

John M Upton

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Episode I - Hainault	Episode XII – Marylebone
Episode II - Holborn	Episode XIII – Haychester
Episode III – Waterloo	Episode XIV – Bank
Episode IV - Moor Park	Episode XV – Leytonstone
Episode V – Westminster	Episode XVI – London Bridge
Episode VI – Victoria	Episode XVII – Cannon Street
Episode VII – Embankment	Episode XVIII – Bethnal Green
Episode VIII – Earl’s Court	Episode XIX – Turnpike Lane
Episode IX – Lewisham	Episode XX – Star Lane
Episode X – Epping	Episode XXI – St. James’s Park
Episode XI – Liverpool Street	Episode XXII - Aldwych

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Episode XXIII – Nine Elms
Episode XXIII – Priory Park
Episode XXIV – Tottenham Court Road

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London Bridge

Thursday October 15th – Washington DC, United States

“So we are all in agreement then” former US Senator William McCallister, the man at the head of the table confirmed to his colleagues, all gathered together in a clandestine meeting in an anonymous rented office building in the heart of the capital of the United States.

“We have the authority to proceed” another member of the meeting confirmed as he consulted the documentation he had in front of him, much of which bore the official emblem of the US Senate “All that is required is to tell our Russian friend to proceed and notify our English cousins.”

“Mr Hoskins” McCallister addressed Christopher Hoskins, an agent of the National Security Agency or NSA who was sat at the far end of the long table looking on with some expectancy “Are your teams ready to go?”

“The US side can be in place and active within forty eight hours, we have all the right people in the right places” he confirmed confidently “All we need to do is send them the magic word and we will have the place under our control.”

“That leaves just the overseas angle” the leader of the meeting confirmed “Probably the most important part of this whole project.”

“Our English friend has his people ready to go” Hoskins responded “Once the Russian and his sub-contractors enter play it should set off every alarm bell in the British Security Services, all we need to do is poke and prod in the right places at the right time and make sure they are suitably distracted.”

“Gentlemen, this is an historic day” McCallister declared triumphantly “A new era for global security and all with the blessing of the Senate and the UK Government and the best thing is neither will know anything about it until it is far too late.”

This remark prompted some deep laughing from the men and women present in the meeting which McCallister allowed to echo around the room for a few moments before politely raising his hand for quiet so he could continue.

“Very well then” he then declared “this is now a live project and your respective departments are now charged with delivering the goods.”

“I’ll get our Russian friend moving” Hoskins confirmed as he produced a telephone “Then we stir the pot until it is time for me to head over to merry old England and firmly nail shut the lid on the old ways of doing things.”

“Outstanding” McCallister proudly confirmed “In which case I declare this meeting adjourned. Good luck everyone not that we will need it and I will see you all in London in three weeks time.

Twenty Four Hours Later
Gatwick Airport, West Sussex, England

The man from the National Security & Police Service's Custom and Excise Department adjusted his peaked cap as the private jet taxied to a halt just a few feet away.

Watching on for a few moments as the whine of the jet engines died down, he observed as the passenger door was opened and lowered to the ground before three men alighted onto the cold hard tarmac in front of the private aircraft reception area of the vast international airport.

“Good morning gentlemen” the Customs Officer declared as he stepped forward to greet the three men who had alighted from the aircraft, smartly dressed in business suits and carrying briefcases “If you will follow me please, I will have you processed through Immigration in just a few minutes.

The three men merely nodded in agreement and followed the Customs Officer into the building where they proceeded to a desk where they were asked to open their briefcases for an inspection and also produce their passports.

As per standard procedure, the passports of the three men were scanned on a flat glass screen set into the desk whereupon the details appeared on the computer screen in front of the Immigration Officer.

“What is the purpose of your visit Mr Kalikov?” the Immigration Officer inquired.

“A bit of business, a bit of pleasure” the leading man, a slightly tired looking gentleman in his late fifties admitted in a strong Russian accent “Hopefully more of the latter and less of the former.”

“And how long will you be staying in the UK Sir?” the Immigration Officer then asked as she made some notes.

“Three or four days, maybe up to a week” the man identified as Kalikov confirmed.

“Very well Sir” the Immigration Officer declared as having seen that the three passport identities had passed the computer analysis with no flags coming up she duly stamped them and handed them back “Welcome to the United Kingdom, enjoy your stay.”

“Thank you, I intend to” Kalikov responded with a grateful smile before he and his two colleagues departed the arrivals lounge and headed through a door into the bustling area of the main North Terminal.

The three men said nothing as they proceeded through the airport premises. They travelled on the monorail for the short journey to the South Terminal before making their way down to the railway station where they immediately boarded the second coach of a Class 460 Gatwick Express service that was waiting on platform one to depart with a service that would run non stop to London Victoria Station, a journey of some thirty five minutes.

Sitting back in the First Class section as the train began to depart, Kalikov relaxed in the seat and one of his associates a tall thin but potentially evil looking man clicked his fingers to attract the attention of the refreshment trolley host nearby who duly came over.

“The best champagne you have please” the tall man requested in a rather gruff voice that contrasted hugely with that of the leader of the group in that it came in a very distinct Welsh accent.

“Celebrating are we gentlemen?” the trolley host asked as she produced three half size bottles from the trolley's refrigerated compartment along with some glasses.

“Oh indeed we are” Kalikov confirmed with a smile of pure delight “To the great project gentlemen” he declared in a toast “May everyone get what they so richly deserve.”

Three Minutes Later

Section Fourteen Operations Head Quarters - Below Horse Ferry Road, Westminster, London

Lieutenant Commander Lizzy Barrett had been recruited by Sir Richard Crowthorne to his specialist Section Fourteen agency just three weeks earlier direct from the Haychester Division of the National Security & Police Service. In that short time she had already built up quite a reputation as an excellent data analyst as well as field agent, this latter task made all the more easier being a fully trained Security Service officer and still in the uniform.

Today with the autumnal rain pouring down outside four floors above at street level, Barrett was quite thankful she was at her new desk working on some files that Sir Richard had earlier asked her to take a second look at but just as she was getting into the minutiae of what they contained, a red notification appeared and began to flash urgently on the computer screen just to her left.

“So much for a quiet morning” Barrett remarked as she turned in her seat towards the computer screen for a closer look but her relaxed attitude soon changed to one of far more urgency when she read what was on the screen.

“Well hello there...” she remarked with a raised eyebrow of surprise as she hit the print button and nearby the printer produced a two page paper based version of the notification she had just received.

Briefly checking the printed copy to ensure it was complete and agreed with what she had just learned, Barrett quickly headed out of her office and down the corridor to the far end where she duly knocked on the door of her superior Sir Richard Crowthorne.

“Come in” he was heard to call whereupon Barrett duly entered whereupon Sir Richard put down the newspaper he had been reading and looked up expectantly “Is this going to ruin my otherwise beautiful morning?” he asked, already sensing that something important was about to arrive at his desk.

“Quite probably Sir” Barrett confirmed “Some flagged Russian guy by the name of Alexander Cruschov and two associates landed at Gatwick Airport in a private jet on false passports about fifteen minutes ago.”

“Holy Mary, Mother of God” Sir Richard responded in shock “Is this confirmed?” he quickly asked.

“Report from our man at Gatwick came in two minutes ago” Barrett confirmed passing across the printed material in her hand for Sir Richard to take a look at “They didn't get flagged at Immigration because he was only on our system, not theirs.”

“Where is he now?” Sir Richard asked with an obvious sense of urgency as he reached for the telephone on his desk.

“CCTV feeds show he and his two friends boarded a Gatwick Express service at the station” Barrett confirmed “He should be arriving at London Victoria in about thirty minutes.”

“Well done my dear” Sir Richard responded as he dialled a number on the telephone “Get yourself over to New Scotland Yard immediately and commandeer a reliable Security Service ARU team then meet me outside Victoria Station in fifteen minutes.”

“Yes Sir” Barrett confirmed before she quickly departed.

“This is Sir Richard Crowthorne” he declared as soon as his call was answered “Alexander Cruschov just arrived in the UK and is on his way to central London right now on a Gatwick Express.”

There was a pause as the person he had called responded before Sir Richard continued.

“I think that would be best Sir” Sir Richard agreed “I already have mobilised my best uniformed officer and an ARU team to snatch Cruschov the moment he arrives at Victoria but I need authorisation for Code Three Special Measures.”

There was a further pause as the person on the other end of the line considered their decision before relaying it to Sir Richard.

“Thank you Prime Minister” Sir Richard confirmed “I will keep you fully informed” he declared before hanging up, getting up from behind his desk and grabbing his coat which he placed over his arm as he hurriedly left the room.

Twelve Minutes Later
London Victoria Railway Station, Central London

“What are you doing here Commander if I may ask?” Sir Richard asked as he, Lieutenant Barrett and the commandeered Security Service Armed Response Unit team arrived on the south central side concourse of Victoria Railway Station and approached the entrance to the Gatwick Express platforms which were numbers thirteen and fourteen.

“Oh you know me old man” the Commander admitted with a wry smile “I can never resist turning up to one of your mysterious little parties, it's a bad habit I think I caught from you.”

“Ah...” Sir Richard responded.

“Besides when Barrett suddenly showed up out of the blue and stole my best ARU team straight out of the canteen without hesitation, repetition or deviation it does tend to stimulate my curiosity” the Commander confirmed “So what's going on?”

“Oh nothing” Sir Richard responded as innocently as he could whilst they made their way through to the buffer stop end of platform thirteen.

“I've known you too long” the Commander reminded him “You never do anything unless it is important and usually vital to national security.”

“Just someone coming in on the next Gatwick Express we have a passing interest in, that is all” Sir Richard evasively explained.

“And Bob and his merry men?” the Commander gestured towards the four tall and fully armed men from the ARU Division “They are just here to carry this guy's luggage I presume?”

“It's just a precaution” Sir Richard confirmed “You never know when things might suddenly get out of hand.”

“Which with you two seems to be very frequently” Barrett remarked.

“Methinks she has got to know our reputations a little too well” Sir Richard commented to the Commander aside.

“Indeed” the Commander agreed “Tell me, this isn't one of those things that is going to cost me my no claims bonus on my life insurance is it?” he wryly asked as they watched the bright white headlights of the Gatwick Express train pierce the gloom at the far end of platform thirteen as it snaked into the station.

“You don't have a no claims bonus on your life insurance” Sir Richard casually reminded him “In fact you don't any life insurance at all as there is no company in existence that is mad enough to give you or Tracy any cover.”

“Oh yes, I forgot” the Commander admitted as the train drew closer to the buffer stops in front of them before stopping.

“All right Lieutenant Commander” Sir Richard called to Barrett “Let's go get him.”

“Mind if I tag along?” the Commander asked as he followed them to the leading carriage of the train just as the doors were released and the passengers began to disembark.

“Join the party” Sir Richard agreed as he and Barrett began to scan around, carefully observing every individual who alighted from the train which probably only totalled about a hundred individuals as it was a fairly quiet time of the morning.

“I don't see him Sir” Barrett admitted after a couple of minutes by which time the crowd of disembarked passengers had all but dissipated.

“Bob, block this area off” Sir Richard confirmed “No one to enter or leave this area unless I say so.”

“Search the train Sir?” Barrett suggested as she drew her gun from its holster and checked it.

“Indeed” Sir Richard agreed before he, Barrett and the Commander proceeded on board the first carriage.

“Whoa!” the refreshment trolley host suddenly exclaimed as he was suddenly confronted by three armed people, two of them uniformed Security Service officers and one of those probably the most powerful law enforcement officer in the country.

“Don't panic, we are the good guys” Sir Richard confirmed.

“I take it that isn't him then?” the Commander asked.

“No” Barrett confirmed “The guy we are looking for is about five foot eight, heavy build, balding in his late fifties and Russian.”

“Well he is not in this one” the Commander confirmed as he looked around both the seating area and the now empty luggage van section of the first carriage.

“Well he has to be on board somewhere” Sir Richard confirmed “Let's move on” he suggested.

Over the course of the next five minutes, between the three of them they searched the entire length of the eight coach train until the Commander reached the driving cab at the far end.

“Nothing” the Commander declared to the others “I hate to say it but I think whatever you guys are looking for has either given you the slip or was never here in the first place.

“I don't understand it” Barrett remarked “He was recognised when he came into Gatwick, the CCTV shows him boarding this train and it departing but it doesn't stop anywhere between here and there so he must be around here somewhere.”

“Unfortunately my dear” Sir Richard remarked as the three of them alighted from the train back onto the platform “this train is emptier than my social diary.”

“Bob!” the Commander called down the length of the platform to the ARU Team leader at the head of the platform “Anyone passed you in the last five minutes?” he asked.

“No one Sir” Bob confirmed whose team had even prevented the train driver from departing just in case he was who Sir Richard was looking for.

“Damm...” Sir Richard cursed “Now the guy is loose.”

“Who?” the Commander asked insistently.

“Trust me old friend” Sir Richard responded before Barrett could say anything “It is far, far better that you don't know.”

“Hmmm...” the Commander mused in response as Sir Richard took out his mobile telephone and quick dialled a number from his directory.

“Amber, it's Sir Richard” he was heard to call as soon as he had been answered “Look I know it is a lot to ask of you but I have a job for you that you may be interested in, a certain Russian of our mutual acquaintance is back in town and I need someone who I can trust that also knows this man like the back of their hand. Are you interested?”

Three Weeks Later
River Thames near Westminster Bridge, London

"Tango Romeo Control to Patrol Vessel Jennifer" the Control Room Supervisor of the Thames River Division of the National Security & Police Service called over the radio link with the first call of the early morning.

It was not even dawn yet with the sky above the city of London only now just starting to lighten as the Security Service patrol vessel Jennifer on the last hour of the overnight duty passed the imposing Gothic outline of the Houses of Parliament, dominating the north bank of the River Thames.

"Just as I thought we were going to get away with a nice quiet night" Captain Andrew Donnelly, the commanding officer of the Jennifer remarked with a certain sense of resignation as he reached across from the helm to the radio set "Patrol Vessel Jennifer receiving, go ahead Control."

"Sorry to disturb your morning guys but I got a possible body for you" the Control Room Supervisor explained "Call came in about ten minutes ago, something body shaped wrapped in black plastic bobbing about in the water just downstream of London Bridge."

"We'll check it out" Donnelly agreed "Jennifer out."

"London Bridge Sir?" the helmsman asked across the bridge of his commanding officer.

"London Bridge" Donnelly confirmed.

With the whirr of the boat's engines, the water astern bubbled up as the helmsman accelerated the powerful vessel and headed upstream passing beneath Westminster Bridge with the siren and lights in full cry.

On London Bridge itself two patrol officers looked over the parapet at the murky water below, one of them shining a torch which reflected off of the black plastic wrapping that could be seen partially submerged in the water below.

"Are you sure it's a body?" one of the officers asked his colleague.

"To be honest I hope not" the other officer who was holding the torch responded "We clock off in an hour and I for one need breakfast."

"How can you think of food at a time like this?" the first officer asked,

"First order of business, survival" the second officer explained.

"Tell that to the poor sod down there" the first officer indicated the black plastic object below them.

"If it is a body" the second officer responded "Well we should find out soon enough, here come the water rats" he remarked as they looked ahead to the sight of the patrol vessel sweeping beneath the bridge before slowing to a halt.

"Down there mate" one of the officers called to the patrol vessel and indicated using the torch.

"Got it" the Captain called back as he switched on the bow searchlight and trained it where indicated, bathing the area around the unidentified object with bright light "Garry, get the hook pole" he called to one of the other officers on the boat who duly stepped to the front of the vessel with the long pole before putting it into the water and successfully latching it onto the object whereupon with a pull, it rotated in the water and a hand appeared sticking up through a hole in the plastic.

"Told you" the first patrol officer on the bridge confirmed to his colleague.

"So much for breakfast" the second officer admitted in defeat as below them the crew of the patrol boat managed to lift the wrapped body out of the water and onto the deck.

A few minutes later as the duty Scenes of Crime Officer and the District Coroner arrived, the boat came into the dock by the river side and the body was brought ashore, laid onto the dock pontoon so that a preliminary examination could begin.

"Let's see what we have here then" the Coroner declared as she knelt down to examine the body, first checking the exposed wrist outside the packaging "Well he's dead that is for certain."

"I'll get some pictures before we open up" the Scenes of Crime Officer confirmed as he extracted a large camera and flash unit from his bag before proceeding to take a number of shots from various angles.

"Ok then let's have a look at you" the Coroner confirmed as she took a scalpel and carefully opened the wrapping, making an incision just large and shallow enough so as to expose the body within without actually touching or disturbing it.

"Doesn't look like he has been in the water very long" the Scene of Crime Officer remarked as he took a few more shots.

"Less than a day I would say" the Coroner agreed as she took a careful look before noticing something in the jacket pocket of the body "Got a wallet here" she declared as she carefully removed it, allowing a couple of photographs to be taken of it before she carefully opened it.

"Driving licence, looks like our friend here" the Coroner declared as she compared the photograph on the licence with the face of the dead man "Officer!" she called over whereupon one of the Security Service patrol officers came over "Got an I.D. on this fella for you."

"Lovely" the officer responded as he proffered a clear plastic evidence bag into which the Coroner dropped the driving licence before taking a look at it "Control from Lima Mike Three Five Seven" he called into his radio.

"Control, go ahead" the duty supervisor at the Metropolitan Division Central London Control Room at New Scotland Yard responded.

"Reference the body just pulled out of the river near London Bridge" the officer confirmed "Found a driving licence on it which seems to match the deceased, a Seamus O'Donnell, born fifteenth March 1978."

As the officer re-laid the details over the radio, the duty supervisor input them into the computer only for his face to take on a look of deep concern at the result that appeared on his screen a few moments later, a record with a large green flashing message emblazoned right across it.

"Oh hell, he's an 'R' list face" the duty supervisor remarked to himself before pressing a button on his keyboard to blank the screen before anyone else saw it "Err Lima Mike Three Five Seven from Control, got nothing on the computer on your deceased" he declared.

"Well worth a try I suppose" the officer responded "Thanks anyway."

"Sorry I could not help" the duty supervisor replied "Control out."

After a few moments thought the duty supervisor looked around the large control room to make sure no one was watching him before reaching across the desk to the telephone whereupon he dialled the direct number for the main New Scotland Yard switchboard.

"This is Ian up in Control, get me the Chief on a secure line" he requested with deep sincerity coupled with a distinctly nervous look.

Up until that moment the only thing to disturb the early morning silence had been the gentle ticking of the grandfather clock in the hallway and the household cat as she had jumped off of the sofa and made her way into the kitchen as always in search of something to eat.

Then the telephone began to ring.

"Bugger..." came the muffled response from beneath the duvet in the master bedroom whereupon a tired looking Commander peered out into the gloom whilst alongside him his wife Tracy reached up and switched on the bedside lamp.

"Now who the hell could be ringing at this hour of the morning?" the Commander asked as reluctantly he sat up in the bed and gave the bedroom door through which the ringing of the telephone could be heard a hard stare.

"No idea love" Tracy admitted whilst stifling a yawn "But I am sure I can narrow it down to a list of usual suspects. Maybe the Prime Minister has lost his wallet again?" she joked but it easily reflected the well connected nature of these two, probably the most well respected couple in the field of law enforcement.

"Will someone answer that damm telephone?" the voice of Jack their adopted son was heard to call from his room next door "Some of us have school in the morning."

"He has a point" the Commander admitted as he got up "It's still ringing so it must be important."

With a little reluctance and some incoherent mumbling, the Commander went out into the hallway and picked up the telephone.

"If this isn't a matter of life and death then start typing your CV" the Commander answered semi-jokingly but with sufficient serious emphasis to make the caller uncomfortable.

"Sorry Sir to be calling at this early hour" the duty control room supervisor called "can you go secure please."

"Done" the Commander confirmed as he pressed a little red button on the side of the telephone, an action confirmed by a little bleep over the line at both ends of the call "What's occurring?" he asked, already sensing the seriousness of the approaching problem.

"The water rats dragged a body out of the Thames about twenty minutes ago" the duty supervisor confirmed "I just ran the I.D. from the deceased's driving license through the computer and it came up red flagged."

"What's the name?" the Commander asked.

"Seamus O'Donnell" the supervisor responded "when I ran it through our system it came up as being 'R' listed so I kept schtum and called you Sir."

"Name doesn't ring any bells with me but I bet I know a man who does" the Commander replied "Get the Coroner to put the body in a very safe place and do it quietly, I'll take it from here."

"Yes Sir" the supervisor confirmed "I'll get onto it right away."

"Thanks" the Commander declared before hanging up the telephone.

"That sounded ominous" Tracy remarked as she joined her husband in the hallway "What's happened?" she asked.

"A body just got dragged out of the Thames that apparently has set off certain alarm bells on the computer" the Commander explained "The deceased as an entry on our 'R' list."

"Our what?" Tracy asked as they both went through to the kitchen whereupon she decided that as they were now up they might as well have some breakfast.

"One of Dickie Crowthorne's little pet projects" the Commander explained "Basically it is a highly classified list of people that if they should crop up on the proverbial radar of certain law enforcement agencies such as ours for whatever reason then it is in the best interests of National Security if their problems disappeared so to speak."

"It will be a bit difficult to make a problem disappear if the guy is lying dead in the company morgue" Tracy remarked "I mean someone will miss him sooner or later I would assume."

"Exactly love" the Commander agreed as he picked up his mobile telephone off of the kitchen table and after some initial fiddling managed to speed dial a number.

"Who are you calling, as if I couldn't guess?" Tracy asked.

"The aforementioned Dickie Crowthorne" the Commander confirmed as he waited to be connected "Damm, answer phone."

"Well it is five thirty in the morning" Tracy mildly pointed out.

"Richard, I have a dead body in the morgue you may be interested in" the Commander called to Sir Richard Crowthorne's answering machine "Breakfast, my office at eight sharp and err bring some doughnuts."

"Station Lima" a communications officer called over his radio headset "Code in please."

"November Sierra One Six Five" came the response from a voice that had been electronically disguised beyond any possible hope of recognition "Code one five one message for Orion."

"Go ahead" the officer confirmed having authenticated the log in code as being correct.

"A corpse of extreme interest to Orion and Pyramid has just been delivered to the eager beavers morgue in Hammersmith" the voice informed the officer "Could have implications with our cousins."

"Will advise Orion, thank you One Six Five" the officer confirmed whereupon the connection was abruptly cut off after which he reached to a telephone and dialled a single number "Get me Orion immediately and have our top intercept team put on standby for a code two cover and extract."

"Ah Simon, sorry to drag you in early but I have the distinct impression a problem is about to land in our laps and I need your skills to do a little snooping" the Commander called to Simon Fuller as they met outside the entrance to New Scotland Yard and proceeded inside.

"I was saying to Jennifer just this morning that things had been kind of quiet around here lately" Fuller remarked "So what or perhaps that should be who is the problem?" he asked as they entered the lift car.

"River Division are holding a body which if the identification on it is correct could mean we are about to take a crowbar to the proverbial can of worms" the Commander explained as the lift ascended to the top floor.

"If there is dirt hidden somewhere then I'll find it" Fuller confidently declared at which point he was interrupted by his mobile telephone ringing.

"Hello my love" Fuller called on answering, seeing it was his wife Jennifer, the Divisional Commander of the VIP & Political Escort Section calling.

"Hello dear" Jennifer called from one of her black bullet proof ministerial escort cars parked in a side street near Westminster "Look love this is going to sound a strange thing to ask but is there something going on this morning?"

"Maybe" Fuller cautiously answered "Why what's up?" he asked, already sensing something may be wrong.

"I just had an off the record phone call from my opposite number over at Grosvenor Square" Jennifer explained "Apparently there are a couple of Lincoln Continentals loaded with Langley's finest leaving the US Embassy as we speak bound for New Scotland Yard and they are seriously pissed about something."

"Ok love, thanks for the tip off, I will speak to you later" Fuller responded "Love you, bye."

"What was all that about?" the Commander asked as the lift doors opened on the top floor and they headed directly down the corridor to the Commander's office.

"Klingons off the starboard bow, we are about to have some uninvited guests over for breakfast by the looks of it" Fuller explained.

"Best lock up the good scotch and hide anything valuable" the Commander wryly suggested at which point the door of the office next to the Commander's opened and Tracy appeared.

"I take it you have heard about our impending guests then?" Tracy asked.

"Yep" the Commander confirmed "What I want to know is what the hell the CIA are up to that's got them speeding over here so fast."

"CIA?" Tracy asked with a puzzled look "I'm talking about the FSB love."

"Russian Intelligence?" the Commander responded with not inconsiderable astonishment "What the hell could those guys want?"

"I think they maybe wanting a word with us about our body" Tracy confirmed.

"For something that only you, I and Sir Richard are supposed to know any details about we seem to be suddenly attracting an awful lot of attention" the Commander mused "All right, here is what we will do, can you get a couple of the largest and most broad shouldered uniformed officers you can find down to the front door and head off our various visitors."

"Consider it done my love" Tracy readily agreed before giving her husband a peck on the cheek and then departing.

"That hopefully should buy me some time to talk to Sir Richard and find out what the hell is going on around here before this develops into a circus" the Commander confirmed as he and Fuller headed into his office.

"Sir Richard..." the Commander called as he entered his office fully expecting him to be there but quickly tailed off when he realised that he was talking to an unexpectedly empty room.

"What's missing from this picture?" Fuller remarked.

"Where the hell is he?" the Commander wondered out loud as he went around behind his desk and sat down.

"Well in his absence perhaps I should get to work?" Fuller suggested.

"I wholeheartedly agree" the Commander, still clearly mystified confirmed "The name of this guy is one Seamus O'Donnell, apparently an Irish citizen born March 15th 1978."

"And that's all we have to go on?" Fuller asked in slight bewilderment.

"Well his name lit up Garry's computer screen like a Christmas Tree when he checked it out this morning so my guess would be something odd is going on" the Commander admitted "Besides until the autopsy is sorted out and Thames River Division sends over this guy's effects it's all we have."

"If this stiff is Irish it might be worth giving our colleagues over in Dublin a bell?" Fuller suggested.

"Way ahead of you" the Commander agreed as he picked up the telephone "Sandra?" he called to his P.A. outside in the outer office "Get a hold of Administrator General Simms in Dublin and see if you can locate Sir Richard Crowthorne, thanks."

Down in the street immediately outside New Scotland Yard Tracy looked on with anticipation as the squeal of tyres signalled approaching vehicles that were in a hurry.

"Here comes the party crashers" Tracy remarked to the two uniformed officers alongside her as a pair of large black four wheel drive cars came to a sharp halt by the kerb side whereupon a number of seemingly identically dressed men in black suits and wearing sunglasses emerged and moved towards her en masse.

"Morning lads" Tracy called with a definitely sarcastic tone "Something I can do for you?"

"We need to talk, now" the leader of the group informed her.

"May I be permitted to enquire as to the subject?" Tracy asked.

"We have reason to believe you have a stiff that is of considerable importance to the security of the United States" David Howell, the head of the CIA's London section based out of the US Embassy in Grosvenor Square explained.

"Really?" Tracy responded clearly unimpressed by the American's show of strength despite the fact that their entire party more than towered over her short stature.

At that moment further vehicles arrived from both directions and this impromptu meeting on the pavement beneath New Scotland Yard's famous three sided revolving sign found it was now receiving further interested parties.

"Sergei Glasgov, Federal Security Bureau" the short dumpy man who had emerged from a black Mercedes complete with a tall sinister looking minder declared in a distinctive Russian accent that seemed to come from the old era of the cold war "I need a word with your esteemed husband about a very delicate matter."

"Sergei, this had better not be about what I think it is" Howell responded with typical grim determination.

"Mind if I join the party gentlemen?" a new arrival asked as they were joined outside the main entrance by Sir John Haliford, the head of operations for MI6.

"Blimey, all I need is MI5, the W.I. and the Tufty Club and I have the set" Tracy mused with a wry smile.

"Good grief, it's a trench coat convention" David Collins, head of operations for MI5 remarked as he joined the distinguished if impromptu gathering of high ranking representatives of international security "I don't suppose I could have a word could I?" he asked Tracy by now already sensing that they were all probably there on identical business.

"Would you be offended if I said take a number and get in line?" Tracy wryly asked "All right, all right gentlemen, lets see if we can't get this mess sorted out" she declared as she reached for her radio "Alpha One come in please?" she called.

"Good ahead love" the Commander was heard to respond.

"The who's who of secret intelligence has turned up on the doorstep and I think they all want to talk to you" Tracy informed him.

"Ah..." the Commander responded "Who do you have so far?"

"MI5, MI6, FSB and David Collins is mouthing something about the Germans apparently being on the way as well" Tracy confirmed.

"No sign of Sir Richard then?" the Commander asked slightly perplexed.

"Has anyone seen Sir Richard Crowthorne on their travels?" Tracy asked to the gathered masses in front of her which resulted in a fairly uniform response of shaking heads and shrugging of shoulders.

"I was just starting to think someone was missing" David Collins remarked.

"All right, divide and conquer routine I think" the Commander declared after a few moments thought.

"Sounds good to me" Tracy agreed "We'll be up in a few minutes."

"Right gentlemen!" Tracy declared to the crowd "All the hangers on, assistants, aides and minders to the canteen where breakfast is on us, the Chief's follow me."

Before moving off, Tracy turned to the two officers to her side "Make sure none of our guests take any unescorted excursions all right?"

"Yes Maam" they both confirmed before Tracy turned smartly on her heels and proceeded to lead her formidable gathering of guests into the main entrance foyer of New Scotland Yard.

"Mind if I join the party Divisional Commander?" the diminutive figure of Andrew Goddard, the head of the Security Service's Anti Terrorism Unit called as he met up with them.

"Join the party" Tracy confirmed as she carried on to the lifts where they all just about managed to squeeze in the lift car before the doors closed.

"Sergei, are you putting on weight again?" Howell asked of his Russian opposite number as the lift headed upwards.

"You should know better than anyone" Sergei responded with a hearty chuckle "Your guy in Moscow has been sending you copies of all our medical reports for the last three years."

"I have no idea what you are talking about" Howell responded with false innocence.

"Oh come on" Sergei continued "You do it to us, we do it to you, it's called détente comrade."

Tracy at the front of the group nearest the doors merely smiled as they reached the top floor.

"Follow me gentlemen" she duly commanded as she led the way out of the lift and down to corridor to the Commander's outer office where the Personal Assistant duly opened the door and let them in.

"Your wife and the heavy mob" she cheekily declared as she let them in.

"Coffee, lots of it" the Commander called back from behind his desk whereupon the P.A. nodded in agreement before leaving, closing the door gently behind her.

"Tracy love, would you mind seeing if you can track down our friend please, he has to be around somewhere" the Commander called to his wife "It's not like him to miss a good party like this."

"I'll give Harry a call and if that doesn't work there are still a few places I can look" Tracy confirmed "Good luck love" she added before leaving.

"All right then, this has better be good gentlemen" the Commander began.

"Your boys dragged a body out of the river last night" Howell of the CIA began, just managing to get the first word in ahead of his rivals "It is a matter of vital importance to our National Security that it and his effects are handed over to US custody immediately."

"Now correct me if I am wrong" the Commander calmly began, slowly removing his small square framed half lensed reading glasses and placing them on the desk in front of him "but the Thames River division pull on average nearly four hundred bodies out of the Thames, the estuary and associated tributaries, canal basins, ponds, lakes, goldfish bowls, etc. etc. every year so would you mind narrowing down which body to which you refer?"

"A man by the name of Seamus O'Donnell" Howell responded "We have rights on his body."

"Sounds rather kinky Comrade" Sergei remarked.

"That's a point" the Commander responded "What are you doing here Sergei, assuming you are not here for the annual service on your listening device in the coffee machine?" he asked with a distinctly knowing grin

"The Russian Federation has an interest in this individual so we want full access as well" Sergei confirmed but was clearly unable or unwilling to divulge any more than that which given the nature of those around him in the room was not all that surprising.

"All right you two" the Commander called to the Operations Chief's of MI5 and MI6 "What's your interest in this guy?"

"You can go first" Collins gestured towards his opposite number from MI6.

"Why thank you" Haliford replied "Your dead body happens to have connections to certain Irish Republican splinter groups" he explained.

"I hate to get all jurisdictional on you old boy" Collins chipped in at that point "but anything to do with the Emerald Isle, north or south is MI5's jurisdiction, you guys deal with anything overseas.

"We have a strong interest in this character" Haliford reinforced his claim.

"Fine, then you can send a guy from Registry over to Thames House with a copy of everything you have and we will take it from there" Collins defiantly responded, reinforcing the old inter departmental rivalry that has always existed between the two sister organisations.

"Gentlemen, gentlemen, this bickering will get us nowhere" the Commander declared as he regained control over the conversation as the P.A. arrived back in the office with the tray of coffee and placed it on the desk whereupon he silently thanked her before she left again.

"Take a seat, have some coffee and lets see if we can't sort this mess out" the Commander declared.

"That's the one thing I like about you Commander" Haliford remarked as he helped distribute the coffee to the others "Always an island of civility in the centre of a crisis."

"I think my cliché alarm just went into overdrive" Collins quietly remarked aside under his breath.

"Sorry to interrupt Sir" the voice of the Commander's P.A. announced over the intercom "but I have the Prime Minister for you on Line Two."

"It never rains but it pours" the Commander remarked in response "All right, put him through" he requested.

"Who is going to turn up next, the Pope?" Haliford asked jokingly.

"No, I had him on the phone last week" the Commander wryly responded before he was connected to the Prime Minister calling from his office in No. 10 Downing Street less than half a mile away "Prime Minister, what can I do for you Sir?" he asked.

"Would I be right in thinking that you have an office full of top ranking officials from across the globe at this very moment inquiring about a body?" the Prime Minister asked sincerely.

"Oh no, not you as well?" the Commander responded "Well yes as it happens, between them up here and their minders and other where with alls downstairs in the canteen it is costing my Department a fortune in coffee and biscuits."

"I cannot say anything at the moment beyond this" the Prime Minister stressed "It is vitally important that under no circumstances does custody of the body or any information pertaining to the deceased pass outside of the United Kingdom authorities and that includes not involving MI6, is that understood Commander?"

"Pretty much my take on the situation anyway" the Commander readily agreed "Speaking of which how did you know about it if I may ask?"

"You may ask Commander but I am not going to tell you, not on this line at any rate" the Prime Minister responded rather evasively.

"Speaking of keeping things in the dark, the master of such trickery Sir Richard Crowthorne seems to have gone walkabout which is rather unusual for him" the Commander stated "I don't suppose you have seen him around anywhere by any chance?"

"Sorry, can't help you on that one" the Prime Minister admitted "Actually I have been trying to call him all morning but all I keep getting is his answering machine, if you do see him perhaps you could ask him to drop by?"

"Will do" the Commander confirmed "Good bye Sir."

"Friends in high places?" Haliford asked.

"You could say that" the Commander agreed "Now the one thing amidst all this mess that I want to know is how on earth did you know we had this body and who he was as according to my memory the only people who know about it are the Coroner, one patrol officer, the night shift control room supervisor, my wife and myself."

"Friends in low places?" Haliford responded with a knowing smirk.

"We were told by MI5" Howell explained.

"I authorised nothing to be released" Collins responded "besides I didn't even know about it until I heard the report from our guy at the Russian Embassy that Sergei and his associates were on their way over here.

"Well we knew about it when MI5 were supposedly informed" Haliford confirmed.

"...and we knew all about it as soon as someone told the CIA" Sergei explained with a smirk.

"Andrew" the Commander turned to Divisional Commander Goddard, the head of the Service's Anti-Terrorism Branch "What are you doing here if I may ask?"

"When the name and date of birth was checked on the system and the red flag came up, it woke up a couple of my lads over in the dormant investigations section, he may be someone we had dealings with some years back, assuming it is the same guy of course."

"Look, we have rights to be kept in the loop on this" Howell insisted.

"So do we" Sergei added.

"I don't see how the Russian Federation could possibly have any interest in a dead Irish guy" the Commander remarked slightly confused by all this "What's your angle Sergei?"

"Hey, we are Russian, we have, err what is it you strange British say" Sergei pondered for a moment "Ah yes the fingers in many pasties."

"Pies" the Commander wryly corrected him.

"I am sorry Comrade Commander" Sergei apologised "My English is not perfect."

"Not what our file on you says" Haliford remarked "Well more of a filing cabinet than a file really."

"Perhaps I should take that as a compliment?" Sergei asked his opposite number from MI6.

"Might as well, it will be all you will ever get out of our office" Haliford responded with a smile.

"I wouldn't bet on that Comrade" Sergei calmly replied with a knowing grin.

"Gentlemen, gentlemen this is getting us nowhere" the Commander took charge once again "Now I have a lot to do and the one thing I do not have time for is an inter agency rivalry bun fight so this is how we are going to play this. Is everyone listening?"

The Commander could tell from the silence that descended upon the room and the general nods of agreement from those present that he now had their undivided attention.

"Good" the Commander concluded "Until I have independent verification otherwise the body stays on ice in our morgue where my medical team under the supervision of the District Coroner will conduct an autopsy on the poor sod later today, this afternoon I think" he declared "Meantime I will personally oversee any investigation that may arise and will keep you ALL informed as to developments as I see fit and necessary, understood?"

Further nods of agreement duly followed for even with this formidable audience, the Commander received the up most respect and authority.

"Meantime you and your various associates known and unknown will sit on their hands" the Commander continued "No one does anything rash, obtuse or ill advised or so help me I will be around with Bob and the heavy mob so fast your heads will spin."

"I think we have an agreement Commander" Collins confirmed as he looked around the room at his various opposite numbers who all looked on in total agreement.

"Excellent" the Commander concluded "Needless to say I expect any information that your respective agencies have on file about this chap to be made available to my investigation team when requested?"

"Might as well" Haliford responded "If we didn't you would just get Simon Fuller to yank it out of our computer systems anyway."

"Now what possibly makes you think I would do something as sneaky and underhand as that?" the Commander wryly asked.

"Years of experience?" Collins asked jokingly although there was a rather strong thread of truth to that statement.

"Very well gentlemen" the Commander declared as he stood up from behind his desk "If that is all, I'll be in touch, oh and don't forget to collect your respective flunkey's on the way out, I don't need them cluttering up my canteen all day otherwise Doris will start complaining."

Amidst the mid morning traffic, the distinctive sound of a Harley Davidson broke the usual traffic noise in Horse Ferry Road as the marked Security Service motor bike came down the road before pulling into a side street in an area of the City dominated by Government Department's and agency buildings.

After removing her crash helmet, Tracy got off the bike and stood on the pavement, looking around the seemingly deserted side street before walking a short distance along it to a very non-descript looking doorway set into the ground floor of what appeared to be the back of some uninteresting buildings, an entrance that by its very nature succeeded in its aim of going totally unnoticed to the average passer by.

As Tracy made her way towards the door however a CCTV camera mounted above her turned to follow her progress as she input a numerical code into a keypad before a buzz signalled the door's release and allowed her to enter.

Anyone entering through that door would have been forgiven for thinking that this was some forgotten rear entrance to an old office block or something as Tracy was confronted with a dark room with just a single lamp over the top of an ornate carved stone portal into which was set a pair of bronze finish elevator doors.

Pressing the single button, the doors opened with a ping from a hidden bell and Tracy entered whereupon she produced a key that she placed in the lock that was set into the interior control panel. Turning the key illuminated two buttons, the lower of which she pressed to start the lift on a descent into a deep basement.

A minute or so later the lift slowed to a halt and the doors opened allowing Tracy to exit into a brightly lit and modern office reception area, a reception desk set against the far wall and a large crest in coloured marble set into the floor.

"Good morning Maam" the receptionist behind the desk called upon seeing Tracy's arrival "How may I help you?"

"I was hoping to see Sir Richard Crowthorne" Tracy explained "This is Section 14 isn't it?"

"Like the sign says Maam" the receptionist confirmed "Not that anything outside tells you it is of course."

"Of course" Tracy responded "Is he in by any chance?"

"I'm afraid not Maam" the receptionist confirmed with regret "In fact he has not been here for two days now."

"Well is there anyone else around here I can speak to?" Tracy asked.

"There is Sir Richard's head of field operations" the receptionist confirmed after a brief moment for thought "You could try asking her, you see Sir Richard is terribly sneaky and underhand about most things, that's how he likes it."

"Oh believe me I know" Tracy confirmed "Through there?" she asked.

"Down the main corridor to the end, last office on the right" the receptionist indicated the way "I'll call Commander Barrett and let you know you are on your way."

"Thank you" Tracy responded before leaving the reception area and heading as instructed in the direction indicated which took her past a row of seemingly identical office doors, none of which offered any clue as to the secretive nature of what went on behind them with the exception of some cryptic identification numbers and symbols on some, all of which would have no meaning whatsoever for anyone outside of this highly secretive organisation.

"Divisional Commander Caverner" the young form of Security Service office Lieutenant Commander Elizabeth Barrett called as she emerged from Sir Richard's office just as Tracy arrived "This is an unexpected pleasure."

"Indeed" Tracy confirmed "and a bit of a surprise as well. Pardon me for asking but aren't you supposed to be in Haychester?"

"Sir Richard recruited me for this little pet project of his six months ago" Barrett explained "We worked together on the case of that dead Member of Parliament and the associated ructions it caused."

"I remember it vaguely" Tracy recalled "I was still recovering from several gunshot wounds at the time so it was all a bit of a blur for me."

"Nasty business Maam" Barrett agreed "Would you care to step into the office, I have the strangest feeling this is going to be one of *those* conversations as my boss would put."

"Funny you should say that" Tracy agreed as she duly followed Barrett into Sir Richard's rather sumptuously appointed office. "So if you are now a big cheese here in Section Fourteen, why are you still in Security Service uniform?"

"Well you can't exactly work for an organisation that does not exist" Barrett explained "Makes a hell of a mess for the Inland Revenue for a starter so when Sir Richard recruited me here, your husband approved it and keeps me on the Security Service books filed under 'on load to special projects' or whatever the term is used these days to describe officers who have been proverbially lost down the back of the company sofa."

"Must be handy when you need to go out in the real world on business too" Tracy remarked as they both sat down either side of Sir Richard's desk.

"It has it's useful advantages" Barrett admitted "A Security Service warrant card and uniform can open a lot more doors than a trench coat and some unknown clandestine agency name."

"Indeed it can" Tracy agreed.

"Speaking of which I hear there is a bit of a breakfast party going on over at the Yard at the moment" Barrett remarked "Was that really Sergei Glasgov I saw on the CCTV link heading in?"

"In living colour" Tracy confirmed "Straight out of the pages of KGB history."

"I have only been in this business for a while but even I know the reputation of Glasgov" Barrett responded almost in admiration "I know he was one of the most formidable overseas agents in the old days of the Soviet Union."

"Yep, real old school" Tracy agreed "and he wasn't alone, we had MI5, MI6 and the CIA all turn up in the space of ten minutes and all because of some dead guy fished out of the Thames that no one not least of all that formidable little gathering is supposed to know anything about."

"The Irish guy the river rats hoiked out of the water underneath London Bridge at some ungodly hour of this morning by any chance?" Barrett asked.

"Now why is it I am not in the least bit surprised that you know about that?" Tracy responded with a wry look.

"Well when the crème de la crème of the world's secret services rise from their bunkers in Grosvenor Square, High Street Kensington, Thames House and Legoland and haul ass over to New Scotland Yard at eight o'clock in the morning it does tend to make outfits such as this little enterprise ask a few discreet questions" Barrett explained "That was when I found about the stiff."

"The one that supposedly no one knows anything about of course" Tracy confirmed "speaking of which, that brings me to the reason for my visit as this is just the sort of silly little shindig that usually has Sir Richard sniffing around New Scotland Yard before the coffee machine has even been switched on and yet not a dickie bird, no pun intended."

"He has been missing for two days now" Barrett confirmed "No one knows where the hell he is, I have even had our technical and communications guru Hendy trawling every telephone and internet link he can think of but thus far not a thing."

"You don't suppose there is any connection between Sir Richard going walkies and all this inter agency bun fighting over a corpse?" Tracy asked.

"When it comes to old tricky Dickie Crowthorne your guess is as good as mine Maam" Barrett responded with a shrug of the shoulders "He was following up some loose ends we had on a document leak inquiry from a few weeks back but I shouldn't worry. I am sure wherever he is I am sure he is fine."

"Feel like talking now Mr Crowthorne?" the mysterious voice asked, echoing all around the dark room in which the only illumination was a spot lamp being shown from the ceiling directly onto Sir Richard who was tied to a seat that in turn was firmly bolted to the cold concrete floor.

The only other thing in the room was the black balaclava wearing thug who at the instruction of the mysterious interrogator outside the room would administer a hefty thump to Sir Richard whenever required.

"Nothing to say?" the voice boomed out menacingly.

"I want my lawyer?" Sir Richard asked wryly.

"Now then Mr Crowthorne" the voice continued "you know how this works after all you practically wrote the book in sinister interrogation techniques."

"Glad to have been of service" Sir Richard responded rather weakly, the twenty four hours of confinement and interrogation now really starting to take their toll "Let me go and we will call it even."

"Cute" the voice remarked.

"Of course having written the book on how this works, I also know how to outwit such interrogation techniques so you and your charming friend here might as well save your energy, you won't get anything out of me you don't already know" Sir Richard warned.

"My organisation believes in being thorough" the voice declared "We already know many things through our not inconsiderable list of contacts but as ever with these matters there are certain blanks that need filling in, so I will ask once again, do you know Seamus O'Donnell?"

"Never heard of the fella" Sir Richard defiantly and convincingly replied.

A click of the fingers over the intercom speaker that was being used to broadcast the interrogator's voice into the room was all that was needed for the hooded thug to step forward and calmly administer a thump to Sir Richard's midriff before he stepped back into the shadows again.

"Where did you get him from?" Sir Richard asked coughing and grimacing "Thug's 'R' Us?"

"All our people are loyal Mr Crowthorne, be they our senior organising committee or our ground level operatives such as my colleague in there with you" the voice explained "we hold power, respect, influence and equality of purpose."

"I've heard that kind of noble bollocks from people like you before" Sir Richard responded "and most of them usually wind up with their heads stuffed and mounted on the wall of the Commander's office alongside where he keeps the various Home Secretary's he has had the scalp of over the years."

"Ouch..." the thug in the room was heard to murmur under his breath unintentionally which caused Sir Richard to smile briefly.

"All right then" the voice conceded just a little "How about a change of direction, let's throw a different name into the mix and see if it ring any bells."

"Hit me" Sir Richard responded "Actually on second thoughts..."

"Siobhan McNeil for example?" the voice asked sincerely.

"Who the hell is she when she is at home?" Sir Richard responded matter of factly.

"Nice try Mr Crowthorne" the voice replied "but much like my colleague in there with you, it doesn't wash."

"I wondered what the smell was..." Sir Richard remarked which only earned him a clip around the ear from behind from the thug in response.

"Oh dear, oh dear, oh dear..." the voice declared with a slightly depressed sounding sigh that was only just loud enough for the sound system transmitting his voice to pick up and echo around the room in a most sinister manner "I can see we are going to be spending a lot of quality time together over the next few hours."

"Mistake number one" Sir Richard admonished his unseen host "You have a deadline to meet, a fact you have given away by specifying that this will only be a few hours more."

"Well I will admit that there are certain timescales to be maintained" the voice freely admitted "For example at the moment your mystery girl McNeil is causing certain friends of mine potential grief which threatens some carefully laid plans and if these were to be disrupted in any way then I for one would not be best pleased and as for those I represent, well I'll let your imagination do the rest. Suffice it to say I am the more reasonable one in this little family of ours."

"I can last a few more hours, no problem whatsoever" Sir Richard declared defiantly "Can you?"

"Stubborn to the last" the voice responded in admiration before a click of the fingers once again signalled the thug to step forward and administer another punch before stepping back "Now let's start over shall we as I have to admit I for one am rather enjoying this...."

"Is that the last of them?" Tracy asked as she joined her husband the Commander in the entrance foyer of New Scotland Yard where outside the last of the cars containing the various international security agency representatives departed.

"Yep, alone at last" the Commander confirmed as they put their arms around each other and kissed "It would seem something of an international hornets nest is in the process of being disturbed, trouble is I can't tell who is interested because they want to find out something and who is in this to make sure whatever it is, is not found out" he went on which resulted in a rather confused expression "Err did that make any sense love?"

"Just about" Tracy admitted.

"Still not a total waste of time" the Commander remarked "I have managed to fob them off for the time being, and with the Prime Minister's blessing I may add and Sergei Glasgov has promised to send over a case of best Russian Vodka for the annual Christmas party again this year."

"Every cloud and all that..." Tracy replied.

"Speaking of clichés, any sign of Crowthorne?" the Commander asked.

"I popped over to his offices and asked about" Tracy confirmed "I found a certain Lieutenant Commander Barrett down there running the show which I found a little odd considering when I last heard she was supposed to be in Haychester."

"A little inter departmental co-operation" the Commander admitted.

"Well she hasn't seen or heard from him in over two days and the technical wizard over there has come up blank on all e-mail, travel and telephone records" Tracy explained "Not so much as a bleep from his Oyster Card since Tuesday lunchtime."

"Something is wrong, I just know it" the Commander explained with a sense of foreboding "It is just not like him to be out of contact during a tasty little mystery like this, hell this is the man who interrupted his own honeymoon to get up to date information on the Watergate break in."

"Err yes he is right here" the receptionist nearby was heard to announce to the caller that she had just answered which the Commander quickly picked up on.

"For me by any chance?" the Commander asked looking around.

"An Administrator General Alfred Simms for you Sir" the receptionist confirmed as she passed the telephone handset over the desk to the Commander.

"Alfred, how are you?" the Commander asked as soon as he had taken the call.

"Oh you know how it is" Simms responded matter of factly "Busy, busy and busy, even had some guys selling fake Guinness last week would you believe."

"Twenty years to life would be my recommendation" the Commander jokingly suggested "Anyway glad you rang, I take it you got my message then?"

"I gather you have a problem with a body?" Simms asked "A chap by the name of Seamus O'Donnell?"

"Yes" the Commander confirmed "Do you have anything on him?" he asked expectantly.

"Well there is a record of a man of that name on our system with the correct date of birth as your stiff" Simms confirmed.

"Terrific" the Commander responded "What can you tell me about him."

"He's dead" Simms announced.

"Oddly enough I already knew that" the Commander admitted wryly "We've got his body on ice down in Hammersmith Morgue not that anyone knows about that, well err that is not anyone is supposed to know about."

"Interesting" Simms continued "because according to our records he has been dead for three years, killed in a plane crash in Indonesia according to our Secret Service."

"Ireland has a Secret Service?" the Commander asked.

"Well it's two blokes, a filing cabinet and a coffee machine hiding behind a door in Dublin which is marked 'Department of Fisheries & Game' but it does have its uses from time to time" Simms admitted "There are a few other things though that may be of relevance that have cropped up in my search."

"Such as?" the Commander probed.

"Not on a public line" Simms politely insisted "We should meet somewhere away from prying eyes, walls have ears if you know what I mean."

"I do indeed" the Commander agreed "Where are you now?" he asked.

"Shannon Airport" Simms confirmed as he looked around the executive departure lounge "I am getting on a plane to Gatwick in ten minutes and should be in London by tonight."

"Take the Express to Victoria and I will have you met at the station" the Commander instructed "Jennifer Caverner will drive you to the meet."

"See you later Commander" Simms declared.

"Indeed" the Commander agreed before hanging up.

"Curioser and curioser" Tracy mused in response to the conversation that although she had only heard one side of she could easily guess the rest.

"Better give Jennifer a call" the Commander remarked "Looks like I will be needing her services for some discrete transport later."

"Going anywhere in particular?" Tracy asked as she and the Commander made their way back towards the lifts.

"Somewhere deep, dark and foreboding" the Commander confirmed "Probably in both senses of the word."

The docks in Newport, South Wales was not exactly the most photogenic place in the country, they were however very much an industrial location which although rather run down in places still saw much activity twenty four hours a day.

Dock number eighteen, a small freight handling terminal consisting of some gantry cranes and a couple of weather beaten sheds was the focus of some considerable activity that lunchtime where in amongst the stacks of containers a large flatbed lorry arrived having been let through the gates by a private security guard who against all laws was carrying a gun and along with a similarly armed colleague searched the lorry thoroughly before it was allowed access.

As the freight supervisor in his yellow high visibility jacket and hard hat directed the lorry to the unloading area inside one of the large sheds, it was followed into the building by a dark blue saloon car and a small silver sports car with an escorting black Range Rover with blacked out windows from which emerged a formidable looking group of men all dressed identically in black and clearly well armed.

From the first car emerged the driver who proceeded to open the rear passenger doors which allowed three people to emerge once the men from the Range Rover had ensured the surrounding area was secure and that there were no uninvited guests.

These people were all men, one very tall in his mid twenties and with a business like look towered above the other two men who were clearly older, wiser and somewhat stockier in build.

The fourth person who emerged from the small sports car was however very different, a young lady in her mid to late twenties, slim build and quite short, indeed the smallest person present at this mysterious meeting. She wore a business trouser suit that signified along with her arrival in the car that she was of some importance to what was happening here and not window dressing or one of the men's bits on the side.

Her short dark brown hair moved ever so gently in the wind that was blowing in off of the sea as she confidently stepped forward and joined the three men by the side of the lorry as a forklift began to remove the first of a series of pallets each loaded with a number of wooden crates and set them down on the cold concrete floor of the warehouse.

"Well Ms Gregory" Steven Altman the stocky leader of the group declared, rubbing his hands with glee "There are the packages as discussed, now its down to you."

"I count twenty three crates" Gregory responded in her broad Irish accent as she looked over the cargo in front of her before turning sharply on her heel to look Altman directly in the eye "You said twenty."

"Last minute change to the order from my client" Altman explained apologetically silently indicating the other middle aged man with him who said nothing, merely looked on with a seemingly never changing impassionate expression of seriousness "It amounts to the same cubic capacity that we agreed on the contract."

"It had better bloody do" Gregory responded directly "I remind you gentlemen that I have provided transportation worldwide for a whole variety of clients who by the very nature of their business prefer my more discrete and efficient way of doing things and that means precise planning according to the specifications of the original contract."

"Don't get your knickers in a twist lassie" the tall younger man called, obviously the least patient member of the group.

"Oh, so you know all about international freight transport do you?" Gregory asked as she went over to the man and stared him down with her striking brown eyes that could if challenged probably have a good attempt at cutting through steel plate "Put the ego and the gun away sonny, I've dealt with far more intellectually advantaged people than you in the past so please do not put me to the test, I may be small but where I come from trust me good things come in small but tough packages."

"Heh, heh, heh" Altman chuckled in response "I like you" he declared "It is a pleasure doing business with someone who is not only a lot prettier than those I usually have to deal with but also has far bigger balls."

"I think I will take that as a compliment" Gregory responded with a slightly quizzical look "Anyway, I believe there is the small matter of money to sort out."

"If you would be so kind as to give the young lady her money?" Altman called to his associate who withdrew to one side to make a telephone call.

"This is Stevens, transfer the money into the account of Emma Gregory Shipping Ltd now please as discussed" the other man spoke into the telephone.

As they waited for the money transfer to be confirmed, Gregory took a few steps away towards the dock side and shrugging her shoulder against the cold wind looked out across the docks out to sea, only the sound of the waves lapping against the dock and the call of a passing seagull overhead breaking the silence until her own telephone rang.

"Emma Gregory" she answered before listening to the confirmation that the payment had been received into her account "Thank you" she declared before hanging up and turning around back to the men "Gentlemen, we have a deal" she announced before clicking her fingers whereupon the gantry crane on the dockside activated and brought in a blue shipping container which was carefully lowered to the ground alongside the lorry and the stack of pallet mounted crates

"The ship arrives in one hour on the afternoon tide" Gregory announced confidently "As agreed your goods will be delivered no questions asked to the specified destination no later than forty eight hours from departure here this evening."

"Thank you Emma" Altman responded as he silently indicated to his associates and the minders forming the secure perimeter to return to their vehicles "It has been a pleasure doing business. Be seeing you" he declared with a wry smile before getting into the back of his car whereupon his car and the Range Rover duly drove off followed a few moments later by the now empty lorry leaving Gregory alone on the dockside.

As soon as the vehicles were out of sight Gregory returned to the crates and watched as they were being loaded into the container by the forklift before it departed.

After checking that the area was clear Gregory stepped inside the container and produced a small wind up torch from her pocket that she proceeded to shine around the interior.

"Machine parts" she read from the outside of the container "Yeah right, pull the other one" she wryly remarked before producing a crowbar that she had hidden in the container before the meeting earlier, this she used to lever open one of the crates and reveal the contents.

"Holy Mary mother of God" Gregory responded as she looked inside the crate with the aid of the torch, her broad Irish accent just accentuating her response to what she was looking at "These guys are serious..."

Using a small digital camera she produced from her jacket pocket, Gregory took some photographs of the contents of the crate and of a second that she also opened, concentrating on the markings on the objects in particular before resealing the crates. Then she took some shots of the shipping markings on the exterior before leaving the container and closing the two heavy doors and applying a customs security seal to the lock.

Returning to her car, Gregory looked around the docks as it began to rain, the drops pattering onto the windscreen and sunroof making the outside world seem to blur and distort whilst she retrieved a mobile telephone from the glove compartment and speed dialled a number.

"Oh for God's sake Crowthorne you old git, pick up the damn telephone once in a while!" she demanded upon hearing the answering machine respond and was forced to wait for the beep before she could leave a message "This is Amber, where the hell are you? Well if you get this message call me ASAFP if not sooner, the goods are in play and I have the files, I think I have a pretty good idea what they are up to but I have this horrible feeling they are on to me, call me, you know the number."

Returning the telephone to the glove compartment, Amber McNeil as we now know her to really be started the car, switched on the windscreen wipers and proceeded to drive away off down the dock. As the tail lights of her car disappeared off into the distance however, the tall young man who had been there earlier and apparently had departed with the others appeared from behind a stack of oil drums where he had observed her actions before making a telephone call.

"Looks like we were right Sir" the man declared as soon as his call was answered "I think it is time our little Irish friend was removed from the equation."

"Right, our next job is..." the Coroner declared as she checked the clipboard of jobs on for that day in the examination section of Hammersmith Mortuary "...ah yes, our body of the day, bit of a rush job too as the Security Service's finest want quick answers on this one."

"The river guy?" the mortuary assistant asked as they made their way down to the freezer section, a morbid location if ever there was one with its rows of shiny aluminium doors set into the large wall, behind each the remains of a human life at the end of their journey.

"That's the one" the Coroner confirmed as she stifled a yawn "He had better be interesting since I had to get up at four this morning to certify the fellow."

"Err freezer B3 according to the job sheet" the mortuary assistant confirmed from the clipboard whereupon they duly went to the assigned freezer door and opened it.

"What the hell...?" the Coroner asked in amazement when upon opening the freezer compartment it was revealed to be empty.

"Well there is something you don't see everyday" the mortuary assistant responded in astonishment.

"Where the hell is he?" the Coroner asked in disbelief with her hands on top of her head in shock.

"Definitely the right place" the mortuary assistant confirmed as he rechecked the number on the freezer door "just no body."

"All right" the Coroner declared as she tried to think straight "Start a search, check this place from top to bottom just in case he was put in the wrong box."

"Unlikely boss" the mortuary assistant remarked "we only have three, well two now bodies in at the moment, been a bit of a quiet period in suspicious deaths but I'll check anyway."

"Meantime I suppose I had better give the Commander the bad news" the Coroner responded seemingly resigned to the inevitable as she picked up the handset of the wall mounted telephone and dialled a number "Switchboard? Better put me through to the Administrator General at New Scotland Yard, I have some bad news for him."

Now back in his office the Commander was working through files on his desk with little enthusiasm, he was always a front line officer and hated being confined to an office doing the paperwork. The fact that most of the paperwork he had to work through seemed to consist of an endless tide of tedious unworkable or just plain hopeless ideas and briefing documents from the Whitehall mandarins at the Home Office and Ministry of Justice did not help matters.

"It will never work" the Commander writ large in red pen across one memo containing a particularly stupid idea that he had been sent from the Home Secretary's office "I ought to have that made up into a rubber stamp, save me a fortune in red pens" he mused.

It was almost a relief to him when the telephone on the desk rang and he reached across to pick it up.

"Hello?" he answered.

"District Coroner for you on Line Three" the P.A. confirmed.

"Lovely" the Commander responded "Put her through, Doctor? Give me some good news."

"Well the autopsy was somewhat shorter than expected" the Coroner admitted slightly sheepishly.

"And the bad news?" the Commander asked sensing something was coming and indeed even having a fairly good idea what it was going to be.

"The body has gone missing" the Coroner confirmed "Sorry Sir, I don't know what happened."

"No need to apologise" the Commander responded "In fact I would have been very surprised if it was still there given the considerable interest there has been shown in it since it was dragged out of the river."

"I've got my people down here conducting a search of the building on the off chance the body got misfiled somewhere" the Coroner confirmed.

"I shouldn't bother Doctor" the Commander replied "I am sure whoever stole it made sure they left no trace and are long gone by now. I'm going to send a team of officers down there anyway to give the place a going over, check CCTV, that sort of thing though just on the off chance they left any trace behind but given the level of professionalism we are dealing with its going to be more for show than anything else."

"Sorry Sir" the Coroner apologised again.

"Don't worry about it" the Commander reassured her "We'll talk again later."

Having hung up, the Commander pondered for a moment, took the opportunity to look across at the photograph of Tracy in its antique silver frame on his desk, smiled and then picked up the telephone again.

"Freddy" the Commander called "It's your boss, get a team down to Hammersmith Morgue and give it a through going over, make it nice and public as you will have a very attentive audience all right?"

"Will do boss" the response came before the call was concluded whereupon the Commander got up from behind his desk, casually chucked one pile of his paperwork in the recycling bin, grabbed his uniform tunic from the back of his chair before heading across the office and out of the door.

"If Sir Richard calls, I want to be notified immediately please" the Commander called to his P.A. as he passed through the outer office.

"Yes Sir" the P.A. confirmed.

"Thank you" the Commander called back with a cheery wave as he left, heading out into the main corridor whereupon he turned left and made straight for Simon Fuller's office down at the far end of the corridor.

"Ah there you are Sir" Fuller called as the Commander came in and slightly despondently sat down alongside him "I was about to call you as it happens."

"Please tell me you have something" the Commander asked "Only we just lost the body?"

"What?" Fuller responded incredulously.

"Spirited away at some point" the Commander confirmed "Not that I am exactly surprised about it mind."

"What was that?" Tracy asked as she came in and joined them.

"The infamous stiff has somehow managed to get up from his death bed and gone walkies love" the Commander confirmed.

"Well there goes our evidence that any of this ever occurred then" Tracy concluded.

"Not quite ladies and gentlemen" Fuller declared with a knowing smirk "They may have got his body but they didn't get his effects" he announced as he moved his chair back and revealed a tray on one end of his desk covered with a number of objects and possessions.

"How the hell did you get that lot?" the Commander asked rather astonished.

"Little bird from a certain secret department we are not supposed to know anything about" Fuller evasively explained "Given the nature of the international interest in the deceased I thought something like this might happen so I took the opportunity of getting one of the patrol officers escorting the body to Hammersmith who happens to also do a little work on the side for Sir Richard's little outfit down the road to drop off the effects on his way by."

"Give the lad a gold star" Tracy responded with a wry grin.

"So have you found anything?" the Commander asked with a definite air of expectation.

"I've been going through this guys effects all morning and yes, something rather interesting has cropped up" Fuller explained as he brought over the black plastic tray with O'Donnell's possessions laid out neatly upon it so that his superior officers could have a closer look at them.

"Looks like your average guy's wallet litter to me" the Commander remarked as he looked over the items.

"That is the problem, they are almost too average" Fuller agreed "There are all the usual things, driving licence, cash, keys, old receipts, credit cards, Oyster Card, etc. all of which are of course now somewhat soggy following our friend's presumably unintended dip in the Thames."

"Hang on" Tracy remarked as she noticed something that to her experienced eye seemed just slightly out of place "If this guy has an Oyster Card then why does he also have a separate card ticket for the Croydon Tramlink and a Zone 1 and 2 Travelcard?" she indicated the two tickets which from their appearance seemed to have been purchased from a machine.



"Well spotted" Fuller responded "and the second question should be why were they encased in a protective plastic bag?"

"West Croydon Tramlink Single" the Commander read from the front of the tram ticket "If this guy had an Oyster Card then there is no reason for him to buy a separate ticket, even less a Travelcard for zone one and two as well."

"I think you will find that the answer is on the back" Fuller explained "A couple of years ago a couple of guys from Israeli Intelligence developed a very clever hidden dead drop system to get information out of the Saudi Embassy, caused quite a stir at the time."

"Don't see the connection" the Commander admitted.

"What is on the back of every single card ticket issued by London Transport and the National Railways?" Fuller asked.

"A magnetic strip?" Tracy asked.

"Exactly" Fuller confirmed "Normally it contains data on the ticket, destination, date, that sort of thing but this one" he then reached across to his laptop and produced a display of numbers "has been written with some sort of coded information, you wash this through some kind of decoding algorithm and there is your message."

"Very clever" the Commander responded "an abandoned ticket left lying around would go completely unnoticed, you could drop this in a prearranged location in plain sight and no one would suspect what it really contained."

"Quality trade craft of the top order" Fuller agreed "I may not be able to tell you much about this chap but one thing I can be certain of is that he most definitely was not a welder from Belfast, I'd put money on that."

"Why do I get the feeling that life is about to get very complicated, again" Tracy wryly remarked.

"Because it's Thursday love" the Commander responded "Things always happen on a Thursday" he joked.

"Aside from our covert ticket message system" Tracy asked "What else do we know about this guy?"

"Nothing we can trust I would wager" Fuller admitted "We've got date of birth, two contact addresses, one in Belfast and another in Stratford, the latter by the way looking suspiciously like little more than a posting address but if our guy had access to this kind of technology" he indicated the tickets once again "I think it is fairly safe to say his rather wafer thin file we have on him is probably some sort of legend."

"I was thinking it looked a bit weak in places" the Commander remarked "Looks fine at first glance but when you look just that bit closer you begin to see holes in it, besides according to my opposite number in Dublin this guy is recorded as having been dead for the best part of three years."

"You think this guy was an agent of some kind?" Tracy asked.

"That would be my bet" the Commander confirmed "The question is though for who and which one of our international friends knew about it."

"Sir Richard would probably know" Fuller remarked "I don't suppose he has come up for air by any chance?"

"Nothing yet" the Commander confirmed.

"I feared as much" Fuller responded "I was on the telephone earlier to my opposite number over at Fourteen and he said there has not been any contact from Sir Richard for the best part of two days now, his Oyster Card hasn't been used, nothing on his bank accounts and he still doesn't answer his phone."

"I've just had a very dangerous idea" the Commander pondered "Can you break into Sir Richard's answering machine, listen to his messages?"

"All stored on a central computer at the telephone company's headquarters these days" Fuller confirmed "Should be fairly simple, give me a minute."

"Don't they have security to prevent people accessing the messages?" Tracy asked somewhat concerned at what Fuller was attempting to do right in front of them.

"Oh yes" Fuller confirmed as he continued to work busily on the computer "It's just that the systems are designed by sneaky buggers like me who work for Security Services and the like and we tend to leave personal back doors so that when, in a professional capacity of course..."

"Oh of course" the Commander agreed.

"...we need to take a look around at someone's voice mail all we have to do is dial in and voila!" Fuller declared as he duly produced a record on screen of messages left on Sir Richard Crowthorne's system.

"Popular fellow by the looks of it" the Commander remarked as he looked at the list of calls that had left a message "Can we hear any of these?" he asked.

"But of course" Fuller confirmed "Pick one" he prompted.

"This first one from two days ago" the Commander pointed to the screen.

"All right here we go" Fuller announced whereupon he pressed a button that proceeded to broadcast the first recorded message over a speaker on the desk.

"Richard, this is Barrett calling from the office, can you return this call as soon as, we have movement on the project, thanks, bye."

"Nothing especially interesting about that one" Tracy remarked "What's next?" she asked.

"Sir Richard" a very finely spoken male voice called as the next message was played "That matter we discussed, it would appear I may have something for you, we should meet."

"Rather lacking on detail sadly" the Commander commented "Don't recognise the voice but I would wager Sir Richard must know who that was."

"There are two calls here from an unlisted mobile" Fuller pointed out.

"Nothing particularly unusual about that I would have thought" Tracy remarked.

"Except that this is from a range of numbers specifically used for what we would file under special projects if you know what I mean" Fuller pointed out.

"Play them" the Commander requested.

"Sir Richard, this is Amber" came a sweetly spoken Irish accent over the speaker "The deal will be done tomorrow lunchtime at Newport Docks but I suspect that their head of muscle, this tall guy I met, Stevens may be a problem, will report back."

"An Irish connection appears" the Commander remarked with a raised eyebrow.

"In Wales?" Tracy responded, "Slightly off our patch isn't it?"

"Just a tad" the Commander admitted "Let's hear that second one, seems to be from the last hour or so if I read that right."

"Oh for God's sake Crowthorne you old git, pick up the damn telephone once in a while! This is Amber, where the hell are you? Well if you get this message call me ASAFP if not sooner, the goods are in play and I have the files, I think I have a pretty good idea what they are up to but I have this horrible feeling they are on to me, call me, you know the number."

"Sounds like there is a lost lamb out in the field" Tracy commented.

"Simon, does this name Amber come up anywhere on our system?"

"Will given that the last time we washed a name through our system early this morning the entire world suddenly landed on our front doorstep, I would not recommend it somehow" Fuller advised.

"Probably a wise idea" the Commander agreed "If this lass is in trouble out on her own, the last thing she needs is us letting any proverbial felines out of their packaging."

