

Hal Johns

by
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This is a work of fiction. None of the characters and events portrayed are real; all of the stables and most of the establishments are fictional too.

WARNING! This story contains some explicit sexual language.

Hal, an unemployed veteran, is feeling gloomy after travelling to London and being rejected at yet another job interview. He instinctively intervenes when he sees two men attack a woman as she is about to cross the street, and finds himself embroiled in a web of violence involving murderous traffickers and corrupt police.

Rejection

Hal stared morosely out of the cafe window while he waited for his meal. The rain was coming in waves with the gusting winds; the world looked wet, grey and dreary. It suited his mood perfectly. His phone vibrated in his pocket, he fetched it out and looked at the screen. Mary, his sister. He thumbed the accept icon.

“Hi Mare,” he sighed into the phone.

“Doesn’t sound promising little brother,” Mary replied, “What happened?”

“Usual shit,” he replied, keeping his voice down, “I am over experienced and under qualified. It’s a bullshit ploy to get me to work for less because I have a military pension.”

“At least you got an interview,” she said, “Look on the bright side.”

“What bright side? A hundred and twenty quid wasted. They could have read my covering letter and CV and saved me the trip and face to face rejection. The next two trains back have been

cancelled. It will be after midnight when I get to Chi, too late for a bus, so I will have to walk it or fork out for a taxi.” Somehow he felt better for getting it all off his chest, “Sorry Mary, I’m just moaning for the sake of it. Thanks for checking up on me.”

“Are you still up for Saturday?” asked Mary, “It’s totally OK if you can’t make it. I know how much you hate Church fetes.”

Despite himself Hal laughed, “I’ll be there, Mare, and I’ll sell all your cakes in record time.”

“Thanks Hal. Good luck getting home tonight.”

The waitress brought his order as he put his phone away. Hal thanked her. The food was good and lifted his mood. He was contemplating getting another coffee when he saw them. Two men, clearly intent on intercepting a woman that ran across the road, struggling with an umbrella. Hal was out of his seat before they reached her.

“Call the police, a woman is being attacked!” he yelled before pulling open the door and launching himself across the pavement. He saw the blade of a knife as he accelerated.

Hal cannoned into the back of the man nearest him, knocking him down. An angry snarl and he saw the knife again, as he rolled and scrambled back up onto his feet. He felt his heart hammering as he desperately avoided the shining blade that slashed towards him. Voices shouting. The sound of a car door slamming. The knife drawing back, blood dripping from the blade. Hal dived forward, slamming his head into the face of the attacker as he tried to bat the knife away with his left arm. He felt a blow on his back as he blacked out.

Alive

He knew he was alive because his head hurt horribly. He couldn’t see a thing, but he could hear well enough. He opened his mouth.

“What is happening?” he asked reaching up to feel his face.

A cool hand took hold of his wrist, firmly stopping him from touching his face, “Just relax,” it was a woman’s voice, “You have been injured. You are in St Thomas Hospital Mr. Johns. How are you feeling?”

“Sore,” said Hal, “How is the woman? Is she alright?”

“I’m sorry, I do not know what you are talking about. Where do you hurt?”

“The woman with the umbrella... she was being attacked, at least one of them had a knife. Is she alright?”

“You were brought in with two men, they were both injured, but there was no woman brought in,” said the woman, “The police are waiting to talk to you.”

“Why can’t I see?” asked Hal.

“You have a lot of swelling on your face,” said the woman, “Now please tell me where you feel pain and how bad it is?”

“My head hurts horribly,” said Hal, “My back and left side hurt too.”

He heard the woman moving around, “Are you a doctor?” he asked.

“No, I am a nurse, the doctor will be here soon, now just relax Mr. Johns, the pain should ease soon.”

“Can I talk to the police now?” asked Hal.

“If the doctor agrees,” said the nurse, “He will be here soon.”

“What’s your name?” asked Hal.

“Jenny Mills,” said the nurse, “How is the pain now?”

“I can manage... I didn’t pay the cafe for my food,” said Hal.

“Don’t worry about that,” said the nurse, “You can deal with that when you have recovered.”

“How long will that take?” asked Hal.

The nurse laughed quietly, “You will have to ask the doctor, but it will take longer if you don’t relax and allow your body to heal.”

The doctor, a stern sounding man with a Yorkshire accent, told Hal that he had three knife cuts; two along the ribs on his left side and one long cut across his back. In addition he had a fracture above his left eye and extensive bruising to his face. The doctor told Hal that he ought to be able to see in two or three days, when the bruising around his eyes had reduced, and that more tests would be done then.

Two days later Hal was interviewed by the police, a sergeant and a constable. They took a statement and told him that the two men who had been admitted to hospital at the same time as him had already been discharged. They said they knew nothing about the woman Hal had seen being attacked. Hal got the distinct impression that they were not interested in following up.

Hal was discharged a week later. He took a taxi to the cafe. The owner refused to let him pay and told Hal that the police had not visited or called to verify Hal’s story. He said the woman ran off as soon as Hal tackled the men.

Hal took the train to Chichester feeling uncomfortable in the sweatshirt he had bought from Oxfam to replace his shirt and jacket that had been ruined in the incident.

He was up late cleaning the fridge after throwing out the milk and spoiled food.

Mary had left a note reminding him that she would be in Mallorca for two weeks. Hal lay in bed wondering what had happened to the woman and the men that had attacked her. His face still ached and the wounds on his side and back itched.

Hal slept late and woke when he heard Mrs. Welsh arguing with her daughter. He looked at the clock radio it was almost ten. He swung his legs out of bed and sat up.

“Just get on with it wanker,” he muttered to himself, “Life is for living.”

An hour later he was walking up Kingley Vale, carrying a flask of coffee and his iPad. The walking helped, he didn't even open his iPad till he was back down and sitting in the Fox and Hounds with a cider and a plate of chilli con carne.

Hal swallowed his pride and sent an email to Kerridge Contracting asking Morgan if he had any work for him. He then proof listened to the last chapter he had written, corrected the mistakes and resolutely plugged away knowing that it would be a while before he got into the flow of writing again.

He made his way back to Welsh's Yard just before midnight. It must have rained while he was in the pub. There was a light on in the living room, as he crept up the outside stairs to his loft apartment.

He slept badly and had disturbing dreams. At three AM he got up and made himself cocoa and added a shot of rum, and eventually fell into a deep sleep. He woke again after nine AM.

He found Mrs. Welsh at the stables and asked if she needed help with anything.

Mrs. Welsh shook her head and told him that he really needed to rest and let his body heal properly, then brightened and asked if he was up to driving her to Portsmouth.

They set off at ten thirty, and Mrs. Welsh spent the entire journey on the phone, talking to her sister. By three that afternoon they were heading back to West Ashling. The Land-rover was filled to the gunnels. Mrs. Welsh told him that her daughter Megan had left in a huff and was planning on staying with her father in Bangor. They had disagreed over the sale of a horse. Hal offered to do any driving that Mrs. Welsh needed. Mrs. Welsh thanked him and insisted that

she pay him for his time, saying she paid her daughter and it was a tax deductible expense.

Semi-employed

Over the next two weeks Hal was kept more than busy. He was a bit nervous about delivering and collecting horses in the horse box at first, but soon got used to it.

Mary returned from Mallorca looking refreshed. She invited Hal for Sunday lunch and asked him to come early and help her to clear out the garden shed.

By eleven Hal had delivered the last load to the council recycling centre. Mary regaled him with gossip from the Bible Study group she had gone to Mallorca with, before asking him how his job hunting was going.

“I haven’t made any more applications,” he said, “Apart from asking Morgan for work. Mrs. Welsh has been keeping me busy and paying well.”

“Your landlady?” asked Mary, “What do you do for her? You don’t know much about horses?”

Hal laughed, “I know how to ride - just about anyway, and I know which end of a horse is which. Both are dangerous, by the way. I drive for her, mostly locally, but I have been collecting and delivering horses for her as far as Yorkshire. I love it.”

Mary gave him a look, “I heard that her daughter stormed off. I hope you had nothing to do with that?”

Hal shook his head and bit back the response that he wanted to make; Mary’s late husband had been a serial philanderer, and Mary judged all men accordingly.

“Megan is almost young enough to be my daughter,” he said evenly, “And is barely civil when she does acknowledge me. I don’t think it is anything to do with me.”

“It’s not right; you sharing that big house with Angela,” said Mary disapprovingly, “People will assume the worst.”

Hal snorted, “You mean your very charitable Christian bible study group will assume the worst! Really Mare, you should listen to yourself sometimes. Angela Welsh is a really nice, hard working and decent person. Just because she doesn’t observe the Sabbath doesn’t make her a bad person.”

Mary reddened and Hal regretted his outburst.

“I am sorry Mare,” he said gently, “I know you are just trying to look after me, but I am really quite grown up now.”

Mary nodded and changed the subject, “Jamie says he might be able to visit soon, he has to attend a conference in Southampton next month.”

“Great!” said Hal, “I’ll ask him for the dates so I can make sure I am here. For an educated brat, he is an awful communicator!”

“He has been busy,” said Mary smiling, “But yes, I wish he would get over his allergy to cellphones and get WhatsApp or something we can make video calls on. I worry about him.”

“You worry. Period,” said Hal and they both laughed, “I can’t help with the stall next weekend; I am collecting two horses from Barnard Castle.”

Mary shrugged, “That’s OK, Joyce will be disappointed, she is desperate to introduce you to her cousin, but I really don’t think think you would like her.”

Hal didn’t respond; his sister was always trying to get him hitched up with someone ‘suitable’, which meant a regular church going woman.

Hal felt exhausted, as he always did, when he left his sister’s house and cycled back to West Ashling. He loved Mary; she had been

more of a mother to him than a sister, but she was as stubborn and set in her ways as their father had been. Hal didn't remember his mother and often wondered what she had seen in his father.

There was a note under the door to his loft from Mrs. Welsh; another horse collection, from Rowlands Castle. A short run. Hal liked the Rowlands Castle run, they served an excellent breakfast if he got there early enough and insisted on loading and offloading the horses themselves.

The Sweepstake

Mrs. Welsh came out in the morning while he was checking the Land Rover and horse box. She handed him a letter.

“Some mail for you Hal,” she said in way of greeting, “Can you take me into Chi when you get back from Rowlands Castle? I need to see the doctor.”

“Sure,” replied Hal, tucking the envelope into a pocket, “Are you feeling unwell?”

Mrs. Welsh laughed, “Not especially. No, I need to get a prescription renewed and then go to the chemists. I should have done it on Friday, but I forgot.”

“I should be back by ten,” said Hal, “What time is your appointment?”

“No appointment, the prescription is waiting for me, so we can go as soon as the horses are settled in.”

The breakfast at Rowlands Castle was good, and Dan Chivvers asked Hal if he could take a groom with him.

“Planet is about to foal,” he explained, “Sally wants to go with her and keep her calm. I called Angela and she says Sally can stay for a week or two.”

Sally was a cheeky looking young girl, she looked about fifteen, but she handled the horses with confidence and led the two mares into the horse box with practiced ease. She was strong too, despite her tiny frame, and had the ramp halfway up before Hal had time to help her.

She rode with the horses, in the tiny compartment at the front of the trailer.

Mrs. Welsh spent twenty minutes showing Sally around, by which time Hal had parked and swept out the trailer.

“You made an impression on Sally,” said Mrs. Welsh with a smile as Hal drove out the gate, “You might want to stock up on some condoms when we get to the chemists.”

“She’s a child!” said Hal, looking shocked, “At least half my age!”

“She’s just small,” said Mrs. Welsh, “And four years older than Megan.” She laughed again, “Megan and the stable lasses have been running a sweepstake on who gets to bed you first.”

Hal felt his face reddening, which made Mrs. Welsh laugh even more, “I’m sorry Hal, we horsey types are an earthy bunch. Sally’s parents own a stud farm, which probably explains a lot.”

Hal was saved further embarrassment when her phone rang, she was still negotiating when they reached the surgery.

“Can you collect a horse from Horsham and take him to Darlington?” she asked Hal when she climbed back into the Landrover, “It’s a stallion, and they’ll send a groom, he can come back by train.”

“Sure,” said Hal, “When?”

“Can you manage tonight?” she asked looking doubtful, “You can stay a couple of nights and then bring the mare and foal back from Barnard Castle on Saturday? I know it’s a big ask, but I owe Robert a favour.”

“No problem, and it gets me away from Sally,” said Hal smiling, “Tesco for the Chemist?”

It was dark by the time he got to Robert Clampton’s Stud Farm in Horsham. The stallion looked vicious and Hal kept out of the way as two female grooms coaxed him into the horse box. Robert offered Hal some coffee and thanked him. They watched the stallion being loaded.

“He doesn’t like males,” he said, “But Barbara will manage him alright. Just take it easy and get him there safely will you? The feisty buggler is in demand at the moment. Have you been to Darlington before?”

Hal shook his head, “No, not into the town, but I’ve passed by a few times.”

“Call me if you have any problems,” said Robert, handing Hal a card, “And when you get there.”

Barbara came over and declined coffee, “I’m all set and don’t want to be peeing all the way to Yorkshire,” she looked Hal up and down, “Give me your number, I’ll call you when I want you to stop. He’s OK with heavy traffic but just be careful when you stop for fuel, he gets jumpy with bright forecourts.”

“There’s an intercom, in the horsebox,” said Hal, “It works well enough.”

“I want your number too,” said Barbara, “Just in case.”

Hal nodded and dialled star, hash, ninety nine, hash and held out his phone for Barbara to see. She scowled and took his phone from him, dialled a number and waited. Her phone whinnied and she ended the call and gave Hal back his phone.

Hal stopped at South Mimm’s to refuel and got fish and chips for Barbara and himself. Barbara managed to soften her scowl long enough to thank him.

They stopped again for fuel at Doncaster and Barbara fetched them both coffee, it was almost midnight. There was heavy fog as Hal finally crawled along the narrow lane to Mycroft Barn just after two AM.

“I’ve called them, they are expecting us and have opened the gate,” Barbara’s voice came over loud and clear on the intercom, “You’ve done well Hal, that’s the smoothest ride I’ve had... ever.”

Hal was surprised at her change in tone, “Thanks. I can see them.”

“Stay in the cab till he’s been stabled, if he smells the mare, he’s likely to get frisky and will attack any male he sees,” said Barbara.

“OK, I’ll call Bob and tell him we have arrived.”

The stallion really was frisky. The noise was enough to wake the dead, and Hal was very glad to be in the Land-rover while the stallion reared and pranced around, spraying gobbets of what Hal assumed must be semen around. It sounded to him like other horses in the stables were adding to the din.

An older woman approached and grinned at Hal as she held out a hand to shake his.

“Am I safe?” he asked opening the Land-rover door, “Do they always behave like that?”

“Aye,” said the woman, “Robert said you were new to this, but a safe driver, “He knows he’s here to fuck and he’s keen enough!” She pointed, “Tha’ can park over yon, and come up to main house, there’s a bed made in’t study for thee.”

Hal slept well enough despite the din from the stables. He woke, desperate for a piss and stumbled around in the dark looking for the bathroom. His phone was almost flat and he found a socket and plugged it in to charge. It was five AM. He woke again to the smell of coffee and bacon. It was eight AM.

Mr. Mycroft said he would take Barbara to the railways station, so Hal set off for Barnard Castle and checked into Luna Farm guest house.

He spent a comfortable two days there, going for walks and writing and then drove to the Crossley farm early on Saturday morning.

Peggy Crossley did not look anything like she sounded on the phone. Hal was unable to guess her age, and was surprised at the strength of her handshake.

“Thank you for getting here early,” she said, “Angela assures me that you will take care of my girls? Minnie has never travelled in a horsebox before.”

The mare looked docile enough in her stall. Her foal was almost as tall as her and very curious, allowing Hal to stroke her neck and cheek while she examined him.

Hal declined tea and food and said he was keen to get away early. Ten minutes later the mare and foal were being coaxed into the horse-box. The grooms, two rosy cheeked girls, had a little bit of difficulty with the mare, but the foal walked quite happily up the ramp. One of the grooms, Caroline, was going back to West Ashling with the horses, but set up a neat little camera so that she could monitor the horses with her cell phone.

“The Crossleys have four cameras in their big horse box,” she told Hal as she clamped a phone mount to the Land-rover dash board, “You should put one in the horse box, it isn’t expensive.”

“Show Mrs. Welsh your setup,” said Hal, “I’m sure she would be happy to get one.”

Caroline began interrogating him. Hal didn’t mind, it kept him awake. It didn’t take her long to get around to asking about his love life.

“So if you aren’t gay, why aren’t you hitched?” she asked, “At forty, it’s almost too late.”

“Too late for what?” asked Hal.

“To have kids,” she said, “My dad was thirty when I was born, he’s fifty now and can hardly walk up the stairs by himself. He’s already had a bypass operation.”

“Are you going to have kids?” asked Hal,

Caroline nodded, “Not just yet, but I want two. As soon as I’ve qualified and travelled a bit; I want to spend three months in Australia. Perhaps I’ll find the right guy there?”

“So you aren’t hitched up yet?” asked Hal, “No nice guys in Barnard Castle?”

Caroline made a face, “Yorkshire boys are full of shit,” she said, “I’m a Hampshire lass, from Portsmouth, I had a boyfriend before I came up a north to study, but we broke up. It’s OK, he was bit of a selfish twat really.” She punched him on the shoulder, “You haven’t answered my question.”

“Ouch! What question?” asked Hal.

“Why aren’t you hitched?”

Hal shrugged, “Not sure really. I haven’t met the right person, I don’t want kids and I really don’t want to own a house and spend my weekends doing DIY and mowing lawns. Perhaps I am a bit fey?”

“Fey?” repeated Caroline, “Is that even a word?”

“Well it must be, if it can be spoken out loud,” said Hal “It means a bit footloose and fancy free. I had twenty two years in the army marching to somebody else’s tune, now I just want to do my own thing.”

“Don’t we all,” said Caroline, “So do you prefer girls or boys... for sex, I mean.”

“Women,” said Hal, “I’m a bit too old for girls and boys.”

“You’re an awkward bugger, aren’t you?” muttered Caroline.

“Well buggery isn’t my thing... but I will agree to being more than a little awkward. My sister says I am a social moron.”

“That’s not very nice of her.”

“She loves me, but she is a devout Christian and doesn’t approve of lying,” said Hal with a laugh, “I think she is right, I am perfectly happy being alone in a crowded cafe, but completely bewildered by social gatherings.”

“You seem easy enough to talk to,” said Caroline, “Why did you join the army?”

Hal shrugged, “So many reasons; it was a good life, I got to travel a bit and learned a lot.”

“Did you do any fighting?”

“A bit of fisticuffs every now and again, but I was never in combat, though I was in war zones. Mostly I fixed things.”

“Did you go to Afghanistan?”

Hal nodded, “Twice. A horrible place. I even got a war wound,” he pulled up his sleeve and showed off a long spiralling livid scar, “A bit of shrapnel from a suicide bomb at a check-point.”

“My grandfather was in the Navy during the Second World War,” said Caroline, “He wanted me and my sister to join the WRENS, but the idea just horrified us.”

“Military service isn’t for everyone,” said Hal, “I loved it, but I can see how some would find it irksome.”

“What did you like most about the Army?” asked Caroline.

“Wow! Now that’s an interesting question,” said Hal, “I suppose I liked having a sense of purpose; knowing what had to be done and generally being allowed to get on with it. I liked the training, learning new skills and I really liked being in Germany.”

“Do you speak German?”

“Nur ein bisschen; just a little, enough to get around,” said Hal, “What about you? Have you travelled and if so, where did you like the most?”

“I’ve been to Paris a couple of times when I was doing A Level French; a student exchange. Didn’t like it much,” said Caroline, “My favourite holidays were in the Norfolk Broads, my Dad’s family has a holiday cottage and a boat there. I really love it.”

“I didn’t like France much,” said Hal, “Dirty and unfriendly. I visited the Norfolk Broads once, just for a weekend. Very pretty. What got you into horses?”

“My mum’s brother is a horse trainer in Petworth, I started working weekends for him when I was thirteen... learned to ride and just loved it. I decided then that I was going to work with horses, but I didn’t want to be a vet, so I am training as an equine physiotherapist at Liverpool University.”

“Sounds like seriously hard work,” said Hal, “And dangerous, I guess, working with horses that are in pain?”

“It can be,” said Caroline, “But I love it. I’ve just finished a three week placement at Crossley Farm.”

“So you are going home?”

“I promised to see Side Step settled at Mrs. Welsh’s - that’s the foal, then I’ll think about going home or going somewhere new for a few days, I have to be back in Liverpool in September. Agnes Welsh has offered me some work. What is she like?”

“I really like her,” said Hal, “She has been a pleasure to work for.”

“She was a legend as a steeple chaser,” said Caroline, “Peggy Crossley said she should have gone professional.”

“I knew she used to ride, but it is a world I know nothing about.”

“How did you end up working for a stable?”

“I lodge there, and Mrs. Welsh asked me to drive for her one day when her daughter wasn’t there. She doesn’t drive herself,” Hal shrugged, “I’ve been doing it for a few weeks.”

Caroline laughed, “You’ve already got a reputation as a safe pair of hands with horse transporting... You know that don’t you?”

“There’s nothing to it,” said Hal, “Just driving.”

Caroline punched him, “You don’t know a thing about horses do you?”

“Stop punching me! I know that they have a leg on each corner, can bite and kick, and that their owners are different grades of crazy,” said Hal, “I can even ride... sort of, though it isn’t something I would do for fun, especially if I was expected to pay to do it.”

Caroline nodded, “We can stop at the truck stop... two miles ahead, I really need a pee and want to check up on Side Step, though she looks happy enough.”

Hal stayed with the horse box and checked the tyres and oil while Caroline went for a pee. She was quick, and he left her checking on the horses while he used the toilet and got a couple of coffees. Peggy Crossley had provided enough sandwiches for six people. Caroline thanked him for the coffee and held his till he was back on the A1M.

“So soldier boy, what did you do for holidays when you were in the army?” she asked as she handed him his coffee.

“Thanks,” he said, “Travel mostly, I promised myself that I would go somewhere new every year. In twenty two years I visited thirty one countries.”

“By yourself?” asked Caroline.

“Mostly on my own, but a few of times I went with a friend. Once, would you believe it, I went with a woman, more of a girl really, we were both nineteen.”

“A woman!” exclaimed Caroline, “Mazel tov! Tell me all about her!”

“Not much to tell, Kate was studying to be a pharmacist, we went to the Isle of Wight for two weeks then drove to Cornwall. I liked Cornwall a lot, especially Tintagel.”

“Details Hal! What did she look like? Did you spend most of your holiday sightseeing or having passionate sex?”

“Kate was beautiful, fair haired, green eyed, quite tall, slim, long legs... a really good dancer, and well... we did a lot of sightseeing and a fair bit lot of snogging I suppose.”

“Snogging? At nineteen? Don’t tell me you were still a virgin at nineteen!”

“What’s wrong with that? Kate didn’t want sex, I don’t know if she was a virgin or not... none of my business, but she was a great kisser.”

