

This is a work of fiction. The town of Millfield and village of Sulham are imaginary as are all the characters and events described in this story.

Hector, stared morosely at the contents of his meager pantry cupboard. Pilchards, sweetcorn, fish paste, rice, and a packet of dried black-eyed beans. The rice looked as if it might have weevils. He closed the cupboard door and felt in his pocket for his keys. Minutes later he was walking purposefully towards the bus stop and wishing he had worn his hat.

The bus timetable showed that he would have to wait another hour for the bus, so he carried on walking. The morning rush hour had passed but there was still quite a lot of traffic as he made his way to town. The courthouse clock showed ten thirty as he stepped under it. His left leg was beginning to hurt, and he had to try not to limp. He caught sight of his reflection in the glass of the coffee-shop door as he reached for the handle. For a moment he was startled by the stern looking bearded face and paused. A woman pulled the door open from inside. She was talking to someone, looking over her shoulder and nearly walked into Hector when she turned to step through the door. Hector mumbled an apology as the woman backed away and let him enter.

He looked around; the place had changed a lot since he had last been there ... he had to work it out; Just under five years ago. There seemed to be someone at each and every table. Very few tables had more than one person at them. There was a counter running along the back wall, with high stools and sockets for people to charge and connect their computers or phones to the internet. Only one person sat at the counter though there were eight high stools. He looked around the cafe again, most of the people at the tables were peering at laptops or tablets. He shook his head and turned to leave.

“You can sit at this table if you like?” a young oriental looking person said to him, earphones over his or her ears.

Hector nodded. "Thank you," he said, but the person had turned away and was hunched over a laptop keyboard tapping away. Hector saw a compass tattoo on the side of the person's neck. He walked to the counter and a fresh-faced young woman gave him a dimpled smile and raised her eyebrows, waiting for him to speak.

"Can I have a coffee and an omelette, please?" he asked, "I didn't bring my glasses, so I can't read the menu." It was a lie; he could not be bothered to wade through the menu and knew what he wanted.

"Of course, you can. What would you like in the omelette? We have cheese, bacon, mushroom, tomato, peppers and onion."

"Everything but cheese and bacon," said Hector, "And some brown toast and butter would be nice."

The woman nodded and said she would bring it to him. Hector sat down opposite the person who had invited him to share their table. He saw that the laptop was an Apple, a sleek looking thing. Hector quietly studied the people around him, automatically weighing them up assessing their threat potential and then mentally chastising himself for doing so. "Old habits," he told himself. He looked up as the young woman brought him a mug of coffee with a biscuit and two paper sachets of sugar and two of sweetener on the saucer. She placed a small jug of milk on the table and said his food would be ready soon. Hector thanked her departing back and admired her shapely rump. He realised his table companion was looking at him and smiled. The person looked away quickly.

Hector wondered if the cafe still provided newspapers for their patrons. He had not spotted any. He sighed and tasted the coffee. It was just right. He closed his eyes and forced his mind to slow down and relax.

“Are you alright?” he heard, “Sir ... are you alright?” He opened his eyes. The oriental looking person looked worried.

“Yes of course, why wouldn’t I be?” Hector said and thought his voice sounded very distant.

“You look very pale,” the person said, and went a little red, “I mean you seem to have paled since you sat down.”

Hector forced himself to smile, “Really I am fine, I apologise for worrying you.”

“That’s OK,” said the person, “I am Lee by the way.”

“It is nice of you to notice, thank you Lee, I am... Hector,” said Hector, realising that he hadn’t introduced himself by his real name for a very long time. The thought unsettled him, so he pushed it aside, “You wouldn’t happen to know if they have newspapers here, do you?”

Lee smiled and stood up, “I’ll ask.” She turned and walked to the counter, then returned to the table, “Maggie says she will bring you the local paper, it is the only one they get now. It was nice meeting you Hector.” She smiled and gathered up her things, then gave him a little wave and left with another wave at Maggie behind the counter.

Hector enjoyed his breakfast and asked for another coffee, which he finished while reading through the Millfield Gazette. He learned more about Millfield in the next half hour than he had learned in the six years he had lived near the town. He folded the paper neatly when he had finished and carried it to the counter with his cup and asked for the bill. He left a tip and thanked the woman politely before leaving.

He decided to go and see the dig for himself. The recently uncovered Roman mosaic that he had read about in the

Gazette. He set off in the general direction and found himself in a dead-end street. Shaking his head, he retraced his steps then took the next road, he had not gone far when he heard a muffled cry and the sound of someone being punched and kicked. He moved without thinking towards the sound, pushing open the narrow wooden gate. Three people; the girl Lee on the ground struggling to push a man's leg away as he pressed a booted foot down on her face. Another man was tugging at the strap of her black and red backpack.

The man pressing his boot on Lee's face turned and snarled at Hector, "Fuck off old man, this is none of your business." He was holding a craft knife. "Here, cut the fucking strap you idiot," he said holding the craft knife out to the man tugging at Lee's backpack.

Hector's right heel connected with the side of the would-be bag snatcher's knee a split second before the heel of his hand slammed into the underside of the standing man's chin. Two seconds later both assailants were lying face down on the moss-covered brick path.

"Can you stand, Lee?" Hector asked as he grabbed the ankle of the man he had first kicked and dragged him away from her exposing the craft knife that the man had fallen on. He kicked the craft knife away. The man who had been standing on Lee's head began to move and Hector stood on his ankle. The man screamed. Lee scrambled to her feet, blood running from her nose. She winced and held her left wrist with her right hand. Hector could see that her left shoulder was dislocated.

Hector lifted his left leg and slammed his heel down hard on the knee of the man whose foot he was standing on. The man's scream turned to a shriek.

"You've broken my leg you cunt! I'll fucking have you for this." he swore through clenched teeth before sobbing with pain.

Hector held his hand out to Lee, "Come, let's get you to a doctor." He touched her elbow lightly, "You are safe now, you are going to be alright."

Lee nodded and stumbled out through the narrow gate.

Hector followed and pointed to the right when she turned to look at him, "We can call a taxi from the coffee shop."

"I have a cell phone in my pocket," she said. Hector could see she was in shock. "Can you get it?" she turned and lifted her right elbow. Hector slid his hand into the pocket of the green sleeveless fleece she was wearing and pulled out a sleek cell phone.

He pressed the screen with his thumb, somehow irritated by how it seemed so natural. The screen lit showing a keyboard and asking for a PIN.

"Ten sixty-six," said the girl, "Then hold it so I can talk to it."

Hector unlocked the phone and held it close to her mouth.

"Call police and ambulance," said the girl, "I have been attacked and injured." She bent over and threw up on the pavement, twisting her body away from Hector and almost fell over. Hector nearly dropped the phone trying to catch her. He got her to sit on the curb just as a voice spoke from the phone. It was the emergency services operator.

A week later Hector finally got to see the exposed section of mosaic at the dig site. It was roped off and a spotty young man in a reflective donkey jacket made sure that visitors stayed in the viewing area. He looked bored. Hector was the only visitor. He read the write up on the glass fronted box and studied the mosaic for a few minutes then left. It started to rain as he

walked back. Hector pulled the hood of his coat over his head and concentrated on not limping as he made his way back to Pandora's Cafe.

Maggie gave him her dimpled smile when he apologised for dripping water onto the counter. "That is OK Mr. Barnes, what would you like today? There is a delicious looking tuna and sweetcorn quiche that has just come out of the oven, with new potatoes and salad?"

"Thank you, Maggie, that sounds perfect, with a large black coffee please?" Hector carefully shrugged out of his wet coat and hung it over the back of a chair at an empty table close to the counter before fetching a copy of the Millfield Gazette from the shelf next to the noticeboard. Maggie brought his coffee to the table just as he returned with the newspaper.

"Have you heard anything from Lee, Mr. Barnes?" asked Maggie, "They said on the radio that she has gone back to Oxford."

Hector shook his head, "No, not since the remand centre," he said quietly, "Thank you once again for your help in getting me out of there."

"I just drove Lee's car, Mr Barnes," said Maggie blushing, "Lee did all the work. I'll fetch your food now."

Hector nodded and thanked her. He scanned the paper disinterestedly, his mind felt like it was spinning out of control. He forced himself to slow down and read everything in the paper. Thankfully, there was nothing about him or Dr. Lee Moy, the Professor of Antiquities who had been in charge of the Millfield architectural dig until she had been attacked. Hector had been arrested for injuring her attackers and charged with assaulting Derek Blane and Michael Dowel and causing grievous bodily harm to them both. This had happened an hour

or so after the ambulance had taken Lee to hospital. Three days later, Lee had arranged for Hector to be released on bail. Hector had not made much of a fuss when he had been arrested; in theory someone should have come to see him as soon as his name was entered into the police computer. Obviously, things had not worked the way they were supposed to. Hector was relieved in a way and hoped that no-one from the Firm would contact him. He had never been much of a team player. Being the 'grey man' was part of his nature and the training had just reinforced his natural tendencies. Hector had spent half of his lifetime blending in and not being noticed while gathering information for the British Intelligence Services. Hector now had to report to the police every day and keep himself available until the trial. The desk sergeant at MillField police station told him the case was likely to come up in a month to six weeks.

"You injured two men, Mr Barnes, they may be villains, but you have a case to answer. It's the law," the sergeant had explained, looking bored. He was obviously more interested in the book he was reading.

Maggie returned with his food and Hector thanked her and put aside the paper while he ate. The food helped to calm his mind. He carried his empty plate to the counter and asked for another coffee. Maggie brought it to his table with a slice of cake.

"The cake is complimentary," she said quietly, "For rescuing Lee."

It had stopped raining when Hector left the cafe. He decided to walk around the town and up along the stream to exercise off the cake he had enjoyed. By the time he got home two hours later, his left leg was totally numb. Hector ran a hot bath and threw in a large handful of epsom salts. He fell asleep in the bath and woke feeling cold, the phone was ringing. It took him a while to realise what it was that had woken him. By the time he

got downstairs the phone had stopped ringing. Hector cursed and went back up to dry himself properly and get dressed.

They arrived the next day. Hector had just finished cleaning the sitting room and was emptying the vacuum-cleaner bag when the doorbell rang. There were two of them; Hector stepped back to allow them in without speaking.

The taller one seemed to be in charge. He nodded to Hector and wiped his feet before entering. The shorter one gave Hector a sour look and followed. They sat in the sitting room and Hector kept his face neutral as he waited for one of them to speak.

“It would make things much easier if you had a mobile phone or an email account Barnes,” the taller one said, “Dorning tried calling your landline three times yesterday, is it working?”

“I was out most of the day,” said Hector.

“Well, we are here now, so why don’t you tell us about the mess you are in?” said the taller one, “I’m Welby. Dorning and I have been assigned to your case.”

“I interrupted a mugging,” said Hector, “Two men trying to take a woman’s computer bag. They had knocked her down and dislocated her shoulder. I broke a knee on each of the men. They told the police that the woman and I had attacked them.”

“The woman, Lee Moy is a Chinese National and a member of the communist party,” said Dorning, “What is your connection to her?”

“She is also a research fellow at Oxford University,” said Hector, “And in charge of an archaeological dig in Millfield.”

“Does she know who you are?” asked Welby.

“She knows that I am Hector Barnes,” said Hector, “Retired claims assessor, resident of Tythe Barn, Sulham.” He shrugged, “That much is in the public domain. Whatever else she knows about me is anybody’s guess.”

There was a long silence after that. Eventually Welby cleared his throat before speaking, “So you weren’t following Dr. Moy then? It was just happenstance that you interrupted her attackers?”

Hector nodded but felt the hairs on his neck begin to rise. He studied Welby and Dorning carefully, “It wasn’t just a robbery, was it? You wanted her laptop... I interfered with an operation.”

Welby and Dorning exchanged glances but said nothing. Hector kept his face blank as things fell into place in his mind. He studied Welby and Dorning carefully and refrained from saying anything. They were going to have to spell it out for him. Eventually Dorning straightened up and cleared his throat.

“This is going to have to play out through the courts, we can’t interfere with this. I am sure you understand,” he said.

“So why are you here?” asked Hector, “You have checked me out and decided that I am not working for the other side; you do not want the Chinese to know that you tried to steal her computer, but you took the risk of coming to me. You want me to get whatever it is you want from her, that is it, isn’t it?”

“If you hadn’t bloody well interfered with the operation in the first place ...” Dorning snapped, but Welby cut him off with an angry gesture.

“I’m not about to apologise,” said Hector, “That was not a professional job, please don’t tell me you hired a couple of street thugs for the job?”

“Look, what was done was done,” said Dorning, “We are here to stop you wondering why the Firm didn’t step in and quash the charges and saying the wrong thing. We don’t want the Chinese looking too closely at you either, but if they do ... we wanted you to be prepared.”

Hector nodded, “Alright, I’ll buy that.”

Two weeks later, the magistrate took all of twenty minutes to dismiss the charges against Hector. Derek Blane and Michael Dowel scowled at Hector from their wheelchairs but said nothing. Lee, Maggie and two other young women were waiting outside the court when Hector emerged.

Lee grinned and asked him to join them for lunch at The Plough. Hector would rather have gone to Pandora’s Cafe, but The Plough was nice enough. Hector had never been in it before. The two other women were Lee’s colleagues from the Roman dig. They both looked very young to Hector, but he thought they must be at least in their late twenties as they both had masters’ degrees.

They talked a little about Blane and Dowel. Maggie said her brother knew them. They had been terrible bullies in high school. Blane had an older brother who was wanted for murder.

Lee was clearly uncomfortable talking about the attack and the upcoming trial, so Hector asked about the dig and what they had learned. He discovered that one of the women, Stephanie Myers, had co-authored a book he had read and enjoyed, an Historic Novel on post Roman Britain. She was a Social Anthropologist and Hector really enjoyed listening to her. He was quite disappointed when they finally decided it was time to leave and surprised to find he had spent the afternoon in the pub. He accepted a lift home. Maggie drove them in Lee’s Range Rover and dropped him at his front gate.

Two days later Hector read that Blane and Dowel had pleaded guilty to the charges against them. Hector walked to the dig and filled in a form offering his services as a volunteer for two hours a day. He put it in the box provided then walked to Pandora's Cafe for breakfast. He was surprised to find the cafe practically empty, there was only one other customer there, waiting for a take-out order. Maggie was not there and an older woman who looked a lot like Maggie took his order and brought it to his table.

Hector walked to the bank and found it closed. It was Easter Monday. He walked back home and was unlocking his front door when he heard someone approaching him from behind. He saw the reflection of a man in the glass just as he turned and felt a sickening thump on the side of his head. His world went black.

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Hector struggled to open his eyes. He was aware of a strange rattling sound that seemed to be inside his head and some soft beeps as he struggled to open his eyes. It felt as if he was drowning in exhaustion, and he gave up and closed his eyes. A rustling sound and a voice.

"For a minute there I thought he was waking up," it was a female voice. Hector did not recognise it.

"Sorry," said another female voice, it sounded as if she was yawning, "I keep falling asleep myself.

"You should go home and get some sleep," said the first voice. "I'll call you as soon as he wakes up."

The next time Hector woke someone wearing a latex glove was holding his right eye open and shining a bright light into it.

Hector turned his head away and tried to speak. He gagged and tried to sit up.

“Just relax Mr. Barnes, please do not struggle,” a deep African sounding voice spoke, and a large hand pressed on his chest, “Calm down Mr. Barnes.”

Hector’s heart was racing, and he squeezed his eyes shut and tried to centre himself. He felt a dull ache in his jaw and throat and a sort of drowsy sluggishness. He closed his mind to the voice speaking to him and methodically took stock of himself. It was something he had done so many times that it only took seconds. He worked out that he had tubes down his throat through his nose and mouth and that he had a catheter in his penis. His right ear was not working, and he could not move his right shoulder and arm, but his other limbs, fingers and toes seemed OK. His chest felt wrong, especially on the right side and he felt a tugging sensation down the right side of his face and neck.

The african voice was still talking, “... can wait a little longer, Mr. Barnes is awake and will want answers, if you can’t find Doctor Reed, ask Denise to come.”

A female voice answered, and Hector heard footsteps moving rapidly away.

Another female voice spoke close by his head, “Are you awake Hector?” he felt a hand stroke his left forearm, “It is me, Stephanie Myers, a colleague of Lee Moy’s; we met... recently.”

Hector opened both eyes. A tall young black man was looking down at him, he smiled as Hector blinked several times.

“Hello Mr. Barnes, I am Jeremy,” he said in his deep, rich voice, “You won’t be able to talk, so please don’t try. Just blink twice if you can hear me?”

Hector tried to turn his head to the left and found that he could not. He reached up with his left hand, moving slowly. A hand took hold of his.

“You have been injured,” Stephanie’s voice, “Try not to move too much.” He turned his eyes to the left as she stood and looked down at him. He decided that she looked relieved. He looked at Jeremy and blinked twice, slowly and deliberately as he struggled to stop his heart from racing.

Jeremy smiled, “Thank you. That is good, now just a few questions while we wait for someone who can tell you more. Blink twice for yes and once for no? Can you do that?”

Hector blinked twice.

“Excellent. Are you feeling a lot of pain?”

Hector blinked once.

“Good. Do you feel any pain?”

Hector blinked twice.

“OK, thank you. How much pain, on a scale of one to five, with five being very painful and one being only a little painful?”

Hector blinked once.

“Thank you, now we need to find out where. Is it in a specific place?”

Hector blinked twice, and after a few more questions Jeremy knew that his jaw and throat hurt.

Footsteps approached and Hector and Stephanie turned to look at someone at the foot of the bed as a female, Irish voice spoke.

“I think Mr Barnes should sit up a little, Nurse Njovu,” she said.

Jeremy nodded and bent down to fiddle with something on the right side of the bed. Hector felt himself being sat up as part of the bed moved silently. The discomfort on the right side of his face and neck increased. He saw a plump middle-aged woman wearing a white lab coat over a pale green blouse. Her name tag read ‘Dr. Reed’.

“Good evening Mr. Barnes, I am a Shirley Reed, a doctor at SouthHampton General Hospital. I expect you would like to know a bit about what you are doing here?”

Hector blinked twice and felt Stephanie squeeze his hand as his heart began to speed up again.

“Well, you were referred here by St Richards Hospital in Chichester. They stabilized your injuries and sent you here for reconstruction surgery. Your skull had been fractured ...” her eyes shifted sideways, Hector guessed she was looking at the monitors showing his pulse and blood pressure, “Your right collar bone, upper arm bone, and several ribs were broken.”

She paused and looked into Hector’s eyes, “It looks like you were attacked Mr. Barnes. Do you have any idea who attacked you?”

Hector stared at her, lost in thought, then blinked once, deliberately. His heart kept getting away from him and he was getting really tired trying to slow it down. He closed his eyes and felt himself drifting off. He did not fight it.

It was dark when he woke again. Someone was moving in his room. It was a policeman. He looked down at Hector.

“You awake again Mr Barnes?” he asked and grinned sardonically, “You are a tough one that’s for sure.”

Another face appeared from his left; a tousle haired young woman Hector had never seen before. She smiled and patted his shoulder. “I’ll fetch the nurse.”

“No, you stay here, I’ll tell the nurses,” said the policeman, “Need to stretch my legs. Do you want anything from the canteen?”

