

The Royal Bank of Lords

The Solaine Trilogy, #2

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THE HAGUE

“The mission in New York was a success,” the man said in an English accent.

The man sitting across from him didn't respond.

The man with the Dutch accent said, "The information you provided has given our organization serious credibility in the international community."

The man only smiled.

"Who is this man of yours?" the Englishman asked.

"I can't say," the man said.

"Why not?" the Dutchman fumed.

"It is better that it be kept that way for now."

The Englishman stared hard. "Our organization is putting a lot of money into this..."

"And we have delivered," the man quickly interjected.

"Yes, but it would be nice to know where that money is going."

The man leaned forward. "It is going exactly where it should be. What happened in New York was proof of that."

The Englishman looked at the Dutchman. The Dutchman nodded.

"Where is your man now?"

"In London."

LONDON

Roman Solaire sat near the fountain and watched the tourists snap photos around it.

Trafalgar Square, located in central London, was much cleaner now than when he had visited it many years ago.

Perhaps it was the pigeons, or lack thereof. He remembered there used to be thousands of them all over the square, like ants on an ant-hill. He remembered the mess they would leave: their droppings covering everything from the ground to the stonework around. The problem was so bad that it had become a health hazard. It wasn't until it became illegal to feed them that the square was able to be rid of them.

Solaire squinted at the center of the square, particularly at Nelson's Column, which was surrounded by statues of four lions.

He felt someone sit next to him.

"I was beginning to wonder when you would show up," Solaire said, not looking away from the column.

"I thought I would give you some time to recover from your last mission," Clive Travers said.

"That was very kind of you," Solaire said without a hint of compliment.

Travers was beginning to get used to Solaire's comments.

"There must be a reason why I'm here," Solaire said, finally looking at him.

"Yes, there is." Travers pulled out a yellow envelope.

Inside were black and white photographs of three people.

"You do know we are in the twenty-first century," Solaire said.

"Have you heard of the Royal Bank of Lords, or RBL?" Travers said.

Solaire shook his head.

“RBL was created during World War II by a group of wealthy individuals. They wanted to protect their money from the British government. While the country sacrificed their health and wealth to win the war, these individuals only built upon their investments. There were rumours the bank was used to funnel Nazi money. This, however, cannot be substantiated.”

“Why didn’t the government go after them?”

“The patrons of RBL went as high up as the royal family.”

“The Queen?” Solaire inquired.

“Not that high up. Plus, after the war the government needed investors to help rebuild the country. RBL was more than glad to do so. They acquired land at cutthroat prices and built businesses on them. Those businesses generated jobs and money for the government, so no one really complained.” Travers glanced at the tourists gathered in the square. He continued, “RBL was only open to private and privileged investors.”

“You mean the rich?”

“The super-rich,” Travers answered. “No less than one million dollars was required to open an account.”

“That’s double what most Swiss banks require,” Solaire said.

“Yes, and they didn’t discriminate who invested. Dictators, oil barons, sheikhs, war lords; if you had money you were welcomed with open arms.”

Solaire made a face. “So you want me to find out where they are hiding their dirty money?”

“No, we already know.”

Solaire was confused.

Travers continued. “Then in the mid-eighties RBL opened their doors to everyone and not just to the privileged few. It no longer required the initial million-dollar deposit. Money poured in at RBL during the nineties. Investors from all over opened accounts. People on salaries and pensions, small and medium businesses, large and small corporations, they all came rushing in with their cash. It seemed that RBL had finally become legitimate—until the millennium rolled around. They began making risky investments and by the end of the last decade, when the recession hit, they had lost close to a trillion dollars.”

Solaire waited for more.

“Those individuals in the photographs are board members of RBL,” Travers said.

Solaire held the first one up. The man in the photo was clean shaven with a receding hairline.

“Sir Anthony Blairwood,” Travers said.

Solaire looked at the next photo. It was of a woman. She was older, with hair that resembled a bird’s nest.

“Lady Marge Thatchburn.”

Solaire pulled up the last photo. The man was heavysset with greying hair.

“Lord Cornell Blacksmith.”

“They all have titles?” Solaire said.

“And why wouldn’t they?” Travers replied back. “Before the recession RBL was the crown jewel in England’s banking circles.”

“What’s special about them?” Solaire said, glancing at the photos again.

“While the average person has lost their entire life’s savings, they have only increased their net worth, making millions of pounds during the financial meltdown.” Travers pulled out another photo. This one was in color. The man in the photo was middle-aged with glasses. “Robbie Fisk,” Travers started. “He was another member of the board.”

“No title?” Solaire inquired.

“He became a board member only a few years ago. So I guess not long enough for any honours. Fisk’s car was found in the Thames. It may have been an apparent suicide, but no suicide note was found and his body has not been found either.”

Solaire looked into the distance.

“Prior to his disappearance, Fisk’s behaviour had become strange. He looked worried and under stress. Some had said they had spotted him with a younger woman, so he may have been having an affair. But that’s not of our concern. What we are interested in is that Fisk may have left incriminating evidence against the other board members. Find it so we can prosecute them.”

“Why?” Solaire turned to Travers.

“What do you mean?”

“Why is CIL going after board members of a bank?”

“The Court of International Law’s mandate is to prosecute those that affect international stability. Investors from all over had invested in RBL. The one trillion lost has had a ripple effect globally. It has destabilized markets throughout many countries.”

Solaire squinted, as if in deep thought.

“Roman,” Travers started. “These people may dress in business suits but they are still criminals. We—I mean you—have to bring them before the international court so that they can be charged for these crimes.”

“There are many financial institutions around the world that are doing exactly what they have done. But why them?”

“The British people are outraged by what has happened. So the British government is allowing us to make an example of them. If we are successful then other countries may follow suit.”

Solaire stared at the photos of Blairwood, Thatchburn and Blacksmith.

“All right,” he finally said.

* * * * *

Solaire took the tube to St. John’s Wood Station. From there he walked the two blocks to St. John’s Wood High Street, where he had rented an apartment for a week. He could have gone to a swanky hotel, but this time he wanted to stay low key. His apartment was on the top floor, and instead of taking the elevators he took the stairs.

The apartment was bare and not at all luxurious. Solaire wasn’t overly concerned, though. He wouldn’t be spending too much time here anyways.

He turned on his laptop and placed the phone Travers had given him next to it. He then went to the bathroom and washed up.

He returned and sat in front of the laptop.

He spent the next several hours researching RBL and its board members.

With darkness falling, he left his flat.

Outside, the air was much cooler.

London at night was as vibrant as it was in the morning.

It was not uncommon to see couples, hand in hand, out for a walk, or even parents with kids in tow strolling down the street.

A group of five people came out of one of the pubs, laughing and a little too excited.

Solaire decided to go in.

The pub's lights were low-lit, giving a feeling of coziness.

Solaire was surprised to see the number of people inside. It was a weekday, after all.

The Brits love their pubs, Solaire was once told.

He went up to the bar.

"What can I get ya?" the barman said.

"Do you have ice tea?" Solaire asked.

The barman made a face. "This is a pub, mate. You wanna get tipsy then you come here, if you know what I mean."

Solaire nodded.

He was about to leave when the barman said, "You an American?"

"Canadian," Solaire replied.

The barman smiled. "Welcome to London, mate. Wait here."

The barman disappeared in the back.

Solaire looked around.

The patrons consisted of young and old.

The barman returned with an orange bottle.

He unscrewed the cap and placed it in front of Solaire.

"Can't have you leaving here without a drink," the barman said.

The bottle had the word Fanta on it.

Solaire took a sip. It was a fruit-flavoured soft drink.

The barman smiled. "I keep a bottle or two in the back for when we get kids in the pub."

"Yeah, I guess that would be me." Solaire smiled and took another sip.

"The name's Martin Humphries." The barman extended his hand.

"Roman Solaire."

Humphries had a horn-dog type of face. His cheeks, ears and even eyes drooped. But there was a hint of kindness in his blue eyes.

"Where in Canada are you from?" Humphries asked.

"Toronto."

"Oh, I've a cousin who lives there. His name is Chris..."

"Toronto is a big city," Solaire quickly said, knowing where this was going.

"Right." Humphries understood. "Let me know if you need anything else."

With that he walked away.

Solaire looked up at the TV perched high up.

A football game was on. Arsenal was up two-one to Manchester United.

Solaire had never been a sports fan. He was, though, conscious of all the sports: baseball, basketball, hockey, and even cricket. He understood their rules

and regulations. But he was not someone who would spend their afternoons or evenings sitting behind the television watching a game.

Humphries returned. "Can I get you another?"

Solaire looked at his half-empty bottle and shook his head. "Tell me," he started. "If I were looking for information in London, where would I start?"

"It depends."

"On what?"

"What type of information you are looking for."

"Information on a certain bank: The Royal Bank of Lords, to be specific."

"You lose money in that bank?"

"You can say that."

Humphries shook his head. "Sorry, can't help you there."

Solaire nodded and got up. "How much do I owe you for the... Fanta?"

"It's on the house. I don't usually charge the little ones for a drink." Humphries smiled.

"Thanks." Solaire smiled back.

The next morning Solaire took the tube to RBL's headquarters in Central London. In the distance Solaire could see the building was huge, made of concrete and granite. Near the entrance, a small group of people were gathered around.

A woman was standing in the front and shouting something.

Solaire got near.

"They should be locked up," the woman said.

Solaire noticed the crowd was holding handmade posters of Blairwood, Thatchburn, and Blacksmith. The posters weren't flattering, to say the least.

"They are nothing but crooks," the woman yelled. "They lost our money and the government is doing nothing about it. We want justice! We want our money!"

The crowd yelled back approvingly.

Suddenly, a police vehicle pulled up and ordered the crowd away.

Solaire waited.

A man in a suit emerged from the building and spoke a few words with the police officers.

The man looked to his left and to his right. He then went inside.

Solaire approached the doorman.

"Excuse me," Solaire started. "Can you tell me who that person was that just went inside?"

The doorman eyed Solaire up and down. "Why do you want to know?"

Solaire pulled out a hundred-pound note. "He dropped it on the side road. And I wanted to return it."

"I'll give it to him," the doorman said.

"I don't know," Solaire said, making it sound like he was unsure.

"Mr. David Clampton is a very busy man. I would hate to disturb him." The doorman's eyes never left the note.

“All right,” Solaire said. He held it for the doorman, who quickly snatched it. “Please make sure he gets it.”

“I will.”

* * * * *

Solaire went into an internet café and quickly did a search on Clampton. David Clampton had been an employee of RBL for eleven years. He had started off as the personal bodyguard to Lady Thachburn, from there moving all the way up to RBL’s head of security.

Solaire looked at his watch. It was almost noon.

He stood across from RBL’s headquarters.

People were going in and out of the building.

Solaire spotted a group of people come out. They were dressed in business suits and other professional attire.

Solaire waited.

Almost half an hour later, David Clampton came out of the building.

He pulled out a cigarette and began puffing away.

Solaire followed behind.

Clampton walked down the block, turned right and kept walking.

He stopped in front of a restaurant, blew out his cigarette and went in.

Solaire went in too.

Inside, Clampton sat at the back of the restaurant.

The maitre d’ placed Solaire a few tables from Clampton.

Solaire looked at the menu. The prices were something he could never afford. Luckily, money was never an issue for his employers.

He ordered what looked like halibut with rice, along with some greens on the side.

Solaire never understood why restaurants used foreign words to describe their dishes.

Nevertheless, he watched Clampton devour his appetizers.

Clampton’s thinning hair was slicked back. His suit was tight on his body, exposing his protruding belly. It looked as if his shirt buttons were ready to pop.

He wore a gold ring on his left pinky finger.

Solaire’s order came.

He slowly bit into the halibut. It was far more delicious than he had thought. Maybe the meal was worth the price.

Exactly an hour later, Clampton got up and left the restaurant.

Solaire paid the bill and followed.

Clampton walked back to RBL and then disappeared inside.

Solaire looked at his watch. He now knew Clampton’s afternoon schedule.

* * * * *

Solaire hailed a cab and gave the driver directions.

He watched the London streets pass by him.

He was not surprised by how busy they were.

The very first time he visited London he had come to appreciate it.

Solaire still clearly remembered sightseeing in the city. He had been amazed at seeing people from all races and cultures freely interacting with one another.