Caroline blew a raspberry at him, “Bollocks to that, how old were you when you first had sex?”

“Not nineteen is the only answer you are going to get,” said Hal.

“Oh come on, there’s nothing to be ashamed of. I was thirteen... there, so now you know.”

“Well I didn’t really want to know,” said Hal.

“So what happened with you and Kate?” asked Caroline, “How long did your relationship last?”

“A year, I suppose, perhaps a bit longer,” said Hal, “She wanted the house, kids and dog and... well it wasn't what I wanted.”

“Was it a bad break up?” asked Caroline.

“I don't really know, I felt like a shit but ...” he shrugged, “It is better to be honest.”

“So that was the last time you went on holiday with a woman?” asked Caroline, “Who were the other people you went on holiday with?”

“A friend of mine, Tony, we had been friends since we were ten. He was a Fireman. We got on really well. We went to Portugal, Greece and Lanzarote together.”

“What happened to him?” asked Caroline, “You look sad.”

“He got sick,” said Hal, “A brain tumour, I was in Germany when he found out. By the time I got time off to visit, he was dead.”

“I'm sorry, what was he like?”

“He liked horses, played polo as a youngster,” said Hal, “A real lady's man too, could charm his way into almost any woman's bed. Had a thing for older married women that got him into trouble more than once. Never figured out what they saw in him; he was an ugly bugger, scrawny too.”

“I'm sorry he died,” said Caroline.

“Me too, but he really made the most of the time he had,” Hal smiled, “I can't think about Tony without smiling; he was that kind of person. A force of nature.”

“We need more people like that,” said Caroline, “Some people seem to suck the life out of you - my last boyfriend was like that. I didn't

realise how awful he was till I got away from him. It's really hard to explain... on the outside he was perfect; good looks, good in the sack... ticked all the boxes, but I just couldn't be myself around him."

"That sounds awful," said Hal, "Well done for escaping."

"So what's your idea of fun? What do you like to do with your spare time?"

"At the moment, this is fun, I quite enjoy driving around the country delivering horses and listening to interesting women," said Hal, "I still like to travel, but I am not that interested in flying halfway across the world to stay in a tourist resort anymore. This is quite nice, but I might enjoy it less if it gets too repetitive."

"What else do you do? Any interesting hobbies? Do you play sport? you look quite fit for an older guy."

"Gee thanks," said Hal, smiling, "I walk a lot, swim whenever I can. I'm not a sports fan. Used to play the usual sports, rugby, cricket, boxing, athletics and all that stuff, but never enjoyed team sports, I did like cross country running but was never very good. I liked cross country skiing when I was in Germany, and wanted to do biathlon... it never happened."

"Biathlon is skiing and shooting, isn't it - are you a good shooter?"

Hal nodded, "Better than average, once upon a very long time ago. What about you? Are you as sporty as you look?"

Caroline laughed, "So I am interesting and sporty looking... things are looking up for me. I ride; dressage and show jumping. At school I liked gymnastics and hockey and did OK at both. I want to sail, but have to learn to swim, which is daft. I know Royal Navy sailors who can't swim, so why should I learn to swim before I can do dingy sailing lessons?"

"Swimming is easy, and really useful. I'm a qualified swimming teacher if you want lessons."

“Who did you teach?”

“All sorts, I was teaching long before I was qualified. I qualified and taught lifesaving when I was a teenager and then got my amateur swimming association teacher certificates while I was in the army. I’ve taught hundreds of people to swim.”

“It is easier for kids to learn,” said Caroline, “I’m terrified of water.”

“Well, you live on an island, and a really excellent teacher has offered to help you if you want to learn. Think about it and let me know. You can pay with coffee. One cappuccino per lesson.”

“Well thank you... if I take up Angela’s job offer, I’ll give you a try out.”

“Please do, swimming is a lot of fun and it’s free.”

“You’ve thrown me,” said Caroline, “I don’t know what to say now.”

“Sorry,” said Hal, “I didn’t mean to throw you, are you arty? Musical?”

“I played recorder in junior school,” said Caroline, “And I sketch... horses mostly, but I’m not very good, I just like doing it.”

“I wish I could play an instrument. I spent ages trying to play a guitar. I worked with a guy in the army who could pick up almost any musical instrument and play a tune on it. He had never been taught and couldn’t read music.”

“Yeah, some people can do that, but not me, I had to work hard at it, but I did OK. Maybe I should have a go at something like a saxophone; that would be cool.”

“You should,” said Hal, “What sort of music do you like?”

“Oh God....I suppose It is easier to say what I don't like... not sure about Heavy Metal, and some country and western stuff makes me want to commit suicide. What about you?”

“I'm not very up to date, but I like all sorts of jazz. I really like Bowie, Cat Steven's, Gordon Lightfoot, Queen...I could go on for ages but I forget names. I love Abba, Bread, a lot of Simon and Garfunkel, Queen....”

“So not classical and opera and all that posh stuff?”

“I don't know enough about classical to know what I like, but I have quite a lot of classical CD's, and there is some Opera I like. I watched a TV production of the Golden Flute in Germany that was really fantastic. Some Opera makes me nauseous.”

So what's your idea of a good night out?” asked Caroline.

“I guess a decent movie or a show,” said Hal.

“So not a night down the pub, drinking beer with your mates then?”

“I've had a few good nights out playing darts and doing pub quizzes,” said Hal, “But just going out to get drunk doesn't appeal. Perhaps when I am older and bitter about wasting the best years of my life.”

Caroline laughed, “It's better than spending the night watching the Telly and stuffing on crisps.”

“So what is your idea of a good night out?” asked Hal.

“I don't know really, it depends on my mood and options I suppose,” replied Caroline, “I like going out to the pub sometimes, especially with a group and having a laugh. Not so sure about night clubs, I like the idea, but every time I have gone out I ended up hating it, usually because somebody got drunk and nasty. I suppose a show might be fun and I quite like concerts. I like the idea of going out for a show or a movie and then having a nice meal. Any suggestions?”

“Do you mean you and me?” asked Hal.

“God you actually look shocked!” said Caroline, “Am I that ugly?”

“No, you definitely are not ugly,” said Hal hurriedly, “But you are nearly half my age!”

“You could pretend to be my Dad!” said Caroline laughing, “I always did like older men. Anyway, I thought I would ask, it might be fun and I promise to pay my own way.”

“You are serious?” asked Hal.

“Yeah, why not? It’s just a show and a meal, not a marriage proposal.”

“Why not indeed,” said Hal, “Can you search for what’s on in and around Chichester to see if there is anything that appeals?”

Caroline spent a few minutes on her phone.

“There’s a couple of shows that appeal to me, Midsummer Nights Dream at The Chichester Festival Theatre or The Rock Follies at the Minerva,” she said, “It’s twenty-five quid per person for the Rock Follies and forty-five for Midsummer Night’s Dream.”

“I get a fifteen percent discount at both places,” said Hal and I am happy with either, what about timings?”

“They both finish quite late...” said Caroline, “Probably too late for a decent meal anywhere.”

“What do you like to eat, or is it easier to ask what you don’t like?”

“I eat a lot, and I like just about anything,” said Caroline, “I don’t like those arty places that give you overly decorated tiny portions.”

Well, let me know if and when, and I’ll make the bookings,” said Hal.

“Forget about the If,” said Caroline with a happy laugh, “I’ve decided to take Mrs. Welsh up on her Job offer. What’s the best day for you?”

“One when I don’t have to do any long drives the next day, so probably Friday or Saturday night, but it is always best to check with Mrs. Welsh.”

“I haven’t had a date for ... months, almost a year I think! When was the last time you went out on a date?”

Hal shook his head, “Years... I really couldn’t say.”

“Oh come on... I mean, you must remember the last time you went out with someone?”

“Maybe I don’t want to remember?” said Hal with a smile, “Why don’t you tell me about your last date?”

Caroline pouted, then smiled, “Well OK, it was pretty good actually, and it will probably shock you. It was with the father of my last room mate at Liverpool. Her dad came to collect her stuff at the end of the semester; she was flying off to Cyprus I think. Anyway, I helped him to load her stuff into his car and he asked me out.” She shrugged, “I like older men and he was fun. He took me out to Jamie’s Italian, it is like one of the top restaurants in Liverpool, that was great. He made it clear that he wanted to get into my knickers, but he was nice about it, and that was pretty good too.” She laughed a little nervously, “Now it’s your turn - tell me about your last date?”

Hal blew out his cheeks, “Well, it wasn’t very exciting really, I can’t even remember her name, it was in London. I had gone for a resettlement course - the Army provides a lot of courses to retiring soldiers to help them to settle back into civilian life. She ... I remember her name now; Anne. Anyway, she was on the course as well and we got on quite well. We were both staying at the Union Jack Club at Waterloo, it’s an ex-services club. A bunch of us went to Leicester Square, Anne and I watched ‘Guardians of the Galaxy’, the others wanted to watch ‘Dead Pool’...long story short, we watched the film, then walked most of the way back to Waterloo and

spent that night and the next two nights together. Then the course ended and she went back to Newcastle; I went back to Chichester.”

“Well I hope it was good while it lasted, life is too short to waste such opportunities,” said Caroline, “Do you think I am a slut?”

“Why on earth would I think that?” asked Hal, startled.

“My mother says I am a slut,” she said, “She says I can’t wait to part my legs for every man I meet.”

“That’s not very nice of her,” said Hal.

“It’s probably true though, I do like sex,” said Caroline, “But if a man screws around he is a “real man” and a “stud”, while a girl who does the same is a whore and a slut.”

“Casual sex might be fun, but it has consequences, for men and for women,” said Hal.

“Does it embarrass you to talk about sex Hal?” asked Caroline.

“Yes it does... a bit anyway.”

“Why?”

“Well... it’s an intimate thing, a private thing,” said Hal.

“It’s just you and me, this is private.”

Hal nodded, “Yes... this is private, and it makes me feel uncomfortable. I don’t know you very well.”

“Well, I don’t know you very well, but I would like to and I think talking like this, about the things you like, and sex, which I also hope you like, and which I think I would like to have with you... I think that is a good way to get to know you.”

Hal nodded, "OK, that is very flattering... I am not sure why a good looking and much younger woman would like to have sex with an old fart like me. Are you teasing me?"

"My mum called me a cock tease and a flirt," said Caroline, "That was before her brother shagged me, then I was a slut and a whore."

"I'm sorry," said Hal, "That must have been very hurtful."

"Which part? The incest or the name calling?" asked Caroline laughing. Before Hal could think of a response she continued, "It's OK really. The truth is that the only thing that upset me is that she didn't call my uncle any names. He was married and all Mum cared about was making sure that I didn't ruin her little brother's marriage."

"What happened?" asked Hal, not knowing what else to say.

"Nothing much, I threatened to tell Aunt Valerie if my mother made a fuss, so she kept quiet and even helped me get on the pill so that I could carry on fucking her brother."

"And your Aunt Valerie never found out?" asked Hal.

"I think she suspected, especially after she caught him having sex with Bethany Wallace, one of the girls that used to help out at the stables after school. She was also thirteen."

"Oops!" said Hal, "What happened then?"

"She took off, threatened to involve the police unless he gave her a divorce and a lot of money, then moved to Ibiza.

"And how did you feel about your uncle having sex with Bethany Wallace?" asked Hal.

"Not very happy at all," said Caroline, "I never spoke to him again, or her. You don't have a girl friend or a wife and I don't have a boyfriend so there's no-one being hurt if we get together, I'm not jail-

bait any more, I am a consenting adult. And I don't have any S.T.I's."

"What... oh, yes. Well I don't have anything either... that I know of anyway," Hal felt his face burning.

"Sorry, I'm embarrassing you...I don't mean to," said Caroline, "Us horsey people are quite earthy you know...well, I suppose you know if you live with the Welshes. Megan is quite ... well, she has a reputation for bedding jockeys, male as well as female."

"I wouldn't have guessed," said Hal, "She has always been distant with me."

"Probably because you don't ride well enough, she likes jockeys that win races."

Hal laughed, "Well that definitely is not me."

"So... what else do you want to tell me about yourself?" asked Caroline, "You know about me and my Uncle Graham. Tell me something that you are ashamed of? Something you haven't told anybody else?"

Hal grimaced, "Why would I do that?"

"So that we are even," she replied, "I trusted you with my secret, you should reciprocate."

"Well, I crapped on someone's car seat once... deliberately," said Hal, "I'm not ashamed of it... he was an absolute arse."

Caroline burst out laughing, "Why did you do that?" she gasped when she drew breath.

"It was while I was driving around Cornwall with Kate," said Hal, "we were camping in Crantock Bay and using the local pub. I wasn't drinking at the time... never did like beer much and I had a gypsy tummy, so I asked for milk. He had a sign up on the bar advertising fresh milk... He was one of those medallion men, hairy chest, tight

trousers... the whole caboodle, and Kate was always having to fend him off. He started calling me Charlie Brown, which irritated the Hell out of me and on our last day there I had to rush to the loo, which was occupied, so I went outside to crap behind a tree and saw his RangeRover... the window was down and the leather seats were the same colour as my ... well, I just had to do it. I didn't tell Kate."

Caroline made a face, "Well, I'll be careful not to call you Charlie Brown or irritate you," she said, "That's really gross. And you seem such a well mannered person."

Hal shrugged, "You can't judge a book by its cover."

They stopped again for coffee and a toilet break. Caroline took a while to relieve Hal and apologised saying that there was only one working loo and a long queue.

They drove in silence for a while after they set off, traffic was quite heavy on the M25 and Caroline had to hold onto Hal's coffee.

"Do you have any gay friends?" she asked when they had driven for about half an hour.

"A few," said Hal, "Why do you ask?"

"What do you think about them? Gays and lesbians I mean?"

"I don't think about their sexuality," said Hal, "The army changed a bit while I was serving, but most gay soldiers didn't flaunt their sexuality because soldiers can be nasty."

"Were you ever... you know, propositioned by a gay man?"

Hal shook his head, "Not really, I met a guy I went to school with, who asked me if I was gay when we met up once in an airport transit lounge. He admitted to being gay and very promiscuous, and says he knew from the age of nine that he was gay. I don't think he was trying to include me in his shag list in a transit lounge..."

“Of course he was,” interjected Caroline, “Airport terminals are notorious for casual sex. There are websites where hackers sell cctv footage stolen from airport surveillance cameras showing all sorts of sex. It’s a big thing.”

Hal shrugged, “Well he didn’t seem to be trying it on. It would not have really bothered me if he did. I only knew one lesbian, or one woman who told me she was a lesbian, and she was really lovely. I didn’t know her well, she was a pentathlete, and was training at the Modern Pentathlon Centre which was next to the barracks I was in. We often met at the pool or while running on the road around the the barracks.”

“A lot of girls swing both ways,” said Caroline, “I prefer men. Older men. I wonder if I will prefer younger men when I get older?”

Maybe you will find the perfect mate and settle down with him?” suggested Hal, “It happens every day.”

“But it hasn’t happened for you?” said Caroline.

Hal nodded, then shrugged, “There was a girl... I think I was in love with her since I was nine. We got on well enough as children, but by the time she was sixteen, she was into older men. We were still friends and she often said she preferred to spend time with me when she was dating guys who had cars and money and could afford things like restaurant meals, and nightclubs. I never told her how I felt, but it killed me to see her going out with guys that I disliked, and it wasn’t just because I was jealous of them. They would talk about her when she wasn’t around, and to them, she was just a hot bit of meat. She went off to university when I joined the army and married a lawyer, they moved to Hawaii. I’m still in touch with her brother, we aren’t close friends but he sometimes visits when he comes to UK on business. Haven’t seen him since the Pandemic, but the last time he was here he told me she divorced the lawyer and moved in with a street artist, one of those guys who does portraits of people in popular tourist spots. Apparently the lawyer was abusive.”

“That’s awful. Have you tried to contact her?” asked Caroline.

Hal shook his head, “No... I’m not going to, but it does make me wonder about the values we have. When I was in my late teens and early twenties, most of the girls I liked preferred bad boys; the guys who lived fast and loose, the ones who burned the candle at both ends. They traded their bodies and good looks for excitement and then, when the bad boys drop them for younger models, they got all bitter and twisted about men.”

“There’s nothing wrong with wanting to make the most out of what you have,” said Caroline, “I know that I only have a few more years of being ‘desirable’, and I intend to make the most of it, even if it means trawling bars for randy losers. I don’t want to look back on my youth and complain about all the fun I missed out on because I wanted to save myself for the perfect man.”

Hal nodded, “That sounds like a healthy attitude,” he said, “As long as trawling bars for randy losers doesn’t lead to an HIV infection. ARV’s might extend your life expectancy, but HIV is not a picnic.”

He turned his head to look directly at Caroline, “I’ve met women far older than me who are still desirable and sexy, it is not just about being young you know.”

“So what makes a woman desirable?” asked Caroline?

Hal shrugged, “Initially it is looks I suppose; being attractive is about presentation, looks, appearance ... that sort of thing, but it isn’t just looks. Someone can look attractive at first glance, but quickly become unattractive on closer inspection, or when they open their mouths. I think it is quite complicated. I’ve also met women who don’t appear very attractive at first glance but who become really attractive when you get to know them. ... I suppose a lot depends on what one finds attractive in other people and one’s own needs and desires and...” he shrugged, “There are probably thousands of articles about it that explain things better.”

“Yeah, it’s interesting...I mean, I like older men, especially if they look strong and fit, I like hands that look as if they work, but some men look right until they open their mouths and talk. Sometimes just

looking at their teeth does that. I like nice teeth. I suppose because I like kissing.” She was quiet for a while then asked, “Have you ever fantasised about something really kinky and then done it?”

Hal glanced at her, “I’m not going to discuss my fantasies with you,” he said, “That is far too personal.”

“Oh come on... what’s wrong with talking about it? If you don’t talk about them, they might never come true!”

Hal nodded, “I can live with that, there’s probably a good reason why we call them fantasies...”

“How about having two women at the same time... most men fantasise about that?”

Hal shook his head, “I don’t. Perhaps when I was a virgin and my hormones were out of control, but I doubt it and definitely not now. Satisfying one woman takes everything I have got, two would kill me.”

Caroline laughed, “OK, so how about sharing a woman with another man?”

Hal nodded reluctantly, “OK! I will admit that it makes a good fantasy, but not something I can imagine being able to do... especially not with a woman I really fancy as I can’t imagine being able to share her.”

“That’s silly, I’d be happy to have two hunks working together to satisfy me... wow, just the thought,” she shook her head, “I mustn’t go there. So you aren’t into orgies then?”

Hal shook his head, “No... can’t perform to an audience. Been in those situations and...” he shook his head again, “It’s not my scene, not in reality.”

“What do you mean you’ve been in those situations...”

“Things happened in the army... take a group of fit guys away from home for long periods, cheap alcohol and ...”

“Gang bangs or orgies,” asked Caroline.

“Orgies mostly, but I’ve dealt with a few gang bangs in my time. It wasn’t fun.”

“What happened?”

Hal shrugged, “Mostly silly young girls who drank too much and didn’t realise what they were getting into.”

“Were they raped?” asked Caroline.

“It happens,” said Hal, “But not on my watches, not that I know of, but I prevented two during my time in the army.”

“There was an incident at the Danegeld Stud about a rape just when I started with the Crossleys,” said Caroline, “Four local lads were accused of raping a groom. Justine, one of the grooms at the Crossleys said the girl was always taking blokes back to the stables and probably asked for it.”

“I need to refuel soon,” said Hal, “Can you look on Google for a diesel stop?”

Ten minutes later they had another stop, Caroline got them coffees. Hal felt uncomfortable about the conversation they had just had. He wasn’t used to such frank talk about sex, especially not with a young stranger. Caroline had asked him to fill the horses hay nets and he concentrated on that. The foal looked quite happy but the mare was looking tired to him, and wasn’t interested in the hay. He stroked her neck and spoke soothingly to her. She didn’t seem to mind.

Caroline climbed in next to him and handed him a coffee, she stood close and leaned into the back compartment to stroke the foal.

“It’s not much further,” she murmured, “Less than an hour I reckon.” She pressed her hip against Hal’s as she reached across to stroke the mare’s neck. The mare raised her head and snickered.

“She likes you,” said Caroline, “She’s a lovely mare and such a good jumper.”

Hal relaxed and decided to enjoy the bodily contact. He sipped at his coffee and let his mind wander, half listening as Caroline stroked the mare’s neck and laughed as the mare tried to take her coffee cup.

“None of that,” said Caroline. “Come on Hal, let’s get moving.”

Hal nodded and drained his cup, he turned towards the door as Caroline ducked under his arm, reached up and kissed him on the lips. Hal felt her tongue slip between his lips, tasting of coffee. Caroline pressed against him, and he felt himself responding just as she pulled back. She smiled, “I wanted to do that,” she said, “You’ll do nicely Hal Johns.” She put a hand on his chest as she turned and then she jumped down onto the tarmac. Hal felt his heart hammering as he followed, his head swirling with conflicting thoughts. He had enjoyed the brief kiss and the feel of her slim muscular body against his. The mare seemed to nod her head as he carefully closed the door and ensured it was properly secured.

Caroline was busily engaged with her phone when he climbed in and started the engine.

“There’s heavy traffic between Waterlooville and Havant,” she said, we should turn off at Horndean.” She tapped away at her phone, “Yes, an accident has slowed traffic southbound on the A3 before Havant.”

“Thanks,” said Hal, “I prefer the B2148 anyway.”

“Are you cross with me for ambushing you?” asked Caroline, “I didn’t plan it.”

Hal shrugged, "I'm not complaining," he said, "You are... unusual Caroline."

Caroline laughed, "Pushy you mean, I'm not going to apologise."

Hal didn't answer and for a while they drove in silence. Caroline didn't speak again till after they had turned off onto the B2148.

"Do you find me attractive at all Hal?" she asked. She sounded subdued.

Hal glanced at her; she was staring ahead and looked serious.

"Yes, you are very attractive," he said, "I'm just not used to women coming on to me. The only time that has happened before, it was a a colleague, who wanted me to beat the crap out of a married man who had dumped her for another woman."

"Did you?" asked Caroline, "Beat up the guy I mean?"

Hal shook his head, "No. It didn't work out the way she planned it, but he got his comeuppance and she is married with a kid."

There was another quite long silence that lasted all the way to Funtington. Hal pointed out the Fox and Hounds and said it was a pretty good pub and an easy walk from Welsh's Yard.

"We'll just so you know Hal, I don't have any ulterior motives," said Caroline, "You are a nice and good looking man. I fancy you. It's that simple, and if you are willing to take a chance on me, I think you will find that I am quite nice too."

"I am just a bit slow and rusty. I think I always was slow when it comes to women. How about we take a walk to the Fox and Hounds after you have settled in?"

Caroline smiled, "I'd like that."

Caroline was ready to go before Hal had finished cleaning out the trailer.

“I’m not going to help; this is my last change of clean clothes and Angela says the washing machine is broken,” she said and climbed up to sit on the top rail of the fence.

“Almost done,” said Hal, “But I need to shower and change... sorry.”

“I’m not in a hurry,” said Caroline, “Angela seems nice enough.”