The woman nodded, “Coffee, black, two sugars would be nice thanks Sid.”

Hector realised he did not have a tube in his mouth. He tried to speak and could not. He coughed instead and wanted to scream. It hurt a lot. He slowly brought his left hand to his face. His lips felt dry and cracked but there were no tubes in his mouth or nose. He tried to lift his head and could not.

“Just a mo’, Hector, let me try and raise the end of your bed,” said the woman moving around to the right side of the bed. She fiddled about and Hector felt the bed moving.

“Stop that!” said a voice. A nurse pushed the young woman away, muttering as the lights came on.

“Keep your knickers on,” said the young girl, “I was just helping him to sit up. He wants a drink.”

The nurse, a stern looking young woman, looked at Hector, “Do you want some water, Sir?”

Hector blinked twice realising that he was really thirsty. The nurse poured some water into a glass that had a bent straw in it and held it for Hector. He tried to take the glass and she shook her head, saying he should let her hold it and not take too much.

Hector struggled to hold the straw with his cracked lips, and dribbled water down his chin. The water tasted of chlorine, but he enjoyed the way it soothed his throat.

The nurse took the water away and said she was going to call the duty doctor.

As soon as she left the young woman picked up the glass and held it for Hector. "Here, drink as much as you want, Hector, it's not as if you can wet the bed with a tube up your cock and that bloody great nappy they put on you." She let him take the glass from her and smiled, "I'm Mags, you don't know me, I'm a friend of Stephanie Myers."

Hector tried to talk and managed a croaked 'Thankyou'. His tongue felt like it had lost a fight with a cheese grater and his throat felt raw.

"You are most welcome, Hector. Steph says you do not know who beat the shit out of you, but it has got to be connected to the bastards who tried to take Lee's stuff. Well done for that by the way."

Hector finished the water and Mags took the glass from him. The nurse returned just then and looked suspiciously at them both. Mags laughed and excused herself, saying she would be back in a few minutes.

The nurse smiled, "The duty doctor is on the way, Mr Barnes."

"Why?" asked Hector, it hurt but it sounded almost normal

The nurse looked startled but smiled, "I suppose we do defer to them, but you can ask him whatever you like."

"Can he tell me anything that you cannot?" Hector managed.

The nurse made a funny face, "Probably not, but don't tell him that."

"Why can't I move my head?" asked Hector, "And how long have I been in hospital?"

The nurse swallowed and looked nervous, "You have a frame and pins holding the bones of your skull together till it heals. You have been here for five weeks ... I don't know how long you were in St Richards before they brought you here."

"My right ear isn't working, what's wrong with it?"

"It should be fine when all the swelling goes down."

"Last question: When do you think I will be able to go home?" asked Hector.

The nurse paled a little, "That I really can't say Mr. Barnes ... it depends so much on how you respond to treatment."

"Weeks or months?" asked Hector, he was getting tired again.

Mags came back in carrying a paper mug of coffee, it smelled good. The policeman followed her.

"You can't question him yet," said the nurse to the policeman, "Not without Dr Reed agreeing that he is up to it."

"Looks like he's gone back to the land of nod anyway," said Mags. "So, you don't have to worry about that."

Hector felt cool hands on his face and arms and felt the bed being lowered again as sleep took him.

The nightmare went on and on, Hector learned that a team of eight woman and one man, all friends or colleagues of Stephanie Myers, had agreed agreed to take turns visiting him while he was in hospital. Stephanie only came on weekends. Hector wondered why nobody from the Firm visited. He could have called one of the numbers he had memorized so many years ago, but some instinct told him not to. He sometimes wondered if Stephanie or her friends were from the Firm. The police had not asked him very much and had told him nothing useful. He told them that he had not seen his assailant. Derek Blane and Michael Dowel were in prison and could not have attacked him. Hector thought it could have been Blane's older brother. Hector had been carrying about two hundred pounds in cash in his wallet. The cash was gone but nothing else had been taken.

Dr Reed told him that the bones on the right side of his skull had been pulverized and the fragments had been pieced together like a jigsaw. Their biggest concern was infection, but the medication he was on should keep him safe. He was sleeping almost twenty hours a day.

The brace on his head was eventually removed. By then he had regained use of his right arm and a tiny physiotherapist visited every day giving him balls to squeeze and lots of different exercises. Two days after the head brace was removed, Jeremy removed the catheter. Going to the toilet by himself was a mixed blessing. Hector did not recognise himself.

“What the hell was I attacked with?” he asked Dr Reed that night when she visited.

“A crowbar,” she replied, “It was stuck in your ribs when the ambulance reached you. Look on the bright side; you lived.”

Something about the way she said it bothered Hector. Mags was his baby-sitter that night.

“Mags, I am really very grateful to you and your friends for chaperoning me so well,” he told her when he was losing at chess that night, “But what are you not telling me?”

“Well, for starters, did you know that I’m gay?” she replied with a smirk.

“Seriously Mags. Is it Lee Moy?” asked Hector.

Mags went very still. She carefully replaced the knight she had been about to move, then pursed her lips and looked up at Hector.

“She’s dead. Somebody buried a garden spade in the back of her head the night you were left for dead on your doorstep.”

“Dead?” asked Hector, “And the killer?”

Mags shrugged, “No arrests yet, police suspect William Blane, but they haven’t found him yet.”

“You think he might come back to finish me off?” asked Hector, “You and your friends are here to protect me?”

Mags shrugged, “At first, I suppose. Stephanie said the police were using you as bait to try and catch him, so we agreed to be here at night, just in case. But after you told the police that you had not seen your attacker... I guess we just like you.” She laughed, “We’ve all seen you naked and helpless, maybe you stirred up our mothering instincts, even Peter’s.”

Hector felt himself going red, "I am very grateful," he said, "I'm not sure how I will ever be able to repay all your kindness."

"Don't even try. I have enjoyed it, and in a gruesome way it was exciting keeping reporters at bay when there was so much about the case on the telly and in the papers. I enjoy the visits and I'll miss them when you are discharged," said Mags.

Stephanie visited the next day, a Saturday, and brought a cardboard box of mail from his house. Mostly it was junk mail.

"You have a very nice home," said Stephanie, "I've taken you up on the offer of using it as a base while I am in Chichester. Your neighbours are quite suspicious of me."

"They were always rather suspicious of me," said Hector, "I'm not overly sociable I suppose and have never really made any effort to get to know them."

Stephanie fiddled nervously with her ring. It was on the finger where most people wore wedding rings, but it looked more like a signet ring, with a crest on it.

"You don't need to be nervous with me Stephanie," said Hector with a smile, "What is it?"

"Mags told you about Lee... I... We, well Doctor Reed and I thought it best not to tell you till you had recovered; she had a row with the police about it." Stephanie laughed briefly, "She threatened to stop them from talking to you if they didn't promise not to let you know." She removed the ring and rubbed her finger, "Stress could have killed you, she was very concerned about that, but now, I suppose, you should know. Whoever attacked you meant to kill you. The poor girl who found you thought you were dead. The police are convinced it was the same man that killed Lee. Nothing but cash was taken; at least she did not suffer. For a while, the police thought he

might come back to kill you, to protect his identity. They had about twenty officers waiting for him to come and kill you.”

“And you and your friends decided to keep me safe,” said Hector, “You hardly know me, they didn’t know me. That was very brave and really kind.”

“We needed to do it,” said Stephanie, “It’s hard to explain, but we needed to do something after Lee was killed and you were attacked so savagely.”

“Thank you, Stephanie,” said Hector, “I’m really not used to people helping me and being so kind.”

Stephanie did not say anything, she put her ring back on and turned to look out of the window. There was not much to see, just the mirror windowed flank of another building. Hector tried not to linger on the thought that had been troubling him more and more; that Lee would still be alive and none of this would have happened if he had walked away from the men attacking Lee, if he had told them to take the bag and let her go. He closed his eyes and centered himself. He had been doing a lot of that recently.

Stephanie said something that he did not catch.

“I’m sorry, my mind was...”

Stephanie waved a hand, “It’s OK, I was just thinking aloud. We have received more funding for the dig; I have been asked to take over Lee’s position and work full-time on it.”

“How do you feel about it?” asked Hector.

“Pleased but a little bit scared,” said Stephanie, “Actually, quite a lot scared. The money is good, and the initial contract is for five years. I’ll be able to pay off my rent arrears in Oxford and

move to Chichester, which is a lot cheaper, I might even buy a car.”

“So, what are you scared of?” asked Hector.

“Change, I suppose. The unknown. Of what people might think about me benefitting from Lee’s death. So many things,” said Stephanie, fiddling with her ring again.

“That’s an unusual ring,” said Hector, “May I examine it?”

Stephanie nodded and handed the ring to him, “It was my father’s, a pledge ring from his university, Baltimore, he was American.”

“It is heavy,” Hector told her, “What did he study in Baltimore?”

“History, he was doing his PhD in Oxford when he met my mother. He loved Oxford and England.”

“Your face lights up when you speak about him, he must be a good father.”

“He was a wonderful father,” said Stephanie, “Very quiet and considerate, and always happiest when he was doing something for someone else.”

“What happened?” asked Hector, seeing the pain on her face.

“His heart just stopped,” she said, “One day he was here and then,” she shrugged her shoulders, “He was gone.” She lifted her head and smiled, “Sorry, I’m supposed to be cheering you up. Tell me about your parents.”

Hector smiled, “Not much to say, I never knew them,” he said. “Thank you for the book by the way. I really enjoyed it.”

Stephanie turned away, her cheeks going red, “I have two more published, but only on Kindle. I could print them for you if you don’t have a reader.”

Hector had an iPad in his wall-safe but was not going to let anyone open that. He shook his head, “No, don’t print them, I’ll get a reader.”

“I have an old iPad mini that I never use,” said Stephanie, “I’ll clean it up and you can use that.”

“Thank you, I would like that,” Hector still found it strange accepting anyone’s help, he told himself he was learning.

Two days later Doctor Reed told Hector that he could move to the general ward.

“There’s nothing more for me to do with you, Hector,” she said, “You have done remarkably well. I will want to see you again in six months, by then we should be able to wean you off the anti-convulsants. Priscilla says you will probably be able to go home in a week, possibly two. She says the physiotherapy department at Chichester is excellent and will make sure they take good care of you.

Mags and Peter held a little party for him that evening, celebrating his escape from Stalag ICU.

“I don’t know why I am celebrating,” said Peter, “I was just beginning to make progress with Jeremy Njovu.”

Mags laughed, “Yeah, dream on Peter. I’ve met his wife and you don’t stand a chance there.”

Peter shrugged, “Well, I’ll still miss him. What about you Hector, won’t you miss this place?”

Hector thought about it for a while, “Part of me is desperate to get out of here, but part of me is terrified.”

“You’ve become institutionalized,” said Peter, “Three months in the same room.”

“It wasn’t too bad, I slept through the worst of it, and had good company when I was awake,” said Hector. “I suppose you saw the worst of it. I got a fright when I saw myself in the mirror after the frame came off my head. I can’t imagine what I must have looked like with it on.”

“You would have scared Frankenstein,” said Mags with a laugh.

The following morning Hector received a padded envelope posted from Oxford, Stephanie’s iPad mini with a charger, earphones and a note.

“Please keep it Hector, I was given the latest model for Christmas.

Stephanie
XXXX

PS. I have accepted the job at Millfield, can I be your lodger till I have found a place to rent?”

Hector spent an hour checking out the iPad, it was only a year old, and much more powerful than the one he used. A generous gift. He felt bad about his paranoia concerning electronic devices but knew he would not be comfortable about the iPad till it had been thoroughly checked by the counter-surveillance expert he used for such work. He reminded himself that he was under constant surveillance in the hospital and opened the Kindle reader. Stephanie had put all three of her books on it.

“Hello Hector,” a familiar voice distracted him from the book he was reading, “I have booked time in the pool for you today.” Priscilla, the physiotherapist gave him an encouraging smile. “You said you liked swimming.”

“Great,” said Hector, sitting up and putting the iPad into the drawer next to his bed, “Do you have swimming trunks for me?”

“Of course, and water wings. Come on, it’s a long walk,” said Priscilla, “And you can have lunch outside afterwards.”

“I’m not wearing water wings!” Hector told her with a laugh.

“You’ll do as you are told,” said Priscilla sternly, “Or you’ll be sent back to ICU for a week.”

“You are such a bully,” said Hector, “Can I have ice-cream for lunch?”

“Only if you are a good boy,” said Priscilla laughing, “Now hurry up.”

Mags could not believe Hector was using an iPad when she arrived that evening. Hector was sat by a window in the day room.

“You don’t have a mobile phone or a computer, but you have a bloody iPad?”

“What’s wrong with that?” asked Hector. “I’m only reading a book on it, one that Stephanie wrote, “Queen Cartamandua of the Brigantes.”

“I liked that one,” said Mags, “But I preferred the one about Halfdan the first Danish King of York.” said Mags. “Sorry, I thought you were one of those technophobes who is terrified of modern IT equipment.”

“No, you are right, I am a bit of a dinosaur when it comes to modern technology; I don’t like the intrusiveness of mobile phones and how people throw their personal data around these days.” Hector admitted. “It isn’t the technology I don’t like; it is the extent to which it can be and is often misused.” He held up the iPad, “This thing is so sleek and so easy to use, that people forget it is also a massively powerful data storage and communications device. It can be used to actively spy on you, and anything you put on here can be accessed without your permission by people on the other side of the planet in seconds. People happily sign up for ‘free’ email and social media accounts, cloud storage and video conference applications and do not stop to think about how the providers of these ‘free’ services can afford to provide the services. They are using or selling the personal data that we give them for free.”

Mags stared at him.

“Sorry, I am sure you know more about modern technology than I do, I shouldn’t go on about it.” said Hector.

“Oh please,” said Mags making a face, “I’m one of the idiots that signs up for free apps and the latest gadgets whenever I can. I never thought about it. Do you really think somebody bothers to monitor my emails?”

Hector nodded, “GCHQ employs thousands of people who do nothing but monitor communications all day and every day.”

“And there was that pedophile ring that got rounded up during the Pandemic; they were they used an encrypted file sharing app that had been set up by the FBI,” said Mags looking alarmed, “Even if you pay for an app, there is no way of being sure it really is private or secure.”

Hector nodded and wished he had not said anything.

“Crap, now I’m getting paranoid,” said Mags, “What should I do?”

Mags looked so shocked that Hector smiled, “Don’t panic Mags, but a little paranoia is a good thing. Before the mobile phone, back in the day of hard-wired plain old telephones there were devices that could be used to eavesdrop by keeping the line open after the person thought they had ended the conversation. Now most people carry a phone in their pocket and anyone with a little bit of knowledge can use it to eavesdrop on you, even when you aren’t using the phone and they can even find out where you are.”

Mags looked a little pale; she nodded her head and pulled her phone out of her pocket and studied it. Then shook her head and replaced the phone in her pocket.

“I have to go,” she said, “Peter asked me to tell you he can’t make it this week - he’s gone to Leicester; his mum had a bad fall.”

Hector walked to the exit with her and thanked her for coming. He was sure Mags was deeply worried about something. He was certain of it, and her worry took hold when he had explained how easy it was to eavesdrop on people with mobile phones. Hector walked every corridor and staircase in the hospital as he thought about what might be bothering Mags. One good thing seemed to have come from his stint in hospital; his left leg no longer ached and went numb as it used to.

The hospital staff threw a little party for Hector on his last day. Dr Reed and Jeremy Njovu from ICU attended, and Priscilla gave a little speech and presented him with a card, hand painted by Jeremy and signed by all of the medical staff that had cared for Hector during his five months in the hospital. The

card was of a street in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe, lined with flowering Jacaranda trees. Hector had spent the first eleven years of his life in an orphanage in Bulawayo, and still spoke a little Ndebele. He was lost for words and hugged Jeremy fiercely. It was a while before he could thank him.

“Hamba gashle,” said Jeremy quietly in Ndebele.

Stephanie collected Hector that evening, she had bought a car, a tiny, sky blue, three door Toyota RAV4. it looked like the sort of car Noddy would drive.

“It’s second hand, or previously loved, as the saleswoman said,” she said, obviously very pleased with it, “And it is four-wheel drive so I can do muddy tracks and a bit of cross country. I’d prefer a LandRover, but they are so expensive.”

Traffic was heavy, but Hector enjoyed the journey. Stephanie told him about the dig and the progress they were making. He realised she was a little nervous as she turned off the main road towards the cluster of houses that constituted the village of Sulham.

“Have you made friends with any of the neighbours yet?” he asked her.

Stephanie looked startled, she shook her head, “Just Graham, he was an admiral, your next-door neighbour... I have not really tried. I suppose I am a recluse by nature.”

Hector wrestled with the gate and closed it after Stephanie had driven through. Somebody had tidied the garden recently and cut back the hedge along his short driveway.

“I have planning permission for a car port, it only took five years to get,” said Hector, “I had intended to get started on it in June. I hope the contractor still has all the materials I ordered.”

Hector stood looking at the front entrance for a while. There was no sign of the violence that had happened on the same spot five months earlier.

Stephanie touched his arm but did not say anything. Hector gave her a reassuring smile and unlocked the front door, holding it open for her.

The house smelled clean and fresh, there were flowers on the hallway table next to a small pile of neatly stacked mail.

Hector and Stephanie both spoke at the same time. "Would you like a cup of ...?" They laughed.

"Yes please," said Stephanie, "Whatever you are making."

"Coffee for me, but if there is any tea, I can make you tea if you prefer?"

"No, I prefer coffee, black and no sugar," said Stephanie.

The kitchen was spotless.

"I briefly contemplated trying to impress you with my cooking skills and have a lasagna ready in the oven for your return," said Stephanie with a nervous smile, "But I wasn't sure how long it would take to get back and, well, it is the only thing I can cook, so I hope you don't mind if we go out for dinner instead?" Her face reddened slightly.

"I'd love to go out for dinner, what do you have in mind?" Hector replied.

"Give me a few minutes to freshen up," said Stephanie glancing at her watch, "I thought Pandora's Cafe would be nice."

“Perfect, I’ll put my things away while the kettle boils.” said Hector.

He was sipping coffee and going through his mail when Stephanie came down. He had heard her talking on her phone, but not what she had been saying. She looked thoughtful. They made small talk while they drank their coffee.

“You don’t drive?” Stephanie, asked after Hector had strapped himself in the car.

“I have a license, and an old motorbike, but I’m not allowed to drive or ride till the doctor’s are certain I am not going to have any more seizures,” said Hector, “It’s not really a hardship, I only ride the bike for fun on hot sunny days.”

“I got a moped when I left school,” said Stephanie, “And pranged it two weeks later.” She laughed, “Dad was more upset than I was.” She bit her lower lip, “I can rent a place in Millfield or Chichester if you would prefer to have your home to yourself. I loved staying there, but I suspect you are a very private person...”

“It really is up to you, Stephanie. There is plenty of room for both of us, but I do understand that you might feel uncomfortable about sharing a house with an older man,” said Hector, “You will be perfectly safe from me, I promise.”

Stephanie laughed, “Honestly, I wasn’t worried about that, I just don’t want to impose on you. I would love to stay, but I do have conditions; I need to pay my way and you have to promise two things: no cats; I am terribly allergic to cats, and that you will always be honest with me about boundaries. By that I mean you will tell me whenever I overstep them.”

