, Margaret. Sadly it isn't. The fix was in for that deal *ages* ago. Bentley and his mates have a lot to answer for. That little bout of opprobrium cost us all very dear. Now we have to patch leaks and at the same time let everyone know where the leak is coming from. It's all public personal scrutiny now.
- There is really no other way, I suppose.

- Maybe not, but there is one extreme and there is the other. We either have the trust of the population or we don't, and frankly I don't see this measure of a cure being any better than the disease it is trying to combat.
- All for the good, I guess.
- Maybe *commune bonum* but not anything else.

Both Margaret and the Deputy exchange polite laughter over their witty *bon mots*. I can't tell if they actually like one another or merely tolerate each other's existence as something they have to live with or be cursed with. I have to observe though that Margaret's *Institut Villa Pierrefeu* ways don't gel at all with the other's rough and hearty Northern beer and whippets bonhomie. Then again, I don't think there is just that under the surface. I can tell from his bearing that he's another example of *local lawyer makes a name for himself, gets a senior partnership, finds himself a name for upholding traditions of public service, likes the limelight, likes the sound of his own voice and turns to politics for kicks*. Not actually that clever, but he can fake it. On cue, he turns to me.

- So *you* must be the Hafdon man, then.
- Hafner, I correct him. – I'm Austin Hafner.

He shakes my hand. Firm grip, powerful hands. *No fucking about with me, son*. That grip also tells me he knows my name but thinks that he can put me in my place by appearing not to know it. *Joke's on you, Mr Flat Cap*. It's not my face and it's not my name.

- I'm Gerald Shepherd, Deputy Prime Minister. I suppose you've seen me on the telly.
- I'm sure I have.

My own put-down was much weaker, and only invites more trouble.

- You worked with the Minister for long?
- Oh...long enough yes, I falter. – Though this has all been unlike anything I have ever known.
- Well, we can wait until the others get here before we hear *your* side of things.

Now *that* doesn't sound good. It sounds like there is another side of things and the cheerless grin on his face implies he finds the other version the more believable of the two. I feel like I am being set up here all over again.

- I was on that flaming *Newsnight* last night with that creep Desmond Torreman. Did you see it, either of you?
- I caught some of it later on iPlayer, says Margaret. – I thought you came across quite well.

Oh, a subtle takedown there. Too busy to see you at the time, I saw you on the Internet later on when I could be bothered. She's really good at this nonsense, I *must* concede.

- Torremán is a troublemaking bastard, says the DPM. – The interviewer kept trying to drag him back onto the subject of the banking crisis but all *he* wanted to do was drag on about that Waters nonsense. I mean, where does he get off on that?
- It made him look weak, I thought. He didn't answer much on the questions presented to him and repeated his answers twice after that, then got on about the other matter. Considering that is so *passé* it's a wonder he wasn't told to simply shut up and move on.
- Ah it will damage him more than me, I'm sure of that. But he's such a tedious little man to have to deal with. I never know why the other side *ever* put him up as Shadow Home. They have such better talents in their ranks.
- Maybe they do it out of spite, says Margaret. – After all, the spat between him and Wriggers is hardly a cold business and they are trying to make a good fist out of a bad situation.
- He was on the same programme right after me. I must see if I can get a copy of it.
- Taking tips from Wriggers?
- No, heavens no. He's just such an utter *cock* every time he speaks. You are guaranteed a laugh with him anyway. Did you hear him at their Conference last summer about the minimum wage?
- Oh god yes. Calling it a *Tecora in waiting* or something, wasn't it?
- Coming from a man like him, that doesn't look or sound great, does it?
- He plays that card too often, says Margaret. – He has it all coming to him.
- Well. Enemy of an enemy and all that.
- Who does that put you in bed with, Gerald?

Another knock. Tea and biscuits arrive. They are laid out on the table by one of the men in suits who have taken it from a young girl who stands outside the door. There is a fuss made of who is pouring for whom, the DPM eventually doing it for everyone. While he is doing this there is another knock and three more men in suits walk in, all of them much younger and better cut than the teaboy. One says his hellos to the room. The DPM talks as he pours.

- Margaret, you know Brian Richards and Mark Winters from *over the road*?

I flash a glance at Madge and she looks already like she is on the back foot, as though she wasn't expecting these people to arrive. She flicks her eyes at me in a glance that lasts less than a second, but which conveys a depth of meaning; *this is serious stuff – please don't mess this up. If you do I will stab you in the balls.*

- Yes, we've met once or twice. You both okay?

- Yes, fine thanks Minister. We've also brought along Thomas Burns from the outside office. You know. Just in case.
- Oh I doubt we'll be needing that, but he's welcome enough to listen in, says the DPM.
- Thomas is here for any SF nonsense, says Brian or Mark. – We don't know if there is any requirement for that at this stage but we ought to be prepared.
- Of course, wobbles the jowls of the DPM.

Once we all have tea we sit back and a moment's silence strikes the room. The four observers haven't moved much. Neither do they seem to want any tea. The three newcomers have pens and papers at the ready, Margaret looks apprehensive and the DPM is clearly trying to think of the first words he can say through a mouthful of crumbed biscuits

- Well, he says - first off, this meeting is to be *very, very confidential*. Not a word outside this room. Fine?

Assent all round.

- Good. I know I can count on your discretion here. Now, this is Mr Hafner and he will tell us a story about a report that has gone missing after he was given it by the Minister here. What we have to ask is where it is and what leakage has been done.
- Actually, I say – that's not *quite* what happened....
- Well then, let's hear your end of the story first, shall we?

The DPM leans forward to take an Abbey Crunch and dunks it into his tea as he sizes me up with fierce little gimlets that quite clearly look upon me as grievously wounded prey.

- Yesterday I was given a report by the Minister here. I was asked to read and assess it and summarise it. She gave it to me in a coffee shop only along the street from the hotel where I was staying for...
- Yes, can we move on a little?
- Yes. Sorry. I took the document back to my hotel room and read it and can tell you ... well. It's just dynamite. If any of the report ever got to the public then I don't know what the consequences would be.

He fixes me again as he dismantles the oat delight and baffles his words through the shrapnel.

- You've read it, right?
- Yes.
- *All* of it?

I look over to Margaret, but her face is expressionless.

- Yes, all of it.

He pauses a beat, crunching away.

- Did it make sense to you?
- Well...I am a bit wary of givi9ng details, as you know...
- ...of course, of course...
- ...but...yes, of course it did. Some codenames were a bit obscure, but it was all pretty clear, yes.

He leans back and smiles. Chewing slowly. Something has pleased him. And Margaret looks at him nervously.

- Excellent...and is it the dynamite we think it is?
- By all means, yes it is.
- I am led to believe, says the DPM - that it would lead to the fall of this and many other governments and probably every institution here and abroad that has any clout *at all*. I am also told that it would spell the end of all organised religion and might actually cause *warfare* between several nations. But anyway...I'm interrupting..
- Oh my *god*, gasps BrianMarkOrThomas. – What on earth can possibly be in this report that makes it so damaging?
- That is where Mr Hafner was going to help us. Go on, Mr Hafner.
- Well...once I read it I realised it was big news, so I hid it in the hotel room and replaced it with blank pages from a writing pad. I didn't want to leave it lying around for just anyone to pick up.
- Commendable, says the loud voice of the DPM, not looking at me but raising his eyebrows. I can tell he has a cocked weapon waiting for me; he's just picking his hide.
- To cut a long story short I was approached by *someone* last night in the hotel who seemed to know me. I don't have his name, but he knew mine. In essence he asked for the report, asking as though obtaining it had been the plan all along and that I was...I dunno...working against the government in some way.
- *Against the government...*
- Well that's the way it felt, Mr Farmer.
- That's *Shepherd...*
- Anyway, I gave him the envelope and he opened it and saw the blank pages. He didn't believe me at first and thought I was taking him for a ride, but I convinced him that I wasn't and had received it like that. After a bit of persuasion he came to the conclusion that I was maybe telling the truth and left.

- Anything else?
- He left a sports bag with me. It contained clothes, money and a gun and ammunition. He brought it for me.

Some sucking on teeth. BrianMarkOrThomas speaks.

- And you have *no idea* who he is?
- I know that sounds incredible, but that is what happened.
- Did he give *any* indication what organisation or movement he was working for?
- None. The way he spoke he seemed to know me, so that sort of introduction would seem to be a bit redundant.
- Yes, quite. How did he introduce himself?
- Oh...well that's interesting. Someone called the room and said '*the code is green*' to me a few times. I had no idea what that meant. He arrived at my door immediately afterwards and said the same thing.

Looks are exchanged.

- Were those his *exact* words?
- The exact words on the phone were 'the code is green'. I cannot remember exactly how he phrased it when he came in, but it was the same thing he said.

They write this down. I peer onto the page one of them is writing on and see 'the code is green' written there with some initials after it. Puzzling.

- Can you describe him?
- Yes, I suppose – mid-thirties, well built, dark hair, a bit of an accent maybe from the north east. Casually dressed. Pale skinned. Pretty lean faced for a big guy. He could have been anyone. He was confident. Organised. I dunno...
- Well...alright. What sort of jargon did he use?
- In what sense?
- Did he speak in terms that you didn't follow?

Since this is currently defining everyone around me, that's a weak descriptor.

- Not that I remember.
- Did he name anyone else?
- No, he didn't. Oh well...he did mention one thing. He had clearly been listening to a conversation I had with the Minister on the hotel room phone.

Eyebrows are raised.

- How do you know this?

- He repeated it. And when I mentioned the Minister by name he flipped out and told me that I had to use code names only.
- Code names?
- Yes, you know like a substitute for a real name.
- Did he tell you the Minister's code name?
- Yes...it was 'Gatsby'.

Margaret looks puzzled. Mind you, so does everyone else. Apart from the DPM. He barely seems to be taking this in. Madge voices her bemusement.

- They call me *Gatsby*?
- I know why, says the DPM. – Think about it.
- *Gatsby*?
- Last June, maybe? The other fellah?

A penny seems to drop. Margaret mouths 'oohhh' but says nothing.

- I don't understand it either, I say. – Aren't code names random?
- Not entirely, gloats the DPM. – Sorry, do go on.
- Returning to the issue of codenames, says BrianMarkOrThomas. – Did he tell you his code name?
- Not that I recall.
- Your own?
- Again, not that I recall.
- Any others?
- Only one. He said '*Remix is dead*'. I assumed this was a code name of some sort. He spoke of the incident like it was some sort of suicide. I am now wondering if that is a reference to Mr Jessop.
- Yes, we heard about that, says the DPM, his face a straight mask of formalised, civic, imaginary pity. – *Tragic* story. A life of public service cut short. Tragic. Is there a press about that yet?
- None yet, Gerald. We'll get to it. It's a tragedy though.
- Anyone asked after Celia?
- Yes, she's distraught, as you might understand. I met her at her sister's place where she seemed alright at first but her legs buckled under her when she stood up to make us some tea.
- Oh the poor woman. At least you are making the effort, Margaret.

We have to pause a moment out of some kind of respect for these words. Of all the people in the room I wonder how many actually knew the late Jessop at all. Eyes are lowered an instant until I continue. Something about Margaret's words doesn't ring true.

- Well my visitor thought that if the document has been removed from safe-keeping for the Minister then it would have been him who did it.
- Jessop?
- Yes.
- I see.
- That was pretty much all we said that I can remember now.
- I see. This sports bag. Where is it?
- I have it locked away with all the other effects he gave me.
- And the report?

I look around the room. The four observers appear to be listening to me pretty keenly now.

- I have it secured.
- Where?
- It's in the British Museum.

The DPM nearly chokes on his tea and rocks forward in his seat to cough.

- The *what*?

Margaret quietly and slowly closes her eyes. She looks like a suicide who has seen the train and doesn't want to know when it's going to hit her.

- He's stored it in the British Museum, she says. - He told me the same thing. Its recovery is important, but so is tracing this fellow who approached him last night.
- I'm sure...assuming he even *exists*.

I look at the DPM who is glowering at me.

- I'm telling it like it is, I protest.
- Yes, I'm sure you want us to think that. But one minute you *have* a report and the next you *have it not*. My question to you is where did it go? Who has it?
- *I have it, I know where it is and I will get it back for you.*
- If you value your liberty you may well want to.

BrianMarkOrThomas continue.

- Did he give you anything else that may be of use to us?

- I'm trying to think...
- Well, I mean...what else was in the bag?
- Some clothes, toiletries...oh, and a phone.
- Have you seen the phone before?
- No. He also gave me a piece of paper in the bag with a phone number on it. I assume it's his, but I haven't tried to call it.
- Where is this number?
- I have it here.

I fish into my pocket and pull out the notebook, retrieving the phone number on the Post-It for them. They peer at it as though trying to divine the future from the remains of some tea leaves or the entrails of an eviscerated turtle. They write it down and put the slip into a plastic bag.

- Is there anything else you can remember that may be of use to us?
- Nothing really. He was pretty hostile when he saw the report was...well...blank.
- I see.
- I did mention that I had spoken to a couple of people in the hotel bar the night before. He seemed to think they were enemies of his plans and spoke about 'visiting them'. I've no idea what that meant.
- Who were these people?
- Just a couple of girls on their way to a music festival or something. Nothing unusual about either of them at all.
- Ok. Back to this visitor. Did he give you the impression he was working alone?
- No – he actually spoke about 'calling it in' when I gave him the fake report. That suggests at least one other person is working with him, doesn't it?
- Yes...it does. Do you have the phone with you?
- Yes, I do. I held onto it in case he wanted to contact me again.

I take it from my pocket and hand it over. They take it gingerly and drop it in a bag, then one of them presses a few buttons on it.

- Well...this has been helpful to us. We can get the office mobilised if you want us to?

The DPM leans forward in his chair.

- I certainly do. And I think we get this document back this morning with no further delay. After that we can worry about the ghosts in Mr Hafner's head at our leisure.

- Ger....Deputy, you're being unfair, says Madge. - Austin has been very straightforward in his dealing here.
- Margaret, your office is either under arrest, dead or under suspicion right now. I also understand from what I hear about it that your methods of handling eyes-only documents verges on the *supersonically stupid*. Maybe your opinion will weigh more favourably when we sort out all *your* little problems, yes? Until then, maybe we can compare dictionaries on the meaning of the word *straightforward* because what I have heard here in the last few minutes has absolutely *throttled my imagination*.
- I understand Deputy, she says quietly.
- Jesus Christ, Margaret. This has got to be worth a *flip*.
- Not again...
- There will have to be a closed session with the PM over this and that means that *once again* your office is coming under doubts about its ability to do anything within the boundaries of reason. Everything you touch seems to turn to disaster. Every plan you have turns out to be a disaster. Every person you trust seems to turn everything else into a disaster. *Gatsby? Gatsby?* They should have called you *Buttons*. You know why?

Margaret is silent.

- Because everything you are in ends up being a *fucking pantomime*.

I try not to snigger at that one. He must have heard it before, but it's a good line. Margaret looks chastened but seething. Someone has to pay for her humiliation. Her voice is clear enough, though.

- This is not the time or the place for this, Deputy.
- You're right. The PM might like to hear it himself. *Jesus Christ, Margaret*. Just do one thing right, will you?

Another pause.

- Mr Hafner?

The question comes from the chap I *think* is Thomas. He has the phone in his hands. His voice is soothing in the crackling air. The observers are writing stuff down. Pencils and pens scratching on notepads, recording the fact that the Deputy Prime Minister has just referred to one of his Ministers as *Buttons*.

- Yes?
- You got a call just before eight this morning. Just a short one. Who was it from?

I try to recall.

- That was from the driver who brought me from the hotel to Whitehall, I say to him. - He was just phoning to tell me he had arrived.

- Well...maybe this is a stupid question...but how does a government driver know the phone number of a phone that some mysterious stranger gave you the night before?

All eyes turned to ThinkIsThomas. The DPM asks him to clarify, a sudden look of intuition uncertainly crossing his face as though it was a foreigner in a foreign land.

- Well, when did the Department phone you about the car, before or after the stranger arrived?
- Before. I am sure it was before.
- Right, and they phoned on the hotel line?
- Yes, I'm sure of that.
- Well...how come the driver of the car knew the number of a phone that you were yet to be given?

It takes a moment to sink in.

- You're absolutely right. He phoned me on that phone and not the room.
- Right, which is why there is a record of that on the phone.

The DPM shifted his weight in the seat, like a vast seal shifting its basking position.

- How does this help up?
- Well, said ThinkIsThomas – it gives us somewhere to start. For a kick off we have the number of Mr Haftons's stranger last night...
- *Hafner..*
- Yes...sorry. And we also can tell that his driver this morning was somehow probably associated with him.
- Or that the stranger was associated with the department?
- Oh for crying out loud, let's not go down that path, eh?
- Yes, Deputy.
- Who was the driver?

I wrack my brains.

- Damn. I read it. First name...William, I'm sure. Second name sounded like...a Scottish town.
- Dundee? Inverness? Edinburgh?
- Aberdeen? Ullapool? Ayr?
- Is it a short name or a long name?

- I can't remember now....two syllables I thought.
- Two syllables and it *sounds* like a Scottish town?
- Glasgow?
- Falkirk?
- Melrose?
- Dundee?
- No, I said Dundee already.
- Sorry I never heard you...
- Any other clues?

Realisation...

- Wait...he also knew we were going to the British Museum. I didn't direct him there. He said something about his orders changing or something and that he was asked to stop there for a 'drop'.

The Deputy splutters into life again.

- This is *incredible*.
- Did he show you any ID or anything?
- Yes! Yes he did, that's how I read the name. It looked like some kind of official pass.
- Like what sort of official?
- Like it was from the Government.
- How about Cupar?
- Cooper?
- No, I don't mean it was the *same* as a Scottish town. I meant that it sounded *like* it.
- You mean like it rhymed?
- Yes.
- Hmmm. Bundeey?

The DPM has a slight attack of apoplexy.

- *Bundeey?* Who in the name of *cocking fuck* has ever heard of a name like *Bundeey*?
- I was just saying...
- East coast or west coast?

- I really don't know...maybe west? I am not sure I even know *where* it is, really.
- An old town or a newer one?
- Newer I think?
- Livingston?
- That has three syllables, Madge...
- I was just saying...
- Oh this getting us nowhere...why don't we just call transport and see who was assigned that detail?
- Irvine!
- His name's Irvine? William Irvine?
- No! Girvan! William *Girvan*.
- Spell it?
- G-I-R-V-A-N
- Well, says the DPM – I'm glad we sorted out *that* latest little crisis.
- I can trace that name if you like. If he has ID then he'll be traceable.
- Fine. What else can we do?
- Well, says BrianOrMark – what about we get Mr Hafner to phone the contact's number and get him to speak to him again? He could make up a story about something going wrong or whatever. We could run a DA14 on him and get Wilson's men on the mark.
- It sounds risky, says Madge. – For one thing we don't know how organised they are, secondly we don't know if 'they' amount to more than two or not, and thirdly we are dealing with people who we are told freely bandy about firearms. Heaven knows what they will want.
- I'm inclined to side with Mark, Margaret. It's a risk we have to take because we have few options and the stakes here are very high indeed.
- If you wish that, Deputy. I just think we ought to exercise caution in the way we go about it.
- Well okay. We'll have to get Hafner here to make the call though. *My* issue here – and I don't know if this is shared by anyone here, but I'll voice it – is that I don't know that Mr Hafner is entirely trustworthy or not.

He fixes me with his piggy stare again. Piggy wants the trough. I am in the way.

- I'm sorry you feel that way, Deputy.
- Oh I *do*, Mr Hafner. I still don't know if you are in this or out of it or what.

- Well..if I was *in* it do you think I'd be sat here listening to you?
- And what does *that* remark mean?
- Well, if I was in a plot to heist a report then why would I place myself in the position where I would be sitting here with you? Why would I not be in a car travelling at very fast miles an hour in the opposite direction?
- Because I don't know what game you are playing yet, *Mister* Hafner.
- It's not a game to me, Mr Shepherd. This sounds like a big deal.

Madge is sitting to the other side of the Deputy, signalling for me to *shut up*. Sadly though the words are out.

- This deal is a big one, yells the Deputy. – It will require clever people and convincing con artists, maybe even people who have been sleeping here for a while and who are now programmed to jump into action when the moment is right!
- Perhaps. Though I have to say, if a document of this magnitude is capable of being stolen by someone on an *errand* then I think quite a number of people have been sleeping all along.
- That's an outrageous slur!
- Maybe, Mr Shepherd, but that's the way it has been. Hasn't it?

I can see Madge sitting waiting to kill me again. On one hand I am impugning a lifelong friend, but on the other she knows that this particular fiction must be maintained for protection.

- You're very fucking sure of yourself, Hafner.
- Like I said, Deputy...I have to be since I am sitting *here* listening to *you*.

Madge rolls her eyes.

- This matter won't go away, you know.
- I hope not.
- There will be a steward's enquiry here after this has blown over and I can guarantee that arses will be kicked and heads will be rolling. Yours is the first one I have in my sights, trust me on that.
- There's nothing like a fair trial, is there?
- It *won't* be, Mr Hafner.

Madge clears her throat.

- Deputy....*Gerald*. This carping won't help for now.

- Yes, but we cannot trust him how can we trust him to speak to this...*agent* without knowing he is dropping in code words or instructions? How can we even be sure this agent exists?
- Well, we listen to the conversation and record it and see who answers. Isn't that a sensible approach?
- I'm having nothing to do with this now. Get over and find out about this driver. Call this *ghost* from last night and set up a meeting. And for Christ's sake, get that document back from the British Bloody Museum!
- Yes Deputy.
- Right well that's all.

The DPM stands up, signalling the meeting is at an end. No handshakes, just bad feelings, perplexed looks exchanged and vague whispering as we file out the office. The four observers stay where they are, their pages covered in writing. I wonder how many times the word *Buttons* was written down.

Madge collars me as we leave and whispers to me in a ventriloquist's *sotto voce*.

- Nice going, *you silly tool*. Maybe you could just tell him he was fat while you were at it.
- What else was I going to say?
- You could maybe *try* and avoid winding up Grievous Bodily Shepherd for one thing.
- The man is a twat. Why did you let him talk to you like that.
- Partly because he is the DPM and partly because he was almost correct. There is nothing like the moral hold for convincing someone that someone can be ground down.
- He's still a twat, Madge.
- He's a very intelligent twat, sadly. And he has a few things right so far. Priority one is to recover that report. Yes?
- Alright, yes. I always meant for us to get it back. It was just too dangerous. Imagine where we would be right now if Mr Code had made off with it. Shepherd would have probably chewed me instead of his biscuits.
- And why did you call him *Farmer*?
- He deserved it. Let's get the document back.
- Fine.

She turns and walks back up to Mark and speaks to him in a low voice. Muttered exchanges, a few wristwatch consultations. Nods of affirmation. Margaret walks back to me.

- Right, in ten minutes' time a car will be here. It will take you to the location where you stashed the *you-know-what*.
- Why are you always talking in euphemisms and riddles?

She carries on as if to ignore me.

- You'll go with the driver, recover the document and get back here. No deviations or diversions. Keep the document safe in your possession until we meet, then I will keep it in my safe.
- Don't tell me Girvan will be the driver again?
- No, we will have someone we know. I still need to know who drove you in here, but that is another matter being pursued by other people.
- How compartmentalised.
- Well yes, it has to be otherwise we'd get nothing done, as you well know.
- Will you be able to find the driver who brought me here?
- They'll work on it. Anyway, our first priority has to be the document. Now. Can you promise me this will go smoothly?
- Yes, of course. All the madness is about trying to cover our tracks.
- Good. Look, I'm sorry I flew off at you up the road, but you really had me dangling there. And that gave that fat shit the ammo to rail at me like that. Where in the *world of shit* does he think he has that right?
- I understand, Madge. I'm sorry. I hope you don't share the Deputy's doubts about me.
- I don't share the *same* doubts, she says, – but I don't doubt your integrity.
- He seemed keen on threatening me.
- He's like that. However, he is a fair man if a bit brusque. If he can find that you were not in dealings with your mystery man then you'll be OK. It's in his nature to suspect everyone. That's why he's an effective manager.
- Constant suspicion of your staff is hardly a good quality to have.
- I said *effective*, not necessarily *good*.

Madge's phone rings.

- Hello? (pause) Yes, I have him here. (pause) Right. (pause) Yes, he's aware of that. I'm sure he won't mind. (longer pause) No, that will be fine. (pause) Okay...thank you.

Phone off.

- And?

- You're on. The car is out by the West Gate. You'll be going with three men, including the driver. Two will come into the museum with you. Don't be insulted, it's just the nature of the deal going on, okay?
- Sure.
- Get the report, get the bag and get out. Clear?
- Absolutely.
- Okay. I will see you back at my office with the report inside thirty minutes, I hope.

Two men approach along the corridor walking at a brisk pace. They introduce themselves as Bruce and Lawrence. More suits. These look like they mean some sort of business, whatever that form of business might be. They accompany me without conversation down to an exit where a car waits outside for us. One of them seems to be muttering something into a concealed radio. I jump into the back with one of them after being shown the door, the car rocking as the others get in. The driver is not the same guy as I had before – this one is more of a civil servant clone. Wordlessly and without a lot of engine noise, we accelerate off away from the Palace and head back to the Museum where I hope I wasn't followed previously.

The route is short, but they make impressive speed down the road nevertheless, more or less following the same route that took me to Whitehall. I have to try and break the silence.

- What's going to happen when we get there?

The silence persists. One of them pipes up eventually.

- We'll take you in, get the goods and come out. Easy enough.

Silence resumes. The museum comes into view and we slow down dramatically and halt outside the entrance. The front door and back door open, which I take to mean I am expected to follow. The driver says something to a loudly bleeping box *somewhere* and I leave the car, following the two guys ahead of me.

They march up to the front entrance and make their way inside where they wait for me to catch up.

- Right, says one – there is a document and a bag. Document first, then bag.

What happens is something I just cannot explain.

I nod and march swiftly through the vast interior and into ROOM 1 but this time I turn to my left and reach a similar but entirely wrong set of books identical to the others. There must be about forty collections all looking exactly the same. But this time I don't pause or deviate – I bend over and pull the books apart theatrically, and then feign shock when I find of course that there is nothing there.

- It's *gone*...

The heavies panic as well. One of them seems to get a bit aggressive with me and takes the lead, this time pulling the books out and breaking the thin beading that holds them together. At the sight of this vandalism, two museum staff run over quickly but are bundled back by his colleague who flashes something in their face amidst the sound of squabbling. The other rakes between the volumes, as though he could find it where I had failed.

- Oh you're *kidding us*, he wails.
- Get onto Tim – let him know *right now*.
- OK.

The heavy drops the huge books noisily – which causes a beautiful echo in the shocked and mausoleum-like silence of the room – and starts wading into the others nearby to see if I was simply mistaken. I try not to even think about case 20 some distance away. Will they get to it in time?

The other one is in an agitated state on the phone. I can only hear bits of his half of the conversation, but whoever 'Tim' is he is clearly giving him stick.

- Yes (pause) We are searching now... (pause) Yes, he is still with us... (pause) He's not going anywhere....Time, I know what this looks like but....

And so it goes on. The first heavy has been pulling books clean out the shelf – not a mean feat, as the books are huge and solid - which has now attracted the attentions of more staff who have run up to see is. Phone heavy (who is now off the phone) shows a badge in a wallet again and then dismisses the protests of the staff. Heavy #2 is in a state of despair.

Phone heavy turns to me.

- You *sure* this was the place?
- Absolutely – I only put it here a couple of hours ago.
- Christ...

He returns to his call to repeat this. Tim is still unhappy. The phone conversation is clearly brought to an abrupt and undistinguished termination. Phone Heavy turns to me again.

- Tim says we have to take out everything on this room.
- What the fuck?
- He's sending a couple of carloads round. He's also phoning the staff and getting this place shut for the day until we find it.

They look around. Not only are there books in the cases, but there are thousands of books in cases around the perimeter of the room too.

- This will take us forever....
- I know

Phone Heavy regards me with a malicious glower.

- I'll ask you one more time...is the report in here?
- The report was right *here*.

I wave at the books now lying on the floor.

- Then you must have been followed in here by someone. Did you notice anyone?
- No. The place was absolutely full – you'd never notice anyone.
- Well there must have been *someone*...
- Really, I don't think there was.
- We better check the cloakroom, said Heavy #1
- Right – where are they?
- On the left of the entrance as you walk in, I say. – But I didn't leave it in there...
- We have to get it back anyway. We'll check it as a matter of routine.

Phone Heavy is back on his little handset walking behind Heavy #1 who is walking a little distance ahead. Quick as you like, I retreat to case 20 and (thankfully, thankfully, thankfully) find the report there, still folded as before. It goes into my pocket quickly, the book being pushed back roughly to where they were before. I can hear staff on the phone now. Just as I move back, Phone Heavy turns around and speaks.

- The boss is going to go *nuts* about this when he finds out..

I am left wondering who the *boss* in this case might be.

- What can I do?
- Honestly? I'd stay the hell out of sight if I were you. Things are going to get tough round here. You will be leaned on like you'll never know.

Heavy #1 is waving to staff ahead, presumably indicating that the place is to be closed and that a call has been placed to that effect. Phone Heavy is engaged with his conversation. I guess that their assistance will be here inside five minutes.

- Hey, Hafner? You are to stay in my sight *always*, got that?
- Sure. I just lost you there in the crowds in the room.
- Well stay the *fuck* with me.
- Sure. Where is your colleague?
- On the phone again. We've got about thirty people coming over.
- Just to search the place?
- Of course. You might have got it wrong or someone might have moved it.

- I'm not wrong – that book was exactly where it ought to have been.
- Well anyway, we have to get the bag from the locker.

I lead him through the crowds to the locker room and open the door to the locker I had only used earlier. Inside is the sports bag as I had left it. Heavy looks inside, presumably sees the money and gun intact, secures it and carries it with him.

- Come with me, he says

I follow, just in time to see a gang of clones in suits jogging into the cold stone concourse like some sort of film. It's almost comical. He takes me out to the waiting car outside, where the Driver Heavy is still waiting.

- What the fuck kept you? And what's happening? I've heard some of the craziest shit on the radio. They've just emptied Abinger House!
- It's not there. Bright boy here has lost it.
- Oh wow, says Driver Heavy – lost it? All of it?

Heavy #1 raises the sports bag and shows it to him.

- Well at least we got this.
- It's not inside it, is it?
- No, I checked.
- Fuck *me* they are not going to make you their poster boy, says Driver Heavy to me.
- Yeah, he's on notice I reckon.
- What next?
- There is a cohort moving in for a sweep.
- I heard. I just didn't guess. That's where they came from, yes?
- Right. Well, they are moving in now. Maybe need more. That place is fucking *huge*.
- No clues from him?
- He says he knows. He knows *nothing*.

Phone Heavy comes up to the car.

- Got them arranged. Simon has them moving now.
- Okay. Hey, Hafner? You *sure* it was even that room in the museum? You seem like you'd easily confused...
- Yes, yes I am sure.

- Well then either it's there and moved or he was followed and it was taken after him. Either way, we might have to clear the whole fucking room. It's *massive*.
- This is impossible.

I realise that my cheap phone has been ringing.

- Excuse me...

I walk away from the car and try to feel unimportant and insignificant, despite what is in my pocket.

- Yes?
- Austin, have you got it?

It's Madge.

- No. It's not there.

There is a lengthy pause at the other end of the line. I can't tell if she is wrestling with her wish to kill me again, or laughing, or crying or simply staring into the middle distance. When it returns, her voice is so measured I have to stifle the instinct to laugh.

- Have you any idea where it is?
- No. They are searching now.
- Who is?
- The guys who brought me here? Well some accomplices of them are looking for it now.
- Accomplices?
- Yes, you know. Others like them.
- How many?

She sounds genuinely puzzled.

- *Lots...*
- Did someone follow you?
- Not that I know of, no.
- Is this another of the games you have been stringing me along in?
- Not entirely....
- Austin. Give it to me straight. Please. Just once. *Do you have the report?*

I close my eyes and sigh.

- You are asking me the wrong question, Madge. Ask me another one. Ask me how long I will have it for instead.

- Austin...what *on earth* are you...
- Ask me, Madge...

The line pauses, just a whisper. I can hear her thinking.

- Austin. I have an even better question. Whose side are you really on? The DPM has you in his sights and I cannot stop him. Whose side are you on?
- Mine. And ours I hope. I trust no one here or anyone around me.
- Do you trust me?
- Yes, Madge. Though I don't know why exactly.
- Austin...

I sense an advantage.

- Madge, *I hope you can trust me*. Everything I tell you is because of what I see around me. And what I see are a bunch of gibbons in suits *beside* themselves with the hope of getting their hands on a report that would do them no good at all because they don't have the means to let it better them.
- Austin, are you safe? I mean, are they with you?
- I'm near the car but walking away slowly. They aren't very good at babysitting. They lost me once already.
- Be careful. They are all armed.
- I could sense that...
- Do you have it?
- Yes.
- What are you going to do?
- Protect it in the best way I know.
- Austin...please. You don't know what that report will do if it gets out.
- I know. So....
- Oh my god...
- Yeah Madge.
- Be sensible about this.
- I am being entirely sensible. You'll find out all about it.

I click the phone off and pocket it, then walk back across the road towards the car where I see various monkeys – including Heavy #1 – waiting around it. Phone Heavy is back on the blower again. As he talks he shoots me glances and seems to be discussing me

with whoever is on the other end of the phone. Some head-shaking. Some rueful gazes. I am no expert, but none of this augurs well for me. I try to appear nonchalant and side up to the car where I can hear the voices of two more heavies (neither of whom are all *that* heavy) discuss tactics. One of them asks whether or not it was a good idea to empty the place as the thief who followed me in might be getting his getaway granted to him. A remark like that has only revealed to me the depths of the ineptitude that I am in the centre of right now. I smile to myself but am forever weighed down with the quartered paper folded in my pocket.

- Okay, now we have to turn the place upside down.

The voice crackles over a radio in the car. The driver sighs and looks back round to me. People fill the street as they file out of the main gates, perhaps more people than they were anticipating. The pavements are broad, but not enough to keep the patrons from spilling out onto the roadway. In anticipation, I slide my hand into my pocket and grip the pages I find there. The driver still holds his gaze on me, so I try to avoid his suspicions by quartering my back to him. Just as I am caught in the crowds I slide back into them and manage to crouch down so I am lost to sight. I turn around to see the driver - phone at his ear - rise out of the car and look around to try and find me. But, as I was reminded earlier, this being the biggest attraction in the Capital has its advantages for me too. I slide down the pavement slowly and stare at the ground as I walk on the kerb until I find my place. I crouch down, whip out the papers and post it neatly through the grating next to the pedestrian crossing which takes it directly down into the rainwater run offs around the city, which in time will find its way into the public sewer system. I am left wondering if the thin paper will be disintegrated by the water first, before the sewage treatment gets to it. Either way, I give the report about two days' notice before it's destroyed quietly and quickly.

I work through the crowd and arc back to the driver, standing behind him. As I walk up I feel the phone vibrate in my pocket again. I snap I out and speak, my voice causing the driver to jump out of a mixture of relief and fright.

- Yes?
- Hafner? This is Max Ferlow. The minister has asked me to call you. You are to be brought back to Whitehall G23 immediately.
- I see. I don't know you, do I?
- No, I don't think we have met.
- You are aware of the circumstances, Mr Ferlow?
- I am. I expect you need my bona fides?
- I expect I do.
- We can sort that out at Whitehall. Right now I am calling your driver to bring you here as soon as possible.
- What about my other escorts?

- Given what is happening right now I expect they will not be needed. For all that you have probably caused more trouble in two hours than most people here manage in a lifetime we don't think that any number of escorts will provide us with any better levels of protection against you.
- Do I detect humour in the face of Whitehall, Mr Ferlow?
- I'm a junior part of all this. My hands are hired. If I am being funny then I am in no way trying to reflect the opinions of our employers.

I smile to myself.

- How do I tell my driver? I am not thinking he is going to believe me.
- Don't worry. We are talking to him right now. Expect a fast ride.

The phone line goes dead and I turn to the driver who is also hanging up.

- I don't know who you are, he says, but you seem to be needed urgently back at the ranch.
- Yeah, I got that impression.
- Do you know how many people it's going to take to search this place? I mean...it will be *thousands*.
- I don't think it is searchable at all. And anyway....(I cast my arm across the vista of those leaving)...what are the chances that it's not with one of them anyway?
- I thought of that too. I can see another enquiry coming up. Get in the front seat. This is going to be very fast indeed.

He's not kidding. The car carefully avoids the flood of pedestrians and then hares up the road, pinning me into the seat. I don't think I have ever been driven quite at this rate in a city before. *Assuming before even exists*. Faces of the curious watch us as the car streaks past them, in and out of their lives in a matter of a second or two. Something they might remember later that day when they wonder why the museum was closed down. And why is nothing on the news about it? Must have been a bomb or something. I guess that the convenient silence of that fiction will remain as long as is required, which may well be forever.

We spin round back to the white buildings we had come from some hours ago, and then into the rear car park of one where a much larger black car sits. There is a man at the wheel, and another in the front seat. Standing just outside the car on a phone is an impeccably dressed middle-aged man in a light grey silvered suit, perfectly matched tie and a beautifully matching turban. His beard is greying and neat and his face turning to me as my car arches around him. He seems to be nodding in the affirmative on the phone to whoever he is talking with.

- This is where we must part, says the driver.
- Thanks.
- Don't mention it. I can't wait to see what happens next...

I get out the car and find that the Indian-looking guy is waving at me, beckoning me to come forward. He looks like a magician's assistant, I think to myself. Or someone you'd see standing beside a bank vault guarding it. I wonder if he has a sword in his suit. I walk up to him in confidence, at least knowing that one weight has been lifted from me properly and forever. As I close up to him I hear him say 'yes....yes...' on the phone a few times, then slide it into his pocket. He faces me and extends his hand. His arms seem incredibly long and I also notice that the suit is so well tailored that the cuff barely moves up his wrist.

- I'm Max Ferlow, he says. Thank you for coming so quickly.
- Thank you. Should I know what this is about?

His grip is firm but not tight. I meet his eyes with mine and sense that there is a warmth there that has been lacking in almost everyone else so far. I warm to him immediately. *Max is an odd name for this guy – doesn't seem to fit.*

- No one really knows what this is about, Mr Hafner. We fly by the seat of our pants too often around here sometimes. Come sit with me in the back of the car. We're going to have to take you well out of London for the next stage of this process. I'm going to have to brief you on a couple of things en route. It's easier if you hear it as we travel.
- Okay then. Where are we going?

He opens the door to the large black car (Daimler? Maybe) and we get in the back. The driver starts the engine and the car silently glides off over the tarmac and back out onto the main road without pausing for as much as a touch on the brakes. With the minimal amount of effort, the black vehicle slides silently up the road as though carpeted underneath. Much more agreeable than the last guy's efforts. At least this guy knows how to change gears without crashing through them.

- Well, Mr Hafner. I'm pleased to meet you.
- Call me Austin. My hands are as hired as yours are.
- In that case I am Max. The minister has given you over to me for her safe-keeping. We are travelling out to an address just north of the City where things can move on a little better without everyone meddling over every last detail of what needs to be done.
- That sounds sensible.
- It is. The minister cannot be with us because of her commitments to the State, but she wants you to know that she and I have no secrets and that my discretion is absolute. Whatever you would say to her you can say to me.
- Are you working alone?
- No, I have staff at the address already. I am here to brief you, among other things.
- That's a considerable reassurance, I say. – I seem to be caught up in the middle of something I am not really able to define here.

Max smiles to himself and gazes out the window of the car. I notice his eyes don't move.

- That happens to us all, I suppose. At times.

For some reason that remark doesn't fill me with inspiration at all. We travel in silence a while. Max offers me a mineral water which I gulp down eagerly from the bottle, only latterly noticing that he has offered me a paper cup from a cabinet in the armrest. His expression is that of surprise, and I suddenly feel so gauche, but the feeling passes quickly enough. The back of the driver's head sits motionless. Charing Cross. Tottenham. Hampstead. Camden. Highgate. All flash by us faster than you can blink as we chase northwards out of the city, weaving a sinuous path through the traffic.

- Can we turn to the matter in hand, Austin?
- Sure, Max. I would actually welcome it. I have a few unanswered questions of my own.
- We'll reach them in time, I am sure.
- Fine.

He pauses a moment and talks to the middle distance.

- How well did you know William Jessop?

Unanswered question number one already. Way to go, Max.

- Not all that well. He worked in the Minister's office I know and he was her bagman but other than that? Nothing really.
- I see. Do you know the inner turmoils he was going through?
- Not beyond scuttlebutt, no. Do you?
- Well that is one of the many things we are trying to uncover. You see he was a valued and trusted friend and servant to the country and then something happens with an important document, it disappears somehow and then he is implicated from start to finish. We would really like to find out what happened to him between the hours he got the document out for the Minister and the hours of his...well...his untimely demise.
- I am sure it would clear a lot of things up.
- Well...perhaps. Though I am guessing it may raise more immediate questions than answers.
- Really?
- Yes, I am sure of it.
- Why is that?
- Well, there is the matter of what his motivations were – assuming he is involved, of course.

- Of course.
- And the other matters of who he was in contact with and just who he was meeting and when.
- I see.

We pause again. I clear my throat a little and play an opening gambit.

- Max, is this all coming from the Minister?
- Of course.
- I see. When did you and she last speak about this?
- Shortly before I left the offices to reach you. Why? Has there been some development of which I should be aware?
- No, I'm just wondering the same thing. You seem to be talking as if something has happened which changes the Minister's strategy.
- No, she is as much in the dark as anyone else.

Well. That settles that. The time between my destruction of the document, my conversation with Madge and Max picking me up means that she would have had absolutely enough time to tell him. All of this adds up to. Well. Several things, maybe. Does the Minister not actually trust Max with this news? Has she told him and are they deceiving me? Or...more worryingly...how close is Max to the Minister at all?

- So is Mr Jessop still the *weak link* in all of this?
- It's a long chain, Austin. Mr Jessop was but one link in what must have been a series of weaknesses. None of this adds up to anything very positive for any of us. However, the Minister is keen to find out what it is that you know about Mr Jessop.
- Well....nothing really. Only what I have been told.
- Yes...yes, that's what she thought you might say.

Max smiles. The smile could be that of a friend or that of a cobra about to hit you in the throat.

- So how can I help?
- Well, in the first instance we are going to travel up to an address from which you can speak to your 'contact' from last night and see what information can be gleaned from him. For another you might like to recall what you and Mr Bryant talked about in the Minister's absence after she handed you what you both assumed was the document.

Oh. Now here comes a novel twist in the process. Max's eyes have quietly met mine now. Less the friend, more the cobra.

- Hmm...that's an interesting question.

- It is, isn't it? Didn't you think to tell anyone before now?
- I didn't really think it was all that significant, Max.

Max smiles broadly this time and gives a mirthless laugh.

- Austin, old boy. You and another department member talk about a senior member of the Minister's staff, hatch a plan about him and then once he is found dead you don't think it is 'all that significant'? Do you see that this isn't something that anyone is going to find very believable?

I gulp hard. I seem to be making traps for myself now.

- Bryant and I didn't mention anything specific; we just discussed Jessop in the same vague terms as the Minister. She thought that it might be Jessop who was responsible for the leaks. Bryant didn't think Jessop was capable of it.
- So you convinced him of the fact?
- Far from it. Jessop didn't have the finesse for it.
- I didn't think you knew him much.
- I didn't. It was a guess. A hunch.
- I see. So why did Bryant call Jessop in the early evening before Jessop decided to hang himself?

Woa.

- I don't know. Did he?
- Yes, and we assume that you knew about it.

We?

- I didn't.
- Well according to the recording we have of the conversation, Bryant said that it was your idea for him to make the call.
- He did?
- He did. I know that is a little strange given your managerial line, but that's what he said.
- Wait....you have a *recording* of this conversation?
- Of course we do. Jessop has conceded to having his home lines recorded since Hollybanks, if only for his own protection. So yes, we have a record of what was said and we have Bryant saying...hold on.

Max lifts a little red Moleskine notebook from his inside pocket and flips the pages, revealing neat, monotonous pencil script.

- Here we are. At 19:20 we have Bryant saying to Jessop *'I'm only calling you because of a conversation I had with Hafner earlier. It's his idea to ask you about the bad business in the office.'*
- Wow. That's not even remotely true, Max. I didn't make the suggestion. If anything, Bryant seemed to make the decision and was looking for me to back it up.
- And did you?
- No, not at all. I mean...I didn't say *'no don't do it'* because he's going to do it with or without my approval. Isn't he?

Max seems to be looking through me.

- He's a self-willed type, but then aren't you?
- Me? I'm nothing really.
- The Minister entrusted you with *the document* didn't she?
- She also entrusted Jessop with it. And look where he is.
- Yes. Just look at where he is.

I turn and gaze out of the window. Max is not hostile to me, or at least not overtly hostile anyway. But he is carrying out a distinct filleting operation on someone's behalf. Problem is, I don't know who. Madge seems not to trust him enough to tell him the full story which (I assume) means she is protecting me for some reason. But in doing that she is also exposing me to this Jessop mess. I am wondering now just who is on whose side.

- Bryant seems to be working on his own, albeit for his personal glory in the office.
- Hartley is being used but seems to think he has an angle on it that will break the government. Or something like that.
- Mr Code Is Green seems to be working *contra* the government, but seems to be most concerned with knowing the document's content with a view to...well....I don't know what. His is a world of codenames and blithering insanity.
- Madge is on the side of the government of course but seems to have little trust and fewer friends. One gets the impression she is resented by a lot of people. Sadly, Gatsby seems to be my greatest ally.
- Max? I don't know. He is working nominally for Madge but actually?
- I'm not even sure Jessop had any witting part in any of this.
- The various thugs who took me to the library might be working for the government but seem to be working for another faction within it, even perhaps for the DPM. They didn't seem to be motivated at all by much other than by getting the document back. Madge didn't seem to be sighted at all on them. Worrying.

- The document has been drawn together by civil servants working in ignorant collusion, which caused a couple of others to go doolally and try to cash in (I assume) on the explosive content embedded within it. Seemingly it was verified and appears to be true, but what can it all mean? It seems to be the most dangerous document in the world, with knowledge within it so damaging to *everyone and everything* that it just cannot be released anywhere. Whose benefit is it for? Why are so many people wanting to get their hands on it? If you could build a bomb so powerful that it would guarantee the expulsion of all life on the planet would it be a good idea to own it? Why not dismantle it?
- And that leaves me. Austin Hafner. Civil servant in what I assume is the Home Office, in some senior position within an office in Westminster and with a tie of *some kind* to the Minister in charge of the department. I seem to have few friends, very few confidantes and appear to be in constant threat of danger.
- And then there is the real me. And I don't know what or who I am any more. I live under Austin Hafner's exterior. I neither know him nor recognise him, and know nothing about his life or work. I am winging it. What started as a dream now seems to be reality, but I can consciously feel myself within all of this. Not a part of it. A spectator to it. It amuses and yet at the same time worries me. Where am I? Not me. But 'I'? I'm not here so where am I? What soul inhabits me now? Perhaps these things are not best dwelt upon.

It does occur to me that I really am Hafner and that I have suffered a catastrophic memory loss of some kind, but how likely is that? Or is this part of some greater scheme? After all, the document (which is seemingly nameless) has a power that could be used by any agency to further their intent. Am I the victim or tool of such an agency? If I am, then who? The most likely is Mr Code Is Green as he seems to think we know each other, but he seems more haphazard than anything else. This kind of thing would take experience and organisation light years beyond sports bag drops and whispered code names in anonymous hotel rooms. Or is that maybe the way these people actually operate?

All I am rock sure of now is that this is no dream. I seem to be living the dream now. For all that this sinks into me and realise that, my life has been if not forfeit then at least hi-jacked, I seem to be taking it incredibly well. Whoever 'I' might be.

- What else do you have on what Bryant said to Jessop?
- All a bit vague really. The most specific thing he said was that he was to focus his mind on the matter and think about it over the weekend.
- How was Jessop?
- How do you think? The man is a wreck at the best of times. The Minister kept him on through loyalty, which is admirable. Many thought that she was making a mistake.
- Bryant did say that Jessop was finding times tight with money. Did Jessop say anything about that?

- Not at all. And Jessop was not as broke as Bryant obviously thinks. He'd never have retained his clearance if he was. He'd be too vulnerable.
- And yet Barker and Francis were both cleared and they had the green-eyed disease when they smelled an opportunity. Barker's in his *blood cottage* now.
- Barker and Francis weren't cleared to the same level. And anyway, they were exposed to something far more potent than anything Jessop may have seen. No, they are going to be thrown to the pigs over this one. I'll never understand what got into their heads. Never. Barker especially. Such a position of trust.
- Bryant mentioned prosecution.
- It's completely possible, and the Minister agrees but there is little taste for it in some circles. The problem is that we aren't Chile – if you want to exact a price then you have to do it the right way, not just with a bullet and a lime pit.
- Well...that's a good thing. Transparency and all that, you know? The usual stuff?
- If only it were that easy. But yes, transparency is a good first step as long as the next step is accountability. The problem we of course face *there* is that none of this sort of thing ought to exist in the first place, if you see my point. We are in the land of smoke and mirrors now, where intentions are not straightforward, where promises made are never kept and where not everyone is as who they seem to be.

I stumble forward a bit further.

- Or who they think they are?
- Well, in some people's cases that is more obvious than in others. Some people think they are above the law, some people think they maybe even *are* the law. Few people are – as you know – in any position like that. No one can offer you a guarantee of any stripe of protective sympathy. Even you, Austin. You seem to think that the Minister is going to be able to shade your actions at all times. Strike that thought from your mind. She is going to have a much harder time simply saving her own skin here, I am afraid. Her currency is of a limited type.

I nod quietly and say nothing, trying to wean something else out of Max. He closes his mouth, but his eyes betray thought.

- Does she know this, Max?
- I have no idea for sure, but I would be shocked if she was so politically idiotic to believe that she has few enemies around her.
- We met with the DPM today. Their relationship seems to be a bit...
- Strained, perhaps?
- Well yes. Maybe that is a better expression for it.
- They haven't been the same since the last reshuffle when some of his people were vaulted so she could get her position at the *old place*. Even though he was

made DPM he never forgave the PM or the Minister, for that matter. Hardly her fault, but this life can be a strange a bitter one sometimes. What you have on one hand you lose by the other. And it never does you any good to remember who your friends are, does it?

- I guess it does no one any good really. Does the Minister have anyone you think she can rely upon?
- I think she thinks she can rely upon you; otherwise she'd never have given you what she did. That was a mark of deep and sincere trust. I hope that you're not thinking about abusing that. She is nervous about nearly everyone around her, and I'm not even sure I am as fully *in the loop* as I might like to think.
- I feel pretty out of the loop myself, Max. Sometimes events seem to happen that no one much seems to anticipate.
- The business with Jessop is a strange one I have to admit. You see, what we think is that Jessop had little to do with the leak and little if anything to do with the loss of the document.
- I see.
- Which leads to a few odd conclusions. One is that Jessop acted properly and was a fall guy for people with greater ambitions than he. The other is that he was induced into suppressing this evidence by a convenient suicide which he may or may not have been induced into.
- Wait...how can anyone induce anyone else into suicide.
- Oh come on Austin, everyone and his aunt knows that Jessop was on the edge at all times. A little push here and who knows where he might land.
- What about his wife?
- What about her?
- Didn't he feel some sort of obligation to protect her? It seems a bold thing to assume, that someone will happily just end it all over politics.
- We're talking more than just politics here, Austin. This is the biggest thing that has come up in this executive since...well, anything. If it suddenly goes missing and of the three people who had anything to do with it, two met yesterday and one of them discussed with a third party a matter concerning the third, and that this party then seemed to cause the third to go totally Tonto then suspicions are bound to fall.
- Am I under suspicion, Max?

Max pauses to consider his next words.

- Yes. But you're not a prime candidate in most peoples' eyes. The DPM is a hard bastard but he isn't unfair and if he thinks you are sincere he'll do whatever he can for you, which is a considerable amount. If you are trying to dissemble even

in the slightest with him then I advise you to prepare for some major inconveniences to the way your life has been flowing lately.

Now *there* is a laugh.

- Alright, Max.
- Now, Austin. I have been asked to fill in a few blanks for you, so to speak. They may shed some light on your current predicament. They may not. We will see.
- Okay...
- The first is that Jessop was under surveillance at all times, mostly for his own good. He is a weak link as we have observed, but he was thought to be sufficiently weak that he may draw out stronger elements that may have been drawn to him because of that weakness. It appears that he was and that they were. Why Bryant, we do not know. He may of course have other associates. How likely do you think it is that Bryant is part of a more sinister force?
- Bryant? I never thought of him like that.
- Neither do I. The problem is that he is a clumsy idiot with little to commend him for work of any real secrecy. You yourself will be aware of the COGENT and RUBYRED documents that were passed straight to you without his knowledge?
- Erm...yes....
- And that was because of the noise he made about COVERSQUARE, right?
- I presume so.
- Right. So we do not think Bryant is the man. We don't even think he is a tool of the opponent because he is such a tool himself. No. So that then rests back to you. Do you understand the reason why you are under observation now?

I pause.

- Tell me.
- How many people had a hand in this?
- Three?
- And who is the third?
- Oh...I see.
- She cannot be allowed to fall because – friends or otherwise – that sort of thing would bring down the whole edifice of HMG.
- So I am a sacrificial lamb? A scapegoat? The office cat?
- Not at all. But we have to eliminate any possibilities before we go any further. We have to make sure you are beyond all reproach and are as incorruptible as the Minister's judgement suggests.

- Why not look at Bryant first?
- We have. Bryant is being detained in an entirely bogus meeting at the offices while our men are inside his house quietly turning it upside down to find out what we can about him and his strange lifestyle.
- Good god. Are you really?
- Yes, we are. We are pretty good at it - as you know - but we have to make this step because we cannot make any progress beyond it until we do.
- Wow Max....this sounds like Russia in the 1950s!

Max laughs and shakes his head.

- If this was 1950s Russia we'd just shoot him and see if the problem persists. If it does, we have to look harder. If not, hey - we have the man.
- It still sounds unbearably harsh.
- Not really. We even got Nicky and his son out the house on a better pretext.
- I daren't ask what that might have been...
- Nothing grievous, but worrying enough to get them and their neighbours *out and away*. Don't try and pretend to me you've never seen that sort of sanction before now. We're all working on the same team by the same rules, Austin.

I shake myself awake from the awful reverie of thinking about a woman and her child being shaken down by the government for the supposed sins of her husband. I may not have liked Bryant, but I have to assume she is faultless in all of this.

- You don't like that as a method?
- Maybe not to anyone I know, Max.
- Not even to someone you view as a personal threat? Remember, this is mostly being done for your benefit, Austin. The Minister knows loyalty and family ties when she sees it.

Family ties.

- That actually doesn't make it any better you know. I'd sooner have nothing to do with the standard issue size twelve on the door.
- Oh Austin! Nothing as deeply egregious as that. It's far more subtle. We can be in and out in seconds. You know...like *professional cleaners*. You know the drill - we've done it so often before.

I sit in silence a while, feeling my stomach turn a quiet knot to itself. The roads fly past as I look outside, not even recognising them now. I chew quietly on my thumbnail.

- I didn't mean for that to happen, you know.
- You've become sensitive haven't you? We've done this before.

- How will Bryant find out? When his wife phones him?
- No, we have a way around that too.
- I bet you do. You think of everything.

We travel in silence a little further. I can tell Max is thinking of telling me something, but for some reason he is holding back on it. Maybe he senses vulnerability in me - maybe even my unease. I try not to let him dwell on it by breaking the silence.

- So have you found out anything more about this 'agent' I am supposed to be speaking with?

Max shifts in his seat, as though the subject isn't one he's entirely happy discussing. The look of one picking words as though picking your way through a live field of landmines crosses his face again.

- Not a *great* deal. The number you gave us does relate to a phone that has been used now and again in Sussex and once in Berkshire. Does that mean anything to you?
- No, nothing.
- It's one of those pay on account phones, so there is nothing we can do to trace it any better than just trying to meet up with the man you spoke with. Or maybe compromise him in some way - even just glean information from him. Anything, just to give us an *in*.

He looks at me hopefully as though I might have more to tell him on the subject, but I remain silent.

- What is it that you are wanting me to say to him?
- I don't know. I'm not running that part of it. Jim Duggan is up there now with his tech guys. We'll meet them soon and they will take you through the business. You'll have a couple of experienced handlers there with you to coach you a bit so you needn't worry too much about saying the right or wrong thing. They will tell you.
- I see.
- He has a few guys from the outside office at his disposal, plus a few field ops who are good at this sort of thing. They'll see you right.
- I'm glad to hear it.

Max grins. - Are you nervous?

- No, not nervous, but a bit apprehensive. You say Jim's men have a plan for me to follow already?
- I assume so. That's what they do.
- That's quick.

- The DPM's office can get motivation from even the most unlikely places when they especially need it, but they do have SOPs for nearly everything. Remember that Duggan reports to Halifax and he's in Harrison's back pocket. You don't get to be DPM by knowing nothing and no one.
- He's a brusque chap.
- He's direct. I'm actually surprised you have never met him before, what with the job you were doing last year.

Max's reference to *last year* suddenly piques my attention. Give me a clue, Max.

- What job was that?
- When you were reading RUBYRED for Home, he'd surely have been your upper line.

'Upper line' I assume means some form of line management. I take a stab at this. I recall the DPM introducing me as being someone I might recognise from the TV. He didn't talk as though we had ever met before then. That also clues me into the fact that I'm not a *political* creature, but a *nominally neutral* civil servant instead.

- He was never around. He deferred and delegated everything he could. I think he had other things going on at the time.

Max says nothing for a second, then looks a bit bemused at my remark.

- That doesn't much sound like the Gerald Shepherd I know but I will take your word for it. All reports I hear of him say that he is someone who finds it hard to let go of things. I don't really know him at all beyond TALISMAN meetings.

That name. Max was in on the deal.

- Way over my head Max...
- Well June and Brian were the ones who took the lead on that one. I have to wonder where she is going to be now that he's for the firing line. He got her that job, after all. She minuted those meeting so well. Poor cow.
- Well exactly.
- How well do you know Brian Barker?

Uh oh. Isn't that one of the '*fat Etonian poofs*' who is getting to take the fall for all the woes of the world? Didn't he make the document up with his colleague who is also being struck down? We need distance.

- Not at all. Madge knows them better than me. Actually, *Bryant* is your man for Barker. He did the dossier.
- June Barker doesn't deserve any of that. She was used from the get go by Brian for his own ends. I never really cared for him when we were together in the city offices. You cannot trust anyone that drinks that much.

- One has to wonder why people like Barker and Jessop continue to enjoy trust at all.

Max furrows his brow a bit and shakes his head, gazing out the window at the passing scenery.

- Jessop was a good and trusted man who got leaned on once too often. Barker was just a bad lot, really. But he held favour with too many people. He knew too many secrets. People like that grow into people like those he chooses to favour and it all gets horribly mixed up in the end. What starts off as good intentions ends up being the same intentions with bad motivations. Barker isn't an *evil* man; he's a *weak* man, and in this line you'll know that this is a far more serious crime. That makes him a bad lot who was a victim of the trust we placed in him.
- Doesn't that mean we share the blame for this mess?
- Some think that already. You'll find most anger about Brian Barker is actually a deep despair at the choices we make or have made. But don't let that slip out, Austin. It's a deceit we have to keep up to save appearance.
- Can I ask you about something?

Max's phone rings inside his jacket pocket. He excuses himself and mutters about '*having the delivery*' and so on, all no doubt blindingly oblique and somewhat humorous references to me. I cannot hear the voice on the other end, but I attribute it to yet another name in this intrigue, wrapped up in other nameless offices under a vast web of codenamed operations all of which are put at risk by operatives suffering from greed, stupidity or latent nervous breakdowns. It's a wonder any of this stuff works at all.

I lean against the window and watch the world whizz by me.

Twenty miles out of town we reach the place. I was expecting a rambling estate with a high-sided fence and a long driveway leading up to a crumbling country pile. My anticipation – probably fuelled by any number of spy thrillers and clichés about spy thrillers – is undone when I find we are dropped off in a faceless main street and I see Max knocking at the red-painted face of a main door to the garden side of a standard semi-detached house just a block away from a small Tesco. I keep my amazement to myself. After all, I might already know the place.

The door opens and a man in casual clothes opens the door smartly. We walk in and are greeted by an affable but tired-looking balding man with a ponytail, worn black jeans, a good amount of middle-aged spread and a replica Argentina football strip. Good grief. Fortunately, Max seems to know him well enough to shake his hand and say 'Hello Jim', which clues me into who this guy is. I assume he is a tech of some kind. I don't suppose he'd be much else looking the way he does. His young assistants seem to be doing most of the work anyway, their faces masks of concentration and intent as they mess about with a large electronic something-or-other with a large bright screen and a bunch of technical papers.

Jim turns to me and grins, extending his hand.

- Jim. Pleased to meet you.
- Austin Hafner.
- Hi, Austin. Bit of improvisation going on here right now. My guys are rigging and testing the sound recorder right now so we can get started pretty quickly, plus we have a digital trace going on. Here, come into the kitchen a sec.

We follow Jim through the hallway, past a lounge and into the rear of the house where two others are sitting at the glass topped dining table. Both wave a brief sign in an acknowledgement of me being there. One smiles up at Max and they exchange some kind of *hail fellow pleasantries* which is both reassuring and disconcerting. No one here is exactly a stranger, except me.

I catch something that a Dave has just tossed at me. A packet of chicken and bacon sandwiches which I assume were sourced from the same Tesco as was seen nearby.

- If you need a drink there are cans of Sprite in the fridge, he says. – Avoid the taps though. We haven't been in this place for about two months and there's an airlock or something in them which splutters out brown water now and then.