“I like her,” said Hal, lifting the ramp and bolting it in place, “There... I’m done here. Do you want to come up while I shower?”

Carline hopped down from the fence and jumped over a muddy patch. She followed him up the stairs to his loft.

“This is nicer than the bunk house the grooms use,” she told him.

“It’s perfect,” agreed Hal, “Make yourself comfortable, I’ll be quick.”

“You don’t have a Telly?”

“Sorry about that,” said Hal, “There’s a radio on the windowsill if you want to listen to that?” He fetched a change of clothes and went into the shower. He desperately wanted to use the loo, but couldn’t bring himself to do so with Caroline of the other side of the flimsy door.

Ten minutes later he was dressed and brushing his teeth. Caroline had her feet tucked under herself and was flipping through one of Hal’s photograph albums.

She looked up and smiled, “Feeling better?” she asked, “I hope you don’t mind?” She indicated the photo album, “Is this Africa?” She tapped on a page at the front of the album showing a group of black people standing together on a lawn with a thatched building behind them.

“Yes, that was my grandfather’s farm in Rhodesia,” said Hal, “Come on, I’m starving.”

Caroline wanted to know all about his grandfather and asked question after question as they walked to the Fox and Hounds.

“You sound very English for someone who only came here when he was eighteen,” said Caroline, taking his hand as they waited to cross the road to the pub.

Hal shrugged, “Is that a good or a bad thing?” he asked.

“Just interesting,” said Caroline, “Would you go back?”

Hal shook his head, “No, I never want to go there again.” He kept hold of her hand after they had crossed the road, and only let go to open the door to the pub.

It was busy and they had to wait for a table, they stood at the bar.

“How often do you come here?” asked Caroline, “Everyone seems to know you?”

“Once or twice a week,” said Hal, “I sometimes work behind the bar here. They are a nice crowd mostly.”

“I’m picking up some weird vibes here,” said Caroline, “You don’t have any girlfriends here do you?”

“Not that I know of,” replied Hal.

A table freed up shortly after they got their drinks and they threaded their way to the table.

“Aren’t there any pubs in West Ashling?”

“One in the village and one on the other side of the road just after the turn off. The Horse and Groom. It’s closer to the village than this, but a lousy walk. They do a pub quiz on Wednesday nights, and they have darts competitions too.”

Caroline had lasagna and a large glass of red wine to go with it. Hal opted for their Caesar salad. He was impressed with Caroline’s

appetite and told her some of the history of the pub while they ate and pointed out some of the characters he had got to know. Afterwards they both had the pecan pie and Irish coffee.

“I really like this pub!” said Caroline after licking the cream off her lip with the tip of her tongue, “I’d like it more if they had a dance floor. Do you like karaoke?”

Hal grimaced and shook his head, “God no... they do Karaoke at the Horse and Groom on Friday and Saturday nights... another good reason to avoid the place.”

“I like karaoke,” said Caroline, “I can do most of the Abba numbers, and they are quite tricky. You like Abba don’t you?”

Hal assured her that he did, and asked her if she knew the lyrics to Juice Newton’s Angel of the Morning.

“Oh God I love that song, I haven’t heard it for ages,” said Caroline. They talked song lyrics for a while and Caroline had two more Irish Coffees, then finished Hal’s cider, which he had only drunk a third of.

“I think I’m a little tipsy,” said Caroline giggling, as she ran a finger round the inside of the Irish coffee glass and then licked the cream she had collected off her finger, “Are you the type of man to take advantage of that?”

“Probably,” said Hal.

“Are you going to have something for the road?” she asked, “I’ll have the same as what you have.”

Caroline followed Hal’s example, and downed the rum in one long gulp, then made a face, “I think I prefer it with coke,” she said.

“It’s too cold out for coke,” said Hal, “Come on let’s get back.”

“Are you going to seduce me now?” asked Caroline, taking his arm and leaning against him, “Vicki and the other girl are in the bunk house... we can't go there.”

“Rihanna...” said Hal, “Let's worry about them later, take my hand while we cross the road.”

“I feel safe with you,” said Caroline, giggling, “Aren't you going to kiss me?”

“When we are on the other side of the road, we can kiss,” said Hal, patiently steering Caroline across the road. She giggled some more.

“OK, now kiss me Hal Johns,” she demanded and almost fell over as she turned to face him. Hal kissed her on the cheek and she pouted, “More kissing...” He kissed her again and felt her tongue sliding into his mouth. Hal relaxed and enjoyed the kiss. Caroline slid a hand down and caressed his crotch.

“I'm looking forward to meeting the rest of you,” murmured Caroline when she stopped kissing him.

“Let's walk a bit,” said Hal.

“Don't you want to touch me?” asked Caroline, pressing against him.

“I do,” said Hal, taking her hand, “Just not on the side of the road... come on,” He tugged her hand towards the bridle path then put an arm around her to support her as she laughed and slid a hand up the back of his shirt and stroked his back.

After a few steps Caroline wanted to be kissed again, she pressed Hal's right hand to her breast, he could feel her nipple hard beneath the fabric.

“I'm so ready for you, Hal,” she murmured before kissing him, “I really need you to fuck me.” She palmed his crotch while they

kissed and tried to get a hand into Hal's trousers but he stopped her.

"What's the matter Hal?" she protested, slurring her words, "I just want to feel you."

"Not here, not like this," said Hal, "Keep walking, we can't make love here."

"I don't want to make love, I want to fuck Hal Johns," said Caroline, "I need to fuck him right here."

"Keep walking, it's not far," urged Hal, "Come on, put your arm around my waist, let me help you."

"I'm really drunk," said Caroline. She giggled, "And I am going to be the first to fuck Hal Johns."

Hal sighed and looped his thumb through one of the belt loops of her jeans. She was heavier than she looked.

Caroline started singing Angel of the Morning as they walked. At the crossroads she said she needed to pee. The moon had come up and the silvery light was shining through the trees. Hal had to hold her steady as she slid down her jeans and knickers, then squatted on the side of the road.

"I might fart..." said Caroline, then giggled.

"Don't worry about it," said Hal.

"I'm very drunk and you are being really nice," said Caroline, "Why are you being so nice to me?"

"Because you are very drunk," said Hal, "Come on, up you get."

"You can touch me now, feel how wet I am for you," said Caroline.

“No thanks. You are wet from peeing,” said Hal, he tugged up her knickers awkwardly, and then her jeans. Then struggled to button them as he tried to keep Caroline upright.

“It’s OK, I really don’t mind,” said Caroline, “I think I want to lie down here.”

Hal sighed and hoisted Caroline over his shoulder in a fireman’s lift. For a while, Caroline sang bits of Angel of the Morning, interspersed with random ramblings. By the time they reached Welsh’s Yard Caroline was asleep. Hal carried her to the bunk room. Rihanna was up and fully dressed. She looked at Hal curiously when he asked her to help him put Caroline to bed.

“She is OK...yes?” asked Rihanna

“Yes, she is OK,” said Hal, “Drunk - too much alcohol.” He mimed drinking from a glass.

Rihanna’s eyebrows went up, “Alcohol very bad,” she said and shook her head.

Hal held Caroline upright while Rihanna removed her coat, then laid her on a bed and removed her boots. He asked Rihanna to keep an eye on Caroline while he put her into the three quarter prone position.

Rihanna frowned and nodded her head but didn’t say anything as Hal took his leave and set off for his apartment.

There was a note on the counter next to the fridge, “Please call police sergeant Hensman. She wants to talk to you about the incident in London. A.W.” There was a mobile phone number.

Hal groaned and took out his phone. It was dead. He plugged it into charge and then had a shower, before going to bed.

Hal was awake before six. He got up and took two paracetamol, then set off for a walk, heading for Bosham. By the time he reached the old Norman Church he felt a lot better. The tide was out. He

watched a gull preen itself for a while, then turned and headed back the way he had come, taking his time and hoping The Crate would be open when he got there. He had coffee and an omelette then bought a paper from the CoOp shop and walked back to West Ashling. Mrs. Welsh was at the gate talking to one of the villagers, an older woman with a Jack Russel. Hal greeted them both and went up to his apartment for a shower. Mrs. Welsh knocked on the door while he was getting dressed.

“You don’t look too bad, considering,” she told him evenly, “Can’t say the same for Caroline, she looks like hell this morning.”

“She’s young and tough,” said Hal, “She’ll be fine.”

“It’s the Sweepstake isn’t it?” said Mrs. Welsh, “You would do us all a favour if you just ... you know, caved in. God knows they are all old enough.”

“Sorry, I prefer my lovers conscious,” said Hal, “It’s tiresome Mrs. Welsh.”

Mrs. Welsh nodded, “You are a strange one, Hal, but a good man. Did you call that police woman? She seemed very keen to speak to you?”

Hal shook his head, “No, my phone was dead and I was tired. Do you know what exactly she wanted to talk about?”

Mrs. Welsh held her hands apart, palms up, “She just said you were involved in an incident on the fourteenth of April and that the police wanted to talk to you about it. That’s when you got stabbed, after the job interview in London, wasn’t it?”

Hal nodded, “Why now, I wonder?” he asked, then shrugged, “Is there anything you want me to do today?”

“No... Megan’s back, at least for a week, so...”

“That’s great news,” said Hal, “I’d like to go back to London for a few days, just message me if you need me for anything?”

Shortly after Mrs. Welsh had gone, Caroline knocked on his door and called out, “May I come in Hal?”

She looked rough, “I owe you an apology, and some money,” she said looking him in the eye, “For what is worth, I do fancy you, but I would have tried for the prize anyway...sorry.” She held out a fifty pound note, “Is this enough?”

Hal smiled, “It was fun, you were good company.” He took the money and tucked it into his back pocket.

“Still mates?” asked Caroline, she looked at the backpack Hal been packing, “Are you going somewhere?”

“Megan is back; I’m not needed - at least for now. I need to find myself some work,” said Hal.

“You are moving out?” Caroline looked shocked.

Hal shook his head, “No, just going away for a day or two.”

Caroline looked as if she wanted to say something, then thought better of it, “I’d better get to work,” she said, “Sorry about ...sorry.”

“Don’t sweat it,” said Hal, “We had fun for a while.”

Caroline nodded, turned and opened the door. She didn’t look back as she closed it and went down the stairs.

British transport police

Hal messaged the number Angela had given him for the police sergeant, saying he was on a train to London and would be at Waterloo station at 12:45. A few minutes later his phone rang. Hal frowned, he hated talking on the phone in public. He refused the call and sent another message saying he didn’t want to talk on a crowded train.

Sergeant Hensman messaged him back, asking him to message when he was free to talk.

Minutes later Hal was listening to Al Stewart on his earbuds and reading through the last chapter he had written on his iPad mini. By the time he got to Waterloo Station he was in the zone and enjoying writing. He walked to the Union Jack Club and used the fifty pound note to pay for his room. He messaged Sergeant Hensman and unpacked his backpack. The phone rang before he had finished.

“Mr. John’s?” a female voice, “Can you hear me Mr. Johns? This is detective sergeant Hensman, Transport Police.”

“I can hear you, how can I help you?” asked Hal.

“Can you come to Liverpool Street Station and look at some photos?” asked Sergeant Hensman.

“I can, but why would I want to?” asked Hal, “What is this all about?”

“I would rather discuss this with you face to face Mr. Johns, but it is connected with the incident you were involved in on the fourteenth of April this year.”

“Alright, where are you in Liverpool Street Station?”

“Platform 10 - when do you expect to be here?” asked Sergeant Hensman.

“I am five minutes walk from Waterloo station now - you probably know better than me how long it will take to get to Liverpool Street Station from here.”

“Less than half an hour at this time of day,” said the Sergeant, “I’ll be here till four PM.”

“I really hope that I won’t,” said Hal, “I’ll see you soon.” He terminated the call, checked his pockets and then locked his room and headed for the station.

Twenty five minutes later he was being offered an uncomfortable chair by a blonde, petite, but very tough looking Sergeant Hensman.

“Thank you Mr. Johns,” she said, “I’ll not waste your time with excuses - the officers that responded to your incident screwed up. They have been reprimanded. We want you to have a look at some photos and let me know if you recognise any of the people in them?”

“OK, did you manage to get any CCTV footage? I’m told London is one of the most heavily surveilled cities in the world.”

“Just take your time looking at the photos, and let me know if any of them ring a bell?” said the Sergeant.

Hal nodded and flipped through the photos. he laid two aside and then flipped through the stack again. He shook his head, “Just these two,” he said, “They are the same man, the one with a knife and whose face I connected with.”

The sergeant seemed to be suppressing a smile, “It’s called a head butt for a reason Mr. Johns, you aren’t supposed to use your face as a weapon.”

“Angles were wrong and I knew I only had one shot before the knife reached me,” said Hal, “At least he didn’t kill me.”

“There’s that,” said the Sergeant, “You are certain that these two photos are that same man?”

Hal nodded and tapped one of the photos, “Pretty certain, especially this one. If it isn’t him, it is his twin or a close relative.”

The Sergeant nodded and handed him a pen, “Please write below each photograph that you recognise the photo as the man you attacked on 14 April outside Jason’s corner cafe.”

“Attacked?... Well I suppose I did attack him, but he and another man were attacking a woman,” said Hal, “I’m not the bad guy here.”

Sergeant Hensman nodded, “You are not being charged with an offence Mr. Johns,” she said, “It wasn’t exactly self defence, you did attack the two men.”

“I am not being charged?” asked Hal, “I’d prefer to write that I recognise the man who I tackled when I saw him assaulting a woman...”

“Use your own words Mr. Johns, everything is being recorded anyway,” the Sergeant interrupted him.

She waited patiently while Hal wrote on both photos and signed. She read each one and put them in an envelope, then gathered all the papers before addressing him, “Thank you, now I have something really unpleasant to show you, it will take forty five minutes and then you can go about your business.”

Hal frowned, “Something unpleasant?” he asked, “How unpleasant...I am not sure I understand.”

The sergeant nodded and held the door open for him, “We are going to look at a body... to the left, after you.”

They took the tube to a morgue, Sergeant Hensman made polite conversation asking him what he was doing in London and then telling him about some of the silly incidents she had dealt with over the coronation.

Hal had seen dead bodies before, and wasn’t phased at being in a morgue, but he felt bad when the morgue assistant pulled open the drawer and then uncovered the the dead woman, her face was unrecognisable. Her hands and feet had also been pulverised. He shook his head when sergeant Hensman asked him if he was alright.

“Not really,” he said, “I don’t recognise this person, I don’t think her own mother would recognise her. Why did you bring me here?”

“This is Katya Persky,” said the sergeant, “The woman you tried to save. She has been dead for at least two weeks... they found her.”

“You know it was her?” asked Hal, he walked away and tried to open the morgue door, but it was locked. The assistant used his card to unlock the door and Hal hauled it open. He strode ahead of the Sergeant, determined to get outside and expunge the sights and smells he had just experienced.

“Slow down Mr. Johns,” said the Sergeant.

“We are done, I think,” said Hal, “Unless you want to charge me with something. That was gross.”

“Those men are still at large Mr. Johns, and you have identified one of them, you put them both in hospital and you are a danger to them and their Operation. We need to talk, Mr. Johns.”

“I am going to get a coffee...if you want to talk, keep up and tell me where the nearest place is where I can get real coffee.”

It was a Lebanese restaurant. Sergeant Hensman led him to a table at the back.

“I’m sorry Mr. Johns,” she said again as she sat, “I wanted to shock you, and perhaps that was unnecessary, but you may be in danger, you need to take this seriously.”

Hal nodded, “You managed to shock me. I take it you know who these men are?”

“We do... but they are slippery bastards and we don’t know where they are. They are traffickers and worse. They are well connected and ... well they are violent.”

“You seem surprised by that,” said Hal, “I knew they were violent weeks ago, ever since the fourteenth of April. Would you like to see the scars?”

“Off the record, Mr. Johns,” she lowered her voice, “They probably have some police officers in their pockets. The two that interviewed you...” she shook her head, “Look, I’m just trying to warn you; I’ve been trying to nail this gang for a while. I was furious when I only learned they had been banged up and hospitalised after they had been discharged. The coppers that interviewed them didn’t file the report till the twenty second of April.”

“So what happens next?” asked Hal, “Do I have to do anything?”

Sergeant Hensman shook her head, “For now, nothing, but please do be careful? If they have, as I suspect, friends inside the force, they might come after you - not just because you hurt them, but because you are a witness.” She fiddled with her cup, “If we make an arrest you will be called as a witness.”

“Wonderful,” muttered Hal, “Well, if that’s all Sergeant, I am going to be on my way.” He fetched out his wallet.

“The coffee is on me Mr. Johns,” she said, smiling, “By way of apology for springing Katya Persky’s cadaver on you like that.” She held out a business card. “Please call me if you suspect anyone is following you?”

“Will do,” said Hal, “Thanks for the coffee.” He got to his feet and dug out his phone to check the time.

“Where are you headed?” asked the Sergeant as she signalled the waiter for the bill.

“Probably Leicester Square for movie,” said Hal, “Any recommendations?”

“Everything, Everywhere, All at once,” she said immediately and had to repeat it twice before Hal took it in. She assured him that it was good but warned him that he would probably have to watch it again to take it all in.

Hal thoroughly enjoyed the film, and thought he would watch it again the next day. It was raining lightly when he left the cinema,

but he made his way by foot back to the Union Jack Club. He lay in bed thinking about the woman, Katya Persky and how terrified she must have been. He slept well and woke late.

Hal spent the morning trawling the internet and applying for project planning jobs. He was surprised to get a swift response from Jackdaw Contracting based in Reading and an interview the following morning. He spent an hour reading about them and working out how to get to their office on Howard Street. He hadn't been to Reading for twenty something years, but relaxed when he saw that Jackdaw's office was near the Hexagon.

Hal contemplated going back to Leicester Square, but ended up eating at the Union Jack Club and writing till almost midnight. He slept fitfully, and woke halfway through an erotic dream involving Caroline. He skipped breakfast and checked out at five thirty. By eight he was in Reading station hunting for a locker to secure his back pack in.

Reading had changed a great deal since his early army days. He had a very nice cappuccino and croissant in a fancy coffee bar and was kicking his heels in the Hexagon with an hour to kill before his interview.

In the end he was very nearly late for the interview having lost track of time while writing on his iPad.

The office manager at Jackdaw Contractors welcomed him with a smile and took him through to the conference room and offered him a choice of refreshments. Hal asked for a large glass of water.

The personnel manager and operations manager arrived together before the water. They apologised for being late and said that the contract manager would not be able to join them.

Mike Wright, the operations manager, was a bald, stocky man who exuded energy. Helen Goody, the personnel manager was a stick thin woman in her late fifties or sixties who seemed strangely familiar. It took a while for Hal to realise it was her accent. She sounded like a Rhodesian.

“Well... thanks for being here at such short notice Hal... May I call you Hal?” asked Mike, “I had a look at your profile on the way here this morning. On paper you have got what we want. What makes you want to work for us?”

“Thank you,” said Hal, “Hal is fine. Um... well I guess I want a job... I had never heard of you till yesterday, I found your advert online and applied...” he spread his hands, “I looked up your company last night and you seem like a good fit. The sort of projects I would enjoy doing.”

“I take it that you are currently unemployed Mr. Johns?” said Helen Goody, “Does that mean you are able to start work immediately?”

Hal nodded, “Technically I am retired, but I have been delivering horses for a few weeks, helping out my Landlady. I can start now if you like?”

Helen Goody nodded, “Aren’t you a bit young to be retired?”

“Helen has been on leave and only returned today,” explained Mike before Hal could answer, “I asked her to join us when I found out that Jake... the contracts manager, was not able to make it. You spoke with him yesterday.” He looked at Helen and slid some papers across to her, “Hal is ex army, did twenty two years in the Royal Engineers.” He patted the papers, “His CV.”

Helen murmured her thanks and started reading the papers.

“So Hal, just a few questions, I didn’t take everything in... Sorry, we aren’t as prepared as I would like to be... are you able to travel? We have projects all over the UK. We don’t do much in Europe since Brexit.”

“Yes, no ties, I am happy to travel. I can drive anything, but I don’t have a car. A motorbike in storage but I only really use it in the summer.”

“That’s good... what about computer skills... how current are you? We do most of our meetings on Zoom, and we use Microsoft Outlook and Project.”

“I’m not a super geek, but I am OK with Zoom, Outlook and Project, though I prefer to use MicroPlanner XPert for Projects. I’m happy to demonstrate my IT skills if you like?”

“That will not be necessary, Mr. Johns,” said Helen Goody, “If you are engaged, you will be on probation.” She seemed to have finished reading his CV. She was a fast reader.

“That’s fine,” said Hal, “Please call me Hal?”

“I prefer Mr. Johns, you may call me Ms. Goody,” said Helen Goody, her face stern, “Jackdaw Contractors are a for profit business, we have deadlines and penalty clauses in our contracts. Your CV says you are a project manager, but this is a project planning position; will you be able to work as a planner, under a project manager?”

Mike Wright made to speak, but Helen Goody cut him off with a gesture, “I would like Mr. Johns to answer.”

“I managed a construction Squadron in the Royal Engineers, Ms. Goody, we constructed schools and clinics in war zones. We had dead lines, budgets and penalty clauses too,” Hal smiled, “I want to work, and project managers in the military are still answerable to their superiors. I think I would prefer planning work now, it should be less stressful than project management.”

“You are on a full Military Pension?” asked Helen Goody, “I presume that means that you do not have to work full time?”

Hal nodded, “No, I don’t but I am forty and I enjoy being usefully engaged. I like construction project planning.” He shrugged, “And I like money, so please don’t think I will come cheap. I earned my pension the hard way and have no intention of using it to subsidise a position in a for-profit company.”

Helen Goody smiled, “Ah yes, compensation. We have industry standard rates Mr. Johns, and I think you will not have any complaints in that regard. There are early completion bonuses for all projects, that’s where the real money is.”

She picked the up the papers that Mike Wright had given her, “I think I have enough to work on for now,” she turned to Mike Wight, “I will need about twenty minutes?” She rose to her feet and nodded at Hal before leaving the room.

“Well you survived that,” said Mike with a grin, “We are in a pickle Hal, we need a project planner pronto for a project in Essex, the planner we had is in hospital, and ... well, the planning seems to be an absolute mess, it is a salvage job. You aren’t likely to earn any early completion bonuses, in fact,” he glanced at the CCTV camera, “He... Ms. Goody will probably bust my balls for telling you this, but we will probably be grateful if we manage to stay in the black on this job. How soon can you start?”

Hal mimed looking at an imaginary watch, “Five minutes soon enough?” He smiled.

Mike nodded and extended a hand, “You’ve got my vote, and I think you convinced He...Ms. Goody,” he said, “Do you want a coffee while we wait for your contract?”

Hal followed Mike into a small kitchen off the reception, Mike introduced him to the office manager, Shirley, and then made coffee, using a neat looking espresso bar.

Helen Goody found them and handed Hal a sheaf of papers.

“Please read everything, and sign and return one copy of the offer and contract if you are willing to accept the position?” she asked, then turned to Mike and asked him to come to her office. Mike winked at Hal as he left.