“Honesty is good, I think we should both be honest with each other. I like cats I but do not want any pets in the house. The

neighbours' cats often come into the garden though," said Hector, "I used to share accommodation when I was young and came up with a list of rules that I will try to remember and discuss with you. We can work on it together."

"That sounds good. I wanted to suggest the same thing, only I thought you might not like me making rules for living in your house," said Stephanie, looking and sounding relieved.

"Think of it as our home, not my house," said Hector, as Stephanie parked across the road from Pandora's Cafe.

Stephanie insisted that Hector go first, grinning widely as everybody cheered. Familiar faces grinned and welcomed Hector back. He recognised his babysitters, and Maggie, there were even some of the staff from the hospital. Mags waited till the noise had died down before approaching with a red-faced young girl.

"Hector, this is Rebecca King, the girl that found you and called the ambulance," she said.

Rebecca shook Hector's hand and told him she was very glad that he was better. Hector had written to her from Hospital months earlier, after learning her name from the police, who promised to get the letter to her. She had sent him a card, thanking him for the letter.

Hector felt a little overwhelmed at first, Stephanie introduced him to the people he did not know, mostly from the dig. He recognised one woman's voice, Stephanie said that Angela had spent one night a week for the first two months reading to him while he was in an induced coma.

"You are as lovely as your voice," said Hector, "You read a Harry Potter story, I loved the sound of your voice. Thank you so much."

Angela smiled a wide smile and gave him a hug as the tears ran down her face, "It was Harry Potter," she told him in her beautiful Caribbean accent, "I'm so glad that you enjoyed it."

By ten PM Hector was exhausted and grateful when Stephanie suggested she drive him home. He had spoken to everybody and thanked everyone. Maggie told him that everybody had chipped in, pointing to a gaily painted box on the counter with his name on it, and saying there was money left over that meant he would be having free food and drinks for a while.

"That was probably exhausting," Stephanie said as they headed home, "How are you feeling?"

"Tired but happy," said Hector, "I didn't realise my neighbours were such nice people. Thank you for organising that."

"The two Maggie's did all the work," said Stephanie, "They were close to Lee, and shattered when she was killed. I think they needed to be involved in your recovery, it helped them to be able to help you... if you see what I mean?" she wiped her eyes, "Sorry, I am not being very articulate."

Hector waved a hand and stifled a yawn, "I'm very grateful, I never knew that people could be so kind," he said, "I really don't feel worthy of it."

Hector was asleep almost as soon as his head touched the pillow that night. He woke early and made himself coffee and toast and finished going through his mail. He had a physiotherapy appointment at nine AM, and wanted to find out where he could swim, having decided that he should do regular exercise now that he had the time. He heard Stephanie moving about and boiled the kettle. He looked at the clock, it was almost six thirty. He called Dexter's mobile phone and left a message asking Dexter to Uber him to St Richard's in

Chichester in time for a 9 AM appointment. He got the papers he needed together and went up to shower and change. He came back down again just as Stephanie was cleaning up her breakfast things and getting ready to leave. Hector opened and closed the gate for her, and waved goodbye just as Dexter pulled up outside.

Minutes later he was patiently answering Dexter's questions as they headed for Chichester.

By noon, Hector had worked up an appetite. He walked towards the Cross looking for a likely place to eat and settled on a gourmet burger place near the Cross. He liked Chichester; there was always something new to discover. The Premier Burger place was alright, but not great. He could see the clock on the Cross from his table and timed his departure so he could reach Bijan's at two PM.

Bijan turned his mournful gaze on Hector and immediately got to his feet, "Hector, my friend, I didn't think I would ever see you again. The news... it was terrible. Come sit. Can I fetch you something to drink? I have tea and coca-cola."

Hector was surprised at the warm welcome, "Thank you Bijan, it is good to see you again. Nothing for me to drink thanks, I have just had some lunch and coffee," he said handing the iPad Stephanie had given him to Bijan, "Please can you work your magic on this for me? A friend gave it to me."

Bijan nodded, taking the iPad and turning it over in his hands. "Sure, what's the time frame?"

"I'm not in a hurry Bijan, I just want to know that it is clean and safe. I would also like a cellular phone, a laptop and an internet hook up at my home, and a regular sweep of my home."

Bijan's eyebrows shot up, "Are you working again? I read about you in the local paper. That was a bad business."

"Not officially, this is for me, I want to find the bugger that attacked me," said Hector, "I can pay you now if you want."

Bijan waved a dismissive hand, "No need, I trust you, Hector. Let me know when I can come to the house to do the sweep, I think I can have everything else ready in two weeks. Is that OK?"

"That's fine Bijan," said Hector, knowing that Bijan always allowed himself a generous margin and would likely be ready in half the time, "Tuesday would be good, if you can make it then? any time after seven."

Bijan nodded, already half distracted with opening up the iPad. "I'll be there, I know the place; Sulham, it was in the papers."

Hector let himself out and decided to take a long walk around the city walls. He checked the time and saw that he had an hour before the next bus to Sulham. He realised that he was looking forward to going home; it was a new experience for him. He decided that he was going to cook a risotto and set off towards Sainsbury's, adjusting his mental timetable.

Stephanie was home by the time he arrived. It sounded like she was in the bath. Hector had a shower and was in the kitchen getting started on the food when she came down in a tracksuit and slippers, carrying an empty wine glass and a sheaf of papers.

"I'm making a risotto," he said, "Would you like some?"

Stephanie hesitated then smiled and nodded, "Yes please, would you like some wine?"

“I wish,” said Hector, “But no alcohol for me for the next six months at least. At least I am allowed coffee - am not sure I would want to live without coffee.”

Stephanie smiled and picked up the sheaf of papers, “Coffee, chocolate and red wine are my go-to anti-depressants. I lived on them through the pandemic.” She waved the papers, “I’ve got to make notes for a briefing tomorrow, please excuse me?”

“I’ll bring you a plate when it’s done,” said Hector as he concentrated on chopping garlic.

Stephanie was curled up in an armchair listening to something on an iPod while frowning at the papers in her left hand while twirling a slim pencil with the fingers of her right hand. Hector put the tray with her food on the table next to her and carried his plate and mug to sit by the window. It was dark outside.

“This is delicious, thank you,” said Stephanie, “You are a better cook than I am.”

“I have a limited repertoire,” said Hector, “But I enjoy cooking simple meals.”

“I tend to buy ready made meals that can go in the microwave or oven straight from the freezer,” said Stephanie, “Probably not very healthy.”

“Convenient though,” said Hector, “Especially for fish dishes, I can’t cook fish and hate washing fishy dishes. I usually eat them straight from the foil.”

They both laughed. Hector washed up his plate and cutlery; he had already cleaned up after cooking, and made some more coffee, then fetched his old iPad and went through to the sitting room and lit the gas fire. It took him a while to get into the right frame of mind to write, and he spent some time correcting

mistakes before he started. He had spent quite a lot of time mentally writing the story during the five months he had spent in hospital, and once he got started, he was lost in the fantasy world he had created. He stopped when the cramp in his right thumb and arm got too painful. He shook out his arm and looked up to find Stephanie looking at him.

“You are writing,” she said, then blushed and apologised, “Sorry, that came out wrong. You have been writing non-stop for two hours and haven’t touched your coffee.”

“It’s OK, I like cold coffee. Yes, I am writing. I do that a lot,” said Hector. He picked up his coffee, it was lukewarm, “Before I forget; the contractor says he will start on the car port tomorrow, I’m afraid you will have to park by the green for a few days. Sorry.”

“That’s OK. Graham, next door, allows me to park in his driveway when I have visitors,” said Stephanie, “And I’m probably going to Oxford on Thursday, I’ll leave my car at Chichester station till Monday, unless I leave it at the dig.”

Hector wondered what type of visitors Stephanie had had staying and realised that he was slightly jealous, then thought it through and told himself he was being ridiculous.

Bijan arrived just as Stephanie was leaving. Hector asked him to park on the green and helped him to carry his equipment into the house. He could tell that Bijan was curious about Stephanie, and was glad when the contractor, Martin, arrived to start on the car port. It was a simple structure, four oak posts and a tiled roof against the side of the house. Martin and his ‘boy’ who looked old enough to be his father dug holes for the posts and had them concreted in before they off loaded the tiles.

Bijan found a transmitter in the entrance hall and another in the sitting room and gave them to Hector, who took them outside and smashed them with a hammer. Bijan installed the satellite modem in the attic and ran a cable down to the spare bedroom that Hector used as a study and work room and was done by midday. He said he would have it activated and then fit, test and align the dish when he brought the laptop.

Hector made bacon and egg sandwiches for Martin and Maurice and helped them to offload the tiles. He cleaned up after they had gone and there was just enough space for Stephanie's little car on the driveway.

Stephanie arrived while Hector was showering. She knocked on his bedroom door and asked if he minded having lasagna for supper, she had brought one from Waitrose.

Hector was tapping away at his iPad when Stephanie came down after showering and changing. She looked animated and told him they had caught one of the volunteers stealing artifacts before she came home. Hector remembered that he had put in an application to volunteer at the dig but did not mention it. Stephanie poured herself a glass of wine and suggested they work on the house rules. Somehow, she made it fun. It was straightforward enough and not much different to the rules Hector had insisted on when he shared accommodations when he was younger. The only proposal he disagreed with was about washing up; Stephanie had suggested that if one of them cooked a meal for both of them, then the other should wash up. Hector said he preferred that the cook cleans up after cooking and that everybody cleans their own crockery and cutlery. There was a dishwasher, which he seldom used and was thinking of replacing with a smaller unit. Stephanie said she would try it his way and agreed that she had not liked washing up after some of her flat mates who made a huge mess and used too many pots and pans when cooking. They were still swapping sharing horror stories when it was time to eat.

“So, what are you writing?” asked Stephanie after they had sat down with their food, “A journal?”

Hector had just put a fork full of piping hot lasagna in his mouth and had trouble swallowing it before he could answer.

“Sorry,” he said, “That was hot. No, I am just writing rubbish really, fantasy fiction, I suppose, swords, magic, demons and dragons at the moment. It’s a habit I have had since my teens, it started when I couldn’t get books for one reason or another, so I just wrote my own.”

“So, you are an author,” said Stephanie, “One more thing I know about you. Soon I will know all your secrets!” She laughed.

“I’m definitely not an author, nobody but me gets to read my stories,” Hector told her, “Before computers, I wouldn’t even read them, just write them, and when the notebook was full, chuck it away. I get what I want from writing them.”

“I used to write for the enjoyment of it,” said Stephanie, “And I suppose I still do enjoy writing, but the tedium of publishing I could do without.”

“I thoroughly enjoyed your books, if that is any consolation.”

“Thanks, if you ever do want to publish your stories, I can probably help.” She bit her lip, “Ummm, I’ve been meaning to ask you if I can get WiFi installed. I have been using Graham’s, but I am not comfortable scrounging off him, and I will be using masses more data as the dig progresses. Some of the files are absolutely huge. Mags told me that you don’t much like the interconnected world.”

Hector laughed, "She probably said I am totally paranoid, and it is true. The chap that arrived as you were leaving this morning is installing a data connection. It should be working in two weeks."

Stephanie looked stunned, "Wow, I didn't expect that. Is this just for me, or are you leaping into the digital age at last?"

"I know my way around computers and mobile phones," said Hector, "And I want to do some research, so I decided to get an internet connection, a laptop and a mobile phone."

"But I thought ... well, Mags told me that you don't like those things."

"I do and I don't, but they can be useful," said Hector.

"The papers described you as a retired Insurance Assessor," said Stephanie, "Didn't you have to use computers to do your job, and a mobile phone?"

"Yes, I used computers and mobile phones quite a lot for work," said Hector.

"Sorry, I'm not trying to interrogate you or anything," said Stephanie going red, "I'm just curious about why you don't like the internet and mobile phones, or TV."

Hector smiled, "It is fine, I really don't mind talking about it. I went off TV years ago when I found myself watching far too much of it, switching from channel to channel looking for something worth watching. I actually do like the concept of internet and smart phones, but when I retired, in December, I decided that I did not need a mobile phone ... I have a perfectly good phone in the hallway. As for the internet, if I want to look something up, I usually go to an internet cafe. I don't have an internet presence, no email address or social media accounts,

because I do not like the way they allow people to gather data about me.”

“Well, that sounds perfectly sensible to me,” said Stephanie, “I have to admit that I waste far too much time on social media, but email and internet have become very necessary tools in my professional life. As for TV, I prefer to download what I want to watch over the internet so that I can binge watch in bed with a bottle of wine and several jumbo bags of crisps.” Stephanie drank some wine, “There’s some left I you like?” she said when she noticed that Hector had finished his lasagna.

“It was good, and I am quite full, thank you,” said Hector getting to his feet, “Would you like me to fetch you some more?”

“No thanks, I’ll take it to site tomorrow and zap it in the new microwave.” she grinned, “I’m glad you didn’t want more. You are too young to be retired, there is no way you are sixty-seven.”

“I qualified for a pension a year ago,” said Hector, “And in December I decided I was too old for all the traveling that went with my work.” He automatically rubbed his left hip and wondered if it would start hurting again. “I’m going to make myself a coffee, do you want anything?”

“Coffee would be nice, it doesn’t seem to keep me awake,” said Stephanie getting up and following him to the kitchen. By the time he had filled and put the kettle on to boil she had washed his plate and cutlery. He ground coffee with the stainless-steel mortar and pestle. Stephanie watched fascinated. “You make that look easy,” she said.

“It’s much easier than a hand grinder, and I prefer my coffee ground finer than most grinders can manage,” said Hector, “There is an electric grinder in the cupboard next to the fridge. I keep the beans in the freezer, please help yourself.”

“I just buy ready ground. I am so glad you don’t use those awful capsule things,” said Stephanie, “I went right off George Clooney when he started advertising them.”

“Quite right,” said Hector, “I am proud of you.”

They sat in quiet companionship, Hector thumbing away silently at his iPad and Stephanie pouring over sheets of paper making notes till her phone rang and she went out to the entrance hall to answer it, closing the door softly behind her. When she came back her face looked paler apart from a red spot on each cheek. She murmured goodnight to Hector as she gathered her things and left the room.

Hector carried on writing till he started nodding off, then rinsed his coffee mug and went to bed. He lay in bed planning his day, he had physiotherapy again in the morning and thought he would ask Stephanie for a lift to Millfield and take the bus from there. He continued with his story in his mind, a trick he had learned when sleep eluded him, and woke early. He made sandwiches and put them and a flask of hot water and the makings for tea in a large cool box outside for Martin and Maurice. Then made himself toast and coffee.

Stephanie looked tired when she came down. She offered to drive him to Chichester, but he said he would prefer to take the bus from Millfield. They did not speak in the car, Stephanie asked if he minded her listening to the radio, it was BBC radio 2. Stephanie dropped him outside the court. The bus arrived before her car had turned off on Mill Road.

Hector was back home just in time to make more sandwiches for Martin and Maurice. They had brought and offloaded the heavy stone pavers that would be the base of the carport and finished laying them just after four PM. Hector was still clearing up when Stephanie arrived. Hector was dripping with sweat

despite the cool breeze. Stephanie offered to help him carry the last two stones and he accepted gratefully. She was strong. They had coffee in the kitchen before going off to their rooms to shower. Hector told Stephanie that he was planning to walk to Bosham to have supper at the Anchor Bleu, it was darts night on a Wednesday night. She said she wanted to go over her notes for the presentation she had to give in Oxford on Thursday afternoon.

Stephanie changed her mind after she had showered and said she would much prefer to relax before her ordeal.

“Graham told me about Bosham, it has connections to the Norman Conquest and is apparently the site of where King Knut got his feet wet after ordering the tide to turn back,” said Stephanie, “I think that Knut’s daughter is buried there.”

“They call him Canute in Bosham,” said Hector. “I looked for the grave but didn’t find it. It is a pretty village. I do not know where Sulham finds the cheek to call itself a village. The path we are taking used to be a Roman road, apparently the locals used all the cobbles to make floors in their huts after the Romans left.”

“Have you been to the Roman palace at Fishbourne?” asked Stephanie.

“Yes, I thought it was rather boring, but that was six years ago when I moved here.”

“Long before you qualified for a pension. How old are you, Hector?”

“Ever so old, thank you for reminding me, fifty-one and a few months.”

“You had your birthday while you were in hospital, why didn’t you say?” asked Stephanie. “You really don’t look your age.”

“Thank you, I think,” said Hector, “So what is this ordeal you have in Oxford tomorrow?”

“I’m meeting all the heads of the colleges that are funding the dig. I need to reassure them that their money is being well spent and answer any questions they have about ...certain sensitive things,” said Stephanie, “Lee seemed to take all sort of things in her stride, but I get butterflies every time.”

“Do you manage to find time to write? Books I mean?” asked Hector.

“God no!” Stephanie laughed, “I won’t be writing anything for the next five years, unless I get fired, but I tend not to write till I have most of the story, more or less, in my head. I am always daydreaming about people in History. Just in the last few minutes I started wondering about Knut’s daughter buried here in Bosham. How do you formulate your stories, Hector?”

“I suppose I start with an idea, probably a daydream and just see where it takes me. Pure escapism really, I write to free myself from reality. Sometimes it comes easily and sometimes it is like getting blood from a stone.”

They walked in silence when the track got muddier. Hector cut a long stick to use to check some of the muddier patches. They were both chuckling when they eventually reached the shore road. The tide was coming in, so they climbed up a set of narrow steps onto the raised walkway.

“It’s called the Trippet,” said Hector, “Old Boshamese for ‘the place to trip on dog shit,’” he muttered. Stephanie laughed.

The pub was relatively quiet when they got there. They both ordered steak pie and chips and put their names down for 501 doubles. Hector paid their entry fee. Stephanie had a Guinness.

Somebody recognised Stephanie, a volunteer from the dig. They were dragged off to meet the woman's husband and sister. The sister kept looking at Hector, he knew she was trying to place where she had seen him before. The pub was filling rapidly, and the volunteer and her husband and sister decided to leave. The food arrived shortly after that. Stephanie had another Guinness and demolished her food. Her phone rang. She looked at the screen, frowned and turned the phone off.

"You are a bad influence on me Hector," she said, laughing.

They got to the semifinals in the darts. Stephanie's playing seemed to improve as she drank more. She was fun.

Hector asked the barman to call Dexter's number and ask him to collect them at the Swan roundabout.

"That's not how Uber is supposed to work," Stephanie told him carefully enunciating her words, "You are supposed to use their App, and choose the nearest Uber."

"I don't want the nearest Uber," said Hector, "I want Dexter, I know him, I like him, and I trust him." He took her arm to steady her as she wobbled towards an oncoming vehicle.

"You are a wonderfully rational man, Hector. Has anyone told you that? You are too bloody nice as well."

"Thank you, Stephanie," said Hector patiently, "You need to keep moving this way."

"Can I hold your hand? You have nice hands. Steady and strong,"

Hector enjoyed holding her hand, she seemed very young as she tight-rope-walked along the lane marking, the tip of her tongue showing as she concentrated.