"Huh?" Fuller responded.

"Cat out of bag" Tracy translated one of her husband's typical mannerisms.

"Keep working" the Commander advised Fuller "Try not to set off any alarms or booby traps and report anything you might find directly to either of us only."

"Consider it done" Fuller agreed.

"In the meantime" the Commander announced as he checked his antique pocket watch that despite its age still kept perfect time "I think it is time you and I got some fresh air."

"Where are we going?" Tracy asked as arm in arm they left Fuller's office and headed back along the corridor towards the lifts.

"House calls" the Commander explained "We'll drop by Sir Richard's place first and then head over to Stratford and give our dead guy's drum a spin."

"Anything that gets me out of the office in your company gets my vote" Tracy readily agreed as they departed.

The interrogation had paused for a while and Sir Richard had been left alone in the sinister dark room that had been his home for nearly two days now.

His body was exhausted but his mind was still as razor sharp as ever for he had noticed that the chair to which he had been restrained was old and not in the best of shape.

As the day had gone on, he had managed unseen by his captors to gently ease the right arm of the chair apart which in turn allowed him to free his wrist from its bonds.

Listening intently for a few moments to make absolutely sure he was alone and hearing nothing more than the gentle hum of the single light in the room, he made his move releasing his right hand before quickly untying the ropes that held fast his left hand and then his feet.

Grabbing his overcoat from the corner of the room, he extracted a lock picking kit and made short work of the lock on the door before looking around slightly apprehensively, up and down the murky featureless corridor.

A window at the far end of the corridor seemed to him to be the most promising opportunity to exit the building which is the direction he went for, only pausing briefly in the shadow of a door way when he briefly heard footsteps and voices passing somewhere nearby.

When he was confident that the coast was clear, Sir Richard made his final move reaching the window which at some point in the past had been painted completely over in matt black paint, just a few pin pricks of light shining through like stars where the aged paint had started to peel off.

"Open you bugger..." Sir Richard muttered under his breath as he struggled to open the window which clearly had not been touched in many years.

With one final heave however it did finally give way and opened enough to allow Sir Richard to climb outside whereupon he discovered he was in fact on the first floor of the rather dilapidated looking industrial building and below him were some large rubbish skips.

"Well it usually works in the movies..." Sir Richard remarked with some hesitation as seeing he had little alternative he braced himself before launching himself into the bin below, landing in amongst its contents with a crunch and a thud.

"Damm it, that hurt" Sir Richard muttered to himself as after a few moments he managed to clamber out of the bin now in an even more dishevelled state than he was in previously "Next time I will remember to bring my stunt double."

As he made good his escape across the yard and onto the road beyond, a man observing from the open window watched the fleeing figure disappear off into the distance.

"Tell C&C they can activate the tracking device at his discretion" the mysterious man called calmly back over his shoulder to his colleague standing just behind him in the shadows.

"So how are you going to get in?" Tracy asked as she and the Commander made their way up the driveway of Sir Richard's home, an imposing late 1930's town house set in the countryside of Metroland near Moor Park.

"Easy, use a key" the Commander confirmed.

"You've got a key?" Tracy asked slightly surprised.

"Why do you think I asked you along, apart from not being able to bear being parted from you of course" the Commander explained.

"Ah, I see" Tracy responded as she duly produced her lock picking tools and approached the front door "Hang on a minute, won't his wife be home?"

"She is into the third week of a month long cruise" the Commander explained "Anniversary present from Sir Richard only she goes on her own on account of him not being too keen on boats, believe me I sympathise."

"Well this shouldn't be too difficult" Tracy remarked as she examined the lock carefully.

"I wouldn't be so sure" the Commander warned her "Sir Richard has one of the best home security systems money can buy."

"Not much use though if" Tracy got up and simply opened the front door "he doesn't bother to lock it on his way out is it."

"Nuts..." the Commander responded as in unison both he and Tracy drew their guns and then fully opened the door before training them inside the hallway.

"Must be the cleaning lady's day off" the Commander remarked as he and Tracy saw for the first time that the interior of the house had been very thoroughly ransacked.

"Perhaps she has gone on the cruise as well" Tracy wryly mused as they cautiously proceeded inside.

"Let's stick together" the Commander suggested to which Tracy nodded in agreement before they proceeded across the hallway cautiously until Tracy stopped upon hearing something from behind a closed door off to one side.

"Over there" she whispered, indicating the door.

"All right love, on three" the Commander suggested whereupon they both silently counted down until Tracy opened the door suddenly only to reveal a very large and clearly angry German shepherd dog behind it.

"Right..." Tracy exclaimed in a mixture of shock and surprise as she then promptly closed the door again before the dog could escape.

"Well I guess that part of the security system still works then" the Commander remarked.

"No kidding" Tracy agreed "That thing was the size of a horse."

"What was that?" the Commander asked as they were interrupted by the sound of something or someone moving in the room directly above them.

"Not another dog, wrong sound" Tracy commented "Could be mice?"

"Wearing very large shoes if they are" the Commander remarked "Come on" he led the way ahead to the staircase before they quietly headed up to the landing on the first floor which brought them to the door leading to Sir Richard's study which was ajar, the shadow of someone moving about within just visible.

"Definitely not mice" Tracy confirmed quietly "On three?"

The Commander gave a thumbs up in agreement before counting down with his fingers. On the completion of the count, the Commander pushed the door open wide and they went in, training their weapons on the person inside who was facing away from them at the desk.

"Don't move" Tracy ordered "Drop any weapons, put your hands on your head and turn around slowly."

The man did as requested and as he turned around revealing who it was, it prompted the two officers to lower their weapons.

"David, what the hell are you doing here?" the Commander asked Collins.

"Same thing as you I suspect" Collins confirmed ruefully "Err can I put my hands down now?" he asked.

"Oh yes of course" the Commander confirmed as he and Tracy both holstered their weapons.

"Looks like you have busy" Tracy remarked as she looked around the heavily ransacked study, the contents of cupboards, the desk and the filing cabinets emptied out and strewn everywhere.

"Not me" Collins responded with his hands held open in denial "Chalk this one up to either the Grosvenor Square Paranoia Club or our Russian friends, it was like this when I arrived including Ermintrude the wonder dog locked in the cupboard downstairs."

"Yes, we met... briefly" the Commander confirmed.

"I don't believe it" Tracy responded.

"Typical unsubtle search routine actually" Collins commented.

"No I mean who in their right mind calls their dog Ermintrude?" Tracy asked in bewilderment which made all three of them pause for a momentary silent thought.

"Oh" the Commander responded "Anyway David are you here with your official MI5 hat on or is this a little private enterprise on your part?" he asked.

"Are you kidding?" Collins responded "The Director General would have my head if he knew I was rooting around Sir Richard's place."

"Just a pity we were all beaten to the punch" Tracy concluded as she looked around the mess "Do you think they found anything while they were wrecking the place."

"I doubt it" Collins responded thoughtfully "Sir Richard was old school, he knew that this sort of thing could happen so he would not have left anything sensitive lying around at home I would have thought."

"Still doesn't tell us where he is though" the Commander added.

"I checked his diary" Collins showed the others the diary that he had managed to recover from the wreckage "Not much in it I am afraid and what there is in code."

"Like you said" the Commander remarked as he looked at the diary "Sir Richard is old school but you can bet he was up to something."

"Well I know he has a little pet project lurking in someone's basement somewhere not too far from Thames House" Collins declared "and I am willing to bet he knows something about your dead Irish fella too."

"I don't suppose it was your guys who nicked the body was it?" Tracy asked more out of hope than expectation.

"Someone nicked the body?" Collins responded somewhat amazed "What from the Mortuary?"

"Right out from under our noses" the Commander confirmed "and not a hide nor hair that they or the body were ever there."

"I'd put a fiver on the Russian's" Collins commented "That sort of shady gig is just the sort of thing old Sergei Glasgov used to specialise in back in his KGB days."

"I fancy that our American friends may have something to tell us" the Commander responded "I got the impression this morning Howell was being prompted by someone much higher up the food chain to get the body into US custody without being totally briefed on what it was all about."

"Get me that stiff and don't ask questions?" Collins asked.

"Something like that" the Commander agreed "but if I know Howell he probably did some digging around off the record to find out what the real story was."

"Well if he does know anything you are going to have a hell of a time getting it out of him" Collins warned "He can be a co-operative guy most of the time but the problem is that he has a constant shadow standing over him in the form of a couple of NSA guys in his staff not to mention the FSB stringer Sergei has had working in there for the last three years."

"What a tangled web we weave..." Tracy pondered.

"If ever I make Director General of MI5" Collins joked "I am going to have that engraved over the front doorway, in Latin of course."

"Well it looks like we are not going to find anything in this lot at any rate" the Commander concluded "I'll get a Scenes of Crime team over here to look the place over, dust for prints but I suspect they won't find any."

"I'd best get back to my office" Collins agreed "Whilst I may be in charge of operations, there is only so long a time I can spend out of touch before some awkward people start asking some equally awkward questions."

"In the meantime" the Commander looked at his pocket watch "I have another appointment, shall we?" he took Tracy's arm in his and they proceeded to leave the room.

With the squealing of its brakes, the ten car train of Class 442 'Wessex Electric' type stock came to halt at platform fourteen of Victoria Station with the 16:20 Gatwick Express which had made the trip non stop from the airport to the south of London in a little under thirty minutes.

Alighting from the front most coach was a tall grey haired man dressed in a full dress Security Service uniform but not the usual very dark blue grey that those in the United Kingdom wore but a deep green which complete with the ornate gold braiding, the small gold Irish harps and the 'EA1' lettering on his epaulettes signified this officer as being none other than Alfred Simms, the Regional Administrator General for the Security Service in the Republic of Ireland.

Having never been to Victoria Station before, initially Simms looked a little lost before deciding to follow the crowds which led him out onto the western concourse of the station where he found himself being met by Jennifer Caverner.

"Administrator General Simms" Jennifer announced "Good afternoon, I am here to drive you to your meeting with the Commander."

"I am in your hands my dear" Simms confirmed willingly whereupon he duly followed alongside Jennifer across the concourse and out of the side entrance to where she had one of her VIP Protection Division cars waiting.

"Would you like to sit in the back Sir?" Jennifer asked as they reached the car.

"Oh hell no lass" Simms responded "I don't get let out very often and I haven't been to London in many a year so if it's all right with you I'll sit up front."

"Certainly Sir" Jennifer confirmed as she opened the front passenger door of the car to allow Simms to get in before going around the other side and getting in herself whereupon she started the car.

"So are you going to tell me where we are going or is this going to be one of the Commander's little mystery tours?" Simms asked as they moved off into the flow of traffic in Buckingham Palace Road.

"Oh I wouldn't want to spoil the surprise" Jennifer remarked with a wry smile.

"You know I have only ever dealt with the legend that is your Commander a couple of times but I can say one thing for certain" Simms remarked "life is never dull if he is involved somewhere."

It took about fifteen minutes driving through the streets of central London, past New Scotland Yard, across Westminster and Trafalgar Square until they arrived in the Aldwych where after negotiating the complicated one way system Jennifer brought the car to a stop outside the old maroon tiled façade of the long closed Strand Station.

"If you will come with me please Sir" Jennifer declared as she got out of the car and went around to the passenger side to let Simms out.

"What is this place?" Simms asked as she escorted him to the old entrance and proceeded to unlock the door which allowed them inside.

"It used to be Aldwych Underground Station" Jennifer explained as they crossed the former ticket hall "Was originally called Strand though hence the name outside, they closed it in 1994 as the branch was uneconomical or something so it sits here untouched."

"Except when someone needs somewhere discreet to meet slap bang in the centre of London for example?" Simms asked.

"Something like that" Jennifer confirmed as she opened the lift door and showed Simms inside "You use that lever to go up and down" she instructed "When you get to the bottom, get out and follow the old signs to the platform, you will be met there."

"Are you not coming with me?" Simms asked just as Jennifer was about to close the lift doors and leave.

"I'll be back later" she reassured him "Mind the doors..." she joked before fully closing the lift door leaving Simms alone to operate the creaky old lift that once he had pressed the antiquated looking lever lowered him down to the old platform level.

As instructed upon arrival at platform level, Simms opened the lift door and followed the old signs that led him through the maze of tile lined tube shaped tunnels to the platform where he found the place empty. There was however but a rumbling sound coming from the far distance in the running tunnel to his right.

A few moments later the rusty rails below him began to screech and hum and the headlights of an approaching train were seen before the grubby formation of old 1969 Tube Stock emerged from the dark running tunnel and came to a halt at the platform whereupon the doors opened and the Commander stepped out onto the platform.

"Now that lad is what I call making an entrance" Simms remarked with admiration as the two men met in the middle of the platform and warmly shook hands.

"They run a train up and down the branch every few weeks or so" the Commander explained "Probably to relieve the monotony if nothing else, it is a little known facility that has certain uses I must say."

"So what shall we talk about?" Simms asked.

"Step into my office" the Commander indicated inside the train whereupon they went aboard and the carriage doors were closed behind them sealing them in.

"This is a copy of everything we have about your dead Irish fellow O'Donnell" Simms opened his briefcase and passed a rather thin looking file to the Commander "I am afraid it is not much."

"Well it is more than we have so far" the Commander confirmed "Someone snuck in and took the body earlier today."

"Can't say I am surprised if I were to be honest" Simms responded to the Commander's surprise.

"Care to elaborate on that claim by any chance?" the Commander asked.

"Well lets put it this way" Simms explained "You have a dead guy pulled out of the river who according to our records died in a plane crash in Indonesia three years earlier, no body found of course so it was a missing presumed dead job, then you have that file in front of you which gives you his life story that is so perfect yet so uneventful that is just screams badly written legend all over it."

"We found a rather clever bit of trade craft in his effects" the Commander responded "One thing we most certainly do know he was not a plumber from Belfast."

"You may be right" Simms continued as he produced another file from his briefcase "Tell me, what do you know about Ireland Commander?" Simms asked.

"Beautiful country" the Commander responded "Certain high profile domestic problems over the last forty years or more, particularly in the northern bit, oh and you guys have some very strange ideas about how wide a railway line should be."

"Unfortunately the only constant in the emerald isle apart from our love of the black nectar has been the sectarian divide and all the baggage that goes with it" Simms confirmed with a tinge of regret "When your Mr Fuller sent me a copy of your dead man's driving licence picture I thought something looked familiar about it and so on a hunch I decided to dig deep into the archives and I found this" he passed across a black and white photograph to which was attached a press cutting from the Irish Times dated seven years earlier.

"Major arms smuggling ring broken by Irish Intelligence sting operation" the Commander read from the article clipping.

"Did you ever hear about an Operation Clover Leaf Commander?" Simms asked.

"Not one I have heard of, no" the Commander confirmed after thinking for a few moments through his considerable experience in the Service.

"Not surprising" Simms continued "Pretty much the only people who have heard of it have either disappeared or turned up dead on a Welsh hillside with sheep nibbling at their rotting remains."

"Ouch..." the Commander responded.

"It was a joint Irish and MI5 Special Operations Section job" Simms continued "Back in the days of what the political muffins of Whitehall called euphemistically 'the troubles' certain paramilitary groups and in particular their very unpleasant not to mention unstable splinter groups were smuggling arms and explosives into Ireland by the boat load."

"I remember reading about it" the Commander responded "Whereas most arms smugglers were struggling to get so much as a replica hand gun in their carry on luggage through Heathrow, these guys were managing to sail bloody great freighter ships full of the stuff in almost undetected."

"Operation Clover Leaf was an attempt to try and identify the sources for these weapons and who was handling the money and shut them down at the root of the problem" Simms explained "There were six key people involved along with a few sundry others who were generally unaware of the bigger picture in which they were involved."

"One of these wouldn't happen to be Sir Richard Crowthorne by any chance would it?" the Commander ventured.

"Educated hunch or pure guesswork?" Simms asked.

"Mix of the two" the Commander explained "He disappeared from the radar without a trace two days ago."

"Oh dear" Simms responded with a concerned frown "Well Sir Richard was the MI5 co-ordinator, he provided three top notch field agents personally selected and trained specifically for this operation."

"That would be the three people in this photograph I presume?" the Commander asked.

"Exactly" Simms confirmed "When arrests were made and a lot of arms seized about six months into the operation it emerged that a rather well connected Russian businessman may have been involved, possibly ex KGB who although it could never be proved was understandably not best pleased that one of his best customer supply lines had been abruptly cut off."

"Hit them in the wallet" the Commander remarked "Works every time."

"Three weeks later this guy on the right" Simms indicated the photograph in the Commander's hand "Leonard Statham was found dead in a field out in the middle of South Wales possibly tortured to death whilst the guy on the left is your dead body who seems to have died twice, O'Donnell."

"Who's the girl in the middle?" the Commander indicated the short young dark haired lady in the centre of the photograph.

"Amber Siobhan Trevelis" Simms confirmed "She was the agent actually inside the group handling the logistics of the arms shipments and the 'company accountant' for want of a better work, her father was old school IRA which got her a convincing foot in the door."

"I've got a recording from Sir Richard's voicemail of a female voice, Irish accent apparently in trouble" the Commander responded "Goes by the name of Amber, could it be the same girl?"

"Possibly" Simms considered the idea "After Clover Leaf I heard Sir Richard kept her on his unofficial books as a floating field agent for his little special projects but beyond that she pretty much disappeared without a trace as far as I can tell."

"Who was running the Irish side of Clover Leaf?" the Commander asked.

"I was" Simms confirmed "That is how I knew who your dead guy probably was when he came up err so to speak, there was also a CIA connection as well, guy by the name of Howell, David Howell. He was our man in the US following up financial leads on the other side of the Atlantic."

"David Howell is now the CIA Head of Station in London" the Commander informed Simms "and he was around to the Yard like a jack in a box the moment he found out the identification of our now infamous not to mention now missing body."

"I know we view the CIA as unsubtle paranoia freaks in matching suits and sunglasses most of the time" Simms advised "but I can vouch for Howell, he is one of their good ones, probably the reason why they dumped him in the UK, well away from the inner circle in Washington DC as he doesn't dance to the company tune. Besides the CIA doesn't really call the shots for US Intelligence anymore, they have the shadow of the NSA hanging over them like a black cloaked figure holding a long knife."

"I got the distinct impression when Howell was in my office earlier this morning that he was there on company orders and not on his own bat" the Commander remarked.

"You should maybe have a chat with him" Simms suggested "If he clams up and starts quoting the CIA company line, just say to him the word Avocet and see what happens."

"Avocet?" the Commander confirmed "All right I will give it a try. This Russian guy you mentioned" the Commander returned to an earlier point "Who was he?"

"Back then he was a fairly insignificant arms dealer" Simms explained "Mostly low grade stuff, plastic explosive, AK47's, that sort of thing but I gather that gradually whoever he is, he has since managed to build up quite a business empire over in the former eastern block states."

"Plenty of those types about" the Commander remarked "Standard path to success when the wall came down was buy an old Soviet gas, electricity or oil company at a knock down price thanks to an old KGB colleague who was now conveniently placed somewhere in the new Russian Federation government and then sit back and count the cash."

"Howell will know the name you can bet on it" Simms confirmed "and I would be willing to bet that old man Glasgow has some murky interest in this little deal as well."

"Well I hope Howell can tell me something" the Commander remarked with a resigned sigh "at the moment all I have is a plastic tray full of possessions belonging to a dead guy who has died twice in three years, a missing Sir Richard and an Irish voice on a telephone message and between those three one of them must know the answer to this mystery."

"Whatever it is I have a feeling it won't be pretty or subtle" Simms warned "Someone somewhere probably stands to make a lot of money out of whatever it is you have stumbled upon here and they will probably do anything to make sure they get it so watch your back."

"Always" the Commander confirmed "Always."

"Who the hell this joker?" the Security Service patrol officer driving the Traffic Division car exclaimed as a man came wandering out into the middle of the road forcing him to abruptly stop the car with the screeching of brakes.

"Here mate, you trying to get yourself killed or something?" the officer called as he got out of the car whereupon the man in the dishevelled overcoat came towards him only to collapse unconscious to the ground in front of him.

"Lima Mike Echo Control from Tango Victor Two Four" the officer called into his radio as he knelt down to check the man was still alive "I need an ambulance to top end of Ealing High Street please, male in late fifties unconscious and looks like he has been badly beaten, possible mugging victim."

"Tango Victor Two Four from Control, message received, ambulance is on the way" quickly came the response.

"All right mate" the officer called to the unconscious man as he rolled him onto his back and checked for a pulse which he found but it was awfully weak "I got you, just take it easy."

With the man now on the ground and moved into the recovery position the officer proceeded to check the pockets in search of some form of identification, finding a battered looking old leather wallet, he opened it and was stunned by the identification card he found inside.

"Ruddy Nora..." the officer muttered in response at seeing not so much the name which to him meant nothing but the organisation on the identification most certainly did.

"Control from Tango Victor Two Four" the officer called urgently into his radio "Re the unconscious male in Ealing High Street, he has identification on him naming him as a Richard Crowthorne and has an all areas access pass for New Scotland Yard, better get a call into the Commander himself I think."

"Why is it in this country it is so damn difficult to get a decent cup of coffee?" David Howell asked generally as he struggled with the cappuccino machine in the corridor of the top floor of the US Embassy in Grosvenor Square.

After the third attempt at randomly pushing buttons the machine finally gave in and produced a plastic cup in the dispenser area which it then reluctantly proceeded to fill it with what Howell would only describe as a vague resemblance of a substance like coffee.

He was about to pick up the cup when his mobile telephone rang "It's just not my morning I guess" he remarked with a resigned sigh as he stepped back from the machine to take the call "David Howell" he answered.

"It's Eddie Regent" the Commander declared calling from his own mobile telephone as he stepped out of the south entrance of Bond Street Underground Station and turned right "Is this line secure?" he asked.

"About as secure as it gets" Howell confirmed "To what do I owe the honour?"

"Lose your NSA minder, the FSB guy in your back office and disconnect all the listening devices in your office" the Commander requested "and tell your goons on the front door to let me in no questions asked, I'm coming up. We talk, right now and alone."

"What's brought all this on?" Howell asked, somewhat taken aback by this sudden development.

"One word for you" the Commander responded "Avocet."

"Ah..." Howell responded as the penny dropped "In which case you had better come on up."

"Thank you" the Commander replied "I'll be there in five minutes" he confirmed before hanging up and continuing with a very purposeful stride to make his way towards Grosvenor Square.

A few minutes later and the Commander was making his way towards the main entrance to the US Embassy, anti-terrorism blockades guarding the front door along with two US Marines on constant guard duty as if the gigantic eagle atop the roof looking down was not formidable enough.

The Marines stood to attention and saluted as the Commander passed them and entered the building unhindered before passing through the main reception.

"Don't worry, I am expected" the Commander called across to the Receptionist and the security guards inside the foyer who were about to say something, allowing the Commander to proceed directly to the lifts and make his way up to the top floor.

Arriving on the top floor, the Commander was slightly surprised to find that even though the ambassador and his staff were not in at the moment, Howell had managed to not only clear his office but it would appear the entire floor of personnel as he made his way along the eerily quiet and deserted corridor to Howell's office where he politely knocked before opening the door.

"Come in Commander" Howell called slightly apprehensively which was not surprising given the nature of his guest and the unexpected circumstances in which he now found himself "I would offer you a coffee but the machine is being thoroughly uncooperative."

"You could always send it to Cuba" the Commander remarked wryly.

"Ah British Security Department humour" Howell responded as he showed the Commander to a seat "Best in the business."

"So do we have an audience?" the Commander asked.

"Well..." Howell declared as he placed three electronic devices on the table before promptly hitting them with a large heavy paperweight "...not any more."

"There goes a chunk of somebody's covert surveillance budget" the Commander remarked.

"So you called this little meeting" Howell began "May I be permitted to know the subject we are discussing?"

"Operation Clover Leaf" the Commander announced "You handled the US end of it, you are probably well aware of who our dead guy who by the way has now disappeared really is and I suspect you know a lot more, so my friend I am all ears."

"Yes, your dead guy was one of the field agents involved in that operation" Howell confirmed "When his name flashed up early this morning I was going to see Sir Richard Crowthorne and discuss what to do next unfortunately events rather over took me."

"Let me guess" the Commander pondered "an urgent call from Washington DC to get that body and his gear no matter what?"

"I was going to come over and see you on an unofficial level" Howell explained "but as soon as someone in DC pushed the panic button on seeing that name it was all I could do to head off the heavy mob before we had a major diplomatic incident on our hands."

"So was it you guys who waltzed off with the body?" the Commander asked.

"Not us" Howell held up his hands in honest denial "Besides what use would he be anyway, it is his stuff that I would want secured I would have thought."

"The Russians then" the Commander suggested "Sergei up to his old habits again?"

"MI5 and my guys have had them under surveillance for a while in connection with another inquiry" Howell explained "The first any of our Soviet friends knew about it was at exactly the same time we did and I would be willing to bet Sergei Glasgov's involvement in all of this is the same as mine, orders from a higher authority to secure what seems to be a worthless dead body and don't ask any questions."

"Not MI6 surely?" the Commander wondered with a hint of disbelief.

"They have been showing a lot of interest in a number of business dealings with certain individuals both in the UK and the former Soviet Union" Howell confirmed "Seems that the arms dealers and money launderers who were active when Operation Clover Leaf was on-line are back in business and this time they have connections in some very high up places."

"Can't say I am too surprised" the Commander remarked "In the last three years I have personally seen the likes of Devlin and Rogers off which has rather left a gap in the market for the unscrupulous to exploit if they have the money and the connections to make the most of it."

"When I last spoke to Sir Richard about three weeks ago" Howell continued "He hinted that he was working on something, he wouldn't say what but I got the distinct impression that the international arms trade came into the equation."

"Which brings us back to this" the Commander produced the photograph that Simms had given him earlier and placed it on the desk in front of Howell and pushed it across to him.

"Ah..." Howell remarked "Someone has been slipping you some dirty little secrets I see."

"Now this guy I know is our body in the Thames" the Commander continued, apparently this other guy wound up dead on a Welsh hillside somewhere whilst we think the girl is still alive or at least she was at around lunchtime when she made a coded call to Sir Richard's secure voice mail."

"These three were the absolute top of their class and were personally selected and trained by Sir Richard for Operation Clover Leaf" Howell explained "I only met them the once but I was very impressed by their skills and abilities."

"So when Clover Leaf went down, what happened?" the Commander asked.

"Some very powerful people who stood to make a lot of money got their fingers burnt" Howell confirmed "in the case of one guy in Moscow quite literally when a certain Sergei Glasgov got to work on him a sound proof room with a blow torch and a needle file."

"Ouch..." the Commander responded.

"Sir Richard and I concluded that there was a far bigger organisation behind the whole thing than we had ever imagined" Howell continued "It was way more than just some guy with a floating guns and ammo shop flogging a few AK47's and some Semtex to some rather unpleasant people."

"So I would wager they were not best pleased then" the Commander concluded.

"Bit of an understatement my friend" Howell confirmed "Very firmly pissed off was the words I heard used, indeed there was talks of contracts being issued which were subsequently confirmed when Sir Richard and I were called on by Special Branch in the early hours of a winter's morning a few years back to identify the human remains on the Welsh hillside."

"Would I be right in guessing he didn't die of natural causes then?" the Commander asked.

"Correct" Howell confirmed "They tortured the poor guy to death very slowly and very painfully, there wasn't much left to identify. After that Sir Richard put together water tight legends for the other two and put them on his special projects payroll with new identities, back stories, the works."

"So we have a leak deep inside the system then" the Commander concluded.

"Trust me when I say there is a lot of money involved and when I say a lot I mean the sort of sums that can buy anything and that includes even the most incorruptible of people in any walk of life so take my advice my friend, tread carefully" Howell warned sincerely "There are far bigger stakes at play here than you could possibly imagine.

In the east end of London sits the busy area of Stratford, at one time a neglected part of Greater London, its forthcoming status as the host for the 2012 Olympic Games and the arrival of the Channel Tunnel Rail Link had seen a massive resurgence in the last couple of years with enormous investment, new buildings and ambitious projects becoming reality.

One of these new developments was the large complex of luxury flats that Tracy on her Security Service motor bike was visiting, this being an address that Fuller had managed to track down for Seamus O'Donnell.

Parking her motorbike in one of the seemingly endless rows of spaces available at the foot of the block, Tracy removed her crash helmet and looked up at the gleaming almost brand new building which looked like it had not so much as been built as placed there from a spaceship such was its modern design which contrasted hugely with the long derelict industrial wasteland that it had replaced.

Looking at her notebook, Tracy saw that she was looking for flat number 32 which would be located on the third floor of the block immediately in front of her and it was into the lobby area of the building that she proceeded before deciding to use the stairs to make her way up.

The well built if somewhat spartan appearance of the main third floor corridor was rather uninspiring and the door to flat number 32 itself, located at the very far end of the corridor was as equally non-descript. It did however have one unique feature compared to the rest of the flat doors around her that certainly caught Tracy's attention.

"Ooooh, classy" Tracy remarked as she stooped down to examine the very sophisticated lock on the door which had a combined key and number pad combination which no doubt was linked to an equally sophisticated alarm system which would sound the moment she made a wrong move in opening that door.

The key lock part was straightforward for Tracy, a simple matter of picking the lock which although complex in design and execution still was not beyond her considerable skills even if it did take a couple of minutes longer for her to overcome it than she would have preferred.

"Insert key card" Tracy read from the small display that illuminated above the keypad once the manual lock had been overcome. Thinking for a few moments, she reached into her tunic pocket and extracted a clear plastic evidence bag that contained some of O'Donnell's possessions that had been recovered from his body one of which was an anonymous plastic card, white in colour and the same size as a credit card with a magnetic strip on the reverse but totally blank with no markings whatsoever to indicate its purpose.

With some trepidation Tracy inserted the card into the receiver slot whereupon the small display changed and asked her for a six digit number.

"Oh give me a break" Tracy responded "Come on girl, think" she said to herself as she tried to think of a number that may be the code before entering simply 123456.

"Please try again" the display duly announced in response to her input.

"All right then" Tracy declared as she took a look at the drivers licence in the evidence bag and from that input its late owner's date of birth in the format 150378.

"Entry granted" the display duly showed whereupon a buzzer briefly sounded and the six dead bolts securing the door were released allowing Tracy to enter.

Once inside and with the door closed behind her, Tracy then came upon her next obstacle, an alarm system control box that was counting down one minute and accompanied by one of those annoying beeping noises at which such devices seem to specialise in.

"Talk about home security" Tracy remarked as she looked at the control box and realised she would be able to deactivate by the swipe of a card so assuming that the card she had used to gain entry would work she tried it whereupon much to her relief the beeping stop and the alarm system deactivated.

It was at this point that Tracy noticed something odd about the rug on the hallway floor which bending down to lift it up revealed a pressure pad sensor beneath in addition to which she also then noticed a laser beam trip device which stretched across the hallway and all three doorways leading off of it.

"Oh we are at a whole new level of paranoia here" Tracy commented before she proceeded into the living room.

Looking all around, the flat was very neat and tidy, everything almost mathematically placed and clinically clean, the same story being found in the modern kitchen where the pots and pans on their racks were placed in order of size and with all their handles pointing in the same direction in addition to which it looked like they had never even been used.

"Something is definitely not right here" Tracy mused as she continued to look around "No man is ever this tidy!"

With that thought in her mind she reached for her mobile telephone and made a call to the Commander which was quickly answered.

"Hello love" the Commander responded from the front passenger seat of a Security Service patrol car that was speeding its way across central London, cutting through traffic with its lights and sirens in full cry "Where are you?"

"Giving our dead body's flat a spin" Tracy confirmed as she looked around "and let me tell you dear something about this is very, very strange."

"Turned over and rifled?" the Commander asked.

"In fact the exact opposite" Tracy responded "You should see the place, it is clinically tidy, you could eat your lunch off the toilet seat, I don't think there is a speck of dust in the place."

"Well maybe this guy wasn't at home very much" the Commander remarked.

"If at all" Tracy concluded "It looks just too clean and neat, no personal items, no little touches. This place has MI5 Safe House written all over it and not just because of the five or six grand's worth of alarm system and anti-intruder devices this place is loaded with."

"Sounds like a dead end" the Commander agreed "Well thankfully with any luck I should have some answers soon, Sir Richard just turned up unconscious in the back of an ambulance at Ealing General Hospital" he confirmed "I am on my way there now."

"I'll head back to the Yard and see how Fuller is getting on" Tracy confirmed "We can meet up for supper in the canteen later."

"Sounds like a good idea to me" the Commander agreed "Love you."

"Love you too, bye" Tracy confirmed before hanging up.

"Come on, get out of the way!" the Commander called up front to a car that was weaving about across the flow of traffic totally oblivious to the presence of the large bright red painted Security Service patrol car that was right on its tail with sirens and lights in full cry.

Eventually the elderly driver of the car in front of them cottoned on to the fact that he was causing an obstruction and pulled sharply over to the left, nearly demolishing a traffic bollard in the process.

"Get a damn driver's licence" the Commander remarked in frustration as they finally managed to pass and resume their fast pace down the road with other vehicles scrambling to get out of the way as they came through.

At this pace it was only a matter of minutes before the patrol car was pulling up at the side entrance to the Accident & Emergency Department of Ealing District General Hospital, the car barely having stopped before the Commander was getting out and walking briskly inside through the automatic sliding doors.

"Hello" the Commander called to the first member of the medical staff he managed to find and brandished his warrant card not that he really needed to identify himself given both the fact he was in full uniform and was probably one of the most well known law enforcement officers in the country let alone the city "You have just had a patient brought in, oldish fella found unconscious?"

"Room 23 down the hall on the right Sir" the doctor confirmed pointing the way.

"Thank you" the Commander responded before heading off in the direction indicated where he quickly found the single bed side ward where Sir Richard was being treated by a large number of medical staff.

"How is he?" the Commander asked as he joined them at the bedside only to see the badly battered state of him "Dear God what a mess" he exclaimed.

"He's taken a heck of a beating" the doctor in charge confirmed "Dehydration, borderline malnutrition, liver's not too good either but I think that maybe more due to the single malt" he indicated Sir Richard's hip flask on the side table along with a number of his other possessions "We have managed to stabilise him for now."

"Can he talk" the Commander asked.

"Given his current condition I would think it unlikely he will regain consciousness for a while yet" the doctor explained "Maybe a couple of hours."

"Doctor I need to make something clear and fully understood" the Commander took the doctor to one side and explained the seriousness of the situation "No doubt you are aware of who I am, this man however is extremely important to the national security of the nation as such I must ask you if all your staff are List Three vetted?"

"Yes" the doctor confirmed "As soon as your officer that found him confirmed his identification we arranged for the single bed private ward and vetted staff only, we have even put a false name on the hospital registry as a precaution."

"This telephone" the Commander indicated the telephone on the wall nearby "Can I get an outside line on it?" he asked.

"Yes" the doctor responded "Dial 9 and then your number."

"Good" the Commander declared as he picked up the handset and proceeded to dial a number "You are going to be having some company over here soon, some friends of mine to keep a good eye on things."

"Oh right..." the doctor pondered with some apprehension.

"Bob?" the Commander called as soon as he was answered by the Operations Chief of the Specialist Firearms Unit of the Security Service "It's your boss, I need you to put together a team of your finest and most trustworthy together and get them down to Ealing District General Hospital, Room 23 on the Q.T. and encircle this place in a ring of steel that even a spider with a cloaking device could not sneak through."

"I'll load up the van now" Bob confirmed, already getting up and grabbing his bullet proof vest and equipment "Should be there in about twenty minutes, maybe even ten if we are not too careful."

"Thanks" the Commander responded before hanging up.

"Does he have any relatives we can contact?" the doctor asked.

"Erm only his wife but she is on a cruise ship somewhere in the Caribbean I think" the Commander confirmed "I'll see if I can get a message to her, there is someone I had better make a call to though" he remarked as he picked up the telephone again and dialled another number.

In Section Fourteen's subterranean offices, Barrett was sat behind Sir Richard's desk trying to run the entire Department without her boss around, a not insurmountable task given the amount of work that the section did, much of it extremely secretive but which still managed to generate a not inconsiderable amount of paperwork if the stacks of files in front of her she was attempting to plough through was anything to go by.

Having spent almost two hours working, Barrett had taken a few moments for a sandwich and a cup of coffee and was just about take the first long awaited bite when the telephone rang causing her to pause, the sandwich just a matter of inches from her mouth as she looked aside at the telephone.

"Un-be-lievable..." Barrett responded slowly as with some regret she lowered her sandwich back to the desk and answered the telephone "If this isn't God, the Queen or the Prime Minister then you better have a cast iron excuse" she declared.

"Would the National Administrator General suffice?" the Commander responded with a wry smile.

"Oh, sorry Sir" Barrett apologised "It's just trying to run Sir Richard's entire Department when you don't have access to his contacts book is a little difficult, even more so considering you can't exactly hire in a temp when you don't technically exist."

"Don't worry about it, in actual fact I may have some good news for you" the Commander explained the reason for his call "A certain gentleman of our mutual acquaintance has just turned up in Ealing District General Hospital" he explained.

"Sir Richard?" Barrett responded with astonishment.

"In the flesh" the Commander confirmed "He has had the hell bashed out of him, looks like a professional job plus he is dehydrated and in a bit of a state, can you get down here at all?"

"I'll see if I can rustle up some transport" Jennifer confirmed by now already standing up and putting on her uniform tunic before noticing Sir Richard's car keys on the corner of the desk and smiling "Do you suppose the old man will mind if I borrow his car?"

"That old Daimler of his?" the Commander remarked "The state of that thing you will be lucky if it makes it to the border of the Congestion Charge zone without breaking down."

"Oh no" Barrett responded "He's traded it in for something a little more up to date."

"The mind boggles" the Commander responded "Anyway it's going to be a while before he regains consciousness but hopefully when he does we can get some answers. Meantime I got my Armed Response guys on their way here now to throw a ring of steel around the place, I have had enough unpleasant surprises for one day."

"I wholeheartedly agree" Barrett confirmed before hanging up, grabbing her sandwich and the car keys and then heading quickly out of the office.

An old steelworks was a rather unusual place to find forty thousand pounds worth of pristine sports car but the rusty structures and abandoned equipment provided a very contrasting backdrop as Amber drove slowly through the site to the finished product storage shed on the far side adjacent to the main railway line, the siding serving it clearly showing with its rusty rails and weeds that nothing had been loaded there for some considerable time.

The wheels of Amber's car scrunched on the aged flaking concrete surface as she drove slowly up to the doors of the old loading shed, some seemingly long forgotten rolls of steel still sitting forlornly in one corner.

Bringing the car to a halt, Amber got out and looked around as a Cardiff to London Paddington express roared by before she proceeded inside.

"Ah, Ms Gregory, so good of you to join us" Altman declared as he emerged from an office in the corner of the large building, his ever attendant body guard Stevens lurking ominously in the shadows immediately behind him.

"You will be delighted to know gentlemen" Amber announced confidently "that your merchandise has been loaded and is en route to the specified destination as per our contract."

"For which many thanks" Altman responded "Please come on in, we are having a little celebration in honour of the launch of my client's major new venture."

"Whoever this client of yours is, he must have a serious amount of money to be able to afford my services" Amber remarked in a sneaky attempt to find out more about those behind this mystery.

"Oh indeed Ms Gregory" Altman confirmed as he walked alongside her towards the offices with the ever present glare of Stevens who towered threateningly over both of them a constant companion just a couple of paces behind them "Perhaps you would care to meet him?"

"Why not?" McNeil agreed, her curiosity both professional and personal suitably raised.

"Bill, would be so kind as to ask our esteemed guest to come and join us" Altman requested of Stevens "In fact lets make this a proper party shall we? Ask his friends and your guys to come along as well."

"Yes Sir" Stevens agreed in a gruff voice but not without a noticeable smirk of expectation as though something was about to happen that he had in some way been looking forward to with great anticipation for some time.

"I must apologise for my associate Mr Stevens" Altman admitted as the man in question left them alone in the middle of the warehouse for a moment "He is not exactly what you would call chatty or civilised but he does make up for that in his not inconsiderable range of err more physical skills."

"Hmmm" Amber mused "I know the type" she agreed.

"Yes I can believe that" Altman muttered under his breath as the door ahead opened and from it emerged first Stevens and then just behind him a stout bearded man in a long fawn coloured overcoat, a cigar seemingly permanently affixed to his mouth.

"Permit me to introduce my esteemed client Alexander Cruschov" Altman declared as they stepped forward to meet in the middle "He's Russian by the way but then again you probably already that didn't you?" his voice took on some thread of knowing menace "Comrade Cruschov, allow me to introduce Emma Gregory our err transport consultant."

"You will have to forgive my appearance Ms Gregory" Cruschov announced in a very heavy Russian accent "The nature of my work means that my arrival in this charming country had to go unnoticed and let's just say that it was not much worse than Aeroflot's economy class to Siberia."

"So what brings you to South Wales Mr Cruschov?" Amber asked, maintaining a cool and collected presence that gave nothing away for she most certainly recognised the Russian, they had met before some years earlier under very different circumstances.

"Oh purely business Ms Gregory" Cruschov calmly confirmed "Or can I call you Siobhan?" he asked "Perhaps Amber suits you best though?"

"Emma actually" McNeil corrected him but by now she had already realised that she was probably staring disaster in the face, a fact that became even more acute as she became aware of a number of armed men approaching the scene in the shadows and the distinctive clicking sounds of automatic weapons being cocked.

"Let's drop the mask shall we?" Cruschov suggested as Stevens came over and proceeded to stand immediately behind her, a gun brought to bear near her head over which he towered "I've been looking forward to meeting you again for five years" he explained "We know who you are, who you work for and most importantly of all who you were Ms Amber McArdle."

"Nope" Amber responded, shaking her head in well pretended ignorance "I really don't know that name, perhaps you have the wrong person?" she suggested.

"Your file" Cruschov declared as an associate passed him an official personnel file clearly marked with the words 'HIGHLY CLASSIFIED' across the front which he placed on top of an old oil drum that stood between them "It's amazing what a little greasing of wheels and some good old fashioned communist manipulation can liberate from the dark and uncharted depths of your Government's so called high security records registry."

"If you don't mind" Amber responded with insistence "I am a little pressed for time so perhaps you would care to cut to the reason for this little discussion?"

"Very well" Cruschov happily agreed "When my British associates, some of them well placed within the Government were helping me put together this little venture of ours a curious coincidence occurred" he explained "As if by magic I suddenly found myself in the unique possibly never to be repeated position to meet those responsible for considerable expense that I and some very good customers and friends of mine incurred both personal and financial about five years ago."

"Still don't know what you are going on about" Amber defiantly responded as she continued to maintain a relaxed composure but deep down she knew that this may well be the end for her.

"Operation Clover Leaf" Cruschov continued "Here, why don't you read all about it?" he suggested as he produced another classified file and tossed it onto the top of the old oil barrel "Oh no of course you don't have to do you? You know what is on every page of this document which is only to be expected since you are the last survivor of three field agents that were sent in by that slippery nemesis of mine Richard Crowthorne in a vain attempt to disrupt my business empire."

"Who's this Crowthorne guy?" Amber asked.

"Your file shows you have an I.Q. of one hundred and thirty seven so playing the dumb brunette won't wash" Cruschov warned "He's your boss, your control but don't think he is coming to help you as at this very moment he is in hospital thanks to some very physical handiwork by one of my people and as for your fellow field agents well let's just say that the final one went for a swim in the River Thames and won't be coming back anytime soon."

"You really are an evil devious bastard aren't you?" Amber stated purely for the record.

"Flattery will get you nowhere err whatever you name is" Cruschov responded dryly "Anyway I believe you British have a quaint phrase that sums it up, err 'Names are for Tombstones?' I believe, so which one should appear on yours? Decide quickly as you don't have long left to make up your mind."

"Your threats do not impress me" Amber defiantly responded "and anyway I am Irish, proud to serve and honoured to have been selected so that I can bring you and your co-conspirators and any other scum like you down to the level of the gutter before flushing you away down the sewer which is a place far too good for the likes you."

"Brave, bold and defiant to the last" Cruschov remarked with a grin "Well I must say I have enjoyed our little chat but time is pressing, there is so much to do and so little time left to do it in so I will take my leave of you."

"What do you want us to do with the little cow?" Altman asked as Cruschov was about to leave.

"I think the least she deserves is a quick and painless death" Cruschov confirmed "After all she is a very brave little girl, taking me and my empire on not once but twice in her sadly short life so I think that bravery should be rewarded. Good bye Amber for I know that is your real name, have a good life" he smirked before adding chillingly "What's left of it."

"See you in hell" Amber responded calmly after Cruschov proceeded to turn smartly on his heels and leave "Then we can square up for the rematch."

"Remarkable man isn't he?" Altman remarked to her once Cruschov and his bodyguard had left leaving just he, Amber, Stevens and the armed men in the shadows surrounding them.

"He is a piece of obnoxious sub-human arms peddling power crazed psychotic slime" Amber declared with a wry smile "You two make a perfect couple."

"Charming" Altman responded before turning to Stevens "All right, you heard the Comrade, make it quick and then we can get back to business with no further distractions from the likes of the young lady here and any more of Richard Crowthorne's associates."

"Come on you" Stevens gruffly grabbed Amber by the left arm and dragged her to one side which was the moment she was waiting for as she kicked out, knocking the old oil barrel which sent Altman to the ground before elbowing Stevens in the midriff which forced him to let go of her.

Using the sudden chaos as a distraction, Amber produced a nine millimetre handgun from inside her jacket and fired off three shots towards the gunmen in the shadows who were moving towards her across the rough concrete floor of the old building, the gunfire sending Altman and the others ducking for cover behind whatever they could find but not before he was hit in the arm by one of her shots.

Thinking quickly, Amber shot out the two lights that were providing sparse illumination inside the building and then used the cover of the near darkness to make a run for it, ducking down as she did so until she reached a deposit of old steel piling.

All around her there were shouts and confusion interspersed with bursts of random gunfire from Altman's men until Stevens managed to recover and get back to his feet and then reorganise his people.

"Will someone please kill that little Irish bitch?" Altman demanded as, sitting on the floor behind a roll of steel sheet for cover, he looked at the blood that was soaking through the arm of his overcoat where he had been shot.

"You two over that side, you two over there and you two with me" Stevens quickly got to grips with the situation "Search this place from top to bottom, if it breathes then it dies."

As Stevens' men dispersed throughout the building and the rest of the site, Amber had managed to clamber up over some old equipment and onto a gantry in the roof space that ran the length of the building.

Ducking down against the rail so as to be as out of sight as possible, she observed as the armed men began to methodically search the place and realised quickly that she needed to find a way out.

"Oh hell, definitely not good" Amber muttered to herself under breath as she looked around before deciding to make a run for it down the length of the suspended walkway towards a shaft of light in the end wall where an access hatch was hanging off its rusty hinges.

"What was that?" one of the men on ground level asked as he heard something creak in the roof space above him and a gentle sprinkling of disturbed dust fell to the ground in front of him. Looking up he caught a brief glimpse of someone moving in the shadows high up in the roof space.

"Oh hell" Amber called out as a hail of bullets ricocheted all around her, sparking off of the metal superstructure of the building and the walkway and only narrowly missing her.

Turning quickly she brought her gun to bear on the two gunmen immediately below and fired twice, wounding one and causing the other to throw himself into the cover of some old machinery.

With the immediate danger dealt with, Amber made a run for it through the hatchway and out onto the roof of the main part of the old steelworks but the gunfire had attracted the others and they were all starting to close in on her position.

"Someone make sure her car is taken care of" Stevens was heard to shout, his voice echoing around the semi-derelict structure that covered some thirty acres in total "I don't want her to leave the site, well not alive at any rate."

Skipping across the roof and walkway sections of various interconnected buildings was a hazardous trip for Amber and twice the rusted and unsafe nature of the structure nearly caught her out with either the flooring collapsing even under her relatively light weight or a handrail coming apart as she leant on it sending parts of it crashing through the fragile roof covering before clanging onto the hard concrete floor some fifty feet below her.

She had almost made it to the edge of the building where she knew her car was parked when further gunfire rang out, one shot catching her in the right thigh but passing straight through. Turning and firing several shots at the three armed men that were now pursuing her across the roof saw one of them fall off to the ground whilst the others were forced to run for cover.

From there it was pure adrenalin that combated her pain from the bullet injury as she headed down the maintenance access steps mounted to the end wall of the building, however before she reached ground level she took a moment to pause and observe two men waiting in the shadows of a nearby doorway for her to appear.

"Oh give me a break guys" Amber remarked to herself, grimacing in pain as she lowered herself the last few steps to ground level but being careful to remain in the shadows out of sight. What she needed was a distraction so looking around she found a loose piece of metal that she picked up and then threw right over to the other side of the yard where it clanked to the ground.

The distraction worked as the two men waiting in hiding duly came out to investigate the sound of movement before liberally spraying the area where the metal had landed with automatic gunfire until their magazines were empty, as they were firing however Amber had skipped across the open ground unseen to the far side of her car only to discover that all four tyres had been slashed rendering the vehicle useless.

Whilst the two men nearby were reloading she popped up from behind the car, gave them a shrill whistle which caused them to turn around with some surprise before shooting them both which resulted in them collapsing to the ground.

Before anyone else came along however Amber had to act fast and so opened the passenger side door of the car and accessed the glove compartment where she took a small black leather bag which she quickly placed in her jacket pocket. Seeing armed men in the distance approaching on foot at speed across the open ground however meant she could not hang around and would quickly need another way out.

The distance sound of the horn of an approaching train gave her an idea, a crazy one to be sure and one that in no way guaranteed any success but at that time her options were limited so Amber made a run for it back to the access ladder and then up onto the roof but as she climbed up Stevens and his men were soon on her trail for as she made her escape, the bullet wound meant she was leaving a trail of blood in her wake.

"I'll say this for you, you have some fighting spirit in you girl" Stephens called after her almost in admiration for his adversary as he cornered her over on the far side of the roof of the rail siding loading area.

"Flattery will get you nowhere" she weakly responded in jest as she held her gun up pointed directly at Stevens who was doing the same in return "My boss knows where I am, the cavalry will be here any minute and you will be on your way to a nice cosy jail cell."

"Hate to tell you this missy but your Russian friend back there who you just met" Stevens informed her "Lets just say he has some very influential contacts which means that with one telephone call he made sure we have this entire site all to ourselves, no reports of shots being fired, no Security Department coming over the horizon to rescue you, just you and me."

"You're pathetic" Amber protested as she promptly pulled the trigger, one round going off which thanks to her weakening condition merely went wide as Stevens stood defiantly still for he could see the state she was in and when she pulled the trigger a second time only to be rewarded with the click of an empty chamber he smiled such an evil knowing grin.

"Maybe I am pathetic" Stevens remarked "Maybe not but then again I am the one with the loaded gun and you have nowhere left to run."

"Well get on with it then" Amber defiantly called to her adversary as she chucked her empty gun to one side which saw it rattle down through the superstructure to the ground below.

"If you insist" Stevens responded with a shrug of the shoulders before firing a single shot that struck Amber in the abdomen causing her to stagger backwards to the edge of the walkway where her weight on the weakened structure of the barrier that guarded the edge made it collapse and she fell down and out of sight.

Stevens now joined by two of his men ran forwards to the end of the walkway and looked down to see the tail end of an empty freight train passing below, just visible on the fourth wagon from the rear was Amber's body which could be seen to be still moving slightly indicating there was a possibility that against the odds, the reputation of this little lady as one very tough Irish girl had seen her survive a very narrow escape but only by the tiniest of margins.

"I'll talk to Altman" Stevens confirmed to his associates as they watched the train gather speed and disappear off into the distance, the horn from the locomotive at the front echoing around the surrounding valleys and hills in an almost ghostly manner "If she is still alive then I want her head, whether it is still attached to her body though is entirely optional."

"That sort of search may attract a lot of attention" one of the men warned.

"Our Russian friend can take care of that and bring some specialist talents to this" Stevens explained "Meantime one of you find out where that train is going and do it quietly, for now though saddle up and lets get the hell out of here."

As the train continued on its journey which would see it head up the Central Wales Line through some of the remotest countryside in the country, Amber groaned in agony as she rolled over onto her back and looked around her at the interior of the open wagon she had landed in from some ten or fifteen feet up.

She was by now battered and bleeding but still alive, however she also knew she was all alone, there was no one she could trust now except maybe one man but the chances of him being her saviour in time were so unlikely that she dismissed the possibility as mere madness.

One thing was certain for her however, the information she had in her possession had to reach the right people in time, all other priorities including her own survival would have to take second place.

Gingerly she lifted herself up against the inside side wall of the wagon and extracted the black leather case she had managed to get from her car. Lying down on the floor in front of her she opened it to reveal a small pocket computer and a strange little black box with wires coming out of it which Amber then proceeded to plug into the pocket PC.

"I just hope someone out there is listening" she remarked more out of hope than expectation as she pressed a number of keys on the keypad which resulted in the device emitting a beeping noise for a few seconds before falling silent. Then a couple of moments later a crackling noise from within the small black box heralded the activation of a self destruct device that rendered the unit dead and useless.

From now on until what would probably be an unlikely miracle occurring she really was on her own.

Situated on the outskirts of Cheltenham in Gloucestershire is the large site of the Government's General Communications Head Quarters, better know as GCHQ, a highly secretive establishment that monitors many hundreds of thousands of lines of communications across the country and overseas on behalf of the Security Department, Secret Services and other similar organisations.

Most of this is done automatically and deep in the bowels of the complex one of the many banks of computers that whirred away continuously to themselves twenty four hours a day suddenly began to record a message, only twelve seconds long and consisting of nothing more than a series of strange beeps before falling silent again.

A couple of floor up, rooms full of analysts would spend their day recording, monitoring and assessing but a fraction of the material the site gathered and in one of the offices a few moments after the mysterious transmission had been recorded downstairs, an alert began to flash on the screen of one analyst.

"What the hell was that?" the analyst remarked to himself as he noticed the alert appear on his screen causing him to stop what he had been doing and investigate further.

Clicking on the alert icon caused a readout to appear which stated the facts about the transmission including length, time and date but most importantly to that analyst the frequency it was sent on.

Realising the importance of the transmission, the analyst quickly set about on his computer retrieving it to a secure file before then proceeding to delete off of the central system so that now only he could access it. Once this had been done he reached across the desk for the telephone and quickly dialled a number.

"Fourteen Command, this is wall glass" the analyst confirmed "I am sending you a package on a secure line, see that Sir Richard gets it immediately."

"That's a bit tasty isn't it?" Tracy remarked as she and the Commander watched as Barrett drew up to the side entrance in Sir Richard's new car, a gleaming Aston Martin in liquid silver.

"Sir Richard must be having one of those mid life crises they keep going on about on daytime television" the Commander concluded as Barrett, beaming like a Cheshire cat at having enjoyed the thrill of driving the car got out and joined them.

"Having fun Lieutenant Commander?" Tracy asked with a knowing smile.

"What ever gives you that idea Maam?" Barrett responded with a smirk of pure satisfaction.

"Come on" the Commander gestured towards the side entrance which had two of the Security Service's uniformed Armed Response Unit officers on the door who acknowledged them as they passed between them and into the hospital.

"Do you have any idea what Sir Richard has been up to of late?" Tracy asked as they approached the room where he was still being treated and went inside.

"Possibly" Barrett admitted "The problem is I am not authorised to say anything, not even to you two without the old man's explicit instruction."

"Doctor, how is he?" the Commander asked.

"Coming around I think" the Doctor confirmed as he continued to check Sir Richard's vital signs which were showing definite signs of improvement "Try talking to him" he suggested "but don't make it overly complicated, nothing too exciting."

"Best leave out the bit about borrowing his car if I were you" Tracy remarked aside to Barrett.

"Dickie old boy" the Commander called to Sir Richard "Looks like you've been in the wars."

"That's an understatement" Sir Richard weakly responded "Where am I?" he asked taking a look around at his unfamiliar surroundings.

"Ealing District General Hospital" the Commander confirmed "You've been missing for the best part of three days and we were starting to get worried."

"Let's just say I had an alternative invitation" Sir Richard weakly admitted "I got pulled off of the street by some passing heavies and then spent two days being interrogated."

"Nasty..." Tracy remarked "Did you get a look at them?" she asked.

"No" Sir Richard confirmed "Only a voice in the dark and a thug in a balaclava."

"Well much as I hate to bring work into it" the Commander admitted with regret "Things have been happening whilst you have been away. Tell me does the name Seamus O'Donnell ring any bells?"

"Maybe..." Sir Richard elusively admitted "What of him?"

"He's dead" the Commander confirmed "Turned up in the Thames in the early hours of this morning wrapped in plastic and with his head stoved in but that is not the most interesting part is it Tracy?"

"Oh no" Tracy confirmed "Strange that within what an hour was it of running this dead guy through the computer and seeing he is flagged..."

"...not to mention dead for at least three years already according to my opposite number in Dublin" the Commander added.

"...then the CIA, the FSB and several other interested parties suddenly all arrive on our doorstep en masse demanding we hand the guy over to them" Tracy concluded "Trouble was someone beat us to the punch and stole the body."

"Ah..." Barrett remarked "I might know something about that" she admitted which caused the others to turn their heads towards her.

"Please don't let me interrupt" the Commander responded "As Mr Spock would say, I am all ears."

"Well when his name flashed up on your system" Barrett admitted "not to mention it would seem everyone else's for that matter I took steps to secure the body before anyone could find out what was going on."

"Didn't get his effects though" Tracy reminded her.

"I made sure those got to you" Barrett continued to explain "There is a lot more to this than meets the eye."

"Well this dead guy's drum had secret agent in a safe house written all over it and then there was the clever dead drop system he was using, the magnetic strip on the back of a otherwise seemingly ordinary travel ticket sounds like your style" Tracy confirmed "So my husband and I reckoned that this was probably one of your pet projects" she informed Sir Richard who merely nodded slowly in response.

"In conversation with my opposite number from Dublin" the Commander continued "some interesting facts came to light, not least about an old operation that was under your command back at MI5, Operation Clover Leaf?"

"Someone has been listening at key holes" Barrett remarked with a wry smile.

"Given what has been going on and the number of interested parties that have been turning up uninvited left, right and centre" the Commander responded "I would say a lot of people have been listening at a lot of keyholes, don't you agree?"

"The voice mail message" Tracy reminded her husband.

"Oh yes" the Commander remembered "We hacked into your voice mail system."

"You hacked into my voice mail system?" Sir Richard asked the Commander with astonishment.

"Well not me personally, I can't even get into my own let alone anyone else's" the Commander admitted which caused Tracy and Barrett to snigger in response.

"So what did you learn from this probably highly illegal intrusion?" Sir Richard asked.

"Aside from the fact you owe your club over three hundred quid on your bar tab, there was a very urgent sounding call from someone called err" the Commander had to refer to his notes for the name at this point Amber?"

"Siobhan must have called your personal line instead of the office" Barrett responded.

"Hang on, who is Siobhan?" Tracy asked "I thought her name was Amber?"

"A long and very complicated story" Sir Richard admitted as he grimaced in pain but before he could continue, Barrett's telephone began to ring which caused her to withdraw to one side and take the call.

"Is this confirmed?" Barrett asked her caller causing the others all to look up "All right I will let him know."

"Something we should know about?" the Commander inquired.

"Depends on Sir Richard" Barrett admitted before going over to the bedside and kneeling down to whisper a message in his right ear.

"All right" Sir Richard declared weakly after a few moments serious thought "I know you are familiar with the material, brief our friends here and get the ball rolling."

"Yes Sir" Barrett agreed.

"All right, what's occurring?" Tracy asked.

"I have been authorised to brief you both" Jennifer confirmed "but not here, you need to come with me to Section Fourteen, we will also need the services of Commander Fuller so if you could arrange to have him ready, we will pick him up on the way."

"All right" the Commander confirmed "You're driving."

The rain was starting to turn from an annoying drizzle to a full rain storm as the DB Schenker Class 66 locomotive that had hauled the train departed the remote engineers' yard light engine leaving behind not only the rake of wagons but also its unusual and unintended item of cargo.

Looking over the side of the wagon, Amber observed that she had wound up effectively in the middle of nowhere, a weather beaten and weed strewn railway yard with just a few cackling crows in a nearby tree the only real sign of any life for miles around.

With the last dying echoes of the locomotive accelerating away into the distance, Amber managed to clamber out of the wagon and gingerly jump to the ground, her leg now sufficiently bandaged using torn strips of material from her jacket which had at least stopped most of the blood loss and meant she was now sufficiently mobile to seek out some form of assistance.

With caution in her step, she picked her way through the weeds and abandoned pieces of railway equipment that were littering the yard towards the perimeter fence and what she could see was a road just beyond.

Here the chain link fence was as equally old and dilapidated as the rest of the site and Amber made easy work of clambering through a hole in it to reach the roadway.

Looking up and down it as the rain continued to beat down, her heart began to sink as she could see amid the mist that there was no apparent sign of any buildings or civilisation for miles around, there was however to her surprise a bus stop.

"When the going gets tough, the tough take the bus I guess" she remarked with a wry smile as she slowly walked down the road to the old style wooden bus shelter that had it not been for the stop flag by the side of the road would have been easily missed as it was so engrossed by the surrounding bushes and undergrowth that lined both sides of the road.

Sitting on the old wooden bench, Amber let out a sigh of resignation before reaching into her back pocket and extracting a small USB memory stick which she checked to make sure was still all right before returning it to the security of her pocket.

"Well Amber" she remarked to herself as she looked up at the rain dripping off of the leading edge of the shelter "Looks like I am stuck here" she confirmed before taking out her wallet and opening it. Inside were a few credit cards, some twenty pound notes and a photograph of herself taken a few years earlier with a young man alongside her, both of them smiling.

Looking at the image caused McNeil to raise a smile herself and maybe just a little bit of forlorn hope "I don't suppose you are around by any chance are you love?" she remarked "Only right now I could use just a little help from an old friend, a hug wouldn't go amiss either."

Thinking back to some old happy memory for a few minutes almost meant that McNeil nearly missed the approaching sound of a vehicle, the deep throaty noise of which clearly indicated a diesel powered engine which as she looked around the corner to her surprise turned out to be an approaching service bus.

"Well maybe you have brought me some luck after all" she remarked to the man in the photograph in her wallet before extracting a twenty pound note and returning the wallet to her jacket pocket. Getting up and stepping out of the bus shelter, Amber frantically waved her good arm to indicate to the driver as he approached to stop.

"Blimey my dear" the bus driver called in his welsh accent from his cab once he had brought the bus to a halt and opened the folding passenger access door to see this soggy blood stained young lady standing there with a hopeful look on her face "Are you all right?"

"I have had better days" Amber admitted "Single to the next town please, do you have change by any chance?" she asked as she boarded the bus and proffered the twenty pound note.

"For a twenty?" the driver responded astonished "You must be joking."

"Oh well, your lucky day. Keep the change" she casually declared pressing the note into the driver's hand.

"Thanks" the driver replied "Take a seat" he suggested to which Amber nodded in grateful thanks before taking a seat in the saloon as the driver shut the doors and moved off down the road.

In nicer conditions the countryside of central Wales was a very picturesque scene but in this foul weather it took on a more mysterious hue with the misty cloud surrounding the hill tops and taking on an almost ghostly appearance which Amber watched through the window of the bus as the rain dripped down the outside of the glass in an almost hypnotic way.

After fifteen minutes the bus began to pass through the outskirts of a small village, little more than a number of farmers cottages, a pub and a village shop were to be found but as far as Amber was concerned this was what she needed and as the bus came to a stop in the small centre of the village by the old mill pond, she spotted something in particular that was exactly what she required.

"I'll get off here thanks" she duly called to the driver as she came to the front platform and once the doors opened, climbed down and got off.

"Are you sure?" the driver asked out of obvious genuine concern for the wellbeing of his unusual passenger "Only this is just the middle of nowhere with a pub, the nearest town with a medical facility is another twenty miles away."

"It will do for now" Amber confirmed "Many thanks" she added before the driver closed the doors and the bus departed.

The thing that had attracted Amber's attention and made her get off the bus was parked over in a side street nearby, the distinctive appearance of a red marked Security & Police Service patrol car which although it appeared to be unoccupied, its very presence meant that there had to be a Security Service officer around there somewhere.

Looking in through the window of the patrol car, she could not see anything particularly unusual and was about to try the door handle when she heard a voice behind her.

"Evening Madam" the voice called causing her to turn around and see two Security Service patrol officers in full uniform standing there "Something we can do for you?"

"Oh hello" Amber responded with a sigh of relief although she was still firmly on her guard "I was hoping to bump into you guys, I am afraid I have run into a spot of bother and could use some help."

"Yes so I see" the second officer remarked looking at the young lady's condition, the bullet hole with dried blood all around it clearly visible in the upper left arm of her jacket and the makeshift tourniquet around her right leg "Been in the wars have we?" he asked.

"Car trouble" Amber responded meekly as she began to suspect that something was not quite right here about the two officers in front of her, the second of which she noticed out of the corner of her eye had his hand on his hip mounted gun holster which was unusual for a rural Security Service patrol officer on a non threatening inquiry such as this.

"Perhaps you should come with us" the first officer suggested as he stepped forward towards the car and opened the rear passenger door so that Amber could get in but by now she had realised that there was definitely something wrong.

"You know you two guys surprise me" Amber remarked stopping just short of getting in the car and turning to them "I would have expected you two to have had strong Welsh accents especially around here, not London ones."

"Life is full of surprises Ms Gregory" the second officer responded, confirming her worst fears that these men were not who they said they were as he drew his gun and pointed it.

"You can say that again" Amber admitted before suddenly slamming the car door against the first officer crippling him and in an instant pulling his gun and aiming at the second officer with a determined look.

"Looks like we have a stand off gentlemen" Amber remarked as she allowed the car door to move back and the first man to collapse to the floor injured to which she added to his plight by kicking him in the midriff just to be sure.

"We are bigger and taller than you" the second man responded.

"And uglier, yes I know" Amber rebuked with a smirk "So how do you want to play this, your move."

"Come with us and this will all be over quickly and painlessly" the second man insisted "Our car is over there" he indicated to a black Range Rover parked a short distance away behind him.

"All right" Amber agreed "You go first but please, no silly moves, I am a very good shot."

"In your condition, I doubt that somehow" the second man remarked but he proceeded to do as agreed and the two adversaries started to move over towards the Range Rover some one hundred yards distance, their guns still pointed firmly at each other and maintaining a constant distance between them.

As they reached the halfway point a car came along the road and passed them by which caused the man to look to his side very briefly, this being the distraction that Amber needed to suddenly open fire shooting the man twice in the legs and sending him to the ground in agony where she then kicked his gun away before administering a hefty kick to his head rendering him unconscious.

"Never underestimate the little people" Amber advised the unconscious man in her broad Irish accent with a wry smile before returning to the patrol car where the first man was still in agony on the ground.

With little thought for his condition, she managed to extract the handcuffs from the utility belt and secured the man's hands behind his back before gently patting him on the side of his face to get his attention.

"I got a message for you" Amber informed him "Tell that disgusting scum bucket boss of yours that I am personally going to see him and the rest of his little power tripping organisation burn in hell, got that?" she told the man defiantly.

The man merely nodded weakly in agreement as there was nothing else he could do.

"Good boy" Amber confirmed before quickly turning her attention to the patrol car which she quickly discovered had been disabled by the men presumably when they had acquired it earlier. Opening the boot revealed the bodies of two Security Service officers, their uniforms stripped from them and when she checked confirmed as being dead.

"Thought those uniforms were an ill fit" she remarked to herself as she looked on with regret at seeing the dead before closing the boot again. Instead she made her way around to the front of the car and opened the driver's door where after a quick search she managed to find useful things such as a first aid kit, a box of ammunition for the Security Service issue handgun she had managed to acquire, a flashlight and a map of the local area.

Taking these items, Amber was about to make her way over to her assailants black Range Rover parked nearby and steal it to make good her escape when she noticed that in the otherwise deserted village she had further company approaching in the form of an identical vehicle with at least four men inside.

"What is this, a convention?" she asked herself as she ducked out of sight into the relative cover of a side street.

Looking around the corner at the scene unfolding before her she could see that the second Range Rover had stopped alongside the first one and that there was some consternation amongst the men who got out of it when they saw the condition of their disabled colleagues.

"Time to go" Amber confirmed to herself as she saw significant numbers of firearms being produced from the vehicles by the men before they started to fan out in a search pattern that if she remained there would almost certainly see her captured and most likely killed.

Looking across out of the small village to the mist encroached hills and valleys beyond she quickly realised that she had no choice but to try and make it across country by foot, the fact that she had a local map and a strong survival instinct being about the only things left that were on her side now.

"All right, let's hear it" the Commander declared as he sat down behind his desk in his office at New Scotland Yard and looked out across the room to face Barrett and David Collins from MI5 who had joined them whilst alongside the Commander was Tracy who anyone present could tell was equally eager to find out exactly what this was all about.

"First of all" Barrett began after clearing her throat slightly nervously "I must stress that what transpires in this office in the next few minute's remains here, it does not get spoken of outside these four walls."

"Agreed" the Commander confirmed "My office was certified as being free of listening devices yesterday."

"And about thirty minutes ago as well" Collins added to which the Commander merely looked across at him "Oh Barrett and Sir Richard asked me to send in one of my people to give it a going over again, just in case."

"I thought my biscuits had moved" the Commander remarked before turning back to Barrett "Ok then so what is all this about?" he asked.

"Does the name Alexander Dimitriev Cruschov mean anything to anyone here?" Barrett asked as she produced a black and white surveillance photograph of a man from a file she was holding, held it up briefly for everyone to see before putting it on the desk for Tracy and the Commander to take a closer look at.

"The disgraced Russian billionaire?" Tracy responded amazed.