Hal sat at the counter and went through the contract and the offer. The money was better than he expected but not by much. There

was nothing controversial. He signed everything and asked Shirley if he should deliver it to Ms. Goody or leave it with her.

“I’ll upload them to the server now,” said Shirley, “Welcome aboard Hal. Do you have your driving licence and National Insurance number?”

Hal handed her his driving licence and then used his phone to send her a digital copy of his P45 and his military service record.

Hal was studying the espresso bar when Helen Goody came into the small kitchen. She handed him an envelope, “Welcome to Jackdaw Construction Hal,” she said with a smile, “Mike is getting copies of the project documents, and it will take a few days for your credit card to be ready, Shirley can give you some cash for expenses.”

“I can use my own card for now,” said Hal, “Thank you very much Ms. Goody.”

“Please call me Helen,” said Ms. Goody, “I believe that Mike explained that things are dire at the Kings Lane site, do you have any events, holidays or unavoidable engagements planned in the next eight months that we need to be aware of?”

Hal shook his head then remembered, “Just one thing... I may be called to give evidence in a criminal case,” he said, “The police are looking for a man in connection with an incident ...I am what I think they call a material witness.”

Helen frowned, “Oh dear, that could be a problem. What is the likelihood of an arrest?”

Hal shrugged, “I honestly don’t know, the police have been less than impressive so far.”

“Are you allowed to tell me what happened?”

Hal nodded, “I don’t see why not,” he said, “In April I saw two men attack a woman in London. I intervened and ended up in hospital

with both men, the woman escaped. The police didn't take much interest at the time, the men were discharged from hospital before the police even spoke to me and a few weeks ago the woman was beaten to death. I positively identified one of the men, who the police say is a trafficker. They are looking for him."

"You were injured?" asked Helen.

Hal nodded.

"Why..." Helen shook her head in disgust, "The police are really not what they used to be. Well, thank you for telling me Hal. It is something we will just have to deal with if and when it happens."

Hal spent two hours with Mike going through the project documents. Shirley gave him a laptop and showed him how to access the project plans. Hal declined lunch, saying he would rather get himself to Colchester and eat once he was settled in.

Shirley had a train ticket for him and told him that she had arranged for a lease hire car to be brought to the site. She gave him the number of a private taxi in Braintree, saying that they had account with Gary who would collect Hal from the station and drive him around till the lease car arrived. She also gave him a printout with faces and names and contact details of the key staff at the site they were calling Kings Lane Project or KLP.

Hal collected his backpack from the station locker and set off for Colchester. Two hours and two changes later he was waiting for Gary outside the station.

Gary smiled widely as he drove up, "Hal Johns?" he asked, "Don't look so worried, I am a great driver."

"Hi Gary," said Hal, "May I ride up front? I get car sick in the back of cars."

Gary grinned and nodded as he cleared up the front seat, "Sorry, I was having fish and chips when you called," he said apologetically.

“Smells really good, could we stop wherever you got them on the way to Braintree?” asked Hal.

Gary chatted away cheerfully as he drove. Hal had not had any contact with Downes Syndrome people before, and was surprised at how comfortable he felt with Gary.

The tiny fish and chip shop was a delight, spotlessly clean and run by a Chinese looking man who chatted comfortably with Gary while he wrapped Hal's order.

Gary drove him into what looked like an upmarket trailer park outside Braintree and parked outside a trailer. He fetched a keycard from his top pocket with a flourish, “Shirley asked me to make sure everything was ready for you,” he said, “What time do you want me to collect you tomorrow? The site workers start at seven forty five. It's a five minute drive there.”

“Thanks Gary. Is seven OK?” asked Hal.

Gary nodded and gave him a thumbs up, “I'll get your bag, you should eat your food before it gets cold.”

The trailer was surprisingly spacious and well furnished. Gary hoisted Hal's backpack in through the door then grinned and said goodbye.

It took a while for Hal to realise that someone had even made and turned the bed down, and put a KitKat on the pillow. There was a newspaper on the kitchen counter and the fridge was stocked with milk, eggs, cheese, butter and tomatoes and a half loaf of sliced whole wheat bread. There was a box of Tesco Muesli on the counter and a bowl with an apple, banana and an orange and a card, which simply said ‘Welcome to Braintree Hal’ with a smiley face below it. On the other side of the card was printed “Gary Oldman, Taxi & Deliveries” with a cellphone number.

Hal unpacked his backpack and explored the caravan. He had always thought trailer parks looked pretty dismal but this trailer seemed pretty luxurious to him.

The fish and chips were great, but Hal had all sorts of trouble working out where to get rid of the paper. He eventually found a row of bins in the parking lot and put the papers in one marked “compostables”.

There was a folder in the bedside side drawer with a list of do's & don'ts and information about the trailer as well as the trailer park.

Hal hooked up to the WiFi and made sure his laptop was plugged in to charge, before pouring himself some milk and settling down on the comfortable settee with his iPad mini.

The shower was pretty impressive, but Hal discovered that he hadn't closed the door properly and had to spend twenty minutes mopping up water with the soaked floor mat.

He slept well and was waiting on the road for Gary before seven. He knew he could probably walk to site but decided to go with the flow for a day or two, he also wanted to thank Gary for the personal touches in his trailer.

Gary seemed genuinely pleased when Hal thanked him for all the effort he had gone to.

Hal said he would call when he knew when he was going to finish on site and asked if Gary would take him to Tesco. Gary grinned and gave his trademark thumbs up.

The site looked a shambles to Hal. He made his way to the project office. It was locked. A man Hal recognised as the site foreman came over and introduced himself.

“Bob,” he said around the match in his teeth, “There's three of us on site, Bobby, the QS is a girl but doesn't like being called Bobby to her face, Bob Young is the site electrician. Office is locked and George has the key. Fuck knows when he will be in.” He nodded and pointed “There's strong tea and weak coffee in the canteen.”

“Anybody else got a key?” asked Hal, “I’m allergic to tea and can’t abide instant coffee.”

Bob laughed, “Fucking Hell, someone who actually wants to work,” he seemed pleased, “Welcome aboard Hal.” He squinted at the clock on the outside of the site office portacabin, “Tell you what, why don’t I show you around the site and if George isn’t here by the time we are back, I’ll drill the lock and fit a new one for you?”

It was an ambitious project and there was nothing wrong with the build quality, but the site was disorganised in Hal’s opinion. He kept his opinion to himself, but sensed Bob’s frustration. It was almost ten AM when they got back to the site office.

George Walker looked very different from his picture on the list Hal had got from Shirley. He had put on a lot of weight and looked ready for a heart attack.

He greeted Hal pleasantly enough and ignored Bob’s comments about being late.

Hal listened while Bob updated George on the day’s issues and waited for Bob to leave the site office before asking George if he had any instructions for him.

George shook his head, “Not really ... Hal, is it? Martha, the last project planner, was a pain in the arse and a total waste of time, if you ask me... didn’t need her and... please don’t take this personally, I don’t need you. I’ve been in Construction since... Well, long enough.”

“Wow!” said Hal, trying to keep a straight face, “OK, so you have made it clear that you don’t need me, but I am here, so how are we going to do this?”

George waved a hand dismissively, “You do your thing, play with your computer and make your charts - Helen Goody loves all that crap, now if you’ll excuse me, I have some calls to make?”

Hal nodded and kept his mouth shut. He set off in search of Bobby Fisk, the site Quantity Surveyor. He found her swearing vociferously. She looked up as he approached, "Who the hell are you?" she asked, "If you are from AspenCrete..."

Hal held up his hands in surrender, "Don't shoot... I am Hal, the new project planner." He held out a hand.

Bobby Fisk looked surprised, "Roberta - you can call me Bob," she said, "You don't look like a planner."

Hal smiled, "OK, I'll bite, what does a planner look like?"

Roberta scowled, "Well you don't look like the last one we had, Martha, looked like a computer geek."

"What happened to her?" asked Hal, "What went wrong?"

"Round peg, square hole," said Roberta, "George rode all over her, she was too timid."

"I looked at her plan... it is not very good," said Hal, "It will take me a couple of days to get it sorted, and I would appreciate your help with inputs after that."

Roberta nodded, "I'll do what I can, but you shouldn't get too comfortable... George doesn't like planners."

Hal spent another hour walking around the site making notes and asking questions, then called Gary and asked George for a key to the site office. George looked as if he wanted to refuse, His face went very red, but eventually he got to his feet, and rummaged in his pocket. He handed Hal a bunch of keys.

"Find the one you want and get a copy made," he said, "Let me have it back before five PM."

"Sure thing bwana," said Hal with a smile. Ten minutes later he was on the way to the Braintree Tesco. He returned the original key to

George an hour later and told him he would be working from his accommodation for the next two days.

George looked up from his desk and went very red. Hal waited expectantly for an outburst, but eventually George nodded, "Suit yourself."

Hal worked till past midnight, then went for a long walk, and was pleased to see a badger. He slept well and was up again at six. He worked steadily through the day, and set his phone alarm to go off every two hours, after which he would take a short walk. By midnight he was done and happy with the plan. He sent a PERT pdf to George, copied to Roberta and Mike Wright, and explained that the dates shown were provisional and likely to change a lot as he added resources and refined the plan.

He went for a walk and didn't see a badger but saw several owls. He sent a message to Gary asking him to collect him at seven and take him to Braintree Printing.

George was not at site at nine when Hal returned and taped up an A0 Copy of the PERT chart on the wall of the canteen.

He cleaned and set up the Kona Coffee station and brewed a pot of coffee.

Roberta came in with Bob the foreman just before the coffee was ready.

"Bloody Hell... a PERT chart!" exclaimed Roberta, "And real coffee!"

"Shouldn't this be in the site office?" asked Bob, looking pleased.

"I prefer everybody gets to see what's happening," said Hal, "Everybody wins if the project is a success, and everybody is in this plan."

"So this is what you want help with?" asked Roberta, "There is a lot of detail here."

Hal nodded, “Probably a lot of mistakes...don’t be shy about telling me what I’ve got wrong.”

Bob laughed, “Thick skinned are you Hal? I like this... George is going to bust a gut!”

Roberta and Bob didn’t waste any time in looking for mistakes, and kept Hal busy for the next hour and a half. More often than not Hal was right with the sequence and linkages. Most of the changes had to do with quantities and task durations.

George arrived at ten. Hal poured himself another coffee and walked across to the site office, following Bob. George greeted them politely and asked Bob for an update.

Hal listened quietly until Bob had finished and left the site office.

“Did you want to speak to me?” asked George, “Ready to go back to wherever you came from?”

“No, I wanted to ask if you had time to look at the PERT chart I sent you. There are a few points I would like to discuss with you.”

George looked at him, his face puzzled, “You sent me a PERT?”

“Yes, it is a project evaluation and review technique...” said Hal.

“I know what a PERT is, I just don’t know why you are bothering with that twaddle.”

Hal crossed to the door and closed it, then turned to face George, “That twaddle is what I am here to do George, my job is to plot the tasks needed to complete this building project in a timely and cost effective manner. I am here to advise you but I report to the Operations manager, so please stop being rude? I am only going to ask nicely once.”

George went very still, his face went from very red to quite pale. Eventually he nodded, “Alright, but this is my site and I am the site

manager. I will look at your plan, and listen to your advice, but I will do things my way. Do you understand?”

“It’s a start,” said Hal, “I have put a printed copy of the PERT in the canteen if you prefer that to peering at a computer screen. I’ll update it manually daily and reprint once a week unless there are really big changes.”

George nodded curtly and Hal thanked him and left the site office.

Roberta was in the canteen with a pad and pencil; Hal joined her and they spent the rest of the morning fine tuning the plan. Several of the team leaders came over to check the plan and by lunch time it seemed that everyone except George had looked at the PERT. Most of the comments had been helpful and positive.

Hal made more coffee and spent the afternoon updating the project on his laptop. He emailed the update to George, copied to Roberta and Mike Wright adding a schedule of actions and asking George and Roberta to let him know if he had made any mistakes.

George came into the Canteen while Hal was manually updating the PERT.

“Is that real coffee?” he asked.

“It is,” said Hal with a smile, “Help yourself. I can’t function without coffee.”

George nodded and poured himself a coffee, “This is good coffee,” he said. He studied the PERT, his face expressionless.

“You’ve done this before?” asked George after a while, indicating the PERT, “Where was your biggest job?”

“Helmand province, Afghanistan, a barracks, clinic and school,” said Hal, “Now occupied by the Taliban.”

George nodded, “My nephew was there... a bad business. Such a waste of life.”

Hal nodded and put his laptop away. Then emptied and rinsed the coffee pot and washed his mug.

“See you tomorrow George,” he said, and set off on foot to the trailer park. George nodded and waved a hand absent-mindedly as he studied the PERT.

Hal’s phone buzzed while he was still on the site track. He stepped off the track, and held the phone to his ear, covering the other ear with a hand to shut out the roar of an excavator engine.

“Hello. It’s Mike Wright... is that Hal Johns?” Hal heard.

“Hi Mike, I can hear you... just about,” said Hal, “What’s up?”

“You are on site, I can hear.... I just wanted to say that I like what you’ve sent... can you copy it to Helen as well please?”

“Yes, I can do that. Thanks.”

“Everything OK? Is there anything you need?”

“All good thanks... It’s early days, but I’ll let you know if I need anything.”

“Excellent, excellent. Thanks Hal.” The call ended.

Hal messaged Gary and asked him if he could take him to Braintree Swimming and Fitness Centre at six PM. He got a thumbs up emoji in return.

Gary collected Hal at eight PM and asked him if he had enjoyed swimming.

Hal nodded, “Yes, it’s an excellent pool. Do you swim?”

“No,” said Gary, “I never learned to swim. I wanted to but they wouldn’t let me because I have Downes Syndrome, the school said I needed a special needs teacher and they didn’t have one.”

“Well I am a swimming teacher...if you still want to learn, I can teach you.”

“Really?” said Gary, “I would love to swim... can you really teach me?”

“Sure... the pool closes at ten PM and was pretty quiet by eight PM.”

“How much will it cost?” asked Gary.

“If you pay your own pool fee, I will do it in exchange for driving me to the pool and back,” said Hal.

“It’s a deal!” said Gary, “Can we start tomorrow? I’ll buy a swimming costume.”

“OK,” said Hal, “I need to get a kick board. If I can find one on-line locally, can you pick it up for me?”

“Yes OK...what’s a kick board?” asked Gary.

“Its a teaching aid,” said Hal, “I need one and have been meaning to buy a new one for years, my old one is falling to bits and is in storage.”

Hal worked every day, often working twelve to fourteen hours a day doing “what if” scenarios to streamline the project. After eight days Hal felt confident that the project was on the right track. The estimated completion date had shrunk from eighteen weeks to fourteen weeks late, but Hal was certain that they could do better. George was actively engaging with the project plan. Roberta had become a full time fan of MicroPlanner Xpert.

Hal’s lease-hire car, a VW Taureg, had been delivered. He used it twice a week; to go shopping for groceries and to get PERTs printed. Gary collected him every Monday, Wednesday and Friday night at seven and returned him home at nine thirty in exchange for swimming lessons.

It took three sessions to get Gary to relax in the shallow end of the pool and push and glide with his face in the water. After that he was a model student, and did exactly what he was asked to do. Hal really enjoyed teaching him. He had a lot of trouble pointing his toes and tended to go backwards when kicking. Hal borrowed a site carpenter's tools and made a rotating foot plate to help Gary improve the flexibility of his ankles.

Two weeks to the day after Hal had arrived on site, George, who seldom arrived at site before ten, still had not arrived by twelve and Mike called Hal to inform him that George was in hospital. Mike asked Hal to take over as site manager.

Hal felt relieved and guilty. He felt especially guilty when Mike reported that George had been struggling to take care of his wife who'd had a stroke just before the project had started. George had been commuting to Oxford and back every day, getting very little sleep. Mike assured him that Jackdaw Contracting was making sure that George and his wife, Lorraine, were being properly taken care of. He said not to expect George back on site for at least three months.

Hal had not wanted to be a project manager; he had a good military pension, enough to live off. He had wanted to do project planning as it was more detached and less demanding than site or project management. Despite that, he found himself enjoying the job. The section leaders responded positively and the site seemed generally a happier place than it had been. The pay was a lot better too.

Mike Wright visited the site on the first Monday of July. He had visited George and his wife on the way to site and reported that they were looking stronger. The project was now progressing well and the projected completion date was now eight weeks late.

By the end of July they had pulled back the projected completion to five weeks late. Helen Goody called Hal that night, she sounded tense and informed Hal that the Golf Club had been bought by an Investment Group and they were sending an Architect to review the

project. She told Hal that she would send a lawyer to deal with any issues and advised him not to get drawn into any controversies.

Hal spent the night studying the contract and in the morning called in Bob the site foreman, and Roberta.

“There are likely to be a few bumpy days ahead,” he told them, “The Golf Club has just been sold to an investment group, and they are sending someone to look at the building work. We need to impress these guys with our work ethic. Keep the site clean and lively ok?”

The buildings works, by now were almost fifty percent complete; the roof was going up. Hal had brought the landscaping forward, saving time and money, wanting to get the site greened up as quickly as possible.

The architect arrived early the next morning in a battered short wheel base land-rover. Hal was already on site, a mug of coffee in his hand, inspecting the roofing trusses while Bob briefed the crane operator.

Roberta brought the architect over to Hal and made introductions,

“Hal, this is Bronwynn Bale, the Architect for Anchor Investments.”

Hal shifted his coffee to his left hand and shook her hand, “Good morning Bronwynn, would you like a coffee?” he asked.

“Yes please!” she said, “But first... a loo?”

Hal directed her to the site ablutions and went to make sure there was enough coffee.

“She’s quite a looker,” said Roberta, “I wonder if she’s hitched. Didn’t see a wedding band.”

“Trust me, all the good ones are taken,” said Hal, “Except you and you’re gay. It just isn’t fair.”

Roberta laughed, “Well good luck. I’m glad she’s dealing with you and not George. I thought Jackdaw’s lawyer was supposed to be here to hold your hand?”

“Can you call Mike and tell him she’s here and the lawyer isn’t?” asked Hal.

Roberta nodded and went outside to make the call, seconds later Bronwynn came into the canteen. She went straight to the PERT chart and studied it carefully.

She murmured her thanks when Hal handed her a mug of coffee and wrapped both hands around it. No wedding or engagement ring, though it looked to Hal that part of her ring finger was slightly paler from once wearing a ring. He tried not to stare at her. Without a hard hat, the top of her head barely reached his shoulder.

“I was told that the project was hopelessly behind schedule,” she said quietly, “Five weeks on an eighteen month project is rather good... how confident are you about this project plan?”

“The plan is good,” said Hal, “Barring unforeseen setbacks, we should be able to complete more or less on time.”

“I suppose my being here might be seen as the harbinger of an unforeseen setback?” she asked with a slight smile, “This is good coffee. I run on coffee.”

“Would you like a tour?” asked Hal.

They donned safety helmets and spent the next two hours walking the site.

“You have started the landscaping already,” said Bronwynn, a clever idea I am going to have to steal.” She studied Hal for a while, “You aren’t quite what I expected,” she said, “George Walker was the original project manager. From his correspondence he seemed more old school than you.”

“George was approaching sixty, I think. Very old school. His wife had a stroke and he worked himself half to death trying to care for her and run the site. They are both being taken care of by Jackdaw Contracting now.”

“Well... any questions?” she asked.

“I’m sorry?” said Hal, “What do you mean?”

Bronwynn smiled, “You must have questions? Why am I here, what is going to happen... that sort of thing.”

“I’m all ears for whatever you can tell me,” said Hal.

“Well, you are going to be stuck with me for a while... the rest of the build probably.”

“Go on,” said Hal, hoping that he didn’t look pleased.

“I’ll probably propose a few changes... just to make my mark and justify my being here. Don’t worry, it won’t impact much on your delay.”

“You can have George’s office, I don’t really need it, I usually work in the canteen, close to the coffee pot.”

“Well, now I just have to find somewhere to stay,” said Bronwynn, “Any recommendations?”

“There’s an excellent trailer park a fifteen minute walk from here - I have no idea if they have any vacancies. Just turn right when you reach the end of the lane, then first left and it’s the first gate on your left.”

“Can I have another coffee and a digital copy of your PERT before I go?” asked Bronwynn.

“Sure, and I’ll get you a key to the office,” said Hal.

Hal was still feeling cheerful at midday when a car rattled up the site track, a BMW. It was the lawyer sent by Jackdaw construction. The exhaust pipe had broken and was dragging on the ground.

The lawyer, Simon Fry, a young man who seemed to have a grievance with the world, was in a foul mood and had a stinking headache. He said it was from exhaust fumes. Hal called the RAC for him and Simon left with them after they had winched his BMW onto their truck.

Hal had a conference call with Mike Wright, Helen Goody and Simon Fry that evening. Simon was peevish and unhelpful. Hal was relieved when Helen asked him to disconnect and return to Reading in the morning. They agreed to proceed with work as usual and Helen said she would deal with the change of client issues and keep Hal informed of anything that impacted the project.

Hal was pleased to see Bronwynn's Land Rover in the trailer park car park that night. He was at site and had coffee ready by seven the following morning. He didn't notice Bronwynn arriving but she was in the office setting up a pair of wide screen monitors on the high computer table when he went for a coffee refill at ten. She looked busy so he left her alone and saw her again in the early afternoon when he made another pot of coffee and started updating the project data on his laptop.

Bronwynn came in, looking like a teenager in faded jeans and a polo shirt. She rinsed and filled her coffee mug before coming over to where Hal was working.

"Afternoon Hal," she said with a smile, "Thanks for the trailer park recommendation. It's great! Do you have copies of any changes to the original drawings that I can borrow please?"

"I can get copies made for you tomorrow when I get the new PERT printed," said Hal.

"I can use the old working copies if they are legible, I just want to update the model I am doing. I don't need archive copies."

Hal nodded and got to his feet, “Bob should have working copies, I’ll ask him to bring them to you?”

“May I come with you?” she asked.

“What sort of modelling are you doing?” asked Hal as they headed off to where Bob was ensuring the roof trusses were being installed correctly.

“I like to do 3D computer models of the buildings I work on,” said Bronwynn. “My brother prints them out on a 3D Printer. Clients love it.”

“CAD drawings?” asked Hal.

Bronwynn shook her head, “No, CAD is too cumbersome, I use SketchUp. It’s really good and surprisingly easy to use. I can show you. There is a free version which is pretty good, but I use a professional version, which isn’t very expensive.”

They watched the trusses being laid for a while. Roberta joined them and used her walkie talkie to ask Bob to come down and meet Bronwynn when he had a chance.

“Your roofing people are good,” said Bronwynn, “You’ll make up some time on roofing I reckon.”

Roberta nodded, “Hal changed the plan so that the work flow allows the roofers to keep going without having to stop and start and change position all the time, it’s very slick. Like those marching bands that intermesh like a clock mechanism.”

“A time and motion masterpiece,” said Bronwynn just as Bob joined them.

“Pretty slick eh?” said Bob grinning, “I saw you earlier but you were busy, I’m Bob - site foreman.”