By the time they had reached the Swan Roundabout Stephanie had grown sad. "I miss Lee so much; she was so good at listening. She made everything seem so easy and she never got angry," she sobbed and clung to Hector's arm. Hector had to buckle her seatbelt and she fell asleep on the short drive to Sulham. Hector managed to wake her but had to help her to the house. She was still maudlin and very quiet when Hector sat her at the kitchen table and made cocoa for them both. He helped her up the stairs and took her boots off, and persuaded her to give him her phone, which he switched on and put on charge. She kissed his cheek and climbed meekly into bed, fully dressed when he told her to. Hector had no trouble getting to sleep that night and woke when he heard Stephanie moving about. She was in the kitchen making coffee when he came downstairs. She looked subdued and tried to apologise for drinking too much.

"You have nothing to apologise for," he said, "I had a wonderful night and really enjoyed your company. You are the best darts partner I have ever had."

Martin and Maurice arrived soon after Stephanie left and cut the stone to lay around the edges and the posts, checked the tiles, cleaned up their mess and left, telling Hector they would be back in four weeks when the concrete was strong enough to support the weight of the tiles. Hector cleared out the garden shed and decided to turn it into a little workshop. He had enjoyed working with his hands as a young apprentice in the Engineers. He called Dexter and spent the afternoon in Chichester ordering tools, hardware and wood for delivery on Friday afternoon. He went to the cinema that evening and afterwards ate at the Nando's close to the cinema. The young woman, Angela, who had read to him while he was in a coma in

hospital, recognised him and asked him to sit with her and her Aunty. They were going to watch a late show.

Dexter drove Hector home and thanked him for all the extra work he was getting from people at the dig.

Bijan arrived early on Friday morning. He had brought a smart phone, laptop and a satellite dish. He gave Hector a lift to Chichester, dropping him outside the physiotherapy centre a minute before his appointment.

Hector went straight home after physiotherapy, eager to get started with tracking down his attacker. Hector spent the afternoon finding out what he could about Dr. Lee Moy and saving it into a folder. He then did the same for the two men that had attacked Lee, Derek Blane and Michael Dowel, and William Blane, Derek's violent brother.

Hector had spent many years discreetly finding people using the internet. He avoided searches and sites that would flag attention from his former colleagues at The Firm. By eight PM he had had enough of peering at the laptop screen. His neck and shoulders ached. He powered down the laptop and put it and the smart phone in his wall safe, then went for a long walk while he contemplated his next move. He decided he would start with London and hurried back home. He called Dexter as soon as he got home.

“Hello Dexter,” he spoke slowly, “Two jobs. First, do you know what a thumb-drive is? Some people call them flash-drives or memory sticks, that plug into a computer?” he stopped and listened for a while, “Yes, exactly that. Can you buy one for me now? I think they sell them in the filling station by the A27 close to Tesco. The biggest one they have, and bring it to me?”

He listened for a while, before speaking again, “No, that is fine Dexter. The second job is to take me to the railway station tomorrow, I need to be there at seven.”

He put down the phone and went into the kitchen thinking about what he was going to make for supper and realised he could have asked Dexter to get him a takeout from the Pride of India. The thought made his mouth water and he decided to make another risotto. He opened the freezer to get some chicken and saw a stack of Waitrose frozen ready to cook meals. Stephanie had put a bit of card in front of them on which she had written in thick black felt tip, “Hector, these are for you. XXX.”

Hector decided he liked the kisses and chose the Lancashire Hot Pot. He read the instructions and put it into the oven, then made coffee and went upstairs to retrieve his laptop from the safe. Dexter arrived before the food was ready. Hector thanked him and paid him cash, then copied the folders he had made earlier onto the thumb drive. He ate at the kitchen table while browsing through some of the information he had downloaded and made notes on a pad. By ten PM he was fast asleep in bed.

Hector woke early and realised he felt good about having something like his old life back. That surprised him, as he had grown to hate his work by the time he decided to quit. He told himself that it was normal to feel good about a return to the familiar. He carried the cellphone and the thumb drive and his small notebook and took the fast train to London. By nine AM he was in Earls Court. E.D. was still in the same terraced house. His mother opened the door and scowled when she recognised Hector, who she knew as Mr Ackroyd. She ignored his greeting and stepped back, allowing him to enter.

She pointed a finger up at the ceiling and Hector nodded, though his heart sank.

He rapped his knuckles on the door which had E.D. spray painted diagonally on it.

“Who is it?” E.D.’s voice had grown deeper,

“An old friend, Ackroyd,” said Hector.

The sound of footsteps and the door opened, E.D had grown, he was almost six foot tall, and only just seventeen. He looked sullen.

“Yeah?” he asked, “You want to inspect? Go ahead,” he muttered and stepped back leaving the door wide open.

“Hello Edward, I can see that you remember me, but I’m a free lancer now. Strictly cash,” said Hector.

“Can’t... Been ordered to shut down.” said E.D, “Not even allowed a mobile phone.”

“I’m sorry to hear that Edward, what happened?” asked Hector.

“I hacked Student Loans and got snitched out,” said E.D. with a little grin, “It was worth it though.”

Hector had read about the incident; tens of thousands of student loan repayment records had been destroyed during the last year of the covid lockdown.

He smiled, “Well done Edward, I’m proud of you mate, just sorry you got rumbled, I’ll leave you alone then.”

“If you tell me what you need doing, I can point you at the best person for it,” E.D. spoke quietly, “Just keep my name out of it, OK?”

Hector looked at him and nodded, "Thanks Edward, I want online history and phone records for four people. It has to be discreet at least one of them is a killer. All I have is names."

E.D. didn't hesitate, "Bomber'll do it. Up north, Manchester, I think. I've got a number is all, you got a pen and paper?"

Hector made the call from Victoria Station. It was picked up almost immediately.

"Yeah, what the fuck do you want?" said a bored voice.

"Is this Bomber?" asked Hector.

"Who wants to know?"

"I need some work done, online records and phone history going back to the beginning of the year, four people, one dead, two in nick and one that may be a killer. Cash," said Hector.

"Where are you?"

"London."

"I'll be at the Costa Coffee in Salford tomorrow at ten." The line cut.

Hector had not visited Manchester for a couple of years. He took the tube to Euston and then the train and found a B&B two streets away from the Sanford Costa Coffee. He spent two hours walking around Salford which looked a lot livelier than it had during the first Covid Lockdown. He went back to the B&B to get a sweater and walked back to the Karachi Wok, which had caught his eye earlier. He was early and had the dining room to himself. He read the local Salford Advertiser while he waited for his food. The light rain had stopped when he left the restaurant, so he walked to the Manchester Ship canal and

watched Quest at the Quays Vue cinema before going back to the B&B.

The next morning Hector was up early. Mrs Cox, his landlady, arranged for her nephew Darren to drive him to the Manchester Machine Shop in Bolton, where he spent too long. Darren dropped him outside the Salford Costa Coffee at quarter past ten and promised to deliver the tools Hector had purchased to the B&B.

He looked around the coffee shop while he stood in the queue at the counter. More than half the customers appeared to be Somalis. Hector displayed the London Evening Standard on the table and sat with his back to the wall with his coffee and cinnamon roll. He waited till ten thirty before deciding, reluctantly, to call Bomber. He reached for his phone and was just about to dial when a woman stepped into his field of vision.

“Fuck me Barnes, what the fuck are you doing in Salford?” said a vaguely familiar voice.

Hector looked at the woman, “Bomber?” he asked quietly.

The woman put back her head and laughed loudly, causing people to turn and stare, “You don’t recognise me, do you?” She pulled out the chair opposite Hector and sat, leaning close and looking him in the eyes, “I am Bomber Vulcan, we were at RSME together. I was Trevor, but go by Tracy now,” she leaned back smiling, “I thought your voice was familiar. You are late.”

Hector shook his head, “How the hell did you recognise me, it’s been... thirty years, and I have a beard now.”

“Yeah, and I have tits and a cunt, but it is still me,” said Bomber with a smile, “You really did not recognise me, did you?” She

picked up the cinnamon roll and took a bite, “Bloody starving, come on, bring your coffee, let’s take a walk.”

Hector could see the resemblance now that he knew who Tracy was. He decided that she was far better-looking as a woman than she had been as a man. He detected a slight limp as she walked. They crossed the road. Tracy pointed at a block of flats.

“That’s me. Fourth floor, flats five and six,” she said, “So what happened to you after RSME? I heard you went special forces.”

Hector nodded, “I got transferred to the Int Corps. What happened with you? I did not suspect you were gay. Perkins was, I saw him on stage in London last year. Doesn’t look a day older.”

“Yeah, Steve is the poster boy for Gay, but I’m not that sort of gay, I’m a dyke, I still like girls, I was a lesbian in a man’s body.”

“Did you stay in the Engineers?” asked Hector.

“Nah, transferred to Signals to do radios. Did nine years and then fucked off to the Philippines for a budget sex change. They fucked it up so came back and got fixed by the NHS. On disability now and happy as a pig in shit.”

An old man greeted Tracy as they reached the lift. She introduced Hector as an old army buddy. The old man was very deaf but shook Hector’s hand with a powerful grip.

“I use six for work and five is my home,” said Tracy unlocking the door to flat 5. “Grab a seat while I fetch a drink.”

The sitting room was comfortably furnished and completely dominated by a bar counter across one wall. Tracy poured two

generous shots of Red Heart Rum and came to sit at the table, kicking off her shoes and tucking up her legs as she sat on the end of the couch, facing Hector.

“Here’s to old times,” she said leaning forward to take a glass.

Hector lifted a glass of rum and sniffed it longingly. He raised the glass and then slid it towards Tracy, before lifting his coffee in a salute, “Cheers to old mates.”

“You off the booze, Barnes?” asked Tracy.

“Hopefully not forever,” said Hector, “It’s a long story, and why I’m here really.”

“OK, I’m listening.”

Hector removed the thumb drive from his pocket and slid it over to Tracy, “There are four folders in there. Four people. The woman, Lee Moy, was attacked by two men, Derek Blane and Michael Dowel in March this year. They were trying to take her laptop. I helped to chase them off. Eight weeks later someone stove my skull in with a crowbar and left me for dead, a few hours later someone lodged a spade in the back of Lee Moy’s head and killed her. Police think it might be William Blane, but they cannot find him. I want to know everything there is about all four of them. It is personal. Can you help?”

Tracy looked at him, her expression blank. She drank a bit of rum, “You want to find and top this guy, William Blane?”

Hector shook his head, “No, I do want to find him, but I also want to know why those guys were trying to take Lee’s bag. I’ll decide what to do with William Blane when I understand more about why things happened the way they did.”

“You didn’t see the guy who attacked you?”

“Not a thing.” said Hector.

“They said you were a retired Insurance assessor, on the box,” said Tracy. “I watched it on the news, you were badly fucked up.”

“So I am told,” said Hector, “I’m not allowed to drive or touch alcohol and have to take anti-epilepsy drugs, which really pisses me off.”

“Were you fucking the girl?” asked Tracy.

“What? No, I’d only just met her, and she was probably fifteen years younger than me.”

“Eighteen years younger than you,” said Tracy, “Very smart and very cute.”

“So, will you do it?” asked Hector.

“Sure. Who sent you to me?” asked Tracy.

“A kid I know in London. Used to help me with this sort of stuff before I retired.”

“E.D.” said Tracy, “He’s grounded for a while. Told him to fuck off to Manila but he was too cocky. What sort of Insurance assessor needs a hacker?”

Hector looked at Tracy and she laughed, “OK, so I checked up on you. You did major fraud investigations for Lloyds of London. Why don’t you use your old contacts there, why come to E.D. or me?”

“I used E.D. when I was with Lloyd’s, but I don’t want them involved with this. This is personal. Be careful Tracy, I have a

very bad feeling about this. Whoever took me out doesn't hesitate to kill."

"Fuck off, it doesn't take guts to attack someone from behind, the cunt is a coward."

"Maybe so, but please be careful?" Hector removed an envelope from his pocket and slid it towards Tracy, "A thousand pounds for starters. There's three grand left in the kitty and it's all yours if you can deliver all the information I want."

"Fuck off Barnes, we are mates. I'll do it for five hundred all in, plus expenses if there are any. It's a piece of piss job anyway."

Hector laughed, "Thanks Tracy, you can donate the balance to charity, but that's what the job is worth to me."

"How do you want me to contact you?" asked Tracy, "You are not on the grid, I checked when I saw you on the news."

"I'll send you a link," said Hector taking his phone out of his pocket, "You can call me and upload data to the site. It should all be secure." He tapped out a message and sent it to Tracy's number. Her phone coughed.

She shook her head, "You are a dark fucking horse Barnes. Let's go out for lunch. Do you want to see my tits?"

Hector laughed, "Thankyou Tracy, I'll pass on seeing your tits, but thankyou for making me laugh. Lunch would be good."

Darren drove Hector to the station late that afternoon and helped him to carry the boxes to the red star office. Hector Gave him an extra fifty quid and had time to buy a paper before he took the train back to Chichester via London and Brighton. He arrived too late for the last bus to Sulham and called Dexter.

Stephanie's car was in the driveway, and she was asleep in an armchair in the sitting room, an empty bag of crisps and a wine glass on the table beside her. A book on her lap.

Hector boiled the kettle and made cocoa for them both. He was not sure how to wake Stephanie. He placed the cocoa and a ginger biscuit on the table next to her and took away the wine glass and crisp packet. Stephanie was awake when he returned with his cocoa and biscuit.

"Did you just get in?" she asked yawning and stretching her arms above her head, then saw the cocoa and biscuit, "Thankyou Hector."

"Good weekend?" asked Hector.

"Not specially, actually it was horrible," said Stephanie, "But I have put all of my stuff in storage and moved out of my flat. I feel much happier for that. How was your weekend?"

"Busy," said Hector, "And quite rewarding. I've gone and spent too much money on some tools, I think I need a hobby."

Stephanie offered to take him to the station to collect the tools he had red-starred to Chichester. Hector told her that the WiFi was working and told her the passkey, then said he needed a shower and bed.

The parcels office was not answering their phone in the morning, so Hector suggested that Stephanie go to the dig, and he would check at the Red Star office after his physiotherapy session. He got a lift to Millfield and took the bus to Chichester.

Hector was still busy in the shed when Stephanie got home that evening. It had rained at the dig, and she had got soaking wet. He found her wrapped in an oversized toweling robe, stuffing muddy clothes into the washing machine when he came in.

“You are looking bright eyed, and bushy tailed,” she said, “Are you happy with your new toys?”

“I am,” grinned Hector, “I’m about to order a takeout from the Pride of India, do you want to order anything?” he asked taking the menu from the drawer.

Dexter arrived with the food shortly after Hector had showered and changed. They ate at the kitchen table and chatted comfortably. Stephanie asked if Hector would mind if some of the staff from the dig joined in with the Wednesday night darts night at the Anchor Bleu. Hector said he would be delighted and was sure the owners of the pub would like it too. They stayed at the table quite late after they had cleaned up. Stephanie declined a hot drink and said she was going to bed. Hector stayed up for a couple of hours tapping away at his iPad. The light was still showing under Stephanie’s bedroom door when he went to bed close to midnight.

The week passed quickly. Stephanie did not go to the darts night as they had to work through the night at the dig shoring up a section of flooring that was in danger of collapsing after some heavy rain undermined it. Hector happily spent his free time making a work bench and shelving in the shed. Tracy sent a message to Hector’s phone and uploaded the GPS tracking data from Lee’s RangeRover to the webpage Hector had given her a link to. Hector spent half the night reviewing it.

By Sunday night Tracy was uploading files twice a day. Hector had to force himself to take regular breaks from staring at the laptop screen and decided he needed to get a larger high-resolution monitor and a printer. He called in to see Bijan before his Wednesday Physiotherapy session and Bijan brought them to his house on Friday afternoon.

Hector was surprised when Martin and Maurice turned up to finish the carport, he had lost track of how long it had been. The supports took two days, and the tiling took only one day, but Martin said he needed a decent dry spell before he could do the flashing properly. Hector didn't think the flashing was necessary, but Martin said it would help to prevent wood rot and that the building inspector would insist anyway. He put up a temporary flashing and promised to come back and finish the job as soon as there was a dry spell.

It was Wednesday and Guy Fawkes night. Stephanie and Hector braved a walk in the driving rain to Bosham. Three of the dig site staff were there for the darts night. The rain stopped in time for fireworks that were set off from a barge in the channel. It was pretty dismal, but they enjoyed the absurdity of it anyway. Stephanie was not quite as drunk as she had been on the first night. Amanda, one of the dig site staff had a minivan and was the designated driver. Hector invited them all in for a coffee and Amanda got Stephanie to bed. Stephanie came down while Hector was cleaning up after Amanda, Giles and Liz had gone.

"Is there any coffee left, Hector?" she asked.

Hector poured her a coffee, "Do you want something to eat?" he asked, "I'm starving and fancy grilled cheese on toast."

"That sounds good, yes please," said Stephanie. She watched silently while Hector cut the bread and put it in the toaster, then cut the cheese.

"Why aren't you married Hector?" she asked suddenly.

"Actually, I am married, I think," said Hector smiling.

"What!" exclaimed Stephanie, "I mean, what happened to... where is your wife?"

Hector laughed, "It was a long time ago, I was in the military, on a training exercise. My CO told me I could go home for my twentieth birthday. I found my wife in bed with my best friend, he had been best man at our wedding three months earlier."

"No!" gasped Stephanie, "You are making this up."

"It's the truth, I swear it," said Hector.

"What did you do?" asked Stephanie.

"I turned around went back to the training exercise. Two days later we returned to camp. He was gone, he had requested a return to his parent unit on compassionate grounds. I collected my stuff from the married quarters and returned to the barracks. I never spoke to either of them again, though I did see her once in the street. Never saw him again."

"Now I know you are teasing me," said Stephanie. She had her feet up on the chair and her arms wrapped around her legs.

Hector put the cheese and toast under the grill. "Why would I make something like that up. It isn't something I am very proud of," he said.

"I am sorry, it must have been horrible for you," said Stephanie. "You never applied for a divorce?"

Hector shook his head. He had to squat down to peer into the grill, "No, I lost all interest in marriage and figured I would have to see and maybe even speak to her if I asked for a divorce; couldn't be bothered with that." He pulled the grill pan out and slid the grilled cheese on toast onto two plates. He put a plate in front of Stephanie, "Be careful, it is really hot. Do you want anything with it? I like it with ketchup."

He fetched ketchup, salt, pepper and a knife then sat down opposite Stephanie, "Do you want me to slice it for you?" he asked.

Stephanie nodded and pushed her plate towards him, "So you were in the military," she said carefully, "Army?"

Hector nodded and carefully cut her toast twice diagonally. He slid her plate back to her, then cut his toast and opened the ketchup bottle, offering it to her.

Stephanie shook her head and picked up a bit of toast, "This is perfect, thank you."

They ate in silence for a while. Hector felt acutely aware of Stephanie. She seemed to be studying him. He finished his food and drained the last drop of coffee from his mug, then stood and started clearing up.

"Have I upset you, Hector?" asked Stephanie, "I'm sorry if I have."

He laughed, "No Stephanie, you haven't upset me. It is old history."

"Well, I think she was an idiot. I think you are a great guy."

"Thank you," he said and turned back to the table to get her plate. Stephanie had tears running down her cheeks. "Hey, please don't cry Stephanie." He felt suddenly distressed.

"Sorry," she sniffed, "I am feeling sorry for myself."

"Do you want to tell me about it?" Hector asked uncertainly.

