

Scavenger Hunt

Dave Roberts, #1

by Barry Buckingham, 1964-

Published: 2014

⌘ ⌘ ⌘ ⌘ ⌘ ⌘ ⌘ ⌘ ⌘ ⌘

Table of Contents

Dedication

Prologue



1 ... thru ... 56

* * * * *

This is a work of total fiction. Names, characters, businesses, places, events and incidents are either the products of the author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

✻ ✻ ✻ ✻ ✻ ✻ ✻ ✻ ✻ ✻

*For my children.
You fill me with me great joy and bring me immense happiness.*

Prologue

The moon was full and bright, there wasn't a cloud in the night sky as the aircraft taxied to the end of the runway. The Captain carried out his final take-off checks, and spoke to the tower.

"Tower. Firebird One. Requesting clearance."

"Firebird One. Tower. You are clear for take-off."

The Captain looked at his Co-pilot, nodded, took a deep breath and put his hand on the throttles. The Co-pilot returned the nod and dropped his hand down to shadow the Captain's movement as he pushed the four levers forward. The heavy aircraft, straining against its brakes, eagerly waited to start its mission. Its passengers felt the airframe vibrate through their seats as the power came on.

The Captain took a final scan of his instruments, "Ready?"

"Ready," the Co-pilot nodded.

The Captain looked forward at the runway and released the brakes. The aircraft lurched forward, its props chewing into the air as it accelerated down the runway.

Barely clear of the ground, the hydraulics groaned as the undercarriage came up, clunking into place. The Captain checked his vectors, and turned the aircraft towards the first waypoint.

This part of the trip would be easy and stress free, but once they entered the mountains there would be no room for error; the low altitude and tightness of the terrain would test their night flying skills to the limit.

The route they were flying was necessary to lessen the risk of detection; they needed to get the team as close to the drop zone as they could. On leaving the mountains, the Captain would climb the aircraft to three thousand metres for the jump, then climb to its maximum ceiling and return home.

The four man team sat inside the darkened cargo hold, patiently waiting for the green jump light to illuminate. They were talking, and laughing about the beers they were owed by their Commanding Officer back at base.

The Air Load Master sat waiting for the ready signal and smiled at the calmness of the team. *I'll join them later for a pint or two when they get back.*

The contact they were meeting, a local man, was already in position at the landing point, he was squeezed in-between two rocks at the bottom of a shallow gully. Once the team were on the ground it would be his job to transport them to the rendezvous.

As he sat listening for the aircraft, he rubbed his hands together to fight off the cold and thought about the fire which was lit in his home. "I wish they would hurry," he cursed.

He didn't have to wait long. Although he couldn't see it in the darkness, he could hear it. With its low whistling rumble coming from its four Rolls Royce engines, the Hercules was right on time.

As instructed, the contact went forward and lit his flare, then retreated quickly back to his little hole and waited for the first man to land.

In the cockpit, the Captain had levelled the aircraft out at the jump height. From here on the flying would be as stressful, but not as exciting: the terrain was flat, featureless and black.

The Captain saw the flare first, pointing it out to his Co-pilot. He nodded at the switch above him, the Co-Pilot flicked it on, changing the colour of the warning light in the cargo bay.

The Air Load Master had already moved over to the control panel that operated the huge loading ramp doors at the rear when he felt the aircraft climbing. He watched as the signal light changed, turned and looked at the four men. They'd also seen the warning light change and watched him for their instructions.

He checked his safety line before opening up the back of the aircraft; it was a long way down without a chute, and watched as the doors opened. Once they clunked in to position he turned and beckoned the four jumpers forward. He smiled to himself and thought how they looked like overweight ducks as they waddled over.

The four men shuffling forward, held on to each other to steady themselves. They stood in silence looking out into the dark. Approximately three kilometres below them, they could see the desert floor passing slowly by. They could just make out the ghostly grey shapes of the dunes below.

With their final equipment checks completed they waited patiently for the jump signal to start their part of the mission.

They each felt the aircraft decelerating. It would slow to one hundred and twenty five knots for the jump. One of the soldiers checked the bag attached to the front of his jumpsuit, again. This was the payment for the exchange. To leave it on the aircraft would just be unprofessional.

When the pilot was happy with the position of the aircraft, he looked at his Co-pilot and nodded. The Co-pilot reached up and changed the jump switch to steady green.

In the cargo bay, the Air Load Master tapped the man closest to him on the shoulder and gave him the thumbs up. The front two stepped off into the dark void, a fraction of second later, the second pair followed.

Once they had controlled the initial tumble from the slip stream, they took a last look at the aircraft as it started its turn and headed back home.

Turning and scanning the ground, they eye-balled the landing flare, adjusted their flight path, checked the skyline, and waited for their chutes to open. They would deploy automatically when they were six hundred and fifty metres above the sand. The shorter the time in the air the less risk of being spotted. Reaching terminal velocity, they were still over ten kilometres from where they would meet the second contact.

The night sky being so clear and the land so flat, and free from the restriction of the cabin fuselage, the men could see the lights and the outlines of the Mosques, which defined the skyline of Baghdad so clearly in the distance.

This is where they would be taken to make the switch.

As the man in the gulley sat staring at the night sky, he saw the first canopy open and watched the parachutist guide his chute towards the flare, landing short of the target by three metres. *About time*, he thought.

The other three landed within thirty seconds of him. They bundled their chutes up, buried them in the sand and disappeared into the rocks around the gulley.

As the contact watched them merge into the dark, he could hear the noise of the aircraft fading. He pulled himself out from his hiding place and approached the first soldier.

"The sand is hot here," the soldier said.

"Not in England," came the reply.

There was a pause, they nodded.

"Follow me please, we don't have much time."

The soldier put his hand up, and signalled to his men. A few moments later, they appeared and made their way to the contact's car. Once in, they sped-off, driving towards the city's lights the men had seen on their free-fall through space.

"Do you have the goods?" the contact asked.

"That's no concern of yours," the soldier in the front passenger seat said. "Your job is to drive us to meet with the other contact."

"I am the contact. The other man was not to be trusted, so I took care of him!"

The soldier turned and looked at his team, the one in the middle nodded. He turned back to the contact, "Yes! Do you have the case?"

"Yes. It's in my house."

As he drove through the streets, he noticed the soldiers were shuffling around in their seats. To try and calm them down, he said, "A lull in the fighting for a change."

The four soldiers nodded and looked around; the silence and empty streets making them nervous.

Arriving at the house, two of the soldiers went inside with the man, the other two took up positions outside to watch for any trouble. They melted in to the dark.

The first two were shown through the little house's main room, towards the back and through to the kitchen.

As they walked through, they could smell something cooking, the contact noticed them sniffing the air, "Dinner, for when you're gone," he smiled.

The contact went over to the far side of the room, and shifted a wall unit aside, revealing a small door. He motioned for the two soldiers to follow him. They watched him disappear, looked at each other, and followed him in.

They had to stoop to get in, as the door was three quarters the size of a normal one, the ceiling was also set at the same height. They crouched behind a small table at one end of the room, at the other end was a safe. It stood in the centre of the space up against the far wall.

The contact made a gesture towards it. "The case is in the safe."

One of the soldiers nodded. He took the package out of his flight suit and put it on the table, setting it squarely in the centre. The contact looked at the small container, roughly the size of two large cartons of cigarettes, he went to pick it up but the soldier took his handgun out and pushed it into the contact's face. "First the case, then you can look!"

The contact looked at the handgun, and nodded, "You English are so untrusting!" The contact went over to the safe, complaining about the heat as he went forward, starting to sweat as the room was not used to this many people. He turned and looked at the two soldiers, took a small piece of cloth out of one of his coat pockets and wiped his face. He removed his coat, and laid it on the floor in front of the safe to kneel on. As he knelt, he breathed in the sweet smell of the lamb cooking in the other room, his mouth started to water with the anticipation of the meal to come. Taking a small comb out of his pocket he combed the saliva out of his beard, whilst nodding at the two soldiers. When he'd done, he turned back to the safe.

Once it was open, the contact removed a small metal box from the space inside and placed it on the ground behind him, in full view of the two soldiers. He turned back to the safe and lifted the floor the small box had been sitting on.

He had positioned a small mirror in the safe earlier that day, for the sole purpose of being able to see what the soldiers were doing while he was turned away from them.

Pausing for a second to say a quick prayer, he leant in and put his hand on a revolver. He took another look in the mirror, on seeing the two soldiers were talking and pointing out the door, he turned and shot both of them. They fell back against the wall and slid down to the floor.

As they lay on the dirt, the contact smiled, he hadn't worried about the noise as he wanted to draw the other two soldiers, who were outside, inside. This worked as planned.

The two soldiers, hearing the shots, cautiously approached the house. They waited a few moments, to see if their comrades emerged. When they didn't, one of them called their names. They waited for a response, none came. With this, they looked at each other and nodded, took up positions on either side of the door and went in.

The contact was already waiting in the dark and shot both of them dead.

The first part of his plan had worked smoothly, the second part would be easier: to leave with the fee.

He stripped them of their weapons and placed them in his secret room, then pulled the bodies out in to the back yard, covering them with an old tarpaulin. *They won't be found for a few days. I'll be long gone by then,* he smiled.

Putting the fee into four pouches, binding each with a leather lace, and placing them in his box, he put it back in the safe. Once finished, he put the wall cabinet back, ensuring the entrance to the room was invisible again.

The contact was going to live the rest of his life in Spain. When he'd found out about the meeting with the soldiers, he put his plan into action. He had befriended the contacts and killed them. Now he had the money to retire and to buy a villa by the coast. What he hadn't planned for, was the fifth member of the team. He'd parachuted down after the first group. The now slaughtered soldiers didn't even know about him, he wasn't there because the other soldiers couldn't be trusted, he was there as a back-up in case things went wrong.

The fifth soldier had hidden out on the flight deck, sitting in the engineer's seat, the Captain, the Co-pilot and the Air Load Master had all known about him. As soon as the four soldiers had jumped, he had been called to the back of the aircraft and stood on the edge, ready.

He'd watched as the four soldiers completed their free-fall and their chutes opened before judging it was safe. His jump had been delayed though. He had hoped for a cloudy night so he could have jumped sooner—the overcast sky would have given him the cover he needed to stay hidden. Instead, he had to wait until the soldier's chutes had deployed, they would then be concentrating on the landing spot, not watching their aircraft moving off in to the distance.

The Captain had to take the aircraft round to line up for the jump again, delaying the ghost soldier's jump by over two minutes.

Once he landed, using the dying flare as a guide, he hid his chute and opened his backpack. Inside was a small two stroke motorcycle he would use to follow the soldiers. It took him less than two minutes to build it and get it running, he then set off in pursuit.

Following them had been made easy, he had slipped a locating beacon into one of the soldier's backpacks before they'd boarded the aircraft. All he had to do was ride towards Baghdad, adjusting his direction left or right if the receiver made a buzz or a beep. What worried him though was that it only had a range of fifteen kilometres, so he was relieved when he'd picked up the signal so quickly.

By the time he was mobile, he was eight minutes behind the team. He made his way through the narrow alleys, trying to stay hidden, but as soon as his locator showed he was within three quarters of a kilometre from their position he ditched the bike and set off on foot.

As he pushed the bike into a ditch, he heard two shots fired in close succession, then less than thirty seconds later, two more.

He'd had a bad feeling about the mission from the start. With the weather being against him, delaying his jump, his anxiety had started to rise.

As the fifth soldier got closer to the team's position, he stopped and scanned the area to see if he could spot them. Not being able to see them warned him that something had gone catastrophically wrong! He waited a few minutes and then went forward to the house. Peering through one of the windows, he saw a man he

recognised from the briefing file the team worked from, he was putting a handgun in a drawer. The fifth soldier scanned the room for the team but couldn't see them.

He decided he had to get the man out of the house, realising it was too dangerous to enter the man's own ground. He thought, *out in the open would be easier and safer.*

He'd already decided to kill him, but first he would find out where his team and the package were.

He made a noise to draw the man outside. It worked, the man removed his weapon from the drawer and went to investigate.

The soldier watched from behind the wall as he opened his door slightly, and peered into the darkness. A torch came on and moved across the small front yard and along the wall. On seeing nothing, he came out of his house and walked down the short path to a gap that was used as an entrance. When he was halfway along the path, the fifth soldier stood and raised his handgun.

"Halt," he ordered, quietly.

The man hesitated for a second and then raised his weapon. The soldier fired one aimed round at the man's shoulder to put him down, intending to wound him so he could question him inside, but the man twisted and the bullet hit him in the chest.

The fifth soldier tutted at the man's stupidity, he looked around quickly as he went forward, checking no one had decided to see what all the noise was about. He felt for a pulse, it was slight. "Good," he said to himself, as he stood and kicked the man's weapon away. He went inside to see if he could find his team, but the place was empty. He went back outside to drag the wounded man in so he could question him properly, shaking his head at his stupidity for not pulling him in with him in the first place.

When he went outside, the man, who he thought was unconscious, was now standing up and leaning against the building. He'd found his weapon and fired, emptying it into the fifth parachutist, killing him instantly.

The contact staggered back into his house and collapsed, he slipped into unconsciousness, never waking to see his villa in Spain.

1

Present day.

You can't beat a hot Sunday afternoon in the middle of August, especially when you're lying in a rowing boat with the girl of your dreams looking at you like you're the only person in the world. Bliss. All I need now is a pint and the footy on the telly. Dave smiled.

"Don't you just love Sundays?" Jane said, looking at Dave, like the cat that got the cream. "Making out in the morning," she said with a wink, "and then staying in bed till lunchtime."

Dave looked at her and smiled.

“Great idea coming down to the lake, though.” When she said this, she looked at Dave with one of her “I feel dirty smiles” and said, “Out here in this little boat...all alone!” Jane sat up and glanced around, looking to see if anybody was nearby. Tilting her head down slightly and looking straight into Dave’s eyes, she stuck the tip of her tongue out and rolled it across her top lip.

Dave shuffled uncomfortably in his seat, wondering what she had in mind. She noticed the look of panic creep across his face and let out a little laugh. Leaning forward, she kissed him, rolled over and lay down. Dave joined her and they both started giggling like a couple of teenagers, and soaked up the sun.

The day felt perfect!

* * * * *

At the time, Dave thought being in the boat with Jane, his fiancée, was real. Little did he know, it was just his mind taking him away from the pain his body experienced and was still enduring from the accident!

When he woke up, lying in the hospital bed, it took him a few minutes to actually work out where he was.

Dave fought to ignore the noises in his head: the screams of the children, the cries of the mothers, and the explosions. And the smells of battle lingering in his lungs: burnt cordite and charred skin.

His physical injuries should slowly improve but it would take years, if ever, for the mental ones to go!

When the Doctors explained what had happened, Dave cried. They said the team he was on had been caught in a bombing raid and he’d been buried under tons of rubble. Four of the team had been caught. Paul and Jim had been killed, and Moss had lost both of his legs from the knees down.

Dave's injuries stretched to burns down his neck, back and legs, and broken bones, so he was the lucky one!

When they explained what he'd been through just to get to this point, he was stunned. Firstly, he'd been treated on the ground by the combat medics, then medivacked to Shaibah Log Base and assessed. Later, he'd been transported back to the U.K. where he was taken by ambulance to the MDHU (Ministry of Defence Hospital Units) in Birmingham, the RCDM (the Royal Centre for Defence Medicine). He then went straight into theatre for the first of many operations.

Dave just said he didn’t remember a thing!

2

Dave couldn’t wait to get back to his unit and his mates. Boredom was his biggest problem. It gave him time to remember. Also, as he kept telling the doctors, "There’s only so many times you can count the shapes in the floor." *Still*, he thought, *I should be glad I’m alive, so they keep reminding me. For God’s sake!*

The doctors told him, “You should expect to get angry and depressed, Dave. Especially after what you’ve just been through!”

He lay there, nodding, wishing the doctor would just leave him alone. He couldn't remember much. It was all just a blur. He went out with his unit and woke up in the hospital. *I just can't remember*, he puzzled. They did say his memory might come back to him though. So they set him up with some counselling to help with the flash-backs he'd experience.

* * * * *

Four months later, twice as long as they expected. 'A problem with the skin grafts' the doctor told him, but the grafts had finally taken and they were pleased with the progress he was now making.

The guys from his unit visited regularly, but that dwindled down to just Nat. "I can't blame the others really," Dave said. "It's not as if I've got much to tell them."

"Cheer up, mate. You'll be out soon!" Nat said, trying to get Dave to smile.

Nat tried smuggling in a few beers but was stopped by a sharp-eyed nurse. She confiscated the stash. She didn't say too much about it, but she's started giving Dave a cheeky smile every time she passed by his bed.

* * * * *

They transferred Dave to the PCH (Peterborough City Hospital), so his family would find it easier to visit. Finding him a bed in the MDHU. The best thing was, they let him lay on his back and sit up. Until then, he'd been on his front because of the burns. *It's the little things in life that help the world go round!* Dave thought, smiling.

Most of the nurses, especially the military ones, were more fun. Being mainly military, they were more on his level. One morning, after their shift change, Dave had woken to find little messages in places that, well, let's just say, only his mother when he was a small boy and a few certain ladies in his life had ever visited!

They'd put him in the hospital's recovery wing, waiting for a date to return to his training unit, when he heard the truth about Jane. The so-called love of his life, who he'd actually agreed to have kids with, had hitched up with the new guy who came in to fill her position at work after she'd been promoted. *Seems it wasn't the only thing he was filling!* he cursed.

The thing Dave hated the most was, she didn't even have the balls to come and tell him herself, she got her idiot of a daddy to do it.

Hope they both get herpes, and daddy's Aston catches fire, he mused.

3

Dave had been in the army seven years, having joined up when he was eighteen. It was all down to a dare. He was with the lads down the pub, the weekend after his birthday, when they taunted, "Bet you a pint you won't go and sign up."

Don't dare me! Dave thought. *Bugger it, I'll show them.*

If the truth be known, it was the best thing Dave ever did. It got him off the streets, and probably stopped him turning into a thief, or worse still, a dead druggie.

Up to this point, Dave hadn't even stubbed a toe, so when he did something, he did it right.

* * * * *

Dave was in the 1st Royal Tank Regiment, based at Warminster, RAF Honington. And he drove tanks!

He would say, "Basically, if it can move I'll move it, or give it a bloody good try!"

He made the rank of corporal in just three years and then got busted. Dave was the unlucky idiot who got caught with the camp bike. Turned out to be the wife of one of the sergeants. Dave got a good going over, but gave as good as he got.

She was a good shag though! he smiled.

He made a promise to himself while he was serving his time inside, "No more getting drunk, and no more getting into other bloke's wives' knickers" ... *unless they're gagging for it, or had me cornered*, Dave mused.

Dave worked his butt off to get back to corporal, kept to his promise, well, as much as the ladies would let him any way! Life was starting to be good to him again, until this little hiccup.

Dave was on a NATO peace-keeping force in Iraq. The unit he was with were over helping the local government to police the area: helping train up the locals to look after themselves.

The day the accident happened, a French team and the team he was on, were sent to investigate a shooting in some outlying buildings. Dave was driving an armoured truck in a convoy of three vehicles: an ambulance, a Viking personnel carrier and his truck. They'd parked outside one of the buildings, having been tasked with cleaning up a massacre.

It was a makeshift hospital a humanitarian charity group from France had set up. The team he was on were documenting anything and everything they saw, in and immediately around the building. They took notes, lots of video and photographs, then had to clean up, making it fit for people to move back in to.

It was whilst they were doing this that the building was bombed.

Nat filled Dave in on what had happened. "You'd been in the building for about forty-five minutes when the area the team you were on, got attacked."

"Who was it, Nat?" Dave asked.

"The aircraft were two American F18 Super Hornets. They were on patrol in the area when they were ordered to take the building out. They'd been told extremists, with links to the Taliban, had occupied a building on the outskirts of Baghdad. They had to take the building out with bombs. They were told the area was clear of friendly troops and civilians."

Someone definitely got that one wrong, Dave thought. He started to have nightmares once he'd been moved to PCH; often waking up at night soaked in a cold sweat. Some nights he'd just lay for ages, trying to work out if he was back in Baghdad, or was actually at home.

The hospital doctors told him he'd be out of action for about a year. "You have to get your muscle bulk back before you can get battle fit again. You should be able to leave the hospital in about six to eight weeks."

Right on the button of eight weeks, and they sent Dave back to his unit for re-training. So it was back to Hereford.

Happy days!

4

Part of Dave's recovery was to be down at the gym every day. Not that he wasn't fit before, but getting blown up, buried alive and almost cooked, sets you back a bit!

Now this is where Dave's life goes off at a tangent again, for better or for worse, he'll find out. But as expected, it involves a woman. Again!

Her name is Poppy, and she's a Physical Training instructor. Standing a hundred and eighty centimetres tall, short dark hair, and big brown eyes. She's a third Dan karate instructor, and has completed the Iron Man challenge for the last three years, even coming first, last year. She specialises in unarmed combat, tutoring three classes a day.

Dave was in lust as soon as she walked into the classroom, and when she spoke, he was in love! She was a Geordie, just like Cheryl Cole.

Poppy had been assigned to the group Dave was in. Her job was to get them all fit for duty, ASAP.

* * * * *

Poppy started with simple circuits, as she wanted to establish a base line for the fitness of the group.

"Come on you lot. Move!" she shouted. "My old gran can run faster than that, and she's dead!"

Three of the blokes threw-up their breakfast within twenty minutes.

"Jesus. You're all a bunch of has-beens!"

"Take it easy, Sarge. We're all half-dead as it is. It won't take much to finish us off!" Dave squeaked, trying to keep his breakfast down.

"Give me twenty, Roberts!"

Dave looked at her, wondering if he'd heard her right.

She came over and eye-balled him until he fell to the ground and started pushing. Putting her foot on his back she growled, holding him down, "Don't talk to me unless you're dying, got it soldier?"

Dave nodded, and groaned under her foot. When she moved off, he thought, *God she's hot!*

They were all getting ready for their second meal of the day, after Poppy had half-killed the group, when she came in and announced, "When you get back from lunch, you'll all be oot in the pool. So, *divvent* eat too much, cos, if you *hoy-up* then you'll spend the rest of the week cleaning it oot with a teaspoon!"

What a way with words, but what a result! In the pool, with a fit little body like that! Dave smiled.

Not to be though, Poppy coached from the edge, and revelled in trying to drown them all.

* * * * *

That was eight months ago. Dave and the rest of the group slowly recovered, adding weight and muscle mass. Dave's scars, his physical ones, started to heal. Whenever he got hot and sweaty though, the itching would drive him crazy. Every day he could be found rubbing his back up against a wall in the gym. The mental one, though, still woke him in the night in a cold sweat.

There were sixteen soldiers on the course, but that went down to only ten. Four of the six left lost interest and quit. The other two lost it all together.

PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder): It's when a person goes through a terrifying event experience and relives that event, often in the form of nightmares and disturbing recollections of the event.

Every time there was a loud noise, one of the two lads would run to a corner, curl up as small as he could and start to cry. The other lad started screaming and rolling into a ball on the floor. It scared the shit out of Dave and the others.

The physical training's been tough, but, Dave enjoyed every minute of it.

Just got to get back into the technical side of things now, but I'm nearly ready for duty. It'll be good to be back in my old unit, having the lads around. Dave dreamed.

* * * * *

Poppy and Dave finally got together, six months now. She resisted at first, but Dave wore her down. He used all the time proven methods: flowers, cards, little teddy bears, and constantly asking her out. One time, hiding in her room and watching her wake up. That nearly finished everything for him! Poppy gently reminded him she could probably eat him for breakfast if she wanted to...!

Some people said Dave was stalking her! Dave's answer to that was, "I'm being thorough and attentive!"

Poppy came around in the end though. Dave knew she would.

They don't live with each other...*yet*, but they spend as much time in each other's beds, and anywhere else they can find! Once getting down and dirty on a coffee table in the officer's mess one morning. They nearly got caught by a couple of the "Rupert's" (officers), who'd come down for an early breakfast, before they went off to play with their toys. Poppy though, cool as anything, said, "Morning, Sir, just checking for serial numbers. Stores want them for an inventory check." They just smiled and winked.

5

Dave stood in front of his commander.

"Corporal Roberts. The reason for your demob is purely on operational grounds. Because of the injuries sustained in the incident you aren't fit enough to wear the protective gear needed to keep you safe on the battle ground. Therefore, we have to let you go."

Dave's shoulders slumped as the news hit home, he turned and left the room.

"Unfit for duty, they said. I'd be a liability to myself and the others in my unit. Rubbish!" Dave explained to Poppy.

Poppy went and sat on his lap and hugged him.

Eight bloody years of humping and dumping. Yes, sir. No, sir. Stir your bloody tea, sir? And now this. Discarded like a used piece of shitty bum wad. Not that I'm sore about it or anything.... Much!! Dave scowled to himself.

"Now what?" Dave asked. "Go and join the ranks of the unemployed I suppose."

"You never know, something might turn up," Poppy comforted him.

"Bugger it, if I haven't got a job by next week, I'll go walk-about, just like Crocodile Dundee. I could be like a British Jack Reacher," Dave smiled.

Poppy did her best trying not to make Dave feel like a charity case. "Something will come along, pet. It's not as if you can't work or anything" she encouraged.

Dave didn't expect her to have the answers, and he knew she was just as pissed off about all this as he was.

The next morning, Dave went to sign on.

Well, what a bloody joke that was! He queued up for an hour outside, then ended up sitting next to a bunch of seventeen year olds dressed in torn jeans and denim. *Their idea of a hard day's work was probably getting out of bed to be here for nine o'clock*, he thought.

The three of them were giving it big and making a lot of noise. The security guard was about as much use as a chocolate fireguard, he was struggling to keep control.

An older lady asked them to quieten down, only to be told to mind her own business. Dave wasn't going to say anything until this happened, so he got up and stood in front of them.

Looking them up and down one at a time, he said quietly, but firmly, "If you want, we can take this outside, or, you can do as the lady asked and shut up! Your choice."

They mumbled something, and chose to shut up. Good job really, the mood, Dave was in, he would have probably ended up in jail.

Dave looked at the lady, and smiled, then looked at the security guard.

He nodded, and mouthed, "Thanks," and went and stood at the door again.

Dave sat and waited his turn, in silence this time.

When it got to Dave, he went and sat at the counter to sign on, only to be told to come back tomorrow. Sent away with a bunch of forms they gave him to fill in, just so they could set up an interview for another day. *What a bloody joke!* he cursed.

When Dave got back, he was really hacked off!

Poppy came over and gave him a big squeeze, she kissed him slowly, a mischievous look on her face, "I've got thirty minutes spare, if you want to, you know, do something?" she said, nodding at the bedroom.

She's one sexy lady. Speedy too. It didn't take them long to get naked.

6

As they lay getting their breath back, Poppy said, "Oh, by the way, there's a message for you on the machine. Someone called Bob?"

Dave sat and thought for a few minutes. *Bob! God, I haven't heard from him for...must be four years!*

After Bob left the army, or should that be, was asked to leave! Dave didn't know, but it was quick and quiet. He fell off the radar, nobody'd heard or seen him since. Everyone assumed that he'd just gone off to be a hermit somewhere. A cave in Wales or something!

Dave skipped down the stairs and played the message.

"Dave. Can you give me a hand with something?"

Short and to the point, no details, just a number to call back on if he was interested.

Too bloody right he was interested!

Dave had only been out of the army two days and was already going crazy.

He rang the number straight-away, Bob must have been waiting for him to ring, because it only rang once.

"Bob Harris."

Quick and simple, Dave thought. *Just like old times*. "Bob. It's Dave. Hi, mate."

"Dave! I knew you'd ring. How you doing, you old scrote?"

"Good! How are you? I haven't heard from you for a while. We thought you'd gone off shagging sheep in Wales, or something!"

"I've been abroad, that's the reason I'm calling, but anyway, how's Jane? Still as sexy as ever I hope?"

"Gone. Bugged off with some shithole from her work."

Bob, Nat and Dave used to be bar buddies. Bob was sound, demobbed four years ago for some gear that went missing. It turned up on eBay. Bob couldn't see the problem, as he said, "I took it out of a skip on the base anyway!"

"Damn, she was hot. Anyway, listen, Dave. I've got this buddy, he runs some private ops over in the Gulf. Basically what you were doing before when you were in the army, but now as a civilian. Interested?"

Dave thought for a second, *I wonder if he knows why I was asked to leave. I'd better come clean now, just in case he gets funny later*. "Bob," Dave said. "You know why I was demobbed, don't you? I mean the injuries when I got blown up." Dave pondered over what he'd just said. *Shit! I haven't spoken about the explosion to anyone, not even Poppy*. "The injuries, and not being able to put the kit on. They said I wouldn't be safe, I could put the others on the unit in danger." Dave waited for him to change his offer.

"Yes, mate, I know. Thanks for telling me straight. Listen, it's not a problem, Dave. This is civilian country now, not military. As long as you can perform, you're in. Still interested?"

Dave's whole body started buzzing. "In that case, yes!" he answered, trying not to sound too excited. "When?"

"Let's meet, it'll be easier than on the phone. We can have a pint and catch up."

"Sounds good to me. The old place down by the park good for you?" Dave asked.

"Shit! Is that place still going?"

"Yep. It went downhill for a bit, but one of the lads invested his redundancy, took it over when he left the army. Quite lively now."

"OK! See you there at thirteen hundred hours, tomorrow?"

"It's a date," Dave said, smiling. "Bob?"

"Yes, Dave."

"Thanks, mate."

"Tomorrow, thirteen hundred."

Dave hung up and punched the sky. "Yes!"

He went straight back up and jumped on the bed and told Poppy what had just been said.

She didn't take it as well as he thought she would. "You should at least go and see. You can always say no," she said, guardedly.

Poppy and Dave spent another hour in bed. "God, Dave," she said, lying back, her hands above her head. "You need to get more phone calls like that."

Dave smiled, kissed her and went to get up to go for a shower, "You need to get back to work, you'll be late."

Poppy grabbed Dave's wrist and pulled him back down on top of her. She said, panting, "You ain't going nowhere, stud!"

* * * * *

Bob and Dave chatted, had a few drinks and went for something to eat. They ended up in a posh restaurant on the other side of town.

Bob paid for the lot, saying, "There's more money than you can shake a stick at when you start."

When Dave got back he was on cloud nine. *It's about time some luck came my way.*

He told Poppy what Bob had said, "Six months to a year tops. A hundred grand, tax free. And if you want, and they like you, you can stay on for another year."

Poppy wasn't pleased, "If you go, Dave, you'll be no better than a mercenary. Our relationship wouldn't last and we'd have to break up. You know my career comes first with me."

Hmm! Dave thought, I think we've come to the end of this road. Shame, she was good in the sack. But I was stung good last time, not again.

The next morning, Dave rang Bob. Two weeks later, and Dave was back in the desert. Different bunch of lads and getting a shedload more money for doing, basically, the same job.

Bloody Heaven!

The epicentre of the whole operation was based inside a number of shipping containers, all bolted together inside a factory unit, totally invisible from the outside. The building that housed the set up was located on the edge of an industrial estate, on the southern outskirts of Ramadi, not far from the train station, Al Ramadi East. Roughly a hundred and ten kilometres west from the centre of Baghdad. For the time being, the area was friendly, but the situation was continually changing.

Each shipping container was a self-contained lab, with all the latest electronic equipment installed and all accessed by doors that had positive pressure airlocks. The whole matrix of blocks was air-conditioned, spotlessly clean and very brightly lit, with each unit having its own team of specialist personnel running the equipment.

The building itself looked like any of the other units on the estate; just another factory turning out cheap shitty clothing. The only way from the outside you could tell it was a bit special, was the number of ten metre long antennas, sticking up from the middle of the roof.

When you approached to enter the building, you walked towards two ordinary steel corrugated doors. Inside, though, you were confronted by two huge security doors. These were positioned on a rail and controlled electronically from the inside by guards watching via CCTV.

Once you went through these doors, you passed the main security check point. You then turned right, around a fake wall, towards a set of steel reinforced shutters before entering the main complex. When they opened, a row of flashing red and yellow lights operated across the top, letting everyone know on the inside that someone was entering.

This entrance was guarded by a two-man unit located in a guard tower, on the opposite side of the entrance.

With all this security you'd be forgiven for thinking you'd taken the wrong turn, and ended up on the set of Stargate.

Once you passed through the checkpoint, after being grilled, searched, prodded, poked, and left in fear they would, if they thought it necessary, anally search you for hidden IED's (Improvised Explosive Devices) you entered a large open space. This was about half the size of a football pitch and where the shipping containers were located.

All around the containers were evenly marked-off areas, these housed the sections that made up the private task force: transport, maintenance, stores, an armoury, a mess hall, a kitchen, a huge walk-in fridge, and freezer. There was also an area marked out for the gym, a shower block, a hospital and briefing areas. Everything was spotlessly clean.

A TV zone was against one of the far walls, with big comfy chairs, they all had headphones plugged in to the sides. Attached to this area was a bank of computers for the personnel to send email and surf the internet when they were on standby.

Running around the inside perimeter of the building, from the floor to the roof, was a metre thick concrete and steel reinforced wall.

The ceiling swarmed with a complex puzzle of pipes, carrying everything from electrics to the fresh air circulating around the building. Different intensities of lighting hung just below the pipes to suit the area it overhung.

All invisible from the outside.

Once you were inside the perimeter, though, you were allowed to go wherever you wanted. Safe in the knowledge you were being watched by a guard or a CCTV monitor, somewhere!

One of the outside walls backed onto the perimeter fence of the industrial estate. This was where they exited the building under cover of darkness when going on patrol. The other three walls were neighboured onto the local businesses.

There was a general mix of units: clothing manufacturers, car garage workshops, bulk food suppliers, plumbing suppliers, toilet roll manufacturers. There was even a fast food outlet where you could buy, and eat, if you dare, anything from pan-fried scorpions, to what passed as a hamburger - there was a distinct lack of feral cats and dogs around, so you ate at your own risk!

All this was happening, supposedly, without the locals' knowledge.

"Who's paying for all of this, mate?" Dave asked Bob.

He looked at Dave for a few moments. "A conglomerate of countries that have an interest in the future peace of the Arab League. They have all jointly funded a private operation to work with the local and international forces, in conjunction with the country's government."

Dave cocked an eyebrow!

"All your questions will be answered at the briefing later," Bob explained. "But for now, have a look round and get some food."

Apart from the guards patrolling the complex, everyone was relaxed and on first name terms. Dave felt really weird just coming from the army, as everything there was "sir" or "Corporal" or whatever rank he was talking to at the time. The men still called certain individuals by the rank they had been given, out of respect, as they were the ones in charge of the place.

Out on patrol was different, the structure was the same as the army. Eight men, broken down into two, four-man teams. Consisting of an overall section commander and a second in command on the other team. The rest of them were specialists: one sniper, one signals, one driver, and because they were civvies, they also had two demolition experts, these were shared out between the two squads.

The demolition expert on Dave's team, was, Harry.

The shift patterns took each team out on patrol for three days at a time, this was broken down into six hour shifts: six on, six off.

They stayed in the factory unit for the three days they were on shift, being on first-response if it all went pear-shaped. The three days they were off was theirs. For this they were moved away from the area, usually being taken away by Chinook for R&R.

When the teams were out on the ground, they usually backed up the regular forces: helping with roadblocks, cleaning up after raids, or going into the local communities and helping to keep the peace.

Out on patrol, they had to be within the Chinooks' flying envelope: this could be anywhere up to one thousand kilometres from base. But if necessary, they could fly further, but this meant stopping on the way back to refuel. The pilots didn't

like doing this. On the ground they were open to ground attacks, so they usually stayed local, patrolling in Baghdad or the surrounding villages.

They were controlled by a central command unit when they were out, and liaised with whatever nationality of the forces who were patrolling the area at the time.

8

On Dave's first patrol he was put on the same team as Bob, team B. This consisted of: Bob – second in command, Steve – signals, Harry – explosives and Dave – driver and signals.

Dave's first shift brought back the nightmare of when he was out here the last time; it seemed like a lifetime away to him now.

Dave spoke to Bob about it.

"Dave, that was another life, you're starting again, but this time with the knowledge of what to expect. It might not make it easier, but it gives you a head start. OK?"

Dave nodded, realising Bob was right.

Whenever an aircraft was flying in the area, Dave scanned the sky, ducking if it came in close.

The problem with the itching was murder in the desert. The sweat meant Dave spent a lot of his time either applying generous amounts of cream, or scratching himself.