Bob promised to bring Bronwynn all of the change drawings that he had as soon as the crane crew took a rest break. Bronwynn asked

him to explain the roofing process and went off with Bob. Hal was surprised to feel a pang of regret as he watched her go.

“Bob looks like the cat that got the cream,” muttered Roberta as she and Hal turned and headed back towards the canteen. She had a wad of updates for Hal to add to the project plan.

That night, when Gary dropped Hal off after their swimming session, Hal was surprised to see Bronwynn’s legs protruding from under her Land Rover. It was after nine PM and Gary had taken him to get fish and chips on the way. He walked over to her Land Rover.

“What’s up with your vehicle?” Hal asked kneeling down to peer under it.

Bronwyn had a wide black smear across the side of her face. She turned and grinned at him, blinding him with the light of her head torch.

“Sump was dripping oil,” she said, “One of the washers had deformed. I’ve replaced it but there’s still a drip of oil from somewhere and it’s making a mess on the pavers.”

“It’s a Land Rover,” said Hal, shielding his eyes with one hand, “The crank shaft seals are designed to leak. Get one of those big catering stainless steel shallow pans and use it as a drip tray whenever you park. Look for one that will fit in the back well. It’s what I did in the army.”

Bronwynn wriggled out of under the vehicle and switched off her head torch. She was wearing a tattered sweatshirt that was splattered and smeared with black oil and her hands, wrists and forearms were black.

“I don’t know whether I love or hate this vehicle,” said Bronwynn as she got to her feet, “It was my Dad’s and somehow I just can’t bring myself to get rid of it.”

“Land Rovers have been turning drivers into mechanics for generations,” said Hal, “But they are icons and they hold their value

well. Do you want some fish and chips? There's more than I need here."

"If you don't mind sharing, I would love some," said Bronwynn, "But I need a few minutes to put some cardboard down to catch the drips and get cleaned up. Which is your trailer?"

"Number seventeen, last row and second to last trailer on the left," said Hal, "What do you drink? I have coffee, milk, cider and rum."

"Coffee would be nice," she said, "I'll bring water."

Hal found himself grinning as he walked to his trailer. He put the fish and chips into the combination oven on a low heat to keep them warm and buttered some bread while the kettle boiled. He was pouring boiling water into the coffee plunger when Bronwynn knocked and opened the door. She had cleaned up but still had a trace of black oil on her left temple. She held up a large bottle of Perrier Sparking water, "My dad told me never to go empty handed to a neighbour's table, I don't touch alcohol so..." she smiled nervously, "I hope this is acceptable?"

"I love it," said Hal, "Come in, the coffee will be ready soon."

"Please don't feel that you can't drink alcohol because of me!" she said, going quite red.

"I think Perrier goes better with fish than cider and can't imagine rum going well with fish. Do you like chip butties? A very army thing." said Hal, getting the fish and chips out of the oven, "Please grab a seat?"

"This is great!" said Bronwynn, after taking a bite from a chip sandwich. Hal could see the stubborn black remains of engine oil around the edges of her fingernails. He felt his heart racing and chided himself; telling himself not to make a fool of himself.

"Probably not high on the list of health foods," said Hal, "I might have to start running to keep my weight down."

Bronwynn nodded, her mouth full. They ate in silence for a while then both started to speak at the same time.

“Sorry,” said Hal “You first.”

“I was just going to ask how long you were in the Army, “ said Bronwynn, “I was a Royal Navy Reservist for twelve years, an IT specialist I got to Chief Petty Officer.”

“Twenty two years in the Royal Engineers, came up through the ranks; got to Captain,” said Hal.

The fish and chips was gone too soon. Hal poured coffee for them both and fetched a bar of chocolate from the fridge.

“Dessert is served M’Lady,” he said, breaking the bar in two and sliding half across the narrow table to Bronwynn.

“I really don’t like running,” said Bronwynn with a smile, “But I can’t resist Cadbury’s fruit and nut.”

“I prefer swimming,” said Hal, “I was swimming earlier at the Braintree Fitness and Swimming Centre. It’s pretty good.”

“Swimming is good,” said Bronwynn, “I should check out their gym.”

“I’m going again on Friday night, this guy Gary, he has a taxi and delivery business, he takes me there and brings me back in exchange for swimming lessons. You should come with us on Friday?”

“You don’t drive?” asked Bronwynn.

“I do... I have a car here, but don’t really need it. I have a motorbike in storage that I would like to fetch, I just haven’t had time. Do you ride bikes?”

“I used to...” said Bronwynn, she shook her head, “Not any more.” Hal sensed a change in her mood. She drained her coffee and got

to her feet, “Let me get started with the washing up?” She said, “I should get back to my trailer. It’s late.”

“I’ve got the dishes,” said Hal, getting to his feet “Don’t worry about it. Thanks for the company.”

Seconds later Bronwynn was gone. Hal felt deflated. He realised he was more than a little in love with Bronwynn ... and it bothered him. He had been attracted to women before, but this was different and he wasn’t sure how to deal with it.

Hal felt that Bronwynn was a little reserved when he saw her the next day, it was around ten and he was just leaving the canteen after topping up his coffee mug and making a fresh batch of coffee; Bronwynn was coming in to get some coffee.

“I’ve just put a fresh batch of coffee on,” said Hal, “It will be ready in a few minutes.”

“Thanks, I’ll get some coffee tonight to add to the kitty,” said Bronwynn with a smile, “I probably drink more than anyone else.”

“Oh I doubt that,” said Hal, “I drink a lot of coffee, too much probably, but ...” he shrugged.

Bronwynn smiled and said she would come back in a few minutes for her fix, then went back to the site office. Hal didn’t see her again that day, and she was gone by the time he finished walking Bob and Roberta through the order of works on organising the work plan for fitting the window and door frames, plastering the walls and doing the flooring. It had taken Bob a while to accept Hal’s way of doing things, but now he was a convert.

Bronwynn’s Land Rover was not in the car park when he returned to the trailer park.

There was a missed call on Hal’s phone from a number he didn’t recognise. He called the number after he had showered. The call went through to a British Transport Police automated exchange and he needed to dial a number to get routed. He listened to the

prerecorded voice and didn't have a clue which number to dial for Sergeant Hensman, so he disconnected and sent an SMS to her mobile number apologising for missing her call and asking what she had called about.

A few minutes later his phone rang, it was Sergeant Hensman's number, but the person on the other end was not Sergeant Hensman, it was a man who identified himself as D.I. Curran, it took a while for Hal to register that D.I. stood for Detective Inspector.

"Are you there Mr. Johns?"

"Yes, yes... I was expecting to speak to Sergeant Hensman."

"Detective Sergeant Hensman is currently not available, Mr. Johns, I can assist you on her behalf. How can I help you?"

"Oh... well, I saw a missed call and when I dialled it was the British Transport Police automated exchange. The only person I know there is Sergeant Hensman."

"Detective Sergeant Hensman," said D.I. Curran, "What exactly was your relationship with her?"

"You are going to have to ask her that," said Hal, suddenly annoyed with Curran's tone, "Goodnight, I'm done here." He disconnected the call and switched his phone off.

Hal was unsettled by the exchange with Curran and decided to go for a run. He got cramp in his right thigh after half an hour and limped slowly back. But the time he had showered again, it was after ten PM. Hal went to bed and had a troubled night.

The following day, Friday, He got a message from Gary to say he would not be able to collect Hal for their swimming session; Gary was feeling unwell. Roberta lost her temper with one of the stock controllers and Hal had to intervene. A pallet of expensive window hardware had gone missing. Hal, Bob and Roberta ended up doing a stocktake, working till midnight on Friday, Saturday and late into Sunday afternoon. Hal called the police when the stock controller

admitted selling goods to a building contractor friend. He called Mike Wright and sent a report to Helen Goody.

Mike Wright turned up at nine AM on Monday morning, and asked Hal to come with him. Mike told Hal that he needed fuel and breakfast and drove to the Wild Bean coffee shop by the BP filling station on the Coggeshall road, giving him an update on George Walker and his wife on the way.

“George is taking early retirement,” said Mike, “He’s looking forward to it, I think. His wife needs full time care, and Helen has persuaded him to have full time, live-in help. Jackdaw’s staff pension scheme is pretty good,” he said, “George has a daughter in New York, she is thinking about returning to UK. She’s in publishing, I think. Anyway... it looks like George isn’t coming back to work.”

Hal didn’t have much to say on the subject, he was feeling tired, and angry about the stock theft, and worried about how it would impact the project, but Mike had gone off on a tangent, telling Hal about a project they were bidding for in Cornwall for the new Prince of Wales.

Mike asked Hal to order him a full English breakfast and a large Americano while he went to the Gents.

The coffees had arrived by the time Mike returned, he smiled and lifted his mug appreciatively before asking Hal when he had last had a day off.

“I haven’t really kept track,” said Hal, flustered, “I’m not really the nine to five type.”

“Yes, I remember your interview,” said Mike, “Now this is good coffee... Yes, I remember that you said you didn’t want to be a project manager either... you said you’d had enough of working seven days a week, and long hours chasing deadlines. But here you are, doing just that.” He held up his hands to stop Hal from replying, “I’m not complaining... You have dug us out of a hole and you know it, but ... I’m sorry to say, you look like shit Hal, you have

black bags under your eyes, and this business with Greg Barrat... I can see that it is eating you up.”

“I don’t like thieves,” said Hal, “Things were going so well...”

“And now there’s a setback,” said Mike soothingly, “It happens Hal... more often than I like to admit. So much so that we are insured to the hilt against this sort of thing. Don’t sweat it. You handled it well. The insurance company investigator is on her way... she’s good and used to this sort of thing. We had a really big theft at a site in Surrey in February... she recovered almost everything within two weeks.”

“I feel responsible,” said Hal, “I should have prevented it.”

“It’s impossible to prevent every theft,” said Mike, “Helen has already said that shrinkage at Kings Lane is almost non-existent since you took over from George. You have done well Hal.”

“Thanks,” mumbled Hal, “It doesn’t feel that way.”

Mike laughed and clapped him on the shoulder, “You need a break Hal. Take two weeks off... go away, relax or do something crazy, but just give yourself a break from the daily grind. I’ll stay here till you get back, and I promise you I will make so many mistakes that you will curse me for a week when you do get back.”

“I can’t go now...” said Hal.

“Yes you can Hal, and you will. Helen ordered me to make sure you had a proper break, and you don’t want to argue with Helen. Trust me.”

“Crap...” said Hal, “This isn’t a nice way of terminating my contract is it?”

“You are still on probation, technically, so we don’t have to be nice, but no Hal. We really want you to stay, but we want you to stay healthy... we are going to need you if we get the Cornwall project, it’s a three year build.” Mike shrugged, “Look Hal, I dropped the ball

with George, he could have died on the job. I let him down. I need to up my game and I'm telling you to take a break, and when you come back, I am going to make sure you take at least one day off each week!"

Hal nodded, "Alright, I'll need to clear out of my trailer. Can you give me a lift to the station this evening?"

Mike frowned, "What happened to your car? The trailer is rented till the end of the project... would you mind if I used it while you are away?"

"The car is in the car park - I usually walk to site but I use it to collect PERT printouts from Braintree Printing on Friday mornings."

Mike smiled, "Its yours to use as long as you work for Jackdaw Construction, you are taxed on it, so don't feel bad about using it for personal stuff. I drove to Nice in my company car last month. Which takes me to another subject... expenses... you haven't submitted much in the way of expense claims."

"I don't have much to claim for," said Hal.

"Why not?" asked Mike. He shook his head, "You didn't get a handbook... I remember now. Look, I screwed up again, you aren't a planner Hal, you are a site manager, and you are entitled to claim for meals out, entertaining clients and suppliers... incidentals, not just fuel and stationary." He grinned and looked embarrassed, "I'll get you a handbook."

The food came and Mike was clearly ravenous. They ate in silence. Hal thought about what he wanted to do with his two weeks and decided to fetch his motorbike and go to the Isle of Wight.

"I'd still like a lift to the station," he told Mike, "I want to collect my bike and make the most of it while the weather is good."

"No problem," said Mike, "Do you want that toast?"

Hal got back to Welsh's Yard at eight that night. There was a stack of mail on his kitchen counter. He could hear Megan's voice as she yelled at her mother for selling a foal too cheaply. He really didn't like Megan.

Hal was woken by someone knocking on the door. It was pitch dark and for a while he didn't know where he was. He stumbled over to the door and struggled to find the light switch.

"Who is it?" he asked, "What's happened?"

He opened the door and blinked in surprise at the two young women.

"Caroline?" he asked, "What..."

Caroline giggled, "Either you need to pee or you are really pleased to see us. Megan told us you were back... I wanted to introduce Madge."

The other woman, taller than Caroline, with short spiky hair and a blue collar tattooed around her neck, looked embarrassed.

"Nice meeting you Madge. Goodnight to you both," said Hal, "Go to bed." He closed the door and locked it.

"He must be tired," said Caroline, "Usually he is very polite."

"He looks sick," said Madge, she sounded very Irish, and they both sounded drunk, "I wouldn't bonk him."

"He's mine..." said Caroline.

Hal went to the bathroom and studied his face in the mirror. He didn't look healthy. He drank from the cold tap, grimacing at the taste of chlorine in the water, then climbed back into bed. He lay awake for ages and thought he would never get back to sleep, but he woke late in the morning when a tractor drove into the yard.

It took Hal half a day to get his bike cleaned up and started. He rode it to Up Marden and had a ploughman's lunch and a coffee before riding back to West Ashling. Mrs. Welsh and Madge were unloading supplies from the land rover. Hal helped and then carried his panniers up to his room to pack his stuff.

He heard the measured tread of Mrs. Welsh and opened the door before she knocked.

"You don't look well Hal," she said, "Madge can take you to see Dr. Blake ..."

"Thanks Mrs. Welsh, I'm just tired." He told her, "My new boss told me to take some leave."

Mrs. Welsh nodded, "It might help, but you should see a doctor anyway, get a blood test."

Hal shook his head, "Maybe next week," he said, "Thanks for cleaning up while I was away."

"Are you enjoying the job Hal?" asked Mrs. Welsh.

"Yes actually... I just got a bit carried away," said Hal, "But I like the job... I suppose it is what I've done most of my life... just different without uniforms and idiots giving orders."

Mrs. Welsh nodded, "Madge... she's Irish. She told me that Caroline has a bit of a thing about you. Tried to get into your room last night. Madge says Caroline is obsessed."

"I thought she was going back to Liverpool?" said Hal.

Mrs. Welsh shook her head, "She is good with the horses but..."

"Well I'll be gone early tomorrow," said Hal, "I'm sorry about her."

Mrs. Welsh nodded, "There was a man called asking for you - foreign. Said you were in St Thomas hospital same time as him?"

“What did you tell him?” asked Hal, feeling his heart begin to speed up.

“I told him you had gone to London to look for a job and never came back.... It was true when I told him, which was ... Wednesday before last.” She reached out and touched his forearm with her fingertips, “Are you in trouble Hal?”

Hal shook his head, “Not in trouble exactly, but the men I tackled... they are traffickers apparently, and the police are after them. They found the woman that the men grabbed when I tackled them. She’s dead.”

Mrs. Welsh put her hand over her mouth, stifling a gasp, “Oh my goodness, do you think they are after you... those men?”

Hal nodded, “Perhaps. If anyone else calls, just tell them I’m working on a building site. You can give them my number.”

“Are you going to contact the police?”

Hal nodded, “I’ll send a message to Sergeant Hensman, she warned me that... well, she told me to be careful.”

Hal had intended to set off for the ferry in the morning, but decided to leave as soon as he had packed his panniers. He glimpsed Caroline as he drove out of the yard and just made it to Portsmouth in time for a ferry.

Isle of Wight

It took him two hours to get a hotel room, he suspected his motorbike leathers didn’t help, but he was happy enough with his room at the Clifton Hotel in Shanklin. It seemed vaguely familiar, but he could not really recognise any of the landmarks from his first visit to the Isle of Wight twenty plus years earlier.

Hal forced himself to unpack and hang up his clothes and then shower before collapsing exhausted on his bed. He slept fitfully and woke coughing and struggling for breath before six in the morning.

He cursed himself, and realised that he needed to see a doctor. He struggled to get to the toilet and practically crawled back to his bed and called reception.

The Hotel receptionist said she would call for a doctor to visit and sent up coffee and a breakfast tray to his room.

Hal managed the coffee and the juice, and took a couple of paracetamol. He was asleep when the doctor arrived. It was around nine.

Half an hour later, Hal was wheeled out to an ambulance and taken to St Mary's Hospital at Newport with suspected Covid and a lung infection. The doctor assured him that his personal belongings and motorbike would be perfectly safe and taken care of by the Hotel staff.

Hal's medical insurance from Jackdaw got him a private room, though he was beyond caring by then, and just wanted to sleep. He was poked prodded and generally kept awake by a barrage of tests by green suited figures with gloves and masks on. Eventually a nurse told him that he had a virus, but that it wasn't Covid and he finally got to sleep.

Hal spent three days and nights in the Hospital before being discharged. The Clifton Hotel sent a car for him and he was welcomed back at the reception like an old friend. His stuff was in his room and the receptionist told him that his motorbike had been wheeled into their lock-up minutes after he had left for Hospital.

Hal was still coughing, and very weak. He had lost weight but didn't look as sick when he examined himself in the mirror. He decided to keep the stubble that had grown on his face.

The Hotel doctor visited him that evening, and seemed satisfied with what she found. She told him that it would take at least two weeks for the lung infection to clear up, and urged him to relax and take it easy, and to complete the course of medication he had been given.

A short walk against a stiff onshore wind convinced Hal that he wasn't ready to do much, and he spent the rest of the day in a recliner on his balcony writing on his iPad mini.

That evening he dug Sergeant Hensman's card out of his wallet and sent her an email, saying that a foreign sounding man had contacted the landlady at his lodgings, claiming to have been in hospital with him at St Thomas's and saying that he wanted to make contact with him. Hal was careful with his wording and read through the email several times before sending it. The effort tired him and he napped for a while before taking another walk around the Hotel.

Mindy, the Hotel Receptionist, brought him newspapers in the morning and asked if he wanted breakfast in his room.

"Thanks Mindy," said Hal, touched at the care he was getting, "I think I would like to come down to the dining room for breakfast, what time is breakfast over?"

"We serve breakfast till ten, but you can order breakfast in your room all day," she said, "There's always someone on kitchen duty at this time of year. We can arrange a car for you if you want to get out for a bit," she added, "It would be a pity to spend your holiday in the hotel, what with that ugly building site next door."

"That would be nice," said Hal, "Is there anywhere that you would recommend?"

"I like Amazon World, it is really lovely and an easy place to get around," she blushed, "I often spend my day off there. I just love it."

"What's at Amazon World?" asked Hal.

"Oh... well, it is a zoo, it isn't huge, but it's lovely. I prefer to take my own food, but there is a cafeteria there. We can make you a packed lunch if you like? I really like the meerkats, but I just love going there. I get a discount, but I think it costs eighteen pounds to get in for non-residents."

"OK, that sounds nice. I'll give it a try," said Hal, "Thanks Mindy."

“Can I arrange a packed lunch for you too?” asked Mindy.

Hal nodded and spent a few minutes answering her questions as to what he would like included in his lunch.

Hal enjoyed a leisurely breakfast.

At ten when he came back down to reception with his daybag, Cindy persuaded him to take a shooting stick that belonged to the Hotel. He tried it out first, having never used one, and found it quite comfortable to sit on, and handy as a sturdy walking stick. The Hotel driver gave him a running commentary on the way to Sandown, and walked Hal up to the counter when they got to Amazon World.

Hal went straight to the meerkats, and was delighted to find that he could go in with them, and was warned to secure his daybag carefully against their inquisitive little hands. He covered the day bag with its waterproof shell and stayed in the meerkat enclosure till a noisy school group drove him away.

He went to the cafeteria for coffee and checked his emails. There was no response from Sergeant Hensman, but there was an email from Helen Goody asking if he was alright. She had been notified of his hospital admission by the medical insurance company.

Hal wrote back and said that he was fine, but had picked up a virus and chest infection, but had been discharged from hospital and was now just taking things easy.

The shooting stick proved to be very handy, especially when watching the sloths at feeding time. Hal enjoyed his time at Amazon World, despite getting irritated several times by loud and boisterous groups of children. A large bird, a Knob Billed Turaco from South America, followed him around companionably for most of the afternoon, seeming quite content with just being close to him. Hal spent the last half hour back with the meerkats, feeding them meal worms purchased from a kiosk. The same driver collected him. Hal showered and went straight to bed, exhausted.

After three days of being pampered and ferried to various locations by Philip, the Hotel driver. Hal decided to go for a ride along the coast on his bike. He was back, shaking and exhausted after twenty minutes, and realised that he wasn't going to be able to ride his bike back to Braintree.

There was a missed call on his phone when he checked it at lunch time. From Mrs. Welsh. Hal called her back immediately.

“Hello? Hal Johns... is that you?”

“Hello. Yes, Mrs. Welsh, it is me... Hal,” he responded, “I just saw that you tried to call me earlier... sorry I didn't hear it. I was on my bike... is everything alright?” He asked.

“Have you seen the news Hal?” she asked, “That police person... DS Hensman, has been found dead.”

“No, I haven't ... are you sure?” asked Hal.

“Well, that's the name - a pretty blond girl. They found her body in a canal in Hackney according to Sky News... they think she was murdered.”

Hal's mind was racing.

“Are you alright Hal?” asked Mrs. Welsh.

“Yes... well actually I have been unwell, but I am much better. I'm shocked to hear about sergeant Hensman. I think I should check the news.”

“You be careful Hal,” said Mrs. Welsh, “This sounds very nasty.”

“I'll be careful. You too and thank you for letting me know.”

Hal thought about it for a while, then called the RAC and asked if they could collect his motorbike and deliver it to Welsh's Yard in West Ashling, saying he had been hospitalised and was unable to

ride it back. He then went down to reception and arranged an early check out and transport to the ferry terminal in the morning. Mindy said she would get a letter from the hotel doctor and hand it to the RAC people when they came to collect his motorbike and panniers.

Live Bait

Hal was exhausted when he got to Liverpool Street station. He made his way to the Transport Police office on Platform Ten and asked at the desk to speak to somebody about sergeant Hensman. He was immediately shown to an interview room and left there. He could see that the camera was on and recording as he tried to make himself comfortable on the hard plastic chair.

Twenty minutes later a middle aged woman in plain clothes came in and introduced herself as Inspector Lawson.

“Are you Sergeant Hensman’s boss?” asked Hal, struggling to his feet.

“No... not as such Sir... do you have an identity document that you can show me please?”

Hal nodded and dug his wallet out, then fetched out his military ID card, “I am retired, but you can verify that it is me easily enough,” he said, “Do you mind if I sit? I am not feeling very well.”

Inspector Lawson nodded, and asked if he would like some tea or coffee.

“Water...lots of it if possible, please?” asked Hal. He suspected he was going to be there for a long time.

Inspector Lawson returned after just a few minutes with two large plastic bottles of water and his ID card. She sat opposite him and asked him why he had come to the station.