"No... I was supposed to get married next summer," said Stephanie, "James and I... well, we got engaged four years

ago, before the pandemic. I don't know what happened, I was so happy..." she sobbed and buried her face in her hands and her body shook. Hector fetched some paper kitchen towel and handed it to her. He sat opposite her and waited quietly. Eventually she stopped sobbing and used the kitchen towel to dry her face and hands, "This last year he has just been foul to me and says he's had enough of me and doesn't want to marry me. I still don't know what I did wrong."

"I am sorry that you are hurting," said Hector.

"Oh, it's OK, it's just a process, I suppose. I was happy for a while and now I am sad. We need one to appreciate the other. I just have to find a way to cope. How do you cope with being sad and lonely, Hector?"

Hector got up, "I can show you, let me fetch something." He went into the sitting room and returned a short while later with a book.

"I have two go-to books that help me find my way out of the abyss," he said, "This one is *The Prophet*, by Khalil Gibran. Read the bit about love and marriage. You can keep the book. The other one is *Jonathan Livingstone Seagull* by Richard Bach. I gave away my copy and keep forgetting to get another one. I will get one tomorrow. It's easy to read."

Stephanie sniffed and took the book. "Thank you, Hector. You are very considerate.

Hector cleaned her mug and plate, while she sniffed and examined the book. He wiped down the table and gave her some more paper toweling.

"I'm going to bed now. Are you going to be alright?" he asked.

“Of course,” she said smiling, “Goodnight Hector and thank you for being a rock.”

Hector was up very early the following morning early preparing a beef stew for the slow cooker. Stephanie took him into Chichester; she said she needed to go to the bank and also wanted to get some hard hats, Wellington boots and raincoats for the dig site. Hector had a review at St Richards’s hospital with Doctor Reed. The rain bucketed down all the way to Chichester. Hector told her he would make his own way back home.

Dr Reed was very happy with Hector’s progress. They agreed that he did not need any more physiotherapy and reduced the doses of drugs he was taking.

Tracy called to say she had done as much as she could and asked Hector if any of the data she had mined for him had been any use.

“Yes, I think so,” he told her, “I’ll come up to Salford next week with the rest of your loot.”

“Nah, don’t do that. Keep it for now. I am going to Manila for a break, I hate the fucking winter here. I will come and get the money when I get back in February. You can still call me if you need anything.”

“OK, have fun Tracy.”

“Fucking right. You too Barnes.” The line cut.

Hector went to Waterfords and got another copy of The Prophet and two copies of Jonathan Livingstone Seagull. While he was paying, someone called his name. It was Giles; one of the site staff, he had been at the house the night before. He had a bunch of Ordnance Survey maps. Giles offered him a lift to

Millfield. Hector accepted and decided on lunch at Pandora's Cafe. Mags was there. She waved him over to her table and gave him a hug.

"Maggie and I wanted to come to the darts night last night, but her mum twisted her ankle and ... well, she's alright now. Reckon she just wanted the company."

Hector made sympathetic noises and asked what had happened to Peter.

"He's up and bugged off to France," said Mags laughing, "Excuse the pun. He's working on a cave full of Neanderthal remains," she leaned forward and lowered her voice, "You aren't missing him, are you? Somehow, I don't see you as gay."

"Yes, I do miss him. I don't think I am gay, but I'm keeping my options open," said Hector with a laugh, "Life doesn't have to revolve around sex you know."

"Maybe not at your age," said Mags, "But I want as much as I can get before, I am too old for it."

"It's refreshing to meet someone who knows what they want," said Hector, "I am going to order, is there anything you want?"

"Another coffee please," said Mags, reaching for his shopping, "What have you got in here?" She was reading Jonathon Livingstone Seagull when he got back to the table. It kept her quiet till after he had eaten his meal. He told her to give it to Stephanie when she had finished it and got a hug and a kiss on the cheek before he left the café. He realised that he hadn't had that sort of human contact for such a very long time.

He checked on the beef stew when he got home and added a bit more salt, then spent the rest of the afternoon methodically going through Lee's emails. It was slow work because he did

not know what he was looking for. He had a stinking headache by the time Stephanie arrived that evening and took a couple of paracetamol.

They ate at the kitchen table again that evening, Stephanie thanked him for Jonathan Livingstone Seagull, and told him that Mags had really enjoyed it.

“I think there is a film of it that Neil Diamond did a soundtrack for,” said Hector.

“I am sorry for being such a drip last night,” said Stephanie, “Thank you for putting up with me. This stew is really lovely, I don’t usually like stews.”

“I’m glad you like it,” said Hector, “How are you with curries? I like curries in the winter.”

“I love them,” said Stephanie, “As long as they aren’t designed to burn their way through my intestines.”

“I’ll try to tone the spice down a bit,” said Hector. “I usually make a huge pot and freeze meal sized portions.”

“I have a friend and colleague coming to spend a week or two at the dig; he is setting up a new ground penetrating radar unit and training us on how to use it. Would you mind if he stays here? He is house trained, and I think you will like him?”

“You needn’t ask,” said Hector, “This is your home now.”

“I know, but please do say if you don’t like having Victor here? It is your home too and neither of us should be made to feel uncomfortable.”

“Of course,” said Hector, “Honesty and good manners, right?”

They both laughed. Hector really did not want to have anyone else in the house and realised it was because he didn't want to share Stephanie with anyone.

Victor arrived on Friday but was at the dig site till quite late on Friday night. Stephanie called to warn Hector and said they would eat out. Hector worked through Lee's emails till almost midnight and did not hear Stephanie and Victor when they came home.

Hector did not much like Victor, though he seemed perfectly pleasant. Fortunately, Victor and Stephanie spent most of the days till late most nights on site. The exception was Wednesday night, when they all walked to Bosham for the darts night. Mags and Maggie were there already.

Victor was not so nice after a few drinks and got quite abusive when he and Stephanie lost to Mags and Maggie at darts. Victor had to call Dexter to take them home, as Mags refused to give Victor a lift. Victor apologised the following morning and returned to Oxford on Friday, much to Hector's relief. Stephanie also seemed quite relieved.

Hector finished going through Lee's emails and moved onto her phone records, which he found much easier going. Tracy had done a fantastic job of the phone records; most the numbers called had identifying tags on them, even some of the Chinese numbers, most of which were Lee's parents and siblings. It was one of the unmatched phone numbers that attracted Hector's attention, it was one of the numbers for The Firm that Hector had memorized, a number he could call when he wanted help. Hector felt his pulse quicken as he entered the call and number on the timeline spreadsheet he had set up. It was three days before Blane and Dowel had tried to steal Lee's computer bag.

Hector felt himself moving into a higher gear. He went to the entrance hall and found the telephone bill for May and smiled

when he saw that Dorning had used a mobile phone for one of the calls he had made to Hector's landline the day before he and Welby visited. The other two numbers were made from one of the Firm's private exchange numbers that Hector recognised. He made a note of the number and was not surprised that it did not show in the list of numbers calling or being called by Lee.

Hector checked the numbers that Lee had dialed immediately after the call from the firm had ended. The first was to the number that Tracy had identified as the British Museum's legal advisor, Sir Michael Whyte, QC. The second was to a Solicitor's office in Oxford and the third was to the Dean of the University of Oxford. Each call lasted over five minutes but less than ten. The next call had lasted almost an hour and it was to the Coroner for Oswestry. Lee had attempted to call the number four times before getting through. With growing excitement Hector checked the GPS data from Lee's RangeRover. The vehicle had spent a week near Oswestry in February. He checked the phone records again and saw two more calls to the coroner, one was four days into that visit, and one was two weeks later.

Hector checked Lee's emails for the same time period and found no mention of Oswestry or the coroner's office or any of the calls to the coroner, the call from the Firm or the subsequent calls to the Dean, QC or Solicitor's Office. He compared the Google tracking data on Lee's phone and her RangeRover's GPS and saw that mostly her vehicle had been parked at the Pen-y-Dryffryn Hotel, and shortly after the phone call to the coroner, had driven to the Coroner's office on Arthur Street. Lee's phone's tracking data showed that she spent a lot of time in what looked on Google Maps to be a field a few hundred meters from Pen-y-Dryffryn Hotel.

Hector sent a message to Tracy asking her to get data on Dorning's mobile phone warning her that it belonged to an MI5 officer.

He decided to call it a day and was surprised to find it was almost three in the morning. He knew he would not be able to sleep, so went out for a walk, deciding on an impulse, to head towards Bosham. The ground was frozen solid. He stopped and cut himself a stout stick to use as a walking stick.

He walked up through the village just as it was waking up and reached the Swan roundabout just in time to get the bus to Chichester. He had a freezing cold ten-minute wait for the bus to Millfield and decided to chance his luck and see if Pandora's was open. It was not but Maggie opened the door for him and greeted him warmly.

"Come in Hector," she told him, smiling brightly, "What brings you here so early in the morning?"

"I couldn't sleep so thought I'd go for a walk," he said, "I'm so glad you were here, I was beginning to fade."

"Come into the kitchen, it's much warmer there. How do you fancy some hot porridge with blueberries and yoghurt?" she asked, "I'm just about to make some for myself."

Hector liked Maggie and had never really chatted with her before. He had always assumed the Cafe was her mother's, but it turned out that Maggie had started the cafe and employed her mother, who had been laid off her job as a receptionist during the pandemic. She said the pandemic had actually been good for her business, as she supplied precooked meals for the Millfield care centre and the Millfield school, which had been kept open for the children of essential service workers.

Hector rolled up his sleeves, washed his hands and asked if he could help when Maggie started preparing vegetables. She accepted readily and he found himself enjoying the work and banter when Maggie's mum, Stella and the cook, Babu arrived

for work. Hector recognised Babu from Sulham, she lived at the last house on his side of the road; the far side of Sulham to him, she introduced herself as Barbara King, and was Polish, her late husband's father had been a Polish fighter pilot in the second world war. Her grand daughter had found Hector after he had been attacked.

Hector could not resist showing off and greeted her in Polish, which got him a huge hug and kisses on both cheeks.

Hector left when the cafe opened at nine and walked to Sulham. There was a note on the kitchen table from Stephanie asking him to call her and let her know if he was OK. He called her mobile number and was diverted to voicemail, where he said he was fine. He felt odd about it and realised that he had never had anyone care about where he was in that way before. He showered and went to bed and had very strange dreams, which he could not recall when he woke late in the afternoon. Stephanie was knocking on his bedroom door.

"I'm so sorry, Hector," she said when he opened the door, "I just wanted to check that you are alright," she went very red, "You don't normally sleep during the day and ... well, I am sorry for disturbing you." She turned and went down the stairs before Hector had fully woken. He pulled on his moth-eaten dressing gown and went downstairs.

Stephanie was in the kitchen putting away some shopping.

"Sorry, I wasn't fully awake," he said yawning, "I didn't get to sleep last night and went out for a walk in the early hours that lasted longer than I intended. I feel much better for it. I am really sorry that I worried you."

"I feel a bit silly now, but as they never caught the man that tried to kill you ..." Stephanie shrugged, "But I'm glad you are OK."

“Stephanie, may I give you a hug?” asked Hector, feeling awkward.

She looked startled but nodded and wiped her hands on her jeans as he stepped towards her. He wrapped his arms around her and held her tight. She relaxed after a second and wrapped her arms around his middle.

“Thank you,” he said, letting go. “I think I like hugs. I have never really had anyone worry about me before. It is a new experience. Hugs too. I like them.”

She gave him a strange look, “You never talk about your family... “

“I don’t have one,” said Hector, “Can I make coffee with that water? Do you want some?” The kettle had just switched off after boiling. Stephanie nodded and stepped out of the way. “Both my parents were killed in an accident when I was a baby, I survived. I spent the first eleven years of my life in a Presbyterian church orphanage in Zimbabwe before coming to England, where I went to a boarding school for the children of military personnel as the ward of my mother’s aunt, who was the widow of a military man. She died soon after I got to England but had left her estate to me. I was well taken care of.”

“God that is so awful. Hector I am so sorry,” Stephanie looked as if she was going to burst into tears.

“I had a happy childhood,” said Hector, “And it helped me in the military.” He shrugged, “I am not complaining, and I am quite content with my lot in life, but if you feel like hugging me again ...” he grinned at her and raised his arms. Stephany laughed and gave him a hug. Then kissed his cheek and stepped back, blushing slightly.

“So how long were you in the military?” she asked conversationally as she opened the fridge and moved the yoghurt forward to place two newer cartons behind it.

“Thirty years, thirty-three if you count apprentice college.” said Hector.

Stephanie closed the fridge and turned around slowly, “Hang on...” she said, “The reporter said you had spent twenty years as an insurance assessor.”

“Yes, I was seconded by the military,” said Hector, “They do that sometimes.”

Stephanie gave him a long searching look, “Are you pulling my leg Hector?” she asked eventually.

“No, not at all. I was seconded to Lloyd’s as a fraud investigator. I’m still bound by the official secrets act, but I think I am allowed to admit to that.”

“Lloyd’s Bank?” asked Stephanie looking confused.

“No, Lloyd’s of London, it’s a strange institution, a sort of insurance and reinsurance marketplace that operates under something called the Lloyd’s Act of 1871. Traditionally they insured ships, but now it covers all sorts of things.”

“Of course, my mother used to boast of her father being a ‘Name’,” said Stephanie, “My father was less impressed; apparently grandpa nearly bankrupted his family.”

“It’s a risky business, but fortunes have been made from insurance,” said Hector, “And lost.”

It snowed on Wednesday. Mags and Maggie collected them from the house and drove them to Bosham in Maggie’s

LandRover. Stephanie and Hector won the darts tournament for the first time. The snow was quite deep when they left, and Maggie slid off the road and into a ditch trying to get around a fallen tree. She got in a panic when she could not get the LandRover out of the ditch. Hector calmed her down and let some air out of the tyres then drove them out of the ditch and back to Sulham.

Maggie did not want to drive and asked if she and Mags could spend the night in Sulham. Hector made Irish Coffee for everybody but himself and then excused himself.

When he woke in the morning, he found Stephanie fast asleep in the bed next to him. He managed to get out of bed without waking her.

Mags came down to the kitchen while he was making coffee. She was wearing Stephanie's toweling gown; it struggled to contain her buxom figure.

"Don't mind my boobs," she mumbled sleepily, "Please can I have some coffee?" She looked out the window, "It's not supposed to snow here."

Hector laughed, "I have heard that every year for six years and it has snowed every winter for the last six years."

"We put Stephanie in your bed last night," said Mags, "She had passed out. It seemed a good idea at the time."

"I hope she is on the pill," said Hector smiling, "If she gets pregnant, it's your fault."

"Sod off," muttered Mags accepting the coffee mug he passed to her, "Though I don't think she would complain."

"Do you want some toast?" asked Hector.

“Can I have some paracetamol with it?” asked Mags

Maggie was the next to come down. She looked very sorry for herself and gratefully accepted coffee and a couple of paracetamol. She peered out of the window and shook her head before asking Hector if he thought he could drive her to Pandora’s, saying he could keep the LandRover till the snow cleared. Hector said he would happily drive her to Pandora’s but warned her that he wasn’t supposed to drive in case he had a fit; if he had an accident, her insurance would not pay out.

“You still have a license though,” said Mags, “If you have a prang, I’ll say I was driving.”

Hector went up into the loft and came down with a bag containing langlauf skis and poles and said he would leave the LandRover at Pandora’s. Maggie checked on Stephanie and left her a note.

Hector enjoyed driving through the snow. They stopped twice to pull vehicles out of the ditch. Both times Hector deflated the tyres and warned the drivers to go slow and avoid using brakes and first gear.

Maggie’s mum had opened Pandora’s and was busy in the kitchen when they arrived. Hector accepted a mug of hot chocolate but declined the use of Mag’s mobile phone, saying he had brought his own along. He gave her his number and she called it, so that he would have her number to call if he had any trouble getting home on his skis.

Hector really enjoyed skiing back to Sulham. He stopped four times to help people who had slid off the road, including Mrs King who was being driven to Pandora’s Cafe by her son Andrew. Stephanie was up and looking pink and freshly

scrubbed; her go-to cure for a hangover was a hot bath and shampoo.

“You are looking bright and cheerful!” he said as he came into the kitchen.

Stephanie gave him an uncertain smile, “Thank you, you look quite cheerful yourself. Those are very long skis.”

“Langlauf skis,” he said, “Some people call them Nordic skis and we used to call them Nato planks in the military. I have not used them for years. It was great fun.”

“I woke up in your bed this morning,” said Stephanie, “I wasn’t sure how you felt about that.”

“Mags and Maggie put you in my bed,” said Hector, “I didn’t even notice till I woke up this morning.” He grinned, “Don’t worry, your honour is still intact.”

“I shouldn’t have had all those Irish Coffee’s last night, on top of the Guinness,” said Stephanie, “I’m really sorry if I embarrassed you.”

“Are you planning to go to the dig? The roads are quite bad.”

“We can’t do anything in this,” said Stephanie, “I’ve already called everyone and told them to stay at home till the roads are safer. Do you mind if I do some cooking and baking?”

“Of course not,” said Hector, “I’m going to carry on with my research.”

“Am I allowed to know what you are researching?” asked Stephanie.

“I don’t see why not,” said Hector, “I want to know why I was attacked and who attacked me.”

Stephanie nodded, “I sort of hoped you would when you told me you had been an investigator. What will you do when you find the attacker?”

Hector shrugged, “I haven’t got that far yet. I don’t want to have my skull bashed in again, so I will be very careful.”

The snow continued to fall. Hector loved it and at Stephanie’s prompting, checked on their neighbours and asked if they needed anything fetching. Mrs King lent him a toboggan that he managed, after waxing the runners, to pull while skiing. It was hard work, but he enjoyed it and made a run to Millfield and back every day to fetch shopping for the residents.

Graham Dennis, the retired Admiral, gave him a set of langlauf skis that had been his son’s. The shoes were too big even for Hector’s feet, but he managed to adapt them so that Stephanie could use them wearing her trainers. She had done a couple of weeks downhill skiing as a teenager, and managed after a few hours of practice, to keep up well enough with the langlauf skis, especially when Hector was pulling the loaded toboggan.

Mrs King started making pies for all the residents of Sulham, and her neighbours, the Browns, doled out bottles of home-made apple and blackberry wine, which was really good.

Hector and Stephanie skied to Bosham and back for the next darts night.

“I’m not going to drink,” said Stephanie puffing behind Hector, “It’s hard enough staying in your tracks when I am sober.”

“You play better darts when you’ve had a drink or two,” said Hector, “So don’t expect to win again.”

“You just want me to get tipsy, so I’ll get back into your bed again,” said Stephanie laughing.

“There is that, but try to stay awake if you do,” replied Hector.

“Hah, I might take you up on that, and then you’ll be sorry.”

“Promises, promises.”

The Anchor Bleu was surprisingly busy. Stephanie limited herself to a pint of Guinness with her meal, and another after they were beaten in the finals. The tide was up, so they walked along the raised Trippet, carrying their skis.

“My feet are frozen,” said Stephanie when they reached the lane and clipped their shoes to the skis.

“They should warm up once we get moving again,” said Hector.

“I should have let you pull me on the toboggan,” said Stephanie, “Then I could have had more to drink.”

“Not a chance,” said Hector, “I’d probably collapse, and we would both freeze to death.”