"The same" Barrett confirmed "Described by some commentators over in the former eastern bloc as the biggest hope for the future of Russia and the eastern Europe states."

"...and described by the Prime Minister just the other day as an oily traitorous slimy little shit who would sell his grandmother if he could smell a profit" Collins put in.

"I think someone had better fill me in" the Commander confirmed "as I have to admit I have never heard of him."

"Try reading the business sections of the paper once in a while darling" Tracy wryly suggested "as I don't think you will find him being discussed in Railway Modeller somehow."

"When the Berlin wall was coming down" Collins continued "Various unsavoury characters, many ex KGB and the like decided to take early retirement and invest their state pension in seemingly worthless investments at a time when effectively the Soviet Union was embroiled in little more than a glorified fire sale, put some hard currency on the desk and name your terms and you could walk away with virtually anything."

"Free market economy" the Commander concluded "So I take it this Cruschov is one of these new money type Russians?"

"New money but old habits" Barrett confirmed "A few years ago his name cropped up as part of an operation called Clover Leaf which was a joint UK, US and Irish intelligence operation to shut down weapons and finance supply to some of the more over enthusiastic Irish terrorist splinter groups and our man Cruschov was the man with the weapons and the financial set up to launder a very large amount of cash almost in plain sight without anyone asking any awkward questions."

"Oh but he has bettered himself since then" Collins added "Now he is believed to be the sleeping investment partner in a whole raft of Government regeneration projects in this country, the US and across Europe, as a result there are a lot of very highly placed people with their hands in the till who do not want any of their former Soviet benefactor's dirty laundry to surface."

"I am beginning to see where this is going" the Commander remarked.

"Now one of the reasons why he almost always remains a silent partner in most of these big deals" Barrett continued "is because he is a wanted man. The War Crimes tribunal in the Hague for a starter want to have a word."

"And that is in addition to the several International Secret Services, Interpol and other agencies all itching to drag him in for a chat for a veritable list of serious crimes as long as your arm" Collins confirmed.

"In short if he is seen or heard setting foot in pretty much any civilised country in Europe or North America then he stands to be arrested and extradited to the Hague faster than you can say you're nicked" Barrett continued "this despite the fact that in this country alone we have managed to trace him as the owner of three Private Public Partnership investments in NHS hospitals and a sixty percent share in two Premiership football clubs."

"If he has evaded the radar of the authorities for this long what, ten years at least now?" Tracy pondered "then it stands to reason that he has some serious protection somewhere in many countries."

"It would appear so" Collins confirmed "Operation Clover Leaf six years ago was an air tight case against him and numerous other high profile characters yet when the case went to trial laden beneath enough 'D' notices to sink a battleship our Russian friend and his associates mysteriously slipped away in the night."

"Leaving behind a trail of bodies in the process" Barrett added as she produced another file and from it a photograph of a dead body taken where it had been found, the word CLASSIFIED printed very prominently across the corner "This was one of three undercover field agents that Sir Richard and David here had running on the operation, despite new identities and relocation they found this guy dead on a Welsh hillside two weeks later and he didn't die from natural causes."

"It wasn't quick either" Collins recalled with a bit of a grimace as he thought back to that incident "the poor sod died slowly and very painfully as various bits of his anatomy were removed with hacksaws, pliers, blowtorches, you can use your imagination to fill in the blanks if your stomach is solid enough."

"The other two managed to evade detection thank goodness" Barrett continued "then three weeks ago like a ghost from the past Section Fourteen gets a telephone call from our man at Gatwick Airport suggesting we check out the passengers of a private jet that had just landed."

At this point Barrett produced another more recent file "The Civil Aviation Authority records show the jet as being registered in Greenland, a flight plan filed that stated its origin as Luxemburg and that it was carrying five passengers and three crew but when I checked with the Luxemburg Aviation authorities they confirmed it was a straight banana, they had never heard of it."

"Our Russian friend?" the Commander ventured.

"Certainly looks like him from the CCTV in the customs hall at Gatwick" Collins confirmed as he extracted the pictures and passed them across "checking back on the passport numbers show them to be genuine but when a couple of my people checked up it turned out the real owners of those passports were in New Zealand at the time."

"So he is here, in the UK?" Tracy asked.

"It would appear so" Barrett confirmed "however where and for what purpose remains a mystery. Our boy and his party are recorded on CCTV making their way through the airport building and to the railway station" she duly played the CCTV footage following the group's movements "they then boarded the 10:20 Gatwick Express service to Victoria and it was at this point that Sir Richard pushed the official panic button and got things moving."

"Oh I can see what is coming already" the Commander remarked with a wry smile as the CCTV footage on the screen showed the Gatwick Express service formed of a single eight coach Class 460 multiple unit depart the platform on its non stop run to the capital "but don't let me spoil the moment, please continue."

"Sir Richard called the Prime Minister on a secure line to get the green light which he duly got" Barrett confirmed "It would seem that unlike many in the British Government, the Prime Minister does not share the opinion unlike many others that the light shines from this Russian guy's backside."

"Hence 'oily traitorous little shit', I see what you mean" Tracy confirmed.

"Commander Elizabeth Barrett who now works for us in Section Fourteen was alerted and she duly scrambled a snatch and extract team down to Victoria Station to meet the train and quietly detain Cruschov and anyone else we could get our hands on and get him secured before any of the other couple of hundred other interested parties in this mess realised what was going on" Barrett continued "only when the train arrived..."

"They had vanished" the Commander concluded.

"Yeah..." Barrett admitted with more than a hint of total bafflement.

"So they get on a train that has no intermediate stops whatsoever and yet by the time it reaches its destination they have vanished into thin air?" Tracy asked.

"That's about the size of it" Barrett confirmed.

"Simon" the Commander turned to Fuller "See what you can do with CCTV footage, both at Gatwick, Victoria and on board the train, see if it has been manipulated or messed about with."

"I'll see what I can do" Fuller agreed "If the footage has been manipulated somehow then it will have taken some very sophisticated technology to do it but there is a chance of some form of digital footprint."

"So how did we wind up with a dead body in the Thames and who is this Siobhan or Amber girl?" Tracy asked.

"They are the other two field agents from Operation Clover Leaf" the Commander explained.

"Very good" Collins responded "Sounds like you have been talking to a certain Guinness drinking friend of ours."

"We had a little chat I will admit" the Commander confirmed.

"O'Donnell" Collins continued "The guy who the Thames River boys dragged up very early this morning..."

"...and I subsequently liberated before the FSB, CIA and anyone else for that matter got their hands on him" Barrett added.

"...was out of the picture as far as special operations were concerned" Collins continued "Sir Richard made sure he had a new identity and was kept well and truly secure, he just did some back room stuff, dead drops, messaging, low level helping out to keep the bills paid as it were."

"Looks like someone talked" the Commander remarked "This operation has a leak somewhere otherwise how the hell did they know how to find him?"

"I honestly don't know" Collins responded holding up his hands in all honesty and open admission "One thing is for certain thanks to Barrett's quick thinking I was able to get one of my section's medical specialists to look at the body and something rather interesting came up, he was tortured and killed in the same way as his colleague four years ago."

"There is something else" Barrett added "One of the faces in Cruschov's party that we saw on the CCTV from Gatwick Airport came up as a match against this man" she produced another file, this time marked 'Ministry of Defence Internal Investigations Section' which made the Commander raise an eyebrow with extreme interest "William Lyle Stevens, known better as Bill, ex SAS and a tough son of a bitch and then some."

"Charming looking fellow" the Commander mocked "Not sure I would want to meet him on a cold night in a dark alley."

"You wouldn't last much more than ten seconds if you were lucky if you did" Collins confirmed "Believe me this guy gives evil vicious bastards a bad name."

"He was booted out of the armed forces about six years ago after a raft of allegations appeared that he had been the primary officer behind a number of very nasty beatings and torturing of captured prisoners in the Balkan states and also Iraq and Afghanistan, the key coincidence being that the torture methodology is near identical to that which finished off our two dead field agents all be it four years apart" Barrett explained.

"So why wasn't this Stevens guy thrown into military prison then?" the Commander asked.

"A combination of a very good not to mention very expensive legal team, some political pressure from above from those in the MoD hoping to avoid a public scandal involving the armed forces at a time when morale was already heading in a downwards spiral and allegedly some intervention from certain US interests" Collins explained.

"Friends in high places" Tracy remarked "So where does this all lead to?"

"South Wales" Barrett declared "Collins the psycho has apparently been linked to a man by the name of Steven Altman."

"The Organised Crime boss?" the Commander asked "How the hell does that disgusting little man get mixed up in all this?"

"You know him?" Tracy asked her husband.

"Only by reputation more than anything else" the Commander confirmed "he heads up one of the largest criminal gangs in western England and Wales, you name it he is into it."

"Drugs, smuggling, money laundering, handling stolen goods, prostitution, you name it" Collins confirmed "his name has come up repeatedly over the last twenty years in that area linked to a smorgasbord of serious offences but has anyone ever been able to pin anything on him? Have they hell!" he remarked with obvious frustration.

"Sir Richard picked up some whispers on the back channels that there may be something big going down in Wales about the same time that Cruschov arrived" Barrett continued "The opportunity this presents to bring that nasty Russian down and take his empire and influence out of play is so huge that all other considerations have to be rescinded."

"Does the Prime Minister know about this?" the Commander asked sensing the deepening seriousness of the situation that was unfolding before him.

"Yes" Barrett confirmed "No one else in Government does though and I need to make this point absolutely clear" she leaned forward in her seat to emphasise the point "If anyone else finds out that the PM has authorised even so much as a passing glance at this Russian we could be looking at a coup from within the very heart of Government itself, that is how much is at stake here."

"Why the hell did he not say anything to me?" the Commander asked more out of frustration than anything else.

"The Prime Minister gave Sir Richard full executive powers and discretion to inform only those he saw fit to be of use and no one else" Collins explained "Myself, certain members of Section Fourteen's staff and our one remaining field agent Amber are the only ones who know, he decided not to involve you at this time as he felt you had enough on your hands with your wife recovering from her gun shot wounds from that Trafalgar Square incident a few weeks back."

"Except it would appear we have a very serious leak in the system" Tracy remarked "Our dead guy in the river is proof of that assuming it is not a horrible coincidence."

"No I am afraid it isn't" Barrett confirmed "but despite the risks Amber actually volunteered for the assignment."

"Taking a hell of a risk wasn't she?" Fuller asked.

"There was no one except Sir Richard who knew the material on this case and the principals involved better than her" Barrett confirmed "plus according to her profile she is one tough little lady."

"Even still the telephone call and the presence of such charmers as this thug Stevens and his disgusting boss not to mention this Russian and whatever unpleasantness and power he brings to the table means she is in a hell of a lot of danger" the Commander concluded.

"And now it would appear that if this telephone call she made is anything to go by that she has found out what is behind all this, which means she is in even more danger" Barrett continued "and things have escalated in the last hour to the point where I fear all may be lost."

"That call you received when we were at the hospital" Tracy ventured.

"About an hour ago our guy at GCHQ picked up a twelve second long transmission on an otherwise long forgotten and disused emergency transmission frequency" Barrett went on to explain "Sir Richard used to use it for deep cover operations but it has been out of use for years, so much so in fact that only he, Amber and a couple of others even knew it existed."

"Call for help?" the Commander asked.

"It would seem so" Barrett agreed "The message can only be sent from a little device that is basically an emergency beacon, single use and it self destructs once the message has been transmitted."

"A little toy Sir Richard managed to acquire from the KGB Closing Down Sale bargain bin some years back" Collins remarked "Nice simple but very effective bit of kit that."

"The message is encoded so that to anyone who by any remote chance happens to drop upon it, it just sounds like a blob of static" Barrett explained "Translated correctly though and we get this" she turned to Fuller.

"Echo Three, Amber Code Nine, List One Only Contact, Help" Fuller read from his laptop screen at the translated message "Means bugger all to me translated let alone in its raw data format."

"Echo Three is her operation code" Collins explained "Amber is her code name but also her real name which she never really stopped using much against sensible advice, List One Only Contact means that she trusts absolutely no one except persons she has pre specified on a list somewhere that we don't have and help just means help."

"Where did this transmission come from?" the Commander asked.

"Still working on the triangulation and signal strength analysis" Fuller responded "This is old school radio technology, no where near as clear cut as a mobile telephone signal or anything like that but initial indications from our friend at GCHQ suggests it came from the west of them at Cheltenham and when I last looked that is where South Wales is."

"We could put together a snatch and extract team" Tracy suggested "Helicopter and a ARU unit, locate her, pick her up and then transport her out of there to a secure location in the blink of an eye."

"I don't think you appreciate the significance of the List One stipulation" Collins explained "Only those on that pre-specified list can as far as she is concerned be trusted with her life and more importantly from her point of view whatever it is she has in her possession."

"Besides a snatch and extract team is pretty useless unless we have a location from which to extract her from" Barrett added with a feeling of helplessness.

"Who is likely to be on this list of hers?" Tracy asked.

"Best guess Sir Richard will be one" Barrett suggested "and usually one other, probably someone personal to her from outside any of the Security or Intelligence Services, a clean skin as it were."

"Ah I see" Tracy realised "So if it were me for example I would specify on such a list my husband and maybe an old school friend I know as the two people."

"That's the principal fairly summed up I reckon" Barrett agreed "That way if your inside contact or superior is either unavailable or compromised which sums up Sir Richard's current condition pretty well then there is an independent backup that can be called in or she could go to, trouble is by their very nature we have absolutely no idea who they are."

"We should try and find out" Tracy suggested "What do we know about this girl?" she asked.

"Complicated history" Collins admitted "Recruited into the Special Executive Service which was a joint autonomous section of MI5 and MI6 by Sir Richard when she was sixteen after she volunteered her services. She was the grand daughter of a top IRA man but when her brother and parents were killed in a botched terrorist attack in Londonderry she came to us."

"Her position and family history made her the perfect mole for Operation Clover Leaf" Barrett remarked.

"Indeed" Collins agreed "After a few months of survival training and the induction process she went in undercover on a mission that was very successful. Take a look at her initial assessment file" he passed across another document "Her scores are off the chart, she is one seriously tough cookie."

"Not bad for someone who is only five foot six" the Commander remarked looking at the file "Born Amber McArdle, became Amber Crompton for some routine domestic missions after Clover Leaf but used the name Siobhan McNeil for day to day business."

"McNeil is her new identity set up by Sir Richard following the Clover Leaf fallout" Collins explained "Amber is her real name which she keeps using for time to time."

"What about this operation in Wales" the Commander asked "What is her legend on that?" he asked.

"Emma Gregory" Barrett confirmed "a well back stopped and very savvy transport specialist with the motto 'If the cash is there I do not care' which means she is the ideal go to girl for certain people who need stuff transported whilst avoiding any Imperial entanglements as Obi-Wan Kenobi would say."

"I get the picture" the Commander responded with a knowledgeable grin "Simon?"

"I'll wash the name through the usual suspects, see if she turns up on any hotel registers, car hire firms, that sort of thing" Fuller confirmed as he got to work on his laptop.

"Have we got an address for her?" Tracy asked "It may be worth a look over her place and see if we can identify the mysterious second member of her List One of hers."

"St. John's Wood" the Commander read from the file "Very classy little drum by the sounds of the address."

"In which case perhaps we should pop in on the way home" Tracy suggested which prompted the Commander to look at his antique pocket watch "It is well past six o'clock now."

"It is indeed" the Commander agreed "All right then ladies and gentlemen, here is what we will do" he declared "Simon, keep working on what we have given you and see if you can come up with any leads, Collins I want you to keep your collective eyes on our Russian and American colleagues, make sure they don't do anything rash whilst they think we are not looking."

"Word from Sir Richard's contact in the Russian Embassy is that the ambassador is getting very annoyed by the heavy pacing that Sergei Glasgov is doing up and down the marble lined corridors" Barrett confirmed with a smirk "Apparently he is getting very up tight about something."

"I have a good mind to pull him in" the Commander remarked, a comment that had the others look at him with open mouths in amazement.

"You can't pull in the Russian FSB head of station London off of the street!" Collins exclaimed.

"Oh yes I can" the Commander responded seemingly annoyed that the others felt it was such an outrageous suggestion "He's is holding something back and I want to know what it is."

"Could stir up a hell of a diplomatic hornets nest" Tracy warned her husband sincerely.

"Well we can't do any worse than we are doing now" the Commander concluded "All we have is a pile of old files, a missing field agent, two dead bodies and a lot of unanswered questions, meantime the threat of some sort of attack or coup against the very fabric of this country's Government is lurking in the shadows like an assassin waiting for the moment to pounce."

"I hate to say it but I am going to have to agree with you" Collins grimly confirmed.

"All right then" the Commander announced "If that is it then I think it is time I declared this meeting that never happened adjourned for the evening."

Having spent the last couple of hours scrambling across the rugged Welsh countryside in an attempt to evade the armed men who were continuing to track her, Amber was hurting, tired and exhausted.

In the distance probably some two or three miles away down the remote windswept valley could be heard the echoes of barking dogs, the latest thing that Stevens and his paymasters had brought in to try and find her but the nature of the surrounding countryside combined with the darkness of nightfall and the dreary weather meant that they were making just as little progress as she was.

It was as she stumbled in the dark over some rocks that amidst the gloom she saw a cave in the cliff face and decided that now was the time to stop running for the night.

Looking back down the valley from the entrance to the cave she could see that the lights of vehicles and flash lights in the far distance were no longer moving seemingly signifying that even her pursuers had decided that with the weather conditions worsening by the minute it was time to call a halt for now.

One thing that both sides of this secret drama could probably agree on was that the combination of her existing injuries, the rough lonely terrain and the weather meant Amber would not be able to get far away from then during the course of the night and the deadly pursuit could easily resume at first light.

Heading into the cave, she lowered herself somewhat gingerly onto a rocky outcrop and looked around forlornly at her temporary shelter with the aid of her flash light whose dim glow was by now of little use with the batteries becoming almost totally drained.

Instead she switched the flash light off which left her all alone in the night looking out of the cave entrance at the dark blue sky which only just silhouetted the dark hills all around.

The gentle breeze fluttering through the minimal vegetation and her own slightly hoarse breathing were the only sounds audible and slowly her mind was beginning to shut down through the combination of lack of food and heat as well as severe fatigue.

Giving in to the inevitable, McNeil made herself as comfortable as possible given her circumstances and injuries before closing her eyes and imagining better things and old friends much missed.

"Do you want me to pick the lock?" Tracy asked her husband as the Commander knelt down and examined the door of the flat in St. John's Wood, North London that was the home to the missing Amber "only looking at that thing it could take a bit of time."

"Unfortunately time is a luxury we don't have" the Commander admitted as he stood back up and dusted off his knees.

"Old fashioned way then?" Tracy suggested.

"Absolutely love" the Commander agreed as he took a step back before proceeding to kick the door in, wrecking the lock and ripping several chunks out of the door frame in the process.

"Trouble is" Tracy responded as they stepped inside, treading carefully over the wrecked door now lying on the floor "reading her file I get the distinct impression she may not appreciate that."

"If we hadn't then we may not be able to save her neck" the Commander suggested "and that of whomever else is going to wind up embroiled in this mess before it is over."

"Seems like a nice place" Tracy remarked as they entered the apartment which was one of those lovely old style Art Deco type ones built in the early 1930's and for which this area of London was well known "Certainly got more personal touches than O'Donnell's place when I looked that over earlier."

"Don't think she is much of a housekeeper somehow" the Commander remarked looking around at the ever so slightly unkempt nature of the place, not messy but things were a little out of place as opposed to really neat and tidy.

"You know it may be my imagination" Tracy remarked as she walked around the living room concentrating hard on looking at everything there in turn "but I think someone has been in here very recently."

"It's not your imagination love" the Commander agreed "Everything has that recently looked through feel about it, slightly disturbed dust, professional enough of a search to not be obvious to the casual eye but look closely and you can see this place has been filtered."

"Insert list of suspects here" Tracy mused "although a few Roubles on our old Russian friend Glasgov probably wouldn't go amiss."

"Well nothing obvious here" the Commander remarked before he followed Tracy through into the bedroom.

"Who do you suppose this is?" Tracy asked as she picked up a framed photograph from the bedside cabinet "That is our girl isn't it?"

"I would say so but who is the chap with her?" the Commander wondered "Boy friend?"

"Nothing in her file about a relationship" Tracy responded "although looking at that I would say they definitely know each other" she remarked as they looked at the picture of the missing girl with a man of approximately the same age possibly taken a few years ago.

"It's the only photograph she has from what I can see" the Commander looking around "Nothing of relatives, parents, pets, childhood or anything."

"Hello, what do we have here" Tracy asked as she looked at the bedside cabinet drawer.

"Anything interesting?" the Commander asked as Tracy began to look at the drawer of the bedside cabinet with a renewed interest before beginning to fiddle about with the underside.

"The inside of the drawer is shallower than the outside by over an inch" Tracy explained as she started to feel about underneath the drawer "When I was a kid my father designed a cabinet once that had a secret lockable compartment in the base of the top drawer and I was just wondering if this was something along the same line."

"Like I always say, never leave home without a locksmith's daughter" the Commander remarked as there was a click from the cabinet.

"Ah!" Tracy declared as she withdrew her hand and in it was a leather bound notebook, thick, well used and secured with an elastic band in order to keep the dilapidated cover on "I think I found our needle in the proverbial haystack."

"Looks like some kind of personal diary" the Commander confirmed as he respectfully took the book from Tracy, carefully removed the plastic band and opened it to reveal pages of hand written notes along with various items inserted between the pages such as mementoes, postcards and another photograph of the young man who also appeared in the picture on the bedside cabinet.

"Not uncommon with field agents" Tracy remarked "Sir Richard was telling me once that many Secret Service operatives have some sort of diary or keepsake collection, gives them a base in reality after the mental exhaustion of being someone else all the time."

"Let's take this and that photograph with us" the Commander suggested "It is just a hunch but I am hoping we have found our man, I just hope we can find out who he actually is and where he may be before it is too late."

"Lima Mike One to Control" Tracy called over her radio "Can you get a couple of uniforms over to Flat 23, Godspeed House, St. John's Wood and a security team please as soon as, thank you."

Administrator General Evans of the Welsh Division of the Security Service pulled up in his car outside his house on the outskirts of Swansea after a tiring day of meetings which had made his day seem longer and more tedious than it really was.

Turning off the car engine and getting out, he picked up his briefcase and took one last look around at the front garden, pondered the state of the flower beds and whether he should maybe retire and take up gardening full time before shrugging his shoulders, locking the car and heading inside.

"You said you would be home by teatime dear" Evans' wife Diane called from the kitchen.

"Yes I know" Evans responded with a tinge of regret "Sorry love" he apologized as he came into the kitchen only to find that he had an unexpected guest, Divisional Commander Gerald Toleman, the head of the South Wales Division "Seems we have guests."

"Sorry to intrude on your evening Sir" Toleman apologised to his commanding officer "Something rather odd is going on and I needed your advice."

"Never heard of this little invention called a telephone lad?" Evans joked.

"What? and miss out on your wife's lovely baking?" Toleman remarked with a smile indicating the cake on the table alongside him of which he had had three slices already whilst waiting for Evans to come home.

"Careful my dear" Evans remarked to his wife "You will make him fat."

"Oh leave him alone darling, he is a growing lad" Diane responded.

"I got the impression from the conversation I had with one of my regional guys that this was a conversation that needed to take place somewhere a tad less official and certainly less public" Toleman explained.

"That's my cue I think" Diane declared as she turned to leave the kitchen "Do you want any more coffee or cake dear?" she asked Toleman.

"I am fine thank you Mrs. Evans" Toleman confirmed with a smile before she left, closing the kitchen door behind her.

"All right then lad" Evans declared as he took a seat, helping himself to a slice of cake as he did so "What's up then?" he asked already sensing the seriousness of what was about to come.

"About three hours ago a shopkeeper in Llantrysalded reported a shooting incident in the middle of the village" Toleman explained "Naturally he kept his head down and then called us."

"Where?" Evans asked.

"It's a small one sheep village literally out in the middle of nowhere" Toleman continued "Well when the call came through to the Regional Control Room we sent an Armed Support Unit up there and they found one of our patrol cars with two of our guys dead in the boot, some English guy in one of the dead officers uniforms handcuffed to car door and another in the other dead officers uniform a short distance away where he was bleeding to death from two gunshots to the legs."

"Why the hell wasn't I notified about this?" Evans demanded to know.

"According to the Range Rover full of Special Forces guys wielding MP5's and badges that showed up about the same time as my lads did apparently you do know all about it" Toleman continued "That was when my bullshit meter went into overdrive."

"So what happened?" Evans asked.

"These guys duly produced documentation that basically said the whole area for a sixty mile radius was now being searched by specialist search teams under the command of none other than the National Administrator General himself and that we were to basically go forth and multiply and not mention anything of what we had just seen" Toleman explained.

"The Commander would never authorize anything like this without consulting me" Evans confirmed "We have known each other for years, this is not his style."

"Hence why my bullshit meter was well above the red line and rising" Toleman agreed.

"Hang on a minute" Evans remarked "If the two dead officers in the patrol car were shot dead by the two guys wearing their uniforms, then who the hell shot them?"

"That as they say is where the plot thickens" Toleman continued "I managed to get to Llantrysalded just before the goons shut the place down and slung us all out taking the two thugs with them I might add and I talked to the shop keeper, he says that there was a young woman there in the village, arrived on the bus about mid afternoon."

"Description?" Evans asked.

"Mid to late twenties, shortish brown hair, five foot three or four tall and quite slim" Toleman confirmed "He says that they two thugs tried to kill her but she overpowered them and then fled when a Range Rover with more strangers came along."

"Do you suppose she was local?" Evans wondered.

"Oh no" Toleman responded "the shop keeper says she spoke with a very distinctive Irish accent and the two fake officers she ran into were English, maybe even from London."

"So what's going on now?" Evans asked.

"Officially nothing, we have been told to keep our noses out of it for the next forty eight hours" Toleman explained "Needless to say I have done a little discreet poking about and let me tell you, these guys whoever they are have brought in specialist search teams, I mean dogs, shooters, the works. They are very professional and very well financed and are currently romping their way across the countryside searching for this girl and shooting anything that moves that crosses their path."

"Time I had a word with an old friend by the sounds of it" Evans admitted as he searched in his uniform tunic pocket for his mobile telephone "You did the right thing lad, thank you. Have some more cake, you've earned it" he suggested as he dialled a number.

"Oh there was one more thing that struck me as odd but now that I think of it, it is just possible it might be connected" Toleman added.

"Go on" Evans prompted as he waited to be connected.

"There was an odd report that some people had been seen in the old steel works at about lunchtime" Toleman continued "When one of my lads took a look there was no one there, they were long gone but he did find a lot of bullet holes and spent shell casings as though someone had been having some sort of shooting party in there."

"What's the connection?" Evans asked.

"Well according to the report, our man interviewed the little old lady who called in the report and she saw some people leave the site shortly after the gunfire stopped, one of them as he was getting into his car said that he wanted that little Irish bitch dead before the deal goes down" Toleman informed him "Could be coincidence but I am not so sure."

"Well I don't believe in coincidences" Evans explained "and I know someone else who doesn't either, speaking of which" he remarked as his call was answered "Regional Administrator General Evans, Wales Division for the National Administrator General, urgent please" he declared.

"Fascinating stuff" Tracy remarked as she read some of the journal whilst the Commander drove them through the streets of Central London now fairly quiet as it was past nine o'clock in the evening and what few tourists were still around had been driven indoors by the rain that was now steadily falling "She had a potential best seller on her hands I reckon."

"Shame about that other little publication that would be ahead of it on the shelf" the Commander responded "A little thing known as The Official Secrets Act?"

"Well it would appear she has led quite a lonely life by the looks of it" Tracy continued "Must go with the job I suppose, apparently the only person special in her life in the last ten years has been this guy in the picture, chap by the name of Alan apparently."

"I reckon he is our guy" the Commander agreed "What does it say about him?"

"Just that they met while she was on an operation a few years ago by the looks of it" Tracy responded "I am just reading between the lines of the edited highlights here but I would wager that this Alan or whoever he is was probably the only normal friend she has had such is the loneliness of the job."

"This industry can be hard on the personal lives of us uniformed law enforcers, well present company excepted" the Commander remarked "It is many times harder for those who constantly live their lives being someone else, never really knowing where you will be or who from one day to the next."

"Well I have sent a scan of the photograph of our chap over to Simon to see if he can locate this guy" Tracy confirmed "With any luck maybe we can arrange a little reunion for these two."

The Commander looked down at the radio inside the car as a call came in which had that distinctively urgent undertone that always meant trouble ahead.

"Alpha One from Control" came the call "Urgent Code Nine call from Administrator General Evans."

"Stick us on a secure channel and then pipe it through" the Commander instructed as his instincts told him something was coming.

A bleep a few moments later confirmed that the radio channel had been secured before the Commander spoke.

"Terry, its Eddie, what can I do for you old friend?" he asked.

"Sorry to be calling at such a late hour" Evans apologised "If I may ask, where are you right now?"

"Just turning out of Oxford Street" the Commander confirmed.

"And that would be the Oxford Street in London, not the one in Swansea I presume?" Evans asked.

"Never been any further west than Swindon in my entire life" the Commander responded, understandably a little curious as to where this was leading "Err why?"

"You wouldn't happen to be running some kind of special operation on my manor without telling me would you?" Evans asked sincerely.

"First I have heard of it" the Commander replied "Why, what's occurring?"

"It's just that I am receiving reports that there are armed men running around the countryside setting up exclusion zones and chasing some Irish girl all over the place" Evans explained "and they are claiming it is being carried out under executive orders issued by your office."

"I swear to you on Tracy's life I have nothing to do with it" the Commander confirmed before he suddenly realised the significance of something Evans had just said "Hang on a minute, did you say these guys are chasing an Irish girl?" he asked.

"The quote from an eyewitness was something along the lines of 'I want that Irish bitch dead' or something along those lines" Evans confirmed "I take it this rings a bell somewhere then?"

"Well yes and no" the Commander confirmed "We have one of those type of situations on the brew and it involves this girl, it being vitally important that she stays alive and that we get to her before those ugly blokes with the guns."

"I could send in a snatch and exact team" Evans suggested "Have her located and whisked away in the back of a chopper to a destination of your choice in time for breakfast."

"Which would have been our plan were it not for the fact she has a List Nineteen restriction on her" the Commander responded.

"Ah I see" Evans realised "Nominated independent contact only, dealt with a couple of those some years back. They have a nasty habit of going spectacularly pear shaped in the blink of an eye."

"Well we are working on something now" the Commander confirmed "and thanks to you it sounds like we now have a possible starting point in finding her."

"All sounds very serious" Evans remarked "What can I do to help."

"For the moment nothing" the Commander confirmed "From what I gather, and you did not hear this from me if you know what I mean, if you send in your guys into that area they could wind up being shot at and then we would have a blood bath. Just feed Tracy, Fuller or I any intelligence and information that happens to proverbially cross your desk and I will keep you informed as to what is going on."

"Whatever it is you have got mixed up in, good luck old friend" Evans remarked.

"Thanks" the Commander responded "I think we are going to need it."

"Well at least we have some idea of where this girl is I suppose" Tracy remarked "Trouble is if we don't hurry up and find this chap of hers and get him down there pretty damn quick then the ugly dudes with the guns are likely to get to her first."

“Hello there” Fuller called as a scan of the photograph found by Tracy and the Commander at McNeil’s flat appeared across his computer screen in his office at New Scotland Yard “Let’s find out who you are shall we?”

“Let me ask you something” Collins asked “How come you manage to do on your own here in this somewhat unkempt little office things that it takes fifty of my people back over at MI5 weeks just to get even close to.”

“Well mostly because I designed all the systems that not only secure the data that I search, I also designed all the searching software that gets around it and I know how to use it” Fuller admitted with a wry smile “By the way do you know you have three unpaid parking tickets dating back to 1983?”

“Remind me to change my passwords when I get back to the office” Collins wryly remarked.

“Alan Martin” Fuller declared as he read from his screen once the system had done a facial scan and matched him with a file on the system “Interesting, he works for the Department of Transport as a technical consultant on railways.”

“Where does he live?” Collins asked.

“Polegate near Eastbourne, East Sussex” Fuller confirmed “and he has an annual season ticket from there to Travelcard Zones 1 to 6.”

“I’ll check with our contact at the Department of Transport and make sure he is coming in to work tomorrow as usual” Collins confirmed “If he is then we can pop down and say hello when he arrives in London.”

“Could we not just pop down to his place and pick him up tonight?” Fuller asked.

“Too dangerous” Collins confirmed “There are already way too many eyes and ears watching this mess as it is, I don’t want them getting wind of the ace up our sleeve here, besides by the time we get down there he will be on his way in to work anyway. I’ll have a couple of my reliable people shadow him on his journey in just in case.”

“I had better tell the Commander” Fuller confirmed “I have the feeling it is going to be a very busy morning tomorrow.”

“I was beginning to give up on you two” Jack remarked as Tracy and the Commander finally arrived home at just past eleven o’clock at night.

“Well you know how it is” Tracy admitted “Work, work and more work.”

“Let me guess” Jack pondered as he proceeded to put the kettle on “Bad guys about to do bad things.”

“In a nutshell, yes” the Commander admitted “How was your day son?” he asked.

“Dull and tedious” Jack responded with a hint of a sigh.

“School is supposed to be a once in a lifetime adventure” the Commander announced “Well at least that is what they tried to convince me it was but I was too busy getting shot at by diamond thieves to really take any notice.”

“Megan is on holiday this week” Tracy explained to her husband.

“Ah, all is revealed” the Commander confirmed.

“I did get a postcard though” Jack confirmed as he duly produced the card and held it proudly aloft for his adopted parents to look at.

“Missing you loads, wish you were here, don’t work too hard. Megan” Tracy read the inscription on the rear “and two kisses” she confirmed which made Jack go red with embarrassment.

“Definitely serious” the Commander agreed.

“She is just...” Jack began.

“...a friend” both Tracy and the Commander responded in unison, teasing him ever so gently as they were well aware of how sensitive he was on the relationship he had with his girlfriend not that he would ever publicly admit it.

“Someone put the kettle on” the Commander suggested as they went through to the kitchen.

“Way ahead of you” Jack confirmed as he got the cups out to make the tea only for the telephone back in the hall to start ringing which led the extension in the kitchen to start a few moments later.

“No rest for the wicked” Tracy remarked.

“When do we ever get time to be wicked?” the Commander joked as he picked up the telephone and answered it “Hello, this had better be good” he declared.

“It’s Simon” Fuller responded “We have found our mystery guy for you, Alan Martin, twenty nine years old, lives in Polegate and works for the Department of Transport.”

“What do we have on him?” the Commander asked as he put the telephone on speaker so that Tracy could listen in.

“Well apart from the fact he has an annual season ticket, he has worked for the Department of Transport for over ten years” Fuller read from the screen in front of him “Expertise is in railways and takes an interest in the history of disused railway lines and Underground Stations according to his profile.”

“I am beginning to like this guy already” Jack remarked.

“What has Collins and Sir Richard got on him?” the Commander asked.

“Apparently a few years ago there was some investigation headed by Sir Richard into possible incursions into the Civil Service by some outside influences” Collins explained as he came onto the telephone call “Sir Richard put our girl Amber onto the case undercover in the same section our man Martin was in at the time, that is how they must have met, indeed it looks as if he may even have helped her with the case.”

“Which almost certainly means he could be willing to help us” Tracy confirmed.

“At the very least help her, our missing Irish girl” the Commander added.

“According to a record that Barrett has dug up, Amber had Martin placed on the Echo Seven Monitoring List so that she could keep an eye on him in case there were any reprisals against him for helping her” Collins continued “It looks like she has been watching over him all this time.”

“All right” the Commander declared “We need to contact this guy and bring him in quickly and quietly before any of the muffins get wind of what is going on, let’s meet him off the train when he arrives in London in the morning.”

“Yes, but where?” Tracy asked “London Victoria or London Bridge?”

“Excuse me” Jack put his hand up “Mind if I make an observation?”

“Why not” the Commander confirmed.

“If your man is a railway expert, I would bet a sizeable pot on him being on the 07:14 off of Eastbourne” Jack remarked “Rolls into London Bridge about 08:50 if I am correct.”

“What make you think that?” Tracy asked rather confused.

“Just trust me” Jack responded “If it were me, that is the one I would go for, direct service and some very tasty rolling stock.”

“Did you get that?” the Commander asked Fuller.

“Hang on a minute” Fuller responded as he worked on his system and called up some archived CCTV footage of London Bridge station that he proceeded to scan the passengers coming off of the 08:50 arrival from Eastbourne the previous day “Well I will be damned, there he is” he declared as he froze the footage with one individual in mid frame seemingly minding his own business “Give Jack a cookie, looks like he is right.”

“I’ll get a couple of my reliable people on that train and shadow our man to London Bridge” Collins confirmed “Meantime if someone can point out the rolling stock I can arrange for some on board surveillance to be fitted before the morning.”

“All right, let’s go with that” the Commander agreed “Have Jennifer and a couple of discreetly armed guys from Bob’s ARU unit meet him on the platform tomorrow morning, make sure he has my card and then escort him to King William Street, I will meet him there.”

“Consider it done” Fuller confirmed “Anything else for us guys over here at insomniacs anonymous?” he asked jokingly.

“Have Barrett put together a legend for this guy” the Commander confirmed “He needs to be a Security Service officer with some excuse to be in the more rural parts of Wales, I need him to have authentic ID and uniform, a fully back stopped story, old case histories, work record, bank accounts, the works and it must be water tight.”

“I’ll get her working on it” Collins confirmed “Oh got a call from the hospital, seems Sir Richard is feeling a bit better so he is on the mend.”

“Good to hear that” the Commander agreed “Both of you try and get some sleep before the morning” he insisted “I am going to need you fresh and frosty in the morning as we are all going to have to bring our ‘A’ game to the table on this one.”

“Very well Sir” Fuller confirmed “Good night.”

“All right then” Tracy asked Jack as he passed her and the Commander their tea “Why the 07:14 off of Eastbourne?”

“Only the best rolling stock on the Southern Region, that’s why” Jack confirmed “If your man is as big a railway expert as you say he is then it really is a no brainer, just be thankful he didn’t live in Faygate.”

“Where?” Tracy asked.

“Exactly” Jack replied with a smirk.

Despite the desperate situation, Amber had managed to put together a small fire using bits of old twig, some paper from her pocket and a lighter that she had on her for just such an emergency although she never thought its use would be in a situation quite as bad as the one she found herself in now.

Looking at her watch she discovered that in the earlier troubles it had been smashed and was now useless so with some reluctance she took it off and chucked it to one side, instead turning her attention to her injuries. She had managed to fix herself up reasonably well with the materials from the first aid kit she had acquired which meant she was at least mobile but the damage still looked horrible.

“I don’t get paid enough for this” Amber mused wryly to herself as she laid back and watched the flickering flames of the fire in front of her, just enough to illuminate the interior of the small cave and her face in a warm low glow which showed her expression to be one of calm but deep down it would have been obvious to anyone had they been there that despite her cool and calm exterior she was deeply worried.

Reaching into her jacket pocket, she extracted her wallet and from within that removed two items, the first being the USB memory stick that seemed so crucial to her mission and the other a photograph, a copy of the one that was to be found back at her flat with her and Martin together.

She allowed herself a smile as she thought back to a better time and as she recalled those brief happy memories, Amber vowed to herself that when this was all over, it was time she looked up an old friend.

Returning the photograph and memory stick to her wallet, she then placed them back in her jacket before resting on the rock ledge that for the night would be her bed, uncomfortable and unwelcoming but it was all she had and as ever with her, she was determined to make the best of it for in the morning there would be even greater challenges to face if she was to stay alive.

“Come on someone out there” Amber murmured as she looked out across the night sky, the clouds having now cleared to reveal a starry backdrop with the moon now becoming visible over the tops of the hills “Somebody save my life” she asked.

“Platform one for the 07:23 Southern Service to London Bridge” the automated announcer on the platform at Polegate railway station declared “Calling at Berwick, Glynde, Lewes, Cooksbridge, Plumpton, Haywards Heath, East Croydon and London Bridge.”

As the announcement repeated itself and the train, a ten car formation of Class 442 ‘Wessex Electric’ type stock approached from the east around the curve of the old Willingdon Cord Junction, Polegate’s regular commuters mostly shuffled around a little on the platform before lowering their copies of the free Metro newspaper and prepared to board.

Amongst the commuters who filed aboard in the manner that they did every weekday morning as if pre-programmed was the figure of Alan Martin, a fairly regular looking kind of young man with overcoat and briefcase, newspaper under the arm and folded umbrella in the other hand who made a note of the unit numbers of the train as he boarded across the top of his newspaper before proceeding inside to his seat in the first class section in the third coach.

It was an automatic process which many commuters repeated across the country at that time of morning in a routine seemingly never changing, the same seat with the same newspaper on the same train at the same time. You could stand in that carriage on that service any day of the week and with the exception of a few minor details, the scene before you would look exactly the same from one day to the next.

However that morning there were two extra passengers who had joined the train in addition to the regulars, these were two men who took up seats in the standard class section in the adjacent carriage as soon as they had seen that Martin was aboard and as the Conductor saw that all the doors were closed before giving the signal to the driver to proceed, one of the two men made a discreet and brief telephone call to confirm the situation.

As the train continued on its journey to London, making its way through the picturesque scenery of the East Sussex countryside in the early morning light, many miles away at New Scotland Yard Fuller was watching its progress on his screen.

“Looks like we are in business” Fuller declared before getting up from his desk and leaving the office. He proceeded directly to the lifts at the end of the corridor and went down three floors before leaving the lift and going straight into the canteen where he found Tracy and the Commander having breakfast.

“The game begins” Fuller declared as he joined them at the table “Collins guy on the train confirms our Mr Martin is on schedule and on route, confirmed by the on board surveillance cameras his lads set up last night.”

“I love it when a plan comes together” the Commander declared all be it rather unclear as he said it with his mouth full of toast which he swallowed before continuing “Have you briefed Jennifer?” he asked.

“Waiting for the signal in a company motor out the back of the Blackfriars office” Fuller confirmed “She will be taking Bob and his number two with her as soon as we give her the word.”

“All right” the Commander agreed “I am going to brief Collins and Barrett on what we have in mind and then go to King William Street.”

“I am going to put a couple of units discretely on standby in the vicinity of London Bridge Station” Tracy confirmed “That way if anything does go pear shaped I can send in the cavalry, let’s just hope we don’t need them.”

“Sounds good to me” the Commander remarked “Simon, I want you to monitor that train all the way to London.”

“You got it Sir” Fuller confirmed.

“Check every stop, make sure we don’t have any uninvited guests or anything strange going on” the Commander continued “That train must arrive on time and unmolested.”

“It will be the smoothest and most punctual journey that train has ever had I can assure you” Fuller confirmed before departing leaving Tracy and the Commander alone to finish their breakfast.

“Are you as worried as I am love?” Tracy asked her husband sincerely.

“Does it show?” the Commander replied.

“To me, yes” Tracy confirmed “I just have this horrible feeling something is going to go wrong and at the end of this someone is going to get very badly hurt.”

“You forget one thing” the Commander reminded her “One person is already very badly hurt, our missing Irish girl, wherever she is right now she must be in a whole world of hurt. I just hope we can get to her in time.”

“Arrgh” Amber exclaimed through gritted teeth as she stumbled whilst attempting to walk briskly down the rocky pathway along the mountain side, twisting her ankle briefly in the process. By now she was tired and hurting, the blood from her leg wound once more starting to seep through the makeshift bandages and the material of her trousers, even walking as she was using an old stick she had found for support was not helping much.

In the distance echoing down the long winding valley was the sound of barking dogs and vehicles slowly making their way in a search pattern in her direction, her pursuers back on her trail and with a lot of determination to find her.

It was then she became aware of a new sound approaching from the other side of the hill she was walking along which was growing with intensity as its source rapidly approached her position.

“Oh hell...” she remarked to herself as her suspicions were duly realised when a black helicopter came roaring overhead, passing barely twenty feet above her before banking sharply around and coming towards her.

“Now that’s just not fair” Amber responded as she saw the helicopter with two men on board, one of which was looking around with binoculars before he pointed towards her position. This prompted a change of direction for her and so she made her way off of the path she had been following and straight down the hillside, having to weave around rocky outcrops and bushes on her way to the valley floor.

About half way down however she was forced to duck for cover behind a rock when the helicopter approached her and its passenger began to open fire with an automatic weapon, peppering the ground all around her with shots.

Once the initial volley of shots was over, Amber defiantly popped up, drew her gun and fired a couple of shots in the general direction of the helicopter, these merely bouncing off the bodywork and causing no discernable damage.

“Plan B I think” she quickly concluded to herself and carried on as fast as her damaged leg would allow down the hillside until she reached the edge of the river that flowed through the valley.

Seeking cover in a clump of trees, she looked up to see the helicopter circling around, no doubt reporting her position to those who were tracking her on the ground probably no more than a mile or two away now.

She had to do something and quickly, there was no way she could outrun a helicopter, what cover there was beyond her current location was sparse, probably no more than a few hedges and the odd dry stone wall, certainly insufficient against airborne attackers with automatic weapons.

Amber spent a few moments watching the pattern of the helicopter's movements before working out where it would be most vulnerable, she just had to hope that she was still as good a shot as would be the case under calm normal circumstances for this situation was far from normal for her.

"Come on, play nice" Amber remarked as she worked out where was the best point to try and attack. Sure enough as she had hoped the helicopter came around again, the sound of the rotors echoing eerily against the valley sides.

"Closer, closer.." she quietly commented as, leaning against the trunk of the tree she carefully lined up her shot and lay in wait until the helicopter came into view, the moment she was waiting for being when it had its tail towards her giving her a clear shot at its tail rotor and the engine.

"...and gotcha" she then declared as she duly opened fire, the shots she fired sparking where they could be seen to hit the helicopter right where she wanted. After a few moments however she thought she had been unsuccessful as initially there was no obvious effect but then the smoke started to pour from the engine as its note began to take on an ominous splutter and the classic signs of panic amongst its crew became obvious.

"No way should that have worked" she remarked with some sense of surprise as the helicopter spiralled to the ground before crashing, reducing it to a heap of smouldering metal.

"As my old granny used to say, if God had meant man to fly..." Amber commented with a wry smile as she watched for a few moments from a safe distance the wrecked remains on the hillside and allowed herself a small smile of satisfaction before realising that the plume of smoke it was sending up would do nothing more than help those still pursuing her on the ground to close in on her position so she summoned up all her remaining strength and determination and carried on.

"Operation Control to all Units" Fuller called over the dedicated and secure radio link to all involved in the intercept plan "Package just left East Croydon, E.T.A. at London Bridge should be eighteen minutes" he confirmed as on one of his screens in front of him could be seen a live CCTV feed showing the 07:14 from Eastbourne departing from platform 2 of East Croydon station in South London.

“Is our man confirmed as still being on board?” the Commander, standing behind Fuller in his office asked.

“There he is” Fuller pointed to another screen showing the image from the covert surveillance camera on board the train which also now showed that as it neared its destination, the train had become packed with commuters taking up almost every available space such was the massive demand made of the rail network at that time of the morning on the average weekday.

“All right then” the Commander declared “Let's get this party started, Alpha One to Welcome Wagon, come in please.”

Parked in a side street not far from London Bridge station was a black saloon car with Jennifer Caverner in the driving seat. Alongside her was Bob, the tall impressive figure that was head of the specialist Armed Response Group of the Service with his Deputy Tim sitting in the back.

“Welcome Wagon receiving” Jennifer responded “Are we in business?” she asked.

“Absolutely” the Commander confirmed “The train should be there in just over fifteen minutes then it is down to you guys.”

“We'll find him” Jennifer confirmed.

“Alpha Two to Welcome Wagon” Tracy called in from her seat at the main supervising console in the New Scotland Yard area Control Room “Just a little precautionary measure but if anything does go pear shaped, I have a couple of van loads of the Service's finest parked around the corner if you need them.”

“I shouldn't think we will need them Sis but thanks anyway” Jennifer confirmed.

“All right then” the Commander confirmed to Fuller as he put his uniform tunic on “I'm heading over to King William Street, let me know straight away if anything goes wrong.”

“Absolutely Sir” Fuller agreed before the Commander departed.

Heading out of the building a couple of minutes later, the Commander was going to turn right and head straight for the nearby St. James Park Underground Station when a car pulled up to the kerbside in front of him and the drivers side window lowered to reveal Collins behind the wheel.

“Get in, I'll give you a lift” Collins indicated the back of the car in a manner which seemed to indicate there was more to this meeting than instantly met the eye, a manner that the Commander quickly picked up on.

“If you insist...” the Commander slowly confirmed before opening the rear door of the car and getting in to find himself sat alongside a rather fatigued looking Sir Richard “Aren't you supposed to be in hospital or something?” he asked.

“Technically I still am” Sir Richard confirmed as the car moved off “Collins briefed me on what you have in mind and I think you are right, it is probably our only chance to get her back and find out what is going on.”

“I don't want to put any pressure on you in your current state” the Commander responded with obvious concern “but do you want to sit in on the chat when I meet this fellow.”

“Absolutely” Sir Richard agreed “I have heard a lot about our mysterious Mr Martin from Amber, it is time I think he and I met at last.”

“This should be interesting...” Collins remarked from the driver’s seat as he continued to drive on through the centre of the city.

“When cutting through the early morning rush hour commuting crowds, two tall guys with MP7 rifles works beautifully” Jennifer remarked wryly as with Bob and his Deputy escorting her in their full body armour and with their guns held close to themselves they made their way across the western concourse of London Bridge Station, the regular commuters not surprisingly more than happy to move out of the way for the Security Service officers as they came through.

“Welcome Wagon to Operation Control” Jennifer called into her radio as they stopped just short of the ticket barriers “Where is this train of ours now?” she asked.

“Just passing the last signal now” Fuller confirmed as he watched the progress of the train, its identification code of ‘1L32’ clearly displayed make its way across the graphical representation of the myriad of lines that led into London Bridge Station “Should be gliding into platform eleven in a few moments. Our boy is in the third coach from the front.”

“Let's go and say hello” Bob confirmed before they proceeded through the side gate of the ticket barriers and then on to platform eleven beneath the imposing overall train shed roof just as the 07:14 from Eastbourne approached and slowed to a stop at the buffer stops.

A few moments later the door indicator lights all along the platform side of the train illuminated, the doors opened and a flood of commuters disembarked, some of them understandably surprised to see three armed Security Service officers waiting on the platform whilst others seemingly on that automatic mode that many commuters take on merely passed them by without even a glance.

“How the hell are we going to find him in this lot?” Bob's Deputy asked as all three of them scanned the crowds.

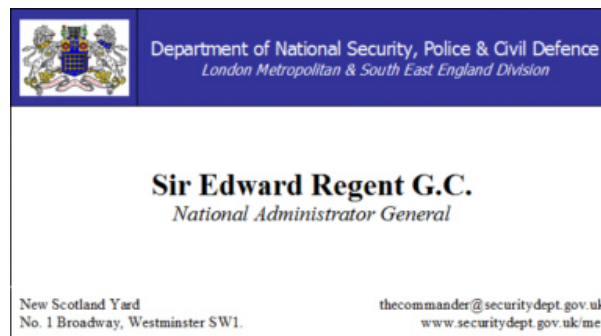
“There he is” Bob pointed to Martin just as he alighted from the train onto the platform, one of the last to do so apart from the Conductor who was off on his break and gave a slightly quizzical looking glance at the unusual scene on the platform.

“Mr Alan Martin?” Jennifer asked as flanked by the two ARU officers, she approached him.

“Yes...” Martin responded slowly wondering what was going on.

“Someone would like to talk to you” Jennifer confirmed as she passed Martin a business card.

With some still understandable confusion he took the card and looked at it whereupon seeing the name printed upon it and his title, his expression changed from mild curiosity to deadly serious.



Turning over the card revealed a hand written message signed by the Commander himself. It read simply 'Your presence is requested...!.

“Well as invitations go, that's quite a big one” Martin remarked “All right then, I accept.”

“Excellent” Jennifer responded “If you could come with us please, we have a car parked out front and I will take you to your meeting.”

“Explains a few things though” Martin remarked as he and Jennifer, flanked by the two armed ARU officers headed back towards the ticket barriers just as another rush hour train, the service from Bognor Regis arrived “The two obvious surveillance blokes who got on at Polegate and the extra cameras on board the train for a starter.”

“You spotted them?” Jennifer asked, slightly taken aback by Martin's statement.

“It's amazing what you can see when you know what to look for” Martin admitted “In my experience, no one is ever really what they seem at face value.”

“Security Service” Jennifer confirmed as she and the others showed their warrant card to the supervisor on the ticket barrier as he allowed the three officers through with Martin.

“Network Gold Card” Martin joined in as he showed his season ticket with a wry smile as he too passed through before they exited out on the busy concourse.

“Hold it a second” Bob suggested as he looked around, something unsettling clearly attracting his attention “I think we may have a problem.”

“What's wrong?” Jennifer asked as she began to look around.

“Is it my imagination or is this place crawling with at least three flavours of goons?” Bob asked generally as he watched at least two groups of men moving discreetly through the crowd parallel to them in a manner that was not typical of the average commuter at that time of the morning, every so often glancing over in their direction.

“I don't think it is your imagination” Martin confirmed “I take it they are not with you?”

“No one else has been invited to this little party” Jennifer confirmed as she got onto her radio “Welcome Wagon to Operation Control, I think we may have picked up some party crashers.”

“Bloody hell” Fuller was heard to respond over the radio as he scanned live CCTV feeds from across the station “Operation Control to Alpha Two, we have the opposition moving in on our boy.”

“What have you got?” Tracy asked from the main Control Room as she clicked her fingers over at the duty supervisor which was her signal to get the backup units rolling.

“There are at least two surveillance teams on the concourse” Fuller confirmed “Classic formation which in a crowd of regular commuters quite frankly sticks out like a sore thumb.”

“Got to be the Americans” Tracy concluded “Welcome Wagon from Alpha Two, backup is on the way to you now.”

“Better hurry up” Jennifer confirmed as they moved off, hoping that the flow of people would in some way camouflage them as they started to cross the concourse but then a series of shots rang out causing them to drop to the ground.

“Shots fired, repeat shots fired” Jennifer called over the radio just as the sounds of sirens became louder and the main entrances into the station were flooded with incoming armed officers.

“Everybody stay down and remain calm” Bob called across to those around as he and his Deputy got up and looked around the roof above “Ah there he is” he declared when he quickly sighted the end of a rifle barrel poking out from a point just ahead and above them.

“Let's get out of here” Jennifer confirmed to Martin as she sheltered him.

“Best idea I have heard all morning” Martin readily agreed as a couple more shots rang out, one of them bouncing off of the floor just short of them.

“Armed Officers!” Bob called out loudly as he and his Deputy took aim at the mysterious gunman “Put your weapon down and surrender or I will shoot” he ordered in a direct and solid manner that left the assailant in absolutely no doubt about his intentions.

Within moments Bob was backed up by further officers who had arrived which gave Jennifer enough cover to evacuate Martin from the scene, quickly exiting the station and bundling him into the back of the car that was waiting just outside.

As Jennifer drove away from the station at considerable speed, the tyres screeching as she went, numerous officers continued to evacuate the station which left the concourse now empty except for Bob and the other ARU officers who were now engaged in a stand off with the gunman.

“You have ten seconds to surrender” Bob informed the gunman “Then we open fire.”

“All right” came a response from up above them whereupon the rifle was thrown down, breaking up as it impacted with the floor just a few feet from Bob and his colleagues.

“Sensible fellow” Bob responded but then a further gunshot rang out and a second later the gunman fell from his vantage point straight to the concourse floor.

“But then again, perhaps not” Bob remarked as he stepped forward, his MP5 still pointed ahead just in case to see the body of the gunman lying in a crumpled heap on the floor, a pistol in his hand and a fresh gunshot wound to the side of his head where he had decided to take his own life rather than being captured.

“Oh I think I am going to be sick” Martin remarked as now that they were clear of the scene, Jennifer slowed the car to a more normal speed and merged into the traffic flow.

“Not in the back of my motor you are not” Jennifer called back as Martin sat upright in the back “Are you all right? No extra holes or anything.”

“My jacket is ruined I think” Martin wryly admitted “but apart from that I think I am all right “Anyway where are we going? I thought Scotland Yard was the other way.”

“We are not going to Scotland Yard” Jennifer explained “Too public, no we have somewhere more discrete in mind.”

"So what was that little side show back at London Bridge all about?" Martin asked as he looked around through the dark glass of the side windows attempting to get his bearings after the shock of being shot at.

"Supposedly we were going to pick you up quietly without anyone knowing anything about it" Jennifer explained "Well almost no one knowing about it anyway."

"Looked to me as if someone had been selling tickets" Martin remarked as they crossed London Bridge itself before Jennifer turned across the opposite flow of traffic to enter Monument Street where she parked up the car.

"We are here" Jennifer declared as she looked in the rear view mirror at the reflection of her still somewhat confused passenger before getting out of the car and proceeding to the rear door to let him out.

"The question is where exactly is here" Martin mused as he got out of the car and took a slightly apprehensive look around.

"If you will follow me please" Jennifer duly led the way towards a small fairly anonymous looking door set into the end wall of the large building on the corner of Monument and King William Streets.

"By all means, lead on" Martin confirmed as he followed on close behind as Jennifer led him through the door, then along a dark narrow passageway with electrical equipment humming away either side to an old style wooden lattice elevator door whose obvious age was curiously far in excess of that of the age of the building it was contained within.

"I am guessing at this point we are going down?" Martin asked as they entered the old wooden panel lined lift car before Jennifer shut the gate and took hold of the antique lever control.

"Good guess" she confirmed before pushing the lever downwards, starting the motor that ran it "Mind the doors..." she remarked as they headed down into the mysterious lower levels.

About forty five seconds later, the creaky old lift slowed to a halt at the bottom of the shaft and Jennifer opened the gate, allowing Martin to step out into a tile lined tubular passageway.

"Welcome to..." Jennifer began as she proceeded to escort him down the passageway.

"...King William Street Station" Martin completed the sentence looking around in wonderment.

"Go on through" Jennifer prompted Martin, showing him at the end of the passageway the way ahead into the former two track platform tunnel which had long since the station's closure over a hundred years earlier been converted into two floors of office and operational accommodation.

Stepping through the doorway ever so slightly apprehensively, Martin found himself alone in what was now a conference room but the full size replica Underground station sign and photographs on one of the curved tunnel side walls served as a reminder when this was the northern terminus of the Central & South London Railway, the forerunner of today's Underground Northern Line.

"Ah welcome" the Commander declared as he entered the room from the opposite end "How do you like my little office away from the prying eyes and ears of the world?"

"Fascinating" Martin admitted "You know I am sure I have a file in my office at the Department of Transport that says this place has been flooded, abandoned and uninhabitable since the war."

"I know, I wrote it" the Commander confirmed with a wry smile "Keeps unwanted visitors away which can be useful at times" he admitted.

"Forgive my tone Sir" Martin asked "but just why have I been brought here and who were those lunatics shooting at us back there?" he asked.

"Have a seat" the Commander gestured towards the board room style table that dominated the centre of the room "All will be explained."

"This isn't some form of interrogation is it?" Martin asked as he apprehensively sat down "I'm not under arrest am I?"

"Oh no" the Commander reassured him "for one thing if you were it is highly likely at this point you would be somewhere dark and unpleasant and I would not be offering you a drink. Tea or coffee?"

"Very civilised" Martin responded now relaxing just a little "Tea please, white with two."

"As to what this is all about, I will come to that in a minute" the Commander confirmed as he made the tea "Suffice to say that we have a rather large problem which only you can help us with, a problem that rather unfortunately got larger and even more complicated with the unexpected arrival of some unfriendly guests earlier."

"The two guys shadowing me on the train all the way from Polegate" Martin remarked "They yours by any chance?" he asked as he received his tea from the Commander with a nod of thanks.

"Just a little precautionary measure" the Commander confirmed "Actually how did you spot them?" he asked as he sat down directly opposite.

"Commuter trains always have the same passengers in the same seat after standing on the same part of the platform every day" Martin explained "Anyone who is not a regular especially those two with no briefcases or anything like that tend to stand out somewhat."

"Your reputation does you justice it would appear" Sir Richard declared as he and Collins joined them in the room and took a seat once they had both poured themselves a cup of coffee.

"Alan Martin, meet Sir Richard Crowthorne from the Special Services section and David Collins, operations director for MI5" the Commander did the introductions and handshakes were duly exchanged.

"A pleasure to meet you at last" Sir Richard responded "I have heard and read a lot about you."

"Oh really?" Martin responded "Why do I get the feeling something is coming that I am not going to like?"

"There are certain risks involved" the Commander admitted "but first some paperwork" he confirmed as he produced a formal looking document with a royal crest at the top of it, placed it face up on the table before turning it to face Martin and pushing it across.

"Official Secrets Act" Collins explained "We need you to sign it before we go any further."

"Allow me" Sir Richard remarked as he produced a pen and passed it across as Martin examined the document in front of him.

"It is nothing to worry about" the Commander reassured him "It is just a little legal insurance policy which basically it says you agree to say or reveal nothing of what you may hear, read or see that may be sensitive to national security unless of course you wish to be whisked away in the middle of the night to a dark sound proof room to enjoy a very unpleasant experience with the sense of humour failures that is the boys from Special Branch."

"I don't really have much choice do I?" Martin remarked as he proceeded to sign and date at the bottom of the document before passing it and Sir Richard's pen back across.

"Thank you" Collins responded as he took the document and placed it in his briefcase.

"Now that I have signed my life away" Martin declared openly "If it is not too much trouble for this highly esteemed company, what exactly is this all about?"

Sir Richard reached into his briefcase to produce a photograph which he passed to the Commander who in turn showed it to Martin.

"This face ring any particular bells perchance?" the Commander asked although he could tell from Martin's initial reaction that he clearly knew exactly who it was.

"Well I will be damned" Martin responded almost open mouthed in amazement "Amber Crompton, I don't believe it."

"To fill in the blanks that I know you have been wondering about for so long" Sir Richard responded "She was born Amber McArdle, the name you know her by, Crompton was her legend during an undercover operation I ran some years ago in a Government Department in which you were working."

"So she was a secret service agent then" Martin asked "I knew it."

"What made you think she was a spook then?" the Commander asked more out of curiosity than anything else.

"Firstly" Martin began to explain "there was the way a vacancy suddenly appeared in the Department and then as if by magic Amber appears, then there was her background story, all very good and believable to the casual observer but look closer over a period of time and you began to see the holes and contradictions."

"He's good isn't he?" Collins remarked.

"Then there was the way she left almost as suddenly as she had arrived" Martin continued "and since that day not a trace of her existence can be found, before, during or after her time there, she simply vanished as if she had never existed."

"Of course there was one complication according to her personal journal" Sir Richard confirmed "backed up by certain conversations we had and some of her actions whilst under my employ it would appear you two got close, very close in fact."

"Err what makes you say that?" Martin became all defensive at that point.

"You have been casually looking for her for three years according to the Internet history from your computer" Collins consulted a file "We know an awful lot about you."

"The file bot..." Martin responded "As soon as she left someone ran some kind of remote file deletion bot through the computer system at work and my home because every single file related to her suddenly vanished, including off of all the backups too except for one photograph I have."

"She insisted we let you keep that" Sir Richard confirmed "Totally against standard protocol but seeing how much she cares about you I allowed it."

"What is going on?" Martin asked evidently somewhat bemused by all that he was hearing.

"She has been your guardian angel ever since" Sir Richard confirmed "Two years ago an infiltrating group with aims to take over the instruments of Government through the Civil Service drew up a list of Government employees who they were going to remove by unpleasant and painful means, you were on that list and Amber personally handled your protection completely unseen before eliminating the man sent to kill you."

"Do you love her?" the Commander asked directly "You carry her photograph in your wallet after all."

"How did you know that?" Martin asked.

"Lucky guess actually" the Commander admitted with a wry smile "So, do you?"

"That is a personal matter between her and I" Martin responded defensively yet gentlemanly.

"So that will be a yes then" the Commander "Your face lit up like a Christmas tree the moment you saw her picture, dead giveaway that one, just ask my wife if you don't believe me."

"All right" Martin surrendered "I'll admit I still care about her, will that suffice?"

"Looks like it will have to do I guess" Sir Richard agreed "Which brings us to the main order of business."

"We need your help Mr Martin" the Commander admitted "To be precise Amber needs your help and by helping her not only might you save her life but you will also help defend the security of the nation."

"What's happened to her?" Martin demanded to know.

The Commander looked across at Sir Richard who merely nodded in agreement with Collins doing the same.

"All right then" the Commander responded "Pay very close attention as I shall be asking questions later. What do you know about organised crime?"

"Not a lot" Martin confirmed.

"Operation Alcydion" the Commander produced a large case file, placed it on the desk and pushed it across the table "A deep level black operation to investigate organised crime and possible world wide connections to money laundering, corruption, arms smuggling, etc. etc. Ad nauseum."

"Looks complicated" Martin remarked after donning his reading glasses and taking a look though the file.

"Oh not really" Sir Richard confirmed "Amber's brief was to infiltrate a group in South Wales, find what they were doing, with whom and then find the evidence we needed to shut them down."

"And she is mixed up in this thing?" Martin asked.

"It's complicated I will admit" Sir Richard agreed "Unfortunately after she had gone undercover it became quickly apparent that there was a lot more to this than meets the eye, rumours of political connections and big money involvement, then there is the Cruschov connection" he added.

"Who?" Martin asked.

"Alexander Cruschov" Collins confirmed as he passed over another photograph "an obnoxious Russian piece of slime that has the ears of many politicians across three continents and yet has managed to evade every single one of the hundreds of arrest warrants that are out there for him in nearly every civilised country in the world."

"In other words a world class asshole with a lot of connections" Martin concluded.

"And a very large chequebook to back it up" the Commander confirmed.

"The complication lies in Amber's first extremely successful operation some years ago when she infiltrated an arms deal in Northern Ireland" Sir Richard continued "The man at the heart of the goings on was that very same Russian who vowed he would get those responsible for losing him a lot of money."

"Did he?" Martin asked.

"Of the three field agents who ran Operation Clover Leaf, one was found tortured to death in very small pieces on a Welsh hillside three weeks later" the Commander continued to explain "After that Amber and the other agent were given new identities but despite this, yesterday morning the badly damaged body of the second officer, a man called Seamus O'Donnell turned up in the River Thames."

"The fear is if these heavyweights have deep enough contacts and pocket books to find that out, it is only a matter of time before they find out who Amber is and kill her" Sir Richard confirmed with all sincerity.

"Well let's send in the cavalry and get her" Martin demanded.

"I wish it was that easy" the Commander admitted with a tone of deep regret "We have reason to believe she has found something that is way too sensitive to trust to anyone except those on a pre-nominated list of secure independent contacts."

"A very short list as it happens according to her personal journal" Sir Richard admitted "One of them is me and quite frankly I am in no condition to go get her, the other is you."

"This is mad" Martin responded.

"Stands to reason I suppose" the Commander confirmed "She has been watching over you for years, even had you put on List 45 monitoring to make sure you were all right."

"Time to return the favour I think" Sir Richard suggested "If none of what we have said convinces you then maybe this will?" he passed across a sealed blue envelope to Martin which was personally addressed to him in handwriting that was familiar.

"I suppose you have already steamed it open and read it?" Martin asked.

“Actually no” Sir Richard responded “There are some things in the life of a deep cover spy such as your girl Amber that should remain tucked away in the metaphorical box, a lifeline back to reality for someone who is always pretending to be someone else until they reach the point where one identification merges into another and the border between reality and fantasy becomes irreparably blurred.”

Tentatively Martin took the letter and opened it before extracting its contents, a single folded sheet of paper and began to read it to himself.

There was a tense silence in the room during which the Commander and the others watched on and noticed that by the time he had reached the end of the note he was almost in tears.

“Something in my eye, must be the dust down here” Martin explained away the tear that was forming in his eyes and quickly dabbed them away.

“Yeah, something like that” the Commander responded not in the least bit convinced but letting Martin have that as his excuse.

“All right, what do you want me to do?” he asked.

“In two hours time a helicopter will be leaving the roof of the building above this old station” the Commander explained “You will be on it. From here you will be flown to a small private airfield in South Wales where you will be met by my colleague Regional Administrator General Terry Evans who will give you all our latest information we have on where your girl may be.”

“Then I guess he just winds me up like a clockwork toy and sends me on my way?” Martin asked.

“Pretty much, yes” the Commander confirmed “I know from your file that you did two weeks of survival training when you were sent on a Transport Department working party to Iraq a year or so ago so you know how to handle yourself.”

“What about back up?” Martin asked apprehensively but he already knew the answer.

“I’m sorry my friend, there won’t be any back up” the Commander admitted “Once you leave for wherever she may be you will be on your own, the only things you will have will be my personal private secure telephone line, a gun with as much ammunition as you can carry and a car.”

“And a uniform, don’t forget that” Sir Richard added.

“I almost forgot” the Commander “As of now you are, all be it temporarily a member of the National Police & Security Service.”

“Blimey, do I get a badge as well?” Martin jokingly asked.

“Oh yes” the Commander confirmed as he produced a warrant card complete with cast metal badge of the Security Department which had already been produced complete with Martin’s photograph and passed it across.

“You guys work fast” Martin remarked.

“One of Sir Richard’s people made that together with your well stocked legend late last night as soon as we identified who you were” the Commander explained.

“Alan Grantham” Martin read from the warrant card “False name as well then?”

“It is in case anyone comes across you in your travels and does a little bit of homework, you know some discreet digging around” Collins explained “The mysterious Alan Grantham has thanks to some clever slight of hand a full life history, case records he has worked on, parking tickets, tax records, birth certificate, even a reasonably average credit rating.”