He had seen people from Asia, Africa, Scandinavia, the Middle East, and even other parts of Europe on the same train. Just standing there he was awed at all the different languages that were being spoken at one time.

He had become convinced that London was a melting pot of cultures, and this was due to its citizens who had opened their doors and hearts to the people of the world.

Like New York, his previous destination, it was a city that never slept.

Tourists from all over pour into the city to see all the attractions it has to offer. From the cathedrals, the museums, the galleries, the restaurants, it was one of the places to visit in the world.

Every nook and cranny of the city was filled with some historical significance. He remembered standing in front of a house where Mahatma Gandhi had once lived when he was a law student.

Now he passed several more locations where the city had deemed as heritage sites.

The driver dropped him off in Kensington.

The white row houses went all the way down the street.

Each house was so attached to the other that a passerby could mistake them as part of one complete building.

Solaire pulled out a business card which he had used in other assignments and moved his fingers over the letterings. He then approached the door.

He rang the bell.

A few seconds later the door opened. A grey-haired woman said, "Can I help you?"

"Yes." Solaire smiled. "Is Mrs. Fisk at home?"

The woman examined Solaire up and down. He was casually dressed. Brown khaki pants, white dress shirt, with a blue jacket on top.

Solaire gave her his best smile.

"May I know who's looking for her?" the woman asked.

Solaire handed her the card.

The woman looked it over as if unsure.

"Can you give it to her? Please," he said with a smile.

The woman looked at him, nodded, and shut the door.

He waited.

The street was quiet, save for a couple of cars driving by. Solaire noticed that all the cars in the neighbourhood were luxurious. He spotted a BMW, a Mercedes Benz and even a Bentley.

The door opened again and this time it was a younger woman.

"How can I help you...?" The woman glanced at the card. "Mr. Bind."

"Jim Bind." Solaire smiled.

"Yes."

"Can we talk inside?"

The woman hesitated.

Solaire said, "Mrs. Fisk, as you can tell from the card, I am a private investigator. I was hired to find your husband."

Mrs. Fisk was taken aback by this. "Is this some kind of joke?"

"I assure you, this is no joke."

Tears formed in her eyes. "I'm not sure if you know, but my husband committed suicide."

"I am aware of this."

"Then why would you disturb a grieving widow?"

"I have no desire to cause any undue stress, ma'am. I am only here to make certain that what was reported is the case."

Mrs. Fisk bit her lip.

Solaire added, "As you can tell from my accent, I'm not from here. I came all the way from Canada." This much was true. "I only want to ask a few questions and then you'll never see me again."

She held the door for him. "Please come in."

* * * * *

The room was both grand and opulent. The floor was hardwood with an embroidered Persian rug on top of it. The ceilings went high up with natural light coming down from expansive windows. The walls were white and bare. There was an unused fireplace with a shelf above it. Family photos littered the shelf.

Solaire spotted Fisk in many of the photos. In some he was smiling with his wife and two sons, while in others he was standing in front of buildings and other properties.

"He was so proud of those." Mrs. Fisk pointed to one of the photos.

They were in the middle of the room, sitting on large leather sofas.

Mrs. Fisk wore a light green dress that went down to her knees. Her dark hair was the length of her shoulders. Her skin was pale but radiant. She looked much younger than her age. The only thing out of the ordinary was the bags underneath her eyes. It looked as if she had been mourning a terrible loss, which she was.

"He genuinely believed the bank was helping regular people," Mrs. Fisk continued. "He thought by approving so many loans that he was empowering people to become homeowners or even business owners." She fell silent. "Robbie didn't come from a wealthy family. In fact, growing up he was even lower than what you would call middle class. His father worked at a factory that made buttons, and his mother cleaned people's houses. I, on the other hand, was lucky to have grown up in affluence. My father was a member of parliament and my mother ran a successful clothing line."

The grey-haired woman entered the room holding a tray. She gently placed it on the table before them.

"Would you like me to pour it, sir?" she asked.

"No, I am fine. Thank you," Solaire replied back.

"Ma'am?" She turned to Mrs. Fisk.

"No, maybe later. Thank you."

The woman left the room.

Mrs. Fisk continued. "Robbie worked hard and borrowed money to pay for his education. He was smart enough to get into Oxford. That's where I met him." She smiled, but it was tinged with sadness. "He was unlike anyone I had ever met. You have to realize, growing up in the environment that I did, everything was—how do I say it? Sheltered. Robbie was without any constraints. Being with him I felt alive. There were no such things as what was proper for me, or what was expected of me, or even what my future held. With Robbie the future held endless possibilities and we were free to pursue any of them. As you can imagine, my parents weren't too happy when we decided to get married. They were ready to cut me off, but Robbie was able to win them over. He always had a way with people. He brought the best in them. Anyway, the first couple of years were trying, to say the least. Robbie refused to take help from my parents. He was too proud. He started as a broker in a small investment firm and worked his way..." She stopped as if it hurt too much. "He became a board member of the Royal Bank of Lords."

Solaire carefully said, "Mrs. Fisk, was your husband happy at RBL?"

She thought about it. "He was, at first. I mean, who wouldn't be? The pay, along with prestige, was too much to turn away. Just the signing bonus paid for this house." She motioned around the room. "I did, however, notice his behaviour change in the last couple of months."

"How so?"

"I mean, he became quieter, more reserved. I knew he was under a lot of stress. I'm sure you heard of what happened at the bank?"

Solaire nodded.

"But there was something else." She fell silent.

"You mean the other woman?" Solaire said.

She bit her lip in order to control her emotions.

"I'm sorry if this is hard, Mrs. Fisk."

She shook her head. "I don't believe it," she said.

He waited for her.

"Robbie was a good man. He was also a strong man," she said defiantly. "He would have never strayed from our marriage, and he most certainly would not have killed himself."

"Can you tell me anything that might help me find him?" Solaire said. "Did he have any enemies?"

She laughed. "Sure he did. Anyone who had invested in the bank despised him. They blamed him for what happened to them, even though he had no idea what was going on in the bank. It was those *three* who were behind it."

Solaire knew she was referring to Blairwood, Thatchburn and Blacksmith.

"If you want to find out more you should talk to them," she said.

"I'm going to try."

There was silence.

This was Solaire's cue to leave.

"Thank you for your time, Mrs. Fisk." He got up.

"I wish I could have been of more help to you," she replied back.

"You have."

He was about to leave when he spotted something on the side table.

"What is that?" he asked.

She picked it up and handed it to him.

It was an invitation for a party held by RBL.

"It's for their highly valued investors. The bank hosts it annually. Naturally, I am invited, but under the circumstances I don't have the heart to go."

"Will the other board members be there?"

"Of course; they are the face of the bank."

"How does one get invited to this event?"

She smiled. "I know what you are thinking, but invitation is highly restricted."

"That's not a problem. I'm resourceful." He smiled.

She eyed him. "Whoever hired you must be paying you well. Can I ask who they are?"

"I'm afraid it's confidential. But I can assure you their intentions are good, or else I wouldn't be working for them."

"I'm glad to hear that." She smiled. "If you are so inclined to be at the event then I would recommend you speak to Louise Mapother. She is the bank's extra affairs liaison."

"Thank you."

She walked him to the door.

"There was someone else who came asking questions about my husband," she said.

"Can you describe this person?" Solaire asked.

"She was tall, fair skin, blue eyes and she had long silver hair."

"Silver hair?" Solaire said.

"Yes. I remember it clearly because I said to myself it was an odd choice for hair colour."

Solaire thought about it and then said, "Thank you, Mrs. Fisk."

* * * * *

Instead of taking a taxi, Solaire headed for the South Kensington Station.

Solaire stood on the platform for the train. On the way to the station he had already mapped out his route back to his flat. He would take the Circle line, interchange at Westminster Station for the Jubilee Line and take it all the way to St. John's Wood Station.

While waiting he spotted someone at the other end of the platform.

Solaire couldn't clearly make out the face—the person was too far away, but Solaire could see that the man wore an odd-looking grey coat, with an even odder-looking grey hat, and he had on dark sunglasses.

The man's attire made him look like he didn't belong in this century.

But what caught Solaire's attention was the way the man was looking in his direction.

The train approached the platform.

Solaire watched the man but not once did he look away.

The train's doors opened and Solaire entered.

Solaire suddenly had a bad feeling in the pit of his stomach. He only felt this way when something wasn't right, and there was something not right about this man.

The train moved along its designated route.

It stopped at Sloan Square Station and then continued on.

Solaire glanced at the Underground map.

The train would stop at Victoria Station, St. James's Park Station and then at Westminster Station, where he was supposed to change lines. But before he could do that he had to be sure he wasn't being followed.

At St. James's Park Station, Solaire popped his head out of the doors. To his horror the man stood half-way out of the doors of his compartment. He could clearly see everyone go in and out of the train, including Solaire.

Solaire went back in.

He was now certain that he was being followed, but by whom?

No one, except for Travers, knew he was in London.

His missions relied on secrecy. He was sort of a contractor, belonging to no agency or department. Even those who were paying for his missions knew nothing about them. It was arranged so that if anything were to happen to him then they would not be held liable. It was more of a precaution for them than for his safety. Solaire knew and accepted this.

It was his mission to find that one thing that would otherwise never be found. And he was paid handsomely for it. In this case it was the evidence against RBL's board members.

Solaire had enemies from previous missions. *Could this person be one of them?*

Solaire wasn't waiting to find out.

He watched as the train approached Westminster Station. He didn't dare get off. He couldn't lead this person to his flat. He had to lose him.

Solaire examined the Underground map.

He quickly charted an alternative route.

When the doors opened at Embankment Station, Solaire bolted.

He rushed down the halls, through the stairs, and toward another platform.

At the Bakerloo Line he waited for the train.

The train approached. Solaire was about to board when he spotted the man. Like before, the man was standing at the other end of the platform.

He was looking in Solaire's direction.

Solaire got on the train.

Solaire was surprised that he had failed to elude the man.

He watched as Charing Cross Station, Piccadilly Circus Station, and even Oxford Circus Station passed by.

When he was at Regent's Park Station, Solaire decided that he would make a run for it at the next station. It was an interchange station, which would be perfect for his getaway.

The train's doors opened at Baker Street Station, and before anyone, Solaire was out first.

He rushed down the halls, through the stairs and escalators, and to the Jubilee Line platform.

He watched and waited for the man to appear down on the other end of the platform.

But by the time the train approached, the man was nowhere to be found.

Relieved, Solaire got in.

He found a seat and rested his head on the side.

When the train stopped at St. John's Wood Station, Solaire got off.

He stood on the *long* escalator as it slowly moved up toward the station's entrance and city streets.

When he was closer to the top, he spotted something.

The man was standing by the escalator with his hands in his pockets.

Solaire thought about doubling back, but the escalator was too narrow and there were too many people behind him.

As the escalator slowly took him closer to the man, Solaire had a plan.

Just as he was almost to the top, he jumped over the side of the escalator and landed on a flight of stairs.

He rushed up, pushed past the man, and ran toward the exit.

As he was about to reach the doors, a familiar voice from behind said, "Roman, wait!"

Solaire stopped and turned.

* * * * *

Donald Levack was putting on his hat and adjusting his coat.

He was middle-aged, slightly overweight, with green eyes which were now hidden by the sunglasses.

"What are you doing here?" Solaire asked.

Solaire had met Levack on his previous mission in New York.

Levack shrugged. "I thought I'd sightsee in London, you know."

Upon closer examination Solaire realized what Levack was wearing. It was Sherlock Holmes's Deerstalker hat and his long caped tweed coat.

"Why are you dressed like that?" Solaire asked.

"I thought I'd blend in with the locals."

"Where'd you get it, a costume shop?" Solaire said.

"As a matter of fact," Levack mimicked a fake British accent. "I did, old chap."

"I hope you don't have a pipe somewhere in there."

Levack's eyes brightened. "I actually do." He pulled out an 'S' shaped pipe from inside his coat. "It came with the costume. And look here." He pulled out a large magnifying glass. "We can now go investigating."

"I'm going to ask again," Solaire said. "What are you doing here?"

"It's a free country, last I heard," Levack answered. "Actually, I was thinking of checking out Madame Tussauds. I really want to get a picture with Attila the Hun."

"Okay, then why are you following me?"

"Who said I was following you?"

"I saw you at South Kensington Station and then at Embankment Station. You were following me. It looked as if..." Solaire stopped and then shook his head. "Travers. He sent you, didn't he?"