“Pah! You could do it; you are like a teenager on those skis,” said Stephanie.

“You are getting better,” said Hector just as Stephanie slid into him from behind, grabbing hold of him and pulling him over in a tangle of limbs, poles and skis.

They laughed as they untangled themselves. Hector helped Stephanie to her feet.

“There is frozen dog poo all over this place,” said Stephanie giggling as she brushed herself down, “At least I hope it is all frozen, I am going to need a bath when we get home.”

They laughed a lot on the way home. Stephanie went to run a bath and came down in her oversized dressing gown to put her clothes into the washing machine. Hector was sat at the kitchen table with his feet in a bowl of hot water while he waited for the kettle to boil. Stephanie asked if she could share his footbath and dragged a chair closer.

“Oh, that feels good,” she said, “Thank you, I had a lot of fun.”

“Coffee or cocoa?” asked Hector when the kettle boiled.

“Coffee, with a bit of rum in it please?” said Stephanie, “I had better go and check on the bath.”

Hector carried the coffees upstairs and called through Stephanie’s open door.

“Can you bring it into the bathroom please Hector?” Stephanie called back, “It is safe, I am covered in bubbles.”

Hector handed her the coffee, she was covered in a huge mound of bath bubble, with just her head and a hand protruding. Her hair was bunched up with a top knot making her look even younger.

“You could join me if you like...” said Stephanie blushing, “It is a huge bath ... I promise to keep my hands to myself.”

“Do I have to promise too?” asked Hector, smiling.

“Only if you want to,” said Stephanie, “We are both adults.”

Hector nodded and asked her to hold his coffee. He was very conscious of Stephanie's gaze as he undressed and stepped into the bath.

Stephanie handed him his coffee, then smiled when he looked startled, "I promised to keep my hands to myself, not my feet," she said, and sipped her coffee demurely.

"You are very quiet," said Stephanie later. They were in her bed, spooning. She had the fingers of her right hand interlaced with Hector's, and gently bit on his thumb.

"You are very lovely," said Hector, "I'm still drinking it all in."

"Were you ever going to make a move?" she asked, "I desperately wanted you to."

"Probably not," said Hector, "You are much too young and ... I suppose I feared rejection."

"I'm old enough to decide that age doesn't matter," said Stephanie, "And you are not old."

"We didn't finish our coffees," said Hector.

"No, we didn't," said Stephanie, turning in his embrace and pushing him onto his back, "And we aren't finished here either Hector Barnes; now that I know what a real man feels like, I want some more." She kissed him as she straddled him.

The blizzard lasted another two weeks. Hector and Stephanie went into Millfield every day. Hector spent very little time working on the data that Tracy had sent him, less than an hour a day, but he did make progress. The phone that Dorning had used to call him had also called Derek Blane three times, twice before the attempt to steal Lee's computer and once hours after the incident. The same phone had also been used to call

William Blane, twice. The first time was on Good Friday; just three days before the attacks on Easter Monday that had left Lee dead and Hector badly injured. The second call was on the 15th of May, almost a month after the attacks.

Graham Dennis fell and broke his wrist. Hector stabilized it and called emergency services. The operator said that they would not be able to send an ambulance for some time as there was an emergency on the A27 involving several vehicles. Stephanie stayed with Admiral Dennis while Hector skied to Millfield and returned with Maggie's LandRover. They took Graham to St Richards and stayed with him till he had been attended to, then drove him back to Sulham at midnight, having missed the darts night. The next morning the sky was clear, and the blizzard was over, Christmas was four days away. Stephanie had promised to visit her mother and aunt for Christmas. Hector refused to go with her but drove her to Chichester railway station in Maggie's LandRover before returning it to Pandora's cafe. He had brunch with Mags and then did some shopping for his neighbours and skied back to Sulham pulling the toboggan. Half an hour after he had reached Sulham a snow plough came through clearing the road.

Stephanie called him from Victoria Station and again from Chelsea when she had reached her mother's flat.

"Just something for you to mull over," she said, "Mum was nineteen when she married dad, and he was thirty-five. I miss you already Hector." She hung up after blowing him a kiss.

Hector realised he did not even know how old Stephanie was. He missed her but was glad that he could concentrate on the investigation. William Blane had travelled a great deal according to his Google tracking data. He had changed his SIM card and phone number three days after the attack on Hector and Lee, but had kept the same phone, which made him an idiot as well as a coward in Tracy's opinion. She had also sent

Hector credit card transaction details for two credit cards owned by William Blane. He paid for pay-per-view porn almost every day, which made tracking his location relatively straight forward. There was a knock on the door.

It was Babu King with a steak pie and an invitation to Hector and Stephanie to dinner on Christmas Eve.

“We celebrate at our home on Christmas Eve and then go to Langston for Christmas day at my son, Victor’s house. He is Rebecca’s father, my oldest boy,” said Babu.

“Stephanie has gone to spend Christmas with her mother and aunt in London,” said Hector.

“Then you must come by yourself!” said Babu, “Admiral Denis is coming too. Please bring a small present, something fun and less than fifteen pounds, for our Secret Santa? Rebecca is organising it this year. It is a lot of fun and we have invited everybody to join in.”

Hector walked into Millfield; it took much longer than skiing had. Maggie looked surprised to see him and asked if everything was alright.

“Yes, of course,” said Hector, “I just wanted some advice if that is OK.”

“Advice from me?” Maggie looked pleased, and then worried, “Do you want anything to eat or drink?”

“A coffee please?” said Hector.

“I’ll bring it to you,” she said, “And ask mum to do the counter.”

Maggie settled down across the table from Hector and composed herself, looking serious, "So what do you want advice about?" she asked quietly.

Hector put down the coffee and felt his face going red, "What is Secret Santa?" he asked, "Babu has invited me to dinner and Secret Santa on Christmas Eve, I need to get a present for it."

Maggie looked startled, and tried not to smile when she replied, "It's just a game, there's probably lots of different versions but generally each person brings a present, usually there is a limit on how much you are allowed to spend. The presents go under the tree and then everybody gets given a number of playing cards. Another set of playing cards is then used along with a set of rules. This is where it can be different because the rules can be simple or complicated. In my family we each choose a present till everybody has a present and then we have to draw a card from a hat. The card tells us things like swap your present with the person on your left, or the oldest person in the room, and so on, till all the cards are finished. It can be really good fun."

Hector felt relieved, "Thank you, Maggie."

"Do you not celebrate Christmas?" asked Maggie.

"Not properly," said Hector, "Not since I was very young."

"But you know about mistletoe and things like that?" she asked with a little smile.

Hector nodded, "It's a parasitic plant that grows in trees, and has little white berries that are poisonous but used for some herbal remedies."

"There is some right above this table," said Maggie, "I was surprised when you sat here."

Hector frowned and looked up. He looked at Maggie who grinned, "You are a tease, Hector, you know perfectly well that you have to kiss whoever you are under the mistletoe with."

Hector looked up again, "I... well, the phrase 'under the mistletoe'..."

"Pucker up buster, and kiss me," said Maggie loudly, before giggling nervously. The cafe was not busy, but everybody heard and turned towards them.

"Go on Hector, kiss her," said Maggie's mum from behind the counter, "It's tradition."

Several people clapped and told Hector to kiss Maggie. He stood and leaned down awkwardly to kiss her cheek, but Maggie turned her head at the last second and kissed him full on the lips. Everybody cheered.

"Wait till I tell Mags about this," said Maggie laughing. She got up and patted his shoulder, "You will really enjoy Christmas at Babu's."

Hector phoned Dexter and asked him to drive him to Chichester. Dexter walked with him to WH Smiths and helped him choose Christmas cards and wrapping paper, he seemed really pleased to be asked to help. Hector also got several bottles of wine before they drove back to Sulham.

Hector stayed up past midnight working in the shed and spent most of Friday in there, by noon on Saturday he was applying the finishing touches to a wooden treasure chest he had made for Rebecca and a small wooden cantilevered storage box he had made as his secret Santa contribution. He was very pleased with both of them. He had wanted a wooden treasure

chest for himself when he was in the orphanage and had a vivid mental picture of it, from a story he had read about pirates. Hector heard the doorbell ringing while he was in the shower. He wrapped a towel around his waist and padded wetly down the stairs. It was Mags, Maggie and Stella, Maggie's mum.

"We are having Polish Christmas dinner with Babu as well," said Maggie, "Come and look what we found above your front door," she stepped back to make room for him.

Hector clutched his towel and stepped out to look up above his front door. Somebody had tied a sprig of Mistletoe to the Horseshoe above the door. Stella cackled as Mags grabbed Hecto by the shoulders, turned him around and mashed her lips against his.

"My turn, my turn!" said Stella when Mags finally let go of Hector. Hector played along and gave Stella a kiss then smiled and waved them inside.

"Please help yourselves, you know where everything is," said Hector, "I'll be down soon."

They were all sitting in the kitchen when Hector came down. Maggie poured him some coffee and told him to be prepared for a grand feast. Babu's Christmas dinners were legendary, apparently. They all wanted to know what the two wrapped presents were. Hector told them to wait and see and said that one was for Rebecca for saving his life.

At six they set off for the King's house collecting Admiral Graham Dennis on the way. He looked very dapper despite the cast on his wrist and offered Stella his arm.

The King's huge dining room was full of people when they arrived. Rebecca came to greet them along with Babu. She

blushed when she greeted Hector who had waited till last. He handed her the present he had made for her.

“That’s something I made specially for you, Rebecca, I hope you like it.” He bent and kissed her on both cheeks the way the others had and then greeted and kissed Babu, “I hope it is OK for me to give a gift to Rebecca for being my guardian angel?” he said. Babu kissed him again and said he was an angel for helping everybody through the blizzard.

Rebecca asked them all to place their secret Santa gifts under the tree and then look for and sit at the place where their names were. Babu’s sons, Andrew and Victor were going around offering red and white wine to the adults. Hector declined wine and settled for water, which was already on the table. Babu asked Admiral Dennis to say Grace before they took their seats.

The meal was amazing, Hector was sat between Mrs Brown and Rebecca’s mother. Mrs. Brown was very quiet, but had a lovely way about her and, Hector discovered, a very good sense of humour. Rebecca’s mother was a teacher, and apart from telling Hector how badly traumatized Rebecca had been by finding Hector in a puddle of blood with a crowbar protruding from his ribs, she said very little to Hector and instead talked to the woman opposite her, who was also a teacher at the same school, they were both very unhappy about the school’s policy on religious education, which they felt was giving too much weight to non-Christian beliefs.

They cleared the table before dessert was served and Rebecca asked for everybody’s attention and explained the Secret Santa rules. Victor, her father, went around the table with a pack of cards and each person drew one card. When everybody had a card, Rebecca shuffled a second pack of cards and asked Admiral Dennis to cut the pack and show the card exposed. It was a seven of diamonds, which matched the card that Maggie

had drawn from the blue pack that Victor had taken around the table. Maggie was asked to choose a present from under the tree and she fetched the one Hector had brought. She chose to unwrap it and turned over the next card in the pack. It was a two of clubs. Victor chose a gift and turned over the next card which matched Stella's card. Hector was one of the last people to choose a present and he got a jigsaw puzzle of a Mordillo pirate ship that he rather liked the look of. The presents were all quite good fun. When everybody had a present, the cards were all gathered up and each person was dealt seven cards. Two more packs of cards were shuffled, and Babu was asked to split the combined pack. The top card was turned over and was a queen of hearts from a red pack. Hector had a matching card. Rebecca came to him with a cardboard box and told him to draw an envelope from the box and read the contents.

“Swap your present with a person who is taller than you, or if you are the tallest person, with the next tallest person.

Hector looked around, Andrew and Victor were both taller than him, and Victor had the latest Guinness Book of Records, so Hector swapped with him and turned over the next card. It was matched by Rebecca's mother, Susan. Her card said she could swap per present with anyone she wished to swap with. She took the wooden storage trays from Maggie, who got a raincoat that folded up really small. Victor and Andrew were going around topping up wine glasses while this was going on. It soon became apparent that several presents were coveted more than others, and there was much good-natured bickering and lots of laughter as the presents kept changing hands. Hector ended up with a powerful slingshot, that Rebecca's younger brother, Angus, clearly wanted. Mags ended up with the wooden storage trays and Maggie got the jigsaw and they were both clearly delighted. Hector quietly swapped the slingshot with Angus and got a giant scented candle. Rebecca asked Babu if she could be allowed to open the present that Hector

had given her and ran upstairs to fetch it while dessert and coffee were being served.

Rebecca tried to guess what was inside the wrapping before opening it. Several of the adults offered opinions. Rebecca unwrapped it carefully, an embarrassed grin on her face as it emerged. Hector was pleased at her reaction; all the hard work had been worth it. Rebecca thanked him and kissed his cheek then ran back around the table to rescue the treasure chest from Angus who was trying to shake it. It took a while before they gave up trying to open it. Rebecca looked at Hector and he suggested that she read the card. Angus found the card under the wrapping paper and urged Rebecca to read it out loud. She opened it and dropped the coin that had been in the envelope. She told Angus to find it and then read out what Hector had written while Angus dived under the table looking for the coin.

*“Merry Christmas brave Rebecca,
I hope you like the treasure chest as much I liked making it for you. I have filled it with treasure and hope that your parents do not mind. Some of the treasure is real and collected by me from countries all around the world. There is a secret to opening the chest. You might need to ask your Babushka to read it and whisper the secret in your ear. PTO.*

Hector.”

Rebecca looked blankly at Hector. Victor bent down and whispered in her ear. She turned the card over and peered at it. Her father whispered to her again and she walked around the table to Babu who read the Polish that Hector had written on the back and looked at Hector before whispering in Rebecca’s ear. Rebecca’s face lit up and she asked Angus for the coin that had fallen out of the envelope. He gave it to her, and she turned the treasure chest around and told him to move away.

Victor had to insert himself between them. Rebecca looked at Hector who nodded. She opened the chest. Everybody cheered and clapped except for Angus who wanted to know how she had opened it. Rebecca grinned and reached into the chest lifting out handfuls of silver and gold chocolate coins and dropping them back inside. She ran back around the table and hugged Hector fiercely, thanking him for the treasure chest. Angus had closed it and was trying to open it. Victor told him to stop. Even the adults wanted to know how to open the chest, but Rebecca refused to tell. She carried the chest to the corner of the room and turned her back on everybody while she opened it, then went around the room offering chocolate coins to everybody. Andrew dug his hand into the box and held up a real coin. It was from Turkey. Rebecca carefully felt for and picked out all the real coins. There were a hundred and forty in all. Each one from a different country.

“I think you’ve more than made up for any trauma she suffered when finding you,” said Mrs Brown quietly, “What a lovely gift.”

Victor shook Hector’s hand, “You have really made Rebecca happy Mr. Barnes, thank you so much.”

“Please call me Hector, Victor. It is nothing compared to what Rebecca did for me, and I truly enjoyed making it. I loved woodwork when I was a young boy. That is the first thing I have made with my own hands in over thirty years.”

“Are you Polish Hector? You write good Polish.”

“I can speak a little, I used Google translate to write what I wrote,” said Hector.

“Well Mum thinks you have Polish heart, watch out that she doesn’t feed you too much. Thank you again, my friend.”

Hector took his leave when Admiral Dennis said he needed to get home. It was almost midnight. Babu hugged him and gave him a big kiss. Maggie and Mags were still full of life and Stella asked if she could sleep on Hector's couch and walked home with him and the Admiral. Hector made up a bed on the couch for Stella and took himself to bed, he slept soundly and did not wake till Maggie knocked on his bedroom door and brought him coffee. She invited him to Christmas lunch at Pandora's, but he begged off saying he could not eat for at least another 24 hours.

The phone rang while they were leaving, Mags answered it and talked for what seemed like hours to Stephanie, she eventually ran off when Maggie revved the engine and threatened to leave her behind. Hector sat on the entrance hall floor and spoke to Stephanie who wished him a happy Christmas and said she would be back on Wednesday.

Hector returned to his investigation work and decided he needed to travel. He thought for a moment and then called Dexter and asked him if he could take him to Poole early in the morning, then opened his safe and got his Irish passport and packed a change of underwear and clothing into his rucksack. He spent some time transferring data to the iPad that Stephanie had given him, then called her mobile phone. The call was diverted to voicemail, and he left a message saying he would be travelling for a few days and was not sure when he would get back. Hector did a couple of hours of cleaning before double checking that he had everything he needed and went to bed.

He was up, dressed and ready when Dexter pulled up outside at four in the morning. He had made sandwiches for Dexter and himself and a thermos of coffee for himself. Dexter abhorred coffee almost as much as Hector disliked tea. They made good time to Poole. Hector bought himself a sudoku book for the ferry journey and by eight AM he was on his way to St Helier;

the ferry was not even half full by Hector's reckoning. He settled down with his sudoku and coffee.

St Helier had not changed much. Hector walked to Iris Walker's cottage and paid for a room and walked back to the Ferry terminal arriving just as the shutters went up on Banc LeClerc's tiny office. Hector was seen immediately and an hour later he was shopping for clothes. He was pleased to find that Cretins, his favourite eatery had survived the Covid pandemic. He returned to the bank at four PM and signed for his MasterCard, then bought himself a ticket for the Ferry to Granville.

After the extended lunch at Cretins, Hector decided to skip supper and took a really long walk around the town that he had grown to know quite well over the last twenty years. He had an early night and another long walk in the morning, skipping breakfast and looking forward to lunch in Granville. Hector had not made many lasting friendships in his professional life, and one exception was Theo Ford, a South African who described himself as a cultural refugee. He owned the Harbour Backpackers and had the sort of knowledge and understanding of good food that Hector wished he could emulate.

There were only four passengers on the Ferry to Granville. Hector was dismayed to find the Harbour Backpackers closed. The service woman at the adjacent launderette informed him that Monsieur Ford had succumbed to Le Covid, adding that his appetite for rich food was to blame.

Hector lost all interest in spending time in Granville and walked two blocks to Bernard St. Pierre Auto, and paid cash for a driver to take him to LeHavre. The driver, Badou, a surly Senegalese looking young man, cheered up once they were on the road. Hector asked him to stop somewhere for brunch and said he would pay for Badou's food if he liked the coffee. Badou stopped in a run-down looking strip mall on the outskirts of Granville and led Hector into what turned out to be a Turkish

family cafe. The coffee was excellent, and Hector was certain that Theo Ford would have approved of the scrambled eggs and salmon.

Hector spent most of the journey mentally reviewing the information he had on William Blane's movements in France. He had no trouble reading on planes and trains but got horribly travel sick if he tried to read in a bus or car.

Badou dropped him at the Ferry terminal at LeHavre. Hector joined the queue at the ticket office; the social distancing stickers on the floor were practically illegible now. When Hector was certain that Badou had gone, he left the queue and changed in the public toilet, then walked along the harbour front looking for cheap accommodation where he would not be asked to show any identification.

He spent half an hour studying the photos Tracy had provided of William Blane and then plotted the route to his regular haunts. From the Google tracking data, it looked like William Blane worked three nights a week at the container terminal; Thursday, Friday and Saturday. Monday and Tuesday he usually spent at a sports bar close to the container terminal and on Wednesdays he usually spent the night at a house on Rue Jules Simon. He spent most of the daytime hours at Rue Louis Dohen, which by the pay-to-view porn billing records was where he lived. Hector decided to check out William Blane's accommodation. He studied himself in the mirror and decided he looked French enough, he doubted Blane would recognise him especially with a thick woolen scarf hiding half of his face.