"You OK, Dave?" Bob asked.

"It's just like the doc said. The scar tissue's driving me nuts."

"Go to the med centre when you get back, they'll have something for it!"

"I've spoken with them already, they gave me this," he said, holding up a bottle of green coloured liquid. "It smells like camel droppings!"

Bob backed off a metre. "That's what that smell is... I thought it was the locals!" he laughed.

When Dave got out of the Chinook, the first time, the first thing that hit him was the stink. "Jesus! Now there's a smell that you won't forget!" he said, to, Bob.

"Get used to it, Dave. We'll be here every day we're on shift."

It was the same rotting smell as before. It completely filled Dave's mouth and nose, all the way to the deepest part of his lungs. As Dave stood there, he realised it was one of those things you never get used to.

Looking around at the piles of rubble, rotting animal carcasses and holes where houses used to be, he also realised nothing had changed, apart from a few more holes!

Dave's shift went well. A bit of a steep learning curve, but so much more relaxed than the army, if that's possible in a "war zone" but still as serious.

The work Dave was doing was familiar, and the local population was still the same. The teams looked after themselves most of the time, but the regular soldiers came over and checked them out when they were in the area, which was

reassuring, especially when they came across any old friends they'd served with before.

Dave had been there three weeks, and was starting to feel as if he was fitting in with the routine. Every shift had a full debrief at the end, but, unlike the army, they could go off for a pint afterwards. Not much opportunity for that though, as it was still a Muslim state.

Dave found himself helping out on his downtime, normally at the vehicle maintenance area. Mainly to keep in the shade because of the sun's effect on his skin. The sun cream he'd been given helped a lot, but being inside in the car pool, tinkering with engines helped as well, also it kept his mind from wandering.

* * * * *

At the end of their patrol debrief, on Dave's third week, the normal question was asked by the boss.

"Gentlemen, are there any questions?"

John, who was the other team's demolition expert, put his hand up, "Sir."

"Yes, John?"

"While I was looking around one of the houses, I came across a room. There was a safe positioned at one end."

When he said, "Safe". The room went quiet.

"A safe! Where was it located, John?"

"It was over on the east side of the city. Tucked away in the ruins of a house. I went in to see if there was anyone in there who needed any help, but it was empty."

"OK, John, thank you. We'll get it reported to the local police, they can deal with it."

"Sir?"

The boss looked at him again and nodded.

"There were some human remains in the room, not that old, but just bones. The clothes were mostly rotted away but there was also an old set of webbing next to it, looked like it was probably twenty or thirty years old. I checked for dog-tags but there weren't any on or near the remains."

"Hmm! OK, we'll inform the military police as well. Thank you. Anymore questions?" He looked around at everyone, then said. "OK. Room dismissed. Thank you, gentlemen. I'll see you all in six days. Get some rest and if you can get one, have a beer."

After the briefing, Bob went and spoke to John about the safe. "Hi, John."

"Hello, Bob, how can I help you, mate?"

"It's about the remains you found, you don't think it was military do you?"

"I did wonder when I spotted the webbing, but I had a good check around and couldn't find anything conclusive. Why do you ask?"

"I remember hearing about a mission that went wrong, around thirty years back, the team all went missing and were never found. Just thought it might be one of them."

"It would be closure for someone back home," John said.

Bob nodded. "Was the safe intact, mate?"

“Yes. Apart from the dust from where the building had been hit, it looked as if it had just come out of the showroom.”

Bob chatted to John about where he came from for a short while and then left. As he left John’s bunk, John started coughing.

“You OK, mate, you look a bit flushed?” Bob asked, concerned.

“Yes. Just feeling a bit hot and sweaty from today, I think I’ll turn in for a few hours.”

“OK, mate. Goodnight.” As Bob walked off, John started coughing more and retching, Bob shook his head, and made a mental note to call in on him later.

Six days later, at the briefing.

“OK. John’s gone on sick leave, so team one have a new guy. They think it’s a viral infection. Keep an eye on yourselves for any symptoms.”

“Probably got it off one of the locals,” one of his team mates laughed.

“He’s down in the med centre if anyone wants to pay him a visit after,” the boss said.

The next six days went smoothly.

Bob, Steve, Harry and Dave, met in Bob’s room, the conversation soon turned towards the safe.

Bob had visited John in the field medical tent when he’d finished his shift, before coming back. He filled the team in on what John had been doing.

“When the other team had cleared a dead family out of a house, in one of the back streets, John had stumbled. He went straight through one of the walls. That’s where he found the safe. He took a few pictures of the room with his phone.” Bob passed them around.

The team spent the rest of the night speculating as to what the safe contained; gold, money, even the head of a goat (that was Harry’s input), or maybe a lost copy of a Harry Potter novel. But whatever was in there, it got the team’s imaginations going.

Bob suggested they did an internet search. “We can use the computers over in the main building.”

* * * * *

“Hey, Bob. Look at this,” Steve said.

“What you got, Steve?”

“It might be easier if you read it, it’s quite long.”

The team crowded round the small terminal, and for the next few minutes it was just a jumbled sound of mumbling as they took it all in.

The safe was made in London, back in the early eighteen fifties and was one of John Tann’s fireproof safes. The one John had stumbled on had been displayed at Crystal Palace, in eighteen fifty one.

“How it ended up out here, hidden in an old house in the desert, is a mystery,” Steve added.

“I’ll do some digging later,” Bob said. “I’ll try to find out how long the building had been there.”

In Bob’s room the next day.

“Sit down, lads,” Bob invited. “I’ve got some news for you.” He offered everyone a beer that he’d arranged to have delivered, smuggled in on the Chinook from the last patrol.

“Thirty years ago, it used to belong to a local jeweller. Apparently he was always claiming he was broke, but always ate in the best restaurants, and wore new clothes. He was killed one night, supposedly by a gang of youths. It was rumoured he was helping the Americans eliminate certain individuals. His body was never found, and neither was his supposed fortune. This has to be his safe and his body.”

They all looked at each other.

“Let’s go and take a look,” Steve suggested.

“When, and how?” Harry asked.

“Tonight, Harry. Before the police decide to finally take a look at it.”

The team looked around at each other and smiled.

At twenty one hundred hours, the team checked their gear was good and they were ready.

9

Harry was ex-regiment. Explosives expert. Explosives nut more like. The phrase "You’re only supposed to blow the bloody doors off" comes to mind with Harry. He can be a bit, how do you say... overzealous with the plastic. He was attached to the BDU (Bomb Disposal Unit) as an instructor, working out of RAF Wittering.

The story goes that one day, at his uncle’s farm, he was helping to dig up an old tree. After several failed attempts to pull it out with the farm tractor, he suggested they let him blast it out.

Well! They never did find the tree, no one actually saw the explosion either, and it was so big it blew them all off their feet from a hundred metres away.

Locals reported hearing an explosion from ten kilometres away! The local gas line was fractured by the shockwave and it took the local fire brigades, from the neighbouring four counties, three days to put all the fires out. Harry wasn’t really surprised when he was asked to leave Her Majesty’s Service. Given a dishonourable discharge after serving two years of five in military prison. This was his fourth time working out here, but he said he’ll do one more, then that’s it.

Bob, or Robert Harris, he was an officer, but one of the good ones. His rank was captain. The oldest of our little group. His speciality is shooting. He was a sniper. "You spot it and I’ll shoot it", was his moto.

Bob claimed he once shot a man at just under a kilometre away. “Unlucky for the guy, though,” he would say, “I was aiming for the camel!”

Steve wasn’t interested in the armed forces, said he didn’t like all the shit that went with the job: bulling shoes, painting rocks white, calling people “sir”. He was a bit of a dark horse, but bloody good with a soldering iron. He would spend all day hacking into systems and making them work backwards for a laugh. He

helped set up the base and all the electronics, so if he couldn't get a signal out in the field, we didn't have a cat in hell's chance of getting one.

And then there's Dave.

The team called their little search, a scavenger hunt. Even though they only had one thing on the list: a safe.

* * * * *

As this was an unofficial trip, the team had to get hold of their own transport. They "borrowed" a jeep from one of the local businesses. The owner wasn't around when they took it, so technically, they nicked it.

It was nearly midnight when they got to the outskirts of Baghdad. It would then take twenty minutes to walk to the house with the safe.

They parked the jeep in a ditch, next to a tree, then set off on foot.

They'd been on the move for less than ten minutes, when suddenly, Steve's little box of tricks started to buzz. They looked at him as he shouted, "Take cover!"

As they hit the deck, there was one mother-fucking explosion! About eight hundred metres behind them. The whole area lit up from the flash, and they felt the heat of the explosion. The shockwave bounced over them at supersonic speed, covering them with sand and bits of timber.

Shit! Not again, Dave thought, as he closed his eyes.

The flash turned everything as white as a snowman's belly. He immediately thought about the last time he was caught in a blast. His army training kicked in, and he got up and went to cover. As he ran, he spotted the others running for the trees and shrubs as well.

Dave got down behind a tree, and looked back in the direction of the explosion, a huge glowing orange ball of cloud was curling up into the night sky. Everything around the team had an orangey, shadowy outline whilst the cloud burnt itself out.

At the same time, tracer bullets erupted from buildings all around, flying upwards, towards where the people on the ground thought, the aircraft that delivered the attack was. Unknown to them, it was probably an LGB (Laser Guided Bomb) tossed from five kilometres away, guided in by a two-man SAS team on the ground - somewhere within the line of sight of the target. It didn't stop people shooting anywhere in the up direction though.

Bob shouted, "They went for the mosque. Dave, Harry, Steve, check in!"

Harry was first to respond, "OK."

Dave confirmed as well, and they waited for Steve to answer. There was a pause, before Bob signalled for Harry and Dave to go take a look for Steve.

They scoped the area for people, especially the crazies shooting at anything that moved. When they were happy it was clear, they pulled themselves up and began to shuffle back to where they were blown over.

Dave radioed Bob, "Steve is still down on the ground."

As Dave went forward, he froze. He turned and got back under cover, quickly. *Shit!* He coughed down the radio. "Steve's dead. His head's missing!"

Bob worked his way over to them.

"Over there," Dave pointed.

All three of them stared at Steve's body lying on the ground.

“Shit, shit, shit! OK, turn back or go on?” Bob asked.

Harry and Dave looked at each other, and then at Steve.

“Go on,” Harry said.

Dave nodded.

“OK.” Bob pulled a body-bag out of his medical kit, had a quick scope of the area, and went forward and covered Steve up. When he came back, he said, “We’ll get him on the way back.”

The three of them turned and took another look at Steve, and pushed on.

As they moved off, Bob noticed Dave starting to hesitate.

Dave was flashing back, reliving the day he’d been caught in the so called, “Friendly Fire Incident”. As Dave started to follow the others, he began to get a cold sweat, his mouth dried up and he could feel everything closing in on him.

“You alright, mate?” Bob asked, staring at Dave’s eyes.

“Yeah, just thinking that’s all.” Dave looked at him and shook his head. He was going to say something, when Bob said, “Don’t think, Dave. Just do what your training taught you. Put it out of your mind. These things happen, especially with what we do. You’ll have plenty of time to do the worry stuff later, OK?”

He’s right, Dave thought. I’m going to get one of us killed. Get a grip Dave. He looked at him, “I’ll be OK, thanks, Bob.”

“No problem, mate.” He slapped Dave on the shoulder, and said, “Now get moving, soldier.”

* * * * *

The three of them stopped for an update, behind a wall, a hundred metres from where the house stood. They got their scopes out and looked around.

Looking in the direction of the explosion, there was now a huge fire raging. The night air was filled with balls of billowing coloured cloud: orange, red, yellow, blue, green and purple, depending on the contents of the ordnance that was cooking off. The occasional large explosion filling in any gaps, followed by shallow light trails arcing off in all directions.

“Whatever’s exploding in there,” Harry said, “isn’t going to stop anytime soon, not with the heat coming off the fire.”

The three of them were well over a kilometre away and they could still feel the heat from the raging inferno. All around them people screamed for help.

“Can you see what got hit, Bob?” Harry asked.

“Not from here, but it looks like a fuel and munitions cache and judging by the shrapnel trails that’s probably what hit Steve.”

They stared at the fire in silence for a few moments, watching the fireworks.

“OK, guys,” Bob said. “We’ve got a job to do, let’s move.”

Staying tight, hugging walls, and using the shadows whenever they could, they worked their way up to the house, senses on high alert, rifles raised, safety’s off.

People were running and shooting at anything that moved. Women crying, kids shouting and screaming, and animals whining filled the night air.

“It’ll be just our luck to get knocked off by one of those idiots,” Bob gasped. “Stay tight in and keep low, guys.”

They worked their way up the dark alleys, climbing over walls that crumbled under foot and skimming around holes that used to be houses, but were now filled with rubble and burnt-out cars.

“Shit!” Dave cursed, looking at Bob.

Harry and Bob thought they knew what Dave was thinking.

If only they knew, Dave thought. Inside, he was bloody shitting himself. *There’s no way I want to end up in hospital again, no way!*

“Dave, remember your training,” Bob mouthed.

“I just didn’t think it would’ve affected me as much as this, mate.”

“I’ve seen some tough nuts crack in lesser situations than this, Dave. You’re doing great. Trust me. OK?”

Dave nodded and carried on.

As they scurried, Harry taking the lead, it seemed every other street they went down they nearly ran into someone sitting up against a wall. A lot of them were just staring straight ahead, their eyes open wide, fear and dread written all over their faces.

Poor bastards! Dave thought.

10

The three of them approached the house from the side, stopping behind the remains of the neighbouring house’s wall. The house that stood in front of them, more of a lean than a stand, was basically a shell; no roof and only one complete wall. They could tell the layout from the rubble laying around. They marvelled at the exquisite floor tiles that once covered the concrete floor of the small house, now broken and shattered.

Dave turned to Harry, “It’d be just our luck that some other bastard got here before us.”

“Hope not for Steve’s sake,” he said, as he scoped the rubble for any IED’s.

Harry and Dave looked over at Bob, and waited for him to work out how he wanted to play it. He signalled for them to go around the outside of the house.

Harry went one way, Dave the other, crossing paths half way round, before meeting back at the start point.

Harry looked at Bob, and signalled it was all clear, Bob looked through his scope before raising his hand and motioning for them to go in.

Dave went first, Harry followed shortly after. When they were both in the small room John had stumbled across, Harry signalled for Bob to join them.

Standing, Dave and Harry’s torches lighting up the front of the safe, Harry whistled.

“Not too loud, Harry. We don’t want anyone coming over to see what we’re doing,” Bob prompted.

The safe looked the same as the picture on the internet. The gold anchor embossed on the front, a chain wrapped around it, two large hinges dominating the sides, and the words, John Tann, welded across the front.

“John wasn’t wrong about it filling the room,” Harry smiled. “That’ll take some blowing!”

“Who said anything about blowing it?” Bob said.

“What are we going to do, pick the lock?” Harry gasped.

“Yep!”

Harry and Dave both looked at Bob, and then at the safe.

“You’ve got to be kidding. I for one have never picked a safe,” Dave said.

“Me neither,” Harry said.

“I’ve had a go at picking a few safes in my time, so I’ll go first. If I can’t do it, Harry can take the door off, OK?” Bob said.

After ten minutes, Bob sat back and looked at Harry.

“Right, I’ll get the gear strapped on, then, bang, we’re in!” Harry smiled.

Bob and Dave looked at him and together, said, “Bugger!”

“We want to be able to pull, whatever’s in there, out of there,” Bob warned. “Not have to search all over this shit hole to find it, OK?”

Harry just shrugged.

“Just try to blow the hinges off first, OK?” Bob scoffed.

Harry said, “Bugger off!” letting out a little laugh. “You command, I blow stuff up. So let me get on with my business, OK?”

Bob looked at him, “OK, but try to keep it small?”

“I’ll just pop it out of the ground, No worries!”

“Isn’t that what he said about that tree at his uncle’s farm?” Dave mentioned to Bob.

“That’s what I’m worried about,” Bob said. He looked around and nodded towards a large boulder, just outside the room.

Ten minutes later, Bob, Dave and Harry were all crouched down. Bob and Dave praying it was just the hinges that would vaporize in the explosion.

Harry grinned, “Ready?”

Bob and Dave covered their heads, and waited for the one remaining wall to dissolve, and a small mushroom cloud to rise into the air.

Pop...!

Bob and Dave looked at each other, then at Harry, he was grinning like a Cheshire cat.

“Told you. No worries!” he smiled.

Harry got up and went over to the safe, looked at it, and waved the others over to look at his handy work.

“Exactly what it said on the tin,” he grinned.

Bob patted him on the back, “Nice one, Harry. Now let’s get the door open and see what’s inside.”

Harry bent down and pulled the handle, he looked around at them and smiled, turned back and tried again, grunting as he pulled it. “It won’t budge,” he puffed. “The locking mechanism must still be holding it.”

“Shit!” Bob cursed.

“OK let’s have another go!” Harry grinned.

This time, Harry placed a strand, of what looked like a long piece of thick spaghetti, around the two key holes. He ran a fresh piece of wire back behind the

boulder. He attached it to the switch, nodded at Bob and Dave to get down, and smiled.

Oh Christ! Dave thought.

Not so much a pop this time, but a huge bloody great crack.

“Shit!” Dave shouted, as bits of the remaining wall collapsed on top of them.

“Jesus, Harry! They’re going to hear that all the way back in bloody Ramadi,” Bob said.

All three of them looked over the top of the boulder, to make sure they didn’t suddenly have any unwanted company, and went back into where the safe was. The small room now had an extra window behind the safe and two less half-walls to its structure. There was also a hole in the front of the safe door that now allowed you to see into it without having to open the door!

“Harry, you have really got to get a grip on that stuff,” Bob said, shaking his head.

Harry grinned, “Worked didn’t it?”

“OK, shift!” Bob commanded. “Let’s get the door open, get whatever’s in there, and get the hell out of Dodge!”

The remainder of the door didn’t exactly open, it sort of fell off, as if it had just given up the ghost!

When they looked inside, they found a small steel container, a bit like an ammunition box, but painted blue.

The three of them frowned when they spotted the lock.

“Let’s blow it away from here?” Bob said. “Out in the desert somewhere!”

Harry nodded and grabbed the box, he turned to leave but noticed Bob had gone still.

Bob’s hand went up, signalling Dave and Harry to freeze, then he signalled for them to take cover. Harry gently put the box down, and took up a position against what was left of the wall, Dave crouched behind him. They waited for Bob to react.

A moment later, two men crept in through the gap where the front door used to be, they were waving AK47s around – choice rifle of the people who were fighting over here: plentiful, durable, strong and very effective, even when wet.

Bob let them enter fully, realising they hadn’t been spotted. He signalled to Dave and Harry, pointing at the men and moving his finger across his throat. Dave and Harry stood and came up behind them, then, in one smooth, practised movement, grabbed them around their mouths and plunged the knives into their backs, using their ribs as a lever block to slice their hearts and puncturing their lungs.

They both lowered their man to the ground. Their rifles clattering off the stone floor. Bob took the firing mechanism out, so they couldn’t be used again, or at least for a while anyway.

Harry wiped his blade clean on the dead man’s clothes and re-sheathed it.

“Right,” Bob said. “Let’s get going before any of their mates come looking!”

The three of them made their way back towards Steve’s body, hid the box and went to retrieve him.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck!” Bob cursed.

Steve’s body was gone.

“OK. When we get back to base we’ll decide what we’re going to do, but I’ll tell you now, I’m not going to say anything until I’ve looked in that bloody box.”

Once they were back in Bob's room, they cracked open a beer.

"Probably Taliban!" Harry said.

Bob and Dave looked at him. "What!" Bob said. "Where the bloody hell did you get that from?"

"They're going to display Steve on the TV, or something," Harry said. "They're going to say, '*they're defeating us and we should leave, or they'll kill each one of us in the name of Allah!*'"

"Harry, mate, you've been watching too much TV," Bob said. He turned to Dave, "Did you see any marks on the floor, as if Steve had been dragged away?"

"No, but there were other footprints."

"Shit!" Bob cursed.

"Told you, mate, they're going to put him on the bloody TV."

"Shut the fuck up, Harry!" Bob scowled.

The three of them finished their beers and decided to open the box.

"Let's see if Steve getting killed was worth it," Harry said.

They drove for twenty minutes, far enough away from the base not to be heard. Finding an empty bit of scrub down in a gulley, they parked up and placed the box in a small dip.

"Hopefully, it won't attract any attention from passers-by," Bob said.

Harry put the container down and looked at it.

Bob asked, "What you thinking, Harry?"

"Booby trap?"

Bob nodded in agreement. "OK. But, Harry. Low key. OK?"

"Of course. Just enough to lift the lid."

Crap! Here we go again, Dave thought.

True to his word though, there was just a little flash and the smallest of pops. The three of them waited a few minutes, to see if anyone had noticed their little firework show. When they were happy, they got out of their hole and approached the box.

The lock, and pieces of an unfortunate lizard, which had chosen that precise moment in time to investigate, were spread around the container.

The three of them looked at each other, anticipation written all over their faces. Bob knelt down, and without touching anything, looked through the gap, under the lid. He fumbled around in his pocket and took his torch out. He scanned the inside. Standing up, he handed the torch to Harry, who knelt down and did the same.

"Clear, Bob," Harry breathed.

Bob lifted the lid slowly, whilst Harry and Dave watched, he stopped when the lid was at right angles.

Inside, a little dusty from the pop, were four pouches, each the size of a baseball, and tied with a lace.

Bob picked one up. "Leather." Rolling it around in his hands, "Feels like it's full of marbles. Weighs, probably, half a kilo." He pulled the tie and opened it. His smile couldn't have stretched any further. "Yes!" he shouted. "Bloody jackpot!" He turned the bag over into his hand.

Diamonds, varying in size from a garden pea to giant gobbstopper rolled out on to the floor.

They quickly counted them, "About two hundred and fifty," Harry said.

Dave took the other three pouches and got the same result.

Crouching in the sand, the three of them stared at each other and then at the bags. Even just having the tops open they sparkled in the moonlight. They were mesmerised.

After a few minutes of staring like a bunch of goons, Bob took a bag out of his pocket and put the four pouches in to it, along with two small keys, which were also in the box. They headed back to base.

On the way back, they chatted.

"I'm quitting tomorrow," Harry said, smiling.

"Let's wait until we've checked them out," Bob said. "We can't do that here, so I'll send them back home and we can do it when we've finished our tour."

* * * * *

At the briefing the next morning, a few questions were asked about why Steve hadn't turned up for his shift.

Dickie, one of the blokes on the oncoming team, suggested, "He's probably gone off with that bird he's been shagging! The one with the big tits who worked in the fast food shop on the industrial estate."

The boss looked at him and let out a chuckle. "Well, get him to report to me when he gets back. OK, Dickie?"

Bob, Dave and Harry winced, thinking about how he'd disappeared. Dave looked at Bob and Harry, they were just looking straight ahead.

When the shift finished, the three of them met in Bob's room. They talked about what had happened, and worked out how to get the diamonds back to the U.K.

"They go in four separate parcels," Bob explained. "More chance of getting through if they go separately. Lucy will look after them until we've finished out here."

Five months later, and the three of them were back in the U.K. En route to Bob's place, they had one thing on their minds, the diamonds.

12

Taking a taxi from the airport was frustratingly long. The three of them looking at their watches as the distance markers notched past slowly.

"The thought of all those diamonds, just sitting there on Bob's desk," Dave said, quietly. "It's enough to do your head in!"

"And on top of that, this bloody taxi stinks of incense," Harry whispered.

The three of them talked about what could happen to the diamonds, sitting there out in the open.

“Burgled,” Dave said.

“Fire,” Harry added. “Jeez! They could get eaten by the dog, or the cleaner could chuck them out,” he squeaked.

“My sister’s a bit of a neat freak,” Bob chuckled. “She cleans from top to bottom, every other day! And as for a fire, diamonds don’t melt... or burn, and we don’t have a dog!” he finished off with.

The three of them turned their attention back to the distance markers and went quiet, trying to relax as the scenery passed by.

Every now and then, the driver would tut or huff at the traffic and make a comment, saying, “Every other driver on these roads is a bloody idiot.” And, “They should bring back compulsory driving tests for the over sixties.”

Bob and Harry just grunted, Dave smiled.

As the kilometres clicked down, Dave started thinking about Jane. *When she was learning to drive, she used to say the same thing. Funny, I didn’t think I’d miss her.*

“Are you OK, mate,” Bob asked Dave.

“Just thinking about Jane.”

“I thought her name was Poppy?” Harry said.

“Jane was the girl I was going to marry, before Poppy.”

“Well, from what I’ve heard about Poppy, it sounds like you screwed up with two stunners there, Dave.”

Dave frowned, and went back into his dream world.

* * * * *

Bob started talking to the driver, giving him directions for a short cut. They were eight kilometres out from his house, when he prompted the driver to take the next left. The driver nodded, and turned onto a little country lane.

A kilometre further on, the driver started his grumbling again. They all looked forward to see who his victim of abuse was this time.

A white Sprinter van was parked up on the left, it was quite wide for the small road and the driver had to slow down, his tyres going up onto the grass verge. This started them all off on a rant, they took it in turns slagging the white van man off as the driver crept past.

While he was squeezing through, a man and a woman were stood at the front of the van, arguing.

Dave thought, *they don’t look like a couple, they’re too different, but then again, who am I to give out advice with two relationships up the spout behind me?*

When they spotted the taxi, they turned quickly away and got back into the van.

“Wankers!” was Harry’s response.

The driver nodded and smiled, “Exactly.”

Bob lived in what people would describe as, a quaint little cottage, on the edge of a village called Docking. It was located twenty kilometres east of Hunstanton, Norfolk.

Dave and Harry looked at Bob, and frowned.

“The fruits of life!” Bob smiled.

“Yeah right,” Harry laughed.

“Whatever floats your boat, mate!” Dave smiled.

It was one of those little biscuit-tin cottages, covered in flowers and hanging baskets. Dave and Harry half expected an old gentleman gardener to walk around the corner, a pipe hanging from his mouth and big green wellies on his feet.

The entrance to the garden was via a small wooden picket gate with an old cow bell hanging from it. Bob saw the other two staring, “Country burglar alarm,” he said, flicking it with his fingers.

Dave and Harry laughed when no sound came from the bell.

“It might need a new clapper,” he said, frowning and flicking it again.

Lavender bushes grew either side of the gate, lining the garden path up to the house, the lawn was immaculately mown, with colourful flower borders peppering the edges.

Bob showed Dave and Harry round to the back garden, he wanted to enter the house via the back door. When they got around the back, the garden was full of rows of vegetables. Partially hidden, a shed nudged its head over the top of a small privet hedge down the far end, next to a small wood bordering the property.

The shed looked as if it had been built up against an old brick outhouse.

Dave and Harry stared at the neatness of the ground in front of them, but frowned at the knackered old shed.

“I potter around in there at night, planting new seed and sharpening my tools,” Bob explained. “Nothing like a home grown carrot or leek, all washed down with a glass of home-brewed pea wine.”

Dave and Harry just looked at him, “Okay” they said together, in a sort of, is he losing it, way!

When the tour of the grounds of castle le Bob was complete, they went inside. They were instructed to take off their shoes, and shown into the kitchen.

Just like the biscuit tin look of the outside, the inside was like something out of a country cottage magazine.

A large wooden table sat in the centre of the room, a red and white checked tablecloth covering it. Up against the far wall stood an old kitchen display cabinet, full of florally decorated plates and posh little paper-thin cups and saucers, mixed in-between was a collection of porcelain cats on cake stands.

“Lucy’s little hobby,” Bob mumbled. “Bloody ugly if you ask me!”

As, Dave was about to say something, a young lady walked in.

“Lads, I’d like you to meet my sister, Lucy. Lucy this is Harry and Dave.”

“Hi,” she said. “Bobby’s told me quite a lot about you already in his letters.”

Lucy was younger than Bob, and looked after herself quite well. She was tall, blonde and fit. She’d never married, but had had plenty of offers.

Dave and Harry both looked at Bob.

“You write as well?” Harry scoffed.

“You were adopted, right?” was all Dave said to Bob.

They both sniggered! Bob mouthed a few choice words, but was instantly reprimanded by, Lucy!

* * * * *

“Everything all right with the mail I sent, Sis?”

“No problems. It’s upstairs on the table as you instructed, oh big and mighty brother. It’s next to some other mail you received.”

Bob looked at her, frowning, noticing she was looking at Harry and running her fingers through her hair. Harry was smiling.

“Ahem,” he said, looking at Harry.

“All right, Bob?” Then, looking back at Lucy, he said “Nice little place you have here. Fancy showing me around?”

“Bloody hell, Harry, you haven’t been here five minutes and you’re already hitting on my sister.”

“Stop it, Bobby! Harry’s just being nice.”

With this, Bob shook his head and gestured for everyone to go up and look at the mail.

Upstairs, Lucy picked up the four parcels and handed them to Bob, along with a shed-load of junk mail.

Bob took one look at it all, “Kindling is all that lot’s good for,” as he chucked the leaflets and circulars in the open fire grate.

“I’ll make some tea and bring it up,” Lucy suggested.

“And some of your homemade scones, with some jam and cream, Sis?”

Lucy smiled and nodded.

“Would you like a hand, Lucy?”

“Leave it out, Harry,” Bob said, shaking his head.

Bob opened up the parcels while Lucy got busy in the kitchen. A few minutes later, the bedroom door swung open and Lucy walked back in. She had a tray loaded with goodies: scones, jam, cream and tea. She placed it down at the end of the table and said, “I’ll be mum!”

14

Bob put the four pouches on the table, and they all sat for a few minutes looking at them. Bob picked one up and untied it, smiled and looked at Dave and Harry. He poured the contents out. The diamonds rolled over the table, sending rainbows of colour over everything.

Lucy was pouring the tea when Bob did this, she continued to pour the contents of the whole pot into one cup, spilling it over the table and down onto the carpet. Very slowly, she put the teapot down and sat where she stood, her mouth hanging open, and her eyes popping out. Dave managed to push a chair under her, before she fell and hit the floor!

The three of them picked up a bag each and did the same.

“Oh my god!” Lucy croaked.

"I know!" Bob said.

After a few minutes, Lucy disappeared out of the room, returning with a set of digital scales and a plastic container. "I think we might need these."

"Good thinking, Lucy," Bob smiled.

Bob put the diamonds in the container and weighed them. There was approximately eight hundred grams between the four bags.

"We can't carry these around with us," Bob said. "We'll put them in the safe, keep these four out to show to the buyers."

Dave and Harry looked around the room. "What safe?" Harry asked.

Bob got up and walked over to a picture hanging above the fireplace. He pulled the picture away from the wall - as if opening a cupboard. "This safe," he said, smiling. "I'd tell you the combination, but then I'd..." They all joined in on the next part, "Have to kill you!"

The two keys were put in the safe as well.

After they'd finished their tea, Bob said, "OK. We now need to look up the price of diamonds so we know what we're into." He booted up the computer. "Anyone got any ideas what to look for?"

"This might be a bit of a long shot, but when I was going out with Jane," Dave said. "I looked on-line at buying a ring for her, a site called Washington Diamond came up. If I remember right, they had a chart for diamond prices!"

"Sounds good" Bob said, tapping the keypad.

One of the first things they saw, was how to size a diamond by weight.

"One carat equals two hundred milligrams," Bob read off the screen. He read out loud, "A high quality diamond, weighing as little as two or three grams, could be worth as much as one hundred kilos of gold."

They all sat in silence, as the scale of the scavenger hunt started hitting home.

"We've got to work out how to sell them," Bob said. "It's not as if we can walk into Cash Converters."

"They'd only give us twenty quid each for them anyway," joked Harry.

"I've got a friend who knows a jeweller," Lucy said. "She lives in Hunstanton. She might be able to put us in touch with him!"

"Good start, Sis. You do that. Don't tell her where they're from though, we don't know if anyone's looking for them, so be careful who you mention it to. We'll see if we can find out anything about those keys."

"Any more tea going, Lucy?"

"Sure, Harry," she said, smiling. "Anyone else?"

While Lucy was downstairs, Harry asked Bob, "Don't take this the wrong way, mate, but... Lucy. Is she... OK, I mean, can we trust her?"

"Yes," he said, looking at Dave and Harry.

"Fine by me," Dave said.

Harry nodded too.

When Lucy came back up, Harry asked, "When can you talk to your friend?"

"I can do it now. I'll ring her."

"OK, but set it up for tomorrow, will you?" Bob asked. He added, "I don't know about you lot, but I need a good night's sleep!"

"Got any beers in, Lucy?" Dave asked.

She looked at Dave, "I think we can do better than that, Dave."

They all got up and followed her downstairs into the front room. She went and opened up an old charm cabinet. Inside was anything but charm, it was more like a small off-licence. Bob, Dave and Harry all smiled and rubbed their hands together.

As they sat back, Bob said, "Call me paranoid, but this all feels too easy. I mean, getting the diamonds back here, and our contracts being finished without too much noise. I've known blokes who were literally threatened with jail if they didn't stay on. It feels too easy."

Dave and Harry sat and looked at him.

15

Eight kilometres away, the van parked by the side of the road was a Mercedes Sprinter. The logo on the side showed it was just an ordinary delivery vehicle. The only reason you might have any concerns about it, was the fact it hadn't moved for the last three months!

Inside, at the front of the rear cargo space, were the only two normal household devices to be seen; a micro-wave oven and a coffee machine. The rest of the compartment was crammed tight with an array of high tech gizmos, all quietly beeping and buzzing.

Down the middle of the crammed space, watching and recording everything they observed and heard, sat a man and a woman.

The woman was in her late twenties, she had a toned, athletic body, hair hanging just off the shoulders, dyed a gingery brown. She dressed in tight fitting clothes, which her partner for the mission hated. He was in his early forties, and had the opposite build to the woman, being short and slightly overweight. He wore black trousers, a white shirt, with a red cardigan.

They were busy listening to, and watching, what was going on at the cottage. They had planted all the audio and video devices a few months prior, posing as burglar alarm specialists, working in conjunction with the local police force. The little cameras they'd installed were inside the movement sensors they put in each room. They had also managed to get a bug inside the computer in the upstairs office.

Just in case Lucy thought it was a scam, they had contacted every house in the village, making sure they also telephoned all her known friends in the area.

Bob had done some checking up when he got back, ringing neighbours and friends, asking them if they had had the same visit or phone call. Once he started to get the same answer from them, he assumed it was all good, but it still niggled at the back of his mind.

Today, the couple in the van were very busy with their equipment. The two of them watched their monitors with interest. The diamonds were out and spread across the table, and in the middle was the set of keys.

16

Lucy spoke to her friend on the phone, asking her if she wanted to go for coffee. Bob, Harry and Dave started flicking between the channels on the TV, to see if there was any news about Steve. It had been over five months now, and there had been no mention of his death, or of a body turning up!

"If anything had been found, it would have been all over the news straight away," Bob frowned. "So I think we can assume it isn't going to turn up!"

"He didn't have any family, did he?" Dave asked.

"He hadn't mentioned any!" Bob said.

The three of them sat in silence, drinking their beers as they thought about Steve's headless body!

Turning their attention back to the table, they looked at the two keys. Harry picked them up, and twiddled them between his fingers, "So, what do you think these are for? I haven't seen keys like this before!"

"I've no idea," Bob huffed. "For all we know they could be for a camel lock or something?"

"I suppose we could go into Hunstanton and ask one of the key cutting shops?" Dave suggested.

"Worth a try, Dave. Harry, can you have a look on the computer," Bob asked. "Just see if there's anything out there with the same shape?"

"On it!" he nodded.

Bob went downstairs to help Lucy while Harry and Dave browsed the web. "And stay off the adult sites!" he shouted.

Dave and Harry looked at each other and shrugged.

"So what do you think, Dave...About the keys?"

"I haven't a clue, mate. Let's give it thirty minutes, if we don't get a result, we'll pop into town."

While Harry booted up the computer, Dave picked up the keys, turning them over he compared them with each other. "They look almost identical." As he studied them he estimated their length to be roughly ten centimetres long, with a flattened tube shaped shank, with teeth running along one edge. When Dave looked closely at them, he thought they looked like the profile of a mountain range. On one side he could see a slight groove running down the full length of each key.

"Why do you think they're gold coloured, Harry?" Dave asked, holding them up to the window.

"Dunno, mate," Harry said, glancing over at them. "They look good!"