“Your new wallet” Sir Richard produced a box file from beneath the table and opened it, passing Martin the wallet “Nothing spectacular, credit cards, a hundred quid in cash plus some loose change, a book of postage stamps with two missing, a couple of old railway tickets, receipts, etc.”

“I get the impression I won’t be getting much opportunity to do any shopping” Martin remarked “If I do find her, then what?”

“Bring her home” the Commander confirmed “We’ll do the rest.”

“Who the hell is this guy?” Altman asked as he lit another large cigar before looking out from the balcony of his well appointed mansion on the outskirts of Swansea.

“According to my extremely expensive sources” Cruschov confirmed as he took a cigar offered to him by his host “he is apparently some link to that little Irish bitch that has been causing us rather a lot of trouble over the last twenty four hours.”

“On the news this morning there was something about a shooting incident in London, at a mainline railway station in the middle of the morning rush hour no less” Altman remarked “Not one of your lads getting a bit over enthusiastic was it?”

“As soon as I heard about this guy I took steps” Cruschov explained “Unfortunately it would appear that certain other interested parties had the same idea, the place was infested with agents.”

“Your hired goons brought down a fire fight in the middle of one of the busiest railway stations in London!” Altman exclaimed “This isn’t Northern Ireland in 1979, you cannot just start opening fire to eliminate someone who *might* be connected.”

“I will do what I damm well please” Cruschov insisted “I work to only one set of rules” he insisted tapping his chest defiantly “Mine and if that means gunning down a whole room full of people to protect my business interests then I will damm well do it. If you don’t like the way I do business comrade, you had better start digging yourself a grave up on those mountain sides you are so fond of.”

“All right, all right” Altman responded “It is just unless you have the world’s security agencies in your pocket, someone is going to come and bite you on the ass.”

“Ah but that is the point” Cruschov explained with an evil knowing grin “I do...”

The telephone rang at that point forcing Altman to break off the conversation to answer it.

“Hello?” Altman answered “What?!?” he then exclaimed whereupon Cruschov realised it was something important and grabbed the telephone of him.

“This is Cruschov, what the hell is going on?” he demanded to know “She did what?” he then responded as the caller informed him about the incident involving his helicopter “All right, extreme measures. I will get it authorised, all it takes is the right money in the right pockets, just make sure that bitch is in a hundred pieces before sundown or I might just send my best men after you instead.”

“Sorry about your helicopter” Altman remarked once Cruschov had rather forcibly hung up the telephone and stood there leaning against the balcony seething with anger “Tough little cookie isn’t she?”

“She cost me a lot of money several years ago” Cruschov warned “I will be dammed if I am going to let her stop me again, we are too close to closing the biggest deal since the break up of the Soviet Union and I for one mean to collect with interest.”

“So do our clients” Altman reminded his Russian counterpart “Speaking of whom, is everything ready for the 23rd?” he asked.

“Once all the pieces, equipment and players are in place” Cruschov confirmed almost as if he was describing a chess tournament “You, me and our mutual friends will own this country, by this time next week we will have more money than God himself.”

“I’ll drink to that” Altman agreed before he and Cruschov headed inside and closed the glass balcony door behind them.

“If you would care to step this way” the Commander called as he showed Martin through a door into the next room where Barrett was waiting for him.

“Welcome to the National Security & Police Service Mr Martin” Barrett cheerfully declared “In the next ten minutes you are going to become an officer of the Service in a rank which would normally take a minimum of three years to reach.”

“My mother always did say I was a fast learner” Martin admitted.

“Uniform” Barrett confirmed as she handed over a tunic and the other fittings “utility belt, holster, communications gear.”

“All seems fairly straightforward although how come you knew my size?” Martin asked as he looked at the tunic and saw it was a perfect fit.

“Let's just say you had someone who kept a very detailed file on you” Barrett confirmed “I mean we even knew what your favourite type of coffee was.”

“Let's just hope that other interested parties do not have access to the same level of information on you as we do” the Commander remarked apprehensively.

“Your weapon” Barrett confirmed as she passed across a gun “Nine millimetre Berretta, semi—automatic, takes seventeen rounds at a time. Ever handled one before?”

“On that survival training I did for the Iraq job” Martin confirmed as he tentatively took hold of the holster and extracted the gun to look at it “Can't say I am a fan of these things.”

“Me neither” the Commander agreed “and I am still using this old thing” he admitted as he showed Martin the old six shot revolver that he really should have dispensed with years ago.

“Sir Richard told me you still carried around that antique” Barrett remarked “So Mr Martin, what is your shooting score.”

“Erm sixty three percent I think” Martin admitted.

“Better than me then” the Commander remarked.

“Sign here please” Barrett passed across a requisition form to Martin for him to sign.

“When this is all over” Martin asked as he applied his signature to the document “What is going to happen?”

“That will be the subject for our next conversation” the Commander confirmed “Although if your young lady is agreeable to it I am sure the Service expenses account could stretch to a nice dinner for two for you and her.”

“I am more a cod and chips man myself” Martin remarked.

“Yes, it says that in your file as well” Barrett confirmed with a wry smile.

“And the politicians say we don't live in a surveillance society” Martin remarked.

“You believe what politicians say?” the Commander asked.

“Well, no actually” Martin confirmed.

“Neither do I” the Commander agreed “Not even when I have read them their rights. Keep that attitude up and you could go far in this business lad.”

“Ah ha, I've got it!” Fuller suddenly called out so loudly and triumphantly that pretty much everyone on that floor of New Scotland Yard heard him.

“I know I am going to regret asking this” Tracy remarked as a few moments later in response she popped her head around the door of Fuller's office “but what exactly is it you have got?”

“You remember the ticket that O'Connell had in his possession, the one with the secret code hidden using the magnetic strip on the back?” Fuller asked, holding up the ticket in question to remind her.

“Well yes” Tracy confirmed “You said it was a load of random numbers or something.”

“I've cracked it” Fuller confirmed with a grin of satisfaction that would rival a Cheshire cat “It converts into a series of musical notes.”

“Any tune to it?” Tracy asked still obviously completely stumped.

“Oh yes” Fuller confirmed as he turned around and returned to his keyboard “Observe...” he declared as he duly pressed a button whereupon the computer began to play a tune.

“Why doesn't this guy use an iPod like everyone else?” Tracy mused as she listened to the tune, its recognition not helped by the fact this was a computerised rendition which rather spoilt any harmony or melody it may have originally intended to have.

“Presumably everyone else excludes your husband” Fuller remarked as the tune ended “According to Jack he is still using 78's.”

“Don't remind me” Tracy admitted with a wry smile “So what does it all mean then?”

“Haven't a clue” Fuller admitted “Still nice tune, just wish I could place exactly what it was though.”

“Dum de dum dum dum dum dum, dum dum dum, dum dum dum, dum de dum dum dum dum dum, dum de dum dum” Tracy went through the tune she had just heard “Rings a bell somewhere.”

“The question is what the hell is a dead guy in a river who supposedly died two years earlier doing with a secret dead drop system in his pocket that contains some musical tune?” Fuller asked shrugging his shoulders.

“Keep working on it” Tracy suggested “I unfortunately have an appointment with the press.”

“Oh yes, the shooter at the station” Fuller recalled “Collins called over from MI5, apparently they have identified who he is and are sending the details over by secure courier in the next half hour.”

“Excellent” Tracy confirmed “Well, better go and meet the press I guess.”

“Good luck Maam” Fuller called after her as Tracy left, still humming that tune to herself as she went down the corridor.

Outside the main entrance of New Scotland Yard there was a clamour of press photographers, reporters and television news crews waiting for the official statement.

“Oh I hate these things” Tracy remarked to herself as she looked through the windows of the main reception area at the expectant scrum outside that was only just being held back by the barriers that had been erected along the kerbside to keep them in check.

“Never been a fan of press conferences myself” the Prime Minister agreed as he arrived having made a discreet entry into the building via the rear entrance “Mind you whenever I am out there it is always with a pre-prepared speech drafted by those strange mutants from the Central Press Office they keep in the basement over at Millbank Tower next to where we store our emergency supply of Home Secretary's in case your husband fancies arresting a few on the off chance.”

“We are going out with this” Tracy showed the Prime Minister the briefing document she had in her hand “Sir Richard's people prepared it.”

“Lovely bit of bullshit” the Prime Minister confirmed as he read it through “Almost a work of art that.”

“My illustrious husband is currently working on a related project” Tracy explained “Hopefully with any luck we should have some answers to this mess before tomorrow evening.”

“Well I hope it isn't any later than that” the Prime Minister remarked with an obvious sense of foreboding “Wheels are in motion even as we speak and if we are not careful we could wind up getting run down in the ensuing rush.”

“What the hell does that mean?” Tracy asked.

“Best you don't know for now” the Prime Minister confirmed “Plausible deniability and all that, suffice to say something is coming and if we don't stop it before it reaches the critical point, nothing may ever be the same again.”

“Let's get this over with” Tracy declared “Ready Prime Minister?” she asked.

“As I will ever be” the Prime Minister reluctantly agreed before clearing his throat and following Tracy out of the main entrance and to the street where with them approaching the massed ranks of the press began to become more and more excited and attentive.

“Ladies and gentlemen” Tracy declared, holding up her hands for silence which thanks to the high level of respect she held she got almost immediately “I will be making a short statement, then the Prime Minister will also add a few words before we take a limited number of questions, is that understood?” she asked looking around to which she received universal agreement from the press.

“At approximately eight fifty this morning on the south central division concourse of London Bridge Station in Central London a shooting incident took place” Tracy began “There was a lone gunman armed with a .22 calibre rifle who we believe was targeting random commuters on the concourse.”

“Prior to the gunman opening fire” Tracy continued, referring to the pre-prepared briefing document in her hand “Security staff at the station became aware of someone in the area below the roof space acting suspiciously and called the Security Service who responded immediately both with Transport Division patrol officers and a specialist Armed Response Unit.”

“The station was quickly evacuated during which three shots were fired by the gunman which caused no injury or damage to anyone” she carried on “The gunman was then challenged by the Armed Response Unit team leader whereupon the suspect threw down his weapon but before he could be taken into custody he took his own life and fell the forty feet or so to the concourse floor where he quickly died of his injuries.”

“At this time” Tracy stressed this point in particular “it is believed that the gunman was acting alone and of his own volition. His identity has yet to be formally established although at this stage we believe he had no links to any established or otherwise unknown terrorist group or extremist organisation.”

“I would like to pay tribute to the station staff and the officers of the National Security & Police Service” the Prime Minister began his part “without their quick thinking and dedication to duty there was the dreadful possibility that this lone gunman could have killed and wounded tens, maybe even hundreds of innocent civilians, more so in callously targeting one of the busiest railway terminals in the capital and at the peak of the morning rush hour.”

“We will not allow our lives to be dictated by the whims of terrorists” the Prime Minister continued by now in full flow “be they lone individuals or organised extremist groups. I place all such individuals on notice that anyone so much as even thinking about attacking our peaceful way of life will be found, arrested and brought to justice, prosecuted to the full extent of the law.”

“Any questions?” Tracy asked generally but with a tone that suggested she didn't really want any, well not too many anyway.

“Did the gunman have any specific target?” came one question to which Tracy was all ready to give the wrong answer.

“No” Tracy confirmed confidently “All evidence we have points to a lone nutter with ambitions to become famous for all the wrong reasons.

“When will you release the gunman's identity?” another member of the press called out.

“Well as I have just said” Tracy reiterated “we still don't know who this guy actually is yet, it is kind of difficult to identify a body when firstly the chap doesn't want to be identified and secondly he had been pretty badly damaged after falling forty odd feet having first blown his brains out, assuming he had any in the first place.”

“Prime Minister, do you think there may be more attacks?” came another question.

“Sadly in the society we live in today” the Prime Minister responded thoughtfully “there will always be a lunatic fringe of extremists who are only bent on making a name for themselves by attacking decent honest citizens as they go about their daily routine.”

“Do you have any advice for the public in light of this incident?” came the next question.

“Keep calm and carry on” the Prime Minister responded with a smile.

“Right that will be all ladies and gentlemen” Tracy declared “Some of us have work to do so if you will excuse us, thank you.”

“That went pretty well all things considered” the Prime Minister remarked as they headed back inside New Scotland Yard “Nicely spoken, eloquent and direct performance by you I felt.”

“As long as it keeps the press happy and not getting under our feet” Tracy responded “I will settle for that. Do you think I could ever make it as a politician?”

“Wouldn't work” the Prime Minister remarked with a chuckle “you have a personality; people like you and your husband are too honest to fiddle your expenses.”

“Maam?” the Receptionist called from her desk “This just came in for you” she confirmed as she produced a sealed plain brown envelope and passed it over.

“Thank you” Tracy responded as she took the envelope and opened it before taking a quick look at the initial summary page in the front of the file that was contained within.

“Anything interesting?” the Prime Minister casually asked.

“Just some information that MI5 have found out about our shooter” Tracy confirmed as she returned the file to the envelope.

“Let me guess” the Prime Minister pondered “The shooter was a Russian?” he asked with a knowing look.

“How the hell did you know that Sir if I may ask?” Tracy responded in amazement.

“Walls have ears” the Prime Minister mysteriously and evasively explained before tapping the side of his nose with his index finger and smiling “Be seeing you Ms Caverner” he confirmed before departing, leaving Tracy to look on slightly flabbergasted.

“A couple of faces we know are involved for you to familiarise yourself with” the Commander confirmed as Barrett put the projections of three pictures on the large view screen at the front of the room whereupon Martin, now dressed in his borrowed Security Service uniform leaned forward to take a closer look at.

“Ugly looking bunch” Martin remarked “Wouldn't want to bump into that lot in a dark alley on a cold night.”

“Pretty much hit the nail on the head there I am afraid” the Commander confirmed “Hopefully you won't actually meet any of these characters but I thought it prudent that you see them just in case.”

“First guy on the left is Steven Altman” Barrett commenced the briefing “Fifty eight years old but looks considerably older. Runs ones of the largest organised crime gangs in the country covering Wales and the South West.”

“He is a worm” the Commander confirmed “a outfit for hire merchant mostly, he will dance to anyone's tune no questions asked as long as there is a profit in it. Unfortunately he is also very clever as he has managed to either slip, kill or bribe his way out of every single investigation ever launched against him.”

“Second man here” Barrett pointed to the centre photograph “is a very unpleasant piece of work by the name of William or Bill Stevens, he is the muscle. Ex SAS and very handy with his fists when any of a large list of preferred weaponry is not available.”

“We are pretty certain he is the one leading the search to find your girl” the Commander confirmed grimly “and if he does find her then her fate will not be at all pleasant. Other hired thugs kill or maim for money, this guy does it because he enjoys it” a point the Commander backed up by passing a couple of photographs of some of Steven's previous victims which made Martin wince.

“Feel free to throw up” the Commander grimly confirmed “I know I nearly did when I first encountered his handy work.”

“Our third guy is our special guest” Barrett continued “He is the prize at the end of this particularly rocky rainbow, a Russian by the name of Alexander Cruschov, fifty nine years old, ex KGB and reputedly one of the richest men in Europe.”

“Not that you will find him listed in any editions of 'Who's Who?' mind” the Commander added “and that is probably down to the fact that most countries in the civilised world have a lorry load of warrants outstanding for this guy's arrest yet for some reason he still managed to slip into this country and disappear without a trace.”

“Arms, drugs, prostitution, people smuggling, money laundering, murder, bribery, genocide, you name it” Barrett added as she slammed a pretty thick file onto the desk “this guy and his very tightly nit company of thugs, thieves and hoodlums have done it all and not one single prosecution to show for it in fifteen years.”

“He was the man behind the arms sales that your girl exposed under Operation Clover Leaf” the Commander explained “and if is influence into the establishment stretches as far as we think it may now do there is a serious possibility that he now knows exactly who she is which is why he has sent Stevens here and his thugs after.”

“They'll rip her to shreds if they catch up with her” Martin concluded looking on somewhat shocked at what he was hearing.

“That is other reason why you are here” the Commander continued “No one knows you but yet you know Amber and she trusts you. Bar a very select few we can let no one know what is going on, we simply cannot risk it.”

“So if I manage to get to Amber before they do, I bring her back anyway I can” Martin concluded “you get your evidence that points straight to this Russian guy's door and then what?”

“Then a nice cosy cell over at the Hague War Crimes Tribunal awaits” the Commander explained “Or at least that is what he is meant to think.”

“Hundreds of millions of pounds poured into a worthless money pit” Sir Richard remarked mournfully as he re-entered the room and sat down “and all we have to show for it after ten years is one conviction and then the evil sod had the indecency to die before we could sentence him.”

“Which is why we have a little more interesting destination planned for him” the Commander continued “I won't bore you with details though, it is probably best you don't know.”

“Helicopter is on the roof and leaves in ten minutes” Barrett confirmed after taking a telephone call.

“Here” Sir Richard handed Martin a briefcase “a little care package courtesy of the MI5 stores department, may come in useful.”

“Thank you” Martin responded somewhat apprehensively as he realised the moment was approaching and the reality of what was now expected of him began to dawn “Well I hope I don't let you down.”

“You won't” the Commander reassured him “Sir Richard and I have a habit of spotting those with the skills needed for a job and you have it by the bucket load even if you don't realise it yet.”

“Good luck” Barrett called as the Commander escorted Martin from the room.

It took some five minutes to make their way up a narrow spiral staircase that proceeded unseen up the inside of the building above before they reached the roof where a black helicopter was coming into land, the noise from its rotors reverberating all around.

“One final thing” the Commander explained to Martin “Remember only a very few people know who you are and what this is all about. My opposite number Administrator General Evans is one but none of his people know so if someone comes up to you at any time and does not use the code word 'Cannon' then they are not from us and you are authorised to use whatever means are required to protect yourself, Amber and the information she has in her possession, is that understood?”

“Yes Sir” Martin agreed.

“All right then” the Commander confirmed “Go get your girl and bring her home. Good luck, I will see you soon” he ordered as they shook hands before Martin took a slightly nervous look at the helicopter before heading over to it and climbing aboard.

No sooner had he closed the door than the whirring from the rotors increased and the helicopter took off, hovering for a few moments just above the roof tops before majestically turning to the west and heading off and away into the distance.

“He's on his way then?” Tracy asked as she joined the Commander on the roof and holding hands, they watched the helicopter disappear into the distance across the skyline of central London.

“Let's just hope he can get to her in time” the Commander confirmed “together those two are our last best hope of finding out what these people are up and stopping it in time before someone gets hurt.”

“I thought I would bring you this direct” Tracy confirmed as with the helicopter now out of sight they headed back to the roof access doorway and she passed the Commander the file “This is what Dave Collins turned up on our London Bridge shooter.”

“Well I will be dammed” the Commander responded as having extracted it from the envelope, he opened and read the file “Small world isn't it love?”

“It is indeed” Tracy agreed “So how do you want to proceed?”

“Bring me Glasgow” the Commander instructed “and do it quietly.”

“With pleasure” Tracy confirmed.

The US Marines on guard duty immediately outside the front entrance of the US Embassy in Grosvenor Square reacted quickly, stepping forward as soon as the black car pulled up and three men emerged from it.

“Don't even think about it son” one of the men called in a deep American accent as he brandished his identification “This is way above your pay grade” he confirmed whereupon the two Marines stepped aside allowing the men through without even so much as a pause in their purpose laden step.

“Hello can I help you?” the receptionist called to the three tall black suited men in matching sunglasses who entered through the main entrance doors and proceeded in the direction of the lifts.

“No you can't Miss” the leader of the group confirmed at which point a second group of men arrived having pulled up outside in an identical car to the first. These quickly dispersed, one heading for the communications control centre, another to security control while the third proceeded directly to the reception desk where he calmly took the telephone handset out of the receptionist's hand and placed it back on to its base.

“No one calls anyone, no one leaves or enters this building without our say so” the leading man of the group declared as he removed his sunglasses revealing a deadly serious gaze “This building and those within in it are now under the direct jurisdiction of the National Security Agency under a class five investigation warrant.”

“Communications, security and perimeter secure” came a message over the ear piece of the leader who responded by clicking his fingers at the two men either side of him and indicating towards the lift.

“All right, this place is tied down, let's go” he duly declared before heading into the waiting lift car with his two colleagues and heading for the upper levels.

Up on the top floor, the chief of the CIA's London Station, David Howell was at his desk in his office when the intercom buzzed twice then paused and then once more. There was no message or anything just a peculiar pattern which instantly made Howell stop what he was doing and swivel his chair around to the window where he looked through the leaves of the Venetian blind at the Square below.

“Looks like we have guests” Howell grimly remarked to himself before reaching for the telephone on the desk but then found that all the external lines had been cut off.

Quickly thinking, Howell extracted a mobile telephone from his desk drawer whereupon he quickly composed a text message but just as he pressed the send button on the cryptically completed message his door opened and in walked the three men.

“Christopher Hoskins” the lead man declared brandishing his identification “Chief of Operational Protocol and Procedures Section, National Security Agency” he confirmed.

“The NSA has no jurisdiction outside of the United States” Howell protested as he sat back in his chair whereupon one of the operatives went around the desk and proceeded to remove both Howell's mobile and his holstered weapon.

“Evidently you have not been keeping up on world events Mr Howell” Hoskins responded “We have a go anywhere mandate that means that if there is a threat to the security of the United States I can come around whenever I like and stomp on it.”

“Looks like he sent a text message on this Sir” the operative who had taken Howell's mobile announced.

“Well he won't be getting a reply on it” Hoskins motioned to his operative who responded by dropping the mobile to the floor and then stamping on it, reducing to a pile of broken and useless pieces.

“I hope you are going to pay for that” Howell remarked aside to the man who had smashed his telephone but all he got was an impassive expression from behind the ever present sunglasses in response.

“Let me get to the point Mr Howell as my time is short” Hoskins declared “You are being placed under arrest as part of an ongoing investigation.”

“What the hell are you talking about man?” Howell demanded too know “Look I appreciate that the US Embassy is United States soil which gives you some limited powers here but in case you hadn't noticed this is the UK, you are on somebody else's turf now and I am willing to bet he isn't going to like it when he hears about this.”

“Does it look as if I really care?” Hoskins responded “The fact of the matter is I and my associates have a job to do and have a whole raft of stamped and approved orders to back it up so if I were you I would stop complaining, accept the inevitable and let us get on with it, that way it will all be over soon.”

“What does the Ambassador have to say about all this?” Howell asked “Any investigation of this sort has to go through his office first you know.”

“Not anymore” Hoskins informed him “and anyway the Ambassador is at this very minute receiving a telephone call from the State Department which will see him on a plane to Washington DC within the hour, in handcuffs I might add although obviously we won't do that in public as we don't want too many questions from the locals.”

“I am saying nothing until I see a lawyer and I have consulted with my Chief at Langley” Howell declared defiantly.

“Heh, heh. Yeah right like that is going to happen” Hoskins dismissed Howell's requests in the blink of an eye “All right then gentlemen, take him in and lets get this party started.”

“David, we need to talk” Sir Richard called as he walked into David Collins office at MI5.

“Would this have anything to do with the load of goons in identical suits and sunglasses who just steamed into the Grosvenor Square lunatic asylum by any chance?” Collins asked with concern from behind his desk.

“You know about that?” Sir Richard asked as he helped himself to a drink from the decanter on the side table and gulped it down in one.

“Our permanent observation point outside the place just called in” Collins explained “He cannot confirm anything but he reckons by the style and attitude they used when they rolled up it has NSA written all over it.”

“Fits in with this” Sir Richard passed Collins his mobile telephone on which was displayed a text message which read simply:

‘NSA in the nest, remember that iron and steel will bend and bow, farewell and good luck’

“It’s from Howell” Sir Richard confirmed “He sent this about the same time the goons came through the door.”

“An American National Security Agency on UK soil?” Collins asked “What the hell are they up to?”

“Bugged if I know” Sir Richard admitted “but it is patently clear that certain elements within the NSA have been setting policy in the US overriding certain elements of the CIA’s mandate.”

“Introducing an unstable element ripe to exploitation from anyone with the contacts, the money and the balls to do it” Collins concluded “This could get ugly.”

“I tried calling Howell back on his mobile but it was disconnected at his end and my people cannot get any trace on his location from it so I reckon the NSA destroyed his phone when they grabbed him” Sir Richard explained “all the land lines into and out of the Embassy are also not working as well.”

“Perhaps a call to our friends over at MI6 is in order, see if they have heard anything” Collins suggested as he reached for the telephone on his desk.

“Don’t bother” Sir Richard confirmed “I already checked, no one has seen sight or sound of Sir John Haliford since yesterday.”

“You don’t think the NSA would grab the head of operations for MI6 do you?” Collins asked with a stunned look.

“Hey these guys just wandered in and took complete control of a US Embassy on foreign soil and arrested the local head of the CIA” Sir Richard pointed out as he poured himself a second drink plus one for Collins that he then passed over to him “After that classy little manoeuvre I reckon anything is possible.”

“So you were grabbed” Collins summarised “Howell has been snatched, Haliford has gone walkies, who is next?”

“If I were a betting man...” Sir Richard remarked.

“Which you are” Collins agreed.

“...then my money would be on Sergei Glasgov, the London KGB guy” Sir Richard concluded.

“FSB” Collins reminded him.

“Still the same friendly service just with a nice new logo on the company stationery” Sir Richard responded “Anyway the Commander wants a word with our Soviet friend so I just hope he manages to get to him before someone else does.”

“In the meantime” Collins replied “I strongly recommend we watch each others backs very carefully.”

“I’ll drink to that” Sir Richard agreed.

“With my best single malt I notice” Collins pointed out with a wry smile as Sir Richard helped himself to another refill.

The gold coloured Mercedes saloon car serenely glided out of the gates of the Russian Embassy in Notting Hill Gate and under the supervision of a Traffic Warden was allowed to merge into the traffic with ease.

As the car proceeded eastwards towards the centre of London, a second vehicle could be seen to be joining the traffic a few vehicles behind in the form of a black car not unlike the ones that only a few minutes before had arrived in Grosvenor Square with the NSA representatives.

“You would think our American friends would change their registration numbers on their cars once in a while wouldn't you?” Sergei Glasgov remarked to his driver as he looked over his shoulder briefly through the rear window at the traffic behind them “Two men, same car, same procedure, it really does get tiring after a while.”

“I could try and lose them Sir” the driver responded as he looked in the rear view mirror at the car in question.

“Ah what's the point” Glasgow remarked “They follow us, we follow them, it's a mutual arrangement we have, keeps all the checks and balances between our two countries going I guess so let them get on with their job for now.”

The traffic was not too bad for an early afternoon in central London and as a result Glasgow's car made fairly swift progress pass Bayswater and along the northern edge of Hyde Park before approaching the massive and complicated circulatory system around Marble Arch where Oxford Street, Edgware Road and Park Lane all met together in the shadow of the large stone archway monument that gave the area its name.

It was as they approached the first set of traffic lights however that Glasgow put down his newspaper as he noticed something or more to the point someone by the side of the road in the near distance seemingly giving him some kind of discrete signal.

“Looks life is about to get interesting Marco” Glasgow called forward to his driver “As soon as that traffic light ahead starts to turn back towards red, floor the accelerator.”

“But why Sir?” the driver asked confused by his boss's request.

“Just do it lad and no questions” Glasgow confirmed as he watched the person who had given him the signal now proceed to board an out of service articulated bus parked in the bus layover area that ran at right angles to the junction they were approaching.

The lights were still showing green as Glasgow's car approached but then when they were about to turn to red he gave the signal to his driver to go.

“Come on, put your foot down, put your foot down” Glasgow encouraged whereupon his driver duly buried the accelerator and shot across the junction at high speed as the lights turned red.

Moments later realising that they were about to lose contact, the car that had been following pulled out of the now stationary flow of traffic and tried to jump ahead but as they reached the junction the driver was suddenly forced to swerve and brake sharply as a fifteen metre long articulated London bus came at them directly from the side road and impacted with their bonnet, disabling the car with a loud scrunch whilst the bus itself was barely scratched.

“Sorry about that Guvnor” Tracy called in a mock cockney accent from the drivers cab “Should have been looking where you were going shouldn't you?” she remarked with a wry smile before calmly stepping out of the cab and off the bus whereupon she went around the other side and out of sight of the men in the car whose view ahead was blocked by the errant bus, she went over to Glasgow's now stationary Mercedes.

“Afternoon Comrade” Tracy called as she opened the rear car door “If you will come with me please” she commanded, all but dragging the man from the car before a Security Service officer joined them by the roadside.

“What the hell is going on?” Glasgow asked in a sense of confusion.

“Give him your coat, quickly” Tracy instructed Glasgow who did as he was asked, taking off his long coat and handing it to the officer with them who put it on before replacing the Russian in the back of the car.

“Ok, get out of here” Tracy called to the driver, slapping her hand on the roof to signal the urgency of the situation whereupon the driver did as instructed and quickly drove away.

“Come on” Tracy called taking Glasgow by the arm and dragging him quickly across the road towards the entrance of Marble Arch Underground Station “I hope you have your Oyster Card on you otherwise this could be a rather short trip.”

“This is madness, I demand to know what the hell is going on here” Glasgow requested as Tracy escorted him down the steps and into the ticket hall of the station.

“I just saved you from a very unpleasant experience with our American friends” Tracy explained as they passed through the ticket barriers without hindrance and made straight for the escalators that led down to the Central Line platforms.

“I don’t understand” Glasgow responded as they reached the bottom of the escalator and headed for the eastbound platform where a train of 1992 type Tube Stock was just arriving with a Central Line service bound for Epping.

“I was on my way over to grab you for a little chat with my husband anyway” Tracy explained as she looked down the platform as the train slowed to a halt before escorting the Russian on board the last carriage which was largely empty “on my way over here we got word from MI5 that apparently something is going on with the Americans.”

“But they were just the normal CIA surveillance team they always have following me around” Glasgow responded.

“Not today they weren’t” Tracy continued to explain as the train doors closed and it departed Marble Arch “About thirty minutes ago a load of goons supposedly hot off the plane from the NSA turned up at Grosvenor Square and seized the place which included putting David Howell under arrest and suspending the entire CIA London Station and sending the US Ambassador to the UK back to Washington DC, in handcuffs I might add.”

“So the guys in the car...” Glasgow began.

“...were NSA goons, not regular CIA locals” Tracy confirmed “Howell managed to get a message to Sir Richard just before they kicked his door in but since then nothing except a sketchy report from his man in the Embassy.”

“So they were coming after me?” Glasgow asked somewhat astounded as the train pulled into Bond Street.

“Don’t know” Tracy admitted “but in any event it was going to be necessary to get you away from the US minders if we wanted to talk to you.”

“Then whatever is happening has started...” Glasgow remarked with a mournful tone “What can I do to help?”

“Well firstly I think my husband has a few questions for you Sergei” Tracy confirmed “After that, well who knows.”

As the helicopter approached the deserted former World War Two airfield, Administrator General Evans got out of his patrol car and looked across the desolate concrete runway, weeds pushing up between the cracks and joins in the long forgotten concrete panels which added to the foreboding atmosphere of the desolate location.

Once the helicopter had touched down on the rough concrete surface, forcing Evans to shield his eyes from the dust and water being swirled up by the rotors turbulence the side door opened and an apprehensive looking Martin duly alighted and came over.

“Hello” Evans greeted Martin “First thing I need to say to you is Cannon.”

“Well I am glad we got that out of the way” Martin responded as the two men shook hands and behind them the helicopter took off and departed leaving them alone.

“You must be the man of the moment or something like that, I have heard so little about you” Evans remarked with a hearty laugh.

“I have to admit it has been rather an interesting day so far” Martin was forced to admit, still somewhat ill at ease with it all “At this point I am wondering what my boss back at the Department for Transport is thinking.”

“Oh I shouldn’t worry” Evans confirmed “It helps that your Guvnor is also the Security Service Transport Security Liaison officer and just happens to owe the Commander a favour or seven.”

“I haven’t quite got used to this business yet” Martin responded “but I do get the distinct impression that the Commander doesn’t exactly follow the book when it comes to doing things.”

“You can say that again” Evans agreed “Although even by his standards this little enterprise is quite a departure even for him.”

“Any word on Amber?” Martin asked, clearly concerned and now eager to get on with the job of finding her now he was safely on the ground.

“On her specifically, no” Evans confirmed “However someone with some very heavy muscle not to mention influence has been in the process of bringing down a fire fight all the way from Newport Docks to central Wales so they are definitely after someone and I would think given they are still at it, there is every chance that she is still alive.”

“At least that is something” Martin agreed.

“Last report we had was from someone reporting burning wreckage about sixty miles north of here in this range of valleys and mountains” Evans showed Martin the area on a map he had ready on the bonnet of his patrol car “Although these goons have told us to stay well clear under the guise of some phoney executive order, I still have a few contacts in the area who are feeding me some discrete information.”

“Anything in particular I can use?” Martin asked.

“Seems that someone shot down a helicopter earlier this morning” Evans explained “My guess is that given your girl’s reputation as a tough cookie that it was her handy work but given she has been out there with no support for the best part of twenty four hours now I would wager her condition is not going to be great.”

“In which case I had better get a move on” Martin suggested.

“I wholeheartedly agree” Evans agreed “I’ve got a Security Service Land Rover for you over there, the tank is full and its registered to a unit dealing with rural crime which gives you a legitimate excuse to be poking around in the area if anyone asks any questions.”

“Anything else I need to know?” Martin asked as Evans walked him to the Land Rover.

“Up there in the hills and valleys there is no mobile telephone reception whatsoever and radio communication is at best patchy so when you find her, you may have to move over land quickly to a location where you can get a message out to us” Evans explained “You are going to be on your own and there won’t be any cavalry coming over the hill to rescue you so you will need to keep your wits about you and use your own initiative, all right?”

“Right” Martin responded still a bit daunted by the prospect but eager to get started.

“All right then” Evans concluded as they reached the Land Rover and he opened the drivers door for him “I have loaded the back with everything I could think of, you have water, a full medical kit and some other bits and pieces in the back plus a spare gun and ammunition locked in the front glove compartment, I just hope you don’t need it.”

“So do I” Martin agreed “Tell me Sir, are first days in the Security Service always this exciting?”

“Only if you are the Commander” Evans responded with a wry grin “When this is over, why don’t you ask him what happened to him on his first day out in uniform, you may be surprised.”

“I might just do that” Martin confirmed “Thank you Sir.”

“Good luck mate” Evans called as he closed the driver’s side door and Martin started the engine “Go and find her.”

“I will” Martin grimly confirmed before driving off.

“Here we are” Tracy declared as she opened a door in the platform wall at the far end of the eastbound Piccadilly Line platform at Holborn Underground Station where they had walked to from the Central Line platforms one level above.

“Well I have to hand it to you” Glasgow responded as Tracy followed him through the doorway before closing it firmly shut behind them “Your husband does pick some very strange meeting places.”

“He’s through there” Tracy indicated the way ahead and they came out onto the disused but still complete former Aldwych branch platform where the Commander was stood waiting for them to arrive.

“Afternoon Sergei” the Commander called with a serious look readily apparent “You are a hard man to catch up with.”

“Indeed” Glasgow agreed as he stepped forward and the two men shook hands “I believe I have you and your fair lady to thank for rescuing me from the clutches of those capitalist muppets from the NSA?”

“All part of the friendly service” the Commander responded.

“I take it you are up to speed on the US business love?” Tracy asked.

“David Collins called me about ten minutes ago” the Commander confirmed “Tracy love can you do me a favour?”

“For you anything” Tracy confirmed with a smile that lit up that dark old platform tunnel.

“See if you can track down Sir John Haliford or anyone who has seen or spoken to him since yesterday” the Commander requested “It is not like him to just vanish when exciting things like this are happening.”

“I’ll get Fuller to go through his life and see what pops up” Tracy confirmed “See you later darling.”

“Ah she loves me” the Commander admitted with a smile as Tracy left, leaving the two contrasting men alone.

“So what would you like to talk about?” Glasgow asked as he and the Commander sat down on one of the old wooden platform benches.

“No doubt you heard about the little incident with the little man holding the big gun at London Bridge Station this morning” the Commander began, the seriousness of his tone readily apparent as it echoed all around the otherwise silent and deserted platform tunnel.

“I saw your wife hopelessly out classing your Prime Minister on the news a couple of hours ago certainly” Glasgow confirmed.

“Well lets just say that was the fictional for public consumption version she broadcast so admirably” the Commander explained “The truth is a little more interesting” he confirmed as he produced the file that was at the heart of this conversation “Does the name Vladimir Korsakov mean anything to you?”

“If it is the same man, there was an agent of that name under my Command in Leningrad some years ago” Glasgow remarked “Apart from that then no, sorry” he confirmed shaking his head in denial.

“Vague yet meaningless” the Commander responded “we know he was one of your hired thugs under the KGB” he informed him producing the report on the dead man to prove his point “after the Soviet Union broke up he went freelance and has done jobs for the FSB, some Algerian outfit, even reportedly Mossad before working in the Balkans coincidentally at the same time as a equally nasty piece of work by the name of William or Bill Stevens who at his very moment is tearing across the Welsh countryside shooting at anything that moves.”

“In which case it is almost certainly the same man” Glasgow slightly reluctantly agreed with a slow nod of the head “We used him a couple of times for jobs that required extreme measures but personally speaking I was never keen on the methods he used, he was too fond of getting his gun off if you know what I mean Comrade.”

“Sounds like just the sort of piece of filth Stevens would sub-contract” the Commander remarked “So let's talk about that evil conniving money grabbing blob Alexander Cruschov shall we?”

“A name I hoped that ten years ago I would never have to hear again” Glasgow responded “Sadly for both our countries and maybe others I never had my hopes and wishes on that matter granted.”

“He's here in the UK” the Commander continued “Then again I suspect you probably already knew that didn't you?”

“Up until recently we have always considered the subject of Alexander Cruschov to be a strictly internal matter” Glasgow explained reluctantly “Aside from the occasional spot of extra curricular activity west of the Berlin Wall which I provided a certain Mr Crowthorne with information on a few years back, he mainly kept to within the Soviet Union and associated Eastern European states.”

“Looks like he has somewhat larger ambitions now” the Commander remarked.

“When I first knew Cruschov he was a man with ideals, dedicated to the security of the Soviet Union, the perfect KGB officer” Glasgow continued “Then came the dark times, the break up of the old Union and the arrival of the so called capitalist free economy, then all he saw was dollar signs and the only security he cared about was that of his own bank account.”

“And then some” the Commander agreed.

“It was like he changed overnight” Glasgow remarked passionately “All of a sudden without realising it we had a monster on our hands. Three years ago I submitted a detailed report to my superiors in Moscow about him warning them in no uncertain terms that this man had become pure evil and what response do I get? We will take it under advisement, that's what!”

“Sounds like Cruschov has his claws into some prominent names in your country's political structure” the Commander remarked “and I reckon the chances are that is not the only country where he has 'interests' if the number of times he has managed to slip away unnoticed from the hundreds of arrests warrants that are waiting for him across the world is anything to go by.”

“I know what you mean comrade” Glasgow agreed “I have repeatedly warned them about this man, his unholy influences and some of the vile and just plain evil people he does business with but they continually refuse to listen despite the obvious dangers this man represents.”

“What do you have on him then?” the Commander asked.

“Cruschov is a man who provides anything to anyone no questions asked as long as the money is there” Glasgow explained “He has no scruples whatsoever about selling stuff to anyone and could not care one bit about the damage that results.”

“So what about his excursion to the UK then?” the Commander wondered “Is he setting up a deal over here?”

“The last six months or so have indicated that Cruschov has taken a very active interest in politics” Glasgow continued “Reports of high level meetings with certain upcoming high flyers in the Russian Parliament and that of other countries all pointing to some big deal coming up then a couple of weeks ago our boy appears on a false passport getting off of a private jet at Gatwick.”

“Let me guess, you had something to do with the mysterious 'disappearance' of our friend on the CCTV between Gatwick and Victoria?” the Commander ventured.

“Maybe...” Glasgow responded with a wry smile.

“Thought so” the Commander confirmed “It had your style about it, nice manoeuvre by the way.”

“Fairly simple really” Glasgow continued “As soon as I was alerted, I wanted to make sure that Cruschov remained an internal matter for us so I arranged a little wrong footing of Sir Richard. Unfortunately he also managed to give my people the slip as well which means that he may very well have some influence within my own people.”

“Do you suppose there is any coincidence in this business involving the NSA rolling into the US Embassy?” the Commander asked.

“What is a coincidence my friend?” Glasgow cryptically responded “Two or more events that just happen to occur at the same time seemingly related but lets be honest here Commander there is more at work here than just a nasty former colleague of mine on a power trip.”

“Well I never really believed in them” the Commander confirmed “I have tended to find I live much longer that way.”

“A very wise philosophy, I congratulate you” Glasgow remarked “We now live in an unstable economic climate, lots of influential people who made bad investments are suddenly finding these coming home to roost, tie that in with certain political aspirations what with recent scandals and then dip all that in the mire of ‘Global Terrorism’ as our American friends like to call their excuse for running rough shod over everything and everyone and it was only a matter of time before the slime of humanity bought their way to the surface.”

“And people like Cruschov have very large cheque books” the Commander agreed “But what I am beginning to wonder is who or what is behind all this, I mean this Russian is pretty clever when it comes to business as it would appear he seems to own half the former Soviet oil and gas fields along with a variety of other interests including a shadow ownership of a football club here in the UK but manipulating the NSA is surely beyond even his influence.”

“Indeed” Glasgow agreed “To find out who really pulls the strings first consider one key thing, how does a upper level KGB officer probably earning less than even you do now suddenly put the finance together to become an international businessman virtually overnight?”

“So what are we talking about here?” the Commander asked “Foreign Government influence perhaps?”

“Governments don’t have powers any more” Glasgow responded with a hearty laugh that echoed all around the deserted platform tunnel “Banks, financial institutions, global business, they hold the real power now. In the last eighteen months the Governments of the west have bailed out multi-national corporations and banks to the tune of billions of dollars but on whose orders?”

“Corporate blackmail by any chance?” the Commander suggested “Give us a whacking great Government subsidy or we take all our manufacturing jobs to China or somewhere and you can rot when the next General Election comes around matey?”

“Are you sure there is no noble Russian blood in your veins Commander?” Glasgow inquired.

“Only best cockney claret I am afraid” the Commander confirmed with a wry smile “I don't suppose you have any idea where Cruschov is now do you?” he asked.

“Sadly not my friend” Glasgow confirmed regretfully “If I did I can assure you right now he would be on his way to a very dark cold place air freight in a box marked for diplomatic use only.”

“If we find him and assuming there is anything left once I have had my word or three then maybe we could arrange that” the Commander remarked.

“I would enjoy that” Glasgow responded with a hearty laugh “No, the nearest we ever got to him was one of my people who did an investigation into his accounts, he turned up dead a week later with a note pinned to him that read 'Silver and Gold will be stolen away'.”

“I've heard that somewhere before” the Commander vaguely recalled “Just remember I could remember where.”

“So how is your Mr Martin getting on in deepest darkest Wales?” Glasgow asked, a statement that made the Commander turn to face his Russian counterpart with a look of horror.

“How the hell did you know about that?” the Commander demanded to know.

“When certain people with connections to our Comrade Cruschov start chasing people across the Welsh countryside with guns and helicopters I naturally start asking questions” Glasgow explained.

“Sounds like we have a leak” the Commander responded “He's fine by the way.”

“Anything I can do to help” Glasgow replied sincerely “You just call me, but be aware Commander anything I can find out, they can find out as well.”

“Working on the theory that you can't go back to your office until this all blows over” the Commander asked “Where will I find you?”

“Just say the magic words and I will appear” Glasgow confirmed with a wry smile as he stood up before he and the Commander exchanged a warm handshake “I will do whatever I can to help, the resolution of the matter of Glasgow is in the interests of both of us both professionally and personally.”

“Thank you” the Commander responded.

“Dosvidanja Commander” Glasgow confirmed before with a tug of the forelock he departed leaving the Commander alone with just his own thoughts for company on that deserted old station platform.

Martin pulled the Land Rover into the side of the rough farm lane and stopped the engine in order to listen to the sounds he had heard echoing through the hills. Once the engine was off and he had got out he could hear in the distance between the gusts of wind the echoes of gunfire coming from some distance away.

Quickly working out which way the sound was coming from, Martin returned to the driving seat and consulted the map he had which showed a whole area dominated by nothing more than deep rural rocky valleys and hills for many square miles ahead.

“Needle and haystack time methinks” he admitted to himself but then he heard a new sound approach which caused him to quickly get out of the vehicle and flag down the source of that sound, an approaching tractor and trailer.

“Afternoon officer” the farmer driving the tractor remarked with some surprise at having seen a uniformed Security Service officer all the way out there “If you don't mind me saying so son, you look lost.”

“Lieutenant Commander Martin” he introduced himself remembering to show his identification to the farmer “Rural Crime Initiative Unit. I was wondering if you had seen or heard anything unusual around in the last forty eight hours?”

“Nothing much” the farmer remarked “Well except for those special forces or army or whatever they are on exercise up over the back of the hills there.”

“Army on exercise?” Martin asked.

“Yes, the forty or so guys in black with the guns shooting at everything in sight” the farmer explained “They turned up yesterday, said to keep well clear of the area as they were on exercise, tough nuts too mind you, they didn't even seem to blink an eyelid when whoever they are supposed to be chasing accidentally shot down their helicopter this morning.”

“Whoops...” Martin remarked.

“Oh yes” the farmer continued “made a right mess it did, Arthur Jones, the guy who runs the farm next door saw the mess himself, frightened the life out of some his prize sheep it did.”

“Where are they heading?” Martin asked as he extracted the map from his Land Rover and placed it flat on the bonnet “Only I think I had better head up there and see what they are up to.”

“Best keep your head down if I were you or you are likely to get it blown off son” the farmer advised as he jumped down from the cab of his tractor and looked at the map “but if you have one of those bullet proof vest things then you best head down this road” he indicated on the map “turn right when you reach this old barn here and then head up the hill as far as you can go which in that thing will be about half way. You will have to walk from there.”

“Right” Martin responded as he committed the directions to memory “Many thanks.”

“You be careful now son” the farmer warned as he returned to his tractor “These guys are serious and strictly between you and me I reckon there is more to them than meets the eye.”

“Funny you should say that” Martin agreed with a wry smile “Thank you for your help.”

“Any time son” the farmer confirmed as he started up the tractor before with a friendly wave he departed.

Getting back in his Land Rover, Martin took a few moments to think about what he was about to get into before reaching across to the briefcase on the passenger seat alongside him and opening it. From within he tentatively extracted the semi-automatic handgun, checked it was loaded and then placed it in the holster attached to his belt before starting the engine and driving off down the muddy lane towards the misty covered hills beyond.

“I hope you guys have very good lawyers because you are going to need them” David Howell warned as he was escorted from the car that had brought him and the two NSA minders who were escorting him from Grosvenor Square to a very anonymous modern looking building in the midst of a brand new but largely unoccupied industrial estate somewhere on the outskirts of London.

Howell had no idea where he was though; the car had blacked out windows and taken a very circuitous route to its destination in a deliberate attempt to disorientate him so that he would have no idea as to his current whereabouts.

The two men escorting him unceremoniously from the car said nothing and the sun glasses that seemed to be ever present on their faces meant they remained totally emotionless throughout.

“Welcome Mr Howell” came a voice that Howell already knew which caused him to look up and see standing in the doorway to the building Christopher Hoskins, the man from the NSA who earlier had so brazenly walked into the US Embassy and seized control.

“What the hell is all this about?” Howell demanded to know as the two men, both flanked by tall suited goons but in different circumstances met face to face on the entrance steps.

“I would like you to be my guest for a while Mr Howell” Hoskins explained “Come in, you should be honoured” he declared as with a nod of the head to his associates he headed inside whereupon Howell was dragged in behind him.

“Nice place” Howell remarked as he looked around the interior of the building, dominated by modern glass surfaces and finishings yet totally devoid of any character, indeed almost clinically empty “So out of who's budget that the Senate doesn't know about is this being paid for?”

“This is the new European headquarters of the International Security Agency” Hoskins explained with obvious pride “You see the NSA is going global and we are taking the issue of International Security into the private sector.”

“Oh, the old delusions of grandeur number” Howell defiantly but coolly responded.

“No more Governments telling us what to do just because they need it to be politically convenient in time for an election” Hoskins continued “Now we will be setting the agenda in association with those that really matter, private enterprise.”

“You haven't got a snazzy logo in marble on the floor” Howell pointed out with a wry smile.

“All in good time” Hoskins confirmed “Unfortunately certain events including the highly unwise decision by certain members of the 'old' order such as yourself to launch certain clandestine investigations has meant we have had to move up our timetable a little.”

“Sorry to have been such a nuisance” Howell responded in a way that meant exactly the opposite.

“That is why you are here” Hoskins continued “You are one of our very first guests at this lavish new facility and once you are settled in, you and I are going to have a little chat.”

“Get stuffed” Howell responded “In the grand scheme of things I am merely small fry, there are far bigger players involved and when they find out what you and your rent-a-cronies are up to you are going to be in for a very serious arse kicking so take my advice friend, pack you bags and get out of this country very, very fast.”

“Save your breath Mr Howell” Hoskins coolly responded “You are dealing with power and control far beyond your imagination, we are the new boys in town and soon security worldwide is going to be dancing to our tune.”

“I'll remember to bring a trumpet” Howell replied with a smile.

“Take him away” Hoskins called to his operatives “Ensure he is comfortable and that a drink is provided, I don't want anyone saying we are nothing if not hospitable.”

“Oh you are too kind” Howell mocked as he was taken away leaving Hoskins to look on whereupon he removed his sunglasses and, standing alone in the centre of the vast marble and glass foyer, he expressed a knowing smile.

“Our Russian friend was right” Fuller confirmed as he took another look at the footage from the Gatwick Airport CCTV feeds the day that Cruschov had snuck into the country.

“Well he is a very clever boy” the Commander admitted as he looked over Fuller's shoulder at the two computer screens showing the replayed footage “He wanted to keep the Cruschov affair a strictly Russian internal matter until he realised just out of hand it had got.”

“His people switched the CCTV footage to make it look like he got on the Gatwick Express but then disappeared when it arrived at Victoria” Fuller explained “Well one train is much like another, it didn't take much to find identical footage of the same train on the same cycle two hours earlier and paste it over, even down to the same unit number. It is only if you look carefully in the background will you see a train to Bognor Regis has mysterious lost four carriages between shots.”

“A pity then that he also gave Glasgow's boys the slip as well” the Commander admitted.

“It does make you think that this Russian guy has contacts in the FSB still, maybe even in other agencies including ours” Fuller responded.

“That is the distinctively nasty impression I am getting” the Commander admitted “Simon” he asked with that serious tone that always meant trouble “I want you to have a look at any accounts you can find relating to this Cruschov character, go as far back as you can.”

“What do you expect to find?” Fuller asked slightly apprehensively.

“Well as Glasgow said” the Commander explained “This guy went from being a humble KGB desk officer to a multi billionaire oil and trade baron almost in the blink of an eye. The money must have originated from somewhere and I am willing to bet whoever funded his earliest deals probably doesn't want the resulting laundry aired in public which may give us some leverage with someone on the inside.”

“I'll see what I can find” Fuller agreed.

“Be careful though” the Commander warned ominously “Glasgow tried this a few years ago and one of his agents met a very nasty end as a result.”

“Ah but they were not me were they Sir?” Fuller responded suggestively.

“Exactly...” the Commander agreed with a smile seeing that they were both thinking on the same wavelength.

“Bloody hell David, are you all right?” Sir John Haliford asked as he looked on from the adjacent cell as Howell was brought in before being unceremoniously dumped inside and the barred door closed and locked.

“All things considered I have had better days” Howell admitted wryly as he felt the back of his head.

“I guess then you have met Hoskins and his friends?” Haliford asked.

“We had a little chat yes” Howell confirmed “Well I guess this explains where you disappeared to then, there were reports floating around just before Hoskins and his mob showed up that you had vanished.”

“Unfortunately it would appear I had a prior appointment” Haliford admitted gesturing around the cell block “I don't suppose you managed to see where we are did you?”

“No” Howell admitted “I got taken via a very round about route and the windows were dark, yourself?”

“Back of a Transit van unfortunately” Haliford admitted “Which means even if we could call for help we have no idea where we are for the cavalry to come and rescue us.”

“Has that loon Hoskins explained what is going on?” Howell asked.

“Apparently there is a plan now going into action that sees the US National Security Agency get an upgrade financed by private investors and in association with like minded people which sees them effectively become a global anti-terrorist force free of Government restrictions and United Nations laws.”

“Sounds like the sort of bandwagon a piece of scum like Alexander Cruschov would nail his flag onto” Howell remarked.

“Why not” Haliford confirmed “He has money, influence and thirty years of KGB experience plus contacts, an ideal man for the job I would have thought plus it gives him the three things he always wants, power, respectability and those arrest warrants for him torn up.”

“So when Sir Richard Crowthorne heard about Cruschov coming into the country and sent his two agents after him that is when it all kicked off” Howell summarised “the 'recent events' that made these people bring their timetable forward.”

“Makes sense” Haliford agreed “The only way to bring it down would be to find the evidence which is who knows where.”

“On a memory stick in the possession of the last surviving agent I would wager” Howell confirmed “Which presumably is the Irish girl that is being chased across rural Wales by goons with guns.”

“If she is still alive then what knowledge she possesses could be of extreme danger to this organisation” Haliford warned “Never mind that Russian scum Cruschov getting his revenge, there could be pointers there to this lot.”

“Let's just hope the guy that the Commander has sent in to get her finds her before they do” Howell confirmed.

“Oh the fellow that got shot at arriving at London Bridge this morning” Haliford responded.

“You know about that?” Howell asked.

“Indeed I do” Haliford confirmed as his tone changed to one of confidence before to Howell's shock he stood up and calmly stepped out of the cell, the door having never been locked all the time.

“I've just walked into a huge elephant trap haven't I?” Howell asked as a smirking Haliford watched through the bars of his cell as he was joined by Hoskins.

“Oldest trick in the book” Hoskins confirmed with a wry smile “Thank you for your co-operation.”

“If we move quickly then I think we can get this tied off and ready to go before tomorrow lunchtime” Haliford suggested.

“I agree” Hoskins confirmed.

“The agent in Wales must be the girl who was posing as Emma Gregory, that would be Amber McNeil, her file is on the system under my personal password” Haliford informed his co-conspirator.

“I will talk to our friends in Wales and confirm the identification of our little friend's saviour and then Stevens can have the fun of ripping them both to bits” Hoskins agreed “Meantime I think it is time we found some company for our friend here.”

“I'll get right onto it” Haliford confirmed.

“Hey, Haliford!” Howell called from his cell just as he was about to leave “You have been with MI6 for twenty five years, at least tell me why you are throwing all that away and signing up with this scum?”

“Why?” Haliford responded with a raised eyebrow “I'll tell you why my old friend, because I am sick and tired of having to constantly bend in the wind to the whims of idiots in Government who think they know better, it is time to cut the umbilical cord and strike out on our own.”

“You see my friend” Hoskins added almost with a sense of pride “We are taking international security 'private', no more boundaries, no more rules. Anyone who thinks about doing something against the greater good, we will just pop around and stomp on them like a bug.”

“You know you two are quite mad” Howell dismissed them.

“Maybe” Haliford remarked with a casual shrug of the shoulders “but I think I will be happy to let history decide” he confirmed before he and Hoskins turned to leave “Be seeing you...”

As Howell looked on with a grim expression, Hoskins deep evil laugh could be heard echoing down the corridor as the two men disappeared from sight.

“I don't like it” Sir Richard remarked as he and David Collins walked across London Bridge and on to King William Street on the north side of the River Thames “First Haliford vanishes into thin air and then some goons show up and grab Howell as well.”

“I have tried all my usual contacts in the US and Canada” Collins confirmed “There are unconfirmed rumours that something is happening within the NSA and that there are several members of top brass over at the CIA who are unhappy about it but as soon as I mention Howell's name I run into road blocks if you know what I mean.”

“Same here as well” Sir Richard confirmed “MI6 have put up the shutters on this one even to me.”

“You know those people that grabbed you a few days ago and held you” Collins remarked as they continued walking “You don't think that they might be connected to the NSA guys that grabbed Howell do you?”

“I have to admit it is a thought that has crossed my mind” Sir Richard admitted “Haliford and Howell both were connected in some way with the original Operation Clover Leaf investigation so they know what I know.”

“I hate to say it old friend” Collins concluded “but I reckon this Cruschov character is just part of the puzzle, there is something far bigger and uglier brewing here I think.”

“You may be right” Sir Richard agreed “Trouble is until we can find out whatever information Amber has then we are in a state of limbo. By the way, is that your herd back there?”

“Blue Transit van with the dented front wing and borderline MOT about two hundred yards behind us that has been following us for the last ten minutes?” Collins asked “I thought they were yours.”

“Maybe we are about to meet whoever is behind this sooner than we first thought” Sir Richard remarked as Collins discreetly reached for his mobile telephone only to then look at the display on it with puzzlement.

“That's odd, I have got a network failure” Collins declared whereupon Sir Richard looked at his own mobile telephone and discovered the same problem “Technical fault?” he speculated.

“In the heart of Central London, I don't think so” Sir Richard confirmed as they heard the sound of a vehicle accelerating hard and approaching them from behind “Are you carrying?”

“Never leave home without it” Collins confirmed as he reached inside his jacket and placed his hand on the grip of his gun just as a second vehicle appeared just up ahead of them.

“Looks like we may not need it, here come the good guys” Sir Richard confirmed initially with a smile as a Security Service patrol car pulled up in front of them having weaved across the opposing flow of traffic just as the mysterious van pulled up behind them.

“Afternoon officers, I was wondering if you could help us” Sir Richard asked but he soon realised that all was not what it seemed when four heavily armed uniform wearing men emerged from the patrol car backed up by more from the van.

“On the ground now, hands behind your head!” the leading officer barked at them, guns drawn and pointed towards them.

“All right Einstein, now what?” Collins asked as they stood there with the officers closing in on them in a tight circle.

“I think we had better do what they say” Sir Richard confirmed as he slowly knelt down to the ground.

“I said get down!” the leading officer reaffirmed angrily as he brought Collins to the ground by striking him across the back of the head with the butt of his MP5 type gun rendering him immediately unconscious to Sir Richard's shock.

“Now then officers” Sir Richard responded “There is no need for any unnecessary violence.”

“Who said we were officers?” one of the other uniformed men remarked casually as he pulled out Collins gun from inside the jacket of the unconscious man before calmly shooting Sir Richard three times in the chest.

“All right, get him in the van and lets go” the leader called whereupon the unconscious Collins was unceremoniously picked up and thrown into the back of the van whilst Sir Richard's seemingly lifeless body was left against the railings at the side of the road. Before leaving, the leader made sure Collins gun was prominently placed in the gutter nearby before attaching a note to the body.

“Job done lads” the leader called before they returned to the vehicles where amidst squealing tyres and revving engines they made a swift departure.

With the state of the track he was following now getting rougher it quickly became clear for Martin that he could drive no further and so would have to resort like the farmer told him to carrying on by foot.

Reluctantly he parked up the Land Rover and looked out across the steep rocky hillside ahead where the rain and misty low cloud merely added to the foreboding atmosphere.

“Ah well Amber love” Martin remarked as he got out of the car and grabbed his coat along with a rucksack into which he had packed various items he felt might be needed “Let’s hope this works.”

Initially clambering over a wall to cross the adjacent field, Martin set off across the rugged terrain making his way towards the range of hills ahead from which the distant echoes of activity could be just heard and where the farmer he had met earlier had directed him to.

It took twenty minutes of clambering over rocks and natural debris before Martin reached the ridge at the top of that hill from where he had a good view into the next valley over. The sight before his eyes however took him by surprise.

“Looks like the circus is in town” Martin remarked to himself as he looked on at the sight of approximately thirty armed men in black military like dress making their way methodically along the length of the valley, armed with multiple types of weapons and being led by a team with search dogs, their barking being the main source of the noise that was echoing eerily up and down the valley.

“Come on Amber, where are you?” Martin asked himself as he took out a pair of binoculars and trained them around, trying to get a feel for the situation and the layout of the enemy on the ground. It was clear that the dogs they were now using was leading the gunmen along the trail of someone and given that only he, they and Amber were the only people in the area it was reasonable to assume they were on the right track.

With the failing light of early evening now beginning to draw in, Martin knew that at some point soon the temperature would start to drop and anyone trapped out there in any sort of injured condition would most likely be seeking shelter so he returned to his map and examined both where he was now and the territory ahead which revealed what appeared to be a series of probably abandoned farm buildings some two or three miles distant.

It was at that point that an explosion from behind him caused Martin to look around to see his Land Rover well alight, four of the armed men having been tipped off about his presence and found his vehicle.

“Oh thanks a lot” Martin remarked as he casually tossed the car keys away before realising that now they were on to him as well, he should make a fairly rapid exit for it would not be long before they were on his trail as well.

The best way forward for him was going to be to proceed parallel to the main group of gunmen, along the top of the ridge and try and get ahead of them in the encroaching darkness which would hopefully mean he could slip past them undetected.

Leaving the smoking ruins of his car behind him some half mile distant, he set off apprehensively into the early evening misty gloom.

“Excellent” Cruschov declared as he took the telephone call informing him of the latest developments “If you find him then feel free to do what you like to him as long as it is slow and painful but the girl, I want her alive” he instructed before hanging up.

“Good news I take it then?” Altman asked from across the study as he watched Cruschov put his mobile telephone away and look back with a pleased expression.

“It would appear the information from our American friend was correct” Cruschov confirmed “Stevens found the vehicle he was using ten minutes ago, he won’t be using it again.”

“In which case I think it is fairly safe to say we can now move onto phase two of the operation” Altman confirmed.

“Indeed” Cruschov agreed “Assuming that Stevens probably won’t catch her until the morning I would have thought, we can leave for London first thing.”

“And then the fun really begins...” Altman added raising his glass in salute.

“Evening Maam” the patrol officer on duty at the tape barrier that was sealing off the street called as Tracy arrived having sped from New Scotland Yard on her motorbike the moment she had received the call “It’s this way” he confirmed lifting the tape before following his superior through to the scene itself.

“Has the identification been confirmed?” Tracy asked, clearly concerned at what scant information she had heard so far which led her to believe what may have happened here.

“Not yet no Maam” the officer responded as they approached a white tent that had been erected over the precise location of the crime scene and they went inside.

“Oh dear God” Tracy responded in shock as soon as she saw the body and instantly recognised it as being Sir Richard Crowthorne “What happened?”

“A very good question” Sir Richard remarked weakly as in the tent a paramedic was helping to remove the bullet proof vest he had been wearing but despite its presence, the bullet impacts has still left some very nasty bruising.

“Shot three times with this” the Forensic Examiner confirmed producing a clear plastic evidence bag containing a semi-automatic handgun “There are three rounds expelled and looking at it I would say this was Special Service issue, no serial number on it.”

“Did you see who did this?” Tracy asked Sir Richard as against better advice he tried to sit up and instantly regretted it if his reaction of agony in his face was anything to go by.

“I am saying nothing my dear without my lawyer and a very stiff drink” Sir Richard confirmed “Not necessarily in that order mind.”

“We have got to get you to a hospital and get those wounds checked out” the paramedic strongly advised.

“I’ll be fine” Sir Richard weakly protested “Besides at this time I think it may be better for the greater good if the world still thinks I am dead” he suggested.

“I hate to say this but I am going to have to agree” Tracy confirmed before turning away to make a call over her radio “Alpha One from Lima Alpha One, urgent message” she called.

“Evening love” the Commander responded from his office at New Scotland Yard “From the tone of your voice something tells me something is wrong.”

“You could say that” Tracy admitted “Look, I think we have a situation which you need to see, I’ll say nothing for now but just get over to King William Street as soon as you can and I suggest you get Simon to pull all the CCTV footage of the area for a one mile radius of the north end of London Bridge from the last half hour.”

“All right” the Commander agreed, his expression clearly showing that he realised something was wrong but also knew that the chances were this was not the channel of communication over which to inquire further at that point “I’ll go and grab him and meet you there in about thirty minutes.”

“Thanks love” Tracy responded “Lima Alpha One out.”

The Commander sat back and thought for a few moments, curious as to what really lay at the heart of that conversation before looking across his desk and picking up the telephone.

“Simon” the Commander called “Get your box of tricks fired up, I am coming down.”

A couple of minutes later the Commander entered Fuller’s office to find both he and his wife Jennifer Caverner observing a computer screen with a rather worried look.

“It could be a failure with the equipment couldn’t it?” Jennifer suggested.

“Don’t think so” Fuller confirmed “It went off way to suddenly, there was none of the usual blappiness you usually get in the run up to a failure, besides this equipment is the latest state of the art stuff from MI5’s spare parts bin and is solid as a rock.”

“Do I get the impression we have a problem by any chance?” the Commander asked slightly apprehensively as he joined them.

“In that as of ten minutes ago I have no idea where our little one man rescue party is, then yes” Fuller regretfully confirmed “Best guess is someone had probably wrecked his tracking device, or the car or even possibly both for that matter.”

“Where was the last trace from?” the Commander inquired.

“About there” Fuller confirmed as he showed a location on a displayed map on one of his computer screens “Middle of nowhere by the looks of it.”

“Not exactly the sort of place you would want to spend the night” the Commander remarked.

“Especially not with that weather front moving in” Jennifer pointed out the weather forecast for that area along with a Meteorological Office satellite image showing heavy storms moving in “It looks like high winds and heavy rain and that is expected to only get worse over the next few hours according to the latest forecast.”

“Well unfortunately there is nothing we can do” the Commander grimly confirmed “He is on his own out there. Anyway we have another problem it would appear, Tracy just called with a rather strange tone in her voice, asked me to get over to King William Street but only after checking the CCTV feeds from the north side of the Thames at London Bridge.”

“What time frame?” Fuller asked as he swivelled in his chair to a separate computer console and began to work expertly on the system that archived all the CCTV footage from across the city and beyond.

“Last hour apparently” the Commander responded “I have no idea what it is about or what we are looking for though” he had to admit.

“I don’t suppose that would happen to be in the King William Street and Monument Station area by any chance about forty seven minutes ago would it?” Fuller asked with a growing sense of concern.

“Probably, why?” the Commander asked.

“Because according to this the entire CCTV system in that area was switched off for about five minutes for what seems to be routine maintenance” Fuller confirmed showing the file record where there was clearly a gap marked by a red bar across a time graph where footage was not available.

“Routine maintenance at this time of night?” Jennifer asked.

“My thoughts exactly love” Fuller agreed “Admittedly I am purely guessing here but something tells me there is the influence of a higher authority with more expensive toys than we have at work here.”

“Well keep trying anyway” the Commander confirmed “I am heading over to King William Street to see what all the hub-bub is about.”

“Will do Sir” Fuller confirmed as the Commander duly departed.

Walking to the front door of New Scotland Yard, the Commander was thankful he picked up an umbrella on his way out as it was pouring down outside. However his attention was drawn away from the weather when he was called by a man standing at the reception desk.

“Administrator General?” called the tall slightly apprehensive looking man in an east coast American accent “Could I possibly have a word?”

“Of course” the Commander confirmed as the man came over to join him.

“Sorry to trouble you Sir” the man responded as he fumbled around in his jacket pocket before producing his identification which the Commander took and looked at with a raised eyebrow when he saw the organisation that his mystery visitor worked for “Special Agent James Block, Special Investigations Section of the Federal Bureau of Investigation” he introduced himself.

“Sort of my opposite number I suppose” the Commander confirmed “I hope you brought a brolly, as you are going to have to walk with me and I am afraid the British weather is not being entirely hospitable tonight.”

“I came prepared for a rough reception” Block confirmed as he produced his own umbrella and together the two men tentatively ventured out into the rain.

“You are a long way from home, not to mention your jurisdiction Mr Block” the Commander remarked as they walked along Broadway towards the entrance of St. James Park Underground Station “What brings you all the way here on a cold, dark and stormy night like this.”

“I believe you and I may have a mutual problem” Block began to explain “It would appear a domestic internal matter within my country has now become a problem here too.”

“Are the words National Security Agency about to enter this conversation by any chance?” the Commander ventured as they lowered their umbrellas upon entering the main entrance of the Station before heading through the ticket barriers and on down to the District & Circle Line platforms below.

“As it happens yes” Block confirmed “About a year ago the regional office in Washington DC received an anonymous tip off that a group of operatives within the National Security Agency along with certain key people within the CIA were apparently putting together some secret plan to reform the whole structure of law enforcement both in the US and overseas.”

“Mr Block, you have my undivided attention” the Commander remarked as they waited on the eastbound platform for the next train which was shown by the indicator as being two minutes away.

“Well we receive hundreds of tip off's and calls everyday as you would imagine” Block continued “Most of them usually turn out to be duds but I thought that given how the NSA likes to get too big for its boots now and again that it was not entirely beyond the realms of possibility so I discreetly dug about a bit.”

“I bet that went down with your superiors” the Commander remarked as the approaching rumble of a District Line train became louder.

“My boss was happy for me to look into it once I had explained what I had found but then all of a sudden we get a congressional summons across the desk that says in no certain terms to drop it or we will drop you” Block carried on “So from then on with my boss's blessing it became unofficial.”

“A group of guys claiming to be from the NSA breezed into town this morning” the Commander confirmed as the six car train of refurbished ‘D’ type sub-surface stock appeared from the running tunnel portal and came to a halt at the platform whereupon they both boarded the lead car “Although we can't get anything out of them, from what I am told they have arrested my local opposite number from the CIA, David Howell and carted him off to God only knows where.”