He walked past the container terminal, and the sports bar. There was a new flashing LED sign for "Mick's Hotel - English Bed & Breakfast" above a bigger sign saying, "Rooms available."

Hector pushed open the door and was assailed by the smell of fried food. A middle-aged man behind a grimy Covid partition was picking his nose while staring at a screen. He looked up at Hector and tugged an earbud out of one ear.

“Yeah? Double or single?” he asked in English. Hector replied in French, asking for a single. The man gave him an angry look, “Twenty-five Euros a night, up front,” he said in English.

“Qu’est que ‘Up Front’?” asked Hector, looking confused.

“In Advance,” said the man slowly, “D’avance.”

Hector nodded and handed the man fifty Euros and holding up two fingers.

The man grunted and opened a drawer, rummaged around for a while and handed Hector a worn looking keycard, “Room five... Cinque,” he pointed a stubby finger, “Last door on the left ... gauche.”

Hector nodded and pushed through the fire door into a brightly lit corridor. The room was tiny, but cleaner than Hector expected. He sat on the bed and thought for a while, then used the toilet and went to the lounge and got himself a bottle of water and a packet of crisps from the vending machines. There were English newspapers on a table by the door. Hector spotted a French magazine on an empty table and crossed the room to pick it up. It was a week old Qu’elle. Hector sat where he could see the street outside the entrance and pretended to read the paper.

He recognised Blane immediately. He was an older and heavier version of his brother, Derek, with a heavy gold earring in his right ear. Blane was dressed quite smartly. He came into the lounge, glanced around and crossed to a cigarette vending

machine, he got two packets of Gitanes and one packet of Dunhill, then two bars of Cadbury's fruit and nut chocolate. He put one in his pocket and walked out while removing the wrapping from the other. He threw the bunched up wrapping at the table by the doors and missed.

Hector waited fifteen minutes before leaving and heading back towards the Auberge du Port. He ate at a Portuguese restaurant, hardly noticing his food. Finding William Blane had been the easy part. Now he had to decide what to do about it. He stayed up past midnight going through all the data Tracy had sent him on William Blane hoping that something would stand out and help him.

Hector was almost a hundred percent certain that William Blane had attacked him. That he was Derek Blane's brother, that Derek Blane had tried to rob Lee, that the same number, belonging to an MI5 officer had called both Derek and William Blane's numbers all pointed to William Blane being used to eliminate Lee Moy and Hector. Hector acknowledged that a part of him wanted revenge, he wanted to hurt William Blane for what he had done to him, but mostly he wanted to know why Blane had been sent to kill him and Lee Moy and what MI5 had to do with it. He had never been an MI5 'insider', which had suited him well enough, and though he knew he was considered as a bit of an oddball by most of his colleagues, he had thought that he was generally trusted and respected by them. He wondered if they had anyone watching Blane and if his interest in Blane had been noticed and flagged yet. He shrugged and decided to try and get some sleep. He had an early start in the morning; Blane's Google tracking data showed that he usually left the house on Rue Jules Simon at four thirty AM.

Hector was up at three AM, he walked past the house on Rue Jules Simon. It looked up market and not the sort of place he expected to find the likes of William Blane. There was nobody

in the reception at Mick's Hotel. Hector made sure that his face was covered by his scarf and checked the monitor. It showed four screens, the upper and lower corridors and the lounge/breakfast room. The fourth screen was dark. He fast tracked backwards and found that William Blane was in room 15, the first room on the right of the upper corridor, directly above the reception. He returned the screen to monitor and stopped the recording function, then looked in the drawers for key cards. He found two marked with the number fifteen and pocketed them both.

Blane's room was a mess and smelled of cheap aftershave, and sour body odor. It had a double bed and a wardrobe but was not exactly large. Hector searched quickly hoping to find a computer, but there was not one. He did find a small, wheeled case in the wardrobe, it was filled with pornography. There were no letters or papers. He felt the butterflies in his stomach as he prepared himself. Speed and aggression, he had been taught. He could not afford to fail, he checked the taser and extended the baton and centered himself. Speed and aggression. He tried to ignore the frantic little voice that told him he was too old for this shit.

William Blane did not know what had hit him, he came in humming a tune and taking his coat off. Hector pressed the taser against the side of his thick neck and Blane dropped like a rock. Hector tasered him a second time, before choking him out. The man had a neck like a bull. Hector searched him, taking everything but the heavy gold earring, then used three heavy nylon ties to bind his wrists and six to bind his ankles. He wedged the door and then methodically searched the room, Blane started to stir after about an hour, so Hector tasered him and choked him out again. He put the cash, passports and papers he found into the wheeled case the pornography had been in along with Blane's phone, charger, wallet, wristwatch, keys and rings. After a final search of the room, he put on the TV, ran the shower and flushed the toilet to mask the sound as

he methodically beat Blane with the baton. The last thing he did before leaving the room was to use Blane's spring-loaded knife to remove the gold earring from his ear. He left the pistol, ammunition and bloodied knife in plain view. He used Blane's phone to dial one seven for the emergency services, then spoke in Norman French to the operator telling them that an Englishman was injured and bleeding in Micky's Hotel and to come quickly.

He disconnected and removed the phone's battery and SIM card, then left the room and went unhurriedly down the stairs, leaving the door to the room ajar. He went into his room and waited by the door, then walked out when he heard the receptionist arguing with an ambulance man. He was a block away when he heard the police sirens.

At the Auberge du Port he counted the money he had taken from Blane's room. Eighteen thousand Euro's and change, and seventy thousand pounds. The pounds were in Barclays Bank banded bricks of five thousand pounds each. They were not new notes. William Blane had two passports, one British and one Dutch. They both looked genuine; the Dutch passport gave his name as Willem de Bont and had the same date of birth as his British Passport. He had a European Heavy Goods vehicle license and a LeHavre Port Authority ID badge on a lanyard in the name of Willem de Bont and an HSBC MasterCard in his English name. The other papers were receipts from a bureau de change for exchanging Pounds Sterling to Euros, there were a lot of them, mostly for two or three hundred pounds at a time. Hector examined the keys carefully before deciding to keep hold of them. He took a bus to Rouen, and then the train to Calais. At Calais he got a lift with a truck to Vlissingen in Holland and used his Irish passport to take the overnight Ferry to Sheerness, then paid another truck driver to take him to London where he put the money and everything he had taken from William Blane, except the mobile phone, into a Safety Deposit box at Coutts Bank. He called Tracy from Victoria

Station and asked her if she could break into William Blane's phone and download everything on it. She gave him an address to FedEx the phone to and told him to throw away the battery.

He asked Dexter to collect him from Chichester station. Stephanie was getting ready for bed when he got home. She gave him a very reserved welcome.

"Hello Hector, there's some pie in the fridge from Mrs King if you are hungry?" she said her face and voice neutral, "Did you have a nice trip?"

Hector nodded, "Not nice exactly, but necessary," he said, "I'm sorry that I wasn't here when you got back from London."

She smiled at that, "Don't apologise, Hector, I don't expect you to be here for me."

"Perhaps not, but I wanted to be," said Hector, "Would you like a hot drink?"

She shook her head, "No thank you, I had better go to bed, I have an early start tomorrow. Visitors from Oxford are coming to site."

"Goodnight then," said Hector.

"Goodnight Hector," said Stephanie.

Hector put on the kettle, then switched it off, locked up and went upstairs. He showered and got into bed, feeling uncomfortable. He had not had to explain himself to anyone for so long that he was not sure about how anymore. He did not want to lie to Stephanie, he did not think it would be right to tell her the truth either. He did not feel in anyway guilty about what he had done to William Blane. He had not enjoyed beating him

and actually felt a little sick about it, but he thought it was just deserts, and necessary as he wanted to shake Blane's tree and see what fell out of it. If and when he did decide to tell Stephanie what he was doing, he would not be saying anything in his home for fear that Mi5 would be listening in. He liked Bijan but was not sure where his loyalties lay; he was a contractor to Mi5. He had a sudden thought that Tracy might also do work for Mi5, being ex military. Despite his troubled thoughts he slept well and woke when he heard Stephanie moving around. He got up and made coffee and toast.

Stephanie greeted him pleasantly enough when she came down and accepted the offer of coffee and toast.

"Have you got anything planned for the weekend?" he asked.

Stephanie shook her head, "No, not unless something comes up at today's meeting. Why?"

"Just making conversation," said Hector, "I am not very good at it, am I?"

"I wouldn't describe you as a talkative person Hector, but I do enjoy talking with you," said Stephanie, "I am sorry if I offended you last night. I didn't mean to..."

Hector held his hands up, "No, you didn't offend me. I just feel there is an awkwardness between us at the moment."

"You are right, there is, and it is silly," said Stephanie, "But I must go now, or I will be late." She smiled, "Can I have a hug and a kiss before I go?"

Hector felt a lot better as he watched her back out of the drive. He waved as she drove off then went back inside determined to finish the investigation as quickly as possible.

Hector spent an hour searching the internet for any news about the arrest of William Blane but found nothing, there was a short addendum in LeMonde, just two lines saying that an unidentified man had been hospitalised in LeHavre in a gang-related dispute. Hector felt that the next logical step would be to find out what he could about Lee's interaction with the coroner. He used Google Maps. The nearest place to the area of activity, which Hector thought might have been an archaeological find, was Christ Church Rhydycroesaw. Hector searched on the name for the time period but found nothing at all.

Hector was grasping at straws when he searched on 'coroner oswestry' and changed the date from 01 Feb 2020 to 01 Mar 2022 to include all of April 2022 and learned that the Oswestry coroner had been found bludgeoned to death outside her office on the 15th of April, just three days before the attack on Hector and Lee. Gloucester police appeared to have made no progress in identifying the killer or motive for the attack on the coroner. Hector felt his heart beginning to race. He called Tracy and got voicemail.

"Bomber, call me when you can," he said and ended the call. He called Dexter and asked him to collect him.

"I need you for the day please Dexter, will four hundred pounds be OK?" he asked.

Dexter was knocking on his kitchen door ten minutes later.

Hector called Mags' mobile phone from the car and got a message telling him to send a message or try later. He tried Stephanie's phone and got transferred to voicemail. He asked her to call him, saying it was urgent.

Pandora's was busy. Hector asked Dexter to park and join him inside. There was a queue at the counter and all the tables

were full, Dexter asked if he could have a burger and chips and a coke then placed his jacket on one of the high stools at the counter along the wall and sat on the one next to it, grinning widely as he looked around the room and waved at people he recognised.

Hector asked Maggie to ask Mags to call him if she spoke to her and ordered. His phone rang as he walked over to join Dexter. He turned and walked outside as he took the call, it was Stephanie.

“Hector? Thank God! Are you alright?” she asked.

“I’m fine, really, I didn’t mean to worry you,” said Hector, “I really need to talk to you soon, before you go home... I am at Pandora’s.”

“I am in the middle of a presentation,” said Stephanie, “I said I needed to pee so I could sneak out and call you.”

“Sorry. How long will you be tied up?” asked Hector.

“Probably till three, can it wait till then?”

“I think so. Could you meet me in Chichester, and bring Mags? Do you know the Bishop’s tea rooms? Don’t go back to Sulham.”

“Is there something wrong?” asked Stephanie. She laughed, “Silly question, sorry. Alright, I will see you as soon as we have wrapped up here.”

Hector returned to the cafe. Dexter removed his coat from the high stool and presented the stool to Hector like a gift.

“Thank you, Dexter,” said Hector, “You seem to know everybody here, you must be the most popular man in Millfield.”

Dexter laughed and nodded, "It is because I am so handsome."

"True," said Hector smiling, "And the best driver in the district."

Maggie brought their food and Hector told her he had spoken to Stephanie and asked her to bring Mags and meet with him later in Chichester. She nodded and asked Dexter how his mum and dad were.

It was half past two when Dexter managed to find parking. They walked to Waterstones and Hector bought another OS map that covered the area around Christ Church Rhydcreesaw. Dexter said he would rather spend some more time at Waterfords than wait at the Bishops Tea rooms and headed for the reading room. Hector said he would call him when it was time to go.

Stephanie and Mags arrived just before four PM. They ordered scones and cream and looked expectantly at Hector when the waitress had taken their order. He asked them to switch off their cell phones and held out a large empty crisp packet asking them to put their phones in it. He placed his own phone in first and rolled up the top of the packet when their phones were in it and placed it on an empty seat.

"It's about Lee Moy," said Hector, "I need your help and it might be dangerous."

"Go on," said Stephanie, "Why can't we discuss this at home?"

"What I am about to tell you is confidential. If you can not keep it a secret, say so now. What I am about to tell you could endanger you, so feel free to say you don't want to be involved."

"Are we in danger anyway?" asked Mags.

“No, I don’t think so, but you should stay away from me if you want to stay out of danger.”

“Do you know who killed Lee, was it William Blane?” asked Mags.

“I believe he killed her, but I can’t prove it,” said Hector.

“Well, I am all ears,” said Stephanie, “I never imagined you would ask for help.” She looked at Mags who nodded, “What can we do?”

“First things first; we can not discuss this in the house, you should not discuss it anywhere that you live or work permanently, don’t discuss it when your phone is anywhere near you and don’t discuss it over any type of electronic media. I worked for Mi5 for over twenty years, they monitor people like me till the day we die. Two Mi5 officers visited me after Lee got me out of jail. I had been expecting them to get me out of jail. Nobody from Mi5 has visited me since. The week after I came out of hospital, I found two of their listening devices in my home. I have been doing my own investigation into what happened to Lee and me. I discovered that one of the Mi5 people that visited me had contact with Lee before she was attacked, he also had contact with Derek Blane before and after she was attacked by him and Michael Dowel. He also contacted William Blane before and after the murder of Lee. To reinforce my warning about trusting your phones, all of what I just told you was learned from analyzing their phone records. Any questions?”

They stopped talking while the waitress served their coffee and scones. The coffee was cold and the scones untouched when Hector finished answering questions and was able to move onto the next phase.

“Alright, now this is where I need your help,” he said, “When the Mi5 men first visited me, after Lee had got me out of jail, they made a point of telling me that Lee Moy was a Chinese citizen and a member of the Communist Party.” He held up his hand to stop Mags from interrupting, “They intimated that they had been concerned about my connection to her; it was a way of suggesting that is why they had been slow to intervene when I was charged with assault. They screwed up there ... it would be unusual for a Chinese National in Lee’s position not to be a member of the communist party. Mi5, or at least those two Mi5 officers had arranged for Derek Blane and Michael Dowel to steal Lee’s computer; I had thwarted an Mi5 operation, and their way of punishing me for that, was to leave me deal with the fall out myself; they probably persuaded the prosecutor to press charges.

“Why would Mi5 want Lee’s laptop?” asked Stephanie.

“I’m coming to that,” said Hector, “Bear with me a little longer. He had some cold coffee before continuing, “No one from Mi5 has spoken to me since then, that tells me that the two men who visited me are still on my case; it’s the way they work. I decided to do some investigations myself and this is where I need your help.” Hector drank the rest of the coffee in his cup and cleared his throat, “As I told you already, somebody from Mi5 offices contacted Lee in February. She made several phone calls immediately after that, one was to the legal counsel of the British Museum, one to the Dean of the University of Oxford, one to a solicitor’s office in Oxford and lastly one to the Oswestry Coroner, a woman called Marjorie Phelps-Burton. Lee had spent a fortnight near Oswestry in February and contacted the Oswestry Coroner twice during that time. Marjorie Phelps-Burton was murdered two days before Lee was killed. Bludgeoned to death outside her office at five PM on Good Friday. Nobody has been arrested for her murder.”

Stephanie and Mags were staring at him looking horrified. He nodded. "Yes, I think it was done by William Blane. He received a call from the Mi5 officer at four AM on Good Friday and again a month later on the fifteenth of May."

Stephanie had gone very pale, "But why... I mean Mi5, they deal with terrorism and things like that, Lee was an academic."

"I don't think it was Mi5," said Hector, "I think the men that visited me are rogue operators, trying to cover something up, something that happened in Oswestry, something that Lee reported to the coroner. That is why I need your help. I want to go to Oswestry and find out what it was. Can you speak to the Dean and see what you can find out from him? Perhaps he can speak to the lawyers that Lee contacted?"

"I know what Lee found in Oswestry," said Mags in a small voice. "Treasure trove... coins, a lot of them, mostly gold, some silver. Roman and Egyptian. That's why she called the coroner."

"I don't understand," said Hector, "Why call a Coroner for old coins?"

"It's the law," said Stephanie, "All finds in England and Wales involving gold or silver must be reported to the coroner within fourteen days. The coroner holds an inquest inviting the finder, and anybody with a claim on the find to attend. Something this old would become property of the Crown and would usually be sent to the British Museum to display. The courts would have to decide what reward would go to the finder, landowner and any other parties with a claim."

"Can you drive me to Oswestry?" asked Hector, "I think it is best to stay away from Sulham for a while."

"Do you think William Blane is likely to return?" asked Mags.

Hector shook his head, “No, but I think this is a good time to be hard to find.”

“I’m coming with you,” said Mags, “I’ll ask Maggie if we can borrow her LandRover.”

Mags took the keys to Stephanie’s RAV and agreed to collect them around eight PM. Hector called Dexter and walked to the car park with Stephanie.

“What sort of value are old Roman gold coins?” asked Hector.

“In terms of the gold, they are worth about five hundred dollars each, Egyptian coins from that era contain over an ounce of gold, so a little more than two thousand dollars.”

“I don’t suppose you know what happened to Lee’s mobile phone and laptop?” asked Hector.

“Sorry no. I would think they would have been sent back to her family, but I really don’t know.”

Mags drove.

“We should call a hotel and book rooms,” said Stephanie, “Let me see what there is on Google for Oswestry.”

“Please don’t use your phone?” said Hector, handing her his phone, “Use this one, it is safer. We should stay at the Pen-y-Dryffryn Hotel, it is where Lee stayed when she was there.” Hector spelled the name for Stephanie then dug out and handed her his credit card, “And use this Credit card. If I try to read or write in a car, I get terribly car sick.”

“You have a mobile phone AND a credit card Hector?” said Mags laughing, “Whatever next?”

“Did Lee tell you anything else about the find?” asked Hector.

“Not much, it’s a burial site, one of the Brigantes Chiefs she thought, found by a local historian,” said Mags.

Hector fell asleep in the back of the LandRover and woke up stiff and desperate for a pee when Stephanie shook his shoulder.

“Wake up, sleepy head, we have arrived,” she said, “Come on, take your phone and card before I lose them.” She stifled a yawn and stretched like a cat.

Stephanie had booked two rooms and there was a tray with chicken sandwiches and an insulated pot of cocoa in the room they were showed to with three mugs and three plates. Hector excused himself and went to the bathroom just as Mags came into the room, she had used the toilet in the reception.

“Nice!” she said, “Did you mean to get us a double bed? Not that I mind, but Maggie might get jealous if she finds out?”

“I’m not sharing with you Mags, but I got two double rooms, you are in the other one, 104.”

“Stephanie Myers!” said Mags excitedly, then lowered her voice, “What’s he like in the sack then?” She laughed so loud that Stephanie had to ask her to quieten down.