The fob differed between the two: one rectangular, the other shaped like a disc. Both having a star cut into them. A seven digit number was engraved beneath each star.

"There's a number on these, Harry," Dave said, handing him one.

Harry squinted to read it off as he typed the number into Google. "Nothing," he said. Harry put his hands back behind his head and leant back in the chair.

Dave looked at him, waiting for a flash of inspiration, when Harry asked, "Do you think Lucy's got any more of those scones left?"

Downstairs, Bob and Lucy were chatting about the shops in Hunstanton. "I'm meeting up with Mary at the little tea shop on the High Street, I'll ask her if she knows anyone who might know about keys."

"Good idea, Sis. When are you going?"

"In thirty minutes."

"Right, I'll let the guys know. We'll grab a lift, if that's alright?"

Lucy nodded as Bob went back upstairs.

Dave and Harry were already coming down, Harry's hunger having got the better of him. "Any more scones going, Lucy?" he asked.

"Lucy's gone to get the car," Bob said. "We're off to Hunstanton to get the key's checked out. Lucy's meeting up with her friend, Mary."

"OK, I'll get the keys," Harry said.

"Room for three little ones, Luce?" Bob joked.

"Only if you clean the mud off your shoes first," she said, smiling. "Harry! You sit up front with me."

Bob and Dave squeezed into the back. They looked at each other, then at Harry chatting to Lucy.

She's a big girl, Bob shrugged.

Lucy's car was a little Ford Fiesta, and she treated it like it was her baby: out cleaning it whenever it got dirty, covering it when the weather changed, and servicing it regularly.

When they arrived in Hunstanton, she said, "I'm off to have coffee with Mary at the tearooms. If you come down now, I can ask her where the key cutting shops are!"

Mary was waiting inside, tea and scones already on the table. She waved excitedly as Lucy looked through the window.

Mary got up and joined them outside, hugging Lucy like a long lost friend.

"Hi, Mary," Bob said, holding his hand out. "Apparently you know someone who might know some things about diamonds?"

Lucy turned to him, "Don't be in such a rush, Bobby!" Lucy asked her about the key cutting shops in the area.

"You could try WH Smith, or one of the bigger supermarkets, they always seem to have those little franchises attached to them. Or there's the market down in the main car park!"

We could have worked that one out ourselves! Bob thought, giving her a quizzical look.

"I'll pick you up later," Lucy said. "Make sure your phone is turned on, Bobby, you've nearly always got it turned off!"

The three of them visited a number of key cutting shops, getting the same answer from all of them.

"Sorry, sir. Never seen a key like that before."

Bob looked at Dave and Harry, and then at the pub, "Pint?"

"Pint," they both replied.

* * * * *

For dinner, Lucy had made vegetarian lasagne: all the ingredients coming from Bob's garden. This was followed by apple and blackberry pie with homemade custard.

During dinner, Dave asked Lucy, "Why's it called, Sunny Hunny?" As far as Dave was concerned, he hadn't seen the sun all day.

"I don't really know, but I think it's because 'Sunny Hunny' is the only west-facing resort on the East Coast," she explained. "And Aficionado's started calling it that because of the superb golden beach, the wonderful sunsets and the candy-striped cliffs!"

Dave nodded, satisfied with the answer. Bob sat there with his mouth open, catching flies.

"Are you OK, Bobby?" she asked.

"How did you know that?"

"I've been asked a few times by tourists. I didn't know, so I looked it up," she said, smugly.

"Nice food," Harry complimented. "Better than the crap we were eating out in the desert."

"Thank you, it's nice to be appreciated," Lucy smiled, looking at Bob. "Almost everything came from Bob's allotment out back." Lucy picked up her glass, and took a sip, "And he made the wine as well."

Bob and Dave watched as Lucy and Harry sat staring at each other for a few seconds too long, this time it was Dave's turn to cough!

"Will you two cut it out, I want to keep this down if you don't mind," Bob said, disgustedly.

Harry laughed, "I can't help it if you've got a good-looking sister, mate."

Dave looked at Harry, *this definitely proves beauty is in the eye of the beholder!*

Bob looked at Lucy, then back at Harry and back at Lucy, shook his head and looked at Dave. "Come on, Dave, let's leave these two love birds to wash-up. Fancy a pint down the local?"

"Now you're talking."

While Bob and Dave were down the pub, Lucy got on the computer and booked the tickets for the trip to London. First class seats on the train and suites at a hotel: the Westbury, in the heart of Mayfair. *Why not*, she smiled. *I'll put it on Bobby's card*, he can afford it. She clicked the reservation button and sat back and thought about what clothes she should take.

When Bob and Dave got back from the pub, Harry was sitting in front of the TV, watching American football. Lucy was sat snuggled up to him, much to Bob's disgust.

"I've booked the train tickets, and got us a suite each in London for tomorrow," she said, as they sat down.

Bob looked at Harry, Harry shrugged back, "First I've heard," Harry said.

The three of them looked at Lucy, and waited for an explanation.

"Mary had a word with her jeweller friend in London, while we were having tea. He said he could see us tomorrow. So I booked the train."

"Will he buy them?" Bob asked.

"He values jewels and buys them if he likes them."

“OK,” Bob said, looking at Dave and Harry. “Looks like we’re off to London tomorrow.”

17

The talk about the diamonds that night was interesting to the woman in the van, the man, though, didn’t think anything of it, he just continued to record everything that was said and done.

They’d had the team followed from the moment they stepped out of the car on the seafront to when they got back in and drove off. Everything had been recorded, sent back to the van and logged.

They were coming to the end of their twelve-hour shift. This had been broken up with the odd pee break, taking turns jumping out of a side door to find a nearby bush. The only food or drink they’d had was from a packed lunch, and a couple of pot noodles they’d bought on the way over. What was said during this meal now, meant the team had to relocate.

“It’ll be easier to tail them with so many people around,” the man said.

“And easier to lose them,” the woman cursed.

The man nodded, turning back to his computer.

The woman thought about getting some good food when they were in London. She’d be able to jump out and go into a café, instead of eating Pot Noodles.

At eight o’clock on the dot, the two people in the van heard a car pull up outside, beeping twice. A black SUV had parked just behind, two men sitting inside. They sat for two minutes, then beeped again—two short beeps, followed by a gap of ten seconds, followed by two more beeps.

This always made the man in the van smile, not because of the comical way it was done, but as it was the signal for the end of their shift, and he could get away from his partner. It also meant he could go home to his Play Station and have a beer.

The woman smiled too. She thought of a nice long session in the gym and then a long soak in a tub full of her favourite oils, followed by some real food.

* * * * *

The next morning, the woman set off for London, minus the man. The two men who’d just finished the night shift were sat in the SUV, they wanted to wait in case he’d overslept and was on his way, but the woman insisted on going.

“He won’t be in today, he rang earlier and said he had a headache,” she explained.

The two men looked at each other, they were tired and wanted to sleep. Shrugging, they followed the white van.

18

Lucy was making breakfast before they set off, a full English, whilst listening to the local news on the radio, when Bob snuck up behind her. "Morning! Sleep well?" he said, reaching around and nicking a mushroom out of the frying pan.

"Oi! That's not for you," she said, slapping the back of his hand with the spatula.

She heard Dave coming down the stairs. "Eggs?" she called out.

"Yes, please. Two. Easy-over if I could?"

"The menu says, as they come, OK?"

"Sounds good to me, thanks. Morning Harry, you look like you've been awake all night mate, you OK?"

Bob looked at Harry, and they waited for an answer.

"I'm good thanks," he said, smiling, looking at Lucy.

Bob tutted and drank his tea, shaking his head.

"Harry's first, then Bob, then you, Dave, OK?"

"Sounds fine, Lucy, thank you," Dave acknowledged.

"I see my sister's taken a liking to you Harry?"

"It's my manly charisma," he said, smiling back at Lucy.

Bob looked at Lucy, who was now smiling, he shook his head again and shuddered.

Dave joined them at the table and poured a cup of tea. He looked at Harry and Lucy, who were now chatting like old friends, she was giggling like a teenage schoolgirl.

He looked at Bob, and mouthed, "What the hell?"

Bob shrugged, and helped himself to a slice of toast.

After they'd finished, Lucy and Harry did the washing up.

"I'll get my bag down."

Bob, Dave and Harry looked at each other.

"What bag?" Bob asked.

"My overnight bag, of course. I'm not missing a chance to go to London, especially first-class. Anyway, I've already booked my suite at the hotel."

The three guys looked at her, all thinking the same thing, *shopping!*

They took a taxi to Peterborough train station, got on the train, sat back and relaxed. Later sitting in the dining car, the conversation turned to what they were going to do with all the money once they'd sold the diamonds.

"A Porsche and a boat," Dave smiled.

"That's so stereotypical, Dave!" Bob scoffed.

"What are you going to do? Holiday, retirement fund..." Dave retorted.

"Nope. I'm going to open a garden centre!"

The three of them stared at Bob, working out whether they'd heard correctly.

"A garden centre!" Harry chuckled. "You mean with plants and trees and stuff?"

"Yep! Plants and trees and maybe a fish pond section as well."

"It'll be lovely," Lucy smiled, affectionately. "I'm going to retire and travel," Lucy said.

"Retire? You don't work, Sis!"

"I'm going to retire from not doing anything and go and volunteer somewhere, a kids' charity, probably abroad!" Lucy smiled, dreamily looking out the window.

"If anyone's interested," Harry chirped, "I'm going to spend half of mine on wining and dining fabulously beautiful women, and then blow the other half!" he said, smiling.

* * * * *

Kings Cross station was busy, especially with the refurbishments going on in and around the station. This had the effect of making it look even busier as it funnelled everyone together coming out.

"This is one of the reasons I stay away from the city," Lucy squirmed, clutching her bag.

When they got to the hotel, they went up to their suites and arranged to meet down in the bar.

"Thirty minutes, people, OK?" Bob said.

"Don't wait for me," Lucy announced, excitedly. "I'm going to take a long hot bath," she said, looking at Harry.

"Enjoy," Bob said, shaking his head.

Lucy went off and ran her bath. She had been looking forward to this part of the hotel all day. Mary had told her the hotel's upmarket oils and bath salts really soothed your skin, and made you tingle all over. Lucy smiled as she added the bath goodies to the water and waited for the bath to fill.

The soaps and fizzy bombs had been tucked into a little bamboo box, a label stuck to the lid showed the name of the hotel, embossed in gold letters. Underneath was printed, supplied by Harrods.

As she sat, she looked at the wrapping paper the soaps had come in, and thought, *I bet you can get this in Body Shop for a fraction of the price.*

As the hot water flowed into the oversized bath, the scented salts fizzed excitedly in the water, turning it a creamy gold colour. Lucy slipped out of her clothes, and stepped gently into the steaming hot water, letting it wash over her body as she slid into her little piece of heaven.

A bottle of Champagne she'd ordered was now perched on a silver trolley; room service having delivered it earlier and pushed it into the bathroom.

As she lay there, letting the mixture of exotic oils moisturise her skin, she slipped her hand over and picked up her glass, she looked at it and smiled.

Downstairs, Bob got to the bar first and ordered a round of drinks. "Three pints of Bombardier, please."

The barman nodded, "I'll bring them over, sir."

Bob found a seat and waited. He didn't have to wait long, just as he sat down the barman slid the tray in front of him. Bob thanked him, picked his pint up, and took a large gulp. *Ahhhh, sheer nectar!* He smiled.

By the time Dave came down, Bob had nearly finished his first pint.

"I haven't had a pint this good for months," he said, wiping his mouth.

Harry joined the pair of them two minutes later, just as Bob got up to get himself another drink. "Get us some cheese & onion crisps and some salted nuts, Bob."

"I don't think they do crisps in here, Harry. Anything for you, Dave?"

Dave shook his head and took another sip of his beer.

As Bob came back with Harry's nuts and something fancier than cheese & onion crisps, he looked at Dave and winked, nodding towards the table behind. Dave had a quick glance and copped an eye-full of a pair amazing legs. They belonged to a nice bit of skirt who was busy nibbling the ear off some skinny scrote sat with her. Between this and the two of them snogging each other's face off, they were talking about their day, and what they were going to do tomorrow.

Dave looked at Bob, "Too old for you, mate!"

A few minutes later, the woman got up, "I won't be long, darling, just going to powder my nose." She leaned over and kissed him on the cheek.

"Missing you already, cherry-pie."

They blew each other a kiss as she walked off.

The walk to the ladies room took her past the guy's table. She made eye contact with Harry and smiled. When she'd passed, Bob looked at him, "What is it with you and women? It's not like you're an oil painting or anything!"

"Like I said before, Bob, it's my manly charisma!"

"I've heard it called some things in my time, Harry, but not your *manly charisma*." Bob and Dave chuckled, as they enjoyed the rest of their beer.

Harry offered his nuts around, but Bob and Dave declined the offer, with Bob saying, "Save it for the women!"

19

The woman walked towards a door at the far end of the room. Blazoned across it was a gold plaque with an old style gentleman, top hat and tails and a walking cane, stood next to a lady dressed in period clothing, holding a chintzy sun umbrella over her shoulder. Underneath it read, 'Powder rooms'.

Casually glancing around, she opened the door. Inside were three doors lining the narrow hall: two on the left showing male and female, and one on the right indicating staff only. She glanced back to see if anyone was following. No one had. She waited for the hall door to close and went through the door on the right.

The stairs she was looking for were located at the back of a long walk-through cupboard full of cleaning materials. She headed up, not running, just walking briskly, realising falling over at this point would bring staff running to see what the noise was about.

At the top, she continued along a short hall to another door, she counted to three and opened it, walking through the main lobby and straight over to the lift.

She already knew what suites the four were in, as there were only five on the floor, her and her partner having the fifth.

She stood outside the first door, the master key in her hand. She'd played her part in the theft of the key by flirting with the receptionist earlier, a young lad, while her partner sneaked round the back.

Going in to each suite one by one, she placed a miniature bug, no bigger than a five pence piece, in each room, hiding them in all the places she'd been directed to:

under tables, inside lamps, even in the loo. She finished off by putting one in the phone handset.

The first three suites all went smoothly, taking just forty-five seconds in each room, but Lucy's suite would be the challenge. She knew Lucy was having a bath, from overhearing the conversation down in the bar. She stood outside Lucy's suite and put the swipe key in the lock, she took one more look up and down the hall, put her ear to the door, on hearing nothing, held her breath and very slowly turned the handle.

She opened it just enough to be able to see in. She could hear Lucy still in the bathroom, so she entered the room and pulled the door behind her, not closing it.

She looked towards the bathroom door and saw it wasn't closed fully, she thought about closing it slowly, to give her more chance of moving around easily, but thought against the idea, so she took a deep, slow, quiet breath and set about planting her equipment.

As she was moving over to put the last one in the phone, Lucy called out, "Who's there? Harry, is that you?"

The woman's heart started to pound, she looked around the room and then at the front door. Straining to hear Lucy getting out of the bath, she quickly planted the last bug and left.

"Harry?" Lucy called again.

When the woman got to the end of the hall, she pressed the lift button, and waited. She willed the lift to go faster as she watched the indicator above the door slowly count its way up past the floors. Glancing back at Lucy's suite, she thought about going to her own, when suddenly the bell pinged and the lift doors opened. She hurried in, pushed the button for the lobby, and stood watching for Lucy's door to open. Standing up against the wall, behind the button panel, she stared down the hall, using the reflection in the lift's mirror. As the doors started to close, she spotted Lucy's head glancing up and down the hall. Lucy scanned the opposite way to begin with, so by the time she looked at the lift, the doors had closed.

Lucy noticed the counter start to go down, and shrugged, thinking, *no one there, the lift's probably just stopping at every floor.*

As the woman felt the lift move she let out a long sigh, she hadn't realised, but she'd been holding her breath since she pressed the button to go down.

Lucy took a final look along the corridor and then went to get dressed, ready to meet the boys down in the bar.

At the lobby, the lift doors opened and the woman walked out, she casually crossed the foyer back towards the door she'd entered by. As she went through, she heard someone behind her call, "Ma'am, you can't go that way!"

It was one of the security guards, and by the sounds of his footsteps, he was rushing across the lobby to intercept her. She walked quickly along the hall, taking the stairs at a jump. Standing at the end of the cleaner's cupboard, she straightened herself up, as she heard the guard coming down the stairs. She walked back to the bar, across to where her partner was sitting. As she sat, she kissed him.

The door she'd just come through opened, and the guard who'd been trying to catch her came out with a bump, making everyone turn. He apologised, looked around and shrugged, then turned and went back the way he'd come. As he

walked off, he thought about going to the control room and checking the CCTV recordings, but he was due off shift in eight minutes and he didn't get paid enough to bother.

She smiled at her partner, then looking at her watch, she thought, *just short of ten minutes, not bad!* She picked up her drink and leant back, taking a sip of her soda water just as her phone rang. She opened her bag to retrieve it, moving her wallet out of the way, it contained her MI6 badge. She answered it as if she was talking to her mother.

"Hi, mum. Is everything OK?" She listened for a few seconds, then said, "Everything you asked for is there, right down to the phone!"

After a little bit of small talk, she sent her love and hung up.

The white Mercedes Sprinter van had arrived earlier and was now parked two streets away, on Hanover Square, in line of sight of the hotel.

The lady in the SUV nodded, "Everything's in place."

"No news from your partner?" one of the men asked.

"He rang on the way here. He's taking the week off as he doesn't feel too good. And he's not my partner!" the woman scowled.

The man shrugged and looked back at his computer screen and settled in for the night ahead. She went and got some rest in a reasonably priced B&B nearby, before she had to be back on duty at eight the next morning.

20

Lucy joined the others in the bar. Looking like a million dollars. She ordered a glass of pink Champagne and sat next to Harry, nicking some of his nuts.

Taking a sip, she said, "I've only had Champagne once before. When I was eighteen years old, we'd gone into Peterborough, to celebrate the New Year. Bobby and a bunch of our friends had met up in the city centre, it ended badly." She put her hand on Bob. "Bob got into an argument with a local lad in one of the clubs over a girl. He started pushing Bobby around. I got knocked and pushed about in the scuffle and this set Bobby off. He laid into him, put this lad down in five seconds flat, but this just gave the lad's mates the excuse to lay in to him. As you can see, Bobby isn't small and the self-defence classes he'd been taking since he was seven years old helped." She looked at him, and smiled. "Well, the six lads who came to help their mate, soon found out the hard way! Of course, the police were called, they arrested all of them, including Bobby, but he was let out the next morning, with a caution."

"It was then that I joined the army," Bob chipped in.

Lucy took another sip of her Champagne. "Did you come up to the room earlier, Harry? I thought I heard someone and was kind of hoping it was you!" she said, coyly.

"We've been here waiting for you," Harry explained.

Bob looked at Lucy, then back at Harry and shook his head again. He looked at Dave, and said, "I think we're being watched!"

With this, the four of them went quiet and finished their drinks.

"Lucy," Bob asked. "Did you talk to anyone apart from your friend Mary?"

"No! And I didn't mention the diamonds to her anyway."

"OK, sorry."

"That's OK."

The couple behind them thought they'd blown their cover, so decided to call it a night. They paid their bill and went up to their suite. Not looking back, they held hands, giggling as they left. As soon as they got to their suite, they called the van and reported what had just been said.

Harry winked at Dave as the young couple got up, he leant forward and whispered, "I'm glad I'm not in the suite next to them tonight."

"Jesus Christ, Harry! You and your 'manly charisma' need to get a hobby."

The three of them started laughing, Lucy sat there, staring, missing the joke. Bob suddenly went quiet, turned and glanced over at the couple as they left the bar. He turned back to the others, waited a few moments to make sure they'd gone before saying anything. He sat forward and put his hands to his chin, as if he was praying, and said, "Those two were on the train from Peterborough, and if I'm not mistaken, they were behind us at the taxi rank at Kings Cross."

"I remember them on the train, but not at the rank," Harry said.

Lucy nodded, agreeing.

"I don't remember them at all!" Dave said.

After talking, they decided it was just coincidence and dropped it, but they all agreed to be more aware of who was around them, and to keep an eye out for the couple again to see if they popped up anymore.

21

The next day, after several phone calls, they decided to go sightseeing, as the meeting had been put back a day. The two men in the van had been listening to everything the team said. Shortly after, new tails were set up.

The couple from the hotel were taken off the team, but told to stay in the hotel for another day or two, so as not to arouse suspicion.

That night, as Bob was walking back to his suite he met the couple from the bar.

"Hi!" the lady said, smiling.

"Hi," Bob nodded, returning the smile.

The three of them stopped in the hallway.

"So! Where are you two heading? Newlyweds can't stay in London," Bob joked. "Spain, Italy, the Canaries?"

The couple stuck to their script, they'd been in the business too long to slip up like this. She nuzzled into her partner's chest, and said, "We're checking out tomorrow, heading to Dorset for a few days, then we're off to the south of France for two weeks before heading back to Peterborough."

“Peterborough! I know it well,” Bob explained. “What part do you live in?” He thought he’d test them to see if he could catch them out, but she scuppered his plans by saying, “We’ve only been there for six months, we moved there for our jobs, but we live in Walton.”

“Ahhhh, yes!” Bob smiled. “It’s nice round there. That’s not far from Central Park, isn’t it?”

The couple had done their homework on Peterborough and knew they were being tested. “Well it’s a bit of a walk,” she said, “but on a nice day it’s good to go there.”

The man nodded in agreement.

“Well the holiday sounds great, and congratulations. Have a great time.”

Once Bob was sure they’d gone he went to Lucy’s suite. He called the others in and explained what had just happened.

“I’ve been thinking about those two,” Lucy explained, “especially the woman. Something doesn’t feel right about her and he’s not... touchy enough, seeing they just got married.”

“You don’t think she went up to the suites yesterday?” Harry asked. “You know, when Lucy thought she heard something.”

They looked at each other, and then looked around the room, as if they were expecting to see something that wasn’t there a minute ago.

“For God’s sake, Harry! You’re making me bloody paranoid,” Dave quipped.

Bob leaned in, and as if he was a big magnet, the others did the same. “Harry’s right,” he whispered, “we need to be more vigilant. I haven’t felt sure about a few things since we left Ramadi.”

“Really, like what?” Harry said, surprised.

“Well, there’s the fact we got released so easily from our contracts. Then there’s the diamonds, why didn’t the packages get checked at customs? There’s the white van in the lay-by near the house, the burglar alarms, the two honeymooners and the thing that’s really knocking around in my head, Steve’s body!”

They all sat there in silence.

* * * * *

That night, Dave went around his whole suite looking for bugs. He didn’t find anything, not that he knew what to look for, but it made him feel better. It didn’t help him sleep though, he just lay there, thinking someone was watching him the whole time!

The four of them were down for breakfast at nine am, tucking into bacon and eggs, when Lucy said, “I heard some sad news on the radio this morning.”

“What’s that, Luce?” Bob said, looking up at her.

“I was listening to the Hunstanton local news on the radio as I was getting showered. The police found a man this morning washed up on the beach. They’re asking for any witnesses, or if anybody might know who he was.”

“Did they say what he looked like?” Asked Bob.

“Only that he was in his forties, a hundred and sixty centimetres tall, wearing a red cardigan.”

“Doesn’t sound like anyone I know.” Bob said.

“There’s a radio in the shower?” Dave gasped.

"It was probably someone out on a stag night. Got drunk, got lost and fell in the sea," Harry added.

"It's still sad though."

Bob touched Lucy's arm, and smiled at her in the way that brothers do.

22

After breakfast, they headed off in a black cab to see the potential buyer. The address was in Fulham, on Atlanta Street.

On the way to the house, Lucy kept looking out the back of the cab to see if they were being followed.

"Relax Lucy," Bob said. "You're making us all paranoid."

"I can't stop thinking about those two back at the hotel, what if they're following us?" she said.

"If they are, and we see them today, we'll go and visit them later, OK?" Harry said, looking at Bob and Dave.

Lucy smiled at Harry and sat back in her seat, but kept turning her head to look out the back.

After a while, driving through London, Bob leaned forward and spoke to the cabbie through the hole in the safety glass, "Driver, can you stop two streets away from the address we've given you please?"

"Sure thing, guv!"

"What's the plan, Bob?" Dave asked.

"We'll get out early and split up. Dave and I will go straight to the house, Harry and Lucy walk around the block and meet us at the front door. That way, if there's anything that doesn't look right, we can get away easier."

* * * * *

Thirty minutes later, the driver pulled over. "Here you go, folks. Your street is just up ahead," he said, pointing.

"Cheers," Bob paid the driver and they got out.

He'd dropped them off at the corner of a cemetery.

As they walked off, Bob pointed out, "It looks like the house we want backs onto this cemetery, that'd take too long for you two to walk around, so we'll walk as two pairs towards the street we want. Harry and Lucy you walk behind, as if you're a separate couple from us. We'll walk into the street, you walk past and take the next street up and come in from the opposite direction, OK?"

As they walked in to the street, they were met with what smelt like a sewer had burst a few days before, and the smell was lingering. The road looked picturesque: tall mature oak trees lined the kerbs, and most of the houses had bulging flower boxes or hanging baskets adorning the properties.

The houses were turn of the century, Victorian houses: four to a terrace, each block having a small path up the side leading to the gardens behind. They were all mainly two floors, with what looked like loft conversions built into nearly all the houses along the street. Most of them, the ones they could see, had cellars as well,

probably all converted to downstairs flats. Some looked well-tended, but others looked like rat holes with rubbish strewn over the floor, blocking the entrances to the flats below.

Mr. Hopkins, the contact Mary had given Lucy, lived in one of the nicer ones. The path, leading up from the road had a black and white chequered tile pattern laid in to it, a bit like a space invader from an eighties arcade machine. The front door that overlooked the entrance was oversized, very green and set back inside a very white tiled porch area. You could tell he looked after his place, the paint was fresh and clean and there were freshly cut flowers on the window sills.

Parking on the street looked as if it would be a problem for the residents; with all the cars parked bumper to bumper.

"Getting out must be a 'push the car in front out the way' exercise," Bob joked.

"That's what bumpers are for though, isn't it?" Dave smiled.

Bob and Dave waited a few moments for Harry and Lucy to join them, whilst looking up and down the street to see if anyone was paying too much attention to them.

Two minutes later, they came sauntering along, holding hands. Harry said, "All clear, Bob."

"Thanks, Harry," he said, looking at their hands. Bob shrugged, "I might as well get use to that," nodding at the two of them.

"OK. Lucy, go and ring the bell." Bob said.

She stepped forward into the porch area and carried out her instructions. "All done, sir," she saluted.

"Very funny!" he said, sarcastically.

A few seconds later, a small light came on and drew their attention to a little camera tucked away in the top right-hand corner of the porch. A voice answered, "Hello?"

"Hi, Mr. Hopkins," Lucy answered. "We're here to speak to you about something we want to sell."

"I don't know what you're on about, please go away."

"Mary gave me your name and address. It's to look at some jewellery we have."

The voice came back, "Mary, Mary who?"

The four of them looked at each other. Bob asked Lucy, "Are you sure we have the right place?"

"Yes! Mary wrote it down for me. Here look."

Bob took the paper with the address and held it up to the camera. There was a pause, then the door buzzed and clicked open. "Come in please, and make sure you close the door behind you!"

The entranceway was big enough for the four of them to stand in and close the door. It was brightly lit and had a row of photos along one wall of a group of men standing together, some in uniform from what looked like world war one, and a few of a man holding a big fish on a boat. Dave pointed at them and said, quizzically, "Mr. Hopkins?"

"Probably!" Bob nodded.

On the other wall, a row of coat hooks hung with a single tweed jacket, a bowler hat sat above it. A large, dark wooden framed mirror hung next to them. Below

this was an umbrella stand, a single broly stood to attention, guarding the entrance.

Stepping through the doorway, showed a long narrow hall. It ran from the front of the house to the back, the stairs to the right about halfway along. There was a smell in the air of incense from a stick burning on a small ledge, which was a welcome relief from the stench outside.

At the end of the hall, you could see through into the kitchen, out into a large conservatory, where a set of open patio doors giving a view of a well-manicured garden.

A voice called from upstairs, the same one they had heard over the intercom, prompting them to go through to the kitchen. When they went in, they could see the garden. Lucy looked at Bob, he was standing with a face full of smile, as he appreciated a fellow gardener's garden.

"Now that's nice!" Bob commented.

At the end of the property was a three metre high wooden fence. A single strand of barbed wire ran along the top with a line of black paint just under it.

"Keeps the druggies out," a voice behind them said. "But not their litter!" He must have seen the quizzical looks on the group's faces as they turned, and he added, "The garden backs on to the cemetery and they have all types going over there at night. All drinking and playing their music. Kids of today!" he said, raising his eyes to the ceiling. "They've got no respect or consideration for other people or their property." Then he added, as if he'd just remembered, "or the dead!"

He introduced himself, holding out his hand, "I'm William, but you can call me Bill."

Bill looked to be in his late seventies but still dressed like he was in the thirties; very smart and straight. He shook each one of their hands with a firm grip, then went and stood at the end of a large wooden table and asked them to sit.

"How's Mary?" he said, looking at Lucy. "I haven't seen her for about..." he looked at the garden, then said, "It must be six months."

"She's fine," Lucy replied. "Started a new job the other day at the local hairdressers."

"Ah yes, she did mention something about getting a job. People will always want their hair cut. And that boy of hers, Greg, isn't it?"

"Gary!"

"Gary, yes that's it. I'm always getting that name wrong."

"He starts school soon," Lucy said, smiling.

He returned the smile, "They grow up so fast these days!"

Dave looked at Bill for a second, watched him studying them. *Obviously a test to make sure we are who we say we are. A bit more on the ball than I had given him credit for.*

Bill sat nodding, he had a smile on his face as if he was recalling fond memories. He turned and looked at Bob. "So Mr. Harris, how can I help you today?"

"Robert, but call me Bob."

"Bob," he nodded. "How can I help you?"

Bob took a matchbox out of his pocket and placed it on the table in front of him. Bill stared at the box for a second, then said, "Good security."

“No one’s going to look in a matchbox!”

We looked at Bob and nodded. He’s got a point, Dave mused.

“We!” Bob said, looking at Harry and Dave, “found these in the sand and *we’d* like to know how much they’re worth? And, if you're interested, would you buy them?”

“In the sand?” Bill said, raising his eyebrows, “Were you at a seaside, Bob?”

“It’s a long story, but yes, we did find them. But not in this country.”

When Bob mentioned they'd found them in a different country, Bill looked confused. He picked up the box and slid it open with his index finger.

“You’ll have to stay for a cup of tea, you can then tell me all about these little stars.”

He placed the box on a small felt square, which he took out of a drawer built underneath the table. He took the box and lifted it, as if he was weighing it, he then opened the box again, not a single wrinkle on his face moved.

I’d hate to play cards with him, Dave thought. Dave glanced at the other three, they were smiling like Cheshire cats as the diamonds caught the light coming through the window, and it was sending different coloured lights around the room like a parade of stars.

Bill took a small jeweller’s eyeglass out of his left-hand waistcoat pocket, put on a pair of white cotton gloves and picked up one of the diamonds. He spent a few moments turning it in his gloved fingers while looking through the eye-piece at them, he then did the same for the other three. “Very nice! Mm. Top quality.” Without looking at any of them, he asked, “How many do you have?”

“A *few* more!” Bob replied. “How much are they worth Bill?”

“Ahhhh, the million dollar question, Robert. Well, they all have their own individual prices and this will be dependent on three factors: weight, colour and quality.”

He put the diamonds down on the cloth, then pushing his chair out he stood, turned and walked over to a cabinet at the other end of the room. He picked up a small wooden box and brought it back to the table, placing it down in front of the cloth.

Harry and Dave leaned forward like excited kids trying to look down a wishing well, watching as Bill opened the box.

Bill pulled out an ordinary set of digital scales. They sat back, disappointed as he also took out another small container from inside the box and placed it next to the scales.

Before he put any diamonds on them, he tested the air temperature. Happy, he opened the smaller container and took a set of small brass-coloured weights and a set of silver-coloured weights out, laying them neatly on the table. He proceeded to test the scales with the weights. When he was satisfied they were set correctly, he weighed the four diamonds, one by one.

The four of them sat watching with great interest as he picked up each diamond and held it against a colour and size chart, then placed them, one at a time, on the scales.

When he had finished, he placed the diamonds back on the felt in a straight line. He packed up his equipment and placed the box back on the cabinet.

All this was done in complete silence.

He sat up straight and smiled. "This one's a high quality piece at one point two zero carat, so about seven thousand pounds. This one also is a high quality piece at one point two zero carat, so again about seven thousand pounds This one is a high quality piece also, but at one point five zero carat, so about ten thousand pounds. But this one is a beauty, top quality and at two point zero carat, is worth about seventeen thousand pounds." He finished up, by saying, "Looking at what's on the table, you have about forty one thousand pounds. He then asked again, "How many diamonds do you have?"

They sat there with their mouths open in total silence. Bill didn't comment, but he must have thought they looked like a bunch of idiots who'd just escaped from a local institution.

After a minute, Lucy said, "Nine hundred and ninety seven altogether, all varying in size like these."

Dave did a quick calculation, working on an average of one point five zero carat, then said out loud, "About ten million pounds!"

"In that case," Bill said. "Congratulations are in order. You're all very rich!"

Dave looked at the old man and thought, *is he the type to call the police as soon as we step outside the front door?*

Bill said something that changed Dave's mind.

"I do detest having to fill out import and export forms, don't you?"

"Never even seen one before," Bob smiled.

Bill looked at them all, smiled and said, "Now, that cup of tea I promised you. You can tell me all about these little beauties. We can chat about the details in a while." As he got up to make the tea, he said, "So you say you found them, where did you say again?"

"We haven't yet," Bob replied.

After talking for an hour and Bill making a few phone calls, it was decided they would come back in four days. Bill said a couple of his jeweller friends would then be there to meet them and look at the diamonds. He also said it would take him that long to get his cash together, for what he wanted to buy anyway.

23

Leaving after another cup of tea, they set off towards Fulham Palace Road to get a taxi. As they walked down the street, Harry said, quietly, "Bob, the two blokes across the street." He looked at Bob, and moving his eyes to the left, said, "Weren't they the two outside the hotel this morning, at the bus stop?"

Bob walked on a few paces, then turned to look at them, they looked straight back at him, said something to each other, got into the car they were next to and drove off.

Bob carried on walking to the end of the road, but at a faster pace, getting quicker until he was almost running. When they got to the end, he turned left. Dave and Harry realised then what he was doing, he was going to see if the car came out of the next road along.

“Nothing!” Bob shouted. “OK, back to Bill’s house, we need to get things moving quickly.”

When they got back, the door was hanging off its hinges, someone had kicked the bottom in and it was in two pieces. They stood looking at the door, they'd only been gone five minutes.

Bob said, “I’ll go first. Dave follow me in, but go to the right. Harry stay here and watch Lucy, OK?”

“OK.”

Lucy went to protest, but Harry put his finger to his lips and they both dropped back to the kerb.

Bob and Dave went forward, cautiously. They heard a groan from the kitchen where they'd left Bill just a few minutes before, Bob advanced, glancing up the stairs as he went.

Bill was lying on the floor, blood coming out of his shoulder, pooling around him dark and red. He’d been shot, a splatter of bone and blood decorated the wall behind where he’d been sitting.

Dave called Harry and Lucy in as Bob knelt next to Bill, holding his head up slightly. Bill had something in his hand, a piece of paper, he looked up and said very quietly, struggling for breath, “Ring this number, they’ll buy your diamonds, don’t let those others get them.” Blood trickled out of the side of his mouth as his head slumped back and he went still.

After a few moments, Bob looked up, saw Lucy was crying, and motioned for them all to leave. Standing and putting his arm around Lucy he turned to the door.

When he got to the front, he stopped, and pushed the others back. “Police, coming down the road with blue lights flashing, there’s already one stopping outside!”

Dave and Harry looked out over his shoulder and saw two men getting out of the first car, black flak jackets pulled over their uniforms, and POLICE written on them.

“We need another route out!” Bob said, to Harry.

“Over the fence and through the cemetery,” Harry suggested.

They turned and ran back through the house and out towards the back fence.

“Over the fence, jump,” Bob told Lucy.

With panic rising in her voice, she gasped, “I’ll never get over it, Bobby. It’s too high!”

Harry and Dave leant their backs against the fence, then with their legs open they cupped their hands out in front. Bob took his jacket off and threw it over the fence to cover the wire.

“Watch Bob,” Harry said.