“I knew Sergeant Hensman,” he said carefully, “She contacted me in May ...I can’t remember the exact date offhand, but I came here and she asked me to look at some photos. I recognised one of two

men that I tackled near Victoria Station on the fourteenth of April. They were assaulting a woman. The woman ran away, and I ended up in St Thomas hospital along with the two men. They were discharged before me.” Hal stopped. The woman had not taken any notes but was looking at him intently.

“Go on Mr. Johns,” she urged him, “I am paying attention and this is all being recorded.”

Hal nodded, “Sergeant Hensman then took me to see a body in the morgue. I didn’t recognise it, but she said it was the woman that the men had assaulted that night. The one who ran away. Her face hands and feet looked as if they had been deliberately smashed up with a hammer. Her name was Katya Persky according to Sergeant Hensman, she said the men I tackled were traffickers. She didn’t tell me their names, but said that they had connections in the police and were very dangerous.”

Hal’s mouth felt very dry. He unscrewed the lid of a bottle and drank a mouthful of water before carefully screwing the lid back on.

Inspector Lawson just sat there, watching him intently. It made him uncomfortable. He knew she was just doing her job.

“A couple of weeks ago I got a missed call on my cell phone, when I called it back it was the British Transport Police automated exchange. I hung up because I didn’t know which number to press to reach Sergeant Hensman. I messaged her mobile number - and got called back by someone using her mobile who said he was an inspector and spoke as if he had a stick up his arse, so I hung up on him. I rent storage from and sometimes stay at a horse farm in Sussex, my mail goes there and I use it as my address for bank cards and the like as I don’t have a home of my own. The owner of the farm told me that a foreign sounding man had called her, looking for me. He said we had been in St Thomas’s Hospital together. I emailed sergeant Hensman to tell her, as I suspect it is the trafficker, trying to track me down. I have not had a response. Then yesterday, the farm owner called me and told me that she had seen on the news that sergeant Hensman had been found dead in a canal in Hackney.” Hal shrugged, “So I came here.”

Hal picked up the water bottle and had another drink, then settled back in the chair and gazed calmly at Inspector Lawson.

She nodded, “Thankyou Mr. Johns... I am sorry to tell you that Sergeant Hensman is indeed dead. I cannot say more about it at this time, but you were right to come here. Her mobile phone has not been recovered. Would you mind very much if we took your mobile phone? It might be possible to trace her phone using your phone.”

Hal shrugged and dug out his phone, unlocked it and slid it across the table, “The unlock code is the one it came with - 1243,” he said.

She thanked him and put the phone into a side pocket.

“The man you identified has several names, we do not know which, if any are his real name, but he is a dangerous and violent man. We believe he is Armenian. I have informed the Sussex police and they are keeping an eye on Welsh’s Yard in case he goes there. We would like to keep you safe as you can connect him to Katya Persky. Are you willing to go into protective custody Mr. Johns?”

Hal shook his head and started coughing. When he stopped he looked up to see concern on the inspector’s face.

“No thank you,” he gasped, “I really don’t wish to be in any sort of custody. I’ll get another phone and put you on speed dial but...” he started coughing again. The inspector opened the second bottle of water and held it out to him when he stopped coughing. Hal thanked her and drank gratefully. “I’m recovering from a chest infection,” he told her breathlessly. “Not enjoying it.”

“Can you keep me informed of your whereabouts?” asked the inspector.

Hal nodded, “Sure, give me a number,” he said, “I’ll probably stay in London for a few days.” He got to his feet, “I’d like to go now.”

“Give me a few minutes to write a receipt for your phone...” she began but Hal cut her off.

“No need... I wanted a new phone anyway, just destroy the Sim and reset the phone when you are done with it,” said Hal moving to the door. It was locked.

Inspector Lawson nodded and the door unlocked, “I’ll walk you out then,” she said and got to her feet. She held out a card, “My number.”

Hal took the tube to Tottenham Court Road and spent an hour choosing a replacement phone, settling for an iPhone 13. The Polish sales assistant set it up for him, linking it to his iPad and smiled widely at the fifty pound tip Hal gave him. Hal made his way to Leicester Square then decided against watching a film. He found his way to the Russell Hotel and got a room for the night. He had a pot of hot chocolate and a plate of beef sandwiches in the lounge before making his way up very slowly to the third floor. He slept soundly and woke after nine the following morning feeling a lot better.

Hal added Inspector Lawton’s number to his phone and sent her his new number. He then spent an hour on his phone tracking down one of his contacts from his army days.

“Hi Paul, it’s me, Hal Johns,” he said, “I need your help!”

“Longjohns! Long time... what are you up to pal? You sound rough,”

“That’s just a chest infection Paul. Am in construction now, just landed a job in Essex building a posh sports centre... but it seems that I’ve pissed of a villain, and I’m too weak to fight my way out of a wet paper bag right now. I need someone to watch my back and keep me safe for a few days.”

Paul laughed, “I never thought I’d hear you ask for help Longjohns, you must be in a bad way. I can find you someone, just give me an hour or so. Where are you now? Essex?”

“No I am in London for a few days.”

“I take it you want someone house trained? Non-smoker.”

“Yeah... not a cave man unless that’s all you got.”

Paul laughed and said he would call him back, then hung up.

Hal spent the morning writing in the lounge and taking short walks every hour or so when his bum got numb. He had lunch in the Hotel restaurant and went up to his room for a nap after eating too much.

He was woken by the phone, it was Paul.

“OK, I’ve got ball busting dyke that would look good on your arm, or an ex Gurkha warrant officer. Ugly bugger, but deadly. I’d take the dyke if I was you, but don’t try anything with her...she really is a ball buster.”

“OK - how much?” asked Hal.

“Mates rates - two-fifty a day, you pay all expenses. She’s in Newcastle,”

“OK, send me bank details and I’ll send five grand now.” said Hal.

“Tami will let you know when to expect her, I’ll send her your number.”

Hal had just finished transferring the money to Paul’s account when Tami messaged him, including a photo of her single ticket to Kings Cross arriving at five forty PM. He messaged back a WhatsApp location pin for the Russell Hotel, then went down to reception and asked to be moved to a twin room as he had someone coming to stay with him.

Hal was in the resident’s lounge contemplating going for another short walk when his phone vibrated. Tami was at reception.

Hal smiled and waved when he saw her, a serious faced young woman with a backpack, she was sat close to the door, leafing through a brochure.

“Hi Tami, I’m Hal,” he said, reaching into his pocket for her key card, “We are in room 304.”

She nodded, “Thanks Hal, give me a few minutes OK? Can We meet here again in twenty?”

Hal nodded, “I’m going to take a walk around the square outside, then I’ll be in the residents lounge over there.” He pointed.

She frowned then shrugged, “OK. Are we going out tonight? Do I need to dress formal or casual?”

Hal made a face, “Sorry... Umm... I could probably do with a movie, if that’s OK, and grab a bite out...I’m not very classy. You can decide where.”

She nodded, then hefted her backpack and headed for the stairs. Hal watched her go. He guessed she was closer to thirty than forty and looked fit and strong. He couldn’t place her accent, it wasn’t Geordie and she had a slightly oriental look.

Twenty minutes later she came into the residents lounge wearing jeans and a light top and carrying a shoulder bag. Her hair in a pony tail. She looked like a fresh, clean, attractive and intelligent athlete.

Hal stood when she approached the table and asked her if she would like something to drink.

“Tea or coffee would be fine, she said, “And some water please?” She sat and looked around briefly, “Nice Hotel.”

Hal nodded, “I usually stay at the Union Jack Club, but... this place is much nicer and it’s just a couple of days so...” he coughed and cleared his throat, “What do you need to know?”

“What can you tell me? Do you have any photos?” she asked.

“I don’t know much,” he said, “In April I interfered with a couple of guys trying to grab a woman near Victoria station. They had knives. She got away. A few weeks later the woman’s body was found, her face, hands and feet had been smashed to pulp. I recognised the photo of one of the suspects. The police woman who showed me the photos has just been found dead in a canal. She warned me that they were traffickers and they have some cops in their pockets. Then my landlady had a foreign man call her and ask about me. I had already picked up a virus and a chest infection and can hardly walk a hundred yards. I thought it best to get some help till I am stronger.”

“You are talking about Detective Sergeant Hensman, the transport police detective,” said Tami. “I saw that on the news. You think the traffickers killed her?”

Hal nodded, “I only saw the one guy clearly... He is about my height, perhaps an inch taller and a lot broader. Dark hair, no grey, dark eyes, high cheek bones ...”

“You say the police have a photo of him?”

Hal nodded, “I think they have quite a lot on him, but I just saw the two photos, which I signed and verified as being the man I tackled near Victoria Station on 14 April.”

“The police are using you as bait,” said Tami. “I’ll see what Paul can get. Did he tell you the rules?”

“He told me not to try anything with you,” said Hal, “I promise to behave.”

Tami’s expression didn’t change, “No heroics OK? No more walks alone. Avoid public toilets... anywhere I cannot go with you. Can you manage stairs? I don’t like elevators.”

“I can go down OK and need to take my time going up, but I am getting better.”

Tami nodded, "I'll be close." She picked up her shoulder bag and moved across to the corner of the residents lounge to make a call. The porter asked if Hal wanted anything and he ordered a pot of coffee and a jug of water, then got out his iPad and carried on writing. He didn't hear Tami return to the table. She was there when The porter returned with a tray.

Tami drank her coffee black and with two sugars. She pulled an iPad mini from her shoulder bag, plugged in some wireless iPods and used an apple pen to do whatever she was doing on her iPad.

Hal was startled when, about half an hour later, he got a request on his screen to accept an airdrop file from Tami. P. He looked up but she had her eyes down and was concentrating on her iPad. Hal accepted the file and downloaded it. A pdf. He opened it and saw a series of photographs. He recognised one of the men immediately.

He looked up and saw Tami looking at him. She nodded and returned to her iPad.

Hector Gulbin, aka, Hassan Galla, aka, Mehmet Salna.. there were over a dozen names linked to the man that Hal recognised. There were eleven men on the pdf, all associated with Hector Gulbin and wanted in connection with the death of Katya Persky, D.S. Cynthia Hensman and the disappearance of several other women, mostly Romanian and Croatian. One of the men had an English name, Brian Watkins, formerly police inspector of Harwich CID. Hal wondered if he was the man who had answered Hensman's phone.

"When do you want to go out?" asked Tami, "Is there any particular film you want to see?"

"I usually just have a look and see what's on and how long the queues are before deciding," said Hal.

"We should go now," she said, "Does anyone know you are here?"

"Only you, and whoever cares to look at my credit card history," said Hal, "I gave a police inspector my new phone number - she has my old phone."

Tami nodded, “Well, if they have set you up as bait, they should be in a position to protect you.”

Hal was wheezing when they got to Leicester Square, but Tami appeared not to notice. Nothing appealed to Hal and he let Tami choose. She was torn between Oppenheimer and Equaliser three, and to Hal’s relief chose Equaliser three because the queue was shorter.

Tami chose seats at the back near the wall and got a huge tub of popcorn. Hal managed to stay awake through the film and quite enjoyed it. Tami seemed quite pleased with it.

“There’s a nice Italian place down there...” said Hal when they emerged from the theatre, “It’s about the only place I know. Do you like Italian food?”

“Who doesn’t like pasta?” asked Tami.

She chose a table, and looked amused as the waiter fussed over her, “Its a bit romantic isn’t it?” she said, “Are you going to drink?”

Hal shook his head, “I like a drink, but not for me thanks. Not till I am fit again.”

Tami ordered a seafood pasta dish, Hal asked for chicken breast stuffed with garlic, and salad.

“So, am I allowed to ask how you got into protection work?” asked Hal.

Tami smiled, “It’s a family tradition,” she said, “Paul says he owes you.... What does that mean?”

Hal smiled, “He’s just being kind. We met in Afghanistan, I gave blood for one of his guys who took a piece of shrapnel to the neck. I was doing construction out there.”

“You weren’t special forces?” asked Tami.

Hal shook his head, “Not like Paul no..., I was briefly in 24 Commando regiment but got fed up with all the political messing about and returned to the Royal Engineers.”

Tami had a huge ice cream after her meal, Hal settled for a cappuccino.

It was raining lightly when they emerged from the restaurant. Tami removed a lightweight waterproof from her shoulder bag. Hal put the hood of his coat up and zipped up. He felt the heat of his body build up rapidly, despite the cool rain. It seemed to take forever to get back to the hotel. Hal struggled to get up the stairs and was panting when he eventually got to the third floor. Tami unlocked the door and cleared the room.

“I’m finished,” wheezed Hal, “Which bed are you taking?”

Tami tossed her shoulder bag onto the bed closest to the door, “You going to shower first?” she asked.

Hal was fast asleep before Tami came out of the shower and didn’t hear her getting up in the morning. She was dressed when he woke to the sound of room service knocking on the door with their early morning coffee. Tami opened the door and watched as they brought the tray in. Hal felt groggy but slightly better as he struggled upright and started coughing.

“So what’s the plan for today?” Tami asked when they made their way down the stairs for breakfast.

“I really want to get back to site,” said Hal, “Can you drive? I’ve got a car in Essex and I really don’t want to take the train there. Not while I am feeling like this.”

“Sure, you want to hire a car?” said Tami, “I like driving. When do you want to go?”

Tami was a fast and aggressive driver. Hal called Mike and warned him that he was on his way back as soon as they left the Hotel.

“Helen says you are off sick!” said Mike, “You don’t have to come back yet.”

“I want to come back Mike, I need to do something, sitting on my arse all day just makes it ache.”

“Well, I’m staying on till I think you are well enough to manage by yourself,” said Mike.

“I’m bringing someone with me,” said Hal, “Are you using the trailer?”

“No, I took a room in Braintree; bed and breakfast and an evening meal. I don’t cook,” said Mike, “Your trailer is free - I’ll get it cleaned up. Helen won’t be happy about you coming back before you are fit.”

“I’ll tell her. It will be OK, feeling useful is part of the healing process.”

Hal thought about it and decided against phoning Helen, he wrote her an email, explaining that he was heading back to Braintree as sitting around was stressing him out, then reclined his seat and asked Tami to wake him when they got to Colchester.

Gary was waiting for them at the EuropeCar office in Braintree, and took them to Tesco before dropping them at the trailer park. Tami got on well with Gary and chatted cheerfully with him all the way back to the trailer park.

She watched Gary drive away and returned his cheerful thumbs up with a wave, “My kid brother has Downes Syndrome,” she said, “He’s twelve. I want him to meet Gary.”

“Well there’s room enough for one more in the trailer,” said Hal, he pointed, “That VW is my company car, you can fetch your brother with it.”

Tami smiled, "You are kind. Thank you for the offer but Mike is in Germany with our parents."

Hal busied himself with putting the groceries away and unpacking his things, then took his dirty clothes to the trailer park laundry. Tami came with him.

Hal felt his pulse quicken when they returned and he saw Bronwynn's Land Rover in the car park. There was a large shiny steel catering dish under the engine.

"How am I going to explain you..." he asked Tami, "I mean...I don't want everybody to know about the traffickers and you having to protect me."

"You are the site manager... am I right?"

Hal nodded.

"So you take me on as your driver and personal assistant... let them think what they want," said Tami.

Hal shook his head, "No... it's.... There's someone," he glanced at the Land Rover. "It's complicated... I really really like her but things haven't progressed."

"You don't want to upset her," said Tami with a smile, "Well... I could be your dyke friend."

Hal shook his head, "This isn't funny," he muttered heading for his trailer.

"Why not just tell the truth? It's usually the best thing in the long run," said Tami.

Hal shrugged and asked if she wanted coffee.

Hal had just finished making coffee when there was a knock on the trailer door. Tami answered. It was Bronwynn. She looked at Tami and then at Hal.

“Oh,” she said, “I just wanted to say Hi, and welcome Hal back. Mike said you were back... I ...”

“I’m Tami,” said Tami, “Hal’s minder, please come in?” She held out her hand and shook Bronwynn’s.

“Bronwynn... nice to meet you Tami,” said Bronwynn, clearly flustered. She was carrying a Marks and Spencer’s bag.

“I’ve got to check the laundry,” said Tami, easing past Bronwynn and closing the trailer door.

“Hello Bronwynn,” said Hal, “Would you like some coffee?”

Bronwynn shook her head and held out the bag, “I wanted to get you fish and chips, but the shop I found smelled disgusting. I got some lasagne from Marks and Spencer’s. It’s for you. A welcome back present.”

“Thanks,” said Hal taking the bag, “Will you stay and share it with...”

“No... no thanks, I have to go, I just wanted to drop that off and welcome you back.”

“Bronwynn, please stay and have a coffee?” asked Hal, “I want to explain.”

“You don’t have to explain anything Hal,” said Bronwynn, going red, “Really.”

“No, I want to. Please?”

“Perhaps another time Hal,” said Bronwynn, “Enjoy!”

Hal wanted to swear when she turned and let herself out of the trailer.

He put the lasagne in the fridge. There was a huge slab of Cadbury's Fruit and Nut chocolate in the bag and a card welcoming him back. Hal put the chocolate in the fridge and tucked the card into his back pocket.

"What happened?" asked Tami a few minutes later, "I saw her driving out in a Land Rover; she looked unhappy."

Hal shrugged, "She didn't want to hear it," he said gloomily.

"Well at least you know she likes you," said Tami, "Can I have some coffee please?"

Bronwynn's car wasn't in the carpark when Hal set off for the site in the morning. Tami drove his Taureg after hosing down the car.

Roberta was in the canteen. She greeted Hal cheerfully and eyed Tami speculatively, "Well, now you are very welcome, I'm Roberta and you can call me anytime."

Tami grinned and shook her hand, "Hi Roberta, I'm Tami, Hal's minder."

"Since when do you need a minder?" asked Roberta, looking carefully at Hal, "You have lost a bit of weight; how sick were you?"

"How old is that coffee?" asked Hal crossing to the PERT chart and peering at it, "I see you've been busy."

Roberta laughed, "The coffee is fresh and you aren't getting off the hook so easily."

Hal spent the morning updating the project plan and asked Tami to drive him into Braintree at two PM to get a new PERT printed. Tami asked if they could go to the Tesco superstore on their way back to put the car through the car wash.

“Isn’t that Bronwynn’s Land Rover?” she asked, pointing, as they drove into the Tesco car park.

Hal nodded, “It is,” he said. Tami turned and parked next to the Land Rover, which was parked alone some distance from the store. There was a bare foot pressed against the passenger window.

“She’s inside,” said Bronwynn frowning.

Hal felt dread as he got out the car.

“Bronwynn?” He called out. Something moved inside the Land Rover, the sound of a glass bottle rolling. Tami gently pulled him back. “Take your car to the site,” she whispered, “She won’t want you to see her like this. Go!” She pushed him gently away handing him the VW’s keys.

Hal reversed away and headed for the exit. His heart was hammering in his chest.

It only took a few minutes to get to site and Hal had a lot of trouble focusing on what Mike was saying to him as he helped Hal to put up the new PERT chart.

“Are you alright Hal?” asked Mike, placing a hand on Hal’s shoulder.

Hal shook his head, “I’m just tired,” he said.

“Well bugger off then,” said Mike gently, “The Plan’s updated; that’s plenty enough for the day. Go home and rest.”

Roberta came in and wanted to know what he had done with Tami.

Bob caught up with him in the carpark and told him that he was glad Hal was back.

Bronwynn’s Land Rover was back in its spot when Hal got back to the trailer park. There was no sign of Tami and Hal didn’t know which Trailer was Bronwynn’s. He looked into the cab of the Land Rover. There was an empty half bottle of Captain Morgan spiced

rum bottle in the footwell and three empty quarter bottles, he couldn't see the labels. The door wasn't locked. Hal opened the door and cleared out the empty bottles, then went and fetched a bucket of hot soapy water and systematically cleaned the inside of the Land Rover. He found a full bottle of Port and a half empty quarter bottle of vodka under the passenger seat. He debated for a while then put them back where he had found them. He closed up the vehicle and returned to his trailer and made coffee. There was a message from Tami on his phone.

"She's OK. Call me if you need me."

"What about you? Are you OK?" Hal messaged back. He got a thumbs up in return.

He woke up when his phone rang, it was Tami, asking him to open up so she could get in. It was two AM.

Tami looked tired.

"Bronwynn's a mess," she said, "An alcoholic with some serious demons, but she is sleeping peacefully now."

"Thanks Tami," said Hal, "I owe you."

Tami smiled, "You owe me zilch," she said, "If anyone owes me, it's Bronwynn. Helping people is part of being human."

Tami was up before Hal. She prodded him awake and handed him a mug of coffee.

"Are you walking to work today?" she asked, "You don't want to be late..."

Hal saw Bronwynn when he went to the canteen for more coffee mid morning, she waved at him through the site office window, but didn't come across to the canteen.

Mike seemed comfortable enough with Tami. Bob was clearly intrigued but didn't say anything. Roberta hardly left them alone. Hal

managed a whole day and didn't feel too bad as he updated the data at the end of the day. Bronwynn had already left by then.

The next day was Friday and Hal called Gary and asked him if he was ready to carry on with his swimming lessons. They were late getting away because a plant operator, who was supposed to load the now redundant excavators onto the low-loader could not be found when the transporter arrived. Bob found the keys and Hal drove the excavators. He enjoyed the look of surprise on the faces of Bob, Roberta and Tami as he expertly manoeuvred the giant machines onto the low loader.

Gary was waiting for them in the trailer park, chatting with Bronwynn. She agreed to come with them and went to fetch her swimming gear. Bronwynn was an excellent swimmer, and seemed to slide effortlessly through the water. Tami was a strong swimmer but not very stylish.

Hal was impressed with Gary's progress; he had obviously been practicing a lot, and though he wasn't getting much propulsion from his very energetic crawl kick, he was no longer going backwards. Hal got him started on breathing to the side, watched him for a while and then left him to practice while he went and did some swimming in the lanes. Bronwynn really was fast, and slid past him like a fish. Tami wasn't very fast, but kept going long after Hal was exhausted. Hal struggled, swimming one length and resting for as long as it had taken him to swim a length before doing the next one. Bronwynn left the pool shortly before Hal finished his half hour of swimming. Gary was still practicing and doing well. Hal spent a few minutes with him, showing him how to keep his forehead down to make breathing easier, then went to shower and change.

Bronwynn was in the cafeteria, close to the window overlooking the pool. Hal got a bottle of water and asked if he could sit with her. Bronwynn nodded and smiled, then unplugged her earbuds.

"I was watching you teaching Gary," she said, "He told me he couldn't swim at all till you started teaching him."

Hal nodded, “He works hard and is utterly fearless. You are a really good swimmer.”

“I was in the Welsh junior team at school, and swam for Swansea University,” said Bronwynn.

Tami got out of the lanes and then walked over to where Gary was swimming, she sat on the side encouraging him. Gary grinned widely, and then swallowed some water and got to his feet coughing. Tami was in the water immediately looking concerned.

“They seem to get on well,” said Bronwynn.

“Tami has a younger brother with Downes Syndrome,” said Hal, “She said she would like him to meet Gary.”