“Don’t worry, we are the only guests on this floor,” said Mags, “So when did this happen... you’ve been very bloody quiet about it.”

Hector hoped he was not blushing when he came out of the bathroom. Mags smiled at him and laughed, "For what it's worth I approve, James was a dick-head and you two seem right for each other." She loaded her plate with sandwiches and lettuce then stood up with it and wished them goodnight, picked up her rucksack and left. She returned a short while later and asked Stephanie for the keycard to her room.

Stephanie waited till Mags was gone before turning to Hector with a small smile, "I didn't want to waste any more opportunities," she said, "Besides, I've shared a room with Mags before; she snores really loudly." She picked up her cocoa, "Did you notice how big the bath is?"

Mags was at breakfast before them. She waited till Hector had his mouth full before asking if they had got any sleep. Stephanie laughed but did not say anything.

After breakfast they set off for the field that Lee had spent time in the previous February. A few cattle were grazing in the field. The gate was locked with a heavy chain and padlock, and there were signs on the gate and fence surrounding the field warning that entry was prohibited and directing anyone who wanted access to the field to visit the Oswestry Coroner's office, giving a number. Hector had brought some binoculars that he used to study the field. He could just make out a faint track that had been made towards one of three small copses in the field, but other than that he could see nothing to indicate any digging or human activity. The cattle started to move towards them just as they heard the sound of an approaching vehicle. It was a quad bike, pulling a trailer carrying a large round hay bale. The woman riding the quad bike did not look very friendly and yelled at them to move away from the gate as she approached.

"You aren't allowed here," she shouted over the noise of the bike, "I'll be calling the police if you don't leave immediately."

She maneuvered the trailer side on to the gate and switched off the engine, then got off and pulled a mobile phone out of her pocket.

“I’m serious about calling the police if you don’t leave,” she threatened.

“We’ve seen the signs and aren’t planning to go in there,” said Hector, “Would you mind telling us whose field that is? We would like to talk to the owner.”

“It’s council land and I rent it for grazing,” said the woman, “But if you want to talk about the Barrows, you’ll need to go to the coroner’s office or speak to old hag Bronwyn Fairchild.”

“Can you tell me where to find Mrs Fairchild?” asked Hector.

“At OBHAG, they meet once a week or you can ask at the town hall for Bronwyn’s number, she does guided tours of the town,” said the woman. She seemed to have calmed down. “I’m sorry for shouting at you, I’ve been upset about this field since the last Coroner put a prohibition order on it almost a year ago, and the new Coroner hasn’t done a bloody thing about lifting it. I have to fetch someone from their office if I want to go into the field myself, even though I rent it.”

She started cutting the string on the bale. Hector helped her and then Stephanie and Mags joined in. They tore armfuls of prickly hay from the bale and threw them over the gate and fence. The woman introduced herself as Claire and thanked them.

“How many Barrows are there in the field,” asked Stephanie when they had finished.

“Three they reckon. One in each of the copses,” said Claire, “Really, you should speak to Bronwyn, she is the one who

discovered them and brought that young professor from Oxford here with her fancy equipment that could see what was underground without having to dig.”

“Thank you,” said Hector, “We’ll do that.”

They walked back to the hotel picking bits of straw out of their clothing.

“Lee must have used the ground penetrating radar,” said Mags. “That’s why they wanted her laptop, they want to know where to dig for the coins.”

“Would anyone else have the information?” asked Hector, “The operator would have seen the imagery.”

“That would most probably have been Lee,” said Stephanie, “She helped to develop the equipment, it is the very latest. Nobody knew it better than Lee, and she would have been very careful about releasing any information, there are a lot of unscrupulous collectors out there, who pay looters a fortune for ancient artifacts. If I were Lee, the only person I would have shown the information to would be the coroner, and I would only show it, I would not give them anything that could inadvertently lead looters to the site. The coroner does not need to value the find, all he or she needs to know is that there is gold or silver and that it has been there for at least three hundred years, and it becomes Crown Property. The inquest is about establishing who, if anybody, has a valid claim to the land or objects or any reward.”

“I have doubts about going to the coroner’s office,” said Hector, “The police must surely have linked the Coroner’s murder with Lee’s, and we will probably end up being questioned by the police for hours if not days.”

“Not if we go as representatives of the University of Oxford,” said Mags.

“Let us try and talk to the woman Claire told us about, Bronwyn. I really thought she called her an old hag at first,” said Hector.

“OBAHG, it stands for Oswestry Border and History Group,” said Stephanie, “Do you mind if I have a shower and change before we go looking for Bronwyn? I can feel things crawling around in my scalp.”

Hector used his phone to call directory enquiries and after three more phone calls he got Bronwyn Fairchild on the phone. She told him she was at the Town Hall and would be delighted to give him an Historic Tour of the town. She charged five pounds per person.

Bronwyn Turned out to be a very tall, energetic woman in her sixties. Hector let Stephanie do all the talking; she explained that they did not really want an Historic Tour but were friends of Lee Moy’s and wanted to talk about the site near the Pen-y-Dryffryn Hotel that Lee reported to the Coroner the previous February.

Bronwyn’s face fell, “She was a dear friend you know; Marjorie was her name. She was killed by some dreadful hooligan for the change in her purse, on Good Friday, of all days.”

“I’m so sorry for your loss,” said Stephanie, looking uncertain, “I feel dreadful for upsetting you so.”

Bronwyn patted Stephanie’s shoulder, “No dear, it is quite alright. I miss Marjorie and am still furious that the police haven’t brought her killer to justice, but life must go on.” she smiled reassuringly, “I must say I am surprised that Dr. Moy hasn’t been back to brief the new Coroner, but I gathered that she is an extremely busy person.”

Stephanie glanced at Hector who shook his head. She turned back to Bronwyn, "Thank you. We just wanted to check that the site has not been disturbed by anyone. We saw that the Coroner's Office prohibited entry signs are still on the gate and fence around the field."

"I haven't been there myself," said Bronwyn, but young Tudor is supposed to keep an eye on it, and he has not mentioned any activity there. You could ask him yourself; he works at the Coroner's office."

"Would you happen to know who is in charge of the investigation into Marjorie's death?" asked Hector.

Marjorie shook her head, "Sorry no, some-one from Shrewsbury," she said.

They took their leave of Bronwyn, who offered to refund their money and looked relieved when they declined.

"I think we should go to the coroner's office," said Mags.

Hector shook his head, "Just because Bronwyn doesn't know that Lee was killed doesn't mean that the Police and Coroner don't. Bronwyn said she and the old Coroner were friends; she was probably still distressed when Lee was killed, it was only three days later."

"My ex's father used to be a big wig in the Shropshire Police," said Stephanie, "We got on well, I could call him? He lives outside Shrewsbury."

Hector nodded, "Could we visit him instead, pop in unannounced or call him just before we get there?" he asked, "I need to think."

Hector handed his phone to Stephanie and tuned out everybody as he tried to get his thoughts ordered. He had made too many assumptions and felt he was losing control of the investigation. He was looking for answers; he wanted to know, at least be certain in himself, who was behind the attack on him and Lee. He needed more information and wished Tracy would get back to him with what she had found on William Blane's phone.

Stephanie reached back and squeezed his knee. Hector covered her hand with his and turned to look at her as she spoke.

"Jim's at home and says we are welcome. He lives alone," she said, "I think you will like him." She handed back his phone.

Hector nodded, "Don't tell him about Mi5? Just ask him if the police are aware of the connection between Lee and the Coroner to start with?"

"He's a smart man, Hector and honest, you can trust him," said Stephanie.

"It's not just about trust, Stephanie, please just keep it simple to start with?"

Stephanie nodded and then turned back to give Mags directions. A few minutes later they parked outside a neat bungalow with an immaculate front lawn and garden. A tall, lean man came out to greet them before they reached the front door. He hugged Stephanie and kissed both her cheeks before shaking Mags' and Hector's hands.

"I'm Jim," he said, regarding them with calm grey eyes, "It's a pleasure to meet you."

Jim invited them inside and offered tea or coffee.

“I’ll make it Jim,” said Stephanie, “If that’s alright with you? We need your advice; Hector will tell you about it.”

Jim nodded and ushered them into the sitting room. He folded himself into an armchair and looked expectantly at Hector. “You are the fellow that got attacked when Steff’s colleague got murdered down Chichester way?” he said looking at Hector, “That was a bad business, did they catch the villain?”

Hector nodded, “Yes, it was a bad business and no, they haven’t made any arrests yet. It’s what we are here about really...” Hector paused, “We have reason to believe that the same person attacked and killed the Oswestry Coroner three days before killing Dr Lee Moy.” He watched Jim carefully as he received the news. The ex-cop did not look surprised, but Hector detected a change in the pulse on his neck.

“Go on, lad,” said Jim, “You’ve got the look of a professional, military police perhaps. Share your reasons.”

“In February last year, Dr Moy informed the coroner that she had found a large quantity of gold and silver coins in an ancient burial site near Oswestry. A week later she was attacked by two men who tried to steal her laptop.”

“You intervened; I think?” said Jim. Hector could see he was fully engaged.

“Yes,” said Hector, “And less than a month later, on Good Friday the Oswestry Coroner was killed, three days after that, Dr Moy was killed, and I was attacked and left for dead. We think the killings and the attempted robbery are connected.”

“If memory serves, the villains that attacked Dr. Moy were sent down,” said Jim.

Hector nodded, "Yes, and I'm told the theory at that time was that the attack on Dr Moy and me was a reprisal by the brother of one of the muggers."

Jim nodded, "I remember that. They never found him?"

Hector nodded his head, "No, they haven't really tried."

Jim regraded Hector gravely before answering, "There's more, I take it, but you aren't sure if you can trust me?"

Hector spread his hands apart and shrugged.

"Look, I've never been anything but a copper," said Jim, "I was a good one, and I can tell that you know much more than you are telling me. What I cannot tell is what you are frightened of. You would go to the police otherwise, rather than come to me."

Hector nodded, "Can you find out if the police have connected the deaths of the Coroner and Dr Moy?" asked Hector.

Stephanie brought a tray in then, just as Jim rose to his feet and crossed the room. He picked up a mobile phone that was sitting on a charging cradle and looked down at the screen. He used his thumb to punch in some numbers and held the phone to his ear. After a short while he spoke.

"Afternoon Dudley," he said, "Sorry to bother you but can you tell me if there's been any developments on the murder of the Oswestry Coroner last year? The Good Friday murder, that's right." He was silent for a while, frowning as he listened. "Right, well, you remember my son James?" he asked and then laughed at whatever reply he got, "Yes, he is. Well, he was telling me about another murder down in Sussex; a colleague of his fiancée, Dr. Lee Moy was murdered on Easter Monday. The thing is, she had a connection to the coroner, she'd reported a treasure trove to the coroner about a month before

the murders.” He was silent for a while longer before saying, “No, I used to get on with his predecessor, Carlton, but he emigrated to New Zealand right before the pandemic, I don’t really know any of the current Sussex lot.” He listened for a while longer, saying yes a few times before the call came to an end. He returned the phone to its charging cradle. He put his hands in his pockets and walked to the window and looked out over the garden.

“It’s 2023,” he said, “And with all their bloody technology, the police forces still can’t co-ordinate any better than when I was a constable.” He turned and looked at Hector.

“Well lad, that’s all I can do for you unless you have anything else to work with?”

Hector nodded and sniffed the coffee, it was instant. He took a sip and burned his lip. Placing the coffee down he looked up at Jim.

“Do you know anyone with clout in Financial Crimes? Someone that can get Barclays to disclose the drawer of a large cash withdrawal, not the account, but the receiver?”

Jim looked at him, “You’ll have to tell me more before I answer that one.” Stephanie handed him a cup of tea and he thanked her and sat down with it, his eyes on Hector.

“Lee Moy was a Chinese citizen and a communist party member,” said Hector, “It is standard operational procedure to monitor prominent Chinese working in this country. I was military, contracted to Mi5 till I retired in December ‘21. I was charged with assault and aggravated bodily harm for injuring the two men that tried to take Lee’s laptop and put in detention awaiting trial. It was Lee Moy that got me out after three days.” Hector looked at Jim, who nodded his understanding. “Two minders from Mi5 visited me then, they told me that their hands

were tied because they didn't want the Chinese to find out my connection to them. The mugging was an Mi5 operation, and I ruined it - that was what they wanted me to believe. I haven't heard a word from them or anyone at the Firm since then, but they bugged my house."

"What made you think the mugging was an Mi5 operation?" asked Jim.

"They did. It was nicely done," said Hector.

"But they made a mistake, they tried calling me before their visit, and one of them used a mobile phone. I learned a lot from that phone number. I learned that it also called the men who tried to mug Lee before and after the mugging and that it also called another man before and after the murder of the Oswestry coroner and Lee. I found that man with seventy thousand pounds in bank wrapped banknotes."

"William Blane! You found him!" said Mags.

Hector nodded, keeping his eyes on Jim.

Jim nodded slowly, "I know somebody, but I can't speak for them I'll have to tell them what they are up against and let them decide. What did you do with the villain?"

"The French police have him on weapons charges. Unless he is an idiot, they don't know who he is yet."

"Am I right? Were you military police?" asked Jim.

"Almost; Royal Engineers, SAS, Intelligence," said Hector.

"Right then," said Jim getting to his feet and picking up his phone again, "This has been an interesting day." He looked up

a number and called it, then crossed to the window and looked out while he waited for the call to be picked up.

“Hello Shirley, it’s been a long time. Too long. How are you?” He listened for a long time, giving short interjections from time to time before laughing, “Well you are right of course, I do want something, and I have no right to ask. It’s a stinker Shirley and I won’t hold it against you if you tell me to piss off.” He listened for a while longer, “We think it’s a bad apple in Mi5, we want his name, he signed for some money, a lot of it.” He looked at Hector and mouthed “Which bank?”.

Hector replied quietly “Barclays,”.

“Barclays Bank Shirley,” Jim listened for a while and then said he would call her back and ended the call.

“She says she will try but can’t promise anything. What can you give her?”

“Let me have your number and I’ll send you photos,” said Hector. “I can get a wrapped brick of cash to her tomorrow if she is in London.”

“Let’s see what she can do with the photos,” said Jim, and gave Hector his number. A few minutes later he was on the phone to Shirley again. She did most of the talking. When he hung up, he put the phone back on the cradle and said, “She says her contact is quick, when she delivers, but don’t hold your breath.” He looked at Stephanie and Mags, “So what was it that the Mi5 rogues wanted from Lee’s computer?”

Stephanie looked at Hector who nodded.

“The exact location of the coins we think. There are at least three long barrows on the site, and they are overgrown with trees, so excavation would be very difficult. Lee used a

specialized X-Ray device that can pinpoint the exact location of the various objects.”

“Have the coins been stolen?” asked Jim.

“We don’t think so, as far as we know there has been no digging and the field around the barrows has been sealed with an entry prohibition order.”

“So why the killing?” asked Jim.

“The only two reasons we can think of is that they wanted to cover up their role in trying to mug Lee and so that they can steal the coins at a later date. They may have obtained the data from Lee’s computer after she was killed, but, even without that, they know roughly where to look and could use a metal detector when the hullabaloo has died down,” said Stephanie. “Have you eaten Jim? We haven’t and I am starving. Do you fancy a pub lunch?”

Jim’s friend Shirley called back just as they were leaving the pub. They all stood in a huddle in the pub car park while Jim answered.

“Aye, it’s me Jim. Thanks for doing this Shirley, yes, I will visit, I promise.” He listened for a while longer and thanked her before ending the call.

“I’ve got a name and an ID number, Thomas Watkins, 5298Uniform.”

Hector nodded, “That makes sense, He would see the unfiltered chatter. Thank you, Jim.”

“What are you planning to do with the killer, this Blane villain?” asked Jim.

“I haven’t decided yet,” said Hector.

“I’d like to give him to Shirley, if I can?” said Jim, “A feather in her cap as payment for sticking her neck out.”

“That works for me,” said Hector, “Give me an address and I will courier a brick of money, his passports and his last known location there by midday tomorrow.”

They dropped Jim at his bungalow and Hector asked Mags to drive to Hereford.

“What’s in Hereford?” asked Stephanie, “I thought we were going to London?”

“The SAS,” said Mags.

Hector nodded and got out his phone. “We’ll be in London tonight. The Russell Hotel.”

He made a short call and then sat back and closed his eyes, tuning out Stephanie and Mags who were arguing about the best route to Hereford.

It took just over an hour to get to Hereford. Mags looked nervous when the soldier at the barrier came to her window. Hector leaned forward, “I’m Major Barnes, the Boss is expecting me, these ladies are my guests.” The soldier stepped back and saluted. The barrier went up and Hector directed Mags to the car park then led them into the building. A soldier with a prosthetic leg met them and took them to a simply furnished office where a grey-haired man in uniform stood to greet them, shaking their hands and asking them to sit before asking if they would like any tea or coffee. There was a tray with a jug of water and glasses on the otherwise bare desk.

“Thought you had finally bought it Barnes,” he said, “The old man said you’d make it. I don’t suppose you remember him visiting?”

Hector shook his head, “No, I was away with the faeries most of the time. Induced coma apparently.”

“Well, you had better not keep him waiting, I’ll tell these lovely ladies all your disgusting habits while you are away.” He nodded to a door behind them, “See yourself in.”

Hector knocked on and then opened the door that he never thought he would walk through again, “Good afternoon, Boss,” he said and closed the door behind him.

“He’ll be fine,” said the grey-haired man, “They were at boarding school together. Do either of you play poker?”

A helicopter flew them to the Heliport at Blackfriars and an Uber took them to the Russell Hotel. Apart from assuring Mags that Maggie’s LandRover would be delivered safely back to Maggie, Hector had hardly spoken since leaving Hereford.

Stephanie took one look at the huge bathtub and decided that she did not want to go out on the town. Mags laughed and left them to it. They ordered room service while the bath ran, and Stephanie wheeled the trolley into the bathroom as soon as the waiter left their room.

“So, Hector, when are you going to tell me what the visit to Hereford was all about?” she asked stretching out in the bath and grabbing at the hairs on his chest with her toes.

Hector shrugged, “There’s not much to tell you,” he said, cradling her feet with his hands, “Thomas Watkins is going to have to explain why he paid William Blane to kill a retired SAS officer. I expect he will be very co-operative. There will be

nothing in the press and I am not sure if they will tell me who else at Mi5 was involved. Tomorrow morning, I will go to the bank and hand over the money I confiscated from William Blane, apart from the brick of five thousand pounds that I will courier to Jim's friend Shirley at FCU along with Blane's passports and whereabouts and then we can take the train back to Chichester and put all of this behind us."

"What will happen to Blane?" she asked.

"I don't care as long he stays away from us," said Hector, "Tracy sent me a message to say that she has uploaded all the data from his mobile phone, but I can't access that till I get home. Tracy seems to really have it in for him, so if she finds anything she can use to hurt him, she'll probably exploit it."

Hector did not tell Stephanie that Tracy had discovered that Blane had been having a wild affair with the local mafia enforcer's wife while he worked the Wednesday night shift at the container terminal. She said there were some very explicit photos of the two of them on Blane's phone. Hector was certain that the photos would find their way to the mafia enforcer sooner than later.