Bob took a couple of paces back, ran and jumped, using their hands as a step up. He grabbed the top of the fence and pulled himself over in one go.

“Do the same as Bob, we’ll do the rest,” Harry said.

She took two steps back and ran. They literally threw her over the fence.

Dave looked back at the house. He could see a man and a woman entering the conservatory, they had their weapons drawn.

They saw the men at the fence and started shouting, "Stay where you are, keep your hands where we can see them!"

Dave turned and used Harry's hands to get over next, then, standing on Bob's shoulders he hung over the fence and Harry used him as a rope to climb over.

They landed on the other side, Bob shouted, "Run to the main gate!" He pointed over at the main road and Lucy started running first.

Dave was glancing back as they ran. "Two: a man and a woman," he shouted. "It looks like the same two honeymooners who were in the hotel the other night."

They ran along the line of the trees that flowed through the centre of the cemetery, then cut across at an angle, running around and jumping the gravestones. Tripping a few times where the grass and shrubs had been overgrown with brambles.

Suddenly, with a loud sharp crack, a corner on one of the gravestones near to them splintered as a bullet buried itself into the weather-worn stone. Lucy let out a scream.

Bob encouraged Lucy to look forward and run, "Look at the gate, Lucy, and run at it!"

Another shot rang out, and the top of another gravestone cracked and fell off. They picked up the pace, weaving as they ran towards the path that led to the open gate and out on to the main road.

When they got through the gate, they walked out into the flow of traffic, much to the annoyance of the car drivers who started honking their horns. They crossed over the road to the path on the other side.

"Split up. Harry, Dave, we'll see you back at the hotel. Lucy and I will go to the left, you two go to the right."

Within seconds, a taxi came along. Harry stepped out in front of it, causing it to skid to a halt. The driver cursed, but Harry opened the door and they jumped in. "Drive!" he shouted, at the driver. "We'll give you the address in a moment."

The driver stared at them, so Harry gave him twenty quid, he turned back in his seat and drove off.

They looked back at the cemetery gate and saw the two who'd been shooting at them holster their weapons and look up and down the street, before they started talking into their phones.

Dave and Harry looked at each other and smiled, sat back and breathed.

"What the bloody hell just happened?" Harry said.

"Lucy was right, those two at the hotel, it was them, the honeymooners."

"We can't stay at the hotel too long, if at all. That's where they'll expect us to go."

"OK, when we get back we'll recce it first, then go in if it's clear."

Harry nodded.

They sat in silence the rest of the way to the hotel.

They stopped short of the hotel and approached on foot, keeping an eye on any cars that slowed down early or parked opposite the entrance with no one getting out.

"Either they guessed wrong about where we'd go," Dave said. "Or they haven't re-grouped yet."

"You walk past, Dave, I'll wait here till you come back."

"OK." Dave walked past the entrance at a normal pace, he took his jacket off and had it over his shoulder, just to change his appearance. He glanced at the door, but didn't see anyone, so he went forward to the end of the street, turned the corner, found a carrier bag in a bin, put his jacket in and walked back.

They entered the hotel and went straight up the stairs, not wanting to use the lift, this way they could spot anyone waiting in the stairwell and hear them entering below. They got to their suites, put some kit together and made their way out before the people chasing them reached the hotel.

Dave and Harry found a spot opposite the hotel entrance to watch from, hopefully without being seen, where they could sit and wait for Bob and Lucy to show.

They'd been sitting for nearly six hours and were seriously thinking about going to the police, when a black SUV pulled up outside the hotel. Bob got out, minus Lucy. It then drove off and Bob walked in to the hotel.

He looked rough, his clothes were torn and his normally immaculate hair was a mess. They waited for the SUV to disappear round the corner and then Dave went and got Bob.

He hadn't got far, he was obviously struggling to walk, but even so he was taking the stairs. When Dave got to him he looked a mess.

"They have Lucy and they'll kill her if you don't come with me now." His eyes were red and he had a look of fear on his face. Dave turned him round and they left, crossing the road again to where they'd hidden out.

Bob explained. "We got round the corner from where we left you two, when Lucy noticed a car following slowly behind us. I turned to look, just as two guys jumped out. We were told to get in the car but I told Lucy to run. One of them shot her with a dart! They blindfolded us and took us to a house. They said she'd be alright as long as we cooperated."

As Dave and Harry stood in silence taking it all in, the black SUV that dropped Bob off a few minutes earlier pulled up in front of their hidey hole.

The front passenger window came down, and a voice said, "Get in!"

When they were seated, they were handcuffed, blindfolded, told to shut up, not to try anything, and to sit still. Harry started to move about, as if he was fighting back. Dave heard a thump and Harry moaned, then there was a crackle and some sparks and it all went black.

Dave woke with a thumping headache, his mouth tasted like a camel had shit in it. He was sitting in a chair, arms tied together behind his back, still blindfold. Where the hell am I? he thought.

"He's awake," a voice said.

"Who's that?" Dave asked, sitting up suddenly.

"We'll ask the questions, soldier boy."

Dave thought he was going to throw up, his head was spinning. "Where am I?" he repeated. Apart from a strange buzzing next to him he couldn't hear anything.

Dave came to again, his whole body ached. His left arm felt as if it was burning. He started to struggle and kick, but was punched in the gut, leaving him gasping for breath.

"We'll ask the questions, soldier boy," the voice growled again. "Just nod, if you understand or I'll Taser you again?"

He was about to ask where he was, when he heard the buzzing. *Taser*, he thought, reluctantly nodding.

"Good, soldier boy. Now, where are they?"

With his head still spinning, Dave moved into army mode. "Roberts. David. Corporal. Two One Three Four Five Four Two One." His head jerked back as he was punched square in the face. Things started to spin again. "Fuckers!" he shouted.

He was punched again. "Anymore smart arse answers and you'll watch us rape your lady friend, Lucy isn't it? Now, where are the diamonds?"

"What diamonds?"

This time the punch broke one of his teeth. The metallic taste of blood filled his mouth, his head and neck throbbed in pain.

"Where are the diamonds?" the voice demanded.

"What pissing diamonds?" Dave shouted, louder.

There was a pause as he waited for the punch or the Taser, but instead, Dave heard a door open. Lucy was screaming, a man laughing.

"Bastards! Let her go!" Dave cursed.

"I'll ask you once more, soldier boy. Or I'll fuck your whore! Where are the diamonds you found in the safe?"

Dave went silent. *How did they know about the diamonds? How did they know about the safe?* He could hear Lucy screaming and sobbing. Dave said, quietly, "They're back at the hotel in the security box." His head snapped around again. Gagging in pain, he spat! The tooth that had come loose with the last punch flew out and rattled across the concrete floor.

"Put soldier boy back," the voice said.

Dave was dragged down a corridor. He heard them unlock a door, he was thrown down onto the floor, landing on a mattress. His blindfold and cuffs were removed and the door was slammed shut. Lucy was still screaming.

As he lay there, he thought, *they've let me see their faces, which could only mean one thing: we aren't getting out of this alive!*

The room was pitch black, as the minutes passed, Dave started to see a little more. The pain in his shoulders was starting to subside but his head still throbbed. When he put his arms out he could touch the four walls around him, they were cold, damp.

Dave lay there thinking, *what the hell is going on? How did they know about the safe?*

Lucy was still sobbing in the next room, Dave tried to talk to her, to calm her down, but it didn't help. He kept asking, "Do you know where Bob and Harry are?"

She didn't answer.

After a while, the sobbing stopped so he tried again, "Lucy, do you know where Bob and Harry are?"

A few more minutes went by, then, "I heard Harry and Bob being taken out yesterday. There was a lot of screaming and banging around."

"Yesterday! How long have we been here?"

"I'm not sure. I think about two days. Harry was in the room next to me, Bob was on the other side of the hall, I think."

Dave lay there stunned. Two days! he gasped.

A little while later, Dave heard Lucy's door being unlocked. She started to cry again, and then started screaming hysterically. Dave started shouting and banging on the wall, "Leave her alone, you bastards!"

"Shut it, soldier boy!" one of the men shouted, kicking his door.

All Dave could do was listen to her sobbing as she was dragged away.

A few moments later, Dave heard the footsteps returning; the two people who'd dragged Lucy away were speaking to each other outside his cell.

"Ready for soldier boy?" one of them said.

"Yep!"

Dave thought, *a man and a woman*, as his door was pulled open. He flinched at the light cutting through the blackness, waiting to see what they would do. He froze as a Taser was forced up against his neck, and waited for the jolt. Nothing happened!

Dave could make out two silhouettes, they were just standing there. *Probably waiting for me to move so they can shoot me!* he thought.

The woman was holding a handgun; a Glock! They motioned for Dave to get up. He crouched and shuffled out of the room.

They reached in, grabbed his ears and pulled him out. Pushing him up against the wall opposite, they handcuffed his arms behind him.

The man stood, forcing his hip into Dave's back, he then kicked his legs apart, his hand pushing his head onto the wall. He shoved the Taser hard against the back of Dave's neck and breathed slowly into his ear.

The woman stood to Dave's left and held her handgun to his face, she smiled, and said, "Any trouble and I'll gladly put a bullet in your head, got-it?"

Dave smirked and blew her a kiss.

The man jerked Dave's head around, scraping his face along the wall. "Just give me an excuse, soldier boy!" he growled.

Dave used all his strength and twisted back so he was facing the woman again. "I don't know who you are, bitch," he spat. "But when I get out of here, I'm going to mess you and your friends up!"

The smile dropped from her face and she started to pull the trigger, slowly.

Dave saw her finger tighten, "Fuck you!" and waited for the shot. The man told her to cool it. He then punched Dave in the side.

As Dave collapsed to his knees, coughing, the man put his mouth to Dave's ear, and whispered, "Shut it, soldier boy. Your time will come!"

Dave glanced at the Taser, and watched as the man moved it around to his right temple. He flinched, and thought, *if he fires that thing, he's going screw my brain right up!*

Instead, he moved to the side and eyeballed Dave for a second, then ordered him to walk.

The woman took the gun away from his face, smiled and returned the kiss. Dave was then pushed along behind her.

"Move, soldier boy," the man signalled, with a flick of the Taser.

Dave clenched his fists as he recognised the voice. *That's the same asshole who punched me,* he growled inside.

They pushed Dave to the end of the corridor, pushing him into a room, the woman stayed outside.

The bulb that hung from the ceiling barely lit the room, making it look dark and dingy. It was cold and smelt damp. Lucy was sitting in a chair in the far right corner.

Dave looked at her, she was still crying, "Don't worry, Lucy, we'll get out of this." As he spoke, he was struck from behind with a rod, just below his buttocks. Dave screamed, as it cut into his thighs. He toppled forwards, landing against the wall.

"Next time I'll break them," a man growled.

They pulled him over to a chair next to Lucy and forced him to sit. Dave's legs felt as if they were on fire.

The one with the Taser stood behind Dave and pushed it into his neck, while the one with the rod stood to his right.

A little while later, the woman with the Glock entered, behind her was Harry. He was still blindfolded and handcuffed, and was being held up by another man. They leant him up against the far wall, then backing off, told him to stand still. He'd obviously been worked over as he was struggling to stand.

The lady stepped up and lifted her handgun.

"No!" Dave shouted.

Then she shot him.

The noise his body made was sickening, like someone hitting their head on the tarmac: a dull thud with a slight crack. As Harry folded over at the waist, sliding down the wall, blood squirted from his leg. He landed in a heap, face up on the floor, bubbles of saliva running down the side of his face. Lucy was hysterical.

The woman calmly put her Glock back in her shoulder holster. "The next one will be in his head," she smiled.

Dave looked at Harry, he was unconscious. Thank Christ! As he lay on the concrete floor a damp patch appeared at his crutch, he'd pissed himself, but he was still alive.

Lucy and Dave were blindfolded, taken outside and put in a car. Lucy was still sobbing. The car smelt the same as before.

One of the men said, "I'll make this easy for you to understand, OK, soldier boy? If you try to make trouble, I'll Taser you. If you take your hood off, I'll Taser you. If you try to get out, I'll Taser you. If you talk, I'll Taser you."

"If, If, If," Dave mocked. "You ain't going to do anything, monkey boy. You need us awake, otherwise you don't get the diamonds."

Dave felt the Taser shoved up against his mouth. "How's about I just mess with your little friend here, soldier boy?"

"He's just trying to wind you up. Just rough him up a bit, then we can get going."

"Give it your best shot, monkey boy." Dave ground his teeth, knowing he couldn't fight back with his hands handcuffed behind him. "Because when we're done here, I'm going to stick that Taser where the sun don't shine!"

Dave heard a buzz and got ready for the jolt, but Lucy grunted and fell across his lap.

"Make you feel better did it, monkey boy?" The man whacked Dave round the head with the Taser and he went out like a light.

* * * * *

When Dave came to, they were travelling down a winding road. He was probably only out for a few minutes. The other man was telling monkey boy to pack it in.

Dave stayed down where he was and listened, hoping they'd say something that might give their position away.

Lucy was waking up, she was making gurgling noises and moaning. Dave sat up, "She needs a drink, she can't take it as much as I can." He heard the Taser click again. "OK, I'll shut up, just, please, don't do that to her again." Dave pleaded to make it seem as if he was begging, it seemed to work, as monkey boy said, "That's better. You're learning."

The drive seemed to go on for ages. The road was straight and Dave could feel the car going fast. Probably a motorway, he thought. Lucy had sat up and was sobbing quietly.

They started to slow down, as if they were in traffic, starting and stopping. Dave tried to estimate how long they'd been in the car, but just then they stopped and their blindfolds were removed. The driver looked familiar, Dave recognised him from the bar, being one half of the newlyweds. He didn't recognise the one with the Taser, *but he'd remember him*, he thought, scowling at him.

"Don't get any ideas, soldier boy. Just get the diamonds and get back here, we'll give you fifteen minutes," the driver said.

When Lucy and Dave got out, they looked back at the car, it was the same blacked-out SUV as the other day. The driver saw them looking and pointed at his watch.

Dave was glad to be out of the car as his stomach was feeling hot and he wanted to throw-up. He looked at Lucy, she was in a daze, her eyes looked glazed and she was staring straight ahead. Dave offered his hand and they walked into the hotel.

* * * * *

Inside, they looked around to see if they could see the SUV. It had driven off and was out of sight.

"Go and get the diamonds," Dave said. "I need to get something from my suite."

Lucy looked broken, but managed to smile.

They walked up to the counter, the concierge looked up, smiled and came over, "Good evening, sir, madam. Can I help you?" At the same time he pressed a button on the counter and a few seconds later a security guard walked over and stood behind the two of them. Dave turned and looked at the guard and smiled.

"I'd like to take some things out of the hotel safe please," Lucy said.

"Madam, are you a guest here?"

"Yes, I've been sightseeing for a few days and bumped into some old friends. Once I have my belongings out of the safe I'm going up to my suite for a shower."

The concierge took their details and put them in the computer, "Have you got your passports, please?"

Lucy looked at Dave and then back at the concierge. "No, I'm sorry, I don't have one, I have a driving license is that alright?"

"That's no problem, madam, I'll need to ask you some questions first." He thanked the guard and the guard left.

"I'm sorry about that, madam, but we do get, how can I say, a few undesirables, coming in and trying to get a room."

They nodded their disapproval, which seemed to appease him.

Dave turned and took another look through the entrance doors to see if he could spot the SUV; it was clear. He gave Lucy's hand a squeeze, "I won't be long. You'll be fine, OK?"

Lucy smiled weakly at him and watched as he walked towards the stairs.

Dave went through the door, as soon as they closed he set off at a run. He didn't want to wait around for the lift, it'd take too long.

On the way up, Dave started to ache. *If I ever get out of this, I've got to get down the bloody gym again*, he frowned. He got to their floor and ran along the corridor to his suite. There was a 'Do Not Disturb' sign on the handle. He pulled it off, unlocked the door and went in.

The room had been trashed. Dave hesitated slightly as he thought about hidden cameras. He went over to the bed and pulled it away from the wall.

When he'd booked into the room he'd knocked the bed, it bumped up and came away from the wall: the bracket holding it had broken away. When he went to see if he could fix it, he found a small hole in the wall behind it.

Dave took a handgun and a spare magazine out. He cocked it and pushed it in to the front of his jeans.

He took a deep breath and ran back down the stairs. He pushed the stairwell door open, just a crack, to see if it was still clear. It was. When he walked over to Lucy, he asked, "OK?"

"Yes. He's just getting the box now. He'll be back in a second."

Dave looked at her, "Everything's going to be OK now," he said, smiling.

Lucy had a tear running down her face, he wiped it off with the edge of his T-shirt. When he lifted it, Lucy spotted the handgun in his jeans. Dave dropped his shirt back down and smiled.

"Thank you," she said, and kissed him lightly on the cheek.

"Harry's a lucky man."

She looked at him, surprised, "How did you know?"

"What, the way you two have been eyeing each other up, and don't forget, I have the room next to yours," Dave said, with a smile and nudging her with his arm.

"Oh!" she blushed.

"Don't worry, Luce, I won't tell Bob, but I think he's already guessed. Harry's gonna be fine, we'll get him out of this. OK?"

She nodded as tears welled up in her eyes again.

The concierge put the box on the counter and asked Lucy to sign for it. He nodded at Dave, "Sir."

Dave nodded back and thanked him, saying "We'll be back later tonight for dinner, could you send someone up to tidy the suites now please?"

He nodded, and made a note of the booking on the hotel computer.

Dave took the box that the diamonds were in and they walked out of the hotel.

Outside, they could see the SUV, just on the corner. Taser man was waiting where he could be seen. As they got closer, the other man got out of the driver's seat and came round and opened the back door.

Dave growled, "How's this for an iron rod around the legs?" as he pulled the handgun out and shot him straight between the eyes. He fell back against the car, and ended up in a pile, face down in the gutter with the back of his head dripping down the side of the car.

Lucy screamed.

Taser man went for his gun, but Dave was ready for him and shot him in the left leg. He buckled and went down screaming.

Two bags of shit, Dave mused, as he looked at them both on the floor.

Dave grabbed the man's weapon and pulled him up and pushed him in to the car. Dave got in behind him, and shoved him over to the driver's position. Lucky for them, and him, Dave hit him in the thigh, but he was still bleeding a lot.

Dave put his belt on and shoved his gun in his side. A quick look around confirmed Lucy was in the back.

"Now, drive," Dave ordered.

The man didn't respond at first, so Dave pointed the gun at his left foot and fired, Lucy screamed, but it did the trick, he looked at the gun, then at Dave and drove off.

"Drive us back to where you had us before," Dave said. "If you don't you'll join your mate back there?" He flicked his handgun in the direction of the body lying in the gutter.

"You won't get away with this you know. The police will be all over that body before we even get out of Mayfair. They'll have every road shut before you and the little whore back there, can say boo!"

"Then they'll be digging two graves, cunt," Dave cursed.

He looked straight ahead again and drove.

As they worked their way out of London, Dave looked around at Lucy, she smiled back, but he could tell it was an empty smile; her eyes were sunken and her face looked pale and drawn.

"Soon be over, Luce, we'll get Harry and go away for a while."

"Too right it'll soon be over," the driver cursed.

Dave pushed down on his leg. As the man screamed, Dave said, "Any more from you and I'll make sure you never walk again."

As they drove towards the motorway, Dave could feel the fatigue taking him over. He turned the A/C on and directed it at his feet.

A little trick he'd learnt at driver training back in the army. "Point a stream of cold air at your feet," his instructor had told them, "you won't fall asleep with cold feet!"

Dave smiled as he thought about his army days.

Getting on the M4 was easy, it was clear and running fast. They headed towards Reading. *Which made sense of the journey into the city earlier*, Dave thought.

They'd been driving for just over an hour, when the driver said, "I'm going to be sick." He lifted his foot off the accelerator, as the car started to slow he threw up over the steering wheel.

Lucy opened the window in the back and started to gag. Dave grabbed the steering wheel as he slumped back. "Just keep going!" Dave said.

He put his hands up onto the steering wheel and held it, the colour had drained from his face and he was starting to shake.

"Where's the place you took us to?" Dave asked, gently.

"Fuck off!"

"Tell me, and I'll let you out at the next emergency phone. If you don't, you'll probably be dead before we get there."

The man was silent for a few minutes, then he started slumping back again.

"Tell me." Dave said again.

He made a grab for the map on the dashboard, it fell onto the floor, into a pile of vomit. Dave picked it up and placed it on the man's lap. He moved his hand around unsteadily and pointed at a spot.

They drove on for another eight kilometres and pulled up - a hundred metres from the next emergency phone. Dave opened his door and looked up and down the motorway, there were a couple of cars on the road, but nothing too busy. He waited a few moments for them to pass. He pulled the driver out of his seat and across the passenger seat. He had another quick look up and down the road, saw it was still clear and pulled him out of the car.

Dave dragged him across the grass verge and into the bushes, which ran along the edge of the fields. When they were hidden, he looked around to see if anyone had stopped, they hadn't. He looked across the farmland to see if there were any

walkers out in the fields, there was no one in sight. He looked down at him, he was quietly groaning, his leg had stopped bleeding but he was as white as a sheet.

He's probably got no blood left in him, Dave mused.

Dave took another look around, stepped back and shot him.

A small black hole, about the size of a five pence piece, appeared in his forehead, turning red as he watched. The back of his head exploded over the grass as the bullet buried itself into the ground. He slumped back, hidden in the long grass. *That'll teach the bastard.*

Dave took another look around and walked back to the car. He pretended to do up his trousers, making it look like I'd just had a pee in the trees.

Lucy looked away and cried.

Dave jumped back in to the car, he could feel his heart racing as he put his belt on and started the car. He pulled back out onto the motorway and sped off.

Once he was away from the area, he glanced at Lucy in the rear view mirror, "He pointed to a spot here, just outside Farnborough. It's on the B four-four-nine-four, going towards Wantage, nearly fifty kilometres away."

She was looking out the side window, crying. "Why did you have to kill him?"

"He would have called them and told them we were coming, they would have shot Harry and waited for us to turn up. Anyway, the bastard deserved it. They all do!"

As Dave drove on, Lucy sat staring, as he told her what was going to happen when they got there.

Dave turned onto the B4494, "We've got about ten kilometres." He looked at Lucy, "Lucy, are you listening to me?"

"Yes," she mumbled.

"OK. Listen, we'll be alright. We'll get Harry out and find Bob." He didn't know if he believed it himself, for all he knew he could be dead in thirty minutes.

28

According to the map, the house was about a kilometre ahead of them and looked as if it was set back from the road, bordering on a small wood. Dave pulled the SUV over and let it climb up onto the grass verge, pulling it into the bushes until the back end was just inside the brush line, invisible from the road.

He turned the ignition off and sat for a few minutes, thinking about what he was letting himself in for!

He turned to Lucy, "Lucy?" She didn't respond at first, so he raised his voice and said it again. She turned and looked at him, her face was blank and she looked exhausted.

"Listen to me!" Dave grabbed her wrist and pointed to her watch to make sure what he was about to say meant something. "Wait here for one hour. If I'm not back by then, drive to a police station and tell them what's happening, OK?"

"OK," she nodded.

Dave looked at her for a few moments, checking to make sure she was still with him.

He checked his handgun was loaded, ready to fire. He thought, *I'm not taking any chances with this lot.* He put the Taser he'd found on the guy he'd shot, in his jacket pocket and put the other handgun on the front passenger seat, just in case Lucy needed it.

"Lucy! Remember, one hour. Don't wait any longer than that. I'll either be back, or something has gone seriously wrong!" *Hopefully the first one,* he thought.

He got out, and sat Lucy in the driver's seat. "Here's the key, look, I've put it in the ignition for you. All you have to do is turn it and back out and drive." Dave held her head in his hands and made her look at him. "Remember, if I'm not back in one hour," he pointed to her watch again, "find a police station and tell them everything. OK?"

* * * * *

Dave turned and set off.

The pine tree wood was about one kilometre long and seven hundred metres wide, and the scent coming off it was amazing. It reminded him of his training days back in the army when they used to go off on exercise in Wales.

According to the map, there was a path running down the middle, leading from the house to a point about one hundred metres from where he'd just left Lucy. The road they'd arrived on ran down the right hand edge of the wood and passed by the drive up to the house.

Dave reckoned it would take about fifteen minutes to get to the house.

He set off, walking at an angle to the left for about two hundred and fifty metres, he then turned parallel to the road. This was so he could come up to the house via the back garden, hopefully that would give him the most cover. He tried to put Lucy out of my mind for now, he had work to do.

As he approached the house, he could see the back garden, his guess was slightly out; the house was actually sideways on to the road. The gardens were huge and laid to grass, they went around three sides of the house, the front being laid to gravel.

Damn! he frowned. *This is going to make it difficult to approach the house without being seen.*

It was located fifty metres from the road, probably to prevent anyone looking into the front windows as they drove by, he thought. There was a single outbuilding built next to the highway, but it was partially hidden by a small coppice of young pines. There was no garage but the entrance ran through the trees and past the outbuilding, which probably acted as the garage.

Dave thought for a second whether the man he'd just shot had lied about where the house was, but it was too late to think like that now.

He crept up through the wood, to the edge of the tree line bordering the garden; the outbuilding was on the other side of the house so he couldn't see it from where he'd planned on running across the lawn. The front door of the house was pointing towards where he'd parked the SUV. That didn't worry him though, it was too far away to be seen from the door or the front window.

As he crept closer he could see there was another car outside, it was tucked in between the house and the outbuilding on the drive: it was an SUV, the same as the one he'd acquired. He smiled and realised then that it was the right house.

From where he sat he couldn't see any movement from the SUV or the house. He worked his way around the wood till he could see into the front window. He could just make out one person sitting inside: it was the woman who'd shot Harry.

As he knelt, he thought about going up to the front door, ringing the bell, waiting for the lady to open it and shooting her there and then, job done. Then it occurred to him, if he did that he might as well just shoot himself now. He shook his head and was thinking about how to approach the house across the grass when a man came out the front door. He got into the SUV and drove off. Dave sat and thought about the events leading up to this point, I shot two, the woman makes three and he makes four, *That's all of them, she's on her own. About bloody time I had some luck.* Then it hit him, shit! He went right, towards Lucy. He thought about ringing her. *No, don't panic her, she's in a mess already.* Anyway, he won't see the other SUV! he hoped.

Dave sat and waited to see if he came back. *They might be hungry and he's just gone out for food.*

Five, ten, then fifteen minutes went by and the SUV hadn't come back. "OK, five more minutes," he said to himself, looking at his watch. "That'll give him time to get there and get back," he hoped.

This is it. Move, Dave, now!

He jumped the wall, ran across the grass and went for the front door, the side of the house covering him. He thought, Good luck comes in threes, so I just hope this is my second piece!

He stopped at the side and decided to walk around the back, going the long way to check out the sides he couldn't see, before knocking, just in case there were more than four of them.

When he got round the front, he took a deep breath and rang the bell. *This is bloody crazy,* he worried.

He heard the woman get up and come to the front door, there was a pause. *Shit! Maybe she's just realised the other guy had a key and she's now thinking "why's he ringing the doorbell?"* Dave gripped his handgun tight, ready to lift and fire if necessary.

When the door opened, the woman looked at the man in front of her, she smiled, and then spotted the weapon. She realised he was on his own. She went for her handgun, but was too slow. Dave shot her in the leg!

She went down, screaming, dropping her handgun at Dave's feet, *she's quick, but not quick enough,* he thought, kicking the gun away from her - it slid along the hall into the house. He made a mental note to collect it on the way out.

As she groaned, Dave looked at her and remembered what she did to Harry. He contemplated kicking her in the stomach, but just stepped over her.

Dave carried on along the hallway, hugging the right-hand wall, just in case he'd miscounted.

The door to the living room, where she'd been sitting, was just in front of him, Dave counted to three, held his breath and went in. It was clear, but now his heart was beating so loud he could hardly hear himself think. He had a cold sweat

running down his back making his scars itch. He turned and went back out into the hallway and checked the kitchen, using the same method, *clear*. He went through into the back utility room, which was also empty. *My counting must have been right, so far she was the only one in the house*, he thought.

Dave went back to where the woman was lying, he stopped and looked up the stairs and listened for any movement. Apart from the bitch on the floor, Dave couldn't hear any other noise.

He bent down and turned her over on to her front, knelt on her thigh, at the same time grabbing her hair and pulling her head back. "Who else is in the house?"

"Fuck you!" she groaned.

Somehow he knew she'd say that. He shoved her face down on to the floor, cracking her nose. He lifted it again, "Where's Harry?" He saw her eyes flick to the stairs. She then told Dave, in no uncertain terms, to go and have a relation with his mum!

Dave smashed her face into the floor and this time she went still. He contemplated putting a bullet in her head, but backed off. *Too many people are dead already*, he thought.

As Dave looked up and down the hall he heard a groan. "Harry!" he called.

"Dave?" Harry replied.

"Harry, where are you?"

"There are two of them!" he shouted.

"I know, a man just left and the woman's unconscious downstairs."

Dave worked his way up the stairs, and found Harry lying on a bed, his leg had been crudely wrapped in surgical gauze and his nose looked like it'd been broken, but then again it was probably like that before. "Bastards!"

"I'll live," he smiled, painfully.

Dave helped him up and the two of them hobbled out to the top of the stairs.

As they looked down, they both froze. The woman who Dave had left unconscious was standing at the bottom of the stairs, she was leaning against the rail. She'd retrieved her handgun from the end of the hall and was now pointing it at them.

Tough bitch! Dave thought.

There was blood all over her face and down her nice frilly top. Without warning, a shot rang out, Dave and Harry flinched, waiting for the pain as the bullet ripped through them. Nothing happened. They looked at each other and then at the woman. Her face was saying 'What the fuck?' Then she fell forward onto the stairs.

Staring at the bottom of the stairs, trying to work out what had just happened, they saw Lucy walk in through the front door. She was holding the handgun Dave had left on the seat, pointing it at the woman. She stopped and looked up at them, there was a look of emptiness on her face, her arms started to slowly drop. Suddenly the woman on the stairs moaned, Lucy looked back down at her and screamed, she shot her again and again, until the firing mechanism clicked on an empty chamber.

Lucy let the gun drop from her hand, toppled back against the wall, and slid slowly down, wrapping her arms around her legs and started to cry.

They went down, Harry reaching out, pulling Lucy up. He put his arms around her and held her.

* * * * *

They left the house and got in the car. Lucy sat in the back with Harry, and Dave got in the front, ready to drive.

"I saw the other SUV leave," Lucy said, "it drove past me but didn't stop. I thought they'd got you, and I wasn't leaving Harry and Bob, so I drove to the house."

Harry leant in and kissed her on the forehead. "We're OK, you did good, Lucy."

She carried on telling Dave and Harry what had happened. "As I drove, I heard a shot, I thought they'd killed you. I drove into the drive and parked up by the small building on the way in, the one down by the road. I nearly turned round and went straight to the police, but I thought if they had shot you, you might need help, so I got out and walked up the drive to the house."

She paused for a second, Harry took a tissue out of the door pocket and wiped her eyes.

She carried on, "The door was open, I was about to walk in when I saw that woman get up and point her gun up the stairs. I wasn't going to shoot her, I was just going to tell her to stop and put her gun down. But as I crept in behind her you two appeared at the top, I saw her hands tense, I knew she was going to shoot, so I shot her!"

"It's OK, Lucy, you did the right thing," Harry said.

Dave set off. He got to the end of the drive and waited, wondering which way to go. "Where would they have taken Bob?"

Harry looked at Dave, "Bob, shit! Bob's in the outbuilding, reverse back Dave, he's in there," he winced with the pain from his leg as he pointed at the outbuilding in the trees.

Dave slammed the car into reverse and spun the wheels as he floored the gas.

He skidded to a stop outside a couple of large barn doors. They jumped out and started shouting Bob's name.

"Dave!" Bob shouted.

He was in there. They tried the doors, but they were locked. Dave went back to the car, reversed back and drove straight at them. The doors bounced open as the heavy car rammed them. One of them falling off its hinges and crashing to the ground.

Lucy ran in as Dave was getting out, she went straight to Bob's little cell, next to where they had all been kept before.

"I heard the shooting and then Lucy screaming," Bob said. "I thought they'd shot her. I was waiting for them to come and shoot me."

"No mate. I shot the woman in the leg," Dave smiled. "Lucy finished her off. The guy she was with left about forty minutes ago."

"Lucy. Lucy shot the woman?" Bob said, looking at Dave and then at Harry.

"Yes, mate, she did well. Now let's go," Dave prompted.

When they got to the car, Bob looked at Lucy, smiled and held out his hand, "Lucy, I'm so sorry."

She hugged him, "It's OK, Bobby, and it's not your fault. I'm just glad you're safe, you're all safe."

29

They headed north up the B4494 to Oxford, then across to the A1 and back towards the hotel in Mayfair. Lucy spent all her time checking for a tail.

"We need to rethink this, because it just got crazy," Bob said.

After getting to the outskirts of London, they decided a different car was needed.

"When those bodies are found, it'll just be a matter of time before this car bleeps up on their systems," Harry pointed out.

"Harry's right," Bob said, "we need to ditch this and buy another one. Dave, when you get to South Mimms pull in and park somewhere in the open. We'll leave the keys in the ignition, hopefully some scrote will nick it."

"Even better if they nick it and drive north," Harry added.

When they reached the services, they left the car over by the exit with the keys in the ignition, then got a cab to Potters Bar and jumped on the train into London, getting off at Finsbury Park. They went into the first back-street second-hand car dealer they came to and bought a car. A VW Golf, and as cars go, not a bad little runner.

They drove to the hotel and parked two streets away, near a small green called Hanover Square. Dave managed to squeeze in behind a Mercedes Sprinter van.

The two men in the back of the van had been there all day, monitoring the suites. They were unaware of the four people who had just got out of the car, which was now parked right behind them. It was so close to the back anyone wanting to get out of the van, would have had trouble just opening the doors.

They'd been recording all the activity in the suites. They had watched Dave retrieve his handgun from behind the bed earlier and alerted the rest of the teams but hadn't got the message out in time. If they had, Dave wouldn't have got the shot in that killed the agent. Dave would probably have been the one lying in the gutter instead.

The four of them walked towards the hotel as two pairs, on opposite sides of the road, in view of each other. As they got closer, Bob signalled to Harry and Dave to come over and join them.

"Lucy and I will go and check it out first," Bob said. "Before we all go in. We'll signal you from my window if it's all clear. Because of that policeman outside, we'll go in the back way, up through the kitchens."

As soon as Bob and Lucy entered Bob's suite, the two men in the van sat up, totally surprised at what they'd just seen, they started their machines and got their pens out.

"Where did they come from? They shouldn't even be in the area, their car was seen going up past Grantham, about thirty minutes ago," one of the men said.

The other man picked up his mobile and hit the speed dial button, when it was answered, he said, "Sir. The targets have just entered the hotel, in Mayfair."

"What? Are you sure?" said the man on the other end of the phone.

"Yes, it's definitely them. One male IC, one female IC."

"That's only two of them, can you see anyone else?"

"No, sir."

"OK, just watch for now, we're on our way."

"How far out are you?"

"Thirty minutes. Don't approach them, just monitor. We'll be with you shortly."

"Yes, sir." He turned back to the other man, explained what was said, then carried on monitoring.

A couple of minutes later, Lucy waved from the window. Dave grabbed hold of Harry and they worked their way in. When they went through the door to Bob's room, it had been cleaned and looked as if nothing had happened.

"They did a pretty good job cleaning this lot up, you should have seen the mess earlier, Bob," Dave smiled.

Lucy sat with Harry on the bed, and raised his leg, giving it a rub. "We've got to get away from here, to have time to think." Harry turned to Lucy, "Got any more pain killers Lucy?"

"Here, I'll get you some water."

"Thanks! We've got to move, Bob, they must know we're not in that car by now."

"He's right, Bob," Dave said. "They probably have someone coming over now. We need to get out." Dave turned to Lucy, and asked for a couple of tablets as well, "My jaw's aching where I lost the tooth."

They all nodded in agreement, got what they needed and got ready to leave.

Lucy looked at Bob, "I got the diamonds out of the safe earlier, when they brought us here the first time."

Bob looked at his sister, smiling, he mouthed, "Are you OK?"

She nodded back, half smiling.

"OK, but I don't think we should split up again, we don't know if they're still watching."

"Who's watching?" Dave said. "That's the question."

"Let's talk about that later; we've got to move."