I smile in response and tear open the sandwich packet. Max turns to me and introduces me to the two seated at the table.

- Austin, this is John and Brian from the Field Ops team. They'll explain what they need from you.
- Okay...
- Hi Austin, says John. – Have a seat and we can run through this.

A cultured Scottish accent. Maybe east coast - some place bland like Edinburgh.

I pull out the cheap and cheerful chair and sit at the table, noticing the ringmarks and crumbs on its surface. I realise that this isn't a house at all. It's a workshop that is just being made to look like a house. So no one cleans up, no one empties the bins and heaven help us when you think what the toilets must be like.

- Okay, we know you have to speak to a covert op someplace. We don't know exactly what or who he is, but we know enough to say that he expects information to be forthcoming from you, yes?
- Right.
- We've not been briefed at all about what it is, other than to say that your contact is after a classified document and he thinks you are his mark inside the agency, is that about it?
- Close enough, yes.

- Okay. Obviously now you will have to do all the talking, but we will listen in and direct you in ways that we feel might be helpful to learning who he is and how he is motivated.
- Okay.
- We'll not speak, but we will pass you notes during the call. Don't ignore any of them, even if some of them seem to be a bit unusual. They are colour coded. Yellow is information only. Green is '*bring it up if you can*'. Red means '*bring it up at the next opportunity*'. Remember, some of what we might suggest is not there to help him but to elicit a response from him – to try and get him to say or do or plan something that will give us a bit of insight.

I chew on what's left of my sandwich crust and nod. Yellow for me, green to go, and red to stop everything and rearrange the conversation.

- When shall we start?
- That's up to Jim and his guys. We're doing this in the lounge where we can sit and take our time.

Brian pipes up.

- You got any questions you need to raise now?

Australian accent this time. Maybe Sydney?

- Where do I say I am calling from?
- Oh from your offices in London. You'll be on a mobile so he won't be able to do anything all that clever. He'll see the number, but that is all.
- Okay. What about other people?
- What do you mean?
- Well am I in the vicinity of anyone else or am I alone?
- No, you're alone. Tell him you are in an empty meeting room or something. Place yourself there right now, in your mind. Try and convince yourself that this is all real.

I try to picture the red-furnished rooms in Whitehall where Madge threatened me with death. I try not to convince myself of this being reality, though. That's a step too far.

- Okay, then I am ready when you are.
- Okay, now how are you going to start?
- Well, when we last spoke face-to-face he told me to phone if anything odd happened. I think it might be wise to say that something odd happened after all.
- Good, such as?

- Well he is after a *very* classified bit of information – a document. I could tell him that it has been...*destroyed*?

John ponders this. His face is not hopeful.

- No, too final. He might call off at that point.

Brian nods.

- How about you say that the document has been recovered...
- Yeah, give him a bit of hope...
- ...and that it was stashed at some prearranged place but that it was compromised?
- Nice one.

I nod in agreement.

- That would work. He told me about a drop in London where I went, and for a variety of reasons it was searched by some of our security guys.
- PO 17 actually, says Max.

Brian and John seem to like this.

- Perfect move then. Take it from there and say to him that the document *may* have been found and that there are government guys all over the building. Try and get him to come up with an alternative plan.
- Try and get him to meet you, if you can.
- Okay. If I can.
- We'll be here to help.
- Do we know if this number is connected now?

John turns to Jim who gives him a thumbs-up sign. We stand up and file through to the lounge which seems to have been furnished from a charity shop fire sale. At least the place is heated. I sit at the coffee table with Brian and John who unload pens and coloured sticky notes, plus a long ruled pad each. Jim appears behind me and plugs some connector into the small phone on the desk.

- Everyone's phone off?

Everyone nods apart from me. I take mine out and flip out the battery, pocketing it all. I can feel their lack of approbation already. *The guy is an amateur. The mission is doomed.*

- Both DATs running and phone uplinked to station now. In your own time, John.

John turns to me.

- Okay now, Austin?

- Yes, fine. Let's do this.

I am amused at my own overcompensation, mostly because my heart has started banging inside my chest. I'm not sure why as phone calls barely ever faze me. Bad news on the end of a phone never seems as bad as bad news face to face. I notice Max discreetly hovering outside the door to the hallway, just this side of the lounge. Is he listening? Is he gauging me? Will he be *making a report*?

Wow...was that a memory leeching through? Bad news on the phone?

I picture the red meeting room with its tasteful yet vapid furnishings. The telephone, the empty walls and bare conference table. The door is discreetly closed behind me so no one else in the stately corridors can make out a word that is being said in here. I'm there now, sitting inside a strange zone of unreality.

- Dialling now...

Brian's voice is low and steady as he hands me the wired handset. I lift it to my ear and wait those pregnant few seconds that it takes for the connection to be made, then the familiar purring commences as the other end rings.

Once. Twice. Three times. Four now. My labouring heart lifts with the idea that he isn't going to answer. I exhale and breathe easier now, just as he lifts the phone on the sixth ring. No voice. I break the strange silence.

- Hello?
- The code is *orange*...

The line is swiftly cut off. Silence, aside from empty static and few clicks.

Brian, John and Jim look at one another in expectation. I dare not say a word. I just shrug and look to Jim who lifts a *shushing finger* to his lips, indicating I should remain quiet, which is something I am unlikely to find completely impossible. They all exchange glances that seem to indicate that a code being *orange* is something they were oddly prepared for and is something that they can take in their stride. The room is strangely quiet for now.

I count off on my wristwatch – the Patek Philippe Aquanaut I found earlier; so, so much earlier. Almost a lifetime ago, or so it seems. Back in a cold dark dead hotel room where I was introduced to the man I am now, a man who is still a mystery and whose life is a series of so many names, codes, accidents and mysterious meetings. I never even knew people like me existed until a few dozen hours ago in a coffee shop in a rainy town in the south.

Jim is counting on his watch too. Brian takes the time to write something down on a yellow post-it note and slide it over the table to me:

He's likely to call back in 5

How he can tell this with such cast-iron certainty I don't know. Maybe 'orange' is a generally accepted cipher for '*not now but soon*'. But in that case, why don't they use orange notes as well as red and green? That might announce some subtlety to the proceedings, like '*bring this point up in the next five minutes*'. Or maybe they do and they just doubt I have the capacity for remembering a complex instruction like that.

No clocks tick in the room. I notice that the UPVC windows have a heavy double glaze over them which has effectively shut out all sound from beyond as well. I cannot even hear the woman outside labouring her brown wheelie bin across the dimpled surface of the cracked pavement.

Where did you get a watch like that?! 😊

That was passed unseen by John. He smiles up at me as I read it, maybe in an attempt to keep our tempers even and our spirits high. Then again, I cannot help but think he is measuring me up too, as though he cannot believe that a civil service grunt – assuming I am that, of course – can afford to have a ten thousand pound watch on his arm. I reach into my jacket pocket and pull out a pen, scribbling my response on the note:

Where did you get a watch like that?! 😊 A GIFT!

He pulls the note back to write something witty when the phone rings and he shoves the thought aside and regains his foil. Nodding to Jim he turns and nods to me and I pick up the phone. No time to tremble. Just do it. Maybe just enough time to improvise.

- Is the code green?

I hear my own voice say these mysterious words. Suddenly they seem less magical.

- The code is green. What line is this? Is it hard or trusted?

- Don't worry about that, it's a safe line to use.
- Well...how safe is 'safe'? Hard or trusted?

Brian has been scribbling fast:

Tell him "THROW DOWN"

- It's a throw down. Relax.
- Okay then. As long as you are sure. Is all OK?
- Kind of.
- Where are you?
- A deserted conference room. And don't worry - we get swept all the time.

John nods and smiles to me at these words. I am doing well, I sense.

- So is all OK or isn't it?
- Not exactly, no. There has been a bit of a complication and it's not good news at all.
- Speak.

John this time:

Document recovered and dropped - COMPROMISED.

- The document was recovered for you and the drop was made, but their guys were seen to move into the building. We have to assume they found and compromised the document.
- Oh no...no. No. No. No no no no no nonononononono....
- What happened to following me to London in three cars 'using parallels'? I thought you might be with me or at least have guys at the drop?

There is a pause. No voice from the other side. John flashes me a glance and makes a 'continue' rotation with his right hand.

- I mean, we made the delivery fine and then continued on to the offices without a hitch. The next we hear the boys from some department up here are all over the drop in a short space of time.
- Did you go back there?

His voice is suddenly harsh and staccato. Monosyllables fired from his lips like an indiscriminate weapon of accusation. John signals to me by nodding the affirmative.

- I was *taken* back, yes.
- That means they have the driver. They must. This is bad news, you know. We have him inside the office staff, dammit.

Brian and John are both writing fast:

Tell him you couldn't say anything about the driver

Yes we have the driver

I read both notes and they clearly cannot both be used. John snatches the second one away and points to the other on the table. I feel my voice crack a little.

- I didn't say anything about the driver. If they got anything they must have followed us there, but your guys would have seen them surely.
- So?
- Well then they must have been inside the building already waiting for us.
- How did you manage to get the document on the way back like that? Surely you would have to go back to the offices to get it, assuming it was even there.
- No...I called ahead and had a trusty check REMIX's desk. It was sitting in his top drawer. He hadn't even locked it.

I can sense him thinking long and hard. Brian gives me the thumbs up.

- Perhaps the Post Office thing was bogus.
- Perhaps it is.

This is more *wild improvising*. Jim, John and Brian fix me with direct stares to see if I flinch. I don't. I wing it. *Wild but controlled improvising*.

EXCELLENT. Set up a meeting for today!!

- If it has been lost to us then we have to call the job off.
- Maybe, but if REMIX got the report out once it can be removed again, don't you think?
- Maybe it could be, but who this time?
- They still trust me, remember.
- So why did they take you to the drop point? Who took you?

SECURITY to ~~make a bogus~~ trace the route

- I was taken back by the security guys...
- *In which case they have the driver and we are back to stage one.* The balloon has burst here, I am sure of it. What did security have to say to you?
- They said they wanted to trace the route.
- He's compromised. So will you be if they speak to him, and then the whole plan will unravel. *Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.*

Brian taps the last green note gently.

- I managed to save back everything from the bag aside from the clothing.
- Well that's something. Where are the goods?
- In my own bag, and it's locked away safely. I have the cash too. You'll need it back I assume.
- We might not.
- The game isn't over yet, you know.

- No, maybe, but we are being handed our hat I think. I will have to talk to Leonard about this. We might have to pull an exec here.

John and Brian exchanged looks and raised brows at that remark. Even I guessed what might comprise and entail *pulling an exec*.

- We're still in the game. The trophy is still there to be won, and remember, there is one thing in our favour still.

He pauses on the other end of the line either out of anticipation or puzzlement.

- *Well?*

...or irritation...

- They still view the document as being thermonuclear and trust no one with its content. If no one else, I am still in the game. No one *has* 'handed me my hat' yet.
- We might have to vary the game-plan though. We may have to leave them with the original and make a copy. I'm amazed they gave it to you in a café anyway. In plain view? So sloppy – really amazing.

I opine.

- I'm amazed REMIX was allowed into the situation at all.

Maybe my swagger is getting the better of me. Brian does a sort of 'cool it' movement with his hand. I notice both their blocks are covered in scribbled writing, none of which I can make out, partly because they are writing at oblique angles, but mostly because their scrawls make the Rosetta Stone look like a gentle bedside read.

- Maybe they regret that now.
- OK – when do we meet?
- We won't be meeting again. You know that.

That sounded pretty damned final.

- OK...then who?
- You can meet with YELLOWDOG. I'll send this phone a message with a time and date. Take the bag there and meet, hand it over and walk away. Keep the money but don't bank it. You might yet need it.
- OK...
- I will speak to Leonard and call you back.
- Give me a time so I can be alone.
- Give me two hours. I will call in exactly two hours' time. Now listen here: if you do *not* hear from me, destroy everything at once and walk away. Understood?
- Absolutely. But...we hope that won't happen, right?

- I hope not.
- Two hours.

The line clicks off without ceremony. I breathe an enormous sigh and put the phone down. Brian slaps my shoulder hard.

- Well done, Austin. That went really well.
- Yeah, good thinking. You led him like a pro.
- Thanks, John.

It took more out of me than I thought. Jim brings a glass of water and sits at the table with us now. The mood is congratulatory. Max is hovering in the background, on the phone again.

- So what do we do for two hours?
- We sit tight and wait, I guess.
- Billy, did we get anywhere with that?

One of Jim's assistants comes through and nods.

- We got a carrier. It's on the pass now, wired to SAC 3. Leave them to it.

We make laudatory sounds and drift through to the kitchen slowly. John gets up, fills the kettle and switches it on to boil, retrieving cups from a cupboard and a bag of teabags from a shopping bag.

- Who takes sugar?
- Two for me, thanks.
- Black for me.
- *Black tea?* Who does that anywhere but in a Chinese restaurant?
- I happen to *like* my tea black.
- You have that lactose thing happening there?
- No, not at all – I eat yoghurt and cheese and all sorts of dairy stuff. I just don't like milk in tea, that's all.
- Sounds weird to me. Do you take it in coffee?
- Oh of course. Coffee is much too harsh to take on its own, I think. Horrible.
- Well I like my coffee black and my tea white. Does that make me a weirdo or something?
- You've *always* been a weirdo – you don't need tea or coffee to make that point really, do you?

- You're just jealous of my exquisite taste, I reckon.
- Erm...remember we were in that Indian place in Bristol? I beg to differ.
- You are also jealous of the breadth of my culinary adventures. Okra is not an unusual vegetable, you know.
- Yeah, but with apples? That's a weird thing to do.

General laughter. Some a bit *work-matey-forced* sounding, but laughter nonetheless.

- It was an apple *sauce*.
- Looked like baby food to me...
- And it had chilli too.
- And tomatoes.
- I *liked* it! And I cannot have been the first to try that. It was on the menu, after all.
- I think the chef put that there as a bet, frankly. Remember the waiter's face when you asked for it?
- Well...it was nice. I've made it at home since then.
- Dear God, Jim. What was it like?
- Um. Not the best, really. I made it for Justine and she took one spoonful of it, kind of smiled at me and left the table. She's a lady of breeding, she is.
- Did she honk it up?
- She *withdrew*. The veil of human decency was drawn after that point.
- How is she doing anyway?
- Better now, thanks. She took the business with Charlotte pretty badly.
- Who's that?
- Her sister. She got pretty badly ill on holiday in Greece one year and it never really mended itself. They thought it was food poisoning at first and gave her treatment for that, then they thought it was gastric flu. They kind of went through a bunch of symptoms and illnesses until someone thought a proper diagnosis was needed.
- And?
- Oh they found a tumour on her pancreas. Killed her inside three months. Before she knew about it she was, you know...*ill but not dying*. The moment she knew it sent her into a slide and she never came out of it.
- Sometimes it's better not knowing, eh?

- I reckon.
- Someone told me that it only seems like that, and it's when you are already *on* the slide that you end up going for help, by which time it's too late.
- Interesting thought. Prevention better than the cure.
- Or ongoing maintenance, if you know what I mean.

Tea is passed around.

- Who was having sugar then? The bag's over there.
- Thanks.
- So were Justine and Charlotte close?
- Not at all until the end. It wasn't so much her dying as it was the feeling she had wasted their time together by letting each other grow apart. But they only lived about two miles away from each other.
- Christ Barney, your tea's strong. *With* milk, even...
- Barney?

A predictable matey smirk. Other matey groaning assuming '*not again*'.

- Not heard that one?
- No!
- Yeah, we were going through the stuff about FRACTAL last week on a Cadence Review process, and he told us he was in at 34/57.
- So? Wasn't he?
- Are you kidding? We haven't run 34/57 since the 1950s on the old relay set up. These days we're even past using the tunnelling stuff. It's all virtualised and wired through clouds via god knows where and god knows how. I doubt there's anyone left who can wire up a 34/57 these days – aside from Barney the Dinosaur here.

More laughter.

- Holy crap!
- Yeah, you took it well didn't you?
- I feel I rose above the self-administered insult to your own shallow knowledge of our profession.

More laughter.

- I wish your tea was shallower. It's like drinking tanning fluid.

- Is that how you made it at Bletchley in the days of 34/57, or was it a bit old hat for them too?
- Me and Turing were like *that*, I tell you. Taught him all he knows.
- I hear his tea was shit too.
- You know if you *go* to his old huts you can see a mark on the radiator where he used to chain his tin mug. I've stood *right on that spot* and I saw it. A big mark on an old iron radiator and that was Turing who did that.
- Sounds like he was a trusting type.
- That was what let him down.
- It was?
- He fell in with some bad type and was sexually compromised, and stupidly went to the police to report the theft of some stuff by this other guy. Of course the plods took one sniff of this and reported him for being queer, and as a compromise for his wartime work the bloody judge – some dehydrated old turdsplash - let him off jail on the understanding he's take hormones and shit that made him grow tits and have his hair drop out.
- Gordon Bennett. Really?

A snort.

- Alan Turing's tits? What a concept.
- Yeah. So he did something that showed he still had balls left and ate a poisoned apple, and killed himself.
- Christ. I didn't know he had done himself in.
- Well, there's something odd about that as well because there was this enquiry...
- Hang on!
- ...about the...what?
- The phone...

Sure enough, Max had heard the hot-wired phone ringing in the lounge. We rise up, spilling tea everywhere and run through to see its little screen flashing at us. I reach for it.

- Still running now. Just talk, it's recording.

I catch my breath and hit the green button.

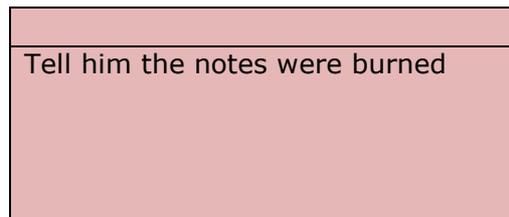
- Hi?
- The code?
- Uhm...green. I thought you said two hours?

- Change of heart. Leonard doesn't have to know anything about any of this stuff. It would give him a heart attack. I've been thinking over what you said about trust.

Same voice. Same measured tones.

- Yes, okay.
- They trusted that old neurotic fool enough to handle it and their processes are so slack that it's laughable.
- I think that might have been tightened up a bit by now.
- Maybe, but I don't believe for a second that your office didn't make a copy of the document. They trust individual morons, but not the collective. Is that making sense?
- Perhaps, but I have worked so far on the basis that there is only the original and nothing else.

I look around and see John and Brian looking perplexed. John scribbles.



- We both know that this is *not* the way the government works. Everything backed up in triplicate at least. One chain, many people, zero trust. Do you really think that your Executive would make such a bizarre decision as to loan this blistering world of shit and pain out to middle management on a *whim*?
- Well...if you put it like that, but I was even told that all the compilers' notes were burned after they wrote it.
- They might have been, but that still doesn't mean that the document wasn't copied at some point.
- Maybe.
- Now I need you to remember what GATSBY said to you about it. How did she describe the document to you?
- You mean security-wise?
- No, I mean by *content*.
- Um...I think she said it was a *copy of some briefing* or other. I forget the details.
- A copy, right. Was it printed?
- No, it was typed.

- *Typed?*
- Yes, like on a typewriter.
- Go on.
- Well, I mean the typeface looked...you know, like a typewriter had made it.
- Double-sided?
- Yes, why?
- I'm thinking here. If they typed the report then they cannot have an electronic copy of it, which stands to reason. So now you have to remember how the rest of the report looked. Was there writing on the pages?
- Writing?
- Stamps, margin notes, redactions, *anything?*
- There were some stamps there, I think. Like rubber stamps, yes. Is that what you mean?
- Yes, exactly. What did they say?

Say that the pages were the originals – by "feel"

- I can't remember now. It was like a department stamp or something. It didn't really say anything else. Maybe a date or something.
- But...if it has been stamped then it suggests someone else has seen it to stamp it, yes?
- I don't really know. Maybe the writers did it. I think the pages I had were the originals. I mean I felt the indentations on the paper where the keys had hit.

Don't give 2 much detail – you hardly had it any time!!!

He's right. I'm getting way too specific.

- Maybe it was, but there is something worth exploring. Let me think a second.

Silence on the line. We all exchange worried and perplexed looks. John and Brian's ideas have stopped. The timer on the recording device ticks through the minutes and seconds silently.

- How was the document bound?
- Um...in a cardboard folder sort of thing. Pretty unremarkable.
- *Think*, man. How was it held in the folder? Staples?

Something odd happens. I close my eyes a second...and I can see it. Clearly. In front of me. I can even smell it. More than a picture...it's a tangible thing in my hand.

- No, though I think it might have been stapled at one time, but it was a sort of string treasury tab that held it...
- Wait - *might have been stapled*?
- Yes.

I look to Brian and John for a lead. Brian makes a 'zip' movement across his mouth. I know what he is saying. John holds his hand up to motion for a pause.

- Think then – if you have a stapled document and then it's not stapled, what does that tell you?

I'm feeling a bit lost.

- That it has been rebound?
- Maybe. Or?
- Or?
- Or...that it has been through a photocopier?

Brian gives a thumbs-up at this news, and retrieves a note from before, appending to it:

EXCELLENT. Set up a meeting for today!! If there's a copy then we have to hand it over

I nod at Brian. John does too.

- That's possible yes. You want me to find out who and why?
- Well, I *assume* they have some sort of paper trail as to who had it before the late REMIX and the soon-to-be-former GATSBY - though on current form I'd say that this isn't precisely assured.

- No, I assume not. I'll get onto that lead of course.
- Pass me the name of the chain of people who have had it. Don't try and get it back yourself.

John nods.

- Okay. Um...do I still meet with YELLOWDOG?
- Yes, you will. I'll arrange that all for tomorrow. Leonard won't have to know anything about it.
- Is that wise?
- Give it a day to find out.
- A *day*?
- Yes, that's all you ought to need, isn't it? Just a day. All you are getting are names from a paper safe audit ticket. You know how the system works better than I ever did. Simple – in, register, out. Nothing more to it.

Interesting – he used the past tense? Was he onsite once and defected later? More mystery and intrigue abound, and how. I raise my eyebrows to Brian but he sits expressionless.

- Okay, I'll let you know when I get the information.
- Good show. Now call me at this time tomorrow exactly. Give me the trail and I'll give you a meet with YELLOWDOG. Okay?
- This sounds like an exchange of information.
- I told you that you are not out of the woods by any stretch yet. Remember?
- Yes, I know. I find this unsettling, really.
- Well that's as may be. But we are still looking into the whole REMIX business and we are certainly looking into *you* now as well.

A light tapping on the door. I turn round, as does everyone else to see Jim there, his expression anxious and his hands whirling. *Keep going*, he silently mouths. That might not be too hard, given this guy's defensiveness.

- Into me? Why me?
- Well don't you think that it's all a bit on the odd side for you to just lose something that's supposed to be the biggest bang since Krakatoa? And odder that you didn't even try to ask after this oddness when you spoke to the woman who is supposed to be your keeper? I did mention this to SMILEY. He didn't like the sound of it at all?
- Who?
- SMILEY.

No other explanation is forthcoming, so I assume I am supposed to know him.

- Why did you tell him?
- Him?
- SMILEY?
- *Him?* You really are a dolt at times, aren't you?
- I am?
- It seems you don't even remember anyone's names these days either...or remember them all too clearly, usually blurting them out in red-hot rooms wired for broadcasted calamity.
- Well why did you mention it? I mean I didn't think I was being anything but open-handed with you.

Brian does his 'cool it' movement with his hand again.

- Well, you know what we discussed earlier. We have to be certain about everyone here. The stakes we are playing on today are very high indeed and any transgression from *anyone* will be met with a harsh reckoning. That means you, me or anyone. It's bigger than all of us. You and I both know why.
- Tell me why.
- Have you forgotten? Or are you doubting yourself yet again?
- No, I want...I want to hear it from you.

John thumbs up. Brian wants me to slow down.

- We have to save this place from them. They asked for the information, they got it and now they are going to use it. We know they cannot be trusted. We know who is the right side and who is the wrong side. Don't we?
- Of course we do. It's just that they are so...persuasive sometimes.

John thumbs up again. Brian wants me to say more. I hear Jim hissing *one more minute* from behind us.

- The document has real power. Whoever has it could blackmail or otherwise persuade a number of *very powerful organisations indeed* to comply with them and give them the kind of tyranny over the mind of men that people like Jefferson swore on the altar of God to oppose. Do they face our eternal hostility?
- Yes...they do.
- Remember what Acton told us. Remember what we have to be. We have to be utterly without principles beyond our single guiding principle. If we are to be great men we have to be prepared to be bad men too.

I get a cold wash coming over me. I look to John and Brian and wonder. Who is being so persuasive now?

- I understand.
- If they get this information it will lift any form of restraint upon them. Absolute power will carry with it more than a mere tendency – it will carry with it an absolute imperative to behave with complete corruption.
- And who can resist that?
- Exactly, so that's why you have been given the task of recovering the document or at least finding where the copy lies. We'll take care of the government mob at the drop. I assume they are still there?

They will be, of course. They are looking for something that's no longer there and which they will not be allowed to stop looking for.

John:

HOW WILL HE
DO THAT?

- I assume so. It's a big place.
- Well, we will find a way of diverting them.
- How will you carry that out?
- Oh our standard H2 procedure.

Everything changes.

At these words, Brian is off his chair like an ignited liquid fuel rocket. He even forgets his own silence imperative and knocks his chair over onto the (thankfully) carpeted ground behind him as he runs from the room with phone in hand, heading towards the kitchen where I hear him shutting the door. I look up at John but he is not looking at me, instead entirely focussed on the unknown voice in his earpiece.

- Are you being disturbed there?
- No, just someone in the room opposite. A cleaner.

I drop my voice to match the imagined situation.

- I heard a noise. Be careful of them.
- I will. How soon can these measures be put in place?

- They will happen in the next hour or so. Once we are assured of that we can move onto other things, depending on the result of what you bring to us. You see now how important you are to our process?
- Yes, I do.
- Call me tomorrow as we discussed. Give us the names and we will give you back your redemption.
- I will. I will get onto this immediately.

I can see Brian outside the window, silent but in hugely animated conversation. He seems to have forgotten about every kind of security that has been drummed into him over the years. John is looking over my shoulder, then taps the table twice quickly and gives me a circular *wind it up now* movement. I assume that whatever Jim needs Jim now has.

- Fine. I will expect your call tomorrow.

The line clicks off again. As soon as it is dead the room starts bubbling with voices. Someone knocks on the window and waves Brian back in. Within the voices there is much *Jesus Christ-ing* and *fuck's sake-ing* to be heard. The guys in the room are the very opposite of the friendly, carefree bunch I heard earlier and are now showing genuine signs of stress. The change in their demeanour is all the more remarkable for the contrast.

- We have to move. Quickly. Jim, how fast?
- Flat out, maybe on a grade one we could do it in forty minutes.
- I can guarantee that we'll need it in twenty.
- I'm *trying*...

I'm so confused.

- John? What's happening?
- Sec...

John lifts out his phone and presses a speed dial on it. Cheap phone. Looks like government issue. His face is a veneer of somewhere between panic and excitement, perhaps shaded with drama and a touch of importance.

- Keith? Did you hear the last relay? (pause) Yes, the next *hour* he said. (pause) Get Anton out over this and call out everyone there is.

The room has quite unexpectedly turned into a foaming madhouse. Everyone is on a different phone (Jim, I notice is on two at once) and chattering away rapidly with a sudden and determined purpose that was lacking fifteen minutes ago. I have no idea what is going on or why the words of the guy on the end of the line has caused such an astounding degree of panic, but cause it, it most certainly has. I stand up and walk out of the room where I find Max, who oddly is the only person around me who is not on the phone.

- We better leave, I think.

I am puzzled by these words.

- We should?
- Yes, they have work to do and it needs to be done very, very quickly. We will only impede them. Besides, we have something to discuss and we cannot talk about it in here.
- I see. What will we do?
- We leave. Unfortunately the car has left and there will be no chance of getting through to the office now, so we walk out of here quickly and quietly.

I follow Max's lead and tail him down the hall, through the front door and out into the relative quiet and calm of the street. Max has a quick look around and then indicates for me to follow him. We cross the road and it occurs to me that Max doesn't know the area but is actively searching for something or somewhere. I skip along behind him – his strides are long and his purpose evident.

- So what do you want to discuss?
- Not here. Wait a while.

We walk past the newsagent and down a narrow road towards a tight nestle of trees which has appeared on the other side. As we get to the end of the walkway it appears that we are looking at a small public park, with a couple of picnic tables, incongruous and depressing in the uncommitted drizzle that hangs pregnant in the air. Max walks towards the wooden benches, looking around as he approaches it whilst obviously not trying to make it too obvious what he was doing. He indicates the bench and sits down on the left side. I stand over him for a second then sit two or three feet away from him, staring ahead.

- So?

I'm at a loss for words.

- Max?
- Austin. Look, this is going to sound unusual, so forgive me for it, okay?

Trepidation grips me.

- Okay. Whatever you want to say, just say it.
- Well. It's going to sound quite odd whichever way it comes out. Let me phrase it this way, shall I?

He pauses, then restarts.

- How long have we known each other?
- Come again?

- This isn't me making small talk, like *how long have we known each other old boy, oh what jolly times we've had*. I mean this as a direct question which warrants a direct answer. So. How long have we known each other?

I don't know which way to turn.

- A while...I really don't know.
- A *while*? How long is a *while*? How many is a *few*? How few is *some*?
- I'm sorry Max, I don't get this.
- Be specific, Austin. How long have we known each other? It's a really simple question and will come with a really simple answer. Now give it to me. How long have we known each other?
- I don't know. I really don't.

Max stares at me sideways.

- You sure about that answer, Austin?
- Well...yes. I don't know what you want me to say or how to answer this question. I don't keep a diary.
- Give me an answer, dammit. A specific answer, but be as vague as you like. Years. Months. Weeks. *Even hours...*

A cold hand reaches inside Austin Hafner and grips at his foreign little heart.

- Honestly Max. I really don't know. Where is this coming from?

Max takes a deep breath as though he is about to make a declamation of some type.

- Well...early on I asked you if you recalled the COGENT and RUBYRED documents that were passed straight to you without Bryant's knowledge, you recall?
- Actually, I don't really Max.
- Well, I did mention it. Let me phrase it this way: you do remember the COGENT and RUBYRED documents, don't you?

The grip tightens on Austin's innards.

- Yes, I do.
- You sure?
- Yes...I am. Will you tell me what this is about, Max?
- When we spoke a while back you said 'I don't think we've met' and you referred to me as 'Mr Ferlow'. Do you remember that?
- I think so.

- Austin. Be serious, will you? I know I'm playing someone else's game here but it was all for a purpose.
- What game?
- I was briefed. Now think about what you said to me.

I'm silent, partly due to the fact I have nothing to say and partly because I am feeling something looming over me for the first time and it feels like a heavy overcoat being taken off my back.

- Austin, there *is* no job named COGENT. Never has been. And the name. I've never been 'Mr Ferlow' to you in the three years we've known each other.

Silence. Something is horribly working its way up inside me and is crawling to escape. I breathe deeply, but it's making little difference to my acute discomfort.

- So what is the game here, Austin? What has happened to you?

Whatever it was scuttling up me, it erupts from within as I keel over the arm of the bench and violently retch it up, taking with it Tesco sandwiches and overcooked tea in a single projected stream that spatters on the cold concrete upon which the wooden frame is bolted. I lean there in silence a while, eyes closed, spitting out the foul dregs in my mouth. Suddenly I feel like I've been released from something.

- Sorry, Max.

My voice feels thin and weak, only a little more than a feeble groan.

- It's alright. But it begs the obvious question about who you are, doesn't it? Are you a forgetful version of Austin Hafner, or are you another version altogether?

I keep my eyes shut. It's easier to accept that way. Maybe easier to hide from something. I'm not sure and I'm not thinking about it. I just want to feel a million miles away from all of this. And for Max, I feel nothing but a weary kind of gratitude.

- I don't know.
- You don't?
- No. I mean...I know who I think I am, or who I want to be....but I can't remember who I was or anything.
- When did this start?
- Just before I met with Bryant. Yesterday morning.
- Austin...you met with Bryant *six days* ago...

Despite my eyes being screwed shut, I feel the entire world recede around me, carrying with it and within it all sense of reality and scope and purpose and perspective that I have ever known. You gain some time. You lose some time. In the end there is balance, but in the end there is also nothing – no equity and no loss. At the moment it feels like the scales are tipped over in no one's favour.

- That cannot be right...I met...

My words are cut short by a dry heave within me, convulsing me on the cold wooden slats of the bench. Now I am afraid to open my eyes in case I see another version of reality I don't even know.

- Take your time, says Max. – You must be feeling disoriented. I don't know why or anything like that, and nor do I really want to know. However, I have to give you the care you need. You're a valued asset to us.
- Asset?
- Absolutely. We all know it and you ought to be reminded of it from time to time.

I can feel Max's hand on my shoulder, but I don't react. I just sit there with my eyes closed and wonder how long the molecules in the seat remain solid enough to support my entirely mythical mass.

- I really don't know what you mean, Max.

More spitting.

- *Family ties*, Austin.
- What of them?
- We have to keep them up, you know. I'll have to do you a favour. It won't take long. I'm still not sure I know what version of Oz you are, but something tells me you're the genuine article in an odd set of circumstances. Someone else might be able to back this up.

I hear Max flipping on his phone and chattering to someone, but I take none of it in. Eyes still shut, the sour taste in my mouth and my nose, and the feeling of the damp air on my face.

My mouth. My nose. My face.

I can hear the voices of children through the breeze which has picked up around us. Simple, uncomplicated children's voices playing simple, uncomplicated children's games, probably. *I have no idea where I am.*

Max stops talking and returns his hand to my shoulder.

- All done?
- I don't know.
- I don't know what's up with you, nor do I know why you're saying what you're saying.
- I don't know who I am, Max.

A slight pause.

- I see. We've been working you well. As a valued asset you'd appreciate that fact of course.
- *A valued asset* I am.

We sit in the relative silence of the park and listen to the swish of the distant cars through the rain-filled roads and the cries of children and punts of a ball in the distance and Max's heavy breath next to me. He doesn't say anything, which marks my attention as being the act of a generous and compassionate man. Friend or cobra? Maybe a friendly cobra. Maybe I need something like that right now. Eyes shut. Rumbling in my head as they squeeze shut. How long is *a while*? How many is *a few*? How few is *some*?

Several. That many minutes pass in a dull kind of silence.

- We can go now, Austin. Stand up, they are here.

I'd sooner keel over than open my eyes and see who *they* are. I just stand on my flimsy feeling legs and let Max guide me forwards until we reach the pavement, at which point I hear the sound of a car engine idling and a door opening. I barely open my eyes to let myself into the back seat where I sit down hard and then slide across the back seat and wait.

The front passenger door opens and closes, Max's voice:

- Thanks, Ray.

The car moves off and I feel left behind by it.

- Sorry about that, Max.
- That's OK, Austin. Just relax. It's been a weird few days for you and the stress has got to you I am sure.
- I think it's more than stress.
- Well...we'll talk about all that later. But I know where you're coming from.

I try to regain some memory.

- Max?
- Yes?
- *The New Ellswater Hotel and Conference Facilities*. Why was I there?
- Um...we can't *really* go into that right now, Austin. It was for the job, though.
- Which job?
- Wow, you really *are* out of sorts, you know.
- It comes with the job, I think.
- It was for SPHINX.

- What's that?

Max laughs to himself quietly.

- Not what, you know - *who*.

Time passes. I assume so, anyway. Who knows?

I try to recollect it all as it happened, but I cannot escape the feeling that it's all been done already. *Six days?* Impossible. That just cannot be measured. I can only remember talking to him a few hours ago. *A few.* It makes so little sense and so little there is upon which I can drape any recollections. Did any of it even happen in the same order in which I seem to have experienced it? So what and where and how and when?

And above all else, *why?*

There's another life in here somewhere. Another forgotten life and I need to unbury it because this isn't any kind of a game anymore and certainly no kind of dream I can ever remember having to bear. *Pain begone I will have no more of this.*

Left. Right. Right. Bear on. Turn around. Turn right. Veer one way then the other. I can follow this route by the fluid in my inner ears. Balance. Equilibrium. Equity. Loss. The scales tip over as I hope they fall from my eyes. I contain a few dry heaves inside me, a reaction to spasm, movement and unseen vectors than to any other less conspicuous circumstances. No voices ahead of me, just the streaming pour of well-lubricated machinery and the smell of a little cardboard pine tree. I smile in recognition of the memory. A cold taxi one night after drinking a toast to a new birth. I hold on tight, but the memory slips through my fingers too quickly like quicksilver through a fork. Balance. Equilibrium. Equity. Loss.

The car vibrates as we navigate a series of adjacent turns, close by. Max asks if I am okay. I try to smile, but I keep my eyes shut. Nothing will persuade me to return to the real world because I seem to have lost it completely. Or it has found me. I'm really not sure which side the loss of balance has happened upon.

- Be there soon, Austin.

There or here or there or here. I really have nothing upon which I can moor myself any longer.

Time passes. Assumptions remain.

More close turns, right angles to each other, close proximity and we draw to a halt. The passenger door opens. Closes, followed by footsteps. A door adjacent to me opens and I step out into the cold air, into the guiding hand of Max again. The car purrs. The door closes behind me and we step up and hard pathway. Darkness all around me, stepping into a dim sort of light.

Doorbell ahead of me.

- You need a load of rest, Austin. We can talk about all of this later when you get your head together.
- I'm not sure it will be together for a while.
- That's fine. There will be time. *Family ties* are important to us all, you know.

I force a smile. I've heard that so many times before.

Clicking of a lock. A door opens.

- Hi Cory.
- Max?

A woman's voice, surprised and concerned.

- Sorry to spring out on you like this. We have a special delivery for you.
- Oh my god...
- You want to sign for him?

She pauses a beat, but I hear her breathe.

- Can I refuse?
- Afraid not. We have him down as one of yours, I think.
- I could be forgiven for having forgotten, you know.
- Cory, you need him back. Please take him. He's had a fairly dreadful time of it. I'll vouch for him and all his movements.
- Max, I trust you enough but there is a *giddy limit*. That was reached and passed some time ago.
- We have to leave, Cory.

The rain starts coming down on my head. Just on me, no one else.

- Leave the package.
- Thanks, Cory.
- Don't thank me. I don't feel that magnanimous yet.

Max pats my shoulder again from behind.

- I will call you, Austin. And I'll let Madge know about this *development*.
- Thank you.

Her voice. – Come in.

I walk forward into a warm room and hear the door close behind me. Max's footsteps recede. Doors close. I detect a smell of warm food in the air. Furniture polish. Scented candles.

- Well?

Curiosity overwhelms me. I crack my eyes open and look at the woman in front of me. She's dark and beautiful and she looks so angry. At me.

- Welcome *home*, Ozzy.

The word shocks me rigid.

- *Home?*

- You utter *little bastard*.

Paralysed with surprise, I stand still while she throws her **wine straight into my face**, turns around and walks out the hallway into the adjacent room from which I can now hear the **soft sound of the TV playing**.

INTERVAL

TALISMAN

A cold and stark room on the eighth floor, illuminated with a cold, luminous blue light. There are no blinds. Eight people seated there, two women and six men. Papers on desk, a folder in the centre of the table. bare walls, water in carafes beside polished glasses, plain lined blocks with supplied plain nibs, a lack of human contact with a vigorous surfeit of vague ambition on heavy blonde desks. Late at night? Discretion during the day? Who can tell?

Plain suits and functional haircuts, both sexes. The flipchart is empty. The projector is off. The phones are unplugged. Mobile phones inert on the desktop. Technology does not function here. Pens are untouched except for one person at the end of the table who writes everything on a yellow pad within a leather folder. No name badges. Shelves empty. Cupboards empty. The room does not exist.

Efficiency seems to be driving them substantially. There is little chit-chat or anything else about the group. They enter the room within two minutes end to end, sit at what seem to be pre-arranged places without name cards and immediately get down to business. Either they are efficient, or they know each other well, or they know that they really shouldn't be there.

Man at the top speaks.

- Thanks for coming along again. The time is....eleven minutes past twelve, 23rd May, present are the usual from the circulation, apologies previously noted. Minutes are being drawn on paper, there are no recordings being made. All phones are switched off. Have we all seen the last minutes?

Nodding.

- All agreed with them?
- Yes, seem fine to me.
- Seconded.

Moving of paper now.

- Fine, thanks. I haven't had a lot of time to prepare the agenda since this meeting has been put together somewhat at the last minute. However, let's move on with what we have got, based on where we were last time. Have we all managed to read through the Blough Brief?
- I got through it fine, Paul but there are a few points I have to make on it, if I can?
- No reason why not now – it was an action from last time. Can we move to it?

More moving of papers.

- I refer to the quoted sections on pages 45 to 52 about the operation launched in the US by their Federal Agency against their own organisation in Oklahoma.
- Ah yes....the blue section?

- Yes. Well, on reading through it I think we can see some serious parallels between what we are doing and what they have already done, and I was wondering if there is anything more we can learn from them.
- In what sense?
- Well, in the sense that their operation was ultimately something of a failure in that their operative was compromised by his own familiarity with the circumstances he was immersed within. He was given an operation which involved him in the accumulation of data which he had been party to in terms of the...um...original *collection*. Now, in itself the job wasn't particularly onerous, but the fact that he was surrounded by triggers meant that his...um...*what's the word?*
- Exposure?
- Well yes...kind of. His use was foreshortened by the proximity of him to the target, previously. Now we all know that our subject has exposure already, and the fact that the Federal man never really got back from the edge makes me wonder how we are viewing our assets. It is possible that the snap will happen and that he'll come around, or that he'll be...well...lost to us all. The former may compromise the operation to such a degree that we'll never recover from it. I was just wondering what the group's view of this is.
- Anyone?

Polite pause.

- We agreed from the outside that all assets are expendable as far as the quarry is concerned. The prize outstrips the methods, as we were once told.
- Yes, but the point is that this asset is not one we can simply replace with anything else. We need this one to complete the job; as we well know, there just isn't anyone we can use.
- That means it's a question of the *spice*.

A muted note around the table.

- I wasn't expecting this matter to come up quite this quickly.
- Me neither. How long have we got?
- Estimates range from between three weeks to six months. There have been few observations of spice being used beyond that. Some haven't come back after less than half the upper figure.
- Do we have any views on how he is bearing up?
- He seems okay so far, but this is only on remote observations. There is a degree of disorientation and naturally some feelings of *déjà vu* going on, but we can manipulate all that to our own advantage if we have to. More accurately, we can give a feeling of *vujà dé* – the notion that something seems familiar but which actually never happened before.

- Is there really such a thing?
- It's a colloquialism. Though I am assured by some who know better than me that real *déjà vu* doesn't actually exist; it's just a feeling you get in the unfamiliar where your mind is telling you is actually familiar.
- Well, either way, that can only improve with time and immersion, but do we have the time?
- We are within time, so far.
- Are we on schedule, though?
- Well, can I refer you all to the scoping document we received on 3rd March at the reconvene. We were told in fairly clear terms that there is no timescale envisaged for any of this.
- Is that because we expected it to happen a bit quicker than it is?
- Maybe. Remember, this is our first attempt at this and we were dealing, after all, with a single mark operation which could in theory have been completed on day one.
- That's another relevant question worth raising at this stage. Does he have the means to even do this?
- Why would he not?
- Well what we are asking of him is not exactly something you'd be able to do right off the bat, like tying your shoelaces or riding a bike, is it?
- They are both learned acts. This learned act was one – we are told – he taught himself. He should still be able to pull off the task. In fact...hang on... (*moving of papers*) I refer you to the CHEVALIER document we were supplied by the *Opération Inondation de Lyon 2007* committee within which they demonstrated that a spiced operative could read and remember a language which he had learned prior to deployment, and did not remember during it. The conclusion reached was that the matter was entirely dependent on the depth of the knowledge embedded in the mind of the reader. This guy used to read this – it's what he did.
- Are you sure?
- We are going to run some tests on some of the words that the CONFLUENCE team managed to crack to see if he can follow who they are. You know; conversationally drop them in and see how he reacts. If he doesn't miss a beat then he's still *in the zone* and will be able to turn the job without problems.
- And if not?
- Then he'll be bleached and sent back.

Fat man at the end of the table, silent so far.

- I have a question on extraction. Should it wait?
- Perhaps. The agenda is fluid but we have to think of the minute-taker.

Smiles.

- The first thing I wanted to recap on was the movements of the case. How has strategy been as far as our *positional play* is concerned?
- Well...it's not going *badly* but it is a bit slower than anticipated. After the handover we've steered him towards H2 twice – one of which was face to face – and we have established him tight with M3. Sadly, the *field business* afterwards speaks of his determination to hide his efforts. Now in one sense that might be construed as good news. His background of confidence and secrecy obviously persists, which might answer the question we were asked previously.
- Sort of – but a knowledge of the *way of doing things* is quite different from knowledge of *specifics*. Can we chuck him a bun and see if he swallows it?
- Such as?
- His desk diaries were written in the same way. Can we see if he recognises them?
- We thought of that already, but the problem with that would be with the continuance of our illusion. He's going to wonder why a stranger's diaries are in his hands.
- Couldn't we make up some kind of a cover story? Isn't that what we are doing anyway?
- I think the issue is more delicate than we think. Remember, we don't want to *lose* him.

Examination of papers.

- So we have him accepted within the community, so to speak and has been embedded into the friendship of at least one. Can we get an update on the present situation?

Coughing. Someone has to speak. It's awkward.

- Well...yes. I'm sure we all have an idea, but the truth is that the spice isn't holding all that well. He's a strong character. The façade was starting to slip more than just a little so we shipped him to M2 who saw to it that he was taken away from the action, so to speak, talked *to and with* at length and given at least some reassurances.
- And did they work?

Pause.

- No.

Sighing.

- Not a complete failure, but the talking made him grow despondent a bit. He also confessed his disbelief to M2 who relayed the message to us quickly. We took the option to give him a quick settlement and ship him home right away.
- Home?
- Yes – we left him with his wife. We’re told it’s a good way of regrounding.
- But...if he sees through the façade then won’t that...?
- No, no... It gives a sense of *resolve*. It centres the subject on the world and gives him a sense of identity via house, a wife, a family and so on.
- He has family? I didn’t think we planned on that one.
- We hadn’t actually. We do have a voice synthesis team standing by on it though. They will never meet, obviously.

Fat man again.

- I see a problem here.
- Go on?
- Okay...it leads on from my earlier point about extraction, but it is relevant to this discussion. Say he gets embedded to such an extent that he does what we need. What next? See, I’m thinking that even after bleaching he might need support – that the bleach will only bleach the spice out and leave him with nothing.
- Well...since that has been brought up, we have three options. We either terminate him, leave him as he is or we preserve him.
- I don’t think HMG has a taste for either the first two options.
- No, neither do I.
- So how do we preserve?
- By keeping the important parts of the story going.
- What, even after the *bleach*?
- If we need to, yes. As long as it takes.

Exchanged looks.

- How do we do that?
- We might toss him the important grounded parts of his life.
- Such as his wife?
- Perhaps.
- And what does *she* think of that?

- She knows the meaning of duty, I think you'll find. You don't just stick *anyone* into these situations and hope for the best. This is taking an awful lot of people and an awful lot of time...
- ...and money.
- Well, so far we haven't been challenged by anyone on the expense side of things, mercifully. It's widely viewed that we are doing this at almost any cost we can bear. We're still submitting costing sheets every month and they are being passed through without issue. The biggest issue to all of this is how deep the pockets are.
- Well...how deep *are* they?
- Very deep.
- As deep as – say – Defence?
- This *is* Defence.
- Well, arguably it's *offence*.
- We all know what it means, thanks.

Tapping of a pen on a table.

- So...to come back onto the major topic, can we say that the mission is on-track right now?

Mumblings.

- Mostly. It's not the sort of thing one can exactly plan out in enormous detail, nor predict to a perfect degree. We need someone resourceful and intelligent to complete the task, but that kind of person is also resistant to being completely collared by us. It's a science, but not an *exact* one.
- Our European colleagues seem to think otherwise. GD-15 told us from the outset that it's all a question of proportion and not just a matter of 'steering', as they put it. Feed him the right lines and he'll be reeled in.
- Well that's all well and good, but what other lines would you be feeding if you had your way entirely? We cannot do this any other way than we are doing and he *is* coming round to us.
- His latest reports indicate otherwise. M2 suggests there may be more to come. How is C4 going to handle this?
- Need I remind you that we nearly lost the entire deal thanks to his 'resourceful intelligence'? We had to browbeat him to get it back and the strain of that likely caused him to start to snap. This operation cannot be left to just drift along until he happens to do what we want by blind luck. This isn't infinite primates with infinite typewriters, you know.
- We are *well aware* of this...

- Then why are we no further forward? *This* is still a hieroglyphic mess.

He points to the folder in the middle of the table, so far unmentioned to by anyone sitting there.

- You expect too many results, too quickly! You have no *reasonable* expectation of...
- My *expectations* are to serve HMG in a timescale that makes this prize worth having.

A hand slapped on the table.

- *Please!*

Silence

- This is hugely unprofessional! We are not supposed to be here, we are not supposed to be discussing this and we barely even *exist*. So please, retain some decorum at least among ourselves. All we need to know are (a) *is the plan on time* and (b) *is the end goal achievable?* Do you not agree?

Chastened silence.

- Do we have an answer?

Woman with three-string pearls.

- The answer to both is 'yes'. We had a track out at the start and we are actually well within *all* parameters. As for the second point, we have to say 'yes' as there is patently no one else about who can do the job. That's all there is to it.

Pause.

- So...what do we do if the spice is slipping?

Cough. Thin young man who has so far not spoken.

- Well, we do have one option available to us, but it is a little risky. We can dilate time for him. We can take him out of the spice and lock him into an artificial state to allow some recovery and then reinvigorate the delivery.
- But won't he notice?
- Not if we control the environment around him.
- Which we already do.
- We do, yes. We just have to be a bit more stringent in it.
- Yes...no repetitions of the *newspaper slips*, right? That gave him a heads-up of about four days' lost time. Can we get a report on this dilation business? It sounds ideal.
- Sure. The Germans have tried it before and they maintain a 100% success rate.

- They would.

Small laughter.

- Action that would you?

Pause. Minutes being noted.

- Good. So can we move on?

Silent assent.

- Can we talk about obfuscated communications? Is there any way we can do this?
- In what sense?
- In that we can maybe send messages to him *under the radar* via our contacts within, so to speak.
- Such as whom?
- Well, M2 seems like an obvious choice.
- Maybe. Is this possible?
- In theory, yes. Then again we have to make sure they appeal to him at a level he understand but does not perceive.
- That all sounds a bit vague, though. If we are worried about triggers then won't these be triggers *par excellence*?
- Maybe.
- Sounds like a reckless act to me.

Pause.

- Can we move to the next matter?
- Sure.
- *Ongoing immersion*. Can you bring us up to speed on this one?
- Yes. Our future plans are going to involve allowing him to use his own ingenuity. We intend to let him think he has a bargaining chip, then will try to use it to his advantage to seek out the meaning of his existence. At that point we will have to take him out.
- Risky. How do we know he will have carried out the deed?
- Because if he has to use it then he has to prove what it is. As it stands, it's meaningless. Useless.
- Is this a calculated risk?

- The risk is only that he won't bite, but I think he will. He's self-sufficient enough. The thing is, to get him to do this he'll have to be rattled enough to realise he is in the middle of a web from which there is no escape. Our plan is to introduce J2, talk to him without revealing 'sides' which ought to make him sit and think the whole thing out. He'll then be taken by a clandestine route to the G1 and G2 locations where he will confront them, then contact B1 and B2 and speak to them. After he is with them then there is not going to be any way back.
- B1 is a thorn. How reliable is he?
- Enough of a cannon to need us to have B2 in the pocket.
- And how deep is that?

Thoughtful pause.

- Deep enough. Deep enough to know where the game will take us.
- We are asking for a substantial betrayal. That might work both ways.
- Loyalties to individuals and loyalties to the country are dealt with differently by different people. B2 is deep, and let's just leave it at that.
- B2 is critical to the whole scheme, you realise.
- B2 is the lynchpin. B2 will draw us to B1 and will get B1 to say enough to convince our asset to do what he has to do. But...small steps. We have to get them together first, and although B1 can talk he won't talk to the asset unless he thinks there is something that he can do.

Pause.

- Can I bring up the point about extraction now?

Pen scores through a point on the agenda.

- We may as well.
- Thanks – the point is that once the data is extracted, and we deal with the asset as we see fit, who are we passing the product to?
- Well...no one for now. We're sitting on it for the time being. But that is an issue for the PM and the DPM really. Whitehall can only advise them on that matter.
- So we are treating it as a weapon?
- Absolutely.
- What sort?
- The offensive type.

Longer pause.

- Do we know what we are actually dealing with?

- Clarify?

Pause.

- I mean...this could be something really *huge*, couldn't it? It's a first-strike weapon set to disrupt to such an extent that little will function afterwards. Tell me how this is unlike a nuke, will you?
- It's exactly the same. The death count is going to be different, that's all.
- Oh you *reckon*?

Mutterings.

- Are we dissenting now? We all knew what we were getting into when we started this. Is it all getting too close?
- Okay, time to stop this. Things are getting fraught and time is marching on. We'll reconvene soon once we have something to report on post the home return. Do we have any AOCB?

Silence.

- Okay. Circulation by closed orders. Reconvening at our future discretion. Let's go.

Silence. Standing. Leaving. Lights out. Doors closes.

No need to lock it. Nothing left within it.

No one was ever there.

PART II

FINDING

All things considered, it's not really a bad place.

The carpets are *dull ethnic* and clean, the colour scheme a comforting mix of browns and greys, nothing too jarring on the eye. Dried flowers, dried grasses and glass vases seem to appear everywhere you look, along with little touches that seem to reek of the odour of *coveted show home*. A heavy wooden chest – the wood modern but distressed, the locks of yellow metal but unhappy enough to look like old brass – forms the centre of the room and doubles as an ornamental table; the armchairs of a matching dark wood and firm cushioning, covered in dark rough fabric; an old six drawer bureau in the corner under a banker's lamp; scented candles and floor wax, the faint odour of a myriad air fresheners, or fabric cleaners, or soaps or something you use to clean the non-existent dirt from a non-existent life. This place is permanently on sale, every inch of it geometrically arranged and given a casual angle of studied nonchalance, a *feng shui* mess of indifferent angles whose apathetic symmetries belie a year's study of how to do it right, right down to the cool jazz sounds playing their languorous dirge at minimal volume on the tiny system whose voice would barely fill a teacup.

And in the middle of all of this showroom elegance, sat upon a sofa of the same shades as the carpet and the walls and the dark wood and the unhappy teak is me, my face still wet with what was projected into it and my hands still shaking every time I unclench them from such tightness that it draws my nails into my palms.

And there *she* is. I have no idea who she is, but I can make an estimate that she and I are sharing this home, that I have been away and that she is less than ecstatic about seeing me.

- I will not shout, because I don't want to wake up Jason...

Well. This is one way of learning that your part in the future of the species has not been an exercise in futile thumping of the tub. Jason – a name I associate with pipe-smoking detectives, Siamese cats, maybe fast cars...or is that Jensen?

I have a child by this woman. The thought of it and our shared history leaves me breathless, even within the strangeness of the circumstances anyway.

- OK
- ...but you owe me some size of an explanation.

She uses slow and measured words, as though she has done this before, many times. I remain silent. I am pretty sure she is not completely sober, but I am also aware that any intoxication of hers is probably a regular thing and that is likely to be something brought on by sharing a life with me.

- I know what you do for your work- in the vague terms you condescend to feed me - and I know that this can and does take you away from me on occasions. But this occasion has been...*unacceptable*. No calls, no messages, no e-mails, no nothing. No words, not even from your lackeys, no Max, no Ray no nothing. I *know* I cannot ask and I cannot question and I cannot be the interrogator, but this time I need just a word from you to stop me throwing you out the door. So...what is it?

I stare at her. She's very dark, but her skin is pale and spotted with freckles. She is maybe thirty-five, perhaps a little younger. Dark eyes, almost to the point of being black, hair very dark auburn and curved in a tight frame around her face in a sort of mask that seems to maintain a comforting shield between us. She's sturdy, but not overweight. Not really my type at all, so I wonder to myself if she is indeed the key to this, the miniscule crack into which I can stuff a blunt tool and wedge open this entire disappearing week.

- I don't know what happened. Max knows more than I do...
- Six weeks. *Six fucking weeks.*

Wow.

- I don't know what to say to you.
- How about an explanation?

I sit in silence.

- Is this all about Marion again? Is she back in the picture?

Marion?

- I can't say anything. I just don't know.
- Oz, I have waited weeks now to hear from you. Once it was the odd call now and again, and other times it was word from your friends. But now they have all left and you are alone and you cannot even give me the respect enough to tell me where you are.

I am silent. This time I really feel like I am out my depth, drowning in a deep pond of someone else's intimate still waters. *This is not my doing.*

- I may as well tell you. Iain and I were out last week. Twice. And no, nothing yet. Not this time. But I can assure you that it's heading that way and as long as you treat me like the shit on your shoe then it's going to go nowhere but upwards. Yes?
- Yes, I understand.
- So...do you have anything to say to me? Any confessions? Any *bon mots* that are going to mollify me? You know I am hooked on this shit now, thanks to you? It's the only way I can sleep. Four fifty from the Co-op and 10% off for six bottles. Anything will do me. And how the hell is it managing to affect my judgement? You think I really *want* Iain or do you think I'm just trying to punish myself? But all I get is silence after silence after silence and nothing makes the silences any less monotonous.
- If I told you what is on my mind right now then you'll never believe me.

She stares at me intently.

- You and I are finished. I just want you to know it from me.

- It sounds like you've made your mind up....
- I have *no mind left to make up*. All I know is that the man I met fifteen years ago isn't the same man sitting opposite me right now and I know...I just *know* that it's been making a fool of me all this time.

She pauses and drains the glass, half-heartedly throwing it from her wrist straight at me, missing me by some margin and bouncing over the floor.

- So how many are laughing at me, Oz? All of them? Some of them?
- No one's laughing at you.
- So says *you*, you shameless, futile, spineless *little man*. Oz, I've waited for three years for this moment, for the time when I can finally say that I've had enough of you and that I want to end this. But you've never given me a reason until now, not enough of a reason. But this time, it's a piss-take and we both know it.
- I'm sorry.

Strange how I can feel apologetic to someone I neither know nor really have any capacity to care about. I don't know who she is, other than by the repute she is giving me. She looks like a lonely drunk woman, and I have to admit that I feel sorry for her. The fact that it might have been me who put her here is not something I find easy to accept, given that my concept of 'me' has shifted inescapably in the last few hours.

- This has to be the end, you know. I cannot take any more humiliation like this.

She stands up, tottering a little through the likely effects and slowly walks over to the unit at the side of the room and picks out another glass, this time filling it with a quite staggering amount of neat whisky about a quarter of which she promptly despatches.

- Steady there...
- Don't lecture me, Oz. We've been through this a million times and none of those times have meant that you have it right or anything. Not even *close*.

She has that rambling logic that comes with the idea that you're absolutely and unassailably in the right, no matter the circumstances or the confusion within.

- Are you going to level with me, Oz? *Is* it Marion again? Or someone else this time. Restless mind, restless heart..you know?

Cody. Cody? No..*Cory*.

- Cory...if I was to tell you what has been happening to me I doubt you'd believe me.
- You said something like that already. You might like to try stupidly trusting me for once. God knows I have been stupid enough to do that to you more times than I care to mention.
- It's just difficult...

- I'm sure it is. Six weeks away from me and what I get back is that *it's difficult*. Have you any idea how insulting it is to hear that?
- I know it sounds unusual. And believe me, it's been unusual.

She contemplates me a second.

- You know what else is an insult to me?

I let the silence be my answer.

- That you haven't even made your ludicrous attempts to hold me when you came in. You just let it happen. You let Max bring you back home again. And you just assume that I'm going to be here for you and ready to take it all over again...
- Cory...
- No, Oz. Enough is enough. And this is the arse end of enough. I want out and I want you out too.
- Will you hear what I have to say?
- Will it entertain me? I could do with a laugh.
- Please treat me seriously...
- I ought to treat you *what*? You know what Jason asked me yesterday? He asked me if he was ever going to see you again. He knows something is seriously up and no amount of smoke-screening by your sweet but over-burdened colleagues will hide that from him or me any longer. I just want you out.
- I see.

She tips more of the whisky over the throat as if to anaesthetise some part of her. I notice the glass is half empty already. Her capacity seems to be enormous, as though this is a practised situation she has been in before and with which she has learned to cope. She doesn't have the look of a burned out drunk – the blemished complexion, the bloat, nor even the weariness of expression – and in many ways that's the most distressing thing about her. She's not my type, and I feel nothing for the woman with whom I have just found myself in intimate, life-sharing contact, yet I feel for her such an overwhelming pity and guilt that I just want to be able to do something – anything – to help her. Austin, you let her down. And who is Marion?

- So...what will it be? And when? Sooner the better, isn't it?
- I don't know, Cory.
- You always have *her* to fall back on.
- There isn't anyone else.
- You said that before.
- You haven't taken me up on my offer to tell you where I have been, have you?

- Well, Max called three weeks ago and told me some story about an operation or something. He made no sense to me. He called about seven, which means I was likely past caring or understanding by that point anyway. Is this the big secret then?
- I'm not sure. I suppose it depends what he said.

I lean forward. Is it possible she can tell me something about my situation? What does Max know? Does he know anything?

- Can't remember. Some of the usual nonsense about you being a *dedicated servant to the country* and how he knows it's hard for me but we must do this all together or some other fatuous crap...you know what it's like. Self-important *prick* that he is.

Damn.