Levack put his hands up. "You got me."

"All right, come, I'll buy you a drink," Solaire finally said. "I know a good place."

* * * * *

They entered the pub and went up to the bar.

Humphries looked at them and without a hint of sarcasm said, "What're you supposed to be, Sherlock Holmes and his faithful sidekick, Dr. Watson?"

Solaire just sat on the stool.

Humphries leaned over and with a smile said, "You're underdressed for the part, mate."

"I know," Solaire said. "I'll have..."

"I've got just the thing for you." Humphries winked. "What about you, Mr. Holmes?" Humphries turned to Levack. "What can I get ya?"

"I'll have your best soda water," Levack said in his fake British accent.

"You too?" Humphries shook his head and left them.

"How's sobriety coming along?" Solaire asked.

"It's coming." Levack shrugged.

"So, how long have you been in the city?"

"I flew in last night."

"Did Travers tell you about the mission?"

"Only what was necessary."

"I appreciate you coming here, but I can handle this myself," Solaire said.

"I know, I know," Levack replied back. "I'll stay in the background. I won't get in your way. Just think of me as your designated *hitter*, when and if things get dicey." Levack pulled open his coat. Solaire spotted a gun under his belt.

"I don't work with guns," Solaire said.

"I know." Levack smiled. "But I do."

Humphries returned with their drinks.

He placed a large glass in front of Levack. "The best soda water in all of London." He then placed another glass in front of Solaire. "Ice tea just for you, mate. I picked it up knowing you might be back."

Solaire looked at it.

"He doesn't like ice in his ice tea," Levack quickly said.

"It's fine." Solaire smiled. "Thank you."

"Right," Humphries said. "I'll leave you two. If you need anything just whistle."

Solaire sipped his ice tea. It was cool and refreshing.

Levack made a face after sipping his. He said, "How are you making progress?"

"It's coming along," Solaire said.

"Travers was really impressed with you in New York."

"Was he?"

"He didn't actually say it, but I could tell."

Solaire looked at him.

"What I'm saying is he wouldn't have asked me to come all this way if he didn't think you were valuable."

Solaire took a sip.

"Plus, I don't mind," Levack said. "New York was fun."

"You have a weird sense of fun," Solaire said. "From what I remember, *I* barely made it through."

Levack leaned over. "But you did, and that is why we are here to fight another day."

Solaire didn't know what to say.

“Don’t get me wrong,” Levack said. “I don’t have any morbid fascination with death, but from what I did before this is way more exciting.”

“And what is it exactly you did before?” Solaire eyed him.

Levack hesitated.

Solaire said, “You know more about me than I do about you. That hardly seems fair, considering we are to trust each other with our lives.”

Levack thought about it. “Okay, let’s say I was a pencil-sharpening, paper-pushing, staple-removing kind of guy. The only exhilarating thing I did all day was change the date on the date-stamper.”

“That still doesn’t tell me anything about you,” Solaire replied.

“That’s all you’ll get for today,” Levack said.

Humphries came over. “Sorry to interrupt, but there is someone who wants to speak to you, mate.” He pointed in the direction of a booth in the corner.

Solaire noticed it was occupied by one person.

“Wow, she’s cute,” Levack said.

“Did she say why?” Solaire asked.

“Who cares?” Levack interjected. “I’ll go if you don’t.”

Humphries said, “I think you’ll find what she’ll say very interesting.”

Solaire got up.

Levack slapped him on the shoulder. “Don’t worry. If you need help I’m right here with my drink.”

* * * * *

She had short blond hair, large blue eyes and a round face. She had on a light jacket over a white blouse, and she wore grey cargo pants.

Solaire slid into a seat across from her.

“I was told you wanted to speak to me,” Solaire started. “I’m Roman Solaire.”

“I know who you are,” she said. “Martin told me.”

Solaire glanced over at Humphries, who was busy with other customers.

“How can I help you, Ms...?”

“Emma Morgan,” she said.

“Ms. Morgan, how...?”

“Mr. Solaire,” she said and then paused. “Why are you interested in the Royal Bank of Lords?”

It was Solaire’s turn to pause. “I have my reasons,” he slowly said. “Do you work for the bank?”

“No, we work against the bank.”

Solaire’s eyes narrowed. “I don’t understand.”

She looked around and then leaned closer. “Before I say anymore, I need to know who you work for.”

“The people I work for want certain individuals at the bank held accountable for the financial meltdown.”

“Are you referring to the bank’s board members?”

Solaire nodded.

“Lady Marge Thatchburn?”

Solaire nodded.

“Sir Anthony Blairwood?”

Solaire nodded.

“Lord Cornell Blacksmith?”

Solaire nodded.

She hesitated but then said, “Mr. Robbie Fisk.”

Solaire shook his head.

“Why not him?” she said.

“We don’t believe he was responsible, but he may hold information that may be vital.”

“I don’t know if you are aware, but they found his car in the Thames.”

“I am aware.”

“He has not been seen in London.”

“I know.”

“He may be dead.”

“Perhaps, but even dead people leave clues behind. I intend to find those clues and use it against RBL’s board members.”

She looked at him hard and then nodded. She looked over at Humphries, who came over.

“I’ll have that drink now,” she said.

“The same thing for you?” Humphries looked at Solaire.

“This time no ice,” he replied.

“Ice?” She raised an eyebrow.

“Ice tea but no ice,” Solaire said.

She smiled. “I’ll try one too.”

“Coming right up.”

When Humphries was gone, Solaire said, “You said we work against the bank. Who were you referring to?”

She leaned closer. “SCABB.”

“SCABB?” Solaire said.

“The Secret Coalition Against Big Business. I know it doesn’t sound glamorous, but it’s not supposed to be.”

Their drinks came.

She took a sip. “I haven’t had iced tea since I was a kid.”

“I’m still a kid,” Solaire replied.

“Our goal is to push the government from letting businesses get too big.”

“You mean by acquisition, takeovers or mergers?”

“Exactly. What’s happening is big corporations are gobbling up small businesses, which leads to less competition, hence potential for monopolies or oligopolies. In some cases the corporations become so large that they are deemed ‘too big to fail’.”

“Like in the United States?”

“Yes. RBL was allowed to become too big for its own good. No one in parliament said anything, and do you know why?”

Solaire waited.

“They themselves had money invested in it. When the collapse happened the first thing parliament did was bail them out, therefore allowing them to recoup their losses via taxpayers’ money. But this wasn’t just the end of it. The regular

citizens who had invested in RBL lost everything. Parliament did nothing to bail them out because *they* were considered to have made bad investment decisions. Talk about hypocrisy!"

Solaire took it in. "Why the word 'secret' in SCABB?"

"Right now we prefer to stay under the radar, but we are involved in rallies, protests and demonstrations throughout London. There are a lot of powerful individuals and companies who want us shut down. Our hope is that one day SCABB will no longer be needed, but until then we will fight for what is right."

"So what is that you want from me?" Solaire asked.

"If what you are saying is true then we want to help you."

"How?"

"In whatever capacity you require it."

Solaire finished his drink and got up.

"How can I contact you?" he said.

She wrote down her number on a napkin.

Solaire took it and put it in his pocket.

"It was a pleasure meeting you," he said.

"Same here," she said, with a smile.

* * * * *

The next morning Solaire went down to the nearest café and had a hearty breakfast, which consisted of two omelets, potatoes, toasts, and a cup of tea.

He returned to his flat and spent the next hour researching on Louise Mapother, RBL's extra affairs liaison.

Mapother had been with RBL for over twenty years. She controlled every aspect of RBL's public image. No interviews were allowed to the media without her permission. No meetings took place without her knowledge. And no individuals were invited to RBL's functions without her scrutiny.

If Solaire wanted to get into RBL's party then he better have a good story.

He spent the remainder of the morning working on his laptop.

He first updated a fictitious website he had used in his prior assignments.

He then prepared business cards corresponding to the website.

When he was done, Roman Solaire of Travers Private Equity Firm was born.

Mr. Solaire was someone who could invest generously in RBL's various portfolios.

* * * * *

Solaire looked at his watch.

It was almost lunch time.

He stood across from RBL's headquarters.

He adjusted his baseball cap and pulled up his jacket collars.

As if on cue, David Clampton emerged from the building and began walking away from it.

Solaire knew exactly where he was going: to his favourite restaurant.

Solaire quickly crossed the road, brushed past Clampton and then headed for RBL's headquarters.

In his hand was Clampton's access card.

As Solaire approached the front doors he was relieved it wasn't the same doorman who had taken his hundred-pound note a day earlier.

The doorman held the door open and Solaire entered.

RBL's entrance lobby was far grander than anything Solaire had ever seen. The ceilings reached three storeys high. Huge columns stood on either side of him. The recently polished marble floor glistened from the lights hanging from above.

Everything about it said 'expensive.'

A guard stood to the side.

There were so many people coming in and out that the guard didn't pay any particular attention to Solaire.

Solaire walked up to the building's directory, which was placed on the wall, and examined it.

Louise Mapother's office was on the seventh floor.

He then searched for Robbie Fisk. His office was on the highest floor: eleventh.

Solaire took the elevators to the seventh floor.

There was a long hall with paintings hanging on both sides of the walls.

Solaire moved down when, behind a glass wall, he spotted Mapother's office.

Her secretary was behind a desk, typing away on a computer.

Solaire retreated back to the elevators.

He took it to the sixth floor.

When he got off he quickly searched for the fire alarm switch.

He looked at his watch and then pulled it.

Instantly a bell went off.

Solaire rushed up the stairs and was back on the seventh floor.

Through the glass wall he could see Mapother's assistant had a bewildered look on her face.

Solaire headed for the washrooms and hid in one of the stalls.

He looked at his watch again.

When two minutes had gone by, he emerged from the washrooms and headed for Mapother's office.

He scanned Clampton's card and entered.

The office was empty.

Solaire rushed to the secretary's desk.

As expected, the computer was locked.

Solaire pulled out a USB key and put it into the slot.

He then restarted the computer.

When it came back on, the software on the USB began to load.

It gave Solaire a temporary password, which he memorized.

He removed the USB, restarted the computer and then entered the temporary password.

This all took less than three minutes.

Solaire found the secretary's calendar.

He entered a memo indicating that Ms. Mapother should call back Mr. Roman Solaire regarding an invitation to their upcoming party.

Solaire restarted the computer and left.

He looked at his watch again. By now the security team would have gone through every inch of the sixth floor.

Solaire didn't have much time.

He took the stairs up to the eleventh floor.

The floor was vacant.

He quickly searched and found Fisk's office.

Solaire scanned the card and ducked underneath the tapes.

Fisk's office was spacious. It had large floor-to-ceiling windows. On the left was a stylish modern desk with a leather chair. In the middle were white leather chairs and a cappuccino-coloured coffee table.

Solaire glanced over and on top of it were business magazines.

There was something odd about the way they were placed.

Instead of being spread over the table, they were neatly stacked on top of one another.

On the left side of the office were large wooden shelves.

Solaire walked over to them.

Books lined the top shelves.

In the middle were various awards and other random items.

Solaire picked up one of the awards. It was for the businessman of the year.

Solaire spotted a tray with bottles and glasses.

Solaire examined one of the bottles, lifted the cap and sniffed.

Whiskey.

He then examined one of the glasses.

They were clean—too clean for someone who hadn't been in his office for quite some time.

Everything about the office looked too orderly...as if it had been thoroughly searched.

Whatever Solaire was hoping to find was either not here or had already been found.

Solaire walked over to Fisk's desk.

Like everything else, it looked spotless and organized. Solaire was certain it had been combed through, and so had the computer.

There was a photo frame on Fisk's desk.

Solaire picked it up. It was of Robbie Fisk and his wife.

Suddenly there was a noise.

Ting.

It came from the elevators.

Solaire instantly moved to the corner where it was the darkest.

RBL's employees were returning to their desks.

He was sure he had more time, but they may have realized sooner that it was a false alarm.

Solaire hid in the shadows and watched.

More people emerged from the elevators.

Soon the floor would be crawling with people.

He waited for the right moment when he quickly rushed over, slid the glass doors open and left Fisk's office.

As he was walking toward the stairs, a hand grabbed his shoulder.

Solaire turned.

A large man wearing a suit said, "Hey, the elevators are working now. You can use them."

"Um, yes," Solaire said. "Thank you. I will."