The man in the van hit speed dial again. As soon as it was answered, he said, "The whole team are there, what do you want us to do?"

"Hold tight, we're making good time, we'll be there in twenty minutes."

"Roger that."

They headed into the corridor to leave, just as the bell went for the lift arriving. They all froze. Then Bob and Dave ran towards the lift. Harry grabbed Lucy and pulled her back into Bob's suite.

Dave reached for his handgun, he had it ready by his side as the doors slid open.

It was the man from the house, the one who got into the SUV earlier. He looked at the two men in front of him with surprise, and then confusion. He saw the gun and went for his, but he was too late, Dave fired and hit him just below his right shoulder. The bullet going through and out of his back, a crimson spray erupted behind him as the bullet smacked the lift wall with a resounding clang. The man dropped back into the elevator with a thud. Bob went forward and swiftly kicked his gun away.

He was quick, Dave thought, *he'd do well in a spaghetti western*. He'd had his gun out and was raising it as Dave shot him, he'd managed all that in a split-second.

Bob turned and looked at Dave, then the gun, then at the man on the floor of the lift.

Dave read his thoughts, and said "Nobody will have heard it. We're the only ones on this floor and the man from six-oh-one is dead, and Lucy shot his wife."

Bob nodded, and turned to the man on the floor, he cradled his head and asked, "Who are you working for?"

Wheezing and dripping blood out of the side of his mouth, he just said "Fuck off."

'Fuck off' must be a standard answer for this situation. *I must remember that*, he thought.

Bob leant forward, and pushed his hand hard into the man's shoulder. The man screamed as the pressure bit in and the bone in his arm cracked.

"Who are you working for?" Bob asked again.

"Help me," he wheezed.

"Tell us who you're working for and we'll get you a doctor."

The man on the floor stared for a second, and then said, "A woman. That's all I know. She spoke to the boss more, she said she wants the diamonds."

"What woman?" Bob asked.

"I don't know. You'll have to ask her." He breathed out once more, then his head slumped back and he went still.

Dave looked at Bob, "That's all four of them!"

Bob nodded, then gestured back at his suite.

They looked around to make sure no one was coming. Why? Dave didn't know, they'd already confirmed no one else was there. Bob and Dave picked him up and carried him back to Bob's room, threw him on to the bathroom floor, closed the door and left, making sure the "Do Not Disturb" sign was on the handle as they went.

They took the lift down, left the hotel and went back to the car.

The two men in the white van who were monitoring the hidden CCTV, watched as they carried the dead man into suite six-oh-three and took him into the bathroom. They heard the thud as he was dropped, and watched as they turned the light off and left.

One of the men picked up his mobile and pressed speed dial, he waited for it to be answered, "We have a problem."

"We're four minutes out."

"It's one of the four operatives who's been absent for the last seventy-two hours, they've just dumped him in the bathroom of suite six-oh-three."

The man on the other end went quiet for a moment. "Shit! Are you sure?"

"Yes sir, he matches the profile."

"Recorded?"

"Yes! It's all on tape. They've now left the building."

"OK. We'll be with you in two minutes."

"Yes, sir," he hung up and looked at the other man in the van with him, "Call it in."

The other man picked up his phone, pressed speed dial and waited for it to be answered, then said, "Agent down. Suite six-oh-three, Westbury Hotel, Mayfair." He listened to the reply and hung up. He looked back at the other man, "They're on their way, twelve minutes out." The other man nodded and then they continued with what they were doing.

30

They left the hotel, and walked back to where they'd left the car, but as they approached they saw it was being pulled up onto the bed of a tow truck.

Bob nodded over at a café, opposite where the car was. They wanted to watch and see if there was any reason for what was happening. Lucy went and got the drinks.

When she came back, they'd sat near the window and were watching the action.

"You don't suppose we bought a stolen car do you and they've just found it and are recovering it?" she said.

As they watched the tow truck pulling the car backwards up the ramp, Harry said, "I don't understand why it's being towed. I doubt it was stolen, it's not on yellow lines, and I put a ticket on it for two hours. We've only been sixty minutes at most!"

Just as it was being pulled on to the bed of the lorry, clear of the van, the back doors swung open and two people jumped out. One of the men had headphones on, he quickly threw them into the back of the van. He then looked around as if he was checking for someone.

The other man went and spoke to the driver of the tow truck, they both got back into the van and closed the doors.

The four of them looked at each other, suddenly realising they'd just been watching their watchers.

A short while later, a black SUV pulled up alongside the white van and two men got out. The four of them stopped talking and watched.

One of the men got out and tapped on the back of the van and waited, then tapped again. The back doors opened and the two men outside started talking to the two men inside. As they were talking, they looked at the coffee shop Dave and the others were in and started pointing, they then pointed along the road, back towards the hotel. After a few minutes, the two men got back in and closed the doors, the other two men got back in the SUV and drove off. The van then started up and drove off in the same direction, towards the hotel.

Once they were gone, the four of them sat staring out the window at where the car and the van had been parked.

"Call me paranoid," Lucy said, breaking the silence. "But did they point straight at us and then along the road we walked down to get here?"

"We need to move," Bob said.

"Where to?" Harry asked, quickly finishing his coffee.

"We'll ring the number on the piece of paper Bill gave us and go there."

While Bob got his phone out, Dave looked around at the coffee shop and sat thinking about Jane. *We used to drink coffee, chat about nothing and everything whilst looking out the window. Do the people-watching thing—making up lives about who they'd married and what they did for a living. Nonsense really. That was a long time ago.*

When Bob had finished on the phone, he said, "Right then, Newcastle!"

As they prepared to leave, they talked about the keys and what to do with them.

"Chuck them in a bin and forget them, it's the diamonds we want," Harry said.

"Send them to the police," Lucy suggested, "with a short note saying MI6 might be interested in these."

"Lucy's right," Bob said, looking at Dave and Harry. "We don't know what the keys are for, and they can check them out."

31

Bond Street was the closest underground station to them, but they went the long way round, so they could see what, if anything, was happening at the hotel.

As they walked down St. George's Street, they could see four police cars with their lights flashing, blocking the road. There were another three police cars and an ambulance parked in front of the hotel. Blue and white barrier tape cordoned the road, blocking the path from pedestrians and the press. A young-looking copper manned the barrier at the end they approached from.

"He looks keen, Bob!" Dave said.

"Young as well. We'll walk a bit closer, join the crowd but we won't go to the front, OK?"

They nodded and walked on, separating slightly as they got closer. The three cars with the ambulance were SUV's, the same type as the one they'd watched next to the white van. The SUV the other guy from the lift had driven, was also there, the white van parked next to it.

Bob nodded, and they all walked off, Lucy went first towards the coffee shop, the others followed one at a time. They got about two streets from the hotel and met in a side street.

"They've probably got more cars around the back. If we were being watched they probably know what we all look like," Bob said.

Lucy started to cry when she heard this, Harry moved closer and put his arm around her shoulders.

"Don't worry, Lucy, we'll get the money and get out of here," Bob smiled, trying to brighten things up.

The tears still ran down her face, Harry leaned in and kissed her forehead.

"We'll go towards Oxford Circus underground," Bob suggested.

When they got there, aware the police might have it under surveillance, Lucy went and bought the train tickets, paying with cash, not wanting to alert anyone who might be monitoring their bank accounts. Returning a few minutes later, looking a bit happier.

"Any problems, Sis?"

"No. We can't buy the train tickets to Newcastle from here, the machines out of order. We'll have to get them from Kings Cross. There are a lot of police around the station but they're just dealing with a bunch of lads who are becoming rowdy and shouting at people."

"Harry, Lucy, you go together, we'll follow," Bob said. "We'll sit apart on the train, same carriage though, but where we can always see each other. When we get to Kings Cross we'll meet up near the main information board and work out what to do next, OK?"

When they got to Kings Cross, Bob and Dave got off first and headed for some chairs in one of the coffee shops, once they were seated, Lucy and Harry came in and sat at the next table.

"The train we want leaves in twenty minutes and it's in the station now. Harry, you get the tickets this time," Bob said.

"First Class OK?" Harry asked.

"Sounds good to me." Bob smiled, looking at Lucy.

Once they were on the train, Harry said, "I can't understand why we haven't been picked up yet."

"Maybe they don't want people to know about the diamonds, "Dave suggested. "That would lead to the four police officers we've killed and would panic people."

"He's right, Harry, or maybe it has something to do with the keys!" Bob said.

Those bloody keys! As Dave thought this, Lucy took the keys from the box and dropped them on the table, they clattered off one of the cups. After a few minutes, with all of them just staring, she picked them up again and put them away.

The long train journey was uneventful. They talked a lot about the keys and came up with some crazy ideas. The topic of what to spend the money on came up again. The ideas hadn't changed much, except Dave had upgraded to a Ferrari!

As they got further from London they started to relax a little. Lucy even looked as if she was having a sleep.

The second stop was Peterborough. They sat expecting the train to be rushed by armed police, cuffing them and dragging them off kicking and screaming. The only people who boarded were a young couple, settling on the seats behind them.

Bob watched them as they sorted themselves out, opened a laptop, plugged in two sets of headphones, leant into each other and started up a film, *Love Actually*.

The couple then recorded everything the four people behind them said.

32

When they arrived at Newcastle, they checked into the B&B Harry had booked whilst they were waiting for the train in London.

The next morning, after breakfast, Bob rang the number again that Bill had given them. He arranged a meeting. At first the man said he wanted to meet at his shop, but Bob was adamant they met on neutral ground, so a Costa was suggested!

When he got back and told them the plan, Dave turned to Harry, "I think Bob's starting to like coffee shop coffee!"

Lucy and Harry laughed, Harry wincing at the same time. "Have you got anything stronger than paracetamol in that bag of yours, Luce?" he grimaced.

"Oh, I'll look. If not I'll go and get something from the chemist."

Bob and Dave watched the two of them staring at each other. Bob coughed, "Ahem!"

They went to the Gosforth Centre and found the Costa by the main entrance. Having located a table at the back, they didn't have to wait long before a man, about the same age as Bill, walked up and introduced himself. He then went and ordered coffee.

When he returned, Bob asked Lucy for the diamonds. She took the bag out of her pocket and handed it over. Bob took the matchbox out and handed it to the man.

He took it with a surprised look, and jokingly said, "What, no briefcase?"

Lucy said, with a smile on her face and tapping the bag, "Nope, I'm a regular Jill. I keep the important stuff in my pouch."

The man smiled and nodded, probably didn't even know what she meant, then again, neither did Dave or Harry!

He opened the box and looked inside. Looking up at Bob, "Approximately how many are there?" he asked, smiling.

"Tell us how much they're worth to you first?" Lucy cut in, taking charge.

The man smiled.

Dave looked at Lucy and thought, is this the same Lucy?

He turned the box over into his hand and smiled some more, "Bill was right, they're good," he said, appreciatively. He looked up at Lucy, and enquired, "How is he?"

"Dead," Lucy said, bluntly. When she said this Dave looked at her again, she had a stony look on her face. It was as if she'd turned a corner in the night and woken up a harder person.

The man looked away, and sighed, "He always was the careless one."

He viewed them through the same type of eye-piece Bill had used, looking at each one for a few seconds before closing the box, and handing it back to Lucy.

"Two thousand," he said, with a cold face.

Lucy gasped and looked at Bob. "That's not enough," Bob said. "We know they're worth five times that... each. So you'd better come up with a different figure."

"Bill always was quick to talk," he sighed. "OK, five thousand pounds each, and that's my final offer!"

"Thank you," Bob said, shaking his head, "but I think we'll go somewhere else."

As they went to get up, the man put his hand on Bob's arm, "OK, seven thousand pounds each, and that's on condition of me having a better look when we go back to my shop." He wasn't smiling anymore!

"How many can you take?" Bob joked.

"All of them!" the man said, expecting ten or fifteen at the most.

Lucy smiled at him, got out the four bags and pushed them across the table. His face was a picture, they weren't sure whether he was smiling or crying, but it was a look of shock. "Let me buy you another coffee!" he said, smiling.

* * * * *

They made their way back to his shop, where he checked the diamonds one at a time. Finally he got on his computer, and asked, "Where would you like the money paid?"

Bob smiled at the other three, winked, turned and gave him the details. The money was transferred that day to a bank account Bob had set up in Switzerland, whilst he was still in Ramadi. He'd planned this while they were still out there.

The four of them left feeling like a million dollars. Lucy had the biggest smile they'd seen on her face for days. But Bob spoilt the moment, by saying, "The keys! What about those bloody keys?"

They looked at each other, and one by one the grins on their faces dropped off.

"Now we're rich and we don't have to work for a living," Dave smiled. "Shall we find out what they're for?"

The smiles came back and they all nodded.

"So that's agreed then," Bob said.

33

They decided to go to a hotel and head back home the next morning. One that was somewhat posher than the B&B they'd stayed in last night.

"Why not, it's not that we can't afford it now," Lucy smiled.

Harry looked one up on his phone, "Found one," he exclaimed, "Kensington House Aparthotel, just down the road. Shall I book it?"

They looked at each other, Lucy clapped excitedly as they all nodded.

"Don't make the call from your phone, Harry, they could trace the call. Find a payphone," Bob said.

* * * * *

The taxi ride was short but very enjoyable, they were all on a bit of a high when they got to the hotel. They booked into their rooms, which turned out to be small apartments, and decided that they'd meet an hour later for dinner, after freshening up.

Sitting in the hotel's rather elegant restaurant, the four of them chatted. Bob asked to look at the wine list. He ordered, to Lucy's delight, Champagne. "Two bottles of Taittinger Comtes de Champagne Blanc de Blancs two thousand and two, please."

"Very good choice, sir."

As the waiter turned to walk off, Bob called him back, "Make that two!" The waiter smiled and left.

Bob looked at the others and explained, "The taste of this particular Champagne is a blend of poached pears, red apples, white blooms, citrus fruit, spices, mild cream, oranges and tangerines."

They sat and stared at him. Harry looked at Lucy, and said, "OK, what have you done with Bob? Who the hell is this sitting here?"

Bob countered with, "While you lot were out getting drunk every night, I was getting educated."

"Pissed more like," Harry said, with a smile. "And it sounds like you paid a lot more for the pleasure than we did."

The waitress came over to take their orders, they all looked at Bob, wondering what he'd say next. "Sausage and mash, please, love." He looked at Harry and Dave, "Just the stuff to wash the Champagne down with."

Lucy ordered the side of beef and mixed seasonal vegetables, Harry and Dave liked the look of the fish and chips.

The waiter came back with the Champagne, the bellboy followed carrying the ice bucket. He popped the cork and they all smiled, letting out a little cheer as he poured.

They were sitting back, savouring the Champagne and talking about what they were going to do first with the money, when two men entered the restaurant and came over to their table. They pulled some extra chairs over and sat down.

The older of the two was about a hundred and eighty centimetres tall with a big build, as if he worked out, and had some silvering in his hair. The nice watch on his wrist was worth a cool eight thousand pounds, a Cartier Calibre. The other man had a buzz cut and was shorter, not by much. He was skinnier than the other man and had a face like a bulldog chewing a wasp, his watch of choice was a G-Shock.

Both were dressed in black suits, not your MIB made to measure ones, but smart and off-the-rack. They sat down as if they were part of the table.

Harry and Bob went to stand, but the younger one of the men, the ugly one, said, "Sit down please, gentlemen!"

It was more of an order than a request. Bob, Harry and Dave looked at each other, and stood.

The older of the two men said, "Now gentlemen, under the circumstances that would be rather silly." He looked at the three of them, one at a time, then with a little flick of his hand, motioned to the windows at the back of the restaurant.

Outside the window, silhouetted from the street light across the road, stood a man. He had a rifle pointing at them! The three of them looked back at the man.

"If I give the signal, or, he feels we're in any danger, you'll be dead before you can say "cheque please". Understand?"

Dave looked at Lucy, she'd started to well up, but kept it under control.

"Now you've been lucky so far," he started with, "we could have killed you on a number of occasions." He stopped talking and looked at them, "but you're all still alive. That alone says something about this situation."

"Who are you?" Bob interrupted.

The man looked long and hard at Bob, "Don't ever interrupt me again, Bob."

Bob sat back, he looked shocked at the way he'd just been spoken to. The man carried on, "Let's just say we've been your guardian angels up to now, but no more!"

Bob waited for the pause, "What do you mean, guardian angels?"

The younger man sat quietly throughout the conversation, letting the older man talk.

"Come now, Bob, you're not that dumb, are you? We've been watching you since the day we led you to your little fortune. Four of you set off to find the safe, afterwards, three of you met back in Bob's room. You talked about sending the diamonds and the keys back to your sister, Lucy," he said, nodding at Lucy.

"Steve died," Dave said.

"Yes, Steve got killed, unfortunately. He was a good man, but we've managed a blackout on the news. Pretty reckless you losing his body like that. It caused us no end of trouble, still can't find the damn thing." He stopped talking and looked at Lucy, and said, "Hello, Lucy, nice to meet you."

Lucy looked at him, unable to control the tears that were running down her face.

"I'm sorry for not introducing myself properly and interrupting your meal, but you don't need to know my name." He looked at all of them, and said, "You just need to know I exist."

When he said this Dave coughed, Harry sniggered.

The man ignored them and looked back at Lucy. "I hope you're enjoying the Champagne, Bob made an excellent choice, but I'm not too sure about your choice of meals though. Oysters with asparagus would have better complemented the Champagne." He looked back at Bob and continued, "You then finished your contracts and met at your little house in Norfolk."

"You've been bugging us?"

The man looked at Bob. Dave couldn't tell whether he was surprised at what Bob said or just pissed off for being interrupted again.

"We made sure the parcels made it through customs, unchecked, and personally hand-delivered them to your sister. We then watched her put the parcels in your office. Would you like me to carry on?"

"The burglar alarms."

The man looked at Bob, tilted his head slightly, and nodded.

"But I rang round the village to ask if anyone else got a call," Lucy explained. "I even rang my best friend!"

The man looked at her, "Yes, we know. We installed five alarm systems in the village, a very cheap and legal way to get into your little cottage."

"You've been watching Lucy all this time? That's illegal."

"Mr Phillips, feel free to report it to the police. I'm sure they'll be more than interested as to where your sudden wealth came from!"

"The money isn't even in the country, and you'll have to prove it," Harry growled.

"Ahhhh, Harry," he said, looking at him. "Ex-RAF Regiment. Explosives expert. I was in the regiment, Harry. I dug around a bit. You have a very interesting past. I wonder if your little friends here know about it!"

Harry stared at him, his fists flexing.

"All I'll say is, remember the Gulf?" He left it at that.

Harry's face drained and went white.

"Harry. The money is in a little Swiss bank account Bob opened, just before you left Ramadi," he explained. "It's waiting for your little group to go and use it. I can give you the bank account number if you want, or better still, I can give you the manager's name and address, you can ask him yourself!"

Bob went to get up and punch the man, but he pre-empted him. He raised his right forefinger and wiggled it from side to side as if he was scolding a little child. "Ah-ah-ah! Remember who I have outside the window?"

Lucy put her hand on Bob's arm and smiled. Bob sat down slowly but locked eyes with the man who had been talking. They stared at each other for a few moments before the man turned away, his tone changing to a firmer, harder one.

"I don't have the time or the interest in playing your little Alpha dog games, Bob! Now shut up and listen. Otherwise, when you leave this hotel, you and your little group, including Lucy, won't even make it across the street. Got it?"

Bob smiled, staring at him.

"Please, Bobby," Lucy begged.

Bob looked away, then at Lucy, "I'm sorry I got you into this Lucy."

"Of course you'll be OK, Lucy, as long as your little group take the deal, or this will be the last Champagne you ever taste."

"Touch her and it'll be the last time you ever pick that ugly nose on your head!" Harry threatened.

"Now Dave," he said, ignoring Harry. "You're a bit of a bad luck case really: blown up, lost your job, your girlfriend, Jane. Shame about Poppy, but you never were really in her league were you?"

Dave clenched his fists and looked away. He knew he was right. "So, this is the deal. We want you to find out who wants those keys."

Those bloody keys again, Dave thought.

"I know what you're thinking, 'why are those keys so important?' Good question." He then said, as calmly as anything, something that nearly made them fall off their chairs. "They're the code keys to a suitcase bomb!"

Bob, Harry and Dave looked at the man in disbelief. Lucy said, "What's a suitcase bomb?"

The man ignored her as if she wasn't there. "That's right, gentlemen, you have the keys to a Mini-Nuke." He looked at Lucy, and said, "Don't look so alarmed, Lucy, it can't go off, unless the person trying to set it off has those keys!"

Lucy opened her bag, took the keys out and pushed them across the table towards the two men, "They're yours, now go away and leave us alone."

The ugly man chuckled. The one in charge said, "It's not that simple, Lucy. You see, we have you over what you would term as, *the proverbial barrel.*" He looked at them all and followed up with, "between you, you've killed four police officers, albeit they'd gone bad I'll give you that, but the fact of the matter is, you still killed them."

"But they were trying to kill us."

"Details, Lucy, details," he said. "Now this can go one of two ways: my way, which is the good way, or your way," as he said this he looked out the window, to where the marksman was standing, then back at them, as if to prove a point.

“Your choice? Oh yes, and something to do with the ten million pounds, of course. You see, those diamonds belong to us, the government. They were payment for the suitcase back in nineteen ninety-five, but someone got greedy, that someone is now dead!”

“So why didn’t you just get the diamonds back? Surely you could have dealt with someone else!”

“Because, Bob, the dead person turned out to be rogue as well. He’d set up quite a good operation really.” He looked up in the air as if he was thinking, “I’d have liked to have him on my team, but hey-ho, we can’t have everything our own way, can we?”

Bob, Dave and Harry looked at each other. Harry looked at the man, and said, “When this is done, we keep the money and you go away, yes?”

“Probably not, Harry, you see, ten million pounds is a lot of money, and this isn’t a Bruce Willis film. The British Government doesn’t make a habit of paying their private operatives obscene amounts of money, especially when we could use our own people. So you see, you’ll do this job for us, the British government, or you’ll,” he paused for a moment, “disappear!”

“Why don’t you just throw the keys away? Then it can never be used!”

“Quite right, Lucy, but we need to know who has it, so we can stop them in the future. This is where your little group comes in. The British government was very embarrassed when it all went wrong the last time. We were condemned for our actions by a number of countries. We’ve healed that gap now, but we don’t want to be seen messing up again. This way, if it all goes wrong, your little group will cease to exist and no blame can be brought back to us,” he said, with a faint smile. “Now there’s a plane leaving tomorrow evening from Heathrow, going to Abu Dhabi. You’ll be on that plane, or...!” he left the sentence there and looked at all four of them, then out the window. “Any questions?”

“Yes, how are we going to travel without our passports, it’ll take too long to go home and fetch them!”

“You’ll have temporary papers waiting for you when you get to the airport. Anything else?”

Dave looked at Bob, “Abu-bloody-Dhabi, again!”

The other man who’d sat quiet through most of it, said, “You have four seats booked, economy only! When you get there you’ll have a vehicle waiting, booked through a local hire company. Try not to break it, we’re paying for that one!”

“How do we get in touch with you?”

“You don’t, Dave. We’ll be watching you. We’ll get in touch if we need to. Any more questions...? No...? Good. Have a nice flight.”

The men got up and nodded at Lucy, who then made the others all smile. “Fuck off, you complete bastards,” she cursed.

The man looked at her, “I always knew you’d come through in the end, Lucy. You just needed a push!” They then turned and left.

Lucy picked up her glass of Champagne, she was going to throw it, but then downed it in one. She called the waiter over and ordered another bottle.

Bob said to the waiter, “Make it four.”

“Now what?” Harry asked.

“Now, Harry, we have a plane to catch!”

* * * * *

The next morning, at breakfast, Bob insisted that Lucy stay in the U.K. "Lucy, it's going to be too dangerous. You could get killed."

"I'm in this now, don't leave me out."

"Sorry, Luce. I'm not risking your life for these arseholes. If they don't like it, tough, they can go and do one."

She protested all the way to the train station, but Bob kept saying, "Look I've already lost one mate. I'm not going to lose you as well. So you're getting on that bloody train back to Norfolk."

She relented in the end and gave her brother a hug.

On the way to the station, Bob spotted his tail almost as soon as he'd left the hotel. He didn't worry about it, not anymore, he knew they'd be watched very closely from now on.

Once he'd sat Lucy on the train, he got off, saying, "One minute, Luce, I just need to speak to someone."

Lucy watched him walk over to two guys, they were standing at the counter of a fast food outlet on the platform ordering coffee.

"Keep an eye on her for me, lads, she acts tough but it's really only an act," he said.

They reacted as if he was a drunk, moving away. They gave him a pound coin, "Get yourself a coffee, mate." They looked at the other people around them in the queue and smiled, "We always attract them!"

"Friends of yours?" she asked, as Bob got back to her.

"No, I thought I knew them, mistaken identity. I think I may need glasses. First Class all the way, Luce, I bet you could get use to this?"

"Oh yes, It's the only way for me from now on," she said excitedly.

Bob looked at the two men talking, and thought, *they're smarmy gits, and I know they're following us*. But he did wonder if he'd made a mistake. He shook his head. *Lucy's making me bloody paranoid*. He kissed her on the cheek, "I'll be back in no time at all. We'll get this sorted and then we can enjoy the rest of our lives.

As the train pulled out, Bob noticed one of the two men who'd given him the coin was now on the train, staring hard at him. They locked eyes, and to Bob's surprise, the man winked at him. It was one of those winks that said "I've gotcha back, mate" then he looked forward again.

Bob nodded, turned and smiled to himself.

He set off back to the hotel, all the time thinking, *we've got a plane to catch*.

34

When Bob got back they threw the belongings they had in a bag and caught a train to the airport. As they left the hotel, they spotted their tails almost straight away, they even had the audacity to wink.

"Shall we play the running game?" Dave said, nudging the other two.

"Really?" Harry said. "I'm not as fast as I was!" tapping his leg.

"Yeah, it could be fun."

"OK. You two go that way, I'll see you back here in five minutes," Bob smiled.

Harry looked at his watch, "The train leaves in thirty-five minutes. If we miss this one we'll catch up at Heathrow."

They played the running game when they were down the local, back at camp. They would all go separate ways, basically just to give someone the run around. They'd end up back in the bar, chuckling as they walked in out of breath. It was mainly local lads who just wanted a fight, it was their way of saying, "Not today thanks."

When they arrived at the station, they looked around for their chaperones as they boarded the train, the arseholes were sitting enjoying a cup of tea. They smiled at the three of them, shaking their heads, tutting.

Dave looked at Bob, who'd broken out in a sweat, "Must be ex-army, they must have known we'd head here."

"I need a coffee." Bob went up to the dining car, when he got back he looked over at their new travelling companions, "I would have offered to get you something, lads!"

"No thanks," they smiled. "We're on duty."

The rest of the journey was quiet. Their new friends disembarked when they did and followed them to the next train, waving goodbye from the platform.

Dave blew them a kiss, as Bob said, "Three seats back, young couple."

Harry and Dave looked over, they were looking straight back at them, "Shit!"

* * * * *

They were the first to board the plane and were shown to their seats by the young attendant. She gave Dave and Harry a long look as they sat down, Bob smiled and shook his head like a dad.

The seats were a little cramped but the stewardesses made up for any comfort shortfalls.

Dave looked at Harry and winked, "I wouldn't mind joining the mile high club with that one."

"You've got about as much chance of getting a blow-job off her, as I've got of flying this plane, mate."

As she walked by with more passengers, she looked back and smiled, whether she heard them talking about her, they didn't know, but that smile said it all.

Dave looked at Harry, "So! Ever flown one of these?"

He elbowed Dave in the side, laughing.

"Pack it in, you two!" Bob frowned.

The trip to Abu Dhabi was uneventful, even though the stewardess attended them very nicely. The in-flight movie was crap, Snakes on a Plane. Very apt as they could see the two men, who'd obviously been assigned to follow them, sitting four rows behind. Both had buzz cuts and wore black suits. Again, not expensive, but smart.

They both looked as if they'd lost a tenner and found a quid. Whether they'd been told to stay invisible, they didn't know, but they stuck out like a pair of nipples at a wet T-shirt contest. Dave reckoned when they got to Abu Dhabi,

they'd contact base and say they'd been compromised and get shipped back to the U.K. *Don't blame them really*, Dave thought. *Where they were going was a shithole.*

* * * * *

When they landed, Bob had a message on his mobile from Lucy. She'd texted, 'Got back OK. Two men helped me with a couple of lads. They got a bit mouthy about me sitting in First Class. They won't be writing home or picking their noses for a while.'

Bob smiled at the last bit. He decided to give her a quick ring, to let her know they'd arrived.

She picked up almost immediately. "Bobby, are you OK?"

"Yep, just landed. I read your text, thought I'd ring. Everything OK with you?"

"Yes, all's fine. I had a nice chat with two men on the train who helped me out. I asked them back for coffee, but they said that they had to get back."

"Did you get their names so I can get in touch and thank them?"

"Yes, Darren and John, no addresses or phone numbers though. When they'd left, I went round and tore all the alarms down, they're on a bonfire waiting to be burnt."

"Ha, that'll please MI6."

As Bob said this, Harry and Dave looked at him, he shook his head and mouthed, "All's good."

Harry pointed at his watch.

"OK, Luce, I've got to go, I'll see you soon, OK?"

"OK, Bobby, you take care and say hi to Harry for me."

He hung up and looked at Harry.

"What?"

"Nothing. Lucy says, Hi." He blew Harry a couple of kisses and laughed.

"I think I owe two blokes a night out," Bob said, explaining what had happened.

They collected what little luggage they'd brought, a change of clothes and a few cameras. They'd decided to buy all the extra equipment when they got there. They looked around, spotted the car hire stand and went off to collect their transport.

"Knowing the British government it'll probably be some heap of junk," Bob quipped.

The two men following kept their distance.

As they got in the car, which surprisingly was a new Range Rover, Dave turned to Bob, "Shall I lose them?"

"Do what you do best," he smiled.

Ten minutes later, they were driving along the road having lost their tails around an old market taking place just outside the airport.

The car was one of the new style Range Rover Sports and the first thing that went on was the air-con. *There'll be time for all the other gadgets later*, Dave thought.

It was in the low nineties outside, but was well into the hundreds inside, that soon dropped once the engine started and the A/C kicked in.

Harry guided them through the streets, going down some tight roads in the old quarter. After about twenty minutes, he asked Dave to pull over outside a

convenience store. He jumped out and went into one of the shops. Harry had arranged to get some gear from one of his contacts of old.

While they sat waiting, Dave picked up the driver's manual to read. "It says here, 'The all-new Range Rover Sport has been pushed to new limits in a series of the most punishing drives to be found on Earth'. We'll see about that!" Smiling, Dave floored the gas pedal a couple of times. The engine roared like an angry caged lion.

"Pack it in, Dave. You'll draw attention to us," Bob cringed.

"Problem? I heard you revving, everything OK?" Harry asked, looking up and down the street.

"Just Dave reverting back to his boy-racer days."

"You want to be careful, Dave, You'll draw attention to us."

Bob and Dave looked at each other and laughed.

"What?" Harry said, confused.

"Got everything you wanted?" Bob asked.

"Yep, all here."

They looked around, looking for the items. Dave was just about to ask what stuff, when the shop owner came out and dumped it all on the kerb. Dave jumped out and threw it all in the back.

Harry then put in a call to another old contact, Anshu. He then filled them in on their soon-to-be new friend.

As he talked, Dave headed back to the main part of the city.

Harry explained, "Anshu was born in Baghdad. He lost his family when he was only ten years old to a suicide bomber. The family were down at the local market when a young man blew himself up. Well they think it was a guy, all they found was the head. The rest of his body vaporised in the bang. He'd claimed to be 'Cleansing Iraq of the western presence'. Ever since then, Anshu has been living on the street, fending for himself." He went on to say, "I met Anshu when the team I was on was out on patrol. Anshu was with a group of young boys begging for food. They came up to our patrol and he pulled me aside, saying he knew where there were guns and he could sell them to me. He led our patrol through a maze of streets to a stash of AK forty sevens and RPG's. I slipped him ten thousand Dinars, about five British pounds, and he went away happy. Anshu went on to become one of our main points of contact between the local militia and the army."

Harry then said something, that made Dave and Bob sit back and stare at him.

"I say hello, whenever I'm in the area." He looked back at them, "It's been a while though. If the number still works and he's still alive, then he'll help us. But it's been about five years since I last spoke with him. If I can't get hold of him, I know where he used to hang out. Usually with the elders smoking their bongos and drinking coffee. That's where we used to make contact with him, for information."

He rang the number, and was surprised when it was answered within two rings.

"Anshu, its Harry. I need somewhere to stay, are we still friends?"

"OK, Harry, my old friend. Yes we're still friends. It's been a long time. At least five years?"

"Maybe six."

"OK, when are you getting here my friend?"

"We'll be there in six days."

“OK, old friend! Business or just sightseeing?”

“Business, but not like the old days.”

“OK, how many of you are there?”

“Two.” He looked at Bob and Dave and mouthed, "Better to keep the element of surprise on our side!"

“OK, I’ll meet you at the usual place, yes?”

“The usual place! Where’s that?”

“OK, don’t you remember, my old friend, the olive trees?”

“Just checking, thank you, Anshu. It’ll be good to see you again.”

“OK, it’s good to hear from you, my old friend, see you soon.”

After he hung up, Bob said, “Can we trust him?”

“He helped me and the lads out a few times when I was over here blowing things up, he’s good.”

“A long time has passed since then, mate. These guys get bought out. They’d sell their own wife if they had to.”

“Dave’s right, Harry, are you sure you trust him?”

“When we get there I’ll go and meet with him, see what he’s like, OK?”

“Sounds good to me,” Bob nodded.

They made one more stop that day, at a small market shop and bought some more supplies: water bottles, food and local clothes. They didn’t know where they were going to sleep, so they got blankets too.

They drove up the coast road, using the E eleven then the ninety-five up to Bahrain, stopped the night and then drove on to Kuwait. So far without incident.

They knew once they left Kuwait it would start to get tricky. A car full of westerners, especially blokes, wasn’t exactly the best combination for travelling into Baghdad.

* * * * *

The first night they came across a little B&B; more like a stable with no doors, but at least it had a roof. The blankets they bought came in handy.

Dave said, "I'd forgotten how bloody cold it gets in the desert".

"You quickly get use to your home comfort, mate," Bob said, putting a thick woolly hat on.

The next morning, over a local breakfast of lamb and coffee, Bob laid out the plan.

“We’re going to try and take the main road all the way in to Baghdad. Well use route eight and then route seven, via Kut, so about six hundred and fifty kilometres. It’s going to be dangerous, but it’s the most direct route. The tricky bit is going to be not getting spotted going into Baghdad. You still got that money they gave us for expenses, Dave?”

"Yep," he nodded. "At the bottom of my bag."

“Why don’t we stay in Saudi?” Harry suggested, pointing at the map. "Travel along the eighty five until we get to Arar, then cut up using the twenty two into Baghdad. It’ll be about twelve hundred kilometres altogether, if we see a route in on the way, we’ll take it and go cross-country. But it’ll be safer, and the roads will be better."

Bob thought, then looked at Dave. He shrugged, "We could always write a road trip report on the Rover, send it into that idiot Jeremy frigging Clarkson."

Bob smiled, "OK, let's do it."

They set off as soon as they'd finished breakfast. They reckoned on covering about three hundred kilometres a day.

To begin with, they decided to use the smaller side roads, where they would be less conspicuous. They were aware at some point that they were going to get close to the fence and therefore probably within sight of any border patrols.

35

Eight kilometres away, flying at seven thousand six hundred and twenty metres, a Predator UAV was cruising. It had levelled out two hours earlier and was now holding a pre-planned flight pattern. Unless you knew it was there, you wouldn't hear it, or see it.

This UAV was sending images of a Range Rover that had three occupants on board, back to an E-3 Sentry that was patrolling two thousand kilometres away over the Mediterranean Sea. The same images were then being sent, via a military satellite, to an MI6 address in London, and a secret underground bunker in the United States.

In the American bunker, deep below the surface, were four men sitting around a table, watching the live video link sent from the UAV.

The general sitting at the top of the table picked up the phone next to him, waited a few seconds for it to be answered, then said, "Stand-by team A to seventy-two hour readiness and get them into theatre."

The reply came back repeating the last command.

"Stand-by team A to seventy-two hour readiness and get them into theatre. Aye-aye, sir."