“That's the reason why I am here in London” Block explained as they took a seat in the emptiest part of the carriage as the train departed the station “There was talk a few weeks ago of a break away group trying to set up a new international organisation independent of Governments and the United Nations, privately financed.”

“Sounds almost like a corporate take over of a bank” the Commander remarked with a wry smile.

“Almost” Block admitted “Effectively whoever is behind this wants to go into business on their own terms, use the powers of the security of the state but only to set their own agenda, no more taking directives from the Senate, no more ‘this we do not do’ as someone once said to me.”

“Does anyone in the US Government know about any of this?” the Commander asked as the train slowed for its next stop at Westminster.

“Heads buried in the sand time” Block confirmed “Some Senators have for years been campaigning for a tougher line what with the so called rise in so called global terrorism but others, those with less influence within the inner circle are running and hiding for fear of losing their jobs or winding up ‘accidentally’ driving their car into a lake and drowning like one Senator did a couple of months back after he spoke up in public.”

“Anyone comes up for air and starts speaking unwise words and they get a visit from the heavy mob huh?” the Commander asked as the train then departed Westminster, continuing the journey eastwards “I have encountered such power tripping ego merchants before.”

“Just not as well connected as these guys seem to be” Block warned ominously “There are rumours but sadly nothing more than the people behind this are existing high level operatives in the NSA, CIA and even a few other how shall I put it, erm nameless agencies.”

“So this morning’s little show of strength in Grosvenor Square was just the opening act then?” the Commander asked.

“No” Block confirmed “Merely the first publicly visible incident outside the US since they cranked things up a gear about three or four weeks ago we think, but a lot of the preparatory work, financing by various private individuals and organisations worldwide and moving key people into key places seems to have been going on for almost a year now.”

“Have you ever heard of a man by the name of Alexander Cruschov?” the Commander asked as the train began to slow again, this time for the stop at Embankment.

“The Russian oil and gas guy with the dubious war crimes record?” Block asked “Everyone in our business has, there is not a port or airport in the world he can turn up at that won’t have him arrested and in many cases shot on sight.”

“Well he is here” the Commander responded to a look of shock in response from Block “Arrived in the UK through Gatwick on a dodgy passport along with some unsavoury fellow ex KGB thugs a few weeks back.”

“Holy cow...” Block responded.

“Then by the power of magic he vanished right from under our noses” the Commander continued “Our local FSB guy is furious.”

“Sergei Glasgov?” Block asked.

“That’s the fellow” the Commander confirmed.

“Word I heard was the NSA boys had snatched him just after they grabbed David Howell” Block remarked.

“Well thanks to a tip off and some quick thinking by my wife we grabbed him first” the Commander explained “He’s now safely parked up with a case of the finest Russian vodka we could find in a very safe place.”

“Well at least that is something I suppose” Block agreed “I was hoping to meet with your MI5 and MI6 people whilst I was here but I can’t seem to get hold of David Collins and I got the proverbial get lost from Haliford’s office.”

“Haliford has been missing for a day or two now” the Commander confirmed “No one knows where he is although if I were a betting man, which I am by the way I would venture that he is probably in the same predicament as Howell, which would have been Sergei’s fate if we had not got to him first.”

“Is it possible they have snatched Collins as well?” Block ventured ominously.

“I hope not” the Commander responded “If they have then I am rapidly running out of allies.”

“How do you know you can trust me Commander if I may ask?” Block wondered as the train stopped at Embankment.

“Because I knew you were coming” the Commander explained “We have a proverbial man at the airport that picked up your ID about two hours ago and sent me a text message, mind you it took me half an hour to work out how to actually read the message though” he admitted.

“If I may be honest Commander” Block continued “I fear that whatever these people are planning is now approaching the point of no return and that they plan to launch themselves simultaneously in the US, here in the UK and maybe elsewhere worldwide very soon.”

“All probably with a very nice public press conference” the Commander agreed “nice official stamp on the whole thing from someone prominent who the public would never doubt, here are the keys, get on with it, job done.”

“Leaving these guys to effectively run roughshod over all existing laws and regulations” Block continued “The problem is, who is setting the agenda.”

“Glasgow indicated to me earlier that more and more it is the big global corporations, banks, financial institutions and certain very rich private individuals who call the shots rather than the politicians” the Commander confirmed “Trouble is the more I think about it the more I fear that Alexander Cruschov may be one of the key financial backers of this as well as providing certain other services and supplies.”

“You look up ‘ruthless bastard’ in the FBI dictionary of world facts and you will find a picture of him” Block agreed as the train carried on, the ever present electronic announcement system declaring their next stop as being Temple Station.

“Slimy obnoxious little feckwit who would sell his grandmother for cash if there is a profit in it was approximately how he was described to me yesterday” the Commander smirked.

“If he is involved then you can bet good money there is a very handsome reward in it for him” Block confirmed “No doubt immunity from prosecution, all outstanding charges dropped and an air of respectability imposed by any new regime he may be helping to set up.”

“And if this lot are as well connected as would appear to be the case” the Commander agreed “it would explain how they engineered that little disappearing act for Cruschov at Gatwick.”

“From what I have found out” Block continued “and admittedly most of it is just hearsay and whispers in darkened corridors these guys are professional, have access to lots of top notch technology, surveillance and communications and have sympathisers in very prominent places but are also being very careful.”

“So far almost anyone that I know of that has got close to Cruschov and his organisation has either disappeared or turned up tortured to death on a Welsh hillside or in the River Thames” the Commander confirmed “The only other one is lost somewhere and probably dead by now.”

“Yesterday I got a call from a mate of mine who I used to work with at the FBI who is now with the CIA in Langley” Block continued “Apparently someone close to the Director General’s office got a call from the NSA concerning some sort of computer data theft, half an hour later the black four by four’s with the tinted windows containing the NSA guys who showed up here in London this morning duly departed DC bound for the UK.”

“Bloody hell, she must have the data with her” the Commander realised as the train made its brief stop at the quiet Temple station before swiftly moving on again heading for Blackfriars “It is not what she knows or who she has managed to identify, it is the files he has with her they want.”

“Sorry Commander you’ve lost me” Block admitted.

“For the last day and a half” the Commander explained “One of Cruschov’s old buddies, a nasty piece of work by the name of Altman, organised crime boss, that sort of thing has had his heavily armed thugs chasing one of our people across the Welsh mountains. She managed to infiltrate Altman’s organisation when it was clear he was up to something but must have bumped into Cruschov who lets just say will be wanting a word with her regarding some previous business they had.”

“If the people Cruschov is working with are as well connected as you say they are then it would not take too much for them to work out who your agent is and proverbially drop her in it” Block remarked “Throw in any previous encounters as Cruschov is not exactly forgiving when it comes to anyone who crosses him and you or rather this lady is in a whole world of trouble.”

“Well hopefully we have a rescue plan in play that may get her and what she knows or is carrying to safety before too long” the Commander admitted although his tone clearly showed he was far from optimistic on that subject.

“I wish her all the best of luck Commander” Block responded sincerely “One of my colleagues came across this Cruschov guy and his people about ten years ago, some involvement in drug smuggling in New Jersey, a week later bits of this guy were posted first class to every FBI state office in the country. It took three weeks to piece all of the poor bastard back together and we never did find two fingers.”

“Ouch...” the Commander remarked.

“That's putting it mildly” Block agreed.

“Sounds like the sort of thing Bill Stevens specialises in” the Commander commented “He is one of Altman's thugs but we think also does some work from time to time for Cruschov. Basically he likes to break legs and torture people very slowly and painfully.”

“Definitely Cruschov's kind of guy” Block confirmed “Somehow I don't think I want to be meeting him any time soon.”

“You probably won't have to” the Commander confirmed “we are fairly confident he is Wales at the moment with his hands well and truly full.”

With the light failing fast, Amber realised that she had better find shelter and quickly. Her injuries were not too bad in that she could keep moving fairly easily but the increasingly poor weather conditions, wind driven rain and plunging temperatures meant that staying out would only make things considerably worse.

As she clambered over a ridge of rocks high up on the hillside, she glanced back to see if there was any sign of the enemy. She had not heard anything in the area for over an hour now and was beginning to think that at last she had managed to evade them, however as was soon to be proved, she was gravely mistaken.

“Ah that's more like it” Stevens gruffly announced as he tried scanning the surrounding landscape now with the added assistance of a pair of binoculars fitted with a night scope which meant he could now see much clearer in the rapidly darkening landscape.

Looking around the surrounding steep hillsides Stevens suddenly stopped and stared harder when he saw movement high up on the hillside to his right but after careful examination it revealed itself to be nothing more than a horse that was roaming around so instead he turned to one of his men nearby.

“Have you got anything?” Stevens called over to his associate who was using a mobile telephone to read some kind of tracking system.

“Possibly something over to the north east Sir” the man responded and pointed over into the distance whereupon Stevens retrained his binoculars in the direction indicated.

“Wait a minute...” he remarked with hesitation as something caught his eye. Stepping forward to look harder at what had caught his attention “There's the little bitch!” he then declared with an evil glint in his eye and an equally horrid grin.

“If she gets over that hill we will lose her again” one of the other men warned.

“Right” Stevens duly took charge of the situation “Give me a full width of covering fire along the entire length of that ridge, pin her down but don't kill her, at least not yet.”

Amber was clambering over loose rocks when suddenly there was a large outburst of rapid automatic gun fire which a split second later saw bullet impacts strike all along the rocky ridge line and forcing her to throw herself to the ground to protect herself.

“Bloody hell!” Amber exclaimed as the shower of gunfire continued and she was showered in shards of stone that were being blasted off the rocks around her by the impact of the many bullets. After approximately thirty seconds of the gunfire although to her it seemed much longer given its horrific intensity the shooting stopped presumably she thought to allow the men to reload.

She decided to take her chances and make a run for it over to the shelter of a nearby rock formation which thanks to being higher up near the top of that valley, she could see marginally better than her enemy located below her in the dark centre.

It was only a matter of ten yards or so but as soon as Amber emerged, ducking down as she went a single shot rang out, ominously echoing all around the valley and she felt an impact in her upper left arm causing her to fall to the ground.

“Winged the bitch” Stevens triumphantly declared as he lowered the rifle which he had just used with a night scope to target Amber some quarter of a mile distant up the valley side “All right you two” he indicated to two of his men “Go and get her and make sure it is a painful but not terminal experience.”

“Yes boss” one of the two men confirmed before they headed off at a quick pace up the valley side.

Amber was in serious trouble and the pain she was in from the gunshot wound plus her sudden impact with the rocky ground when she fell after being hit meant that she was running out of time and options.

Seeing the two men being sent up the hillside in her general direction, Amber forced herself to summon up all her remaining strength, struggle back up onto her feet and make her way as best as she could up towards the top of the hill.

As she struggled on, her right leg was now becoming badly swollen and almost useless which meant Amber was effectively dragging it along behind her and hopping on the good leg whilst her left arm hung limply and the blood flowed freely down over her hands and began to drip a trail on the ground as she went.

Further shots rang out in her direction striking the ground behind her as Amber continued towards the hill top, grimacing in agony but deciding not to look back, just continue to have the determination to keep going no matter what.

Amber managed to reach the top of the ridge a few moments later and all but collapsed against the rocks in order to look over the other side into the next valley where in the dark she could just about make out some sort of building about five hundred yards in the distance.

“All or nothing” Amber grimly confirmed to herself as she clambered unsteadily over the top of the ridge and headed across the rough downhill slope, strewn with barely visible hazards such as loose rocks and vegetation.

Not far behind her now were the two men Stevens had sent to pursue and capture her and with her injuries slowing her down, they were beginning to make up the ground quickly although even they struggled with the rough terrain over which they had to travel to get to her.

It was a fairly close run thing as Amber headed down the hillside but she just managed to reach what turned out to be some sort of fairly ramshackle complex of old farm buildings. Struggling against the pain and with her left arm now virtually useless, merely hanging down limply at her side, she managed to find a door into the old barn and made her way inside, maybe hoping to make a last stand as she took out her gun.

“Just not my day” Amber remarked with a painful smile as she checked the gun which revealed she had only three bullets left meaning that if she was going to defend herself, she was going to have to make every shot count.

Clambering in the dark through the barn, Amber found a stack of hay bales behind which she hid although she was well aware that it would be no protection against gunfire but by this time she figured that scant cover was better than none at.

Training her eyes on the door by which she had come in which was gently swinging back and forth with the stormy wind whilst the rain dripped down on her through several holes in the roof, Amber waited for the inevitable, her finger on the trigger.

It seemed like an eternity before anything happened but in fact it was just a minute later that a hand appeared and cautiously opened the door before a torch was swept around the interior of the barn forcing Amber to duck down.

“Can’t see her” one of the men remarked to his colleague as they entered the barn.

“Still beats being out there in that crap though” the other man remarked as he took the opportunity to shake himself down “I don’t know why we are bothering with her anyway, the state she must be in by now she will be dead by morning anyway.”

“Thanks a bunch” Amber remarked to herself before taking a deep breath and standing up all be it using the bales to support her, whereupon she took aim at the men.

“Never underestimate the small ones” she warned them wryly in her strong Irish accent and taking the men completely by surprise.

“You’ve got nowhere to run lady” the first man casually warned her “So put down the gun and play nice darling.”

Then the second man brought his gun to bear and was taking aim when Amber calmly opened fire twice dropping that gunman to the ground.

“Don’t call me darling” she strongly responded as she reaffirmed her aim at the other man.

“Looks to me love like we got ourselves a stand off” the man remarked as they stood approximately twenty yards apart, both constantly maintaining their aim at each other waiting for their opponent to be the first one to flinch.

“I’m game” Amber responded “We’ll see who falls asleep first shall we?” she challenged.

“In your condition I reckon it won’t be long, with or without my gun” the man confirmed confidently.

Amber maintained her look of defiance but she knew full well that her opponent was right, she could feel her strength, her life even flowing away and becoming weaker with every passing second on that stormy and sodden night.

“I have no compunction whatsoever about killing you” Amber warned.

“Then do it” the man challenged her, lowering his gun and opening his arms wide.

“Don’t come any closer” Amber responded reaffirming her grip on the gun but her hand was now starting to shake uncontrollably with the agony she was in.

“Give it up” the man insisted as he stepped forward forcing Amber to defend herself in the only way available by pulling the trigger but the shot missed and the slide locking back on the top of the gun told both of them that she was now out of ammunition.

Amber, resigned to her fate slumped against the hay bales and just stared back, an empty stare which reflected her realisation that this was probably it.

“If you are going to kill me, just hurry up and let’s get it over with all right?” Amber asked, her mind already made up that the end was here and there was now little left except to hope for a quick finish.

“If you insist” the gunman readily agreed, clearly not caring one bit about her life but just as he was about to take aim, another gunshot rang out which saw the man freeze with a stunned look on his face before he collapsed to the floor revealing a gunshot wound in the back.

“Hello Amber” came a familiar voice from long ago which caused Amber to look up with surprise and delight as Martin stepped into view whereupon he looked down at the body on the floor in front of him “Is he dead?” he asked.

“Heh, I sincerely hope so” Amber responded weakly.

“I got a message you might be in a spot of bother and could I come and find you” Martin summarised as he stepped forward and knelt down in front of Amber whereupon using the light of his torch he could see her condition.

“Well I have had a few problems with the locals” Amber wryly admitted.

“Don't take this the wrong way” Martin expressed deep concern “but you are mess, what happened?”

“An argument or three with some very unpleasant people with guns” Amber admitted.

“Good thing that Mr Crowthorne chap sent me along with this” Martin confirmed as he took the rucksack off of his back and opened it before producing a first aid kit and additional bandages “Care package, thought it might come in useful.”

“Well done Sir Richard” Amber responded as Martin handed her some food and bottled water which she eagerly took some of, “I take it he worked out the message I sent then.”

“I gather it was something along the lines of send only someone who you could unreservedly trust” Martin confirmed as he started to tend to Amber's wounds, cleaning the worst of the damage before preparing some bandages “Apparently that narrowed it down to him and me and as I was the only one that was still standing at the time I got a surprise call.”

“I bet they grabbed you off of the train at London Bridge” Amber smiled in response despite the pain she was in.

“Funny you should say that” Martin confirmed “One moment I am going into work as usual, well usual except for the two MI5 guys that were shadowing me all the way from Polegate, the next I am being met by a reception committee from the Administrator General himself no less and then the bad guys showed up.”

“Given what has happened to me in the last couple of days” Amber remarked “I get the distinct impression someone has not so much been letting the odd cat out of the bag than selling tickets to every nutter with a gun that is for hire.”

“Thankfully they missed” Martin confirmed “How is that?” he asked as he finished applying the bandage to her upper left arm.

“Yes, that's OK thanks” Amber confirmed with much appreciation.

“Well the next thing I know you metaphorically walk back into my life after years of absence and I wind up being dropped into the middle of Wales in a helicopter to come and rescue you and whatever it is that apparently you know” Martin continued to explain as he turned his medical attention to her leg wounds.

“I wouldn't say I have been out of your life completely” Amber confirmed with a warm smile.

“Apparently you have been keeping an eye on me from what I understand” Martin responded “I owe you my life I gather.”

“The least I could do for you” Amber responded softly “Actually I saw you once on a train about a year ago.”

“Really?” Martin asked as he continued to make good her leg wound with what limited materials and experience he had available.

“I was on a job for Sir Richard” Amber explained “There I was standing on the platform at Earl's Court station waiting for a train to Hammersmith when the Kensington Olympia service rolls in and I saw you sitting there reading the Evening Standard. Of course being in character on a mission I could not say or do anything, you do not know how much I wanted to just jump on that train, sit down next to you and talk just like we used to.”

“I have missed you so much” Martin admitted as their hands met and held each other in a reassuring show of support and caring “Oh sorry, did that sound too soppy?”

“Fine by me” Amber confirmed with a welcoming smile tinged with a wince of pain as Martin continued to work as best he could to patch her up.

“Well that's a relief I suppose” Martin remarked “Well, that is the best I can do with what I have available” he confirmed as he stepped back to allow Amber to take a look at the bandaging.

“Looks a pretty good job to me” Amber admitted.

“Can you walk at all?” Martin asked “Only I think we ought to at least try and put some distance between us and the loonies with the guns before they decide to investigate where their buddies here have got to” he nodded back towards the two dead gunmen over on the other side of the rickety old barn.

“To be honest I don’t think so” Amber was forced to admit “I haven’t eaten or drunk anything in over thirty six hours and I am afraid it is all rather catching up with me.”

“Plan ‘B’ then” Martin confirmed as he stood up and thought for a few moments “Don’t go away, I will be right back.”

Amber looked on by the light of the torch as Martin went back over to the other side of the barn and started to examine the two dead men whereupon he managed to remove their weapons, spare ammunition and the radio set from the one who was wearing it before he headed outside.

Looking around from a safe vantage point, Martin was unable to see any movement so assumed correctly that the rest of the gunmen were still on the other side of the high ridge whose silhouette could only just be made out towering ahead and above him, the slightly contrasting light of the late evening sky just providing a glimpse of its outline.

“Well there is no one in the immediate area at the moment” Martin confirmed as he returned inside the barn and back to Amber’s side “and that gives me an idea, can you pass me that map from my bag?” he asked.

“Here you go” Amber confirmed as she passed over the map for which Martin gave her one of the recovered guns in exchange.

“All right, where the hell are we?” Martin asked as he sat down next to Amber and with her holding the torch steady, they studied the now rather soggy and battered map carefully.

“To be honest I am a Sat-Nav kind of girl” Amber admitted “We could be in Piccadilly Circus and I would not be able to find it on a map.”

“Well I came up along this ridge line for about five miles” Martin confirmed, indicating on the map the route he had taken since leaving his vehicle some hours earlier “which by my reckoning puts us in this valley over here where this old farm is shown whilst our friends with the guns and the attitude problem are over here somewhere on the other side of the ridge.”

“Stay ahead of them or throw them a dummy?” Amber asked.

“Throw them a dummy” Martin decided “The state you are in we would not get very far in these conditions.”

“Pass me that radio set” Amber asked whereupon Martin duly gave it to her “I think it is time I showed you one of my little party pieces.”

On the other side of the massive rocky ridge, Stevens was looking around amid the howling wind and hard rain that was making both him and his associates soaking wet; however his long years of military training meant that this was nothing to him.

“Scout Team One from Leader” he called into his radio impatiently for it had been well over thirty minutes since he had last heard from the two men he had sent over the ridge to get Amber and even allowing for the poor radio reception in those valleys along with the atrocious weather, it was unusual for them not to have reported in by now.

“Scout Team One” came the response a few moments later.

“Ah, there you are” Stevens responded, wiping the rain from his face “Have you nailed that cow yet?” he asked.

“It looks like she has slipped and fallen into the bottom of the valley boss” the response came “We can't get down there, not in this weather but from what we can see from here I think she is dead, she certainly hasn't moved in the best part of ten minutes.”

“Pity” Stevens responded “I was looking forward to slowly skinning her alive with a blow torch. Any sign of the other one?” Stevens asked, a sense of frustration at not having captured his prey alive becoming obvious as he always looked forward to giving anyone who had crossed him what he termed simply as 'the treatment' which was usual painful, brutal but certainly not quick.

“We think he may have been here a few minutes ago” the confirmation came “If I were him then I would head west over towards that range of hills up beyond the lake.”

“All right then” Stevens declared “You start heading over that way, we will meet you there. Leader out.”

“There” Amber declared with a satisfied smile as she switched off the radio and tossed it to one side “I bet you didn't know I did impressions did you?”

“You know ever since I first met you, you have never ceased to surprise me every time we meet” Martin remarked.

“Well hopefully that should get them well away from us for a while” Amber confirmed “It should be morning before they realise they have been sent on a wild goose chase by which time I sincerely hope you and I are far away from here.”

“That may be a little difficult” Martin reluctantly admitted.

“You did bring a vehicle didn't you?” Amber asked.

“Well yes” Martin confirmed “Unfortunately it met with a little accident courtesy of our friends with the guns.”

“Ah...” Amber replied “Ah well, it would not have been much use in this terrain anyway, actually that reminds me, my lovely little sports car is still in Newport Docks. I do hope the local plods are looking after it.”

“Look, you are tired” Martin suggested “I’ll sort out these bales and make a bed so that you can get yourself some rest and then I’ll sort us out a nice fire, get you and me for that matter dried out otherwise we won’t need those nasty buggers with the guns to kill us as the weather will have done it first.”

“All right” Amber reluctantly agreed as Martin stood up and set about organising the place “Thank you” she added sincerely.

“My pleasure Amber” Martin confirmed with a smile which she reflected back.

"What the hell did you think you were playing at?" the Commander demanded to know as he arrived back in the room deep in the heart of the subterranean King William Street complex "You could have been killed!"

"In case you hadn't noticed I was" Sir Richard confirmed with a meek smile "Now that I am safely dead and buried perhaps those behind this will pay a little less attention to me."

"Hell of a way to lose someone off your tail" Tracy remarked as she brought Sir Richard a mug of black coffee.

"I don't suppose you have anything stronger by any chance?" he asked "Despite the best efforts of a bullet proof vest, they still sting like hell."

"I will see what I can find" Tracy confirmed before leaving the room.

"So whilst you were playing dead, I don't suppose you saw what happened to David Collins by any chance?" the Commander inquired.

"The lead thug" Sir Richard confirmed "the guy in the Security Officer's uniform knocked him out cold with the butt of his gun, then they used his gun to shoot me, fortunately whoever this guy was, he wasn't particularly bright."

"Good thing too" the Commander confirmed "If he had thought about it and shot you in the head it would not have mattered one jot how much armour you were wearing."

"Well they bundled him into the back of their van and sped off" Sir Richard confirmed "They chucked his gun in the gutter before they went mind."

"Yes, my people found it, presumably as intended" the Commander remarked "Whoever it was seemed pretty determined to ensure we think that Collins was the guy who shot you."

"But surely the CCTV from the street cameras...?" Sir Richard began.

"Don't worry, I'm way ahead of you" the Commander quickly replied "Unfortunately whoever they are were also way ahead of us, the CCTV cameras just 'happened' to have a five minute failure at the crucial moment although I have Fuller trying every trick in his not inconsiderable arsenal to try and recover the footage."

"I wouldn't bother" Sir Richard responded "Whoever they are, these guys are top drawer professionals, and you only have to look at the involvement of these NSA guys that showed up at the US Embassy to see that. Speaking of which, any sign of Dave Howell?"

"Not since the NSA goons carted him off in one of their motors this morning" the Commander responded "Unfortunately the guys Collins had tailing them were given the slip as well and there is still no word of where Sir John Haliford may be."

"Here" Tracy responded as she returned to the room with a glass of brandy "See if this helps."

"Thank you my dear" Sir Richard thanked her as he took the glass and sipped gently.

"Oh, one other thing that has happened" the Commander remembered as Sir Richard let out a sigh of satisfaction as a result of the drink "I have had a visit from the Fed's."

"The FBI?" Tracy asked "Here?"

"Only one of them" the Commander confirmed "A guy by the name of James Block."

"Oh, I know him" Sir Richard responded "Good man, nice to know he is around actually."

"Sir Richard" Tracy reminded him "You know everyone."

"Mind you it does make you wonder who is going to turn up next?" Sir Richard wryly asked "Sherlock Holmes perhaps?"

"No, he popped around last week" Tracy responded with a cheeky grin.

"Any word from our boy in deepest darkest Wales?" Sir Richard asked.

"Nothing since Evans saw him off from the airstrip this morning" the Commander confirmed "However I think it is a fair bet to say the bad guys with the guns are probably already aware of his presence, the tracker system Evans had fitted to his motor suddenly went dead a couple of hours ago."

"If I could get to my office then maybe I could do something" Sir Richard suggested.

"Not happening I'm afraid" the Commander confirmed "You are dead and I need you to stay that way until this is over. There seem to be leaks all over the place and the last thing we want is your 'assassin' popping up out of the woodwork and finishing the job properly."

“It may be wise to issue some kind of statement to the press” Tracy suggested “At least make it look like we are playing along to the tune of these people and lure them into a false sense of security.”

“Or play right into their hands” the Commander admitted “But you are right, let's go with a 'member of the secret intelligence services' involved line, nothing specific.”

“I'll head back to the Yard and get right on it” Tracy agreed “Tell you what love, you get yourself home and I'll meet you there in an hour.”

“Sounds like an offer I can't refuse” the Commander agreed.

“Life seems to be getting interesting all of a sudden” Altman remarked as he put down the telephone and returned to the front room where the lounging Cruschov was to be found slightly the worse for drink and cigars on the antique leather sofa.

“Anything I should know?” Cruschov asked.

“Well apparently according to our people” Altman summarised “Your old KGB buddy Sergei Glasgow has gone to ground somewhere where we can't find him and a man from the FBI has arrived in London, possibly the same guy our masters told to take a hike a few months ago when one of them started to poke around in ill advised places.”

“I could have a couple of my people remove him from the equation” Cruschov suggested “After all we have already taken care of that meddling fool Crowthorne and it would appear that your country's idiotic Security Department have taken the bait and are linking it to Collins if the BBC is anything to go by.”

“I think maybe we should wait until McCallister arrives tomorrow” Altman cautioned “Anyway it may be useful to have the FBI man around for a while, he may be able to inadvertently tell us exactly how much he knows about us.”

“Anything he may know can surely be no more than speculation and hearsay” Cruschov reminded his host “We have this thing sealed tighter than a ducks arse.”

“Oh, whilst you were busying draining my cabinet of every last drop of alcohol” Altman remembered “Stevens called, apparently our little Irish problem is no more, dead in the bottom of a valley.”

“Excellent” Cruschov smiled broadly at the news “I will have a helicopter prepared to go up there in the morning and recover the body, I want to see this for myself.”

“Don't forget we leave early for London in the morning” Altman reminded the obnoxious Russian as he helped himself to yet another drink.

“You think I am going to miss this?” Cruschov remarked with a hearty laugh “You forget many things my Welsh friend, tomorrow my name will be revered and I will once more achieve respectability and most importantly a very healthy profit margin in my back pocket to boot.”

“Dosvindanja” Altman confirmed which in his Welsh accent did not really sound right but he didn't care anyway, he knew that despite Cruschov's bluster and confidence, his time would soon come as well.

“The National Security & Police Service have confirmed tonight that they are seeking a former member of the Secret Intelligence Services in connection with a shooting incident earlier this evening near London Bridge in central London in which a man in his late fifties was killed after being shot three times in cold blood” the presenter on the BBC News broadcast announced over the television as Jack only half watched whilst working on his laptop.

“At this time no further information has been released” the news report continued “Sources confirm that due to the sensitivity of the inquiry, further information will not be available for some time, furthermore the identity of the suspect, the victim and the specific Intelligence Agency involved has not been released.”

“Another one bites the dust” Jack remarked with a tinge of sadness as the front door of the apartment opened and in walked Tracy and the Commander.

“Evening Jack” the Commander called as he entered the front room and joined him on the sofa.

“I guess you guys have been busy then?” Jack asked nodding at the television.

“It's certainly been an interesting day I will admit” the Commander agreed.

“Tea anyone?” Tracy called through from the kitchen.

“Large with three sugars” both the Commander and Jack responded in unison which certainly raised a smile.

“So how was London Bridge Station at eight fifty this morning?” Jack asked “I assume I was right about the train?”

“Spot on lad” the Commander confirmed “Unfortunately someone invited some party crashers along so things got a bit lively.”

“So I understand” Jack responded “I take it you have seen the Standard tonight?” he passed across the evening newspaper whose front page story was all about the earlier shooting incident at the station, it having been published too early to have covered the Sir Richard Crowthorne shooting.

“Oh, nice picture” the Commander remarked wryly as he looked at the front page news story “Stock picture though, that type of train was withdrawn four years ago.”

“Since when have the journalists of this city ever been interested in facts or reality?” Tracy mused as she returned to the front room and joined them.

“You may have a point there love” the Commander agreed “So what are you working on?” he asked Jack.

“French Revolution and its influence on modern politics” Jack admitted “Homework, it is at times like this I wish Megan was around.”

“Learnt anything?” Tracy asked.

“Well from what I can work out” Jack admitted “one lot didn't like the other lot and decided to say stuff democracy, let's just cut to the chase and simply guillotine the buggers instead.”

“You know that could work here” the Commander wryly remarked.

“At the rate the Government have been getting through Home Secretary's, Justice Ministers and mediocre civil servants I think they are already well ahead” Tracy responded with a wry smile.

“I'm getting nowhere with this” Jack decided to give up and shut down the laptop “I think I will head for bed” he declared “Goodnight guys.”

“Where you any good at history when you were at school?” Tracy asked the Commander when Jack had left the room.

“Nope” the Commander honestly confirmed “Mind you I wasn't good at much else either, particularly woodwork.”

“Given the alarming angle at which the shelves in the kitchen lean at, suddenly all is clear” Tracy mused with a wry smile.

By the light of the fire that Martin had managed to put together, he watched Amber, the flickering of the flames being reflected in her face as she warmed herself up, the first welcome comfort she had received in almost two days.

“There you go” Martin remarked as he put another piece of wood on.

“Just a nice romantic evening by the fire” Amber mused with a wry smile.

“You're looking better” Martin remarked “The colour is returning.”

“I can feel the ends of my fingers at last” Amber confirmed “I was beginning to think I had left them behind somewhere what with the damp and cold, I tell you something, I am never coming back to this country again at least not until the summer.”

“Can I ask you something?” Martin inquired as Amber snuggled up alongside him for comfort which in turn saw him put his arm around her.

“If the question revolves around a romantic dinner for two at a *very* expensive London restaurant and Sir Richard Crowthorne is picking up the tab then the answer is yes” Amber willing agreed.

“That was going to be my second question” Martin joked “Actually I was wondering what this was all about, I mean the Commander mentioned something about some information you might have in your possession but I have to admit my mind was more on finding you and making sure you were safe.”

“Ah...” Amber confirmed as she reached into her inside jacket pocket and took out the USB memory stick which she held up in front of them, the reflection of the flames from the fire gently highlighting it “This is what it is all about or to be more precise what is on it.”

“What’s on it?” Martin asked.

“Absolutely no idea whatsoever” Amber honestly admitted “You see when Cruschov the obnoxious Russian with whom I have had dealings in the past turned up in the UK three weeks ago, Sir Richard called me up and immediately I volunteered for this mission.”

“Pretty damm dangerous given your previous encounters with the fella I would have thought” Martin remarked.

“A risk I was willing to take” Amber admitted “Besides no one else in this country on our side at least has the experience plus knows his methods and operations as well as I do so it was a no brainer really.”

“So where does this little bomb shell come in?” Martin indicated the memory stick.

“I found out that Cruschov has been working closely with a guy by the name of Steven Altman” Amber explained “He is the top go to guy for anything illegal in Wales and the south west, a real piece of work in the organised crime community, you name it he has done it.”

“So how did you get in?” Martin asked.

“Altman needed some stuff moving by sea to a number of points around the country” Amber continued to explain “so he calls in the south west’s premier transporter of dubious goods and services, one Emma Gregory who not only has an outstanding reputation dating back four years of excellent service to some of the biggest names in international crime but also has a fully stocked back story that courtesy of Sir Richard and a couple of friends at MI5 happens to fit me like a glove.”

“Sounds a tad too easy to me if you don’t mind me saying so” Martin remarked.

“It was, that was the problem” Amber confirmed “Thanks to some carefully placed contacts, Altman rings me up and requests a meeting, over the next couple of days we thrash out a deal for so much amount of merchandise to be delivered as specified for a specific fee. Then one day I am at Altman’s warehouse when Cruschov shows up along with his usual attendant goon show including that murderous thug Bill Stevens.”

“The ex SAS guy with the fondness for torturing people” Martin replied “I was given a run down on his err colourful C.V. before I was sent out here.”

“Well unlike others of his particular trade who torture and kill for money” Amber continued with a certain sense of foreboding “Bill Stevens does it purely for evil pleasure and is more than happy to nail his flag to the mast of anyone who brings him a nice steady supply of unwilling victims. Believe me, he and Cruschov make a very well matched couple.”

“Charming” Martin agreed “Remind me not to invite them to my next garden party.”

“Can I come?” Amber asked cheekily.

“You are welcome any time” Martin confirmed.

“Well anyway” Amber continued “fortunately Cruschov did not recognise me or at least that is what I thought at the time, now I am not so sure. About three days ago I got a call from the UK regional station chief of the Central Intelligence Agency who I worked with on my first operation back in Ireland, he informed me that he had reason to believe that there may be an American connection to all this and to obtain any and all information I could and then get the hell out of there.”

“That is presumably where this thing comes in I take it?” Martin asked indicating the memory stick once again.

“I managed to get a download of the entire contents of Altman’s laptop hard drive” Amber explained “Unfortunately most of it is encrypted so I could not see what was on it but if I am right then the entire plan or at least Cruschov and Altman’s part of it is on here.”

“No wonder they are so keen to track you down” Martin confirmed.

“Trouble is I have the distinct feeling Cruschov has someone on the inside at MI5, possibly MI6 and maybe even the National Security Service itself” Amber added forlornly “Seemed awfully strange that they found out a lot about the real me in a very short space of time which was when things started to go pear shaped.”

“Someone told them about my arrival at London Bridge station yesterday as well” Martin confirmed “From what I gather from the Commander it appeared as though someone had been selling tickets, there were so many goons about the place.”

“We can trust no one but each other now” Amber confirmed as she took Martin’s hand in hers and held it firmly “Don’t leave me will you?” she all but pleaded.

“Never” Martin confirmed “We will get through this, you and me together and when this is over I will bring the party snacks and we can then kick this Cruschov guy and the rest of his motley crew so hard up the jacksi they will be sitting on their heads for months.”

“Now you are talking” Amber agreed with a giggle.

“So what was it that Altman wanted you to transport?” Martin asked.

“Weapons and electronic equipment from what I could see of the brief look I took down in Newport Docks the other day” Amber confirmed “Now I know my weapons and let me tell you what I saw was not your ordinary run of the mill stuff, it was very expensive tactical weapons, much of it military and law enforcement specification by the look of it.”

“And the electronic equipment?” Martin then asked.

“No idea” Amber responded “You know me, I can’t even program a video recorder, gadgets are just all boxes with buttons and flashing lights to me.”

“I haven’t seen you in nearly three years” Martin reminded her.

“And there has never been a day since when you have not thought of me” Amber honestly responded to a somewhat surprised look from Martin “I hacked into your computer when I gave your flat its annual security check last month” she explained with a cheeky smile.

“I thought you said you were no good with technology?” Martin responded.

“I am good at being nosey” Amber admitted “It is kind of in the job description, oh by the way your freezer needed defrosting something chronic when I looked.”

“When does a security check require a look in the freezer?” Martin asked somewhat confused.

“Actually it doesn’t, I was just a tad peckish” Amber wryly responded.

“How did a nice girl like you wind up in a business like this?” Martin wondered.

“Well it was either this or become a vet but I discovered I was allergic to cats and I didn’t really fancy the prospect of sticking my arm up a cows arse” Amber wryly confirmed “Tell me, you met the Commander?”

“Yes” Martin confirmed.

“The Commander, the National Administrator General” Amber added.

“Well yes” Martin reconfirmed.

“The legend himself in living colour?” Amber asked.

“What of it?” Martin responded, not really understanding the significance of her inquiry “Seemed like an ordinary chap to me, bit of a surreal sense of humour though.”

“Wow” Amber relaxed back against the stack of hay bales “You actually met the Commander.”

“And his wife as well” Martin added “Oh and Sir Richard Crowthorne, he sends his regards if I were to bump into you by the way.”

“Oh thanks” Amber confirmed “Wow, the Commander and his wife. I guess they must have run out of Home Secretary’s to throw in jail” she mused with a giggle for even she was well aware of their legendary reputation.

“You know it’s past one in the morning” Martin looked at his watch by the light from the fire “We should get some rest, you need the sleep and we are going to have to get an early start.”

“Yes I suppose so” Amber reluctantly agreed “I have an idea about how we can get back to London, I just hope your talent with transport is still as good as when I first met you.”

“I think you will find I am still full of surprises” Martin confirmed “You get some sleep my dear” he suggested as Amber snuggled up against him to rest “I’ll keep watch over you” he reassured her.

“Morning” Howell called across to the cell next door as he heard a groan come from Collins who for the last few hours since his unceremonious arrival had remained unconscious and only now was starting to show any signs of coming to “Welcome to the party.”

“Oh my head...” Collins remarked as he slowly sat up and rubbed the back of his head.

“No offence old friend” Howell remarked “but you look about as bad as I feel.”

“Where the hell are we?” Collins asked as he looked around trying to identify where he was and maybe settle the extreme disorientation he was suffering “Last thing I remember Sir Richard and I got turned over by some thugs near London Bridge.”

“That would probably be our genial hosts” Howell confirmed “Unfortunately beyond the fact that they seem to be dancing to the tune of some mad guy from our NSA called Hoskins and that slimy git Sir John Haliford is involved somehow I am as much in the dark as you are.”

“Speaking of dark” Collins rubbed his eyes and looked across the room that contained a number of cages of which so far they were the only two occupants “Is it me or is it the middle of the night.”

“About four a.m. mate” Howell looked at his watch “With a bit of luck we should get breakfast, despite the lack of social graces of this Hoskins character, they do at least do a decent bit of grub down here.”

“Where exactly is down here?” Collins asked.

“Not sure” Howell confirmed “Best guess is we are somewhere on the outskirts of Greater London, apparently this being the European head quarters of the new International Security Agency according to Hoskins.”

“Who?” Collins responded bemused.

“Exactly” Howell replied “From what I gathered amongst the bluster laden bullshit that Hoskins and Haliford were spouting when I was brought here it would appear to be some sort of newly developed privately funded international agency along the lines of the NSA but without any Government control.”

“So who sets their agendas?” Collins asked clearly concerned.

“Whoever pays their bills I would guess” Howell commented “Private businesses, global corporations, maybe even well connected people like that Russian piece of shit Cruschov.”

“So I guess we don’t conform to this new world order of theirs then?” Collins remarked.

“It would appear so” Howell confirmed “but Sir John Haliford clearly does, you could practically see him frothing at the mouth at the thought of it all.”

“Not entirely surprising when you look back on his history” Collins explained “He has been greasing palms and blackmailing politicians with dark secrets to get his way to the top since he was a teenager, power mad and no scruples to boot.”

“I know the type” Howell agreed “The US seems to be rather full of them of late and they in turn are well and truly full of it.”

The two men both looked up towards the main door into the room when they heard footsteps approaching before with a slightly ominous creak it opened and in walked Hoskins and Haliford, both with an air of over confidence in their expression and their step.

“Here come the landlords” Howell remarked.

“Ah, good morning Mr Collins, you are awake. So good of you to join us” Hoskins declared warmly but still with a hint of underlying menace.

“You had better have a bloody good explanation for all of this” Collins defiantly responded, still a bit sore headed but defiantly getting his fighting spirit back “and a good lawyer for that matter because when my people catch up with you they are going to have you for breakfast in very small pieces.”

“I told you he was feisty” Haliford remarked aside.

“And as for you, you slimy little toad” Collins turned to the head of MI6 with a scowl of disgust “I always knew you would sell your grandmother for a new carpet in your office but even I cannot believe you have sold out your country and your colleagues so that you can nail your flag to the mast of a bunch of loonies on a power trip.”

“I see what you mean” Hoskins agreed with his colleague “Well Mr Collins, I hate to disappoint you but no one is coming to your rescue. There is a new world order coming and quite frankly you and others of your old fashioned ways of thinking will only get in the way, in fact in many ways we are doing you a favour keeping you down here.”

“Oh?” Collins responded “and how exactly do you figure that out?”

“Because my friend, at this very moment the combined forces of both MI6 and your very own MI5 along with the Special Branch of the National Security & Police Service are currently engaged in a country wide man hunt for you” Haliford explained “It would appear that in your haste to make good your escape less someone discover you were working with us, you shot dead one Sir Richard Crowthorne.”

“Rubbish” Collins defiantly responded.

“You shot Sir Richard?” Howell asked in amazement.

“No I did not” Collins defiantly replied “It's a set up, quite a clever one but I very much doubt it will be believed on the outside.”

“Really?” Hoskins responded “Well even if you did not shoot that meddlesome Sir Richard, your gun certainly did. We took measures to ensure it was found at the scene of the crime and yes the ballistics will match as will certain witness testimony that we have thoughtfully provided.”

“Ah but of course” Haliford added “What with you lying around unconscious all night you have not had time to catch up on the news” he duly produced the first edition of the morning paper and casually chucked it through the bars of the cell where it fell at Collins' feet.”

“I see West Ham lost again” Collins remarked with a slightly depressed sigh as he saw the back sports page of the paper “Blimey, three one at home as well.”

“I think you will find the front page being more relevant to your current situation Mr Collins” Hoskins confirmed.

“You do realise that this is a breaking of the strict ‘D’ notice protocol for such occurrences?” Collins reminded Haliford in particular as he looked at the front page with disdain, a news story that named names including his own.

“I find things run far more smoothly when everything is out in the open, don’t you agree?” Haliford joked.

“Oh does that mean you are going to let us out then?” Howell cheekily asked.

“Always good to see a sense of humour in the time of a national crisis” Haliford confirmed.

“International crisis” Hoskins reminded his associate “and technically it hasn’t happened yet.”

“Of course not” Haliford remembered “Still got a bit of housekeeping to sort out first.”

“Cleaning lady’s day off?” Collins asked.

“With any new idea there always has to be a certain amount of pre-preparation” Haliford explained confidentially “It’s a bit like gardening, dig out the prevalent weeds that if not checked will merely pop back up and ruin all our hard work.”

“So you can see” Hoskins continued “we needed to remove you two and as a bonus we get rid of that meddlesome Sir Richard Crowthorne into the bargain.”

“Pity we missed Glasgow though” Haliford added “He has gone to ground somewhere thanks to some clever slight of hand on the part of the Commander and his lovely wife.”

“You are going to take them out too?” Collins asked disbelievingly.

“If necessary” Haliford honestly confirmed.

“Hah! Good luck with that matey” Howell remarked “Those two will eat you and the rest of your merry little band for breakfast.”

“I think you underestimate exactly the sort of power our fledgling organisation possesses” Haliford responded “Whilst it may be true that the Commander has the ear and respect of many major players in the global political arena, I think you will find that those like us with deep chequebooks can speak far louder and more persuasively.”

“Money talks” Hoskins agreed “and more money speaks louder.”

“As long as no one looks too closely as to exactly where it has come from” Collins concluded “That Russian toe rag Cruschov for instance, please tell me you are not linked to that piece of filth?”

“Alexander Cruschov is a patriot” Haliford explained to which Collins responded with a brief outburst of laughter “A good man who has the best interests of both his native and adoptive countries at heart.”

“With a nice proverbial white wash of his record in the process no doubt so that he can then go and do god knows what unchecked and effectively with official blessing” Howell warned their captors “If you don’t take my word for anything else, take it for this, that man is very dangerous and if left unchecked could destroy everything and everyone in his path and that includes his new friends, that would include you two idiotic bozos by the way.”

“I don’t know, we go to all that trouble to ensure that not only are you framed for murder but also get you safely tucked away out of sight of the authorities and this is sort of gratitude we get in return” Haliford joked with a wild gesture of the hand and a chuckle that echoed around the room.

“Fine” Collins dismissed the riposte “in that case feel free to hitch up your wagon to this particularly unpleasant horse, just be ready to get yourself well and truly burnt.”

“Get some rest gentlemen” Hoskins suggested “After breakfast we will be having more guests and then the fun will begin, hope you enjoy the show” he announced before he and Haliford departed.

“What a pair of muppets” Collins concluded.

Outside the main entrance of New Scotland Yard all was quiet as would normally be expected for half past four in the morning in central London, therefore the arrival with squealing tyres of two silver Mercedes panel vans was rather unusual.

As soon as the vans came to a halt, a tall thin uniformed Security Service officer got out of the passenger seat of the leading vehicle and with a clipboard and a file under his arm which he acquired from the parcel shelf, he proceeded to the main entrance along with a colleague who had got out of the second vehicle.

The receptionist behind the desk in the main entrance foyer looked up with some surprise when she saw the two officers arrive and proceed straight to her.

“Early risers aren’t we?” the receptionist remarked as the two men arrived at her desk.

“Tell me about it love” the leading officer confirmed “Oh, erm Gary Jones” he declared proffering his identification “Internal Weapons and Security Auditing Section.”

“What can I do for you Lieutenant Commander Jones?” the receptionist asked.

“Got a audit order to give your armoury the once over” Jones explained as he produced the official looking document “Signed by the Divisional Commander herself no less” he confirmed showing the signature at the bottom.

“Nothing like getting an early start I suppose” the receptionist agreed “All right, if you will just sign in and then it is all yours.”

“Terrific” Jones agreed as he duly signed the visitors log as it was passed across to him “Do you suppose anyone would mind if we park our van down in the basement, I know it is early but I can bet knowing our luck some traffic warden will still be around to stick a ticket on it if we leave it out there.”

“Don’t see why not” the receptionist agreed “ramp entrance is down to the right and the armoury is one level below.”

“Been there a lot” Jones confirmed.

A few minutes later the two vans were being driven into the basement level car park of New Scotland Yard before being parked up at the loading bay platform, deserted at that time of the morning much like the rest of the place.

Jones got out of the leading van and was quickly joined by both the other officer and several other men who had travelled in the vehicles.

“Right then lads” Jones declared “We’ve got about two hours to load up what we need and disable the rest, remember no one must know we were ever here. So does everyone know what to do?”

The rest of Jones team nodded in agreement.

“Very well then” Jones confirmed “Lets get to work.”

Martin awoke with a sudden start when he heard the clicking of a gun being cocked but looked on relieved when he saw silhouetted in the doorway of the old barn Amber who was checking the Uzi machine pistol she had acquired.

“Sorry to wake you” Amber apologised sincerely “You looked so peaceful lying there I didn’t want to disturb you.”

“How are you feeling?” Martin asked as he sat up and brushed off a couple of bits of loose straw from his coat.

“Better thanks to you” Amber admitted “I can stand up easier now and the painkillers seem to be kicking in which helps a lot.”

“What time is it?” Martin asked as he stood up and joined Amber in the shaft of light coming in the door.

“Dawn by the looks of it” Amber confirmed as she continued to check the variety of weaponry that she had laid out neatly on the top of an old wooden table in front of her “We should be making a move” she suggested as she picked up the large calibre automatic weapon and held it up.

“That’s definitely you” Martin remarked to which Amber responded with a wry smile “Where did all this lot come from?” he asked looking at the equipment before them.

“Courtesy of our two dead friends” Amber explained “There is some handy stuff here I can tell you.”

“Speaking of whom, where are they?” Martin asked looking around.

“I hid them over in the corner” Amber confirmed “They should be safe there until this is over, then I’ll give the local boys a call to pick them up, at least that way they should get a decent burial.”

“Very considerate of you” Martin commented.

“Well that is the sort of person I am” Amber agreed as she passed Martin a gun and two spare clips of ammunition “Here take this.”

“I can’t say I am too fond of guns” he admitted as he reluctantly took the weapon from her.

“Neither am I” Amber casually agreed “Don’t argue with me on this, it could save your life today.”

“Or yours which is far more important as far as I am concerned” Martin added which made Amber smile “What do I do with this thing?”

“Well that is the safety catch which is the first important point” Amber pointed out “and that is the dangerous end” she indicated the end of the gun barrel “point at bad guy and pull the trigger, horribly simple really.”

“Indeed” Martin agreed as he slowly put the gun away in his Security Department uniform tunic pocket “It is a strange and dangerous world you live in Amber” he admitted “Is that even your real name?”

“I have had so many identities and names over the last four years I have almost forgotten who I am” Amber admitted with a tinge of sadness “About the only two certainties I have ever had was my first name, it’s because of my eyes you see.”

“And the other certainty?” Martin inquired.

“Err I’ll tell you later” Amber responded after an awkward pause during which it was clear she wanted to admit something but in the end deferred it until later.

Martin looked on with a raised eyebrow, his curiosity well and truly piqued by the reluctant look Amber was exhibiting.

“Ah to hell with it” Amber relented “There is one thing that I have been determined to say for the last three years but I never had the courage to say it and I promised myself that if it was the last thing I did I would finally have the guts to tell you something. If we die today I want you to know, I love you.”

“I love you too” Martin responded almost in a sense of shock.

“Great” Amber responded with a huge sigh of relief “That’s got the embarrassing bit out of the way” she remarked “Let’s get our stuff together and get moving.”

“Absolutely” Martin agreed as he picked up the backpack and helped Amber place all their bits and pieces inside “Just one thing, if we live long enough to go out on a proper date, no camping holidays please?”

“Agreed” Amber confirmed with a giggle “Ready?”

“As I will ever be” Martin responded before they moved to the doorway where they both looked out across the countryside before them where the first rays of sunrise saw a misty red glow shine across the valley and reflect off of the opposite side, casting long eerie shadows.

“I studied the map whilst you were sleeping” Amber confirmed “I figure if we head south west for about ten miles we should find a railway line. If I am right it is probably the same one where I got a lift on a freight train the day before yesterday.”

“Do you ever do anything that is just good old fashioned normal?” Martin asked.

“Not really, no” Amber was forced to admit after a moments thought “Come on, let’s get going.”

“Ladies first” Martin gestured whereupon they duly set off across the weed ridden old farm yard and then through the dilapidated gate before entering the field where a few sheep were quietly grazing and took no notice whatsoever of the two strangers as they passed through.

They walked for over an hour across the steeply inclined fields of that valley, no one else but each others company as the sun rose and the sky became increasingly brighter, only the occasional grimace from Amber as her leg injury protested from time to time interrupted their progress.

“Well you have to admit” Martin remarked as they stopped by a dry stone wall at the edge of one field for a breather “without the cloud, mist and constant rain it does look rather nice around here doesn't it?”

“It does indeed” Amber readily agreed “Trouble was I did not have much chance to really stop and take a look what with the goons with guns about most of the time.”

“Err speaking of which” Martin suddenly pointed down the length of the valley with an ominous tone “I think we may have a problem.”

“Pass me those binoculars quick” Amber called as they both crouched down behind the wall before she then looked cautiously over the top.

Both of them watched apprehensively as the object that had caught their attention came closer, the sound reverberating around the surrounding hills quickly confirming it to be a helicopter that through its lack of any official markings that they could see meant it had to belong to someone who was not from any authority of any kind.

“You have to hand it to these guys, they don't give up easily do they?” Martin remarked as they both squeezed themselves up against the wall making themselves as invisible as they could just as the helicopter reached them, roaring overhead before continuing on its direct course towards where they had spent the last hour or so walking away from,

“Knowing Cruschov I am willing to bet he wants to see the body” Amber confirmed grimly as they watched the helicopter now in the far distance begin to circle over where they had been last night and where her fake radio report gave the location of her body.

“Which means any minute now he is going to know we have pulled a fast one” Martin agreed “I think now is a very good time to make a hasty exit.”

“I fully agree” Amber confirmed.

“Still about two miles to the railway line” Martin consulted the map “Fortunately taking us away from them in the process.”

“In which case lets get the hell out of here” Amber declared as they quickly got up and scrambled as best they could over the wall before continuing on at a brisk a pace as her injuries would allow.

Exactly as Amber had predicted, the helicopter was indeed searching for her reported body but as Stevens surveyed the valley floor from the front seat without success he was already beginning to suspect that they had been duped.

“Take it down” Stevens ordered to the pilot alongside him “I want to take a closer look, I think we may have been given the old proverbial two step.”

“Are you sure Sir?” the pilot asked “Maybe our guys just reported the wrong location, it was pretty dark and stormy last night after all.”

“Not likely” Stevens confirmed “My lads could find a needle in the middle of the Iraqi desert in the dark, blindfolded. No, our little Irish friend I think has sold us a dummy, I am beginning to understand how she thinks.”

“Looks like a good spot just here” the pilot remarked indicating a fairly flat and clear piece of land not far from the abandoned farm buildings “I just hope the sheep stay out of the way.”

As soon as the helicopter had landed, Stevens was getting out and was quickly joined by two more of his men who had arrived at the same time in a specialist army style four wheel drive vehicle which was now parked nearby.

“We have two bodies over in that barn Sir” one of the men reported when Stevens reached them in the middle of the old farm yard.

“McNeil and her friend by any chance?” Stevens asked.

“Err no Sir” the man confirmed “I think you had better see this Sir for yourself” whereupon he escorted his boss over to the barn door before leading him inside.

“This bitch is really starting to annoy me” Stevens declared angrily as he was confronted by the sight of the two bodies, those of his men where they had been discovered a few moments earlier “I like her style mind but she is definitely going to pay for this.”

“What do you want to do Sir?” one of the men asked.

“Blanket the entire area for a ten mile radius with as many people as we can muster” Stevens confirmed as he marched furiously out of the barn “Anything that moves I want it captured alive, as badly injured as you like but alive. She is injured so she can't have got too far I would have thought.”

“The authorities are going to be sniffing around before too long” one of the men warned his superior “Even with Altman's contacts we cannot hold them off forever.”

“Oh they will have their hands full elsewhere believe me” Stevens confirmed with a wicked smile as he was handed a satellite telephone by the pilot who had at his signal brought it to him from the helicopter, this being the only means of mobile communication of any distance that was able to work in those remote valleys.

A few moments later Stevens was connected to the person he was calling to whom he issued a simple instruction.

“Back up plan three” Stevens informed the person he had called “Full distraction protocol and as soon as possible please” he confirmed before hanging up and tossing the satellite telephone back over to the pilot.

“All right lads” Stevens declared as he went back to his helicopter “Let's saddle up and nail that little bitch.”

“Well there it is” Martin confirmed as he looked ahead towards the twin thin strips of shiny metal which marked the course of the single track central Wales railway line approximately half a mile below them in the bottom of the valley.

“You have a plan I do hope” Amber remarked as she and Martin ducked out from behind the hedgerow they were hiding behind and proceeded as quick as they could down the steep valley side towards the railway line.

“It depends my dear” Martin confirmed “It depends.”

“Oh dear...” Amber responded.

A couple of minutes later they reached the edge of the railway line, the elderly wire boundary fence presenting no problems for them to get through before they were standing together on the line side itself looking up and down the tracks.

“North or south?” Martin asked.

“I reckon north” Amber confirmed “Not that there seems to be much difference with either option.

“And I reckon south” Martin responded.

“Hang on” Amber declared as she reached into her pocket from where she produced an Irish coin “It's my lucky charm” she explained.

“Doesn't seem to have been bringing you much luck in the last couple of days I would say” Martin wryly remarked.

“I was beginning to think that too” Amber admitted before tossing the coin in the air whereupon she then caught it on the back of her hand “Heads or tails?” she asked.

“Heads” Martin chose quickly.

“Heads it is” Amber confirmed removing her hand to show the result of the coin toss before she put it back in her pocket “We head south then.”

“Walk on the ballast, not on the sleepers” Martin advised Amber as they set off down the track “Less slippery” he explained.

“What are we hoping to find just out of interest?” Amber asked as they proceeded along the track.

“With any luck a signal post telephone” Martin confirmed “It is an internal system used on the railway.”

“Smart thinking” Amber agreed “Internal independent system not likely to have been hacked by whoever is behind all this, you can use your identity to summon help or even the cavalry although I would advise against the latter option given recent events.”

“I was hoping for a train actually” Martin confirmed “Trouble is the service frequency in these parts tends to be a little sparse, especially this early in the morning.”

“Well I hope we find something soon” Amber remarked as she looked down with a grimace at her leg which was bleeding again, the wet stain on her trouser leg and bandage from the seeping blood becoming more noticeable with every stride “I don't think I will be able to go on for very much longer.

“Come on” Martin stopped and went around behind her where to Amber's sudden surprise he proceeded to pick her up in his arms.

“You don't have to do this” Amber responded as once he had ensured he had a good hold of her he carried on.

“I promised the Commander, Sir Richard, myself and above all you that I would find you and bring you home alive” Martin reminded her sincerely “and I for one am not going to let any of them or you down if I have anything to say about it.”

“Good thing I am fairly small then” Amber mused.

“Like my grandmother used to say” Martin responded as he carried on down the track “Good things come in small packages.”

“Very wise” Amber agreed with a wry smile.

“Seeing as you two are so busy lately I thought I would make breakfast” Jack declared as Tracy and the Commander both arrived in the kitchen to find him busy cooking up a full English with tea already brewed and ready to be poured from the cup.

“Blimey” the Commander remarked in admiration “You know you don't have to do this you know.”

“You two were kind enough, or mad enough, I am not entirely sure which to adopt me” Jack reminded them “It is the least I can do, now sit down before it gets cold” he insisted.

“You will make someone a lovely house husband one day Jack” Tracy remarked as she sat down at the kitchen table to which Jack merely smiled meekly in response.

“Enjoy...” Jack duly declared as he completed serving breakfast before stepping back and looking on at his efforts with some pride only to then look slightly off put when the door bell rang.

“Someone is up early” the Commander remarked as he looked at his antique pocket watch which showed it to be only just past six in the morning.

“I'll get it” Jack confirmed “you finish your breakfast” he insisted before heading out of the kitchen and into the front hall where he duly opened the door whereupon he looked on with some surprise when he saw who was standing there.

“Morning Jack” the Prime Minister declared “Your parents in?” he asked.

“Yes” Jack confirmed, still somewhat dumbfounded “The old politics thing not working out so you are now making take away deliveries to make ends meet instead?” he asked jokingly.

“I’d probably get more job satisfaction from that I have to admit” the Prime Minister honestly responded as Jack let him in before closing the door behind him but not before giving a good look up and down the corridor outside just to make sure all was well.

“Did any of you guys order a take away from the Prime Minister?” Jack called as he arrived back in the kitchen with the Prime Minister in tow.

“You do house calls now?” Tracy asked as both she and the Commander were about to stand up but the Prime Minister gestured them to remain seated as he hated formality.

“Just happened to be in the neighbourhood and thought I would drop in” the Prime Minister evasively explained.

“Without your usual attendant bodyguards, driver, MI5 watcher or associated goons in tow, yeah right” Jack responded “Coffee?” he asked.

“Oh thanks” the Prime Minister readily agreed “All right, I slipped away while nobody was watching as I wanted a word with you two before things got serious and also somewhere where I know we won’t be overheard.”

“You could always have come over to my office at New Scotland Yard” the Commander suggested as Jack handed the Prime Minister a mug of coffee for which he gave a nod of grateful thanks.

“I fear even the hallowed glass towers of the Yard are not safe” the Prime Minister regretfully confirmed “A darkness is approaching which even I cannot stop and I wanted to make sure you were fully aware of what facts I possess in case we are unable to speak openly again for the next few days.”

“If anyone wants me” Jack remarked “I’ll be online shopping for a bullet proof vest in my size as this sounds like one of those conversations that eventually winds up in one, some or all of us being shot at.”

“He could be more right than he realises” the Prime Minister ominously confirmed once Jack had left them to continue “In three hours time there is going to be a news conference at Westminster City Hall. Attending will be the Justice Minister, representatives from the United States National Security Agency as well as spokespersons from our own MI5 and MI6 and some other key people.”

“May I ask what it will be about?” the Commander inquired “assuming that is both of us are not going to be invited that is.”

“I am going to watch you both very carefully to see what reaction I get” the Prime Minister responded as he leaned forward on the kitchen table “No doubt you are well aware of the mandates of certain national security organisations such as the American’s NSA, our own MI5 and MI6, the Russian’s FSB and so on.”

“All clear so far” Tracy agreed whilst the Commander merely nodded, his attention clearly focused on what the Prime Minister was about to say.

“At nine o’clock this press conference will announce that the principles on which the familiar national security agencies have been established is to be extensively reformed into an International Security Agency” the Prime Minister explained “Basically along the lines of the NSA over in the United States but with a autonomous mandate to intercept, arrest, detain without charge and prosecute anyone they consider to be a ‘global threat’ to use their words from the glossy pamphlet that landed on my desk late last night” he handed across a document for the other two to look at.

“I am willing to bet they must have spent a fair amount just on the snazzy new logo” Tracy remarked “So who are these lunatics?”

“Top people from the NSA, our own MI5 and MI6” the Prime Minister confirmed “plus head hunted people who feel like they do recruited from around the world with a carte blanche free for all get out of jail free card to do what they like, where they like to who they like and not a single hint of Government or United Nations Security Council overseeing.”

“Sounds like a bandwagon on a power trip” the Commander concluded “Needless to say that this all ties in with certain err ‘interesting’ shall we say events over the last forty eight hours.”

“Who is paying for this little party?” Tracy asked.

“Private enterprise” the Prime Minister confirmed grimly “Big global corporations and individuals, no Government money or influence whatsoever.”

“How did you find about this?” Tracy asked.

“I received a deputation last night” the Prime Minister explained “Sir John Haliford turned up late last night along with a couple of ‘representatives’ and announced that not only was he resigning from MI6 with immediate effect but that also he was to be the head of European Operations for this new international agency.”

“Bet that took you by surprise” the Commander remarked.

“You can say that again” the Prime Minister confirmed “In all my years I never thought I would ever hear the words ‘I resign’ from that greasy pole climber extraordinaire Haliford, turns out he had a better offer though.”

“You could have just told them to shove it where the sun doesn’t shine” the Commander suggested “or Croydon, whichever is the more convenient.”

“That was exactly what I intended to do” the Prime Minister confirmed “However it was made very clear that this comes direct from our American Cousins, they want carte blanche to override all existing jurisdictional and legal restrictions, the gloves are off big time. I informed them politely but firmly that this is not the United States, unfortunately that was then they produced their trump card, their financial backers.”

“Ah I see” Tracy remarked “Green light our new agency or our backers pull out all their industrial and business dealings within the UK.”

“Pretty much yes” the Prime Minister grimly confirmed “Economic blackmail which they know we cannot afford to ignore given how fragile the economy has become what with this recession.”

“Which ironically some of these big global organisations backing this lot of muppets probably deliberately helped to cause in the first place” the Commander added.

“You know with cynicism like that you could make a good politician” the Prime Minister joked which made Tracy giggle as well.

“Here is a question for you Sir” the Commander thought for a few moments before asking “Have you ever heard of a Russian by the name of Alexander Cruschov by any chance?” he asked, knowing full well the Prime Minister had but wanting to see what his reaction was face to face.

“That slimy back handed two faced obnoxious snivelling evil little gobshite” the Prime Minister fumed in response, his anger deep down reflected in the way his left hand formed a very tight fist and his right nearly crushed the coffee mug.

“Well I would say that was a pretty big yes” Tracy mused with a wry smile.

“So you have met the fellow then?” the Commander asked.

“No, fortunately I have not had the pleasure” the Prime Minister confirmed still fuming “If I had I would probably have had to get the place fumigated assuming I didn’t make a leap for his throat first. No, his reputation has most certainly preceded him thanks to the extensive files on him Sir Richard passed to me three weeks ago when he first slipped into the country.”

“Indeed” the Commander agreed “The C.V. of both our Russian friend and the extremely unpleasant bunch of hangers on and other assorted thugs he employs the services of is enough to give even the most calm person serious nightmares.”

“And now he is on the loose in the UK” Tracy remarked “with the possibility of the oxygen of respectability bestowed on him by this new lot in return for his generous financial donations possibly a matter of just hours away.”

“The horrors that could unleash just don’t bear thinking about” the Prime Minister agreed “We have already lost Sir Richard Crowthorne.”

“Not exactly” the Commander responded “He is in fact still very much alive, a little sore perhaps but definitely still breathing. At this very moment he is holed up at King William Street with a bottle...”

“...more like a case” Tracy cut in.

“... of finest single malt and enough doughnuts to see him through the rest of today” the Commander confirmed “Whoever is behind this deliberately planted David Collins gun at the scene and fed our guys bogus witness statements so for the moment we will play along, keep them on the wrong foot for the time being.”

“Good grief” the Prime Minister exclaimed “Does anyone else know he is still alive?” he asked.

“Only Lieutenant Commander Barrett from his Section Fourteen department” Tracy confirmed “She is holding the fort whilst he is out of commission, continuing to gather any intelligence that crosses her metaphorical desk.”

“So what do you want to do now?” the Prime Minister asked.

“For now there is very little we can do” the Commander remarked “Bar a few theories that happen to fit the facts plus suspicions of who a couple of the front line protagonists may be we have nothing on them.”

“They can’t surely expect to set up some glorified new security organisation without the co-operation of us and other existing agencies?” Tracy asked.

“I think as far as they are concerned it is a done deal” the Prime Minister explained “Apparently Haliford and his merry band feel there is 'legitimate concern' within the public both here, in the US and elsewhere about the threat of 'global terrorism' as they like to constantly call it.”

“What, three dimwits in a dingy flat in Swindon trying to make bombs out of pizza bread and ready made mash potato?” the Commander scoffed in response.

“Oh you know about that one?” the Prime Minister.

“Read the trial transcripts the other day” the Commander confirmed “Haven't had such a good laugh for ages.”

“Anyway much of this global terrorism threat has been exaggerated by the likes of Haliford and co in order to justify their jobs and ever increasing budgets from what I can see” Tracy remarked “I know there is and indeed always will remain an underlying threat of terrorist attack but that has been the case for hundreds of years. I mean just how many gold plated paper clips do the likes of the CIA and NSA actually need in this war on terror they are so fond of?”

“My thoughts exactly” the Prime Minister willingly agreed “Normally I would have dismissed this approach by the group as an idle load of bollocks by a bunch of over hyped muppets on a power trip.”

“Seen a few of those over the years” the Commander remarked.

“But these guys are serious” the Prime Minister continued “They have the finance, the personnel and the support to pull it off and I don't think there is a damn thing we can do about it” he admitted.

“They are already starting to put their pieces into play” the Commander concluded “The fact that they have taken out of circulation potential road blocks such as David Collins, Sir Richard Crowthorne and the CIA's David Howell are proof of that.”

“We could discredit them” Tracy suggested “Show them up for what they really are?”

“To do that you would need irrefutable evidence” the Prime Minister responded “Something concrete.”

“There is one possibility” the Commander confirmed “Assuming that is it is not lying dead on a Welsh hillside by now that is” he commented with some heavy hesitation.

“Sorry, I don't understand?” the Prime Minister responded.

“Given what seems to have happened to almost everyone else who knows or knew about that, not to mention the subject in question herself, it's probably better you don't” Tracy agreed “Trust me.”

“That helicopter is sounding awfully close” Amber remarked as she looked around the surrounding skies nervously as in the background the sound of the rotor blades reverberated against the valley sides sending out ominous echoes for miles around.

“Well with any luck we will be out of here soon” Martin confirmed as he saw what he had been looking for, smiled and then carefully lowered Amber to the ground where she duly perched herself on a pile of old railway sleepers stacked by the line side where it appeared they had remained for many years judging by their condition.

By now Amber was beginning to feel the cold again despite the fact the early morning sunshine was beating down upon them and she held her arms close in around herself to try and keep some heat on whilst she looked up at Martin who was looking at a small grey box mounted on pole by the side of the line.

“As, that's got it” Martin declared as after a few moments of struggling he managed to open the front panel of the box which had rusted shut through probably years of lack of use plus exposure to the often inclement weather conditions of the surrounding area. Inside was revealed to be a black telephone handset which he picked up and put to his ear.

“E.T. phone home...” Amber joked as she watched Martin trying to make a call however it was a worrying few moments before he finally made a connection.

“Hello. Am I speaking to the signaller?” Martin asked as soon as he had been answered.

“You've done this before” Amber remarked noting the professional communication approach Martin was using on the telephone.

“My name is Alan Martin, I am a Security Service officer, identification number Oscar Golf One Five One Two Seven Eight” he informed the signaller who was on the other end of the line “I am calling from the Signal Post Telephone at signal number Charlie Whisky Echo Three Seven One. I need urgent assistance.”

“This is area signalling control” the slightly surprised duty signaller many miles away responded “Message understood, what I can do for you?”