"No problem," the man said, smiling.

Solaire took the elevators down.

He quickly raced out of RBL's headquarters.

Outside he spotted David Clampton.

Someone must have informed him about the alarm at RBL. Clampton didn't look happy about being pulled out of his lunch.

Solaire finally allowed himself to smile.

His initial plan when he had first seen Clampton was to procure his access card and search Fisk's office. Now he was able to not only go through Fisk's office, but also invite himself to RBL's exclusive party.

* * * * *

Solaire sat back on a comfortable leather chair and surveyed the surroundings.

The Penthouse Suite at the Sheraton Park Tower was a stylish one-bedroom suite with a historic view of Knightsbridge. It came with the basic amenities: a plasma TV in the bedroom and lounge, a walk-in wardrobe, a lavish bathroom detailed in marble with plush bathrobes and slippers, and an opulent bedroom with cotton sheets and piled high plump pillows.

It was luxurious, to say the least.

For £3,500 a night it better be, Solaire concluded.

The only reason he had selected the Knightsbridge Suite was because rumour had it Muhammad Ali stayed here.

How true this was, Solaire didn't know nor care.

He wanted to experience what *the Greatest* may have experienced while he stayed here.

There was a knock at the door.

"Talk about expensive," Levack said as Solaire opened the door.

"Come in," Solaire merely answered.

Levack whistled as he took in the room. "They don't spare any expenses, do they?"

"Can I order you anything?" Solaire said.

Levack plopped himself on a chair and felt the leather exterior. "Yeah, why not? I'll have a..." He stopped and then smiled. "I would love a spot of tea," he said in his fake British accent. "With crumpets."

"Right," Solaire said and ordered.

"Nice," Levack said, admiring the room. "They give you a nice budget, huh?"

"Yes, I suppose." Solaire sat down across from him.

"Pricey?" Levack inquired.

"Very."

Levack nodded as if understanding. "I wished they gave me a nice budget."

"Where are you staying?" Solaire asked.

Levack gave him a devilish smile. "It's for me to know and for you not to find out."

Solaire was becoming accustomed to Levack's secrecy.

"Where I'm staying it's nothing spectacular, I promise you," Levack added. "I'm a company man, on company dime, as they say."

Solaire didn't reply back.

"So what can I do for you?" Levack said.

There was a knock at the door.

A butler entered with a tray and placed it on the table before them.

"Is there anything else, sir?" he politely asked.

"It's fine, thank you," Solaire said.

The butler bowed and left.

"Oh, goodie." Levack rubbed his hands. "Would you like some?" he asked, still not leaving his British accent.

"I'm good."

Levack poured the hot liquid in a cup, added some milk, dropped two lumps of sugar, gently stirred, tapped the side of the cup with the spoon, lifted the cup with his pinky raised to the sky, and sipped.

"Marvelous," he finally said.

Solaire wanted to roll his eyes but the telephone rang.

He lifted the receiver. "Yes, put her through." He listened, spoke a few words and then placed the receiver back down.

"Who was it?" Levack asked, taking a bite of the crumpet.

"I've just been invited to the Royal Bank of Lords' annual party."

Levack raised one eyebrow.

"I need you to do a scouting of the location. I need to know the entire layout of it. Important people will be attending. These people are linked to RBL. I am certain that vital information will be passed among them. If I know where they will be congregating then I can make myself available there."

"And where is this event being held?"

"I don't know yet. The private invitation should be arriving soon."

"Ah, I see." Levack nodded. "Is this why you are here in this fancy hotel—for appearances?"

"Roman Solaire of Travers Private Equity Firm only travels first class." Solaire smiled.

* * * * *

The taxi driver dropped Solaire off in front of a Pakistani restaurant in Southall, a suburban district in west London.

Earlier, he had called Emma Morgan and had asked her to meet him.

She had given him the address of this restaurant.

A waiter escorted him to a table near the windows.

Solaire ordered a glass of water and waited.

The restaurant was starting to get busy and through the windows Solaire saw the sun was coming down. Soon it would be dark and the restaurant would be packed for dinner.

Fifteen minutes later a car drove up to the restaurant and out came Emma Morgan.

She entered the restaurant and was escorted to his table.

She was wearing a blue dress that went down to her knees. Her blond hair was pulled back in a ponytail.

“Sorry to keep you waiting,” she said, taking a seat.

“It’s all right,” Solaire replied. “I was early.”

The waiter came over and Emma ordered a glass of wine

When Solaire declined she asked, “You don’t drink, Mr. Solaire?”

“Nothing hard, I’m afraid. My stomach is quite sensitive. And it’s Roman.”

She blushed. “I’m sure in your line of work you need a strong stomach,” she said.

“My line of work?” Solaire raised an eyebrow.

“I mean, going after high level bankers.”

Solaire smiled.

“I was wondering, Ms. Morgan,” Solaire started.

“Call me Emma.”

“Emma, the person who drove you here...is he your boyfriend?”

“You mean Sean?” she laughed. “Sean’s my brother and the president of SCABB.”

“Then I would have loved to meet him.”

“You will,” she said. “I told him about you, but he’s still a little cautious.”

“He’s not sure if he can trust me?” Solaire said.

“I hope to alleviate that tonight.”

“Ah, I see.” Solaire grinned.

“What?”

“Here I thought I was going to find out some information about you, but instead you are here to find out something about me.”

“I think that’s fair. We both get what we want.”

“Indeed.”

The waiter returned.

Emma ordered karahi chicken—boneless chicken in masala sauce—while he ordered butter chicken—boneless chicken in creamy butter sauce.

“What would you like to know about me?” Solaire said.

“Who are you?” she said.

“Who am I? I am Roman Solaire,” Solaire said with his arms wide out.

She laughed. “I can’t say I have heard of you.”

“Which is precisely how I want it.”

“Where were you born?”

“Montreal, but I was raised in Toronto.”

“A person from the commonwealth?” she said in a regal accent.

“Yes, your majesty.” Solaire bowed.

“And what do you do?”

“As my employer likes to say, I find that one thing which otherwise cannot be found.”

“Sounds complicated and dangerous.”

“It is.”

Their meals came.

Along with the chicken there was rice, a naan bread, and chutney on the side.

“So who do you work for?” she asked in between bites.

“I’m afraid I can’t say, but I assure you we’re the good guys.”

“That’s good to know,” she said half-heartedly.

Solaire pulled out a card and placed it in front of her. “For now you can assume I work there.”

“Travers Private Equity Firm?”

Solaire nodded. “And as the head of the firm I have been invited to RBL’s annual party.”

“I heard it’s very exclusive.”

“It is, and I would like to bring you as my date.”

She stopped eating.

Solaire continued, “This will get *you* closer to RBL’s board members and I will have a beautiful lady by my side.”

She blushed.

“But first, I would like to know a little about you,” Solaire said. “To make sure you are right for the position. There are other candidates, you know.”

“Are there?” she said teasingly.

“Yes, ma’am. All candidates will go through a rigorous selection process.”

“Will they?” She leaned forward. “Do all of them go to a fancy restaurant?”

Solaire shook his head. “Only a select few.”

She laughed. “Okay, I was born and raised in Brighton. I went to the University of Sussex, graduating in Cultural and Community Studies. After that I worked for various organizations, and now I devote my time fully to SCABB.”

“Interesting,” Solaire said. “What about your family?”

“Well, my mum and dad got married when they were still teenagers, and so it didn’t last. My dad went off to Oxford and my mum stayed behind and raised me. I didn’t know who my father was for a very long time. I was raised by my step-father.”

“So Sean’s your step-brother?”

“Yeah, but he might as well be my, quote unquote, real brother. We are inseparable.”

“What about your biological father? Where is he?”

She paused and looked away.

“I am sorry,” Solaire said. “That was insensitive of me. It is none of my business.”

“No, it’s okay. I found out recently when my mum got sick. I confronted him. At first he didn’t believe I was his daughter, but now he has done everything in his power to help me.” She paused and then said, “You have to realize both my parents were very young when they got married and both had different plans for their lives. My dad became focused on his education and my mum focused on me.”

Their desserts came.

Rasmalai consists of milk dumplings served in thickened milk.

“Sweet,” Solaire said, sipping the milk.

“You haven’t had it before?” she asked.

Solaire shook his head.

“My favourite,” she said. “I love Indian food.”

“I find they are either too spicy or too sweet,” he said.

“What do you have planned for the members of RBL?” she asked.

“Find evidence against them and prosecute them.”

She looked at him. “Who’ll prosecute them? I don’t know if you know, but they are strongly linked to British high society.”

“I know, but we won’t prosecute them in Britain.”

“Then where?” She was confused.

“Somewhere else.” He gave her a wide smile.

“There’s something you are not telling me,” she said.

“Right now I would rather keep my cards close to me; for your own safety, of course.”

“Of course,” she said.

“Why don’t you show me around London? I am only here for a short time.”

“I would love to, but Sean and I have work to do tonight.”

“Some other time then.”

* * * * *

Solaire spent the next morning scouring Savile Row. It was famous for its bespoke men’s tailoring and had a history going back two hundred and fifty years. Its customers had included dignitaries, presidents, heads of states, and even kings and maharajahs.

The tailored suits could cost thousands of pounds but required weeks to get made. Solaire searched, with little hope that he could get one sooner—much sooner. Fortunately, one shop had a tailored suit which a client had failed to pick up for quite some time. It fit him nicely, with minor alterations, of course.

His next stop was at a luxury car rental.

At five hundred pounds a day, Solaire selected one of the finest cars they had available.

He then went to a café, where he met Donald Levack.

Levack had a sombre look over him. “The place is surrounded by ten-foot high walls. The only way in is through the front gates, which has security guards. I also noticed as I passed by that it had several CCTV cameras around the perimeter.” Levack pulled out a folder. “But that didn’t mean I didn’t find anything. I spoke to a real estate agent and, apparently, Upper Town Court is a private mansion, one of the most luxurious estates in all of England. It has over a hundred rooms, many of which are bedrooms. It has several swimming pools, a squash court, tennis court, a wine cellar, and even a panic room.”

“A panic room?” Solaire said, surprised.

“Yes, it’s for when...”

“I know what it’s for. Please continue.”

“Yeah, well, it’s surrounded by over fifty acres of land. It has a garage, which can hold a dozen luxury cars, a private cinema, and oh, it also has some of the finest marble from all over the world. That’s what the real estate agent kept

repeating.” Levack looked up from the folder. “And get this,” Levack started. “It’s up for sale.”

“What is the asking price?” Solaire inquired.

Levack raised an eyebrow. “Why? You’re interested in buying it?”

Solaire shook his head. “Not quite, but that information may come in handy during my visit there.”

“Well, let’s say when converted to US dollars it’s over a hundred million.”

“Expensive.”

“You better believe it. And the current owners are in financial trouble as no one is willing to pay the asking price, so they have agreed to rent it out until they find a buyer.”

“And RBL has rented it in order to host their party.”

“Precisely, old chap,” Levack said, smiling. “But I’d be careful if I were you.”

Solaire waited.

“The security personnel don’t belong to the estate. RBL has hired their own.”

“Why would they do that?” Solaire said, more to himself.

“I guess they are expecting trouble.”

* * * * *

Solaire pulled up in his grey Maserati Gran Turismo.

Emma Morgan was waiting for him on the steps of her building.

She wore a stunning green dress that went down to her ankles. Her hair was pulled back in a bun. She had on diamond earrings, and a pearl necklace around her throat.

Solaire got out. He was wearing a charcoal grey suit, fitted perfectly to his body. Underneath the suit he had on a white shirt and a charcoal grey tie.

“Wow,” she said.

“I can say the same thing,” he answered.

“I meant the car.” She smiled.

“Well, I meant *you*.”

She blushed.

He held the car door for her.

“Is this yours?” she asked.

“It is for tonight, at least.”

* * * * *

The queue to get into the party was long.

Solaire counted almost twenty vehicles before him.

The backup was due to security screening each vehicle before it entered the gates.

In his Maserati, Solaire didn’t feel out of place. He saw Bentleys, BMWs, Mercedes, Porsches, and even a couple of Rolls Royces.

“Are you certain we’ll get in?” Emma asked.

“We’ll find out.”

They approached the gates and a big burly security guard came over.

He was holding a computerized tablet.

“Your name, sir?” he asked.

“Roman Solaire.”

The guard typed it in.

“Do you have identification?” he asked.