Two minutes later, four British SAS (Special Air Service) and four American SOF (Special Ops Forces) got the call. They picked up their kit, carried out last minute checks and gave the familiar war shout (customary before going into action) before walking out to their designated aircraft, a Hercules MC-130 Commando 11.

The aircraft was winding up its four Rolls-Royce engines and readying its electronics to take the eight-man team to their destination.

On the way out to the aircraft, one of the American SOF said, "That noise still gives me a hard-on."

"You're a pervert, Louie," the only female team member laughed.

The other team members slapped him on the shoulder and smiled.

They walked up the ramp into the back, stowed their kit and strapped themselves into the side seats along the fuselage wall. The middle section of the aircraft was set up for taking kit on to another destination, once they'd been dropped off.

The Hercules taxied out. The eight service personnel in the rear heard and felt the aircraft vibrate as its engines accelerated it on its short sprint down the

runway. The soldiers in the back tensed, holding themselves upright, as the aircraft quickly gained speed.

Within a short space of time they were airborne.

On the way, the Hercules made a short detour, landing and stopping halfway along the runway of a busy European civilian airport, giving the civilian air traffic controllers a heart attack. They watch aghast as a military police car, lights flashing, sirens blasting, shot across the grass to the back of the waiting Hercules. Two men jumped out and ran up the back ramp, strapping themselves in to the first available seats. The ramp closed and the aircraft accelerated, aided by short take off rockets attached to the fuselage, and lifted into the sky. The two men, nuclear physicists, becoming part of the team for the mission.

36

Harry and Bob were scoping the border looking for a way in through the fence. Harry pointed out where he'd gained entry twice in the past. "We'd nearly been caught on the last mission, we only just got out. And according to intel that area has now been mined."

"We'll give that place a miss then!" Dave said, having seen what an IED can do to an *armoured* vehicle.

"There's plenty more places we can get in, the fence was always falling down, something to do with the sand shifting!" Harry added.

The sun was really cooking now. The on-board computer was reading an outside temperature of a hundred and four degrees Fahrenheit, you could hear the air-con working hard as it fought to keep the inside of the car cool. The heat haze on the horizon ahead was making it difficult to see along the road, so spotting potential trouble was a problem.

When they got out for a pee break, the mixture of the heat and light breeze lifted a fine sand and dust mix into the air. It got into their clothing and coated the inside of their mouths, grinding on their teeth whenever they chewed. Added to that was the sun, which was trying to cook you.

They were about two hundred kilometres along on the first day when it started to get dark. They decided to set up camp.

They found a gully big enough for the Range Rover to disappear, and set up for the night.

Making camp was quick and easy. It consisted of three comfy fold-up chairs and a blanket each. In the end though, they decided to sleep in the Range Rover as it was going to get cold. Luckily, it was big enough for the three of them. Dave made a mental note of this for his report to Clarkson.

It seemed as if the sun and the temperature were having a race to see which could drop the quickest, and it felt like the temperature was winning! Before the sun had disappeared out of sight, the sweat on Dave's back had started to cool, he dug out his jumper, ready for the chill to take the place of the searing heat.

The rocks around were still radiating a little heat, but that wouldn't last long, once the sun dropped below the horizon it would get bloody cold.

Dave could hear the night crawlers waking up, scurrying around looking for food. They were on the rocks nearby and in the sand around the car. It gave Dave the creeps thinking about them.

He turned, "Just like old times, ay, mate?" he said, to Bob.

"I'd rather be down the Dog & Duck. A pint and a packet of crisps would go down nicely at the moment!" he said, smiling.

"I could be getting laid right now," Harry chipped in.

Bob frowned as Harry remembered it was his sister he was talking about. He was about to apologise when, "Contact," Bob whispered.

Harry and Dave looked up, they could see he was looking out at the horizon. They both grabbed their weapons and took up positions around the car. Harry at the front, Dave about five metres away, behind a large rock.

Bob looked over at them, seeing they were both in position. "Large tree four hundred metres, left, goats," he directed.

"Yep," Dave replied.

"Got them," Harry sneered. "Bloody smelly animals!"

Bob then said, "Harry."

Harry looked at him.

"Mate. They've got a better chance of getting laid than you, and that's probably by the shepherd."

"Piss off!" Harry said, laughing.

Dave smiled and shook his head, got the back of the car open and started to get the kit out.

They covered the Range Rover with some canvas that Harry bought in Kuwait. "It's not as invisible as cam-net, but if it's seen, it'll look more like a tent than someone hiding something. Not that it should matter too much, as we'll be packed up by sunrise, ready to move on."

They took turns keeping watch. When it came to Dave's turn, he was reminded of the change in temperature out there. His breath was condensing into a white mist every time he breathed out. He didn't know about the other two, but his nose was bloody freezing.

* * * * *

The next morning, just before the sun showed its head, the old shepherd with the goats, and an old donkey, came close to where they were. They pulled their rifles out, just in case. He walked right past their position but showed no sign of even noticing them. They noticed him though, if they hadn't seen him they would have bloody smelt him!

"He looks happy," Dave whispered.

"Probably got his rocks off with one of those goats last night," Bob said, smiling at Harry.

Dave sniggered. Harry gave Bob the finger.

* * * * *

They set off at daybreak, after another amazing breakfast of coffee and baked beans! The sun had made its way over the horizon and was already starting to turn the place into an oven.

Dave gave his mouth a final rinse from the toothpaste, ready for the grit to take over. He checked the jerry cans; *still two full ones, so plenty*, he thought. As soon as he felt the heat coming on, he got the air-con going in the motor and they set off. They continued along the border road, with Harry and Bob scoping again for a gap in the fence.

Two hours into the second day, Harry saw a break a couple of kilometres up the road. They pulled up five hundred metres from it, on the verge. Bob and Harry going forward on foot to check it out.

While they were gone, Dave got the car jack out to make it look like he was changing a tyre, although, if someone had stopped and offered help he wouldn't have known what to say as he couldn't speak the lingo.

It took Bob and Harry thirty minutes to cover the distance, it was slow going because of the lack of cover. When they got near to the gap they spotted a work gang fixing the fence.

There were twelve people altogether - six men digging and six guards. Three guards on the Iraqi side and the rest on the Saudi side. There were also two JCB diggers.

"A bit of overkill on the guard front. Are they expecting a Range Rover with three blokes trying to gate crash or something?" Harry beamed.

"Let's get back," Bob smiled. "We'll hide the Rover and come back with Dave. We'll stay until it gets dark, see if they leave. If not we'll find another way in."

They got the Rover off the road and disabled the engine as there was nowhere to hide it. Hopefully anyone coming along would just think it had broken down.

Just as the sun started going down, the workmen put the JCBs across the gap, they then got in the minibus and headed towards Karbala They couldn't believe their luck.

When the two vehicles were out of view, Harry went forward to check out the gap. When he got back, he said, "The keys are in the diggers and the place is deserted, not even a guard dog."

"It's too much of an opportunity to let up," Dave said.

"Let's get going. Harry and I'll move one of the diggers, Dave bring the Rover through."

"Gotcha."

When Dave got back to the vehicle he turned the heater on, whacking it up to full. The temperature was starting to drop quickly back to what it had been the night before. By the time he got through the fence, it was fully dark. Harry and Bob moved the diggers back, took one last look to check things over and jumped in.

They were in.

Keeping about ten kilometres away, but parallel to the fence, on the east side of the Samawah road, they drove for forty K's, getting deeper into Iraq before they made camp. They found a small tangle of bushes between some rocks and laid low for the night.

The next morning, after a quiet night, they set off, having had beans and coffee again for breakfast. They followed the same course for another forty K's, half expecting the guys from the fence to be charging after them, with most of the Iraqi army in tow, but nothing came. It was at this point they decided to cross the Samawah road.

They had to get to the other side before hitting the little trunk road that joined it just up ahead. They thought it would be less risky crossing the one road, rather than two. When they spotted the tarmac they slowed to a crawl, whilst Bob and Harry looked for trouble. Happy it was clear, they crossed quickly, disappearing into the desert again. They drove the rest of the two hundred and ninety K's to Karbala, staying off any roads.

They spent another quiet night camping under the stars. Harry smiled, *there wasn't a soul around, or any bloody goats.*

They decided to join route twenty-two twenty K's south of Razazza Lake, heading into Karbala, but as they got closer, they could see it wasn't going to be as straightforward as they would have liked. There was a steady stream of vehicles using the road, everything from cars to huge tank transporters.

They stopped, deciding to wait until it was just getting dark, hopefully making it easier and less noticeable to catch a gap.

As they got to within five hundred metres of the road, it was about the point where you'd probably turn your lights on, just to take the edge out of the dark that was starting to cover everything. The traffic on the road seemed to be thinning out slightly, probably all stopped for dinner somewhere, but at least the plan was working.

They waited, but not for too long, before their chance presented itself. They drove at the road, coming at it at right angles and bounced up off the desert floor onto the tarmac. Dave straightened up and settled down, hoping the few cars that were there didn't give a shit!

"I think we got away with it," Bob said, looking up and down the road!

They drove on into Karbala without being noticed too much, a few people looked at them, but probably, as Dave hoped, at the car!

They found their way to the other side of the city and joined the Baghdad road. They settled down with the rest of the traffic and started counting down the K's.

They made one more overnight stop on the way, pulling off the road into a copse of olive trees and getting their heads down for some shut eye.

The next morning, they set off on the final leg into Baghdad, knowing this would be the tricky part.

When they were thirty minutes out from Baghdad, Harry made a call to Anshu.

“Anshu, hi mate.”

“OK, hello, Harry, my old friend. How are you?”

“Good. We need to get into Baghdad, can you meet us?”

“OK, yes where are you?”

“About thirty minutes out.”

“OK, I’ll see you at the olive grove in one hour.”

“Right, see you soon.”

They continued to the meeting spot and parked alongside a wall. They got out and used the tyre change cover again until Anshu turned up. Bob and Dave went and hid on the other side of the wall. Harry was going to check him out first, before they showed themselves.

Anshu arrived twenty minutes late, he was riding a clapped-out old moped. He got off and pushed it up against the wall and strode over to Harry as if he owned the place. He was loud and bold, which worried Dave. When he looked at Bob he must have been thinking the same. They both started looking up and down the street, half expecting the local army to be following.

Anshu came over and hugged Harry as if they were the oldest and closest of friends.

“OK, Harry, my old friend, it’s good to see you again.”

“You too, Anshu, how’s things?”

“OK, they’re good. I’m working now, I run my own coffee shop, very good business.”

Anshu looked around, “OK, where’s your friend, Harry?”

“He’s just gone for a pee.”

With this, Bob made his way around the wall and over to the two of them, he offered his hand. Anshu took it and pulled Bob into him for a hug. Bob returned the gesture.

“Nice to meet you, Anshu. Can you help us?”

“OK, yes, yes. But first you must rest and eat. You’ll be my guests in my house.”

Anshu looked at the Rover up on its carjack, “OK, car trouble?”

“No, Anshu, we were just checking something out.”

Bob turned to Anshu, and said, “We have one more friend with us, Dave.” He looked over towards the wall and waved Dave over.

Dave wasn’t that keen. Something about Anshu wasn’t right! He jumped the wall and came over offering his hand, but again Anshu opened his arms and wrapped them around him before he could object.

“OK, Dave, don’t be shy, we’re all friends.”

“Hi,” is all Dave managed to say. He looked at Bob and winced, Bob just shrugged.

“OK, follow me, my friends, I’ll take you to my home. We can rest and talk.”

With Anshu's help they put the wheel back on. Anshu led them through the centre of Baghdad, cutting through the back streets until he pulled up outside a row of houses. He leant his moped up against the wall, next to a gate and came over. He directed Dave to park over behind some bins, just past his bike.

“What a shithole!” Dave said, to Harry.

“Hasn’t changed a bit, apart from the bullet holes!” he replied, looking round.

Anshu came over and opened the door for Harry. “OK, welcome to my house, while you are my guest it is your house.”

They got out and Anshu showed them in. As they entered, a pretty young woman carrying a baby came through and looked at them. Anshu said something to her and she went off, coming back shortly with tea and food.

Please, no more bloody beans! Dave thought.

“OK, Harry, you’re looking good my friend.”

“You look older, Anshu. Who’s the woman?”

“OK, I’m married now. I have two beautiful children, a boy and a girl. My wife, she’s very beautiful?”

“Yes she is.”

The young woman came back and poured the tea, she then sat behind Anshu, her baby in her arms.

“We need somewhere to stay, can you help us?”

“OK, you can stay with me, my old friend.”

“No.”

“OK, I insist. You are my old friend who helped me, so now I help you.”

“Does your wife speak English?” Bob asked.

“OK, no she doesn’t.”

Anshu said something to his wife, she nodded and got up and left.

“OK, I have told her to go and tend to the children.”

“I need some information, Anshu.” Harry said.

“OK, what is it you need, my friend? I’ll help however I can.”

“I need to meet with people who know about a bomb.”

“OK, what kind of bomb?”

“A dirty bomb, a miniature nuke.”

“OK, what is this... miniature nuke?” he said, with a quizzical look on his face.

“It’s called a suitcase bomb, it could take out half of Baghdad. I need to find out who has it. Do you know anyone who could help?”

“We’ll pay you,” Dave added. “Enough money for you and your family to live like kings for the rest of your life!” Dave thought, *what the hell, the British government can afford it.*

“Can you help us?” Harry asked again.

“OK, my friend, if this is true what you say, then I’ll find out who can help.”

They finished their tea and food. Dave gave Anshu a bag full of money, about ten thousand pounds. “There’s more when we’re finished.”

Anshu looked at the bag and then came over and hugged Dave.

“We need the address of somewhere to stay,” Bob said.

“OK, my friend.” Anshu gave Bob an address for a small hotel; a chain of them had sprung up along the highway, and this one was near the football ground. It was a type of Travelodge, or at least that’s what he said.

A shithole more like it, Dave thought.

They got there, threw their gear down and got some shut eye.

* * * * *

It was dark when the phone rang. Harry picked it up.

“OK, Harry, my friend.”

“Anshu, what have you got for me?”

“OK, I've arranged a meeting for you with one of our leaders, he's very worried about what you said.”

“That was quick, well done, old friend. When can I meet?”

“OK, tomorrow in the morning. I'll ring you tomorrow with the meeting point.”

“Thank you, Anshu.”

“OK, sleep well, my friend.”

39

Back in the U.K.

It was Saturday, and the sun was out. The promenade at Hunstanton was bustling with happy, smiling people. They were there for the great British seaside experience: fish and chips, ice-cream, sticks of rock, candy floss and a number of different species of dead sea-life immersed in vinegar.

Babies were dressed in little, fancy swimsuits and were wearing kiss-me-quick hats. Smiling people were writing funny messages on saucy postcards and sending them to friends around the world. The amusement arcades were making penny fortunes from people who were splashing out their hard-earned savings, all in the hope of winning a cheap watch or a real fake gold Galleon to spend in Diagon Alley. There were even one or two people swimming in the sea.

Lucy was walking along the promenade with Mary. They'd finished eating their fish & chips and were now enjoying the view along the sandy beach. The weather was warm with a slight sea breeze coming off the water, just enough to move their hair.

As they walked along, arms folded in to each other, they were watching the waves working their way up the shore line—chasing away the fishermen who were out catching fish.

Since returning home last week, Lucy had been having nightmares. She would wake up in the middle of the night, covered in a cold sweat. The same recurring dream haunting her sleep. The woman she'd shot, except when she looked at her face it was herself looking blankly back at her. Lucy started to imagine there were people in the house, trying to kill her, there never was, but the thought still gave her the shivers.

When she was out walking with Mary she had a feeling they were being watched, she kept turning around to see if anybody was following them. She thought, *if we were being followed, I probably wouldn't see them anyway*. But it didn't stop her from checking every few minutes.

She hadn't told Mary what had happened or what she'd done. Her friend would've tried making her go to the police, thinking they could sort the problem out.

They continued their stroll and went to a nearby pastry shop they frequented whenever they were in the area. Finding a space at a window table, they sat next to a young couple who were having coffee and pointing out to sea, obviously enjoying the day.

Lucy and Mary started to people watch but this soon moved on to how the tourists coming in was good for the local economy.

Lucy decided to tell Mary about Bill, but left out how he'd died. She just said when they'd turned up, they'd found him having a fit on the floor and he'd died later in hospital. Mary said she was sad to hear about Bill, they'd known him for years and he always looked really fit and healthy.

"I suppose everyone has to die at some point," she said, sadly.

The white van had parked up in one of the side streets, before Lucy had arrived. Two young people had gotten out and walked into town to the seafront, holding hands. They were now enjoying a cup of tea and a sticky bun, chatting and giggling like a couple in love. They were pointing out to sea at a lorry that had driven off the sand and into the water, it was now floating out into the distance. As they sat chatting about their day, they recorded everything being said at the next table.

Lucy and Mary finished their tea and cake and set off along the promenade, passing the old light house, until they came to the cliffs. They then turned and walked back.

"Have you been to see the seals?" Mary asked. She was looking out at the lorry, which was now up to its chassis in the sea.

"Yes, but a long time ago."

"Would you like to go again, now? My treat."

"Are you sure?" Lucy said. "I can't promise I won't feel sick, but OK."

Mary clapped excitedly, then wrapped her arms around Lucy and hugged her close.

At the booking hut, Mary paid for two tickets, they waited in the queue, excitedly chatting about sitting at the front of the boat. The young couple from the café arrived and booked two tickets as well. They came over and stood behind them. "Hello," the young lady smiled.

Lucy smiled back, recognising them from the café. "Hello."

The young couple introduced themselves and said they'd heard them mention the seals. "We didn't know you could get a ride out to watch them," they smiled. They turned and looked out to sea, pointing at the ships and chatting about the day they'd had.

The boat ride was very enjoyable. Mary and Lucy spent most of the time looking at the seals and chatting with the young couple.

They'd recently got married and were travelling around Norfolk on their honeymoon. They were looking for places to park their van and pitch their tent for the night. "We're just touring around, looking at all the beautiful places Britain has to offer. We're off to Europe next week," she said. "We're going to drive down through France and work our way through to Italy, then take a ferry across to Slovakia."

"You can pitch at mine tonight if you want to," Lucy suggested.

"We couldn't possibly do that!" he said.

"I don't mind, really. If it'll help you out!"

They introduced themselves as Helen and Gavin, then spent the rest of the day looking at the sights with Lucy and Mary. Lucy gave them her address and phone number and said she'd see them later.

The young couple arrived just after nine pm, they set their tent down the side of the house. Lucy gave them a key to the back door so they could use the bathroom.

At eleven thirty, Helen yawned. Gavin looked at her, "Tired, darling?"

"Hmm. It's been a long day." She turned to Lucy, "Thank you so much, Lucy. You've been very kind."

The next morning, before they left, Lucy cooked them breakfast. They spent the next hour chatting about where they were heading next and where the closest petrol station was. Just after ten am they went on their way, promising to be in touch the next time they were in the area.

When the couple left, they looked at each other and smiled. They couldn't believe how easy it had been. They'd gone around the cottage, when Lucy was asleep, and replanted all the devices Lucy had ripped out. As they drove off, they high-fived each other and smiled.

40

They set off at daybreak and headed towards a checkpoint on the western outskirts of Baghdad. Anshu informed them that the clothes they were wearing were no longer used in the area, unless you travelled the desert all the time. He gave them some of his to help blend in with the locals. They already had a tan from when they were working before and they also had a week's worth of facial hair.

"Checkpoint up ahead," Dave warned.

"OK, I'll do the talking," said Anshu.

A guard flagged them over, directing Dave to drive to an area sectioned off at the side of the road.

"*Marhaba*," Anshu greeted the soldier.

Bob, Dave and Harry smiled. Dave fidgeted as he watched the soldiers check them out, their weapons across their chests, ready.

The conversation between Anshu and the soldier sounded heated, but Dave knew that's how a lot of the locals spoke to each other. He still didn't trust Anshu, though. Something about his manner told him to be cautious around him.

Ten minutes later, a hundred thousand dinars down, which was about fifty pounds, and they were driving to the next checkpoint. In all, it cost them just over three hundred thousand dinars to leave Baghdad, but at least they were alive.

They set off towards Fallujah, then on towards Habbaniyah Lake to meet with Anshu's contact.

* * * * *

It was about a hundred kilometres from Baghdad, but still took nearly three hours because of the road and hectic traffic.

As they approached the lake, Anshu asked them to pull over. "OK, I can go no further."

"Why?" Harry asked, suspicion written across his face.

"OK, I have only dealt with these people over the phone and that's why I'm still alive. My face is unknown to them."

"OK, old friend," Harry smiled. "We'll pick you up on the way back."

Anshu got out and walked off towards a mound of rocks a little way up the slope to their left.

Dave took the Rover forward, negotiating the broken road expertly. Some of the potholes were as big as the vehicle they were in, but the Rover handled it well.

As they approached the house they were feeling very nervous.

"Get the weapons ready and put them on the dashboard, just in case," Bob cautioned.

"Shall I drive all the way up to the house?" Dave asked.

"No. Stop about five hundred metres short, we'll walk the rest."

Dave nodded and pulled over just off the track, behind a small copse of trees.

"Goats!" Harry cursed. "Bloody goats all around the place. I can't wait to get back to good old Blighty, just so I don't have to look at any more bloody goats." He got out and threw a few small stones at them and was very quickly shouted at by a young shepherd boy. The lad started swearing at Harry in pretty good English.

"Where the hell did he come from?" Harry frowned.

"Probably having a shit in a hole, mate," Bob mused.

They started to walk up the track to the house, when Bob said, "Contact, top left window."

"Got it," Dave and Harry nodded.

Harry moved off to Bob's right, whilst Dave dropped back ten metres, covering the rear.

As they continued, scouring the surrounding area for anyone who might be thinking about sneaking up on them, a man came to the front door with a rifle in his hands. He started waving it at the three of them. "Stop!" he shouted. Again, in pretty good English.

Three more men joined him out of the house, then two from round the sides.

"I don't like the look of this, Bob," Harry said, nervously.

"Just stay calm, Harry. Dave, got your scope?"

"Yep. AK forty-sevens, one of them has a sword or something, hanging from his waist."

"OK, stay calm, but be ready to fight our way out of here!" Bob said, looking at the terrain around them. "We'll go up the slope to our right if it kicks off."

The five men stopped a hundred metres short of them. One of them came forward and shouted. "Harry?"

"That's me."

"You come with me!" the man said.

"All of us?" Harry asked.

The man turned to the others with him, he then turned back, and said, "OK, but you mustn't bring your weapons."

"No deal," Bob shouted.

"Then we're finished here."

"OK, but we walk behind you," Bob said.

"What the hell are you doing? We're not going in there without backup! It'll be suicide! "

"They've only seen the rifles, Dave. We keep our side arms. Harry, have you got the grenades?"

"Yep."

"OK, if things get hot, we rock."

Dave and Harry smiled as they placed their weapons down.

They got to the door and were met by an older man. He had an orange beard and wore big, black-rimmed glasses, which made his eyes look huge. "Hello, come in please," he greeted. He then asked, "Tea?"

"No thank you," Harry replied. "What has Anshu told you?"

"That you have keys to a dirty bomb. Is this true?"

"Yes."

"Do you have them on you now?"

"No."

"I see. Who owns the keys?"

"We do," said Bob.

This was going wrong, the three of them started to glance round. Suddenly a rifle was pushed into Harry's back, there was a pause, and then all hell broke loose.

Bob pushed Harry over to the wall, just as the man fired. As Harry was falling he pulled his handgun out and shot the one who tried to shoot him. He rolled onto the floor, then twisting, he shot two more. Dave had his weapon out and shot the other one.

The door exploded open as it was kicked, three more men came in, their rifles spitting lead. They hit the deck.

These guys are frigging amateurs, Dave thought, peering at them. They wouldn't be able to hit the arse on an elephant if it was on the end of their rifle!

They waited for a gap in the shooting before they returned fire. It then went very quiet. Dave and Harry looked at Bob, he'd grabbed the old man and was now pushing his handgun into his mouth.

Bob was fingering the trigger and staring straight at him. The old man's eyes were white and bulging.

"Now that was bloody silly," Bob said, spitting.

Harry and Dave secured the building, checking the other rooms. "All clear!" Dave shouted.

Harry called all clear as well as they joined Bob back in the main room.

"Old man," Bob said. "Where's the bomb?"

The old man smiled, and started babbling in his own language, Bob punched him in the gut; he went down like a sack of spuds. "Speak in English or I'll shoot you and leave you here with the others."

"It's in Ramadi," he said, panting. "I'll take you there."

"You used your last life up, one more trick like that and I shoot you, understand?"

The old man nodded.

“Out the back way, guys. I’ll go first.” Bob pushed the old man out the back door, held him there for a second before following.

“You’re coming for a little ride, if you’re good, we’ll let you go, if you’re not, I’ll have great pleasure telling everyone how you’ve been helping the Americans fight IS. Got it?”

The old guy nodded this time, though his eyes were filled with terror.

41

The UAV circling overhead was relaying the video, via a live feed, back to the Americans and the English. They watched with bated breath as the team walked up to the house.

The American general picked up the phone and waited for it to be answered. “Bring the teams up to immediate readiness,” he ordered.

“Bring the teams up to immediate readiness. Aye-aye, sir,” came the reply.

Putting the phone down, he looked around the table, “Gentlemen, it just got interesting.”

The ten-man team had been dropped off at Al Dhafra Air Base, just outside Abu Dhabi. They were located in a HAS (Hardened Aircraft Shelter) on the far side of the airfield. They were checking their equipment, sitting around talking about the mission ahead. When the tannoy crackled in to life they immediately stopped what they were doing and listened to the announcement.

“Recovery team to immediate readiness.”

They looked at each other. The team commander said, “OK, let’s do this.”

The customary battle cry went out again and they got their kit on. They walked over to the RAF Chinook helicopter that was parked up in the corner, waiting for them.

42

Bob, Harry and Dave worked their way back to their vehicle, picking up the rest of their weapons on the way. They put the old man in the back with Harry, who now had his handgun out and was pushing it against the old man’s stomach. They set off, picking up Anshu on the way. He didn’t look that pleased that they had one of the men from the meeting with them.

As he approached the car, he covered his head, so as not to be recognised, he got in and sat facing the front. “I heard the gunfire and was working my way to the house, when it suddenly went quiet. Then I heard a vehicle, so I thought I’d wait and see who came up the path.”

The old man looked at him in silence.

Taking the track that went around the western point of the lake, they cut across and joined the main road into Ramadi. The old man started chanting prayers, when suddenly Anshu turned, shouting at him to shut up.

"Anshu, is that you?" the old man said, frowning. "You help these dogs?"

Without warning, Anshu pulled a handgun from his clothing and hit the old man around the head, he went out like a light.

Bob grabbed him. Holding the pistol to Anshu's head, he growled, "Do anything like that again and I'll kill you! We need him to tell us where the bomb is."

Anshu was stunned. "OK, but he'll lead you into a trap," he grimaced, trying to pull away from the muzzle.

"You mean like the one you just led us into!" Harry spat.

"OK, I didn't know they'd do this."

"Bollocks more like!" Bob said, anger written all over his face. "For all we know, you set it up."

"OK, Harry, my old friend," Anshu smiled. "Tell them I wouldn't do this."

"You set us up, you bastard," Harry cursed. "That's why you got out when you did."

"OK, no. I didn't know this."

"I haven't trusted this guy since we first met him," Dave said, looking at Anshu.

"Harry. If he tries anything like this again, shoot him!" Bob sneered.

"With pleasure," Harry nodded.

Anshu sat the rest of the journey in silence.

Dave drove into Ramadi and found a back street he knew from the last time he was there. *Back on old turf*, he thought.

After they parked up, Anshu said, "OK, you must trust me."

"We don't have to trust shit," Bob growled.

"OK, I'll get us food and water, you will see you can trust me. Wait here, please."

"You ain't going anywhere, matey," Harry said, grabbing him and making him flinch.

"Let him go," Bob said.

Harry took his sidearm out and pushed it against Anshu's temple. "I'll put a bullet in your head if I think you've double-crossed us!"

The three of them watched as he scurried off.

Dave turned to Bob, but he cut in before he could say anything. "We'll drive around the corner, park up and take up positions on the roof over there," he pointed. "We'll watch him when he comes back. Harry, follow him, but stay well back."

Harry nodded, checked his sidearm and set off.

Bob and Dave made sure the old man was secure, then took up their positions on the roof.

Twenty minutes later, Bob spotted Anshu. He was half-walking, half-running. He had a bag over his shoulder, which looked pretty heavy.

"Harry's fifty metres behind," Dave said.

"Got him," Bob replied.

Harry spotted them on the roof, he signalled that everything was good.

Anshu was given the task of tasting each bit of food first, then drinking some water from each bottle.

The old man moaned, Bob and Dave looked over at him as he was rubbing the side of his head, Harry ignored him and just watched Anshu.

"He won't do that again," Bob said, passing him a bottle of water, "Drink!"

The old man looked at Anshu, then at Bob. "Thank you," he said.

Bob wasn't sure whether he was thanking him or Anshu, but he got the idea from the way he scowled that it was him.

"Where's the bomb?" Bob asked, as the old man gulped at the water.

It took a few minutes for him to get his senses back, but then he said, "It's in a house, with a safe, in a hidden room. We haven't moved it because it is poisonous."

They sat looking at each other. Dave could tell they were all thinking the same thing. *The same bloody house!*

"Exactly where?" Bob said, cautiously.

The old man told them exactly where, as Bob, Dave and Harry sat there, not believing what they were hearing.

"It's under the safe. The safe was put over a hole with the case beneath it."

They couldn't believe their ears. They were right on top of it when they blew the safe.

"Shit! We could have set it off," Harry gasped.

"Yeah, but we didn't, so don't think about it," Bob said.

"Shit!" Harry said again. Dave joined in, saying the same.

After a few minutes, they got out of the car and headed towards the house. Bob went point, then Anshu, the old man, Harry, with Dave bringing up the rear.

The old man was jabbering on at Anshu as they walked, you could tell this was winding Anshu up. Every couple of hundred metres, Anshu would turn and raise his hand at the old man. He would say something, the old man would look down and Anshu would carry on walking.

Something ain't right! Dave thought, looking at them.

When they got to what was left of the house, Harry whistled, "Looks like it's taken a bit more of a beating since we were last here."

They could work out where they'd entered the last time. Just. The door they used and where they took cover was vaguely recognisable, but they couldn't see the safe.

They dug around for a few minutes before Dave called, "Found it!" The safe was buried under the remains of what was left of the wall and the roof.

The old man started to back off, Dave looked at him. "It won't go off unless the keys are in it," he said.

The old man shouted something in his own tongue, Dave looked at Anshu, "What did the old man say?"

"He said it's poison!"

Dave looked over at Bob and Harry, they just shrugged. He started to clear some more rubble away, with Harry and Bob coming over to help. They cleared enough to see all four sides down to the floor it was on. Suddenly, bits of concrete starting pinging up around them.

"Sniper. Get down!" Bob shouted.

Not that they needed telling. They all fell down behind the rubble and waited for the shooting to stop. The old man went to run away, he started to climb over the

safe but got hit in the chest and dropped like a stone, landing on top of it, his blood squirting from a hole in the side of his neck. The flow slowed and started to run down the sides of the safe, pooling at the bottom.

Great! Dave thought. *That's going to stink later!*

"Well at least no one can see it now," Harry chirped. "Safe. Two o'clock. Fifty metres. Shooter on the roof!"

There was a pause, Bob said, "Got him." He shuffled around for a second. His rifle cracked once, and they watched as the shooter fell forward and over the side of the building.

"Like being at the fun fair," Bob smirked. "We'll wait till it gets dark, then get the safe up."

Anshu was lying flat on the floor, behind a shallow pile of rubble.

"Anshu, are you OK?" Harry asked.

"OK, yes!" he shouted back.

It started getting dark and the temperature started to drop again, Dave felt his nose starting to sting.

Once the buildings around had melted together in the dark, they started to dig around the safe. After ten minutes, Dave was sweating like a pig on heat, his shirt was drenched and he could feel it starting to chill as it stuck to the scars on his back.

They threw the old man's body over the wall of the next house along, they didn't bother digging a grave, but did cover it with an old sack they picked up off the floor.

"The bastard would have left us to rot back at the lake anyway!" Harry said.

"You always were the sensitive one, Harry," Bob said, smiling.

"Wait," Harry said. "The bomb."

Bob and Dave looked at him.

"The old man kept saying it was poison, right? Remember John? He was on the other team when he found the safe. Didn't he get sick? Ended up getting shipped back to the U.K. with a sickness they couldn't identify. I think I've worked out what it was."

It dawned on them what Harry was on about, radiation poisoning. "Shit. How close can we get, Harry?" Bob asked.

"We're already too frigging close!"

Anshu didn't know what was going on, but could tell something was up.

"We need to get a Geiger counter," Harry said, concern written all over his face.

"Where the hell are we going to get one of those in a shithole like this?" Dave cursed.

Bob looked up and mouthed the word, "shit!" He looked back at Harry and Dave, "There! That's where," he said, pointing up.

Eleven thousand kilometres away, the General picked up the phone, "Launch the team now!" he waited for the reply.

"Launch the team now. Aye-aye, sir."

He looked around the table, "Now it gets really interesting!"

The CH-47 Chinook that was waiting in the corner, got pushed out onto the PAN in front of the HAS and started up. A few minutes later, it started rolling forward and gracefully lifted in to the air. It dropped its nose and the tail came up, so it was at about sixty degrees to the ground, it then set off, hugging the ground over the desert towards Baghdad.

The team sat silently, the jokes had finished, and they had work to do. Each one of them went over their drills in their heads.

One of the scientists said, "Gentlemen, check your badges!"

A murmur went around the cabin, hardly audible over the noise of the blades chopping at the air. "Clear!" came the response from each one of them as they all checked their indicators.

The journey would take a little over two hours.

En route, they were joined by a pair of Warthogs, the warplanes would be with them for the rest of the mission.

44

"What the hell? Are you going all religious on us or something?" Dave said, following Bob's gaze.

"They've been following us since we set off."

"What are you talking about?" Harry asked.

"UAV. They've been watching us since we entered Iraq, Harry. Seems that our guardian angel has been keeping an eye on us."

"Like shit have they! I didn't see any troops helping us out when we went into that bloody house!"

"Harry's right," Dave said. "They couldn't give a rat's arse about us. All they want is that suitcase and whoever it belongs to. We're just cannon fodder!"

Harry looked at Bob, "How are they going to help us then?"

Dave pointed out, "We have the keys. Now we also have the bomb!"

"We don't have it yet," Bob grunted. "It's over there, and for all I know, it's frying our fricking balls off."

They all subconsciously fidgeted slightly, turning sideways on as if it would stop anything happening.

"He's right, Dave, anyway, what good's a bomb to us?" Harry looked at Bob, "How do we get help, Bob? Pick up a phone and say, "excuse me, could you send us in a decontamination team? We seem to have a bit of a nuclear leak problem."

"Exactly that, Harry. Exactly that."

Harry looked at Bob as if he'd lost his marbles, Dave shrugged. Bob got his mobile out and switched it on.

"Bob?" Dave asked, as Bob waited for his phone to start up.

“Yes, mate?”

“I’d hate to see your mobile bill at the end of the month, the data roaming charges are going to be through the roof!”

It rang almost immediately; they all nearly jumped out of their skins. Bob pressed the connect button, “Hello?”

“We’ve got your position locked in to the rescue helicopter. We’ve also picked up the leak from the suitcase with the UAV you were just looking at.”

“It’s you then?” Bob said, looking at Dave and Harry whilst pointing up.

“As soon as we picked up the leak we launched the recovery team. They’ll be on your position within two hours. Secure the area and await further instructions.” The man hung up.

Bob looked at the phone, “Fuckwit!” He put it away and looked at the other two, “They’re on their way. They’re sending in a team to get it and us out. We have to secure the area.”

“What! We’re not in the bloody army now!” Dave cursed. “Who’s he think he is?”

Harry suggested, “We’ve got to move away from this position. It can’t be that bad, though. They said the UAV didn’t detect the leak until we moved the rubble. I’d say behind that wall would be OK,” he said, pointing.

Dave looked down at his family jewels, “Hear that little fella, just behind that wall, OK?”

Bob and Harry burst out laughing as he tapped them.

They set up in line of sight of the safe and dug in, keeping an eye out for any more shooters.

“The cavalry will be here in two hours. Dave, Harry, you two OK?”