- That doesn't help me at all.
- I think he was calling to try and help *me*, you know. I never guessed they would start covering for you quite like this
- I'm not covering for anything...
- And what about last time *that cow* was on the scene? Your excuses then were just as thin.
- Cory, this is really not getting us anywhere...
- No, it's not. The *where* I want you is any old *where* outside my life. She'll have you, doubtless.

Amazing her voice is so calm and her words so neatly picked out with all that booze swilling inside her. I'd almost be impressed.

- It's not been like that.
- And Lord alone knows when you were last anywhere with Jason, let alone me. I wonder if he'll recognise you this time.
- Oh he will.
- I'm even amazed that you know where you live, or did Max just steer you back because he's the pilot?

I breathe in deeply. *Carpe diem*.

- I don't know where I live, Cory.

She sneers at me.

- I always knew you were never sure about your loyalties...

I cut her off.

- No, I mean I don't know where I live. I don't even know where I am right now.

That seems to silence her, the glass hovering in front of her mouth, eyes perplexed and trying to focus on my words with a look on her face that was as though she had just lost her spectacles and was trying to discern indistinct shapes on a screen.

- Come again?
- I don't know...*where the bathroom in this house is.*

Another pause.

- Oz, even I know you're giving me melodramatic nonsense here.
- I don't know where I am. It's true. I've never been in this room before. Until about half an hour ago I had never even met you.
- Don't say that...*don't say that...*

Her voice rises a bit, this time looking at me in some anger.

- If you want to know what has happened to me that I have to tell you the candid truth.
- I don't need to hear it if this is what it is going to be like, Oz.

Okay...here goes.

- Cory...*I'm not Oz...*

This time she puts a bit more effort into it, letting the whisky tumbler sail past my head at speed, showering me in the spirit and crashing the glass into the wall where it breaks with a loud crack.

- I've no idea what you are doing here, Oz but it's the final fucking straw.
- Cory...listen to me.
- I will *not*.
- Cory...I only know your name because Max called you this. I've never met you before. Nor do I know Jason.

Her face immediately changes from anger to fear in an instant. She seems to recoil back into her chair, as if she is trying to blend into it.

- Oz...what in the fuck has happened to you?
- Cory...I don't know. I swear to you...I really don't know.
- Oz...
- I cannot remember the last six weeks at all. And before that, I know I was...*someone else...*but I was not your 'Oz' and I wasn't anything to do with you.

She latches onto this, her expression incredulous.

- What?

- I have no idea where I have been for six weeks. I want to tell you what I *do* know, but I promise you that it will make no sense.
- Oz...this is *madness*.
- It's possible it is, yes. It's not the first time I think I have lost my reason.
- Don't move. Stay in that seat and don't move. Don't come towards me...

I remain where I am.

- I won't.
- Say what you just said again...

Deep breath.

- I'm not Oz. I'm not your husband. I'm not Jason's father. I don't know this house.
- *STOP...*

I jump, deeply shocked. Cory has just shrieked the word out loud – very loud, like the howling brakes on a train. It's as though she is possessed.

- Cory, it's true, I...
- I can't hear this, Oz. You're making up some deeply disturbing stories here and it's not going work with me.
- Then I'm defeated. I can't prove who I am, and I can't prove who I'm not.
- Oz, this is just insanity...
- Wait...

My word causes her to go quiet immediately, eyes wide open and alert, even through the haze of alcohol in her.

- Max knows.
- Max knows what?
- I think Max knows what I am saying...that he can vouch for this.
- Oz...look, I've *known* you for years now. I've never heard you pull this sort of thing before and it takes a special kind of desperation to even attempt it, but it really is the....
- Phone him. Phone Max.
- What, now?
- Do you trust him?
- He's a self-important prick.

- Yes, you said that. But do you trust the man?
- You know I do.
- Then call him and ask him about me. Ask him if he thinks I am Oz.
- This is *nuts*. I'm going to call an old friend and ask him if I think that my husband is actually my husband? They'll take me away in a fucking van.
- If you trust him he'll say nothing. So why not ask him?
- I can't. I can't play this stupid game, Oz.
- It's no game. I'm not Oz. I'm not your husband. My body might *look* like him and I might speak and think like him...but I don't know him at all.

There is an awkward, bony silence. I'm sitting opposite a woman I don't know but ought to, telling her something that means a lot to me which will probably destroy her life or turn her quite irreversibly insane. Either way, I am slowly wiping her out – blotting her from all existence, far faster than she is managing to do herself.

Her voice – when it returns from the stillness – is slow and awkward and her tone uneven.

- Say that again.

I take a deep breath and try again.

- I'm not Oz. I look like him, but I'm not him. In my head...I'm not him. I'm someone else. And honestly Cory...I don't know how or why.
- Jesus Christ Oz...*what did they do to you?*

Her words hit me like a mallet. Something has not occurred to me; maybe I am Oz after all, but *someone has done something to me* and I am malfunctioning. I try to drink in this awkward revelation to myself. How can I deal with this? How can I suddenly forget everything about myself? More to the point, how can I suddenly think I am someone else trapped in the wrong body? The mechanics of it all just doesn't add up. I don't even know where to begin. The sheer *construction* seems infeasible.

As I think this out, another idea befalls me. If I treat this revelation as the truth then I might end up erasing what I think I am altogether. Or put another way, Oz will overwhelm me and I will become him, assuming that she is wrong of course. But, if I go along with her instincts I might be able to find out more about where I was before and what I was and who I am to her. The trouble is, she seems to be on the dreadful cusp between hostility and sympathy. If I did this to myself she wants rid of me; if someone did it to me then I may find her more favourable.

Of course, what might help is to find something concrete that I can point to and say 'this is not of Oz' but of course that isn't going to come from anywhere quickly, if at all. I don't even know my own name. Is it possible that I really am who she and everyone else think I am and that I've been tampered with somehow?

- I really can't even say how or why or anything...

- Are you drugged?
- No, I don't think so. I'm just tired and...defeated.
- Oz...I know you too well for this. I know who you are, you just seem...different.

I sit up.

- Tell me how.
- Well..what do you want to know?
- Like...how I am different. How I was. What I did. Anything. I just need mooring...a reference. You understand?
- Oz...this is weirding me out...
- How do you think I feel about it? I've been on a strange auto-pilot – I am told – for ages now. I'm in the middle of a life I don't understand or have *any* point reference with. Jesus Christ Cory, I met the Deputy Prime Minister and had a strip torn off me by him. I mean...how in the hell can I even come near the likes of him? What am I? Who the hell am I? *What am I doing in this head?*
- Oz...

She eases up from the chair and comes towards me, then sits on the arm of the chair, puts her arms around me and holds me. I can feel her warmth against me, can smell the spirits leeching from her pores mixed with the Dior that still lurks on her from the day before. This woman is in a bad shape. She is operating without hope or milestones.

- I'm sorry Cory. I didn't know I'd be here or doing this to someone like you.
- Oz, Oz, Oz...

She just holds me. I hold her. Nothing goes away.

I open my eyes. The light is blinding.

The bed is empty beside me, but I can hear her movements in the en suite to my immediate left. My body aches as I turn around in the clean cotton sheets, the scent of the detergent still lingering deep within the fabric. I can hear her showering, and for a moment it feels like I am in the right place at the right time.

With the right face.

Then gradually it comes back to me, pooling round me like a cold and clammy wet blanket. I don't deserve to be here. I don't have any reason to be here. I even told her last night I didn't have to be here. But still she pitied me and took me to her bed and slept chastely beside me.

The half-light filters through the window in a hazed work of bright and dazzled brightness, bouncing off the white walls around the narrow window frames. There is a bird outside, a single bird – just singing for the sake of it. A radio plays in the bathroom, strange and distant metallic voices with an indistinct beat. The rush of the water, the footsteps in the shower cubicle, the steam in the air, the drop of the soap in the dish; I lie still under the blanket and wonder how long I can stay here before I am compelled to leave. Maybe I can live the rest of my days in this exact spot and never leave. Maybe no one will know I am here.

The water shuts off, followed by the music. More footsteps, all of them sounding deliberate and measured; she has amazing powers of recovery. The bathroom door lock clicks open and she walks into the bedroom. A squint through my closed eyes shows she is wet and wearing a towel, walking with a purpose, into the walk-in closet. Rummaging sounds, a sliding of drawers and an opening and closing of doors. She walks out, clicking the light off and sits on the bed next to me. She reaches for me and strokes my hair.

- How are you this morning, then?

She must know I'm not asleep.

- I'm OK. Are you going out?
- I have to. Hanna has her show this morning and I promised her I'd help her carry the exhibits. She doesn't have the big car now that Douglas has taken off, and Maddie has the other so she is a bit lost. She cannot help it, can she?
- What time is it?
- It's a little after ten. You were out cold. Caroline has already come to fetch Jason and taken him to St Thomas' so that means you can get some peace. You really must call Mary and see what she can do for you. You know....about what we spoke about before?

I am clueless but I accept the suggestion with a nod.

- Yes, I will.

She drops the towel from her pale body and dresses in a perceptible hurry.

- I have to use the car also. I'll fill it up down at the supermarket if I have time. I won't be long, hopefully back about two or three.
- Okay. Where is this show?
- Barnetts, off Lawrence Street – remember?

It's ironic that I cannot.

- OK. Have a good one.
- Thanks, I will. And try and take it easy, Oz. Don't do anything silly.

When did we discuss anything to do with anyone called Mary?

- Alright.

She walks out the door, then calls back to me.

- Oh and the plants need watered, and can you empty the buckets?
- Sure. I will...
- Thanks.
- Oh and your phone – you better check it...
- Mmhh?
- It was ringing about once an hour last night. It's downstairs where you left it. I'll call you from the event once I find out how long we will be. Oh and try and see if you can get through to Andy today about the upstairs. It's been ages.
- Will do.

She trundles down the stairs hurriedly, rustles with unseen bags, then opens and closes the front door...and she is gone. In a flash. Footsteps clunk down the path to the car. I hear the chirp of the electric lock, the opening and closing of the door. I try to imagine what she is doing in the long pause between the door closing and the engine starting – maybe messing with bags, a phone call – who knows? Then I try to imagine what is being done between the engine starting and the handbrake being released. The car backs slowly away, the turns and drives cautiously down the road, growing more and more distant. My one point of actual reference slowly moving out of shot and into the distance, where it is lost to me forever.

Point One: For someone whose husband has *at best* lost his mind or *at worst* become someone else....she is taking it all remarkably well. Last night was drunken hysteria and broken crystal, followed by a complete *volte face* into her pity and comforting arms. How quickly can *stay there and don't come near me* translate into *come into my bed*?

Point Two: If Max knows, and Cory doesn't then why did he bring me back here?

Point Three: I now have officially got no idea what I am doing.

I stare at the ceiling and focus on the soft pastel shade. Not one I'd choose myself, but then again nothing in the house is as I would want it. Or at least as far as I can remember, or determine what *my taste* would be. The place feels so clean, so bleak, so *unlived-in*.

Two simultaneous perceptions come at me. The first is that I need the toilet; the other is that I am in need of food, as the last thing I had eaten I threw up near a park bench fairly soon afterwards. I am guessing that the kitchen will be clean lines of granite and blonde wood and the toilet a work of glass, porcelain and black tiles. It would make sense at least.

I swing out of the bed and make my way to the toilet where I relieve myself quickly and try to avoid any social contact with the mirror that accuses me from behind. The black speckled polished floor tiles are cold on my feet. The home is built for appearance, not for comfort. The flush is a strange type, with a button that jets a measure of water

almost silently around the bowl and removes any trace of the human from the white china in a single infertile whirlpool, eliminating everything it touches. So enthralled am I by this that I watch it after it refills, then do it all over again another three times. As metaphors go, it's a good one.

Once done I leave and locate the stairs, making my way down to where I am guessing the kitchen must be, towards the back. Sure enough, the surfaces are all wiped to a perfect shine, the floor devoid of any trace of dirt, the worktops barren and without anything on them. Even the fridge doesn't have a note, a sticker, a magnet or a wine label on it. It is cleanliness that reeks of the unclean mind. I pull the door open to find it bursting with food, wine, cold meat, everything I need, and also giving some sense of the human among the distinctly antiseptic. Unhurriedly I remove cold meats, pickles, butter, cheese, piling them onto a plate I find in the adjacent cupboard in a neatly stacked pile of plates graduated by size, shade and finish. I drop two bits of bread into the toaster (care being taken not to *spoil the breed* with any crumbs) and check around the room. I find correspondence in a small wooden box, with electricity bills addressed to *Austin and Corinne Hafner*, offers of cheap pizzas, children's clothing brochures, carry-out menus from local Chinese and Indian restaurants. A school report lies under the box. Jason Alexander Hafner, class 3G3, studying mathematics, English, French, physics, chemistry, history and biology and – as far as I can tell – doing well in them all.

I carry the plate through to the front room where we had sat together last night and wander around, examining its few artefacts like a curator in a museum. Photographs of her and me, *going back some time too*; parties together with faces I have never seen, holding drinks I have never tasted and having fun I can never recall. I recognise my face in some of them. I'm younger. I even have an unwise moustache in one of them, which dates it way back in style maybe 20 years or more.

And other pictures of a small boy, dark-haired and going through the years of school, a play, a game of rugby, a prize-giving, riding a bicycle, on family holidays...a catalogue of a life I have shared but have never had anything to do with. A small boy, completely unaware that I am watching him right now, without any idea about anything to do with him, other than the knowledge that he is a part of someone within whom I dwell, unseen and unheard.

As I eat from the plate, conscious always of the slightest trace of debris, I pick over pieces of paper, ornaments, books and the other clinically stored *éléments de la vie* which we surround ourselves with. My attention is drawn to a pile of newspapers, all clearly read and all folded away almost as if they had just been delivered. Below, the wastepaper basket contains used envelopes and discarded correspondence, *all folded before being put away*. Stacked neatly like that it looks nothing at all like a means of getting rid of unwanted detritus and more like a storage method.

A thin cable snaking from the wall upwards to the elegant wall unit tails off with a mobile phone which I recognise as being mine. I don't remember charging it. I put down the plate a second and pick up the handset, flipping it on to reveal a startling bit of information – I have missed about 40 calls. Checking through the numbers I find that the last twenty or so have been from the *same person*. Odd times, all through the night; I assume Cory had set it to silent eventually. No voice mails, though. Strange indeed. With a nearby pen I write down the number of the last caller on the top line of

one of the discarded newspapers and am about to call it...when the phone silently rings. I press the little green button and lift it to my ear.

- Hello?
- At last! Austin, is that you?

I don't know the voice at all. Male, getting on in years I am guessing.

- Yes, this is me. This is Austin...who is this?
- It's William.

No idea who William is.

- I see. What can I do for you, William?

There is quite a pause on the other end of the line.

- You don't even s-s-s-s-s-sound surprised to hear from me.

I will string this one along a bit. Poor man seems to have a terrible stammer.

- Well...should I be surprised?
- Depends who you have b-b-b-b-been talking to.
- I've been talking to a lot of people, William. These days it gets confusing if I even...
- Have you spoken to B-B-B-B-ryant?

That name stops me talking. It's like an anchor, some place I can moor.

- Yes, I have. Isn't he in trouble?
- He certainly is.
- Look...I don't mean to be rude...but who are you?
- Oh Austin. How quick to forget, how slow to remember. The ink is b-b-barely dry on my certificate and the fish b-b-barely wrapped in m-m-my obituary.

I am talking to a certifiable lunatic, it seems. Not the first in the last few days.

- You have lost me.
- *Jessop. William Jessop.*

I drop the plate without thinking of the mess it will cause, letting it crash off the side of the unit and shatter broken china and Branston pickle over the dull ethnic and clean carpet under my feet. The power of speech seems to have left me.

- Well, that s-s-s-seems to have shut you up.

And he's right. It has.

- Jessop?
- Yes, it's me. Surprised?
- I don't get this. They say you're...well...*dead*.
- That's what some might want you to b-b-b-believe. It depends on whose head you find it, I suppose. And you don't seem quite as p-p-p-pally as you used to be with me? What's the m-m-matter?

He's right. I might have known him better than this.

- Sorry...it's just the shock.
- Dear heavens above, Austin. I thought you of all types would know a little subterfuge by now. Okay, so it's b-b-b-bigger than some have been, but still...it's not the most alarming we've had to cons-s-s-ider.
- Who else knows?
- Not many people, I'm afraid.
- What about Madge? Does she have any idea you're still...around?
- Oh no...she is mostly the reason why I was sent *incommunicado* as it w-w-were. Her and a few friends of hers. And yes, I know you now must be w-w-wondering why I am talking to a c-c-confidante of hers like this in such a way that suggests you and I are *b-b-buddies of the b-b-b-bosom*.
- The thought occurred to me, yes.
- Well you can b-b-blame Max for that, I think.
- Max?
- Yes, M-M-Max. He knows, you know.

I pause a beat to see if he will clarify Max's knowledge. Nothing comes back at me.

- Max knows what?
- About you. Who you are. I mean r-rather, who you *aren't*...

I grip the phone tightly in my hand.

- What does that mean?
- It means he is smarter than you give him credit for and that the events of the other day are only going to be tied up by your help and p-p-p-probably yours alone.
- Events?
- Oh my...don't you ever read the n-n-n-newspapers? Watch the TV? I know he took you home a few days ago but this is...

A few days ago?

- ...just the limit, you know. The place is in-n-n uproar and everyone is looking for you. Little wonder they cannot find you as they have no idea you'd be anywhere as p-p-p-prosaic as *at home*.

Jessop laughs heartily at his own wit – a stammering laughter of course - and probably expects me to do the same. I don't. I am still wondering about the news I have missed and just how much time has passed me by. I was brought back a few days ago?

- How long ago did Max bring me back?
- Well...I'm not sure. Can't you r-r-r-remember?
- No, I can't. Just humour me.
- Well he didn't say explicitly, but it s-s-s-sounded like a few days ago at least. He spoke about how he had 'stashed you in the orchard'.
- Orchard?
- I guessed that was a reference to hiding an apple in the place you'd b-b-b-be least likely to look for it.
- Oh I see...so when was this?
- Like I said, I really have n-n-n-no idea. Days ago, probably.
- And this 'news'. What news?
- Good grief...have you been asleep? Never seen a p-p-p-paper or heard any n-n-n-news?

By this point I am back to the folded newspapers, raking through them with one hand to find anything I might understand. It doesn't take me long. One edition shows a picture of a huge flaming building and a massive headline: 'OUTRAGE'.

- The b-b-b-bastards blew a hole in the place. We never thought they would, but they did...

My call. My one last call. This is all back to me. Pictures of ambulances and police cars and fire engines and the army, all out acting in an impressive concert to put out the flames and save the broken bodies of those who suffered in the museum. Maybe academics. Maybe heavies. Maybe both. I cannot bring myself to read any of it, just gaze over the pictures with a sense of guilt so heavy it bends my spine to live under it.

- How many?
- You really haven't seen this, have you?
- *How many?*
- Well, they r-r-r-reckon there are thirty-two dead and easily twice that w-w-wounded, some of them grievously so. No one stood much of a ch-chance, really.

Deep breaths again.

- Who else knows about my part in this?
- M-Max does. As do the others in the centre where you all were. I'm not sure it's all *j-j-j-joined up* enough to take you with them, so to speak. It's pretty r-r-r-ramshackle. The street CCTV coverage seems to show some m-m-m-man walking into the building carrying a sports bag of some kind. Seven minutes later the camera is blown over by the b-b-b-blast.

A sports bag.

- Who did it?
- Oh you know them. You s-s-s-spoke with them...
- Oh dear god...
- I have to w-w-w-warn you though. This hasn't helped your credib-b-b-ility in some quarters.
- Like who?
- Shepherd still thinks you're the cold fish they are out to get, but they are fighting against M-M-M-adge on that front. She's a formidable woman when she gets started. And she has her allies.
- Is she defending my position? Why didn't they come here for me if they know where I am?
- They don't.
- Then how come you do?
- Are you forgetting whose s-s-side we are all on here, Austin?
- I think I might be, yes
- Oh well, then, it s-s-s-seems we are discussing a m-m-m-moot point. Is this really so hard for you t-t-to manage?
- William...this is all a mystery to me.
- Yes. But not *that* much a m-m-m-mystery, eh?

This is all losing me again...

- Then remind me.
- Let's go b-b-b-back to first p-p-p-principles, shall we?
- Okay then...
- We need that document. You stored in the m-m-m-museum, yes?
- Yes...for safe-keeping.

- Yes...safe-keeping. Well, as you can see, most things formerly there are pretty well completely *s-s-s-safe* now, aren't they? Your actions have b-b-been fairly predictable so far, but this has been a turn for the w-w-w-worse. If indeed the document was in there then it has been turned to ash by now.
- I can see that.
- So the next question is this: if we have lost the p-p-paper original then do we have a copy elsewhere?
- I don't think there was a copy...unless you took one and mailed it off on your trip to the Post Office?

I hear him laughing quietly on the end of the line.

- As if I w-w-would get that chance.
- So you didn't take a copy?
- Of course not. I n-never even opened it. You know this, of course. You're the only p-p-person to have read it.
- ...aside from the people who wrote it.
- Yes, and they are being d-d-dealt with already. Mostly.

I am feeling threatened, and I can see the way this is going to swing towards me. I must remain useful enough for them to preserve me, but not *so* useful that they might want to recover whatever I had seen by whatever means they deem necessary.

- So what is the next stage?
- To recovery a c-c-c-copy.
- But none exists.
- That's where you may be quite wrong, Austin. A c-c-copy exists alright and we have to use any m-m-means at our disposal to recover it.
- Okay. And where is this copy?

He pauses for the effect of drama.

- It's in your head, old chap.

Suddenly, the phrase *any means at our disposal* sounds more ominous than anything else. I am left imagining hideous probes and electrodes designed to extract without pity and delve without discretion.

- I see.
- I think you do. And d-d-do you understand now why we need you?
- I think you need the document recovered from inside my head.
- Exactly.

Change tack. And change ear.

- William...why is the document so valuable to you?
- Oh come on...you've r-r-read it. Anyone with that knowledge could b-b-blackmail governments, hold corporations to ransom and subvert entire religions. It would be an un-n-n-n-stoppable fount of power. The straighter arrows among us realised that something was amiss and commissioned its p-p-production, and it was hazarded that it would be of shattering importance. We know broad strokes without d-d-d-detail. The detail is down to you.

I'm playing this one cagily. I need to let him know I *know* but not without error.

- And why do you think I know better? How can you tell I can recall it?
- Why else were you s-s-selected? You possess a gift few have, and so far you've done r-r-really well at using it.
- Gift?
- Your gift of recollection. Perfect recollection.

Wow. My earlier vision of the document binder now makes sense.

- Like...a photographic memory?
- Something like that, y-y-yes.

I need to clarify this badly, and now.

- William...you mentioned Max. How he knows. That he knows I'm not who I *think* I am...
- Yes...
- Well, doesn't that mean that I have no memory of the past..and so how can I be guaranteed to remember the document's contents. I can hardly photographically remember a document if I cannot remember where I grew up, who my parents were or where I first learned to ride a bike.

Once again I feel I can hear Jessop smiling on the end of the phone.

- Well, let's just say that once a man has been emptied of his p-p-personality then there is less of him that may be m-m-motivated by darker forces, shall we?

I catch my breath. I recall Cory's words. *Jesus Christ Oz...what did they do to you?*

- Explain?
- We will in time, but after you have carried out the mission for us.
- That word again, William. 'Us'. Who the hell is 'us'?
- You know perfectly well, Austin. The same 'us' who has been doing this all along. The same us who has b-b-been guiding you to this point.

- *Who?*
- Do you believe that a m-m-man can change who he is entirely? Be reset completely and r-r-reprogrammed?
- I don't know. Has that been done to me?
- No, b-b-but it was done to some of us.
- Reprogrammed?
- *Remixed*, as it were...

Oh dear god above...

- Jessop?
- Indeed.

I try to gather my thoughts but they are cascading at great speed through my head.

- Gatsby?
- No, not her. But she is greatly valued to us.
- Us?
- Us. She is useful to our g-g-greatest asset.
- She is? I thought you and she were close. She trusts you like no one else. Are you playing her?
- Yes. *Family ties*, Austin. You know how these things work.

Family ties.

- I don't get this...
- Confused by it?
- Utterly...it's a mystery to me...like a puzzle without a complete answer *anywhere*...no one can give me a straight answer, no one can say who they work for, no one can say who I am or what I am doing...all I get is riddles...
- Riddles?
- Yes

Jessop permits himself a brief chuckle.

- Just as well we called you SPHINX then, isn't it?

The line crackles a little and goes dead.

Barker. Francis. Names on a piece of paper in front of me, sitting at a dining room table nursing a cup of tea and looking at a network of other names on the page, lines interconnected and weaving through a tree of words – as many as I can remember with little notes appended all over. Central to the sprawling mass are the two names above. BRIAN BARKER and J F FRANCIS. Next to it are these words:

BARKER: married to June..drinker (?). co-writer and primary source handler, corroborating FRANCIS. HO official?

FRANCIS: Filed the document himself. HO official? Co-writer. ??

BOTH: Not cleared to the same level..."fat Etonian poofs"? Facing prosecution – leaked fact of the document's creation, not content. Content self-corroborated.

Drumming my pen on the tabletop. Thinking to myself. I need to get both of them. One or the other. Then there is Philips as well – he's their line. But I know nothing about him. He's a blank note on a crowded page. Drumming. Drumming.

The house silently flexes and moves around me. Pipes go on. Pipes go off. Metallic clunking noises. Boarding. Neighbour sounds. Cars. That's *outside*...but *inside*, things are moving in a mysterious way. More drumming. Pondering.

Then I move my pen onto the page and draw a new label, labelled JUNE BARKER. I tap the name with the pen, then connect it with a double line to BRIAN BARKER. Then I extend a little mark from it and write next to her name the word TALISMAN and then 'minuted meetings', then draw a line from this to the other near-centre acronym DPM. I tap the page again. The writing is small, the lines many and the connections myriad. I underline the word TALISMAN again. Then circle it. Another line emerges from that and leads to the word near the top: MAX. The words move on the page. They make sense and speak to me.

I pick up the little phone again and this time click through until I see the word 'office' and dial. The switchboard operator answers and asked for the department.

- Records, please.
- Paper copy or digital retrieval?
- Um...paper please.
- One moment.

Clicking of lines.

- Paper safe, David speaking.
- Hello David this is Austin Hafner from upstairs, I was wondering if you kept the minutes from DPM meetings?
- Some of them, yes.
- I see...which ones?
- His daily briefs are kept in G boxes, but the rest are open storage.

- Fine. These aren't daily briefs though, these are coded meeting briefs.
- Oh well, then you'll need a 4-72 to get that access. If it's an outside brief then you'll also need a letter of authority from G Branch.
- Oh...okay. Maybe you can tell me if it is an outside brief or not.

David is heard tapping at a keyboard. He is not unhelpful but I smell him doing it on the QT a little. I wait for him to say 'I shouldn't really be doing this, but...', which is meant to make me immediately grateful for him sticking his neck out and which then means I feel obliged to hang up and go elsewhere.

- You got an op name for the meetings?
- Yes, it's TALISMAN.
- TAL...IS...MAN. Okay. Gimme a sec.

We wait a few seconds

- I shouldn't really be doing this, but getting the information any other way is impossible.
- I know, I've tried. Someone suggested your place because it's helpful.
- Well...sometimes. Good job you didn't get Old Colin.

We share a snigger at an unshared joke.

- Is he still there?
- Oh sure he is. Seven years past his forty now. Mick says that they'll just chuck him in a Q file when he keels over.
- How is Mick? Ages since I saw him.
- He's alright. Still same old, you know.
- Fine...fine..
- Okay...I got TALISMAN up here and the news is worse I am afraid.
- Oh dear.
- Yeah...this is covered by section 14 which means that the 4-72 won't matter. You'll need to get coverage from A section to get access to it.
- Why is that?
- Minutes from TALISMAN are M12ed and filed in a J box. They aren't even kept here - they are located off in NW2 with the rest of the scaries.
- Oh right. *Blast*. This is *really* inconvenient.

My voice loses the *matey blunted edge* I had a second ago, and takes on a more colonial tone.

- That's the red classification for you, Mr Hafner. It's a bit obstructive at times, but it's the protocol.
- OK then..what should I do?
- Well you'll need to see the manager about Application for Access Rights and then you'll need a 4-17 and a counterstamped 4-23 from A Section.
- Alright. Which manager should I speak to?

I can hear his puzzled look.

- Well...it's Mick. I thought you knew him.

You *arse*.

- Oh...of course. Is he on right now?
- He'll be back in ten. Shall I get him to ring you?
- No, I'll get back to him.
- OK

Never try and be smarter than you are.

Half an hour later, still having fretted over my diagram – now rewritten to spread over six sheets of A4 paper taped together – I pick the phone up and dial the switchboard again.

- Paper Safe, please.

Clicking of lines.

- Paper safe, David speaking.
- Hello David this is Austin Hafner from upstairs again.
- Oh, hi...
- Is Mick in?
- Isn't he in his office?
- Um...I asked for him by name but I seem to have been put through to you.
- Hang on.

Distant shouting on the other end of the line. More clicking.

- Mick Duggard.

Written down.

- Hi Mick, this is Austin Hafner from upstairs...

- Oh hi...
- ...and I was on the phone earlier.
- Uh huh. David said you called about an M12 business.
- Yes, that's right. I'm looking at a review of some TALISMAN minutes.
- Oh wow...that's some heavy stuff I am told. Well, what we'll need is the right level of authority for that. You'll need to be cleared for an AAR and you'll need a 4-17 and a counterstamped 4-23.

Gibberish. Sheer gibberish. How does these people function from one day to the next?

- OK
- Now, the AAR is a sort of sifting process to make sure that the request can be even processed. After that we get onto the 17 and 23 and get them set up for you.
- I see. How long does the process take?
- Oh the AAR can be done now on the phone. The 17 you do yourself and submit with the 23 to A Section which has to be marked up by your line and by SEC-comms. The last is the long part; that can take a few weeks.
- All a bit disagreeable.
- Yes, so the earlier we start...you know.
- I suppose.
- Let me get an AAR form up on the screen first.

Tap tap tap. Patient waiting. No small talk.

- Right, so you are Hafner, yes?
- Yes, H-A-F-N-E-R.
- Gotcha. Staff number 1175369 yes?
- That's me.
- OK. And it's TALISMAN access too. Let me fill in what I know first.

Tap tap tap. Patient waiting. No small talk.

- Right. Now, when is access needed? Soon?
- As soon as.

Tap tap tap tap...

- ASAP...okay. Noowwww....can you give a non-identifiable précis of just what it is you want and why? Obviously the 17 will go into that in more depth, but that's marked up so no one here needs to see it.
- Okay...well, we need to see TALISMAN minutes.
- Which ones?
- All of them.

Tap tap tap tap...

- OK. For what vague purpose?
- We're conducting a review of various documents mentioned in the course of the meetings to trace who had their hands on them and thereafter make a proper audit trail of their locations.

Tap tap tap tap...

- I see. Is this to form accountability or is it to make a trace?
- I'm sorry?
- Do you know where the documents are or don't you?
- Oh, I see...well in some cases the documents appear to be missing.

Mick stops.

- Oh now we cannot have *that*. Any idea who lost them?
- We're not saying they are lost yet, merely that the trail has gone a bit cold and that we need to start finding any references to them.
- Are they TALISMAN documents?
- Some might be.
- Well it's more than likely they have M12ed as well. Have you checked that first?
- No, but these documents don't have any *official status*.
- Now Mr Hafner...*all* documents have an official status unless they are RESDEV or INTELL-1 and they *have* to be cleared by P15. We pride ourselves on keeping that whole area of business in check. Any little breaches and we risk letting all manner of information run awry. *Clean the decks and open the sails* as Mr Dunlop used to say back when I was...

I feel the carefully thought out idea is being battered to death by the peeling mind of an earnest and enthusiastic civil servant, wounded where it hurts.

- Yes, I'm sure Mick. But this is a very *very* unusual situation and carried with it some *very* serious and classified information.

- Are you implying we're not up to the task of keeping *schtum*? Our boxes contain the archived attack codes for the nuclear deterrents of the 1980s!
- No, Mick, I'm not implying this. Your department is good and great and fine and we all know it. It's other people who have been foolish here and we need to identify who and where and all the rest, yes?
- Well...alright. But how will minutes help?
- I'm thinking that documents drawn up on named actions might be of some use. You know, to point the finger a little.
- Oh now see, that's not quite true. You don't have to go as far as the *minutes* to get this stuff.
- No?
- No! The secretary's job is to provide minutes but also to review the minuted content and give a subject list of linked documents.
- So where do I get that?
- From the secretary.
- Excellent. And so who is this person?
- Ah...that information will be...
- ...in the minutes?

Mick concedes a point.

- Yes. I see your point now.
- Yes.
- Of course there might be an easier way.
- What would that be?
- Well the secretary would be the first person to file them, would he not?
- The secretary would! Can you tell me who that might have been?
- I'll try. It's not classified, so it's not going to need the 17...

Tap tap tap.

- I shouldn't really be doing this, but it's quicker.

We exchange a chuckle for different reasons.

- I understand.

- Yeah...it's all bollocksed up really. Riiiiight. TALISMAN...Q...T..1...4. We have 23 meetings and 23 minutes, 87 linked documents two secretaries. Got a pen handy?
- Sure, fire away.
- One is Dawson L, staff number 1743386, the other is Barker J, staff number 9445021.

Both written down on my diagram.

- Mick, you've been a real help.
- Pleasure.

Now we are on to something. I pause a while. Think of a name, something reliable. 'Bob' will do. The surname comes to me by instinct from an earlier conversation. I breathe in and assume the difference. Then I steam on.

I dial back in to the switchboard.

- Human Resources please...
- One moment...

Clicking of lines.

- HR - Donna speaking.

Scottish accent. West coast. Sounds about twenty. Useful.

- Hi Donna, this is Bob Kelly of Internal Audits here. I need to get in touch with a couple of our staff please.
- Oh right, er...what's it in connection with?
- It's a sort of personal matter we can clear up unofficially, just a bit of housekeeping.
- Oh alright. Who are they?
- I have names and staff numbers if that's useful?
- That'd be brilliant. Fire away.
- Dawson 1743386 and Barker 9445021.
- Okay. Let's see.

Tap tap tap.

- Well Linda Dawson is in P14 but it says she's on leave this week. June Barker is also away but...hang on. Need to read this.
- OK....

Clock chimes the hours.

- It says here she has been booked off with stress and cannot be contacted by work for any reason. It doesn't say why.
- OK, that's fine. I'll get in touch next week. Can you bounce me back down to the switchboard?
- Sure can.
- Thank you.

Clicking of lines.

- Switchboard?
- P14 please.
- Who in P14?
- Good question. Who is the office manager?
- I don't really know. I'll put you through to the department.

Clicking of lines. Mercifully HMG have not invested in Vivaldi.

- Can I help you?
- Hello, this is Bob Kelly from Internal Audits, I was wondering if I could...
- Who?
- Bob Kelly from Internal Audits.
- Wow. I didn't know we *had* an Internal Audits department.
- Well, it's all quite new. Can I speak to Linda Please?
- Pearson or Dawson?
- I'm sorry?
- Linda Pearson or Linda Dawson?
- Dawson, please.
- Sorry she's on leave, back next Monday. Can I take a message?
- No it's okay, I'll e-mail her. Does she have a Blackberry?
- She does yes.
- Will she take it on leave with her do you think?
- Oh sure – knowing Linda she probably *sleeps* with it.
- OK thanks.

Down goes the line.

Give it five minutes. Go for a pee. Come back.

I guess her e-mail address from the format of that used by others at HMG. Write it down. Then I make up an address for Bob Kelly and write that one down too. Then I send one to Bob Kelly from the phone, just saying TEST. Off it goes. A minute later it gets sent back to me – no one by that name here. Excellent. Now I compose an e-mail in Bob's name addressed to Linda Dawson.

```
To: Linda Dawson
From: Bob Kelly
Subject: URGENT: INTERNAL AFFAIRS INVESTIGATION
Priority : High

Sorry to trouble you with this on your leave break but I need to
speak to you urgently on a very confidential matter concerning some
documentation of a classified nature that may have gone astray.
Please contact me ASAP.
```

I sign it 'Bob Kelly, Internal Audits' and give it my phone number. Send. Gone.

I stand up, fill the kettle and drop a teabag into a cup. Gaze out the window. Damp sort of a day. This lawn needs cutting, but this is no day for it. Basil in little planters along the edge of the lawn, all billowing with greenery and suggesting that wonderful aroma of fresh pasta and tomato sauce. Coriander bush just behind it. A fabulous and exotic curry. Parsley, mint and thyme just over at the window. All of them stews. Fantastic.

Kettle clicks. Water in mug, stir. Water gets tannic, out with the bag, in with the milk and I carry it back through to the table in perfect time to hear the phone ringing, showing a mobile number. I write it down and pick up the line.

- Kelly..
- Mr Kelly?
- Yes, this is Bob Kelly.
- Hi yes...this is Linda Dawson here. I just got your e-mail.

Good girl. Tied to a digital desk, even on her leave. She's ambitious, perhaps ruthless. Willing to stand on anyone to get up the ladder, maybe. Her voices is breathless and she talks quickly. On edge. Vulnerable. Liable to say anything to get out of this if it might dent her chances. Oh *perfect*.

- Oh right, I thought you might just reply to it.
- I did but it came back with an error so I thought I'd better phone you.

- Oh really? That's always happening to me. Well...thanks for phoning, Linda. It's about some documents that we're trying to trace that were created for the TALISMAN team.
- Oh wow...yes...scary stuff.
- Yes...now, you're the secretary for the meetings aren't you?
- Yes, but I have only been there for the last five. There was a sort of hiatus there.
- Oh...really? We have you down as the secretary.
- Yeah, I am now but for the previous ones it was June.
- June?
- June Barker. She was the last secretary, back for the first meetings.
- Oh...oh I see. Um. Right. And she was there for the majority of the meetings, not you?
- Yes, that's right. The last few were wash-ups so we didn't get any document requests anyway.
- Oh I see. So it might be better to speak to June about the missing documents?

Drop that in. Hint of menace.

- Well yes, I'd say so.
- Why did you replace June?
- Well June is off sick. I was called in as a replacement for her. It's not like it was sudden though. Like I said, there was a hiatus. She's coming back though.

I'll bet.

- Well, I have to speak to her very soon. Any idea when she is back?
- No...we've been told not to speak to her. We work in the same office and the instruction went out.
- Well...yes. There are reasons for that I'm sure. I assume she doesn't have her e-mail at home?
- I wouldn't think so.
- Do you know how I can get in touch with her?
- Did you say this was about TALISMAN?
- Yes. The DPM is aware of it all, you know. I am trying to be discreet here before things are made more...well...official.
- Oh wow. Well...hang on.

- OK
- Where did you say you were from?
- Internal Audits.
- I didn't even know we had such a thing....one sec.

The receiver is put down. A minute passes.

- Hello?
- Hello, Linda.
- June has a mobile. I don't know if this is up to date but it was okay about six months ago. You got a pen?

I write down the number she gives me on the sheet, thank her and hang up. So far, so good.

I dial in June's number. If it fails then we are back to square one. If not then we have a foothold. It rings. And rings. And then I get the voicemail so I hang up and curse.

Within a minute my phone rings.

- Hello?
- Hello? I missed a call from you?

Maybe late middle aged women. Light, airy voice. More like a teacher than anything else. Slight accent from the Midlands. Don't let that fool you into thinking she is a lightweight. She won't be.

- Hi there, can I speak to June Barker please?
- This *is* June Barker speaking.

Nailed it.

- Hello June, my name is Austin. I'm taking a bit of a risk speaking to you, but I have to talk to you urgently about something that may be to your advantage.

I pause. Silence.

- Hello?
- Yes? I'm still here...who are you?
- Austin Hafner. We work for the same government department and I have to speak with you urgently.
- Government? Good lord. I thought you were trying to sell me something.

- No no...I have to discuss something with you about the business with your husband and the way he is being treated by the...
- *My husband?*
- Yes, Brian...your husband..
- *My husband?*

I hear a note of sudden distress. It was nowhere there before, but now it is. For a hideous moment I imagine she is going to say to me my husband was driven to kill himself because of *you people*...

- My husband is a good man, Mr Austin. A very good man. None of this would have happened if things had been left alone. And now I am asking the same of you. He is a good man. *A very good man.*

She might be crying. Now I feel like a heel.

- Mrs Barker...June. *I know* he is. That's why I am calling you.

Voices off the line. A man's voice. My quarry? The phone makes a clattering sound as I hear it being passed over.

- Hello?
- Mr Barker?
- I don't know who you are or what weird game you are playing, but I want you to never call this house again. We are decent people and we are tired of you.
- Brian. Listen – *please*. *I know* you are good and decent. That's why I am....
- Good day to you.

Phone slammed off on the other end. *Damn.*

Face in my hands. Pretty close. And there was a breach made there anyway. At least I am known, albeit in the wrong way perhaps. Maybe I sounded too eager.

Within twenty minutes I hear a key in the door. Heels on the steps. Cory shouts out to me.

- Hello?
- Kitchen...

She comes through and kisses my head, unravelling a scarf from around her neck and dropping it beside a knitted hat. She smells of cold air and the outdoors.

- Bloody awful day outside. Cold now. At least the rain has stopped.
- How was the show?
- Meh...so-so. Hanna sold three but was hoping to sell more, though the three she cleared were the three biggest.

- Nice for her. How much did she get for them?
- Five-fifty down from seven hundred. Not bad really, considering she rattled them all off in two weeks. Maddie says she has more talent in her little finger than any others at the Press, but I don't know.
- I'm pleased for her.
- Douglas showed up, which really surprised me. He stayed quiet, had a couple of drinks and then left after speaking with her quietly. Pretty civilised for him, after the business at the wedding and all that unpleasantness. It caused a bit of a ripple when he walked in, though.

I smile as she continues.

- Did you hear from Caroline?
- No, not a note. Have you?
- No...I tried calling her earlier but she wasn't answering. Just wondering how it went, that's all.
- She'll be in touch I'm sure. Had anything to eat?
- Cheese and wine at the event, that's all.
- That's kind of early, isn't it?
- Ah, it gets them in the mood. Oils up their wallet springs, as Miles says. Hanna was a bit disappointed by her performance but I thought it went okay. Oh, and she even got a commission.
- That's nice.
- Well, I suppose. Thing is, the punter saw in her abstracts something that no one else could and has asked her if she could *paint his dog*. Like a kennel portrait.
- Really?
- Really. She does these impressionist abstracts and yet he sees her talents in a different way and thinks she can do a Black Russian Terrier in the same way. We had a bit of a giggle about it, but deep down I think she reckons it's more of a challenge than she can pull off. She can't actually *paint pictures* of things. Just abstracts. To me, that makes Maddie's assessment of her all the stranger. Does it take talent to be able to paint stuff no one else can see?
- Hmm...so her talent has come to a breaking point then?
- Kind of. With an abstract dog.
- That sounds weird to me. Did she accept it?
- Of course. Her and Diane aren't that well-off yet. You want anything to eat?
- No thanks.

- I can do you a sandwich.
- Hmm...what's on it?
- Cheese and pickle - if you want?
- Okay then go on.

She fusses in the fridge and pulls bread from the bread bin.

- Did you speak to Mary?
- No, I'm going to call her this afternoon.

There is that Mary again.

And who is Marion?

- Branston alright?
- Yeah fine.

My phone rings. Number withheld. I know it's not *Wibbly* this time, but never know what to expect these days. For all I know it's Marion. Or Mary. Or the mysterious Diane who is *not all that well-off yet*. The word 'yet' bothers me a little.

- Hello?
- *The code is yellow.*

I nearly drop the phone. This is not the same contact. I'd recognise his voice in a second. This one is a much older man. Speaking with some kind of authority. Almost like a politician or a barrister.

- Hello?
- *The code is yellow.*
- Alright then...it's yellow. Cool.

I stand up and walk through to the lounge.

- Are you alone? Can you be overheard?
- No I am not, but I cannot be overheard. Now who is this?
- No matter. The woman in the house with you. Is she still there?

For some reason that chills my heart to hear.

- She is...yes.
- Go outside your front door and turn to your right where you keep the garden box. Open it up. There is a box in it.
- How do you know all of this?

- Go outside. Do it now. Quickly.

I turn sharply and reach the hall, open the door and walk over the terracotta to the white plastic garden storage box. It isn't locked. I open it up and see, amidst the rakes and hoes and boxes of weedkiller, a small brown package.

- I can see it.

I lift it out. It's heavy. Sealed down with tape. Something of a lopsided weight in it, maybe damped with some kind of packing.

- Lift the box out. Don't open it yet.
- I have it and I haven't. Look, who the fuck are you?
- We've never met, so that's a moot point. You'll understand in a second. Go inside and open the box in the bathroom.

I walk back in and shut the door. Cory from the kitchen:

- Everything okay?
- Fine, Cory...just scaring off a cat from the...um....garden.

I walk into the tiny bathroom off the hall and shut the door.

- I have to put the phone down...wait a second.

I drop the phone into the sink and take a pair of scissors from the pot above the cabinet. I cut through the thick tape and pull open the flaps, dig out the bubble wrap and see a dull black metal object. I lift it out. I swallow hard and lift the phone back to my ear.

- What the *fuck*?
- Careful, it's loaded. Quiet too, so it should suit our needs.
- What in the world am I supposed to need this for? And who is '*our*'?
- Listen carefully. The woman in your house is a plant. She is an enemy. You have to eliminate her *right now*.

I cannot believe this. My voice yelps.

- *Are you telling me...*

I restrain my voice...fierce whisper.

- *Are you telling me to kill her?*
- Of course. She is an enemy.
- *I cannot kill her...she's my wife!*
- Is she? *How do you know that?*

Bingo. All at once stuff drops into place.

If I was at all uncertain about her then I'd have known that already. I would not have to be told this is not my wife. But I just have been. So this joker *knows* about me. He knows I am not who I seem to be. He has to. He's in on it.

But there are the wedding pictures I have seen. The unknown images. *Parties together with faces I have never seen, holding drinks I have never tasted and having fun I can never recall.* And it's her face in them all. All of them. Have they gone to this length just to conceal her from me? And if so...what does that make me? Or Hafner? A Home Office donkey who *writes briefs and advises on matters?*

There is also the question of Max...and by extension, Madge. Max brought me here. He knows her. He knows Cory. He recognised her and said hello. Three years we have known each other. She would be the deepest of deep sleepers if that were true. And Madge too. *Family ties.* Ties that bind. If Cory is an enemy then we are all enemies and that makes the world my enemy and *they don't have the ability to break that.*

- *Phone me back in ten...*

I snapped at him and I cut off the phone call. Think think think think think. There is only one opportunity. Fast. Act fast. Act now.

I pitch the object into the cabinet under the sink and walk out, fiddling with the phone again.

- Got your sandwich...
- Thanks. Let's see if I got this thing working again?
- What thing?
- *Say cheese!*

I press the little button and capture the picture, catching her off guard.

- Ozzy! Stop that. You know how I *hate* being photographed!
- It stopped working. I just want to check it again.
- Well why did you have to go and take one of me?
- What better subject do I have?
- Well get rid of it. And here's your bloody sandwich.
- Thanks.

She stomps out. Upset. Plate rattles on the table top.

- *And delete that damned thing.* I'll check it later.

She's moving upstairs. I'm dialling now. Hope she can speak to me. Rings twice.

- Austin?
- Madge?

- Yes...are you okay?
- Madge I have to ask something of you. It's important. Really important. And it will sound insane...it really will. But it's important.
- Austin...you sound *tense*.
- I am. And speed is absolutely of the essence here.
- Well it's a good job for you I'm at my desk this time of the day, isn't it? I thought you were on a bit of a break anyway? Is everything alright with...
- Madge. This needs to be done *very* quickly.
- Good grief. Slow down Austin. Is it war or something?
- Yes. I need you to do something. I am going to send you a picture of someone.
- Who?
- Just ...*someone*.
- *Right...*
- And I need you to call me *straight* back when you get it. Yes?
- Austin...this is weird. Are you *really* OK?
- I think so, but I really need this.
- Well...you have fifteen minutes before I am out of here. The Hurst Committee is meeting this evening and they are *ferocious bastards*.
- Thanks.

I snap the phone call off and send the picture I have just taken to Madge. I watch the little bar click along as it sends it. It takes forever.

Back to the lounge. Waiting. Parties together with faces I have never seen. And there we are, on the steps of a church with friends and family. I recognise no one there. The picture is glossy and colourful, but the faces and fashions have changed. Collars like that went out twenty years ago at least. And that haircut. I pick the picture up from the mantelpiece and turn it over, releasing it from its frame. I give it a close look. Crop marks? Shade marks? Not even any cut marks. Either the best job ever, or it's the real thing.

A face at the back...wide brimmed hat, a strained smile as though avoiding the pitiless glare of the winter sun. Blue patterned dress. Three-stringed pearls? Dressed so old for one so young. Is that her?

Phone.

- Austin?
- Madge...

- She looks a bit *underprepared* on the picture, doesn't she?
- Who does?
- *Cory*, Austin. Are you alright? What sort of a game is this now? And what do you need me to do for you? Time is going to be pressing...
- Madge...those pearls you wear...
- *What?*
- Where did you get them from?
- *What?*
- And when did you get them? The pearls. Three strings of them. You always wear them.
- My *pearls*?
- Yes.
- My grandmother. She gave me them when I was ten just before I moved to St Bartholomew's. Now what in the *world* are you going on about?
- I'll tell you later. Thank you so much, Madge.
- Austin I...

Hung up.

Up the stairs two at a time. Cory is in the spare room folding washing.

- Hey there.
- Did you delete it?
- Yes, I did. I have to go out for a second, okay?
- Well don't do it again - it really upsets me. Where are you going?
- Just down the road to meet up with someone. You know. *Scary business*.

She smiles.

- Well if you're going out can you get us bread?
- Sure will. Anything else?
- Maybe a bit of cheese as well. I think we're out of it.
- I'll get some, sure. See you soon.

Down the stairs two at a time. Grab coat, check for house and car keys. The fat envelope is still there too. Most comforting. I'll need it. Quietly to the back door. Locked. Open cutlery drawer, take out a bundle of the notes donated from the Code Is Green Cause and drop in ten or so of them. *For Cory*. To the toilet, open cabinet and

take out *that thing* which I stick in a pocket. To the front doors, open and close it and pull over the outside doors too. Yale lock snibbed. Check it's secure. *This is for you Cory, whoever you might be.*

I jog lightly down the street, phone in hand. Not fast enough to make me look like I am running away, but just fast enough to make me out of breath and a little shaky. Through the cars parked in the mews buildings across the road, over the cobbled street, down over the grass and the tables and up the side of the river where swans sit in the early evening air. The light is a thin haze, sounds of traffic distant, no one much around.

Two minutes pass. The phone rings.

- Code?
- Green.

I guessed 'green'. Yellow for me, green to go, and red to stop. We are at 'go'.

- You did it?

The voice is frankly incredulous. My voice is shaky from my exertions on the roadway, hopefully passing for a shakiness of someone who doesn't carry a gun, far less uses it on anyone. Especially his own wife.

- Yes.
- Good grief. Well done. Where is the body?
- I left it in the house. What am I supposed to do with a body? You've *no idea* what I have just done. I'll be in fucking shock soon...
- Calm, calm. It's OK...we have a team for that. We didn't think you'd do it, really. It must have taken guts.
- I don't know. I just did it.
- What did you do with the weapon?
- It's still there.

Panting a little.

- You sound shaken up.
- I *am*!
- What's your next move, then?
- I have no idea...you put me in this position so I don't know what my *next move* should be. I have nowhere to go.

Say it. Say it. Say it.

- Okay. Listen. YELLOWDOG is in your area. Shadowing you. The RV point is some way up the Crawford Road – do you know where that is?

- Not exactly. Right now I am at the...Mossford Bridge, by the swans and the old lock.
- Okay. I'll get in touch with YELLOWDOG for an RV.
- What vehicle?
- Blue Transit. Stay where you are.

The conversation ends. Blue Ford Transit. Van? Minibus? How many in it? Does that even matter? I sit on the park bench and try to look inconspicuous. Recalling again. *YELLOWDOG is in your area.* Not his area. My area. How far is it from *his* to *my*?

I hear the howl of the labouring diesel engine and a grind of gears long before I see the van coming round the corner at speed, slightly losing the back end on the wet cobblestone surface. My idea of being inconspicuous seems to have been a wasted one. This guy's driving through the streets of a southern English village like he is in the Manx TT. He dabs the brakes, still moving, obviously scanning for me. I stay seated. The van isn't in prize condition. Not exactly *Concours*. I am sure I just saw a bit fall off the rear end of it.

I stand up, hands in pockets around my only insurance.

The van draws to a halt up next to me, the face behind the wheel surprisingly slight and short, hidden behind dark glasses and what seems like a scarf or muffler. Hugely cloak and dagger stuff, it seems. The driver waves me around to the passenger door, revving the throaty engine all the while in an impatient blur. I trot around, gathering my nerves and open the nearside which creaks like a church door in a Gothic horror movie.

- Jump in.

Voice is slight and cheery too. I'm barely in the door when I am thrown back in my seat as the driver stamps on the accelerator and the legs are kicked from under the throttle. I struggle to stay up, wrestling to get the seat belt round myself.

- Sorry about the speed of all this, but we have to get you the hell out of here!

The driver seems focussed on the road ahead, which is a good thing, but also strangely dissociated from the actual driving process. Corners are negotiated at the last possible moment, gears changed when the engine sounds like it's about to fall apart and braking used as a sort of stand off between it and what the seemingly independent right foot was doing to the accelerator.

- Yellowdog, I assume?
- Yeah, that's me. We've not met, have we?
- I don't think so, no.
- I *never* thought I'd get a chance to meet you. We were going to meet some time ago but..events overtook us all a bit, didn't they?
- Oh yeah...the museum?

- Yeah well...Georgie is more extreme than some others make him out to be. There is moderate and there is moderation, you know?
- Yes, I think I do.

Georgie. Filed.

- I was told you needed an evac quick. Get up to any nasties back there?

The shades come off and the scarf lowered. I suddenly realised – this is a girl, not a guy at all. Maybe not even twenty. Not a spot of hair on the chin nor any breakage in the voice. Ruddy sort of a complexion and straight, straw coloured hair with the bluest eyes I think I have ever seen – they are *mesmerising*; eyes whose colour would mean I could never grow sick of looking into them. I fear for my own resolve. Should I be as pitiless as they are to others? *They wanted me to shoot Cory dead.* These are not human beings we are dealing with, but cold-blooded assassins and murderers of the innocent. I have to fight their brutality with my own brutality. I have to cultivate this hardness.

- It went a bit strange; I guess I am not used to that sort of thing, really.
- Yeah well...when you have to, you have to!
- Who spoke to you to get me out of there?
- Carter. He called me up and said that the shadow was off and that were to call in the hit, get you out of there and get you moved.
- So where are we heading?
- I'm not sure. I thought you might know.

Telling. And Carter has been filed too. Is this *the Barrister*? Is this my moment?

- I've no idea – I just needed out of there.
- Oh...well that's disappointing to hear. Maybe they have a place for you. Let me call in.

She reaches down the side of the driver's seat and picks up a handheld radio. Peeking down to read the dial on top – which makes me nervous, as we are doing about fifty out of a single track road – she flips it on and speaks.

- Y2 calling in.

Silence.

- Y2 here. Anyone listening?

Radio crackles. She fiddles with one knob whose legend has been worn through by what looks like decades of use. The unit is held together with insulating tape and the fascia scratched and tired.

- Y2 calling in...

A mechanical sounding voice comes from the other side of the radio. I try and place it, but it's not known to me at all. The speaker system is lousy. It might be Georgie. It might be Carter. It might be no one I know. I cannot even make out the gender.

- Yes, Y2. Where are you?
- Made the uplift and heading in for the deposit. Where is the delivery address?

A pause.

- RV back at local control. We'll organise the onward transmission from here. Out.

She hangs up the microphone and turns to me.

- We have a little drive ahead of us. Control is about twelve miles from here, in the old farmhouse. You know the one?
- No – never been there.
- Oh well. It's north from here, just over the first ridge past the cathedral.
- Oh...I see.
- I'll gun it.
- Don't do anything dangerous.
- Oh no. I mean, I wouldn't want to spoil the prize, would I?

I smile, thinking that I understand her phrase.

- Would that be me?

She smiles, engaging.

- For sure. Well...you know. Tactical bits of you anyway! You must know how much we need you and what you mean to the cause, don't you?

The cause is a phrase that resounds. A ramshackle arrangement of vehicles and old radios, guerrilla tactics, a mish-mash of all types of people, coded messages – all add up to a group of revolutionaries. And it seems that I am one of them. Or am I?

Tactical bits?

As for this girl, she seems ridiculously cheerful for anyone steeped in the mire of mass murder and ideological struggle. Far too grounded. Only her khaki pants give any hint that there may be more to her than a simple and jovial existence, and that might be down to the rigours of fashion. Her face and especially her eyes make a startling presentation, but the rest of her is boyish and her appearance gives the idea of the wholly asexual, as though she is committed to a cause far greater than the permission of vanity.

I ignore her last remark and press on.

- Farmhouse, eh? Are there many there?

- Oh not really. Just myself, Georgie and the two others. We're still lying low after the big smoke in the Big Smoke.
- Oh right. How many were killed in that?
- We don't try and think of that. We just know it was a solution to an issue for which no other solution existed.
- It was quite extreme, don't you think?
- Don't you approve?
- Well, it's not a question of my approval or disapproval. More a question of where we go from here.
- Well we were coming for you anyway. There are still a few things we need to clear up about this and that.

I try to think of an approach.

- Who gave you the tip-off about my wife?
- Oh that was Blackie. Him and Drebs were onto her for ages but they only got a hard confirm today.
- Where did they get that from?
- Their usual little bunch of inside admirers. It's amazing how much excitement we can generate among the civil servants when we get them motivated.
- You mean by money?
- I mean by excitement, she smiled. – Revolution isn't a question of knowing your ideology. Well at least not always. It's a matter of deciding where you'll be standing when the last card falls. Self-interest often motivates.
- I see.
- And so does a sense of adventure. I'm sure you know your history as well as the rest of us. When Bonnie Prince Charlie was recruiting in the north did you know that he got masses of farmworkers on his side, not because they believed in him, but because marching on the lowlands just seemed like a better thing to do than work for nothing?
- I didn't know that.

That strikes me as an odd thing to say – a weird comparison. Odd, muted history parachuted in from above to sustain a discourse. She's been taught – maybe even brainwashed.

- It's true. The Viet Cong wasn't made up of committed Communists fighting for their red book; it was made up of farmers and bored men and women who hated their isolation as much as they hated the Americans.
- Is that so?

- Of course. The Shining Path don't all want a cultural revolution, they just want to believe in something. Anything. Mariátegui and his men did most of their recruitment at universities once the results came in and they could pick off the failures and give them a wider chance.
- This is all very odd. For a start you are referring to three losing parties so far.
- It depends on the where you are standing when the hammer comes down. Make sure you're just not under it. Other hammers flatten the bigger enemies. We have common purposes with people with whom we share nothing other than a mutual disregard for another. So we use each other. That's the economy we use, isn't it?

She sounds like a cheerful girl quoting the words of far less cheerful people who have wormed their words into her head.

- I suppose so. But if you say that revolutionary organisations are made of people who just don't care surely weakens the cause, don't you think? Don't you need people who actually know and want whatever objective it is that they speak of?
- Of course. We need generals and we need foot soldiers. All kinds.
- And which are you?
- Oh I'm a soldier. Maybe one with a few tricks up her sleeve and some wit to her name, but I'm still a soldier. I also happen to believe.
- And who is your general?
- Don't you know? How long have you been with us? I thought they explained all of this to you when you were recruited.
- Humour me.

I smile. She refocuses on the road ahead and grinds up a gear. It looks like she is turning something over in her mind.

My phone rings and breaks the spell. I answer it. No identifying number.

- Yes?
- *The code is green.*

It's him again. I assume this is the one she refers to as Georgie. My old friend from the hotel and from the conversations on the line with Max and his colleagues listening over my shoulder.

- Confirmed
- Hmm..okay. Are you with YELLOWDOG now?
- Yes, she has me in what once used to be a transit van.

I look over to her. Her eyes are fixed ahead but at least she smiles.

- Alright. She is bringing you this way so we can hammer a few things out. You've been missing a while, so we need a debrief from you.
- I'm deep cover.
- We all know that. I'd sooner you checked in more often but we realise your value.
- This doesn't sound like the Doubting Thomas I met back in the hotel that night. Have things changed?
- Let's just say your story is carrying more water, shall we?
- I hope so. I assume you know about Jessop?

There is a strange silence.

- Yes, we discussed him already.
- And what of that?
- Are you alright?

His voice has an angle to it that seems to be backing away from the cosy edge he was almost betraying a second ago. I glance up at the driver. She seems to be oblivious to all of this.

- I'm fine, but I spoke with a ghost not that long ago and he seemed to be having a ball wherever he might be.
- A ghost?
- I spoke with the ghost of William Jessop.

The silence is palpable. The driver still stares ahead but she is obviously listening to the conversation. Her reaction is something I cannot determine. I feel like Georgie and I are two teachers discussing a pupil in the hearing of another.

- Say that *again*?
- Jessop phoned me. He's alive.
- This is a joke, yes?
- Not at all. He's alive, speaking in the plural, referring to you as 'bastards' and says that GATSBY is your greatest asset.

A silence. The gears crunch and the engine roars as we sling up a steep turning hill, the headlights picking their way through the static gloom that is falling.

- Good grief.
- I'd say you have a faction on your hands here.
- It sounds like it. *I never even guessed...* how did that old fool manage to pull something like this off? And what about his wife? Where is she in all of this?

I smile inwardly.