Solaire supplied one.

“And your guest’s, please.”

Emma handed over hers.

Another guard came over.

“We’ll need to do a routine check-up, if you don’t mind,” the first guard said.

The second guard quickly scanned the interior of the vehicle.

“Can you please pop open the boot?” the first guard said.

Solaire understood that he meant the trunk.

When the second guard was done, the first guard finally smiled and said, “Enjoy your evening, sir.”

The drive to the mansion was long but beautiful. Tall lush trees were on either side of them. They passed by gardens and ponds and a few birds and animals.

A valet rushed over.

They got out and Solaire handed him the keys.

“Take good care of it,” he said.

He meant it. It was, after all, a rental.

Solaire held his arm out and Emma took it.

Together they entered Upper Town Court.

The grand foyer was made of some of the finest marble available in the world.

A man in a butler’s uniform approached them with a tray.

“Champagne?” he asked.

Solaire took a glass with no intention of drinking from it.

Emma took one too.

“I can’t believe,” Emma started, “the average person is struggling to keep their homes while RBL is throwing money to rent a place like this.”

“I suppose appearances are still important, even in an economy such as this.” Solaire was thinking more about the money he was throwing to get into this party.

They were escorted to the grounds area of the estate.

An orchestra was playing music on one side. Tables and chairs were placed on the other. In the middle were long tables with hors d’oeuvres.

Solaire estimated that there were over a couple of hundred people.

A woman came over and Solaire immediately recognized her.

“I’m Louise Mapother,” she said.

“Thank you for the invitation, Ms. Mapother,” Solaire said, shaking her hand.

“Your CV on your website was very impressive,” she said. “It would have been a travesty not to have invited you.”

“Thank you.” Solaire introduced Emma.

“How do you do?” Emma said.

“Pleasure to meet you.” Mapother smiled back. “Come,” she said. “I would like you to meet some people.”

Emma turned to Solaire. “I think I’ll go sample the appetizers, if you don’t mind.”

“Not at all.”

Solaire followed Mapother through the party. They occasionally stopped to allow Mapother to greet some guests.

All three were standing together, as if in a huddle. Blairwood, Thatchburn and Blacksmith turned when they approached them.

Mapother introduced Solaire.

When the pleasantries were over, Blairwood said, “How long have you been in London, Mr. Solaire?”

“Only a few days,” he replied.

“How long are you intending to stay?”

“Until all my work is done.”

“You mean for your investment firm?” Thatchburn said.

“Yes.”

“Where are you situated?” Blacksmith interjected.

“Toronto.”

“A Canadian firm?” Thatchburn said. “We don’t get many investors from the commonwealth.”

“I assure you, we may be in Canada but we have our fingers everywhere,” Solaire said.

“Indeed.” Blairwood raised an eyebrow.

“Let me cut to the chase,” Blacksmith said. “How much would you say your firm is willing to invest in London?”

“As much as needed,” Solaire said. “But only if the returns are stable and assured.”

“I don’t know about that,” Blacksmith said. “In today’s economy nothing is guaranteed.”

“But they are definitely not risky.” Thatchburn gave Blacksmith a look.

“Ah, yes, we are heavily risk averse,” Blacksmith said. “We don’t play with our investors’ money. We treat it like it is our own.”

“That is reassuring,” Solaire said.

“Plus,” Blairwood quickly said. “We are not like those American banks and their subprime rubbish.”

“So what do you invest in?” Solaire asked.

Blairwood leaned closer. “Gold, oil, natural gas—the necessities of life.”

“Gold is a necessity?” Solaire said.

“For the rich it is,” Thatchburn said.

It was then that Solaire noticed the golden bracelet, the golden rings, and the golden earrings on Thatchburn.

“When gold was less than five-hundred dollars an ounce, I predicted it would go up,” Thatchburn said proudly. “Now it is *triple* that.”

“We made a fortune on that speculation,” Blairwood said.

“You mean your investors made a fortune,” Solaire added.

“Yes, of course.”

Solaire said, “It was sad to hear what happened to one of your board members, Mr. Robbie Fisk.”

There was a pause when Thatchburn said, “Yes, we were all heartbroken.”

“I read in the papers that he committed suicide?” Solaire said.

“Yes, well,” Blacksmith started. “That’s what Scotland Yard told us.”

“Why would he do that?” Solaire said.

Blairwood leaned closer. “If I can be frank with you, Mr. Solaire, Robbie was going through some personal issues.”

“Women issues, to be exact,” Blacksmith quickly added.

“Scandalous,” Thatchburn said, shaking her head.

“It may have been too much for him,” Blairwood said.

“Do you suppose someone killed him?” Solaire asked.

There was dead silence.

“Why would anyone want to do that?” Thatchburn said. “Robbie was one of us; he was family. I just can’t imagine anything as horrific as that.”

Other guests came over and greeted the three board members.

Blairwood leaned over to Solaire. “Maybe later we can sit and discuss how the Royal Bank of Lords can help with your investment needs.”

“I would like that.”

* * * * *

Solaire headed back to where he’d left Emma.

On the way, something caught his eye.

A woman was standing in the distance. She had shoulder length silver hair. She was wearing a silver business suit and matching silver shoes. She was looking directly at him.

Solaire had the sudden urge to go up to her. But before he could, she turned and disappeared in the crowd.

Emma approached him.

“Did I miss anything important?” she asked.

“Not really,” Solaire said. “Only that the board is interested in doing business with me.”

“Isn’t that good?”

“Very.”

A voice came through the speakers, asking everyone to turn their attention to the south side of the estate.

A projector and screen had been set up.

A video came up and showed the history of the bank, followed by the transition the bank had undergone over the years, and finally ending with all the great work the bank had done for the local communities.

“They make it sound like RBL is a charitable organization,” Emma whispered to Solaire.

All three board members came up to the microphone and thanked the guests for coming and for their loyalty to the bank in such difficult times. They briefly mentioned the loss of one of their board members.

Solaire noticed Emma cringed whenever they mentioned Fisk’s name.

“He’s a good man,” Emma said, biting her lip.

“Did you know him?” Solaire said, turning to her.

Emma blinked and said, “No, I read about him. He seemed like he genuinely cared about those who had lost their life’s savings.”

Solaire put his arm around her and looked directly in her eyes. "We are going to make sure that no one else loses their life's savings."

She nodded.

The music came back up.

"Would you care to dance, Ms. Morgan?" Solaire said with his arm extended.

"I would love to, Mr. Solaire," Emma said, smiling.

* * * * *

They danced through a couple of songs when Solaire caught the three board members leave the party and head back into the estate.

"You will have to excuse me," he said to Emma. "I have to go to the men's room."

"I'll be right here," she said.

Solaire rushed past the other dancers and went up the stairs. With over a hundred rooms, he did not want to lose the board members.

He saw them going down a hall.

He followed but kept a fair distance.

They stopped by the elevator and took it up.

Solaire watched the numbers change, and when it stopped on the third floor, he took the stairs up.

He was halfway down the hall when a voice said, "Sir!"

He turned.

A man in a security uniform approached. "Sir, you're not allowed to be here."

"I am so sorry," Solaire said. "I was searching for the men's washroom and then I ended up here."

"There's one on the ground floor for the guests. I can escort you there."

"Is there one near here? I have to go *really* bad, I'm afraid." Solaire made a face.

The guard looked at him and then said, "Right this way, sir."

They walked down the hall, stopping at a door.

"Once you're done, please return to the party," the guard said.

"I will make sure to do that. Thank you."

Solaire entered the bathroom and was taken aback by how exquisite it was. Everything, from the sink counter to the bathtub, was covered in intricately designed marble.

Solaire waited for the guard to get as far away as possible. He was about to leave the bathroom when suddenly the door swung open and in came a man.

The man's head was shaved. He wore a silver suit on his large body.

Solaire immediately went to the sinks. He turned on the taps.

The man moved past him and went to the other side of the sinks.

Solaire slowly washed up and then grabbed a hand towel.

As he was drying his hands, through the mirror Solaire caught the man remove a knife from his jacket.

The man hid the knife behind his back. He moved toward Solaire.

Solaire carefully twisted the towel in his hands.

Just as the man was about to swing the knife, Solaire turned and, using the hand towel as a weapon, he snapped it across the man's hand.

The man howled as the knife flew out of his hand and landed near the tub.

Solaire kicked the man in the gut, causing him to fall back.

Solaire raced toward the knife. The man quickly recovered and tackled him from behind.

He pushed Solaire to the wall.

Solaire's face hit marble.

The man was strong and his weight was crushing Solaire into the wall.

Solaire swung his elbow back, connecting across the man's jaw.

The man released his weight and stumbled back holding his face.

Blood flowed into Solaire's left eye.

He tried to wipe it away but through the mirror he saw the man charge toward him with his head down.

Solaire instantly moved left. The man missed him by an inch and went straight into the mirrors.

The man smashed his face, shattering glass.

He screamed as he stumbled back.

Solaire lowered himself into a crouch and tripped the man.

The man fell back, hitting his head on the side, and then rolled into the tub.

When Solaire checked, the man's head was twisted to one side with blood covering the inside of the tub.

The man was dead.

Solaire fell to his knees.

He was drained.

He lowered his head and took a deep breath.

Blood fell down his face.

Solaire lifted himself up and checked himself in one of the mirrors.

There was a deep cut above his left eyebrow.

Solaire turned on the taps, filled his hands with cold water and then splashed the cut.

It stung.

He grabbed one of the hand towels and placed it on the cut.

He applied pressure.

A few minutes later it looked as if the blood had stopped flowing.

He then cleaned the wound with a wet towel.

He adjusted his shirt and tie, and applied water to his hair.

When he felt he was ready he went to the door.

He pulled it open and found himself facing the barrel of a gun.

A silver haired woman was holding it.

"We've been waiting for you, Mr. Solaire," she said.

* * * * *

Solaire was taken to a room.

His arms and legs were tied to a chair.

The woman crossed her arms and looked at him directly.

“Do you expect me to tell you everything?” Solaire said.

“That is so clichéd.” The woman laughed. “You’ve been watching too many spy movies. And yes, I do expect that you’ll tell me your entire life story. We are in the farthest corner of the estate—away from *everyone*. No one will come to your aid and no one will hear your screams, Mr. Solaire.”

“Are you planning on torturing me?” Solaire said.

“It depends on your answers.”

“I have a question for you.”

“Okay.” She smiled.

“Why were you trying to kill me?” Solaire asked. “The man in the bathroom is one of yours, is he not?”

“Yes, and if you hadn’t put up a fight it all might have ended painlessly for you.” She walked around him. “You see, he was very skilled with a knife. One slice to the throat and it would have been over very quickly. Who do you work for?”

“You did not answer *my* question.”

Suddenly the door swung open and in came David Clampton, RBL’s head of security.

“He will tell you why,” the woman said.

Clampton looked at him with disgust. “The cameras caught you in the bank’s headquarters. You accessed areas and equipment that were strictly off limits. You stole my access card. Do you have any idea how much trouble that got me in?”

“Who do you work for?” the woman asked, ignoring Clampton.

“You would not believe me even if I told you.”

“Try me.”

“An international organization that prosecutes criminals, and we have our eyes on the board members of the Royal Bank of Lords.”

“Really?” the woman said, raising an eyebrow. “I didn’t think white collar crime would result in such drastic measures, and by that I mean stealing security passes, breaking into corporate buildings, and falsely entering parties. It’s just money.”

“I suppose to you it is, but to those who lost everything it is more than that. Their entire lives were destroyed by the recklessness of the board members of RBL.”

“I’m not here to discuss morality,” she said. “What is the name of the organization you work for?”

“That, I’m afraid, is top secret.”

“I hope it’s worth risking your life for.” She turned to a man standing in the back.

The man wore a similar silver suit like the one worn by the dead man in the bathroom.

“You dress them up in matching outfits,” Solaire said. “How adorable.”

“I’m glad you are enjoying yourself, Mr. Solaire. But you won’t be for long.”

The man came up to Solaire. He cracked his knuckles and then swung his fist into Solaire’s midsection.

Solaire gasped.

He coughed hard.

“That’s just the beginning,” the woman said.
Solaire sucked air through his nostrils.
“Okay, okay, I will tell you what you want to know,” he said.
She smiled. “Why is it that I don’t believe you?”
“Ask me a question.” Solaire coughed some more.
She stared at him.
“All right, who do you work for?” she asked.
“Travers Private Equity Firm.”
She shook her head and nodded to the man again.
The man smiled and cracked his knuckles once more.