Bronwynn nodded, “Gary has achieved a lot,” she said, “It isn’t easy for people like him.”

“I’ve never met anyone with Downes Syndrome before,” said Hal, “He seems nice enough.”

“Tami’s a nice person too,” said Bronwynn, “She told me that she has only just met you, and that there’s nothing personal between you.”

“It’s complicated...” began Hal, but Bronwynn spoke over him.

“It’s really none of my business; you don’t need to explain.”

“Actually, I think I do,” said Hal, “I ... Tami is protecting me.”

Bronwynn didn’t say anything, but she looked puzzled.

“I’m probably being paranoid, but I think that a trafficker is trying to find me. The police want him for murder, and I am a witness. As far as I know the only witness.”

“Is that why you changed your phone number?” asked Bronwynn, “Shouldn’t the police be protecting you, if you are a witness?”

“The police have my old phone, and yes, they offered to protect me but... the police officer that asked me to identify the trafficker told me that some police officers are in the pockets of the traffickers - her words - and now she has been killed.”

Bronwynn looked startled, “By the man that’s looking for you?”

“I don’t know,” said Hal, “But I would prefer not to take chances.”

“How did you get into this mess? Did you witness the murder?”

“Not exactly, I intervened when I saw two men trying to grab a woman in London back in April,” said Hal, “The woman got away, and I ended up in hospital with the two men, but they were discharged before I gave a statement to the police. The woman’s body was found a few weeks later. I was called in to look at photos and identified one of the men that I had tackled. He is wanted in connection with the murdered woman.”

“So you asked Tami to protect you?” asked Bronwynn.

Hal laughed, “Not exactly - I called a man I know from my army days. He provides body guards for celebrities and people who think they need protection. He recommended Tami.”

“Is it expensive?” asked Bronwynn.

“To me yes, though I suspect he gave me a big discount. It’s only for twenty days; I’m hoping I will have recovered by then.”

“Have you told Mike about this?” asked Bronwynn.

Hal shook his head, “No... the fewer people that know, the less likely for word to get back to the traffickers.”

Bronwynn frowned, “Now I need to keep it a secret too,” she said, “I suppose I should not have pressed you. You should not have told me.”

“I didn’t want you to think that there was anything between Tami and me,” said Hal quietly, “I really like you and was hoping...”

“Don’t... please don’t say it Hal,” said Bronwynn, “I like you too... but I’m not ready to... I’m just in a bad place at the moment and I can’t ... I mean, we can be friends. I would like that.”

“Don’t hate me OK, that’s all I’m asking... for now.”

Bronwynn clamped her lips together in a tight smile and nodded.

“Tami and Gary should be out soon,” he said, “Do you fancy some fish and chips? Gary knows where to get the best fish and chips.”

Bronwynn nodded and got to her feet, keeping her face averted. He gave her space and walked ahead of her to the foyer. Tami was already there studying the notice board.

“I might try our their gym next time we come,” she said, “Where’s Bronwynn?”

Bronwynn came out of the Cafeteria just then.

Gary came out of the changing room looking very cheerful and happily agreed to take them to get fish and chips but told them they weren’t allowed to eat them in his car.

Bronwynn ate her fish and chips in Hal’s trailer with Tami; Gary had dropped them off outside the trailer park, saying he wanted to go home. Bronwynn asked Tami how she had got into being a body guard.

“I do mixed martial arts and one of the instructors at my club recruits bouncers for night clubs and provides security for visiting celebrities. He’s a former IDF diplomatic protection specialist. He trained me.”

“What’s IDF?” asked Bronwynn.

“Israeli Defence Force,” said Tami.

“It sounds like a tough career choice,” said Bronwynn.

Tami laughed, “It’s not my career - no chance of that, it’s just a way to pay my way through University. I’m doing a Masters degree in Molecular Biology with a bias to Endocrinology.”

“That is to do with Hormones in the digestive system, isn’t it?” asked Bronwynn.

Tami nodded, “Yes, it is a fascinating subject. I’m hoping I can get a job in Endocrine research.”

“It sounds very complicated to me,” said Hal, “How much longer before you qualify?”

“I’m in the last year now, and working on my thesis,” said Tami, “I’ve already done the hard work, Now I just have to get it presented properly. I can do that anywhere.”

Tami walked Bronwynn back to her trailer, taking Hal’s swimming towel and a bag of clothes she wanted to put in the washing machine. Hal did a quick clean of the trailer and went to bed.

Helen Goody arrived at the site while Hal was making coffee at seven the following morning.

She greeted Hal and Tami politely, and asked for the key to the ablutions, which had not yet been unlocked.

Hal fetched the spare from the site office and unlocked the ablutions. Helen was drinking coffee and chatting with Tami when he returned to the canteen. She rushed off to use the loo when Hal said he had unlocked the ablutions.

“She’s the big boss?” said Tami, “A tough old bird. I told her I am your minder. She knows about the trafficker.”

Hal nodded, “I told her before I took the job. She is a director of Jackdaw Contracting, the only one I have met or know about. I think it is a family business, but I really don’t know much about them.”

Hal had arranged to meet the boss of a subcontractor doing the air ducting at seven thirty in the main entrance of the building. He decided not to wait for Helen, and took his coffee and the drawings he had prepared for the contractor and made his way to the entrance. The contractor was already there with two workers. Hal introduced himself and got started.

Helen arrived and stood next to Tami, watching quietly, while Hal talked the contractor through the drawings and answered his questions. When the contractor was happy, Hal left him rolling up the drawings and went across to Tami and Helen.

“Sorry to keep you waiting Helen, I’d arranged to meet Derek at seven thirty...I need him to get working as soon as possible.”

Helen smiled, “That’s quite alright Hal, I enjoyed watching you work. You don’t waste time and it shows.” She turned to Tami, “I promise not to attack him dear, but I do need to talk privately with Hal.”

Tami smiled and nodded as she moved away.

“I’ve asked Mike to come back to Reading,” said Helen, “He told me that you really don’t need baby-sitting, but I wanted to talk to you about ... Well about your need for a body guard really. How serious is the threat?”

Hal nodded, “I really do not know, but the police woman who was after the trafficker has been murdered and a foreign sounding man called my landlady asking about my whereabouts.”

“What are the police doing?”

Hal shrugged, “Whatever they are doing, they aren’t telling me. The police woman that was killed... she told me the traffickers have some police in their pockets. Now that she is dead, I would imagine that the police are making a lot more effort to find the traffickers.”

“I am guessing that you are paying Tami to protect you... are you able to afford it?”

Hal smiled, “I pay her expenses, and I have paid her employer for twenty days of protection... I hope I am able to take care of myself by then,” He shrugged, “With luck it will be over with by then anyway.”

“Who is her employer, if you don’t mind me asking?”

“Paul Prestwick,” said Hal, “His company is called Lympstone Services, though his office is Cambridgeshire. He does a lot of work protecting Ministry of Defence contractors.

“You know him personally?” asked Helen.

Hal nodded, “Not very well, but well enough to trust him to provide me with someone good. He was special forces.”

“Well, there are other aspects of taking care of yourself that you need to pay attention to. Taking time off, for instance. As much as I appreciate your work ethic, I would prefer you stay healthy... and alive,” said Helen.

“I’m only doing a half day today,” said Hal, grinning, “I’m not working on Sunday.”

Helen nodded, “You are taking me somewhere nice for Lunch today, I’ve also invited Mrs. Bale, but she hasn’t responded yet. I assume Tami has to come with us?”

“Who is Mrs. Bale?” asked Hal.

“The architect that Anchor Investments has sent to oversee the project,” said Helen, “She must have said good things about the work... Anchor has been very positive since her arrival. Mike rather likes her.”

“Sorry, Bronwynn... I didn’t know her surname,” said Hal, “Yes, I like her too. She is probably in the site office by now, we can ask her if she is coming for lunch.”

“Have you tried out any good restaurants?” asked Helen, “Your expense claims are pitiful.”

Hal laughed, “I’m a pub-grub and cafe person,” he said, “I’ll ask Roberta, the QS - she told me she had been to a really nice restaurant in Braintree recently.”

They headed back to the canteen. Hal messaged Roberta, asking for the name of the restaurant she had told him about.

“I need to sit down with you for a while,” said Helen, “Your probation period is over.”

“We can sit in the canteen,” said Hal, “I’ll ask Tami to ensure we aren’t disturbed.”

Helen nodded, “You keep a remarkably tidy site,” she said, “You would have been wasted as a planner.”

Hal shrugged, “I like project planning... managing a site is a lot of hard work. I wasn’t really looking for such a full on job when I applied for the planning position.”

“Yes,” said Helen, “I am fully aware that taking over from George... well, the project was a mess and you exhausted yourself fixing it... it made you sick. I feel responsible.”

“It wasn’t your fault,” said Hal, “I should have known better...I’m an obsessive person, I like to make things right.”

“You are a fixer.., that’s clear enough,” said Helen.

Bronwynn was in the site office. Hal introduced her to Helen and excused himself, saying he needed to use the toilet.

They were in the canteen when he returned. Helen was talking to Roberta and Bronwynn was making a fresh pot of coffee.

“I’ve booked a table at the House by Hilly Gant for two PM,” said Bronwynn with a smile, “Roberta told Helen that it is a great place to eat.”

“The House by Who?” asked Hal.

“The House by Hilly Gant... I have no idea why it’s called that. We can find out when we get there. How are you feeling today?”

“Pretty good thanks,” said Hal, “Getting better every day.”

“Helen says Mike is heading back to Reading this weekend. Do you know which stuff is his? Helen wants to take it with her.”

Hal nodded, “I’ll load it into her car. Let me get her car keys.”

Bronwynn and Tami helped, the coffee was ready when they returned to the canteen. Roberta had gone and they had the canteen to themselves.

Hal and Helen sat in the corner of the canteen, Bronwynn and Tami stayed chatting by the coffee station.

“I don’t really have much more to ask you,” said Helen, opening a file she had removed from a slim briefcase. She put on a pair of reading glasses, picked up a propellor pencil and worked through the pages in the file, making neat notes in several places.

She looked up at Hal, “I always forget something,” she said a smiling, “Where would you like to see yourself in five years from now... career wise, I mean?”

“Oh dear... I always get into trouble over this one,” said Hal, “Hopefully still enjoying the job. I am not ambitious, not for promotion and responsibility. I value job satisfaction and of course I would like to earn good money.” He shrugged, “That’s it really.”

Helen smiled as she wrote another note, “I think you answered very well,” she said, “There, that is the review done. Now, I can tell you that the company is delighted with the work you have done here. You have exceeded expectations, salvaged a project that was likely to lose substantial amounts of money. The only criticism is that you damaged your health in the process.”

Helen removed two pages from the file, and slid them across to Hal, “That is our offer. Please read it through and let me know if there is anything that you would like to discuss?” She got to her feet, “Thank you for loading Mike’s things into my car. Did Mrs. Bale tell you that we are booked for lunch at two? Roberta says it is a ten minute drive from here.”

Hal nodded, “Yes The House of something strange.”

“I need the loo again... too much coffee,” said Helen before making her way out of the canteen.

Hal read the contract of employment. Jackdaw Contracting had already doubled his salary since he took over from George, and were now offering a twenty percent increase if he signed a five year contract as their Senior Project Manager. He read the contract a second time, and couldn’t find anything troublesome. He signed and dated it and left it face down on top of the file Helen had left on the table.

The House by Hilly Gant was a pleasant surprise, the prices were steep, but the food and service were excellent. Helen was in good form and a lot of fun. Her father had been in the foreign service, and according to Helen, the foreign service had tried to hide him in the most obscure places on the planet. They survived military coups, civil wars, riots and all manner of hardships, but Helen had them all laughing with the way she recounted the experiences.

Hal was thankful that nobody had asked for wine; the bill was more than Hal usually spent in a month on food.

Helen set off for Reading after they emerged from the restaurant just after four PM. Gary collected Hal, Bronwynn and Tami and took them to the trailer park.

“Helen Goody is a remarkable woman,” said Bronwynn on the way back, “My brother says that she took over Jackdaw Contracting when it was about to declare bankruptcy in two thousand and eleven. The business had been her maternal grandfather’s and had been run into the ground by her father and older brother. Since then she has paid off all their debts and bought them all out. Apparently she was an academic, an Historian, I think my brother said.”

“I loved her story of trying to smuggle her pet snake out of the Congo,” said Tami and they all laughed at the memory of it as Tami retold the story for Gary’s benefit.

Bronwynn thanked Hal for the lunch when Gary dropped them off, then made her way back to her trailer.

“Any plans for tomorrow?” Tami asked Hal as they walked to his trailer.

“No plans,” said Hal, “I was going to work on the project plan; run some ideas to see if we could save more time... but I promised Helen I would take a break from work. Do you have a motorbike license?”

Tami nodded, “Yes, I ride a Kawasaki 650 most days in Newcastle.”

“I have an old Norton 500 in Sussex, I’m half contemplating fetching it. Would you mind riding it if I can’t manage?”

Tami shrugged, “Sure... but you might want to forget about your bike for a while,” she said, “Helen told me that Bronwynn’s husband was killed in a biking accident in which she lost her baby and had a nervous breakdown because of it. If you still fancy her...?” She shrugged again.

“That’s just awful... unbearable really,” Hal shook his head, “Thanks for telling me... Definitely not going to bring my bike here now.”

“Let me know if you ever want to sell it,” said Tami, “I know someone who has been after a Norton for years... don’t know why; I’m told they take a lot of tinkering to keep on the road.”

Hal nodded, “It’s what I’m used to,” he said, “I’ve only ever had two bikes, both old British bikes, my first was a BSA. It needed the tappets adjusting just about every fifty miles and the exhaust flange worked loose every trip till a machinist friend of mine spent a couple of weeks working on it. He did the same for my Norton. I only use it during the summer and usually only need to tweak and tighten once a year. Not sure I’d ever want to sell it.”

“I service my bike myself,” said Tami, “I got it second hand, had it three years, use it every day unless there’s snow and ice on the ground and I haven’t had to adjust anything. Japanese bikes are awesome.”

Hal nodded, “I’d go for a Japanese bike if I wanted reliability and performance... A nice thing about old British bikes is that you can usually sell them for more than you paid for them. I bought my BSA for fifty quid, and sold it for three hundred and fifty, five years later. The guy who bought it boasted that he’d have paid five hundred.”

“Well thanks for lunch, I ate so much I don’t think I need to eat again for two days.”

“I’m not sure I can afford to eat for a month,” said Hal with a smile, “It was pretty good though.”

Tami laughed and then grabbed Hal’s arm, stopping him, “Stop!” she spoke, her voice low and urgent, “There’s someone in the trailer!”

They backed away slowly, “Call that Inspector Lawson now,” said Tami, “I’m calling Paul.”

Inspector Lawson answered promptly, “Lawson, Scotland Yard,” she said.

“This is Hal Johns,” said Hal, “Can you hear me?”

“Yes, Mr. Johns, I can hear you.”

“It looks as if someone has got into my accommodation, I’m in Park Estate in Braintree...”

“I know exactly where you are, Mr. Johns. Are you safe? Can you get out?”

“I’m outside,” said Hal.

“Stay out of sight Mr. Johns, armed police are on their way. Stay out of sight until you are certain it is safe. Mute your phone and leave it on.”

“Roger that,” said Hal, “Thanks.”

He muted his phone and put it in his shirt pocket.

Tami was talking into her phone, her voice low. She looked tense. She looked up at Hal and gave him a thumbs up. A few seconds later she put her phone away.

“Paul has sent a couple of guys, he says we should get away from here,” said Tami.

“Cops are on their way, and they are monitoring my phone,” said Hal. “I’m not sure I can get the VW open and started without the key.”

“We could take Bronwynn’s Land Rover,” said Tami, “Easy enough to open and start.”

Hal shook his head, “Yes, but I’m not taking her car. I feel bloody stupid hiding here.”

“You don’t know what we are up against,” said Tami, “No heroics remember?”

Hal smiled, "I'm not looking to confront the bastards," he said, "Even if I was fit, I'd not charge in there."

"Call Bronwynn and ask her to drive us out of here," suggested Tami.

Hal shook his head, "No, sorry, leave her out of this. We can hide easily enough under the trailers."

"I think I just knelt on dog poop," said Tami a few minutes later.

"Shit happens," said Hal, struggling not to laugh, he then had to suppress a coughing fit.

"There's someone creeping along behind that trailer," whispered Tami, pointing, "Looks like the police are here."

A vehicle drove into the yard and rolled quietly past the trailer Hal and Tami were crouched under, heading towards Hal's trailer. The engine cut off and Hal heard four doors slam. Raised voices. "Armed police!" The sound of a trailer door slamming and running feet. More shouts, not English. The crackle of a radio, "Two suspects apprehended. Still checking."

Tami tapped on Hal's forearm, "Time to show ourselves," she said, wrinkling her nose, "This poop really stinks!"

They stood side by side outside the empty trailer. Two armed officers approached cautiously. Hal and Tami raised their hands to shoulder height, palms forward.

"Identify yourselves!" an officer called out.

"Hal Johns and Tami Prestwick," said Tami quietly.

The officer moved closer, "Turn around and keep your hands up."

"Stand down Val," said the other officer, "Command has visual, says it's him. Inspector Lawson says you can unmute your phone Mr. Johns, she wants to talk to you."

Hal took his phone out of his pocket and unmuted it, “Hello Inspector?”

“I’m here Mr. Johns,” said the inspector, “Two men have been apprehended. The officers will conduct a sweep of the area and inform you when it is safe to return to your accommodation. Thank you for calling me.” The phone disconnected.

Tami put her phone to her ear, “Paul’s guys are here,” she said quietly, “There’s a Ford Transit a way down the road, they think it belongs to the bandidos.”

Hal smiled, “Bandidos? You really are Paul’s sister,” he said, “It’s hard to believe such an ugly bugger can have such a good looking sister.”

Tami smiled, “He’s not that ugly when he smiles,” she said, “I wasn’t trying to ... I didn’t want you thinking he was scraping the barrel by sending his kid sister to look after you.”

“I feel honoured,” said Hal, “Please don’t take this the wrong way, but I’m surprised that he’s put you in harm’s way protecting me.”

Tami laughed, “You saved his life, our family owes you.”

“It wasn’t like that... I just gave blood. There were no heroics involved.”

“Try telling that to mum or dad, or Mike. You stopped Paul from bleeding to death and carried him out of the kill zone. But don’t worry; I’m not promising to take a bullet for you Longjohns - why did they call you Longjohns anyway?”

Hal shrugged, “The Army loves nicknames, and I got stuck with Longjohns, it never made sense to me, so of course it stuck.”

“Paul was called Pansy Prestwick when he was a marine,” said Tami, laughing, “Don’t tell him I told you, but he says it made him more determined to get through special services training.”

“Pansy is not a word I’d associate with Paul ; he’s more like a Panzer,” said Hal smiling, “Here comes Bronwynn.”

Bronwyn looked relieved to see them, “Are you OK?” she asked, “The police wouldn’t tell me anything...” she frowned, “What’s that terrible smell.”

“I knelt in dog poop,” muttered Tami, “We can’t return to our trailer till the cops say so.”

Bronwynn looked relieved, “Come to mine... I’ve got some clean sweat pants you can use.” She looked at Hal’s trailer, “What happened?”

“Tami saw that the door to my trailer had been forced,” said Hal, “We called the police. They were quick. Two men have been arrested.”

The two police officers followed them to Bronwynn’s trailer and waited outside. Bronwynn asked them if they would like coffee or water. They declined.

Bronwynn’s sweatpants were a bit short and very snug on Tami. Bronwynn gave her a plastic carrier bag to put her jeans in and Tami left the bag outside the trailer. Bronwynn made coffee for them all and they shared a slab of chocolate.

Hal’s phone rang. It was inspector Lawson.

He put it on speaker, “Hello Inspector.”

“Hello Mr. Johns. You can return to your accommodation now. The local police will keep a car parked outside tonight and arrange for someone to repair the door. I can confirm that the men arrested are connected to the gang of traffickers that Detective Sergeant Hensman was investigating. Neither of them are the man you identified, he is still at large. I would appreciate it if you did not discuss this incident with the media.”

“What should I say if they approach me... the media I mean?”

“Ask them to speak to the Braintree police,” said Inspector Lawson. She disconnected.

“Do you play Scrabble?” asked Bronwynn. For some reason it set them all laughing.

A tall officer in tactical gear knocked on the trailer door. Bronwynn invited him in. He had to duck down to get through the door.

“You can return to your trailer Mr. Johns,” he said, grey eyes boring into Hal’s, “It’s a bit of a mess I’m afraid. You can send Inspector Lawson a list of anything missing, destroyed or damaged. Take photos for the record.”

“Thank you for coming so quickly,” said Hal, “I really appreciate it.”

The officer smiled briefly and nodded, “The local police have a car parked outside your trailer for the night.” He backed away and out of the trailer.

Tami got up and went to the door. She watched as the police made their weapons safe and climbed into their vehicles. When the last one had gone she turned back to Hal and Bronwynn, “I’m going to fetch some detergent and check on the trailer,” she said, “I’ll join you for scrabble later, if that’s OK?”

“Such excitement!” said Bronwynn, “I’m going to make some hot chocolate... would you like some? I can do more coffee if you prefer?”

“Hot chocolate sounds perfect,” said Hal, “Thank you.”

They had just set up the scrabble board when Tami returned with a young man that Hal remembered from the front office.

He looked flushed with excitement, and asked Hal if he would like to move to another trailer, as the intruders had damaged his trailer. There was a vacant trailer three down from Bronwynn, quite close to the Laundry unit. Hal thanked him and was given a key card.

Bronwynn offered to help, and Hal accepted, though he really didn't need any help.

The trailer was a mess, all of Hal's clothes had been slashed and thrown on the floor, his backpack had been cut open, the mattresses and cushions had been slashed, there were deep knife gouges in most of the cupboard doors, milk and ground coffee had been poured over the clothing and bedding on the floor.

"There's nothing worth salvaging," said Hal, "I'm so sorry Tami, we'll go to Colchester tomorrow. I'll pay for everything."

"I'm well insured Hal," she said lightly, "You didn't do this. I'll get a police report. I'm just glad I had my iPad with me, but they've smashed the charger."

"It looks like they ignored the bathroom," said Bronwynn, "Your electric toothbrush is OK." She held up a blue electric toothbrush.

"Don't use it till you've replaced the brush head Tami," said Hal taking the toothbrush and carefully sniffing it. "I've heard nasty things about what intruders do with toothbrushes."

Tami scowled and took the toothbrush, then shrugged and tossed the brush head on top of a shredded cushion.

"Well, there's nothing else to do here," she said, "Please can I scrounge some detergent Bronwynn?"

They stayed up late playing scrabble. Hal got thoroughly trounced and Tami managed to stay ahead of Bronwynn. They laughed a lot.

Their new trailer was almost identical to the one they had been in. Tami handed Hal the VW key fob when they were alone, "They've damaged it, we'll probably need to get a new one," she said, "That's my bad, I should have kept the keys with me."

Hal shrugged, "We survived unscathed, that's what matters."