- Well, it seems that he might start firing loose shots from the deck. He also assumes that he and I are on the same side.
- Save this for the debrief. When did this happen?
- Not long ago.

Truth is that 'long ago' seems to matter less and less as it means less and less. It might have been yesterday. Or today.

- Alright then. Come in and we'll discuss it.
- Who else is there?
- Just Drebbie and Blackie.
- Well keep it tight until we can discuss this. I don't think this is anything that ought to spread.
- I hear you.
- Good. I'll see you soon.

The road winds on ahead of us. The girl obviously tries to break the silence by glancing round at me a few times, trying to get me into making a remark of some kind. I stay silent until she seems unable to bear the lack of words.

- Bad news?
- Surprising news, perhaps. Georgie wants to debrief me.
- Well he probably will; we haven't seen you in a while and you might have interesting information for us.
- Oh I do.

Just Georgie at the farmhouse, plus the mysterious Drebbie and Blackie. I steel myself up for the events to come. I must not give in. I must be strong. I keep nursing an internal monologue of personal outrage - that someone has stolen my life and everyone in it and has handed it over to something and someone I cannot even fathom. Names, places, events, dates, groups, ideals...none of them make the least sense to me and I *know* I am an intelligent man. People seem to flip sides here all the time, act capriciously and have ideals that balance on the business edge of a particular type of dangerous cut-throat razor. The confusion is part of it. And dammit, *I left the diagram in the house*. It helped me, made sense of everything. At least I have a head start on it all now, though.

Maybe I have it memorised. I'm supposed to have that gift, but it doesn't feel like any gift is within my grasp right now other than a cold feeling of the inevitable *that which must be done* which is coming up to me very shortly; something so alien and outlandish that I feel all that has foregone has been close to my heart and to my personal ideals - if I could remember any of them.

She could be pretty if she made an effort in that direction, but she's obviously not even in that zone. She might seem upbeat and full of a gaudy stripe of enthusiasm for her chosen niche, but she's essentially a parrot for other people who may be more evil than she is. What age is she? Nineteen? Twenty? An impressionable child, really. Little more. And she seems impressed with me as a prize, as a mascot for their cause. She won't notice. Won't expect. I must be cold. *Quiet, so it should suit our needs.*

Still feeling the chill from those words. The shock of the new, the fear of the old.

- How far is this place?
- About another six miles yet I'm afraid. Just over French Common and to the west of the cathedral.
- Did you hear what Georgie and I were talking about?

I am sure – *sure* – that I detect nervousness in her face. A twitch maybe, perhaps a sort of guilty look as though she was a child who had been caught stealing sweets.

- I have my eyes front, she finally says.

I'm disappointed by this response.

- Aren't we all in this together?
- There are *those* and there are *those*, if you follow my reasoning.
- Oh I do. I certainly do. But even those who are *not those* need to be kept informed. I mean, it's not like there is many of us, is there?
- Last count I heard we were five thousand, but that might have been Drebs just letting her mind wander.

Drebs is a she. Noted and filed.

Five thousand?

- Still...not a lot compared to the might of the rest of the population, is it?
- No, but we have advantages other than just numeric ones. They never know where we are, nor who we are, nor even what we are doing. They have their moles and plants but we can usually turn them around pretty quickly.
- Our own little network of double agents.
- Sure. Just like you.

She smiles. Already I am feeling my loyalties being torn from the cause, from the government, from Cory and from everything else I know or have known in the short period I have been conscious of my surroundings.

I try to focus on the road ahead as it twists into sight under the eyes of the van's headlights, but it's hard to do this *and* be trying to get yourself together enough to finally confront the very thing that has been holding you down all this time.

- Do we ever do anything with psychological warfare?

She looks puzzled.

- I dunno. Like what?
- Well, I mean like turning people's minds by making them doubt who they are or what they stand for or where they are from?
- Sometimes. I don't know about the specifics. I just know that we use any means necessary, as someone else once said a long time ago.
- I was just curious. I mean, it would be a pretty difficult thing to do.
- I imagine it would be. But no, I think most of our sleepers are doing it in the complete knowledge of what they are doing. We're not all robots, you know.
- Well, I can imagine that such a person would be useless. You need to use people who can think for themselves and make autonomous decisions and fight in the field without being told what to do every minute.
- You didn't do First Camp, did you?

First Camp?

- No, I wasn't recruited that way, was I?

She smiles – maybe at the way I use the word *recruited*.

- They did a lot of stuff there about the meaning of what we were doing and what we were standing for and how we would operate. It was a sort of mind-washing I guess, but it was deeply interesting.
- How long did it last?
- Seven weeks. Pretty intense.
- Where about?
- They moved us all to a forest camp in France, just to keep out of the way of the intelligence services, but they were on our tails always. It was so *exciting* to be a part of this.
- And what did you get taught there?
- Ideology mostly, some practical stuff about living on the rough and in getting food from all kinds of places. We also did some weapons handling and manufacture and some other things for those who were going to be in deeper cover.
- Like what?
- Like how to be one person and exist as another. They called it Double Living.
- Interesting. How did they do that?

- I don't know – I wasn't chosen for that. I mean, before I was doing this I was an Art Student.
- You make it sound like a career choice, almost.
- Not really. I never finished the course as I was recruited at University and saw that what I was training myself for was just a horrible kind of servitude and that there were dangerous forces at large in the country that needed to be held in check. Not a career choice, just a life choice.
- Who funds all of this?
- I don't know. Maybe ask Georgie when we get to the farm. He knows more about the mechanics of the movement than I do. I'm just a more practical type – a foot Lieutenant sort of.
- How would you sum up what the fight is all about then, Lieutenant? I mean...in about a dozen words.
- Hmm...dozen words? How about '*stopping government*'? That's two words.
- Any government at any cost?
- Any government, at any cost.
- I admire your single mindedness, you know. I was wondering how a girl as young as you could do this sort of thing without any thought for yourself.
- There is no 'self'. I'm not a girl either.

I blink.

- Can you explain that?
- Gender doesn't matter, does it? Age, gender, colour, anything. None of them matter a bit, do they really. No 'self' either. We have been taught that there are far worse things that could happen to you than dying.
- Such as what?
- Such as a betrayal of the cause.
- And the cause is just to 'stop government'?

She smiles.

- You sound like someone who doesn't have conviction! If you were not the superstar we all know you are I'd be doubting your commitment right now!
- Perhaps *I'm testing you...*

Her mouth opens and closes, silently. Her wit seems to have left her standing.

- I see.
- Don't worry about it.

Silence. She seems shocked.

- I mean, you passed any test I applied to you.

She seems relieved but still nervous – on edge and suddenly jumpy. She blurts out.

- Oh fuck, did I say too much?
- No, not at all. You showed incredible depths of knowledge and seemed to be able to put it all together in a coherent argument.
- Oh my god...*you think so?*
- I surely do. I'm just interested in what our people make of what we do. And you seem to be *totally committed* to the cause.

She seems beside herself with excitement, like a child (again) who has been given a prize at the end of a testing examination.

- Oh wow! Oh that's so exciting. Oh god man...I never even thought I'd get a chance to *meet* you..but here you are in my van testing me, and I passed...you've no idea the honour this is to me.

I cannot help but smile at her enthusiasm.

- It's perfectly alright.
- I mean, hell...I know we were taught it was all wrong back at camp, but I could just...just...just *stop the van here and blow you in your seat.*

Her mouth closes quickly. Didn't she just say 'gender doesn't matter' a few seconds ago? I try not to smirk.

- Oh?
- Oh my god. I said too much. I'm sorry.
- Oh it's okay. We can..um...overlook this.
- They don't like that talk.
- No, I guess they don't. If you're not a girl any more then it would make no sense.
- Exactly...oh *crap* I do this all the time...
- What?
- Open my mouth and never think of the consequences. Not to outsiders, mind. Just to people in the cause...sometimes. I've been warned about it before.

She looks pretty downbeat now. Almost distraught.

- It's alright. Really it is.
- If you say so. Are you going to tell anyone?

- No. I'm pretty discreet. How do you think we got here without that?
- Maybe that's why I am a Lieutenant and not a sleeper.
- Oh I don't know. We need all types, remember?

She seems to cheer up now. Looking round at me I see the black rings round her absorbing blue eyes. The girl doesn't look that well fed and certainly looks like she could do with a day or more asleep. She's carrying an invisible weight on her back and it seems to be affably killing her.

- We do. We're always being told that.
- We can't be far away now, can we?
- Over that ridge.

We pass by the falling shadows of a church spire and over the brow of the hill, where a narrow dirt road leads off the main roadway between two dry stone walls. The Transit navigates the path without any discernible suspension and rattles up the thirty degree slope which scoops up to the top of the hill in the fading light. As we near the top we see lights emerging from a small squat group of buildings. My throat tenses. Back aches.

She turns the van in a wide arc and sweeps the headlamps over the back end of the tiny cottage from which the light emerges, the other buildings being dark and bleak outhouses and storage sheds. Pressing the brakes, the van is persuaded to stop by her hauling up the ratchet on the handbrake, so slack the handle is almost vertical.

- Better go see what they want of you.
- Hold on...

She pauses, one hand on the door. My heart starts thumping in my throat.

- What's up?
- Um...I gave him some pretty bad news. He might not want us all to hear it.
- Oh...what do you want me to do?
- Well..wait here a second...

I crack the door open and wait for the creak I heard before which comes loudly and long and sounds like a wounded animal. I slide off the seat and onto the side step then off the van into the rough patch of ground on which we have stopped. I feel I have to say something to her before I do it, so I make the words as brief and vague as I can.

- I'm really so sorry about this...

My hand turns inside my pocket and in a single fluid motion I flip the safety catch and present the gun, pointing it at her. She makes no sound at all. In a strange kind of dispassionate calm I draw a bead on her narrow shadow and squeeze the trigger and immediately think of a god who might forgive me for what I'm about to do to her.

The gun goes off with a dull crack which is still shockingly loud to my ears, followed by a leaden crashing inside the van as the girl is propelled against the side of the driver's door. My arm turns to jelly and the gun hangs limp in my grip as I see her leg stick out over the gearstick and the large dark semi-fluid stain on the window behind her which wasn't there a second before. My stomach heaves. But I have hardly any time for that.

The cottage's rear door opens and a figure steps out. This figure is larger than Yellowdog but moves more cautiously, perhaps less capably.

- Cally? Are you there Cally?

A woman's voice. Could this be the mysterious Drebs who put the sights onto poor Cory? Could it be any other? She steps out of the shadow and is illuminated by the light from the cottage windows. I move as best I can into the shadowed area between the frames to stop her from seeing me, then come up behind her as she walks up towards the van straight into the headlights.

I let off a single shot which I am horrified to see hit her in her back and appears to dent her clothing and knock her down to the ground slowly. She makes a deep groaning, exhaling sound as she goes down, still managing to put one hand out to break her fall. Her groan sounds like a strange kind of disappointment, like a child caught at hide and seek. Merciful instinct. I move to her quickly and closely, raise the gun and without even giving it a *thought* fire a further shot into the base of her skull. Her body convulses upwards and falls down in a still, dead and silent heap.

Last time I knew myself I would never hit a woman. Never. Now, within the space of a minute I have two of them lying dead at my feet. *And I did that to both of them.*

The second woman is much heavier than Yellowdog – Cally – and older too, even matronly in her appearance. I am guessing she is in her forties. Her head lies sideways on the ground, mouth open, her face a destroyed mass of flesh and teeth and bone and tissue. *I did that.* I have to be sure. I swallow my nerves and move to the driver's door, opening it. The girl falls out backwards in a limp heap that clearly indicates any life in her was lost. Just a child. *I did that.* The wound I can see seems to have hit her in the neck, blood running down the front of her clothes in a steady stream. I reach in, take the keys and flip off the lights. Then I move to the back doors and open them. The rear of the van is filled with tools, some kinds of frames, electronic equipment and...rope. I grab one nylon line and move away from the vehicle, then walk up to the door from which the older woman had appeared. I enter noisily.

- Hello?

A voice responds.

- Through here.

I walk in through a very small vestibule and enter an open brightly lit lounge area. Three seats, a sofa, a long table, a chest which seems to be doubling as a coffee table in the middle of the floor. On the long table there is radio equipment. A staircase to my mid-left. The room curves away to a blind corner at the far side. On one of the seats is my old friend Georgie. From around the far corner comes another man, younger and leaner than him. Georgie stands up to greet me. I don't give him a second chance.

I manage to fire the bullet straight through his shinbone. He falls to the ground immediately and screams like an animal in distress, contorting and writhing meaninglessly, just the actions of a creature in more pain than it can ever have expected and which will do anything to relieve that suffering. The younger man freezes at the sight of Georgie on the ground. I throw him the nylon rope and point the gun at him.

- If you don't want the same, tie him to that chair.
- *What?*
- Tie *him* to *that* chair.
- How?

I impatiently let off another shot, this one calculated to scare the wits out of him. I fire it past his frame and watch it embed into the rendered wall behind him in a puff of sandstone and plaster. The young man – Blackie, I assume – urinates himself and nearly loses his legs. Four shots gone. I have a feeling this magazine holds plenty. But how do I know this?

- Yes...yes...don't hurt me.
- Be quick about it. And do a decent job. I'll check it.

He shakes.

- You're Blackie?
- Yes. Yes I am.
- Then move quickly, Blackie. You're not the first person I'll have killed today.

He lifts Georgie by the armpits which causes him to scream in pain; then he drops him which makes it worse. After negotiating and much shouting, Georgie is dropped onto the chair and Blackie winds the rope around him, his hands shaking, and face white as a sheet. Georgie cries out several times, partly due to the wet wound on his left leg and partly because of the tightness of the rope.

After about two minutes Blackie stands upright. He eyes me cautiously, nervously...his one concern his own preservation. He holds his hands out at me, palms facing. I lead him around the room and stand behind the keening form of Georgie who now bears no relation to the tough guy in the hotel or the hard-nosed negotiator on the phone. Now he seems small and quite pathetic. He's looking at his own mortality for the first time. The ropes seem tight enough. I experimentally move Georgie forward and backward to more howls of pain and can see that he's not going anywhere fast.

I look up at Blackie, poor young Blackie whose head full of ideology and trousers full of his own piss barely make any case for their cause, whatever it might be. *Stop government*. Maybe his should be *stop shaking*. I give it no further thought and fire off one shot straight at him, hitting him in the stomach and putting him down with a blunted shout. Not wanting to hear him howling in pain I stick another straight into the top of his head. All the sounds he makes now come from the kicking his convulsing body is placing against the chest in the middle of the floor. The blood spreads from the narrow hole in the top of his head in a pool. I fix my eyes on Georgie and sit on the edge of the

chest, the gun still in my hand. I pull out the clip. Yes - two left, plus one in the chamber. Enough.

One other excellent by-effect is that Georgie has stopped making any sound and instead is shaking in his chair through the shock of seeing his colleague being rendered into a kicking piece of dead meat, and no doubt also by the shock of the pain in his shin which has taken the entire colour from his face. I sit and look at him a while. Silently.

- Well. Georgie.

Silence. He sits and shakes.

- I'm here now because I really want some answers from you about what has been going on with me. What you have done to me. What you expect me to do for you. Everything. Is that understood?

He looks up at me. Mouthing a word. Almost a whisper.

- *Cally?*
- She's not around any more, Georgie.

He holds my gaze, almost as though he doesn't understand what I have just said. His eyes seem unfocussed and distant. He just looks defeated.

- Now, I've come all the way from my house with one intention, and that is to get answers from you. I know you know. I need to know *what* you know. And I need to hear it from you. Tell me everything and I'll take you to the hospital and you might even be able to walk again. Tell me nothing and I will leave you here to die. It's your choice.

Georgie just stares into the distance. My words don't seem to be registering with him. I am assuming that the traumatic shock has hit him so badly that he is shutting down on me. Damn.

- Can you hear me, Georgie? I want you to tell me about 'the cause' and where I fit into it. Then I want you to tell me where I came from, how you got me here and just what you expect of me?

He blinks. Tears come from his eyes, down the pallid cheeks, onto his shirt bound by blue nylon ropes. I've broken his hopes and dreams. I look down on him and I can smell his defeat. I have become the stronger monster.

- Georgie? Can you hear me?
- Yes.

His voice is laboured, as though it was coming from underwater.

- Good. Then that's what you will do for me.
- Then do something for me.

I look down at Georgie and wonder what he means, where he thinks he has any bargaining potential at all.

- I don't think you're in a position to make requests, you know.
- Shoot me.
- I beg your pardon?
- *Shoot me.* Now. Just kill me.
- Why are you saying this, Georgie?
- Cally's my daughter. I don't want to look on your face or live without her for another second.

Something inside me deflates and quietly dies. I try to leave it unnoticed. But it won't go away. My instinct is to apologise, but I know I can never do that. The time now is for resolve. Strength. Even to the point of being vindictive. *Cultivate.*

- Then we will speed the process up. Tell me what I need to hear and I'll make all this go away.

His head lolls in a silent howl of pain. Pain inside or pain outside? I cannot tell. I guess which though. He looks straight at me.

- They'll find you...and they'll kill you too, he says. – And no one will *care*...

I sit further back on the wooden box and look at his situation. He knows he is done for. He will die from his wounds, die from me abandoning him or die because I will do what he wants. Perhaps my better gambit would be to threaten him with non-extinction, but that might pose more problems for me.

- Maybe they will. But maybe they won't. I need to know about things so I can fight for the cause.
- The cause? What *cause*?
- The one that stops governments. The one you are busy dying for right now.
- What would *you* know about this struggle?

I pause and reflect.

- How come Cally is in the same cause as you when she said she was recruited from University? Was it a coincidence you were already in the same organisation?
- Far from it. *She* recruited *me*.

I admit to myself that I didn't see that one coming at all.

- And who are you, Georgie?

His answer is just about spat out at me in disgust.

- I won't be a part of your odd little....*personality search*.
- Then how can I know what I am?

- You mean you don't know?
- Of course I don't know. That's why I am asking you. You must know.
- What makes you think I know anything?
- Because you are part of all of this. You called in a strike on my wife, Cory. But she is who she says she is, something that some family ties on the other side have confirmed to me. Some of your enemies who you claim to be your greatest assets. And if the enemy of my enemy is my friend then we cannot be friends, can we?

For a second his pain and loss seem to have deserted him.

- Tell me what you know.

I breathe a deep breathe.

- On which level?

He winces in agony.

- The pain...it's killing me.
- Won't be long now. On which level do you want to hear this? The level you understand or the level I see it from?
- Either.
- I'm a government official working in the Home Office. I am given a document to read and digested by a Minister, the content of which is so explosive that it would take the entire edifice of the Western world and rip it apart. In the course of this I find you visiting me with a sports bag stuffed with money, weapons and clothes, you demand this document, then you follow me to a library where you commit mass murder to protect this document from other people's eyes, and in the course of all of this I run into journalists, civil servants, scientists, bodyguards, committees, various politicians, and bureaucrats, none of whom seem to be working for the same side and none of whom seem to have any interests at heart but their own. And at the heart of it all lies this document which everyone is so keen to get their hands on. Is that familiar to you?
- That would be a fair summation of events.
- Well, there are a few details you don't know about.
- Such as?
- The document was destroyed by me. I stuck it down a sewer grating in Central London. I wiped it out because I didn't want you finding it.
- You did *what*?
- Well you managed to blow the entire building up to try and hide its presence, so ultimately we were doing the same thing for the same...

- *That is not why we blew the museum up. We blew it up to divert them.*
- Well, it didn't work.

He moves and winces horribly.

- It didn't?
- No. They are still onto you and the document appears to be destroyed. Fortunately, in the confusion of the government mob getting the readers out the museum they lost me for long enough to let me lose the document. I have it still. I scanned it in the hotel and stashed it in my phone.
- You do? You *do*?
- I do, yes. I have it in my pocket.

His silence is a mixture of sheer speechlessness and what later seems to pass for horror.

- You do realise how vulnerable that action makes you?
- No. No one knows that I have it. Aside from you, that is. It's my ticket to freedom. Or would be, were it not for a few little complications.
- And these are?
- You remember the hotel room where we met?

His face is puzzled. Pain grips him again. He gasps loudly.

- Yes. I remember it.
- That was the first time you and I had ever met.

Another silence.

- Rubbish. We've known each other for years now...the cause, for crying out loud.
- Earlier that day I woke in that hotel room. I'm making this all up on the hoof. Not only do I not remember getting there, but I don't remember anything of my life *at all* before that moment, and neither do I even recognise my own face. I'm told I am named Austin Hafner, but that name means nothing to me. Nothing. No one I have met since that morning has ever been a part of my life before, as I don't know or recognise anyone. I sit in meetings, give opinions, chase shadows and hide documents without knowing what *any* of it means.

Georgie pushes upwards on his uninjured leg to relieve the pressure on the other. The blood is now running down his trouser leg having soaked in as much as it can. The blood spooling from Blackie's head spreads over the floor in a coagulated puddle. The smell of death in the room is awful. Georgie howls in pain, gritting his teeth as he contorts.

- Then you know what you are.

I barely breathe. Just to hear what he says to me. I barely breathe.

- What am I?
- You're a Sphinx. A plant who is just programmed to rise when the moment is required. You don't need to know anything or anyone, you just live on your wits and live on your knowledge. Everything you knew before is useful to you and can be used in your everyday existence, but nothing you are conscious of makes any sense at all. You just know enough to get by.
- *Sphinx*...that word was printed on the outside of the document file...
- That was not the name of the file. That was the name of the eyes-only classification. In other words, it was bound for you.
- And Jessop...he said that it was my name.
- Almost. He meant it was what you are. A deep plant waiting to be sprung like a trap. The question is...for whom?
- You mean not you?
- Never. We don't have that level of resources or technique. No, this has the government all over it. All over it.
- So why then do you send me to kill my wife?
- You don't have a wife, Hafner.
- I live with her. I live with Cory.

He looks right at me now. And he smiles.

- That is not your wife. You don't have a wife. *You don't have anything.*
- I don't understand.
- You will. But not from me. *Now kill me you fucker...*
- Oh not yet. I need to know more.
- You've given us enough.

He even manages to smile.

- Us?
- Us.

He looks behind us over at the radio on the table.

- Carter? Did you get all that?

The radio cracks into life – the same plummy voice as before. The barrister who told me to shoot my wife.

- I have got it all. We're fifteen minutes away.

I cannot believe my utter stupidity. I gave it all away. The phone. The mystery. The document. The connections. I had to unburden...but to whom?

- My job seems to be done, then.

He turns to me.

- Time for the cleansing bullet, I think. Give me back my daughter.
- Wait. I'm a...*Sphinx*...but not yours?
- No. We won you over before you activated. It seems that the latent memory you have of your previous existence remains. You were our asset because you were going to recover the document and pass it to us.
- And what would you do with it?
- If we were better people? Lose it forever, probably. The power in it would corrupt a saint.
- I...read it. And I tend to remember everything I see...
- Then heaven help you. But the reality is that we'd likely keep it and use it against anyone who tried to overstep their mark. We'd use their own weapon against them. A sort of unilateral deterrent.
- So where does Jessop come into this? He said that the Minister was your greatest asset.
- I fear that Jessop has become unstuck. He's acting in his own direction. And he cannot possibly be acting alone. There is every chance that he is acting for the government again, although perhaps a part of the government that does not like to show its face. Perhaps a part that dislikes the idea of not acting on the information that it knows about.
- You mean he has tasted knowledge and doesn't want to relinquish it?
- Precisely.
- Which means...
- ...yes, that he has read the document too. He may even still have a copy of it.

For the first time I am starting to find defeat easier. I am now willing to accept that I cannot follow what is going on around me any longer. I don't know who is on whose side, what anyone's aims or intentions are, who are the good guys, who are the bad guys, whether the document is a force for good or a force for ill or whether I am good bad or indifferent and to what cause I am lending myself.

- This is a mess.
- It is. And you're right in the middle of it. And I don't think any amount of information is going to get you out of this situation.

I nod. Scratch my face. I get up from the box and extend my arm.

- You took my life away. Of that I remain convinced. Sides? Who cares? You're part of a corrupted whole. It doesn't matter whose side you're on. You're just not on mine.

Georgie looks up at me and into the barrel of the firearm.

- I think you might find that no one *is*..

I release the trigger and watch as his head erupts in a sudden, filthy halo of blood and tissue, spraying up into the air in a dark red plume which bouquets over the off-white plastering on the walls. He crumples back in his seat immediately. I sniff a little and try to forget what I am doing. I rifle his pockets – made difficult by his kicking and twitching – and remove his wallet, his phone and a set of keys. I walk over to the radio and pick up the handset.

- Carter? You there?

Brief static. Then the voice returns.

- Yes, this is Carter.
- This is the Sphinx. There has been a change of plan.
- Oh? *We have a plan?*
- We do now at any rate. I've knocked out everyone here and now I intend to vanish to somewhere you will never find me. I have the document as you know but it appears I don't need to have it at all since it's all locked in my head. However, that won't prevent me taking it to government and giving them back their property.
- That would be an unbelievably foolish step. For one thing you are an expendable agent. They'd take it and kill you.
- Kill me? Kill *me*? I don't know what *me* actually means right now. That would be the least of my worries. No, I want to take it to them to finish you off and tie off Jessop too. Then I want to see what steps they will take with it. My guess is that they will never use it in a million years because they will be much too frightened. The document could destabilise civilisation, but that sort of power would undermine the foundations of government itself and I don't think these particular turkeys are going to be voting for Christmas any time soon. No, the more public it gets the more light shines on it the lesser the possibility that any of it will see the light of dawn.
- I cannot stress to you just how insane this is. If they have it they will use it.
- This is a gamble I can take. After all, if they are going to do me in, what can it do to me anyway? No, this way is better. Now...

I consult my watch...

- ...I reckon you are about five minutes away, maximum. Well, you'll find this place without me. You won't know anything more about what I am planning until such time that I contact you. And I will.

- Hafner...this is senseless. Don't ruin it for all of us.
- I'm not. I'm just ruining it for you.

I drop the handset and leave the cottage, making for the van. I open the driver's door and try not to look on her once pretty face as I step over her prone and contorted body and get in, gunning the engine and stamping on the throttle. I know I am leaning on her blood and flesh. I cannot help that. The stink of corruption will stick to me anyway. It's a part of me.

I swing the van out of the farmhouse and make off back down the dirt road beyond the dykes and hit the main road, heading back the way I came. Low on fuel. Van sticks out a mile. Noisy and smoky and falling apart and soaked in blood and stinking of death and filled in the back with some of the most suspicious looking kit ever seen.

At the first opportunity I pull the van off the road and into the nearby forest down the rutted road signposted as being used by the Forestry Commission. Down I drive until I reach a small cleared area into which I turn up a darkened broad roadway of trees, some appearing to have been recently felled. I pull the van in off the road and right away hear the clang of the sump being shorn by what I assume is a stump. I'm unconcerned; the van is going nowhere anyway. I turn off the lights and sit in the pitch darkness in a blood-soaked van.

Austin Hafner. *Government officer. Double agent. Husband. Father. Murderer.*

On nights like this I might imagine fearing the darkness, but not tonight. Tonight I *am* the darkness. Fatigue overwhelms me and I descend into the harsh sleep of the guilty.

The daylight is overwhelming and streams into my eyes directly. It must be later than I expected. The air cold and the birdsong loud. The van is in a worse state than ever in the daylight.

I think back to the previous day's events. The four bodies will be found eventually, but they cannot be tied back to me save in this van or on the word of Carter, and he is hugely unlikely to say much, given that his mob were responsible for multiple deaths in a huge public library. And even then they have to be found, and that's unlikely given the remoteness of the location. Sure Carter's mob will be all over the area but they have to find me, and I am ahead of their game.

Eight AM. How did I stay out cold for so long? I must be getting used to this lark by now. How far away are they? Are they onto me? I know I have to call Cory, but I am frightened by the prospect of the line not being answered. She's never tried to call me. I've been away for – well *how long* – and I haven't heard anything back from her yet. Is she just used to this sort of treatment, or did they finally managed to get to her?

I'm about to take the phone off its charger when it rings. No number. Cannot be Cory. My heart sinks as I lift it to my ear.

- Hello?
- Mr Halfer?
- *Hafner*. Yes...this is me.

A vaguely familiar voice. Cannot really place it.

- I'm sorry about yesterday...that wasn't what I intended...

Now this sounds interesting...

- I'm sorry too..I cannot place you...
- This is June Barker. We spoke yesterday. You were asking about my husband.

I'm now fully awake. I even crack open the van door to admit a little cold air to keep me awake and alert. My left hand feels about in my jacket for something to write with and on. Small post-it pad and a biro. Enough. Anything will do. *Is that my hand shaking?*

- June...thank you for calling me back. I had sort of given up hope of speaking to you again.
- My husband is a proud and loyal man, Mr Hafner. We are good people. He was just doing the job for which he was paid. He is a loyal patriot to Her Majesty and Her Government; let no mistake about that be made.
- I know. I wanted to make that point to him but he didn't seem interested in letting me speak.
- We've been approached by other journalists, you see. They seem to sense a scandal but they don't know what or how or any of the symptoms behind it. I don't know why..but you just sounded perhaps *different*, as though you were sympathetic. Well last night lying in bed I considered this and I'm not so green as to think someone like you won't be someone useful to us in a very short space of time.
- Have you spoken to your husband about this?
- No. He's in a deep, deep depression. I cannot reach him about most anything to do with his former business. He drinks. He won't talk much.
- Would he talk to me?
- I really don't know. He hardly talks to *me*.
- Could you persuade him, given what you just said about what you were thinking about last night?
- I might be able to, yes. Uhm..which newspaper are you from?
- I'm not a journalist, Mrs Barker. Your husband and I have worked at the same government department as each other and I know much more about what he was involved in than even he might.

She pauses a beat.

- Good god. You *know*?
- Yes, I know. I know what he was involved with and I know what he wrote with Mr Francis.
- You do? *How*?
- I worked with Margaret Hayes-Williamson. She gave me his work to write into a brief for the DPM. I've read it all, and I think I know the terrible trouble he is in and may have a way of getting him out of it.

A much lengthier pause.

- Mr Hafner...if you're lying it will be terrifically disappointing, you know.
- I know. I need your trust and especially that of Mr Barker too.
- Well...is there any way we can verify what you are saying?

I pause and think. This may be the time for a calculated gamble.

- Mrs Barker...did you know William Jessop?

There is another pause on the end of the line. I swear I can hear her fingers tensing on the receiver.

- Yes...I know William. It's a tragedy what happened to him...

Well she has her tenses muddled nicely and yet correctly.

- Did you just drop me a clue there, Mrs Barker?
- I don't understand.
- William phoned me recently. He's alive and, I think, working against our former employers.
- He called us too.

Pieces slot together again and I can almost hear her confidence in me increase and solidify, the whole thing closing tight with a satisfying snap like that of a doorbolt closing over. Something that didn't exist before now exists and bonds us.

- What did he say to you?
- I don't know – my husband spoke to him and seemed to lose whatever remaining mirth he had when they had finished. He wouldn't speak of it.
- I think Jessop is working to his own agenda.
- I don't know. I do know that whatever he is doing has come as a significant disappointment to Brian. I don't know much more than this.
- I need to speak to Brian. I think I can help him and in the process help myself.

- Yourself?
- I'm seriously mixed up in all of this stuff too and I really have no idea what is being stuck on me. I get the impression I am carrying the can for a fall which isn't my doing.
- Funnily enough, those are Brian's thoughts too. The trouble is all he can say is something that failed at the Nuremberg Trials and which won't help him one scintilla.
- Can we arrange to meet?
- I'll have to speak with him again to see if he can, but at least I know I can be positive about this since I realise you have bona fides that can be verified.
- Can I bring anything with me? Is there anything you need?
- I don't think so. We're not at our main home; that has been sequestered by the *forces of darkness* as Brian calls them. We're in our holiday cottage on the Dorset coast. They still crawl all around us though, but at least they show some discretion.

This gives me pause. First of all this is miles from London and secondly I know this van will never get that far. It will either break down, fall apart, melt or be noticed by Carter's mob. I have to get another vehicle to get there – but from where? I could maybe hire one somewhere, but I'd need a bunch of documentation that I don't have, and I would probably leave a trail. My keys jangle in my pocket, which make me think of the car sitting in the driveway back home – but would it not be folly to go there? And anyway, where on earth *is* home? I've never been there before as far as I can remember and have no superhuman powers of navigation at my disposal.

- Well don't tell me where you are just yet. Speak to Brian first and see if he is agreeable to this. If he is we can discuss times and places, okay?
- That would seem to be sensible. We're not exactly in hiding though. The police cruise past this cottage fairly often and we have surrendered our passports when this all broke. We're only out here to keep the worst excesses of the press away when the story breaks bigger, although a revolting little man named Hartley seems to know where we are and what we are doing here.
- *Hartley?*
- Yes, he left a card through the letter box twice now. Name of Johnny Hartley, some kind of freelancer. He's called the house three times but we gave him short shrift. Do you know of him?
- Yes I do. He's being played by the forces of darkness, I think. I don't even know if he knows it. A mutual friend once described him to me as being 'utter poison'. I suggest you continue the same line of action. He'll do you no favours.
- We didn't much think he would. Can I call you later this morning?
- Certainly.

- Brian is sitting in the garden right now with a drink in his hand, and I suspect it's his third of the day already.
- I'll wait for you to call me.
- I will. Goodbye Mr Hafner.

What *now*?

I have to get mobile, and that means not using this van for any longer. Besides, I'm sure the sump is destroyed on this tree stump I am sitting on. Even if it started it would go about half a mile before the engine seized.

I jump out and inspect the van from all angles. Aside from the hideous cosmetic damage that years of neglect have wrought it also seems that there is damage to the front bumper which is now hanging off, revealing the extent that the tree stump did to the rest of the front end, all of which is pretty horrific. Even if I could get it running (and it seems now on inspection that the sump might be intact – there is no oil aplenty) the cops would stop me in about a minute if this was seen on the roads.

I haul the bumper off entirely and think long and hard. I might be able to do this, since – judging by the time it took to get here - the house is fairly close, but the risk is still great. First I'll have to avoid the attention of cops on the journey, secondly I'll have to find my way home directly and third I'll have to be prepared for whatever I find back at the house when I get there.

Solutions to two problems are at hand. Directions can be obtained from the photograph I took of Cory in the house which has the location embedded in it. The phone's navigation program has the facility to lead me straight to it. Being prepared for what I find is still resting with the gun lying on the floor of the van. Avoiding the cops is trickier, but I figure that if I just brass it out I'll get by. I hope.

The mechanical voice from the sat-nav starts giving me directions. I fire the engine up again (fourth start) and spin it around, feeling the vehicle heavy and tired under the greenery on the forest floor. The exhaust is smokier than I remember which is a *very* bad thing, and it also has a very loud rattle, both of which suggest that what I thought was the sump being eviscerated was in fact the exhaust pipe being fractured. This gets worse. I sit a moment and contemplate the possibilities; I get stopped by the police, driving a bloodied van, with a live firearm which has recently been discharged and whose ammunition will bear the same tell-tale rifle marks as those found within four bodies nearby. Worse, I may also find that I can be traced to a house in a leafy part of England within which lies the dead body of my wife. This is a special kind of insanity.

I hit the accelerator and the engine and exhaust roar in a mutual protest against their imminent deaths.

An hour later I find that – by a near miracle – I am by the river where YELLOWDOG picked me up. I daren't drive further into the village as I *will* attract some serious attention there, but so far it seems that my powers of attraction don't live up to my own expectations. For once, this fills me with hope. Not one police car passed me on the way here, and the most attention I got was from an angry farmer pointing at my smoke-erupting vehicle as he passed me in his tractor. By the time I arrive, though, I swear I can hear the engine grinding against itself and slowly committing a form of vehicular suicide, in concert with the exhaust, the rear part of which decided to disengage itself entirely en route. I managed to find the right level of throttle (and gear) to keep the racket coming from under the vehicle to a minimum, but that was only what I could hear from within the van.. What it must have sounded like outside the van is anyone's guess. Fortunately the route I was sent on was rural, and although I may have wrecked the sweet vapours of some countryside idyll it avoided me making much form of human contact.

I pocket the gun and get out of the van – nothing left behind - just a gory, broken and smoking van full of non-specific electrical equipment. Without looking back I jog down the road to where I see the green. From here I can recover my bearings and can return to the cobbled streets past the mews and back to the small estate where Cory and Austin Hafner have set up their lives together. For some reason, a pang of grief pulls at the edges of my memory. Then it fades away.

Only a few people on the street, two of whom are washing their cars. Ah...no traffic, few people, car-washing...*this must be a Sunday morning*. Hand on the comforting weight in my pocket I pull no hesitant moves and move smartly around the side of the house towards the rear garden. I pause, heart playing an irregular rhythm, my breathing more strenuous than I would have hoped.

I round the building and see the back door lying ajar by a few inches. Back to the garden – nothing. No clothes hung out to dry, no gardening equipment lying out, no breakfast being taken outside. So why is the door open? Ducking under the rear window I make my way to the open entrance and listen carefully. Silence. No voices. No music. No vacuum cleaner. Nothing. Still leaning back from the door I prod it open a little wider, letting it swing quietly. A door ahead lies open. Nothing appears to be disturbed.

Crouching, I slowly move into the house and draw the gun, more out of a sense of comfort than anything else. I'm not even sure how many rounds are left in it now. I edge slowly across the floor of the kitchen and towards the door leading to the hallway. Nothing. No sound. Not the creak of a floorboard. Nothing.

I move through the house, room by room and see nothing out of place, nothing untoward. No furniture overturned, no dead bodies, no blood marks on the walls, not even a pile scuff on the dull ethnic and clean carpets. The only sign that there is something amiss is that there is no Cory, the back door is open and her house keys are lying on the distressed heavy wooden chest in the middle of the lounge.

She's gone.

I return upstairs and grab a suitcase from the bedroom and fill it quickly, throwing clothing into it quickly, picking two suits out of the wardrobe and folding them in their dry-cleaning bags into the suit bag I have found on the back of the walk-in door. I fling

toiletries from the bathroom into the same case and finally manage to shut it and the suit bag and run down stairs with both. Heart beating hard all the time, thinking eyes somewhere are upon me, watching and waiting, with the *inevitable bullet* cocked and waiting to take its easy and corrosive trajectory through the base of my skull.

No one. Still no one. Even in my limited understanding of my situation I find it incomprehensible that there would be no one at the house waiting for me to arrive. Surely they would have put out someone after they had taken Cory. And where had they taken her? What are they doing to her? Who is doing it to her? A woman I barely know and who barely means anything to me and yet I feel I have failed in an unseen duty in protecting her. That feeling weighs on my mind as I walk smartly through the lounge towards the kitchen and stand on something crunching underfoot.

Examination shows it looks like porcelain or glazed pottery of some kind. Small shards, presumably with the larger pieces picked up and hidden; cream background with fine black line illustrations and hand-coloured. Curious now, I walk into the kitchen with a couple of the pieces and look into the bin. Sure enough, on the top there is the remains of a large broken vase or flower jar with the same glazing, the same faux oriental illustrations and the same colouring. Smashed to pieces. Why would they break this? And why hide the pieces in the bin and leave the small parts out? And why not lock the kitchen door?

Many puzzles, few answers. I leave by the rear door and pull it shut, locking it and make for the Audi. The lock chirps open, the boot is filled with my bags and I get into the front seat. The feeling that death will rise out of the back seat and claim me is almost overwhelming. I ignite the engine, slip into drive and get the car out of the driveway as fast as I can without making myself look too obvious. As easily as I can I get away from the estate, the lanes, the mews, the cobbles and the greenery of the English countryside in a cold day in a month that ought to by any right be warmer than it is.

An hour later, now driving in the vaguest possible direction towards the South West, not hoping to do anything other than circle the area where I want to be, where I need to be and where I need to know someone who might know something – *anything* – will talk to me and spit away all this hopeless doubt and awful unpleasantness. The M3 speeds under me as the impressive German engineering hurries us both in the right direction somewhere towards Southampton.

The phone rests in its little charger as it goes off. The name appears in the display and at first I cannot place it. MARION. Things click back into place at once; the name that Cory had accused me of seeing or having an affair with, by the sound of it. Do I answer it? Will it be useful? I quickly surmise that it will not. It can only complicate a situation that I am already finding so complicated that I am having a serious bother trying to remember all the players and all the faces and all the names and all their purposes and intents and actions.

Marion? No. That would only make things much, *much* worse. I let it dangle and focus on the road, trying not to break any speed limits that would otherwise draw attention to me from all the wrong people for all the right reasons. Nagging at the back of my head is that my house is potentially a crime scene. The other is of course that I have left

another crime scene parked up nearby, which of course might lead them back to a far worse crime scene not all that far away. Has anyone found the bodies yet? Is it too early for that? The place is remote, so I ought to have time. I just need to know.

The phone rings again. Marion. I let it ring until it turns off, then ignore it. Almost at once it rings again. A complicated situation is becoming more complicated by the minute. Maybe I ought to speak to her. Who is she? Is she a friend I can use? Maybe she will have an innocuous place I can stay in for a while until I get the chance to get away from all of the noise around me. Maybe she is suitably unknown to let me hide in her world for a bit; heaven knows, I'm hiding in everyone else's right now. Then of course I realise the utter folly of that idea. My wife is maybe lying dead somewhere and I'm with a woman I suppose is my former lover. Would it take anyone an awful long time to put two and two together and figure out where I was? Even the brittle intelligence of Her Majesty's Government would have little bother putting that story to use and finding me in a minute. And 'Marion'...sounds like a civil servant's name. They will know her. Common office knowledge. A source of amusement and the butt of jokes. I see her a buttoned down civil service type who lets rip at weekends in a haze of smoke and booze and sexual liberation, only to return to her sensible business suits, court shoes and severe spectacles on the Monday morning. And this is Sunday after all. Slow day for news. Slow day for the imagination. Who can tell?

It rings again. I ignore it again.

Up ahead I see a sign indicating Winchester Services. Perfect. I slide off the road and head around the great looping road, past the dank depression of the oddly-named Premier Inn and round to the main building where I find I can park easily near to the doors. Rather than become distracted by the way the phone is going off again I lift it and knock it onto silent and drop it into my pocket, then get out the car, cheep the lock shut and head for the Eat & Drink Co where I can lose myself in a muffin, some coffee and surroundings that don't give any indication as to where I am.

The phone rattles in my pocket almost continually as I get through the service counter, past the depressed-looking Japanese girl on the cash register and make my way almost alone into the spacious curved eating area. I pop my tray down, unstick the sticky muffin from its sticky cellophane wrapper and chew into it, almost becoming disoriented by the sudden and intense burst of sweetness and cake and chocolate and cocoa that contrasts so heavily with the weight of what is going on in my head. A sip of coffee. Suddenly, things seem to be righting themselves. They aren't, but they seem to be.

I sit through minutes of calm. Barely aware of the rattling in my pocket. I take stock and prioritise.

1. Speak to Barker. It's a must-do. It might explain everything.
2. Can I trace Francis? It's a must-try. It might explain everything.
3. Cory?
4. Carter? Who why and where?
5. Talk to Max again and get from him what he knows.
6. Confess to him about the farmhouse? Can he help?

The last seems partially insane, but the more I think of it the more he knows what I must be under and the more he must know that these people are his enemies. This is probably some kind of warfare. We're all troops and

Goddam it Marion...

I pick the phone out my pocket intending to turn it off, when I see that there is now a message left on the voicemail. Well at least this way I can hear how the fragrant and frantically repressed Marion sounds without her getting any whiff of me back.

I sip more coffee as the voice goes through its menus and the first and only message comes up.

- *Oz? Oz? Why aren't you answering your bloody phone? Call me back now...I'm at Marion's...*

The funny thing was that I know neither Cory nor Marion, but hearing Cory saying *I'm at Marion's* made the coffee jump up in my throat and the muffin drop from my hand onto my lap. *Wooaa...what are they doing?*

Dialling. Ringing. Answered.

- Hello?
- Marion?
- Austin?
- Yes...Marion?

A voice in the background. Marion sounds younger than I imagined. Distinct northern accent too. Huddersfield, maybe? Thirties perhaps? Why do I hear *dark hair*?

- Hold on, Austin. Cory is here.

Noises. Phone being handed over.

- Oz?
- Cory?
- Yes...where the hell are you?
- Cory...I have to do something. It's so complicated to explain, but I have to get to the heart of this...I have a way.
- Oz...*where the hell are you?*
- Winchester Services, heading south west.
- Listen...someone came for you.
- Me?
- Well I assume so. I heard you leave. I was so frightened...
- Cory...what happened?
- I heard you leave and lock the door. I thought you were going to take the car but I looked out and saw you running away. I didn't know what to think...I thought something was wrong.
- It was. I had to get away quickly...from you.
- *What?*
- I had to get away from you to draw *them* away from *you*.
- Oz...is this the same stuff as before?
- Wait...let me walk out of this place. I need to make sure this is private...
- OK.

I hang up a second and smartly leave the cafeteria and back out into the cold air where I get to the car I had only just left and sit inside. I dart my eyes about, checking in case someone is creeping up on me. The paranoia is increasing again. Hands shake. Dialling Marion's number.

- Cory?
- Oz...what happened?
- Something has come up, Cory...I don't know how to tell you about it. It's just too...
- Listen...a man came by this morning. I think he was after you...I don't know...
- A man?
- Yes...a very big man. A car drew up outside and he came up the drive and shook the front door, but it was locked. I panicked and ran downstairs where I could see him through the blinds...but he had disappeared.

- Where did he go?
- Round the back...he started rattling the back dining room window and then tried the back door. I kind of hid in the dining room and tried to call the cops, but by the time I got the phone he had got in.
- Good God Cory...are you alright? Did you call the police?
- I'm okay...just nervy. No, I didn't call the cops. He came in and walked into my kitchen and through the dining room and I hit him with it.
- With what?
- With the Chinese vase Bella gave us in Lyons...remember?
- Oh yes...I remember...did you get him?
- Yes...he went down and I tied him up. I might have hit him a few more times...I broke the vase on him. He was out cold.
- Jesus Christ Cory...what happened to him?
- I came across the road to Marion's...told her. We got back and manhandled him into the white plastic garden storage box outside and locked it.
- *Holy crap, Cory...*
- We came over here and just...sat quiet.
- Why didn't you call me?
- My phone is in the house.
- Why didn't you phone the cops?
- I don't know...Marion thought I might have really hurt him.
- It doesn't matter about that. Call them and...

Pause. Thinks. *Call them and get them to start a trail at my place that leads to a bloodstained van not far away and a farmhouse with bodies all over it.*

- Second thoughts...don't call them. Stay where you are. Don't move.
- Do you have the car?
- Yes, I have the Audi.
- I thought someone had stolen it. I looked across the road and saw it was missing. OZ, what the fuck is happening to our lives?

She looked across the road – *Marion is a neighbour.*

- It's happening to me too, love. Where is Jason?
- He's with me...he's okay but he's pretty frightened.

- Leave this with me. Stay where you are and lock your doors. Leave the lights on and stay by the phone. Alright?
- Oz...when will you be back? This is killing me...
- I will be back as soon as I do this. Be brave for me Cory...you're an amazing woman.
- Maybe...but I *feel* like a violent thug. I've still got it in me...I had a good teacher.

She did? How? Where? Who? When? Why?

- Be safe.

Off goes the phone and I think hard. Only one person to call right now.

Dialling. Waiting.

- Max Ferlow...
- Max....this is Austin.
- *Jesus*...where are you?
- Heading north on a scrap. I need a favour.
- How is the garden coming along?
- Excuse me?
- Your leave?

Ah...*gardening leave*...

- It's working out slowly. Slowly but nicely.
- Have you got any close to the heart of the matter yet?
- No, not really...but the trip north might reveal something hard that might let me untighten this stuff.

I like him, I am grateful to him and I might even trust him...but just keep a distance.

- Okay...what's the favour?
- Cory's in danger.
- What sort?

Max's voice seems to harden and become insistent. For a second he sounds like a family friend, someone who wants to look out for the welfare of his friends and their spouses and their friends too. *Max, I trust you enough but there is a limit. That was reached and passed some time ago.* Words echo. She reaches to the past to make an excuse for the present.

- Some thug came looking for me. I know it is linked to this business.

- How?
- Don't ask. But I have to ask you something.
- Name it.
- I need your utter discretion here. No questions, yes?
- Well...that depends what you want me to do.
- You once mentioned *professional cleaners* to me...remember? "*We can be in and out in seconds. You know...like professional cleaners.*"
- Yes, I remember.
- I need that service.
- Erm...is this a service wash or are you going to do it yourself?

Pause. I get the allusion.

- Neither. Cory did it. It just needs picked up and dry cleaned.

Max can be heard laughing down the other end of the line.

- Cory always was a bit vicious. Nice to see she's never forgotten the Brigade!

Brigade? Who's Brigade? Which? Boy's? Girl's? Red? Angry? *Play dumb.*

- She's still handy yes.
- So where is the laundry?
- In the plastic storage box in my garden. I'm told it is tied up and locked.

Max whistles quietly, the sound shrill down the receiver.

- Do you know who this person is?
- I think he's a cleaner from another firm.
- I see...know which one?
- That's part of the larger issue, if you remember...
- Ah yes...I do. Well...I can get a couple of professionals to clear up the mess and dispose of it if needs be.
- There's another thing.
- Oh my...what else has she done?
- There is a very battered van down by the river near where I live. You might want to take and clean this up a bit too.
- How badly dirty is it?

- More than you want to know.
- I need to know. Are we talking *biological dirt*?
- We certainly are.
- Fucking *hell* Oz...
- Sorry man...I don't know what I can say.
- Is this something of Cory's too?
- No...this might be his. But it won't help if it gets found.
- Is it parked in an obvious place?
- Obvious enough to let anyone see it, yes. And the state it's in it will bring her Majesty's finest flocking to it just as soon as they have gotten over their early exertions.
- I see. Priority job. Okay...let me make a couple of calls and I'll see when we can slot this in.
- I appreciate this Max. I owe you one.
- You owe me lots.

Line goes dead. Some relief is felt, but also some anxiety as I know that whatever Max can find so can anyone else, and maybe faster.

The rain patters over the windscreen and the car rocks in the wind. Thinking hard. Biting my lip. Do I call Cory? Of course I should.

- Cory?
- Oz.
- Yeah...okay. I have someone coming to clear up that mess you made.
- Oh wow. Really? At our place?
- Yes. It will be discreet. Stay indoors and watch for them. When you see a couple of guys walking up the side of the house to the back garden you'll know it's them. They'll have a van or something like that with them. Don't worry about it. Just sit tight until they come and go, and then get the hell out of there. Take Jason and go somewhere safe.
- Where? I don't have any money.
- You do. Go to the house after they leave and check the cutlery drawer. You'll find money in there.
- Oz...where can I go?
- Anywhere you're not expected.

- Peter's? Is that safe?
- I don't know. Where is he these days?

I can hear her smiling in recognition.

- Worcester. I can take your car up there.
- My car?
- The BMW.
- Oh...right...yes. Do it. And take the money.
- I'm not happy about going back there, really.
- I know...but remember the Brigade.
- You been talking to Max? He always brings that stuff up!
- I know.

A pause. I can feel a settling.

- I do love you, Oz...wherever you are and whoever you are.
- That's a weird way to put it, Cory...
- You want to speak to Jason?

My heart suddenly makes a jump up into my throat and seems to remain there, pulsing ferociously like an angina attack.

- Put him on...

Voices off camera. *Dad wants to talk to you...*

- Dad?

Oh my dear god...oh my dear god...oh my dear god...oh my dear god...oh my dear god

- Hi Jason...Mum tells me you're scared.
- I am. She said someone was in the house. Who was he?
- I don't know. But he's not coming back.
- How do you know, dad?
- Because I'm dad and I'm always right. I promise you he's not coming back.
- Can we go home?
- No, not yet. Just to be sure about things.
- But you said he's not coming back.

- He's not. But we have to be sure no one else is and we have to protect the home against all of that.
- Are you sure he's not coming back?
- Certain. Some guys are just coming over to make sure no one else ever will.

Pause.

- When are *you* coming back?
- Very soon. I'm away for a bit – I have to see some people.
- You remember Alton Towers?

Um.

- Sure I do.
- That was the last time we went anywhere together. I miss you. You're never here.
- I'm sorry Jason...my work is difficult.
- I wish it wasn't. I wish we could just do things like that again.

Christ. That hurts. I have to veer on course.

Jason Alexander Hafner, class 3G3, studying mathematics, English, French, physics, chemistry, history and biology and – as far as I can tell – doing well in them all.

- How are you getting by in school? Your last report was good.
- Chemistry test tomorrow. Reactivity tables and stuff.
- Easy?
- Sure it is. I got a one in it last test about three weeks ago.
- That's good.
- What's going to happen to us?
- Your mum is taking you to Peter's in Worcester for a few days.
- Where?
- Worcester.
- Where's that?
- Oh it's not far. You remember Peter?
- *Uncle Peter?*

Ulp.

- Sure.
- Of course I do.
- Well, it will be fine there. You'll see. It's just to be certain.
- I suppose. What about school?
- You can miss that I think. We'll see you okay on that.
- Grierson has a mock coming up and we cannot miss that otherwise we'll not know what to expect...or something.
- I think you already know what to expect.
- Dad?
- Yes?
- Are you okay? You sound a bit weird.
- I do? Like how?
- Like the way you are talking. I don't know really.
- Well...we're all under a bit of pressure here. It's a hard time.
- What was he doing in our house?
- Oh don't worry about him...
- I can't help it. Why was he in our house?
- He was looking for me, I think.
- Was he going to hurt you?
- Probably. But he's gone now.

I sense his distrust.

- If he's gone then why are we going to Uncle Peter's and why aren't you here with us?
- We're just being cautious.
- So he *might* come back, then?
- No. *He* won't.
- But his friends might?
- It's *very, very, very* unlikely but you and mum are too precious to take any chances at all with. I have friends too. They are making certain that nothing like that can happen again. After that we're all going to be back home.
- I miss you dad.

- I miss you too, son. I really better go. The sooner I get some things done the sooner I can get home.
- Okay.
- Can I speak to mum again?
- Sure...

Phone being handed over.

- So what's the drill?
- You take Jason to Peter's and stay there. Wait until the clean-up people arrive then get over to the house, get the money, lock up and leave.
- OK...I'm still not happy about going over there.
- Don't worry about it. The cleaners are the best there is.
- Alright. So where are you heading?
- I'm heading away a bit. Just to see where it leads me in my quest. You know. Restless mind and all that.
- But no restless heart.
- None. But I have one person I need to speak to otherwise I am just going to burst. After that I am heading back home and frankly I am going nowhere after that.
- What about the job? Are you staying in it?
- We can talk about this later, Cory. Just be safe and look after Jason for us.

She pauses on the phone. A moment of emotive braking.

- Am I losing you, Oz?
- Are you what?
- Losing you? I don't want this.
- Neither do I, love. It's just something you and I have to fight through.
- We did all this before. We managed it then, I suppose.

Before?

- We'll be alright.
- Okay...I'm going to watch out for the cleaners.
- Okay. Be careful. Remember the brigade!

I can almost hear her smile at the end of the phone.

- I will. Be safe.

She hangs up.

I sigh. A momentary feeling of absence and loss, amidst hopes for their safety. Catching up. To be done. And how.

I start up the engine and let the car drift out of the confusingly laid out car park, the rain starting to really hammer down now, so much water on the windscreen that it no longer looks like running water but a thick pane of ill-constructed glass through which nothing can be seen properly without distortion. I pull past the services, down the lengthy slip and out onto the motorway again, hugging the inside lane at sixty hoping that the phone will ring again.

Thirty miles and as many minutes later, it does. Number withheld. Hope against hope.

- Hafner.
- Mr Hafner?

Barker.

- Yes, this is Austin Hafner.
- This is Brian Barker. My wife June has spoken well of you and seems to think it might be in our interests to talk to you. Should I share her opinion?

Conscious of talking and driving at the same time. Paranoid.

- Perhaps. It is also in my own interests too as I need to unburden myself. We've got mutual goals, Mr Barker. Mutual goals *and* mutual enemies, I hope.
- We can discuss that when you get here. I will give you my address.
- Give me one second...

Searching my pockets. Sixty miles an hour. Pen in my left pocket. Pull the cap off with my teeth and spit it out.

- Okay...go ahead.

He gives me the address. His house is named Laburnum Cottage.

- A pretty name for a house.
- It is. It's now a ruined idyll, but it's ours. I will see you soon?
- Yes, you will...I'm heading into your area now. I'll be there within two hours or less.
- Mr Hafner, understand something. For reasons you may come to understand, I am under a form of *house arrest*. It's nothing so crass as it sounds – there is no policeman in my home watching me – but they are monitoring my every move and my every visitor. You will be a part of that surveillance. If you find that troubling I suggest we find another way.

- No, it will be fine. If we start trying to hide from people then the likely chance is that we'll draw even more attention.
- That would seem likely. I will see you in short course.

Hang up. Stamp on the gas. Driving now with a purpose.

Fifty minutes later I am up to Laburnum Cottage situated in a small village on the Southern coast. Sure enough, it is set behind a garden with golden deciduous trees true to their name, a white stone front with traditional black surrounds on the windows, grey slate roof and twin chimney pots. Outbuildings to the side and rear look like later additions, as does the expansive conservatory abutted to the rear which peeks up at me between the rows of trees. Behind that is a long stretch of greenery, a flat lawn surrounded by tall conifers and shrubbery. As prisons go, this one is an idyll, despite the rain driving down around me and hammering onto the roof of the car. No one else around, despite the warnings. Are they watching? Filming? Or are there no jailers at all?

I get out the car and boldly move to the dry stone wall around the front garden, creak open the black wrought iron gate and walk up the path, past rows of herbs in planters just like mine and up to the dark wooden door with the art deco inlaid glass, the name of the house on a brass plate by the bell pull. I ring. I see movement behind the glass. A short person, walking up towards me. The door unbolts from the inside and swings open. She is in her early sixties maybe, dressed smartly, gold rimmed spectacles, an unspoken air of efficiency and a lack of anything frivolous about her. Her eyes look tired, as though the mirth has been wrung out of her, *as of late*.

- Mr Hafner?
- June Barker?
- Yes, I am.

We shake hands.

- Call me Austin. Thank you for seeing me.

She eyes me up and down, without much pretence or reticence. I am being judged. Scanned. Assessed. She won't be calling me *Austin*.

- I hope that my husband and I don't have any cause to regret this...
- I hope that you won't either.

She lets me inside. The cottage is extremely warm, hardwood floors, rugs and runners. Brass decorations, beams and low hanging lighting. Bookcases, grandfather clock, pot plants everywhere. It reeks of finesse. Care. Love.

- Mr Barker is through the back in the conservatory.
- Thank you. This is a beautiful house.

- We worked long and hard for this place. We never thought it was all going to come down to *this* sort of a turn.

Break some ice.

- I've spoken to your colleague, Linda Dawson. She's taking over your business while you're...away.
- So I hear. Not really a *colleague*. I've never met the girl.

That sentence came with a full stop.

- Oh I thought maybe you had.
- No. She's a stopgap, I am told. Came down from Manchester carrying her *Northern ways* with her, I expect.

I follow her through the hallway, through a lounge that is surprisingly sparse and elegant and into a wide open kitchen beyond which there is an expansive glass wall facing onto the large conservatory. Greenery everywhere. The rain hammers down. The place feels of...home.

- Mr Barker is in here.

She slides open the door to the conservatory and walks in. The heat is surprisingly present here too, although the rain crashing onto the glass roof is louder than ever. Yet somehow...it comforts. Above us within the atrium a glass cupola stands, within which there is a light which shines a dim illumination down onto the room, compensating for the lack of sunlight. Clever. The space seems contradictory, with the strong smell of tomato plants suggesting a small greenhouse, but the actual area easily able to encompass Cory's lounge. *My* lounge. Earthenware tiles underfoot, all of them clean, signifying the sound of metal garden furniture scraping along their dull surface.

She takes me to a central table at which is sitting Brian Barker. He's overweight, balding, exhausted-looking, in a white shirt, black trousers and what look like handmade leather shoes. Sleeves rolled up. Creased brow of a man with too much worry. On the table in front of him is a bottle of Hendricks gin, a bottle of tonic water, a chopping board with lime and cucumber sliced on it, and an ice bucket. In his hand is a cut crystal glass which is nearly empty. Were he not the person I imagine him to be he would look dissolute. But he's been forced into this, somehow. And he has nowhere to turn and no one to turn to other than his wife who is as much a prisoner as he is. He looks less like a *fat Etonian poof* than he does a banker who has grown to despair of his trade.

He looks up and me from his chair. He doesn't attempt to stand up. I extend him my hand and he shakes it, a weary handshake of someone who only wants to make the gesture and not the mark. A pallid insinuation of a smile crosses his face and then vanishes to be replaced by the somnolent despondency his face wears so willingly. He eyes me without the cynicism I imagined he might have. Perhaps it's the drink.

- Austin Hafner...
- Barker. Glad you could come. Have a seat among the ruins.

I sit down in the soft cushioned wicker chair which creaks and flexes under me. Faint music playing comes to me from far away, either softly in the conservatory under the sound of the rain, or from elsewhere in the house. Barker finishes his drink and stares out into the distance for a second. I have no inkling what he is contemplating.

- They'll know who you are, you know.

He seems to be addressing me.

- Who will?
- The keepers who have taken this place over. They'll have seen you, noted you and will have you marked as a nasty, or something. That way I guess you'll never be quite as free from this business as you may otherwise hope. So whatever your intentions may be, Mr Hafner, you'll never quite extricate yourself from the very real possibility that trouble will come stalking you.

He's obviously had a fair bit to drink but he doesn't seem to be incapacitated. Merely loquacious and perhaps unable to filter from his mouth the words he is thinking. That can only be positive for me.