“Firstly I need the next train past this point to stop and pick up both myself and a colleague” Martin confirmed “When is that likely to be?” he asked.

“Next train is about five minutes away from your current location” the signaller confirmed as he looked across the signalling centre control room towards the complex electronic track diagram that was mounted across the entire face of the opposite wall “Local passenger service heading south to Bristol Temple Meads.”

“Sounds good enough to me” Martin agreed “Also I need you to patch me through to a Regional Administrator General Terrance Evans on a secure line.”

“That may take a minute or two” the signaller confirmed “however that should be possible, I'll call you back.”

“Thank you” Martin responded before hanging up whereupon he returned to Amber and sat down on the sleeper stack alongside her where they put their arms around each other for much needed comfort “Don't worry, we will soon be out of here.”

Amber said nothing, merely looked across at Martin where their eyes met before she leaned forward and they met, kissing each other gently.

“The first of many I hope” Amber uttered almost in a whisper as they parted but only just.

Administrator General Evans was travelling in the back of his official car, studying the morning papers on his way into work when the call came through. The telephone in the car rang almost ominously which caused him to lower the newspaper he had been reading slowly and give the handset a worrying look before he leant forward to answer it.

“Evans” he responded simply but in his usual business like manner.

“I have a secure call for you from the railway signalling centre at Swansea Sir” came the confirmation which saw Evans expression turn to one of inane curiosity.

“Very well then” Evans agreed “Put it through” he instructed whereupon there was a pause until Martin's voice came through.

“Good morning Sir” Martin called, relieved at last to be speaking to someone he knew he could trust “It's Alan Martin.”

“Bloody hell” Evans responded “Martin? Where are you?” he quickly asked.

“Somewhere between the middle of nowhere and the middle of no where's back yard” Martin admitted as he looked around “Would you like the good news or the bad news first Sir?”

“Let's start with the good news” Evans readily agreed “If the rumours I am hearing on the grapevine are true I can already guess what the bad news is likely to be.”

“I've found Amber” Martin confirmed smiling back at her which she returned in kind “She's all right but needs medical attention as she is pretty badly bashed about and I am not looking exactly in mint condition either.”

“Great news” Evans responded almost with a cheer “So the bad news as if I couldn't guess?”

“We have a serious problem with some very unfriendly locals” Martin confirmed as the sound of the helicopter in the area continued to echo all around menacingly “We managed to give them the slip last night but they seem to be back and it is only a matter of time before they realise that we have duped them.”

“All right” Evans confirmed “I have tried to get some of my best people into the area to try and get you two out but so far without success” he explained “Your unfriendly locals have some very serious connections and some equally serious hardware.”

“Tell me about it” Martin agreed “At the moment the plan is to catch the train that is scheduled to be here in a couple of minutes south and then take it from there, can you have some people meet us at the next major station?”

“I will see what I can arrange” Evans confirmed “Unfortunately the system seems to have so many leaks at the moment I cannot guarantee who will get to you first so for the moment you may have to keep working off your own wits.”

“I understand Sir” Martin confirmed.

“Just a second” Evans then called as something on the road ahead of his car had caught his razor sharp attention “What the hell is this?” he asked generally but could say no more as suddenly a large articulated lorry appeared from a side road at full speed and impacted hard into the side of his car.

There was a cacophony of squealing tyres and rapidly applied brakes from surrounding vehicles in response to the sight of the lorry as it careered across the junction, ramming Evans car before forcing it at full speed into the solid concrete retaining wall opposite reducing it to a mangled mess of twisted metal barely a third of its original size just a couple of seconds earlier.

As other motorists looked on in horror and even began to leave their own vehicles to rush over to the scene of the crash to help, the lorry driver who was largely protected from the impact by his high mounted cab calmly got out, stepped down to the tarmac surface of the road and producing a gun that dissuaded anyone who thought of stopping him, he duly left the scene, leaving a trail of carnage in his wake.

“Hello?” Martin called again but there was no response, all he heard was a sudden crashing noise coming down the telephone line before an ominous silence.

“What's wrong?” Amber asked as she got back on to her feet and hobbled over to him.

“Line has just gone dead” Martin confirmed with a worried look before he reluctantly put the handset back on its hook and closed the front flap of the box “I think something terrible has happened.”

“Welcome to my world” Amber admitted “So what's the plan?” she asked.

“We catch the train” Martin confirmed with a smile as he nodded down the line where in the distance the approaching passenger train could be seen coming into view and slowing down to pick them up.

“Morning” the train driver called in his broad welsh accent from his cab side window as he brought the single coach Class 153 diesel unit to a halt alongside the two somewhat unusual passengers “You be the two lunatics from out of town that need a lift I take it?”

“We would very much appreciate it” Amber confirmed with a wry smile.

“Not from around here are you?” the driver remarked “All right, hop in” he nodded towards the rear of the train where the passenger door had been opened by the conductor who had produced the wooden emergency ladder and put it in place so that they could get on board in the absence of a proper platform.

Whilst Martin was able to climb the ladder without too much trouble, Amber with her leg injury was a different matter and between him and the Conductor they managed to lift her on board before the ladder was recovered, the door closed and the train resumed its journey.

“Go on through” the Conductor indicated the passenger saloon whereupon Martin and Amber duly went through and took seats either side of a table.

“I don't suppose there is a doctor on board is there?” Martin asked the Conductor.

“It's your lucky day” the Conductor confirmed with a smile “Four passengers, two are you pair and one of the others is the doctor from the last stop back there, I'll go and fetch him.”

“You see” Amber remarked “Our luck is changing for the better I think.”

“I think my grandmother used to say something about counting chickens before they had hatched” Martin casually cautioned.

“Maybe” Amber agreed “but we can't do any worse than we were before can we?” she suggested as she took Martin's hand in hers across the table in reassurance.

“No I suppose not” Martin agreed “I don't think I am exactly cut out for this line of work.”

“You came half way across the country and rescued me” Amber reminded him gratefully “Not bad for a guy who spends most of his time in an office in Whitehall.”

“Do you think it is too late for me to change my career?” Martin asked.

“To be honest” Amber admitted “I think it is I who will be changing career when this is all over, I don't suppose there is any space in your place is there?”

“You are welcome anytime” Martin confirmed as they were joined once again by the Conductor who had with him a tall elderly gentleman.

“Hello officers” the Conductor announced “This is Doctor Albright, he is a G.P.”

“My colleague has some injuries that need a bit of TLC” Martin confirmed.

“Blimey, you have been in the wars my dear haven't you?” the Doctor remarked as he sat down alongside Amber and saw the extent of her blood stained injuries “Are these gunshots?” he asked clearly concerned.

“Had a bit of a run in with some unfriendly people with a grudge” Amber shyly admitted.

“And a lot of guns” Martin added “Err it's a long story Doctor.”

“I bet it is” the Doctor confirmed “Conductor, do you have a first aid kit on board?” he asked.

“Yes, in the rear cab” the Conductor confirmed.

“If you could fetch me some bandages and antiseptic please?” the Doctor asked.

“I'll be right back” the Conductor agreed before leaving for the rear of the train as it began to accelerate to full line speed.

“Sit back and relax my dear” the Doctor duly reassured Amber “You two are safe now and with a little work I will have you fixed up in no time at all.”

As the red tail lights of the train began to disappear off into the distance down the valley, Stevens observed its progress through a set of binoculars before lowering them as soon as it was out of sight.

For a few moments he thought before lighting a cigarette and inhaling a deep breath and then turning to his associate standing behind him.

“Harry” he called “I think it is time we called in the specialist dirty tricks squad and have some real fun.”

“Right boss” the man agreed before he and Stevens made their way back to their helicopter waiting for them a short distance away.

It was as if everyone involved in this complex drama was on the move at the same time across the country and indeed the world.

In central London a worried looking Prime Minister was on his way to Downing Street, a worried look across his face as he looked out of the window and the streets of the city passing by, the people of London going about their early morning business unaware unlike himself of the potential trouble that was now only hours away.

South of the River Thames, Tracy and the Commander were on their way in to the centre of the City as well, boarding a Victoria Line train at Vauxhall for the short journey north to Victoria.

Below the streets of the financial district, Sir Richard Crowthorne, now feeling somewhat better following a nights rest, was awake and discussing the information that Lieutenant Barrett and FBI Special Agent James Block had managed to collate during the small hours of the morning and begin to formulate some idea of what may be in store and who was involved.

Two of those people definitely involved were Alexander Cruschov and Steven Altman who at that moment were on their way to Bristol in Altman’s bronze Mercedes saloon along with an escort of two black Range Rovers containing various associates and heavies most of which despite the neat appearance with tailored suits and well polished shoes, were only really interested in getting started on some aggravation and meaningless violence, a wish that would become true later that day if everything worked out as planned.

Others directly involved in the plot included a group of mysterious Americans who were at that moment over the eastern Atlantic approaching the United Kingdom aboard a American Airlines Boeing 757, enjoying the luxuries of the sumptuous First Class accommodation and revelling in the knowledge that their trip was being paid for out of expenses courtesy of the unsuspecting American taxpayer.

Sergei Glasgov meanwhile was keeping himself out of sight, a bottle of finest Russian Vodka and several 78RPM records of old communist music, the soundtrack to the Soviet Union back in they days when they were one of the two dominant superpowers during much of the twentieth century blaring out from the speakers as he relaxed in an old KGB safe house he kept in service for just such emergencies in north London.

His part in this matter was not over however, not by a long shot for he was planning to make full use of the opportunity to grill and bring to justice Cruschov as soon as the hand cuffs were on his wrist, an eventuality he hoped to be enjoying sooner rather than later.

In the over glamorised ‘International Security Agency European Headquarters’ meanwhile, Hoskins and Haliford were meeting to go over the final plans and finish the fine print on the charter that in a couple of hours time they would be announcing once the Prime Minister had signed it, something they knew he would have no choice in doing.

Meanwhile down in the lower levels of that same building, David Howell of the CIA was fast asleep in his prison cell where he figured he might as well get some rest as there was nothing else he could do. His colleague in that prison, David Collins of MI5 however was wide awake, anxious about being locked up and deeply concerned about events that were unfolding, events he could do nothing about all the time he was incarcerated in there.

Heading at speed across the Severn Bridge were four more black Range Rovers, these containing Stevens and his team of muscled heavies, their plan to ensure at least two people that morning would not be reaching their intended destination.

Those two were of course Alan Martin and Amber McNeil who were still in south Wales on a train. Now patched up and feeling a lot better thanks to the medical attention she had received, Amber and Martin had been talking virtually non stop for over an hour and a half, catching up on three years apart and finding they still had a lot in common in addition to their love for each other which only now they were finally openly admitting.

“So your real name is actually Amber then?” Martin asked as the train they were travelling on approached the Severn Tunnel that took the main line beneath the River Severn estuary.

“It’s on account of my eyes” Amber explained which prompted them to look into each other eyes with even more concentration than they had up until then “Officially they are brown but my grandmother said when I was born that they were Amber so that was the name I got.”

“I like it” Martin agreed “It suits your whole personality.”

“It’s strange actually” Amber admitted openly “For six years I have been living multiple different identities depending on my assignments, today is the first day in years that I have just been myself. I had almost forgotten who I was, it was only you that gave me any kind of anchor in the real world.”

“By way of contrast I have only ever been little old me” Martin confirmed with a wry smile “Dull and uninteresting.”

“Never ever put yourself down like that” Amber admonished him “You may not realise it yourself but you are in fact one of the nicest, most caring people I have ever had the honour to meet and believe me you don’t meet many if any like you in this job.”

“I seemed to have bumped into a few in the last twenty four hours it would seem” Martin wryly agreed but then suddenly remembered something which caused him to start checking his tunic pockets with some urgency.

“Something wrong?” Amber asked.

“Got to call the office” Martin explained as he duly found the mobile telephone he had been issued before he had set out on this precarious mission “Ah at last, got a signal” he declared.

“Who are you calling?” Amber asked, cautious that they should not be making any contacts which could potentially reveal their location or current destination.

“The Commander” Martin explained “He told me to make contact with him as soon as I found you and got to an area where I could get a signal through.”

“You have the Commander's personal phone number?” Amber asked astonished
“Wow, I am impressed, even I don't have that.”

“Let's just hope he is in” Martin remarked with an apprehensive look as he dialled the number before putting the telephone to his ear and waited patiently if a little nervously to be answered.

“Don't you ever sleep?” the Commander asked as he entered the office of Simon Fuller to see him still sat at his desk working away with that sort of look that told him straight away he had been there all night.

“Well this job seemed pretty urgent Sir” Fuller explained, barely taking his eyes away from the screen in front of him as he continued to work, analysing the data in front of him “Besides the lovely Jennifer got called away on a late notice urgent job so no one at home to make any tea for me.”

“Should have popped around to my place” the Commander responded “Jack seems to be very good at making breakfast so probably would have set out an extra place given the chance.”

“I'll bear that in mind” Fuller confirmed.

“Anyway, how goes things here?” the Commander asked as he sat down alongside Fuller and looked at the screen but to him what he saw was pretty meaningless.

“I have been taking a look thanks to some information passed to me by Lieutenant Barrett at the life and times of Steven Altman” Fuller explained “It would appear he has been moving a lot of money through off shore accounts in the last three weeks but as far as I can tell its all legitimate.”

“Where is he getting it from?” the Commander asked.

“Seems to be mostly investment payouts from some US companies, a couple of Russian and a Chinese equity company” Fuller explained as he showed the Commander some of the figures “However from what I can see he is really only being used as an intermediary, essentially a petty cash tin with some muscle thrown in.”

“That is some petty cash” the Commander remarked as he took a look at some of the numbers on the screen.

“Well not all of it is cash” Fuller confirmed “There are some shares, interest payments, some legal bills, etc. but then again this is just what we can see, heaven alone knows what lurks in any hidden accounts he is also managing.”

“What about this Bill Stevens and his merry band” the Commander asked “Are they still tearing up the Welsh countryside?”

“To be honest I am not sure” Fuller explained “There has been no word from our opposite numbers in Wales since last night but I did do a trace on anyone Stevens may have served with during his army and mercenary days, it would appear most of his old unit are in the country under one name or another and most of them arrived through Bristol International Airport about five days ago.”

“I am not sure which shocks me most” the Commander remarked “That these thugs have arrived on UK soil or that Bristol actually has an International Airport.”

“Well, hacking into their CCTV revealed they departed in a convoy of very classy yet a tad clichéd black Range Rovers” Fuller continued to explain “I have just put their number plates into the Automatic Number Plate Recognition system to see if they crop up anywhere.”

“Good work” the Commander responded only to look around as Tracy came in with a very urgent manner about her “What's up love?” he asked.

“Put the BBC News Channel on now” Tracy urged whereupon Fuller switched on the live Internet feed of the channel onto one of his computer screens and turned up the volume.

“...to repeat our breaking news story” the BBC News Channel presenter announced over the speakers in the office “We have received a report that the Regional Administrator General of the National Security Service for Wales and the South West Sir Terrance Evans has been killed in a hit and run incident just outside of Swansea. There has been no statement at this time from the Security Service but eyewitnesses at the scene are reporting that an articulated lorry drove directly at Sir Terrance Evans' car as it crossed a junction after which an armed man was seen leaving the scene in a black Range Rover.”

“I have already put the scribble squad on stand by” Tracy confirmed “The press will be all over this one like a cheap suit.”

“The scribble squad?” Fuller asked.

“The Press Office” the Commander explained “Has there been any word on any channel whatsoever from Martin and his girl yet?” he asked.

“Not a peep” Fuller confirmed.

“Nothing reported from Section Fourteen either” Tracy also confirmed.

“All right” the Commander responded after a moment for thought “Let's assume for the moment that Bill Stevens and his merry band of thugs is probably behind this, we can safely assume it is either a warning to stay off the grass, a diversion to keep us occupied or possibly even both.”

“It also conveniently takes out Martin and Amber's only contact in the immediate area” Tracy pointed out “If they thought they were almost alone before then they are totally isolated now.”

“Simon, track these buggers” the Commander responded “I want to know every move they make before they make it and find me that piece of crap Altman as well.”

“You got it Sir” Fuller readily agreed.

“Tracy...” the Commander began only to be interrupted by his personal mobile telephone ringing which caused him to search his pockets to find it before he could answer it.

“Hello?” he called as soon as he had managed to take the call.

“Sir?” Martin called “I've found her” he declared.

“Alan” the Commander responded “Well done lad, how is she?” he asked as Fuller at his silent request managed to route the call to the speaker phone on the desk.

“A bit shot up but still as beautiful as I remember her” Martin confirmed which raised a mutual smile between him and Amber sitting alongside him now.

“Now isn't that sweet?” Tracy remarked with a smile.

“Did you run into any problems?” the Commander asked.

“One or two” Martin reluctantly admitted “Hang on a second Sir I will pass you over Amber.”

“Miss McNeil” the Commander called “A pleasure to make your acquaintance at last.”

“The honour is all mine Sir” Amber responded sincerely “Whoever these guys that Altman and Stevens are using are deadly serious, connected up to the nines, well equipped and well financed.”

“An impression I am starting to get here too” the Commander readily agreed.

“For the moment we think we have managed to lose them” Amber continued “We are on a train heading south, Alan here is the travel master and has a plan that should get us back to London. One thing though, we can't seem to get hold of Administrator General Evans, we were on the telephone to him about two hours ago and then we were suddenly cut off.”

“He's dead” the Commander regretfully informed them “Details are sketchy at the moment but it would appear he may have been deliberately targeted in a hit and run. An articulated lorry rammed his car off the road before the driver was seen leaving in a black Range Rover.”

“Sounds like the Bill Steven's sort of job” Amber grimly confirmed “I have run into him and his associates before, I know their style, methods and skills and believe me they get the job done even though it may not be pretty.”

“This is a secure line” the Commander explained “Well as secure as we can make it given how well connected we think those behind all this are, where are you now?” he asked whereupon Amber handed the telephone back over to Martin.

“Well to put it in slightly evasive means” Martin explained “we should be going under in about ten minutes and then to the church of medieval wine where with a bit of luck we can get another connection back east. Did that make sense Sir?”

“Understood entirely” the Commander confirmed as he made some notes “I am going to send someone down there to meet you, it will be someone you can trust implicitly but if it does go wrong then may I suggest you work out an alternative route home just in case.”

“Already have something in mind Sir” Martin confirmed.

“All right” the Commander responded “You two take care of each other, we will get you back home one way or another.”

“Oh, tunnel” Martin was heard to say before they were cut off as the signal was lost.

“Church of medieval wine?” Tracy asked.

“Bristol Temple Meads station” the Commander explained “Clever lad I must say.”

“Well I would never have got it” Fuller responded whereupon his attention was distracted by a bleeping noise from his computer.

“Tracy, I want you to get down to Bristol as fast as you can and pick them up” the Commander requested “Take Bob and a couple of his trustworthy guys as back up, I know you can look after yourself but in a situation like this you can never have too much fire power at your side.”

“And this from the man who hates guns” Tracy reminded her husband “Worrying stuff indeed.”

“Err I hate to say this but I think our bad guys may be about to beat us to the prize” Fuller called with obvious concern as he looked at a series of readouts on his computer screen “The ANPR system just picked up four vehicles whose registrations match some of those that picked up Stevens gruesome crew heading south east towards the Severn Toll Bridge.”

“Well so far they have known all about Amber” Tracy summarised “They knew about Martin coming into London Bridge yesterday morning, they managed to locate and either snatch, shoot or kill Dave Collins, Sir Richard Crowthorne and Terry Evans and seem to have been one step ahead of us the whole way so it stands to reason they have the same toys as us and access to the same information as well.”

“Given Sir John Haliford's likely involvement in this I would have to agree” the Commander confirmed grimly “Simon, I want you to track down Terry Evan's number two, Vivian Jones.”

“Can we trust him?” Tracy asked slightly apprehensively,

“About the only one down that part of the world we definitely can for the moment until we know otherwise” the Commander confirmed “For now we should consider all regular and even the standard secure channels compromised so lets only use them for things we want the bad guys to know until further notice.”

“I can have a network of pay as you go type mobile telephones set up for key personnel that you choose within the hour” Fuller confirmed.

“Sounds good to me” the Commander agreed “Tracy, get to Bristol as fast as you can and bring them home, as soon as they are secure and safe call me and then I will personally track down Altman, Stevens and that Russian coward Cruschov and throw them in a very dark damp jail for the next thirty years.”

“I am on my way love” Tracy confirmed before she and the Commander embraced and kissed goodbye.

“Be careful” the Commander strongly advised his wife.

“Always” she confirmed with that wonderful smile of hers that could light up the gloomiest situation before she left the office.

“Pennies from heaven” Altman remarked with a chuckle as he hung up the telephone in the back of his Mercedes as it sped along the M4 motorway passing Swindon.

“Something I should know about?” Cruschov asked as he took a drink from a silver engraved hip flask before offering it across.

“When Haliford and our American friends present the documentation to the Prime Minister to sign later this morning” Altman explained “It would appear we will have a little more leverage to apply.”

“Really?” Cruschov responded intrigued.

“A terrorist incident at a major railway station” Altman continued “A special bargain one stop shop that will not only demonstrate that we need these new security measures but also at the same time rid us of a couple of little annoyances into the bargain.”

“The boss has cleared this then?” Cruschov asked.

“The more 'terrible incidents' we can create to back up our new world order the better” Altman confirmed “His words by the way not mine.”

“So which splinter group, extremist organisation or lone lunatic gets the blame this time?” Cruschov asked.

“Who cares” Altman casually replied as he dialled a number on the telephone “Bill?” he called as soon as he was answered “Bristol Temple Meads in about ninety minutes, build it up with bricks and mortar.”

“Do we know who is on the guest list?” Bill Stevens asked from the front passenger seat of the lead black Range Rover as it lead a convoy of three similar vehicles over the majestic Severn Toll Bridge, leaving Wales behind them and heading into England.

“Looks like our little Irish bitch, her boyfriend and maybe even Divisional Commander Tracy Caverner who apparently is on her way there right now to pick them up” Altman confirmed.

“Delicious” Stevens responded “I've never tortured a Security Service legend to death before, I think I am going to have a very pleasant day.”

“Just make sure that you leave the evidence we need on site and don't leave until you are sure McNeil is well and truly dead” Altman strongly insisted.

"I won't let you down Sir" Stevens confirmed.

"...and remember that you need to have your people in position in London before six o'clock" Altman reminded him "Years of planning will lead to that moment and I don't want it to be late."

"You can count on me Sir" Stevens confirmed before hanging up whereupon he turned around to look at the man in the back seat of the Range Rover "Terry, give our man at MI5 a bell, tell him I need full building plans, security layouts, CCTV feeds, the works for Bristol Temple Meads station in thirty minutes."

"No problem boss" the man in the back confirmed before getting on to a laptop computer he had alongside him.

"All right boys, look alive, eyes down for a full house" Stevens called over the radio to his other men "Game time, get tooled up, the whistle will blow in ninety minutes."

"Barrett!" Sir Richard called from the King William Street office where he had been on the couch most of the night grumbling and muttering "Get the car, I am getting out of here."

"Are you sure that is wise Sir?" Barrett asked as she popped her head around the office door "If anyone sees you there could be complications."

"My dear I have dealt with some of the most unpleasant scum on the planet over the last forty years" Sir Richard reassured her "I think I can handle this bunch of losers."

"Try telling that to your wife" Barrett responded wryly "She still hasn't forgiven you for that business in the Epping Forest last year yet has she?"

"Err no" Sir Richard was forced to humbly admit.

"All right Sir" Barrett agreed "I'll get the car, meet me outside in five minutes" she confirmed before leaving the room to head up to the surface by way of the creaky old lift.

Whilst he waited, Sir Richard returned to the laptop computer he had been studying and continued to read an interesting new report with an obvious sense of serious concern in his face.

"Now what are you up to my old friend?" he asked himself with instinctive curiosity.

"Ok Sir" Barrett confirmed as a few minutes later she dutifully got out of the driving seat of Sir Richard's brand new Aston Martin and went around to open the passenger side door for her superior who after looking on momentarily with a bit of understandable concern upon seeing his own very expensive car, duly got in.

"Please tell me you have only just got my car from the Section Fourteen car park where I left it and that you haven't been using it for the last four days?" Sir Richard asked as Barrett started the car and pulled out of Monument Street into the flow of traffic.

"Only for the last two days Sir" Barrett admitted "Anyway it was the only spare vehicle this department had left unless you want me to go all the way to Newport Docks to retrieve Amber's little Audi?"

"I really must con some more budget out of the Prime Minister the next time I see him" Sir Richard mused.

"Look at it this way Sir" Barrett remarked "I have three advanced driving qualifications, if you were really unlucky then Divisional Commander Caverner could have wound up driving it."

"Oh cripes" Sir Richard responded with wide eyes "It doesn't even bare thinking about."

"So where to Sir?" Barrett asked.

"The Yard" Sir Richard confirmed with a grim yet determined tone "As the old song says, there may be trouble ahead..."

"Tell me something I don't know Sir" Barrett admitted.

"How about we are being followed?" Sir Richard suggested as he looked in the wing mirror at the traffic queue behind them before double checking his suspicions by swinging around to look over his shoulder through the rear window.

"Way ahead of you Sir" Barrett confirmed "I guess sending your coat to the morgue to send our friends off the scent through their tracking device hasn't quite worked out."

"Looks like Americans to me" Sir Richard remarked "Standard formation of two sunglass wearing goons in a Ford saloon."

"Dark blue Mondeo about four cars back?" Barrett asked.

"That's the one" Sir Richard agreed.

"Buckle up" Barrett suggested as ahead the traffic lights began to change towards green "I'll lose them."

"There goes my no claims bonus" Sir Richard remarked as once she could manoeuvre, Barrett gunned the powerful engine and smartly pulled out of the traffic flow and accelerating away up the opposite side of the road before the oncoming traffic flow from the other side of the junction could reach them.

As Barrett expertly performed a high speed double hand brake turn across the junction much to Sir Richard's horror as he held on for grim death, the car that had been following them tried to follow only for them to be rammed broadside by an oncoming bus sending pieces of glass and vehicle bodywork scattering everywhere.

"You drive worse than my wife" Sir Richard wryly remarked as he looked back through the rear window at the carnage they were leaving behind at a rapid rate.

"Relax Sir" Barrett responded "We lost them didn't we? And without a scratch on the motor I may add."

"Point conceded" Sir Richard agreed "Unfortunately this little escapade does indicate one thing."

"Two I would have thought Sir" Barrett suggested "Leaks in our internal communications and clearly the opposition have someone very high up on the inside."

"Which makes the arrival of a certain gentleman on a flight from the United States this morning all the more significant and worrying" Sir Richard confirmed with a deeply foreboding tone.

"Morning Sidney" Jennifer Caverner called to her opposite number from the CIA Close Diplomatic Protection Service as she got out of her ministerial escort car outside the VIP Terminal at Heathrow Airport on the outskirts of West London.

"The lovely Jennifer as I live and breathe" Sidney Askwith responded with a smile before the typically tall American walked around the front of his own car to greet her "What brings you to this charming little neighbourhood?"

"I might ask the same of you mate" Jennifer replied as they shook hands "This is my turf after all."

"Got called down here by Grosvenor Square about an hour ago" Askwith explained "Apparently there is some big party coming in from the States on diplomatic passports and the powers that be want us riding shotgun whilst your lads provide the transport."

"Welcome to the party" Jennifer responded "Who's is the goon squad over there?" she asked indicating the group of tall suited men discreetly standing nearby who throughout remained motionless and uncomfortably still, hiding behind their identical matching dark glasses whilst the bulges in their jackets discreetly hinted at the concealed weapons that they were all carrying.

"Oh you mean the charmless brothers over there" Askwith remarked "They are new, latest directive from planet Langley, me thinks that someone somewhere is getting a bit paranoid about something all of a sudden."

"The CIA, paranoid?" Jennifer joked "Surely not?"

“Very funny” Askwith responded with a meek smile “Anyway as far as I am concerned this is your show so you lead the way and I will keep my boys quiet in the background.”

“Sounds good to me” Jennifer readily agreed whereupon they both looked around to the doors of the VIP Lounge as they slid open and a party of some ten distinguished looking men strode purposefully outside exuding extreme confidence in their step and their expressions.

“Bloody hell...” Askwith remarked upon recognising the leading man of the group “There is a face I thought I would never see again.”

“Who?” Jennifer responded “The tall guy in the expensive tailoring?” she asked.

“That’s him” Askwith confirmed “Erm William McCallister is his name” he recalled “Used to be some high ranking Senator until something happened a while back.”

“Perhaps he has come for a holiday” Jennifer remarked “although somehow I doubt it.”

“If he has actually got on a plane then he is definitely here on business” Askwith confirmed “but watch your back, he has a reputation for being a bit of a nasty piece of work.”

“It’s all right” Jennifer responded “I run the country’s most expensive taxi service for some really unpleasant people, I think I can handle this bunch” she confirmed “Catch you later.”

“Take care” Askwith responded before Jennifer returned to her car and opened the rear door for McCallister and two others of the group to get in.

“Divisional Commander Jennifer Caverner” she confirmed to them as they prepared to get in “Diplomatic and VIP Protection Section, welcome to London.”

“Thank you” McCallister confirmed in his drawling American accent before getting in the back of the car where he and his two associates were joined by one of the mysterious suited goons who had also been waiting for them, indeed one of these men proceeded to get into each car with the rest of the group, something which both Jennifer and Askwith noted with a concerned look.

“All a bit short notice Sir” Jennifer called to the back of the car as she got in the drivers seat with her colleague alongside in the front passenger seat “My office was unable to obtain an itinerary in time so where would you like to go Sir?”

“Downing Street” McCallister confirmed confidently “We are expected.”

“Sit back and enjoy the ride then Gentlemen” Jennifer confirmed before reaching for the radio “Echo Alpha One to Control” she called “Caravan Delta now leaving Heathrow, destination confirmed as Number Ten, E.T.A. in approximately forty five minutes.”

With an escort of Security Service motorcycle outriders joining them as they left the airport, the convoy with the CIA escort vehicles in close proximity as well was soon on its way scything its way through the busy traffic of west London heading for the centre of the city, the skyline of which rose ahead of them against a cloudy grey and ominous sky.

“Sorry to appear rude but I wonder could you give us some privacy my dear?” McCallister asked politely as they headed along the busy main road towards central London.

“Certainly Sir” Jennifer readily agreed as she reached down and pressed a button that raised a glass screen up between the front and the rear of the car, cutting off the passage of sound between them.

“So gentlemen, how are we doing if I may ask?” McCallister inquired.

“Everyone is in place Sir” Hoskins confirmed as he removed his sunglasses and consulted his Blackberry “A few minor details to sew up and we should be ready to go at six o'clock, the only thing left to sort out is the local domestic Security & Police Service.”

“Ah yes, the legendary Commander and his equally formidable wife” McCallister recalled “I shall be meeting with him as soon as I have finished stomping all over the Prime Minister” he confirmed with an almost gleeful look of expectancy.

“Unfortunately it looks like our man in Wales and his team are going to be a bit occupied for the next couple of hours” Hoskins confirmed “So I took the liberty of securing some alternative employees, in particular this man has been brought to my attention” he passed across a file to McCallister.

“Looks rather rough, who is he?” McCallister asked as he looked at the prison photograph of the subject in the front of the file.

“Someone that Haliford and his friends have been keeping on a retainer for just such an emergency” Hoskins explained “William Harcourt, a hard nut from the east end of London currently doing twenty years for amongst other things arranging the attempted assassination of the aforementioned Divisional Commander. Needless to say as a result of his incarceration he is ripe for revenge, something that we have encouraged so that when he is released he creates a really big distraction.”

“Leaving us to put our plans into place, I like it” McCallister agreed “Let's get him out and onto the streets, money no object.”

“Consider it done Sir” Hoskins confirmed as he duly proceeded to send a message through his Blackberry.

“What of operation mouse trap?” McCallister asked.

“Just give the word and our people will have the targets secured inside of thirty seconds” Hoskins explained “Team three are handling the logistics and we already have them in a secure location, all ready and waiting.”

“And our primary team?” McAllister’s tone turned even more insistent as he emphasised the importance of what was being planned “They are ready to go?”

“The materials arrived earlier today” Hoskins explained “We have the shut down codes ready to be initiated plus a sneaky little back up for that and we managed to disarm the Security Service at the same time.”

“You really do have to admire British efficiency don't you” McCallister remarked wryly “However I remind you all that the timing for this action is absolutely critical if we are to achieve maximum impact and most importantly of all persuasive power in the press” McCallister insisted.

“Well our generous benefactors in the media will happily take care of that” one of the associates in the car confirmed “Nice sensational yet tragic headline will get the papers flying off the news stands.”

“It is amazing what some people will do for money” Hoskins laughed “Speaking of which, our Russian and Welsh friends will be meeting us at the office in a little over two hours.”

“I like good old fashioned honest criminals who only think with their wallets” McCallister remarked wryly “Makes them so much easier to control and manipulate.”

“With the amount of money we have at our disposal that is a hell of a lot of persuasion” Hoskins agreed before being distracted by his Blackberry showing a new message that he took a moment to look at with a very interested expression.

“Something interesting there?” McCallister asked.

“Turns out our man Stevens and his team in Wales are now heading for Bristol” Hoskins explained “They want to know what you want to do when they intercept that little Irish irritation of ours only it would appear she, Stevens and no lesser a mortal than Divisional Commander Tracy Caverner herself are set to be at Bristol Temple Meads railway station at the same time, in approximately thirty minutes.”

“This could be an opportunity, a little more persuasive power” one of the associates ominously suggested “Think of it, a major terror incident at one of the country's largest transport interchanges outside of Greater London where no one would normally think of an act of terror ever occurring?”

“A very interesting idea gentlemen” McCallister agreed as he thought for a few moments “Very well” he declared, “Tell Stevens and his people to make it big and spectacular, the more bloodier the better but” he stressed “I want Tracy Caverner still alive, anyone else feel free to cut them to pieces.”

“I’ll make the call” Hoskins confirmed as he returned to his Blackberry “Pity we will miss the fun, sounds like it might be quite a rumble.”

“Don’t worry” McCallister responded sincerely “You will get your turn to have some fun, the next few days are going to be very lively I predict.”

As the helicopter approached the area of waste ground in Bristol not far from Temple Meads Station, a young uniformed Security officer looked on slightly nervously from the relative safety of his patrol car.

Amid a cloud of dust thrown up by the turbulence from the rotors, the Security Service helicopter landed on the ground whereupon Tracy alighted from the front passenger seat whilst Bob and his small hand picked Armed Response Unit team appeared from the rear and joined her before making their way across the grass and rubble strewn waste ground towards the car.

“Good morning Maam” the officer saluted, still rather nervous at being in the presence not so much of such a high ranking officer as a legend in the form of Tracy not to mention the formidable looking ARU team with her “Lieutenant Commander Vivian Jones” he confirmed “It would appear that I am now Acting Area Commander.”

“Relax” Tracy instructed with a smile “This your car?” she asked.

“Yes Maam” Jones confirmed.

“Ok then” Tracy declared as she got in the front passenger seat whilst Bob and his two ARU colleagues squeezed tightly into the back “This is your neighbourhood so you’re driving.”

“Station is only a few minutes away” Jones confirmed as he started the engine before driving off, slowly initially as he had to negotiate the rough waste ground before reaching the paved road “Your Commander Fuller is plugged into the National Rail computer and has confirmed whoever it is you are waiting for is due to arrive in about ten minutes.”

“Do any of your guys know what is going on?” Tracy asked as they sped along the road towards the station, the majestic arched roof of which could be seen ahead towering above most of the other buildings in the area.

“Only two of my own ARU guys” Jones confirmed “and then only basic facts, I have them checking out the station and surrounding area under the guise of a Transport Division routine security sweep right now.”

“In which case lets keep it that way” Tracy agreed “I want to get our two people off of that train and away securely without anyone knowing a thing about it.”

“Might be prudent to have a fast car standing by the rear exit of the place just in case anything does go pear shaped” Bob suggested as he consulted the plans of the station in the back of the car.

“I can arrange that” Jones confirmed.

“And as soon as our people are secure I want to go after those two numbskulls Altman and Stevens along with the rest of his crew” Tracy explained with clear determination “Their time in the crime business ends today.”

“I don’t think they will take too kindly to that Maam” Jones remarked “The last time our Serious Crimes lads tried to nail Altman they got their backsides seriously kicked and that was before his two grand an hour lawyers got involved.”

“Let’s just say lad I have much more direct methods” Tracy confirmed with an expectant grin.

“There goes the overtime budget again...” Bob wryly mused as the patrol car continued towards the Railway Station in the near distance.

William Harcourt was sat in his cell reading the newspaper and passing the time, something which thanks to his lengthy prison sentence he was certainly not short of. It was as he was reading that his senses picked up on footsteps on the metal balcony grating approaching the heavy metal door of his cell before stopping immediately outside.

“Seems we have guests...” Harcourt remarked to himself as he heard the keys jangle at the lock whereupon he put his newspaper down on the sparse bed that his cell was provided with and waited expectantly.

“Morning Bill” the tall well dressed man who was let in by the prison officer declared as he entered the cell, neatly dressed in well pressed tailored suit and carrying an expensive looking leather briefcase.

“Ah, Mr Corbin, I was wondering when you would be calling” Harcourt responded “Any news for me.”

“Could you give us a moment please” Corbin called to the prison officer stood in the doorway “You Governor has cleared it with the central office group.”

“Err yes, certainly Sir” the prison officer responded when he realised the significance of what Corbin had said before discreetly closing the cell door leaving the two men alone.

“I regret to inform you that your father is dead” Corbin explained.

“Oddly enough I know this” Harcourt wryly replied “He got shot dead by the Old Bill twenty years ago, he was in the process of robbing a Post Office in Debden at the time if I recall.”

“Well let’s just say for the purposes of our requirements and also your benefit that he has had a momentary return to form” Corbin continued to explain “You are to be released on compassionate grounds for a week to comfort your poor ill mother.”

“I’ll say she’s ill” Harcourt chuckled in his gruff deep voice ravaged by years of chain smoking and hard drinking “She snuffed it back in 1993.”

“A prison service van” Corbin explained “or at least a van that looks very much like one I should perhaps more accurately say will arrive at the prison in twenty minutes. All the paperwork has been pushed through by my superior’s very highly placed contacts and from then on you are a free man, well almost anyway.”

“Ah, here comes the catch” Harcourt responded “So what am I needed to do in return for this little deal?”

“Do what you do best Mr Harcourt” Corbin confirmed “Create havoc, fear, and confusion. You see we need to ensure that certain senior officers of the National Security & Police Service with whom you have had dealings with in the past are kept very busy over the next seventy two hours.”

“I think I can come up with a few things that is guaranteed to get their attention” Harcourt confirmed with a wicked grin as he thought about the task ahead with some obvious relish “Of course I am going to need a few things if you want me to get this done.”

“Oh believe me we have access to a lot of lovely little toys and the muscle to use them” Corbin agreed “All that we need is your imaginative leadership and a bit of good old fashioned brut force.”

“One Million, cash” Harcourt added with all seriousness “or I go nowhere.”

“Half when you arrive at your destination this afternoon and the other half upon completion of the job” Corbin confirmed.

“Nice old fashioned way of doing business, I like you Mr Corbin” Harcourt agreed, patting him on the back appreciatively which from Corbin’s side look reaction anyone could tell he did not appreciate. Even though he worked for some pretty unpleasant and ruthless people, he found being in Harcourt’s presence difficult as this was an evil violent man who would be prepared to do anything for money, power and sheer violent fun.

“There is one thing specific we need you to be aware of however” Corbin continued to explain “Timing is vital on this project, we need you to be in place at a specific location in central London at exactly 17:50 this evening where we have a specific target that we want you to attack.”

“Bank? Post Office?” Harcourt asked out of curiosity.

“Oh no Mr Harcourt” Corbin confirmed with more than a hint of mystery in his voice “Something far, far more interesting. You will be briefed when you reach your destination later today but suffice to say that once that initial job is out of the way the floor and the equipment we provide is yours to do with as much chaos as you please.”

“Where do I sign?” Harcourt asked with an evil chuckle.

As the convoy of cars and escorting Security Service vehicles swept quickly through the tall wrought Iron security gates and into Downing Street they were joined by a second group, a black Daimler limousine, itself with two Security Service motorcycle outriders as escort.

The usual encampment of press and television reporters on the pavement directly opposite the famous black door of Number Ten Downing Street looked on with a mixture of curiosity and bemusement at this sudden unadvertised arrival and some were even more surprised when they recognised the tall distinctive figure of controversial former US Senator William McCallister appear from the back of the lead car.

"Bloody hell" the man from the BBC remarked "Looks like someone is having a party" he commented as he then recognised the now former head of MI6 Sir John Haliford as he joined McCallister on the steps of Number Ten.

"Smile old friend" McCallister told Haliford as they shook hands warmly before facing the press and smiling gleefully for a few moments "We are about to make history."

"Sod history" Haliford responded jokingly "I am in this to make a disgustingly large amount of money."

"Ready?" McCallister asked as behind them the heavy black door opened and they turned to face inside.

"Absolutely old friend" Haliford resolutely confirmed before they proceeded inside with determined purposeful strides.

"They have arrived Prime Minister" the Personal Assistant in the outer office announced as she looked up from her desk at Haliford, McCallister and Hoskins who towered above her.

"All right..." the Prime Minister responded reluctantly "Send them in, and hold all calls please."

"You can go now in gentlemen" the Personal Assistant confirmed whereupon without further word the three men marched confidently into the Prime Minister's office.

"Prime Minister" Sir John Haliford proudly declared as he led the other two into the large ornate office, offering his hand which noticeably the Prime Minister only stood up to take slowly and with obvious reluctance

"Haliford" the Prime Minister responded "Won't you take a seat gentlemen?" he gestured ahead at the leather arm chairs.

"Why thank you" Haliford confirmed sitting down as did the others, all still maintaining looks of sheer and utter confidence on their faces throughout "May I introduce to you Christopher Hoskins, formerly of the United States National Security Agency and our new head of specialised operations in Europe and I am sure you recognise former Senator William McCallister?"

"Your reputation precedes you Sir" the Prime Minister confirmed "So that is the pleasantries over, do you care to skip the bullshit and cut to the chase?"

"A man who likes to get straight down to business, I like that" McCallister confirmed "Very well then, from six o'clock this evening the United Kingdom and Europe will fall under the jurisdiction of the new independent International Security Agency."

"Ha!" the Prime Minister responded "In your dreams matey."

"Once a dream of a few now soon to be the long hoped for reality for the many" Haliford responded poetically although the Prime Minister's look of doubt on his face clearly showed he was far from impressed.

"Think of it Prime Minister" McCallister responded "An independent force with the finance and the power to crush all global terrorist threats in the blink of an eye, restore financial security to the world economy and let the voters sleep soundly in their beds, all it needs is your signature."

"Shove it up your arse" the Prime Minister tersely responded.

"Ah, if only you would co-operate this would be so much easier on us all, especially you" Haliford remarked before looking across at Hoskins and nodding.

The Prime Minister looked on with an anticipatory sense of concern as he watched Hoskins make a telephone call which was short and to the point, consisting of one simple word delivered in a formal business like manner.

"Now" Hoskins declared before calmly hanging up.

"There is nothing you can do to threaten me or the integrity of this office" the Prime Minister strongly warned.

"Who said anything about threatening you?" McCallister casually responded "Oh I think you will find we have a whole different ball game in mind Prime Minister."

There was a tension filled few moments of silence in the room for a short while which saw contrasting attitudes from the two sides, Haliford and his colleagues sitting more than comfortably and with expectant looks whilst facing them the Prime Minister looked on still grimly determined that he was not giving any ground on this matter whatsoever.

Then with a shrill beep Hoskins Blackberry received a text message which he calmly looked at before smirking and then putting the device back in his pocket.

“It’s done” Hoskins then declared confidently.

“Thank you” Haliford responded as this news seemed to make him look even more confident that his goals would now be achieved.

“What’s done?” the Prime Minister asked “What the hell are you up to?” he demanded to know banging his fist on the desk in anger.

“In the interests of ‘national security’ I have had three people taken into protective custody” Haliford confirmed “To be precise your wife and two daughters who are currently on holiday in the Surrey I believe.”

“What?!?” the Prime Minister responded “They are protected by the VIP Protection Branch, you cannot possibly get even remotely close to them.”

“Such naivety in one supposedly in charge of this great nation” Haliford responded with a wry tone “You would be a fool to think that this project of ours was dreamed up in the space of a few days. We have been planning it for two years, putting our people and those who sympathise with our aims in key places throughout Government and all associated agencies, this includes the VIP Protection Branch where the two officers assigned to protect your family just happen to work for us.”

“It’s amazing what can be achieved when you spread a little money about the place” McCallister gruffly remarked with a laugh.

“I demand that you release them immediately” the Prime Minister responded directly, his emotions being a confused mix of fear, anger, confusion, shock and determination which together was causing him to become disorientated as he tried to think about what to do.

“They will come to no harm” Haliford explained “Just as long as we can count on your unconditional co-operation and you sign our documentation, then we will be on your way and your family will be released unharmed in a couple of days.”

The Prime Minister realised he now had no choice but to sign the documentation that he had been presented with so with slow reluctance he took the documents and then proceeded to sign them before throwing them back across the desk in disgust.

“Thank you” Haliford declared as he took the documents and placed them back into his briefcase “You won’t regret this.”

“I am going to fight you every step of the way on this” the Prime Minister warned tersely.

“Give it your best shot” McCallister encouraged with a laugh as he and the two others got up “Thanks to these documents” he indicated Haliford’s briefcase “we now have more power in this country than you and the National Police & Security Service combined.”

“You may be surprised at what we can achieve under pressure” the Prime Minister calmly warned “See you in hell gentlemen” he then dismissed them.

“I think that is our cue” Haliford remarked “Good day” he declared before he and the other left, closing the door behind them.

In response the Prime Minister threw the pen he was still holding angrily at the door where it broke into several pieces from the impact and crashed to the floor before he looked across his desk at the picture of his family where he was now at a loss at what to do next.

Getting up from his desk he went over to the window that looked down onto Downing Street where he could see the car containing the men who had just left departing along with the other vehicles that made up the convoy. It was as the last car left that the Prime Minister had an idea and returned to the desk.

“Emma, cancel all my appointments for the rest of the day” he instructed over his intercom to the Personal Assistant in the outer office “No calls except from List Alpha contacts and then get me a secure line to Jennifer Caverner of the VIP Protection Division.”

“Yes Sir” the Personal Assistant confirmed, evidently by her tone somewhat surprised at this uncharacteristic request from the Prime Minister but she did not question it.

“It will be all right, I promise” the Prime Minister confirmed towards the photograph of his family “Even if I have to personally chase them to the end of the world to do it.”

“Aren’t you supposed to be dead?” Fuller asked from his position at the top of a step ladder as he saw Sir Richard Crowthorne in the corridor of the top floor of New Scotland Yard.

“I get that feeling quite a lot” Sir Richard wryly admitted “Anyway I was getting bored down there so I thought I would do some sightseeing.”

“That is a new way of describing a raid on the New Scotland Yard drinks cabinet I must say” Lieutenant Barrett remarked.

“You know you fit perfectly into Section Fourteen my dear” Sir Richard responded “You are way to cynically minded for any ordinary job.”

“Compliments will get you nowhere Sir” Barrett joked in response.

“Anyway what are you doing with that thing?” Sir Richard asked seeing the electronic device in Fuller’s hand which he was using to scan inside the ceiling access panel.

“You know the old saying, walls have ears and all that?” Fuller explained when he looked down at the device as it beeped indicating something had been found whereupon he went back up to the top of the ladder.

“And ceilings as well it would appear” Barrett remarked as she and Sir Richard looked up the ladder as Fuller began to scramble about in amongst a series of cable runs in the ceiling void.

“You couldn’t pass me that torch from the toolkit could you?” Fuller asked down, indicating a rather disorganised jumble of tools and equipment in an old ice cream tub on the floor at the base of the ladder.”

“Err yes, here you go” Sir Richard confirmed as he extracted the battered old torch before passing it up.

“Ah there you are my little beauty” Fuller declared with a sense of satisfaction before he duly produced a small electronic device with some wires attaching it to one of the conduit runs which he cut with a pair of snips before handing it down to Sir Richard “Have a look at that, been finding these all over the place today.”

“Nice” Sir Richard confirmed “Looks like a Class Seven listening device, one of the ones they used for data intercept.”

“Figures” Fuller agreed “This is the main computer network conduit for the entire building up here.”

“May I?” Barrett asked whereupon Sir Richard duly passed it across to her to look at “So where has this come from then?” she asked.

“Best guess someone with a lot of contacts, influence and of course money” Fuller confirmed “These little beauties do not come cheap nor do you just purchase them off of EBay.”

“Have you found any more of these?” Sir Richard asked concerned.

“The place is riddled with them” Fuller confirmed “Someone must have spent weeks putting these in, probably whilst the place was being redecorated last month, they only take seconds to install, the skill is knowing exactly where to put them for best effect.”

“Does go some way to explaining how we seem to be always one step behind this lot” Barrett remarked.

“Well in addition to these little beauties I also found several of these” Fuller confirmed as he climbed down from the ladder before producing a plastic bag full of more devices which he passed across to them “Looks like they have also been tapping into our telephone and radio systems as well, including the secure lines to the Prime Minister, the United Nations and the Commander’s personal private line, not that he ever uses that one mind.”

“Whoever is behind this must have a hell of a lot of cash to pull something this big and sophisticated off without us noticing” Sir Richard confirmed “Just adds fuel to the fire of my fears I am afraid.”

“Yeah well try this proverbial can of petrol on the flames of fear” Fuller continued “I called my opposite number in MI5, Nigel Foreman last night and suggested he check over their place, he has spent most of the morning finding similar devices to what I have turned up here, along with an old KGB bug he found in the toilets.”

“The Russians are coming” Barrett joked.

“Not in this case” Fuller confirmed “The best before date on its battery was 1969 so I think we can safely say that was a long forgotten one from the Cold War whose time was up long before this lot kicked off.”

“Well I best leave you to it” Sir Richard confirmed “I need to see the Commander urgently.”

“Need a hand?” Barrett asked Fuller as he ascended back up the step ladder.

“Join the party” Fuller confirmed as Sir Richard headed off down the corridor towards the Commander’s office with a noticeably determined pace.

“Well that went about as well as could be expected” Haliford remarked as he, Hoskins and McCallister relaxed in the back of the car as it made its way out of the end of Downing Street still under full Security Service escort.

“Do you think the Prime Minister will give us any trouble?” Hoskins asked.

“No” Haliford confirmed confidently “As long as we have his family which combined with the various sympathisers we have in the Government and Civil Service I think that we can safely say he will be fully co-operative. It is not like he has any real power anyway, Civil Servants run the Government, politicians are really only there to put a public face on it all, rubber stamp the policies and claim the expenses.”

“And take the fall when it all goes horribly wrong of course” McCallister confirmed.

“Yes, it is amazing what accidentally dropping a carefully forged copy of a memo on a train out of Waterloo just as a member of the esteemed press gets on board can do” Haliford remarked with a chuckle “Anyway our biggest problem will be the Commander and his wife, how is our little distraction plan coming on?”

“Bristol goes live in the next few minutes” Hoskins confirmed “That should have Divisional Commander Caverner well and truly occupied for a while whilst we prep, equip and deliver our new friend Mr Harcourt into the mix.”

“Stir thoroughly and bake at gas mark five for a few hours then serve” Haliford declared with a satisfactory grin “Outstanding gentlemen, outstanding.”

“With a little luck, a lot of provocation in the right places and some carefully placed money it should be utter anarchy on the streets come ten to six tonight” Hoskins confirmed “Then the London Bridge project will go live at six and we gentlemen will own this place.”

As the car continued slowly through the mid morning traffic approaching Parliament Square, Jennifer Caverner, driving glanced in the rear view mirror and managed to pick up a few words being said by the men in the back despite the sound proof screen between them by way of lip reading their reflections in her rear view mirror.

She had managed to spot the words Bristol and London Bridge but being out of the loop with what was going on at that time unlike her twin sister she did not immediately recognise the significance of what was being said. Unfortunately just as it appeared that she was starting to get a grip on the conversation she was eavesdropping on, her mobile telephone in the hands free holder on the lower dashboard began to bleep ominously.

“What the hell is that all about?” Jennifer asked herself as she looked at the display as a text message appeared on the screen which after reading it and seeing the sensitive nature of who it had been sent by, quickly deleted it. It read simply:

‘Victor Alpha One. Code 99. Urgent you call Sapphire immediate. Eyes Only’

“There goes my plans for a quiet afternoon” Jennifer remarked as she drove on but then looked once again in the rear view mirror at the three men in the back and for a moment began to wonder if these two events may be connected.

“What the hell are you doing here?” the Commander asked as Sir Richard came into his office “You are supposed to be dead you know.”

“Let’s just say something came up” Sir Richard confirmed “Or to be more precise someone, a situation that has been exacerbated since talking to young Simon out there just now.”

“Ah yes, he was telling me earlier apparently not all the bugs in this place are in the canteen after all” the Commander confirmed “Oh this office is clear by the way, I chucked the bugs we found in here out of the window about half an hour ago.”

“Mind if I...?” Sir Richard indicated the decanter on the side table.

“Be my guest” the Commander agreed “If you don’t mind me saying so you look like hell. Have you slept at all?”

“No not really” Sir Richard was forced to admit as he poured himself a very large drink “I think we may be about to have a very unpleasant experience from our American friends.”

“Still no word on where David Howell has disappeared to” the Commander confirmed “The name of the NSA spook that carted him off appears to be a Christopher Hoskins but when Fuller tried to run his name through the database he got the proverbial electronic equivalent of a go forth and multiply.”

“He’s small fry” Sir Richard confirmed having gulped down the drink practically in one gulp “It is his potentially disastrous boss I am more concerned about.”

“Anyone I know?” the Commander asked.

“This man came into Heathrow along with about ten aides and associated flunkys including at least three CIA covert surveillance experts about an hour ago” Sir Richard confirmed as he produced a photograph from inside his coat pocket.

“Who is this goon?” the Commander asked as he looked at the CCTV still that Sir Richard had managed to acquire.

“Former US Senator William Wilberforce McCallister” Sir Richard confirmed, still clearly on edge about something to do with this development.

“Wasn’t he the guy quoted in Time Magazine as saying Guantanamo Bay was a good idea?” the Commander recalled vaguely.

“Not your usual reading material Commander” Sir Richard remarked.

“Actually it was Jack’s, he had borrowed my Railway Modeller” the Commander explained “It was either that or Tracy’s Motor Cycle News” he admitted.

“Well you are right” Sir Richard confirmed “Not only did Senator McCallister advocate the creation and use of Guantanamo Bay he also actively campaigned both in the Senate and in the private sector for the creation of further such detention camps worldwide and that is before we even get started on his views on extraordinary rendition, use of torture, detention without charge, I think you get the picture.”

“I do indeed” the Commander grimly confirmed “So what happened to him?”

“Well, change of President means a change of regime” Sir Richard explained “Ironic when you think about it, there was this Senator and his odious hangers on actively campaigning for regime change and the one that actually did happen was in their own country via a ballot box. Needless to say his radical ideas were well and truly out of kilter with public opinion so as soon as the new President and his team were in place he was quietly kicked out with a flea in his ear.”

“I bet he didn’t take too kindly to that” the Commander remarked “I know from experience that there is nothing more dangerous than a determined loose cannon on the deck that has lost his meal ticket.”

“He used to head the joint Senate committee on national security” Sir Richard continued “Effectively directed the CIA and NSA from his desk in Washington D.C., it was even rumoured he had his own brother in law assassinated in a car crash after he hit his wife a few years back.”

“Charming fellow” the Commander commented “So assuming the ego has landed as it were, what exactly is he doing here?”

“Best guess I would suspect he is probably the big face behind whatever is coming” Sir Richard confirmed “He has a lot of connections, many in some very unsavoury places so if he has any say in this I think we can safely say he has some sort of plan for some new International Security Agency, privately funded and potentially unstoppable.”

“Bring extraordinary rendition and other associated techniques to the UK and Europe?” the Commander asked astonished “The Prime Minister and the Government would never sign off on it, well not unless they wanted the Civil Liberties mob down their throat for the next ten years.”

“He, Haliford and some of his flunkys left Downing Street after a brief meeting with the Prime Minister about ten minutes ago, they are on their way over here I believe” Sir Richard confirmed.

“Janice” the Commander called over the intercom to the outer office “There may be a party of disreputable gentlemen on their way up shortly, let me know when they arrive.”

“Yes Sir” the Personal Assistant confirmed as in the office Sir Richard recharged his glass once more.

“Well I reckon he must have some angle worked out otherwise even McCallister would not waste his time” Sir Richard cautiously responded “If he is here, he means business and you can bet he has the people, resources and finance to pull it off.”

“I could declare him an unwelcome undesirable and pack him back to the US on the first flight, preferably in the Diplomatic Bag that is” the Commander suggested.

“With his contacts in the State Department all you would do is ignite a major diplomatic row and let all hell break loose” Sir Richard warned.

“A fight, lovely” the Commander jokingly rubbed his hands together with expectant glee but it turned out to be short lived as the intercom from the outer office bleeped.

“Commander, that party you were expecting are on their way up” the Personal Assistant in the outer office suddenly announced over the intercom.

“Bloody hell, that was quick” Sir Richard responded.

"Stall them as long as you can" the Commander requested before turning to Sir Richard.

"Considering my current status" Sir Richard remarked as he finished his drink with some urgency in a single gulp "I think now is the time for a discrete exit."

"Hide in Tracy's office" the Commander indicated the connecting door in the side wall.

"An excellent idea" Sir Richard agreed.

"And take the good stuff with you" the Commander added as he reached across to the side cabinet and took out another decanter of whisky "These nut jobs are only getting the cheap stuff."

"Have fun" Sir Richard remarked as he tugged his forelock before disappearing through the connecting door.

Initially thinking he was alone in Tracy's office, Sir Richard relaxed for a moment only to then suddenly spin around when the light was switched on and an arm carrying an old gun appeared from behind the curtain.

"Morning Sergei" Sir Richard remarked as soon as he realised who it was "I know it's you, I would recognise that old Cold War Soviet antique anywhere."

"It ages well and still works" Glasgow confirmed "Sadly unlike its owner" he admitted wryly as he lowered the gun and stepped out from the shadows.

"I know the feeling" Sir Richard admitted "So I guess you and I are in the same boat then?"

"For the first time in many years I am a popular and wanted man" Glasgow admitted "Unfortunately it is by the most unpleasant people and for all the wrong reasons."

"Join the club" Sir Richard humbly agreed "Anywhere what the hell are you doing sneaking around the top floor of Scotland Yard?" he asked.

"Keeping out of the way" Glasgow confirmed "After all surely here is the last place anyone is going to look?"

"You may have a point there" Sir Richard admitted as the two men sat down whereupon he proffered the decanter "Drink?" he asked.

"Constantly" Glasgow agreed as he produced his glass.

“So how is the ulcer?” Sir Richard asked as he duly filled Glasgow’s glass.

“Anesthetising nicely” Glasgow freely admitted with a chuckle as he duly drank the contents of the glass in one whole go.

"We are now approaching Bristol Temple Meads" the Conductor announced over the PA system as the train slowed on approach to the impressive and dominating Victorian era overall roof of the main railway station in the City.

"Is it warm in here or am I just nervous?" Martin asked as he and Amber rose from their seats and along with other passengers began to make their way towards the doors at the far end of the carriage

“Given how reliable this piece of junk is it sure as hell ain’t the heating mate” the Conductor remarked with a chuckle as he passed them down the aisle “You two going to be all right?” he asked.

“I think we have it covered” Amber confirmed with a smile that just about disguised a grimace of pain from her injuries “Thank you for your help.”

“You are welcome” the Conductor agreed “An unusual start to an otherwise fairly uneventful day” he admitted before leaving them to undertake his station duties as the train drew to a halt at the platform.

As the doors opened, the passengers began to alight, many of them also unloading large suitcases and bicycles which meant that Martin and Amber had to wait a minute or two before they could get off.

“Looks like we have a welcoming committee” Amber pointed ahead up the length of the platform where coming towards them through the crowds they could see the uniformed presence of Tracy Caverner coming towards them with Bob and his colleague escorting her either side and a little behind, both of whom towered over the Divisional Commander.

“And a friendly one too” Martin agreed.

“Wow, that really is Tracy Caverner herself isn’t it?” Amber remarked.

There was still about a hundred feet between them as the crowds on the platform began to clear but just as Amber and Alan were about to start to walk towards Tracy and her group there was a sudden volley of gunfire, the shots echoing all around the lofty interior of the train shed roof and sending people into an instant panic of screams.

“Move, move, move” Bob called urgently but calmly to the general public as he and his colleague tried to provide cover for their escape to a place of safety.

Martin’s instant reaction to the sudden outburst of gunfire that seemed to originate from somewhere above and behind them was to grab Amber and throw her to the ground behind a bench on the platform, this being about the only available shelter.

“Don't you ever get tired of being shot at?” Martin asked.

“Yes, welcome to my world” Amber wryly admitted to Martin as they looked around to try and see what was going on just as Tracy, her gun already drawn in response joined them.

“Hi” Tracy called “Does trouble follow you two around or something?” she wryly asked as a further burst of gunfire impacted into the surface of the platform narrowly missing where they were.

“Lately, well yes actually” Amber admitted “It’s an honour to meet you Divisional Commander” she confirmed.

“Guv!” Bob was heard to shout from over behind a pillar about fifty feet away “We got two gunmen on the upper level and I think they have friends who appear a tad pissed” he indicated urgently towards the far end of the station where a group of four armed men in balaclavas were approaching.

“What is this?” Tracy asked “A convention?”

“Next person who moves gets killed!” the lead man of the group called loudly.

“That’s Stevens” Amber confirmed to Tracy recognising the voice from her earlier encounters “He is bad news with knobs on.”

“I’ve read his C.V.” Tracy confirmed grimly.

“Hand over that little Irish bitch or we start perforating everyone in the building” Stevens called defiantly, backing up his threat by firing his automatic weapon indiscriminately around above his head.

“Nice to be popular isn’t it?” Amber mused.

“Give it up man” Tracy called back “We knew you were coming, the whole station is surrounded by armed officers and you don’t stand a chance.”

“Do I really look like someone who cares?” Stevens responded gruffly “You have thirty seconds to come out and then I start having some real fun.”

“That would be a no then?” Martin asked.

“Even if you went out there” Tracy warned “he will still cut you two, me and everyone else to pieces in an instant and enjoy the experience into the bargain.”

“I think I can get the guy in the roof just to our left” Amber confirmed quietly to Tracy as she looked upwards and carefully got her gun out of her coat pocket and checked it.

“Are you sure?” Tracy asked back.

“Trust me” Amber responded.

“I am going to confront this Muppet face to face” Tracy confirmed “When I have his attention, take that guy out then when you can you two make a run for it.”

“Here, take this and give it to your Simon Fuller” Amber passed Tracy the memory stick “It is the contents of Steven Altman’s laptop hard drive, it is encoded but he should be able to crack it if he is worth one tenth of his reputation.”

“You two ready?” Tracy asked apprehensively.

“Err no not really but now is a good time as any I guess” Martin confirmed whilst Amber, still maintaining her constant watch on her intended target merely nodded.

“In which case good luck you two” Tracy confirmed whereupon she stood up from behind the bench and stepped forward holding her arms outwards with her gun loose on her index finger. In response Stevens and his men took aim and maintained it on Tracy as she approached.

“I’ll give you this girl” Stevens “you have some guts, should be interesting to see what they look like when I slice you to little pieces.”

“I’ll pass on that thanks” Tracy responded with clear revulsion for the sick piece of filth that was stood a short distance away from her “How about we skip to the part where you put down your weapons and I have you dragged off in a straight jacket to the nearest funny farm?”

“Just hand over that little bitch” Stevens demanded.

“No...” Tracy calmly and defiantly replied.

“Say goodnight matey” Amber remarked as she took aim and fired off two shots which struck her target. A moment later everyone was instinctively looking up as a man fell from the roof space and crashed to the platform surface, everyone that is except for Tracy, Bob and his colleague who took the opportunity to rush the armed men.

Tracy was the first to strike out, quickly swinging her gun back into her hand, bringing it to bear on one of Steven’s men and shooting him clean in the forehead.

Bob took out the second man whilst his colleague took out the third whereupon Stevens suddenly found himself disarmed as Tracy angrily swung around and high spin kicked the gun from his hand before she and Bob grabbed him and tackled him to the ground.

“Let’s go” Amber declared.

“Best idea I have heard all morning” Martin agreed whereupon he quickly got up, grabbed Amber’s hand and helped her to her feet before they quickly made for a side exit a short distance away where they quickly merged in amongst the crowds of passengers who were evacuating from the station, many in a blind panic.

“Get the hell off of me bitch” Stevens protested as he managed to shake Tracy and Bob off of him thanks to his exemplary strength whereupon he scrambled back to his feet and started to make a run for it towards the main exit.

“Oh no you don’t” Tracy determinedly responded as she and Bob promptly gave chase.

“Covering fire!” Stevens then called whereupon two more armed men appeared from an alcove and together with the one remaining gunman still in the roof space they opened fire, pining Bob and Tracy down in the shadow of a train whose body side was being rapidly wrecked by piercing gunshots.

“Bloody hell, these guys are serious” Bob remarked “Never spotted the back up team at all.”

“Lima Alpha One to Whiskey Delta One Zero Two” Tracy called into her radio as she ducked briefly when she became showered in broken glass from the shattered window of the train they were in the shadow of “We need back up, lots of it right now or we are all dead.”

“Well you heard the lady” Jones called to his own division’s Armed Response Unit “Get in there and save the day.”

“Hold your ears guys” Bob called as he squinted and aimed around the corner before opening fire, firing six shots in rapid succession which saw one of the gunmen drop to the floor and another withdraw injured.

“Good shot” Tracy responded.

“I think I have winged the guy in the roof boss” the ARU officer with Bob confirmed after firing two rounds upwards whereupon the random shots from that direction ceased almost immediately.

“Armed officers!!” came the sudden shout which echoed all around the interior of the now largely empty station complex as a group of ARU officers sent in by Commander Jones charged in, guns raised and clearly meaning business “Put your guns down and take two steps back with your hands up, NOW!!”

On this cue Bob, Tracy and the other officer came out and confronted the group of gunmen from the opposite direction, blocking them in on both sides.

“Do it!” Tracy insisted seeing the gunmen's reluctance to lower their weapons although they had at least ceased fire and were holding their arms out “I warn you gentlemen that this has been a hell of a morning so far and I am not in the best of moods so please don't try my patience as I haven't got any!”

Wisely the gunmen complied and dropped their weapons to the ground where they clattered onto the hard concrete before they were swiftly wrestled to their knees by the ARU officers who had them quickly searched, disarmed and restrained.

“Right lets have a look at you” Tracy declared as she confidently stepped forward and one by one removed the balaclavas from the three detained men but found none of them to be Stevens.

“I take it these are not he Maam?” Bob asked seeing Tracy's look of concern whereupon she started to look around with a worried look.

“Jones!” she called across the concourse “I want this building and everything around it for two hundred metres sealed, secured and checked in the next ninety seconds!”

“On it Maam” Jones confirmed before rounding up his officers “Come on lads, lets get this place buttoned up” he declared before leading them from the building.

“Bob, you stay here and keep our new friends company” Tracy requested as she drew her gun from its holster once more, inserted a fresh clip of ammunition and looked around “I'll be back in a minute.”

“Right Maam” Bob confirmed although he was somewhat concerned to see Tracy going off on her own back into the depths of the station but it was her orders so there was nothing he could do about it.

Inside the main platform area of the station the air was filled with the ticking over of diesel engines from the three trains that were there that had been abandoned in a hurry. The only other sounds were of distant sirens outside and the flapping of a few restless pigeons in the roof space, a constant feature of many railway stations.

Tracy approached the main ticket hall with caution as she looked around for any sign of where Stevens might have gone but there was nothing, only a few abandoned bags lying on the ground from where people had fled in panic a few minutes earlier.

Suddenly a sound attracted Tracy's attention which prompted her to move to her left and down the length of one of the abandoned trains. Again she found nothing of significance and was about to reluctantly give up when she was taken by surprise by Stevens jumping down on top of her from the carriage roof.

Before she could do anything, the considerably larger and stronger Stevens had Tracy in his grip like a rag doll, a throttle hold around her neck meaning she could now barely breathe.

“I am going to enjoy this” Stevens declared defiantly “I have never broken such a senior neck as yours before” he confirmed manically.

“Let her go!” Bob called as he appeared and trained his gun on Stevens with a determined look but with Tracy held in front of him there was no clear shot that did not put her at risk and Stevens clearly knew it.

“Looks like we have a stand off” Stevens declared.

“Feels more like resisting arrest to me” Tracy managed to remark despite being short of breath from the strangle hold he had on her.

“The whole place is surrounded” Bob informed Stevens “You have nowhere to run so be sensible and let her go.”

“I don't think he really does sensible” Tracy remarked.

“Shut up bitch” Stevens almost shouted in Tracy's ear “Even if you did take me in, I have very powerful friends that will have me back out on the streets with a record clean as a whistle before you can say Immunity Certificate. You have no idea whatsoever who you are dealing with do you?”

“A violent scum bag who gets his rocks off inflicting torture and pain on others according to your record” Bob confirmed after noticing Tracy mouth the words 'keep him talking' silently to him.

“Flattery will get you nowhere” Stevens responded with a wry smile as he reaffirmed his grip around Tracy's neck but as he was doing this he failed to notice that she had managed to reach into her pocket and find something.

The next thing Stevens knew was when he felt a sudden stabbing pain in his leg which caused him to let go of Tracy whereupon he looked down to see a knife in his left thigh.