“There was a blood stained hammer in their van, along with a roll of plastic sheeting, several rolls of packing tape and Nylock restraints. Paul’s guys took photo’s.”

Hal nodded, “It was a good call. You saved me a lot of pain, thank you.”

“It’s not over,” said Tami, “They know where you are now.”

Hal smiled, “Thanks, that’s really going to help me sleep!”

“Goodnight Longjohns,” said Tami, “Paul sends his regards.”

Despite everything, Hal slept well. The VW would not unlock. Hal left a voice message on the lease hire help number and called Gary, who cheerfully drove them to Colchester.

The iPhone shop didn’t open on a Sunday but Gary drove them to Curry’s where they managed to find chargers for their phones, iPads and Hal’s Laptop and Macbook. They had a late breakfast before spending the rest of the morning shopping for clothes and food. Hal splashed out on a Breville espresso bar like the one he had seen at Jackdaw’s office in Reading.

The lease hire company called and arranged to deliver another vehicle on Monday morning. Hal asked if they had a spare key as he had his MacBook, Laptop, iPad, drawings and documents he needed in the vehicle. The agent said the recovery team would be able to open the vehicle for him.

They called Bronwynn and offered to bring her fish and chips when they set off for Braintree. Gary was eager to see the Espresso Bar in action, but declined coffee, saying he much preferred tea. They all crowded around the table to eat their fish and chips.

After Gary and Bronwynn left, Hal sent an email to Helen Goody, telling her that two men had broken into and trashed his accommodation trailer and had been arrested by armed police. He said that the police had asked him not to discuss the incident with the media.

Hal phoned Mrs. Welsh and Megan answered the phone. She told Hal that a man had been arrested by police after her mother and Madge had confronted two men in Hal's loft apartment. Megan said Madge had been hurt, but that she and her mother had managed to grapple one of the men and the other had run off when the police turned up..

"It's bloody well not on," said Megan when Hal asked what had happened to Madge, "I don't know why Ma puts up with the trouble you cause, you and your bloody motorbike."

"Is Madge alright? How badly is she hurt?" asked Hal.

"And Ma's a diabetic. She doesn't need this sort of stress in her life. You should move out."

"Can I talk to her please?" asked Hal, trying not to lose his temper with Megan, "I'm sorry for all the trouble. Please let me talk to your mum?"

Megan hung up on him.

Hal called Caroline.

"Hi Hal," she said, "When are you coming back?"

"Hi Caroline," said Hal, "That depends. Can you tell me if everybody is alright? Is anyone hurt?"

"What? Oh you mean Madge? She's OK, just needs to use a crutch for while. Her knee is the size of a balloon. She really kicked that guy."

"And Mrs. Welsh?" asked Hal, "Is she alright?"

"Oh she's fine, she's just tired. She was up all night with the police and getting Madge sorted at St Richards. She and Madge are both fast asleep now."

“Thanks Caroline,” said Hal, “I have to go now.” He terminated the call quickly.

Tami was looking at Hal expectantly.

“There were intruders in my lodgings in Sussex yesterday,” said Hal, “My Landlady and a groom confronted them and managed to hold onto one of them, the police have him now. The groom injured her knee.”

Tami nodded and used her phone to make a call, she went outside.

“Paul’s looking into it,” she said when she came back inside, “He says the police have arrested seven of the people on the list he sent earlier. They still haven’t got the man you identified.”

“I’m going to Sussex tomorrow,” said Hal, “As soon as the new car arrives, I’m worried about my landlady and the injured groom.”

Tami nodded, “I’m already packed,” she said, “Can I use your espresso bar?”

Hal had a troubled night, but hardly coughed and woke feeling a lot better than he had for a while despite the poor sleep. He went to the site early, and left instructions for Bob and Roberta, saying he would be away for the day on personal business.

Helen Goody called him while he was walking back to the trailer park. He told her that he was driving down to Sussex to check on his landlady and a groom who had interrupted two intruders in his lodgings. He told her that the groom had been injured but had managed to keep hold of one of the intruders until police arrived and arrested him. Helen told him to be careful and said that Jackdaw Construction would pick up his security costs, including the expenses for Tami. She also told him that Jackdaw’s insurance would cover the costs of all the losses and damage at his trailer and lodgings. She said the insurance investigator would call him.

The lease hire vehicle arrived at nine thirty. The driver, a young man, opened the VW with a key fob, but said he had to replace the

vehicle. He asked how Hal had damaged the keyfob, and was shocked when Tami said it was done in a home invasion. She took him to see the trailer while Hal transferred everything across to the replacement car, which was brand new and the same make and model.

Twenty minutes later they were on their way. Tami drove and Hal was kept busy with messages and phone calls for most of the drive.

Mrs. Welsh was up and about and looking cheerful when they arrived at Welsh's Yard. Megan scowled at Hal through the kitchen window.

The intruders had forced the door to Hal's loft apartment, but there was no visible damage inside. Mrs. Welsh said Madge had heard the noise and had rushed at the men, screaming obscenities. One man fled and the other was half conscious after being kicked between the legs and then being battered with the crowbar they had used to force the door.

"I always thought she was a quiet, well-behaved lass," said Mrs. Welsh, chuckling, "I learned some good swear words from her, I can tell you. She went into Chi with Rihanna, but she should be back soon. Her knee swelled up - I think she must have hit it when she was beating the man, but nothing is broken." She shook her head, "We all rushed to help her and ended up having to stop her from killing him. She's a strong lass."

"I can't wait to meet her," said Tami, grinning, "She sounds like quite a girl."

Mrs. Welsh nodded, "She is an amateur steeplechaser - they're tougher than most," she eyed Tami curiously, "Come down and have some tea or coffee, there's scones too, unless Megan has finished them."

"You'll want to check on your motorbike," said Mrs. Welsh turning to Hal, "Caroline says she spoke to you about it. I'm not very happy with her, I've given her a final warning."

“What’s wrong with my bike?” asked Hal, “What has it got to do with Caroline?”

Mrs. Welsh frowned, “You’d best go and look at it,” she said, “I’ll get you the key.”

Hal left Tami talking to Mrs. Welsh in the Kitchen while he unlocked the door to the store room he rented. His motorbike looked fine, until he looked closely and saw that rubber on the left handle was torn and the clutch lever was bent out of shape. There was a scuff on the tank paintwork but no other damage he could see. He removed his leathers from the panniers and hung them up.

Everything else was in order. He locked the door and returned the key to Mrs. Welsh. Megan was there, she smiled brightly at Hal, and was clearly trying to impress Tami.

Mrs. Welsh broke off what she was saying, “How serious is it?” She asked taking the key that Hal proffered.

“It’s annoying,” said Hal, “But I can probably bend the clutch lever back into shape well enough to use it. I’ll order a new grip and lever and fit them next time I visit. What happened?”

Megan began to speak but Mrs. Welsh cut her off, “Don’t you dare defend her,” she said, then turned to Hal, “Caroline told the RAC man that she was your girlfriend, she asked him to start the bike so that she could check it, and then dropped it. Luckily for her he was close enough to help. He said the RAC would not accept responsibility for the damage.”

“You have another girlfriend?” asked Tami her face blank.

Mrs. Welsh scoffed, “Only in her dreams! And it’s all your fault Megan, you and that damned sweepstake.” She shook an admonishing finger at a Megan.

Megan went bright red, got up and stormed out of the kitchen.

Mrs. Welsh sighed, “She set up a sweepstake with the grooms, betting on who would tumble Hal first. There’s a lot of money in it for whoever wins, and Caroline has convinced herself that she will win.”

“Are you playing hard to get Hal?” asked Tami with a smile.

Hal scowled, “It’s getting a bit irritating,” he muttered.

“I told you to relax and let it happen,” said Mrs. Welsh, “They’d soon lose interest if you did.”

“Most of them are half my age,” protested Hal. He looked up as the Land Rover drove into the yard, “Oh good, Madge is back.”

Tami and Hal helped to offload the Land Rover, Madge looked cheerful enough and told Hal she had enjoyed “Sticking it to the bastards” that broke into his apartment. She followed Rihanna to the loo, moving easily on her crutches.

Madge returned to the kitchen for tea and scones, and lost no time interrogating Tami.

“So are you the reason Caroline isn’t having any luck with Hal?” she asked Tami.

Tami smiled, “Would that mean I win the money?”

“Did you bet on yourself winning?” asked Madge, “I put down a tenner at twenty to one that he’d not go for anyone under thirty.” She looked at Hal, “You’re no cradle snatcher I reckon.”

Hal realised it was a compliment, he smiled, “Thanks for the vote of confidence Madge, but Tami is my minder, she’s keeping me safe from the traffickers.”

“They came for him too...” said Mrs. Welsh, “They wrecked the trailer he’s living in on the building site in Essex, but the police got them.”

“I told her,” said Tami, looking apologetically at Hal, “They need to know that the traffickers are serious and violent.” She handed a card to Mrs. Welsh, “Please don’t confront them if they come back? Call the number on that card if you see them or think they have come back. He’ll get the police here fast.”

“I don’t think they will come back,” said Mrs. Welsh, “Not after the beating Madge handed out.”

“We had best be going,” said Hal, “Thanks again, Madge. I’m sorry for bringing this trouble to your home Mrs. Welsh.”

“You didn’t do anything wrong,” said Mrs. Welsh, “Don’t blame yourself. I’ll get Taffy Llewelyn to do a proper job of fixing the door jamb and claim the cost on insurance. I already have a police report.”

She walked him and Tami back to the car, and nodded when Hal asked what he could do for Madge, to thank her for her help.

“She’s saving for a trip to Canada, so cash is probably best. She isn’t one for chocolates and flowers.”

“Can I put five hundred quid in your account and you give her the cash?” asked Hal.

“I’ll send you her account details,” said Mrs. Welsh, “I’ll go and do it now, before I forget!”

Hal managed to do the transaction before they reached the M25. Tami had not spoken much in the car, but after they passed Thurrock she asked quietly, “Do you mind if I ask you a personal question?”

“I suppose that depends on how personal it is,” said Hal.

“Yeah, silly question, I suppose. It’s just that you aren’t what I expected,” she said.

“Is that good or bad?” asked Hal.

Tami laughed, “Not bad...” she shrugged, “I guess Paul didn’t really know you, but I looked you up when he asked me to protect you and told me about you carrying him away from the check point and then giving blood for him. Your LinkedIn profile is kind of... well I guess I filled in the gaps wrong.”

“You’ve really got me worried now...” said Hal, “What were you expecting me to be like?”

“Paul told me to be careful, said your army nickname was Long Johns probably because you were a serial womaniser ... Well words to that effect. I’m pretty sure you aren’t gay, but your landlady said some of the stable girls were literally trying to force themselves on you, without success. I don’t get it; most men, especially older men that I know, wouldn’t have hesitated to screw a young woman who asked for it. You aren’t married or in a relationship - why not go for it?”

Hal sighed, “I don’t know why not... Well not in easy, glib terms. I suppose it’s a bunch of things... experience, I suppose, which tells me that casual sex often leads to complications, including STD’s and emotional headaches. I don’t like being manipulated and the whole sweepstake things irritates me, probably because I don’t like Megan and that is because I live above their home and can hear the way she yells abuse at her mother. She’s an entitled, greedy brat...I’m being polite. I’m not explaining it well... but basically if I don’t feel right about something, I prefer not to do it. Isn’t that normal?”

“I suppose,” said Tami, “But for what it’s worth, I think you are a great guy, and I hope things work out with Bronwynn and you.”

“Thanks,” said Hal, “You’re pretty awesome yourself.”

Tami’s phone rang when they were approaching Colchester, she answered it through the car’s Bluetooth, “Hi Paul, you’re on speaker, Hal John’s is next to me.”

“Hi Tami, Longjohns,” said Paul, “Just wanted you to know that the police have another body - Hector Gulbin, the bandido that you rumbled. He was in the same spot where they found the transport police detective sergeant Hensman.”

“The traffickers killed him?” said Tami.

“He became a liability, and perhaps they are sending a message to the gang members the police have in custody. Looks like he was killed slowly with a claw hammer,” said Paul, “But they didn’t wreck his face, they wanted the police to recognise him.”

“Thanks for the update Paul,” said Hal.

“Sure thing. You can probably relax now, I don’t think they will be coming after you anymore,” said Paul, “I’ve sent your money back to your account - your employers have picked up the tab.”

“Thanks again,” said Hal.

“I’m staying for a couple more days... just to make sure,” said Tami.

“I think another five would be better, but it’s Hal’s call,” said Paul.

“Five is good for me,” said Hal, “I didn’t know you had such an attractive sister Paul, were you adopted?”

Tami laughed and disconnected the call, “Are you trying to wind him up?” she asked.

“You are very attractive,” said Hal, “I’m just telling it as it is.”

“Well thank you,” she said smiling, “Shall we get Fish and Chips?”

They got fish and chips for Bronwynn as well, and ate them with her in her trailer. Hal told her what he had learned from Paul about the traffickers. Bronwynn looked relieved.

Hal was busy on site for the next three days getting the new final fix contractors working to plan. Most of the old construction staff were

gone and there were a lot more new faces to get used to. Hal brought in a new security company from Braintree and began to work in the site office as the canteen was getting a bit crowded. Bronwynn was delighted when he decided to bring his Breville espresso bar to the site office.

Helen Goody arrived unannounced on site on the morning of Tami's last day. She had a couple with her, that she just introduced as Martin and Susan. She introduced Hal as "Hal Johns, our senior Project Manager, and Tami as Ms. Prestwick, before telling Hal that she wanted to show Martin and Susan around the project herself but asked him to make himself available later in case they had any questions for him.

Hal had intended to drive Tami to Colchester, but called Gary to collect her.

"I'm going to miss you Tami, you have been good company as well as a life saver," he said when they walked back to the site office. "If you want to bring your kid brother to meet Gary before the project is finished, you are more than welcome to use my trailer."

"Thanks Hal, I've enjoyed your company too. It's good to have met you at last."

"Before you go... was it Paul who you said might want to buy my Norton?" asked Hal.

Tami nodded.

"He can have it," said Hal, "Do you want to tell him? I'll let Mrs. Welsh know to let him take it for a spin and decide what it's worth."

"I'll tell him," she said, "Thanks, and I might take you up on the offer of putting up Mike and me for a weekend."

Hal got a hug and a bright smile from Tami before she climbed in the front passenger seat of Gary's car. They stopped to chat with Bronwynn, who drove in just as they were leaving. Tami and Bronwynn got out and hugged each other before Tami finally left.

“I’m sad to see her go, but glad that it means you are no longer in danger,” said Bronwynn, “I’ve got some brownies and fresh milk... how about some cappuccino?”

“Helen Goody is here,” said Hal as he started making the cappuccinos, “She brought a couple and is showing them around - Martin and Susan, he’s in his thirties, I think she is older. Do you know anything about them?”

Bronwynn shrugged, “I don’t know any Martin or Susan at Anchor Investments, but they might be shareholders.”

“Are you working this afternoon?” asked Hal, “I want to go to the Pier at Harwich for a late lunch. Roberta says it’s pretty good.”

“I’m done for the day,” said Bronwynn, “I just wanted to say goodbye to Tami and share these brownies with you. Lunch at the Pier would be nice. Perhaps Helen will want to come for lunch as well, with her guests?”

Hal shrugged, “We will just have to wait and see,” he said.

“I’ve got some changes, I’m afraid... they are more cosmetic than structural. Can I show you on my model?”

Hal was impressed with the 3D computer model that Bronwynn had done.

“This is pretty amazing,” he said, “How easy is it to make changes?”

“That depends on what you want to change, and how well you have built the model,” said Bronwynn, “Here, let me show you... This is the main entrance as designed by Haraldsson.” She rotated the drawing so that they were looking directly at the entrance, then clicked on a tab at the top of the screen and the picture faded and was replaced with a modified entrance, “I’ve incorporated the Anchor Investments logo and added some portholes and a ship’s wheel here... like I said, it is more cosmetic than structural.”

“But you haven’t changed the model, both options are there,” said Hal, “How do you do that?”

Bronwynn smiled, “It’s called ‘scenes’ in SketchUp... Its not actually very difficult...”

They were I interrupted by the arrival of Helen Goody, Susan and Martin.

Helen introduced Bronwynn to Martin and Susan and Hal offered coffee and ended up making everybody cappuccino.

Martin and Susan were impressed with Bronwynn’s computer model of the project and were engrossed with that while Helen chatted to Hal.

“Mr. Prestwick informed me that Tami’s services are no longer required,” she said quietly, “Have the police said anything?”

Hal shook his head, “No, but even if the traffickers were still after me, I feel up to looking after myself now.”

Helen studied him carefully for a while, “I do hope it’s all over,” she said, “Martin and Susan are from the Prince of Wales Trust... they wanted to see some of our work.” She looked at her watch, “I promised to get them back to Stanstead by three... we had better be going. Thank you for the coffee.”

Hal walked them back to Helen’s car, then went back to the site office.

“Well?” she asked, “What did Helen say?”

“Martin and Sue are representatives of a prospective client,” said Hal, “They wanted to see some of our work.”

“I’m sure they were impressed,” said Bronwynn, “You are a good manager Hal. So... do you really want to learn SketchUp?”

Hal nodded, "I'd like to have a go," he said, "Please be patient with me?"

Bronwynn laughed, "It's actually fun, I promise you will enjoy it, come on, bring your chair over here."

They ended up having supper at the Pier, quite late, after spending the entire afternoon doing SketchUp. Hal was hooked, and only partially because he enjoyed being taught by Bronwynn.

"You never said anything about the changes to the entrance," Bronwynn reminded him during the meal.

Hal put his fork down and chewed for a while before swallowing and answering, "It looked pretty good. I can't see it causing any delays."

"You've got time to spare now," said Bronwynn, "Are you anticipating any problems?"

Hal nodded, "A few; Industrial action at a manufacturing plant in France means we can't get some of their of the gym equipment on time...Roberta is looking for a suitable alternative." He shrugged, "The rest you know about, squabbles with tenants who don't like Anchor Investment's terms and conditions... the parking pay and display equipment nonsense."

"You aren't being dragged into that, are you?" asked Bronwynn.

"No... I've put in my recommendations but I can see it going to court if Anchor Investments refuses to budge."

"They are being a bit greedy," said Bronwynn, "I've told them that already."

"And there's the rain... with all the dire warnings we have had and the deluges we have avoided so far, I can't help worrying that sooner or later we are going to get flooded," said Hal.

"Well you are way ahead on the landscaping, which should help," said Bronwynn, "Fingers crossed that our luck holds."

Hal spent most of Sunday doing a SketchUp model of his trailer using the free version of SketchUp. Bronwynn spent most of the day in his trailer reading a book when she wasn't helping him with a problem.

Paul called late on Sunday afternoon, "Hi Longjohns, it's me Paul. I've taken your Norton out for a spin - it's a beauty! And worth a lot I reckon. Do you mind if I take it up to Manchester for a valuation?"

"Go ahead Paul. There's an ammo box on the shelf above the panniers with spares."

"Righto," said Paul, "Are you keeping the leathers and helmet?"

"No," said Hal, "You'd never get your shoulders into my jacket, but you can take the lot if you want them."

"They look like they'd be a good fit for one of my mates," said Paul, "Are you sure you want to sell the bike? It's a real collector's piece."

"I'm sure," said Hal, "Just take care of her."

"Will do," said Paul, "Also wanted to tell you that the ex-copper, Inspector Watkins that was working with the traffickers - he is singing like a lark. The police have made dozens of arrests, including several cops. Fourteen traffickers have been arrested in Europe."

"Good to know, thanks Paul."

"You're welcome Longjohns, I'll call you from Manchester sometime next week."

"No hurry Paul, take your time. Have fun."

Paul laughed and ended the call.

They had two weeks of non-stop rain. A culvert collapsed and several of the transplanted trees developed strange tilts, but there

were no major problems. Hal called Helen to arrange the handover inspection at the end of October.

On Guy Fawkes night they had a small celebration in the Canteen. Mike Wright presented all the Jackdaw staff with their early completion bonus cheques. Roberta gave a tearful speech thanking Hal for her bonus adding, "I have never enjoyed a job as much as I have enjoyed working with Hal Johns."

Helen Goody waited till the end to announce that Jackdaw Contracting had won the tender to construct an eco-community for the Prince of Wales trust in Cornwall and that Hal Johns was the project manager for the project.

The following morning Hal helped Bronwynn to assemble the scale model of the complex in the entrance lobby. At noon the CEO of Anchor Investments officially opened the complex. Helen, Mike and Hal had been invited to the official opening.

While the Anchor Investments CEO was giving his speech, Helen turned to Hal and asked him if he had anything planned for Christmas.

Hal nodded, "Tami Prestwick is coming to visit just before Christmas, with her younger brother. Bronwynn, Gary, Tami and I have agreed to team up and do a sponsored triathlon to raise money for the Essex Special Needs training centre.

"Gary Oldman, the taxi man?" asked Helen, "You were teaching him to swim?"

"Yes, he's pretty good," said Hal.

"Put me down down as a sponsor," said Helen, "Mike too! You can decide how much we will sponsor you for, and don't be shy about it. Did Bronwynn tell you that we have offered her a job with Jackdaw? The Prince of Wales Trust want her to do a computer model of the project."

Hal shook his head, “No, she hasn’t told me yet, but she did ask me to see the New Year in with her brother and his family.”

Helen’s eyebrows shot up, “He lives in America!”

“Yes, in Denver, Colorado,” said Hal, grinning widely, “I haven’t skied for years.”

“You’re going to break a leg,” said Helen, “But you had better be back in time to get started on the Cornwall job in March.”

None of the Jackdaw people had been invited to the celebratory dinner at Shillingfords restaurant that evening. Hal was content to have bangers and mash in his trailer and was enjoying working his way through the SketchUp tutorial videos that Bronwynn had put on a memory stick for him.

At around eleven that night, Bronwynn knocked on his door and poked her head in, “I’m glad you are still up,” she said holding up a flask, “I’ve made hot chocolate, if you want some?”

Hal smiled, “I’d love some, how was the dinner?”

“Too much booze and sycophancy for my liking,” said Bronwynn, “But the food was pretty good. Do you want cream on top of your hot chocolate?”

Hal nodded and closed down his MacBook, “Yes please.”

“I’ve accepted a job offer from Jackdaw,” said Bronwynn... “To work on the Prince of Wales project in Cornwall - doing a 3D model of the project.”

Hal grinned, “Am I allowed to hug you?” he asked.

“I thought you would never offer,” said Bronwynn, “A kiss wouldn’t go amiss either.”

“Steady now...” said Hal, getting to his feet, “Any more encouragement and I might hump your leg.”

“Don’t you bloody dare!” laughed Bronwynn, sounding very Welsh, “I’ll not have you wasting a good hump on my leg!” She laughed again when Hal wrapped his arms around her and lifted her off her feet, then got serious when he kissed her.

“Oh I really needed that!” said Bronwynn when they came up for air, “You are a very good kisser Hal Johns. Now put me down before you break all my ribs.”

She sat facing Hal and sipped at her hot chocolate, her eyes dancing with delight as they looked at each other.