- Are you a drinker, Mr Hafner?
- I can be, yes.
- I hope you are, because this stuff doesn't pour itself and as Kingsley Amis used to say, if you find yourself here without a drink in your hand then it's your own bloody fault. Give him a starter, June.

Mrs Barker makes her way through to the kitchen and returns with a matching glass which she hands to me, then seats herself next to her husband. I find myself unavoidably sitting away from them, immediately distanced as though we are on opposing sides, waiting for the stand-off. Maybe that was the ploy. I pick up the gin bottle, pour a decent measure and then top it with a couple of bits of the chopped lime, ice and tonic. I settle back and watch Barker do the same, only his measures are heavy on the arm. Ice added along with cucumber.

- I have a doctor whose lack of humour is only matched by his lack of the subtle. He says to me 'Brian, you have terribly high blood pressure' and I reply that I know I do and that I need it to give me an edge. He prescribes me with tranquilisers for my nerves, but I leave these pink dragees on the shelf and use this stuff instead. Works better and seems more agreeable to the palate. My wife doesn't care for it but my style cuts to the fine, don't you think?
- It seems to, Mr Barker.
- I told you we were clean people, decent people and people not willing to stand for any nonsense. It may seem unusual given what you can see but I can assure you that what you are seeing is a life in aberration. I'd be prepared to say *mea culpa* but I'm afraid that the buck won't trundle quite this far. You see, we've had our portion as well.

I push back some of the gin and savour its remarkable flavour under the hissing fizz of the cold quinine. Grimacing a little as I swallow over the bitter *cinchona* flavour I listen intently to Brian Barker spilling over to me. It sounds a little as though he has had few opportunities to say anything much to anyone. Maybe I am more a vent than he thinks.

- I quite believe you have. I believe I have as well. Maybe that's why I came here. I have to talk to you about the situation I am in and the one you are in and see what we can do about this.

Barker almost smiles the smile of a predator.

- I don't think we quite match up, do we?
- We'll see.

His gaze is still fixed out of the conservatory windows, the rain sliding down them in cleansing torrents, feeding the grass and the bushes and the herbs and the trees.

He takes another draft of the bitter blue botanicals.

- Did you see a blue car outside when you arrived?
- No, I didn't.
- Well, that would have been them. Were they there, of course. Incredibly and deviously careless. No *tradedcraft* to them anymore. None of that *four stage design* any longer, just a gaggle of flat footed *better-myself-but-quickly* butcher's boys out to cause trouble for decent people who just do what they've been told to do by people who pay a line better than they'll ever imagine in all the days they'll ever see. They can watch me drink for all I care. Maybe it feels like a waste to them. I drink this stuff because it tastes of victory to me.
- Brian...

June touches his arm.

- I know, love. It's slowing me down. But in another way it's speeding me up. And they'll never see me in any other way again. Cheap little *parishoners*...

He half-finished the booze in one fast slug and then sets the glass down on the marble-topped table.

- So come on then, Mr Hafner. You have things with me that you want to discuss? You know they can hear everything we say, so we sit in this place where the rain is loudest, and if I strain my ears I might hear the words you say that they might not get the chance to detect. You follow my reasoning?
- I do...
- Good, then we don't have any issue with *them* hearing what we are all about. Perhaps we can move onto less pleasant things than thinking about my incarceration.
- Why are you being held?

He sighs and for the first time looks directly at me.

- I think some people see me as some kind of *threat* to their existence. As if my voice threatens theirs.
- That's absurd, though...isn't it?
- It *would* be absurd if it were not so perilously true.

He shifts his weight towards the table and proceeds to pour another for himself. In what seems to be resignation, June chops the fruits. A slow movement of what looks like defeat, quite unlike what Brian asserts as being its flavour.

- So Mr Hafner...speak to me now and let me hear what draws you into this flame.

I take a deep breath.

- Some time ago you wrote a document with a Mr Francis. In it you detailed a number of things which linked governments, industries, churches, society world orders and a number of other things which revealed a network of collusions and conspiracies which would threaten the existence of nearly all that they touch and which would, if made public knowledge, destroy the fabric of order in this country and likely all others worldwide.

I look at him and pause, waiting for his acknowledgement. It's not forthcoming.

- If you are waiting for a disagreement then it's a long time coming.

I clear my throat.

- This report was lodged at government and has been viewed as being so dangerous that it cannot be revealed for the fear that it will detonate in the faces of many people, including those within whom the paper's commission was founded. In my capacity within the Home Office I was approached by a government minister, to receive the document and report on its content in summarised form and – I assume – provide them with a précis as to its content and to the realistic damage it contained.

I lean forward and take the bottle from Barker to pour myself another before I continue.

- I read the report and have its content committed to my memory. However, there are some extenuating circumstances around this which affect me deeply and profoundly. There have been various...*factions*... of one sort or another which have been after the document, or me or both and who do not seem keen to relinquish a hold of either. I find myself being in opposite directions at the same time in a struggle I neither know nor really care about.

I pause.

He interjects.

- That's not the whole story, is it?

- Far from it. When we met I told you I was Austin Hafner. I might be, yet I know deep down I am not.

Barker doesn't even flinch at this news.

- Some weeks ago – time now being fluid to me – I woke in a strange bed in a strange town wearing a strange face. I have no idea who I am, nor where I am, nor even what I am doing. Yet I sense that there is something so very wrong going on here and that I am unable to escape that fate.

Barker's face is deadpan. I continue.

- There have been people killed to get a hold of this document. Government departments seem to be waging political war against each other in its name. They all need to know what's in it.

He sits quiet and impassive. He doesn't move.

- You created some kind of a weapon and I – I have to assume this – am some sort of device used by one side or another to either retrieve this document, or gain the knowledge in it, or destroy it or...something. I don't have any clear idea for whom I am working and have had to rely on my wits to get from one minute to the next, more or less judging everyone on instinct and a gut sense of ethical values. The fact remains that this document contains information so unbelievably powerful and *damaging* that there are some hugely committed people out there who are intent on this information. I seem to be at the centre of this and I don't know why and I don't know how and ... I just *don't know*.

Barker swirls his glass and raises his eyebrows. The ice cubes rattle gently, the gin splashes and the rain keeps on pelting down above and around us.

I carry on.

- Within the last day...or so...I have killed four people. It's something I would like to say that I have never done before, but I don't *know* what I have done before. I have been shown a wife and a child and a home and I know none of them. My only clue to any of this is that I have been referred to as a 'sphinx' by someone who may know about these things, and who has told me that I am some kind of sleeper agent who has been – for want of a better expression – 'activated' to carry out a task, although since I don't seem to know what I am doing it would appear my education has been lax.

Still nothing from Barker, other than his raised eyebrows when I said the word 'sphinx'. Noted and filed. *He knows something*.

- I have had possession of this document of your creation. I realised quite quickly that I was working within Her Majesty's Government in some context or another and that I was handed the document by a Minister who asked me for the brief. Since that time I have spoken to what appear to be political hucksters, some kind of Angry Brigade movement, journalists, other politicians and civil servants, people claiming to be friends, others who are clearly not...and I have no idea what to do or where to turn now. That's why I am here to speak to you. I'm sorry if

this all seems vague, but that's all I can say to you without getting into specifics right now.

He stops rattling the ice, drains the glass and clanks the empty glass onto the marble. His breathing is laboured and slow. His consumption is formidable.

- Well...Mr Hafner...I'm not sure what I can really do for you.
- First of all Mr Barker, you can tell me whether or not any of the detail of what I have just given you makes any sense at all.
- You didn't really give me a lot of *detail* at all. You gave me wide strokes on a blank sheet. Now I'm sure you can flesh out the bonier parts in some manner, but overall you didn't give me much of a hand to match you.
- Give me anything. *Anything*.

I realise that I sounded desperate there. That might send off the wrong message.

- I can certainly give you another drink, Mr Hafner. But I am unsure just what it is that I can offer you beyond that.

I collect myself.

- Alright. Then does my story sound plausible?
- If I am assuming that you are not a liar, then your story *ipso facto* has to be plausible at the least. Perhaps the question is in the way you are interpreting it.

May as well start off big.

- Did you write the document I am referring to?
- Well...answering that properly will mean that I will have to fill this bugger again. I suggest you do the same.

Refills for both of us. June appears to be sitting motionless, her eyes boring into me like diamond tipped drills, trying to eviscerate me from within. I sense outright hostility from her; I sense her protection for the man she loves. Like the rain it doesn't let up, not even for a second. I just don't get her – there is something about her I just don't *get*.

Barker turns to June and makes a motion with his finger and thumb, twitching them back and forth. I don't get the meaning. June nods and stands up and picks up the discarded parts of the limes.

- Wait for me, she says.

She leaves. I watch her go and remain silent. Barker turns to me and speaks quietly.

- You've a long way to go yet, Mr Hafner.
- Meaning?
- Meaning what you've seen so far may only be a small fraction of what you are going to hear about in the next short months.

I lean towards him. I am not sure who the lowered voices are supposed to be hiding us from; June or the unseen jailers?

- Time means little to me. Days come and go and I never know what time it really is. It seems...*elastic*.
- Well, you'll see more shortly than you might expect.
- I don't know. I've come to expect almost nothing and at the same time quite a lot.
- I think I am following you there. But eyes are always able to be opened wider.

He leans back. Silence under the heavy canopy of the downpour above us.

June returns and resumes her place next to Barker, then re-fixes me with the same bayonet stare she had been using on me earlier. I try not to show the same discomfort, but it's hard not to. My measure is to maybe focus on Barker and see where he takes me.

- Mr Hafner, there is no easy answer to your questions, really. There is some background I could give you and some reasoning behind all of that but for the most part things lurk in the hidden shadows. I'm not being obtuse, but I am trying to figure out what can be said that might help you on your search for...meaning.
- May I ask you direct questions?
- You may, if you think it will help.

I take a deep breath.

- Does the document I am referring to exist?
- I don't know if it *still* exists, but it certainly once did.

Relief #1.

- Is its content as I described?

He contemplates a moment, pouting and looking out the windows again.

- In a broad sense, yes. In a more specific sense the answer is *no* but that hints at what you said about its nature earlier.

Relief #2.

- When was it written?
- About ten years ago.

Wow...I was *not* expecting that one.

- *Ten years ago?*
- Give or take, yes. You're probably wondering why it has only come to light now.

- I am, yes.
- TALISMAN was buried and boxed and filed and forgotten. It was a project known to only about a dozen people and the outcome was known to only a tiny handful. They blue-booked it and left it forever. Thing is, some currency is valuable to liquidate and besides, once out it's always out.

Barker taps his temple.

- Why was it forgotten?
- Why indeed. Perhaps its uselessness is that it's really so powerful that it's useful to no one. *Perhaps* there is a better question that would fit the moment.
- Such as?
- Such as why a weapon of such resounding *mutually assured destruction* is suddenly being resurrected and to what end has it suddenly found a purpose?

His words resonate in the air for a second. Mutually Assured Destruction. MAD. A term of warfare. Carnage. *Destruction*.

- What about Francis?
- What about him?
- What was his part in this?
- Francis was a sop. It was committee work for which I received the commission. Francis' name appears on it because he was leading TALISMAN at the time. Jim Francis read it and approved it, but ultimately the content was down to...well...us.

He taps June's hand. She breaks her gaze on me and looks down at his hand and holds it tightly, a smile stretched on her face behind which I can see years of loss and regret.

- I didn't know...
- No one really did. June and I have no secrets. We have our advantages. I have the will and the knowledge and she has the direction and *of course* she has that fabulous memory of hers. She was the secretary at the time and wrote up the directions, but ultimately she and I put the document together and made sense of it all.
- What happened to TALISMAN?
- It was *operationally suspended* and we were told not to report on it again. We were briefed, then taken to see the security services one at a time and told never to speak of the matter again.
- Is that when Francis filed the report?
- Yes, but he didn't tell anyone. He filed it within another box, just to protect us all. If they had got a hold of the thing then they could have read it, used it...anything. Plus they could have just said we were all crazy to imagine such a thing existed.

- Another thing I don't get - why did he file it *at all*? Couldn't it have been made safer somewhere else where no one would suspect?

Barker almost smirks.

- You're substantiating your *outsider story* pretty nicely here, Mr Hafner. Anyone *within* would never have said such a thing as it wouldn't even *occur* to them. You've much to learn about the Service, you know.
- So...who verified the content?
- We had a team do the analysis on the intelligence a piece at a time, but they reported only to TALISMAN and specifically to a loose sub-committee comprising June, Jim Francis, myself and two others as and when required. We gave ourselves a secret committee name and left it at that with the filed box content only available to us. It wasn't as if we had secret meetings in the potting shed after prep. Our correspondence was largely via noted briefs.
- And what about everyone else on TALISMAN? What did they make of it?
- None of them read it. The *entire* content of the document was only known to June and myself and Jim Francis.
- Where is Francis now?
- I've no idea. After TALISMAN we were never to work as a team again. I think he managed to put it all behind him and make his way up the greasy pole again. His name went off my gunsights some time ago - if he was ever really in them.
- I've been told he has been suspended as well.

Barker sighs and slumps a little. He seems depressed by that remark.

- I thought they had left Jim out of it. Who told you?
- I got it from my Minister.
- Who is that?
- Margaret Hayes-Williamson.

He seems reanimated.

- Good God almighty. You are from SACRA?

I've no idea what that means. I am about to lie as I have been doing all along, but realise that in front of Barker I have been disarmed so there is no option but the truth.

- I don't know. Like I said, my backstory is kind of missing from me.

Barker is contemplative. Shakes his head a little. June seems unmoved, but she lowers her eyes from me.

- Well, if you *are* and that messy little *trellis-climber* has her hands over it then we may as well hand in our commissions now.

I bite my lip about the *family ties*.

- She doesn't know anything about what's in it. She told me herself.
- Do you believe her?
- Absolutely. She doesn't have the stomach to read it, far less digest it. She gave it to me to summarise for her so she could use it.
- *Use it?* For what purpose?
- We never really got as far as that. All I know is that she didn't have any idea as to its content. Remember – I didn't know what this was when it was landed on me.
- How did she get it to you?
- He handed it to me in – you might like this – in a coffee shop on the first day I 'awoke' in a hotel room. I was completely disoriented.
- How on earth did they fix the meeting then?
- Oh I had a message waiting for me from a chap called Bryant saying we had to meet.
- *David Bryant?*
- Yes...the same one. Do you know him?

Barker smiles, which is almost as alarming as his silences. June is shaking her head.

- I knew *Miles* Bryant. A pretty awful little man really. Shot himself, don't you know? We never figured that one out. His greatest skill was as a bootlicker, which is something he managed to carry off to enormous effect and efficacy. He was the man behind the sale of some *trade secrets* to the Germans in exchange for their support for our currency. At the time it seemed like a stroke of genius, but in the end it was entirely done to claw his way into the favours of a Minister who could do him the most favours. As it transpired it did the little shit no good, but in the short term he was positively *meteoric*. Many of us watched his awkward ascent with a sort of dejected feeling that his type was the very sort to get on in life whereas the grafters were doomed to labouring in the ditches. All I know about David is that he has taken Miles' form from him.

I smile at the connection.

- I assume that's his father?
- Miles? Yes. Wonder how Ada ever got over that one. One day he got back from the office, sat and ate dinner with her and seemed absolutely fine, then went up to his study, locked the door, phoned the police and ambulance services and put a bullet through his head. His suicide note just said '*We made some mistakes*' and that was it. We all thought that was a weird way to go – no one was even sure what the 'mistakes' were.

- Were you asked?
- Oh good grief yes – there was an enormous yet very quiet enquiry into the whole thing as the plural pronoun in the suicide note seemed to infer some level of corruption or misdoings which might have involved others. Those of us outside the blast radius but with knowledge of the events were asked if we had the faintest idea what had gone on in Miles’ head, what these ‘mistakes’ actually were or who ‘we’ might have been. No one had any idea. Even Ada said she had no idea. He had made a couple of poor financial investments but nothing worth blowing your brains out over.
- Maybe he took that type of mistake a bit too seriously?
- It’s dubious. An awful little man really. Shameless. A complete bootlicker.
- His son seems to be falling into the family tradition.
- Oh that comes as no surprise at all. What’s he doing?
- I get the impression he’s my management, but junior to others. He’s currently under some form of arrest as well. They suspect him of being part of a *sinister force* or something.
- Good Lord. Is he?
- I doubt it. He hides behind the Minister’s skirts. Any force that wants to be called sinister would have to shop harder than that.

Barker almost laughs.

- Well - as I said - his father was - frankly - a repulsive turd. He was an insider working out. In the pay of others not conducive to the normal operations of the department. He was reporting on all of us.
- Well, you may not want to hear this but Bryant was ‘doing the dossier’ on you.
- Was he *really*? I’m amazed that he’d be given any level of trust, going on the reputations that preceded him. But then, if MHW has any part of it then I cannot say I am all that surprised...or worried. She likes to surround herself with her own men. I really have so little to hide from anyone.
- Hmm...he didn’t seem to think so. Then again, if he thought otherwise he’d be voting himself off the job.
- And to dossier *me* he’d have to have clearance to M2 or better, which is a pretty sorry state of affairs. Maybe some of the favours his father pulled have paid off. Heaven knows. Ghastly family, though. His wife didn’t deserve any of that. Poor Ada.
- Oddly enough that was said about you too. *June doesn’t deserve any of this.*

June smiles and speaks for the first time.

- I hope what I *deserve* and what I *get* are much the same.

- It's all throwaway stuff, Mrs Barker. Office banter and *knowing stuff you don't know*. Half the time I really think all the guarded words and phrases are because no one much knows a lot about the detail and they hide behind vagueness as a shield. Maybe I'm wrong.

Barker smiles again.

- I said that you have much factual information to learn, but in the short time you've lingered around HMG you seem to have acquired a remarkable grasp of the political way things function. Nothing much is said, less is done but much is promised. You open your mouth and your limitations come pouring out, you know? Keep yourself quiet and let them remain guessing about what sort of a fool you are, as opposed to saying something and confirming what everyone guessed about you all along. What passes for the circumspet is actually nothing more than two blind people trying to describe the sky to each other.
- Can we come back to TALISMAN?
- Of course.
- You mentioned that you made a secret sub-committee. Idle curiosity, but why?
- We knew the content and that it was too dangerous to even spread to the innards of the TALISMAN party. So, we took trustys and briefed them as far as we dare. Just June, Jim Francis, myself and two others. Only June, Francis and I knew the actual content but the other two knew what manner of material was locked away in the file. They knew it was a dangerous pot to have on the boil but they had no wish to taste it, so they conceded that Francis bolt it down under a cover and hope it remained safe.
- Yet they had access to it if needed?
- Well technically yes, but under the terms of the box only Francis had the redemption on it. They were pretty sure that they had no wish to know anything about it.
- How much did you trust them?

Barker mused.

- All the way, I think. Eddie Jefferson – God rest him – took a myriad secrets to his eternal rest, and I would trust Bill Jessop with my life.

Suddenly, as if a rocket has gone off next to my ear. That name. That name. *That name*. More puzzle blocks from the game drop down and lodge themselves together to become a part of a composite whole.

I know that the excitement must be read from my face as June looks at me through narrowed eyes.

- Are you alright Mr Hafner? It looks like you've just been hit by lightning.
- Perhaps I have, Mrs Barker.

Barker sits upright and suddenly, as if from nowhere and nothing I have his fullest attention.

- Speak, man.

I try to compose myself.

- I'm sort of thinking this through on the hoof. Forgive me if this isn't going to sound constructed or well thought-out.
- Go on.
- What was the name of your sub-committee?

Barker smiles again.

- It was just a throwaway we came up with which reflected the puzzling nature of what we were playing with. We thought about ENIGMA but that had been used, then we thought about PARADOX but in the end we settled for SPHINX.

Bingo. Touchdown. Triple word score. Check mate.

- Which was the name on the front of the file...

Barker furrows his brow at me.

- It was?
- Yes. The Minister passed it to me personally as a DAC briefing on a matter concerning some 'leak' or another...only it transpires it was something else.
- Who else was there in this tea shop?
- Bryant.
- He'd be annoyed at her working past him.
- He was, and perhaps with some justification because it was a bit down for the Minister to do that right in front of him.
- Well, like I said, she creeps up by keeping the other weeds down. Go on with your line of thought, though.
- Well...she gave me the file. It was marked 'top secret' and had the word SPHINX on the cover.

Barker nods.

- Pretty standard. We just put the operative name on the cover. Was it treasury tagged?
- Yes, it was.
- June actually typed it up herself. We didn't want to risk it getting near a computer so we typed it on an old Remington of ours. At least that way we'd not a risk of it being copied as readily.

- It seemed intact to me.
- Good grief. So you've read it?
- Yes.
- All of it? All the way through?
- Yes.
- I have to ask you...where is it now?
- I'm coming to that. Now...Margaret gave me the file and I read it. But...she didn't draw it.
- She didn't?
- Well according to what you've just said she couldn't; she was never on TALISMAN or SPHINX.
- You're right. But she'd find a way.
- She did. Jessop drew it for her.

The colour in Barker's florid features seems to drain away. June's hand rises to cover her mouth as though she is about to scream. Both stare at me. Both looked shocked to the roots. For a second I feel like I've just told them that their child is dead.

- *Jessop?*
- Yes. William Jessop. He was acting as PA for the Minister at the time in her office affairs. She rates him.

Barker heaves himself upright and stands up, grunting as he exerts himself. He's a tall man, very overweight and moves awkwardly as he paces the conservatory floor.

The rain has eased off. I never even noticed until now.

- Oh this isn't good, Hafner. He got his hands on TALISMAN. That's not good. He's bound to have read it.
- I'm sure he has.
- Why? And why would he give it to the Minister?
- Perhaps she found out about TALISMAN and got nose-y.
- No...I just *cannot* see Bill doing that, just to keep her personal interests up. No...there has to be another reason.

I ponder.

- What sort of a person is Mr Jessop?

Barker shakes his head.

- Honest, secure, steady, trustworthy...hard-working. He'd be there when the rest had gone. His briefs were always good and his staff would have marched over a cliff just to follow him. Top clearance too, and they don't give that away with four gallons and ten coupons. Of course his previous appearances would have helped...
- His staff? He had seniority?
- He was head of DAC organisational division at one point. And of course he sat in the House for Blackpool.
- Wait...so...he used to be an MP? So...why was he working as a PA latterly?
- He had a problem – like we all do in the end – with this...

Barker waves the glass at me and continues.

- He also had a breakdown about eight years ago, post *the Celia business*. The reason for it was never made clear but it was felt unwise to ship him out so he was made down and kept on at full whack.
- Did he resent that?
- If he did he never showed it. His intellect was impressive, but the pharmacy and odd licence kept that blunted as long as I knew him afterwards.
- You drifted apart?
- After TALISMAN we were all pretty much kept at a distance, like we would form a critical mass or something.
- After TALISMAN?
- Yes.
- It was suspended.
- Yes, I told you that.
- Well it was revived.
- It was? When?
- I don't know. I spoke to someone named Linda Dawson who took on June's role. She told me that there had been some sort of break in the meetings but that she had attended five of them and that they had been 'wash ups'.

Barker pauses to think again.

- This must have happened since we were *excised*. Surely I'd have known...
- Like I said, I don't know when they started again.
- Who is on the committee now?
- Again, I don't know yet.

- You have to find out, and you have to find out what was said at them too. It might speak to the sudden relevance of the TALISMAN document.

I have to ask...

- I have to ask this, but it's just a thought. Is it possible that Jessop is doing all of this?
- On his own?
- No...he has a strange bunch of people who seem to be onside with him. Some sort of radical political protesters who want the document too, though they say they want to stop anyone using it.
- I cannot see Bill aligning himself with them...why would he? Are they politically driven?
- They seem like anarchists, frankly. And not in a good way.

Barker runs his hand through his thinning hair and hands the glass to June to refill, then turns to pace again.

- No. I cannot countenance Bill doing that. He's going to have to be either insane or deeply compromised. He's made some sacrifices for his country that most people simply wouldn't ever understand.
- What if he is using them too?

Barker turns to me. His perplexed expression is now even more confused.

- In what way?

I take a deep breath.

- Jessop faked his own death. No one at the office knew the truth and no one in his little Angry Brigade knows the truth either, though I have spilled the beans to both parties.

Barker sways on his feet. *I thought he knew...June said so...they spoke...*

- How do you know?
- He telephoned me.
- How do you know it was him?

A fair point.

- I suppose I don't, but why would anyone else do this?
- It's a confusing situation for everyone. Who knows what motivation lurks?
- I know, but let's assume for the time being it's him. He did name SPHINX to me.
- Oh good God...he did?

- Yes. He also alluded to the fact that 'they' call me that.
- That sort of shifts it into his area. Oh dear God...*Bill*...what are you *doing*?
- Well...suppose that he feels he didn't get his just desserts in his job and wants to get back at everyone.

Barker stares at me.

- Just suppose he knows about the presence of TALISMAN and threatens the newly extant government with exposing it. Now what coin does he carry that makes his threat seem reasonable?
- The file, I suppose.
- Which he can draw, of course. He draws it to show to his Minister to take to Cabinet and express the threat. He knows the Minister wants a brief on it because she is dim...overworked...tired...*whatever*...and that she will hand it to *me* to read. It seems roundabout, but it distances him.
- To *Cabinet*?
- I've met with the DPM about this business. It seems to be something that concerns HMG at a pretty senior level. I'm also sure that the evicted government wouldn't air this sort of dirt with the incoming ones, even if they are all just civil servants.

Barker looks flabbergasted. I suppose I can sympathise. I have just blasted away a substantial part of his trust in an old friend. I notice June looks almost tearful. I'm not proud of any of this.

- What if Jessop drew it to give to the Minister to give to *me* and that I am on the wrong side?
- What side *are* you on, Hafner?
- Mr Barker, *I don't know*.

June interjects.

- One side or another? Why do you think there are only two sides?

I have to agree with her.

- I know. But what I want to know is this; what did you leak?

Barker glances at June, who is doing the same back to him. I sense a collusion about to happen here. Barker takes the refilled glass from June and sits down again.

- It wasn't a *leak* as such. More a statement of intent...
- Whose intent?
- Francis' and mine.
- Who did you speak to?

- We dropped into conversations with a contact that *a document* existed which could cause more mayhem than anything else ever devised since. We authored it – nominally at least – and so we felt we were bound to it. Now we knew that the document was to be held in the highest secrecy and hence was something that could only be revealed *in extremis* or under the highest and most pressing duress. However, the amount of danger that could be wreaked by it made us nervous, given the secrecy that surrounded it. We concluded that we might be able to defuse the petard a little by revealing its presence – but not the payload – before it hoists us all.
- Who was the contact?
- A friendly. I don't want to say much more than that.
- I assume the 'friendly' was not as close to you as you feared.
- I assume that is the case. I don't know how the disclosure was made, though. That troubles me greatly.
- Yes...you expect them to protect their sources...
- That's what they say, isn't it?

A turn of phrase maybe, but that makes it smell like a journalist. Hartley? Surely not. He strikes me as a grubby creature and far removed from Barker's rarefied ideal.

- So you were betrayed?
- It feels like it.

I ponder a bit.

- What about Philips? He was your line at the time of TALISMAN, wasn't he?
- We kept him in the dark all throughout.
- So who did TALISMAN answer to?

Barker smiles at me.

- That would say who set up the committee, wouldn't it?
- Well, yes.

Pause. Barker smiles. I smile back.

- So who did?
- Mr Hafner, that's really not up for discussion. Leave some things with me as yet untouched, yes?
- Fair enough – I'm not a cop, but they are bound to ask.
- Are they?
- I've heard rumours that you might face charges...

Barker laughs and almost sounds genuine.

- That would make everything far too open, wouldn't you think?
- Well...assuming they make the charges accurate...
- And *stick*.

Again...he has a point.

- So, if that's the case, why are you being held here?
- Keeping us quiet, I assume. Keeping us on a brief. Keeping us where they know where to find us.

His point is being lost, somewhat. I think he knows it too.

- Well...what else would you do?
- Oh I don't know...but we're not the jailers, are we? I cannot imagine how or why they want to keep us here...but here we are.
- So...where are they then?
- Like I said..blue cars, white vans...they live up the road sometimes. If this was a *real* house arrest then they would be in here. But they contain us.

I furrow my brow in a visible show of doubt. June chips in.

- Every week they bring us food and drink from the shops. You even give them a shopping list. And they come here, check up on us and leave. Every few days. You'll likely meet them, sometime when they come for you too.

Amazing.

- Are they listening?
- We're never sure. Brian thinks this room is best for counter-acoustics, plus the rain is a benefit.

Barker nods.

- Although we do other stuff as well. Earlier I asked June to turn up the music in the other room. Just to be annoying to them.
- And you're never allowed to leave?
- We can, but they have to accompany us.
- This is incredible – you've never been charged?
- No, not at all. We've committed no offence.
- And you've never even been spoken to by the police?
- No, we haven't.

- This seems...heavy-handed.
- One of the reasons we came to the conclusions that seeing you was a better option than not.

I fill up my glass again and finish what is left of the tonic.

- I have one other thing to ask you about TALISMAN.

Barker stares into his glass, as though he is expecting the question. I admit to myself that it is an honest one and inevitable.

- We better have it then...
- Why did you do it? Why did you create something whose only purpose was to ensure that all *this* would happen? What purpose was TALISMAN for and for whose benefit was this working?

Barker drains some of the bitter liquor in his glass, purses his lips and nods.

- Now you're getting somewhere, Hafner. Now you're asking the biggest question of them all: why? Now if you want to know why then I can tell you, but it might sound like an odd answer.
- I've heard quite a few odd things in the immediate past. I don't know if one more would make any deal of a change to that.
- Well...to understand what TALISMAN was about you have to understand what drives me. I told you that we are decent and clean people and that this visitation upon us is the last thing we want or need. It's still the case, of course, but we have obligations to our abilities and to our needs. I won't tell you who wanted TALISMAN written up – it was no one you have so far mentioned, though – but I will say that I was picked right away by this person – call them *the source* – as being someone who could do the job, do it well, do it quickly, do it efficiently and do it wisely, showing maximum discretion when the moment came.

To understand this means you must understand what I am. My father worked in SIGINT during the war and was responsible for the passage of traffic that was read and broken by some clever people at Bletchley. It was accepted by many people – including our wartime leaders – that what they did overarchingly saved lives and helped end the war sooner, as opposed to letting the North Atlantic become an open battleground for the next decade, as it could have been. I mean, had they seen their way through the engineering they were working on in Berlin they could have been picking us off at will for years without recourse and we'd have been nowhere. Without supply ships we'd have been isolated. I'm not saying that starvation would have assailed us, but it would have been far worse than the meagre offerings we were having already. We'd have been seriously beleaguered by this and so, what was being done to each other under the waves became of such vital importance that *action this day* was a byword for their use and a statement of factual intent on behalf of HMG who were investing in their own futures for the sake of us all.

My father was otherwise a lost man, without the certainties of the military and without the further conviction of warfare. He knew *if I do this then this will happen and therefore I must do my duty*. Duty became important to him and to others of that time. It's what held us together and won important arguments here and abroad and what made us such a hardy little opponent against such overwhelming odds. You see, we are surrounded on all sides by water and by enemies or by the agents of enemies, and we know that all we can do is defend ourselves and not stretch it any more to trying to prosecute the same elsewhere. We were driven by the best form of self-interest that there is and that's what inspired us to what became our best moments. My father was an impressive man in those days; I was just young but I knew how much those times meant to him, and how he would tell me couched stories that I knew to be absolute statements of truth. Not because they were given to me by my father, but because he told them without any glamour and without any need to *Biggles them up*. It was their lack of running through no-man's land with a grenade in your teeth that made them seem realistic to me and gave me an idea – even then – about service, duty and a kind of courage of which we seem to have lost a degree. When I asked him *Father, what did you do in the war* he would tell me that for the most part he sat at a desk, received messages and passed them on to the appropriate destinations for actions that will, in the long term, cost a few lives, save hundreds of lives and bring the whole thing to an early and amenable end. And he did, quietly and without the least amount of celebration.

Afterwards he lost his rudder. He imagined a comfortable life with my mother, my brother and me in some little house in rural Suffolk where he came from, but it never happened. After '45 he found himself let down by the military who no longer had a focus, let down by the government which promised something it couldn't deliver and which he never agreed with, and let down by my family who resented his quiet actions in favour of their own immediate family's losses. As ever, history is written by the winners and read only by the survivors. He was recalled to his colours, given a stiff handshake by someone who promised never to forget what he had done, and then was promptly forgotten.

Once his commission lapsed he found himself without anything much and so he tried to make the best of it, but everything he did and everything he stood for seemed to be dissolving around him. He stood as an independent candidate for Waveney but they didn't want him and what then must have seemed to be a backward-looking perspective on what were austere times anyway. We were victorious in a hollow sense, but were still on starvation rations, the country was near bankrupt and owed millions to the Americans whose crass interventions were only propagated when they were kicked into it by Hirohito's pigs not quite managing to do what they were planning on doing. As usual, all that gets a bully motivated is his sense of inferiority and the presence of opportunity, but deep down they have no pride. Those two could tear each other's' throats out for all we really cared.

He eventually worked as a journalist for the East Anglian Daily Times which of course he hated. Local politics was what he did, but in the end everyone covered everything. And why did he do that? Duty. Even then he knew what he was all about and what he owed and to whom he owed it. He took what he did seriously,

even if they didn't take *him* entirely seriously. But he stuck at it by day and by night he'd sit...drink *this stuff* and get morose. So we are all likely to repeat the errors of our ancestors, Mr Hafner.

When he spoke to me of his bitterness he said he was one of *the forgotten few* which I think was a phrase of his own coin. He had done what he had to do and then was more or less thanked and then forgotten and left to find his own way. All that stuff about *homes fit for heroes* didn't amount to anything. We ended up in a prefab and we had very little.

One day, mother's ruin beat him and he died at fifty-eight. He willed everything to my mother, but she lasted only a year after him and I ended up with it all, my brother having been killed in the line of his own service. I was shocked to learn that I had amassed a lot of money, which my mother's estate explained was due to my father keeping his contacts within and selling on things of value to those who would pay for them. His exploits made steady income, but he was too wracked with guilt to enjoy it and too practical to see that spending it visibly would attract the wrong attention. Eventually it came out that he was the Dutch source for the red cipher which of course was being used in their dependencies against them. I don't know how much he got for it, but his name and memory was always tarnished by that. Nevertheless, here I sit on the money made on the backs of the blood shed to keep a secret safe and to set the truth free, the fruits of his industry and the very instrument that killed him. And that brings me to the next point, which is the fulcrum.

Industry doesn't thank us, Mr Hafner. Industry doesn't exist within a vacuum of silent capital, it needs victims and usually they are more than willing to throw themselves in front of it. Industry is not an end, but a means to an end for most people. Only those who invest in industry hope to make any direct benefit from it, whereas the rest of us use whatever it pitches at us to make an attempt to live our lives the way we please. We buy our telephones and our music players and our conservatories and Swedish furniture and our patios and leather suitcase sets and extra virgin olive oil and wallpaper, mirrors, cars, magazines, healing crystals, houses in the country and leather jackets and we are supposed to feel what, gratitude? But as well as needing victims, industry needs to get a hold of each other's throats, for the nature of Capital is that in order for one to survive, others must perish or stay away. It's exactly like the model of evolution and it works as elegantly and as succinctly as that. It essentially comes down to *win or die* and in the process there are some winners but many more dead. The essence of the action, the *sine qua non* of their credo is simply their ruthlessness to each other, without which the process would not and could not operate. By merger, takeover, out-performing or by simply steamrolling, *e pluribus unum*. Sadly, in the process come the litany of victims, and in most cases those at the top of the tree lines move into other avenues and the little people lying crushed under the collapse are left to fend for themselves. Of course, that might mean less of a marketplace for the product, so it's as well to keep your workforce so overwhelmed that they cannot afford what they are making anyway.

Now ideally, what we have is a situation where we have honest and hard-working people trying to make their product better than the next man's so they can expand their horizons, drop their prices, increase their productivity, diversify their

market and products and make money to please their shareholders so they can earn more, pay more and produce a quality product to an eager market with a motivated and contented workforce. Of course that never happened. What we have now is huge corporations paying bottom of the barrel wages to children working in unimaginable conditions to produce *tennis shoes* for a people who treat them as a disposable commodity and who could not care less about whence these items come, nor how they are made, nor who has been trampled on to have them made, nor the fact that the price they are paying for that product is about eight hundred times the annual wage paid to these children who are fully expected to die *in situ* and to be replaced by others. We may have abolished our own national institution of slavery, but we more than condone it within the private form – and that is what it is – everywhere else, just as long as the tennis shoe arrives here so we can wear it until it falls apart or drifts from fashion six months later and we move onto our *next* industrial abomination.

The trouble industry finds is this; competition isn't enough. It needs more. It needs a leg up, and to do that it needs intelligence, it needs shored up and it needs favours. They might get them from each other to combat a common enemy, but that is altogether an evanescent thing. No, what they need is some way of reaching out to even bigger bullies and making them do their dirty work for them, and that generally comes in the shape of world governments, and even *they* need each other to pull off coups against one another, and pretty soon every industry, church, government and world order is involved in some business that's only out there to fillet someone else. And it's either one person carrying out a dirty act to kill off another, or it's one party knowing another's dirty secrets to buy his silence and inactions. Presidents are shot, governments rise and fall and currencies run up and down like a rollercoaster just so some turd in a suit can sell a turd in a ghetto a sports shoe that he will be shot for weeks later by other turds who buy the guns from the turds further down the street. Who wins? The sellers. Who loses? Everyone else.

Where did this crystallise itself in my mind? In a photograph I saw, which was taken in 1905 by a Reverend and his wife who had toured the Congo and brought back photographs specifically condemning the rule of Leopold II of the Belgians who was the de facto owner – not the administrator, trustee, company director, colonial overlord or even king, but owner in his own capacity – of over a million square miles of central Africa, in the form of Congo Free State, with its capital at Leopoldville. The photograph showed a man staring at a little black hand and foot lying on the ground in front of him, a look on his face of such bewilderment that you had to imagine what had happened. And when I learned, I was shocked to my very core. Local government sponsored troops – *troops* – had severed the hand and foot of this man's little five year old daughter as a punishment because she had not harvested enough rubber. I cannot tell you how much this affected me. It was like my brain was being rewired. For all my life I had been in my father's political wake and had followed his form of traditional conservatism, but now I saw where this led; it led to soldiers mutilating a five year old girl from their own country, in the name of a foreign owner, because she hadn't worked hard enough. I thought back to when I was five. I sometimes wondered how hard my life ever was up until that point, in our little post-war prefab with a privet hedge and a little wooden fence around it. Then I thought of this little girl

and the helplessness of her father, and how emasculated he must be in knowing that he cannot protect his own daughter. Civilisation is a veneer, Mr Hafner. It is measured by how we treat those most vulnerable within us. What I saw wasn't any kind of civilisation. What I saw and what I still see is packs of animals running with bigger packs of animals so they can keep everyone else down. Deep down – really deep down – we are such appalling *beasts*. We aren't even *out of the caves or the trees*.

With that burning in me and having joined part of an organisation that I despise I sought to lever it from within. The movement towards what might have been TALISMAN started twenty five years ago, but I helped shape it and jockey enough until I was in a position to do something about it. I had it made up so that it could be used as a stick of dynamite to place under them all and take them off the face of the planet. It will not solve, but it will *correct*.

The feeling of righting wrongs has remained. If we have a destructive device in our midst that will kill off all of us, why sit on it ourselves in silence? Surely a deterrent only works if the opponent knows you have it? And yet HMG didn't want to enter that route. So, after a few years of having been off TALISMAN I spilled the news of its presence to a contact who *knew people*. Just like my father, I was indiscreet, but unlike him I didn't ask for money. I asked for action. I wanted to fulfil the sense of service, duty and courage we have lost and stand up when something is wrong. So I spoke to this contact.

- What did you tell him?
- That we have in our possession a document whose content could destroy everything we know. Of course, that doesn't mean that we can convince them of it without some small measure of its salt, so I let slide – via an intermediary – what it said in broad detail. Well of course the balloon went up when the intermediary sensed some cash and to limit it I spilled that off to a press *confidante* who ran a byeline article in the more garish national leaders. The government were then placed into the appalling position of having to answer a question in the House concerning a matter relating to a document for which they had no brief. Now *they* were keen to get their hands on it too. Three sides already. You see how this all happens? The more there are who are bitten by avarice, the more factions burst upwards.

I carefully consider his words. His hands shake a little, the ice cubes rattling again.

- Mr Barker, may I speak candidly?
- I'd sooner you didn't speak at all than be dishonest.
- Well, this all adds up to you being neither fish nor fowl. You want to ride with the hunt but run with the foxes, don't you?
- I don't understand...
- You want to be a part of the big fabric, but not of the mechanisms under it. You'd sooner sit at the side and boo at the players rather than offer them constructive criticisms. And I'm afraid your story about your father is likely

neither unique nor particularly moving. I'm not happy that he felt forgotten after serving his duties, but I'm less happy that he took his own failings out on the rest of us by making ends meet by selling on the family silver to the highest bidder. But the rest of it is a mixture of his bellyaching because he didn't stand up for himself, and your weirdly Communist wish to bring us all down twelve pegs because you think there are some bad people out there, but rather than address them you would address us all as though we are all these 'beasts' you talk about.

- Now look here, Hafner...
- You asked me to be honest, and I have to say that this is my honest feelings. You are right that you are committing the same sins as your father; you're just running a different sin to that which you think is your main issue.

He stares at me.

- I didn't ask to be judged.
- Then don't dish out the evidence that makes me judge you.
- Don't feel compelled to do it either.
- Barker – it smells to me that TALISMAN was only engineered by you so that you could leak it...

June interjects.

- We are *decent people* living in *indecent times*. Cannot you see that what we are doing is trying to help keep peace among our friends?
- No, I cannot. You can't speak of 'duty' one second and then 'betrayal' the next as though they were automatic and inevitable.

Barker speaks slowly.

- Then you've got a *long* way to travel before you can possibly understand any of this.

I stare back at him.

- Oh I think I have the message clearly enough. Isn't it *trust no one – not even me?*

Barker swirls his glass nods just as the unexpected ray of sun breaks through the glass and lands on the marble table, refracting into a million points of light on the cut crystal cup in front of me.

- Mr Hafner, that's the first entirely sensible thing I have heard you say today.

Later we eat in the dining room, a simple meal of bread and cheese with wine and fruit and coffee, discussing and recapping and restating and reassessing. Barker can hold his drink with impressive vigour, but it's bound to be affecting him.

- I don't expect you to really understand what I did or why, Mr Hafner, but I am a man of honour. A patriot even. I don't want to make a bomb that anyone can use on anyone else and take out the world in collateral damage. I am a decent person who was placed in an indecent position.
- That view of you is one shared by many, I think.

Okay, it's a lie...but only a small one.

- And what do the others who don't share that view think of me?
- Well...they are pretty disparaging, but then again they are a pretty disparaging lot anyway.
- What do they say about me?
- Some say you sold out. Others say you never bought in. Still others think you were driven off your rocker by what you were doing. And a few others who simply don't know about any of this refer to you as a *fat Etonian poof*.

I am astonished to hear Barker laugh at this last remark.

- Well, fat I am and I had my dalliances, but *Eton*? Good grief no. Not for me the rarefied essence of swans on the Thames, red bricked outfitters and tail coats. No...cannot stand anything about that place, nor any of the fellows that place has *rumped forth*.
- You sound so...*egalitarian* sometimes, Mr Barker.
- Mr Hafner, I am a civil servant and have no opinions of my own; or at least none worth having. I just answer to whoever sits about me and follow their line into the ground. That's my line, I'm afraid. It's not glamorous and doesn't get you after-dinner speaking dates with the Grand Company, sadly.
- I get the impression though that you don't approve of Margaret Hayes-Williamson.
- It's not her politics I dislike, it's *her*. She's a career political whose opinions on anything change in variance to the way the wind is blowing that week. I don't think she can utter a single sentence without having to consult through eight weeks' back issues of the Times to see what the voters would want her to say. I doubt she convinces herself, you know.
- I wouldn't know. I've never really examined her as a political creature. She seems determined though.
- Almost as determined as the DPM...though *his* determinations are set in a different direction entirely. He is more interested in seeing how many women he can snare with his political willpower firing its aphrodisiac qualities at them.
- Really?
- Good grief, yes. Shepherd has a notorious streak to him, despite being one of the most unpersonable savages in circulation.

- I met him. It was all a bit *whistle-stop* though.
- Best way to meet him. I'm assured by some of the women whose guard was down too long that he was much the same way himself.

June *tuts* at this remark, Barker waves her a little apology with his cheese knife.

Later that day, the cheese is gone but the wine remains. I am starting to feel quite drunk on the sustained intake, but not so intoxicated that I cannot make sense of my thoughts or what is being said to me. The sort of drunk that makes you realise that your problems might very well just disappear, with any luck.

Barker seems to want to get onto a topic that bothers him.

- So...you read it?

Brain switches gear.

- Yes. I read it. About three times. Once to read it, once to understand it and once again to *disbelieve* it.
- Well you might be one of the few people to have read it cold without having worked on it, so it must have appeared...*jarring*...to you.
- It was.
- Did you find it credible?
- Well...it was dealing with subject matters and conclusions that were very, very far from my usual understanding...
- Yes, but was the logic that holds it together understandable?
- It was, though the evidence for it all was a bit lacking at times. Not that it wasn't compelling.
- The document was written as a cover-all to bind other findings. The proofs you require are all referenced elsewhere. The TALISMAN dossier is simply something to pull all the parts together into one unified structure.
- The others on the committee...those not in the 'centre party', so to speak. What did they know of its content?
- They knew the gist. They didn't know the actuality of it all. They were given a placebo variation anyway, just to keep them and our masters happy.
- Do any of them offer a threat?
- No, none of them. I could vouch for them all.
- Yet you also vouched for Jessop.
- I'm still not certain that Jessop has done anything wrong, yet.

A pause. I have one burning question for him.

- Is it all true?
- All what true?
- The TALISMAN document. Is it all for real?

Barker smiles and tips the last of the wine into my glass. I'm drunk enough to ask what I need to ask.

- It is, I am afraid. Most is a little too true for the average palate. Why do you doubt it?
- Oh it's not *doubt* as such, more like a sense of...wonder.
- Well you haven't seen the half of it. You should read some of the references. Some of the preliminaries are just astounding, but we never kept them as they....*occluded*.

I tap the glass a little and smile to myself, that woozy smile of contemplation. My mind just wants to enjoy it like entertainment, so I try to.

- What's your favourite bit?

Barker smiles back. He's wanted to tell someone this for ages, it seems. His lidded eyes gaze across the table onto its messy wet surface, spattered with tomato seeds, gin, tonic and small leaves and other foliage from the thyme bush behind me.

- Oh that's an easy question to answer. EFFIGY. When I found out about that it was a real moment, I can tell you.
- I didn't think it still existed.
- I was raised not to believe in that stuff. Father was pragmatic about it. But to know that the magic was tangible and real was...just overwhelming.
- How did you know?
- Some people believe that it *never* existed, myself included. Then I found inescapable proof that it *did* exist. I saw it. I almost reached out to touch it, but they told me that I shouldn't. They used an interesting expression. They said '*it's too powerful*'. That put the wind up me, I can tell you.
- You *saw* it?
- Yes...
- Some people have been looking for that for years...
- ...and it's right under their noses too.
- Is it beautiful?

- It's beautifully constructed, certainly. The odd thing is that you cannot see the faces of the two figurines on the lid. To do that you'd have to crane your neck between them, and I'm told that would bring an assured and immediate death.
- And so what are they doing with it?
- Oh just keeping it there, ready for stage two.
- Incredible...but why did they call it EFFIGY if in fact it's the real thing?
- Oh that...well, it's not EFFIGY *itself*. EFFIGY isn't the box...EFFIGY is what is *in* the box. The box was made the way it was to allow it to contain EFFIGY at a much, much later date. It might *seem* to be incredibly far-sighted, but you have to remember we are talking about a single institution here whose lineage goes back six millennia.
- Is EFFIGY in it now?
- It is. That's why the Ark shines. It's not what it is made of, nor even what it contains, but what it is *doing*.

Later. Coffee now.

- Who runs all this? Who is at the top?
- No one. The machine is now running itself. It has since 1632.

Later. Feeling slightly hostile towards him now.

- Why the betrayal?
- What *betrayal*?
- You were going to sell the story out to the press, weren't you?

He looks reflective again. Not that the answer takes any thought if you're an honest man, I suppose. Barker makes three false starts at the next sentence. A chink is revealed again.

- I was...but for the best of intentions.
- What would you have told them?
- Oh probably everything...or at least as much as I could afford before they threw me into some asylum somewhere.
- And how much did you negotiate?

He looks at me with a distinct tinge of complete contempt.

- *Really?* Is that what you think drives me? June and I don't need anyone's *money*.

- So why then?
- Well think of it this way...if you have a bomb that is bound to go off sooner or later, what do you do with it?
- I suppose you disarm it.
- *Precisely.*

We pause a moment. The rain has never let up.

- So explain the ideology that makes you want to sell out the biggest secret in the world to the Fifth Estate...for no remuneration?
- I doubt you'd understand, Mr Hafner. There is a certain aspect to *noblesse oblige* that seems to escape you almost completely.
- No, I get the idea, I just don't see why you did it.

He stares into the darkness beyond the glass.

- I think I just told you. I didn't want this thing detonating anywhere near anyone, so I made plans to let all its wind out.

I smile and recall my encounter with Hartley.

- Why did you choose Hartley?
- Convenience. He was part of the more sensationalist end of the market, but that also means a greater coverage. He also has a keener intellect than his demeanour suggests.
- He calls you and Francis 'Brian and Stanley', you know.

Barker smiles.

- Really? Do you know why they use those names?
- No, I never asked him.
- Hartley likes his little intrigues. They sell what is dear to him, plus he has a distinctly apolitical angle, which suits me as well. Drip feed. Bit by bit. Make them ready for the bombshell. He could finesse that just as well, you know.
- I don't doubt it.
- Pity he's a Socialist at heart, though. That always makes it sound like jealousy is a motivator.

Not long afterwards.

- No, I just don't see it. Where is the ideological link?
- There isn't any.

- So why was that associated to the Great Wall?
- You don't see it, do you?
- No, I don't. Am I seeing all this two-dimensionally?
- No, you're seeing it one-dimensionally – or rather as a discrete series of one dimensional events. A continuum would be one dimensional; a line of time. The way *this stuff* all works is that it's a mesh of events on a plane in two dimensions which can fold back on itself.
- So it's three dimensions?
- No at all. Think of what Einstein said.
- I don't know what he said.
- Alright then, think of what the Americans *told* him to say.
- Oh...

He casts a dispirited eye at the denuded bottle in front of him.

- Better get another one. Not much fight left in this poor chap.

Later. Growing in confidence. Maybe getting drunker too.

- What can you tell me about Jim Francis?
- Francis? Well, like I said he faded from my view some time ago. He had the ear of a lot of the mandarins and grey suits where some of might have struggled. Without that advantage this might never have left *terra firma*.
- Did you get on with him?
- At a professional distance. We never saw eye to eye, if you see my point. We were *apart* on so many things and in so many ways.
- You mean you disagreed on details?

He smirks in an off-putting way that brings back all his irritating condescensions. He's alarmingly impenetrable; just when you think you might have breached one defence, up slots another.

- We worked well together, but never closely. Just leave it at that.
- But he is a good man, yes?
- He has...*moments of clarity*.

Later. June brought us cheese on toast and tea. So many questions bubble in my head.

- Does all this actually fit together?
- In a loose sense. I don't really think that it was masterminded to end up like this, but it did. What I did was look back on this with the benefit of a government agency having absolute hindsight. It's the only precise science, so let's use it.

Later. The conservatory is growing cold but the small food and large drink is keeping it out of our interest. And the talk is too compelling to leave alone.

- Blunt only had one thing to do and he messed it up. Just *one thing*.
- Where did he leave it all?
- In Berlin, where he was charged with taking it. However he was also asked to recover some other papers and instead drew them to the attention of the Germans who of course could scarcely believe their luck and who later tried to use the knowledge to their advantage.
- So from then on the Pope's hands were tied?
- Effectively. He wasn't able to stop something started by Ramses II (*Barker smirks here*) and once Shell and Deutsche Bundesbank got in on the act then it became a seriously tricky situation for all of them to control. The key of course remained with the Dutch and when Truman found out he went crazy over it as – maybe understandably – he had never been briefed. He then made a point of having every incoming President and Vice-President briefed on the matter, regardless. The sticking point of course was when the first Catholic came into the White House and realised he was being briefed against the Pontiff.
- Good god...
- Sort of. By now he was negotiating the return of the key, and declared the moon mission not as a scientific assignment or as a national chest puffing exercise; no...he was using that as a place where the key could be hidden forever.
- Which I assume was what they did in 1969?

Barker smiles and shakes his head in slight disagreement.

- The plan was to bury it on *Mare Tranquillitatis*. They would have done if they had it. They thought they did...but they didn't. It had been bought from the Dutch before that under some duress. It's presently in Melbourne. It was too late for the Americans to call off in the face of the Russians. The Dutch were saying nothing and the by-now sizeable German contingent were paying for their earlier stupidities. *Ich bin ein Berliner*, indeed...

I smile in recognition of the admission that one is a doughnut, however grammatically correct and misunderstood that phrase may have been.

- So Kennedy failed?

- Yes, but of course by then it was a moot point. He came into conflict with *Il Duce* and of course there could be only one winner. November 1963 was when the matter was...settled.
- But...I thought that was...
- Mr Hafner, you have to remember the *geometry* of that event at all levels. They are heavy on the symbolic, you know...
- I wondered why.
- So there would be no doubt about those responsible. It *sends a message* to the rest of the world. Or at least to those who recognise it for what it is.
- Some might have mistaken it for our other *geometric friends* you know.

Barker suppresses a laugh.

- A secret boy's club who meet up for drinks and spookery every Friday isn't on the same level - the same *page, the same library* - as what we are discussing here.

Later, after discussing the connection between the Royal Mint and a very old mystery in the West Indies...

- Did anyone else go down this path?
- Which path, Mr Hafner?
- This one. The one you went down with TALISMAN. Surely someone at some point in history must have said *hang on a minute* and started putting this stuff together from outside the box.

Barker looks over the top of his spectacles and sifts through the papers in front of him like a gentleman academic preparing a slide talk on the pollination of *solanum lycopersicum* before an invited audience of enthusiasts.

- Yes. There were some attempts, but they were a little curtailed by what was then a limited view of history. Viewed from *inside* all the information is there for you, but trying to penetrate it from outside without a sort of 'world view' is almost impossible. And of course today we know all about global communications which makes all of this seem so much more believable and comprehensible. Back then it would have seemed like black magic. Back then if the king died on Monday then people a hundred miles away *might* get to know about it by the next month.
- Back when?

Barker turns a page to me headed *Santa Anastasia*. The language it's mostly written in seems unclear and completely unrecognisable.

- In 1512 Giano II di Campofregoso - then the Doge of Genoa - tried his hand at this and failed. He appointed a group of the Fieschi family to investigate links

between Genoa and the Silk Trade which seemed to be passing by any form of local taxation.

- Templars?
- No. Much more interesting than the mere *Templars*...but from there they led to the Egyptians and from there to the Arab lands where they were hiding you-know-what, you-know-where. For a Doge that was too much to resist but the Adornos got in on it and got the support of the French king who was also keen to get his hands on this prize.
- They must have been keen.
- Oh they were. It would fit into the palm of your hand, but for them it was *everything*. The key to immortality, of a sort.
- Why *Santa Anastasia*?
- Oh that's the church where Giano II was buried. They dug him up a couple of centuries later to see if the much earlier threat about 'interference' was still taken seriously. It seems it was.
- Really?
- Yes, they were so shocked by what they found they removed the remains and locked them in a wooden chest which they kept secured within Turin Cathedral's crypt. It's mostly still there.
- Really?

I'm over-using this word.

- Yes, really.

Barker flips a black and white six by eight glossy print over to me. It shows a wooden box lying open and its ludicrous contents arranged outside it. A tape measure is held against the box to give scope. My mind finds it impossible to encompass the outrage of what I am seeing.

- When did he die?
- In 1525.
- They did *this* to *him* in 1525?
- They did. The coffin was sealed down with concrete when they buried him, *vis a vis* the threat, then they impressed five seals on it from the local dignitaries, including that of Ottaviano di Campofregoso. It was all intact.
- It's just...*awful*...
- Yes, and the kicker of course is that when they broke into it and dug up what was left of him in 1734 they had no idea at all what *that* was...

Barker taps the bottom left of the picture.

- Here...there is a better picture of it here...

He flips me over another glossy of the artefact he had indicated. This time it's shown face-up and this time there is no mistaking it.

- How...?

I cannot find the words.

- No one knows. But they carbon-dated the fibres from the handle parts. It confirmed that it came from a cotton plant that died about five hundred years ago. The parchment is even older.

My mind finds it hard to fathom this. I stare at the picture and try to make sense of it. All I can see is the Nazi swastika on the handle.

- This...in 1525?
- Yes, buried with him after - one assumes - they did *that* to him. When they disinterred him they were so alarmed by what they found they just locked it all up in that chest and forgot about it, even though most of it would make no sense in 1734. It was only re-examined in 1954 after the crypt was being restructured. One assumes they used a box that size only so they could fit the whole lance into it.
- What does the inscription on the knife say?
- It says *Alles fur Deutschland*. Pretty standard stuff for *Sturmabteilung* I am assured.
- Brownshirts?
- The same.

I cannot take my eyes off the photograph. Its simple content is spellbinding.

- Could it be an old handle?
- No, the fabric is held on by polymer resins only discovered in the 1920s. The analysis was pretty thorough. 16th Century fibre glued with 20th Century adhesives, found in the 18th Century. They also dated the riveting too, down to classic 16th Century workmanship using hand tools and hammers.
- Where is this now?
- Still in Turin. What was left of the Doge was reburied and reconsecrated in 1957. The artefacts they kept in Turin in the box. They don't know what to do with it. They let researchers view it if they can provide good bona fides, but for the most part it's a hideous secret. Some think it's a joke or a fraud, but the account of them digging up the remains in the 18th century not only had written descriptions, they also sketched it too. The sketches replicate it in every detail.
- This is just...so *baffling*. How did *that* get back to...1525?

Barker smiles at me like a professor who has just kindled a glimmer of intellect in a slow yet favoured pupil.

- You see how powerful all this is now?
- I had no idea...
- *OMNES QUI ME TANGERE MORIETUR. 'All who touch my face shall die'...*

The words are the same as those repeatedly imprinted on the ancient and time-worn parchment riveted using 16th Century hand tools and hammers into the helpless skull of Giano II and were sealed there with wax and the impression of Pope Clement VII, cousin of Leo X, who crowned Charles V Emperor at Bologna, uncle to Catherine d'Medici and patron of Henry II of France. The words were clearly produced on a *modern typewriter*.

Much later in the early evening. Onto brandy. Drinking myself upright. Barker is insistent. June has gone elsewhere.

- Your priority must be this. Firstly, you have to know why TALISMAN was reconvened. I am guessing that it was because HMG now know that their predecessor commissioned it and that it's now being used against them by one or more people.
- And that Jessop is one of them?
- Perhaps...as grotesque as that sounds to me. Find out what they discussed and what their plans are. Any means necessary. The minutes should be enough to clue you in. That secretary you spoke to might be the best option, really.
- I think I have a mark on her already.
- Good. The other thing you must do is safeguard TALISMAN itself. Assume it's the Holy Grail.
- I will.
- The only other hideous prospect is that some *rogue factions* in HMG mean to actually detonate this thing. If that is the case then they have to be stopped at any and all costs. That's an overarching reason to protect TALISMAN.

I consider. Fish in my pocket for a pen. It's red. Motion to him for the *Telegraph* sitting on the other side of the table. He slides it over, confused. I write down something and turn the paper to him.

I destroyed the paper copy but first I digitally copied it entirely and it's safe.

He motions for the pen and writes down a retort.

Where is it?

I reply.

In my pocket. No one knows except you.

His eyebrows rise. I nod. He writes again.

*Then you are in tremendous danger. You have enemies all around you and can trust absolutely no one at all. But you probably know that already. You have to use it as leverage. **THERE IS NO OTHER WAY**. Only you can know how. Use your judgement.*

I look at him and nod again in affirmation. I tear off the portion of the page, screw it up and pitch it into the burning coals of the fire where it is entirely consumed in a yellow burst of flame that silently and suddenly licks upwards and is gone forever.

INTERVAL

ABDUCTION

There is a banging on the door and the rattling manages to get me out of a sleep so deep and black and fathomless that it takes me a while to realise just what is happening.

- What's that noise?

Jocelyn's voice, next to me.

- Hold on...someone at the door, I think.
- What time is it? Jesus...is that the neighbours?
- I've absolutely no idea.
- I wish they'd go away, if this is *business as usual*. Why can they never use the phone?
- It's their trusting nature. Give me a second. I'll go down and see who this is.
- Well, be careful. Check the windows first. Christ, I'll never get a decent night's sleep here. I have a class test tomorrow. Or Monday.

She flops back down. Gown on, emerging from a warm and familiar bed and feeling the flat bare floorboards underfoot. The heating is off, so it must be past 2am. Day? Sunday. March. Nothing doing today. This must be a surprise. Rhythmic lights outside reflected off the theatre glass windows and faded whitewash give away a police escort, so it's business alright. Blue lights. About as subtle as a flying spanner in the face. And at this time? Is this really necessary?

The door to the flat opens inwards and I see their faces. Three of them, obviously tired, obviously sent to me. Why three? One usually suffices.

- Sir, my sincere apologies.