* * * * *

Suddenly the door swung open and in came the three board members.
“You shouldn’t be here,” the woman said to them.
“Have you found out what he knows?” Blacksmith said.
“I’m working on it.”
Blairwood turned to Solaire. “Why are you asking questions about Robbie Fisk?”
“I should ask you the same question.”
Blairwood stared at him.
“Mrs. Fisk mentioned a certain person matching your friend’s description.”
Solaire nodded toward the woman. “Who paid her a visit.”
“Fisk is dead,” Thatchburn said.
“And if I am guessing correctly, you had him killed,” Solaire said.
Thatchburn shook her head. “No, but it’s not that we didn’t want to. Before we could take any action he did it for us by driving his car into the Thames.”
Solaire said, “Then the question I need to ask is why did you want him dead?”
There was no response.
“Is it because he had incriminating evidence against you?” Solaire said.
“Something he was willing to provide to the authorities?”
Blacksmith said, “It was only after his death we realized he had something against us. I will admit our assessment of Fisk was wrong. Until a couple of months ago he was completely loyal to us and the bank. Fisk was as guilty as any of us for the financial crisis. Then suddenly he had a change of heart. He wanted the bank to compensate for any and all losses incurred by the investors.”
“And he was right to request that,” Solaire said. “You had insurance against such losses. Either way, the bank would have come out of it in good standing. You chose not to do it.”
“You have no idea how disastrous that would have been,” Blairwood said.
“Not to mention set a precedence,” Thatchburn said.
Blairwood continued. “Can you imagine a bank repaying someone for bad investment advice?”
“Isn’t that what the government did when they bailed RBL out?”
“Decisions were made,” Blacksmith said. “No one could have predicted how bad things would turn out. Banks all across Europe have taken a hit, and we are no exception. We did what we had to for the survival of the bank.”

“You did what was best for *you*,” Solaire said. “All three of your net worth has gone up since the financial meltdown. While everyone else lost everything, you gained much more than before. How do you explain that?”

There was silence.

“We don’t owe you any explanations,” Blacksmith said.

“Our shareholders are quite happy,” Thatchburn said. “And we only answer to them.”

They turned to leave.

“What are you going to do with him?” Blairwood asked.

“What we should have done with Fisk,” the woman replied.

The punches were hard and fast.

Solaire coughed up blood. His midsection was bruised and raw.

He was certain he had a broken rib or two.

He tried to breathe and it hurt when he did so.

The man cracked his knuckles again.

He hit Solaire again and again.

“I can’t watch this,” Clampton said. “I’ll see you when you’re done.”

He left.

The woman turned to Solaire. “I told you it would be painful.”

Solaire tried to speak, but no words came out.

“Save your breath. You’re going to need it.” She turned to his abuser. “Finish him.”

From his jacket pocket, the man pulled out a clear plastic bag.

He went around Solaire.

He placed the plastic bag over Solaire’s head.

He wrapped it tightly around his neck, constricting air flow.

Solaire gasped.

He tried thrashing his body this way and that, but the man held the bag firmly in place.

The bag inflated and deflated as Solaire tried to breathe.

But it was futile. Solaire was suffocating.

He felt dizzy and lightheaded.

Soon he would lose consciousness.

Suddenly someone burst through the door.

“What is it?” the woman demanded.

“We have a problem outside. You need to come right away.”

Solaire’s abuser released his grip.

Air flowed into the bag.

Solaire inhaled deeply.

Oxygen went into his lungs and it felt good.

The woman turned to his abuser. “Do it quick and get rid of the body.”

The woman, along with her men, left.

Solaire was now alone with his abuser.

The man cracked his knuckles and a smile came on his face.

The man swung his fist at Solaire's midsection, but this time Solaire was ready for it.

He leaned forward and twisted.

The man's fist hit the side of the chair.

He winced back, holding his hand.

Solaire was barely upright. With his arms and legs tied to the chair, he placed all his weight on his toes.

Before the man could recover, Solaire threw his body onto him.

The back of the chair hit the man squarely across the head.

The man fell back with Solaire on top of him.

The impact snapped the arm of the chair in two. Pain shot through Solaire's arm. He quickly slid the ropes off the broken piece and then freed himself.

The man shook his head and tried to get back on his feet.

Solaire grabbed the broken piece and swung it across the man's face.

It connected. The man's head jerked back and he fell to the ground hard.

Blood poured out through his nose.

The man's eyes rolled up.

He was dead.

Solaire pulled off the plastic bag and dropped to the ground, exhausted.

He knew he couldn't stay here. They would come back, and if they found him they would find a quicker way to kill him.

He thought about going through the door but was uncertain as to how many guards were outside.

He opened the window and looked down.

There was a balcony on the floor below him.

He pulled off his suit jacket and loosened his tie.

He carefully pulled himself up on the windowsill and then over it.

Outside, he firmly clung to the edges of the window.

He measured how far he was to the balcony below and then let go.

He landed on concrete.

Pain shot through him.

He didn't have time to worry about the damage to his body. He jumped over the balcony.

This time he landed on dirt and grass.

He got on his feet and rushed away from the estate.

He ran as hard and fast as he could.

His entire body was on fire.

He moved past trees and bushes.

He remembered Levack telling him the estate was surrounded by fifty acres of land.

Solaire didn't know how long he had run, but he saw a fence before him. Beyond the fence was a road.

He hoped the fence wasn't live. The last thing he wanted was to be electrocuted, considering he had twice escaped from being killed.

He grabbed a branch and threw it at the fence.

The branch hit metal and then fell to the ground.

Solaire estimated the fence was eight feet high.
He pulled himself up and over it.
On the road, he began walking away from Upper Town Court.
He was not even a mile away when a car pulled up.
Out came Emma Morgan.
“Oh my God,” she cried, looking at him.
She helped him get in the back seat.
Solaire immediately recognized the driver. It was Sean, Emma’s step-brother.
Solaire put his head back on the seat.
A million questions were swirling in his head, but before he could ask even one he passed out.

* * * * *

Solaire opened his eyes to darkness.
He blinked and then blinked some more.
He tried to get up but his entire body felt rooted to where he lay.
He scanned his surroundings and quickly realized he was in a room.
He heard sounds.
He listened.
They were voices and they were coming from another room.
He slowly lifted his head and then willed his body up.
Every inch of him was in pain.
He touched a bandage above his left eye. It was bulky.
He moved his hands over his midsection. It was wrapped in a white cloth. He tried to inhale deeply but stopped when it became unbearable. He took short breaths. It hurt less.
His knuckles were sore and bruised.
He left the room and was in another room, this one bigger.
There was a television and sofa on one side, a kitchen on the other, and a table with chairs in the middle.
Emma and Sean were at the table, going over some papers.
They stopped when they saw him.
“You shouldn’t be up,” Emma said, coming over.
She looked him over as if to make sure all the bandages and wraps were still in place.
“Where am I?” he asked.
“My apartment,” Sean said. “By the way, I am...”
“Sean,” Solaire said. “Emma told me.”
Sean said, “Can I get you anything? Tea perhaps?”
“Tea is fine. But make it strong.”
“Right away,” Sean said, going into the kitchen.
“How are you feeling?” Emma asked.
“Like someone who just went through a meat grinder.”
Emma smirked. “Well, at least you came out in one piece.”
He slowly made his way to the sofa and sat down.
He rubbed his eyes. “What happened last night?”

Sean came over and placed the steaming cup before him. "We rescued you."

Solaire waited for more.

Emma said, "When you didn't return from the estate I knew something was wrong. I called Sean. He provided the diversion."

"Diversion?" Solaire was confused.

Sean said, "When Emma called and told me, I quickly assembled a large protest outside the party."

"How were you able to do it that fast?" Solaire asked.

Sean smiled. "Technology is every protestor's dream. I posted a message on our website, which instantly passed it on to each and every one of our members, and voila! Two hundred loud and angry demonstrators were outside the gates of Upper Town Court."

Emma said, "When I saw most of the security guards go in the direction of the front gates I went inside, searching for you. But it was like searching for someone at a carnival. The estate had too many rooms to go through. I doubled back and caught up with Sean. We hoped you had gotten away but we weren't certain until we saw you by the road."

"Thank you," Solaire finally said. He took a sip of the tea.

"Emma told me what you are doing," Sean said. "SCABB is here to help in any way."

"What did you find out?" Emma asked him.

Solaire shook his head. "Nothing of importance."

"So it was all for naught," Emma said.

"Not exactly," Solaire said. "We now know we are dealing with dangerous people—people who capable of doing anything, even murder."

"What are you going to do?" she asked.

"First, I am going to need some strong painkillers. Then I'm going to go after them."

* * * * *

Behind dark sunglasses, Solaire watched as tourists strolled by him.

They were easy to spot. Either they were holding some sort of guidebook or cameras.

If that didn't give them away then it was the way they looked at everything. It was as if they were in awe and wonder, which most were.

London had some of the most recognizable sights in the world: the London Bridge, the House of Parliament, and even Big Ben.

Right now he was staring up at London's most recent, relative to the others, attraction—the London Eye.

He watched a man buy a ticket.

Solaire had already bought his.

He followed the man to a giant capsule, which was on a Ferris wheel. The wheel moved slowly, allowing passengers inside the capsule to get a panoramic view of London.

The man sat on a wooden bench in the middle. The other passengers circled the giant windows, taking pictures and videos.

Solaire sat beside the man.

"You look terrible," Travers said.

"I feel even worse."

"I could..."

"No," Solaire cut him off. Solaire knew what Travers was about to say and he wanted nothing to do with it. Solaire hated guns, ever since he was a child. Regardless of what gun-nuts proclaimed that it's not guns killing people but people killing people, Solaire knew guns made it easier.

"Then utilize Levack," Travers said. "He is becoming restless."

Solaire nodded.

"After speaking to you I made some calls," Travers said. "The woman in silver, her name is Claudia Cain. She is a freelancer, working for the highest bidder. In this case it is RBL."

"What have they hired her for?" Solaire asked.

"It seems what we have hired you for."

Solaire looked at him.

"Cain is searching for incriminating evidence Fisk may have left behind."

"How does she know there is even any evidence to begin with?"

Travers went silent.

"There is something you are not telling me," Solaire said.

"The day before Fisk disappeared he had made a phone call to an anonymous person—a woman. He made a mistake by using his office phone. He did not realize at the time that he was under surveillance. Apparently, for the past couple of months his behaviour had become strange, and fearing a public relations disaster, the other board members had made an effort to keep a tab on him. In their defence, they were worried that Fisk was having an affair and they just didn't want the negative publicity. What they overheard instead was Fisk describing certain documents in his possession that might shake the foundation of RBL."

"What type of documents?" Solaire asked.

"We don't know."

"Who recorded it?"

"David Clampton."

Solaire nodded as if understanding.

"Why did you not tell me this at the beginning?" Solaire asked. "In fact, why did you not just give me the recording?"

"It is not as simple as you may think." Travers looked away.

Solaire leaned over and whispered. "I almost died. Simple is not the answer I am looking for."

Travers sighed. "The recording was acquired without legal means."

"It was stolen?"

"Yes."

"By whom?"

Travers said nothing.

"You?" Solaire finally asked.

Travers nodded.

"I don't understand why that is an issue."

“CIL cannot be linked to anything irregular. What I did broke the law. It would have been inadmissible in court, anyways.”

“But what I do isn’t exactly by the law,” Solaire said.

“But you are not linked to CIL.”

Solaire understood. As far as anyone knew, Roman Solaire did not officially work for the Court of International Law. According to Travers, he was an advisor while Levack was a hired consultant.

“I should have told you,” Travers said. “I didn’t know this woman Cain was also involved. I am sorry, Roman.”

Solaire said nothing.

They were coming to the end of their journey.

Solaire got up. “Tell Levack to meet me at my flat in St. John’s Wood. We’ve got a lot of work to do.”

* * * * *

“What is the link between RBL’s board members and Claudia Cain?” Solaire asked.

Levack was sitting on a sofa, sipping a drink, while Solaire was standing, staring out the window.

“Is this a multiple choice question?” Levack shrugged.

“David Clampton,” Solaire answered, ignoring his comment. “Clampton is the head of security for RBL. He was the one who bugged Fisk’s phone. He was also the one who hired Cain.”