Tracy collapsed to the ground but quickly recomposed herself, got to her feet and lashed out at Stevens, kicking him so hard that he fell backwards to the ground with quite a loud and painful sounding crunch.

“You will have to do better than that bitch!” Stevens responded, still as defiant as ever.

“Yes you are probably right” Tracy calmly admitted “How about this for starters?” she asked as she brought her gun to bear and shot Stevens in the left kneecap without any hesitation.

“Now that has got to hurt...” Bob remarked as he looked on somewhat astonished.

“I suggest that if you wish to retain the function of your other knee along with any other more vital areas of your body” Tracy informed him “you should start co-operating and play nice, all right?”

“All right” Stevens conceded, his hands raised ahead of him in meek surrender.

“Bob” Tracy called back “Have this stinking piece of crap packed up and loaded on the first Black Maria back to London.”

“My pleasure Maam” Bob confirmed.

"Good morning Commander" Haliford joyously announced as he entered the office along with Hoskins and McCallister however his happy greeting was not well received as the Commander merely remained sat behind his desk, visibly unmoved.

"Sir William Haliford and guests" the Commander remarked "So what can I do for you gentlemen only my time is precious."

"Well we were hoping to meet with both you and your lovely wife" Haliford explained.

"She's out on an investigation" the Commander confirmed "I'll pass on your message, if it is worth bothering with that is."

"The opportunity for a safer world through strength, co-operation and determination" Haliford declared "Believe me Commander it is worth it."

"Sounds like you have spent too long in focus groups thinking up new tag lines for your website" the Commander remarked "Ever considered going into advertising?"

"May I take this opportunity to introduce my learned colleagues" Haliford continued "This is Christopher Hoskins, head of European Operations and our esteemed founding father as it were former Senator William McCallister."

"Gentlemen" the Commander courteously responded "So what exactly is all this about?"

"Thirty minutes ago the Prime Minister signed this document" Haliford passed across a piece of paper for the Commander to look at which prompted him to get his small half square framed reading glasses out and balance them on the end of his nose "That is a copy for your reference by the way."

"International Security Agency" the Commander read from the top of the document "That logo alone must have set you back all of twenty quid for a starter."

"As of six o'clock this evening, we go live across the United Kingdom" Hoskins explained "An elite international anti terrorist unit with world wide powers independent of Government and United Nations restrictions."

"We are taking the fight against terrorism private" McCallister declared proudly, a turn of phrase that merely had the Commander roll his eyes upwards in disbelief "No more restrictions, no more this we do not do, the gloves are off and the bad guys will be crushed under our mighty boot."

"You will have to excuse me gentlemen, I seem to be drowning in clichés" the Commander wryly retorted "or bullshit, I can never usually tell the difference."

"I appreciate it may take some time for your to accept our presence" Hoskins readily agreed "but I can assure you that the vast majority of our work will be done with the co-operation of you and your Service and most of the time you won't even know we are here."

"We had a perfectly good working relationship with the CIA until yesterday" the Commander responded "Where is David Howell if I may ask and indeed if my suspicions are correct David Collins as well for that matter?"

"Gardening leave" Haliford firmly but politely insisted in a tone that meant he was not prepared to discuss that particular subject any further.

"Ironic considering according to his wife David Collins can't even grow mould" the Commander commented.

"As I was saying" Haliford continued "operations will commence at six o'clock this evening with a press conference scheduled to take place at the Queen Elizabeth II Conference Centre later this morning."

"And then back to the plush new headquarters to admire the spanking brand new shag pile in your new office and enjoy an evening soiree of wine and a vol-au-vent or three?" the Commander asked.

"You are welcome to pop around and say hello" Haliford confirmed openly.

"I am more a tea and bacon buttie man myself" the Commander admitted.

"Yes, so it says in your file" Hoskins remarked.

"Ah, so you have been doing your homework" the Commander responded "So tell me what else does your information on me along with your inside sources that I have spent most of the morning trying to track down and shoot actually tell you?"

"You are a man of great pride in what you do" Hoskins confirmed "You are as married to the National Security & Police Service as you are to your wife Tracy, numerous commendations, awards for bravery, indeed you have literally saved this country twice."

"I keep myself busy" the Commander admitted with a wry smile.

"As do we Commander" Hoskins continued "We already have credible intelligence that we intend to act on that a terrorist attack on London may take place within the next twenty four hours, persistent rumours of terrorist cells abound."

"You only have to look at that terrible shooting incident in Bristol not half an hour ago" McCallister remarked "Innocent people dropped into the middle of a fire fight between armed terrorists and your brave Service officers."

"I know the BBC News Channel works fast but even they have not managed to fully cover that story yet" the Commander responded.

"Friends in low places as a certain former colleague of mine used to say" Haliford explained "Trust me Commander we are very well connected."

"I don't doubt it" the Commander agreed "So who is paying the bill for this little band wagon of yours then?" he asked.

"Private finance" McCallister confirmed proudly "International firms and individuals who only have the goal of world peace..."

"...and the safety of their wallets..." the Commander muttered under his breath.

"...as their objective" McCallister concluded.

"How the hell did you get the Prime Minister to green light this bollocks?" the Commander asked as he flicked through the signed document with disdain.

"Our backers have many fingers in many pies" Haliford explained "we simply pointed out to him that given the delicate nature of the global economy at the moment that it would be a terrible shame if something were to upset the balance and plunge this country into a financial crisis from which he and his Government could never possibly recover."

"Tell me, does your brief cover international blackmail?" the Commander retorted "because that is what it basically amounts to."

"What our backers and supporters do in their daily business dealings and where they do it is entirely up to them" McCallister explained "Of course there will always be a certain amount of cross curricular interaction, you know, every action has an equal and opposite reaction."

"Like for example I kick you up the jacksi and you go yelp" the Commander responded.

"Charming..." Hoskins responded with a meek grin.

"None of this impresses me so far gentlemen" the Commander declared.

"It doesn't have to" Haliford responded "The Prime Minister has already signed the agreement, you are required to give us your co-operation whenever we require it and without hesitation or question."

The Commander said nothing in response, merely looked across at the three men from behind his desk still visibly unmoved and unimpressed.

"We can start with this" Hoskins passed across a file document to the Commander "This is a list of people that we would like immediately taken into custody and handed over to us for immediate extraordinary processing and interrogation."

"Why don't you ship the entire population of Finsbury Park off to Guantanamo Bay while you are at it?" the Commander joked.

"One thing at a time Commander" McCallister coolly responded

"And this is a list of people who we would like to have their records cleared with immediate effect" Hoskins passed across another piece of paper to which the Commander looked at with incredulous eyes.

"Crook" the Commander ran his finger down the list of names which included the likes of Alexander Cruschov amongst them "major crook, obnoxious crook, murdering crook, major obnoxious murdering crook, lunatic, about the only thing not here is a list of Home Secretary's. Are you serious?"

"Deadly Commander" Hoskins responded.

"Well I know what I can do with this" the Commander responded as he calmly took the list, tore it in half before taking a match, striking it against the edge of the desk and setting light to the paper whereupon he dropped it into the waste paper bin alongside.

"Ah..." Haliford responded with a tone of disappointment although deep down knowing the Commander as well as he did he was not that surprised by the response "I was hoping for something a little more positive."

"If you think I am releasing and or pardoning Grade A scum bags such as Alexander Cruschov and other associated lunatics you have another thing coming" the Commander strongly warned.

"Look Commander, we don't actually need the co-operation of you and your Service" McCallister pointed out "The powers we have been granted and the experience that our group contains mean we are more than capable of operating independently of state run Security Services such as yours."

"You will find gentlemen that when sufficiently motivated I can put a lot of proverbial flies in your ointment and spanners in your works" the Commander calmly responded with a wry grin.

"So we have heard" McCallister readily agreed "which is why we want you to work with us, not against us. There are things we can help you with too."

"Such as?" the Commander asked.

"Take this intelligence we received just this morning" Hoskins produced a file and passed it across to the Commander "A bungling civil servant issues the wrong name on a prison release form and before you know it a very dangerous criminal is back on the streets."

"Jesus Christ..." the Commander responded as he looked with concern at the name in the file before him "Where the hell did you get this?" he asked.

“Casual back channel communications” Hoskins confirmed casually “Things come up in conversation, this was one of them so as a courtesy to you in the spirit of co-operation I thought I would look into it and pass it on. I believe you have had dealings with this man?”

“More my wife than me” the Commander confirmed “Thank you for bringing it to my attention.”

“My pleasure” Hoskins confirmed.

“Well I am afraid we must be going” Haliford confirmed as he checked his watch with a slightly concerned look, one that the Commander most definitely noticed “Press conference in half an hour and I don't want to be late.”

“This is going to be a new era for global security Commander” McCallister reminded him as he and his two colleagues rose from their seats “The train is leaving the station soon, would hate for you to miss it.”

“I'll make my own arrangements thanks” the Commander confirmed with a meek smile “Good day gentlemen” he declared.

“Commander” Hoskins nodded in respect before the three men duly left closing the door behind them.

“The ego has landed” the Commander remarked as he looked on at the closed door with a sense of disbelief.

“Is it safe to come in?” Sir Richard asked as he looked around the connecting door from Tracy's office.

“Don't worry, the meeting of egomaniacs anonymous has come to a close for now” the Commander confirmed.

“That William McCallister sure is some piece of work” Glasgow remarked as he followed Sir Richard into the office.

“He is certainly a piece of something” the Commander was forced to agree “Anyway where did you pop from Sergei?” he asked.

“Seemed the safest place in the City what with all that has been going on” Sergei admitted “I am afraid I ate all the biscuits in your wife's desk drawer though.”

“National emergency” the Commander confirmed “I am sure she will understand” he admitted.

“Well at least we know what they are up to” Sir Richard concluded “Extreme security measures by private contract effectively.”

“What I want to know is how on earth did the Prime Minister green light the approval for these idiots?” the Commander asked before he began to sniff the air as he realised something was not quite right.

“I hate to bring up another problem Commander” Sir Richard remarked “but did you know your rubbish bin was on fire?” he asked indicating the rapidly increasing column of smoke that was rising behind him.

“Oh hell” the Commander exclaimed by which time Glasgow had grabbed the vase of flowers from the side board, removed them and passed the vase across to him.

“Well that was different” Sir Richard remarked with a wry smile as the Commander poured the water from the vase into the waste bin and extinguished the smouldering mess.

“As if I didn't have enough problems this morning” the Commander admitted.

"Sir!" Lieutenant Barrett suddenly called as she burst into the office clutching a piece of paper.

"This had better be good Lieutenant" the Commander called from behind this desk "I have already had power mad loonies and incinerating rubbish bins to deal with this morning."

"Oh so that is what the burning smell is" Barrett commented "Anyway, Fuller sent me up with this" she explained as she put the piece of paper on the desk in front of the Commander whilst Sir Richard came across the room and looked over her shoulder.

"Pray tell my dear, what exactly are we looking at?" Sir Richard inquired.

"This is a report from the ANPR, that is Automatic Number Plate Recognition system from ten minutes ago" Barrett explained "Three black Range Rovers registered to a front company run by Steven Altman just passed a routine traffic patrol on the M4 motorway heading for London."

"That must mean there is more than one team in operation” Sir Richard remarked “They have bigger ground resources than we thought.”

“Get me a secure line to Tracy immediately please” the Commander requested “If it hasn't already I have this horrible feeling things are about to turn very nasty.”

Jennifer Caverner watched as her ministerial escort car with her Deputy now driving departed New Scotland Yard with McCallister, Haliford and Hoskins bound for a still unspecified destination. As soon as it was out of sight heading down Victoria Street she withdrew to a side road just off of Broadway and out of sight of the local street CCTV cameras to make a telephone call.

The number Jennifer needed to dial was one she had not used for a very long time and indeed she had to consult her little black contact book to see what it was before dialling the number on her mobile and waiting patiently to be answered.

“Sapphire, this is Victor Alpha One responding to your Code 99 call” Jennifer announced as soon as she was connected.

“Go secure” the Prime Minister responded on his own mobile telephone as he looked across the city skyline of Whitehall and the area around the Houses of Parliament from his vantage top alone on the roof of Number Ten Downing Street.

Jennifer looked down at her mobile telephone for a moment and pressed a button before returning it to her ear.

“We are secure Sir” she confirmed “What can I do for you?”

“They have got my family” the Prime Minister explained, trying to remain strong and upright but the emotion of fear and sadness was still creeping through his voice.

“What?” Jennifer responded in horrified astonishment “Who has got them? Where?”

“Holiday cottage in Surrey last I heard” the Prime Minister confirmed.

“It must be a bluff Sir” Jennifer tried to reassure him “Two of my people should be with them twenty four seven.”

“Unfortunately Jennifer it would appear that these people we are dealing with have loaded certain key areas of the Service with their own sympathisers” the Prime Minister explained “Either way I cannot afford to take the risk, I must rescue them.”

“You will do nothing of the sort Sir” Jennifer informed the Prime Minister in a very strong insistent tone “I will handle this.”

“We need help” the Prime Minister confirmed “Find an untraceable van and two people you can trust with your life and meet me by the tradesman entrance in twenty minutes, we are going to have to kidnap someone if what I have in mind will work.”

“Erm right Sir” Jennifer responded as she quickly thought “I think I know just the guys for the job. Twenty minutes Sir” she confirmed before hanging up.

Looking around the deserted side street for a few moments to double check that she was still alone and not being eavesdropped upon Jennifer then dialled a new number.

“Hello Cassini?” Jennifer asked as soon as she was answered by Commander Cassini of the Specialist Covert Surveillance Division of the Service “It's Jennifer Caverner, I need a favour on the Q.T., round up your sidekick Iggy and a nice unmarked van and meet me around the back of the Ministry of Defence building in about ten minutes, oh and don't tell anyone.”

“Oh dear” Hoskins remarked with a definite tinge of disappointment as their car proceeded through the centre of the city “I was so hoping he would be more co-operative.”

“It was never going to happen” Haliford responded tersely “The Commander is one tough son of a bitch which is why we need to keep him occupied for a while, hence our interest in one Mr Harcourt.”

“Where is he now?” McCallister asked.

“If all has gone according to plan then he should be arriving at our special operations base around about now” Hoskins confirmed.

“You know the Commander and his wife could make trouble for us” McCallister warned “We should consider bringing phase three forward.

“No” Haliford instantly ruled out that option with a wave of the hand “The London Bridge Project must go ahead tonight as planned, it has taken two years of planning to come this far and I am not putting anything at risk by moving around the plans at this short notice.”

“How are plans for the Cannon Street phase of the plan?” Haliford asked Hoskins.

“Only initial stages at the moment” Hoskins confirmed “Our people are arriving in the City by various discrete routes now and will come together for the final briefing this evening, of course it all depends on getting the target in the right place at the right time if we want this to work.”

“Leave that to me” McCallister confirmed “Manipulation is my middle name” he confirmed with an evil sounding chuckle.

“Meanwhile I believe it is time we met up with our two friends and gave them the good news” Haliford confirmed “As of half an hour ago the more than generous Alexander Cruschov became a free man.”

“Altman will be pleased as well” Hoskins confirmed “No more Security Service Special Investigations Branch sniffing around his business anymore.”

“And all arranged thanks to a generous donation to a worthy cause” McCallister remarked with a hearty chuckle “and it is even tax deductible!”

“Your wife on the secure line Sir” the Personal Assistant called over the intercom into the Commander’s office whereupon he reached across the desk and grabbed the handset like greased lightning.

“Tracy love, are you all right?” the Commander asked, his sense of concern for her more than obvious.

“Nothing a strong pot of black coffee can’t fix” Tracy admitted slightly hoarsely as she was still a bit uncomfortable from her earlier encounter with Stevens “I’ve got some good news, bad news and worse news.”

“Let’s hear the good news first” the Commander suggested.

“Stevens is in custody” Tracy confirmed “although he won’t exactly be able to stand up in the dock as I am afraid I might have accidentally shot him in the kneecap.”

“Ouch...” the Commander wryly responded.

“Well he was trying to kill me at the time” Tracy admitted “Anyway that is the good news. The bad news is that we have lost all tracking on Altman and Cruschov, they could be anywhere by now.”

“My best guess is they are probably heading to London to meet up with the Haliford & McCallister All Star Ego Road Show” the Commander commented “I just had the dubious pleasure of their esteemed company in here about twenty minutes ago.”

“Now please tell me darling you didn’t lose your temper did you?” Tracy asked.

“Oh no love” the Commander confirmed “I did manage to accidentally set fire to my waste paper bin though” he admitted, casting a brief look down at the blackened and charred bin alongside his desk.

“You managed to what?” Tracy responded somewhat astonished “Err never mind love” she surrendered “The worse news is that we have also managed to lose Amber and Alan.”

“Define lose exactly...” the Commander cautiously asked.

“Stevens and his rent a thugs brought down a fire fight right in the middle of the station and in the confusion they made a swift exit but no one has seen or heard from them since” Tracy explained “Amber did give me a USB memory stick though, I think it may be what Altman and his people have been chasing her for over the last few days.”

“All right love” the Commander confirmed “Get back to London as soon as you can and thank Commander Jones for his help as well.”

“Will do” Tracy confirmed “Love you” she responded before hanging up.

“There she is Iggy” Commander Cassini pointed ahead down the side street that nestled in the shadow of the formidable building that houses the Ministry of Defence in the heart of London’s Whitehall.

“Hello lads” Jennifer called as she came up to the passenger side window of the anonymous blue van as it drew to a halt alongside her “Thanks for coming.”

“My pleasure” Cassini politely confirmed “Err if you don’t mind asking what is this all about only it seems awfully cloak and dagger like for you if you don’t mind me saying so.”

“Haven’t a clue” Jennifer honestly admitted as she opened the door and once Iggy had budged over to the centre front seat she got in alongside them “Take the next right and then left, we have to pick someone else up.”

“Should be interesting” Cassini agreed as he duly drove on, heading towards Whitehall where he turned right as indicated once the traffic lights controlling the junction permitted him to proceed.

“Down there and then left again” Jennifer indicated ahead.

“Where the hell are we going if you don’t mind me asking?” Cassini asked as he turned the van into a very narrow access road as instructed before bearing left once again into what seemed to him to be a dead end behind some buildings.

“I could tell you but then I would have to kill you” Jennifer responded with a smirk “Ah there he is” she confirmed as a man in a long coat with a rather ill fitting hat appeared from a fire exit doorway and approached the van.

“Boss, that isn’t who I think it is, is it?” Iggy suddenly asked with surprise in a rare moment when he actually spoke out loud as he thought he recognised something about the individual approaching.

“Well I will be dammed...” Cassini responded with an almost jaw dropping look.

“Iggy, open the back door and let our guest in” Jennifer instructed which he promptly went and did allowing the mystery guest to discreetly get in the back.

“Prime Minister” Jennifer called back “We really must stop meeting like this” she remarked.

“At least it gets me away from the usual Civil Service flunkeys for the day I suppose” the Prime Minister admitted as he leant forward on the back of the front seats “Can we possibly put some distance between us and Westminster before they find out I have given them the slip.”

“Absolutely Sir” Cassini confirmed as he looked in the rear view mirrors to reverse the van out of the narrow alley before turning and proceeding back to the main road.

“Any further information Sir?” Jennifer asked.

“Nothing yet” the Prime Minister grimly confirmed “Last I heard of Haliford and his associates they had gone over to New Scotland Yard to try and impress the Commander and I suspect fail miserably.”

“They didn't exactly look overjoyed when I saw them leave the Yard about thirty minutes ago” Jennifer confirmed.

“Does he know anything of what is happening here?” the Prime Minister asked with clear concern.

“The only people who even know you have escaped from Downing Street are all in this van” Jennifer responded “What exactly do you want to do Sir?”

“I want to kidnap someone” the Prime Minister frankly admitted “I cannot go direct to the Security Service with this, my family are everything to me and if I am seen to be contacting the Service direct they could be harmed in the blink of an eye.”

“You are not thinking of doing something rash are you Sir?” Jennifer cautiously asked as she began to sense what might be coming.

“I need to know where the Commander is” the Prime Minister admitted “Then I need us to kidnap him.”

“Are you insane Sir?” Cassini suddenly responded with eyes wide in surprise at what had just been suggested.

“I am a politician lad” the Prime Minister admitted “Being of sound mind is most definitely not a requirement, however my judgement is probably best described as clouded where the safety of my family is concerned.”

“Cassini, pull in here for a minute” Jennifer indicated up ahead towards Trafalgar Square which they were now approaching “I need to make a telephone call somewhere where I cannot be eaves dropped upon.”

“Oh rats” Fuller exclaimed as, still messing around in ceiling voids halfway up a stepladder, his mobile telephone began to ring but his initial frustration was soon cleansed as soon as he saw the caller display which confirmed it was his beloved wife Jennifer calling.

“Hello love” Fuller called with a gleam in his eye, always glad to hear from her.

“Hello dear” Jennifer called from the shadow of one of the four large lion statues that dominated Trafalgar Square “How's your day been so far.”

“Intriguing” Fuller was forced to admit as he yanked another bugging device out of the main wiring looms before calmly dropping it to the floor and stomping upon it, shattering it into several pieces “Place seems to be full of rodents, of the electronic kind I might add.”

“Conspiracy theorists of the world unite” Jennifer remarked with a chuckle.

“A very appropriate choice of phrase under the current circumstances” Fuller admitted as he looked around the relatively quiet seventh floor corridor.

“Look I am sorry but it looks like I am not going to be able to make lunch today” Jennifer apologetically admitted “Something has come up but I need to know something but I don't want anyone to know that I have asked if you see what I mean?”

“Is this going to be one of those little things of yours that results in me getting shot at again?” Fuller asked “Although admittedly that is more the speciality of your sister and her husband.”

“Let's just say the less you know the better” Jennifer confirmed “Can you tell me where the Commander is likely to be during the next half hour?”

“Well supposedly there is some press conference on the television from the Queen Elizabeth II Conference Centre in Westminster in about twenty minutes from some new security agency task force or something” Fuller admitted “My guess will be whilst it is quiet he will take the chance to nip out for one of those cholesterol packed lunches he thinks Tracy doesn't know he is having while she is not looking.”

“Where is she anyway?” Jennifer asked “Someone told me that they had seen her heading off in a helicopter earlier.”

“She went to Bristol with some of Bob's ARU guys on a snatch and extract job” Fuller explained “Although I gather it didn't go quite according to the original plan, she is on her way back to London right now.”

“Could you ask her to call me as soon as she gets back love?” Jennifer asked.

“Will do” Fuller confirmed “Are you all right?” he asked sensing tension in his wife's voice and becoming increasingly concerned.

“Ask me again later” Jennifer responded with some apprehension “Listen I have to go, my phone will be off for a while so I will call you when I am finished all right?”

“All right” Fuller reluctantly agreed “Take care love” he instructed.

“Always” Jennifer confirmed before hanging up.

For a few moments she looked around with a serious expression that would normally be reserved for specialist surveillance duty whilst escorting a VIP before striding back across the Square and climbing back into the van which then drove off, quickly merging into and disappearing amongst the thronging traffic.

“Come on Tracy, pick up” the Commander muttered to himself with some concern as he waited for his call to her mobile to be answered, however by now she was on her way back to London in the Security Service helicopter and was unable to receive the call.

After letting the telephone ring for over three minutes the Commander was forced reluctantly to give up, hanging up the telephone before looking again at the file open on his desk which Hoskins had passed to him earlier.

It would have been obvious to anyone who had seen him at that time that he was deeply concerned about what he had read and would not have been in the least bit surprised when he proceeded to reach down, unlock and then open the lower desk drawer of his desk from where he extracted his back up gun and ammunition supply which he then placed in the shoulder holster beneath his uniform tunic.

“I’m out to lunch” the Commander confirmed to his Personal Assistant as he left the office a few moments later.

“Understood Sir” the Personal Assistant readily agreed knowing from the Commander's tone and expression that the subject of lunch was the last thing on his mind at that moment.

The Commander shuffled tensely down the corridor with a worried look readily apparent until he reached the Conference Room at the far end of the corridor which he entered and found around the main table not only Sir Richard Crowthorne but also Sergei Glasgow, FBI Special Agent James Black and Lieutenant Barrett.

“Oh hello Commander” Barrett remarked as she looked up from the table and was about to rise from her seat in respect only for the Commander to indicate discreetly with his hand for her and the others to remain seated “We were just indulging in a bit of brain storming.”

“Try this for starters” the Commander dropped the file he was carrying onto the table “Barrett can you do me a favour, I want you to check this out, see if it is correct and if it is I want to know who signed it off and where that piece of shit is now.”

“Holy cow...” Sir Richard exclaimed with a mixed look of shock and horror as he saw the contents of the file, which included a formally processed release document for William Harcourt “Which numbskull let that psycho out?”

“I don’t know” the Commander responded grimly “But I am bloody well going to find out.”

“Harcourt, wasn’t he that lunatic that tried to kill your wife?” Glasgow asked as he recalled the name from what he read in the papers at the time of the incident several months earlier.

“He was the muscle for an old time hard as nails east end gangster called Franklin Rogers” the Commander explained “although Harcourt really ran the show, he organised an assassination attempt on my wife gunning her down in cold blood in Trafalgar Square” the passion and controlled anger was readily apparent in his eyes as he spoke “She came this close to dying.”

“What happened to this Franklin Rogers?” Black asked as he took the opportunity to look through the document.

“Let’s just say he was taken care of” the Commander confirmed “but Harcourt is an entirely different kettle of fish.”

“You can say that again” Sir Richard was forced to reluctantly agree “I was slipped a copy of his psychological evaluation and it made for very ugly reading. Makes this Stevens character look like a girl scout by comparison.”

“And now he is out there and I can’t get a hold of Tracy” the Commander confirmed.

“We will find him Sir” Barrett responded with an obviously determined sense of reassurance.

“Be careful Lieutenant” the Commander warned sternly “If this is connected with this International Security Agency bandwagon then he will have a lot of support both financial and hardware backing him up and he will kill any Service officers on sight without hesitation.”

“Yes Sir” Barrett confirmed “What do you want us to do if we find him?”

“Kill him” the Commander admitted “It is the only way to be sure” he confirmed before he left the room leaving the others behind in a brief stunned silence.

“A carefully organised distraction to keep Tracy and the Commander busy by any chance?” Barrett asked around the room.

“It looks like it” Sir Richard was forced to agree.

“Distract them from what is the question?” Black asked as he reached across the desk for the telephone.

“Who are you calling?” Sir Richard asked.

“Old friend of mine, ex CIA and FBI as well as being a former Navy SEAL” Black confirmed “He lives in blissful retirement over here in the UK now but still does odd off the record favours now and then for my colleagues and I. If this Harcourt is on the streets, he will find him for us no questions asked.”

“A bit risky bringing someone outside into this I would have thought with the apparent connections this group has” Glasgow warned with a note of concern.

“Oh I shouldn’t worry about that” Black confirmed as he finished dialling “He has been legally dead for ten years, saves a fortune in tax” he remarked with a smirk “Dale, it’s Jim” he called as soon as he was answered “Stupid question but how would like to make a little money, tax free of course?”

“At last we are complete” McCallister triumphantly declared as he, Haliford and Hoskins entered the main lobby of the Queen Elizabeth II Conference Centre in Westminster where they were met with equally beaming grins by Steven Altman and Alexander Cruschov and warm handshakes were exchanged.

“How does it feel to be a free man Comrade?” Haliford asked the Russian.

“Liberating my old friend” Cruschov confirmed before laughing heartily “So when does the fun start?”

“Providing all our people are in place at the right time and know what to do I anticipate that it should start getting very interesting sometime around six o’clock this evening” Hoskins confirmed.

“One slight problem gentlemen” Haliford responded with a slight reluctance “Turns out our main muscle man Mr Stevens has gone and got himself arrested in Bristol not to mention shot in the kneecap by a certain lady Divisional Commander.”

“Our man in the Prisoner Escort Logistics Section reports he is on his way to London now” Hoskins confirmed as he checked a series of messages on his Blackberry “retrieving him from the clutches of the Security Service should not present too many problems I would have thought.”

“Excellent” Haliford declared “I want to make sure that our friends from the Security Service are kept nicely occupied for the next couple of days.”

“Be reassured gentlemen” Altman confirmed “with the assistance of a few new friends, they will be enduring more wild goose chases than they can count.”

“In which case I think it is time we introduced our vision for the future to our adoring public” McCallister declared “Shall we go and make history gentlemen?” he asked before they moved on towards the main conference hall where the world’s press, unaware of the huge significance of what was about to be announced were poised waiting for the press conference to begin.

“Welcome home Mr Harcourt” the heavy who had driven him from the prison to the outskirts of west London confirmed as he got out before opening the rear door of the black Range Rover so that he could get out.

“Ah freedom...” Harcourt declared triumphantly “So where are my tools of the trade?” he asked “I have a sense that we will be getting quickly down to business” he confirmed rubbing his hands expectantly.

“Everything you may need is here” the operative confirmed as he showed Harcourt to a series of wooden crates containing numerous items of weaponry and other equipment, much of it brand new and of high grade military quality.

“Looks like someone severely raided their piggy bank for this little lot” Harcourt remarked as he examined some of the items “What is the plan?” he asked.

“We need an explosion, a terrorist attack that we can legitimately blame on certain popular extremist groups” the operative confirmed “fuel to the fire of the objectives of our employers.”

“And you think I am the man to provide it?” Harcourt asked.

“Well we do have other people on our payroll who will also be err lending a hand at the appropriate moments if you know what I mean” the operative explained.

“I do indeed” Harcourt agreed as he checked a case of automatic weapons with a very satisfactory grin.

“Plus of course your previous dealings with certain members of the antiquated load of idiots they laughably call a Security Service means that you will be able to keep them well and truly distracted” the operative remarked with a knowing grin.

“Excellent” Harcourt confirmed as he loaded an automatic rifle and checked it by scoping around the interior of the building through the sights “Means I get to have some fun with some old acquaintances into the bargain, I could almost do this job for you for free if it means I get to finish off that cow Caverner.”

“Knock yourself out mate” the operative agreed “The more chaos, panic, fear and confusion you can spread the better.”

“And all attributable to extremist groups that no one gives a toss about” Harcourt concluded with a hearty laugh that echoed ominously and evilly around the interior of the old warehouse.

“Ah your team is here” the associate confirmed as a minibus with blacked out windows pulled into the building before emerging from it came a group of military types, two of which were helping out of the front of the vehicle the grumbling figure of Stevens, his leg heavily strapped and bandaged.

“Bill Stevens as I live and breathe” Harcourt remarked “Been a long time” he confirmed as the two men exchanged handshakes.

“William Harcourt in living colour” Stevens responded “Sorry I am not in the best of condition, only I had a bit of a run in with a certain bitch from the Security Service.”

“A mutual acquaintance, believe me mate” Harcourt confirmed “I am going to enjoy these next couple of days.”

“In which case I suggest we get tooled up and then we can go and have some revenge and a lot of fun” Stevens confirmed with an evil cackle.

“It is so nice to work with professionals who have the same goals in life” Harcourt confirmed with an expectant look of glee.

“Ladies an gentlemen” Haliford declared proudly from his position standing at a podium at the front of the Conference Centre stage “Today marks a new chapter in the war against terrorism with the introduction of a new global Security Agency with the independence, the power and the finance to get the job done.”

As he looked on proudly from the spot lit podium, the others of his group sat smugly in the shadows behind him whilst ahead he had the undivided attention of the press whose camera lights were trained upon him and it was clear from the beaming smile he was more than enjoying his time in the public eye.

“It gives me great pleasure to bring to you the people of this great nation today a new force in the constant fight against terror, the International Security Agency” Haliford duly announced with all the enthusiasm of a compare announcing a lottery winner at which point a large screen behind him duly came on to display the logo of the new organisation, essentially a stylised globe with an attacking eagle above it.

“Free from the restrictions of national boundaries, differing laws from nation to nation and political ideologies that change with the wind that has come to dog other Government controlled agencies in recent years” Haliford went on to explain “we are the first truly global privately funded security organisation and we mean to kick ass with the people, by the people and for the people of the world” he triumphantly confirmed, by now well and truly away with his enthusiasm.

“Now there is a man with a serious ego problem” the shop assistant in the electrical store remarked as he stood just behind the Commander as they watched the press conference being broadcast live on one of several demonstration televisions in the front of the store.

“Seriously over inflated I would say” the Commander wryly admitted “Looks like I am going to need a bigger pin for this one” he admitted.

“We hereby serve notice upon those who would dare to plan acts of terror against individuals, groups, nations, communities and especially commerce and business” Haliford continued now that he had calmed down a bit having got the media friendly quote bit of his speech, much of which he was making up on the spot out of the way “We are going to find you, take you down and crush you underfoot like the verminous little bugs you are. No more will we say 'this we do not do' as the gloves are well and truly off.”

“I make that four clichés in less than two minutes” Sir Richard remarked as he and the others watched in the conference room at New Scotland Yard “That is pretty good going even for him.”

“Has anyone got any rotten tomatoes handy?” Glasgow joked “I haven't seen a speech this bad since the old Soviet days.”

“Typical man if you ask me” Lieutenant Barrett commented “All ego and no substance.”

“I make this promise to you” Haliford duly continued “We will find those who would act against the interests of the greater good and we will bring them to justice or die trying.”

“I think I have head enough” the Commander admitted as he stepped back from the television screen.

“Me too” the shop assistant readily agreed as he turned the volume back down whilst the Commander duly left, heading back outside whereupon he took a few moments to look up and down the length of Victoria Street which was as usual for a weekday lunchtime busy with the normal central London traffic whilst the pavements were thronging with lunching workers and the obligatory contingent of slightly lost looking tourists.

The Commander withdrew to the relative quiet of Strutton Ground, a cobbled side street just off the main road so that he could try and call Tracy again. It was with a sigh of apprehension that he looked down at his mobile telephone as he speed dialled Tracy's number before putting it to his ear.

“Come on love, where the hell are you?” the Commander asked to himself as his call went unanswered and after a couple of minutes he reluctantly disconnected the call before looking around with a sense of deep concern for his wife's welfare.

“Cassini” Jennifer pointed ahead down the street to where they could see the Commander.

“I see him” Cassini confirmed “Err Sir are you sure about this?” he asked towards the Prime Minister looking over his shoulder from the back of the van.

“To be honest ladies and gentlemen I think I am out of options” the Prime Minister was forced to admit “Let's do this” he confirmed.

“All right then Cassini me old china” Jennifer confirmed “Just like I said, nice and easy does it.”

“This is definitely going to get me locked in a very dark cellar in East Croydon for six months, I know it” Cassini wryly admitted as he started the van and advanced the vehicle forward towards where the Commander could be seen still standing.

With his thoughts of concern for Tracy's welfare at the fore, the Commander was effectively distracted and failed to register that a vehicle had pulled up sharply behind him until it was too late when the side door of the vehicle opened and two people wearing balaclavas quickly grabbed him and pulled him inside before the door was slammed shut again and the van then sped away.

“Oh my God...” a passer by remarked as she looked on at the scene she had just witnessed, not entirely certain whether it was real or not.

“Good afternoon” Jennifer suddenly declared causing the witness to suddenly spin around and see the uniformed officer standing there “If you would be so kind as to call the appropriate authorities on this number” she handed across a Security Service contact details card “Tell them exactly what you have just seen and please mention specifically that it was the Administrator General who has just been snatched we would greatly appreciate it.”

“I don't understand...” the witness began, by now thoroughly confused.

“That's the beauty of it, you don't have to” Jennifer confirmed “Oh and if anyone asks, I was never here. Good day” she declared with a wry smile before calmly walking away where she got into a car and quickly drove off.

As the helicopter came into land on the roof of New Scotland Yard, Tracy unbuckled her seat belt and quickly got out almost the instant that the skids touched the ground.

“Welcome back” Sir Richard declared as he greeted her on the roof before escorting her inside “Did your husband manage to reach you?” he asked.

“No, my phone was off” Tracy confirmed as she extracted her mobile and switched it back on where it quickly registered six missed calls, all from the same number “Something wrong?” she asked.

“You could say that” Sir Richard grimly confirmed “I think this is best discussed in an office over a drink” he suggested.

“That sounds ominous” Tracy admitted as she tried to call the Commander on the mobile but to no avail.

“Ladies first” Sir Richard declared as he opened the office door to allow Tracy to enter.

“Why thank you” Tracy responded whereupon she went straight inside and sat down behind her desk “So what have I missed?” she asked.

“William Harcourt” Sir Richard regretfully confirmed “Someone has let him out.”

“What?!?” Tracy responded in sheer astonishment “Who in their right minds would let that utter psycho out?” she demanded to know.

“Beats me” Sir Richard admitted “I’ve tried checking through all the usual channels but it would appear someone somewhere gave him compassionate leave on account of his sick mother.”

“His mother has been dead for years” Tracy responded, her knowledge of Harcourt's case history and background being well known to her.

“Well someone has let him out and I am willing to bet it is not so that he can pop around for tea and crumpets” Sir Richard remarked “The fact that the initial tip off came from Christopher Hoskins makes me even more suspicious that this is not a case of unfortunate coincidental timing either.”

“Hoskins” Tracy responded “That NSA guy who is in town?”

“Ah, you haven't been watching the news have you my dear” Sir Richard explained “He has been promoted to royalty, the head of European Operations for the brand new all singing and dancing not to mention entirely unaccountable International Security Agency.”

“Sounds like a bunch of egomaniacs with chips on their shoulders” Tracy remarked.

“They have a very nice glossy brochure and a website” Sir Richard confirmed “All very slick and well financed.”

“Dickie” Tracy reminded him “Everyone has a website these days from the Tufty Club to the Mafia.”

“However I don't think Tufty the road safety Squirrel is going to launch a program of extraordinary rendition on any random person or group he chooses somehow” Sir Richard warned.

“They can't be serious” Tracy responded.

“Deadly” Sir Richard confirmed “It is being fronted by an ex US Senator called William McCallister”

“The guy who wanted every Muslim in the US interrogated McCarthy style just on the off chance one or two of them might be a bit iffy?” Tracy asked.

“The same, only now he has money, muscle and power and this particularly unpleasant sounding bandwagon has just rolled into your fair City I am afraid to report” Sir Richard confirmed.

“Perhaps we should introduce this McCallister to that radical cleric from Finsbury Park” Tracy mused “Stick them in a room for a while and I should reckon McCallister would get a right hook inside of ten minutes, literally.”

“Well apparently the Prime Minister has approved it so gawd only knows what hold these people have over him” Sir Richard informed her.

“Where is that errant husband of mine?” Tracy asked as she got up and opened the connecting door through to the adjacent office of the Commander only to find it empty.

“Probably popped out to lunch I expect” Sir Richard commented as he checked his watch “There is another possibility though, if you would excuse me” he remarked as he reached across Tracy's desk to use the telephone.

“You don't think something has happened to him do you?” Tracy asked with obvious concern.

“Just checking a theory” Sir Richard responded as reassuringly as he could “Ah, Mr Fuller, could you join us up here in Commander Caverner's office as quickly as you can please? Thank you.”

“Control to Lima Alpha One, urgent message” Tracy's radio came to life with an urgent sounding voice that she quickly recognised as being that of the duty Control Room supervisor a few floors below.

“Lima Alpha One receiving, go ahead” Tracy quickly responded.

“We are getting sketchy reports from an eyewitness that a Security Service officer has been seen being snatched off the street about half a mile from here” the duty supervisor confirmed “Initial reports suggest it may be the Administrator General Maam.”

“Get the area sealed off” Tracy demanded “I am on my way down there right now. Lima Alpha One out.”

“I was afraid something like this might happen” Sir Richard confirmed as he looked on whilst Tracy checked her weapon before putting her uniform tunic back on.

“McCallister and his merry men?” Tracy asked.

“Well they have already snatched David Howell and Dave Collins, they tried to grab Sergei Glasgov, they have missed me twice and the Commander was the next person to go up against them” Sir Richard concluded.

“In which case I think it is about time this McCallister and I met” Tracy confirmed determinedly “formally of course” she iterated before walking purposefully out of the office with Sir Richard in close pursuit.

“Oh hello, you sent for me?” Fuller called as he came face to face with Tracy and Sir Richard as they were heading the other way.

“Walk with us” Tracy instructed “Do you know where my husband was likely to be going about thirty minutes ago.”

“Lunch most likely” Fuller confirmed “Odd, my wife was asking where he would most likely be as well not an hour ago.”

“Jennifer?” Tracy asked “She wanted to know my husband's likely whereabouts?”

“On the QT mind” Fuller explained “I got the impression she had some sort of special job on.”

“Uh-oh” Sir Richard remarked “Maybe it isn't our American friends after all.”

“Well who else could it be?” Tracy asked.

“Considering the who's who of international crime and security agencies have been crawling all over this case since we dragged that stiff out of the Thames it could be absolutely anyone” Fuller admitted.

“Simon” Tracy turned to her brother in law with the sincerest of looks “Have you managed to locate all the bugs in this place yet?” she asked.

“Last bag full off them was chucked in the incinerator about ten minutes ago Maam” Fuller proudly confirmed.

“Excellent” Tracy responded “Call Jennifer and ask her just what the hell she is up to, if she doesn't play ball tell her I will be wanting a very strong word.”

“I will get right on it” Fuller confirmed before leaving Tracy and Sir Richard to continue on down the corridor.

“You are not thinking what I think you are thinking are you?” Sir Richard asked slightly nervously.

“You said it yourself” Tracy agreed “These bozos must have a huge probably personal hold over the Prime Minister to have got him to sign that agreement, if that is correct then I reckon he would need someone very powerful to help him out.”

“Hmm” Sir Richard responded “I think this is going to be a very interesting afternoon.” he remarked thoughtfully.

The tyres of the van squealed loudly as it came into the deserted lowest level of an empty underground car park, the confined space of the location only adding to the intensity of the sound before the vehicle came to a halt and the side door opened.

“I hope you have a very good lawyer” the Commander was heard to call as he was helped out of the van before turning around to look at his captors.

“Oh the best in the business” the Prime Minister admitted as he removed his balaclava.

“What the hell is going on?” the Commander asked somewhat astonished as the identity of his 'kidnappers' was revealed with Cassini also removing his balaclava.

“Sorry about this Guvnor” Cassini sheepishly admitted “It was his idea” he cheekily indicated the Prime Minister.

“Ah, and here comes the other conspirator” the Commander remarked as a car pulled up alongside the van and Jennifer Caverner got out.

“Desperate times call for desperate measures I am afraid” Jennifer admitted “Still all his idea though” she confirmed indicating the Prime Minister.

“Have you not heard of the telephone?” the Commander asked.

“Couldn't take the risk Commander” the Prime Minister confirmed “Even my closest colleagues in the Government do not know I have left Downing Street and they must never find out.”

“I sense something is troubling you” the Commander asked “What is it?”

“By now no doubt you will have received a visit from that new comedy double act in town McCallister and Haliford” the Prime Minister explained.

“They popped by for a chat” the Commander confirmed “Boil it down to basics, I told them to take a hike, setting fire to my office in the progress I may add. The thing that surprised me more than the outrageous attitude of the gentlemen was the fact that you signed the agreement green lighting their operations here. So I take it from that and this little meeting that they must have something very serious held over you.”

“They are holding my wife and two children” the Prime Minister confirmed.

“Dear God” the Commander responded almost in a state of shock at this revelation “Has this been confirmed?” he asked.

“I haven't been able to contact any of the officers that are supposed to be watching over them” Jennifer confirmed “They have simply disappeared.”

“I appreciate that Sir John Haliford would sell his own grandmother for a knighthood, in fact I am fairly certain he actually did but even I would not think that he would stoop this low” the Commander concluded.

“Sign or be damned was the message” the Prime Minister confirmed “and if I alert the authorities I got the distinct impression they would come to harm and there is no way I am going to let that happen.”

“This by any stretch of the imagination has not been a good day” the Commander admitted “All right, if we are going to do this then we do it quietly and discreetly, the trouble is I am needed back at the Yard what with Harcourt back on the streets.”

“Harcourt?” the Prime Minister responded “That lunatic that gunned down your wife a while back?”

“The same” the Commander confirmed “Methinks someone somewhere has let him loose to cause a lot of chaos and distract us from what is really happening.”

“Well then your place is with your wife Commander” the Prime Minister insisted.

“Jennifer” the Commander turned to his sister in law “I want you to take Cassini and his loyal sidekick and look into this, thanks to your respective positions in the service it will be very easy for you to disappear off of the radar without anyone asking any awkward questions.”

“Yes Sir” Jennifer agreed.

“Whatever it takes Sir” Cassini also agreed whilst his seemingly ever silent deputy, Iggy merely nodded.

“I’ll talk to your husband, keep him in the loop” the Commander informed Jennifer “Meantime only use untraceable lines of communication and if you need anything you contact me on my personal mobile and I will make sure you get it.”

“I had best get back to the office methinks” the Prime Minister admitted reluctantly “Much as I would like to spend the day sneaking around the country with you guys catching the bad guys it would result in some very awkward questions from the Whitehall mandarins.”

“Anyone asks, this meeting never took place and none of us were ever here” the Commander strongly recommended “Speak of this with no one Sir” he instructed the Prime Minister “and continue as if everything was normal.”

“I’ll try” the Prime Minister admitted “It will be difficult though, I am afraid I don’t have the same level of calm determined resolve that you seem to have.”

“At this moment I have a madman somewhere out there who probably wants my beloved wife dead” the Commander admitted “Believe me Prime Minister we are more alike than either of us would probably care to admit at this time.”

“Good luck Commander” the Prime Minister responded.

“To us all Sir” the Commander agreed “To us all...”

As the rest of Stevens men were busy getting ready for the various missions that they had planned for later that day, he and Harcourt had proceeded out through the main doors of the warehouse to the wharf outside where adjacent to the weed strewn quay was a large City of London refuse barge.

“Not exactly the Queen Mary is it?” Harcourt remarked with a definite hint of disdain.

“It is what it can do, not what it looks like that is most important” Stevens explained “Every day thirty barges of London's rubbish make the trip along the river right through the heart of the capital and no one ever notices.”

“So what is on this one that is so special then?” Harcourt gruffly asked.

“Something provocative shall we say” Stevens confirmed as he indicated the apparently ordinary looking bags of refuse that were already loaded into the barge with the aid of his crutch “Enough home made explosive to make a very big dent not only in one of London's landmarks but also in the delicate economic confidence of the City and justify our employers new vision for the future.”

“Sounds like fun” Harcourt agreed with a wicked grin “Forgive me for saying this but I get the impression that our employers as you refer to them may just be a tad nuts and this is coming from me I point out.”

“They have some rather radical ideas I will grant you” Stevens agreed “but they do pay very well and in cash, something which is increasingly rare is this electronic age.”

“Can't argue with that” Harcourt nodded in agreement “So what does this explosive consist of then?”

“Common household substances in carefully measured proportions” Stevens confirmed “All carefully mixed to a recipe use by certain fashionable target terrorist groups, fuel to the fire so to speak.”

“So we get to have fun with a big bang” Harcourt summarised “the usual suspects get the blame and our employers get the justification they need to nail them to the nearest wall, pretty slick.”

“Well whilst our dream boat here is sailing down the Thames to its target by which time I hope that our friends in the Security Service will be running around like headless chickens in a vain attempt to head it off” Stevens confirmed “You my friend will be bringing your talents to the party upon the real target, this is just a very big distraction.”

“Real target?” Harcourt asked “Who?”

“Oh I don't want to spoil the surprise” Stevens responded with an evil knowing grin “Suffice it to say that it will just be the first of many and a lot of people are going to get what is coming to them, with interest.”

“Sounds like fun” Harcourt confirmed “and the bargain is we get paid for doing it as well.”

“Paid very well I might add” Stevens added as both men began to laugh manically, a foreboding cackling that echoed across the predominantly deserted quayside with an evil echo.

“Have we rounded up the witnesses yet?” Tracy asked as she ducked underneath the tape that was sealing off the area around where the Commander was snatched about forty minutes earlier.

“All one of them Maam” an officer confirmed “That's her over there” he indicated towards a worried looking young woman in the distance to whom Tracy was about to approach when a Security Service patrol car screeched to a halt behind her causing her to turn around.

“Hello love” the Commander slightly sheepishly declared as he got out of the car and approached her.

“I know I am going to regret this” Tracy remarked “but I don't suppose you would mind telling me darling exactly what the hell is going on would you?”

“I got kidnapped by the Prime Minister” the Commander wryly remarked.

“And I have just seen Elvis Presley” Tracy responded with a smirk knowing deep down that there was a distinct possibility of a thread of truth to what her husband had just admitted.

“Have you got your bullet proof vest on love?” the Commander asked, clearly concerned for Tracy's well being.

“It's back at the office” Tracy had to admit.

“In which case we are heading there right now to get it” the Commander insisted as he took Tracy by the arm and guided her back to the waiting patrol car.

“Hang on a minute” Tracy remarked as she got in the front passenger seat whilst the Commander got in the drivers seat of the car “Am I imagining it or are you insisting I wear a vest?” Tracy asked slightly amazed “Only it seems ironic since I have been trying to get you to wear one for years, largely without success I might add.”

“Point taken” the Commander conceded with a wry smile “It is just that with Harcourt on the loose and very likely to be taking up his old hobbies I don't want him popping up and killing you” he openly admitted “If I were to lose you then a very large part of me would go with you.”

“I'm going nowhere love” Tracy confirmed as she leaned across and kissed the Commander on the cheek which made him smile once more “So did you really get kidnapped by the Prime Minister?” she asked.

“Oh yes” the Commander confirmed “Haliford and the rest of his unpleasant bandwagon are holding his wife and kids hostage, that is the hold they have over him that got their licence to create merry havoc in this country rubber stamped.”

“Ruthless doesn't even begin to describe this bunch does it?” Tracy asked.

“Not even close” the Commander admitted “Who are you calling?” he asked seeing Tracy pick up her mobile and dial a number.

“Putting the rest of our little family on alert” Tracy admitted “Jack?” she called as soon as she was answered “Where are you?”

“What I shall describe for the purposes of this conversation on a potentially open channel as alternative accommodation” Jack confirmed as he used the remote to turn down the television set whilst he answered his mobile “Simon Fuller filled me in on some of what is going on about half an hour ago so I decided to make a move.”

“Wise lad” Tracy admitted “Keep your head down for a while, I will call you when all this has blown over.”

“I’ll sit tight” Jack confirmed “Oh by the way did some guy named Alan get a hold of either you or the Commander?” he asked.

“Alan Martin?” Tracy asked with a sense of surprise.

“Aye, that’s the fellow” Jack confirmed “Sounded like he was on a train to me with some Irish bird.”

“When did he call?” Tracy asked.

“About ten minutes ago” Jack explained “I put all the house calls on divert to my mobile seeing as it looks like I am going to be out of circulation for a while, it was in case Megan called actually.”

“What did he say?” Tracy asked.

“Something about did you get the memory stick and that he will call when they are on final approach to Greater London” Jack confirmed “Probably early this evening he reckoned.”

“The memory stick” Tracy exclaimed as she proceeded to scabble about in her uniform tunic pocket where she duly found it “I had forgot all about it in all the chaos.”

“If he calls again what do you want me to do?” Jack asked,

“Make sure there are no bugging devices on the line for a starter” the Commander advised as he turned the car into Broadway approaching the main entrance to New Scotland Yard.

“Already taken care of” Jack confirmed “Flushed them down the bog before I came out and I checked my mobile as well, it’s clean.”

“If either Alan or Amber call again” Tracy instructed “give them this number or the private direct mobile for my husband.”

“Got it” Jack confirmed as he grabbed a pen and made a note of the telephone number for Tracy's mobile telephone just in case “All right, take care you two” he instructed.

“You too” Tracy confirmed before hanging up just as the Commander stopped the patrol car outside the main entrance of New Scotland Yard in the shadow of the famous revolving three sided sign.

The Commander looked out of the side window of the car with a slight apprehension before slowly getting out, constantly maintaining his view on the surrounding tall buildings just in case there was a sniper or worse waiting for them.

“Looks clear” he confirmed to Tracy who merely got out of the car as casually as she would normally, not in the least bit worried unlike her husband.

“Will you stop worrying love?” Tracy asked.

“Well who else do I have to worry about?” the Commander admitted.

“Our son for a starter” Tracy reminded her husband as arm in arm they proceeded inside.

“He is pretty tough for a thirteen year old” the Commander commented “Jack can and indeed has looked after himself you know. He is certainly tougher than I was at his age.”

“This from the man who faced down and was subsequently shot dead by diamond thieves at the age of twelve” Tracy reminded “Not two hundred yards from this very spot I might add.”

“True” the Commander was forced to admit “The damage in the brickwork is still there I noticed the other day.”

“Hello” Tracy called to the Receptionist “Can I borrow your telephone, I need a line to the custody section please” she confirmed.

“Here you are Maam” the Receptionist confirmed as she passed the telephone over the top of the desk to Tracy.

“Custody Sergeant?” Tracy called “It's Divisional Commander Caverner, not the other one. Has that piece of filth Bill Stevens arrived from Bristol yet?” she asked.

There was a pause as the Commander looked on alongside her whilst Tracy listened to the reply.

“Very well thank you” Tracy confirmed “I will be right down.”

“Good news?” the Commander asked.

“Black Maria with our maniacal loony will be arriving downstairs in the next couple of minutes” Tracy confirmed with a smile “Care to meet him?”

“Absolutely my dear” the Commander agreed.

A couple of minutes later, Tracy, the Commander and Bob with some of his Armed Response Unit team were waiting with baited breath in the basement of New Scotland Yard by the vehicle bay area for the Custody Suite where prisoners are brought in.

“Ah there you are” Fuller called as seemingly out of breath he appeared from the stairwell.

“You all right?” the Commander asked as Fuller joined them.

“Lifts are playing up” Fuller explained “There is a lot of very odd things going on around here today I can tell you.”

“I have just spoken to your wife” the Commander informed him “She is going to be out of circulation on an errand for next couple of hours at least so don't be surprised if you don't hear from her for a while.”

“Right...” Fuller responded with obvious uncertainty although the fact this information was coming from someone as trustworthy as the Commander meant that he could at least take some reassurance that she would be all right.

“Oh I managed to get this from our two friends” Tracy passed across the memory stick to Fuller “See what you can get off of it but erm keep it to yourself all right?”

“Will do” Fuller confirmed as he took the memory stick and looked at it as if it was a stick of dynamite with the fuse lit.

“Here they come” Bob remarked as the squeal of tyres signalled the approach of a number of vehicles into the basement area, making their way from street level by way of the ramp down.

A few moments later the large black Security Service prisoner escort van appeared with two patrol cars and two motorcycles accompanying it before the van was turned around so that the rear door faced the entrance to the custody area.

“Ready?” Tracy asked as she reached for the door lock of the van and proceeded to release it.

“Got you covered Maam” Bob confirmed as he decided not to take any chances even though the prisoner inside should be shackled and restrained.

“Welcome to New Scot...” Tracy began to declare only to tail off as once she opened the door it revealed the interior of the van to be empty.

“What is wrong with this picture?” Fuller remarked thoughtfully.

“What the hell?” Tracy exclaimed.

“The invisible man?” the Commander asked ruefully as Tracy in a sense of disbelief proceeded inside the van and looked all around the interior including checking underneath the bench seats and then tapping the walls just in case.

“Where the hell did he go?” Tracy asked before stepping out of the van, still somewhat bewildered by this development.

“Lieutenant” the Commander called to the motorcycle officer who had led the convoy in “Where did you pick this up?” he asked.

“Slough” the officer confirmed “M4 Services, Wales & West Division escorted the van in, we took over and carried on.”

“Is it me or is there something a bit odd about that number plate?” Bob asked indicating the back of the van whereupon the Commander duly turned around before clambering up on the back of the van for a closer look.

“Oh hello...” the Commander duly declared as he poked at the yellow rear number plate of the vehicle only for it to gradually come away revealing another different registration underneath.

“Looks like we have ourselves a shell game going on here” Fuller remarked.

“This took a bit of organisation” the Commander remarked almost in admiration as he stepped down back onto the concrete, the false registration plate in his hand “Must have done two swaps.”

“I don't follow” Tracy responded.

“You have a fake group of Security Service officers and vehicles intercept the real van on route maybe just short of the originally planned rendezvous” the Commander explained “No one is any the wiser, the van changes escort then you change the van to this identical one with copied number plates and of course minus its cargo and then hand it over to our guys at the originally intended change over point.”

“Meaning that thug Stevens is still out there” Tracy regrettably concluded “Let's just hope he hasn't pitched up with Harcourt.”

“I'll drink to that” the Commander agreed.

“Still he won't be able to make too fast a getaway” Tracy admitted with a smile of some satisfaction “I shot him in the kneecap in Bristol.”

“A little over the top perhaps my dear” the Commander remarked.

“He had just tried to kill me by strangulation” Tracy informed him.

“Oh well in that case, fair do's” the Commander confirmed “Come on” he declared as he took Tracy's arm in his “Let's go and get that vest sorted out.”

“Excellent thank you” Haliford confirmed before hanging up and turning to his colleagues “Well gentlemen” he declared “You will be delighted to hear that the London Bridge project is about to set sail, Stevens has been safely delivered from the clutches of the all mighty Security Service and the Commander is about to start tearing the country apart looking for Harcourt.”

“That should keep them busy for a while” Hoskins agreed.

“How is Bill?” Altman asked with not that much concern really.

“Limping badly” Haliford confirmed “However he says he has suffered worse and come through it, he is not going to let a little thing like that distract him.”

“Good man Stevens” Altman remarked “in an evil sadistic bastard kind of way of course.”

“Well I do believe it is time we said goodbye to our guests” Haliford remarked as he checked his watch “Mr Hoskins would you be so kind as to accidentally let them out perhaps?” he asked.

“What do you want them to find out Sir?” Hoskins asked.

“Enough to keep the authorities guessing for a while” Haliford confirmed “but in such a way that they will work it out just a tad too late.”

“I'll see what I can do Sir” Hoskins agreed before he departed the room, making his way down a corridor until reaching a set of stairs that took him three storeys down into the basement of the building.

Outside the door that led to the detention area which still held David Howell and Dave Collins were two heavily armed security guards who saluted Hoskins as he arrived.

“Afternoon gentlemen” Hoskins declared warmly “Time to let our guests enjoy a little fresh air I think.”

“Yes Sir” one of the men confirmed whereupon he turned around to input a code into the door control that then beeped and allowed them through into the cell area itself.

“We were beginning to think you had forgotten about us” Howell remarked as he looked up through the cell door as Hoskins arrived.

“I am not an absolute bastard Mr Howell” Hoskins explained almost apologetically.

“Unlike your insane boss Sir John Haliford” Collins ruefully commented.

“You evidently haven't met his boss then” Hoskins remarked “Now there is a real piece of work.”

“Who's that then?” Howell asked sensing something interesting might be gained here.

“Former US Senator William McCallister no less” Hoskins proudly confirmed.

“Oh shit, we are in real trouble now” Collins responded almost in shock at hearing the name “Are you really telling me that lunatic McCallister is running this over inflated ego trip?”

“No ego trip gentlemen” Hoskins confirmed “Now a reality, thanks to the co-operation of the Prime Minister and the Senate over in the US we are now a fully active world wide independent security agency and believe me gentlemen we mean business.”

“I don't doubt it” Howell responded “So where do we fit into this grand scheme of yours then?” he asked.

“For the moment you don't” Hoskins admitted “However I am not a total monster so I thought you two gentlemen would enjoy a little fresh air and some refreshment so if you would care to come with me” he confirmed before turning to the guards and nodding at them to indicate that the cells could be unlocked.

“This could be an opportunity” Collins remarked quietly aside to Howell as they both stepped from the cells as soon as the doors had been opened.

“And this could be a trap” Howell warned before they both took on a look of silent innocence when Hoskins turned back to them.

“This way gentlemen” Hoskins declared as he led the way “Perhaps on the way you would like a tour of our grand new facility.”

“Very kind of you old chap” Collins responded appreciatively.

Hoskins led the way back up the stairs until they reached one floor where he went through into a large control room area dominated by rows of desks with terminals and telephones whilst up on the front wall was mounted a huge flat screen with a map of Europe currently being displayed upon it.

“This must have cost a fair few quid” Collins remarked as he and Howell, still under the watchful eye of the guards looked around.

“Best equipment money can buy” Hoskins proudly confirmed “and believe me gentlemen we have a lot of it to spend.”

“I don't doubt it” Howell agreed.

“From here we can tap into every line of communication across the entire continent of Europe and link into our sister control room in the United States” Hoskins explained proudly “No more applying for endless warrants, court orders and technical barriers to overcome, now we can eavesdrop anywhere, at any time and in any place at the push of a button.”

“If the Civil Liberties lot ever heard about this they would have a heart attack” Collins wryly mused.

“This from the man from MI5 who has Echelon at his fingertips” Hoskins responded with a chuckle “We have simply taken the same principle and thrown a lot of money and the best technical know how from across the world at it and this is the result.”

Hoskins looked on with a brief smirk when he saw that Collins had noticed something on one of the screens that flashed up momentarily which was of course exactly what he hoped would happen.

“If you would care to come this way gentlemen” Hoskins then declared gesturing ahead “I thought we would have lunch on the roof terrace.”

“How very civilised” Collins remarked as he and Howell duly followed.

A couple of minutes later Hoskins led the two men with the two guards still in close proximity out onto the building's roof terrace where Haliford was waiting for them at a table with tea and sandwiches waiting.

“Ah gentlemen” Haliford called genteelly “So nice of you to join us for afternoon tea.”

“Are cucumber sandwiches covered by the Geneva Convention?” Collins asked wryly as he and Howell joined Haliford taking seats at the table whilst their host dismissed the presence of the two guards who duly left them alone on the rooftop.

“So what do you think of our facilities?” Haliford asked as he proceeded to pour the tea.

“All a bit expensive for my taste” Collins admitted “Mind you I would advise that you have your interior decorator taken out and shot, that wallpaper in the hallway is terrible.”

“Easily arranged” Haliford confirmed with a wry smile.

“Do you really think you can pull this whole thing off?” Howell openly asked.

“We have already begun gentlemen” Haliford confirmed “We have the necessary permission from the Prime Minister to operate in this country which by default also gives us access to the rest of the European Community, meanwhile my colleagues in the United States are already starting to make significant inroads into the backlog of those awaiting arrest and detention for suspected support of certain extremist groups.”

“So what” Collins asked “You and your hired thugs are just going to go around Europe arresting anyone you just happen to not like the look of?”

“There is a little more method to it than that” Haliford admitted “but basically the gloves are off and if we so much as even think someone holds something we believe to be contrary to the greater good, be it a thought, a blog or a weapon then I will not hesitate to send the boys around to say hello.”

“A secret police in all but name” Howell confirmed with a disappointed shake of the head “Still, never mind. Keep riding high matey and one day your fall from grace will just be all the more spectacular.”

“And I can bet people like the Commander will be there to ensure personally that the safety net is whisked away from beneath you at the last possible moment” Collins added “Alligator pit awaiting my friend.”

“The Commander has enough on his hands at the moment without having to worry about us” Haliford dismissed the two men's concerns with the slightest of hand gestures “Last I heard he was dealing with some escaped prisoner who apparently tried to kill his wife a while back. Besides we can operate without their assistance, indeed we are already working on a terrorist cell we believe to be active somewhere in Greater London even as we speak.”

“And on your first day in the job as well” Howell remarked wryly “What an amazing coincidence.”

“Ah, would you excuse me a moment gentlemen” Haliford remarked when he saw Hoskins gesture him over from the roof terrace access doorway “An important message I have been waiting for, I won't be long. Have another cucumber sandwich perhaps?” he suggested before getting up and leaving them alone.

“What do you reckon?” Howell asked.

“Certifiable beyond all possible doubt” Collins confirmed “Tell me old friend, how is your head for heights?”

“Not good if I were to be honest” Howell admitted “You thinking about the window cleaning hoist by any chance?” he quietly asked.

“Indeed I am” Collins quietly confirmed “Chances aren't great but I figure it has to be worth a try, what do you think?”

“In for a cent, in for a dollar” Howell agreed “When Haliford returns, use the knife to hold him hostage and then I will get the hoist up and running.”

“Do we take him with us?” Collins asked.

“Not worth the extra dead weight” Howell confirmed “He will suffice to cover us until we can get moving. I just hope they don't have a reception committee waiting for us when we reach the ground” he admitted.

“Here he comes” Collins confirmed as they saw Haliford finish his conversation with Hoskins who disappeared back inside before he returned to the table where as he was not looking Howell secreted a knife from the table up his shirt sleeve in readiness.

“Sorry about that interruption gentlemen” Haliford confirmed “but business is business as they say” he remarked.

“Could not agree more” Howell confirmed before in a sudden move he produced the knife and grabbed Haliford from behind, putting the blade to his throat “Now I am not a violent man unlike some of your new pals but I should point out I have already had a really bad week and now would not be a good time to put my sense of humour to the test, all right?”

“The gun if you please” Collins requested “and erm right hand if you please, I know you are a leftie.”

“Don’t you just hate it when this happens” Haliford admitted with reluctance as he reached inside his jacket pocket and produced his gun which Collins then took and released the safety catch before aiming it back at him.

“Well thanks for the hospitality” Collins confirmed as he and Howell began to back away from Haliford who had no choice but to just stand there with his hands rather modestly raised “I am afraid I won’t be recommending your place for inclusion in the London good hotels guide though.”

“You can’t win them all I suppose” Haliford wryly remarked as he watched the two men climb over the parapet and into the window cleaner’s hoist.

“Be seeing you” Howell remarked before activating the hoist and sending the window cleaners cart downwards.

“Hoskins...” Haliford called with a slightly concerned cry “They are trying to make a run for it.”

“I never get this much excitement stuck in my office in Grosvenor Square” Howell admitted as they headed down the side of the ten storey building as fast as the motor of the winch would allow them to descend.

“Spend a week chasing bad guys around with the likes of Sir Richard Crowthorne, Tracy Caverner and especially the Commander” Collins suggested “Within twenty four hours you will be begging to spend the rest of your career back in your snug office, you’ll live longer most likely too and you won’t have your wife constantly buying you bullet proof vests for Christmas.”

“Makes a change from pullovers I suppose” Howell remarked as he cast a look over the side of the cradle “Ah...” he then declared with a worried tone “Looks like we have company waiting for us.”

“Is that the best they could come up with?” Collins remarked as he looked down to see Hoskins and three associates run out of the main entrance into the almost empty car park and then look up at them.

“Well it is difficult to find good staff these days” Howell commented “Besides, give these guys a chance; they only started up this morning.”

As soon as it was reasonably safe to take the risk, the two men jumped out of the cradle before it had reached the ground whereupon Collins pointed in the direction of the main road.

“Come on, leg it”! Collins insisted whereupon the two men ran as fast as they could for the low hedge which bordered the perimeter with Hoskins and his two guards some distance behind them.

“I am getting to old for all this running around” Howell was forced to admit as he followed Collins in forcing his way through the hedge that saw them out into the main road on the other side “Now what?” he asked.

“Taxi!” Collins called with a shrill whistle where as luck would have it for the first time that day a black cab was heading down the road towards them.

“Where to Guvnor?” the taxi driver called in his distinctive cockney accent as Collins and Howell piled into the back of the cab.

“New Scotland Yard please” Collins confirmed as he looked around through the back window of the cab to see Hoskins and his men beginning to gain on them “Step on it and there is an extra twenty in it for you.”

“Right you are Guvnor” the taxi driver willingly agreed before he accelerated sharply away leaving Hoskins and his men trailing in the dust of his wake.

“Well that went better than could have been expected” Howell remarked wryly as he and Collins settled down, at last being able to relax for the first time in some while as it had appeared they had evaded their captors successfully.

“That’s what is bothering me” Collins responded “I reckon they were in some way quite glad to let us go, lets face facts, it seemed awfully convenient didn't it?”

“Let's be thankful for small mercies eh?” Howell prompted.

As the taxi disappeared off into the distance amidst the traffic, Hoskins looked on from the roadside with a satisfied grin before reaching for his Blackberry where he quickly made a call.

“Worked a treat boss” Hoskins declared “They are on their way now” he confirmed before with a smirk he hung up.

“I hate wearing these things” Tracy admitted as she reluctantly put the bullet proof vest on assisted by her husband in her office.

“Well for once I am insisting” the Commander responded with obvious concern “Think of this as revenge for all those times you constantly badgered me about wearing one” he remarked with a smile.

“It is bugger all use if someone shoots me in the head though” Tracy reminded him as she then put her uniform tunic back on over the vest “and no I am not wearing one of Bob's Kevlar hats before you ask” she confirmed before her husband had the chance to come up with the idea.

“Hats don't really suit you love” the Commander agreed as they leaned forward towards each other to kiss just as the Commander's mobile telephone began to ring.

“Oh give me the old days of red boxes in the street with buttons marked 'A' and 'B' or better still some good old fashioned carrier pigeons” the Commander wryly remarked managing a peck between them before stepping back to answer the call.

“I love it when you get all cranky yet caring” Tracy confirmed with a warm smile as she kissed the Commander before leaving him to answer the call as she continued to sort out her uniform.

“Cranky Commander's Anonymous” the Commander humorously answered “How may I direct your call?”

“Err Sir?” Martin asked, not being familiar with the Commander's wayward sense of humour meant he was not entirely sure he had called the right number now.

“Alan” the Commander realised the importance of the caller “Where are you?” he asked, waving his arm at Tracy to attract her attention and gesture her back over.

“Heading north” Alan confirmed as he looked across at Amber and smiled which she returned in kind “We had to bail out when the loonies turned up at Bristol Temple Meads” he admitted.

“Sorry about that” Tracy confirmed now that the Commander had put the call on speakerphone “We were all rather taken by surprise by just how unpleasant and determined these people are. The most important thing right now is are you two all right?” she asked.