Young black man, exotically handsome, maybe twenty three or so, *extremely* well-spoken, very well cut in his suit, despite the wrinkles that come from a long day at the office and a long wait in a cold car. The two behind look more like brute muscle, but muscle that carries its grooming well. Almost like upscale nightclub bouncers. One nods to me, the other looks me up and down as if he is trying to figure out where my weak points are.

- Never mind that, son. What's the tearing hurry?
- Sir, it's NatSec-1. They need you right away.
- NatSec-1? What is it? Warfare? With no warning? Are you kidding me?

He sounds breathless. Almost apologetic.

- Sir, we're not briefed. All I know is that we have to get you in quickly and above all else discretely. We have a car outside. We really are in a hurry. I have to move you along. I'm sorry.
- Who gave the direction?
- Harry Worthing gave it to us, but it came from above him, as you must be aware.

I eye him up. There is something odd about the whole thing, but I cannot place my finger on it at all. I hear a voice upstairs. I call back up in response over my shoulder, but I hold his gaze with my own. Nodding muscle looks around as a door downstairs cracks open, no doubt trying to find out the source of the banging. Staring muscle looks at the state of the plasterwork.

- Give me a second, love.

I fix back to him.

- Can you give me five minutes?
- Yes, of course.
- What do I need to bring?
- We'll provide everything. Perhaps the usual change of clothes and whatever items of comfort you need.

I eye up his suit. It hangs awkwardly.

- Since when do *messenger boys* like you manage to save for a Brooks? And why ruin the cut with a Glock 26 hanging like that?

He almost looks sheepish, the boy caught with stolen biscuits in his pocket at midnight.

- They did say you were good, Sir.
- I'm not good, I'm terrific. A suit like *that* tells me you're Ministry and a weapon carried like *that* tells me that you're no more used to carrying it that my wife would be. So it's an issue and if that's the case you're on protection detail and hurried one at that. That means that only I will do, so that further prompts the question *why*. And if you're really not briefed then it makes it all the more interesting why they'd send someone out in the night without as much as a question.
- If I was briefed I'd tell you, Sir.

I give him a three second assessment. He knows he's being scanned. I want him to know.

- I'll be down in five. I'm phoning to confirm.
- We'll see you outside.
- What's your name?

- Briggs, Sir.
- See you in five, Mr Briggs.

Close the door without aggression. Jog upstairs, pausing at the bathroom to pick up a wash bag that's always there. Back to the bedroom and find her now sitting upright again with a cardigan around her shoulders. She looks put out, as you might expect.

- Sorry, seems the office needs me ASAP.
- Anything that cannot wait?
- Seems not. The young man sent for me seems earnest and in a pressing state. He's also carrying a small gun with him, and his colleagues seem set for trouble. Of some kind.
- Really? Who are they?
- Messengers, it seems. *Not briefed*. I'm phoning this one in.

I pick up the cradled handset from the bedside, a relic from a visit to Amsterdam some years ago when these sort of things seem to have been important. Looked nice in the shop. Familiar ring to it. My mobile in my other hand I look up the number for ON CALL OFFICER and dial it from the landline. One step ahead. It rings once before it's answered. *He's hanging*.

- Peterson.

His voice sounds quite relaxed. He's acting. Frank Peterson was promoted way above his own *dutiful position* some years ago. He's a sock puppet for the people who decide who to pay and who not to pay.

- Frank? I don't suppose you can tell me why there are two heavies, a picturesque chap named Briggs and the massed ranks of the *five-oh* outside my house right now?

He smiles inaudibly down the line. Good? *I'm terrific*.

- I wondered if you'd be calling this one, Jay.

Ooh. *Enforced pallyness*. Only those who knew me on the banks of the Granta Punt knew me by *that* name. He's briefed. Mention it? No, not yet. Hold this one back, even though it smells to high heaven already.

- You know me, Frank. Mistrust half of them and distrust the rest.
- Yes, well...it's true. We have a situation here. We need to reel you in. It's Hollybanks.
- Really? I thought that was done and paid off.
- Well...indirectly. More directly it's a matter of a few fish we have to fry. You're the man for that, and the Man Upstairs has asked for you.
- Which one?

- *Le plus grand de legumes*, if you see what I mean.

I snicker at the reference.

- What's my part?
- You have a brief. Your driver will give it to you? Eyes only.
- My *driver*?
- He's a trusty with better clearance than any of the messengers. Trust him and trust me.
- Well, you know me, Frank. Mistrust half of them and...
- He's good. But get in here quick, will you? There's a drink in it for you.
- Oh wow. Such a carrot.
- You bet. Tom still has that 50 year old to break open and word is that it's yours for the voice.
- I'll pass. Head says yes, heart even says yes but something tells me there is a bigger price on it.
- Okay. Come quickly. Funny you mention that, though; Pricey is here for you.

That stops me fast.

- Is he?
- Hand-picked, I'm told.
- By the *largest side dish* as well?
- Not quite. But close enough. As far as I can tell, there may be other guns out too. I'm not sure where this is headed, but...you know...*Hollybanks*.
- I really thought that was tucked up and wound down.
- I think a lot of people did.
- I'll be there as fast as I can.

The phone goes down. I rake together clothes from a hanger and dress quickly, all the time wondering why they sent one man to fetch me when I'd have been faster and more discreet getting myself in by car. I peer through the curtains. They sit outside, *two* cars, lights bright. Hardly discretion, even out here.

- It's verified.

Jocelyn seems nonplussed.

- Who with?
- Frank. They've told me to take a bag, so it might be a day or so.

- Oh come *on*. They said that last time and you were gone for a bloody *week*.
- It was only four days, and they did manage to get me home early.
- Well this had better be important. Your overnight case is on the back of the walk-in door and the wash bag is sitting in the green bathroom.
- Yes, I picked it up.
- Be safe, darling. I don't trust any of them.
- I trust fewer of them than that.
- So what is the rush now?
- *Hollybanks*, it seems.
- My God. I thought you said that business was all done.
- Seems a lot of people were badly informed, love.

Kick on my laced shoes, find the case, kiss Jocelyn fondly, hop downstairs and I'm ushered out my own front door to the car in front. It's like I have no mind of my own.

- Two cars? Are you expecting trouble, Mister?
- No, Sir. Just making sure. That's *our* brief.
- I'm sure Harry knows what he is doing.

He smiles. – None of this is really *Harry's doing*.

He's a bright boy. I get into the back seat of the car in front and nod to the driver.

- Girvan, Sir.
- Pleased to meet you. Do you know anything about this? They tell me you are cleared above and beyond.
- Oh they tell me nothing, Sir. Now buckle up - I drive really fast. There is a brief on the back seat pocket I have to give you. You're asked to read it before you get there.
- According to *who*?
- According to the man who told me to tell you, and you'll likely never heard of him.
- All very mysterious.
- Would you have it any other way? It's all I've known?
- You ex-Signals, Girvan?
- With respect Sir, to hell with everything about the *Interflora*.

I laugh loudly and with deep sincerity. Oh I like this man. He's one of us.

- So where then?
- Never served, Sir.

That tells me all I need to know about Mr Girvan. Special Forces. Solid.

I sink into the seat cushions as he proficiently presses on the gas and pulls the car away in a great and soundless haste. A backward glance confirms the young gunslinger is behind me, driving just as fast. This really has to be *something*. Who knows what?

In the seat pocket in front is a stiff brown envelope, sealed shut with tape, a stamp and a signature. Within it is another envelope, just as sealed, but this with the stamp **TOP SECRET:EYES ONLY** across its face. Eyes up to the driver, but his eyes are forward, on the road. I drop out the content and find a thin folder with a single block word printed on it, and that word brings back a flood of memories so vivid and so repressed that I gasp audibly when I read its eight letters and shut my eyes to avoid having to see it immediately. Right away I know I'm not going to be going home any time soon.

I look up cautiously and see Girvan watching me in the mirror. One of us.

Whitehall in darkness – every bit as imposing as Whitehall in daylight.

My bags are at the back of the room. They seem pointless now. Price greeted me without any real warmth and it was immediately apparent that anything Briggs said was programmed into him by the man yanking his strings.

- Sorry to drag you out here like this, Jay. You know how this is, I am sure. All this clock and witch-hunt stuff gives me the creeps as much as it does you, I'm sure.

I look at him resentfully. We're not alone in the room but I cannot see the others.

- Someone in my position should never have to be ferried like this, Ian.
- Well, yes. But it's something we need you for and I am told that we need you and no one else. You know you're not expendable, Jay.
- Not expendable and usually quite *willing*.
- But you have an idea what this is about?

I wave the brown envelope in front of him feebly.

- The brief was complete enough without anything meaningful being in it.

My antagonist is a colleague of many years, and a friend from our long bright endless summer days at Selwyn, which sometimes seem like an ancient form of dark history, like a thicket of imaginary memories. Ian Price. A cheery Scottish man from the Borders town of *somewhere* who grew up with a bigger outlook than it could provide and who studied pure mathematics, which did him absolutely no good at all until he grew into a dour but efficient manager with a keen analytical mind (which he said he owed not to mathematical pursuits but to listening to Bach, which I never understood) and a definite

flair for managing large amounts of data and people and cutting a swathe through it all to find the path of least resistance with the most product available. We joked that he'd be well served by the Scottish oil industry, but that never appealed, saying that he felt as Scottish as St George. That the noble *Georgios* was actually a Palestinian never seemed to worry him much.

He was enamoured of public service, which came over as quite opaque when voiced by a grandson of a mill worker and the son of a civil engineer. He had other ideas. Always affable and outgoing, his orderly and cultivated world was cut down when his son was killed by a drunk driver as he walked home from school. The condolences were offered without reservation, but no one from the office was invited to the funeral back in the Borders town of *somewhere*, where the rest of the Price family were interred. People thought less of him for that, or that maybe the tragedy had affected his judgement. But I knew him better. He plunged into his work and grew very much closer to Kerry, who also worked in the Ministry. People were sometimes surprised to know that for such a conventional man he had never married her, but I understood him better. There was still the germ of the young man in him.

Even though we walked into the Service together we never worked together much, so his words here to me were never going to be *practical*. I could tell he was here to soften me up for something; the familiar face to encourage you to step into the room to get made up – or down. They were using him to get to me. If that was the case, then it might explain the twitch at the corner of his eye. I'd never noticed that before.

- Been a while since we had any sort of chat, don't you think?

He doesn't look up at me as he speaks. Eyes fixed to the desk. If he comes around it and perches on the edge then he'll get a fist from me. Hugh used to pull that trick way back when the HO was young and when people like me were able to be intimidated by people they mistook for their intellectual superiors. Never going to happen now. Keep Price guessing.

- It has, yes.
- It feels a little like you and I have grown apart. I regret that.
- I don't think you or I are in any position to believe that I was swung in here after two in the morning to discuss the nature of loss, Ian.

He seems defused. He's not good at this.

- No, of course not. We both know that. You've never lost your capacity for being direct, have you?

He smiles that little smile he does when he thinks he has cracked something clever, but which sometimes comes over as a sneer.

- We can go on about it if you like, though.
- No, we have a point to make and we ought to make it.
- Well...let's get to business shall we?

Ian shifts in his seat. He's not going to perch, more's the pity. Jesus, he has put on weight. Her home cooking cannot account for it all, so we assume it's the drink and the days away in far-off places where he gets to imbibe without limit or supervision. There was a rumour about him in the rounds just after the ATG Conference in Munich, but we don't mention it much. Never to his face, though.

- I take it you've heard the PM's latest statement on the situation in the Middle East *vis a vis* the American intervention?

I had. Even the PM sounded flustered, and for all that he was a tragedy from the other place he could sound authentic when he wanted to – except this time he didn't sound like he was interested in artifice. It wound up a few people. What did Semple say to us? The last war to be fought and lost will be a slow war of the economy? 'Silly old tool', we thought back then. Not so silly now. He was bang on the money. I could see this business coming a way off. Jilly did her entire thesis on Semple's predictions and even found a line through them which showed that he was correct about 80% of the time and even on the 20% lost he was still somewhere close to the mark. We can only win in the stock markets. He knew what he was doing, or so Jilly endlessly assured me.

- What of it?
- I was just wondering what you made of it.
- I was brought *here* for *that*?
- Not entirely, but do go on and indulge me. Some people think this stuff is important, you know.
- And my take on it worth what, exactly?
- More than most, Jay. That's why you are here.

My mind flips back to the brief. Why is this lying bloody liar lying to me?

- You're flattering me, Ian. Can we cut out all this stuff, really? That brief is enough to give me a clear enough signal what all this is about, though why now and why here...is...odd. I'm just wondering who was telling tales out of school. You do know that *the man at the end* doesn't know about this business, don't you? I've kept my end of the deal – who else hasn't?

Ian shifts in his seat. He doesn't look comfortable.

- It's a matter of bringing you around, you know.

I can feel a cold rush come over me in a sudden rush that surprises me. Bringing him around is a phrase I've heard often enough, but never expected to hear applied to myself. His next words are more *far* more predictable.

- What do you remember of *back then*?
- You mean...*way* back then?

Interesting approach. I wonder where this one is going. It's much too parallel to be a softener.

- Yes, days on the green. Days of rash promises and...all that.
- Some of it is still clear to me, some other parts less so. What are you driving at?
- Do you remember that summer afternoon that we spent there with the three girls from the town?

I try to swallow hard, but my mouth is dry and my throat tight.

I did, and fondly.

Valerie, her older sister Tessa and a girl whose name I always thought was Sophie but turned out to be something else, but I still call her Sophie. If ever there was an idyll, it was then.

Sophie. Black hair, blue eyes, pale skin.

A day spent with such reckless freedom and careless thought of consequences that I can hardly believe now that it happened, and believe even less that I could let it go. Sun so warm it felt like an embrace; grass so soft it was velvet underfoot; wine so cold and dry it flowed like our wit and our youth. The silence around us enveloping our companionship, the birds singing, the air clear, and nothing to betray the fact that anyone on earth even *mattered* that day. We couldn't do anything wrong or say anything that wasn't right. The day passed by in a shimmering spark and the night spent against her...I could have wished forever that I could live that again, if only for a moment. Did I ever see Sophie again? I did not, although I thought I may have but that was always just me wanting it to be true. What would I say if I saw her again? I would just thank her. That day may have meant nothing to you...but it was just *everything* to me. We were young and beautiful, and life wasn't a ploughed rut to be driven along. Would we have been perfect together? I don't know. I will never know. Maybe the perfection of those hours together is all the perfection I need.

We all meant to do that again, but we knew we'd be trying to recreate an experience borne from nothing. It wouldn't work. We'd just spend our time trying to rebuild something enchanted.

Somewhere, somehow that enchanted day goes on forever. I've spent my life trying to find it again.

Reverie. And it shows.

- I do.
- Do you remember what we said? About what we were going to do and what friendship means? And how we'd sooner walk over hot coals or throw ourselves in the Cam than betray our friends or our country?
- I don't need to be reminded of one isolated remark, Ian. I've believed that all my life.

He was a mathematician, I was the historian, the girls were...I don't even remember. The talk on the lawn was that of friendship, patriotism, work – all that *matters* in life. We fitted without flaw and matched our opinions against the other in a way I've never known since. Does *everyone* have days like this? Do we all get one chance of it and

then lose it forever? Do some people live their lives like that? Would it end up being too much? Would it ever get diluted into the commonplace? Do you ever yearn for a day like that when the other days surrounding you are just the same? Would anything be special ever again? We were all so young, so clever, so boundless and so beautiful.

We had drunk, but were not drunk, and although not drunk we all *felt* drunk. Every word a witticism; every opinion a truth; every value a value shared; every thought an idea understood. And yet every hour, every day, every week, every year a small part of her memory is eroded from me. Can I remember a word she said to me? I cannot. Can I remember all we did? I cannot. So what is left of her? A series of faded vignettes, like sepia images stolen from a bound book of photographs from five generations ago. That pale skin, that mass of dark, dark hair and those eyes...*oh forgive me Jocelyn...*but those eyes. Blue to the point of being the colour of the sky on a clear summer's day, that same blue we saw *that day*. How you moved me. How you and I breathed that magic, a magic enough for me to believe that somehow magic existed.

Sophie – wherever you are, *whoever* you are - you will never know what you did for me that day. Halfway between boy and man, you made me taste what the headlong rush of the real freedom of spirit is like. *I can never thank you enough, never worship you enough, never love you enough, even if you never know it.*

- But do you remember it?
- I do. What point are you making here? And who is making you make it for you?

He looks uneasy and glances over my shoulder.

- Jay, the time has come to come good on some of that.

And now I find my most cherished, private memories cheapened, pinned to the ground and bartered. We close in on the truth at last. I turn in my seat and see behind me the definite and quite unforgettable figure of Sir Gerry Flory, which I have to admit takes me aback more than a little. I never thought he'd be up at this time of day. Even more worryingly, Gerry hands me a glass which seems half-full of whisky. I take it but play it too cannily to drink any of it. FO special. One of a type that we all know. I dislike him less than I distrust him, but not by much. He's the type you thought went out with gas lighting and ration books.

- This is awkward, you know.

His face is a baroque mess of burst capillaries and stress - seldom has a man enjoyed such an accurate and symbiotic relationship with his surname. His reputation as a drunk is only exceeded by the esteem with which certain quarters anoint him on a frequent basis. He's spent and he knows it, but he always seems to be going down with the flags flying high.

- I'm sure it is, Gerry. And the answer is *no*.
- We need all the leverage we can get, you know...
- And that's *why* the answer is 'no'. Jesus Christ, this has been decided *way* over your head, and you know it.

- How do you know I'm not speaking for a higher power?
- How do I know you *are*? You've a reputation that precedes you.

Gerry smiles, knowing he has little real say over me. As Moran used to say 'when Gerry says *the PM says such-and-such* then take it from me that the cleaner will know more about it than the PM ever will'.

Ian speaks.

- Jay...we all know about *the dirty work of Empire*, don't we? This is what we have to do. We have to use whatever we have. And you have it. And we need it.
- *We*?
- The country needs it. We. The nation. This is the day that we spoke about, when your patriotic duty has to be called in and you pull off the most amazing thing that saves us from the brink, remember?

Gerry:

- It's not as though we have any choice. Hollybanks will be the downfall of us all if we let it grow. And it is taking on a life of its own, and you well know that.
- So what am I supposed to do? Renege on the most sacred promise I have ever made to my country – my *country*, Ian; remember those *hot coals*? – or do you want me to just replay the past like it doesn't matter anymore?
- Jay...you're being melodramatic...
- *Fuck Ian, no I am not.* You're not even supposed to know about it, let alone guess at its content. Who leaked? Which bottom feeder was it this time?

Flory smiles a dissolute smile and raises his eyebrows. – That needn't really be any concern, you know. The fact is that the tiger is out the cage now, and we just have to get on its back before anyone else does.

His metaphors stink like his morality.

- Anyone else?
- Well, thanks to the protections you placed on it, it seems that may be tricky.
- But not impossible, Jay. Everyone has a price, don't they?

He pauses to let it sink in, I assume. I pause to let the enormity of what he said resound in the deadened room.

- What are you implying, Ian? What are you saying about me?

I find myself on my feet. This isn't the Ian Price I knew.

- That we cannot entrust this to any one person. It's too big, Jay.

Flory: - Come on, sit down. Have a drink and think about this. We are talking *sense* here. This is more than just us. This is the fate of the *whole of the United Kingdom*.

Maybe even of the nation as a people. Are you *seriously telling me* that you think you're bigger than all of this?

I'm on a roll.

- Gerry? *Fuck you, Gerry.*
- I think I deserve 'fuck you, *Sir Gerry*', actually...
- Gerry, fuck you and everyone who *talks* like you. Everyone who *thinks* like you. Everyone who *looks* like you. I'm never going to betray my promises and myself in the way you seem to find such common ease within. It's not happening. You'll spend the rest of your lives, your children's' lives and your children's' children's' lives trying to get through it and you'll still fail and you know it. If you want to break it then you have to break me, and I am not going to be broken for you. Is that clear?

A silence. Gerry has picked on the wrong angle entirely and Ian fuelled it. I'm not talking to either of them, for what comes from deep within is my outrage that promises and deep, deep feelings expressed *to her* are being given away.

- Perfectly. You know, I had expected more from...
- ...from what? From someone whose loyalty was vague enough to be compromised like that? That document is not just dynamite – it's a whole new broken world. The whole *purpose* was to shroud it because it would break *any* system, break *any* nation and be *utterly corrupting* to anyone who touches it. We cannot use and expect to come out unscathed. It will be the ruin of everything.
- So. Where are you in all of this, *Jay*?

That fucker. At that angle again.

- I'm a rare breed. I can resist. Call it integrity. You better look it up, though – you seem to have lost the definition somewhere along the way.
- Jay, that's a cheap word to use. We're trying to act on the best interests of everyone concerned. You seem to think we are enemies! We're not. We need that information and we need it quickly.
- And what are you going to do with it? Drip it out? How? If it comes out too slowly then it might get diluted. Too fast and I doubt anyone would really take it in.
- So you're saying it's worthless?
- I'm saying neither of *you* have the finesse for this.
- What makes you think this is down to us?
- You or anyone else in this weird little political world you inhabit.
- Anyone else?
- *Anyone* else.

Gerry leans over.

- What makes you think this is *just politics*? This is war. And war is not 'politics by other means'. It's about survival. It's about letting the next man know that you can cut him down, without actually cutting him down. The threat of what you can do is all that is needed. It's a bluff, like everything else.

Maybe it's my imagination, but too many sentences are starting with *what makes you think...*

- I know the document. I know what it contains. I know what it would do.
- And you know better?
- Better than you. *Much* better than you. I've no idea whose shill you are, but I am embarrassed to be talking to you.
- Well...your former *compère* has resisted as well, though for other reasons.

I had expected this.

- Such as?
- Such as living in a blind-soaked haze of gin and pity. He's a pathetic bag of indignation and tragic memories. Care to side with him? Last we saw of him he was still with that shrew of a wife of his getting less coherent and more piqued by the day. We stopped listening into him months ago.
- So that's why you are listening to me, is it?
- One of the reasons, yes.

Something still stinks.

- And why this time of day?

Gerry leans back as if in despair of my stupidity.

- Oh come *on*, man. We can hardly do this in the open air, can we? We have to show some discretion when we are doing this and walls have ears, especially when they are filled with those who want to hear.

Resonance. How could I be this stupid? I see two people here, yet they talk like they are the government. And they are not.

- You keep talking in the plural, but it's a factual plural...isn't it? You're not a *plurality* at all. Who else are you actually talking for?

Gerry smiles and nods to Ian who speaks.

- Enough of us to matter.
- *How many?*
- More than enough to matter, Jay. We can see our inactions far enough and know that we hold a weapon that would put paid to all our troubles right away. No use

in sitting on it, so we need it. It doesn't matter how *many* of us there are, does it?

- You're not even official, are you?
- Not exactly. Broad cross-party support exists.
- Jesus Christ, Gerry...how many people know about this thing?
- Do you *really think* something like this could remain any sort of a secret? Are you seriously that naïve, Mister?
- Jay, we need this. We need it and we need it now. We need you to deliver on it. You're going to save the nation.

I think hard and fast, maybe giving them time to think I am about to capitulate.

- This is a coup, isn't it? It's a coup. I give you what you want and there would never be an end to it. Your rubbish about the Americans is just a front for what you are after. Well...you're getting nothing.

I look at Gerry without expression.

Gerry loses it.

- Jay...we need TALISMAN and we need it *now*. Now *give it to us*.

I smell the threat of victory.

- You won't get it.
- Oh yes we will.
- Without me? How?
- By hook or by crook, that's how.

I permit myself a huffed sigh and stand up.

- I'm leaving.
- So be it.
- And Ian? Consider the blithe days on the Cam in the past. We are no longer friends.

Without knowing it or meaning it, I have just killed you, Sophie. Forgive me.

They are wordless and merely look at me in a last gambit to play on my sense. I walk out of the room and the corridor and the building, composing my resignation letter as I stride down the silently firm carpeted steps to the concourse. I just want to get back to Jocelyn and talk to her. We can move out. Move out to the cottage and sell up the town. We can well afford it, and I can take up that academic post we've always mentioned and which they have been offering me annually. She can give up teaching and write that book about Maréchal Luxembourg she has always wanted to do. I can go back to painting and writing. I also resolve to go back to that birch down past the

marker post off the north shore of Loch Ard, within sight the ancient forest on the road to the Aberfoyle Pass. I buried something there in 1999 and I have to get rid of it now.

I wander to the Liberal Club where I know the taxi rank waits. I don't even get to Scotland Place before the unmarked van roars up beyond and three of them jump out around me. I'm taken aback, but not enough to resist. Something told me this was going to happen.

- So this is how it is, is it?
- Sorry, mate. This is the way it has to be.

I find myself in the centre of a bright halo of light that descends in a chaotic nimbus around my head and blots me out. It takes much less than a second. I feel no pain, only chronic helplessness. As they stun me outrageously and bundle me into the van, the last words I hear are

- Watch, Larry. Remember. Don't damage the *tissue*.

I'm tissue. Nothing. A meat puppet.

I wish I'd never coined the word TALISMAN. It seemed so clever then. So clever, so boundless...so beautiful.

Black hair, blue eyes, pale skin.

Forgive me Jocelyn.

At this point I surrender and - for all intents and purposes - cease to exist.

PART III

FAMILY

TIES

- **Austin...come in. I wasn't expecting you back so soon...**

- Thanks for seeing me, Madge. There have been a few developments, and I think you ought to be aware of what they are. I know you're busy but I will try to be quick about this.

Speak assertively without aggression. This woman is probably on my side and will be a valued ally. Do not be pushy, but let her know that there is stuff in your head that will benefit her entirely.

Wednesday afternoon. Two days since I saw Barker and three days – as far as I can tell - since I committed a multiple murder for which I have yet to hear any report or consequences. In the interim period I managed to drive – through the remnants of a crashing hangover - north to Bristol where I checked into the eponymous hotel by the quayside. There I had a leisurely bath, ate an enormous room service, locked my door and slept tight and dreamlessly for fifteen hours straight amidst their faux mahogany, steel and glass tubular furniture and cheap pastel prints of local scenery.

On waking I walked quietly down to the waterside where I took the broken sections of the firearm and dropped them into the deep water at legally opportune intervals, then made my way to the south west in Bedminster where I disposed of the by-now no doubt notorious Audi and exchanged it for a smaller BMW on an older plate, much to the delight of the salesman who could hardly believe his fortune. Back to town, where I bought new shirts, underwear and socks, and a wide range of toiletries, then to a stationery shop where I bought a case and a few items for tying, securing and filing, then returned to the hotel where I had them dry clean and press my suits and ties, and buff up my shoes.

Lying low in the hotel, reading some paperbacks and magazines, every newspaper I could find and every news channel I could bear on the TV. That night sleep was more orderly, as was my shower and general grooming, contrasting with the chaotic need to just rid myself of blood and filth and debris from the last week. I could stand under the ripping heat and thudding power of the eight jet shower for half an hour at a time, simply shedding what of me I could, erasing, removing and sloughing what I was into what I wanted to become.

Suitably dressed I consulted the IT facilities in the hotel and found that there was a printing service which I could use for a pound a page. So I made a hard copy of TALISMAN from the connection to my phone, laboriously retyped and rejigged it all cleanly, making sense of the insensible, printed off three copies, paid my money, went back to the room and made up three identical but numbered folders with the document bound within them with treasury tags, then slid each into a stiff, slim folder and made a single tag to fit into the clear name holder, with the single word TALISMAN in neat, small letters. All went into the case which I locked shut and laid on the long unit to that ran the length of the room under the picture window.

I spent a while picking through Georgie's wallet and phone. The latter was almost empty although it contained some pictures of himself and Cally in what looked like less stressful

times on a boating holiday. I tried not to dwell on her azure eyes. I wonder what they are doing now, and in what direction they are sightlessly pointing.

The names in the phone's contacts are just abbreviations, but I write them all down anyway. There is one for C which I am hoping is Carter, but if Carter has a phone then why were they talking to Carter via a radio link? Is he worth pursuing too? Or has their entire intent been wiped out by my efforts? I should doubt it. *Last count I heard we were five thousand, but that might have been Drebs just letting her mind wander.*

Or her imagination running away with her.

From the hotel I called Madge's office and made an appointment. It was going to be for three days hence but I managed to persuade the secretary to bring it forward if Mrs Hayes-Williamson was agreeable. A returned call from the secretary confirmed that she would be, but I kept it a day away to make me seem less...keen.

Checked out, drove the BMW back along the M4 east to the capital where I check myself into an almost plush hotel near Hyde Park and the car into the secure underground car parking for almost as much as my room costs.

Georgie's wallet offered about as little as his phone. I learnt that his name on one card was GEORGE FARQUHAR whereas on another it became GEORGE COLSON. There were differing dates of birth on two separate driving licences and even the photographs on some of his identification looked vaguely different from each other, as though they had been altered touched up or even taken of different people. The wallet contained no notes, no messages, no receipts and no cash. It felt less of a wallet than it did a prop, an instrument of an imaginary war.

Given the time I had and the lack of any discernible panic or notice about the deaths at the farmhouse I now wish I had spent more time there taking the place apart and searching it. For an insane minute I considered the possibility of going back there, but that was dismissed all too fast as being recklessness *par excellence*. It would be revolting anyway, and there would be *her* there, lying on the cold ground where I let her fall. And that would be too much for me to bear.

Cory had called me already. She and Marion watched as a vehicle without any livery backed into our empty drive and three animated and highly motivated men got out, jogged up the side of the house and returned about two hours later with a very large bag which she could only just see, being pitched into the rear of the vehicle before it was driven off at speed. Her voice was shaking as she described the events as they happened towards the end, but needed no persuading to stay the hell away from the house. As good as her word, she managed to get Marion to drive her north along with Jason to find safety at Peter's house. I even called Marion back after Cory confirmed her safe arrival, thanking her for her efforts. Marion's voice betrayed no hint of previous indiscretions. Maybe she was warned off, or maybe she regretted it. No idea. But I was grateful.

Out of the blue a call came in from Hartley. Gave him nothing. He seemed to think our agreement was going to stretch on a bit. It does not. He strikes me as a disease waiting for a prime chance to become the epidemic it aspires to be. Most of his time is not spent in gathering information from me as it is trying to serve me with reassurances that *we're all on the same side, all in the same boat, we're all aiming for the same target*

and all shooting at the same goal. I remain tight-lipped. He detects a change in my purpose, even in my position.

- What has got into you? Have you gone soft?
- Johnny...it's not like that at all. We have reached a place where we just have to be more circumspect than before. We cannot let you blunder along into this.
- My team are onto all this too, you know. This isn't something you could reveal on your own. Look at what happened to the others? We'll cover you.
- The others did the same sort of thing in a bad way and they are paying a price for that. That's not going to happen to me – and besides, there is more than just me at stake now. There are others moving on this too.

Hartley seems amazed at this news.

- How many?
- Lots. If we want to make the proper overtures to turning this situation around then we have to have *everyone* in place before we make the slightest move. That includes you, and sometimes you feel like a whippet gagging on a chain.
- You have to realise my position. I am working to a deadline.
- Your deadline and mine aren't the same thing. Not the same ballpark, not the same sport, maybe not the same universe. And certainly not the same *boat, target or goal*. You'll move as and when we say so, and even then you'll only do what we say. There is more than enough in this to go around. Now let this be.
- I cannot and will not wait forever.
- That's exactly what you'll do, Johnny. *Exactly* what you'll do.

Two more calls from Cory. Jason is upset at moving. When can we go back?

Call to Max, making thanks. *Just doing my job, sir.* Sarcastic. The house is under observations through a safe posting further down the street. He remonstrated with me for the van, it has to be said. He told me it was idiotic even driving that thing and that it was *much* too dangerous to even consider getting into it, not just mechanically but also in terms of the amount of *biology* that was found all over it. I took my bollocking like a man. *A family man. A government man. And a murderer.*

- With that sort of exposure it's utterly amazing you were not found.
- I know. I had no other option.
- There is *always* another option. Where on earth did you get it from? And whose DNA is all over the window? We've sampled it.
- I'd sooner you just eliminated it.

I heard Max inhale a bit on the end of the phone.

- You back on your feet again?
- Very much. I have to thank you for your understanding.
- You know why you are here now?
- Almost, but not entirely. But I understand a purpose at last.
- And that is?
- Well...
- One good turn?

I cannot help but smile.

- A former bagman who I think was buried not long ago.
- Oh *him*? What of him?
- Well, whatever was buried in the coffin wasn't him. Likely nothing to do with him.

Max pauses from his retort.

- Come again?
- I think an exhumation may be in order.
- That might be awkward – he was cremated. I was there. Stitching together shredded paper is hard. Revitalising carbon is harder still.

I puff out.

- That's not handy. Jessop is still around and still in the game, as far as I can tell.
- If I knew what the game was then I'd be a happier man, I think.
- Well...Jessop is leaning on HMG, put it that way.

Max exhales hard into the handset he's holding. A laugh, perhaps?

- Then Jessop is looking for *Death By Westminster* if he's that stupid. How can he exert and pressure? I wonder who was in the box?
- I've no idea. Having said all that, I've neither met Jessop nor spoken to him with any knowledge of his voice. It might all be utter rubbish.
- Should I mention any of this?
- No, I'm seeing the Minister shortly. I am sure she is going to want to escalate the business pretty quickly, but I'm not certain about the direction. I get the impression that the dearly departed wants to lean on *her*.
- That isn't wise.

- No, Max. But he's unafraid. Since he's technically no longer with us, I understand his new-found bravery.
- You know about the McGuffin then?
- The what?
- McGuffin. I forget who coined the phrase. It's a device that drives a plot but which has actually no meaning to the story itself. Like the statue in *The Maltese Falcon*. It doesn't do anything, just drives the narration.
- I think you have the wrong end of all this, Max. This isn't a nothing...it's a something.
- Austin, you'll never be able to use it.

I wondered where he was going at this point.

- How's that?
- Say you got yourself the recipe for Coca Cola...
- That's a myth – it's not a secret...
- Yes, but say you got it and you were going to use it to make your own drink and make a fortune. How would you use it?
- I don't follow you.
- The point is that the drink is actually irrelevant to the plot. You could make an identical beverage, but the marketing juggernaut that it rides upon is something you'll never be able to match. You just won't get a chance to do anything with it.
- And you say that this document is the same thing?
- In a manner of speaking. You'll not be able to use it, pass it on or anything because you'll just not have the ability to do so. In your hands it's not useful. Now, if you were the government or an agency of the state or a powerful lobby then it might have some use for you. But as an individual? Hardly.
- Yes, but I'm not going to use it. Not that way, anyway.
- Then why is it so exciting to everyone?
- Maybe it's just interesting to them, Max.
- Watching nature documentaries is *interesting* too. But afterwards we get up, marvel at the intelligence of the Orca and move on.
- *David Attenborough* is not about to threaten Western Civilisation.
- And neither are you. Think carefully before you choose to do anything with this knowledge. Cory still needs you around her.
- I know. I sent her away after your men visited.

- Who was the unfortunate?
- I think he was somehow connected to the person I spoke to on the phone that day.
- Oh...Mr 'Code'.
- Yes.
- Find out anything about him?
- His name might be George Farquhar or Colson, but beyond that I've no idea. He has a daughter named Cally.
- Well we can check that, plus we have the van obviously.

For some reason this gave me a pause.

- And?
- Well, it had false plates on it but we got the chassis number and traced the owners. Some farm north of here. We'll give them a shout later on when we have the time.

Ohhhhh...

- Well Max...my bet is that it's stolen.
- I doubt anyone would *choose* to steal a van like that. Now maybe you can tell me how the blood got all over it?

Ohhhhh...

- Max...is this...off the record?
- It depends on your answer. I don't tend to keep that many records unless I have to.
- I'll answer you, but after I speak to Margaret. But please...for now...keep it to yourself, yes?
- Is this going to give me any cause for regret, Austin?

My heart was thumping at this point.

- No, but leave it with me. There is something happening and it cannot be upset at this stage.
- My trust in you is probably completely stupid, but I am doing this for Cory. I've bailed you out of one fallen hero already.
- That actually wasn't my doing.
- Yes, you said.

Max sounded like he didn't believe a single solitary word of it.

- Max, the more you know what I must be under, the more you must know that these people are your enemies. This is probably some kind of warfare. We're all troops, aren't we?
- Pawns, maybe.
- Whatever...you know what I'm getting at, don't you?
- Rules of engagement don't extend to blaming your wife for misdeeds, Austin.
- *Fuck's sake, Max.* It was her – she is a deeply resourceful woman you know.

Max paused a bit.

- You really don't remember a damned thing, do you?
- About what?
- About 'before'...
- No, I don't.

Max laughed a little.

- Okay, let's leave this one lying still. We'll see where it takes us.
- Thanks again, Max. I owe you several.
- Just doing my job, sir. You should have faith in your wife. She's a convenient front for a hugely inconvenient truth that many of us won't like to face. We all go back a long way. Some of us go back to days we cannot live again. Just be grateful she's on your side.

He hung up.

I also called Barker back to thank him for his hospitality and say that his efforts were not to be forgotten, nor my efforts to be confused with hostility. He said he was amazed at my civility in the face of it, and that June found me 'charming'. My recollection was of a different type altogether, but then again I never understand people of that type who hope to express themselves by driving tactful words that don't exactly mean what they ought to down myriad paths until they get home largely by accident. They usually get misunderstood for perfectly understandable reasons and then fail to understand why they are incomprehensible.

The taxi took me this far, I walked the rest and the rain started thundering down again. Right now my life is like a *film noir* with endless rain, death, plot, intrigue and non-stop continual dreary downpours. The face of the building was again tall and daunting, as though dropped from Gotham City and leaning up over me to ask who I was coming to visit. The new confidence that the clothes, rest and sleep gave me turned me from Austin into *The Hafner*. With that in mind I ascended the stairs and spoke to the receptionist like I owned the place and paid her wages out of my pocket change.

So here I am again with Madge. And she seems so put out by my being here, despite the appointment. She has an edge to her voice. Twitchy in her seat. Some balance has just shifted. She knows something, and I am suspecting that Mr Ferlow is playing a double-edged game here.

- So what has been happening?
- Well Madge, let's start at the beginning. Some time ago I was visited at the Ellswater by someone from a strange little select group who wanted the document and who referred to you as GATSBY. Remember we discussed this with the DPM?
- Of course I do. His friends were responsible for the British Museum incident.
- Well his cronies were also responsible for attempting to get me to take Cory's life.

Madge pales.

- I don't follow you.
- They asked me to shoot your sister. Dead. In my home, in cold blood.

Madge seems unusually flustered. I think this is cold and hard realisation.

- Madge – *how much did Max tell you about what he suspects of me?*
- I...I...I don't know..
- It's all true. Whatever he told you, it's all true. Let's make that the starting point. I photographed Cory that day for you to verify that was her, because I have no memories of her. None at all. If you told me that you didn't know who she was then I'd have known it wasn't her and she'd have been killed alright. But you gave the right answer. And she is still with us, and I knew which side was the right one.
- And which is that?
- The one with you, me, Cory and Jason on it.

Madge leans back.

- That's pretty narrow, Austin.
- I know, but I have had a long conversation with someone about 'duty' recently and I think most people have that concept entirely wrong.
- Why did you ask me about my pearls?

She's wearing them now.

- Because they were in the photograph of my wedding, with you wearing them. The woman in the picture was definitely the woman I was living with, but if it was a composite then what were you doing there? So I had to know if it was really you, and of course you had those pearls on twenty years ago, or whenever Cory and I were hitched.

- Good God, Austin...
- I know. This is the sort of life I have been leading recently. Everyone flipping sides from one to the other, everyone questioning loyalty, effort, and duty.
- Yes...*flipping*. It's a well-known strategy of authority. Keep changing your mind and your opinion and the opposition cannot land a blow on you because they cannot see you. The DPM even said all this stuff is going to mean another flip on our part.
- This is *madness*.
- You spoke to someone about 'duty', you said.
- Yes. Barker.
- I know. You were spotted by his watchers. You should really be more discreet, you know. He's not exactly the *plat du jour* right now. Anyone coming or going from his place is going to be given the fillet.
- What sort of arrest is he under?
- Effectively none. He knows he is going nowhere, though.
- He's paranoid. He had us speak in his glasshouse when the rain was coming down so we couldn't be overheard.

Madge shakes her head.

- He's paranoid. He's not on surveillance. He's just closed up and we are hoping for the end of him soon. With any luck the amount of gin we are shipping into the bastard will finish him off. Ambition I can take, even a bit of good-natured back-stabbing. But disloyalty? I take that grudge to my grave, thank you very much. I hope every *mouthful* of that foul stuff kills off enough of him to reduce his capacity to think but not his capacity for self-loathing.
- He says he drinks it to forget. Frankly, I think he drinks it to give his imagination a boost.
- What did you talk about?
- Nothing that would surprise you, but we did discuss one thing that you don't yet know about.

Madge suddenly looks *extremely* interested.

- This anything to do with Francis?
- No, just Jessop.

Margaret flinches at the sound of her former trusted friend's name. Her reaction is almost a physical one. I half expect to see a red weal on her face. I sense fallen loyalties coming out of her. Her face is red. And I notice she is *perspiring*.

- Unfortunately we all managed to watch him go up in smoke to the rafters and beyond.
- I think you'll find he arranged that too.
- I don't follow you.
- He's alive. He's still with us. And he's got something planned, I think.

Margaret had paled, then flushed and now she looks as white as her perfectly cultured pearls.

- Explain?
- He phoned me. He faked it. There was a body in the coffin no doubt, but it wasn't him.
- What the *fuck*?
- He has been on the side of the Angry Mob who blew up the library, we think.
- What the *fuck*?
- Barker filled in the gaps. About TALISMAN. And Jessop's involvement in it.
- What the *fuck*?
- He was on the committee ten years ago and knew where Francis had secretly stashed the file. Being part of a significant and secret sub-group of TALISMAN he could re-draw it without any problem and pass it on to whoever wanted it, which was of course...you.
- What the *fuck*?
- In the interim I'm sure he read it. He might even have copied it.
- What the *fuck*?
- Madge, please stop saying that.
- This is...just too ridiculous for any *other* words, Austin.
- Perhaps, but it's all true and it's all happening. And I think you are being a little bit disingenuous right now...
- *Austin?*
- Well...why did you get him to draw the file for you if you didn't know he had security cover to enable it?

Madge starts to say something then stops.

- I...
- Margaret, did you know about the file's content already?

She says nothing.

- Did he try to threaten you with it? And did you get him to draw it for you to prove its content? Is that why I was given the file?

She starts to speak.

- Austin, I...it was for the best of reasons.
- Margaret, that looks helluva like managerial weakness, being threatened by a subordinate who is actually threatening the entire government.
- It was nothing like that!
- What was the expression Barker had for you? Oh yes... *messy little trellis-climber...*
- Barker said that about *me*?
- He did. He doesn't have a high opinion of you. He doesn't have a high opinion about *anyone* really. The only person who seemed to get any of his grudging respect was Jim Francis, and even then he was drawn as a pallid kind of shadow cast over the story. But you? No, he *hates* you.
- As if I need any opinion of me held by a *filthy little shit* like him.

I wait for the words to resonate in the air, bringing the proceeds down to the ground again. She shakes her head, unapologetic.

- It's true, Austin. He's a ghastly little man and I won't have him speak of me like that. Have you any idea how he got to where he was before TALISMAN?
- I have an idea, but it's not one we need dwell on right now. What we need to focus on is the current. June Barker used to be secretary of the group. She told me that the document was drawn up by her and Barker and that Francis was a patsy for the whole thing, just someone to sign a name and take the heat.
- Okay...
- She was relieved of her duties some time ago. In that interim, it seems that TALISMAN has reconvened. I spoke to the new secretary Linda Dawson who told me that this group has met five times for what she describes as 'wash ups'. I'm not entirely sure what this means, but it sounds like something odd has been going on.
- It does.
- So what do you know about it?
- About TALISMAN?
- Yes. Why is it meeting again?
- I haven't the faintest idea. I didn't even know it was meeting until you told me five seconds ago.

- I need to find who attends the meetings and what is said during them.

Madge's face colours suddenly.

- Um...Austin...even being charitable, you'll never find any way of getting near them. Way back TALISMAN was graded A2. It won't be any lower than that and that means privileges way beyond your status. It would take – probably – someone of my clearance to get to them and I am not about to wander down to Paper Records, wave my badge about and draw files like that.
- Is that what you said to Jessop, Madge?
- *No!*

Her face is suddenly flushed with anger. She drives the point home with an index finger rattling down on the desktop on selected syllables.

- I did *not* say anything such thing to *William Jessop*. That man showed loyalty to me and HMG and I will not take the word of a fatuous drunk like Brian Barker over his reputation which he demonstrated numerous times and for which he paid a heavy price. No, I just won't accept it.
- Then who phoned me to say he was Bill Jessop?
- I don't know – you've been keeping fairly lurid company recently. Could it not be someone trying to smoke you out? You're doing pretty well so far.
- At what?
- At getting over-excited.
- That answers nothing, Madge. Did you get Jessop to draw the file for you?
- How *dare* you ask me that sort of question, Austin? We might be family but there is a limit to how far I will be taken by you. *Remember who I am*.
- Did you get Jessop to draw the file for you?
- I have already answered that absurd question.
- Was Jessop threatening you?
- No! He wouldn't. I know him too well for that and have trusted him for years now. He's a colleague and a friend; I've known him and his wife for *years* now.
- What about any other part of HMG?
- Emphatically not! Jessop was an old and wayward man and he had his issues sometimes, but he was *never* like that.
- So why did some paramilitary revolutionary tell me that GATSBY is '*our greatest asset*'?
- Austin...I. Don't. Know.

She lightly palms the desktop on each syllable. It's clear from her demeanour that the questions are going nowhere. Yet for all her piss and wind she is very, very much on the back foot. It's also apparent to me how confused her tense is about Jessop. I perhaps foolishly press on, a little more gently.

- Then perhaps we can approach this from another angle. I *was* phoned by someone saying he was Jessop, in which case it either was or was not Jessop. Yes?
- Yes...but...
- So...we should assess whether or not Jessop actually is dead or not.
- That's repulsive, Austin!
- It's practical. And we have to be certain of our facts. Sadly there was a cremation, so no exhumation is possible, but we could see if it's possible to recover...
- Austin... Austin... Austin... *we are not doing that or anything like it*, do you hear?
- Alright, but I would like to speak to people who acted after the fact.
- *What?*
- Well the police would have attended. There may be photographs taken at the time. Perhaps witness statements.
- If you go *anywhere at all* near Felicity Jessop I will eviscerate you *myself*.

Tacit agreement. Noted.

- I also want the last five TALISMAN minutes.
- You simply won't get them and I am not drawing them for you.
- I won't have to get you to do that.

She looks right at me, pausing for a second. Her eyes hollow and begging a question.

- Something tells me that I am about to be filled with regrets...
- Hear me out. Have you ever met Bob Kelly of Internal Audits?
- No...I didn't think we had such a division. What have you been saying to them? Where are they based? Across the road? Jesus Christ...is this going to make it *worse*?
- No, they don't exist. But I have blagged my way into things by touting his name already. It takes a brass neck.

She looks thunderstruck at my audacity.

- Oz...that could get you *arrested*, you know.

- Yes, I know. But I have a plan. Kelly will contact Linda Dawson on the auspices that the minutes filed for TALISMAN don't match up with those that were taken and that there are omissions. She won't be able to draw the filed copies because once lodged they are tied down, so she will have to release her own files.
- She'll never give them to *you* without clearance...and 'Bob Kelly' doesn't have anything. I doubt he even has a badge or a bucket to piss in.
- He doesn't need to. He's going to ask her to transfer the files to someone who *does* have clearance so they can be compared with the recollection of those at the meetings.

Madge doesn't twig.

- Who on earth would ever do anything that...*oh wait*....you have to be *joking*...
- HMG is at stake here, Madge. What was your phrase? *We cannot let a bit of bureaucratic nonsense stand in our way, can we?*
- That's not the point. All this *bureaucratic nonsense* is there to protect sensitive information from leakage. I am just not going to do it. It's dishonest. And I'd be crucified.
- Why? You mean sacked?
- Of course!
- And for what reason? Do you think that will ever come out?
- It fills me with no great amount of unalloyed joy to know that I might be in line for a mysterious heart attack, Austin. I won't do it. It's unethical and dishonest.
- No it's not. It's for a greater good. Besides, I have no idea who I can trust round here anymore. You might be 'it'. And as for 'ethics and honesty', I think you have a bit to learn about your trade, Madge.
- *No*, and that is my final answer. And your time is up. I have to get to the Reid Committee now where we are to decide upon how to fund X+Y in public expenditure from either X or Y but not both. Slightly more pressing on my mind than this stuff ever will be.
- Think about what I said, Madge.
- *No*, and that is my final answer. And think on this, Austin..

She stands up and takes her bag.

- ...think on this. What if Barker just made it all up?
- If he did Madge then why are we running circles after this thing?
- Because we are never sure of anything, Austin. Go home to Cory. One day this will all pass. And my final answer is *no, no, no*.

I take this as a yes.

With the slightest part of Madge's help I get the number for CS-1, which is the department where Linda Dawson is located. Three phone calls don't find her. Worrying. Hope she hasn't suddenly gone off sick or cried wolf or – worse - gone running to someone to find out about who *Bob Kelly from Internal Audits* actually is. I get put through to her supervisor who assures me that she is *somewhere about* but she knows not where. Damn. I want to strike while the iron is hot. I need those minutes. For some reason I think that I owe it to Brian Barker, yet I also remember his whining to me about his dreary father and his own bad choices in life and how he wants to blame anyone but himself for all the misery he's had to endure, like he was conducting a piss-poor defence of his own actions in advance of his trial. I'd pay money to watch that one go down in front of a jury. *Look at the meagre houses I have and the life I have been leading, and think about what I might have been otherwise. Oh woe.* I know I have sympathy for him and the way he has been treated, but dammit he doesn't do himself any type of favour at all.

Some damned fine stories though.

I meet with Max later on, presumably at Madge's behest. He seems amazed to find I am up and about, even odd that I am functioning. The canteen where we make the encounter is busy, some kind of elevenses rush that goes on round here, with cardboard coffee cups, muffins and biscuits compensating for the slump that seems to affect everyone in the building.

- She told me you were here. I didn't expect to see you for a while.

We shake hands with unexpected warmth.

- I owe you.
- You do. How is Cory?
- She's fine. She's safely harboured elsewhere and we're keeping a lid on this until all the nonsense blows over.

Max guides me aside in the corridor.

- Well as long as she is biding well then we've *less* to worry about.
- Thank you.
- Unlike Her Ladyship – she has the Reid mob to worry about, getting more money than sense out of people with neither in abundance.
- Max...what happened to Bryant?

Max obviously thinks the question is odd. He stares at me quizzically.

- Concerned?
- Interested. What happened to him?

- He's still listed as a horrible and is currently incarcerated. He gave the wrong answers to the right questions in our little pop quiz and failed the examination. We have him under house arrest in the north waiting for a decision on what to do with him. In the meantime we are keeping him sedated and quiet while we wait about his disposal, and that is pending Jessop's of course.
- Jesus Max....this is like...
- ...Russia in the 1950s? It is. Then again, what else could have run that place then?
- I don't think he's an evil man, Max.
- Neither do I. But neither do I think he is a *good* one. And we need lots of good ones to persuade the others that being good is a worthwhile thing, you know?
- You'll broadcast this?
- Oh in time – maybe after we're all past caring or not even here. We work in bigger cycles than just elections, you know. We're all over the map.
- I'll thank you to remind me of that sometime, Max. Add that to the tally.
- Ah...yes...talking of that...the other favour I did you...

Oh...

- Yes. I remember.
- Do you? I seem to have done you a few recently!
- Well, I know...I assume you mean the vehicle?
- Yes, the vehicle. We managed to lose it. We had it crushed at a yard about ten miles away; far enough to lose the trail but close enough to get it tarped and off the plot with all speed...
- Thanks, Max...
- ...but this comes at a price.

Uh oh.

- What would that be?
- My guys went over the van for obvious signs and found the false details on it, but of course there was the *biology* all over it.
- Yes.

He pauses some.

- You said you had to speak to Margaret first, then you'd tell me. You've spoken to her...so tell me.

I admit to myself that the promise had slipped my mind a bit.

- It's tricky. I couldn't bring it up with her because I needed to clear up some other issues that were...*more pressing*...
- More pressing? What could be more pressing than an abandoned van in your quiet neck of the woods, covered in blood.
- I think the van was...um...rural. You said so yourself. It might have been animal blood for all I know.
- So you know about it?
- In a manner of speaking...look, this is sensitive stuff.
- Shall I quote you back my clearances? I think you'll find they are the envy of these halls...
- Max, I'm not questioning you. It's just that I have a lot to deal with and a lot is at stake. I mean, a *lot*...
- You know we searched the van's interior quite thoroughly?

His tone has changed. Almost as though he was carrying out another conversation elsewhere.

- Yes, I assumed you might.
- Yes. Well we found a charming little memento inside the van by the driver's door down on the floor.
- Oh? What would that be?
- Come with me...

Max leads me along a brisk corridor, passed by people who occasionally nod at him and who – disconcertingly – do the same to me. I do my best to reciprocate and let him take me down to a swing door behind which there are downward wooden steps which lead us into a store. Max fishes keys from his pocket and opens a cabinet. Rifles the content. Finds a plastic bag. Reads the label. Nods. Takes it out and hands it to me. The labelling is all but meaningless.

- Have a close look.

The bag is clear, self-sealing and seems to be double thickness. Inside is a stiff, sharp edged rounded dark object, almost like a coconut shell fragment. I turn the bag over, puzzled. Dark coloured, some lengthy matted mass of fibres on it too...yellowish, maybe straw coloured...

I drop the bag with a shudder and feel my stomach heave without any prompting.

- It seems you and it are *old friends*.

I say nothing. I can only look at it and see those eyes that were once attached to it, mesmerising me. And thinking that *I did that to her*.

- You got anything to say?

I try to look away, but I cannot. It is a focus of grief and guilt.

- Not really. The van is crushed?
- To shavings, then we had it conveniently dropped from a boat.
- All gone?
- All, bar this. And the numbers unhelpfully stamped on the chassis which led to a farm near a hill in Oakhampton.

I feel my knees weaken a little. Then a lot. The cabinet is close to me and has to keep me upright.

- You've been there?
- Well *I* haven't if that's what you mean, but other people I know have.
- Oh Christ.

I lean against the wall and wonder at what I have done. I try not to focus on the detail, but the detail focusses on me.

- Do you know who she was?
- Her name was Cally.

Right away I know I should never have said that. But it wasn't me talking.

- Cally Hume. A young, idealistic woman who was wanted all over the continent for politically motivated arsons, robberies, kidnapping (it's said) and is a prime suspect for the murder of a Belgian banker they roused and regrettably panicked about in Rome.
- She is?
- She was. So how come you have a fair piece of her skull and a whole clot of her brain and blood over the inside window and door pocket of a van you seemed to know something about? And before you answer anything *wise* remember we are on the same side and we are seeking the same resolution to the same issue.

The words are hard to form in my head let alone my mouth. I can see Max but I cannot read his thoughts. Even his face has that stern look his severe race can adopt when they are unsure of an ambiguous situation. Or did I just imagine that?

I open my mouth to say one thing, but another comes out.

- What did you find in the farmhouse?
- An interesting question, Austin. What do you *think* we found there?

At this point – by some mechanism I don't know and cannot explain – I start to talk without necessarily knowing where I am heading. I sit back and watch myself.

- I don't know. I haven't been there.

- Are you sure about that?
- Of course I am. I know where I have *been* Max...goddam it, is this some kind of set up happening to me?
- Easy, Austin. Remember what I said about sides.
- I'm trying to. I just find it difficult sometimes when I hear you lead me on like that.
- Well we didn't find much because we were the second on the scene by some time. The story was widely reported, but there has been little information coming forward from anyone.
- What do you mean?
- We were beat to the scene by the fire brigade. By some days. We didn't have to go at all because the place had been wiped out by a fire the day before you call us in to clean the house, which is the day after the van arrived in your village. Coincidence? Seems a bit thick to me. And the fact that the van is coated with the last thoughts of a political agitator – *whose name you know* - seems to me to be just too much of a stretch, especially when you know her father was George Hume who was of course *stonking* good mates with Ronald Jessop, the son of the man at the centre of so much angst right now. So Austin. How about coming up with a better story?

I'm trying to take it in, but it's not working.

- George who?
- Hume. George Hume. One of our leading troublemakers whose intel file I might show you if we have a spare *week* or so. My first question to you, though: how did you just know Cally's name?
- I can't tell you that.
- Austin...this may all have to come out.
- No, you listen. Tell me about the farmhouse.
- What about it?
- What did you find?
- Nothing. I haven't been there. No one from this place *has*. A fire cut through the place the day the van turned up *chez Austin* and destroyed everything there. The place was so remote it took ages for anyone to raise the alarm by the smoke and by the time they got to it the place was gutted.
- Was anyone hurt in the fire?

Max raises his eyebrows.

- I find it odd that this story has slipped under your attention.

I was scanning for murders...not a fire. *Stupid stupid stupid.*

- How can I expect to know anything about a place I've never been to, Max?
- They found three bodies there. Two men inside and this Cally girl too. They are pretty sure that one of the men inside is George Hume, but so far they haven't identified the other.
- Wait...*three* bodies? All *inside*?
- Yes, three. Inside. Is that a surprise to you?
- No...
- It sounded like it.
- It's *not*.

Max pauses.

- We *think* all the bodies had gunshot wounds of some time, but it's hard to say because of the extent of the fire – they tell me it was *incendiary*. The others were inside, one of them tied up. It sounds like an execution and a stupid way of covering it up.
- It does.
- The fire was started with what looks like some kind of vociferous explosive accelerant in the kitchen area, but the damage is such that they cannot be sure.
- So...what's the story?
- Well I was hoping you might tell me. You see, we have an outpost of troublemakers, all of whom get shot, burned and then their van turns up near yours. We have several questions. One of them is 'why yours?' Another is 'what do you know about the deaths and the fire?' Another is 'how you know Cally's name?' Another yet is '*what in the fuck are you playing at, Austin?*'

I take a deep breath. I pause. It's not for drama, it's because I don't know where this is all about to veer off. And then I hear myself say this:

- That day someone knocks on my door. I've never seen her before. In her forties, a sort of matronly look about her – quite heavy. Longish hair, corkscrew curls, dirty clothes. She asks for me by name. I confirm this and she looks relieved. Then she says 'the code is red' and then something about she had to dispose of two people for me. I thought she was rambling and would have got rid of her except for the 'code is red' business. Of course I listened to her, no matter how mad she seemed. I asked who she had disposed of, and she said Cally and her father. I say I don't know them, she says that I do. Then she leaves me a card with her number on it and says that she will return in an hour with information for me. Then she makes off.

Max just stares at me. He doesn't say a word.

- *That's it?*
- Yes.
- Austin...this is *just absurd*,
- Why?
- Why didn't you say anything to anyone?

Think fast.

- I have no idea whose side she is on...but she's obviously on someone's.
- Did she leave a name? What about this card? Do you still have it?
- Are you kidding? And implicate me with a crazy woman who is making a confession to murder for me, *and* using crazy code language? No way.
- Yes...that's another point. She called her 'Cally'?
- Yes.
- These people only use code names. Cally was known as 'Yellowdog', her father was 'The Colonel'. Why did she call her 'Cally'?
- I have no idea.
- And why did she come to you?
- I don't know.

It feels so thin. Max knows it.

- How did she know where you live?
- Well the guy your men cleaned up found me. How hard can it be?

Max pauses and stares.

- This is just *not believable*, Austin.
- It's what happened.
- So what happened when she came back?
- She didn't. Now could she not have killed them all in the farmhouse, torched the place then driven to mine to tell me she had done it?
- Yes, but we would want to know why, not to mention who she actually is.
- You've no idea at all?
- Their vigilante army numbered several thousand. She might have been anyone. She also has to be assumed to be at large and is perhaps responsible for two or maybe three murders and arson. The police will have to be told. They will want

a statement and for you to look at photographs. And probably have a damned good idea why you never came forward.

- How was I to link her to the farmhouse? I never even *knew* about any farm house.

That was *close*.

- When people turn up at your door to confess to murder then what do you do about it usually? Congratulate them?
- Maybe you're forgetting the sort of world we inhabit, Max. This shit happens a lot more often than it might for real people.

Max shakes his head.

- The police are involved, of course. We can stall them to a degree but not indefinitely. Even the likes of *us* cannot do this kind of thing and walk away from it. Now if the person who had actually *done* this had told us about it then it might have been able to avoid the worst of it. A hideous domestic accident. A tragic argument. Guns? All over farmhouses. Fire? God alone knows what they have in their kitchens. But now...too late.
- Why would she call you? More to the point, *how*?
- *Austin, I'm not really amused by the way you treat me like a moron.*

He hissed the words at me. Max is clearly furious. I think a little. Alter tack.

- What do the police have on this?
- Not much, as I understand it. Of course we cannot get involved *now* as it's too late and it would start to implicate us completely. The fire brigade make a report on what they think it was. If they even sniff at foul play then it will mean a triple murder enquiry. Not good.
- How have they identified Cally?

He nods towards the hideous skull fragment in the bag.

- They haven't – we picked *that* out of the van which we got at yours and got a DNA match on *known horribles* with it. The rest is our supposition.
- Are you *sure* they found burned bodies inside?
- Yes, of course.
- All three of them?
- Yes, all three of them. Why do you ask?
- Nothing...no reason. How can you tell they were shot and not just burned to death?
- Too many questions, Hafner.

- I'm curious.

Three bodies? A fire? Who was there after me? What were they trying to hide? Am I being protected by someone for some reason? Or do our wishes simply coincide?

- Austin, man to man, straight up, no pretence and it will go no further; did you have anything to do with this?

I look Max in the eyes. He means it. I buckle to the truth.

- No, I didn't.