“Okay. But I don’t see where you’re going with this,” Levack said, scratching his head. “I have to tell you I didn’t have my bowl of cereal this morning.”

Again Solaire ignored Levack’s response. “Clampton is the key to all of this.”

“How?” Levack said.

“Just ask yourself, why did Fisk decide to end his life?”

“Maybe he was guilty as sin and his conscience couldn’t take it anymore so he decided to jump in the river,” Levack said. “Personally, a bullet to the head would have been simpler.”

“But why on that particular day?” Solaire asked.

“I don’t know.” Levack put his hands up in defeat. “Maybe it was his birthday.”

Solaire placed an old newspaper in front of him.

“It was on this day RBL reported one of their biggest loses ever.”

Levack picked up the newspaper and scanned it.

“So?” he finally said. “Maybe he didn’t want to face the media after that huge loss.”

“The investors lost money, yes, but RBL was insured against such losses. So why would Fisk kill himself on the day *he* made a lot of money?” Seeing Levack’s blank face, Solaire said, “Because he didn’t kill himself he was murdered.”

Levack sat up straight. “But didn’t you say the board members denied having anything to do with his death?”

“They did only because they were too late to do anything, but Clampton knew. He had the recording the day *before* Fisk disappeared. He only made it available to the other board members after what happened to Fisk. And I’m assuming it

was then that the board members asked him to find that evidence, which led him to hire Cain.”

“What you’re saying,” Levack started. “We get Clampton. We solve this case.”
“Precisely.”

* * * * *

“Are you certain this was the best choice for a vehicle?” Solaire said.

Both he and Levack were inside a Mini Cooper. The Cooper was red with a Union Jack flag on the roof.

“Why do you ask?” Levack said.

“I mean, we’re in a stakeout. Wouldn’t this give us away?”

“No.” Levack shook his head. “We are in England. All Brits drive this car.”

Solaire looked around but he didn’t see a single Mini anywhere.

Across from them was RBL’s headquarters.

“You sure he’s going to come out?” Levack asked.

Solaire looked at his watch. “Any minute now.”

As if on cue, Clampton emerged from the building and began walking in the direction of his favourite restaurant for his afternoon meal.

Levack put the Mini in gear.

He drove slowly, matching Clampton’s pace.

Up ahead was a side street.

Levack accelerated, turned and cut into Clampton’s path.

Before Clampton could react, both Solaire and Levack were out.

“Get in,” Levack said. Beneath his jacket he revealed a gun.

Clampton nodded and quickly did as he was told.

With Clampton in the backseat, they drove away.

“I told you this car would be perfect,” Levack said, driving. “With no back doors he can’t escape.”

“I thought you were dead?” Clampton said.

Solaire, from the passenger seat, turned to him. “I’m not.”

“What do you want from me?” Clampton asked.

“Why did you kill Fisk?” Solaire asked.

“I didn’t.”

“Why is it that I don’t believe you,” Solaire said.

“I swear.”

“Then what happened?”

Clampton went silent.

Levack glanced back through the rear view mirror. “Do you want me to stop the car? Because if I do, I’ll bring out my friend again, and I promise you that it’ll be the last thing you’ll see.”

“Don’t shoot me. I’ll tell you everything.” Clampton turned to Solaire. “I followed Fisk in my car through London, but then I lost him and before I knew what happened, his car was in the Thames.”

“Why were you following him?” Solaire asked.

Clampton’s shoulders sank. “I was trying to get money out of him.”

“You were blackmailing him?” Solaire said.

“Yes.” Clampton sighed.

“Classy,” Levack responded.

“I saw how much money everyone was making...”

“You mean the board members?” Solaire said.

“Yes. While they were making millions I was barely making ends meet.”

“Why Fisk?”

“He was not as careful as the others. They’d been under public scrutiny for years so they were always cautious. There are things even I don’t know about them, and I’m RBL’s head of security.”

“How were you going to blackmail Fisk?”

“There were rumours swirling around that Fisk was seeing another woman. His behaviour changed around this time as well. The board members asked me to keep an eye on him. I knew that was my chance. I started recording his conversations. But he was careful. He made sure to never use his office phone. Until one day...”

“When you overheard him say he had information against RBL,” Solaire finished his sentence.

“You know about it?” Clampton’s eyes widened.

“We know a lot of things, pal,” Levack interjected.

“Go on,” Solaire said.

“After Fisk died, what could I do then? I couldn’t blackmail him, could I? So I showed the tapes to the board members, but soon after I lost one of the tapes.”

Solaire thought of Travers but said nothing.

“Why did you hire Claudia Cain?” Solaire asked.

“The board members were freaked out. If anyone found that evidence they’d be ruined. So I hired her to appease them.”

“But you had no intention of her finding that information?” Solaire said.

Clampton lowered his eyes. “No.”

“Why not?”

“I wanted to find it so I could use it against them.”

“You wanted to blackmail the board members?”

“Yes.”

The Mini moved through the London streets, occasionally going around the roundabouts.

“You know where the evidence is?” Solaire asked.

Clampton nodded. “But I’m not a hundred percent sure.”

“Take us there.”

* * * * *

Across the street was the building of a self-storage facility.

They were in the Mini, looking directly at it.

“You think it’s in there?” Solaire asked.

Clampton shrugged. “Sure.”

“How sure?” Levack turned and looked at him directly.

“On the day I was trailing Fisk, he made a stop at this location. I figure he either took something or left something in there.”

“So you’re not sure,” Levack said, shaking his head.

“No, but we can’t ask Fisk now, can we?” Clampton said.

“Don’t get smart,” Levack warned.

Clampton crossed his arms and said, “Good luck trying to find it, though. There are over a hundred units in there. Plus, there are security guards and security cameras everywhere, and you need a proximity card to get through the front gates. It’s not as simple as you think. Believe me, I tried.”

Solaire looked across.

The gate was open during business hours with a manager inside during this time.

A blue van approached the building and then went in.

“Wait here,” Solaire said and got out.

“Where’re you going?” Levack asked.

“I’ll be back,” Solaire said, and with that he was gone.

Levack stared at the rear view mirror. “You behave yourself, okay? Or else I *will* shoot you. I haven’t used my gun once in London and I am itching to.”

Clampton lowered himself in the backseat.

Twenty-five minutes later Solaire returned and got in the passenger seat.

“Let’s go,” he said.

“Where?” Levack asked.

“Anywhere, but we have to come back when the facility closes.”

“We’re going to break into it later?” Levack inquired.

“We don’t need to.” Solaire pulled out a coloured card. “I was able to procure this from the family in the blue van. I then went to the manager and told her I had forgotten where my storage unit was as I had not used it in quite some time. She asked me for the name on the lease. I said I wasn’t sure as I had purchased it off an auction some years back. I rattled off some names, the common ones first: Robbie Fisk, Stacey Fisk, and Fisks’ kids’ name, but none came up. I showed the manager that I did indeed have a pass, just not the location of my unit. Seeing how frustrated I was, she mentioned some names and one of them was the one.”

“Which one?” Clampton said, sitting straight up.

“Wouldn’t you like to know,” Levack shot back.

“Stacey Glenister, her name before her marriage to Robbie Fisk.”

Levack smiled. “You, my friend, are worth every penny.”

“Okay, now that you know where it is, can I go?” Clampton said.

“Not a chance, pal,” Levack said. “We wouldn’t want you calling your friends, would we?”

“I wouldn’t, I promise.”

“Why is it that we don’t trust you,” Levack continued.

Solaire said, “You help us find what we are looking for and we will let you go.”

“Why is it I don’t trust you?” Clampton said.

“I give you my word,” Solaire said.

“Plus, you got no choice,” Levack said.

Clampton reluctantly nodded.

Levack started the Mini and they were off.

* * * * *

Two hours later, they were back at the same spot they were in earlier.

This time the gates to the storage facility were closed.

The Mini pulled up to the gates. Solaire held the card up to a black panel and waited. There was a *beep*, indicating the card had been read, and the gates slid open.

They parked and then went inside.

"It's on the top floor," Solaire said. He was carrying a small bag.

They took a freight lift up.

They were confronted with several rows, each row containing many storage units.

"You go ahead," Levack said. "I'm going to check out something first."

Solaire and Clampton moved up.

They entered a row and then stopped.

"It should be this one," Solaire said

The unit was covered with a roll-up metal door. A u-lock was attached at the base.

From the bag, Solaire pulled out a lock cutter and snapped the lock off.

He pulled the metal door up.

The storage unit was 20x20, windowless, and surrounded by corrugated metal. It was the size of a two-car garage.

Solaire switched on a light.

The unit was filled with all sorts of objects. There were boxes upon boxes to the back, painted frames to one side, shelves filled with odds and ends to another side, folded tables and chairs lay in the middle, electronic items such as old computer and monitors next to it; even kitchen utensils were placed among the items.

"How are we going to find it?" Clampton said.

"Check the boxes first. See if they are labelled."

Levack returned.

"Whoa," he said. "That's a lot of junk."

"Then help us go through it," Solaire said.

Three hours went by and they had failed to find anything.

"I guess it's not here," Levack said.

"It has to be," Clampton said. "Where else would he keep it?"

"I don't know," Solaire said, in deep thought.

"Can I go?" Clampton then said. "I helped you like you wanted. You gave me your word."

Solaire looked over at Levack and then nodded. "You can go."

"No one is going anywhere," a voice said.

They turned.

* * * * *

Claudia Cain stood at the door of the unit. Beside her were two men. Each was holding a weapon.

"Thank goodness you are here," Clampton said. "These two had me as their hostage."

"Shut up," Cain said.

"How did you find us?" Solaire asked.

"His cell phone," she said, nodding toward Clampton. "We put a tracker on it."

"How did you get in?" Solaire asked.

"The security guard was kind enough to let us in." She had a smile on her face that said the guard didn't make it.

"I'm so glad I hired you," Clampton said, smiling. "Now shoot these two."

Cain pulled out a silver gun from her pocket and aimed it at him.

"What? What are you doing?" Clampton said, flabbergasted.

"I don't work for *you*," she said. "I work for the board of RBL. And they no longer trust you."

Clampton turned pale.

"The board started to get suspicious when you failed to report certain information on time."

"You mean the recorded tapes? I know I was a little late in giving them, but I did, didn't I?"

"The board no longer requires your service," she said coldly.

Before he could say another word, she fired. The bullet hit Clampton squarely in the chest. For a second he stood stunned. He looked down at the red liquid soaking his shirt and then he fell to the ground.

David Clampton was dead.

"You didn't have to do that," Solaire said.

"You should worry about yourself, Mr. Solaire," she said, aiming the gun at him.

"What do you want?" Solaire said.

"I want what you want."

"We didn't find it."

"Well, that is a shame," she said with a smirk. "Then you are no longer useful to me."

"We'll pay you double what they are paying you," Levack quickly said.

Solaire looked at him.

"It works in the movies." He shrugged.

"Maybe I'll shoot you first," she said, turning her gun to Levack.

"Let him go," Solaire said. "Your fight is with me."

She looked at him.

"I was the one who broke into RBL. I was the one who killed your men at the estate. I am the one who was hired to find what Fisk was hiding. He had nothing to do with any of that."

"Then what is he? Your assistant?" she asked.

"More like a business acquaintance," Levack said.

"Just let him go," Solaire repeated.

"You know I can't do that, Mr. Solaire," she said. "You've put me in a difficult situation."

"Then shoot me first," Solaire said.

"Yeah, shoot him first," Levack said.

Solaire looked at him.

"Gotta extend my life as long as I can, buddy," Levack said.

Cain laughed. "Be careful who you choose as your friends, Mr. Solaire."

She turned the gun at him.

"Be ready for the impact," Levack said to him. "It's going to be a blast." He winked.

That's when Solaire noticed something hidden in Levack's hand.

Before Cain could pull the trigger there was a loud explosion. It shook the walls of the storage unit.

Then there was another, and another. The explosions were in rapid succession.

The walls felt like they were going to tip over.

"Now!" Levack yelled.

Solaire grabbed a lamp from a shelf and hurled it across at Cain. She ducked and it flew over her head and hit the man behind her.

Before she could recover, Solaire rushed forward and with his shoulder shoved her hard. She fell to the floor with the gun flying in the air.

Without stopping, he lunged at the man who had just been hit with the lamp.

Solaire kned the man in the stomach. The man keeled over.