“I’ll be glad to get home,” Harry smiled. “I’m going to have a long hot soak,” he looked at Bob, and said “with Lucy!” He waited for a reaction. Nothing. Bob either didn’t hear or he was ignoring it. Harry just smiled and shrugged.

Bob looked away for a few moments, then, “Me too, Harry, me too. Not with Lucy though, that’d just be weird!”

“I could murder a pint of Bombardier,” Dave said, his mouth watering.

A thought they all agreed with!

* * * * *

Two hours to the minute, they heard the tell-tale chop off the Chinook blades as it approached their position. Bob held a torch up, pointing it towards the noise.

It came in low, roof top height, touching down fifty metres from their position. Kicking dust up and blowing small pieces of rubble away.

The back ramp was open as it came in. As soon as the wheels hit the deck they counted ten bodies disembark. Seven of them took up defensive positions around the transport. The remaining three came and joined them in their makeshift bunker.

The Chinook lifted off, skimming the rooftops, banking round to the right as it went.

The soldiers disappeared through the rubble and buildings and worked their way to the group's position.

“Bob?”

“That’s me. You are?”

"Major Anderson." They shook hands.

"Major, nice to meet you. Who are these guys?"

"Special Ops team, a mix of British and American forces and these two are nuclear physicists."

"Gentlemen, these are for you," one of the scientists said, handing them a detector badge each.

"What's the situation?" the major asked.

"Four of us," he said, pointing. "Harry, Dave, me and this is Anshu our guide. No one's tried shooting at us since I took the last one out." Bob pointed his torch beam briefly at the safe. "See the safe over there, the case is under it, how far under it I don't know, but it's giving out radiation."

"OK, thanks, Bob. We'll take it from here."

The major looked at his men, the two scientists who were with him went up to the safe. When they got up close to it, they took a big grey bag out of a box and folded it out on the floor. They signalled to two other soldiers who came forward and secured a line around the safe.

The two scientists looked at the major, giving him the thumbs up. He nodded and the line went tight, then the safe tipped over.

The two scientists put the cover over the hole and lifted the case out. Turning it over, they wrapped the case in the cover and taped it closed.

"OK, Bob, it's safe now," the major said, as he got a Geiger counter out. It read just above normal levels. He said, "This'll hold it, until we can get it in the box on the transport."

Bob nodded and they all breathed a sigh of relief.

The major asked, "Do you have the keys?"

"No, they're somewhere safe."

Dave noticed Anshu look at Bob when he said this. Anshu paid too much attention for Dave's liking.

"OK, I'll need them soon though," the major instructed.

When they were alone, Harry said, "We've got to let Lucy know, Bob."

"Harry's right, Bob, she has the keys, and she's in danger."

"No one knows she has them yet," Bob said, worriedly.

Dave told Bob and Harry what he'd seen earlier. With this, Bob said, "I'll make a call to her now. I'll tell her to get out of there and stay low until we get back."

Lucy couldn't believe it, but she packed her things and left. She booked into a B&B in London, working on the assumption that it's a big place, so it must be harder for someone to find her.

"I'll meet you there, we'll be about five days, OK?"

"OK, you take care, Bobby, and tell Harry I'm thinking of him."

The men in the white van listened, packed up their equipment and set off for London. Hopefully, getting there before Lucy, wouldn't alert her to the van being parked in the same street, it would just be another white van.

As soon as the van arrived, the men got into the property and planted bugs in every room. Also setting up hidden cameras, so they could see if anything was happening. They sat back and waited.

“Hostiles, one hundred metres. Heading this way!” came the shout over the radio. “Seven counted, armed with AK forty sevens and two RPGs (Rocket Propelled Grenade launcher).”

The major instructed Comms to get the transport back in.

There was a brief pause and then, “Five minutes out,” came the reply.

They took up positions around the area where the suitcase was and waited anxiously for the transport to return.

The major ordered two of his men to take out the two RPGs. “Don’t want them shooting down our transport out of here, do we?” he said, looking at Bob.

Thirty seconds later, there were two dead hostiles laying in the dirt. They killed them with their knives, keeping the noise to a minimum. The first the others knew about it was when their leader shouted to them to get the helicopter. Shortly after, he was lying dead with his companions. The others fled to get some distance between them and the hidden forces in front of them.

Dave looked around and noticed Anshu had legged it. “Can you see Anshu?” he asked Harry.

“No, the little shit’s gone. If I ever see him again I’ll kill him!”

“Don’t worry,” Bob said, “we’ll catch up with him.”

The helicopter landed with the ramp down and they all scrambled on. Scientists and suitcase first, then Bob, Dave and Harry, closely followed by the soldiers, lastly the major. The aircraft lurched into the air, skimming the roof tops as it went, flares popping out from their casings as they headed towards the border.

Out of the side window, in the distance, Dave could see the ghostly appearance against the sunrise of two Warthogs, they were high, five hundred metres off to their right.

“Air cover,” said one of the soldiers.

The Special Forces guys sat looking at their three guests, not saying anything. Ten minutes later, one of them said, “Who the hell are you guys?”

“They’re a bunch of gung-ho pricks!” one of them shouted above the noise.

Dave looked at the person who just said this, he couldn’t believe his ears, it was Poppy.

“Hi, Dave, still doing your mercenary bit I see!” she smiled, taking her head gear off.

He smiled back, “I gave that up four weeks ago. I’m working for MI6 now!”

She looked at him, cocked her head slightly, “You into nuclear clear-outs now then?”

“Nope just diamonds, we were...coerced into this one.”

She nodded, then said, letting her guard down, “It’s good to see you again, Dave.” She looked around at the others, “Who are your mates?”

“This is Bob, he’s the one who left me the message on the phone. And this is Harry.”

“So how did you all meet?”

"We all served. Bob I knew from working with him just after training, captain in the army. Harry I met at the new job, ex-rock demolition expert. "

On hearing they were all forces, the other soldiers all nodded, the uncomfortableness that had greeted them as they lifted off, melted away.

Twenty minutes into the flight, the helicopter suddenly banked hard over, forcing them in to their seats. The flares started popping off again as the aircraft lurched from side to side. There was a huge flash and a deafening explosion, immediately followed by a huge cracking sound. The Chinook began to shake violently and then dropped.

Dave looked over at Poppy, all he saw was a huge hole where the fuselage had been ripped open. The daylight changing to darkness, then day, then night as the aircraft started to spin. Dave's guts tried to escape from his mouth as the chopper fell out of the sky. Claxons were shrilling all around the cabin. They hit the ground. The Chinook skidded along the sand rolling on to the side with the gaping hole, shovelling tons of sand inside as it slid to a stop.

Dave looked around and saw Harry, he was hanging in his seat harness, dead! He'd been caught by the shrapnel from the explosion and torn apart. His eyes searched for Poppy, but there was just a large pile of sand where she'd been sitting.

The major, four soldiers, Bob and Dave were all who were left alive. One of the soldiers had a broken arm but the rest of were OK, mostly bruised and shaken. The others were all missing, presumed dead, including Poppy.

The major got up, "Let's get going," he ordered.

Dave looked at Bob, and they both looked at Harry. They sat, staring at him.

The major shouted his order again, they both reacted like soldiers and got their arses in gear. If they didn't want to end up like Harry and Poppy, they had to start listening.

They took up positions outside the helicopter and watched as the two Warthogs overshot, they waggled their wings and climbed, but remained in the area, passing over every few minutes. The sun was starting to break over the horizon and the temperature started to climb.

The major got his radiophone out. "Firebird One, this is Recovery, copy."

"Go ahead, Recovery."

"Firebird, five down, seven for transport. One casualty. Is the Angel inbound?"

"Roger that. Angel inbound, one hour out."

"Roger that, Firebird, can you stay and cover?"

"That's an affirmative."

"Roger that, Firebird, out."

They got ready to wait, and they expected trouble. People from as far as thirty kilometres away would have seen the smoke. The people who shot them down would already be heading towards their position. The major got his men dug in, ready for an attack.

They waited about six minutes before the shout came. "Hostiles, to our north, one thousand metres. Small vehicle. Four on board, heading this way. They've got a top mounted gun."

"Fire when you can hit them," the major ordered.

He radioed the Warthogs, "Firebird, hostiles to our north, one thousand metres out."

"Copy that, Recovery. Give me fifteen seconds."

Fifteen seconds on the button, and there was a huge plume of dust and flame in the area of the incoming vehicle, followed by the tell-tale whine of the Gatling gun burping, and the whistle as the Warthog came out of its dive.

The radio kicked out, "Recovery. The target is dust."

"Copy that, Firebird. Thanks. The beers are on me when we get back."

"Just glad to oblige, guys."

They took up positions and waited for the helicopter. Forty-five minutes later, "Recovery. Firebird One, copy?"

"Firebird One. Recovery, send."

"Your transport has turned back with engine trouble. No Angel for two hours. We're nearly bingo. We'll get back ASAP."

"Recovery, copy that. Don't be too long guys. Out."

The major turned to Bob, "We've got to get away from here, Bob, get your guy ready."

The major got his men sorted. Dave carried the suitcase.

They set off towards the Saudi border on foot, but first they set charges on the helicopter and blew it up. It was a three-day trek to the border, but they were hopeful the Angel would be back to pick them up soon.

46

They set off in single file across the desert, in the opposite direction to where the hostile's vehicle came from, working on the probability that more would follow. Without air-cover for a while they wouldn't stand much chance.

Dave didn't know whether to cry or shout when he thought about Poppy, but he knew one thing, he was going to get a few of the bastards. He bottled his anger up, pushing it to the back of his mind, he couldn't afford to take his eye off the ball, more so now Steve, Harry and Poppy were all dead.

They stopped near a small oasis, basically a pile of rocks with a few bushes growing around it. It was big enough though to cast some shade, enough for all of them to rest under, away from the heat of the unrelenting sun for a while. It had a shallow puddle at the bottom, so at least they could cool off while they rested.

The major took the watch as they took a short rest, it wasn't to be though, a few minutes later he brought them up to alert.

"Hostiles, two kilometres back along our track." The major turned to his men, "OK, guys, we've got two choices: run or fight? If we run, we're out in the open and they'll mow us down. If we stay, we have cover and we could probably last until the helicopter arrives."

He looked at each one of his men, and each one of them said, "Fight".

"OK, take up positions between the rocks."

"Sir," one of them said. 'If we can take them out without damaging one of the vehicles, we could be home by tonight."

The major looked at Dave, "Dave, you're in charge of getting one of those, OK?"

"Yes, boss."

Just then, the radio spluttered in to life. "Recovery, this is Firebird One, back on target. What's your status, over?"

"Firebird One. Two vehicles approaching us from the north. We're in the small rock outcrop."

"Copy that, Recovery. Do you want us to take them out?"

"We'd like to take one of the transports, if that's possible, over."

"Recovery, standby."

A minute later, there was a series of puffs in the sand, then an explosion, followed by a plume of smoke near the approaching hostiles. They all heard the whine of the Warthog again, and smiled. The vehicles stopped approaching and then nothing, no movement from the area.

"Recovery. Firebird One, over?"

"Firebird, send?"

"Recovery. No movement on the ground. You're clear to go in."

"Copy that, Firebird One."

The major and Dave approached the vehicles, five men in each, all dead.

"Firebird One, Recovery. The target has been neutralised."

"Copy that, Recovery."

When Dave heard the response from the U.S. Air Force pilot it had an edge of sadness in it. War stinks! he thought.

The major turned and signalled in the direction of their temporary rock fort.

The vehicles were two American style jeeps with machine guns mounted on the back. They had to change two tyres but they were good to go. The Warthogs had strafed the area with fragmentation rockets, sending white-hot shrapnel in all directions, designed to kill soft targets, hence the dead men and punctured tyres.

Bob Explained to the major, "We're going back to Baghdad, we've got unfinished business."

"Is that wise?" he questioned. "You'll be on your own, your job is done here."

Dave looked at Bob and nodded. Bob knew what Dave was thinking.

They took spare ammo and rations. The major said they'd be home by nightfall and didn't need it. Bob and Dave set off back towards Baghdad, they had a job to finish, and Dave wanted payback for Poppy and Harry anyway.

47

As they started back down the tracks they'd walked along, they passed the hole where the crashed Chinook lay. There were a few natives hanging around but not much to see. They'd put enough explosives down to make Harry proud, he would have been smiling at them from wherever he'd ended up.

They stopped and checked the wreckage, said a few words for the lads. Dave said goodbye to Poppy and they set off.

"When we're done here I'm calling it quits. I'm too bloody old for all this running around!" Bob sighed.

"It's not as if we've got to work for a living anymore, is it?" Dave said, smiling. "I'm going to go abroad somewhere, buy a villa with a pool. Get laid lots."

"You ain't changed."

"And I never will."

"Amen to that," Bob said.

As they got closer to Baghdad they decided to leave the jeep, covering it with rubbish, they continued the rest of the way on foot.

They'd taken the hostiles' clothes so they could mingle with the locals. Bob had remembered what Anshu had told them. They walked right into the heart of Baghdad, unhampered.

Their first port of call was Anshu, he needed to do a lot of talking if he was going to see the next day.

They found him in the coffee shop, he wasn't exactly pleased to see them! The bastard nearly choked on his coffee. Bob grabbed him by the collar and pulled him up. Anshu pissed himself there and then.

"OK, *Marhaba*, my old friend," he spluttered.

The people sitting down with him stared. Bob pushed him out on to the street, pulling him around the corner to the alleyway next to the shops. They reckoned on having about two minutes before they had the whole of the Iraqi militia breathing down their necks.

"OK, you piece of shit!" Bob spat. "You've got one life left so make it count. Who are you working for?"

"OK, my friends," he said, looking at both of them. He was starting to sweat like a cheap whore. "They said they would kill my children!"

"Who's they?" Bob growled.

"OK, you've already killed some of them. They were the people near the lake, in the house."

With this, Bob raised his right knee and planted it in Anshu's bollocks, it made a dull thud, Anshu dropped like a stone, puked up his coffee and whatever part of a goat he'd eaten for breakfast. Dave picked him up off the floor and was just about to have a go, when Bob said, "Wait."

Dave followed Bob's gaze. There were several men walking towards them.

"Follow my lead," Bob said. He put his arms around Anshu and started talking to him out loud, like a close friend, "Thank you for helping us. The British and American people will love you forever and will always be in your debt." He took a wad of notes out of his pocket and shoved them into Anshu's hand. Anshu tried to give them back, but Bob and Dave had already moved off, running around the corner. As they turned the bend they heard Anshu scream.

"I hope they chop his balls off," Dave smiled.

"It's the kids I feel sorry for," Bob huffed, "they're the ones who'll suffer."

"Fuck them," Dave cursed. "What about the kids Harry and Lucy would have had, then there's me and Poppy."

Bob nodded, "Let's go home."

They disappeared before anyone could stop them. Finding their way back to the jeep and driving straight for the border, non-stop.

48

They landed back at Heathrow, where Lucy was waiting for them. She looked great, but her eyes looked lost and sad.

Bob gave her a squeeze. He started to tell her about what happened to Harry, Lucy stopped him and shook her head, "Don't, I don't want to know how he died."

He gave her another hug and they headed for the car.

Lucy had hired a limo to drive the three of them back to the place in London where she was staying. She was enjoying the new side of life that money brings.

They got the driver to drop them a couple of streets away from the address. Bob said, "Call me paranoid, but I don't trust them."

"I know what you mean, mate," Dave said, looking around.

As they walked to the house, Lucy said, "It's been quiet since I arrived. I haven't seen anyone or even felt as if I was being watched."

"I'm glad you're settling in, Sis, but let's still be on our guard, aye."

Once they were in the porch, Dave looked at Bob, he waited for Lucy to go through before saying anything. "There's a white van at the top of the road."

"Yes I know. I clocked it as we turned on to the street."

"Shall I go and say hello?"

"We'll both go down there later, Dave. Let's get cleaned up and have a cup of tea first."

Later that evening, Dave looked to see if the van was still there, but it had gone.

"I'll go and recce the area," Bob said. "I'll be back in about half an hour."

"OK, mate. Give me a ring if you catch anything."

The couple in the white van had heard the conversation and driven off shortly after to change vehicles, swapping all their equipment to a different coloured van. They had returned and parked at the other end of the street. Bob walked straight past them, not paying the van any attention.

When he got back later, he said, "Have you seen this garden, it looks lovely." They both went and looked at the flowers and the vegetable patch.

"They've change the van to a blue one," Bob smiled. "They must think we're stupid."

"OK, what now?"

"Lucy! We've got to get her safe. Somehow they knew she was coming here."

"Shit! Can she go back home?"

"They've probably already got it re-bugged up to the eyeballs, but at least she can go and stay with her friend."

They went back in the house, Bob went upstairs to the loo. A few moments later, Bob shouted for Lucy, asking her if she could come and give him a hand with the bed. Once she was up there, he put his finger up to his mouth and whispered, "Shush!"

Lucy's face dropped, she started to go glassy-eyed, then shook her head and nodded.

Bob hugged her, whispering into her ear, "Lucy we have to get you home, they're staking this place out. They must have followed you and bugged the place when you were out. They would have already replanted the bugs back home but at least you can go and stay with your friend."

"OK, when?"

"Tonight."

They decided to go out for dinner, going to the local pub. It was crowded and noisy.

"Lucy, are the keys still safe?" Bob asked.

"Yes."

"OK, go home and post them to MI6."

"What?" she said. "They didn't want them back."

"I know, but things are changing fast, plus they have the suitcase now."

"What's the address?"

"Just put, 'For the attention of MI6' on the address and write Free Post on the envelope. Put a note inside that just says, "This goes with the suitcase."

"OK."

"Dave and I are going to pay a call on a man in a van, but first, we're going to get you on the train."

* * * * *

When they got back from the station, they walked straight to the van. They were waiting for them with the doors open. They got in the front and waited for the driver to get in.

"Buckle up!" he said, sarcastically.

"Piss off!" Bob retorted.

The driver shrugged his shoulders, got his belt on and just said, "Your life!"

The drive took forty minutes, ending up at an address in Hammersmith. It looked like any suburban house you'd expect to find in that part of London.

When they got out, the driver pointed at the front door, "In there," he directed. He waited for them to get out and walk up the stairs, and then drove off.

Bob knocked. The door was opened straight away, and they were led down a hall and through a door to a room on the right. The only furniture present were four chairs around a table. They were set in the middle of the room, under a single light bulb that hung with no light shade.

Dave looked at Bob and smiled, "You've got to be kidding, right!" It was just like something out of a spy book.

They were looking around at the room, talking about the events leading up to that point when the door opened, and Steve walked in.

Bob and Dave just sat and stared, their mouths opening and closing.

"Careful guys, this place has mice!" Steve tried to joke.

Bob and Dave looked at each other. Bob speaking first "Steve! What the hell's going on?"

"You cunt!" is all Dave said.

"Nice to see you again too, Dave" he looked at Bob, "Bob."

Dave got up to punch him, but sat straight down again, he was gobsmacked.

The door opened, the older of the two men who had spoken to them over dinner, came in. "Good evening," he said, sitting next to Steve. "Steve here works for us".

He must have read Dave's mind, because he answered his first question.

"You're probably wondering how he's alive! Well we did a little, how do you say, switcheroo. Finding a body to put in his place was easy, there are so many wannabe fighters in Iraq these days, and in the dark we knew you'd misidentify him. As you went on to get the safe, which we knew you would, we got rid of the body. Simple really."

They both got up and went for Steve, but the man pulled a handgun. "I'll gladly put holes in both of you! You've caused me nothing but headache since Steve here, suggested your little gang. Sit! Now!"

They sat slowly, locking eyes with Steve. He just smiled.

"I'm sorry to hear about Harry, he was unlucky, he was a good man."

"What about Poppy?" Dave said. "What was she then?"

"Poppy. Sgt Davies," the man said, "was killed in the line of duty, along with the other four soldiers. Their deaths would have happened anyway, even if someone else was doing the work for us. That helicopter went down because of enemy ground action, not because of what your group did." He looked at us, "Now where are the keys?"

They ignored the question and looked back at Steve.

"You set us up, you bastard?" Bob growled.

"No, you set yourselves up!" he said, pointing his finger at both of them. "You're nothing but a bunch of greedy mercenaries. Did you really think you could send a load of diamonds through the post and nobody would notice? You really are incredibly stupid. It's your greed that set you up, Bob." Steve continued, "John went in to find the suitcase. Remember him? The one who became ill? He's fine by the way. We knew roughly where it was, but we needed confirmation. Then we needed to get someone to recover the bomb for us, someone who wasn't employed by us, the British government. You fitted in just right."

"You bastard, Harry died because of you."

The other man spoke, "Bob. What we didn't bargain on, was you not finding it. Instead, you found the bloody diamonds." He repeated the first question, "Now we need the keys, where are they?"

"Piss off!" Bob shouted, curling his fists. Dave could feel the tension in the air, he sensed Bob was about to kick off.

"Now, now, Bob," the man said, pointing his weapon at him. "If you want to enjoy the money you have while you're still young, you'll tell me where the keys are or you'll spend a long time in prison, and your sister too!"

"You touch Lucy and I'll do what should have happened out there."

The man got up and walked to the door, Steve followed him like a little puppy.

"Heel boy," Dave smirked.

"Think about it, guys," Steve said, ignoring Dave. "We needed someone to find this suitcase; you guys fitted the profile: civilians, mercenaries, and greedy. Perfect," he said, smiling. "The fact that only Harry died amazed us really, we expected only one of you to come out of this, if you were lucky. Now the rescue team, Poppy and the other soldiers; that was always going to happen, even if it

wasn't you, not that they were going to die. That's just unfortunate, but they would have gone in, even if it was with another group. If you'd all been killed in that house, no one would have ever known about it and we would have recruited another bunch of losers."

"What now?" Bob said. "We have the keys. You want the keys. We give you the keys. You let us go and leave us alone."

"Not quite," the other man said. "You see, nobody knows who you are, so nobody would miss you. But, you did us a great service by getting rid of those rogue agents. That's why you're still alive now. Shall we say that alone is a thank you from us to you, of course us, being the British government? If it was up to me, I would have had you shot." He looked at them as if he'd just scraped them off the bottom of his shoe. "Now, here's the next problem, you know about the suitcase, so now what do we do?"

He looked at them, and said, "Dave, Bob, you're both ex-forces, you both left the army for one reason or another and as far as anyone knows, you're has-beens, invisible, forgotten. But, for arguments' sake, let's say, between you and me, Her Majesty's government and these four walls that we let you back in, not the army but as MI6 operatives. Think about it."

They looked at each other, not believing what they were hearing.

"I thought we were already working for you?"

The man looked at Steve worried, then changed his expression straight away.

Bob said, "What about Lucy?"

"She won't have to do anything," he said. "She's free to enjoy the rest of her life, and her money."

"Do we have a choice?" Dave asked.

The man just smiled and left, leaving them in no question that they didn't.

"Clocks ticking, guys," Steve said, turning to follow him out.

The other man waited a few moments, then smiled, he said, "Right, welcome to the club. We'll be in touch."

They closed the door quietly behind them.

They waited a few moments before speaking.

"Bastards," Bob said.

"MI6, who would have thought it, me, a spy," Dave quipped.

In the hall they passed Steve and his boss, they were speaking quietly.

"We'll be in touch about the keys, soon," Steve said, as Bob and Dave left the house.

Turning left at the bottom of the steps, the transport that brought them was nowhere to be seen. They looked for a taxi to get them to the station. "Dave," Bob said, without looking at him. "Something ain't right."

Dave nodded as they walked away from the house.

"That was too easy, and what was with the room?" Bob said.

They found a cab, and asked the driver to take them to Kings Cross. Next stop, Docking.

As soon as they arrived, they dropped everything and searched the house, removing any devices they found and stamping on them.

They rang Lucy.

The next day, the three of them were sitting around the table, having eaten another of Lucy's amazing breakfasts. They were telling her what had happened. She couldn't believe they were set up. The rest of the morning was spent going over everything again, trying to make sense of it all.

Two days later, they got a phone call from Steve, "Hi guys," he said. "Where are the keys?"

"Nice to hear from you, too," Bob said, sarcastically. "Yes, we had a nice trip back, thank you for asking. Now go fuck yourself!"

"Now, now, Bob, there's no need for all that aggression. We're going to be working together now, so let's pretend we're friends for now, OK?"

"Fuck you!" he repeated.

"OK, have it your way. A courier will call at your house in one hour, give him the keys. We'll speak again when we have them. Got that?"

"Fuck you!"

"I'll take that as a yes."

Bob put the phone down, and said "Let's go for a walk."

Lucy walked behind with her head down, she was crying.

"They keep asking for those bloody keys," Bob said. "I think it's safe to assume they don't know where they are." Bob asked, "Lucy, did you send the keys?"

"Yes. But I thought it would be better to send it by private courier, straight to the MI6 building in London. He rang me back to confirm they'd received them that night."

"Good thinking." Bob turned back to Dave, "Just as I thought, Steve isn't playing on our side."

"What?"

"Think about it, Dave. They delivered us to a place in Hammersmith, set up a room in a house, now they keep asking us for those keys. If they were straight they would have known about them the moment they were delivered."

He was right. "OK, what now?"

"We need a safe contact," replied Bob.

"I've got an old mate, Nat, in the police, but he's in Wales. He was in the army with me. Pulled me out of the rubble when I was blown up. I can give him a call."

"Good thinking," Bob nodded.

"What about the courier?"

"We'll give him two different keys, we'll take a chance they don't know what they look like and then we'll get the hell out of here!"

They'd used UPS, so Bob wrapped two bike lock keys in a bubble bag. After the courier had left, Dave went into Hunstanton to find an Internet café. He didn't know Nat's mobile number, but they kept in touch via email.

'Nat. Dave. I need your help. ASAP'.

That should do it, Dave hoped.

He didn't have to wait long for a reply. Dave sent him the number for a pay phone he'd passed down the road from the café.

'Ring me in ten minutes. Important!'

* * * * *

"Hello?" Dave answered.

"Dave, how you doing?"

"Nat," he smiled. "I'm good, mate. Thanks for getting back so quickly."

"It looked kind of urgent. What's the problem?"

"I need some information."

"OK. I'm not promising anything until you tell me what you need."

"That'll do, mate," he said, thanking him. "What do you know about MI6?"

There was silence for a few moments, before Nat said anything. "Bloody hell, Dave! What have you done now?"

"I just need to know how you'd check out if someone is MI6."

"Ask them," he said, sarcastically.

"No! Seriously, Nat. How can I find out?"

"OK, I'll have to talk to my boss, give me ten minutes."

"Cheers, mate."

"Have we got a name?"

"He calls himself Steve Graham."

"OK, mate, I'll see what I can do."

Dave waited. He was busy looking around for anyone or anything that looked wrong. He was about to walk off when the phone rang. He jumped. *Bloody hell that was quick,* he thought. It wasn't the pay phone, it was his mobile. He looked at the caller ID, it was Bob. Dave told him what Nat had said.

Bob explained, "Change of plan, we'll come to you now. We'll meet you by the pick-up point for the seal boat ride. We'll be there in twenty minutes."

"OK, just waiting for a call back."

A few moments later, the pay phone shrilled into life, "Dave."

"What you got for me, Nat?"

"You must be in some serious shit, my phone's gone crazy with people ringing me, all asking why I want to know about this Steve bloke."

"Shit, what did you tell them?"

"There's nothing I could tell them, you just gave me a name. They want to meet you, now."

"Shit. OK, give them my phone number, I'll text you it."

"Dave, what have you been doing?"

"Nat, you don't want to know."

"Try me."

Dave filled Nat in on what had happened about the diamonds, the kidnap, and the dead agents and how they ended up back over in Baghdad, and now this.

Nat stayed quiet the whole time, when he'd finished, he said, "Jesus, Dave. Listen, do whatever they say, these people are big. I ain't going to be able to pull you out of this one."

"I owe you again, Nat. When this is over we'll meet for a pint."

"Sounds good, take care."

Dave hung up, sent the text and waited. Not for long though, unknown caller came up on his phone. He took a deep breath and answered, "Hello."

"Mr. Roberts?"

"Yes. Who's this?" The voice was very English, very proper.

"My name's Peterson, MI6. I think we need to talk, don't you?"

Dave thought for a second, shit that was quick. "How do I know you are who you say you are?"

"I'm not here to play games with you, Mr. Roberts, but if you want proof: your friend PC Nathan Parks made an interesting enquiry. I was informed straight away. Enough?"

That was good enough for Dave. Peterson gave Dave an address in Cambridge.

"I can be there in three hours," Dave said.

"I'll look forward to seeing you, Mr. Roberts. Bring your friends with you." He said the last bit as if it was an order, not a request.

Dave hung up just as Bob and Lucy appeared. He filled them in on the phone call and they set off. They walked up to the centre and rang for a taxi, deciding it was too far for Lucy to drive. They had to wait about twenty minutes before the car arrived. When they gave the taxi driver the address, he looked at them, and said, "You're having a laugh?"

Bob got his wallet out, paid him a hundred pounds up front, "Get us there in less than three hours and there will be another two hundred on top."

"Pay me the two hundred up-front and the hundred when we get there and you're on."

Bob didn't argue. He passed him another hundred pounds.

Two and half hours later, and they were getting out at the address in Cambridge, with one happy taxi driver who was now three hundred pounds richer.

Bob gave him another two hundred on top. "You haven't see us, OK?"

"Who?" he smiled.

Not bad for a couple of hours work, Dave thought.

50

The address they'd been given was for the Magdalene College in Cambridge. They entered through a pair of big iron gates, and headed along a gravel path towards a small grassy area.

They were greeted by a smartly dressed man in a black gown. Dave mused at the fact that he looked like the stereotypical professor: tall, lanky, very pale, slicked back hair with a big pointy nose with a pair of glasses hanging on a piece of cord around his neck. Dave estimated his age at about the late fifties. He also spoke with a very British accent.

"Mr. Roberts?" he asked.

Dave nodded. He was about to introduce the others when the professor abruptly said, "Follow me." He stopped, looked at Lucy, as if he'd only just see her, and said, "Madam, if you would be so kind."

Lucy smiled and fell in behind him.

He walked as if he was late for a meeting, fast with big strides. They followed him around the right-hand edge of the building, skirting between the river bank and a row of three terraced houses. Showing them up to the middle house, he held the door open, ushering the three of them in.

Inside, they were led up a set of stairs lined with old paintings, of what Dave could only assume were former University Deans. They were led along a long hall lined with more portraits, the only lighting coming from little brass lamps protruding from the wall above each frame.

Lucy glanced at a few of them, stopping at one she recognised. "This one looks like my old music teacher, Mr, Williams," she said.

"That is indeed Mr. Williams. He was very influential in the production of the fifth verse of the national anthem. It was a sad day when he passed away!" the professor said, a tinge of sadness in his voice.

He stopped the three of them at a group of chairs in an alcove, "Please sit." He disappeared through a big wooden door.

As they sat, Dave thought, *Jeez, it's like being back at school and waiting outside the head teacher's office because you'd been caught smoking behind the bike sheds.* He looked at Bob and Lucy, judging by the look on their faces they must have been thinking along the same lines.

The professor reappeared, he looked agitated, as if he'd just been ticked off about something. He ushered them into the room he'd just exited.

The room definitely looked out of place with the rest of the building they'd just walked through. The furniture was modern and new. The only old piece of furniture was the bookcase along two of the walls, it was crammed with books. Along one of the other walls was an array of files. As Dave scanned them, he could see some of them dated back to the First World War, others were only six months old. There was a large window on the fourth wall, it overlooked the river and the park. In the distance stood a few very large old oak trees in a grassed meadow area. Dave could see a few picnickers enjoying the sunshine.

On his desk was a laptop, open. The man who was sitting behind it looked to be in his later years, *probably about seventy, seventy-fivish*, Dave thought. The man ignored his visitors.

As they stood, waiting for the man to look up, three men entered. They hadn't seen them in the corridor, but as Bob and Dave turned to look at them, they were grabbed and forced down on the ground. They were handcuffed and made to sit on the floor. "Don't move, guys, OK?" The man behind the desk didn't even budge.

"What the hell's going on?" Bob cursed.

"In good time, Mr. Harris. In good time. Now, please, for your sake, shut up and listen!"

"Lucy, are you OK?" Bob asked.

"I won't tell you again, Mr. Harris."

"Fuck you!"

The man nodded at the guy behind Bob. He walked around and stood in front of Bob, picked him up by his hair and punched him in the gut. Bob keeled over, gasping for breath. Lucy screamed.

“Now, I could have you killed and thrown in the river outside if you want, or you can be quiet and listen. What’s it to be, Mr. Harris?”

Bob groaned, he was straining against his restraints.

The man looked at Lucy, “Miss Harris. May I call you Lucy? I trust you had a pleasant trip?”

“Piss off!” she snapped.

Dave giggled, Bob let out a little snigger, but moaned again. When Dave looked at Bob he was smiling at her.

The man behind the desk swung his chair around and looked out the window behind him. He said, “Very well, straight to business. My name’s Peterson. I’m going to ask you three simple questions. Answer them and you’re free to go.” He turned back to face them and leant forward, “Mess with me and I’ll hand you over to my friends here. Understand? Now, who are you working for? Where are the keys? And how do you know our Mr. Steven Graham? See, not difficult are they. Answers please?”

There was silence from the three of them as they looked at each other. Dave wasn’t going to say anything and he knew Bob wasn’t, but then Lucy coughed, “We’re not working for anyone.”

“Lucy, don’t say anything,” Bob cut in.

Peterson got up and stood at the window. Looking out, he waited a few moments. “Please carry on, Lucy.”

Lucy nodded and looked at Bob. She smiled lovingly at him and started again. “We’re not working for anyone. I think if you thought we were, you would have come and got us, not asked us to come to you.”

Peterson sat down, smiled and looked very slowly at them, as if he was looking for the lie. Leaning forward, his elbows on the desk, his hands under his chin, as if he was praying, he said, “Thank you, Lucy. Now where are the keys?”

Bob said again, “Don’t say anything else, Lucy, They’ll kill us if they know where the keys are.”

Peterson looked at all three of them, “Robert, Lucy, David. I won’t kill any of you, it’s not in my ... in this country’s interest to kill any of you. This isn’t the film industry, you’re not in some adventure spy film. On the contrary, we plan on using the three of you more in the future. Let’s just say you’ve become... interesting to certain people. Now please, Lucy, where are the keys?”

Lucy said something Dave and Bob hadn’t thought to ask, “Ring your HQ, then come and speak to us.”

Peterson looked at her, paused, and picked up the phone, “Get me Howard.” He waited about thirty seconds, “Howard, are there any packages waiting for us?” He listened to the reply, “Yes I’ll wait.”

He looked back at Lucy, and warned, “I hope you’re not playing games with me, young lady.” He put the phone back to his ear, “Two keys. Are they the ones? OK. Thank you, Howard.”

He looked back at Lucy, “Thank you, Lucy.” He looked at Bob, “Your sister just saved you from, well, whatever the gentlemen behind you do to recover

information from people like you.” With this, Peterson nodded at the three men. Bob and Dave tensed, ready for whatever they were going to dish out, but all they did was pull them up off the floor and sat them on the couch.

Peterson nodded at the man behind Lucy, who bent down, released her and stepped back.

Turning back to Bob and Dave, “Gentlemen. The suitcase has been...” he paused while he got up, he went to turn to look out the window but stopped, “Release them please, gentlemen.” While they did this he carried on speaking. “The suitcase that was recovered by your little group, has been lost, again. I, that is 'we' the British government, can't let it fall into the wrong hands, again. Do you understand?”

The three of them looked at each other.

“What about Major Anderson,” Bob asked, “and the others. Are they OK?”

“Unfortunately not. I'm afraid they were all killed in an ambush. We have good intelligence that this Steven Graham was involved. He's been spotted in Baghdad.”

Bob looked at Dave, “Anshu. I knew that meeting was all wrong.”

Peterson looked at Bob, “Who's Anshu? And what meeting?”

Bob looked at Dave and shrugged. “Anshu was a contact Harry used when he was over in Baghdad, serving. We were using him when we went over last week. But he disappeared when your lot showed up. We met with Steve and his boss. We thought Steve had been killed the first time we went to look for the safe. He got hit by shrapnel and was killed when a munitions cell was attacked, or so we thought. It turns out he's working for you.”

“I can assure you, Mr. Harris, this Mr. Graham isn't employed by, and never has been employed by the British government. He's what we term a terrorist. And a very dangerous one at that.