He holds my stare.

- Sure about that?
- Positive.

He measures me.

- Right...then we'll work on that basis. Let it slide.

Coffee in canteen. Pretty dismal. Max is affable. We are joined by another man who is introduced to me as Collins. He doesn't say much but makes small talk with Max about the jobs they share. I sit on the side and listen, getting lost in the haze of the world I find myself in.

Why am I not panicking more about this?

- I hear you made touchdown with the fat man.

Collins' voice jars me.

- I'm sorry?
- The Barking Man. I hear you went out on a mission to speak to him. Can't ask too much, but I never cared for him. He talks a lot and thinks a lot too. He's a really creepy fish. *Those who know and those who would know, you know?*

I smile at him. Weird haircut, ears too big, tragically fitting off the peg suit with dark pinstripes and pink tie on a button down shirt. His leather-upper shoes haven't seen polish in the last month at least, not unlike the man himself.

- If you say so. I thought he was talkative.
- What was he talking about?
- Oh..this and that.
- We're all Charterhouse here, Austin.

Yeah, thanks for the assurance, Max.

- I know, but it was pretty much off-the-record stuff. Lots to think about. He seems pretty down, though?
- Still drinking like a pike?
- He likes his gin, certainly.
- Brian had an *outstanding* wine cellar once; it was really the sort of thing you could explore for ages until you realised that he had you there for other reasons.

Max smiles at Collins' words, as if he knew about it.

- Like what?
- Oh, him and sexual fancies.
- Well June seemed perfectly nice.
- She's *the beard*. He's a raving queen and quite able to be blackmailed, turned and anything else you mention.
- So why was his clearance as high as it was?

I feel Max kick me lightly under the table. A Charterhouse Kick, of course.

- Brian Barker enjoyed many benefits, says Max. – Most of them deserved. I don't envy his position now, but I think he's paid a high price for years of loyal service.
- He's a weirdo, Ferlow. You know the rumours about him and...stuff. There was that other feeble creep...whassisname...Butler?
- What, Ralph Butler?
- Yeah...wasn't he a bit *lambda* too?

Max looks puzzled.

- Not that I ever knew.

Mutterings until...

- Hello you people, what's going on?

Max stands up and pulls up a chair for the latest visitor to our table. Mid-thirties woman, looks far better than most around here, dressing down to dress up, in a manner of speaking. Piercing brown eyes and deep features. Black hair. Lots of black hair. Short fingernails, only noticeable by the red polish that matches her lipstick which is noticeable against the white of her skin. She is making a decided effort for someone, despite the cloud of piercing Opium wafting around her.

- Hi, Phillipa...haven't seen you here in a while.

Max greets her warmly. Her name rings a bell. Why?

- Hello Phillipa, just shooting the breeze here.

- So it seems. I've got half an hour before I meet up with Dizzy about the whole business of repacking the Roberts Report. Some people so need an editor, you know. They don't half drag it over ten when three would do.

Collins groans.

- Is that crap really *still* going on?
- It is Nick, yes. And it's boring me to tears. Sidlow wants it all done in the same flashy style he saw in a BMW brochure once. Says much about his imagination.
- We can cope.
- Yes... *mutatis mutandis*.
- What about Jenny?
- She's no use. I asked her to come up with something cleverer than that but her strong point is design, not standing up to Sidlow.

Max laughs.

- Have you met Austin, Phillipa? He's from Margaret's office.

She extends a hand and I shake it.

- Austin Hafner.
- Phillipa Kelly...I think we met at the Flanagan Enquiry? You remember? I think you were sitting next to Jim Bryson for most of the duration. You looked bored silly.

Face a blank. It shows.

- Really, don't be offended but I meet that many people all the time and it gets a bit much for you to remember sometimes. I can barely remember Flanagan, let alone who was there. Your memory is impressive.

I expect another kick from Max.

- That's fine. How is Margaret these days? I miss the days when we both lived in Islington. We used to travel in together by the tube until she ascended to the ranks and found herself a *driver*.
- She's well, thanks. Keeping me busy anyway.

Phillipa Kelly. The person whose name and life I screwed up at the coffee shop. Her and the girl from *The Department of Downstairs*. Oops.

- Say, have any of you heard about David Bryant?
- He's in some sort of trouble, I think. Never liked him much either.
- He'll live, says Max.
- What happened to him?

Max turns to Phillipa a little conspiratorially.

- He flapped his mouth about too many things to be comfortable and he was removed from office for a while.
- I'm shocked.
- Don't be, says Collins, - he had a mouth *this wide* and tried to use it to impress the women.
- There were always rumours about him.
- There were?
- Yes, like that business about Susan Middlemass. They never got to the bottom of that one, did they? All I know is that Dilly had to cancel the flights and get him back before she went up the wall. Seemingly she was *hysterical* about it.
- Susan was a bit hysterical about a lot of things, Pippa.
- Nick...*please*, okay?
- Sorry. But she was. I don't think he was her first allegation, exactly. She made a business out of...
- Why him though? I mean, if you're going to make up stuff about someone make it someone at least a tenth of the way towards being personable. Bryant was a ball of slime and I'm not in the least surprised by any of this has happened to him.

I listen quietly. *You ought to hear what I said about you.*

Conversation ebbs.

- Anyone got Reid on today?
- I do, just after two. Got some searching stuff to hit a couple of small-timers with and then there is the *beheadings* to do. Our resident Turks.
- Does Foggy still hate them as much as he did?
- Oh more than ever. He's got a major thing about them ever since he got taken to the BAFTAs by the pair of them. As if things weren't bad enough we have these table-hoppers to think about.

Phillipa looks puzzled.

- I assume that '*taken to the BAFTAs*' is some sort of metaphor?

Max and Collins explode in laughter and Phillipa looks to me to see if I know what they are laughing at. Search me, I just sit here and listen to this. I don't know what *any* of this means.

- It's a metaphor alright. Like most of Foggy's existence is a metaphor.

- I never follow you boys and your talk, you know. I hear stuff and I never know *what* it means.
- Just joshing, Phillipa. But Foggy doesn't half make it hard for some of you, you know.
- Is it true about him being drunk at Lords that time when they all had their day out?
- And ever. He was *wankered*. But at least he never tried to start a fight with anyone in the toilets.

Collins sharply sucks air through his teeth and raises his eyebrows.

- Oh yesssss...*that* little business. My bad one.

Communal laughter. I smile and join in some – facially at least.

- Did Matty ever leave him?
- Oh *several* times. She's still there now, preparing for the next time.
- God almighty, we ought to make her a presentation or something. Get something engraved.

Laughter.

- So are the rumours about you true, then Pippa?
- Nick..I thought I *told* you...
- Oh come on, it's all round the estate by now.

Phillipa's face is red. *Bright* red. Speaks a lot. I feel pity for her almost immediately.

- I sooner hope it is *not*.
- What's all this?
- Ignore it; Nick's just trying to be a tosser again.
- As usual...Nick, *try* and rein it in, will you?
- Sorry...just thought it opportune to ask.
- I'm not going to give you or anyone else the satisfaction of an answer.

At this point I chip in.

- Well said. Nick you really ought to leave well alone, you know.
- Oh come on, it's rife right now, and what's rife is fair old sport don't you think?
- Not at all, and I don't think you ought to either. She's no one's *sport*, let alone yours.
- Well said over there.

- Oh come on, it's not like we're not close enough for a bit of *banter* you know...

I turn to Phillipa.

- Do you think it's just banter?

She looks at Collins and answer my question.

- I surely do not.
- In which case, *Nick*...keep your face shut.
- Now hang on...I don't care much about my friend's life, but I do care about being made to look like a dick...
- In which case you ought to speak less. *Much* less.

Nick flares.

- Listen, you...you might have her ladyship's magic promise hanging over you protecting you from all that is evil but it won't stop me from saying it how it is.
- Nick, what are you trying to tell me here?

Phillipa rounds on him too.

- Yes Nick, what do you mean by any of this stuff?

Max slaps his hands on his knees.

- Time for us to go, I think.

I look to him.

- It is?
- Not you and me...Nick and me. I think he's doing enough *bantering* for a day.

Nick stands up, smiles thinly to Phillipa and scowls at me. Max winks to me and makes a sign as if to say 'later...' and ushers Collins away elsewhere in a tearing hurry, or so it seems. Max smiles and says words I cannot hear to Collins, ushering him through the people congregating around the instant coffee machine, wondering why they all taste the same, making an illusion of choice.

- Sorry to see him go...

She smiles at my words.

- He's a friend, but a dick. He sees people as his personal property and has absolute run of them. I cannot imagine where or how he gets off. I cannot *stand* his too-close-for-comfort, overbearing attitude.
- It's a matter of control, Phillipa.
- It's a matter of him being a dick, really...

- You know what this place is like for gossip.

She rounds on *me* now for that one.

- Oh is it like that? And what have *you* heard about me?
- I was talking in the abstract sense. I don't listen to gossip really. I find it all pretty uninteresting.
- If only that were true for more people. Sometimes you get the idea that this is all that carries them. Honestly, they are just such *fuckwits* at times. And he is one of the most abject sufferers of fuckwittery.
- Well...let it drift. He's a lonely type.
- That's more than obvious. The hucksters and sharps round here I can take, but not this. Anyway...we've met before?

We have?

- I think so. I work for Hayes-Williamson Incorporated.

Her features cloud a little. Seems Madge isn't all things to all people.

- Yes. How is the old nag doing?

Good grief. She spoke of Islington like it was Green Gables a few seconds ago.

- Um...she's doing okay. You don't seem to be her biggest fan.
- She's one person round here that I cordially dislike. You'd be hard pushed to throw a rock in here and hit someone that disagrees with me. Some people view ambition as a means to an end, not as an end in itself.
- Odd, you're not the first person to have pointed this out to me.
- You've worked for her for a while.
- Yes, some years now. I honestly never noticed that she was like that.
- It sounds like you are the proverbial *frog in hot water* if that's the case. Archie cannot *abide* her and was never happy when he was shuffled upstairs to Health; he got to sit next to her in Cabinet. He said that his coronary was the best thing that ever happened to him.
- That's a bit extreme.
- Try having to be briefed by her staff sometime; that slithering reptile Bryant makes me want to throw up sometimes.
- Ah...yes.
- I guess you know him quite well if you're working with her office.
- I know him well enough. Though it seems you never really know anyone in here.

- They said he was selling stuff on...you know, like secrets or something.
- He was?
- So the story goes.

Send three and fourpence...we're going to a dance.

- He must have been hard up. That sort of risk is just beyond all belief, don't you think?
- Well you know all about the last time that anything like that happened. Blood on the carpets and the press just about killed them. If it wasn't for the conviction of Boyle and Hardcastle the entire pack of cards might have gone you-know-where.
- Well yes...exactly. So why exactly does Margaret hold such a place in your affections? Is it just her ambitious streak?

Phillipa looks around and moves a little closer to me. Opium is a bit sickening really. Nice stockings though, but a bit on the obvious side of *look who's coming this way*.

- You know all about the business with Unman and Jessop?

That name again.

- Jessop yes, Unman...no.
- Peter Unman. He was her batman for a while and carried her bag when she was still working under Mike Shore before the big day arrived. You know Mike?
- Only vaguely...
- Peter and Margaret were pretty much rumoured to be an item back then and there was a shedload of chat about them being much closer than they ought to have been given their professional status.
- Oh I see.
- Mike disliked Peter – we reckon it was jealousy, not all of it professional – and so he made some moves towards what looked awful like setting him up for a substantial fall.

I like the way she says 'we' as if there has been a committee meeting about this. She pauses for effect then moves on. She has told this story before obviously, so she's not as discreet or as *inclusively confidential* as she wants me to think. She's a show-off. An opportunist. Another *trellis-climber*, maybe, looking to choke off the bigger weeds above her.

- Turns out that *someone* interfered with his bags and caused him to lose some diplomatic papers of some kind, but they also managed to sneak in a few documents that neither he nor Margaret should even have known about.
- Really? How odd. Why go to that extreme?
- For credibility I think. Sorry...I've forgotten your name...

- Austin.

That jarred. She remembered me from some vague committee years ago...now she doesn't know my name. This girl is a fake.

- It's for credibility, Austin. It would fit in with the pattern of her ambitions and with him pretty much slavishly following her over the edge. He was suspended with moves made to fire him and she was reprimanded and dropped down to a junior's position in Transport. She also threatened to resign if the action was carried through, but there was also the probable spectre of her blowing the story about the plant, so they quietly forgot about this and sent Peter onto other duties. Meanwhile, Margaret gets her foot in the door at Transport, comes up with the whole scheme that supposedly spawned the Chapman issue and made a name for herself.
- What happened to Peter?
- Well...he gets a letter at home addressed to his wife. She opens it and the whole subject is *brought out*.
- Which?
- Oh keep up! The business about him and Margaret.
- But I thought you said it was just rumour?
- Oh rumour...scuttlebutt, whatever...but it was certainly a story to be answered.
- Well...maybe. But not like that, surely...
- How else?
- So someone torpedoed his marriage for what end?
- To force his hand. In the end she left him, but for other reasons...but that side of it worked anyway.
- This all sounds a bit dubious...I mean, it sounds like Margaret wasn't doing much wrong and that whatever her relationship with Peter might have been it was no one's business but theirs and yet people want to poison them because she has character traits they dislike. All a bit terrible.
- Oh you're *such* a Madgeman you know

I smile at the name. I think part of the reason people speak to me so freely is because I cannot speak to them without trapping myself in corridors of guesswork and error, so I open it up to them and let them do the talking. I just steer around the rest as best I can.

- I'm not, it just sounds dubious bordering on the illegal. Certainly unethical.
- It was a means.
- Well not much. I mean Peter was now a free man to do as he liked and Margaret hasn't exactly been slowed down by any of this.

- She's still a very unpopular figure. The DPM loathes her, and by extension of will so does his entire office. If I was going to pick an enemy I'd pick a less formidable one.
- Yes, but no one chooses their adversaries. Neither do they always choose who they happen to fall for. Yet you *do* choose to plant incriminating papers on people and send their wives toxic letters about stuff that might never have happened.
- You never saw them in Blackpool.
- Well what of it?
- Well it was after the event, and she was on thin ice. He shows up and it looked like things were kicking off again. AD and his mates made some noise about it to Mike and he went to the chair and asked him what could be done, particularly given Margaret's latest speech about '*public decency in office*'. Mike thought about it and gave her the full regulation speech.
- About what?
- Oh you know. The usual. Anyway, at that point Jessop enters the story. The long and short of it was that he alibied Peter for Margaret's night of passion saying that he stayed with him and his wife in his flat in the town.
- Jessop lives in Blackpool?
- You have memory issues, Austin? He was the Honourable Member for Fleetwood.
- Ah yes....go on then.
- Well that puts Mike on a spot and he immediately smells a rat. AD gets pulled up...
- AD?
- Adrian Duncan. He gets pulled up and he demands the source from him. AD says that he saw it along with the others. Then Margaret gets hauled in and she denied the whole thing point blank. Given Jessop's story – and remember, he was still a force back then – the chair suspended AD and Mike from the Party and then accepted their resignations the next week. Jessop was lying of course and everyone knew it, but no one had the balls to say anything about it.
- What happened to Peter?
- Oh he went off to work in the City and Margaret of course married Tim Goodwin – which we all found strange as Tim was seemingly queer at University – so in the end I suppose it got to them, but at a hell of a price. And of course there are rumours that the relationship persists.
- I suppose it also explains why Margaret is soft on Jessop, even yet.

- Well...yes. To be fair to Jessop he was an honourable man trying to protect two friends. She owed him an awful lot for doing that. It's sad the way he ended up, though. I feel sorry for his wife – she's disabled, you know.
- Yes, so I believe.
- You've never met her?
- No, I don't think so.
- I met her the year after in Brighton at the conference. Strange woman. Always looked kind of sad, even when she was laughing. She was obviously a looker in her day, though. Pity about what happened to her.
- What *did* happen to her?
- She was hit by a police car on Fenchurch Street; she lost both her legs.

A light bulb has just started to glimmer in my mind, but I'm not entirely sure why. Phillipa seems to have just said something to me that is of significance, but I am damned if I can place why...

- How long ago?
- Oh about ten years ago? Jessop was still in the shadow cabinet at the time. It was all over the news, mostly though because of the police involvement which was the Daily Mail's *bête noir* at the time.
- How do you mean?
- They had a downer on the police being a bit gung-ho in chases and whatever so they took a dim view on all of that. Well of course when someone of their own got taken out by one of them, well that was like *gold dust* to them, so they ran it all a while. The fact that he was shadow on law made it all the...juicier.
- What happened to the cops?
- They kept their jobs. Seemingly the CCTV exonerated them and no trial was brought. Another stink was caused over all that.
- Interesting.
- I thought you might have known this.
- To some extent, but not the detail. And you're a mine of detail, Phillipa.

She smiles at me and brushes stray hair from her face. She might be better looking if she just smiled a little more. Maybe toning down the fragrance would be an advantage to her too. Now she crosses her legs. She must be looking for a favour.

- I'm actually thinking of moving to press after this term. Seems like a radical change of position but some people say it might suit me. I dunno. It might be a way out and up. I'm sick of waiting the table, if you know what I mean.

- Well...we all have to wait to see what turns up. I had to wait around two years for this come to me.
- Where were you before?

Shit. *Say too much, answer too much.*

- Um...I was in Health for a while, just on the fringes.

As I say that I regret it.

- Oh do you know Clive Stockwell? He was up in the *bean counting section* there.
- No, I can't say I do...I didn't work down here, you see.
- Oh...you were up in the Tower? Well. That's pretty fringe after all. What did you do there?
- I was writing briefs for seniors, mostly. Just translating from one form of unintelligible drivel into another, as if either version makes the least amount of sense to anyone. Almost the same thing I am doing right now, just with different terminology and different bosses. All our jobs are interchangeable.

She smiles in recognition. Legs still crossed, still moving phantom hair from her face.

- That's what press might be like as well, I suppose.
- I suppose.

She seems to make a move *towards* now. Maybe my interview technique needs revision.

- You ever hear of any openings in your line? I mean within MHW's less-than-immediate orbit?
- Not always, but sometimes yes. You know we have press openings here too, or sometimes speech advisors, which might be a way into the outer realms of press.
- Well...how can I *gain an advantage* over anyone else who might be applying for the same position? I mean in terms of experience or ability or..well...*anything*.

This is quite an angle she is playing, for someone who didn't know me less than an hour ago. She's not making a pass; just playing a middle-aged man at a game she usually wins.

- I'm not sure I follow you.

She repositions herself in her seat, subtly moving closer to me, keeping the conspiratorial and moving into the decidedly familiar at the same time.

- Well...if I was in a pool with about say ten others, what would make me *stand out from the others*?
- Um...your ability to interview well? Selling yourself is important, as in that field you're trying to sell something that oftentimes no one wants to buy.

She seems to be trying another less oblique tack.

- Yes, but we can all do that. I mean what would gain me an *unmistakeable advantage* over the others?

I lean away from her, making a point of showing her.

- I'm not sure, really. Sadly, the man who knew most about that is a bit..out of it right now.
- Oh...you mean Jessop?
- No, I mean Bryant.

She is deflated, her posture replying in kind. I feel relieved.

- I'd sooner not bother with him. I'm just hoping that press suits me, that's all. I think it might.
- I'll bet it will. Well...if I can be any *constructive* help to you, let me know.
- I will, thank you. Oh..look who is here...

Three women approach and sit by us. They chatter greetings to Phillipa which I take to be a grateful sign I ought to leave. Maybe I have misjudged her after all this. But. *Something* is still nagging at me, though. *Something* deep and awful. It needs a name. It needs a place. I have neither. I must talk to Barker. A thought pulls annoyingly at the corner of my mind.

I wander back through the people and return to the offices upstairs where I find a suitable telephone, set apart from the others and located in a quiet area away from anyone who might hear. I dial a number I have dialled a few times before and grab a notepad from the desktop. No idea whose desk this actually is, but this ought not to take long. Ringing. I look out the window. The rain insolently spits back at me.

- P15?
- Oh...good afternoon. Can I speak to Linda please?
- Linda speaking.

I try to hide my elation at this. Voice even and calm.

- Linda, hello...this is Bob Kelly. I work in Internal Audits; we spoke a few days ago about a small matter of integrity?

I give her a second or two to process the information. I can hear her jiggling through her memory for that name. The event. The words.

- Oh! Yes! You were interested in back records?
- Yes, the TALISMAN issue after you took over from June Barker. You minuted four or five wash-up meetings.

- Yes...sorry I was trying to remember who you were! Yes, of course. Remind me what the conversation was about?
- Some of the minutes went astray – you helpfully passed me June Barker’s number.
- Oh yes...did you speak to her?
- Yes, I did.
- How is she doing?
- She seems fine – understandably maybe a bit strung out, but she seems fine.
- Oh *dear*. I hope she isn’t suffering.
- I think it’s the uncertainty of the situation that is getting to her.
- I can imagine. Poor June.

She sounds sincere.

- Linda, one thing – we need to get your versions of the minutes, as opposed to the versions we have filed here; you know...for comparisons.

Slight pause.

- Well...these are sensitive minutes and I couldn’t pass them onto you without some written clearance from the overseeing committee.

Overseeing committee? I write that down and circle it twice.

- I know, but that’s OK. To speed things up you can send them on to someone suitably cleared, yes?
- Well...yes, I suppose...
- Mrs Hayes-Williamson has agreed to this. Do you both share the same secure file drop?
- Yes...we do, but...does she know about this?
- She does. She has agreed to it.
- Oh...I see.
- Can you drop them to her?
- All of them?
- Yes, all of them,. She can review and react as needed, if needed.
- Well...okay then. Now?
- If you could, yes.
- Give me a second.

I can hear her clacking on her keyboard, but I can sense her doubts over this. My doubts about hers are confirmed almost immediately.

- Mr Kelly?
- Yes, Linda?
- Can I call you back? I really ought to check this with my seniors.

Play it calm.

- Yes, of course. I'm on 6033 upstairs.
- Give me five minutes.

I give her fifteen minutes. I sit in an empty office and listen to the traffic moving by far beyond the windows, outside in the real world where none of this stuff as much as matters.

Five minutes later than that the phone goes off in my pocket, startling me. Unknown caller. I fear the worst. Fumble with the keys.

- Hello?
- Hello, Mr Hafner?
- Yes?
- This is Ursula from Admin Three – Mrs Hayes-Williamson said I might get you on this number urgently?

Good Lord...things move fast sometimes. I speak to the pause, redundantly.

- Yes, this is me.
- She has asked me to forward some documents to you. I have left them in the admin tray under your name. She asked me to print them and make sure you receive them. She put them in a form three and has left them up here. She said they were urgent and were *eyes only*.

I try to avoid shouting out with triumph.

- I'll be right there.

After I put the phone down I realise that I have no idea where Admin Three actually *is*. Something to address first though. Clearly Linda took the bait and her seniors are not that interested either.

On cue, 6033 rings.

- Hello?
- Mr Kelly? Linda here – the documents have been sent to Mrs Hayes-Williamson's drop. We called her to confirm.

- Great – thank you. That lets me make a bit of progress anyway. However, I haven't *entirely* addressed the issue I spoke with you about earlier.
- Oh?

Got her interest now.

- No, sadly. We ought to meet – this isn't something that I really want to discuss on the telephone. You cannot be too careful with the *elevation issue*.
- No, I'm sure.
- Have you had your lunch break yet?
- No, I'm on late break today.
- What time is that set for?
- Two o'clock.

I look at my watch. Forty five minutes away.

- That will be fine. We can meet out of the office if you prefer – maybe more discreet.
- Well I usually go with two others down to the sandwich shop at the foot of the road. Better coffee, and there are less people there you might recognise. Makes it feel like you're getting away someplace.

Fewer not less. Says a bit about her. Filed.

- How about we meet in O'Briens on the other side of the road. We can sit in there, try and remain discreet and talk about what we need to talk about.
- Alright. Should I bring anything?
- No, not now. We just need to clear a few things up first.
- Okay. Two o'clock at O'Briens.
- I'll be there ahead of you. I'll sit at the table in the window.
- See you then.

She hangs up. I sit and think a bit then stand up from the desk and wander past a couple of incurious administrative assistants and back to the corridor. Down stairs, past the rows of closed doors to the meetings rooms and into the open atrium where the coffee lounge is once again. I search in the faces for the youngest and most open there is. And there she is. Maybe eighteen, quite plain, trying to avoid being seen by anyone. She'll do. I make a beeline for her and address her politely but firmly.

- Excuse me? Can you help? I'm looking for Admin Three.

She seems a bit startled, perhaps at the idea of being spoken to directly. Maybe I am making too much of a stereotype.

- First floor, I think. Are you new here?

I smile at her with a sheepish shrug I hope passes for humility.

- Yes, from a new department. I'm still finding my way around.
- Literally and figuratively, I suppose? It took me a while too. What department?
- Internal Audits. Bob Kelly.

I extend her a hand. She shakes it. There is no fear in her at all.

- Julie Fearman. I'm from the Trade Section. Hope we are not on your radar quite yet.
- Not yet, but I'll keep you in mind. I really have to rush. Nice to meet you, Julie.

I part from her in a way that suggests I have *stuff to do* and make for the stairs, passing people coming downwards in the first rush of the lunch break. Mutters of *excuse me...excuse me...excuse me* as I pass them all, trying to appear apologetic, all the time trying to figure out who among them looks the most like a typist who might lead me to the office by a process of elimination.

First floor. I listen carefully, trying to filter out the sounds around me from the sounds that might be useful. It takes a second, but I can hear something mechanical, something moving, something *printing*. Second door on the right, propped open by a rubber stopper. Two men sitting at a partner desk, both in silence.

- Admin Three?

Neither speaks, one just jerks his thumb over his right shoulder in the direction of the next office.

- Thanks...

Next door – an office with three women in it, many computers and screens, and more printers. On the wall, a sign on green paper with a large number 3 on it.

- Hi...I'm...

Apply brakes. Think back. Stop. Did Madge use my name or Bob's?

Did I really just say *my name*?

- ...told Mrs Hayes-Williamson has left me an *eyes only* package. Ursula knows about this?

Woman at the back of the office, large type, maybe the manageress. Huge spectacles on a chain.

- She's not here right now, but there is an envelope for you on Ursula's desk over there.

She indicates an empty desk with papers in neat piles and photographs of a strikingly beautiful family. In the middle is a green envelope marked with the bold letters EYES ONLY: BOB KELLY (INTERNAL AUDITS).

- I'm from Internal Audits
- Then that will be for you, she says cheerlessly.

I pick it up and leave, secretly elated. As I make my way through the crowds – this time in their general direction – I feel the pages within the envelope. All quite slight, really. I make a sudden detour and make myself scarce inside the toilets on the ground floor where I find an empty stall without neighbours and sit myself on the closed lid, eagerly opening the envelope and pulling out the stapled sheets. *Eyes only and they let a secretary print this out.* Or is she more than that? I'll never meet Ursula, so I will never know.

Top of the sheets – a yellow Post-It note from Madge. *She put them in a form three and has left them up here.* Her doing.

I said no, but you ignored me. If any of this shit gets out I will deny all of it. Get rid of this note now.

Yes. Madge, alright. I drop the note under me into the toilet and elbow the flush.

The first sheet is a minute of a meeting...but it has been redacted. Damn. March 3rd.

OPERATION TALISMAN

RECONVENED MEETING #1 - 3RD MARCH – BOARD ROOM 223

MOST SECRET

Chair: Paul Philips

Attendees: William JESSOP, [REDACTED], Ian PORTER, Simon BLOUGH, Richard FAIRCROSS, and Jennifer DENHOLM.

Apologies: [REDACTED], [REDACTED] and Patrick CUNNINGHAM.

AGENDA

1. Welcome and apologies
2. Prior Minutes
3. Security Requirements and Clearances

4. Locations
5. Disclosures
6. Aims and Intentions
7. Strategy
8. AOCB
9. Close

I turn the page...and find nothing but one set of redactions after another. Missing pages. Black sheets. Nothing. Nothing of any use at all.

The Code is Green.

Every meeting is the same. The same heading, different dates, different redactions. *I am being played out of the game here.* I'm being given enough to keep me interested but not enough to be anything useful. My bafflement turns to a quiet fury until I remember Madge's words that are slowly being flushed away. *I will deny all of it.* Deny what? Page upon page of blacked-out scribbings?

Either Madge doesn't know or someone is playing a game with me. What did Linda send her? What did Madge see of it? Do I trust Ursula? And why do I sense Max's hand at work here?

I stuff the pages into the envelope and leave the toilet quickly. Tie marches on and it's time to meet Linda to see what *she* has.

With twenty minutes to go I walk through the lunch traffic and head in a general sense to the place where I am to meet her, neither slowly nor quickly. Just thoughtfully wandering, taking in the sights and sounds around me of a low developed, slow moving behemoth in the full stages of doing precisely nothing because that is more or less what it was evolved to do. The people I see sitting in their offices with their 'clear room' signs on the doors and the fire drills and the phones and the computers and the endless reams of paper being ferried from one place to another, all to perpetuate a myth of governance. Neither one stripe nor another, nor even an entire philosophy seems to bind it, other than the necessary evils of choice and upheaval but never means anything other than the slightest blip to the way things actually operate. The people are given a choice, they make it but in reality what they are choosing from is which brand of baked beans they want to eat. In the end, they are still going to be eating beans.

Phoning again, this time from my own phone. It rings a few times, then a courteous but cool voice answers.

- Hello?
- Hello, June? This is Austin Hafner again. I'm so sorry to call again so soon but I had to ask you one small detail.

A pause.

- Yes?

As ever, distant of manner and with a curious sense of a *lack of protocol*. She exudes hostility only because she doesn't know how to be cordial. Everything phrased as an interrogation tinged with disappointment that the answers are not more forthcoming.

- It's slightly delicate.

Another pause.

- We cannot see you again, Mr Hafner. We've been warned.

Curious. Why was I told he wasn't actually being watched? Is he or isn't he?

- It's okay. I just have to ask you a few small details about one person, that's all.
- As long as that is all you want.

She is quite a different person now. I wonder just *how* different.

- Well, yes it is.
- Do you need to speak to Brian? Because if you do, be prepared for a wait.
- Why? What's up?

I was assuming she'd say something of a dalliance with a bottle of gin.

- We had a doctor round yesterday. Brian has *seemingly* lost the ability to speak, albeit temporarily.
- What?
- He cannot speak. He can't even mumble. The doctor thinks he might have had a minor stroke.
- Oh my....I hope he is okay. Has he been taken to hospital?
- Not yet.

Something weird is up. Seriously weird. She sounds...like she is being watched. Primed.

- June, are you alright? I mean are you safe?
- Yes...why would I not be?
- Would you tell me if you were not?
- If I could I probably would...

No, *more* than weird. I'm starting to think that I'm not even talking to June Barker. I wrack my close memories to try and find a link. Anything.

- June...don't take this the wrong way, but I need you to answer one question before we go on, alright?

A pause. Now even silences are sounding as if they may not be hers.

- Yes?

I screw my eyes up and dredge my memories. Heart beats faster.

- From TALISMAN. In which county were the caves found which contained the true Gospel according to Joshua?
- *Pardon?*

Deep breath. His words. *She has that fabulous memory.*

- *Trust me.* In which county were the caves found which contained the true Gospel according to Joshua?
- Mr Hafner...I don't think....
- Please June, this is vital. Truly vital.
- It sounds like a game.
- It's much, much more serious than that.

A pause. Then a longer pause. Is that a whispering I can hear on the end of the line? Time moves slowly, but progresses faster than I am happy about.

- Dorset. It was found in Dorset. They thought it had been lost but it had been brought back here to hide it.
- Thanks, June. I'll call you back.

Down goes the phone. I've never heard of any Gospel according to Joshua. Neither has anyone else. I have to assume that some large scale compromise has started. That wasn't June, or June isn't June...or something.

Quickly. To Max. Dialling. Waiting. Ringing. Clicking.

- Max?
- Yes...Oz?
- Yes. Quick call...is there anything big going on I ought to know about?

He pauses to think. I can sense his shock down the line.

- Not that *I* know. Should I ask you the same?
- Perhaps. For various reasons it seems that our man in exile has been silenced, if not permanently then perhaps enough to make him never to want to open his mouth again.

Max doesn't hesitate to speak.

- You're in danger, Austin.

- Did you know about this?
- No, but I know enough now. Where are you? More to the point...*do you have it on you?*

Suddenly...this place is a freakish haze of flipping and revolving mirrors. I snap the phone off, suddenly alarmed that my dangerous situation is exacerbated by the fact that someone needs to know where I am and what I am carrying. Why would he?

I've never felt more alone than right now. I check my watch. There is still time. My phone rings. It's Max. Let that slide. For now, anyway. It rings off. I ring out. Protracted ringing. No answer. Then, an answer.

- P15?
- Linda?
- No, she's out for her lunch. This is Evelyn. Can I take a message? Who is this?
- No thank you. Call you back.
- Who is this?

I hang up without a further word. I consult my watch. There is still time. A lot of time.

I make my way down the corridor, across the atrium and out into the sunlight and the cold, damp air that London seems to comprise most of the year. Look right, look left. Hopping between the cars I make my way through the traffic towards the other side of the street, away from the small clutch around the shops by the grey buildings, and over towards the small glass fronted shop on the other side. And...

...as I thought. She's there already. So far ahead of time I would be astounded and now have to wonder which side of the line she is on.

I could go and expose myself to scrutiny

Or I could avoid her and forget about her as a lead

Or I could lure her from here

None of these seem like good choices. The first is the only one I can stomach for now, and the risk is huge. Crowded streets. People everywhere. It may be anyone I know or someone I do not. For all I know it may even be her. A haze of mirrors all around. Every face is an enemy. Everyone needs to be doubted.

Toss a coin in my head. Make a decision. Stick to it.

I walk smartly up to the door of the shop and open it, addressing her right away.

- Hi Linda. You're early?

She looks up, seemingly surprised to see me.

- Oh...Mr Kelly...yeah...I came over quickly.

I scan the shop as discreetly as I can. No one paying overt attention, but that means nothing. Now I wish I had brought the insurance I had hauled along with me before.

- Thanks.

She stands up and stretches her hand out. I shake it quickly and then motion towards the rear of the shop.

- Maybe we can be a little more discreet inside?

She looks up the shop at the others within. I don't recognise anyone, but that means little. Her eyes betray nothing. This woman is a secretary. A typist. A minute-taker. She'll not be practised at this sort of deceit. I don't give her time to think – I lead on and wait for her to pick up her coat and bag and follow me. At least this way I take the initiative. Bob Kelly is running the show. Don't flag now.

She follows me to a booth which I find mercifully empty and she sits opposite me. A waitress comes and takes our order – uninspiring sandwiches and tea - and I wait until she has discreetly moved off. The others in the place are noisily concerned with their own affairs and the music is loud enough.

- Sorry to drag you out here, Linda but this is maybe best dealt with outside the office. It's a little delicate.
- This is about TALISMAN again, isn't it?
- Yes it is. The bottom line is that we are investigating the events around the last five meetings. As you might know, we've had some...discrepancies.
- Really?
- Yes....we've had a few things going missing and we are really concerned over them. We feel that the minutes you have written up might shed some light on the proceedings.
- I see. You know I don't really have access to that material any more, don't you?

Damn. Too soon.

- Well...that's maybe not such an issue. We just need to know who there was who was there and what they were there for. Just trying to assess whose access was permitted to the meetings, that's all.
- I'm not sure I follow you Mr Kelly...access? To what – the minutes? They were securely filed by upstairs, I'm told.
- Well that's not all. I was also wondering who had access to the meetings too.
- Oh...you mean who was there?
- Well, that might be a start.
- Oh I see. I'm not sure if this is classified or not.

Dammit Austin...you might have guessed *Bob from Internal Audits* would have known that. Defcon Bluff.

- It's classified as M1, so it ought not to be a problem.
- I know, but after the business with Marion I'm not so sure.
- Marion? Who is she?
- MARION...it was an operation whose content was leaked a bit and which caused a bit of a stir.
- Oh yes...I remember that now. Did any heads roll on that one?
- Oh a few, nothing major of course but it caused a stir at the time. The press were saved from it, fortunately. However...the hangover lingers, as it were.
- Oh I know.
- Your department is new in the office, isn't it?
- We're just been set up, yes.
- Yes...because no one seems to have heard of you.
- Oh?
- Yes.
- Well we try to remain discreet.

She seems to be on the attack. And these don't seem to be *her words* any more. Don't look round. Don't look round. Focus on her. I've made a dreadful mistake coming here.

- You've hardly been discreet so far, have you?

She smiles. I feel disarmed.

- Who was at the TALISMAN meetings?
- Straight to the point, eh?
- Well we have to get this done, Linda. I'm not asking you to betray secrets, just to give me a route into other avenues. The documents *were* compromised; we just need to know the other names on them.
- Good job I brought this then, isn't it?

From a square canvas bag she produced a featureless hard-backed A4 sized diary, opened it at a place thoughtfully marked by a rather tatty-looking yellow post-it note (the thought *yellow for me, green to go, and red to stop...* is never far away) and lays it down flat on the tabletop. She picks out a fat blue pen and traces the text on the book until she finds what she is looking for.

- Oh...a diary?

- Kind of. You got a pen?
- I'm onto it now.

Pen and notebook at the ready.

- This information belongs to the group, really. I just made roughs of the details so that I can make up proper notes later from them. Any mistakes in the details are down to my shorthand which, as you can see, is impenetrable.
- Good grief...isn't this stuff classified?
- Let's just say I hoard and burn the meaningless stuff.

Volte face. My judgement is flawed again.

- Okay, fire away with what you have.
- There were five meetings; March 3rd, March 24th, April 15th, April 16th and May 23rd.
- Okay.
- March 3rd, chaired by Paul Philips, minuted by me, attendees are Jessop, Hayes-Williamson, Porter, Blough, Faircross and Denholm with apologies from Barker, Francis and Cunningham. Conditions on the meeting were quoted as being 'most secret'. What else do you need to know?

Although tempted I don't drop my pen. Paul Philips must be the same man who was Barker's management and who Barker claimed to have kept in the dark throughout, Jessop I half expected but...Margaret? That makes no sense at all as she was keen to keep away from the whole business of knowing the details on the case. My head starts to spin a little. The tea doesn't help. And apologies from Barker and Francis? What on earth is that all about? Was it a joke? The three names redacted from the minutes. Margaret, Francis and Barker? Why? And who by?

- Oh just general stuff about the content of the meeting, nothing too specific.

Her gaze trails down the page and lands on something she seems to think salient enough for me to want to note.

- Welcomes, apologies, no prior minutes to refer to, code of hush-hush above all else...erm let's see...something about 'likely locations', another part about 'necessary disclosures' and a part about 'aims and intentions'.
- Let's hear that bit. The rest isn't important.

My hand is shaking. My writing looks like her shorthand, only it isn't. Her voice drops a couple of decibels. Her posture and demeanour couldn't signal treachery more if she had a sign above her head.

- Okay. Seven point exposition about the reason why TALISMAN was re-incurred after the matters of the past few days, namely: one, that the original report has been lost and that no one knows where it has been filed or removed to; two, that

the report contains the most damaging information...yadda yadda....probably shouldn't read you that bit, Mr Kelly...em...three, that the opportunity has now arisen to make public certain sections of this report under *extreme control* and use it as a weapon of destruction; four, that relocating this document is now the prime concern for this meeting; five, that all other conditions and situations are to be of secondary importance; six, that personal safety is a secondary concern; and seven, that in the event of legally disruptive proceedings taking place there will be every effort to render the perpetrator immune to prosecution if it can be shown that they were acting under the aegis of this group.

Writing fast. Very fast.

- So they lost a weapon that can now be used and cannot spare any effort at all in recovering it, even if it meant breaking the law or getting hurt in the process?
- That's what the minutes said, yes. The rest of it is a discussion between the various parties in agreeing targets. I don't think I can really talk to you about who and how and where, but if this got out...wow. It's powerful stuff.
- You sure there were apologies from Barker and Francis?
- That's what it says, yes. The names mean nothing to me – I've no idea what it means, really. It just says that they were not there.
- What else was discussed on that section?
- Nothing much – minutes recorded that the meeting only went on for fifteen minutes.
- Interesting. That means that the subject would not have been new to anyone there.
- I assume so, yes. So...what in the minutes is in any discrepancy from the ones you now have?

I had almost forgotten my own subterfuge.

- The attendance list is missing, and the seven points have been either redacted or omitted. We're trying to find out why.
- Oh wow...you don't think that they really *are* up to anything illegal, do you?
- Linda...keep your voice down.
- Damn...sorry. I was getting at you for discretion too.
- Yes, what was that all about?
- I'm sorry. I'm nervous about being here.
- Actually, so am I.
- You are?

- As you might have seen, there are fairly powerful forces at work here. They might not like what we are doing here.

Her eyes open wide.

- Are we in any danger?

Her voice is now a strong whisper, eyes haloed by pallor, leaning right across to me. Her breath smells of the coriander found liberally strewn within the offhand structure of the egg sandwiches to give it the illusion of sophisticated cuisine.

- We might be. And yes, this is the first major deal I've been involved in with this department. We're pretty new and to get dumped into this is...well...
- It's okay, you know. I know how it feels to be dropped into something unfamiliar. Look, you want to get out of here and move somewhere safer? What about your offices?
- No, it's too risky there. Aside from anything else we might be overheard.
- We could sit by the river.
- Too cold, honestly. Plus it's raining on and off. We'd look odd.
- Not good, really.
- Though tell you what – we could get a cab back to my hotel.
- You have a hotel?
- No, I'm living in one for a while. Kind of between houses right now. New job, new offices....I've had to up everything from my last place and move here. I sort of work from there too.
- Oh goodness. That sounds a bit inconvenient. Where is it?
- Not that far from Marble Arch, over by Hyde Park. What time do you have to get back for today?
- I don't really, I'm on flexible hours. I have to work a certain number of hours a week unless there are advance arrangements. As long as they know where I am and that I'm not coming in then it's not an issue.
- Back to my hotel then?
- Sure. Let me call the office first.

I walk up to the counter and pay the girl with the corporation tee-shirt for the non-committal lunch, dropping the coins I get as change into the white cup marked **TIP'S THANK YOU** and - despairing of the punctuation - walk to the door to await Linda's afternoon arrangements, watching the faces of the others in here, no one much paying any real attention to anything here, other than getting ready to leave or engrossed in talk, a book, a newspaper, a mobile phone...anything other than me. I start to wonder about my paranoia. Outside the air feels damp still, threatening more wind and rain. No one watching me. Well...no one I can see anyway. Some people live this life all the

time. I wonder how it must feel to them. Do they know, or can they guess? *Hidden eyes watching secret movements.* What a crazy existence.

Linda bounces out the shop behind me. I will her into playing things more low-key but as I observed before, she won't be used to any of this. It might even seem like a game to her. She seems...flighty. I am surprised she got the requisite clearance. Maybe I'm just judging on first impressions.

I wave down a cab and we get in, letting the driver take us to the spacious accommodation I am renting near Hyde Park.

- I have a car, but it's parked downstairs.

Linda seems impressed.

- How do you manage to get a place like this? I mean...you must be on a *fortune*.
- I get by. Not everything I enjoy comes from my job.
- Doesn't that make someone in your line an obvious target?
- How so?
- Well...this...I mean, you'll look corrupted or something. Besides, I don't have to fully pay my way yet.

I smile to her knowingly.

- Actually, the fact that I can afford this makes any allegations of corruption pretty useless. How am I going to get bribed?
- We've all got a price, Mr Kelly. All of us.

I know what she means. We march past the receptionist who looks up at us as we walk past in quiet confidence, then up to the lifts which take us on a mirrored route to my floor. Silent movements, heavy carpets, soft-sprung doors and invisible staff. My kind of place, I think.

I slide the card through the door lock and walk in. The room is immaculate, clean and laid out tidily. I drop my cases and keys on the table and fill the kettle. Linda looks about the room like she is a prospective purchaser.

- Lovely place.
- It does me fine for now. Just until I get squared away with the property market. Everything so damned slow now.
- We got gazumped twice before we got our little flat. It's all so difficult.
- Where were you looking?
- Camden. We squared ourselves down from the brighter spots of Kings Road when we were cleanly beaten on three different places down there.
- You like it there?

- Love it – it's where I grew up. Well...not far from it anyway.

That light bulb again.

- That sounds like heaven. Tea or coffee?
- Neither really...hotel room tea and coffee tastes like it's made from dust.
- You're right. I haven't inspected the minibar yet.
- What have they got?

I open up and find the usual selection of smaller than average measures together with nuts and snacks and a price list that would suggest all were made by a gourmet chef who was languishing between jobs.

- We have wine. Looks like a Sancerre, if you like. Stone cold.
- Well, if you're having some.

She takes off her coat and hangs it in the backlit alcove with the hooks. She seems to find something unusual. I cannot see her face...her *body shape* seems to imply it from behind.

- Can I ask you something?
- Sure, what?
- Well...for someone who is living here out of home you don't seem to have a load of stuff with you. You know...*stuff*.

She has a point. Kind of overlooked that.

- Well, most of my clothes are in the hotel laundry and as for the rest I really travel very light. I keep a lot in the car, you know...just for travelling. The less in the rooms I suppose the less the temptation there is for it to feel like home – or for the cleaners to nick it.

She seems unconvinced, but it passes. I drop a yellow notepad onto the table and draw up a chair, sliding the fluted glasses on the surface, positioning one in front of her. The cork is drawn, the wine poured and the bottle clunked onto the stone surface. Even the sounds make it feel more like home than business.

- To work, Linda. We should try and get through this as soon as we can.
- Mr Kelly...you mentioned danger.
- I did yes.
- Who from?

I draw a deep breath.

- You know how sensitive TALISMAN is don't you?
- I do, yes.

- But you don't know what it actually contains?
- No, I don't. That was never discussed. Christ, I'd never even dare to ask what it means. What I took just sounded like nonsense to me.

I start to wonder if she is holding out. Maybe as insurance? Protection? We're on the eighth floor, after all. Quiet and alone. Probably no one around us for yards.

- I see.

At this point I lift up the case and place it on my knees, Linda's eyes watching my slow movements. The catches are popped open. The top is lifted. And one of the three copies is lifted out and dropped casually onto the table, the bold name on the cover obvious to her. She stares at it as I return the case to the floor.

- Is that what I think it is?

Her voice is weak and curiously indecisive. Her fascination clear.

- What do you think it is?
- Is that...the TALISMAN report?
- It might be. You sure you've never seen it?

Silence a while. A pause.

- No...never. No one in the meetings ever had seen it. All we did was speak about it. It was the elephant in the room. I'm not even going to think of how you managed to get your hands on it.
- It's a copy, not an original.

I carefully arrange the file so that the top end of my copies of the minutes are visible too, with the redactions hidden underneath. I flip open the report's front cover and the title page is plainly visible, along with the huge protection markings on it. Signatures and scrawls and a large marginalia collection to the upper left.

- Well...here it is. The real thing. Well...a re-type of it anyway.
- I've been scared witless of this moment, you know.

I turn my gaze to look at her and see on her face the kind of terrified curiosity one might get from finding a corpse. Fascination at a distance - a deep desire to poke it and prod it and see if it moves.

- It doesn't bite.
- Actually, I'm told that it does.

Curious.

- Go on?
- Oh...just things.

Her hand sneaks out, fingers creeping the empty inches towards the plain buff-coloured folder lying open in front of her, its title imploring her to look further. She reaches it. Her fingers stop. Even from here I can tell she has just held her breath.

- What sort of things?

She finds her voice.

- The way that power corrupts, then consumes.
- Those who read it?
- Those who even *know* about it, in some cases. I just wrote *about* this thing. I had no idea it really existed. Not in any meaningful sense. It was an intangible.
- It exists. Or did. I don't know where the original is any more, but this is a verified copy.

Only a slight lie there.

- Verified by whom?
- Those who know it.
- That must mean Barker.
- Or Francis.

I feel something - a reaction to that name. A bristle, or a coldness or a shudder that runs over her, almost imperceptible. But it was there. She repeats it.

- Yes, or Francis.
- Or even Jessop.

She looks at me curiously.

- William Jessop died, didn't he?
- He did.

Another small lie; not one I can quantify.

- That power consumed him. It's consuming Barker.
- Tell me about Francis.

There it is again. That reaction. She takes a sip from the wine, as if to reassure herself.

- I never really met Jim Francis. He was just a name that we heard at the table from time to time. Barker was mentioned more.
- Did you ever meet Barker?

- Not face to face, but he was seen around the building from time to time. He seemed pleasant enough. Quite a jovial guy at times. Always popular with his staff and seemingly the life and soul of the party.
- But not yet 'consumed'?
- Not yet.
- Do you think Francis was consumed?
- I don't know.
- How was he mentioned at meetings?

She shifts in her seat. Her fingers are still on the report, like it's some sort of security blanket.

- Kind of distantly. Is this enquiry of yours about the report, the minutes or about Jim Francis?

She seems to have turned on the offensive. Or the defensive. It's kind of hard to say. Certainly any time Francis' name is as much as mentioned she seems to react inwardly.

- It's about a lot of things.
- You work alone?
- No, there are other people working with me, but they all have compartmentalised opportunities.
- This *enquiry*...it's about more than minutes, isn't it?
- What makes you say that?

She extends her index finger and points down to the document, tapping it twice.

- If it was just about *minutes* then I wouldn't expect you to have this here, would I?
- I suppose not.
- So what capers are you cutting here, Mr Kelly? I can see the minutes underneath, so you have got *some* idea what I am going to say.

This is – once again – feeling like I am playing out of her hands.

- None, I just need to get to the heart of a few matters.
- And you need to know about Jim Francis?
- Among other things, yes. And for someone you've never met or known you use his first name pretty easily.
- Oh that was just how he was referred.

She pauses and looks down at the desktop.

- This report....

I follow her lead. It's a change of subject too, it seems.

- Yes?
- Is it true about what it says? About what it is?
- What have you heard?
- I've heard it's the most powerful document there is. Something with secrets in it so shocking that they would threaten our way of life across the globe. Something so big that anyone who knows about it would have his or her life changed forever.
- You're on the right lines.
- Well, if that's the case then what is a case officer from an internal enquiries division doing with it in his possession? I still don't get that.

I have to admit this is a fair question. I also notice that she has veered back to the offensive again. I cannot measure her at all. Is she *climbing a trellis*?

- I have it because it's pertinent to the job I am doing.

She seizes on this with sudden animation.

- No no no...you're not doing any such thing. The people on the *Committee* were not allowed to see it because of the damage it could do to them. It was kept away from them quite deliberately because they were all in a position to do something destructive with it, because that power *corrupts*, Mr Kelly. It bends the will in irresistible ways, and government ministers would use it to their own advantage. Anyone with any leverage at all would be able to. Anyone.

These are not the words of a secretary or a minute-taker. I consider my next move carefully. This could be the breaking of her.

- Let's just say that what I am saying to you isn't as far as this thing goes. But you must understand that what you know is utterly vital.
- Vital? Vital to whom? The minutes I took are still on the system and my notebook was sitting in my desk on a lock even I could make an attempt to get around.
- The minutes are doctored and until we met I didn't even know about the notebook.
- Sorry Mr Kelly, but this all seems a bit suspect to me. You're giving me more importance than I think I deserve, and this business about doctored minutes is just a load of nonsense, isn't it? I mean, what I lodged back then was what's still available. If there is anything doctored then it's been done way after the event and far after I e-mailed them out to everyone.
- What's available now is...

- ...and there's another thing - the notebook was common knowledge. The minutes are so generalised and so vague that they don't actually contain anything. Not one thing of any significance or secrecy.
- Then why was it...?
- It was protectively marked because of the subject. *Everything* under TALISMAN was classified, as you ought to know.
- Linda, we are sort of drifting away from the issue here.
- Well, I'm not confident you know enough about the subject to discuss it.
- I have the report, Linda. It's right in front of us.
- That's what is making me nervous, Mr Kelly.
- Why?
- I have no way of knowing if it's the real thing, or whether it's some kind of a baited line to draw me into conversation. The problem I have is that I have no way of verifying it either.
- I see your issue. You're being very commendable in your ability to keep quiet, you know. I don't know how I can convince you.
- Neither do I.
- ...which begs the question why you came up here.

Her face darkens a little. I have her on a defensive offensive. Something else just doesn't seem right about this...her mood is changing too often.

- I came here because I was asked to. I took this on good faith, and now I find I am confronted with a report which I don't think is accurate because I really cannot see anyone in your position being allowed to have it. So either way, you stole it or it's a fake. So which is it? And the empty hotel room...it feels like a set up. It feels like a trap. Is this all a sham?
- Linda, this isn't helpful.
- I *knew* it...this is all a fake, isn't it? You're no more from any internal investigations office than anyone else. So who are you?
- Linda...
- When I took this job on I knew that something was going to happen just like this. June warned me. She took me aside and said that people like *you* were all around, waiting to gather whatever they wanted from whatever I had. She warned me about people like you. No wonder she was unwilling to speak to anyone.

The light bulb starts to glow a little. Then a lot.

- This is extraordinary behaviour, Linda. Can you not control yourself?

- And can you not convince me you're who you say you are? Because right now, I don't know who you really are at all.
- Well...let me see.

I reach down and hold the handle of the briefcase.

She's fishing for information.

Mood swings. Aggressive. Passive. Reactive.

Not the actions of a secretary, a typist or a minute-taker.

Vital to *whom* but there are *less people*? Can't have that one both ways.

Down from Manchester with her *Northern ways*. Grew up in Kings Road? SW3 – *not even the north of London*.

Jim Francis. Jim Francis. Jim Francis.

'You are in tremendous danger'

June took her aside and warned her?

'Not really a colleague. I've never met the girl...'

June's words. This woman has never met June Barker. She's lying.

This isn't Linda Dawson.

I hold the handle tight in my hand and swing it upwards and across the table is a wide arc, completely taking her by surprise and striking her on the side of her jaw at the widest trajectory. And she goes *down*, sprawled over across the floor as though I had just shot her. Oddly, she is soundless, a situation that won't persist for much longer.

Fighting back my every instinct, I stand over her and watch her roll onto all fours, her senses dazed and her head jangling with the impact, so much so that through a combination of surprise and suddenness she hasn't had time to register pain. I strike once more, this time kicking her full in the face with every bit of strength in me, fuelled by every ounce of frustration and every shred of anger, sinking her to the floor in a deflated heap.

I compose myself. I hope I've never hit a woman in my life, because in a short space of time I have killed two and have just grievously assaulted another. *If this is my life then I don't want another part of it.* I check her. She's barely conscious, face down, blood welling from her nose, her jaw probably broken by the force of the case on her open mouth. Faint groaning coming from her, way off in the distant place where her consciousness is lying. She'll live. I make sure she is face down.

I grab her bag and rake through it. Notebook as before. Purse too. I open it and find cash, credit cards and a pass for what looks distressingly like the Ministry of Defence. Her face, her pass and her name: Michelle Mitchell. How *amateurish*.

I flip open the notebook and find a spread bookmarked, where she had read from before. The rest of the book is brand new and completely empty; this is a prop. Did she scribble this out between phone call and meeting? I turn her bag upside down and scatter its content everywhere. Pens, cosmetics, tissues, a purse, unused greetings cards, receipts – the usual. I drop the bag and open the purse. Credit cards in the name of M MITCHELL, a folded photograph of some younger looking women in military uniform in what looks like a desert. One looks passingly like the woman lying face down on the floor of my hotel room. She doesn't look like anyone *active*; more like an intelligence jockey. Chances are she will be wired, and if she is then she won't be alone.

A folded bit of paper floats out along with the change. On it I read the words

TALISMAN 14 DOWN FRANCIS HAFNER 44523-52789-78712-12222

Whatever else it means, it means she has an association between 'me' and TALISMAN although what the rest of it means, I can only guess. I look through the rest of the bag but it's mostly rubbish, the sort of thing any handbag might hold. Something tells me though that there is something else up, that I am missing something. She'd never be sent here alone. There has to be a wire on her...

I lift her up, her eyes glazed, nose probably broken and bleeding, her jaw hanging open, swollen and starting to bruise darkly. Even through her semi-conscious state she can feel the pain of being moved like this, one hand feebly waving at me in a forlorn protest as I rip open her blouse. Maybe she fears the worst from me. I am pre-occupied.

- Shut up, Michelle. I'm checking you out. Don't move.

That probably sounded more salacious than it had to. I find nothing. No wires taped to her chest, nothing around her waist. I pat down her legs still looking for anything that might indicate someone else is listening, but I find no wires...only a small gun down the back of her waistband. I whistle to myself. *We have a live one*. Certainly not the actions of a secretary, a typist or a minute-taker. It's a Ruger LCP 380 pistol (I amaze myself to hear my recognition) and fits in the palm of my hand quite easily. It's strange how the knowledge of this weird little device also fits in my head so easily too. Where did that come from? But there it is, small, light and black. I put it up on the table, checking the safety. Michelle moans in front of me; she might be coming back around for all I know, spluttering a bit and choking out blood from her nose. I stand up, lift her by the armpits and prop her up against the wall, and crouching in front of her think to myself a while. Over by the window is my bag of stationery supplies, within which I have a few handy cable ties that I was thinking of using on large bundles of paper. They would be better suited to the large bundle of Michelle instead.

I fasten her ankles tightly, and then fasten her wrists behind her. A bit of propping up needed here to get her vaguely onto her knees, but that lets me fasten the two sets together, hog-tying her upright, letting her slump against the wall in the corner of the room. She's still deeply groggy, mumbling and groaning incomprehensible stuff, catching her breath then coughing up a gout of blood. The bruising on her jaw is deepening and spreading already.

- Michelle? Wake up, Michelle.

She gurgles, eyes drunk and unfocussed. She maybe tries to speak, but it's barely a sound I can fathom and certainly nothing to do with words. She starts shuddering, presumably with shock, now groaning a little more in pain.

- Wake up, Michelle. We have to talk...well...I have to talk to *you* anyway.

I pick up her purse and sit at the table again, looking through it. Maybe three or four hundred pounds in cash, keys, coins, credit cards and bank cards, an ID card for HMG...no department mentioned here. Nothing else obvious. I pick over the photograph again. Is there something in this?

Nothing.

I pick through the rest of the bag contents strewn over the carpet and see nothing that alerts me to anything, but I know there has to be something here that gives me an idea. Something. Anything.

My fingers trail through the contents and find the fat blue pen she pulled out at the sandwich shop, the same pen she waved in front of me as we spoke. I sit back up at the table and make a mark on paper with it; it's a pen alright. I unscrew the top of it and it comes apart, revealing a small connector socket within.

- Ah ha...

I pick that off and reveal a pair of small watch batteries and a wound aerial and trails around the ink reservoir. The screw top seems to join around the connection by a pair of gold-coloured contacts. Picking apart the screwed top cause a small microphone to drop out.

Bingo.

I pull out the aerial and break the small electrical board within to pieces, working on the assumption that the device is live and that someone has been listening to the sounds we have been making, including that of me breaking her face and of her groaning in the corner. I walk to the balcony window, slide it open and pitch the broken fragments out, raining them down on the street outside. I come back in, leaving the window open for some welcome cold air and pick up the water jug on the coffee tray and fill it with a cold draught from the en suite tap, then return to Michelle and throw it directly into her face.

- Wake up, Michelle. We have to talk.

Her eyes open in shock, though both still look like someone on the wrong side of a ten hour binge. Her jaw will be starting to seize up soon. The pain must be excruciating.

- I've broken your jaw. You cannot really speak so don't try too hard. Just nod or shake your head. Can you understand?

She nods.

- Good. Now, I have the pen transmitter and I have seen your notebook and your MOD pass so I am onto you, so forget the story, okay?

Nod.

- Bringing the pass along was pretty sloppy, don't you think? Was that in case of a total compromise? Were you sent here to find out what I know?

No reaction.

- Michelle...were you sent here to find out what I know?

Still no reaction.

- Michelle, I have also broken your nose and can give you a world of pain if you don't start speaking.

Still no reaction.

I sigh and stand up, then fish around in my cabinet for a shirt which I promptly cut into a strip and tie around her mouth to stifle the scream. As I do she gives off a sort of huffing noise, presumably from the pain from her jaw. She's tough. Really tough – a *soldier*, alright. She doesn't scream. Not yet anyway. I know the gag will make breathing hard since her nose is broken mess so I don't cover her mouth with it, just bind across it. She'd be no use to me dead.

Now gagged, I return her to the question.

- Michelle...were you sent here to find out what I know?

Her eyes start to clear a tiny bit. She must still be well dazed though. I fetch more water and shock it into her reddened face. She splutters under the gag and shakes her head by instinct.

- Can you hear me?

Nod.

- Were you sent here to find out what I know?

Nothing.

I reach out and grab her broken nose and twist. The broken cartilage cracks in my fingers, sickening me profoundly. A high-pitched, stifled, muted howl comes from under the gag. She tries to turn her head away from my grip but I hold on. I can see her pulling at the cable ties, writhing in absurd attempts to either break them or slip them. Neither is possible.

- Painful, eh?

Nod. I release my grip.

- Were you sent here to get the report from me?

Nod.

I reach over for the remote and flick on the TV, just in case more pain is needed. The sounds will need to be disguised. Ah..perfect. The adult channel. More moaning there

than you will ever need. I raise the volume to *just about unacceptable for next door* and return to Michelle. The juxtaposition of sound and sight is unsettling.

- You sent here officially?

Nothing. But she winces in the same way she recoiled when I mentioned Francis' name. I pull at her crushed nose again and she screams, but what emerges isn't that far away from the sound on the TV. Same ballpark anyway. Just that the vocalisations of *Electric Teens III* doesn't sound quite so authentic.

- No one is coming to save you.

She raises her eyebrows. Eyes filled with tears - I assume from the pain. I hope she doesn't have an ace up her sleeve and has a gang of armed men about to charge in. That wouldn't be much use to me.