From the corner of his eye he caught Levack punching the other man across the face.

Solaire thought about grabbing one of the weapons, but before he could a bullet zipped past him.

Cain was still on the floor but she had regained possession of her gun.

Solaire dashed down the rows of units.

Another bullet flew past him and went straight into a wall.

Solaire reached the end and then quickly turned, his feet skidding on the floor.

Up ahead he saw the freight elevator. He thought about it but knew there was no way he could wait for it. Instead, he turned right and headed for the stairs.

Another bullet zipped past him and hit a glass wall.

"Stop!" a voice boomed. Solaire turned.

The man whom he had kned was holding a weapon and it was aimed directly at him.

From behind, Cain showed up.

She had a look of disdain on her.

"This is the last time you'll be a thorn in my side," she cursed. She leveled the gun at his head.

Suddenly there was a large explosion.

One of the metal doors flew and hit the man squarely. The impact threw him hard into Cain.

Solaire didn't hesitate for a second. He bolted through the doors and raced down the stairs.

In less than a minute he was out the front door and running away from the self-storage building.

* * * * *

"You look like you've just gone through a boxing match," Humphries said.

Solaire was back at the pub.

“And I’m guessing you didn’t win,” Humphries said.

“Not quite.”

“I know exactly what’ll cheer you up.” He went to the back and returned holding a glass of ice tea. “Just the way you like it, no ice.”

“Thank you,” Solaire said.

When Solaire was halfway through his glass, he felt a man sit beside him.

“I’ll have your hardest soda water that money can buy,” Levack said.

“Coming right up,” Humphries said. He came back with a glass and placed it before him.

Levack took a sip and made a face.

“Thanks.” Solaire turned to him.

“For what?”

“For saving my life.”

“I don’t know what you are talking about,” Levack said. “After I punched my guy I ran as far away as I could.”

Solaire knew it was Levack who had detonated the last blast that hit the man and Cain.

“Thanks, anyways,” Solaire said.

“Ah, don’t mention it.”

They both sat with their drinks when Levack said, “That was nice what you said back there.”

“What?” Solaire turned to him.

“*Let him go*,” Levack said. “It’s nice to know there are still chivalric people out there.”

“I knew it wasn’t going to work, but it was worth a try.”

“And it’s the thought that counts,” Levack said.

Solaire looked at the bottom of his glass. It was almost empty.

“What happens now?” Levack asked.

“I don’t know.” Solaire shook his head. “We were so close but so far at the same time.”

“Is the mission over?”

“I don’t know,” Solaire sighed. “I’m sure I’ll be getting a call from Travers soon.”

“What if it was there but we failed to find it?” Levack said.

“In that case the mission is definitely over.”

“What are you going to do?” Levack said.

“See if I can dig up some more leads, or maybe even go back to Toronto.”

“Yeah, it would be nice to go home.”

“Where would that be?” Solaire turned to him.

“Wouldn’t you like to know?” Levack smiled.

“One of these days I’m going to make *you* my mission. Find out everything I need to know about you.”

Levack laughed hard.

Solaire got up.

“Where you going?” Levack asked.

“I think I better hit the sack.”

“Don’t. Even though we may not have succeeded in our mission, at least we succeeded in staying alive. That’s something to celebrate about.”

Solaire thought about it and then said, “Fine.”

“Great.” Levack slapped him on the shoulder. “Another drink for my friend here,” Levack yelled to Humphries.

“I have to make a pit stop,” Solaire said.

“You mean go to the loo?”

Solaire smiled.

He walked to the end of the bar, turned right and down a hallway.

Up ahead he saw both the men’s and women’s washrooms.

As he was making his way there he suddenly stopped.

In the middle of the hallway was a large board.

Photos were tacked on the board, probably of the pub’s regular patrons. They consisted of various people, some on their wedding day, others on their skiing trips, or some smiling on the beach.

One in particular caught his attention.

He removed it off the board and stared at it.

His mouth nearly dropped.

He rushed back.

“That was quick,” Levack said. “Your drink is waiting for you.”

“No time,” Solaire said, pulling out his cell phone. “We have to go.”

“What?” Levack said, confused.

“I’ll explain later.”

Solaire began dialling numbers.

“Who’re you calling?” Levack asked.

“Travers.”

* * * * *

The car pulled up to the driveway.

A woman got out. She was carrying bags. She walked up the steps and then entered the cottage.

In the distance, hidden from view by trees and bushes, Solaire and Levack sat in the Mini Cooper watching everything.

Solaire looked over at Levack.

“Let’s do it,” Levack said, putting the Mini in gear.

They drove up and parked behind the car.

They got out.

Levack touched his jacket pocket, feeling the gun.

“You will not need it,” Solaire said.

“Just making sure,” Levack said.

They went up the steps and Solaire knocked on the door.

A moment later the door swung open.

“Hello, Emma,” Solaire said.

Emma Morgan’s face turned pale.

“May we come in?” Solaire said.

Before she could answer he pushed his way through.

“Who is it?” a voice said from inside the house.

Two seconds later, Robbie Fisk emerged from down the hall.

“Hello, Mr. Fisk,” Solaire said. “I’m not sure if you know me, but I know a lot about you.”

* * * * *

They sat in the living room, with Fisk and Emma next to each other, and Solaire and Levack across from them in separate chairs.

There was a chill in the air.

No one spoke until Emma finally said, “How did you find this place?”

Solaire pulled out a photo and placed it on the coffee table. “I found this at Humphries’ pub.” The photo showed Emma smiling in front of what looked like a cottage. “I saw this same cottage in another photo,” Solaire said. “It was during my conversation with Mrs. Fisk. In that photo, you, Mr. Fisk, were standing before it. So you can imagine my surprise when I saw you, Emma, standing in one exactly the same.”

Emma had her head down.

“I then started going over conversations,” Solaire continued. “You once said that Mr. Fisk had not been seen in London. You were correct, because he was outside of London. *Here.*” Solaire moved his hands around the cottage. “And then at the party you said Mr. Fisk is a good man, not he *was* a good man, indicating that he was not dead but still alive. But I still was not sure until I listened to a recording that you, Mr. Fisk, had with a woman the day before your so-called suicide. That woman’s voice was yours, Emma. So when I was certain there was a link between you and Mr. Fisk, I followed you here.”

There was silence.

“For the past many days I have been through quite an ordeal,” Solaire said. “I have done things that may not be legal. I have taken actions that have caused a lot of damage, and on several occasions I have even risked my own life. Now, all this could have been avoided had I known the missing piece to all of it was still alive and living here. I expect an explanation, and I hope it’s worth it.”

“He’s my father,” Emma said.

Solaire’s eyes narrowed.

“Yes,” Fisk said. “Emma is my daughter. I didn’t know until only a couple of months ago. I assure you, it came as a shock to me as well.”

“So you were the other woman everyone had been talking about?” Solaire said.

Emma nodded.

“I didn’t know what to do,” Fisk said. “Except that I wanted to spend as much time as I could with her. I wanted to make up for lost time. She told me about what she and Sean did. SCABB became not only her passion, but also mine. I wanted to do what was right.”

“That was why RBL’s board members thought you had started acting strange?”

Fisk moved his head up and down. “Listen, I know I’ve made mistakes. But I wanted to rectify them. I tried making the other members listen to reason, but ultimately they were too blinded by greed. So I figured I would use SCABB to get the point across.”

“What about your apparent suicide?” Solaire asked.

“I had no choice,” Fisk said. “I was under surveillance. They had my phones tapped. I knew I had to do something, so one day I was driving to a meeting when I realized I was being followed. I called Emma and told her what was happening. That was when the plan was hatched. For a brief moment I lost my tail, and that’s when I put the car in gear and let it roll to the river. Emma was waiting for me in another car. She then drove me here.”

“What about your stopover at the storage facility?”

“I initially hid the documents there, but when I knew I would have to disappear I took them with me.”

“Why hide?”

“At first I didn’t know what to do. I thought about going to the authorities, but RBL’s board members have friends all over London’s high society. Then I found out a woman was looking for me.”

“Claudia Cain,” Solaire said.

“Is that her name?” Fisk said as if that information mattered. “Anyways, then Emma told me that someone was asking about RBL.”

Solaire understood he was referring to him.

“Humphries is a friend of yours?” Solaire asked Emma.

“Yes,” she said. “When he told me about you that’s when I decided to get involved. At first I didn’t know if I could trust you, but I know now I can.”

“Enough to still not tell me about your father?” Solaire shot back.

“It’s not Emma’s fault,” Fisk said. “I told her to not do anything. She told me what happened to you at the estate. I wanted it to be safe—for her—before I took any actions.”

“I can assure you, it is safe now.”

Fisk looked over at his daughter, who moved her head up and down.

He got up and left the room.

He returned with a portrait of the Queen.

From behind he lifted a piece of cloth and pulled out a large envelope.

“This is what you’ve been searching for.” He handed it to Solaire. “Everything I found against the board members is in there.”

Solaire felt the envelope. “There may be things that you will have to answer for too.”

Fisk nodded. “I am ready for it.” He smiled at his daughter.

Solaire got up and so did Levack.

“I’m sorry,” Emma said. “I never meant for anything to happen to you.”

“I know,” Solaire said.

They moved to the door when Fisk said, “Will you be able to bring down RBL?”

Solaire looked at him. “That’s why I’m here.”

* * * * *

He lay in bed reading the morning newspaper.

He was in his flat in St. John’s Wood.

Solaire turned the page when he heard a knock on the door.

He answered it. It was Travers.

They went to the living room.

"There is no mention of it in any of the newspapers," Solaire said, sitting down.

"We are trying to keep it like that for the next little while," Travers said, not taking a seat.

"Why?"

"RBL is too entrenched in London's society, so we have to be careful how we proceed. But I give you my word, Sir Blairwood, Lady Thatchburn, and Lord Cornell will be charged."

"What about Fisk?"

"We are keeping a close eye on him. No harm will come to him, if that's what you are worried about. Right now no one knows he is still alive, and we will keep it that way. He's our star witness so we are going to take extra precautions to keep him safe."

"What about Emma?"

"There will be some scrutiny but that will be from the media and not from us. She is not linked to RBL, so I don't see her getting involved in any way."

Solaire nodded but said nothing.

"You did a great job, Roman," Travers said. "CIL is grateful for everything you have done."

"Do they even know I exist?"

"No, but would you like them to?"

Solaire thought about it but then shook his head. "I guess if they knew then I wouldn't be able to do my job the way I like to."

"Probably not."

Solaire stared out the window.

Travers looked around the flat. "You know you can afford better accommodations?"

"I know," Solaire replied back.

"All right," Travers said. "I'll let you get some rest." He walked to the door. "But this rest will have to be short. We have a lot of work to do."

With that he was gone.

* * * * *

Solaire showered, changed and then went down to a café.

He ordered a lemon pastry and a cup of tea.

When he was almost finished a man came over and sat across from him.

"I'm famished, old chap," he said in a fake British accent.

Donald Levack had a large smile across his face.

"You're having a spot of tea?" Levack continued in his accent. "I think I will have that as well."

He waved the waiter over.

"I'll have three large eggs scrambled, two toasts with a side of mash potatoes, and your biggest sized cup of tea."

The waiter wrote it down but still gave him an odd look before going away.

"Should you not watch your weight at your age?" Solaire said.

"My age?" Levack said. "I'm a spry twenty-eight-year-old."

"I'm sure." Solaire smiled.

Levack's breakfast came and he dug into it.

"What are your plans?" he asked.

"I'm going to stick around maybe a day or two more. There are still parts of London I would like to see. What about you?"

"I'm going to Cleveland."

"Is that where you live?"

Levack looked at him and then nodded. "I've got someone waiting for me."

Solaire couldn't help but suppress a smile. This was the first time Levack had mentioned something personal about himself.

A car came and stopped not too far from them.

Solaire got up. "Give them my regards, Donald."

"Where're you going?" Levack said.

"There's someone who owes me one and would like to make it up to me."

Levack glanced at the waiting car.

Behind the wheel was Emma Morgan.

Levack smiled. "You devil, you."

"I don't know London too well and so I need a tour guide."

"I'm sure you do." Levack was still smiling.

"Goodbye, Donald," Solaire said, walking away. "Have a safe trip back."

"Maybe I'll see you in another city," Levack yelled across.

Solaire turned and smiled. "You can count on it."