“Bugger, we had him in front of us,” Bob said.

Peterson took a photo out of his drawer and showed it to them, “Is this the other man?”

Bob took one look at it and nodded.

“And you say you met with him recently! Can I ask where? ”

“Two days ago, in London.”

“Are you sure it was him?”

“Yes! Why?”

“You're very fortunate to be alive.” He looked at them, and said, “All three of you! I feel the next time you meet him, you won't be so fortunate. We've been following Mr Graham's partner now for four years, waiting for him to enter this country and make his move. He was the mastermind behind several bombings: a number of them killing, in total, several hundred people, including women and children. He's been seen beheading Canadian soldiers and raping female soldiers before cutting their genitals to pieces.”

When he said this, Lucy put her hands to her mouth and gasped.

“Would you like a drink of water, Lucy? I'm sorry you heard that, but this man is very dangerous. A lot of governments have been looking for him for a while.”

Lucy shook her head.

“He was also looking good for a failed attempt to kill the Royal family. You won't hear about that on the news, and everyone you ask will deny it ever happened.” He

put the photo away. "Now, this Anshu sounds interesting. We knew he was helping the allied forces up to about four years ago, then he disappeared. We thought he'd been killed. I hope I get the chance to meet him!"

"Not if I get to him first," Dave growled. "Would you settle for a piece of him? I could always bring you his hand!"

"That won't be necessary, Dave, thank you. We've known about the suitcase, but not its location. The keys we had no idea where they were, but now we do." He looked to Lucy, "Thank you again, Lucy." He nodded and the three men left the room.

"Someone will contact your little group. They'll give you your next task. Until we have the suitcase, you three are in danger, so I suggest you lay low, until we contact you."

Peterson looked at his laptop and acted as if they weren't in the room. They sat there for a few moments wondering what to do, when he looked up, and said, "Dismissed."

Now he sounded like my old headmaster, Dave shuddered.

They left the way they came in. The professor followed them to the gates then walked back. "What, not even a 'thank you for coming'," Dave said.

"Let's find a pub," Bob suggested.

51

The next morning, over breakfast, they decided to go sightseeing. When they'd finished with Peterson they thought they'd stay in Cambridge. The threat of being in danger didn't worry them. They all thought, if it happens it happens, we'll deal with it then.

Bob and Lucy were talking about the day before when Dave got down to the table. Bob looked up, "Sleep well, mate?"

"Like a log, you?"

"Same as."

Lucy chipped in, "What do we do now?"

"Well we're alive, so we wait for them to contact us and then see."

They looked at each other for a few seconds and sat nodding.

"Right, I fancy a punt and a pint," Dave smiled.

"Sounds good to me, Dave." Bob looked at Lucy, "Sis?"

"I've never punted before, it sounds like fun. The pint though, I'll up you to a bottle of Champagne?"

"You're on," Dave said, rubbing his hands together.

They set off towards the river. In the back of Dave's mind he was thinking, *what the hell have we let ourselves in for?*

* * * * *

Lucy loved the punting, even having a go herself. Dave tried but kept losing the pole in the water, a couple of times nearly joining it. Bob was a natural, guiding

the punt up and down the river as if he'd been doing it all his life, Lucy and Dave sat back and let the scenery pass by.

After an hour, they pulled up alongside a small jetty, sat back and enjoyed the sun. Bob went off, and much to Lucy's delight, brought back a couple of bottles of Champagne and some glasses.

They toasted old friends.

After a few minutes, Lucy looked at both of them, and said, "I liked Harry. We could have hit it off, you know, got married and had a bunch of kids."

Bob looked at Dave and shuddered.

"Oh well." She raised her glass, "Harry, I'll miss you. Goodbye."

With this Bob and Dave raised their glasses, "To Harry."

* * * * *

The next day, they made their way back to Docking. They'd been there long enough to get the kettle on when the phone rang.

Lucy picked it up and said, "Oh."

Bob and Dave stopped what they were doing and looked at her, she'd gone as white as a sheet. "Peterson," she mouthed at them.

They sat at the table and waited for her to finish.

"OK, I'm ready." She started to write the instructions down. When she'd finished she hung up and joined them.

"Well?" Bob asked.

She pushed the piece of paper over, he looked at it, "Shit!"

He slid it over to Dave, as he read it, Bob said, "Lucy, you don't have to go through with this."

"It's OK," she said. "I said I'm in when I told him about the keys and I meant it."

The message said they were to go to Heathrow and fly to Abu Dhabi, where rooms at the Millennium Hotel had been reserved for them. When they got there someone from the British Embassy would meet them. They would come to Bob's room to give them their briefing.

"Looks like we're going to get our tans topped up, again!" Dave grimaced.

52

When they arrived in Abu Dhabi, the first thing that welcomed them as they got off the aircraft was the heat blowing in from the desert. It was so intense they had to turn their heads away, it was like opening an oven door!

As Dave walked down the stairs, beads of sweat instantly formed on his back, soaking through his top. Here we go again! he thought.

"How do people live in these temperatures all the time?" Lucy asked, fanning her face with her boarding pass.

"If you look around, Luce," Bob said. "You'll see they don't stand out in it, they're all in their air-conditioned cars or tucked away in the shade somewhere. It's only us tourists who venture out with hardly any clothes on!"

"I don't know about you guys," Lucy commented, "but I could do with an ice cold bottle of water right now!"

"With you on that one," Dave said.

When they reached the terminal, they headed straight for the bar. Dave explained to her how the temperature changed so drastically between the day and the night. "You'll need to have a jumper handy, especially at night. Once the sun goes down it gets bloody cold."

She looked at him, wondering whether he was kidding!

"Trust me on this one."

The heat brought back the memories of what happened the last couple of times Dave was there. Some good, some not so good. As he looked across the airfield from the bar, he thought of Poppy, she had so much life left in her, but now she was dead. Bob slapped Dave on the shoulder, "Don't do it to yourself, mate. We all miss them. It wasn't our fault, it was the bloody system!"

"It still hurts though!"

"I know, mate, I know! Come on, let's get to the hotel."

When they got there, they checked in, went to their rooms and freshened up, then met up in Bob's room. They sat and chatted while they waited for the contact to arrive. They didn't have to wait long. There was a knock at the door, which even though they were expecting it, still made them jump. What Dave didn't expect was what walked in.

She looked about nineteen years old, slim, not anorexic slim, but model thin. She was dressed in a smart, cream two-piece suit, expertly cut to perfectly show off her figure. Her hair was long and black, and gathered at the back in a ponytail, which came down to just above her waist. This would have shown her face perfectly, if it wasn't for the designer shades she had on. At least a hundred and eighty centimetres tall, wearing a pair of red eight centimetre high heels. She looked amazing!

As she came over, she took her shades off and held out her hand. Dave found himself looking closer at her hair, and there it was, blonde eyebrows and blonde roots. But what a stunner!

She introduced herself as Diane. She opened up the file she had with her and immediately went on the attack, "Problem, Mr. Roberts?"

"No, no, just admiring your hair. Loving the black look," he said, smiling.

"It's that blonde-brain thinking of yours, which got you into this mess, Mr. Roberts. The advantage I have over you is, I can dye my hair again with no effect to the way I play the game. You, on the other hand, would have to go through some very expensive surgery and take a considerable amount of time to recover. From what I've read about you, Mr. Roberts, it probably still wouldn't be enough to cure you."

Ow! Dave thought. *I love this woman!*

Bob looked at him, "I think you just got owned, mate!"

Dave sat down, smiled, and asked, "Will you marry me?"

Bob looked away and shook his head, Lucy laughed. Diane looked at Dave and moved her hand through her hair. She turned to Lucy and Bob.

“All the details for you are here,” she said, handing them a small file. “Read through them. If you have any questions ...” She looked at Dave, and said, “Sensible questions, my number’s on the back.” She bid them goodnight and left.

Bob and Lucy looked at Dave, as if to say, “What the hell was that about?”

“What?” Dave said, innocently.

That night, over a few Cokes, the three of them studied the files she’d left. There were maps of the area and the names of a few contacts they could use to get information. They decided to avoid any help from the locals, especially after their last so-called friend, Anshu, had been so friendly!

After they'd read through everything, they settled down for the night. They had an early start the next day.

53

After breakfast, they decided to hire a car, a Range Rover. It was the same model as they had before, which reminded Dave, *I still need to send off the road trip report to Jeremy Clarkson from the last time we used one over here.*

They set off to find this suitcase.

* * * * *

They put Lucy on watch, Bob and Dave had seen it all before so a fresh pair of eyes would spot things they would take for granted, knowing she’d point out everything, from stray camels to people. Bob kept looking up into the sky but this time Dave knew what he was looking for.

“Seen any yet?” he asked.

“Nope, but I know they’re watching us.”

“Who’s watching us?” Lucy enquired.

“Our friends,” Bob said. “They like to keep an eye on us to make sure we’re not just offing with the money.”

Lucy looked at them, confused, and then looked up.

They filled her in on the UAV’s, which patrol the skies, and how they'd been able to call for help the last time, by waving at them.

“You won’t see them though,” Bob smiled, as Lucy peered into the blue. “They fly too high to be seen.” She carried on looking anyway.

They took the legal way into Iraq, stopping overnight in Kuwait before starting the trip to Baghdad. They set off at midday, stopping in Hafar AL Batin to sightsee, just in case they'd picked up a tail. They tried to give the impression they were tourists following route eighty-five to Arar. When they left they took their time; the trip to Arar taking two days to cover the border fence road. They headed up the twenty-two to Karbala. They made out they were doing a program on climate change, taking soil samples for the background commentary for when they returned to Ireland. They’d been supplied with all the documents for the border patrol for the necessary checks to get in. They also had plenty of dinars!

Once they were on route twenty-two, they decided to visit the house where the first meeting took place, near Habbaniyah Lake. This took two days to reach,

stopping en route every twenty or thirty kilometres to take samples. They wanted to see if the people they'd met before had left any clues. All they found were bullet casings and bloodstains, nothing else, not even bodies, so they left and drove on to Karbala.

They booked in to a hotel for the night, they didn't intend on staying long. If necessary, they'd move on to another one the next night and so on until they got to Baghdad. The night went with no surprises so the next morning they headed straight for their target.

When they got there, Bob suggested they go straight to see their old mate, Anshu.

Dave looked at Bob. "Why?"

"He might feel he owes us some goodwill."

"I wouldn't count on it. For a start, if he knew we were still alive he'd probably want to see us hang for what we did."

"Nah, he wants to make it up to us, besides, we could clear his name with the locals."

After a late lunch, they set off towards the café Anshu used to hang out at. When they got there, Bob and Dave couldn't believe their eyes, there was Anshu, chatting as if nothing was wrong!

As they sat in the car looking at him, he must have sensed something was up. He looked straight at the car and smiled, then looked down again to drink his tea. The cup stopped half way to his mouth, you could almost hear his brain clanking away, working out what he'd just looked at, or working out what he thought he'd just looked at!

He slowly lifted his head, his eyes widened and the tea he was drinking dropped from his hands as if he'd seen a ghost. It was at this point Bob said, "I think we've found the bastard who owns the suitcase."

"What do you mean?"

"He was hoping we were dead. The last people he ever expected to see again have just walked back into his life. Basically, by being here, we're saying, "Hi mate, how's it hanging? You haven't seen a suitcase round here have you? We seem to have misplaced it...again!" He must have bought his life back off that mob we left him with. Probably promising them eternal greatness that would make them live forever, or at least till it went flash!" Bob looked at Anshu, "Oh dear, I think he may have just pissed himself, again!"

"He should really see a doctor about that," Dave said, with fake concern in his voice. "It could be the early sign of a prostate problem."

Bob laughed and put his left hand up, pointed at Anshu and signalled for him to come over.

Anshu, like an obedient puppy, smiled and got up. And ran out the back, knocking over tables and chairs as he went. He was screaming something that made everyone in the café look at the Rover they were in.

It became obvious it was time to go.

Dave floored the Rover and went around to the back of the building as Anshu was coming out the back door.

He looked at them and started running the other way, Bob anticipated this, "Follow him."

Within a blink of an eye, they were on top of him. Bob jumped out, grabbing him, he pushed him against the wall, quickly patting him down.

Bob must have thought the same as Dave, *how quickly he'd pulled his handgun out on the old man before.*

Bob pulled him around. Anshu's eyes were bulging out of his head, he looked at Bob and then at Dave.

"OK, my friends. You are alive, praise be to Allah."

"Shut the hell up, Anshu!" Bob scowled.

Anshu started saying it was all a big misunderstanding and he was very sorry. He then started crying, "They were going to kill my children, my wife, and we needed money for food."

"Bollocks," Bob said. "We gave you all that money the last time we were here, you're one of the richest sons of bitches in this shithole."

Dave looked at him and thought, He must take us for bloody idiots!

"Get him in the car now, Bob," Lucy shouted. "We can talk to him away from here!"

"Do it now, Bob!" Dave said, looking up the road. "We've got company."

Bob turned and saw what they were looking at. He pulled Anshu into the back seat of the Rover. Once they were in, Dave gave Lucy his handgun, she dutifully shoved it in Anshu's mouth. This seemed to do the trick as Anshu stopped trying to shout and just stared at her. His eyes were bulging and he was starting to sweat again.

Shit! I wouldn't want to mess with her in a dark alley. Dave thought. He set off towards the house by the lake, where Anshu had left them to be killed the first time.

It took several hours to reach the lake, using Anshu as the interpreter at the check points. *It's amazing how helpful someone can be with a Glock pushed into their stomach,* Dave smiled.

Anshu was a mess by the time they arrived, and judging by the smell, he was literally shitting himself.

Lucy had eyeballed him all the way there, she hadn't said a word, keeping the gun firmly in his mouth every kilometre of the way.

When they got to the house, Bob pushed Anshu into the room they'd been attacked in. Anshu was about to say something, but when he saw the looks on Bob and Dave's faces, he didn't.

They made him sit in the middle of the room, legs crossed, and his hands on his head. Standing around him so he had to twist to look at whoever was asking the questions, but not so close that he could kick out.

"Where's the suitcase?" Bob started off with.

"What suitcase?" Anshu said, acting dumb.

Bob kicked him in the side, Anshu cried out and started shouting something in Urdu.

"Where's the suitcase?" Bob repeated.

Anshu looked at him and spat on his boots. Lucy said, "Wrong answer," and shot him in the foot.

Dave nearly jumped out of his skin as the weapon went off. Bob leapt out of the way of Anshu's foot as it flicked into the air. Anshu screamed, looked at Lucy and started to call her a madwoman as he held his foot and rolled around on the floor.

"That's for Harry, you bastard!" she cursed.

Bob looked at Lucy and smiled, but asked her not to do that again. He looked at Anshu, paused, then said, "Unless he doesn't tell us the next time I ask him."

Lucy smiled and pointed the gun at Anshu's other foot.

Anshu squealed like a stuck pig, his eyes wide with terror as he tried to back crawl to the wall in an effort to get away, but Lucy kept the barrel firmly targeted on his other foot.

"I wouldn't move around too much, Anshu. I might miss and hit something else!" she said, gesturing at his groin.

Anshu stared for a moment at where the end of Lucy's weapon was pointing, "OK, keep her away from me," he pleaded to Bob and Dave.

"Lucy, can you put the handgun away please?" Bob asked.

She frowned and dropped it to her side. She thought she'd keep it in view, in case Anshu started to get brave.

They all looked at Anshu. Bob kicked his bad foot, "Start talking, you piece of shit!"

Anshu squealed, and after a few moments, said, "OK, they took the suitcase but I didn't have the keys. When I told them this they didn't believe me. They said they would stone my wife and kill my children."

"I wonder why?" Bob said, sarcastically.

Anshu didn't get the sarcasm and carried on talking. "OK, I pleaded with them to spare my family, so they cut off my left hand." He pulled up his sleeve and showed them the stump.

Dave looked at Bob, and smiled, "That has got to have hurt!"

"Should have cut off your bloody foot. Lucy wouldn't have shot it then," Bob sneered.

Lucy looked at Anshu, "They should have cut off your head. Harry's dead because of you." She had tears in her eyes.

Anshu went quiet, then said, "OK, I didn't mean to get my friend killed, but I love my children and my wife."

"Where's the suitcase?" Bob asked again.

"OK, I will take you to the people who have it, but they won't give it back so easily."

"If you're thinking of setting us up again, I wouldn't. I'll have great pleasure cutting your other hand off." Bob got his close combat knife out and showed it to Anshu.

"They might, if we tell them we know where the keys are!" Dave baited.

"OK, they'll kill you straight away when they get the keys, they've been looking for this suitcase for a number of years. They have plans to use it against America." When Anshu said this, Dave looked at Bob, who must have read his mind.

"Who are these people who have the suitcase, do they have a name?" Bob asked.

"OK, they all follow the same cause, their leaders are the Taliban."

"That's not what I asked, Anshu."

He looked at Lucy and nodded. Lucy started to raise the gun again. Anshu shouted a name, "Mr. Graham!"

You could have knocked them down with a feather.

"Are you sure that's the correct name?" Bob asked.

Anshu was staring at Lucy with the gun and nodded.

They bandaged his foot, tied his hands behind his back and set off to meet their Mr. Graham. Very aware that what they were doing was potentially suicide.

Bob rang the number he'd been given, in case anything else came to light; and explained the situation.

He was told as soon as they found the suitcase, he was to keep it in sight. He had to make contact immediately, and if possible, keep control of the suitcase. He was also told to terminate any involvement Mr. Graham had in it all.

When he told them, Dave volunteered his services to be the one who pulled the trigger. Payback time, he thought.

54

They drove back into Baghdad, to the café they'd found Anshu in.

"OK, you have to let me go and talk with them," Anshu said.

Bob looked at him. Untying him, he said, "One wrong move and Dave will put a bullet in you. Understand?"

"OK, yes, yes. It will be OK, my friend!" Anshu said, staring at Dave.

"There's one thing you need to remember, Anshu," Bob said, looking at him. "I'm not your friend!"

Anshu gave a forced smile, fidgeting, his hand hovering over the door handle. He got out and went towards the shop. As he approached, one of the customers got up and opened the door, greeting him as if he was some big chief.

Dave looked at Bob, "When he said 'my friend'. That's the point when I knew he was lying. Now people are opening doors for him. Something doesn't smell right?"

"I agree," Bob said. "Drive to the corner and I'll go around the back. Let's see if he tries to run!"

As they started to move off, a moped cut out of a side entrance along the road. Dave looked at it, he saw the rider stare at them. "Bob. That's him, looks like he beat us to it."

"Follow him. Buckle up, Lucy, this could get bumpy."

Dave waited until the bike was about a hundred metres in front before pulling away from the kerb.

Lucy kept an eye on him as he weaved through the procession of trucks, cars and bikes that crowded the road.

"It looks like our little friend is heading out of the city, probably to get his family and make a break for it," Dave said, as he dropped back.

"Stay close. I think I know where he's going, but we'll watch him, just to see!" Bob said.

As they followed through the traffic, Dave started to realise how ordered the roads were back in the UK. I won't miss driving out here, that's for sure, he thought.

Just then, another moped darted across their front, nearly causing them to swerve into oncoming traffic. Dave shouted a few choice words, then set off again. "Shit I've lost him!"

"Turn right at the crossroads ahead, Dave," Lucy prompted.

Dave threw the heavy vehicle into the turn. The back end twitched slightly, but the four-wheel drive kept it on track.

"There!" Lucy pointed, "four hundred metres ahead."

"Nice one, Lucy."

"Nicely spotted, Sis. Don't get too close, Dave, I've got a sneaky suspicion that near miss wasn't an accident!"

After driving for thirty minutes, they ended up on the other side of Baghdad. Anshu pulled up outside a gate that led up to a big plush house. Dumping his bike against a wall, he had a quick look up and down, then darted inside.

Dave pulled over, turning down a side street opposite the road Anshu went down. They waited for a few minutes, to see if he came out again.

"I'm going to go in from the back, you two take the front door," Bob said, laying out his plan. He took three walkie-talkies out of a bag. Lucy and Dave went towards the front gate.

They walked down the opposite side of the street to his moped and hid behind a wall adjacent to the gate he'd gone through. As they were waiting for Bob to signal he was in position, Dave said to Lucy, "I'm going to let the air out of his tyres, wait here." He looked up and down the street, then jumped the wall. He walked up the road about fifty metres and was about to cross when someone shouted from behind him. Dave froze, putting his hand inside his clothes he gripped his handgun. He waited a few moments, then turned slowly, ready for a shootout. It was an old lady babbling something and pointing at the path he'd walked on, looking down, Dave realised he was standing on her freshly cleaned path. Dave put his hands up, and said, "Sorry". She looked at him, huffed, turned and went back into her house.

Shit! he thought. *I just said sorry in bloody English.*

Dave looked around and crossed the road. He looked over at Lucy, "All clear?" he mouthed. She stuck her thumb up. Dave let the air out of both tyres, and for good measure, took the HT wire off and snapped the spark plug. *Try and run off now, you little shit!* he thought.

Dave was about to go back to Lucy when he heard shouting. It was coming from the house Anshu had gone into. He didn't understand it, but got the drift that someone was telling someone to pack and move. Dave heard 'English' and 'suitcase' mentioned and realised he was getting ready to run again.

He got back to Lucy and called Bob. "Bob, he's packing up and moving out. And it sounds like he still has the suitcase!"

"OK, let's move in now. I'm round the back. There's a kid getting out of the swimming pool and running inside, there's also a woman with a baby, must be his wife. Lucy, get the car. When we get him out we can't stick around!"

"OK," she said.

Dave went in through the front gate, up the path and waited by the front door. Bob picked up his phone and speed dialled, waited for a reply, then said, "Stand-by. We have a possible on the suitcase." He waited for the man on the other end to confirm, then hung up. Bob looked up, "Hope you're watching, big brother, because this could get dirty."

Bob went over the wall and headed straight for the back door. "Dave, are you in position?"

"Yes! At the front door now."

"What can you see?"

"The hall's clear," he said, peering through the glass front door, "but there's loads of noise coming from the back."

"Anshu's in the kitchen with a woman and the two kids. I'll go in when I see you at the kitchen door."

"Roger." Dave took a deep breath. He could feel the adrenalin building, the buzz running through his body. He slowly turned the handle on the door, it opened with a slight squeak. He stopped and waited a few moments. No one responded, so he pushed the door open. He went in on the left side, hugging the wall. There was a room on his right, a few paces up the hall. He took a deep breath, counted to two, and stuck his head in. Clear.

He slowly went forward to the kitchen, his handgun ready. He stopped in the doorway, Anshu and the others hadn't noticed him, but he could see Bob. Bob spotted Dave and nodded. He walked forward and kicked the back door open.

Anshu and the woman froze, Bob had his weapon pointing at Anshu's head. "Get on the floor, now!"

The kid and the woman started screaming and crying, but Anshu shouted, "Shut up!" It seemed to work, the woman went quiet, the kid stood there sobbing.

Anshu looked at Bob, then said something and the lady and kid got down. They stared at the two men in their house. Dave looked at them, they were petrified, but the woman looked calm. He thought, *there's something about her that's not quite right!*

Dave went round and grabbed Anshu by the scruff of his neck. At that point, Dave got the impression he hadn't seen him, as he jumped out of his skin when he was grabbed.

The woman looked around at Dave, the look on her face didn't change. *She's one cool bitch or we're definitely missing something here!* he thought.

Bob looked at Anshu, "Tell me where the suitcase is, now! Or I *will* cut your other hand off!"

The woman pointed at a cupboard and started shouting at Anshu. He told her to shut up again. Dave realised he was speaking bloody good English.

Dave nodded, indicating to Bob at the way Anshu was sweating.

Dave opened the doors slowly, standing to one side. As soon as they opened, the little badges they'd been given by Diane, started to beep. Dave looked at his and watched as it changed colour.

"Close the cupboard door, Dave!" It stopped beeping straight away.

"Shit!" Bob cursed. "That thing's leaking like a sieve!" He got on his phone and speed dialled the number again. "Positive on the suitcase, but it's activated our badges."

“Copied that. Hold position,” came the reply.

Meanwhile, Anshu kept looking from Bob to Dave. Bob warned him, “Anshu. If you make a move, I'll shoot you where you stand, in front of your kids. Do you understand?”

Anshu nodded and seemed to relax, but he was still sweating.

The man on the phone spoke to Bob for a few moments, Bob repeated the instructions, and said, “OK. ETA four hours at pickup point one. Be advised there will be seven to pick-up: two children, five adults.” He hung up, “Let's go.”

“What about the suitcase?” Dave asked.

“If it's on the roof of the car it won't hurt us. We've got to get to the pickup point near the lake.”

“OK.” Dave looked at Anshu, and said, “Get the suitcase, Anshu. Take it to the car.”

He hesitated, but Bob said, “It's either that or we get your wife to carry it, your choice!”

Anshu looked at the woman, smiled, then got it out of the cupboard and carried it out. He put it on the car roof, and they gave him a blanket to put over it and some bungees to secure it. When he'd finished, they took his wife and kids and put them in the boot compartment. They tied Anshu's one hand, to his right foot and told him to keep quiet. Saying if he caused any trouble, he and his wife would be out on the road.

“With a big sign explaining how they helped us,” Bob added.

The badges were going bonkers when Anshu got the case out of the cupboard, but stopped beeping when they got in the car. Overall, they must have been exposed for about twenty minutes.

* * * * *

The journey to the pickup point took about three and a half hours. They had to drive back through Baghdad, then on to the lake. Anshu dealt with the check points, he co-operated well, but then again, he did have a gun pushed into his side.

At the lake, Bob got out, walked away from the car and got his phone out, holding it up above him. He waited twenty seconds before it rang. “What took you so long?” he said, sarcastically.

“Do you still have the case?” the caller asked, ignoring his comment.

“No doubt you've watched us all the way here, so you know the answer to that one.”

“Do you still have the case?” the caller asked again.

“Yes we do still have the case. Are you on your way to get us?”

“The recovery teams left three and a half hours ago, they should be at your position in twelve minutes. They'll be coming in from the west.”

Bob looked over and gave the thumbs up, so Dave got out and joined him, saying to Anshu before he walked off, “If you don't want your other foot shooting,” he looked at Lucy and nodded, “then don't do anything daft. Got it?”

Anshu nodded, his eyes wide, looking at Lucy smiling.

Dave opened the boot, Anshu fell out onto the floor, cursing. He spat at Dave boots. Dave was about to kick him, when, Bob said, "He's not worth it, Dave. Get him up and bring him over here. He can sit next to the case."

"Ten minutes out," Bob said to Dave. "When it gets here, you and Lucy get on with the two kids, I'll bring Anshu and his wife. They've got people who'll come and get the suitcase."

"Bob, remember John, back when we found the diamonds?" Dave said, sounding concerned.

"I know what you're thinking, Anshu looks the same," Bob said, looking at Anshu.

They went over to Anshu, Bob asked, "How'd you get the suitcase?"

"You really don't know who you have, do you?" Anshu sneered. "You're nothing but a bunch of fucking amateurs!" he cursed.

"What happened to the "OK" then?" Dave said, looking at him.

"I think we may have inadvertently caught the leader of the little group he's been going on about."

As he said this, right on schedule, two Chinooks came in low and fast, circled round and landed in a cloud of dust and sand. The back ramps came down and twenty soldiers came out and took up positions around the aircraft. Four men in NBC suits and respirators followed and went straight for the suitcase.

Lucy and Dave took the kids on first, Bob followed with Anshu and his wife.

The men in the NBC suits put the suitcase into another larger suitcase and climbed back in the other Chinook. The soldiers followed them in and they took off, hugging the roofs the way they had come in. All in all, it took seven minutes.

Dave tried not to think about what had happened the last time they'd got in one of these. When he looked over at Bob, his face was saying the same as Dave was thinking. Lucy, though, had the biggest smile Bob and Dave had seen for a few weeks.

She looked at Bob, "So, this is how you used to travel?"

Bob smiled and nodded.

Dave looked out the side window; he could see two Apache gunships in front, two behind and two F18 Super Hornets over-top, circling. He sat back and started to relax. He thought to himself, *don't relax too much, Dave, not till we're on the ground!*

* * * * *

They headed out to sea where there was an American aircraft carrier waiting, landing right at the end of the ship.

The back ramp of the Chinook opened up and they were met by a team of fully armed soldiers, who put them in their sights. They told them not to move or they'd shoot them dead.

They stayed there until the suitcase was off the other Chinook and on its way to wherever it was going, then Anshu and his wife, were escorted with their kids to the sickbay at one end of the ship and Bob, Dave and Lucy were escorted to the other end.

They were given full medicals and briefed on where they could and couldn't go on the ship. They were shown to their bunks. Basically they were put in a four-

man cabin and told it would be their home for the duration of their stay. Once they'd showered and had some food, they were given a health and safety brief followed by a guided tour of the ship. They were also told if anyone heard them calling it a boat, they'd be thrown overboard!

Dave felt the ship move off, and thought, it's over, thank God!

* * * * *

Two days later, they were flown the short trip back to Abu Dhabi, where they were escorted to their hotel.

Dave asked their hosts why they didn't simply take them back there in the first place.

"Security protocols. They had to make sure you were who we said you were. Also the extra time allowed them to make sure the radiation hadn't affected you too much before letting you go."

55

Lucy fell on to Bob's bed and started crying. Bob and Dave let her be for a while. When she'd settled down, Bob went and spoke to her.

"Hard few days, aye, Sis?"

"I'm thinking of poor Harry. And those kids, what are they going to do now? They must be so scared, it wasn't their fault."

Bob gave her a hug. "The contact from the embassy will be here tomorrow to debrief us, she can tell you what's going to happen to the kids. So for now, we have to stay put." He got up and went to the door, "Get some sleep, Luce, you'll feel better in the morning. You done good, goodnight, love you."

The next morning, at ten am, Diane turned up. She took one look at Dave, smiled and looked to Bob. "The suitcase has been sent for tests, it will then be decommissioned." She looked at Lucy, and said, "Taken apart."

"Thank you," Lucy mouthed.

"Anshu will end up in jail somewhere in America. He'll be a political prisoner. Seems our Anshu had a hidden agenda, turns out he didn't like the West. He blames them for the death of his family and his friends and has been acting out his revenge ever since. He's been working for the Taliban for years, setting up soldiers, destroying convoys, basically anything to upset the peace process. So don't feel bad for him."

"What about the kids?" Lucy asked.

"The kids and their mother will end up in America somewhere, or wherever their mum wants to go. She didn't know anything about any of it, pretty naïve really, but that's the way they live!"

"Good," Lucy smiled.

Dave butted in at this point. "Diane, I know you think I'm an idiot, but the mum, there's something not right about her. She seemed too calm."

"Rest assured, Dave, we have some of the best negotiators in the business working on this and they've said she's clean. Now, as for you three."

They waited for the charges to be read out, and the goon squad to march in and arrest them all.

“Thank you! That’s from the British, and American governments for a job well done.”

Dave looked at her, “Is that it? Just thank you. No threats? No, *You will not come back to the U.K., you will not pass go!*”

“We could send you all to prison if you prefer! Or have you shot! Your choice, Dave.”

Dave slunk back in the chair and shut up.

“Good choice, Dave. Now, we’re flying you back today, you have one hour to get ready.”

“What about the money?” Bob asked.

“What money?” she smiled. “Oh, I nearly forgot, we picked up the man who was with Mr. Graham, he was boarding a ferry at Dover. No sign of our Mr. Graham though. So again, thank you.”

Dave stood and looked at Diane, he was about to say something, when she stopped, turned and looked at him. She smiled, moved her jacket to one side and showed him her sidearm, then left.

Bob and Lucy laughed. Bob said, “Beer, mate?”

“No, Champagne!” Lucy cried.

“Now you’re talking, Luce,” Dave said.

They headed down to the bar for a drink, before heading out to the foyer to wait for their lift.

56

The flight back was long, but comfortable. They landed at Heathrow early the next morning, in torrential rain. They got soaked walking to the transport that took them to the terminal.

Bob said, “Good old Blighty, you can always guarantee a good soaking after a holiday.”

Lucy looked at him and smiled, “You know, Bobby, I think I might get used to this travelling lark. Do you fancy going somewhere else soon?”

“As long as it’s not hot,” Dave said.

They both looked at him and started laughing.

To everyone’s delight on the bus they did a little dance in a puddle that had formed by the door. A couple of bemused marshals stood and watched them for a few moments, then ushered them on-board.

They got the train to Kings Cross and then up to Peterborough, they jumped into a taxi and headed back to Docking.

Lucy was about to say to the taxi driver where they were going, when he turned around and smiled. “Hello, it’s the, “you haven’t seen me gang”. You all look nicely tanned, have a good holiday?”

They looked at each other, got out and went to the next taxi along, but before the other taxi driver could move off, the first taxi driver got out of his cab and came and opened the door of the second taxi they got in. He apologised to the driver, looked at the three of them, and said, "This one is on me. I've just dropped a fare off so I'm going back anyway. Would you like a lift?" The driver of the second taxi they got in, was about to say something, but took one look at him and turned around and looked out the front.

"Why not?" Lucy smiled.

Bob and Dave just shrugged.

On the way home he tried to make small talk, mainly directed towards Lucy. Dave smirked at his attempt to hit on her. Lucy wasn't having any of it and blanked him.

"See you around!" he said, dropping them off.

They thanked him and walked through the gate. Bob and Dave watched as he drove off, they looked at each other and shook their heads.

Once they were in, Lucy got the kettle on and they sat down.

"To fallen friends," Bob said, raising his mug.

* * * * *

The next day, Lucy let out a squeal. Bob and Dave rushed down the stairs, thinking the worst.

"I've got some shopping to catch up on," she smiled, holding up her new credit card. "Would you like anything?" she said, grinning like a Cheshire cat.

"Just the usual for me!" Dave said, relieved.

"And what might that usual be, Dave?"

"You know, the usual for a single bloke like me: beer and a girlie mag," he said, smiling at her.

She shook her head and tutted as she walked out to her car.

* * * * *

Hunstanton was bustling with summer holidaymakers. The funfairs were in full swing, and the penny arcades were shrilling their music to entice people in to spend their money. The prom was crowded with children eating ice creams and dads moaning that they just wanted to sit on the sand. The amphibious vehicle was taking on its first load of passengers for the day, whilst the donkeys were stretching their legs ready for the huddle of kids all eager to sit on their backs for the short journey across the sand.

Lucy parked up near the prom and went down to the water line and walked along with her shoes off. She breathed in the salty sea air and smiled, shivering at the few people out swimming in the cold North Sea.

She looked around at the people enjoying their day. She was thinking of Harry when she bumped into Mary. "Hi, Mary. How are you?"

"Hi! You're looking tanned, been somewhere hot?" Mary smiled, wrapping her arms around her, giving her a tight hug.

"We popped over to the south of France for a bit of shopping, just a booze cruise for Christmas."

Mary smiled, "Fancy a coffee?"

They linked arms and walked up to the prom, towards their favourite coffee shop.

"It's not just for the coffee," Mary smiled. "It's the cake as well, they make the most delicious Mississippi mud pie. It's orgasmic."

Lucy agreed, but said, "I prefer a real man for that line of work."

"Lucy!" Mary said, shocked. "You're right though," she winked.

As they walked along chatting about their day, a young man, skinhead, tattoos, ring through his nose, black tight leather trousers and a scruffy T-shirt, zeroed in on them. He reeked of booze. "You got a cigarette, darling?"

"I'm sorry," Mary said. "I don't smoke."

The young man took this as an attack on his good nature, and said, "Ah ya stuck up bitch! Think you're better than me do you? I could have any one of you two, so give me a fag."

Mary was shocked and scared, she started to pull back on Lucy's arm, "Come on, Lucy. Let's go back to my place for coffee instead!"

Other people around were giving them a wide berth.

"No!" She took Mary's hand off her arm and faced the lad. She kicked him right between the legs. The noise his balls made when Lucy's foot made contact, reminded her of the time she dropped half a dozen eggs on the floor at the local supermarket.

The colour drained from his face instantly, his mouth opened wide and his eyes nearly popped out of his head. He folded up and sank to the floor, holding his crown jewels in his hands.

Lucy, bent down and put her mouth close to his ear and whispered, "If I ever see you again, I'll rip your shitty little head off! Understand?"

The young lad nodded and promptly threw up all over his top. Lucy stood up, put Mary's arm back on hers and carried on walking along the prom, much to Mary's delight.

When Lucy got home, she gave Dave his beers and girlie mag, and went and had a cup of tea.