- Were you sent by the government?

She snorts and shakes her head. It even sounds like she is trying to say something, but I'm not about to release the gag just yet. Blood trickles from her nose.

- Michelle, I have seen this...

I hold the MOD pass up to her eyes as they zoom in and out of focus.

- You're obviously no secretary. So were you sent to me officially?

Pause. Then she shakes her head.

- Hmm...unofficially? Who by? The government?

Another pause. Then she shakes her head.

- Someone *in* government?

Pause. Nod. Interesting.

- Sent here unofficially by someone in power. And they send you up here; I assume you because you might pass for a secretary. Yet you come here wired and armed and ready to use it, yes?

Nod.

- You'd have killed me for the report?

No reaction. Notably, no denial. I let that drift.

- Were we tailed here?

No reaction.

- Michelle...*were we tailed here?*

No reaction. Stronger means. I let her have the back of my hand across her jaw once and then twice. She's shaking in pain as I reach out and grip her jaw and squeeze. She's writhing like a distressed animal now, muffled screaming coming from under the

ripped shirt which is now soaked in her spit and blood. She spasms and then starts to vomit with the pain. She'll choke. Her eyes are filled with a real fear. I have the ability to release her, but I won't. Not yet.

Jesus Christ. I'm a torturer.

- I'll take the gag off when you answer me.

She keens under the gag. The puke soaks into the shirt rag and thinly dribbles out of her mouth and down her chest through her ripped blouse. The smell is vile.

- Were we tailed here?

She nods vigorously.

- Are they onto us?

Nod. Fear in her eyes. Mascara everywhere. Soggy gurgling and gulping from behind the gag. That's all I need to hear. I snip it off with the scissors and push her forward onto her face. Without anything to stop her she lands face first on the carpet, which cannot be pleasant for her given that her face is a damaged ruin. I lift her head by pulling up on her hair, letting her spit and hack and gasp in air as though I just pulled her out the sea.

- Are you a soldier?

Her retort is mangled. She manages to talk through her slack jaw and wheezing intakes.

- *We all* are.

That's a surprise.

- Very good, Michelle. Bearing in mind that I have your gun and that I am quite prepared to use it, answer me this. Do they know where we are?
- How should I know?
- I assume you do. You're a soldier.
- *We all* are.
- Yes, you said that already.
- You don't know what you're getting into, you know.

I have to focus on her words to understand her. She's like the world's least competent ventriloquist. Her tongue has swollen and her jaw is static. I'll give her this; she is *tough*.

- Well, I've been doing all this for a while now, you know. What I am *into* is pretty clear to me.
- Listen...*Hafner*. You don't. Have. A. Clue.
- Ah...you know my name.

- ...which is more than *you* do.

That stings me deeply and hard. And for some reason it gives me a clue.

- You going to explain that remark?
- *Fuck* you.

The soldier is defiant. Still on the last of the barricades. She is tough *and* brave.

I pick the gun up from the table and press it against her head. I have no *real* intention of using it and I suspect she knows this already, but it makes me feel stronger. More in control. Less of a compliant actor, more of an active performer.

- You going to explain this remark?
- Which one, the *fuck* you?
- The one about me not knowing my name.
- Well, *do* you?
- I'm Austin Hafner.
- You *sure* about that, sunshine?

Sunshine! That was definitely the word that struggled out of her. Where in the world did that come from? The open-eyed innocence of Linda the typist?

- As sure as I can be, *Linda*.
- Oh I can stop being her whenever I choose. You are a bit more stuck with your delusions.

This is worryingly interesting.

- Do go on, Michelle.
- You think you are in control of yourself? Your life? Your destiny?
- Do you think I'm some sort of puppet?
- I dunno - what do you think?
- I think I'm in complete control of my life.
- Really? What makes you even think you're in control of this situation right now?
- The fact I have a gun at your head?

She makes a gagging noise. A sort of rattling, choking. Then I realise it's laughter of a sort.

- You'll never use it, even if I dare you.
- What makes you think I won't?

- You're a vessel, that's why.
- You might be surprised to hear I've killed two women already.
- Yes, I know. One trusted and even admired you, but you gunned her down anyway when she wasn't expecting it. As for the other you shot her in the back, both of them at a remote farmhouse. You're a regular hero, Hafner.

Gulp. *Too much information.*

- Oh you're good, Michelle. Real good. Keep it coming.
- I'm very good, but you will *never* know just *how* good. How did it feel when you shot Cally through the head? Did it give you a thrill? Then same way it thrilled you when you used to beat Mathilde?

CLUNK. Something just drops into place. Something distant and far, far off. But there is a name. *MATHILDE*. I know that name. *I know that name.*

- Thrilled me?
- Thrilled you. Gave you a thrill for beating up women, same as your dad, same as your drunken uncles. Remember now, *brave boy?*

Transported. But for a moment. But transported nonetheless.

A smoky room, filled with adults all sitting in a circle around the edge. Glasses everywhere, gentle music. Laughter. A mild party of family. Adult voices talking down to a confused infant in the room.

- Come to me, Jimmy! Show your dada how clever you are. Come to me!

No source of the voice, no face to fix it on, merely the voice and the imploring nature behind it, pleading for the reflected attention that an infant barely able to stand can bring to you. The eyes scan the room but there is no one to focus upon, only a whirl of friendly faces egging you on. So you pick the face closest that means the most to you and you totter towards it, not so much a walk as a falling stumble and a constant recovery of balance as you get deeper into it.

Big powerful hands grasp you around the torso and you laugh as you're lifted up high up into the air and back down again onto someone's knee amidst aggregated laughter.

- You've always been his favourite, Bobby.
- Always. He knows where he's safest now, don't you think?
- Being safe for a brave boy, eh?

More laughter. More smoke. More fleeting faces that will one day mean nothing more to you until one day many, many years later when you are confronted by those memories by someone you've never met.

- Brave boy?
- That's you to a tee, isn't it?

She cannot possibly know any of this. It's just not possible.

- The effect wears off after a few months of conditioning. Either you accept the imprinting or you don't. Those who do never go back and might live the rest of their lives happily as someone they never met and will never know. Others find themselves breaking back through and making sense of two lives at once. Either they make it or they don't.

She breathes heavily, exhausted by the effort of saying so much. Blood still drips from her face. Her face is immobile. Even her eyes can't express anything.

- You broke my fucking jaw. I need to get to a hospital.

She veers between being the key to everything and simply a woman I beat up and tied up and searched. She has no fear of me.

- Am I a brave boy?
- You are.

She makes that laughing sound again as though she is choking.

- I want you to start talking, otherwise you'll come to a messy end, Michelle.
- A what? A messy what?

She drools out blood and saliva. The side of her face is swelling hugely, livid with bruising. Her eyes still appear only semi-focussed.

- End. So start talking.
- What are you going to do, shoot me?
- If I have to.
- You might as well set off a flare saying where you are.

She convulses a bit, then retches with a throaty, gasping groan. I can tell that this pain is almost as great as that of the fracture. The TV soundtrack in the background now sounds just ridiculous.

- Maybe. But I'm sure I can pitch you off that balcony if I wanted to.

She snorts.

- So you're the seasoned killer now, are you?
- You think I'm not.
- I *know* you're not. You're a civil servant working in the government, not James Bond. You might think you are, but you're not.

I breathe heavily close to her in what I hope passes for menace, digging the cold metal of the barrel into the flesh behind her ear.

- You will be the fifth person I've killed. Don't think I'm not capable of this.

- The fifth?
- The fifth.
- And what makes you so sure the others are dead?

Well *that one* stops me in my tracks.

- *What?*
- You seem certain the others are all dead. So tell me. Why are you so sure they are all dead?

I have to will the words out of my mouth. It's like I am explaining to a duck that it's a duck.

- You mean aside from the blood and dead bodies?

She pauses.

- And you believe everything you see?

Her words make the room swim a little. The world shifts its focus a bit. For a few seconds, E doesn't equal $m c$ squared. The pattern in the carpet moves around and floods my line of vision, with a sudden shift, like an optical illusion flipping from one perspective to the next. I am confronted by the horror of what I am doing. A question has formed in my head, but I get the distinct feeling I'm not the one who put it there.

- Is your pain real?

She looks up at me and feebly stretches her lips out in a facsimile of a smile.

- It certainly is. *You got me good.*

I am shocked at her indifference to her predicament. She's overwhelmingly confident. The gun now feels useless in my hand because I'm too close to her to even think about using it. Something tells me the bullets just wouldn't work on her.

- I'm sorry.
- Don't mention it. This can be fixed up. Sometimes you have to give things up for the greater good, you know.
- I don't understand.
- You don't have to. Just put the gun down before you get over-excited and fire off a shot in the wrong direction. I can take one for the team, but I don't know about two.

I place the gun back onto the table next to the open front page of a report whose content has sparked all of *this*. The word on the open page now looks so ominous and yet at the same time so feeble. As though any of it matters.

- Does any of this stuff really matter?
- It does. You just don't know how.

- So tell me who you are and where you're from.
- You already know both. I assume you've been through my bag.
- Yes, and I found the pen and pulled it to bits.

She pauses.

- That's not good news. It was actually a form of protection for you, but never mind.
- Protection for me?
- Like I said, never mind about it. You might find out one day. We might *actually* be on the same team.
- Look, Michelle...what is this all about? The report? The threats? The bugs?
- It's a means to an end – a way of getting our way.
- And who is wanting their way?
- We are.

I'm growing tired of drawing teeth here.

- And we are who?
- Oh come on. How stupid do we look?

BANG!

The door flies open and ricochets off the cupboard door behind, knocking the fire warning instructions to the floor. Two men in suits – both of them much bigger than me – erupt into the room and throw themselves onto me. My head thumps off the floor and bounces off the carpet with a thud that stuns and nauseates me, a sense not helped by the sweet to sickening stink of the aftershave reeking off one of them as I lie pinned to the floor under his open jacket.

- I have him. I have him. *Stay still, Hafner.*
- *Down, cunt. Move a fucking muscle and we'll fuck you ten ways from Tuesday.*
- *Stay still, Hafner.*
- *Stay there, fucker.*

I try to wriggle out of his grip, but he is much stronger than I am and his weight on me is such that I'm not going to be able to move an inch. He's done this before, obviously. His hands run over me quickly and roughly.

- He's clean.

Voices around me.

- You alright? Fucking hell...

- I'll live. I think I have a broken jaw.
- Christ, M...did he do this to you?
- Yes. Dropped my guard. I must have.
- I'll do for him.

The guy on top of me:

- Help me turn him around.

Hands on me. I struggle and find myself roundhoused across the face sharply, a blow that blurs my vision and jars my nervous system to the extent that it doesn't cause me pain as much as it just makes me feel like I've been *benignly electrocuted*. I'm flipped over. Rough grip on my wrists as my arms are pinned back. Clipping together. Must be handcuffs. Shit.

- Who the fuck are you?
- We're the fucking cavalry, Hafner. And your life is about to take a seriously weird turn for it.

I can't see their faces - only hear their voices. My face is pressed into the carpet. I want to believe that this isn't happening to me.

- Well...*someone's* life is.

The two of them laugh.

- Hold on, I'm cutting you free. Bag him. And radio up.

Sounds of fussing with something. A voice speaks to a radio.

- We have him. She's okay but hurt - we'll need an ambulance.

The voice that responds is familiar.

- Good stuff. Get him down to the rear doors and we can take him from there. I'll call in support for the casualty. How is she?
- Alive, but in pain. Looks she has been given three rounds with Ali. Her face is broken all over.

Her voice:

- Thanks. Remind me of this later will you?

Comforting laughter. I feel my shoulders being lifted a little and to my panic, blackness covering me completely as a soft fabric bag is used to cover my face. Dread gets to me and my legs kick out.

- Don't panic, you can breathe. I don't want to brace your legs as well, you know. Take it easy.

I don't speak. I stop moving but I don't want to answer.

- Why are you doing this?
- Oh just protecting our interests. You'll see why soon enough.

The radio speaks again.

- Medics on the way. How about the goods?

The voice of the other guy:

- Looks like we have it all here. Well done, Michelle.
- Thanks, Guy. I wish it was less painful though.
- Did he hit you with just one punch?

Laughter, but not from her.

- Hit me with his fucking briefcase.

The last word was difficult for her. Sharp intakes of breath.

- Must have hurt.
- And your mouth must have been hanging open too. Never can get you to shut up, can we?
- Ha fucking ha.

I try to imagine what they are actually doing but whatever I imagine it always ends up being vague and unconfirmed. The imagination iterates and reiterates.

- Okay you, to your feet.

I'm hoisted up. Not onto anyone's knee this time. *Brave boy, Jimmy.*

- We're going to lead you down and away from here, okay?
- Yes.
- Right, don't walk faster than I'm leading you otherwise you'll fall.
- Are you the cops?

Laughter. Maybe even she joins in.

- No, nothing like that. They would have a fit if they knew what we were up to.
- A fit of jealousy, probably.

More laughter. I stay silent under my hood. I don't know where I am going to be taken, by whom, for what purpose or whether I'll ever see daylight again.

It's some time later. No idea how much longer or later, but darkness is still all around me. Cool damp air and a familiar smell lingers on it like a fine mist. I cannot place it. I don't know the time, the date, the place or anything else about me or my situation. But there are voices. Several voices, but it's so vague I cannot even place their locations or even their genders for sure. I pick up their cadence and their aspects, but barely make out the situation.

- Oh you know...television appearances and that.
- How many?
- Six a week. Sometimes more. Pain in the arse but that comes with the job. I don't know how else he would have put it, really. We just need a competent foil and nothing more than that.
- That takes time.
- It takes time but there isn't anything we can do to hurry that along.
- Got to love that about them.
- Oh you have to or they will kill you.

Laughter.

A pause. Other voices to my left now. Accented.

- So come on. How many others can you name?
- Are you kidding?
- No really – not everyone can remember them.

The questioner a woman, definitely.

- Hmm...something about school fees? Maybe £150? And there is one about repairing the street to, but I never remember how much you pay.
- Isn't there one about winning a competition too?
- A beauty contest? Yes. You get £10 for that.
- No, I was thinking of a crossword contest. And the beauty contest is only second prize anyway.

Another voice chimed in. Deeper, with more gravitas – still cannot place an accent. Younger though. Fighting thought through the pain.

Do I lie still or do I let them – anyone – know that I am here and that I can hear them? I bide my time. The headache is coming on strong. I tense my limbs and find them unbound. Fabric on my face? No. Darkness on my face. Lights in the distance. Far? No, closer.

- Of course there are people opposed to the conformation.

- Who reads the opposition?
- I don't know. Pure bullshit.
- They have to remain quiet I guess.
- Screw them. Runyon knows best for us all.
- Perhaps.

The lights grow stronger and proportion to the pain. I screw up my eyes and peer into the lights. Voices seem to be coming from that direction, but who? Where?

- I think he's here now.

Voice to the left.

- Ah, so he is.

Voice ahead.

- Good day to you, sir. Can you hear us?

I say nothing. I'm not even certain they are addressing *me* here. I don't even dare move in case I give something away.

- Can he hear us?
- Maybe not. They gave him a small amount of Succinylcholine which might account for his hearing being down a little.
- Hello? You over there, in the centre. Can you hear us?
- You're perfectly safe.

A pause. Slight echoes in the room, as though they are sitting fairly close within a much larger room. It sounds empty. My hearing gains a little sharpness. My muscles would ache if I could move them much, but they remain torpid. My stomach contracts, both from emptiness and from an ache.

Hell...I'm sitting in a chair. A soft one too. Not bound or manacled. I strain to move my leg and the little it can move moves freely. How odd. Do I dare to speak?

- Hello?
- Ah...you're *there*...are you okay?

A strange question to ask? His voice clipped, even upper class and schoolmasterly. Not unkind.

- Yes, I think so. I have some pain.
- Yes, that's an unfortunate side-effect of a drug you were given to stop you from struggling too much. We're sorry. Are you hungry? Thirsty, maybe?

His words jar. Are they going to feed a man they are about to kill?

- No neither...I feel a bit nauseous.
- Well yes...another side-effect. Is it really necessary?
- We're working on reducing that.
- Well...this isn't much use to our friend here is it? Is there anything we can get you?

I feel breathless.

- No, nothing...just maybe an explanation or two?
- Well yes. We're coming to that. You better be led into things gently just because your mind is slowly unfogging a bit. To start, you may be interested in knowing where you are. You're in a government establishment in Northern France but there is no need for alarm; you've been brought here because it's altogether safer than remaining in London – for the time being anyway.
- We brought you along here because we're looking out for you, you see.

I can only think of one retort.

- Thank you for that.
- Oh don't mention it. We're not monsters, you know. We just have to have some certainties before we do anything. Your well-being is such a certainty.

I ought to feel grateful for this. Oddly, I am not. The light is still shining, but more diffusely now, illuminating them from behind. How far away are they, twenty feet? It's hard to say.

- Give him some water, someone, will you?

Some fussing to my left and a cup of water is given to me. They understand. A glass would have fallen through my fingers; a cup has a handle. I can hold it. They have done this before. My danger and predicament are real.

I throw the water back in one draft and receive two others afterwards, both of which are similarly despatched. The fourth I hold as a comforting device in my hand while I listen to their voices.

- Now, it seems that we have reached the end of a useful and viable relationship and that your time with us is up. Now, although some colleagues appear to have been apprehensive about what we ought to do with you we have to come up with something at least. Some thought it appropriate that you be perhaps cut off from the service in some ways, others had even more barbaric notions, but as I said earlier we are not monsters so it is our intent that you be released, albeit in a reversed condition which allows you to take up the positions you formerly enjoyed and the life you used to lead, yes?

I sit silent. I have no idea what he is talking about. None.

- So now that we have the document we have been pursuing in a format which is intelligible to us then it remains for me to thank you on behalf of Her Majesty's Government and to wish you the...

Voice to my extreme right.

- We might need an order here. I am not sure that our subject need know any of this stuff. We don't even know if he is following any of this.

A couple of grunted assents.

- Well, that is as may be but we have to take the best medical advice we have to hand, and that is of Dr Hooper who assures us that *the reveal* is extremely important as it will undermine any future problems that may arise. Let me read this from the paper we have had submitted on this very note, if I may...
- By all means.

Rustling of papers. Pause. Clink of a water glass on a hard table. Gentle coughs. Judging by their directions there may be as many as ten of them in front of me, spread out in an arc.

- Now this is from Dr Hooper in the original brief that we got from him on the subject of the RC submission, and it reads as follows: *to the best of both my knowledge and that of my colleagues aforementioned it seems that the prospect of underlying medical issues is of paramount importance should the subject's existence be retained. Although the effects are deep, the human mind is an uncharted territory with this regard and it ought to be remembered that what is regarded as submerged may still be revived in subconscious matters in the future. It is therefore important that we refuse all requests to ignore this and instead make a full and frank explanation which, even though it will be forgotten will serve to give a bedrock of well-being to the subject's mind.* He goes on to cite a few cases where a failure to follow this have resulted in what he calls 'breakthroughs' which seem to be extremely unpleasant and in two cases were actively compromising. In the cases following where this advice he gives was followed, no such returns were found. It seems a reasonable course to me.
- Yes, but there is the issue of national security. I mean that although it is well for us to consider his psychological well-being it is also beholden upon us to also consider the effects that it can and will have on the broader population and on HMG in particular. This is all untested and may have results which could be found to be unpredictable.

Another voice. A woman this time.

- Perhaps, but what we also have to consider is that the entire *process* is not understood. We know that it works and that it has efficacy - as we can see from the delivery - but we don't know what else it holds. I side with The Chair on this one - to do all we reasonably can to make sure that the subject isn't damaged in the process.
- Are there other alternatives?

The chairman speaks again.

- Well, recommendations are and have been plentiful, but most are lamentably short of practicality. The overarching suggestion was for the subject to be kept in this condition for the rest of his natural life and provided with a sinecure which keeps him in his new existence and sees him to a pension. Although initially attractive, the biggest problem with this is that Hooper is of the opinion that the prime psyche will win through in the end and will override the other. The issue there is that both psyches may co-exist, which means we have – in essence – a disgruntled agent with full knowledge of why he is disgruntled, and that would be the worst thing of all.
- Agreed.
- The other notions are to either follow Hooper's mandate or to terminate the subject entirely. Although the latter seems again to be efficient and even appealing it is also the least legal and probably the least effective as far as secrecy goes. The counter runs that *someone is going to miss him* and that may lead to exposure we can ill-afford.

The first objector again:

- I agree that we are not animals, but we have to keep that one back as a situation policy.
- There is a fourth way. Hooper suggests that we give the subject a third life into which he can blend the other two. He seems to think it is the most psychologically secure but also that it is the most difficult to pull off, but with the aid of RC-442 it may be possible over a course of treatment lasting a decade or more.

Another voice, an older man than any who have spoken so far.

- That has to be out of the question. RC-442 comes in a form that requires administration every week to ten days. Even hoping that the production increases and prices decrease, that would mean we would have to spend over eight million pounds on the subject's protection. Is it worth that?

The woman again.

- Well since we are adhering to the law and since we are acting in the subject's best interests then it stands to reason that we have to take whatever course is the best.

The young man:

- In which case it's either of the last two solutions. And given that it's a case of finances – which need I remind this committee are perilously tight right now – then the only sad option is for termination.

Another woman, much younger than the other:

- I can't see how you can possibly say that. We are operating within a legal framework and have to abide by the legislation that governs our country. We are

not going to start to cause *victimes de guerre* just because it suits our pockets. As people put in the position of trust we have to act in the best interests of ourselves as well.

The young man speaks up, a little irritation in his voice.

- Nothing is written in *stone* here – we’ve never really been in this exact situation before. I mean we’ve had covert ops and data rededication but nothing like the *detonation device* we have in our possession now. This *may* call for a more audacious approach. I say we put it to the vote, Chair.

The chairman coughs.

- Perhaps we can, if there are no objections.

Young woman:

- Well *I* object.

Young man:

- No, you’re objecting to the idea, not to the idea of the vote about it. I say that if we are a functioning democracy then we ought to allow all voices to be heard.
- Functioning democracies don’t turn weapons of economics on their colleagues...

Chairman:

- Well, this isn’t helping now is it? We should have a vote and then leave it at that once the vote has been cast. If the vote goes *one way* then we can act swiftly on it and if the *other way* then we can probably do the same. Now is a time for any objections to be heard, and this is the way we do it elsewhere isn’t it?

Young woman:

- I find this distasteful.

Older man at the right:

- I agree; I find this hideous given that the subject can hear all of this.

Which is a fair point. It seems they are voting on whether to have me killed or not. Now may be a good time to speak up.

- May I speak?
- Oh...of course you can, but it won’t have any voting weight, you understand...
- That doesn’t really concern me much. All I want to say is that it seems to me you want to kill me to save yourself some secrets. The fact is that I don’t remember anything or have made sense out of any of the last few months at all. I’m not myself.

I could swear I heard a stifled laugh out there in the darkness.

- We know it's been tremendously difficult for you, and we are trying to find a solution to the problems that face *all* of us. Now, shall we simply count off with an *aye* or a *nay* as to the suggestion that we terminate the subject entirely? Shall we carry on? You may abstain if you wish, and I will cast the vote in the event of a tie.

They reel off their votes. Counting them I hear ten voices, three in favour of termination, five in favour of preservation and two in favour of vacillation. My immediate future is at least assured.

Young man:

- Of course I will stand by the wishes of the panel, but I think we are going to find it difficult to find a solution that will not compromise us either actually or potentially.

New voice, an Irish accented male:

- Well we have the advice of Dr Hooper to follow and in the absence of any other *learned* advice I suggest we follow that.

Mutters of assent all round.

Chairman:

- Well since we have come to that I am glad for the recommendation that we follow the course which seems to me to be the most suitable given, as has been pointed out, the fact that it has academic rigour behind it.

More muttered assent. Balance. Equilibrium. Equity. Loss.

- With that in mind, I have to turn to the subject again and address him directly with a view to offering some explanation as to what has been going on. Sir, are you able to take in what is being said here? I know that things have been difficult for you recently and that you have been in various confused or confusing situations which mean you must have had *some* doubts about what you were seeing or hearing from time to time.

I nod, wearily.

- It has been difficult, yes.
- I also appreciate your physical condition. You may be unaware of the matter but you have been under medical observations for the last five days and – we are happy to note – have been making great progress. It turns out that you were under *operations* for longer than anticipated and that we put you under great strain. We'll see to it that you receive the full benefits of a proper medical servicing and that you are returned to full fitness.

He makes me sound like a 1972 Mercedes.

- Thank you.

- Now, you probably have a wealth of questions in your mind, and expressing them may help us to be able to phrase the answers properly. You see, we are unaware of the full extent that your memory has been operating. Perhaps you could start off this process by telling us about the earliest memory you have of the recent past?

Seems like prehistory now.

- The earliest thing? Well...the *earliest* thing I can remember is waking up in a hotel room and not knowing who I was or how I got there.
- Good. And can you remember the name of this hotel?
- Yes, it was the *New Ellswater Hotel*. I was in room 242.
- Impressive. Your recollection faculties seem to be unimpaired. Do you remember when this was?
- When?
- Yes, I mean the date.
- Oh..well, sometime in April 2009 but I don't know or remember the exact date.
- I see.

He pauses.

- Would it surprise you to know that it's now October 2010?

Wow.

- Yes. Yes it would.

Good god...*where have I been?*

- It's the effects of the RC-442. It dilates time and – sometimes – only allows memorable events to stand out. You see, it only affects what they call the active memory but not the functional memory. You don't remember anything about which school you went to, what street you used to live in, or where you used to work, do you?

I clench my hands.

- No, I don't.
- And yet you can tie your shoelaces, ride a bike, use a telephone and switch an egg. All *practical* memories. The effect removes the *situation* and leaves only the *function*. We remove the noun and allow the verb to remain. The problem we face is that the human psyche is persistent and will return in time. Unfortunately you were a long time under and were given prompts which were less than helpful.
- I see.

Again, *I don't see*.

- What do you remember after the hotel room?

I pause to recollect. It saves the panic from welling up.

- Leaving the room, calling a man called Bryant, meeting him at a coffee shop somewhere, then meeting Margaret at the same place. She gave me a document there in a folder and told me that she needed it worked on.
- And that was that, was it?
- Yes. Pretty much, I think.
- So from that moment on you've found yourself in the middle of what you might think of as a political conspiracy, yes?

I actually manage to smile.

- It feels like I have been in the middle of several at once.
- What do you mean?
- I mean that I never know who there is I can trust nor who is telling a straight story. They change all the time.
- Well, that happens in constructs, you know...
- And they make no sense and let me see through it all, almost.

Young man who was once eager for me to be killed:

- Can you give an example of that?

I sigh. I now realise it, but at the time it was just a faint glimmer.

- Mrs Hayes-Williamson played me as a friend and, it turned out, as a member of her own family. Unfortunately, she doesn't have a convincing story. If she was improvising you might have chosen a better cast.
- Elucidate?
- *Celia Jessop*.

They are all silent. I continue.

- Celia Jessop, the widow of the supposedly late aide William Jessop. Mrs Hayes-Williamson not only got her name wrong once, she also said she paid a visit to her and watched Celia's legs buckle under her as she fainted from grief after her husband died. All very moving. Even more moving considering she lost both her legs in an incident in Fenchurch some years ago. That kind of observable detail let it down.

Someone is tapping a pen.

- *Well played*. We chose you well.

That was the older man's voice. If this is a game I have a better hand than I thought, although I still know neither the rules nor the style.

- All I sense are switching sides, enemies all around and I have a need to preserve myself. *I killed four people.* I am not myself. I'd never do that.

The Chair gives me space, but I don't know what else to say, so he moves in.

- Well, we can address that in short order. Suffice it to say you won't be facing any kind of legal challenge on that, but you'll find out why. Perhaps we ought to start from the beginning. Before I go any further I want you to know that what you are seeing and hearing right now is as much of the truth as you have heard since your earlier experiences in that hotel room. Just accept what I am saying – as hard as that may be – because there is no point in any more deceit, simply because it is all going to be washed away soon. This is just a matter of Dr Hopper's completion.

Some years ago HMG commissioned a report, following a number of leads it received from various sources which suggested that the order of the world was not as straightforward as it seemed and that in fact there were numerous operators working in dark forms of collusion with each other. I don't intend to dwell on it, partly because I only know a fraction of it, partly because the committee need not hear it and partly because you know it all already. HMG thought it vital to know about this, so the report was researched and finalised over a lengthy period by two senior civil servants; Brian Barker and James Francis. The report was produced and was capped by the production committee which had itself been closed down to a core which excluded the rest of its members. That 'core' security-filed the real report but placed a dummy in its stead which was made available to HMG to let them see some smattering of information – enough to make it plain that the committee wasn't wasting its time and that HMG had invested in them wisely.

Now, this all happened some years ago. Some years hence one of the writers was punished for leaking some parts of the report out to people we need not discuss, but on their part they were acting with a view to releasing the issue to the public via the press. Their intentions were *supposedly* politically fuelled as well as sustained under a wish for egalitarianism and openness in government. The prosaic truth is that no one in government knew about the truth and that were it known it would have shocked HMG as much as it would have reeled the public. In candour, the motivations behind the attempted leak were largely driven by base financial matters which were a combination of greed and a wish to retain a lifestyle in one's dotage which was in line with that enjoyed within one's employment. Either way, the matter had to be capped, and capped it was.

You met with this author – Brian Barker - some weeks ago, when you were also introduced to his wife, June, yes?

- Yes, I met them both.
- It won't be a shock to you to know that Brian Barker is not the most reliable person any longer. Aside from his motivations and concerns about his pension, he is also a despairing, fully-trained alcoholic and would say almost anything to

keep one's attention. It also won't be a shock to you to know that we were keeping close tabs on your entire conversation.

It shouldn't be a shock, but it is.

- I admit I am...surprised. He took actions to counter anything that you might have installed – loud music, a rainy conservatory roof, poor room acoustics.
- Well, that he may have done but he overlooked one thing; June Barker is one of ours. She was prepared to betray her husband because he was betraying the country.

It shouldn't be a shock, but it is. I should have seen that. I cannot speak right now. I feel...*alive to the astonishment*. Steely-eyed June was in on it all along. *Christ*.

- I'm shocked. She seemed so devoted to him.
- She is. She just *measures her devotion*.
- How on earth did you turn her?
- Actually we *didn't*. She came to us.

I gulp. He continues.

- She reported on everything that was said, including the repetition of one well-worn lie, that being that Francis was a 'sop' who was leading the TALISMAN project and who read and approved Barker's work. The truth is actually that Francis wrote the report himself on the basis of the intelligence and research that the entire committee was turning out, and that Barker felt overlooked. Since then he has been swelling his own importance; something that alcohol and indignation - and a few well-documented *previous failures* - do a lot to assist.

Good god above.

- Francis was a canny type though and knew that what was being written was like some kind of super-weapon which - in the wrong hands - could destroy all manner of things, including the ethics of even a person with the *right* hands. He committed his real report to a file which he lodged in secret in an obscure corner of the paper filing system and lodged the fake version via the TALISMAN committee.
- Why did he commit the real version to paper? Surely that would be vulnerable to anyone finding it and using that information, whether it was 'obscure' or not.
- You're correct, but Francis was wiler than that. He wrote the report in code. Not any kind of normal code, but a code which substituted real names for fake ones, real places for fake ones and so on. It read as complete nonsense to anyone uninitiated, but to Francis it would have been completely straightforward. Seemingly that was the way he wrote nearly everything he wanted to retain as private, and having a photographic memory means he could retain the *primer* in his head and use it at will.

I struggle to absorb this extraordinary situation. What a *curious* way of working.

- Now, some years down the line the TALISMAN committee found out that the lodged version they have is a diluted version of the real thing and that William Jessop – a member of the original TALISMAN – has done a bit of digging and found the original. Sadly though no one can make any sense of it because of Francis' code, but having this sort of dynamite is something they cannot let slip.
- Did they ask Francis to 'translate' it back?
- Of course they did. He had left this area of government to work in other extremely sensitive departments, but the will to have this work restored was so great he was pulled from that position and summoned to the PM.

When he spoke to the PM he was adamant that the information in the document was so perilous that it simply could not be read by anyone without corruption infecting them and that it was therefore so dangerous it could not be used. Naturally the PM went a little ballistic at this and *ordered* Francis to restore the document. Francis refused that order. The PM of course realised his weakness in this argument. He considered giving the document to GCHQ to break, but they pointed out that an arbitrary substitution cipher like this was impossible to break without specialised knowledge, and that this resided only with Francis. Besides, GCHQ would turn into a monster if it had that knowledge and would probably not hand it over to HMG anyway, or at least those were the terms within which Francis assured us.

With that, Jessop – a trusted member of the committee - took the document to Margaret Hayes-Williamson who was his line Minister and advised her of the situation. A new TALISMAN committee was prepared which met to decide the best course of action to take. Their eventual decision was to arrange to have the document translated and summarised for them by a reliable member of the Minister's office, someone who was deemed to be *incorruptible* by nature and who would not be able to exploit that corruption anyway. That is where you came in.

I hear the words and I sense the blocks again dropping into place, confirming officially so many things that I already knew or suspected that I feel vindicated in holding some of my weirder ideas about this entire situation. I pipe up to speak.

- So Jessop was on TALISMAN all along?
- Yes, from start to end.
- Is he alive?
- He is. His apparent death was a tactical matter which we needed to give you *motivation*.
- Motivation? I don't understand.
- Well...you may soon enough when the story is told.

I sense an uneasy instinct creeping up behind me. The chairman goes on.

- Jessop gave Margaret Hayes-Williamson the TALISMAN document in the knowledge that she couldn't know its content but that she could find someone

who could and that this person would remain unblemished by it. That person was you.

- Why me?
- Because only you could do it. No one else could.
- But how could I? How could I even break the codes?
- Because you don't actually exist, Mr Hafner.

My name – for the first time.

- I don't exist?
- No, you don't. You're Jim Francis.

Come to me, Jimmy! Show your dada how clever you are. Come to me!

When I was a lot younger I used to try and understand my dreams but I knew that I was really wasting my time in even trying.

And it seems that when dreams collide with what passes for reality there is even less chance of understanding them because they are – quite literally – *beyond belief*.

Only a matter of months ago I was unsure who I was, then I grew into another person's skin to the extent that I believed I was that person. Now I am being told that, in actual fact, I am not the latter at all and instead I am another person whose name has been heard much but who has been seen so little in the flesh. Now I know why I've never seen him; I'm living in him.

I find it hard to speak. I find it harder to breathe evenly. All I can do is try and focus on the voice to see if the ringing in my ears will stop even a little. The voice carries on, but the silence in the rest of the room oppresses me.

- I know that must come as a great jolt to you, but it's completely true. When you were handed the report to produce a *summary* what we were actually wanting from you was a *translation*. As you wouldn't do it overtly, we had to come up with a means to do so *covertly*. What you are living within is a manifestation of that covert wish. That you have been living here longer than expected is a testament to your tenacity and – let's be candid here – your dogged determination to do whatever it was to run contra whatever it was that you were told to do.

I make a conscious effort to disguise my breathing by taking deep and even breaths, but every so often I gasp because I need more than I am ingesting. An intelligent hand fills my cup. I draft from it for no reason other than the action feels normal to me.

- You see, you can read your own coded text without issue and may see fit to write your fair copy in a plain and straightforward way that anyone can understand it. After all, it didn't need a codebook, just your mind, and with luck you could read it, comprehend it and then write it out in plain English because the notion of recoding it wouldn't even occur to you. And now it seems that this is exactly what you did. The copies of the report we recovered from your hotel room were perfectly comprehensible, and for that we must thank you. The fact that you also did so within the guise of *Austin Hafner* may also have given you the idea that you were doing good work in the service of the country. I know it was running against your personal wishes, Mr Francis but at least the greater good was served.

I open my mouth to speak.

- I'm...*Francis*?

Middle-aged woman interrupts The Chair's flow.

- You are. We've been fooling you all along.
- *How?* I mean...I've been living as Austin Hafner now and have come to accept it. How can I possibly be someone else? I've been at my office, at my home, met people who know me...*how?* Have they *all* been lying to me?

The Chair:

- I'm afraid so, yes, to one extent or another. And situations have been manufactured to suit the needs of the moment. Even when you think you were acting independently, you weren't. Even when you thought you were having ideas and strategies, you weren't. When you thought you were *doing* you were really *being done*.
- I don't understand.
- Have a think about it. Try and remember how charmed your life has been. How come there was no police enquiry about the four people you apparently shot in the farmhouse? How come there was no tail on you back to your home? How come you managed to evade every attempt at capture, arrest, detention or even efforts to slow you down? They were all us, Mr Francis. All of it was us. Our only intention was to get you somewhere safe enough to carry out a job that you felt threatened enough to fulfil. It was a tricky balancing act, but it came off.
- Wait, wait, wait...I only *apparently* killed people at the farmhouse?
- Yes.
- I don't get that. I put bullets through...

I have to pause to compose myself. I realise I am confessing before them.

- I put bullets through their bodies and killed them all. I tortured one of them before I killed him. I can remember all that *completely clearly*. How come it's just 'apparent'?
- Because it never happened. You just saw it happen, but it didn't really happen. We've been running you within a *construct*, a type of alternative to *real existence* where what you believe and see and sense and experience is open to strong suggestions and we simply made those suggestions. No one died by your hand, Mr Francis. We were simply playing games with you, in effect. We took you out of one scenario and plopped you into another.

I ought to feel rage. Instead, I just feel *defeat*.

- Where are they all?
- They are all safe and well and probably working on another construct right now doing - *mutatis mutandis* - probably much the same job.
- It all seemed real enough to me. How did you manage to keep that up?

Hoarse man to the left. I only heard his voice before at the vote.

- This might be an appropriate time for the brief.

Chair:

- Yes, I think it is. Any objections?

Silence.

- Please go on.

Hoarse man clears his throat to little effect and begins:

- It's called RC-442. It's a psychotropic developed by the Americans for use in interrogations where they are confronted by unwilling subjects. Administration of this was intended to convince the more closed-up of suspects to open their hearts and minds and mouths by being open to the suggestion that they were among friends and confidantes. The success of the project was so great that it was used extensively around the world, but it was latterly that someone wondered if the effect could be sustained over a greater period.

Trials were actually quite good, provided that the subject was suitably mentally robust. In some cases the subjects confessed quickly, in others they had to be managed more carefully. In any event, the project was a success. Your distinction in this, Mr Francis, is that you were under the effect longer than anyone else ever has been.

It was the Americans who came up with this stuff. They needed agents to work in conditions of absolute secrecy on hugely sensitive situations, and yet have the ability to defuse that agent without having to resort to killing him. They needed plausible deniability; they needed to be able to allow the agent to exist and yet to be in no position to give anything away under any circumstances.

RC-442 comes in two payloads. Now I won't tire us all with the chemical construction of it all, but I will say that these are known by those who are in the business as *spice* and *bleach*. The spice is there to keep the illusion going and is therefore the active component. However, the bleach is administered later to reset the effect and put you back onto the place that you were before, thereby forgetting everything that the spice taught you or told you. What they really are, are mechanisms for sustaining a highly suggestive state. If we can assure you that you've forgotten who you are, then you will forget; if we later give you a memory back – real or otherwise – then you'll sustain that. The problem is that in *forgetting* you may remember. It's not just a matter of giving you a drug, you see. There is all manner of conditioning and discourse needed with the subject to let the suggested situation solidify in their mind.

There is a book by a man named Tupper called *The Theology of Wolfhart Pannenberg*. Have you ever read it?

He's asking *me* now?

- No...

- Well the book is largely drivel but within it the author coined a phrase which describes this process. He called it *retroactive continuity* or 'retcon' for short. It's a means of altering previous facts to match up with the future or intended future. The bleach in RC-442 does exactly that; it essentially reboots your head. It's like defibrillating your brain and letting it pick up its natural course again. It's a plot device, just like the McGuffin you alluded to earlier on. We bleach you, look after you for a while, give you some ideas and then release you to slowly ease back into existence.

Another voice:

- Like we said earlier...we're not *animals* about this. We do operate within the bounds of what passes for decency.
- How did you know I'd not be adversely affected?

The Chair:

- We took medical advice. Previously you had enjoyed a health scan every year and a psychological evaluation every half-year, both showing you AOK and ready for business.
- But if I didn't...if I showed signs of breaking...what then?
- Fortunately, we never had to make that decision. The honest answer is that I don't know. Consider this though; as our only chance in the document's retrieval, you were perhaps usable to the point of destruction. But...we never had to get there.
- Destruction? I thought you said you weren't monsters.
- Only if we have the element of choice removed do we ever become monstrous, Mr Francis.

Pause.

- 'It was all a dream is so'...*lame*...
- Not really, you know. It wasn't a real dream. It was a *constructed* dream. Made just for you.

Sudden alarm.

- ...and the document...?
- What of it?
- Why the sudden need for it?

A pause again.

- Now that is a *very* good question indeed. At the moment we find ourselves embroiled in a form of world economic warfare. Although many of us are friends on the surface, we must remember Sun Tzu's saying *keep your friends close but your enemies closer*. We are in a situation now where we have to distrust

everyone with a view to arming ourselves as a best form of defence, and as such we need information on them all and the engines that drive them. This sort of intelligence is nothing new; we just need it now more than ever to protect ourselves.

- Doesn't anyone else have this knowledge?
- Not to *our* understanding. We were thorough in erasing our tracks. Of *all* kinds.

That one hangs in the air amidst the recent echoes of the words *bleach* and *destruction*.

- You said that we used it for protection...but most of what I saw would only ever be used offensively, as a means of attack.
- And attack is definitely the most effective form of defence. It may come to that. We just have to be forewarned and forearmed. You can't have too big an arsenal behind you. I could go on quoting the world of Sun Tzu but I'm sure I'd be preaching to the converted.

Another question - borne from realisation - just occurs to me.

- Something has puzzled me.

The Chair:

- Ask, please...
- If this effect wipes my prior memory out...
- Please. We prefer *suppresses* really...
- If it *suppresses* my memories...then how come you knew I'd remember the code the document was written in?
- We didn't really. We took a gamble about it being such an ingrained part of your function that you'd just...*remember it*. This isn't a precise game we are playing, but we calculate the bowl.

Too vague. And another thing...this one suddenly lights up the air around me...

- There is something else.
- Please, feel free to ask anything.
- If I am Francis...how come Barker didn't recognise me when we met? I even told him that I was 'Austin'. He didn't as much as blink.

Middle aged woman speaks:

- This will come as a surprise to you, maybe; Barker and you have never met before. You were kept apart for reasons of security once your co-authorship had been decided upon, and *that* was partly predicated upon your distance from each other up to that point. You even only attended alternative committee meetings so you'd not encounter one another. Both of you reported via Phillips.

These words clang in my ears. Francis never met Barker. Now Barker's words make a marked sense: *At a professional distance. We never saw eye to eye, if you see my point. We were apart on so many things and in so many ways. We worked well together, but never closely.* They literally never saw eye to eye. They never knew each other personally.

Why didn't I pick up on this?

- And was everything that Barker said to me true?

She ponders a while.

- Hmmm. There is 'true' and there is 'accurate'. What he said to you he truly believed, yes. Whether it was all actually *correct* is open to interpretation.
- Well, let me rephrase that – is the *document* accurate?
- Well, to be charitable about it, the real answer is that we don't actually know as we don't really know what it contains in any verifiable depth. Having read it we have a *running gist* and have managed to verify that what you researched and compiled was actually accurate to the best of your abilities and according to information extant a decade ago. The landscape changes over time, you see.
- So it might be out of date?
- Some of the information might be, yes, but the organisations to which that information pertains still persist and would be embarrassed about should any of that information get out, even if the people concerned are dead or incapacitated. Bear in mind that the report details the existence and dealings of two organisations which have been around since the sixth century or so, which probably makes them the oldest non-secular organisations there are.
- But they have no public face. So how can you hope for embarrassment from them?

Her voice now betrays a little impatience with my line of questioning.

- The *public* don't matter. It's a matter of face and confidence. And there are internal divisions which can be exploited too, which again gives us a strong position which allows us to bargain.
- Bargain? Is this really something that was worth blowing up the British Library over?

Man to the right coughs and tries to humour me.

- And how do you know *that* happened?

That takes me aback. I wish I could see their damned faces.

- It was all over the press and the media. Everyone knows about it.
- Rather, it was all over the press and media *you saw* and that those you came into contact knew about it. Printing up newspapers and staging broadcasts is easy

stuff. If we can make you think you killed four people then thinking that a national institution has been reduced to rubble isn't going to run us down to the ground, is it?

I swallow hard. I realise that I have been entirely taken in, and that admitting that in front of ten pairs of scrutinising eyes whose gazes I cannot return is as close to an impossible task as I will ever encounter.

- You fed me that information?
- Yes, we fed you and you swallowed what we fed you. Just like the way you swallowed everything else we gave you. We even gave you a new identity and you swallowed *that*.

This prompts another more obvious question.

- So...who *is* Austin Hafner?

I sense a jocular smile on The Chair's face. He speaks:

- A name. A nothing. A cipher. A riddle. Something that doesn't matter and which never will. He's a name from a code book produced by a bureaucrat deep in Whitehall somewhere, the same place that produces operation names and cover stories. We never see them, they never see us. What his name was, is really irrelevant, Mr Francis. What matters is that he was a means to an end. Now he doesn't exist.
- He exists in my mind.

Ow...

To my right a smiling woman in a white smock has just hit me with a shot of something that makes my arm feel numb and warm at the same time. True enough, I cannot move it and the feeling is spreading its strange euphoria throughout me in a paralysing wave, across bone, muscle, sinew, blood, tissue and mind. I can feel Mother Darkness coming over me, the sounds again coming from afar.

- Soon, not even that Mr Francis. Soon we will move you away and clean you completely.

I feel like I have been hit by a flash of lightning. Whatever it is, it acts *fast*. My head lolls forwards onto my chest as the weight of it cannot be supported by my neck any more. A force far greater than I am has just gripped me. I try to speak but none of the mechanisms are working - none of them. I'm drowning in a benevolent sea of adverse beauty and although I ought to get out of it I don't want to. The beckoning overwhelms the fear. My only option is my intruding chemical surrender.

- We'll meet again, Mr Francis.

Voice to my left:

- *Only this time you won't know it.*
- Oh of course - how apt! There is always 'get out of jail free', isn't there?

- Oh for goodness sake – you're *so slow* about things sometimes.

I perceive their laughter but I don't hear it because a speeding, onrushing ball of blackness consumes me again for the last time. My last coherent thought is about how helpless I have always been.

PART IV

DEUS EX

MACHINA

I woke up about an hour ago. There was a banging on the door and the rattling managed to get me out of a sleep so deep and black and fathomless that it took me a while to realise just what was happening. The first odd thing I noticed was the smell. I didn't have a bedroom that smelled like this. Nothing like it, in fact. And the mattress was too firm and the sheets too tight and the pillows too high and the room too cold. The next interesting thing I realised was that there was no banging on the door at all. It was instead the rhythmic thudding of the pain in my head, the blood pounding hard in my ears as the discomfort clung onto the back of my head like it was coming apart. Instead of trying to get up, I moved a little then apathetically lay back and knew that, whatever else was happening, the previous night's excesses would come back to me and this would all make perfect sense.

Except it didn't. This was definitely a strange room, it was dark and I was feeling like death. I had no recollection of what brought me to this place – wherever and whatever it was – and I had no idea why my head was hurting as badly as it was. I sat up quickly – which was tricky against the tightness of the firmly tucked-in bed covers - and stared into the blackness. Tight bed sheets? Was I in a hospital? But what hospital keeps a hold of darkness like this?

Someone stirs.

- Jim. Go back to sleep, will you?
- I'm sorry, love.

A pause.

- What time is it?

I reach over and pick up the phone by my bedside, pressing the buttons almost at random to get the time to show.

- Looks like it's about six.
- How come you're awake?
- I dunno...got a dicky tummy, maybe. Bit of a sore head too.
- Oh not again. You and your digestion. Like last time?
- I dunno. What did we have last night?
- We had the sole and the chicken in the citric sauce. It was pretty good.
- Yeah it was. Nice stuff. I'm going to get up a sec.
- Okay...come back soon.

I prise myself out of bed into the oddly scented cold air and try to pick my way through the darkness towards the source of the grey light to my right, en route walking into a short table that cracked against my upper shin. On reaching the curtains I pull them open a chink and look out into the grey morning light. Rain pattering on the window panes in waves brought by a gusting wind. Pressing my face closer to the glass I look into the refractive lens of the water resting upon it and tried to discern the view outside.

A street. Shops. Hardly anyone about outside. A couple of cars. A lorry trundling past. Back in rainy London again. We've hardly been away.

- Rain's back on.
- Hardly a surprise, is it? Just when we start to make plans about anything...
- Uh huh.

I drop the curtain and walk through to the little bathroom and flick on the light, lift the toilet seat and relieve myself into the pan. Jesus. *How much older are we now? That roll of fat over my belt area is not going away.* I look backwards into the mirror mounted on the wall beside the shower and stare at the face that looks back at me. Heavier, older, wiser, slower. It comes to us all. Now forty-six and showing it. My hair recedes and greys and I look tired and unshaven. Blue eyes bloodshot from the previous night's citric excesses, skin pale and drawn as though I was either vaguely undernourished or I haven't slept properly in about a week.

Flush.

I walk back to the bed via the light cast from the break in the curtains and squeeze myself into the tight covers. She turns to me and presses her body against mine and drapes an arm over me. We kiss softly.

- What are we doing today then?

I struggle to remember.

- I think we're going to take a walk across the park down to the water and see what we can see. Those crazy boaters might be out again.
- That sounds good to me, the rain notwithstanding. I bet they have that cormorant there again.
- Cory, they do *not* have cormorants on the Serpentine.
- I think we need to have a bet on that.
- Name your odds.
- Loser gets to clean our shoes when we get back?
- Deal. You'll be sorry.
- Sorry because you lose? *I think not.*

We smile at each other in the darkness. Life feels good. We have security, and we have each other. Above everything else I have a singular freedom coming to me as well.

An hour or so ahead we are downstairs in the restaurant at one of those dreadful little self-service *breakfast buffets* where you just know half the people here are called Kevin and are here on a business course on staff management strategies from their head office in Leicester. Small pots of tea, little jams, burnt *room-scent-defining* bread in a

rack made on one of those odd little lattice conveyor machines, scrambled eggs on toast and that eerie breakfast room silence where no one wants to make a sound as they glide over the carpet towards the machine that silently turns the watery facsimile of orange juice.

I mutter quietly between us.

- These places just *creep me out*. Look at these people in their little single serving tables with their tiny pots of tea. That smell of toast – nowhere else in the world makes toast with that hotel smell, you know? It just creeps me out, like they are all secretly the same.
- Oh *Jim*...it's just serving a purpose.
- I know, but there is something about the *little foods* that bothers me. Where are the factories that turn this stuff out? I get the feeling it's little food made by little people, like creepy little gnomes with permanent scowls and weird floppy pointed hats.
- Oh come on. They are just doing what people want. If it was that much different then they'd not know what to do.
- I know, but it still creeps me a bit.
- Well, we'll be out of here soon.
- And the *little shampoo* and the towels and the small biscuits in the rooms. And who makes those tubes of coffee granules? There's never enough coffee there so you always want more, and if you want more you have to pay for it. And the things you *think* are favours to you are actually things you end up paying for, like the shoe-shining service...
- ...a service which you'll be fulfilling later on, I think...
- ...which *seems* to be free to give the illusion of service. You know what I saw last night when I put my brogues out? I saw down the silent corridor with the dull night lights, and there were pairs upon pairs upon pairs of shoes outside the doors all the way down the corridor in both directions, with those little room service breakfast menus hanging on the handles. Silent life all around us, all stuck away in their rooms. It made me wonder about the people inside, like they are all wedged in their little cells in suspended animation, not knowing there are other people around them...

Cory laughs.

- You're so *beset* by your imagination, you know. Some of the things you come out with! What did you say about the laundry woman?
- Oh...don't take that one all too seriously.
- She is *not* an Oompah-Loompah, you know...
- Yeah but y'know...that orange foundation. Caked on like that. Melon of breast and empty of head. Don't kid me on you don't understand...

Cory shakes her head.

- That's just downright mean, you know. She's nice enough. She made a damned good job of that tatty old suit of yours. Looked better than when you bought it. Or when your father gave it to you. Or whatever.
- Or my gramps left it to me?
- That too. More tea from a miniature pot?
- No thanks – it's stewed.
- It was *poured* stewed. I thought this place was a four star.
- It is. I don't know how they measure it now.
- Dice, I think.
- Chicken bones.
- *Tiny little* chicken bones.

We muse in mutual silence.

- So...for a trip down to the water?
- Yes, I guess. You thought more about what we were discussing before?
- Yeah, I have.
- Any thoughts?
- Yes.

A pause.

- And?
- And let's save them for the mythical cormorant.

Some time later, through the gloomy air we walked, past the Marble Arch and over the hill down the winding path past the old police office towards the snaking water that ripples in the strong cold breeze. Across the far side comes the distant outcry of voices that the determined make as they prepare a launch of canoes, their words indeterminate and many but far off and only adding to the closer yattering of the waterfowl around us.

We walk slowly down the path way and around to the benches where we sit and watch out for whatever it is that's worth watching there.

- I can't see him.
- Oh he'll be here. Trust me.
- What is he, disguised as a goose?

- No, he'll be here. You wait and see.

She takes my hand.

- I've been worried about you.
- I know.
- I just want you to know that *whatever* decision you take, I'll stand by you.

I try to find the words.

- I really appreciate that, Cory. I just need you to know that. And that what I'm thinking of doing is with *us* in mind and no one else. No one else in the world matters to me but *us*.

She gives me space.

- I want to leave. I'm pretty sure of that now. It's all gone on too long and things are not the way they used to be around the place. *The writing is on the wall*, as the saying goes; I just don't see my name up there. Rather than give them the satisfaction I'd sooner see the end of it now, I think.
- Well...I kind of guessed you'd come up with that. Have you told anyone else?
- No, of course not. This is between you and me. I'll spring it soon enough, though. I'm just not keen on advertising the fact just yet. You never know what contingencies they will be making for my departure if they do. You know what these people are like. They talk of loyalty and all that but in truth it's always going to be a one way street with them. I'd sooner just leave them when they least expect it.
- Don't do this just to inconvenience them, Jim. You have to do what's best for *us*.
- I can do that *and* make myself a pain at the same time. I've been considering the matter of timing. You know The Big One rolls out in six weeks' time. That *could* be an opportune time for me to go.
- Will you tell them why?
- No, I'd sooner just give them a resignation they were not expecting and walk away from it. It's the way I left the Old Place – not that they know about that, of course.

The water laps, the breeze furls. Her hand on mine.

- What will you do?
- I don't know, but I think we could move into freelance. Maybe something like that. Advisors or consultants – they pay well for that sort of information and experience. We can manage, I think. Maybe even get an academic job at the same game.
- Okay...

- We sell up the flat and move out to the cottage. It's not much but we can cut our cloth to suit and that only means saving some money. We can change our lives and probably feel better about ourselves. What we have left over we can use to finance Jason at University and we can give up the cars and the holidays, at least for a while. We can have a sort of adventure.
- It sounds fine to me.
- We can also use some of the money to convert the lock-up down by the cottage into a workshop studio for you. That way you can carry on doing what you are doing and not worry about discontinuity; you do most of your business electronically anyway, so there ought to be not even a blip as you pass from one place to another. It's not as if you need to remain in the city, and if you want a prestige address then we can get you a mail drop.
- That won't be necessary. I just need a fixed place where I can work from and turn out my stuff. Like you say, I work electronically now. Sometimes I don't even see clients' faces.
- That's the way the world is now; smaller and faster. Maybe not *better* for it always but certainly sleeker.
- Look! There he is!

I look in the direction in which she is pointing and see, balanced on the knotted branch, a large black broken umbrella which stretches out, draws its wings apart, and then flaps them noisily. The creature makes no other sound; it just sits there and watches.

- Well I'll be damned...
- I think I'm going to walk through every single muddy puddle on the way back to the hotel, you know.
- There is *winning* and there is *gloating*.
- Yes, and I know the difference. Right now I am gloating. I am a gloater. I gloat.

I smile.

- I feel sorry for you that your life is made the more complete by the fact that you were right about something.
- Whatever. I'm still gloating.
- *Whatever.*
- Actually, I'll tell you who *I* feel sorry for...
- Who?
- Her over there.

Further up the path is a van selling – of all things – ice cream. It's October, it's cold and wet and it's early and she is trying to sell ice cream.

- She has staying power.
- She does.
- Oh, and talking of staying power, I have one more idea.
- Yes?
- We probably ought to get married. It might make things a bit smoother.
- We discussed that before and you didn't care for the notion.
- *Meh.* Times change.

She grips my hand.

- Then we ought to celebrate.
- We should. How about two choc ices?
- Sounds good to me. I hope they have really tiny ones made by those goblins.
- That's *gnomes* actually.
- I say goblins. This is my idea now.
- Goblins don't exist.
- Neither did the cormorant until two minutes ago.
- Oh well....*goblins it is.*

We stand up and meander to the ice cream van, where we seem to take the solitary vendor there almost completely by surprise. Cory stifles a laugh and holds my hand tightly.

- Good morning.
- Yes...good morning. What can I get you?
- Two choc ices, please.
- Sure. Are Choc-a-Blox okay for you?
- My favourite!

I feel a dig in my ribs from the side. The ice-cream girl turns and opens the freezer to the left of the counter while I rustle up the change from my pockets. Cory mumbles under her breath.

- Do you have enough?
- Probably. We'll do a runner if we don't.

The girl behind the counter produces the foil-covered ice creams and hands them over. I give one to Cory and offer the girl the money.

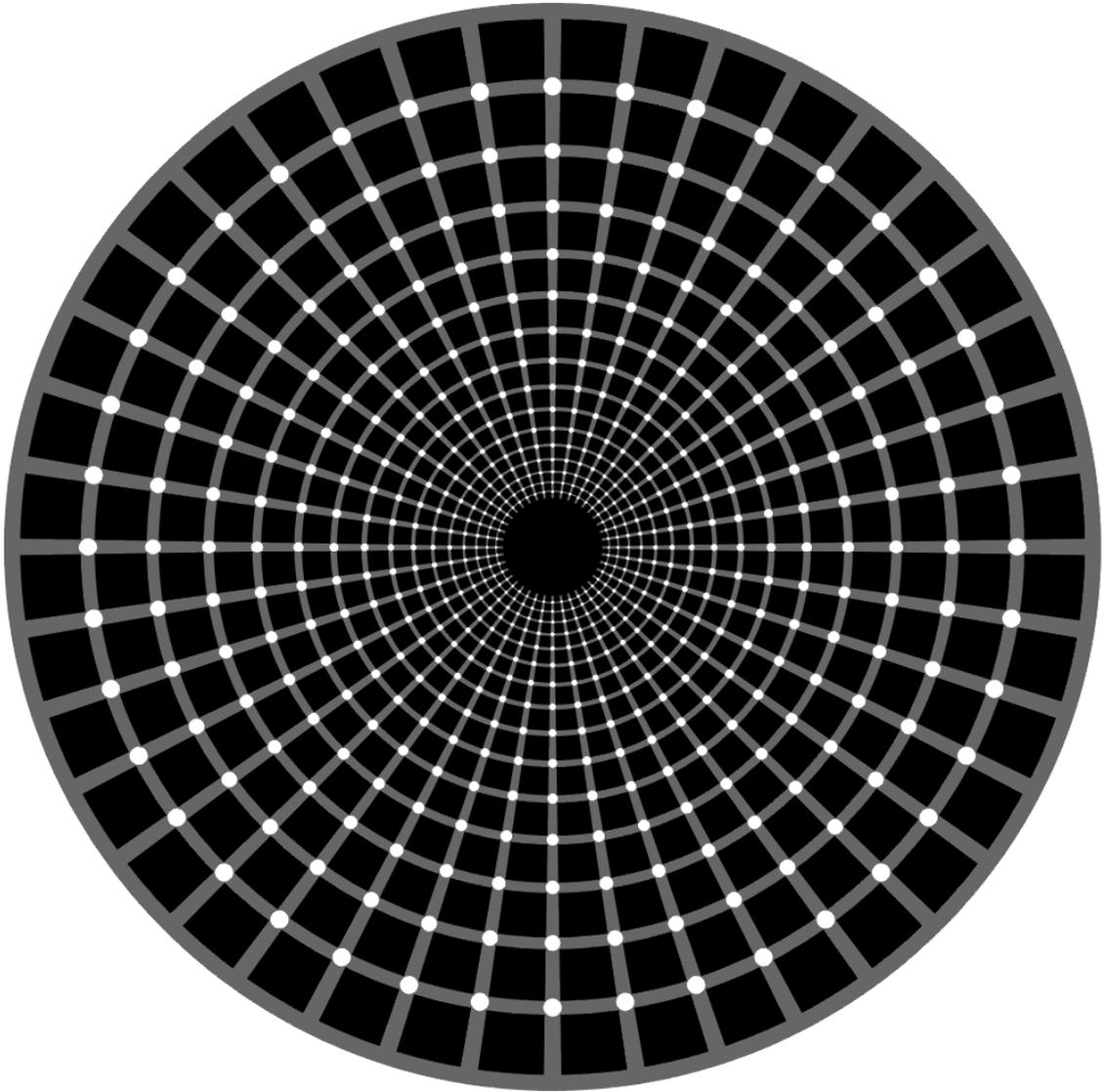
- Five pounds forty, thanks.

I cough. Cory laughs quietly. The girl hands me the sixty pence change back and smiles broadly at me.

- It's a lovely day, isn't it?

I smile back at her, entranced by those azure eyes; eyes whose colour would mean I could never grow sick of looking into them. The world is full of possibilities again.

- Yes...it's a *fantastic* day.



END