“Amber is in a bit of pain still but she's holding together” Martin confirmed “Thankfully we managed to get out of Bristol and jump on another train without suffering any more damage.”

“What phone are you using?” the Commander asked “Only we have been having a few problems with leaks, walls have ears and all that.”

“I flashed our Security Service identification cards and borrowed the Conductor’s internal mobile” Martin explained.

“Tracy...” the Commander motioned towards his wife whereupon she took a note of the number on the caller display.

“Clever” Tracy remarked “Enclosed system and no one can run a trace that fast.”

“Providing you stay on that same train into the capital” the Commander confirmed “we should be able to work out where you are and meet you, preferably without any uninvited guests coming along to spoil the day.”

“I think I have had enough unpleasant surprises for one week already” Amber confirmed as she took over the mobile telephone “Did you manage to get anything off that memory stick I gave you?” she asked.

“Our best technical guy is working on it right now” Tracy confirmed “Trouble is it is all encrypted.”

“The answer is just the ticket” Amber cryptically responded.

“Oh very clever” the Commander remarked as he realised the significance of this otherwise cryptic answer “I’ll pass the message along.”

“I just hope that it is of use” Amber commented “It has been a hell of a week, it would be nice to think something good has come out of it aside from meeting up with Alan again that is.”

“Well I have this nasty feeling that things are going pear shaped at this end” the Commander confirmed “There be lunatics with their own specialist asylum about to set up business in town and I don’t like what they have to say.”

“Agenda’s, bandwagons and the determination to see it through” Amber remarked “Always a recipe for trouble that will leave a very unpleasant after taste.”

“Very poetic” the Commander responded “Who said that?”

“You did Sir” Amber confirmed “I read it in the Evening Standard six months ago.”

“You always did have a way with words love” Tracy remarked with a smile.

“All right” the Commander declared “Are you two still armed?” he asked.

“Oh yes” Amber confirmed as she checked her gun.

“Reluctantly” Martin also confirmed as he gave his own gun which was in the uniform tunic pocket a brief look.

“I will meet you two personally somewhere on route and bring you in” the Commander confirmed “Just sit tight and try not to attract too much attention.”

“Could be difficult considering we seem to have the appearance of two war weary uniformed Security Service officers who look like they have been through a war” Amber wryly responded “However I think we can be subtle with a little effort” she confirmed.

“All right” the Commander replied “I am on my way.”

“Simon” Tracy called over the office telephone as the Commander hung up and looked on “I am sending you a text message to your secure phone with a number” she instructed “I need you to find the name of the railway employee whose phone it is, what duty they are doing and therefore when the train that he or she is working right now gets to somewhere significant.”

“Tell him to send me the location to my phone” the Commander instructed as he drew his old six shot revolver from its belt holster and checked that it was loaded and ready for anything that may be about to happen “I am going out to meet them personally.”

“Be careful love” Tracy warned sincerely as they embraced and kissed.

“I’ll be all right” the Commander confirmed as he held Tracy both for his own and her comfort “As long as I know you will be all right.”

“In other words don’t do anything silly?” Tracy wryly asked with that smile that was always guaranteed to cheer the Commander up.

“Exactly my love” the Commander confirmed “I got to go” he admitted as he reluctantly let go of her.

“Wait” Tracy asked “How do you know where they are? Fuller hasn’t run the trace yet?”

“Doris knows” the Commander responded cryptically with a smirk before winking and then leaving.

“Huh?” Tracy responded with a raised eyebrow that signified her understandable confusion.

“Looks like the place” Cassini remarked to Jennifer as they observed the isolated country cottage from some distance away through binoculars.

“That is a standard VIP Escort motor all right” Jennifer confirmed as she looked at the dark grey saloon car parked outside in the driveway “and the guy on the door is definitely carrying judging by the standard bulge in the jacket lining.”

“Got movement inside” Cassini reported as he caught sight of something which made him move his binoculars across suddenly to concentrate upon it “Looks like the PM’s wife I think.”

“Where?” Jennifer asked as she scanned around.

“Centre right window, ground floor” Cassini confirmed.

“Yep, that's her” Jennifer duly agreed “Seems to be moving around pretty freely in there, suggests that whoever they are, they don't have any active capture yet.”

“A kidnap victim that does not know she is kidnapped?” Cassini asked.

“It's been done before” Jennifer explained “Makes life a lot easier for the captors You put your people in place where there would normally be guards such as in this instance and only make your move to capture the subjects if and when necessary. The telephone is likely to be cut off mind.”

“So what is the plan?” Cassini asked.

“For now all we can really do it to watch the watchers I think” Jennifer confirmed “If we were to go in there mob handed then they would know that we have been tipped off and the potential fire fight it could bring down would be rather messy I fear.”

“Well I reckon between Iggy and myself we can probably cover all the exits” Cassini gave his summary of the situation with his expert eye in matters of covert surveillance “We can walk through walls and if necessary follow them if they become mobile.”

“All right” Jennifer agreed “If anything happens, call me direct” she insisted as she gave Cassini a card with her own personal number on it “If it does go pear shaped I don't want the Prime Minister hearing about it on BBC News 24 all right?”

“Strictly shtum” Cassini quickly agreed “Iggy, get the van” he instructed.

“Right you are boss” Iggy agreed before leaving.

“I've got to get back to London” Jennifer confirmed as she checked her watch “Fortunately I will be driving the PM around from about five o'clock so if anything does kick off I can keep him informed directly.”

“Or keep him away from any bad news” Cassini suggested.

“Exactly” Jennifer reluctantly confirmed “Do what you do best and make sure nothing happens to them, the very soul of the country could depend upon it” she insisted.

“You have my word as a gentleman” Cassini agreed “Scouts honour.”

“I could never imagine you as a boy scout” Jennifer remarked with a wry smile “Ah well, see you guys later. Be careful all right?”

“As always” Cassini confirmed as Jennifer departed.

“Here” Howell passed across some money to the taxi driver as soon as the cab pulled up outside the main entrance to New Scotland Yard “Keep the change.”

“What, from a fifty?” the taxi driver responded with amazement “Thank you Sir.”

“I do hope you are claiming that back on expenses” Collins responded as Howell joined him on the pavement having alighted from the cab before heading towards the main entrance.

“It depends on whether I still have an employer after this mess is all over” Howell admitted as they approached the door where the on duty patrol officer looked on slightly amazed.

“Aren’t you David Collins from MI5 Sir?” the officer asked with an apparent sense of bemusement.

“In a previous life I think” Collins admitted.

“You do know there is a warrant out on you Sir?” the officer inquired.

“Arrest me then” Collins wryly challenged in response before he and Howell duly headed inside.

“Doesn’t seem much point now” the officer remarked as the two men disappeared inside.

“Well, well, well” the Commander remarked as he met the two bedraggled looking men in the reception area “Look what the cat dragged in.”

“It’s been a hell of a couple of days” Collins admitted “Did we miss anything?” he asked.

“Well the good news is that Sir Richard Crowthorne is alive and well” the Commander confirmed “He is upstairs with Sergei Glasgov and Special Agent Block from the FBI in my office working on a case, of scotch I think.”

“Sounds like a good idea” Howell remarked “Just out of interest what is the bad news?”

“Pretty much everything else” the Commander was forced to admit “So far today I have had escaped lunatics, dodgy intelligence, bugs coming out of the walls literally, gunfights, explosions, lost sheep and to cap it all I got kidnapped by the Prime Minister.”

“Very funny” Collins responded with a chuckle that he quickly subdued when he saw from the Commander’s expression that he actually wasn’t joking about that last bit “I don’t want to know do I?” he asked.

“Best not” the Commander had to agree “I would love to chat but unfortunately I have to go and rescue a couple of lost sheep from a wretched hive of scum and villainy before they get run over by Haliford and company’s careering bandwagon. See you later” he confirmed before leaving.

“A wretched hive of scum and villainy?” Howell wondered as he and Collins entered a waiting lift car.

“East Croydon” Collins confirmed with a wry smile as the lift doors closed.

“Oh...”

“Tug boat is approaching Sir” one of Steven’s men reported to his superior as he observed the vessel coming up the River Thames towards the dock alongside which the refuse barge was moored.

“Excellent” Stevens confirmed as he duly took a brief look through his own binoculars at the tug boat “Get the lads ready, I will take care of this” he declared before putting on a high visibility yellow jacket and peaked cap.

As he turned towards the river and hobbled with the aid of a walking stick down to the dock side the words ‘Thames Harbour Authority’ were visible written on the back of his jacket.

Once on the dockside and with the tug boat nearing him he waved his arm formally to attract the crew’s attention.

“Ahoy there” Stevens called whereupon the crew on the bridge of the tug boat could be seen waving in response before the vessel began to manoeuvre closer into the dock.

“Afternoon mate” the captain of the vessel called from the bridge “Something I can do for you?” he asked.

“Need to come aboard” Stevens explained as he approached the boat as one of its crew lowered a gang plank to allow him to get on.

“The more the merrier” the captain agreed whereupon Stevens now joined by a couple of his men duly boarded the vessel before proceeding into the wheelhouse.

“Port authority” Stevens confirmed as he produced an identity card that was sufficiently authentic for the captain to nod in agreement when he gave it a look “I need to ask a favour” he admitted.

“Shoot” the captain readily responded.

“Took the words right out of my mouth” Stevens agreed with an evil grin whereupon in an instant his men drew guns from beneath their jackets and before any of the crew could respond, opened fire killing all three of them.

“Ok lads” Stevens commanded as he took the uniform cap from the body of the dead captain before putting it on his head with a look of glee “Get these guys weighted down with some concrete then chuck them over the side.”

As the men on the boat set about the disposal of the bodies of the crew, Stevens gestured up to the dockside where a white van was backed towards the vessel before two more of his men appeared and proceeded to open the back to reveal a large amount of equipment along with a long black mortuary bag lying on the floor of the vehicle.

“Got the patsy for you boss” one of the men confirmed “All present and correct right down to the incriminating evidence and he is even the right colour.”

“Excellent” Stevens responded “All right let’s get him on board before he starts to go off.”

With that instruction the men proceeded to unload the body bag before it was carefully lowered over the side of the quayside and onto the main deck of the boat whilst at the rear of the vessel the refuse barge was being hitched up ready for towing.

Stevens proceeded onto the bridge of the tug boat and after looking out across the bow from the front windows, he picked up the radio handset whereupon after changing the frequency he proceeded to send a coded message.

“Eagle Command, this is Diamond One” Stevens declared “The package is hitched up, the players are in place and the flag has been raised, we are preparing to set sail, over.”

“Diamond One from Eagle Command” came the response “The Director sends his regards and confirms it is time to build it up with bricks and mortar, over.”

“Message received and understood Eagle Command, over” Stevens agreed.

“Bon voyage Diamond One, Eagle Command out” the final response declared.

“Right” Stevens confirmed as he replaced the radio handset “Run up the main sail, slip the lines, wreak havoc and let slip the dogs of war!”

“Err we haven’t got any sails Sir” one of the men responded somewhat confused.

“Sorry Dave” Stevens apologised “It’s just that I have always wanted to say that.”

“Oh, right” the man realised.

“Let’s just get going shall we?” Stevens suggested.

“Yes Sir” the man agreed “Gary!” he then called down to the fore deck “Cast off!”

Within a few moments the lines that were mooring the vessel and its attached barge to the quayside were released whereupon with a sound of the horn it moved off into the flow of the river and began its journey down the Thames towards the city visible in the distance.

“East Croydon” the Commander remarked to himself as the automatic doors of the main entrance into the station building slid open in front of him allowing him to enter the busy main concourse as a tram departed from just outside with its characteristic warning bell echoing all around “I am so happy to be here.”

With the approaching evening peak of rush hour, the station was beginning to become extremely busy which meant that as the Commander approached the ticket barriers, the fully uniformed senior officer of the Security Service barely registered as being present to the hundreds of commuters, visitors and railway staff around him.

However whilst he had gone largely unnoticed by the majority around him, the Commander had quickly realised that he was not alone and his expert senses and experience soon identified at least three groups of people were mounting surveillance operations around the station.

As he looked up at the next train indicator above the ticket barriers, the Commander took out his mobile telephone and made a call.

“Simon” the Commander called as soon as Fuller had answered “I am at East Croydon, main concourse” he declared “Do me a favour will you and pull up the live CCTV feeds from here and confirm my suspicions will you?”

“What’s occurring Sir?” Fuller asked as he turned to one of his many computer screens in his office and began to call up the CCTV feeds as requested.

“Well unless my eyes deceive me” the Commander remarked as he discreetly glanced around “either East Croydon is holding the AGM of spies anonymous or I am standing in the middle of a major goon convention.”

“Oh yes...” Fuller confirmed with realisation as he began to look through the various CCTV views “First up for our entertainment is the two decidedly poorly dressed guys over by the newsagents trying not to look like they aren’t reading their newspapers.”

“First ones I spotted in as soon as I came in the door” the Commander admitted “Russians would be my guess, the FSB have rather suffered from budget cuts in their overseas operations of late. Now if you want expensive clobber how about the three trench coat wearing lunatics over by the ticket office?”

“Those are definitely CIA” Fuller confirmed as he looked at the CCTV view that provided an overview of the ticket office queue “The typical bulges in the jacket and tendency to constantly stick their fingers in their ears are a dead giveaway.”

“It would appear that no matter how careful we are” the Commander concluded “Someone keeps copying everyone else in on our communications.”

“Well it didn’t come from this office” Fuller confirmed “I have had the entire building fumigated, in an electronic sense that is.”

“Well someone is slipping them our mail” the Commander remarked “Oh, there is Uri and his lads from Mossad” he remarked as he noticed another group and cheekily gave them a little finger wave backed up by a wry grin “He has worn that same coat for the last ten years to the point where I suspect he is actually sown into it.”

“I can probably rustle up some kind of diversion for when the train carrying our two friends arrives in about three minutes” Fuller suggested “It might not be pretty and is for certain going to have the guys from Network Rail complaining late into the night but it will with a bit of luck distract the various onlookers we seem to be attracting.”

“Sounds good to me” the Commander agreed “Platform four looks like where I will be heading and then I am going to take them to London Bridge, it should be safer there than changing trains and trying to get to Victoria.”

“When you hear the signal, make good your escape Sir” Fuller confirmed as he started to work on his computer.

“I take it I will know it when I hear it then?” the Commander ventured.

“Oh yes” Fuller confirmed with a wry smile “Just get on that train and keep going as all hell is going to be let loose in your wake.”

“Sounds like a normal day to me” the Commander joked “Ok then, when I have made contact with our two friends I will let you know. Oh by the way” he asked as he proceeded through the ticket barriers and then down the ramp to platforms three and four “did you get anywhere with that memory stick thingy?”

“Computer is chewing on it now” Fuller confirmed as he looked across at the adjacent terminal to check on its progress “Turns out the decoding algorithm was encoded on the magnetic strip on the back of one of the tickets but it is still going to take a little while to unlock it all.”

“Keep on it” the Commander requested “Got to go, I have a train to catch” he confirmed before hanging up just as he stepped onto platform four and looked down the line where in the distance the bright headlights of an approaching train could be seen still a minute or so away.

“Train at platform one is for Norwood Junction and London Bridge only” the platform supervisor announced generally over the PA system as the four car train of Class 377 ‘Electrostar’ stock arrived with the whirr of its electric motors winding down as it slowed to a halt at the platform.

“This is the service from Horsham isn’t it?” the Commander asked the platform supervisor as he came out of the office to see the train off.

“Yes Sir” the platform supervisor confirmed as he recognised the Commander
“Who’s in trouble then?”

“Me probably” the Commander admitted with a wry smile as the door of the train in front of him opened and he stepped aboard whilst the Conductor looked on.

At that moment a fire alarm began to sound throughout the station along with a pre-recorded announcement asking all within to evacuate immediately.

In amidst the chaos, the Commander smirked as he could see the various groups of surveillance teams being caught up in the exiting flow of passengers back up the ramps which effectively forced them away from the train and meant they were unable to continue their observation and pursuit.

“Understood” the Platform Supervisor was heard to respond to his radio “All right, your train is to leave as booked, everyone else gets out” he confirmed to the Conductor.

“Who’s in trouble?” the Conductor asked as she too had recognised the Commander as he had come aboard her train.

“Long story my dear” the Commander explained “I don’t suppose you have seen two rather lost sheep, one of whom is likely to be short, Irish and have something of a limp by any chance?”

“Right there Sir” the Conductor pointed across the carriage at Amber and Martin who were sat nearby before she proceeded to see the train safely away from the station.

“Thank you” the Commander responded before crossing the vestibule “Hello you two, glad to finally catch up with you at last.”

“Commander” Martin responded as he stood up “I’d very much like to introduce you to a good friend of mine, Amber.”

“Pleased to make your acquaintance at last” the Commander remarked “Unfortunately there would appear to be a lot of other interested parties who would also like to meet you, trouble is unlike my wife and I, I suspect they don’t have your well being at the top of their list of priorities.”

“Something I am kind of getting used to it Sir” Amber admitted as she rubbed her leg with a grimace, the injuries still troubling her despite some treatment and painkillers earlier in the day.

“Blimey this train is busy today” the Conductor remarked as she came back through the carriage and went to the control panel where she checked the small CCTV screen that showed a rolling view of the interior of the entire four coach train.

“Oh dear...” the Commander commented as he looked over the shoulder of the Conductor at the small screen as it scrolled through the various views “I think we seem to have attracted something of an audience.”

Gingerly with Martin supporting her, Amber got to her feet and they joined the Commander in looking at the screen.

“I recognise those two” Amber confirmed as she indicated a group of men pictured in one doorway “Met them at a joint terrorist intelligence briefing last year, both of them are American and pretty unpleasant I found.”

“Well there are our Russian friends” the Commander confirmed as another view showed a further group “Err which coach was that?” he asked the Conductor.

“Front one” she confirmed.

“Hang on” Martin remarked as he noticed something “I think those are some of the guys who we ran into in Wales.”

“Oh hell, not them again” Amber responded “They have some questions to answer, where my car is for a starter.”

“Ah there is Uri and his guys” the Commander commented “Looks like they managed to jump on at the last moment.”

“Lucky they didn't get squashed in the doors” the Conductor confirmed “or the guys in the third coach either.”

“This is turning into a convention” Martin remarked.

“Oh, Germans off the starboard bow” the Commander noted another familiar face in the same carriage as them who was trying not to be noticed observing them “Is there anyone here who is not employed by a major international security agency or the bad guys?”

“Just me by the looks of it” the Conductor wryly admitted “Norwood Junction anyone?” she asked as the train began to slow for its penultimate stop.

“How are we going to get out of this one?” Martin asked.

“Trust me” the Commander responded as he took out his mobile telephone and made a call which was quickly answered “Bob, it's your Guvnor” he declared “Bring them on” he instructed before hanging up.

“We are now approaching Norwood Junction” the automated on board announcer declared throughout the train as the platforms appeared and the train came to a halt.

“You might want to hold off a moment” the Commander informed the Conductor just as she was about to blow her whistle and close the doors whereupon she withdrew her finger away from the door close button “I am expecting guests.”

“Are these ones fare paying by any chance?” the Conductor asked more out of hope than expectation.

“There they are” the Commander pointed towards the stairs from the subway where Bob and his ARU team could be seen coming onto the platform before boarding the train and joining them.

“Silly question really” the Conductor admitted wryly as she then closed the doors and gave the two bell signal to tell the driver to proceed.

“Welcome to the party” the Commander called as Bob and his men joined them in the vestibule “How are your close protection skills these days lads?” he asked.

“A little rusty” Bob admitted “Are we expecting trouble as if I need ask Sir?”

“I want these two protected no matter what” the Commander indicated Amber and Martin standing alongside.

“Actually I can look after myself Sir” Amber pointed out before looking down at her injured leg “Well most of the time” she admitted.

“You two carrying?” Bob asked Amber and Martin.

“Always” Amber confirmed as she drew her handgun from its shoulder holster whilst Martin duly took his gun out and also held it up only for Amber to look across, take it from his hand and then replace it again, this time held by the stock handle rather than the barrel.

“If anyone wants me I’ll be down the back looking out my tin hat, some strong tea and a packet of chocolate biscuits. Just try not to put any holes in the rolling stock guys all right?” the Conductor confirmed before leaving them too it.

“All right” the Commander instructed “I think we can safely say that when we arrive the cream of the worlds security agencies along with some somewhat less scrupulous people will be waiting for us to take you two into their own differing interpretations of protective custody so when we get there you two get behind Bob and his guys, I will do the talking.”

“And you get behind me” Amber instructed Martin with a look of insistence “I have been watching your back discreetly for five years, I will be damned if I am going to lose you now.”

“Can’t really argue with that can I?” Martin responded with a look of surprise as the train continued on its journey to its ultimate destination.

“Two coffees, strong, black, four sugars and all in the same mug” Barrett wearily requested of the canteen server with a meek smile before rubbing her eyes. She was beyond tired now having been working pretty much solidly with little by way of breaks or rest for over twenty four hours now.

For someone as dedicated a professional as Barrett it would have been all right if in all that effort she had actually managed to achieve anything really notable but in the course of the day all she had to show for it were a few scraps of disjointed information, some vague theories and not a lot else which just frustrated her even more.

“Here you go love, you look like you need it” the canteen assistant remarked as she duly passed Barrett her coffee.

“Thanks” Barrett responded with much appreciation before withdrawing to an empty table over on the far side of the staff canteen where she was about ready to collapse into the chair when her telephone rang.

“You couldn’t make it up” Barrett remarked to herself with inevitable resignation as she took out the telephone and looked at the caller display whereupon she raised an intrigued eyebrow at seeing the call was coming from an old contact that she had not heard from for some time.

“Hello Gem” Barrett answered “Long time, no hear. What’s up?”

“Look I know we are not supposed to officially tell each other anything given we are supposed to be on competing sides and all that” Gemma Davis, an old acquaintance of Barrett’s explained from her office in the central offices of MI6 located on the south bank of the River Thames at Vauxhall “but have you heard anything about an active terrorist cell in central London?” she asked.

“That mad bunch your ex boss Haliford is heading up seems to think so” Barrett confirmed “Aside from his ramblings and those of his minions we have heard nothing intelligent so far.”

“It may be nothing” Gemma went on to explain “Only I got a call from a usually reliable yet not exactly high level source who claims that a man by the name of Ben Al Masaroute is apparently setting up some sort of attack using home made explosives but when I passed it on to them upstairs they were not in the least bit interested.”

“Who did you take this too?” Barrett asked, her curiosity suitably raised by this intriguing new development.

“Haliford’s old deputy, Lord Gerard” Emma confirmed.

“Hang on a minute” Barrett responded “I am going to put you on hold for a moment while I separate my boss from the Commander’s brandy supply.”

“Yeah, no worries” Gemma confirmed whereupon Barrett duly put the call on hold before grabbing her mug of coffee and making her way briskly out of the staff canteen.

A minute or so later Barrett was up on the top floor and entering the Commander’s office where Sir Richard was sitting behind the desk reading the paper and grumbling a lot.

“Guv” Barrett called as she entered.

“It must be serious” Sir Richard remarked as he lowered the newspaper and looked across at his young officer as she stood before him “You didn’t call me Sir for a change.”

“Old friend of mine from MI6 on the phone” Barrett explained “Apparently she has got a very good tip off about a guy by the name of Ben Al Masaroute and a possible bomb plot but when she took it upstairs they were not in the least bit interested.”

“That name rings an alarming bell” Sir Richard responded with a worried look “Put it on speakerphone please” he instructed.

“Gemma?” Barrett called “I’ve got my boss here, do you want to fill him in?”

“Ah, Sir Richard” Gemma responded “How are you?” she asked.

“Not too bad considering the circumstances” Sir Richard admitted “Can you confirm the name mentioned was Al Masaroute?” he asked.

“My snout was very specific” Gemma confirmed “Apparently he has a job under an assumed name with the contractor that shifts refuse for London councils along the Thames to the disposal and recycling plant over in the Essex marshes.”

“He was also connected with that group that did a suicide bombing on a warship in the Arabian Gulf using explosives packed speed boats some years back” Sir Richard responded with obvious concern.

“That was why I thought my bosses would run with it and hit the panic button but yet nothing” Gemma confirmed “That is why I thought I would give you Section Fourteen guys a call to see if you had heard anything.

At that point Tracy knocked on the connecting door from her adjacent office whereupon Sir Richard silently gestured to her to join them.

“Who did you take this information to?” Sir Richard asked.

“Haliford’s successor” Gemma confirmed “His old deputy, the newly knighted Lord Peter Gerard.”

“Who the hell appointed that little weasel a Lord?” Tracy asked astonished “The Sith?”

“And his exact words when you took him the information please” Sir Richard requested.

“Speculative information with no factual base and of no interest to ongoing operations” Gemma responded, repeating what she had been told word for word earlier that afternoon “Then he simply wrote ‘no further action’ across it, filed it in his in tray, thanked me for my enthusiasm and sent me packing.”

“All right” Sir Richard confirmed “What I want you to do is to keep feeding either Barrett, Divisional Commander Tracy Caverner or myself anything else that may cross your desk in the next twenty four hours that Gerard wants sat upon but do not put yourself at unnecessary risk all right?”

“Certainly Sir” Gemma confirmed “I ought to go now before the internal security muffins notice who I have been talking to” she suggested.

“Very well” Sir Richard confirmed “and thank you, good bye.”

“What did I miss?” Tracy asked having come in half way through the conversation and not being up to speed.

“We may have a problem” Sir Richard admitted.

“Well there is a switch” Tracy joked.

“Why the hell would Haliford’s lap dog Gerard sit on potentially inflammable intelligence?” Sir Richard pondered “It makes no sense, and not to inform the City Security Service is against every established protocol in the book.”

“Nothing from MI6 or indeed MI5 for that matter has landed on either mine or my husband’s desk for at least forty eight hours” Tracy confirmed “If they do know anything we are being kept well and truly out of the loop.”

“Of course there is one other possibility” Barrett remarked with a deepening frown as she came to a conclusion that was far from pleasant “What if this Haliford guy is deliberately having Gerard hold back the information so that his new agency can claim the credit for the arrest?”

“Allow a terrorist incident to occur then a quick snatch and grab to look good on the telly and in the press” Tracy concluded “It’s been done before and I wouldn’t put it past that weasel Haliford to go for a stunt like that, especially with the likes of McCallister behind him.”

“Be a hell of a justification for his new agency” Barrett agreed.

“He basks in the glory of being the all conquering hero whilst we are left to clear up the bodies off the street from a terrorist atrocity that he probably allowed to happen in the first place” Tracy confirmed, barely managing to control her seething anger, the gritting of her teeth being the give away.

“I fear much unpleasantness is about to be heaped upon us” Sir Richard remarked ominously “Unfortunately in my current position I am unable to offer more than advice I am afraid.”

“Don’t worry” Tracy confirmed with a determined tone “We can handle this, this is the most complex and intensive Security Service Department in the country, we’ll find this guy. Actually who are we looking for?” she asked.

“A man by the name of Ben Al Masaroute” Sir Richard confirmed “Dave Collins will be able to tell you more about his past misdemeanours” he explained “Suffice to say he was implicated in a suicide bombing some years back in the Persian Gulf where speed boats packed with explosives were rammed into commercial and military vessels.”

“I remember that” Tracy recalled “I thought they got him for it though?” she asked.

“Someone bugged up the paperwork at the US Department of Justice and he had to be let go” Sir Richard explained “He came to the UK about three years ago I think, the Home Office promptly declared him undesirable and slung him out again after which he was linked to Somali pirates before dropping off the radar a few months ago.”

“If this guy is here then we could be in very serious trouble” Barrett remarked.

“What do we know of this Al Masaroute’s current whereabouts?” Tracy asked.

“Gemma indicated that he may be working in London probably under a false identity I expect” Barrett confirmed “May be working for the company that handles the movement of refuse for the local borough councils.”

“Well given his past hobbies” Tracy remarked “I certainly don’t want him anywhere near a boat in my city that is for certain.”

“Oh hell...” Barrett exclaimed with realisation “The river, the company this guy is linked with moves large barges of refuse up and down the Thames to and from the recycling plant in the Essex marshes.”

Tracy quickly reached to the desk and picked up the telephone “Janice, get me the duty chief of the Thames River Division, urgent” she requested.

“Could we not shut down the Thames and search all boats?” Barrett suggested.

“Not enough time I fear” Sir Richard responded “Besides there are so many vessel movements both commercial and civilian and only what three or four on duty patrol boats in the Thames River Division at any one time it would take hours just to get going.”

“Terry, its Tracy” she called as soon as she was answered “Sorry to spoil your quiet afternoon but I need to ask you something.”

“Certainly Maam” Terry replied from his seat in the Thames River Division control room in Hammersmith.

“Those barges they use to transport refuse up or down the river every day” she asked “Would I be right in thinking they are named after precious stones?”

“Err yes I think so” Terry confirmed “Have to admit I don’t take much notice of them myself, then again given their cargo I don’t suppose anyone does really.”

“That’s what I was afraid of” Tracy responded “All right, roll, float or whatever everything you have in the direction of London Bridge right now and stop any vessel approaching the area, in particular any refuse barge or tug.”

“Consider it done Maam” Terry agreed before the call was concluded.

“Lima Alpha One to Control” Tracy called into her radio with calm urgency.

“Control receiving” came the response.

“I want everything we have including the bomb squad, ARU guys and every unformed body we can find making their way down to London Bridge right now” she explained “Code One priority, I need the bridge and the riverbank both sides up and down stream for one mile evacuated and sealed in the next ten minutes, I am on my way down there to take Command on site.”

“Understood Maam” the Control Room Supervisor agreed before signing off.

“Sapphire and London Bridge?” Sir Richard asked apprehensively.

“Yes” Tracy agreed “A barge packed full of explosives, the experienced trigger man in the right position to deliver it and the target right in the heart of the city in the middle of the evening peak.”

“Mind if I join the party Maam?” Barrett asked as Tracy checked her gun as she prepared to depart.

“The more the merrier” Tracy agreed.

“Let’s hope we are not too late” Barrett responded as she followed Tracy to the office door.

“Good luck” Sir Richard called after them before the two women left leaving him alone to contemplate the rapidly unfolding events of the last half hour.

“What the hell are these guys playing at?” Cassini wondered to himself as he looked through his binoculars as one of the men guarding the Prime Minister’s family continued to walk around the grounds on patrol.

In the hour and a half since he and Iggy had taken up observation points overlooking both sides of the house there had been little movement apart from a couple of the men on guard taking a few moments to have a cigarette and a chat in the garden.

“Iggy” Cassini called into his hidden radio set “Any sign of life your side?”

“I have seen snails move faster and more interestingly than these guys boss” Iggy confirmed from his position on the other side of the cottage “Are you sure this isn’t a wind up?”

“Well Jennifer Caverner seemed pretty certain about it” Cassini remarked “Perhaps I ought to call her and let her know.”

“Well if you do boss, get her to send over some coffee and a Red Cross food parcel” Iggy suggested.

“Will do” Cassini agreed with a wry smile before signing off and taking out his telephone whereupon he dialled Jennifer Caverner’s number from the directory.

Thirty miles away in the centre of London, Jennifer Caverner was just getting out of the black ministerial escort car immediately outside the front door of Number Ten Downing Street when her telephone rang.

“Caverner” Jennifer answered in her usual formal business like manner as she paused on the kerbside alongside her car.

“It’s Cassini” he called “Thought you would like to know there has been no movement whatsoever from our alleged bad guys, all very much quiet in fact” he confirmed.

“The PM will be glad to hear that at least” Jennifer agreed.

“Look I don’t want to be seen as questioning your judgement or anything Maam” Cassini cautiously ventured “but is there any chance this could just be a wind up by any chance? It has that feel to it.”

“If only” Jennifer admitted “Trust me, the PM knew exactly what was going on, I mean the poor sod was trembling at the mere thought of what was going on, now does that sound like a wind up to you?” she asked sincerely.

“I guess not” Cassini was forced to agree “All right then, we will keep an eye open here and if anything happens I will let you know straight away” he confirmed.

“Thanks” Jennifer responded before hanging up and resuming her walk to the front door of Number Ten where the regular uniformed Security Service officer on duty acknowledged her and called into his radio for the door to be opened.

Stepping inside the hallway Jennifer was met by the Prime Minister coming the other way who with a reluctant smile gestured ahead whereupon she duly escorted him out to the car.

As the ever present ranks of the press looked on from behind the barrier on the opposite side of the street, Jennifer opened the rear door of the car allowing the Prime Minister to get in before closing the door and going around to get in the drivers seat.

Once Jennifer was in, she proceeded to drive slowly off back down the length of Downing Street where at the end, the standard accompaniment of four Security Service motorcycle outriders joined the car along with the usual second car containing the MI5 Political Unit minders which kept to the rear.

“The Prime Minister departed a few moments ago from Downing Street bound for Mansion House in the City of London’s financial district where he is scheduled to deliver his annual address in what is widely being tipped as a potential key note speech” the BBC News correspondent reported live to camera as the convoy was seen in the distance being allowed out through the wrought iron gates that guard the entrance to the street.

“It is believed that in addition to the current financial climate” the correspondent continued “the Prime Minister is also expected to deliver a new policy on National Security and the future of anti-terrorism both in the United Kingdom and overseas, a fact made all the more prominent earlier today with the surprise announcement of the formation of the independent International Security Agency which in this country is being headed by the former head of MI6 Sir John Haliford who resigned yesterday in order to take up this new position.”

Some miles away in the Control Room of the so called International Security Agency, Haliford watched events unfold on the news broadcast on one of the impressively large screens that dominated the full length of the front wall.

“Fame at last” he remarked with an amused smirk “Well I guess it is time to start moving the pieces on the board.”

“What is it with you and chess analogies?” McCallister asked out of curiosity.

“Benefits of an Oxford education my friend” Haliford confirmed before turning to one of his operatives “All right then, lets set our boys loose shall we, then we can relax, sit back and enjoy the show.”

“Thames Group from Eagles Nest” the operative called into a radio as Haliford looked proudly on “You have a green light, repeat a green light.”

“Roger that Eagles Nest” came the response from Stevens.

“Where is our Russian friend?” Haliford asked of Hoskins who joined him at that point.

“He and Altman are at the hotel” Hoskins confirmed “They have been told to keep a low profile for tonight, we will call on their services in the morning.”

“Excellent” Haliford responded rubbing his hands together almost with glee “In three hours time we will have the Security Service so tied up chasing their own tails that they won’t know what has hit them.”

“Harcourt and his team of, well yes thugs is about the only word to describe them are ready to go whenever you give the word” Hoskins confirmed.

“The word is given” Haliford responded “I want carnage, chaos and horror on the streets tonight, a climate of fear throughout the city and the people quivering in their living rooms as they watch it all unfold on the news.”

“And all attributable to a bunch of unpleasant extremists” McCallister remarked with a wry smirk.

“Harcourt and his guys don’t exactly come with a quality reputation for being subtle” Hoskins remarked “Quite the opposite in fact.”

“Never mind the quality, feel the cash” McCallister commented, revelling in what was unfolding “By this time tomorrow we will be running security across the world and then we will be calling the shots on our terms. No more mister nice guy.”

“Time for our opening move” Haliford declared “Let’s send the Prime Minister on a merry dance shall we?”

“If the Security Service follows standard procedure” the operative nearby confirmed “they will shut down everything along the Thames either side of the bridge for a mile or more which should be more than enough to see our target delivered to our people waiting for him.”

“Excellent” Haliford responded “Let’s get ready to pull our team out of location three shall we and see what kind of reaction that generates?”

“I’m on it Sir” the operative confirmed.

“And then tell our friend Mr Harcourt to have fun” Haliford confirmed “He is to go when he hears the signal.”

“What is the signal?” Hoskins asked.

“Trust me” Haliford responded “He will know when he hears it.”

As the tug boat with its refuse barge in tow approached Hammersmith Bridge, Stevens came onto the bridge having briefly stepped outside to take a call.

“All right, we got a green light from the boss” Stevens confirmed “Let’s get our patsy out of the freezer and place him where he can be assured of warmth.”

On his orders, two of Steven’s men proceeded below deck and within a couple of minutes were bringing up the dead body which they then carefully placed in the captain’s chair on the bridge.

“Now just to make sure the authorities are in no doubt who blew up their precious city...” Stevens remarked as he produced a clear plastic bag containing a number of personal effects including a passport, drivers licence and wallet which he then proceeded to place inside the jacket of the dead body.

“The launch is here Sir” the helmsman confirmed as a small vessel pulled up alongside the tug boat, matching its speed as it ran parallel alongside it.

“Very well” Stevens confirmed “Put her in mid stream, connect the remote control system up and set the auto pilot whilst I take care of our friend here and set the detonator. The rest of you make your way off the ship.”

“Yes Sir” the helmsman and the others duly confirmed.

“Don’t go away” Stevens cheekily remarked to the dead body, patting him on the side of his face before leaving it and heading gingerly down into the lower decks where he proceeded to open a case that was sitting on a table in the engine room.

Inside was a control system with a timer and a number of wires protruding from it which if they were followed would have been found to run through the ship, out the back and then wrapped around the length of the tow rope to a set of detonators planted amid the explosives that were packed into the refuse containers on the barge that the tug boat was towing.

“And here we go” Stevens calmly declared as with a simple press of a button he set the system running “I do hope our Arab friends appreciate all this” he remarked with a smirk before leaving the engine room.

A few moments later Stevens was back out on the deck of the tug boat where a couple of his men helped him aboard the launch.

“All right, let’s go” he called to the helm whereupon the line connecting the two vessels was released and the launch pulled away, reversing its course and heading back down stream whilst the tug boat and its deadly cargo was left to carry on.

“We are now approaching London Bridge” the automated announcement system declared as the train snaked its way across the point work at the throat of the terminal platforms of the large station.

“Everyone ready?” the Commander asked as he looked around whereupon he got firm nods from Bob and his ARU team who were standing either side of Amber who responded similarly whilst Martin merely looked on with some obvious apprehension.

“All right then” the Commander confirmed as the train came to a stop and the doors were released “Let’s do this” he declared before stepping out onto the platform beneath the large overall roof that covers platforms nine to fifteen.

With the Commander leading the way and the ARU team flanking them, the party proceeded at a brisk pace along the length of platform ten towards the ticket barriers, the presence of the armed and uniformed Security Service officers with probably the most well known and respected if not the most powerful of them all at the front meant their progress through the crowds of evening peak commuters was swift and uninhibited.

It was only once they swept through the ticket barriers and out onto the main concourse that the Commander met the first problem when three men in matching long coats and looking like they meant serious business stepped forward into his path and presented themselves.

“Special Agent Aldus Frant, Central Intelligence Agency” the leading man confirmed his identity whilst characteristically removing his sunglasses as if to emphasise his importance, none of which impressed the Commander one bit “I have a warrant for the arrest of one Amber McWilliam and request that under the United Nations Security Council charter that you hand her over to us immediately.”

“Sorry mate” the Commander calmly responded “No can do I am afraid.”

“Not so fast” came a Germanic voice as they were joined by two more men “Franz Klaus, German Federal Intelligence, we want her.”

“You can’t have me, I am already spoken for” Amber remarked cheekily before smiling at Martin which cheered him up no end.

“She has an appointment with us I am afraid” came another voice as they were joined by another man “FSB, Paris Office” the Russian man confirmed.

“Did someone organise a convention of spooks on Facebook and not tell us or something?” Amber asked.

“Anyone else?” the Commander asked around only to see two more men he recognised as being from Israeli Intelligence joining them “Yes I know” he responded before they could even speak.

“We have reason to believe that Ms McWilliam has in her possession information that is vital to the security of my country” came the instant request.

“Nuts to the lot of you” the Commander quickly quipped in response, not in the least bit impressed “The young lady is under my own personal protective custody” he insisted making sure all of them could understand him “You are in my city, we operate under my rules and I am not in the mood for a diplomatic jurisdictional bun fight so unless you all want to spend the night in a cell shouting diplomatic immunity until the morning I strongly suggest you get out of my way before I lose my temper.”

“Make no mistake Commander” the man from the FSB reiterated “I will be taking this up at the highest level.”

“Give it your best shot” the Commander advised him “I am the highest level around here so nah!”

“If you would step aside please gentlemen then we can all be on our way?” Bob suggested with a guiding arm and is if anyone needed any further persuasion, his MP7 rifle slung across the other.

His request together with the respect that the Commander garnered meant they all stepped aside and allowed the party to continue on their way but no sooner had they had crossed the concourse when a group of men appeared from behind them.

“Down!” Bob called out as he realised they were about to be ambushed by people who unlike those from official agencies, were far from official and far more ruthless.

Martin and Amber instantly tried to grab each other to protect the other and wound up on the floor whilst the Commander leant down to shield them.

“Don’t even think about it pal” Bob warned as he and his officers duly brought their weapons to bear only for a major scuffle to break out, however the attackers reckoned without the sudden assistance of those from the other agencies who duly leapt in to assist.

There were screams and shouts both from the participants in the fight and passers by caught up in the melee as everyone piled in with the Commander being the one who grabbed the leader of the group and smashed him down to the ground with his weight despite being half the body size.

“You can consider yourself well and truly nicked sunshine” the Commander declared as with the others assistance the attackers were stopped, bundled to the ground and disarmed.

“You!” Amber pointed to one of the men as now in handcuffs Bob and one his men roughly pulled him to his feet “You are one of those bastards who shot me” she confirmed recognising him from the pursuit in Wales whereupon she tried to aim a kick in his direction but her earlier injuries saw her recoil in agony.

“Allow me love” Martin confirmed as he calmly stepped forward and then with a swing duly punched the man firmly in the mouth.

“Thank you” Amber responded “I thought you didn’t like violence?”

“I’m just getting warmed up” Martin confirmed with a wry smile.

“Welcome to my world” Amber remarked.

“Right, if there are no further interruptions, I strongly suggest we get out of here and get you patched up” the Commander suggested.

“Sounds like a plan” Amber agreed.

“What she said” Martin confirmed which made the Commander smirk, it being obvious to him that those two really were now firmly joined at the hip.

With the attackers being taken off in the opposite direction to a waiting Security Service van, Bob and his men resumed their escort positions before the party carried on through the doors off of the concourse to the bus station area where the distant sound of a lot of sirens approaching the general area could be heard echoing all through the surrounding city streets.

“That sounds a bit ominous” Amber remarked as they listened, trying to make out what course the source of those sirens was taking and whether they were in fact heading their way.

“I whole heartedly agree” the Commander confirmed with a concerned look as he reached for his radio “Alpha One to Control, come in please” he requested.

“Control receiving” came the swift response.

“I am at London Bridge station” the Commander confirmed “It sounds like the entire emergency services of Greater London are heading for a party I know nothing about, what’s occurring?” he asked.

“There are reports of a potential explosive device in the area of the River Thames in your area” the Control Room Supervisor formally informed him “Divisional Chief Superintendent Caverner is on her way to the scene.”

“Thank you” the Commander responded “Alpha One out.”

“London Bridge is falling down...” Amber remarked “Oh my God.”

“What?” the Commander turned to her and asked.

“It was something I heard Altman say a few days ago” Amber explained “They wouldn’t would they?”

“Greed and the thirst for power can make even the most apparently sane man do outrageous things” the Commander grimly confirmed “Come on, we have to go.”

As the cacophony of sirens increased with the arrival of further Security Service vehicles, Tracy got off of her motorbike and after removing her crash helmet, proceeded to the parapet of London Bridge to look over the side down river.

“Lima Romeo Control from Lima Alpha One” Tracy called into her radio with her usual confident yet calm urgency “I want confirmation that this river is shut down in the next three minutes.”

“Maam” an officer called from further along the bridge “Sniffer dog teams are here.”

“Excellent” Tracy confirmed “I want them deployed up and down the river bank both sides for one mile in each direction on the off chance the intelligence is wrong and it’s a land born device. I am not taking any chances.”

“Yes Maam” the office quickly responded before leaving at a hurried jogging pace to carry out his orders.

Tracy looked down towards the north river bank where she could see a large number of uniformed Security Service officers making swift progress at clearing the immediate area, a task that was reflected on the opposite side as well.

“Commander Robertson!” Tracy then called to another officer who had just arrived in a Transport Division patrol car.

“Afternoon Maam” the officer responded as he got out of the car.

“I am putting you in charge on site with responsibility for transport links” Tracy explained “I want every Underground line beneath our feet and along the river bank shut down and confirmed evacuated ASAP.”

“Already being done Maam” Robertson confirmed “My Guvnor is rapidly beginning to learn the way you and your husband think.”

“Excellent” Tracy remarked “What’s the traffic looking like?” she asked.

“Backed up all over the place” Robertson explained “Traffic boys have managed to get most of it either out of the area or emptied but that still leaves us with a lot of abandoned vehicles, any of which could be hiding a device.”

“It’s going to be hours before this one is sorted out” Tracy agreed before returning to her radio “Thames Division” she called once more “Where the hell is the boat I asked for?”

“Burning water between Hammersmith Bridge and Battersea” came the response “ETA still seven minutes.”

“Come on people” Tracy responded generally “We have got to get a move on here, we are looking at a potential major incident here so let’s get this party moving everyone.”

A couple of miles down stream the Thames Division Patrol Vessel ‘SSV Zodiac’ was making swift progress, passing beneath Grosvenor Bridge at maximum speed in defiance of the regulated speed limit on that part of the river.

“If we go any faster Captain she is likely to come apart at the rivets” the engineer confirmed as he emerged from the engine room below decks onto the bridge, rubbing his hands clean as best he could on an oily rag.

“It will have to do” the Captain responded as he reached for the ship’s radio “Control from SSV Zodiac, can we please have a description of what we are supposed to be looking for?” he requested.

“Patching you through to officer in charge now” came the response.

“Three to one it’s the Commander” the Captain remarked wryly whilst he waited to be connected “Sounds like one of his specialist little incidents.”

“Fiver on Divisional Commander Caverner would be my bet” the helmsman commented.

“Zodiac, this is Caverner” came Tracy’s voice over the bridge radio whereupon the helmsman smirked “Where are you guys?” she asked.

“Just passing Vauxhall Bridge” the Captain confirmed as he looked out of the bridge windows as the vessel passed in the shadow of the MI6 building on the south bank with the Houses of Parliament ahead in the distance on the other side of Lambeth Bridge “Could you let us know what we are supposed to be looking for please?” he requested.

“We have credible intelligence which leads me to suspect that there may be a large explosive device on a refuse barge of some kind, possibly called the Sapphire and heading towards London Bridge” Tracy was heard to explain over the radio.

“We are on it” the Captain confirmed in a business like manner “All right lads, you heard the lady” he declared “I want every eyeball out on deck and looking out for this thing.”

The crew of the ship scrambled out onto the open deck both fore and aft and began to look all up and down the river and amid the plethora of vessels that used it everyday.

A few minutes later in the shadow of the huge London Eye Ferris wheel one of the crew spotted something some distance ahead, initially reacting by lowering his binoculars before refocusing again on a vessel that had caught his attention.

“Green three five, possible suspect vessel ahead” the officer then called back to the bridge and pointing ahead whereupon the Captain emerged onto the deck and joined him at the bow.

“Could be our boy” the Captain agreed “Moving at a fair old lick though. Gary, push the beejebus out of her and get us closer” he called back to the bridge whereupon the helmsman pushed the engines throttle to the full limit, well above the recommended maximum operating power for the vessel causing a very apprehensive look from the engineer.

As the SSV Zodiac closed in on the tug and its refuse barge, Stevens watched from the top floor of a nearby overlooking building in the manner any tourist would watch the passing river traffic whilst touring the city.

“Looks like this is about to get interesting” Stevens remarked as he put down his binoculars and reached for a remote control unit, the same one he had brought with him when he had left the tug boat earlier that afternoon whereupon he duly switched it on.

“Looks like the proverbial balloon is about to go up as my mother used to say” Harcourt remarked gruffly “Mind you she was a bit of a nutter, runs in the family.”

“Never would have noticed” Stevens sarcastically responded.

“I best get my boys rolling” Harcourt confirmed “Time to have some real fun.”

“The old man should have your target delivered to you at the designated location gift wrapped about five minutes after I set off our floating surprise package down there” Stevens confirmed.

“I do hope so” Harcourt remarked as he grabbed his coat and prepared to depart “It takes a lot of effort to set up something like this and get away with it by blaming it on someone else.”

“Every good skill comes with practice my friend” Stevens responded as he raised his binoculars back to his eyes to see that the patrol vessel was now almost alongside the barge whereupon he duly flicked a switch on the device in his hand and ominously the ‘armed’ light illuminated “and believe me over the next few days you and I are going to get a lot of practice indeed.”

“See you back at the barn” Harcourt confirmed with a chuckle.

“Enjoy yourself” Stevens called after him.

“Oh I intend to” Harcourt agreed as he left but paused at the door “It is not everyday that you follow in the historic footsteps of John Bellingham is it?”

“Hello love” the Commander called as he got out of a patrol car he had hailed to catch a lift in from the station and joined Tracy on the bridge whereupon they kissed briefly “What’s up?”

“Patrol vessel just reported that they think they have found the target ship” Tracy confirmed, an unusual hint of apprehension and tension in her voice that she did her best to try and hide although the Commander naturally noticed it straight away.

“I have managed to secure our two friends” the Commander confirmed indicating back to the car “I am going to take them to the secure unit at Charing Cross Hospital and get them checked out before we debrief them.”

“Lima Alpha One from SSV Zodiac” Tracy’s radio suddenly called.

“Go ahead Zodiac” Tracy quickly responded as the Commander listened in whilst curiosity got the better of Amber and Martin as they got out of the car to join them at the bridge parapet.

“Coming alongside the refuse barge now” the Captain confirmed over the radio as he and his crew looked across at the fugitive vessel, its unusually neatly stacked refuse bags and containers on the deck of the barge seemingly seeing slightly wrong for what was an otherwise ordinary everyday move on the river.

“Can you identify it?” Tracy asked.

“Barge name is Amethyst” the Captain confirmed “There appears to be someone on the bridge of the tugboat so I am going to attempt to pull them over.”

“Be careful” Tracy warned.

“There they are” the Commander pointed ahead up the river into the distance where the flashing lights of the SSV Zodiac could be seen approaching with the tug and its refuse barge mid stream alongside.

“That’s odd” Tracy remarked with a worried and puzzled look “I could have sworn Fuller said the key words were Sapphire and London Bridge.”

“Sapphire and London Bridge?” Amber asked “That is the key code words I saw on a file on Altman’s laptop just before I took a copy of his files” she explained “Trouble was I had to make a very swift exit and without a computer to read it on plus the automatic encryption he had on it I could not find out any more.”

“Maybe the other barge wasn’t available” the Commander suggested.

“Maybe” Tracy reluctantly agreed “But I can’t help think we are missing something here.”

“Ahoy there!” the Captain called over a loud hailer to the tug boat “To the Captain of the towing vessel Hermes, this is the Security Service Patrol Vessel Zodiac. Pull into mid stream, stop your engines and prepare to be boarded.”

There was no response whatsoever other than the tug boat slightly increasing its forward momentum under the remote control of Steven’s who was still controlling the ship’s speed and course from some distance away.

“Sir!” one of the officers on deck called whereupon the Captain turned around to see the officer pointing worriedly at the tow rope between the tug boat and the barge
“This looks like it is wired.”

“Bloody hell” the Captain confirmed after taking a look at the tow rope for himself whereupon he noticed a series of electrical wires running along its length from the boat and running into the depths of the hold of the barge amongst the refuse containers.

“Helm, get me parallel with the bridge of that ship right now” he called back whereupon the helmsman manoeuvred forward and the Captain was able to see through the side windows of the bridge into the interior.

Training his binoculars intently on the view through the window, the Captain looked puzzled and then growingly concerned at what he was seeing.

“Once again” he then called into his loud hailer “Stop your vessel and prepare to be boarded.”

“I have got a bad feeling about this Guv” one of the officers remarked.

“Could this thing be on a remote control?” the Captain asked generally.

“Look at that aerial” the chief engineer pointed out the long extended antenna that was mounted on the top of the bridge superstructure of the tug boat “There is no way that is standard shipboard equipment.”

“Well there is someone at the wheel” the Captain confirmed “Except he has not moved or responded in any way which means he is either very calm or very dead.”

“ETA London Bridge in less than two minutes Sir” the helmsman called from the bridge whereupon they all looked ahead to see the bridge looming ahead in the distance with flashing lights of emergency service vehicles and Security Service officers lining the river banks on both sides as well as on the bridge itself.

“SSV Zodiac to Lima Alpha One” the Captain urgently called into the ships radio as soon as he rushed back onto the bridge “It looks like the boat is wired on a remote, if the entire contents of that barge are what I think they are, you had better get everyone the hell out of there right now.”

“Roger that” Tracy confirmed before she and the Commander turned to each other and exchange a loving yet worried look.

“I’ll take this side” the Commander confirmed.

“Thank you” Tracy responded before they both proceeded to clear the area.

“All right!” Tracy declared “I want everyone off of this bridge and the embankments right now, move it!”

“Gentlemen” the Captain of the SSV Zodiac called to his crew with sincerity “Under no circumstances must that barge reach that bridge, am I understood?”

“Yes Sir” they all agreed to a man.

“Very well” the Captain confirmed “All right then lad, whatever the hell that thing is, ram it.”

“Yes Sir” the helmsman confirmed.

“Forget the car, just run like hell” Tracy called to two officers who were still on the bridge and having trouble getting their patrol car started whereupon they took the advice of their senior officer and abandoned the vehicle, running to the north side as fast as they could.

“I think I have got everyone off of that end” the Commander confirmed as he rejoined Tracy in the middle of the bridge.

“Thank you love” Tracy confirmed before they both turned to look back at the river where they saw the SSV Zodiac suddenly pull away from the target vessel before turning quickly to point its bow directly at the tug boat

“He’s not going to make it” the Commander quickly summarised “We have got to get out of here.”

“Too late” Tracy responded whereupon they both embraced each other tightly and looked into each others eyes before looking back at the scene on the river below.

“Aim for the towing cable” the Captain called to the helmsman “Full throttle.”

“Here we go” the helmsman confirmed as he pushed the engine throttle levers right forward as far as they would go which unleashed a turn of speed that saw them close the distance between the target boat and the bow of the patrol vessel with alarming speed.

“All hands brace for impact!” the Captain called although by then everyone on board was already gripping onto something to brace themselves against what was about to happen.

There was a huge jolt and a crash intertwined with the sound of scraping metal as the bow impacted with the target, jamming itself in the gap between the tug boat and the barge which forced it sideways towards the evacuated north bank of the river.

“All right, we got her” the Captain confirmed “Give it everything she has got” he ordered.

The powerful engines of the patrol vessel were no match for the old tug boat and a few moments later the barge and its towing vessel were being pushed up against the river bank wall just a hundred yards short of London Bridge.

“Right, everyone who is not essential, over the side and get the hell out of here in case this thing blows” the Captain insisted.

As the crew of the SSV Zodiac abandoned ship by jumping off the stern into the cold river, Stevens continued to watch with an amused smirk through his powerful binoculars.

“Nice effort boys” he remarked admirably “Better hold your ears everyone” he then ominously declared as he calmly flicked a switch on the remote control.

A matter of a couple of seconds later the remote radio detonators buried deep inside the tug boat and the barge began to receive the signal and count down just five seconds.

“Maybe it was a dud?” Tracy dared to venture as they looked on from the parapet of London Bridge but before the Commander could reply the tug boat and barge suddenly erupted in a huge explosion and fireball that also engulfed the SSV Zodiac, effectively vaporising both vessels and the adjoining embankment in the blink of an eye.

The roar of the explosion was deafening itself, the huge shockwave, river water and burning debris thrown up over a wide area only adding to the intensity of the event that shook buildings more than four miles away and shattered the facing windows of many buildings in the immediate area.

Tracy and the Commander’s initial reaction was to throw themselves to the ground whereupon the Commander tried to shield his beloved wife with his own body but the force of the explosion threw them across the bridge almost to the other side, tumbling over and over until they came to rest together against the far side.

Moments later as the echoes of the explosion began to die down, it was as if the entire city had been stunned into a shocked silence permeated only by the wail of building fire alarms and sirens.

The Commander was amongst the first to come to and once he had regained his senses, immediately looked around for Tracy, finding her lying on the road a short distance away.

“Oh God no...” the Commander responded as despite being battered and bruised from the impact of the explosion, he managed to get to his feet and went quickly over to her “Tracy love, are you all right?” he asked with a strong hint of desperation “Talk to me please” he begged.

Tracy stirred momentarily before rolling onto her back and opening her eyes slowly to the obvious relief of the Commander who breathed a sigh of thanks.

“My ears are ringing” Tracy confirmed with a smile as the Commander gingerly helped her to her feet revealing that she too had suffered little more than superficial cuts and bruises.

“Mine too” the Commander confirmed before they embraced and kissed, thankful that despite what had just happened they still had each other.

“What’s the damage?” Tracy asked as she and the Commander went back across the bridge to the damaged parapet and looked down towards the river.

“Dear God” came the shocked voice of Sir Richard Crowthorne as he, Martin and Amber joined them and saw the scene ahead of them.

Below them in the river were hundreds of pieces of burning or smouldering debris which were also spread all along the adjoining north bank of the Thames whilst several facing buildings were damaged with shattered windows.

In the water itself there was little trace of the remains of the tug boat, the barge or worst of all the patrol vessel Zodiac.

Already emergency services were responding to the explosion as evidenced by the approaching sound of sirens from all directions which was quickly joined by a London Fire Brigade fire fighting vessel that came below the bridge and approached the scene with its hoses already active to tackle the burning wreckage.

“Control, this is Lima Alpha One” Tracy called into her radio “Status and damage report please.”

“Control receiving” the response quickly came which was notable as it contained the sound of much activity in the background “It looks like most of the city just dialled 999. Apparently the north bank took the full force of the blast but had been largely evacuated so it looks like casualties may be fairly light, civilian ones at any rate Maam.”

“Well at least that is something” the Commander remarked.

“You two should get yourselves looked over” Sir Richard strongly suggested “I will co-ordinate with the Prime Minister and get the Major Incident Plan up and running until you get back.”

“Detonation confirmed” one of the operatives at the control console confirmed to Haliford, Hoskins and McCallister who were stood behind him watching events unfold on the big screens as the initial reports began to filter through to the television news channels.

“No shit Sherlock” McCallister remarked “We heard the explosion from here. What did he put in that thing?”

“Common household substances in carefully measured proportions” Haliford explained “All mixed to a conveniently published Afghanistan recipe and then left on gas mark three to cook until ready.”

“Remind me never to accept any invitation to a dinner party with you Sir” Hoskins remarked.

“All right, time to really stir things up” Haliford declared as he rubbed his hands with eager anticipation “Contact the guard team, tell them to get out of there.”

“Team three from Central” the operator called into a radio microphone “Withdraw immediately, your work is done.

Still observing the holiday cottage where the Prime Minister’s family were being held hostage without their knowledge, Cassini watched through his binoculars as he noticed one of the men patrolling the grounds take a telephone call on a mobile phone before he called across to his colleague with a shrill whistle.

“Ere’ mate” he called loudly “Boss has called, we are not needed here anymore.”

“Thank God for that” the other man confirmed as he rejoined his colleague and together they proceeded to their car parked in the driveway “I was getting monumentally fed up freezing my nuts off out here, I take it there is no need to hold the PM to ransom anymore.”

“Believe me, in a few minutes time he will have far bigger things to worry about” the first man confirmed as they got in the car before driving away.

“Boss” Iggy’s voice came over their radio “Did you get all that?” he asked.

“Yes I did” Cassini confirmed with a look of concern “Something terrible is going to happen I fear” he agreed before reaching for his telephone and speed dialling a number.

Back in the centre of London, the traffic was at a virtual stand still as several major roads were closed and the emergency services were still on their way to the scene of the explosion a few minutes earlier.

In the back of the ministerial escort car the Prime Minister was taking a call from Sir Richard Crowthorne.

“Do we have any idea of casualties or anything?” the Prime Minister asked with obvious concern.

As the Prime Minister continued to discuss the unfolding events, Jennifer’s telephone rang in the front of the car whereupon she used the hands free system to take the call despite the fact they were still stationary in the traffic.

“Jennifer Caverner” she confirmed as she answered the call.

“It’s Cassini” came the voice from the other end “Something odd has happened.”

“No kidding mate” Jennifer confirmed “Someone just blew up a boat load of explosive in the middle of the River Thames a couple of minutes ago.”

“Well that might explain it then” Cassini replied “Only the PM’s family watch dogs just left after receiving a call, they talked about something about the Prime Minister will have far bigger things to worry about.”

“Makes some sort of sense I suppose” Jennifer agreed “Look as soon as I have dropped off the Prime Minister at the Mansion House, I will get a couple of my best lads up there to take command, meantime you two sit tight and watch over the family.”

“Will do” Cassini confirmed before hanging up.

“Good news Sir” Jennifer called into the back of the car “The watchdogs have left the family alone for some reason, I guess they wanted to keep you on side until this bomb went off.”

“What a mess” the Prime Minister remarked with an almost distressed look “Well at least the wife and kids are safe I suppose, small mercies and all that.”

At that point Jennifer turned to look to her right when one of the motorcycle escort riders knocked on the window and indicated to her to wind it down.

“What’s up mate?” Jennifer asked.

“Apparently Cannon Street is clear of traffic on account of it being inside the cordon” the officer confirmed “It has been suggested we make our way down there to get the PM out of this mess.”

“Sounds like a plan” Jennifer agreed whereupon the motorcycle officer proceeded to move out of the traffic flow and clear a path through to the Cannon Street turning just up ahead “Soon have you there Sir” she confirmed to the Prime Minister but it was clear from his expression reflected in her rear view mirror that it would take a lot more than that to cheer him up at this difficult time.

“Oh I do so love it when a plan comes together” Haliford remarked with glee as a live traffic camera feed showed the Prime Minister’s car and its motorcycle escorts start to move towards the barriers blocking off the end of Cannon Street “Contact the Bellingham team” he instructed “Tell them Operation Perceval is green.”

“Control to Bellingham team” the operator called “Perceval is green, repeat Perceval is green.”

“Roger, out” came the briefest of responses from the gruffly voiced Harcourt.

“All right” Haliford declared “Gentlemen, we stand on the cusp of making history, the largest terrorist bomb ever seen in London, a major incident in amongst the chaos and the piece de resistance, the shutting down of the communications of the most sophisticated city in Europe.”

“Not bad for an afternoons work” McCallister remarked as he proceeded to light up a huge cigar with much vigour “and from the ashes of destruction shall rise a new force in global security” he declared proudly.

“Indeed” Haliford agreed “All right, make it happen” he called across to a team of technicians “I want every channel of communication in this city dead in the next minute.”

“You know something is still not right” Tracy remarked as arm in arm with the Commander they proceeded to walk off of the bridge towards the north side of the river “Sir Richard” she asked “You said the words you and David Howell saw were ‘Sapphire’ and ‘London Bridge’ yes?”

“Well this is London Bridge” Sir Richard confirmed “and I presume that the smouldering remains down there was called the Sapphire?”

“It was called Amethyst” Tracy explained “That is the bit that has been bothering with me.”

“Could have been a mistake on Haliford’s part?” Sir Richard suggested.

“He is too clever to make mistakes like that” the Commander warned “He may be a conniving two faced bastard who would sell his grandmother for a knighthood but he is also very intelligent. Wait a minute, what if it is a set-up?” he ventured.

“A duck blind?” Amber asked incredulously.

“One hell of a duck blink” Martin responded “Some bastard just blew a huge hole in the centre of the City of London, there hasn’t been anything like this since the place was remodelled by the Luftwaffe.”

“Amber, you said you saw the same code words on Altman’s laptop when you downloaded it” Tracy asked.

“Yes” Amber confirmed “It was in a file that flashed up as the data was transferring, I only remember it because the file name started with the same numbers as my date of birth, eleven zero five, the eleventh of May.”

“Do you remember anything else?” the Commander asked with a sense of growing concern, it was apparent that something was on his mind triggered by what Amber had just said.

“File number was 11051812, referred to London Bridge, Sapphire and some guy named Perceval I think...”

“Oh shit...” Sir Richard responded as he and the Commander exchanged identical looks.

“Eleventh of May 1812, Spencer Perceval, the only British Prime Minister ever to be assassinated” the Commander quickly concluded.

“Sapphire is the code name for the Prime Minister whenever he is in transit within the city” Tracy confirmed “I have heard Jenny mention it in the past.”

“They wouldn’t would they?” Martin asked incredulously.

“Lima Alpha One to Control” Tracy called urgently into her radio “Gold priority message!”

There was no response to which the Commander duly tried his radio instead “Alpha One to Control, urgent message” he called “Alpha One to any station, please respond.”

“Radio frequencies are dead” Tracy responded “Hey” she called over to a couple of officers nearby “Are your radios working?” she called.

“No Maam” one of them confirmed “It suddenly went dead about thirty seconds ago.”

“I hate to say this but I can’t get any signal on my mobile” Martin commented as he fiddled with his telephone.

“Same here” Sir Richard confirmed “and mine is a different secured network.”

“Do we know where Jennifer was heading with the Prime Minister?” the Commander asked.

“Last I heard he was being taken to the Mansion House for tonight’s Lord Mayor’s speech” Sir Richard responded.

“Come on” the Commander called to Tracy “With the roads blocked and the tubes shut down, we are going to have to run for it.”

“I think I have an idea which route Jenny may take” Tracy confirmed as she and the Commander began to run down King William Street in the direction Monument Underground Station and the City of London itself.

“If it is a line of radio or telephone communication in the City, we own it” the lead technician confirmed to Haliford who looked on with an almost evil grin.

“Excellent work gentlemen” he responded “and land lines too, I am most impressed. Let’s prepare to broadcast as soon as the smoke begins to rise.”

“Yes Sir” the technician confirmed as he inserted a CD into the console he was working at and prepared to load its contents.

“This is much better” Jennifer remarked as her car and the motorcycle escort was allowed through the barriers at the end of Cannon Street and she was free to accelerate, making full use of the empty road to make good progress at a time of day when it would normally be blocked by traffic.

“Beats taking the bus I suppose” the Prime Minister commented.

“I do wish you wouldn’t sneak off like you do now and again” Jennifer remarked “I am supposed to be responsible for your security you know and it is bloody difficult if you suddenly decide to pop out to the chippy when you think I am not looking.”

“Sorry...” the Prime Minister apologetically responded.

“Now who the hell is this joker?” Jennifer asked as approximately half way along the length of Cannon Street just outside the mainline and Underground station entrances they were brought to a stop by two Security Services officers who appeared to be wearing the uniform and insignia of the Transport Division.

“Maybe they want to pop out to the chippy as well?” the Prime Minister ventured with a wry smile as Jennifer wound down her side window and leaned out.

“Hey mate, what’s the problem?” she called from the car.

“Oh no problem” Harcourt remarked in his familiar gruff accent as he recognised the driver of the car “Wrong twin but I suppose I can be satisfied seeing you are identical” he added.

“Oh shit...” Jennifer muttered to herself as she looked in the rear view mirror to see two balaclava clad gunmen heading down the road towards them from the rear.

“What the hell...?” the Prime Minister began to ask.

“Hang on!” Jennifer called back as she slammed the car into reverse and accelerated sharply away amid much tyre smoke and squealing.

“You can run but you can’t hide” Harcourt remarked with a evil laugh as he removed the Security Service uniform hat and tossed it casually aside before producing a small remote control device on which he then proceeded to flick a switch that armed the magnetic explosive device that had attached itself to the underside of the car when Jennifer had been brought to a halt.

“Where are we going?” the Commander asked as he and Tracy ran down the street with half a dozen officers they had managed to round up on the way just behind them.

“Cannon Street” Tracy explained “its Jennifer’s alternative route and seeing as we evacuated it half an hour ago it seems logical that she will come that way.”

As they continued to run, they were momentarily distracted by a burst of static from their service radio sets before both theirs and those of the other officers they were with began to emit a song.

It was the same across the city, mobile telephones, radios and even some public address systems began to simultaneously play the same tune, a cheerful tone but in such a way as to have a deeply sinister undertone as if building up to a crescendo of horrific reality.

“London Bridge is falling down, falling down, falling down, London Bridge is falling down, my fair lady...”

As soon as the last word was uttered of the old nursery rhyme, the city was rocked by another explosion, this time in the centre of Cannon Street.

“Oh my God, what was that?” the Commander suddenly asked.

As they rounded the corner into Cannon Street, they were met by a scene of horrific devastation, the badly wrecked remains of a car burning in the middle of the street, wreckage strewn all around including at least one person lying motionless in the street just clear of the car.

Immediately a number of balaclava clad gunmen appeared from the shadows of doorways along the length of the street with automatic weapons and opened fire randomly causing Tracy, the Commander and the other officers to quickly duck for cover.

“Shoot those bastards” the Commander called back as a fierce fire fight began to erupt which saw the two most senior Security Officers pinned down and in imminent danger, their lives potentially hanging by a thread.

As the fire fight, clearly dominated by the gunmen who had the superior firepower, position and upper hand unfolded, this was transmitted via the overlooking traffic camera back to Haliford and his associates who looked on with much glee and delight.

“That man Harcourt was worth every penny” McCallister remarked “and at five fifteen on the dot too, very appropriate.”

“Well gentlemen, I think we can safely say we have successfully put civilisation in harms way, blamed it on all the usual target groups and now it is up to us to ride to the rescue” Haliford declared.

“I’ll alert out Welsh and Russian friends to start moving our people into place” McCallister confirmed as he picked up a telephone “Time for them to be let off the leash, no reason why they should not share in the fun.”

“And so it begins...” Hoskins ominously responded as he too looked at the screen.

Over the City of London a large pall of smoke hung like a heavy fog bank, sirens, screams and alarms pierced the air. A time of great darkness, fear and pain had begun...

To Be Continued in Episode XVII – Cannon Street...

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